

‘What towns all over CT need to have’ — can Darien blueprint be duplicated?

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Baywater Properties CEO David Genovese speaks Nov. 22 near the construction site for the Corbin District in Darien, with co-developer Penny Glassmeyer, left, on hand.

Alexander Soule / Hearst Connecticut Media

As he readied for his final semesters at Norwalk Community College, Andre Denunzio took a job this past September moonlighting as a cashier at Whole Foods Market in neighboring Darien.

The 22-year-old will soon move to Darien himself, one of the most affluent towns in America — and one that has handed other Connecticut towns a potential blueprint for how to go about mixed-use downtown redevelopment with a blend of old and new, and perhaps a bigger mix of people from differing walks of life.

If completed as planned under developers David Genovese and Penny Glassmeyer, the Corbin District will transform downtown Darien, on a far smaller scale but with the grand intentions as Building & Land Technology’s remake of Stamford’s South End, where it created the Harbor Point luxury high-rise neighborhood from scratch.

While other Connecticut towns have seen big developments in their downtown districts the past few decades — Bedford Square in Westport, Storrs Center in Mansfield and Blue Back Square in West Hartford to name a few — the Corbin District is notable for its scale, with 11 new buildings and a town green on seven acres requiring extensive demolition and site preparation for new construction.

In Connecticut, which saw renewed appeal during the COVID-19 pandemic as New York City renters moved to the suburbs, could the Corbin District model

serve as a template for other towns? David Lehman thinks so in his role as the state economic and community development commissioner under Gov. Ned Lamont, and before that as a real estate and municipal finance expert with investment banking firm Goldman Sachs.

“Transformational is a word you hear a lot from politicians, and I think that’s an overused word — but here it is absolutely appropriate,” Lehman said last week at a ceremony in Darien marking the start of construction. “When I think of the impact that the Corbin District will have on the town of Darien, this is exactly in my mind what towns all over Connecticut need to have, in terms of investment and bringing mixed use and residential and retail — more vibrancy in downtown.”

‘Nobody does that’

Genovese was himself previously a real estate investment banker, with Credit Suisse. He created Baywater Properties 20 years ago alongside his father Rocky, who ran Genovese Industries in Stamford’s South End. O&G Industries acquired the firm in 1996.

In a nod to the Corbin District’s potential and Baywater’s other projects in Darien, in 2018 the Connecticut Main Street Center handed Genovese its annual “Founders” award recognizing major achievements in downtown revitalization. He remains the lone private-sector developer to receive the award in its two-decade history, among a parade of urban planners and advocates.

Connecticut Main Street Center’s interim CEO Kimberley Parsons-Whitaker says the Corbin District is “a unique situation” in her words, given the challenges in getting Darien residents to embrace a denser downtown.

“The Corbin District represents a paradigm shift in thinking in the community,” Parsons-Whitaker said in an email. “What is more common (and for good reason) is the incremental: the challenge of bringing individual buildings and sites back to life, redeveloping bit by bit.”

For Steve Olvany, chairman of Darien’s planning and zoning commission, perhaps the most surprising element of the project is the efforts by Genovese and

Glassmeyer to assist current tenants by finding them temporary quarters while their buildings are razed in the coming years for Corbin District replacements — an incremental process in its own right.

“These guys are spending so much money moving tenants from the left side of the street to the right side of the street — and then bring them back to this side of the street,” Olvany said. “Nobody does that.”

It took Baywater Properties and PG Properties 16 years to assemble the properties through land purchases or roping in landowners to its partnership team for the project, and to win approval from Darien’s planning and zoning department.

Genovese is quick to credit Glassmeyer, whose PG Properties built the Grove Street Plaza just off the Boston Post Road opposite The Corbin District’s footprint. On days the weather cooperates, Grove Street Plaza’s courtyard is a magnet for people lingering over coffee or lunch.

“Penny was the pioneer for the revitalization of downtown Darien,” Genovese said. “Penny set the bar very high.”

The test of time

More than 1,000 Darien residents and business owners attended meetings or otherwise weighed in with opinions on the project over the years, according to Genovese. He said Baywater adjusted its plans repeatedly based on feedback from the public and town officials, including adding more street-level parking and concealing a four-story garage inside the orbit of an outer ring of apartments and retail buildings.

Beinfield Architecture produced the designs for the buildings and streetscapes.

“One of the most enduring charms of New England is its collection of small coastal towns that were constructed hundreds of years ago and continue to resonate — places like Stonington, Mystic, Essex and Nantucket,” said Bruce Beinfield, founding principal of his namesake firm based in Norwalk. At Corbin,

“The architecture is designed to read as an assemblage of small buildings that were constructed incrementally over time.”

Genovese said the Corbin District is designed for the test of time not only in its aesthetics, but in its construction and the mix of businesses.

“Usually the profitability of the venture is the priority and objective, and lately it seems to me the intent of the developers is most likely to build and sell the properties — construct them as quickly as possible with less attention to the materials used and how they will age,” Genovese said. “With almost every decision we make — from the brick we are using to the colors of the siding, the tenants we are targeting to occupy the buildings, we are considering the impact on our community in terms of the quality of life and also the relative attractiveness of Darien for people considering moving.”

A nudge toward affordability

A dozen fewer Darien houses sold through the first 10 months of this year compared to the same period in 2020, according to Berkshire Hathaway HomeServices New England Properties, but price of the median home sold was 15 percent higher than its equivalent a year earlier, at just over \$1.6 million.

As in many towns in southwestern Connecticut, affordable housing remains a challenge in Darien which had just 3.6 percent of its nearly 7,100 units classified as affordable in 2020 by the state Department of Housing. Since 2000, however, nearly a third of new units built in Darien or otherwise on the books qualify as affordable.

The Corbin District’s timeline dates back to Evonne Klein’s tenure as first selectman. Klein went on to become of Connecticut’s foremost experts on affordable housing as commissioner of the Connecticut Department of Housing, and more recently interim CEO of the Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness.

The Corbin District will nudge the town’s percentage of affordable housing only slightly. But in reserving nearby rentals for adults with developmental

disabilities who receive ongoing support from the nonprofit Abilis, the Corbin District could serve as a model to encourage other developers to follow suit.

“Darien is a place where I will call home for the foreseeable future,” said Denunzio, who has received assistance himself from Abilis over the years. “And I mean that.”

Dan Haar contributed to this report. Includes prior reporting by Brian Gioiele and Susan Schultz.

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