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Local family preparing to turn hotel in Chinatown into 84 apartments

■ *Tanya Woo says: 'All the other building owners are watching us to see if this will work out or not.'*

By [LYNN PORTER](#)
Journal Staff Reporter

A local family plans to convert a former hotel in Seattle's Chinatown-International District into 84 apartments.

The Woo family wants to start work in early 2016 on the Louisa Hotel at [669 S. King St.](#), and open the apartments in spring 2017.

But Tanya Woo said her family may have to wait another year if it does not get the New Markets Tax Credit financing it is seeking.

Rolluda Architects is designing the project, Barrientos is the development manager and Marpac Construction is the contractor.

On Christmas Eve of 2013 a fire damaged the three-story masonry building, forcing out tenants that included Sea Garden Seafood Restaurant, Mon Hei Bakery and Liem's Pet Shop. Woo said Liem's had just received a big shipment of fish (a sign of good luck) to sell to Chinese New Year celebrants when the blaze broke out.

She said the upper floors were vacant when her father, Paul Woo, who is now deceased, bought the building in 1963 from William Nelson and Minnie Nelson Harris, who were the children of one of the men who constructed it.

She said some tenants had been in the building for decades, and are fixtures in the community. There will be up to 10 commercial spaces in the rehabbed building, and Woo said her family hopes to fill them with the former tenants as well as some new businesses.

Bob Hale, a principal with Rolluda Architects, said the fire left the building in danger of collapse. Much of it was demolished and what remained underwent seismic retrofitting, though there is still work to be done.

Only the east side and the facades on Seventh Avenue South and South King Street remain. Hale said common areas on the east side will be restored as well as the facades and parts of the southwest wall.

Hale said the single-room occupancy hotel was built in 1910. The space will be converted to apartments, and 16 units will be added with a rooftop addition. Studios will be 270 to 400 square feet and the one-bedrooms will be 450 to 550.

A roof deck and private decks for some units are planned, and a 25-car garage in the basement.



Rendering courtesy of Rolluda Architects [\[enlarge\]](#)

The former Louisa Hotel was built in 1910. It will be converted to apartments, with 16 units added with a rooftop addition.

The building was designed by the Seattle firm Willatzen & Bryne for three Scandinavian men. The partners in the firm had previously worked at Frank Lloyd Wright's Studio in Oak Park, Illinois, according to an application prepared by Artifacts Consulting.

The Woo family is using the application to seek historic tax credits from the federal government, and has gotten conditional approval, Tanya Woo said.

The project needs equity from the New Markets and Historic tax credits to move forward, said Kim Orr of Barrientos, who is managing the project. "Like any project, you have to have your equity in place."

The building is in the historic district and parts of it must be preserved, Woo said.

There's lots of history associated with the structure. In 1914, rooms for men were advertised with rates that began at \$1.25 per week, according to Artifacts.

A 2014 article in the Seattle Weekly notes that when the building became the Louisa Hotel it had 120 rooms for Chinese, Japanese and Filipino immigrants who would stay here before being dispatched to work in Alaska's sardine and salmon canneries.

The article by Ellis E. Conklin says Noodles Smith opened the Ubangi club in the Louisa Hotel in the mid-1930s. "It was a glamorous joint, awash in potted palms and exquisite African-themed decor," writes Conklin. "Music and dance acts flew in from Los Angeles. Cab Calloway played the Ubangi."

Artifacts' application notes that the building also was known for social clubs, lounges and pool halls.

News reports say it was the site of a 1983 massacre in which three men gunned down 14 people in the Wah Mee gambling club in the basement. All but one of the 14 died.

Tanya Woo said her father had a law office in the building, and her parents worked in Mon Hei Bakery.

Paul Woo, a founding member of the Seattle Chinese Chamber of Commerce, was the highest bidder for the property, she said.

After the 2001 Nisqually earthquake, the building got a \$1 million retrofit to reinforce the roof, but Tanya Woo said it wasn't required to have earthquake upgrades or fire sprinklers, and the upper floors could not be occupied.

But now the family wants to make use of the upper floors so it seems the right time to redevelop, Woo said.

In Seattle if a building is substantially altered, it must be brought up to fire and life safety codes.

Woo said her family hopes its project will attract more people to the neighborhood. "We just want people to come and make Chinatown active again."

Costly safety upgrades are keeping many people in the neighborhood from redeveloping older buildings, she said.

"A lot of the people who own the buildings are from the older generation, and they don't want to be saddled down with debt," she said.

The neighborhood is starting to see some change, such the Publix Hotel, which was built in 1928 as a single-room occupancy hotel for immigrant Asian workers. Publix is getting a new wing, and will have a total of 125 apartments.

Hirabayashi Place, 96 units of low-income housing, is under construction at Fourth Avenue South and South Main Street.

Woo said her family is partnering with Seattle Chinatown International District Preservation and Development Authority in the renovation. That group is helping the family find financing and

manage the redevelopment, working with Barrientos. The authority will also manage the apartments for seven years.

“All the other building owners are watching us to see if this will work out or not,” said Woo.

Other firms on the project team are: DCI Engineers, structural; KPFF Consulting Engineers, civil; Sider + Byers Associates, mechanical engineering; AES Associates, electrical engineering; and Karen Kiest|Landscape Architects.

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