

THE REAL DEAL

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Stop, hammer time: Q&A with NYC construction boss Jeff Levine

By Kathryn Brenzel



Jeff Levine and rendering of the Level

The renovation of 90 West Street, a landmarked building severely damaged in the Sept. 11 attacks, marked a turning point for Levine Builders.

It's one of [Jeff Levine's](#) most treasured projects, and it's also the last job that his construction outfit completed for another company. Since then, the company's worked exclusively for Douglaston Development, the firm founded by Levine in 1991. Since its founding, the company has completed 38 projects and has another five under construction, including its third waterfront tower in Williamsburg, the Level, and a mixed-income apartment complex in Mott Haven called Crossroads Plaza. The company is also in contract to buy 150,000 square feet of air rights from the Hudson River Park Trust to build a [1.1 million-square-foot](#), mixed-use development south of Hudson Yards.

Levine, 64, serves as chairman of both Douglaston and Levine, as well as a property management company, Clinton Management. Though formally trained as an architect, he founded the construction management firm in 1979, first working out of a two-bedroom apartment he shared with his brother.

Levine Builders' headquarters in Douglaston, Queens, still uses the phone number from that makeshift office.

The oldest of four children, Levine spent his childhood in East Flatbush, East New York and then in Bayside. He and his wife now live in the West Village. They have three children, two of whom work for the family business.

As part of [a new questions-and-answers series](#) with construction bosses in New York City, *The Real Deal* sat down with Levine in Douglaston Development's office on the sixth floor of 7 Penn Plaza. Next to Levine's desk sat a new addition to his office: a red neon sign that flashed "Shit happens, deal with it."

Can I ask about the sign?

In business, obviously, you have to be hard working. I think that having character and integrity is a very important part of succeeding in business. After that, it takes brains, and it takes a little luck. One of the obstacles of succeeding in any business is having a threshold for aggravation, or tsuris as we say in Yiddish. If you don't have the ability to overcome the aggravation, you'll be defeated, just like anything else. If it was easy, everyone would do it and everybody would be successful.

How did you get your start in the industry? You studied architecture at City College, right?

While attending City College, I answered an ad in the New York Times. Before the Internet, that was how we used to get jobs. It was basically an assistant super's job for \$250 a week. At that time, 1974, New York was embarking on, I guess, a great New York-centric depression. I was one of 350 callers for a two-line want ad in the classified section. I was fortunate to be given that job, and I began working as an assistant super for the organization of Herb Mandel doing major gut rehabs in Manhattan.

Did you do any construction work before that?

During the summers of my youth, I grew up in Brooklyn and Queens, and I had many friends whose families were blue collar construction entrepreneurs, so my first jobs were during the summers of my high school, where I worked with concrete, roofing and siding. I found, I had an affinity. I liked the business, so I thought I found a calling.

Your father and grandfather were cab drivers. Did you ever consider becoming a cab driver?

Absolutely not. This was not, from my perspective, the family business.

Did you ever ride with your dad?

When I attended City College, which was on 133rd Street and Broadway, it was a very nondescript school of architecture at that time. The old school of architecture was a converted warehouse, and it had no signage whatsoever. What it did have was a flashing neon sign in the window that said "deli." And my father, when his shifts would coincide with my finishing of school, he would oft-times pick me up. And one time, he says, "Are you sure this is really a school of architecture?" Because he wasn't quite 100 percent sure. We'd pick up a fare on the way home.

Why didn't you stick with architecture?

I worked for Mandel on those projects as an assistant super, increasing my salary over the years to about \$350 a week. When I finished City College, if I wanted to pursue my career in architecture, I would've had to do an apprenticeship with a licensed architect or firm. They were offering me the proud sum, in that recession era, of \$150 a week, to put in 80 hours. Or I could continue working in construction for the

grand sum of \$350 a week. Double the pay, half the hours. I said, “I’ll stay in construction thank you very much.”

Why did Levine Builders shift from a third-party construction company to one that only worked for your development firm?

Subsequent to 2001, I realized that number one, I was making 90 percent of my revenue, from my own development projects, spending only 10 percent of my time, and spending 90 percent of my time contracting for other developers, earning only 10 percent of my income. So, I said, that’s got to stop.

Why have you focused on affordable housing?

Having had the privilege of growing up in NYC affordable and NYC Housing Authority (apartments) for part of my childhood, I very early on recognized that there are a lot more poor people than rich people. I recognized that it’s a lot easier to market to what there are more of, and there are a lot more people in need of affordable housing, frankly, than there are of market-rate housing. While affordable housing is lower reward, the risks are commensurately lower. The market demand is great, and the market supply is limited by the economics.

Is there added risk in doing your own construction?

Because you are an owner and builder you, in essence, eliminate a level of cost. The builder’s profit is not critical to the success of the development, so if you can build it at your cost, minimize your investment in that way, you can max your return and the risk is therefore commensurate with the reward.

What about in terms of safety?

Our construction costs are great. But I operate under the concept that I don’t ever want to save a quarter or cut a corner if it will in any way jeopardize anybody’s personal safety. There are going to be accidents, inevitably, but I know I personally could not live in this industry if I ever thought that we did not do something that could’ve prevented an injury. So, we take that very seriously.

What do you think of the new construction safety bill (Intro. 1447)?

Obviously, construction safety is critical. It’s become a political issue. The issue has to do with union versus nonunion. I do both union and open shop. I work with unions that are extraordinarily capable, and I work with nonunion operations that are capable. And the issue is to use only those who adhere to the safety rules, and whether it be union or nonunion. If this now be the law of the land, we’ll adhere to that as well.

What other trends in the industry should we watch out for?

Unfortunately, we’re at the end of an upcycle. I think that landowners have not yet realized that the condo parade has passed them by and have not yet reduced their prices to make them feasible for multifamily rental development. I think we’re going to go into a quiet period until there’s an understanding between landowners and developers.

What’s your favorite TV show?

Obviously, during this election season, I’ve found Saturday Night Live extremely entertaining.

Do you enjoy the Donald Trump impersonations?

Without getting into any of the particulars, I find the show very entertaining.