



The Chronicle

THE SLEEPING GIANT • DURHAM, N.C.

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Media Credit: Michael Naclerio Durham at Night



Media Credit: Michael Naclerio Downtown Durham

Walking into Toast feels like walking into a venerated, Old Durham institution. It's not the look, not as though dust has collected in corners, or paper browned to the color of tobacco on the walls. But the sandwich shop's ambiance, the unique menu and Kelly Cotter's warm smile give the establishment-or paninoteca, as the sign reads-the feel of something that's been in Durham for decades.

But only two years ago, the space that houses the downtown café was a clothing store, and the Five Points area lacked vitality and foot traffic. And eight years ago, when Cotter and her husband Bill moved to Durham from Atlanta with the dream of opening a restaurant, setting up shop in the city center district was hardly a viable idea. "It was good that we waited," Cotter says, "because it would have failed surely."

In the years between moving to Durham and opening Toast, Cotter has seen the downtown scene change drastically. Downtown has grown up with businesses: big and small, commercial and otherwise, turning the heart of Durham from a ghost town to a thriving, cultural center. But the transformation didn't happen overnight.

Decades ago, Durham was a bright spot in the South. Home to the American Tobacco Company, Black Wall Street and the black-owned North Carolina Mutual Insurance Company, downtown was a thriving district. But like the rest of the city, the landscape of downtown Durham changed following the departure of the tobacco, textiles and furniture industries.

In the early 1990s, though, a band of Durham citizens (and some Duke faculty) organized efforts for revitalizing downtown. It led to the establishment of Downtown Durham Inc., a 501c(6). Headed by Bill Kalkhof since 1994, he and his small staff-now five strong-have played a big role in stimulating development. "We do everything from being the marketer for downtown to being the commercial realtor to doing tons of demographics for realtors," Kalkhof told me. "We're good at putting deals together. Talk about a major project in downtown, and we've been part of it somehow."

Working with public and, predominantly, private developers, DDI has seen many ideas for downtown go from fantasy to reality. Outer areas of downtown, like the warehouse districts, were the focus of early development, thanks to the interest from development firms. Anchored by the \$16 million Durham Bulls Athletic Park, the American Tobacco Campus was the first of these to see the light of day. Kalkhof said that starting on the outside of the greater downtown area helped to slowly draw people into the area. And as ATC and Brightleaf Square were completed, development grew closer to the city center. Projects like the West Village, now a popular off-campus housing option, and Golden Belt, historic textile mills reenvisioned as apartments and studios, helped drive the downtown turnaround.

But the growth in the area has been significant across the board. Between 1994 and 2008, \$1.3 billion in investment was poured into downtown, the amount of office space more than tripled and the area went from having less than 100 residential units to around 1,000—a number that continues to grow. And much of this is the result of private development firms like Greenfire and Scientific Properties, which are working on large-scale projects ranging from housing to commercial. Scientific Properties' Golden Belt is an arts-focused complex with loft-style apartments, artist studios and lots of exhibition space, with an expanding retail lineup.

Kalkhof says the creative professional class, aged between 20 and 40—a demographic, he adds, that no one was considering when DDI was founded—has been a major player in downtown Durham, be it opening businesses, moving downtown or otherwise. "[Downtown is] supporting a different level of personnel. Artists are here. Scientists are here. It's brought a more creative culture into the downtown area," Durham Mayor Bill Bell said.

And from businesses like Web receipt company Shoeboxed Inc.—founded by a band of recent Duke graduates—to chef Jim Anile's celebrated restaurant Revolution, the work of the creative professional class has an obvious effect. Just take a stroll into the Pinhook, opened last fall, and the atmosphere is young, hip and vivacious.

But the marquee opening of 2008 was the \$46.8 million Durham Performing Arts Center, a 2,800-seat facility. The Carolinas' largest theatrical venue serves as a visual link between ATC and the city center, closing the gap between the two areas. Already having drawn the likes of B.B. King, David Sedaris and Morrissey, DPAC will play host to Robin Williams, Tori Amos and the 76th season of the American Dance Festival in the coming months.

But one of DPAC's most intriguing storylines has been its Suntrust-sponsored Broadway Series, which has put a dent in the Broadway South series that plays in the state capital. The Raleigh version has reshuffled shows at its Progress Energy Center venue. And DPAC's reach has been farther than the Triangle. At a recent production of the Color Purple, Bell reported seeing a tour bus from South Carolina.

Major attractions like DPAC and the nearby Durham Bulls Athletic Park, as well as annual events that call downtown home like the Full Frame Documentary Film Festival, the Durham Blues Festival and ADF, are critical factors in stimulating street-level business, Kalkhof said. Many of downtown's street-level businesses are restaurants, which have become major selling points for the Bull City. A 2008 article in *Bon Appetit* dubbed Durham America's foodiest small town (an honor it shared with Chapel Hill), and last month, *US News & World Report* named Durham one of the best places to live in the entire United States.

Sometime soon, Burt's Bees will move into its 75,000 square-foot office space in the American Tobacco Campus, a major boon for raising downtown's profile as a working space. On the food front, 2009 will see the opening of two eco-friendly restaurants in Rogers Alley (adjacent to City Hall Plaza). The first, Eno Restaurant and Market, is the latest venture from Richard Holcomb, owner of Raleigh's nationally recognized organic eatery Zely & Ritz and Hillsborough's Coon Rock Farm. Eno has attracted famed chef Marco Shaw all the way from Portland. Santa Cruz native Charlie Deal, owner of Chapel Hill's Asian-inspired Jujube, will bring Dos Perros, a taqueria, bar and restaurant, to the Alley as well, enhancing the Bull City's already rich taco scene. Both a coffeeshop from a Duke alumnus and a whiskey bar near Five Points are slated for openings within the calendar year.

But Durham is a diverse place, and despite the variety of new establishments cropping up, one of the overarching challenges will be incorporating any number of the city's demographics. "Marginalization is going to be an issue," Bell,

the Durham mayor, told me. Bell said the city is always trying to work giving more people access, whether it be through low-income housing or making sure businesses can hire existing Durham residents. And even though he's cognizant of the problems, it's more likely for the city's leader to dwell on Durham's strong points.

Besides, he says, he's aware of what it takes to make the district work. The downtown area can only be as successful as the community wants it to be, and if local citizens want a downtown renaissance, their tenacity might just be enough to pull it off. There is a reason, after all, it's called the Bull City.