

Up and down

The Pulitzer Foundation makes plans to build its new headquarters, and developers begin to raze the "round building" with the help of TIF. Pages 5 & 6

WEST END ~ CLAYTON
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For arts' sake

Bais Yaakov High School students will offer their enlightening take on 'Guiding Light,' and a potpourri of musical performances span February and March. Page 15

Kohner Properties purchases Midtown complex Clayton realtor to renovate historic buildings

By Lee Khorll

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The Drake Plaza on Lindell Boulevard east of Grand Boulevard is being renovated by new owners.

Two historic buildings in Midtown St. Louis have been purchased by a Clayton real estate firm, which is reviving a renovation plan that was abandoned about 10 years ago.

Kohner Properties Inc., purchased the former Drake Hotel and the Pink Building, located along Olive Street just east of Grand Boulevard, in November at a foreclosure auction.

"I purchased the Drake Plaza with the intention of keeping it forever," said Jon Pyzyk, president of Kohner Properties. "I plan to tie the buildings to the Grand Center area and St. Louis University. We will associate with our neighbors and hope to draw residents from the university."

According to Pyzyk, the previous developers had obtained a mortgage insured by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to finance the purchase. When they did not make payments to HUD, the agency foreclosed, leading to Pyzyk's purchase.

Pyzyk said the apartments were "beautiful" when he bought the complex. "They were almost like new after 10 years," he said. He then went to work renovating the storefronts, and these were completed recently. New tenants include the St. Louis Association of Community Organizations, which moved into former St. Louis Mayor Freeman R. Bosley Jr.'s campaign headquarters. Most of the apartments also are occupied, he said.

Kohner Properties is updating the lobby and commons area of the Drake building. Robert Payne Newton and Associates is the interior designer. The two buildings were constructed in the early 1900's. The Pink Building, which draws its name from its color, originally was known as the Pickel Building. It was named for Pickel Realty Co. and was constructed for offices and for automobile dealership showrooms. It became part of the flourishing auto trade along Locust Street.

In 1915, the Pickel Co. announced plans for construction of its Plaza Hotel complex. The complex included the six-story Plaza Hotel, which was renamed the Drake in 1960 and closed in the early 1970s, and three adjoining two-story buildings. They housed a café, a dinner-dance hall and bar, automobile showrooms and offices.

These storefronts on Olive Street were neglected for years. The 1987 investors ran out of money before they could complete the units, Pyzyk said. The units sat without plumbing, heating or air conditioning for 10 years, until last November when

Kohner Properties began renovating them, he said.

Some of the original tenants of the two buildings reportedly were involved in the movie industry. In the 1950's, the area was a major film distribution center, with dozens of firms such as Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Warner Brothers and 20th Century Fox located there. These companies moved out in the 1960s as the area faded.

The apartments often were used by theater people from the nearby Grand Avenue vaudeville and movie district. The architects for the buildings was Preston J. Bradshaw, designer of a number of other hotels, including the Mayfair and Lennox downtown and the Chase in the West End.

The Plaza was Bradshaw's first hotel project and his most original exterior design. The building's symmetrical façade and bracketed, projecting metal cornice contribute to the Italian Renaissance feel of the building. Other features, such as the lack of applied ornament, the emphasis on surface texture and the characteristic brick patterns embedded in the stucco at the sixth floor, also suggest a strong Craftsman influence.

The buildings are said to have been the first major commercial development in St. Louis with stucco exteriors. Why the stucco on the Pink Building was painted pink no one seems to know. Raymond Dennis, one of the partners in Drake Plaza Associates, the company that renovated the building in 1987, said at the time that it had been pink for as long as he could remember. Deborah Wafer, who researched the structure for listing on the National Registry of Historic Places, said the building may well have been pink when it was built. She said nothing in the history of the building names a color.

In contrast with the historic exterior of the buildings, Pyzyk said that the apartments are modern and have many amenities such as European cabinetry, dishwashers and a security system.

The two main structures are separated by a courtyard that formerly was the Lindell-Locust Cutoff. It cut diagonally through the block bounded by Olive and Locust streets and Channing and Leonard avenues. The roadway was completed in 1915 to connect Locust Street and Lindell Boulevard. It was closed in 1987 as part of the renovation project.

The 1987 project began when two men with offices in the area, Elbert Dorsey and Dennis, discussed the sorry state into which the two buildings had fallen. They brought in Bill Thomas, who had expertise in redevelopment projects, and formed the Lindell-Olive Redevelopment Corp. They turned the complex into apartments before running out of money to complete the project's storefronts, Pyzyk said.

The storefront units were in the news in 1997 when one of them was renovated for use by Bosley as his re-election campaign headquarters. HUD officials became upset that the developers had not paid on their mortgage, but had spent money fixing up the unit for Bosley, Pyzyk said.

"I am thrilled to have the Drake Plaza" Pyzyk said. "It is destined to be a vital part of the Midtown-Grand Center area."