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Re-imagined River Oaks high-rise promises 17 floors of luxury

By Diane Cowen | November 29, 2016

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Photo: The River Oaks

IMAGE 1 OF 10

Renderings of the penthouse at The River Oaks, the 19-story high-rise under construction on Westheimer. The 79-unit building will have three penthouses. One of which will be listed as the most expensive luxury ... [more](#)

Richard Leibovitch sits in his sales office on Westheimer, excited about every last detail of the midcentury-modern building he's virtually re-creating.

It will have a fountain out front, green space all around, lots of Calacatta marble, modern finishes, a dog park and what might become the sleekest mail room you've ever seen.

Leibovitch is managing partner of New York-based Arel Capital, a real-estate investment firm. In Houston, though, his baby is the renovation of the 17-story River Oaks high-rise, designed by Cameron Fairchild in the early 1960s.

Fairchild created it as an apartment building with 600 units. A modern building in its heyday, the River Oaks got less-than-stellar makeovers in the 1970s and '80s, Leibovitch said.

Leibovitch was urged to tear it down, but couldn't bear to destroy this landmark with so much character and history. Instead, he's keeping its bones - steel beams and concrete floors - and re-creating its glassy exterior and sleek interiors.

His re-imagined building on three acres will have just 79 luxury residences, from 1,600-square-foot condos that start at \$905,000 to a 13,000-square-foot penthouse for \$13 million. It will also have two smaller penthouses on the 16th floor (6,500 square feet for \$6 million each) and a handful of two-story garden homes that open up to actual backyards. Already, the building - to be finished in mid- to late-2017 - is 60 percent sold

Leibovitch chose interior designer Lauren Rottet to help him plan it, and Lea Weingarten of the Weingarten Art Group to help select art for public spaces.

First, the setting was considered: gracious River Oaks homes, big green trees and beautifully manicured lawns. They decided to alter the drive to include a water feature and green space in place of asphalt.

Rottet - whose design work includes the American Embassy in Frankfurt, Germany, the St. Regis Resort in Aspen, Colo., and the Lowes Regency Hotel



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in Manhattan - said she took a good long look at the building, assessing its good qualities as well as its challenges.

"I said, 'If we were doing it in 1963, with the knowledge we have in 2016, let's do that,' " Rottet said.

Its classic modernist traits included floor-to-ceiling panes of glass that allow you to see through to the garden in back, even as you're walking in the front door. "One thing I learned a long time ago doing interiors is that views are free," Rottet said. "So we focused living spaces on different views. The library focuses forward on a lovely fountain that will trickle from the front door to Westheimer. The back focuses on the pool and those gardens."

That's all on the first floor, and the views only get better as you go up. The 17th-floor penthouse has a 360-degree aerial view of the city, its downtown skyline, Texas Medical Center and Uptown Park.

Rottet said that they studied Fairchild's original plans and visually removed layers of things that were changed or added over the decades.

A big consideration was given to who will live here when the building is done. Leibovitch said that units have been sold to a wide range, from a recent medical school graduate to an 80-year-old.

Generally, though, they're likely to be inside-the-Loop residents in their 50s and 60s, who are tired of stairs and home maintenance.

Both Leibovitch and Rottet remind people that even in a modern building, old and new decor styles blend well.



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Rottet said she talked to one woman who was worried she'd have to get rid of her European antiques. No, said Rottet, a home is a "background for who you are."

"I want to find a couple of beautiful antique pieces to put in the lobby," she said. "Some strict modernists thinks it's the only thing. I think modern is beautiful, but that doesn't mean other aspects are not equally as beautiful."

There's a model of a kitchen and bathroom in the sales office in front of the construction site. Designed by Rottet, they include Poggenpohl cabinets and Gaggenau appliances.

She's created designs for public spaces on the first floor, as well as how living spaces can look, though all are just artist renderings now.

And let's not forget that mail room. They've planned custom-made mailboxes around the perimeter of the room, with a gorgeous seating area in the center, filled with chairs in modern design and a show-stopper rug.

"Getting your mail is a daily routine and most mail rooms in condo or apartment buildings have white linoleum, plain walls. It should be a great experience," Leibovitch said. "Ours will overlook the gardens. You can go through the mail; we'll have a shredder there. You can greet your neighbors."



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