

THIS WEEK | January 09, 06

## Father-and-son architects find niche in Mount Vernon



**Peter Gaito Jr. and his father, Peter F. Gaito, are keeping busy designing several Mount Vernon apartment projects.**

Mount Vernon has long been nicknamed the "City of Homes," but a father-and-son team of architects is busy transforming the hometown of Art Carney, Dick Clark and Denzel Washington into the city of apartments as well.

Peter F. Gaito and his son Peter Gaito Jr. head a White Plains-area architectural practice that has left its design and development stamp on several multifamily projects in Mount Vernon. Last fall, the Gaitos joined with Steven Judelson's city-based Judelson Development Group L.L.C. to start work on The Vista at Fleetwood. The 70-unit, 11-story apartment building is set to be completed later this year at 550 Locust St.

By then, the Gaitos hope to break ground on another apartment project, The Alexander, a 200-apartment condominium building with some 15,000 square feet of ground floor retail space. The \$100 million project, now under review by officials, would rise on East Sandford Boulevard between Franklin and Union avenues. The Gaitos are designing The Alexander for Brooklyn developer Reed Properties.

"Typically, you blend architecture with its surroundings. But here the area is run down, so we're creating the architectural standard. As people build up the surrounding properties, we'd hope they will relate to the standard," the elder Gaito said.

He and his son are also busy on a third Mount Vernon project, the \$16 million conversion of a former telephone company building into 70 condos, by adding three stories to 15 South 5th Ave. and refurbishing its existing three floors.

The Gaitos have six other projects in the works, but say they won't be ready to discuss them for at least a few months.

Like other developers, the Gaitos still see a strong condo market in Westchester, even as rising interest rates have begun cutting into sales. During the third quarter of 2005 the median price of a Westchester condo was \$359,000, half that of a single-family home (\$711,700), according to the Westchester-Putnam Multiple Listing Service.

The prices of the Gaito-designed condos will be around the median, between \$301,500 and \$480,000 for Vista at Fleetwood apartments; from \$320,000 past \$500,000 for units at The Alexander.

### COMING HOME

The elder Gaito says developing in Mount Vernon is a homecoming of sorts. He was born and raised in the city, and his son was born there.

"I understand the community and its potential. Too many people have been short-sighted and not seen what the city has to offer: the small size, the variety of housing, access to Metro-North and highways, its proximity to New York City. What we're attempting to do is tap into that potential."

And send an upbeat message to other developers about Mount Vernon.

"I'm not just developing buildings, but I'm encouraging development of the community as well," Gaito said. "In other communities, developers don't need encouragement to build there. In Mount Vernon, they need a little more hand-holding, explaining to them the value of doing their projects there, which has us being salesmen for the city to some extent. That lingering perception of Mount Vernon and lower Westchester has to be overcome."