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Redefining Downtown

A \$160 million mixed-use project in New Haven is set to transform a strategically located surface parking lot into an environmentally friendly model for spurring urban vitality.

At first glance, the idea of promoting economic development, urban living and environmental protection—all under the guise of a single project—might seem like a tall order.

But for developer and architect Bruce Redman Becker, president of Fairfield-based Becker and Becker Associates, Inc., it's a natural mix—one that he's used successfully in award-winning development projects in southern Connecticut and New York State.

Now Becker + Becker is hard at work on its latest plan, which is expected to transform a long-vacant 1.5-acre surface parking lot in the heart of New Haven into a high-end housing, retail and parking development that will work overtime to meet a slate of seemingly diverse objectives. These include: attracting more people of various income levels to live downtown while minimizing neighborhood traffic; blending in with the historic character of the neighborhood while providing state-of-the-art green building technology; offering a substantial amount of parking that will go largely unnoticed by the average pedestrian; and spurring nearby development while enhancing patronage of existing local restaurants and shops.

In February, the City of New Haven chose Bruce Becker from a field of nine contenders to turn a property known as the Shartenberg site into a mixed-use project that would help breathe new life into that section of downtown. The site, which once was home to the historic Shartenberg Department Store but has been a surface parking lot for the past 40 years, is bordered by State, Chapel and Orange streets.

While the plans for the property are still evolving, Becker's \$160 million, 450,000-square-foot undertaking will likely include

450 high-end rental units in a 23-story tower, a grocery store and retail at street level, a childcare center and up to 700 "wrapped" or hidden, parking spaces. A 120-room hotel in a separate 12-story building is also a possibility.

The apartment complex will utilize green building technology, with energy for its common spaces generated by perhaps the largest rooftop photovoltaic array of any residential building in the state. Becker + Becker is in negotiations with the city to make 50 of the units available to moderate- and lower-income residents.



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At a Glance

SHARTENBERG PROJECT

Developer: Bruce Redman Becker, president, Becker and Becker Associates, Inc., Fairfield

Project Location: 745 Chapel St., New Haven

Projected Cost: \$160 million

Square Feet: 450,000

Project Type: Mixed-use

Details: 450 high-end apartments, grocery store, retail, enclosed parking, possible hotel

Special features: Located opposite State Street train station, New Haven

Estimated completion date: Early 2010



PHOTO COURTESY OF BRUCE REDMAN BECKER

Located across from the State Street train station, the development will be “transit-oriented,” meaning that people who live there will be able to reduce their dependency on their vehicles. A couple living in the building may find that they only need one car, or none, Becker says. At the same time, he is hopeful that the train’s proximity and the project’s lower housing costs, compared to Stamford or New York City, will attract people to move from those high-rent areas to New Haven. Connecticut Department of Transportation officials say they are already looking to expand train service through the station—perhaps even adding service to Hartford and Boston.

Becker says his firm expects to have the project design finalized, and city approvals completed, by the fall. Because the development is already funded to the tune of \$100 million by the same pension fund that financed some of its previous projects, Becker + Becker, which serves as both architect and developer, doesn’t have to secure financing. That means it could conceivably begin construction by early 2008. “We think once we break ground, we’ll probably be done within 24 months. Hopefully by the spring of 2010, people will be moving in,” he says. “The marketing effort will probably happen six months before that, in the fall of 2009. We’re in discussions now with retail tenants.”

Community Input Welcome

One of several things that make the project so interesting is that Becker is taking pains to consult all stakeholders (the City of New Haven, local residents, urban planners, real estate professionals, local business owners and even other architectural firms that

submitted competing bids) to make sure the end product fits everyone’s needs. He also wants to meet their expectations for how the project should look and function as part of New Haven’s downtown.

The initial design submitted to the city as part of the competitive bidding process won Becker + Becker the right to serve as the site’s developer. But residents complained that the project was too dense for the neighborhood and didn’t fit well with the existing architecture. Becker responded by tweaking the plan, reducing the project’s overall height and modifying its street-level appearance. The second version included a four-story brick “street wall” containing retail space and indoor parking, with the modern residential tower above it stepped back roughly 95 feet to make it significantly less visible to pedestrians on the street below. On April 24, the developer headed a three-hour community workshop to explain the revised design, and solicit additional input.

“The purpose of it was to get feedback on a number of different topics. Specifically, we were looking for urban design and architectural design feedback, and a sense of what criteria were important to the stakeholders,” he explains. “We also wanted to explore different ways to capitalize on the [train] access, ... get into market preferences for retail and amenities for the residential portion, and find out what we could do to make the building a greener building, most consistent with the principles of sustainable development.”

The company is now working on the third version of the plan.

Becker + Becker has been the developer of numerous multi-million dollar mixed-use,

commercial, educational and residential projects, winning some 17 awards for historic preservation, architectural design, sustainable design, urban excellence and affordable housing. Is this level of community interaction common for his company?

“It’s almost an obsession for us,” Becker says. “We feel that the more [plan] iterations there are and the more feedback we get, the better the end result is. We don’t shy away from it.”

A recent \$100 million historic rehabilitation of the landmark Octagon Tower on Roosevelt Island, overlooking Manhattan, went through 12 design versions, he notes. The project ultimately earned Becker + Becker awards from the federal Environmental Protection Agency, the New York Landmarks Conservancy and the NYC Department of Environmental Protection.

As for the Shartenberg development, he says, “there are so many different facets to this project and so many aspects of New Haven that we’re not looking to impose some monument on the city without regard to how it will fit with all of the different [needs] of the community. Therefore, it’s a natural process for us, because we’re architects as well as developers. It’s not a great burden. Good design should respond to not only the physical context of the building, but also its cultural and social context.”

Eco-friendly Luxury

Current plans call for a mix of studio, 1-bedroom, 2-bedroom and possibly 3-bedroom apartments that, while not large in size, will be “large on amenities.” These will include a health club, a library, the fastest possible Internet access, extensive rooftop gardens

and, on a rooftop terrace, a year-round swimming pool with an enclosure that can be opened during warmer weather.

Retail geared to residents’ needs will be available at the street level, but “the principal use will be housing that is at the high end of the market—rental housing with fantastic views and extraordinary environmental design,” Becker says. “We plan to have a much smarter building in terms of technology, and we’re [going to be] 30 to 40 percent more energy efficient than the new code mandates.” He says his firm has engaged a green building consultant, and is considering geothermal heating and cooling for the residential portion: “I want to design the building so it uses significantly less energy than a typical apartment, and a fraction of [the cost of] a single family home.”

Becker’s company is also looking into robotic parking—an eco-friendly system that’s popular in Europe and Asia, and is being used on a limited basis in Manhattan and Washington, D.C.

“I take seriously the concerns about global warming,” he explains. “It [global warming] is no longer an opinion; it’s a fact. If the development design and construction industry don’t make radical changes, we’re going to leave a huge burden to our kids and their children. We think this is a great site to develop a model for a new kind of urban development that will leave a very positive impact on the region and the city.”

Becker says the project offers numerous benefits to everyone involved, a situation he sees as win-win. “It creates an opportunity for the pension fund, our investors, to get a market rate return on their capital. But at the same time, there’s a real need in the marketplace for high quality housing where you don’t have to use a car every day,” he says. A key priority is “capitalizing on the site as a location for transit-oriented development. I see it being important not only to the city of New Haven, but also to the whole region, as a way to focus growth at a location that can sustain it most easily.”

Becker believes downtown New Haven will see enhanced economic development and vitality as a result of the project, saying residents who live in the building will generate more foot traffic downtown, likely benefiting the shops, restaurants and other small businesses within walking distance. That increase in pedestrian traffic might well lure other businesses downtown.

It could also prompt other developers to take a closer look at the nearby site of the recently demolished coliseum. That property could be perfect for office uses, further complementing the area, he says. With Manhattan office space running at about

B + B = A+

Fairfield-based Becker and Becker Associates, Inc. designs and builds multi-million-dollar mixed-use, commercial and educational projects with the aim of “allowing underutilized buildings to play a more vital role in their communities.” Becker + Becker’s award-winning projects to date include the following:

Wauregan Hotel Redevelopment, Norwich, Conn.

- 2007 Harlan Griswold award - Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation
- 2006 “Restore America” award - HGTV and the National Trust for Historic Preservation

The Octagon, Roosevelt Island, N.Y.

- 2006 Lucy Moses Award - New York Landmarks Conservancy
- 2004 Green Apple Award - EPA and the NYC Department of Environmental Protection

The Crescent Building, New Canaan, Conn.

- 2001 Connecticut Design Award - American Institute of Architects
- 1998 Maxwell Award of Excellence finalist - Fannie Mae Foundation

Urban Horizons, The Bronx, N.Y.

- 2000 HUD Secretary/American Planning Association Award
- 1998 Maxwell Award of Excellence - Fannie Mae Foundation
- 1996 Municipal Arts Society Special Citation

Avalon Grove, Stamford, Conn.

- 1998 Excellence Award for Best Mid-rise/High-rise - National Association of Home Builders
- 1996 Excellence Award for Best Zoning/Urban Land Plan Award - Home Builders of Connecticut

The Times Square, Manhattan

- 1998 Gold Medal Winner, Rudy Bruner Award for Urban Excellence
- 1996 Best Affordable Urban Apartment Project in the U.S. - Affordable Housing Tax Credit Coalition
- 1995 Special Citation - American Institute of Architects, New York City Chapter
- 1995 Bard Award for Excellence in Architecture and Urban Design - City Club of New York
- 1994 New York State Historic Preservation Award
- 1993 New York Preservation League Affordable Housing Award

\$150 per square foot, and Stamford and Greenwich leasing rates running not too far behind, “I can imagine some office tenants wanting to come to New Haven. Maybe that would be the next phase.”

He is quick to give credit to the developers who have preceded him, noting that development in New Haven up to this point has set the stage for his project, and will allow it to act as a bridge between Wooster Square and the area surrounding Yale University. Becker, who lived in New Haven for several years in the early 1980s while earning a graduate degree from Yale, says, “I felt a real affection for the city, and got to know it pretty well. I’m so impressed with how far it’s come.”

At the same time, he says while there have been several successful rehabilitation housing projects within blocks of the Shartenberg site, there hasn’t been any new construction in the area for decades. “With new construction,” he says, “we have a blank slate, so we can design a building that really is a national model for energy efficiency and green design.”

New Haven Mayor John DeStefano Jr. seems to have no doubt that the Shartenberg project will give his city another needed shot in the arm. He says the fact that Becker + Becker is bringing \$100 million of pension fund financing to the deal is a huge plus. Taxes paid to the city will be phased in over five years, but will eventually exceed \$2 million annually. The project will also create more than 1,200 union construction jobs (with 25 percent set aside for New Haven residents and 7 percent for women), and 99 permanent jobs.

Becker hopes his mixed-use development will attract residents from New York, other parts of Connecticut and New Haven’s own suburbs, saying, “I think the time is ripe for a new kind of housing that appeals not only to people in New Haven, but can be more attractive than housing you see in surrounding communities.” While many people have long believed the suburbs offers a better lifestyle, “I think that’s being reversed. New Haven can be a much more dynamic and exciting place to live, and a more healthy and fulfilling environment to live in.”