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Young Alums Are Rebuilding Downtown Newark

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A group of young architects from NJIT are working to restore landmark buildings in Newark and to revitalize the city's downtown.

Take, for instance, Samer Hanini (bachelor's in architecture in 1999; a master's in Infrastructure Planning in 2003), a principal in the Hanini Group. The Newark-based firm is part owner and developer of the Hahne's building, a historic structure that has sat vacant since 1987.

But yesterday Hanini received some heartening news: Whole Foods Market, the organic grocery store, signed a lease to open a 29,000-square-foot store on the first floor of the Hahne's building, which his firm is helping to convert into a mixed-used structure that, once completed, will have retail space on the first floor and residential units on the upper floors. Whole Foods tends to locate in cities that are on the upswing, and other retailers tend to follow its lead. So the Whole Foods announcement yesterday was great news for Newark, and for Hanini.

"We are taking a vacant building and bringing it back to life," said Hanini, who lives and works in Newark. "We are also creating 150 jobs, many of which will go to Newark residents. It just doesn't get any better than that."

Hanini said his firm is a complete design, build and development firm, and as such will be involved in all aspects of the restoration of the Hahne's building. He said a clean-up of the building has already begun and construction is due to start early next year. The building will be completed sometime in mid-2016, he said.

The firm is devoted to the revitalization of Newark, he added, and has completed a number of successful renovations of buildings in the city such as Rita's Italian Ice, the Dinosaur Bar-B-Que and Brick City Bar and Grill, all on Market Street. The firm is also now converting the National State Bank Building into the Indigo Hotel.

"We have a reputation for finishing projects and Hahne's is our biggest project yet," Hanini said. "We'll keep the historic hallmarks of the building, such as a huge atrium in the center interior, with natural light flooding into the Whole Foods store. The residential units upstairs will be Soho-like lofts with high ceilings, hard-wood floors and granite counters. It will be a beautiful restoration and I'm honored to be a part of it."



Asked if he uses his NJIT education in his work, Hanini said that NJIT is a great university that taught him not only how a single building functions, but also how each building on a street plays a role in forming a streetscape. At NJIT he learned that a building must be feasible, aesthetic and functional, while also fitting into a city's overall feel and texture.

"I use the knowledge of my degrees all the time," Hanini said. "I was a better student when I was in grad school, where professors like Darius Sollohub taught me to look at cities on the macro-level -- how each building contributes to the whole. And I hope the Hahne's building becomes an anchor for the great neighborhood of bars and restaurants on Halsey Street and the nearby universities such as NJIT."

The plan for the site also involves constructing a new five-story mixed-use building at the vacant corner lot on Halsey and New Streets; that building will be connected to Hahne's by way of a shared lobby and atrium. A group of NJIT architects and engineers are also working on that building.

The group of nine NJIT alumni works for Inglese Architecture and Engineering, who initially served as civil engineering consultants in the planning of the new building. The firm was subsequently hired as the architects and engineers for the new building, which will have ground floor commercial space and residential units above, says Jak Inglese, the founder of the firm who has an architecture and two civil engineering degrees from NJIT.

Inglese has also restored old buildings in Newark and helped to gentrify Newark. The firm, for instance, revamped the old Studebaker warehouse on Broad Street, turning it into loft apartments, some of which are affordable housing. It also built the Roseville Commons on Orange Street, a 62-unit, three-story building that has LEED certification for being environmentally benign.

Two other principals in the firm, Joaquin Bouzas and Jennifer Palermo, also studied architecture at NJIT. Bouzas graduated in 1999 with a bachelor's degree in architecture and Palermo graduated in 2000 with two master's degrees: one in architecture and one in management. Both say they received great educations at NJIT and are delighted to be working in Newark professionally.

"If not for NJIT, I would not have my great job doing this great work," said Palermo. "Going to school in Newark left a warm spot in my heart for the city. It's great to see all the changes here and it's great to be a part of it."

And yet another NJIT graduate also played a role in the rebirth of the Hahne's building. Chanda Dawadi, a senior associate in real estate for the Brant Development Corporation, worked to help Whole Foods find the Hahne's building. Dawadi, who earned a master's in Infrastructure Planning in 2003, she too is guided in her job by her NJIT education.

"I use my planning and infrastructure background all the time to on my my job," said Dawadi. "This is a great day for Newark, in that the Hahne's restoration will help revitalize, anchor and unify the University Heights section of the city."

By Robert Florida

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Samer Hanini, an NJIT graduate and principal of the Hanini Group, is restoring a landmark structure in Newark: the Hahne's building.