

Ybor City gets ritzy new look

William Field wants to turn an X-rated theater into a vaudeville showplace and a deserted club into a hot nightspot.

By **BERNICE STENGLE**
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Ask William Field about Tampa. "This town is going to have the greatest boom in the country." Ask him about Ybor City. "The revitalization of the theater district will bring life back ..." Then, ask him about himself. "I'm an optimistic person. I bank on the future." Field's aspirations are contagious.

An hour with him, and one can envision a block of deteriorating structures turned into a quaint, Victorian village of professional offices. A rundown, porno-film house becomes a first-run movie theater with vaudeville shows. And a large, 71-year-old landmark glows with off-Broadway productions, first-class restaurants and full Saturday night houses.

"I have very ambitious plans," Field said.

Earlier this month, Field paid \$325,000 for the Ritz Adult Theatre,

1503 E. Seventh Ave., in Ybor City. In October, he and partner Carol Vigderman will purchase the Centro Espanol club, 1536 E. Seventh Ave., also in Ybor City, for \$500,000. He has plans to restore both.

Meanwhile, Field has begun the first part of a \$1 million renovation of seven homes he owns with another partner on a Hyde Park block.

In that neighborhood, seven deteriorated homes — the oldest dating to 1889 — will be restored to their original Victorian design and leased to professionals and businesses for office space.

Field plans to landscape the area — bounded by Hyde Park Avenue on the east, Cedar Avenue on the west, Grand Central Avenue on the north and Cleveland Street on the south — with a fountain in a park-like setting.

In Ybor City, Field will renovate the Ritz, most recently a XXX-rated movie house, and change it to a first-run movie theater with live entertainment, such as vaudeville shows. The Centro Espanol will become an entertainment facility with restaurants and a theater.

"Theater is the heart and soul of the city," said Field, who has dabbled in acting and sung on stage with the Florida Lyric Opera.

His friends and colleagues are not surprised that Field, an avowed supporter of Tampa's arts community, has tackled such sensitive projects. They describe him as a businessman who relies more on his

emotions than shrewd calculations. However, such gut feelings, said one, often turn to profits.

Said Field, "I made money through the appreciation of properties in Florida, and I believe in putting it back in the state."

About 10 years ago, Field and a partner from New York purchased eight structures — seven homes and a carriage house — on the block in Hyde Park. They paid about \$25,000 apiece for the rundown homes, Field said, which he estimates are now worth about \$150,000 each — before renovation.

The homes are on a block of land zoned for high-rise construction, near the University of Tampa and in the area being referred to as Downtown West. The oldest one, which has nine fireplaces and a carriage house, was built in 1889. Together, they represent about 25,000 square feet of potential office space.

Within the past four months, Field has renovated one of the Victorian structures on 217 Hyde Park Ave., rescuing elaborate woodwork and trying to restore the house to its original image — complete with transoms and sash windows that can still be opened.

On the neighboring, and oldest house, he has removed a storefront, which was added in the 1930s, and is preparing to begin work on it.

Offices for Normandy Investment Co., Field's developing firm,

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are now housed in the renovated building, and he will refurbish the other buildings as he gets demand from potential tenants. Field envisions a courtyard with fountains in the space behind the buildings and hopes the office space gains a reputation as a unique location.

"I believe eventually it could command as high a rent as downtown," he said.

He has also begun work on the 500-seat Ritz Theatre, which he plans to open by January.

Field said the building, which includes six storefronts and eight apartments, may cost between \$300,000 and \$400,000 to renovate.

His most ambitious undertaking is the Centro Espanol club, which he believes will soak up millions of dollars before it is completed.

The 71-year-old structure, with 21,000 square feet of space, has been regarded by more than one person as the "gem of Ybor City."

The center, when completed, will have restaurants and a theater, and Field already is searching for potential, "high-calibre" tenants.

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Tribune photo by JIM REED

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