

The Odd Couple

How developer Rick Holliday reached out to community activist Marcel Diallo to pave the way for Central Station.

By *Rachel Swan*

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If West Oakland's "Village Bottoms" were its own insular township, then Pine Street would constitute the arts district. A wide road lined with two-story walk-ups, it's home to the Cornelia Bell Art Gallery, the Black Dot Cafe, and the Black New World Social Aid & Pleasure Club. The whole scene has loosely coalesced around local curator Marcel Diallo, who's known both for his connections in the art world and his persistent anti-gentrification campaigns. An incubator and an agitator, Diallo has nonetheless positioned himself as the guy to know if you're a newcomer seeking any kind of street cred in the neighborhood. Which explains why land developer Rick Holliday — a man who, in many ways, could be the Village's nemesis — set out to endear himself to Diallo before launching what has to be the most ambitious projects that West Oakland has seen in years. Oddly enough, it worked.

At first glance, they seem like an odd couple: Holliday, the astute businessman with a large portfolio of rehabilitated landmarks and live-work spaces, and Diallo, the committed bohemian and life-long crusader, known for his socially conservative vision of the neighborhood (not for nothing is the name "Black New World"). But somehow the two managed to join forces, entering a unique, if somewhat improbable arrangement. Two years ago Holliday came in and turned the Pacific Cannery on Pine Street into a chic townhouse complex. The apartments are competitively priced, starting at around \$295,000. Holliday is trying to entice artists, young cosmopolitans, and first-time homebuyers, particularly those who have some kind of stake in the neighborhood. A downstairs gallery that abuts the Cannery lofts has been reserved for community artists of all stripes, though for the next several months, at least, Diallo will be its main curator.

Black New World collaborator Kele Nitot describes Holliday as a James Bond lookalike: He's quick, lithe, and a little disarming, and vaguely resembles the M16 agent in 2006's *Casino Royale*. Holliday grew up in Orinda and went to UC Berkeley, where he got a BA in urban policy and a master's in city and regional planning. His dissertation on the rehabilitation of West Oakland would prove eerily prophetic. Holliday married his high school sweetheart Nancy, started two affordable housing corporations, and launched Holliday Development in 1988. Among his most famous projects are the Clock Tower by the Bay Bridge, a once-vacant historical building that he converted into 127 loft apartments. He renovated an old turn-of-the-century-era print house that had been reallocated for storage in the '70s. He got hold of a decrepit warehouse in Emeryville that once was a furniture factory, and transformed it into 138 stylish units. He built the Iron Horse Lofts in Walnut Creek, which were integral to turning the Pleasant Hill BART station into a transit village. Even in a soft market, Holliday is quick to close real estate deals. He brags that he once sold eighty units in a single day.

Holliday discovered the Cannery by accident in 2001. He was going the wrong way, en route to the Holliday Development office on Park Avenue in Emeryville. "He was just driving, probably talking on the phone or something," said Nancy Holliday, who works as the company's creative

director. "He went passed the train station and went, 'Oh my God, West Oakland! This is part of West Oakland! This is what I used to think about all the time.'" Located in the Prescott Oakland-Point neighborhood — which overlaps with what Diallo has now christened as Village Bottoms, and once marked the last stop on the Southern Pacific railroad — the building began life as Pacific Coast Canning Company, a business founded by a Chinese immigrant entrepreneur named Lew Hing. Rick has meticulously upheld the Cannery's history, naming one of its three courtyards after Lew Hing, inviting members of Hing's extended family to come visit, and even preserving a century-old scale that was once used to weigh cans.

In the next few months several developments will spring up in the thirty acres that have now been deemed "Central Station," a smart-growth community within Prescott Oak Point. The historic Cannery lofts will soon be cheek by jowl with an affordable housing complex and another building with market-rate condos. Nancy said there won't be any fences between the projects, only greenways and walkways. She said a similar arrangement in the Iron Horse Lofts helped foster a sense of community within that residential area. How this new community will interact with the established Village Bottoms remains to be seen, though Rick said it's quite possible that former Bottoms residents may become homebuyers in Central Station. After all, the prices are low, and he says that even with the reality of credit markets, lenders are willing to write mortgages for the property.

Winning the neighborhood over was a long process of courtship. Rick spent several months hanging out in local barbershops and getting to know everyone on a first-name basis. He said Diallo was wary of him at first. "I first met him in about 2003 maybe. And then the project went through in 2005. His testimony for the planning commission was interesting because some of his ambivalence, but expressed ultimately that it was a good thing." Rick's relationship with West Oakland artists started out shaky, but it became one of grudging respect, then genuine appreciation as the developer showed his commitment to preserving elements of the homegrown scene. A cafe at the Cannery entrance displays photographs by Julie Placencia, depicting all the families on her block in West Oakland standing in front of her homes. In the gallery next door, Diallo has mounted an exhibit of old *Black Panther* newspaper covers and poster graphics by San Francisco artist Emory Douglas. Diallo showed up to last Friday's opening reception in a suit and pork pie hat, and addressed a crowd that included Coup rapper Boots Riley, aerosol artist Refa 1, and city council hopeful Rebecca Kaplan, along with Douglas himself.

Through careful politicking and negotiation, Rick has demonstrated that he's not at cross-purposes with the locals, and that he wants Central Station to be just what the name implies. "It's good that we were able to actually bless it, incubate it," said Diallo, who's accepted Rick's presence in the neighborhood but indicates that the Cannery is sitting at a crossroads. Thirty people have already moved into the Pulte real estate nearby, and Rick predicts that in the coming months at least 150 people will settle in the Cannery's 160 units. "I said to Marcel this neighborhood's gonna be really different when the Cannery fills up," Rick said. He's doing his best to make sure they all co-exist peacefully.