

Neighborhood Reinvestment

Bonstra \ Haresign's Parker Flats in Washington quietly complements its neighborhood and the former Gage School.

By Deborah K. Dietsch





Restructuring its public education system has left Washington, D.C. pondering ways of recycling vacant schools across the city. One model of revitalization has already been successfully carried out in the District's Bloomingdale community, where the former Gage School now forms the centerpiece of a site-sensitive condominium complex.

In designing the development for District-based Urban Realty Advisors, Bonstra|Haresign Architects skillfully restored and adapted the school while adding two sympathetic residential structures to its grounds. The three buildings, now called Parker Flats, are arranged around a grassy courtyard forming a green roof over an underground parking garage for 70 spaces. They now define the edges of the block to repair

Bonstra|Haresign restored the 1903 Gage School (above and opposite), while renovating the attic with new dormers (top) to provide another level.

the urban fabric and spur improvements in the surrounding neighborhood, as evident in the refurbishment of nearby homes and a corner store.

Such a rosy outcome was unimaginable only a few years ago when the grammar school lay vacant and decaying from neglect. Gaping holes in the roof, missing cornices and dilapidated masonry walls seemed beyond repair. "The building was in terrible shape," recalls architect David Haresign, AIA. "But from looking at the school and the adjacent grounds, I realized this site was a great opportunity for housing."

Originally designed in 1902 by D.C. architect Lemuel Norris, the Georgian Revival-style building served students and teachers for about 70 years until it was abandoned after D.C. consolidated its schools. In 2002, Howard University acquired the property and sought ways of resurrecting the structure as part of its LeDroit Park Initiative, a redevelopment program aimed at upgrading the neighborhood around the campus. Two years later, the university held a competition to redevelop the site and selected Urban Realty Advisors and Bonstra|Haresign to maximize the number of housing units on the site while preserving the school.

Courtesy Bonstra|Haresign

A brick-patterned tower marks the corner of the 43-unit condominium at 2nd and V Sts. Projecting bays relieve a sense of massiveness.





“The 59 units in the two new buildings gave the project critical mass and justified the investment required to save and adapt the landmark school,” says Haresign. The development team named the project Parker Flats at Gage School in honor of educator Nathaniel Parker Gage who improved the quality of D.C. public education during the late 1800s.

At the same time, the architects worked with the community and the city’s historic preservation office to designate the school as a city landmark. They collaborated with local preservation consultant EHT Traceries to retain as much of the existing architectural features of the building as possible, including brick-bearing walls inside the condos. Modern-day elements such as a fire stair and an elevator were accommodated by widening a 1908 addition to the school with masonry and framing left intact.

“The school still has so much character and charm, and you can still see the bones of the building,” says homeowner Isaac Williams, an assistant professor of architecture at the University of Maryland. In 2009, Williams and his wife Susan purchased a two-bedroom unit after being drawn to its tall ceilings, big windows, and exposed brick walls.

A tour of their apartment reveals a spacious living space, an open kitchen with stainless-steel appliances and bathrooms

On Flagler Place, the new condominium resembles a row of townhouses but actually is divided into 16 one-level units, each stretching from front to back.

fitted with low-flow fixtures. Outside the unit, the public spaces in the school are spruced-up to preserve original features, including cast-iron staircases and separate entrances for boys and girls. Vestibules to each condo are treated as obvious modern insertions below the ceiling, or “phone booths,” as Haresign calls them, part of a strategy to differentiate new elements from old.

In realizing the building’s potential, Haresign and his team turned the former attic into a third story by extending dormers from the new metal roof. That addition provided five additional units with daylight and impressive city views, so that the school now houses 33 condominiums. From the street, the dormers and a new cupola hiding plumbing stacks and air ducts are hardly noticeable so that the original beauty of the school prevails.

Bonstra | Haresign is known for de-



signing contemporary housing in downtown D.C. but, in adding new brick condominium buildings to the school grounds, the firm deferred to the architecture on surrounding streets. “The project is a contextual response to the school, the block and the neighborhood,” says Haresign. Crisply expressed surfaces and details avoid postmodern exaggeration while rhythmic brick bays relieve any sense of massiveness. The quiet architecture complements the school without upstaging its Neo-Georgian design.

With its mansard roof, pedimented dormers and corner tower, the 43-unit condominium at 2nd and V Streets is “a modern interpretation of apartment blocks built in Bloomingdale when the Gage School was constructed,” says Haresign. Along V Street, the building incorporates an arcade in the middle of the block to frame the boys’ entrance into the school and connect new architecture to old. This passageway provides access to the

School condos feature open kitchens and living areas (above) while retaining original brick walls. Unit vestibules (below) are treated as phone booths in the lobby. Visible through the window above the boys’ entrance (below right) is a restored staircase.

lobby in the new condominium building and the elevator to the parking garage.

At the northeast corner of the site, the new building steps down to what appear to be townhouses and turns the corner to reveal an entire block of similar designs on Flagler Place. The row houses actually turn out to be parts of a 16-unit condominium building, the second new structure designed by BonstralHaresign on the school grounds.

Their projecting brick bays, gables, and metal stoops obviously reference the neighborhood’s turreted, Victorian row houses but through clean-lined architecture at a larger scale. A mansard roof disguises a third level to maximize the number of apartments without overshadowing the smaller houses across the street. Inside the new building, each of the units stretches on one level from the front of the brick building to the stucco-clad rear.

Catering to the neighborhood, Urban Realty Advisors agreed to sell up to 30 percent of the development’s units to buyers associated with Howard University and the remainder at affordable market rates. The strategy worked despite the current economic downturn—88 of the 92 condos have sold and the rest have been rented. Residents now use the courtyard as a social space for cook-outs and parties, while inside the school, they frequently gather in the main lobby for happy hours and condo board meetings. “This is not a cookie-cutter development,” says Williams. “It has become a real community and an asset to the city.”

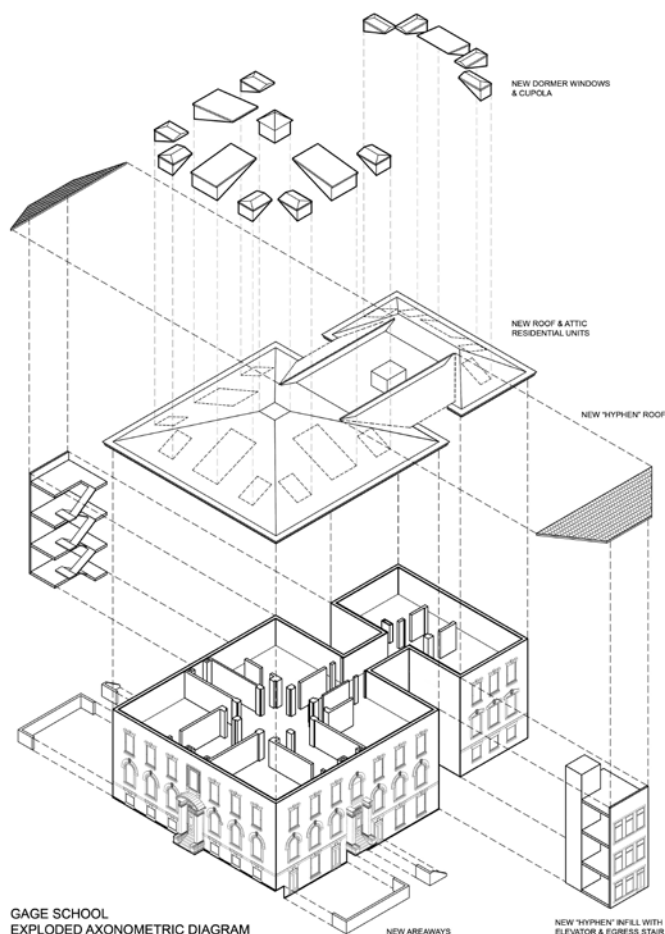




Vicinity Map



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GAGE SCHOOL
EXPLODED AXONOMETRIC DIAGRAM

Bonstra|Haresign added two new buildings to the north and east of the Gage School (above) on the vacant schoolyard. A new fire stair, elevator, and additional unit space occupy the recesses (at left) between the 1903 school and a 1908 addition.

Project: Parker Flats at Gage School, Washington, D.C.

Architect: Bonstra|Haresign Architects, Washington, D.C. (David Haresign, AIA, Principal-in-Charge)

Contractor: James G. Davis Construction Corporation, Rockville, Maryland (Louise Boulton-Lear and Melissa Burneston, Project Superintendents)

Developer: Urban Realty Advisors, Washington, D.C.

RESOURCES

ARCHITECT: Bonstra|Haresign Architects (see ad., inside-back cover); **CIVIL ENGINEER:** Delon Hampton & Associates (see ad., p.37); **CUSTOM CASEWORK:** Montgomery Kitchen and Bath, Inc. (see ad., p.37); **CONSULTANT:** Wiss, Janney, Elstner Associates (see ad., p. 38); **HISTORIC RESEARCH & CONSULTING:** EHT Tracerics (see ad., p. 39); **ARCHITECTURAL WOODWORK:** Chesapeake Woodworking, Inc.; **STRUCTURAL ENGINEER:** Rathgeber Goss Associates; **PLUMBING:** John E. Barry Plumbing and Heating Corp (see ad., p. 38).