

How one developer 'dude' is making a positive impact

MARCUS
GEE

OPINION



Property developers are an unpopular species. Hollywood usually portrays them as greedy sharks who make a living turning poor folk out of their homes to put up shopping malls. People in places like Toronto blame them for all those glass condo towers that everyone loves to hate. It hasn't helped to have a billionaire developer in the White House who personifies the stereotype: flashy, crude, boastful, unscrupulous.

In fact, though, developers come in all types. Some live up to their bad name, throwing up crummy buildings and making off with their boodle. Others care about what they build. They want their buildings to look good and feel good for those who live or work in them. They seek to have a part in the evolution of modern cities, making them better, cleaner, livelier places to live.

Toronto is seeing more and more of these good-guy developers. One of them, Chris Harhay, is incorporating a family shelter into a mid-rise condo project in Leslieville on Queen Street East. His company will build a new home for the Red Door shelter then transfer it to the city.

Another, Les Mallins of Streetcar Developments, built a space for Crow's Theatre in the base of a new Dundas Street East condo. The company gave a gift of \$1.25-million to the facility, which includes a 200-seat theatre and a studio with space for 90 people.

The model for this new breed is Mitchell Cohen, president of the Daniels Corp. Heading Daniels, the real estate giant founded by John H. Daniels, makes him one of the city's most influential developers. Daniels is the company behind such projects



'There are so many ways for developers to make an impact locally,' real estate mogul Mitchell Cohen says. His company is partnering with arts groups to include galleries in some buildings. FRED LUM/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

as the TIFF Bell Lightbox on King Street West and the huge Regent Park redevelopment. Mr. Cohen, 66, has led the company's day-to-day operations since 1984.

But with his hipster's pork-pie hat and his habit of addressing people as "dude," he doesn't look or sound like a real estate mogul. A musician who plays a mean guitar, he wrote and produced a musical, *The Journey*, about Regent Park's evolution.

He is a big fan of affordable housing and started his career as a jeans-clad co-op-housing organizer. He thinks fellow developers are wrong to attack inclusionary zoning, which requires them to include below-market units in their projects.

His company is partnering with arts groups to include galleries and studios in some buildings. "There are so many ways for developers to make an

impact locally," he says. It helps their image and, in the end, it helps their bottom line. Reputation counts for a lot in the property business.

Cities across North America are looking to Regent Park as an example of how to revive their housing projects.

Mr. Cohen grew up in Regina, the son of a doctor. He moved to Montreal to go to McGill. Doing social work in a Montreal housing estate, he got caught up in a struggle with the landlord, who was planning to evict the tenants and put up condo towers.

The tenants marched on city hall to protest. Mr. Cohen helped cobble together a compromise: The landlord would build his

towers on half of the property, the tenants would keep and renovate 98 units as co-op housing. The co-op is still there today.

After the election of separatist René Lévesque as Quebec premier in 1976, Mr. Cohen filled a little U-Haul trailer with his worldly goods and moved to Toronto to do more work in co-op housing. When federal funding dried up, he decided to shift to the private sector. He went to see the legendary Mr. Daniels, an act of chutzpah for a "socialist weirdo co-op-housing dude." Mr. Daniels hired him.

As initiation, he bought the shaggy Mr. Cohen five new suits. Over the next decade, Mr. Cohen built thousands of units of government-backed affordable housing.

At first a developer of low-rise suburban housing, Daniels moved into condominium towers as the condo boom gathered

steam. One of its latest projects is Daniels Waterfront: City of the Arts. Under construction now on Queens Quay across from Sugar Beach, it mixes office space, retail space and condo towers. At its heart will be an arts hub with space for OCAD University, George Brown College, the local arts group Artscap and other non-profits.

But the project where Mr. Cohen is leaving his greatest mark is Regent Park. The sprawling public-housing tract in the east end of downtown Toronto is undergoing a multi-year makeover. Condo towers and other market-rate housing is going in and the decayed old public housing is being torn down and rebuilt. Cities across North America are looking to Regent Park as an example of how to revive their housing projects.

City housing officials at first offered Daniels and other developers the opportunity simply to buy land in Regent Park for market housing, with the profits from the sale going to new public housing. Daniels said it wasn't interested. The contaminated land in a rundown part of town, it said, was essentially worthless. Mr. Cohen said he would far rather become a partner with the housing authority, building something together.

The result is a fruitful collaboration that has been good for both sides and much better for the community as a whole. Instead of just building its condos, selling and moving on, Daniels has become a full partner in the redevelopment, helping build community assets like the Daniels Spectrum, a cultural centre with a theatre, exhibition spaces and room for music and art classes. Mr. Cohen is a fixture at the Paintbox Bistro, a glass-walled café next door.

Has Daniels made a buck or three along the way? No doubt. But Mitchell Cohen and others like him are showing that developers don't have to be bad guys. They can be city builders, too.