

S I L O P O I N T

Sky High

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By: Amanda Kolson Hurley

One day almost five years ago, developer Patrick Turner and architect Chris Pfaeffle went for a walk in Locust Point, scouting for real estate opportunities in the rapidly gentrifying South Baltimore neighborhood. Turner looked up at a 1920s-era grain elevator, three hundred feet tall, and saw their destiny. "I said, 'Chris, there's the project,'" Turner recalls. "He immediately agreed. It has magnificent bones to it."

Turner, a veteran Baltimore builder with a history of backing dramatic projects, pulled out his cell phone and called the number on a sign hung from the gate outside. Within minutes he was transferred to an executive at Archer Daniels Midland, the agri-giant that operated the elevator. The company declined his initial offers, but Turner persisted, purchasing the building, along with 182 cylindrical grain silos, for \$6.5 million some months later. He has since poured "well over \$100 million" into the site, he says, transforming the property into Silo Point, a complex of 228 luxury condos that will go on the market this summer.

Pfaeffle, founding principal of the architecture firm Parameter and a frequent collaborator of Turner's, had landed by far the biggest job of his career, and with it some vexing challenges. The only model he could find for this type of adaptive reuse was a hotel housed in old Quaker Oats silos in Akron, Ohio. (There is actually one other example—a condo complex in Minneapolis.) In any case, he and Turner soon dismissed the idea of inserting condos into the silos themselves: It was too complicated in structural terms, and designing "in the round" would be a headache.

Besides, the main attraction was the elevator building itself, which was twice as tall as the silos and closer to the water. The largest and fastest grain elevator in the world when it was built in 1923, it housed a network of conveyor belts that scooped up grain from arriving trains, lifted it through a series of vertical shafts inside the building, weighed it, and deposited it in the bank of 110-foot silos. From there, the grain was loaded onto tankers for export overseas.

A sand-colored, largely windowless tower on the outside, the building looks like an Egyptian temple inside. Massive octagonal columns twenty-three feet high recede in long, even rows. Overhead, in the ceiling, openings from the grain shafts create a not-quite-regular rhythm of dark squares. Above this ceiling are a series of concrete bins, rising up nearly half the building's height. Pfaeffle initially considered turning the bins into living units, but was again deterred by structural considerations, and the fact that the space wouldn't yield enough condos to justify the cost.

In the end, the team decided to leave the bins empty and tear down most of the silos, but the grain elevator is still the backbone of the project. The lobby for the complex will be nestled among those enormous columns, soon to be uplit for dramatic effect. The upper portion of the building, and a new glassy structure that wraps in front of it, hold condos, all designed to conform to the elevator's 16-by-16-foot structural grid.

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Pfaeffle showed me an end unit within the front wrap and explained the thinking that went into its floor plan: the placing of the balcony between rooms, not cantilevered off one, to honor the scenery; his fusion of a loft-like open floor plan in the living/dining area with a more traditional layout of the other rooms (inspired in part by the “Classic Sevens” of prewar New York apartment buildings), to balance flexibility with privacy. Through the glass curtain wall—a rarity in red-brick Baltimore—the condo’s interior seemed to dissolve into the sky and water. “Every time the marketing people talk about the view,” Pfaeffle told me, “I say, ‘It’s not view, it’s panorama.’ It’s cataclysmically different.” Atop the structure sit two two-story penthouses with nearly 360-degree water views.

A “sky bridge” leads from the old structure to a block of new construction, where more glass-walled condos wrap around a nine-story parking garage, anchored by a dozen remaining silos. On top of the parking garage perch two- and three-story “townhouses in the sky.” Clad in gleaming corrugated metal, they surround a courtyard where Pfaeffle hopes residents will chat, sunbathe, and watch their kids play.

Who will move into Silo Point? “The creative class, whatever that definition drives down to,” Turner says, using scholar Richard Florida’s much-hyped term. “A mix of singles, young couples, and empty nesters; a variety of people.” However creative they are (how many artists can afford a 180-degree water view?), they’ll have access to a fitness center, a common area, and a lounge on the penthouse level. They’ll be able to control their lights, air conditioner, and stereo—and even make dinner reservations—using a touchscreen control panel in their unit.

Depending on your perspective, Silo Point is either a monument to industrial chic built on the shifting sands of an overheated housing market, or it’s simply another, albeit bold, step in Locust Point’s inexorable modernization. Historically, the residents of “the Point”—many of them Irish, German, Polish, and Italian—have lived downwind from big industry, their modest brick and Formstone-faced rowhouses overshadowed by the grain elevator, the Procter & Gamble soap factory, and the (still active) Domino Sugar plant. For them, the water is a livelihood, not a view.

Brian Mastervich, a board member of the Locust Point Civic Association and the co-chair of a task force that reviewed the Silo Point plan before it gained city approval, takes a sanguine view of the development. Although longtime residents have voiced concerns that the newcomers will be isolated and aloof, the completed first phase of the overall project—121 brick townhouses that were built by Pulte Homes just southeast of the grain elevator—have reassured him, he says. “I know at least ten people who live there and are active in the community.”

Turner, for his part, isn’t saying how much his new condos will cost, though early in the project he said that prices would range from \$400,000 to more than \$1 million. “We want people to get the total ‘wow’ factor,” he explains. “We wait ‘til it’s ready to go, then price it at what the market can bear.” His decision not to do presales is unusual, but Turner, who famously planned an airplane-crash-themed restaurant on Key Highway (the idea itself crashed after the attacks of 9/11), is not your usual developer. Silo Point isn’t even the most ambitious project he’s currently working on. That would be Westport, a 42-acre, \$1.4 billion “second downtown” with housing, office space, shops, and restaurants on the Middle Branch of the Patapsco.

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Turner shrugs off concerns about the cooling real estate market. He cites expansion at the University of Maryland and Johns Hopkins, as well as military jobs arising from the base realignment and closure (BRAC) process, as drivers of future job growth in the Baltimore area. "We're close to the bottom; we'll be coming out," he says. Besides, he's aiming high: "Certain income levels aren't necessarily affected by that. There's a lot of quiet money here."

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