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business

Pyramid power, in glass

Plans for revamping Writer Square include a moat

By Margaret Jackson
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The pyramid, which would have a restaurant or retail below ground in what is now a parking garage, is designed to help open up the development, built in the late 1970s. (Rendering courtesy of Don Ruggles)

The new owner of Writer Square plans to rejuvenate the downtown development with an ambitious plan that calls for a glass pyramid with

restaurant or retail space below street level.

Developer Gary Dragul's vision is reminiscent of the Apple Store in New York City. The planned structure at the corner of Lawrence Street and the 16th Street Mall would also have a moat.

Writer Square, built in the late 1970s, already includes a mix of retail, office and residential buildings. Dragul's plan aims to make the area's public spaces, which provide a link between the 16th Street Mall and Larimer Square, more appealing.

"This will be one of the most unique things in Denver," said Dragul of GDA Real Estate Services Inc. "It will be a gathering spot and it will rebrand Writer Square."

Dragul said the project is contingent on securing a tenant for the new 12,000-square-foot structure, which now is part of the development's underground parking garage.

Meanwhile, he's moving forward with plans for the rest of Writer Square, which he and partner Alan C. Fox of ACF Property Management Inc. in Studio City, Calif., bought for \$58.4 million in September.

New retailers, events and performance space will be included in a European-style plaza free of the planters, furniture and sculptures that currently make the space feel like an obstacle course, said Don Ruggles, founder and president of the architecture firm D.H. Ruggles & Associates. "The plaza will have new signage,

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lighting and remodeled storefronts," Ruggles said.

"We want to open it up," Ruggles said. "It's hard to negotiate through the space, and over the years the storefronts have been remodeled and it's lost its sense of continuity."

Tenant Jeff Morris said he'll miss the planters outside his store, Chez Cheese.

"In the summer, they are very attractive," said Morris, who also is a partner in Evil Bean and Jamaica Juice, which have locations in Writer Square. "The whole facade and everything is pretty sleek, but Writer Square has always been a bit more rustic. I'm not against it, but it's a wait-and-see."

Jim Kirchheimer, director of economic development for Downtown Denver Partnership Inc., said he supports the plans.

"I think he's right-on in terms of opening it up and really energizing it and activating some of those open spaces," Kirchheimer said. "It's a huge opportunity from a connectivity standpoint between Larimer Square and the 16th Street Mall. Writer Square is positioned perfectly to take advantage of all the pedestrian and vehicular traffic that occurs there."

Writer Square was developed by George "Geoie" S. Writer of Writer Corp., which built homes in the metro area for many years and was later acquired by Standard Pacific Corp. Construction of the square began in 1979.

Retail expert Mary Beth Jenkins, president of The Laramie Co., said any project more than 10 years old is due for a face-lift.

"To focus on redeveloping or redesigning portions of the retail, especially the interior, is a very wise move," Jenkins said. "The tenants on the exterior of this project have done very well. The interior has been a challenge."

To be successful, the pyramid will require a destination tenant to attract people to the area, Jenkins said.

"You need a very strong tenant that can break the rules of being on grade in retail," she said.

Dragul's plans for Writer Square coincide with several other downtown rejuvenation projects: the \$70 million renovation of the Sheraton Denver Downtown Hotel at 1550 Court Place; the \$25 million investment in the Denver Pavilions; the renovation of the old Fontius Building; and the overhaul of McDonald's — all on the 16th Street Mall.

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October 1978: Contract between Denver Urban Renewal Authority and George "Geoie" S. Writer Jr., president of Writer Corp., is signed for construction of Writer Square. New England Mutual Life Insurance Co. provides financing for the development. Construction by Hensel Phelps begins April 1979.

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September 1989: Denver real estate investor Pat Broe, through Polaris Capital Corp., purchases 7.7 percent interest in Denver-based homebuilding Writer Corp. and negotiates to purchase Writer Square.

Compiled by Barbara Hudson, Denver Post Research Library

July 1990: Writer Corp. sells Writer Square. A partnership that includes George Writer Jr., chairman and chief executive officer of Writer Corp.; Roland Seidler Jr., a Writer Corp. director; and New England Life Insurance Co. of Boston purchases the Writer Square retail and office complex.

March 1993: Taubman Co. proposes a new shopping mall and plans to demolish most of Writer Square for a Nordstrom department store. Writer fears the property will be taken by the Denver Urban Renewal Authority.

June 1996: Writer Square is sold for \$23.5 million to investor Edmund Leo, who is owner of Strawberry Holdings.

September 2003: Denver-based Alliance Commercial Partners purchases Writer Square for \$23.4 million.

September 2004: Writer Square is sold for \$30.3 million to a Boston- based real estate investment advisory firm.

September 2008: Writer Square is purchased for \$58.4 million by Gary Dragul of GDA Real Estate Services Inc. and Alan C. Fox of ACF Property Management Inc.