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Metro Atlanta seeks next wave of game-changers

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Centennial Olympic Park: Created as an Olympics-worthy gathering spot in 1996, the 21-acre greenspace has taken off as a development destination, especially since the Georgia Aquarium opened there in 2005. It's also drawn the relocated World of Coca-Cola, the College Football Hall of Fame and the Center for Civil and Human Rights. Now the Georgia World Congress Center Authority is negotiating to buy the adjacent Metro Atlanta Chamber building to boost park acreage.

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EXPLORE

For decades, metro Atlanta's growth was a story of suburban sprawl, of turning raw tracts of what developers call "greenfield" — acres and acres of untouched forest — into the shopping centers, swim-tennis communities and burger drive-thrus that dominate the area landscape today.

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Many of them changed the game.

The 1984 opening of Gwinnett Place Mall, for instance, transformed the sleepy, pastoral but land-rich neighbor to Atlanta's north into the state's second most populous county virtually overnight. The Wildwood development in Cobb County in 1985 ushered in the live-work-play model while more recently the growth of the IT



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industry has changed Alpharetta into a giant traffic-snarled office park whose population doubles during the workday.

These days the emphasis is on redevelopment projects, experts say. Today's game changers are either "adaptive re-use" developments such as the Atlanta Beltline or Fortune 500 magnets such as Georgia Tech's Tech Square, which has attracted giants such as Home Depot and Panasonic to open offices there and NCR Corp. to plan a new headquarters complex next door.

Driving the change: the post-recession, post-housing bust economy and changing lifestyle demands, the experts said. Tighter lending makes it tougher to support sprawl. Traffic-weary commuters and car-wary millennials are beginning to embrace public transportation or are moving closer in. Suburban cities such as Norcross and Marietta are reinventing their downtowns with a more "urban" feel to attract businesses, shoppers and festivals.



Game-changing redevelopments in metro Atlanta

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Bob Simons, a partner in commercial real estate law firm Hartman Simons, said timing is key for a viable redevelopment project. Developer OliverMcMillan's Buckhead Atlanta project — the reinvention of Buckhead's old party district as a high-end retail-residential magnet — is in some ways the vision of the property's original owner, developer Ben Carter. But Carter launched his idea just as the economy tanked and eventually had to give up the tract.

"I don't think it's luck, but absolutely it's timing," Simons said.

Design is also critical, said Jerry Cooper, a principal at architectural firm Cooper Carry. The Georgia Dome and Turner Field never lived up to their promise because parking requirements made both destinations pedestrian unfriendly and hard to sell for further development.

"The Braves have recognized this and moved to a mixed development structure from the beginning," he said, referring to the Atlanta Braves plans for a new home in Cobb County.


Leo Wiener, board chairman of the Gwinnett Place community improvement district, said suburbs also are switching their attention to redevelopment. Gwinnett Place's owners are considering ripping the roof off the mall, creating a pedestrian street grid and converting its anchor department stores to free-standing structures.

"Nobody would have been talking about this 10 years ago," Wiener said. "Five years from now we will have a lot of (redevelopment) examples."

But which ones will have the intended game-changing result? Metro Atlanta's track record is spotty.

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Here are some big projects that have created lasting ripple effects in their communities, some that failed to do that, and some that may change the game in the future.

Game Change SUCCESSES

Centennial Olympic Park: Created as an Olympics-worthy gathering spot in 1996, the 21-acre greenspace has taken off as a development destination, especially since the Georgia Aquarium opened there in 2005. It's also drawn the relocated World of Coca-Cola, the College Football Hall of Fame and the Center for Civil and Human Rights. Now the Georgia World Congress Center Authority is negotiating to buy the adjacent Metro Atlanta Chamber building to boost park acreage.

Buckhead Atlanta: Once Atlanta's party district, Buckhead Atlanta has transformed the area into a high-end shopping destination that has lured mall retailer Restoration Hardware to open a flagship free-standing store across the street. New apartments and rising property values around the project are making some nearby parcel owners, such as rent-to-own retailer Aaron's, consider selling their buildings.

Tech Square: Midtown's Tech Square is hot as corporations and residential developers seek to be closer to what is becoming Atlanta's tech heart (though Alpharetta might argue). NCR plans to move its headquarters from Gwinnett to take draw in tech-savvy Tech students while several big apartment projects, such as the Square on Fifth tower, create walking-distance housing.

Atlanta Beltline: The Atlanta Beltline has been one of metro Atlanta's best redevelopment success stories — at least along its extensive eastside neighborhoods. Built along abandoned railroad tracks, the project includes parks, jogging trails and activity fields aimed at one day forming a loop. In the Old Fourth Ward thousands of new apartments have been built or are planned. Owners of the property that houses concert venue favorite The Masquerade plan to build apartments on the multi-acre site, though whether The Masquerade will be razed is unclear. Yet to be seen is whether future sections of the loop can approach the eastside success.

Downtown Duluth: Several suburban downtowns have been redeveloped in recent years, including Norcross, Roswell, Decatur, Vinings and Marietta Square, as city leaders try to boost foot traffic, business and an overall sense of livability. Duluth has done so by attracting unique features like concert venue Eddie Owen Presents at Red Clay Music Foundry, by the founder of Eddie's Attic in Decatur, or more intown-like restaurants such as Pure Tacqueria.

Game Change FAILS

Georgia Dome: Vine City residents hoped back in the 1990s, when the Georgia Dome was constructed, that it would transform their neighborhood. Other than the construction of a few new houses, the promise of change in the economically struggling neighborhood never happened.

Turner Field: Different community, basically same results as the Georgia Dome. One government-backed effort to develop a next-door entertainment attraction, called FanPlex, was a notable flop.

Underground Atlanta: Despite strong name recognition stemming from the original destination, attempts at resurrecting the downtown shopping and eating complex have fallen flat. Now, a South Carolina-based developer has control of the property and plans a mixed-use development with possibly a long-sought grocery store for downtown.

Game Change POTENTIAL

General Motors plant: Redevelopment of the massive Doraville site with housing, office, retail and restaurants is planned. What actually happens remains to be seen.

Underground Atlanta: see above.

Atlanta Streetcar: City leaders hope the streetcar can spur economic activity in the areas along its route, particularly the Sweet Auburn area. The jury is still out.

SunTrust Field: The future home of the Braves, near the I-285/75 junction in Cobb, has already drawn a Comcast office tower, an Omni Hotel and a concert venue to the surrounding development. But few ballparks have turned the double play of mixing a sports venue with a thriving year-round commercial district.

TODAY'S REPORT IS PART OF THE ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION'S EXAMINATION OF THE ECONOMIC STATE OF METRO ATLANTA SINCE THE RECESSION.

Past installments include an overview of the region's strengths and weaknesses, as well as stories on peer cities that have forged faster recoveries. Our reporters have also examined the role of regional planning in spurring longterm growth, delved into "inflection points," or pivotal moments, in regional development and talked to CEOs whose companies are expanding here.

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