



# Mission Unaltered

By Erryn Walker

In any metropolis, the term “affordable housing” has always been accompanied by less-than-desirable connotations: Think “projects,” “ghettos,” and an overall concentration of poverty. Affordable housing faced increased scrutiny in the 1990s, when Congress passed the HOPE VI program designed to demolish all government-funded housing. Atlanta — at the forefront of the push to decentralize poverty — ambitiously raised most of the city’s federally funded housing. In light of the widespread demolition projects, affordable housing was and still is of utmost concern for Atlanta’s underserved communities — otherwise known as Noel Khalil’s target demographic.

As president and founder of an affordable housing development firm, Khalil sought to defy stereotypes commonly associated with affordable housing, beginning first by changing his company’s name from Affordable Housing Partnership, which he launched in 1991, to the current Columbia Residential. “There was a lot of negative connotation surrounding the concept of affordable housing, and for public relations purposes, it [was] wiser to change the name.”

Another strategic business move was to align himself with commercial development baron Herman J. Russell who was, at the time, the main contractor for Gibraltar Land Inc., another construction company that Khalil headed. “Russell believed in me [and] that I could make something happen, especially in real estate. He gave me that latitude and financial support to take great real estate risks, and fortunately that all panned out.”

Since embarking on his mission two decades ago, Khalil has expanded his company from one to 30 residences, all of which are functioning at full capacity. “I would’ve never envisioned that Atlanta could have had the level of growth that it has in [the last] 20 years.”

Atlanta has certainly taken notice. In 2005, Columbia Residential won the prestigious Pillars of Industry award for the construction of West Highlands, a mixed-income, mixed-use community in northwest Atlanta, which replaced the notorious Perry Homes projects.

“I think [West Highlands] was our crowning glory; that project allowed us to [showcase] our flare for architectural excellence and quality living spaces in a kinetically appealing environment, and I think that what it does is raise the bar for us personally. [It cost] over \$100 million, and it has led us to start other projects of that scope,” says Khalil.

The West Highlands development includes a public housing component, single-family homes, retail space, a public golf course and a complex dedicated to seniors. There also are plans underway for a YMCA, day care, public library and school. “[Some] people who knew the old Perry Homes were in tears when they came back,” Khalil says. “Some made statements like ‘we didn’t think we could live like this.’” It’s exactly the type of response that Khalil thrives on in his quest to make quality living and affordability synonymous. **AT**

Noel Khalil was featured as a “Hot New Developer” in *Atlanta Tribune’s* August 1987 issue.