

Former Cleveland Athletic Club is reborn as luxury apartments

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Packy Malley was there the night they turned out the lights at the Cleveland Athletic Club: Jan. 1, 2008 — at the end of one last, wild New Year's Eve party.

"It was such a shame it closed," says Malley, a local music promoter and owner of Malley's Chocolates. "I joined in the early 2000s. I loved downtown and it was a great way to get to know downtown. By far it was the best club in town to belong to, as far as business contacts, as far as events, and the most important part was the people were over-the-top friendly. I formed a lot of great relationships there."

Still, Malley wasn't surprised when the century-old club for sports enthusiasts, the society crowd and downtown workers and their families, shut its doors at 1118 Euclid Avenue.

"You could feel it happening. The club had financial difficulty for a while and it could not survive in the downtown economy of the time. It's a shame it closed. I think it would be at capacity if it was downtown today."

The CAC closure wasn't surprising. What was surprising was how fast they shut the door after that party.

Champagne glasses were left on the tables, decorations on the walls, Christmas trees in the ballroom and clothing in the locker rooms, says Allison Burke, Marketing Assistant at J&S Management Company, Inc., on a recent tour of the former club.

"They thought they would come back and clean up, but

they never did," she says.

The iconic, Neoclassical building by architect J. Milton Dyer, who also designed Cleveland City Hall, sat empty for the next decade. As the roof rotted, water seeped throughout the building, warping the basketball courts and bowling alley, doing widespread damage. The legendary penthouse pool and ballroom fell into disrepair, the guest rooms and lounges gathered dust.

It was a sad ending for a space that had once been such an important part of Cleveland's social fabric.

But it wasn't the end.

The 15-floor building recently reopened as The Athlon luxury apartments. Gone are the bowling alley, basketball courts and ballroom — it's a planned shared workspace — but the dynamic downtown energy of the beloved building lives on, as does the original marble and woodwork and other elegant touches. And, of course, the legendary pool. (Though it is now 4½-feet deep, instead of 9.)

Where lounges and billiard rooms and 12 guest rooms once housed visiting businessmen and club members, there are now 163 one- and two-bedroom suites. Renting for \$1,250 to \$3,400 a month, they are attracting both millennials and empty nesters, says Burke.

SEE APARTMENTS, D4



The 15-floor Cleveland Athletic Club has reopened as The Athlon luxury apartments.

Kevin G Reeves



A \$66 million renovation, the apartments have a sleek modern vibe, and the public spaces, left and below, pay homage to the building's past. Photos by Kevin G. Reeves

Apartments: Building's storied history 'a major selling point'

FROM D1

"A lot of our younger residents hadn't heard of the CAC until they toured, but they are so intrigued when they hear about the history. It's a major selling point," says Burke.

Few downtown buildings have such a storied history. The club was founded in 1908 as the second club for athletic enthusiasts in Cleveland. Its founders included prominent early Clevelanders Charles Otis and Walter and Elbert Baker.

The club's permanent home on Euclid debuted in 1911. The gym, indoor track, pool, basketball courts and a bowling alley were all on the upper floors. The ballroom was on floor seven, with guest rooms, card rooms and lounges below.

At first it was just for "gentlemen," though wives and families could attend with members.

Through the decades, the CAC hosted many significant moments — including 1922 when Johnny Weissmuller set the world record in the 150-yard backstroke in the pool, and in 1923 when it hosted Cleveland's first indoor track meet.

But the CAC was most beloved for its social events: the annual New Year's Eve, Wild Game Day and St. Patrick Day parties in particular.

"Game Day was the chef's idea to attract men into the club who were hunters and fishers and sportsmen," says Erich Hooper, who worked as prep cook in the bakery in the '90s.

"We'd serve deer and pheasant and ostrich and bison ... just about anything you could get in the market. My task was to carve a 30-pound block of butter into an elephant."

But it was the St. Patrick's Day parties, which began in 1966, that Hooper remembers most vividly.

"St. Patrick's was always a nice time," he said. "It brought back a lot of members who loved the club each year. They would bring their families and watch the parade from out of the windows. It looked like the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. It was always such a positive thing to see members show up in force to support the city and the club."

Malley was a regular at the St. Patrick's Day parties.

"Those were legendary!" he says. "There was always a lot of great entertainment and food. It was the best party in town."

Malley joined CAC in his 30s for the same reasons men had for nearly a century: business contacts and camaraderie.

In its last decades, the club had been seeking to broaden its membership base, appealing to more women, minorities and younger generations.

Sam McNulty, co-owner of Market Garden Brewery and other Ohio City businesses, was one of the next generation Clevelanders who joined.

"A good friend's family at Cleveland Heights High were members of the CAC ... my buddies and I would tag along for the epic and rowdy St. Patrick's Day party every year," he says. "It was a blast! Then, a few years later while I was attending Cleveland State University, CAC ran a student discount membership and my older brother Paul and I signed up and were members for many years until it finally closed."

McNulty learned a few surprising things about the club when he joined, stumbling upon a clothing-optional, men-only diner near the locker room.

"It was in that diner that I learned that age and modesty are often negatively correlated!" he adds.

Erich Hooper just laughs when asked if men really dined au naturel. "I'm sworn to secrecy," he says.

Cleveland attorney Julie Juergens was one of the few female members in the early '90s.

"I joined mostly for the fitness aspect of it, though at the time the equipment was not that great. ... It was a beautiful old building. It was lovely and had history and my firm had luncheons there for years. Compared to club in the Marriott, which I joined later, it was gorgeous.

"There was a push to get women members at the time I joined, but it was still mostly a boys club," she says.

Juergens said this became very apparent at one Wild Game dinner.

"I was the only professional woman there. It was great and it was fun, but some of the entertainment was, let's say, more geared towards men. There were even chicken fights in the pool with women on the men's shoulders. I remember I was talking to (former Cleveland Brown) Hanford Dixon and he said 'you might not want to go there.'"

Still, Juergens' overall experience at the club was very positive, so much so that she held her 1996 wedding there.

"The catering at the club was great, and I loved how they set up events with separate cocktail and dinner and dancing areas. I loved the dark wood atmosphere and the windows overlooking the city. You couldn't get that anywhere else downtown. They had done so many events over the years, they knew how to do everything, so it was perfect."

Hooper says that although the CAC tried to change with the times, efforts to rebrand were unsuccessful in the mid-2000s.

"They were going through a recruitment drive, but it wasn't really taking off. The suburbs had taken hold and people were going home after work. Gyms had opened up across the country — and liquid lunches were fading."

The club belonged to a different era, he says.

"It was probably 99 percent white male businessmen who initially joined the club to work out and socialize around the bowling and swimming and activities, the fundraiser and benefits," says Hooper, who is African-American.

"I was sad to see it go down, but it didn't successfully evolve to go with the new times."

Still, he says the kitchen experience he gained there was invaluable.

"The opportunity the CAC provided was intensive skill training and team-building, it opened up a world of opportunities. ... And unlike a restaurant, the club viewed us as part of a family, they provided free parking and meals and clothing."

Up until the year it closed, the club continued to pour money into the building and membership efforts. Major — and short-lived — renovations in 2007 included a new aerobic studio and fitness complex, a Turkish bath, a family locker room and babysitting center. But it wasn't enough. The doors on the bankrupt club closed for good that first day of 2008.

They stayed closed until 2015 when the building sold for \$3.3 million in a sheriff sale to a group of investors, including the locally based Bobeck and DiGeronimo families and Ned Weingart. Under the management of Cleveland-based J&S, the building has undergone a massive, \$66 million renovation.

Making use of an array of private funding, federal and state historic tax-credits, tax abatement, a \$2 million loan from Cuyahoga County and bonds from The Cleveland-Cuyahoga County Port Authority, the club has been restored to its glory.

While the 625- to 1,500-square foot apartments, including some three-story units in the former gymnasium, have a sleek modern vibe, the public spaces pay homage to the building's past. In the ballroom/workspace, the ornately-detailed plaster ceiling has been fully restored, as have the marble walls and woodwork throughout. Besides the depth, the gorgeous blue-and-white tiled pool looks exactly as it did. Bold CAC logos adorn the elevators and walls, as do framed vintage black-and-white photos from the club's heyday.

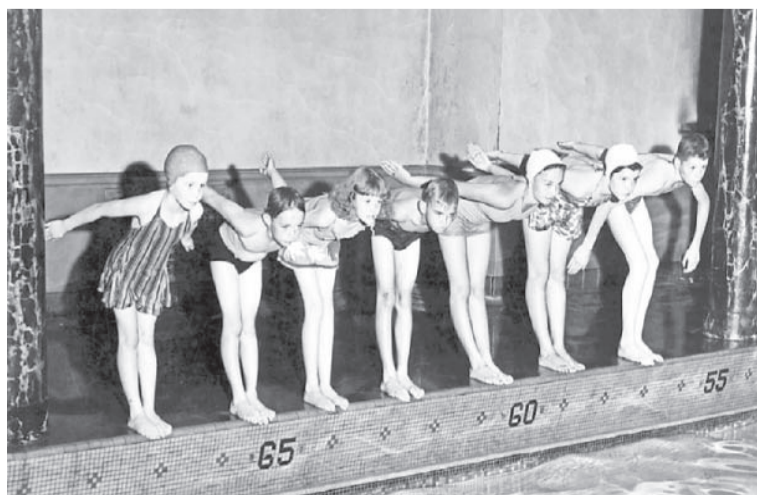
The Athlon celebrated its grand opening earlier this month and interest has been booming, says Burke.

"People love the amenities, the pool, the public spaces — and the history," says Burke.

For more information on The Athlon: theathloncac.com



The pool at the Cleveland Athletic Club was changed from 9-foot deep to 4½-foot deep, but other than the depth, the gorgeous blue-and-white tiled pool looks exactly as it did. Laura DeMarco, The Plain Dealer



Cleveland Athletic Club