

The Rockefeller: Once a homeless shelter, now a chic apartment spread

By Sarah Kleiner
The Virginian-Pilot
© September 18, 2015

NORFOLK

The name itself might be the most obvious paradox.

The Rockefeller, the newest luxury apartment community to open its doors in downtown, was a dilapidated former homeless shelter just a year ago.

The iconic building was constructed in the early 1900s as a YMCA facility for the Navy, largely on the dime of John D. Rockefeller, the wealthiest businessman of his time.

But it became a dark spot on a prominent street after Union Mission Ministries, which had used the building as a shelter, tried to sell it. A South Carolina developer had it under contract but left it in limbo for four years as it tried to raise money for renovations.

Photo: Rooms formerly used by the homeless under renovation (<http://media.hamptonroads.com/cache/files/images/1912951.jpg>)

When the deal fell through in 2013, Norfolk developer Buddy Gadams bought the building to add to his growing cache of chic downtown dwellings. Construction on the building began in August of last year.

Photo: Gadams inside The Rockefeller during construction (<http://media.hamptonroads.com/cache/files/images/1912941.jpg>)

The renovations aren't complete, but this week the first tenants are moving into an elegant mashup of contradictions.

On Thursday, the modish property manager walked in heels over dust-coated floors, side by side with construction workers in weathered jeans and hard hats.

Restored marble floors and historic murals are paired with stainless steel appliances and sleek common areas.

Art is everywhere - from the Corinthian columns topped by ornately carved capitals to the tattoos adorning the shoulders of the newest residents.

Chelsea DiCaprio, 24, and Jeremy Johnson, 31, both adorned with colorful tattoos, beamed as they stepped inside their one-bedroom apartment on the fifth floor.

Sure, they had to step past a massive scaffold in the lobby and wait for a worker to unlock the elevator - but that's part of the excitement for the couple.

"We were just really interested in this building ever since the day it was announced it was getting turned into an apartment building," DiCaprio said. "It had a really cool look that some of the newer buildings just don't have."

She and Johnson had been sharing a 495-square-foot studio apartment in the Metro, one of Gadams' newer additions to downtown. On Thursday, they upgraded to 687 square feet.

Johnson's commute to Field Guide a few blocks away will increase by about three minutes, he said. DiCaprio works full time for a refrigeration company and a few nights a week at the Birch, a craft beer bar in Chelsea.

They needed more space but didn't want to spend the extra money at the Rockefeller. The kitchen changed their minds.

The first thing you see when you walk into the apartment is a stainless-steel hood hanging over the stovetop, which separates the open living room from the kitchen in the back.

Johnson, who grew up in Hickory, loves to cook. He and DiCaprio were sold.

"You can't take it with you, so you might as well have a nice kitchen," Johnson said.

He leaned down and opened the hefty freezer drawer in "the nicest refrigerator he's ever had."

"All the ice cream is gonna go in here," Johnson said. "Can you tell I've lived in a field for most of my life?"

Sarah Kleiner, 757-446-2318, sarah.kleiner@pilotonline.com

Log in