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YOUR HOME The Heights — a book and a TOUR INSIDE

184 Kent developer Jason Halpern in front of the giant Cass Gilbert 1913 warehouse



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RENT ON KENT

A dose of authenticity from a mammoth rental building is driving business on the Williamsburg waterfront

Put Williamsburg anywhere else in the United States, and it becomes one of the top neighborhoods in that city. Yes, the old art scene and underground indie music crowd has been joined by graphic designers, techies and couples with kids, but the boutiques, bistros, bars and supermarkets keep coming. So do creative types looking for places to live.

Developer Jason Halpern knows that. His firm's 184 Kent Ave. waterfront rental has more things to write home about than most rental properties in the city combined. In a land of new developments built of glass and steel, his building was one of the first reinforced concrete structures in the entire country.

Designed in 1913 by Cass Gilbert, the



architect of Manhattan's famous Woolworth Building and the man known as the world's first skyscraper builder, 184 Kent was the waterfront warehouse for Austin, Nichols & Co., then the United States' largest grocer and distributor of Wild Turkey bourbon. They moved to Williamsburg from the lower East Side for waterfront access to boats delivering and

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Some units in the building are ready for move-in by Monday; all are lofts

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The six-story 425,000-square-foot building was one of the soundest warehouses ever built. Gilbert designed more ornate courthouses and treasury buildings of the same material, but 184 Kent was a pared-down version of its stately counterparts. Its integrity is in its simplicity.

"This building is basically a 41-story skyscraper on its side, with four separate cores," says Halpern, walking the site of his 339-unit development. "We have the best site in the area, the best building in the area, and we have the most history in the area."

It isn't just history that makes this project one of the city's most intriguing rentals in recent memory. The construction, landmark issue and marketing strategy were methodically thought out to ensure this building got as much care as possible.

"Development is never as simple as it looks," says Halpern, whose JMH Development is developing Soundview Pointe, a successful gated community in College Point, Queens. "This was a very complicated project."

After some early controversy caused by the previous owners, who evicted long-term tenants and lobbied the city council to have the New York City Landmark Commission's decision to protect the building overturned (owners wanted to build a seven-story glass box on top for a condominium conversion), Halpern's group bought out the owners and secured 184 Kent as a rental. Immediately, JMH went through a nine-month process of having the building federally landmarked, allowing him tax credits on the rehab.

"We would not have been able to do this project economically without the landmark approval," he says. "It meant saving us 25 cents for every dollar spent on refurbishing."

Next, Halpern's team focused on design. Landmark approval led the way to a one-floor addition on top of the structure that added units in pods with large terraces on the building's rooftop. Working with the New York firms of SLCE Architects on exteriors, Slade Architecture on interiors, and Scape on landscaping, they decided to cut a giant hole the size of a football field in the building to give tenants a garden-like common space and outdoor terraces.

"These apartments feel like mini lofts," says Halpern. "We left the lobby huge, and we gave the gym views right to the river. We got lucky in some ways. The city's waterfront path runs outside the building."

Construction became an issue after Halpern worked diligently with local unions to reduce costs. When they refused, he hired HRH Construction as the owners' representative to work with nonunion contractors, frustrating local trades, who picketed 184 Kent. Almost fully completed with move-ins expected on Monday, the building will be among the city's largest nonunion-built structures in recent history, becoming a model for future projects.

"I gave presentations at the monthly union meetings to explain the importance of working together in these hard times," says Halpern. "We couldn't come to an agreement. I had to think out of the box."

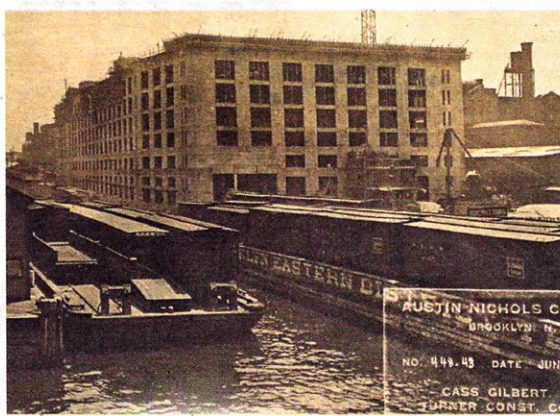
He did the same on marketing. When it came time to start renting this mammoth

the character of the building and neighborhood. He wanted authentic.

"After I saw some early attempts from these other companies that looked like everything else near us, I almost puked," he says. "I started looking for someone who gets the building."

Halpern found the Dune Road Group, a boutique ad agency in SoHo founded by Kevin Richards. Richards, whose father was a movie producer ("Tootsie," for example) and director, looks at every campaign as a production. In the past few years, Dune Road has worked on real estate strategy in Aspen, the Caribbean, for the Ritz-Carlton Residences, and locally on Manhattan House and 515 East 72nd St./Miraval Living. Immediately evoking emotion, fresh slogans, innovative ideas and personalizing photography are Richards' medium. He and Halpern clicked.

"Rent on Kent" became the slogan, history was applauded with photographs, and honest talk about the area's recent reincarnation as a creative center for young New



Historic photos of the operational warehouse line the sales office hallways



Architects cut a giant "doughnut" hole in the once-complete building to give tenants common space and terraces

Yorkers ousted the hipster stigma.

"Williamsburg is the next great artistic neighborhood," says Richards, who runs Dune Road with Jim Anderson. "It's where the creative class comes to roost. That hipster thing is an old cliché. This building is as authentic as Williamsburg can produce. It's old neighborhood meets new neighborhood, grit meets luxury. That's what we wanted to convey."

They had fun doing it, too. The Web site has an orange front page that gives way to a simple site maneuverable in six pages. The brochure folds out to be a wall poster. A mobile van cruises downtown Manhattan with "184 Kent" plastered on it, stopping strategically near Wall St. and the Meatpacking District. The team is at work now on a glossy neighborhood guide.

The most interesting marketing tactic was a viral Web site called WilliamsburgLove.com, a faux dating site showing short films mocking connections between the area's growing ethnic mix. In one, a hipster meets a tech nerd. In another, a Jewish American princess falls for a biker. In one launching today, Lenora Russo, a Williamsburg legend in her 80s, gets together with a snooty banker in his 20s.

In each, the couples explain how the neighborhood brought them together. Scenes of them canoodling in local bars, restaurants and parks are as much a star of the three-minute short films as the characters. Photos on the Web site link to the building's rental site.

Only word of mouth has been used to spread the site's existence, which is too bad because Emily Axford, the actress who plays the Wenda hipster character,



COURTESY DUNE ROAD

Wenda and Branston (above) and local legend Lenora (top r.) fall in love at WilliamsburgLove.com. A van spreads the word



delivers a laugh-out-loud performance.

"We want to put the word out there in the right place," says Richards, who wrote the copy and directed the short films. "This is the real Williamsburg as opposed to Toll Brothers buildings right next-door that have no relation to the area at all."

The result has been more than 80 leases signed in six weeks, including one potential \$30,000 per month rental on the building's rooftop and a \$10,000 combination of two two-bedroom units. Currently, no

fee studios start at around \$1,900, one-bedrooms at \$2,700 and two-bedrooms at around \$3,500.

The north side of the building is ready for occupancy, with the south side on the water expecting move-ins by 60 days. The courtyard will be ready in the spring. Apartment ceiling heights hover around 12½ feet. Art in the lobby comes from artists associated with the Brooklyn Arts Council. Renters are young, hip and come from a variety of industries, including high-tech, fashion and entertainment.

"We're attracting a high caliber of

renter," says Halpern. "We can ask and get these high prices because the building and neighborhood are worthy of it. That says a lot for the future of this area. I think people are happy we landmarked the building and kept it true to what it was. It adds something to this area the other new buildings don't."

Rose Associates is handling the renting. For information, go to rentonkent.com, call 888-414-5174, or visit the building at Kent Ave. and North Fourth St. The leasing office is open seven days a week.