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Commercial Real Estate



BY RICKY CARIOTI — THE WASHINGTON POST

Developer R. Donahue Peebles made it big in Miami and recently returned to Washington, where he lost a pivotal deal 12 years ago.

FROM THE GROUND UP

D.C. Developer-Activist Returns to His Roots

By ALLAN LENGEL
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In Washington, R. Donahue Peebles had a history: He was a congressional page, real estate appraiser, a Marión Barry confidant, political activist and disillusioned African American developer who left town after a highly publicized \$48 million real estate deal with the District collapsed.

Then the native Washingtonian moved to Florida and made his real fortune. That was nine years ago.

"I left here, went to Miami Beach as an outsider, didn't know a single person there," said the 47-year-old founder of the Peebles Corp. "The population was 3 percent African American. All seven city commissioners were Anglo, and I competed against local developers who were established and I won."

The man *Ebony* magazine referred to as the nation's biggest African American developer, returned home last week — much richer than nine years ago — to promote his book, "The Peebles Principles."

The book includes "tales and tactics" of the business world and chronicles Peebles' triumphs and losses in the commercial real

estate world and his life in Washington as a developer, political activist and fundraiser.

"Being a minority in this country and this business has always made me somewhat of an outsider," Peebles said in an interview. "It was always an insider's game here in D.C., and being an insider really comes with longevity and establishment," he said of the commercial real estate world.

"When I was here, almost my entire tenure I was perceived as controversial. I was very political. I was kind of perceived as a wheeler-dealer. Now, in New York, I'd be like bland. In Miami, I'm bland."

He said he has more than \$4 billion in projects underway or on the drawing board in cities including Miami, Las Vegas and Detroit. He said he owns a hotel and an office building in Washington and is seriously looking at two hotel projects here.

The idea of writing a book, Peebles said, hit him two years ago when he was aboard a plane and read in a newspaper that Donald Trump was writing a book on how to get rich.

"I remembered joking and laughing and saying, 'It's going to be a short book: Have your dad have \$250 million and don't lose

it,'" said Peebles, who dropped out of Rutgers after his first year of pre-med studies.

"I thought there needed to be a credible book on how to create wealth and entrepreneurship . . . from someone starting from the ground up," he said.

His first development came in the late 1980s: a 100,000-square-foot office building in Anacostia. He later bought other properties, including an office building at 9th and F streets NW, which he converted to a Marriott Courtyard hotel. In 1995, he made a bid to lease two buildings to the city for \$48 million.

The bid generated controversy because of his ties to Barry. The mayor eventually killed the deal.

"It was a pivotal point in my life," Peebles said.

"By me losing those deals, which was a big setback business-wise, I ended up winning later," he said. "I wouldn't have moved to Florida.

Then, quoting his book, he said, "Each setback is an opportunity in disguise."

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