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ARCHITECTURE DC

Urbane Renewal Renovations & Additions

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Inside:

Architects Reshape DC Public Schools
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Old School (New Housing):

Historic Building Becomes Center of Condo Complex

by Steven K. Dickens, AIA

The residential development known as the Parker Flats at the Gage School, according to **David Haresign, AIA, of Bonstra | Haresign Architects**, is really four projects in one. The centerpiece is the elaborate restoration and adaptive reuse of the historic Gage School building, incorporating a few small additions. Then there are two entirely new buildings that occupy portions of the former school grounds: a condominium building at the corner of 2nd and V Streets, NW, and “Flagler Place,” a group of row house-style condominiums at the rear of the original school. These three buildings face the fourth component, a landscaped courtyard sitting atop a two-level parking garage.

The story of the complex starts in 1904, when the DC government commissioned architect Lemuel Harris to design a school at the edge of the established LeDroit Park neighborhood, within the then-rapidly-developing Bloomingdale area. Harris produced one of the more geometrically rigorous buildings in the city—a perfect square in plan divided into a modified nine-square arrangement, with a series of spaces that pinwheel around a center space. There were separate entrances and stairwells for boys and girls, and all classrooms had abundant natural light and fresh air. A smaller pavilion containing two classrooms per floor was added in 1908, with a “hyphen” corridor connecting it to the original building.

By 2004, when the site was acquired by Urban Realty Advisors for redevelopment, the school had been abandoned for some three decades. The DC Historic Preservation Office was already working on a landmark nomination for the school (which was eventually successful), in part to be able to enforce laws against “demolition by neglect.” A huge hole in the roof, clearly visible in satellite photos of the time, revealed the substantial dereliction.

The redevelopment of the site was multifaceted, reflecting a mix of painstaking restoration, simple preservation, and addition of new elements, some of which are clearly expressed and celebrated while others are downplayed. First and foremost, the original building’s exterior was carefully restored by Bonstra | Haresign with consultation from the firm of **Oehrlein & Associates Architects**, known for preservation expertise. Missing metal cornices were re-created, and the large, wood, double-hung windows were replaced. In a modest departure from the original exterior appearance, low-profile dormer windows were inserted along the roof, allowing the former attic to become a bona fide third story. Modern plumbing and air-handling vents, which could have seriously compromised the integrity of the restored roof, were routed to a re-created cupola whose louvers hide them from view.

Inside the magnificent doors of the original building, full-fledged restoration gives way to a more basic preservation aesthetic mixed with new architectural expression. The load-bearing brick walls, for instance, are expressed as just that: what little plaster remained prior to renovations was removed. The rotted ceilings and their mostly-destroyed



An apartment interior in the former Gage School.

Exterior of the Gage School after renovation.

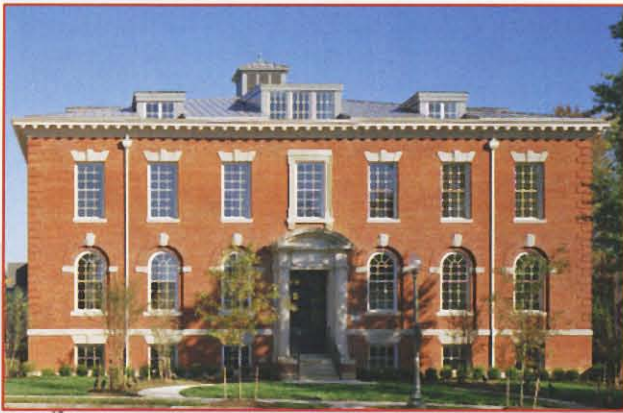


Photo by Anice Hoachlander, © Hoachlander Davis Photography, LLC

Exterior of the school before renovation



Courtesy of Bonstra | Haresign Architects

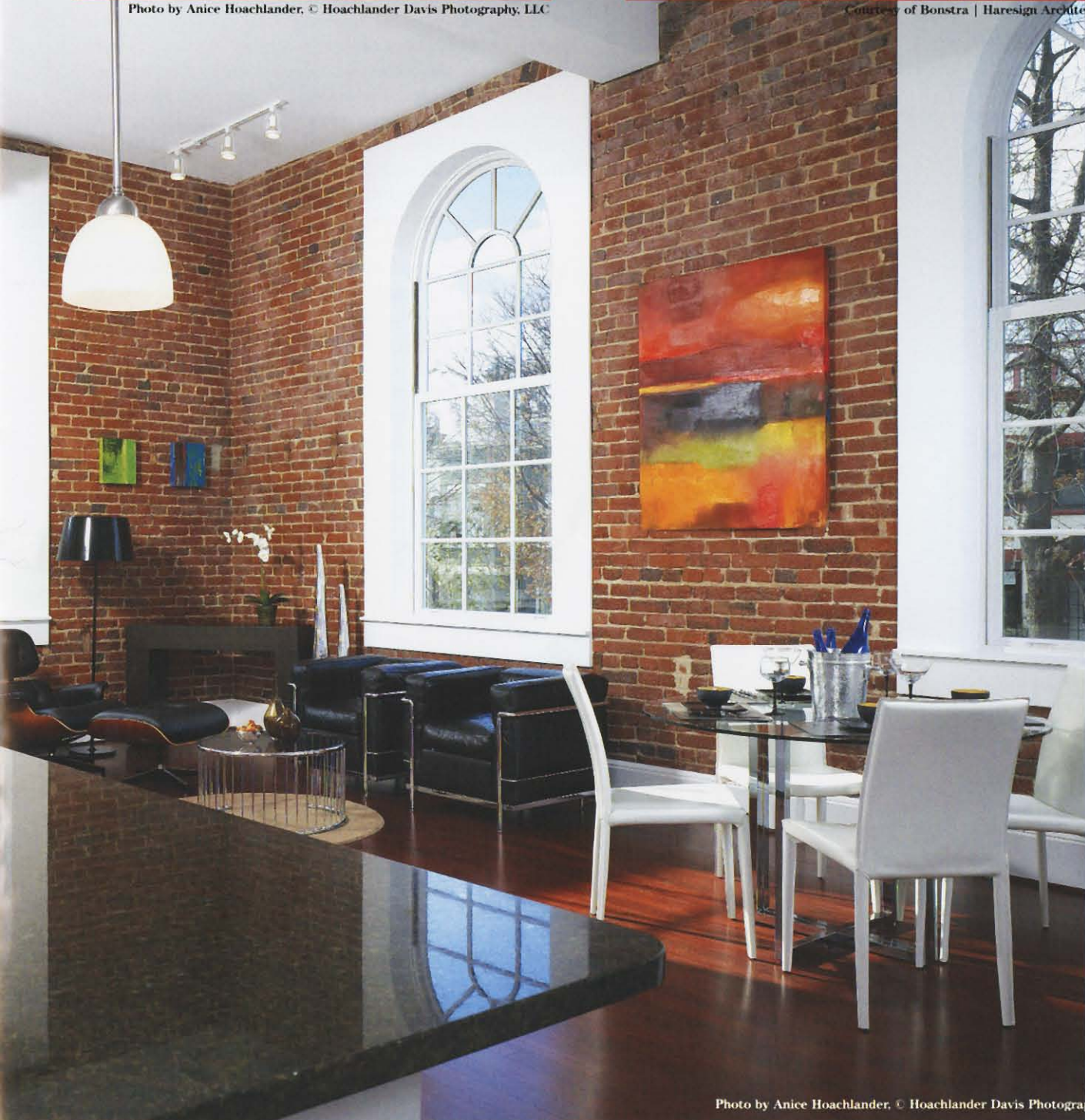
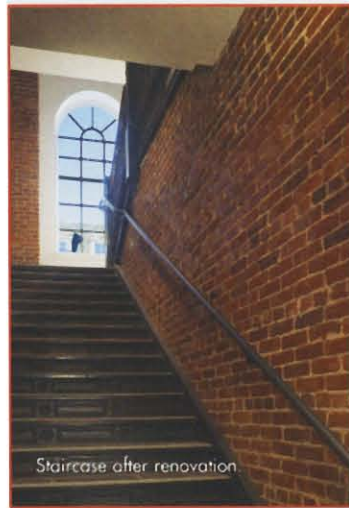


Photo by Anice Hoachlander, © Hoachlander Davis Photography, LLC



Staircase before renovation

Courtesy of
Bonstra | Haresign Architects



Staircase after renovation

Photo by Anice Hoachlander,
© Hoachlander Davis Photography, LLC



The new Flagler Place building.

Photo by Anice Hoachlander,
© Hoachlander Davis Photography, LLC

cornices likewise were not restored—in their place is a taut drywall ceiling with recessed light fixtures in a modern grid. And the flooring, which was also badly deteriorated, was replaced with stylish grey slate and carpeting.

The corners of the central lobby space have been given over to white millwork “phone booths,” as Haresign calls them, which serve as foyers for the condominium units. Similarly, the corridor to the “hyphen” connecting the 1904 and 1908 portions of the building was narrowed to allow more space for the adjacent apartments, while the hyphen itself was broadened to accommodate an elevator and a second stairwell. The primary stair is the highly decorative cast iron former boys’ stair, which—in contrast to its raw brick enclosure walls—was meticulously restored using parts from the dismantled girls’ stair. The extension of this cast iron stair up to the new third floor is, however, clearly different and modern while maintaining a complementary, painted metal aesthetic.

Within the units, the dialogue between old and new continues. The massive windows—replicas of the originals, except with modern, double-insulated glazing—dominate, and exposed brick walls are focal. Ductwork is exposed, and the floors, ceilings, lighting, and kitchens are also obviously new and therefore modern in expression.

The buildings at 2nd and V and at Flagler Place, although entirely new, display a version of the same dialogue. At first glance, the facades appear to be an exercise in neighborly, well-executed contextualism, with obvious nods to such features as the turreted towers that are common among row houses in Bloomingdale. On Flagler Place, though, the new building needed to be three full stories in order to maximize sellable space, which could have rendered the new structure out of scale with the predominantly two-story row houses in the area. The architects’ solution was to create a series of gables within a mansard roof. The gables provide the rhythm of pointed elements at approximately the same height as the neighboring buildings’ turrets, while the mansard allows for the full third story.

All of these moves help the development to fit easily within its historic context without sacrificing all-important square footage. In initial feasibility studies, based solely on satellite images and scant public records, the architects projected that 78 units could be accommodated. But as the project developed, they found space—in the attic and basement, mostly—for 12 additional units. “Any time we can squeeze out additional revenue for the client, some of that revenue can invest in the project as better design work,” commented Haresign. In other words, doing well for the client can mean doing well for the architecture.

Overall, the Gage School complex is reminiscent of a collegiate quadrangle, with buildings that are simultaneously distinct and complementary. “The old school building,” said Haresign, “has the big leading role. The other buildings are supporting actors in this play.” The production obviously turned out quite well, since the complex won a 2008 Washingtonian Residential Design Award (see the Summer 2008 issue of *ARCHITECTURE DC*) and, more important, has played a key catalytic role in the revitalization of the neighborhood. 🏡