

Building a Community, Not Just Housing

By Sherrie Voss Matthews

*Richard
Baron at
Ninth
Square in
New Haven,
Connecticut,
one of the 94
projects he
has helped
develop in
25 cities*

Sherrie Matthews



Courtesy of McCormack Baron Salazar

nationwide. Another is the Center of Contemporary Arts (above), which provides instruction in the arts for 6,000 students in the St. Louis area.

Developer Richard Baron

builds trust and commitment while reshaping neighborhoods.

What was once a bleak, empty set of warehouses near Busch Stadium in St. Louis is now a busy four-star Westin Hotel. In Cleveland, the Hough neighborhood—once a no man’s land—is now *the* place to live.

The driving force behind these reconstructed, reconnected neighborhoods is Rich-

ard D. Baron, chairman and chief executive officer of St. Louis-based McCormack Baron Salazar. He is a developer who considers a community’s heart and not just its buildings—as residents, bankers, and city officials agree.

“Richard is one of the few people who looks at the whole community,” says longtime friend Andrew Trivers, president of the St. Louis-based architectural firm Trivers Associates. “Most developers are only in it to

make a buck and get out; he wants to make a better life for people. It’s maintenance, parent participation, and education. That’s what makes Richard tick.”

The firm Baron founded in 1973 with his late friend Terry McCormack has built more than 94 projects in 25 cities; development costs total about \$1.2 billion. The firm became McCormack Baron Salazar, Inc., in 2003.



James Schwartz

From attorney to developer

Richard Baron was an unlikely developer. This Detroit native began his career as a student teacher in Cleveland, working in the Hough neighborhood, a once well-to-do east-side area that had been at the center of the 1960s riots. After graduating from Oberlin College, he volunteered in the Hough freedom schools, which taught African Americans various school subjects that were often neglected within the poorly funded and segregated public school system.

He earned a master's degree in political science from the University of California at Berkeley in 1964 and then his law degree from the University of Michigan. Baron moved to St. Louis in 1968 to direct the housing division of the Legal Aid Society of St. Louis. From there, he represented tenants of major public housing sites such as St. Louis's Pruitt-Igoe.

What Baron found there were neighborhoods devastated by poor decisions. Urban renewal destroyed communities by closing schools, tearing down homes, and building high-rise public housing. Baron represented the tenants who went on a rent strike during 1968 and 1969 to draw attention to the living conditions permitted by the St. Louis Housing Authority. Residents faced substandard rental units filled with lead-based paint and other unsafe conditions.

"That got me interested in rebuilding neighborhoods," Baron says. "I thought about how areas of St. Louis could be redeveloped by looking at areas that had been severely blighted and were losing population. Substantial tracts

of vacant land were becoming part of the city's redevelopment authority."

Terry McCormack and Richard Baron became developers by default, says Andrew Trivers. Baron and Trivers met in 1972, when both were stuffing envelopes for George McGovern's presidential campaign, Trivers recalls with a laugh. A short time later, he asked Baron to help out with the George Washington Hotel renovation. Trivers landed the contract to redo the historic hotel (once the favorite of President Teddy Roosevelt), but, as the project architect, he still needed a developer.

No one was developing in St. Louis's abandoned neighborhoods, many of which were primarily African American. Richard Baron and Terry McCormack decided to do it alone.

Rebuilding, placemaking

One of the first projects McCormack Baron tackled was Quality Hill in Kansas City, Missouri, part of the city's decaying central core. The area had been severely run down. Residents were fleeing to the suburbs. Once a stately area with warehouses, rowhouses, and mansions, Quality Hill had become a slum, says Brad Wolf, administrator of Kansas City's Landmark Commission.

McCormack Baron started work at Quality Hill in the mid-1980s, focusing on 1,000 residential units and 52,000 square feet of new office development. The Hill is now vibrant and booming. "That whole side of town is doing quite well," Wolf says. Among the businesses that have moved there are United Way, American Heart Association,

American Cancer Society, and HNTB. The Kansas City Southern Railroad has just completed building its headquarters in Quality Hill as well.

To date, more than 400 rental and condominium apartments have been developed or rehabilitated, two parking garages built, and more than 100,000 square feet of retail space revitalized in Quality Hill. There are 13 rehabbed historic buildings, mainly lofts and condominiums. Thirteen new buildings have gone up to fill in the gaps among the historic structures.

Writing in a perspective paper for the University of Buffalo, former Kansas City *Star* columnist Steve Nicely noted: "It's difficult to imagine any project having more impact than this one. It re-establishes downtown as a residential community . . . it has triggered other significant redevelopment projects and will continue to do so in the future for years to come."

Tom Reeves, now executive director of Downtown Now! in St. Louis, was one of the first lenders who helped finance McCormack Baron projects. Reeves was a vice-president at Mark Twain Bank when he learned about Baron's plans for Quality Hill.

"That was the first major step toward reviving downtown Kansas City," Reeves recalls. "It was something most people looked at and shook their heads, but it became the anchor for western downtown Kansas City."

What works

Quality Hill had many of the elements that Baron looks for in a site. It had a sense of place

and historic buildings that could be saved. It was downtown, close to work, and close to a vital city core.

“[We are] continually looking for opportunities, areas that are severely disinvested over the years and the ways they are positioned: jobs, natural sites with wonderful views,” Baron says. “[We] try to think about ways to master plan those areas so they would allow us to create mixed-income communities.”

McCormack Baron rarely works on a small scale. The firm looks for 50-, 60-, or 100-acre sites that are centrally located, close to churches, schools, major institutions such as universities, and other infrastructure, like light rail or bus routes. The idea is to create a new community from the ground up, and for that, McCormack Baron needs enough land to reach critical mass.

But communities are not just about mass housing. They are about people and neighborhoods. That is why Baron insists on prices appropriate to the existing neighborhood—and why every project includes some form of low-income housing.

Baron is adamant that residents not be gentrified out of their homes. Lexington Village in the Hough neighborhood of Cleveland, a 347-apartment development, houses everyone from teachers and doctors, who pay market-rate rents, to low-income families. Nearby, a new subdivision houses professionals and families moving up out of starter homes.

“Richard was the only developer who was able to do what I envisioned at 79th and Hough,” says Cleveland Councilwoman Fannie Lewis. “I didn’t want it to be public housing. I wanted mixed use. I wanted it to look as good 10 years down the road as it was the day it went up.”

Now, 13 years later, McCormack Baron’s development has more than met Lewis’s expectations. The neighborhood has been rebuilt, and two-thirds of the housing units are owner occupied. “I would recommend Richard anywhere to do housing,” Lewis adds. “He does more than just housing; he sees people and he designs things for people. He’s the best I’ve seen across the country.”

Rebuilding connections

The area on St. Louis’s North Jefferson Avenue near Jefferson Elementary School had long been considered a no man’s land when McCormack Baron began to revitalize land once occupied by the St. Louis Housing Authority’s Vaughn housing complex. Begun in 1996, the townhouses and garden apartments of Murphy Park are attracting quite a bit of attention.

Once one of St. Louis’s poorest neighborhoods, Murphy Park is now home to 1,200

low-rise garden apartments and townhouses. An area once infamous for gang warfare, drug dealing, and an extreme poverty rate, the Murphy Park neighborhood is now considered a good place to live. Fifty-five percent of the units are reserved for low-income residents.

It is still a predominantly African American neighborhood, but is becoming economically integrated, Baron says. The \$50 million project includes beautiful homes (some with four to six bedrooms), swaths of green space, and spacious back yards. A day care center is located nearby, and an elementary school is

Photos by Sherrie Matthews



A few of Baron’s projects in St. Louis (from top): McCormack Place offers assisted living services to seniors in the city’s historic Central West End. The Forest Park Southeast community center is a magnet for both children and adults. Edmonds Field, next to Adams Elementary School, was funded by Cardinals Care, the philanthropy arm of the St. Louis Cardinals baseball team.

within easy walking distance. St. Louis's popular Metrolink light rail and city bus lines have stops in the neighborhood.

Schools and the arts

Baron doesn't just build housing. He builds connections. He rebuilds schools, when necessary. Jefferson Elementary School is part of the Vashon Education Compact, a public-private partnership of the St. Louis Public Schools, St. Louis Board of Education, the St. Louis Public Schools Foundation, the Danforth Foundation, and the Vashon/JeffVanderLou Initiative. Some \$12 to \$14 million in donations from local philanthropies and employers, such as Washington University, will support the re-investment in St. Louis's public schools. Parents, teachers, and school officials are involved in targeting the funds.

Baron hopes that by reinvesting in neighborhood schools—often the heart of a community—parents and neighbors will be able to reconnect. He raised \$3.5 million for Jefferson Elementary alone.

Earl Williams, Jefferson's principal, is amazed at the transformation. The compact provides money for luxuries like air conditioning, which makes it easier for students to concentrate during St. Louis's infamous hot, muggy weather. There are supply funds for teachers and after-school programs for kids.

"Those types of enhancements create a good environment for children," Williams says. "It changes people's attitude; they now have pride in their neighborhood and their school."

Adams Elementary Principal Sharonica Hardin also sees the community around her school reconnecting. Adams—built in the late 19th and early 20th centuries—was shuttered in 1993 as a part of the city's desegregation policy. The school was an urban ruin; its students were bused for hours to schools across the city and into St. Louis County. The school was no longer the heart of the neighborhood.

Resources

On the web. Selected projects by McCormack Baron Salazar: Westminster Place, St. Louis: <http://stlouis.missouri.org>. Crawford Square, Pittsburgh: www.post-gazette.com/newslinks. Murphy Park, St. Louis: <http://stlc.in.missouri.org/devprojects>. Center of Contemporary Arts, St. Louis: www.cocastl.org. Vashon Educational Compact: www.vashoncompact.org/html.

National conference. On April 28, Richard Baron will be the featured speaker at the closing general session of APA's National Planning Conference in Washington, D.C.

As part of the community-driven master plan for the revitalization of the 45-block Forest Park Southeast neighborhood, Baron convinced the Board of Education to completely renovate Adams Elementary School. A community center on 1311 Tower Grove Avenue was added. The master plan was subsidized by grants from Washington University Medical Center and Firststar Bank; McCormack Baron and Associates acted as the program manager.

The \$14 million renovation included a complete rehabilitation of Adams Elementary, the addition of a new wing to house a gym, cafeteria, kitchen, specialized classrooms, and an outdoor play area. The St. Louis Cardinals underwrote the construction of Edmonds Park, funded through Cardinals Care. The whole process took about 10 years.

Adams Elementary reopened three years ago. "We're in a very good place right now," Principal Hardin explains. "It will take a little time—getting everyone to work together. It's a process. Once you develop trust, that commitment, that involvement just comes."

Blending interests

Community building helps Baron blend his interests. By creating the Center of Contemporary Arts in University City, he also created a community center and an outlet for children and adults living in some of St. Louis's neglected neighborhoods.

Baron, in conjunction with Dorothy Dubinsky, Mark Twain Bank, Robert Orchard, the Sachs Fund, and Trivers Associates, spent \$2 million to renovate the B'nai Amoona Synagogue, originally designed in 1946 by architect Eric Mendelsohn and now on the National Register of Historic Places. The de-sanctified synagogue was converted into the contemporary art center in 1986.

"I get a great deal of pleasure out of sitting with designers and putting back public infrastructure, finding ways to connect with other agencies and organizations," Baron says. "It's part of the fun of what we do."

COCA serves 6,000 students from city and county schools. It provides art education, a family theater series, the Anheuser-Busch Gallery, and urban arts programs to city and county residents.

There are after-school arts classes, summer art camps, an arts residency program for public school students, an art and technology program, and a scholarship fund. Students who attended COCA have gone on to Juilliard, the Joffrey Ballet, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre, and Ballet Hispanico.

How does he do it?

Baron warns that his type of redevelopment is not for everyone. It takes patience. It takes the courage of your convictions. It takes a creative mind. And it takes the ability to finance a multi-million-dollar development in areas that traditional lenders would reject.

"There's no prescription for success," Baron cautions. "You can't just read a book and go do this work. It's taken many years of experience and the ability to move back and forth between interested groups. You need a sense of humor, you have to listen to neighbors, listen to city governments, listen to philanthropists."

Baron's projects also use a mix of financing: Public funds, such as HOPE VI, and private funds from investors willing to take a chance on rebuilding a neighborhood. The mix includes state housing finance agencies, which attract investors wanting to get low-income housing tax credits and historic housing tax credits, plus banks and local philanthropies.

"Critical mass is the key," says Reeves of Downtown Now!. "You have to do something of scale; you can't do isolated scattered site development. As a former banker, I appreciate that he [Baron] knows how to put together the numbers and the financing. Some of his projects do have gaps in financing based on what traditional loans will cover, but he takes a realistic approach and makes realistic assumptions about what can happen today. Then he goes in to get financing."

Pulling together diverse financing sources was harder to do in the early days when McCormack Baron was just starting its unconventional developments. It is easier now that the firm has a proven track record, but it still is not simple, Baron says.

"It's always a hard sell," Baron says. "I think that the size of the projects is a little bit of a concern to people—the amount of money that we have to put together to make this happen is often millions of dollars."

McCormack Baron Salazar can now point to successes in Quality Hill, Murphy Park, Lexington Square in Cleveland, Centennial Place in Atlanta, Phoenix Place in Louisville, Crawford Square in Pittsburgh, Pueblo del Sol in Los Angeles. All thriving neighborhoods.

"People are always very skeptical that these things can work," Baron says. "We've demonstrated that it can happen time and time again in different cities across the country."

Matthews is a freelance editor and writer based in Springfield, Missouri.