

CHANGES

THE WESTERN FRONT

An influx of creative businesses and daring new residents make the **Westside** one of Atlanta's hottest—and coolest—frontiers

BY JONATHAN LERNER PHOTOGRAPHY BY ERICA GEORGE DINES

Howell Mill Road, between downtown and I-75, is the main drag of an area that's not easy to define. It's too spread out and disconnected to be called a neighborhood. Anyway, it already includes two bungalow neighborhoods, Howell Station and Berkeley Park, plus a shabby, amorphous old community known as Blandtown—in addition to its warehouses and salvage yards, kudzu-choked acres and nodes of fashionable redevelopment. The area's name is uncertain, too. Some now call it West Intown, some say Midtown West and others (including us) refer to it simply as the Westside. Even if the naming issue were settled, where does the Westside actually begin and end? Let's say its borders are I-75 on the north and Northside Drive on the east. The other boundaries are sketchier, but extend at least to Marietta Street on the south and Marietta Boulevard on the west. It's sliced through by railroad rights-of-way, furnished with less-than-adequate roads and discontinuous sidewalks—and suffers perhaps from multiple personality disorder. Whether and how this part of town will ever be successfully knit together as a seamless, functional urban district remains unclear. In fact, there's really only one thing absolutely certain right now about the Westside: the place is buzzing with energy and changing fast.

The renaissance dates back to the early 1990s, when King Shaw began the renovation of his family's historic plow factory on Marietta Street into lofts for artists and other creatives. Its transformation into the King Plow Arts Center was a brilliant, and award-winning, example of the adaptive reuse of an industrial space. The artists have mostly moved on now, but the complex is still home to Actor's Express theater, Food Studio, Paul Mitchell The School, several function spaces and dozens

of creative firms. Perhaps because of its isolated location, however, King Plow did not immediately spark much adjacent redevelopment.

Meanwhile, the area around Howell Mill and Huff roads had become home to several businesses catering to the interior-design trade. In 1999, Michael Phillips and Kathleen Walker turned a complex of buildings at that key intersection into showroom and restaurant spaces. Bacchanalia, arguably the city's most sophisticated restaurant, surprised the world by moving there from Buckhead. An unstoppable momentum was generated.

All this was taking place in the context of the phenomenal rebirth of interest in

central Atlanta, a trend accelerating ever since the 1996 Olympics, which has created a burgeoning market for in-town housing. The Westside was not the first focus for new residential construction, but it's definitely on developers' agendas now. Since 2003, some 1,300 units have been built in the district (as we're defining it here), according to Matthew Levin of Sperry Van Ness realty; nearly 2,000 more are slated for construction by 2008, and at least that many again within the following few years. Perhaps in reaction to the current in-town condo glut, most of these will be rental units. Thus their occupants are likely to be younger and less affluent than the clientele from elsewhere who come to the high-end boutiques and showrooms. Another growing presence is the people who work at the numer-

ous advertising, architecture, film and design studios that continue to locate on the Westside. A demographically mixed—and in that sense authentically urban—scene is the likely result. The reurbanization will speed up when the Beltline transit system is built, since it passes through the Westside.

The epicenter of development right now is at the intersection of Howell Mill Road and Marietta Street, where Richard Martin has a master plan for his 13 acres. Eventually, he'll add a mid-rise residential component, but now his renovation of



Regeneration. An interior courtyard at the King Plow Arts Center.



Urban chic. The *Atlanta Peach*-sponsored launch party for Verde Home, which, along with Kiang Gallery, is among the newest tenants at The Brickworks. 5 Seasons brewery opens this spring.

BEN ROSE

warehouses into a retail and loft-office complex called The Brickworks is nearing completion. It is already home to Toscano & Sons, an Italian market, Luxe Atlanta, a fashion boutique, and two shops specializing in recycled and sustainably produced new furnishings, Verde Home and Waldenour. Kiang Gallery moved there recently, joining early tenant Sandler Hudson Gallery. A branch of Five Seasons Brewing, the Sandy Springs organic brewery and gastropub, is coming soon. The Brickworks is adjacent to the recently built M Street apartment-and-retail complex. Ample 15-foot sidewalks front all of these buildings—a tantalizing suggestion, along with the fitful but ongoing revival of Marietta Street further to the east, of a viable pedestrian route into downtown.

The next focus of redevelopment activity, already underway, is where 14th Street dead-ends into Howell Mill. There, Chris Faussemagne and Mike Millett, from Weaver & Woodbery Real Estate, are transforming the huge White Provision warehouse. It will become a complex of shops and boutiques, incorporating several new mixed retail/residential buildings, arranged in a way that promises a pedestrian-friendly welcome. Just next door is the new location of retromodern.com, which moved along with its Alessi and Kartel boutiques from Peachtree Street. Both the Brickworks and White Provision projects involve sensitive renovation of historic industrial buildings, a consistent theme in Westside redevelopment. But much of the district's building stock is neither historic nor distinguished, and there are many patches of virtually empty land. Perhaps this accounts for the absence of tricked-up historicism and the many examples of bold modernism in both new projects and adaptations. It's what you

“An authentically urban scene is the likely result.”

might expect from an architecture office, like Menefee + Winer's new one, but it's also seen in the Carlos and Marguerite Mason clinic, at the Atlanta Humane Society and even at the Atlanta Union Mission, which occupies an art-deco former industrial building onto which a handsome contemporary addition has been grafted. “I like when time and money are spent on architecture as opposed to just throwing something up. I don't like cheap development,” says *Trading Spaces* designer Hildi

Santo Tomas, whose business partner, architect Franz Schneider, built a cluster of striking modernist live-work townhouses amid the bungalows of Berkeley Park. “Building with integrity is important,” she adds, “especially when somebody is juxtaposing something new with historic buildings.”

The aesthetic and urbanistic quality of future redevelopment along Chattahoochee Avenue and Ellsworth Industrial Boulevard is less certain. New zoning there permits mid-rise residential buildings; large-scale complexes will likely result. Industry is going to disappear from the area “very quickly,” Martin says. “Land is at \$1.5 million an acre. Residential developers can pay it, since they can build density.” “That's the fragile element,” Phillips says. “In Atlanta we don't tend to do things of quality in residential multifamily.” He describes himself and developers like Martin, Faussemagne and Millett as “stewards...of a place that has authentic qualities,” and points out that so far there is virtually no intrusion of national or chain retail. “We've really taken a curatorial attitude to the kinds of businesses we've nurtured, trying to create a vibe, which is the antithesis of what big development is about.”

WESTSIDE

GREGOR TURK AND BOSCOE

Three years ago, artist Gregor Turk, whose work often explores images of topography and urbanization, bought a nearly derelict house on a street of crack dens. "I have a high threshold for dilapidated houses and aggressive kudzu," he grins. Architect Amy Landesberg helped him blow out the interior to create a flexible studio space. Now, with crack houses gone, roughly 40 surrounding acres are slated for a large-scale, mixed-use development. Until then, Turk has an oddly rustic view of "a vegetable garden, an abandoned truck and rolling acres of that creeping vine. It could be North Georgia." On the wall behind him are examples of his ceramic Urban Tablet Series.



NANCY AND CHAFFEE BRAITHWAITE

Long one of the city's premier interior designers, Nancy Braithwaite switched careers last year to help daughter Chaffee open B Braithwaite, a boutique specializing in nursery and children's room décor. The choice of a Westside location? "We were bringing contemporary baby to Atlanta and needed a traffic that was ready for it," Chaffee says. "Now we get the older crowd that comes to Bacchanalia and the younger ones who come to Taqueria del Sol. People feel they can take a bit of a risk around here."

There's only one thing absolutely certain right now about the Westside: the place is buzzing with energy and changing fast.

ELISA GAMBINO

Now a supplier to many of the city's top restaurants, Elisa Gambino left a career at CNN to open Via Elisa Fresh Pasta, "because I really care about authentic Italian food." She located on Howell Mill Road because it is convenient to her clientele and is "a vibrant and growing part of town. And I like the industrial feel." Business is strong now, but "when I started, it was the era of the Atkins diet. Finally people are swinging back to a healthy Mediterranean approach."



**FIO PICHARDO,
LAWRENCE PRITCHARD,
OWEN HALPERN
AND FRIENDS**

OwenLawrence principals Lawrence Pritchard (center) and Owen Halpern (right), with staff designer Fio Pichardo, recently moved their furnishings shop from a Buckhead location they think shoppers found intimidating. "We're getting the right clientele now," Halpern says. Their specialty is importing designs not found in other area showrooms, such as this Neue Wiener Werkstaette upholstered furniture, manufactured in Austria. "People really appreciate finding products they've never seen before," Pritchard says.



**ANNE QUATRANO AND
CLIFFORD HARRISON**

Bacchanalia was well-established as one of the city's best restaurants when Anne Quatrano and Clifford Harrison relocated to a vast space in a former meatpacking plant on Howell Mill Road in 1999. Perhaps more than any other single thing, that move made people notice the Westside. So what made the couple think it would work? "We had no idea," Quatrano says, "but we didn't want to be in Buckhead anymore, and we took a chance." In the years since, they have expanded to include Star Provisions, a source for fine tableware, ingredients and baked goods; Provisions to Go, for prepared foods; and a second restaurant, Quinones at Bacchanalia.

GREG MARTIN AND MICHELLE LARRABEE-MARTIN

Drawn by what Greg calls "the synergy of the tenants around us," the Martins opened Kolo Collection at the intersection of Howell Mill and Huff roads in 2003; last year they added 2,400 square feet to the outdoor-furniture showroom. Like the other design businesses on the Westside, their clientele is a mix of in-town residents and buyers from across the region. "They're savvy shoppers," says Michelle, and have driven the Martins' merchandise mix away from traditionalism and in a modernist direction. "The collection became its own entity. Customers were excited about these simple things."



WESTSIDE

JIM WINER AND TONY MENEFFEE

Architects Jim Winer and Tony Menefee, original tenants at the King Plow Arts Center, recently moved their 14-person Menefee + Winer firm to a striking new home they fashioned from a muffler shop and taxi-dispatch office. "The neighborhood is taking on a village quality," Winer observes in explaining their choice to stay on the Westside. Referring to the building's automotive roots, Menefee declares, "We created our own little engine here. We also inherited about 100 muffler clamps. One day a purpose for them will reveal itself."



"People recognize the importance of a place that has authentic qualities, that won't market itself in such a mass way that it destroys itself!"

—Westside developer Michael Phillips

KOLBY FLAKES, CASSANDRA INGRAM AND CHRISTY NIXON

Shown here with baristas Kolby Flakes and Christy Nixon, Cassandra Ingram (center) left a marketing job in New York to open Urban Grind, choosing the Westside because it's "very eclectic, very young and very urban." Her vision is "a community gathering place, like the coffee shops I loved in Manhattan." And with its frequent poetry readings, art shows, book signings and open-mic music evenings, this is definitely not Starbucks. "People never leave here without having met someone."



Modern man. Franz Schneider at home in one of the Berkeley Park houses he has built since 1985. "I knew this area was coming up. It was too obvious."



Tropics transplanted. A Maya Lin daybed and a Marcel Wanders lamp mark the boundary between the entry foyer and the long, wedge-shaped pool court that separates the two wings of Schneider's house.



Easy living. In the living room are a sofa and tables designed by Didier Gomez for Ligne Roset. The floor lamp is by Paris designer R&Y Augousti.

AT HOME ON THE WESTSIDE WITH FRANZ SCHNEIDER

It was 1985 when architect Franz Schneider built his first Westside home—a tall, clean-lined structure meant to be both residence and studio. Since then, he has built a cluster of 12 more units, all in a modernist idiom, one of which is his current home. Schneider's father was also an architect, a practitioner of what became known as the Sarasota School, and the son's own glassy, one-story house refers back to what he knew as a kid in Florida. The location for this pod of futurism is Berkeley Park, an established bungalow neighborhood. That might have been a formula for conflict. But Schneider says, "Berkeley Park was accommodating because it's a diverse, in-town area. Everybody's cool here. And like attracts like."