

## Franklin Square House renovation honors legacy

POAH and the architects at The Architectural Team (TAT) have spent the last six months renovating Franklin Square House, a historic brick and granite building in the South End of Boston with a fascinating history, as a luxury hotel originally and since the turn of the century, as affordable housing. POAH acquired the 193-unit building in June, 2012.



*The marble fireplace and original call buttons mounted on a podium grace the entrance foyer of Franklin Square House*

Built in 1865 as the 400-room St. James Hotel, it was designed in the French Second Empire style with wedding-cake trim and a dome. As the largest hotel in Boston, it earned the nickname "Boston's Grand Hotel" and played host to such prominent guests as Teddy Roosevelt, Diamond Jim Brady, the Prince of Wales and President Ulysses S. Grant. The building served as a hotel for only 14 years before beginning a new life as the home of the New England Conservatory of Music and eventually took on its permanent mission as affordable housing when it was converted to a dormitory for young working women in 1902. The building had its fifteen minutes of Hollywood fame too when its exterior was used as the façade shot of the fictional St. Eligius Hospital in the 1980s television series "St. Elsewhere".

Today, its proud tradition continues as it serves more than 200 low-income senior citizens, who are POAH's most linguistically diverse resident population, speaking Mandarin, Russian and Spanish. Much of the grandeur of the old building can still be seen in its spectacular community spaces, bas relief art on the walls, marble staircases, and exterior architecture.

Robert J. Verrier, FAIA, co-founder/managing principal at The Architectural Team, which implemented the conversion to senior housing in 1974, said the firm has again helped to restore this remarkable building so that it continues its important mission of providing affordable, quality senior housing well into the future.

Describing it as "a regal presence on Franklin Square," TAT first restored the Second Empire roof and dormers, and repaired or reproduced the cast stone corbels, quoins and window headers of the main façade. The artful interior layout preserved and incorporated significant interior spaces and details including the main entry foyer with its curved period staircase and, most significantly, Sleeper Memorial Hall, the former ballroom. The marble staircases and flooring were uncovered and refinished and interior fireplaces, wood doors and transoms were repaired and restored.

"Although care in restoring interior finishes and spaces such as these is a normal expectation of historic renovations today, such spaces were commonly considered disposable in 1974," said Verrier.. The firm's instinct to ensure their preservation displayed a vision that was not to emerge more generally in design consciousness for another ten years.

This second generation of renovations, much of TAT's work focused on accessibility upgrades to units in a building which serves a senior population. Other renovations include unit kitchen and bath upgrades,

replacement of exterior windows, masonry repair, reconfiguration of first floor amenity spaces including new kitchen and site furnishings and bathrooms, new fire alarm system, new boilers, new exterior entry ramp, repaved driveway and sidewalk, and new exterior plantings.

"Renovations in an occupied building can often create inconveniences but Franklin Square residents have been overwhelmingly supportive of these improvements because they understand that they will help ensure its status as affordable housing for years and generations to come," said POAH Project Manager Julie Creamer.

With this round of renovations, Franklin Square once again evokes the elegance and welcoming legacy of its history. Today residents enjoy parties, classes and cultural events in the beautifully restored spaces of Franklin Square, making it reminiscent of a time in its history when, by the thousands, the young working women of Boston came to its doors for friendship, comfort and community.

## A walk back in time at the Franklin Square House:

*"Walking in through the pillars of the massive stone entryway, a visitor entered hallways and rooms where everything was designed on a grand scale. Throughout the first floor, the ceilings, some of them domed, some partitioned, some decorated with paintings, were 20 feet high.*

*The entry hall was the center of life, with wide open spaces where dozens of people met and talked almost like Italian piazzas. The black and white marbled-tiled hallways gleamed. The style of the entire public area of the first floor was classically Victorian. Thick, dark velvet drapes fell from the top of the magnificent 10-foot-tall windows to the floor. The smaller rooms entered by archways or oversized dark wooden doors, had accent rugs on top of area rugs. End tables and conversational tables were covered with fringed shawls. Potted ferns, some as tall as the shortest girls, were scattered throughout. Substantial iron chandeliers with globe lamps were suspended from ornate ceiling fixtures high above.*

*Large wooden-framed paintings and enormous gilt mirrors hung on the walls and massive six-foot wide columns along the central walkway; smaller portraits were hung in the style of the era, dangling by velvet cords from moldings.*

*The most dramatic room was Sleeper Hall, reaching two floors high under an ornately painted ceiling and seating 476 in velvet chairs on its floor and curved balcony. At the other end of the building, drenched in light pouring through 12 of the extra-large windows was the dining hall. Dominated by massive, sculpted pillars and a dozen oversized chandeliers, 350 diners sat on carved wooden chairs at oblong tables of eight, served their meals on starched white tablecloths. Guests could join them for 25 cents a meal.*

*The rooms all had been designed and built with great attention to detail especially noted in the ornate yard-wide carved moldings which edged all of the ceilings. What had been a music store was now turned into a writing room with private desks. The reading room and library, across from the dining hall, offered leather chairs around heavy reading tables and giant floor-to-ceiling glass-front mahogany bookcases that ran the length of both side walls."*



- excerpted from The History of the Franklin Square House

photos: Preservation of Affordable Housing