



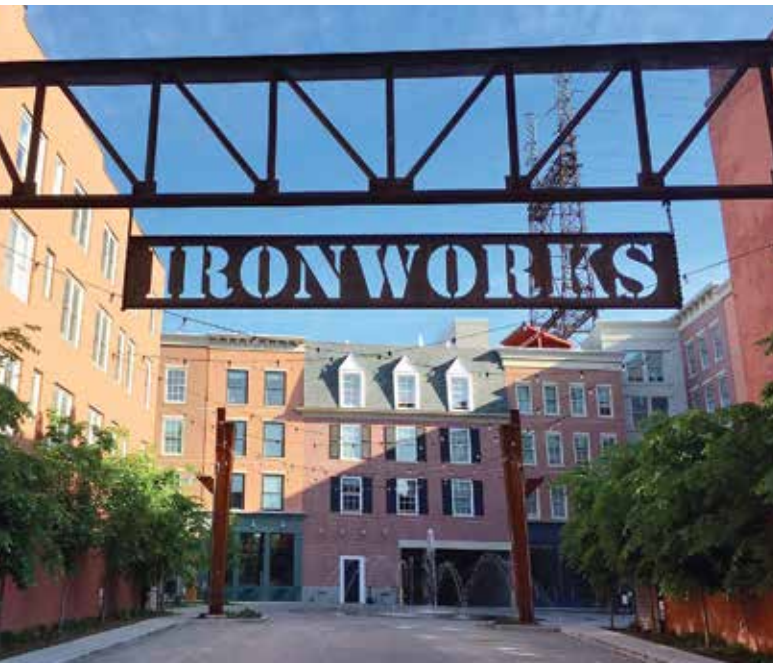
# BEAUTIFUL BOXES

APARTMENT LIVING GLAMS UP SONO // BY DOUGLAS P. CLEMENT

IT'S TOO DIFFICULT TO RESIST the *Field of Dreams* build-it-and-they'll-come reference when talking about the long, sometimes slow, and these days hyper-energized rise of SoNo—South Norwalk to the uninitiated—as the hippest home base in lower Fairfield County. Architect Bruce Beinfield, the father and visionary of the SoNo renaissance, and Spinnaker Real Estate Partners CEO Clay Fowler are the principals who have built “it”—in this case hundreds of amenity-rich living spaces in new and gorgeously revitalized historic buildings. And “they” have come. SoNo has emerged as the preferred address for millennials, drawn by affordability, walkability, diversity, and authenticity, as well as easy access to the water, arguably Connecticut’s best dining scene, and rich opportunities for social interaction. “People want connections—work, social, sexual,” says Fowler, whose office is located in the historic and transformed Ironworks building, home to 108 units of housing and 24,000 square feet of retail/office space.

Ironworks makes a grand first impression with its shared amenity area, home to a kitchen, bar, media library, fireplace, ping-pong table, conference room, and gym. Residents share a community rooftop, with grills, a television, lounge chairs, WiFi, and a stereo system.

It can be quicker to get to midtown Manhattan from SoNo—an hour by train—than from other parts of New York City. The convenience of Metro North also eases access to job centers like Stamford, or New Haven in the



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other direction. “People don’t want to waste their time driving,” Fowler says.

If convenience is SoNo’s curb appeal, cost closes the deal. “It’s far less expensive to live in SoNo than it is to live in Brooklyn and the travel time’s not that much different,” Beinfield says. Fowler fills in the details: You can get into a studio or one-bedroom for around \$1,800 and rents go up to about \$2,600. The biggest living spaces with the best views might exceed \$3,000 a month. That’s 60 percent of the price of Manhattan rentals.

Unlike the Big Apple, SoNo has a human scale: no skyscrapers for one, and it has organic geography more like Boston’s charming twists and turns than Manhattan’s austere grids. “The restaurants are a really the anchor for millennials,” says Beinfield, referring to highly rated places like The Spread, Match, Washington Prime—all of which Beinfield designed—as well as Mecha Noodle Bar, Bruculino, Local Kitchen & Craft Beer Bar, and the chic SoNo 1420 Distillery.

SoNo’s charm derives in part from the rail line: it encloses the district like a discrete gem, epitomized by the train bridge crossing over Washington Street at a jaunty angle. Of course, that charm will be tarnished by the project set to begin next year to replace the four-track bridge over the Norwalk River. The complex undertaking is expected to cost more than \$500 million, stretch over several years, and be disruptive to the neighborhood.

That feeling of being tucked inside SoNo by the train tracks will be enhanced for the next wave of arrivals as Beinfield and

his colleagues develop 280 apartments and townhouses divided among two buildings that will go up on either side of his architectural office on Chestnut Street near the train station. The project is made possible by a change to zoning rules, allowing greater residential density in the area, which Beinfield had long supported.

Beinfield and Fowler estimate the number of new apartments in the SoNo residential renaissance at close to 500, with Fowler calculating that another 450 to 500 are in the pipeline, a figure including East Norwalk, the next revival hotspot. In addition to the 280 units adjacent to his office, Beinfield’s current projects include 136 units under construction on Water Street and 120 units at the Clarke Kitchens site, with more projects in the “talking stages.”

The architect and the real-estate executive who work together on many projects have been friends for a long time and have known each other since childhood, when their parents were close. Their SoNo quest originated in 1990 when they did their first building together, which began with a façade improvement incentive program by the city. “That sort of grounded us in South Norwalk,” says Fowler. The acceleration of the influx of new residents now, Fowler thinks, can be attributed to a general population movement into urban areas throughout the world, specifically those near smart and reliable rail service.

Beinfield’s SoNo experience parallels Fowler’s, but from a different perspective. Having grown up in Westport, after receiving a Master of Architecture degree from the University of Colorado,

he was living in Denver in the 1980s when the old buildings in the LoDo area (Lower Downtown) were starting to be converted into spaces for professionals. “There was something about the rejuvenation of dilapidated urban cores that fascinated me,” says Beinfield, who moved back to Connecticut in 1983 to start his architectural practice in Norwalk. “It’s been a career-long adventure, which started with me originally thinking, ‘How can an architect have a positive influence in the community?’”

The first project was the old building on North Main Street that had been boarded up and needed a lot of attention. “I found a rug maker and a pottery maker and other crafts oriented, creative businesses to join me in taking the second floor of that building,” Beinfield recalls. In 1994, the first floor became home to a restaurant that would change Connecticut’s dining scene, the original Barcelona Wine Bar. The new energy attracted other businesses, and Beinfield began to envision SoNo as the destination it’s become.

“I saw the potential for SoNo being a very millennial friendly place quite a while ago. It’s taken a long time for the zoning to get into place for that to happen, but it seems to have a lot of momentum now,” adds Beinfield, who is designing a SoNo brewery. “These small maker oriented business are starting to flourish in the neighborhood and are going to add to the culture and make it a more fun place to be,” he says. ■

### Roasting a Chestnut

The J&J Cash weaving company constructed what would eventually become a 40,000-square-foot building at 57 Chestnut Street in 1906. Among the company’s biggest output was clothing labels (“machine wash, cold water” type thing). It thrived and in 1970s the building was taken over by Pac-Kit, which made among other things first-aid kits, popular among world explorers.

Now the building’s third owner, RBA Properties, led by Keith Brown, has an exciting new vision to fill the sprawling brick edifice, currently occupied by East Coast Kombucha, Bruce’s Marble, and Big East Environmental. RBA is in negotiations with a brewery to take about 4,500 square feet. Says Brown: “We are aiming to create a community of mixed uses for this space. Preservations of an old building helps to create that community. It’s what people want.”

As new tenants move in, Brown continues to make improvements throughout. “The building originally had some outdoor courtyards, and we would like to reclaim that exterior space,” he says. —GEOFFREY MORRIS

