

Apartments slated to be high-end condos

By Erin Mulvaney

New Yorker Richard Leibovitch says local developers advised him to demolish the River Oaks Luxury Apartments — the aging midcentury high-rise his firm bought last fall — and build two side-by-side towers with upward of 600 units.

Instead, his firm, New York-based Arel Capital, decided to redevelop the 1967 structure with fewer but larger units for a luxury condominium project. During its heyday, the developer says the 17-story apartment building at 3433 Westheimer was iconic for its "exclusive address, expansive grounds and Miesian-style architecture," with its steel frames, curtain walls, prominent use of glass and open interiors.

The building deteriorated over time, with aging plumbing and yellowing walls. "What we wanted to do was basically renovate this building and bring it back to its old level," Leibovitch said in an interview.

"We are taking the bones of the building and bringing it into the 21st century."

Construction is under way on the 84-unit condominium project. The project will retain the original footprint on the 3-acre property along Westheimer in the heart of River Oaks.

Initial renderings show a contemporary-style building with floor-to-ceiling windows and terraced gardens all around. The design includes panoramic views, corner balconies and large roof terraces. Floor plans will range from 1,500 to 9,000 square feet.

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» In case you missed it: A version of this story was published April 18 in the Houston Chronicle

The design retains influences from the original midcentury design, but it also takes modern inspiration from Houston's Menil Collection and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

The interiors will feature hardwoods and limestone. Amenities will include a state-of-the-art fitness center, massage and yoga rooms, two pools, a dog park and outdoor kitchens. It will offer two garden residences and two penthouses with private pools. Units will start at \$875,000.

During the recent real estate boom, many properties in the River Oaks and Galleria areas were torn down to make way for high-end, high-density projects.

"Our theme has always been about breathing life into real estate again," Leibovitch said. "Our business has always been about finding opportunities in good locations. Historically we've bought older and tired properties and renovated them."

"We want to go against the grain of what has been done a lot over the last 15 years."

In Houston, Arel Capital owns two other projects, in Timbergrove and in Alief, but the River Oaks building is its first redevelopment project here.

Leibovitch said the company was attracted by the River Oaks high-rise because of its downtown views and proximity to shopping in the Galleria

area. He said he expects buyers to be empty nesters and wealthy business people who want to live in luxury, but not necessarily maintain mansions.

While thousands of rental apartment units will come to market across Houston this year, condominium projects are much less common.

Other announced condo projects in the Galleria area include a 26-story development called Belfiore being built at the Post Oak Lane and South Wynden Drive, and a 28-story condominium tower called Astoria on Post Oak Boulevard.

Bill Pederson, executive director of the graduate real estate program at the University of Houston, said there is a market and need for condominiums in desirable locations, like River Oaks and the Galleria area.

"They bought a building with some value," Pederson said. "You will continue to see in-fill near River Oaks. This is the epicenter. This is where all the action for the wealthy is."

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The company also develops in New York City,



EDIT International

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Denver and Austin.

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The River Oaks is slated to be completed by fall 2016.

erin.mulvaney@chron.com



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