

# Create Streets

## Atlanta: leaving a history of racial division and suburban sprawl behind?

*'Leave Paris and Amsterdam- go look at Atlanta, quickly and without preconceptions.'*  
Rem Koolhaas

When people think of iconic American cities they rarely think of Atlanta, a city that sprawls through the Georgia woods where the southern Appalachian foothills peter out into a swampy plain. There may be no Hollywood sign or Statue of Liberty but Atlanta is that most American of cities - it speaks of the urban history of an entire nation.

While Atlanta's 19<sup>th</sup> century history is bound up with railroads, the Confederacy and a ruinous fire that destroyed the city during the Civil War, the city rose to real prominence post-war. By 1945, Atlanta was a relatively dense city that still used streetcars. Traditional suburbs, reliant on public transport, surrounded a concentrated downtown.



*A bird's eye map of Atlanta by Augustus Koch (1892) showing a dense downtown, network of streets and relatively limited suburban development*

The post-war development of Atlanta's suburban landscape was intimately linked to race. Of course, the city had experienced segregation since its founding. Even the humble streetcar played a role, as white owners of the trams would often only serve white neighbourhoods denying minorities public transport. Yet paradoxically it was the city's post-war suburban growth that would go on to help create one of America's first centres of black political power.

The Keynesian policies of the New Deal, alongside a post-war economic boom, helped foster an explosion of speculation in real estate and infrastructure. Eisenhower's interstate system, cheap credit for suburban developments and the rise of the automobile combined radically to change the American landscape. Meanwhile, car companies successfully lobbied city governments to rip out streetcar systems and invest heavily in road infrastructure, often at the expense of old neighbourhoods that were bulldozed with an almost gleeful zeal.



*Here the freeways required the demolition of swathes of communities and cut off them off from downtown in the foreground*

Jane Jacobs' *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* was of course the great rallying cry against the brave new world of 1950s planning, a hard-hitting critique of the ill social effects of projects prioritising cars above people and streets. Atlanta is not special for having experienced this post-war transformative period of motorisation, but what happened to its politics as a result made the city nationally important.



The construction of interstates cut off downtown from inner city neighbourhoods while also opening up cheap land to development. So began Atlanta's long process of decentralisation. Some American cities' economies and business centres are so spread out that urban geographer Robert Fishman described them as 'technoburbs'- a bewildering maze of shopping malls, freeways, business parks and industry without form or pattern. This sort of sprawl really bears little resemblance to traditional suburbia. After all, the original function of suburbia was to offer somewhere to live with open space and nature close to an economic centre to which the resident could commute. However, in a city where everything is so jumbled, and there is no definable centre, perhaps the bucolic suburbia of popular American imagination is ultimately defeated by forces beyond its control.



*Ben Geddes' City of Tomorrow at the Futurama New York World Fair 1939 sponsored by the General Motors Corporation- an example of the post-war vision cities where the car ruled supreme and traditional streets were nowhere to be seen*

As Atlanta spread out into its hinterland, the white population in the city continued to fall. Minorities were often rejected from loans for suburban developments, and inner city decline resulted in white flight. As sociologist Robert Beauregard wrote 'urban decline and race become intertwined as cause and consequence... by displacing race into decline white society avoids its complicity in inequalities and injustices...' Yet this eroded the city's political power structure. Suddenly there was a majority of black voters in the city proper.

These inner city districts' role in the Civil Rights should not be underestimated. Martin Luther King grew up in an area called Sweet Auburn where one can visit his childhood home and local Baptist church today. His experience of racial segregation in his Atlanta childhood helped inspire him to make a stand. In 1973, only five years after King's tragic assassination, the electorate voted for Maynard Jackson as the first black mayor of any major southern city. He went on to serve three terms in elected office. Atlanta has made great progress since the days of the Civil Rights Movement at tackling racial inequality and segregation. The area has a burgeoning black middle class, even in far flung suburbs such as Alpharetta far to the north of the city in the land where the car rules unchallenged. Yet unemployment and deprivation still tend to be higher in areas with a higher black population.



The street on which Martin Luther King grew up, these are some of the oldest buildings in Georgia, known as "shotgun houses".

Today, Atlanta is doing something truly different in an attempt to bring about urban renewal, racial cohesion and a more sustainable city. The Beltline, envisaged by urban planner Ryan Gravel in a master's thesis in 1999, promises to revitalise derelict railroads which encircle the downtown as a light rail system, urban park and zone of new developments. The hope is that infrastructure like this will not only connect diverse neighbourhoods, but also encourage people to use cars less in a city where 95% of journeys to school or work are taken by automobile. However, as my new research has revealed, there are challenges in providing sufficient affordable housing, preventing displacement of long-term residents and maintaining the special, historic character of neighbourhoods like the Old Fourth Ward. Here rare late 19<sup>th</sup> century wooden shotgun houses and great brick industrial buildings have survived in a city of winding freeways and sprawl that stretches far into the horizon.

Atlanta's story is in many ways America's story: at times a depressing tale of racial discrimination that divides cities, and sprawl that eats away both at nature and community. Yet it is worth ending on a positive note, Atlanta has come far and can go further. If only Martin Luther King could visit his hometown today.



*The newly completed Historic Old Fourth Ward Park adjacent to the Beltline. This was industrial wasteland only a decade ago*

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