

Homewood Suites Fruitville



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Ugly-duckling Site Grows into a Hospitality Swan

By Kevin McQuaid

For years, it has been known simply as "the eyesore."

Gray and unkempt, it was an ugly collection of large, derelict boxes on Fruitville Road, a fitting grave marker to an abandoned plan for an assisted-living center. But on Monday, it will open under a new name: Homewood Suites, a Hilton extended-stay hotel brand.

Though the renovation took three years and \$11 million, owner Merca Real Estate believes it succeeded in erasing the images of the forsaken structures that had once been home to rats, raccoons and the occasional homeless squatter.

"We did all we could to kill the modular look," said Eric Collin, the project manager for the hotel conversion. "We did whatever we could to make people forget the previous look here."

The 100-room Homewood Suites represents the first U.S. project for Merca, a company led by French immigrant Enzo Gagliardi and his cousin, Collin.

In Europe, the family specializes in converting shuttered factories into apartments.

"So this was a perfect fit for us and our know-how," Collin said.

Still, Merca faced numerous challenges after it bought the property in January 2002, some of which threatened to derail the project entirely.

Although the developer wanted to salvage the modular units, inside them Merca discovered unpainted drywall, exposed wiring, broken windows and unhooked plumbing.

Outside wasn't much better: There were nearly three acres of brown and barren dirt surrounded by chain-link fence.

The biggest hurdle, though, wasn't physical. It was the skepticism Merca battled from city officials, Hilton executives and even the project's architect.

At one point, Tim Litchet, Sarasota's building, zoning and code enforcement director, even condemned the property. Hilton officials shared Litchet's view.

"When they brought the project to us, I looked at it and said, 'Oh, well,'" Jim Holthouser, Homewood Suites' senior vice president of brand management, recalled. "I give them credit for coloring outside the lines, so to speak. This shows what's possible to developers across the country."

Architect George Palermo never did come around. He refused to put up a sign listing his involvement on the property, Collin said. Despite the early skepticism, the hotel renovation by general contractor R.E. Crawford Co. is a wonder of modern construction.

Today, the modular buildings have been connected and the gray, dingy walls covered with butter yellow paint and Venetian plaster.

The two-story lobby sparkles with chandeliers, blue- and yellow-checked carpet, murals and windows that look out to a new swimming pool.

The rooms, which will rent from \$105 to \$150 a night, depending on time of year, contain full kitchens complete with microwave ovens, refrigerators and dishwashers.

They also sport wood floors, granite counters, sleeper sofas and new fixtures.

To accommodate business travelers, the hotel will offer guests hot breakfasts, high-speed Internet throughout and a "welcome home" reception each evening featuring beer, wine and plates of pasta and other foods.

For Sarasota , the Homewood Suites represents the first new hotel to open since the 266-room Ritz-Carlton debuted in November 2001.

It will help reverse a loss of hotel rooms to condominium conversion, a trend that tourism leaders find alarming because they fear a decline in hotel-generated "bed taxes" will mean fewer marketing dollars, which could eventually shrink visitor numbers.

The Homewood Suites is expected to generate about \$150,000 in so-called bed taxes annually.

And with the improvements complete, Holthouser and Hilton are among those impressed, even awed, by the conversion. Earlier this month, the Fruitville Road hotel won "Best Conversion of the Year" during an annual Hilton gathering of some 4,000 franchisees.

"They've done an incredible job," Holthouser said of Merca. "Their project is a credit to the brand, and I know the community will be proud. I give them credit, too. They had a lot of vision and they were very creative. They thought what was there could be a high-end hotel, and they were right."