



## The Birmingham News

### Renaissance developer

Sunday, February 24, 2008

**KATHY KEMP**  
News staff writer

The view from Cathy Sloss Crenshaw's office, near the crest of Highland Avenue, shows where she's been and where she's going.

Just east of downtown, she can see the long-dormant smokestacks of Sloss Furnaces, which Crenshaw's great-great grandfather, Col. James Sloss, built in the 1880s when Birmingham was a fledgling city.

Northeast of downtown sits Park Place, an eye-catching community of town homes, apartments, lofts and office space built on the killing fields of the old Metropolitan Gardens housing project.

Crenshaw, president of Sloss Realty Co., spearheaded the project under a federal Hope VI master plan to build safe, affordable housing for mixed-income residents. It is now 100 percent occupied.

Toward the Lakeview District, she can see the once-decrepit Martin Biscuit building her company renovated and turned into a hub for design firms, antiques shops and restaurants. Saturdays there in warmer months, Crenshaw's Pepper Place Farmers Market brings together Alabama farmers and urbanites eager to buy their produce and enjoy the outdoor cafe and live music.

Those are but a few of the places Crenshaw has been. When she stands before the expansive plate glass windows in Sloss Realty's Ridge Park Place headquarters, she can see into the very heart of the city. And therein, too, her future lies.

She envisions more farmer's markets, more green space, a new city transportation system, a healthier environment, beautifully renovated urban neighborhoods and the eco-friendly preservation of Birmingham's old buildings.

Now, fresh from her year-long Loeb Fellowship at Harvard University, the 54-year-old developer seems ready and able to pursue those goals. And she has lots of new friends eager to help. Just a phone call away, for instance, are celebrated landscape architect Walter Hood of Oakland, Calif., and Rick Gustafson, a Portland, Ore., urban transportation expert.

They were among 15 innovative designers and planners who came to Birmingham earlier this month to take part in a Harvard-sponsored Bruner-Loeb Forum at Crenshaw's invitation.

The day-long workshop, in the Birmingham Museum of Art auditorium, drew an audience of 175 local designers and planners, plus neighborhood leaders and community activists. They seemed energized by the firestorm of ideas and the "let's work together" attitude that was the order of the day.

"Cathy really believes in finding the people who know the most about a subject and bringing them together to explore what can be done," says architect Cheryl Morgan, director of Auburn University's Urban Design Studio in Birmingham.

"Her being a Loeb Fellow helped us lure these people here. So now we have a deeper bench, to use a

sports analogy, of people who know us well and can help us find resources," Morgan says.

The day before the forum, Morgan rode along as Crenshaw took the Harvard-connected visitors on a tour of Birmingham and the Black Belt. Crenshaw introduced them to movers and shakers and to ordinary citizens.

"There are rare leaders who make it `we' and not `us versus them,'" Loeb Fellowship program curator James Stockard says. "Someone like that, who's always bringing people together to do what's best for a city, can get so much more accomplished. Cathy is that kind of leader."

The Loeb Fellowship, established at the Harvard University School of Design in 1970, is awarded to practicing designers, developers, planners and others who seek to improve cities and natural environments.

"It's quite competitive," Stockard says. Of more than 100 applicants from around the world, 10 to 12 are chosen as fellows. They spend a year in Cambridge, Mass., taking classes not just in Harvard's School of Design, but also in business, law, theology, or any other field they believe might enhance their skills and opportunities.

"I was like a kid in a candy store," Crenshaw says. "I took as many classes in as many schools as I could get to.

"I've always loved design, but had never had any training. I think I really understand now how critical it is to have high-quality design in a community. We want to push the bar up as high as we can get it, because that's what makes great cities."

Crenshaw's new connections already are drawing political interest. After hearing Gustafson, the urban transportation expert, talk about a streetcar system he developed in Portland, the mayor's office is considering sending a delegation to Oregon to learn more, Crenshaw says. And that's just for starters.

"Cathy has benefited greatly by participating as a Loeb Fellow and very clearly understands she is now charged with changing the world," Gustafson says.

That's quite a stretch for a former Beaux Arts Krewe presentee with old-money roots who never particularly wanted to be a developer. Her grandfather A. Page Sloss, who founded Sloss Real Estate in 1920, died in 1975, just as Crenshaw finished a bachelor's degree in music at Wofford College. "I came to work with my dad (A. Page "Pete" Sloss, now Sloss CEO) because he needed me at the time," Crenshaw says.

As she grew into her job, Crenshaw developed a "we can" attitude founded in cooperation. Instead of criticizing the ideas of others, she jumps into the brainstorm with them, feet first.

"Cathy is such an evangelist about Birmingham," says her friend Gail Andrews, director of the Birmingham Museum of Art. The two sometimes go on walks together in Forest Park, where Crenshaw lives. "We both love the outdoors, and Cathy is drawn to the beauty of the sky, the arc of a tree and how nice it is just to be in this world," Andrews says.

That consciousness clearly inspires Crenshaw's work as a developer. She's a big promoter of urban green space. Instead of tearing down old buildings and clearing off the land, she prefers to rehabilitate existing buildings and use them to create urban mini-districts, such as Lakeview.

The Sloss Realty headquarters is in what used to be the Rust Engineering building. When Sloss acquired it a decade ago, the building was boarded up and the property littered with garbage. Today it is the landmark Ridge Park Place building on a campus that includes the Red Cross.

Sloss Real Estate's \$3 million renovation of the century-old Young & Vann Building, a former warehouse on First Avenue North, drew a roster of related tenants, including the Regional Planning Commission of Greater Birmingham, Region 2020, the Auburn Design Studio and the Cultural Arts Alliance.

Crenshaw plans to continue to preserve buildings, including the city's existing housing stock. Today, though, her priorities also include working to develop an urban streetcar or other transportation system.

"We have to have a regional transportation system, absolutely," Crenshaw says. A successful city center circulator could help suburbanites become more comfortable with the idea of commuting via express bus from, say, Tarrant or even Walker and Shelby counties.

Byproducts would include reduced air pollution and healthier lifestyles as people began to appreciate the walkability of downtown, the University of Alabama at Birmingham area and city neighborhoods, Crenshaw says.

Crenshaw also has a new interest in green design and is in the process of retrofitting Sloss' existing properties with low-flow toilets, low-wattage lighting and possibly even solar water heaters. Maintenance people are now required to use less-toxic paints and cleaning materials.

Crenshaw's 82-year-old father remains a close confidante to his eldest daughter.

"The thing that's most interesting to me is that she has such a great love of this city," Sloss, whose office adjoins Crenshaw's, says. "I think money is rather secondary to her."

### **Haunted by 1963 bomb blast**

Thirty-odd years ago, Crenshaw, a classical pianist, seemed more likely to follow in the footsteps of her mother, Caroline, a Jacksonville native who was, briefly, a Metropolitan Opera soprano.

Caroline and Pete met in New York City. They married and raised their three girls in Mountain Brook. The younger two are Pilates instructor Carolyn Ratliff and Leigh Corra, who works for Southern Progress.

Crenshaw grew up across the street from the Birmingham Botanical Gardens, and also near the Birmingham Zoo.

"I remember hearing the lions roar," Crenshaw says.

Brought up also in downtown Birmingham's Cathedral Church of the Advent, she is forever haunted by the 1963 bombing of nearby 16th Street Baptist Church. "I heard the bomb go off," she says. "It's such a part of who I am, and who we are."

She seems embarrassed by her debutante background and claims to have been a watered-down hippie in college. She met her future husband, environmental consultant Larry Crenshaw, at Wofford. They have one son. Documentary filmmaker Arthur Sloss Crenshaw, 26, has done a film on Alabama folk artist Lonnie Holley and is at work now on another about a Tanzanian orphanage.

Over the years, in particular the 1990s, Cathy Crenshaw also grew into a community leader. She has served on more than a dozen boards, including the Alabama Jazz Hall of Fame, the Alabama School of Fine Arts and Sloss Furnaces, now a National Historic Landmark that attracts tourists from around the world and offers educational programs for all ages.

She remains on the boards of the Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham-Southern College, Lakeshore Foundation, Leadership Birmingham and the Alabama Moving Pictures Association.

### **Visiting scholar at Harvard**

Although her Harvard fellowship ended last fall, Crenshaw says she is just now settling back into her hometown. She stayed in Cambridge through fall and early winter as a Harvard Visiting Scholar, a position she will hold through the summer. "I feel like I can work from Birmingham now," she says.

That's music to the ears of her friends and associates, including Operation New Birmingham president Mike Calvert. "Cathy's enthusiasm is contagious," he says. Other developers with a vested interest in Birmingham have been following her lead in renovating old businesses and filling them with youth and culture, he points out.

That, coupled with the election of Mayor Larry Langford, who's already shown a drive toward change, could

lead to significant positive results, Calvert says. "Cathy's been working in this vineyard for a long time, and some of the seeds she's planted are about to come to fruition."

But she won't be watching them through her office window. Crenshaw plans to be in the middle of things, and she invites us all to join her.

E-mail: [kkemp@bhamnews.com](mailto:kkemp@bhamnews.com)

© 2008 The Birmingham News

© 2008 al.com All Rights Reserved.