

370 BROWN

Building an Urban Landmark in the Heart of Birmingham

By Susan Thwing

In downtown Birmingham, where nearly every square foot of land carries both value and expectation, constructing a new building is rarely just about the building itself. It is about fitting into an established urban fabric, maintaining the pedestrian experience, respecting neighboring businesses and residences, and finding a way to build within a site where space for construction is almost nonexistent. At 370 Brown, those challenges were multiplied.

The new four-story mixed-use development occupies virtually an entire city block between Brown and Daines streets, directly behind the new RH Gallery and near the Daxton Hotel. The approximately 133,000-square-foot development brings together commercial and office space, 22 luxury rental residences, below-grade parking, a landscaped courtyard, and an amenity-rich rooftop within one of Southeast Michigan's most prominent downtown districts. The project represents an approximately \$44 million construction investment.

For the team responsible for bringing it to life, however, the significance of 370 Brown extends beyond its statistics. Developer Boji Group, Saroki Architecture, and Sachse Construction approached the project with the understanding that they were reshaping a highly visible Birmingham block. The location presented an opportunity to replace underutilized

properties and surface parking with a development designed to contribute to the city's walkable downtown for decades.

It also presented a construction puzzle. The zero-lot-line site left virtually no staging area. An existing building stood approximately 10 feet to the west. Immediately east, another major construction project — the RH Gallery — was rising at essentially the same time. Construction traffic was restricted from Daines Street, leaving Brown Street as the primary lifeline for deliveries. Beneath the development, a parking structure complicated equipment placement above. Going vertical required a tower crane and the associated state, federal, and local approvals, as well as air-rights agreements with neighboring property owners. Solving those challenges demanded an unusually high level of coordination.

"I would say, from the get-go, not just me but the whole development team — the developer, the designers, Sachse





The completed 370 Brown brings a new mixed-use presence to downtown Birmingham, combining office and residential space within a four-story structure whose brick masonry, expansive windows, and architectural detailing were designed to complement its urban surroundings.

Photo credit: Anthony Samona Quik Pix Photography

— it was always going to be a premier development in downtown Birmingham," said John Fekaris, Senior Project Manager for Sachse Construction. "When you hear 370 Brown, you know it's going to be kind of an exclusive address and a first-class building, and that's been the theme from beginning to end."

Completing the Block

The origins of 370 Brown are closely connected to another major addition to downtown Birmingham: The RH Gallery. Saroki Architecture had been working with RH to identify a Birmingham location for the company's gallery concept. An earlier site on the north end of downtown did not materialize, leading the team to explore the south end and ultimately assemble the parcels necessary for the RH development. That process also revealed the opportunity next door.

"We were involved early in the design and with the partnership team for both RH and 370 Brown," said Victor Saroki, FAIA, President of Saroki

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Construction of 370 Brown unfolded within the tight confines of downtown Birmingham, requiring careful coordination of cranes, equipment, deliveries, and street access while work continued alongside neighboring buildings and businesses

Photo credit: Anthony Samona Quik Pix Photography

Architecture. "We identified this site, and then the site where 370 Brown was." Five partners ultimately participated in the development, according to Saroki, with Boji Group's Ron Boji serving as developer. From the outset, RH and 370 Brown were conceived not as isolated buildings but as complementary pieces of a larger urban composition.

For Boji, the opportunity was even broader. "It's really a dynamic opportunity because it reshaped an entire city block in what's known as Birmingham, Michigan, one of the most walkable communities not only in the state of Michigan but in the United States," Boji said.

The properties that previously occupied portions of the block included older, underutilized buildings and a significant amount of surface parking. Once RH committed to Birmingham, Boji said the development partners recognized the opportunity to complete the block with a larger mixed-use project.

The resulting 370 Brown development extends from Brown Street on the north to Daines Street on the south. Its first two floors provide commercial and office uses, while the third and fourth floors contain 22 luxury apartments. Beneath the building is a parking level with

56 spaces, along with generator and mechanical rooms and storage areas. At the center is a landscaped courtyard with a water feature and gathering spaces, while the rooftop incorporates a live green roof, cabanas, fire features, another water feature, grills, and a pedestal paver deck.

The development was shaped in part by Birmingham's zoning requirements and in part by what Boji describes as the property's "highest and best use."

"The ground floor has to be some type of retail-office environment," he explained. "The second floor has to be an office. The third and fourth floors must be residential. So we took what was by code, and complemented and accentuated it by the mixed-use development that we put together."

JPMorgan Chase ultimately leased approximately 40,000 square feet spanning the commercial and office portion of the development, providing an anchor tenant before the building was completed. Above it, the development team pursued a different segment of Birmingham's residential market. Rather than maximizing the number of units, the team reduced the original unit count to create 22 larger two- and three-bedroom

luxury residences, aimed in part at people downsizing from large homes in Birmingham and surrounding communities while seeking to remain in the city.

The fourth-floor residences take advantage of the building's setbacks to provide substantial outdoor terraces, some accessible from dining and family rooms and others from primary bedrooms. Residents also have access to the rooftop amenities and courtyard. The result is density, but density calibrated to the Birmingham market.

Designing Two Buildings as One Urban Experience

The simultaneous development of RH and 370 Brown gave Saroki Architecture an unusual opportunity: to design two substantial buildings side by side while knowing that each would influence the other. RH fronts Old Woodward Avenue, while the larger 370 Brown development sits immediately to its west. Although the buildings have different programs, their relationship was considered at virtually every level — massing, materials, colors, pedestrian circulation, and outdoor spaces. "It was intended to design both RH and 370 Brown so they were cohesive and they could work together," Saroki said. That relationship becomes particularly apparent at pedestrian level.

RH incorporates four building entrances. At 370 Brown, courtyards and pedestrian vias were positioned to connect with those entrances as well as with 370 Brown's own access points, effectively creating a network of pathways rather than two buildings turning their backs on one another.

"It was important that from a pedestrian standpoint there were these courtyards and vias that sort of all worked with each other," Saroki explained. "We wanted to have our building with the courtyards and the vias connected into RH's entries as well as our entries."

Both buildings incorporate active rooftops, reinforcing the architectural dialogue between the two developments. "We were lucky to have the benefit of designing two significant buildings on a site at about the same time, knowing that each is going to influence each other," Saroki said. "And then just knowing

how the patterns of the city work, from vehicular and pedestrian [movement], and the scale and the massing, to make sure these two buildings complement each other — even just the material palette, the colors, everything being considered."

Inside 370 Brown, the design had to reconcile very different users without making the building feel fragmented. The commercial and residential components have separate elevator systems but share a common lobby with a reception desk and concierge service. The intent, Saroki said, was to establish a consistently upscale character throughout the development.

For Saroki, whose firm has worked in Birmingham for decades, that urban relationship is as important as the individual architecture. "It's built with integrity, quality. It's timeless in our opinion," he said. "It has a very good urban scale and pedestrian scale."

Building in a Tight Urban Footprint

If the architectural opportunity was unusual, so was the construction challenge. 370 Brown is a large building on a site that offered almost no construction real estate beyond the building footprint. "It spans from Brown Street on the north to Daines Road on the south, like an entire block," Fekaris said. "And there was a zero lot line ... so there was like zero real estate to work with on the project."

The neighboring conditions only tightened the vise. To the west, an existing building stood approximately 10 feet away. To the east, construction of the RH Gallery was underway for a significant portion of the 370 Brown schedule. The two major projects therefore had to coordinate access and construction activities within the same constrained downtown environment.

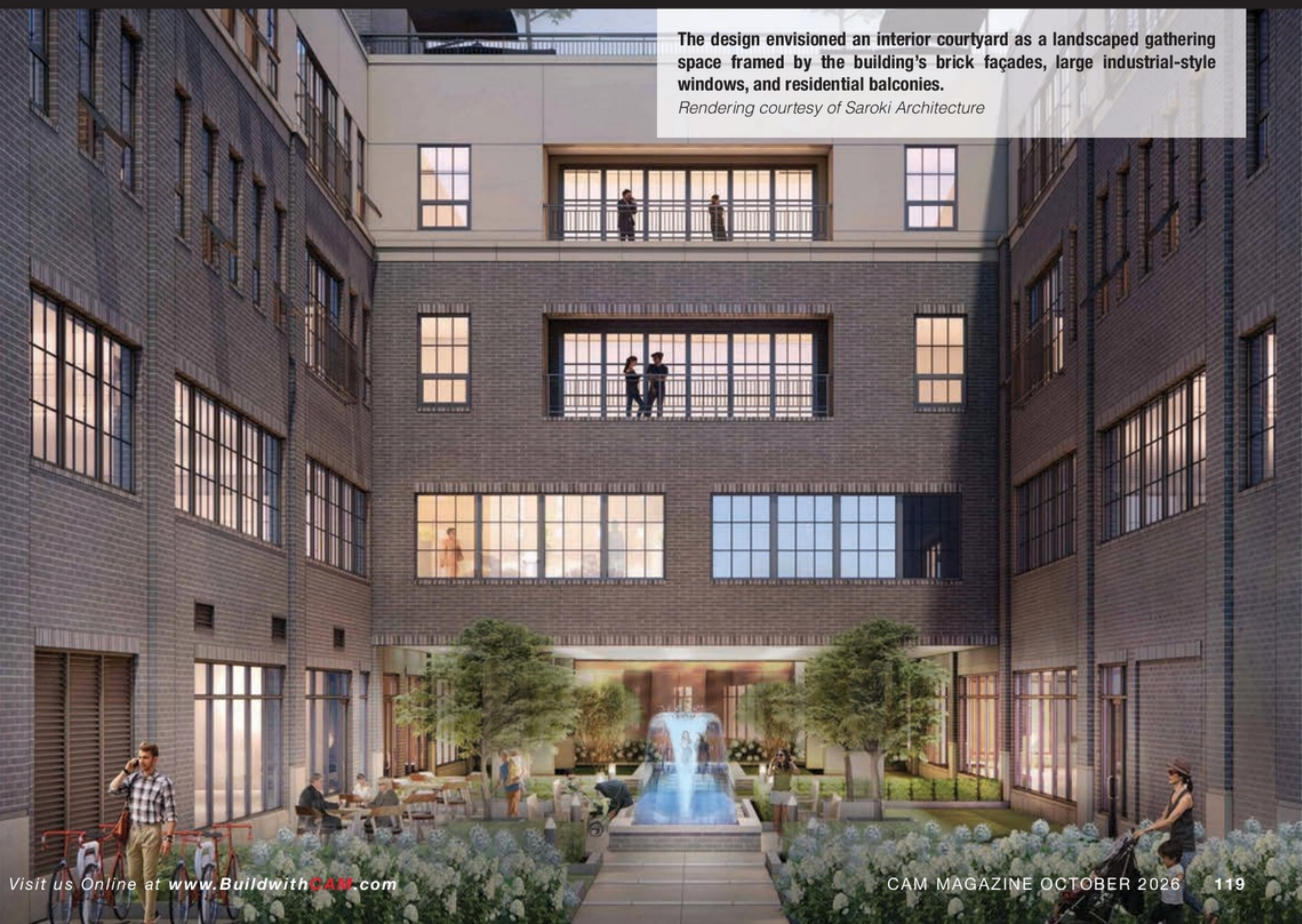
The City of Birmingham prohibited construction traffic from using Daines Street on the south side of the development. That left one lane along Brown Street to handle the project's flow of materials.

Every delivery became a scheduled event. "Deliveries had to be planned by the hour," Fekaris said. "Everyone had to sign up on a board — if you're having a delivery, it has to be on the board for a particular time. And you come in, you unload, and you leave."

There was virtually no room to stockpile materials on site, so the team relied heavily on just-in-time deliveries. A truck arriving too early could be nearly as disruptive as one arriving late. The logistics planning extended beyond convenience. Maintaining surrounding streets, businesses, and residences as normally as possible was a fundamental

The design envisioned an interior courtyard as a landscaped gathering space framed by the building's brick façades, large industrial-style windows, and residential balconies.

Rendering courtesy of Saroki Architecture





The 22 residences were designed as spacious two- and three-bedroom homes, with a high level of finish extending throughout the interiors, including the kitchens, where cabinetry, countertops, tile, flooring, and residential equipment contribute to a polished, upscale environment befitting a premier Birmingham address. *Rendering courtesy of Saroki Architecture*

project objective. "There was a lot of planning, a lot of thought that had to go into how to build the building, how to get in and out of the building, and how to not disrupt the neighboring businesses and streets and residents," Fekaris said.

The Tower Crane Solution

With conventional crane positioning largely eliminated by the lack of available space, the team turned to a tower crane for vertical construction. That solution introduced another series of engineering and regulatory challenges. The crane had to be positioned for maximum efficiency while accounting for swing radius, height, lifting capacity, and the urban surroundings. Its foundation had to be engineered to support operations throughout construction.

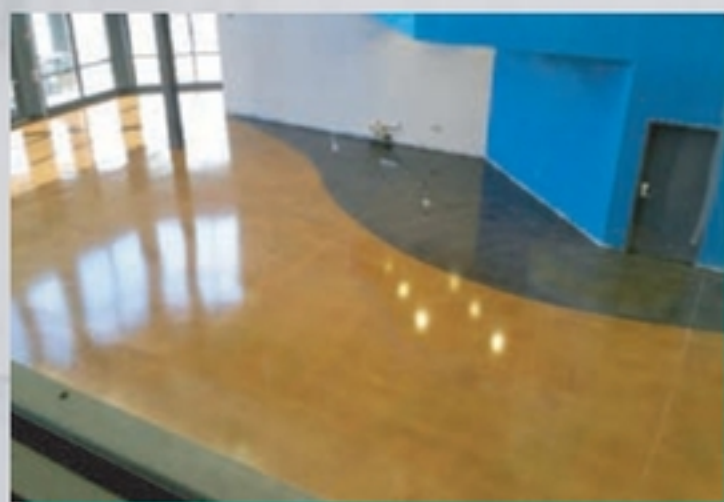
Then came the approvals. Because of the crane's height, the project required a Tall Structures Permit from the Michigan Department of Transportation. Its proximity to Oakland/Troy Airport also required FAA approval. Air-rights agreements were executed with the City of Birmingham and adjacent property owners on both the east and west sides, allowing the crane to swing legally and safely beyond the project's property lines. Even once the building was enclosed, the below-grade parking structure continued to affect construction strategy.

"We utilized swing stages in a lot of places rather than heavy equipment because there's an underground parking level," Fekaris explained. "Even though there was an open courtyard in the middle of this building, because of the load requirement structurally, we couldn't put heavy equipment on that courtyard." Each constraint required the team to rethink what might have been routine on a less restricted site.

Seeing Inside the Walls

Technology also gave Sachse another way to manage the complexity. The team used OpenSpace, a construction documentation platform that allowed project personnel to walk the building with a camera and create 360-degree imagery linked to the plans at critical stages of construction.

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The rooftop amenity space extends residential life outdoors with landscaped gathering areas, shaded seating, and water features, creating a private retreat above the activity of downtown Birmingham.

Photo credit: Anthony Samona Quik Pix Photography

For a project with 22 high-end residential units and extensive systems concealed behind finished walls, that documentation became particularly valuable. "You walk every inch of the building with a camera and you capture a 360-degree image of the entire building," Fekaris said. "Let's say you did the walk before drywall and you wanted to go back and see something that might be in the wall. You can go back through OpenSpace and see, 'Oh yeah, there's backing in this location,' or 'There's plumbing in this wall.'"

OxBlue construction cameras mounted on neighboring rooftops provided another layer of documentation. Cameras captured activity around multiple elevations, allowing the team to review site conditions remotely and revisit images from earlier stages of construction. The accumulated footage could also be transformed into a time-lapse record of the project from its earliest stages through completion. For a building where coordination was measured not simply by days but sometimes by delivery hours, that visibility was another tool for keeping the work moving.

Collaboration by Proximity

Technology helped connect information. Geography helped connect people. Sachse maintained a project office directly across the street from the construction site. Boji Group's offices were about a block away on Old Woodward. Saroki Architecture was another block away. When a question arose, the team did not necessarily schedule a virtual

meeting or wait for the next formal project conference. They walked over.

"Being geographically right around each other helped this project," Fekaris said. "Rather than having phone calls and team calls and people being distanced, if you needed to see something, Saroki would come down and they would look at it, or Boji would come down and we would talk things through."

Regular site walks brought the owner, architect, and contractor together in the building. Ownership remained closely engaged in details throughout construction. "We were a true team," Fekaris said. "It was really refreshing, the collaboration that occurred."

Formal communication was equally intensive. Saroki estimated that the team conducted more than 150 owner-architect-contractor meetings during the project, and those meetings continued through the final stages as the residential units neared occupancy. "Construction always has its challenges, but I think we had a good team from an ownership standpoint," Saroki said. "There were a lot of meetings, a lot of communication."

The simultaneous RH construction added another participant to that communication network. Because RH began construction before 370 Brown and the two buildings were being developed within feet of one another, coordination between the project teams was essential. The process reflects one of the less visible achievements of 370 Brown: complexity was not eliminated; it was managed.



Private terraces extend the residences outdoors, with large, glazed openings that create a strong connection between interior living spaces and the building's upper-level terraces.

Rendering courtesy of Saroki Architecture

Details Worth the Difficulty

As construction approached completion, Fekaris said reactions from people walking through the development began confirming one of the team's primary objectives. Quality was visible. "From what we're hearing as we're finishing and people are walking through, [they're] very complimentary of the fit and finish and the quality of the work," he said. "That goes hand in hand with this type of building." That finish extends from the commercial spaces through the residential floors and amenity areas.

The courtyard introduces natural light and landscape into the center of the building, with a water feature, benches, and gathering areas intended to soften the urban environment. Above, the green roof and resident amenities transform the rooftop into an outdoor amenity space rather than simply a place for mechanical systems. Private terraces extend the residences outdoors and give upper-floor units a connection to downtown.

Below grade, 56 parking spaces provide dedicated parking for the residential component, an important consideration in a building designed for

people who may be downsizing their homes without necessarily downsizing expectations.

Boji sees that combination as a response to a particular Birmingham market — residents who want the services and walkability of downtown without sacrificing space, quality, or amenities. Many potential residents, he said, are moving from sizable homes in Birmingham, Bloomfield Hills, West Bloomfield, and surrounding communities. Some may maintain more than one residence but want a Birmingham home near friends and family.

That influenced the decision to create fewer, larger units. "We made them very large — very large two bedrooms, three bedrooms," Boji said. It also illustrates the economic dynamics behind the project.

Boji said new development in many Michigan communities requires economic incentives to bridge the gap between construction costs and achievable rents. Birmingham's strength is the market itself; its walkability, downtown amenities, and demand can

support rental rates capable of sustaining contemporary construction costs.

"The economic development for the City of Birmingham that they offer to developers is just that — the City of Birmingham," Boji said. "We're able to obtain that because of the walkable community, because of the amenities that the City of Birmingham has literally at your footsteps."

A Public-Private Partnership

While much of the project story centers on the development, design, and construction teams, Boji emphasizes another partner: the City of Birmingham. On a project that required extensive planning, permitting, street coordination, crane approvals, and interaction with the surrounding downtown, the relationship between the development team and city officials was critical. Boji credited Birmingham's elected officials as well as its city manager, planning board, planning department, and engineering personnel with helping the team navigate the process. "We would not be as successful if we didn't have a great partnership, a public-private partnership, with the City of Birmingham," he said.

That partnership was particularly important because 370 Brown was never an isolated construction site. Downtown continued operating around it. Businesses remained open. Residents, vehicles, and pedestrians continued moving through surrounding streets. RH Gallery was under construction next door. Every major construction decision had the potential to extend beyond the property line. For Sachse, minimizing that impact was part of the job.

Built to Last

The CAM Project Achievement Awards recognize completed buildings, but the people behind 370 Brown consistently describe their ambitions in longer terms. Saroki talked about timeless architecture. Fekaris talked about a building that will stand the test of time. Boji talked about legacy. "I truly do think that this building will stand the test of time," Fekaris said. "I hope they'll see that there was a lot of thought and care put into creating this development, and that it adds to the

block, to the community, to the street, rather than detracting."

The transformation is tangible. A lot that had included underutilized buildings and surface parking now contains office and commercial space occupied by a major financial institution, luxury housing, underground parking, pedestrian spaces, landscaping, and rooftop amenities. "I think it'll add value," Fekaris said. "It'll be looked at as adding to the community for sure." Saroki sees a similar measure of success in the way the building meets Birmingham itself.

Residents can step outside into a walkable downtown, with RH Gallery and its restaurant next door and the Daxton Hotel nearby. JPMorgan Chase employees work within the same integrated environment. Pedestrian routes and courtyards help connect the individual developments into a broader district. "We think our residents are going to enjoy living in town," Saroki said. "We just feel like it'll be a win-win for everybody."

For Boji, the measure of success extends a generation or two further. Asked what he hopes people will say about 370 Brown 10 or 20 years from now, he turns not to leasing rates, square footage, or construction costs, but to his four daughters and the grandchildren he hopes will someday walk through Birmingham. He imagines them looking at the building and at development that may follow it.

"I want them to say, you know, Papa Ron, he envisioned this opportunity," Boji said. "He changed the dynamic of already a very upscale community like Birmingham, and they took it to another level."

His hope is that future development will demonstrate that 370 Brown did more than occupy a desirable piece of property — that it helped establish what could come next. "More important to me is my family and the legacy that I hope to be able to implement inside of the City of Birmingham and to my family for generations to come."

That may ultimately be the clearest expression of what the team set out to accomplish at 370 Brown. The development filled a city block, but its achievement lies in how that space was transformed: with architecture intended to age gracefully, construction engineered around extraordinary constraints, commercial and residential uses tailored to the community, and pedestrian spaces designed to strengthen rather than interrupt downtown Birmingham.

For the construction team, getting there meant orchestrating just-in-time deliveries through a single street, erecting a tower crane amid neighboring properties, working above an underground structure, building beside another major project, documenting what disappeared behind the walls, and maintaining almost constant communication among contractor, architect, and developer.

For the city, the result is something much simpler. Where there was once surface parking and underutilized property, there is now a building intended to become part of Birmingham's fabric — not simply for its first tenants, but for decades to come. 🏠

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PROJECT TEAMS

LISTED IN THE ORDER THE ARTICLES APPEAR IN THIS ISSUE



KRESA Career Connect Campus | Kalamazoo

Owner: Kalamazoo Regional Educational Service Agency

Architect of Record/Civil Engineer: Wightman

Design Architect: DLR Group

Construction Manager: CSM Group

Engineer: IMEG Corp.

Trade Contractors & Suppliers:

- Aluminum & Glass – Forman Glass, Galesburg
- Asphalt Paving – Michigan Paving & Materials Co., Canton
- Casework Millwork – Hazelhoff Builders, Inc., Kalamazoo
- Concrete – Cannon Concrete Construction, Rockford
- Doors & Frames – S.A. Morman & Company, Grand Rapids
- Earthwork – Hoffman Brothers Excavating, Battle Creek
- Electrical – Buist Electric, Inc., Byron Center
- Elevators – Schindler Elevator Corp., Morristown, NJ
- Fencing – D-K Fence Company, Inc., Battle Creek; and Straight-Line Fences, Grand Rapids
- Fire Protection – Blaze Fire Protection, Inc., Walker
- Floor Covering – Yoxheimer Tile Co., Jackson
- Fluid Applied Flooring – Applied Flooring, Inc., Mason
- Food Service Equipment – Stafford-Smith, Inc., Kalamazoo
- General Trades – Clark Contracting Services, Lansing
- HVAC – R.W. LaPine, Inc., Kalamazoo
- Interim Construction Cleaning – American Redecoration, Inc., Galesburg
- Landscaping – DJ's Landscape Management, Grand Rapids
- Lockers – Rayhaven Group, Inc., Livonia
- Masonry – Leidal & Hart Mason Contractors, Livonia
- Mass Timber – Christman Constructors, Lansing; Element5, Ontario, Canada
- Med-Volt Electrical Switchgear – Buist Electric, Inc., Grand Rapids
- Membrane Roofing – McDonald Roofing & Sheet Metal Company, Inc., Jackson

- Metal Studs – Bouma Corp., Grand Rapids
- Metal Wall Panel – Universal Wall Systems, Inc., Grand Rapids
- Misc. Metal Fab – OIK Industries, Inc., Kalamazoo
- Overhead Doors – Overhead Door Company, Battle Creek
- Painting – H & H Painting Company, Kalamazoo
- Pilings – Hardman Construction Inc., Ludington
- Plumbing – R.W. LaPine, Inc., Kalamazoo
- Precast Concrete – Fabcon Precast, Grand Rapids
- Sealants & Caulk – CJ's Coatings & Sealants, Hudsonville
- Site Concrete – Cannon Concrete Construction, Rockford
- Structural Steel – Van Dellen Steel, Inc., Dutton



Southeast Michigan Psychiatric Hospital | Northville

Owner: Michigan Department of Health & Human Services

Architect: Integrated Design Solutions

Construction Manager: The Christman Company

Interiors: architecture+

Foodservice: Professional Foodservice Design, Inc.

Engineers: Becket and Raeder, SDI Structures

Trade Contractors & Suppliers:

- Asphalt Paving – Nagle Paving Company, Novi
- Audio Visual Systems – Bluewater Technologies, Wixom
- Civil, Mass Excavation, & Site Utilities – Site Development, Inc., Madison Heights
- Construction Fencing – Nationwide Construction Group, Richmond
- Dental Equipment – Dental Health Products Inc., New Franken, WI
- Demolition – Renascent, Indianapolis, IN
- Electrical – Shaw Electric, Southfield
- Elevators – TK Elevator Corp., Livonia
- Exterior Envelope Testing – Testing Engineers & Consultants, Inc., Troy
- Exterior Glazing – Curtis Glass Company, Troy