

*Turning Louisville on its head*

## Eclectic art lovers push Museum Plaza, a 61-story centerpiece of a \$380 million project.

By [DREW JUBERA](#)

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Louisville, Ky. — They threw a \$1,000-a-ticket pajama party — black tie optional — to open their hotel: five renovated warehouses crowded with \$10 million worth of their own wickedly up-to-the-moment art. Among the works throughout the hotel, called 21C were four bold, life-sized statues of nude children behind the check-in desk, and a video projection on the lobby floor of a sleeping couple tossing in bed.

Almost 200 movers and shakers showed up like the horsey set's rendering of a Playboy Mansion bash — a guy in lime green underwear, a young woman in her grandmother's lingerie — to toast the creation of Laura Lee Brown and Steve Wilson, the whiskey-money couple turning this old river town on its head.



BRIAN BOHANNON/AP

**Steve Wilson and Laura Lee Brown** are building Museum Plaza, a \$380 million structure in Louisville, Ky., that will include a hotel, 85 luxury condos, 150 lofts, an art gallery and plenty of office space.



This schematic shows how the Museum Plaza, in all of its 1.2 million-square-foot glory, will change the city's skyline.

The party moved from sidewalk cocktails to five-course dinner to live entertainment: an Irish singer, a New York comic, a private show by Cirque du Soleil. An art school grad holed up all week with a cot and a computer inside a ground-level window looking out on West Main Street, her performance piece dubbed "Life as Art." A chandelier created by a renowned Austrian artist hung above a street corner. It made the sound of someone breathing.

Yet as curious as the night was for downtown Louisville — "Weirdest gig I'll ever do," allowed Mark Geary, the singer flown in from Dublin for last weekend's event — it pales beside the couple's next act: a 61-story skyscraper shaped a lot like a three-legged chair.

Designed by an on-the-rise architect from one of the world's most acclaimed firms, Museum Plaza will remake the skyline of the nation's 43rd largest metropolitan area. Its centerpiece is a 22nd floor, acre-and-a-half contemporary art museum.

In less than two years, Brown and Wilson have emerged as the city's, and perhaps the South's, unlikely "It" couple, parlaying a passion for art into what they hope is a whole town's transformation.

"They've rattled some teeth that needed to be rattled," said Bob Hill, longtime local columnist for The Courier-Journal. "Louisville's always been more than what it thought it was, and now it's figured it out. It's been a basketball and beer town until now. Now we have some way-out art to go with it. And it's home folks doing it."

### Buying into the vision

Brown, 65, is the wealthy great-granddaughter of George Garvin Brown, founder of the multibillion-dollar Brown-Forman liquor company, whose products include Jack Daniel's and Southern Comfort. Wilson, 58, is son of a fifth-generation farmer, and a former aide to three Kentucky governors. It's the second marriage for both.

In a city built on tobacco, bourbon and horses, Brown and Wilson see cutting-edge art — along with UPS' air hub and a burgeoning health care

industry — as a new engine to move Louisville into a new century (21C stands for 21st century). And after a decadeslong nap from which it has begun to stir — the last downtown tower, the city's tallest at 35 stories, went up 13 years ago — the town is buying into the vision.

"Ten years ago, a 61-story building in Louisville was beyond my imagination," said local developer Bill Weyland. "It still is, a little bit. But when you get entrepreneurs with the capacity to think that big, that's something that's been lacking in Louisville for a long time."

For most Louisvillians, Brown's and Wilson's projects came out of nowhere. Before opening the art hotel and unveiling the skyscraper, scheduled to break ground in February, the couple raised bison on 1,000 acres about 25 miles north of downtown. They also loaded their 18th-century farmhouse with contemporary art collected during trips all over the world. A skyscraper wasn't even on their radar 18 months ago.

"Louisville has a tradition of being traditional," said Brown, whose family has been among the city's most prominent for more than a century. "I don't know what makes it so difficult to get the old guard on board."

"There are parts that are open to newness," she added. A cousin, Ina Brown Bond, is co-chairwoman of the new Muhammad Ali Center, dedicated to the native son's life and ideals. Last year's opening drew the likes of Bill Clinton and Angelina Jolie.

"I tend to think it's like getting a mouse with cheese. If you put it out there, they'll find it."

### **Not-so-humble beginnings**

Brown and Wilson grew up on farms worlds apart.

Wilson's father cleared virgin woods in western Kentucky, where the family home stood on stilts without water or electricity until Wilson turned 6.

The farm prospered and Wilson's father built a three-story house in nearby Wickliffe, population 800, and became mayor. Wilson worked the farm year-round, baling hay, cutting silage, riding cattle off the lot to check for diseases.

His window on the world was 4-H; he went to camp every summer and "won all the blue ribbons I could." He got a 4-H scholarship to Thailand. To promote the program, Wilson rode a horse more than 300 miles from Wickliffe to Louisville. That showmanship resurfaced later when he staged events while working in public relations and arts commission jobs at the governor's mansion.

He attended Murray State University in Murray, Ky., because his father wanted him close enough to "work the farm on weekends." He loved art and politics. When he graduated, Wilson headed straight to Frankfort, the state capital, where he first worked for his brother-in-law, future Gov. Julian Carroll.

"I couldn't wait to get off the farm," he said.

Brown calls her late father, then Brown-Forman's CEO, a "gentleman farmer" who raised cattle for beef and show. Her early years were spent on rolling land just miles from the bison farm she lives on today. She sometimes rode with her father around the property in a truck. She had a pet raccoon. She took museum tours started by her mother. Before going off to boarding school in New York, she car-pooled to school. One family picked her up in a limousine.

"An old limousine," she insists.

Brown attended Sweet Briar College, an all-girls school in Virginia, where she majored in French "to please my father." She lived in Paris for three months after graduation, then in San Francisco before marrying and raising three children on a spread outside Louisville. She started to collect art in her late 20s.

Brown and Wilson met in the early '90s. With both divorced, a mutual friend sat them together at a dinner party because of their common interest in art. Wilson, flamboyant and extroverted, fell for her quickly. Brown, elegant and more introverted, took her time.

"I was from the wrong side of the tracks," Wilson said. "Her friends and family were protective. Her housekeeper hardly opened the door for me."

### **Pushing preservation**

But the attraction of opposites worked.

"She's got the background and genes to do something," said Sally Campbell, daughter of another Kentucky whiskey dynasty and an ex-sister-in-law, "and he's not someone to shy away from being different."

Rural land conservation became their cause; Brown still regrets the sale of her family farm, now a McMansion subdivision. They bought an abandoned farm overlooking the Ohio River and began to raise organic bison and rehab the farmhouse, then a quaint ruin. (They also keep two camels, a nod to Wilson's camel-back marriage proposal during a trek through Pakistan.)

The restored house is packed with contemporary art: paintings, photographs, video, sculpture — the edgier the better. A pond beside the house, complete with a cement bottom, nearly replicates the pond in a Bruce Weber photograph from their collection.

They bought more land to conserve, but grew tired of just sitting on it. So they took their preservation instincts downtown, where Louisville has undergone a boomlet of converted residences, museums (including the Louisville Slugger bat factory) and nightspots. They decided the area needed more of what they had.

"We have this fun collection," said Brown, "and we wanted to bring it downtown."

That began the ball rolling on 21C. But the couple soon thought bigger. They wanted the venerable Speed Art Museum, located a few miles south and on whose board Wilson sits, to open a contemporary art space downtown. They found land, tax credits, traveled the world for similar examples — until the Speed turned them down.

"It never occurred to us to do it ourselves," Wilson said.

### **Mammoth plans**

Within a year, an initial plan for a 22-story block building became a \$380 million, 1.2 million-square-foot mixed-use series of Tinker-Toy-like glass towers.

With Brown's name and money easing banks and investors, the structure actually grew to spread the risk: it's really like five manageable, midsized developments put into one structure. It'll include 300,000-square-feet of office space, a 300-room hotel, 85 luxury condos and 150 lofts (Wilson also insisted on a farmer's market). All of it feeds into an "island" on the 22nd floor that will house the museum, as well as the University of Louisville's master of fine arts program.

Seeing the plans the first time, Mayor Jerry Abramson thought the building might swallow downtown. "My original reaction was, 'It's going to have to grow on me,'" he said. It did. Abramson now calls Museum Plaza "an icon." Architect Joshua Prince-Ramus described it for *The Wall Street Journal* as possessing the raw, awkward beauty of "the gap between Lauren Hutton's teeth."

"It's a very rational idea," said local developer and project partner Steve Poe. "It just doesn't look rational."

"Why Louisville?" added Ramus from his New York office. "Without a client such as this, nothing happens, let alone something this ambitious."

Few who know Brown and Wilson are surprised it came together so quickly.

"They like to move fast," said Lois Mateus, a Brown-Forman executive who introduced them. "Laura Lee has the means to facilitate things. She's made of good stock. Her whole family thinks in terms of giving back."

Yet Brown often gets vertigo thinking about what they're doing.

"I'm still freaking out," she said the afternoon after the hotel party, sitting with Wilson on a stone patio behind an old house of her's on 40 acres that's now a bed and breakfast. "I'll be walking down the street with somebody and go by a building and say, 'How tall is that?' And they'll say, '32 stories.' And I'll realize what we're building is twice as big. And I'll just shrivel."