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Places to visit, and live

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Camden's riverfront soon will have it all.

Camden's waterfront has an aquarium, a baseball stadium, an entertainment center, a marina, a performing-arts center, college campuses, office buildings, and high-tech businesses.

Soon, it will have the battleship New Jersey. In a couple of years, it will have an Imax theater, restaurants, retail stores, light rail to Trenton, and an aerial tram to Philadelphia.

What it does not have is housing. But that, too, is being taken care of.

A Philadelphia developer, Carl Dranoff, is two months into turning Building 17 of the old RCA complex into The Victor, 349 luxury loft apartments being rented for \$850 to \$2,300 a month.

It will be the first market-rate housing built in the city in at least four decades.

The site is also known as the Nipper Building, because of the tower and its stained-glass windows of the dog listening to "his master's voice."

Built from 1909 to 1916, the structure was used for crafting cabinets for gramophones and radios, and later for manufacturing components for spacecraft and telecommunications.

Dranoff will need three more months to get the place ready for construction.

RCA abandoned Building 17 in 1992. By 1999, when Tom Corcoran, president of the Cooper's Ferry Development Association, took Dranoff on a tour, the factory was in a "deplorable state," the developer said.

It took awhile to get Dranoff's attention, because the developer was completing Locust on the Park in Center City and starting The Left Bank in University City, Corcoran said.

But unlike others Corcoran had courted, Dranoff was intrigued. "The others cringed," Corcoran said. "It was so full of



When Carl Dranoff saw the old RCA Complex's Nipper Building, he saw past the debris and envisioned luxury lofts. An old rail loading area will become a courtyard.

debris that you couldn't walk on the floor. But Carl could see past the vandalism and decay to something beautiful."

On a stifling August afternoon, it was still difficult to see past the decay. In the parking lot, a tanker truck pumped oil from underground tanks - part of \$6 million allocated by the Delaware River Port Authority for environmental cleanup and gutting the interior.

Peeling paint littered the stairwells of the 502,000-square-foot factory. Plastic sheets covering broken windows flapped in what little breeze the river could offer.

It did not seem to faze Dranoff, who was leading a hard-hat tour of what he calls "son of Left Bank," his \$58 million, 282-unit West Philadelphia project that is just a few units shy of being filled only a few months after its completion.



Camden riverfront soon will have places to live, too

The Victor - which is the name given to the factory by its builder, Eldridge Johnson, founder of the Victor Talking Machine Co. - will cost \$55 million.

Like The Left Bank, the six-story Victor will have an atrium courtyard. Dranoff will use the space in the middle of the building where railcars were loaded and unloaded, then cut away a section of the floor to widen the courtyard to 60 feet.

Dranoff created a similar interior courtyard at The Left Bank, but did so by removing hundreds of thousands of cubic feet of concrete and steel from the center of that building.

The Victor courtyard will be in two sections, separated by a covered bridge between the upper floors.

The entrance will be on Market Street, through the gated archway at the base of the Nipper tower that RCA Victor employees used for almost 80 years.

The ground floor will have a lobby, public areas, retail/office space, and an indoor parking garage.

Thirty sixth-floor apartments will be two stories because the ceiling is 20 feet high. "They are basically townhouses," Dranoff said.

That's the how of the project. The next question is who.

"There are people working at the DRPA, at L3 [the high-tech company a hundred yards up Market Street from The Victor], and faculty and staff at Rutgers Camden who want to be able to live close to work," Dranoff said.

Moreover, because the rents will be 20 percent below those for comparable apartments in Old City, Dranoff believes he can attract Center City workers, who will commute to Penn's Landing by ferry, by the aerial tram when it is up and running in 2003, or by light rail to the PATCO station at City Hall.

The light-rail line will be able to transport state workers to Trenton in 45 minutes and New York commuters to their New Jersey Transit train connections in the state capital. Secure parking in the building and two adjacent gated lots will be included in the rent.

"People were skeptical about The Left Bank, even though there were 27,000 people working around the building," which is near the Schuylkill Expressway and 30th Street Station, Dranoff said.



Carl Dranoff plans for phased completion and occupancy of the Nipper Building over 18 months. That schedule meshes with the anticipated completion of a light-rail line and aerial tram.

"The people working here have no choices," he said. "They either have to live in Center City or the suburbs."

On the other hand, Corcoran said, when he proposed the Nipper Building as housing, "There were no skeptics, unlike just about everything else in the 17 years we've been at this."

Though much of the housing near the Camden waterfront is gone, the Cooper Grant neighborhood adjacent to the Rutgers campus has undergone somewhat of a revival since the waterfront development took root.

Corcoran said median sale prices in that neighborhood have risen to \$45,000 from \$20,000 in the last five years.

For the security-conscious, there is an insistence that the area is safe.

"We've spared no expense to make The Victor 'bulletproof,' but you have to look at the Camden waterfront as a neighborhood," Dranoff said. "When you do, it is a neighborhood that is patrolled by Camden police, Rutgers police, DRPA police, and security at the baseball stadium and the aquarium." Dranoff expects to begin construction

in the fall, with phased completion and occupancy over 18 months.

The schedule meshes with the anticipated completion of the light-rail line and aerial tram.

If The Victor is as successful as Dranoff expects, he will begin work on the metal shop behind it - the two will be linked - and the ornate administration building across Cooper Street and adjacent to Johnson Park that will be vacated by the Camden Board of Education.

There are enough other things going on at the riverfront that the area will be marketed as a "singular destination" rather than being paired with Philadelphia, said Judi London, director of the Camden Waterfront Marketing Bureau.

London draws a parallel to Inner Harbor in Baltimore, but emphasizes that the Baltimore harbor does not have a residential component.

"Everything is coming together for the Camden waterfront," Dranoff said. "A few years ago, The Victor wouldn't have been possible."