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Former Peabody building gets new owner, life

By Tim Bryant tbryant@post-dispatch.com 314-340-8206 Feb 1, 2013



Mike Robson, president of ICC, stands for a portrait in front of a Fred Conway mural in the lobby of the old Peabody Coal building in downtown St. Louis on Tuesday, Jan. 22, 2013. Photo by Erik M. Lunsford elunsford@post-dispatch.com

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Lights will glow again soon at the historic but vacant modernist building that Peabody Coal opened near the St. Louis riverfront in 1958 as its international headquarters.

ICC Inc., an engineering consulting firm, completed its purchase of the former Peabody HQ on New Year's Eve and will move to the three-story building from Laclede's Landing.

Mike Robson, an ICC founder and its president, plans to relocate the firm by June 30. He will occupy the white-paneled, top floor corner office from where, back in the day, Peabody's boss ran the coal giant's far-flung operations.

The Peabody building, at 301 North Memorial Drive, "needs a lot of work" but, structurally, is "rock solid," Robson said.

Bargain prices in downtown space, low borrowing rates and expiration of ICC's lease on its current office led to the company's switch to owning from renting, he said.

Although the downtown office rental market remains "a bit soft," Robson said he hopes to find "a couple of good tenants" to lease the building's lower two floors.

"The idea of owning our space was certainly attractive," he said. "We like the downtown area."

Most of the work over the next five months will involve renovation of the third floor to remove office walls and open space for ICC's approximately 50 employees. The new owner will replace worn carpeting, redo scuffed walls and build a spacious lobby with a view of the Gateway Arch.

In addition, the roof will get a deck for employees to relax and a 25-kilowatt array of solar panels that Robson said will produce about a third of the building's electricity needs.

Because the building is on the National Register of Historic Places, ICC is limited to what it can do to the exterior. So ICC will seal and regrout the building's exterior and refurbish its 1950s windows.

"It should pretty much look the same as now except cleaner and spiffier," he said.

ICC also will preserve a colorful mural by St. Louis artist Fred Conway. The large mural inside the first-floor lobby depicts coal mining, shipping and conversion to electricity. The basement, where Peabody operated a computer center until 2006, will be redone as workout space, a game room and a conference center.

Robson estimates the project's cost at \$2.5 million, including the building's approximately \$1 million purchase price from the Gahlberg Trust. The new owner is seeking historic preservation tax credits to help fund the work.

ICC has leased space on Laclede's Landing since Robson and three colleagues left Anheuser-Busch in 1986 to start the engineering services firm.

"When we first got going, I was the kid," he said. "I was 29."

Historic building

When opened 55 years ago, the Peabody building, designed by St. Louis architect Ralph Cole Hall, was an outpost of mid-century modern architecture in a block of dilapidated offices and factories.

Within a decade, however, construction of the Mansion House complex of apartment towers and low-rise commercial buildings nearly engulfed the squat Peabody building and transformed the block overlooking the Arch grounds.

The block had been redesigned as a result of the decision in 1955 to extend Interstate 70 through downtown, according to the building application for the National Register of Historic Places.

Peabody spent 25 years in the building before considering a move. By the early 1980s, the growing company had several offices downtown. The coal company, which later took the name Peabody Energy, eventually consolidated its headquarters at the Gateway One building on Market Street.

ICC is leaving the cobblestone streets of the Landing for busy Memorial Drive and the shrieking stream of eastbound I-70 traffic where it dives into the depressed section.

"Right now the cars whiz by here real fast," Robson said.

Tim Bryant

Tim Bryant is a reporter for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.