

A Boom Giveth, and It Taketh Away

Church of the Rapture, Paradise Liquor and the owner of Cafe Saint-Ex look beyond their corner for a place to be pioneers again. The second of two parts.

By Anne Hull
Washington Post Staff Writer
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When Church of the Rapture sells for \$10 million this year, the Pentecostal storefront on the corner of 14th and T streets NW hits the jackpot. Pastor Theresa Garrison always says that God channels his wishes through her, and when He said, "Sell," it was near the peak of a commercial real estate boom on 14th Street.

The buyer is the West Group Development Co., a behemoth developer from McLean, in partnership with Ellis Development Group in the District.

The West Group built Tysons Corner. Although the chief executive of the Ellis company, Chip Ellis, has no sprawling office parks on his resume, he brings another asset. He was born in Shaw, the historic soul of black Washington and right where the development team hopes to convert a black church into half-million-dollar condos.

Church of the Rapture also has a share in the deal, and to make sure that three decades of shouting down Satan at 14th and T won't be forgotten, the 40-unit development would be called Rapture Lofts.

Like a veil lifting on the future, the blueprints reveal the dramatic remaking of the corner: glamorous industrial lofts of glass and steel with underground parking and first-floor retail.

To test the community's support, the developers hold a meeting in the church. There is no lament for the loss of the church. Nearly every question from the mostly white audience involves parking, construction inconveniences and what kind of restaurant might go in the ground floor.

The first official hurdle is the District's Histor-

ic Preservation Review Board. The hodgepodge-painted Church of the Rapture building was an auto showroom built in 1919. A smaller adjoining structure also owned by the church was one of the city's first department stores that catered to African Americans. Both buildings are in the Greater U Street Historic District.

Besides dealing in the arcana of corbelled cornices, the preservation review board has the authority to limit the height and scale of construction. The idea that 11 preservationists could hinder the development team's profits angers Charlton Woodyard, a church member who wants the lofts to go as high as possible for maximum financial return.

"If you can't make money, what good is that gonna be?" Woodyard asks. "Now they are talking 'Historic Anacostia.' Where were you when we needed you? When guns were splayed and people were dying?"

To woo the review board, the developers put together some heavy street credibility. Architect Suman Sorg has transformed other buildings on 14th, including another auto showroom. Emily Eig, an architectural historian, is brought on as a preservation consultant.

On the day of the hearing, the bona fides of Shaw's descendants are on display as much as the blueprints. Ellis speaks on behalf of the project, introducing himself as a fourth-generation Washingtonian born at Freedmen's Hospital, now Howard University Hospital. Another supporter enlisted by the lofts project, preservationist Lori Dodson, tells the board that her grandparents and great-grandparents grew up in Shaw and that Ellis understands the importance of those roots. "He himself embodies the history, just as the buildings do, so he carries those memories with him," Dodson says.

Woodyard testifies that the church wants the project to go forward so "we can move out and leave a legacy behind."

Newcomers to 14th are there, too, making the case for the lofts. "I wish the building could be taller," says Eric Kole, owner of Vastu furniture store across the street. "I wish I could see more of the new addition, more of the industrial aspect of it, as opposed to less. But I'm absolutely thrilled that it's going to be . . .

"Okay, great," interrupts Tersh Boasberg, chairman of the review board.

The city's preservation planner, Steve Callcott, tells the board he is concerned that the design packs too much construction on the existing structures. He recommends that the development team rethink the scale of the project. The board agrees.

Woodyard can't believe it. "That church has held that neighborhood together in the worst of times, and now it's the best of times and they are putting a ball and chain around us," he says.

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Three days after the hearing, the raggedy building rendered gorgeous in dozens of architectural drawings is shaking with fury and joy. A smiling fifth-grader stands at the front of the church with her uncle -- her mother is serving in Iraq -- and holds up an award from school to thunderous applause. Later in the service, an infant swaddled in ivory taffeta is christened, and she, too, is bathed in joyous applause.

To the outside world, the church is a mystery, a big slab on the corner with double-parked cars. When drums and organs are bringing the congregation to a boil, sometimes the muffled fury and sharp cymbals seep from the building, causing a man to pause one night outside a prayer service and ask, "Is that a jazz club?"

Lawrence Guyot walks the sidewalks of Shaw, watching as small black businesses and institutions are replaced by real estate development and the whims of newcomers. "There is a total avoidance of the value and history of the people we are dealing with," says Guyot, a community activist and former member of a Ward 1 Advisory Neighborhood Commission. "How many people in that area put themselves in mind of the parishioners? What does it do to you, when a church, the place you worship, vanishes? It's not just another building."

Guyot knows the story line is not that simple. The church struck a lucrative deal and is ready to go. "What's the best way to exit with grace and aplomb?" Guyot asks. "Millions of dollars is the

answer."

The changes at 14th and T aren't happening fast enough for others. ANC member Ramon Estrada says he gets "tons" of questions about the corner. Neighbors have called him to complain about noise from the church on Sundays. Others cringe at Paradise Liquor, with its bulletproof glass. "These are people who've just spent a half-million on a house," Estrada says. "I get asked, 'Why do I have to subject my guests to that?'"

Estrada belongs to the powerhouse Dupont Circle ANC, whose brownstone aesthetics now stretch east to the once-gritty borderlands of 14th Street. It was Estrada who helped force Paradise Liquor to clean up and stop selling single beers. Advisory neighborhood commissioners influence zoning, alcohol licenses and historic preservation and decree how many sidewalk tables a cafe can have. After Church of the Rapture sold, pastor Lawrence Garrison and the developers came to Estrada, who organized the community meeting in the church.

Several weeks after the initial hearing with the Historic Preservation Review Board, the Rapture Lofts project wins final approval, with modifications. But instead of calling it Rapture Lofts, the developers decide that T Street Flats is a more marketable name. So much for legacy. Pastor Theresa Garrison says she doesn't care what the lofts are called. From the pulpit one Sunday morning, she warns that the hallowed church grounds soon will be overtaken by the sinful. "See, I found out that the rent is gonna be so high that only the rich homosexuals and lesbians will be able to buy this condominium," she tells the congregation. One part of what the pastor says is true: The condos will be priced from \$400,000 to \$1 million, with no set-asides for affordable units.

The slow fade of the old 14th and T is underway. Engineers begin taking soil samples from church property. Cafe Saint-Ex, the trendy bistro that arrived two years ago, is hosting oyster night and Bastille Day night and is packing it in on weekends. Paradise Liquor on the other corner has less than two months left on its lease. Gone will be burglar bars that wrap around the doors like ominous orthodontia and the stale air of a package store that failed to change with the times.

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Late this summer, Paradise customers begin to notice something amiss. The chip rack is empty and stays empty. The liquor shelves aren't as deeply stocked. The "Building for Lease" banner is strung to the roof.

"How you doin', Pop?" manager David Lee asks a man who is holding a pipe and a half-pint of gin.

"What they gonna do with this building?" Pop asks. "They trying to sell it?"

"I don't know. Why?" Lee asks. "You wanna buy it?"

In Paradise, where nothing is ever addressed directly, Pop knows he just got an affirmative answer. The Paradise building was bought last year for \$900,000, and the new landlord is tripling the rent, forcing Paradise to move out when its lease expires.

Eager speculators come in to scope out the space. Paradise might be a wreck, but it's a prime location. One afternoon, a man asks Lee if he can take a look around. He wants to open a day spa. "A day spa!" Lee says. "What about the rats? Talk about jumbo! They so fat they can't even run."

Two entrepreneurs strike a tentative agreement with the landlord, and the sign for a beverage license goes in the window: Paradise is going to become a sushi bar.

Lee is a tough guy, but something about the agreement makes him know it's all real. "I'll probably pass by here and look at the building," he says. "I might even walk in and order me a sushi."

The liquor stores along 14th Street are going away. "The first generation of liquor stores were run by the Jewish," Lee says. "They call Koreans second-generation Jew because we took over all the liquor stores. Now, more Indians. We call Indians second-generation Koreans because they are buying the liquor stores."

Liquor stores are places of secrets and desperation, but at Paradise the desperation is rarely disguised. A city employee cuts work to buy a bottle. A size-2 woman in need of a crack pipe comes in and asks Lee whether he sells single-stem rose vases. A man opens a garbage bag containing a fax machine, a color copier and a printer, all available for a low, low price. They come to Lee with their wares: three-packs of underwear, stereos, heavy-duty tools and tubes of toothpaste.

But Paradise is also a post office, bank and candy store, full of teetotalers and children and old men from the neighborhood sharing gardening and gambling tips. Every Friday, Paradise cashes \$10,000 in payroll checks. Lee takes a 2 percent cut, sometimes more. "You don't like it, you can go to a bank," he tells them. But he knows that Paradise is their bank.

Lee has never been robbed. He has two surveillance cameras, but his eyes are superior. Same with his helper, Sang Choi. A couple of days earlier, a guy grabbed a carton of Newports, and Choi chased him across the street to the alley behind Church of the Rapture, where the thief pulled a knife from his shorts and Choi grudgingly gave up.

Lee tells everyone the slightly built man was a heavy in the Korean military. Choi smokes incessantly and commutes 40 miles each way to the dingy liquor store from his home in Ellicott City.

"Hi, baby," a woman says to Choi, who gives a little bow with his head. "Gimme a pint of that Christian Brothers."

Lee goes outside with some empty boxes. He used to have a dumpster, but the ANC made him get rid of it because the homeless were using it as a buffet. "They want to upgrade the neighborhood. I understand that," Lee says. "These ANC guys walk around day and night looking at things. I wonder how they make a living. "

As time runs out on the lease, the owner of Paradise, Byung In Min, finds two liquor stores to buy. One is at First and Kennedy streets NW, and the other is off Marlboro Pike in Prince George's County. Lee drives to check out the store at First and Kennedy. A steel gate makes the front look like a jail. There's housing all around, potential customers. Perfect, Lee thinks. He returns to Paradise excited. It reminds him of the old days on 14th and T: hustle and trash-talking and the sound of cash registers. "I'm gonna have to get to know the head of the households," he says. "I'll be selling 40-ounce and 24s. I'm gonna be running it by the neighborhood with nobody telling us what to sell."

Lee doesn't notice that not far from the new liquor store is a luxury condo project called the Lofts at Brightwood, with a rooftop terrace and a restaurant featuring "upscale diasporan cooking and an eclectic lounge atmosphere."

Whatever washed over 14th and T is pushing across the whole city.

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Across the street from Paradise, Cafe Saint-Ex chef Barton Seaver is briefing the staff on the evening specials. "The daily bruschetta will be fresh organic heirloom tomatoes with gorgonzola and balsamic," Seaver says, wearing chef's whites and a faded Boston Red Sox cap. "Our fish of the day is a grilled boneless trout fillet."

"Is it Virginia trout?" a server asks, taking notes.

"This is Pennsylvania trout," Seaver says.

"Is it farm-raised rainbow trout?"

The menu is more gourmet than the red-meat bistro fare that Mike Benson offered when he opened Saint-Ex two years ago. In the encroaching universe of cremini mushroom polenta, Benson tells his chef that taking the burger off the menu is non-negotiable. The burger stays.

Benson opens another bar a few doors down from Saint-Ex called Bar Pilar. It's a more laid-back place with a big-screen TV where Benson increasingly goes to hang out and watch sports, away from Saint-Ex. All he ever wanted was a bar he could walk to from his house at 13th and T. Now he's on the run from his own creation. He worries that the rise of the condo canyons will squash the galleries and small businesses that have opened on 14th in recent years. "It's just a matter of time before Pottery Barn and the Container Store come in here if we're not careful," he says.

Late this summer, after eight years of living in the neighborhood, Benson decides to move east toward North Capitol Street, to the land of scrappy corner markets and housing in transition. There is something alive about the neighborhood that invigorates him. Quietly, he begins visiting salvage shops to look for an old wooden bar. His wife goes on the hunt for vintage airplane seats. It's true: Benson is scheming to open a restaurant in his new badlands of North Capitol and Quincy streets NW. He wants to buy the old No. 12 firehouse.

His new neighborhood reminds him of how 14th and T felt in 1998. "It still has the character," he says.

So much character that Benson is robbed of his Vespa scooter, and when he confronts the young robbers, they pull a gun on him.

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On a sunny Saturday afternoon, two employees from the West Group prop a tall ladder against the Church of the Rapture building. They have come to take down the church's signs.

For years, the fire-and-brimstone message -- "NOW! IT IS TIME TO COME TO CHURCH AND TO GOD" -- has hovered over the corner, and now as the signs are coming down, people on the sidewalk stop to watch. Cars pull over.

Brian Liu is sitting at a table across the street at Saint-Ex and comes trotting. The graphic artist thinks the signs should stay in the neighborhood. Andrea Evers is on her way to brunch and rolls down her window to ask if the signs are for sale. One of the men jokingly tells her to check eBay in a few days. Evers is persistent and drives away with the sign for fifty bucks. Liu pays \$50 for the other one. Evers props her sign in the dining room of her Kalorama home, with plans to hang it in a third-floor gallery space. "Heaven or hell," she says of the sign's illustration of a cross and flames.

"I love how they give you an option."

When church members arrive the next morning, they are greeted by a huge banner hanging down from the building.

"T Street Flats. A Style of Living That's All Your Own."

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"Hey, write an address, we'll ride up to see you," a customer tells David Lee on his last week at Paradise. Lee is packing and preparing to move to the liquor store at First and Kennedy. His old customers tell him to be careful over there. Lee shrugs. "It's a risky business," he says. "I'm not here to be comfortable."

Not that 14th and T is some kind of Disneyland. In August, a woman was stabbed to death 20 yards from Paradise. Lee knew 55-year-old Gloria Banks, whose blood was still puddled on the sidewalk when he arrived for work. Her daughter came into Paradise later, and Lee said how sorry he was.

The sushi bar deal falls through, and the Paradise building is again up for grabs: anyone with \$8,000 a month for rent and the fortitude to win the approval of the ANC, which questioned the sushi bar's true intent after noting that blueprints showed a small kitchen and a deejay booth.

"Not my problem anymore," Lee says.

The last days are full of hugs and handshakes. A longtime customer named Jerome stops in. Jerome doesn't drink. He just comes in to play Powerball before his spiritual group meeting Thursday nights. He doesn't know what he will do without Paradise. "They don't mess the numbers up, and it's orderly," he says. "David knows everybody. You come in here, and you ain't gonna get robbed. It's Northwest!

"Love you, man," Jerome says to Lee.

"Love you back," Lee says.

Two high school students appear at the bulletproof glass. The girl wears a "Jesus is My Homeboy" T-shirt, and the boy carries a warm pan of jambalaya for an after-school function. They buy two sodas, and as they leave, the boy stops in the doorway and looks at the deco block glass. "I remember this glass from when I was growing up," he says.

A woman with a platinum card stands at the scratched glass and asks Lee, "You think you'll be restocking the Blue Curacao?"

"Thing is, we are moving," Lee says.

"I'm sorry to hear that," she says.

"It's too rich for my blood around here," he says.

"I hear you."

A man named Louis buys a bottle of water. For years, he was a Velicoff drunk, several pints a day.

Now, he's been sober for two months. Lee studies him, wondering how he's pulled off such a feat. Then Jermaine the KFC manager comes in for cigarettes and tells Lee he's saving a potpie for him.

On Paradise Liquor's last night of business last week, there is no climactic locking of the doors or turning out the lights for the last time. Just a slow night, so slow that Lee closes 40 minutes early. But first he steps outside onto the corner. The cracks in the sidewalk are filled with used matchsticks, cigarette butts, bobby pins and chips of glass. Down the block, men are huddled around a chess game. The cars are double-parked in front of Church of the Rapture for Thursday night prayer service. Cafe Saint-Ex radiates. Lee is bathed in the weary light of Paradise.

"They are gonna miss me," he says. "They are gonna miss this store, period. Eventually, the people gonna go away, too."

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In the church building stripped of its signs, worshipers still faithfully fill the rows of seats in the upstairs sanctuary: old women on canes with their zippered Bibles and tissue, and toddlers with braided hair and patent leather shoes. A gray-haired Metrobus driver arrives for Sunday school in a three-piece suit and sharp hat. When he stands at the microphone with his gospel quartet, the harmonies echo from another era on this corner.

The search for a new church intensifies. Garrison wants the space to have a day care center and facility for seniors. The people don't seem to care where they go as long as they can stay together. "I don't know where the new building is," says Joy Mayo, who was christened in the church as a baby and now has a master's degree from Howard University. "I know who will lead us, though. Her name is Doctor Theresa. She's like God Superstar. She keeps it all so real. Some churches stay on top of the water. She goes deep."

Garrison's arrival at church always causes a stir. Heads turn and people stand or clap. One Sunday, she appears at the door of the sanctuary in a silky animal-print cape. "I love y'all," she shouts, making her way through the crowd. She is wearing blue slippers and is surrounded by five attendants. While a woman in a feather hat, Sister Marcus, sings a high-pitched hymn, two attendants deliver a silver tray of bottled water to the pulpit, giving papal arrangement to the water glass and stack of napkins. Garrison makes her way up.

"Good things are coming our way," she tells the church. "I'm waitin' to sign the paper. It's just that I got to sign the paper before I can talk about it. We'll get buses and go see what God has given us. My lawyer told me, she said, 'Doctor Theresa, you don't have to tell the people nothin' until you sign the dotted line.' "

She pauses. "Can I take my time?"

"Take your time," several people in the congregation shout.

Garrison's husband has already told the congregation that they had found a possible new home for the church in Prince George's County. It is a big building on a big spread of land that cost \$13 million. He spoke matter-of-factly and courteously. No one had any questions. His wife's delivery is different, splicing in Jesus, Lucifer and serpents. Her audience is rapt.

"He suffered!" Garrison moans. "They knocked him. They threw stones on him. They looked at him like he was a nobody." By now she is weeping.

The worn tambourine rests on the amplifier, and the "T Street Flats" banner casts a faint shadow over the pulpit.

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