



CRAIN'S

NEW YORK BUSINESS

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WHAT'S NEXT?
Brokers adapt to make deals during the pandemic
PAGE 3

NEW YORK NOW

2021

The pandemic hasn't diminished the enthusiasm these companies have for the city's future
PAGE 13



BUCK ENNIS

ECONOMY

However long the Covid horror lasts, rebuilding the city's economy will take longer

CRAIN'S READERS are optimistic about the city's recovery PAGE 16

Ten years of job growth was wiped out by the pandemic in just two months last year

BY AARON ELSTEIN

In Washington Heights the aftershocks of *Contagion* lingered for almost a decade.

The Steven Soderbergh horror

movie, about a novel virus that killed millions worldwide, opened at the RKO Coliseum at the corner of Broadway and West 181st Street in 2011, shortly before the theater closed. But the title remained on

the marquee until the 100-year-old building was demolished late last year.

It will take at least five years to recover from the real contagion horror that has afflicted the city start-

ing exactly 12 months ago this month. That, at least, is the opinion of Ronnie Lowenstein, director of New York City's Independent

See **REBUILD** on page 27

HSBC SET TO SLASH OFFICE SPACE TO LOWER COSTS

PAGE 4



THE LIST The largest executive-recruiting firms

PAGE 11

Union Square Events focuses on growth despite the pandemic

Continues building out a commissary kitchen in Sunset Park's Industry City

BY CARA EISENPRESS

On West 28th Street, where Union Square Events had prepared food for various functions since 2005, the employees—400 of them pre-Covid-19—would squeeze between boxes of supplies to eat lunch.

When clients arrived for tastings, production in the main kitchen would have to pause to make room. There was a sense of isolation incumbent to being on the Far West Side of Manhattan, a lack of creative energy despite being part of a 20-location restaurant group and working with sports arenas, event venues, museums and private clients around the city.

In 2019 the events branch of Danny Meyer's Union Square Hospitality Group sought a bigger site, and in early 2020 it completed a

"GOING THROUGH A ... PROJECT LIKE THIS DURING THE PANDEMIC ... IS HARD"

15-year lease for a 70,000-square-foot space on 41st Street in Sunset Park's Industry City.

Union Square Events, led by company President Tony Mastellone, planned to build out the blank box into a commissary kitchen that would support the company's growth and illustrate its corporate ideal of putting people, both customers and employees, at the center of its work.

When pandemic restrictions eradicated huge segments of its business, reducing the workforce to 55, the company nonetheless kept the project alive, eventually adapting it to accommodate new lines of business discovered during the health crisis. Mastellone expects the headquarters to open during the summer.

"We saw this as the key to our future," Mastellone said. "We had all the plans, the funding, the space." Still, he conceded: "Going through a construction project like this during the pandemic, with no end date in sight, is hard. And anyone who says they didn't have a second thought would be lying."

Union Square Events left its old home early and rented a temporary space on 35th Street, also in Industry City, which made it easier to visit the in-progress headquarters. Industry City offered the company a month-to-month lease for about one-third the cost of its Manhattan location, which gave the construction timeline more flexibility.

"We didn't have to have this build-out in 90 or 120 days," Mastellone explained. "So we had the ability to have an orderly process in each phase of the operation where the contractors didn't have to double up on one another, and you didn't have those crunches where one trade had to come in on top of another trade."

RIGHT RECIPE

55

NUMBER OF employees Union Square Events has kept on during the pandemic

70K

SQUARE FEET, space the events caterer is leasing in Industry City

It also made social distancing and on-site safety easier to implement.

Meanwhile, Mastellone was uncovering new business. The food company devoted kitchen space to helping the nonprofit ReThink Food prepare meals to donate to people in need.

During the holiday season, employees fulfilled orders for at-home dinners, sold through ReThink's website and in partnerships that included Social Studies, a startup that rents festive table settings.

Manhattan-based Goldbelly, an e-commerce retailer that ships dishes from restaurants all over the country, has become an important partner.

Not only does Union Square Events now prepare and ship favorite dishes from its own restaurants, such as the mushroom lasagna from Gramercy Tavern and barbecue fare from Blue Smoke, it produces and co-packs meals created by celebrities and celebrity chefs for Goldbelly.

To keep the prepared food safe, the company decided to add more cold-room space at its new headquarters. The cold room will double as a food-safe storage area for inflight meal production, which will restart when travel picks up.

Consulting work, already part of the business, also stayed constant.

"That's been very busy," Mastellone said, "but I'm not totally surprised, because the true entrepreneurs are looking to make moves now to set up for when the curtain goes up" and the world re-opens.

Mastellone said the group recently had designed the food hall and amenity spaces at a soon-to-open building. It also helps companies create on-site dining programs and hires staff or management companies for them. For its clients, a tasting kitchen is being built outside the main production area.

Part of the community

It overlooks the waterfront and is a space, Mastellone said, where cooks and clients can "dream up food together."

The president of the commissary kitchen, who is originally from Brooklyn, said he already feels like part of the culinary and creative community in the borough, and specifically at Industry City.

To contribute, Union Square Events is planning to offer space and coaching to local entrepreneurs who want to start food businesses, and to recruit employees from Sunset Park.

As the headquarters progresses toward opening, Mastellone hopes to see enough government support to make sure that the small businesses that are Union Square Events' partners and vendors, from florists to fishmongers, survive.

"They are all supporting our virtuous cycle of hospitality," he said.

When sports are up and running, when events come back, when the city feels opened, Mastellone plans to bring back all of his employees too. ■



MASTELLONE said getting more space for operations was key to the company's future.

BUCK ENNIS