

By Christi Elflein | Photography by Craig O'Neal

SCHOOL HOUSE ROCKS

Transforming old schools to the new cool

The front entrance of the converted John Gorrie Junior High School, built in 1923.



The South Jacksonville Grammar School, now The Lofts San Marco, is listed in the National Register of Historic places.

The Lofts San Marco

The Southside Grammar School was built in 1916, designed by students of famous architect Henry Klutho. Their designs included the best educational elements of the 19th century, including 14-foot ceilings, large classrooms and plenty of light and fresh air. The building served its students till 1971, then was used as a book repository for a number of years.

In 2001, Cesery Companies purchased the property and began their quest to renovate the building and create The Lofts San Marco.

The Cesery Companies' vision was two-fold. They wanted to convert the building into Jacksonville's first example of the live/work concept, while maintaining the building's historic architectural integrity. The first step was to place the building on the National Register of Historic Places, which Bill Cesery explains, "is there to entice you to spend money on doing a better job of renovating." And in return, if you meet their expectations, you receive tax benefits.

The renovations and restorations were extensive and included a new tiled barrel roof, refurbished single pane windows, and refinished oak floors. "We spent \$4.5 million on renovations," says Cesery. This according to Cesery, equated to \$900,000 in tax credits.

Today, it is evident that their hard work paid off. The building is beautifully renovated. It maintains its historic character, and those lucky enough to call it home cherish it. "People who live here, love it," says Cesery.

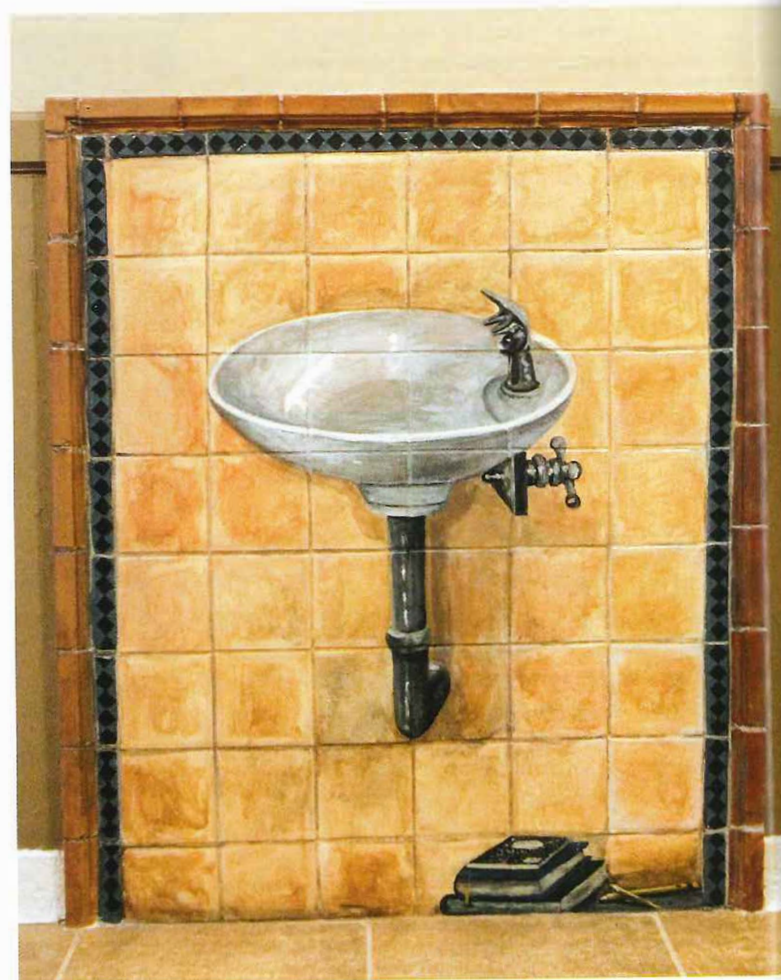
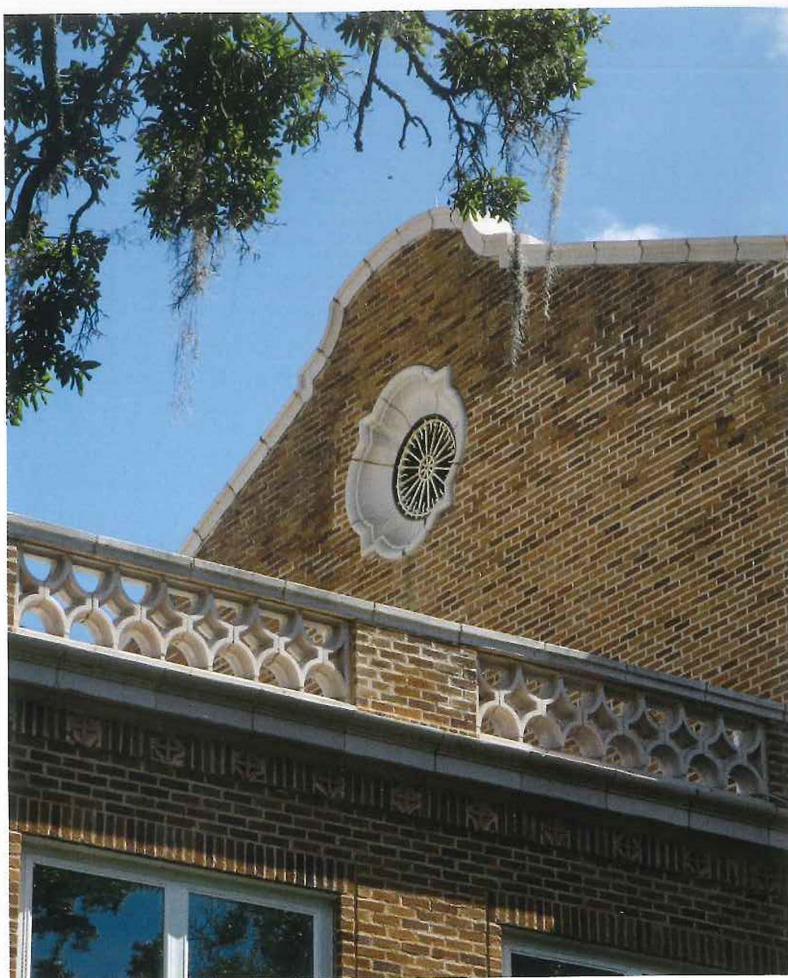
If you rent a place at The Lofts San Marco, you could hash out ideas for your business on a slate chalkboard where teachers once scribbled homework assignments. You could nap in the principal's office and not be in trouble. Then you could walk two blocks to Bistro Aix for dinner.

The Lofts' unique mix of live/work space adds to the coolness of the building. Of

Two of Jacksonville's oldest schoolhouses, the Southside Grammar School in San Marco and John Gorrie Junior High in Riverside Avondale, have two tales to tell. It's been decades since their school bells have rung, but history is continuing to be made in these architecturally rich buildings.

Their stories date back to the early 1900s, when they were built in prime locations within the neighborhoods that grew up around them. Today, their locations make them desirable for a mix of uses as they are located within walking distance to the chic shops and restaurants in some of Jacksonville's hippest neighborhoods. They are also key components of the continued revitalization of these communities.

Each of these schools was purchased by private land owners who saw the investment in preservation, and saved the buildings by adapting them for modern uses. The industry term is "adaptive reuse," which translates to taking old buildings and giving them a new purpose. Walking into each schoolhouse, you halfway expect to hear children giggling and see them running through the halls. The buildings themselves still hold much of their original character combined with contemporary design. They are prime examples of how historic preservation can serve as an investment in maintaining vibrant authentic neighborhoods.



the 38 units for rent, currently five are rented to businesses, including Studio 6 Hair Salon, Tiffany Manning's photography studio and Ruckus Advertising. One unit is rented to a lawyer who lives and works there.

A typical classroom was about 700 square feet with a 100-square-foot cloak room. By combining the two spaces, each loft is 800 square feet and rents for \$1,075 per month on average.

More information about the Lofts San Marco can be found at theloftssanmarco.com.

The John Gorrie

John Gorrie Junior High, standing proud on 3.5 acres in the heart of the Riverside Avondale neighborhood, saw thousands of students go through its doors between 1923 and 1997. Named for the brilliant Dr. John Gorrie, the man who officially invented the first air conditioner and the ice machine, the building sat vacant and neglected for over a decade. When Wayne and Delores Barr Weaver moved into their condo in Riverside Avondale, their evening walks often included a stroll by the then derelict property, where Mrs. Weaver would comment: "Why doesn't someone do something with this old school?" The beautiful brick building built in the Mediterranean Revival style was eye-catching.

"One day I saw in the local paper that the school board was going to auction it off," says Mrs. Weaver. "It was meant to be." One thing led to another, and in 2009 the Weavers purchased the 100,000-square-foot school.

Mrs. Weaver envisioned that saving this old school would be her legacy to Riverside, her new community. But she didn't have a clear vision for the project, and she didn't completely know what she was getting into. Before purchasing the building, the Weavers had only toured the building one time.

"I couldn't even fathom how bad it really was," Mrs. Weaver says. Looking back on the venture, she jokingly refers to it as a "project of insanity."

Clockwise: The original exterior details and wooden floors of the gymnasium of the John Gorrie Junior High; Tiled water fountain artwork replace the original locations of the fountains in The John Gorrie. The Lofts San Marco courtyard has many shaded trees, flowers and benches to relax.



Clockwise: Natural light fills the Lofts San Marco, like this stylish living room located on the first floor; The ornate portico of the John Gorrie; What was once the principle's office of the junior high is now a common area reading room.

Renovations were an extensive labor of love to save and restore the building's history and remediation of its historical pitfalls, including asbestos and lead paint. The end result is a building that no longer detracts from the neighborhood, but stands as a spectacular pillar of its continued revitalization.

What was John Gorrie Junior High is now The John Gorrie, a condominium with 68 residences. Walking through its grand front doors, visitors are greeted with a gallery of black and white photos that serve as a reminder of the building's past and a look into its future. The principal's office straight ahead has been repurposed into a reading room with modern amenities like Wi-Fi, yet complete with historical relics like a bench engraved by the Class of 1926. The juxtaposition of historic elements and modern amenities are woven into the design throughout The John Gorrie.

Classrooms with expansive windows have been converted into studios and one- and two-bedroom units. Townhomes have been carved out of the gym and the auditorium. About half of the units have been sold. But if you want to live on the auditorium's stage with its stunning refinished hardwood floors or in the middle of the basketball court with exposed brick walls and mammoth-tall ceilings, those unique residences still are available.

Prices range from the low \$100,000s to \$300,000. And the building's status on the National Register of Historic Places allows for property tax abatement for each homeowner through 2021.

Visit johngorrie.com for more information.

