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CHANGING OF THE GUARD

HOUSTON FAMILY PRESERVES THE PAST WITH NEW EXPANSION PROJECT



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Steve Zimmerman moved to Houston in 1964, fresh out of Tulane law school with only \$90 to his name.

Over the next 52 years, Zimmerman – the New York-born, but New Orleans-raised entrepreneur – sold clothing on credit in downtown Houston, practiced and taught law at the University of St. Thomas and eventually pivoted to real estate, focusing on the hospitality sector.

In 1974, Zimmerman opened Zimm's, Houston's first wine bar and sidewalk cafe. Zimmerman wished to create a cafe and bar reminiscent of those found in France and New Orleans.

By 1980, Zimmerman acquired the Fondren Mansion – a private residence built in 1923 for the founder of Humble Oil. Over the subsequent 30 years, the self-professed Francophile turned the historic property on Montrose Boulevard into a boutique luxury hotel, art gallery and bar-restaurant called La Colombe d'Or, named after the eponymous cafe in St. Paul de Vence, France. One of the crown-jewels of the hotel is a Le Grand Salon de la Comtesse, a grand ballroom, built in 1715 for European royalty.

"When I first came to Houston, they were tearing everything down," Zimmerman said. "I grew up in New Orleans, where they did everything in the world to preserve every building. I wanted to bring some of that lifestyle of New Orleans to Houston, and the thought of tearing down these old buildings when they could be turned into something that is very people-friendly – I just didn't have the heart to do it."

Zimmerman's sons – Dan and Mark Zimmerman – are now taking on their father's mantle and vision of real estate development with an emphasis on historic preservation and Southern hospitality. The Zimmerman brothers, who launched the Pax Americana restaurant in Montrose in 2014, are working with their father on a number of new projects, expanding their real estate endeavors into new office and multifamily sectors.

The Zimmerman family has partnered with Hines Interests Ltd. to develop the Residences at La Colombe d'Or, a 34-story, 285-unit luxury apartment tower on the back of their boutique hotel. The new brick and limestone tower will feature a sculpture garden, hotel-like amenities and a rotating art exhibit. The hotel's historic ballroom will be reassembled at a nearby location that's yet to be announced.

The real estate family is also converting a row of historic brick buildings in downtown Houston into a lofty co-work-



Steve Zimmerman, left, and son Dan Zimmerman

ERIC KAYNE/HBJ

ing space, art gallery and cafe, bar and restaurant.

Why did you decide to branch out from hotels and restaurants?

Dan: What we try to do is find assets in great locations, focusing on value-add properties in walkable inner-loop neighborhoods. Most of what we like to do, what dad's done historically and what I'm trying to do, is bring concepts to Houston that haven't come yet. We've got tons of young people moving here, that there's a market for wonderful things that haven't been done here yet but have been successful all over the country and all over the world. We don't want to do cookie-cutter development. We have unique properties. We want to hold on to them and we want them to be great places for many years to come. That's what we aim to do. Hopefully, what we've done raises the bar for the city.

Steve: We don't want merchant projects. We don't want to go in, fix it up and sell it. We want things that are going to add to the community and continue with its culture and stay in the family. I'm tickled to death both of my boys are involved in the business. Dan's been doing it for eight years and has come up with these new innovative concepts, so it's kind of fun for me to sit back and be kicked in the rear end.

How did you come up with the idea for your apartment and office projects?

Dan: We don't want to grow as a restaurant

company, we want to grow as a hospitality-based real estate company. One of the things I always look for is highest and best use. For our apartment tower with Hines, I was standing outside La Colombe d'Or and said, "We've got an acre of land with one purpose and most of it is parking. So what can we do?" These residences are going to be a step above what you typically see in an apartment and more in line with what you'd see in a hotel. We're talking house accounts, housekeeping, room service and dog butlers, perhaps. As for the downtown buildings, I looked at these big open floor plans with four walls of windows, a courtyard in the back and an atrium on the side. You get tons of natural light. What's the highest and best use? For me, I thought flexible office space for the people who want to come and go as they please. We're thinking of some cool concepts, like a bike valet and art gallery on the top floor.

Steve: We've been approached over the years to do all different kind of projects. But the chance to do something with Gerald Hines is sort of like taking Charlize Theron to the prom. Our vision is for our residents to have all the benefits of our hotel guests with a restaurant and bar downstairs, and for our hotel guests to have all the benefits of the apartment tower with its amenities. We're going to be redoing everything here, but we're still trying to keep the essence of who we are. When you say, "I live at La Colombe d'Or," we want it to mean something more than just the residential experience.

Why are you so focused on preservation?

Dan: We're very much progressive in our thinking, but we're traditional in the sense that we don't want to tear down and build new stuff like everyone else is doing. We want to be innovative but with respect to our surroundings and place in the architecture of the project. We could have made more money had we torn this hotel down and built a bigger project on this whole site. But that's not what we want to do. This mansion makes the apartment tower more of a special project. You might make more money in the short term, but then you're just another building with nothing special about it. You want to create places that make our home, Houston, a special place.

Steve: People used to say, "Why don't you sell (the hotel) to some high-rise developer? You'd get more money." I tell them, "Let's say they pay me a lot of money, like \$25 million for the old mansion. By the time I pay my taxes, I wouldn't even be a rich Texan." But more important, I wouldn't be Mr. La Colombe d'Or anymore. I wouldn't be associated with culture, music and fine art. It's a quality of life thing. We want people to start feeling like they want to come to Houston, not that they have to come to Houston for medical or oil. We want people to really start saying, "Wow, Houston has a great restaurant scene, urban life, quality of life." That's what we are investing in.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.