

## Commercial Real Estate

# Here's a look inside D.C.'s revitalized Grimke School, now home to one of the region's top architects



By **Alex Koma** — Staff Reporter, Washington Business Journal

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Despite its spot at the heart of D.C.'s bustling U Street corridor, the Grimke School has sat largely empty for a decade. Until now.

It's taken perseverance by the District and a team of developers, but the historic building is finally open again, freshly repurposed as office space. D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser cut the ribbon on the long-sought redevelopment Thursday, welcoming in Torti Gallas and Partners — the architecture and design firm that will make the building its new headquarters, occupying the bulk of its 57,000 square

feet of commercial space after helping design the project.

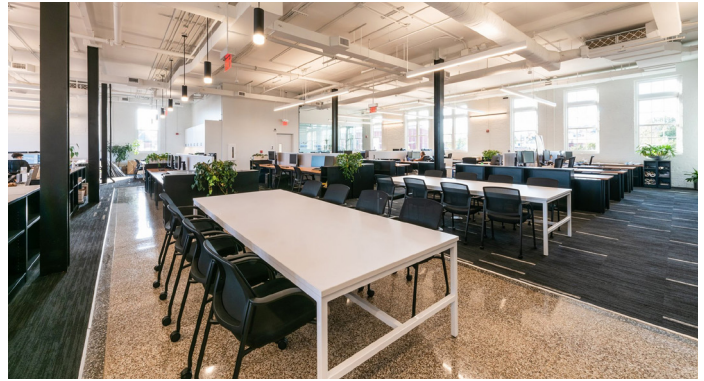
The company, long one of the busiest architects in the city, is making the move from Silver Spring and bringing more than 100 employees with it to return to in-person work, CEO Tom Gallas said Thursday. That makes Grimke's re-opening at 1923 Vermont Avenue NW an especially good bit of news for Bowser, who has urged workers to return to the office and revitalize the District's Covid-stricken commercial areas.



“There’s been some question about whether cities would remain popular destinations,” Bowser said at the event. “But you should never bet against cities. You can’t bet against cities.”

The education nonprofit the Malala Fund is also moving into the space, while local arts advocacy group CulturalDC is working to program it.

The project’s lead backer, D.C.-based Community Three Development, is simultaneously opening 30 for-sale condos, including nine affordable units, on an adjacent former parking lot. Eventually, it will move to a second phase of the project to transform the school’s roughly 100-year-old gym into 38 apartments, including six “maker” studios with storefronts along 9 ½ Street NW, just behind the commercial space.



The developer originally hoped to start all this work a bit earlier, after breaking ground in 2019. But the pandemic brought another brief delay – hardly anything new for the project, which is on its second development team after a previous deal with Roadside Development fell through in



But that will require a bit of shuffling with one of the other tenants moving into Grimke: the African-American Civil War Museum. The museum currently occupies the old gym, but will get 12,000 square feet in the newly renovated school. Frank Smith, the museum’s director, said he’s in the process of selecting a contractor now and will ultimately need four months to relocate exhibits and build out the new space.

Once that happens, Community Three can start work on the rest of the residential, according to Sarosh Olpadwala, director of real estate for D.C.’s Office of the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development, which has spent years pursuing the project. He expects those units to deliver 18 to 22 months after construction starts.

2016.

Grimke was constructed in 1887 as the Phelps School and was renamed in 1934 for Archibald Grimke, a local civil rights leader and one-time president of the NAACP of Washington, D.C. It shuttered in 1989, but was eventually repurposed as office space for D.C. agencies, including the Department of Fire and Emergency Medical Services and the Department of Corrections.

The city relocated those offices to the Reeves Center nearby, but soon it’ll have to repeat that process, at least temporarily — the old government building is also up for redevelopment, with a pair of prominent teams vying to reconstruct it.