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SQUARE FEET

Finally, Progress in Restoring Bridgeport's Grandeur



Photographs by Susan Farley for The New York Times

DOWNTOWN REVIVAL

Craig Tooman, left, the architect, and Eric Anderson, one of the developers, inside an old bank building on Main Street whose vault is at right. Below, the old Bijou theater is being renovated as part of the rehabilitation of Bijou Square, above.



Ginsburg, the concern's president. "But the city has good bones."

In addition to the historic architecture, he said, it has good train and ferry service, a minor-league baseball park and access to Long Island Sound on a two-mile-long beach. "It could be a great city," Mr. Ginsburg said, "but it lacks a residential base."

Both developers believe that reasonably priced housing will initially be in high demand by people who commute to work in Stamford and Norwalk but can't afford housing in those cities.

There are plenty of indications that the demand is there. The local developers Garfield and Rebecca Spencer of First National Development bought an abandoned industrial building south of downtown six years ago for \$800,000 and converted it into condos. All 53 units created in the first phase have been sold and most are occupied. In a second phase, 10 more units have also sold out but will not be completed until September.

The Spencers have since begun the nearby Jefferson School Lofts project, with 21 loft condominium units, and the Cherry Street Lofts at the west end of downtown, for another 150 units.

Another local developer, Jason Epstein of E/N Properties, is converting an old office building next to the downtown courthouse into 40 luxury condos. Even with a rooftop garden, an upscale health club and better retailing, the condos will sell for considerably less than anything comparable in Fairfield County. Mr. Epstein said a 1,000-square-foot unit in his building would command about \$250,000, as opposed to \$450,000 elsewhere in the area. "Everybody is being squeezed out of Norwalk and Stamford," he said.

This week, there will be the grand opening of the Sterling Market Lofts building, formerly a Read Department store. It has been converted into live-work artists' apartments by Artspace Projects Inc., a developer based in Minneapolis. The opening will showcase the art and music of its residents, whose incomes had to be within certain limits. All 61 units have been taken, at rents of \$294 to \$995 a month.

Michael Micinilio, born and raised in Bridgeport, is a sculptor and painter whose artwork has been put on hold while he finishes his Sterling Market loft space with wide plank wood flooring and terra cotta tiles. "We're the cornerstone of revitalization in Bridgeport," Mr. Micinilio said. "Local businesses are excited about us."

Philip Kuchma is a local business owner who is indeed excited about the new residents of the Sterling Market Lofts as well as the buzz that has been generated in the development community. As the owner of a series of properties called Bijou Square, Mr. Kuchma is rehabbing a historic theater complex that will have a restaurant and cafe started by a group including Phil Hartman, an owner of the Two Boots restaurants in New York. Above will be a party space in a grand old ballroom, and across the street will be eight new housing units.

As a fixture in Bridgeport for most of his life, Mr. Kuchma was used to being a lonely developer, undertaking small projects one at a time. Now he finds himself competing with other developers to purchase properties. On the other hand, Mr. Kuchma said, "I'm getting calls from people out of the blue asking to invest in Bijou Square."

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By LISA CHAMBERLAIN

BRIDGEPORT, Conn.

FOR years, Bridgeport has struggled to throw off the yoke of poverty, crime and corruption. But now, with nearly 25 percent of the historic downtown district about to undergo a major rehabilitation, developers are champing at the bit to enter an emerging mixed-use market that, despite being situated in the richest county in Connecticut, suffers from an image problem.

Projects that are about to get under way will add hundreds of housing units and thousands of square feet of redeveloped commercial and retail space. "I've had at least a half dozen developers tell me, 'If this gets going, we're coming in,'" said Kevin Gremse, director of the National Development Council, a nonprofit community and economic development organization. "And it's about to get going."

For the better part of a decade, Mr. Gremse has been involved in Bridgeport's many attempts to rehabilitate itself, first as a city economic development specialist and then at the National Development Council. But it wasn't until several years ago, when he met Eric Anderson, a New York City developer who founded Urban Green Builders, which focuses on urban in-fill projects using environmentally friendly technologies, that the ball finally got rolling. Having learned of Mr. Anderson's mixed-use projects in places like East Harlem and the Bronx, Mr. Gremse asked him to look at Bridgeport.

"I was just giddy," Mr. Anderson said. "I'm getting the tour and everyone's talking about what a disaster it is, and I look around and say, 'Sign me up.' You just don't get many opportunities to have an impact on an entire city."

Mr. Anderson was enticed not only by the challenge of redeveloping a distressed urban area but also by a complex and powerful new financial tool, called New Market Tax Credits, brought to the table by Mr. Gremse. The redevelopment of Bridgeport is one of the first major projects in the country to take advantage of this program, which was established in the waning days of the Clinton administration.

The credits are parceled out to community development groups like the National Development Council. These groups then dispense them to developers like Mr. Anderson who are willing to undertake projects in distressed areas. Mr. Gremse estimates that the total cost of the project is \$110 million, and up to a third will be covered by New Market Tax Credits coupled with historic preservation incentives and other subsidies.

"This project is recreating the marketplace," Mr. Gremse said. "And that would be very difficult to do without these credits."

The four-phase project includes 23 buildings and empty lots. Rehabilitation will start in June on an Art Deco bank tower on



Main Street, vacant for nearly 15 years, which has a flooded basement, rusting vaults and peeling paint. It will be combined with three neighboring buildings and turned into 118 apartments and 50,000 square feet of retail and office space.

One block down Main Street is Phase 2, where a historic glass-roofed arcade-style mall will be restored to its 1889 condition. The dark arcade, mostly empty except for a smattering of hip-hop clothing and music stores, will have 23 housing units and 35,000 square feet of commercial and art studio space. Next door will be another rehabbed historic building, a former hotel dating back to 1835; it will have 36 apartments and 70,000 square feet of commercial space.

Later, three more buildings will be redeveloped and three new ones built, providing almost 300 units of housing. The first three phases will all be under way by the end of the year. Phase 4, to begin in 2006, will include eight more mixed-use buildings,

both historic and new construction.

"We're starting with the historic structures, so as we work through the phases, the architecture will become more and more visible," said Craig Tooman, a principal architect of the firm Cutsogorge, Tooman & Allen, which doubled its staff to handle the Bridgeport project. "The new construction will meld a modern aesthetic with the late-1800's commercial aesthetic."

To manage such a large redevelopment effort, which Urban Green Builders had originally undertaken on its own, Mr. Anderson recently brought in the Ginsburg Development Companies, a Westchester developer, as a joint venture partner. "Bridgeport has had a checkered history," said Martin