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Urban retail rebirth takes planning and innovation

Rick Blalock Contributing Writer

Building new retail centers takes time and money. Lots of it.

Rebuilding retail centers takes even more effort. But turning around older retail centers is not impossible.

The key to revitalization is demographics and the potential for new growth in an area that has, for the most part, seen its "golden years" pass by.

Michael Beyard, vice president of strategic development at the Washington, D.C.-based Urban Land Institute, says downtown retail centers face enormous odds.

First, a downtown shopping center can't stand alone.

"It can't exist as an island," Beyard said. "It must be part of an overall comprehensive plan of the district."

Second, identifying the markets can be a major obstacle. Developers must look for a combination of consumers in order for the downtown retail center to succeed. The combination includes

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consumers from office space renters, tourists, suburban travelers and residents.

On top of all of this, downtown and inner-city retail centers must provide something consumers can't get in the suburbs.

Moving back to the city

Another factor that can trigger a rebirth of a downtown retail center is the prospect that a sizable population segment will move back to the area.

"There is a strong interest, especially in young people, who want to be intown," said David H. Herskovits, a partner at Deloitte & Touche LLP. "And, I think retailers are willing to support an area and build if we think a population is there, and will stay there and be stable."

A good example is the new strip shopping center on Cheshire Bridge Road just east of Interstate 85 at Lavista Road.

The property had sat empty with grass and weeds growing through the cracks of cement, with vacant lots as a backdrop.

That was a year ago.

Now, it's a new retail center with a Kaufman Tire service center, a new McDonald's restaurant, a CVS Pharmacy store and other shops.

Although projects in neighborhoods such as that along Cheshire Bridge seem to go up overnight, rebuilding in the inner city or downtown is harder and takes longer, and finding money can sometimes be as difficult as trying to persuade a Coca-Cola employee to buy a Pepsi.

Underground Atlanta is a case study.

Year after year, stories are reported of its demise and rebirth, its rebirth and its demise, and so on.

This year, the city has worked out a deal to sell the complex of shops and restaurants on Upper Alabama Street to a group of private developers, including Dan O'Leary, Vickie Henson and Harold Dawson, who plan to revamp it.

In cities such as Indianapolis, Columbus, Ohio, and Norfolk, Va., developers figured out what would make a downtown retail center work.

In Norfolk, for example, developers created a strategy to provide what

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other malls didn't. To attract suburbanites to the downtown market, the developer, the Taubman Co., signed Nordstrom department store as an anchor. The mall, which opened a few weeks ago, expects to draw customers from Richmond, Va., and North Carolina. The closest Nordstrom to Norfolk, Va., was in Washington, D.C.

Adding entertainment retail

The one true advantage downtown areas have is that retail centers can integrate with entertainment retail and tourist retail.

Experts said this is absolutely critical to turning around old retail space in urban centers.

Tourists usually want to be in the most visible, exciting areas.

Entertainment retail is growing rapidly, along with lifestyle-oriented shopping, theme restaurants, new-generation theaters, and specialized attractions such as the All Star Café on Peachtree Street or the Youngbloods R&B Café at the Rio Mall on North Avenue at Piedmont.

Youngbloods is a restaurant that has rhythm and blues-oriented items on its menu. Tourists can try the Aretha Franklin Do-Right Catfish or the James Brown Burger. While eating, diners listen to the sounds of vintage R&B.

"Cities are now leveraging their cultural and historical assets with retail and entertainment, and it's paying off," Beyard said.

The Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change is a prime example. Each year, hundreds of thousands of tourists make a visit to the Martin Luther King Jr. memorial site on Auburn Avenue. These visitors spend thousands of dollars in the downtown retail area.

Also, Atlanta's federal Empowerment Zone, designated for redevelopment with help from the U.S. government, opens up an area where businesses can relocate or build and be eligible for a host of tax incentives and credits.

The Promus Co. took advantage of the zone with its new Embassy Suites hotel, which overlooks Centennial Olympic Park and the CNN Center. Opening in June, it's the first hotel built in downtown in 14 years. With the building comes a new Ruth's Chris Steak House restaurant.

Atlanta officials see the hotel as the beginning of a rebirth of the downtown retail sector.

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"If there wasn't a market, they wouldn't have come," said Joseph Reid, executive director for the City of Atlanta Empowerment Zone.

"They saw the opportunity, and we hope that other businesses will see the advantage of coming into the Empowerment Zone," Reid said.

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