



Building a niche in Buffalo's Elmwood Village: One of the 10 Great Neighborhoods in America

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Local and national evidence suggests people are willing to pay a price premium to live in a walkable urban place such as Buffalo's Elmwood Village. It represents a major shift in the way an increasing number of Americans, especially younger generations, want to live and work.

"There are still plenty of suburban buyers hoping to move back to the city," said realtor Jim Mack of Holcberg Ltd. "But the problem we face here in the city, especially the Elmwood and Allentown areas, is a lack of suitable inventory."

"People are moving back to cities for what they offer—legacy architecture and walkable neighborhoods with a diversity of places to go," said Buffalo commissioner of economic development, permit and inspection services Brian Reilly.

So what are these buyers seeking? "Walkable urbanism," places with convenient mixes of shops, interesting architecture, parks and entertainment. That is the formula University of Michigan urban planning professor Christopher Leinberger spelled out in his recent book, *The Option of Urbanism*. These are neighborhoods in which an individual can meet most every daily need by walking, from home to work to restaurants, services and shopping.

Last year, the American Planning Association selected Elmwood Village as one of 10 Great Neighborhoods in America "for its vitality, broad spectrum of cultural and social assets, and its commitment to maintaining high community standards."

Despite national financial difficulties, Elmwood Village-area homes are selling quick, oftentimes with multiple offers and final sales over the asking price.

"Demand for city living right now is more than it was five years ago," says 13-year veteran realtor Kristan Andersen with Gurney, Becker & Bourne. "People just want to live in the city for its diversity, culture, restaurants and theater."

High demand is spurring some new construction. Contractor Paul Johnson is one of the first developers to capitalize on the high demand for Elmwood Village living.

His three-unit town home project at the corner of Brantford Place and Potomac Ave. sold out at prices starting at \$400,000 before completion. The location is an easy walk to Elmwood Ave. shops, restaurants and caf  s.

Based on that success, Johnson teamed up with attorney Michael Ferdman and architect Karl Frizlen, AIA of The Frizlen Group Architects to form FJF Development specializing in residential and mixed-use projects. Each had been involved with the Elmwood Village Association and aspired to do a high-profile project on Elmwood. Their first development at 504 Elmwood Ave. opened in early 2007.

The \$1.5 million, three-story, mixed-use project replaced an older commercial structure on the site. The contemporary building includes nine apartments and 3,500 s/f of retail space occupied by Lu

Modern Classics, and it brought new life to what was a struggling block of Elmwood.

"We each felt a bit of frustration with some of the projects being proposed and built on the Elmwood strip," said architect Frizlen. "New development needs to blend in and match the character of the street, and a mix of uses adds needed density. We see it as a model for the community to follow elsewhere."

Frizlen, who resides nearby, said investment and redevelopment is needed to keep the Elmwood Village healthy. He also sees a need for additional residential development to bolster neighborhood shops and restaurants.

On West Utica St., just steps from Elmwood, the developers are pre-selling units in their \$5 million Elmwood Village Condo project. Four of the fourteen units have been sold in the four-story building.

The condominiums include a one-bedroom unit with 1,096 s/f of living space, two-bedroom units with 1,300 to 2,132 s/f, and three-bedroom, two-level units with 2,809 s/f. Units are priced from \$199,900. Work is expected to start when six units are pre-sold.

There are few condominium living options in the Elmwood Village. Baby boomers are aging and becoming empty nesters; some are opting to sell their large house to move back into the city. There are also more well-off singles and more double-income, no kids couples that find condominium living attractive.

"Older couples looking to move into the city and downsize are not interested in the mostly large, high-maintenance homes to be found in the Elmwood and Allentown areas," said Mack.

Andersen concurs. "We don't have enough of them, there is a huge demand. Many buyers are downsizing and do not want the maintenance involved with a home."

FJF Development is working on plans to revitalize the former KFC restaurant property at the corner of Elmwood Ave. and Bryant St. Their proposed new three-story building, currently under review by the city, will feature 4,300 s/f of retail space and enclosed parking on the ground floor. Twelve, two-bedroom residential units had been planned for the upper floors, but Frizlen says recent inquiries by office tenants may result in a change in the mix of uses in the building.

Johnson and Frizlen, working without Ferdman, are looking at the outer edges of the Elmwood Village for development opportunities as well. They have the former Catholic Academy School at 257 Lafayette Ave. under contract and plan to convert it into a mix of commercial and residential space.

The three-story, 1928 school building will be transformed into 20, two-bedroom loft apartments and 11,000 s/f of commercial space. Johnson and Frizlen are planting roots in the up-and-coming neighborhood. Each will relocate their offices into the building and Frizlen's wife will run a day care center there.

"Our goal is to reinvigorate a school that has been empty for nearly three years," said Frizlen. "We see the area close to Grant St. as coming back with an interesting mix of immigrants, younger families and Buffalo State College students. There's quite a bit happening there."

Near Gates Cir., Johnson and Frizlen are redeveloping a residential site at 759 Lafayette Ave. An existing home on the property was deconstructed by Buffalo ReUse and will be replaced with three townhome units. Two and three-bedroom units will range in size from 1,639 to 1,907 s/f, with prices from \$399,000. A carriage house at the rear of the property will be renovated and sold.

Johnson, Ferdman and Frizlen are carving an infill redevelopment niche in Buffalo's most sought-after residential neighborhoods. Frizlen is surprised other developers have not followed their

lead.

"We aren't trying to corner the market," he said, "We want others to follow our lead and invest in the neighborhood. Many developers just aren't interested. Financing infill projects may appear to be more complicated, but it really isn't."

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