

The Right Mix

BY KENNETH CALDWELL

Two masters of mixed-use development, **Adam Flatto** and **Lewis Wolff**, discuss what it takes to make a success of this challenging project type.

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ADAM FLATTO is a general partner at The Georgetown Company in New York City. He and his partners have developed many large-scale projects, including Easton in Columbus, Ohio—a 1,300-acre, 14-million-square-foot mixed-use community anchored by the retail-focused, 1.5-million-square-foot Easton Town Center. They also take on many pro bono ventures.

How do you make mixed-use work?

Adam Flatto: There is no formula. Successfully integrating different uses takes great patience and care, so our starting point is our focus on design and detail combined with our sense of what consumers are seeking. We want the places we develop to feel natural because they've grown organically rather than just being some developer's idea. As a private company, we can select projects where our focused approach can add real value, and then dedicate the time necessary to do so. This is equally true for our non-profit ventures, such as the International Center of Photography's new museum and school in Manhattan.

What is it about mixed-use that pulls people in?

AF: Consumers want places to go where they can have fun—places where people are excited, yet comfortable, walking around. New Yorkers experience them every day. When we did the equivalent in Columbus, it was unprecedented. For Easton Town Center, we started by asking how we could apply these sensibilities in a city that didn't really have them. The goal was to create settings where people say, "This is where I want to hang out!" then choose to do so again and again. We're also fanatical about adding density, because the mix of uses and the urban feel is what draws customers in and gives our projects their unique value. At Easton, this meant turning an essentially suburban location into a mixed-use urban center, the highest

concentration of commercial activity in Columbus outside of its downtown area. We've also learned lessons from our non-profit work, such as the revitalization of Manhattan's Bryant Park. Easton Town Center is about 10 New York City blocks long, with four different public spaces running through it. It's these spaces that draw people from one place to the next, fostering the interaction that is so critical to defining the pedestrian experience and bringing the Town Center to life.

How do you keep mixed-use from going stale?

AF: We do so by making it a living, breathing place. That means it has to change all the time. Food is a wonderful way to create atmosphere, so Easton has 30 restaurants, six of which are among the top 10 highest grossing in Columbus. Health and sports also draw people on a 24/7 basis, so we included a 10,000-member fitness club, along with 24-hour ice-skating and soccer venues. With over three million square-feet of office space, Easton has a fixed base of customers for the Town Center's shops, restaurants, and hotels. With the commercial uses established, we are now turning to housing, believing that Columbus is ready for a high-density residential product with upscale amenities.

What role does design play in mixed-use's appeal?

AF: The biggest mistake that mixed-use developers have to avoid is to underestimate the consumer. Whether we're developing hotel, retail, office, or residential uses, people appreciate good design and quality—and are willing to pay for it. The cost difference is marginal—the real investment is the time it takes to get it right. When we do this, it more than pays for itself. We've seen the return we can get from taking risks and pushing the envelope. As an example, we reached out to Gensler to design our first office building at Easton, which set the tone for subsequent development. We also designed our main full-service Hilton hotel so it could be easily upgraded to, say, a Ritz-Carlton standard.

How do you measure success?

AF: Let's look at the statistics. Easton is only half complete, but it already has three million square-feet of retail, with \$500-per-square-foot average sales in the Town Center, and a million square-feet of hotel and residential development—plus the office buildings and their 40,000 workers. The retail activity alone generates 30 million visits a year, which is quite remarkable in Columbus, a city of 1.5 million people. To me, though, the real measure of success in mixed-use development is its ability to evolve naturally into an integral part of the larger city. If the consumer eventually forgets that we developed Easton, then we will have truly succeeded.

Los Angeles-based LEWIS WOLFF is involved in mixed-use projects in several ways, from prime mover in urban-scale redevelopment to active investor in hotels and resorts. Wolff got the attention of Bay Area baseball fans recently with an unusual proposal to build a stadium for the Oakland A's that would anchor a branded (and brand new) mixed-use district.

How do you find the best mixed-use opportunities?

Lewis Wolff: Cities themselves, the ones that are friendly to developers, generate the opportunities. It's not a question of subsidies, but of cooperation. Cities have to be risk-takers—the vision thing is real—but they can't be micromanagers. We're not constantly looking for projects. They don't have to be big, either, but there has to be a compelling reason for them. In Fresno, for example, we're partnering with a very community-minded developer to help a local university build a hotel that will serve its campus and the area.

How do sports fit into mixed-use development?

LW: If you're going to spend the money to develop a new stadium, you have to do it so it will have a real impact on the surrounding area. San Diego has seen tremendous development around its ballpark. This kind of co-development maximizes the payoff for whoever is doing the project—the developer, the city, or a partnership of the two. In Oakland, we're looking for a site near or adjacent to the Oakland Coliseum where we can develop a new Oakland A's stadium in tandem with a high-quality outlet center, condo/rental housing, and a hotel that will be part of the ballpark. Baseball is the draw, but the other uses will pay for the new stadium, just as they did in San Diego. They fit very well together.

How does design contribute to the bottom line in leisure?

LW: Even if the project doesn't need to be an award-winner, quality design helps get it built—secure the entitlements, get the financing, attract good tenants—and then operate it profitably. Design is critical every step of the way.

Kenneth Caldwell is an Oakland-based writer on architecture and design.