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# Queens Neighborhood Gets a Little TLC

By ANTHONIA AKITUNDE

SOMETIME this fall ground will be broken in Astoria, [Queens](#), on Hoyt Plaza, a rental building with 34 units, from studios to three-bedroom penthouses, with amenities that include an expansive lobby, a gym, a laundry room, a pool, terraces and a rooftop garden.

That might not seem unusual in many neighborhoods in New York, but Hoyt Plaza is a departure for Astoria, a neighborhood mostly known for its Greek cuisine and as the home of Steinway & Sons.

Architectural renderings of Hoyt Plaza suggest a scale heretofore unseen in the neighborhood. The glass and brick building will be 11 stories high, benefiting from recent rezoning that allows new developments to rise above the previous maximum of six stories. Hoyt Plaza, which is expected to open in two years, is being developed by Giannola Realty, which has also built two other rentals, Hoyt South and Bridge Side. The buildings are within five minutes' walk of each other in the westernmost reaches of Astoria, near the foot of the Robert F. Kennedy Bridge.

Joseph Giannola, the company's vice president and co-founder, said monthly rent at Hoyt Plaza would be slightly more than at the original buildings. Bridge Side has 27 units (studios rent for \$1,500 and two-bedrooms are \$2,200) and Hoyt South has 19 (studios are \$1,800, one-bedrooms \$2,200 and two-bedroom penthouses \$3,200 to \$3,500).

Before going into real estate, Mr. Giannola, who has lived in Astoria for almost 50 years, worked as a hairdresser at 42nd and Lexington. Most of his clients didn't live in [Manhattan](#), he said, and they came to him because they were unhappy with the services in their own boroughs.

"I said to myself, 'Why can't I do this type of work in my neighborhood?'" Mr. Giannola said. In 1970 he opened Joseph's Hair Place, which still operates a few doors down from his rentals.

The hair salon and the rental buildings are just part of a puzzle that Mr. Giannola is assembling in Astoria. The area is known for its wealth of dining options, but around the Giannola buildings, restaurants and places to commune are few and far between. So Mr. Giannola and his brothers Anthony and Vito have opened two storefront restaurants within the last year: Twirlz, a frozen yogurt shop, and Basil Brick Oven Pizza, featuring pizza made with fresh ingredients and baked in a wood-fired oven.

“That’s why we not only try to provide nice apartments,” Mr. Giannola said, “we tried to build something unique for our tenants.”

Brokers say the Giannolas’ presence has improved the area, cosmetically and socially.

“They wanted to bring up the community,” said Luca Di Ciero, the president of NY Space Finders. “People appreciate it.”

With business booming, Mr. Giannola says he plans to expand the dining areas in both restaurants. There is also talk of opening a [yoga studio](#).

Mr. Di Ciero said the Giannolas’ rentals raised the bar for other developers in Astoria. “They weren’t just cookie-cutter-shaped layouts,” he said. “They were one of the first to mount the cable outlet in the wall so you could have a flat screen. They put a gym in. A lot of buildings I know have the room to do that, but they didn’t go the extra mile.”

Mr. Giannola said that his tenants were willing to pay “that extra dollar” (his rents were about 10 percent over the market average) for higher-quality construction and finishes. “I looked at so many places and said, ‘No, no, no,’ ” said John Gaspar, a production manager who has lived in Hoyt South for eight months and plans to move into Hoyt Plaza when it opens. “Places I looked at in Manhattan comparable to this are \$4,000 a month. I pay \$1,900 and I can see the Chrysler Building.”

After it opened seven years ago, Bridge Side was fully rented in six weeks; Hoyt South, which opened in January 2010, filled up just as quickly. Mr. Di Ciero said he expected a similar response to Hoyt Plaza.

The presence of such developments hints at a growing interest in Astoria. Near La Guardia Airport and 20 minutes from Midtown by car or public transportation, the neighborhood is becoming more of a destination, said Steffan Olausson Partridge, a real estate broker who has placed clients in Hoyt South.

Mr. Giannola, who said the only time he had been away from Astoria was the two-year period he spent serving in Vietnam, expressed the hope that more people would come to know the pleasures of his neighborhood.

“Why would you want to go live in the city?” he said.