

Martin Selig: Maverick Developer

This Seattle-based businessman has developed not only prime real estate but also his own way of getting the job done.



by Adam Woog

The skyscraper can be seen from every part of Seattle, poking its slender head over the city's hills and towering above the buildings around it. Hikers in the distant Olympic Mountains regularly spot its reflective black curves, visible with the naked eye as it dominates the far-off cityscape.

It has been called "incredibly vigorous," "wildly out of scale," and "a discredit to downtown." Mostly, though, it's been the subject of left-handed compliments: One prominent local architect said, "At least it's not a

box," and *New York Times* architecture critic Paul Goldberger, having declared it "unique," went on to say that "it seems to me to be a well-meaning, second-rate building."

The building in question is the 76-story Seafirst Columbia Center, the eighth tallest building in the world and the highest structure west of Chicago and north of Houston. It literally outshadows the rest of the Seattle skyline, and it neatly symbolizes the rapid growth the city has seen in recent years. Just as the Space Needle was emblematic of the futuristic, 21st-century ideas behind the 1962 World's Fair, so the slender black tower represents Seattle's transformation, 25



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years later, into a major urban center.

In the opinion of many Seattle residents, the building is also a monument to — and synonymous with — the man who built it: developer Martin Selig. Mr. Selig has become, in a remarkably short time, a major force in the fiercely competitive world of Seattle commercial development. Since 1963, he has averaged about one new office building a year; he owns roughly one-third of Seattle's downtown business space, and he controls significant pieces of property in other parts of the city. The Seafirst building is just one of the many Selig structures, with their trademark dark windows and reflective mirrored glass, that have radically altered the shape of Seattle.

Mr. Selig, like his buildings, arouses strong emotions. His image is contradictory: To some he's a maverick, a ruthless loner who runs roughshod over anything blocking his way, an outsider unresponsive to the needs of the business community and the city. To others he's a highly religious, devoted family man; a no-nonsense straight shooter; a generous but anonymous donor to charity.

As often as he draws fire from them, Mr. Selig elicits grudging respect from his fellow developers, architects, planners, community activists, and politicians. As *Seattle Times* reporter Don Duncan puts it, "The only thing upon which booster and critic totally agree is that Selig's parents, Manfred and Laura, did not raise a dumb kid."

Mr. Selig was born in Germany in 1936. Three years later, he and his parents, fleeing Hitler's regime, were bound for San Francisco via the Trans-Siberian Railroad and Japan. "The ship stopped in Seattle," he says. "My parents got off and looked around. It was a very nice day. They didn't bother getting back on the ship."

Settling in their new home, the Seligs started a small children's-wear shop; young Martin attended Seattle public schools, the University of Washington, and the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business. Classmates remember him as a hard-working student, a football player, an inveterate practical joker. His original goal was law school, but very early on — while still a college senior and part-time employee in his

parents' store — he discovered his true calling: real estate.

His start was modest but canny; he acquired a small building near the university for \$4,500 down. After graduation and a stint in the army, he sold it and bought a small shopping center in Everett, north of Seattle. After a few months, he sold the shopping center and used the profits to buy another shopping center in rural Monroe. A year later, in 1963, Mr. Selig gave up buying and selling to create his own buildings, and he hasn't looked back.

His unorthodox style was evident from the start: For his first development, he chose as a location the Denny Regrade, a then-unfashionable section of Seattle between downtown and the Seattle Center (site of the World's Fair). Following the success of that building, he created a number of similar office sites in the Regrade and nearby Queen Anne Hill, helping to turn a neglected area into a thriving business center and displaying what his lawyer, John Hempelmann, sees as a knack amounting to genius — "like a few old prospectors" — for sniffing out potential sites.

But he stayed within the Regrade, even as he added property after property to his holdings (he has sold only one of his own buildings). It became a popular pastime among community leaders, businesspeople, and the media to speculate on when, and how, Martin Selig was going to move into downtown.

When he made that move, it was a bold one. Taking advantage of loopholes in a downtown zoning code designed to trade off height bonuses for public amenities, Mr. Selig was able to breeze past city regulations and get permission to build a skyscraper of unprecedented height: the Seafirst Columbia Center.

Putting up as collateral almost every property he owned, Mr. Selig secured a \$205 million loan from Seafirst Bank (the lead in a consortium of 12), despite the fact that he didn't have a single commitment from a major tenant. "Finding financing isn't hard," he says, "if you have a track record for getting buildings up on time, leasing them fully, and meeting your payments."

Reactions to the new building were, to say the least, mixed. Seattle Mayor Charles Royer said at the time, "You have in Martin Selig a developer who really knows how to use the maximum. . . . We have an old, complex system, almost like a tax code. A good lawyer could figure out how to work around it." Don Erickson, a former Seattle planner, is more outspoken. "I think," he says, "the city may have been taken."

Chances are that Columbia Center will dominate the Seattle skyline for a long time; laws passed in its wake are designed to prevent any other building from reaching its height. But the point was made, and Mr. Selig's response to critics of the building is typically matter-of-fact. He says, "I think all you have to do is realize that Columbia Center is now really the focal point of Seattle. The Space Needle once said what Seattle was; now this building says we've arrived."

Today, Mr. Selig directs his operations from offices on the 62nd floor of the building. His numerous current

projects include a 43-story structure for Seattle Trust and Savings ("I fell in love with that building the first time I saw it") and the 21-story, \$32-million Metropolitan Park II. With four major office projects currently being developed in downtown Seattle, Mr. Selig — predicting a glut in quality office space there — is focusing on other parts of the city.

Mr. Selig's management techniques are classically simple and straightforward: He keeps on hand a small, intensely loyal group of trusted colleagues, expanding his staff as needed but keeping it to a bare minimum and choosing people who are, in his words, "midway between generalists and specialists." He gives these people as much responsibility as possible. ("I give them freedom until they say 'ouch.'") And as a leader, he's known for doing his homework, displaying a keen interest in issues, and making informed decisions quickly.

When a decision is made, he moves on to the next task at hand. A colleague says, "Martin told me once,

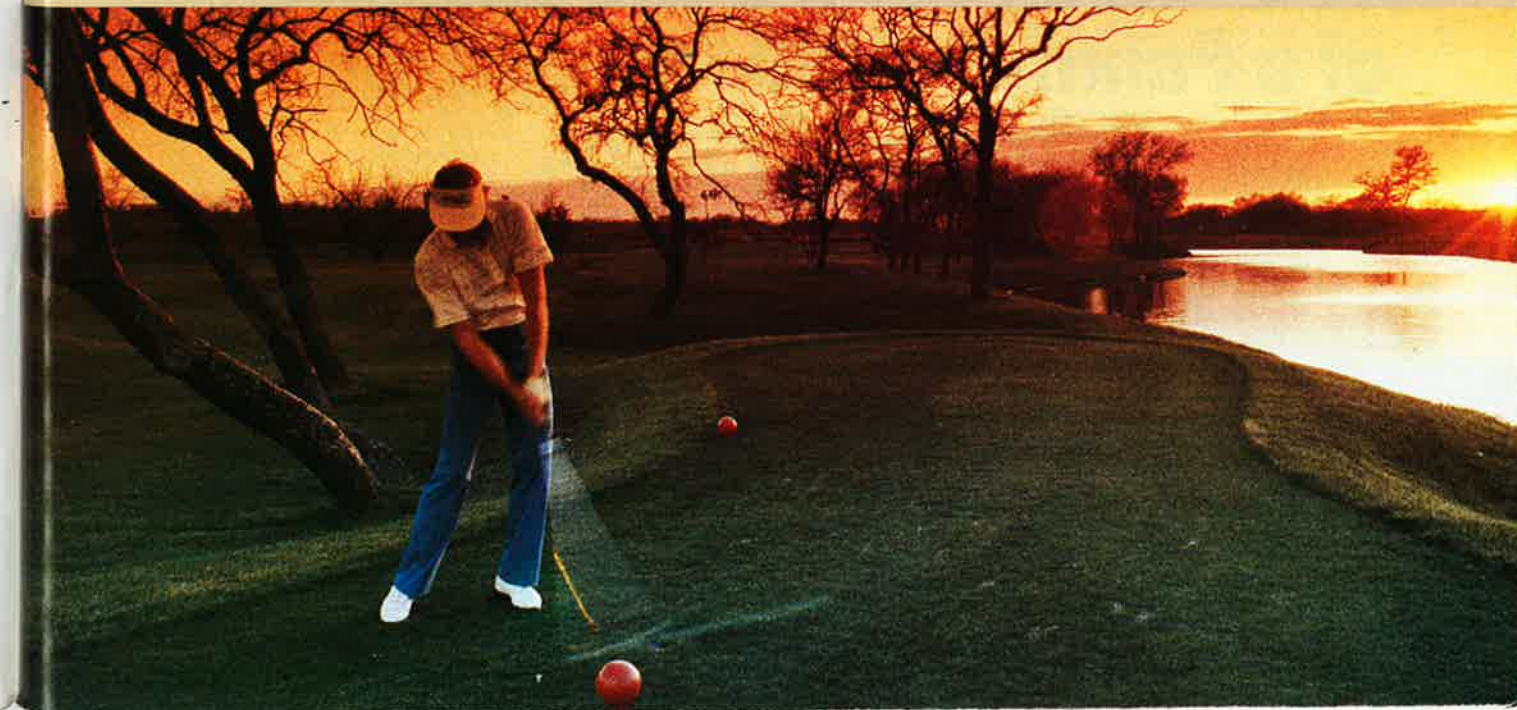
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'You'll make more right decisions than wrong ones, so don't worry about it.' Mr. Selig is a hands-on manager, and his rapport with everyone he works with — from executives to construction workers — is good. "He treats his people well," another colleague says, "and he really appreciates your activities and contributions. He manages by delegation and praise."

Mr. Selig's working philosophy is pragmatic, summed up in a brief, well-worn but true maxim: "You take care of your buildings, and they'll take care of you." And one person who works with him closely says:

"The important thing about Martin is that he doesn't renege on his word. If the deal's been made, it's been made. But he's a hard negotiator; it's a hell of a lot better to work for him than negotiate with him, believe me."

Mr. Selig the businessman is an outspoken lone wolf; Mr. Selig the individual is an intensely private man who, not surprisingly, takes care to see that things stay that way. Any questions about his nonbusiness activities are met with a quick, firm negative: "I do

not talk about my private life."

The known facts of his private life are few: that he shares a lakefront house with his wife and three young children; that he doesn't drink hard liquor, rarely uses profanity, and indulges himself only occasionally in a cigar. One colleague says Mr. Selig keeps his private and business life separate to the point of never socially entertaining even his closest associates at home.

Like many hard drivers, he plays as intensely as he works. He's an expert skier, slipping away often in winter for helicopter skiing or to his condominium in Sun Valley. In the words of Mr. Hempelmann, a frequent skiing partner, "he's the same kind of skier as he is a developer — all out." He also enjoys motorcycling, and he arranges his schedule to include frequent trips abroad with his family.

Mr. Selig's taste in art, shaped by his European parents, is notable, and his collection (both private and on display in his buildings) is extensive. Many artists, including prominent Northwest painters such as Kenneth Calla-

han and Paul Horiuchi, are included.

A man whose business has such an immediate impact on the life of a city is sure to have critics, and Martin Selig is no exception. He's often accused of having second-rate taste, of stealing ideas from other developers. It is true that striking comparisons can be made between Houston's Pennzoil Building and Mr. Selig's black, sharp-angled complex at Fourth and Blanchard (dubbed "the Darth Vader Building"); between Houston's Post Oak project and Mr. Selig's Metropolitan Park; and between the Blue Cross Tower in Denver and Mr. Selig's Fourth and Vine Building.

Folke Nyberg, professor of architecture at the University of Washington, thinks that Mr. Selig is not unique to Seattle, calling his buildings "distinct but not distinctive." Of the developer himself, Prof. Nyberg says:

"He's a sort of mini-Hines or mini-Trump. He's building Houston here; this city could be anywhere. Being in Seattle just makes him more distinct; there aren't so many like him around, so he stands out."

Though Prof. Nyberg concedes that Mr. Selig is "able to package and finance brilliantly," he adds, "Skills are one thing, contributions to the city are another." And of Mr. Selig's recent property purchases in Seattle's University District — traditionally a quiet, residential neighborhood with few large office complexes — Prof. Nyberg comments dryly, "Greed has no bounds."

Mr. Selig's responses to Prof. Nyberg's criticisms are bristling. He says:

"I don't know the difference [between distinct and distinctive]. You have to realize that most people love the building, but loving doesn't sell Life Savers. The majority of critics are architects who are, I think, jealous because they didn't get the commission." He points out that Columbia Center was chosen Office Building of the Year for 1987 by the National Engineering Association and has won dozens of other awards from building and trade associations.

Peter Staten, an architect and contributor to the newsmagazine *The Weekly*, says:

"He's endlessly impressive — completely without fear or scruples. He tests and illustrates what's possible in this town better than anyone. The problems he creates aren't ones he invents; they've always been there. If anyone is sufficiently . . . ambitious, they can do the same."

Mr. Selig's general attitude toward criticism is positive. One co-worker says, "Martin forces himself to be positive instead of negative — he'll rarely admit the negative aspect of something." When critics take him to task on issues such as insensitivity to community concerns and public amenities, Mr. Selig replies, "There's nothing more gratifying to me than seeing people sitting around, eating their lunches on a sunny day [near one of his buildings]."

Mr. Selig has always been the outsider, the spoiler who refuses to play games with the other guys. Now that he's established, though, his maverick tendencies seem to be mellowing. Rebecca Boren, senior editor of *The Weekly* and a longtime Selig observer, says that in recent years he's become

more of an establishment developer; she cites his partnership deal to build the Seattle Trust building—a departure from his previous lone-wolf stance.

Ms. Boren also notes Mr. Selig's increasing personal distance, the lack of direct contact, as his empire grows. She says:

"It's only in the last few years that he's had a secretary answer his calls. It used to be that when you called his office, Martin would pick the phone up himself."

Janice Hayes, a business reporter for the *Seattle Times*, recently wrote that as competition for tenants in downtown Seattle intensifies, "the power structure among downtown developers is also changing. It is moving away from [developers like] Selig . . . who have proven track records . . . [and] towards new players . . . who have more at stake."

But Mr. Selig says, "I don't consider myself a proven developer; I'm still proving myself. I'm still a newcomer. Maybe I'll be proven when I retire. You have to take that attitude — that's how you survive." ♣

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