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RockPlaza: Urban lifestyle in the heart of Newark

By Tom De Poto/The Star-Ledger *The Star-Ledger on November 29, 2012 at 8:09 AM, updated November 29, 2012 at 8:11 AM*

Courtney Alonzo is a hockey fan. She roots for the Pittsburgh Penguins, but admits she'd have no problem donning a Devils jersey.

And that's a good thing, because her next-door neighbor is the Prudential Center, home to the New Jersey Devils. And outside her window stands a two-story-tall stainless steel hockey player with his hockey stick.

Alonzo is among the first tenants to rent one of 22 loft-style apartments at 224-26 Market Street, Newark, adjacent to Devils Championship Plaza and the Rock.



Courtney Alonzo was one of the first tenants in RockPlaza on Market Street in Newark.
Frances Micklow/The Star-Ledger

Alonzo, who hails from Pittsburgh, is a first-year student at the Seton Hall University School of Law, just a few blocks away.

Her one-bedroom apartment features brick interior walls, exposed steel girders, 10- to 12-foot ceilings, large windows, keyless entry and a rooftop deck.

"It's been a dream of mine to have a place like this," she said.

RockPlaza — new residential and commercial properties along Market Street between Broad and Mulberry streets — will host its grand opening today. Fidelco Realty and the Hanini Group partnered to redevelop the long-abandoned buildings in the shadow of the Rock. Dinosaur Bar-B-Que is the anchor retail tenant.

The properties are the latest sign of renewal in the neighborhood since the Prudential Center opened in 2005. A Marriott Courtyard opened on Broad Street earlier this year, but Fidelco and Hanini Group are the only developers offering apartment living in the area.

"We developed the first residential building on Market Street in, since, forever," said Samer Hanini, who with his brother Thafer operates the Hanini Group.

They turned the Bowers Building, also on Market Street, into a mixed-use building two years ago.

The block has been home to stores, offices and warehouses for more than a century.

When construction is completed late next year on the \$38 million project, RockPlaza will consist of seven restored buildings housing 34,000 square feet of retail space and 80 apartments.

The Columbian Building at 224-6 Market St., however, is already welcoming tenants. Nineteen of the 22 units are already rented.

Lisa Thompson moved in on Nov. 3, just after Hurricane Sandy ripped through Newark. What drew her to the building was its proximity to Penn Station.



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“The apartment is larger and less money than where I was living,” said Thompson, who worked in New York, “and closer to the train station.”

Built in 1890, the building has housed storefronts, manufacturing and warehousing operations. Marc Berson, chairman of the Fidelco Realty Group, said blending residential housing in a part of the city where none had ever been is part of a new urban model.

“People want the city experience,” he said. “They want to be able to walk to stores and have access to public transportation. And retailers want a customer base 24-7. Bringing that altogether, that’s the goal.”

Dinosaur Bar-B-Que was the first tenant in May. Four other shops are expected to open in the next few weeks, including a pizza restaurant, a convenience store and a beer garden on Edison Place.

“We’re very selective about who we put in our retail locations,” said Thafer Hanini. “We want it to be a choice location for families coming to the Rock.”

The brothers take pride in the historic details of the building. The brick facade has been restored, as well as the “Columbian” sign above the doorway. The building front also displays rare, curved-brick columns. The restored foyer is part of the original structure with ceramic tile walls and a tin ceiling.

As for Alonzo, the Seton Hall law student, only one thing could make life at RockPlaza better: “A coffee shop that’s open on Sundays,” she said.

Tom De Poto: tdepoto@starledger.com or 973-392-4270