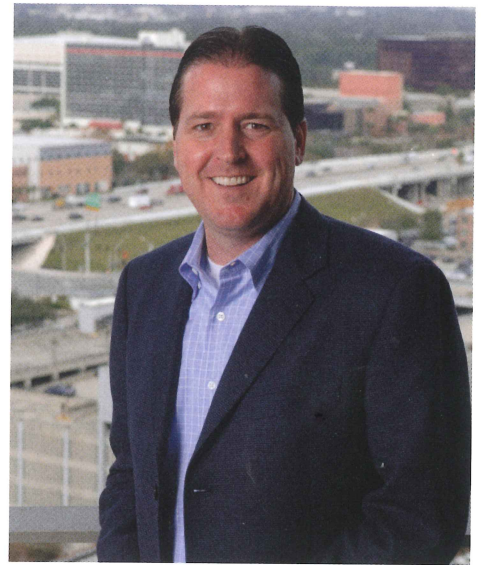




Alfresco cafes dot the landscape in North Quarter, Orlando's newest neighborhood



Comfort food, beer-brined fried chicken, from the North Quarter Tavern



Craig Ustler, Ustler Development, a leading force behind new urbanism communities

Craig Ustler

How this real estate mogul is shaping downtown's North Quarter into a hip I-want-to-live-there neighborhood

In 2007, Craig Ustler had a decision to make. As an owner, investor, developer and broker of various properties in downtown Orlando, he had built cache and plenty of clout. But this particular decision required him to think differently.

Ustler had Thornton Park to his credit, along with multi-family residential, office, restaurant, retail and mixed-use projects in places like Delaney Park and College Park, dating back to the mid-1990s. Clearly, he was in a strong enough position to call the shots when it came to a vision of what would become Orlando's newest urban neighborhood.

Such a move would be intuitive, too. Ustler is self-described as "particular, hands-on and a micromanager" who believes that "when you have a vision for something and you're passionately committed to that vision, part of what you're seeking is control."

This fateful time, though, instead of asserting himself in customary fashion, he chose to assimilate. In an industry frequently marked by turf-war competitions, he sought collaboration.

It worked.

On the edge of downtown, in a five-block area located along Orange Avenue, north of Colonial Drive and south of Lake Ivanhoe, North Quarter rises as an uncommon shared blueprint of three major players in

commercial real estate: Ustler Development, GDC Properties and the Pizzuti Companies.

More than \$200 million in real estate investments are planned over the next

"We like to say that we don't build projects; we build neighborhoods."

three years. Several pieces already are in place, including two hotels, three office buildings and restaurants.

The neighborhood is a model of what Ustler calls New Urbanism — a mix of traditional urban design principles and today's real estate realities that features walkable neighborhoods, interconnected places and welcoming outdoor spaces. (Think tree-lined sidewalks for dog walkers, Pilates studios for making new friends and outdoor cafes for a breath of fresh air and designer burgers paired with local craft beers.) To top it off, Ustler is adding his specialty: factoring people into the equation.

"We focus on the things that actually populate the spaces that we build. We think about the brand that we create ... what restaurants are there and what vibe is there, and what level of personality it has

and characteristics it takes on," he explains. "We like to say that we don't build projects; we build neighborhoods."

Ustler won't take center stage on the initial success of North Quarter, but he won't refuse kudos, either.

"I think it was everybody's collective idea, but I probably had more of a catalytic effect because I was the most known commodity in downtown Orlando," he says, adding that "it certainly was a team effort."

Similarly, Ustler acknowledges that this concept of neighborhood planning isn't unique across the country, but he believes he's helped to make it a reality here. "I do think I got Orlando to look at itself a little bit differently and as more of a world-class city," he says. "It's innovative. But I think it's more introducing something that we didn't know we could be."

Prospectively up next for Ustler is Creative Village, a 68-acre urban infill and transit-oriented development project at the former Amway Arena site.

A third-generation local, Ustler had been attracted to New York earlier in his career but couldn't figure out how to, as the saying goes, move the needle. The right place turned out to be home.

"I thought Orlando was a city on the rise and a city where I could make a difference," "Hopefully, that's what has happened."

—Michael Candelaria

Photos courtesy of Ustler Development