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Long Vacant Office Tower Begins New Life as High-Rise Homes
Construction being on what will be the tallest residential structure in Los Angeles

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The final chapter as been written on one of the most talked about real estate stories of the last two decades, and the story has a happy ending. An office building, located at 1100 Wilshire Blvd., in downtown Los Angeles, vacant since it was completed nearly 20 years ago, is preparing for a new life as a 37-story high-rise luxury condominium.

When the office tower was originally completed in 1986, there were high expectations that its dramatic angles and Wilshire address would attract tenants seeking something different. The distinctively styled building features a novel design with a 21-story, triangular glass tower that sits atop a 16-story, rectangular granite and concrete parking structure. It could have been the unique architecture; it could have been the fact that the developer was trying to charge high rents at a time when there was an excessive supply of office space, but no matter the reason, the building was never leased. It has since sat vacant.

A tall order to fill

Developed by Forest City Residential West, 1100 Wilshire is the only high-rise office-to-housing conversion currently underway in Southern California. It represents the first modern skyscraper to be converted to housing. The design team for the endeavor includes TCA – Thomas P. Cox: Architects, AC Martin Partners, RAD-TMG, and McFarlane Partners.

With thousands of new condos in development within a one-mile radius surround 1100 Wilshire, the new high-rise community is expected to be the anchor for an emerging urban neighborhood within the downtown Los Angeles. It also represents the current trend toward high-rise condos in Southern California. Several new projects are underway by a variety of builders in Los Angeles, Marina del Rey, Long Beach, Irvine and San Diego.

1100 Wilshire will offer more than 40 floor plans, including ultra-luxury penthouses on the top floor. Home prices are expected to range from the mid-\$300,000s to about \$1.7 million. With every condo boasting extraordinary views of the Los Angeles skyline and surrounding mountains, sizes will range from approximately 550 square feet for a studio, to 12,000 square feet for a full-floor penthouse. One- and two-bedroom units, and two-story lofts are also available.

Above it all

Since the tower's residential units do not start until the 17th floor, every condo is surrounded by panoramic views. "These homes will offer spectacular views – from some of the homes, they will be 360 degrees," say Daniel Gehman, associate principal with TCA of Irvine, Calif. "This will be the tallest residential structure in all of Los Angeles, and air restriction rights will prevent new developments from obstructing the views."

According to Kevin Ratner, senior vice president of Forest City Residential West, the views were one of the main reasons Forest City was so interested in acquiring the building, which they purchased for \$37 million. 1100 Wilshire represents the first for-sale project that Forest City has built on the West Coast in more than 10 years. "When Greg Vilkin and I first went to the building, we got off the elevator at the top floor and looked out, and we were stunned," Ratner says. "We knew that we had a jewel."

If it ain't broke...

The conversion of 1100 Wilshire from office to residential will not significantly alter the building's signature design. According to Gehman, even though the tower was designed for office tenants, its floor plates, ceiling heights, windows and ample parking are well-suited for residential use. "The building renovation will create a more residential environment, with enhancements planned for common areas such as the building entrance and lobby, as well as more residential style landscaping," Gehman explains. Community amenities include an outdoor "sky deck" with a large pool and arbor that sits atop the parking structure.

Approximately 10,000 square feet of retail are also part of the plans. Ratner says they want to ensure the retail component is an amenity to the community and might include something along the lines of a spa, market, bistro, or coffee shop. 1100 Wilshire is within walking distance of the city's financial district and close to shops, restaurants and a public-transit station.

"Downtown Los Angeles is quickly becoming a community where people want to live, work and play," says Victor B. MacFarlane, founder and managing principal of MacFarlane Partners. "We believe that this will be a highly desirable downtown residence that features spectacular view of the Pacific Ocean, the Hollywood Hills and the Los Angeles skyline."

Overcoming challenges

Gehman says the exterior is in excellent shape and won't change, although there are plans to install operable windows. Nevertheless, remodeling always presents a challenge. Innovative design solutions, proper phasing and value engineering can overcome even the toughest budgets and space constraints. "Although the interiors were never built, we still have to work around the existing structure," Gehman says. "But the original designers used some wonderful concepts that make this a great candidate for residential use."

Ahead of its time

Christopher C. Martin, co-chairman AC of Martin Partners, agrees. “The building’s original developer, Dr. Tsai Ming Yu, apparently misunderstood the downtown office market, but it’s definitely a natural for housing now.”

The Los Angeles Adaptive Reuse Ordinance, adopted in 1999, allows for these types of office-to-housing conversions. It gives the developer the flexibility to propose unique resolutions that may not have been possible under previously strict building and zoning codes.

“The entitlement for 1100 Wilshire falls under this ordinance that covers special projects that require special solutions,” Ratner says. “It’s more flexible, project friendly, and will definitely help us avoid some of the pitfalls of developing in downtown Los Angeles.”

1100 Wilshire is one of the many conversion and historic preservation/adaptive reuse projects currently underway in downtown Los Angeles. According to officials with the Los Angeles Conservancy, the city’s leading historic preservation organization, more than 4,000 housing units are currently in development in the downtown area, and many of these are in historic buildings.

The 1100 Wilshire development/design team is also converting the historic Subways Terminal in downtown Los Angeles into a mixed-use community of luxury apartments and commercial space.