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**ACT ONE**

## Atlanta Is a Magnet for Young Job Seekers

 By **STEPHANIE CHEN**  
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*Editor's note: This column is part of a continuing Act One series that looks at real estate and career prospects for young professionals starting out in their careers. See past articles on [Minneapolis](#)<sup>1</sup>, [Washington, D.C.](#)<sup>2</sup>, and [San Francisco](#)<sup>3</sup>. Plus, see a [map](#)<sup>4</sup> of popular cities for twentysomethings.*

ATLANTA -- In the weeks before he graduated from the University of Pittsburgh in 2005 Chris Valasek eagerly hunted for a local computer science job nearby. The avid Steelers fan had always wanted work near his hometown.

But in job interviews he was told over and over again that he needed more work experience. He wound up taking an offer from a technology company in Atlanta.

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Nearly two years later, Mr. Valasek has grown attached to the city's lively neighborhoods and soul food, as well as his job in the city as a researcher at IBM Internet Security Systems. He plans on staying for a few more years -- though he admits he won't be rooting for the Falcons this season.

"There are a lot of jobs out here, and it's nice to be able to spend money instead of always worrying about if I'll make to the next check," says the 25-year-old Mr. Valasek, who lives with his girlfriend in the trendy Midtown area.

In the last decade, Atlanta has become a magnet for recent college graduates seeking jobs in technology, health care and law. In 2006, 12,492 new people ages 20 to 29 moved to the city, marking 21.4% growth from the year before, the census reported.

Meanwhile, the population in the city's metropolitan areas has shot up to a record four million in 2007 with the city itself experiencing the largest single-year population gain in more than 35 years, according to the Atlanta Regional Commission, an intergovernmental planning agency.

A year ago, Mr. Valasek says that he let his jobless best friend from Pittsburgh crash with him. Within two weeks, his friend found a job

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Chris Valasek

Stephanie Chen

a computer technology company.

The city is home to 13 companies in the Fortune 500. Several international companies have opened offices in the past six months, including **Wipro Ltd.**, an Indian information-technology company that created 500 new jobs, and UCB, a Belgium biopharmaceutical company that produced 125 additional jobs.

For \$1,300 a month, Mr. Valasek and his girlfriend Sara Jackson, who also works in the Atlanta area, rent a spacious two-bedroom Midtown loft apartment that's within walking distance of all types of activities: posh dance clubs blaring hip-hop, college-like neighborhood bars and a variety of restaurants and cafes.

Midtown's housing stock has been increasing: There are 10,378 housing units in the neighborhood up from 2,500 in 1997. One 35-story mixed-use building, set to open in fall 2008, will boast an eighth-floor one-acre outdoor grass plaza overlooking the city featuring a pool and a bar. Developers are already recruiting young professionals at a half dozen local law firms to live in the building, says Steve Baile, a senior vice president at Daniel Corporation who oversees the operations in Atlanta.

Allison Blakely, a 24-year-old graduate of Northwestern University and a Colorado native, moved to Atlanta in October 2005 from Chicago. She picked the city over a job offer in New York and is now making \$45,000 a year as a weekend producer at CNN. Ms. Blakely says she wasn't ready for the hustle of Manhattan and her salary probably wouldn't have covered the exorbitant rents.

"I have my own little one bedroom apartment, and I love it," says Ms. Blakely, who lives in the Buckhead area, another young professional hot spot laced with recently-constructed high rises and condos, and giant shopping malls touting high-end designer stores. She pays about \$850 a month for a luxury apartment in a gated community with a clubhouse and pool where crowds of young people relax on weekends. "All my friends in other cities have roommates."

Some young professionals complain that Atlanta lacks an urban edge and that the city's sprawl isolates them from other young professionals. Ms. Blakely says that she misses public transportation and pedestrian friendly neighborhoods.

Developers are trying to give Atlanta a more city-like ambience. There are 35 major developments underway in Buckhead along a three-mile stretch of Peachtree Street, including high-rise rentals, condos and hotels. Street-level boutiques are also planned, says Sam Massell, president of the Buckhead Coalition, a nonprofit group of business professionals. Mr. Massell says the influx of young professionals into the community influenced developers to build high-end condos starting at \$300,000 compared to the traditional luxury condos costing about \$2.5 million.

Despite the new construction lining the city, Michael Elliott, an associate professor of regional and city planning at the Georgia Institute of Technology, says Atlanta still retains a diverse collection of old Southern-style homes in neighborhoods alongside new high-rises. He adds that the mixture of buildings helps attract young professionals because they want to feel like they are in a city with an identity.

Samantha Williams, a 23-year-old Georgetown University graduate, who studied history, says she sees Atlanta as a launching pad for the bigger cities. She came here in September 2006 and quickly secured a job as a program specialist at Communities in Schools of Atlanta Inc., a nonprofit working to reduce school drop-out rates.

Ms. Williams, who doesn't own a vehicle, cites Atlanta's poor public transportation system as a drawback, a common complaint. "It's just really hard to get around," she says. "But I've gotten good at finding inventive ways to get to places."

• *Stephanie Chen, 22, is a reporter in the Journal's Atlanta bureau. Write to [stephanie.chen@wsj.com](mailto:stephanie.chen@wsj.com)*

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Image Courtesy of Rule Joy Trammell + Rubio, Architects

A rendering of 1010 Peachtree Street, a 35-story mixed-use building set to open in fall 2008.

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