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Real estate development reflects a community's health and growth, and that means to an end caught Davon Barbour's interest while he was studying subjects totally different: sociology and French. It was the 1990s at Goucher College in Baltimore, and a sociology professor showed Roger & Me, Michael Moore's 1989 documentary film about Flint, Michigan's struggles following GM plant closures. "A light bulb went off in my head," Barbour said. "As a native Baltimorean, I thought, 'Wow, this is Baltimore.' Our economy had not kept up with change, and we were having similar experiences to Flint."



That experience set Barbour on a career path in which he has emphasized retail and placemaking as ways to drive urban renewal and economic development. For more than 20 years, he has served in planning and economic development roles in Baltimore, Miami, Orlando, Los Angeles and now New Orleans.

Barbour's Path

Barbour didn't wait long after seeing Roger & Me to start down that road. His interest was piqued, and it turned out that a classmate's father was an executive with The Rouse Co. An introduction turned into an internship in which Barbour experienced mall, hotel and mixed-use renovation and development firsthand. After graduating in 1999, he joined a small development company and helped communities use Department of Housing and Urban Development HOPE VI funds to transform outdated public housing into mixed-income and mixed-use projects that included retail and other amenities.

As part of that work, he conducted a retail development study of Linn Street in downtown Cincinnati, Ohio. "That was an exciting project for me," he explained. "It was the first time that I was really pounding the pavement and analyzing the opportunities to bring in new retail that would serve the community." From there, he went to the city of Baltimore and then to East Baltimore Development.

But it was his next job, in 2004 with the Miami Downtown Development Authority, where Barbour really dug into retail development. One day, his boss told him to pack his bags and attend an ICSC show in Orlando. There, he realized the critical role retail could play in revitalization. He also found out how much he did not yet know. "I had no idea what ICSC was, and candidly, I was ill prepared because I had no idea what it took to recruit a retailer or any understanding of how retailers approach site selection," Barbour confided. "But I was blown away to see the presence of all these retailers and other companies, and I became more knowledgeable by attending other ICSC events and building industry relationships with brokers, developers and retailers."

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Omnichannel and Urban Marketplaces

Ever since, Barbour has applied his growing knowledge and experience in economic development. As part of a deal to attract a Publix to a tax increment financing district he oversaw in Orlando, Barbour crafted performance benchmarks that required the grocer to create a jobs program and showcase art celebrating downtown's history, among other obligations. A few years later and across the country, he found himself advocating for 79 commercial and residential pipeline projects for Hollywood, California.

Along the way, Barbour has experienced a terrorist attack, the Great Recession and COVID. One lesson Barbour learned in the early days of the pandemic is the importance of an omnichannel presence for retailers and restaurants. In his role for the Los Angeles County Development Authority, he doled out \$150 million to help small businesses survive the mandated closures but still saw too many fail because they had lost their connections to their customers. "We're going to be working with mom-and-pops in our community to ensure that they have a digital presence," Barbour stated of his current work. "That is something that's very important."

On a broader scale, the advent of work-from-home and the likelihood that hybrid workplace models will last for the foreseeable future has created questions regarding the recovery of urban restaurants and retailers. No longer are those operators guaranteed captive office workers as a market, at least for the short term. For brokers, developers and retailers that have ridden the rise of downtowns over the past two decades, that's a novel concept. "After the 2008 crash, there was a clear reduction in retail traffic, but at the time, everyone was confident that the market would rebound and business would return to normal," he recalled. "What's top of mind for me now is: How will site selection change moving forward, particularly in urban areas? How do we continue to diversify our land uses so that we can continue to provide a customer base to sustain those retailers and restaurants? That's a big shift."

Public-Private Partnerships

Ultimately, those questions present an opportunity to focus on urban placemaking, Barbour said, which complements his role on the ICSC board of trustees, where he represents public sector members. He was elected to ICSC's board of trustees in December, around the time he took the helm of the 48-year-old Downtown Development District of New Orleans as president and CEO. DDD was the U.S.'s first business improvement district, and it oversees 1.2 walkable square miles that have attracted \$7.6 billion in new investment since 2005.

Barbour is paying particular attention to Canal Street, where department stores, hotels and entertainment once lined the 21-foot-wide sidewalks. While the promenade still hosts Mardi Gras parades, it has struggled to fully recover from disinvestment that began in the 1960s and from Hurricane Katrina in 2005. A Hard Rock Hotel under construction on the corridor collapsed in 2019.

"New Orleans has such a tremendous global reputation, and I view Canal Street as our Champs-Elysees," he said. "It's an asset that has such a rich history in this community, and we need to update and polish that jewel so that it realizes its full potential." He plans to use incentives and an exciting, comfortable and clean experience at the street level to attract high-end retailers, restaurants and local entrepreneurial concepts. Those uses will complement the recently opened Four Seasons hotel and residences and an ongoing strategy to convert empty upper floors along the corridor into residential, hotel and office.

Incentives invariably would come with performance requirements, Barbour said, and among other tools, he is keeping his eye on the proposed Revitalizing Downtowns Act. Introduced in 2021, the bill would establish a federal tax credit to encourage developers to convert unused office space into residential and mixed-use projects, which could fuel and sustain retail market growth, he said. It's also the type of solution that demands collaboration, the aspect of his work that he finds most rewarding.

“Retail doesn’t occur by happenstance; you have to be an active participant, build relationships with brokers and developers and meet the residents in the neighborhood to find out what their retail and job-creation needs are,” Barbour said. “Public-private partnerships are really important because at the end of the day, what we’re really talking about is developing a community.”

By Joe Gose

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