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Silo Point: An Industrial-Strength Renovation

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During the winter of 2003, Patrick Turner, president of Turner Development Group, and I meandered through one of his company's recent acquisitions: the towering shell of what was once the world's largest and fastest grain elevator. The Locust Point Grain Terminal Elevator, built by the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad in 1923 on the southernmost peninsula in the city of Baltimore, stood hauntingly quiet except for the sound of faraway seagulls and the occasional train passing through on the tracks below. While the concrete was damp and the windows squeaky and tilted, our tour provoked the kind of raw wonder that any five-year-old might experience when seeing such an astonishing sight for the first time. Our ambition was to transform the iconic structure—along with portions of the adjacent array of 187 silos—into a sleek, modern residential complex while still respecting the original building's industrial character.

Pat and I never once considered demolishing the elevator tower, despite the naysayers who insisted that the only sensible approach was to take it down and then build from scratch. While starting with a blank slate is often easier, that was just not an option in this case as we came to admire the grittily elegant structure. We were convinced that saving the building was worth the effort, and four years after our initial visit, the complex that we now call Silo Point is finally being transformed from an archaic industrial facility into a stylish condominium with 228 airy apartments.

Old Dog, New Tricks

We wanted to create a cutting-edge work of architecture that would reveal much of its past without expressing it too literally. Our adaptive reuse strategy involved coming to an understanding of how the building was designed and how it worked, and then translating that into a modern use. For example, one of the most important aspects of the grain elevator structure was the sense of vastness that one felt when walking around both the interior and exterior. We wanted to preserve that aspect of the elevator building's character while taking advantage of every opportunity to let the building tell its own story.

When approaching any adaptive reuse project, the design team must decide which elements of the existing structure to retain and which to remove. In the case of the B&O grain elevator, the extant concrete tower was tall, narrow, and long, with views of the harbor and city skyline. It was easy to see how that arrangement could translate very well into a modern residential project. In contrast, the windowless, virtually impenetrable storage silos would not lend themselves readily to any other uses. It quickly became clear that keeping the entire silo farm was not possible, so we devised an alternative strategy to maintain a small number of the silos and to incorporate them into the new complex. The retained silos will serve as visual anchors, as well as highly evocative relics of the site's industrial past. The new architectural elements will snake around the remnants, creating a dialogue between historic and contemporary materials and forms. In many cases, existing footings and piles are being reused to accommodate the new structure.

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Another challenge was the 16-foot-by-16-foot structural grid that was used throughout the original elevator and silos. Although such a grid bears no relationship to typical modern dimensions for residential construction, we felt compelled to retain it and integrate it into the new construction in order to preserve the historical continuity of the project. In the end, original beams and columns remained in place, as we found ways to make the contemporary apartments conform to the unusual structural dimensions. Ultimately, as we came to understand the ramifications of this decision, it helped us to design better living units than might otherwise have been the case.

The incorporation of elevators—for people, that is, rather than grain—also posed quite a problem. In a typical new construction project, stock elevators are placed in shafts designed specifically to accommodate them. In Silo Point's case, elevators had to be custom made to fit in the building's existing silos on that unusual 16-foot-by-16-foot grid. Moreover, we had to design special platforms in adjacent silos to access the elevators' counterweights, and had to "suspend" elevator pits in the basement. Additionally, new elevators were placed at the perimeter of the project.

A Striking Model for Urban Living

Any new residential development must stand out from its competitors, of course. Fortunately for Silo Point, the site's vivid history, awe-inspiring historic structure, and waterside setting make for an inherently interesting and attractive living environment.

The public spaces of the complex will celebrate the project's origins. Robust, octagonal columns march through the main lobby, emphasizing the great weight of the structure above and creating dramatic perspectives. The basilica-like quality of this space will serve as a powerful reminder of the vastness of the original structure that so impressed us on our initial visit. Visitors will be able to look up and see the lit interiors of the grain silos rising 10 stories overhead. The lobby itself—aside from the columns—will remain practically empty.

The columns in the lobby extend into the lower level, which will house a fitness club, a business center, a billiards room, a wine club, and a gallery. An interesting aspect of these lower-level spaces will be the exposed pile caps, which will further enhance visitors' appreciation of the massive structure.

The additions to the building, including the elements interwoven with the remaining silos and a multi-story block on top of the existing tower, are being constructed out of concrete, glass, and various forms of corrugated metal. A 550-car parking garage, capped by two- and three-level townhouse-like structures, will be linked by a three-story glass bridge to the tower.

In a project of this type, of course, a cookie-cutter approach to apartment layout would be impossible, and Silo Point will therefore offer a broad range of unit options. To pay homage to the site's history, we decided to call the residential units "bins." Each "bin" number will be illuminated on the floor in front of the apart-

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ment door—an allusion to the original system in which a plate in the floor identified the number of each storage bin. Some condo units will have ceilings as high as 18 feet, most with floor-to-ceiling windows. Units near the top of the skyscraper will have glass on two or three sides, and since no other building nearby approaches the complex's 22-story height—and current zoning prevents any other high-rise construction in the area—Silo Point's residents will enjoy spectacular views for years to come.

Another important design consideration was the provision of outdoor space for residents. Every bin at Silo Point has access to some kind of outdoor area, be it a private balcony, the lushly landscaped common terrace on the roof, or the walking trails that surround the property. The landscape design will allude to the complex's original use, incorporating mounds representing the volume of grain that would fit in one silo, as well grain-like plantings.

In the end, we expect that Silo Point will prove to be an exciting and dynamic marriage of seemingly disparate histories, uses, materials, and forms. The project also serves as a compelling reminder that our landscape is dotted with many structures—some abandoned, others merely underutilized—that might be ripe for new functions. By preserving and adapting elements of a structure that could easily be dismissed as a white elephant, we hope to create a residential community of unique character and vibrancy that will serve as a model for urban revitalization in Baltimore and elsewhere.