

A Hulking Factory Is Given New Life in Norwalk

Design of Maritime Place makes use of the site's industrial past.

By ELEANOR CHARLES

FOR half a century a hulking 140,000-square-foot brick building loomed half-vacant and deteriorating over the corner of Marshall and North Water Streets in South Norwalk. In recent years it became a pariah amid its historic neighbors: the Maritime Aquarium across the street, the shops and restaurants around the corner on Washington Street, and the spreading development of the waterfront under urban renewal.

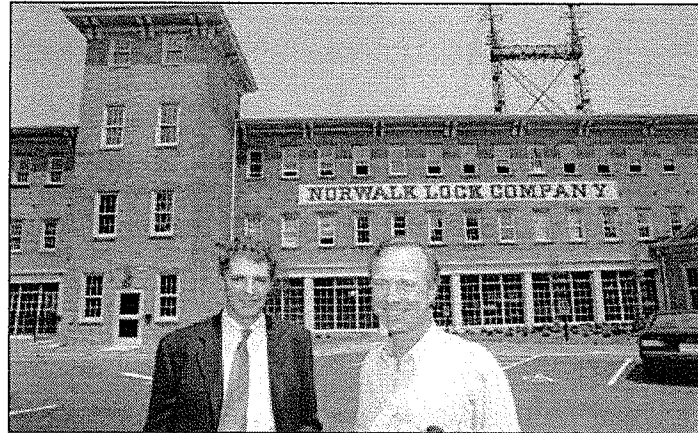
Built in 1856 as the Norwalk Lock Company and vacated in the 1950's, the building became a warren of warehouse operations, carpentry and plumbing services, small businesses and artists' studios.

Last month it reopened as Maritime Place after a \$12.3 million rehabilitation that has delighted tenants and visitors with its imaginative use of the 130,000 square feet left after partial demolition. Bruce Beinfeld, a principal in the Norwalk firm of Beinfeld Wagner Architects, and Eric Rains, project manager for Wesley Stout Associates, a New Canaan landscaping company, have converted a daunting old war horse of a building into a sophisticated interpretation of its hard-bitten industrial past.

It is already 65 percent leased to a variety of office tenants. Annual rents that once accommodated impecunious artists and marginal businesses at \$3 and \$4 a square foot are now in the mid-\$20's a square foot, still well below the mid-\$30's and higher that prevails in Fairfield County's Gold Coast towns. Spaces range from 2,500 to 25,000 square feet, but hover predominantly around 3,000 to 5,000 square feet, with ground-floor space suitable for a restaurant or retail operation.

The project was developed in cooperation with the city and the Norwalk Redevelopment Agency, which has oversight of a 70-acre area from the Norwalk River to West Avenue between Interstate 95 and Washington Street. The redevelopment partnership consists of the Spinnaker Companies of Stamford; Summit Development L.L.C., the leasing agent; and Greenfield Partners, both formerly of Westport but now headquartered at Maritime Place with 10-year leases for 2,000 and 9,000 square feet respectively. Spinnaker has leased an 820-square-foot office as manager of the building, but its headquarters remains in Stamford.

The Lock Building, as it is known locally, is one of two Norwalk projects undertaken by the partnership. The second is the redevelopment of an 80-acre site at Norden Place off Strawberry Hill Road Norden, a developer of radar equip-



Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

The architect Bruce Beinfeld, left, and Kim Morque, director of development at Spinnaker, part of a redevelopment partnership.

ment, has four years to go on a five-year lease with options for the 481,000 square feet it occupies. The property, developed by United Technologies, Norden's former parent, was sold to the Greenfield-Summit-Spinnaker partnership last year.

The space vacated by a downsized Norden in the sprawling 633,000-square-foot two-story building is a sea of rubble while workers gut the interior before reconfiguring it as a flex office and research and development complex. Three tennis courts encircled by a running track will be retained on the property, along with a softball field and woods and wetlands where deer gambol. Driving a narrow forested road through the site could pass as a short spin in the country except for I-95 running alongside, out of sight behind dense summer foliage.

A concrete helipad will be demolished and vast expanses of surface parking for 2,200 cars, minimal landscaping and an unprepossessing entrance to the property will be redesigned into a parklike setting by Hellmuth, Obata & Kassabaum P.C. of New York, serving as landscape architects. The building is being redesigned by Perkins Eastman, Stamford architects, with Mr. Beinfeld as architectural consultant.

Charles Hoffman, a broker with Cushman & Wakefield in Stamford, has been talking to prospective tenants looking for

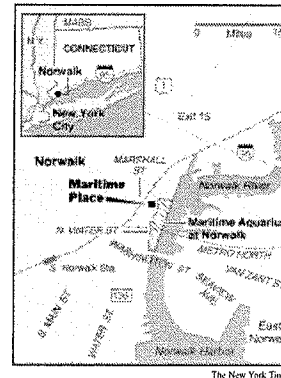
15,000 to 100,000 square feet. "We think it's a great location just off Exit 16 of I-95 and great value for brand-new, efficient office space without going to the eastern end of the county to get it," he said. "We're shooting for January 2002 occupancy."

KIM MORQUE, Spinnaker's director of development, found the disparities between the two buildings, built 100 years apart, a challenge. "Norden was built in the 60's and had a full set of original plans, with large floor plates, lots of steel and concrete, no mystery," he said.

But the Lock Building was a trip into the unknown because of its age and various uses, all brick and timber construction and lack of documentation, he said, and "community interest in these historic buildings made the project highly visible."

To begin with, 17 feet of the building facing the aquarium across North Water Street had to be cut off to create a 12-foot sidewalk where there had been none. New footings and a new brick wall were constructed, and the old bricks were used in various parts of the reworked building. Interior courtyards were revealed when old wooden buildings set into them were removed.

Original interior brick walls were cleaned and retained.



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supported by massive original wooden beams and perpendicular timbers. A new three-story main entrance on Marshall Street was glass-fronted with two tiers of steel and steel-mesh balconies inside.

Walls made of wallboard were painted with a formula devised by Eve Novotny, a faux finisher in Stamford. Combining real rust with paint and other materials, she achieved a richly textured rusty look that the architect wanted. Concrete floors have been polished to a marble sheen, and tin-clad, heavy wood-core doors, fabricated in Lowell, Mass., are dead ringers for clanging old factory doors. The original black and white Norwalk Lock Factory sign on an exterior wall was exposed under layers of paint and touched up enough to be legible.

One of two enormous original boilers was left standing in the board room of the Greenfield Partners' space. Two stories high, the room has a Beinfeld-designed pyramid fireproofed fireplace painted in rust and edged in steel. Mr. Beinfeld also designed the 4 1/2 by 14 1/2 foot conference table of half-inch steel plate weighing 2,500 pounds, painted black and treated with polyurethane. Lighting, designed by Mr. Beinfeld and fabricated by the development's in-house electricians, is composed of 10- and 12-inch tall clear tubular bulbs with orange filaments. Some are strung vertically in a line from a steel plate high above the table; others rise from 7-foot-high copper poles attached to the floor and wall.

"We wanted the place to have a mythological industrial look of the bygone era," Mr. Beinfeld said, "mixing new and old in ways that people would not be able to distinguish."

In one of three landscaped courtyards, Wesley Stout Associates installed a striking fountain consisting of a huge

vertical iron pipe with a curved piece at the top, broken at the end where water spills out continuously onto a stone floor under which lies the reservoir that stores and supplies the water. The pipe looks like castoff industrial equipment, but it is brand new.

Even the art, on loan from the Silvermine Guild Arts Center in New Canaan, is attuned to the industrial theme. Two outdoor sculptures by Carole Eisner were created from industrial iron parts into striking works that are for sale for \$44,000 and \$36,000. A pair of indoor sculptures by Kevin Thomas in gold-glazed ceramic are \$4,500 each.

Silvermine hopes to exhibit in some of the building's ground floor windows, giving some credence to Maritime Place's subtitle: the Lock Art and Technology Center. The name is all that remains of the artists who lived and worked there until about a year and a half ago and were unable to negotiate the inclusion of an art center in the city's concept for the building.

The Navios Corporation moved last month into the largest space occupied so far. A former wholly owned subsidiary of U.S. Steel, it is now a privately owned shipping company that operates large bulk carriers of iron ore, coal, grain and bauxite worldwide, with a terminal business in South America. Its 13,000-square-foot headquarters supplants former locations in Stamford, Greenwich and Wall Street dating from 1978. "You can see we've been moving gradually north and east," said the company's president, Anthony Whitworth.

"Most of our employees live in Norwalk, or east or north-east of Norwalk, so the commute is improved dramatically. Lower cost is another factor, and a feature I found attractive is the ability to expand within the building."

Occupying 3,000 square feet since May 18, the Nat Nast Company is a maker of men's luxury sportswear. Patty Nast Canton, a daughter of the founder, runs the company with her sister, Barbara Nast Saletan. "We outgrew our space in Wilton," Ms. Canton said, "and we had our eye on this building from the time we heard it was going to happen. We have a showroom in New York, our design studio here and manufacturing in China, Peru and Italy."

"They've done a remarkable job with conceptualizing the space," she said. "We hope to be able to expand here. Our only complaint is we still don't have window shades."

Images: Photo: The architect Bruce Beinfeld, left, and Kim Morque, director of development at Spinnaker, part of a redevelopment partnership. (Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times)

Map of Connecticut highlighting Norwalk and the Maritime Place.