

Building The Dreams That Others Will Buy

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By Spencer Heinz

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Towers of glass and steel rise from the earth like magic, but nothing is magic. These are the South Waterfront's emerging condo villages, and millions of dollars raise them up on the shoulders of workers in the trades.

Hundreds of men and women, from glaziers to ironworkers, form a temporary community that ebbs between here and their homes that range from Beaverton to Hood River to the inner city itself.

For those who care to imagine how much work by how many it takes, one way to begin is to wend through the buzz and screech of construction, beneath the great tram tower that looms like a being from "The War of the Worlds," and into the condo-sales Discovery Center showroom marked by a giant orange asterisk.

"You are here," say words on the wall.

Inside stands a room-size scale model of Portland's westside riverbank with formations of buildings either built or still imagined.

"The River Blocks is as much an address as a state of mind," orange words say, but someone has to build it. This is a \$2 billion job on 130 acres, one of the nation's bigger urban developments. This crusade of hammers and hope involves everyone from workers on the ground to salesmen such as Sean Z. Becker, a broker with Realty Trust who considers how each person has a hand in making it real.

"Wow," Becker recalls a concrete worker exclaiming during a trip to the showroom. "So that's what it'll look like."

A big-picture view comes from two brothers on the job, Blair Bubenik, vice president of estimating for the South Waterfront prime contractor of Hoffman Construction Co., and Cary Bubenik, a Hoffman senior project manager. They serve as communicators between construction workers and the project's many owners -- the hundreds of condominium buyers headed into their vertical homes.

Customer service counts. The project has brought in consultants from service-savvy businesses such as Les Schwab Tire Centers and Ritz-Carlton Hotels. The ethic extends, the brothers say, from fixing a condo light switch to limiting construction noise, when possible, near occupied units.

"It's a neighborhood now," Blair says.

They head into the cold, where workers running 80,000-pound machines build the dreams that brokers sell. They heave the earth into other shapes. Backing-up warning beeps fill the air. A tower crane glows a purplish pink as residents settle in.

About 7 a.m. in rain or wind or whatever, workers by the hundreds maneuver for parking spots and start their day. The topography keeps changing, so their places move from here to there.

These days by 7:30 a.m., they are working on primarily three condo towers -- the John Ross, Atwater Place and the 3720 Building. The jobs are desirable, pulling down \$20 to \$40 an hour. Providing many more of them for businesses owned by minorities and women continues to be the topic of talks among the city, the prime contractor, the developers and the workers.

They show up as waves of carpenters, drywallers, tile setters, stonemasons, electricians, plumbers, glaziers, laborers, cement finishers, ironworkers, pipe fitters, pile bucks, equipment operators, electricians, sheet metal workers and more.

Over at the 3720 Building, which is in the foundation and excavation phase, they include men such as Arthur Flores, 41, of Tigard, drilling as an operating engineer apprentice for Scheffler Northwest; Chris Wrench, 46, pile bucks crew foreman with Scheffler who commutes weekly between here and Bend; Rod Runkle, 58, of Orchards, Wash., a John L. Jersey & Son laborer building a slab for the first level of a parking garage; and Troy Pennock, 39, of Milwaukie, a Hoffman Structures carpenter encasing the conduits that will feed electrical wire for a fire-sprinkler system.

"The only thing that makes it all work is mutual respect for each others' jobs," says Adam Bonner, Hoffman Construction's 3720 project superintendent. "They're coming from all over, but they've all got to get along."

That extends to the nearby showroom floor.

"Whether you're pouring the concrete or selling the condos, I think everyone's excited about it," says Becker the broker.

"We wouldn't be doing this," he adds, "if they weren't doing that."

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