

Recycling historic Seattle apartment buildings into modern condominiums with period charm



Lower Queen Anne's The Pittsburgh in the February chill. Another venerable apartment building goes the way of the condo version — and is thus spared the wrecking ball.
Photo by Bradley Enghaus

By Korte Brueckmann

Seattle is a national model for recycling. Homes and apartments put out their separated recyclables and the city sees to it that the paper, glass and aluminum reenter the consumer stream. Seattle's Pioneer Property Group takes it a giant step farther; they recycle buildings.

Among the flurry of condominium offers that have graced Seattle mailboxes in the past few years, Pioneer Property is offering something a little different. Under the brand name of Live Historic, the group is buying elegant old apartment houses suffering from neglect, refurbishing them and offering them as urban condominiums with a period flare.

“We love our buildings,” said Ben Rankin, one of the company's principals. He and his partner, Chad Barron, “find buildings that are pretty tired and put a whole lot of money into them to bring them up to standard.”

For enthusiasts of Seattle's gracious, old, pre-World War II apartment buildings, there is nothing standard about the old buildings compared to new construction. Now abandoned, expensive building practices from the first half of the 20th century, guarantee these buildings have good bones, and provide them with many decorative details no longer

found on the glass-box, cookie-cutter developments that have become standard.

“Live Historic” buildings offer unusual amenities, varying from building to building, but including fireplaces, courtyards, spacious lobbies, and bay windows – even built-in iceboxes from the days before refrigerators were common. Lesser, but important details include terra cotta ornamentation, wood floors, big windows, fine woodwork and pocket doors.

“It’s important that people have the opportunity to choose new or old,” Rankin said. That opportunity exists for house buyers “but not a lot of opportunity to buy a vintage condo. Lots of creative people are looking for old things they appreciate.”

On the other hand, this is far different from buying an old house. With Live Historic condominiums all the “surprises” that come with old places have been found and dealt with. Heating, electrical and plumbing systems have been completely redone to code.

“We go in and do a really good job on those,” Rankin said. Many old buildings have small capacity electrical systems and few outlets, sufficient for an earlier time, but not know with modern reliance on things electrical. Many of the units have radiators for heat, and a Pioneer Square building, the Nord, still uses its connection to Seattle Steam.

“We love being part of that,” Rankin said. “It’s so much a part of Seattle history.”

Lighting fixtures in all of the buildings have been updated with period style and all new appliances have been installed in the renovated kitchen. Bathrooms, too, are updated, though where vintage fixtures, such as claw-foot bathtubs, were in place, they were renewed and put back.

“What we find is that if you try too hard holding on to what’s there, you end up not having the freshness you want,” Rankin said, explaining that it is very rare to find kitchen fixtures that are original or worth keeping. Living Historic does not mean making do with something old that doesn’t work.

“When we can keep the old ice boxes or the [built-in] ironing board, or the spice rack, we definitely keep that,” Rankin said. Upgrades include dishwashers, clothes washers and dryers, new appliances, new cabinetry where it is needed and upgraded counters, many of them granite.

“It’s finding a balance between what makes for good living and what makes for aesthetic living,” Rankin said.

So far, Live Historic apartments have been completed, or almost completed, on Capitol Hill, Queen Anne Hill, First Hill and in Pioneer Square. Plans call for adding more, and some are already in

the works. The ages of the buildings available so far range from 78 to 108 years old.

Examples of the genre are the Pittsburgh (1907) and the Queens Court (1930) opposite each other on Warren Avenue North just a stone’s throw from Seattle Center.

The Queen’s Court, 124 Warren Ave. N., is the kind of building you may remember from going to visit Great Aunt Irene. It is four stories of brick



shaped in a U with its arms wrapped around a garden court complete with pond and fountain. Marbleized terra cotta decorates the grand entry, story courses and cornice. Passing through the baronial main door takes the visitor into a spacious lobby, complete with fireplace, now converted to natural gas.

One of the things that makes old buildings fascinating is the eccentricities they have acquired over time. One of the Queen’s Court studio apartments – a spacious, high-ceilinged unit with lots of windows – is reached by a 12-foot hallway to the front door.

All of the apartments have wood floors and much of the woodwork is stained, clear fir. In the hallways, large copies of historic Seattle photos line the walls showing such historic moments as Sen. “Scoop” Jackson greeting President John Kennedy and Babe Ruth in an exhibition game at Sick Stadium.

Across the street is the Pittsburgh, 125 Warren Ave. N., which is actually a complex of four small, but elegant apartment buildings that turn the corner west onto West John Street.

Two of the 100-year-old buildings feature bay windows, and original features in the apartments include fireplaces (converted to natural gas), original built-in cabinets in kitchens and dining rooms, and sliding pocket doors. The windows are huge, some of them six feet tall and four feet wide. Stained woodwork and wood floors are featured throughout.

Pioneer Properties is dedicated to keeping its Live Historic properties affordable, offering studios from as low as \$150,000 and going up to \$450,000 for two bedrooms. The Marlborough (1927), a 13-story, First Hill landmark at 1220 Boren Ave., even has not-so-affordable, view penthouses, but those are in the million-dollar range.

For more information about the Live Historic properties, point your browser to www.livehistoric.com or call 436-0285.

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