

The Inscription of “Public” and “Civic” Realms in the Contemporary City

MICHAEL E. GAMBLE
Georgia Institute of Technology

“The city used to be something that you get for free. It’s been a public space, and it enables the citizens to assemble in a kind of collective sense, but basically through the process, effects of the market economy and through the withdrawal of the public sector and the kind of complimentary invasion of the private sector, which is expressed through shopping, the nature of the city has changed from something that is fundamentally free, to something that you have to pay for, so that even in educational establishments, even in religious establishments and certainly in cultural establishments there is always this kind of commercial presence”

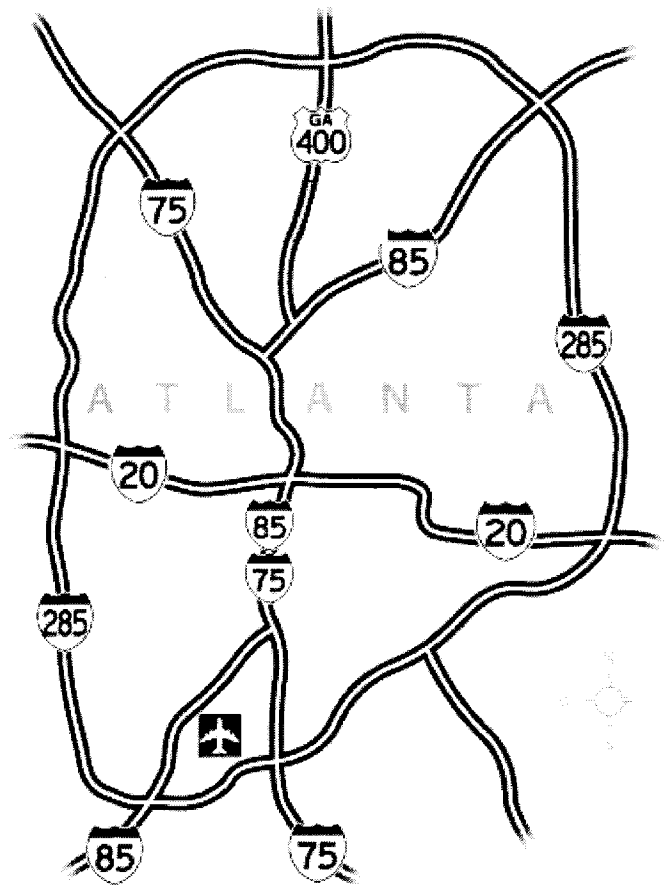
Rem Koolhaas in an interview with Ray Suarez,
PBS commentator

In our day it seems to me that civic spirit is inseparable from the exercise of political rights . . .

Alexis d’Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*

INTRODUCTION

This is not a narrative about the universal decline of the public realm. I’m not locked in a search for the once vital site of democracy or a unified public. I realize that the “decline” of public space was essentially class-specific nostalgia for a place that never existed on the terms so imagined, especially by middle income suburbanites. I cannot mourn the loss of something that has hardly ever existed in the parts of Atlanta I would like to discuss. I do however believe that we need public spaces that are free from private influence, market force and policies based on control and consumption. The terms public and civic should in fact be in quotation marks, denaturalized, because of the changes in meaning wrought by so much interpretation. The definition of public space is indeed a site of debate.¹



As the contemporary city grows and designers, policy makers, developers and special interests groups seek ways to allay the gap between suburban life and urbanity, automobiles and pedestrians, sustained debate on the nature and quality of the public realm is essential. In what ways can public life manifest itself in an increasingly privatized world? Is public life now limited to residual, liminal, or everyday spaces? Public space is literally required in order for democratic society to exist by the

Bill of Rights and Amendments to the Constitution, being the realm of organized political action, the place of free speech and freedom of assembly, tolerance, self-presentation, and self-preservation, public dialogue, and petitioning. Some would say that today the defense of public space is a radical project. The question is where is it and how is it made manifest in suburbia, urban retrofits and new public/private partnerships? Is the public realm now relegated to the temporary² status described by Margaret Crawford in *Everyday Urbanism*?

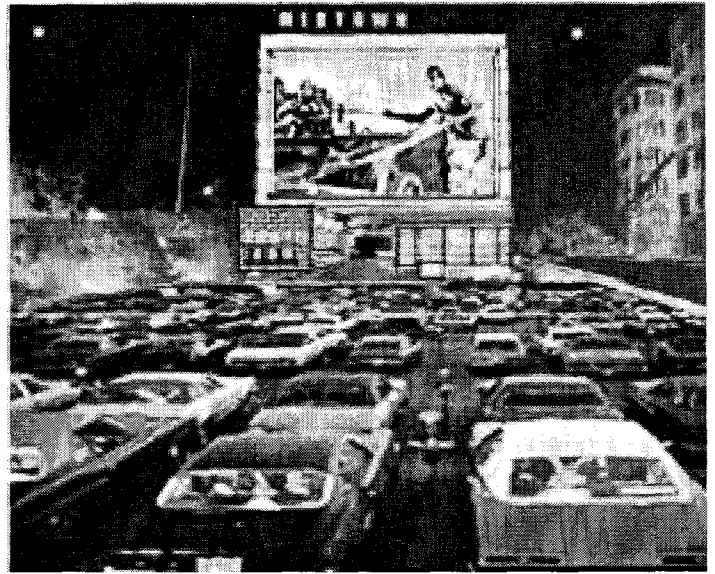
This short essay is an introduction to a larger set of issues I am working through my design research, studio and seminar teaching, and writing. In what follows, I will outline a few positions pertinent to the construction of civic and public life in the contemporary city. I will then discuss new developments in Atlanta, which are further and further removed from the serious debate about the construction of public and civic realms. Some of the illustrations accompanying the essay are examples of recent studio and student work on the subject. Illustrations of new Atlanta developments are also included.

The Generic City, Shopping Mall Urbanism, Simulated Urbanism, The Private Public are all recent themes associated with the increased privatization of American public space. In Atlanta, most parks and outdoor spaces are now privately maintained and monitored. New developments in Atlanta such as Lindbergh City Center, Perimeter Town Center and Atlantic Station are developer driven, privately maintained, consumer havens with little or no civic or public infrastructure. Similarly, in Atlanta's newest Park, Centennial Olympic, the private body that maintains the space prohibits some forms public gathering and the expression of political opinion. The trend has even reached many of Atlanta's sidewalks, which are now privately maintained and monitored through video surveillance and security.

PUBLIC SPACE AND PUBLIC USE

Why is the continued cultivation of the public realm important? In support of the questions framed thus far, I would like to outline three relative positions on the definition of the public realm and the nature of public use. Public space today is understood as a place in which a range of different individuals who don't necessarily know each other can interact. Pure public space should be democratic and responsive, accessible to all groups, and a locus of public action, but because so many public spaces are now part of larger public/private partnerships and not essentially democratic, this definition, as we will see, can be problematic.

To Hannah Arendt, "Action and speech create a space between the participants which can find its proper location almost anytime and anywhere. It is the space of appearance in the widest sense of the word, namely, the space where I appear to



others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly". The space of appearance, a subject that is now widely understood as the essence of Arendt's position on political representation, is "... for us, appearance – something that is being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves, that constitutes reality." Privacy, to Arendt, is the other, darker, hidden side of the public realm, and while to be political meant to attain the highest possibility of human existence, to have no private place of one's own meant to be no longer human. Public life, by her definition, was essential in the formation of private identity. For Arendt, society is the form in which the fact of mutual dependence for the sake of life and nothing else assumes public significance, and where the activities connected with sheer survival are permitted to appear in public. The space of appearance is the world itself, "... as it is common to all of us and distinguished from our privately owned place in it." While Arendt's definition of the public was representative of a hierarchical political system, and was not essentially social, she articulates a clear vision of the significance of public space to society. Like Aristotle, Arendt's urban epistemology evolves from the fact that without a visible public realm, we lose our private place in it. What happens when everything becomes privately held?

Like Arendt's definition, the search for 'public' space has traditionally focused on an idyllic place, made possible by the elimination of conflict. In her book *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics*, Rosalyn Deutsche contends that conflict is a prerequisite for the existence and growth of public space, and states that public space is possible only when society accepts that the social field doesn't have an essential identity, but is structured by multiple relationships. Focused on public art discourse and working with Claude Lefort's thesis³ stating that democratic power comes from the people and is located in the social, Deutsche further defines public space as the place where the



meaning and unity of the social is negotiated. Eliminating conflict obscures the basis of democracy, making public space artificial. Individual and group identities are formed in public space and only become meaningful through sustained debate. Without a singular identity, the social has no unity and power, in essence, belongs to no one. The existence of democracy is based in the fact that the social is an open, incomplete entity. This misconception of public space rises through the definition of democracy. With no central core of power, the social order has no basis. In essence, the privatization of the public realm is an attack on society. The security of a public/private division shelters the subject from public space. The recognition of public space as the locus of conflict and the struggle for representation is an attempt to prevent the conversion of the public sphere into a private possession, something that is often attempted in the name of democracy.

Margaret Crawford, drawing from the writings of Lefebvre, De Certeau and more recently Nancy Fraser, proposes an alternate reading of public space to that of Arendt's, and extends Habermas' concept related to "communicative action" and "dialogues" beyond systems of equal power. By introducing, through Fraser, 'counter publics' and 'subaltern counter-publics', Crawford dismisses the public as a single entity and defines a public sphere "based on contestation, rather than unity, and created through competing interests and violent demands as much as by reasoned debate." Crawford seeks locales, both public and private, for the development of new social and spatial practices where new meanings are continuously being created because new users keep reinterpreting and reorganizing the place over and over again. Unexpected and unplanned use of these places enables the specificity of the liminal urban terrain to become visible. "... instead of a single, 'public' occupying and exemplary public space, the multiple and counter-publics that Fraser identifies necessarily produce multiple sites of public expression, creating and using spaces that are partial and selective, responsive to limited segments of

the population and to a limited number of the multiple public roles individuals play in urban society."

According to Crawford, "when we recognize these struggles as the germ of an alternative development of democracy, we can begin to frame a new discourse of public space – one no longer preoccupied with loss, but filled with possibilities". In her evolving definition of democracy, we discover a complex and contested idea that can assume a multiplicity of meanings and forms. The boundary between public and private become blurred and "violate the strict lines between public and private on which the liberal bourgeois concept of the public sphere insists."⁴



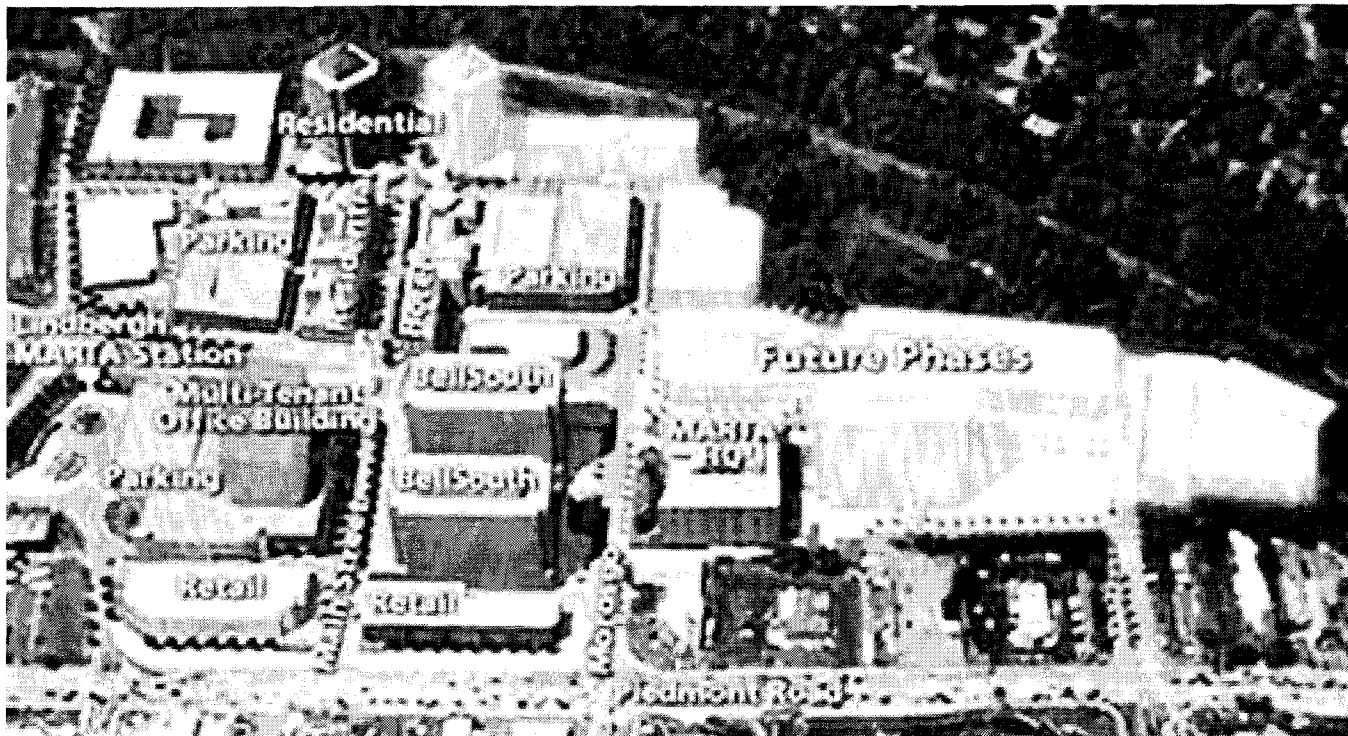
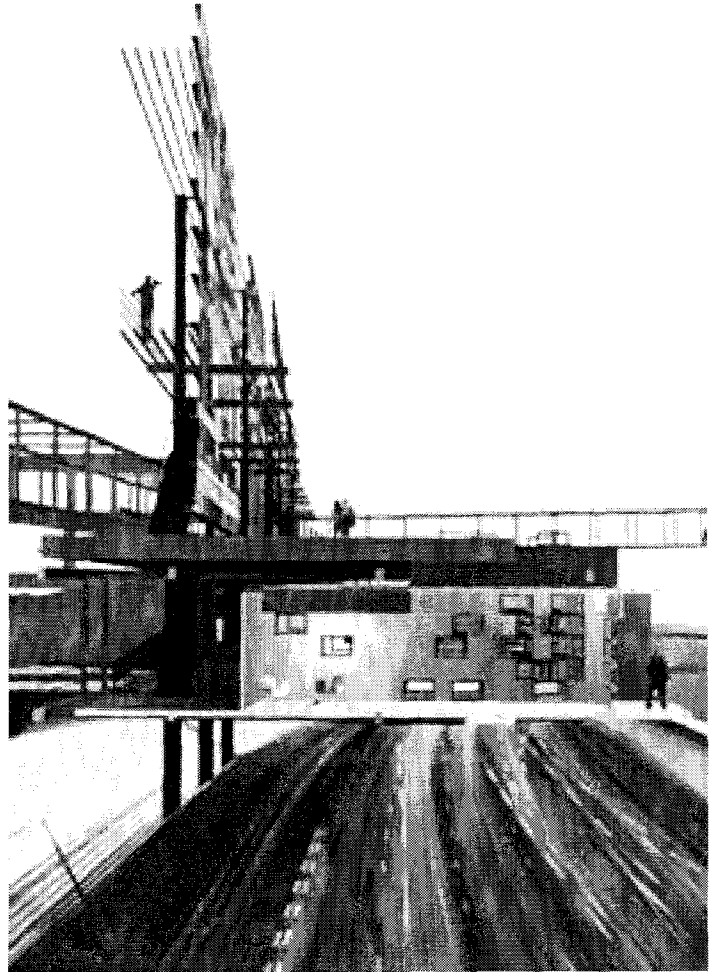
Arendt's theory is formed from an idealized public space; Crawford's theories of public space are grounded in the radical ethnicity and suburban sprawl of Los Angeles; Deutsche in the contested, compressed spaces of Manhattan. Significant and parallel is a concern with the definition a public and private.

Deutsche argues that private identity should be formed in the public sphere, because the social (or 'phantom public') has no essential identity. While Arendt considers the social as an anomaly caused by the confusion of public and private, Crawford and Deutsche argue that it is this very condition that must be accepted and enhanced. While Arendt refers to the rising phenomenon of the social, in which private activities are allowed to take place in public spaces, Deutsche and Crawford encourage it, arguing that private individual identity should be formed in public spaces. Against any notion of collectivity or "oneness", Deutsche and Crawford warn us against the dangers of a society distracted by the "benign fantasy of social completion"⁵ which negates plurality and conflict through the construction of an image of social space on authoritarian ground. Democracy is all that supports the construction of public space – enigmatic, grounded in the struggle for representation of all individuals and based on multiple publics.

Let's now look briefly at a few new developments in Atlanta, a.k.a. the contemporary city, and potential areas of debates inscribed within them.

NEW DEVELOPMENTS

Whether implicit or explicit, many new developments, be they New Urbanist or other, problematize the role of public and civic space by either sanctioning private definitions of the public realm, or by failing to describe the role of civic and institutional structures on democratic terms. What is the nature of public and civic space in the contemporary city? Privatization makes



public space, civic and social institutions like sidewalks, squares, parks, museums, community centers, and schools vulnerable to censor, security and pervasive retailing as decreased consumer demand, fear, and market instabilities proliferate. In many cases, debates about the representation of diverse publics appear to be under attack. Unfortunately today, many private and public development agencies see the tenets of New Urbanism only as a brand or a commodity. On the heels of many successful projects like Seaside and the Kentlands, New Urbanist practice is seen now more for its capacity to produce profit than to create the types of spaces outlined by the Charter and desired by the Congress. "How do we know it's New Urbanism?" is a recent addition to the Congress of New Urbanism's website. Good Urbanism and its progeny New Urbanism both place high value on civic identity, community and representation in the public realm. But in the contemporary city is there simply no space for civic and public space in the developers pro forma? Is shopping the pentultimate expression of public life. Where does branding end and public life begin? In fact, in America there is well over five and a half billion square feet of retail space. Is, as Koolhaas contends, the marketplace the final arbitrator and regulator of life?

In the examples that follow, I want to make clear that I am not arguing against transit-oriented developments or New Urbanism I find progress in Atlanta's new developments, particularly in the desire to mix uses on any given parcel, and especially in close proximity to alternate transportation infrastructure, namely rail. I'm not writing to indemnify. I would simply like to point out a few areas for debate and closer discussion. Lindbergh City Center, Perimeter Town Center and Atlantic Station are three large new developments currently under construction in the city and are by definition public/private partnerships between developers, Community Improvement District Funds, The Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority – MARTA, and the City of Atlanta. They are also defined as TOD's, and in all cases listed as *New Urban Projects on a Neighborhood Scale* as compiled by the staff of New Urban News in December 2002. These projects are conceived of, and named, as urban enclaves or city centers.

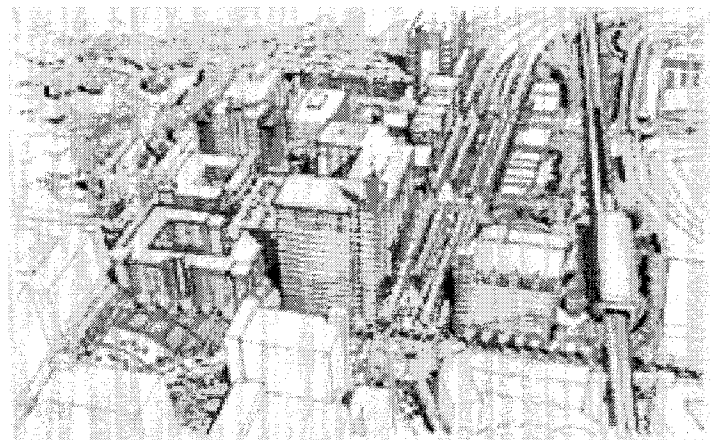
Lindbergh City Center

Situated on the North Marta line in the geographic center of Atlanta, Lindbergh City Center is an assemblage of several multi-tenant office buildings into a "dynamic, new urban village" and will provide approximately 230,000 rentable square feet of Class "A" office space constructed above seven levels of structured parking. Retail space fronting "Main Street" will occupy the building's ground floor, while the level directly above the retail space will feature 22,642 rentable square feet of "loft" office space overlooking Main Street. Typical floors contain approximately 24,963 rentable square feet and will be

set back from the vertical plane of the retail space in order to maintain a pedestrian-scale environment along Main Street. Varying façade treatments of the street level retail will contribute to the "urban landscape" ambiance that characterizes the Main Street corridor. Approximately 430 living units will sell in the \$300,000 range.⁶

Perimeter Town Center

In the outline of amenities published by the architect and developer, the stated vision for Perimeter Town Center "is a matter of giving the Edge City the characteristics that are the hallmarks of great urban areas," included in the plans are a 60-foot-wide park in the middle of Perimeter Center Parkway, enhanced pedestrian experience through expansion the street network, mixes of land uses in close proximity, all within walking distance of the Marta station. Perimeter Town Center will be a true neighborhood, full of residents who add vitality, safety, and take pride in the place. In a sense, this suburban environment will become more urban."⁷



Atlantic Station

The vision for Atlantic Station is to create a “live, work and play” environment where one would live in walking distance to everyday needs: from work to shopping to entertainment. According to the website, Atlantic Station is the national model for smart growth and sustainable development. It is a community of mixed use that will include middle-income housing, upscale housing, restaurants, theaters, businesses and retail. Wide boulevards will promote pedestrian traffic with trees bordering the road along with sidewalk cafes and parks. Atlantic Station is organized into 3 major areas of development: the “Town Center,” “The Commons,” and “Tech Village.” With 3.0 to 4.0 million square feet of residential, 2.0 to 2.5 million square feet of retail, 5.0 to 6.0 million square feet of offices, 1.5 to 2.0 million square feet of high tech labs, and 1.0 to 1.5 million square feet of hotel space, Atlantic Station will provide homes for 10,000 people, employment opportunities for 30,000, and shopping and entertainment for millions more. A new 17th street bridge is being constructed that will help reconnect midtown to the west side of I-75/85 and is designed for the automobile, mass transit, bicycles, and pedestrians.⁸

SOME CHALLENGES AND QUESTIONS

These three new developments are all within 10 miles of each other. It’s quite remarkable to think that so much investment is occurring inside or on the edge of Atlanta’s perimeter. The role of city and state government in the development of these grand schemes is on the one hand, unprecedented, but on the other, sadly removed from other vital questions. Again and again, the city makes the decision to further distance the legislative body from the construction of public spaces. Below, I will address some issues that are being written out of the discussion of city planning or have yet to be debated:

REVENUE MAXIMIZATION AT THE EXPENSE OF THE LARGER PUBLIC REALM

Gathering space, whether green or other, is not revenue producing space and is constantly under scrutiny by developers. One solution is to create a joint venture between the development firm and the local government that provides the developer with an economic incentive, through tax relief or financing structures, to set aside public green space. In such a joint venture, the developer could negotiate increased density, which allows the higher density that was originally allocated to the area now being used for public green space to be used elsewhere on the property.⁹ In most cases, the city provides the tax incentive to make such a space possible, but cedes constitutional rights over to the discretion of the developer and its agents: security, leasing, grounds keeping, etc. Because

public money is appropriated to offset development costs, these joint ventures are becoming more popular across the nation as a means of helping governments revitalize cities or create new TOD’s.

However, several recent lawsuits are testing the limits of free speech in public/private partnerships. The lines between public and private are literally blurred, because of the intermingling of funds. The ACLU, concerned that US cities are selling the rights to public space in new developments as well as rehabilitated and gentrified areas in the inner city, is ultimately seeking a ruling by the Supreme Court on the role of the Bill of Rights in Public/Private partnerships.¹⁰ In the case of Fremont Street in Las Vegas, the city ceded control to the private Fremont Street Experience Limited Liability Corporation (LLC) and banned protests and solicitation. Similar legal disputes are ongoing elsewhere, leading to speculation the US Supreme Court will have to ultimately rule on the matter. With consumption as the driving force in all three schemes, community development is lost. Many would argue “true” neighborhood and community development includes amenities and services beyond retail. Civic infrastructure should include a variety of scaled outdoor spaces for other types of communal exchange other than shopping.

I think every American understands the necessity for these projects to be financial successes. It is clear however, that a concern for profit is the driving force. The pressure to buy more, the desire to consume more, communities of consumption – they are everywhere now. “Shopping has found a way to expand by colonizing the institution,” writes Sze Tsung Leong in the introduction to the Harvard Guide to Shopping. Incidental spaces as yet designated by name or use should be included in the programming of any new development.

ICONIC, NOT FUNCTIONAL OR POLITICAL CONCERN WITH THE DESIGN OF THE PUBLIC REALM

“Central Park”, “Main Street”, “Fifth Avenue”, “Boulevard” and “Avenue” are all terms used almost interchangeably between the three developments, invoking the presence of great public spaces. “Town Center” and “City Center” are terms appropriated by developers to evoke the presence of something larger than a suburban enclave. By definition, these names should be understood as indicative of more complex relations, not just empty iconography. In all three developments, closer scrutiny reveals only a nod to the cultivation public space beyond the street, and the street is primarily seen as a place to shop. Atlantic Station, the largest of the projects, suffers from radical homogenization, and resembles an office park as much as any “town”. The public realm should be more than just a name, and the appropriation of names and places as images without substance is to what end? Architecture has become a subject of mass-market manipulation. Have both the modernist

and postmodernist efforts at populism ultimately ended up succumbing to 'market forces' and pandering to the rich rather than serving the public good? Is the commercialization of architecture now commonplace?¹¹

LACK OF INTEGRATION OF CULTURAL OR CIVIC BUILDINGS, NAMELY CHURCHES, SCHOOLS OR COMMUNITY CENTERS INTO THE MASTER PLAN

Without civic amenities, the ability to form a community becomes harder, and shopping prevails as the locus of a debased communal interaction. This appears at many levels to be a problem. "Town Center" and "City Center" both imply by name a concern with Civitas. Yet sites for special buildings, devoting unique sites to buildings or spaces that help inscribe or promote interaction within the community; special areas for civic buildings which enhance the prominence of the building and its function are missing. How will community needs be accommodated in the future? Will the residents, a combined total of 15,000 between the three developments, be content to just shop? Institutional landmarks like the Post Office, a museum, schools, or churches are missing. Residents will have to leave "town" to go to church or school. It's not that the buildings or places have yet to be designed, there is simply *no place* for them in the plan. The design of cities must also communicate with it's inhabitants, not just the developing agencies, and provide buildings and landscapes where both programmatic and symbolic points of difference and commonality are expressed.¹²

Atlantic Station and Lindbergh City Center have become hotly contested developments with respect to surrounding neighborhoods. For worse, not better, we see at Lindbergh especially a desire not to connect into existing street patterns or street names. Lindbergh's Main Street is 4 blocks long and doesn't connect to any parallel street at either end, terminating at the MARTA station at one end and Piedmont Road at the other. There were numerous opportunities for interconnectivity missed by the developer and planner. Atlantic Station has in fact made efforts to connect but extreme changes in scale have rendered such connections almost impossible. The adjoining neighborhood group has filed lawsuits on two occasions against the developer for failure to communicate design intentions along the perimeter of the project as well as for not clearly articulating a traffic plan. Both projects make it very clear as to when you are 'there' or 'not'. Interconnectivity is a hallmark of New Urbanism, and good urbanism, for pedestrians and automobiles.

Are commercial centers replacing traditional public realms? Yes. Intended to maximize sales and retail consumption, corporations design their spaces with a single use, and goal, in mind. A world by Starbucks has few public basketball courts, little room for street musicians, no soapboxes for political

instigators, nowhere to bring a picnic lunch. A corporate monopoly on space has deleterious consequences for the development of a democratic culture.¹³ Or as Margaret Crawford states in *The World in a Shopping Mall*, "'Place' is read as an over-produced, formula-driven, star-studded reel of market-infiltrated culture and theme- (posing as culture) infiltrated markets: its mass production of cast-in-place spaces a sort of ratings-sensitive place-surfing within the new hegemony of corporate sponsored urbanism."

NOTES AND QUOTES IN THE FORM OF A CONCLUSION

It's an exciting time for many American cities, as blighted areas are revitalized and new developments realized. Doug Kelbaugh asks, "As citizens, are we too seduced by private pleasures and personal conceits to cultivate a rich, coherent, and democratic public realm? In our quest for a new civitas, which New Urbanism can help sponsor, are we prepared, like great cultures before us, for the balance and discipline required?" What and where is the public? Marteen Reijndorp observes that the lack of authenticity and a limited form of control don't have to obstruct the experience of public domain. "The existing need for the consumption of events in a protected space won't necessarily obstruct the experience of public domain. The design of public domain is just matter of designing the crossings between the different landscapes, and of the provocation of voluntary manifestations of diversity".¹⁴ As Americans stroll forth from franchise cafés and bookstores in search of more varied public space, it is important to at least qualify this desire by looking to the future and the past. More public and civic spaces are needed, but it is not clear that sufficient quantities were ever present in the past, that they were not highly exclusive, or that we would not be better served creating settings and activities fitted to our current needs, rather than relying on misconceptions of earlier examples.¹⁵ Ellen Dunham-Jones concludes her essay "75 percent"¹⁶ with a quote from Manuel Castells, "A new society emerges when and if a structural transformation can be observed in the relationships of production, in the relationships of power, and in the relationships of experience. These transformations lead to an equally substantial modification of social forms of space and time, and to the emergence of a new culture."¹⁷ The developments that I have discussed above are in so many respects positive responses to the problems created by sprawling suburban expansion and challenges set forth by SmartGrowth, The Georgia Regional Transportation Authority and The New Urbanism. However, experience in relation to social form is what's a stake here, and as I see it, the new social forms under construction are inadequate. I'm particularly interested in the inclusion of debates about public and civic space outlined by Hannah Arendt, Rosalyn Deutsche, Margaret Crawford and others as we, as a society, seek parity between pedestrians and automobiles. "I shop therefore I am" should not be our only

mantra. The construction of identity in public is only possible when spaces in which each of us can appear as democratic citizens are willfully conceived and implemented.

WORKS CONSULTED

- Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*. London: the University of Chicago Press, 1967.
- Margaret Crawford, John Chase and John Kaliski, *Everyday Urbanism*. New York: Monacelli Press, 1999.
- Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* translated by Steven Rendall. Berkeley: Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995.
- Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk and Jeff Speck, *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream*. North Point Press, 2001.
- Ellen Dunham-Jones, "75 Percent," in *Harvard Design Magazine* (Fall 2000), pp. 5-12.
- Nan Ellin, *Postmodern Urbanism*. Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999.
- Fishman, Robert "Cities After the End of Cities" in *Harvard Design Magazine* pp.14-15.
- Peter Hall, "Retro Urbanism," in *Harvard Design Magazine* (Fall 2000), pp. 30-34.
- Rem Koolhaas, "Whatever Happened to Urbanism." in *S.M.L.XL*. New York: Monacelli Press, 1996.
- Rem Koolhaas, "Atlanta" in *S.M.L.XL*. New York: Monacelli Press, 1996.
- Alex Krieger, "Whose Urbanism" in *Architecture* (Nov. 1998), pp. 73-79.
- Claude Lefort, *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1987.
- Greg Smithsion, "People in The Streets: The Promise of Democracy in Everyday Public Space", Published by the author.
- Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, translated by George Lawrence, edited by J.P. Mayer. New York: Harper Perennial, 1988.

NOTES

- ¹ I was fortunate enough in graduate school to participate in Rosalyn Deutsche's course The Question of Public Space and am indebted to her for sustained insight and debate related to the subject. The term public remains bracketed throughout this discussion.
- ² "no-longer-but-not-yet-their-own", p. 29.
- ³ Claude Lefort, "Human Rights and the Welfare State"
- ⁴ Many thanks to Ana Maria Leon and her work in my Public Space seminar on parking lots. Her commitment to close readings of selected texts was very beneficial to this research.
- ⁵ Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions*, p. 326
- ⁶ Lindbergh City Center Website
- ⁷ Perimeter Town Center Website
- ⁸ Atlantic Station Website as well as Michael Goodwin's research in my Public Space seminar entitled Public Space at Atlantic Station: an Assessment, Fall 2002.
- ⁹ See Cooper Carry Architects website, www.coopercarry.com.
- ¹⁰ Robert Harbison, A PUBLIC SPACE? Civil libertarians contend that the Fremont Street Experience in Las Vegas, a public-private partnership, violates the First Amendment by restricting free-speech activities, from *The Christian Science Monitor*, October 21, 2002 edition.
- ¹¹ Nan Ellin, *Postmodern Urbanism*, p.153.
- ¹² John Kaliski, *The Present City and the Practice of City Design*, in *Everyday Urbanism*, p. 109.
- ¹³ Smithsion, p. 3.
- ¹⁴ Hajer, Maarten en Reijndorp, A., In search for new public domain. Analysis and strategy, Rotterdam 2001 in OASE no. 54, *Re:Generic City*, Nijmegen 2001.
- ¹⁵ GregSmithsion, *People in The Streets: The Promise of Democracy in Everyday Public Space*, article published by the author on his website.
- ¹⁶ See Ellen Dunham-Jones, "75 Percent," *Harvard Design Magazine* (Fall 2000), pp. 5-12.
- ¹⁷ Manuel Castells, "Conclusion: Making Sense of our World." *The Information Age-Economy, Society, and Culture*, pp.360.