

Preserving a Florentine palace

The new owner of a historic apartment building on Davis Islands says he'll spend nearly \$700,000 and several years on the Mediterranean-style castle.

July 29, 1995

Section: UNIVERSITY

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D. QUENTIN WILBERTribune Staff Writer

DAVIS ISLANDS -- The headless and weathered gargoyle still guards the steep white stairs. Inside, the 69-year-old hexagonal door knobs jiggle with the slightest touch. But that doesn't bother **Hamilton Jones**, the new owner of the historic Palace of Florence, 45 Davis Blvd.

For through the cracked floors and broken fixtures of this Davis Island landmark, he sees the investment of a lifetime. "I call it one of the jewels of Tampa," says the 31-year-old Jones of the apartment complex, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. "It will take a little work, but it's a good investment."

Jones, owner of Gaspar Properties Inc., bought the Palace and three other Davis Islands apartment buildings last month from a group of Nashville investors for \$1.26 million. He plans to spend an additional \$1.5 million renovating the complexes, which also include the Ritz, 58 Davis Blvd., Bayview I and Bayview II.

Modeled after the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence and designed by architect M. Leo Elliott, the 28-unit Palace, a seasonal tourist hotel/apartment building, was one of the first buildings completed on Davis Islands in 1926 at a cost of \$350,000.

D.P. Davis, the island's developer, had just begun construction on 300 lots, a yacht basin and Marjorie Park the year before.

"The Palace is a very important part of Davis Islands' history," says Stephanie Ferrell, director of the Historic Tampa/Hillsborough Preservation Board. "It has a unique Venetian theme. It's a beautiful building with high ceilings, wood floors, large windows and transoms." In 1927, the Palace opened its doors -- advertising its rooms as "home-like private apartments offering every modern convenience with old world charm."

Guests vacationed lavishly in furnished abodes filled with Oriental rugs, china, walnut tables and sofa beds from Maas Brothers department store. When their rooms needed dusting, they could call on a full-time maid with a real luxury item -- a personal telephone. While the tapestries and lacquered-wood bedroom sets have long disappeared, the decorative light fixtures still hang from the ceilings and walls.

Outside, the rough yellow stucco exterior, classic jutting parapet and 105-foot tower mingle uneasily with aluminum-framed windows and their air conditioners. In the courtyard, plastic plants and pink flowers sprout from a two-tiered fountain. Jones, who buys depressed properties and renovates them, says he'll spend nearly \$700,000 and several years on this Mediterranean-style castle.

With the addition of new kitchens, bathrooms, central heating and air conditioning, he plans to rent the 650-square-foot apartments to young professionals for \$550 to \$600 a month. Now, mostly artists and college students occupy the building, he says.

Contractor Bill Winn, who has worked with Jones in the past, says the renovations will be a time-consuming and delicate task. "We're going to try to keep it how it was," Winn says. "It's a big challenge and there's always problems. It's not like remodeling a new building. The lumber is all different shapes and sizes. You have to be careful." The original contractor, R.W. Wishart, built the structure with clay blocks and layered plaster. Rough and discolored with age, that coating has begun to flake away.

On the roof, between old mushroom-domed exhaust pipes and black tar patches, Jones treads on soft and bubbly material. In earlier years, under a cool awning, guests drank tea in a rooftop garden of green plants and red flowers. A broken chain-link gate hangs loosely in the final entrance to the tall tower. Jagged, iron stairs shower rust with every step. However, the courtyard tiles still spell "Palazzo Firenze," and the original brass room numbers remain tacked to the dark-stained doors.

"If you've done this enough, you look past the decay," says Jones, who renovated the Melville Place Apartments in Hyde Park and 30 other homes. "I have the eye and see what it can be." As an architect and historian, Stephanie Ferrell knows why the building is a wonder. But she also enjoys it for another reason.

"The Palace and Bayshore Boulevard were the two most beautiful places that made me want to stay in Tampa," says Ferrell, 47, who in the late '70s lived in Palace of Florence apartment No. 11.

Cutline: (C) **Hamilton Jones**, second from the left, talks with members of the property maintenance crew Thursday about renovation plans for the Palace of Florence, in background. Jones recently acquired the historic Davis Islands apartment building, located at 45 Davis Boulevard. Crew members, from left, are Scott Powell, Gill Winn and Garrett Wells.