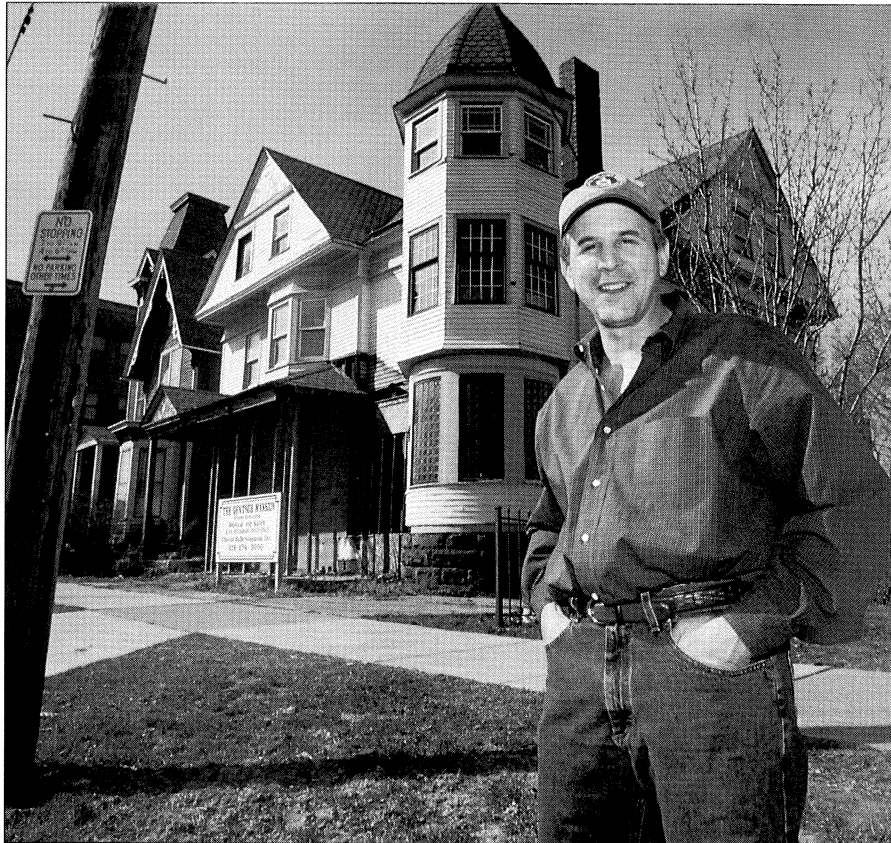


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## Chesler redeveloping more than mansions



JANINE BENTIVEGNA

Mansions like the Gentsch Home are in short supply for redeveloping, so Michael Chesler is pursuing other types of buildings to renovate.

## MidTown building slated for renovation

By **STAN BULLARD**

With commerce playing the role of Cupid in his labor of love, Michael Chesler is searching for new objects of his desire.

Best known for restoring two mansions near downtown for office use during the 1990s, Mr. Chesler is broadening his redevelopment efforts not only to include converting mansions into commercial space, but also to bring new life to old office and industrial buildings.

To that end, his Chesler ReDevelopment

### REAL ESTATE

Inc. has agreed to buy a two-story, 25,000-square-foot building at 5000 Prospect Ave. in the MidTown Corridor from Applied Industrial Technologies Inc. of Cleveland. He plans to renovate the space for office tenants.

Mr. Chesler is pursuing redevelopment opportunities in other, similar-size buildings — and may try to go as large as 500,000 square feet — simply because he's running out of mansions to renovate and must find other properties to keep his real estate business moving along.

"I know all the owners (of the remaining) mansions and call them up regularly, but I can't predict when they'll become available

or build a business on them," said the 40-year-old developer.

While he still has two mansion projects on tap, Mr. Chesler is interested in finding buildings that are architecturally unique or have character, if not in design, then in terms of the difficulty of the project.

"And it's got to be fun or we're uninterested," Mr. Chesler said.

The Applied Industrial building, a former Packard Motors garage that dates back to 1923, fits the bill.

Mr. Chesler describes the old machine shop and warehouse as "awaiting the change" to a beautifully restored building. He plans to replace windows that were long

# Chesler

ago bricked in, open up the original ceiling and add a mezzanine between the floors.

Mr. Chesler got his start in the renovation business while a student of English literature at Case Western Reserve University. He converted the 1888-vintage Mather Carriage House into Club Isabella for his mother, Isabella Basile.

He later renovated 30 homes while spending most of his time building Chesler Group Inc., a licensing business that represents American companies in Asia. His signature mansion renovations were the Groh Mansion, 3043 Superior Ave., and Gaenslen Place, 3050 Prospect Ave.

Thanks to the decline of the Asian economy, Mr. Chesler, who is fluent in Japanese, said he has put the licensing business in maintenance mode and turned his real estate interests into a full-time pursuit. To help accelerate the pace of real estate deals, Mr. Chesler for the first time has taken on outside investors. However, he declined to identify them or to say how much they've invested in his business.

Mr. Chesler already has completed his first project in his new direction. Last year he converted the former Perfeclite Lighting Factory, 1457 E. 40th St., to the corporate headquarters of Unicare Inc., a company that provides administrative and reimbursement

support to hospitals and nursing homes.

"The roof was largely missing when I first saw the building," Mr. Chesler recalls. After the addition of a new roof, plus new windows, heating and ventilating systems and hickory flooring, the structure now provides Unicare a sharp, open-office design for about 100 employees on the second floor and room to expand in the future on the first floor.

Michael Baird, Unicare president, said Mr. Chesler helped the company buy and convert the building to office use "in a way that's nothing short of spectacular." Mr. Chesler originally wanted to lease the building to Unicare, but the company wanted to buy, so Mr. Chesler agreed to do the \$1.5 million conversion project for an undisclosed fee.

Mr. Chesler refers to the project as one for his résumé because he typically prefers to buy buildings for his own portfolio, then renovate and lease the structures for \$10 to \$13 a square-foot. Those are prices low enough to attract office tenants from the downtown central business district.

People familiar with Mr. Chesler, who wore a ballcap, blue jeans, a vest and blue shirt during a recent interview, describe him as passionate about redevelopment and persistent.

Sandy Coakley, a vice president specializing in chic properties in and near downtown for the Chartwell Group real estate brokerage, said Mr. Chesler is "a taskmaster."

"He makes sure the job gets done," Mr.

Coakley said. "He gets the best (construction) quotes; he's a hands-on owner."

Mr. Chesler is so hard-driving that Mr. Coakley said he frequently tells the developer to "take a deep breath and relax."

Jim Haviland, executive director of the MidTown Cleveland redevelopment group, said he's excited about Mr. Chesler's plan for the Applied Industrial building. He said MidTown is sharing leads with him because the area needs more renovated office space.

"Unicare shows what can be done with an existing building," Mr. Haviland said.

While Mr. Chesler worries about finding future mansions to work on, he does have two mansion projects in the planning stages.

Last October, he bought the Gentsch Home, an 1879-vintage Queen Anne Victorian home at 2826 Franklin Ave. in Ohio City, better known from a stint as the Scrooge & Marley tavern. He plans to convert it, preferably to commercial office space, but perhaps to a bed and breakfast or restaurant. He is also negotiating to buy a Prospect Avenue mansion he wouldn't specify.

Observers don't think Mr. Chesler will face the same diminishing supply on the small-building front as he does with the rare mansions.

"There's a steady stream of business there that you could make a living out of," said Terry Coyne, vice president of industrial properties at Grubb & Ellis Co.