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Man With a Mission

Jonathan Rose makes the world greener while building affordable housing.

By Kristin Choo

Hitch a ride with Jonathan Rose through the streets of New York City and you'll be treated to a whirlwind tour of some of his latest projects.



First he runs you by the future site of the 52nd Street Project, where professional performing artists will mentor inner city children. Then he heads up Riverside Drive to point out a vacant lot being targeted for affordable housing. Next he pulls up in front of 263 West 153rd Street and marches into the David and Joyce Dinkins Gardens Project (now under construction), where low- and moderate-income families will share gardens and community space with young adults about to leave foster care.

With a hard hat perched on top of his neatly trimmed salt-and-pepper curls, the 55-year-old Rose shows off the new building with obvious pride. On the first floor, he points out a soon-to-be completed youth center. Then he bounds up the steps two at a time, pausing in an unfinished apartment to point out a nifty device called a trickle vent, which, as part of a low-energy air circulation system, allows fresh air to circulate in the apartment without vertical ducts. By keeping each apartment's air supply self-contained, the vent not only saves energy but helps to control the roach infestations that are one cause of asthma among inner city children.

On up to the rooftop boiler room. It saves three percent of a building's total heat and hot water costs to put the boiler room on top of the building, not in the basement, Rose says.

Then it's out on to the roof, where green gardens will soon freshen the air, insulate the building, and delight the residents. Here Rose takes in the view, including the surrounding brick buildings, Yankee Stadium, and a leafy cottonwood tree. "What a world!" Rose exclaims.

He's got a calling

There's no doubt that Jonathan Rose loves his work. A lot of other people love it, too. From Connecticut to Colorado, from New York to New Mexico, his projects have won accolades and awards for their elegance and their smart growth features. He has won, among others, the United Nations Habitat II 1996 Corporate Best Practices Award, the Natural Resources Defense Council's 2000 Force for Nature Award, and the 2007 American Planning Association New York Metro Chapter Distinguished Service Award.

While his business, Jonathan Rose Companies, does a lot of things — planning and developing green, affordable housing; advising nonprofits on how to manage their real estate holdings; acquiring green, transit-based properties; and, most recently, a private equity green investment fund — Rose says that "affordable housing is at the core of what we do."

And it's not your father's — or his father's — affordable housing. In keeping with the mission, declared on the company website, "to repair the fabric of communities," Rose aims to create "vibrant communities" by building green, mixed use, mixed income projects located near mass transit nodes.

He'll tell you that this is what he always wanted to do. Always? "Well, let's put it this way," he says. "I always wanted to build great buildings that were socially and environmentally responsible. You might say I have a calling."

It may seem odd to think of a developer with a calling, at least if you buy the stereotype of the rapacious developer who rips apart farms, forests, and neighborhoods in the quest for profits. But Jonathan Rose is not that kind of developer.

"On meeting Jonathan, you immediately get a sense of his having incredible knowledge about development and

the role development has in a much broader sense of social justice," says Norton Kalishman, program director for the McCune Charitable Foundation, which is working with Rose Companies to redevelop a historic district in downtown Albuquerque. "His vision is based on values."

Family tradition



The term "Renaissance man" also pops up. Rose is a third generation developer who is also a jazz enthusiast. In 1979 he founded his own record label, Gramavision. He and his wife, Diana Calthorpe Rose, are cofounders of the Garrison Institute, a spiritual retreat located in a former monastery overlooking the Hudson River. The institute's mission is to apply the "transformative wisdom of the world's contemplative traditions" to modern social and environmental challenges. The institute recently organized a retreat for environmental leaders hoping to thrash out a plan to address global warming.

"You might say, gosh, an affordable housing guy who who's green and spiritual? But these are all interrelated," says Jim Himes, former director of the New York office of Enterprise Community Partners, a Washington-based nonprofit that promotes affordable housing. "More than anybody else we work with, Jon understands the interdependence of all things and all people." (Rose sits on the group's board of directors.) Yet, for all his visionary qualities, Rose is committed to making money. As a for-profit developer, he thinks making money is the right thing to do, like paying the mortgage on time.

Making money and doing good are a Rose family tradition. Frederick Rose, Jonathan's father, built New York City landmarks like the Bankers Trust Building as well as public housing projects. He was also a noted philanthropist who sat on the boards of dozens of New York City institutions and reportedly gave away \$95 million to various causes before his death in 1999. Rose's mother, Sandra Priest Rose, is a reading consultant and a founding trustee of the Reading Reform Foundation of New York.

"They kept the business end of the work separate from the social justice end," Rose says. "In my work, I combine them. So in a sense I feel as if I'm carrying on the family tradition, but in a different way."

A different path

Rose graduated from Yale University in 1974 with a B.A. in psychology and philosophy. In 1980 he earned a master's degree in regional planning at the University of Pennsylvania, studying under Ian McHarg, the landscape architect and author of *Design with Nature*, often called the founder of modern environmental planning.

Rose worked for the family firm before striking out on his own in 1989. That is when he created the Affordable Housing Development Corporation, which is now the development subsidiary of Jonathan Rose Companies. The umbrella firm has offices in New York City, Westchester, New Haven, Colorado, and New Mexico.

His admirers say that Rose stands out for the complexity of thought and commitment he brings to his projects. "Jonathan is an integrator," says frequent collaborator Peter Calthorpe, principal of Calthorpe Associates, a California-based planning firm, and one of the founders of the new urbanist movement.

Calthorpe, who is also Rose's brother-in-law, has this to say about his colleague: "[Jon] doesn't just think, how can I deliver so much affordable housing per square foot? He thinks, 'How does it work on the larger context of the neighborhood and the city? How are people going to interact?' He sees things in a holistic manner."

Rose is an advocate of transit-based housing, not only because it produces less air pollution, but for other reasons as well: It promotes walking, it saves lower income residents the estimated \$6,000 a year it costs to keep a car, and it cuts commutes, thereby giving people more time to spend with their families and their communities.

Likewise, Rose is committed to mixed income housing and to diversity. "Different types of housing means different lifestyles, different family types, different ages, singles, families, seniors," says Calthorpe.

Project profiles

In Highlands' Garden Village, a \$105 million development built on the site of an old amusement park near Denver, single-family houses, town houses, apartments, and live-work lofts are knit together by green terraces, parks and plazas, and amenities such as a performing arts center, a 24-hour fitness center, and a health food

store.

To Rose, diversity also means integrating affordable housing with special needs housing. Of the 85 apartments under construction in the David and Joyce Dinkins Gardens in New York, 26 will be reserved for youths leaving foster care because they have gotten too old for it. This is an overlooked population, says Rose. "There is an enormously broad range of needs and we need to find designs that create a diversity of solutions," he adds.

The Fortune Society Development Project, located in West Harlem, plans to provide 50 studio apartments for former inmates, but also 63 affordable apartments for community residents. In addition, some of the 25,000 square feet of service space in the building will be available to community groups for meetings, conferences, or other uses. These provisions helped win local support for the project, says Fortune Society president and CEO JoAnne Page, who adds that the local Community Board 9 now meets in the Fortune Academy next door to the planned construction site.

People who know Rose say he works hard to make connections. "He actually started a little branch of his company here and the two people he hired have long experience working in Albuquerque," says Louis Colombo, deputy director of Albuquerque City Council Services, which provides support for the Albuquerque City Council. "I think he does that consciously to have sensitivity to local culture."

One of these local partners, Theresa Bell, a longtime collaborator and managing partner of Romero Rose, Rose Companies' New Mexico partner, says the firm takes this a step further, drawing on the history and culture of the site itself. Romero Rose's plan for the redevelopment of a section of Albuquerque's Alvarado Transit District includes a central courtyard modeled on the famous courtyard of the historic Alvarado Hotel, which dominated the area before its demolition in the 1970s. In the Highlands' Garden Village project, Rose kept the diagonal entryways of the old amusement park, as well as the carousel and theater, says Bell.

Rose is also sensitive to the missions of the nonprofits he works with, says Page. When Rose was asked to codevelop the Fortune Society project, Page showed him a rainbow obsidian rock and told him she wanted "a building with rainbows." As Page recalls, "Jonathan looked at the rock and said, 'Maybe we can use rock like this in the lobby of the building so that when the sun shines in just the right way, you'll have your rainbows.'

"And of course, it's symbolic of what we do," Page says. "We work with people who've never seen the rainbows in themselves. That was the kind of symbolism I was sharing and he got it and that's pretty lovely."

Complete package

Perhaps Rose's most ambitious project is the \$80 million Via Verde project planned for an abandoned 60,000-square-foot lot in New York City's South Bronx. As part of a four-member team, Rose and his colleagues developed a design that in January 2007 won a city-sponsored competition.

Via Verde is slated to provide 206 housing units, including 145 rental apartments for low- and middle-income tenants, as well as 61 cooperative apartments for middle-income owners. Housing types will include low-rise townhouses, a mid-rise duplex, and an 18-story tower, all linked by a network of greenery: backyard gardens, courtyards, and rooftop gardens that will collect rainwater for vegetable and fruit gardens. An organic food coop, an outdoor amphitheater, a health and wellness center, a fitness center, and a bicycle storage facility are also planned.

Shaun Donovan, commissioner of New York City's Department of Housing Preservation and Development, says that the judges were impressed not only with the broad array of incomes and housing types, but with the concept of linking the open space to food production. "It was really exciting," Donovan says.

In addition to funding from the city, Via Verde will need a combination of federal, state, and nonprofit funds and tax credits to get off the ground. Helping clients navigate through this thicket of funding sources, as well as the equally tangled regulations, is a Rose Companies specialty.

Rose wishes there were less need for this skill. "If you wanted to build a 1,000-unit project that is mixed income, mixed use, green, next to mass transit, you could spend years going through the NEPA [National Environmental Policy Act] process. However, if 1,000 home builders each built just one house, leading to sprawl, there's no environmental impact statement required. But which creates the most traffic? Which is more wasteful of energy? Clearly the 1,000 single homes, but because each one is used independently rather than synthetically, each one falls below the screening limit of NEPA."

To Rose, this is just one way the system currently favors sprawl over high-density, environmentally sustainable,

mixed income housing. Last May, while testifying before Congress on ways to expand the low income housing tax credit, Rose called for the federal government to take a leadership role in leaving "a more sustainable development legacy to future generations."

A key problem, as Rose sees it, is that the U.S. has no national plan, only regulatory statutes such as NEPA and the Clean Air Act. "Essentially we created a regulatory environment in which we made our decisions based on science and law, a good thing, but insufficient," he says. What is missing from this piecemeal approach, he says, is values. "You could no longer say we will preserve this historic landscape because it is important to our national heritage, because it is who we are as a people, because it is part of our moral regional value system, our social values, our spiritual values."

NEPA is also a poor planning tool, he says, because of its heavy reliance on environmental impact statements, whose accuracy he believes is unproven. "I ask this of *Planning* magazine readers: Does anybody have a good, broad-based study of a diverse group of environmental impact statements of [completed] projects that 10 years later were back-tested to see if the predictions were accurate?"

One of the reasons he believes they can't be accurate is that "they look at projects from a granular point of view; essentially, they look at a project by itself, and not the whole system."

In the meantime, federal funding is handed out piecemeal, without oversight or coordination, with separate applications and plans filed with different agencies for housing, mass transit, or water and sewer funds. "There's no requirement that they overlap, that they connect, that they [follow] the same plan. They're not even on the same database. So we're planning in isolation, which is not valuable," Rose continues.

"In the next 30 years, the population is expected to grow by 94 million," he says. "We are going to have to decide where to house these people. I believe it needs to be in downtown communities. That's where the existing water and power sources are, that's where the mass transit is, that's where people are more likely to have access to jobs and education."

"Planners have a choice," he says. "They can act as regulators and respond to applications for development, or they can act as visionaries who shape the future of their communities. Only if planners act as visionary leaders can they galvanize their communities, protect what matters, create the basis for what needs to grow, and transform the future."

Kristin Choo is a freelance writer based in New York City.

Resources

Images: Top — Jonathan Rose in his Fifth Avenue office. Bottom — Jonathan Rose and colleagues at David and Joyce Dinkins Gardens building. Photos Anne Ritchie.

The Jonathan Rose Companies: www.rosecompanies.com

The Garrison Institute: www.garrisoninstitute.org

Calthorpe Associates: www.calthorpe.com

The Fortune Society: www.fortunesociety.org

New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development: www.nyc.gov/hpd

McCune Charitable Foundation: www.nmmccune.org

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