

Remaking Buckhead: Hometown guy gives it a try

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The silvering Buckhead Boy steps through glass doors from his office building's marble lobby, lights a cigarette and stares across Peachtree Road.

The view looks more backstreet than Buckhead: a block of empty, shabby storefronts whose signs — Tongue & Groove, Uranus, Lulu's Bait Shack — already reek with the scent of musty cultural curios.

Yet when Ben Carter, 53, looks up and down Atlanta's most celebrated street — hair fluttering in a sticky breeze kicked up by five lanes of morning traffic — he sights both the past and a future most others don't see.

He nods toward the empty shell of John Harvard's Brew House: His grandmother bought his first pair of Bass weejuns there — when it was Buckhead Men's Shop — and salesmen slipped a penny into each loafer.

Nearby was the record store where he picked out his first Emerson, Lake & Palmer album; a firehouse where the Lodge now sits shuttered; the studio where he "had to take" ballroom dancing classes.

"I got my first kiss at the Capri Theater," Carter goes on, waving north toward what's now the Roxy Theater. "To the woman I married."

Carter finishes his smoke and crosses the street.

"It was really a small neighborhood then," he says. "Atlanta was a lot smaller. I remember standing on Peachtree when the population sign turned one million."

It's hardly a small neighborhood anymore. Gleaming towers and million-dollar condos sprout around Buckhead like summer corn.

Yet much of the Buckhead Village devolved into a rowdy, sometimes dangerous bar district before embarrassed civic fathers pulled the plug. Now it's set to be transformed into the Streets of Buckhead, an eight-block, walk-around enclave of posh boutiques and high-life living — the Upper East Side in the Deep South.

Carter is the \$1.2 billion project's point man. Son of a renowned Atlanta developer and the force behind the Mall of Georgia, Carter is an insider's insider, viewed by many in the Buckhead establishment as one of their own stepping up to salvage what once was the community's heart.

"He became our savior. Our knight on a white horse," says Sam Massell, former Atlanta mayor and president of the Buckhead Coalition, a group of 100 business and community leaders.

"He had faith in Buckhead. You can have a lot of knowledge, a lot of experience and a lot of money. But you have to go on faith. Something like this, there are no guarantees."

Carter grew up around plenty of knowledge, experience and money.

His real estate genes carry over generations, beginning with his lawyer grandfather, who wrote a standard form brokerage contract used for decades.

His father, Frank Carter, helped pioneer — with legendary developers like John Portman and Tom Cousins — Atlanta's transformation into a sprawling, New South capital. Known as the "mayor of Midtown" for the office towers he built there, his mall projects during the 1970s included Northlake, Southlake and Cumberland.

He also served as president of the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, and had a hand in Underground Atlanta's redevelopment. He died in 1991.

"Frank was a true entrepreneur," says Joe Martin, who worked for him in the early '70s. "He wasn't a cowboy like a lot of others in those days. He was a dignified gentleman.

"Frank worked for the benefit of Atlanta as a whole but clearly the Buckhead area was home."

The Buckhead that Ben Carter grew up in was a kind of in-town small town, not annexed by Atlanta until 1952. He first lived in Brookwood Hills, just north of Midtown, and took the 23 Oglethorpe bus up Peachtree to buy woodworking tools at Sears, which once stood across from the site of his new development.

When the family moved to Northside Drive, Carter could ride his bike to the Buckhead Village, where he bought his Lovett School uniforms, ate hamburgers, met friends at Wender & Roberts Drugstore.

He was a standout soccer player. He also played Buckhead Little League ("They put me in right field") and was a 140-pound backup guard on Lovett's 1970 state championship football team ("That means I acted like the other team in practice").

It was a fortunate, normal-seeming childhood. He delivered newspapers, repaired go-carts and once plowed up the backyard while his parents were away to plant a vegetable garden.

He also was taken on trips around the world — Japan at 14 — and first talked with his wife-to-be poolside at the Piedmont Driving Club, where his father was president. Neighbors, friends and relatives formed a Buckhead core that dominated the city's business and politics.

"Back in those days, the money and politics was all within three miles of the center of Buckhead," says Charles Loudermilk, 80, founder of Aaron Rents and an old-school Buckhead Boy — a term made famous by poet, novelist ("Deliverance") and Buckhead native James Dickey to describe those reared in that set-apart setting.

Carter knew he'd be a developer, he says, "since I was in the sandbox." His father talked business at breakfast and dinner, and drove young Ben around every Sunday afternoon "looking at real estate."

"It's in my blood," he says.

Soon after leaving his late father's company in the early 1990s to strike out on his own, Carter saw the future in a vast, middle-of-nowhere acreage in far north Gwinnett County. Many who heard about it laughed.

Carter laughed last. In 1999, it became the 1.7 million-square-foot Mall of Georgia, the largest shopping complex in the Southeast.

"A life-changing event," he says.

His partner in the project was another legendary developer, Scott Hudgens, 30 years his senior. Carter calls Hudgens, who also made his name in malls, a mentor whose influence matched his father's.

A painting of Hudgens, who died in 2000, hangs in Carter's office.

"He gave me the confidence to have a vision and go implement it," he says, eyes watering at the memory of a man who once spent a day driving him around Atlanta, describing how each parcel of land they passed would be developed in the next 15 years. Ninety percent of what he predicted came true, Carter says.

Few developers had the contacts, vision or brass to take on Buckhead Village as a whole before Carter stepped in and "sort of tied a lot strings together with a core group of property owners," says Scotty Greene, executive director of the Buckhead Community Improvement District.

The area's decline had become an enigmatic chapter in Atlanta's social and economic narrative: a boom in office towers, condos and high-end restaurants surrounding an area where mom-and-pop shops had been replaced by blocks of bars, many catering to a newly arrived hip-hop crowd.

Crime, including several high-profile murders outside throbbing nightclubs, suddenly defined the Village. Local residents and business owners lobbied for a crackdown. Robin Loudermilk, Charles' son and Aaron Rents president, bought up properties to close the bars.

Enter Carter, lifelong friend of the Loudermilks and once related to Robin by marriage. Saddened by the ghost-town pall that had fallen over the Village of his youth — and drooling over demographic research that screamed growth and wealth — Carter decided to buy up almost the entire area, including some of Loudermilk's real estate.

He eventually purchased 34 properties, he says, sometimes paying almost \$500 per square foot — about double what prices were in an already heated market.

"We had no idea Ben could assemble all this land from all these different landowners," says Charles Loudermilk. "But as is always true, money talks."

Some observers wondered privately if Carter had lost his mind ("We're all cheering for him," allowed Greene. "I'm just glad he's doing it and not me"). Others applauded his audacity.

"It's not an arena that any but the boldest travel in," says David Allman, president of Regent Partners development company and Carter's high school classmate. "I suspect he has a strong sense of timing. It does mean something to him to do something special in the neighborhood where he grew up. This is his legacy project."

If Carter is uneasy about his high-stakes gamble, due to open in 2009, he doesn't show it. Walking the district's spooky streets, about to be leveled, he points to the luxury hotel that will rise over here, the condos that will go up over there, the Soho-like boutiques that will line the block around the corner.

Yet the past hasn't quite disappeared for him. Still visible on an outside wall of one closed club is the faded lettering of the old Buckhead Hardware. Carter pauses in the middle of a nearby intersection. Just stands there. Looks around.

"Pretty sad, isn't it?"

He then climbs to the roof of a parking deck to give a visitor an overview of the area. Striding across the empty concrete, he suddenly stops, bends over.

"You got lucky," he says to the visitor beside him. He offers the penny he just picked up.

Carter doesn't think he needs it.

BENJAMIN CARTER

- Age: 53
- Occupation: Developer
- Title: Founder and Chairman, Ben Carter Properties
- Family: Married 30 years to Tricia Reed Carter. Two children: Palmer Carter, 27, and Benjamin M. Carter, Jr., 25, both of whom work for Ben Carter Properties.
- Education: American University, political science degree. Attended University of Georgia two years.
- High School: The Lovett School.
- Residence: Vinings. Family farm in Madison.
- Hobbies: Sailing, gardening, hunting, fishing.
- Quote: "Don't be scared to dare to succeed."