Profile: John Portman

America's leading architect-developer is exporting his urban vision to the Far East.

Our cities will be a success because people want to be a part of them." John Portman's voice becomes animated as he talks about this favorite subject—the American city. "Cities are made of people, not things." Portman sips ginseng tea from a plastic cup in his office at the nexus of Peachtree Center, the 13-block urban complex he developed in Atlanta, Georgia, over the past 30 years. Such Portman-designed developments have become synonymous with attracting people back downtown, involving major hotels, big money, and high hopes.

While other architects only dreamed, Portman acted, boldly venturing into partnerships with Rockefellers and Fords, a model of the architect-developer in a profession reared on the strict ethics of client patronage. In 1976, he co-authored The Architect as Developer, a book that inspired a generation of architects with the possibilities of commercial success and artistic control. Yet, the heroic scale of his achievements has made Portman an obvious target for controversy. Like an embattled warrior, he has raised eyebrows for his glitzy designs; faced ire for challenging professional norms; and confronted picket lines in New York, where his Marriott Marquis hotel replaced older theaters. In commenting on the Times Square hotel, critic Paul Goldberger wrote, "There is not really very much commonality of form or scale to what surrounds it."

Despite high visibility in the 1970s and 1980s, Portman recently has assumed a lower profile, due in part to the recession, in part to a critical shift toward smaller scaled design. "I'm still here," the soft-spoken 69-year-old architect asserts, lightly brushing off criticism. Advised as a student by Frank Lloyd Wright to "seek Emerson," Portman exhibits the self-knowledge and confidence proposed by the philosopher. Although his organization has shrunk from its peak of 1,500 employees in the 1980s, the Portman Companies continues to employ more than 600 people.
“We are Atlanta’s largest taxpayer,” he says, referring to the multiblock network of office buildings and trade marts that form the cornerstone of his enterprises.

### Early developer projects

The kernel of Portman’s success lies in his real understanding that “people, not things” make up the city, an unemotional appraisal forged through his experience with local trade marts, his first development venture. Shortly after opening his own office in 1953, Portman’s eye fell on the Belle Isle property, a multistory garage about to be vacated. He approached the owner’s representative with the possibility of converting the garage to a wholesale showroom, a bold suggestion that prompted a counter-offer: “You form a corporation and come back.”

The rest is legend. After leasing half of the first floor, construction proceeded from the top floor down as tenants signed up. Within a year and a half, Portman had leased 250,000 square feet—all predicated on occupancy. His success with marketing had architectural implications: By seeking people first, building projects followed.

Today the Atlanta Market Center, comprising 8 million square feet, continues to fuel Atlanta’s urban renaissance. The Merchandise, Gift, and Apparel marts; the Decorative Arts Center; as well as Inforum, a technology mart, attract over a half-million buyers to 40 teeming trade shows per year. These marketplaces represent the unfolding of the Portman vision for Atlanta, an influence that rivals that of any architect on an American city.

Three Portman-designed convention hotels anchor the marts: the invariably soothing interior of the 1967 Hyatt Regency, Portman’s signature atrium hotel; the 73-story cylindrical shaft of the 1976 Peachtree Westin Plaza; and the cavernous 1,675-room Marriott Marquis, completed in 1985. Former Mayor Andrew Young cites their importance to the local economy: “Those three hotels paved the way for Atlanta to become one of the leading convention cities in the world. And the convention business has made Atlanta recession-proof.”

Atlanta and Portman grew up together. “If Atlanta is a great city, it is because as a young man, John Portman made a commitment to make it one,” says Young. Born in 1924, Portman lived downtown within the shadows of his current office building. His entrepreneurial skills appeared early. “At 15, I started my first joint-venture development,” he boasts. Football teammates were stationed outside the six downtown movie theaters with boxes of gum. Portman supplied the gum and rode a bicycle to replenish the stock. “We split the profits 50/50.”

After service in the U.S. Navy, Portman worked his way through the architecture program at Georgia Tech, graduating in 1950. Anxious to get to work, he opened his own office immediately after completing his apprenticeship with an Atlanta firm, Stevens and Wilkinson. An assessment of the competition revealed that a partner, someone with office practice skills and construction experience, could help win commissions. An experienced professor from Georgia Tech, H. Griffith Edwards, fulfilled Portman’s goal of a mutually sustaining team.

Armed with a balanced organization, Portman entered the development arena. Following the debut of his groundbreaking 1967 Hyatt Regency hotel in Atlanta, the scope of his enterprises mushroomed. Joined by son Jack as chief of the firm’s development arm, Portman undertook development of significant urban projects with clients that include this nation’s most visible, respected financiers and corporate chiefs: San Francisco’s Embarcadero Center developed with David Rockefeller (1971-88); his private venture near the bay, The Portman hotel, a building with a respectfully articulated exterior, now known as the Pan-Pacific (1987); with Henry Ford, Detroit’s massive Renaissance Center (1976); and in New York, the Marriott Marquis hotel in Times Square (1985), with J.W. “Bill” Marriott.

### Challenging urban traditions

Self-initiated work also allowed Portman to work at an urban scale. When others were abandoning America’s downtowns for the suburbs in the 1970s and 1980s, it was John Portman who responded, enticing businesses and tourists to reinvest in American cities. It was not solely an aesthetic exercise. “For our cities to survive, they have to be restructured, revived under new circumstances. That’s why I started Peachtree Center.”

Some of Portman’s attempts at urban revival have resulted in strong negative reactions. In describing the Detroit Renaissance Center shortly after it was built, critic Paul Goldberger commented: “It is almost designed as if the insurrection has already taken place, and it was time to barricade oneself inward. It is that sense of being cut off—pushing the existing city away, as if to say that it did not matter, that it was somehow dirty and ugly and best avoided.”

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**AFTER:** Il Porto Vecchio, an unrealized harborfront development designed in 1988 for Genoa, Italy.

**FACING PAGE, TOP LEFT:** Model of Genoa project features beacon-like conical tower in harbor.

**FACING PAGE, BOTTOM LEFT:** Proposed 725-room expansion (tower, right) to an existing luxury hotel in Cairo.

**FACING PAGE, TOP AND BOTTOM RIGHT:** Model for Gateway City, designed in 1990, proposes a mixed-use scheme for Yokohama, Japan, including offices, shopping, housing, concert hall, and 510-room hotel.
But Portman remains an unfazed champion of downtowns. Although he has planned two large suburban office developments in north Atlanta, Riverwood and North Park, suburbs create isolation, he contends, "They are communities of wheels...a nomadic society." The city, by contrast, is "where people meet people, see people." And according to Portman, the key is density, properly designed, which can create amenities—museums, restaurants, and shops.

In creating urban centers, Portman has challenged the traditional notion of how urban density should be achieved. Projects such as Peachtree Center are less concerned with open streetscapes lined with fully packed blocks than with interconnected blocks of captured space. It is an architecture of interiors, modulated by light and layering, given scale by human artifacts and the sensory variety of water and plants. These projects may be bunkerlike, but they are safe and comfortable, familiar as the suburban mall.

Portman's interior networks offer a sense of safety in downtowns threatened with the perception of mounting crime. J.W. "Bill" Marriott cites the "increased security on the part of guests" that was a by-product of the atrium hotel, such as Atlanta's Marriott Marquis. Whether for pleasure or hermetic insulation, Portman's formula works: people are attracted downtown.

**New directions**

Portman's architecture has evolved over time; more recent projects offer more interaction with the street. Architect Kemp Mooney, who teaches architecture at Georgia Tech, thinks that a recently completed office tower, One Peachtree Center, may represent the best of Portman's work. Mooney particularly admires the humanly scaled piazzas, sculpture, and planting surrounding the building. "It's a place for people to walk up and meander," he says. "As a street participant, I find it entertaining."

Rising from a strong granite base, the 60-story structure exhibits a sureness and snap in its curtain wall, a strong hand in its details at large and small scales. Throughout the lower floors, Portman's own sculptures and bright paintings stand beside the work of professional artists. Although hanging beads and elevated planters are pure Portman, assurance in the details comes from Richards Mixon, an architect formerly with I.M. Pei, who heads the firm's design effort.

Mixon's presence signals a seriousness on Portman's part for mature, carefully detailed design. Together, the two architects collaborate on increasingly far-flung projects. Documents shuttled among their offices in Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Atlanta by modem have included designs for Marina Square in Singapore (1987) and Shanghai Centre in the People's Republic of China (1990), both immense, mixed-use developments tailored to the grand Portman vision.

**Changing clientele**

While the scale of his projects remains large, Portman's architecture staff has dropped from 150 persons to a more manageable 40, according to Mixon, a major shift that reflects a changed clientele. After years of being its own client, John Portman & Associates now courts the open market for fee-based work, from feasibility studies to building design—even the Portman Companies are not immune to economic forces. Changes in the tax code, depressed real estate values, and political events such as the Tiananmen Square incident, which affected the firm's Shanghai Centre project, pressured the Portman Companies to restructure debt in 1990. In a highly visible series of articles, The Atlanta Constitution reported that Portman offered a collateral pool of "all of the assets of the Portman Companies" as security for what it reported as approximately $2 billion in debts to about 50 creditors. After protracted discussions, renegotiated loans freed the organization to do what it does well, designing and managing properties for others.

Portman finds most of his new business in the Pacific Rim, entering foreign competitions for architectural services. Two recent competitions for mixed-use projects in the People's Republic of China (facing page) exhibit characteristic clarity with an enriched appreciation for the cultural milieu. Despite financial problems and criticism of his unfashionably large projects, Portman is still regarded as an architectural giant in Atlanta. "There wouldn't be any street life downtown without him," asserts Andrew Young. John Busby, former AIA president, agrees, describing his fellow Atlanta as "an outspoken architect who puts his visions in substantive developments."

Portman's legacy extends beyond Atlanta, beyond the influence of the atrium hotel or any other individual design issue. It is his personal belief in the American city that towers above any specific building. If our cities succeed because "people want to be a part of them," no one has wanted to be a part of them more than John Portman.—Robert Ivy
THE NEW ENTREPRENEURS

Architect-developers call their own shots—and make money while they're at it, by Deborah K. Dietsch

Entrepreneurial spirit is alive and well in a new generation of architects who have taken on the role of real estate developer for their own projects. These under-50 designers are following in the footsteps of such pioneers as Atlanta architect John Portman, who built a profitable career by developing and designing hotels around the world.

While the younger architect-developers interviewed for this article haven't yet tackled such large, international projects, their investments in speculative housing and small office buildings are based on the same motivation: financial rewards and control over architectural design.

"I always felt like I was doing all the work, but the developers were getting all the money," says Greg Zahn of Zahn Design Architects in Washington, D.C. Zahn started his career designing condominiums for local real estate firms, but grew weary of "training other people in property development and seeing my designs getting screwed up." With the help of investors and loans, Zahn is now developing his own condominiums in downtown D.C. by rehabbing historic buildings.

Architect-developers say the easiest way to begin a career in real estate development is by learning the ropes from developer clients and using your own office as a springboard for speculative projects. Four years ago, with the help of a loan from the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA), Zahn bought an 1890s building on Washington's developing 14th Street corridor to set up his offices, then used the property as collateral to secure a construction loan for a small condominium project.

STARTING AT HOME

Other architects start development ventures by purchasing houses with conventional home mortgages, which are typically easier to obtain than commercial loans. Five years ago, Detroit architect Michael Poris, a partner at McIntosh Poris Associates, split the cost of a $200,000 house with a former builder client, and then tore it down to build a larger, Arts and Crafts-style home that sold for about $800,000 in 2003. "We didn't make any money because we spent too much on construction," admits Poris. "It was a good lesson in understanding how construction costs affect the bottom line." Despite that experience, Poris is planning to raze his former home, an early 1900s bungalow, to build another spec house, which he hopes to sell before construction begins.

Working for developers on neighborhood revitalization plans and historic-building conversions also convinced Poris and his partner McIntosh that they could tackle similar projects. "For years we were teaching developers how to navigate the process of building in the city and convincing them to invest in the city," says Poris. "That experience helped us take a risk on our own development project."

The partners recently secured a purchase agreement for the Cliff Bell Building, an abandoned Art Moderne landmark in downtown Detroit. They plan to renovate the second floor of the 1929 building for their offices and rent out the ground-floor bar and retail space. To finance the estimated $1.3 million project, Poris hopes to secure a loan from the SBA, which requires 10 percent of the total project costs as a down payment—in contrast to the 20 to 25 percent required for conventional financing. To qualify for the SBA loan, Poris says his firm has to occupy 50 percent or more of the building.

"The biggest challenge of development is securing the capital and building a reputation for credibility," says San Diego architect-developer Jonathan Segal. "I have been

In collaboration with a team of developers and investors, Jay Reynolds, a principal of OJMR Architects in Los Angeles, designed and co-developed a 2.2-acre cluster of 16 homes south of downtown Palm Springs (above).
fortunate that all my projects have been successful.”

Segal got his start in development in 1990 when he and four investors spent $1.5 million to buy a scrap of land in downtown San Diego and construct seven row houses. Seven on Kettner, as the project is called, netted Segal $450,000, encouraging him to design and develop more than a dozen projects over the next decade. Many of his unconventional residential and mixed-use buildings have helped turn downtown San Diego into a more vital, livable place.

Among Segal’s loft and condominium buildings is the Titan, a 22-unit apartment house wrapped in glass and rusted steel, which was finished last year. (He also just completed his own home and office in La Jolla, which will incorporate a glass floor.) Having the freedom to experiment with shapes and materials, Segal says, is a chief benefit of developing one’s own projects. “Design control is everything,” he asserts. “My advice to other architects is to try to find investors who believe in you. Eliminate the banker and the contractor if you have enough cash.”

DESIGN SELLS, TOO

Most of these architect-developers found investors by convincing former clients to help finance their projects. Key to the sell are compelling architectural designs and the business plan or pro forma that compares anticipated project costs against revenues. “Those are your sales tools,” says Segal, who hired a business consultant for $350 to develop his first pro forma. “That’s how you create interest in the project and get investors to loan you the money.”

Some architect-developers maintain that the problem-solving skills of architecture are more critical to ensuring success than business acumen is. “You have to prove your worth to a lender by showing the value that you add to the project,” says Gregg Pasquarelli, a principal of SHoP Architects in New York City who started his career as an investment banker.

Pasquarelli explains that his idea of expanding a 1905 warehouse in Manhattan’s meat-packing district by transferring air rights from adjacent properties
“radically transformed the development model and helped us outbid our competitors.” The transfer allowed a six-story addition, boldly clad in zinc panels, to be built atop the old masonry warehouse, creating room for 22 condominiums. Units in the building, called Porter House (June 2004, page 74), sold out within six weeks, according to Pasquarelli. “People said the main reason for buying was the design.”

But patience is a virtue when it comes to development, especially for architects who run conventional practices while pursuing speculative projects. After completing a house for his parents in Palm Desert, California, in 2002, architect Jay Reynolds, a principal of OJMR Architects in Los Angeles, undertook a six-month survey of the local housing market to determine the potential for contemporary-style residential developments. That led him to team with Los Angeles–based Symphony Development and, with the help of eight investors, plan a 2.2-acre cluster of 16 modernistic homes—each with its own plunge pool—south of downtown Palm Springs. Once the houses are completed this fall and then sold, Reynolds stands to earn about 16 percent of the profits. Meanwhile, he has spent the past two years pursuing other development opportunities as well, and completing feasibility studies—everything from design sketches to zoning studies—for about 40 sites in Palm Springs and Los Angeles.

“Development is a way for architects to control their destiny,” says Reynolds. “But it takes understanding the economics of the marketplace—what will sell and for how much. It’s exciting but a somewhat risky and time-consuming process.” That risk, he and others maintain, is worth it. Like those who go into design-build, these entrepreneurs say investing in their projects offers what a conventional practice does not: design control and increased income.