

HEALTHY LIVING FROM THE GROUND UP

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born again



Bruno now owns these houses, as he does most every property behind them, and is converting them into rentals for weekend getaways.

Flipping the neighborhood, but keeping its guts

A vision of getting away from the city, without setting foot in a car

By Rusty Tagliareni

Perhaps nowhere in the Hudson Valley is spring's spirit of rebirth running as rampant as it is right now in the corridor between Sloatsburg and Tuxedo, NY. The epicenter of this renaissance might be the row of unassuming houses along Route 17, which are in the midst of being rehabbed. In them can be found

the seeds of a grand plan from the entrepreneurial mind of Michael Bruno.

Bruno made his fortune as founder of 1stdibs.com, whose users bid on items from a highly curated collection of "the most beautiful things on earth." He has since used that capital to fund several other endeavors, including his latest, the Tuxedo Hudson Company.

Bruno's first experienced the

Hudson Valley in 2012, when he began his search for a new home closer to his work. He lived in Manhattan, and being none too fond of the subway, found himself spending upwards of half an hour driving across town to his office. A friend convinced him to make a day trip to the gated community of Tuxedo Park, NY. He fell in love, purchasing his \$3 million lakefront manor days later. Not exactly closer

to his office, but undeniably a more pleasant commute. Nowadays, though, he conducts his business from Tuxedo Park.

As we drive around the community Bruno now calls home, he points out historic homes, their architects, and notable previous residents. The highlight is a literal hilltop castle once known as Loomis Laboratory, which during World War II housed a secret

government think-tank composed of our nation's greatest minds, Albert Einstein included. It is widely believed that the concept of the atom bomb was conceived within those stone walls. Today the building serves a much less secretive purpose as, among other things, the base of operations for Bruno's new app, Housepad.

We leave the community behind and head out onto Route 17. All along this thoroughway Bruno has purchased properties, some \$15 million in total. His Tuxedo Hudson Company aims to turn this corridor along Route 17 into the "gateway to the Hudson Valley."

The first phase of his plan, Bruno explains as we drive, is taking place in Sloatsburg, just south of Tuxedo. That's where we're heading.

In the meantime, though, there are sites to see en route through Tuxedo, that comprise phase two of the plan. The first building we see is an old storefront across from the train station. The Tuxedo Hudson Company now owns the large structure, and plans to convert it into an upscale local market. Bruno believes that a key strength of the Hudson Valley is the locally sourced organic food, and this market is to become the epicenter of all things edible. A bit up the road our SUV pulls onto a muddy roadside.

"See that barn through the woods there?" he asks, pointing past me out the passenger window at a crooked frame of brown wood atop a stacked stone foundation.

Generations of disuse have found the woods encroaching up to its walls. It was the kind of building that many don't even notice through the trees, and those who do may consider a blight on the landscape. "Isn't it beautiful?"



Loomis Laboratory, once a World War II top secret government think tank, is now Bruno's headquarters.

he asked. Honestly, it was.

Pointing further down the four-lane state highway, he explained how another old home and the adjacent commercial building were going to be turned into a 7,000 square-foot art gallery. On the corner of the same property stands a ragged mustard-yellow house. It looks to be at least a century old, with its last paint job occurring around the time disco was popular. I inquired to its future, as it clearly stood too close to the proposed art gallery, likely in the optimal location of a parking lot. I expected to hear it was to be razed, its crooked porch and badly peeling facade put out of misery after decades of neglect.

"We are going to move that house," he said. "I'm going to have it moved across the street and placed on blocks until we decide what to do with it. I don't have the heart to tear it down." We drive on to Sloatsburg.

We arrive at a row of houses, covered in ladders, exposed plywood, and some dozen construction workers laying into them. Bruno now owns these, as he does most every property behind them, up to the Sloatsburg train station on the next street. This is phase one.

We get out and walk. These houses are being converted into rentals — multi-bedroom facilities with shared common rooms including the dining room, kitchen, and living room — for weekend getaways or extended stays. Bruno aims to start renting them in June.

We enter up a makeshift ramp into the last house on the row, which is the closest to completion. In the gutted space, among new timbers and exposed insulation, stands the original staircase, worn with age. "We try to keep any of the details of the buildings that we can," said Bruno. In doing so he hopes that, though modernized, they may retain their character.

Behind the houses, the foundation of what must have been a sizable barn lives on as a rose garden with a reflecting pool at the center. The outbuilding is to become an organic food stand. Outside the northern wall of the foundation stands an old two-floor cube-shaped building in mid-renovation. Come summer

this will house the coffee shop, and eventually behind it will stand a new restaurant. "If I were to build something, I would never use that footprint," said Bruno, pointing toward the splintered form. "But I want to keep what we have."

We pass the future pool, the bike shop. In essence, Bruno is constructing a village within greater Sloatsburg, a literal stone's throw from the train station, and a two-mile bike ride to Harriman State Park, with 52,000 acres of forest and beaches and hundreds of miles of trails. With this stop, and the Tuxedo station up the line, both easily accessed from Penn Station, Bruno envisions people popping up from the city without even having to catch a cab.

Change on this scale can meet with skepticism from the locals, but it's hard to find a naysayer. "I think it's great," said Dan Castricone, owner of The Castricone Agency, which sells insurance in Tuxedo. "He's bringing the Ramapo River, which is a huge resource for tourism, into play. He's bringing together fine dining, antiques, and culture, all of the things a town like Tuxedo should have," he said. "I only leased my store downtown because of the progress that's being made around me. You want to get in early and I can see this is going to be a vibrant business district."

This row house is being modernized and turned into a rental, but the old staircase will remain. "It's much easier to turn it down and build something new," said a contractor on the site. "It's nice to see old things like this saved."

