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# Blue ambition

Georgia State University's  
footprint in Downtown Atlanta  
keeps growing

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Photo credit:

“We are not going to buy up everything in sight and make this one self-contained campus,” Georgia State University President Mark Becker told *CL* recently.

But that isn't apparent given the institution's record since Becker entered office in 2009. Under his guidance, GSU has grown exponentially through new building acquisitions and original construction. In 2007, the university acquired the former SunTrust building at 25 Park Place and began renovating it floor by floor, and seven years later, the school unveiled plans for a state-of-the-art digital media institute as part of the renovations. In 2010, the Petit Science Center opened as part of

the first phase of the university's Research Science Park at the corner of Piedmont Avenue and Decatur Street. Shortly after, GSU broke ground on phase two of the science park, a fifth residence hall along Piedmont Avenue, and a new law building at John Wesley Dobbs Avenue and Park Place. This is in addition to a housing facility and dining hall that opened on Piedmont Avenue in 2010 and 2011, respectively, the University's acquisition of the former Georgia-Pacific building (55 Park Place), and the construction of Centennial Hall (100 Auburn Ave.), among other developments.

To be fair, this growth has been part of the university's master plan — and the result of some favorable real estate circumstances. As the city's business center shifted focus from Downtown to Buckhead and Midtown, property was left up for grabs. Becker says Downtown wasn't a vibrant area of the city, which allowed the university to purchase land or buildings at a low cost, then develop them.

Becker sees Georgia State as Atlanta's version of New York or Northeastern universities, where a once relatively barren part of the city is full of life again: "Those are the two in my mind that, looking over the last 30 years, have gone from being a part of the city that was struggling to being a part of the city that's

thriving, and the university is part of that energy, that momentum, that positive activity. And I think Georgia State is on that same trajectory.”

In 2013, the University unveiled its most recent master plan, a blueprint for GSU’s long-term footprint on Downtown Atlanta. The idea is to create precincts within the university’s sprawling campus: Academic spaces cluster around the east side of Woodruff Park; classrooms, libraries and student services make up the university’s core on either side of Courtland Street; student housing stretches along the Piedmont corridor; and scientific research infrastructure resides on the southern end of Piedmont Avenue. The biggest and most time-consuming undertaking is the demolition of Kell Hall, a classroom building created out of a 1920 parking deck, complete with ramps in lieu of stairs, replacing it with a greenway and new arts building.

The university is still renovating 25 Park Place, home to the College of Arts and Sciences, and 55 Park Place. The Creative Media Industries Institute at 25 Park Place is slated for completion this spring. Once completed, 55 Park Place will house the Andrew Young School of Policy Studies and the J. Mack Robinson College of Business. The current business school on Broad Street, a property GSU owns, will be used for academics or for administrative office space. The University is

waiting for the state legislature to approve \$5 million to demolish the Kell Hall. Should they get the green light, the project will commence in 2018. And Georgia State is still figuring out what to do with the historic Bell building on Auburn Avenue. Plans to tear it down were met with pushback from city officials and historic preservation activists.

The arts community at south Broad Street, the city's revitalization of the northern side of Broad Street, the tech hub within the Flatiron building and a renewed community interest in what happens to Underground Atlanta suggest people want Downtown to be a hotbed of activity again.

And the opening of businesses — such as Starbucks in the Hurt Building, Highland Bakery in 25 Park Place, Ébrik Coffee Room on Park Place and Buenos Dias Cafe on Decatur Street — has grown simultaneously as GSU grows.

An article published by the *AJC* in 2014 poses the question: “Is Georgia State Downtown Atlanta’s savior?” They seemed to think so. Becker disagrees. “I don’t think it’s the most beneficial to call us the savior,” he says. “I think it's beneficial to say that Georgia State's growth and development over the last 20-30 years has been part of the resurgence of Downtown Atlanta itself.”