

COVER STORY

Apartments 101

Old classrooms find new life as livable spaces

By Bethany Bump

There's a moment at the end of the season three finale of TV's beloved mother-daughter drama "Gilmore Girls" when high-achieving, bookworm daughter Rory is about to race off to her high school graduation party and her mother pulls her aside.

They're outside the hallowed halls of the fic-

tional Chilton Preparatory School, a prestigious school in a town not far from the fictional Stars Hollow, and doting mother Lorelai drags Rory back into the empty, palatial halls of what is now her alma mater.

"Wait, wait. Look around for a second. Notice?" Lorelai asks a clearly confused Rory.

After a pause, Lorelai divulges with a know-

ing smirk: "It's not so scary anymore."

"No, it's not," Rory says as the screen goes black and the credits roll.

What is it about an empty school? Once emptied of its teachers and principals and bullies and first loves and heartbreaks, there's something about the space that's unquestionably alluring.



Paul Buckowski / Times Union
A view of the community room inside the Livingston School Apartments in Albany.

Developers nationwide know the moneymaking potential of such nostalgic attraction by turning old classrooms into apartments while retaining original features like chalkboards, water fountains and classroom doors. They have cashed in on the demand for a bit of old-meets-new aesthetic touch.

It's hard to blame them, as few others see much use for big empty school buildings when school districts run out of bodies to fill them. And neighbors, certainly, welcome the adaptive reuse of such buildings that would otherwise invite blight and decay.

In Albany, the same story is seen in the old Philip Livingston Junior High, a beautiful and stately structure defined by a copper-green cupola and seated on a vast green lawn on the city's north side.

It graduated its last class of eighth graders in June 2009 and was sold a couple years later as students left district schools for the many charter schools popping up in the city. Several of those charter schools would close over the next few years, however, and enrollment would tick right back up — causing school board members to express regret at the sale.

Winn Companies, a developer with properties across the U.S., had the good fortune to snatch it up in 2011 and managed to turn the 1930s-era building that once housed middle schoolers into a living space for senior citizens.

"Old school buildings are really attractive, because of the high ceilings," said Ed Cafasso, spokesman for Winn Cos. The



Paul Buckowski / Times Union

Original banisters in the stairwell inside the Livingston School Apartments.

ON THE COVER

Photos by Paul Buckowski / Times Union

A view of the Livingston School Apartments in Albany. Inset, a view of the community room inside the apartments.



Provided photo

An artist's rendering of the finished renovations to Rotterdam's former Draper School, which will become an apartment building.

On the Web

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feature can be seen in the high-walled community room, for example.

In Rotterdam, where work is underway to transform the old Draper High School into loft-style apartments, developers looked past the broken windows, peeling paint and crumbling walls of a school that last housed teenagers in 1986.

They saw instead a historic and beautiful Beaux Arts structure, built in 1913, with original school plaques and detailing. They saw the possibility of tall ceilings, unique floor plans and oversized windows that would offer enviable natural light. They also saw a residential neighborhood that likely wouldn't welcome a large commercial project coming into the space.

"This is especially true at Draper — who wants a big boarded-up building or commercial use of that size in their residential neighborhood?" said Jesse Holland, who heads Sunrise Management & Consulting, the developers on the project.

Holland's company expects to start leasing lofts in early May for occupancy by late summer. When complete, the old school will have 110 apartments, some of which will feature original brick and beadboard walls reminiscent of an old classroom. One apartment opens up onto what was the old school stage. There is even a row of lockers that residents can use.

"For Draper Lofts, it was especially gratifying to be able to take a large, loved building that had turned into a vacant vandalized eyesore and return it to a usable feature of the neighborhood," Holland said.

His company recently did the same thing with an old Beaux Arts-style school in the Rensselaer County town of Sand Lake.



Photos by Lori Van Buren / Times Union

Above, a repurposed chalkboard outside the door of an apartment at Homeroom Lofts in Sand Lake, in a former school converted to loft apartments. Below, student lockers in one of the hallways.

That space opened last year as Homeroom Lofts, with 35 luxury units total. One unit is currently available.

Other long-forgotten schools in the Capital Region have received similar makeovers.

The former School 1 in Troy's North Central neighborhood debuted this January as School One Lofts, a complex featuring 28 apartments, high ceilings and oversized windows.

Troy's former School 10, built in 1898 and shuttered in the 1970s, was remade into School 10 Apartments in the early 1990s.

Schenectady's old Franklin School, built in 1907 and closed in 1974, was remade into Franklin School Apartments.



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