Panacea or Fools’ Gold?  
Reinventing Downtown Atlanta 
After the Olympics  

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Atlanta has long been a city that placed more emphasis on boosting its image than on confronting its day-to-day concerns. Beginning in the early 1980s with then-Mayor Andrew Young’s efforts to transform Atlanta into an international city, Atlantans have worked to construct the necessary improvements and facilities to achieve Young’s goal. These efforts culminated with their hosting of the Olympics in 1996.

There is no doubt that, as a result of the Olympics, the city of Atlanta is now known worldwide. However, now that the Olympics are over, the “boosters” who were so instrumental in cultivating an international image of Atlanta have begun to acknowledge that developing that image was only the first step in the process of Atlanta’s emergence as a worldwide hub. As Georgia State University President Carl Patton observed, “To be a truly international city, Atlanta cannot roll up its sidewalks at sundown.” With concerns like Patton’s in mind, the most pressing planning issue facing post-Olympic Atlanta has become the transformation of its downtown from an office and hotel district into a 24-hour environment in which people reside, work, and play.

The centerpiece of this transformation into a 24-hour community is Centennial Olympic Park. Although Centennial Olympic Park was envisioned for this purpose during the pre-Olympic period, few permanent developments were realized at that time. Today, the only permanent Olympic-inspired projects downtown are either small loft and/or retail developments in existing buildings or larger apartment developments further away from the Park. Although these projects are demonstrating signs of generating around-the-clock activity downtown, the area surrounding the Park is still largely undeveloped.

Since the end of the Olympics, there have been a variety of proposals for developments directly adjacent to Centennial Park. The projects under consideration include at least two large-scale housing/retail developments, an expansive business park, a new hotel to serve the Georgia World Congress Center, and an entertainment district adjacent to a new sports arena. Of these, only two projects are under way at this time: the construction of the sports arena, which began in the summer of 1997, and the Doubletree Hotel, which broke ground in early 1998. A considerable amount of pressure is
Fig. 1

Central Atlanta

Legend

- Empowerment Zone
- Streets
- Railroads
- Interstates
- MARTA Tracks
- MARTA Stations
- Points of Interest

Source: Base map from U.S. Census TIGER files
being placed on the new arena to transform the area since it will be the first large, permanent, post-Olympic project to be realized in the immediate environs of Centennial Olympic Park.

This article is an evaluation of the prospects for Atlanta’s new downtown sports arena in light of the city’s goals for around-the-clock life in the Centennial Olympic Park area. Following an examination of historic development patterns around the arena site, this article assesses the potential for success of the arena project in light of the issues that confront downtown development. It specifically discusses four areas of concern for urban planners: development economics, politics, equity, and urban design. The ultimate goal of the analysis is to determine whether or not this project can fulfill the promise of its image.

The Laws of Stadium Economics

Ostensibly, there are two reasons for building a new sports arena in downtown Atlanta: first, to prevent the Atlanta Hawks basketball team from moving to the suburbs or to another city; second, to provide an attractive home for Atlanta’s National Hockey League expansion franchise, the Thrashers. Although the Omni Coliseum served adequately as the home of the Hawks, and was the home of the Knights and Flames hockey teams, it could never generate the same revenue that a newer facility would. In order for professional indoor sports to continue to thrive in Atlanta, the teams needed a venue that obeyed the laws of “stadium economics.”

Stadium economics is the primary force behind the nationwide spurt of new sports facilities construction in recent years. The guiding principle of stadium economics is this: if a stadium or arena is not making enough money, it should be replaced by a modern facility that contains the attributes necessary to generate more revenue (Forsyth 1995:13C). The cornerstone attribute of the new, “economically correct” sports facility is the corporate skybox, which commands a sizable annual fee from its tenant. In addition, food and beverage services at sports facilities have evolved from fast-food operations to full-service food kiosks with diverse and high-quality menus. Similarly, T-shirt stands have been transformed into retail stores complete with full lines of clothing and memorabilia. Nearly all new stadia and arenas constructed in the 1990s contain these features.

With such profit-inducing amenities in mind, cities like Cleveland, St. Louis, and Washington, D.C., have replaced their outdated (and in these three cases, suburban) arenas with new, state-of-the-art facilities. Even Miami is constructing a new arena, since the existing Miami Arena (which was built in the mid-1980s) lacks many amenities now considered standard in new facilities.

It is generally accepted that sports arenas and stadia do not usually have significant effects on local economies, since they create only modest increases in jobs and tax revenue. As a result, a city looking to build a new facility must consider whether or not it is worthwhile to spend money on an investment that will likely generate only a small direct return. Economist Mark Rosentraub suggests that it is a choice that must be made by each city as a reflection of its values (26). Atlanta has already demonstrated its willingness to spend money in the short term in order to improve the city’s stock of sports facilities, although these are expected to be entirely financed in the long term through gate revenues and the rental car tax.

Clearly, Atlantans believe, in the words of economist Roger Noll, that “Our psychic investment in sports is disproportionate to its economic importance to a city” (Forsyth 1995:13C). Thus, in their efforts to maintain Atlanta’s status as an international center for sports, and, more important, to continue the flow of investment into the city’s professional sports industry, residents demonstrated their belief that their city needed to bow to the laws of
stadium economics and replace its 25-year-old arena.

Striking a Deal

When the Hawks first announced their desire to vacate the Omni in 1994, there was public speculation that instead of waiting for the City of Atlanta to build a new downtown facility, they would move to a site in the suburbs. In this debate, the city found itself at a disadvantage from the beginning, as the Hawks declared that they would be willing to construct a privately-financed arena in the suburbs, but they would only stay downtown only if their new home was publicly financed.

A downtown arena would come under the jurisdiction of the Atlanta-Fulton County Recreation Authority, which draws its tax base from both the city and county. Fulton County made it clear from the outset that it would not support the project if any additional burden was placed on its taxpayers. Thus, if the Hawks were to remain downtown, not only would they require public financing, they would need a deal which guaranteed no public debt to the taxpayers of Atlanta and Fulton County. In 1995, an agreement was reached among the Hawks, the city of Atlanta, Fulton County, and the Recreation Authority to construct a new downtown arena and a variety of surrounding public improvements. The plan called for the building to be financed with revenue from its events and for the public improvements to be financed with a three-percent increase in the rental car tax at Atlanta’s Hartsfield Airport.

The next issue was to pick a specific site for the new arena. Four different sites were mentioned, but only two were ever seriously considered: 1) the site of the existing Omni, which would be torn down; and 2) the “railroad gulch” between Techwood Drive and Forsyth Street, which separates the Omni/Georgia Dome/Georgia World Congress Center (GWCC) complex from Five Points and Underground Atlanta (see Figure 1).

These two sites were considered mostly due to the fact that Turner Broadcasting Systems, Inc., which owns both the Hawks and Thrashers, had a strong interest in building the new arena immediately adjacent to its offices in the CNN Center. However, Turner and Norfolk Southern Corp., the owner of the railroad gulch, failed to reach an agreement on the land price of the gulch. In November of 1996, Turner and the City of Atlanta agreed to build the new arena on the site of the Atlanta Adanta. The Omni was demolished in the summer of 1997, and the new arena will open on its former site in the fall of 1999.

Great Expectations

The new arena has generated a high level of excitement among downtown supporters. Their expectations have put tremendous pressure on the project to kick-start the process of turning the area surrounding Centennial Park from a blighted wasteland into a booming urban neighborhood. Unfortunately, there are a number of factors which suggest that the new stadium will not be able to achieve this purpose single-handedly. First among these is the fact that there already had been an arena downtown. The new arena will be slightly larger than the Omni, but it will still only draw crowds for the same events that previously occurred at the Omni. The arena itself will not significantly increase the amount of people downtown. In fact, fewer people are coming downtown during the construction period, especially since the Knights moved to Quebec City in 1996 and the Hawks currently play one-third of their games outside downtown at Georgia Tech (the remainder are at the Georgia Dome). This trend could derail the momentum of downtown activity that was generated by the Olympics.

Second, the arena is a one-shot project. Even though Turner, the city of Atlanta, and its designers conceive of the facility as an urban design project, not just a building project, it still
is a singular gesture which is not yet part of a larger design scheme for its environment. In order for the arena and its accompanying improvements to truly be successful, it will need to go beyond just drawing crowds indoors, and take the necessary steps to promote access to other downtown destinations.

A third factor poses the most difficult obstacle, and it is one that will require a high level of coordination among planners, politicians, urban designers, developers, and economic development interests. Land prices in downtown Atlanta have become quite inflated since the early 1990s, making most development very risky. Since the arena possesses the blessing of being partially financed by the rental car tax, its risk was mitigated. However, for any other developers, the barrier of land cost is a reality, and until it is lifted, very little will likely occur in the area.

If the city of Atlanta were willing to use the tools at its disposal, it would be possible to reconcile a portion of the difference between the land prices desired by developers and the prices commanded by land owners in the area. In fact, this section of the city is located within the target areas for three different economic development programs: 1) a Federal Empowerment Zone; 2) a state of Georgia Urban Enterprise Zone and; 3) a city of Atlanta tax-increment financing (TIF) district. As a result of the first two programs, the city is in the enviable position of being able to provide tax breaks for private developers. Additionally, the TIF program allows the city to exert a greater level of control over the development of the area, since it can direct development by constructing public improvements without incurring any further debt to its taxpayers. With this arsenal of incentives, the city should be able to expedite the process of developing the Centennial Olympic Park area. Unfortunately, the city has not yet demonstrated a commitment to taking advantage of these resources.

Reinventing the Badlands

Now that the Centennial Olympic Games have come and gone, Atlanta has shifted its efforts from planning a party for the whole world to making its downtown into a worthy centerpiece for the world’s new great city. As indicated earlier, these efforts begin and end with the desire to create a 24-hour city. In its quest to reinvent itself through the expansion of downtown housing, retail space, and nightlife, there was really only one direction downtown Atlanta could go: west. To the north is Midtown, which has already become, in the words of Charles Rutheiser, “a petrified forest of postmodern residential and office towers” (1996:125). To the east and south the concrete canyons of Interstates 75/85 and 20 restrict downtown’s expansion (see Figure 1). The only room for growth is to the west of downtown.

The west side of downtown has long been a downtrodden zone commonly known as “the Badlands.” Atlanta’s desire to rebuild this area is long-standing: a variety of ideas to remake it have been on the drawing boards of architects and developers for nearly 30 years. Even so, as the Olympics loomed on the horizon in the early 1990s, the Badlands remained. Its proximity to the Olympic venues at the Omni/Georgia Dome/GWCC complex and Georgia Tech made it imperative that something be done to improve the area by 1996. The result was Centennial Olympic Park.

Occupying 21 acres in the southwest corner of the Badlands, Centennial Olympic Park is the largest public open space in
downtown Atlanta. However, the Park is not quite as public as it may seem. Due to the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games’ (ACOG) mandate to use no tax money in its efforts, the park was financed by the GWCC Authority, a quasi-public organization that reports to the state of Georgia, rather than the city. As a result, the GWCC, not the city, controls the park. The GWCC has already expressed its desire to use the park for private convention-related activities. 

Although the merits of constructing an urban park from the ashes of a blighted, but not quite empty, area can be debated, this issue has passed. The challenge of making this grand new park a useful and active feature of downtown Atlanta still lies ahead. Even at this early stage, however, it is evident that the public interest in developing the areas adjacent to the Park is not receiving primary consideration. This is illustrated by the first development to follow in the arena’s footsteps.

Seemingly out of nowhere, developer Legacy Properties International submitted a proposal to the city of Atlanta in May 1997. This proposal seemed like the miracle that downtown Atlanta had been seeking: an $88 million hotel/office/retail/residential complex to be built on five acres adjacent to Centennial Olympic Park, directly across Marietta Street from the GWCC (see Figure 1). Legacy asked the city to designate its property as an Enterprise Zone, which would save the developer an estimated $2.5 million in property taxes over a 5-year period.

Downtown miracle or not, the designation of the site as an Enterprise Zone would have serious negative impacts on other aspects of the public interest. The project was slated to include a luxury hotel, upscale condominiums, and high-end retail shops—hardly uses one would expect to find in an Enterprise Zone. The only concession to the public interest made by Legacy was an amendment to the proposal, which required that 20% of housing units be “affordable.”

Furthermore, the waiving of property taxes for this project would be detrimental to the TIF program, since the success of TIFs depends on the generation of new tax revenue.

Even with all of these concerns on the table, the Atlanta City Council voted to approve Legacy’s request. This action demonstrated a remarkable short-sightedness about the uses and purposes of an Enterprise Zone. The council also exhibited a poor attitude toward the balance between development and equity. Fortunately, as often happens in Atlanta, development activity was controlled by private interests acting more responsibly than the city. This situation is outlined below.

**Let the Games Begin . . . Eventually**

To play any game, one needs a playing field, players, the proper equipment, and a set of rules. In downtown Atlanta, the game of “Reinventing The Badlands” is under way. The playing field is the area around Centennial Olympic Park. On the sidelines are a whole lineup of players armed with land, money, financing incentives, regulations, and, most of all, big plans. However, unlike the complex rules for the basketball and hockey games that will take place in the new arena, this game has but two rules to govern its play: create a 24-hour downtown and spare no expense to do it.
The role of the referee is being filled by Centennial Olympic Park Area, Inc. (COPA). COPA is an offspring of Central Atlanta Progress, Inc. (CAP), Atlanta's downtown business organization, which, as the preeminent representative of downtown boosters, has a strong interest in the park area. COPA is a non-profit organization that was created just before the Olympics in 1996 with the self-described purpose of "facilitating development" in the areas around Centennial Olympic Park. In late 1996, COPA blew the starting whistle on the development game and has kept a watchful eye for development activity on the west side of downtown. However, the dearth of post-Olympic building activity in COPA's domain is evidence that the players have been slow to take the field.

COPA does acknowledge that there are currently a number of major obstacles to development in its target area. High land prices and a skeptical real estate market represent imposing problems. Even so, COPA, like the downtown boosters it represents, remains confident because of the new sports arena. COPA President Ken Bleakly believes that now that land owners, investors, developers, and city officials have begun to see the dirt moving for the new arena, they will start taking the necessary steps to spur development around the arena and the park. In the meantime, COPA is trying to prepare the land around the park for the coming deluge of development. The question is, when will this deluge be coming?

Opening the Door

COPA believes it can help spur development by bridging the gap between land prices sought by landowners and revenues sought by developers. Currently, potential developers are not even amicable to projects with TIF incentives because they feel that land prices remain too high for development to be profitable. COPA has in mind another use of financial incentives to spur development. It wants to create a business park in the Badlands.

The northwest piece of COPA's study area contains a large stock of run-down and abandoned industrial, commercial, and residential structures, and is notorious for its active drug trade. It also contains Herndon Homes, a public housing project that was renovated as part of the city's efforts to improve its public housing before the Olympics. This area is important to COPA because it is in both an Empowerment Zone and an Enterprise Zone. As such, businesses that locate in this area would be eligible to receive the tax credits and other benefits of these two programs. COPA has identified this site as a potential business park that would employ and provide vocational training for residents of Herndon Homes as well as the adjacent communities of Vine City and English Avenue.

Development of the business park is crucial to the success of COPA's efforts to revitalize the area for four reasons:

- It would pump much-needed revenue into the TIF district.
- It would clean up an area adjacent to downtown Atlanta that is notorious for drug traffic.
- The developer of the park would be unlikely to back out of the project, since doing so would create problems with potential businesses and the surrounding residents. As a result, the city would incur less of a risk in issuing TIF bonds for infrastructure improvements for this project than it would for other projects.
- The surrounding low-income neighborhoods stand to benefit from the increased access to new jobs.

One measure of COPA's interest in the business park project is that it has expressed a willingness to develop the property itself if no
private developer is willing to do so. Since COPA possesses the resources of CAP and its member corporations, it could theoretically take this risk.

COPA, not the city of Atlanta, has taken the lead on downtown development. In fact, the only action the city has taken has been to extend Enterprise Zone benefits to a project that does not match the intended purpose of those benefits. While the city has done little to create a coherent vision for the area around Centennial Olympic Park, COPA has attempted to formulate a comprehensive strategy for developing this area. The elected officials of the city of Atlanta are turning their backs on the poor and disadvantaged among their constituency while COPA, a private organization, is making an effort to integrate job creation for Atlanta’s underclass into its development strategy.

An Island in the Urban Archipelago

Even if COPA does succeed in delivering investment dollars to downtown Atlanta, the urban design of the area will remain to be addressed. The following section explores the development history of the west side of downtown in order to give the reader a sense of the area’s urban context.

The growth of downtown Atlanta during the 1960s and 1970s centered around a variety of interiorized mixed-use complexes. Beginning with the first and largest, architect/developer John Portman’s Peachtree Center, downtown Atlanta absorbed a vast amount of programmed space contained in a disjointed network of mini-cities during that era. The second in line was the Omni complex, which was first conceived by developer Tom Cousins in the late 1960s. Due to the proposed location of the complex on the western fringes of downtown, Cousins’s grand vision was met with skepticism by lenders. To prove the viability of this area, Cousins built an enormous parking deck on the east side of Techwood Drive, between Marietta Street and the railroad gulch. This structure, simply called “The Decks,” proved very successful. With one profitable venture on the west side of downtown under his belt, Cousins was ready to forge ahead with the construction of his own island in Atlanta’s urban archipelago: Omni International Atlanta, now known as CNN Center.

Downtown boosters picked up on Cousins’s grand scheme for Omni International, quickly labeling the development “Atlanta’s Rockefeller Center.” From a standpoint of pure functionality, this assertion was accurate. Like Rockefeller Center, Omni International was a private development containing a dense concentration of office, retail, and entertainment space, including a central ice skating rink. However, the success of Rockefeller Center as a public gathering space has as much to do with its urban orientation as its actual function. Jane Jacobs notes:

Imagine [Rockefeller Center] without its extra north-south street, Rockefeller Plaza. If the center’s buildings were continuous along each of its side streets all the way from Fifth to Sixth Avenue, it would no longer be a center of use. It could not be. It would be a group of self-isolated streets pooling only at Fifth and Sixth Avenues. (1961:237)

In contrast to Rockefeller Center’s superb integration into the grid of Manhattan, Omni International was the penultimate expression of what Rem Koolhaas has termed “Bigness.” Koolhaas writes: “Bigness no longer needs the city; it competes with the city; it represents the city; or better still, it is the city” (1995:515). As a truly “Big” building, Omni International was, by design, its own city. It ended downtown Atlanta’s grid and defined its own territory, separate from the rest of the city.
In addition to eschewing the city grid, Omni International also shuns its fronting streets and sidewalks. This inward orientation speaks of the fact that Cousins delegated the development of the building to Alpert Investment Corp., a mall developer. Alpert thought of Omni International as a mall, with anchors at either end, which gave its architects little opportunity to address the exterior of the building. This predictably resulted in the building’s fortress-like appearance. While Omni International contains all of the elements of Rockefeller Center, its inward urban orientation precludes it from being like Rockefeller Center. However, given the obvious differences between the privatized interiors of downtown Atlanta and the very public streets and plazas of midtown Manhattan, perhaps the “Atlanta’s Rockefeller Center” label is accurate: it was the closest approximation Atlanta could achieve.

The History of an Heroic Failure

The Omni definitely was a creature of its time: an imposing, futuristic structure tucked beneath street level and surrounded by a concrete plaza. Since MARTA, Atlanta’s heavy-rail system, did not yet exist, nearly everyone attending events at the Omni drove. Access to parking was the prime objective of the building’s urban strategy.

The Omni Coliseum, which opened on October 14, 1972, was the first piece of the Omni International complex to be completed. Both professional sports teams who called the Omni home, the Hawks and the Flames, were partially owned by Tom Cousins, who clearly felt that building a sports arena was a key to realizing his urban vision. Omni International opened in 1976 to a great deal of hype. Although its premier attractions, including movie theaters, the ice skating rink, and The World of Sid and Marty Krofft indoor amusement park, generated interest, the excitement proved short-lived. The amusement park lasted through its first summer then went out of business once the children of Atlanta went back to school. The crowds drawn by the movie theater and skating rink tended to spend their money on those attractions and go home without patronizing the Omni’s shops and restaurants.

The failure of the retail and entertainment elements of Omni International was matched by high vacancy rates in its office spaces. The Omni was never able to attract a large anchor tenant, and during the down years of the real estate market in the late 1970s, Atlanta’s entire office market took a major hit.

The Omni remained dormant until 1987, when Turner Broadcasting System, Inc. acquired the building to house its Cable News Network (CNN) and renamed it CNN Center. Omni International was good for Turner because it had vast amounts of empty space left behind by the failed theme park, as well as acres of vacant office suites. Turner had also recently become majority owner of the Hawks, which made locating adjacent to the Omni Coliseum even more desirable for the company.

The 1980s also saw the construction of two more massive facilities adjacent to the Omni: the Georgia World Congress Center in 1985; and the Georgia Dome, which was begun in 1989 and opened in 1991 as the home of the Atlanta Falcons of the National Football League (see Figure 1). In the 1990s, the Olympics inspired the construction of a green plaza atop the GWCC/Dome parking deck, which

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**To cap off the Omni’s dismal first decade, the Flames packed up and moved to Calgary in 1979, leaving the arena empty for an additional 40 nights each year. By the end of the 1970s, it was clear that Omni International was an heroic failure.**
transformed the once moribund space into an attractive, well-lit park. Unfortunately, this plaza is still very isolated and lacks day-to-day activity. Even so, its presence affords the opportunity for the GWCC, the Dome, and the new arena to be better connected to one another and to the rest of downtown Atlanta.

After twenty-five years of construction and expansion, the Omni/Dome/GWCC mega-complex is firmly established as the anchor of the western edge of downtown Atlanta. It has been home to teams in three of the four major professional team sports. It has hosted countless concerts and conventions. It has even served as a venue for the Olympic Games. However, it is an interiorized complex, not an active part of downtown Atlanta.

Prescribing the Panacea

In order to fulfill the high hopes for downtown Atlanta generated by the Olympics, the arena that will replace the Omni Coliseum will need to reach beyond the boundaries of its complex to generate activity downtown. Given the arena’s central location and its substantial allocation for public improvements, the arena could easily strengthen its connections with both the other buildings in the complex and the rest of downtown.

In fact, the way in which the arena engages its surroundings will go a long way toward determining the influence of the project on downtown as a whole. In discussing how special activity generators like arenas can affect their surroundings, Kent Robertson proposes the following design objectives: to provide spillover benefits to local businesses; to stimulate new construction; and to revitalize a blighted area (1995:433). The proposed design objectives in this case are pedestrian paths and walkways. While these features can improve the area’s visual environment, the success of the arena depends more on what happens along and at the ends of these connectors.

Turner and the city of Atlanta assembled an all-star squad of architectural designers to create the new arena. The overall urban strategy and design of the building’s exterior is being prepared by Arquitectonica, a Miami firm noted for its “Miami Vice” aesthetic. The interior elements that are unique to sports facilities are the responsibility of Hellmuth, Obata, and Kassabaum (HOK). HOK’s Sport Facility Group has established itself as a world leader in sports design with its urban baseball palaces in Baltimore and Cleveland. The major public improvements around the new arena are being handled by Rosser International, a prominent Atlanta firm. The idea behind the assembly of this “dream team” is that the combination of Arquitectonica’s creativity, HOK’s expertise in sports facilities, and Rosser’s knowledge of downtown Atlanta will generate an exciting venue that engages its surroundings and becomes the sort of activity generator of which Robertson speaks.

Assembling the Pieces

The future of downtown lies before Atlanta like a box of building blocks dumped on the floor. Nowhere is this more evident than in the plan prepared for COPA by the Urban Land Institute (ULI). This plan matches the various proposed uses for the Centennial Olympic Park area with actual locations. It sites sports and entertainment (including the new arena) to the south of the Park, an expansion of the GWCC to the southwest, an entertainment/commercial district to the east, residential development to the north, and the business park to the northwest.

COPA clearly knows what it wants the elements of its project area to be, a fact that is evident from the bold lines drawn on its plan. However, a more striking feature of the plan is that the proscribed boundaries of each use are not contiguous. In fact, there is at least a one-block gap separating each programmed use in
the project area. As a result, the ULI plan reads less like an urban redevelopment strategy than a plan for suburban mixed-use development. Assuming that COPA is able to attract development in the short term, it faces a long-term challenge of making these islands of development into a unified urban neighborhood.

As difficult as it will be to start development in the isolated manner that the ULI has suggested, connecting these pieces will be an even greater challenge for reasons that return to the issues of development economics, equity, and urban design. From the development standpoint, the challenge centers on the fact that the Centennial Olympic Park area is not a greenfield site. Land acquisition will be an expensive and tricky proposition. Almost any project that could be built around the edges of the programmed areas of the plan would require the extra expense and hassle of demolishing or re-using existing buildings. On the plus side, by the time any project might be built outside the proposed boundaries, the city’s available TIF money supply should be sufficient to help developers overcome the costs of developing land that is not vacant.

The potential application of TIF money for this purpose again raises the issue of equity. As with the land that was acquired and cleared for the construction of Centennial Olympic Park, much of the property surrounding the park contains old, run-down structures. Although developers and COPA dismiss these blocks as blighted and underdeveloped, they are still in use. COPA has proposed redeveloping the entire landscape around the Herndon Homes public housing project as part of its business park, apparently forgetting that “blighted” does not necessarily mean “vacant.”

Kennedy Street, which forms the northern boundary of Herndon Homes, contains a collection of run-down commercial buildings that are in active use by the residents of public housing. COPA has proposed razing this entire block and replacing it with 70 housing units, which would replace a portion of Herndon Homes that was condemned in 1995 after the city discovered that the site was environmentally unsafe. While this transformation would undoubtedly make the street more aesthetically attractive to both residents and future tenants of the business park, it would remove the basic commercial services needed by residents of Herndon Homes. Clearly, while the business park would bring employment to low-income residents, it would also remove the area’s commercial services and further destroy what little is left of an active neighborhood.

Beyond the issues of economic feasibility and social equity lies a complicated urban design problem. The fragments of development that ULI and COPA have proposed for the Centennial Olympic Park area contain all the elements of a 24-hour neighborhood—entertainment, workplaces, retail, and housing—but they are not yet part of an overarching design strategy. If COPA seeks to make the area feel like a unified urban neighborhood, and not just more islands in Atlanta’s downtown archipelago, it must establish continuity in the area’s design.

As one of the architects of the original Omni complex, Thomas Ventulett has witnessed more than 25 years of development in and around his Omni complex. In his office, Ventulett keeps a map of the western area of downtown on which there are a series of concentric circles around the corner of Marietta Street and Techwood Drive at CNN Center. Each radius represents a five-minute walk from this intersection. The fourth circle from the center, a 20-minute walk, reaches as far as the other extremes of downtown: Georgia Tech to the north and I-75/85 to the east.

In Ventulett’s view, 20 minutes is not a long walk if it is a pleasant experience. To enhance the streetscape, he has designed a scheme he calls “2,000 points of light”: the installation of 2,000 uniform and distinctive light fixtures throughout the west side of downtown.
These fixtures, he surmises, will speak of the fact that this area is both a continuous neighborhood and distinctly urban. Over at COPA, Bleakly expresses his desire to incorporate signage and lighting into the design of the west side, and even has mentioned extending the traditionally-themed streetlights installed downtown for the Olympics.

In the opinion of Arquitectonica’s Yann Weymouth, street furniture is nice, but it cannot be the sole definer of an active urban area. Weymouth stresses the need for an “urban concept” that both understands and controls levels of automotive and pedestrian traffic through the area. He believes that unless the buildings in the area are part of a larger concept of the area’s character, street furniture will not be very useful.

Weymouth’s point is well taken. Simply dressing up a streetfront with attractive lights, trees, and benches will not solve the deeper problems of a neighborhood. This much is evident from examining the efforts of the Corporation for Olympic Development in Atlanta (CODA), which created many pleasant looking street environments in central Atlanta for the Olympics. Even so, an “urban concept” as Weymouth envisions will be difficult to achieve given the lack of vision by the city of Atlanta. In this light, Ventulett’s proposal for 2000 Points of Light may be as close to an urban concept as Atlanta can achieve.

Panacea or Fools’ Gold?

In early 1998, there are signs of hope for the future of downtown Atlanta. A modest amount of new loft apartment and retail development, combined with new destinations such as restaurants, coffeehouses, the renovated Rialto Theater (in the Fairlie-Poplar district), and downtown’s first brewpub, have unquestionably enhanced Atlanta’s downtown experience. For all of the improvements, however, downtown Atlanta still has a long way to go before it can proclaim itself a 24-hour district.

Atlanta’s commitment to expanding its downtown westward is a bold one, considering that the central downtown is currently struggling to maintain its vitality. This strategy has potential, as evidenced by Cleveland’s success in generating excitement through the physical expansion of its downtown. However, while Cleveland introduced a wide variety of new entertainment opportunities as part of its urban design strategy, Atlanta’s new sports arena neither adds a new use nor expands downtown’s size. For these reasons, it will definitely not be the panacea that its boosters would like it to be.

The transformation of downtown Atlanta will progress slowly during the arena’s two-year construction period, assuming that the string of small successes continues. By the time the arena opens in 1999, it is possible that development efforts will have spread as far as the area around Centennial Olympic Park. If this is the case, the arena will be part of a burgeoning urban neighborhood. This would make a trip downtown for a basketball or hockey game more than just a drive in and out of a concrete parking garage; it would be a thoroughly pleasant and uplifting urban experience.

Declaring the new arena to be the cure for all of downtown’s ills is overstating the case. As the central element of a well-designed and conceived urban district, the arena definitely has the potential to be a major success. Yet to be addressed are the various problems encountered in the arena deal, specifically in the areas of
development, politics, equity, and urban design. If those responsible for the next several years’ development around Centennial Olympic Park learn their lessons from this project, the arena will be part of a successful urban strategy. Otherwise, it will stand for the next several decades as a $200 million chunk of fools’ gold—a perpetual reminder of the 24-hour downtown that never was.

References


