

Italian Inspiration

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Work begins next week to return a faded architectural gem back to its former grandeur.

DAVIS ISLANDS - When Hamilton Jones looks upon the Palace of Florence apartments, he sees beyond its faded paint, its chipped gargoyles and the beer bottle jutting from the central court's fountain.

He sees what once was and what will be again. Using postcards from the past and photographs from the Burgert Brothers collection, Jones plans to restore the 75-year-old structure to its former grandeur. He plans to spend about \$1 million on the renovation, which begins in full force on Tuesday.

"It's in very poor condition right now and in need of updating," said Jones, 37, president and owner of Gaspar Properties Inc. Jones bought the Palace and three other Davis Islands apartment buildings in 1995 from Nashville investors for \$1.26 million. He has completed restorations of the other three buildings: The Ritz, a 12-unit apartment at 58 Davis Blvd.; Bayview I, a 12-unit complex at 511 Columbia Drive; and Bayview II, a six-unit apartment at 513 Columbia Drive.

The Palace of Florence, built in the Mediterranean Revival style of architecture, was designed by Athos Menaboni. Menaboni was hired by a group of Italian businessmen in Tampa, who were active in banking and shipping in Ybor City.

Besides using the Palazza Vecchio for inspiration, Menaboni incorporated elements from the Palazza del Podesta for the center court and the stair from a Tuscan castle.

There's no doubt about the structure's historic value, said Del Acosta, the city of Tampa's historic preservation administrator.

"In my opinion, it's the most important privately owned structure in the city," Acosta said. "It was the only building on Davis Islands that got its inspiration from a European building," he added. "There's detail everywhere you look." The structure is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Its historic and architectural significance are described in documents contained in its file with the city's Architectural Review Commission. The documents paint a picture of the grand building in its early days.

Patrons could rent by the day, week, month or year - with reduced rates in the off-season, ARC documents say. Each of its 28 furnished apartments included a bedroom, tiled bathroom, combined living and dining room and kitchen. Standard furnishings, supplied by Maas Bros. in Tampa, included a walnut table, chairs, cabinets, benches, a settee, sofa bed and lacquered wood bedroom set.

Besides furniture, each apartment included rugs, table linens, glassware, china and silver. The homelike private apartments boasted hotel conveniences, including telephones in each apartment with a 24-hour switchboard and daily maid and janitor services. All patrons had access to the roof promenade, roof garden and terraces. Afternoon teas and evening concerts were scheduled during the winter months.

Construction of the complex began in September 1925, during the midst of the Florida land boom. The \$350,000 project was built by contractor R.W. Wishart, and ready for occupancy in May 1926. The apartment-hotel was made of hollow clay tiles on a foundation of concrete footings. Its exterior walls are a smooth stucco.

"Recessed concrete stairways lead directly from the sidewalk to the north and south wings of the structure. The building's flat roof is shielded from view by a crenellated parapet with a blind cornice," says the building's nomination for National Historic Register status.

"The not quite symmetrical fenestration includes windows with plain, flat head and others with round fanlights. Still others have blind lancet arches. "The windows are found singly, paired and in groups of three. All of them have plain concrete sills," the nomination states. Only one of its original 136 windows remains. Jones plans to use aluminum windows in the restoration.

Other features included cypress woodwork and oak floors in the apartments and wrought iron chandeliers in the hallways. But restoring the building to its former glory will take work and money. To help offset the cost of the renovation project, Jones is seeking a special tax break. Essentially, it locks in the structure's assessed value for 10 years, Jones said.

The tax reduction is available from the city of Tampa and Hillsborough County for historic properties that qualify, Acosta said. It applies only to the structure, not to the land where it sits, Acosta said.

The building's value is \$333,807, according to Hillsborough County Property Appraiser records. Its land value is \$280,000, the records show.

Jones said many of the original fixtures are missing or inoperable.

He also plans to restore the chandeliers and molding, grind and reseal the terrazzo floor and remove, polish and reinstall the original hardware on the doors. Jones intends to replicate any fixtures or decorative features that are missing. Plans include the removal of a laurel oak tree on the northwest side of the building. Jones said it wasn't part of the original landscaping and obscures the view of the structure.

Jones also plans to add a tower on the southwest side of the building, there when the building opened but gone for years. A rooftop garden atrium, one of the structure's original features, also will be reconstructed. Additionally, to modernize the apartments, he will add central heating and air conditioning, update the plumbing and electrical work and provide a laundry room.

The project is expected to take about a year to complete. When finished, Jones plans to rent the apartments starting at \$900 a month. Jones offers a simple explanation for engaging in the restoration project. "I just like that old architectural style. You don't see it much today. I just like knowing that I can preserve some of that history."

Cutline: ROBERT BURKE/Tribune photos

(C) As he stands in the five-story tower of the Palace of Florence, Hamilton Jones describes plans to restore the historic Davis Islands building.

(C) Courtyard tiles spell the building's name in Italian.

(2C) The postcard at left shows the Palace of Florence in 1927. At right, the building today is missing a tower on its southwest side.