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on a


Photo by Jay Thomas, Jay Thomas Photography



mission

George Rohrig helped define Buckhead as the 'place' to be and be seen. So what's he up to now? His new vision for the heart of Atlanta already has people talking

By Mary Welch



George Rohrig is sitting at Little Azio, his restaurant in East Atlanta talking about his latest project, a 30-story building in Midtown being developed with Jim Borders and The Novare Group. “It is going to be the coolest, the hippest building in town,” he says. “Lots of people can get excited about a 30-story building, but if it’s not the coolest, the neatest building, then what’s the point?”

Rohrig has been building the “coolest” hippest buildings in town for a long time. But the magic of Rohrig is that he does it one small building at a time rather than tall, ego-defining structures. And, before anyone knows it, he has turned a city block into the hippest place to be seen, shop and eat. He’s been doing it ever since he started buying up dilapidated buildings in Buckhead. A few years later, the Buckhead Village, an eclectic group of restaurant and stores, was dubbed “Georgetown.”

Rohrig is still in Buckhead, but he’s venturing out to other parts of metro Atlanta – Decatur, Midtown, East Atlanta, Avondale. But to see the future of the Buckhead Village, which is now in developer Ben Carter’s hands, you must go back to Rohrig.

“I go into a neighborhood that needs attention and then I go in and liven it up with street life and reposition the neighborhood,” he says. “I like to think that I’ve had a positive effect on each neighborhood and its street life. I’ve made retail viable. If you don’t have

people, then retail and restaurants don't work. But if you have restaurants that people want to go to, then retail follows and then residential."

It's hard to imagine that Buckhead was a distressed neighborhood, but years ago it was. "It was in transition," he recalls. "There were a lot of stores – like Miller Bookstore, the hardware store, the record shop – where the owners were retiring. When Sears went away (once located where Buckhead Plaza is today), every-

thing went away. There was no parking in Buckhead but you could park at Sears, cross the street and shop."

The irony of Buckhead, he says, was that "Peachtree Street was the most famous street, but East Paces Ferry was the most prestigious street. I just started getting as many of the lots and stores as I could. My goal was to get more than anyone else."

With parking being his biggest hurdle, Rohrig couldn't attract retailers who

wanted to open a shop, despite the area's envious demographics. "I tried getting Ralph Lauren in," he says. "I tried the Gap. Nobody would come in. Eventually I got Laura Ashley to come in on the corner of Peachtree and East Paces across from Buckhead Plaza. There wasn't any density and there wasn't any parking."

Rohrig couldn't solve the parking problem (in fact, he fought for zoning changes allowing for restaurants to have fewer parking spaces, much to the hostility of

#	Address	Location	Name	Developer	Use	Size & Notes	Status
1	1820	SW Corner 28th	The Brookwood	Urban Realty & Melaver	Condos	19 floors; 275 units + 20,000 sf retail	UC
2	1891	E. Side, N. of Palisades	Unknown	Paradise Development Group	Offices	80,825 sf + 22,325 sf retail	PR
3	1968	W. Side, at Collier	Piedmont Hospital	Piedmont Hospital	Hospital	Expansion: 34,000 sf + 30 beds + 6 suites	UC
4	2020	W. Side, S. of Bennett	Shepherd Center	Shepherd Center	Hospital	Expansion: 181,000 sf + 20 beds	UC
5	2171	E. Side at Colonial Homes Dr.	Mezzo	Tivoli Properties & Kennedy Capital Group	Condos	20 floors; 84 units + 3,000 sf retail	UC
6	2233	E. Side, S. of P'tree Creek	The Astoria at The Aramore	Kairos	Condos, Offices	15 floors; 77 units + 30,000 sf offices + 6,500 sf retail	UC
7	2282	W. Side, S. of P'tree Creek	The Enclave on Peachtree	Core Development Group, LLC	Townhouses	17 units	UC
8	2440	W. Side, N. of P'tree Battle	Regents Park	Carter	Townhouses	23 units, \$1,800,000-\$5,000,000	UC
9	2640	W. Side, S. of Peachtree Way	Bellingrath Town Residences	BOSS Properties	Townhouses	8 units, starting at \$2,500,000	UC
10	2795	SE Corner Rumson	Gallery	Coro & Novare	Condos	27 floors; 203 units	UC
11	3005	SE Corner Pharr	Unknown	Novare Group	Offices, Condos, Retail	9 acres	PR
12	3059	E. Side, N. of Pharr Rd.	Buckhead Avenues	Buckhead Avenues Development Company, LLC	Offices, Hotel, Condos, Retail	100,000 sf offices + 300 rooms + 125 units + 375,000 sf retail	PR
13	3232	NW Corner Maple	Buckhead Place	Coro	Condos	148 units + 81,000 sf retail	PR
14	3280	NW Corner Piedmont	Terminus 100	Cousins	Offices	33 floors; 582,000 sf + 70,000 sf retail	UC
15	3284	NW Corner Piedmont	Terminus 200	Cousins	Offices	23 floors; 500,000 sf	UC
16	3288	NW Corner Piedmont	Terminus	Cousins	Condos	40 floors; 350 units	PR
17	3292	NW Corner Piedmont	Terminus	Cousins	Condos	40 floors; 350 units	PR
18	3296	NW Corner Piedmont	Terminus	Cousins	Condos	150 units	PR
19	3314	SW Corner Highland Dr.	Unknown	Pope & Land	Retail, Restaurant	2 floors, 9,000 sf	PR
20	3336	SW Corner Tower Pl. Dr.	The Buckhead Church	North Point Ministries	Church	185,000 sf, 3,000 seat sanctuary	UC
21	3344	NW Corner Tower Pl. Dr.	3344 Peachtree, Sovereign	Regent Partners	Offices, Condos	50 floors; 470,000 sf offices + 93 units + 21,000 sf retail	UC
22	3368	NE Corner Stratford	The Stratford	Wood Partners, Ackerman & Co.	Condos	20 floors; 300 units	PR
23	3372	NE Corner Stratford	The Stratford/ Hilton	Wood Partners, Ackerman & Co.	Hotel, Condos	43 floors; 300 rooms + 196 units + 13,000 sf retail	PR
24	3376	NW Corner Stratford	The Mansion on Peachtree/ Rosewood	City Centre Holdings, LLC	Hotel, Condos	50 floors; 127 hotel rooms + 45 condos	UC
25	3500	NW Corner Lenox	Phipps Tower	Crescent Resources	Offices	20 floors; 500,000 sf	PR
26	3570	W. Side, SW Corner Wieuca	Unknown	Hanover Co.	Hotel, Condos	250 rooms + 530 units + 58,500 sf retail	PR
27	3630	SW Corner P'tree Dunwoody	Thirty-Six Thirty Peachtree Road	Duka, Post, Novare, Pope & Land	Offices, Condos	35 floors; 425,000 sf offices, 84 units + retail	UC
28	3690	SW Corner P'tree Dunwoody	Thirty-Six Thirty Peachtree Road	Duka, Post, Novare, Pope & Land	Condos	30 floors; 200 units	PR
29	3655	E. Side, N. of Roxboro	3655 Peachtree	Mays Development Company	Condos	13 units	UC
30	3663	E. Side, N. of P'tree Dunwoody	3663 Peachtree	Brunning & Stang	Townhouses	18 units	PR
31	3680	SW Corner Narmore	Brookhaven Manor	John Willis Homes	Townhouses	33 units	UC
32	3710	W. Side at Vermont	The Vermont on Peachtree	Unknown	Townhouses	Unknown	UC
33	3747	E. Side, N. of Kingsboro	Lenbrook	Lenbrook Foundation	Assisted Living	Expansion: 24 floors, 142 units	UC

Source: Buckhead Coalition

shop owners), but he could work on the density. In one of his buildings he opened a restaurant, Peachtree Café. In 1978, it wasn't like anything else around. Rohrig and his partner, Nick Ellis, struggled with the small sandwich shop that sold salad by the ounce and yogurt as well as great hulking hamburgers. Rohrig moved Peachtree Café across the street on East Paces Ferry and it suddenly became the place to go for what was becoming known as "yuppies." "Harrison's was around but losing its audience," he says. "It shifted to Peachtree Café." He quickly opened Otto's, a sophisticated nightclub and as he says "Buckhead became an entertainment district, the place to go

The restaurants took off and so did Rohrig and Cartel Properties.

One by one he would buy a building, a piece of land and assemble it. Rohrig owns the land where Steamhouse Restaurant is, as well as the block of the Rialto Theater and Andrews Square. In rapid success, Rohrig started opening more restaurants, Nickiemoto's and Azio's both opened in the complex by Bolling Way and Pharr Road. He took a former firehouse and changed it to the East Village Grill and the Lodge restaurants.

Built it and they will come

Rohrig's theory that if you build restaurants people want to go to, then the foot traffic necessary to sustain retail will take off. In fact, it did – but too much. Buckhead eventually had more than 200 restaurants in the Buckhead district. Some like Chops and Nava, run by the tony Buckhead Life Group, attracted a proper clientele. Others not so reputable. The high-profile murders, which originally implicated involvement by Baltimore Ravens' football player Ray Lewis (the charges against him were dropped), showcased what Buckhead had become.

"There were trouble spots," Rohrig admits. "We didn't control them but they were next door to our places and the places of other good owners. We fought it as long as we could. We couldn't get police protection and [former] Mayor Bill Campbell didn't care about Buckhead. A bunch of us ended up paying for extra police – something like 20 to 30 policemen. The city gave us two cops for the whole two

miles. Our staff, our customers, were all getting robbed. The city's attitude was "it's your problem, you solve it." Things just went downhill."

Rohrig says that while he didn't leave Buckhead, he turned his attention to other places. He built condos and retail at 805 Peachtree, where he now lives. He, often in partnership with Aaron's Rent's Charlie and Robin Laudermilk, started do what Rohrig did in Buckhead, buying up parcels of land until they made a big parcel. "We probably have about nine consecutive corners in Midtown," he says. "We're changing the density and trying to bring in different retailers."

Susan Mendheim, executive director of the Midtown Alliance, says Rohrig is indeed making his mark in Midtown. "He is one of the biggest creative visionaries around," she says. "I don't know if he's out of the box but he's certainly ahead of the curve."

Rohrig entered Midtown in the late '90s when "Few people could see Midtown's potential. It was obvious that George saw what was possible. He's almost wide-eyed about the possibilities. He would talk about his vision and say "Tell me I'm not crazy," and he wasn't."

Rohrig was interested in bringing different retail to Midtown and he would sit with Mendheim's staff members who were in their 20s and early 30s. "He would ask them about stores and potential targets. He wanted to make sure that what he thought the area needed in terms of retail was what the people who would be living in his buildings would want for retail. Sometimes it's two different things. But George was really listening."

Rohrig's retail mix is "brilliant," Mendheim says. "Whenever we talk about things he always wants to make sure that it's hip and stays true to what we've imagined for the area. He takes a very organic approach. The Krystal on Peachtree was a very bad place and he bought it and turned it into a Starbucks and Noodle restaurant. That one action made such a big deal in the neighborhood."

One building at a time

Saving a neighborhood one building at a time is the key to Rohrig's success. He bought two corners at Moreland and

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Ormewood Avenue and turned it into several local shops, businesses and restaurants, including his own Little Azio. He is building condos across the street. One of the condos is built for a downstairs office or retail store.

“I don’t own the rest of the block, although eventually I hope to,” he says. “But look at what’s happening. Little Azio’s does a great lunch crowd and there’s no offices around here. People are coming from all around. At night it’s packed. This development will turn the entire neighborhood around. It’s now vibrant.”

He is doing similar projects in Decatur and throughout East Atlanta. He drives around on weekends looking for neighborhoods that could use his touch. “It’s almost like being in the antique business,” he says. “It’s looking going out looking for rummage sales. I look for potential street life.”

Neighborhoods don’t just “pop up,” he says. “You have to build restaurants, because that is vital to the neighborhood. Then maybe some art galleries, some retail. Then residential. All of a sudden, you’ve got some expensive real estate. You have to wait to make it happen, to make it all come together. But you sure can be the catalyst.”

Making it happen one store, one block at a time is Rohrig’s signature. “I like neighborhoods with real people who are walking on the streets, going to the park, buying their stuff from retailers down the street,” he says. “That’s what excited me. Much more than building a really big building.”

He is building a real big building with Borders. Rohrig is quick to describe the people working on the projects, including how he goes to Miami, New York, Los Angeles and other cities and just wanders into buildings looking at what’s being put up. He keeps scrapbooks of details, such as lampposts, windows, floor plans that excite him.

Rohrig is very supportive of Ben Carter’s seven-city block development for Buckhead. “We have to get back to Buckhead being a 24-hour city with vibrant neighborhoods and I think Ben has the best vision. He’s showed the tenacity to do the deal like no one else.”

In order for Carter to build his \$800

million massive project, several landlords, including Rohrig, had to sell him their properties. In addition to hotel, office and residential components, Ben Carter’s Buckhead Avenues will include more than 300,000 square feet of high-end retail. It is expected to break ground in October.

“It just needed to be done,” he says. “Everyone had to put their egos aside and realize what was the best for Buckhead, and that was Ben’s vision. He can turn it around.”

Rohrig is as much a restaurateur as a real estate man. He owns four restaurant brands, Azio, a pizza and pasta place, Nickimotto’s, a sushi and Asian fusion restaurant, East Village Grille and The Lodge. Azio is his best bet for expansion – or possibly franchise -- and he currently owns five Azio’s. “We’re not big enough to have efficiencies,” he says. “We have people who go to each restaurant every day and make the sauce. We don’t have that many restaurants so we have one person doing it and then taking it to the restaurants. I have nothing but admiration for Pano [Karatassos] who handle so many different restaurants and maintain the top quality.”

His two sons, Al and Matt, have now joined him. They and their sister, Lindsey, now in graduate school, all worked in the restaurants growing up. “Both my sons still have their jackets in their office so if someone doesn’t show up at one of the restaurants, they can take a shift, work the register. Al can throw a pizza, actually I think they both can.”

The littlest addition to the Rohrig clan, four-month old Grace, is the splitting image of her dad, minus the beard. “We’ll get her going in the business as she gets older,” he says.

In the meanwhile, Rohrig is continuing to do what he does best – look for little opportunities and turn them into big dollars and opportunity. He loves working, living, breathing neighborhoods and he’s willing to achieve that one block at a time.

Say Mendheim, “George is so creative. He doesn’t buy things and turn them into a parking lot waiting for the neighborhood to turn around. He puts something in and then it happens. He has wonderful conceptual plans for his projects. And, he’s so cool.” **BIOB**