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Fueling the Housing Boom

SUGAR PLANTATION CONDOMINIUMS RETROFIT

New Orleans' fashionable Warehouse District has left its industrial roots and fairground reputation behind. The district, now a lively arts community with museums, galleries, jazz clubs, shops, and restaurants, affords many development opportunities.

"There's a resurgence downtown," says Allan McDonnel, President of The McDonnel Group. "In particular, the multifamily residential market is really taking off." Many of the massive warehouses that serviced Mississippi River traffic now boast upscale loft apartments and first-class condominiums with luxurious amenities and extraordinary views of the river and the skyline.

The Challenge

The Florentine Development Corporation of New Orleans is hard at work convert-

ing the former Standard Supply & Hardware Building, an 1890s-era structure that once housed heavy cable, buckets, bolts, and other construction supplies, into luxury living space and retail opportunities. The new Sugar Plantation Condominiums will sit right next door to renowned chef Emeril's restaurant.

Peter Trapolin, Principal with Trapolin Architects of New Orleans, designed the conversion. In doing so, he focused on maintaining the historical integrity. "We've been trying to leave as much of the original buildings as possible," he says.

McDonnel won the Florentine project bid and started work on the 123,000-square-foot, \$8.7-million conversion in September 2003. Construction should wrap up by the end of May 2005. The three-story complex, comprising four

buildings, will offer retail space, parking, and 43 unique residential units with access to a communal room, fitness center, and swimming pool courtyard.

Each floor plan of the Sugar Plantation Condominiums differs, presenting a unique challenge for McDonnel because this eliminates any opportunity to achieve the efficiencies of repetition often found in new construction. "It's a painstaking job, due to the complexity and the age of the building," says Joe Montalbano, Project Superintendent. "It takes a long time to see any accomplishment. We're trying to make something appealing out of something that wasn't."

Once McDonnel finishes, however, its meticulous attention to detail will attract discriminating buyers to the one-, two-, and three-bedroom units, which are

expected to sell between \$250,000 and \$400,000.

Blending Old and New

Brick walls, rough-hewn timbers, and stained concrete floors will grace the second-floor units in the restored warehouse. Wherever possible, McDonnell and the project architects are striving to preserve the look and feel of the original structures. One building, however, was in such poor condition it had to be demolished. Architect Trapolin did manage to save the façade, though, using it to frame the new courtyard. The outdoor area left by the demolition also came in handy as a staging area, with crews working from the inside out.

Ultimately, the courtyard will be a beautifully landscaped recreation area complete with swimming pool, decking, and a community room. The courtyard also provides a light well for units overlooking the pool. Another light source for the condos will be clerestory windows — small casements placed high on a wall like transom windows over a door — in their kitchens.

To maintain the luxury feel of the units without breaking the owner's budget, McDonnell searched world markets for suitable products. For instance, the



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company ordered all 43 granite kitchen countertops from China. In doing so, McDonnell had to make exact measurements. No two kitchens will be alike, and if the countertops do not fit, the time and expense involved in replacing them would be huge.

Third-Story Challenge

McDonnell added a third floor to the original two-story structure, so units on the upper level will lack some of the historic touches but enjoy a balcony. Building the third story presented an interesting engineering endeavor, however. Some of the original wooden support beams had weakened, which required McDonnell's attention. "We salvaged 28 timber beams from one part of the job being demolished to replace deteriorated beams in other project sections," Montalbano notes.

Once McDonnell removed the roof, crews provided temporary support for the timber columns, spaced about 13 to 19 feet apart. Then the third floor structural steel was bolted to the columns. "It was a challenge marrying up the structural steel and rough timbers," McDonnell says. "It required exploratory work, field measurements, and a creative system of saddles to put the pipe columns over the wooden beams."

The Sugar Plantation building walls are masonry and plaster, and some of them are common with adjacent structures. As with any old structure, a few surprises,

such as off-kilter floors, cropped up. But McDonnell managed them with confidence.

"The second floor in two sections of the building had settled over time," Montalbano says. "We corrected that using structural density foam. It comes in sheets, and we laid it down in layers." Crews then gradually divided the building's big open spaces into smaller units.

Big Efforts Reap Rewards

For the Sugar Plantation project, McDonnell self-performed the demolition, poured the concrete foundations, did the rough carpentry, and installed interior unit trim. The mechanical and electrical portions of the job were performed on a design-build basis. McDonnell supervises about 100 people at work on the site, and although you can't see it yet, the company knows it will have an elegant finished product. "We've put a lot of effort into this project, and the goodness will come at the end," Montalbano says.

The Sugar Plantation Condominiums represent McDonnell's second foray into large residential construction. Its positive experience converting the Standard Supply & Hardware building has prompted the firm to look into bidding on three or four larger residential projects. "This is the next wave in the market," McDonnell says. "And we are poised to capitalize on it." 