

Sculpting a city of the future

Chris Herden meets the land developer with the Midas touch

Maha Sinnathamby has a favourite analogy when he recalls the first time he looked out over 2860 hectares of desolate bushland that would later become Greater Springfield. "Like a sculptor who looks at a rock, I could hear a voice crying to be let out," he says.

While others saw little worth in the land at Opossum Creek, 23 kilometres from Brisbane's CBD, Sinnathamby visualised a place of spectacular promise, a thriving city unlike any other in Australia. "Initially, the Premier at the time, Wayne Goss, didn't want anything to do with me but he started to see the tremendous opportunities and three years later the Centenary Highway link got started."

"I failed both my first and second years at university but I had a commitment to go back [home] with a degree"

Clearly the word 'no' is not part of the Sinnathamby vocabulary. In 1992 he and business partner Bob Sharpless pressed onward with their dream to develop Greater Springfield, now recognised as Australia's largest privately-owned master-planned city. But the entrepreneurs were on shaky ground at the start.

"We've sailed close to the wind many times and Maha and I had some pretty robust conversations regarding our financial sustainability," says Sharpless, adding the master-planned community wouldn't have got off the ground if not for Sinnathamby's courage, work ethic and political shrewdness.

"He's charismatic and I've never met anyone as persistent as Maha. He's very determined and when you look at the Springfield project and what has been achieved by a small company over a 21-year period, it is pretty impressive."

Greater Springfield, which encompasses six smaller suburbs, is estimated to cost \$23billion by completion and has a projected population of 105,000 by the year 2030 (which is expected to be more than Darwin).

Greater Springfield won the International Real Estate Federation's Award for World's Best Master Planned Community in 2010. The sceptics who said it couldn't be done have long since disappeared. "I've learnt a lot from my failures and later in life I learnt that money isn't everything and that you have to give back to society," says Sinnathamby. "What we are doing in Springfield is testament to adding value to a society."

Sinnathamby came to Australia in 1959 at the age of 20 to study engineering at the University of New South Wales but it was a constant struggle.

"I failed both my first and second years at university but I had a commitment to go back to Malaysia with that degree. My father said, 'son, just keep going because the darkest of nights brings the brightest dawn.'"

After a period working as an engineer in his home country he and his wife Yoga decided to permanently relocate their young family to Perth. Refusing to go on unemployment benefits, he sold metric rulers to hardware stores for a short time and then moved into selling real estate on commission.

In 1976 he entered the world of property development as co-founder of Murdoch Projects. The business grew quickly but success was short-lived. A recession was brewing

and following a disastrous attempt to raise \$14million through a public trust, the company collapsed. Sinnathamby had arrived penniless in Australia, made a fortune, and then lost it.

"In the first five years everything I touched turned to gold, and then I was down in the dumps, burning in hell," Sinnathamby says.

Following the demise of Murdoch Projects, he and new business partner Bob Sharpless headed east and threw themselves into an audaciously ambitious city-building scheme. Today, Greater Springfield boasts a 52-hectare Health City precinct, a \$220million state-of-the-art data centre, the \$60million Springfield Tower and the \$1.2billion Darra to Springfield rail link is on time to open in November.

"Maha has always put community values before profit. He could have cut the land purchase up into big blocks, made a profit and left - but he didn't. He took a gamble because he wanted to make a community," says City of Ipswich Mayor Paul Pisasale, who admits to having engaged in a fair share of debate with the Springfield developer. "But I can tell you that in the whole 20 years we've never faced off in court. What most impresses me about Maha is his talk about the value of an education. He's always closely aligned to the core value of people."

Springfield's Education City precinct is home to numerous learning facilities geared towards preparing students for a career anywhere around the world. For Sinnathamby, education is the key pillar in Greater Springfield's development and he himself is a living example of how education can transform a life; not just through formal learning but through his constant drive to immerse himself in his chosen goal.

"Education is the soul of Springfield. It is the currency of the future, the only currency you



Maha Sinnathamby

can cash in anywhere in the world and it can never be stolen from the owner. I am a strong believer in adding human capital. I have seen five successive governments in Queensland, from both sides of politics, since starting this project, and they have always been supportive of me because we are doing their work. The best gift you can give a person is education."

Now in his mid-70s, and with all of his four children taking on important roles beside him, the Springfield Land Corporation chairman has no plans for retirement just yet. "I am strongly committed to building the most unique city in this country."

BRISBANE PERSON OF THE YEAR

Proudly supported by



CALL AND BOOK A FREE DESIGN BRIEF

- > CUSTOM HOMES AT NO EXTRA COST
- > SPECIALIST IN SLOPING AND ELEVATED BLOCKS
- > \$15,000 AVAILABLE FOR ELIGIBLE FIRST HOME BUYERS



STARTING FROM ONLY **\$699** per m²

DISPLAY HOMES DALRAY DRIVE, RACEVIEW QUEENSLAND | VALENTINE CIRCUIT, AUGUSTINE HEIGHTS QUEENSLAND
KIRDI CIRCUIT, DURACK QUEENSLAND | TIMBERLINE WAY, FLAGSTONE QUEENSLAND

BELLA QLD PROPERTIES HEAD OFFICE (07) 3823 4778 OR 0408 000 332 bellaqldproperties.com.au

