



Apartment tower evokes New Rochelle's past

By **Bill Heltzel**

April 14, 2016 [1 Comment](#)

Developers of an apartment building in downtown New Rochelle will create a space that could reclaim the street's former cultural prominence and preserve a bit of history that echoes an affluent bygone era.

The city's master developer, RDRXR, submitted plans on April 11 for a \$120 million, 28-story apartment tower on Main Street on a site that companies have tried and failed to develop.

The apartment project is significant because it will be the first in the city's ambitious plan to rebuild downtown using new zoning tools.

"And it's important because it shows a commitment from a major developer," said Luis Aragon, New Rochelle commissioner of development.

If all goes according to design, the city Planning Board will soon vote on the project, ground will be broken by Nov. 15 and the building will open in 2018.

The building will include retail space on the ground floor, a parking garage and a "black box" theater.

The theater is a crucial part of the city's plan to transform Main Street into a cultural district. To understand the dynamics of the project, first look at what's there now.

RDRXR will build the tower at 587-599 Main St. The site includes two buildings: the old Loew's Theatre, a massive structure that extends all the way back to Huguenot Street, and a narrow row of storefronts and the theater entrance.

The old theater is an eyesore and four storefronts are vacant. But if you look more closely you will see a telling detail. The façade behind the theater marquee features terracotta architectural embellishments. Look around and you will notice more terracotta features on several nearby buildings.

The architectural flourishes had been concealed by paint and faux facades for many years. In 2012, the Downtown Business Improvement District won state grants to uncover them. About \$100,000 was spent restoring the Loew's façade, according to Ralph DiBart, the district's executive director.

He said the restorations have played a role in the city's efforts to revitalize downtown. They demonstrate to developers that these are streets that people care about and that this is a good place in which to invest.

The architectural details also hint at a grander time and place.

Loew's was built in 1926. It was designed by Herbert J. Krapp, one of the leading theater architects during the era of movie palaces. It was built in an elaborate Spanish-Mediterranean style, with a clay tile roof, baroque parapet and gorgeous mosaics, according to New Rochelle City Historian Barbara Davis.

Krapp also designed the elegant Proctor's RKO Theater that opened across the street in 1927. Both theaters could seat about 2,500 people, and they staged vaudeville shows and presented the most popular movies of the day. George and Gracie Burns, Sophie Tucker, Bob Hope, Lucille Ball and other celebrities performed on Main Street.

The movie palaces also reflected the city's wealth. New Rochelle had the third highest per capita income in the nation by the 1930s, Davis said, and the highest in New York state. Posh department stores, park-like neighborhoods and quick access to Manhattan by train gave the city a reputation as a premium bedroom community.

The city's economic fortunes declined over the years. By the 1960s, Interstate 95 and suburban malls had drained customers out of downtown. Television put a dent in movie attendance and the convenience of buying videotaped movies at stores divided audiences even more. The large auditoriums were subdivided into multiplexes. In 1980, Loew's closed.

Years ago, the theater was turned into a nightclub called the Palladium. The walls were painted black and unique architectural elements were stripped out, according to RDRXR spokesman Seth Pinsky.

The club became the site of drug activity and unruly conduct. Or as Albert Tarantino, a city councilman and co-owner of Talner Fine Jewelry a block away from the theater, recalled, "It created late night and early morning issues for our police department."

A city task force was formed to remind the club owner to comply with the laws. Agents enforced liquor laws. Patrons filed lawsuits. The club closed in 2003.

Around 2006, a White Plains developer proposed a 150-unit apartment building, but the Great Recession stopped that project.

As the economy began to improve, Tarantino said, the city council began looking for ways to reverse falling revenue and "turn negatives into positives."

Two years ago the city began focusing a plan for more housing, shops, restaurants, offices, and hotels, with easy access to the New Rochelle Transportation Center, built around safer streets and abundant green space. It hired RDRXR at New Rochelle LLC – a joint venture of two large real estate development firms based on Long Island, Renaissance Downtowns and RXR Realty LLC – as the master developer.

The firm developed ideas and strategies for achieving the city's goals. It also completed a comprehensive state environmental quality review for the entire downtown development area. Now any developer can skip that expensive, time-consuming step and take a proposal directly to the city, cutting the approval process by a year, Tarantino said.

"It saves time and money, the two most important things to developers," he said.

The downtown plan also offers incentives to invest there.

Developers can build more floor space than the basic zoning allows, gaining up to 20 percent more height, by preserving historic sites, creating cultural spaces or providing other community benefits.

The area around the Loew's has been designated a cultural district.

"We're talking about art galleries and maker spaces and performance studios and housing for artists," Aragon said.

That's why RDRXR is building a 10,000-square-foot black box theater, a versatile space that can be used for many types of events, on the second floor of its building. Under the existing zoning, 24 floors may be built. By building a performance space and preserving the façade and its terracotta details, four more floors may be built.

As an official in the mayoral administration of Michael Bloomberg in New York, Pinsky learned that the key to making such incentives work is for the city to squeeze as much as possible out of the developer while giving the developer enough incremental value to make the project work.