

# Hands-On Building

## An Interview with Miles Berger, Chairman and Chief Operating Officer, The Berger Organization



Miles Berger

**EDITOR'S NOTE** Miles Berger is responsible for spearheading The Berger Organization's hospitality and commercial operations encompassing more than one million square feet of office space. Over the years, he has acquired more than a dozen hotel and commercial properties throughout Newark, where he has spearheaded several prominent commercial real estate development projects, and in other burgeoning Northern New Jersey cities, including Jersey City. His deep appreciation for Newark's rich history and personal, unwavering commitment to restoring New Jersey's largest city to its past brilliance serves as the foundation for the company's concentrated real estate acquisitions throughout the city and the employment of more than 220 local residents.

Berger has been recognized for his professional and personal efforts with Newark's Business Person of the Year Award as well as community service honors from the Newark Police Department and Coalition of 100 Black Women.

**COMPANY BRIEF** A privately owned diversified real estate company, The Berger Organization ([www.bergerorg.com](http://www.bergerorg.com)) is involved in the development and management of residential, commercial, and hospitality properties throughout Northern New Jersey and New York City. Based in Newark, New Jersey, Berger has been instrumental in the city's renaissance during the past 36 years. Current projects include converting more than 600,000 square feet of space on Broad Street into luxury residential apartments with a retail component and indoor garage, as well as the planned adaptive reuse of the three-acre former Newark Holiday Inn site for a mixed-use transportation hub complex. Berger's strong commitment to Newark is further reflected in the firm's involvement in the Newark Regional Business Partnership (NRBP).

### How has The Berger Organization developed and what is the strength of the business today?

We began in Newark in 1976. Prior to that, my father had purchased a 100-room hotel in Jersey City off of Journal Square, which is now operating as a Ramada Inn.

Being a New Yorker, I was not familiar with Newark, but I saw an ad in the Sunday *New York Times* Real Estate section that listed a Holiday Inn on Broad Street for sale.

I looked at the hotel and it was a beautiful two-story, 200-room property across the street from Broad Street station. I fell in love with it and six months later, I purchased it from New England Mutual Life Insurance Company, which had foreclosed and taken back the building from a large Holiday Inn operator. That was my introduction. After buying that, I settled in Newark, and for 30-odd years, I have been accumulating various properties, both hospitality and office holdings.

The Robert Treat Hotel was and is Newark's leading hotel; it has a long history, having opened in 1916. In 1960, the Robert Treat was expanded and a new 175-room tower was built next to the original 1916 hotel. And prior to my buying it in 1986, the owner had partially converted the original hotel into office space. So when I bought the property, I was buying a hotel and also a partially converted office building. That was my introduction into the office building business.

We completed the conversion and renovated the entire office building and it became what is now known as Robert Treat Center, which

is a 100,000-square-foot office building located next door to what now operates as a hotel. So the original hotel is now an office building and the 1960 construction is the hotel.

I like the office building business. I found it a much easier space in which to operate than hotels, and thereafter, I bought a number of office buildings in and around Newark, specifically the Fireman's Insurance Company building at 10 Park Place, which is the neighbor of the New Jersey Performing Arts Center; the Military Park Building at 60 Park Place, which is a 250,000-square-foot 21-story office building; and more recently, 570 Broad Street, a 200,000-square-foot building originally built by Helmsley-Spear and one of the four Helmsley-Spear buildings in Newark before they sold off their Newark properties.

### What kind of an impact did you see for Newark as a result of the downturn and is the market coming back?

In the hospitality area, we had to drop our rates in 2008 like everyone else in order to compete. Occupancy did fall slightly; our market for Newark hotels is predominantly based on Newark Airport. Newark primarily has tourists and visitors who come to the New York area via one of the three New York airports, which is how Newark is introduced to them. Not everybody can spend \$450 a night on a hotel room in Manhattan, so we get Manhattan's overflow in Newark.

But throughout 2009, 2010, and 2011, the situation has been improving. Our rate is moving back up and our occupancy is very strong.

### How has Newark evolved and is there an effective understanding of the changes taking place in the city and the opportunities offered?

Under Mayor Booker's leadership and administration, Newark has moved ahead. There is a trust in the Booker Administration from the business community, both from a public safety standpoint and from a development standpoint. We see that through recent developments, including an announcement by Panasonic, which is going to move their U.S. headquarters to Newark, as well as the development that has taken place around the downtown area and throughout the five wards of Newark.

### What is Newark's greatest advantage?

Newark's location is its greatest advantage – 15 minutes from Manhattan by public transportation and a half hour by car. Its transportation system is the best in the state of New Jersey, equal to New York City's transportation system in terms of highway, bus transportation, light rail, train, and Newark Airport, which is often considered the easiest to navigate of the three airports in the New York region.

It's tough to compete with Manhattan, but Newark can offer businesses office or hotel space, as well as residential space, at much lower rates than New York City.

### To what do you attribute your longevity and consistent results?

For the past 25 years, we have concentrated on development of buildings in the downtown Newark area, so the company has built a reputation for hands-on building management backed by fine landlords who are trustworthy and able to get the job done on time and on budget for our clients.

### You are involved in a number of community organizations. How critical is it to be engaged in that regard?

In order for business to thrive and for the city in general to thrive, the entire community has to get involved. Various organizations that I've worked with over the years are dedicated to helping the community within Newark. Newark is not without its problems and special effort has to be made by businesses in order to help citizens in Newark who need it. ●