

People

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

JOBS GALORE HAVE BEEN CREATED BY JIM SPEAR'S HOMES PROJECTS IN A VILLAGE ON THE GREAT WALL

By MARK GRAHAM

After two decades of enduring the stress and pressure of the business world, American Jim Spear decided it was time to get off the corporate treadmill. The plan was to spend more time at his Great Wall village hideaway, pottering around, enjoying the clean mountain air and working on the odd village-house restoration project.

But life took a very different turn. Within a few years, Spear had become a property developer, restaurateur, hotelier and exchange-program organizer, providing work for hundreds of people in and around the Great Wall village of Mutianyu, close to the capital city of Beijing.

It was a post-retirement career that came about purely by accident. Spear's tasteful and sensitive renovation of a village house was much admired by Beijing pals, who asked him to locate, and modernize, houses for them. Before long, California-born Spear had a thriving business on his hands, charging people a handsome sum of money to bring run-down, or derelict, courtyard homes up to contemporary standards.

Spear has now converted more than 30 properties, providing work for local carpenters, craftsmen, bricklayers, electricians and plumbers. The core business of the entrepreneur's portfolio is taking long-term leases on crumbling village houses — ideally for 30 years or more — and renovating them to dream-home standards of luxury, outfitted with imported kitchen appliances, custom-made furniture, rainforest showers and proper heating.

Some are converted with the aim of renting out to Beijing city dwellers and overseas tourists, others are acquired and built for individual owners who, if they decide to lease the place out as a holiday home, generally go through Spear.

The Spear portfolio also includes the just-opened 15-room Brickyard Retreat and Spa, a former brick factory located just outside the village, several local restaurants, a glass-making factory and a student



Jim Spear with wife Tang Liang at his Great Wall retreat.

MARK GRAHAM / FOR CHINA DAILY

exchange-program operation.

"I consider myself to be extraordinary fortunate, I built my house and that in itself led to a business," says Spear, who is married to Tang Liang and has two adult daughters.

"Six years ago I had a mid life crisis at the age of 50. I decided to cash in my chips and decided I wanted to come and live in the village in the house that we had earlier renovated as a weekend retreat.

"We got a lease on the next door place and made it really special, with proper heating, plumbing and so on. When friends came and saw the wonderful views of the Great Wall they said, 'Jim we want one' and that is how the whole thing started.

"The mayor of the village also sat me down and said the village was having a hard time there were not enough good jobs for the next generation. He said 'you are a rich American, we think you should make an investment in our village'.

"When I converted the first house many years ago, I didn't know much, so I kind of got ripped off. In general, the underlying driver is what it costs for a long-term lease

of the property. Around 15 years ago it was a few thousand dollars, five years ago it was several tens of thousands, and now, in this village, it has come up to about \$100,000 to lease one of the houses as-is, without any improvements.

"People are sitting on assets that were worth almost nothing and now they are worth something. It is a nice windfall. It helps them unleash the sale of assets they are sitting on.

"We have done more than 30 house leases and people have taken that money and done something with it. The families get the money, they educate their kids, take care of their old folks, improve their own homes. It is a big impact. The prices in other nearby villages with good infrastructure and Great Wall views are also increasing rapidly."

The entrepreneur's business partners, Wang Peiming and his American wife Julie Upton-Wang, also have a Spear-designed home, a cosy split-level hillside property, underneath an enormous pine tree, that acts as a weekend getaway; friends and colleagues from

the city relish the chance to visit, spending a day breathing in the pure mountain air.

"When we started, there wasn't really a master plan or a big picture," says Upton Wang. "It just evolved. The villagers have now become very comfortable with us. People from overseas come here and, while they are impressed with Beijing's modernity, they see the village and say 'this is what we were looking for'."

Each conversion is personally supervised by Spear who, while not a trained designer or architect, clearly has a well-honed eye for style, so much so that Architectural Digest, the American interior-design journal of rich people, ran a photo feature on the Mutianyu properties. Every home has a distinctive, or idiosyncratic, name ... Grandma's House, Eagle's Rest, the Red Door, Big Rock House, Stone Forest.

Many of Spear's clients are extremely wealthy people who are more concerned about quality than cost. They want the best of everything, whether it is oversized rain forest showers, imported ovens

from Germany or custom-made rugs for the floors.

An even more ambitious Spear conversion, of a former tile factory into an eco-friendly boutique hotel, the Brickyard Eco-Retreat and Spa, opened for business recently. Every one of the 15 rooms in the compound has uninterrupted views of the Great Wall, a feature that is attracting individuals and conference organizers; there are plans to expand the property further and build a swimming pool

"It is another example of us taking existing buildings and redeploying them," he says. "The Schoolhouse for example, which operates as our Western restaurant, really was the village schoolhouse. We dug out concrete floors and put in heating and changed the walls and ceilings so it operates much more efficiently.

"It is more expensive to retain an existing building than to start from scratch, that is the reason it is not done more often. The Brickyard is a wonderful old building with a tiled roof that looks like a temple. We took a building that was a dormitory and turned into a conference center. We built new rooms and used all the salvaged materials, brick by brick."

The seeds of Spear's new career were sown long ago, when he had a chance encounter with a hawker on the Great Wall, an anecdote he loves to relate. Spear, a fluent Chinese speaker, told the man how much he would love to live out by the Wall, handed over a name card, and said his farewells. Some weeks later, Spear's wife received a phone call from the hawker offering to help fix up a village-house lease, beginning a chain of events that, ultimately, led to the current string of businesses.

"It it all started when a hawker wanted me to buy a T-shirt and I ended up buying a house instead!" says Spear. "The best stories are the true ones like that. I have lived in Beijing for the past 25 years and right after I moved here was the first time I came to this section of the Great Wall. I fell in love with it. It was blue skies and friendly people and close enough to town without taking all day to get there . . ."