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A Patchwork Project, by Design

By ANTOINETTE MARTIN

JERSEY CITY
IF his plans hadn't been thwarted two decades ago, said Peter Mocco, the developer of the massive Liberty Harbor community rising adjacent to two historic neighborhoods here, he would have built a "spaceship" development — sealed-off and sterile.

But today, as the 667-unit first phase of Mr. Mocco's project at last takes shape, he is going in the opposite direction — open and eclectic-looking. The only "spaceship" aura exists inside the residences under construction. Each will have a touch-screen computer on the wall that can do just about everything but take out the garbage.

Before construction began, the site was inlaid with raceways of fiber to generate virtually unlimited bandwidth at all points.

"From one of the town houses in Liberty Harbor," Mr. Mocco said, as he walked the site on a recent day, "you could operate 10 high-definition TV's with video on demand and still have enough bandwidth to run a day-trading operation."

"This will probably be the most technologically advanced residential community in the nation," he suggested. "Everything, from the thermostats to the lighting, including computers, TV, kitchen and bath appliances, can be remotely controlled from outside the home — say, in your car while coming home from work, using your cellphone or P.D.A."

It was 1985, a decidedly different era, when Mr. Mocco was named master developer of the huge site adjacent to the Paulus Hook and Van Voorst historic neighborhoods covering 28 city blocks. The area was run-down and industrial, with abandoned warehouses and, on the fringes, rows of substandard apartment buildings.

"The conventional wisdom at the time was that if you were going to re-

develop in the inner city, you built a defensive residential complex — set behind a giant wall, with one gate to go in and out," Mr. Mocco said. "Crime rates were very high in all the urban areas. The idea was to create a sort of sealed-off space station in order for people to feel safe enough to live there."

So that is what Mr. Mocco dutifully designed, and by 1987, he had city approval for his plans to cover the site — bounded by Grand Street, Luis Muñoz Marin Boulevard, Jersey Av-

enue and the Tidewater Basin — with modern, but "sterile looking" apartment buildings and single-family homes set behind a fortress wall.

Abruptly, though, things soured: the economy, the real estate market and the financial industry's willingness to back a plan for 7,000 to 10,000 housing units in a risky area of Jersey City.

A decade passed, Mr. Mocco said, before the notion of rebuilding in

Digital wizardry will tie together 28 city blocks in Jersey City.

beat-up urban areas became realistic again. Crime rates were significantly lower in New York, and Jersey City, too, by the late 1990's, he recalled, and urban living was regaining cachet. By the year 2000, he had begun considering how to reshape his vision for Liberty Harbor.

Mr. Mocco, 64, whose company bears his name and is based in Jersey City, decided five years ago to put his project under the wing of the renowned architect Andrés Duany, a prominent advocate of New Urbanism. Mr. Duany developed a concep-

tual plan for Liberty Harbor using New Urbanist principles calling for open, "porous" development that fits seamlessly into the existing urban setting and offers a variety of housing types and styles integrated with retailing and park space and pedestrian-oriented street layouts.

To prevent the Levittown syndrome in a community that will have so many residences, Mr. Duany recommended commissioning a number of architects to work on various parts of the project.

Mr. Mocco hired 10 architectural firms, whose members sat with city planners and community representatives in a series of "charrettes" — open-ended working sessions to generate ideas and drawings — and produced plans employing a diverse "vernacular," as the architects say.

Sometimes, an individual architect designed a block of one type of housing — condominiums or town houses or duplex apartments. In other cases, the work of different architects was designed to stand side by side. A single block of five attached buildings in the first phase of construction, for example, features five designs by five architects, ranging from a classic brick building with bowed windows and a slate mansard roof, to a more modern-looking structure relying heavily on wood and glass for a sleek facade.

The connected buildings are drawn together by their scale, friend-



ly front stoops and small touches, including the circular pediment ornaments that Mr. Mocco had custom-designed, which are stamped “L H” for Liberty Harbor.

In addition, the community will be tied together by fiber and circuitry. “Residents of Liberty Harbor will be able to see what’s going on inside their own homes, and up and down the block, by looking at the screen on the wall or the computer or the TV,” Mr. Mocco said, “and they can do that from anyplace in the world with a digital connection.”

“From your office, you can check out who is down at the park,” he said, “and whether there was a package left on your doorstep.”

“If you’re in the Bahamas,” he continued, “and someone rings your doorbell, your cellphone will ring, letting you know someone is at your door, and you will be able to communicate with them.”

There will be video cameras on every corner recording the street activity, and the images will be kept for a minimum of 30 days, which Liberty Harbor planners expect to act as a deterrent, keeping a lid on crime and mischief.

Mr. Mocco said he is intent on making Liberty Harbor a haven for families. “I believe for urban areas to redevelop, they have to compete with the suburbs,” he said, “compete with the barbecue grill and the patch of grass in the backyard, and the sense of being safe and secure.”

The wall screens and digital wizardry are meant to imbue the community with a sense of security, he said. One or more screens will be installed in every residence; home shoppers can try them out at the just-completed 6,000-square-foot Liberty Harbor sales center on 333 Grand Street, directly opposite the new Liberty Health Jersey City Medical Center.

With a few minutes of instruction, a visitor can learn to raise and lower the blinds on the vaulted windows at the center, or lower the lights in the main hall, by simply clicking on a button.

The sales center also houses four model kitchens and baths that are available in the units under construction, and prospective buyers can view floor plans for the units to be completed within the next year or two. The project may take five to seven more years to complete, Mr. Mocco said.



DIVERSE STYLES

Attached buildings in the first phase have designs by five architects.