New Twist on an Old Tale...
Historic *Phoenix Building*
Rises from the Flood

There must be something magic about the name "phoenix."

In mythology, the phoenix bird dies a fiery death every hundred years and a new bird rises from the ashes.

In downtown Grand Forks, North Dakota, a historic structure rebuilt in 1898 after a fire the year before—and renamed Phoenix as a result—is being reborn after being nearly destroyed by the record 1997 Red River Valley flood.

The Phoenix Building in March 2000 as renovation begins.

This time, the "new" Phoenix will be better able to withstand another flood, thanks to disaster-resistance measures being put in place by owners Bill Schoen, Jim Kobetsky, Todd Mitzel and Mike Kuntz.

The owners, all from the Grand Forks architectural firm of Schoen Associates, are giving new "life after flood" to nearly a block of historic buildings overlooking the river. Considered a significant part of Grand Forks' commercial development in the early 1900s, the buildings were deemed important to save when this city began rebuilding after the 1997 flood.

"We wanted to make an investment in downtown," Schoen said, "and these buildings looked like they could be really great once they're redone. But we also want to minimize future flood damage, so we're taking extra steps in the renovation."

The project includes an empty lot and three buildings: the Phoenix, which originally housed a dry goods store and was the premier commercial structure at the time; a building built in 1931 for the Red River Power Company; and the Panovitz Building, custom-built in 1904 as a furniture store. The empty lot housed a fourth building, rebuilt in 1951 for a department store, which was torn down by the city after the flood because it was too damaged.

To begin the project, the partners purchased the three flood-ravaged buildings and the empty lot for $20,000. With the help of a $1.1 million Community Development Block Grant and another $1.5 million in cash and loans, the partners will spend nearly $3 million to recreate the historic block.

A contractor installs window framing in the Panovitz Building.

So to protect that investment and to reduce the damage potential from flooding, Schoen said, several special features are being put in.

In the Phoenix and Panovitz buildings, which anchor each end of the project, new structural supports have been added and the existing basements have been eliminated.

"These buildings are about a foot-and-a-half below the base flood elevation and the last thing we want is a basement full of water," Schoen said. "So we're going to get rid of the basements altogether by removing the wooden floor structure, filling them in with clay and pouring a concrete slab floor."

Because the buildings are considered historic, local floodplain ordinances do not require that they be elevated, Schoen said. Raising the buildings would be extremely difficult structurally and cost prohibitive, he added.

Restoration of the Panovitz Building is well underway.

"In the Red River Power Company Building, which is poured-in-place concrete and very solid, we'll still have a basement," Schoen said. "But we're not putting a single thing in it, no elevator and no mechanicals. We're just putting in basic lighting and a sprinkler system. The basement will be available for incidental storage and as a storm shelter."

A new building is being constructed on the empty lot to fill the space between the Phoenix and the Red River Power Co. buildings. Because the new building has to meet current floodplain requirements, the structure primarily will house a parking garage with a small commercial area in front and two apartments on the second floor. A waterproof membrane will be installed both under the main floor and 24 inches up the walls to floodproof the building. There will not be a basement.

The Power Company and Panovitz buildings also will have commercial space on the main floor, apartments on the upper floor and parking in the back 70 feet of the structures. In all three buildings, special concrete-block walls are being used to separate the parking and commercial spaces instead of traditional wood frame and drywall that could be damaged by floodwaters. The inner cells of the blocks will be filled—as high as 4 feet—with concrete to add strength and to prevent water from getting inside the walls.

The Phoenix begins to take on a new look by August 2000.

The Phoenix Building will be returned to its original use with commercial space on the main floor and apartments on the upper floor.

Mechanical equipment for all the first-floor commercial spaces will be hung from the ceiling so that the utilities are at least 12 feet from the floor and away from floodwaters, Schoen said. Electrical circuit panels also will be elevated well above the 1997 flood level.

If Schoen, 47, sounds determined to be flood-resistant, it's because he has good reason. Both the memories and the cost of mucking out the flood-filled basements of his home and four other commercial properties still haunt him. At one property alone — a warehouse converted to apartments — he spent $250,000 to replace flood-damaged mechanical systems. And, Schoen says, he'll be 75 years old by the time he pays off his flood-repair loans from the U.S. Small Business Administration.

Artist rendering of the Phoenix project as it will look when done. Courtesy of Schoen Associates.

By comparison, the flood-resistant measures for the historic renovation project have added only about $130,000 to the overall cost. The majority of that expense is related to eliminating the basements.

"If we had another flood, that one hundred and thirty thousand dollars would be a drop in the bucket compared to the cost we would incur if we hadn't done these things," Schoen said. "There's no question that the money is well spent."

When the historic renovation project is completed in January 2001, it will join the ever-growing disaster-resistance efforts now throughout a city that was once brought to its knees by a devastating flood and fire.

And the Phoenix will rise yet again.