



The six-story building at 600 W. Main St., which wraps around the Blue Moon Diner, is due to open in September.

Main Street grows up

A New York developer and his artist wife share their vision for a more urban Charlottesville

The homepage for the New York City cafe and lounge DT•UT features a stark black-and-white storefront photograph that brings to mind similar shots of CBGB, the iconic rock club. DT•UT is on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, and CBGB was down on the Bowery. DT•UT—downtown-uptown, get it?

Subtlety isn't a virtue in marketing and branding. Ivy Levien, whose nom d'artiste is Ivy Naté, dreamed up and launched DT•UT. She's a designer, entrepreneur, and the wife and creative partner of Jeff Levien, a big-time real-estate developer (\$3.5 billion in "deals transacted," according to his bio). She likes temporary tattoos, laughs loudly, wears big black boots with platform soles, and fusses a lot with her long dark hair. Like his wife, Jeff is a New Yorker and a shaved head. He's an adjunct professor at NYU's Schack Institute of Real Estate, philanthropist, attorney, private equity fund manager, mortgage banker, "and, yes, even [a] performing comedian," his bio says.

You might ask: Why all this? Why do these personal details pertain to the sleek, 53-unit

apartment building under construction at 600 W. Main St.? Because Ivy and Jeff—the project's interior designer and developer, respectively—say so. Because they say they wanted to imbue the structure with personality. Specifically, Ivy's personality, according to Ivy herself.

"This building has become me," Ivy says. "It's thoughtful, respectful. It has a lot of integrity. It's a leader. It has an edge to it. But it's kind of funny and quirky. It's unique. And a little bit rock 'n' roll. That's what drives me."

Funny and quirky, like the publicity photo for Six Hundred West Main (the building's official name), showing Ivy sitting on a diner counter holding a bottle of Jack Daniel's between her legs and tilting back a shot, while Jeff gazes up at her and, apparently distracted, dispenses a stream of way too much sugar into his speckleware coffee cup. Unique, like the proposed mural—by South African artist Faith XLVII—that's part of the Six Hundred development. Ivy worked with the Charlottesville Mural Project to commission the impressive artwork.

On a sunny day in May, in the office of Jeff Dreyfus of Bushman Dreyfus Architects, Ivy and the two Jeffs discussed the ambitious project, which will change the face of West Main Street, bringing greater density, fresh style, and a dose of New York attitude.—*Joe Bargmann*

Abode: Jeff and Ivy, you moved here from New York and now split your time between the two cities. How did you choose Charlottesville?

Jeff Levien: It started as a personal journey. Seven, eight years ago, Ivy and I were living in the suburbs of New York City. The suburbs were not for us, and definitely not for Ivy—she's an artist. And it just gets very singular in the suburbs.

Ivy Naté: It was not one of the highlights of my life. (laughs)

Jeff L.: We wanted to change our life. We wondered, after our son graduates high school, what do we want to do? Where do we want to live? What are our objectives in life?

CONTINUED ON PAGE 17

We started looking at areas of America where we could live. We made a pro/con list. We chose Charlottesville. It had the seasons but wasn't too warm or too cold. We had no ties to UVA. We didn't necessarily think Jefferson was the best president. But we knew we wanted land. We wanted culture. We wanted diversity. And Charlottesville checked all those boxes.

I had a bigger vision of teaching and writing more, and giving Ivy space to do her art. But someone said, 'We heard you're in the real estate business, and there's a site in town....'

Ivy: That was seven years ago.

Jeff L.: And Ivy thought, this city needs a boutique hotel. There was a skeleton on the mall [then the Landmark Hotel]. But they weren't sellers and that was tied up in its own thing.

When we lived in New York, in the city, Ivy had started this hip café and lounge called DT•UT, bringing some of the feel and the concepts of downtown, uptown.

We wanted to bring that feel, a different feel, to Charlottesville. Someone showed us this site [the Blue Moon Diner]. We really didn't think it worked for a hotel, but neither did I think it was big enough to build residential. So, we were able to acquire some adjacent land, which enabled us to build Six Hundred. In my mind, that's why Charlottesville worked.

We also had a 36-acre farm in North Garden, with a 1700s log cabin that we refurbished.

Ivy: With Bushman and Dreyfus.

Jeff L.: Which is how we met Jeff [Dreyfus]. And he won an award for that. What was that? Best renovation?

Jeff Dreyfus: Best renovation, I believe—officially, the AIA Virginia Award of Merit.

Jeff L.: From a business perspective, Charlottesville had all the fundamentals. It had culture. It had an educational base. It had a business base, you know, like Northrup Grumman, somewhat tied to government. So, it wasn't subject to the big economic fluctuations that you see in other cities, small or large. And the other thing that was interesting to me was that no one here really builds market-rate residential.

Why do you think that's the case?

Jeff L.: There's a propensity to do student houses or just put up your next 50 hotel rooms. I use 'hotel' loosely, because it's a lot of Marriott/Fairfield Inn, and it's servicing a certain community.

But the residential housing stock was old. City Walk, at the time, was just being built. But there was no real dense, urban, multi-family development in this city. Having some background in that—working in a city like, let's say,



AMY AND JACKSON SMITH

Ivy and Jeff Levien

Quincy, Massachusetts—it made me say, that's what this city needs.

With the look and feel of Six Hundred, you're adding something uncommon, maybe nonexistent, in Charlottesville. Is that deliberate?

Jeff L.: When we first sat down with the [Bushman Dreyfus] design team, I said, 'Is it going to offend everybody if I don't want to do another Jeffersonian red-brick building?' I didn't want to be over-the-top, to the point where we would be perceived as the out-of-towners. But what I saw was very suburban.

What were your impressions of the city from a lifestyle and quality-of-life perspective? How did it jibe with where you'd been and what you wanted going forward?

Ivy: When I first came here, my intention was isolation, and the farm really allowed us to do that. Quiet. No more suburban. Ultimately, our plan to live on the farm full-time didn't work, so now we split time between Charlottesville and New York.

I don't live here day-to-day, but I engage a lot more with downtown than I thought I would have. I'm always impressed by how sophisticated everybody is. I'm impressed by the level of everything: music, art, entertainment. I was like, How does everybody *not* know about Charlottesville? I don't want to scream it from the rooftops—but I sort of do. It's just a cool little beatnik [enclave].

How did you find Bushman Dreyfus? Why did you choose to work with them?

Ivy: Where we are, in North Garden, there was a list of architects you had to choose from, and Bushman Dreyfus was one of them. After one or two meetings with JD, we made up our minds.

Jeff L.: That was to redo the cabin. It was a natural progression to stay with him on the larger projects.

Question for Jeff Levien: You've said that Six Hundred is not going to be student housing. How can you make that call?

Jeff L.: Students are not a protected class. So, you can put metrics in place to not lease to students. Why do it? We want to have a certain atmosphere and level of sophistication within the building. Also, we think there's enough student housing in the city, and we just want to be a different product.

What provisions are you making for affordable housing?

Jeff L.: We're going to do what we think is novel to the city, and also something we're pretty proud of. We're placing the required affordable units on-site. They're going to be above one of the retail buildings, on the second floor, and part of the project.

There's a formula you use to come up with either the amount you'll pay into the [city's housing] fund, or the number of units you have to provide. Most developers choose not to build those units on-site, but we have. Based on the formula, our affordable housing requirement comes out to two units. It's basically 5 percent.

Let's talk about the form of the building, including the Blue Moon and how that figures into the equation.

J.D.: At the very beginning, we agreed that this building needs to be forward-looking. That was inspiring in many ways. It really is what Jefferson was about. We also had to keep the two contributing structures, the Blue Moon and the one next door. There have been some misconceptions, but we and the Blue Moon owners agreed that the diner would reopen at Six Hundred. I believe the two older buildings add a layer of richness to the project that we wouldn't be able to fabricate. Six Hundred looks forward, but also embraces the past. The new building steps back from the other two buildings, which retain their presence on the street. And where the new building approaches the street, it steps down, in deference to the scale of the existing buildings.

What about the exterior cladding. What look are you going for, and what is the materiality?

J.D.: The material is the result of a lot of exploration by the team. I have to say first that Jeff and Ivy are not your standard clients. We became a design team. Developer, artist, and architects figuring out what we're capable of doing together. How far can we reach?

CONTINUED ON PAGE 19

Jeff L.: We had this idea of metals—more industrial or less industrial—and stuck with it. There was never a conversation of brick.

What are some of the points of reference?

Ivy: I can't name one building, in particular. They were all over the world. The materials, the way the buildings interacted with the space around them, the way the light played off of them. We covered so many things, I don't recall there being any one influence that stood out, like, The Lever House [a Modern "glass curtain" building in New York]. We were more interested in a mix of influences.

J.D.: Jeff and Ivy would send us images with notes. 'Hey, we were walking down the street in New York and we saw this, and it's so cool!' And we, my associates and I, were finding images. And we put them up on this wall. It was before Pinterest became big, so we had our own version of that.

Ivy: It was a conversation about, for instance, should it feel like a collection of [shipping] containers? No! That's too far.

One big thing was, we spent a lot of time figuring out what the personality of the building was. It helped the design of the building. We had the personality on one side, we had the materials on the other, and as a team, we thought about those things, and then built it.

What personality are you referring to?

Ivy: I hate this question, because this building has become me, in bricks and mortar.

J.D.: Or no bricks and mortar (laughs).

Ivy: It's thoughtful. Every piece of hardware, every material—we said, 'This is what the building should have.' It was very intentional. We had an idea of who our clients would be, who we wanted them to be. They are interested in design, they are forward-thinking. The building feels curated. It's clean-lined. And it's a little modern but not so much that in five years it's going to be dated.

About the other building....

Ivy: Changing the subject, I see. Oh, Six Hundred is so yesterday! (laughs)

Jeff L.: We closed on the site next door, the University Tire site, which we call 2.0. It will be the next great West Main project, we think.

Ivy: We came up with the idea that the next building is going to be Six Hundred's best friend. We came back to personalities. How do the buildings relate? How do they understand one another? How do they engage with one another?

Jeff L.: Timing-wise, University Tire is staying for at least a year. We'll get the benefit of seeing how Six Hundred plays out. We'll have to layer in market considerations with design. But I don't think it's going to be yin-and-yang. It's not going to be an all-white building next to an all-black building.

J.D.: To double back on the earlier question, why Charlottesville? Here, in Jeff and Ivy, you have two true urbanites in Charlottesville. I think the interesting part about 2.0, and benefiting from the knowledge we gain from Six Hundred, is that we'll better understand just how urban Charlottesville is willing to go.

J.D.: It's going to be really beautiful. We're thinking, How do we make that part of this project? Beyond that, we haven't dived into it too deeply.

Former mayor Maurice Cox led the charge in the early 2000s to densify Charlottesville and, in effect, make it more urban, which is what Six Hundred does. Cox went on to become the director of planning and development in Detroit, and talked about "taking control of the narrative" of that city as it recovered from its bankruptcy crisis. In Charlottesville, our crisis remains the



SIX HUNDRED WEST MAIN

Between the 53-unit apartment building and the back of the two older structures, including the Blue Moon Diner, lies an interior courtyard. "It's tight, it's tucked away, it's vertical—and the character of three different buildings all help create this unique space," says architect Jeff Dreyfus.

Ivy: Maybe the city wasn't ready for [Six Hundred] before. So, now it's ready. I think it's for sophisticated people. A well-designed, curated, thoughtful, clean space. I want my building to represent how I want to live my life.

J.D.: There's a part of it that's aspirational.

Ivy: Right. We dreamed a little. We dreamed for every one of our clients. We dreamed for you, so now go live it.

What else can you tell us about 2.0?

J.D.: We get to start with a clean slate. One interesting note: We've gotten approval to have a mural on the existing retail building by a world-renowned artist. That would go up in October. It's really cool.

Ivy: Faith XLVII is the artist's name. Charlottesville is really lucky to have a mural by her. That is a gift that we are giving to Charlottesville, wrapped in a bow.

events of August 2017. Do you think that smart development can make a difference and begin to redefine the city?

Ivy: We discussed where the city is now in relation to those events, and whether they have a bearing on what we do. It's not our place to weigh in on politics. But when we became interested in Faith XLVII, and she heard 'Charlottesville,' she said, I would love to come there and work. She is aware of what happened here. To me, the mural is a giant positive that comes out of a horrible negative.

J.D.: It does go to the question of how can design and urban development affect the trajectory of this town. We talked earlier about wanting to be forward-looking with Six Hundred. People from the outside, they look at Charlottesville, they know the 'event.' It's also true that our architecture is known for being historic and backward-looking. From a world perspective, Charlottesville is mired in this zone. But I think with Six Hundred and some other projects going on now, we're looking to the future. We're looking to move beyond where we are as a community, both in how we build and how we interact with one another day to day.