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We all know **metro** Atlanta has grown faster than kudzu over the past decade. But that sprawl has been paralleled by a quiet revolution. Now **the city of Atlanta** is poised to take off as it hasn't in decades. Projects like Atlantic Station, the Aquarium and the High Museum expansion are fueling this growth—but the real revolutionaries are the thousands of people moving back into the city.

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PHOTOGRAPH BY JONATHAN HOLLADA

Downtown's Making a Comeback

(This Time, We Mean It)

By Michael Ludden

he city center, once again, has a chance to rebound.

Some folks will tell you that it all hinges on the aquarium. That steel-and-glass ship cresting over Centennial Olympic Park, they say, will be the catalyst for Atlanta's latest resurgence. It will bring millions of people downtown, they'll tell their friends and the next thing you know—bingo!—new restaurants, trolley cars, happy tourists snapping pics on every corner.

But Atlanta has pinned its hopes on a single idea before: Underground, the Olympics. If things are going to work this time, it's going to take more than one project, more than one person, to harness the potential and make it a reality.

What is clear is that Atlanta seems poised to move. Yet even with all this momentum in the air, there are potential minefields. Will a downtown resurgence really happen this time? And why now?

First, a bit of context. The last time there was this much optimism was about a decade ago. This gateway big-pants city; the shopping hub of the South; the classy corporate magnet; home to the mother of all airports had hosted the Olympics for the world. We'd seen that hundreds of thousands could flock downtown, that Atlantans would leave their cars at home and take MARTA, that suburbanites would actually hang out around Five Points after 5 p.m.

Post-Olympics, the pith helmet-wearing "ambassadors" continued to roam downtown's streets to help newcomers and tourists. Georgia State moved students into the athletes' dormitories and began its transition from a commuter school to a residential campus with chic city living. Urban pioneers moved into lofts around Castleberry Hill. There was buzz about resurgence as we chatted over cocktails at Mumbo Jumbo.

Then, stagnation slowly set in. The sports fans who'd lingered around Centennial Park at night in the spirit of '96 went back to going straight home to the burbs after the big games. Nightclubs and restaurants migrated to Buckhead and Midtown. So did a bunch

of lawyers. Macy's closed. Underground faltered yet again. The ballyhooed downtown Kroger threw up its hands and shut its doors. It would be easy to sound gloomy about downtown. But the slow declines were paralleled by quiet action that didn't always make headlines. Central Atlanta Progress reached out beyond the interests of business (i.e. rich, old white guys) under the direction of A.J. Robinson. Carl Patton, a university president with expertise in urban planning, made it his mission to increase Georgia State's role as a civic citizen while boosting the rolls of resident students. At Tech, President Wayne Clough spurred an expansion that took his campus across the Connector, rejuvenating a portion of the Spring Street corridor and pushing revitalization south of Fifth Street. The Home Depot zillionaires made their moves: Arthur Blank re-energized the Falcons (thank you, Mike Vick), and Bernie Marcus began building that big fish tank. A coalition of service providers put aside turf battles (for the most part) and tackled the twin problems of homelessness and panhandling. And an outspoken dynamo named Shirley Franklin moved into the executive offices at City Hall.

Then there were the people who aren't bold-faced names or billionaires, the ones who, fed up with traffic and willing to take a chance, began to move downtown. It wasn't the mass immigration we predicted post-Olympics, but it's been a steady stream. Warehouses became lofts. Parking lots became condos. Over the past five years, the city added an average of 5,125 residents annually. Residence in the city of Atlanta has gone up 6.4 percent between 1990 and 2005, reversing years of "bright flight."

By 2007, Central Atlanta Progress forecasts, another 3.5 million visitors a year will visit downtown, and 6,000 more housing units, 200,000 more square feet of retail and 600,000 more square feet of office space will be created, representing an estimated \$2.3 billion in private investment.

But what about the rest of us, those who don't want to move into a loft but maybe just want to take a trip to see

the sharks or tour CNN? Downtown's still dirtier and more dangerous than Buckhead and Midtown, right? As a matter of fact, no. Serious crime dropped by a third over the last five years. And thanks to the Clean Team—a collaboration between CAP and the city—the sidewalks and streets are better kept.

Let's not screw this up.

For downtown to really work, two things need to happen: First, sustained energy needs to go into a number of projects simultaneously. It's happening now, but the momentum can't stop. Secondly, the needs of poor Atlantans need to be addressed alongside revitalization plans. That's a little trickier.

Most of us are quick to lump the truly down-on-their-luck together with the aggressive panhandlers under one broad label—"the homeless." But not all panhandlers are homeless and vice versa.

This big issue merits a longer discussion down the road. Here's the executive summary: Metro Atlanta has one of the largest homeless populations in the country—an estimated 7,000 people are without a place to sleep at night, and at least

16 percent of those are parents with children. For those people, affordable housing, childcare, job training and other services are crucial. Then there are other populations:

those who are on the streets because of drug and alcohol addiction or mental illness and those who make a living, after a manner, hustling for spare change.

How do you balance compassion for the needy with sympathy for downtown residents, workers and visitors who are fed up with being hassled on the street? It's a sticky problem that hasn't been fully solved.

Bernie Marcus, who doesn't have to worry about job security or political constituents, has been a high-profile and outspoken critic of panhandlers, using his



STREET SIGN: EMMETT MARTIN; AQUARIUM: COURTESY OF FLETCHER MARTIN; ATLOFTS: COURTESY OF LANE COMPANY

PIECES OF THE PUZZLE

In the past, Atlanta pinned its hopes on a single big new thing. But real revitalization is a matter of many factors working together. The best things that have happened so far:

Georgia State University's Transition

Under the leadership of President Carl Patton, the commuter school is bringing in more traditional college-age students, who will live, shop, eat and party downtown. Of the freshman class of 2005, 90 percent are traditional college age. Today, there are 40,000 students, with 28,000 on campus on a typical day. New dorms at the corner of Piedmont and Ellis (the old Beaudry Ford site), will bring 2,000 young residents downtown next fall. Pizza shops, Starbucks and clubs are sure to follow.

Shirley Franklin

A surprisingly common element throughout the business community is its vocal enthusiasm for the mayor, who enjoys enormous public approval and whose re-election next month seems a shoo-in. Skeptics might wait for Franklin's honeymoon to end, but it shows no sign of fading. "She gets it," says Falcons owner Arthur Blank. "She's a big-picture person." Her passion for addressing the needs of the homeless mitigates some objections from advocates.

The Gateway Center

The 24/7 central services center offers restroom and shower facilities, food, beds, counseling and referrals. A collaborative effort between the city, United Way, Union Mission and several other groups, it's a first big step to addressing the needs of homeless Atlantans. It is by no means a panacea; affordable housing remains a key element of long-term revitalization in the city.

Allen Plaza

A complex of new office buildings, hotels and Southern Company's headquarters represents hundreds of millions of dollars in investment.

The Aquarium

Built with \$200 million of Bernie Marcus' own money, it will generate another 2 to 3 million visitors a year downtown. It comes equipped with a 600-space parking garage and a Wolfgang Puck-affiliated restaurant. Not to mention the star sharks, Ralph and Norton.

Atlantic Station

Just a stone's throw north of downtown, developer Jim Jacoby turned a desolate former steel mill into 6 million square feet of office space, 1.5 million square feet of retail and entertainment space and thousands of residential units. This isn't downtown proper, but the enthusiasm for city living will trickle southward along the Connector and Peachtree.

New World of Coke

Moving the shrine to soft drinks from Five Points to Centennial Park gives visitors a cluster of attractions—the aquarium, CNN, the Dome, the Children's Museum—all in easy walking distance. Coke projects 1.2 to 1.5 million visitors a year, up from about 800,000 at the old location.

CNN Tour

Turner Broadcasting spent \$5.5 million adding to and upgrading the tour. There's a fancy new globe at the top of that big escalator, a new control-room visit, a look at weather and election reporting and a roundup of the network's history. It already draws more than 300,000 visitors a year and should see a bump in traffic with all the other attractions nearby.

An Audacious Suggestion



Legalize Gambling

★ Fulton County Commissioner Rob Pitts and others have suggested that turning Underground Atlanta into a casino district might be a boon to downtown. "I'm not wed to a location. I'm wed to a concept," Pitts says. "It would answer a lot of problems. From an adult conventioneer's point of view, we'd offer something to do. One of the knocks against Atlanta is that we have great facilities, great restaurants and great hotels, but what are you going to do for nightlife? We need the revenue and the jobs." ★ Pitts has to contend with the state legislature; a two-thirds vote of the general assembly would be required to amend the state constitution. Then a simple majority in a general statewide vote would be needed.

27 REASONS TO LOVE DOWNTOWN

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- ★ The genteel elegance of lunch at the City Grill
- ★ Going up to the SunDial and realizing you *can* see your house from up there!
- ★ \$5 knock-off handbags
- ★ The Coke sign at Five Points
- ★ The "Jesus Saves" sign on Big Bethel
- ★ The Flatiron Building (Ours came first, so take that, New York!)
- ★ The Gold Dome
- ★ Watching the ambassadors zip by on those Segways
 - ★ Auburn Avenue
 - ★ The Candler Building
- ★ Bread pudding from the Loaf and Kettle on Broad Street
 - ★ H. Stockton in the 191 Building
 - ★ It's not Houston
 - ★ The guy dressed like Superman in the liquor store
 - ★ Playing in the fountain at Centennial Park
- ★ Riding the escalator at the Peachtree Center MARTA station
- ★ Grady Hospital—like the bumper sticker says: "If I'm in an accident take me to Grady"
- ★ Miss Thelma and her kitchen
 - ★ Sitting in a pew at Ebenezer Baptist Church
- ★ Hot firefighters at Station 4
 - ★ Cool Castleberry Hill
 - ★ Shirley Franklin
- ★ Shoe shopping at Walter's
 - ★ Sampling all the weird flavors at the World of Coke
 - ★ The "cheaters' booth" at the Ritz-Carlton
- ★ The Georgia-Pacific Building
 - ★ Sherman burnt us but he couldn't destroy us

position as bestower of a \$200 million gift as a bully pulpit. "It's going to have to be better," says Marcus, the man behind the aquarium. "Everybody realizes it. Even the advocates realize it."

Maybe. "I hope we can find a middle ground," says Bill Bolling, executive director of the Atlanta Community Food Bank and a respected advocate for the poor who's collaborated with public, private, church-based and civic groups for decades. "A person sitting on the sidewalk with a cup out isn't hurting anyone. It may be bad for business, but it's not against the law. If you're homeless, everything's failed you."

The new Gateway Center (see sidebar) is one step in addressing issues relating to homelessness. The panhandling is being tackled via a new law passed by City Council this summer that restricts aggressive and verbal solicitation in the so-called "tourist triangle," which covers the aquarium, Peachtree Center, Underground Atlanta, much of the Georgia State campus and the King Center. Legal challenges to the ban are inevitable, but supporters say that it balances the interests of downtown residents, visitors and workers while leaving room for non-verbal begging.

When it comes to enforcing panhandling laws, it will be up to Police Chief

Pennington to carry the weight and local judges to follow through. Pennington says he won't risk being accused of selective enforcement. "There are important quality-of-life issues throughout the city," he says. "Three years ago, when I moved here, I was getting bombarded with calls [complaining about panhandling] every morning. That's changing.

When people come to Atlanta, they'll see a police presence."

The perception of panhandling as a "problem" would diminish if there were simply more people on

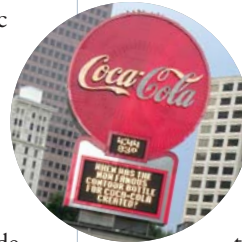
the streets. Walk any big city with a bustling downtown and you'll see folks pushing shopping carts or dragging garbage bags. But you don't care because you're surrounded by people. That critical mass of bodies creates a sense of security and energy.

Ultimately, filling the streets is downtown's No. 1 priority—not buildings, attractions, new hotels or new shops. It's people walking, locals heading downtown for a game or a concert and sticking around afterward, people heading downtown just to be downtown. Conventioneers who bring the family staying just one more day. Tourists.

What will force that transition is not visitors, but full-time residents. The best thing that could happen? Gasoline at \$5 a gallon. (Mike Vick in the Super Bowl wouldn't hurt either.) "If you do all the right things for people living here," says Blank, "you'll be doing the right things to bring people here."

The good news is that, these days, it is hard to find anyone who thinks downtown could fail. Atlanta has momentum and is at a tipping point. Today, there is a window, but this time, it has to be right. We won't find another Bernie Marcus. Or, perhaps, another Shirley Franklin.

This city doesn't need any more false starts. ✚



An Audacious Suggestion

Create a "Red-Light" District

★ Atlanta became a convention center in the eighties for two reasons: the World Congress Center and nude dancing, says Alan Begner, an attorney for more than half the adult clubs in town. Begner says the single most powerful way to revitalize downtown would be to make Underground a "special entertainment district," sort of a mall of adult clubs. Research shows, he says, nude clubs have half the crime of regular nightclubs. "Half the customers are conventioneers; they're not getting into fights."