

Power Center Meets Lifestyle Center

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The [Edgewood Retail District](#), approximately two miles east of Atlanta's downtown, was developed in 2005 by the Sembler Company of St. Petersburg, Florida. Atlanta-based Robertson Loia Roof (RLR) was the architectural firm responsible for the design. Edgewood is difficult to classify. The commercial development has aspects of what the International Council of Shopping Centers calls a [power center](#), but also resembles a newer type of development called a [lifestyle center](#). The development contains a total of 531,300 square-feet of retail space. Most of this space is occupied by large stores, but areas classified by the architect as "small shop retail/restaurant" and "commercial/bank" occupy 50,000 and 25,000 square feet, respectively. There are also approximately 220 residential units of a variety of types—condominiums above small retail spaces, other condominiums in a converted factory, townhomes around the periphery of the development, and an apartment building for lower-income seniors. The plan can be described as two power centers—one to the north, one to the south—with a small lifestyle center sandwiched between them.

The Plan

Primary vehicular access to Edgewood is from Moreland Avenue, a major four-lane north-south street (Figure 1). The shopping center is designed so that a motorist driving along Moreland barely glimpses the large parking lots that are hidden by building frontages along the busy street. Abutting the Moreland sidewalk along the southern section, for example, is a brick structure containing stores selling cellular phones and vitamins, and a similar building containing a bank and a vision services center (Figure 2). To enter the southern section of Edgewood, a driver turns into a driveway running between the two buildings. Only then is the 1,675-space parking lot visible. The lot is surrounded by seven retail stores: Barnes & Noble, Bed, Bath & Beyond, Kroger supermarket, Office Depot, Petco, Ross Dress for Less, and Target. Although at 130,792 square feet, the Target is the largest of the seven, it is the smaller of two typical Target [formats](#), a so-called General Merchandise category as opposed to a Super Target.

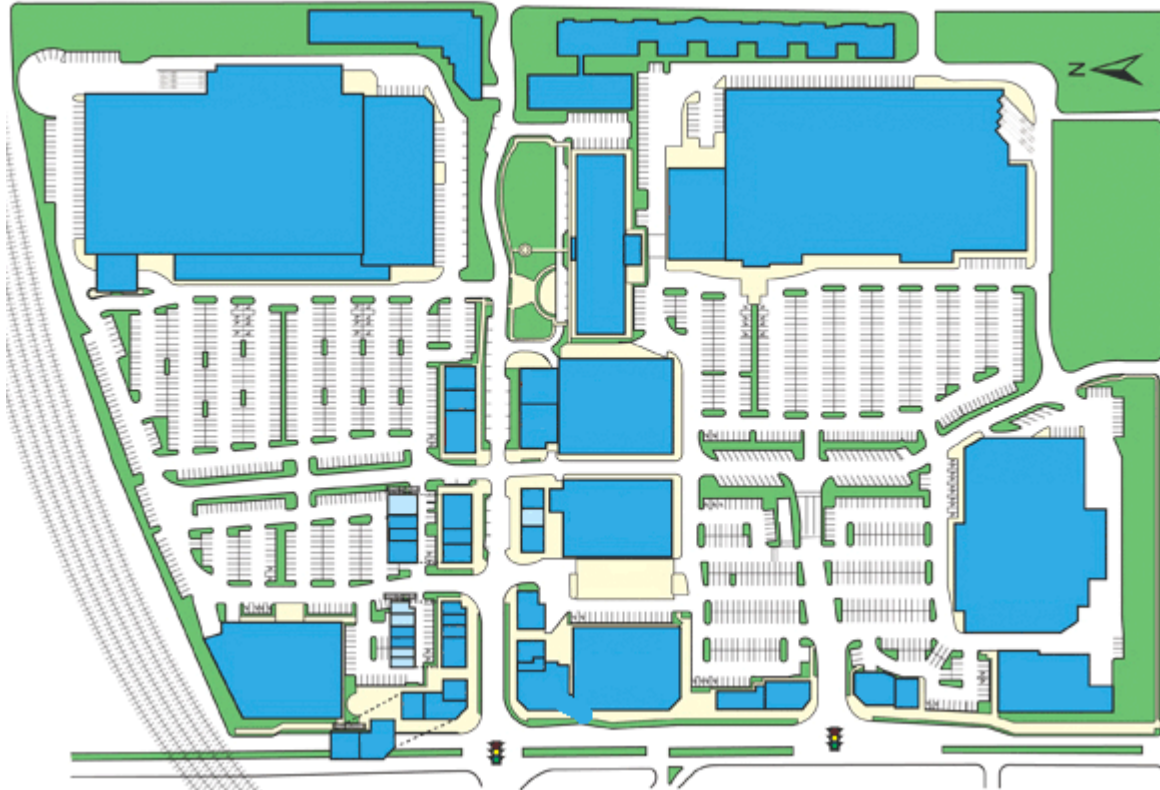


Figure 1: Edgewood Retail District plan.

The other access point to Edgewood is farther north on Moreland Avenue, and enters directly into the lifestyle center. Instead of entering a parking lot, the driver turns onto a shopping street— Caroline Street—which is lined on both sides with mainly two-story buildings (Figure 2). The first floor contains shops and restaurants, and while the second floor on the north side is mostly professional service offices, the upper floors of the south side feature thirty [loft condominiums](#) (Figure 3). The sidewalks are fifteen feet wide, allowing terraces with tables and chairs to be located in front of the restaurants. A five-foot-wide landscaped buffer zone separates the sidewalk from the street, and there is brick paving at designated crosswalks. The street itself has parallel parking spaces for twenty-six cars. This is a tiny fraction of the total parking at Edgewood—which has room for 2,478 cars—and the on-street spaces are hardly sufficient for patrons of the Caroline Street shops. Nevertheless, the presence of parked automobiles on the street is important as it adds to the urban atmosphere.



Figure 2: Stores along Caroline Street.



Figure 3: South side of Caroline Street, with shops and restaurants on the first floor and loft condominiums above.

Accentuating the feeling of a small-town main street is the presence of what appear to be two cross-streets that divide Caroline Street into three blocks (Figure 4). Actually, these cross-streets are access drives to the northern and southern power centers, and to a 642-car partially underground parking deck snugly sited between Caroline Street and the southern power center. Just east of the final block of shops, there is a former shoe factory that has been converted into forty-one [loft condominiums](#); adjacent to this is the 136-unit, four-story [Columbia Senior Residences at Edgewood](#). While the shoe factory is a conversion of an existing building, the senior residences were constructed concurrently with the other parts of the Edgewood development. All the Columbia apartments are Low Income Housing Tax Credit units intended for tenants sixty-two years of age and older earning no more than 60 percent of median income for the area.



Figure 4: Access from Caroline Street to north power center.

Unlike the southern power center, the northern center does not have direct access to Moreland Avenue; the only way a motorist can reach it is via Caroline Street. The north section of Edgewood consists of Lowe's and Best Buy, facing each other across a 777-car parking lot. At 133,841 square-feet, the Lowe's is the largest big box in the complex. To the north, this section is bordered by elevated railroad tracks. To the south are the backs of the Caroline Street stores and restaurants, some of which have rear entrances so shoppers can access them from the parking lot as well as from Caroline Street. Behind Lowe's, but sited about two stories higher due to the topography, are twenty townhomes facing Marion Place, the eastern boundary of the Edgewood development.

While Edgewood was designed to facilitate automobile access, there is public transportation thanks to the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA), whose Inman Park-Reynoldstown rail station is two blocks away. There are also several bus routes with stops on Moreland Avenue in front of the complex.

In regard to the overall appearance of the development, Lee Berg, project architect, notes that it contains features of [new urbanism](#), as well as addressing Atlanta's commitment to [green design](#). Berg acknowledges that Edgewood has some characteristics of both a lifestyle center and a power center, although he calls it a "mixed-use urban development." He adds that the design team incorporated several historic styles of Atlanta architecture that referred to the surrounding neighborhoods. Hiding the sea of parking from Moreland Avenue was also integral to the plan (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Buildings along Moreland Avenue obscure view of shopping center parking lots.

Russ Berndt, an urban planner at RLR who worked on the site layout, remarked that during the design phase more than 100 different plan configurations were contemplated for Edgewood. Emphasizing the street life along Caroline Street was considered important both for providing a focal point and to show that the project is an integrated mixed-use development. Berndt noted that Moreland Avenue is a state highway, so the number of curb cuts was limited by Georgia Department of Transportation standards. This prevented having separate car entrances for each of the three Edgewood sections, leading to the solution of accessing the northern power center section from Caroline Street.

Retail Issues

While the Edgewood Retail District was still under construction in 2005, Sembler sold the development to Bell Partners of Greensboro, N.C. In 2011, Bell sold it to the Canadian firm North American Development Group for \$81.65 million. An *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* article on the sale reports that the retail properties are 99 percent occupied. Likely contributing to the success of Edgewood is that many of the retail stores are of popular chains not previously in the area. The average distance between a typical chain's Edgewood store and the next nearest unit is 4.7 miles.

As a result of conversations with employees at several of the chains represented at Edgewood, I learned that the stores there exceed others in the state in terms of sales. The extremely low vacancy rate in the center and the often crowded parking lots likewise suggest that business is brisk. Other indicators of Edgewood's retail success are that the Target store is currently expanding its grocery section—in spite of the sluggish economy. Furthermore, when the ice cream store at the corner of Moreland and Caroline closed in 2010 a similar business took its place within a few months.

In *Makeshift Metropolis: Ideas About Cities*, Witold Rybczynski noted that open-air lifestyle centers seem to be most successful when "located in a prosperous, growing region and in a mild climate." Both population growth and mild climate are characteristics of Atlanta. In the half decade leading up to the opening of the Edgewood Retail District, the Atlanta metro area grew more than any other urban region in the United States, adding some 890,000 residents, 133,000 of whom live within a three-mile radius of Edgewood. Pleasant weather is sometimes cited as a reason for Atlanta's growth; even in the coldest month, January the average daily high temperature is above 50 degrees Fahrenheit. Because of mild weather, the tables and chairs in front of the restaurants along Caroline Street are used year-round.

Community Relations

The area surrounding the Edgewood Retail District is predominately residential, so not surprisingly, there was significant community opposition when the development project was first proposed. Nick Gold, the spokesperson for AGL Resources/ Atlanta Gas Light Company (the original landowner), recalls the two main concerns brought up by neighbors: additional traffic on Moreland Avenue, and the fear that suburban-type big box stores would drastically alter the character of the community. Particularly troublesome to local retailers was the anticipation that competition from large national chains would harm their business. Most of these small businesses are an eclectic mixture of shops and restaurants in Little Five Points, the neighborhood located immediately beyond the Edgewood development's northern limit.

Sembler retained the services of Angelo Fuster & Associates to handle media contacts and community/governmental relations for the Edgewood project. Fuster recalls that more than eighty community meetings were held, many attended and moderated by Atlanta City Council member Natalyn Archibong. Mindful of the increased employment and tax revenues Edgewood would bring, Archibong supported the project, although she was aware of the need for community input to address the public's concerns.

Fuster noted that from the start, the Sembler Company was eager to work with the neighbors, and he credits the [Organized Neighbors of Edgewood](#)(ONE) with playing a key role in negotiations between the community and the developers. Sembler explained to the community that the economics of shopping centers required the presence of large anchors to attract customers, as without such stores there would be insufficient credit to get the project off the ground. The developer made several concessions, however. For instance, to avoid creating competition with nearby neighborhood stores, Sembler promised there would be no fast food chains with drive-through service, no stand-alone pharmacy, and no specialty hardware stores.

Summing up the experience of the community-developer relations at Edgewood, Nick Gold observes, "It appears that the shopping center is doing quite well and that the community now supports it—and the local, homegrown stores in Little Five Points continue to thrive." Indeed, while an [article](#) in a neighborhood newspaper written six months after Edgewood opened acknowledged that some people in the area were still unhappy, the reporter noted Sembler's attentiveness to community concerns. The article reported favorably on the \$1.5 million in annual property tax revenue, the \$8.6 million in annual sales tax revenue, and the 1,600 jobs Edgewood was expected to bring (2005 figures) to the area.

Conclusion

Whether one classifies the Edgewood Retail District as a lifestyle center, a power center, or a mixed-use urban development is of little import. Whatever it is called, it has found a niche in a bustling Atlanta setting. The lesson of the project is that even in a shaky economy, places like Edgewood can have remarkable success. When access is

convenient, parking is ample, and the variety of stores ensures a diverse array of goods and services, an Edgewood-type project can serve as a community magnet. As a bonus to the community, the project, which includes restaurants and housing, created a twenty-four-hour-a-day place in a location that was formerly a rather bleak site beside railroad tracks.

Summing up his experience on Edgewood, architect Lee Berg says, "One of the best compliments I ever received came from my brother, who lives in New York City. He was in town and he went to see the site without me. I asked him later how he liked it. He said he thought it was a nice looking shopping center, particularly how we tied the design into those existing older buildings on Caroline Street. He didn't realize that the entire street was new. I liked that. Making a walkable place was the whole idea."

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