

# St. Petersburg Times

## Landmark gets new lease on life:[STATE Edition]

*ELIZABETH BETTENDORF. St. Petersburg Times. St. Petersburg, Fla.: Jan 10, 2003. pg. 1*

Jennifer Malin wanted to live in the Palace of Florence apartments with such a passion that she filled out an application years before the renovation was complete.

"It's one of the most fantastic buildings in Tampa," says Malin, marketing manager at the law firm of Carlton Fields. "You walk down the halls and feel like you're in a different country."

Malin and her boyfriend, Marc Dahl, share a two-bedroom apartment in the historic Davis Islands building, known for its Mediterranean revival towers that rise gracefully over Davis Boulevard. The second tower was rebuilt as part of a \$1.5-million renovation completed last year by Hamilton Jones, president and owner of Gaspar Properties Inc.

Jones, a South Tampa native with a love for historic preservation, threw a party in December to wrap up the 18-month overhaul of the grand scale Italian palazzo that first opened as a hotel in 1926.

Dozens of people partied in the newly refurbished rooftop garden, once a fancy outdoor promenade for flapper-era hotel guests. The area was so decrepit when Jones bought the building in 1995, just walking on it caused ceilings below to leak.

"I'll never forget getting a phone call from a tenant right after I bought the building complaining that her roof had a leak," he remembers. "It was right around the Fourth of July, and when I climbed up there I found that people had been shooting off fireworks. When I went over to look at the spot that was leaking, there was a perfect imprint where a foot had gone through."

The South Tampa real estate investor knew he was in for a fight if he wanted to coax the crumbling behemoth back to its original condition. He essentially gutted the 28-unit building from the inside out: "The heart and lungs have been torn out," says Jones, who outfitted each apartment with a brand new electrical system, plumbing, central heat and air conditioning.

Tall and soft-spoken, he appears at the Palace on a Saturday morning wearing a preppy navy blazer, game for a good hike around his building.

Raised in Sunset Park, Jones graduated from Plant High School and majored in finance at the University of Florida. He launched his career humbly: fixing up and selling old houses, doing all of the work himself, never dreaming that "with no background in construction or real estate" he would end up restoring historic properties on a massive scale.

His many projects include the Ritz Apartment building on Davis Islands and a former

cigar factory that he leases to the University of Tampa.

At 38, Jones is the married father of three small children and lives in Hyde Park. But it's obvious he still gets a teensy thrill out of navigating the narrow spiral staircase into the tallest of the Palace of Florence towers.

And it is thrilling. The Port of Tampa, downtown skyline, open bay and Harbour Island create a 360-degree panoramic view above the whoosh of traffic on Davis Boulevard.

Overhead, decorative ornate metalwork supports a weather vane and a mirrored gazing ball, forming a crown over the crest of the tower. Jones would like to add a few benches so that residents can occasionally hang out comfortably with the birds.

In the main building below, heart pine stairways have been restored to their original beauty, as have hardwood floors in each apartment. Reground and polished terrazzo floors in the corridors shine as they did 75 years ago.

The Palace was designed by Athos Menaboni, an artist hired by a group of Italian businessmen in Tampa.

According to the building's nomination to the National Register of Historic Places, Menaboni drew his inspiration from the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence. Begun in 1925, the Palace was built at a cost of \$350,000 and opened for business the following year.

What couldn't be restored was replaced with the help of old postcards and photographs from the Burgert Brothers collection.

The egg and dart molding that wraps like a ribbon around the exterior has been re-created. So have the winged gargoyles, courtyard fountain and garden benches. And Jones is proud that the reconstructed southwest tower looks exactly as it did in a 1927 postcard.

The building is attracting a mix of young, upscale renters, from doctors to artists.

"Our typical renter is a young professional who likes a building with character," he says. "Most have lived in big, huge complexes and are tired of them. They want a quaint building that has been restored, where everything is new, but the building still has a lot of historic character."

Dahl, a graphic artist who uses the second bedroom as an office, is crazy about the historic details. The kitchen is small but quaint, with its original cabinetry painted and outfitted with historically accurate knobs and drawer pulls.

"Look around," he says. "These are not things you just pick up at Home Depot."

Even the black and white bathrooms have been completely redone in bottle cap-size 1920s style tile. The original cedar closets - where Northerners surely hung their

stoles and winter woolens - were salvaged as well.

Everything looks so old, it's eye-fooling.

"I can't imagine anybody going into the kind of detail he has. It's as close as somebody could possibly make it to the original," says Betty Culbreath, who toured the building at the party last month.

Culbreath should know. She lived in the building for three years during the 1920s while her mother was employed as the manager. Culbreath, who was "a little girl" at the time and attended Gorrie Elementary School, won't say exactly how old she was when she lived in the Palace "because that would be telling."

Advertised as an "exclusive apartment hotel in the Bay of Tampa," the Palace boasted maid service and long winter rentals. According to an antique postcard Jones found in the old office during the renovations, each furnished room offered an "electrically equipped kitchen with individual Frigidaire, silver kitchen utensils, china and glassware."

Culbreath recalls hotel guests gathering to socialize on rattan furniture beneath a wide awning in the rooftop garden.

"It was all furnished then, with hand-woven upholstery and pillows made in Italy," Culbreath says. "It was very glamorous. I got a big kick out of living there."

### **[Illustration]**

Caption: This decorative fountain and courtyard greets visitors to The Palace of Florence on Davis Islands.; Hamilton Jones is a developer for Gaspar Properties, which specializes in historical restorations of apartments and office buildings.; The Palace of; Florence on Davis Islands, features 28 units, most of which are one-bedroom, one-bath apartments. All units have access to the rooftop garden.; Photo: PHOTO, STEFANIE BOYAR, (3)

