



**MOVING ON
UP:** Buckley
left Columbia
because the
university
didn't share
his vision.

THE PIED PIPER OF DENSITY

MICHAEL BUCKLEY is bringing the national conversation about urban development to, of all places, Arlington.

BY JOSEPH GUINTO // PORTRAIT BY ELIZABETH LAVIN

ON THE DINNER TABLE, A MAP OF THE NATION'S CAPITAL. To the west, a water glass. That's the U.S. Capitol. To the east, a bread plate. That's RFK Stadium. To the south, a knife. It represents the site of both a prison and an old hospital. Irony! // Now, streets. Michael Buckley, the mapmaker, drags his finger along the tablecloth, connecting the glass to the bread plate, the Capitol to RFK. Just under the bread plate—or RFK, depending—he drags along the cloth again, back to the water glass. The two “streets” form a triangle. The knife is at their base. The glass at

their tip. “If you want to buy a house, you want to buy one right in there,” Buckley tells me, tapping the table near the triangle's base. “There are affordable houses in there. And there are real, substantial houses in there.”

Not literally, of course. Literally, what's “in there” is my appetizer of grilled, boneless quail from the pricey downtown Dallas restaurant Stephan Pyles. A lot of people who bought homes “in there” literally can't afford to pay \$27 for a plate of poultry right now. A lot of them have gone bust. The neighborhood is rife with foreclosures. And that's what brought Buckley to Dallas.

A pioneering professor in the field of real estate development, Buckley is so concerned about the real estate market's woes nationwide that he left Columbia University (top-tier, academically renowned Columbia) and joined the University of Texas at Arlington (a nice place) in part so he could do something about the mortgage meltdown. Think of it like an All-American forward for Syracuse deciding he'd like to play basketball for UTA because at UTA he can score 50 points a game. In this case, though, he wants to create a new kind of real estate development curriculum, one to teach students—architects, mostly—how to unshackle all types of properties from the bizzaro financing schemes that have brought development projects to a halt all over the country. Like in D.C., where that knife might, maybe, someday be redeveloped into a massive, multiuse complex, and like in Dallas, where construction cranes have been idled by a lack of loans.

“That's just the beginning,” Buckley says, grinning slyly. “What I really want to do here is the high-density stuff I've been doing at Columbia.” Stuff. Stuff like founding Columbia's Center for High Density Development,

an institute respected around the world. Stuff like encouraging developers and city planners to put more stuff in less space. High-rises. Low-rises. Mid-rises. Stores. Homes. Offices. All that. This is the stuff that Michael Buckley has been preaching for nearly two decades. And now the country's leading evangelist for stuffing more stuff together—a whip-smart, smartass sixtysomething native of Midland, Texas—is building his new church right here in Dallas. Right here where most of our stuff sprawls on and on. And on. Buckley is on a tour of sorts, mapping out his vision for developers and movers and shakers all over town. He'd probably even map it out for you. Just ask him to dinner.

THE SUBJECT OF COLLATERALIZED debt obligations is not very appetizing. So we are very much not talking about them over dinner at Stephan Pyles. We're not talking about balloon mortgage payments either. We are talking, instead, about pretty medieval churches. Which, it turns out, is really the same conversation.

“Cathedrals were made to reach high, because the people who built them used buttresses to support the walls,” Buckley says, forming his fingers into a triangle to represent Gothic arches. “Then the builders in-filled the middle of the walls with stained glass, such that when you walked inside you were surrounded by this ethereal environment. It was designed to make you religious, obviously. So cathedrals got thinner and taller until eventually one collapsed. That was Beauvais Cathedral that did that.”

If you don't know your medieval history, Beauvais Cathedral was built in the Gothic style in the 1200s, and a portion of its vaulted ceiling, which reached 157 feet, went bust

during construction. “This is what we've done with the financial markets,” Buckley says. “We've carried them out and extended them so far that they cannot rationally survive. We've used these complex financial techniques to prop up everything we can find.” Here, he's referring to banks that loaned money to just about anyone, anywhere, then bundled up those debts and resold them to someone else who may or may not have known what they were buying. “All these financing techniques have failed,” Buckley says. “And now, we have a crisis in real estate.”

This crisis has been occupying Buckley's attention for nearly two years. At Columbia, where he started teaching 19 years ago, running its master's in real estate development program for the last 11 of those years and founding the school's Center for High Density Development, his handpicked students were studying the impact of the credit crunch nearly from the moment it began. As banks began to fail, lending dried up, foreclosures spiked, and commercial property development stopped cold, Buckley decided he needed to teach his students, especially his architecture students, how to dig out of the mortgage mess. Or, that is, how to build their way out.

“With their design skills, architects can add elements to buildings that will increase their revenue,” Buckley says. “And if they can do that, they'll be allowed to do better architecture. Right now, architects are focused on costs. If they'd get focused on revenue, they'd be powerful contributors to the development world.” Put another way: that condo-retail-office-park-museum development you've been hearing about that's now stalled because

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the lenders have gone bankrupt? Maybe a new architect can get it going again. That is, if that architect understands how that project can make more money over the long term.

Revenue enhancements? What happened to flying buttresses and ethereal stained glass? Won't having architects focus on revenues produce projects that are as cold as the lamb chop they've just brought out of Pyles' kitchen? (Seriously, at these prices, it'd be nice if they served warm food.)

"You know, right now in architecture, you have Rem Koolhaas and all these types who talk about an architectural theory that sounds very, very sexy," Buckley says, poking at the chilly chop in front of him. "But in my opinion, we're in a different kind of crisis where we can't focus on that kind of stuff.

"And the problem is that, for the most part, we're teaching our new generation of architects how to do these silly things instead of focusing on high-rise, high-density stuff that can actually be built. What I like about the kids at UTA is that they know how to draw, they know how to build models, and they're learning about structure. They're not doing all the weird, warped, zombodial stuff that they're doing at Columbia. The students here know that this stuff can't be built. And, even if it can be built, it will only be built by the effete. Frank Gehry built a band shell in Chicago for Millennium Park. It was projected at \$10 million. It came in at \$60 million. A freaking band shell."

No surprise, then, that Buckley has split from his long-time association with Columbia's real estate development program. Buckley had pressed the school to turn its focus to practical projects, to partner with more real-world developers and steer the curriculum away from teaching hyperboloids and other complicated geometrical architectural styles. Columbia passed. "I had built the world's best development school at Columbia," Buckley says. "It was part academics and part industry professionals. But Columbia wanted to get more academic. They considered teaching this stuff about troubled assets to be like teaching current events."

Of course, Columbia is right. The mortgage crisis is a current event. And there are some signs that it has eased, maybe, a little in residential real estate. But Buckley believes the troubles in commercial building will be with us for years to come. "Commercial real estate is really in trouble," he says. "Valuations on commercial properties are dropping, and people are losing their equity positions.

Sooner or later, they won't be able to pay off their mortgages. This is a very big problem that's going to evolve over the next two to three years."

Perhaps that wasn't the kind of thing Columbia wanted to be talking about, much less teaching. But at UTA, which has the second-largest architecture student enrollment in the country (Texas A&M is No. 1), Buckley found a much more adaptable partner.

Don Gatzke, the dean of UTA's architecture school, says that when Buckley called him in the middle of last year, he jumped at the chance to design a new kind of real estate development program. "It didn't take a whole lot of discussion," Gatzke says. It also didn't take a whole lot to sell UTA's provost and graduate school on Buckley's approach—which calls for melding architecture and business school curriculum, teaching both about drafting boards and blueprints and about spreadsheets and green eyeshades. It took only four months for what is now called the Certificate Program in Asset Repositioning and Turnaround Strategies to go from concept to reality. That's lightning speed in an academic setting.

"It was a good marriage between our school of architecture and the economic and professional community here in Dallas-Fort Worth," Gatzke says. "Dallas is developer driven. So if we can work more in the development community, we have the potential for more influence, for a larger arena for the school to work in."

WE'RE TALKING ABOUT TAMALES. "Those are not wrapped like they would be, traditionally," Buckley says, pointing his fork in the direction of the tamale. "This is more like a tart. It's a deconstruction of the traditional." Tamales not being my area, I just nod in agreement.

Buckley knows his Tex-Mex because he grew up in Midland, back in an era when Roy Orbison would play on the local TV station at 4 in the afternoon and back when the future first lady, Laura Bush, was good friends with Buckley's brother. That history has made Buckley's return to Texas a bit less of a culture shock than was his first move east, for graduate school at MIT, after getting his undergraduate degree at Rice. "I got in through the back door at the school of architecture at Rice," Buckley says. "And I immediately went from the top 10th percentile of the class to the bottom. I was very close to flunking out all the time. I think beer had something to do with that. And chasing women. Then, when I went east for the first time, I realized again that I didn't know anything. My life has been a succession of 'I

thought I was smart and now I don't know anything.' I'm going through that right now."

Modesty! And, perhaps, truth. Together with Gatzke and an accommodating faculty at UTA, Buckley is embarking on something that hasn't been done before in real estate development education. He's building a multidisciplinary curriculum that can adapt as markets change. And, perhaps more important, he's hoping to build something tentatively called the Metropolitan Center for High Density Development.

Gatzke says that the center—a place for the best minds in real estate development to share ideas—will require public as well as private funding to get going. If it gets that—and Buckley's gregarious dinner companionship sure can't hurt fundraising—the center could open by spring 2011. If so, it would move the national conversation about density out of Manhattan, where it logically belongs, and into Dallas, where no one expects it.

But maybe they should. As Buckley sees it, Dallas can be the model for the high-density future of the world's cities. It's already headed in that direction, he figures. "Look back at Dallas just 15 years ago," Buckley says, pointing out Pyles' windows. "None of these buildings out here on Harwood were even built. This is what density does. This restaurant would not be here if it could not attract enough clientele. And all these customers don't live right around here, believe me. But this place needs a certain amount of density around it to attract people here. It has that now."

He goes on and on. Look at the impact the Arts District has had on downtown. Look at vacant tracts of land between downtown and UTA and beyond. What's to be done with them? Will they be densely developed? Will Stephan Pyles West open someday out there? Look at Garland. That city roared ahead with industrial development in the middle of the last century. Now what? Can Garland remake those low-slung warehouses into something denser, something that will draw Stephan Pyles East? "If you can turn that around, you're really doing something," Buckley says.

Sprawl City turned into a model for the world. The message is powerful. Religious, almost. And Buckley knows it. "To do high density right, you need to have a bully pulpit," he says. And he believes he can have that at UTA. "The message we have to deliver is one that's part messianic zeal and part raw opportunity."

Buckley pauses to lift his glass of Bordeaux. It's a theatrical pause. "But I'm not a savior," he says. "I just have the right story. And this is the right place to deliver it." **D**

Write to joeguinto@gmail.com.