

# Meeting the triple bottom line

By: [Joe Nathanson](#) February 15, 2018



Just north of Penn Station and the Amtrak parking lot on Lanvale Street is the soon-to-be-opened Nelson-Kohl building. This eight-story structure will contain 103 market-rate apartment units and space for two ground-floor retail outlets. Other amenities at the Nelson-Kohl, the largest new residential development in the Station North Arts and Entertainment District, will include a community room, a fitness center and an art gallery. A rooftop deck will afford the opportunity to observe all the other changes slated for the neighborhood, including the planned redevelopment of the Penn Station complex.

Around the corner on Charles Street, nestled between the Pen and Quill restaurant and the Charles Theatre, are the local offices of SA&A Development and EVI. In the lobby of the building, among a number of other exhibits, is a plaque with this inscription: “Baltimore-based Ernst Valery Investment Corp. (EVI) is a mission-driven development firm committed to investing in communities without displacement.”

Not long ago, I had a chance to interview Ernst Valery. Dressed casually, wearing his Cornell University sweatshirt, he was ready to answer some basic questions about his development projects in Baltimore and how he found his way here in the first place. Valery arrived in the U.S. as a child with his parents from Haiti and grew up in Nyack in New York’s Hudson Valley. He studied urban and regional planning at Cornell, where he also earned a master’s degree in policy analysis and public administration. After dipping his toes in the development field, he returned to academia, receiving a second master’s from Columbia University’s program in real estate development.

Prior to settling in Baltimore, Valery had worked in New York, Pennsylvania and Washington. His development activities over the past decade had consisted of a variety of projects, ranging from multi-tenant rental properties, single-family renovations and condominium conversions.

I had actually met him a few months earlier at a meeting in which he articulated his views on an innovative approach to urban development. On the earlier occasion, he was interested in explaining his Real Estate Developer Index (REDI), which he describes as a values-based approach whereby investors, concerned community members and other stakeholders can evaluate a development company and its principals.

At the heart of REDI is a set of metrics organized around the principles of transparency and accountability; sustainability and design; and community engagement and empowerment. Valery would describe the REDI primarily as a tool for communities to rate urban developers.

When I first heard about REDI, I suggested that it seemed analogous to the LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) system, the now widely accepted green building rating system. Valery would agree. When approaching a development project, the developer should be able to satisfy the triple bottom line: a project has to be economically viable, environmentally responsible and generate a positive social impact.

REDI or something similar is not part of standard practice. It's not a standard part of the curriculum in graduate planning and real estate programs, nor is it typically part of the public sector's Request for Proposals process. Valery would like to change that. In addition to pursuing his own development projects, he finds time to head up to Cambridge, MA and collaborate with MIT's Community Innovators Laboratory (Co-Lab). As a research affiliate of the lab, he is involved in formulating strategies for equitable and inclusive economic development.

Ernst Valery is one of a number of young, community-minded developers with Baltimore ties intent on making a positive impact on local communities. His REDI materials cite Seawall Development, busy transforming the Remington community. Seawall, founded by Donald Manekin, is now led by his son, Thibault and partners.

Another is Greg Heller, formerly the CEO of the Baltimore-based nonprofit development corporation American Communities Trust, the entity creating the Baltimore Food Hub in East Baltimore. Heller is now serving as executive director of the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority, where he continues to work at the intersection of urban development and positive social impact.

"PRA's mission is to return publicly owned land to active use in a way that benefits people and communities," Heller wrote in an email. "Scoring projects in part based on their social impact is a way of making sure that we are fulfilling that mission and our responsibility to the public."

The Nelson-Kohl development, which should be gaining its first residents next month, is named after two of Ernst Valery's mentors who were urban renewal experts, Mary Nelson and Ben Kohl, his professor at Cornell. The Nelson-Kohl development will now be a test of how well this new investment adds positively to the community fabric of the still-transforming Station North district.

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