

# PROPERTY REPORT

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PORTRAIT BY BRAD RANKIN

## IMAGINE A GREENER, MORE SUSTAINABLE CITY

*Emory Morsberger Dreams of a Radically Remade Atlanta*

In "Big Yellow Taxi," Joni Mitchell lamented the paving over of our earthly paradise. But developer Emory Morsberger is more about tearing up the parking lot to build his version of utopia.

First, he started in downtown Lawrenceville. Quietly, he acquired parcels around Lawrenceville's Square. With them, he has led the Gwinnett County seat's revitalization efforts, attracting new restaurants, galleries, residential development and the Aurora Theater. A charming small-town square emerged from a neighborhood on the brink.

Inside the Perimeter, Morsberger now leads one of the most ambitious development efforts in Atlanta's history. With Ponce Park, Morsberger has assembled a team to redevelop City Hall East, a two-million-square-foot behemoth on Ponce de Leon Avenue. It is a former Sears, Roebuck & Co. warehouse, and current home to the Atlanta Police and Fire departments. The fire and police departments move out in the fourth quarter of this year, and then City Hall East will undergo a two-year redevelopment.

Scheduled for occupancy in 2011, Ponce Park is years away; Morsberger is nailing down the development's financial details now. Still, his firm vision involves creating a place for artists, intellectuals, the disabled, and most everyone else willing to keep an open mind—and playing a role in Midtown's and the Old Fourth Ward's continuing renaissance. Where fleets of police and fire department vehicles once sat, you'll eventually find the city's newest park, on North Avenue across from the enormous brick structure. That will be part of a green necklace connecting Freedom Park, the Beltline and Piedmont Park. If Morsberger fails, it may say more about us than him.

Morsberger also takes a leadership role in bringing to fruition the Brain Train, a commuter-rail link connecting Athens and UGA, Emory University, Downtown and Georgia State, and eventually Macon. We spoke to him as he drove from Lawrenceville to downtown Atlanta, and he was quick to point out that it would take half as long if he were able to make the trip by train.

**ATLANTA PEACH:** Where are we in Ponce Park's devel-



**A green future.** Ponce Park is Emory Morsberger's vision for the green, mixed-use redevelopment of the two-million-square-foot City Hall East.

opment process, and what's the roadmap from here?  
**EMORY MORSBERGER:** We're going to change the whole direction of that area. We're working with a number of arts and theater and other cultural groups to include them within the project. We're working to create at least three theaters within the project, where existing theater companies will come and set up shop, and have a tremendous amount of different arts and cultural events continuously, year-

**"We're working to create a center for sustainability."**

round. We're working to create a center for sustainability, in addition to seeking LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification on the redevelopment of the existing building and on the new buildings. We're looking to create a center of sustainability there, where sustainable products would be exhibited and sold, and where different companies or organizations or foundations involved in sustainability and the environment would be based. We have partnered with the Shepherd Center

and Jewish Family and Career Services. We're setting up a situation where a large number of people with disabilities will be living within our project with a good quality of life, with a lot of freedom, and with the ability to get around to anything they need on their own, independently—people with physical or mental disabilities. We're also working with different universities to create a center for healthy living. All of these different areas of interest, if you will, are part of the whole Medici Center, which will exist within Ponce Park. We're in the process of incorporating a 501(c)(3) Medici Society that will include a number of academic and intellectual and community leaders. The society will guide all of the different academies within the Medici Center.

**What are some of the sustainable aspects incorporated into Ponce Park?**

The coolest aspect of the development is that we sit on top of the springs of Ponce de Leon. The street name originated in the 1800s when the springs that were located on our site were a place that people came to for picnicking and health reasons. The [water from the] springs of Ponce de Leon was actually bottled and sold alongside Coca-Cola in the late



1800s and early 1900s. [It was said to be] good for your kidneys and good for your virility. We're going to uncap the springs of Ponce de Leon, which are currently being pumped into the Atlanta sewer system, and use the springs for a number of different uses. It'll be used generally for things you would use gray water for—toilets and irrigation and other water functions. We may try to heat and cool the building using some of that spring water. The second point is we're working toward LEED certification. We'll recycle a lot of the different things that come out of the

#### What about the new park?

We're donating two acres to the city for the beginning of the new North Avenue Park. That's the park that's being created that runs south from North Avenue down to Ralph McGill. We're taking a site that's currently 98 percent paved or built on and basically trying to create about 20 percent green.

#### That area and that particular building have a certain grittiness that doesn't seem to be part of Ponce Park's grand scheme. How can that perception change?

That area is changing in perception now. Folks who

technically in, has the lowest rate of foreclosures of any place in the metro area.

#### What's the residential mix going to look like?

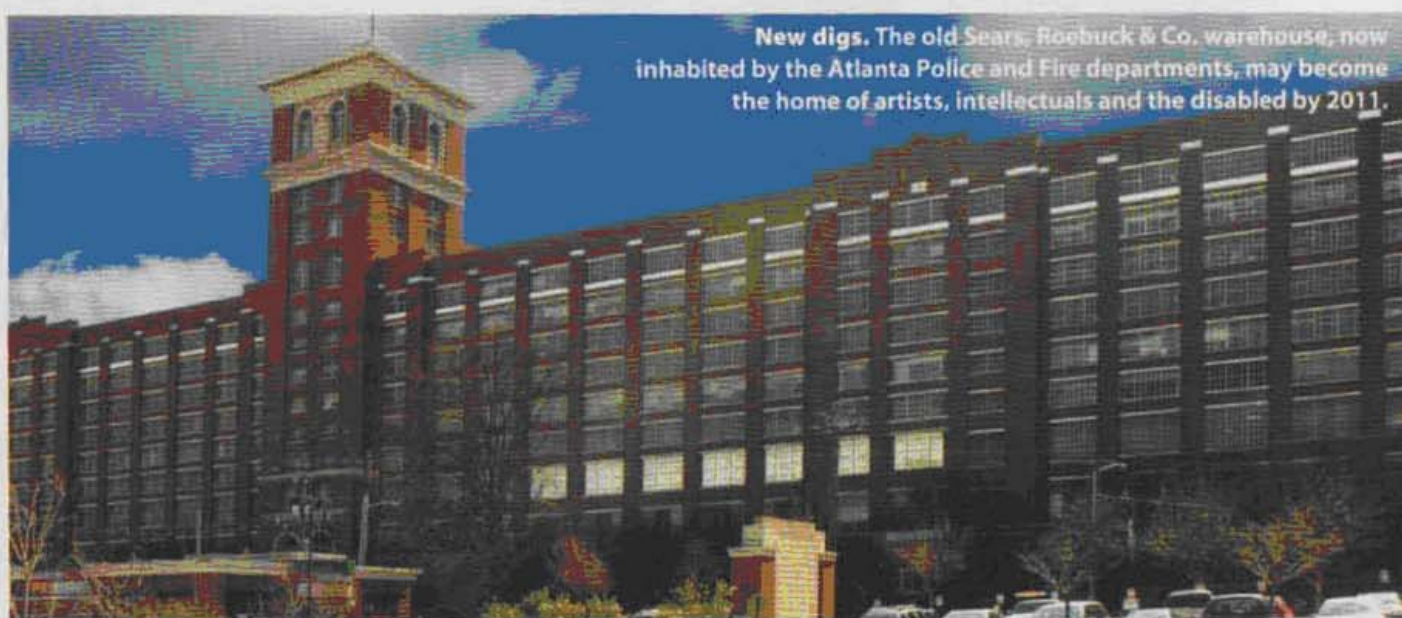
Twenty percent of that project will be affordable. We're targeting that affordable aspect at folks who have disabilities, number one. Number two, we're hoping to house some police officers in the project. We committed to that since we started to take over police headquarters. Number three, we're working to house people who are currently living in the Fourth Ward who may be gentrified-out, just trying to create

## "We're working to brand that area around Ponce de Leon and North Avenue and Glen Iris and the Beltline to be the Park District."

building in the demolition process. We are working to do the building in as energy-efficient a way as possible. We're meeting with architects from other parts of the country who specialize in sustainable development to actually start thinking about the types of things to consider as we move forward. I envision we'll have some kind of solar panels. We'll have a somewhat green roof. We're fortunate that we have the time to work on that where we're not under a real tight time constraint at this time.

#### Just how are you going to reconfigure City Hall East?

We're doing a true mixed-use development, both vertically and horizontally. On the basement level, we envision parking and art galleries. On the street level, we envision retail, primarily. On the floors above, a combination of retail, theater and office up to the third or fourth floor, and then on the fourth through ninth floor of the main building primarily residential with some art studios, as well. There will be space for interaction for the people who live in Ponce Park. We envision a lot of the creative class living within this project. We're looking to attract "thinkers with hearts." In fact, we've trademarked that name. Living in our place will be kind of like your freshman year in college. You'll have a lot of things to do, and you'll meet a lot of people who you ordinarily wouldn't come in contact with. We'll have a lot of interaction.



live in that area are going through a major planning process now for its revitalization and future development. We've been actively involved. We're working to brand that area around Ponce de Leon and North Avenue and Glen Iris and the Beltline to be the Park District. We're calling it the Park District because of the four different parks—Piedmont Park, Freedom Park, the Beltline Park that's being created along the Beltline and then the new North Avenue Park that we've contributed two acres to and the Woodruff Foundation has contributed \$8 million just to help get it cranked up. A lot of things are moving forward in that area that are going to make it a great place to live, and a great place for a real cross-section of people. We're going to have a mix of races, religions, ages and economic levels. We have a home run with the neighborhood. You can't get much better than between Midtown and Poncey Highlands and Virginia Highlands and the Old Fourth Ward. They're all doing very well. In fact, Fourth Ward, which we're

some opportunities for them to live in Ponce Park. Last but not least, there's the whole art and cultural component, the demand from starving artists. We're creating a couple dozen units that will be occupied at a lower rent by art and theater folks.

#### Where does Ponce Park fall on the Beltline?

We're right in the middle of the section that the city bought from Wayne Mason. We already have a bridge that goes from our third floor to the Beltline. That's going to be an important component of the whole setup for people with disabilities. If you're in a car wreck today and in a wheelchair the rest of your life, you'll be able to live in our place and wheel right out that bridge to the Beltline and be able to go one way to Piedmont Park and the other way to the Carter Center on your own.

#### Where are we on the Brain Train? Will we see any progress on it from the Georgia legislature this year?

We've built a lot of support within the state House and state Senate. The state DOT board is now on board supporting the Brain Train. That took us a while. We're moving forward. We're working with the state for its 20 percent match to a federal 80 percent match that we hope to start working to get later this year. The Brain Train can be up and running by 2012. All it needs is money—a minor detail. ☐