

MIKE SHERIDAN

houston's

Downtown Transformation



More than \$4 billion in public and private projects has transformed the central business district of America's fourth-largest city.

In the middle of the sea of steel and concrete structures that make up downtown Houston stands a 12-acre (4.9-ha) oasis with numerous massive live oaks—some dating to the early 1900s. The \$122 million expense includes the Jones Lawn, a two-acre (0.8-ha) stretch of green that provides views of the city skyline as well as of the Brown Foundation Promenade, a shaded walk lined with 100-year-old trees. The sanctuary, known as Discovery Green, was completed in April, marking yet another large step in the transformation of the capital of cowboy capitalism into one of the nation's greenest—and most pedestrian-friendly—metropolises.



JIM OLIVE (DISCOVERY GREEN)

“There is no question about it: downtown Houston is certainly becoming greener,” remarks Bob Eury, president of Central Houston Inc. and executive director of the Houston Downtown Management District, organizations that over the past decade have facilitated many of the more than \$4 billion in public and private projects that has transformed the central business district of the nation’s fourth-largest city. “We now have two ‘bookends’ downtown—Discovery Green and the Sabine Promenade.” A \$15 million project led by the Buffalo Bayou Partnership, the Sabine Promenade has hike and bike trails, bayou-themed public artwork, and a pedestrian bridge that links the north and south sides of the bayou. “We expect Discovery Green will someday become as synonymous with Houston as Millennium Park is with Chicago.”

Bold initiatives such as Discovery Green and the Sabine Promenade are only one part of downtown Houston’s continuing evolution from a stark, seemingly desolate urban area to a lively, robust, and prosperous metropolitan district. Since the early 1990s, Houston, through various public/private partnerships, has methodically undertaken a multibillion-dollar effort to showcase its strengths and new urban amenities.

Downtown Houston is not only home to two major professional sports venues—Minute Maid Park

for baseball and Toyota Center for basketball and hockey—but also a growing theater district and residential community. According to Eury, over the past decade some 70 percent of Houston’s downtown blocks have been rebuilt, providing the area with a new face and a vastly improved quality of place. Houston’s light-rail transit system—construction of which began only a decade ago—continues to help spur development not only in the downtown area, but also in adjacent neighborhoods, such as Midtown, the Washington Corridor, and the East End.

“Over the last decade, downtown Houston has experienced remarkable growth and revitalization,” Eury adds. “Billions of dollars have been invested in improving infrastructure, renovating buildings, expanding transportation, and new development.”

Many cities today continue to add bricks and mortar. What sets the Houston transformation apart is the emphasis on green. Discovery Green will be Houston’s new backyard, “a place that everyone feels they own, that they are proud of—a sort of outdoor window for the city,” says Guy Hagstette, president of the Discovery Green Conservancy. “It’s a major, yet subtle, transformation. People’s appetites have been whetted, and since the park has opened it has been a major draw for families and visitors. People now have more positive feelings, and they associate it with the changing face of Houston.”

Projects such as Discovery Green are credited with spurring other developments, including Houston’s first new downtown high-rise luxury apartment residences in 40 years—the 37-story One Park Place, developed by the locally based Finger Companies and scheduled for completion next spring. Scheduled to open this month is the \$170 million Houston Pavilions, with 200,000 square feet (18,600 sq m) of office area and 360,000 square feet (33,400 sq m) of retail space to include the House of Blues, Lucky Strike Lanes, as well as much-needed soft-goods retailers. Other proposed projects alongside Discovery Green include a second major convention headquarters hotel and Discovery Tower, a new Class A office building.

The 23-acre (9.3-ha) Sabine Promenade includes hiking and bicycling trails, and a pedestrian bridge that links the north and south sides of Buffalo Bayou.



CENTRAL HOUSTON ASSOCIATION

On The Move

Light Rail Comes to Houston

THE NATION'S FOURTH-LARGEST city has not just been making strides in becoming more green and pedestrian friendly. It has made major improvements in mobility as well.

After decades of debate and years of fighting, Houston constructed a 7.5-mile (12-km) light-rail system early this decade that runs along Main, Fannin, and San Jacinto streets and serves the new Reliant Park—home of the Houston Texans and the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo—as well as convention facilities, the Texas Medical Center complex, the Museum District, and downtown.

Light rail has been a tremendous boon to downtown Houston, according to E.D. Wulfe, president of local real estate firm Wulfe & Co., who led the referendum that paved the way for the city's first Main Street rail line. "With about 45,000 people a day taking MetroRail, it's one of the most successful new light-rail systems in the country," he says. "It enhances mobility and movement and allows people who work along the corridor, the medical center, or downtown to travel between the various activity centers without getting into their cars. It has eliminated a lot of traffic—and pollution—from our roads."

In growing cities such as Houston, alternative means of transportation are absolutely necessary today, says Wulfe. "Because of congestion, cars aren't the only viable public transportation," he explains. "Houston is becoming more densely populated, and mobility has become an issue. You can only widen Houston's freeways so much."

The introduction of MetroRail has also changed the perception of visiting downtown, says Bob Eury, president of Central Houston Inc. and executive director of the Houston Downtown Management District. "It's an entirely different mode of transportation for Houstonians, who have always liked their cars," he explains. "With light rail, many people don't need to get into their cars to get downtown or to the medical center. They can use light rail, which is spurring new transit-oriented developments."

Years ago, Eury notes, Houston's Main Street lost its luster as shops closed, businesses fled to the suburbs, and residents were leery about venturing downtown. "It had become pretty forlorn. But light rail has revived Main Street."

For instance, International developer Hines has begun construction of the 1 million-square-foot (93,000-sq-m) MainPlace, a 46-story office tower along the main line on Main Street. Designed by New Haven, Connecticut-based architecture firm Pickard Chilton and forecast for completion in 2011, the structure is precertified Silver under the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) rating system.

Houston's light-rail system also has spawned new businesses and enhanced existing ones along the line and allowed Metro to remove more than 600 buses from city streets. "The success of this line goes beyond anything we anticipated and proves that Houstonians will ride the rail, finding it a valuable way to get to work, weekend outings, and sporting events,"



Houston's light-rail system is credited with being a boost to the downtown area, especially Main Street. A 46-story office tower, Main Place (shown in a rendering) is currently under construction along Main Street.

says Frank Wilson, president and chief executive of the Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County.

The transit system has been so successful that its board of directors last year approved expansion of the light-rail system to five new areas of the city—downtown, midtown, the Museum District, the Texas Medical Center, and Reliant Park. Construction is expected to begin next year. "Rail has been a tremendous boost for downtown Houston. People have options now instead of driving," says Eury.

"Light rail has opened arts and theaters to more residents, who can now travel effortlessly to and from the symphony, museum, and theater without ever getting in a car," adds Wulfe. "Light rail has helped breathe new life into downtown Houston and helped alleviate parking constraints up and down the line."—M.S.



CENTRAL HOUSTON ASSOCIATION



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MetroRail, Houston's 7.5-mile (12-km) light-rail transit system, connects downtown to other major activity centers, including Midtown, the Museum District, the Texas Medical Center, and Reliant Park. Ridership on MetroRail averages about 45,000 people per day.

Already, the Sabine Promenade—the city's new 23-acre (9.3-ha) segment of the Buffalo Bayou Walk downtown, the result of a historic public/private partnership to revitalize downtown's urban waterfront—is credited with breathing new life into the activities along Buffalo Bayou, which include live music events, canoe trips, boat rentals, hikes, and educational family events.

"The project has taken a neglected segment of the bayou and transformed it into an attractive and exciting gateway to downtown Houston," says Houston Mayor Bill White, who has been a strong advocate of the downtown transformation. "Houston is a global city competing for jobs with a highly skilled and highly mobile workforce. We have some distinct advantages, such as the relatively low cost of housing, but we have to keep Houston a place where people want to work, play, and live."

These changes to Houston's skyline present a stark contrast to the 1980s and 1990s, when Houstonians rarely ventured into the central business district other than to work, preferring instead to remain within the confines of their gated communities and drive to the local mall for entertainment.

This is why many residents consider Discovery Green one of the best chances Houston has to preserve a significant amount of green space downtown. The mayor says he expects Houston's central business district to see more residential, retail, and streetscape development that will make downtown not just a destination for jobs and entertainment, but also a neighborhood with a style all its own.

"These developments are significant in and of themselves," notes White. "But, they also will help Houston keep the momentum and dynamism the city has created over the past few years. The fact that significant amounts of private dollars are being put into these projects is a statement about the confidence many people have in the city's future in general—and in the central business district in particular." **UL**

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Houston's New Park Discovery Green

DISCOVERY GREEN, A \$122 MILLION, 12-acre (4.9 ha) park with a lake, a restaurant, and a café located amid commercial and residential towers in downtown Houston, is the product of efforts by civic leaders who envisioned a new kind of urban park—one that would draw together the city's diverse, cosmopolitan population.

The park, which occupies the equivalent of eight city blocks on the east side of downtown, is located across the street from the George R. Brown Convention Center, a block from the Toyota Center sports and entertainment arena where the Houston Rockets play, and two blocks from Minute Maid Park, home of the Houston Astros. Previously dominated by parking lots that remained empty except for periodic surges during events at the three large venues, the area lacked continuous everyday activity.

Houston Mayor Bill White and a group of civic leaders initiated a public/private partnership to secure the site for a downtown park in mid-2004. The city agreed to contribute 6.4 acres (2.6 ha) of land and \$7.9 million toward the acquisition of an additional 5.4 acres (2.2 ha) for \$24 million. The city council later approved \$21.5 million for construction of a 670-car garage under the park to serve the convention center. The city deeded the land to the Houston Downtown Park Corporation, a public government corporation, which entered into agreements with the Discovery Green Conservancy, a private nonprofit formed by initial donors to the project, to develop and operate the park. The conservancy then raised

more than \$54 million in private funds to supplement the city's contributions of land. Gifts from four Houston philanthropic giants—the Brown Foundation, the Wortham Foundation, the Houston Endowment, and the Kinder Foundation—led the fundraising effort, which eventually included hundreds of donors.

The conservancy board invited representatives from cities across the country to make presentations in Houston on what makes a downtown park successful and active. Project for Public Spaces, an urban and public space planning nonprofit organization based in New York City, helped orchestrate a series of public workshops and focus groups that contributed to the creation of a detailed program of activities and spaces.

In spring 2005, the conservancy conducted an international search for designers, eventually selecting a team led by the San Francisco landscape architecture and planning firm Hargreaves Associates and including the Houston office of the architecture firm PageSoutherlandPage and local landscape architect Lauren Griffith. In addition, artists Margo Sawyer of Elgin, Texas, and Doug Hollis of San Francisco were on the team to identify art projects as part of the site plan and to produce commissioned works. A team of local and international engineers and consultants was added as site planning and design progressed.

The conservancy board worked closely with the team over a 14-month design and documentation period. In addition, the public participation process continued with workshops to



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Art projects were installed throughout the 12-acre (4.9-ha) Discovery Green, including San Francisco artist Doug Hollis's stainless-steel water sculpture *Mist Tree*.

solicit input, refine the program, and generate a constituency for the park's future. "A civic project of this magnitude is hard work, and it requires the passion and commitment of so many people to succeed," notes Nancy Kinder, former chair of the conservancy board.

The design of the park emphasizes connectivity to the city surrounding it. A north-south promenade replaced a street that had bisected the site and creates linkages to the ballpark to the north and the arena to the south. The major activities of the site are clustered along this promenade. An east-west path, shaded

by the boughs of a double row of live oak trees already at the site, crosses the spine and connects the downtown core to the convention center.

Though the conservancy board members wanted a range of activities and programs, they also wanted the park to provide areas for respite. The park accommodates a wide range of activities while still providing the experience of a green oasis. The major challenge presented to the design team was to keep the park green while providing the diverse programming desired.

The result is a place that celebrates Houston's garden heritage, but also features a wide range of amenities, including:

- ▷ a five-star restaurant;
- ▷ a casual café;
- ▷ an interactive water feature;
- ▷ a one-acre (0.4-ha) lake suitable for sailing remote-controlled boats in summer or for ice skating in winter;
- ▷ an old world Italian bocce ball court and a down-home Texas horseshoe pitch, both set within gardens;
- ▷ a scenic jogging trail;
- ▷ a putting green;
- ▷ a pair of dog runs for large and small breeds; and
- ▷ a great lawn for casual sports and large gatherings.

"If there is a universal comment, it is surprise that there is so much to do in just 12 acres without the park feeling crowded," notes Guy Hagstette, president of the conservancy. "The conservancy's initial focus on activating the park, combined with the design team's elegant site plan, really paid off."

The conservancy also wanted the park to meet high standards of sustainable design and to integrate art. Designed to qualify for Gold certification under the U.S. Green Building

Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) rating system, the park incorporates 256 photovoltaic and solar hot water panels funded by a \$1 million gift from Houston-based BP America. Building orientation and extensive shading devices also harness and deflect the sun's light and heat.

Century-old trees on the site were protected and preserved and are supplemented by other large trees saved from destruction elsewhere. The design emphasizes native and climate-adapted plants and uses local materials wherever possible to reduce the energy consumption required to transport materials manufactured far away. Light-rail access and bike racks sprinkled through the park encourage alternatives to the dominant car culture of Houston.

Art and its integration into the overall design and activities of the park are a prevailing theme of Discovery Green. Sawyer's *Synchronicity of Color* consists of multicolored panels covering the interior stairwells and the exterior walls of the underground parking structure on the south side of the park's great lawn. Hollis's water sculpture *Mist Tree*, near the children's playground, creates an ironic blur between built and natural forms, and his carved limestone sculptures *Listening Vessels*, placed in a quiet garden, invite the same kind of participatory engagement as the rest of the park. French artist Jean Dubuffet's grand, static *Monument au Fantome*, a \$7 million donation from a downtown real estate investor, is also located in the park.

"From day one, our board was focused on the long-term funding required to create and sustain a world-class urban park," comments Kinder. "Without the money, the rest is just talk."

Besides the initial fundraising effort, four continuing funding streams for the park were identified:

- ▷ Houston is committed by contract to provide \$750,000 per year, adjusted for inflation, for maintenance and security—a sum estimated to be equivalent to the costs the city would have incurred if it managed the park itself.
- ▷ Rent from the park's restaurant and café is projected to produce another \$750,000 per year. Rent is calculated as a pure percentage of gross sales, which currently are exceeding expectations.
- ▷ The conservancy will hold a major gala every other year with a goal of supplying an average of \$600,000 to \$750,000 annually. The first gala, held in February, met the high end of that goal.
- ▷ Through programming sponsorships and rent from private events, the conservancy plans to raise another \$650,000 to \$750,000 each year.

Safety in the park has been a major operational concern. Security guards and field staff patrol the site 24 hours a day. Off-duty Houston police officers on bike patrol supplement permanent staff when the park is particularly active, and security cameras provide additional observation and monitoring. Security in the park is also provided by what Hagstette refers to as "crime prevention through environmental design": the park's spaces are visually continuous, light levels are high, and the buildings' broad expanses of glass provide "eyes on the park." "Many visitors have commented about how comfortable they are entering the park. The activity, site plan, and design have created an inherently safe environment," he says.

White also credits this combination of a professional security presence and citizen self-patrol with creating the feeling of safety in the park. "The best deter-



JIM OLIVE



JIM OLIVE

Discovery Green, envisioned as a new kind of urban park to bring together the city's diverse, cosmopolitan population, includes a lake, a five-star restaurant, and a casual café.

rent to bad behavior is when you allow thousands of happy citizens to gather together in a place they consider their own. That is the key reason why Discovery Green feels so safe," he says.

The response of Houston residents to Discovery Green has been enthusiastic. In its first four months of operation, more than 230,000 people visited the park, and attendance at individual events has surpassed 75,000. When asked about the response of his constituents to the park, White says, "Go look on any weekend and you will get your answer—hundreds if not thousands of people from all over the city enjoying the park, including families with their young children, people walking their dogs, couples listening to a concert, and natives bringing their out-of-town friends to the park to show off their city."

The hoped-for revitalization of the east side of downtown is well underway. "From its announcement, Discovery Green has shaped new development on downtown's east side with nearly \$400

million of projects now under construction and another half billion dollars of development soon to follow," says Bob Eury, president of Central Houston Inc., a private nonprofit corporation supported by area businesses and institutions. "Our vision of a high-density park district neighborhood is quickly becoming a reality."

A 37-story multifamily residential tower, One Park Place, developed by the Houston-based Finger Companies, has topped out across the street from Discovery Green. The first new residential high-rise to be built in downtown Houston in decades, its promotional material makes it clear that its location on the park is a big selling point for moving downtown. Discovery Tower, a 30-story office building developed by Dallas-based Trammell Crow, is currently rising on the north side of the park, and its promotional release also cites the park as an amenity.

"The public really responds to high-quality, well-managed public space in an urban area," Hagstette says. "Downtown sites offer unique opportunities to include activities that enhance life and generate revenues for ongoing operations." Observes Brady Carruth, Kinder's recent successor as chair of the Discovery Green Conservancy, the most important lesson from Discovery Green is "to show Houstonians what can be accomplished when local government and private interests come together with a vision to create a better city."

LAWRENCE W. SPECK, an architect and design principal for PageSouthernlandPage, is on the faculty of the School of Architecture at the University of Texas at Austin. **MARY MARGARET JONES** is senior principal of Hargreaves Associates, a landscape architecture and planning firm.


Second-Tier Revivals

AMERICA'S DOWNTOWNS ARE ENJOYING a renaissance, thanks to public/private partnerships, innovative deals with visionary developers, and continuing demand—propelled by high energy costs—for closer-in housing. A number of U.S. cities—including Pittsburgh, Charlotte, Orlando, and Baltimore, among others—are capitalizing on this trend, recognizing that revitalizing their downtown areas now will continue to pay dividends in the future.

In fact, the sweet spot of American real estate today is downtown, says C. William “Bill” Struever, partner, chief executive, and president of Baltimore-based Struever Bros. Eccles & Rouse, a firm that has revitalized several urban neighborhoods on the East Coast. “Our downtowns are the future of our cities. The more people live downtown and the more businesses locate downtown, the stronger the social fabric of our urban core becomes,” he says. “Downtowns are the magical dynamic of American cities. Four-dollar-a-gallon gas is creating a profound change in lifestyles.”

Over the past few years, visionary local governments, business leaders, developers, and finance partners have collaborated to bring many new development projects to downtowns, says Jeff Decker, a partner and head of the Orlando, Florida, Real Estate Practice Group of the law firm Baker Hostetler. “The synergies among these new residential, retail, and office projects are creating broad-based appeal for downtown living. Downtown Orlando, for instance, has already seen a wide range of new businesses open along its core, as well as many new residents moving into the area.”

Pittsburgh is another example of a city where companies such as locally based financial services firm PNC and others are helping revitalize the downtown area. “More than \$1 billion in public and private investments are under way in downtown Pittsburgh, ranging from cultural arts facilities to



Pittsburgh is an example of a city where companies such as locally based financial services firm PNC are helping to revitalize the downtown area. Three PNC Plaza, a 23-story mixed-use development, scheduled to open next year, is the first high rise to be built in downtown Pittsburgh in more than 20 years.

ROBIN COMPANIES

loft housing, along with new retail and office space,” says Diana Reid, executive vice president and head of PNC Real Estate Finance. “The success is driven by collaboration between the public and private sectors.”

For example, notes Reid, Three PNC Plaza, a 23-story mixed-use development scheduled to open next year, is the first high rise to be built in downtown Pittsburgh in more than 20 years and is expected to be a catalyst for continued downtown investment. “By redeveloping a series of vacant buildings to create more office and residential space, we can restore a section of Pittsburgh that is crucial to the long-term success of the city,” says Pennsylvania Governor Ed Rendell.

Pittsburgh has revitalized its downtown area through a combination of public and private investment, including renovation, explains Jack R. Norris, managing director of the Pittsburgh office of CB Richard Ellis (CBRE). Piatt Place, a conversion of a former department store in the downtown area, is a mixed-use project containing first-floor retail space, the Capital Grille and McCormick & Schmick’s restaurants, 180,000 square feet (16,700 sq m) of office space on three large floor plates, and 65 luxury condominiums on the upper stories. Diagonally across the intersection of Fifth Street and Wood Avenue from Piatt Place is the former G.C. Murphy building, being redeveloped to house the new downtown YMCA plus 120,000 square feet (11,000 sq m) of retail and residential space. Both projects are being developed by Millcraft Industries in concert with state and local public funding.

CBRE is leasing 600 Grant Street, a 2.5 million-square-foot (232,000-sq-m) building that houses the U.S. Steel Corporation headquarters. Late last year, CBRE closed a lease with the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center for 500,000 square feet (46,500 sq m), and the medical center has moved all its administrative offices to the building,



The University of Pittsburgh Medical Center has moved all its administrative offices to 600 Grant Street, consolidating Pittsburgh’s largest employer in the central business district.

Norris says. “This will consolidate Pittsburgh’s largest employer into the central business district,” he says. “Pittsburgh is the national leader in projected rent growth over the next two years. This contra-trend phenomenon is welcomed and indicative of our rapidly diversifying economy.”

Downtown Pittsburgh also is experiencing a hospitality boom sparked by a surge in demand for recreation and destination developments, says W. Jeffrey Funovits, managing principal in the Pittsburgh office of Burt Hill, an architecture/engineering firm working on several hotel projects downtown, as well as a nearby new alternative sports complex and a condominium development targeting young professionals. The firm also recently completed a master plan for the region’s Riverlife Task Force, which focused on providing recreational access to the city’s riverfront, as well as architecture/civil engineering work on three local hotel

projects—the Ross Street Hilton Garden Inn, North Shore Fairfield Inn & Suites, and the Mount Lebanon Springhill Suites—all of which resulted directly from increased tourism, says Funovits.

“The revitalization has made choosing to visit and/or live in the downtown area a more viable and appealing option,” he adds. “A growing cultural district, world-class museums, three beautiful sports venues, and improved commercial areas have helped improve the city’s image from an industrial brownfield to a renaissance city, which has led to stronger urban neighborhoods and a relatively good job market and job growth.”

Baltimore is also seeing a downtown renaissance, says John B. Frisch, chairman of the locally based law firm Miles & Stockbridge. “The city is experiencing strong growth in key industries, including information technology and government

contracting, financial services, life sciences, and tourism, as it makes the transformation from a blue-collar to a knowledge-based economy,” he says. “In addition, there has been an intense focus on issues of crime and grime.” The law firm has been involved with a number of projects in the area, including the east Baltimore life sciences research park, the National Aquarium, and restoration of the Hippodrome Theatre.

Over the past several years, Maryland’s largest city has experienced an economic and cultural renaissance, says Roy Higgs, chief executive and managing partner of Development Design Group (DDG), a Baltimore-based international design and architecture firm. “Downtown Baltimore has become a mecca of new shops, restaurants, offices, and residential,” he points out. “The convenience of living downtown, with work and entertainment options, along with the excitement of Baltimore’s tremendous waterfront, has prompted many new developments, including downtown Baltimore’s eastward expansion Harbor East. Traditionally, downtown living is strong with young professionals, but Baltimore’s increased retail and restaurant options have attracted empty-nest couples as well.”

Downtown Baltimore has strong economic drivers, including fast-growing new business startups like Laureate and Under Armour, established businesses moving into the city like MetLife and Morgan Stanley, life sciences and university-related users, and the government, points out Struever. “In 2007, our company and our partners leased more than 1 million square feet [93,000 sq m] of office space, representing many thousands of new jobs,” he says. “Ten years ago, with crime a major issue, a company such as Legg Mason may have chosen to move out of town to the suburbs. Now Legg is consolidating suburban operations into the city. But the city has changed dramatically. It is safer and

more exciting. The rental market is strong; it is not overbuilt like Las Vegas or Miami.”

Baltimore will continue to enjoy job growth and an influx of people that will cushion the economy, predicts Michael A. Anikeeff, professor and chair of the Edward St. John Department of Real Estate at the Johns Hopkins University Carey Business School in Baltimore. “Baltimore’s downtown harborfront continues to be an ever-changing landscape, with Harbor East its most notable ongoing development, now clocking in at 1 million square feet [93,000 sq m] of Class A office space and 250,000 square feet [23,000 sq m] of retail,” says Anikeeff. “Look for coming development—Harbor Point, Canton Crossing, Port Covington, Middle Branch, and Westport—to shape this evolving waterfront and help deepen Baltimore City’s attractiveness to new companies and residents.”

In Orlando, revitalization of the downtown area has restored its status as a social des-

ination for residents and nonresidents—a place where people stay after work or visit for dining, entertainment, and cultural events, says Baker Hostetler’s Decker. “We now see many more retail, dining, and entertainment venues, as well as sophisticated living options, in the downtown area,” he says. “This renewed commitment for all facets of residential living in downtown has appealed to many young professionals, bringing an increased vibrancy to the city’s core.”

Baker Hostetler has been involved in a number of office, retail, and residential projects in the downtown Orlando core, including the Plaza, a mixed-use office, residential, and retail condominium project that was one of the largest redevelopment projects in downtown Orlando. “The public and private investment made now and over the last few years will provide momentum to energize the future growth of downtown Orlando,” Decker says.

Baltimore’s successful waterfront area has prompted new development, including an eastward expansion.





Orlando has shown a renewed commitment to residential living downtown with projects like the Plaza, a mixed-use project consisting of two office towers with a total of close to 400,000 rentable square feet (37,000 sq m) of space, a 305-unit residential tower, plus retail, dining, and entertainment venues, including a multiplex movie theater unit.

KUHN COMPANIES



The downtown area of Charlotte, North Carolina, is experiencing an increase in residential development as more residents seek to live and work in center city.

Investment is also fueling the transformation of the Charlotte, North Carolina, downtown, an area known as uptown and center city. “The increase in residential development along with retailers coming back to the center city have increased the quality of life for many

of our residents because they can now live and work with all the amenities that a bigger city downtown has to offer,” says J. Andrew Rowe, director of real estate for DCG Commercial Inc., the commercial real estate arm of Charlotte’s Davis Capital Group Inc. “The

increase in gas prices and the growth in our commuter transportation arteries have also been catalysts, attracting younger generations uptown seeking a nightlife and older generations seeking to cut out their commutes.”

Developments such as the Epicenter, 5th & Poplar, 220 South Tryon, Trademark, Encore, and the Trust are giving Charlotte residents the option to live and work uptown, he points out. “The relocation of our minor league baseball team to an uptown stadium will also be a nice complement to the sports located uptown already,” Rowe says. DCG Commercial also is building the North Lake Business Park, a 236,000-square-foot (21,900-sq-m) mixed-use development north of the city. The project includes office space, medical office space, a hotel, and retail space.

Johnny Harris, president and chief executive of Lincoln Harris, a Charlotte-based corporate real estate company, traces the revitalization of uptown Charlotte to the 1994 NCAA basketball tournament, when the eyes of the sports world were focused on the city. “Since that time, with the addition of the Museum of the New South, Imax Theater, the expanded Discovery Place, NASCAR Hall of Fame, and the over 6,000 residential units, the whole uptown area has become an unbelievable place to go and to be a part of,” he says. “You begin to find a place where young people think the activity is. Instead of going to Atlanta, they move to Charlotte to be part of this quality of life.”

Increasingly vibrant downtowns such as those in Pittsburgh, Charlotte, Orlando, and Baltimore provide examples of how urban areas have evolved over the past several decades—and where they will be headed in the future.—**M.S.**