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## New Front-Runner On Front Street

Greenwich  
Developer  
Sees 'Social  
Goals' And  
A Good  
Business  
Opportunity

By **MIKE SWIFT**  
COURANT STAFF WRITER

Thirty-six years ago, Yale University graduate Bradley Nitkin won an award given to a member of the Class of 1969 expected to follow a career in public service, and set out with the rest of his generation to change the world.

Several careers later, the 58-year-old Greenwich real estate developer stood alone this year at the plot of land that was supposed to be a lynchpin to the future of America's second-poorest city. On a March morning, Brad Nitkin had driven up to Hartford to take a look at a business opportunity the state of Connecticut was shopping to developers: To build the shopping, entertainment and housing district at Adriaen's Landing.

As he walked the empty lot between the Connecticut Convention Center and the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Nitkin said he had "an epiphany."

He could do this. And in so doing, he could unite several threads of his life: the Eagle Scout who attended Yale on an academic scholarship and set out to make a better world; the lawyer who built his own real estate company after learning real estate through his law practice, rather than having the knowledge and connections handed down from his family; the developer with a passion for vibrant urban places and a relationship with one of America's foremost

architects.

Nitkin said he pulled out his cellphone and called his office as soon as he got back to his car. "I want to do this project," he told them in Greenwich.

Four months later, Nitkin has emerged as the third - and possibly, the last - developer in the state's tortured five-year search for a private-sector partner who could build the housing, shops, restaurants and entertainment attractions at Adriaen's Landing.

A year after the state ejected Richard Cohen, the second developer it had tapped to build the "Front Street" district, Nitkin and state officials hope to execute an agreement by the end of the summer that would give the Greenwich developer the reins to the \$150 million project.

"A lot of the things I've done in my life have prepared me for this," Nitkin said last week in his first extensive interview on his plans in Hartford. "It fits in with so many of my social goals."

Listening to a developer talk about his social goals might sound a bit like a wolf trying to sell you on the ecological benefits of predation. But Nitkin doesn't deny that he intends to make money in Hartford. As a developer whose company is in the middle of a \$100 million-plus development project in the center of Greenwich with celebrated architect Robert A.M. Stern, Nitkin says there are many places he could make money.

The place he says he is passionate about

doing that is Hartford, in part because of the impact that he believes a successful Front Street could have on such a beleaguered city.

"There are so many strands in my life, all of which come together in this project," Nitkin said. "I've made the commitment to the state that I will be personally involved in all aspects of this project. I think this is the sort of project you can't do halfway."

The developer also is exploring the possibility of building at least 200 owner-occupied condominiums, instead of rental apartments as Cohen had planned. Nitkin also says he's negotiating with several local television stations about building a "Today" show-type studio in the center of the district that could be a base for local telecasts as well as a public attraction.

ESPN is still planning to build an entertainment attraction as part of the Front Street district, and some details of the television sports network's plans have begun to emerge.

"The ESPN Experience" is the working title for an attraction that would combine elements of a sports hall of fame with interactive electronic games. "It's something like a sports museum and an interactive experience, where you get to see sports historical memorabilia on display, but you also get to interact with different kinds of displays," Nitkin said.

Mayor Eddie A. Perez said he likes what he has heard from Nitkin, especially the

# Is Third Time The Charm For Front Street?

developer's interest in building condominiums instead of apartments. The city controls federal loan money and a property tax deal, financing crucial to the project's success.

"Everything I've talked to him about is right on the money," Perez said. "Those [loans and tax deals] are things that are on the table, and they are more on the table with a guy like this who's talking my music. We're [singing] off the same music sheet."

## Strengths And Weaknesses

A look at the experience and record of HB Nitkin would give anyone handicapping Nitkin's chance of pulling off the project reason for optimism, as well as concern. Many real estate experts say urban projects that mix residential, shopping, restaurants and entertainment on one site are among the toughest development challenges.

They are difficult to engineer because of the physical density of the site, which also must incorporate multiple uses. They are difficult to finance because lenders are used to financing one type of project, such as retail or residential, but rarely finance a single project that mixes both. But where they have been completed, in Bethesda, Md., and Arlington, Va., they have been successful.

The state struck out, however, in trying to attract developers who have built those projects to Hartford.

"That would worry me," said Michael Beyard, a senior resident fellow with the Urban Land Institute in Washington, D.C., an information clearinghouse for the real estate industry. "It tells me that there is a risk here that the city and state are not recognizing, to the extent that they may have to kick in more to make it happen. ... This is not like building in West Hartford. [Downtown Hartford] is not a proven location at this point."

HB Nitkin, which specializes in breathing life into tired suburban shopping centers, something it has done successfully for two centers in Cromwell, has never built that type of complex, mixed-use project in a city.

"He hasn't done that kind of project. There aren't a whole bunch of developers who have, frankly," said John F. Palmieri, the city's director of development services.

But what has impressed city and state officials and other local observers most about Nitkin is the team the developer has assembled, including Stern's highly prestigious New York City architectural firm. Stern is also dean of the Yale School of Architecture.



**BRADLEY NITKIN**, a developer based in Greenwich, stands on the "Front Street" site with the Connecticut Convention Center, right, and the new Marriott, left, in the background. Nitkin hopes to become the project's developer, bringing a mix of shopping, entertainment and housing to Hartford's downtown.

"I'd like to think if anybody can make this happen, [Nitkin] can," Palmieri said. "He has collected the people who really understand these issues. I think that's what we see: a well-balanced team of professionals to work with them to ensure that he can do this."

## The Plan

Although the convention center is now open, the Front Street site still felt very much like a construction zone last week. Workers were completing the first parking garage on the site, while across Columbus Boulevard at the convention center's new hotel, crews had placed "A-R-R-I-O" in large red letters, on the way to spelling "Marriott" on the hotel, which will open this summer.

Nitkin says he has already flown a prominent national retailer to the site at his expense to sell it on the city and the project. He says he is now in negotiations with that "drop-dead" national retailer - he would not disclose the company - for a prime slot fronting on Columbus Boulevard.

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**BRADLEY NITKIN**  
DEVELOPER

"As soon as they saw Hartford and saw Adriaen's Landing, they said they wanted to be part of that project," Nitkin said. "The problem was getting them to come."

He said he would even charter a private jet to bring prospective tenants to the site because he is so confident that once retailers see the projects in downtown Hartford, they will be sold on the city.

Nitkin declines to give specifics of his

shopping and entertainment district will be, although he said "Front Street" is definitely in the running.

## Life Strands

One of the reasons Nitkin said he got into real estate was because he wanted to make places, in addition to making money.

"I sort of felt that in real estate you could really have an impact on how people live, and affect people's environments," Nitkin said. "I think what we're going to be doing in Hartford is to create a genuine and authentic place."

When Nitkin left Yale, after attending classes with George W. Bush and other leaders in the first wave of the baby-boom generation, his professors told him that their generation would shape the nation's future. Nitkin believed it.

Nitkin left New Haven for West Los Angeles, where he worked for a Great Society anti-poverty agency as part of his service to VISTA - Volunteers in Service to America - the domestic equivalent of the Peace Corps. Nitkin also worked for New York City Mayor John V. Lindsay and on the staff of Ogden Reid, a congressman from New York State.

But Nitkin ultimately left public service, going to law school and specializing in tax and real estate law. He and his wife, Helen, a former commercial real estate broker in New York City, founded HB Nitkin in the mid-1980s.

In recent years, the Nitkins' philanthropy has benefited Greenwich Hospital, Outward Bound, the Yale architecture school and other organizations. Brad Nitkin also serves on the executive board of the Greenwich council of the Boy Scouts of America.

Ultimately, Nitkin's social goals will have little to do with whether the Hartford project flies or crashes.

One person who will need to work closely with Nitkin, Wadsworth Atheneum director Willard Holmes, said he hopes that Nitkin will be every bit the tough and mercenary businessman that Cohen was, because the project demands it. Holmes said he is optimistic that in the state's third courtship with a developer, it may finally have found a match, especially because Stern's firm is involved.

"I have a lot of respect for Richard Cohen and I have a lot of respect for Brad Nitkin," Holmes said. "I think in a funny kind of way, [Nitkin] might be the right person at the right time, rather than [as Cohen was] the right person at the wrong time."

plan, but he says he has been sounding out Hartford political, neighborhood and institutional leaders about what they would like to see at Front Street, as well as traveling to major real estate conventions to pitch the project to tenants and brokers.

Nitkin's retail experience is his company's greatest strength, say state and city officials. Nitkin has submitted a list of "representative national and retail tenants" to the state that includes many household names: Lilly Pulitzer, Jos. A. Bank, J. Crew, Chico's and Talbot's, Maggie Moos ice cream, P.F. Chang, Bertucci's, Starbucks, Borders books and Smith & Hawken.

That doesn't mean that any of those retailers are coming to Hartford.

"This is reflective of the type of people we do business with," Nitkin said. "Some of the people are people we would be bringing this project to. But I'm not saying these specifically are the tenants we would want to bring to Hartford."

One thing Nitkin said he doesn't know yet is what the formal name for the housing,

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