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Keep your eye on Mr. Ball

BY AIMEE L. CURL
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Robert Ball just can't stand sitting still. In addition to overseeing demolition work on the former Meier & Frank warehouse – now called “The Avenue” and slated for 166 lofts – and keeping a watchful eye over sales of the last eight units in the Marshall Wells building down the street, Ball recently purchased another prime piece of property.

He calls The Embassy, located on Northwest Flanders Street at 20th Avenue, “one of the crown jewels” of the neighborhood he calls home. He had been working to buy the building for nearly five years.

Ball, whose Portland real estate holdings started in Northwest Portland's Alphabet District, said he's happy to be returning to his roots renovating historic apartment buildings.

The 69-unit Embassy was built in the early 1920s. The interior, complete with Crown Molding and Murphy Beds, will be converted to condominiums. Ball lives just down the street in The American, another one of his sentimental favorites, which he purchased and converted to condos nearly 10 years ago.

“I love the old buildings, the beautiful hardwood floors, the moldings, the tiles. These are exquisite things that you can't afford to put in new,” he said.

Because of this passion for preserving old buildings rather than constructing new ones, Ball doesn't consider himself a “traditional developer.”

“I think historic preservation is responsible development. What makes neighborhoods great is a combination of new



Ray Hughey/DJC

Developer Robert Ball poses on the seventh-floor of the former Meier & Frank warehouse building. The top floor of The Avenue Lofts will feature 26-foot picture windows.

construction and older buildings adapted for reuse. That gives character and life to the neighborhood,” he said. “I feel satisfaction in preserving a building that has a history.”

Ball's personal stake in his projects is almost palpable. He scurries around the skeleton of The Avenue Lofts giddy as a kid on Christmas Eve.

On the top floor, 26-foot-tall holes bordered in concrete are the site of future windows that will frame, like giant portraits, the West Hills, downtown and the Cascades beyond.

Ball's blue eyes gleam.

“There will be a mezzanine here, and they will be able to look out over all of this,” he said over the rhythmic ringing of nearby jackhammers.

Originally from Knappa, a small community just east of Astoria, Ball, now 37, got started early in real estate. He purchased his first building when he was just a sophomore at the University of Oregon. Ball remembers putting about \$2,000 down on a \$17,000 to \$19,000, 800-

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square-foot home in Eugene's Whitaker neighborhood.

"I was so nervous about making the payments, I didn't sleep for three weeks," he said.

It wasn't long before Ball owned two more homes and was leasing them to fellow students.

"I really fixed these places up. I scrounged up some paint, built a fence and repainted the inside," he said. "I learned how to place toilets, to pull floors out. I would work all night if I had to get things done."

Ball, who hired SERA Architects to draw up the plans for The Avenue, is still hands-on when it comes to his projects.

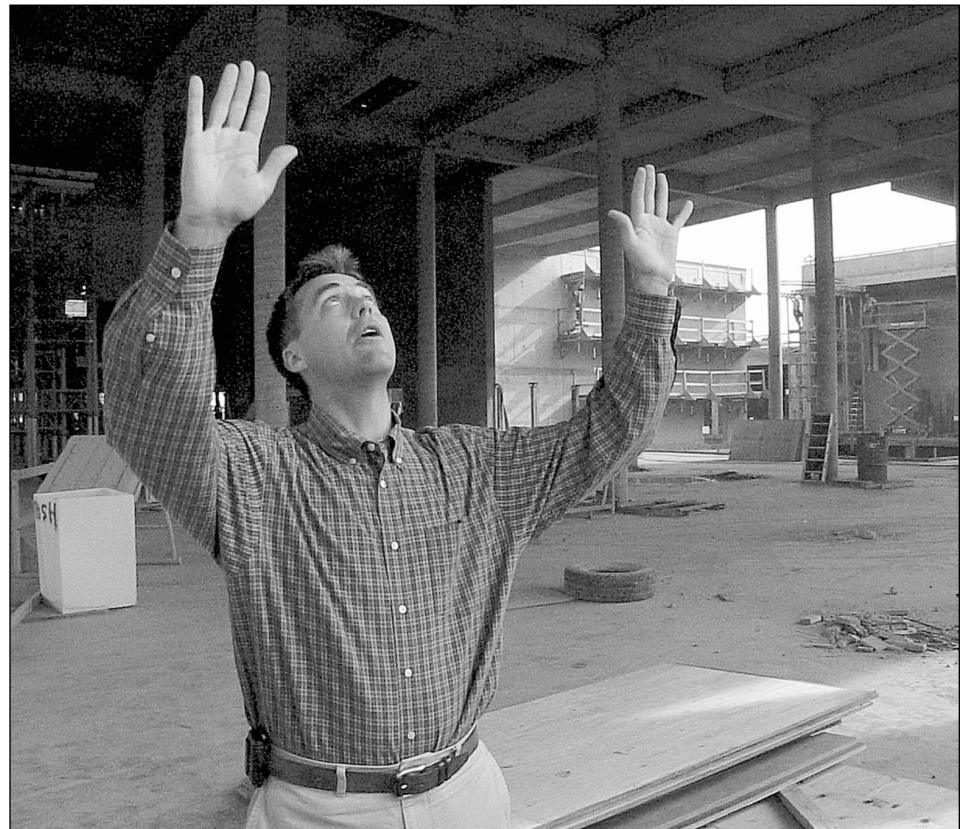
"It was a collaborative effort," he said, explaining how the design for The Avenue's atrium came about.

Ball said he wanted to do something elegant for this building's inner courtyard, which is even larger than the one cut from the center of the Marshall Wells building.

The units lining the interior of The Avenue will have floor-to-ceiling glass windows that open to decks overlooking the atrium, which will wind its way in an "S" shape through the center of the building. Colored lighting will be a prominent feature in both the atrium and the tower that tops the building.

Although Ball's happy the Pearl District is coming of age with a critical mass of residential, retail and work space, he said he would've liked to see more variation in design of some of the neighborhood's buildings.

"Everything is brick with stucco. It would be nice to see something different," he said. "We're starting to see some variation on heights, but I'd like to see even more. It makes it feel less sterile, gives the



Ray Hughey/DJC

Although he no longer does the construction himself, Ball is still hands-on when it comes to his projects. Demolition work on the former Meier & Frank warehouse began last month. He hopes to have construction completed early next fall.

neighborhood some pizzazz."

Ball – who spearheaded last year's initiative effort to reorganize city government – is considering bringing his own pizzazz to City Hall. He's kicking around the idea of running for mayor, although he said it's a long shot.

"I love politics. I know I'd be a good mayor," he said. "It's difficult because I've been asked about it a lot. The question is whether I could run a good campaign while finishing up two projects."

Ball hopes to complete The Avenue early next fall. Since he doesn't plan on building anything from the ground up,

and he's run out of old warehouses to renovate, this may signify the end of his efforts in the Pearl.

As work on The Avenue wraps up, renovations to The Embassy should be well under way. Even without a bid for mayor, Ball's development work, along with a growing interest in golf and volunteer duties as a member of the city's reserve police force, should ensure he won't be sitting still anytime soon.

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