

Building on the echoes

When a developer set out to convert an historic factory complex into luxury apartments, they insisted on embracing its industrial past in the most creative ways – and selected O&G client Eric Rains Landscape Architecture to make re-use of rescued elements in an inventive, practical outdoor environment.

This fall Eric Rains and his design team wrapped work on the Corsair Apartments, an upscale amalgam of history, thoroughly modern amenities and clever design.

This urban parcel in the East Rock section of New Haven had been many things before its current reinvention: the Elm City Dye Works and Steam Laundry, factories that turned out cigars, carriage locks and rifles, and most famously during its WWII incarnation the manufacturer of big aluminum propellers for Corsair fighter planes.

For its developer, these industrial echoes from the past had to be woven throughout the project. A flatiron from the 1800s laundry is a handle to a large sliding barn door, itself made from arching, weathered boards gleaned from the old factory buildings. Metal-mullioned glass walls that once brightened factory floors now separate office spaces. Arching slices of steel that were roof trusses hover above a large rooftop terrace.

Commissioned works of art by New Haven artists enliven the exterior, entrances and common areas at Corsair. Much of the work pays homage to the industrial past of New Haven and the manufacturers and service companies in this rich site's history.

Tasked with designing all of the landscape that rings the buildings, Rains' particular focus at Corsair was the half-acre central courtyard, once a factory floor that rang for more than a century with the sounds of men, women and machinery.

There is a refinement and cordiality about Eric Rains himself, a thoughtfulness in his choice of words and a ready smile that speak of his upbringing in the deep South. That same genteel essence flows through his design studio and is translated into his work.

The courtyard is relaxed, adaptable, diverse and inviting all at the same time. A bocce court lies next to a ring of rocking



BACKGROUND The F4U Corsair fighter plane flew off aircraft carriers with a 1 under repurposed factory trusses; outdoor movie theater with concrete frieze

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The impossible takes a week, ten days at the most."

REX BEISEL, CHIEF ENGINEER OF CHANCE VOUGHT, MAKER OF THE F4U CORSAIR, 1939-1952

chairs surrounded by wispy Stewartia trees. A hammock ranch rests beside an outdoor theater, with its green lawn ideal for blankets and folding chairs. There is a perfectly round, kelly green gathering spot with Adirondack chairs tucked under trees and behind rolling mounds. A communal fire pit blossoms out of a native boulder. A wide, articulated glass door resembling an outsize garage door raises to open the complex's main function room to the outdoor spaces. The pool area has abundant mingling space and four cabanas for relaxing, already weathering to blend with the grey apartments that rise behind them. All in under an acre.

And as Corsair's buildings ooze history purposely, the landscape Rains and his firm designed partners with the same spirit. Friezes pulled from the old factory decoratively anchor the base of the outdoor movie screen. Stone stepping slabs of differing pale greys, some with ghostly traces of scuffed paint from their previous lives, are set into the soil to define entries. An abstract wooden boat floats above a secluded gathering area, suspended from wooden masts by guy wires, speaking of New Haven's historic connection to its harbor.

The team that converted Corsair from neglected and run down into relevant and energizing has a remarkable chemistry. The creative business that he is in, Rains affirms, is a great deal about this kind of chemistry. There is a collaborative spirit not only among his own team of licensed practitioners, designers and support personnel, but with clients and suppliers at Corsair. One is reminded that this same cooperative spirit must be an echo of the drive that was here as they turned out fighter propellers as quickly as they could for two wars.

In the execution of their creations at Corsair and dozens of sites around the state, Rains and his firm have partnered with O&G's Earth Products Showcase repeatedly as an extension of their team. Because of the breadth of materials O&G presents and the technical knowledge of products and processes that O&G staff can provide, Rains and company are comfortable relying on them for their upscale projects. They also know that the materials they specify will arrive at their sites when they are promised.

"Our working relationship with O&G has been exemplary. Responses to our questions and needs have not only been timely but thorough. With this level of service, we're able to respond to our clients' needs in the same manner."

It's another echo of the drive and skill practiced here by Corsair workers and thousands before them. It is what the owner calls a "spirit of can-do ingenuity that lives on in every detail." ●



3-foot-tall aluminum propeller manufactured at the site. LEFT TO RIGHT, TOP TO BOTTOM Eric Rains; poolside cabanas; fire pit in a native boulder; rooftop entertaining area; salvaged factory trusses; rocking chair nook; salvaged factory trusses lead to a secluded gathering area; stylized boat hull suspended from wooden masts above that area.