

LIVING LARGER THAN LIFE

As the largest residential historic preservation project in the U.S., The Beacon in Jersey City provides comfortable living amid exquisite architectural details and opulent shared spaces.

BY POLLY KREISMAN; PHOTOGRAPHS BY DEBORAH DEGRAFFENREID

Legend has it that one of Franklin Roosevelt's first stops after his inauguration as president in 1932 was at the Jersey City Medical Center. In appreciation of the fact that New Jersey had put him over the top, he is said to have presented his friend Mayor Frank Hague with a blank check of WPA funds to continue to build one of the biggest facilities of its kind anywhere.

Like almost every aspect of the 10-building, 14-acre, 2-million-square-foot campus on the rise of the Palisades ridge, that story seems larger than life. And now this cluster of tall Art Deco buildings, familiar fortresses on the Jersey skyline, across the Hudson River from lower Manhattan, has become The Beacon, the largest mixed-use renovation project currently underway in the United States.

The Saturday Evening Post described it in the 1940s as "a beautiful mirage...(rising) up from the municipal rubble that is Jersey City." In 1988, overbuilt and underfinanced, it declared bankruptcy. Some of the buildings have been vacant since then, others since the hospital relocated in 2004.

What was left behind were the grand structures built as part of the Works Project Administration, with the remains of terrazzo floors, carved friezes, outdoor decks, marble walls, Deco moldings, ornate chandeliers, and etched glass. There are five theater auditoriums, once used by doctors and nurses, and an observatory. Mayor Hague, whom history remembers as intimidating and corrupt, kept an office deep in the center of one building (now, appropriately, a poker room) with a concealed doorway. The historic preservation consultant on the site, Ulana Zakalak, says they also discovered a hidden staircase. An elaborate system of tunnels underneath, used by the medical center staff to access other buildings, "were very, very spooky," says Zakalak, remembering her first time down there. And one of those tunnels was found to lead directly to Hague's City Hall.

Even in less than perfect shape, the complex's Deco designs have inspired movie backdrops: *Quiz Show* (1993), *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001), *Jade Scorpion* (2001), *Fur* (2006), and for Sarah Jessica Parker on the upcoming cover of the June 2010 issue of *Vogue*.

All of it, says developer George Filopoulos, president of Metrovest Equities, will be restored to the original detail and redesigned as 1,200 rental and condominium

apartments, 80,000 square feet of retail and commercial space, a 66,000-square-foot children's center and a restored public movie theater.

Two of the towers, known as the Rialto-Capitol Condominium (all towers are now named after famous Art Deco theaters) and joined by a newly built Deco lobby and circular driveway, are nearly 100 percent occupied, with about 550 residents in 315 units, Filopoulos says.



STANDING ON THE ROOF DECK OF ONE OF THE BEACON'S TEN DECO BUILDINGS, HIGH ABOVE JERSEY CITY, THE LARGEST RENOVATION PROJECT IN THE U.S., IS DEVELOPER GEORGE FILOPOULOS (WHO IS 6'6" TALL).

One-bedroom units in these towers start at about \$300,000. A penthouse recently went for \$2.3 million. Michelle Calabrese, 29, sat with her newborn baby in a lounge area outside the "Grotto" gym and spa, part of a 50,000-square-foot amenities package that includes

a pool and hot tub, yoga, party rooms with a catering kitchen, a billiards room, and a great room (a former teaching room for the medical staff) with a stage.

"Every single person who comes to visit us is astounded by what they were able to do," Calabrese says. "Keeping the historic piece adds more character." She says she and her husband settled on The Beacon because it was affordable but had all the amenities of "a New York-type condo."

To her point, 25 lofts under development will have polished original concrete floors, exposed beams, and spiral ductwork. One penthouse loft has 28 windows.

Amenities for residents include a 24-hour concierge, valet parking, and shuttle service to the PATH train. For better or worse, this further isolates the fortress on the hill from the surrounding Jersey City neighborhood where views of Manhattan are as plentiful as those in the gritty opening scenes of *The Sopranos*.

Jersey City sold the property, now a National and State Historic Landmark, to Metrovest Equities for \$9.5 million in 2005, but Filopoulos says the de facto price was actually "north of \$20 million," with an agreement that the developer absorb the operating expenses for all of the project's residential and commercial elements. Original estimates had the entire project completed in 2010.

"We didn't anticipate the real estate apocalypse," Filopoulos laughs. That date has been pushed back five years, with three buildings to undergo renovations at once. "No one has ever renovated something of this scale," he says.

Zakalak remembers the first day she toured the facility. "My head was spinning. I was literally dizzy. How was I going to figure this all out? It's greater than human scale. It's the largest project I have ever worked on. It's the largest project anyone's ever worked on!"

And so passionate about the space was this historic preservationist, "I marched right in and bought a two-bedroom corner unit" as soon as the first phase was put up for sale.

Preservation is inherently green and Filopoulos says The Beacon is "one of the largest recycling projects in U.S. history in terms of materials."

Nothing will be destroyed to create 1,200 residences. Missing marble is mined from other buildings here. Historic paint analysis was used to match original 1932

LEFT TO RIGHT: A FORMER DOCTORS' TEACHING HALL IS NOW THE GREAT ROOM, FOR SOCIALIZING OR SHOWS, WITH THE ORIGINAL STAGE AND A MODERN 10-FOOT VIDEO SCREEN; OUTDOOR SPACES AFFORD A BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF NOT ONLY THE NEW YORK SKYLINE BUT THE DECO DETAILS IN THE RESTORED FAÇADES.



PHOTO PROVIDED



LEFT TO RIGHT: ABOVE THE BILLIARD TABLES IN THE FORMER ENTRANCE TO THE MEDICAL CENTER, IS AN EXTRAORDINARY FRIEZE CALLED "FROM MYTH TO MEDICINE," CONSIDERED A WPA MASTERPIECE; (EXTERIOR) REPLACEMENT BRICKS, CUSTOM MADE TO THE ORIGINAL SIZE, CAME FROM FOUR DIFFERENT MINES IN AN EFFORT TO MATCH THE EXISTING VARIETY OF SHADES. THE CARVINGS WERE METICULOUSLY RESTORED.

PHOTO PROVIDED

colors, gold and silver leaf, and sheens, as required not only for accuracy and aesthetics, but for historic preservation tax credits. One-of-a-kind light fixtures are being restored.

"There were massive water infiltration problems on the exterior," says Zakalak, "and no expansion joints. On the corners, over time, bricks just popped off and concrete was poured over it." Four different brick foundries were sourced to match the existing structure and were mixed in randomly so no one brick color would be prominent.

Historic façade restrictions require the HVAC systems to be internal; central boilers and chilling plants are efficient and utility costs are included in residents' common charges, which Filopoulos boasts are "minimal."

One of the most remarkable discoveries was a bas-relief frieze running the perimeter of what is now the Billiard Room (the former medical center's main entrance) just below the ceiling. Titled "From Myth to Medicine," the WPA masterpiece (reportedly appraised at \$1 million) displays images of the evolution of man through time, from caves to paganism to Pandora and her box to Native American medicine men. At the center of the room is the Caduceus, the symbol of modern medicine. From here, on the sculpture, with modern medicine and, symbolically, the Medical Center itself, the evolutionary scenes become euphoric and futuristic.

"Every single person who comes to visit us is astounded by what they were able to do. Keeping the historic piece adds more character."

— Michelle Calabrese,
a resident of The Beacon

After four years of restoration in that part of The Beacon, at literally the last moment, late on a Friday night before the first public event, Zakalak and her partner discovered something alongside a sculpted cloud

on the frieze never seen nor allowed on WPA works: a tiny signature. The sculptor was Allen George Newman, one of the most prominent of his time.

Had there been more room on the bas-relief, Newman's vision of the future might have included the evolution of the vast white elephant to The Beacon on the hill. ■

Resource List

Writer's note: resources are limited as most amenities are provided solely to the construction trade, and design was in place.

THE BEACON
Jersey City, NJ; thebeaconjc.com

DEVELOPER
METROVEST EQUITIES
metrovest.com, (212) 644-7474

HISTORIC PRESERVATION AND RESTORATION
ZAKALAK RESTORATION ARTS; (732) 804-7332

VIEWS OF THE MODEL LOFT: 25 PENTHOUSE LOFTS WILL HAVE POLISHED CONCRETE FLOORS, EXPOSED BEAMS, AND SPIRAL DUCTWORK.

