

Horizon

Business & Growth in Metro Atlanta



Angling for jobs

Plenty of people want to get on a new transportation authority the Legislature is expected to create. **Turn to E3**

Entrepreneur's retail crusade

One Atlanta entrepreneur dreams of a "retail reincarnation" for a historic neighborhood not far from the Georgia Dome. Mira Bergen has seen the success of lofts in Castleberry Hill. Now she's taking a chance that residents have an appetite for retail and also want a restaurant or coffee bar in the area. **Turn to E6**

What's in store for Castleberry Hill?

Retail broker leads the charge to bring restaurants, services to a historic downtown neighborhood.

By Patti Bond
STAFF WRITER

The white VW New Beetle with the Cabbage Patch doll strapped in the back seat is your first clue: Mira Bergen is not your typical retail broker.

That impression is confirmed during a tour of downtown's Castleberry Hill neighborhood with Bergen in her beloved "Moonbeam" Bug.

"Just look at this. The energy is amazing," Bergen said. She's so smitten by the vision of a rooftop patio on an old warehouse building, she nearly lands Moonbeam on the sidewalk. Just around the corner, Moonbeam bottoms out in a muddy alley in front of a building that looks condemned.

"People live in there. It's incredible," says Bergen, who's determined to start a "retail reincarnation" in Castleberry Hill, a six-block area south of the Georgia Dome that has become one of Atlanta's prime loft neighborhoods.

Her personal crusade began two years ago during a tour of the area following a downtown development meeting. "Other people were going on and on about the lofts, but the first thing I noticed was that there was no retail," Bergen recalled. "I started walking around [Castleberry] on Sundays and just fell in love with it."

So much so that Bergen just bought a building at 199 Walker St., where she wants to bring in a restaurant or cafe. Unlike most property owners in the area, she's not caught up in the much more profitable loft and condo craze.

"All anybody wants to do is lofts, but the people who live here don't even have a place to get coffee," Bergen said. "The neighborhood is screaming for services and a place to hang out."

Residents and developers think Bergen, who has been leasing retail spaces for 16 years, has the commercial know-how previous entrepreneurs lacked. "We had a sandwich shop and a jazz cafe once, but they didn't have a feel for the neighborhood. It was more of a real estate deal for them," said Rick Skelton, who sold Bergen a 900-square-foot building that once housed the Mount Aire Annex Soul Food Restaurant, which stopped serving barbecue ribs in the mid-1980s.

"I could have spent \$50,000 on the building and sold it for \$200,000 as a single residential unit, but I'd be doing the neighborhood a disservice," said Skelton, who has seven developments in Castleberry. "What we need now is retail."

Bergen bought the building to lease it to a caterer with a cafe or a coffee shop. In addition to that venture, she persuaded Castleberry's original loft developer, Bruce Gallman, to let her lease two retail spaces on the ground floor of the Swift & Co. Lofts at 244 Peters St.

Bergen's retail vision of a "Southern Fried SoHo" capitalizes on the feel of the neighborhood, which has been carved out mostly by painters, sculptors and other creative types who began landing there in the 1980s. She wants to bring in one or two restaurants like East Atlanta's Heaping Bowl & Brew or the Flying Biscuit in Candler Park.

"Food is the glue, and other retail services will come after that," said Bergen, a former leasing representative for Cadillac Fairview Shopping Centers and founder of A Store is Born, a retail brokerage and consulting firm.

Although she has enthusiastic backing from residents, Bergen admits she's having a tough time convincing a restaurateur to be the first there. Castleberry Hill is a strange animal.

Once a red-light district known as Snake Nation, the area now is home to some of the priciest loft conversions in metro Atlanta, with prices ranging from \$200,000 to \$400,000. One old warehouse on Walker Street has a price tag of \$849,000.

The neighborhood has a few hangovers from its past, though. In many cases, the old industrial buildings look



LEVETTE BAGWELL / Staff

Screaming for services: Mira Bergen hopes to bring a restaurant or cafe to her Walker Street property.

ON RETAILING

abandoned from the outside even though six-figure renovations lie behind the barred windows and rough facades. And a homeless shelter on Peters Street keeps a steady stream of transient traffic going in the morning and night.

Both Bergen and residents agree that Castleberry has a perception problem to overcome.

"There's no way I will let anyone meet me down there when I show them the neighborhood," Bergen said. Instead, she picks them up in the Beetle and takes them on the official tour, knocking on residents' doors and clamoring through construction zones with a hard hat.

"It's very time intensive, but unless you've seen what they've done with these lofts, you don't understand what's happening here."

Bergen's energetic campaign is starting to stir interest. Andy Alibaksh, owner of North Highland Avenue's Cafe Diem, said he's seriously looking at buying a building in Castleberry for a restaurant.

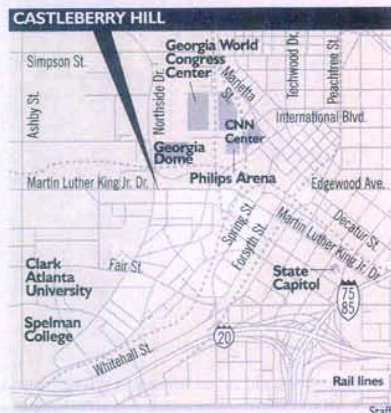
A recent surge in condo development should help the retail prospects. "The condo dwellers are permanent residents. They've invested money, they're staying and they want amenities," said Skelton, who has four condo projects in Castleberry.

Another boost is Northside Drive's Village at Castleberry, a new mixed-income housing project. "That, combined with the loft dwellers, creates the critical mass you need for a deli or a tavern or pub," developer Gallman said. He estimates Castleberry's population has reached 800. Some estimates put it at 1,200.

Regardless, the residents say they have a promise for any retailer willing to set up shop in Castleberry. "The first restaurant will have a loyal customer base because we're desperate for a place to hang out," longtime Castleberry resident and real estate agent Grant Lundberg said.

"Right now, we have neighborhood bonfires from time to time, or we'll walk around with a glass of wine and visit each other. I know we'd be inclined to go to a restaurant more often than usual, knowing that the owner took a chance on us."

That's good news for Bergen, who said she thinks of herself as a potter, much like Castleberry's artists. "This is like making something out of nothing," she said. "I like to think I could take this clay and make a beautiful pot out of it."



Staff

From 'cesspool of sin' to fashionable lofts

The six-block area now known as Castleberry Hill was a rough and rowdy spot before the Civil War. Locals called it Snake Nation in the early 1850s, when wild drinking sprees and fights were easy to find at neighborhood saloons.

In short, it was a "cesspool of sin," says Atlanta historian Franklin Garrett.

After the Civil War, Atlantans tamed the neighborhood and turned it into a respectable residential section. Castleberry Hill got its name when Merrill T. Castleberry, a furniture store owner, built a home at the intersection of Fair and Peters streets, one of the highest vantage points in the city.

A spate of residential development later gave way to warehouses and wholesale stores that popped up beside the train tracks. In the 1980s, artists and a few small developers began turning vacant structures into studios and funky lofts. By the early 1990s, demand sent rent soaring, and a string of loft conversions hasn't stopped. Area residents have yet to see a resurgence of retail, though.

— Patti Bond