

New life: Alumnus guides building restoration

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It had been a car dealership when it opened in 1955, but the historic, modern-era building at 701 Baronne St. in downtown New Orleans has new life. New cars have given way to grocery baskets, because this is the new home of Rouses Market, revitalized in a major preservation project headed by Tulane architecture alumnus John Williams.



Formerly Pontchartrain Motor Co. in 1955 and, later, Sewell Chevrolet, the modern-era historic building at 701 Baronne St. in downtown New Orleans has re-emerged as a Rouses Market. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

The store, eagerly awaited by growing numbers of Warehouse District, French Quarter and downtown residents who lacked close access to a large supermarket, opened in mid November.

"It's revitalizing the neighborhood ? it's incredible to see the activity," says Williams, whose [architectural firm](#) is located just a block away.

Perhaps the modernist architect Edward B. Silverstein, whose firm built the structure for Pontchartrain Motor Co., would be pleased at the transformation. Williams

certainly is: “Every building needs to be preserved and put back into commerce. That's the highest form of sustainability.”

After restoring “400 or 500 buildings” in his career, Williams says he's “really good at finding incentives for folks to be able to justify restoring a building”? that is, matching the Rouses purchase of the structure with a suite of historic tax credits to make the renovation possible.

Williams says the building was carefully restored, inside and out, as the tax incentives require. The approval process for those incentives is daunting, and “a little bit over the top” for a chain like Rouses, which has nearly 40 stores in Louisiana and Mississippi.

Some modern-era structures in New Orleans have been razed, including several schools this year that had won design awards, but forward-thinking Rouses officials saw merit in the clean lines of the vacant car dealership, with Williams guiding the preservation work.

“There is the power of one â?| you can effect change, like Rouses has effected change here,” Williams says.