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TWO DOLLARS

From Piano Keys to Condo Keys

The century-old, 13-story Sohmer Building at 170 Fifth Avenue, at 22nd Street, which once attracted piano purchasers to its showroom, is being converted to a residential condominium as its commercial tenants leave. Topping the building is a \$7.5 million, 4,936-square-foot duplex that includes a golden-domed octagonal cupola featuring a 360-degree view, a 40-foot-high ceiling and a band of eight 8-foot-high clerestory windows atop another set of eight 10-foot-high windows at living-room level.

The 1897 Beaux-Arts building, which is part of the Ladies Mile Historic District, is to have 10 full-floor, 2,736-square-foot apartments below the duplex.

The structure was originally designed by Robert Maynicke, just southwest of the Flatiron Building, to house the Sohmer piano showroom and offices. Its exterior gold dome, recently regilded, is a familiar sight, glittering by day and illuminated by night.

Leslie Gill whose architectural firm is working with Bryce Sanders Architecture/Design on the conversion of the building, compared being in the cupola to "standing in the lantern of a church." She said that they were trying to make the space feel like "an urban retreat."

Mr. Sanders envisioned the 307-square-foot space as a library, including bookcases between windows and a telescope.

Sheldon Stein, president of the Valhal Corp., the developer, said that "shadows dance around the room from sunrise to sunset." Valhal paid \$7.2 million for the office building in 1989.

Living in the dome isn't a new idea. Richard Welling, a founder of the City Club and a friend of Theodore Roosevelt, called the cupola home in 1908. His family had owned the building.

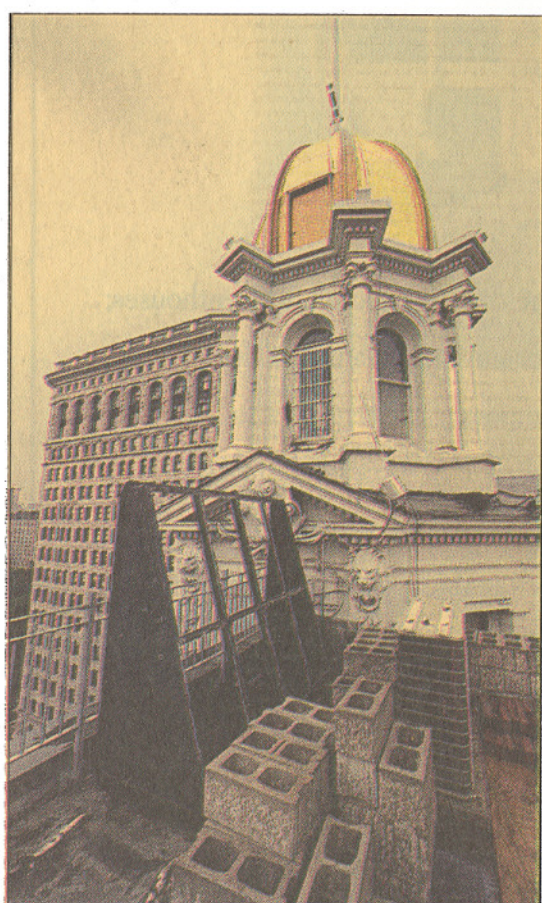
Valhal began converting vacated office space in the building a year and a half ago. A complete conversion was approved by the New York City Planning Commission early this year.

Besides the duplex, three other apartments are now available, costing from \$1.75 million to \$2.15 million. Five others have been sold, and four are occupied. The remaining commercial tenants are expected to move out over the next year.

Mr. Stein said his company was spending \$7 million on the conversion into apartments. An additional \$2 million is going toward new building systems, common areas and exterior renovation. The mansard roof is to be re clad with Vermont red slate, and modern storefronts are to be replaced by bay windows, each with metal ornamentation and copper roof. In the 1990's an aluminum flagpole replaced a rotted wood mast from which the piano company once flew its banner atop the dome.

A concierge will be on duty from 3 to 11 p.m. daily. Two elevators are to open into each apartment. Tenants can purchase space for storage or a wine cellar. The exclusive broker for the duplex is Sothby's International Realty.

At Valhal's Web site, www.170fifthcondos.com, inquiries have mistakenly come in for piano appraisals and repairs.



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

Gold dome tops \$7.5 million duplex.