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## A thesis to build on

### Then-student's idea is at the heart of a plan to remake city.

By Ariel Hart

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Ryan Gravel was 26 when he wrote a student paper suggesting that old train tracks around central Atlanta could be a development tool.

Like most students, he graduated and moved on to a regular job. He's now an urban designer at the Atlanta office of Perkins Will.

But his paper, unlike most, took on a life of its own. Ten years after he bound it in green hardback and sent it to the Georgia Tech library, the project it proposed — the Beltline — has evolved into a big-time metropolitan vision. The proposed loop of transit, trails and parks around Atlanta's urban core now forms the foundation of Atlanta leaders' plan to remake portions of the city.

The basic idea Gravel proposed hasn't changed as it's progressed up the food chain, he said in a recent interview, "but it's expanded in ways I could never have imagined."

It has also drawn its critics and forced it battles. The state Supreme Court ruled that the Beltline's method of funding was unconstitutional. A developer who owned the Beltline's prime slice in northeast Atlanta, Wayne Mason, wanted to build condo towers on it, which city and neighborhood activists opposed. More recently, the state Department of Transportation teamed with Amtrak to insist that the Beltline's pedestrian-friendly streetcars or light transit would need to share the corridor with heavy rail or high-speed rail.

Each of those crises got resolved in the Beltline's favor, usually with neighborhood activists' support. But now, the sour economy isn't helping anyone develop anything.

Another rail opponents' argument has yet to be addressed: Atlanta is simply too spread-out to make passenger trains worthwhile. The Beltline runs in circles around the most important job center — downtown — and will have to rely instead on connections with MARTA for those commuters.

Yet despite all that, city leaders still believe in what first Gravel imparted: take these old train tracks, make them useful and pleasant, and development will come.

It will be a different kind of development, pedestrian-friendly and a bit denser in place of the car-friendly sprawl. The new buildings that spring up around Beltline transit stops and parks will give Atlanta new places for people to live. And it will be an agreeable place, improving land values and enhancing property tax revenues.

Only time will tell. But Gravel knew that to make it work, he would have to let go and hand his carefully thought-out baby over to the politicians. And that was OK, he said, because at the same moment it was taken from him, he knew it might actually get built.

Grass-roots support has shown up at critical meetings, helped pass a referendum that made the Beltline funding constitutional again, filled newspaper letter pages and battled it out with opponents on blogs.

"All these bumps in the road, the Mason thing, the Amtrak deal ... when there's a problem, the public doesn't shoot the whole thing down. They come out in support of the vision we built," Gravel said.


He may never again produce a project as significant as his master's thesis, but Gravel still works on research centers and industrial complexes from Memphis to China, creating spaces he hopes will help people may meet each other and interact.

"It's about connecting people, basically," he said.

To read the thesis, visit <http://hdl.handle.net/1853/7400> and click on the link at the bottom of the page.

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