

URBAN EXPLORERS

URBAN LIME GOES WHERE OTHERS FEAR TO TREAD, OR CERTAINLY, THINK TWICE ABOUT DEVELOPING AND INVESTING. THEY'RE BECOMING MAJOR COMMERCIAL PROPERTY PLAYERS WHO'RE REPURPOSING THE FACE OF NEGLECTED CORNERS OF OUR CITIES



Jonny Friedman is Urban Lime, commercial developers but with a far more interactive and creative vision than converting the traditional bricks-and-mortar-into-money model. Jonny has no interest in single buildings, but rather about piecing together a range of buildings, and “making them into more than the sum of all the parts.”

Urban Lime is about the bigger vision. “I’m interested in public spaces, the spaces between the buildings, and how they work. We’re place makers,” says Friedman. They need scale in order to effect a change. Clearly, every area requires an approach as unique as each city.

Friedman first bumped into the “Urban Regeneration” concept around 30 years ago. In his early 20s he’d seen the radical transformation of old derelict warehouses in New York’s meat-packing district into vibrant live-work spaces. He believed

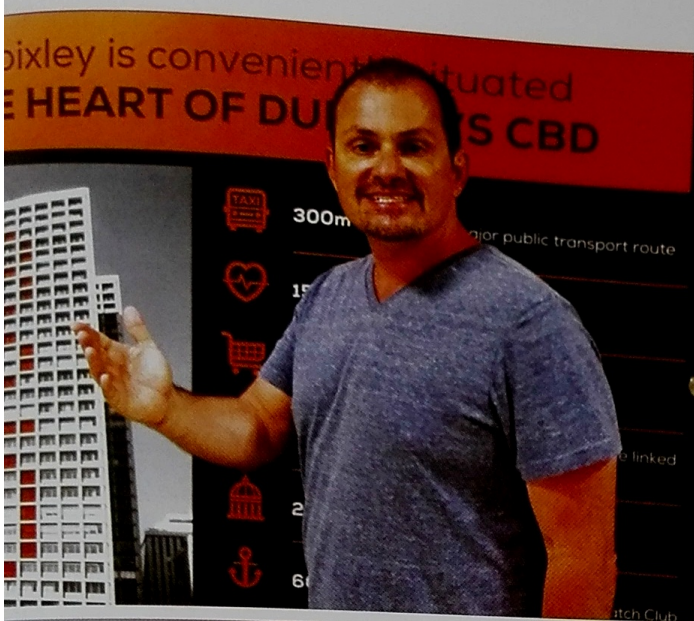
“We feel that bringing our experience and ability to invest to a lot of these projects, could turn good real estate into amazing real estate”

London was ready for the concept, bought up old factories in London’s east end – Shoreditch – divided them into smaller, manageable, affordable spaces, and leased them to the likes of artists and students. “It worked amazingly well. I paid 20 pounds a square foot freehold, and today I’m leasing them out at 60 pounds a square foot annually. In a nutshell, says

Friedman, “we envisage it, buy, create, piece it all together, and manage it.” The next Urban Lime project was the seaside town of Brighton, where Friedman bought up around 100 units in a year, and regenerated the area.”

Urban Lime retains their buildings – they don’t sell, they lease. They take a long-term view, “We’re normally associated with buildings and projects few would consider economically sound,” states Friedman.

In 2006, Urban Lime entered the South African market, and became the largest property owners in Cape Town’s Bree



PASSION FOR SPACE

Jonny Friedman is Urban Lime, commercial developers with great vision.

looked like disasters – paying rates on 100 percent of a property, leasing out 40 percent?” For Friedman, Durban didn’t need a regeneration, but tweaking and TLC: “It’s fit for purpose as is – once people regain confidence, there’ll be a far more general acceptance. Nothing like it was, but then, nor should it be.”

Urban Lime bought the iconic 320 Pixley Kaseme Street (a massive 36 000 square metres), broke it up into 20, 30, and 40 square metre workspaces, and provided a specific value-driven proposition – the three drivers, “economy, security, cleanliness”. Brands are generally very important to Urban Lime, but functionality came first with 320. Appropriate is a frequently re-occurring word: “Amazing spaces always, yet they must be appropriate – we can’t impose our own views.” Urban Lime spent R1-million per floor over 32 floors. Today, they’ve let out 20 000 square metres and have 285 separate, largely black-owned SME tenants.

A couple of doors down, Protea House – renamed Pioneer Place – is the “fashion building”. Says Friedman, “Affordable rentals, spaces of between 10 and 40 square metres – and a hive of activity, 200 small SME tenants stitching, sewing, designing.”

At the other end of the scale, Urban Lime purchased Six Durban Club Place, and opposite, the Nedbank or Netherlands Bank building (to be renamed Durban Club Chambers). The two buildings will be refurbished to a premium standard, with the two being linked to form “Durban Club Place – a professional quarter”.

“We’re going to pedestrianise the street – other than access to the designated parking – and streetscape between the buildings.

At ground level we envisage high-end, targeted retail such as a bespoke tailor, barber, coffee shops and restaurants.

There’ll be a permanent Tuk Tuk shuttle service to the courts.”

Friedman plans professional suites in the old Nedbank 4th floor boardroom and the floor above: “We’ve designed a great public space serving both towers – something akin to the BA Slow Lounge concept, and there’ll also be conference facilities, mediation suites – global standard – video conferencing, private meeting and boardrooms, and public spaces. Likewise, but up a notch, the top floor of Six Durban Club Place will have the BA First Class ambience.” This professional quarter will be entirely self-sufficient, sophisticated, and, for professionals (which goes beyond the legal profession), the only place to be and work: “The area »



Street, a property revival attributed to them. First the vision, then the properties: “We consider ourselves the lighter, the spark. We have the collective vision, we work on the individual properties, and what we really want – and if you do it well, it happens – is for everyone else to join in. Neighbours upgrade their properties, examine their tenant mixes, and gradually, property prices climb.”

Friedman has an unusual view on Durban. “It’s a fascinating African middle-class city with far wealthier origins than Cape Town, confident in its architecture, and it’s incredibly fit for purpose.”

When he first looked at Durban’s CBD, he saw how it worked superbly for retail, but not offices: “A mismatch between ownership and demand. Ownership was sitting in property funds, only interested in letting out a quarter or half a floor to what is a limited number of national tenants. These investments



urban development*



has been devoid of investment for 20 years. We're taking a longer term view – it's going to be amazing," says Friedman.

And then, there's Florida Road. Urban Lime considers this stretch of great significance to Durban. "This road is the meeting point between north and south, the point at which both communities feel comfortable together. It's great in so many ways, but with some relatively easy tweaks, it could be far better. Florida Road needs a more balanced, niched offering with more offices, retail, and all the elements which make it more family orientated."

Friedman has bought three blocks of properties: Florida Exchange – retail in front, offices at the back, wonderful parking "square"; the Spiga buildings (anchored by Spiga); and a number around Spar/Tops which will be renamed Hacienda, an office hub directed at creative SMEs, with communal reception and meeting rooms. The street frontage will be retail, coffee shops and restaurants, and both leisure and office tenant mix is crucial.

Friedman's vision is for each area in its entirety, not simply his own enclaves, and Urban Lime is working extensively with all players – particularly the successful UIP programme – to attend to traffic calming, reducing lanes from double to single, extending public spaces, increasing parking, and raising safety and perceptions

around security. "We're starting with the buildings we own, then examining the public spaces and how they can be employed in a public-friendly way. Our pilot project for using our commercial parking space at night launches soon, with the idea that others will follow suit. Not a money-making venture, just a public service."

Safety and security extends beyond the obvious: "I'm very interested in how architecture defines spaces. We're looking at specific design elements around our buildings which assist with the perception of security – creating order in the lighting, the placement of trees and shrubs, street furniture," says Friedman.

Take a drive up and down Florida Road, and there are massive, energetic signs of new life to come.

For Urban Lime, this is by no means the end: "We see our business in Durban moving into the public-private arena. There's some amazing publically-owned real estate which we believe is calling out for our skill sets. We feel that bringing our experience and ability to invest to a lot of these projects, could turn good real estate into amazing real estate. We are already moving into that space."

Urban Lime has a great passion for South African cities and how smart, consultative, interactive regeneration can make precincts work. Appropriate regeneration, that is. – *Anne Schaffer*