

It was a tough row to renovate for building rehabilitator

trying to appeal to the soul of an artist

By Neal Gendler
Staff Writer

Jonathan Larson didn't expect row-house rehabilitation to be easy.

But misery took him by surprise.

"There were times," he said, "when I just would have liked to have doused it with 'scout water' and thrown in a match. "

Instead of using kerosene to turn his hopes to ashes, he's kept wrestling with the hulk on Dayton Av. in St. Paul that he and two partners purchased three years ago, scraping it bare and cloaking the bones in the smooth, spare flesh of contemporary styling. Three of the building's four units are sold and occupied, and the last is about done.

Completion would please no one more than Larson, the partnership's contractor, wrecker, builder and self-appointed sufferer.

"It's not that I hated it," he said. "It's just that it was such a continual hassle Almost everything wound up being a significant problem."

Frustrations ambushed Larson from first notion to the latest nail: clearing title, finding financing, remov-



ing the ruined interior, securing supplies, obtaining laborers, hiring construction workers, learning and teaching skills, selling the dwellings and finishing work around the occupants.

Not to mention that he's only been paid through spring 1976.

"There were three partners in this," he said, "me, Phil Miller and Judy Sevada. I was just supposed to supply the knowhow, and they had the starter money-\$35,000." They planned to rehabilitate the building, returning it from 31 rental rooms to its original four housing units, selling them at a profit.

"My contribution was that I would do the work," he said. "I was supposed to get paid when this fourth unit was sold. That hasn't happened."

Larson, 29, didn't expect to have

three birthdays on the way; the son of a small-town Lutheran minister, he'd collected his cash quickly and frequently during college summers with a building crew in Red Wing, Minn. He'd worked on about 100 houses, he said, but his own project "came as a complete shock."

"You can whip out a new house in four to five weeks," he said. "You can't do that, no way, no how, with rehabilitation," removed from oldstyle home building and even farther from modern assembly-line techniques.

"This rehabilitation's such a new sport, you can't even get good advice," he said. "I don't think there's four guys in the Twin Cities who know how ... and I'm one of 'em now. I certainly wasn't when I started

"I devised my own problem-solving

scheme: Determine the problem and find out fast how to learn how to solve it." That usually meant trying to find a publication. "There was no use asking anyone, because hardly anyone knows"

Larson's seven years at the University of Minnesota had left him with an urban-science degree specializing in housing. He devised a program for suiting housing to life styles, but no one was interested in making money with it. Then he got his own chance.

"I got this derelict put into my lap and I had to sink or swim. I think I swam all right Now that the pain's gone, it looks a lot better."

It should. Larson's labors have produced four sleek units of inner-city chic that support his theories and market research about the desires of the affluent, professional participants in the trendy trek back

into the city. In a summary of the project, he described those desires as:

"Easy maintenance, space for entertainment, space and light for indoor plants and reasonable consumption of energy."

The partners commissioned St. Paul architect John Rova to design interiors to those parameters, the results bear no resemblance to the sort of living spaces associated with Ramsey Hills last-century ambience.

Inside, the Dayton Ave. row houses are a study in white bare-wall-modern: two 2,000 square foot center units with dramatic, three-story dining atriums beneath overhanging balconies; two 2,400 square foot end units with two-story dining atriums; multiple bathrooms; kitchens with eating areas, new fireplaces, treated pine

decks across the rear of the building, and private sun spas.

"The thing was well conceived," Larson said. "It looks like it would appeal to the soul of an artist, but when you look closely, you see it would appeal to the soul of an engineer." His atrium, for example, has a temperature gradient of only two degrees in its 29-foot height, he said.

Larson's home has some of the more elaborate touches, including a kitchen with custom designed, hand-built teak cabinets. The dining atrium has three windows—one for each floor and planter-box balconies that protrude further as they rise, like those of San Francisco's Hyatt-Regency hotel. Outdoors and indoors blend, light streaming through three stories of south windows and plants mingling with wood on the north.



His first floor also has a small living room overlooking Dayton Av. and a fireplace. There's a redwood paneled half-bath and a teak-and-glass hutch hiding a wooden beam between the dining room and kitchen.

The second floor has a master bedroom overlooking Dayton Av. out the front and the atrium through a 12-by-6-foot opening in back, at the end of the bed. In a moment, Larson can change day to night with oak slats shutting off the interior and exterior windows. The atrium fills the center of the second floor. Behind it are a bathroom with yet-unfinished shower, and a small study.

The top floor has a bedroom with a dormer window overlooking Dayton Av., a hallway past the atrium, a dressing room, a door opening onto the sun deck and a bathroom. Inside the bathroom is one

of Larson's mistakes, the sole relic from the building's former splendor-turned-squalor: a footed bathtub.

"I didn't know that until you get all the junk out, you shouldn't even start rebuilding," he said. "A standard problem with people doing this is that you try saving things that you shouldn't try saving-like a footed bathtub I don't know how many times I moved it.

"Get the junk out at very first; otherwise, you end up moving it around from place to place. We could have put in a gold-plated footed bathtub if you count the time we spent moving this one."

Aside from the tub, there's nothing inside above the stone foundation to suggest that the brick-and-stone building is 74 years old. Larson doesn't think that's out of tune, even in a neigh-

borhood whom restoration is esteemed.'

"The first guy who did this was a modernist," Larson said. "I'm sure if he came back from the grave, he'd be happy He was a fellow by the name of Louis Lockwood, at one time an editor of a publication called *The Western Architect*, kind of a prime organ for the early prairie school movement.

"While we were initially quite disappointed there wasn't a lot of gingerbread and a lot of things that supposedly make old houses nest to save, eventually I became very impressed with the work this fellow had done."

"There weren't any major structural problems. The walls were tip-up walls--the kind you see done now. It went up in a hurry, I'm sure. The lack of gingerbread was a result of prairie-school architects deciding

that all of that Victorian gingerbread was decadent.

“When this went up, it probably was the most modern building around I’m sure it was very

avant-garde. There was a picture window on the second floor, for example ... that doesn’t impress anyone until you realize they didn’t return until the 1950s. He was 50 years ahead of his time.”

Lockwood, who left other examples of his work around Crocus Hill and St. Paul, died at 40 in 1905, on his first wedding anniversary, Larson said. The Dayton Av. rowhouses, built a year earlier,



barely survived decades of murderous neglect.

By 1975, when Larson, Miller and Sevada thought of bringing the building back, it wasn't even sufficient for a slum. It had been vacant for five years, had a small fire, and the wood was decaying from leaks in the roof.

"It was absolutely dead," Larson recalled. "Orders were cut to tear it down. Some bureaucrat pigeonholed the order--he should get a medal, but if the city found out, he'd probably get fired."

Once they'd decided they wanted the place, Larson said, they had to struggle to get what they needed: the building, the bodies and the money.

After months of haggling loan refusals and bureaucratic delays, the partners located the last of a

stream of owners; In a closing ceremony so complex it filled three hours, they took possession of a wreck.

"We went ahead even though the judgment on that was probably not so hot," he said. "The shell wound up costing \$25,000, and I'm not so sure that was a good deal. If it had been \$1, it would have been-maybe."

The roof was a sieve, most windows were broken and the interior was filthy, with cracked, discolored, peeling and foul-smelling walls, buckled, stained floors and unspeakable bathrooms. Trash in some places was waist high.

"That gave us an advantage," Larson said, "because we could proceed in the order that construction should proceed. We didn't have any out-of-sequence

problems that you have when you live in it. You couldn't live in it; it was demolished.

"It a house is livable and you can move in, there's probably less to do to the place-but it you're doing it a room at a time, you're always living with a mess, plaster dug in everything...

Lucky for them they had somewhere to live; financing took much of the next year.

They'd gone ahead after assurances by the St. Paul Housing and Redevelopment Authority (HRA) that there was "plenty of money for rehabilitated," he said. Then he hired the architect and, after the closing, began ripping out the debris with recently dried-out laborers from a neighboring halfway house. They hauled out more than 1,000 cubic yards of trash.

"Then it became rapidly apparent that the HRA had no way of getting us the money," Larson said. "We were developers, not owner-occupants. We were running out of money and weather in the months the HRA had our plans. We'd started in July 1975 and had a long beautiful fall, but we had to get a roof on. We did that in January 1976, but our money had expired.

"Then we got the incredible news that to get money from private sources, we'd have to get mortgage commitments and find buyers." Money was tight anyway because it was spring 1976, when the state's usury law was being debated.

Larson produced a sales booklet called "Dayton Ave. Rowhouse," subtitled, "House of Eleven Gables," featuring it as "the ideal place for two people to live." In

retrospect he said, "We were trying to sell this piece of junk."

The partners finally got two commitments, and Miller decided to be a third.

"We tried to parlay that into a construction loan," he said. "We could as well have been asking for the world.

"Try when you're 26, walking into a bank and saying: 'What I'd like today is a couple hundred grand.' We decided to go sequentially," building and selling a unit at a time. The money started to come through after Miller's father posted some bonds against a loan, Larson said.

"By now, we'd made a bunch of commitments we hadn't time to keep." For example, a cellist who'd bought the first unit was to move Sept. 1, and it already was July 15.

Larson had six weeks to do major construction and subcontract plumbing heating, electrical, masonry and sheet-rock work.

"It was a madhouse," he recalled. "We had 15-20 guys in there at a time. We were in real trouble. We'd got \$50,000 when we needed \$200,000," and couldn't afford journeymen.

"We had a lot of willing workers, but I had to show them how to do these things. I knew how and figured because they were willing to work, they knew how. In their defense, I'll say they picked it up fast." But they'd taken on other work during the low activity when the trio was battling for a loan, "so I had only part-time workers. I put in 16-18 hours a day."

The cellist's place got done the worst way—around him and his furniture. Larson started on the

unit he'd picked for himself and moved in Feb. 15, 1977.

"I basically hadn't taken a deep breath since the 15th of July," he said, "but by now I'd matched the tools to the skill levels of the workers and had regular materials delivery.

"Then I learned that Phil had to be in by the first of April. I had six weeks again.

"You know something? We did it. By that time, we were smoking along."

They began on the fourth unit, progressing until October, when the buyer dropped out. Work diminished and the crew drifted off. Larson turned back to finishing his home, especially the kitchen, which was scheduled for a friend's Christmas party.

"The hutch had to be built, the cabinet fronts weren't on and there were trim pieces missing all over the place," he said.

He finished in time, but was worn out physically and mentally and fled to the Bahamas for January and February. He returned to jobs on other houses and finally the fourth unit, which he described this month as 96-percent completed.

He figures he's put around 5,600 hours into the project and hired another 3,500. For 8,800 square feet, that's just over an hour a square foot at a cost of \$25 a square than the cost of new construction. The trio lost money on the cellist's unit, he said, because of rising material prices.

"There were a lot of times I wished I'd done this with a new structure," Larson said. "There are a lot of limi-

tations" in old buildings where structural elements are pretty well fixed. Windows, for example, come in a variety of sizes hard to fit with, new things like combination units.

"Ceiling heights aren't standard," Larson said. "We wound up with six ceiling heights per unit, a sheet rocker's nightmare": 8. 1/2 9, 9 1/2, 7 feet, 10 inches and either 25 or 19 feet in the atrium.

What kept him going, he said, was his ability to read blueprints.

"All those dank days when we were fishing plaster dust out of our nostrils. you could look at the plans and say, "Hey, this is going to be beautiful."

"It was the nonconstruction headaches that bothered me the most," he said, "dealing with lawyers and banks." He said government programs and banking conservatism

inhibit rehabilitation.

“Government agencies must realize that most of the people who are moving back to the city are white, middle-class, well educated, well traveled and young,” he wrote in his summary.

“Whether they are the victims of creeping nostalgia, aging revolutionaries who cannot save the world but will settle for a neighborhood, visionaries who believe that a tight European-style urban milieu is a necessary solution for the impending shortage of energy, or a combination of all three, they are not minority poor who want that symbol of the American dream—a house in the suburb. Rehabilitation is a middle-class movement.”

His efforts are an example; “Even though the interiors are contemporary they retain the essence of

the older homes in the neighborhood while providing the kind of dwelling that fits the life styles of today’s households

Larson said he kept going to prove a point, more than anything else “that we were building the wrong kind of housing in this country, that there were alternatives, that multiple housing need not be a pain in the butt.”

Perhaps not for the occupant but for the self-rehabilitator, it’s a lot like, childbirth.

“After a while, you sort of say, ‘That wasn’t so bad, so why don’t we do this again?’” Larson said.

“But at the time, it was like, ‘You’ve got to be kidding me.’”

Sept. 3, 1978
Minneapolis Star and Tribune