

Apartment Therapy

Portland development firm CE John builds a new kind of rental, with high design and history in mind.

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Image: [Michael Schmitt](#)
CE John's VP of development Thomas DiChiara

It would be easy to write off the Benevento, a 24-unit building just completed at NW Raleigh and 23rd, as a footnote to the apartment-building boom spurred by Portland's ultratight rental market. But then you notice the hardwood siding, the LED lighting, the rainwater-treating "bioplanters," and the light sculpture by New York artist Hap Tivey.

Developers usually lavish such expensive details on owner-occupied condos, not rental apartments. But for CE John, that's exactly the point: the 66-year-old family-owned development firm plans to keep the building, probably for decades.

"We're building to hold," says the company's vice president of development, Thomas DiChiara. "The third generation will be the keepers of these assets. When you build for the long term, you make different decisions."

Long a suburban mall developer, the Vancouver, Washington-based company is now moving into urban mixed-use buildings in Northwest Portland, with an emphasis on history. The Benevento is named for a groundskeeper at long-gone pro baseball field Vaughn Park. Another CE John project, Sawyer's Row, will add 40 units at NW Raleigh Street's other end, with a name paying homage to the neighborhood's historic wood industry. In between, DiChiara will renovate an old warehouse into a New Seasons Market, and break ground on a 114-unit apartment named for Col. L. L. Hawkins, who helped bring legendary parks planner John Olmsted to town and is often credited for envisioning Forest Park.

The trio of new buildings sets the early standard for the coming transformation of 15 surrounding acres. Long controlled by the trucking company Con-way, it is now the second-largest redevelopment area (after the Zidell family properties in South Waterfront) under single ownership in central Portland. A recently completed master plan outlines a dense new urban neighborhood. Con-way vice president Craig Boretz says his company chose to sell to CE John because of the development firm's "transparency" in negotiations and overall ethos. DiChiara's combination of high-design sensibility and development know-how, Boretz says, is key to the relationship. "Tom is more invested in architectural integrity than any developer I've ever met," he says.

DiChiara, 44, took an unusual path: Working for GBD Architects, the Harvard-trained architect oversaw such pivotal projects as Museum Place and three of the five Brewery Blocks. Wanting more reward and control (both financially and aesthetically) DiChiara leapt to what many of his designer peers view as the dark side. For Trammell Crow, one of the biggest merchant developers in the country, he oversaw such projects as the 188-unit Tupelo Alley on N Mississippi Avenue and the 294-unit Riva on the Park in South Waterfront.

But after eight years, DiChiara wanted to do smaller, finer buildings. "We're blending history with modern design to tell a story people can connect with," he says. The commitment runs deeper than building names and branding. CE John razed the Old Lompoc Brewery to build the Benevento, but reinstalled the storied tavern on the ground floor. The company bought the block that includes Besaw's, a restaurant that has occupied its humble environs for most of 110 years; DiChiara promises to build *around* the landmark. And when the city tagged a recent CE John acquisition—the colorful 72-year-old dive bar Joe's Cellar—for demolition, DiChiara performed the repairs needed for the old tavern to reopen. (CE John says that it eventually plans to tear Joe's down to make way for a new building.)

DiChiara contends that an approach that weds modern design to the city's past is perfectly in keeping with both heritage and an urban culture defined, in many ways, by young new arrivals. "They want to feel like they belong someplace," he says.

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