

Construction company rehabs decaying building

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Contributing Writer

The boarded-up row house on Rhode Island Avenue near 14th Street NW seemed an unlikely candidate when Jim Abdo went looking for a headquarters for his company, Abdo Construction. It had been a crack house, and the interior was in shambles. Pigeons and rats were nesting amid the debris, which included crack vials and abandoned mattresses and clothing.

But with the eye of a developer who specializes in rehabilitating distressed urban dwellings, Abdo looked beyond the problems and saw much to like. The century-old building was structurally sound, and its architecture and red-brick exterior retained their charm. He also prized its location in the center of the neighborhood where Abdo Development is focusing its work, and where Abdo himself makes his home. Half a block to the west is the future site of Abdo Development's most ambitious project to date: The Manhattan, a large residential building that will have 70 to 75 condos ranging from \$200,000 to \$900,000.

Abdo bought the building and put his crews to work gutting the interior and starting over. The result is a bright and highly functional space with every modern convenience, including computer and TV cable outlets in all rooms.

Abdo reserved the top floor for his headquarters and leased the lower three levels to a graphics design firm and an importer. He designed the office himself, indulging his desire for an open feeling and

for natural light to permeate the entire suite.

"I would prefer to work without any interior walls," he says, "but I need them for privacy, so I did them all in glass."

He also installed skylights to supplement the illumination coming through a large south-facing bay window.

Visitors ascending the stairs to the office suite enter a reception area where everything is in view: Abdo's office behind glass to the right, a conference room and smaller office behind glass to the left. The receptionist's desk sits in front of an exposed brick wall — a reminder of the building's vintage and a pleasing contrast to the white walls elsewhere.

Many of the suite's furnishings are Indian antiques Abdo obtained from the importer downstairs, Worlds Away (formerly of Potomac). The coffee table in Abdo's office is hand-carved teak, as is the conference room's table with its rich, dark patina and iron straps. Wrought iron chairs with leather seats and backs are also from India.

Abdo designed his own triangular desk and had it crafted in solid cherry by Antique Tables Made Daily, a small custom furniture shop near his country getaway home in Rappahannock County, Va. It was originally intended to fit into a corner, but it works well facing out into the room from the bay window's alcove.

In one corner of Abdo's office is a large cushion reserved for Liza, an 11-year-old Wiemarner who is his constant companion.

In the reception area, two large abstract paintings by local artist Mark Zeender grace opposite walls. Their luminous expanses of closely related colors are reminiscent of

Mark Rothko's work.

The pictures on the walls of Abdo's office are the product of another local artist, Tom Bucci. Abdo commissions him to do hand-painted etchings of all the old buildings he converts into upscale condos. Each condo purchaser gets one also.

A floating staircase leads up to a rooftop deck, where Abdo can view several commercial properties along 14th Street that he has purchased and intends to rehabilitate.

"I was concerned," he says, "that we were improving housing stock in the area rapidly, but we were not seeing the level and diversity of services and retail business needed to support the housing. I'm negotiating to bring in retailers and restaurant operators who appreciate the change taking place in this neighborhood and want to be part of it."

Abdo says he has been able to get local support for his plans by meeting regularly with community associations to explain his vision and ask for their input. He also goes out of his way to hire from within the neighborhood.

His work force includes several formerly homeless people who now have company-provided apartments and steady incomes. "Our mission goes beyond making old buildings beautiful again," Abdo says. "If you can help people improve their lives by giving them jobs, then you have made a real impact."

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