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FEATURE > IN CONVERSATION: ALTERNATIVE DEVELOPERS

Matt Shaw talks with four developers who are working in alternative ways.



As part of the AN developers feature, Matt Shaw interviewed representatives from four developers who are innovating in New York and elsewhere using alternative models for development. These perspectives offer new ways forward as the architecture and business communities work together to find new design, housing, and community-oriented solutions to our 21st century urban issues.

Sumaida + Khurana

Up-and-coming developer Sumaida + Khurana is bringing high-profile international architects to do its first buildings in New York, including NoLita condos by Tadao Ando and a forthcoming 400-foot midtown tower by Alvaro Siza. Amit Khurana has more than two decades of experience in the real estate industry, while Saif Sumaida holds an architecture degree from the Cooper Union. Together, they are changing how New York development is designed.

Matt Shaw: How did you end up working together as developers?

Saif Sumaida: I graduated from Cooper Union with a degree in architecture, and the education was very rich in discourse and concepts. Just by accident, I actually ended up in construction, and over the last 23 years, I've been



building in New York. I like working as a developer because you have control of authorship both from a construction and architecture perspective, but also as the developer when you put the vision together.

Amit Khurana: Saif is tremendously experienced and when we met it was an interesting fit just because I love architecture and design. I have to give Saif such credit for this but when we are in a room with an architect and we sit down, his knowledge is so fantastic, to not only think of just construction but to think of how architecture relates to construction. And I think that it was a unique situation because there was a shared vision and very complementary sets of skills.

What do you feel these projects bring to New York as a city, not just for the residents of the buildings?

AK: We see ourselves as developer/custodians of the built environment and ultimately we have a responsibility because we play a very important role that really changes the city. Small or large—it doesn't matter. It's about uplifting people, and fulfilling the dream of the city too, right? I think if you ask anyone, at the end of the day people appreciate excellence. It's not about the asset type, it's not necessarily about who is going to live there or rent there or work there. It has something to do with a kind of purity of design and the impact it has on people.

SS: I think the problem is a lot of developers are really looking at buildings as commodities to monetize. But I think there is a legacy to be made in selecting the architect and making something that has meaning and has a place in the fabric of the city and that is something that you'll ultimately be proud of. We want to create places. We feel that we have some sort of a social responsibility to do that.

Why bring in these architects?

AK: New York is a melting pot with a lot of influence from outside. We also came from different countries although we spent so much time here. We wanted to just focus on, in a very pure fashion, this idea of bringing master architects to New York to design their very first buildings here. Especially in New York where as-of-right sites are such a tremendous opportunity to work in a specific way and to push the envelope a little bit. Looking at it and finding a site, we're actually looking for a site for Ando or for Siza. This inverted process allows us to think about things a little bit differently.

SS: A lot of developers rely on marketing people to tell them what has worked. They're following formulas because they believe that these are the formulas that will get them the profit. People find a proof of concept and just follow it. You don't have to think too much. When you bring somebody else from abroad or somebody who hasn't built anything in New York, they actually bring a certain amount of freshness. What's amazing about New York is that it allows for this diversity. You can still be visionary and make it successful.

Do you think that your experience as an architect lets you work with these architects in a different way rather than other developers?

SS: I think the one thing is, I'm very respectful of the process. I'm always able to talk to architects in their language. Instead of looking at it, again, as a commodity, I can engage them in their concepts and be able to enter that dialogue and be able to discuss it with them as opposed to always looking for an end product. I can enter the process and into a discourse with them so that once I understand what they're trying to do we can then figure how best to get there.

You mentioned affordable housing a little bit. Do you see that as a project that could be interesting to take on?

SS: Very much so. I think there's a responsibility for developers to be able to bring to the city various projects. It can't just be building for the wealthy, you have to be able to do it for all. Otherwise, you're not really making an impact in the city as you think you are. To make an impact on the city you have to touch on the various fabrics.

AK: Well I think that it's also responding to the realities of where you are in a market cycle. Currently we're in a market where land is insanely expensive. So we have to respond to that. It's always allowing yourself to be flexible with different opportunities. I mean, imagine bringing in a famous Spanish architect to New York to build a wonderful, affordable housing project or something like that. It isn't about how many dollars per foot you spend on a construction; it's about thoughtfulness. We have the ability and skillset that allows us to also control costs and control some of these variables that can get out of control.

