

Los Angeles Times

<http://www.latimes.com/news/la-fi-revive22-2008jul22,0,1139228.story>

REAL ESTATE

Developer returns luster to L.A. landmarks

Wayne Ratkovich's restoration projects have helped change the attitude of the local real estate industry

By Roger Vincent, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
July 22, 2008

Developer Wayne Ratkovich had little idea 30 years ago when he and his partners bought an unwanted office building in downtown Los Angeles that a forgotten gem lay waiting.

The office market at the time was hot for glass and steel towers, and to hell with the old piles such as the Art Deco-style James Oviatt Building. The former UCLA football player in his 30s wasn't sure exactly what "Art Deco" encompassed.

What he uncovered was an architectural treasure that he proceeded to bring back to life. He profitably restored its Roaring '20s grandeur, and today the building at 617 S. Olive St. is home to many tenants including the retro-glam Cicada restaurant.

Once hooked on rescuing fading stars from the city's past, Ratkovich went on to revive several others including the landmark Deco-style Wiltern Theater and the elaborately decorated Fine Arts Building. His latest project is across Wilshire Boulevard from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Nearly complete, it is the resuscitation of a distressed 1970s skyscraper -- with a strictly 2008 front porch on its way.

Ratkovich's success also helped change the attitude of the local real estate industry, which had assumed for decades that newer buildings were always more profitable than old ones and cavalierly razed many of downtown's greatest buildings from earlier eras.

"Wayne and a few others including Ira Yellin showed us something that was right here under our noses. His projects helped bring people back to the traditional urban areas of Los Angeles," said competitor Dan Rosenfeld, who helped restore the frequently filmed Bradbury office building downtown that played a central role in the 1982 hit "Blade Runner."

Ratkovich is regarded as one of the pioneers along with Yellin and Gene Summers, setting the tone for sophisticated restorations of historic buildings in L.A. starting in the 1980s, even when it

wasn't always profitable. Developer Tom Gilmore revved up the market again early in this decade with his successful conversions of old downtown office buildings to apartments.

Ratkovich's work earned him frequent accolades, but also proved humbling. Two large-scale projects in a row in the 1980s -- restorations of the Wiltern Theater building and Chapman Market in the Wilshire Center neighborhood -- were financial flops.

His company is private and finances are confidential, but Ratkovich acknowledges losing millions of dollars on those ventures even though the properties built in the 1920s and '30s were widely considered to be beautifully restored.

The losses were wrenching, yet Ratkovich successfully redeveloped several other projects including the Fine Arts Building downtown, the former C.F. Braun & Co. office campus in Alhambra and, most recently, a Wilshire Boulevard high-rise in Los Angeles built in the early 1970s that had lost its luster. Renovation of the 30-story tower at 5900 Wilshire is still underway, but improvements have already attracted several new tenants including the venerable entertainment industry trade publication Variety.

"Development is like oil wildcatting or farming," he said. "There are some good years and some that aren't so good."

Many of downtown's older buildings had already been knocked down when Ratkovich bought the Oviatt Building in 1977 because they were considered obsolete. A similar fate was perhaps in store for the Oviatt, which the Los Angeles Archdiocese wanted to sell after receiving title in a parishioner's will. Ratkovich acquired the former department store turned office tower for \$450,000 and spent about \$5 million to restore it before selling it for \$13.5 million.

"That changed us," said Ratkovich, founder and president of Ratkovich Co. of Los Angeles. "We moved into the urban marketplace."

The 13-story Oviatt was one of the most sensational local buildings in an age when owners spent lavishly to distinguish their properties. A haberdasher to the city's elite and a dedicated Francophile, builder James Oviatt had persuaded the great French art glass craftsman Rene Lalique to make the Oviatt Building his first commercial project.

Lalique's etched glass work was found throughout the structure, from the entrance doors to the windows of Oviatt's deluxe personal penthouse and rooftop garden, which once included a small pool, tennis court, putting green and "beach" with sand imported from the Riviera.

Ratkovich grew up in less-glamorous circumstances. He was the youngest of six children born to immigrants from Serbia who settled in Alhambra soon after he was born. The family later moved east a few miles in the San Gabriel Valley. Ratkovich graduated from La Puente High School before attending UCLA on a football scholarship in the late 1950s and early 1960s. At 6 feet, 3 inches tall, he played end on both offense and defense.

Like many of his peers, Ratkovich was caught up in the spirit of President John F. Kennedy's call

for a "New Frontier," and the political science major settled on the idea of becoming a real estate developer. He could help build better cities, he reasoned -- and hopefully make a good living, perhaps even get rich, in the process.

"I was very naive and didn't know what I was talking about," Ratkovich said.

After a brief stint in the Army and eight years learning the business at a large real estate brokerage, Ratkovich took off in 1972 to form a partnership with an industrial developer.

By the 1970s, however, the economy was in a doldrums and there wasn't much demand for new buildings. Renovating the Oviatt Building seemed a good way to land some business, but it ended up leading to his new specialty as an urban developer.

Ratkovich "certainly has had his challenges doing these projects but he believes in them, and overall they've been successful," said architect Brenda Levin, who has worked on several of them with him. Where others saw decrepit, obsolete buildings, Ratkovich saw opportunity and was willing to take a risk, she said.

One of the bigger risks was to put a top-drawer restaurant on the ground floor of the Oviatt. Yet Rex II Ristorante was a glamorous success that lured limousines to a dodgy stretch of Olive Street. When the wealthy lawyer played by Richard Gere took Julia Roberts to a fancy dinner in 1990's smash movie "Pretty Woman," he took her to the Rex. More recently, scenes from the movie "Mr. & Mrs. Smith" and the television show "Mad Men" were filmed in the restaurant now known as Cicada.

Ratkovich remains committed to restoring the urban cores of L.A. and other cities as a developer and officer of the Urban Land Institute, a real estate think tank and trade group.

"Our strategy is to rescue," he said, "to take over challenged buildings and make them better."

roger.vincent@latimes.com