

Birmingham's one-time Dr. Pepper plant now anchors one of the city's most popular design and entertainment districts

a sparkling revitalization

“Never in a million years did I think I would open a garden shop in downtown Birmingham, Ala.,” remembers Charlie Thigpen.

Two years ago, what Thigpen, a landscape designer and former garden editor at *Southern Living* magazine, thought would be the best place for his new Garden Gallery was also the most predictable: He would locate the shop in one of the suburban neighborhoods outside the city center, where new construction—and newly planted landscapes—flourish.

But near the glass, concrete, and stone of Birmingham's city center? That didn't make any sense. Thigpen knew that most of the activity in downtown ceased weekdays at 5 p.m. when workers hit the highways for home; few of them came back at night or over the weekend. Locals who did live downtown tended to occupy warehouse lofts with small balconies and



Charlie Thigpen

limited growing space.

Then Catherine Sloss Crenshaw, president and CEO of Sloss Real Estate, approached Thigpen with an unconventional idea: “She asked me to consider Pepper Place.”

Anchored by a massive brick building that once served as a Dr. Pepper syrup plant, the Pepper Place complex southeast of downtown encompasses 13 buildings and more than 350,000 square feet of space. “Cathy invited me to come down for one of the Saturday farmers markets,” Thigpen says. After witnessing the astounding number of patrons purchasing local produce—close to 10,000 people come each Saturday between Memorial Day and Labor Day—Thigpen was sold. Today, his container gardening and botanical art business is a suc-

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DR. PEPPER

CO





Catherine Sloss Crenshaw (above) and her quest to revitalize Pepper Place have attracted tenants like James Lewis (left), named one of *Food & Wine* magazine's Best New Chefs 2011.

cess and continues to attract both suburban homeowners and the loft dwellers who are remaking the core of the Magic City.

CATHERINE SLOSS CRENSHAW HAS ALWAYS BELIEVED in Birmingham. Her great-great-grandfather built furnaces here in the 1880s during the city's iron and steel boom. "I love Birmingham," she gushes. "We have this amazing city with all these beautiful historic buildings. It is quite extraordinary that we have not torn them down like other cities did."

Crenshaw has been making the case for Pepper Place for more than 20 years. In the mid-1980s, it stood in the middle of an abandoned neighborhood pockmarked with substandard housing and deteriorating commercial structures. "The whole area was rundown. It was full of empty shotgun houses, vacant lots, and burned-out buildings," she says. "A pretty horrible place." But Crenshaw saw potential, particularly in the Dr. Pepper building.

Inside the three-story structure, built in 1931, workers produced syrup for Dr. Pepper accounts east of the Mississippi River for 50 years. Crenshaw saw the building as the logical centerpiece of a comprehensive neighborhood revitalization. "The goal was to create a walkable, urban neighborhood," she says. "We wanted to get people to come back in from sprawling out in the 'burbs." If she could draw them to the Dr. Pepper building, and give them a reason to keep coming back, she thought her vision had a chance.

Enter interior decorator Richard Tubb, who walked into the Dr. Pepper building in the early 1990s at Crenshaw's invitation. "I thought it was unique," he says, remembering the soaring industrial windows and the impressive, hefty columns. "I didn't even think an earthquake would rattle that building." Crenshaw, who had closed on the property in the late 1980s, began sharing her vision for its future. Still, Tubb saw a major problem: isolation. There were really no other retail businesses nearby that catered to his clientele. At that time, his shop was located in Mountain Brook, an affluent suburb to the southeast, and it was filled with privileged customers. "I told Cathy, 'No one ever comes down here,'" he recalls. "And she said, 'If you will come, others will follow.'"

He did. And they have. At Pepper Place, Crenshaw established a design center for the city, with Tubb, her first tenant. "He bought into the vision and the plan," she says (adding that

Crowds at the weekly Pepper Place Saturday Market enjoy live music and chef demonstrations. Inside the former syrup plant, artifacts like the vaults that once held the Dr. Pepper secret formula are incorporated into current businesses.

“the rent was pretty cheap”). Tubb eventually increased his lease to 10,000 square feet of showroom and storage space, and says it was a terrific business decision. Today, he says, he occupies prime real estate. Customers come by on their lunch hour or after visiting one of the restaurants and cafes nearby. Designers buy furniture and accessories from him right off the floor. “It’s the best move I have ever made,” he says.

Richard Tubb Interiors is one of over a dozen design- and arts-related businesses—from architects’ offices to antiques shops to art galleries to a theater—now operating out of Pepper Place. Additional tenants (there are close to 50 in total) include marketing and branding firms, two magazines, and a technology consulting company.

In 2000, Crenshaw launched the Pepper Place Saturday Market to bolster the success of the complex and draw attention to the plight of family farmers across the state. Today farmers and crafters fill as many as 100 booths every Saturday, and the American Farmland Trust has ranked it as one of the country’s most popular markets.

The rise of interest in fresh produce has drawn still more restaurateurs to Pepper Place, among them Chef James Lewis, who opened Bettola, an Italian-style trattoria, in the complex’s Martin Biscuit Building in 2006. “I wanted to be in a safe area but also have a city feel,” Lewis remembers. “I looked around for a year or more and this building ... the décor and the ambience of the surrounding streets made me keep coming back.” Also, Lewis adds, “I believed in Catherine’s vision. She actually cares about what is going on.”

Lewis’ diners have confirmed his conviction that historic enclaves are magnets—whether you live in the city or a suburb. Many tell him they’re drawn by the integrity of the historic space, which retains the original high ceilings and brick walls. “They always feel like the space transports them,” Lewis says. “They feel like they are in New York because of the shotgun space.”



Catherine Sloss Crenshaw’s original vision for Pepper Place might not have included a trattoria, or a farmers market, or a collection of galleries and antiques shops, but her dream of a neighborhood anchor certainly fostered their success. “We were able to save that building and cluster all those creative folks together,” she says. “We were able to create what has really become a model for the city.”