

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 9, 2006

The New York Times

Real Estate

NATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

An Outburst Of Development In a Small City

By CHUCK GREEN

FOR decades, the focus of development in most parts of the country was on the suburbs. Cities, by and large, faded, while suburbs grew. But in the last few years, that pattern has been changing. With suburbs running out of developable land and many people tired of long commutes, the potential of cities is being recognized. Developers are building apartments in downtown areas that once went dark when offices and stores closed for the day.

These changes are not universally appreciated. In Homewood, Ala., a small city just four miles or so from Birmingham, the construction of large buildings downtown strikes some residents as unplanned and precipitous, and they fear that there has not been enough thinking about what the city's future ought to be.

It is not surprising that Homewood, an established community of around 25,000 with a good school system, is appealing to developers. Bill Dobbins, a vice president for Arlington Properties of Birmingham, said Homewood's proximity to Birmingham is also crucial, as is its vibrant shopping district. His company is about to break ground on a complex, to be called Hallman Hill, with 177 condominiums as well as some other houses and stores.

"People interested in purchasing our condos are for the most part empty nesters," Mr. Dobbins said. "They want to be somewhere where they can easily go out to eat or shop without driving."

To put up its condos, his company will tear down a 50-year-old apartment complex that has been home to working-class residents and college students, called Homewood Gardens. He believes the new residents and retailers will make the area even livelier. "Historically, the problem with Homewood has been that it was a great shopping destination from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.," he said, "but had very few shops and restaurants that were open at night, and very few

open on Sundays."

His development follows one that opened for sales last year, called SoHo Square, a \$55 million, 265,000-square-foot project with 76 condominiums, retail stores and offices. It was developed by Cyprus Partners, and its owner, Scott Bryant, said the firm recently received approval for another project, a \$20 million mixed-use condominium complex.

The sudden development, more in a few years than Homewood had seen in decades, has residents worrying that the city is not operating with a master plan and that developers will simply build what they want, where they want it and with no regard to how their work fits into the existing styles.

Ken Shaia, an owner of Shaia's of Homewood, a men's clothing store started by his great-grandfather, is nervous about the



pace of change. "I'm not against change; change is the only constant," he said. "But if you don't plan intelligently, you basically have development sprawl get out of hand."

Mr. Shaia said his family "loved the SoHo concept when it was proposed and still does." But, he said, "because Homewood is an easy place to get things done, every developer in the world will want to come here."



Photographs by Gary Tramontina for The New York Times

HOMEWOOD, ALA.

SoHo Square, above, and rising behind local businesses, below left, is one of several developments in this small Alabama city. Van Scott, below right, supports the new projects, but some residents say the increased development is largely unplanned and precipitous. Larry Baker, right, outside his boot shop.



"As soon as the city passed SoHo, next thing you know, there's more," he said. "They didn't even give SoHo time to get up and running so that they could explore its success. Where does it end?"

Dora Sarris, co-owner of Theadora's, a woman's boutique situated on a street dotted with other small businesses, is among those who believe city officials have been too quick to welcome developers. "In some

ways, redevelopment is exciting, because it's reinventing the community," she said. "But it's being done in a fast, hasty manner, and we're left with the final product."

And what is that? "The new is sticking out like a sore thumb," she said. "If the city had gone more slowly and had had more community involvement, I think there would have been more consistency between what was there and what's there now." Without a

master plan, she said, she fears the city is inviting developers to have a free-for-all for every little bit of unclaimed land.

Homewood's mayor, Barry McCulley, says that the city is monitoring development and that residents and business owners have had ample opportunity to provide input through public hearings.

"I'd say those people who are not necessarily satisfied with the way things are being done are probably the same ones who prefer it be done their way," he added.

There are some, though, who are thrilled by the changes. "We got rid of a lot of old, run-down, dilapidated buildings," said Larry VanReenen, owner of the Homewood Art Gallery. He isn't concerned, as some are, that redevelopment will damage the city's small-town atmosphere. "Absolutely not; they're not tearing up the streets," he said. "It's just like it was, and it probably needs some updating."

Van Scott, owner of Savage's Bakery, said the fact that some business owners question the redevelopment is "misguided."

"As American businessmen and women, we have to be adaptable to anticipate or react to changes in the marketplace," he said.

Cities everywhere are wrestling with the same issues. Chris Walker, research director with the Local Initiative Support Corporation in Washington, the nation's largest supporter of grassroots community development, and formerly with the Urban Institute, said that redevelopment is occurring in almost every metropolitan area in the country, though to varying degrees.

In some areas, Mr. Walker said, "you might even say it's happening with a ferocity in which there has been a fairly rapid transformation of older neighborhoods from lower density to higher density and from lower income to moderate and higher income."

"It's produced a real friction," he said.