


[Print Page](#)

Perfect Shape

The Octagon gets its form back after years of neglect.

Source: MULTIFAMILY EXECUTIVE MAGAZINE

Publication date: 2006-08-15

By Rachel Z. Azoff

- **Property:** The Octagon
- **Architect and Developer:** Becker + Becker Associates
- **Interior Designer:** Rockwell Group
- **Location:** Roosevelt Island, N.Y.
- **Renovation Cost:** \$120 million
- **Length of Renovation:** 20 months
- **Scope of Project:** Adaptive reuse of a hospital building's remains

No one was more excited to see The Octagon's debut than the 80-plus-year-old alumnae of the Metropolitan Hospital School of Nursing. The 1941 through 1958 graduates recently gathered at the site of their former school in Roosevelt Island, N.Y., to see its transformation into a 500-unit mixed-income rental community. "We have our home back," exclaimed Lilian Kovarik (class of '48) as she saw the newly restored building, which had been reduced to eight single walls after two fires and years of abandonment.



eagle eye photo

The visit marked the nurses' first time back in decades. Sadly, the former school and hospital had deteriorated over the years. The building first served as the New York Pauper Lunatic Asylum in the 1830s and then as the Metropolitan Hospital beginning in the 1890s (the nursing school opened in 1902). But the hospital closed in the late '50s, and in the late '70s its two wings were demolished (deemed in too bad of shape for repair). All that was left: The eight-sided tower (aptly named the Octagon Tower), which was all but destroyed by two later fires.

"After the first fire, the city got a \$1 million grant and made a real effort to keep it [the structure] from deteriorating," says Bruce Becker, president of Fairfield, Conn.-based Becker + Becker Associates, the development and architecture firm which revived the building. "After the second fire, most people felt its days were over." But Becker, who has a passion and talent for historic preservation, wasn't going to let the 19th-century landmark meet such a deadly fate.

In 1997, Becker submitted a redevelopment proposal in an open RFP process. The firm won the RFP but designing a project that satisfied both the city and historic preservationists certainly

wasn't easy. Nearly a decade later—after 25 design ideas and 50-plus meetings with local community groups—The Octagon opened in April 2006. The project features the restored tower, which offers a host of residential amenities, plus 400 market-rate units and 100 affordable units built in two new, off-shooting 14-story wings (where the old hospital wings once stood). Rents range from \$1,700 for a studio to nearly \$3,800 for a three-bedroom unit.



Matt Greenslade/photo-nyc.com

GEOMETRY LESSON: The landmark Octagon Tower has been meticulously restored to its 19th-century glory and is now the centerpiece of a 500-unit residential development. The tower, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, features a recreated "flying" circular staircase.

Getting in Shape

When Becker visited the property's remains back in 1997, he immediately knew that housing would be a natural fit for the site. "There's such a shortage of housing in New York at all different income levels, and Roosevelt Island is an ideal location for housing," he says. "You get all the benefits of suburban living with the parks, tennis courts, pools, and bike paths, yet you are one [train] stop from Bloomingdale's."

Despite this pent-up housing demand, getting the project off the ground proved to be immensely time-consuming—but Becker was up for the challenge. "Bruce is persistent," says Judith Berdy, president of the Roosevelt Island Historical Society. "A lot of people have inquired about the site, and once they start dealing with the bureaucracy here, they just throw up their hands and say forget it, it's not worth the aggravation."



Lori Berkowitz

The biggest design setback: Becker crafted a plan with the state historic preservation office (more than a year of work) only to have it rejected by the National Park Service, which gives the final stamp of approval for historic rehabs. "We had to do an 11th-hour redesign," recalls Becker. "We worked around the clock, and within 45 days of the original denial we had a new approved plan."

To complicate matters even further, the project had to be approved by three different administrations of the Roosevelt Island Operating Corp. (which manages, develops, and operates the island) since the leadership changed over the years of the project's planning.

Final Form

After the project's long and tedious approval process, the actual construction of the project proved to be quite painless, says Becker. The team restored the tower to its original splendor, repairing the cracked masonry and using historic photographs to replicate the missing parts. On the inside, the National Park Service allowed for an interpretive restoration because documentation was limited. "So we had a free hand with the interior. It's actually very exciting," says Becker. "There's lots of glass, steel, and light."

The 30,000-square-foot tower features a public art gallery and an array of residential amenities. The most memorable feature: a recreation of the tower's original seven-story "flying" circular staircase, which captured the attention of Charles Dickens and was noted in his travelogue,

American Notes.

The spiral staircase received rave reviews from the nurses who once lived in the building. At their recent reunion, one nurse recalled how she used to slide down the banister of five flights of stairs. But at the reunion, the 85-year-old was content to simply pose for a photo on the stairs.



1 Keep your eyes open for new financing opportunities. Becker + Becker planned to use FHA-insured tax-exempt bond finance but instead formed a joint venture with the real estate equity fund Multi-Employer Property Trust, which sped up the financing process.

2 Explore all possible financial incentives. The developer "greened" the project, taking advantage of green building state tax credits.

3 Invite the community to be a part of your project. The Octagon features a 2-acre ecological park, preschool, and public art gallery showcasing the history of the building and Roosevelt Island.