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In a fifth-floor Trace Lofts condo with a view of downtown, developer Ted Schroth, left, and Edward Kringsman, of EK Real Estate, talk about the building's development. Schroth had to put layers of new materials on top of old wood floors to muffle sound -- and then, to preserve character, put new floors made out of old wood on top. (Grant M. Haller / P-I)

Capitol Hill moving forward -- but preserving its past

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By AUBREY COHEN
P-I REPORTER

Anne Michelson spoke for many Capitol Hill residents when she complained recently about the loss of charming old buildings in the neighborhood.

"At this point, I don't think anything should be torn down," said Michelson, who lives and owns property in the neighborhood, at a forum sponsored by Capitol Hill Housing. "I think we should preserve everything."

A few minutes later, it was Maria Barrientos' turn to talk.

"I guess I am the enemy," said Barrientos, a developer with several Capitol Hill projects, including an apartment building that displaced the well-known gay bar Thumpers'.

But developers such as Barrientos have also started adapting some old Capitol Hill buildings to the neighborhood's new, denser reality. It's a way to keep the charm while accommodating growth, the developers say. But they also say working with old buildings is more expensive and complicated than building new, and the city isn't making it easier.

Barrientos plans to add three floors of apartments above a two-story concrete building erected at 1205 E. Pine St. in 1910 as an auto dealership.

"The highest and best use of that property is to tear the building down and build new," she said after the

forum.

But older buildings help preserve the neighborhood's character and charm, and neighbors want to see them stay, she said. "The more a building fits into the neighborhood and is embraced by the community, the more successful we think it's going to be."

A couple of blocks south of Barrientos' building, at 12th Avenue and East Madison Street, developer Ted Schroth is overhauling an old three-story triangular warehouse, adding two floors and erecting a new building next door to create Trace Lofts, which will include 142 condominiums and six retail spaces. The building dates to 1919 and has been, among other things, a moving company warehouse, athletic supply store, Tibetan monks' home, home furnishings store and warehouse for vintage sewing machines, according to the developer.

"Saving this thing is the right thing to do," Schroth said. "You see a lot of the old stuff getting torn down, and they just don't build stuff like this anymore."

Across the street from Trace, developer Liz Dunn renovated the historic Piston and Ring building into new restaurant space and is erecting new lofts and retail space.

Adding floors to old buildings helps meet the city's goal of accommodating more residents in existing urban centers, while preserving charm, Barrientos and Schroth said.

"Capitol Hill seems to me to be one of Seattle's best hopes for urban densification," Schroth said.

It's a great idea, said Michelson and Jennifer Power, another Capitol Hill resident, who has helped organize neighborhood response to other area projects.

"A lot of the time what people see is only the first couple of stories," Power said. "If you don't change that, you're not changing the streetscape."

Michelson and Power also praised such projects as Trace for setting the new floors back from the old so they're less noticeable from the sidewalk. But Michelson's not impressed with the new building Schroth is erecting beside the old warehouse.

"I feel that makes it look like a Belltown corridor," she said.

And developers who are willing to work with old buildings still are the exception.

"I think there's a lot of property owners and developers who don't have the experience working with old buildings," Barrientos said. "And it's just easier to build new."

The cost to retrofit old buildings to meet current earthquake, fire and soundproofing and other standards makes it hard for projects to pencil out, and there's a lot of uncertainty compared with a new building, Schroth said. "No matter how much due diligence you do it's really hard to find out everything about a building. You just can't."

In the Trace building, Schroth had to put layers of new materials on top of the old wood floors to muffle sound. But he knew buyers would want the look of the old floors, so he brought in old fir from a former pipe factory in Northern California to put on top. He's left old brick walls and new seismic braces exposed in some condos, but energy codes required him to cover up much of the building's brick with

insulation and drywall.

"It's expensive to put it in and people don't want it," Schroth said of the insulation and drywall. "A lot of people would rather be cold and have the charm."

Schroth managed keep the old wood ceilings exposed above the retail spaces, but to do so he had to haggle with city officials over interpreting code provisions. He, Michelson and Barrientos said city rules could be more flexible on applying some rules and do more to encourage preservation of old buildings.

"Right now the way the code is and the rules are it's harder to do what we're doing," Barrientos said. "It's actually easier to knock it down."

Seattle Planning and Development Department spokesman Alan Justad said city officials try not to discourage renovation of existing buildings, although they do require fire- and life-safety upgrades.

"The amount of upgrade we require is subject to analysis and some negotiation, such as allowing the phasing in of upgrades, in order to help owners of existing buildings to renew those structures," he said.

The city's landmark designation requires preservation of certain buildings and their features. The building Barrientos plans to overhaul appears to meet the criteria to be a landmark, according to a city review of buildings in various neighborhoods, but it is not one. The Trace building is not a landmark.

Beyond landmark designation, neighborhood pressure plays a big role, said Karen Gordon, Seattle's historic-preservation officer.

"I think a lot of it is really being responsive to the community," she said.

And preserving character is about more than just keeping old buildings. Old buildings can lose character if owners boot out neighborhood businesses in favor of higher-paying chains, Michelson said. And Power said residents would have an easier time accepting new buildings if designs did a better job of fitting into the neighborhood.

"We've been repeatedly disappointed by what goes up," she said.

P-I reporter Aubrey Cohen can be reached at 206-448-8362 or aubreycohen@seattlepi.com.

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