DRINKING IN HISTORY

Horseshoe Bar will get a new life as an upscale bar and grill

By Eric J. Greene
The Grand Rapids Press

David Munro worked at a Steketee's warehouse on Grandville Avenue SW as a teen-ager in the 1970s and fell in love with a boarded-up old building he passed each day on route to work.

He was mesmerized by the Horseshoe Bar's unique architecture, its mysterious history, and the aesthetic integrity that gave the neighborhood south of Fulton Street.

As he became a successful businessman, Munro moved into the warehouse where he had worked and turned it into his furniture installation headquarters, Systems Installations Co., a block down from the bar.

This year, keeping with his love of restoring and using antiques, the 41-year-old Munro has struck up a new venture — something a little different from his furniture business.

In February, the Grand Rapids resident teamed up with computer programmer David Langin to buy the Horseshoe Bar building down the street from Munro's office. They plan to turn the 105-year-old, three-floor building into an upscale bar and grill called "333," which is its address. Renovation, which Munro said will cost less than $1 million, began last month.

Langin said the first and second floors will be for the bar and dining areas. The kitchen will be downstairs and the third floor will likely be used as office space.

According to Munro and local librarian Cheryl LaMar, the building has been a hotel and dry goods store, a bordello and gambling establishment, a black-owned hotel, and finally was the Horseshoe Bar until the late 1970s when the building was boarded up.

LaMar's grandfather, Frank LaMar, owned the building from the mid-1940s until his death some 30 years later.

The business was so good, LaMar said, that some of the biggest names in jazz and blues came there to play. Duke

interior makeover: Workers gut the inside of the building in preparation for a planned October opening.

"I didn't even tell my wife before I did it, so I had to go home and tell my wife that I had bought this decrepit old whorehouse."

DAVID MUNRO
333 owner

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The building's architectural character is what first caught David Munro's eye.
HORSESHOE Building was built as a hotel in 1891

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Ellington, John Lee Hooker, Count Basie and Koko Taylor.

She said her grandfather was active in the community, sponsoring baseball teams and fishing tournaments and also was a successful businessman. She said the first and second floors were used for the bar, kitchen and grocery.

The third floor was off limits to Cheryl and her cousin Anita Hurst.

“We could run around anywhere in the place, but we couldn’t go on the third floor. You know what was going on up there,” Hurst said.

As the story goes, the third floor was where the brothel was run.

Munro and Langin, with the help of chefs Michael Kalanowski and Harold Timber, are hoping for an Oct. 1 completion date to coincide with the opening of the Van Andel Arena.

As Munro tells it, Ted Allsburg, the previous owner, was looking to sell the building for a long time. Munro said he had had a lot of offers, but none serious.

“I called him up and he said, ‘If you’re serious, meet me down there’, so I met him at the building on a Saturday and we went in and I saw it and said, ‘What do you have to have?’ and I wrote him a check for a down payment right then.

“I didn’t even tell my wife before I did it, so I had to go home and tell my wife that I had bought this decrepit old whorehouse,” Munro said laughing.

The brick-and-timber structure was built originally by L.B.D. Stolpe as a hotel and dry goods store in 1891, catering to railroad travelers passing through the city.

Langin, a 46-year-old Grand Haven resident, plans to take over the daily operation of the restaurant. He said he is happy to move out of the computer business and into something new. Although he has no restaurant experience, Langin said his specialty is in managing employees.

“What I know about is the management of people and keeping people doing what they know best. I’ve had very little direct restaurant experience, but I’m a team kind of player,” he said.