



# The good energy of the Smiley Building

**Its tenants include artists, businesses and non-profits.  
But what exactly goes on in this eco-friendly building?**

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The south side entrance to the Smiley Building.

Way up on a government hill, there stands a small-handed, orange President-elect who believes that climate change isn't real. There are a contingent of people who agree with him. Incredibly, climate change is still a controversial topic. Even more contentious of a debate is how to regulate businesses into becoming more Earth-friendly. For some reason, being eco-friendly appears to many as anti-business.

The Smiley Building is a prime example of how being environmentally friendly doesn't haven't to butt heads with having a thriving business culture. It is a mixed-use building that provides a template for how to incorporate renewable energy and conservation techniques into a capitalist setting. It also demonstrates how having a diverse collection of business increases the overall vitality of not only the

structure but the town it's housed in. Gather ye round and let's get deep on how the Smiley Building came to be and what actually goes on inside it.

Isn't the Smiley Building that old school?

In 1936, the Smiley Building was built. To set the scene, F.D.R. was president. Dorothea Lange took her famous "Migrant Mother" photo depicting the struggle of the working poor. The Great Depression was seven years into a 10-year stretch. Somehow, the Smiley Building was built. Actually, not somehow. Good ol' Roosevelt's New Deal had created the Public Works Administration. The PWA granted the school an \$86,198 grant to help complete architect Charles Thomas' plans. A junior high school was born and named after a former superintendent, Emory E. Smiley, a man alleged to know all 1,600 names of the kids in his school district.

Who the heck buys an abandoned junior high? After about 60 years, the Smiley Building was left fallow. Even though the building was sturdy enough to outlast a zombie apocalypse, it was an energy hog and there was a new middle school in town. Nobody wanted to deal with the massive demolition or renovation process. Until 1997, when brothers Charles and John Shaw, along with Lisa Bodwalk, bought the behemoth.

Seriously, the place is big ... 45,000 square feet big. You can fit about 18 average American-sized houses (2,500 square feet) inside the Smiley Building. That's a helluva big space to up and decide to renovate.

Charles Shaw, a part owner and jack-of-all-trades, said, "Just to put it in perspective, at the time, it cost the same as a house. I looked at it in the sense of, wow, it is an overwhelming project but not an overwhelming cost. And this is what I do. I'm a plumber and an electrician and builder. So we do everything in house, me and my crew. We do all the work. We have a shop in the basement. We make most of the furniture and tables. We built the entire café."

The crew is three people big. The renovation is reaching its second decade. "Most people don't know the Smiley Building is not done. It's a work in progress, and we are not even close to done. We are always transforming space."

Renovation-shenomination, so what? So what? The Smiley Building is a perfect example of preservation meets up-cycled architecture. The lighting is LED. Motion sensors alert lighting and ventilation. Water conservation techniques are in use. There are high-efficiency wood and natural-gas-fired boilers. Twenty-thousand square feet of roof had to be redone and solar panels now cover it. The energy bill went from about \$5,000 a month to zero. Yes, zero. In fact, the Smiley Building is now pumping money back into the grid.

The Smiley Building is a success. Since opening to tenants, the Smiley has been full with a waitlist to get into studio space there. According to Shaw, "What's exciting to me is that people can think it's a community building and it has that feel, but it is also a legitimate business that uses almost no energy. I'm trying to make a model of what I hope we can be."

But what actually goes on in there now? The Smiley Building has become a mixed-use space. It's residential, commercial, institutional, and slightly industrial. "I wouldn't call it an art colony. I try to push the limits of the mixed use. That's way more interesting to me," said Shaw. "I try to have a little of

everything that I like here. There's dance, yoga, artists, builders, nonprofits, architects, designers, and a lot of environmental organizations. That is a big part of what I'm interested in. Taking care of the planet. But also, I can genuinely say I really like every tenant. And there's around 50 tenants."

The Smiley Building is completely open to the public. Folks can walk right in, and when they do, they're greeted by The Smiley Café, owned by Carrie Hladik and Franci Stagi. Serving everything from soup to sandwiches to vegetarian fare and gluten-free baked goods, the Smiley Café provides a warm welcome when you first walk into the large, somewhat intimidating building.

The Smiley Café is a coffee shop with a handmade menu. Brick walls give texture. High ceilings bring spaciousness. Plenty of work tables and comfortable couches invite people to stay for longer than one cup of coffee. Hladik said, "If you're sensitive to it at all, the energy is amazing." Once people enter the Smiley Building, they tend to love it. "It is a unique experience. Not just what Charles does to the building, but the people that it draws. Everybody from college kids just trying to study who feel good in here to moms who want to expose their kids to different activities and lifestyles. It's hard to put in words, but it is a unique experience ... I feel like community is a really good word for this place."

From tai chi and channeling sessions to animation studios and bakers, the Smiley Building has brought a wide range of art, business, and nonprofits together.

"Everybody's doing their thing to enjoy the space and the beauty of the space," said artist Becca Conrad-Whitehead, who has studio space on the second floor. "They embrace its history and look forward to its future."

Every once in a while, Conrad-Whitehead comes across someone new to the current incarnation of the Smiley Building.

"I've had people who come to the studio who are like, 'I took calculus there. [Or,] that was my old biology [classroom] ... and that was the old gym.'"

There are dance classes for disabled adults and children next to a solar company next to ukulele jam circles. While there is no central directory online that is up to date, there are directories posted at the building's entrance.

And, OMG, the fliers. There is a bigass promotion wall that showcases not only what's happening in-building, but also around town. Want to know what's happening in Durango? Check out the Smiley Building's flier wall. Walk straight in the front door, past the café, past the fish mural, and there will be an entire wall to your right covered in upcoming events.

What about the future?The current political climate has a lot of folks (appropriately) down-and-out. But. As author, activist, and broadcaster Studs Terkel would've said, were he still around, "Hope dies last." That seems to be the general vibe at the Smiley Building, too.

When confronted with the idea that mixed-use buildings that incorporate high-density, pedestrian-friendly living, retail, and office space aren't exactly the norm, Hladik said, "I think that people who have the vision that came with this building are going to do great things, no matter what. I am trying to have awesome faith in humanity."

Durango is seeing the direct effects of rental costs for both housing and commercial use increasing. One has to wonder how much more affordable housing and business could become if more mixed-use buildings were created within town limits. Could our already bustling small-business culture strengthen if more spaces like the Smiley Building became available? Could some of our atrocious housing costs be soothed if residential mixed-use buildings started to appear? Who has the funding for these projects, and is it something that the city should directly be a sponsor of? The Smiley Building starts an excellent conversation about where an eco-friendly Durango with neighborhood character could go.

Are people even interested in sustainability? Can a green future continue in our current political climate? Shaw has a bright vision of the future. "I don't worry about politics. My hope is that this is a wake-up call. No one is going to do this for us. To me, it lights a fire under us to create the world we want here, not to wait for anyone to do it for us. It makes me want to do more environmental actions and work for the things I believe in."



Shaun Stanley/BCI Media

Hula hoops hang on a wall on the top floor of the Smiley Building.



An ocean-themed painting on an interior wall of Smiley Building as people work on their laptops in the cafe area.



People congregate in the café of the Smiley Building, some working, some eating and some in conversation with friends.



Shaun Stanley/BCI Media

A woman climbs a stairwell inside the Smiley Building past a painting on a wall beneath her.



A woman reads notices posted on a community board within the Smiley Building.



Shaun Stanley/BCI Media

Abstract artwork becomes more abstract with veiwed within a stairwell of Smiley Building.