

“Furnishing and installing the structural steel was one of C.T. Taylor’s more challenging recent projects. We are proud to have been a part of the rebirth of this historic building.”

New Directions on West 25th

Challenging renovation creates new apartments from historic Ohio City properties

By Doug Bardwell | Photos by Joe Albert Studios

One hundred fifty years ago, Cleveland’s hottest new brew pub was the Jacob Baehr Brewery, which opened for business at West 25th and Church Avenue. Successful from the start, the family added upper levels for the family residence above the saloon, as well as a brick horse stable and a brewery out back, including a 90-foot-tall smoke stack.

Today, these historic buildings in Ohio City have been transformed as part of the much larger West 25th Street Lofts at 2599 Church Ave. It’s a 165,000-square-foot, \$27 million renovation on two acres that includes 83 apartments, 9,600 square feet in four retail areas, a 55-car indoor heated garage and fenced parking for 70 cars outside. The apartments were already 85% leased as of February 1, and approximately one new apartment is being leased each day.

Going back 200 years

Activity in this area really began in 1816, as a small group of Episcopalians met to begin what would become St. John’s parish at West 26th and Church Street. In the same year Cleveland became incorporated as a city (1836), work began on the church and was completed in 1838 on what remains today as Northern Ohio’s oldest consecrated structure. Honored for its role in the Underground Railway, a large historic plaque is mounted right outside the church.

Walking out of the church, facing south in 1872, parishioners would have first witnessed the brewery going up to the left along West 25th Street. The sound of horse’s hoofs would have clattered along the hard dirt street in the years that followed, as the beer wagons made their deliveries to local bars.

By 1873, next to the brewery, a four-story, Gothic-inspired building was added along West 25th as home for the Westside



Photo by Mark Watt

International Order of Odd Fellows (IOOF). By the 1880s, the building was the site of huge galas and meetings.

Looking to the right, around 1906, parishioners watched as Henry Bollinger constructed a factory at the corner of West 28th Street for his Phoenix Ice Machine Company. The

Of the 83 apartments at West 25th Street Lofts, 85% were already leased as of February 1, and approximately one new apartment is being leased each day.

sound of horse’s hoofs gave way to the sound of automobiles, and machine noises undoubtedly filled the air as the two center sections of the block were built out about 1930 and 1950.

During the summer of 1953, a tornado that ripped through much of western Cleveland caused extensive damage to the third and fourth floors of the Odd Fellows Building, requiring them to be removed.

Until 1978, much of the space on the east end of the block was used by Reister and Thesmacher for their sheet metal business. Exhibit Builders occupied the West 25th Street buildings later. The western end became Lester Engineering, a heavy stamping machine builder. Then, in 1985, the complex was purchased by CMHA for office space.

Fast forward to the 21st century

In 2007, Rick Foran, of the Foran Group Development LLC, was on the board of a non-profit group who was looking for a location for a women’s shelter. While in the neighborhood visiting



BIG CHANGES Plans for the renovation and transformation of West 25th Street Lofts called for installation of a new below-ground parking garage, plus conversion of existing spaces into first-floor retail areas and apartments (top). Residential units are located on four floors, many looking out into a 40-foot-tall atrium with a 50-foot-long, polycarbonate skylight (middle). A leasing office and nearby fitness center reside on the first floor (bottom).

his son, who co-owns Market Garden Brewery and Nano Brew Cleveland, he happened to notice the former Odd Fellows Building and was attracted to it with its Gothic windows. Thinking it might make a suitable shelter, he took an option on the property. Relatively soon thereafter, the organization changed its plans, but Foran held onto the option.

Upon the suggestion of City Councilman Joe Cimperman, Foran began exploring the option of converting it into market rate apartments.

“About that time, a good, mutual friend of ours, the late Ken Fleming, introduced me to Chris Smythe, president and CEO of Smythe Property Advisors, LLC,” Foran says. “As I was showing Chris my idea of converting the buildings at the east end of the block, he asked what was being done with the then-vacant CMHA parcel at the other end of the block. It turned out to be available and they quoted us a price.”

Construction begins

As work finally began, the first challenge presented itself in the basement of the eastern buildings which had been built back in the 1800s. Several massive wood columns in the basement of the brewery which looked suitable, turned out to be almost hollow from years of ice piled on the beer kegs. Had the start of work taken another year to get started, there might not have been enough structural integrity left and the project could have been a complete tear-down.

With work proceeding, the next surprise came in the summer of 2016, as all the Republican National Convention activity overwhelmed the city’s building inspectors. First, they were being swamped with requests for all types of temporary structures and then as the convention wound down, they had unused vacation time that was subject



Images courtesy of C.T. Taylor

MEASURED APPROACH To assist the construction team (left), a laser scan was performed and utilized to create a three-dimensional digital model from which exact measurements could be obtained at any elevation within the existing structure (right).

to “use it or lose it.” That made for a scarcity of inspectors for the rest of the building community.

“Trying to expedite the project as much as possible was not easy,” recalls Pete Perticarini, CCM, president of &build, a PCS company. “From a logistics perspective, this is a custom project. With 65 different floor plans, there is no provision for a normal flow of work. There were literally challenges around every corner.”

Efficiencies of scale did not apply here. “To Pete’s point, every suite you walk in, you’ll find a beam or other structural element that doesn’t occur the same way in the next space,” says Fluker. “We tried to be sympathetic to the architecture and incorporate them the best we could in each case.”

C.T. Taylor was hired by &build to furnish and install the structural steel. The new lofts were spread out over a series of existing structures, and the new steel was to be attached to older steel crane rails, some of which were old enough to have been riveted. The new steel had to be fabricated to close tolerances to fit properly.

“Rather than spend weeks doing exhaustive field measurements with tape measures, we elected to hire CESO Engineering to do a laser scan,” explains John Hitchcock, president of C.T. Taylor Construction. “The scan produced a three-dimensional digital model from which exact measurements could be obtained at any elevation within the existing structures.”

Erecting steel within an enclosed space could not be done with a crane,

but rather needed to be manhandled and lifted with forklifts.

This new steel was used to create a platform eight feet above the floor of the 45-foot open-overhead crane building. Once in place, three more levels of floors were constructed on the platform. The space below the platform became the heated garage, with the living spaces above.

“The existing steel columns, as expected, had variations from the

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Pete Perticarini
&build, a PCS company

designed column spacing. Therefore, no two beams were the same length. The laser scan enabled us to fabricate individual beams to the precise length they needed to be,” says Hitchcock.

“Not only that, but we are dealing with basically nine different buildings in the complex, each built at different times,” says Foran. The red brick buildings are actually four different structures, and the older complex consists of five different structures: the stables, the powerhouse, the Odd Fellows hall, the brewery and the brewer’s residence.”

Often, each building had its own brick type and unique mortar, which all needed to be maintained. Almost nothing could be salvaged from one part of the building

to be used somewhere else. None of the team had ever encountered a project with as many unique requirements.

The challenges continued with approvals needed for the new Traco windows being ordered. Just prior to their submission, the U.S. Park Service, which administers the federal tax credits, placed increased pressure on the state historic tax boards to do much more stringent reviews before they were sent to Washington.

“During the review in Columbus, we were subjected to all sorts of additional layers of review,” relates Fluker. “We literally met with four different inspectors, each with their own specialty. What we normally could expect to be approved in one to two months stretched into almost six months.”

Final approvals did come eventually, in time for the first wave of tenants to move in September 2, 2016. Twenty-two units were completed at first, with a second batch ready for occupancy on November 15. December 30 saw the final certificate of occupancy ready for the last 36 units.

Taking a tour

Entry to the apartments is through a newly created courtyard facing north on Church Avenue. A swooping curved glass wall encloses the leasing office to your left as you enter the old stable area. Elevators to the four floors of apartments occur on the right.

Following the office wall, another glass-walled area encloses the fitness

center. Strip LED fixtures and a large exterior window make for a bright, cheery space. Looking above, the ceiling features historically interesting, inverted queen post trusses.

Another door off the lobby, right outside the elevator doors, leads to the two garage units situated in the center of the block. The 26,400-square-foot, heated garage can accommodate 55 cars.

Apartments are located on four floors, many looking out into a 40-foot-tall, four-story atrium with a 50-foot long, polycarbonate skylight. Comfortable

community seating is planned for the first floor of the atrium, where many community events have already been hosted.

Apartments range from 618-square-foot studio units to 2,000-square-foot, three-bedroom, three-bath units. Some are set up as two-story townhouses. All feature Energy Star, Frigidaire stainless-steel appliances and cherry stained wood kitchen cabinets. Glossy granite tops sparkle under the pendant LED fixtures. Most feature bamboo flooring and 18-inch by 36-inch vinyl plank flooring for the kitchen/dining areas,

and most have borrowed lights for the interior spaces. All units have been designed and equipped to meet “Green Communities” standards.

Many of the apartments have structural steel elements occurring in their spaces – some at the walls and some overhead. One unit even has a rolling circular steel support that still operates a boom crane.

Five suites on the second floor have direct access out onto a huge rooftop patio area. The balance of the tenants can also take advantage of this area through a sixth door that opens into the public corridor.

Proud to have been a trusted partner in this adaptive reuse project



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It's all worth it in the end

As final touches are being added, the team is quite proud of the end product. “I don’t think we’ll ever see another project like this,” Fluker recalls, “but I especially love the two-story units. They turned out wonderfully.”

“This project was a distinct challenge, but I really get a lot of satisfaction from repurposing a building,” Perticarini says. “It takes a lot more grit from the development side and a lot of prowess from the architectural team to hang in there, as these projects can seem to take forever to complete.”

Smythe reflects that, “I think every hurdle possible was thrown our way. In the end, it’s a very positive feeling of accomplishment though. I also can’t say enough about Tracy Nichols and Ohio City Inc. (OCI). Every time a problem arose, if we needed help, they were there for us. But, not only did we benefit from OCI’s assistance, the impact on the neighborhood is really huge.”

“Hingetown wasn’t even a reality when we started,” continues Foran. “We feel very proud of our impact. Not displacing a single resident, we were able to take boarded-up buildings and convert them into vibrant new retail and apartments, while maintaining the historic integrity of the buildings.”

Ohio City and nearby Hingetown look to be some of the most vibrant new communities on Cleveland’s west side, and West 25th Street Lofts is well poised to be at the epicenter. **P**

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