



TOM STOECKER

NEW DEVELOPER ON THE BLOCK

Andre Singer is a developer with a mission. In 2008 Singer moved from Belgium to New York and founded MNHTN LLC. He brings with him an attitude not shared by many a more established local developer: a respect for architects. For his first mid-scale project at an as yet unannounced site in lower Manhattan, he has enlisted both OMA and Diller Scofidio + Renfro. Dedicated and ambitious, the 46-year-old developer wants to change the face of New York with good design and good planning at the fore. Gwen Webber gives him a background check.

What experience do you have in building?

I started in development 20 years ago and from the beginning there was an ambition to work with high-quality architecture. Then as the projects became bigger, I also wanted to work on town planning. In Europe, I was doing projects between \$50 million and \$1 billion, which included extensions of the city. This was in Belgium and France—in Paris, Brussels, Antwerp and the Cote D'Azur. In 2008 I was lucky enough to sell my shares in Project2 [a real estate development based in Antwerp and Paris, founded in 1991] and set up MNHTN LLC.

Why did you move to New York?

Essentially, I found Belgium very dull. I wanted to move to a major economic center. My wife is English, and I studied at Oxford,

so I was going to move to London, but the opportunities for development were really bad. The big attraction to New York was the downtown rezoning. I can do really interesting, ambitious stuff here for the rest of my life. Then once I moved here I fell in love with New York.

What projects are you currently working on in New York?

I purposely started here with a small project [a 9,000-square-foot townhouse on 9th Street between 5th and 6th avenues] to find my way around. In September, I will be acquiring a plot downtown to develop an 80-unit apartment in two phases. The first phase is by Rem Koolhaas and the second by Diller Scofidio + Renfro.

Why did you approach these particular architects?

I think Rem Koolhaas—with Herzog and de Meuron and Frank Gehry—is the most important architect from the last 25 years. Also, the pricing of these apartments isn't very high, so to work with an architect who is used to building for a reasonable price and good at cost control was very attractive: it is a combination of someone who is interesting conceptually and who is also pragmatic. And I think DS+R is one of the best American firms.

It is fairly unusual to find a developer who works so closely and comfortably with designers.

When did you start tapping into high-profile architects?

There was no one particular experience. I have been interested in visual arts since childhood... in painting, photography, etc. Although I worked in finance for four years, it was never a question that I wouldn't work with good design. If I was going to do this job, it was always going to be in this way.

I started off doing much smaller projects with the best or better Belgian architects. Then ten years ago, I did a really large project—250,000 square feet above grade—with Hans Kollhoff [the architect of Potsdammer Platz in Berlin] on the docks of Antwerp.

How have you found the New York development scene?

How does it compare to working in Europe?

I think the big difference is that on a large scale, European developers are used to working in tandem with the city on master planning and the underlying idea of public good, public space, and social cohesion. In New York, there hasn't been significant master planning initiatives since the war, so the city isn't used to working like that.

While I think public space in New York has been successfully done, what has not been so successful is building significant buildings, creating a new paradigm. The last building I would put in that category is the

Seagram building. The most interesting buildings in America are happening in Miami—Herzog and de Meuron's car park is astoundingly good. Rem's work in Seattle or what he did at Mies' campus in Chicago. These are the buildings that are the most important in America in the last ten years. None of them have been built here in the past 50 years. Why?

What kind of master plans have you been involved with in the past?

In Antwerp we won a competition to redevelop the Dry Docks area [about 2.7 million square feet] that involved a large public park, a building for the symphony orchestra by Herzog and de Meuron and a master plan by [Swiss architects] Diener and Diener. We won the master plan hands down, but in typical Belgian fashion it didn't move on to execution.

What makes large-scale development in New York appealing to you?

If you look at the housing stock you have excess inventory in the second tier of the market, it is a shadow inventory, it has been taken off the market and turned into rentals but when prices go up again these will be on sale again. I think it will take three or four years for this capacity to be absorbed, but once that is absorbed, you're looking at

Andre Singer is getting to know downtown.

significant price increases.

Although Downtown Manhattan has been rezoned, the people who were willing to sell easily have sold already, but the people who own sites where you can build at a much greater density are more loathe to sell because they are getting a good return from renting or using it as a parking space. It's enough to keep someone like me happy, but it's not enough for the market to be in equilibrium. I don't think people will want costs to grow in this exponential manner. The social cost is too high. That's why I think it would be smart for the city to look at developing sites, not in Manhattan but in other areas in New York. The only way you could do it coherently is with a master plan. I have no idea if the city would do it, but I have little doubt that the city would benefit.

Do you see your role as very hands on?

Yes. I think you have to be both a puppeteer and a manager. I respond very strongly to architects' proposals. I work in a friendly but very critical manner. They don't have an easy ride with me, but they enjoy that. If you look at why 1111 Lincoln Road in Miami and the High Line are both successful, you are looking at a client who is knowledgeable and passionate and committed, and I think that's what gets you outstanding results. I'm very active in the design role but not in the sense that I try to impose my vision.

Are you creative?

Yes. And I channel it into the work. I also look at art a lot. I go to museums almost continuously, and recently I discovered opera. When I was at university I did a lot of drama, directing. There was definitely a possibility that I would have gone into drama professionally. Actually what I'm doing now, it's a perfect combination of business and creativity.

What are your long-term plans?

My aim is to do between one and three developments like the one downtown. Then once I've built a certain track record with these types of projects, I'd like to see if it's possible to do much larger projects—1,000 units plus, in New York but outside of Manhattan. Obviously they'd be mixed-use but the center of gravity would be housing, working in tandem with the city. It's an open question if this is the way it will go. If it doesn't work, I'll reach my conclusion and stop taking that sort of initiative. But I will certainly give it a try.