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Building's hot redo is real cool

By GAIL KERR

The elevators are still where they used to be. And the great big, old-fashioned mail-drop box is too, although it's now clean and shiny.

But what made me feel like Alice in Wonderland were the bright lights, clean marble walls and elegant vase of flowers in the lobby. When a young man stepped off the elevator with his leashed pooch, I had to check the address: Yep, it was 211 Union St. The Stahlman Building. It's not just for the Metro Beer Board anymore.

City workers toiled there in a dusty, creepy firetrap. Now modern chrome-and-white apartments, with black appliances and exposed pipes, are being scooped up by renters. They are 85 percent occupied, after a restoration was completed just short of a year ago. "The building is about 100 years old now," said Bert Mathews, who, with partner Martin Heflin, owns and developed it.

City's 2nd skyscraper

The 12-story Stahlman Building was Nashville's second "skyscraper." It was more like a sky scratcher. It is named after newspaper publisher Edward Bushrod Stahlman, who owned the late Nashville Banner.

The building was a bank at first — the 3-ton brass vault is still in the basement. Over the years, the building was used by lawyers, a Western Union office, the U.S. Weather Bureau and a radio station.

Eventually, Metro government used it: public defenders, the Civil Service Commission, Beer Board and purchasing offices were once there. The Stahlman was shut down and turned over for development in 2001. It was about time.

One man recalls his days working there.

"I spent 3½ years on the 12th floor as a public defender," Mayor Bill Purcell recalled. "I knew the building was troubled when fellow city workers began using the stairs to avoid the elevators. I suppose it was when I realized the Beer Board had abandoned the building as unhealthy that I knew for sure how far it had fallen."

The building has 142 rental apartments. Of those, 28 are on the low side of the \$805 to \$2,850 monthly rent. Retail downstairs is to come.

Gone is the smoky snack bar with orange-and-yellow wallpaper, the layers of cheap vinyl floor and the grime.

Saved are the mosaic tile floors, mahogany trim, Tennessee marble and the funky square chrome letters above the entrance.

Depending on the apartment, the views look like a TV show's opening credits: the Cumberland River, downtown skyline and Public Square.

"There's an ad from the 1930s that said if you're in the Stahlman Building, it's 10 degrees cooler than it was outside," Mathews said.

Well, I don't know about that. But it's a lot cooler than when the Metro Beer Board lived there.

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