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Real Estate

Restoring a Sag Harbor Eyesore



Gordon M. Grant for The New York Times

The restoration and retrofit of the 1881 brick Bulova factory in Sag Harbor into 64 residences is expected to be completed next winter. Construction began in the fall of 2011.

By MARCELLE S. FISCHLER

SAG HARBOR — From what will be the rooftop terrace of a penthouse at the transformed Bulova Watchcase factory here, the sweeping views of church steeples, Main Street shops, Peconic Bay and the port of this historic maritime village resemble a William Merritt Chase landscape painting. The vistas are the crowning glory of the long-awaited \$40 million restoration and retrofit of the 1881 factory into a 64-unit luxury condominium complex.

The project, built by Cape Advisors, a developer based in Manhattan, was designed by the architectural firm Beyer Blinder Belle. With its high-beamed ceilings and exposed brick walls, it is something of an anomaly in this Hamptons community dominated by single-family homes.

The factory sat vacant as an eyesore near the heart of Sag Harbor for years. Construction on the condos, which will include lofts, town houses and bungalows, began in the fall 2011 and is expected to be completed next winter. The first model apartment, a \$3.39



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The rooftop terraces at the Bulova Watchcase factory development will provide sweeping water views.



Tim McCauley

A rendering of the completed complex.



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A third-floor model apartment will have 28 windows in its open living-dining-kitchen area.

million two-bedroom penthouse, opens this weekend. James Lansill, a senior managing director of the Corcoran Sunshine Marketing Group, said that 880 potential buyers already fill a five-year-old waiting list.

“It is unprecedented,” Mr. Lansill said, referring to the historic retrofit and the advent of a deluxe condominium with a doorman, on-site superintendent and resort-style amenities. “There is barely such a thing as a condo in the Hamptons.”

Among those on the waiting list are owners of multimillion-dollar Hamptons mansions, including empty-nesters looking for something easier to take care of, without the need for a staff, pool guys and gardeners. Longtime seasonal renters who didn’t previously buy because of maintenance responsibilities, particularly in the off-season, have also signed up. The distinctive units will carry hefty price tags. Factory lofts will range from \$1.05 million to \$3.22 million, and penthouses from \$2.59 million to \$10.2 million.

In addition, 17 bungalows and town houses designed to complement the factory building will be placed atop, though on the perimeter, of a 130-car underground garage that is being built under what was a vacant parking lot. Amenities, including a swimming pool, a fitness center and a gardens, are also being created over the garage. John H. Beyer, a partner in Beyer Blinder Belle, which also handled the restoration of historic Grand Central Terminal, described the old Bulova factory as an “industrial version of a Victorian mill.” The five-story solid brick structure has “modest but very effective detailing.”

After the whaling industry here declined in the mid-19th century, the Watchcase factory, with wings added in five stages over its 100-year history, played an important role in the village’s development, including the sponsorship of blue-collar housing. The larg-

est of Sag Harbor’s factories, the Watchcase employed generations of local workers beginning in 1881, when Joseph Fahys, a French immigrant who had married a local woman, relocated his watchmaking factory from Carlstadt, N.J., to Sag Harbor. It replaced a cotton mill built by former whalers and destroyed by fire.

Bulova subsequently bought the factory in 1936. After the factory shut down in 1981, the building stood empty, its gutters dangling, windows broken and crumbling bricks defaced with graffiti. Cleanup of contaminants from a century’s worth of heavy cleaning solvents poured into the building’s drainage system began in the 1990s. Asbestos removal was completed before the retrofit began.

Despite its long industrial history, Mr. Beyer said he was “stunned by the appropriateness of introducing residential uses into this factory,” with its 24-foot-wide wings and “endless repetitive, beautiful, spacious windows.” The building has 999 arched windows, each three feet wide and seven and a half feet high. Many of the apartments will have more than 20 windows. The way the building was sited, with wings stretching along Washington, Division and Church Streets, lent itself to “creating courtyards and spacious gardens.” The old boiler room was removed to create the main lobby, with courtyard space in front of it, between two wings.

Steven Gambrel, an interior designer working with the developer, kept the structure’s “muscular architecture” in mind. “It is not a beach house and it is not a maritime house,” Mr. Gambrel said. A huge two-sided fireplace is being carved into the original factory smokestack in a lounge area off the main lobby.

Some of the turrets, chimneys and an old water tower that fell into disrepair during the three decades the building stood vacant are being replaced, according to Craig D. Wood, a chief executive of Cape Advisors. Each of its 999 brick window openings were repointed, with 20,000 original bricks scraped clean and reused. A bracketed three-foot cornice replicating the factory’s original, which was removed about 50 years ago, is also being installed. Inside, the original southern yellow pine timber beams were blasted with 80,000 pounds of ground walnut shells to restore their patina in an eco-friendly fashion.

Floors were lifted 14 inches, thus lowering windowsills that had been set high to allow maximum light for the fine work being done at jewelers’ benches. Mechanicals like electrical wiring, plumbing, heating and cooling systems, along with fireproofing and insulation, will be hidden in the raised floors. Ceilings will remain 11 to 14 feet high, and ceiling beams exposed.

To minimize corridors and provide direct access to each apartment, three elevator hubs will have separate lobbies. Penthouses with wood-burning fireplaces will range from 2,500 to 3,800 square feet, and will have commodious roof terraces. Balconies and grade-level gardens will provide every unit with outdoor living space.

A third-floor model apartment has 28 windows in its open living-dining-kitchen area. Its bluestone terrace has an outdoor kitchen with a gas barbecue and a 13-foot mahogany deck with a fire pit. Inside, the master suite includes a spalike “wet room” bath with a walk-in shower room and tub.

Arthur Blee, the director of design and construction for Cape Advisors, said each of the 64 units is “quite different,” with its “own quirks and appeals.” One kitchen was fashioned from the factory’s silver vault; others have pine plank ceilings.

But buyers can also opt for all-new construction. Eight bungalows and nine town houses, being built on the site, will range from \$1.08 million to \$6.5 million. These units will have different historical styles, with some clad in brick and reflecting the factory’s Victorian look, while others will have painted clapboard siding or cedar shingles. They will wrap around the complex’s amenity space with some of their gardens, decks and patios overlooking the factory.

Michael Wetstone, an architect with Beyer Blinder Belle, said their Italianate, colonial, Greek Revival, Cape and Victorian facades represent Sag Harbor’s varied historical architecture.

Keeping the “historic fabric” intact was paramount, said Mr. Wood of Cape Advisors. “There are people who love the magic of this.”