

AN ADVISORY SERVICES PANEL REPORT

# Downtown Birmingham, Alabama



Urban Land  
Institute

# **Downtown Birmingham, Alabama**

***A Master-Planning Process for Downtown***

May 5–10, 2002  
An Advisory Services Panel Report

ULI—the Urban Land Institute  
1025 Thomas Jefferson Street, N.W.  
Suite 500 West  
Washington, D.C. 20007-5201



# About ULI—the Urban Land Institute

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**U**LI—the Urban Land Institute is a non-profit research and education organization that promotes responsible leadership in the use of land in order to enhance the total environment.

The Institute maintains a membership representing a broad spectrum of interests and sponsors a wide variety of educational programs and forums to encourage an open exchange of ideas and sharing of experience. ULI initiates research that anticipates emerging land use trends and issues and proposes creative solutions based on that research; provides advisory services; and publishes a wide variety of materials to disseminate information on land use and development.

Established in 1936, the Institute today has more than 17,000 members and associates from 60 countries, representing the entire spectrum of the land use and development disciplines. Professionals rep-

resented include developers, builders, property owners, investors, architects, public officials, planners, real estate brokers, appraisers, attorneys, engineers, financiers, academics, students, and librarians. ULI relies heavily on the experience of its members. It is through member involvement and information resources that ULI has been able to set standards of excellence in development practice. The Institute has long been recognized as one of America's most respected and widely quoted sources of objective information on urban planning, growth, and development.

This Advisory Services panel report is intended to further the objectives of the Institute and to make authoritative information generally available to those seeking knowledge in the field of urban land use.

Richard M. Rosan  
*President*

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## About ULI Advisory Services

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**T**he goal of ULI's Advisory Services Program is to bring the finest expertise in the real estate field to bear on complex land use planning and development projects, programs, and policies. Since 1947, this program has assembled well over 400 ULI-member teams to help sponsors find creative, practical solutions for issues such as downtown redevelopment, land management strategies, evaluation of development potential, growth management, community revitalization, brownfields redevelopment, military base reuse, provision of low-cost and affordable housing, and asset management strategies, among other matters. A wide variety of public, private, and nonprofit organizations have contracted for ULI's Advisory Services.

Each panel team is composed of highly qualified professionals who volunteer their time to ULI. They are chosen for their knowledge of the panel topic and screened to ensure their objectivity. ULI panel teams are interdisciplinary and typically include several developers, a landscape architect, a planner, a market analyst, a finance expert, and others with the niche expertise needed to address a given project. ULI teams provide a holistic look at development problems. Each panel is chaired by a respected ULI member with previous panel experience.

The agenda for a five-day panel assignment is intensive. It includes an in-depth briefing day composed of a tour of the site and meetings with sponsor representatives; a day and a half of hour-long interviews of typically 80 to 100 key community representatives; and a day and a half of formulating recommendations. Many long nights of discussion precede the panel's conclusions. On the final day on site, the panel makes an oral presentation of its findings and conclusions to the sponsor. At the request of the sponsor, a written report is prepared and published.

Because the sponsoring entities are responsible for significant preparation before the panel's visit, including sending extensive briefing materials to each member and arranging for the panel to meet with key local community members and stake-

holders in the project under consideration, participants in ULI's five-day panel assignments are able to make accurate assessments of a sponsor's issues and to provide recommendations in a compressed amount of time.

A major strength of the program is ULI's unique ability to draw on the knowledge and expertise of its members, including land developers and owners, public officials, academicians, representatives of financial institutions, and others. In fulfillment of the mission of the Urban Land Institute, this Advisory Services panel report is intended to provide objective advice that will promote the responsible use of land to enhance the environment.

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## Acknowledgments

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David Walker of Brookmont; Dallas Whitaker of Colonial Properties Trust; David Silverstein and Jeffrey Bayer of Bayer Properties; and Dick Pigford of Architecture Works.

In addition, the panel wishes to thank those who gave their time to act as tour guides for the panel members, City Action Partnership (CAP) for transporting panel members around town, and the more than 130 interviewees who provided their insights and expertise to help the panel understand the development issues and the concerns of the people of Birmingham.

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# Foreword

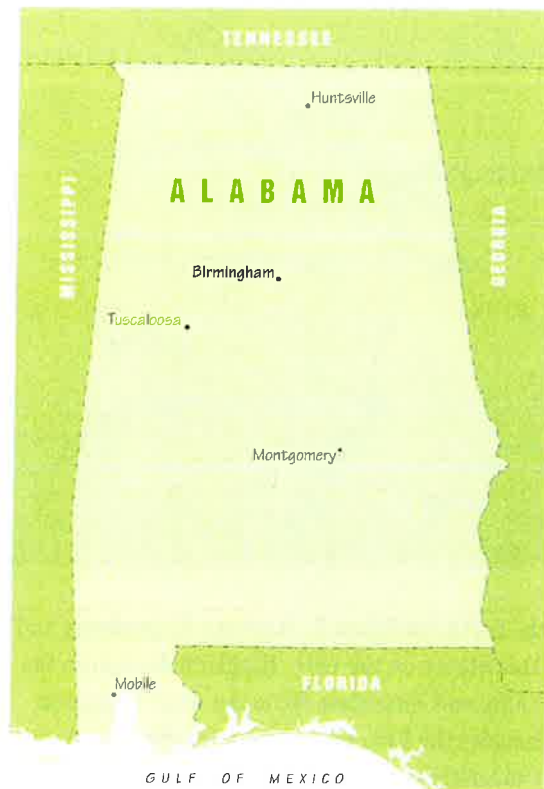
*"If we are to regenerate our cities, to preserve their beauties and to make them better, more is required than the good intentions of a group of technical experts or public servants; for this end a veritable civic conscience must be developed in all citizens. When people begin to feel the ties which bind them together as citizens and which attach them to the place which they inhabit, when they shall understand that their prosperity, that their dignity, that their happiness are bound up with the welfare of the city; when they have learned to cherish their home town, their love for which unites with and intensifies their love for the nation, this expansion of civic consciousness is not the least of the benefactions that we can expect from the adoption of comprehensive programs for future civic development."*

—Warren H. Manning  
Warren H. Manning's City Plan  
for Birmingham

(Birmingham, Alabama: City of Birmingham, 1919)

**T**he largest city in Alabama, Birmingham is located in Jefferson County, in the north-central part of the state at the southern end of the Appalachian Mountains. From the start, the city was shaped by its powerful topography, verdant landscape, and a tradition of excellence in planning and design.

Birmingham's early economy was developed around the railroads and the steel industry, which attracted workers from rural areas of the south as well as the industrial cities and towns of Europe. Until the Depression, Birmingham grew so rapidly that it was called the "Magic City;" its steel industry also earned it the title "the Pittsburgh of the South." Like Pittsburgh, however, Birmingham's industrial base later declined and the city struggled to replace it. The 1960s were a turning



Birmingham is the largest city in the state of Alabama.

point for this southern city, which then became a battleground for civil rights.

Today, Birmingham is physically defined by its lush, green setting and traditional urban grid. It retains an extensive inventory of intact historic buildings and well-planned, close-in urban and suburban neighborhoods. The housing stock ranges from small craftsman-style bungalows and newly rehabilitated urban loft apartments to large estate homes nestled on rolling hillsides. Economically and culturally, the city is still working to redefine itself for the 21st century.

## The Study Area

The panel was asked to study downtown Birmingham, which is bounded by 12th Avenue on





Birmingham is located in north-central Alabama's Jefferson County, at the southern end of the Appalachian Mountains.

to the north, the Elton B. Stephens Expressway and 31st Street on the east, Highland Avenue on the south, and Interstate 65 on the west. This area includes the Five Points South neighborhood, the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) campus, the traditional downtown business district, and the Birmingham Jefferson Convention Complex (BJCC). The downtown includes or borders more than 15 of Birmingham's 99 residential neighborhoods.

Five Points South, with its shops, restaurants, and nightlife, is one of Birmingham's more vibrant neighborhoods.



Within those core neighborhoods, Birmingham offers numerous cultural amenities, including significant historic sites, theaters, museums, and entertainment venues. Among its most important economic attributes is the University of Alabama at Birmingham, with its world-class hospital and research facilities. UAB currently is the city's major growth industry and economic driver.

### The Panel's Assignment

The panel's assignment was to advise the city on its strategy for a downtown master plan. The city's overarching goal is to build a vibrant and thriving city center. The panel was asked to address a variety of questions, including the following:

- Which markets should private investment and public policy be targeting in the city center, given the existing amenities, employment base, housing, and transportation?
- What opportunities exist to think about the most significant current projects in a way that leverages their outcomes most effectively for city center development?
- What type of strategic approach should the city take? Should the city center be organized in fewer geographic-based areas for the purpose of design review and redevelopment approval? Would doing so allow the city to better coordinate and facilitate public and private development?
- What type of tactical approach should the city take? What is a rational strategy to provide new parking and make better use of existing parking to encourage redevelopment?
- What approach should the city and its partners take in their 2002 update of the city's master plan?

The panel's investigation began with a fact-finding phase that included a comprehensive tour of the study area and surrounding neighborhoods plus interviews with about 150 local community and business leaders, government officials, real estate and development professionals, and other stakeholders. In addition, the city prepared an exten-

sive briefing book covering every aspect of the city's development. Throughout its learning process, the panel identified opportunities for and obstacles to success and discussed alternative solutions. It then formulated a set of specific recommendations. The panel considered the questions posed and identified specific focal points of prime importance to Birmingham's urban core. These include:

- The UAB expansion;
- Railroad Reservation Park;
- The 20th Street corridor;
- The BJCC expansion; and
- Core cultural and entertainment assets.

## Summary of Recommendations

**T**he panel developed several significant recommendations for the city. Birmingham's downtown should be viewed as belonging to the entire community. Rather than responding only to the needs of those who live or work there, it must be developed as the concentrated core of jobs, shopping, entertainment, and urban living for the entire metropolitan region. This can occur only if support for downtown becomes stronger, broader, and deeper. Governments, institutions, businesses, and the public—not only at the city level, but also at the county, regional, and state levels—must support downtown.

In return, downtown Birmingham must deliver its maximum potential. It must foster growth and development by providing support to its important assets: urban pioneers (both residents and business leaders), UAB, cultural and historical attractions, and entertainment venues. Obstacles to progress must be eliminated. The city must streamline and clarify the approvals process to facilitate appropriate types and levels of development.

Through its inaction, the city has allowed development opportunities to lie fallow by permitting recalcitrant property owners to contribute to a perception of continued downtown disinvestment, dissipating the value of other, significant improvements that are being made to the city. Such obstacles to progress should not be allowed to continue. If downtown property owners become intractable in their refusal to remediate blight and make their buildings positive contributors to the revitalization of the city center, the city must be proactive and either encourage private purchase or, if necessary, use its powers of eminent domain to condemn properties that are crucial for revitalization efforts.

### Get Over It and Get On With It

Birmingham can continue to be a place where bad things have happened in the past, or it can move

forward to become a great place where great things are happening today. The city should adopt “resolution” as a key theme for its plan. It should resolve longstanding problems between the city and the university, between the city and surrounding jurisdictions, between the “99 neighborhoods” and the downtown, between city government and recalcitrant building owners, and among the races that make up the people of Birmingham. By shedding its old image and working to create a new one, Birmingham can become known as the place where resolution becomes the pathway to a brighter tomorrow.

### Overarching Principles

The city must have a vision. It must focus its energies on furthering this vision, and it must have the leadership to implement its plans. The city must strive to build consensus and support among all stakeholders, including citizens, business leaders, directors and supporters of cultural institutions, and government officials from throughout the region.

#### Vision

The city should develop, nurture, and promote a vision for itself as a great place to live, work, play, and invest. The vision should specify actions that will move the city forward economically and culturally. The vision must be inclusive. It must aim to create a place where everyone feels connected and takes ownership. The city should develop the vibrancy, vitality, and animation of a 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week urban destination.

Its neighborhoods—including downtown—should be consistently safe, clean, and high-quality places where residents of all races and income levels can live, work, play, and invest. Birmingham should cultivate its distinctive character by maintaining its built, cultural, and natural assets and by promoting new ones. Finally, the vision must recog-

nize that UAB represents the future of Birmingham's economy. The city can help UAB to reach its full potential, which in turn will help the city to attract growth and diverse economic development.

### Focus

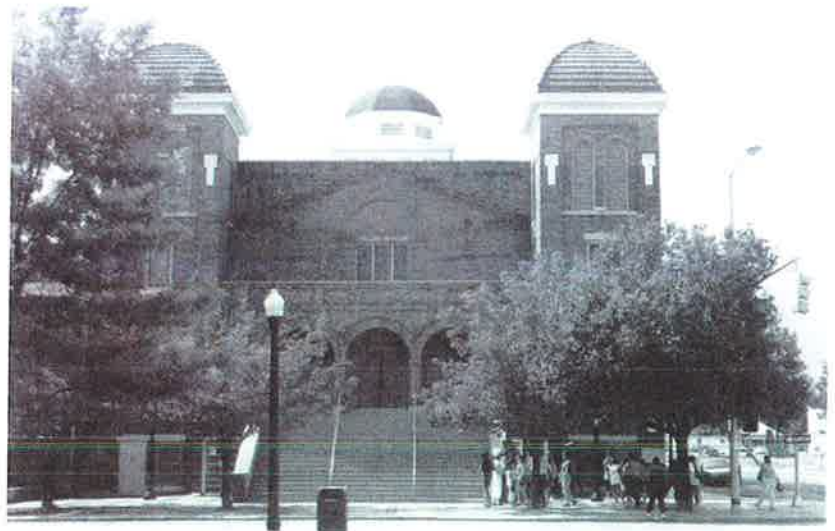
Government must facilitate—rather than hinder—the development process, allowing the private sector to do what it does best. The city government must create a framework for decision making that is rational, analytical, efficient, and transparent. Private sector investors should know what the rules are and should know that they will remain constant.

The city should concentrate its efforts on activities that further its vision. Each new action must build upon the one that preceded it. Efforts should not be spread so thinly that they have little impact. The city should not dissipate momentum by trying to accomplish too many things in too many places. City leaders should build public consensus to help identify and implement four inspiring, specific, and quantifiable projects that could begin immediately. Such an effort will accomplish several things. It will start the city on its path to revitalization and will show people that this is a city that can make things happen. Synergies will build from these first actions, and even bigger accomplishments will follow.

### Leadership

The city must have the political will to make—and defend—the most difficult decisions. The city should create, empower, and fully fund a downtown redevelopment authority, the Birmingham Downtown Redevelopment Agency (BDRA). Cities the size of Birmingham rarely operate without such an entity. The BDRA should have the authority to structure and carry out a redevelopment plan.

The panel recommends that the BDRA be established as a public/private partnership with a board appointed by the city, the private sector, and relevant institutions. It should include leaders drawn from finance, real estate development and brokerage, higher education, research, retail, health care, and the public sector. It will require a small, well-qualified staff led by a president with extensive downtown redevelopment experience. Although the staff should manage all major functions, ex-



The 16th Street Baptist Church is among several important civil rights sites in Birmingham.

ternal consultants and contractors also will be required.

### Focal Points

#### The UAB Expansion

The university will continue to lead economic development in the city, and Birmingham's government and all other local and regional stakeholders must do everything they can to encourage and facilitate the university's growth. The city must become a partner in the university's expansion efforts. This includes facilitating UAB's development plans and creating suitable sites for new, privately developed housing for students and staff.

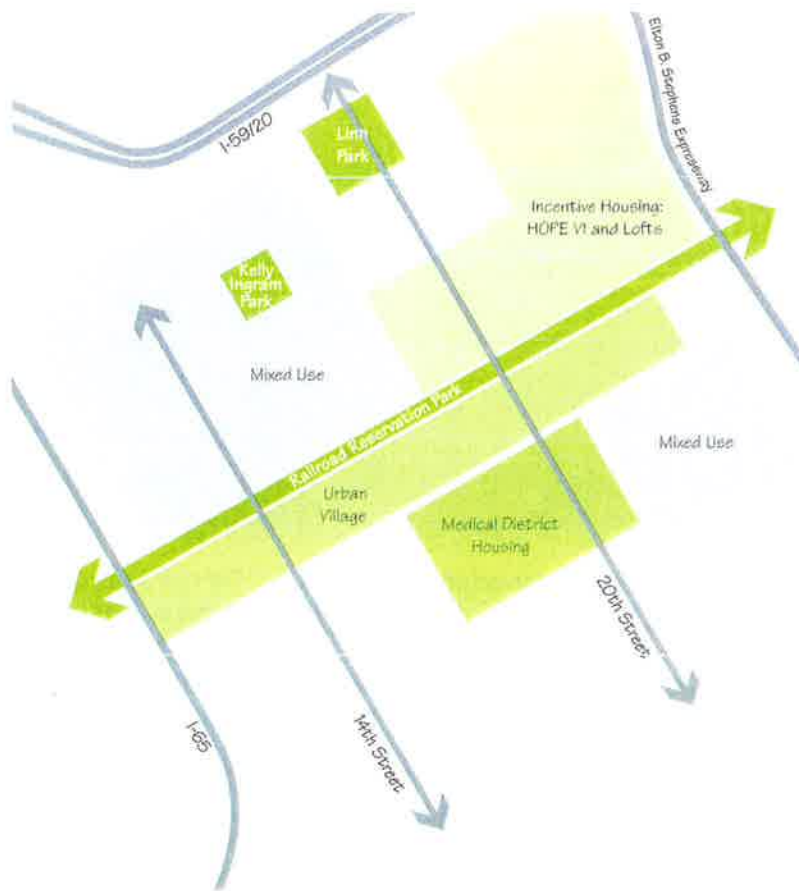
#### Railroad Reservation Park

The city should pursue the development of a park along the railroad tracks. The park should be planned as an active-use urban park that will serve as a recreational amenity for those who live and work in the city, as well as for the surrounding metropolitan area. It should be a unifying design element and a unifying social magnet. It also should be used to generate increased value along its edges, for the development of new residential and commercial uses.

#### The 20th Street Corridor

Twentieth Street—the spine of the city—already has been improved with landscaping and street amenities. This improvement needs to be expanded and broadened to include a comprehensive rede-





Railroad Reservation Park will knit together the northern and southern portions of the city. Housing can develop in areas along the park, east of 20th Street, and in the area surrounding UAB's medical facilities.

development strategy overseen by a downtown redevelopment agency.

#### The BJCC Expansion

Any contemplated or proposed expansion of the Birmingham Jefferson Convention Complex (BJCC) should be studied carefully, with full attention paid to its projected benefits, attendant costs, and other consequences. In particular, the panel recommends that the city carefully scrutinize the proposed domed stadium and entertainment center, in terms of its potential positive and negative impacts on Birmingham as a regional draw as well as on the city center's vitality and

viability. The initial capital costs and ongoing public subsidies required to sustain such large-scale facilities also must be explored. The panel strongly suggests that much more analytically and methodologically rigorous empirical economic studies be conducted before such an undertaking is pursued further. Finally, once the public commitment for this proposed project has been fully quantified, the city should evaluate the potential benefits of deploying those funds to a number of smaller-scale but strategically integrated city center improvement projects.

#### Cultural and Entertainment Assets

Birmingham's cultural and entertainment assets are important resources. Managing and improving these resources is an essential element in turning around the deterioration of the urban core. To achieve critical mass, entertainment development should be concentrated in a single area around Fourth Avenue North and 20th Street. The public and private sectors must join forces to plan the location, character, and operation of these facilities to stimulate downtown growth while protecting the city's most important assets.

The following sections of the report present these recommendations in greater detail.

## Market Potential

**G**reater Birmingham's employment base grew from 451,000 jobs in 1996 to a peak of 487,000 in early 2001, an annual growth rate of just 1.6 percent. Although positive, this growth is below average compared with the United States as a whole, where job increases averaged 2.0 percent annually over the same period. The comparison with major southern markets, where annual growth topped 2.2 percent, further underscores Birmingham's slow performance. Over the last year, Birmingham's regional economy—like those of most U.S. markets—has slowed even further. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data through March 2002 indicate that the region lost around 2,000 jobs—a modest loss, compared to some metro markets.

The panel's review indicates that most industries were affected by this slowdown, with manufacturing, telecommunications, and wholesale trade showing notable declines. One industry that has been particularly hard hit has been primary and fabricated metals producers. A combination of weak demand and price pressures has led to a 12 percent decline in employment in this sector since last year, which represents the continuation of a two-decade decline. One employer, Fairfield Works, reportedly reduced its workforce by 2,300 during 2001, and the Thomas Foundry announced plans to close its Birmingham operation altogether.

Even with this job erosion, Birmingham's unemployment rate is running at a reasonable 4.3 percent. Though higher than the 3.0 percent trend consistently set during the late 1990s, this compares favorably with the current U.S. unemployment average of 6.0 percent (as of April 2002).

Important industries that have exercised a stabilizing influence during the current downturn include health services and—to a lesser degree—the financial sectors. The panel's review underscores that the region's hospital and medical research sectors (particularly those associated with UAB)

are the most significant economic engine for the region.

UAB continues to build its reputation as a medical center, with strengths in many areas, including genetics research, AIDs research, organ transplants, and geriatric medicine. All of these are growth industries with significant potential to create spin-off jobs. The city of Birmingham should position itself to encourage and take advantage of home-grown medical technologies as a basis for the city's growth. In 2001, UAB received grants totaling \$321 million, of which more than \$182 million funded medical school research and programs. The university currently is home to nearly 17,000 graduate and undergraduate students and has a workforce of nearly 16,500 employees, making it the largest employer in the region.

The presence of four banking institutions (AmSouth, Compass, Regions, and SouthTrust banks) with a major presence in Birmingham has made the area a financial hub for the South. Importantly, these economic drivers are located in the city center, reinforcing the region's urban core. Continued consolidation in the financial services industry, however, could have an adverse impact on Birmingham, should one or more of the downtown banks be acquired by a larger financial institution that subsequently curtails its presence in the city center or relocates entirely.



UAB is a major economic driver for the city.

Some of Birmingham's restaurants have national reputations.



### Commercial Market Overview

Birmingham's office market is relatively soft. Vacancy in the broad metropolitan region is running at 13.5 percent as of the end of the first quarter of 2002, an increase of 3.5 percentage points since the end of 2000. In comparison, vacancy in the downtown submarket—which includes the medical center—is running at slightly more than 19 percent. This higher vacancy level is strongly influenced by extremely soft conditions in the urban area's older office inventory, where the vacancy rate in buildings built before 1970 averages almost 30 percent.

Vacancy in buildings built during the 1980s averages 9.4 percent; in those built during the early 1990s, it is just 2.7 percent. These figures will change, however, as new space currently under construction is delivered. Interestingly, the suburban markets show mixed occupancy patterns. Areas like the one known as 280 South now are experiencing vacancy levels of almost 15 percent, the result of a rapid rise in vacancies over the past two years. Other locations, like Hoover, still are in relative balance, with vacancy remaining just below 10 percent.

A substantial amount of sublet space continues to be put back on the market by tenants downsizing their office space. In addition, two new buildings are coming online in the near future. One Federal Place and Concord Center will add 311,000 and 179,300 square feet, respectively, to the downtown office inventory.

The panel's review of the area's industrial market underscores a variety of challenges. Although this sector has brought many jobs to the region (most notably at the Mercedes, Honda, and Hyun-

dai plants), air quality attainment issues have made future major relocations to Jefferson County doubtful.

Like most U.S. metropolitan regions, Birmingham's retail market is dominated by suburban shopping centers. Projects like Riverchase Galleria (1.7 million square feet), Brookwood Village (700,000 square feet), Eastwood Mall (600,000 square feet), and Century Plaza (750,000 square feet) are traditional regional malls that define the suburban shopping experience. A recent addition is the Summit, a 600,000-square-foot, open-air, lifestyle center near Hoover—but located in the city of Birmingham—that is anchored by Saks and Parisian.

In response to these strong suburban shopping nodes, the downtown retail market has evolved to serve merely the needs of the daytime workforce. Small delicatessens and shops offering personal services now dominate retail space in the city's core. Most of these businesses have limited operating hours, typically closing around 5:00 p.m. and remaining closed on weekends.

Despite the draw of suburban shopping venues, one sector of downtown retailing—the restaurant industry—is thriving. The downtown boasts a number of first-class restaurants, including Hot and Hot Fish Club, Highlands Bar and Grill, Botega, and Veranda. These restaurants appear to have an exceptionally strong following, and are bringing patrons back into the downtown from the suburbs after normal working hours and on weekends. Likewise, a fairly discrete nucleus of retailers—including restaurants, clubs, cafés, boutiques, and some personal services—at Five Points South attracts area employees, students, and tourists to this district's eclectic shopping mix.

Birmingham offers a range of cultural, historical, and entertainment venues that draw a largely local and regional patronage. These include the Birmingham Museum of Art, the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, the Alabama Jazz Hall of Fame, the Alabama Theatre, McWane Center, the Birmingham Botanical Gardens, Sloss Furnaces, and Vulcan Park. UAB is home to the Alys Robinson Stephens Performing Arts Center, which enjoys broad community support.

The performance of Birmingham's hospitality and tourism industry also is mixed. An economic impact assessment prepared for the Greater Birmingham Convention and Visitors Bureau in 2000 indicates that the region has approximately 120 hotels offering more than 13,000 rooms. During 2000, regional hotel occupancy averaged 64 percent. This level, although considered soft by industry standards, is on a par with U.S. industry performance for the year.

By comparison, the downtown hospitality market appears to be very weak. Although the panel did not have access to complete data on city center hotels, it did learn that the downtown has seven major hotel properties with approximately 1,700 rooms. Interviews with area business leaders underscored that the downtown hotel market is struggling and that occupancy currently is well below 60 percent. Downtown hotel occupancy had been higher as recently as two years ago, until the addition of 2,000 new rooms in close-in suburban areas, mostly in limited-service hotels, siphoned off some of the occupancy. A 1999 PricewaterhouseCoopers report indicated that city center hotel occupancy had been in the mid to high 50 percent range for about the previous ten years, underscoring the fact that the hotel market has been soft for quite some time.

The panel also did not have access to data about the downtown lodging properties' business mix. The 2000 economic impact study indicated that the region generated just under 3 million occupied room nights. Given the average length of stay and average party size detailed in that report, the region had only 500,000 overnight visitors who required lodging and 110,000 convention/meeting participants (who likely were concentrated in the downtown properties).

This market depth is extremely shallow and underscores the fact that Birmingham performs more as a regional hub for visitors, rather than as a compelling national draw. This conclusion takes into account Birmingham's location in the south central United States, with few direct flights from major cities. With these findings in mind, the panel has reservations about Birmingham's ability to support a major expansion of the convention center. The panel feels that this endeavor requires



Downtown Birmingham is built on a traditional grid plan.

extensive further study as to its core target markets, its ability to penetrate the southeast markets, and a realistic set of comparable competitive centers by which to judge potential performance.

The panel believes that Birmingham's key strength is its accessibility from the immediate region. Cities like Atlanta, Huntsville, Tuscaloosa, and Selma all are located within about a two- to three-hour drive. This proximity may be of increasing importance to Birmingham's ability to draw additional tourism business—considering the post-September 11, 2001, trend in favor of travel by private vehicle rather than by air—and uniquely positions Birmingham to attract visitors from a broad geographic region. Importantly, capitalizing on this regional potential is more realistic and significant to the local economy than trying to tap into a national visitors market. The key ingredient here is for Birmingham to market its significant cultural, arts, and civil rights heritage resources.

#### **Commercial Market Potential**

The panel examined the development potential for major commercial property markets in Birmingham's city center. The current slowness in the overall economy and the uncertainty about which factors will emerge to drive the next growth phase make it generally difficult to accurately forecast the outlook for most of these markets.

The challenge for downtown Birmingham is to reestablish itself in the regional context. In terms



Four early 20th-century office towers make up the corner of First Avenue and 20th Street, once known as the "heaviest corner on earth."



of the office market, Birmingham's city center is home to many key regional players that are well established in the urban core. Major users that serve as an anchor for downtown include the region's governmental functions, professional firms like legal and accounting services, the banking business, and the university and related medical professions.

The panel believes that it is critical for Birmingham to encourage these users to remain—and grow—in the city center because few alternative users could be identified to replace them should they leave. If any major employer were to leave, the city would not recover easily; such a loss would be devastating to Birmingham's redevelopment efforts. If the downtown were to lose 1,000 employees (either from the region—due to merger/consolidation—or to the suburbs), for example, the direct impact on local occupational tax revenues could range from \$450,000 to \$500,000 annually, a figure that does not include any additional erosion to the real estate tax base or retail sales

revenues, or the psychological impact on the city center's vitality.

Although this may seem like a remote event, the city center's office sector is especially vulnerable to the continued flight to the suburbs. An occupational tax, parking costs, higher development costs, and traffic congestion all have conspired to make suburban locations an attractive option for local employers. In addition, because Birmingham relies on just a handful of major corporate users (like the banking sector) to anchor the city center, continued corporate consolidation could have a serious impact on the local economy.

As the market currently stands, few major retail opportunities will emerge for the city center because of its reliance on the local daytime workforce. This workforce totals about 17,000 in the central business district; another 16,000 people are employed in the medical center area. Industry standards for worker spending (approximately \$6.00 per day) suggest that this captive market can support 60,000 to 65,000 square feet of daytime and after-work convenience retail uses (eating and drinking establishments, drugstores, shops that sell books and magazines, personal services, and the like).

An additional constraint on downtown retailing is the general lack of strong physical connections among the largest office buildings and street-level retailers. This constraint is compounded further by the fact that some large employers provide services within their headquarters buildings, thereby discouraging pedestrian activity at a critical downtown intersection that lacks street-level vitality.

Interestingly, when the number of residents in the city center and those neighborhoods that immediately ring the downtown (that is, people who live within a five-mile radius of the city center) are added to the employee population, it appears that the local market could support substantial retail space. The 79,000 households (with an average income of \$45,000) in these close-in neighborhoods could support well over 2 million square feet of traditional shopping center space. Currently, however, the suburbs decisively capture almost all of this potential demand.

With that said, the panel does not believe it is possible for the city center to compete directly with the suburbs. The potential does exist, however, for a limited amount of traditional retail space to be added incrementally to the city center, including some new retail space in the downtown business district. The panel's interviews and analysis clearly underscore the desire—and need—for an urban-scale (25,000- to 30,000-square-foot) grocery store in the city center. Although some grocery shopping alternatives already exist in the immediate area, they tend to be inconveniently located or smaller stores that meet only the convenience needs of area residents.

The potential also exists to add—selectively—new restaurants, personal services, and related supporting/soft goods retail uses. This new growth will be tied directly to two factors:

- The future expansion in city center households will require a basic retail infrastructure to complete the urban living environment. The panel's forecast for growth (1,200 to 1,300 new city center households over the next five years) will support an additional 35,000 square feet of retail space to serve the needs of these new residents (if all of these sales remain in the city center). This would translate into about 15,000 square feet of grocery-store space, 8,000 square feet of restaurants and other eating and drinking venues, and 12,000 square feet of convenience-retail space.
- An increase in visitor activity in the city center will result from the synergistic effects of improving access to and through the downtown core, enhancing the area's visitor attractions (including expanding the convention center), and accommodating new employment in the medical and research sectors. Though it is impossible to quantify the amount of space required by an increasing number of visitors this early in the planning process, a reasonable target may be on the order of 150,000 to 200,000 square feet. Half of this space should be geared to eating and drinking venues, with the remainder offering soft-goods retail and services.

Like the property segments noted above, the potential demand for new hotel rooms in down-



The city already has done much to enhance its downtown streets by installing brick sidewalks, plantings, and street furniture.

town Birmingham is minimal. If the convention center expansion goes ahead, some new hotel space will be needed to accommodate increased delegate/tourism activity. Before any new project becomes feasible, however, the existing inventory must be utilized fully (with occupancies in the upper-60 to lower-70 percent range) and must maintain stable average room rates. In fact, it may be prudent to renovate the existing stock before adding new rooms to the city center.

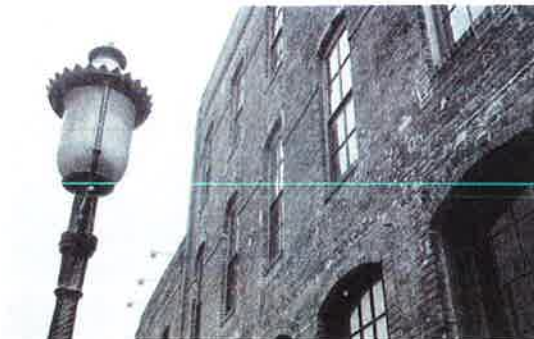
#### Key Considerations for Commercial Development

While near-term market demand is modest, due to the overall direction of the U.S. economy and the challenges ahead for Birmingham, the panel believes that development opportunities will become manifest over the mid to long term. As noted above, many of these opportunities will be tied to the city center's economic engines: the hospital/university/research connection and the expansion in cultural/visitor attractions. With this in mind, it is critical that Birmingham plan for these opportunities, addressing both location and site-specific issues through a proactive and forward-looking planning process.

#### Residential Market Potential: Birmingham's Urban Core

The development of downtown housing need not take place at the expense of other city neighborhoods. Housing opportunities within the downtown—appropriate in tenure, type, and location—should provide an attractive alternative for many households that otherwise might move out of the city, as well as for many households moving to Birmingham from other urban areas.

A large proportion of young singles and couples have strong preferences for the urban lifestyle afforded by Birmingham's loft district.



Neighborhoods to the north of downtown offer attractive housing for a range of households.



**Figure 1**  
**Residential Market Potential, by Draw Area**

Draw Area	Percent of Households
Local (City of Birmingham/Jefferson County)	62%
Regional (Adjacent Counties)	5%
Atlanta Metro	3%
National (Balance of the United States)	30%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Figure 2**  
**Residential Market Potential, by Household Type**

Household Type	Percent of Households
Empty Nesters and Retirees	22%
Traditional and Nontraditional Families	12%
Younger Singles and Couples	66%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>

### The Depth and Breadth of the Potential Market

The panel determined the depth and breadth of the potential market for housing units in Birmingham's urban core by analyzing migration, mobility, and geodemographic household data. Based on migration data from the U.S. Internal Revenue Service, the draw areas for Birmingham's urban core consist of:

- The local (or internal) draw area, which consists of households currently living within the Birmingham city limits and the balance of Jefferson County;
- The regional draw area, which consists of households moving from adjacent counties; and
- The national draw area, which consists of households moving from anywhere else in the United States (and includes a significant number of households from the Atlanta metropolitan region).

The draw area distribution of market potential—those households likely to move to Birmingham's urban core if appropriate housing options are developed—is shown in Figure 1.

The proportions and types of households likely to move to Birmingham's urban core are best defined by the general categories listed in Figure 2. The largest market segment is likely to consist of young, mostly childless households, including both singles and couples. A substantial percentage of young people have strong preferences for an urban lifestyle, and make a conscious choice to live downtown, where they can enjoy a diverse and inclusive environment as well as a wide variety of activities, cultural opportunities, and restaurants. Many of these young adults were born and raised in the suburbs and have no interest in the suburban environment.

The largest potential markets in this segment are young professionals, office workers, small business owners, artists or artisans, and graduate students, teachers, and other higher-education affiliates. In city after city across the United States, downtowns and deteriorating older neighborhoods have been repopulated by these households, when appropriate housing options are available. In every case, however, the neighborhood estab-



lished by these households has grown to encompass more than simply housing; its flavor and tone has been reinforced by the nonresidential uses—shops, galleries, clubs, and eating and drinking establishments—that follow these young people.

The next largest market segment is likely to be older households, including empty nesters and retirees. A significant percentage of these households have children who have grown up and moved away. Many of these older people lived downtown as young adults, and the urban environment thus represents the lifestyle choice of their youth. Over the next several years, this segment should comprise a significantly larger proportion of the market for downtown housing, because increasing numbers of the baby boom generation—the huge population cohort born between 1946 and 1964—will be entering the empty-nest stage of life with a new sense of freedom from responsibilities.

The smallest market segment will consist of family-oriented households (including both traditional and nontraditional families). Nontraditional families, which became an increasingly larger proportion of all U.S. households during the 1990s, encompass a wide range of family households, from a single parent with one or more children to an adult caring for younger siblings, a grandparent living with grown children and/or grandchildren to an unrelated, same-sex couple with children. In addition to married couples with their own children, traditional families also include “blended” families, in which each parent previously was married to another individual and has one or more children from that marriage.

Households with school-age children historically have been among the first to leave a city when one or all of three significant neighborhood elements—good schools, safe and secure streets, and sufficient green space—are perceived to be declining or at risk. Although this is the smallest market segment, families that are likely to move to Birmingham’s urban core also have a preference for urban living. Many of the adults in these households were raised in or near urban centers and have rejected the suburban alternative; most already have made appropriate school accommodations—by enrolling their children in good public, charter, parochial, or private schools—and

have elected to live in a multicultural community rather than the less diverse suburbs.

More than 1,500 younger singles and couples, empty nesters and retirees, and traditional and nontraditional families currently live in the draw areas that represent the most likely potential renters/buyers of new market-rate housing units (new construction and/or adaptive use of formerly nonresidential structures, excluding single-family detached units) in Birmingham’s urban core. These households represent approximately 10 percent of the total potential market for the city of Birmingham. Based on the tenure and housing preferences of these households, the panel estimates the annual market potential by housing type as shown in Figure 3 on the following page.

In theory, it is possible for a downtown location to capture 100 percent of its market potential. In reality, however, market capture likely will be cumulative, starting small and rising each year. As the number of downtown residents grows and housing production increases, market capture also will rise. Given that Birmingham’s downtown housing options are still very limited, initially the downtown likely will be able to capture at least 15 percent of the potential market for rental multifamily units and 10 percent of the market for both for-sale multifamily and single-family attached units, as shown in Figure 4.

As established by migration and mobility analyses, and dependent on the creation of appropriate new housing units, nearly half of the annual market potential of between 200 and 1,500 new units in Birmingham’s urban core likely will be households moving from *outside* the city. Over five years, the realization of that market potential could lead to the in-migration of between 500 and more than 3,000 new households to Birmingham’s urban core from locations outside the city.

In addition, significant opportunities exist for multifamily housing development adjacent or close to the UAB campus and hospital complex. An initial development of at least 250 apartments could be supported, based on a capture rate of between 0.75 percent and 1 percent of the current estimated student population of 16,100 and UAB and hospital staff of more than 16,000.



**Figure 3**  
**Annual Market Potential for New Downtown Housing**

Housing Type	Number of Households	Percent of Total
Rental Multifamily (leased apartments)	890	59%
For Sale Multifamily (condos, co-ops)	320	21%
For-Sale Single-Family Attached (fee-simple owned rowhouses)	310	20%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,520</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Figure 4**  
**Predicted Capture Rates for New Downtown Housing**

Housing Type	Number of Households	Capture Rate	Number of New Units
Rental Multifamily (leased apartments)	890	15%	134
For Sale Multifamily (condos, co-ops)	320	10%	32
For-Sale Single-Family Attached (fee-simple owned rowhouses)	310	10%	32
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,520</b>	<b>—</b>	<b>198</b>

#### Criteria for Residential Development

In general, areas or buildings proposed for new residential development or redevelopment should be evaluated relative to the following criteria for successful urban housing initiatives:

**Advantageous Adjacency.** The city must “build on strength,” not only to provide maximum support for any proposed housing initiatives, but also, conversely, so that housing initiatives will reinforce existing or proposed adjacent commercial, retail, and/or residential developments. For example, physical connections must be made between the emerging loft district on Morris Avenue and the HOPE VI redevelopment of Metropolitan Gardens in the northwest quadrant of downtown through complementary infill development and rehabilitation of existing buildings. Likewise, similar connections must be made among new residential neighborhoods surrounding UAB and new housing construction in midtown and along the proposed Railroad Reservation Park.

**Building and/or Land Availability.** From the city’s perspective, vacant or underused commercial buildings and surface parking lots would be better utilized for new housing.

**Potential for Expansion.** Each housing initiative should be located in an area where, at the successful completion of the initial project, adjacent or nearby buildings and/or land are—or could become

—available for the continuation or extension of the neighborhood, either through rehabilitation or through new construction. Each housing initiative should not be viewed as a “standalone” project, but should serve as a catalyst for additional residential development in surrounding areas. In this way, the neighborhoods surrounding Birmingham’s urban core could become the recipients of spillover housing demand, for both conversion and renovation of existing, architecturally distinctive single-family houses as well as for new infill construction.

**Anchors/Linkages.** Each housing initiative must be seen as part of an overall urban strategy to build a critical mass of both housing and related non-residential uses. “Anchor” locations establish the potential for economic activity in an underutilized area; “linkage” locations build on the strength of two or more established or emerging locations. Linkage to the downtown YMCA is particularly important because of the extensive recreational facilities it offers, particularly for those who live in smaller properties that are unable to provide such amenities.

#### Amenities

Since the diversity and social and cultural amenities of the city are among the attractions of urban living, successful downtown housing does not necessarily require the creation (and expense) of extensive new on-site recreational amenities. How-

ever, locations that are within walking distance of parks, greenways, and entertainment venues—such as theaters, clubs, and restaurants—and that offer convenient access to a variety of retailers, including a grocery store, hold a significant market advantage.

In order to be competitive, larger rental properties should provide the amenities that have become the norm for investment-grade assets: a business center, a clubroom with a catering kitchen, and some type of exercise facility. Again, the panel notes that the downtown YMCA provides many of these amenities, relieving developers of smaller properties of the expense of creating and managing such facilities. One amenity, however, is important for all properties, both small and large: safe and secure parking for residents.

#### The Current Context

**Demographics.** Between 1990 and 2000, the city of Birmingham lost more than 6 percent of its households. The number of households within the city limits dropped from 105,437 in 1990 to 98,782 in 2000, a loss of 6,655 households. In contrast, Jefferson County experienced household growth of nearly 5 percent, from 251,479 in 1990 to 263,265 in 2000, an increase of nearly 12,000 households. Families declined from more than 70 percent of all Jefferson County households in 1990 to just under 67 percent in 2000; in Birmingham, family households declined from nearly 64 percent in 1990 to 60 percent in 2000.

As of the 2000 census, more than 88 percent of the city's 111,927 dwelling units were occupied, down only slightly from 1990. Homeownership rose slightly, from 53 percent in 1990 to 54 percent in 2000. Although very modest, this 1 percent increase contrasts with the experience of many American cities, where declines in homeownership ranged between 10 and more than 25 percent over the same decade.

The neighborhoods within and directly adjacent to Birmingham's urban core include Fountain Heights, Smithfield, North and South Titusville, Glen Iris, Five Points South, Highland Park, Southside, Central City (including Metropolitan Gardens), Norwood, and Druid Hills. With the



Once the site of drug activity, this wedge of land on 14th Avenue is now an attractive neighborhood park.

exception of Glen Iris, all of these neighborhoods lost population during the 1990s, with population declines ranging from less than 2 percent in Five Points South to between 12 and 20 percent in the northern neighborhoods and as high as 24 percent in Smithfield.

During the 1990s, the percentage of family households dropped in all of the neighborhoods surrounding downtown. In the northern neighborhoods, family households declined from nearly 74 to 66 percent of all households; in Smithfield, from 51 to 48 percent; in Five Points South, from 30 to 27 percent; and in Central City/Southern Fountain Heights, from 50 to 37 percent.

**Rent and Price Values.** A Reis Reports survey of 66 apartment properties reveals that at the end of the first quarter of 2002, the average asking rent in central Birmingham—excluding downtown buildings—ranged from just under \$400 per month to nearly \$680 per month. Few individual apartments rented for more than \$700 per month. The per-square-foot asking rent averaged less than \$0.70 at all but one property, which achieved \$0.78 per square foot. More than half of those properties had vacancy rates of 6 percent or less, and thus were close to functional full occupancy.

In comparison, Operation New Birmingham indicates that downtown rents generally range from just under \$650 per month for a one-bedroom/one-bath apartment at Southside Station to more than \$1,500 per month for a two-bedroom/two-bath loft in the Transportation Building. Per-square-foot rents for downtown units typically range between \$0.65 and \$0.85, although some of the smallest units are achieving more than \$0.90 per square foot. There are few vacancies, and the average

To attract more residents, the city must deal with its blighted areas.



occupancy rate of apartments downtown exceeds 95 percent, above functional full occupancy.

According to Censeo data, house prices in many of the neighborhoods surrounding downtown have escalated significantly during the 1990s, although actual values remain quite low. In northern Birmingham neighborhoods, per-square-foot sales prices rose nearly 43 percent between 1990 and 2000, from \$22 to nearly \$31; median prices rose from \$31,450 to \$40,000. The average price per square foot in the Smithfield/Titusville neighborhoods increased from \$26.50 to just over \$28, a rise of just 6.7 percent over the ten-year period; median sales prices, however, fell from \$46,500 to just under \$41,000. Average per-square-foot prices are highest in Southside, where they jumped from \$33 to \$55, an increase of more than 67 percent, and median prices jumped from \$28,100 to \$83,000.

Operation New Birmingham also indicates that sales prices in the downtown have risen significantly between 1997 and 2001. Some individual units have more than doubled in value; others have escalated at annual rates of between 6 and 14 percent per year. Average values have risen from approximately \$43 per square foot in 1997 to \$90 per square foot in 2001. In early 2002, a 1,000-square-foot unit in the Wheelock Building sold for \$101,000, breaking the \$100 per-square-foot barrier for the first time.



#### Neighborhood Stabilization

A broad range of new construction as well as rehabilitation of existing buildings will be required to stabilize the neighborhoods adjacent to downtown. An effective housing strategy to achieve that stabilization should include:

- The construction of a variety of both rental and for-sale housing types—including higher-value market-rate housing units as well as more moderately priced ones—throughout each neighborhood;
- Adherence to general neighborhood guidelines established to maintain compatibility of housing scale and type;
- Funding and providing incentives to conduct deferred maintenance and capital improvements; and
- The establishment of programs and policies that preserve existing affordable residential units as well as encourage the introduction of new and higher-value units.

# Planning and Design

**E**xperience has shown that following specific city-building principles can restore urban vitality. When these principles have not been followed, the results—in cities across the United States—have been less than desirable. The key principles are as follows:

- Locate urban catalysts to reinforce the city center;
- Combine complementary uses;
- Create linkages;
- Concentrate development and create critical mass;
- Capitalize on and exploit existing assets; and
- Identify the consequences of each action.

Examples of locations where these principles have not been followed include Kansas City, which has multiple centers, none with sufficient critical mass to attract business or visitors, and Dallas, where the recent Victory project threatens to siphon growth from the central business district. In Los Angeles, linkages among many important destinations are tenuous or nonexistent, leaving the city with no “there there.” Atlanta’s activity centers also are dispersed, dissipating activity and contributing to some of the worst traffic congestion in the country. Detroit’s central business district has imploded because of a lack of confidence and thus a failure to attract investment.

The city of Birmingham should draw from the experiences of other cities to avoid their mistakes. Birmingham should follow the principles listed above. It should link and reinforce major city center destinations and build critical mass in the city center. Key destinations include:

- Historic and civil rights sites;

- Cultural destinations, such as museums, theaters, and urban parks;
- Retail, restaurant, and entertainment venues; and
- Employment destinations.

The panel focused its attention on the following areas and subjects: the UAB expansion, Railroad Reservation Park, the 20th Street corridor, the BJCC expansion, and various cultural and entertainment assets.

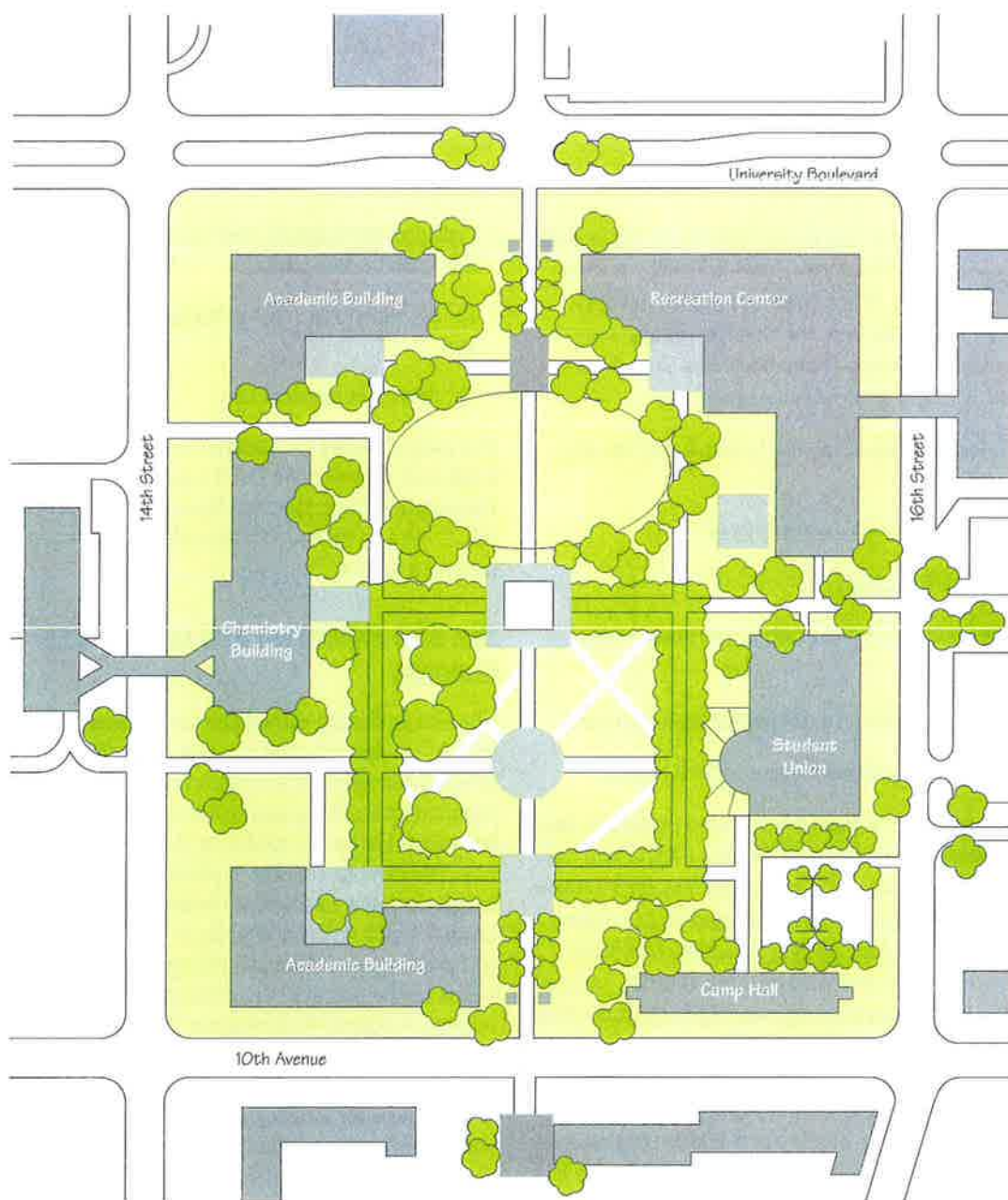
## The UAB Expansion and the Campus Concept

Thomas Jefferson coined the term “academical village” to describe the concept of a university campus centered on a common open space surrounded by teaching and residential facilities. This has proved to be the model for American universities. The campus concept typically features quadrangles, similar to those at Oxford University, around which either academic or residential facilities are clustered. Campus planning generally is based on the concept of pedestrian access, with minimal vehicular intervention. This principle is essential to maintain the continuity of campus development and community. Walking distances are the basis for locating groupings or clusters of uses, which in turn include growth units based on the use of quadrangles.

In urban settings, the contemporary campus building blocks are “superblocks,” large sites that may include several quadrangles and generally exclude vehicular traffic. Examples include UAB’s own Southern Research Institute (SRI) development. This principle is particularly important for universities that include medical centers, which are driven by grants that often require proximate expansion around investment-intensive facilities. Without adequate room for expansion, these cen-



The UAB plan includes consolidating blocks to form large green quadrangles, reminiscent of those in Thomas Jefferson's "academical village" model.



ters can become too dense, sometimes rivaling the most intensely developed commercial centers. A highly competitive institution increasingly requires a top-quality, physically beautiful campus built around pedestrian-friendly greens and other spaces that foster a sense of community, supported by a rich array of arts, entertainment, housing, and other facilities that contribute to the quality of university life.

Building this type of high-quality campus requires near-term actions that will support appropriate improvements over the next decade and beyond. Within the campus precinct, two elements are particularly important:

- Supporting physical planning initiatives, such as the creation of one or more campus greens and other pedestrian-friendly—and largely

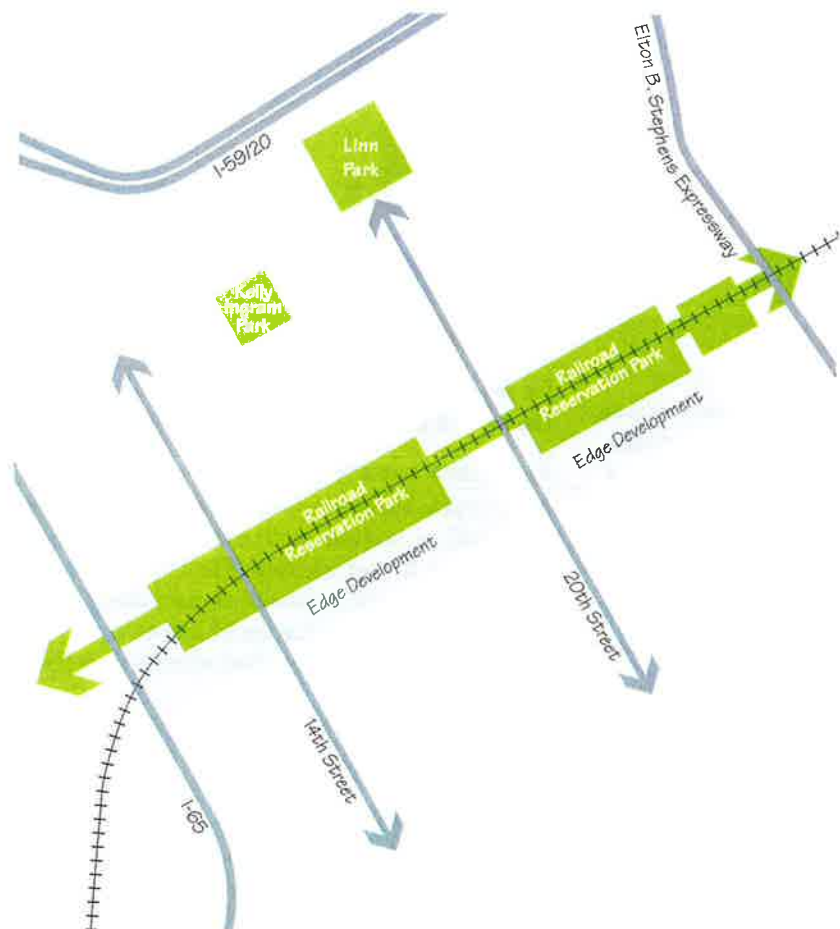
automobile-free—zones at the heart of the campus and the development of attractive walkways among university facilities. The university gains a great deal from its urban setting, and it will be important to balance efforts to enhance campus quality with essential city-building elements such as connections among the districts to each side of the university and a transition from the campus pattern of the university precinct to the traditional block pattern of midtown and the other districts around the campus.

- Fostering a regulatory environment that promotes a desirable campus land use pattern, including parking that meets the university's needs and recognizes the full scope of joint-use opportunities and the university's responsibility to manage parking within its boundaries; building reuse requirements that accord with cost-competitive practices, particularly for historic reuse; and traffic and circulation patterns within the precinct that balance university-specific and broader university access needs.

### Railroad Reservation Park

Birmingham owes its existence in part to the still-active railroad lines that bisect the city center from east to west. Those lines—and the undeveloped land that surrounds them—offer Birmingham a rare opportunity to provide a magnificent central park for its citizens. The park could serve as a place for the community to play, rest, and refresh itself. It could host community celebrations, festivals, and markets. It could be a signature focal point that brings together the people of Birmingham. It also could provide a unique development environment in which new neighborhoods, both residential and commercial, could be created along its northern and southern boundaries.

Moreover, the park could act as the centerpiece of a network of city squares that would include Linn Park, the proposed quadrangle at UAB, the central open spaces of the Hope VI project, Kelly Ingram Park across from the Civil Rights Institute, and new open spaces to be created from underutilized property in each quadrant of the city center. These new and existing squares would be linked with an urban greenway system consisting of side-



walks with improved lighting and landscaping, and streets with dedicated bicycle lanes. One route of the downtown area runabout transit (DART) circulator system could be run along this path system as well.

The city should add trees, lighting, streetscaping, bicycle lanes, and wayfinding signage to link all of its parks. As an early priority, the city should facilitate the development of property along the rail lines that already is publicly owned or reserved as parkland and initiate a program of substantial tree and ornamental planting.

### The 20th Street Corridor

The city has focused attention on the development of 20th Street to serve as a “spine” that links the northern and southern halves of the city center. This corridor should serve as the continued focus

Railroad Reservation Park should become a place where residents of the city and surrounding jurisdictions can come together for public celebrations and to relax. The park's edges would become desirable sites for development.

Birmingham's courthouse and Linn Park form a magnificent public space at the end of 20th Street.



The city center (below) is a destination for 30,000 employees daily and 1.6 million visitors annually. Improved linkages will help to encourage people to stay longer and take advantage of all the city has to offer.

for redevelopment efforts, and the city should take the following actions to guide its transformation.

### Strengthen Existing Businesses

Many viable businesses—including banks, restaurants, offices, and automotive and retail centers—have a 20th Street address. The city must encourage these businesses to remain along the corridor with a combination of incentives and investments that are described elsewhere in this

report. Included among these are improvements in mass transit and the creation of a great urban environment.

### Colocate Multiple Activities

One of the hallmarks of vital activity centers is diversity. The city should make every possible effort to enhance diversity by continuing to encourage housing and cultural activities, in addition to commercial uses.

### Develop Great Public Spaces

Birmingham already has several great public spaces, including Linn Park, which is located at one end of the 20th Street corridor. Additional spaces with a variety of personalities should be developed, so that exciting and attractive experiences are continually available. Some cities that have developed similar corridors, such as Santa Monica's Third Street Promenade, have worked with private developers to choreograph uses that stimulate activity and create value.

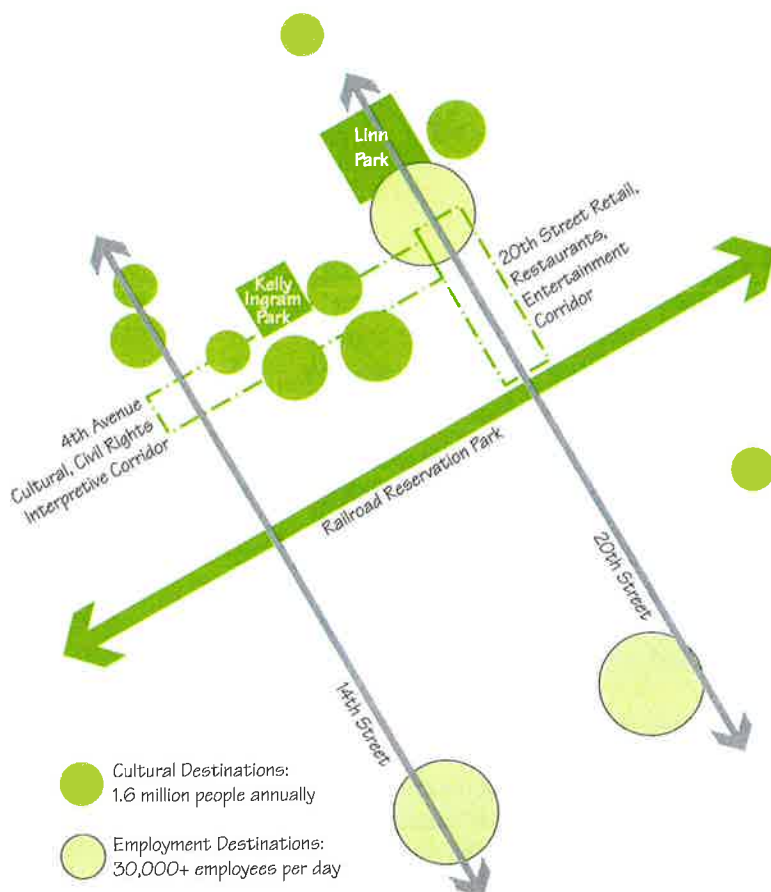
### Provide Amenities

Using block grants, private grants, commercial rights, and other investments, Birmingham should develop a powerful combination of public amenities that can include kiosks, street furniture, fountains, shade structures, police substations, newsstands, and public art.

### Employ Place-Making Principles

"Place making" refers to the activity of creating places that are attractive destinations in and of themselves. Creating new places or turning existing places into such destinations involves using certain urban design principles to build a character for the targeted place that is:

- *Authentic.* The character of the place should be derived from the area's history and quality.





Patrons identify authenticity as the key market driver for stimulating interest in visiting destinations. Birmingham has a wealth of historic, authentic features.

- *Distinct in Personality.* This personality usually is grounded in the place's authentic historic character, but it also may incorporate some other specific theme or cultural identifier.
- *Pedestrian Friendly.* Automobiles can be part of the environment and, in fact, should be accommodated, but they must not dominate the experience.
- *Perceived as Safe.* A combination of factors contribute to the perception of safety, including lighting, a reassuring but unobtrusive police presence, clear lines of sight, the prohibition of antisocial or threatening activity, and calm vehicular traffic conditions.
- *Clean.* Like the Walt Disney Company's theme parks, attractive urban places must be scrupulously maintained. Such high maintenance standards may require supplementing city services with private ones.
- *Attractive.* The design of public spaces should represent the highest design standard that the community can afford. A single poorly designed element detracts from the whole experience.
- *Varied.* Successful urban places offer a variety of settings and experiences. The place should be a gathering spot for a diverse population. It should provide a variety of experiences, including passive activities such as people watching. Ideally, it also should offer a variety of level changes, open spaces, sunny and shaded areas, quiet and active places, commercial venues, and cultural sites.
- *High Energy.* Intensity is a critical part of the urban experience, and several psychological factors influence this element. Pedestrians typically enjoy the company of others, yet their experience should not be crowded or threatening. Lighting, programmed street activities, and kiosks can contribute to the perception of a highly active environment without making it feel chaotic.



Five Points is a magnet for activity and commerce, a neighborhood where everything comes together right.

### Reinforce Streetscapes and Lighting

While the 20th Street corridor benefits from street planting, extra lighting, and special paving, these improvements are nearly 30 years old, and repairs already are underway. As good as these amenities are, substantial improvements will be required to make the corridor a more attractive destination. Improvements should include new landscaping, intensification of the civic arts program, plantings and other shading devices in open plazas, a coordinated system of street furniture—seating, trash receptacles, and water fountains—and a comprehensive wayfinding system that extends throughout the city center. All of these, particularly the wayfinding system, will be important elements of Birmingham's new branded identity.

### Consider Allowing Limited Street Parking

American retailing depends directly on convenient automobile access. Limited pockets of on-street parking can enhance the perception of convenience for shoppers while also calming traffic. Although there will be a price to pay in terms of a moderate increase in traffic congestion, this can be relieved by streets that run parallel to 20th Street. High traffic volumes and fast-flowing traffic are not conducive to pedestrian environments or retail activity, and 20th Street must become a more pedestrian-oriented environment, which in turn will facilitate commercial growth.

### Activate the Streetscape to Make It Clean and Safe

As mentioned above, providing a clean and safe environment is critical to the success of the entire downtown area, and especially the 20th Street corridor. Doing so will involve programming additional activities and uses and enhancing the perception of safety along the corridor. A public/



private effort should be undertaken to carefully select and attract uses that will benefit the street experience and to sponsor events and activities that enhance street life, including street performers and vendors. In addition to adding a pedestrian-friendly police presence (such as bike-mounted patrols and neighborhood substations), the city should enlist the media's support to assist the community in reversing perceptions that the downtown is unsafe.

### The BJCC Expansion

The following planning and design principles should guide the proposed expansion of the Birmingham Jefferson Convention Complex:

#### Maximize Expansion Functionality

The convention center's main floor area should consist of large, column-free, divisible spaces that provide multiple venues and maximum flexibility. It should be planned to accommodate rapid setup and breakdown. Utilities should be modular. Service access should be planned carefully for convenience as well as to limit the disruption of outside traffic and pedestrian movement. The convention center should include state-of-the-art audiovisual and communications facilities.

#### Soften External Street Exposure

The BJCC expansion should accomplish certain urban design objectives, insofar as this is possible. The primary goal should be to integrate the complex into the fabric of the city. Designers should strive to soften the convention center's boxy appearance. The design should place prefunction spaces and similar open and lower-scale elements along the south side of the convention center, to open the facility to the outside and to reduce its visual impact. Adding retail spaces and pocket parks along the south edge would further enhance the linkage between the conference facility and its surroundings. A "destination" landscaped plaza, perhaps with a major vertical sculpture element, could terminate the axial view to the north from the "Art Walk" connector.

#### Connect Hotels to Convention Space

The existing Sheraton hotel and any new hotels should be physically connected to the convention center. Pedestrian access and mobility should be a

primary consideration. Pedestrian routes must be attractive, safe, and active.

#### Consult with Meeting Planners

Meeting planners are the individuals who select convention centers for events. No major convention center expansion should proceed without consulting with these specialists. Their recommendations typically include the following:

- Functional spaces;
- Rapid setup and teardown;
- Secured marshalling and parking areas for exhibit trucks;
- An adequate number of appropriately priced, convention-quality hotel rooms nearby;
- Flexible exhibit space;
- Available meeting rooms and breakout spaces;
- Appropriately configured and located prefunction spaces; and
- Efficient, appropriately sized service and support areas.

### Cultural and Entertainment Assets

A number of recommended strategies are emerging from the development of entertainment venues across the United States in recent years. These include:

- Locate critical facilities at a city's "100 percent" corner;
- Incorporate the principle of authenticity;
- Consolidate activities to create critical mass;
- Plan for activities 24 hours a day, seven days per week;
- Incorporate popular "live/work" opportunities;
- Use public/private development strategies; and
- Plan for ongoing, active management of the district and improvements.

Some additional specific recommendations for such venues in downtown Birmingham include:

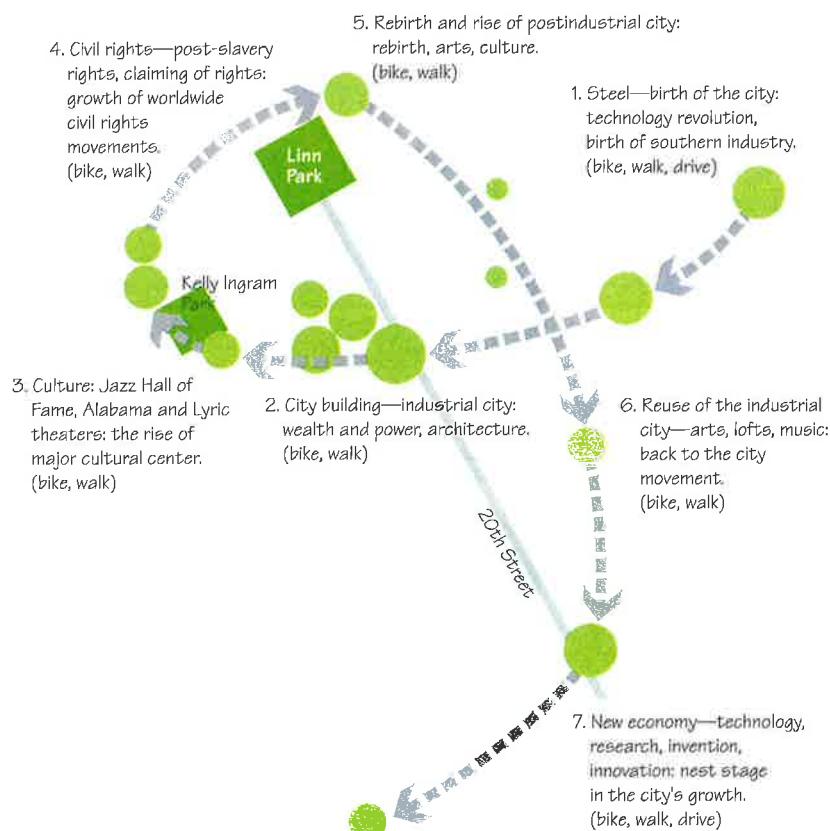
- Hide parking behind venues;
- Consider providing expanded shuttle service to link the various nodes; and
- Choose a location that will strengthen existing venues and counter the current development pattern, which is creating a bipolar nighttime entertainment axis. The current plan is to expand the BJCC and the cultural and arts district at the north end and Five Points at the south end of the 20th Street corridor. This pattern diffuses the potential for synergistic activities and disregards conventional wisdom about creating viable entertainment venues.

Downtown Birmingham already is home to a very healthy set of cultural institutions. The city must strengthen these institutions by creating a more cohesive identity for the district and by linking the institutions through a program of signage, banners, and walking tours. Providing a site for an arts middle school near the Alabama School of Fine Arts (a magnet high school) and museums will enhance this focus even further. In addition to an expansion in retail activity, these areas need to be connected with the historic African-American business district. The city also should encourage the growth of the Civil Rights Institute as a worldwide conflict resolution center. It should take the following steps to make this a reality:

- Create a walking tour of the civil rights district;
- Maintain and enhance storefront facades;
- Improve the streetscape, landscape, lighting, and maintenance in targeted areas; and
- Design and implement a wayfinding system and banner program.

## The Birmingham Interpretive Trail: Reconciling Race and Change

Birmingham can create a cultural heritage trail that uses the city itself—through its unique collection of civil rights history, industrial history, urban architecture, and cultural resources—to



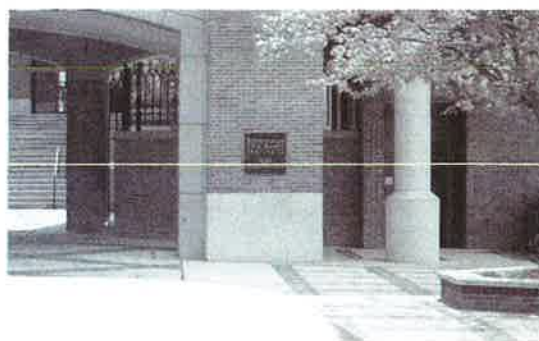
tell a compelling story of national and worldwide significance. At its core, this trail would tell the story of the civil rights struggle—a story that continues today—through a mix of important places where the story unfolded, particularly the 16th Street Baptist Church and Kelly Ingram Park, and the interpretation offered by the Civil Rights Institute and other nearby sites. This story can be made even more meaningful in the context of Birmingham's industrial history and postindustrial present. Weaving these stories together, in ways that focus on the core story of civil rights, will provide a compelling opportunity to explore themes of struggle and reconciliation.

Key themes and elements of Birmingham's heritage trail—which could be accessed by bike and foot within the core and/or by car at its two ends, and possibly by a dedicated DART circulator bus route—could include:

- *The Steel Story*: an exploration of the birth of the city, industrial technology, and southern

A cultural heritage trail could explore various sites, organized by major themes, throughout the city.

Some of the important sites along the proposed cultural heritage trail include Kelly Ingram Park, the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, and the Alabama Theatre.



industry; life in a city that escaped the Civil War; and the underpinnings of racial struggles and the civil rights era, primarily through interpretation at sites like the Sloss Furnaces and possibly Pepper Place and similar sites.

- *Building an Industrial City*: an exploration of the blossoming of Birmingham as the “Magic City,” exploring themes of the planning of the industrial city; the exuberant architectural expression of success and power in the city’s early boom-period architecture; and the economic system that underpinned the early industrial age, primarily through interpretation at sites like the “heaviest corner” and a short walking tour of the city’s early 20th-century architecture.
- *The Culture of the Industrial Age*: an exploration of the wealth of arts, music, and other cultural resources that this period endowed to the city and the deeply rooted racial and class differences expressed through this cultural history, and of the economic system that supported the industrial age, primarily through interpretation of the Jazz Hall of Fame, the Alabama and Lyric theatres, and possibly McWane Center.
- *The Civil Rights Struggle*: an exploration of Birmingham’s civil rights history; the claiming of rights, beginning in Birmingham’s post-slavery founding and continuing as a worldwide struggle today; and the emergence of a worldwide civil rights movement, primarily through interpretation at the 16th Street Baptist Church, Kelly Ingram Park, the Civil Rights Institute, the Jazz Hall of Fame, and other sites.
- *Reuse of the Industrial City*: an exploration of themes of the city’s cultural renaissance in the late industrial age and later years, cultural and other expressions of the beginnings of racial reconciliation, and similar stories, primarily through the Birmingham Museum of Art, Linn Park, the Birmingham Public Library, and the galleries and music venues east of 20th Street.
- *The Emergence of a Postindustrial City*: an exploration of the rise of technology as a force shaping the city and its economy, invention, innovation, and the continuing story of reconcilia-

tion, primarily through interpretation of state-of-the-art research and medical technology at UAB, and possibly through exhibits at the Alys Robinson Stephens Performing Arts Center and other sites.

Entertainment and cultural sites presently are located at multiple points up and down the 20th Street corridor. A group of viable restaurants is clustered at Five Points. A “theater district” is located near Fourth Avenue North. Several performance venues and the city’s civil rights district are located in the northwest quadrant of the downtown. The art museum is located north of Linn Park, and the convention center is located still farther north, across the Interstate 59/20 expressways.

These venues are scattered over a distance of one and a half miles, which is too long to be a comfortable walk for most patrons. As isolated locations, none of these can achieve the critical mass necessary to stimulate development of a dynamic destination for daytime and nighttime activities. The proposed Birmingham Interpretive Trail, which would tie these activities together, is about six miles long.

## Branding and Wayfinding

Whether intentional or not, every city has a brand. It is the identity created by all of the visual elements that represent the city—its logo, street signage, directional signs and stoplights, street furniture, regulatory signs, the graphics on city vehicles, the uniforms worn by city employees. All of these constitute the city’s image, its brand. Like most cities, Birmingham developed without consciously establishing a brand. Its graphics program evolved over time, with various elements created separately, to address specific technical criteria, in isolation from each other. Increasingly, cities have come to realize that it is more effective to design these elements comprehensively, to impart a personality, a style, and a visual image that deliberately speaks to their values and aspirations.

Birmingham has a signage program that identifies certain districts. The panel recommends that the city take this one step further and prepare a com-

prehensive branding program that includes and ties together the design of the following elements:

- The city’s logo;
- Individual district logos;
- Street and directional signage;
- Wayfinding signage;
- Regulatory signage;
- Banners and pageantry;
- Streetlights and street furniture, including benches, trash receptacles, and kiosks;
- Vehicular colors and markings;
- Uniforms worn by police and maintenance personnel;
- Printed materials; and
- The city’s Web page.

By weaving together the design of these elements, Birmingham can improve its image, express its personality, facilitate tourism, and improve public safety. The panel recommends that the city employ a firm that specializes in this field, work with that firm to design a comprehensive branding program, and establish funding to implement as much of the program as possible simultaneously, perhaps tied to some other important civic event.

## Benchmarks

A number of urban entertainment facilities can serve as benchmarks for study and comparison. One category to examine is location-based entertainment, facilities that pack a concentration of activities into a small, contained site on one or more city blocks. Examples of location-based entertainment facilities include Sony’s Metreon entertainment center in San Francisco, New York’s Times Square, and the Walt Disney Company’s Disney Quest projects (in several locations). Although these kinds of developments typically require higher rates of visitation than Birmingham is likely to achieve, the principles they illustrate can be applied at Birmingham’s scale.



Other examples include entertainment venues like Houston's Bayou Place and active street corridors such as Santa Monica's Third Street Promenade. Bayou Place has generated more nighttime activity in Houston's downtown than any other recent project. Located immediately adjacent to three existing performing arts venues, the project involved the conversion of an outdated convention hall into a mixed-use facility with restaurants, a movie theater, a performing arts theater, and a pool hall. Bayou Place's success led directly to successful conversions of existing structures into residences and generated a cluster of restaurants in the downtown area.

In Santa Monica, California, the city and developers collaborated in a public/private venture to focus their efforts on a three-block area in the heart of the downtown. A combination of shops,

restaurants, theaters, and housing, with parking located behind a tier of commercial development, Third Street Promenade provides a mixture of activities that draws patrons from the surrounding community and from outside the region. The street is enhanced by special paving, colorful banners and signs, kiosks, water fountains, small police information substations, and abundant landscaping. Birmingham needs to study these and other examples, learn from their successes and failures, and devise a strategy to focus the city's energies and create a great 24-hour environment in the heart of the downtown.

# Development Strategies

**T**he city must become a partner with private sector business leaders and developers. It should facilitate their efforts, particularly in activities relating to downtown growth and revitalization, and should concentrate its own efforts in areas where the impact will be greatest.

Birmingham should aim to become known as a “development-friendly” community. To do so, it must smooth the development process by understanding and responding to the needs of developers for timely, clear, consistent, and predictable regulations and approval procedures. It must eliminate confusion and duplication in both regulations and jurisdictions. The city should create a division for permitting and zoning approvals that responds directly to developers, working in concert with them wherever possible.

The panel also suggests that the city create a new set of development incentives. These should include the following:

- Low-interest loans, both short and long term;
- Grants for building facade improvements, especially for small, entrepreneurial developers who may not be able to proceed without such assistance; and
- A “payment in lieu of taxes” program to encourage developers to work in the city center.

Finally, the city must strictly enforce its nuisance abatement program through the new environmental court, to improve public safety and its civic image.

## Five Focus Areas

The city must channel its efforts and investments in key, targeted areas that will reinforce its community identity, quality of life, and economic base. The key areas for immediate attention include UAB, Railroad Reservation Park, the 20th Street Corridor, the BJCC expansion, and the range of

cultural and entertainment assets located throughout the city. Development strategies for each key area are detailed as follows:

### UAB

The panel believes that UAB is the single most important and robust economic generator for downtown development and for the city as a whole. UAB’s continued growth and success must be supported at all levels and nurtured by the entire community. Any downtown development strategy must not only recognize, but also proactively and assertively support, the university’s future plans. As UAB goes, so goes downtown Birmingham.

Because the university is the downtown’s most significant growth and job generator, the public and private sectors must help UAB build on its successes by doing the following:



The city should facilitate the spin-off of businesses from UAB’s medical research activities.

Kirklin Clinic houses UAB Hospital's outpatient clinics



- Encouraging the incubation of spin-off businesses from UAB's medical research activities;
- Devolving greater control over the campus master plan to UAB; and
- Taking all reasonable steps to facilitate UAB's execution of its growth strategy.

To facilitate a smooth transition from the city's current level of involvement in planning for the expansion of the UAB campus, and to ensure that future changes in the campus master plan—as well as any physical additions, outside the traditional boundaries of the UAB campus—are consonant with sound city planning principles and are well integrated into the whole of downtown, the panel recommends that UAB, the city, and surrounding neighborhood stakeholders work cooperatively to develop a set of common goals and objectives to guide UAB in the future.

The emergence of a nationally recognized medical campus and expansion of the UAB campus represented a significant contributor to the city's recovery after the rapid decline of its traditional industrial base in the 1960s. The university's constellation of academic campus, medical and research facilities, cultural amenities, and emerging entrepreneurial spin-off development is now directly responsible for roughly one out of five jobs in the city center.

The nature of UAB's contribution to Birmingham's economy is at the cusp of a significant change. This transition will offer important opportunities for revitalizing the city center. In contrast to the past three decades, the next stages of expansion and change will focus on continued growth in research and related entrepreneurial development,

with far more modest growth in medical and traditional educational facilities. Should this next-stage growth be managed in a way that enhances the quality, character, and competitiveness of the entire city center? The answer, for Birmingham, is clearly “yes.”

The just-released UAB master plan envisions moderate increases in the university's student body and faculty as well as significant expansion of its medical and research facilities. The plan envisions that in the near and intermediate terms, most growth will take place directly on or adjacent to the traditional university precinct.

The city and UAB should begin immediately to plan for the following stage of growth. As UAB pursues research grants from the National Institutes of Health and other government agencies, it expects to more than double its current funding levels. It furthermore expects to attract increased levels of private market pharmaceutical research and development.

Over the next 15 to 20 years, the stage will be set to attract several million square feet of high-value development, together with a wide range of jobs, housing, and quality-of-life amenities, including shops and restaurants. This development will be attracted to midtown and the area lying between UAB and the heart of downtown north of the proposed Railroad Reservation Park.

Both the city and the university have a great deal at stake in managing this growth in a manner that both fosters revitalization of the city center and supports the university's educational mission and its ability to attract funds. Each of these goals depends on the others. The most important next step will be to build a strong sense of partnership and shared endeavor, shaped around the principle, “let the city be a great city and the university be a great university.” This partnership should recognize the significant degree of mutual interest that both parties have in each other's ability to grow and prosper.

The first step in this effort should be to create an integrated economic development and physical planning strategy for the UAB precinct (midtown), accompanied by an effective implementa-

tion strategy that builds on the experience of city/campus revitalization partnerships in such cities as Hartford and New Haven, Connecticut; Columbus, Ohio; and Philadelphia. The health of the university itself, as well as its ability to attract research and related investment, are directly related to UAB's ability to attract and retain top-quality faculty; medical, research, and other staff; and students. This, in turn, is affected by the quality of life offered by the city.

The city should improve physical access to the larger university/midtown area. A near-term goal should be to improve DART circulator bus service and some of the poorly performing interchanges that connect with the regional highway system. A longer-term goal should be to implement regional public transit that guarantees convenient access to the university and the rest of the city center.

The city should foster the emergence of a vital university community around the campus, building on the vitality already found at Five Points. It should support a significant increase in on-campus and nearby student housing, housing for university employees, and amenities to serve the residents of such housing.

A vibrant university community is a gift—and an important economic asset—to any community. The essential ingredients are a critical mass of housing—together with bookstores, cafés and restaurants, and similar uses supported by a university community—within walking distance of the core campus. UAB has the potential to build on the elements of the university community that already exist. As it does so, it can contribute meaningfully to the convenience and quality of life essential to support the expansion of other significant university-related medical and research districts. The following strategies can help the city work toward these goals:

- Direct economic growth into a pattern that reinforces revitalization. The city should identify economic development corridors that can accommodate the majority of the research activities and related development that occurs off campus in the area between the university and the downtown. Over the next 20 years, these corridors could accommodate several million square feet of development, including a mix of



The university's health sciences complex includes the Tinsley Harrison Tower and the McCallum Basic Health Sciences Building on University Boulevard.

state-of-the-art research facilities (sponsored by the university, related hospitals, and the private sector); some expansion of medical facilities; housing; professional services (particularly those related to research and health care); and supporting retail and similar uses. These corridors should be focused on building strong connections to the downtown core north of Railroad Reservation Park. The city's first priority should be the 14th, 18th, and 20th street corridors. Its second priority should include infill development between 14th and 18th streets and west of 14th Street. Within these corridors, it will be critical to identify a long-term inventory of sites appropriate for major buildings—with floor plates that may exceed 25,000 square feet—together with related parking facilities. Beginning late in this decade and through the next, the city should identify sites appropriate for roughly 2 to 5 million square feet of development, with further growth in later years driven by ongoing increases in medical-related research, powered by the accelerating rate of change in the pharmaceutical and related industries and the increasing pace of innovation in other aspects of health care and related needs for new facilities.

- Improve near and long-term access to this area (as noted above)—for both private automobiles and public transit—to ensure that the area's long-term access needs are met.



Railroad Reservation Park would create opportunities for residential and commercial development along its edges.



GOODY CLAWY & ASSOCIATES

- Invest in public realm improvements, including streetscapes, small parks, and other efforts that will enhance the area's appeal as a place to work, invest, and—increasingly—live.
- Support development of medical district housing adjacent to existing and proposed hospitals as well as research and other medical facilities, to serve the demand for housing within a short walk of round-the-clock medical jobs.
- Foster ongoing revitalization of the area west of 20th Street, toward and including the Lakeview district, as a vibrant mixed-use district that enhances the quality of life—and competitiveness—of the university, the medical area, and future research investment in midtown. In particular, the city should take advantage of visibility and access from 20th and 21st streets (both heavily used commuter routes), proximity to growing downtown housing, and potential site availability to create a food market to serve the downtown. The city also should encourage the expansion of food, art, and entertainment uses that build on the vitality already associated with the Dr. Pepper property, Lakeview, Work-Play, and similar uses.

### Railroad Reservation Park

The panel suggests that the city should facilitate the development of a major park on the reserved land along the rail lines. This should become a real central park, a place that symbolically and functionally weaves together the city center's north and south districts. An early step should be to begin a program of substantial tree and ornamental planting. The city also might identify and begin to acquire and develop additional property along the rail line, converting it to parkland and linking it with the existing reserved land.

Over time, the city could acquire appropriately located, underutilized properties in the four quadrants of the city center for the future development of new squares amid areas of potential development. The city can designate the land for a distance of two blocks north and south of the rail lines as a special development district. Over time, the city may acquire and, where necessary, clear those properties, preparing them to be leased to private developers at extremely favorable rates, to facilitate the development of housing and commercial uses compatible with the goals of the master plan.

The city should enliven the park with activities—including food vendors, periodic performances, and festivals—and design features that create a genuine destination. It can add further vitality—and promote safety—by sponsoring the development of a new urban neighborhood around the park that takes full advantage of the power of the park to create a sense of place. By acquiring control of sites immediately facing the park, the city will be able to participate in capturing the value stemming from the park's creation.

The blocks between 14th Street and the Red Mill Expressway could be devoted in part to 500 to 1,000 new housing units, including a mix of townhouses, lofts, and apartments. This housing, together with the park, could become a substantial asset that would help draw investment to midtown. City-sponsored development of the land facing the park would ensure the city's ability to control the character and quality of both the park and the emerging development in nearby midtown and the blocks to the east.

### **The 20th Street Corridor**

Birmingham perceives 20th Street as the “spine” of downtown, its single most important street, which ties together the anchors of Five Points South, the downtown office and commercial core, the centers of culture and government, and the convention complex. The intersection of Fifth Avenue and 20th Street has been called “the corner of Main and Main” for the state of Alabama. The panel recommends building critical mass by concentrating new development—including visitor attractions and performance venues, parks, retail outlets and restaurants, and loft housing—near this intersection to create a central, mixed-use activity center.

Public and private sector downtown stakeholders can strengthen the corridor's importance, function, and structure by taking the following actions:

- Providing supportive parking adjacent to existing businesses.
- Treating the ground floors of buildings along 20th Street from First Avenue to Fifth Avenue, and along Fifth Street from 19th Avenue to 21st Avenue, as a single retail development with a

cohesive strategy. The proposed downtown redevelopment agency should master lease all ground-floor space, subleasing it to one developer at a significantly subsidized rent (for example, \$1.00 per year plus a percentage of profits). This “master-lease retail developer” would be responsible for bringing in a synergistic mix of tenants that will attract target markets and for setting an operating protocol and requirements (such as hours of operations) similar to those at a shopping center.

- Improving ground-floor facades and signage consistent—but not rigidly uniform—with a master sign program that emphasizes the uniqueness and individuality of the historic downtown retail fabric.
- Reinforcing the shuttle service. The 20th Street corridor is about one and a half miles long, which is much longer than the average American is likely to walk. The length of this corridor argues for establishing a free, clean, convenient shuttle that serves the entire corridor, allowing visitors who arrive at any point to travel its entire distance. This shuttle should connect directly to the proposed multimodal station next to the Railroad Reservation on First Avenue North.
- Encouraging the development of rail transit. A reliable regional transit service that is clean, dependable, and inexpensive to use should be a high-priority project. It is needed to move employees, visitors, and residents to and from the city center and to relieve congestion and improve air quality and the quality of life. Although interviewees frequently spoke of Birmingham residents' reliance on personal automobiles for travel, this condition is, in fact, prevalent throughout the United States. Yet many communities, including several in the South, are finding that this situation is due in part to a lack of attractive travel alternatives. In Dallas, for example, the Dallas Area Rapid Transit rail system has proven unexpectedly popular, encouraging an accelerated expansion of lines to outlying suburban communities. Houston, another area where reliance on personal automobiles for all travel is endemic, is building its first light-rail segment to link the downtown with important outlying facilities.



Expansion plans for the BJCC facility should be part of a comprehensive master plan for the city.

Houston's METRO transit system also has implemented a free trolley shuttle that moves people through the CBD and connects to close-in residential areas, which subsequently have become more sought after, largely as a result of the availability of free and convenient transportation to employment centers. Birmingham should consider a similar type of rail transit that is tied to shuttle transit terminals, to stimulate growth in the CBD.

#### **The BJCC/Civic Core**

The Birmingham Jefferson Convention Complex anchors the north end of the downtown area. Its ambitious expansion plan suggests a desire to elevate Birmingham to the next tier of American cities. While admirable, the proposed development concept requires further thoughtful examination and objective analysis.

Any such plan must recognize the critical relationship between the general public's perception of Birmingham as a convention and/or leisure destination and the city's ability to attract convention and visitor patronage of a certain scope and scale, the quantity and quality of its proposed facilities notwithstanding. In addition, any expansion of the BJCC must be planned and undertaken through a comprehensive and holistic approach. If, for example, the expansion of existing conference, exhibition, meeting, and spectator sports facilities precedes construction of an adequate number of hotel rooms and the ancillary retail and public spaces

required to support the larger events that an expanded BJCC could accommodate, the center will be unable to attract conventions of the size and duration necessary to support the cost of such expansion.

Likewise, while the proposed entertainment district has the potential to create a new "center of gravity" for the city, it also presents potential negative consequences of dissipating the energy that has been generated in other parts of downtown Birmingham. The panel therefore recommends that a range of alternatives be considered before a final approach is selected. These include locating the proposed entertainment district so that it can be linked to and create synergies with the downtown cultural and civic core. The Deloitte & Touche study methodology must be expanded to include a more rigorous evaluation of the true market potential of Birmingham's competitive position within the nationwide convention market. The city should analyze four alternative programs for expansion:

- Expansion with new exhibition and conference space only;
- Expansion that includes a 20,000-seat arena;
- A domed-facility expansion scenario; and
- The option of doing nothing now.

In particular, the city should do the following:

**Study Alternative Financing Options.** Current plans include financing from conventional sources, such as occupancy and rental car tax revenues and general funds. Many new convention centers and expansion facilities are making use of other sources, including tax-exempt revenue bonds and public/private financing. These and other avenues should be explored to determine the potential extent of financing available, which in turn will determine the ultimate size and scope of the proposed facilities.

**Support the Proposed Realignment of Interstate 59/20.** The proposed realignment of I-59/20 to the north of the city center deserves support, as it will remove the current barrier between the BJCC and the CBD. Although current estimates indicate

that it may take 25 years to implement this plan, it is an important proposal that deserves full support at every level of government. Nonetheless, planning for the BJCC should not be based on the possibility that the 59/20 freeway someday may be removed. Whether or not the realignment ever is implemented, the expanded BJCC must function for at least two decades with the existing freeway configuration.

**Explore the Domed-Stadium Concept.** The idea of including a domed, multipurpose sports facility has garnered support for a variety of reasons. A domed stadium is seen as a destination attraction that might pull in visitors while serving local users, as well as an opportunity to attract a national franchise sports team. Proponents of a domed stadium believe that it could become the nucleus of an entertainment district that could energize the area north of I-59/20. Such a stadium also has the potential to serve as a multipurpose facility that would offer exhibit space, an events center, and a sports facility. This idea is deserving of further exploration, but several points need to be examined critically. The entertainment component relies on ramp improvements and the rerouting of I-59/20, which is not expected to occur for at least 25 years.

Successful convention facilities have very specific requirements, which are likely to be compromised by combining them with sports venues. This concept, while both innovative and meritorious, should be reviewed with professional meeting planners before it is pursued further. Market demand for either a sports facility or an entertainment district of the size, scope, and scale proposed for this location needs to be examined thoroughly and objectively, and must be based on reasonable assumptions consistent with the experience of cities of a similar size. Finally, entertainment facilities have their own set of market dynamics, which deserve to be studied by experts in that field, including entertainment providers.

The further conceptual development, financing, and citizen approval necessary to proceed with the proposed BJCC expansion will require the most substantial investment of political will, community support, fiscal subsidy, and private capital the city of Birmingham has ever seen. These are

extremely precious resources that are in very short supply in every American city, and the benefits that Birmingham's varied stakeholders could receive by devoting these resources to other, more discrete revitalization initiatives that collectively could strengthen the city center also must be fully examined.

### The Cultural District

Downtown Birmingham's existing cultural institutions need to be strengthened through the creation of a more cohesive identity for the district and through their linkage by a fabric of signage and walking tours. Creating a site for an arts middle school near the Alabama School of Fine Arts and museums will enhance this focus even further. In addition, expansion and connections need to be made to the retail activity in the historic African-American business district.

Encouraging the growth of the Civil Rights Institute as a worldwide conflict resolution center produces an opportunity to promote the institute. The renovation of the Lyric Theatre in conjunction with the fine arts magnet high school is another excellent opportunity to develop synergies.

The most significant element for the near term is to coordinate the resources of these cultural institutions with the BJCC so as not to dilute the community's time, energy, and money in the sequencing of projects. The following steps could begin immediately, with small budgets and little manpower:

- Create a walking tour;
- Institute a banner program;
- Establish a program to maintain and enhance storefront facades; and
- Maintain and improve public landscaping and lighting.

### Important Issues

In addition to the five focus areas described above, the city must consider several important issues, including parking, transit, and business development, which affect the downtown and the entire region.



The city should implement a unified, prioritized strategy to ensure that parking is added where and when it is most needed.



### Parking

Of all the issues affecting the future of the city center, the panel most often heard concerns about reconciling the conflict between the Birmingham Parking Authority (BPA) and Operation New Birmingham (ONB) regarding the allocation of resources for the expansion of existing parking facilities and the construction of new ones. During the interview process, business owners stated that while their employees can find adequate parking, it often is located at what is considered an inconvenient distance from the major employment centers. This limits employers' abilities to satisfy the needs of their employees, and creates pressure on them to move to the suburbs, where parking not only is free to the employee but also is usually more conveniently located.

BPA's report states that "there is now a serious shortage of parking in the city center," and that additional parking is needed if existing major employers are to be retained and new ones attracted to the city center. One strategy advanced by the report advocates expanding Parking Decks 3 and 5, an idea that employers told the panel they favor.

The report also calls for additional parking to stimulate development in the 300 block of 19th Street and west of 20th Street. This strategy addresses future needs rather than solving present parking shortages. Whether the current problems are real or perceived, employers and the BPA disagree on the use and occupancy of existing parking in terms that directly affect existing businesses.

The employers' observations are validated somewhat by the fact that, according to the BPA study, curb parking is tied up by long-term users during

peak work hours, suggesting that employees are "feeding the meters" to avoid the cost and inconvenience of deck or lot parking. The result is that merchants are further dissuaded from locating in the city center because customers do not have access to short-term, on-street parking.

The BPA report lists several strategies for discouraging long-term meter parking. Although these strategies may be effective, they rely on negative incentives such as stricter enforcement and higher fines. However, the report also recommends operational strategies that would provide incentives for workers to use parking structures. While the panel agrees with those strategies, it also advises the city to take a comprehensive planning approach that would provide additional parking in facilities that would be perceived as convenient and safe, and priced in a way that makes them competitive with metered parking.

The panel recommends that the proposed downtown redevelopment agency be designated as the city's single parking authority. This agency then should fund a single study to produce a unified, prioritized strategy for adding to existing parking facilities and developing new ones. Its three priorities should be to retain existing businesses; designate strategic locations for future facilities, to be built in response to currently planned development; and make long-term plans to provide parking in areas where development is not currently planned, but could be appropriate if parking were available.

Parking in these locations would supplement the needs of downtown cultural institutions and entertainment venues as they are developed. This could include shared parking used by residents of new downtown housing, employees of nearby businesses, and visitors to cultural and entertainment events. Providing such shared parking also would create synergies among these land uses and would spread the cost of the facility among them. All new parking facilities should be located and constructed in a manner consistent with the downtown street pattern, to facilitate access and egress.

### Transit

The issues of parking and transit often are linked. Most major cities provide adequate, convenient,

affordable public transit as a means for citizens and visitors to travel into and through their centers. As is true in most cities of its size, the culture of Birmingham is one in which the automobile dominates other modes of transportation. Nevertheless, Birmingham could provide a transit system using a combination of light rail along existing rail lines, city buses, and a strengthened DART circulator bus system to link in-town parking, multimodal interchanges, distant park-and-ride facilities, and in-town activity and employment centers.

To succeed, such a system must be run in a consistent fashion, convenient to the needs of its users, with predictable, frequent headways and clearly marked stops and routes. It must be priced to encourage ridership. Furthermore, it must serve and be supported not only by those who have no other transportation choices, but also by people who choose transit as a desirable alternative to their cars as a way to enter and move through the city center.

At present, driving and parking an automobile continues to be the most convenient form of transportation for most Birmingham residents. The panel recommends that the city adopt a long-term strategy for transit, but that it implement this strategy incrementally, starting by strengthening the DART circulator system and adding appropriate routes to support the institutions, businesses, and centers of interest that already exist in the city center. More ambitious plans can follow, if and when they are warranted by demand from future development.

### **Emerging Businesses: incubating the Hatchlings**

Small and medium-sized businesses are a current and future growth engine for the city. This group includes the new businesses that could be formed as spin-offs from medical research at UAB and the hospitals. These emerging businesses will need inexpensive space in which to begin their lives, either in older, converted industrial buildings or in newer buildings that can be customized for their specialized needs. As they grow, they will need larger spaces in which to “incubate” and expand.

The panel suggests that the city begin preparing to meet the needs of these “hatchlings” by expanding the incubator zone from the UAB campus and including the new technology zone. The redevelopment agency will need to acquire land—and possibly buildings—to accommodate the future growth of this vibrant sector. In addition, public infrastructure should be put in place to support the daily needs of the sector’s employees, including adequate parking and recreational space. The city approval process must focus on facilitating new development and redevelopment of existing structures that will support the needs of this vibrant new commercial activity.

### **Housing**

The housing market in the study area and the immediately surrounding neighborhoods consists mainly of older structures, many of which are in need of repair or rehabilitation. Numerous vacant lots give visitors the impression of a declining neighborhood. Facilitating the improvement of the existing housing stock and reclaiming vacant lots by building new units will enhance the livability of the neighborhoods and improve the image of downtown living.

One tool that will help in this process is the construction of a database listing the number, type, and condition of the housing stock, and the number and location of vacant lots. This database also should include rents, purchase prices, occupancies, household demographics (projections from the 2000 census show that 79,000 households and a total population of 191,600 people live within a five-mile radius of the downtown core), and other data necessary to understand the supply side of the economic equation. The database will provide invaluable information to those interested in acquiring houses or lots to implement this improvement effort.

The creation of an overall housing plan for upgrading the existing housing stock, building on vacant or underutilized lots, and converting commercial and industrial buildings to residential uses all will be essential steps in improving the economic viability of the city and transforming it into a place where people will want to live, work, invest, and play. The city must establish priorities for housing renovation, conversion, and new construction,



The city should encourage further development of housing in the loft district (above). The Fountain Heights neighborhood (at right), just north of downtown, features excellent housing stock, but also contains blighted areas that must be revitalized.



based on the realities of the marketplace and available financing.

**North Neighborhoods.** The city must proactively facilitate the revitalization of existing houses and apartment buildings in this submarket. One strategy the panel recommends is to encourage the conversion of single-family homes from rental to owner-occupied properties by providing appropriate incentives to stimulate acquisition and rehabil-

itation. As neighborhoods become stabilized, infill opportunities will become more attractive to investors. These incentives should encourage both the expansion of supply and long-term owner occupancy, and should include subsidies for the rehabilitation of existing units and the construction of new units through reduced land prices, and financing assistance for qualified homeowners. Examples of appropriate parties to facilitate this process include Habitat for Humanity, the Housing Enterprise of Central Alabama (a member of the Coalition of Community Development Financial Institutions), and other affordable housing groups, as well as private developers and contractors who might assemble one or more lots to create a critical mass of units for construction and marketing efficiencies.

The city must improve and continuously maintain streets and sidewalks, landscaping and lighting in the public right-of-way, parks and open spaces, and keep up regularly scheduled trash removal services. The Fountain Heights Neighborhood Improvement Plan completed in January 2000 is an excellent first step in the analysis portion of the process. The next step must be an implementation strategy, followed by the solicitation of financing sources to make this strategy a reality.

**Downtown.** To create a significant residential impact downtown, the city should support the emerging loft neighborhood stretching from Morris Avenue to the HOPE VI project in the northeast quadrant of downtown. To do so, it should facilitate the development of more loft units in existing buildings, including both rental and for-sale units. It also should assess existing buildings and establish a priority evaluation system to determine their potential for conversion to residential use. The buildings then would be rated to determine the level of funding support they will be qualified to receive.

The city also must facilitate the activities of the entrepreneurial developers who already are working in the downtown area, as well as those who will begin converting historic downtown office buildings to residences as demand increases. The city should acquire and make available appropriate parcels of land between 21st and 22nd streets along the linear urban greenway for the develop-



ment of small-scale, service retail facilities that meet residents' daily needs, such as a specialty grocery store, a dry cleaner, a Laundromat, and restaurants.

The city always needs to be cognizant of the costs and benefits of all projects in terms of their economic viability, the resources available to support them, and their impact on the livability of the city. When this type of analysis is included as part of the decision-making process, success—both financial and in terms of community acceptance—is more likely.

The city also should be aware of a variety of techniques that can be used to bring more residents to the downtown, including the following:

*A Special Code for Adaptive Use.* Impediments to downtown residential development and redevelopment that typically discourage the private sector range from regulatory obstacles, an unpredictable approval process, and high asking prices for existing, underutilized buildings and vacant land to potentially high production costs relative to the initial value of completed units. Cost problems may be even worse for adaptive-use projects, since existing structures often complicate the design effort while costing nearly as much as—or sometimes even more than—new construction.

In 1998, New Jersey was the first state to adopt a separate construction code for existing buildings (New Jersey Department of Community Affairs, Division of Codes and Standards: Rehab Subcode of the Uniform Construction Code [NJAC 5:23-6]). This code is responsive to scale, easing compliance for small projects and increasing code requirements with the scope of the rehabilitation project. This is critically important, since most neighborhoods will derive maximum benefits from residential—and nonresidential—initiatives that will occur on a variety of scales. In cities across the country, it has become clear that the neighborhoods with significant historic rehabilitation efforts are the ones that have fared best in maintaining and building housing value. These historic rehabs have ranged in scale from the sweat-equity efforts of individual owner occupants to the professional renovation and rehabilitation of large, multiunit buildings. Since the New Jersey code's

adoption, the amount of rehabilitation in the state's largest cities has increased by 60 percent.

*Artists' Housing.* Artists often are urban pioneers and can be tapped to bring growth and stability to a downtown district. A proven approach to maintaining a stock of affordable housing and live/work space for artists is the use of dedicated Low-Income Housing Tax Credits (LIHTCs). In addition to meeting household income restrictions, prospective residents of affordable artists' housing projects also are subject to a portfolio review that ensures that at least one member of the household is a working artist. This program can be augmented with historic tax credits to redevelop existing buildings within a historic district. Minneapolis-based Artspace Projects, Inc., has used this strategy to redevelop several buildings for artists in St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Duluth and has provided consultation services for equivalent redevelopments in St. Louis, Salt Lake City, Detroit, and Philadelphia, among others.

Another technique for developing a vital arts district is to provide tax relief to resident artists. Providence, Rhode Island, has populated its DownCity Arts and Entertainment District by sales and income tax exemptions. DownCity artists and artisans are exempt from state and local sales taxes, and resident artists also are exempt from personal state income tax. The program has been deemed so successful that the Rhode Island General Assembly recently passed legislation to establish similar districts in two other Rhode Island cities, Westerly and Pawtucket.

*Monitoring and Marketing the Downtown.* Baltimore, Maryland's Downtown Partnership maintains a database of all existing residential properties located within the downtown. The partnership updates data on monthly rents, vacancy, and turnover rates at each rental building; values and sales of newly developed units in new construction or adaptive use of existing buildings; and values and frequency of resale activity within older condominium buildings on a quarterly basis. The partnership also monitors the status of all new development proposals. This information is readily available to potential developers via the partnership's Web site. Another Web site, which is linked to the Downtown Partnership site, actively mar-



kets downtown Baltimore and most adjacent neighborhoods. This second Web site describes in detail each neighborhood's assets—from cultural institutions to architectural characteristics—and also provides comprehensive listings of available rental apartments (along with each unit's location and size, asking rent, and a photograph) and for-sale units on the market (which also are accompanied by information on their location, asking price, unit size, and a photograph).

**Midtown.** The city can facilitate the creation of new neighborhoods surrounding UAB, which could help support commercial activities that also will serve the emerging loft neighborhood. The city's main contributions would be through land acquisition and assembly, and parking creation and management.

**Financing.** For all of the housing-related programs and projects in the areas discussed above, financing is the one essential element that the city must seek proactively, in conjunction with the development community. In addition to government, Fannie Mae, and Freddie Mac programs, local banks with community revitalization programs will be very interested in assisting in this process as a way of satisfying their federal Community Revitalization Act obligations. Setting up programs with clearly stated goals, specific time frames, and simple procedures to obtain money will enable individuals to evaluate these opportunities with a clear path to continued appreciation potential, justifying their investment of time and money in revitalizing these well-located neighborhoods.

# Implementation

**W**hile in Birmingham, the panel saw a wealth of projects, and spoke with many skilled people who have extensive knowledge of the city and an understanding of the players involved. The challenge faced by some cities is a shortage of projects and a lack of skills. In Birmingham, it may be an embarrassment of riches. Nevertheless, the panel has identified the following impediments to progress:

- An excess of projects leads to competition for attention, funding, and other resources.
- The involvement of multiple organizations causes a dissipation of energy and confusion of missions. Many people wearing several hats are stretched too thinly to achieve their objectives.
- New leadership in the city, institutions, and the private sector is an opportunity for new energy but also a challenge, since established patterns of doing business may no longer apply and yet no new “modus operandi” has emerged.
- Political priorities have shifted to the neighborhoods outside of the downtown without a clear rationale for the future role of the city center.

The experiences of many other cities indicate that successful implementation of downtown revitalization is based on a few major foundations:

- A clear vision of the role of the city center;
- Extensive buy-in and commitment from the whole community of stakeholders;
- The right organization(s) focused on a mission; and
- A supportive government.

The panel recommends that the city adopt a bold vision for the future. Birmingham should become a great city for residents and visitors alike. Before

specific tasks are defined, there must be a common understanding of the respective roles of the public and private sectors, institutions, and other interests that make up the city of Birmingham and the metropolitan region.

## The Private Sector

The private sector in Birmingham is strong, but it has proven its strength only in terms of carrying out its own business, be it banking, retailing, or entertainment. In terms of redevelopment, the private sector can do more, in the following ways:

- Landowners can make their land available for development;
- Developers can commit to making places, not just individual buildings;
- Tenants can commit to downtown on a long-term basis; and
- All occupants, whether owners or tenants, can commit themselves to the management and maintenance of their facilities to improve the quality of the built environment.

## The City Government

City government creates the environment, sets the agenda, and is an essential partner in downtown redevelopment. Despite the considerable talents of individual elected and appointed officials, the panel believes that significant challenges abound.

In recent years, the change of leadership has created new priorities that favor the neighborhoods over the downtown. The conflict between the mayor and the previous council caused delays in decision making and some lack of confidence in city leadership among the business community. Birmingham’s lack of an economic development function is unusual for a city of its size and has

resulted in a lack of economic analysis and an increased reliance on officials with other important responsibilities as well as other overstretched organizations, such as Operation New Birmingham (ONB) and the chamber of commerce.

For the city center to reemerge as a priority, city government needs to do the following:

- Review its organizational structure of departments and reporting responsibilities. It may be necessary to reorganize and concentrate leadership to improve relations between the city government and the development community.
- Facilitate actions for development in a truly coordinated fashion, including setting up mechanisms to get regular feedback from the development, business, and institutional communities.
- Create an impetus and environment for change by embracing a vision of the future of the city center and applying resources only to projects and policies that achieve those goals.
- Manage the process of development regulations, approvals, and permitting in a positive manner to increase shared understanding of the importance of government responsibilities for safety while appreciating the needs of the applicants.
- Establish an economic function—either within the city government or by contracting with another organization—to carry out analysis, make data available, actively seek new investment, and be the city’s proactive “dealmaker.” The proposed downtown redevelopment authority is one example of such an entity.

These are largely operational matters within the purview of city hall. More importantly, only the mayor and council members can create the overriding environment of political support and commitment to the city center from the neighborhoods and throughout the region.

A strong economic case can be made for reenergizing the city center, which currently contributes 30 percent of the city’s tax revenues. This share will increase if the downtown is made economically stronger. The current and future economic generators that provide jobs, training opportuni-

ties, tax revenues, much of the fabric of the built environment, and the entertainment and attractions that bring visitors to the city all lie within the city center.

In addition, every new downtown job generates spin-off spending in the regional economy for housing, retail sales, and other goods and services. Every downtown job lost, on the other hand, causes problems for a family and may force a home sale at a lower value, leave a restaurant table empty, and result in lost retail sales as well as publicly undermining confidence in the region.

It is in the direct interest of the neighborhoods to have a thriving downtown that will generate the revenue for necessities such as servicing the new bond issue that is sorely needed for investment in each neighborhood, for education, and to provide facilities that neighborhood residents can enjoy. City staffers must research and document the case for promoting downtown. City leaders must articulate this case to build a balanced political agenda that delivers needed facilities and services to all neighborhoods while also nurturing the heart of the city.

## Partnerships

Birmingham has a fine tradition of collaboration and cooperation among the government, institutions, civic entities, and the private sector. Region 2020, despite its limited funding and resources, is an essential conduit for building and maintaining a broad understanding of the importance of regional thinking, planning, and action.

ONB is widely admired for its work in facilitating relationships between the private sector and various levels of government, and has been actively involved in virtually all major transactions in the city for the last 30 years. It uses its limited resources to aid projects but does not have the resources to take a strong leadership position in downtown urban renewal.

The Metropolitan Development Board has been an important economic development collaboration, but its regionwide mission to attract industry precludes the downtown from deriving any direct benefit from its efforts. These partnerships and

**Figure 5**  
**Proposed Birmingham Downtown Redevelopment Agency Structure**



others demonstrate that the key players in Birmingham know how to collaborate. What is lacking is an organization with the single-minded focus—as well as the skills and resources—to take the lead to achieve effective and realistic downtown urban renewal.

### The Birmingham Downtown Redevelopment Agency

The panel strongly recommends the establishment of the Birmingham Downtown Redevelopment Agency (BDRA). Its mission should be determined by the participants, but might be summarized as follows: “To redevelop the central city as the heart of Birmingham for all its people, a place where they can live, work, play, and/or visit.”

The panel recommends that the BDRA be established as a public/private partnership with a board appointed by the city government, the private sector, and relevant institutions. It should include leaders drawn from finance, real estate development and brokerage firms, higher education, research, retail, health care, and government. It will require a small but well-qualified staff, led by a president with extensive downtown redevelopment experience. All its major functions should be

managed by the staff, although external consultants and contractors also will be required.

The BDRA will be the lead agency in planning, redeveloping, managing, and promoting the city center. Its key functions will include the following:

- Building consensus and commitment from all stakeholders;
- Managing the master-planning process;
- Preparing a database of property and opportunities;
- Establishing and overseeing a system of design guidelines;
- Actively assembling land for development, by eminent domain if necessary;
- Serving as the developer of last resort;
- Being a vocal, articulate advocate for the city center in all forums;
- Perfecting the “one-stop shop” by facilitating developers’ interactions with government agencies, including expediting permits and approvals;



The historic Powell School will be redeveloped as part of a HOPE VI project.



- Retaining and attracting investment through focused target marketing;
- Managing “clean and safe” programs throughout the city center;
- Promoting, coordinating, and initiating events and marketing efforts;
- Investing in enabling and supporting infrastructure for key development; and
- Creating a partnership between the city and the private sector to provide parking.

#### Preparing the Master Plan

One of the BDRA's most important early tasks will be the preparation of a downtown master plan. The physical master plan should follow a visioning and strategic business planning process. The city has a unique opportunity to use this process to create the constituency of stakeholders that will be required to take the finished plans forward.

The BDRA should form a task force and identify interest groups throughout the region who need to be included in the planning process. The BDRA president will be responsible for drawing up requests for proposals, hiring qualified consultants, and managing the overall process. It is essential that this process be transparent, use many techniques to foster involvement, and document the contributions of all involved, so that the consultants can be held accountable to the inevitable strongly held and wide-ranging opinions.

By engaging in this broad visioning process, establishing a strategic business plan, and focusing in on a strong development framework, the BDRA can use the master-planning process to create con-

sensus for the plan. This process also can be used as a training ground to bring forward a new generation of leaders from the community, business, and institutional environments—those who will be involved during the next 20 years of the plan's implementation.

#### Funding

The BDRA will require three levels of funding. The staff and organization will need base funding every year. In the first year, funds will be needed for planning and other studies, but the more significant expenditures will occur when the BDRA starts to acquire land and invest in deals. It also will require ongoing funding for its management and maintenance functions.

One of the BDRA's first tasks will be to prepare a financial plan that identifies potential sources of funds to match its expenditures. Base funding needs to come from a variety of public and private sources. Grants and taxes from the enlarged business improvement district also can form part of the base funding. Other funding sources will be required on a project-by-project basis.

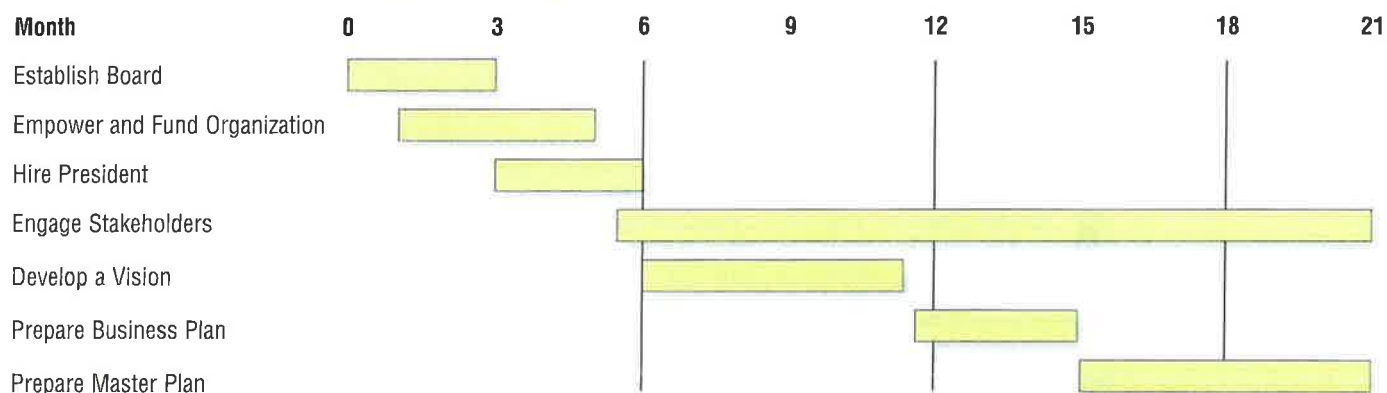
#### Priorities

The BDRA's long-term success will be built on its initial successes. The organization needs to focus on key actions and set itself up to plan, evaluate, decide, and act. It must take the following first steps:

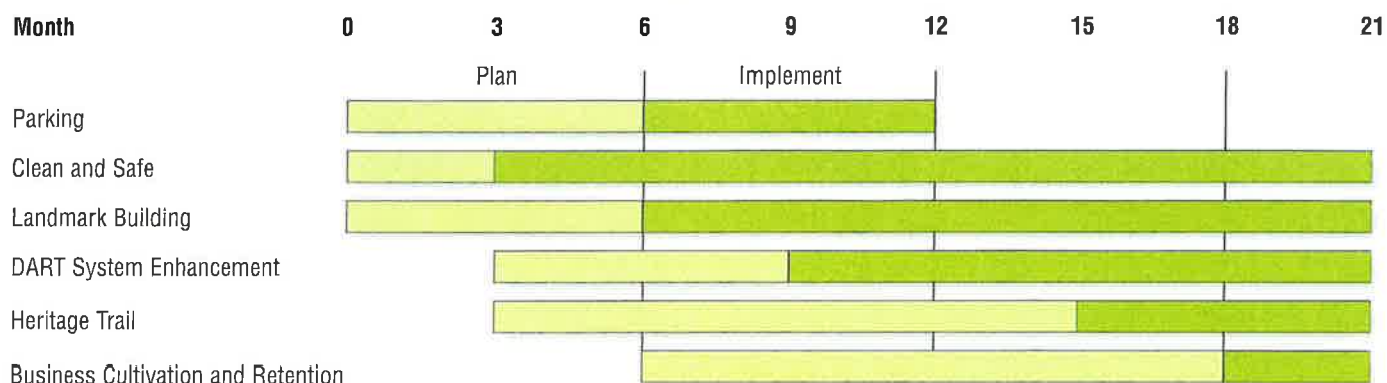
- Establish a board;
- Empower and fund the organization;
- Hire a president;
- Establish a stakeholder and community engagement process;
- Define a visioning process;
- Complete a strategic business plan; and
- Prepare the master plan.

At the same time, it is important for the BDRA to undertake some high-impact, fast-track projects that will benefit a wide range of constituents, such as the following:

**Figure 6**  
Downtown Redevelopment Agency Timeline



**Figure 7**  
Downtown Redevelopment Agency Fast Track Programs



- Identify the most important parking priority required by existing downtown businesses and implement a solution;
- Radically enhance the funding of the City Action Partnership (CAP) program to increase its presence on the streets and improve perceptions of safety;
- Negotiate the acquisition of an historic landmark building and seek developer interest for an adaptive-use project;
- Fund an enhanced DART transit service loop to key downtown destinations;
- Partner with Region 2020's Cultural Master Plan to establish the Birmingham Interpretive Trail and promote it through schools, churches, and other interested organizations; and
- Establish a program to cultivate and retain major employers, identify their needs, and take first actions.

As these projects are defined and implemented, the president and chair of the BDRA must meet on a biweekly basis with the mayor and his chief of staff to ensure ongoing focus and coordinated leadership.

## Conclusion

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**T**he panel's assignment was to advise the city on a process for creating a downtown master plan that will build a more vibrant and sustainable city center. The panel investigated the potential for growth and concluded that downtown Birmingham has a wealth of assets upon which to build. The city first must build support from local institutions, business leaders, and the public, as well as from the county, regional, and state governments. It must focus its efforts to achieve the maximum impact. The city must develop the leadership to make difficult decisions. By working to resolve conflicts, build consensus, and prioritize tasks, the city can develop a plan for a revitalized city center.

# About the Panel

## Peter Smirniotopoulos

*Panel Chair  
Falls Church, Virginia*

Smirniotopoulos is a nationally recognized urban strategist who provides real estate advisory services, training, and technical assistance to the public, private, and nonprofit sectors through Petersgroup Companies, which he founded in 1993. The firm offers transdisciplinary real estate services, research and analysis, and public policy consulting focusing on urban revitalization and economic development strategies, the transformation of public housing and public housing agencies, and the creation of mixed-income, mixed-use communities.

Before he established Petersgroup, Smirniotopoulos was a practicing real estate and corporate finance attorney in Washington, D.C., and served as a senior redevelopment housing official in Alexandria, Virginia. During the past 20 years, Smirniotopoulos has handled real estate and capital planning and finance transactions in excess of \$1.5 billion, and has taught and published nationally on real estate development, housing, and capital formation. He is currently on the Johns Hopkins University faculty in its master's of science in real estate program and serves on the training faculty of the National Association of Housing and Redevelopment Officials. Smirniotopoulos holds undergraduate and law degrees from Georgetown University.

## Walter S. Bialas

*Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania*

Bialas joined PNC Bank in 1993 to establish an internal market research group. His main role as vice president of the research group is to provide market research due diligence in support of the bank's commercial underwriting process. Bialas conducts custom research to evaluate unique mar-

ket dynamics, assess location issues, evaluate the impact of competitive projects, and test the reasonableness of pro forma assumptions. Projects evaluated at PNC Bank include all property types in all regions of the United States. Bialas's particular analytic strengths include retail and affordable housing.

Prior to joining PNC Bank, Bialas spent ten years with the national consulting practice of GA/Partners-Arthur Andersen in Washington, D.C. While a senior manager there, he advised clients on the market and financial feasibility of proposed projects throughout the United States. Bialas received his bachelor's degree in urban studies from Albright College in Reading, Pennsylvania, and his master's degree in city and regional planning from Catholic University in Washington, D.C.

## Daniel Brents

*Houston, Texas*

Brents leads an architecture and planning studio in Houston for Gensler, a global architecture, design, and planning firm. His current projects include three hotels with more than 2,000 rooms, a headquarters campus with more than 2.5 million square feet of new space, and the Town Centre Entertainment District at the Woodlands, Texas.

Brents served as the Houston Sports Authority's development coordinator for the \$250 million downtown Enron Field ballpark and as an adviser for the \$30 million Cotswold redevelopment project in downtown Houston. He was a consultant to Hillwood Development on the 65-acre Victory project in downtown Dallas. His earlier work includes urban design consultation on Sony Center in Berlin.

Previously, Brents was vice president of architecture and planning for the Walt Disney Company's real estate development group in France at Disney-



land Paris (previously known as Euro Disney). He was responsible for land development and negotiations with French authorities for the development of the 4,800-acre, \$4.5 billion mixed-use project. Before joining Disney, he managed 3D/International's architecture and planning division in Houston and also established the firm's regional office in Hong Kong.

Brents has served on ULI Advisory Services panels that studied downtown Stockton, California; Uptown Charlotte, North Carolina; Atlanta's Centennial Olympic Park; Governor's Island in New York Harbor; and the convention center in Barcelona, Spain. He is a fellow in the American Institute of Architects and a member of the American Institute of Certified Planners. Brents served as cochairman of the Texas Society of Architects International Committee and as civic affairs director for the Houston chapter of AIA. He has a bachelor's degree in architecture and a master's degree in urban design.

### **Ray Brown**

*Memphis, Tennessee*

Brown offers architectural and urban design services as a consultant to Memphis architectural firms on individual projects. He provides creativity, skills, experience, knowledge, and ideas in architectural and urban design, project direction, and project development. He seeks projects that have the potential to improve the quality of life for disadvantaged residents by transforming at-risk urban neighborhoods into more livable communities. Brown directed the design and construction of AutoZone Park in Memphis, Tennessee, one of America's finest minor league baseball parks and a crown jewel in Memphis's downtown renaissance.

As vice president for development of the Memphis Center City Commission, Brown set the framework for the downtown urban design plan, facilitated new development, recruited new businesses, and administered design standards. For 26 years, Raymond Brown Architect specialized in providing municipal and private clients with architectural and urban design projects focused on downtown redevelopment and planning. Brown also taught architectural design at the University of

Cincinnati and was downtown planner for the city of Dayton. He is a member of the Memphis Habitat for Humanity "Green Hat" construction committee and holds a BS in architecture from the University of Cincinnati.

### **Richard J. Dishnica**

*Point Richmond, California*

Dishnica is president of Bay Glen Investments, Inc., and the Dishnica Company, LLC. Bay Glen Investments was formed in 1994 to develop for-sale and rental infill housing in the San Francisco Bay Area. Dishnica formed the Dishnica Company in 1999 to pursue his individual investment goals and provide consulting services.

From 1994 to 1998, Dishnica was executive vice president and chief operating officer of American Apartment Communities, a privately held REIT, where he was responsible for all apartment operations, development, and rehabilitation. Until its merger with United Dominion Realty Trust in 1998, American Apartment Communities owned and managed 54 apartment communities in nine states containing more than 14,000 units valued at almost \$790 million.

In 1982, Dishnica became executive vice president of the Klingbeil Company, predecessor to American Apartment Communities, with operating responsibilities for the western United States. From 1989 to 1993, he also served as chief financial officer and chief operating officer of K/W Realty Group, an affiliate of the Klingbeil Company in the for-sale business. Before joining Klingbeil, Dishnica was a principal of Comstock Ventures Limited, a real estate venture capital company, and vice president of Fox and Carskadon Financial Corporation, where he was responsible for joint venture solicitation, analysis, negotiation, and management.

Dishnica served as an officer in the U.S. Navy and received his master's degree in business administration from the University of Southern California and his BS degree from the Ohio State University.

## David Dixon

*Boston, Massachusetts*

Dixon is the principal in charge of planning and urban design at Goody, Clancy & Associates, a Boston-based architecture, planning, and urban design firm. He has led initiatives to revitalize significant urban districts in Boston, Cleveland, Providence, New Haven, Albany, New York, and other cities. The *Wall Street Journal* cited his vision for redevelopment of the neighborhoods around Chicago's Cabrini Green public housing as "a model for creating new mixed-income urban neighborhoods."

Dixon also has led significant revitalization initiatives for civic partnerships. For Campus Partners—a partnership of the Ohio State University and the city of Columbus—he directed the preparation of a vision, urban design plan, and strategy to guide the revitalization of the commercial core of Columbus, Ohio's University District. For a partnership among public agencies and a citizens' advisory committee, he directed the creation of a vision and plan to guide the development of more than 25 acres of air rights over the Massachusetts Turnpike in the heart of Boston. He worked with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the city of Cambridge to shape the development of University Park, a 2.5 million-square-foot, mixed-use district adjacent to the MIT campus that replaces older industrial uses.

Dixon is a frequent contributor and moderator at public forums and conferences. He recently moderated forums on the creation of neighborhoods at a conference in West Palm Beach sponsored by the MacArthur Foundation and the Conservation Fund and at the International Downtown Association annual meeting. He has been invited to talk about creating 21st-century main streets, creating new neighborhoods, and revitalizing downtowns at annual conferences held by the Council for Urban Economic Development, the American Planning Association, the Society for College and University Planning, the International Making Cities Livable Council, and the American Institute of Architects.

Dixon is a fellow of the American Institute of Architects and serves as an adviser on AIA's national Urban and Regional Design Committee. During the past two years, he received the American Institute of Architects's National Urban Design Honor Award and national awards from the Congress for the New Urbanism, the Society for College and University Planning, and the American Society of Landscape Architects. He is the president-elect of the Boston Society of Architects and codirector of the society's smart growth initiative.

## Robert Pell

*Alexandria, Virginia*

Pell is an urban and economic development planner with 25 years of experience. He specializes in planning, economic development, and revitalization projects that vary in scope from the strategic level to practical implementation. Pell has considerable experience with residential and mixed-use development from the perspective of the private developer, public sector official, and consultant. He trained and worked in the United Kingdom before leading many international projects for EDAW, Inc., and then relocating to the firm's Alexandria, Virginia, office.

Pell began his career in new town development and spent ten years at Conran Roche in London, where he built the firm's economic consultancy team before setting up Conran Roche property development activities, which included business, industrial, and residential developments and mixed-use schemes, mostly in London. He became managing director of the group and also was a director of Conran Roche Architects, which undertook major award-winning design commissions.

Pell established EDAW's European offices in 1992 and moved to the United States in 1999. Recently, he has worked on master-planning and revitalization projects in East Chicago, Philadelphia, Jacksonville, and Shanghai. He serves on EDAW's board and is responsible for the firm's offices in Atlanta, Alexandria, Miami Beach, and Montclair, New Jersey. He has a degree in economics and politics and another in urban planning.

## Laurie Volk

*Clinton, New Jersey*

Volk is principal in charge of Zimmerman/Volk Associates's market studies and is the firm's primary analyst of demographic, market, and lifestyle trends. Her development and direction of research methodology for the company, as well as her groundbreaking application of geodemographics to real estate market dynamics, have been instrumental in bringing Zimmerman/Volk Associates into national prominence.

Among Volk's recent efforts have been the development of analytical tools to determine the market potential for two critical initiatives: first, the mixed-income, mixed-tenure repopulation and stabilization of fragile inner-city neighborhoods and second, new mixed-use, pedestrian-oriented sustainable neighborhood developments. She is on the board of directors of the Seaside Institute and the National Charrette Institute, and is a recipient of a 2002–2003 Knight Fellowship in Community Building.

Volk is quoted frequently in a variety of consumer publications. She has addressed conferences in both North America and western Europe and is a

sought-after speaker, particularly on the markets for compact and sustainable development and social equity issues relating to urban redevelopment. Volk established international credentials for her observations of consumer and economic trends as a writer and researcher for the *Times* of London and as a member of the prestigious Insight Team of the *Sunday Times*. She also was chief of research for more than a dozen *Sunday Times* books covering topics ranging from finance to commercial aviation.

Zimmerman/Volk Associates, Inc., has a national reputation for innovative market analysis based on its proprietary target market methodology. The woman-owned company specializes in the analysis of compact and sustainable development; mixed-income, mixed-tenure redevelopment; mixed-use urban revitalization; traditional neighborhood developments; and integrated-use master-planned communities. Zimmerman/Volk Associates is recognized by the leading practitioners of the new urbanism as the national expert on the market feasibility of new urbanist communities.







