

Q+A: Daniels Corp.'s Cohen on the cost of not building accessible

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With an aging population, accessible design is drawing interest



For more than 40 years, Daniels Corp. has built residential and mixed-use projects across the Greater Toronto Area. The firm has developed everything from a live-work-play midrise on Toronto's waterfront to an award-winning, master-planned community in Mississauga. Most recently, Daniels has been leading a charge for the inclusion of more accessible design in developments.

Green Street News spoke with chief operating officer Jake Cohen about Daniels' Accessibility Designed Program – a series of accessibility changes that can be made to units at no additional cost – as well as the importance of residential developers implementing accessible designs as Canada's population continues to age. Cohen also discussed the market's shift toward rental and the rising interest in senior housing.

When did accessible design start to become a priority for Daniels?

It started probably about 15 years ago. I was working on a project at Bayview and Eglinton, and I was working for the customer-care and service-and-warranty team. My job at that time was receiving calls from people who were entering their units, doing their pre-delivery inspections and then having requests about certain changes that they wanted to make in their units after the units were already built. I would get a call saying, “Oh, Jake, the unit looks great. However, we’d love it if we could install some grab bars in the shower.” I would go to the construction team, and they would be like, “Jake, you’re killing me – it’s not easy to install grab bars in a shower after the tile is up and after the walls are done and the faucets are in.”

We started to compile a list of accessible features that we thought would be beneficial to people who wanted to potentially age in place or just for people who wanted better, more universal accessibility in their homes. We developed our list of items based on feedback that we received from this building and then subsequent buildings that we were starting to build over the next couple years.

You touched on one of the accessible features there, but what are the different options? What can an accessible unit look like?

Some of the key ones that are really straightforward and don’t take a lot of time, energy or effort when designed and thought about up-front are things like wider door frames. Lowering light switches – that’s another straightforward one. Someone who’s in a mobility device who needs to access a light from a seated position can do so in a way easier fashion. Having a roll-in shower detail for the bathroom – it doesn’t need to be for someone who’s in a wheelchair. It can be someone who simply has a harder time navigating into a bathtub because of the curvature, because of the slipping nature.

In a building of 100 units, let’s say, how many would you have to make these adjustments to?

What we’re saying right now is a subset of the 15% barrier-free suites in our buildings will have these types of Daniels ADP accessible design standards because we feel like that has made sense based on market soundings that we’ve been doing. That could evolve, though, as the population continues to age, and we know it’s going in that direction. So, planning for that and incorporating more of these types of units we feel is an important step in the right direction.

What does designing these units add in terms of costs and construction timelines, if anything?

That’s a really good question. It’s one we’ve worked hard on trying to navigate. What we’ve learned is, if we can incorporate these design standards right up-front – so working with the architect, working with the design engineers, the interior designer, the mechanical engineer,

the electrical – if we give them these standards right up-front and they build them into the design, the costs come way, way, way down.

And what do I mean by that? The cost to do some of these things per unit, it's negligible, probably about \$1,500 additional cost on all of our units to do these six or seven features. It doesn't cost more for a millwork contractor to create a wider door frame, right? There's no extra cost if the faucet is a handheld faucet versus a regular faucet, again, if you're planning for it.

So there's a cost to not offering these options with, like you said, an aging population, not to mention there are fewer people who can afford houses.

That's exactly right. We think that there is a great market that's growing toward this type of housing. People are looking to stay where they are – in comfortable condo environments – and not necessarily move into seniors' residences.

And how does building accessible come up against developers building smaller and smaller units?

I think those smaller and smaller units are going to be going to the wayside. I think those were dominated by the investor market and speculators in the industry just looking to buy the smallest asset they could possibly buy in real estate. That then forced developers to say, "If these are what the investors are buying, I'm going to make them smaller and smaller." That doesn't make them more livable, right?

You have to still be able to live in these houses and these condos, so I think there will absolutely be a push to growing the size of units back to more livable housing.

In your rental buildings, what's demand like for these units? Is it comparable to the rest of the building?

What we've seen so far is that it has not been a deterrent and it has not been an accelerator. We just leased up a building in Brampton that had 15% accessible-housing ADP units in it. The entire building was leased up within a nine-month period, and the ADP units scattered throughout the building were snapped up just at the same rate as all the other ones.

On the condo side, we've noticed people have come in looking specifically for that type of product, and that's been a great selling tool for our sales teams.

Having done both rental and condo, have you shifted your priorities in terms of focusing more on the rental side as the condo market has slowed down?

Absolutely. We've been building purpose-built rental for probably about 10 years now, so it hasn't been so much of a shift for us. I think there's more focus on it across the board in general because the condo market has slowed to such a halt that not as many people are able to launch condo projects.

For us, we've got condo projects that are being built as we speak, and our pre-development work is around what's the next rental building and next rental partner that we're going to be working with to build buildings. We're also focusing heavily on seniors and building more seniors' assets with other providers who are in that market because that's something we've been doing for a number of years with some very good providers that are really experienced in that space.

There does seem to be a rapidly growing interest in seniors housing right now, and the numbers look pretty compelling.

Absolutely. The thing with seniors – and, again, I'm not an expert, but we build for them so we know how to do the building of it – the operations of running a seniors building is very expensive. There's a lot of care, there's a lot of staff, there's a lot of overhead, so ensuring you know how to manage that side of it, that's a huge component of it. I think there are certain providers that are really good at that, and they've really captured that market and have nailed it, but I think there's definitely going to be an influx of more buildings providing seniors housing for people in the next little bit.

Last thing: What will be your main focus for 2025? Anything in particular that'll have your attention?

For us in '25, a lot of it has to do with getting our accessibility programs out there more into the world, into the GTA, into the developers' hands, encouraging more people to take up the mantle of saying accessible housing is important. Accessible housing and affordable housing combined are hugely important. We can address the physical nature of that side of it through these accessible design standards, and the more developers that do that and pick up that mantle, the better the industry will be and the better units there will be coming to the market in the next wave. We're out there banging the drum and saying that this is a really important thing for people to be focused on.