



## Reuse of Historic Buildings

*Becomes a Viable Strategy*

By Chris Reynolds

As available land dwindles and anti-sprawl sentiment gathers in the metropolitan areas, especially in the Northeast corridor between Boston and Washington (DC), it's no wonder that developers have increasingly turned to re-use and conversion of historic properties into residential and mixed-used developments. With their rich stock of high-quality buildings in historic neighborhoods, the older cities of the Northeast present conversion-minded developers with numerous opportunities - and with a unique set of challenges to address.

Architecture and planning firm BartonPartners of Norristown, Pennsylvania, has recently taken a leading role in facilitating siting and development of several recent historic redevelopment plans. Two projects currently under way are The National in Philadelphia and the Vail Mansion in Morristown, New Jersey. The projects illustrate some of the complexities and rewards of urban historic redevelopment, and the win-win solutions available to forward-looking communities, developers, and planners. The National

will add badly needed housing and retail capacity to one of Philadelphia's hottest and priciest residential neighborhoods. Vail Mansion will provide Morristown with handsome parkland, parking, and a restaurant, all answering the needs of Morristown residents.

### Connecting Architecture in Philadelphia

One of the last holdouts among the dozens of restaurant supply stores that once comprised a characteristic business sector in Philadelphia's Old City, National Products boasted a landmark 1950s terra cotta tile façade, with the name of the enterprise emblazoned in stainless steel letters on the vertical sign that overhangs 2nd Street. The historically certified facade is among the icons of the Old City Historic District, along with Elfreth's Alley, the oldest continuously occupied residential street in the United States.

Sensitivity to preserving these treasures was always important in development of The National, says Steve Patron, President and CEO of Paradigm Realty Alliance in Mount Laurel, NJ.

*Philadelphia's Old City Historic District is home to The National. The building (second from top) and site plan (third from top) are shown. (Courtesy of BartonPartners.) The Vail Mansion in Morristown, New Jersey, is undergoing renovations - here is a look at the exterior (top) and the interior's living room and kitchen (bottom). (Courtesy of Roseland Property Company.)*



"Even though our project is literally next door to the residences on Elfreth's Alley," states Patron, "the plan developed by BartonPartners has met with not only acceptance but affirmative support from neighbors and neighborhood groups."

Patron has been behind the National project since the start in 2003, when he was working with Matrix Development.

"From the beginning, we always envisioned The National as two phases of the same project. The parcel on the west side of 2nd Street was pretty straightforward, but the East parcel was much more complex."

The West parcel was developed in a joint venture between K. Hovnarian and Matrix, and is complete today. Because of the complexities of the East parcel, it took longer to assemble the right combination of resources, which ultimately came in the partnership of Paradigm and Red Bank, NJ-based Robertson Douglas Group. Fred Patterson of Robertson Douglas says The National East strategically broadens its traditional portfolio in

single family homes: "We are looking for urban redevelopment opportunities. Suburbia is getting to be a very tough environment in which to build."

The two privately-held partners committed to creating goodwill for The National East in its community through grass roots outreach. In many meetings with individuals and neighborhood groups like the Old City Civic Association, the Old City District, the Elfreth's Alley Association, and the Appletree Court Association, the developers obtained a broad base of support for their project.

The whole of Old City is subject to a height restriction of 65 feet - insufficient for the six-story and ten-story buildings BartonPartners' plan proposed, and obliging the city to initially deny a building permit. However, following that first denial, the developers presented letters of support from these groups and were able to convincingly show neighborhood support in front of Philadelphia's Zoning Board of Adjustments.

While previous developers had proposed building on the site of Flagpole Park - a traditionally open plaza used for tour group rendezvous and neighborhood gatherings - "we thought that was inappropriate," Patron says. Instead, the developers will give back the park and a townhome at 128 Elfreth's Alley in which the association will house its museum. The design also adds a public walkway to serve nearby Appletree Court.

Working in a neighborhood with hundreds of years of habitation brings additional responsibilities, Patron says.

"Being aware of the historical importance of the site," reveals Patron, "we hired an archeologist to devise a recovery plan, and a protocol for handling of artifacts turned up during site preparation."

During construction of The National East, the developers and the contractors on site are working hard to anticipate and address some of the issues raised by neighbors during the first phase of construction, including lack of parking, truck traffic, impeded access to neighboring



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"This is a large scale project in a part of the city that is only recently seeing significant new construction," says Tom Barton, principal of BartonPartners. "It's not enough just to get approvals. Planning and designing The National East required that we continually demonstrate to interested parties that development plans would preserve the fabric of the neighborhood while improving the quality of life for residents of, and visitors to, Old City and Philadelphia."

Underground parking was the solution to the concerns of merchants and residents in the neighborhood who shared the eternal urban concern about scarce on-street parking. Three hundred parking stalls below ground in the East and West parcels will be offered to buyers at The National East, then to other local residents. The housing plan for the site builds gracefully in scale, rising from nine three-story townhomes adjacent to Elfreth's Alley to a six-story loft and condo building and topping out with a ten-story condo tower.

Restoration work has posed interesting challenges as well. The terra cotta façade consists of 1,500 handmade terra cotta tiles in dozens of varied shapes and sizes, all of which need intervention. Once finished, the 2nd Street façade will welcome shoppers to the boutiques and galleries planned for the 15,000 square feet of ground level retail space.

While the market for housing in the city remains hot, Patron says, "The National's condo units and lofts will offer price points that enable singles and first-time buyers to afford to live in one of Philadelphia's greatest neighborhoods. We will have some 650 square foot efficiencies and one-bedrooms. But in this location, with so much property nearby under preservation and height restrictions, we can build units with killer views of the Center City skyline, the Delaware River, and the Ben Franklin Bridge. These go as large as 1,900 square feet, with terraces, and should appeal to people who can live anywhere in the city or the suburbs, but choose this dynamic neighborhood."

## Reviving a White Elephant in Morristown

In Morristown, NJ a century ago, Theodore Vail, president of AT & T and chief architect of the Bell System, commissioned the design of a 20,000 square foot Italian Renaissance villa that would serve as both his residence and a museum for his family inventions. Ironically, Vail died on a safari and never moved here; in 1922 the mansion assumed a new purpose as Morristown's municipal offices.

More recently, the Mansion lay unused for many years before the town arrived at a viable plan to realize the potential of this stately white elephant. Combining in a joint venture called Rosewood, Roseland Property Company and Woodmont Properties responded to Morristown's request for a proposal, and were selected as the developer of the four-acre site.

"Our plan captured the vision the town had for this property," says Woodmont CEO Eric Witmond. "They wanted to preserve the grandeur of the original villa within a functional complex that would bring life to the area and integrate the building into the context of the town."

"Through the Morristown Redevelopment Agency and The Morristown Partnership, this town has made a great commitment to planning open space and preserving a high quality of life," says Debra Tantleff, Roseland's development manager. "This project fits right in with Morristown's priorities." All the grounds of the property will be open to the public, including a war memorial and an acre of surrounding parkland. A public/private partnership plans to rebuild a reflecting pool in the park, according to Widmont.

BartonPartners designed a two-level parking garage that meets the needs both of the condo buyers and of the town. One floor of parking is for residents, with two spaces allocated to each unit and entry at the rear of the structure. Public parking, on the second level of the deck, is isolated from access to the condo elevators but has access to the original Mansion entrance level. More parking is available on the oval entryway from South Street.

More than 150,000 square feet of residential space on three floors is being built in a C shape, with the Mansion nestled in the center; construction is due to be completed this year. The Italianate architecture inspired BartonPartners' design of a three-story mid-rise which sits above two stories of below-grade parking built into a hillside. This traditional exterior architecture in stucco and cast concrete is comforting and appealing to prosperous buyers; the setting amidst parkland appeals strongly to well-to-do individuals and couples.

With 70 percent of the Vail Mansion's 36 condo units already sold at prices averaging \$900,000, the product offering has strong appeal to the market. Inside the three-story residential buildings, double-loaded corridors give onto large, well appointed condominium units of 1,700 square feet and up.

"The buildings are served by two elevators, and each residence comes with two parking spaces in the lower level of the structure to meet the expectations of buyers who are accustomed to the suburban lifestyle," says Eric Witmond. "Concierge service is planned, along with exclusive amenities like a billiard room."

"The sophistication of the site sells these condos," Tantleff says. "It is unique, and it has a history and meaning to people in Morris County. It's a very upscale location, near the Morristown Theater and restaurants in the pedestrian-oriented town center, yet just a few blocks from the train station and close to highways, providing easy access by rail or car to the commerce, culture and vibrancy of New York City."

"Most of the buyers thus far have been transplants from elsewhere in Morris County, mostly empty nesters downsizing and moving into a town they regard as stimulating yet comfortable. To our market, I think the location within Morristown is more important than proximity to New York City." **SLDT**

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