

A New Plymouth developer has made it his personal challenge to revive a landmark New Plymouth building. **John Anthony** found out what's in store for Top Town.



City landmark: Left, Top Town in 1987 - the year Taranaki Farmers sold the Devon St complex to a Nelson syndicate for \$6 million, and right, Top Town in 2012.

Top Town getting \$1m makeover

Of all the buildings Kevin Doody has restored none has been a bigger challenge than the New Plymouth Top Town revamp.

Doody, who has owned the 50-year-old building since last year, said he was spending more than \$1 million doing up the mall.

When he bought the building two years ago it was in such a bad state something needed to be done, he said.

"You should have seen downstairs when we took over, it was a bloody dog."

Doody started a total refurbishment of the building shortly after buying it.

"It's a landmark building in the city.

"The bones of the building are unreal."

So far the ground floor had been completely refitted, new lifts had been put in, major maintenance was carried out on the roof and new air conditioning was installed.

Scaffolding went up three weeks ago so work could begin on a major refurbishment of the exterior.

The building's entire exterior is being painted, the windows are being made larger and the front will take on a new facade.

Interior work yet to be completed includes rebuilding the

escalators and renovating more office space on the third floor.

Doody said he hoped to have the whole project finished by the end of summer.

"Basically we're doing what should have been done years and years ago."

The building was originally built for the Farmers Corp in 1960, he said.

Commercial buildings required constant maintenance and upgrading, something which hadn't happened at Top Town for decades, he said.

It still had the original lifts when Doody took it over, he said.

Doody said he took the project on as a personal challenge to restore a landmark New Plymouth building.

"It's been a bloody eyesore for quite a number of years.

"It's in the middle of the city and it's never going to get knocked down, so it had to be done."

The building has three floors, each with an area of about 2700 square metres.

Already the renovations had cost more than \$1 million and were expected to climb further, he said.

But, for a building like this, the costs were a must, he said.

"If you put a budget into this you'll never do it properly."

In saying that, the project was still an investment opportunity, he said.



Spruce up: Top Town owner Kevin Doody at a renovation site on the third floor of the Top Town complex.

Photo: CAMERON BURNELL/FAIRFAX NZ

"Hopefully there's some monetary gains in it."

Doody said he had done up plenty of buildings since he first

got into property. But this was by far the biggest challenge he had taken on, he said.

The public's impression of Top

Ground floor renovations had altered the layout of the arcade, resulting in more foot traffic passing through rather than having it slip out side doors.

Doody had been "collecting" buildings since he was 21, and now owned more than a dozen commercial buildings in New Plymouth.

During that time he had established strong working relationships with good contractors, he said.

"We've got a good bunch of contractors that have worked for me for years and years."

Top Town renovators Street and Cook Construction had been working for Doody for about 25 years, he said.

Painter Phil Murch Ltd, Andy Smaill Electrical and Copestake Gas and Plumbing had all worked with Doody for more than 16 years, he said.

So far Top Town had 10 tenants including the movie theatre.

There were five spaces on the ground floor ready to be leased and more to be ready by early next year, he said.

Modster PC, the one-stop computer and technology shop, has been in Top Town for nearly four years, owner Steve Mayes said.

Modster PC was initially an internet-only based business, but moved into Top Town to test the

water, Mayes said.

"At the time the mall was really run down and the rents were really low," Mayes said.

The initial plan was to relocate after 12 months when the customer base had built.

Instead Modster PC just relocated to a different space within the mall, closer to the road.

"What we've got now is a nice-looking shopfront with good security and underground parking."

Now the mall was refurbished the business would stay put, he said. "I think once the place fills up with more retailers it will be away."

Modster PC had picked up a lot of business from large employers located behind Top Town, he said.

These included ACC, PricewaterhouseCoopers, Tanker Pacific, TenderLink, Origin Energy, Work and Income and the New Plymouth Club.

When the picture theatre was showing good movies foot traffic and business also increased substantially, he said.

The mall used to be a site of a much vandalism but that had stopped since the renovation, he said.

Doody said he had noticed a difference as well.

"When I bought it every weekend someone had come in and kicked holes in the walls.

"It was pretty rugged."

TDM 26/11/2012 +