

Fables of the Reconstruction: Remaking Midtown, Atlanta

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Without question, there is a renewed commitment to the American City. Atlanta, Georgia like many 'contemporary' cities is experiencing unprecedented urban renewal. This paper, based on current studio research, examined the dynamic between predominant market forces and an evolving master plan in the cultural center of Atlanta – Midtown. The specific organizations involved include the Midtown Alliance, a non profit organization seeking to regulate the rehabilitation of Midtown, Atlanta; the City of Atlanta Zoning Enforcement Division; private capital interests; and a group of city planning and architecture students from Georgia Tech.

The goals of the studio were to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the 'Blueprint Midtown', investigate specific areas as yet defined within the evolving master plan, and demonstrate through case studies, architectural and urban design, projects which might contribute to the economic and cultural viability of one of Atlanta's most promising urban environments.

Through the course of our research, we discovered some of the complex issues at stake as inner city neighborhoods quickly redevelop. Reasonably sound real estate values, availability of large vacant parcels of land, historic structures in need of retrofit and preservation, Tax breaks for new development, etc are all contributing factors as well as many others. Simultaneously, one observes on the north end of the Atlanta wildcat suburban development, unprecedented sprawl and paralyzing vehicular congestion.

The equation is quite simple: Midtown is situated to become a viable model for urban redevelopment, placing it's inhabitants in close proximity to their occupations, cultural and political institutions, restaurants and retail establishments. The results of the research and graphic component of the studio were varied, with each student asking questions at the level of the neighborhood as well as the site while developing potential programs for investigation.

Some Forces at Work in the District

As an extension of the Midtown Alliance, formed in 1978, an organization called Blueprint Midtown¹ (BM) was created in 1993 to oversee Midtown's impending redevelopment. As described through their website—

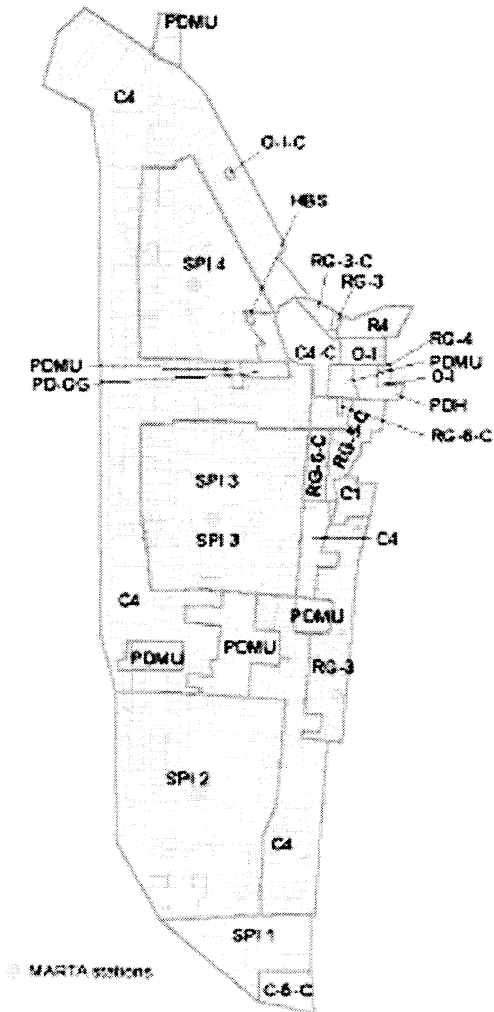
The purpose of the Blueprint is to stimulate new development, to provide direction for public improvements, and enhance the pedestrian environment.²

With the help of Consultant/Urban Planner Anton Neessen's patented survey method, called the Visual Preference SurveyTM, the Midtown Alliance "actively pursued the opinions and ideas of all sectors of our community through a visual survey, a questionnaire, a workshop, and a series of follow-up review sessions."³

A truly livable, attractive urban area only happens when the community which lives and works in it cares enough to act. The Midtown community has done just that by spending countless hours framing its vision for the future of Midtown Atlanta. The outcome of these efforts clearly states a desire to encourage and retain an urban character with an increased emphasis on people-friendly paths and places that connect Midtown. There are several themes that define how people want their environmental to feel, look and function. New buildings should be predominantly mid-rise in height. Today, Midtown is best described by signature tall buildings and surface parking lots. Clear, pedestrian-friendly paths with appropriate signage should be developed between our parks, museums, theaters, hotels, religious institutions, and schools. A livable and workable place is defined by a safe and pleasant public environment... Sidewalks must be wide enough to accommodate passing pedestrians or friends walking side-by-side; people must be safe from vehicles and lights should illuminate sidewalks and buildings as well as streets. Trees should be planted along the curbs to define an edge between the roads and sidewalks and to lend shade from the hot Georgia sun as well to provide a visually pleasant place to be... Midtown should be mixed with office, housing, retail, hotels and cultural uses to create a vibrant urban area beyond the work hours of the day... Finally, the architectural details of the buildings, the small extra touches such as flags, banners and awnings, and the buildings' proximity to the street and heir orientation to the sidewalk will make a difference in how safe, attractive, and neighborly the community feels.

– Excerpts from the "Midtown Blueprint"

The development control in Midtown is created by the city governments' implementation of zoning ordinances and buildings codes. Zoning restrictions for the Midtown district have evolved into the Special Public Interest (SPI) to promote development of land and buildings in the district. The intent of the SPI is to encourage localized development of retail and commercial ac-

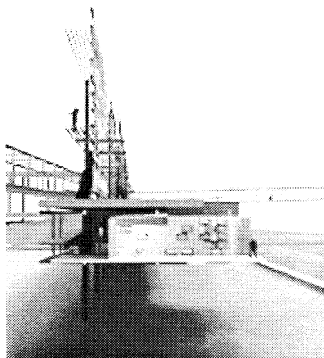
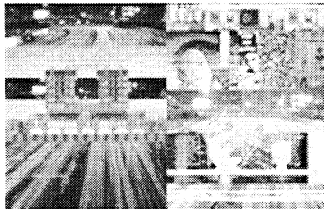
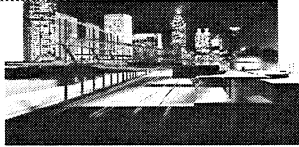


tivity centered on Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) stations. The SPI in general is a zoning document which states requirements for permitted uses and restrictions on building size, shape and placement on a given site. Building type and use, parking, parking lots, and setbacks are some of the major elements covered in the SPI's for the Midtown district.

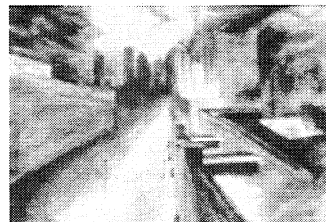
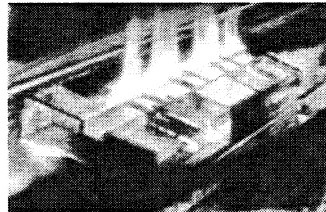
While SPI's promote economic growth and diversity in districts CID's (Community Improvement Districts) allow money to be directed towards specific public improvement projects like

william davis

With the conditions of the individual communities on either side of the Downtown Connector pushed to the edge that their programs (Blueprints) will allow, a calculable space of in-between is created. The project then becomes one of addressing how to engage the limit-space of the Midtown edge, the Georgia Tech sphere and the intervening highway, enhancing both districts as well as the greater urban community.

**johnathan ruffin**

No event in American history matches the drama of emancipation. More than a century later, it continues to stir the deepest emotions, and properly so. There is a need for a museum that can begin to tell the story of the African struggle for a place in America. The project is very necessary. It is not meant to represent the horrors of slavery, but is to simply not let us forget where our country was headed.



BM has developed objectives for the redevelopment of the Midtown district by suggesting an improved version of the SPI based on input from the community. The intent of the BM is to encourage new growth in Midtown that produces an aesthetically pleasing idealized appearance. Another function of BM is to assist developers in navigating through the process of land acquisition and the planning process with the City of Atlanta. To accomplish this the BM has created a database of information that allows developers to see what land is available for development and details of the current zoning, building restrictions and expected use of that parcel. The BM provides examples of development and setback standards for development of buildings and adjacent support structures. The BM encourages the improvement of the pedestrian realm along streets by increasing the density of planted trees, lighting, street furniture and minimum width of sidewalks. This has also led to the detailed establishment of setbacks for a specific street, which provides space for the new pedestrian space. BM is promoting a review process that allows their organization to review the proposal to see if it meets the current and proposed zoning and restrictions for Midtown before the project is submitted to the Cities Planning Department. These are just a few parts of the BM that promote long term changes to the physical appearances of the neighborhood.

The initial phase of this planning process resulted in the identification of the vision, an evaluation of existing physical and economic conditions, policies, plans, and regulations that currently influence Midtown. The "Midtown Blueprint" is currently under Review by the City of Atlanta Zoning Board, and if approved, will become the Master Plan for redevelopment.

Studio Work

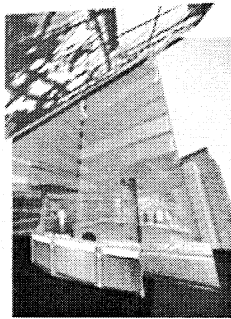
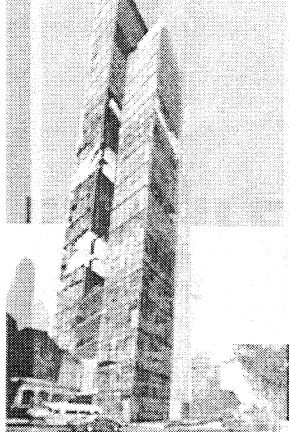
Defining the public, social and private realm has become an ever-increasing problem in today's contemporary society. Boundaries that once existed have become blurred. Midtown, Atlanta is today very quickly changing however many issues remain to be critically acknowledged, like "public" space, affordable housing, and public services.

Originally planned and constructed at the turn of the century, Midtown is today home to a wide variety of Atlanta's culture and commerce, Nations Bank, IBM, First Union, the Fox Theater, the Woodruff Arts Center, the High Museum, Piedmont Park, and MARTA. Though these buildings and places bring a lot of people in to the area, as landmarks, there is to date no significant density thus pedestrian activity suffers. What exist now, though changing rapidly, is series of nodes of activity concentrated around major thoroughfares and MARTA stations. In Atlanta as in many contemporary American cities, much of the public realm was abandoned from the street and turned inwards for many years. Not until recently have efforts been made to open up the buildings to the street and emphasize the "public" realm. As the studio has observed, many of the infrastructural, programmatic and typological necessities required to reconstruct a viable neighborhood appear to be currently missing from the Master Plan. Luxury housing seems to be the focus of much of the revitalization. The diversity which has long characterized the neighborhood is arguably in jeopardy.

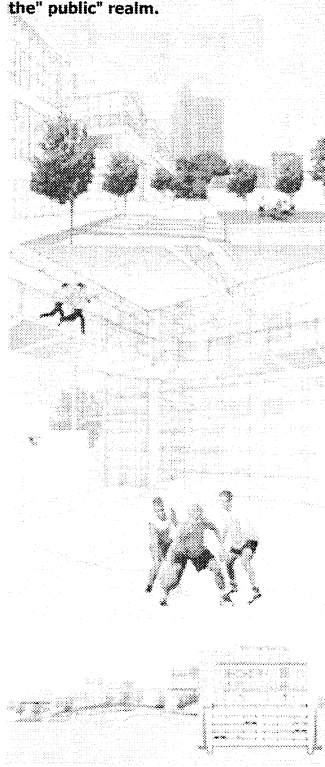
Our challenge was to identify and problematize the relevancy (or existence) of what might considered normative conditions in Atlanta as well as other "contemporary" cities. Many of the proposals in the studio dealt specifically with those civic and public institutions and patterns which have been slowly excluded or suppressed in urban planning and discourse, and in this sense, aligned with the problem of memory, ethical/moral responsibility and life cycle. In many respects, this was the foundation of the studio, the fables of the reconstruction This investigation analyzed the "public" sphere and its relationship to private development and the city, worked to identify the significant components of sound urban planning without relying on solely nostalgic models, and to identify through programming and building design specific areas of interest to the neighborhood. In the end, the goal was to highlight what is missing from the current Midtown Blueprint proposal and to suggest alternate approaches to public, social and private space that would better unite and enhance this area's quality of life.

todd boyd

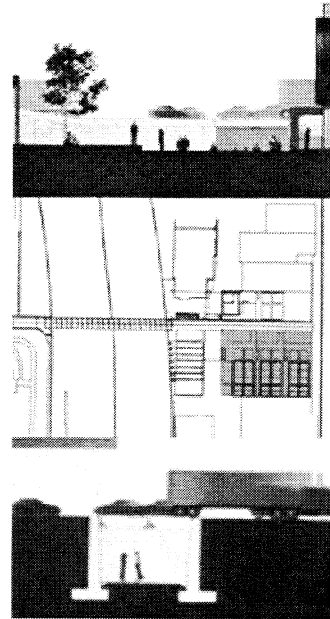
What if, in the production of a truly different, critical architecture, one cast off Jameson's preoccupations with semantic generation and, instead, began concentrating on syntactic displacements of the elements that comprise existing architectural texts? Could one then, through such a strategy, begin to construct an architecture outside of, and critical toward, that produced by the traditional modes of production of a particular society?

**kristen brantley**

The Midtown area is deficient of a variety of scaled open spaces. Atlanta's current approach to public space seems either too large or too small. The issue of vicinity seems to be overlooked. Atlanta can no longer afford to provide all the public space needed where as private development can and needs to begin collaborating with the city to enhance the quality of the public sphere. I have reexamined how private development and the city engage the urban fabric and transition the "public" realm.

**michael reiman**

Intentions must be diverse in order to fill the needs and desires of as wide a range of individual interests and needs as possible. This in turn leads to the exploration of ways to overlap, layer and intensify different elements in ways that are new and inventive. Through this overlapping and intensification it will be conceivable that these new spaces will be reflective and fostering of the contemporary condition while at the same time working to enable new relationships to develop, both physically and socially, within Midtown. Finally, inherent flexibility will be called for if these moves are to have durability and a lasting meaning within the ever-changing landscape of the contemporary city.



Conclusion

As we observe the dramatic reallocation of development resources toward Midtown and the efforts of public and quasi-public institutions to manage and condition this rapid growth it becomes clear that Midtown is in danger of being overwhelmed by the forces of privatization, exclusion and market oriented commodification. The developers presently at work in Midtown have displayed a remarkable ability to fluidly standardize and exploit an emerging consumer demand for intown accommodation and neo-traditional urbanity. Residential and commercial developers have cynically appropriated forms and patterns previously associated with marginalized urban culture (coffee houses and loft apartments) and promoted them to an exurban mass market suddenly frustrated by sprawl style development. The forces of flexible late capitalist accumulation and standardization are poised to transform Midtown into a homogeneous landscape sanitized of the diversity which characterizes urban life. Understandably, the studio proposals have limits, however, new models must be revealed and investigated if urban revitalization is to work for the 'good' of the city.

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¹ Blueprint Midtown web site <http://www.blueprint-midtown.org>

² <http://www.blueprint-midtown.org/>

³ ibid

⁴ Blueprint Midtown, New Incentives /CID? , <http://www.blueprint-midtown>