

‘Philadelphia’s best kept secret in real estate development.’

No one would ever confuse Alon Barzilay with the shy guy in the corner. He’s garrulous and confident; a bit of a renaissance man. While the motor scooter-loving Barzilay’s main passion is “adaptive reuse,” taking old industrial buildings and breathing new life and use into them, he can sometimes be found in the pilot’s seat of a helicopter. He also dabbles in the motion picture business and went to school with Bradley Cooper and Jack Klugman’s nephew, actor Brian Klugman.

What attracts investors to Barzilay Development? Barzilay Development is Philadelphia’s best kept secret in real estate development. Until recently, I have flown under the radar, quietly developing unusual midscale adaptive reuse projects with strong returns for investors that happen to be “in the know.” Now that some of my Philadelphia-based projects, such as Sanctuary Lofts are receiving national recognition, the industry and new investors are starting to take notice.

Have you had many investors? I have had around 42 different investors over the years that started out as friends and family and friends of friends and eventually third-party professional investors. In the beginning, many of my investors were fellow young professionals, but as the company grew, it found a niche for seasoned doctors and lawyers, high-net-worth families, and many other retired CEOs and large scale entrepreneurs who gravitated to the company’s business model.

What kind of projects do you like to do best? While I can certainly grow and develop much larger scale projects, my investors and I prefer these boutique projects for a variety of reasons. I typically only create one or two new developments every few years, so that they command all of my attention, which is a key to being successful. While other companies grow rapidly, the use of unique projects are as much an art as they are a science. The attention to detail that is required with zoning approvals, design, construction, finance, marketing, and leasing, while it may be a labor of love, still requires a lot of work.

How long before investors see a return usually? Often within a two-year period, investors see tangible results, as buildings are built and leased up. While we may choose to maximize our earnings by holding on to properties making annual financial distributions, we typically sell in a five- to seven-year period, allowing investors to double or triple their money.

It’s easy to invest from your couch these days, why invest in Philly projects? These days when someone could easily press a button on an iPhone and use the E-Trade app to buy an overseas tech stock, I think it speaks volumes when local investors want their money to go towards improving our hometown.

What makes Barzilay Development Group unique? I usually get around town on a double head-lighted Honda Ruckus motor scooter. It looks like the offspring of a Harley and a Hummer, and could easily eat a Vespa for breakfast! I outfitted our leasing and maintenance staff with bright red ones (staying on brand with Red Door Residential — the property management arm of our firm) so they can quickly zip through the city to take care of customer needs. At 100mpg, I think “green” both for the environment and for saving money.



Let's get more personal. In the movie about your life, what actor would play you? My personality and appearance have been compared to a few actors over the years. In fact, one of those is Jonathan Silverman, who happens to be in the movie that I am an executive producer of. Contrary to my friends' and family's opinions, I have always envisioned Robert Downey Jr. playing myself in a movie about my life. I have forever been fond of his films and character role choices. His intensity and passion for his career transcribes into my life as well. Similarly to Robert, we are both Jewish, movie producers, and accomplished musicians.

What are your favorite movies? Appropriately, my favorite movie would have to be the superhero series — Iron Man. Not only does it star Robert Downey Jr., but Robert's character, Tony Stark, and Stark's overall life in the movie is the perfect depiction of my life as an entrepreneur and innovator. Oddly enough, my last name, "Barzilay," even translates to "Man of Iron" in Hebrew.

Where do you go out to eat? I love these emerging fun and eclectic restaurants that are popping up in the neighborhoods near my loft projects, anywhere from the South of South Street in the Graduate Hospital area to the Northern Liberties and Manayunk. I find them more interesting than big chain restaurants.

Another interesting item of note, you're a helicopter pilot? For many years, I have been active in EO (Entrepreneurs' Organization), which is a national group with an 80-member Philadelphia chapter. When my fellow entrepreneur friend, Joe Awe, challenged my forum subset group to make "bucket list" of all of the things that we wanted to experience in life, among the list, I jotted down learning how to fly a helicopter.

At the end of the exercise, Joe asked me why I'm waiting to do it! After my best friend Tracy gave me a little push with a birthday gift of a first lesson, I was hooked.

Flying a helicopter is a lot like juggling chainsaws while balancing on a beach ball. It is extremely technical and requires equal parts of bravery and finesse.

As an entrepreneur, I think about my real estate development companies in every waking hour. The only time that I can get away from it all is when I am 1,400 feet up in the air. I even incorporate flying the helicopter into the business by creating aerial videos of new projects and even film the interiors of my loft projects with my toy helicopter video drone, which I control manually through my iPhone.