



ARCHITECTURE

A STUDIO LOT GROWS IN BROOKLYN

DOUG STEINER PROVES THAT IF YOU BUILD IT, HOLLYWOOD WILL COME

**STORY BY
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In 1999 Doug Steiner made a big bet. The real estate developer and owner of Steiner Studios gambled that if he built a sprawling complex of soundstages and production facilities on the East River, major movies and television shows would decamp for Brooklyn and a patch of land between Dumbo and Williamsburg. “I was told that the margins in this business are huge,” Steiner says. “I was told the city would welcome us with open arms, and that there was a lender available, willing and ready.”

None of those things materialized. Instead, then-Mayor Rudolph Giuliani threw his support behind a rival project involving Harvey Weinstein and Robert De Niro, the local Hasidic community filed lawsuits, the city government became consumed

with rebuilding after the 9/11 attacks and Steiner was forced to dip into his own pocket to fund construction. To make matters worse, he became embroiled in a contentious divorce that dragged on five years and sapped much of his attention. “It really shook me up, and I really thought I was going to lose my shirt,” says the 58-year-old. “I aged a lot.”

Steiner’s rocky start is in the past. The studio he has created in the largely abandoned Brooklyn Navy Yard is now the largest in New York and boasts 30 soundstages, with plans to construct a full-on studio backlot. On a recent afternoon in September, the 50-acre campus thrums with activity. Television shows such as “Gotham” and “Power” are in production, and sets are being painted

FEAR FACTOR

“I really thought I was going to lose my shirt,” says Doug Steiner, whose Brooklyn Navy Yard-based Steiner Studios is the largest in New York.

and built out for two big-budget feature films whose names Steiner says he can’t reveal. The number of Hollywood productions continues to balloon, lured across the continent by Brooklyn’s hip factor and generous tax incentives that Steiner pushed state leaders to enact. In fact, this year there are more scripted drama series being shot in New York than in Los Angeles, a sign of the business’s growth. “There’s a financial district,” he says. “There’s a garment district. We like to think of ourselves as a content-creation district for New York City.”

The developer strives to provide a boutique hotel experience for the productions that shoot on the lot — he offers cleaning services and equipment rentals, and the facility has an exercise room and showers. Steiner tries to keep the atmosphere low-key and familial. He’s frustrated that his staff has grown to the point where he no longer knows everyone’s name. There are bike racks in front of nearly every building. Cast and crew members tool around in golf carts, and parking is on a first-come, first-served basis. “The ethos here is we’re all the same,” Steiner says. “If I don’t need a reserved space, you don’t need a reserved space.”

As Steiner Studios has expanded, the area around it has blossomed. When construction began more than a decade ago, packs of wild dogs roamed the streets and most New Yorkers steered clear. Now there are posh apartment buildings and hipster bars and coffee shops filled with locals. “This entire neighborhood is changing, and Doug was at the forefront of that,” says Carla Raij, a line producer who has worked on such Steiner Studios-shot films as “Bridge of Spies” and “The Post.” “He saw something here that a lot of people didn’t see and propelled it in a direction that’s incredibly positive. He’s created a whole world here that can’t be duplicated.”

Last summer, Steiner opened up two new soundstages. Over the next decade, he plans to keep developing, adding at least a dozen more structures and a parking lot. One of his most ambitious goals is to restore to its former glory a dilapidated naval hospital that once housed Civil War soldiers and refashion it into an office building suitable for a media company. These projects could take five to six years to complete. Ultimately, Steiner thinks that a studio or company like Amazon or Netflix will buy an equity stake in the production facility he built. “We can deliver what nobody else has in New York,” he says. “Nobody is going to be able to build something like this from scratch.”

On the real estate front, Steiner recently constructed the highest tower in Brooklyn, dubbed the Hub, and has another condominium complex being completed in the East Village. He’s also working to bring Wegmans, a beloved grocery store chain, to the city. But there’s one business that Steiner says he’ll never pursue: “I will never create content. I barely know what I’m doing here. Shoot me if I ever try something like that.”