

BY ELIZABETH EVITTS DICKINSON

building communities

Left to right: Matt Pinto, Evan Morville, Kristen Shackelford, Jon Constable, Thibault Manekin and Donald Manekin atop the former Lebow Clothing Factory in Station North, which Seawall is redeveloping into the Baltimore Design School.

Seawall Development Corp. could be **making millions** by turning Baltimore's forgotten buildings into apartments or offices. So why is it creating spaces for **teachers and nonprofits** instead?

When you're born into a clan that runs a successful business, it's often presumed that you'll follow your forebears into the family enterprise. But that wasn't the case for Thibault Manekin. Even though his last name is synonymous with real estate—his grandfather co-founded Manekin Corp., one of the most successful commercial real estate businesses in the Mid-Atlantic, and his father, Donald, worked there for nearly three decades—Thibault initially took a different career path. “I had always been around real estate growing up but never had much of an interest,” he says.

Instead, Thibault traveled the world after college working with PeacePlayers International, a nonprofit that uses basketball to inspire kids who live in divided communities, like post-apartheid South Africa, where Nelson Mandela became a supporter. “I spent my career influencing change from the grassroots level and we were always looking for successful businesses to help us in that work,” Thibault says. Then, he had an epiphany. “It seemed there was no better resource than real estate. On any given day we're working with plumbers, attorneys, residents, the governor, the mayor. I don't know of any other industry that touches so many people.”

At 28, Thibault returned to Baltimore with a new perspective: What if real estate could galvanize people and become an agent of change? What if a building could

be the lightning rod that sparks transformation—not just of physical space but of social need, as well?

A year later, in 2007, Thibault approached his father about starting a new social enterprise in Baltimore: a real estate company that would be fueled by a triple bottom line, creating social, environmental and economic value. Donald liked the idea so much he came out of retirement, and Seawall Development Corp. was born. “It's an incredible honor to have your kids ask to help start their future,” says Donald, 62.

Five years later, Seawall Development Corp.—led by co-founders Donald and Thibault and partner Evan Morville—is housed in an unassuming office tucked into the corner of Union Mill, the formerly unoccupied, 90,000-square-foot historic stone textile mill in Hampden that the company helped turn into a bustling mixed-use building of businesses, apartments and a cafe.

If an office could tell the story of its occupants, this one speaks volumes. Two couches and a coffee table center a small room with exposed wood ceiling beams and stone. Modest offices for Seawall's six employees rim the perimeter, some clad in transparent plexiglass, others demarcated by open cubicles crafted from 150-year-old wood planks recovered during the renovation. Functional, beautiful, open and simple, the historic architecture takes center stage, offering an unobstructed opportunity to contemplate the craftsmanship that built this mill, stone by stone, in the 1860s. Besides a few houseplants, a 10-foot-tall wooden weather vane salvaged from the bell tower serves as the sole decoration. It's a nice touch for a company whose success hinges on reading the erratic whims of the real estate market.

And the team at Seawall appears to be excellent forecasters. Since its inception, Seawall has corralled \$90 million to restore some of Baltimore's most daunting properties, transforming more than 300,000 square feet of building space and reversing a combined total of more than 60 years of abandonment. Seawall has saved historic buildings from demolition, revived moribund properties that others couldn't and fostered good will within communities through an inclusive approach that involves neighborhood participation in the building's redesign.

Union Mill easily could have become market rate apartments and fancy shops, but instead it offers rent subsi-



Left to right: Seawall Development Corp. is transforming 30 rowhouses in Remington that the company will sell to teachers and first responders for as low as \$150,000. The neighborhood's Miller's Court—and its attractive apartments—was used as a model for the company's next project, Union Mill in Woodberry.

dized housing for city schoolteachers and commercial offices for educational nonprofits like Teach for America. Seawall's goal is to not only resuscitate buildings, but to also breathe life back into urban education by attracting teachers to Baltimore with affordable, well-designed living and by supporting educational nonprofits with rent-stable office space. "Creating something from scratch and redefining how things are done has always been appealing to all of us at Seawall," says Thibault. "I like to say that there's nothing more powerful than an idea whose time has come."

The employees at Seawall are less developers in the traditional sense and more consensus builders and social entrepreneurs. "In many ways, Seawall is committed to the city and the development of communities as much as they are to having the numbers work," says Michael Braverman, deputy commissioner at the Baltimore City Department of Housing.

It was with one of its earliest projects, Miller's Court located in the Remington neighborhood, that the company intuitively stumbled into its business model and its focus on urban education. The 1860s former tin can factory on North Howard Street had been vacant for decades and multiple redevelopment attempts had failed. "I didn't think we would bite off 85,000 square feet right out of the box," Donald says. Let alone a wreck of a building with flaking lead paint, sagging floors and a leaking underground fuel tank.

But the company saw potential. Before committing to a plan, Seawall invited the neighborhood and potential tenants for a tour. A group of teachers navigated the crumbling building and daydreamed about where the

washer and dryer might go in a rental unit. The developers listened and took notes. The idea of adding a coffee shop (which became the popular Charmington's cafe) came from the community, which asked if it could have a space to host meetings. The developers also put together a creative financing package that included historic and new market tax credits to make the numbers work.

"Most developers talk to real estate brokers or to national brands, like big box stores, when doing market research on a project," says Ben Stone, executive director of the Station North Arts & Entertainment District, where Seawall has a project now under construction. Stone also is trained as an urban planner with experience in property development and has participated in a community design conversation hosted by Seawall. "Developers don't usually invite in the community and say: 'We are open to your ideas. We don't know what to do with this building and we want to hear what you think,'" he says.

Miller's Court opened in 2009 with 40 affordable apartment units for teachers and 35,000 square feet of office space. The design preserved the integrity of the building, amplifying its unique attributes with exposed wood trusses and brick. New windows flooded the interior with light. "The building itself is the architectural feature we're trying to highlight," says partner Evan Morville. "Our aesthetic is clean and modern and we focus on what's authentic."

They dubbed Miller's Court a "Center for Educational Excellence," a prototype that they replicated at Union Mill, which opened in 2011 with 60 apartments and 10 non-profits. Neither building required any advertising. Word of mouth saw both leased to capacity before construction finished and today there's

a waiting list of nearly 300 for apartments.

Seawall's unique approach to development earned the company an invitation to the White House last year as part of the President's Champions of Change initiative that recognizes "ordinary Americans doing extraordinary things in their communities," to quote the White House.

The staff is quick to deflect the "extraordinary" accolade. "We don't see these as 'our' projects," says Thibault. "Our whole philosophy is that these projects have souls. The idea already exists, it's on the tip of the universe's tongue, and we simply help to shape it."

"It's a team effort and we're like the orchestra conductors," adds Donald.

Seawall's success can be attributed not just to its unique approach to architecture and affordability, but also to its property management style. Seawall manages its own properties—a rare decision for developers—and rarer still, they endeavor to provide white glove, concierge-like services to the teachers in an effort to keep them teaching in Baltimore. Jon Constable joined Seawall in 2009 as an in-house property manager and he remembers the interview with Thibault and Donald that won him the job. "They said nonchalantly that their goal was to reinvent the way property management was done," Constable says.

Over the years, Constable has fielded calls from anxious, out-of-state parents, counseled tenants about staying in the teaching field and provided services beyond any landlord's obligation. A tenant once asked to borrow tools to assemble a new bike. Instead, Constable put the bike together as a surprise and left it in the tenant's apartment with a handwritten note saying to have fun and wear a helmet. "We have personal relationships with all of

our tenants and we treat them as if they own \$5 million penthouses," says Constable, who recently passed the property management duties on to a new employee in order to concentrate on development.

Sarah and Kenneth Rogers are teachers who moved to Miller's Court from Ohio in

Ziger/Snead Architects is working with Seawall to turn the former Lebow Clothing Factory on Oliver Street in the Greenmount West neighborhood/Station North Arts & Entertainment District into a permanent home for the Baltimore Design School, the city's first public middle and high school for

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2010. They say that Seawall's personal approach persuaded them to stay in Baltimore. "They create a safe space for newcomers in their buildings and then they give you the opportunity to explore the city," Sarah says, citing regular emails from the company about neighborhood events and volunteer opportunities. When her husband, Kenneth, published a science fiction novel, Seawall helped promote the book.

Soon, tenants like the Rogerses approached Seawall for help buying a home. In September, the company announced its "30 by 13" initiative to redevelop 30 dilapidated rowhouses in the Remington neighborhood by next year and sell them for as low as \$150,000 to teachers and first responders. The Rogerses signed on to buy and, as with other developments, Seawall convened focus groups to help with the redesign.

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cused on architecture, fashion, graphic and product design. Built in 1915, the factory was abandoned after an out-of-state owner shut its doors more than 30 years ago. All attempts to acquire the building failed and the city finally brought suit against the owner, spurring a thorny legal proceeding that resulted in a court-ordered demolition in 2009. "No one was able to convince the owner to sell and the building was at the point of no return. Vandals were breaking in and setting fires, among other things," says Braverman. "Then Seawall stepped up and said: 'We can make that building work. How can we avoid this demolition?'"

Donald had a personal connection to the property. "My mother's maiden name is Lebow and it was her father's business. My bar mitzvah suit was made there. My uncle worked there," he says.

And it was through a personal connection that Donald eventually convinced the owner to sell. "For a year, every week or two, dad was on the train to New York and he would sit with the 90-year-old owner at this

hole-in-the-wall restaurant and listen as he talked," Thibault says.

"To meet with the owner in New York and build trust and eventually reach the point where they could acquire the building, I don't know that anyone else could have done it," Braverman says.

Seawall is now exporting its Center for Educational Excellence model to other cities, with a \$40 million renovation of a factory in Philadelphia and another building under contract in New Orleans. But this doesn't mean that its work in Baltimore is done. After years of negotiation, the company just announced plans to turn an underused tire shop across the street from Miller's Court into an arts complex with a restaurant, a state-of-the-art theater run by Single Carrot Theatre and office space dedicated to the arts. Combined with Miller's Court and the 30 rowhouse renovations, they see this project as the linchpin for change in the Remington neighborhood.

Back at the Seawall headquarters in Union Mill, Constable notes that one decorative element is missing from the office. A photo of the company's namesake, Seawall beach in Maine. Donald first saw this remote stretch of rocky coastline as a camp counselor at age 18 and his family returns there every year. It's a beautiful beach, massive but mostly deserted because it's accessible primarily by swimming across a river or hiking over a mountain. Seawall beach is symbolic of something pivotal to the Manekin family and to the philosophical underpinning of this venture. Place matters. And when you believe in a place, you commit to its people and its success, knowing that no matter how challenging the journey, the end result is worth the effort. □