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Column: The Next Big Thing

PARKING IN HIGH STYLE LUXURY CONDO PROJECT'S CAR ELEVATORS SAVE ENOUGH SPACE SO HISTORIC CAROLINA THEATRE CAN STAY INTACT

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Elevators in Charlotte's next condo high-rise will deliver owners and their cars right to the door.

It's an innovative way to ensure privacy - you stay in the car as you rise to your unit - but it also saves space that would be chewed up by parking ramps.

The developers of 20-story Encore, billed as "showplace living at the Carolina Theatre," plan to install car elevators along with passenger elevators to help preserve the 80-year-old theater at North Tryon and East Sixth streets.

Charlottean Jim Donnelly's Pursuit Group LLC has taken over as lead developer and revised the \$65 million project since the city approved partner Camden Management Partners' contract in April 2006 to buy the property.

Pursuit Group plans 20 "boutique" units selling for \$1.7 million to \$5 million instead of Camden's earlier proposed 35-story, 125-unit tower, where the most expensive condos would have been priced in the low \$300,000s.

As lenders tighten credit in a slowing housing market, Donnelly believes small, unique projects have a better chance of getting financing and selling out.

The Trust, his eight-unit conversion of the former Home Federal Savings and Loan Building at 139 S. Tryon St. sold out at prices ranging from \$1.5 to \$3 million. Residents are to move in starting in February.

In that upper-end niche, Donnelly said, buyers are more financially secure and less focused on short-term capital markets and interest rates.

On Encore, he said his team is evaluating financing terms offered by three large banks.

He's not concerned that lenders typically require at least 50 percent of the units be sold in advance of construction.

Donnelly said he doesn't believe he will have difficulty selling 10 condos based on his experience at The Trust, where buyers had to be turned away.

Encore is more than just dwelling units.

The project would include three floors of offices (5,000 square feet each), a restaurant level, a theater lounge floor, an amenities floor for residents and a 1,400-seat auditorium for movies, live entertainment, charitable benefits and corporate events.

For Charlotte history lovers, who have been trying to secure a future for the Carolina since it went dark in 1978, there's no question this is a Next Big Thing.

Carolina Theatre Preservation Society President Charlie Clayton is pleased with the redesign.

"They've had me involved from the very beginning," he said. "I like the architecture. I like the way they incorporate the original facade and emphasize the marquee out front."

The developers expect to spend \$5 million on the theater, and the society plans to raise millions more to return it to its original grandeur, Clayton said.

The city has agreed to help the developers and theater operator Ark Management with arts programming through annual grants based on the project's property taxes.

Mitigating the impact of parking was perhaps the most significant change Donnelly's team made to keep the theater in tact and improve the project's feasibility, Clayton said.

Past proposals included spiral ramps that would have required shaving off some of the theater to build condos atop several parking levels, he said.

"This would have been done a long time ago if it hadn't been for the parking problem," Clayton said.

Clay Landers of Atlanta-based Camden said, "Parking was the biggest constraint to the site" when he initiated the project three years ago. "This is a very creative solution," he said.

Car elevators are more common in cities where land is expensive and scarce. Donnelly, who co-founded an Internet travel site named IgoUgo.com, said he became acquainted with the technology during his travels.

Encore owners would enter the garage and condos on the Sixth Street side. Theater patrons would have a separate entrance on the Tryon Street side to the Carolina lobby and no access to the residential portion.

Donnelly said the project was designed so condo owners can be as private as they like, never mingling unless they choose to do so.

A restaurant would be cantilevered over Tryon Street at the seventh level.

A rooftop terrace with a lap pool for swimming and a smaller pool for cooling off would be open only to residents.

Residential condos with balconies overlooking Tryon would be on floors eight through 20 with one or two units, 3,000 to 7,000 square feet, per floor.

Pre-construction buyers would have some flexibility to design their spaces and window configurations. High-end finishes, fixtures and appliances would be standard. Owners could combine units horizontally or vertically.

Each condo would have either two or four parking spaces within a few feet of the owner's door. Residents who don't need as many spaces could convert them to other uses.

Separate passenger elevators open directly into residences.

Donnelly said the developers expected to sell the office space but would consider leasing. No commercial prices have been set.

He would like to break ground in March and complete the project by late fall 2009.

The next step is an extension of the developers' theater purchase agreement with the city.

City economic development director Tom Flynn, who's familiar with the plan, said his staff will recommend an extension to the City Council next month.

Sales Center: 221 S. Tryon St.

Information: www.encorecharlotte.com