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Using Redevelopment to Tell a Story

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Karen Tam for The New York Times

Parrish Street is on the left; Main on the right.

By LISA CHAMBERLAIN Published: December 13, 2006

DURHAM, N.C. — In the historic downtown district, where many midrise buildings sit empty, there is a story that this city wants to tell, which for now can be found only in a single plaque on Parrish Street that reads Black Wall Street.

In the early 1900s, when Durham was firmly segregated, some of the most prosperous black-owned businesses thrived on Parrish Street, including financial and insurance companies. Meanwhile, parallel to Parrish is Main Street, where white-owned businesses once thrived.

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But now that both streets are in need of revitalization — having lost commercial tenants over the decades, especially as the tobacco industry declined — a new kind of collaboration is taking shape. In an effort to turn a painful past into an opportunity, the city and private developers are working in tandem to use history as a teaching experience while also rebuilding a once-vibrant commercial district.

Two developers, Carl Webb and Michael Lemanski, recently formed a partnership that will redevelop 20 buildings, or 600,000 square feet, as well as a vacant lot that was once the site of a Woolworth's where lunch counter sit-ins took place, attracting the support of the Rev. Dr. [Martin Luther King Jr.](#) in 1960.

For its part, the city has been organizing business owners and volunteers to build a “museum without walls” in honor of Parrish Street, once home to Mechanics and Farmers Bank, the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company, and Mutual Community Savings Bank, all three of them still in operation. This year, the city began a \$12 million program to improve the area's infrastructure, including rerouting streets and upgrading lighting and sidewalks. The infrastructure improvements are being done in anticipation of the private development, but also for Black Wall Street, a two-block heritage site along Parrish Street with signs, plaques, benches, artifacts, and other public art along the sidewalk and in small parks.

“We didn't want to sequester history inside a building, but put it out on the street where people will encounter it,” said Nathan Garrett, chairman of the Parrish Street advocacy group, which is made up of residents and business owners. “This is about the future as much as it is the past,” said Mr. Garrett, who once worked on Parrish Street as North Carolina's first African-American certified public accountant.

Trying to create a heritage site while also bringing Durham's commercial district into the 21st century has been a slow process.

Despite years of effort on the part of the city, it was not until Mr. Webb and Mr. Lemanski teamed up that downtown revitalization gained momentum.

“I was involved in the Parrish Street project with the city,” said Mr. Webb, a co-founder of Webb Patterson, one of the largest minority-owned public relations and marketing firms in North Carolina. “But it was too slow, there wasn't much creative thinking going on, and frankly, there wasn't much diversity being represented on the development side. If you want a diverse product when you're done, then you have to start with it. I just thought, this isn't going to happen until we have some skin in the game.”

So Mr. Webb bought the Woolworth site, a cornerstone of the redevelopment plan being pushed by the city. He was then approached by Mr. Lemanski, managing partner of

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Greenfire Development, who had been assembling a number of historic structures that were badly in need of repair.

“They’ve been talking about redeveloping these buildings for 25 years,” Mr. Lemanski said. “But we realized, you could fix up one building on every block and not have much of an impact. So we began acquiring properties, some of which were around the Woolworth site, and we decided it was in everyone’s interest if we combined forces.”

Mr. Webb left Webb Patterson and joined Greenfire as a partner. On the Woolworth site (the unremarkable low-rise building was torn down in 2003), the developers will erect a 17-story tower with 150,000 square feet of commercial space. In addition to retail space, the ground floor will be home to a small museum that will anchor Black Wall Street.

Directly across the street is the SunTrust Tower, a 17-story Art Deco building completed in 1937, which the developers also bought. It will be converted into apartments and condos. Meanwhile, the restoration of historic midrise buildings is under way up and down both Parrish and Main Streets, although little in the way of new commercial activity has taken place.

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“We’re going to keep ground-floor retail spaces off the market until the residential is built up more,” Mr. Lemanski said. “We’re going to market the entire area at once. The worst thing is if people trickle in, businesses fail, and people trickle back out.”

“We’re investing over the long run,” Mr. Webb added, “so we don’t mind waiting until more pieces of the puzzle are in place.”

One major piece of the puzzle is reconnecting downtown with a historic black neighborhood called Hayti (pronounced HAY-tye), which had been cut off by a freeway built in the 1960s. Although the freeway is going to stay put, a major new mixed-used development was approved this month by the Durham City Council to replace a failed strip mall that sits in the shadow of the freeway.

Andrew Rothschild, a native of [Manhattan](#), gave up practicing medicine when he moved with his wife to Durham six years ago and founded Scientific Properties. He had completed several adaptive reuse projects on the periphery of downtown, including a biotech lab building, when he began looking at the Hayti shopping center. The 10-acre site currently has 70,000 square feet of retail space but only a handful of businesses remain open.

In its place, Mr. Rothschild plans to build Heritage Square, a \$130 million six-block, multistory district that will reconnect underneath the freeway the streets between downtown and Hayti, where many people who worked on Parrish Street once lived.

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“I’ve approached the city about extending Black Wall Street all the way here as a kind of heritage trail,” Mr. Rothschild said. “If we really want to be urban and make Durham interesting, we have to broaden the vision and start talking about the surrounding area, not just downtown.”

In addition to 750,000 new square feet of residential, commercial and retail space, Mr. Rothschild’s plans include a space for Piedmont blues musicians to perform, as well as an outdoor basketball court surrounded by tiered audience seating.

There has been some tension because the shopping center is being demolished by a white-owned development company, stirring memories of urban renewal. But generally, Mr. Rothschild’s plans have been hailed as a much-needed boost to the neighborhood. He enlisted the help of the North Carolina Institute of Minority Economic Development to recruit minority-owned businesses and conduct business development workshops.

“Instead of affirmative action, we’re about competitive action,” said Farad Ali, vice president of the institute. “This is just good economic development strategy.”

Meanwhile, the Parrish Street project is still a work in progress, said Alan DeLisle, assistant city manager for economic and workforce development.

“Durham was a national player in the civil rights movement because of the strength of the African-American community, its spirit of entrepreneurship,” he said. “They put their own banks and savings companies together to serve the workers in tobacco factories. We’ve uncovered this incredibly fascinating story that we’re in the process of telling.”

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