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**After 20 Years, Rooms With a View**

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By Evan George

Like an ugly duckling in its awkward teenage years, the triangular glass skyscraper at 1100 Wilshire has stuck out since it was built in 1986 as an office building. It's been called names, and though it had multiple suitors, it was never occupied.

Now, after a two-year conversion to high-end condominiums, the 20-year-old building hopes to transform into a swan.

The odd design and eccentric flourishes – like-floor-to-ceiling windows in every unit and 16 levels of brick-bounded interior parking – that original developer Tsai Ming Yu insisted on made it impractical for office leasing. A team of developers and architects are using these former blemishes as unique beauty marks.

Late last month, city officials granted an occupancy permit for 1100 Wilshire to the development team of Forest City Residential West, TMG Partners and MacFarlane Partners. They worked with three different architecture firms on various sections of the building. Thomas P. Cox Architects Inc. was enlisted to convert the interior units, Johnson Fain handled the common areas and AC Martin Partners, which originally designed the structure, was brought back as executive consultant.

Converting the stark offices into 228 livable units – with 42 vastly different floor plans – complete with all the amenities of luxury condos took the team to task.

“For this building in particular, and with all adaptive reuse buildings, there are specific skills that people need,” Kevin Ratner, senior vice president of development of Forest City Residential West, said last week during a tour of the building. “The combination of the three [architects] gave us the sum of the parts.”

Plus, he joked, “I was bored and decided the more developers and planners I have, the more I'd have to do.”

In June 2004, Forest City – which in recent years developed the Met Lofts in South Park and transformed the historic Subway Terminal Building into the apartment complex Metro 417 – purchased the property for \$37 million, and began construction in March 2005. Since then, nearly everything in the 380,000 square-foot building, from the massive lobby to the pool deck to the units, has been renovated.

The residences range from 700-square-foot studios to 3,400-square-foot penthouses with multiple levels. Approximately 12,000 square feet of retail space awaits on the street level.

According to Forest City, nearly 75% of the units are sold, at prices from \$400,000 to more than \$3 million. Ratner said a handful of people have already moved in.

Flummoxed by Feng Shui

Reinventing the glass and granite ghost tower may provide a happy ending to a long and twisted development debacle.

Taiwanese businessman Tsai Ming Yu enlisted Downtown Los Angeles architecture firm A.C. Martin & Associates (no AC Martin Partners) to turn his fantasy building into reality. His vision for a 500-foot office complex called for two distinct parts: a 21-story, blue glass office tower in the shape of a triangle perched atop a square, 16-story concrete parking structure. It was completed in 1986.

Yu imagined the complex as a beacon for Asian business looking for offices in Los Angeles. He insisted the floor plans not be changed because he'd designed the structure – everything from the building's orientation to the placement of the elevator shafts – according to feng shui principles.

However, his Eastern vision encountered Western resistance, and early negotiations to lease the building stalled, some say because of Yu's uncompromising stance. Ultimately efforts to house offices for the Metropolitan Water District and the LAUSD in 1100 Wilshire failed.

The building sat unused for years while Yu waited for tenants who shared his vision, but the timing couldn't have been worse, as the Los Angeles real estate market collapsed in the early 1990s. In 1993, Yu lost the building to bankruptcy and Format Corporation, a subsidiary of Formosa Plastics, purchased 1100 Wilshire for a mere \$18 million.

The tower sat unused – except for in the punch lines of jokes made by Downtown brokers – until 2004, when developer Robert D'elia bought the property to the attention of Ratner.

“To be 100% honest, I never particularly liked the building,” Ratner said. “But we got off on the 32<sup>nd</sup> floor and that was about all it took.”

As the developers are quick to point out, the very same eccentricities that made the building a laughingstock of the office market now make it a residential high-rise like no other.

“Tsai Ming Yu apparently misunderstood L.A.’s Downtown office market, but it’s definitely a natural for housing now,” said Christopher C. Martin, CEO and co-chairman of AC Martin Partners.

The building’s bizarre history has made it the first modern structure to be converted under the Adaptive Reuse Ordinance, which was passed in 1999 by the city to spark the conversion of historic commercial properties into housing.

One thing is for sure: a building like 1100 Wilshire will never be constructed again. That (along with the profit potential, of course) is part of what made working on its transformation so alluring to the developers and architects.

### A Bathtub With a View

Daniel Gehman, a principal architect with Thomas P. Cox Architects, the firm charged with the tricky task of converting the interior units, recently showed a reporter all his favorite hooks in the outlandish building, including a laundry room on the 18<sup>th</sup> floor that overlooks the 10 Freeway all the way to Santa Monica, a bathtub on the 32<sup>nd</sup> floor with a view of the Dodger Stadium, and a kitchen pantry on the 37<sup>th</sup> floor with a better view than most Downtown penthouse balconies.

When asked if converting Yu’s freakish offices into livable spaces seemed like a daunting challenge, Gehman said, “Are you kidding me? I was like, “Bring it on!”

The triangular spaces left by Yu’s feng-shui floor plans were a playground for the architects’ imagination.

It’s really indulgent to be an architect on a project like this. It’s just really exciting, it’s fun, you can do stuff that you wouldn’t normally be able to do,” Gehman said.

All three architecture firms have managed to spruce up the building’s outdated and cold, minimalist feel.

A neon red revolving door shoots visitors into the high-ceilinged street-level lobby, where stark red granite has been covered with an impressive curved wooden wall, warming the room. On both sides of the lobby sits retail space – about 12,000 square feet of it – that according to Ratner will likely be filled within a year by a high-end convenience store and restaurant.

A glass-encased gym and a common room for film screening preside over the lobby’s mezzanine level.

Eight elevators, still donning the calligraphy left over from Yu’s era, shuttle passengers through the 16 floors of parking to reach the generous sky patio and the residential tower that sprouts from it.

Straight out of a catalogue, the cabana rooms and breeze-swept swimming pool, while gorgeous, pale in comparison to the expansive view – all of Los Angeles revealed, from City West to Westwood.

And, as Gehman pointed out, this is just the first floor.

By installing operable windows but preserving all other aspects of the glass structure, the vistas from nearly every unit of 1100 Wilshire surpass the cliché marketing catch phrase “great views”.

But there were numerous practical challenges, noted Gehman. For example, he said, adding 21 floors of plumbing, including nearly 350 bathrooms, required dead-on alignment from the ground floor to the top penthouse.

According to Gehman, another challenge was quieting the building’s acoustics, which required constructing entire columns to stifle the sound between units.

On a recent walk-through, saws still buzzed in hurried anticipation, betraying last-minute work that continues to delay most of the move-ins.

“There’s always one more set of bones buried somewhere,” admitted Gehman.

But as construction crews give way to resident at 1100 Wilshire in the coming weeks, developers hope the new arrivals will allow the glass tower to finally outgrow its gawky shadow.