



Reviving a Relic

Renovation effort brings discarded Andrew Jackson House back to life in Akron

By Mark Watt | Photos by Bill Webb

When Michael Chesler first walked into the Andrew Jackson House in late 2006, the historic, Second Empire-style mansion was in rough shape—it had been vacant for close to 20 years. Located at 277 East Mill Street in Akron near the edge of the University of Akron’s campus, the building had enjoyed a compelling history – first as home to Akron lumber magnate Andrew Jackson when it was built in 1868 and later as home to the local chapter of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows beginning in 1918. But in recent decades, it had fallen into disrepair and was condemned by the City of Akron in 2006. Homeless men and women occupied the home and built fires on its floors, removing and burning pieces of the historic solid walnut trim and dimensional lumber to keep warm. There were no toilets, no running water and no working mechanical system. Rooms were stuffed with broken pianos, organs, furniture and other discarded items.

Just three years after Chesler first toured the Andrew Jackson House however, the 16,000-square-foot building has been fully renovated and updated by Chesler Construction LLC with the help of Dimit Architects LLC, of Cleveland. The ornate, five story structure boasts restored architectural details, a new ADA compliant hydraulic elevator and octagonal staircase, new restrooms, a new event kitchen serving a second-story ballroom and a highly efficient, state-of-the-art variable refrigerant HVAC system.

“From the moment I walked in, I knew it was a phenomenal building

– despite the fact that it was in bad condition,” Chesler says. As the owner of The Chesler Group, Inc., development firm that specializes in the adaptive reuse of historic structures, he says he has seen many such structures and can recognize their potential immediately.

“We’ve done about 20 to 25 of these projects over the past 20 years,” Chesler says, noting that projects \$10 million and under are his company’s niche and that his team self-performs much of the work. “You always wait for the other shoe to drop when you’re performing a complex historic renovation project but not this one. From

the beginning I could see it was just a beautifully built building.”

House with a history

Fully revived under the ownership of The Chesler Group, the Andrew Jackson House is now serving as the new home of GAR Foundation, an Akron-based entity that provides grants to nonprofit organizations in the fields of education, health and social services, civic enhancement, and the arts. The foundation signed a lease in May 2008 and moved into the space last month, kicking off a new chapter for a building that has seen its ups and downs over the past 141 years.



SHAPING UP A renovation project launched in the late 1920s by the Independent Order of Odd Fellows included the conversion of seven second-story bedrooms into one large ballroom. The space has been updated to serve as a mixed-use office/meeting hall (left) for GAR Foundation.

The five-story brick house was constructed in 1868 as the personal home of Andrew Jackson, one of the founders of the Akron-based lumber firm Jackson, Buchtel and Co. It continued to serve as a private residence after John T. Johnson, a railroad superintendent, bought the house at the turn of the century.

In 1918, the Independent Order of Odd Fellows purchased the building and eventually renovated and updated it to serve as the fraternal organization's meeting lodge. The second floor, which originally contained seven bedrooms, was converted into a grand meeting hall. The group also added a mezzanine level, providing access to a balcony overlooking the new meeting space. And wiring was installed to provide electricity in the building for the first time.

Seventy years later, the house was sold to an individual who attempted to convert it into a coffeehouse serving University of Akron students, according to Chesler. The renovation efforts were

unsuccessful and much of the botched construction made the re-design far more challenging.

As Chesler explains, GAR Foundation had approached his group in 2006 with an interest in restoring an older structure in Akron to serve as its new home. Chesler suggested the Andrew Jackson House as a candidate and the foundation eventually agreed. After seven months of negotiations, Chesler purchased the building in June 2007 and enlisted Dimit Architects to assist in the planning.

"Directly thereafter, our entire staff and Scott Dimit and his staff worked 24/7 to put the renovation plans together in one week and went down to the Ohio Historic Preservation Office in Columbus for the first round of state historic tax credit applications," Chesler says. "There's a limited amount of projects that get accepted and it's on a first-come, first-serve basis. We all slept in chairs on the sidewalk for 40 hours to get in line.

Unfortunately, we were the next group in line when the state decided to suspend the project."

As Chesler explains, a lawsuit ensued as his group and four other developers statewide sought an Ohio Supreme Court order to force the Ohio Department of Development to restart the historic preservation tax-credit program. The effort was successful and several months later The Chesler Group and other developers in the queue were awarded with the tax credits.

Parker Hannifin partnered with The Chesler Group as its tax credit investor for the project, which complied with historic standards set forth by the U.S. Department of the Interior. It would become one of the first projects in the area to receive both State of Ohio and Federal historic tax credits.

Working toward revival

Construction began in July of 2008 with Chesler Construction LLC serving



ENTRY FROM THE PAST Throughout the house are several original solid-core walnut doors (left), some with original cast bronze hinges. Designed to fit in with those original features as much as possible is a newly built octagon stair (right), which is constructed of 20 tons of steel and concrete.

as general contractor and self-performing much of the work, including carpentry, electrical and demolition.

“To make the building waterproof, we had to hand dig around the perimeter of the foundation,” Chesler says. “All new drain tile was installed and new floors were poured in the basement, which originally had dirt floors. It all had to be done by hand.”

As Chesler notes, the ceilings in the garden level were 10 feet from top to bottom, unusually high for buildings of this vintage. Those heights allowed the crew to install all systems needed to service the rooms above, including mechanical, electrical, sprinklers and plumbing (“The choreography of installing all of those systems was challenging,” Chesler says).

KW Lang, of Solon, installed a Mitsubishi variable refrigerant HVAC system that provides the “same efficiency as a geothermal system without needing to dig wells,” according to Chesler, who says it’s among the first of

its kind in the region. The system uses ambient air temperature and transports warmer or cooler air from one portion of the house to another as needed.

The building now has a fully automated sprinkler system, supplied by a pump installed in a new service room built beneath the house’s front porch. Although most of the house is served by a typical “wet” sprinkler system, the loft and mezzanine levels utilize an ethylene glycol system. “The Mansard roofline created interstitial spaces between the outside of the roofline and the drywall,” Chesler says. “Because there are a lot of soffits that breathe air, we were concerned that sprinkler heads could freeze up there. The ethylene glycol system prevents that from happening.”

A new five-story Schindler commercial hydraulic elevator was added, a process that required a creative solution. “We had an eighth of an inch of tolerance for the 60-foot shaft and we knew that if we built it from the bottom up

there would be shifting,” Chesler says. “So we built it from the top down, using old-fashioned shoring techniques and put the concrete in at the end. It was a bizarre approach but we needed to do it.”

An octagon stair, constructed of 20 tons of steel and concrete, was added as well and serves as the primary method of accessing the second-floor meeting hall. The structure is secured on steel girders buried in the surrounding walls that extend through the basement floor. “The stair was difficult,” Chesler says. “It gave us fits.”

To make room for the stair, a fireplace in the existing first floor space was preserved and moved to an office on the southeast corner of the building.

Additional work on the first floor included the restoration of original first-growth walnut doors from the 1868 building. “The woodwork in the house was impressive,” says Daniel Weaver, owner of Weaver Window & Woodcrafts, of Middlefield, which restored doors throughout the house.



RECONDITIONED ROOMS Extensive work took place on the house's garden level, which was transformed from a dark, dirt-floored space into a set of comfortable, contemporary meeting rooms.

"From the doors to moldings and casings, it makes you wonder how they went about making these finely detailed pieces." Some doors feature original cast bronze hinges, Chesler notes.

On the second floor, the 2,500-square-foot ballroom was restored. Furniture selected by Dimit Architects' Senior Designer Analia Nanni Dimit allows the space to be staged for office use or as a comfortable, open meeting area. Chesler notes that the wooden trussed supported ceiling over the ballroom was in great condition and was not sagging at all, which highlights the quality of construction completed during the 1918 renovation by the Independent Order of Odd Fellows. A fully operational caterer's kitchen is situated at the rear of the floor as well.

The mezzanine level has been updated to provide an office space and filing room.

Finally, the loft space is currently unoccupied but has been updated to provide office space for a tenant in the future. The 2,500-square-foot space is now available for sub-lease.

Another tenant, Akron-based staff of the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, has offices on the garden level. These spaces include original stone walls, which contrast with contemporary office furnishings.

Work on the exterior was minimal, requiring some tuckpointing and painting, Chesler says. The previous owner had restored cornice work.

"The exterior was in good shape already and we were thankful for that," Chesler says.

Now that the project is complete, Architect Scott Dimit says the project team is happy with the results. "We have enjoyed working with the Chesler Group over the years and this project was a continuation of that," Dimit

says, noting that Chesler recently received a Preservation Award of Merit from the Ohio Historic Preservation Office for his work in preserving historical buildings in Northeast Ohio. "We also enjoyed worked with GAR Foundation. Our visions for the space were aligned and that made it a pleasure overall."

Christine Amer Mayer, chief operating officer and legal counsel for GAR Foundation, says her group is excited to be headquartered in the restored Andrew Jackson House, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

"It has turned out swimmingly," she says. "We are thrilled. It's a beautiful place to work and now we have a space where we can host our grantees. It opens up a whole new world for us."

Chesler says he's pleased with the finished product as well. "It feels good," he says. "I'm happy the tenants are enjoying the space." **P**