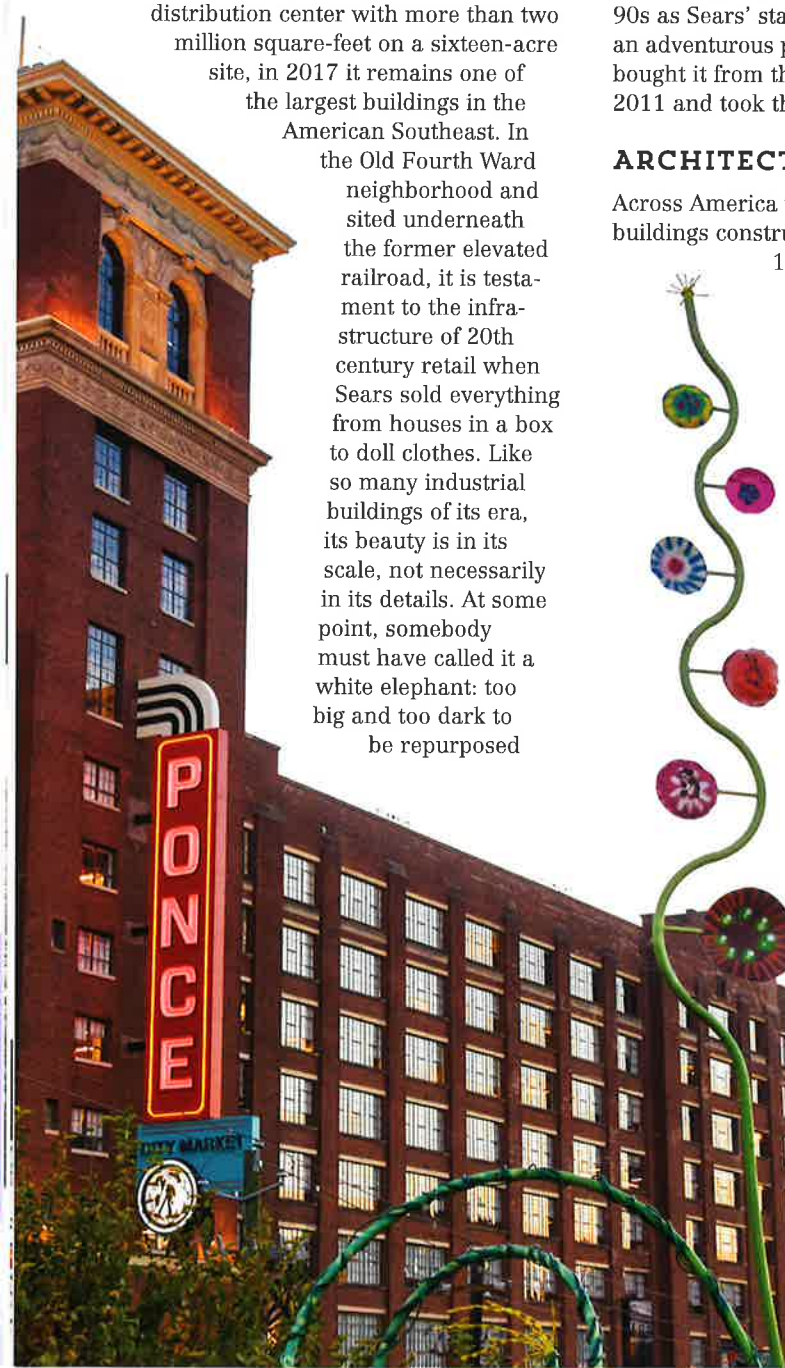
URBAN ICONS IN TRANSITION

By Paco Underhill

Ponce City Market opened in 1926 as an industrial site in Atlanta built by Sears Roebuck & Company. A massive brick warehouse and distribution center with more than two million square-feet on a sixteen-acre site, in 2017 it remains one of the largest buildings in the American Southeast. In the Old Fourth Ward neighborhood and sited underneath the former elevated railroad, it is testament to the infrastructure of 20th century retail when Sears sold everything from houses in a box to doll clothes. Like so many industrial buildings of its era, its beauty is in its scale, not necessarily in its details. At some point, somebody must have called it a white elephant: too big and too dark to be repurposed or reinvented, and much too far from downtown to ever be relevant. The city of Atlanta tried to make it work as a branch of city hall, having bought in for a meager $12 million in the early 90s as Sears' star faded. Jamestown, an adventurous property developer, bought it from the city for peanuts in 2011 and took the plunge.



ARCHITECTURAL GEMS

Across America we have industrial buildings constructed over the past 100 years that are sitting vacant. Ride Amtrak from Boston to Washington and all along the way you'll see brick monoliths, many with cracked windows and crumbling roofs, yet the brooding castle-esque walls stand intact. The buildings were constructed in an era where engineering standards were high. Here in New York City along the riverfronts

you can see the evidence of an industrial and shipping past when architecture was more monumental than stylish.

The question is: Do we knock them down, or do we find a new purpose? My first home in New York City was on the western edge of SoHo where in 1975 the warehouse-lined streets were completely deserted by dusk. Some 30 years later the same neighborhood is known for hip luxury housing, galleries, showrooms and restaurants and bars, buzzing with people at all hours. Like the reinvention of SoHo and Tribeca, Williamsburg and the Brooklyn Navy Yard are now in transition. All across America, from New York to Detroit and Oakland, there are bright and shiny nodes of revitalization in the midst of urban blight.

ARCHITECTURE AS CHANGE AGENT

So back to Ponce City Market. Today it is at the epicenter of a changing Atlanta. It is a mash-up of housing, retail,

office space, dance studios, a restaurant complex and an amusement park. It is like a massive warm oven casting off heat, human activity and hipness. The adjacent residential housing has almost doubled in price since Ponce City opened in 2012. Aging industrial buildings within a quarter mile are all being frantically redeveloped as mixed-use office space and housing. Wander the corridors of these shared work/living spaces, and the average age is 25 and highly tattooed. Bars are crowded and the workout classes on the old open-air train station are hot in more than one way to this cultural observer.

I love the simple super graphics, curated bicycle parking and the curved stairways. I didn't even mind paying for parking. If I were 25 again, Ponce City is as close to Disneyland as a childless adult can get. The developer has done a great job being true to the building's roots, with curated railway artifacts and time clocks. The retail offerings range from local stores and brands to the new prototype Williams Sonoma. You have instant access to coffee, alcohol, bread sticks, good hot dogs, Kimchee and expensive pots and pans.

NEW URBAN MODELS

American cities are crying for reinvention. The idea that you can live, work, and play in the same place is part of our tribal and villager DNA. Henry Ford and Frank Lloyd Wright may have distracted us for almost a century with style over substance, but across the world we are returning to our roots. As I have stated so often, retail and housing are intertwined concepts. The birth of the shopping mall was based on Americans moving to the suburbs. All across the world, the middle and not-so- middle class are making lifestyle and housing choices that are different from the preceding generation. It's back to the cities, and millennials are supporting a whole host of urban work/living spaces that are curated and concierge-ed.

NEW URBANISM, A PLANNING REVOLUTION THAT TRIED TO DUPLICATE THE LOOK AND FEEL OF SMALL TOWNS. HOUSES ON SMALL LOTS, A VARIETY OF HOUSING TYPES AND CUTIE-PIE RETAIL WERE ITS HALLMARKS.

How many hours a year do Atlantans or Angelinos spend stuck in their cars commuting between their homes and their jobs, not to mention their shopping trips? Millennials have a better idea. In the 90s we saw the birth of New Urbanism, a planning revolution that tried to duplicate the look and feel of small towns. Houses on small lots, a variety of housing types and cutie-pie retail were its hallmarks. In parts of the south and midwest it has successfully brought new life to the neighborhoods. It's the small college town vibe without the college. The idea is you can walk safely, see your neighbors, shop locally and use your car every two weeks to go to Costco. New Urbanism begs a number of questions; cutie-pie retail feels like a retirement hobby where in the face of Costco and Amazon, the small merchant has to be very careful choosing their niches. It also doesn't address the issue of where people work or the commute to the job. Yes, it works in small- and medium-sized America, but what about cities?

ICARUS RISING

Yesterday's debris is the answer to tomorrow's dream. Jamestown Development has been heroic in cherry-picking urban properties like Ponce City and Chelsea Market in New York and revitalizing them. It isn't about the amount of money you invest, but rather about the vision you put into that spend.

If asked, how many of us would chose to live, work and play in the same place? Ultimately, retail in all its forms is about supporting how we choose to live. It is the infrastructure that every urban and suburban community is built on; part provisions supply,

part entertainment and reward, and originally meaningful gathering places for good neighbors. For every mall that closes and every Macy's that fades, we have to keep focused on the unique nodes of light in our urban landscapes and understand why they can continue to burn brightly, offering shelter and choice for all forms retail. **RR**

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Paco Underhill leads a behavioral research and consulting firm with 10 offices globally. Paco and Envirosell's work has been featured in The New York Times, 20/20, National Public Radio, Smithsonian Magazine, Wall Street Journal, and other major news media. Paco is also the author of What Women Want, which was published in soft cover edition by Simon & Schuster in July 2011; Call of the Mall, a walking tour of the American shopping mall; and Why We Buy, the bestselling book about retail in history. In addition, Paco's columns include regular features in major trade publication DDI Magazine.