

By Richard Westlund

PIONEERING THE LOFT CONCEPT IN MIAMI



Lissette Calderon

Being young, Hispanic and female in a male-dominated industry hasn't stopped Lissette Calderon from achieving remarkable success. In fact, she has embraced her unique position. In just six years, Calderon has carved out a strong niche in Miami's hotly competitive real estate development market by creating stylish and exciting loft residences that have been snapped up by sophisticated buyers.

Just 31 years old, Calderon is a powerful force for renewal along the Miami River in the heart of South Florida. As CEO of Neo Concepts LLC, Calderon has taken the best of Manhattan loft living and given it a downtown Miami flair.

"Lofts are just the beginning of the trend towards urban movement," Calderon says. "In the near future, more and more people in South Florida will be working and living in a village-like neighborhood setting with shops, restaurants and parks all within walking distance."

Her first solo high-rise project, Neo Lofts was a 199-unit loft building on a neglected warehouse site along the river's south bank. Back in 2002, Calderon secured more than \$35 million in financing for her pioneering development and brought her dream to reality. Now complete, Neo Lofts brought the Miami River's first residents in almost a century.

In 2004, Calderon began developing NeoVertika in Brickell Village, also on the south bank of the Miami River. Already sold out and currently under construction, Neo Vertika broke convention once again. The new "Splits" style condominium features massive interior volume with 20-foot floor-to-ceiling windows and unparalleled views, and the freedom to personalize the vast open spaces. Neo Vertika is on time for completion in March 2006.

Currently, Calderon is focusing on Wind, Miami's first and only gated river community and downtown's only private enclave. The 41-story high-rise with 489 units is nearly sold out. Construction is underway with completion scheduled for summer 2007.

Located on the north bank of the Miami River, Wind will become part of River Front, a 13.5-acre urban oasis that will have a boulevard lined with cafés, retail, residences and office condos, as well as a 900-foot Riverwalk that will feature some of Miami's finest restaurants and docking space. A true mixed-use oasis, River Front is designed as a complete sanctuary in the city's urban core.

One of Calderon's hallmarks is the ability to defy traditional thinking and define the trends for the future. Her corporate philosophy is based on introducing residential products to the market that radically differentiate NEO from its competitors. Calderon's goals include continuing to develop residences that offer an all-encompassing lifestyle, allowing people to enjoy the conveniences of living, working and playing in a village-like environment. She hopes to enable people to fulfill the American dream of home ownership through quality housing at affordable prices.

Side-by-side with her mother, Maria Calderon, she has opened NeoRealty LLC and NeoFinance, LLC to make the process of home ownership simpler for her residents. She hopes to live out her dream while continuing to give back to her Miami roots.

On the personal side, Calderon has been able to balance a remarkably active life. Last February she moved her corporate headquarters to a new 10,000 square-foot building with room to accommodate future growth. Almost simultaneously, Calderon gave birth to her first child, Mia, who now stays close to her mother in a special nursery room built next to Calderon's office. Just one week later, she launched Wind, at a grand VIP celebration with more than 1,000 guests and received a proclamation presented to her by City of Miami Mayor Manny Diaz.

In July 2005, the "CBS Early Show" profiled Calderon as an innovative female business owner who has attained the best of both worlds, balancing motherhood with a successful career.

She is also active in the community, serving as a volunteer board member for Amigos for Kids, and on Wachovia Bank's prestigious national Community Development Advisory Board.

Born and raised in Miami and educated in the Northeast, Calderon first fell in love with the loft concept while living in New York City. A graduate of University of Pennsylvania's prestigious Wharton School of Business, Calderon dreamed of taking her business savvy back to Miami and building lofts by the river. Her job as a merchant banker on Wall Street allowed her to deal with major real estate development projects, including one that required her to travel to Brazil to determine the value of factories.



Before founding NEO in 1999, Calderon gained invaluable experience working for Manny Medina of Terremark and Jorge Perez of the Related Group. She was involved locally with Gables Grand Plaza, which helped reenergize the Coral Gables area. In Palm Beach County, Calderon also worked on the St. Andrews Polo Club in Wellington. But her savvy for urban development really flourished with her involvement in the Congress Building in the heart of downtown Miami. It was her wake-up call and the start of a new chapter in the city's urban history.

A hands-on leader, Calderon is intimately involved in each NEO project, working alongside bankers, architects, contractors, designers and other professionals transforming her vision into reality.

Calderon's developments are renowned for their innovative approaches to creating open interior spaces and resort-style amenities. For example, Wind residents will enjoy both Exo-Rooms, 11-foot deep spaces which function as outdoor living areas, and interior K-Rooms, multi-functional air-conditioned rooms. Both rooms promise to meet the ever changing lifestyles of their occupants by offering maximum flexibility. Also at Wind, Neo Epoch introduces a professionally equipped communal kitchen with a chef's table for 24 guests that can be reserved for private events. Residents will take pleasure in a two-story clubhouse, men's and women's spa with aromatherapy steam room and sauna, wellness center with a gym, holistic center, riverfront pool, ExoBath, meditation garden, and bar overlooking the Miami skyline.

NEO's leading-edge developments attract young professionals, artists and urbanites who are looking to combine the trendy, cosmopolitan lifestyle of New York City with Miami's relaxed, tropical attitude. But unlike New York City lofts, which are generally converted industrial factories and warehouses, South Florida's lofts are new buildings that Calderon is building from the ground up.

With the remarkable success and growing popularity of the loft and split-style urban living concept, Calderon intends to expand her enterprise to the rest of Florida and eventually develop similar projects across the country. A fourth project is already in the design phase with a fifth development on the way.

Today, Calderon remains an inspiration to South Florida's loft movement, as she continues to fulfill her dreams.

