

Real Estate

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This bronze door, which is framed by a wrought-iron canopy and copper roof, offers entry to 33 E. Bellevue Pl.

Historic venture

As condo, Gold Coast classic will soon enjoy a renaissance

By J. Linn Allen

A wrought-iron entrance canopy with a copper roof framed the bronze front door. A marble main staircase with wrought-iron and mahogany railings led to an inner courtyard with a fountain.

Dining rooms were paneled in mahogany, birch, oak or walnut. There were hand-carved marble fireplaces and marble window sills, oval-shaped rooms just for charm and French doors leading from the drawing rooms to "Juliet" balconies with wrought-iron railings. Twelve-foot ceilings were accentuated with tier upon tier of moldings.

That was class in apartment living on Chicago's Gold Coast in 1910, when developer Buckingham Chandler built the Chandler Apartments at 33 E. Bellevue Pl.

And some of Chicago's most illustrious names of the time snapped up the seven sprawling apartments in the six-story building during its early years, including Gustavus F. Swift Jr., the son of the founder of the Swift meat packing company; John V. Farwell, grandson of the original partner (along with Marshall Field) of a pioneer Chicago dry goods firm that later merged with Carson Pirie Scott & Co.; and financier and civic leader Charles Schwepke.

The building fell on hard times and has been empty since 1986, but now it is being restored and updated by LR Development, which is turning it into 12 condominiums priced from \$175,000 to \$830,000.

"This is really fun. It's a special building," said LR president Bruce Abrams, who is planning to move into a 3,899-square-foot, second-floor unit himself.

LR was started in 1988 by Abrams, an attorney who formerly

worked with a big downtown law firm, and has been doing condo conversions of vintage buildings on the North Side as well as reddevelopments of multifamily projects taken over by lenders.

Though not the largest project LR has done, the Chandler Apartments is the most complex because of the degree of historical renovation involved, Abrams said. He has four project managers working instead of the usual one per building, and two full-time architects working with purchasers.

"It's such an encompassing project," Abrams said. "Everything historic we're trying to restore, and historic takes work."

The building was designed as a palazzo in the English Renaissance style by the architectural firm of Schmidt Garden & Martin, which was a well-established group at the time and continues in business today under the name Schmidt Garden & Ernkson.

Among the original firm's buildings were Michael Reese Hospital and the Ambassador West Hotel.

Luigi Mumford, specialist in the architecture department of the Art Institute of Chicago, said the Chandler was built as part of a movement toward luxurious apartments, including precursors of co-operative apartments, that was just beginning at the time on the Gold Coast. It isn't certain whether the Chandler was cooperative or rental.

Most of the residences in the area were single-family, freestanding structures or row homes, but a concern for security and a desire for big, comfortable spaces on one level were beginning to make apartments attractive to the wealthy and fashionable, she said.

Some society types had grand apartments in the city and "sum-



The courtyard fountain will be in working order when the renovation work is finished, according to developer Bruce Abrams.

mer houses"—in fact rambling mansions—in Lake Forest, she said.

The architectural style, Mumford said, became popular in the era following the Columbian Exposition of 1892, in which classical and Renaissance forms were heavily favored. It is characterized on the facade by balance and motifs such as pilasters, medallions and softly rounded arches.

The style conveyed a "feeling of substantiality" and "classic good taste," she said. "It's visually non-aggressive, pleasant and restful. It was considered in very good taste for the upper economic groups."

Features such as the oval rooms for dining rooms or studies were not all that unusual, she added. The interior courtyard, however, was distinctive, since the typical Chicago pattern is to have a courtyard opening onto the street.



An even more unusual element was an "acro station" landing pad outside the fifth-floor apartment, a 5,600-square-foot home occupying the entire floor that Chandler reserved for himself. It's not known whether anything handmade ever landed on it, but garage spaces provided for each unit, an uncommon feature for the time, were certainly used.

A good part of the building was occupied by servants' quarters, and each apartment was provided not only with maid's bedrooms but also with special dining rooms for servants.

Mumford said the building may have been home to such a lifestyle until the end of the Depression, when live-in help became increasingly hard to find.

Lack of maintenance during the Depression and World War II, plus the lack of building in the

city, which contributed to a severe postwar housing shortage on the Near North Side, led to the deterioration and subdivision of many fine old buildings, Mumford said.

The Chandler, which had been expanded to eight apartments when a seventh floor was added in 1914, was cut up into 31 rental units in 1955. In 1985, the previous owner began a renovation project that would have cut down on the number of units, but the owner died and the work wasn't completed.

The building also suffered from the construction in 1985 of a hotel next door—now named the Meridien—and the estate of the former owner is still in litigation with the hotel developer, Abrams said. Fears that the building would collapse led to a temporary evacuation, but the structural problems

were fixed.

Abrams has been interested in acquiring the building for several years, but his initial offer two years ago was topped by another developer, who put in a bid of \$3 million.

"I felt that was higher than the building was worth and said, 'Take it.' Then that deal fell through," Abrams said.

He got the property for \$2.5 million and is rehabbing it with a \$3.6 million acquisition and construction loan and "a lot of equity," Abrams said. The project is being helped out by an eight-year property tax freeze available for landmark buildings that are being restored.

The only significant new construction on the project will be terraces being built out from the



Bellevue

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four second- and third-floor apartments over the courtyard to give those units outdoor space. The terrace and deck will be a common area. Each unit will have indoor parking.

The rest of the work will involve knocking out the 1955 walls, putting in new mechanical systems, appliances and fixtures, and renovating features such as the wrought-iron balconies, the marble fireplaces, the wood paneling and the decorative plasterwork in the lobby. The courtyard fountain will also be returned to working order, Abrams said.

The 12 units will include two on the first floor—which was originally utility space, wire rooms and bedrooms for handymen, maids, chauffeurs and a gardener—and

duplex units on the top two floors. Unit sizes will range from 1,231 to 4,249 square feet, substantially bigger than most freestanding houses.

All the units except those on the first floor will have outdoor terrace and deck space, and the courtyard will be a common area.

"It's a charming place, a little jewel in the middle of downtown Chicago," said Sara Rafel, who has a contract on one of the larger units with her husband, Dana Ploskin.

Rafel, a magazine publishing consultant, and Ploskin, a marketing executive, lived in a co-op apartment in New York before coming to Chicago several years ago and had been looking for their ideal city residence for a long time, Rafel said.

"We've looked at a lot of vintage co-ops on Lake Shore Drive, the Gold Coast and Lincoln Park, and I can't think of anything comparable to this," she said. "It's more like having an apartment in Paris than in downtown Chicago."

She praised the architectural detailing, the historical feel, the high ceilings and the outdoor space, which she is hiring a landscape architect to design like a terrace in southern France.

"It's a unique property," she said.

Mumford agreed, and said its restoration is important to the city. "It's part of the fabric of the past that's made this city so exciting," she said.

"You can't build those spaces today. There's no way from the standpoint of material or craftsmanship that you can afford that kind of gracious building."

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