CityLimits

Q&A:
Developer with Soul

Michael Lander on why Twin Cities urban denizens tend to think exactly like suburban ones.

Michael Lander, fifty-two, is responsible for sexy urban utopia projects such as 301 Kenwood Parkway, the swank condos overlooking the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden, and Sibley Park Apartments in the state-of-the-art "mixed-use" urban Wacouta Commons neighborhood in downtown St. Paul. One of his favorite expressions is "counterintuitive." Fitting, because this "new urbanist" comes from a fourth generation of self-made men from Grand Forks, North Dakota. He attended the University of the Pacific, then built houseboats in Sausalito. Now he drives a Prius around Linden Hills, where he lives with his wife and his two children. "I can't admit to being a real estate developer," he says. "Because that's not a very lofty goal." —*S. M.*

You've changed the social fabric of downtown. You can't even buy a girl a drink at Bellanotte anymore without a downtown loft.
The sort of urban-living loft boom is like many things we saw that emerged on the coasts ten years before they came to Minneapolis. We saw it five years before in Denver. It was generated by demographics. There's been a huge change in household makeup. Now 75 percent of our [buyers'] households are one or two persons, or single parent and child. So with that change came a need for different kinds of housing. Those two-person households tend to be families without children. They are looking for a different kind of social experience. More community activity outside their home. Urban areas with mixed-use, entertainment, and service options are very attractive to them.

How does Minneapolis rank, in aesthetic quality of new residential development?
Minneapolis is not as sophisticated as what you see in other urban cores. The bar should be raised. I would like to see higher quality projects. There is good work being done in this community, but on average, I would not say that it's on par with Denver, Seattle, Portland. I tend to go west, personally.

Where is exemplary downtown development happening?
Physically, the most beautiful downtown development I've seen is in Pasadena, California. It has a very revitalized downtown. I don't want to hold up Pasadena as a community model, but as a physical design model, it is really spectacular. We certainly can learn from and aspire to the better work we see in those communities.

We have Graves and other noted architects building high-profile projects. Does that help goose local residential design ambitions?
It elevates people's interest in archi-

tecture. The public buildings should be allowed to be more exuberant and more individualistic—the object building—while the other buildings should work hard to fit in. I'm enjoying the new architecture landscape and actually, between the MIA, Walker, the Guthrie, and library, there's a wide range of expression.

Do people think about the interplay between civic design and the domestic realm or are they just focused on their new iPods?
I am surprised by how little is understood. Much of urban design is very counterintuitive.

How do you mean?
When I go to neighborhood meetings with projects, the kinds of concern people have are too much traffic, the intrusion of commercial on my residential life, and too much density. Well, the rational response to that is the suburbs. "I got a cul de sac, so there won't be too much traffic. We put the commercial way over there, and we put all the apartments somewhere else." Adding density in south Minneapolis is almost never welcome.

Density is a word that seems to spoil Sunday dinner.
There is a lot of resistance to density in the city. Even though Minneapolis once had 500,000 people and now has under 400,000, most people feel any increase will degrade their lives. On my block, for example, there are duplexes, and a couple fourplexes, and single-family homes, and it's delightful. If I went into another block, and proposed taking down one of those single family homes and building a fourplex to allow three more households where there was one, virtually no one would see that as a positive. The positive [to them] is the

preservation of the homogeneous, and I find that to be anti-urban—suburban, actually. Traffic, density, and commercial intrusion are part of the city. When I hear that there's a new commercial offering, I'm very concerned that it be properly designed but I'm very excited about the use. I would love and support anybody that came into my block and skillfully designed denser buildings.

But you're a developer.
Yeah. I think our generation and the last two or three have come to see development as a bad thing, because so much of it hasn't been done well. [My firm] was involved in one community meeting about the two SuperAmerica stations at 40th and Lyndale. The neighborhood was concerned that something bad was going to happen [after they consolidated], worse than two 1950s-era gas stations. That says we don't have much confidence in the developer to deliver improvement to our lives.

What was the Twin Cities' biggest developmental misstep?
The biggest miscue, over the years, is that we turned over the planning of our cities to traffic engineers. It's not his job to worry about the pedestrian or the business or residential experience or the public realm.

How is St. Paul's downtown different from Minneapolis's?
St. Paul has a little less vibrant market. People are willing to spend more money on housing in Minneapolis. [St. Paul] has had—it is unraveling a little bit at this point—a very unified leadership, a great vision and plan, a really clear idea held by a broad group of citizens about where St. Paul was going. That is not something that exists in Minneapolis. St. Paul has worked harder and has been able to compete effectively with Minneapolis because of the alignment of interests. It's been a great place to work. ■