



West went the East End

Low-key apartment developer Franklin West leaves imprint all over Shadyside's victorians

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By Joyce Gannon, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Over the last four decades, Frank West has transformed shabby Victorian homes into hundreds of chic apartments in one of the city's toniest neighborhoods. But despite his vast holdings -- about 400 rental units in Shadyside and more than 300 in Pittsburgh's suburbs -- West is no Donald Trump wannabe.

Consider his company's Web site, www.franklinwest.com. The only reference to West is a photo that identifies him as part of the service staff. He stands with the rest of the maintenance crew, wearing khaki pants, a blue work shirt and holding a clipboard under his arm as if he's on his way to inspect a faulty furnace or leaky toilet.

"I don't recall a Christmas or a Thanksgiving without a call from a tenant about something that was broken. And I'd go along with Dad and hold the flashlight," said eldest daughter Caroline West, 36, an attorney who now works for Franklin West Inc. as general counsel. She and her husband, Antonio Castracani, a civil engineer, relocated to Pittsburgh from Washington, D.C., in February to become involved in day-to-day operations and eventually manage the company.

Not that West, 72, has plans to retire anytime soon despite a recent bout with cancer. "Retiring from what? I'd be bored to death." But, he admits, "I'm in the fall of my career. I have to either hire someone to run it or liquidate it."

Frank West came by the real estate business naturally. His father, Frank West, Sr., was a home builder in Pittsburgh's north suburbs during the post World War II construction boom.

West, Jr. was born in Squirrel Hill, grew up in Fox Chapel and attended Shady Side



John Beale, Post-Gazette

Frank West, his wife Sara, their daughter, Caroline West, and her husband, Antonio Castracani, in front their property at 513 Shady Avenue.

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Academy. After earning a bachelor's degree in architecture from Carnegie Mellon University, he went to Yale University for a master's in city planning.

He spent two years in the U.S. Army in jobs that included intelligence, aerial photo interpreter and paratrooper before returning to Pittsburgh to help his father build homes in Richland.

But the suburban environs didn't spark West's interest. "I was a fish out of water. I hated picking out wallpaper with suburban housewives. So I quit."

He then worked for three years for the Pittsburgh Regional Planning Association, a foundation-supported organization that designed urban redevelopment projects including the ill-fated makeover of East Liberty -- West said he wasn't involved with that endeavor.

The planning job also bored him, so West left to pursue full time a moonlighting venture he and his father had begun a couple years earlier: buying beat-up houses in the city and converting them into rental units for young professionals.

At the time, the eastern portion of Shadyside -- which West defines as the area that stretches east of Negley Avenue to Penn Avenue and is bounded by Fifth Avenue on the south and Ellsworth Avenue on the north, was largely in decline. "It was slipping over the edge. There were cars parked in front yards and stovepipes sticking out of windows."

But West saw long-term potential in the neighborhood, with its mix of large, formerly grand residences, turn-of-the-century Victorians and tree-lined streets. He also noted that it had strong community anchors including Calvary Episcopal and Sacred Heart churches, Mellon Park and the Ellis School.

The first property he invested in was a three-story, Second Empire-style home at 513 Shady Ave. that was built in the 1870s. An owner had added a sun porch to the front sometime after World War I, and when West bought the dilapidated place in 1962 for \$19,000, it was being operated as a rooming house.

He moved into the first floor and set to work gutting the house from top to bottom. The sun porch came off and West stripped the rest down to bricks, mortar and studs.

The final product included seven one- and two-bedroom apartments featuring high ceilings, hardwood floors, fireplaces, patios and balconies and off-street parking. Tenants, mostly young singles and married couples who worked for big corporations Downtown, paid about \$125 per month.

"It was the beginning of the yuppie era" when young, urban professionals were eager to live in the city, West said. Those units now command monthly rents of \$950, and the property is valued at \$243,300, according to Allegheny County property assessment records, though observers believe it could fetch well in excess of that.

When 513 Shady was finished, West refinanced it with a \$100,000 mortgage to get cash to rehab the house next door, at 517 Shady. Next came a restoration on Denniston Street and eventually, he expanded his holdings to about 65 buildings in Shadyside, including some contemporary-style buildings as well as Highland Towers, a 36-unit apartment complex

built in 1913. The occupancy rate among his Shadyside rentals is 98 percent.

During his first few renovations, West lived in each property until he finished it and then moved to the next project. He had completed a couple of buildings when he took a trip to London and met his wife, Sara, who was a flight attendant with now defunct airline Pan Am.

She recalls her early role in the business was to "clean the apartments, show the apartments and ride my bicycle to deliver lunch to Frank."

After the birth of her daughters -- West's other daughter, Rebecca, 35, is a curatorial assistant for the Plains Indian Museum at the Buffalo Bill Historical Center, in Cody, Wyo., but sits on the Franklin West Inc. board -- Sara West earned several degrees at the University of Pittsburgh, taught school and now works as a painter, helps interview new employees and also sits on the board of the family business.

The couple has lived in Fox Chapel since 1982, but Sara West said they would like to return to city living that they've done so much to shape. Indeed, real estate observers say West's early vision for the neighborhood and his staff's attention to services for its tenants established a standard other landlords and property owners worked to match.

"They were the pioneers in Shadyside. They set the market," said Gregg Perelman, principal and chief executive of Walnut Capital Partners, a Shadyside-based residential and commercial real estate firm that has developed upscale apartments and townhouses in Shadyside and Squirrel Hill.

Perelman called West's properties "the best product, the nicest living in Shadyside. ... They were something we sort of emulated when we got into the business" in 1997.

"His units are the best of the best," said Peggy Lampenfield, an agent with Howard Hanna Real Estate's Shadyside office.

Though Shadyside has a mix of single-family and rental units, West's developments, because they attract professionals and are meticulously restored, have bolstered the market, said Lampenfield. "He goes into a neighborhood and stabilizes it."

Though West never liked the suburbs as much as urban neighborhoods, by the 1980s, he was building new garden apartments in Oakmont, Gibsonia and Butler. "We couldn't find enough to keep us going in Shadyside," he said, noting that the suburban properties also are doing fairly well, with occupancy running at 85 percent.

Despite his suburban foray, West kept his eye on potential projects in the city, and two years ago completed construction of the Alder Townhouses, 17 two- to three-bedroom units with 2 1/2 baths, garages and car ports. Rents are about \$1,875 a month.

West doesn't have to look further than his tenants to chart the change in the city's economic base over the last few decades. During the 1960s and '70s, many of his renters worked for Pittsburgh's cluster of Fortune 500 firms, but he now depends on employees of the city's universities and medical companies to fill its properties.

His own staff includes about 20 employees working in maintenance, leasing and the corporate office on Shady Avenue.

Looking back on his 40 years as a developer and landlord, West recalls his first renovation project as his favorite.

"We really did things right there. And we spent too much money."

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