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GRETSCH BUILDING NO.4: BANJOS, SLUBLORDS AND BRAZILIAN WOOD **Instrument factory to Luxury Lofts in 90 years or less**

Gretsch Building No. 4
60 Broadway

By Kaya Laterman

When Martin Wydra first took a tour of the Gretsch Building No. 4 on the Southside of Williamsburg, he didn't think too much of it. He called one of his brothers, a member of the realty company Classon Realty LLC, to say he wasn't convinced. He suggested they should move on, look at other buildings and neighborhoods. Then, as a last resort, he stepped out onto the balcony from one of the top floors.

"I wasn't interested until I walked up and saw the view," Wydra said. "It's the view that sold me, my partners, and the bank to invest in it."

The view, spectacular as it is, is almost as interesting as the history behind the building, which involves a European immigrant, several dud landlords, years of vacancy, and a dozen or so artists that helped revive the community, only to be pushed out once real estate values shot through the roof.

It all starts out with a German immigrant named Friedrich Gretsch. After briefly working for a drum and banjo maker called Albert Houdlet & Sons, Gretsch left in 1883, at the age of 27, to start his own shop at 128 Middleton Street. Gretsch focused on making drums, banjos and tambourines, and just expanded his staff to 12 when he died suddenly in 1895. His son Fred Sr. took over and moved the establishment to 104 Middle Street. When business expanded further, the company moved into the 10-story building on 60 Broadway in 1916.

The Gretsch Manufacturing Company expanded their operation into numerous other buildings in Brooklyn, and sales sky-rocketed, especially during the 1950's. But the success did not last. Although Gretsch guitars are in high demand to this day, the company was sold off to Baldwin Pianos in 1967. After several decades of housing one of the most popular instrument makers, the building went silent in 1972.

And that's how the building largely stayed for the past several decades. The history of the building thereafter is a bit murky. It stood empty for years, it passed through several different owners, several floors were rented out to city and community affairs groups, and finally landed in the hands of Lawrence Krasne in the 1990's.

Krasne caused quite a stir back in September 2000 when he tried to remove a dozen or so tenants by cutting off their electricity. At this time, most artists living in the building paid about \$3,000 per month for an entire floor. But Krasne, hoping to bank on the Internet boom, wanted to renovate and sell the floors to hi-tech companies that could pay up to \$25,000 per month for the same space. After cutting off power for more than six months, the city did get involved, but nothing was resolved. After almost a year of fighting, all of the artists eventually left.

To be sure, Krasne wasn't the only landlord in NYC that tried to cash in on the economic boom. Williamsburg and Greenpoint were forced to house hundreds of people priced out of their old Manhattan digs, all looking for cheaper rent and larger apartments. According to the Department of City Planning, the Williamsburg-Greenpoint area experienced a population growth of a whopping 13.8 percent, to 10,000 from 8,830 in the 1990's alone. And that's not including the Hasidic community, which saw its population grow by 14 percent over the same period to 43,300.

During the Krasne fiasco, many other loft residents all over Brooklyn were evicted by the city's Department of Buildings, after the New York Fire Department compiled a list of commercial buildings that violated various fire codes. Since then, the Loft Law, which dates back to the early 1980's, has been used to protect loft residences.

It essentially allows residents to live in commercial lofts while the owner brings all violations up to code. But this law is up for review by the State Legislature next year, says Robyn Stein, Press Secretary for the NYC Department of City Planning. That means residents in lofts that don't have a residential certificate of occupancy could be left out in the cold as early as next year.

But Brooklyn-native Wydra isn't worried about his building being up to code. He's spending millions of dollars renovating the place with brand new materials, which includes importing Brazilian wood for the floors, smoky glass inserts for the bathrooms, and granite for the fireplaces.

"I'm telling you, we're going for the minimalist-boutique concept," explained Edward Wydra, one of the partners.

The first floor will dub as a classic lobby, with glass elevators. There will be entrances from Broadway and from South 8th Street, which will also house a 3-level garage that aims to house about 100 cars. Other amenities could include a library, a health club and a restaurant, adds consultant Elan Padeh, CEO and President of The Developers Group. On average, there will be about 12 apartments on each floor, many with multiple windows, video intercoms, and 12-foot ceilings.

Although there has already been about 100 inquiries about the building, the development is still a gamble for the Wydra brothers and Corcoran Group Marketing, the sales agent.

"What Martin is trying to do is change Williamsburg from a rental to a sales neighborhood," said Tricia Hayes Cole, Executive Vice President of CGM. "It was done in Soho, in Tribeca.

Someone first came in to build that luxury building when no one else was developing. Then came the changes. It sets the new standards for the neighborhood.”

And the new standard is exactly why some residents are not too happy about the current renovations.

“I moved out of Williamsburg about three months ago because of all the yuppies moving in,” said one bartender, who asked not to be named. “It may be a natural progression, but I can’t stand development.”

When asked if his bar, which is a stones-throw away from the Gretsch building, might get a boost in business, the bartender did not agree.

“They’ll come in, slum it a little, and then move on,” he said.

Although potential residents won’t be moving in until the summer of 2004, the Wydra brothers are hoping to start showing the model apartments, pending approval from the New York State Attorney General’s office, around July.

Mike Moran, a resident of Long Island City who parks his company truck on Kent Street every day, echoed much of what critics say about rapid development in mid-to lower income areas.

“Every poor neighborhood gets run over by the rich eventually. Why should this neighborhood be any different?”