

The Zeckendorfs

A Lasting Legacy

by Steve Cutler

“In New York we have a particular kind of real-estate entrepreneurship,” observes architect Robert A.M. Stern, who has written five books on the city’s architectural history. “We have families like the Zeckendorfs going from generation to generation. These people are interested in building spectacularly for the love of building in part, but also just to create a place in the sun.”

Few families have had so dramatic an impact on the New York City landscape as have the Zeckendorfs in their three generations of entrepreneurship, starting with William Sr. in the 1940s. Their large-scale projects have transformed neighborhoods in every quadrant of the city and changed the way buildings are made and sold.

William Zeckendorf Sr. was a flamboyant, voracious deal maker who built or owned—and ultimately lost—vast real estate holdings, including such properties as Roosevelt Field on Long Island, the Chrysler building and Chase Manhattan Plaza in Manhattan, and the Mile High Center in Denver.

Zeckendorf Sr.’s most significant deal, earning the family a lasting legacy of civic good will, was his contribution of the land mass on which the United Nations was built. Piece by piece Zeckendorf acquired 17 acres of land, including 75 individual properties, from 42nd Street to 49th Street on the East River, with plans to develop a massive urban center to include office and apartment towers, a 6,000-room hotel, a concert hall, a center for the Metropolitan Opera, a marina, and floating nightclub.

At the time, the UN operated out of a vacated defense plant on Long Island and needed a permanent headquarters site. New York City was determined to keep the UN, but the city was flat broke, its infrastructure declining after years of neglect during WWII. Plus, there was no site big enough in Manhattan to accommodate the institution, and San Francisco, Boston, and especially Philadelphia were competing ferociously to win the contract.

New York City mayor William O’Dwyer recruited Nelson Rockefeller to serve on a task force led by powerful parks commissioner Robert Moses to work with UN secretary general Trygve Lie, secure land, navigate hugely complicated negotiations, and raise financing for the project.

In stepped William Zeckendorf, who, the story goes, having read over his morning coffee of the plight of the United Nations’ search for a home, offered to sell nine acres of his East River site for a pittance. John Rockefeller took him up on the offer, paying \$8.5 million for the land, which he donated to the UN.

Zeckendorf was active in the development of the project in its early stages, and through his association

with Secretary General Lie came a fateful event. His son, William Jr., had a blind date with Lie’s daughter, Guri, and soon after they married. Their two sons, William Lie Zeckendorf and Arthur Zeckendorf, are now at the helm of the family business.

William Zeckendorf Jr.

William Zeckendorf Jr. was a visionary developer in his own right. “He was 20 years ahead of his time,” says Arthur Zeckendorf. “His two most notable projects were probably the Columbia at 96th Street and Broadway, a trendsetter at the time, one of the first of the condominiums built after the 1970s. The other was Union Square,” referring to Zeckendorf Towers at One Irving Place and Park Avenue South, one of the most important developments of the 1980s.

Zeckendorf Towers was bold not only for its size — it was the first residential development in the city to have four towers - but for its location. The 26-story red-brick towers replaced several run-down low-rise buildings at Union Square Park, which had been overrun by drug dealers, and, recalls Arthur, “the area had declined in the ’70s, as many neighborhoods had. The development transformed the neighborhood.”

“Will and I were working for the company at the time,” recalls Arthur, “more from a marketing standpoint. We were the first developer to build off-site models of the apartments as well as a model of the building in which each apartment actually lit up.”

Worldwide Plaza

Zeckendorf Jr. pioneered another area of the city in the mid ’80s — the seriously devolved Times Square area —with Worldwide Plaza, which again proved instrumental in the revitalization of its environs. “If you look at Eight Avenue now,” says Arthur, “it’s as hot as can be.”

Occupying an entire block at Eighth Avenue and 50th Street, the beautifully designed Worldwide Plaza contains 455 condominium apartments spread among a 35-story tower and a group of six-story structures, a 50-story office building, an open-air plaza with restaurants, and, at the time of its opening in 1989, a welcomed cinema complex.

When William Zeckendorf Jr. retired, says Arthur, he and Will “purchased Terra Holdings in order to diversify our holdings and bought office buildings with our partners.” They also bought Brown Harris Stevens brokerage and Halstead Properties, “creating,” says Arthur, “the largest sales company in Manhattan. It’s been a very successful business.”

515 Park Avenue

Their approach to residential development assumed a different profile: “We’re going after super-prime locations,” says Arthur. “We like to do one or two projects at a time, go after the very high end.” Their first hands-on project in this development model was the 43-story 515 Park Avenue at 60th Street, the tallest residential building on Park Avenue, a postmodern limestone and beige-brick luxury tower completed in 2000.

The building’s 38 apartments, 12 of which are duplexes, have grand layouts with spacious entrance foyers and stunning vistas. Featuring private wine cellars and a dining room off the lobby, the building went up just in time for the surge in luxury condominiums—and the soaring prices that went along with them—that came in late 1990s.

15 Central Park West

In 2004, the brothers acquired the land for their *pièce de résistance*, 15 Central Park West, on 60th Street between Broadway and Central Park West. “Two hundred feet on Central Park West doesn’t come along very often,” says Will Zeckendorf, in an understatement. “This is the last significant available site likely for a generation,” observes the architect for the project, Robert A.M. Stern. “Maybe forever.”

The \$1 billion ultra-luxury project consists of two wings: the 20-story House on Central Park West and the 43-story Tower bordering Broadway. The two neoclassical buildings, connected by a private courtyard, are clad in limestone taken from the source of the stone for the Empire State Building and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Amenities will include a 13,500-square-foot fitness center and spa, designed by Robert A.M. Stern, with a 75-foot swimming pool featuring skylights illuminated by the reflecting pool in the garden above; private dining room with full-time chef; wine cellars; business center; children’s playroom; and a Theo Kalomirakas–designed private screening room with seating for 20. Owners are offered 29 guest/staff suites for purchase.

The apartments reflect traditional prewar values: “They have big rooms,” says Stern, “opening to each other in ways that are gracious so people can flow through the apartment, particularly the living rooms, libraries, and dining rooms.” With new-world prices: some units sell for more than \$6,000 a square foot. A 6,600-square-foot penthouse with setback terrace overlooking the park asks \$45 million.

While the building, scheduled for occupancy early 2007, comes up at an uncertain time in the real estate market “I think this project operates at a certain level,”

he notes, “and is geared to a certain income, which puts it in a whole different category. Nothing’s ever 100 percent immune, but it’s certainly significantly immune from market fluctuations.”

“Sales have been successful,” according to Arthur at the time of this writing. “The building is over half sold — 115 contracts out of 200.”



Arthur Zeckendorf, Robert A.M. Stern and William Lie Zeckendorf

Construction Challenges

While the construction is going very smoothly, he says, it has had its interesting moments. “You have to bring the limestone in from Canada and you have to bring the trucks through customs and have them arrive on time.” And the winter weather presented some challenges. “With the record blizzard that came in on a Sunday we had to spend Monday, Monday night, and Tuesday shoveling snow on over an acre. We had to heat it so it wouldn’t ice up. But we only lost a day.”

Again with this project, the Zeckendorfs show mastery in marketing. “It takes the concept of a sales center to a new level,” says Will, referring to the whole-floor model apartment designed by Stern at Carnegie Hall Tower on 57th Street “And we took double-

page ads. You have to stand out.”

The team took a new approach to brokers. “In the ‘80s, most projects didn’t use outside brokers. In this project we’ve used over 50 brokerage firms, throwing broker parties and teas.”

The Fun Part

Amid their vast real estate operations, “development is probably the most challenging yet fun part of the business,” says Arthur. “You have many obstacles to overcome, but it’s rewarding because you actually see your product being built. You buy an existing building and there’s nothing you can do to it but upgrade the lobby. It’s much easier than doing development.”

“Site acquisition is a challenge,” adds Will. “Design is always complicated and finding the right market is complicated. Building in New York is not getting any easier.”

But, says Arthur, “when I drive across Zeckendorf Boulevard on Long Island or stand in Union Square Park, I feel pride that our family has accomplished so much.”

Of his motivation to continue developing, he says, “It’s the satisfaction of completing the project. Right now, we’re at the 14th floor of concrete at 15 Central Park West. Every day you see the floors go up and the limestone go on and eventually you’ll see the lobby being built. And in a year from now, hopefully, we can walk you through the project.” ■