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## Atlanta's Emperor of Empty Lots

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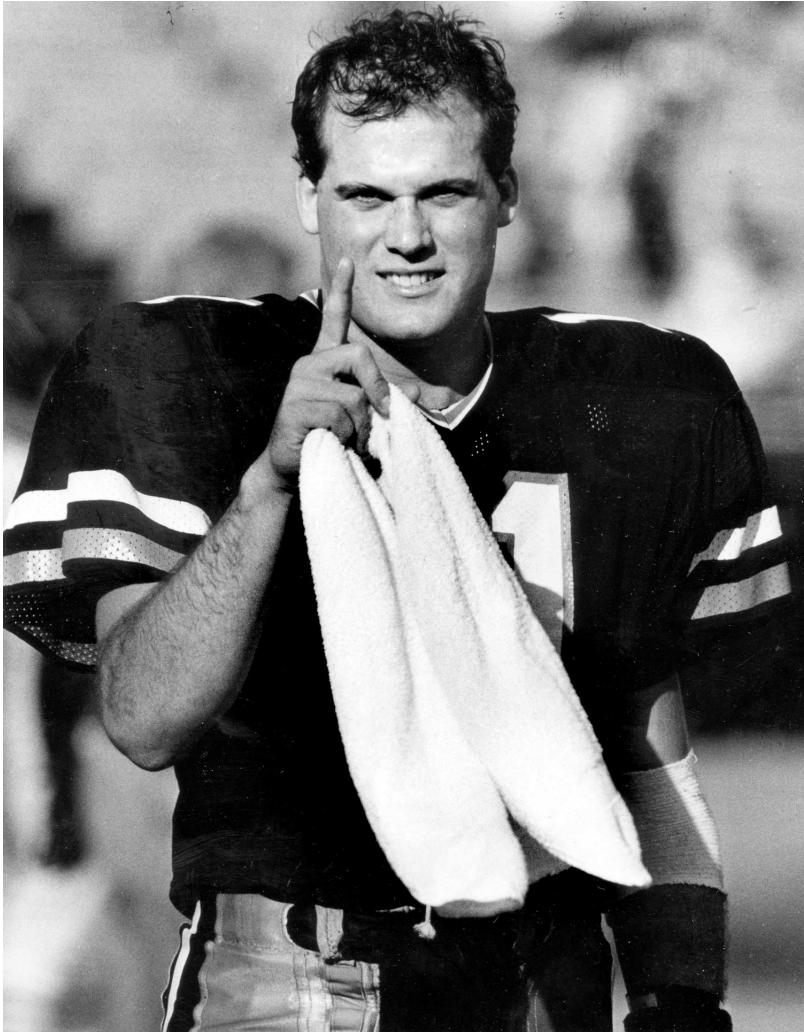
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On a damp Saturday evening in Manhattan, in a cigar bar on East 63rd Street, John Dewberry, who is among the most powerful real estate developers in the South, begins to weep for the second time in roughly 24 hours. The first time, the previous night, was during a performance of *Hamilton*, which he attended with his fiancée, Jaimie Brown. At 29, she is Dewberry's junior by 25 years; they met in a skybox at a football game at Georgia Tech, where Dewberry starred at quarterback in the

1980s. Brown is now sitting across from him, nodding sympathetically. "That's why Jesus died on the cross!" Dewberry says, tears sliding onto his cheeks, which are tanned from a recent bonefishing trip to the Bahamas. "That's why Martin Luther King Jr. died! That's why Abraham Lincoln died! For the truth!"

Dewberry's late father, Gary, was among other things a Baptist minister, and Dewberry has a churchman's instinct for narrative. He favors parables, similes, and metaphors, many of them based on American history and family lore. The tale he's weeping over now is a childhood episode involving snowballs, plonking a police cruiser, and sticking around to fess up to the deed. Like certain preachers and some criminal lawyers, Dewberry, who was born in Virginia, can be swept away by his own oratory, which he delivers in down-home Southern style: "Georgia" equals "Geo-juh." His tendency to self-mythologize is best read

as a way to make sure he's not misunderstood.



Dewberry starred at quarterback for Georgia Tech in the '80s.

Photographer: W.A. Bridges/Atlanta Journal-Constitution/AP Photo

His company, [Dewberry Capital](#), is headquartered in Atlanta, where he's a polarizing figure—the subject of conjecture, reverence, and criticism. In a culture that prizes lineage and pedigree, Dewberry is euphemized in the local business press as a “maverick.” His father, a high school graduate, managed corporate food services when he wasn't ministering, and in his own career, Dewberry has eschewed the institutional investors that power virtually all major Atlanta development. Instead, he's risked his own capital, amassing a fortune he estimates at \$700 million. But even though Dewberry owns more than 25 acres of Atlanta and has developed a string of conspicuously successful projects across the South, it's what he hasn't done with his holdings that arouses the most fascination.

Dewberry is the largest private owner of undeveloped land on Peachtree Street, a storied thoroughfare that Atlantans tout as their Fifth Avenue and Champs-Élysées. One particular parcel, a 4-acre block across from the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, is arguably the most valuable piece of developable land in the South. It's currently occupied by a parking lot, some unglamorous low-rise buildings, and a small park. Dewberry says he has his reasons for sitting on the lot, and he'll sermonize about them if asked, but to outsiders he is a Dixie paradox: a developer who won't develop.

Peachtree Street represents the spine of Atlanta's business district, joining prosperous, residential Buckhead to more corporate and touristy Downtown. Dewberry's land lies mostly in between, in Midtown, occupying the center of a city that has matured from a regional capital to an international economic

hub. Since 1950, metro-area Atlanta has grown from 670,000 residents to about 6 million—from the country's 23rd-largest metro area to its ninth. In the past four years, at least 17 major corporations—including [Mercedes-Benz](#), [Porsche](#), [NCR](#), [General Electric](#), and [Honeywell International](#)—have located national, regional, or divisional headquarters there, investing hundreds of millions of dollars in construction. Today, only New York and Houston have higher concentrations of Fortune 500 headquarters.

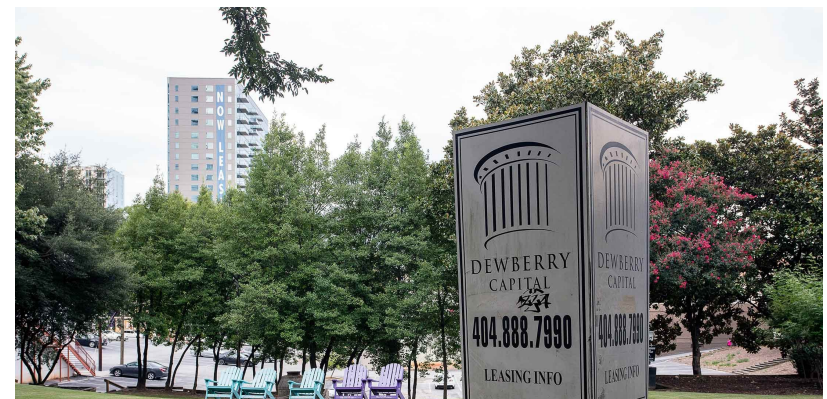
For almost 20 years, Dewberry has described a tantalizing plan for Midtown that would remake Atlanta's skyline and create a promenade akin to Chicago's Magnificent Mile. When he first raised the idea, Midtown didn't have much cachet. But other developers have since signed on and gotten to work. According to one recent analysis, 45 projects are currently planned or under construction. None

of the cranes foresting Midtown, however, operate on land that Dewberry owns. Since he started buying property in the area, he has erected only two buildings, the last one in 2007. The paltry output suggests parallels with other projects known chiefly for baroque procrastination: New York's Second Avenue subway, Guns N' Roses' *Chinese Democracy*.

Among rival builders, real estate hobbyists, and local stakeholders, displeasure about Dewberry's inactivity is widespread. "It's only natural for people to look at sites that are seemingly dormant and be anxious to see them contribute to the urban experience," says Kevin Green, the chief executive officer of the Midtown Alliance, a nonprofit coalition of business and community leaders. Some say Dewberry may have missed his best chance to realize his vision in the years after the financial crisis. "He should have made his move in that 2010 to 2011 time frame," says Kent Smith, a

friend and former partner. Yet Dewberry shows no immediate interest in breaking ground or selling to a rival.

Over the years, he says, he's fielded offers from the [Trump Organization](#), Ross Perot Jr., the [Related Companies LP](#), and others—all of them rebuffed. "Not many people could withstand hearing what he's heard," says John Holder, the CEO of the Southern developer Holder Properties. Josh Green, the editor of the development-obsessed website [Curbed Atlanta](#), adds, "In terms of how he could potentially change Atlanta, it would be absolutely huge. But instead, he's just this ghost."





A Dewberry Capital property on Peachtree Street across from the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta.

Photographer: Mohammad Javad Jahangir

With wealth, Dewberry has acquired the hobbies of a gentleman farmer. In Kentucky, he's invested in breeding racehorses. One Friday in February he spends the morning quail hunting in southern Georgia before flying on his private jet to Charleston, S.C., where he keeps a townhouse that dates to 1770. The structure, which Dewberry spent three years restoring, evinces luxe rusticity. To hone such details as historically accurate grout, he employed almost three dozen artisans, including coppersmiths, stone workers, furniture makers, and iron craftsmen. An unsigned Gilbert Stuart portrait of George

Washington presides over the dining room, and upstairs, a cypress-paneled library contains early editions of Whitman, Poe, and Twain. "I bought that off a Yank," he says, pointing out a Revolutionary-era flag over the mantle.

In the evening, Dewberry walks to a party at a home as opulently Southern as his own, with a guest list to match: local *bons vivants*; Rebecca Wesson Darwin, a co-founder of *Garden & Gun* magazine; and Bill Murray, inconspicuous as a Ghostbuster in bright red pants. Dewberry, who is square-jawed and green-eyed, with a conservative crop of light brown hair, settles into discussion with Jeff Corwin, an Animal Planet host. Later, beneath palm trees in the yard, he tells a small group about his first big real estate play, a Charleston-area shopping center he purchased at 25, in the late 1980s, after saving about \$40,000 from stints in the [Canadian](#)

[Football League](#) and finance.

Dewberry secured a regional grocery chain as an anchor tenant, and the property thrived. He quickly acquired additional Southern retail centers. As the recession of the early 1990s set in, he used unfavorable conditions to his advantage. More established competitors were largely in retreat, scrambling to balance their books. Dewberry had unblemished credit, winning preferential treatment from bankers otherwise short on worthy loan applicants. In Florida he bought a mall and dismembered it to create an open-air shopping center more attuned to the zeitgeist. In Virginia, he bought another one, razing it for future development.

These projects were lucrative but didn't suit Dewberry's ambition to become a tasteful, renowned developer of city-defining projects. "It's hard to build a beautiful shopping center," he says. By the end of the decade, Dewberry had parlayed his early investments into

Midtown Atlanta land buys. Again, his timing was good. Back then, rival developers were largely focused on other neighborhoods. Dewberry saw Midtown's potential: the even street grid and historic buildings, the proximity to stately Piedmont Park. He finished his first major Atlanta building, One Peachtree Pointe, in 1999, and set about renegotiating his loans, drawing cash from existing developments in anticipation of the next down cycle, which duly arrived in the early 2000s. In 2007, right before the financial crisis, he reprised the strategy, using the influx of liquidity to acquire land. Perhaps his greatest coup was his 2010 purchase of the Campanile Building, the former BellSouth headquarters, for \$36 million—about \$62 million less than what its previous owner paid—over a host of other bidders, including [Tishman Speyer Properties](#).

But while this and other deals made him the owner of a significant chunk of Midtown

Atlanta, Dewberry hasn't done much with the properties. They sat, largely dormant, through the financial crisis, the recovery, and the years since. They sit there still.

The day after the party in Charleston, Dewberry and Brown drive to a small park, on a spit of land stretching into a saltwater cove, and disembark for a stroll. Dewberry is in a reflective mood. "My main concern with a project," he says, "is that when I'm gone, we've improved the built environment. After a while, a building belongs to a place." He says he worries more about the effect of his work through generations than about its near-term reception. Dewberry often brings up artists who went unappreciated in life: Vincent van Gogh, Herman Melville. As he walks, he says, "Maybe I'm in as big of a hurry as I've ever been."

Dewberry is open about his 2008 diagnosis of prostate cancer. It infiltrated his bones and

lymph nodes. Doctors told him that if treatment failed, he would die in less than three years. But Dewberry has now been cancer-free since 2014. He takes injections that stimulate white blood cell production, and he's sworn off speculative construction projects, which he regards as cancer-causing stressors. Also, for idiosyncratic reasons: socks. On a raw winter evening, he'll lift the cuffs of his jeans to show off bare ankles.

Almost everyone in Dewberry's orbit highlights his preoccupation with legacy. Of the long lag times in his projects, Charles Rea, his former director of operations, says: "That speaks to John's unwillingness to compromise when it comes to his vision. He's not going to put his name on anything that's not superior, in his point of view." Steve Cesinger, a friend of Dewberry's, worked as a top executive at Dewberry Capital from 2002 to 2010. "He used to talk about Dupont Circle, Rockefeller

Center,” he says. “He wants his projects to stack up against the best.”

But desire for timeless perfection can be hobbling. The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* reported in 2008 that Dewberry planned to introduce a chain of 10 boutique hotels across the country over the course of the next decade. He’s since disavowed that timeline and so far has opened only one: the Dewberry, which debuted in July 2016 in a former federal building in Charleston. “It took him almost eight years to renovate it,” says Christopher LoPilato, a veteran hospitality executive who worked closely under Dewberry for most of the 2000s. “That’s very unusual. Most people in that industry [turn around a property] in one and a half to two years.”

Dewberry found some vindication when his hotel garnered glowing reviews. *Forbes* dubbed it one of the “25 Coolest in the World,” and *Condé Nast Traveler* and the *New York*

*Times* offered praise, too. In April the Charleston Historic Foundation honored him with a preservation award given to “those citizens whose work embodies the spirit of achievement and high expectations.”



The Charleston, S.C., hotel has received glowing reviews.

Source: The Dewberry

Dewberry can resemble a type less familiar to the world of real estate than to the arts: the obsessive, defiantly slowgoing auteur. That his canvas consists of spaces he owns but which



belong in a civic sense to the public complicates matters. Dewberry's next luxury hotel is scheduled to open in Charlottesville, Va., but it, too, has been wracked by delays. He acquired the site in 2012, after another developer quit midconstruction; today, it remains dominated by an unsightly skeletal structure, which has occasionally rained down dislodged debris. About two years ago, someone spray-painted a message on its side: "We are fed up." In February, Ivan Rekosh, the co-owner of a neighborhood restaurant, complained to a local reporter, "We were really excited to have a hotel come across the street. ... It's kind of turned into a void of space." It's likely that the hotel will not open until 2020.

"You have to understand that [Dewberry is] very narcissistic," LoPilato says. "The problem with John is that his ego gets in the way of the numbers."

Through the windows of his office at the Midtown Alliance, Kevin Green can look down on a Peachtree site that Dewberry's office once described as having potential "greater than that of the Empire State Building": the 4-acre block across from the Atlanta Fed. "[It's] our Main and Main," Green says. "When he does develop it, it's going to be significant."

Historically one of Atlanta's ritzier neighborhoods, Midtown became neglected after World War II, marred by parking lots and dormant storefronts. The neighborhood's marginalization reflected postwar prejudices in Atlanta real estate, when prodigious construction was dedicated to the suburbs, and an outgoing tide of white citizens. "In the '60s, '70s, and '80s, the priority was to move people and cars rapidly through Midtown, not to Midtown," Green says. Organizers of the 1996 Olympics declined to showcase the area. "Visitors were counseled not to come here

after dark. It was a place to roll the windows up and keep driving.”

To remedy that, in the late 1990s, the Midtown Alliance started a planning initiative called Blueprint Midtown. Dewberry was among the first developers to join, helping to craft proposals for new housing, office space, and improvements to transportation and public safety. For Atlanta to become a world-class city, he saw, much of its postwar infrastructure—especially disruptive roadways laid to prioritize suburban commuters—would have to be mitigated.

“John is among the big thinkers who’s talking about ‘How do we knit [the city] back together?’” Green says. “He’s always got a map rolled out on the table, or a blank piece of paper, and he starts drawing: ‘This street could connect to this street; there could be a roundabout right there.’”

Now in its third iteration, Blueprint Midtown has


produced seismic changes: the largest rezoning in Atlanta history, more than \$4.5 billion in private investment, 6.2 million square feet of office space, and upwards of 1,300 hotel rooms. Fifteen linear miles of streetscaping have been completed since 2000, providing verdant backdrops for tourists, students, and office workers as they ignore Atlanta gridlock to lunch outdoors in corporate courtyards and sidewalk cafes, and at haute-humble food trucks and bright, public patio tables. Among them are signs staked in earth undisturbed by bulldozers, bearing a contact number for leasing at Dewberry Capital.

Dewberry’s office is at One Peachtree Pointe, in northern Midtown, a section he’s attempted to rebrand “Uptown.” It’s largely empty, an expanse of unoccupied cubicles. A taxidermied game bird stands in a terrarium. From a conference room, Dewberry retrieves a poster board showing an overhead view of

Peachtree Street, with his properties outlined in green. Speech bubbles indicate his intentions: “Uptown Heights High Rise Residential”; “Midtown Square Mixed Use”; “Ansley Luxury Hotel/Condominium/Retail.” The poster is years old, and Dewberry hastens to clarify that he’s been working on related tasks, including engaging architects and engineers to add details to his master plan, and meeting with city officials to lobby for better rail service and promote walkability. He attends assiduously to minutiae. At his office, he’s just been reviewing a daily email enumerating hiccups at the Dewberry; a typical report might note that a guest failed to receive a spoon with room service. Ridr Knowlton, a minority partner in Dewberry Capital from 2007 to 2014 and a friend, says Dewberry’s punctiliousness is tied to his personal investment in each site. “Most big properties in Atlanta are institutionally owned,” Knowlton

says. “That’s an important differentiator. John has a personal tie with his real estate, which sometimes is hard for people to understand.”

Indeed, Dewberry’s obsession can be frightening. David Dorman, a friend and former [AT&T Inc.](#) CEO, likens Dewberry’s leadership style to “standing in front of the troops before the jungle, with a bayonet between his teeth.” Some of Dewberry’s former employees echo the sentiment, but in less sympathetic terms, describing Dewberry as volatile. For months, they say, he might be world-conquering in his ambition. Then, for days, weeks, or more, his mood will darken. One former assistant says co-workers alerted one another to their boss’s day-to-day disposition with a quiet red light-green light code. Dewberry’s friend Cesinger once told the *Journal-Constitution*: “John is two people. He is the most charming man you will ever meet. And he is the biggest son of a bitch you will ever meet.”





Dewberry stands in front of the Atlanta building where Dewberry Capital's office is located on Feb. 21, 2002.

Photograph: Levette Bagwell/Atlanta Journal-Constitution/AP Photo

Dewberry runs meetings on “Lombardi time,” a system favored by the legendary NFL coach, in which being less than 15 minutes early is late. Failure to abide—as well as stocking the wrong salsa, asking the same question twice, neglecting a ringing phone, or other infractions—can loose avalanches of invective.

Susannah York, another former assistant, recalls that to avoid Dewberry's ire, she once retrieved an already mailed package from a FedEx box, using an umbrella and a human ladder, after he demanded to re-edit the proposal inside.

Dewberry acknowledges his surly side—“the big bad wolf,” as he puts it—though he prefers to characterize himself as an underappreciated dispenser of tough love. The claim has some merit. Many former employees describe emerging from Dewberry Capital grittier and more competent. But they emerge at a dizzying rate—turnover is a problem. “If he has a weakness, I'd say it'd be the continuity in management of his company,” says another friend, Ronald Terwilliger, former CEO of [Trammell Crow Residential](#), one of the country's most prolific developers. “If something happened to John, I don't know that it would continue.”

In 2007, Dewberry tried to fix the problem, giving five people minority partnerships. But the arrangement dissolved. Dewberry attributes the breakup to imperfect personnel, whereas some of the former partners suggest he was unwilling to relinquish enough control to make things workable. In recent months, Dewberry decided to try again. He's taken on two new minority partners, former executives at Tishman Speyer and [Post Properties Inc.](#), and is optimistic that this time will be better. "If I were to pass and there were still blocks on Peachtree that we had not developed," he says, "I would hope that we'd built a strong enough team to carry it forth." He hopes, too, that having partners will free him to devote more energy to hotels.

Dewberry allows that he has no immediate plans to build on his most-watched Atlanta property on Peachtree between 10th and 11th streets, nor even to break ground Uptown. He

says he's waiting for Midtown to get busier, with foot traffic sufficient to support a project exceptional enough to meet his standards. In the meantime, he says, he's pleased that rival developers are proceeding with their own plans, which make his land more valuable. "You can compete with me, but it's gonna be at an inferior level," he says, setting up a metaphor involving the avenues of midtown Manhattan. "You're gonna be on Lex. I'm gonna be on Fifth."

Where other developers might compromise, Dewberry will not. A large tenant, for example, might want to pay \$30 per square foot, get one year free, and put its name on the building. If Dewberry believes the space merits a \$34 rate, six months of incentive, and no naming rights, that will be his final offer—no negotiation. He leaves property dormant rather than relent. Tenant departures are common. In 2014 two nightclubs occupying a Dewberry

building on Peachtree closed, following rent-related disputes; the spaces remain vacant. Under Dewberry, the Campanile Building, one of Atlanta's most desirable addresses, has also had periods of substantial emptiness.

Recently, a profane rant Dewberry recorded on the voicemail of a contractor has circulated merrily among Atlanta real estate professionals. When discussing his abrasiveness, he attributes it to the gap between his own expectations and others'. "It can make me a difficult person when other people are not on the same page," he says. Dewberry's forcefulness can seem especially pronounced among genteel Southerners, but he sees it as a strength. "People say, 'Dewberry, you ain't nothin' but a Yankee with a Southern accent!'" he adds, with a measure of pride.

Still, none of the major corporations that have moved to Atlanta in recent years have

contracted with Dewberry. And amid the current boom, the obviously desirable location of his undeveloped land has begun to make its very availability seem suspicious.

"The dragon creates all that," says Knowlton, referring to Dewberry's temperament and the material success it has produced. "You wonder, without the dragon, would he have accomplished everything he's accomplished? But that intensity and abruptness—it's something that at times has held him back."



Midtown Atlanta.

Photograph: Aerial Innovations of Georgia

At his namesake hotel, Dewberry gives a handful of friends a private tour of an as-yet-unveiled area. Afterward, he leads the group to the Living Room, a ground-floor space decorated in high-1960s style, which transitions at night from quiet parlor to sultry lounge. Dewberry and Brown stand away from the group by a highball table. (The two married in July.) She recommends that he drink water; he orders whiskey. The room is packed and high-spirited, but Dewberry seems agitated, skipping from one subject to another. Earlier that evening, looking like a hunted man, Scott Dawson, the hotel's general manager, had reflected that he'd never seen his boss satisfied.

To the left of the Living Room bar hangs a photo of Gary Dewberry, John's father, young, dark-haired and virile-looking, handling a pouch of tobacco. Gary died of lung cancer, in

2011, and the pouch now reads as a kind of memento mori. "You know," Dewberry says, his eyes welling with tears, "my father never asked how long he had to live. Because I think my father, like me, didn't really believe he was ever gonna die."