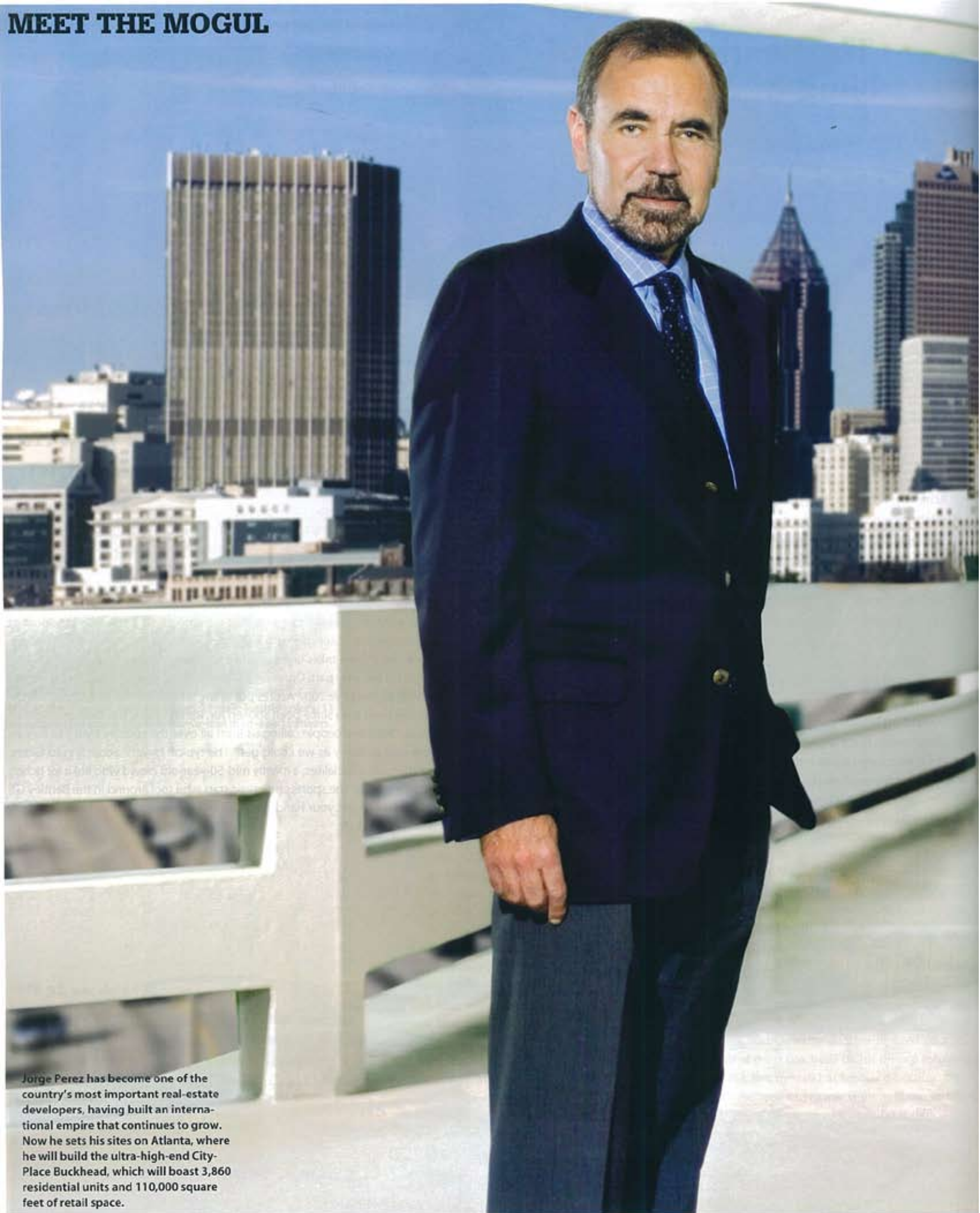


MEET THE MOGUL



Jorge Perez has become one of the country's most important real-estate developers, having built an international empire that continues to grow. Now he sets his sites on Atlanta, where he will build the ultra-high-end CityPlace Buckhead, which will boast 3,860 residential units and 110,000 square feet of retail space.



POWER BROKER

Real-estate giant **Jorge Perez** brings his Southeastern headquarters and soon-to-break-ground nine-tower **CityPlace Buckhead** to Atlanta

BY JACQUELYNN D. POWERS PHOTOGRAPHS BY NAVID

Real-estate tycoon Jorge Perez's office might as well be his plane, a luxurious Gulfstream III, which ferries him to construction sites across the country. On one such flight, from Miami to Atlanta, Perez is strictly business as he reviews architectural plans, discusses construction costs and analyzes marketing reports. His suit-clad executives rotate around their boss, each vying for attention or providing data to the always information-obsessed Perez. Near the end of the short flight, I was invited to the "first-class" section of the plane (i.e., the seat next to Jorge's) to delve into his Atlanta dealings, sales strategies and business philosophies.

Perez is no stranger to anyone who follows the luxury construction market. His buildings in Miami are some of the finest edifices in that metropolis (including One Miami, Murano Grande and Icon Brickell). He has famously partnered with Donald Trump on an oceanfront project in Sunny Isles, Florida. In 2006, the Argentinean-born Perez was named to *Forbes'* prestigious list of wealthy Americans (he was ranked #197), and *Time* magazine recently honored the entrepreneur as one of the top 25 most-influential Hispanics in the United States.

Currently, the 57 year old is turning his laser-sharp gaze and building power toward the Atlanta market with CityPlace Buckhead, an ambitious project boasting nine towers, 3,860 residential units and 110,000 square feet of commercial space. But it is well within the scope of Perez's The Related Group, which erects impressive condos across the nation with aplomb. The first phase of CityPlace Buckhead is called One CityPlace and slated to begin construction toward the end of this year, with the sales center opening in November. Atlanta will also be the headquarters of Related Group's new Southeast regional division.

"We are proud to be working with Cousins Properties on One CityPlace," Perez says. "Cousins has deep roots in Atlanta, and this partnership will help us hit the ground running here. Plus, having already partnered with Cousins on Park Suites at 50 Biscayne in downtown Miami, we know the two companies work very well together."

The 30-story tower, at the intersection of Roxboro and East Paces Ferry roads, will feature 269 condominiums and 11 townhomes. CityPlace Buckhead will consist of 16.5 acres and also include a dog-walking area when it is complete in 2009. Construction begins in October on the upscale condo, which is being designed by cutting-edge architecture firm Arquitectonica, whom you may recognize locally as the designer of SCAD Atlanta. Additionally, the Rockwell Group (known for modern restaurant work such as Emeril's Atlanta and the Kodak Theatre in Los Angeles) was commissioned to gussy up the interiors.

"One CityPlace will be high-end," Perez describes. "The finishes will be luxurious, much more than anything you see in Atlanta today. There will be Italian cabinetry, European appliances and the best granites and marbles. In Atlanta right now, the high-rise market is going anywhere between \$300 to the mid-\$400s per square foot. We are going to price ourselves at

JORGE PEREZ

the higher end, but we will provide amenities at the highest end, too. The units, which start at \$300,000, will be spacious, with one bedrooms ranging in size from 807 to 989 square feet. Two bedrooms will range in size from 1,400 to 1,522 square feet. Three-bedrooms will begin at around 2,000 square feet. At the peak of the spectrum, penthouses are selling for \$1 million.

"Our market is the well-heeled executive, the guy who wants to be in Buckhead, near his offices," Perez acknowledges. "Our first building is in the middle of everything, but the street is very residential in nature. We have views that are totally unblocked. This is not for the young, first-time buyer."

Therefore, CityPlace's Buckhead location was a key factor for Perez. Not only is the development adjacent to office complexes and major roadways (including I-85, Georgia 400 and Peachtree Road), but its proximity to malls such as Phipps Plaza and Lenox Square is equally attractive. According to District 7 city council member Howard Shook, the area is booming along with the rest of Atlanta. "Atlanta is experiencing a sustained and forceful building boom as we accommodate a population that has increased by a quarter in less than a decade," Shook says. "Buckhead is experiencing a wave of projects. Quality developers invest in Buckhead because of market conditions. The Buckhead brand name keeps them coming."

"We feel this piece of land is the best in Atlanta," Perez adds. "It doesn't matter to us if we have to wait 10 years to reach its full development. We are willing to take our time to do it correctly. I'd like to start with One CityPlace and have people see the type of quality architecture that we do. We do finishes that are

"Atlanta has reinvented itself very well. It wants to be a player. It is becoming a livable, urban area."

better than anything at prices that are still very competitive. I'd like our name to be synonymous with creating great urban environments. What's important to us is that when this is done people will say, 'The place to live is CityPlace.' I'd like to become the lead urban developer in Atlanta—just like we are in Florida."

Perez has had his eye on Atlanta ever since the Olympics in 1996. "I saw how much they were doing to make Atlanta great," he recalls. "I built two urban, rental buildings in Atlanta with a local partner. We did well even though it was a down market. But we became so busy in South Florida that our whole concentration had to go back there. In the last eight years in South Florida, we built 30,000 units. It was a massive amount of dwellings, the largest any city has seen. In the last two years, we have been the largest multifamily developer in the country. We had a market that responded to us. While we had that response, it made no sense



Above: an artist's rendition depicts one of the nine towers that will comprise CityPlace Buckhead.

Top right: with fellow megadeveloper Donald Trump.

Right: with wife Darlene and former President Bill Clinton.



for us to move away from that incredible growth. As the market in South Florida has slowed down, we went back to the cities that I thought were going to be great urban centers, like Dallas and

Atlanta."

In the decade since the Olympics, Atlanta has become attractive to developers like Perez and Trump. "The difference between Atlanta 10 years ago and today is just night and day," Perez enthuses. "Atlanta has reinvented itself very well. It wants to be a player. It is becoming a livable, urban area. It has the speed, commerce, amenities and cultural facilities, without losing its Southern charm. As opposed to being fast-paced and a little inhuman, like some of the larger cities in the country, Atlanta keeps a human quality to it. The people I do business with are gentlemen and ladies. Atlantans are very proud of what they are, and they are very hospitable to outsiders. It will be the great city of the South. There will be an Eastern corridor with four vital cities: New York, Washington, D.C., Atlanta and Miami. Related is in all of those areas."

This is Perez's second CityPlace concept. The first, in West Palm Beach, is one of the most lucrative metropolitan developments in Florida, with residential living, convention facilities, hotels, restaurants and shopping spanning 70 acres. In 2002, the project earned an award from the Urban Land Institute (ULI) as the best large-scale mixed-use job in the world. "We want to emulate the success we had in Palm Beach in Atlanta," explains Perez. However, CityPlace Buckhead is a more urban venture than its Palm Beach predecessor. By comparison, West Palm Beach has a population of 150,000, while [metro] Atlanta has five million. Therefore, the scale and density are much greater at CityPlace Buckhead. "It will be a city within a city," comments Perez. "CityPlace Buckhead is our largest single project to date. It's over four million square feet of residential space, retail, restaurants and recreational amenities."

Moreover, this mixed-use model fits in with Perez's love for New Urbanism, a trend in development that places residential and commercial entities together to eliminate suburban sprawl. Before he was a megabuilder of luxury condos, Perez, who attended the University of Michigan, had his roots in urban planning and

affordable housing. "I was the worst hippie you've ever seen," he reminisces. "I had hair down to my waist. But I wasn't just a hippie in the sense that I had long hair. I was socially conscious and wanted to change the world. Today, we like to do meaningful urban jobs that people will go by and say, 'That's another Perez job.' If I build another garden apartment in suburbia, that doesn't carry the meaning that I want to get across."

Perez, who is of Cuban descent by way of Buenos Aires, co-founded The Related Group with Steven Ross in 1979. He is the chairman of The Related Group of Florida, and has built more than 60,000 apartments in Florida over the past 25 years. "I enjoy the creation the most, the visualizing of the building and the deals," Perez says. "When I look at a site, my greatest strength is rapidly understanding what it is that I want to put in that location and then getting the right people to make that dream a reality. So, I'm not an architect, an artist or a designer, but I know good art, design and architecture. People say that working for me is the best and the worst. I push people to the limit, and they really grow. The downside is that I

"We are developing CityPlace Buckhead in stages. We are taking the time to make it perfect."

won't accept anything but perfection. We continue to push the envelope. I am not in the supermarket business. I don't have customers I keep on selling the same thing to. Everything we do is unique; every day we re-create ourselves."

Despite his private plane and gorgeous Miami mansion, Perez is a low-key billionaire with rugged charm. "I don't envision myself as this rich guy," he asserts. "It has been very hard for me to even take the luxuries that money can afford you. My life is very simple in many ways. My friends are the same friends that I've had for 20 years. I envisioned myself being successful but in different ways. I would have seen myself as a college professor or an important government official doing meaningful work in redistribution." Perez, a father of four, is active in politics, as a frequent fundraiser for Hillary Clinton and other prominent Democrats.

Perez's eagerness to give back to the community and play fair goes a long way—both financially and personally. "Even in the world of megadevelopers, Jorge has quite a reputation," Shook notes. "I'm sure that his emphatic entry into the Atlanta market will cause other high-caliber builders to take a closer look at us. His willingness to exceed virtually every standard asked of him by the city and neighborhood activists raises the bar for all who follow." One only has to view the way The Related Group has created an upscale metropolis in South Florida of sleek skyscrapers with names like Apogee, Murano Grande, Oasis on the Bay and



Jorge Perez says he envisions Atlanta being part of an Eastern corridor with four powerful cities, along with New York, Washington, D.C., and Miami.

One Miami. The scope of Perez's work speaks volumes.

As for rumblings that the real-estate bubble is about to burst, Perez says he is not too concerned about that happening in Atlanta, which is thriving, and sees the downturn as more of a South Florida phenomenon. "We were first to hit in the growth and first to hit in the slowdown," he says. "I feel better about Atlanta because it has much less development. As Atlanta becomes a greater city, it will start drawing from a larger market. It won't be the guy who is moving from a single-family home in suburbia to an apartment. It will be more of a regional place where people who want to do business in Atlanta will maintain an apartment. Given that, I still think this will be a year of reflection and caution for all of the markets. We are developing CityPlace Buckhead in stages. We are taking our best structure and starting small. We are taking the time to make it perfect."