



MAEGAN OCHOA
and **ERIC COLLIN**

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T

he “cranes” are back in Sarasota. No, not the winged ones. More like the construction cranes hovering over downtown. And the developers who are so much a part of the economic ecosystem have also returned to their

most favorite habitat: a growing, wealthy community like Sarasota.

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Yep, a redevelopment company and one of their recent projects (still ongoing) is the re-vamp, rebrand of — are you ready — a north trail motel. The Regency Inn was once a prime stop for families driving to Florida who wanted a convenient and affordable stay in what was a new American-made novelty: a motel.

In its glory days, it was the Rainbow Motor Lodge and boasted a pool, shuffleboard and lots of aqua paint. Kudos to the motel’s current owner, Jay Patel, who decided to take the plunge and spruce up his property even when the rate of self-invested improvement on north trail still moves at a very slow pace.

As cars fly by on the trail, drivers may not know that the motel is a great example of mid-century modern architecture of the motel subset. Mid-century design (approximately 1933 to 1965) is now very much “in” and in regards to homes, fetches some very high prices. Maegan and Eric are working on the interiors, restoring the motel to some of its former glory, making it more energy efficient and updating it to today’s needs.

So getting back to the Regency Motel — why work on the only hotel on north trail that’s trying to spruce up its appearance? For them, it’s also about investing in your own backyard — literally — as well as your hometown. Maegan and Eric (as well as motel owner Jay Patel) live in the Indian Beach neighborhood — that leafy, mature neighborhood to the west of north Tamiami Tr. that runs approximately from New College to the north, down to thereabouts the Sarasota Bay Club.

The work on The Regency was after Maegan and Eric worked on the Hampton Inn near the airport that opened a few years back. That Hampton is the only LEED certified hotel in the area and the first Hampton to earn Silver LEED Certification. (LEED is an acronym for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Green Building Rating System™ certification. It designates environmentally responsible — sometimes referred to as “green” or “sustainable” — commercial buildings designed, built and operated to optimally use the building location, minimize non-renewable energy use, reduce water consumption, while offering healthy settings in which to work and live.)

In the Hampton’s parking lot you’ll see a rarity: a place to charge your electric car. Having stayed recently at that hotel (with its reasonable pricing plus many amenities including free breakfast, large rooms, Neutrogena products, etc.), it’s amazing to think a hotel conglomerate like Hilton can afford or would bother with “green” initiatives when competition is so fierce.

Continuing with the hotel theme, Eric (before Maegan joined the firm) did a redo of the Homewood Suites on Fruitville Rd. He “turned it around,” she notes, as the hotel was in dire need of a total makeover. Now it looks like a stylish, contemporary hotel you might see in a big city.

But they do much more than hotels at The Sibari Project. They do commercial and residential work. Eric is a contractor so they can work with an architect’s plans, pull permits and manage a project from start to finish. Their goals, as stated on their web site, are about “revitalizing our urban core and surrounding neighborhoods through environmentally, economically and socially responsible building solutions.” What that means is they can pretty much do it all — especially with what are frequently called “green initiatives.” And “going green” dovetails nicely with redevelopment which stands in stark contrast to demolish and the heck with conservation of resources.

The couple works out of a very cool space they built on the west end of Main Street — a hodgepodge section of downtown more known for nonprofits, lawyers and bailbondsmen who want to be near the courthouse. (But then, isn’t Sarasota a hodgepodge of styles — some good, some really bad?).

Maegan is from Connecticut, studied in New York and then LA, and worked in film and film production — involving herself in what she calls, “That world.” She then went on to the University of Hawaii to study cultural anthropology while also observing Hawaii’s keen sense of “being aware of the land” meaning their history, but also their “sense of place.”

Her peripatetic life took her next to Paris where she taught English and yes, she seems to be too young to have done all this traveling and studying. “I’ve seen lots of cultures,” she reflects, and it all adds up to having “a nice tool to add to my tool belt” — which is a great analogy for a redeveloper.

Eric, who is from Nice, France, has worked in Sarasota for over 15 years. They’ve known each other for years, but started The Sibari Project together three years ago and they married last year. They have a staff of four in Sarasota and two others in Paris. Even their puppy, an affectionate chocolate spaniel named Pipa was “reclaimed” as they found her and brought her home from a shelter.

Their headquarters, called the Finergy Building, also came under their “green” experience spell and has earned LEED CS Silver certification. The best way to explain what that means is to see their annual electric bill: it’s less than \$100. A year. So Eric and Maegan not only talk the talk, but they work where they walk the walk.

Their company takes its name from the Italian city by the same name that is located in the boot-shaped country’s “arch,” yet was founded — or should we say refounded — in the 1960s and has but 5,000 residents. It’s been “reclaimed” — that is, rebuilt on the bones and legacy of ancient Greek people from around 720 B.C. Their small community amassed great wealth due, in part to its location near the water. These Greeks were also known to have their excesses and gave us the words “sybarite” and “sybaritic” which are bywords for “opulent luxury” and “outrageous pleasure seeking” (thank you wikipedia).

Now Sybarite means a company in Sarasota in a land of excess and wealth that is by the water, reclaiming and rebuilding on land settled by people who were here long ago, but who left or disappeared. Maybe it takes a well-traveled 30-year-old woman who has only been here a few years to understand what this town needs.

Find out more about Maegan and Eric at sibariproject.com. 

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