

Only in East Austin: Auto shop turned film studio

Premium content from Austin Business Journal by Jan Buchholz, Staff Writer

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Jeff Brown, co-owner of Wilson-Brown Productions Inc., shows the former auto mechanic's garage that the company plans to convert into a studio.

Wilson-Brown Productions Inc. has bought a former mechanic's garage in East Austin with plans to convert it into one of Austin's premier video production venues.

Co-owner [Jeff Brown](#) said that with digital recording equipment becoming less of an expense with rapidly changing technology, the company decided to redeploy its capital into real estate.

"Things have evolved so much in the last 10 years that it now seems like the right time to invest in infrastructure," Brown said.

Originally, Brown and partner [Gary Wilson](#) thought they'd lease space, having outgrown offices at 522 E. Sixth St.

"We decided that since rents were so high, we'd be better off buying," Brown said.

[Chris Skyles](#), co-founder of SkylesBayne Co., an Austin real estate brokerage company, scoured the area for them and came across the former George's Auto site at 718 Northwestern Ave. It was partially owned by the father of SkylesBayne associate [Turner Wimberly](#).

“It had a garage tenant in there for years, and I think the guy retired,” Skyles said. “So they were thinking about what to do with it.”

“Right off the bat, I liked the property,” Brown said. “We immediately saw potential for studio space.”

Until now, Wilson-Brown Productions has had to rent studio space for many of its productions. But with the acquisition of the 3,100-square-foot garage, they’ll have a full studio with green-screen capabilities.

“We’re not going to be the first green screen in Austin, but we will have the finest one,” Brown said.

Wilson-Brown Productions paid a little more than \$500,000 for the property that sits on about a half acre across the street from the MetroRail line. With renovations to the building and new equipment, the company will invest another \$400,000.

The company was able to secure the property partly because it owned the property it currently occupies and sold it to an investor earlier this year for a profit.

Brown, Wilson and graphic designer [Rex Peteet](#) bought their current space on East Sixth Street in 2002. It was a bargain at the time, Brown said.

“We walked in at that property and said, ‘This is it,’” Brown said. “It had already been remodeled as a creative environment.”

It was replete with history, too, as the site of the first African-American owned business in Austin. [E.H. Carrington](#) built it as a grocery store and community center in the early 1870s.

The property had a variety of uses over the years before M2K, an advertising agency, bought it in 2000. The owner sold it to the Brown-Wilson-Peteet partnership after the dot-com bust.

“We made an insult of an offer and they accepted it,” Brown said.

The 6,000-square-foot property served its purpose over the years, but it lacked the requisite studio, which is needed for a new breed of clients.

When a wealthy investor — Brown declined to disclose his name — came calling, the partners decided to sell.

“We wanted more actual workspace, and he just happened to throw out a number that sounded good to us,” Brown said.

That deal closed in February, and Wilson-Brown Productions has been able to stay there through a leaseback contract.

Besides making a profit on the East Sixth Street location for a downpayment, Brown said the company got a loan from BB&T Bank, a North Carolina-based institution with several branches in Austin.

“They were incredible,” Brown said. “They did everything on a short time line and they gave us a great rate,” Brown said.

Local bank executives [Blake Absher](#) and [Ed Lick](#) said they are eager to build their book of business by helping entrepreneurs like Wilson and Brown flourish in a time of tight lending.

“We closed that transaction very quickly. I know they were in talks with other banks, but I think we came up with the best loan structure,” Absher said.

Lick said that even though BB&T is a national bank, it operates more like a community bank, making loan decisions locally.

“We’re not here to sell but to consult,” Lick said.

Now that the pressure to close the real estate deal has subsided, a new kind of pressure is on.

“We have a contract with a reality show, so we have to be ready by Jan. 1,” Brown said.