

New Face, Same Family

BY LAUREN BOSTON





After five decades, one Midtown Atlanta community is undergoing a complete interior and exterior renovation—while remaining fully occupied.



The community's landscaping is complemented by Italian-style echo wood panels. Inside, soft-close drawers replaced many swing-out cabinets.



Plumbing pitfalls, a trip to Italy and a freak snowstorm sound like the makings of a travel misadventure, not a mass apartment renovation.

Unless, of course, you're Ansley Forest.

Built in 1962 and managed by Madison Property Management, the 269-unit apartment community in midtown Atlanta is in the midst of a complete interior and exterior renovation while maintaining occupancy. It's sort of like trying to cook Thanksgiving dinner while your mother-in-law is in the kitchen, looking over your shoulder.

In other words: It's a challenge.

However, the second-generation owner was determined to do everything she could to provide residents with a cool, modern, efficient and sustainable place to live while still preserving the feeling of the low-density, garden-style community her father had always loved as Ansley Forest's original owner.



Sue Mied

In keeping with the owner's philosophy, Sue Mied, Operating Partner of Madison Property Management, says the preparation began in November 2012 when residents were notified of

Ansley Forest's 2014 renovation. As residents' leases expired going forward, they were required to move or sign a non-traditional lease renewal that expired at the time of their building's depopulation. For some, this meant as long as 16 months.

The first building—Q—was depopulated in November 2013, with a schedule to empty an additional building each month until all 20 were back online in March 2015. Residents in the final building are expected to move out this December during the project's final phase.

In total, 71 percent of residents renewed in 2013, signing non-traditional leases that expired in conjunction with their building's scheduled depopulation. Of those who applied for a newly renovated unit, some elected to transfer onsite during the three-month process, while

others relocated to as far away as Arizona until their new residence was ready.

However, renovations came to an unexpected halt before they ever truly began. Although the property was fully permitted prior to inspection, the city required a full electrical upgrade after seeing the excessive amount of renovation work that was planned. It was a large, unplanned expense that changed the scope of work and led to several permitting delays.

"Buckhaven Construction Services had to reroute the electrical lines and increase the amount of drywall removal," Mied says. "It was quite the undertaking but it turned out to be a big plus because everything is now brand new."

But there's never just one problem.

When the construction team entered the second building and began moving walls for the new floor plan, they found sewer lines running inside of the bedroom closets. Yet another re-routing project.

Additionally, the city enforced yet another plumbing mandate requiring a distance of 10 feet between the washer and toilet. Mied says Ansley Forest had many plumbing problems in the past, but never one involving this technicality. Still, it had to be fixed.

One of a Kind

Despite the roadblocks—both anticipated and otherwise—that come with any renovation, Mied says the owner had a clear vision for the project. Namely, she wanted it to look like nothing else in the market.

"We have a unique property for the area—it's garden-style and low density," Mied says. "We knew we wouldn't win the game competing against mid-rise amenities. We had to do something else to set ourselves apart."

Although the unit interiors were being redesigned, Mied says the owner insisted on keeping the same, white appliances, largely because all of the ranges had recently been replaced.

Mied says it took a long time—and a trip across the Atlantic—to find low-emission cabinets that both complemented the



(Above) What was once a small galley kitchen, the renovated apartment space is now a cozy eating area. (Below) Ansley Forest has been an Atlanta staple for over 50 years.





Residents in the remaining unrenovated building are expected to move out in December during the project's final phase.

appliances and reflected the owner's eco-friendly mission. In lieu of stainless steel appliances and dark backsplashes, the design team aimed for an airy European look. Mied even spent a week in Arco and Riva del Garda, Italy, where the property owner is from, taking pictures of concepts to bring to Atlanta for review.

Project Designer Jerry Spangler, TSW, immediately saw the inspiration and created a vision for the community, embarking upon a renovation in which no detail was left unexamined. The team worked for weeks just to find a particular light fixture, for example, some of which were designed exclusively for Ansley For-

est. Mied says the new kitchen cabinets were custom made and imported directly from Italy, providing the biggest "wow" factor of all. Soft-close drawers also were installed to replace many swing-out cabinets.

"Italian cabinet designer Claudio Del Fabbro flew to Atlanta before building the

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The Ansley Forest pool prior to the current deck renovation; a renovated bathroom; and the Atlanta skyline.

cabinets to ensure the best use of space and design,” Mied says. “It’s all extremely durable.”

Such attention to detail spilled over to the exterior. Located half a mile from the Atlanta Botanical Garden, the 10-acre community took its landscaping cues from the nearby attraction. Mied says

they ultimately paired landscape designer Valerie VanSweden with Landscape Management Services to create unique grounds that bloom in all four seasons. The landscaping is complimented by echo wood panels also inspired by Mied’s trip to Italy that run vertically on the back of each apartment exterior.

“A garden-style community has a different type of community feel to it, and we believe Ansley Forest draws in lovers of the botanical garden and Piedmont Park,” Mied says. “We also chose local plants that require less water. The property owner was adamant about creating an exceptional, environmentally friendly



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In lieu of stainless steel appliances and dark backsplashes, Ansley Forest's design team aimed for an airy European look.

design to complement the buildings and characterize the property.”

Home at Last

With a March finish line for Q Building in sight, Mother Nature threw a wrench—or, more accurately, ice—into the schedule. Mied says two unusual snowstorms—one of which left hundreds of cars stranded on the side of many Atlanta roadways—created a combined two-week weather delay in the days leading up to move-in.

“Atlanta hasn’t seen two snow storms like that in a decade!” says Josh Mackenzie, Vice President of Operations, Buckhaven Construction Services. “The city was in lockdown. We had guys working around the clock because we had a deadline to meet. These are peoples’ homes and it was our job to deliver the product on time.”

Mied says Mackenzie’s team was amazing, with as many as 80 people working on 12 units to ensure the apartments were finished on time, and of the highest quality.

“The residents of those 12 units were in a building across the street, watching it all unfold,” Mied says. “They said it was so exciting to see the progress.”

On March 1, residents from Q Building moved out of the onsite units to which they’d temporarily transferred, loaded everything into a moving truck and socialized with fellow residents and staff before checking out their new homes.

“It’s almost like they were cheering on the contractors,” Mied says. “I bought barbecue for everyone; it was a big celebration that day.”

Each resident paired up with a staffer for their move-in inspection and were thrilled with what they saw. “Like little kids, showing off their new windows and fixtures,” Mied says.

In addition to a unique kitchen aesthetic, the renovated interiors include large Andersen windows and cellular blinds without cords, a feature typically only seen in high-end residential areas. All carpeting was also replaced with an easy-to-clean click vinyl that resembles hardwood.

The bathrooms also received a major face lift, and include modern vanities that are elevated off the ground and mounted on the wall. In the two-bedroom units, such as the one resident

Anthony Guidry moved into last month, the master bedroom was reconfigured to include a second bathroom.

Guidry moved from a studio to a two-bedroom townhouse and says his favorite feature is the additional bathroom. “This place has been around for a long time, like a little secret in Atlanta—but I don’t think it’s going to be a secret for much longer,” says Guidry, who has lived at Ansley Forest for nearly eight years. “These renovations are a great thing.”

Raising the Roof—and Rent

With a major makeover comes a major rent hike.

The starting rents are comparable to newer construction and increasing anywhere from 17 percent to 45 percent—or as much as \$445 more a month for current residents—over the non-renovated units. Mied says the rate jump plus a new, monthly water bill, initially concerned her.

“I realize it’s a big jump in rent. It doesn’t matter how much they like the renovations—the question is can they afford it?” Mied says. “But when the day came for our first group of residents to reserve a renovated apartment, we had a line forming at 5:30 a.m.”

Although current residents had to pony up with the rest of them, Mied says they were offered introductory rental rates that have since risen for prospective residents, as well as 30-day priority to reserve any of the new units before they were released to the general public.

“If our residents could re-budget and still afford to live at Ansley Forest, we wanted to thank them for sticking with us,” Mied says.

As of May, 25 percent of residents had already elected to stay.

“Initially, our residents were surprised by the new rates, but once they saw a mock-up of the renovated units, they couldn’t believe it,” says Robert Wilson, CAM, Property Manager at Ansley Forest. “It took the blow off of the increase because it seems like a fair price for what they’re getting.”

Wilson says those who have chosen to stay are also understanding of the process.

“The challenge is that about six months out from depopulation, we don’t always know exactly where a resident is going to



Large Andersen windows were installed in each apartment; the carpet was replaced with easy-to-clean click vinyl that resembles hardwood.

go, where we're going to transfer them onsite," he says. "It's the unknown, but most understand that we don't have all the answers."

Mied says her team is grateful for the resident loyalty.

"There's something to be said for the stability that the original resident base will bring to the community," she says. "Some of our residents have been here for 10 years and the property owner has an emotional attachment to people staying. She didn't want to kick residents out."

As for new residents, there's already a waitlist.

"Marketing to prospective residents is one of the easiest jobs I've ever had," Wilson says. "We've had some advertising, but a lot of word of mouth, and our lines have been out the door. I signed nine leases in one Saturday."

Midtown Makeover

Ansley Forest has not only remained on schedule—they've also stayed on budget. Additional money has been budgeted for pool renovations, including a new deck and place for grills. A clubhouse and a fitness center will also be built in September. The total renovation translates to \$46,000 per unit.

Prior to the renovation, Mied says infrastructure problems

caused NOI to drop substantially. Thanks to the owner's strong commitment to energy efficiency and reduced expenses, NOI is now expected to more than double.

"I've been at Ansley Forest for 15 years and I'm very familiar with the pains of an older property," she says. "The owner has provided the opportunity to address issues from top to bottom and reposition the property. It's grand to see the new product."

Even more important, residents love their new homes.

"I have watched the completion of the P Building from my balcony, and I must say, I am excited for the residents as they move in," says resident Renita Mosley, who was one of the first residents to move back into Q Building in March.

"The renovation of Ansley Forest has been truly phenomenal. I have watched a 52-year-old building full of history in the Atlanta community transform into a modern apartment community that will make its own history statement in Midtown for years to come as the 'place to live.' I am so proud to be a resident, she says. ■

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