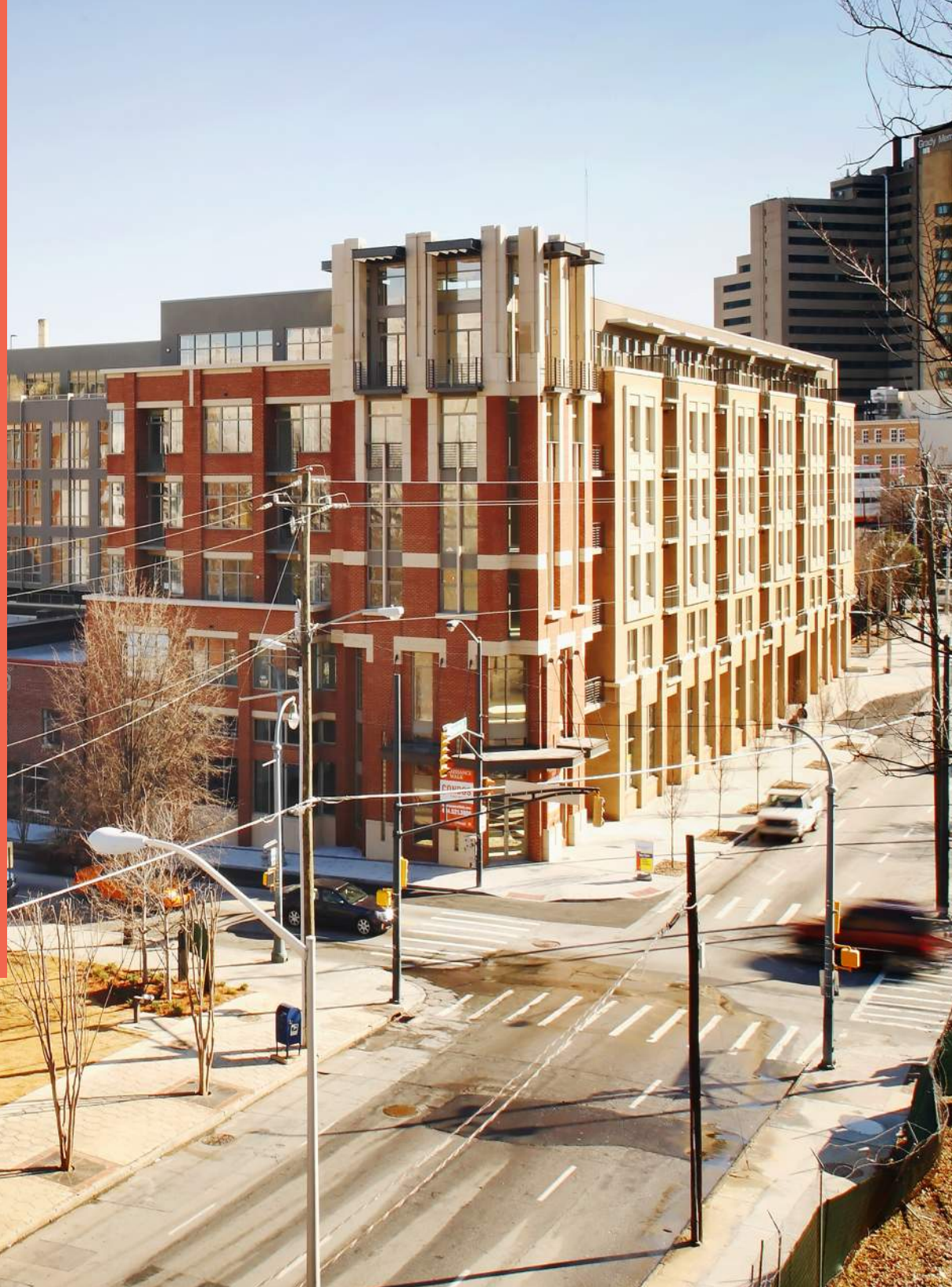
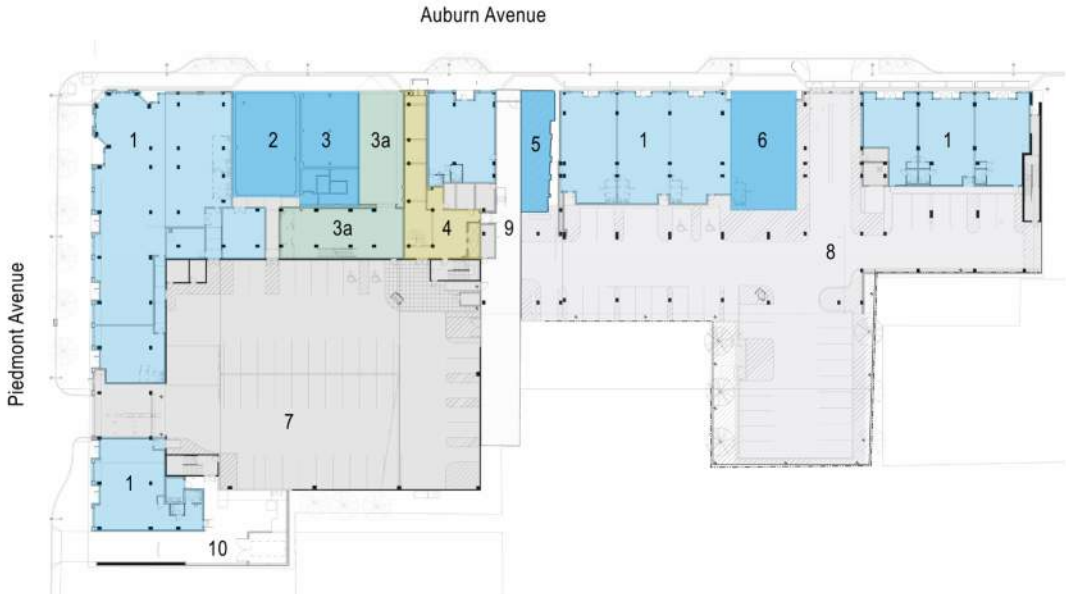


REVITALIZING SWEET AUBURN

When Praxis3 and JW Robinson and Associates began design work for Renaissance Walk, it was the first large-scale mixed-use development on Auburn Avenue in decades, and there hasn't really been anything like it since. This project was catalyzed by Big Bethel AME Church, which spent years assembling properties around the church building – a historic structure located at the intersection of Auburn Avenue and Jesse Hill Jr. Drive – in the hopes of converting a block of underused and vacant buildings into a development that would reinvigorate the neighborhood. It required much more than a developer's imagination and speculative acumen to make this project happen: it also required a partner that had a stake in the neighborhood and was therefore patient enough to execute a long-range plan.



PROPERTY ASSEMBLY

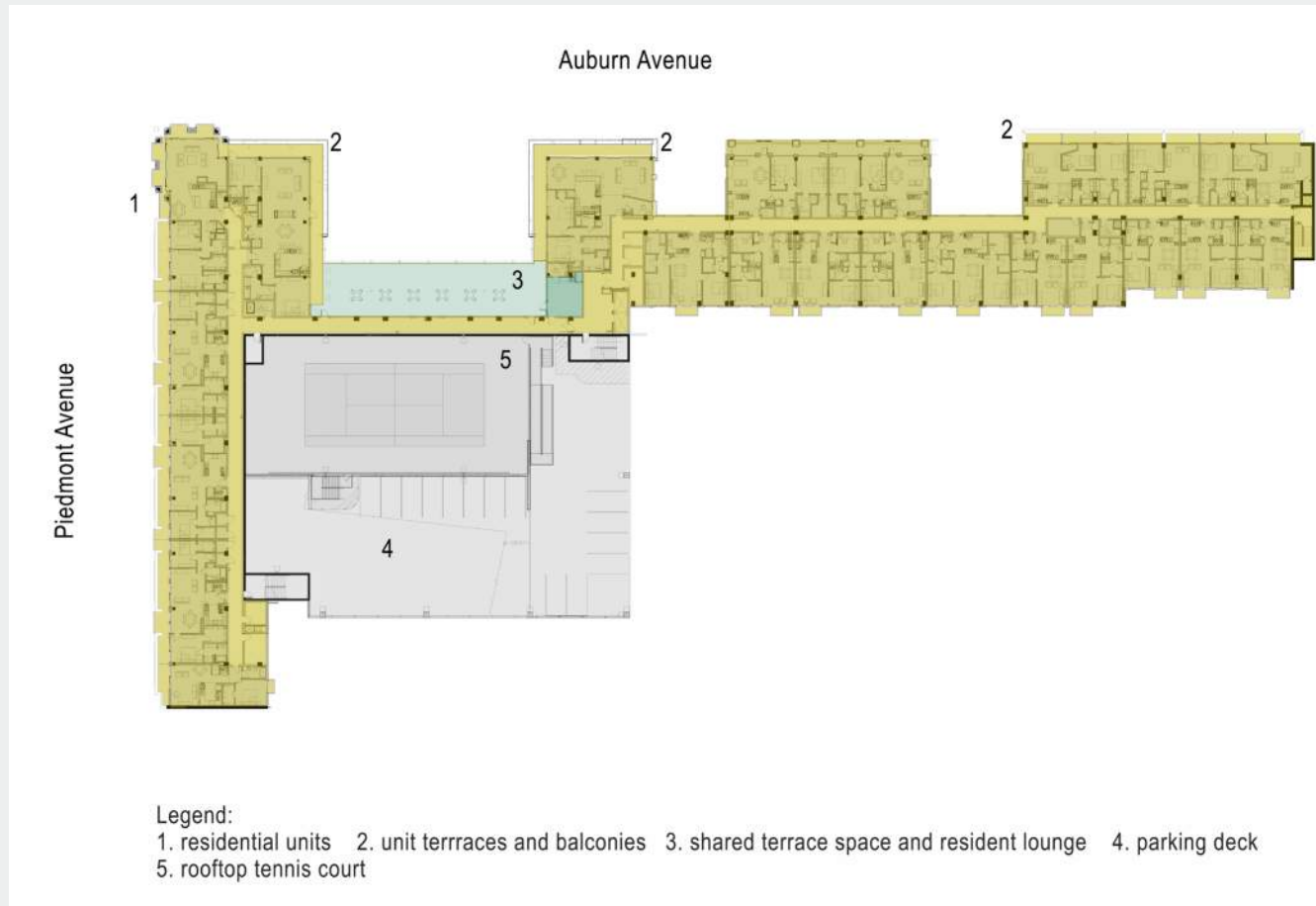


The property assembled by Big Bethel and developed by their partners at the Integral Group had previously consisted of multiple parcels along an entire city block of historic Auburn Avenue. Several parcels were vacant and some existing buildings were demolished to make way for the project, but the assembled project site also includes five historic structures that were required to be saved and incorporated into the larger project. Additionally, the character and scale of the existing Sweet Auburn district consists of relatively small buildings built on small parcels by different owners over time, creating a streetscape that while consistent in scale and typology also presented remarkable variation in architectural design across any given city block. Praxis3 / JW Robinson & Associates developed an urban design strategy that takes advantage of the existence of these historic structures, embracing their historic character and highlighting the historic buildings by carving out the volume of the new development to ‘frame’ the settings of the existing buildings. The new building has an irregular footprint, with portions of the building’s front façade aligned to the sidewalks and the adjacent existing buildings and some portions of the façade set back to provide space for the existing buildings to remain. As a result, the apparent mass of the new building is reduced, and is articulated not as a single large building but as a series of smaller buildings, inter-weaving historic and new buildings to create a cohesive whole that nonetheless reflects the textural diversity and scale of the existing avenue.



MULTIPLE STAKEHOLDERS

The process was informed by a broad spectrum of stakeholders. In addition to developers Big Bethel AME Church and the Integral Group, the design team met with the National Park Service (the project is located within the Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historic District), the King Center, various civic and business organizations, the Historic Preservation community (including State Historic Preservation Office), and the Atlanta Urban Design Commission, which has jurisdiction over the design of the building due to its location in the Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historic District. Situations like this often result in mediocre designs plagued by ‘design by committee’ but in this case we feel like the process actually served to sharpen the design team’s understanding of the place and resulted in a design that is more articulate, not less.



UNITY AND DIVERSITY

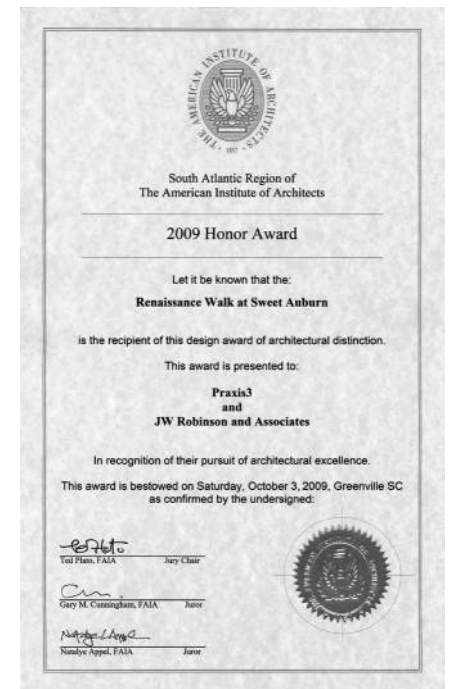
As with all large projects, the design team was composed of many contributors with multiple points of view. A common tactic is a “string of pearls” approach, which conceives of a single design composed of discrete volumes tied together by a thin component, usually a circulation route. For this project, the team instead opted for a “radiator” approach, in which the outward facing skin of the building folds in and out to create projected volumes with recessed spaces between them. The skin is both continuous and broken, both unified and diverse, and creates the opportunity for each implied volume to have its own design signature. Each of the various “buildings” in the composition were assigned to a different design leader, to create a legitimate diversity of expression, rather than just a simplistic representation of stylistic difference. We feel that unity is created when we challenge a group of designers to work within a single overall vision for the project, and that actual diversity results when those designers bring forth their own personal iteration of that vision. This is very different from an approach that seeks to make things “look diverse”. Conversely, our team’s approach was to establish a single party and a loose set of rules. These rules had to do with basic urbanism (i.e., each building needs a base, middle, and top), building organization (i.e., floor levels are continuous across all buildings), and a basic materiality (brick, precast concrete, steel, and stucco). From there, each building was designed as its own composition and as a unique contributor to the streetscape.





2009 AIA HONOR AWARD

At the 2009 South Atlantic Region Conference of the American Institute of Architects, Praxis3 and JW Robinson and Associates were presented with an AIA Honor Award for the Renaissance Walk project. The award recognizes significant projects from across the South Atlantic Region, which includes North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia.



INFRASTRUCTURE CHALLENGES

The existing property was bisected by a large combined storm and sanitary sewer that crossed the site from east to west. Besides the fact that the existing elliptical brick pipe was badly deteriorated, the city required the separation of storm and sanitary sewers. Auburn Avenue is one of the oldest streets in the city, with a complex network of infrastructure conveyances in the area below what is a narrow street. This led the design team to replace the storm portion of the sewer on site, traveling below the proposed new building, a somewhat unusual solution. This was in part because the building did not occupy the entire block and so the sewer outfall to the east runs below an existing historic structure.

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