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REMEMBERING 9/11

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WHERE RECYCLING MEETS REAL ESTATE

DEVELOPER
DANNY POPKIN
TURNS OLD
BUILDINGS INTO
MODERN SPACES.

CHRISTINE OTT REPORTS, PAGE 30.



“Recycling Meets Real Estate”

by Christine Ott

Danny Popkin collects old stuff: some of those items are on the small side, like toy cars, Southwestern Native American pottery, and oil cans. But some of those things are sizable, like the iconic sign from Pete Lorenzo’s famed Clinton Avenue restaurant in Trenton. Also, it can be said that he collects old buildings, including the historic Giordano diner most recently located on Route 1 at Bakers Basin Road in Lawrenceville, which needed to be moved back in June to make way for a new shopping center.

But not all of the old buildings need to be relocated. Popkin, 54, owner of Modern Recycled Spaces in Hamilton, finds satisfaction in rehabbing expansive, old structures right where they stand. He says, “There are often unperceived qualities in something, and you have to find the potential that others haven’t seen. People love old things. But they love new things too.” Popkin’s knack for collecting and his eye for innovation allow him to retool a valued but underappreciated old site so it will appeal to modern sensibilities.

His refurbished properties, as it turns out, are also an ideal way for him to show off his collections like the oil cans and the vintage toys, but also the diner, which he plans to integrate into his most recent project, Mill One, most recently a golf bag factory, is located at the intersection of Nottingham Way and Johnston Avenue in Hamilton. Popkin partnered with Trenton’s Isles Inc., a community development and environmental service organization, to save the classic restaurant, which may become an Isles training center. Isles will be relocating from its Wood Street location in Trenton to Mill One some time this year. “The polished aluminum will look great against the old brick,” Popkin says.

“The diner cost a dollar,” Popkin says. “We spent \$20,000 to move it, and it will cost even more to renovate it.” But preserving local history is important to him, and Popkin is pleased he was able to rescue this shiny landmark from certain doom. He had a similar experience with the large, green, neon Pete Lorenzo’s sign: he had to hire a crane to move it. He’s planning to incorporate it into one of his properties.

Rescuing old buildings and fixing them up is gratifying to Popkin, but it can also improve quality of life for people living near his buildings by turning an eyesore into something appealing. Hamilton Township’s Economic Advisory Committee recently announced its Distinguished Achievement Awards for the contributions of local companies — Popkin was selected for the Beautification Award.

Popkin loves his location in Hamilton, as well as working with the township. “We’re comfortable here. There’s a stable business base, anchored by great transportation, parking, and cultural attractions,” Popkin says. He — and his tenant, Bai beverages — works out of his Studio Park location, at 1800 East State Street, close to Grounds for Sculpture.

This 200,000 square foot building was also an old mill, which Popkin converted into low cost, multi-tenant spaces. The building has particular appeal to start-up businesses, and it’s been rewarding for Popkin to watch his tenants grow and flourish. He speaks about Bai like a proud father. Bai is a beverage company that uses the coffee fruit (the outer protector of the coffee bean) for a nutrient boost. Bai started in a basement and has settled into a huge spot at Studio Park to accommodate its more than 120 employees. “They’ve grown like crazy,” Popkin says.

Another firm that’s bloomed at Studio Park is Snaque, a natural snack food company that uses lentils and quinoa as key ingredients. The Special Olympics also has offices at the resurrected mill, along with about 30 other businesses, including creative agencies, and manufacturing. Old factories are flexible and allow for a multitude of uses. “But it’s really all about networking and bringing businesses together to grow in the space,” Popkin says.

Modern Recycled Spaces also modernized and manages Canal Studios in Lambertville, another old factory that is now home to the popular coffee shop/roastery, Rojo’s; Total Soccer Academy; Kromite, a scientific consulting firm; and Taglio Design, among others.

A departure from his adaptive repurposing work, Gateway 195 on Commerce Way in Hamilton is modern construction. What it lacks in history, it makes up for with its location in the Route 130 corridor

“I think that corridor is the next Route 1, and it doesn’t have the traffic that the Princeton area has,” Popkin says. The site allows for small, creative work studios, roomy offices, and bigger ventures that involve shipping and receiving. If you have young children, you’ve probably been to Gateway 195: it’s home to Pump It Up party and play center. Lumber Liquidators is there, and the state and federal governments both have offices at this location as well.

“A lot of people hate rehab because they think it costs too much, but it doesn’t. I hate new construction because it costs more,” he says. But sustainability is also important to Popkin. He loves the high ceilings, and sees the esthetic value of exposed brick and huge windows at his historic sites. The openness of old factories invites endless possibilities. “I love creating fabulous,



low cost spaces out of salvaged buildings.” The low cost aspect is a goal for Popkin. “I always say ‘buy cheap, fix cheap, and lease cheap.’ That way I’ll always have tenants. And it builds loyalty.”

Popkin says a company’s success can be attributed to proper project management. “But inviting spaces help to recruit good people.” His spaces are definitely inviting, attracting an assortment of companies, many of them fledgling companies that wind up staying with him because he’s affordable and his facilities offer room for growth, and his team is responsive to tenants’ needs. “It takes some planning to figure out how to balance a forklift user with, say, a company who wants office space. But we can do that,” Popkin says.

“But,” he adds, “It’s not for everyone. Sometimes you lose a tenant because of noise, or kids, or strict corporate guidelines. But we’re ideal for start-ups, creatives, groups that need showrooms, warehouses, and distribution.” His retention rate is good: “Staying is always easier than moving, and we can accommodate expansion. We foster an environment where our tenants can network with one another and grow off each other.”

So how much does it cost to convert an old factory to modern use? “That’s difficult to answer,” says Popkin, though he offered some numbers. “Sometimes we get a building for next to nothing, but that’s not always the case. Figure it costs \$5 a square foot to install a new roof membrane, and \$4 a square foot to pour concrete.”

“We don’t take shortcuts,” he adds. “We have to clean everything. And we save as much of the bones as possible, adding new elements cost effectively. “ He says that his buildings vary in size, and some of the bigger costs are electrical and plumbing, and each building, depending on its final use, has different numbers of switches and sinks, for instance.

“I have a fantastic staff,” Popkin says. “We like to control the process, and we do a lot of the demolition, framing, masonry, sandblasting and pointing work ourselves.” Popkin says his team scopes out and inspects the sites as well; and Popkin has long-term relationships with subcontractors for his HVAC and plumbing needs. “We want control over the final look of the project as well,” he says. “A rehab can take as little as 60 days if we’re just fitting out a unit. But it could take a year if we have to do an overhaul. The square footage of the building factors in as well.”

Popkin employs 10 full-time people who primarily handle project management, property management, financing, and maintenance. “We have on-site property management,” Popkin says. “We provide high quality and low costs, and our tenants are happy, and grow where they are.” A significant part of development projects like Popkin’s is dealing with municipal government. After 30 years in the business, Popkin understands the process. “Every township and every job is different,” he says, “but it can be a fun challenge to figure out how to make everything come together.”

It used to be more challenging, Popkin recalls. “Once I had a difficult time getting a permit. I wondered what I was doing wrong. But people in those offices are overworked and stressed and probably deal with a lot of complaints. But I found if I’m diligent, persistent, responsive, and nice — really nice — I’ll get my permit.”

“The hardest part of business is understanding the whole process; you have to be detail oriented. It takes a lot of time, and there’s some aggravation, but there’s a big reward at the end. I know building inspectors like working with us,” he says.

“To succeed in redevelopment projects,” Popkin says, “you have to be willing to take risks.” Popkin, of course, loves adventure, and exploring the unknown in business, as well

as his personal life. “I’ve always been into music, and I love live shows. I love so many songs, I wanted to be able to play them, so 10 years ago, I bought a shiny, black Yamaha baby grand piano and put it in our living room.” He started playing his favorite songs by ear, working out the chords, and sang along. He went to a voice instructor in Titusville, who told him he should check out Fred Miller’s Copper Penny Players in Sergeantsville.

Miller hosts singing classes where each participant sings a solo every week. “My first week, I sang ‘Fly Me To The Moon,’ in front of about 20 other people, and I was so nervous, but by the end, everyone was clapping,” Popkin says. “It was glorious. It was amazing to open my heart and be so vulnerable and free.”

So now he makes the trek each week, and even performed in costume recently in one of Miller’s revues, which are held five to six times a year. “I go to a lot of shows,” Popkin says. “Lucinda Williams is one of my favorites. And so is Bruce Springsteen, and Ron Sexmith.” It’s been rewarding for him to go from spectator to performer, and his recent musical training has given him the confidence to play and sing at a Bruce Springsteen tribute.

Popkin’s roots are in Mercer County: he was born in Trenton; his parents, Jerry and Sharen, were born and raised in the city as well. They moved to Ewing when Popkin was 5, where he and his two younger brothers went to elementary school. Later Popkin attended George School, a Quaker institution in Newtown, Pennsylvania, and went on to Georgetown University, where he graduated with a degree in history in 1982.

A few years later, he was having dinner with his parents at Rossi’s in Trenton when they ran into a family friend, a general contractor, who was renovating flex space in Toms River. The family friend gave Popkin, then 25, a job with a lot of autonomy; Popkin oversaw a team



of seasoned masons, electricians, carpenters, and other highly skilled workers. “They were tough on me because of my age and inexperience, but I learned a lot,” he says.

He loved all of the details of the work, so in 1982, he and his brother, Jimmy, bought a house for \$1,000 in the Mill Hill section of Trenton, and completely renovated it. The rehab bug bit him hard, and he wanted to take on a more challenging project, so he started buying larger, and often commercial, properties. In 1990 he bought Canal Studios in Lambertville, and nursed the 40,000 square foot building back to life.

It’s no surprise that Popkin went into business for himself: his parents were both entrepreneurs. “I have it in my blood,” he says. Popkin’s great-grandfather started York Luggage in Lambertville in 1935, a business Jerry Popkin eventually took over. His mom founded Luggage Factory in Flemington; his mom is also the president of the Anne Klein outlet stores, and has opened nearly 50 of them around the U.S. in partnership with Anne Klein. Popkin’s son, Max, 23, is helping to rebrand Luggage Factory.

Popkin’s business drive was undoubtedly influenced by his parents, but he also cites an early commercial success for his motivation today. “I was a cub scout, and I was number one in cookie sales. I won a radio — a battery powered thing — and it was so exciting to me. I liked that feeling.”

He started collecting at a young age, too. “I started with sugar packets,” Popkin says. “My favorites were the ones with presidents and states on them. Every restaurant had them in the ’70s. My mom tossed them when we moved. It broke my heart,” he says. He also collected lighters and pocket knives, giving birth to his interest in Native American pottery, art, and old signs. He bought his first big sign in the early 1980s, the Lido Gardens sign. Lido Gardens was a Chinese restaurant in Trenton, on the second floor of Dun-

ham’s department store downtown. “They were knocking down that block, and I saved the sign from demo and have it in my office,” Popkin says. In his 20s, he worked in a studio that restored old French posters, which also played into his desire to save what’s valuable. “I love bringing something back to life. A useful life.”

Popkin is married to Robin Federiconi, who is a personal shopper for Neiman Marcus. “She has a great sense of fashion,” he says admiringly. “I throw ideas off of her for work, too,” he says. “We’re both very visual.” They live in Hopewell.

Adaptive reuse of old mills is hot around the country, but especially in the factory-dense northeast, which was the epicenter for industry during the 19th and early 20th centuries. The trend is especially popular with start-up firms with young owners who came of age in a pro-demolition era, amid disposable plastics and electronics; they crave an authentic brick and mortar building filled with history and character, with the flexibility to accommodate all of their needs, and the space to grow. These young firms may also lack financial capital and experience to deal with new construction, making renting — or buying — old factories enticing.

Repurposing old buildings is becoming more prevalent in the United States. Loft housing within old mills is extremely popular in the northeast, and because the factories have so much space, they are perfect for mixed-use sites that combine office, retail, restaurants, residential, warehouse, and sometimes even recreation. Museums, too, have found their way into old buildings, including the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, the Watermill Center in Long Island, and the Dia Art Foundation in upstate New York.

What’s next for Popkin? While work is underway on Mill One, Popkin is also in the process of opening his own Neapolitan style

pizzeria. It will be called Liberty Hall, and will feature a wood fire oven, at his Canal Studios location in the near future. of seasoned masons, electricians, carpenters, and other highly skilled workers. “They were tough on me because of my age and inexperience, but I learned a lot,” he says.

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Popkin continues to keep his eyes open for old things he can make new, and has advice for successful business ventures: “Be bold and different, and creative with design to attract great people,” he advises.