

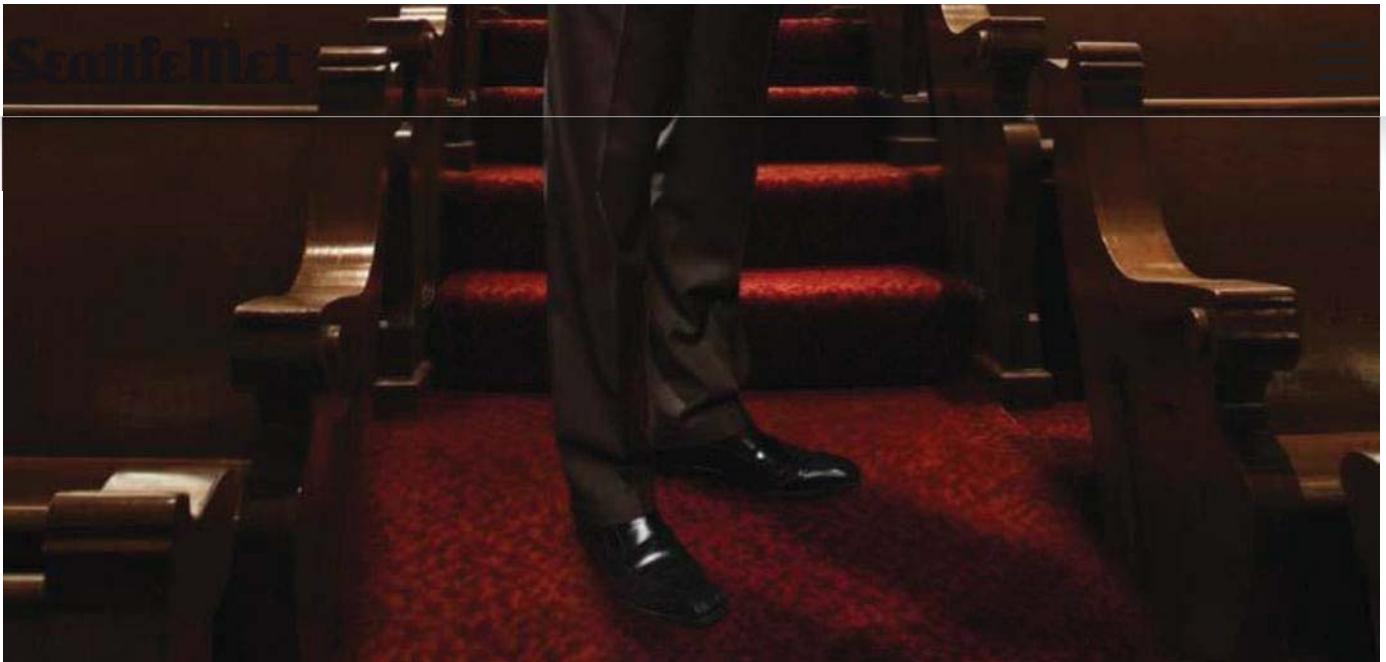
ARTICLE

A Higher Calling

For Kevin Daniels, saving historic treasures means building new—and big.

By [Eric Scigliano](#) • Published Thursday, February 18, 2010 at 4:02am •





Eleventh-hour deal No wrecking balls for First United Methodist.

KEVIN DANIELS'S CAREER began like an old blues song, with the lonesome wail of a passing train. Daniels grew up in the rail and sugar-beet crossroads of Nampa, Idaho. His grandfather and, briefly, his father worked in the railyard; and Daniels loved the old steam engines, so evocative of both faraway places and distant days. He escaped Nampa in the usual way, first to Spokane, “which seemed like the big city,” and where he attended Gonzaga. “And then, like everyone, I came to the big city.” Seattle.

Daniels took up a safe, steady career: accounting. He discovered that accountants learn a lot about other businesses—including commercial real estate. He started working as an accountant for the New York property firm Nitze-Stagen and Co., whose cofounder Frank Stagen came west to scout property here in 1984, just as Seattle was emerging from another slump, and soon crossed over to the practitioner side.

In 1990, Nitze-Stagen landed a big fish: renovating Sears, Roebuck's mammoth distribution center at First and Lander, the second-biggest building in the state. Stagen, Daniels, and company buffed the old behemoth to a shine, dubbed it SoDo Center, and gave Starbucks a corporate home and the heretofore anonymous neighborhood a name.

Daniels had found not just his calling as a developer but a passion for preservation that

constructed (i.e., “pre-1950”) buildings that have many decades more useful life in them—not to mention their aesthetic and communal values. “It takes 65 years for a LEED Platinum building replacing a 1920 building to break even in carbon footprint,” he explains. “They’re replacing wood windows that could last 100 years with vinyl windows that last 10 or 15 and then are toxic waste.”

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Daniels became Nitze-Stagen’s president in 1997 and got the chance to follow his bliss and honor the steam engines of his childhood by restoring the opulent, long-neglected Union and King Street stations. Nitze-Stagen also partnered with Paul Allen to build a new office complex at Union Station.

In 2007, Stagen handed the development reins to Daniels, spinning off a new firm, Daniels Development, to undertake new projects. The idea, says Stagen: Give the next generation “a chance to own something.”


That same year, Daniels Development emerged as a civic white knight when it struck an eleventh-hour deal to save downtown’s last landmark church, First United Methodist, from demolition, funded by a slim office tower to go up beside the church. “Building a downtown high-rise wasn’t of interest to us,” says Daniels. “Saving the church was.” But then the high-rise, at Fifth and Columbia, took on a higher purpose as well—nothing less than a chance “to change the design character downtown.” Indeed, if it goes up as designed when the finance spigots come back on, its swooping diagonal forms will make Seattle’s current boxy skyscrapers look, literally, square. Imagine the Koolhaas library stretched out to 43 stories.

Daniels is also taking on another big project that’s eluded other developers: a 1.5-million-

Seattle's perennially troubled legacy district: "Pioneer Square needs a lot more residential to make it truly livable."

Once again, this developer sounds more like a crusader. "I consider myself a community activist," he admits. "Fortunately, I'm not just expected to show returns. Or, I should say, the returns aren't just monetary."

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