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Developers in Movieland



Charles S. Cohen in the screening room of the Cohen Media Group, which he founded. Mr. Cohen's other hat is president and chief executive of Cohen Brothers Realty Corporation.

JESSE DITTMAR FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

A few whose day job is putting up buildings have also, somehow, found their way into show business. And it's a labor of love.

By MICHELLE HIGGINS

When it comes to a second career, many people daydream about breaking into show business, including some well accustomed to white-knuckle drama and skin-of-the-teeth ventures: real estate tycoons.

Indeed, a few prominent New York developers have taken the fantasy to the next level, finding another outlet for their creativity with bold endeavors in the entertainment industry.

Charles S. Cohen, the commercial real estate magnate, runs Cohen Media Group, a film distribution and production company that has released more than 15 foreign and indie films to theaters in the last year.

Peter Fine, a developer of affordable and market-rate housing, has had success as a Broadway producer, most notably for the Tony Award-winning musical "In the Heights," and has written a film treatment about a boxer from Brownsville, Brooklyn.

And the Brooklyn developer Douglas C. Steiner has made perhaps the biggest splash as the chairman of Steiner Studios, the largest film and TV production complex on the East Coast.

Whether to fulfill a lifelong passion, to satisfy a creative yen or simply because it's good business, each has found a way to pursue projects in both real estate and entertainment.

Charles S. Cohen

Mr. Cohen, 62, is the president and chief executive of the Cohen Brothers Realty Corporation, a commercial real estate firm with properties in New York, Florida, Texas and California.

It may have been destiny that drove Mr. Cohen into the family real estate business. He learned the ropes and eventually took over from his father, Sherman Cohen, who built the company with his two brothers.

But his first love was film.

"When the lights went out, everything on your mind would disappear and you'd be transported to another place," said Mr. Cohen.

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Cohen, who was hooked at age 3 when a grandmother took him to see "Cinderella." "I remember sitting through it twice."

When he was old enough, he would take the bus by himself from his home in Harrison, N.Y., to watch double features with friends at a movie theater in White Plains. "It was the first indication of being emancipated," he said.

In high school he wrote movie reviews for the school paper and created a short flick that won an honorable mention in the Kodak Teenage Movie Awards competition. As a student at Tufts University, he made a short film satirizing Bruce Lee that was shown on a New York-area cable channel. He went to law school with the goal of becoming an entertainment lawyer. But after graduating in 1977, he found the employment options in New York limited. "I really didn't have any contacts," he said. "I was pretty much shut out from going down that road."

Real estate, on the other hand, was in his blood. After getting his feet wet as an officer in Chemical Bank's real estate division from 1977 to 1979, Mr. Cohen joined the family business which, before it became a major player in commercial space, focused on residential high rises on the East Side of Manhattan.

Mr. Cohen acted as vice president and general counsel until 1983, when he was promoted to president. Under his leadership, the company's portfolio of three million square feet has grown to more than 12 million, with properties in New York, Texas, Florida and California.

All the while, he remained a film buff. In 1985 he wrote a movie quiz book called "TriviaMania." He built a movie theater in his mansion in Greenwich, Conn., modeled on the old Paramount in Times Square, complete with red velvet seats and ornate molding.



He didn't get into the business until a few years ago, when he invested in "Frozen River," the first feature film by Courtney Hunt, the wife of one of his lawyers. But even then he had his eye on the bottom line: He points out that he agreed to help finance the film only after production costs were slashed to about \$600,000 from the original \$2 million.

"I remember my mother saying, 'Why did you do this?'" said Mr. Cohen, who was named a lead executive producer on the project. "Maybe I had to get it out of my system."

"Frozen River" soon became an indie hit, winning the grand-jury prize for best American drama at the 2008 Sundance Film Festival. It was also nominated for two Oscars. "That was the beginning and the end for me," Mr. Cohen said.

In 2010 he formed Cohen Media Group and quickly found a niche in distributing French cinema in the United States. Last year the company released more than 15 films, including "Delicacy," starring Audrey Tautou; "Farewell My Queen," with Diane Kruger; and "Just Like a Woman," starring Sienna Miller. This year it plans to release about 10 more, including "Breathe In," coming out later this month from the writer-director Drake Doremus and starring Felicity Jones, Guy Pearce and Amy Ryan. Its subject is an English exchange student who shakes up the lives of her small-town host family in upstate New York. Last month, the company released "The Last of the Unjust," a documentary about the Holocaust directed by Claude Lanzmann; it was a New York Times Critics' Pick.

A few years ago, Mr. Cohen acquired the rights to the Raymond Rohauer Film Collection, a library of more than 700 classics with rights to the motion pictures of Buster Keaton, D.W. Griffith and others. His team is working on restoring and rereleasing them for the digital age. "I see it not as a hobby," Mr. Cohen said, "but a full-fledged business that continues to grow."

Peter Fine

Mr. Fine, 53, is the president of the Atlantic Development Group, one of New York's largest affordable-housing developers, which also has a growing portfolio of market-rate residential projects.

The youngest son of a cabdriver, Mr. Fine grew up in a public-housing project in Flushing, Queens. From his father, Robert, a Jewish immigrant from Russia, Mr. Fine said, he acquired a strong work ethic and an "individualistic perspective on life." His

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mother, Bette, the American-born daughter of immigrants from Eastern Europe, imparted a love of the arts, with impromptu salsa lessons in their living room. He carried those influences into adulthood, though it was the people he met along his circuitous path who ultimately took him to Broadway.

Mr. Fine received a master's degree in sociology in 1986 from New York University and also pursued a doctorate there; his unfinished dissertation was on Jewish immigration to Brownsville and East New York. He began working with the city's burgeoning homeless population and saw firsthand the dire need for housing that also provides services for the elderly, mentally ill and those battling drug addictions.

In 1995 he and Marc Altheim founded the Atlantic Development Group, focusing on subsidized housing in the Bronx. Since then the group has developed about 60 affordable projects — roughly 7,000 units in the five boroughs and Westchester County. The company also creates market-rate housing, including luxury buildings like 2 Cooper Square, which pushed rents to new heights when it opened in 2010 in NoHo.

Despite his success, Mr. Fine didn't forget where he came from or those impromptu dance lessons in the living room. So when the opportunity arose in 2008 to ease the path to Broadway for "In the Heights," a musical about the Latino community in Washington Heights, it made sense to Mr. Fine to invest in the production.

The show was the brainchild of Lin-Manuel Miranda, the son of Luis Miranda, a political consultant whom Mr. Fine had met through his endeavors in affordable housing. The story line struck a particularly close chord for a Jewish boy from the projects who grew up listening to mambo and salsa. "It was a very aspirational story about people immigrating to New York and trying to make it," he said. "You know, all the frustration and all the energy and hope that goes into that. It didn't matter that it was a story about Latinos. It's the same story for Jews, blacks, Italians, Latinos. It seemed to me to be a very prototypical New York story combined with amazing music."

The show opened on Broadway in March 2008 and won four Tony Awards, including best musical.

Soon afterward, Mr. Fine became an investor in the 2009 Broadway revival of "West Side Story," for which Mr. Miranda translated some of Stephen Sondheim's lyrics into Spanish. "To me it was a fantasy," said Mr. Fine, recalling the annual television airing of the 1961 film. "If you were a kid in New York you had to watch the movie, and then you went out and everyone play-acted and had fake fights and stuff — who were the Jets and who were the Sharks? — so to have the opportunity to invest in that was a thrill."

Mr. Fine also helped produce "Irena's Vow," a Broadway play based on a true story about a young Polish woman who risked her life to save 12 Jews during World War II in German-occupied Poland.

"I'm doing things from a sense of passion," Mr. Fine said. "That is the common denominator, whether it's affordable housing or a high-design luxury product or a musical that I love or a story that I'm deeply attached to. It's all the same thing to me."

But his latest artistic pursuit is particularly personal. Inspired by his father's childhood stories about growing up in Brownsville in the Depression, he bought the rights to "Bummy Davis vs. Murder, Inc.: The Rise and Fall of the Jewish Mafia and an Ill-Fated Prizefighter" by Ron Ross (Macmillan, 2004). He has written a treatment, based on the book, that he hopes to turn into a screenplay.

"This is a passion play for me," said Mr. Fine, who learned Yiddish on visits to his grandparents in Brownsville on weekends. "When I was a kid, my father used to go back to take his haircuts underneath the elevated line on Livonia Avenue, and I used to go with him," he said, recalling how stories at the barbershop often included Mr. Davis. "He was like a hero, really, for that particular Jewish immigrant community," he said, noting that his father had boxed as a kid at Beecher's, the gym and pool hall at which Mr. Davis trained. For all those reasons, he said, "it was very personal and very easy for me to imagine it as a movie."

But unlike his previous theatrical forays, in which his contribution was largely monetary, this one involves a more creative role, with Mr. Fine spending a couple of hours each morning on his film project before turning his attention back to real estate.

It is not lost on him that his chosen career has allowed him to pursue his passion. "I don't think I could get involved unless I was lucky enough to have some success in real estate," he said.

Douglas C. Steiner

Mr. Steiner, 53, is the president of the Steiner Equities Group in Roseland, N.J., which has developed retail, industrial and office space nationwide. He is also the chairman of Steiner NYC, the company's New York City arm, with upcoming projects in Manhattan and Brooklyn, in-

cluding the Hub, an amenity-laden 720-unit rental going up in Downtown Brooklyn.

Mr. Steiner did not grow up dancing salsa in the living room. Sure, he saw plenty of movies as a kid, but he couldn't tell you their titles. He wanted to be a novelist. But after graduating from Stanford University with a degree in creative writing, he realized it wasn't his calling after all. "I figured out I like to read," he said. "I don't like to write. Writing is torture."

Instead he went into the family real estate business, working with his father, David S. Steiner, a commercial developer. In 1999 their company, Steiner Equities, along with partners, beat competitors including Robert De Niro for the rights to develop Hollywood-style sound stages at the Brooklyn Navy Yard.

"I'm very tenacious," said Mr. Steiner, who had no experience in the movie industry at the time and hadn't yet developed anything outside of New Jersey. "A lot of people in the city took a chance on me, because I wasn't in the business and I shook hands with them and I told them if they supported me, I wouldn't let them down. I'd do the project."

Steiner Studios opened in 2004 on 15 acres of the Brooklyn Navy Yard, which abuts the East River and offers stunning Manhattan views. Created for the production of movies, television shows, videos and commercials, the campus has grown to 26 acres with 10 sound stages, a 100-seat screening room and a cafe named after Mr. Steiner's daughter, Isabel, now 18.

"I'm basically in the hospitality industry for a very particular industry — very particular," Mr. Steiner said. "I see it as our mission, not only to make New York easy to work in for film and TV — eliminating all the obstacles that traditionally were here — but also to build a community, a place that lets people do their thing and they like working at."

A self-described "control freak," Mr. Steiner, who keeps the temperature in his office at a chilly 63 degrees year-round, is obsessive about branding. He has worked hard to cultivate a "cool" factor through strategic design, from restoring and lighting a pair of World War II radio towers atop the 1941 Art Deco building at the studio entrance to making the invitations for the annual holiday party. "I like designing things," he said, "and I have my own taste and style — other than my clothes." He gestured toward his striped button-down

shirt, khakis and hiking boots. "You can verify that with my daughter."

Navigating his BMW S.U.V. the other day along an unpaved path in the abandoned Navy hospital annex, adjacent to the studios, Mr. Steiner paused to take in the ghostly snow-covered landscape. Working with the state, he plans to transform the historic and hauntingly derelict 20 acres of old Greek Revival mansions and crumbling cottages into a high-tech media and film hub. The \$400 million plan, which he estimates could take 12 years to complete, includes an underwater stage and the restoration of the 1838 marble Naval hospital.

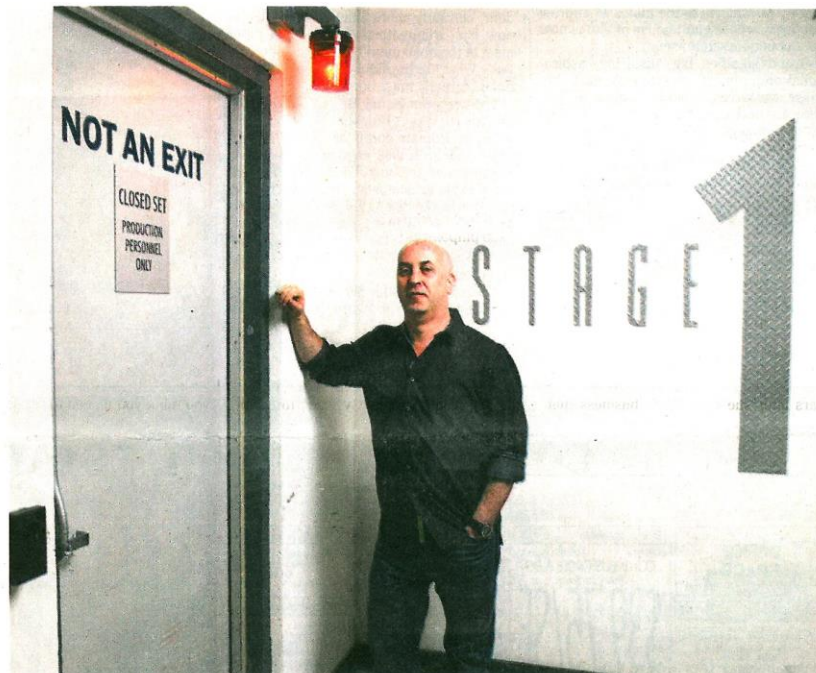
It was this neglected and yet picturesque corner of the Brooklyn Navy Yard that inspired Mr. Steiner's master plan. He envisioned a movie studio the minute he set foot on the Naval Annex Historic Campus more than a decade ago, when it resembled "what Sarajevo probably looked like."

"People said: 'You're crazy to do this in Brooklyn. No one will ever go to Brooklyn,'" he recalled. "I can't tell you how many times I heard that. Luckily, they did."

Steiner Studios has played host to numerous stars — Brad Pitt and George Clooney ("Burn After Reading"); Kate Winslet ("Mildred Pierce"); Lena Dunham (the second season of "Girls"); and Will Smith ("Men in Black 3") among them. But if hobnobbing with celebrities has rubbed off on him in any way, you wouldn't know it. When it comes to marquee names and the shows being filmed at the studios, he is tight-lipped. By contrast, he is a great fan of the craftspeople who toil behind the scenes.

Walking at a brisk pace across the vast Steiner Studios campus, he escorted a reporter and a publicist up 45-foot-high catwalks, past various backdrops and through elaborate sets for hits like HBO's "Boardwalk Empire." He exuded a mix of pride and reverence at the creative work going on around him, pausing every now and then to say hello to a carpenter, props maker or costume designer, or to inquire how things were going.

"This is why I have such a fun job," he said as he stood in front of a lifelike nightclub set. "I really like being surrounded by creative people. There's a vibe that's indescribable. I like to come to work almost every day."



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