

news & features

Store of Memories

The day of reckoning finally nears for Miller & Rhoads.

by Jason Roop

On a chilly Wednesday afternoon, a man leans back against the front of the vacant building that once was Miller & Rhoads. In front of him, eastbound traffic on Broad Street zips by construction crews working on the new convention center, past the valet parkers at the Richmond Marriott, and under the 6th Street Marketplace bridge.

A woman heading for a hot-dog vendor pulls two children along behind her, and notices the man. "How are you doing?" she asks him.

"Hanging in, holding on," he says.

In many ways, that answer could apply to the building behind him. Miller & Rhoads, beloved and boarded-up, is in its own holding pattern.

For years, proposals for downtown — including the city's official master plan — have suggested that the building come down. But now there seems to be a growing feeling that it's time to rethink that idea.

Although the 76-year-old Miller & Rhoads building has stood empty since 1990, interest in the property recently has intensified.

Last month, the city asked its property-owning arm, the Richmond Redevelopment & Housing Authority, to initiate plans to buy the building from New York-based General Electric Capital Corp. for no more than \$1.6 million.

If that sale goes through, the fate of Miller & Rhoads would be up to officials from the city and Richmond Renaissance, a public-private group that works to revive downtown. Along with a master developer who has yet to be hired, the officials would have a say in what kind of developer ends up with Miller & Rhoads. And that means the store could be torn down — or saved.

"I think it's fair to say that the city would be looking for the highest and best use of that parcel," says John Woodward, the city's director of economic development. "Does that mean that use has the building on it? Or gone from it? ... The 'highest and best' [standard] leaves it open to judgment."

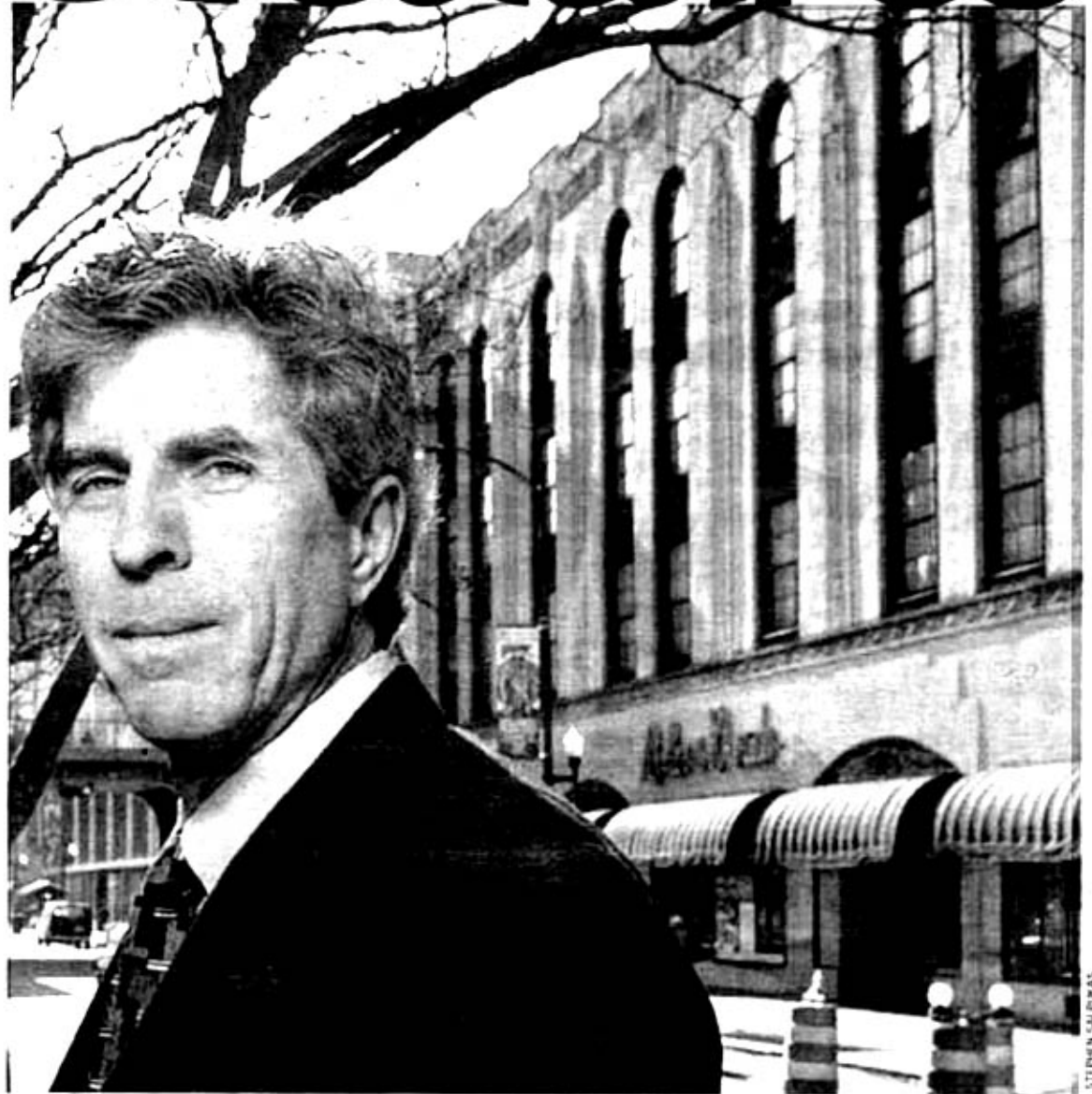
Such uncertainty worries sentimental Richmonders, who love to recall shopping at the once-bustling retailer, seeing Legendary Santa and dining at the Tea Room. Preservationists and architects, meanwhile, fawn over the building's Art Deco facade. And even commercial developers say potential tax credits make the building worth keeping.

stead, he says, it should provide some space to attract people, but immediately encourage them to enter nearby retail stores or other cultural attractions.

There's also the question of weather. "This is not San Francisco," he says. "[In the South], people do not generally spend a great deal of time — especially in the

summer months — occupying plazas. It's just too uncomfortable."

Harnsberger thinks a plaza that's about a fourth of a block could be created by demolishing Woolworth's, and renovating Miller & Rhoads for retail space and apartments. He says his idea has been met with favor by several planners and developers.



But standing in the way of saving Miller & Rhoads are some who dream of a "new" downtown.

Miller & Rhoads covers about 2,710 square feet of land. To the east, it bumps against the 6th Street Marketplace. To the west, it stretches toward Fifth Street, where it runs behind and against the vacant Woolworth's building on the corner.

That corner is directly across from the Richmond Marriott and cater-cornered from the Richmond Center, which is undergoing an expansion that would triple its size. The enlarged convention center, scheduled to open in January 2003, is supposed to revitalize downtown with thousands of tourists and commercial investments.

In 1997, when the plans were drawn for the convention center — and renovations to the surrounding area — Maryland-based consulting firm LDR International Inc. suggested creating a plaza at Broad Street between Fifth and Sixth streets.

Such a plaza, about as big as a block, would serve as a focal point for downtown activities and would try to draw visitors from the convention center into retail, cultural and tourist attractions downtown.

Save Miller & Rhoads, urges architect and preservationist Doug Harnsberger.

The plaza has long been incorporated into the city's master plan. And in February, the plaza again was included in renderings released by Richmond Renaissance, as it unveiled a campaign to build a multi-theater performing arts complex downtown.

But the plaza would be a big mistake, says Doug Harnsberger, a principal in Commonwealth Architects and a local preservationist. Harnsberger is undertaking a campaign with his architecture firm to convince planners to build a smaller plaza that includes the Miller & Rhoads building.

In essence, Harnsberger says, plopping a plaza the size of a block into downtown won't work effectively. For one thing, he says, the proposed plaza is about four times too big. It wouldn't be filled comfortably by people, thereby creating too much emptiness.

"A large open space is the opposite device that you want for pulling people out of the convention center and into the open area of Richmond," Harnsberger says. In-

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And he hopes they will run with the idea.

There definitely would be financial incentives. Renovating the building would earn a developer 45 cents on every dollar spent, thanks to federal and state grants. And the city's tax abatement program would postpone taxes on improvements to the Miller & Rhoads property for 15 years.

"That is probably the driving factor in whether or not it stays or goes," the city's Woodward says. But it's up to a developer, he adds, not more consultants.

"This thing has been planned and rendered and talked about until we're blue in the face," Woodward says. "It's time to do something." ■