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Dumbo adding pachyderm-sized projects

New high-rise condominiums with 525 units dwarf area loft buildings

By Steve Cutler

Despite its reputation as Brooklyn's priciest condo spot, Dumbo, the 25-block area at the eastern foot of the Manhattan Bridge, has only 1,500 residents ensconced in lofts in converted factory buildings.

So, when construction is completed on the two largest projects to hit the neighborhood, J Condominium and 70 Washington, the 525 apartments they'll add to the area will have an outsized impact.

"For Dumbo to be a self-sustaining neighborhood," says David Kramer, principal at Hudson Properties, developer of J Condominium, "you have to have more people to help the retail environment. These two projects normally wouldn't mean that much in other neighborhoods, but in Dumbo they'll help."

Once it is completed in 2007, J Condominium will affect more than the neighborhood economy. A modern glass tower soaring above low-rise late 19th-century industrial buildings, it will leave a lasting imprint on the area's architecture.

At 33 stories, J Condominium will become a Dumbo landmark.

"We know we're going to be that tallest building in the neighborhood for the foreseeable future," says architect Michael Gelfand, head of residential housing for Gruzen Samton, designer of the building. "It's also a gateway to that section of Brooklyn. As you come across the bridge, the glassy area of the building is sort of a beacon, a lighthouse for that part of Brooklyn."

The builders hope the design will help sell the building. According to Gelfand, "People today are spending a lot of money and they want to be able to say, 'I live in that building.' They don't want the background building."

If buyers are happy to be seen, the designers intend for them to be thrilled with what they see.

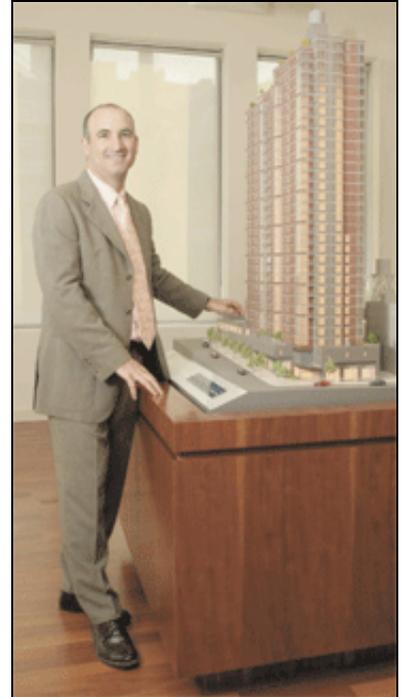
"It's very carefully sculptured in its floor plan to take advantage of the views," says Gelfand. "Almost every apartment has a phenomenal view. It's got a serrated edge on the north and west facing façade, which have the views toward Manhattan. The curved glass area takes advantage of the panoramic view up harbor -- the Statue of Liberty -- once you get up to a certain level."

The design pays homage to historic Dumbo. "With the base of the building, we tried to pick up on the old industrial aspects of the buildings," Gelfand says. "We used some big exposed steel lintels [horizontal beams supporting the window] and big openings to mimic some of the old warehouses at the base."

Hudson Properties, which is developing J Condominium in a special arrangement with the site's owner Cara Development, wants to attract a wide range of buyers with its mix of apartment layouts, including first-timers. Kramer says half the building is studio and one-bedroom apartments, providing a real alternative to large, pricey lofts.

There will be 42 studios, 104 one-bedrooms, 66 two-bedrooms and 54 three-bedrooms, which will sell in the range of \$700 to \$800 per square foot. The building will contain an onsite garage, 2,000-square-foot fitness center, children's playroom, media room and rooftop terrace.

A few other large luxury condominiums are under construction in Dumbo, including the 23-story, 79-unit Beacon Tower; 12-story,



Dumbo's Tallest: David Kramer, principal at Hudson Properties, next to a model of J Condominium

56-unit Nexus; and a 30-story tower at 85 Adams Street.

But most future new construction will likely be modest in scale. Zoning requirements for new projects in the neighborhood have been decided on a case-by-case basis. "J Condominium was an anomaly of the zoning," according to Gelfand. "I think everything else there will be lower and more contextual to the neighborhood."

A number of forces are in motion to limit high-rise construction in Dumbo. The area is being considered for landmark status by the Landmarks Preservation Commission, and the Dumbo Neighborhood Association has appealed to the Department of City Planning to rezone the neighborhood, limiting the height of new buildings.

Unlike J Condominium, most new apartments in Dumbo are created through the conversion of existing office and industrial buildings, in the same manner as the luxury lofts at 70 Washington Street. The building, a conversion of a 1910 manufacturing plant, is the largest project to date by David Walentas' Two Trees Management, the developer who put Dumbo on the map with conversions of the Clock Tower and Sweeney buildings.

70 Washington sold a third of its 260 units in the first week of sales in May; then sales slowed a bit.

"We're at the 50 percent mark now," according to director of sales Toby Klein, "ahead of our projection."

Klein says approximately 25 percent of sales so far have come from people who are upgrading from other Two Trees' Dumbo properties and the remainder are split evenly between people from Manhattan and from Brooklyn and elsewhere.

The loft apartments feature 11-foot ceilings, bamboo flooring, wine coolers, kitchens with Sub Zero, Viking and Thermador appliances and master bathrooms with Jacuzzi tubs, separate showers and glass tile floor. The building offers city and river views, a fitness center and a 7,500-squarefoot roof deck. Rooftop cabanas are available for sale for 22 residents. The units start at \$800,000.

There's very little room in Dumbo for new residential construction. "There are one or two spaces left," says William Ross, director of Brooklyn sales for Halstead. "The developers know about them. However, David Walentas owns 2 million square feet of office space right now."

Dumbo draws eclectic commercial and retail

A year or two of free rent was the needed incentive to kick-start the retail scene on Dumbo's quaint cobbled streets. While freebies are part of the neighborhood's past, rents in the area remain relatively inexpensive at around \$20 a square foot.

The neighborhood is staking a claim as a new destination for metro area shoppers and weekend strollers.

"You see the blue hairs and Mercedes," says Chris Havens, Two Trees director of commercial leasing. "A lot of people are coming over from South Street Seaport."

Two Trees' co-owner, David Walentas, carefully planned the commercial character of the neighborhood as he developed his property, which includes 2 million square feet of office space; he offered free rent to selected retailers when he put the Clock Tower on the market in 1998.

"There was really nothing down here except some pizza and rice and beans," recalls Havens. "What David did to get a grocery store, Jacque Torres [the celebrity chocolatier], a hardware store, frame shop, coffee house -- he gave away space for a year or two free."

Jed Walentas, David's son and partner, went to Rice, a popular Pan-Asian Downtown restaurant, recalls Havens, "and asked, 'Do you want to do something in Dumbo? We'll give you this cool space -- you've just got to build it.'"

Starbucks came in a year ago paying in the mid-\$30s per square foot. West Elm furniture, ABC Carpet and Wonk, the contemporary furniture store, have succeeded here and other high-end retailers are testing the waters. New arrivals include Journey, the chic housewares store, Blueberi, the fashion boutique, and Pomme, the high-end children's store. And the tiny neighborhood has 17 art exhibition spaces.

Commercial property above street level is changing as well. According to William Ross, director of Brooklyn sales for Halstead, "When the Clock Tower opened, 50 percent of the office space were people like bathrobe makers. Now it's publishers, attorneys, graphic design studios and public relations."

New tenants include Fuzzcode and Andromache Chalfant, noted video game developers; Gary Tsirelman PC, a medical and business law firm; and four magazine and book publishing houses. Architects are also taking space, with two new firms signing leases last month.

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