

On Life and Meaning

MARK PERES

Episode 49 – Daniel Levine – Neighborhood of Tomorrow

Imagining First Ward

And now a personal word,

In the movie *The Candidate*, Robert Redford plays a young lawyer running for the US Senate against an older, well-funded incumbent. Redford has no chance to win, so he feels free to say exactly what he wants. He starts rising in the polls. Before long, Redford wins the race. In the last scene, Redford, stunned that he actually won, turns to his political consultant and delivers the line, “What do we do now?”

I thought of the movie as I listened to Daniel Levine. He spent years accumulating property in the center of the city of Charlotte. Over decades, Daniel pieced together over thirty acres of land in a part of the city that no one else was interested in. It took meticulous planning, patience, and dozens of transactions for him to tie together nine contiguous city blocks. Once he collected it, I imagine him asking, “What do we do now?”

Imagination is at the heart of real estate. I can only imagine what it’s like to own nine blocks of prime undeveloped land in the center of the city of Charlotte. In fact, I can only imagine it because I have imagined it nearly every day for eighteen years. That’s how long I have lived in First Ward. My home is just a few yards away from the many blocks of land that Daniel Levine owns. I have walked across his property a thousand times: the parking lots and grassy knolls and pebbled asphalt and sandlot fields. On all that undeveloped space, I have imagined townhomes and brownstones and high rises and campus buildings and bookstores. I have imagined restaurants and cafes and neighborhood pubs. I have imagined walkways and cobblestone streets. I have followed announcements of projects and wondered with neighbors when it all might come to pass. I imagine however long I have imagined it, Daniel Levine has imagined it far more. It’s his property, after all.

Right after college, when most young adults were balancing their checkbooks for the first time, Daniel started buying up derelict land in First Ward. As he noted, it was either a fool’s errand or visionary genius. As the center city of Charlotte has developed around his property, with museums and apartments and rapid transit, Daniel made the right bet. Now everyone else is waiting for him to build what they imagine on land he owns.

And Daniel Levine is building. We see First Ward Park, a lively four-acre green space and community gathering spot. We see the UNC Charlotte Center City Building, an architecturally distinct academic tower with a street-level bookstore, art gallery, and café. We see a 1,300-space parking deck that will be wrapped by eleven floors of steel and concrete framing for a 428-unit apartment complex with signature public art. We see demolition underway on another block that will soon become a thirty-three-story high-rise apartment building beside a six-story midrise apartment complex alongside a two-block market street of stores and shops and restaurants. All of it is exciting. All of it is to the credit of Daniel Levine.

Bill Gates famously said, “We always overestimate the change that will occur in the next two years and underestimate the change that will occur in the next ten.” In the year 2028, the land Daniel Levine owns today may be unrecognizable. It might be a fully realized neighborhood with people and pets and scooters and flying cars. Or no cars at all. Of course, I thought that ten years ago. So it’s more probable that it will be a partially realized neighborhood with room to imagine. I’ve learned to wait.

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