



Madhouse to green house

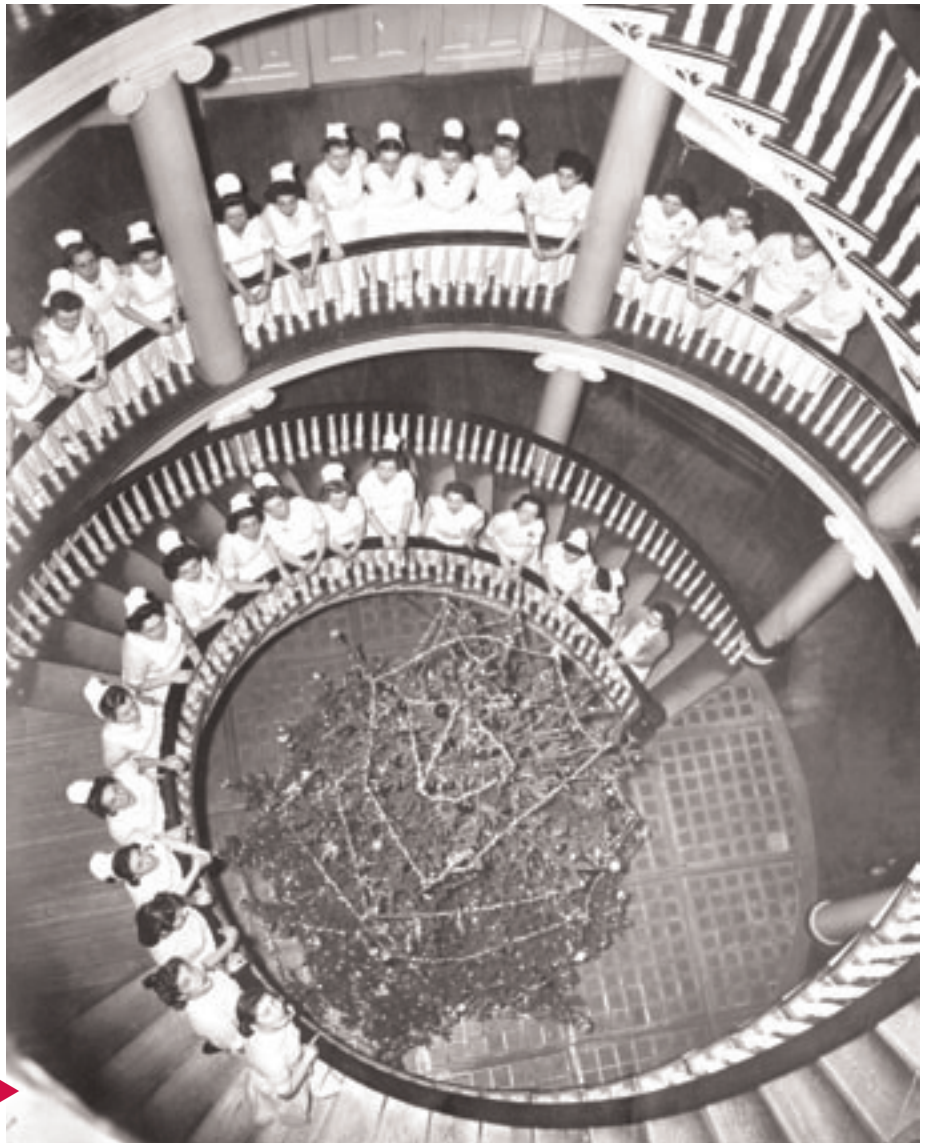
Bruce Becker, president of Becker + Becker Associates, feared that fate was not on his side a few years ago, as permit problems plagued his plans for the historic conversion of a 19th century hospital to apartments on an island in New York City's East River. Fate would take a turn.

PEGGY SHAW

When the 500-unit Octagon Apartments finally came to market last spring, the timing was absolutely perfect and lease-up was achieved with astonishing velocity of more than 75 units a month, more than double original expectations.

"When we were working through the approval process and finding ourselves delayed, we were frustrated. We never realized it was actually all part of a master plan that would insure our market timing was perfect. We also bought the project — we went out to bid — before the prices had escalated. And that was actually more important because in the two years since we started this, not only have rents gone up probably 15 percent, construction costs have gone up 50 percent, so we could never really do The Octagon again. It was this rare window where the construction costs were still reasonable and the rents were in a good place and, of course, they've gotten better," said Becker, whose company was architect and developer for the \$170 million project that was built by general contractor Gotham Construction.

"The easiest part was the building. It took a lot longer to get the plans and approval for the building than it took to build it," Becker



◀ FROM 1941 THROUGH 1958, THE METROPOLITAN HOSPITAL INCLUDED A SCHOOL OF NURSING. SOME OF THE STUDENTS GATHERED DURING A LONG-AGO CHRISTMAS CELEBRATION ON THE OCTAGON'S SPIRAL STAIRCASE, AT RIGHT, THAT WAS IMMORTALIZED BY CHARLES DICKENS IN HIS TRAVELOGUE, AMERICAN NOTES. SOME OF THE MORE DARING STUDENTS ENJOYED SLIDING DOWN THE BANISTER OF THE FIVE FLIGHTS OF STAIRS, ONE OF THE FORMER STUDENTS RECALLED DURING A REUNION THERE LAST SUMMER. ▶



said last month. “I made my first visit to the site in 1997 and we were working in earnest in 1999. We went through three different RFP processes and worked with four different preservation oversight agencies, but starting in 2004, things started to really speed up and, by 2005, we were on a fast track. We closed our construction contract and financing in November of 2004 and we went right through construction, finishing about six months earlier than anticipated,” he said.

Not that the site itself didn’t present significant challenges, offering little in the way of actual structures to reconstruct. But Becker, who for the past two decades has headed up the company founded 57 years ago by his late father, Nathaniel Becker, and his late uncle, Jules Becker, has a passion for historic restoration. He saw beyond the pitiful remains of the former hospital’s grand façade to its potential future as an equally beautiful apartment community.

Becker’s father and uncle established an international design and planning practice with offices in London and Chicago and Manhattan. When Becker, a registered architect, took over the firm in 1988, he redirected its focus to architecture and development, putting to use his education, which includes a masters degree in architecture, an MBA from Yale University and a B.A. from Amherst in American studies and fine arts.

Becker + Becker’s recent projects range from participation in commercial renovations like the \$1 million makeover of a florist shop in Darien, Conn., and new construction of \$11 million, 75,500-square-foot office building in Bermuda to educational facilities like the 100-acre Echo Hill Outdoor School that the firm master-planned in Still Pond, Md., and mixed use projects like the conversion of the historic Wauregan Hotel in Norwich, Conn., into 70 affordable apartments in five stories atop 4,000 square feet of ground-floor retail that was completed last fall.

“I had a background that got me interested in a wide range of issues and challenges. I think The Octagon was finally the project that challenged every aspect of my imagination and taxed every bit of experience and training I had,” Becker said.

The history

The hospital that Becker + Becker transformed into The Octagon apartments opened in 1841 as one of the first municipal lunatic asylums in the country. The New York Pauper Lunatic Asylum was built on the two-and-a-half-mile-long island in the East River that runs parallel to the

THE RECONSTRUCTED VERSION, BELOW, OF THE EIGHT-SIDED BUILDING ORIGINALLY DESIGNED BY CELEBRATED NEW YORK ARCHITECT ALEXANDER JACKSON DAVIS IN 1939 RECAPTURES THE ORIGINAL GRANDEUR OF THE STRUCTURE THAT ONCE HOUSED HOSPITAL ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICES AND NOW HOUSES THE OCTAGON’S LOBBY AND A NUMBER OF RESIDENT AMENITIES.

THE NEW YORK PAUPER LUNATIC ASYLUM OPENED ON ROOSEVELT ISLAND IN 1841. IN 1893, THE ASYLUM PATIENTS WERE MOVED TO WARD’S ISLAND AND THE ROOSEVELT ISLAND FACILITY (PICTURED ABOVE AS IT LOOKED IN 1913) BECAME A GENERAL HOSPITAL THAT PROVIDED HEALTH CARE TO THOUSANDS OF NEW YORKERS DURING ITS 60 YEARS AS A CITY HOSPITAL.



PAUL WARCHOL

Manhattan shoreline from 46th to 86th Streets.

Early records indicate that the sliver of land was known by the Canarsie Tribe as Minnahannock, which some say means, "it's nice to be here." When Dutch Governor Wouter Van Twiller bought the island it became a pig farm called Hog Island. The



CELEBRATED 19TH CENTURY WRITER CHARLES DICKENS (1812-1870), ABOVE, VISITED ROOSEVELT ISLAND IN 1942. HE ADMIRERD THE HOSPITAL'S MAGNIFICENT ARCHITECTURE, BUT WAS DISTURBED BY THE CONDITION OF THE LUNATIC ASYLUM'S PATIENTS.

British ousted the Dutch in 1666 and Captain John Manning acquired the island, giving it his name. His step-daughter married Robert Blackwell, who later followed the family tradition and renamed it Blackwell's Island.

The city bought the island for \$32,500 in 1828 from Blackwell's decendants, and built the prison and lunatic asylum

that Charles Dickens toured in 1842, when construction still was underway. In his travelogue *American Notes*, Dickens described the Octagon Building that housed the hospital's administrative offices between the two four-story patient wings as "handsome" and "remarkable for its spacious and elegant



THE EXTERIOR OF THE OCTAGON'S MAIN BUILDING UNDERWENT A TRADITIONAL HISTORIC RESTORATION, GUIDED BY OLD PHOTOS OF THE STRUCTURE. SO LITTLE OF THE INTERIOR REMAINED THAT BECKER + BECKER BROUGHT IN THE ROCKWELL GROUP'S INTERIOR DESIGN TEAM TO HELP WITH AN INTERPRETIVE RESTORATION OF THE INSIDE, CREATING A NEW INTERIOR THAT IS AS DRAMATIC AS THE ORIGINAL, BUT MORE MODERN.

staircase." But he deplored the condition of the inmates, writing, "Everything had a lounging, listless, madhouse air, which was very painful." The great writer was so dismayed by the dismal scene that he cut short his visit to the island.

The situation at the asylum remained relatively unchanged until journalist Elizabeth Cochrane, writing under the pen name Nellie Bly, feigned insanity and spent 10 days there in September 1887, which she chronicled in a lengthy piece, "Ten Days in

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a Madhouse,” for the *New York World*. Her exposé prompted a grand jury investigation into the deplorable conditions, resulting in recommendations that improved the lives of the inmates there until they were moved to another asylum on Ward’s Island in 1893.

The Blackwell’s Island facility became a municipal hospital and was renamed Metropolitan Hospital in 1895. The Metropolitan Hospital School of Nursing opened its doors there in 1902.

Ten years later, the hospital made the news again when it was one of several medical facilities in New York City that treated the sick and injured among the 710 survivors of the Titanic disaster that were

brought to Port of New York on the Cunard Line’s RMS *Carpathia* on April 18, 1912.

Thousands of New Yorkers were born and cared for there during its 60 years as a city hospital. It closed in the late 1950s, after which the buildings slowly deteriorated. The city renamed the island Roosevelt Island in 1973, referring to a plan to build a memorial to Franklin Delano Roosevelt there. That project was abandoned when the memorial’s architect, Louis Kahn, died, but the redevelopment continued, resulting in construction of 3,200 apartments in five affordable and mixed-income communities by 1989, most of which have since gone market-rate, co-op or condo.

FIVE HUNDRED APARTMENTS FLANK THE OCTAGON’S EIGHT-SIDED ROTUNDA IN TWO 14-STORY WINGS, FACED WITH FINELY DRESSED GRAY STONE TO MATCH THE BLUE-GRAY SCHIST OF THE CENTRAL BUILDING. THE EDIFICE’S CLASSIC LINES RECAPTURE THE FLORENTINE GRANDEUR OF THE ORIGINAL STRUCTURE.

In the late 1970s, the two wings flanking the Octagon Building that was designed by prominent architect Alexander Jackson Davis were judged too blighted for reconstruction and succumbed to the wrecking ball. And fires in 1982 and 1999 destroyed 90 percent of the Octagon Building, leaving behind just eight charred, crumbling walls.

The historic conversion of the Octagon Building that is listed on the National Register of Historic Places was partially

funded by \$10.2 million in federal historic tax credits, but, because there was so little left of the Octagon, Becker + Becker did a historical restoration on the outside of the building and an interpretive restoration on the inside.

“Using historic tax credits, you have the option, when there’s not enough historic fabric that remains, to reinvent an interior. So we brought in David Rockwell’s interior design organization, which created a new interior that I think is as dramatic as the original was, but more modern. Since we had a free hand in terms of design on the inside, we remade the interior as common amenities for the residential community, going up five levels. If you count the little gallery at the very top of the cupola, it’s six levels,” Becker said.

Because two four-story wings of the hospital were not included in the historic designation for the property, Becker had a relatively free hand in their reconstruction, building two 14-story wings in the footprints of the old structures. They house 400 market-rate apartments and 100 units affordable to middle-income families, who earn up to 150 percent of area median income, or \$66,000/year. The studios, ones, twos and threes range from 423 to 1,315 square feet and market rents range from \$1,800 to \$5,900 for the four three-bedroom penthouses that include decks. PRC Management is overseeing day-to-day operations at the community.

The amenities in the main building include a 2,200 square foot fitness center, a screening room, a club room, a billiards room, a library, two conference rooms and a gallery, and offices for the Roosevelt Island Historical Society. A children’s playroom and onsite day care center for infants, toddlers and preschool children also are available to the residents. Bright Horizons provides the full-day preschool and infant care at the facility that serves 50 children, where priority is given to Octagon residents, with costs running from \$1,400/month for preschoolers to \$1,800/month for infant care. A general store and Internet café recently opened on the site that also includes a swimming pool restricted to resident use.

“We tried to develop a home for people that gives them as much free time as possible, so they can concentrate on hanging out around the pool instead of schlepping around getting their child to daycare or running out and getting a loaf of bread. We have full concierge service in the lobby for things like dry cleaning and shoe repair and we have underground parking for 135 cars.

We’re the only building on Roosevelt Island that has parking onsite,” Becker said. The parking spaces rent for \$225 per month.

“We also have these ZipCars, three cars that the residents can use for short- and long-term rentals. We really tried to introduce as many conveniences as we could,

and all of that is in the context of a site that has incredible views of the Manhattan skyline — the best views of Manhattan in Manhattan,” he said.

In addition to the amenities on the 2.5 acres that Becker + Becker leases from the Roosevelt Island Operating Corporation, a



THE 50KW ROOF-INTEGRATED PHOTOVOLTAIC ARRAY (ABOVE) IS THE LARGEST IN MANHATTAN, PRODUCING ENOUGH ELECTRICITY TO POWER ALL OF THE OCTAGON’S COMMON AREAS, CORRIDORS, ELEVATORS AND LOBBY. THE COMMUNITY’S MYRIAD GREEN FEATURES INCLUDE ROOFTOP HEAT RECOVERY UNITS, NET ELECTRICAL METERING, OCCUPANCY SENSORS AND A SWIMMING POOL THAT IS CONNECTED TO THE BUILDING’S WATER LOOP TO IMPROVE EFFICIENCY OF SUMMERTIME COOLING.



BY 2000, ONLY EIGHT CHARRED WALLS REMAINED OF THE ONCE GRAND OCTAGON BUILDING THAT SERVED AS THE ENTRY AND ADMINISTRATIVE SPACES FOR THE HOSPITAL THAT CLOSED IN THE 1950S. THE WINGS THAT FLANKED IT WERE DEMOLISHED IN THE LATE 1970S AND FIRES IN 1982 AND 1999 DESTROYED 90 PERCENT OF THE BUILDING.



quasi-state agency that was an offshoot of the city's Urban Development Corporation, Becker built an ecological park overlooking the river that includes a playground, walking paths and native plantings on the other half of the five-acre site. The developer also built six tennis courts, which are open to anyone on the island for a token annual payment of \$150.

Development funding for the community included \$5.3 million in New York State Green Building Tax Credits, \$1,550,000 in total grants and a 10-year interest reduction on loan proceeds from the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority. The interest reduction supports the site's installation of the largest rooftop photovoltaic array of any building in Manhattan that produces 50 KW of power, enough electricity for all the community's common areas.

In order to meet requirements of the green building tax credit program, the



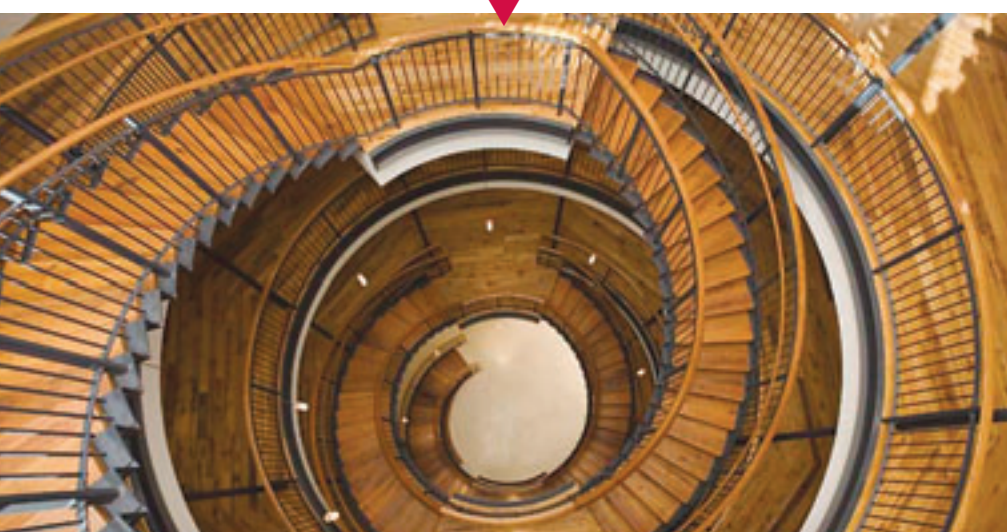
BECKER + BECKER PRESIDENT BRUCE BECKER'S PASSION FOR HISTORIC RESTORATION KEPT HIM GOING THROUGH THE OCTAGON'S PERMIT PROCESS THAT TOOK NEARLY A DECADE, FROM RFP TO FINAL OK. HIS FIRM HAS A GROWING REPUTATION FOR SUCCESS WITH PRESERVATION PROJECTS WHERE BUILDINGS WERE THOUGHT TO BE BEYOND REDEMPTION.

Octagon was built to be 35 percent more energy efficient than comparable non-green buildings, using such techniques as low-E argon-filled windows, highly insulated walls and roof, high-efficiency heat pumps and condensing boilers, occupancy sensors to control hallway and stair lighting and heat recovery units to capture energy from exhausted air and heat from waste water.

More than 40 percent of the building materials are from recycled sources and 50 percent are manufactured within 500 miles of the site. Kitchen cabinets are made from wheat hulls, a rapidly renewable material, and no products that emit toxic fumes, like urea formaldehyde in particle board, were used in the construction. Even the pool chairs are made of 100 percent recycled material. The community also makes use of the island's AVAC system, the only pneu-

THE 19TH CENTURY SPIRAL STAIRCASE THAT GRACED THE ORIGINAL OCTAGON TOWER WAS VERY TRADITIONAL, BLENDING IN WITH THE ROTUNDA'S IONIC COLUMNS AND COLONIAL DETAIL. ITS REPLACEMENT REFLECTS THE MODERN ELEGANCE OF THE INTERPRETIVELY RESTORED INTERIOR, BUT RETAINS THE SOARING SPLENDOR OF THE ORIGINAL.

BECKER + BECKER'S DEVELOPMENT ON ROOSEVELT ISLAND COVERS FIVE ACRES THAT STRETCH FROM SHORE TO SHORE OF THE ISLAND THAT IS THREE-QUARTERS OF A MILE WIDE AT ITS WIDEST POINT. THE OCTAGON SITS ON 2.5 LEASED ACRES, WITH THE TENNIS COURTS, ECOLOGICAL PARK AND WALKING PATHS LOCATED ON THE PUBLIC PORTION OF THE PROPERTY.





THE OCTAGON'S STUDIOS, ONE, TWOS AND THREES INCLUDE NUMEROUS LUXURY FINISHES LIKE HARDWOOD FLOORS, CERAMIC TILED KITCHENS WITH GRANITE COUNTERTOPS AND STAINLESS-STEEL APPLIANCES AND FLOOR-TO-CEILING WINDOWS WITH FABULOUS VIEWS OF NEW YORK CITY'S SKYLINE.

matic garbage collection in New York, which runs under all of the multifamily housing on the island. Trash is deposited in chutes in the buildings, sucked into an underground pipe and propelled by a system of air valves at speeds of up to sixty mph to the AVAC center at the northern tip of the island, where it is compacted.

Becker hopes one day to tap into the electricity supplied by Verdant Power, which has installed test turbines in the East River that just started turning last month, driven by the tidal current and churning out power that will provide electricity, during an 18-month trial period, to the Gristedes supermarket and community parking facility on the island.

The energy-saving measures built into the Octagon translate into lower utility bills for the community's residents. "So, not only is it a more responsible way of living, but more economical," Becker said, adding that monthly electricity bills for studio apartments average around \$20 and around \$80 for the three-bedroom apartments. "In all of our decisions, we've tried to be environmentally responsible and found it not only has inherent value, but is also an attraction from a marketing perspective. We have a lot of very passionate environmentalists in the building."

"It ended up being very attractive to younger professionals, people in their 20s, 30s and 40s. I think our average age might be as low as 30. We have a lot of idealistic young

professionals, who like the green building features, the history of the building, the amenities, the finishes and the views. A lot of folks were attracted by the day care center. We actually have a lot of pregnant women in the building. I think they moved in realizing that when their children were on the scene, it would sort of be an ideal lifestyle, where they could use the childcare center for the building and, if they wanted to return to the workforce, they could do that quickly," Becker said.

The community is also popular with tennis players and people who put a value on having a little more peace and quiet and open space than you might find in other neighborhoods in Manhattan. "I think there probably is a higher proportion of women in the building, drawn to it

because it's a safe neighborhood," he said, referring to the fact that the island is virtually crime free.

The final piece of the project is the addition of water taxi service to the transportation options already available to the residents of the island that include a vehicular bridge to Queens, subway access, an F Train stop and a tram.

Becker already has four of the five permits needed to establish water taxi access and expects to receive the final permit for rebuilding of a dock from the Army Corps of Engineers by mid-February.

Now, Becker + Becker, which has a national reputation for tackling historic restoration projects often judged too challenging by other developers, is looking at other project possibilities. "We're committed to doing green development for our next project," he said, adding that Multi-Employer Property Trust, the pension fund that invested around \$145 million in the Octagon, is eager to work with his company on other sites.

"We're looking at some large-scale mixed-use projects in New Haven and Bridgeport, Conn., as well as in New Jersey. We're not sure which one's going to be next. We're just laying the groundwork," Becker said. ■

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