

Aspen developer looks back at successes, challenges as W Aspen Hotel opens

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John Sarpa's ability to navigate three luxury properties at the base of Aspen Mountain in the past 30-plus years got its foundation from his involvement in the Middle East peace treaty process during the Carter administration then being part of a group that out-maneuvered Donald Trump for 120 acres of prime Aspen real estate.

But it is the guiding principle of the Aspen Idea that Sarpa has relied on as the basis for what he's done since becoming immersed in Aspen in 1984.

The former director of Middle Eastern affairs for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce has helped develop more than 750,000 square feet around Aspen, and the latest is this week's opening of the W Aspen Hotel at the base of the mountain.

With that amount of development, Sarpa, who has been the face of several partnerships, LLCs and organizations throughout the years, has his detractors.

His critics are part of a group that favors slow and smart growth, and didn't always agree with what he and his development groups proposed.

But as former Aspen mayor Mick Ireland recently surmised, it's better to have someone like Sarpa than an outsider coming in. He compared it to having the ski areas run by a family-owned company, the Aspen Skiing Co., rather a private equity firm.

"He is certainly aware of what the community wants," Ireland said.

Whether one agrees with the projects, it's hard to argue that Sarpa, 68, isn't a likeable guy, which is a driving force in what's he's gotten accomplished.

Over the past 35 years, he's been instrumental in securing approvals for hundreds of new hotel rooms at the base of Aspen Mountain, as well as the preservation of the Aspen Meadows campus, and the cultural and intellectual nonprofits that reside there.

"He's very tenacious and he doesn't give up easily," said former Aspen mayor Bill Stirling, who was in office in the '80s and '90s during the controversial Ritz Carlton project (now the St. Regis) that Sarpa was the face of.

Representing Mohamed Hadid and the Washington D.C.-based Savannah Limited Partnership, the group Sarpa was involved in was primarily interested in the property where the St. Regis now sits. But they also had acquired 80 acres at the Aspen Meadows.

The Savannah group had snagged a creditor's rights to several properties that were in foreclosure — beating Trump, who had a contract to buy the land from the bank that was repossessing it.

"The Meadows is a whole lot more than buildings. ... It has a deep intellectual and cultural background and importance to people all over the country and world, and I had no clue about any of it," said Sarpa, reflecting on his introduction to the Aspen Idea.

It's the concept of integration of body, mind and spirit — the nurturing of the whole person first envisioned by Chicago industrialist Walter Paepcke, who is responsible for the town's renaissance in the 1940s.

The new W Aspen hotel and The Sky Residences at W Aspen, set to open Thursday, pays homage to the Aspen Idea and Paepcke.

Sarpa, co-developer of the W Aspen and investor in Washington, D.C.-based Northridge Capital, received approval to build the new 88-room hotel and 11 free-market fractional condos at the foot of Aspen Mountain in 2015.

BUMPS ALONG THE ROAD

The public hearing and approval process in front of Aspen City Council to replace what was the Sky Hotel was a cakewalk compared to some of the other projects Sarpa and his partners floated to the community.

And no matter how many millions of dollars or years of work spent on failed and successful projects, Sarpa remained calm and collected.

“Listening to people was a skill I was taught early on. ... You can either sit in that hot seat or not, and not lose your temper,” Sarpa said. “It was easy to listen even though I was screaming at someone in my head.”

That was likely happening Jan. 14, 2009, when then-mayor Ireland, who was part of a 27-member citizen task force called a COWOP, otherwise known as a “Convenience and Welfare of the Public” committee, ultimately voted against Sarpa and his partners’ Lodge at Aspen Mountain proposal.

For 30 weeks, committee members hammered out details of the Lift One Master Plan along South Aspen Street. The committee unanimously voted to recommend it to City Council for approval.

Ireland, who was up for re-election that May, was the swing vote and voted “no” because of concerns of parking and traffic.

Much like this year’s voter-approved but developer-abandoned Lift One plan, Centurion Partners’ 2009 proposal had nearly 300,000 square feet of residential and commercial space along South Aspen Street.

Sarpa, a partner in Centurion Partners, and Bob Daniel, representing Roaring Fork Mountain Lodge-Aspen LLC, were the two developers individually proposing two hotels, affordable housing, restaurants, retail space and public amenities on an 8-acre site in what’s known as the Lift One neighborhood.

Sarpa said his biggest lesson learned thus far came from that project and that process.

“When you have something that has gone that wrong, you can learn from it and I did,” he said. “I learned to be even more cautious on process and be more cautious about people who say one thing and do another.

ASPEN POLITICS 101

Sarpa’s first real foray into Aspen politics was in the mid-1980s. The Ritz Carlton hotel project went through a controversial City Council vote, only to be overruled by a district court judge and then approved by voters in 1990.

Sarpa and Hadid were viewed as outside developers who were here to make a buck and leave.

“It takes a long time for folks to get to know you, to test you,” Sarpa said. “Are you a person of your word? Are you going to do what you say? I was certainly tested on that.

“But I also think me and my partners understood the broader community interest.”

Well, maybe not at first, at least architecturally.

Alan Richman had just been named planning director when detailed plans were submitted for the Ritz.

They were less than ideal — Richman put it mildly — and told Sarpa and his team it would never fly.

“To his credit, he significantly reworked the plan and came in with something completely different,” Richman said. “It’s virtually exactly what we are looking at today.”

THE ART OF RELATIONSHIPS

Chris Bendon, who worked in the city’s planning office during the COWOP and W Aspen processes, said Sarpa was easy to work with because he understood the score even if he didn’t like what he was hearing.

“Being at the city for 19 years, I saw a lot of strategies (from developers) including steamrolling staff,” Bendon said. “But with John it’s very comfortable.”

Sarpa, who moved to Aspen in 1995, said that is a necessity if you are going to be a developer and live here.

“If you are in a small community doing major impactful things you really do have to listen,” he said, “because the kind of projects I’ve been involved with were huge — more so than New York, Chicago or LA. It’s because of that difference, and you can’t be here for very long without caring about the place.

“I want it to be better and more interesting and environmentally healthier and all the things you need for a sustainable community.”

R.J. Gallagher is a longtime friend, business associate and partner of Sarpa’s and has collaborated on some of the most iconic property developments in Aspen.

They include the Residences at The Little Nell, the Ritz-Carlton Hotel, The Grand Hyatt Aspen, the Aspen Meadows, W Aspen and the Sky Residences at W Aspen.

“We have literally seen it and been through it all together ... the good, the bad and the ugly,” said Gallagher, who is the founder of the marketing and sales firm Forte. “It’s been luck, timing, the passion and the commitment to the backyard.”

Sarpa said it’s been key to go to the neighbors to get their buy-in before getting too far down the road.

His resiliency was tested, former mayor Stirling said, during the Ritz controversy.

“We worked him over pretty hard,” he said. “You have to hand it to Sarpa for his staying power.”