



THE HERALD-SUN | PHOTOS BY MARK DOLEJS

Chris Weekly (left) and Gary Molitsky of J-CON Building work on renovations Wednesday to retail space as part of the Straw Valley project that Tallus Development Group is working on. The property is located near New Hope Commons on Chapel Hill Boulevard.

STRAW VALLEY REDO

Developer hopes to draw specialty shops to ex-artists' enclave

BY MONICA CHEN

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DURHAM — Scott Bednaz first set his eyes on Straw Valley 10 years ago and hasn't been able to look away since.

Though many in Durham and Chapel Hill don't remember it now, the buildings squeezed between New Hope Commons and U.S. 15-501 now known for housing a psychic and a bar used to be a tranquil, artistic enclave built on a dairy farm.

It was called Straw Valley, and it was developed by two men, a potter and a sculptor, who lived on the property in a house they lovingly built over two decades.

Last June, Tallus Development Group, a Raleigh-based commercial development firm owned by Bednaz, purchased the property at 5420 Durham-Chapel Hill Blvd. for \$1.5 million.

The funds were pooled from Bednaz and two other local investors, and the company has begun a \$2 million renovation of the 7,700-square-foot rectangular commercial space fronting the highway and the 4,500-square-foot house behind it.

National retailers have expressed interest in the property, Bednaz said, but instead of gutting it or tearing it down, he wanted to keep the original wood beams taken from a 1930s barn and other historic details. He hopes to restore them and keep their unique look.



Scott Bednaz, managing partner with Tallus Development Group, stands on Wednesday in the main living room of a home that his company is renovating into a space to be used for receptions, charitable events and weddings.

"I didn't want this torn down," he said. "You can't find this anywhere."

Bednaz hopes to draw specialty tenants, like a day spa, bakery or wine bar, in the commercial building. With the house, he hopes to restore it for use as a banquet space for charitable events, weddings and other gatherings.

And it's obvious it was the house — a maze of a building in the Japanese and Danish style with pressed concrete and slate floors — that really captivated him.

Bednaz couldn't help but repeatedly call it "amazing" and "beautiful" as he showed a reporter through it Wednesday.

He remembers when he first stumbled across it in 1998, he

said. Then as now, *the house* was completely hidden from view and overgrown with trees and brush, but the architecture, looking so Frank Lloyd Wright-esque, made it one of the most unique properties he had seen.

"They did this all by themselves. They were crazy," he exclaimed.

"They" were Robert Black and Ormond Sanderson, who started Straw Valley in 1959, first by renting buildings on part of a dairy farm owned by Sanderson's uncle, Woodard Russell, then as owners starting in 1964.

They started the Straw Valley Craft House and sold their pottery and sculptures along with those of

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other North Carolina potters.

In 1968, they built the rectangular building now being renovated by Bednaz. In 1972, the two-story building to the southwest of the property was built and began housing some of the area's most well-known and lasting galleries and studios.

Somerhill Gallery, Rosemary's Attic, Craft House of Durham and The Bentwood were all located there, as was Minta Bell Design Group, an interior design firm now in Meadowmont Village.

Woods and farm land surrounded the remote property back then, Minta Bell said. U.S. 15-501 had no traffic lights, there were no restaurants in the area, and Bell said Wednesday that the property was so in the country, she twice found a snake in her office.

Somerhill Gallery's owner Joe Rowand said Straw Valley was his business' very first location. He opened exactly 36 years ago on Wednesday and was a young man in 1972, fresh from studying art in New York.

Black and Sanderson's store and home were the only place with furniture from Knoll, a company with exclusive rights to products by some of the most famous

designers of the 20th century, including Ludwig Mies van der Rohe.

"I just thought, 'Oh my goodness, there is this sophisticated life here,' " he said, calling the place a "design mecca."

The location helped Rowand stay in the area and start his gallery, which today is housed at Eastgate Shopping Center in two floors with five separate gallery spaces.

As with Bednaz, Rowand remembers the house and its owners fondly.

"I remember when I was a tenant, just to go there, it took your heart someplace else," he said. "It enlarged your life scope, culturally and from a design point of view. It was extraordinary."

Black and Sanderson, who were introspective and reclusive artists, according to Rowand and others, used half of the house as living space and the other half as their studio.

Black was a potter, and Sanderson made modern sculptures on display in their courtyard. The studio portion of the house had a working kiln. They slowly added features to their house, like the Chinese bamboo, a hidden passageway and etched glass windows.

In the '90s, they sold much of the 200-acre farm inherited by Sanderson to developers of New Hope Commons. They now live in Burlington.

Until Bednaz and his com-

pany bought the property, many in Durham and Chapel Hill did not know the house existed — not even the design firm on Franklin Street that's been hired to convert it into a banquet and events space fit for catering.

"We had never heard of the house back there, so it was one of those pleasant surprises," said Craig Carbrely with Tise-Kiester Architects.

The "front" of the building toward U.S. 15-501 will be kept for dining use. A portion of the roof toward the back will have to be raised to fit a modern kitchen for catering. Pipes will have to be laid under the concrete floors for restrooms, and a portion of the outdoor space will have to be enclosed to connect the studio part of the house with the residential portion.

Black and Sanderson had kept them separate and walked outside to reach the rear studio.

Bednaz's company also is planning to punch through a road on the northeastern side of the property to New Hope Commons Drive for better access.

As for the other properties — the ones housing the psychic and The Tavern that also made up the original Straw Valley? Bednaz declined comment.

"When this is finished," he said, "it will be the most unique property in Durham and Chapel Hill."