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Zoellner turns Tolstoi House into novel idea

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RedPeak Properties LLC, a Denver development company, normally buys apartment complexes and turns them into luxury rental units.

But with the Arboretum at Cheesman, President Mike Zoellner decided to embark on a labor of love.

In 2005, he bought the former Tolstoi House, a communal living experiment dating to the mid-1960s, and converted the 11-story building at 1150 Vine St. into upscale condominiums that were completed several weeks ago. Buyers recently started moving in.

"I first saw this building in 1981," Zoellner said. "My wife and I lived in an apartment down the street and we just loved this area, especially this block."

He means the 1100 block of Vine Street, just north of Cheesman Park and the Denver Botanic Gardens.

"There's wonderful architecture in this block. It's so quiet, so walkable, so livable," Zoellner said.

Though Zoellner grew up in Wheat Ridge and now lives in Park Hill, he never forgot the charm of Vine Street.

When he started RedPeak Properties in 2001, Zoellner created an opportunity inventory list.

"We'd identify buildings that were in need of investment," he said.

The property at 1150 Vine St., built in 1964 and requiring significant repairs, was near the top of that list. It wasn't for sale, but that didn't deter Zoellner.

"I wrote an unsolicited offer to the owners," he said.

The Greeley-based landlords weren't interested. They'd owned the property since 1976 and were content with the status quo.

But Zoellner persisted. Not only was the building located in a great neighborhood, the history behind it created a certain cachet that would appeal to buyers looking for a one-of-a-kind property.

The background was intriguing. An organization of women philanthropists that had contributed to Denver's needy population since the early 1900s built the apartment building in 1964 to provide affordable housing to its members and create a community center for promoting its charitable efforts. They named it the Tolstoi House in tribute to Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy.

Funded in part with Federal Housing Administration subsidies earmarked for elderly, middle-income residents, the structure included 72 modest units, some as small as 600 square feet. The top floor was wide open, with dramatic views of Cheesman Park, the Denver Botanic Gardens and Cherry Creek.



Kathleen Lavine | Business Journal

Mike Zoellner, president of RedPeak Properties, at 1150 Vine St.

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"There were no penthouses," Zoellner said. "The area was wide open. They had a little kitchen area that was locked off and had these large cabinets. They had card parties and bake sales and holiday craft sales. They used it as their social area."

The large cabinets, Zoellner said, were built to store tenants' personal china, crystal and silverware. Many had moved from homes into tiny buffet apartments and didn't have enough room in their units to store dishes and other treasures.

For 15 years the guild and its members occupied the apartments. Eventually the burden of owning and operating the building detracted from the group's original mission. The group sold it to the Greeley investors and eventually disbanded. A fund at the University of Denver that provides scholarships for financially strapped students is the only remnant of the group's philanthropic activities.

Zoellner eventually convinced the Greeley owners to sell, and RedPeak converted the apartments into stylish condominiums, all with roomy balconies and ceiling-to-floor windows. He renamed the building the Arboretum at Cheesman.

"There's a whole [architectural] movement out there called mid-century modern," Zoellner said. "It's very popular in L.A."

Developers there have taken buildings built in the 1950s and 1960s and reworked them inside and out, creating a more modern interpretation of historic preservation.

"That's what we've done here," Zoellner said. "We have all new finishes inside in a beautiful, old neighborhood, and we've got a good story to tell, too."

Retirees Burley and Irene Shepard moved into the Arboretum from a village in Portugal to be closer to family.

"Now that was a very old community," Burley Shepard said. "It was built in 1240."

Today they're settled into a one-bedroom unit filled with contemporary Scandinavian-styled furnishings.

"We made a decision to buy this place in 20 minutes," he said. "We just had the right feeling."

Lisa Schlelein, a 28-year-old coordinator at the Denver Athletic Club, bought a two-bedroom unit.

"The whole place has a good energy to it, and the history of it is very cool," Schlelein said.

Human resources professional Tiffany Robbins, 36, has the same contented feeling.

"My balcony overlooks all of these old houses," she said. "It's like living in a treehouse. It's so awesome."

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