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Monahan Restores Midtown Gem

Former Newberry Nurses' Home Gets its Own TLC

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Photos Courtesy of
The Monahan Company

In the late 19th Century, nursing students in starched aprons, nursing caps and long dresses often congregated in the parlor of the Helen Newberry Nurses' Home located near the former Grace Hospital in Detroit. Originally built in 1898, the three-story building served as a dormitory for one of the first training schools for nurses in the United States. Fourteen young women who enrolled in the first class of the Grace Hospital Training School for Nurses lived and studied in this elegant gem of a building located on 100 East Willis, near the corner of John R in today's Detroit Medical Center.

Elijah E. Myers, the architect who designed the Michigan State Capitol Building, brought the full force of his design talent to bear on this 31,000-square-foot building now being renovated into a 28-unit

apartment development by The Monahan Company, Eastpointe. Myers' design sensibilities adorned the building's three-story limestone entry with a Flemish gable, a flowing sweep of curved gable with – in this case – an array of decorative finials. On the interior, Newberry's graceful parlor of a past era is a glory of oak and butternut raised wall paneling, leaded glass windows and a coffered ceiling.

The Monahan Company's own meticulous craftsmanship will soon offer contemporary residents – whether a tired DMC intern or an aficionado of historic buildings – a truly unique place to live. Quinn Evans Architects, Ann Arbor, is bringing its own expertise to bear on bringing this wonderful building back to life.

A YEAR OF INTENSIVE CARE

Long vacant, this former home for nursing students initially needed some intensive care of its own. Prior to renovation, the building had sustained two interior fires, both extinguished and limited in scope. "The building also had several holes in the roof, and subsequently the structure was compromised," said Joseph Monahan, vice president of The Monahan Company.

The first step was "to structurally mend and stabilize the building," said Monahan. "We replaced a lot of floor, ceiling and building members, using basically wood with some steel installed for new openings. Essentially, longer spans were supplemented with steel." In the parlor, The Monahan Company refurbished and replaced an iron beam, originally installed to achieve the long span of this sizeable space.

Beyond structural repair, about 70 percent of the interior was gutted to reshape the residential units from a 19th Century nursing student's small cloister-like room to a contemporary apartment with large suites and bedrooms. The corridors were also enlarged and widened for modern tastes.

WELCOME TO NEWBERRY HALL

The building offers the best of two centuries, namely a range of 21st Century residential units and the decorative flourishes of the 19th Century. "The entire parlor/lobby is being restored to its original grandeur," said Monahan. The gorgeous raised paneling, the keystone arches of the parlor entry, and two small but unique faux bay windows in the grand vestibule are among the restored treasures of Newberry Hall.

"The wood pieces were all painstakingly taken down, numbered and removed," said Monahan. Last winter, the Monahan crew

then spent three months in the shop scraping, refinishing and restoring the building's original wood, "taking an extraordinary amount of care to bring that wood back to life before re-installation," said Monahan.

The original wood trim in the corridors and public areas has been restored and re-used, along with raised wood paneling in the main stairway. Because of a sizeable opening in the roof over the wood staircase, some of the staircase has been rebuilt with supplemental wood and painted beige. "The stairway was compromised, but has been restored to its historical significance," said Monahan. "A minimal amount has been supplemented with new wood, but quite a bit of it is still original."

Merry Go Round Stained Glass, Inc., Rochester, restored the leaded glass windows throughout the building, including the ornate, almost floor-to-ceiling windows in the parlor and stairway landings. "All the original windows were removed, refurbished and re-installed, and new storm windows added to boost energy efficiency," said Michael P. Monahan, controller of the firm.

As a prime energy saver, the building is heated and cooled with 22 geothermal or geo-exchange wells installed 360 feet below the parking lot. Detroit Geothermal, LLC, Detroit, installed this deep vertical geothermal installation.

The Monahan Company also installed ultra-efficient Energy Star appliances in all the units, and switched the water heat from electrical to gas for energy-efficiency, said Monahan. The project also brought the building up to modern code by adding fire protection, fire alarms and making the facility ADA compliant, mainly by adding a new elevator tower to the back of the building.

MORE TLC FOR A SINGULAR BUILDING

The Monahan Company is restoring this elegant, almost regal building, composed of projecting and recessed areas and capped with a sequence of ornate dormers and gables. Two ornamental chimneys, topped with corbelled brick, complete this unique structure listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2008.

The Monahan Company tuck pointed and repaired - and in some instances replaced - the exterior brick. Brick repair focused on the gable areas. "Some of the gables had to be redone, almost entirely, because they took on the most moisture," said Monahan. Much of the gable brick is still original, because it is clad in brick removed from the building section with the new elevator tower attached, added Chuck Stadler, a Monahan carpenter.

Rescue brick was also used to restore the ornamental chimneys. "Reconstruction was challenging, because it required so much stabilization to get it done correctly," said Monahan.

The Monahan Company also cleaned the limestone entry by hand with a mild solution, and salvaged the original front steps. On the back of the building, the Monahan team created a wood replica of the original porch. "It really is going to be an exquisite building," said Monahan.

Newberry Hall Development, LLC is the developer of this historical building. With financing as intricate as its restoration, the project was made possible by the University Cultural Center Association; Detroit Medical Center; US Department of Housing and Urban Development; City of Detroit; State of Michigan; Detroit Investment Fund; Greystone Financial Group; and Comerica Bank. ☞



The Monahan Company disassembled, reframed and resupported the roof. The firm also preserved the original masonry, including the gables and chimneys.



The crew meticulously restored the interior woodwork, including the parlor's coffered ceiling.