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Physical Graffiti

by Debra Tantleff

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Roseland Property Co., a residential and commercial developer headquartered in Short Hills, NJ, purchased the Vail Mansion in Morristown about four years ago. Working closely with local and state public officials, Roseland intended to restore the mansion, originally designed and built by Theodore Vail, the first president of the American Telephone and Telegraph Company (AT&T) and chief architect of the Bell System, and incorporate it into a brand new luxury condominium residence. The Residences at Vail Mansion would be a major part of the revitalization of this historic community.

Contractors for Roseland prepped the area around the marble façade of the once-opulent 100-year-old home.

However, everything came to a screeching halt when workers from the construction manager, Belle Construction, LLC, showed up for work to find the mansion covered in graffiti.



Fencing and other signs of construction had caught the attention of graffiti artists, who wasted no time in tagging the building's marble façade in bold reds, greens and blues with a smattering of black mixed in for good measure. It covered about 20 percent of the entire surface. After sitting unobtrusively vacant for more than a decade, the mansion was defaced virtually overnight.



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A lot was riding on this project. Careful attention needed to be paid to adhering to historic preservation standards while at the same time meeting modern zoning and construction codes. Historic architect David V. Abramson, AIA was charged with making it happen.

"The moment the fence went up, that was an invitation to make a mess," Abramson said. "It was tagged within a week of the fence going up. The first idea was to wait until the exterior goes on, but I felt it was important to get the graffiti out sooner rather than later."



Removing the graffiti was only part of a larger \$4 million restoration to the building and associated grounds and war memorial, which resulted in the great lawn being refurbished for public use. Abramson brought in Lime Contracting Corp. of Jersey City, NJ, a specialist firm, to see what they could do about removing the graffiti.

Sandblasting and power washing is sometimes used to remove graffiti, but is not typically used in historic preservation projects because of the irreparable damage the high water pressure would cause to an aging, historically significant surface, according to Abramson. Trained preservation professionals frown on that practice. Even if sandblasting or power washing were used, traces of the bold colors would likely remain.

A more commonly used method is chemical treatments. Under the watchful eye of Abramson and officials from the New Jersey State Office of Historic Preservation, Lime Contracting tested a dozen different chemical treatments in varying strengths and application methods over the course of two weeks, but to no avail.



The particular treatments they tried involved applying a paste left to work for hours or days, depending on the type, and then peeled or scraped off. The reason for using this method was so the paint is contained for disposal and does not run off with the water during

removal. Further complicating the problem was the multitude of colors involved. Some removal methods are more effective

on one color than others.

"We didn't find any that was fully effective. Part of the problem was the porosity of the stones and it was worn," Abramson said. "One remover worked with the blue, but not with the red and green."

The project seemed at a standstill, until someone from Lime Contracting mentioned a new cleaning method they heard about called The Farrow System that had been developed in England, but that they had never tried. Abramson asked an English colleague about the method, who confirmed it was a legitimate product gaining popularity in Europe.

The Farrow System is essentially a method that adds heat to the power washing process at very low water pressures, using a volcanic stone media that is less abrasive than other media, is environmentally friendly and makes for an easy cleanup.

Nigel Farrow, a 47-year-old boater from Norfolk, England, discovered the method while researching an effective way to clean and remove the finish from boat bottoms. Adding heat to the power washing process, he said, causes the volcanic media to line up and shoot out like a million tiny darts, picking off the paint and then disintegrating, causing minimal or no damage to the stone.

"Imagine that you're holding a box of matches open in the palm of your hand. That one is cold (water). Tip that box upside down and the matches fall down on the floor all over the place," Farrow said. "When you blast cold, you create friction, drag. With heat, you get free flow – no friction, so what's going down the hose is matches all in a line."



In the meantime, Roseland had selected Paragon Restoration Corporation, a Kenilworth, NJ firm specializing in historic preservation and restoration, to complete the main restoration work. Paragon has worked on such prominent East Coast projects as Ellis Island and the Franklin D. Roosevelt Mansion in Hyde Park, New York. Owners Michael and Matthew Papio, father and son respectively, were skeptical when they saw the graffiti.

"We couldn't see this coming out where this would be an acceptable outcome," Matthew said. "Graffiti finds its way into

the paint...these stains are well into the stone. You need to dig them out and marble is a soft stone that is very porous.

A chemical agent would burn the stone and make it very brittle.”

The Papios rented one of several compressors of varying size outfitted with The Farrow System, essentially self-contained units that add heat, mix the media, almost everything except the actual spraying. The Roseland team used a Farrow 60, a skid-mounted unit with an onboard water supply and a 20HP Honda gas engine air compressor. The unit fits in a standard 6-foot pickup bed.

Although the unit can spray up to 100 psi, it can be effective at 50 psi. This is significantly less than the 1,500 psi typically found on standard power washers. Farrow says it’s his method of adding heat that makes this possible.

Once they obtained the machine, the Papios fed bags of media, which Farrow calls Green Clean, into the machine where it was mixed with water and heated. The Papios worked slowly, spraying about a 2 square-inch section at a time.



“It’s a painstaking process. Depending on the stain, you may need to go over it once or twice with the wand and modify the stream a little bit,” Matthew said. “You can clean five times the area compared with the usual chemical method.”

It took about half a day to complete the entire job.

“It worked beautifully...it did more than just clean it. It left the integrity of the stone,” Matthew said. The successful removal of the graffiti cleared the way for the project to proceed. The Residences at Vail Mansion includes 36 luxury condominiums with private, gated parking adjacent to the historic mansion, which has been fully restored to its original appearance.

Debra Tantleff

Debra Tantleff is vice president, development for Roseland Property Co. She manages over \$500 million in active development for Roseland, including over 500 residential units, 100,000 square-feet of retail and two parking garages. She is involved in every aspect from land acquisition, to construction management to sales and marketing. For more information call (973) 218-2300. For more information about the Farrow System, go to www.farrowssystem.com. For more information about David V. Abramson & Associates call (973) 623-0300. For more information about Paragon Restoration Corporation call (908) 216-8122.

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