

Dance Yourself to Death

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Window on the world: Paul Tamburello and Stephanie Garcia are resurrecting the old Olinger Mortuary in Highland.

Marc Suda/ sudaimage.com

Aboveground, the Olinger Mortuary in Highland looks like any historic building under renovation: drywall, exposed two-by-fours, boarded-up windows, tools littered everywhere. The mortuary's history is masked. It's sunny here. Spacious. Peaceful, even. It seems so, well, not scary.

So when Paul Tamburello, co-owner and developer of Olinger's, suggests a tour down below, the idea doesn't seem too creepy. After all, he doesn't appear to be a serial killer. (Then again, they never do.)

But if basements, as a rule, are spooky, then basements of hundred-year-old mortuaries are *really* spooky. Climbing down the back stairwell, Tamburello points out where bodies were washed down, where the embalming took place. Where the dead lived. But it isn't until the crypt room -- a twelve-foot-by-twelve-foot box that once held up to 24 caskets and a couple dozen urns -- that the air really turns thick with energy, the kind that makes the hair on your neck stand straight up. Tamburello offers a peek inside the boiler room, then rescinds. "Nah, that'll scare the shit out of you," he says. Duh. Everyone knows that the boiler room is where stupid girls die in Krueger flicks.

But the property will be one helluva place to have a Halloween party once Tamburello is done converting it. He sees restaurants, retail, offices -- and nightclubs. A sort of macabre version of the Church. The Mortuary: Dance yourself to death. "I've fully expected someone to stop by and tell me how sacrilegious this project is," says Tamburello's partner, Stephanie Garcia, "but the neighborhood has been hungry for this type of change."

The mortuary has been a resident here for 113 years, ever since the Olinger family moved to Denver from Santa Fe in 1890 and began building its embalming empire. The Olingers started across from a brothel on the corner of 15th and Platte (location, location, location), but in 1909 they moved two blocks away and built the Spanish Colonial structure that now towers above I-25. Throughout the '20s, '30s and '40s, the operation burgeoned; chapels were added, and the building was expanded. However, as the population of northwest Denver became increasingly younger and competition from other funeral homes increased, Olinger's services were needed less and less. In 1999 -- after ninety years on the hill - the doors closed for good, and the 18,000-square-foot building was put up for sale.

Three years of failed deals later, Tamburello and Garcia bought the property for just under \$1 million and founded their company, Resurrection Properties, specifically to redevelop the mortuary. Tamburello has historically specialized in "bringing East Highland buildings back to life" -- remodeling phrases containing references to the undead seem to pop out with ridiculous frequency -- beginning with brokering the sale of the colossal Asbury United Methodist Church, which now houses the Ron Judish Fine Arts Gallery, and developing the Highland Flats. Garcia herself is a northwest Denver native who owns several commercial and rental properties within six blocks of Olinger's and who sold the Highland Bar last fall to make way for the über-urban Forest Room 5.

The two are hoping their newest investment will go the way of Forest Room, and they say that several "really experienced, well-known" club and restaurant owners have already shown "amazing interest" in the space, though they decline to name names. Of particular appeal, Tamburello says, are the main floor and the window-lined Boulder Street wing. By fall, the building, which they say is costing another million in renovations, should be ready for them to lease or sell space. Plans call for a combination of dining, drinking and dancing establishments spread out between the first floor and the basement, along with two business offices upstairs.

It will be a dramatic change from what was "a rat's nest of additions and a labyrinth of small, dark spaces," says architect Ted Schultz of Agency for Architecture, who is currently working with nightclub impresario Regas Christou on the redesign of Vinyl, the Church's interior renovations and Christou's new health club, Oxygen. "There will be big, wide-open spaces...so much opportunity. We're finally getting down to some great structural elements that will be really cool to work with."

Stuart Fox, who heads up Highland United Neighborhoods Inc., is happy to see the building being restored rather than torn down. After all, Buffalo Bill Cody's body was stored there for six months while Wyoming and Colorado were fighting over it in 1917. The body of Checker Smaldone, the head of the Denver Mafia, was prepared at Olinger's, as was that of his wife. In fact, over the past century, an estimated 45,000 people (famous and otherwise) have come through the doors of this north Denver landmark. And some of them, it seems, are still there. Just ask Drea Penndragon.

As a child, Penndragon didn't realize that all the folks that were visible to her were actually invisible to her friends. She would point them out, like a tour guide for the Dearly Departed Sightseeing Service. "There's a guy with a thing through his head...and ooooooh, there's one over

there without an arm!" she says while having coffee. Since founding Farrout Penndragon Investigations in 2001, she's investigated nearly one hundred buildings, private residences, cemeteries and outdoor locations throughout Denver. And guess what? She sees a whole lotta dead people.

When Penndragon and her team of eighteen investigators came to check out the Olinger's property, they unanimously determined that the premises were, indeed, haunted. The building, however, was classified "Friendly and Active" (as opposed to "Vindictive and Active"; see any of the *Amityvilles* for specific examples) and deemed "safe for non-investigators and newbies." Newbies? "People who have never been in a haunted place before," Penndragon explains.

Members of her technical and psychic teams work in tandem, with the psychics getting a feel for energy or temperature variations (Marco!), and the tech team recording the hot-spot data (Polo!) using microphones, temperature readers, an electromagnetic-field detector, assorted photographic devices and infrared video cameras -- because, as every five-year-old knows, all of the spooky stuff happens at night.

Reported in the "official official report for public release" were temperature fluctuations, whispering voices, the scent of fresh talcum powder and the smell of fresh cigarette smoke. Penndragon also noted that all of the energy was perfectly benign -- none of the investigators got dizzy or felt lightheaded, which is a sign of anger in a haunt -- probably because most souls were actually released elsewhere. One investigator even thought the remodel "may actually give them the freedom they've been waiting for."

So far, Garcia says, there haven't been any weird accidents or anything during construction that would counter Penndragon's assessment. But Schultz did get a little unnerved while watching the old crypt room being demo'd -- "I wouldn't want it to be me working in there!" -- and by the "weird vibe up in the attic. Way back, there's this hidden little room, and when we went in to do measurements, a couple people on my team were really creeped out and wouldn't go in there. I thought maybe it was a little girl's spirit up there." *Carrie Ann, is that you?*

Bob Hansburry, manager of Olinger's, which is no longer family owned but still operates other locations, dismisses it all as rubbish. "I've been in this business 35 years, and I've never seen a ghost. I just don't believe in them."

Apparently, local residents don't, either, since Highland has been one of Denver's most booming neighborhoods. There have been other sightings, though. "When the new condos went in next door, we started getting complaints about unloading the bodies out in the open, which we'd done for years," Hansburry says. "We had to start backing the cars in all the way so you couldn't exactly see what we were taking out." Lovely cadaver views are typically low on realtors' lists of selling points, but considering the new NIMBY-ness of north Denver, nightclubs may not be any better.

"Anything that serves liquor scares them," Fox says.

"People have had some bad situations in the past," admits Garcia, who says that she's only heard positive feedback so far. "It's human nature to be fearful of change. You know that saying about the Devil you know?"

The undead references just never stop.