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## Downtown designers branch out into retail

Obelisk Home to be most prominent face of Taylor-Martin.



*Didi Tang*  
*News-Leader*

Two shoppers walked in, and J. Martin couldn't help but listen up, eager to learn how they would judge his latest venture.

"Wow,' did you hear that," said Martin proudly as he stood in the home furnishing store stacked with an assortment of lamps, chairs, screens and end tables.

Martin and his partner Nathan Taylor, both 41, have recently opened Obelisk Home, a trendy home store near Boonville Avenue and Phelps Street in downtown Springfield.

The 3,200-square-foot shop dovetails the success of their six-year-old furniture design and sourcing company BridgeBlue. It also will be the most prominent face of Taylor-Martin Holdings, which started with the design firm BridgeBlue but has expanded into retail, real estate and a line of home products for dogs.

All are converging at the 39,000-square-foot, two-story warehouse building at 214 W. Phelps St., which Martin and Taylor bought in early 2007.

Both are designers and have become businessmen.

"We always thought it was an interesting building," Martin has said. "With its dilapidated condition, basically being just a shell, we could envision the potential."

A year and half later, the couple are still turning the old structure into a modern building to house a string of their ventures -- the furniture store, the company BridgeBlue and seven luxury lofts.

Stepping outside Obelisk Home, Taylor pointed to three adjacent buildings Taylor-Martin Properties has acquired.

The one across West Phelps Street will become a warehouse for Unleashed Life, a business that makes stylish products for dogs, such as beds, bowls and canine-themed paintings.

The building at 503 N. Boonville is planned to be leased out for a coffee shop, and the structure at 427 N. Boonville will be renovated, Taylor said.

"We feel this is such an important investment that we need to protect it," Taylor said, referring to their

signature building at 214 W. Phelps St.

## Ready for MSU

The cluster of buildings by Martin and Taylor is tucked between the Roy Blunt Jordan Valley Innovation Center and Missouri State University's art and design program in Brick City on Mill Street.

The university has put forward a proposal of IDEA Commons -- IDEA stands for Innovation, Design, Entrepreneurship and Arts -- in downtown Springfield to spur economic growth.

To fulfill that vision, MSU expects to finalize acquisition of several downtown properties, including the former Willow Brooks plant, in early 2009.

Rusty Worley, executive director of the Urban Districts Alliance, said the enterprise by Martin and Taylor "adds nicely" to the developing plans north of Park Central Square.

"Well, it expands the momentum from the core downtown and is reaching toward the government plaza and Commercial Street," Rusty said.

When Taylor and Martin bought their first property on Phelps Street, MSU had yet to move in.

On Wednesday, Martin said he welcomes the university. "They are a good neighbor," he said.

Students from the art and design program, Martin said, can be potential employees at BridgeBlue.

## One of a kind

The economy has been bad, especially for those in housing-related industries, such as home furnishings.

But Martin said BridgeBlue is still growing and they are optimistic about their nascent retail effort.

"When there's a turnaround, we will be positioned to take advantage of that," he said.

BridgeBlue designs home furnishing items and outsources production to countries such as China, India, Vietnam and the Philippines. The company counts several major national retailers as their clients.

Taylor said they have been building an inventory over the last two years to open Obelisk Home so they could sell BridgeBlue products directly to customers.

They named the store after an ancient architectural element depicting a tall, tapering monument with a pyramidal top, or Obelisk.

The shop, which opened for business in late November, doesn't carry just BridgeBlue products; it offers rugs, upholstered furniture and candles from other companies.

The store also displays and sells artwork by local artists. "Our goal is to provide a unique shopping experience," Martin said.

"We can't reorder," Taylor added, explaining many items are one-of-a-kind.

Initial responses from the local market have been encouraging, Martin said.

"People say they feel like they were in New York, and we consider that a compliment," he said.

## Custom lofts

On the second floor of the building, Martin and Taylor are putting in seven luxury apartments, which they plan to rent out at \$850 to \$1,350 per month.

A work of professional designers, those lofts can brag about their doors, cabinets, hardware, light fixtures and even tiles because those features have been custom-designed.

Martin said he is confident those lofts will find occupants when they become available by mid-January.

Matt Miller, who owns several downtown apartment buildings, said the market has been "extremely strong" for center city apartments.

"We've been completely full since last summer," Miller said.

Miller also is the developer of Brick City. He sold the warehouse building on West Phelps Street to Martin and Taylor.

## Big upgrade

The BridgeBlue company started from a modest home operation in the Phelps Grove neighborhood.

Since 2002, it has grown into a multimillion-dollar business with 20 employees. The workers are excited about moving into the new facility, Martin said.

"We are going to go from one toilet to nine toilets," he said. "We didn't have money, and we could only afford one toilet."

In addition to an ample supply of the plumbing fixtures, BridgeBlue employees also will enjoy an open work space with a clerestory and a rooftop deck.

They now are working out of an industrial-looking building on North Washington Avenue.

Their canine companions, which have always been welcome, will get more amenities, too, as the new facility will have a dog run connected to an indoor dog play area.

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