

Atlanta and the Olympics: The Case for Comprehensive Planning

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In a matter of a few weeks, the City of Atlanta will host the 1996 Summer Olympic Games. This will be only the fourth time since the modern Olympiad movement was launched that the event has been held in an American city. St. Louis held the competition in 1904, and Los Angeles was host in 1932 and 1984.

Large-scale events such as the Olympics, world's fairs, and international exhibitions and festivals often have a lasting impact on a city. As such, they are of special interest to urban planners. For example, the Chicago World's Fair of 1893 significantly shaped the future of that city, as did gatherings in Seattle and St. Louis. On the other hand, Los Angeles has not been greatly affected by its two Olympic events.

Atlanta determined at the outset that it would use the event to prepare itself for the roles it seeks to play in the 21st century. In a July 1992 publication entitled *Atlanta's Olympic Development Program*, the city presented its program for preparing itself for the event to the meeting of the International Olympic Committee in Barcelona, spelling out the projects it would undertake set within a framework of its vision of a 21st century metropolis. Over the past four years, the city has endeavored to implement this program. Now, after years of feverish efforts, it is assured that when the Olympics end on August 4, Atlanta will be a significantly changed community. More importantly, the changes undertaken will direct the city to-

wards its chosen future. The way Atlanta set out to use the Olympics to shape its future provides a rare opportunity for examining how the techniques and practices of urban planning can be applied to a mature city to successfully achieve a long-term vision.

Recent Development Trends in Atlanta

To understand how Atlanta has used planning to direct its future requires some knowledge of Atlanta's recent development history as well as the nature and characteristics of the Olympic event itself. During the latter half of this century, Atlanta emerged as a nationally important urban region. Its population expanded rapidly during this period, growing from fewer than a million persons in 1950 to almost three times that size today. During the present decade, growth has accelerated. The Atlanta area has become the nation's fastest growing large region, adding over 165,000 jobs during 1994 and 1995.

As in most regions of the country, population growth in the Atlanta region during the 1970s and 1980s occurred almost exclusively in the suburbs. New housing and centers of commerce and industry—the familiar “edge cities”—sprawled outward. What distinguished Atlanta in this period, however, was the difference in growth rates between the city and the surrounding area. While the region added a population of one million persons over the 20 years, the City of Atlanta lost 80,000 of its residents, a decline of 16 percent. In no other large and rapidly growing region did the central city lose such a large proportion of its inhabitants. Whereas over 37 percent of the region's population lived in the city in 1950, less than 15 percent resided in the central city by 1990.

Perhaps more significant than the demographic shifts were the changes in the area's economy and

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social fabric. The loss of city residents was accompanied by a drain of investments, greatly weakening the city's economy, tax base, and ability to deal effectively with an aging infrastructure. All of this was also taking place during a period when federal funds for improvements and reinvestment in the physical and natural environment were diminishing. At the same time, the city was also left to house many of the region's disadvantaged residents. This type of abandonment occurred in many urban places and is certainly not unique to Atlanta.

In the early 1980s, however, soon after the nation's economy moved out of recession, new patterns of settlement began to emerge in Atlanta. A significant level of investment returned to the city in office buildings, retail establishments, hotels, and multi-family housing. By the end of the 1980s, the city's losses in population and private investment had bottomed out. And while most of growth in the region during the 1990s occurred in the suburbs, the demand for new housing, employment, and places of lodging within the city, virtually absent for three decades, has become increasingly strong. Since 1990, a net total of more than 6,000 new units of housing have been added, and the city's population has grown by over 10,000 persons. This resurgence has enabled Atlanta to take greater advantage of the Olympics than would otherwise have been possible.

The Olympics As Catalyst

It is difficult to grasp the significance of the Olympics without understanding its scale and character. The Atlanta Olympics, involving 198 countries, will be the largest gathering of nations in history. Between two and three million people will visit the city during the event, and another two to three billion people, over a third of the global population, will watch the competition via television and satellite.

The impact on Atlanta—both city and region—will be especially great. With a population of under three million residents, the urban area is the smallest to host an Olympics since the Helsinki and Melbourne Olympics in the 1950s. New competitions, new nations, and expanded interest through the spread of

communication technologies have all added to the size and focus of the event. For example, the 15,000 athletes and coaches registered for the Atlanta Olympics is one and a half times more than the number which arrived only 12 years ago in Los Angeles, a region of 12.5 million people at the time. Furthermore, while Los Angeles spread its competition sites across much of southern California, two-thirds of the Atlanta events will be concentrated in its downtown area, vastly increasing the impact on the central city.

Shaping the Olympic Development Program

The city's Olympic Development Program, prepared by its Department of Planning and Development, grew out of an articulated image of the future city. Three planning questions were raised and debated which helped to define this image: First, what roles does the city expect to play in the next several decades? Second, what kind of city must be developed in order for it to play these roles? And, finally, how can the Olympics be used as a catalyst to achieve such a city?

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Future Roles of the City

Two roles were deemed essential for the city to play during the early decades of the next century. One was reestablishing its former position as the central place within what has now become a booming, yet fragmented, region. The second was building a larger capacity which would enable the city to operate more effectively within a network of international cities.

Fundamental changes have occurred to Atlanta, its region, and its people during the decades following World War II. Routine public decisions concerning growth during the early years were largely made by a single government. The delivery of services was directed by the tenured heads of a small number of public agencies with clearly defined missions and authority. Information flowed from a few confined sources. The major decisions, as described by Floyd Hunter in *Community Power Structure*, flowed through a hierarchy dominated by a handful of civic leaders. This way of making decisions has now been drastically altered. Centralized authority and decision-

making, both public and private, has long vanished. The region has exploded, like a local Big Bang, with pieces scattered across 18 counties. The once vibrant center now monopolizes only a few functions, like banking, government, and conventions. The region is now composed of over 60 local governments.

Furthermore, the loss of tight control over development and service delivery has occurred at a time when such control is most required. Of the major problems facing the city, few can be solved by the city alone. Issues concerning transportation, land development, the environment, water supply, economic development, solid waste, and public safety call for a unified and coordinated city and regional approach. Yet there are few mechanisms for addressing these issues across jurisdictional boundaries. If the Atlanta region is to confront its problems related to growth and service delivery, a structure will have to be imposed through which these matters can be addressed. Thus, the first role which the city seeks to play in the next century is that of reestablishing itself as the central place within a fragmented regional settlement.

The second role is played out in an international arena. Over the past decade, Atlanta has built strong linkages to other large urban centers throughout the world. It has done this through the globalization of many Atlanta-based private corporations and public institutions such as Delta Airlines, CNN, Coca Cola, Holiday Inn International, the Carter Center, CARE, United Parcel Service, the Center for Disease Control, and the Georgia Institute of Technology. The city has recognized that its future is tied not only to its ability to unite a fragmented region, but also to an emerging relationship with other urban places across the globe.

Characteristics of the Future City

If the first question is what roles Atlanta will play in the 21st Century, the second is how to design the city to play these roles. Over the past decade, Atlanta has moved to put in place many of the plans, programs and regulations which will shape its next phase of development. These are intended to advance three major characteristics of the future city which have dominated Atlanta's vision for itself:

1. A high-quality physical environment,
2. Greater reliance on alternative modes of transportation, and

3. An improved quality of life for its citizens.

The city's *Comprehensive Development Plan* describes the first characteristic of the future city as follows:

Our actions should lead us towards the creation of a more humane, safe and enjoyable place to live, work and raise our children. People have come to Atlanta to be with one another, to share their lives, products and experiences. The future city requires that we promote places for human association and activity, strive for variety and choice in our daily lives, and seek to obtain beauty and humanity.

In order to create a more humane and enjoyable place, Atlanta has now begun to:

- Increase the abundance, quality and accessibility of its parks, plazas and open spaces,
- Provide more opportunities for pedestrian movements,
- Enhance the visual quality and beauty of the city,
- Secure the city's irreplaceable historic heritage and cultural life,
- Protect its natural and man-made environments, and
- Provide for a safer environment.

A few examples of actions already underway by the city and others include the creation of a new city-wide Parks, Open Space and Greenway Plan under which new open spaces have been created and older facilities improved. In addition, the city is also adopting a Public Arts Master Plan, strong tree and sign ordinances, an increased number of historic districts, and stream clean-up programs.

The second characteristic of the future city is stated as follows:

We need to establish integrated, multi-modal transportation systems which would move people and goods in a more efficient and environmentally sensitive manner. Greater balance is required in the development of a variety of transportation modes. We should also seek out increased acces-

sibility to jobs, services and places of leisure. All systems and all modes need to be built so as to have minimal effect on the quality of residential life and on the natural environment.

In order to produce transportation systems which are more integrated, balanced and sensitive to neighborhoods and environmental concerns, Atlanta is seeking to:

- Increase the efficiency of existing streets and arterials,
- Place greater emphasis on the movement of people by rail and alternative modes of travel,
- Adhere more faithfully to a comprehensive and continuous transportation planning process, and
- Provide for safer and more efficient operations at Hartsfield Atlanta International Airport.

Several examples of efforts in this area include: the design of a new \$130 million downtown passenger terminal, construction of a \$100 million advanced traffic signalization program, expansion of the rapid rail transit system, design of a 12-corridor commuter rail network, expansion of airport runways and the construction of the world's largest international terminal, completion of a 112-mile Greenway Trail system, and the adoption of a 300 mile on-street commuter bike system.

The third characteristic of the future city is stated as follows:

There is a need to build a City which would raise the quality and productivity of the lives of all citizens. The City's neighborhoods are among our most valued and essential ingredients to our quality of life. As such, they must be a closely protected asset. At the same time, far too many of Atlanta's residents are poor, live unproductive lives, and are not participating in the recent surge of growth and prosperity.

As such, the city has set its course on assuring that Atlanta is livable for all of its citizens, seeking to:

- Protect, maintain, and enhance the quality of its neighborhoods,

- Support greater neighborhood cohesion and empowerment, and
- Promote greater economic and human development and investment in all sections of the city.

Many actions have been undertaken by the city and others to achieve these objectives, including adopting a new subdivision ordinance, launching the programs under Atlanta's designation as an Empowerment Zone city, administering a program to remove more than 1,000 substandard housing units per year, revitalizing several older neighborhoods commercial districts, and linking unemployed persons in poverty-stricken neighborhoods with new jobs being created.

Role of the Olympics

The third and final question is how can the Olympics be used as a catalyst to create such a city. The answer to this question shaped the city's Olympic Development Program. Mindful of its 21st century vision, the capital investments now under construction and programs underway have focused on those projects which would not only serve the city during the Games, but also move it towards this vision. Activities launched in preparation for the Olympics have fallen into one or more of three groups.

1. Actions taken to accommodate the visitors to the Games. A wide range of activities and improvements will be required to accommodate the millions of people who will visit Atlanta to participate in and enjoy the Summer Games. These projects, which will be permanent additions to the city, are mostly of four types: parks, plazas, and open space; pedestrian systems; traffic management and alternative travel modes; and public safety.
2. Actions undertaken to improve the inner-city neighborhoods affected by the Olympics. The city initially identified nine neighborhoods which will be directly affected by activities associated with the Olympic Games. (The Corporation for Olympic Development in Atlanta has since expanded the list to 15 neighborhoods.) Four of these neighborhoods would be especially impacted and were given the highest priority. The programmed improvements were largely physical, starting with comprehensive neighborhood plans drawn up by residents and planners, then

identifying improvements to parks, lighting, streets and sidewalks, drainage, and so on. In some cases social programs were contemplated, such as an after school program, employment and training for work on Olympic construction projects, as well as public safety initiatives.

3. Actions which will create a lasting legacy for the city. Finally, the Olympic event will leave a number of long-needed improvements to serve as a memory of the event. Some of the projects are physical landmarks, such as the parks and sports complexes, while others, such as the anti-poverty programs and public art, are less corporeal. In total, they are intended to leave a lasting imprint from the Olympics on the future city.

Implementing the Program

The Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games (ACOG), a public-private corporation, is in charge of providing for the competition itself, together with the programs and activities required to arrange for the events and to handle the logistics. This involves the housing, transportation, feeding, entertainment, security, ticketing, communication, signage, and marketing for athletes and their families, members of each national and international sports federation, fifteen thousand members of the media, plus thousands of dignitaries, employees and support personnel. For the most part, they will be utilizing existing facilities. Nevertheless, a number of new facilities have had to be constructed, including an 85,000-seat stadium, aquatics center, tennis facility, basketball arena, velodrome, equestrian facilities, and venues for shooting, archery, and rowing, as well as housing for 10,000 athletes. Since automobiles will largely be banned from the downtown area, ACOG has had to borrow 1,400 buses, assemble remote parking spaces for 125,000 vehicles, and arrange for bus transfer to the rail system.

A second set of preparations has gone on to ready the city itself to welcome its visitors. This has principally been in the hands of the city agencies and another organization, the Corporation for Olympic Development in Atlanta (CODA), a public entity specially created by the city to lead the activities related to non-competition infrastructure construction, neighborhood revitalization efforts, and public art initiatives. The City of Atlanta established CODA in January of 1993. Functioning as an independent public/private arm of the city with a public mandate, its mis-

sion is to implement the Olympic Development Program. The Mayor shares the chair of the 24-member Board with a prominent business leader, and the members represent a broad range of business, civic, and non-profit groups. CODA's 29-person staff is led by four senior personnel with considerable public and private planning, administrative, design, engineering, and redevelopment experience.

As stated in its originating documents, the primary mission of CODA is to prepare the city for the 1996 Summer Olympic Games, to use this unique opportunity to enhance the quality of life for Atlanta's citizens, and to leave a legacy for future generations. Its tasks are to assist the city's Department of Planning and Development to finalize a master development program and then to undertake plans, set priorities and schedules, and secure financing for implementing the program. While the availability of funds, feasibility of the projects, and political demands have been constantly changing, the basic elements of the plan are now under construction.

CODA's record of success in meeting its mission is impressive. As it enters the final stages of the implementation of its efforts, CODA is completing virtually all of the initial Olympic Development Program projects. Over the past two years, a few of the original projects have been dropped or postponed, but CODA has also expanded the original scope of the program. Additionally, it has coordinated a large number of Olympic-related projects which are being undertaken by others.

In its efforts to accommodate the visitors, for example, CODA has embarked on an ambitious Public Spaces Program for parks, corridors and public enhancements. The purpose of this effort is to:

create and enhance quality permanent public spaces within the 2.5 kilometer Olympic Ring, the downtown and adjacent areas in which most of the competition will be held. Intended to leave a legacy which is civic in nature, the Public Space Program seeks to create spaces to enjoy, to commemorate the city's unique heritage, and to bind together the citizens of a city which values its public environment, in spaces which are usable, safe, maintainable and memorable.

The public space initiatives have been adopted to:

- increase the capacity, security and quality of the pedestrian environment in the center city,

- engage a wider discourse on the public realm through the creation of new public space types and uses,
- leverage investment in the public infrastructure so as to encourage economic redevelopment in adjacent private areas, and
- serve as symbols of the city's collective identity, both past and present, making its heroes and stories visible.

The content of the public space program consists of:

- enhancing 11 pedestrian corridors,
- creating and improving nine parks, plazas and civic spaces, including four art parks and a bike path,
- installing 22 public art, historic monuments and project enhancements;
- undertaking 14 inner-city neighborhood street improvements, and
- constructing several special projects, including a signage system, street furniture, and an electric bus shuttle system to link cultural sites.

CODA's other major initiative, designed to improve the Olympic neighborhoods, expanded the list of inner-city neighborhoods affected by the Olympics to 15 such communities. It was clear from the outset that rebuilding the inner-city neighborhoods was to be a long-term, almost permanent, undertaking. Furthermore, the efforts of CODA were largely confined to physical improvements, which are only one piece of the effort to rebuild the distressed communities. In fact, most of the social services needed in these places are not under the authority of the city at all, but rather are the mission of County, State or non-profit organizations.

CODA, therefore, has taken two approaches. It has launched a redevelopment process in the 15 neighborhoods, using the powers and procedures remaining from the days of urban renewal. Second, it un-

dertook to make physical improvements in most of the 15 neighborhoods, with high-priority given to communities especially affected by activities associated with the Olympics. The city's planning staff drafted master plans for the communities with citizen participation. CODA then produced the required redevelopment plans and coordinated infrastructure projects being carried out by others to make the physical improvements.

Funding for CODA's efforts has been a major struggle throughout its life. Only limited amounts of money was committed from public sources at any one level. In time, funds emerged from a variety of sources.

The City of Atlanta passed a \$149 million bond referendum in June of 1994. Primarily aimed at the replacement and restoration of storm utility lines in streets and parks, major portions of the improvements have been Olympic-related. The city has also used monies from its General Fund, previous bond lettings, and its impact fee program to resurface neighborhood streets and improve its parks.

Large local corporations have made important contributions, especially in rehabilitating and constructing housing in downtown Atlanta.

Federal funds have helped to underwrite major Olympic projects, including grants from the Department of Transportation's enhancements and congestion mitigation and other Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) funds, the National Park Service to expand and improve the Martin Luther King, Jr. Historic Site, and the Environmental Protection Agency, which underwrote the construction of an important Greenway Trail. In addition,

the State of Georgia has upgraded the traffic signals, rebuilt two downtown bridges and landscaped the expressways primarily using Federal transportation dollars.

Non-profit organizations have made sizable financial contributions. The Woodruff Foundation has provided major funding for the new Centennial Olympic Park, Piedmont Park and the Greenway Trails. They have also underwritten numerous planning and construction projects of the city and CODA. The PATH Foundation has led the efforts to fund and construct major portions of the Greenway Trails. Trees Atlanta, with major financial assistance from Woodruff and other foundations and corporations, has planted more than 10,000 trees.

Finally, important contributions have been made by large local corporations, especially in rehabilitating and constructing housing in downtown Atlanta and in a number of low-income neighborhoods. More than 1,000 housing units, for example, are being placed in the downtown, an area which has attracted few new residential units over the past several decades.

Conditions Underpinning Atlanta's Successful Efforts

Atlanta is following the course set by the City of Chicago a century ago when it recovered from the destruction of the 1871 fire to become the international city it is today. During the final decades of the 19th century, Chicago put essential infrastructure in place. Public and private investments tied the city to the national rail system. The city constructed an inner-city rail network, making adjacent farmlands available to absorb new growth. Chicago also cleared out its waterfront, constructed boulevards and produced great parks. All of this was crowned by the Columbian Exposition of 1893, which exposed Chicago to world scrutiny and admiration.

The City of Atlanta, together with other public agencies, has improved and expanded the park system, rebuilt several downtown bridges, replaced major portions of the aging infrastructure, extended the rapid transit system, and enhanced the quality of streets, sidewalks, and public plazas. The state and city have designed a new \$130 million downtown passenger terminal for interstate and commuting trains and buses. Most importantly, the city has begun to seriously address the declined state of several inner-city neighborhoods. Now, with its recent Empowerment Zone designation, the city will be able to better attend to the social and employment needs of its residents.

Reviewing the past five years, four major conditions appear to have contributed significantly to Atlanta's ability to use the Olympics to shape its future.

Reversal of Development Trends

The timing was fortunate. Shifting regional development patterns has brought additional population and substantial investments to a city experiencing withdrawal and abandonment. This reversal of trends has played a major role in the city's ability to orchestrate the changes sought. To the business commu-

nity, such changes produced the first evidence in many years of a strengthening marketplace. This raised the confidence of the lending and bond-rating communities and encouraged them to provide financial support for public and private projects which suddenly seemed far less risky.

Presence of Strong Political, Business and Managerial Leadership

Atlanta has a history of exceptionally enlightened community leadership. A succession of strong mayors—Hartsfield, Allen, Massell, and Jackson—together with a impressive group of civic and corporate leaders led Atlanta through a wartime and post-war era characterized by both rapid growth and stagnation. When the Olympics period arrived, both Mayor Maynard Jackson and Mayor Bill Campbell grasped the opportunities which accompany such an occasion and used the attendant energies and resources to raise the quality of the lives of the citizens. They and other leaders were able to articulate the meaning of the moment and bind the community to their vision, turning the opportunity of sponsoring a 19-day festival into a catalyst for building a future city.

Finally, the city was able to assemble a small cadre of talented and experienced planners, designers, administrators, and managers, who possessed good political and public decision skills and were willing to devote years of their lives and energies to this event and to the city. This nucleus of able public officials became the critical team which has pushed the program to its successful conclusion.

Early Agreement on the Olympic Development Program

It is problematic enough to launch a program designed to rebuild and redirect the development of a large American city towards a defined future. The challenge is enhanced given the scale of the project and the limited resources and time. The essential objective was to build a common agenda in a diverse and shifting environment. The announcement that Atlanta was to host the 1996 Summer Olympics Games was made in September of 1990. By July, 1992, Mayor Jackson presented the Olympic Development Program to the International Olympic Committee. Five months after this presentation, CODA, the implementing agency, was created. And now, three years later, almost a hundred projects are nearing completion, not including a similar number of other govern-

mental, non-profit and private projects. Buying into and staying attached to a quickly articulated vision has been central to the success of this effort.

The city was quickly able to find agreement on its vision of the future in part because of its well-established on-going planning process. Each year, the city produces a new Comprehensive Development Plan (CDP) for one-, five- and fifteen-year periods. The plan receives significant input from the public through hearings, television programs, and review by the 24 neighborhood planning units. It is then formally adopted by ordinance of the City Council. Thereafter, no rezoning can be approved which is inconsistent with the CDP, and no capital improvements can be undertaken which are not contained in the CDP. Once the Olympic vision was produced and the Olympic Development Program completed, they too became part of the CDP and were adopted by the governing bodies of the city.

The Character of Atlanta

Although cities in general have much in common and each may resemble others in one respect or another, the character of each city is unique. Atlanta's uniqueness has contributed fundamentally to what was sought and what will now be achieved. Like many places, Atlanta has a great sense of pride in itself. It is brash, if not boastful. It relishes hyperbole. It wants to be noticed and recognized. As such, it has always reached out to a larger dream, and because it deeply believes in its own self-worth, it has been willing to take chances and build for the future. Why else would such a small place proceed to build the world's second largest airport, a modern rail transit system of enormous capacity, and one of the country's largest convention centers? Looking to the future, the city created a water supply during the 1950s which would service its growth well into the 21st Century. This same determination to become, in the words of Henry Grady, the leading newspaper editor in the 1880s, "a great and beautiful city" also fueled the city's readiness to recognize and accommodate the region's and nation's social and racial changes during the 1960's, changes for which Atlanta provided much of the leadership.

The Olympics effort, therefore, is consistent with Atlanta's character. Atlanta has chosen to take on an event of global dimensions not simply to celebrate a brief moment, but to use the moment as a step to what it seeks to become: a place of importance among the great cities of the world in the 21st Century.

Conclusion

Comprehensive planning for mature cities remains a valid and valuable option for urban planners advising on ways to obtain a defined future. For such planning to work, however, at least three conditions must be present. First, for large-scale efforts like Atlanta's, such planning requires an early agreement on the goals and the embracing of a common agenda of what will be required to reach these goals. Second, the process must express a broad vision at one level and detailed implementation strategies and sources of funding at another. And third, affected citizens must buy into the process at the outset, and the political leadership must provide strong enduring commitments. The presence of these conditions in Atlanta has given the city the opportunity to prepare itself for its future and to use the Olympics to move the city towards that future. **CP**

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