



This is another in an occasional Urban Times series on the people who helped make our Downtown neighborhoods the successes they are today.

Sally Rowland came Downtown with a design business and an appreciation of historic preservation

SALLIE ROWLAND'S MOTHER WAS A GENEALOGIST OF note, which goes some ways toward explaining Sallie's interest in history, and what she calls her natural interest in historic preservation. She sees the correlation between people and buildings.

"Natural interest," however, doesn't begin to explain how it came about that Sallie Rowland decided to move her 11-year-old business Downtown – in 1979, when the future of Downtown was far from assured. But that's exactly what she did, bringing the firm from East 38th Street to Lockerbie Square, to a century-old building that had started its life as a grocery store at the start of the Civil War.

"My partner thought I was out of my mind to bring people down here," she said, thinking back to a time when the recovery of Downtown was far from a given. Only four years had passed since the city's Bicentennial effort had brought attention to the historic neighborhood through the successful "garden parties." Only six years had passed since a group of urban pioneers had banded together with the few long-time residents to establish the Lockerbie Square People's Club.

"I had always been an historic preservation buff, and Lockerbie was the city's only historic preservation district," Rowland said. "I wanted to get Downtown."

Sallie Rowland did much more than just "get Downtown." Two years before her company's move Downtown, she was appointed to the Indianapolis Historic Preservation Commission. David Baker remembers her as a tireless advocate for historic preservation at a time when the community had not embraced the concept that historic preservation is a good idea.

Baker, now the IHPC's long-time administrator, came to the commission as



▲ Sallie Rowland

The former Simon grocery store (center) as it appeared in the late 1970s, just before Sallie Rowland moved her design firm there from East 38th Street. ▶



The historic building today, as headquarters for Vision 3. Rowland left the building in 1992 in favor of a larger building just south on New York Street, also within the Lockerbie Square Historic Preservation District. ▼



a young preservationist only six months before Sallie's tenure ended in 1984. He said that, at that time, influential people saw no value in saving Circle Theater and Union Station. "There was little faith," he said, "that historic preservation could contribute in a positive manner to the revitalization of downtrodden Downtown neighborhoods."

Baker said Rowland's leadership helped save Circle Theater and Union Station and led to more neighborhoods and historic buildings being protected by IHPC. "But perhaps her most important contribution was the work she did influencing the community and its leaders to see the benefits that historic preservation had to offer for neighborhood revitalization, urban design and general quality of life," Baker said.

More recently, Baker helped provide staff support for the Urban Design Oversight Committee which Sallie Rowland co-chaired as part of the development of the Indianapolis Regional Center Plan 2020. That experience helped cement his views.

Baker said that, in the early 1980s and before, many people believed historic preservation would lower property values, thwart development and stand in the way of progress. "Historic Preservation today is more likely to be seen as encouraging development, expanding housing opportunities and raising values," Baker said. "The groundwork for that attitude was laid by Sallie Rowland, who committed her time, talent, influence and networking skills to the task of infusing a preservation ethic into

our community."

Rowland came to IHPC in January 1977, and served as president from January 1979 to December 1984 when she left the commission. It was an era of high activity for the commission, which added four historic areas – the Old Northside, Fletcher Place, Chatham Arch and Fountain Square. Seven individual properties also came under IHPC's auspices, including Union Station, Circle Theatre and the Ruskaup-Ratcliffe House and Store in Cottage Home.

She said her proudest success during that era was the creation of the city's second historic preservation district – the Old Northside. That action came in 1979, 12 years after Lockerbie's designation. It was a time when historic preservation was not viewed in the warmest of terms. "People came (to the hearings) toting guns," Rowland said, now able to smile about the experience. She remembers telling Mayor William Hudnut, "Dodging bullets is not part of the job description."

Fortunately, no gunfire was ever exchanged. Rowland now remembers the era with fondness. "It was an interesting time," she said, "because we were the first company to take an historic building and rehab it into commercial offices." The second, she noted, was the rehabilitation of the Morrison Opera House on South Meridian Street.

Rowland also served on the board of directors of Historic Landmarks Foundation of Indiana. Marsh Davis, now president of that organization, praised Sallie Rowland "as a great friend to the organization and to historic preservation."

Rowland's initial Downtown headquarters, at 330 N. College Ave., was built beginning in 1860 as the grocery store and residence of Fredrick Simon. He added the east section of the building, closest to College Avenue, in the 1870s, when the building was Lockerbie's major commercial building of the 19th century. The third section of the building – a unornamented, two-story brick addition with large windows, was added sometime between 1914 and 1927. "We bought it for a song," Rowland said,

explaining that the addition had obviously been used as a drapery workroom which she believes was associated with L.S. Ayres. “In the attic, we found lots of old patterns,” she said.

Rowland Associates, as the firm was then known, moved to the building’s second level, while a residential interior design firm moved into the street-level space. By 1984, however, Rowland Associates took over the entire building to accommodate its continued growth. The timing was good, Rowland said, because of her uncertainty over the strength of the historic structure. “We were afraid the library on the second floor was going to end up on the first floor.”

By 1992, the firm had grown even more, forcing Rowland to move some of her staff to an office building north of the State Capitol. Wanting to remain in the Lockerbie area, Rowland was able to buy a vacant building just a block south at the southeast corner of New York Street and College Avenue. The former home of Wholesale TV was renovated from a 10,000-square-foot single-story building to a two-story, 18,000-square-foot building, a renovation directed by Rowland’s son, Eric, then an architect with a Chicago firm.

Eric joined his mother’s company in 1994 to head the architectural division, and is now a partner. He followed in the footsteps of his father, an architect, but said his move back to Indianapolis to join Rowland Design has been very gratifying. He was struck most by the many people who are genuinely fond of his mother. “I didn’t realize I had to share my Mom,” he said. “And she left big shoes to fill.”

Although Mom had mixed emotions leaving the historic College Avenue building, Rowland said the move (much of it accomplished in grocery carts borrowed from O’Malia Food Market) was satisfying because it enabled the company to stay in Lockerbie Square.

Sallie Rowland, now chairman of the board of directors, no longer comes to the office every day, but she still enjoys visiting the historic neighborhood she helped stabilize almost 30 years ago. She believes the turnaround has been exceptional, “and the



▲ Sallie Rowland (center) in 1979 with colleagues (l-r) Ron Strantz, Cynthia Von Forester and Bob Frist. The photo was taken in the upstairs conference room of Rowland’s former headquarters at 330 N. College Ave.

designation of the historic districts was the nucleus for Downtown residential growth.” But she said her biggest satisfaction comes from looking at the historic grocery store, which is now home to Vision 3, a high-tech firm. “We made,” she said, “a little jewel out of it.”

- Bill Brooks

Rowland brought a new idea to Indy

THE CONTINUED SUCCESS AND SPIRALING influence of Rowland Design has obscured the fact that design firms weren’t always an accepted part of the business community.

“We separated interior design as a profession,” said Sallie W. Rowland, who founded the celebrated Indianapolis company 40 years ago. “We didn’t sell anything except unique design.”

That was new for Indianapolis in 1968, when Rowland teamed with William B. Hawkins to launch Rowland/Hawkins Partnership at 3906 N. College Ave. Four moves later – the last two involving Lockerbie Square – and Rowland Design has never stopped moving up the ladder.

“Our success was, and continues to be, because we’re very good at what we do,” Rowland said with no false modesty. But she said the causal effect goes deeper. “We design to meet our clients’ needs – not ours,” she said, explaining that some designers have a definable look. “That’s not my philosophy.”

Meeting clients’ needs involves the art of listening, she said. “If you listen, if you take the time to hear what your client is all about – you hit the target.” Her intent is to reflect the clients’ mission – but also to stretch the clients’ imaginations.

Rowland Design has hit many targets, among the latest being the suites at Lucas Oil Stadium and both the original and redesign of the Scholars Inn. The awards have flowed in, from national, regional and local organizations. From 2002 to 2006, Rowland Design pulled down six honors in Keep Indianapolis Beautiful’s Monumental Affairs Awards; the firm won a gold medal in the 2005 International Festivals & Events Association Pinnacle Awards, and a 2003 Project of the Year Award from the International Facility Management Association.

Personal awards have piled up, as well. There are many firsts on her resume: First woman to serve as president of the Indianapolis Historic Preservation Commission; first woman president of the Economic Club of Indianapolis; first woman to

ROWLAND / page 4

chair the United Way campaign for Central Indiana. Often, she found herself the only woman serving on other boards of directors.

In March, Sallie Rowland will trailblaze once again, when she becomes the first person to receive the Legends IN Design Award from the Indiana Design Coalition, an organization of interior designers. The state group was formed to protect public health and safety and support the SAFE Coalition legislation, which addresses those issues. The ceremony will be conducted March 19 at the Indianapolis Museum of Art's Deer Zink Pavilion.

Her record was noted by her alma mater, Indiana University, which in 2008 gave her a Distinguished Alumni Service Award "in recognition for outstanding career achievements and significant contributions benefiting the recipient's community, state and nation or IU." Indiana University had this to say: "From the time of her graduation from IU in 1954, Sallie W. Rowland has been making history as a pioneer in interior design and an outstanding entrepreneur."

There's a downside to the interior design game, however. Unlike architects, designers rarely get to see their work survive the ages, which is why Rowland is hard-pressed to think of a favorite work, a crowning achievement. One project which stood out was the firm's involvement in the original renovation of Union Station in the mid-1980s. "That was huge for us," Rowland said, noting that it fell into two categories she favors – the hospitality industry and historic preservation. "It hit you right where you live," she said.

Digging deeper into the archives, Rowland singled out one of her first major clients – Purdue University. "They've been a joy to work for," she said, adding that one of her most unique assignments in West Lafayette was designing a display case for the Old Oaken Bucket.

In the end, though, pride is tempered by Rowland's team approach. "So many things I've done have been in concert with other people in the office," she said. "I don't have sole ownership."

In fact, Rowland believes in surrounding herself with talented people. "I've always tried to hire people who are better than I am – then give them their head. As long as they have the same values I have, we're okay." She added that Rowland Design's varied and challenging projects keep the talented staff stimulated. The result, she said, has led to the firm's success. "The designers who are part of this firm are so talented it's mind-boggling," she said.

- B.B.