

urbanite

Smooth

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OPERATOR

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY PAUL BURK

A condo developer adds some green highlights to an old telephone-switching warehouse in Charles Village



The light fantastic: High ceilings and big windows reflect the telephone

Justin Shelby is certain that green design and sustainable materials will be part of every renovation in the future. He's just not sure whether buyers realize it yet—that is, whether using recycled and toxin-free materials will help him close sales in a slow real estate market.

Shelby, the founder of Baltimore development company UrbanEx, may soon find out whether sustainable green leads to capital green. His latest project—a renovation of a 1936 telephone-switching warehouse in Charles Village into sleek, modern condominiums—incorporates a number of environmentally friendly products in its design: bamboo and cork flooring, toxin-free paints, cabinets made from discarded rubber trees, and more. (The building was first converted to living spaces about thirty years ago, Shelby says; the renovations merely update and clean up what was already there.)

All this is highlighted in the sales pitch on the project's website. "It's easy being green," the site proclaims, pointing out that the mere act of reusing an old building's "embodied energy"—all of the raw materials and fuel that went into stacking the bricks, forging the steel, and pouring the concrete more than seventy years ago—is itself a sustainable choice. In the long term, this may or may not be true: Renovating a poorly insulated old structure, for example, is not necessarily greener than building an efficient new one. But that's deep thinking in sustainability, and Shelby, by his own admission, is just an eager beginner. Accordingly, most of his building's green features involve mainstream, easily available products and appliances; he's not installing complex solar systems, adding wall insulation, or going for waterless toilets. "A lot of people are instantly claiming to be an expert on green construction," he says. "I thought that if I get into this now and start learning about the materials ... over the course of many years I'd become an expert."

Still, even this modest greening has helped market the newly completed building. He credits a few sales to the eco-design elements in the Telephone Building and another UrbanEx project he is working on, called Ten14 North Charles. And Shelby says that a number of prospective buyers who came to look at the condos were drawn specifically by the green marketing message on the website.

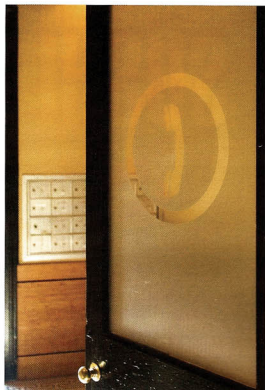
Even though these features get a lot of play in the Telephone Building pitch, the project's most attractive assets are perhaps its more traditional ones. For starters, the building is in a great location, in the midst of bustling redevelopment in Charles Village. Second, the condominium units—which range from studios to two-bedroom units—are unusually large and open, testament to the building's industrial roots. The main living room boasts soaring ceilings and eight-foot-tall windows. The wall colors are usually muted greens, grays, and blues, and the décor is contemporary: penny-round and clear-glass tiles, granite (or, for an extra charge, recycled paperstone) countertops, stainless-steel appliances, minimalist ventless electric fireplaces.

Despite the modern décor, Shelby is playing up a number of historical elements from the old telephone-switching facility. During a tour of the building on a December morning, Shelby was trying out a clever idea for displaying the unit numbers: rotary-phone dials, with the unit numbers at the center of the circle. Just inside the front door is a granite-tile floor with a herringbone pattern and a border that has a "T" motif. (It's a classic tile pattern, but Shelby insists, half-joking, that it stands for "telephone.") Shelby paid a specialist to acid-clean the tile and then regrout it. He's also preserving the building's original doors, complete with their wavy industrial wired glass.

The basement of the building, where the telephone lines once entered, is now 6,500 square feet of open space. Shelby plans to reserve some of that space for storage cages for the residents and a workout room. But the majority will be left open for the residents to decide how to use it.

Shelby is a relative newcomer to the real estate game: He spent most of his career in product development for Black & Decker and 180s, the sports-apparel company. He left that career in 2005, when it started to feel like a treadmill. "You basically kill yourself to get something out there, and eighteen months later you're looking for the next thing," he says.

He first started dabbling in real estate with the development of Federal Hill Fitness in 2001, and says that he finds the design and marketing aspects of real estate development similar to those of product development. But there's a substantial difference when the process is over: "The end result is lasting."



Good connection: Developer Justin Shelby mixed original features with such sleek modern amenities as electric fireplaces.



THE TELEPHONE BUILDING