

Decaying mansion transformed into condos

By **KATIE PEARCE**
Current Staff Writer

A few years ago, the mansion at 3324 18th St. NW in Mount Pleasant seemed headed toward irreversible rot.

The property had lived through many phases — as the grand home of a German-American family in the early 1900s, a facility for disabled veterans in the middle of the century, and finally, as the target of an idealistic but ultimately failed renovation.

By the time developer Grant Epstein came upon the faded four-story mansion in 2010, a condo conversion was the inevitable lifesaver. But Epstein says his firm, Community Three Development, handled the project differently than others might have.

In the first place, they took it on. “We started this company a number of years ago to do projects that other developers didn’t want to do,” Epstein said.

Community Three purchased the ramshackle Mount Pleasant property for \$1.35 million after its previous owners — a couple who had dreamed of renovating it as a single-family home — gave up on the daunting project and moved out of town. Over the past two-plus years, the firm has carved out 12 distinc-

tive condo units from the sprawling mansion.

The building takes its new name, The Schafer, from its initial owner, and each unit is named after its location in the home’s original layout. The largest, “The Library,” is a 1,825-square-foot, two-level unit with two bedrooms, two baths and a broad front porch. The tiniest, “The Study,” is a 465-square-foot one-bedroom unit in the attic. The project also includes a detached carriage house unit and five parking spots.

The condos, which range in price from \$279,000 to \$599,000, are expected to go up for sale early next month.

“This is a building that was dying,” Epstein said. “Now it’s going to have a life again.”

Community Three specializes in challenging restorations of historic properties in D.C. Epstein started the

company with two other colleagues from the Silver Spring-based Torti Gallas architecture firm, where he had spent seven years before completing a master’s of business administration at Georgetown University.

Community Three’s condo projects include The Nine, which incorporated Civil War-era stables and a 1920s storefront in Blagden Alley; and the Residences at St. Monica,



Photos courtesy of Community Three

The 1909 property seemed doomed before the firm Community Three remade it as a dozen condos.

which transformed a historic Capitol Hill church. The firm is now working on a 24-unit building at 435 R St. in Shaw, which will replace a derelict commercial storefront.

In the Mount Pleasant project, Community Three tackled a turn-of-the-century property designed by German-American architect Albert Goenner, who worked in the same circle as the prominent Adolf Cluss. Goenner’s still-standing work includes The United Church at 20th and G streets and several buildings in Chinatown.

Through a German financial organization, Goenner came in contact with Charles Schafer, the well-to-do president of the American Fire Insurance Company. Schafer enlisted the architect to design his new home on 18th Street, which was completed in 1909. With his

wife, four children and a small team of servants, Schafer lived in the mansion until his death in 1939.

The house remained in Schafer’s family until the late 1960s, when it was sold and converted into the Embassy Rest Home, a live-in facility for about 20 disabled veterans that operated for about three decades.

The property’s most recent owners, Ron Lipsius and Marta Ortiz, pursued an ambitious vision of restoring the home to its past grandeur. The couple started by ripping out features from the veterans’ home, like linoleum floors and wall partitions. But the mansion’s poor condition, along with its sheer size — 30 rooms, two staircases and eight fireplaces — made the project untenable. The house then made for a complicated sale, involving various legal issues and aborted deals.

Epstein said he embraced the condo conversion because he likes a challenge. “When you’re doing a building like this ... you have to design every day,” he said. “You assume stuff about the structure of the building, but then you have to change.”

“This is fun for me,” he added. “Every day is different.”

For the new condos, Community Three retained the home’s hall and grand staircase as the centerpiece. “The plan was to keep the central hall and create all the units around it,” Epstein said. On the upper levels, that meant extending the original wooden staircase — by sending pieces to a mill that could replicate the features as closely as possible.

The firm also re-created the columns and balustrades of the home’s wrap-around porch, and the wavy concrete tiles of its roof. And developers retained, whenever possible, the building’s original woodwork and tall ceilings.

The new features in the 12 condo units include energy-efficient window glass, hardwood floors, solid quartz kitchen counters, central air-conditioning, modern bathrooms, and washers and dryers.

Since the property falls within the Mount Pleasant Historic District, Epstein’s firm had to work closely with the city’s Historic Preservation Review Board. The process “wasn’t that difficult,” he said, “because we weren’t trying to do anything too outrageous.”

The largest change developers made was building a two-story addition that creates an outdoor balcony for one unit and an enclosed, sun-filled main room for another. Epstein said he never considered a more radical transformation for The Schafer. “As an architect, I like things to fit.”

The Urban Pace firm is handling sales and marketing for The Schafer’s units, which real estate agents toured this week as construction wraps up. More information about the project is available at theschafer.com.

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