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Developers burnishing the old Jersey City

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Eric and Paul Silverman are not your ordinary real estate developers.

While other developers are making a splash building modern skyscrapers and luxury condos on the waterfront, the Silverman brothers have spent the last two decades quietly turning former warehouses into mixed-use buildings, schools into residences and storefronts into fashionable shops in the historic district Downtown.

So far, they've produced more than 500 units of market-rate and affordable housing, with more on the way.

From the Park Hamilton on 10th Street to the St. Boniface Apartments on First Street to the Park Foundry at the corner of 10th Street and Jersey Avenue, for which they received a 2001 Excellence in Preservation Award from the Jersey City Landmarks Conservancy, the brothers have looked to make their mark while preserving the history of the buildings they renovate.

"They're a model for other developers," said John Gomez, the president of the Jersey City Landmarks Conservancy. "They could have knocked the buildings down, but they didn't. They care about the history of Jersey City."

The Silvermans' latest project is hard to miss, since it involves the four Grove Street buildings directly across from City Hall, which have stood vacant, boarded-up or in disrepair for more than 20 years. One of the buildings once held the celebrated Majestic Theatre, a vaudeville house that drew such luminaries as Mae West, Houdini and the Marx Brothers.

To look at the storefronts today and compare them to a postcard of the Majestic Theatre circa 1909, it's as if the buildings never changed.

Historic details, from the twin lions holding the decorative marquee on the Majestic to the window shutters on the two surrounding buildings, have been restored. Passersby today would never guess the shops were a nightmare less than three years ago, when the Silvermans first became involved in the project.

Grove Street

The first Grove Street building the Silvermans restored was the former bank building at 279 Grove. It now houses the Merchant, an upscale restaurant and the Silvermans' new offices upstairs.

Next door, at 277 Grove, the two-story early Victorian wood clapboard building with terra cotta shutters looks much as it did a century ago. It may soon house another eatery.

At 275, construction on the former Majestic Theatre is in full swing.

"Most of the original details of the building were lost," Silverman said. "But by studying photographs of the theater and architectural renderings from the period when it was built, we've been able to restore a great deal of it. The original doors of the theater were refurbished and will be reinstalled."

The auditorium could seat 2,300 people and had a 77-foot proscenium stage, and an observation balcony that was modeled after the Grand Opera House in Paris.

The Majestic featured live theater as well as movies in the early days of the cinema, screening its first feature film in 1915: D.W. Griffith's now-controversial "The Birth of a Nation."

The Majestic closed as a theater in the 1950s.

When it's reborn, the Majestic will house a small retail space, while the back will be cordoned off to become the lobby of the Majestic Theatre Condominiums, a six-story, 45-unit brick complex.

The luxury condominium project is slated to be completed in 2004, but dozens of units have already been sold.

Next door to the Majestic, Weichert Realtors has settled into the newly renovated four-story building at 273 Grove, where around the corner in the same building Antheia, a flower shop with a cool contemporary twist, has opened.

"When people think about the renewal of Jersey City," Mayor Glenn D. Cunningham said, "they think about the waterfront. Projects like the Majestic Theatre and the buildings surrounding it show the continuum of growth here, turning the Gold Coast into golden neighborhoods."

First project

The first project that drew the Silvermans to Jersey City was a dilapidated building on Sussex Street in Paulus Hook.

"We try to preserve the soul of a building," Eric Silverman explained.

While the brothers, who are in their 40s, grew up in an old Colonial house in Ridgewood in Bergen County, it was Eric's interest in architecture that first drew him into real estate development after he graduated from the University of Vermont. His enthusiasm convinced Paul, a graduate of Muhlenberg College in Allentown, Pa., to join him.

"Eric's the creative one," Paul said about his younger brother. "He can look at a building and instantly envision its potential."

Robert Cotter, director of planning for the city of Jersey City, compliments the Silvermans for their knowledge of the codes and regulations that govern the restoration of historic buildings and then seeing the process through.

Joining the community

Although Paul lives in Montclair and Eric lives in a small town in Hunterdon County, the Silvermans have become very active in the Jersey City community and sit on the boards of several nonprofit organizations.

The Silvermans are also branching out to different parts of Jersey City.

A project for Goldman Sachs developing 21 affordable housing units in two connected buildings on Martin Luther King Drive is already in the works.