

DEVELOPMENT OF A BUILDER: POTATO FIELDS TO MAIN STREET developments along Route 107 in Hicksville, L.I.

By Shawn Kennedy

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"Twenty-five years ago this was a dusty twolane road and nobody seemed to want to build anything but houses here," said Jerry Spiegel one recent afternoon as he maneuvered his car through traffic on North Broadway, Hicksville's six-lane thoroughfare. "Today this is one of the main commercial and industrial corridors in Nassau County and now anyone who wants to be here today has to come to me."

Mr. Spiegel has the largest concentration of commercial and industrial space under individual ownership on Long Island. With the exception of the Mid-Island Shopping Center and the Sears store, Mr. Spiegel owns most of the property along Route 107-North Broadway between the Long Island Expressway and the Hicksville train station. In addition to that mile-long strip, which includes office buildings, banks, gas stations, shopping centers, fast-food establishments, showrooms and light industrial businesses, Mr. Spiegel has developed hundreds of other commercial and industrial sites in both Nassau and Suffolk Counties over the last two decades. Almost all of his buildings are small, one- to three-story projects.

Revealing his personal worth or the income from or value of his holdings is something Mr. Spiegel refuses to do. But a 1971 library bond proposal statement from the town of North Hempstead showed that Mr. Spiegel paid \$2.5 million in real-estate taxes that year. Only two other companies in the town paid more real-estate taxes than Mr. Spiegel did - the Long Island Lighting Company and New York Telephone. Mr. Spiegel will say, however, that he has at the present 110 commercial and industrial buildings in both Nassau and Suffolk Counties and that his portfolio of undeveloped land is about 300 acres.

"I knew from the beginning that North Broadway, that Hicksville was a great location," said Mr. Spiegel. His father died when Jerry Spiegel was 3 years old. He spent much of his youth on his uncle's 115-acre farm in Smithtown. The farm produced mainly potatoes and chickens.

"I had no particular idea of what I wanted to do," said Mr. Spiegel, as he sat in a suite of offices in his headquarters Hicksville building surrounded by his collection of sculpture and graphic art. "But I did know that there was something else for me besides farming."

He realized the money to be made in construction, he said, when he hired a builder to put up a barbecue in the yard of his uncle's farmhouse and the builder charged \$700 for a project that required less than \$100 worth of materials.

At 18 he started his own construction company in Hicksville in 1948. When he talks about the early days Mr. Spiegel provides insights into how a young man with limited professional and academic experience succeeded. Once he bought land for one of his first projects at what was even at that time a throwaway price because the property was marred by a huge sand pit. Mr. Spiegel filled the pit with earth from basements dug at another development. That property became the site for 27 homes.

Located in the county's virtual geographic middle, Hicksville's residential and commercial center was the focus of intense construction between 1960 and 1970. This activity spread to Jericho and Syosset to the north, Westbury to the west and Plainview and Bethpage, Gruman's location, to the east and south.

In Nassau County prior to 1965 there were about 50 office buildings in the county with less than two million square feet of space. The commercial growing spurt increased the number of office buildings to 130 and doubled the available square footage by 1970.

While Mr. Spiegel's financial success is anchored in his commercial and industrial holdings, he began building along the Hicksville road in the late 1940's and 1950's with capital from his residential projects..

"We learned by doing," said Mr. Spiegel, who had no formal training as a builder, architect or businessman., "At the time it was much easier to get loans, particularly for residential projects since there was such a desperate need for housing."

With a \$1,500 loan from a savings bank, he went into business with a friend, Roger Crapeau, a brickmason who had worked with a construction crew on the Empire State Building and who also was experienced as a home renovator. They were together about a year and a half.

Young Spiegel did not have the financial resources to buy land so he leased building lots from the landowner. When a home was sold the landowner was paid an amount equal to the value of the land plus a 25 percent premium.

The average cost of land then was \$600 for a typical residential plot; house and lot sold for about \$8,000. Today most of the twobedroom, Roger Homes, as they were called, are worth about \$50,000.

"When you grow up on a farm, you learn to do a bit of everything and I suppose that is what got us through," Mr. Spiegel said. "But at the time it seemed that everything that could go wrong did."

The sale of those homes produced a \$150,000 profit. Mr. Spiegel used his share to start his first independent project, Sunnymeade Ranch, a 2,000-unit development off North Broadway.

"By that time I had it down to a science," he said, describing construction technique. "I was building at the rate of one home a day."

Mr. Spiegel sold his last Sunnymeade unit and bought a one-acre lot on Hicksville's border, suitable for a light industrial business. He continued in this methodical vein, often buying a lot at a time.

His design approach was built around an "office-building" concept applied to commercial and industrial development, which Mr. Spiegel believed offered the most flexibility for potential clients. By office-building concept he means a large complex suitable for more than one light industrial company. The partitioned space for tenants was designed to suit their specific needs.

"This approach provided an alternative to small industrial companies that want to relocate in Nassau County but could not afford modern plants of their own," said Mr. Spiegel.

He designed as well as constructed nearly every one of his buildings. He hired architects to turn his renderings into finished blueprints.

After his first partnership was dissolved, Mr. Spiegel had not been interested in forming another. Although neither of his grown children, daughters Lise or Pamela, have expressed an interest yet in joining him in business, his wife, Emile, has been active in his company for some time. The Spiegels live on the North Shore.

Unrolling blueprints for a current project, he observed that design "is the part of this profession that is the most fun, the most satisfying."

Much of the architectural landscape in the Hicksville area is the results of Mr. Spiegel's design concepts. Not all of his building live up to his highest design standards.

"It's not much to look at but it's small and efficient," he remarked while pointing out one of his first commercial projects. "The challenge, particularly today, is in designing a building that will be marketable, practical and attractive," he said. "I'd say that security and energy efficiency are the primary concerns of today's tenants."

He recalls no big setbacks, though he remembers headaches on individual projects. He still owns almost every commercial building he has built. He feels he has been protected from economic ups and downs partly because he was not interested in over-extending himself with monumental projects.

Rising construction costs and high interest rates, however, have made new designs of any sort a luxury. "Recently we have been concentrating on renovations because of the tremendous cost of building from the ground up," he said. The tastes of prospective tenants have also kept Mr. Spiegel from building some of his favorites. He recalled his difficulty in selling one design for a round office building with a glass dome. "Even those who were intrigued by the publicity of having their names on such an unusual building were not ready to make the commitment," he said. "So it's still in my file."

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