

# A CITY REBORN

*Atlanta's downtown renaissance finally arrives*



The nearly completed Georgia Aquarium, seen rising beyond the World of Coca-Cola construction site, is expected to bring more than 2 million visitors downtown annually. Jim Stawniak

By [Scott Henry](#)

Downtown Atlanta was still a wonderland of busy stores, crowded sidewalks, swank restaurants and glitzy nightclubs when George Berry arrived here in the early '60s.

Luckie Street was anchored by fine-dining competitors Ye Olde Herren's Restaurant and the Ship Ahoy. If you didn't find what you wanted at Davison's department store, you could climb on a trolley to take you down to Rich's - or to any of a hundred other shops lining Peachtree or Spring or Marietta streets.

At night, downtown Atlanta lit up like Broadway. Movie marquees at the Rialto in Fairlie-Poplar and the Loew's Grand and Paramount on Peachtree Street advertised the big films of the day. Limousines shuttled visiting businessmen to the Playboy Club on Luckie Street and the Domino Lounge in the upscale Imperial Hotel. At the Royal Peacock on Auburn Avenue, you might be able to catch a show by Ray Charles or James Brown.

"Downtown was an exciting place then," says Berry, 68, who worked his way up through the ranks of City Hall to become chief operating officer. "I would spend my lunchtime just walking around the streets, drinking in the sights and sounds of the city. It was thrilling just to be part of it."

Downtown Atlanta has come a long way since those heady days - and, unfortunately, it's mostly been a downhill ride.

Not that there haven't been efforts to bail out this sinking ship. In the late '80s, a relaunched Underground Atlanta was supposed to rescue downtown. A few years later, fingers were crossed for the Georgia Dome and a major expansion of the Georgia World Congress Center.

In the mid-'90s, of course, the role of savior was claimed by the Olympics, which left behind the stunning Centennial Park - but never seemed to spark the downtown development boom many assumed would follow the '96 Games.

Despite the temporary triumphs, downtown Atlanta has spent decades in a holding pattern - or worse, in a nosedive, as with the closing of the downtown Rich's and Macy's stores. Every step forward - SunTrust Plaza, Philips Arena, the Sam Nunn Federal Center - was followed largely by silence and inertia.

By most standards, downtown is a slightly more happening place than it was 10 or 15 years ago, thanks to developer John Portman, whose soaring hotels and America's Mart complex helped establish Atlanta as a top convention city, and CNN founder Ted Turner, who turned his hometown into a media capital and stood up to mounting pressure to move the city's major sports venues out of downtown.

But compared to the lively urban centers of Baltimore, San Diego or Denver, downtown Atlanta is Nowheresville, an uninviting concrete canyon for office workers who high-tail it to the 'burbs at the stroke of 5.

Even with the help of Turner and Portman, as well as GSU President Carl Patton and Olympics wrangler Billy Payne, our downtown remains a dull, dreary place by most standards. Just last week, a New York Times travel article invoked Atlanta in an unflattering comparison to how utterly dead central Belfast becomes after dark.

Which is why the implication that the much ballyhooed Nov. 23 opening of the Georgia Aquarium will be the salvation of Atlanta's underachieving downtown carries the stale whiff of *déjà vu*. Um, haven't we heard this promise somewhere before?

As David Feehan, executive director of the Washington, D.C.-based International Downtown Association, explains, "There's nothing wrong with an aquarium, but it isn't a magic bullet."

But here's a bit of news you may not have heard yet: Downtown's long-awaited urban renaissance has already begun. Pull a Rip Van Winkle for a few years and when you wake up, you'll scarcely recognize the formerly dull, shopworn streets.



Free shuttle buses pass along downtown Denver's 16th Street pedestrian mall every few minutes as office workers and visitors do some lunchtime shopping or relax in sidewalk cafes. Scott Henry

How do we know? Consider these facts:

- More than 2,500 new condos, apartments and townhouses are in the works in or near downtown, boosting the downtown population by nearly a quarter to more than 30,000 - and those figures don't include a new 2,000-room dorm tower for Georgia State University students.
- Four new hotels are planned for the Centennial Park area, three of which will be upscale boutique hotels, including a just announced 250-room W luxury hotel.
- Spaces for hundreds of street-level shops and restaurants will open up around Centennial Park, along Marietta Street and throughout the now blighted Auburn/Edgewood corridor.

• Construction on two new corporate headquarters buildings containing a half-million square feet of office space is already well under way at the \$330 million Ivan Allen Plaza, at the northern tip of the Grady curve.

• Millions of dollars in private and public money is earmarked for landscaping along downtown streets, new urban greenspace, and pedestrian signs to direct you to historic sites or help you find your way around SoNo.

Never heard of SoNo? You will. By this time next year, we bet you'll have heard a tourist, a friend or maybe even yourself use this semi-pretentious nickname - it means south of North Avenue, get it? - to describe the streets around Crawford Long Hospital. The area currently brings to mind a no-man's land wedged between downtown and Midtown. But not for long.

These changes aren't simply a gleam in some developer's eye or part of a 10-year plan destined for a dusty filing cabinet. They're happening as you read this. Most should be completed within the next couple of years.

And that's only the first wave in a city that, the Olympics aside, has long had to content itself with the occasional ripple.

Few people are more excited about the turn of events than Shirley Franklin, who says she's seen minor flurries of development downtown since becoming mayor, "but now it's happening at a breakneck pace, and this wave will be followed by another. I see Atlanta as coming out of its adolescence."

The unprecedented volume of private developments and public projects already in motion downtown is expected to create its own momentum, spurring even more consumer interest and investment - and, ultimately, leading to better public transit for navigating the area. One day a few years from now, you'll be sitting at a sidewalk café on Peachtree Street or riding a streetcar along Auburn Avenue or looking down at the lights of the city as you sip a cocktail on a rooftop bar, and you'll turn to the person next to you and ask, "Remember when downtown sucked?" And you'll both laugh and take another sip.

Again, how do we know? Because it's already happened almost everywhere else. Seattle. Portland. Minneapolis. Miami's South Beach district. Even our midsized country cousin to the north, Chattanooga, has famously gotten its downtown act together.

There, what was once a wasteland of boarded-up storefronts and empty streets at dusk has been transformed into a vibrant downtown tourist destination where visitors can spend a day walking between the Tennessee Aquarium, an IMAX theatre and the Hunter Art Museum, perched on a bluff overlooking the Tennessee River. Or, they can stroll across the river to Chattanooga's hip north bank on the longest pedestrian bridge in America.

"Downtowns are thriving in America," says Otis White, an Atlanta-based public policy consultant who publishes "Civic Strategies," a newsletter for government types. "If you see one that's not, like Atlanta, you have to ask what went wrong."

Even local small-town burghs such as Smyrna and Decatur have spent the past few years transforming themselves from sleepy bedroom communities into bustling city centers with retail districts and actual nightlife.

Over the past 15 years, downtowns across America have experienced a revival, explains Christopher Leinberger, an urban-planning guru for the Brookings Institution. Leinberger, who divides his time between running a real estate consulting firm in Los Angeles and revitalizing downtown Albuquerque as a private developer, says the flood of intown loft development that Atlanta has experienced over the past few years isn't simply a local trend but part of a national movement to recapture the excitement of urban living.



An artist's rendering of Twelve Centennial Park, a downtown mixed-use project by Atlanta's Novare Group that will include two condo towers, a boutique hotel and retail shops. Atlanta Development Authority

"Across the country, consumer preferences have been changing and younger people were becoming infatuated with an urban lifestyle," he says.

Part of this generational shift can be attributed to a growing backlash against what Leinberger calls the "characterless sprawl" of the suburbs, where one big-box shopping center blends into the next, and the subdivisions in which many Gen X-ers have grown up offer no distinct feeling of place.

A steady diet of '90s television also helped, he adds. Unlike the previous generation's favorite shows - "The Brady Bunch," "Happy Days," "The Cosby Show" - which presented slices of suburban life, the most influential shows of recent years - "Friends," "Seinfeld" and "Sex in the City" - have treated their inner-city settings almost as another character.

That's no mistake, Leinberger says. "Hollywood does as much consumer research as any industry there is."

But it's not only young apartment-dwellers and DINKs (dual-income, no kids, in trend-speak) who are moving back downtown. Many of those leading the charge to re-pioneer the urban core are empty-nesters who no longer need the hassle of a three-bedroom house and half-acre yard, says Barbara Faga, chairman of the board of EDAW, a global land-use planning firm with offices in Midtown's Biltmore.

"There are people retiring to cities, which has never happened before," she says. "People who never would have moved downtown before are coming here." Denver and Atlanta have more in common than it first might seem. Both capital cities are relatively new, Denver having been founded in 1858, only few years before Atlanta had that unpleasant episode with Gen. Sherman. Neither city was located on a great river, majestic coastline or other dramatic natural feature. When the great urban exodus of the 1950s and 1960s swept the country, both cities became convinced that the best route to urban renewal was to knock down old, historic buildings and replace them with new ones. And today, Denver and Atlanta are each home to four major-league sports franchises located in or adjacent to downtown. But here's one big difference: Denver's downtown is being held up as a national model for urban revitalization, while Atlanta's is seen as lingering at the starting gate.

At the heart of downtown Denver is the 16th Street pedestrian mall, which stretches for 16 blocks northwest from the Civic Center to the city's belle epoch-era Union Station (Atlanta demolished its own art-deco Terminal Station in 1972). At noon on a weekday, the walkway is filled with office workers and tourists having lunch at outdoor cafes, grabbing a snack at a tamale stand or strolling to one of several retail malls that punctuate the strip.

The largest of these, Denver Pavilions, boasts a full-size Virgin Megastore, a 15-screen movie theater, and dozens of shops and restaurants.

If you tire of walking, you can ride for free on one of the quiet, natural-gas-powered shuttle buses that run in both directions, appearing every minute or two. If you get lost, there always seems to be a yellow-shirted downtown ambassador in sight. And you don't even need to drive to get there; three of Denver's light rail stations are located along the walkway.

But the 16th Street mall didn't revive downtown Denver by itself, explains John Desmond, vice president of urban planning for the Downtown Denver Partnership, the Mile High City's counterpart to our own Central Atlanta Progress. In fact, not long after its 1982 debut, the bottom fell out of the city's economy and the mall project limped along as Denver's remaining department stores pulled out of downtown.

But city leaders stuck to a plan drafted in the early '80s to transform the downtown area into a 24-hour neighborhood with a viable way of getting to and fro, Desmond says. Tax incentives spurred redevelopment of deserted office buildings into housing. The Coors Field baseball stadium was built on the northern outskirts of downtown, followed by the Pepsi Center sports arena a few blocks away. And the city linked downtown to Denver's southern suburbs by rail.

As new businesses, condos, restaurants and entertainment venues continued to open downtown and in the nearby, formerly blighted LoDo neighborhood - another semi-pretentious nickname that stands for lower downtown - the area got

progressively livelier. In 1998, when the Denver Pavilions opened to popular acclaim, "we realized that downtown had finally arrived," Desmond recalls.

In other words, it wasn't one or two big projects that put Denver over the top, but what Desmond calls "constant pressure over time" through unified efforts by City Hall, state legislators and the local business community. When the time was ripe for full-scale urban revitalization, he says, the city was able to use the 16th Street mall as "the spine that everything else could be built around."

Atlanta can take heart in Denver's example that early investment in a unique project can pay big dividends later on, says White, the Atlanta consultant.

Next weekend, when the Colorado city plays host to the International Downtown Association's annual conference, White will take part in the keynote panel alongside Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper.

"The one necessary component to any urban revival is something that just feels right," White says. "Centennial Olympic Park is the first thing in Atlanta in a very long time that really seemed like they got it right." The resurgence of inner-city America has become so commonplace over the past decade that Leinberger has published a formula for success titled "Turning Around Downtown: Twelve Steps to Revitalization."



A.J. Robinson, president of Central Atlanta Progress, stands next to one of the many street-level directional signs that the urban improvement group will begin to erect throughout downtown Atlanta early next year. Andisheh Nourae

The good news is that, with the openings of the Georgia Aquarium and the World of Coca-Cola, in addition to Centennial Park and a refurbished Underground Atlanta, downtown will already be at "Step 7: Create an urban entertainment district." This time, the city hasn't skipped any of the earlier steps, such as creating a downtown improvement district, making streetscape improvements and priming the private-investment pump with millions in development bonds. Part of the reason the most recent incarnation of Underground Atlanta has proven to be a disappointment so far is because city leaders, seemingly expecting it to kick off an urban revival by itself, didn't lay the rest of the groundwork.

The not-so-good news is that Step 7 is essentially the concrete starting point to reach the eventual goal, what Leinberger calls "walkable urbanity." We've still got a long way to go.

According to Leinberger, the revitalization process can take years, even decades. But it almost always begins the same way, with local politicians and business leaders hammering out a strategic development plan that includes tax incentives or public bonds to help lure private investment to an area that has long been ignored by market forces.

"It's a chicken-and-an-egg thing," explains Lawrence Frank, an urban-planning professor at the University of British Columbia and a former Georgia Tech professor who still owns a land-use consulting firm in Atlanta. "You've got to have something to kick-start the process."

Of course, it should be noted that intown Atlanta already has experienced a surge of high-density urban development - it just didn't happen downtown.

After One Atlanta Center, better known as the IBM tower, opened as the tallest building in the Southeast in 1987, it touched off a Midtown construction boom that continues today with the massive Atlantic Station complex, the King & Spalding tower at Peachtree and 14th streets, and the hotly anticipated Atlanta Symphony Center.

Buckhead, of course, has been booming for decades, essentially serving as the city's surrogate downtown by providing the setting for the bulk of its shopping, dining, nightlife, tourism and business deals.

For downtown, however, the visible results are just beginning to manifest - with the launch of an entertainment district giving tourists, locals, and deep-pocketed developers a reason to go there.

Successful entertainment districts are followed by an influx of rental housing, then condos, as more people want to live near the center of things. Next come shops and restaurants to take advantage of the new concentration of consumers. Then, new office towers will break ground downtown as employers strive to locate jobs close to population centers.

And when all that happens, Leinberger says, people finally will be compelled to get out of their automobiles. The pace of development will attain a self-perpetuating momentum, and streetcars and other forms of alternative transportation will become inevitable.

Ironically, this vision of Atlanta's future looks a lot like its past, during downtown's heyday of the '50s and '60s.

"You'll achieve walkable urbanity much quicker than anyone will imagine," Leinberger predicts. "I'm guessing that over the next five years, Atlanta will hit critical mass, and you'll see a significant difference in your downtown." Forty years ago, at the same time George Berry was acquainting himself with his new home, changes were taking place downtown and all across America as people started to trickle out of the inner city and push into the suburbs, where land was cheaper. In Atlanta, the trend was even more pronounced, driven by white flight and aided by the fact that the region has no natural boundaries such as a waterfront or mountain range. It didn't help that the Georgia Statehouse was long controlled by rural legislators with a fondness for highway-building that bordered on fanaticism. Even today, the anemic MARTA is the only major urban transit system in the country that receives no significant state funding.

"Atlanta really embraced the automobile lifestyle to the hilt," notes urban planner Frank, "and didn't invest in public spaces."

The '70s and '80s were an era of collapse and decay for all but a handful of America's most distinctive urban centers, such as Manhattan, San Francisco and Chicago. Atlanta, whose population peaked in the early '60s at about 500,000, hit rock-bottom sometime in the '80s when the number of people living inside the city dipped well below 400,000. (The city's current population is around 440,000.)

Meanwhile, our outlying counties took turns holding the title of fastest-growing in the nation. By 1990, more than 45 percent of the U.S. population lived in suburban areas.

"Early on, the ability to expand indefinitely was considered to be an enormous advantage," says consultant White. "In the mid-'80s, the growth of the freeway system made it much easier to get around. But the highway model for moving large numbers of people in metropolitan areas is not sustainable. We passed the point about 10 years ago when we could build more freeways."

Call it the rubber-band effect. As development sprawls outward, suburban highways become saturated until frustrated commuters actually begin eyeing the inner city with longing.

And why not? For most of the last millennium, civilized people have looked to cities for shelter, employment, commerce and entertainment, says Leinberger.

Decades from now, he predicts, "We'll look back at the suburbanization of the country as a fad and the transportation policies that supported it as obsolete." At the risk of sounding New Age-y, Central Atlanta Progress President A.J. Robinson has chosen to call the circumstances surrounding the impending downtown boom a "harmonic convergence." He ticks off the factors that have come together to shake the city out of its doldrums: the increasing surge of new intown residents; GSU's continued expansion; a newfound sense of cooperation and trust between City Hall and the local business community; Bernie Marcus' largesse; and - actually, this one heads his list - Mayor Franklin's willingness to make tough decisions on such politically unpopular matters as sewer repair and panhandling.

Concern for downtown quality of life is what led Robinson, city officials and the business leaders behind CAP to push for the mayor's new anti-panhandling ordinance - and to welcome the opening of the city's Gateway Center for the homeless.

White says the begging ban is essential to the rebirth of the central city. "As more people move into downtown, they will be far more vocal about the homeless and other quality-of-life issues than the office workers who are already there."

Though it has drawn criticism as an attack on the city's homeless, the ordinance is one of a series of steps, according to Robinson, that needs to be taken to make downtown an inviting place again.

The next big step Atlanta must take will be a tough one: overcoming the city's long-strained public transit system.

The recent upswing in downtown's fortunes have made Franklin optimistic about the prospects of some longer-term transit projects - the proposed Atlanta Streetcar and, more urgently, the Belt Line, a 22-mile loop of light rail that would circle the city and connect to MARTA. But some downtown revitalization projects having to do with Leinberger's "walkable urbanity"

goal are still speculative. They include providing free shuttle bus service between the aquarium, the King Memorial and the Georgia World Congress Center - and somehow convincing state lawmakers to fund the on-again-off-again multimodal terminal just west of Five Points.

While awaiting a public transit renaissance, Franklin says, "We've got to worry about creating affordable housing near downtown, so that we can continue to attract young people and to support a range of intown jobs."

The mayor adds that the improvement of Atlanta public schools is crucial to retaining the mostly childless newcomers who are driving the city's current loft boom. Once they have school-age children, they'll likely leave downtown, or the city altogether. "I'm pleased with the reform of public education in Atlanta," she says, "but it has to get better and get better faster."

Even as downtown grows, it's important to realize its limitations. As one of the least-dense cities in the world population-wise, Atlanta will never have the street buzz of Manhattan - maybe not even Indianapolis. Its remaining historic districts will never rival Philadelphia or New Orleans. Nor is downtown ever likely to steal away Buckhead's crown as a retail destination; few cities have managed to lure department stores back to the urban center.

But, as urban planner Frank points out, "People in Atlanta don't want to be told they have to be San Francisco. They want to be Atlanta."