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BUILDING VIBRANT SPACES

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Building Vibrant Spaces

Real estate development group with a social purpose revitalizes Fargo by investing in downtown spaces



Kilbourne Group, a vertically integrated development firm in Fargo, North Dakota, is spearheading the transformation of Fargo's downtown district with multiple exciting infill projects.

What started as a way for now Governor and philanthropist Doug Burgum to invest capital into Fargo's historic downtown buildings at risk of demolition is now so much more. Mike Allmendinger, President, is proud of the purpose that Kilbourne Group has grown out of.

"What's unique about Kilbourne Group is that we never started with the idea of being a real estate developer," he says. "We started with, 'How do we have an impact on downtown Fargo?'"

According to Allmendinger, developing downtown Fargo is one of the best ways to have an impact on the health of the city and its economy as a whole. Kilbourne Group uses infill and redevelopment projects to achieve its goals.

Allmendinger has worked with Burgum at Kilbourne Group for many years. Together, they have accomplished a number of catalytic projects that have transformed downtown Fargo. Twenty years ago, when they started, the value of properties in Fargo amounted to only \$200 million. By 2020, the firm had helped quadruple the property value in such a unique cultural district.

CREATING VIBRANT DOWNTOWNS

Kilbourne Group's projects are guided by the belief that a well-developed downtown positively affects all aspects of city life. Allmendinger is excited about the impact that a vibrant downtown can have on the health of the city at large, the economy and its workforce.

"Vibrant downtowns create smart, healthy cities. That's a core belief that we have for the work that we do," he says.

During development since the 1970s, Fargo was designed around cars, so creating a walkable downtown has been a challenge. However, Kilbourne Group thinks this challenge is worth taking on because of the many health and wellness benefits people gain from living in a walkable city.

Kilbourne Group

PRESIDENT
Mike Allmendinger

LOCATION
Fargo, North Dakota

To achieve this, Kilbourne Group has made a commitment to keep Fargo “human scaled.” The vast majority of its projects are maxed out at five or six stories. Even its largest project, Block 9, is 18 stories at its peak, but its podium is only five stories high, with the tower set back in the corner of the block. Allmendinger says that Brian Lee from SOM, the building’s architect, did an elegant job of making the tower a focal point of the district while harmonizing it with the surrounding architecture.

While there is a purposeful design reason for the size and scale of Kilbourne Group’s projects, limiting the number of floors is also a practical solution to a structural problem. Fargo is in the remains of glacial Lake Agassiz, and its clay soil goes about 100 feet deep in most places. Allmendinger likens the struggle to trying to build buildings on top of peanut butter.

A vibrant downtown also helps companies attract a strong workforce. Kesler, one of Kilbourne Group’s current projects, holds 96 apartment units and retail on the first floor. Kilbourne Group is very excited to be working with ESG, an architecture and design firm from Minneapolis, and local architecture and design firm TL Stroh to bring stunning architecture to the city.

Kesler is among three of the firm’s mixed-use projects now underway that will bring new residential units and retail space to make downtown Fargo a more desirable place to live.

REVITALIZING ABANDONED CITY SPACES

In Kilbourne Group’s early years, the firm focused on renovating old historic buildings. Now, the group is largely focused on infill projects.

“During those urban renewal days of the ‘60s and ‘70s, the federal government was paying people to rip down buildings to create surface parking lots, so they could compete with the strip malls...” Allmendinger says. “Now, we’ve been able to go back and put buildings back in those locations [like they were] originally designed.”

Kilbourne Group has educated both themselves and the community to bring to light the benefits of building on empty lots throughout the city. Filling these parking lots is not only best for the city and its taxpayers, but it’s also the most sustainable way to grow.

“Re-utilizing an existing building is a huge step in the right direction for environmental [sustainability] instead of tearing it down, throwing it away and starting over,” Allmendinger says.

Of the four projects the company has under construction right now, three of them are mixed-use brownfield projects, where Kilbourne Group is taking bulldozed, abandoned lots and turning them into beautiful spaces to live.

In addition to the projects currently underway, Kilbourne Group has completed about 25 projects throughout downtown Fargo. Allmendinger remains passionate about the impact these projects are having on the downtown neighborhood and the city and says their work is already coming to fruition.

“We love the projects that we’re working on, but really, we love the impact on the neighborhood,” he says. “It’s how each of these mixed-use buildings creates a neighborhood; that’s what’s so special about what’s happening in downtown Fargo. And when you’re here on the sidewalk, you feel it and you see it.” ■

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