



» NEW IN HOMES: 35 YEARS



STEVE RUSSELL/TORONTO STAR

Daniels Corp. vice president Tom Dutton calls Regent Park a vibrant, lively place with a strong community. Behind him is a mural by artist Elicser at One Park Place Condominiums.

Building with a social heart

Daniels focuses on affordability as well as high-end developments

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Whether they are affluent empty-nesters looking for a luxury condo or a family of modest means hoping to buy its first home, the folks at the Daniels Corp. want all its buyers "to love where they live."

That's why its affordable housing projects remain as important to the builder as its glitzier, high-end developments.

"Right from the beginning, the company took on a persona of inventiveness and innovation and had a different slant on things," says Daniels vice president Tom Dutton. "It had a major social agenda and a commitment to providing affordable home ownership and supporting charities."

John Daniels, a past chairman of Cadillac Fairview Development Corp. who was involved in the creation of the Eaton Centre, the Toronto-Dominion Centre and Erin Mills, left Cadillac Fairview in 1982 to start the Daniels Corp., with a vision to build small residential projects.

In 1984, he hired Mitchell Cohen, who had been working as director of development for the Co-operative Housing Federation of Toronto, as general manager. Cohen (now company president) didn't want Daniels to be a typical building company; he wanted it to provide affordable home-ownership opportunities.

One of Daniels' first townhouse sites in Erin Mills was built to R2000 standards, the first time a multiple housing project had been built to those stringent energy efficiency standards. It was on property that had been part of a land assembly Jack Daniels had put together for Cadillac Fairview.

"He saw a unique opportunity to fill a different niche with townhouses and higher density units," says Dutton. "From the beginning, the Daniels Group, as it was then called, had a different approach than other players. From the start, it had innovative tendencies."

Until 1986, Daniels used general contractors to do its building but Cohen became frustrated with the lack of quality and uncaring attitude toward purchasers and in October 1987, Dutton, who had trained as an architect but "was a builder at heart," came on board to head up construction.

Daniels started working for various non-profit groups and governments and in 1988, built its first public non-profit housing for the Region of Peel. Business flourished, due to its skill at building quality turnkey social housing on time and on budget and allowed it to survive the market crash of 1989.

That experience in social housing came in handy in subsequent years, when Daniels moved into the condo market. Its first project was NY Towers at Bayview and Sheppard, where four towers went up at once in 1999.

"We'd been building co-op and social housing, so to make the transition to condos was fairly simple for us," says Dutton.

Daniels' lengthy run at building social housing came to an end in 1995, when the newly elected Mike Harris Conservative provincial government cancelled social housing programs. Daniels started supporting charities such as Second Harvest and started building retirement homes in conjunction with Amica Mature Lifestyles.

Around 2000, it became the first developer in more than 20 years to build rental housing and introduced Gateway communities offering a Home Investment Program (HIP), where a portion of a tenant's monthly rent could be directed to saving a down payment toward the eventual purchase of a new Daniels home, as the company knew the down payment was often a stumbling block for buyers. The program is still running today.

Next came FirstHome, to provide the new homes for those people to buy, offering graduated deposits, and special financing. There are now 12 FirstHome communities and when a preview is announced, potential buyers start lining up days in advance and the homes tend to sell out quickly.

Daniels has also proven its skill at portfolio building for the middle- to upper-end market, with distinctive buildings in Mississauga city centre (Chicago, Limelight, One Park Tower), luxurious One Eleven Forsythe on the Oakville waterfront and the Bell Lightbox, and its sequel, the Cinema Tower.

The builder has always been a trendsetter: in 1988, it was the first to bring front verandas back to new houses and in the early '90s,



John Daniels, centre, hired Mitchell Cohen, left, in 1984. They joined hands with movie tycoon Ivan Reitman to create a joint venture called the King John Festival Corp., which includes TIFF's headquarters, The Bell Lightbox.



One Park Place is the most recent addition to Regent Park.

it executed one of the first urban renewal projects in Toronto at Lakeshore Village, on the site of an old Goodyear tire plant where 862 co-op housing units were built.

Recently, it introduced urban garden plots and a full-sized gymnasium at its Limelight condo in Mississauga.

The latest addition to Regent Park, the One Park Place condominium, is already under construction and sales will open in October.

While the revitalization is unfolding as envisioned, Dutton says working with the local community

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DANIELS VICE PRESIDENT

as the massive building continues has yielded rich and satisfying relationships. "We didn't realize how strong and resilient this community is and how dedicated the people are to Regent Park as a place to raise their kids and get ahead. It's a vibrant, lively place."

Dutton says the company was honoured that the new 60,000-square-foot arts and cultural centre in Regent Park was recently renamed Daniels Spectrum. The centre will serve as a social and cultural hub for Regent Park residents.

Another triumph for the company was winning the 2012 Tarion High-rise Builder of the Year award. Dutton says the company's goal is to turn over every home and condo suite it builds deficiency-free and says the award means a lot because it is based on feedback from Daniels purchasers.

"We are not always perfect but we do say, 'We are not going anywhere and we will keep working at this until you are satisfied,'" he says.

Many Daniels projects are under construction before sales launch.

Daniels' ongoing commitment to charities is deeply ingrained in its corporate culture, with hunger, homelessness and the arts as key themes. Its key charities include:

Habitat for Humanity, Second Harvest (Toronto's only perishable food recovery program) and Eva's Initiatives, an organization that develops long-term solutions for homeless and at-risk youth.

Cohen and Dutton continue to write and record songs for Give a Gift, Get a Song, which can be purchased online (www.giveagiftgetasong.com) and benefit some of the charities it supports, as well as an endowment fund for engineering and construction technologies students at George Brown College.

The company continues to build a diverse range of housing.

The current projects on the drawing board include the aforementioned One Park Place in Regent Park, NY2 condominiums at Bayview and Sheppard that will offer a rent-to-own program, High Park Condominiums and Lewis Honey townhouses and semi-detached homes in Aurora that will be fully built when they come to the market.

"We (at Daniels) often say we have the greatest job in the world," says Dutton. "We get to create communities and create the experience people will have living there. Our jobs require great responsibility but provide tremendous satisfaction."