

THIS IS D.C.?: A Japanese pagoda (below) and English manor-style hotel (inset) are among the 23 vintage structures that will eventually be transformed into residences at the National Park Seminary in Forest Glen, Md.



SECOND LIFE

Old buildings are reincarnated as hot properties through adaptive reuse.

NEW-CONSTRUCTION HOMES HAVE their pristine drywall and big closets, but secondhand properties often come with something the new ones don't: delectable stories to tell. Consider the National Park Seminary, a quirky outpost just north of the nation's capital. Founded in 1887 as a summer resort for Washington's elite, the 32-acre spot later became a girls' finishing school. During that era, an eccentric headmaster's penchant for international flair culminated in sorority houses resembling, among other things, a Japanese pagoda, Dutch windmill, medieval castle (with drawbridge!), and a Swiss chalet. In 1942, the campus was annexed by the U.S. Army as a recuperation point for soldiers returning from World War II, and later Korea and Vietnam. Today, this prime spot bordering D.C.'s idyllic Rock Creek Park is undergoing another reincarnation—this time as a mixed-income residential community unlike any other.

It's hard to put a price on history, but there's no doubt it's worth a premium to a certain subset of buyers. Whether the

transformation involves a one-time factory, bank vault, school, or speakeasy, it's not hard to fathom why building permits for historic makeovers have held steady, even when new-housing starts have come to a grinding halt.

Municipalities tend to like such projects because they preserve local character, revitalize blighted areas, boost the tax base, and create local jobs (the lion's share of restoration must be performed on site). And adaptive reuse is eco-friendly to the extent that it saves demolition waste from landfills, stems sprawl by repurposing urbanized land, and reduces the energy consumption intrinsic to the building process. (It's estimated that roughly 85 percent of the total embodied energy in the construction equation is expended in the production and transportation of materials to the jobsite.)

But historic reconstruction is not a business for dabblers. Multiple stakeholders, funding sources, and surprises all weigh into the equation. We are pleased to shed some light on the stories behind three such transformations. *(see page 104)*

BY JENNY SULLIVAN

Around the World in 32 Acres

Old school kitsch makes a dramatic comeback.

THE NATIONAL PARK SEMINARY faced imminent demise more than once. After two Army bids to raze the property were squelched by preservationists, the buildings sat vacant for 25 years. By the time the current \$110 million revitalization effort received approval in 2003, many buildings were on the verge of collapse due to water damage.

"It is unlikely these areas could have withstood another round of spring rains without falling victim to neglect and the elements," says Chris Gosch, an architectural project manager with Madison, Wis.-based Alexander Co., a master developer specializing in large-scale restorations.

As plumbers ventured into underground crawl spaces to seal off the rusted valves of a decrepit private water system, architects and construction managers hacked their way through crumbling plaster and rotting wood—crowbars in hand—to get a handle on what they were dealing with.

What they found wasn't an easy fix. None of the buildings' original framing members conformed to standard sizes. Some were jury-rigged with fastening and bearing methods that would never pass muster with present day building codes. "The challenge was to retain and not disturb historic elements ... while replacing the structural system before it collapsed," Gosch says. In one building, broken steam



ICONIC COLUMNS: Original statuary will continue to serve as structural elements or as outdoor sculptures.

pipes had turned a sunny atrium into a lush greenhouse overgrown with ivy and ferns.

Much of the campus remains a work in progress, but prospective buyers have already begun to realize its promise. Once transformed, the school's former gymnasium will feature sunken condo units in the space once occupied by the swimming pool (complete with wall mosaics of exist-

ing pool tile). Condo residences within the shell of the original hotel will enjoy hammered tin ceilings, arched windows, and authentic plaster wainscoting. A four-story Gothic-style ballroom, housing one of the nation's last remaining large-scale Victrola speaker systems, will serve as a community space for parties and fundraisers.

With the property's conversion to residential zoning, its larger structures will become home to 88 condo residences, 56 workforce housing apartments, and 10 market-rate apartments, each meticulously restored by Baltimore-based Struever Brothers Eccles and Rouse, with no two floor plans alike. Bids to transform 11 former sorority houses and other odd buildings into unique single-family homes have been awarded to local contractors. In addition, the campus will include 90 new-construction courtyard townhomes by local builder/developer EYA. And the neighborhood will keep its treasure. *(see page 106)*

Money Flow

There are two universal truths to large-scale adaptive reuse projects. First, tax credits are a necessary part of the equation, notes Dave Vos, a development project manager for Madison, Wis.-based Alexander Co., the master developer of the National Park Seminary property in Forest Glen,

Md. Vos says his firm only pursues projects in the 15 or so states with tax incentives substantial enough (pushing 20 percent) to make large-scale restoration work financially feasible.

Second, the pro formas are typically a mirror opposite of those seen in new-construction projects. "Whereas in new construction your breakdown is usually 40 percent labor and 60 percent materials, the ratio for restoration work is flipped to 60/40," he says. "You have an existing structure, so you need fewer materials. But that structure needs a lot of work."



Project: National Park Seminary, Forest Glen, Md.; **Size:** 32 acres; **Number of units:** 165 renovated, 90 new; **Developer/Architect:** Alexander Co., Madison, Wis.; **Builders:** Struever Brothers Eccles + Rouse, Baltimore; and EYA, Bethesda, Md.

PHOTOS: COURTESY NATIONAL PARK SEMINARY AND ALEXANDER CO.