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Making It Happen

By developing their own projects, Jared Della Valle and Andrew Bernheimer have succeeded in New York without going through the “right” schools or firms. Now, just as the economy collapses around them, they are completing their first two buildings in Manhattan.

By Marc Kristal
Posted May 13, 2009

3 comments

Jared Della Valle and Andrew Bernheimer don't fit the “hip architect” profile. With his cocky Long Island charm, Della Valle, 37, might have fronted a doo-wop group a generation ago, while the Massachusetts-born Bernheimer—40, big, and shaven-headed—has the rough-and-tumble look of a hockey player. Nor do the partners, who met in graduate school at Washington University, in St. Louis, belong to what Bernheimer describes as the Northeast Architecture School Club. “I wouldn't call it a chip on our shoulder,” he says. “But we definitely used our outsider status when we were starting to energize ourselves.”

It worked. By combining design excellence with the terrors and pleasures of real estate development, Della Valle Bernheimer (DB), based in Brooklyn, has launched into projects of a scale, ambition, and profitability that might otherwise have eluded the firm for years. Though the decimated housing market may (for now) have kicked the legs out from under their strategy, the two are enjoying the completion of two condominium buildings in Manhattan's chic Chelsea district and looking forward to the publication, in August, of their monograph, *Think/Make* (Princeton Architectural Press).

The motivation for their unorthodox approach was simple. “Coming out of school, we were desperate to build,” Della Valle says. The pair relocated to New York following graduation and, after working day jobs (Bernheimer in architecture, Della Valle at a construction firm), began DB in 1998 with a competition-winning design for San Francisco's Federal Plaza. Over the next four years, the partners completed five projects and started several

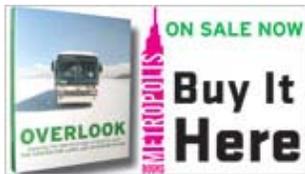
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others. “But Andy and I wanted to build bigger things, and nobody was going to hand that to us,” Della Valle says. In fact, their early independence was a hindrance. “Typically, people work for a big firm for a decade,” Bernheimer explains. “When they leave, they can say, ‘I was the design partner on this tower in Singapore’—they have the experience of running a project that size. Because we started so young, we had to make it happen ourselves.”

Those who have worked with them say that Bernheimer seems happiest when he’s designing. But Della Valle loves to wheel and deal, and it was his inexhaustible jones for real estate development that offered a chance for them to build. Though the two professions seem incompatible, Cary Tamarkin, who launched his own highly successful architecture-and-development firm in 1994, says they are actually complementary. “Architects can creatively think through what can be done with a property that might be unique—and who might buy into it—before money is invested,” he says. “That’s what developers hire you for, so why not do it for yourself?”

The go-go market of the late 1990s provided an opening. “I realized it would be easy to make offers on buildings I had no money to buy and then, if they were accepted, chase the funds,” Della Valle recalls. He focused on industrial properties in hot neighborhoods—ones the pair could convert into architecturally distinctive condos or co-ops. “I had a master’s in construction management, and I learned to write a thirty-page project proposal: here’s the site, the neighborhood, the market conditions, the expected returns.” If someone agreed to a deal, he says, “I’d send the contract to my lawyer, then scramble around looking for partners.”

Though he struck out for several years, Della Valle picked up valuable contacts and experience. “I did maybe thirty of these,” he says. “I was meeting high-net-worth real estate people, and there was never any question that we would be the architects, in exchange for putting the deal together.” No less motivating was the profit potential. “The numbers were tantalizing,” he says. “It was like, ‘God, if I can pull this off, we could make a gajillion dollars.’”

In mid-2002, the partners scored, albeit at a less-than-gajillion-dollar scale. They responded to an RFP from New York City’s Department of Housing Preservation and Development (then headed by Shaun Donovan) seeking a developer for ten semidetached two-family houses in Brooklyn’s downtrodden East New York neighborhood. Each would contain an owner’s duplex and a rental unit. The department’s desire for architectural innovation gave DB an edge: typically, HPD projects are awarded to builder-developers, who submit generic plans that they can construct quickly and affordably. With a strong design vision, backed by construction experience and Della Valle’s development knowledge, DB offered a compelling alternative, and got the job.

The partners made a number of smart decisions. Believing that, as Della Valle puts it, “affordable housing requires more thought, not less,” they invited several progressive firms—Architecture Research Office, Lewis.Tsurumaki.Lewis, and Briggs Knowles



Architecture + Design—to design three of the five buildings. To control costs, they established a shared exterior material palette, including corrugated-aluminum and cedar siding, and developed two floor plans that maximized habitable square footage. Since they were neophytes, DB brought on experienced development partners, Philip Tugendrajch and Richard Eaddy, who secured part of the roughly \$3 million budget from CPC Resources, the for-profit subsidiary of New York’s Community Preservation Corporation.

The firm got high marks from both the creative and business participants. “Not only did Jared and Andy make an opportunity for all the firms to learn from each other,” says Adam Yarinsky, a principal of Architecture Research Office, “they showed HPD that a new model for urban redevelopment could be multiple voices on a single project.” Tugendrajch had been impressed when previously approached by Della Valle. “He thought like an architect but was able to overcome that handicap and look at how to make money,” he says. But this time he was leery. “They wanted to do different homes for each buyer, and if you’re a developer, you want the same thing over and over,” he says. “And the high end of craziness, for affordable housing, was the metal facades.” Ultimately, he and Eaddy decided that “the market was strong enough to handle stuff that looks weird.” They were swayed by the power of the proposal. “It was a terrific project,” Tugendrajch says. “They were saying, ‘We can make the world a better place by using high-end design for low-income buyers.’” Though not completed until 2007, the homes proved highly successful. “There were 3,000 applications, and the mayor came to the opening,” Tugendrajch says.

Most important, the partners’ willingness to accept the greater management, administrative, and financial obligations that came with development served their architectural ambitions. “They’re attractive to financiers because they’re businessmen,” Tugendrajch says. “So if they’re pushing the design envelope, they can say, ‘This’ll work, people won’t hate it.’ That, I assure you, is a big deal.”

It paid off on DB’s next major project, 245 Tenth Avenue, an 11-story luxury condominium on an L-shaped site adjacent to the High Line, in Chelsea. Della Valle found the land in late 2004 and brought it to a Philadelphia developer, David Grasso, whom the firm had worked with. Della Valle received a finder’s fee and, along with Bernheimer and a syndicate of friends, invested cash. Yet, as in East New York, the principal benefit was professional: DB got its first from-the-ground-up Manhattan commission—and in a glamorous new “starchitect” district, boasting projects by the likes of Frank Gehry and Jean Nouvel, to boot.

The architects were able to exercise a remarkable degree of design control. Taking their cue from the clouds that once emerged from the stacks of passing freight trains, they partly clad the building in steel panels stamped with a faceted diamond pattern that, flowing from dark to light, replicates the evanescent shifting of smoke. It’s an arresting concept (and somewhat controversial for the glare it throws off), and Grasso freely admits that he would never have agreed to it if Della Valle hadn’t brought him the deal. “Jared’s involvement led me to take a risk I might not otherwise have taken,” he says. DB leveraged that risk by

bringing in a partner of record, Goshow Architects, with reassuring experience on comparably sized projects.

With 459 West 18th Street, a 29,700-square-foot Chelsea condominium begun six months after 245 Tenth, the partners were finally able to max out their opportunities. The design—a massive black-and-white building pierced by cinematic 7-by-15-foot windows—is exclusively theirs. DB custom-designed the kitchen and bathroom fixtures in the ten residential units and licensed them for sale to the Italian manufacturer Rifra. And the building is the maiden project of Alloy Development, a company Della Valle co-owns with Katherine McConvey, CEO of KMM Telecommunications. A former design client who now serves as a business partner, McConvey provides the financial muscle to move quickly on projects that Alloy anticipates will be in the \$50 million to \$100 million range. (Bernheimer chose not to be involved, preferring to focus on the architectural practice.)

People make plans, as the proverb goes, and God laughs. This should be the happy ending—except that, after a decade of effort, DB is in the position of achieving its goal just as the real estate market implodes. “Development gave us bigger opportunities, and we had two projects for clients, both around 130,000 square feet, on the boards,” Bernheimer observes. “But in a bad economy, those are the first things that start falling off the map.” That leaves them battling it out like most practices: streamlining operations, working on smaller projects, and, as teachers at Parsons the New School for Design, relying on what Bernheimer calls “the Saran Wrap parachute” of academia.

But even if the firm’s unconventional pursuits left it more exposed, they also raised its profile. “Our name is out there, which wasn’t true five years ago,” Bernheimer says. Thanks to the success of the East New York project, DB was invited, in tandem with ARO, to participate in a competition to design sustainable single-family homes for a low-income neighborhood in Syracuse, New York; the team won the commission in January. On the development side, Alloy is actively pursuing distressed properties. “There are extraordinary opportunities,” Della Valle says, though, he concedes, “they’re not priced right yet for the risk.” As unwilling as ever to leave their fate to chance, the partners are thinking way ahead. “We’re talking to other firms about doing large-scale research pertaining to the stimulus package,” Bernheimer says. “We’ve learned not just to make opportunities but to look for them.”

Times may be hard, but the outsiders are in. And in a larger sense, Della Valle and Bernheimer’s odyssey offers a useful lesson for the profession. “Design quality happens through the sum total of how you frame a project as opposed to just positing a form at the end,” ARO’s Yarinsky says. “Jared and Andy have gained opportunities by not hewing to strict boundaries—by engaging the other side. And that helps developers and architects understand how to assimilate issues like budget or construction restraints into a new way of doing things.”

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