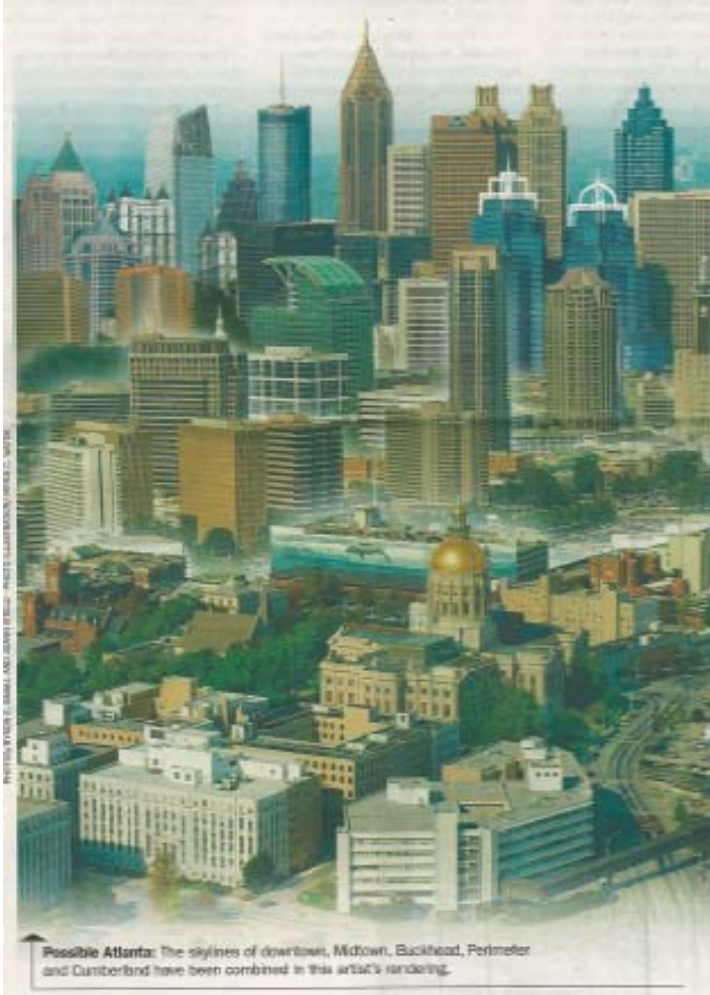


RESHAPING THE FUTURE



ALTHOUGH THERE IS NO WAY TO CHANGE ATLANTA'S DEVELOPMENT PAST, EXPERTS SAY THEY SEE THE CITY TAKING A DIFFERENT DIRECTION IN YEARS TO COME.

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American cities with the most heralded and recognizable skylines have two things in common -- long histories and natural barriers to sprawl. New York is an island, while Lake Michigan boxes in Chicago, and San Francisco is confined to a peninsula.

However, with no mountains or water to confine development, Atlanta's skyline stretches for miles -- 13 miles to the north of downtown is [Perimeter Center](#), Ravinia and the "king and queen" buildings at Concourse. And 12 miles to the northwest of downtown are the skyscrapers of Cobb County's Galleria.

If Atlanta had developed differently, all of these buildings would have been grouped together into a central urban core and Atlanta's skyline would resemble that of Chicago or New York.

Although there is no way to alter past development, some Atlanta area experts say they see the city's future taking a different shape.

Developers, government leaders and academic researchers believe Atlanta is beginning a process of infill and densification that will lead to increased high-rise construction in the urban core.

Georgia Tech's Catherine Ross, former director of the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority, is one of those believers.

"People are now moving in and clustering in places where they don't have to drive everywhere," she said. "I think the value of time has gone up in terms of travel time. People are making the decision that they just can't allocate that much of their day to go from one point to another. So one solution is to move where you don't have a great separation between where you live, where you work, and where you play."

Atlanta's past

Atlanta experienced its economic growth spurt after the popularization of the automobile.

"Atlanta grew very quickly, very horizontally. There were good roads, good interstates that led to large tracts of vacant land," said Dan Reuter, division chief of land-use planning for the Atlanta Regional Commission.

Dallas, Houston, Phoenix and a handful of other Sun Belt cities experienced similar growth patterns.

Another key factor to Atlanta's growth, Ross notes, is that instead of adding to its transportation systems, Atlanta dismantled one in favor of another.

Atlanta abandoned its streetcar system during World War II. Buses were used to maintain some of the routes but, over the next few decades, Americans began to rely more on personal cars for their transportation.

Roads became more important than train tracks, so the city built an asphalt belt 64 miles long to circle the city. When it opened in 1969, the four-lane Interstate 285 was intended as a bypass. Instead, growth followed the road, especially to the north, and land prices increased within the 20-mile wide loop.

By the time MARTA opened its first rail service a decade later, on June 30, 1979, Atlanta's population already had spread away from the city center, abandoning huge swaths of downtown and Midtown.

Housing developers built the most desirable homes on cheaper land further from the city center.

Consequently, when the labor market moved north, commercial developers followed.

"When you get people moving away from the city, people demand services," said Beau King, president of [Kim King Associates Inc.](#) "One of those is the need for office space and retail. Some people with a lot of vision went out there and saw the growth patterns."

Ten of Atlanta's 25 largest office buildings are outside of downtown. If all of those had been built around a centralized transit system, life for Atlanta's residents would be radically different.

"You'd clearly have a much more urbanized population. The house with a white picket fence and an acre of land, I'd guess, would not be an ideal," said John Sullivan, vice president of property management for Chicago-based [Equity Office Properties Trust](#). "Most residents of Manhattan never think that's a goal, and they wouldn't here either."

Atlanta's present

Although the metro area's major transportation projects still are in the works, developers, government leaders and academic researchers believe the migration back toward the city's core already has started.

The ARC's Reuter not only believes that Atlanta is heading toward greater infill, he's among those who have made the move.

For four years he commuted from Douglas County to the Atlanta Regional Commission's downtown office. Last year he moved to Decatur, turning his 45-minute, twice-a-day commute into a 10-minute drive.

"I can take MARTA to work. I can even ride my bike to work; it takes about half an hour," he said. "When you decide to move intown, you have to make a lot of decisions. It may mean living in a smaller house with a larger mortgage."

But Reuter is convinced many suburban families already are considering the intown move. And as they decide to move closer to work, that will have an enormous impact on the city.

"All the places where people say, 'I wouldn't live over there,' they will," Reuter said.

King also sees a shift in the housing market.

"There's a whole demographic shift of people moving back into the city," King said. "You have the baby boomers saying, 'You know what? I don't need my fourth 5,000-square-foot home with three bedrooms. All I need is a place to stay for the weekend.'"

Atlanta's future

The lock-and-leave condo hunters, with their empty nests and inheritance, are among the first to fuel a market that's expected to bring between 6,000 and 8,000 new residential units in the next two years to the downtown submarket alone.

John Reagan, a partner with [Urban Realty Partners](#), also notes there's a financial incentive for some people to return to the city.

"We talk very proudly about our low housing costs, but we don't add in transportation costs," Reagan said. "Atlanta is one of the most expensive places to live if you combine housing and transportation. Some people are doing the math now and realizing how much gas they're putting in their cars just to get to work."

Reagan and others say Atlanta will see greater reinvestment in older or blighted neighborhoods in the next decade.

As this happens, there will be an impact on the skyline.

The commercial developers once again will follow the labor market. Sullivan notes that Perimeter Center's boundaries have stopped expanding.

"You have it filling in. You really have it pulling into itself to be more integrated," he said.

The same is true of Buckhead, where [Cousins Properties Inc.](#)'s Terminus is going up and [Regent Partners'](#) 3344 Peachtree is planned.

Both are at the intersection of Peachtree and Piedmont roads.

Sheldon Taylor, chief financial officer with Urban Realty Partners, sees an opportunity for Atlanta to build along its primary corridors.

"Personally, I think the future is already signed off in some areas," Taylor said. "[But] where I really do believe you'll see some shifts [in density] is along the corridors. Peachtree is probably the prime example."

"I think once you get those areas filled in, you will see people not using cars day in and day out."

People will walk to retail and office space that must rise to the sky.

In addition, the expected growth will fuel more high-rises.

So Atlanta's development and its skyline remains a work in progress.

"Could it have been better?" King asked. "Probably so. But people are doing something about it now. You're getting a lot more responsible development. You're getting mixed-use. And I think now is even more exciting."

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