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The Best Neighborhoods in America: Southeast

Wed, May 27, 2009

[Travel](#), [Uncategorized](#)



Equip yourself for a paddle down Asheville's French Broad at Second Gear on Haywood Road. Photo credit: Peter Frank Edwards

The Eccentric Throwback

WEST ASHEVILLE/ ASHEVILLE, NC

There are some residents of Asheville who aren't just wary of suburban sprawl and unchecked development; they're downright pathological about it. And for this very vocal slice of the population, the downtown revival, via a slick new Grove Arcade and pedestrian mall, was a worrying step forward. So they fled to West Asheville, set up a perimeter, and dug in. Brandon Mise, owner of custom letterpress [Blue Barnhouse](#), pointedly refuses to recommend his favorite hiking trails to nonlocals, and no one seems all that ashamed of the vandals who did nearly a million dollars' worth of damage to an under-construction Wal-Mart back in 2004.

With a population of slightly more than 70,000, growth in this city cradled by the Blue Ridge Mountains is hardly careening out of control, and it still retains the rough edges and cool factor it's known for, but downtown's reinvention cost it some character. After being priced out of the hundred-year-old homes encircling downtown in the 1990s, a few pioneering young professionals decided to cross the French Broad River and take this formerly run-down part of town from dangerous to desirable. And they had a unique vision: Even after nearly two decades of growth, West Asheville is still basically what downtown Asheville was like a decade ago, when it had four good restaurants instead of 12, and old-school drugstores and paint-chipped storefronts sat alongside clothing boutiques. Keeping it funky was a priority for a population young enough to not yet care about saving for retirement.

Just like downtown itself, there are side streets of attractive bungalows with deep front porches, and a single commercial strip, Haywood Road, where all the basics are within walking or cycling distance. Spots that would be considered unique and progressive in most cities of this size are a given in West Asheville, with its anchors being the Haywood Road Market health food co-op on the west end and the [Appalachia School of Holistic Herbalism](#) and its al fresco front-yard yoga studio on the east. Between the two, equip yourself for your first kayak lessons at Second Gear, where the French Broad stink is infused in the spray skirts. Or go for a tune-up at Pro Bikes, which caters to commuters as well as fat-tire freaks. (Asheville is your base of operations for camping in the Pisgah National Forest, whitewater weekends in Hot Springs or Bryson City, and outdoor music at the biannual [Lake Eden Arts Festival](#) just east in Black Mountain.) And even though this is the Bible Belt, most West Ashevilleans worship at the [West End Bakery](#) on Sunday mornings, before hitting the [Lucky Otter](#) for lunch.

No one expects to find everything he needs in West Asheville — the coffee shop is closed on weekends (no joke), and aside from funky-smelling thrift stores, forget shopping for clothes — but the locals have spoken: If convenience follows progress, they're having none of it.

- Britta Waller

Median Home Price: \$131, 810

Cost of Living Compared to Rest of U.S.: 15% lower

Sunny Days Per Year: 212

12-Hour Test Drive: The Triangle's Quiet Corner

WATTS-HILLANDALE/ DURHAM, NC

Chapel Hill gets more press, and Raleigh has more heft, but Durham is where sweet tea sidles up to espresso. 8 am: Stroll down Ninth, the strip serving Duke University, and stop at [Elmo's Diner](#). It's great for gossip and a heaping plate of biscuits. 11 am: Clear your arteries with hoops in Oval Park, and note the park bulletin board's for-sale-by-owner houses. Plenty of early-20th-century bungalows change hands this way because of the locals' DIY ways. 6 pm: Head downtown for a Bulls game. Since Bull Durham the team has gone Triple A and gotten a swish stadium.

- Timothy Gray

Median Home Price: \$161,710
Cost of Living Compared to Rest of U.S.: 2% lower
Sunny Days Per Year: 217

Inner City Mash-Up, Revived

OLD FOURTH WARD/ ATLANTA, GA

Think downtown Atlanta is tall, sleek, and shiny? Not where I live. The Old Fourth Ward, right next to downtown, is none of those, and history is why. Ever since the '96 Olympics brought throngs back to the city center, the old "intown" neighborhoods filled in with condo towers, and 90-year-old bungalows were remodeled and sold for twice the price. The Old Fourth Ward, on the other hand, is a neighborhood whose identity, people, and architecture are too jumbled for it to ever become trendy.

During segregation, it was both industrial and residential. Martin Luther King Jr. grew up and preached here, and families have occupied the same shotgun houses for generations. But there's also industry here — a commercial laundry, a welding shop, a heavy equipment yard — which gives it a look of mild clutter and commotion. There's even a southern food spot with a Japanese sensibility.

And well after the last of the dirt and funk is cleaned up, if it ever is, we'll still have our edge. If the industry gets pushed out, the huge variety of housing types and sizes means there will always be different kinds of households. There may not be much new paint, but there's plenty of promising energy.

-Jonathan Lerner

Median Home Price: \$223,530
Cost of Living Compared to Rest of U.S.: 1% lower
Sunny Days Per Year: 217

FIVE MORE NEIGHBORHOODS

Little Rock, AR

Arkansas's capital has a practiced charm and an easy embrace of new ideas. Historic Stiff Station is diverse, filled with cheap Craftsman-style bungalows, and is a walk or bike away from unique local cuisine (from whole hog to haute).

New Orleans, LA

The winding waterway where picnickers lounge on grassy banks and kayakers paddle their way up to Lake Pontchartrain creates a pastoral backdrop for Bayou St. John's bungalows. It's all within shouting distance of NOLA's top art museum, a huge city park, and the barbecue shrimp po'boy at [Liuzza's By the Track](#).

Nashville, TN

For a century the Gulch was just a barren railroad corridor, then redevelopment brought it back from the dead. It also created the first LEED Neighborhood Development certification in the South — all while preserving some history. Don't miss the [Station Inn](#), the mother church of bluegrass, now flanked by new condos and sushi bars.

Charleston, SC

Left-leaning Park Circle, in the north, has long flown under the radar in the state, and while development tends to change a place, its recent housing boom has left its liberalism intact. Sure, there are lots of new residents, but they seem to have the same unique, character-driven, fun-loving attitudes as the pioneers.

Charlottesville, VA

UVA lends this mountain town its cultural cachet — but that doesn't mean you want to live next to frat row. Safely tucked away from campus hoopla, eclectic Belmont boasts its own diverse dining hub and fast access to biking and kayaking in the Blue Ridge Mountains.

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This post was written by:

[MJ](#) - who has written 7 posts on [Men's Journal](#).

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16 Comments For This Post

1. *Ashevegas* Says:

[May 27th, 2009 at 10:23 pm](#)

I would love to know where they found a house in West Asheville for 132,000. More like 200 to get in the door. W. Asheville is nice, but it's more hype than fact for locals.

[\[Reply\]](#)



Avillebornandraised Reply:

[May 27th, 2009 at 10:28 pm](#)

I agree. I've lived in Asheville all my life, and the more West Asheville grows, the more expensive it becomes. I love that they are doing the whole eco-friendly housing, but when it costs 500,000, who can afford it other than the ultra wealthy who took over downtown?

[\[Reply\]](#)



Asheville Realtor Reply:

[May 28th, 2009 at 7:55 am](#)

The average price in 2009 so far for a two-bedroom home within walking distance of Haywood Road, which is the main commercial street through West Asheville, is around \$185,000. The \$132,000 figure is absurdly wrong.

[\[Reply\]](#)

