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### Building a legacy

*A family-owned development company refurbishes landmark buildings, saving history while adapting them for modern reuse.*

BY CHRISTIANNA MCCAUSLAND  
PHOTOGRAPHED BY KIRSTEN BECKERMAN

If you want to know what a prison cell was like in 1854, Marty or Tony Azola will be happy to lock you up. The family's business, Azola Companies, was behind the recent \$1.7 million renovation of the old Towson jail, now called Bosley Hall. Today's tenants are companies not criminals, though business is still conducted "behind bars" since much of the original architecture, including cell doors, remains. In the basement, a commercial wine storage facility allows connoisseurs to stow their prize bottles in the pokey.

Bosley Hall is the latest addition to the adaptive reuse portfolio of Azola Companies, whose history is as interesting as the buildings it revitalizes. During its nearly 40-year existence, Azola has refurbished visible projects such as the Bromo-Seltzer Tower, The Oregon Store (now Oregon Grille) and the Rockland Grist Mill.

The company is entirely family-run. Martin "Marty" Azola serves as president; his wife, Lone, is president of a sister company and keeps the books; their daughter, Kirsten, does design and marketing; and a son, Mat, handles West Coast projects. Nearly eight years ago, another son, Tony, joined the clan, stepping into the position of vice president.

Marty's father, Joseph Azola, opened J.R. Azola & Associates in 1966, repurposing his background in heavy construction into the renovation of old buildings in Baltimore, including the C.J. Benson Building, which now houses the Annie E. Casey Foundation, and the Graham-Hughes Mansion in Mount Vernon. After attending Virginia Tech, Marty entered the Air Force and was considering the path of a career officer when a phone call changed everything.

"My dad called me while I was in the service and said, 'Come join me,'" recalls Marty, 64. "[Dad] would find the deal, arrange financing and get it set up. My job was to be the project manager."

That scenario repeated itself with Tony's entrance into the company. After earning an environmental sciences degree at Virginia Tech and spending several years pursuing a dream

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as a professional cyclist in Europe, Tony moved to Boston to sell software. "I told him [in Boston] he'd be happy and poor," says Marty.

Three years later the phone rang. It was Tony. "He said, "Dad, you were right. Can I come home?"

"I never set out for this to be a family business," says Marty. "What catalyzed it was the 'Dad, can I come home?' call."

Marty quips that upon Tony's arrival he "made a list of crappy work I didn't want to do and gave it to him," like his father had done in the '70s when he indoctrinated Marty into the development world. Like Marty, Tony started out doing property management, learning by trial and error. "[Dad] said, 'Here's what needs to be done, go figure it out,'" says Tony.

Tony's first project was redeveloping 100,000 square feet of office space, now the South Harbor Business Center, on Key Highway. "We were renovating the spaces into offices and I had to do everything from figure out why the roof was leaking to how to work with contractors," Tony remembers. "Without a construction background, it was trial by fire."

Tony, now 36, went on to work on prestigious projects including the renovation of the Bromo-Seltzer Tower into artist studios and the 1866 Ruscombe Mansion into an office building. Two of Azola's projects, the Railway Express and Copy Cat buildings, were recently recognized with preservation awards from Baltimore Heritage. "They have a reputation for taking on projects that are historic gems but extremely challenging and making them work," says Baltimore Heritage's director, Johns Hopkins. "What I think is really neat about them is they can do big projects, like the Railway Express building, but also the medium and smaller projects that other groups will walk away from."

When Joseph Azola died prematurely in the early '80s, Marty held the business ropes solo, sometimes learning expensive— even ruinous— lessons. "I don't want [Tony] to go through that," says Marty of his financial troubles in the 1980s. "The transfer of knowledge is under way. ... As [Tony] moves forward he'll build on his strengths and drag what he needs to from the past along with him."

It's apropos that a company that is in the business of preserving history has a legacy of its own. Perhaps that in some way informs the Azolas' success. "Saving history is important to me," says Tony. "We can repurpose a building and still make it modern and not cookie-cutter. Our buildings are almost 100 percent leased and I think that's a reflection of their uniqueness."

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