

Development Fuses Past And Present

Twenty-five miles north of downtown Atlanta, Alpharetta City Center is taking placemaking to new heights.

Lynn Peisner



Keeping the past alive in the Alpharetta City Center development was important to the leadership team behind the project. The Jones house could have been demolished, but instead was integrated into a small restaurant district at the mixed-use, urban property.

A special kind of mixed-use magic has happened in Alpharetta. A 26-acre development that's springing to life downtown and catalyzing nearby growth is the result of various groups serendipitously on their marks at the same starting line and sharing similar goals for a finished product.

City officials, private developers and engaged citizens came together to shape Alpharetta City Center, which was announced in 2015 but has been years in the making. The project puts a fresh spin on placemaking. It didn't just come in and create a faux downtown. It fans out around a historic district that is already there, extending downtown Alpharetta by six city blocks. This type of footprint was possible because of a new downtown masterplan the city adopted the same year the project was announced.

"Much of the change that has happened

would not have been possible without this masterplan and an associated downtown code that went into effect — basically opening up the door to the private development community in terms of a lot greater flexibility for what was possible from a zoning and development/redevelopment standpoint," explains Ben Kern, GIS specialist and planner with the city's Community Development Department.

The city had been assembling the downtown land for about 15 years before reaching out for a private partner. For the project's public funding, residents came on board and approved a \$29 million bond referendum in 2011.

"I don't know how you can do something like this without a public-private partnership," says Alpharetta City Center developer Cheri Morris. "To do mixed-use in Alpharetta, you need at least 25 acres of land, and that's not going to happen

in the urban core without a partnership."

Today, Alpharetta City Center blends municipal buildings with mixed-use retail, restaurant, office and residential. City Hall sits on the east end of the property, creating an aesthetic of a classic terminating vista in the spirit of traditional town planning. City hall is neighbored by a branch of the Fulton County Public Library. The project is bookended on the west side with a replica of the 1858 Milton County Courthouse that once stood on that same piece of land. The building, which will be home to Highland Bakery, is such an accurate replica, that many visitors mistake it for a restoration instead of a new building.

The city constructed the municipal buildings, which opened in 2015, as well as three parks, the street grid and the parking deck, then sold off the outparcels to the development team of MMS Partners,

Southern Local carries locally sourced merchandise with a southern flair. The boutique opened at Alpharetta City Center in October 2018.

a group comprised of Morris & Fellows, MidCity Real Estate Partners, South City Partners and Hedgewood Homes. South City Partners, an Atlanta-based multifamily developer, and Morris & Fellows developed Amorance, which contains 168 luxury apartments, and the street-level shops called The District. MidCity Partners developed the office building. Voysey is an adjacent neighborhood of 42 single-family homes, starting in the \$600s, that Hedgewood Homes is developing. Now fully built out, the project will continue announcing new tenants through the spring.

A PLACE, NOT A PROJECT

Morris & Fellows was behind a similar urban redevelopment in Woodstock, Georgia, called Woodstock Downtown. There, Morris also executed a refurbishment of a historic urban district with creative restaurants, homes and retail with nods to the city's past woven throughout.

Morris believes urban mixed-use projects are only as successful as the people who actually come to them, walk around, stay awhile and maybe even decide to call the place home. Sounds simple enough, but authenticity and popularity aren't easily manufactured. For Morris, building a destination that will attract shoppers, diners and residents for the long haul means pitching ideas that aren't initially music to investors' ears. That's because maximizing gross leasable area or coming in on the tightest possible architectural budget doesn't guarantee people will love a development for years to come. Instead, Morris advocates for carefully curating walkable physical spaces with trend-setting tenants who can afford top rents.

New construction and historical restorations are found along the new street grid system. The new buildings, particularly the retail and multifamily, were carefully constructed to remain true to what downtown Alpharetta would have looked like in the later 19th and earlier 20th centuries — when downtowns consisted of single buildings occupied by the owner, each of whom designed their own facades.



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CENTER REVIEW



Jekyll Brewing will be the first brewery located in Alpharetta. The brewery/tasting room will open this summer at Alpharetta City Center.



Kilwin's, which offers chocolates, ice cream, coffee and confections, joins a diverse lineup of retail and restaurant tenants in Alpharetta's reinvented downtown.

"We have 10 buildings, but it looks like we have 28," says Morris. "We worked with multiple architects throughout the process to share the vision that we are a place, not a project. We are the history of downtown, not a development."

The diverse arrangement of building sizes and styles is organized into two areas, The District and The Gardens, which, altogether, offer 45,000 square feet of shops; 45,000 square feet of freestanding restaurants; 2.5 acres of parks and greenspace; 210 residences, consisting

of apartments, and single-family homes; the 160-employee corporate headquarters of DataScan (which DataScan owns); and a 445-space parking deck, which complements 125 spaces of street parking.

Morris' intentions weren't to pave over and completely reinvent downtown, but to build on its basic bone structure and bring forward the history and culture of Alpharetta. In fact, many of the buildings are connected to well-known local stories.

Restaurant Holmes, a cocktail-centric restaurant led by Atlanta chef Taylor

Neary, takes up some of the project's most interesting space. The standalone restaurant is housed in a former single-family home that was built in 1914. Morris made the decision not to demolish it – which she admits wasn't the most profit-maximizing thing to do – because it anchored what she calls the architectural vocabulary of the project. George Jones, a 98-year-old resident of a nearby seniors community, was born in the house, which was built by his father. Jones was the first customer when the restaurant opened for business in July 2018.

Next door is the popular restaurant Citizen Soul. On that site, George "Hard" Bailey, an African-American blacksmith, once had his shop. Bailey has deep ties to the community, having donated the land that became the Bailey Johnson School, which until 1967 was the only school black children could attend prior to integration. The restaurant's logo, an anvil, pays homage to the building's former owner. Behind Citizen Soul is an 80-year-old oak tree the developers saved and built a shade garden around.

Unlike the nearby mixed-use center Avalon, Alpharetta City Center is primarily made up of local or regional retail and restaurants. The restaurant spaces, specifically, were only leased to local chef-driven concepts.

Chiringa, a restaurant spun off a popular spot along Florida's Highway 30A, opened in August on one of the Town Green "jewelboxes," which are two white, airy buildings that flank the green space. Botiwalla, famed Chef Meherwan Irani's Indian street food concept, is under construction in the other jewelbox. SHADE Street Food and Bar opened in December and is a late-night hotspot that cranks until the wee hours. Jinya Ramen Bar and Lapeer Seafood open in March, followed by Never Enough Thyme and Central City Tavern in April and May. Jekyll Brewing, the first brewery located in Alpharetta, opens this summer, taking the upper floor of the Exchange Building in a space that includes a 2,500-square-foot rooftop deck overlooking Market Street Park. The building's design was inspired by downtown's 19th Century cotton gins and warehouses. Other restaurants include Kilwin's Ice Cream and Vitality Bowls.

Retailers that are open include Anna Bella Fine Lingerie, The Ballog, Core 57, DressUp, Al's European Barber Shop, Exquisite Living, Hemline, The Hope Network, Magnolia Moon, Mountain High Outfitters, Natural Body Spa and Shop, Perched, The Pink Valise, The Red Hound, Skin ReMEDI, Southern Local, and Spirited Boutique. Joining the lineup this spring are Olli and Park children's wear and Chic Evolution in Art.

Morris has been in the retail industry for more than 30 years in a variety of roles. Today, she is becoming well known for these popular redevelopments of overlooked historic downtowns. Over the years, she's taken notes on what developers get right and what they miss when creating what she calls "offbeat urban mixed-use product."

"I saw a lot of \$100 million mistakes along with some really great things," she says, noting that investors often look past important details about who today's shopper really is and what he and she really want.

"We've had a dearth of creative retail for several decades," says Morris. "Somehow we convinced our consumers that they needed to go to the mall and buy jeans from chain stores that all look alike. All of that has worked well for the investment market. But in America, we're seeing the emerging strength of the individual. Consumers don't want to be like everyone else, so there's a need for true creativity."

City Center received a 2018 Development of Excellence award from the Atlanta Regional Commission. Today, Morris & Fellows is heading back to Woodstock to be the master developer for Woodstock City Center, which will add 35,000 feet of retail, 35,000 feet of office and a 100-room boutique hotel to downtown.

"Everyone thought Woodstock was lightning in a bottle," Morris says. "I had to come back and show them it could be done again."

The two developments have had a strong impact on growth outside the perimeter of the projects. According to the city of Alpharetta, \$400 million in private investment has poured into the half-mile radius around Alpharetta City Center since the project was first approved.

"Before the City Center project was announced, there were 670 residences

within a half mile of the site," says Kern. "Since its announcement in 2015, 930 new residences have been built or are under construction in that same area. Of all the residences built or under construction in Alpharetta in the past three years, two-thirds of them are within walking distance of City Center."

Walking through the development on a recent afternoon, Morris was delighted talking about how many families, friends and couples are spending quality time here.

"I consider myself a developer of social places," says Morris. "City Center is a very special environment. To achieve that, we have to push ourselves in the areas of architecture, place making, parks, green spaces, history and legend. We have to have linkages to the community to create places for people. I'm an old hippie. So parallel to the profit motive, it's important to me to be proud of what I've left on Earth." **SCB**

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