

Artistic Vision



Developer Bruce Becker stands in front of New Haven's iconic Pirelli building on Sargent Drive, which he is transforming into a boutique hotel.

PHOTO | GARRY LEVINS

Developer Bruce Becker transforms iconic buildings

By Michael C. Bingham

Are architects "artists"? Well, they create things of beauty. But can they also be business people. Bruce Becker would know.

His Westport-based architectural firm, Becker + Becker, is widely acclaimed for recent projects in New Haven, Hartford, Norwich and Roosevelt Island, New York.

His latest project is giving one of New Haven's most iconic structures a second life

— the long-vacant former Pirelli Armstrong headquarters building at 500 Sargent Dr., which he is transforming into a boutique hotel.

Fellow architect Duo Dickinson of Madison says of Becker, "The real reason Bruce Becker is changing architecture more than any other practitioner in New England and perhaps America is that he has broken the mold of the near Holy Trinity of those who build buildings: he's the client, builder and architect."

According to Dickinson, Becker "becomes the project."



Duo Dickinson

\$180 million 360 State Street residential/retail/parking complex on the long-vacant site of the former Shartenbergs department store. At 25 stories it's New Haven's second-tallest building and was fully leased within six months after construction was completed.

Becker also recently headed the bold

creation of 285 apartments in a 1965 mid-rise — in downtown Hartford. Within 12 months that \$80 million project, at 777 Main St., was fully rented.

But it's not just residential developments. Becker seeks projects that are social and environmental game-changers: restoring underutilized historic buildings and transforming urban sites to enrich and revitalize communities.

Becker's education background helps to inform his world view. After undergrad work at Amherst, he attended the Yale School of Management for a joint degree in architecture and business. He has the financial chops to make deals with major players.



Matthew Nemerson

"I decided that I wanted to be able to control, create and manage both the business side and the design side of projects and to approach them in an integrated way," Becker says. "Having my hands in both of these disciplines helps me because often I'll find a design solution that also solves a budget problem, or utilize a financing solution that allows me to address a design and planning priority. My competitive strength is being able to take on projects that wouldn't be possible with the conventional design/development approach."

Matthew Nemerson, who served as New Haven's city economic development administrator under former Mayor Toni Harp, has worked extensively with Becker.

"Bruce is a great politician and also a great finance person — but there really is no one else in the state who combines a love of interesting architecture, and also innovative design and construction methodology," Nemerson says. Moreover, "He's always trying to do things that are green and sustainable."

"There are three architects in the country that do this — become the architect/developer," he added. "What makes Becker the most interesting is he does very few projects — one major one about every five years. He is a new entity — I don't think you could have had a Bruce Becker in the 20th century, because you would have needed a large group of humans to execute the amount of data to do projects of this scale."

Long-term play

The Pirelli building, designed by renowned architect Marcel Breuer and constructed in 1967, is best known for having no third and fourth floors — it seems to defy gravity. Becker plans to transform it into a boutique hotel.

Becker purchased the Sargent Drive structure and its 2.76-acre site from Swedish furniture retailer IKEA for the low price of \$1.2 million. IKEA owns and operates a vast showroom and retail store adjacent to the Pirelli building, and the deal was the culmination of two years of discussions.

Once the headquarters of the Armstrong Rubber Co., the building has sat idle for more than two decades, since 1999. City officials and IKEA have for years sought to have the building — treasured by architecture buffs and preservationists as a one-of-a-kind exemplar of mid-20th-century Brutalism — preserved and converted into a hotel to meet the surging demand for hotel rooms in greater New Haven.

That, of course, was prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, which sent the hospitality industry into a tailspin.

Becker says the market needs more hotels that satisfy the growing urge for sustainable design and travel, but he understands the industry won't be fully recovered when his new property debuts later this year. However, it's a long-term play, he said.

Bruce Becker's CT project portfolio

Hotel Marcel

Location: 500 Sargent Drive, New Haven

Project: 165 room boutique hotel, including restaurant, gallery and meeting space

Cost: \$50 million

Gross area: 110,000 sq. ft.

Timeline: Construction started summer 2020, completion expected summer 2021

Sustainability: Targeted LEED platinum certification. Solar power generated from rooftop and parking canopy arrays to provide 100% of electricity for lighting, heating and cooling; and electric car charging stations.



777 Main

Location: 777 Main St., Hartford

Project: 285 apartments (including 59 affordable units) six retail shops, full floor of resident amenities including gym, club room and library, and 250 car parking garage.

Cost: \$80 million

Gross area: 400,000 sq. ft.

Timeline: Construction started in spring 2016, completed fall 2017, and fully leased summer 2018

Sustainability: Renewable fuel cell power to provide electric, heat and hot water to building; electric car charging stations; smart metering with energy and water tracking for residents.



360 State

Location: 360 State St., New Haven

Project: 500 apartments (including 50 affordable units), Elm City Market cooperative grocery store, Devil's Gear bike shop, parking garage, green roof with swimming pool, library, fitness center, art gallery, club rooms and guest suites

Cost: \$145 Million

Gross area: 700,000 sq. ft.

Timeline: Construction started fall 2008, completed fall 2010, fully leased by 2012

Sustainability: LEED Platinum. Includes the first fuel cell in an apartment building in the world. Smart metering with energy and water tracking website for each resident; electric-car charging stations; 0.5-acre green roof.



An architectural icon reborn

Although the structure's exterior will remain visibly unchanged (except the replacement of 525 thermally efficient three-by-six-foot windows), the interior will be unrecognizable to those who may have attended the opening of then-Armstrong Rubber Co. in 1967.

The guest rooms will be on the upper floors, except for a gallery and meeting space on the top floor. Only the third and fourth floors will remain as they are today — open air.

Becker plans to transform the building into a 165-room hotel/conference center that will operate under the Hilton flag. Day-to-day operations will be handled by Maryland-based Chesapeake Hospitality. Becker says the build-out, financed in part by a \$25 million loan from Liberty Bank, will cost about \$50 million.

Becker plans not only to preserve the structure, but to create one of just a handful of net-zero energy boutique hotels and conference centers in the United States.

Becker says the new hotel will be Connecticut's first multi-unit residential facility targeting LEED platinum certification. Guest rooms will feature just one-fifth of the carbon footprint and utility bill of a conventional hotel room, says Becker. Clean and renewable power will be provided by a 400-kilowatt fuel cell on-site.

The "green" element extends to the Sargent Drive site: The new "Hotel Marcel" will be the closest hotel to Union Station for guests who ride the rails.

For Becker, this project, the product of

two years of discussions, is a "labor of love."

"There are people who think it's the ugliest building in Connecticut, and there are people who think it's the most beautiful building in Connecticut," Becker notes. "And certainly it is one of the most visible ones — there are 140,000 cars that pass it every day [on I-95]. So either you love it or you hate it. But you notice it."

Why did it take more than two decades for a viable redevelopment proposal to come forward?

"It's a very hard project to make happen," Becker explains. "IKEA deserves some credit for recognizing the importance of it and being somewhat cautious about embracing the first proposal to come forward. The building has great bones; architecturally it's a magnificent building. But it could easily be destroyed if it were redeveloped by somebody who didn't value the historic architecture. Most developers don't have an appreciation of that."

But Becker isn't most developers.

"Even if [a developer] has all the right values and skills, it's very hard for a hotel to be financed in this era," Becker says. "And it's hard to come up with a plan that fully respects and embraces the historic legacy of the Breuer building but also meets current market needs."

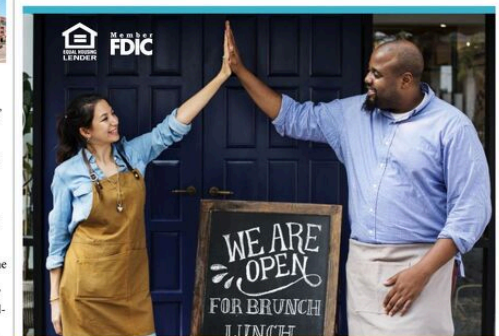
According to Becker, IKEA had been waiting for the right development and the right developer — someone who would finish what they start.

"This will be worth waiting for," Becker says, "even though it's been two decades of waiting." ■



Bruce Becker has a history of transforming iconic but older and mothballed buildings into new and modern uses.

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