

S I L O P O I N T

Turning Old Structures Into New Living Spaces

Maryland Distinctive Properties

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When Kim Webb moved from Washington, D.C., to Baltimore, she looked at both new construction and older buildings before finding a property that was a little of both. Her new condominium is in Silo Point, a renovated former grain elevator in Locust Point.

Webb, a real estate agent, paid around \$320,000 for a one-bedroom unit of about 1,400 square feet on the sixth floor. She loves the views of the harbor from her balcony and the proximity to Fort McHenry National Monument and Historic Shrine, where she likes to run.

She also likes that her new home is a “pretty unique property,” she says.

The grain elevator was converted by Turner Development Group, which has a long history of transforming aging Baltimore Landmarks into modern residential and office spaces. The company’s projects included a duckpin bowling alley, church, hospital and theater.

“I love adoptive re-use,” says Pat Turner, president of the company. “We believe in doing urban projects and using existing infrastructure, existing buildings.” He says people are attracted to structure that have a history. “I think people like their space to be unique and different, not just a vanilla box somewhere.”

As people become more concerned about the environment, reused spaces like these, typically in walk-able urban neighborhoods, are becoming more common. These personality filled structures are the opposite of sterile new suburban developments, with their tiny just-planted trees and rows of identical houses. And it doesn’t hurt that they tend to be exceptionally well made.

Turner says even in this downturn, more than 100 people a week are waling through the not-quite-completed Silo Point to decide if they want to buy there.

The structure has 228 units with about 40 different floor plans and prices ranging from \$260,000 to \$4.2 million for the penthouse. There is also a Sky Lounge open to everyone in the building, conference rooms, a gym and about 20,000 square feet of retail space. So far, about 50 units have sold, Turner explains.

Turner’s history with converting Baltimore buildings dates back to the early 1990s, when he turned the Southway Bowling Center into apartments. In the ensuing years, his company converted Holy Cross School, Built 1899, to a condo complex, the McHenry Theater, built 1917, to offices; and the former South Baltimore General Hospital on Light Street into condos.

SILO POINT

The silo Point project is believed to be the only grain elevator in the world that has been converted to condominiums, Turner says. He first noticed the structure in 2002, when it was still in operation as an Archer Daniels Midland grain elevator, filled with about 5 million bushels of grain.

He had been walking about Locust Point with architect Chris Pfaeffle, a principal with Parameter Inc., and the notion that the structure would be ideal as residences seemed to strike them both at once, Turner says.

Turner called the “in case of emergency” phone number on the side of the building and from there spent about seven months cajoling officials with the giant conglomerate to sell their grain elevator to him. Finally, the company relented.

The grain elevator dates back to 1923 and “represented a huge amount of architectural and engineering challenges,” Turner says. But the glass and steel structure was well made.

It also had a singular advantage over building something new: It was more than 300 feet tall in a neighborhood zoned for structures no higher than 35 feet. No new construction could be that tall, but this one was grandfathered in. It now has 24 stories, allowing residents like Webb to enjoy commanding views of the city and water.

Turner worked closely with Pfaeffle, a partner on Turner projects for the past decade. Pfaeffle says he’s built projects from scratch and has been involved with Turner conversions, and each has its own challenges.

“If you look at an existing building, your framework is already in place,” he says. “Your task is how we make stuff fit intelligently and how make all that work. That’s fun and we enjoy that. The other one is the clean slate is very intimidating. You have to approach that in a totally different way.”

No doubt, turning a structure filled with grain and conveyor belts into a sunlit, modern, energy-efficient space is not easy.

“You approach it two ways,” says Pfaeffle. “one is that you have the existing structure, but you also need to make the units marketable on a host of levels.” He and Turner “literally started by doing a series of blocking diagrams based on the existing structure,” he says. They figured out where the added floor would go and where to put vertical cores, elevators and means of egress. “It was a back and forth for about a year,” explains Pfaeffle.

To reference the structure’s history, they worked to “redeploy” some existing infrastructure, Pfaeffle says. My personal strategy is to do that without being too literal or too kitsch about it,” he says.

So, for example, a piece of machinery that was used to lift trains and dump out grain became a sculptural element at the entryway.

“We kept a lot of the old columns and old structural components,” says Turner. “We didn’t try to make the new look old and the old look new.”

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Many tenants are either empty nesters who no longer need large suburban homes or young couples just starting out, says Pfaeffle. They like the “cool” factor of an urban loft, but still want privacy, storage and wall space, he says.

For Webb and her partner, Silo Point provides a lot of character and square footage for the money. Their one-bedroom unit is spacious and has lots of light and “great views of the sunset,” Webb continues.

And it’s just the right mix of old and new. Webb appreciates the energy-efficient appliances and other features that come with new development, but also like the character that comes with a property that has a story to tell. “It’s nice that they were able to keep some of that history,” she says.

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