Urban outfitter

Anthony Lanier brings European flavor to stodgy old Washington development

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Urban alchemist

Anthony Lanier is bringing his European vision of development to Washington’s neighborhoods, fusing old and new to create more vibrant streetscapes

By DEBORAH K. DIETSCH

Real estate developer Anthony Lanier reflects on his career during breakfast in Leopold’s Kafe, the Viennese-style restaurant he owns in Georgetown. While waiters scurry around to serve the growing crowd, Lanier recalls how his idea for an eatery tucked behind M Street NW was once ridiculed. “Everyone told me how it was going to fail, so I decided to open it myself,” he says in a slight German accent. “Look around, it has turned out to be a great success.”

Lanier’s willingness to take risks in reviving neglected parts of Georgetown and the west end has earned him a reputation as a visionary who sees potential in difficult sites. “I try to appreciate what’s there and make it better,” he says. “Old buildings are the soul of the city. They represent a challenge to the designer and developer, but the result can be unique and not simply a reproducible structure.”

In Georgetown, Lanier is best known for renovating a row of storefronts on M Street into a cluster of high-end design emporiums known as Cady’s Alley. At the center of this block between 34th and 35th streets, a passageway leads to an internal street framed by an unexpected mix of historic and contemporary architecture.

Next to the Whitehurst Freeway, Lanier and Millennium Partners LP applied a similar approach in transforming an abandoned incinerator into the centerpiece of the Ritz-Carlton hotel. The chimney of the industrial structure now houses a circular dining room.

Farther west along the freeway, at 3303 Water St., Lanier built a luxury condominium project next to a Pepco substation. In contrast to the bland, brick buildings around it, the loft-style structure is fitted with big windows that overlook the Potomac River and a green roof atop the power plant. It has attracted such high-profile residents as President Barack Obama’s social secretary, Desiree Rogers, and senior adviser, Valerie Jarrett, despite its proximity to a busy traffic route.

Even a gas station hasn’t deterred Lanier in making urban improvements. At 22nd and M streets, he erected a glass-and-zinc condominium building around an Exxon station and made the eyesore more attractive with a rooftop garden.

“Anthony is an urban alchemist,” says architect Robert Sponseller, who designed the residential building known as 22 West. “He turns underdeveloped, challenging sites into gold.”

For the 57-year-old Lanier, mining a property for top dollar typically means combining new and old structures to house a variety of uses and enliven the neighborhood. He built a sports club inside the West End Ritz and movie theaters next to the condos and hotel rooms at the Georgetown Ritz. Within Cady’s Alley, he added Leopold’s, the L2 lounge and office and residential space.

European approach » “Anthony has a European vision of cities, the idea of introducing contemporary life into historic settings,” says Bethesda architect Mark McInturff, who designed portions of Cady’s Alley. “We all go to Europe to see that and then ask why we can’t do that here. He actually makes it work.”

This European-style approach comes naturally for the Brazilian-born Lanier, who grew up in Vienna, Austria, where he attended university and began his career in real estate. After stints in Saudi Arabia and England, Lanier moved to Washington in the 1980s. He started his own business, EastBanc Inc., in 1987 and soon began buying and renovating small buildings in Georgetown. His equity typically comes from European partners.

Over the years, EastBanc has become a family affair. Lanier’s Portuguese-born wife, Isabel, works on smaller projects and is more involved in the nitty-gritty of layouts and materials than is her husband, “who has a broader design sense,” McInturff says. “Together, they have a complete vision.”

Two years ago, their son Philippe joined EastBanc after working on Wall Street as a research analyst. The 31-year-old oversees the financial side of the business while managing its strategic growth with his father. “I serve as a backstop to Anthony, and we share in all decisions,” he says.

For Anthony and Isabel, the EastBanc office is within walking distance of their home on N Street where they live with their teenage daughter Camille. Renovated by Barnes Vanze Architects Inc. a few years ago, the house reflects the same invest-
ment in design as their larger projects.

“I delayed its completion because of a bathroom,” acknowledges the developer. “The marble mason took it to the next level, and now every day I go into that bathroom I am happy.”

That quest for quality has turned local architects into Lanier’s biggest fans.

“Anthony always wants to do the newest and best work out there,” says architect Shalom Baranes, whose firm has handled several projects for the developer. “He operates in the commercial world but aspires to museum-quality architecture in terms of detailing. That is the real challenge of working with him because you aren’t working with the same budget as a museum.”

Lanier’s willingness to experiment with contemporary design trends has resulted in some of the District’s boldest architecture. With Prudential and the Mark Winkler Co., he built one of the first neomodern structures downtown at 1875 Pennsylvania Ave. NW. The sculptural glass office building is now home to law firm Wilmer Cutler Pickering Hale and Dorr LLP.

“I try to be innovative and not copy anything,” says Lanier, known as much for his large ego as his large ideas. “Our job is not to tell the architect how to design a building. It is to push them to do more.”

Baranes, whose firm designed the WilmerHale headquarters, recalls how Lanier encouraged him to consider a lighter material for the building at 3333 M St. NW, recently vacated by Artefacto, a Brazilian furniture company.

“When we designed that building, it was in brick,” he says. “Anthony was very concerned it would blend in too much. He pushed us into looking at French limestone on the primary facades to establish a livelier rhythm on the street.”

GIVE AND TAKE » While praised by architects, Lanier’s practice of blending contemporary and historic structures has not always won over preservation and community groups who tend to lean toward more conservative solutions. When the developer proposed a mixed-use complex along the 2300 block of L Street, he was met with neighborhood opposition, and the project was scuttled.

Still, Lanier says the public criticism of his projects has improved them.

“The preservation board has helped us to get things right,” he says. One example is Cady’s Alley, where the developer initially struggled to create a gateway to the multi-building complex between M Street and the C&O Canal. “I came up with one entrance after another until someone on the board said, ‘Leave it be, you don’t need it.’ They taught me a lot.”

Lanier started Cady’s Alley a decade ago with the purchase of a single building, now occupied by Baker Furniture. Landing that prestigious store inspired him to develop a design district that would be an alternative to the stodgier, trade-only Washington Design Center in Southwest D.C. Lanier eventually assembled 16 structures on both sides of the alley, and to avoid a uniform look he worked with five local architecture firms to connect and expand the buildings inside the block.

“I had to convince retailers that the alley was not only a street, but a cool street,” he says.

Today the complex, named for a 19th century family, is home to hip establish-
compensation with minimal layoffs.”

Anticipating hard times, he diversified in 2000 by forming EastBanc Technologies, a financial software and consulting business that has worked for the D.C. and federal governments. The company has offices in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, and in Novosibirsk, Siberia, thanks in part to the Russian father-in-law of Lanier’s eldest daughter, Nadine, who lives in Moscow.

EastBanc has also crossed the Atlantic to manage and develop properties in his wife’s native Portugal. Due to break ground in Lisbon next year is the urban revitalization of some 20 buildings bordering a botanical garden in the heart of the city. With the help of award-winning Portuguese architect Eduardo Souto de Moura, Lanier plans to expand the existing structures into a 1 million-square-foot complex of apartments, stores and a hotel.

“It’s like a fairy tale of 1,001 nights,” he says, pointing to a 19th century Moorish-style palace anchoring the project.

**URBAN VILLAGES** » Equally ambitious is Lanier’s plan to transform parts of D.C. outside Georgetown and the West End. On Capitol Hill, he has teamed with Stanton Development Corp. to redevelop Hine Junior High School near Eastern Market. One of three proposals now being considered by the city, the plan envisions space for retail, housing, offices and hospitality, along with a performance venue for the Shakespeare Theater Company.

EastBanc also is vying for a 67-acre project on the Anacostia riverfront near RFK Stadium. Lanier has suggested a mix of residences, offices, retail and recreational facilities for the Hill East development. Other development projects are on the radar, including a possible residential building in Columbia Heights.

He says there is still untapped potential in the city, comparing D.C. to an “adolescent” enduring growth pains as it revitalizes long-neglected areas.

Lanier’s idea of a District filled with urban villages — vibrant neighborhoods of shops, housing and offices — continues to win converts, even among competitors.

“Anthony is ahead of the pack,” says Michael Darby, founder of Monument Realty. “He is always thinking about making places more fun to live and work. Without his vision, Washington would be a dull place.”


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