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Identifying Atlanta: John Portman, Postmodernism, and Pop-Culture

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Identifying Atlanta: John Portman, Postmodernism, and Pop Culture

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: Two Atlantas.....	4
Chapter 2: The Peachtree Center.....	23
Chapter 3: Pop Culture.....	33

Introduction

In his 1995 text “Atlanta,” architect, theorist, and notorious provocateur¹ Rem Koolhaas claims, “Atlanta has culture, or at least it has a Richard Meier Museum.”² Koolhaas is implying that the collection at Atlanta’s High Museum of Art is a cultural veneer. A recent music video by an Atlanta hip-hop group reveals Koolhaas’ ignorance by sarcastically echoing his perspective. The video begins with a solemn shot of the famous Coca Cola sign in midtown Atlanta. The sign reads, “Dazzle Your Senses & Enrich Your World. Visit The High Museum of Art.” The video cuts to a lifeless long shot of the Phillips Arena as the music slowly begins. Finally, the viewer is brought to a windowless studio in which a number of Atlanta hip-hop artists are energetically recording.³ The message is clear: Atlanta is rich with culture if you dig a little deeper. André 3000’s famous 1995 statement, “The South got something to say!”⁴ clearly hadn’t reached the Koolhaas crowd.

The music video invites the following question: how can a city with such a recognizable pop-cultural identity be so placeless? This project will investigate Atlanta’s identity through different forms of representation. I will view architect-developer John

¹ See: Nicolai Ouroussoff, “Why is Rem Koolhaas the World’s Most Controversial Architect?” <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/why-is-rem-koolhaas-the-worlds-most-controversial-architect-18254921/>

² Rem Koolhaas, “Atlanta,” in *S,M,L,XL* (New York, NY: The Monacelli Press, 1995), 835.

³ “Migos Welcome to Atlanta Feat. Rich Homie and Young Thug Official Video,” video file, 04:58, Youtube, posted by ShootersWorld3D, July 15, 2014, accessed May 2, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1TeEEQLTjTw>.

⁴ 1. Paul Cantor, “How the 1995 Source Awards Changed Rap Forever,” Complex, <http://www.complex.com/music/2015/08/how-the-1995-source-awards-changed-rap-forever>.

Portman's Peachtree Center complex as an architectural image of Atlanta and a political symbol of the city's power structure. The overarching argument of this project is that Atlanta's shift to planning in the 1970s transparently formalized division in the city. The first comprehensive plan in 1971 and the corresponding development of John Portman's Peachtree Center attempted to re-define Atlanta's identity and augment the power structure in the city. In doing so, they employed aspects of Atlanta's historical roots of growth and development, thus solidifying Atlanta's history in form as they attempted to pave over it. The result of this is a confusing and contradictory urban organization that expresses duality in its form. The concentration of the city's image in a sculptural form sets the underpinnings for a city of eccentric ATLians (to borrow from the revered Atlanta hip-hop duo, Outkast) to fully form. In the explicit expression of duality between Atlanta in plan and Atlanta in practice, the city has cultivated a uniquely recognizable pop-cultural identity anchored in a concentrated image of the city while existing outside of it.

The first chapter of this project discusses Atlanta's planning practices in relation to the city's history and identity. The 1971 Central Area Study, the city's first comprehensive plan, will be introduced as the turning point in Atlanta's history. I will argue that this year saw the conceptual notion of "two Atlantas" find a physical form. I will illustrate the duality and division of Atlanta's urban organization and argue that it is irrational but true to the city's history. Architect-developer John Portman will be introduced at the end of this chapter as the embodiment of the city's power structure that plans and designs the city. I will argue that the 1971 Central Area Study was largely a

tactic to produce John Portman's Peachtree Center complex and the turn to planning in the postmodern moment was an advertising technique.

In the second chapter, I will zoom in on the Peachtree Center complex and analyze it as a singular sculptural symbol in the city. I will argue that it does little for Atlanta's organization but reinforced the strength of the city's power structure and fulfilled political desires in projecting a superficial image of centralization in a sprawling city. I will discuss some of Portman's structures in relation to the city-at-large before discussing the grand interior space of Portman's Hyatt Regency Atlanta as a self-aware postmodern reference to the placelessness of his structures.

In the final chapter, I will telescope back out of the Peachtree Center and view the position of Portman's architecture in popular culture before analyzing the symbolic effects of Portman's concentrated complex on Atlanta's highly spatial hip-hop culture. I will argue that Portman's architecture functions as a sculptural landmark in the city to anchor its cultural identity, not its form. Further, I will argue that the spatial and temporal divide in Atlanta's history has permitted the city's cultural identity to mutate so freely while remaining grounded in place.

Chapter 1 – Two Atlantas

In 1996, the celebrated boxer Muhammad Ali proudly raised a torch to initiate an elaborate pyrotechnic affair. In an instant, a flame had travelled from Ali's hand to a distant cauldron that curiously resembled a McDonald's French fry container. The Atlanta Olympics had begun.⁵ Spirits were high in Atlanta following the unexpected announcement that the city would be hosting the '96 Olympic games and the extravagant opening ceremony aptly captured Atlanta's atmosphere in anticipation of the games.⁶ Unfortunately, a tragic turn of events saw this excitement eclipsed by disaster. Less than ten days after the games began, a terrorist's pipe bomb exploded in the newly constructed Centennial Olympic Park, killing two and injuring 110.⁷

Remnants of the '96 Olympics are still visible in the city after 20 years but the dreary fog left by the terrible legacy of the Olympics has dissipated and Atlantans have moved on.⁸ The strange McDonald's French fry cauldron persists in ruin as a solemn reminder of the city's triumph-turned-tragedy. Despite the lives that were lost and the cataclysmic image of Atlanta following the games, Former Mayor Andrew Young—a

⁵ Doug Richards, "Young: Atlanta '96 Olympic cauldron 'an embarrassment,'" *11Live Atlanta* (August 6, 2016). <http://www.11alive.com/news/local/young-atlanta-96-olympic-cauldron-an-embarrassment289670337/>

⁶*City of Atlanta Comprehensive Development Plan* (1995), 3. <http://digitalcollections.library.gsu.edu/cdm/search/collection/planningatl>. The City of Atlanta 1995 Comprehensive Plan emphasizes the importance of the Olympics for the city: "The vision for Atlanta is rooted in the understanding that the Olympics represents a means and a catalyst for realizing the City of tomorrow"

⁷ "Atlanta 1996 Olympics," Olympic Games, <https://www.olympic.org/atlanta-1996>.

⁸ Rembert Browne, "The Eroding Legacy of the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta," *Grantland* (January 31, 2014). <http://grantland.com/the-triangle/the-eroding-legacy-of-the-1996-olympics-in-atlanta/>

key figure in winning Atlanta's bid to host the games—cites his biggest regret as not having the architect John Portman, an Atlanta icon, design the Olympic cauldron.⁹

Before the 1996 Olympics, city officials playfully enlisted the help of the public to conceive of a slogan for the games.¹⁰ This community exercise is an example of the city's "weakness for slogans" discussed by Calvin Trillin in a 1988 *Time* article in which the journalist outlines the extensive list of city slogans that Atlanta has boasted over the years. Trillin argues that Atlanta's ever-changing slogan is symptomatic of the city's constant desire to "escape its own roots."¹¹ The Olympic bid exemplifies Atlanta's desire to define its character through superficial efforts that are detached from its history.

In this chapter, I will discuss Atlanta's urban organization and planning practices in relation to the city's history and identity. I will argue that the city's roots are inescapable as they were paved over, fossilized, and artificially reimagined by the city's elite power structure in the 1970s with the city's first comprehensive plan. I will illustrate that the development of the city's "new downtown,"¹² the Peachtree Center (Figure 1), corresponds with this plan as an isolated product of Atlanta's governing power structure.

⁹ Doug Richards, "Young: Atlanta '96 Olympic cauldron 'an embarrassment,'" *11Live Atlanta* (August 6, 2016). <http://www.11alive.com/news/local/young-atlanta-96-olympic-cauldron-an-embarrassment/289670337>

¹⁰ Peter Applebome, "Atlanta Journal; Atlanta: The City Without a Slogan," *New York Times* (October 6, 1993). <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/10/06/us/atlanta-journal-atlanta-the-city-without-a-slogan.html> Submissions ranged in scale and specificity. While attempts to define Atlanta locally ("Atlanta: We're Better Than Birmingham"), nationally (Atlanta: Home of the American Dream), and even globally ("Atlanta: Conquering the World") proved insufficient in accurately capturing the city's character, this slogan contest speaks to the number of perceptions one can have of the city. Novelist Anne Rivers Siddons chimed in to this discussion, bluntly proposing an image of a cash register to serve as Atlanta's defining symbol. Siddons explains, "So far, the soul of the city has been money and business." This suggestion may seem like a criticism of the city as it implies that capitalism has subdued the city's culture. This is not the case. Atlanta is a city with a complex culture and a dynamic form, and Siddons's suggestion is incisively highlighting a discernibly constant force within the ever-changing city.

¹¹ Calvin Trillin, "The Democrats Atlanta: A city of Changing Slogans," *Time* (July 25, 1988).

¹² *AIA Guide to Architecture in Atlanta* (Athens: Ga: University of Georgia Press, 1993), 45.

Viewing the 1971 Central Area Study (CAS) as a lens in to the political intentions for the development of the Peachtree Center will illuminate the way in which business interests have overwhelmingly governed Atlanta's form. The result of this is a confusing and contradictory urban organization that does little to solve social or practical issues facing the city but transparently expresses the division between Atlanta in plan and Atlanta in practice.

In 2011, a seemingly small street renaming ceremony spurred a surprisingly big controversy. Two streets in downtown Atlanta were to be renamed to honor Xernona Clayton, an Atlanta civil rights leader and media pioneer, and John Portman, the famous architect and Atlanta icon.¹³ Street renamings are quite common in Atlanta and residents have trouble keeping up with the pace at which officials love to re-create the city's urban vernacular. Preservationists loudly argued that the official fondness for rechristening Atlanta's unbothered pavement is symptomatic of a much larger issue in the city: the tendency to write over the city's history.¹⁴

After months of deliberation, it was decided that Xernona Clayton's commemoration would come in the form of an additional street sign hanging below Baker Street reading "Honorary Xernona Clayton Way" (in an apt illustration of the city's layered history). John Portman's commemoration, on the other hand, was fully implemented and Harris Street was renamed John Portman Boulevard. This process

¹³ Jim Burrell, "Looking Back: Atlanta's Street Renaming Controversy." WABE 90.7

<http://news.wabe.org/post/looking-back-atlantas-street-renaming-controversy>

¹⁴ Thomas Wheatley, "Harris Street renamed in honor of John Portman," Creative Loafing Atlanta, <http://www.clatl.com/news/article/13062079/harris-street-renamed-in-honor-of-john-portman>.

speaks to the power of politicians to pick and choose favorable segments of Atlanta's history to recognize. Further, the full embrace of Portman's name compared with the half-hearted addition of Clayton's highlights the historical influence of business leaders on political decisions in Atlanta.¹⁵

The (renamed) streets endure after the controversies around the renaming processes settle down. These adjacent downtown streets (Baker Street, AKA Honorary Xernona Clayton Way, and John Portman Boulevard) communicate two completely different histories in their names alone. The parallel streets articulate parallel histories within the same neighborhood. Xernona Clayton and John Portman are contemporaries of one another but their paths, just like their eponymous streets, never cross. On a simplified level, these parallel streets exemplify a long-repeated fact about the city: there are two Atlantas.

While the narrative of two Atlantas is pervasive, the content of the duality is less than consistent. Atlanta is sometimes seen as a hub of old, white and wealthy southern families on one hand, and African-American's "learning to be free" in the antebellum South on the other.¹⁶ Others take a different perspective of a similar dichotomy based around race relations. Anthropologist Charles Rutheiser outlines Atlanta's duality as a conflict between the legacy of segregation and racism entrenched in Atlanta's history as a white city and Atlanta's prosperity as a hub for African-American intellectuals,

¹⁵ Larry Keating. *Atlanta: Race, Class, and Urban Expansion*. (Philadelphia, Pa: Temple University Press), 2001,

¹⁶ Gary M. Pomerantz, *Where Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn: A Saga of Race and Family* (1996), 117.

innovators, and leaders.¹⁷ Hipster-journalist Zach Goldbaum, speaking to Atlanta hip-hop wunderkind 21 Savage for *Viceland*, explains Atlanta's "two worlds" to the artist: "you have the black mecca, the universities, a lot of black millionaires... and then you have the trap."¹⁸ "The trap" is a reference to the (sometimes conceptual) spatialization of the source of Atlanta's hip-hop sound popularized by the city's creative class that contributes to the label "trap music" under which most of Atlanta's music falls. Goldbaum, discussing Atlanta with a group of young black men in a residential neighborhood, perhaps finds reassurance in describing his current setting (and apparent discomfort) as a "trap" in contrast with the other, implicitly better, Atlanta.¹⁹

Economist David L. Sjoquist highlights a paradox produced by Atlanta's racial, economic, and cultural distinctions. He explains, "It is a paradox of substantial racial segregation in a community with a reputation for good race relations and of high inner-city poverty in the face of substantial economic growth."²⁰ Sjoquist's "Atlanta Paradox" brings to light a number of dualities in the city. Regarding race, he mentions the difference of Atlanta in representation and reality. He also adds a consideration of class, mentioning the economic disparity within the city. Atlanta has both persistent poverty and unbounded economic growth.

¹⁷ Charles Rutheiser, "Making Place in the Nonplace Urban Realm: Notes On The Revitalization of Downtown Atlanta" in *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development* Vol. 26, No. 1 (SPRING, 1997), Page 13.

¹⁸ "Watch 'NOISEY: Atlanta 2' Featuring Migos, Lil Yachty, Young Thug, Killer Mike, and More," video file, Noisy, posted by Noisy Staff, February 8, 2017, https://noisy.vice.com/en_us/article/watch-noisey-atlanta-2-featuring-migos-lil-yachty-young-thug-killer-mike-and-more.

²⁰ David L Sjoquist, *The Atlanta Paradox*, (New York: Russell Sage, 2000), Page 1.

Some address Atlanta's duality by locating two different cities within Atlanta's bounds. Urban historian Dana White claims that Atlanta is defined by two contradictory slogans: "The City in a Forest" and "The City without Limits." This duality speaks to two defining physical features of the city (abundant trees and sprawl, respectively) as well as conflicting environmental and commercial "impulses" that are fundamental features of Atlanta's urban character.²¹ In the same book that White establishes this duality, Architectural historian Isabelle Gournay introduces a different set of identities that define Atlanta. Gournay claims that Atlanta balances dual identities as a "traditional city" and an "invisible metropolis." Atlanta as "traditional city" refers to the difficulty in preserving the past while moving toward modernization in the image of other cities. Atlanta as "invisible metropolis" refers to the city's decentralized, amorphous shape.²² Gournay borrows the term "invisible metropolis" from Rem Koolhaas, the architect who notably summarized Atlanta with an intriguing equivocality: "Atlanta is not a city; it is a *landscape*."²³

The multitude of dualities in contemporary Atlanta can be boiled down to a simple distinction of "two Atlantas" between the Peachtree Center, often described as a "city-within-a-city,"²⁴ and the rest of the expanding metropolis that rests within Atlanta's tree canopy and below the towering downtown complex. This distinction is between Atlanta in plan and Atlanta in practice. The Peachtree Center exemplifies the city's power

²¹ Dana F. White, "Foreword: The Dogwood and The Dollar" in *AIA Guide to the Architecture of Atlanta*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), xxii.

²² Isabelle Gournay, "Introduction: Urbanism and Architecture in Atlanta, A Personal View" in *AIA Guide to the Architecture of Atlanta*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), xxv.

²³ Koolhaas, "Atlanta," 835.

²⁴ "A Day at Peachtree Center," Peachtree Center, accessed May 3, 2017, <http://peachtreecenter.com/>.

structure in which a small group of businessmen plan in the image of other cities to support commercial interests and satisfy political aspirations. The rest of Atlanta, defined by disjointed neighborhoods and a sprawling form, exemplifies the city's organic growth and development produced by citizens who have learned to navigate the city's impractical organization to reimagine Atlanta's identity outside of its form. Rem Koolhaas' statement, "Atlanta is not a city; it is a *landscape*,"²⁵ holds historical weight. In criticizing the city's downtown image, Koolhaas denounces the Peachtree Center's validity as a practical element in the city. By claiming that Atlanta is a landscape, Koolhaas is arguing that the city exists everywhere outside of its concentrated image. What are the forces of development that led to such an explicit divide?

The story of the '96 Atlanta Olympics speaks to a number of themes that will be discussed throughout this chapter. The first (and most esoteric) parallel is the fire that marked the beginning of the '96 Olympic games. The extensive scope of this chapter is bookended by two notable Atlanta fires: The Great Atlanta Fire of 1917 and the 2017 fire on Interstate-85.²⁶

The Great Atlanta Fire of 1917 obliterated 300 acres of the slowly industrializing city. 1,900 structures built in 19th century Atlanta, then a somnolent southern town, were forever gone. This fire profoundly transformed the city as 10,000 citizens were displaced and the erasure of Atlanta's architecture effectively provided a fresh foundation for the

²⁵ Koolhaas, "Atlanta," 835.

²⁶ Associated Press Atlanta, "Atlanta: three arrested as major interstate bridge collapses after huge fire," *The Guardian* (Ga), April 1, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/mar/31/atlanta-major-interstate-bridge-collapses-in-fire>.

forces of antebellum industrialization to build upon.²⁷ This is just one of many instances of destruction in Atlanta's history that has contributed to the powerful narrative of rebirth that guides the city's growth and defines its character. In fact, the 1917 fire isn't even the first time that Atlanta was burnt to the ground.

Atlanta played a significant role in the Civil War as a transportation terminus where all southern railways met. In 1864, the Union army invaded Atlanta, ordering citizens to evacuate before setting fire to the city's railroad infrastructure.²⁸ The destruction of the critical railroad terminus played a large role in the dissolution of the Confederacy and Atlanta emerged from the Civil War with a lingering mentality of progress tied to transportation that saw the city rise again. The rise of antebellum Atlanta is the most recognizable instance of destruction-turned-triumph that contributes to the city's motto, *resurgens* (Latin for rising again).²⁹

As illustrated by the Olympic catastrophe, the strength of Atlanta's *resurgens* is tested time and again. Another transformative disaster in the city's history is the 1962 airplane crash that killed over one hundred of Atlanta's elite art patrons.³⁰ Atlanta's

²⁷ Gabbie Watts, "Old Fourth Ward Remembers Great Atlanta Fire of 1917" *WABE 90.1* (April 30, 2015). <http://news.wabe.org/post/old-fourth-ward-remembers-great-atlanta-fire-1917>

²⁸ Stephen Davis, "Civil War: Atlanta Home Front," Georgia Encyclopedia, last modified August 8, 2016, <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/civil-war-atlanta-home-front>.

²⁹Ibid.,; "Atlanta from the Ashes (Phoenix Rising).," Atlanta Office of Cultural Affairs., http://www.oaatlanta.com/public_art/atlanta-from-the-ashes-phoenix-rising/.

One of Atlanta's most famous sculptures in the city's Downtown epitomizes *resurgens*. The sculpture (completed in 1995, one year before the Atlanta Olympics) depicts a woman lifting a phoenix towards the sky. In Egyptian mythology, the phoenix represents rebirth as the creature that rises from the ashes toward success. This sculpture has come to symbolize Atlanta's rise from the devastation of the civil war towards its position as a successful international city.

³⁰ Victoria Camblin, "Up Close: Buildings Seeking Art," *Art in America*, December 1, 2016, <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazine/buildings-seeking-art/>.

abrupt loss of its cultural backing in the 1960s emphasizes the incredible character of Atlantans as the city has been reimagined and reinvented as a contemporary cultural hub despite this enormous monetary setback.

The recent I-85 fire it speaks to the force that has guided the growth of the city in the 100 years since the 1917 fire: transportation. Atlanta's dependence of transportation is demonstrated by the fact that many of its defining disasters occur around different modes of transportation (i.e., The 1864 Fire of the railway terminus, the 1962 Airplane crash, and the recent I-85 fire). In Atlanta—an inland city without the locational advantages of other major metropolises—the railway, airport, and highway system have long been the underlying forces of economic growth (not to mention physical growth in the city known for suburban sprawl).³¹ The I-85 fire disrupted the (arguably illogical) ebb and flow of Atlanta's daily operation. Atlanta Mayor Kasim Reed claimed the I-85 fire to be the largest transportation crisis the city could possibly face.³² This highlights the faults and fragility of Atlanta's urban organization as the city's greatest possible transportation crisis occurred outside of the city on a commuter highway while the central city transit system, completely unaffected by the fire, continued to operate.

Transportation initiatives are central to the expression of duality in Atlanta's built form. Railway and automobile infrastructure pave over the city's uniquely abundant tree canopy. Further, the economic underpinnings of transportation and the emphasis on interconnectivity are intrinsically counterproductive to the city's recent efforts to

³¹ Truman A. Hartshorne, *Atlanta: Metropolis in Georgia* (Cambridge, Ma: Ballinger Publishing Company, 1976), 11.

³² Associated Press in Atlanta, "Atlanta: three arrested as major interstate bridge collapses after huge fire," *The Guardian* (April 1, 2017).

centralize its sprawling form. Lastly, the city's most recent transportation initiative reinforces racial polarization in the city's urban organization as the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) remains mostly limited to Atlanta's inner city due to the continuous rejection of MARTA's expansion by Atlanta's predominantly white suburban communities.³³

Atlanta's politics have long been defined by a "biracial coalition" in which a class of primarily white businessmen endeavor to gain the city's African American electoral vote by persuading African American politicians to endorse mayors who support the city's business interest. Atlanta's first African American mayor, Maynard Jackson, attempted to break away from the exploitive race relations governing political decision when he took office in the 1970s. The influence of the business leaders proved too strong as public criticism quickly saw Jackson reestablish the political relationship with the business elite.³⁴

While McDonalds may not have actually been involved in the design of the Olympic cauldron that resembles a form famously associated with the fast food chain, this object exemplifies a critical feature in Atlanta's urban development: the longstanding history of commercial interests governing the city's form. This produces an urban form that transparently expresses the divisions produced by Atlanta's power structure predominantly comprised of downtown business leaders.³⁵

³³ See: Michael Kahn, "Johns Creek Rejects MARTA. So Let's Reject Johns Creek!," *Curbed Atlanta*, last modified November 20, 2015, <https://atlanta.curbed.com/2015/11/20/9898220/marta-expansion-north-johns-creek-resolution>.

³⁴ Keating, *Atlanta: Race, Class, and Urban Expansion*, 69.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 108

The foundations of Atlanta's sprawl and suburbanization were set decades ago and have been led by big business innovation. In "Applying Urban History to City Planning: A Case Study in Atlanta," Stephen W. Grable looks back to the beginnings of Atlanta's sprawl. Grable discusses three 20-year periods in Atlanta's history as setting the underpinnings of Atlanta's expanding form. In the first period, from 1880-1900, inner city housing is replaced by commercial development, thus creating a demand for suburban housing. The next period, from 1915-1935, saw the dilapidation of inner-city neighborhoods as affluent Atlantans fled to suburban housing or neighborhoods along Peachtree and West Peachtree Streets. Blue-collar workers, drawn to the city by the increased commercialization of the downtown, clustered in specific in-town neighborhoods that were predominantly classified by race. In the final stage that Grable discusses, between 1950-1970, suburbanization increases and the concentrated commercial district disperses as a centralized model no longer efficiently serves the sprawling city. According to Grable, the commercial and residential decentralization of this period led "to the creation of a completely new spatial structure in which the downtown district no longer functioned as the city's economic core."³⁶ How has this new spatial structure that emerged after 1970 been managed? The answer is complex.

Unsurprisingly, it involves new efforts to centralize the city.

Atlanta's first comprehensive plan, the 1971 Central Area Study (CAS) entitled *Central Atlanta Opportunities and Responses*, was a joint project by the City of Atlanta Department of Planning and Central Atlanta Progress (CAP), an organization of private

³⁶ Grable, "Applying Urban History to City Planning: A Case Study in Atlanta" in *The Public Historian* 1979, Page 53.

downtown business leaders.³⁷ The plan was Atlanta's first ever attempt at understanding the city's overall form and it demonstrates the city's emphatic embrace of a private-public partnerships in planning the city.

The study begins by stating that city centers are the most important aspect of American society. After recognizing the main problems facing Atlanta's central area (congestion, deteriorating buildings in some neighborhoods, increasing costs, and "major social problems in neighborhoods within the shadow of commercial skyscrapers"), the study outlines the immense potential of Atlanta's downtown. Interestingly, this potential predominantly relates to the opportunity for economic growth over improving the quality of life.³⁸

Adhering to Atlanta's foundational dependence on transportation as a guiding force in its development, the CAS puts a large emphasis on the impending implementation of The Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) system. Also in 1971, though, was Atlanta's transit compromise in which a number of suburban counties voted against the implementation of MARTA in their communities.³⁹ While the CAS stresses the importance of MARTA's implementation, the planners also propose enormous increases in parking spaces in the downtown to accommodate automobile traffic. By catering to automobile traffic despite MARTA's in-town efficiency, the CAS greatly contributed to a "two-tiered" system of transportation in Atlanta where the highway system supports in-town movement from the largely white suburbs and the

³⁷ *Central Atlanta Opportunities and Responses* (1971)
<http://digitalcollections.library.gsu.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/planATLpubs/id/7583/rec/3>.

³⁸ *Central Atlanta Opportunities and Responses* (1971), 6.

³⁹ Doug Monroe, "Where It All Went Wrong," *Atlanta Magazine* (August 1, 2012)
<http://www.atlantamagazine.com/great-reads/marta-tsplost-transportation/>

underfunded and underemphasized MARTA system serves people of color in Atlanta.⁴⁰ The easy accommodation of commuter travel proposed in the CAS thus permits further suburbanization, as the downtown becomes an enclosed safe haven for white suburbanites.

The 1971 CAS marks another example of centralization-turned-suburbanization. In his study, Stephen Grable diagnoses the city's current form with a chronic case of sprawl. He explains, "many of our so-called contemporary 'problems'—such as uncontrollable decentralization—are part of a long-term process and not simply the products of recent trends." Grable argues for research based planning for the management of Atlanta's future. The Central Area Study is another misguided centralization attempt, albeit more "comprehensive." The closing remarks from the Central Atlanta Progress explain, "As long as random suburbanization continues and metropolitan areas sprawl out farther and farther, the city's social ills will continue to grow worse."⁴¹ Grable's overview of Atlanta's history of sprawl clearly explains that the city's suburbanization is far from "random."⁴²

In *The Postmodern Urban Condition*, Michael Dear argues, "Planning is about power. It is concerned with achieving urban outcomes that serve the purposes of powerful agents in society. Since there are many such agents, planning is also about the process of conflict, as agents attempt to maneuver to achieve their ends."⁴³ The message from a

⁴⁰ Angie Schmitt, "How Racial Discrimination Shaped Atlanta's Transportation Mess," *Streetsblog USA* (February 8, 2017). <http://usa.streetsblog.org/2017/02/08/how-racial-discrimination-shaped-atlantas-transportation-mess/>

⁴¹ *Central Area Study: Technical Appendix*, 191

⁴² *Ibid.*,

⁴³ Michael J. Dear, *The Postmodern Urban Condition* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2000), 119.

coalition of downtown business leaders that the revitalization of the city's downtown will solve social ills illustrates that this planning effort is entrenched with conflicts of interest.

The 1971 CAS was met with criticism from Atlantans. An article simply signed by "Candy" in *The Great Speckled Bird*, a short-lived but incredibly popular underground publication in Atlanta,⁴⁴ enthusiastically captured the problems with the supposedly helpful study:

CAS is full of other examples of the city's decisions being made by the rich, ruling, white downtown businessmen without input from or consideration of those who make up a majority of Atlanta's population (especially in the inner-city areas)----women, Blacks, the poor, who don't need 160,00 parking spaces or four-level streets. Yet they have no way to direct city attention toward their needs because they have no money and can't finance studies to come up with plans that would serve them.⁴⁵

Candy's assertion that the study doesn't include input from the city's residents and neglects their needs confirms to the distinction of "two Atlantas" between plan and practice. The distinction is between the Peachtree Center and Atlanta, the power structure and the Atlantans. The broad goal of growth clearly does not serve the needs of the citizens. In diagnosing Atlanta's issues, the members of Central Atlanta Progress explain that they worry the downtown will become increasingly lifeless and dangerous if their plan is not adopted.⁴⁶

In 1971, *Ebony* published an article that labeled Atlanta a "Black Mecca" with immense possibility for peace and prosperity.⁴⁷ The message of this article clearly did not reach the members of the CAP as they begin their discussion by depicting Atlanta as

⁴⁴ Justin Heckert, "The Great Speckled Bird Flies Again," AtlantaMagazine, last modified December 1, 2011, <http://www.atlantamagazine.com/great-reads/the-great-speckled-bird/>.

⁴⁵ Candy, "Central area study, say no!!," *The Great Speckled Bird* 5, 36 (September 11, 1972).

⁴⁶ *Central Area Study Technical Appendix*, 191.

⁴⁷ Phyl Garland, "Atlanta: Black Mecca of the South," *Ebony*, August 1971, 152.

inferior to other major cities. The study paints an ugly picture of Atlanta before describing the city's potential to establish the image of the city as a blank slate on which the business leaders can build: "Atlanta has been fortunate because of its strong leadership of the past decade and still has the opportunity to become a great city. No other city in America has this unique opportunity Atlanta has now."⁴⁸ Considering Dear's argument that "planning is about power," what purpose is this rhetoric serving for the business leaders planning Atlanta?

In *The Condition of Postmodernity*, urban theorist David Harvey locates the early 1970s as a turning point in the planning of U.S. cities. The modernist spaces of urban renewal in the 1960s were in notable states of disrepair after protest, riots, and crime swept over downtowns across the nation.⁴⁹ Harvey discusses the renewed interest in community building in planning in reaction to the dilapidation of U.S. urban centers. He explains, "Imaging a city through the organization of spectacular urban spaces became a means to attract capital and people (of the right sort) in a period (since 1973) of intensified inter-urban competition and urban entrepreneurialism."⁵⁰ Atlanta stood apart from other urban centers in that it came out of the 1960s relatively unscathed,⁵¹ yet the city still decided to completely redesign its downtown to take part in this inter-urban entrepreneurialism. The contradictory function of the centralized complex in increasing suburbanization through the accommodation of the automobile illustrates that the city desired for the downtown to function as a transitory central hub for Atlanta's predominantly white suburban class.

⁴⁸ *Central Area Study: Technical Appendix*, 191

⁴⁹ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 92.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 152.

⁵¹ Garland, "Atlanta: Black Mecca of the South," 152.

John Portman, the architect-developer of the Peachtree Center, was president of the CAP in 1971 and greatly influenced the direction of the 1971 CAS while simultaneously developing the city's "New Downtown."⁵² In 1971, the development of the Peachtree Center was already gaining traction after the successful realization of his inventive design for the Regency Hyatt in 1967.⁵³ Portman's powerful position is attacked in another criticism of the 1971 CAS from *The Great Speckled Bird*:

Mr. Portman, unfortunately, has a typical architect's view of the city. Most architects believe that poverty and crime will disappear if only things are made prettier. It is Mr. Portman's concern for urban design which sets the tone of the study. Although the jazzy urban features are a minor expenditure of the \$326.7 million proposal, it is presented as the central figure.⁵⁴

It's clear that a large effort of the study was to support Portman's downtown development. The "architect's view of the city" discussed in this criticism adheres to Michael Dear's discussion of the strategies of postmodern planning: "At the end of our history of the last three decades, we seem poised to create a truly postmodern planning style – a planning of filigree, of decoration alone."⁵⁵ While the 1971 CAS attempts to discuss community building and fixing of "social ills," the adherence to the label of postmodern reveals the study's business strategy over aesthetic approach.

The 1971 CAS is a plan in the image of other cities. The study claims that development of downtown will "establish a new skeleton for growth for many decades."⁵⁶ This comment is not discussing the city on a local scale. Considering Portman's Peachtree Center as the corresponding development to the CAS will illuminate the strategy of the plan. In 1974, Ada Louise Huxtable, the architecture critic for the *New*

⁵² *Central Atlanta Opportunities and Responses (1971)*, 1

⁵³ *AIA Guide*, xxvi.

⁵⁴ Marcos, "Central Area," *The Great Speckled Bird* 5, 18 (May 8, 1972), 15.

⁵⁵ Michael Dear, *Postmodern Urban Condition*, 124.

⁵⁶ CAS 1971.

York Times, termed Atlanta “Instant City” and positioned Atlanta’s recent development, led by John Portman, as the stimulus and template for the renewed planning interests across the nation.⁵⁷ The turn to planning in the postmodern moment is the most evident example of business interests governing Atlanta’s form. With the Central Area Study, business leaders utilized Atlanta’s power structure to fabricate an Atlanta *resurgens* in order to advertise an urban renewal template.

The 1971 CAS borrows from urban planner Kevin Lynch’s *The Image of the City* to identify the design elements that most need attention in rebuilding Atlanta’s downtown.⁵⁸ Lynch provides a basic model for rebuilding cities by identifying five referable forms that contribute to a city’s legibility. Lynch explains that in considering his model, planners “must consider not just the city as a thing in itself, but the city being perceived by its inhabitants.”⁵⁹ Considering the disregard of citizen input and the perpetuation of exclusionary transportation policies, it is clear the Central Area Study is not proposing a plan to increase legibility in the city. It is proposing the creation of a superficial image of a city in order to advertise John Portman’s architecture to other cities. In explaining *The Image of the City* Kevin Lynch claims, “It is taken for granted that in actual design form should be used to reinforce meaning and not to negate it.”⁶⁰ The CAS seems to negate meaning in Atlanta as they radiate irrationality in miraculous form.

John Portman’s Peachtree Center could not exist without Atlanta’s position as a transportation hub. His complex serves the conventioners arriving through Atlanta’s

⁵⁷ Ada Louise Huxtable, “The New American City,” *The New York Times* (May 5, 1974).

⁵⁸ Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City*, 48; *Central Atlanta Study: Technical Appendix* 164

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁶⁰ Lynch, *Image of the City*, 46.

airport terminal. Further, his complex is extremely accessible by automobile and incredibly allocates space for over 100,000 parking spots throughout the 14-block complex. The Peachtree Center draws in the ultimate conglomeration of Atlanta's notorious automobile traffic and presents it in almost whimsical intensity. Portman's grand interior spaces work in contrast with the congested streets to provide escape from the congested downtown. Portman's structures have been criticized for turning in on the street, but in the case of the Peachtree Center, it seems as though he embraces a concentrated conglomeration of urban problems to enhance the experience of his architecture by implanting meaning through escape.

In 1985, Portman constructed the Marriott Marquis in New York City's Time Square with the intention of providing the city with an "internal lung" to alleviate the problems associated with the then overcrowded and dangerous commercial district.⁶¹ While this tactic of escape-from-within can be applied to other urban areas, Portman's Peachtree Center design is actually very dependent on Atlanta. That said, there's a big difference between Portman's New York creation of an isolated option for escape in an already over crowded city and the architect-developer's Peachtree Center in which he develops the compact, congested, and centralized neighborhood from which one wants to escape. The 1971 CAS is a transparent expression of Atlanta's self-interested private planning as a result of the city's exploitive power structure.

Former Atlanta Mayor Andrew Young's regret of not having Portman design the cauldron for the catastrophic Olympics suggests that politicians see Portman as a savior

⁶¹ Steven Kurtz, "John Portman, Symphonic Architect," *The New York Times* (Oct. 19, 2011) <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/20/garden/john-portman-symphonic-architect-qa.html>

in the city defined by *resurgens*. Perhaps Portman simply has enormous political clout. What, though, do his projects provide to Atlanta?

Some consider Portman to be a “neofuturist” architect,⁶² but his tireless involvement in all sectors of the political and social Atlanta adheres to an idea of “the great man” that is firmly rooted in the past. Portman pioneered the position of being both an architect and developer with his work in Atlanta. On top of that, he is both a painter and a sculptor—many of his works are shown in the atriums of his commercial buildings. As head of Central Atlanta Progress, Portman lengthened his curriculum vitae by communicating his principal position as an influential business leader and planner in Atlanta. His political clout is astounding. He was even on at a 1973 meeting discussing plans to desegregate Atlanta’s public schools.⁶³ John Portman plays an enormous role in Atlanta’s politics and planning, but ultimately his “city-within-a-city” is set in opposition with the larger Atlanta. It can be difficult to locate the Atlanta beyond Portman’s well-recorded version, but his postmodern penchant for pastiche uncovers much of his vision of Atlanta. The following chapter will look in to Portman’s enclosed complex in conversation and conflict with Atlanta to illustrate the ways in which the architect-developer absorbs governing themes in Atlanta’s history and form to process into commodified metanarratives.

⁶² See: Patrick Sisson, “Neofuturist architect John Portman bet on cities just as people fled them,” *Curbed* (Aug 26, 2016), <https://www.curbed.com/2016/8/26/12663306/architecture-john-portman-hyatt-atlanta-atrium>

⁶³ Mike Raffauf, “A Tale of Deals: Atlanta Desegregation... And the Power Structure,” *Great Speckled Bird* 6, 10 (March 19, 1973), 4.

Chapter 2 – The Peachtree Center

When asked if he had any road trip stories from a drive between Atlanta and New Orleans, Jim Morrison of The Doors gave a uncharacteristically muted response:

“no...”⁶⁴ The “King of Orgasmic Rock”⁶⁵ didn’t want to discuss the film festival he attended in Atlanta or any of the unruly southern stories that inevitably occurred along the way. There are a few beats of silence after Morrison’s lingering “no...” that indicate the rock star has been swept away into memories too disorderly to repeat on the record. Morrison’s voice finally returns and he admits his most notable experience from the south: staying at The Regency Hyatt Atlanta Hotel (1967).

Morrison describes John Portman’s hotel with admiration:

One thing I do remember is Atlanta has the most amazing hotel you’ve ever seen. Um, you walk in, and from the outside it looks like any other large hotel. You get in and you look up and it goes up about 27 floors and the interior is like a Spanish courtyard and, and architecturally it’s hollow. So all the rooms face each other across this vast garden-arena. And the elevators are like, um, kind of Victorian rocket ships and the... they’re glass and so...um. And you go up, you go up to the restaurant on the penthouse level and it’s completely encased by glass.⁶⁶

While Jim Morrison’s description of the hotel isn’t especially eloquent or incisive, his uncharacteristic architectural appreciation highlights the experiential grandiosity that defines Portman’s space. The fact that Morrison is commenting on the hotel at all not

⁶⁴ Lee Wallender, “When Jim Morrison of The Doors Stayed at the Hyatt Regency Atlanta,” *Invisible Themepark*. April 6, 2011. <http://www.invisiblethemepark.com/2011/04/hyatt-regency-atlanta-and-jim-morrison/>

⁶⁵ John Burks, “Jim Morrison’s Indecency Arrest: Rolling Stones Original Coverage,” *Rolling Stone* December 10, 2010.

⁶⁶ “Rare Interview with Jim Morrison,” Recorded 1970. YouTube Video, 4:35. Posted August 20th, 2006. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=swxMeuVQ0xk&feature=related>

only illustrates the power of the experience but also the popularity and success of Portman's structure. The space is completely separated from its site as Morrison describes the grand interior as though it's a hidden paradise within a world of mediocrity.

In this chapter, I will investigate Portman's "city-within-a-city" to identify its function in the city. The interior of the Hyatt will be discussed and I will argue that Portman employs extravagant design to illustrate placeless fictions as he processes and sells Atlanta's image through spectacle. I will then consider the image of the Peachtree Center in conversation and conflict with Atlanta as I investigate its value as symbol and monument.

In an interesting 1970 *Great Speckled Bird* article, a self-proclaimed Atlanta hippie describes the Hyatt's green interior as emblematic of the city's architectural impracticality:

The Regency Hotel in particular is intriguing. The impressive and opulent interior, the plants that flow from the upper floors much like the Babylonian gardens, the elevators with gothic lines brightly decorated with electric bulbs, could themselves make it one of the most obscene examples of the architecture of showmanship.⁶⁷

Portman's interiors are undoubtedly embellished, but the architect describes his manufacturing of synthetic interior canopies as an architectural tool in developing an organic experience that naturally resonates with users of the space.⁶⁸ As illustrated by the 1971 CAS, Portman's interiors are the architecture of showmanship by design. Portman's extravagant integration of organic and inorganic forms in his interior space reflects urban life, particularly in Atlanta. The ornamental use of plants to line the compartmentalized hotel rooms distinctly echoes the importance of Atlanta's tree canopy as a shared pleasure between distinctly disconnected neighborhoods.

⁶⁷ luca m. venturi, "Architecture as Moment," *Great Speckled Bird* 3, 46 (November 16, 1970), 13.

⁶⁸ John Portman, *The Architect as Developer*, 107.

The forest green emblem of the 1996 Atlanta Olympics was designed to represent Atlanta's unofficial slogan as the City of Trees.⁶⁹ Atlanta's surprisingly lush canopy of trees has long been considered to be one of its key characteristics in the city that lacks the locational advantages of other urban centers.⁷⁰ City officials are well aware of the value of Atlanta's unique natural quality: Atlanta's 1995 comprehensive development plan listed the city's canopy to be "one of the outstanding positive elements of Atlanta's image and identity as a city."⁷¹ Here we again see a political self-awareness of the city's identity and a proud attachment to a unique feature of the southern metropolis. In the 1995 comprehensive plan, John Portman's Peachtree Center is listed alongside the city's tree canopy as another defining feature of the city. How can the city balance the preservation of its natural landscape alongside the full-fledged support of the continued development of Portman's megastructural project in the city's center? While these two elements seem to be completely conflicting, Portman's Peachtree Center interestingly works in conversation with the city's natural landscape.⁷²

This conversation between Portman's practice and the city's natural landscape is not evident from afar. An aerial photograph of the Peachtree Center (Figure 2) shows the dense network of structures towering over a lush forest that expands in to the horizon. The SunTrust Plaza (left) and the Westin Peachtree Hotel (right) enclose the network of structures and define the mixed-use space as a singular, dense unit. The parking lot in the foreground appears as a support system of pavement and production from which these

⁶⁹ "Atlanta 1996 Olympics,"

⁷⁰ AIA guide to Architecture PAGE XIX

⁷¹ *City of Atlanta Comprehensive Development Plan* (1995), 425. The other four features that the city defined as characteristic of Atlanta's urban form (and will be discussed further in this chapter) are 1) Neighborhoods; 2) The Peachtree Street Spine; 3) Nodal Development; and 4) Railroads. It is telling that the city's natural form is detailed as a critical feature in projecting a positive image of Atlanta within a publication that is focused on economic development and investment throughout the city.

structures grow in stark contrast with the abounding forest on the other side. While this aerial image places Atlanta's architecture and its natural landscape in apparent conflict, Portman actually employs organic forms that quote Atlanta's abounding landscape in the isolated complex.

When Portman was in graduate school, famed architect Frank Lloyd Wright told Portman, "Young man, go seek Emerson."⁷³ Portman has held on to this advice for his entire career.⁷⁴ It's hard to believe that Portman's mixed-use megastructural complex in Atlanta contains Emersonian ideals. The following exploration of Portman's engagement with organic forms will examine the seemingly contradictory practice of development embellishing Atlanta's natural image.

The site plan for the Peachtree Center's most iconic skyscraper, the SunTrust Plaza (Figure 3), depicts an orderly tree lining enclosing the tower's plot. This landscaping effort does not recall the overgrown tree canopy overwhelming the rest of the city. Instead, the ordered trees enclose the plaza's right-angled plot to create distinct plaza space between the street and the circular base of the tower. The rectangular shape of the tower rises out of this circular base, completing the interaction between three distinct geometric forms. The completely inorganic scheme is contained within a natural, albeit designed, barrier.

The glass façade of the SunTrust plaza interestingly reflects the rigid landscaping of the building's site. The sturdy skyscraper stands distinctly detached from the city's street and the concrete base does little to communicate natural forms when viewed from street level, but when viewed from afar—as monument or power statement—the city's

⁷⁴ See: *John Portman Visits Fallingwater* follows Portman on his 2012 visit to Wright's famous building that exemplifies a connection between architecture and the natural world.

discrete tree canopy is amazingly echoed in the SunTrust's façade. The distinct, organized landscape design of the plaza in no way echoes the city's defining tree canopy but the SunTrust's façade interestingly reflects an obscured image of the natural forms as though it is communicating the complete embodiment of Atlanta's distinctive tree canopy.

There are full-grown trees within the SunTrust's atrium that confirm the function of the reflective façade as symbolically absorbing Atlanta's arbor. That being said, the expansive space, sculptural forms, and sterile lighting of the SunTrust atrium overwhelm and belittle the green inclusions in the interior. Feeble remnants of Atlanta's tree canopy succumb to the pressure of commerce inside of the symbolic skyscraper. While this may be the case for this Peachtree Center project, other Portman structures employ vegetation as an experiential spatial tool.

Moving less than a block from the SunTrust brings a viewer back to Portman's famous Regency Hyatt Atlanta to absorb its notoriously extravagant interior space.⁷⁵ Both of the SunTrust and the Hyatt interestingly employ natural forms (as either experiential interior elements or symbolic pronouncements of Atlanta's natural character), but the short space sitting between them is often barren and inactive. It's as though Portman's structures are mirages that a deprived viewer develops in the deserted streets once isolated from The City of Trees.

John Portman believed that the Hyatt's distinctive design would set the hotel apart from competitors.⁷⁶ The architect must be quoted at length to illustrate his entrepreneurial ambition and highlight the stark uniqueness of the Hyatt's design in the 1960s:

⁷⁵ The SunTrust is located at 303 Peachtree St NE and the Hyatt is located at 265 Peachtree St NE.

⁷⁶ Portman, "Architecture as Social Art," 30.

I didn't want the hotel to be just another set of bedrooms. The typical central-city hotel had always been a cramped thing with a narrow entranceway, a dull and dreary lobby for registration, elevators over in a corner, a closed elevator cab, a dimly lighted corridor, a nondescript doorway, and a hotel room with a bed, a chair, and a hole in the outside wall. That was the central-city hotel. I wanted to do something in total opposition to all this. I wanted to explode the hotel; to open it up; to create a grandeur of space, almost a resort, in the center of the city. The whole idea was to open everything up; take the hotel from its closed, tight position and explode it; take the elevators and literally pull them out of the walls and let them become an experience within themselves, let them become a giant kinetic sculpture.⁷⁷

In this description of his intentions for the Hyatt's design, Portman is excitedly envisioning a powerful alteration to conventional commercial design. Interestingly, his description emphasizes architectural qualities and ignores his perspective as a developer looking for a return on his investment. His intentions to "explode" the space and "literally pull [the elevators] out of the walls" to create "giant kinetic sculpture" sound more like the ramblings of a crazed artist than the program of a practical architect or developer.⁷⁸ Portman's language is telling though, as his structures function best as placeless sculpture in the city.

John Portman's Peachtree Center was featured in the U.S. Pavilion at the 2010 Venice Biennale of Architecture.⁷⁹ The U.S. exhibition, *Workshopping: An American Model of Architectural Practice*, showcased the interdisciplinary and innovative spirit of American architects and designers.⁸⁰ The U.S. Pavilion's exhibition intended to represent

⁷⁷ Barnett, "Architecture for buildings people use everyday," 28.

⁷⁸ See Portman, "Architecture as social art," 28-30. Portman is aware that his imaginative intentions seemed crazy. He playfully notes that John O. Chiles, a prominent financier of architectural projects, referred to him as "the marijuana guy" because of his penchant for out-of-the-box design.

⁷⁹ John Portman & Associates, "Portman to Participate in 2010 Venice Biennale of Architecture." <https://www.portmanusa.com/en/news/portman-to-participate-in-2010-venice-biennale-of-architecture/>

⁸⁰ Michael Shapiro, "Foreword" in *Workbook, The Official Catalog of Workshopping: An American Model of Architectural Practice*, 2010, 3.

American architecture to a global audience.⁸¹ Portman plays a prominent role in the exhibition because of his groundbreaking position as “architect-initiator.”⁸²

Portman’s Peachtree Center is included in the exhibition because it displays Portman as a developer as much, if not more, than it does him as an architect. *Workbook* includes a four-page discussion of the development of the Peachtree Center. Details of Portman’s architectural features are only sparsely interspersed within the discussion of Portman the developer.⁸³

While the exhibition intended to highlight Portman’s success as a developer, his feature focused on “experiential installation.”⁸⁴ An acrylic glass model of the Peachtree Center is the central component of the exhibition. Five projectors cast sweeping footage of Portman’s interiors onto the walls. The projections interestingly attempt to recreate the experience of Portman’s dynamic spaces through tactical representations of grandiosity. The footage accentuates this by underemphasizing the physical structure of the spaces and highlighting their overwhelming enormity through the disorienting depiction of fragmented forms in motion. The Peachtree Center is a fictional place. It is allowed to switch and shrink to scale because it functions predominantly as an “experiential installation” in Atlanta.

Portman’s Peachtree Center is considered to have “[shaped] the skyline of Atlanta, transforming a once-quiet downtown into a bustling, international urban center.”⁸⁵ In *From Bauhaus to Our House*, Tom Wolfe reiterates this praise but refines it

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., 4.

⁸³ *Workbook*, 90-93.

⁸⁴ Danielle Roney, “Venice Biennale of Architecture U.S. Pavilion 2010” <http://www.danielleroney.com/portfolios/venice-biennale/>

⁸⁵ Shapiro, “Director’s Foreword” in *John Portman: Art and Architecture*, 6.

immensely. Wolfe writes, “[Portman’s hotels] have succeeded, more than any other sort of architecture, in establishing the look of Downtown, of Urban Glamour in the 1970s and 1980s.”⁸⁶ Wolfe is only addressing Portman’s influence in changing the look of the American downtown. Portman’s development in Atlanta illustrates the distinction between these two comments. Portman’s architecture projects an image of opulence and the Peachtree Center provides Atlanta with a distinct architectural identity. The complex is isolated from the rest of the city, though, and Portman’s tangible accomplishments in Atlanta do not extend beyond the image of his symbolic skyline.

Returning to the Lynchian analysis of Atlanta in the 1971 CAS will provide insight in to the symbolic function of the Peachtree Center in the city: “A moving view of the city is strong when seen from a distance. The development on Peachtree ridge is very dominant, and the buildings are well grouped. When driving on the expressway bypassing the CBD on the east, the view of the downtown skyline is very exciting.”⁸⁷ The Peachtree Center is an exciting road side tour.

Discussing his favorite views in his hometown, journalist Rembert Browne describes two approaches to Portman’s Peachtree Center. The first of Browne’s favorite Atlanta views is experienced from within his car, heading North on I-75 toward the Peachtree Center before leaving it in the rearview mirror as he heads east on the Freedom Parkway. Browne’s other favorite view is at the intersection of Boulevard NE and Freedom Parkway, where he often gets out of his car to admire Downtown as he heads

⁸⁶ Tom Wolfe, *From Bauhaus to Our House*, (1981), 94

⁸⁷ *Central Area Study: Technical Appendix*, 169

toward the Peachtree Center from the northeast. Browne loves the view of the Peachtree Center from his car at sunset in Atlanta: he explains, “It’s perfect. It’s Atlanta.”⁸⁸

Browne feels Atlanta in the view of Peachtree Center from without, from the within his car.⁸⁹ To Rembert Browne, Atlanta is looking at Portman’s city-within-a-city from the city it is within. Browne explains that he’s never been to the top of his favorite building, Portman’s Westin Peachtree Plaza Hotel, despite it being a site he fantasized about as a kid. He says, “I was fascinated by that weird, cylindrical building. I thought it was beautiful.” Browne is looking at Portman’s structures as objects, not architecture. The interconnected forms interact with the sky, the streets, and the landscape to provoke an emotional response as he views from the outside.

Discussing postmodern projects in U.S. Cities, David Harvey explains, “Above all, postmodern architecture and urban design of this sort conveys a sense of some search for a fantasy world, the illusory ‘high’ that takes us beyond current realities into pure imagination.”⁹⁰ The transcendence of reality into fantastic imagination is what Rembert Browne experiences in the view of the Peachtree Center. Portman’s Peachtree Center importantly functions in contributing meaningful place, rich with social associations, to Atlanta. Regardless of practicality, the image of the enclosed Peachtree Center delivers an ephemeral escape in to ones imagination. Portman’s Peachtree Center captures an inexplicable Atlanta atmosphere and radiates it in its form. Rembert Browne, viewing the Peachtree Center from the highway and the shade of the city’s tree canopy—*from*

⁸⁸ “Atlanta according to Rembert Browne,” *Creative Loafing* <http://local.clatl.com/story/atlanta-according-to-rembert-browne>

⁸⁹ It’s notable that in the paragraph after Rembert Browne finds his perfect Atlanta in the view of the Peachtree Center, he describes that Atlanta is a city built in a forest. Despite an awareness of Atlanta’s identity in its natural landscape, the view of Portman’s architecture still resonates with Browne as an emblem of Atlanta.

⁹⁰ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 97.

Atlanta—connects with the distant forms of the Peachtree Center and sees his city in the complex's concentrated and commodified image. The Peachtree Center is firmly rooted in Atlanta but it is placeless as sculpture.

Chapter 3 – Pop Culture

It's telling that the most recent popular TV series set in Atlanta are *The Walking Dead*, a dystopian zombie horror, and *Atlanta*, an award winning comedy-drama about Atlanta's hip-hop culture.⁹¹ A daunting image of the Peachtree Center is used in the credits of *The Walking Dead* to set the dark tone of the show. More importantly, the Peachtree Center isn't only used aesthetically in the opening sequence; it also sets the fictional story in a real place.⁹² Portman's architecture has featured in popular sci-fi films such as *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* in which the expansive interiors of his Peachtree Center structures provide a tangible illusoriness to a genre increasingly reliant on post-production tactics to illustrate the grand atmosphere that the architect realized in the 1970s and 1980s.⁹³ While these representations of dystopian futurism utilize Atlanta's atmospheric architecture to support stories set in other cities (or worlds for that matter), *The Walking Dead* stands apart in staying true to place and setting the story in Atlanta. The question must be asked: why Atlanta?

In "Mass Shock Therapy for Atlanta's Psych(ot)ic Suburban Legacy," Paul Boshears argues that Atlanta's history of *resurgens*, suburbanization, and white flight plays a critical role in the first season of *The Walking Dead*. The only survivors of the zombie apocalypse are in Atlanta's northern suburbs. This speaks to the longstanding perception of the safety of white suburbanization in Atlanta. Boshears explains the representation of the city center and its periphery in the show: "There are no people in Atlanta, only faceless, threatening bodies between the suburbanites and what they

⁹³ Kristi York Wooten, "How 1980s Atlanta Became the Backdrop for the Future," *The Atlantic* (March 30, 2015).

want.”⁹⁴ *The Walking Dead* simplifies the complexity of the narrative of two Atlantas into a spatial opposition between the livelihood of the suburb and the threat of the city. Further, Boshears explains that Atlanta’s history of consistent progress in the face of destruction is a clear parallel with the hunger of Atlanta’s zombies in the city. Atlanta, defined by rebirth, holds the ideal history for a town comprised of zombies relentlessly rising from the ashes of mass-elimination.⁹⁵

Boshears’ discussion of Atlanta’s history in relation to *The Walking Dead* is insightful but it’s hard to say that the show needed to be set in Atlanta. Recent tax incentives in Atlanta have led to the city’s newfound identity as a major film production hub in the United States. The colloquial epithet “Y’allywood” has now been added to the city’s inventory of nicknames. *The Walking Dead*, like numerous other films and TV series, capitalizes on these generous incentives from the city. For many, John Portman’s expansive atriums are convenient Y’allywood sites to be easily transformed into a fictional sci-fi terminus.⁹⁶ *The Walking Dead* is unique in incorporating site-specific metaphors in its story, but as the show moves away from Atlanta in later seasons it becomes clear that the city contributes very little to the plot. Portman’s architecture is usually recognizable behind its pop-cultural makeover, but Atlanta is quickly forgotten.

Rem Koolhaas’ criticism of John Portman speaks to the placelessness of Portman’s interior architecture: “With atriums as their private mini-centers, building no

⁹⁴ Paul Boshears, “Mass Shock Therapy for Atlanta’s Psych(ot)ic Suburban Legacy,” in *“We’re All Infected”*: Essays on AMC’s *The Walking Dead* and the Fate of the Human (Jefferson, NC: Mcfarland, 2014), 117

⁹⁵ Ibid., 112.

longer depend on specific locations. They can be anywhere.”⁹⁷ Portman’s isolated interiors, as well as the enclosure of the Peachtree Center in its entirety, provide the perfect setting to film a story set *anywhere else*. That said, every film utilizing Atlanta’s tax incentives and Portman’s architecture is a unique postmodern cultural artifact that defines Atlanta’s identity outside of its physical form and within the city’s relentless regulatory capitalist reasoning.

The embrace of film production illustrates Atlanta’s gravitation toward transitory urbanism. Conventioneers are comfortably welcomed to Atlanta by Portman’s famous hotels and an expanding airport,⁹⁸ and the city is now asking for film crews to periodically occupy the streets to create representations of dystopian unreality or cheap recreations of other cities.⁹⁹ The film industry’s exploitation of Atlanta’s aesthetic ambiguity to create fictional worlds that are completely detached from their site speaks to the narrative of Atlanta as a blank slate that governs the city’s physical and economic progress.

In a fascinating footnote, Fredric Jameson refers to John Portman as the Francis Ford Coppola of the new downtown.¹⁰⁰ This invites the following question: If Portman is the Coppola of architecture, what is his equivalent to Coppola’s career-confirming *Godfather* trilogy? This question could be answered through a discussion of the Hyatt’s popularity, the SunTrust Plaza’s symbolic stature, or the entire Peachtree Center as an architectural tour de force comparable to Coppola’s *Godfather*. Considering Atlanta-as-Y’allywood and the Peachtree Center as a popular location for film, though, one does not

⁹⁷ Koolhaas, “Atlanta,” 843.

⁹⁸ See: Koolhaas, “Atlanta,”

⁹⁹ See, for example, Atlanta as Chicago in *Insurgent*, or Atlanta as New York in *Anchorman 2*.

¹⁰⁰ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 421 (Footnote 19)

need to move out of Coppola's field to find an equivalent work in Portman. Portman's *Godfather* is *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay*, in which The Atlanta Marriott Marquis serves as a portion of the fictional Capitol of Panem. *The Hunger Games* does not have the same cultural impact of any of Coppola's works, but the film marks the full realization of Portman's architectural program in the same way that the *Godfather* defines Coppola's auteurship.

The 52-story atrium of the Marriott communicates a quasi-contradictory futurist-nostalgia for a community of a fictional Atlanta past. In Portman's expansive interiors, Atlanta's history is forgotten in fantasy. Discussing the role of the atrium in his architecture, Portman explains, "The whole concept of shared space is based on the human desire for a release from confinement. . . . it gives you a sense of spiritual freedom."¹⁰¹ Portman's quote is referring to the general problems of crime and congestion related to the urban organization of many U.S. cities, produced in part by the then-prominent ideology of modernist planning that is criticized by Portman for lacking life.¹⁰² Unfortunately, the "human desire for a release from confinement" discussed by Portman is not a thoughtful reflection on his own position as an architect, developer, and influential figure in a city with a history as a central hub in the Deep South where slavery was a foundational force of development.¹⁰³ This shows that the full function of Portman's atmospheric architecture is to be a placeless escape from the confines of reality (read: Atlanta's history) in to a fantasy world. For this reason, the role of

¹⁰¹ *The Architect as Developer*, 117

¹⁰² *The Architect as Developer*,

¹⁰³ Stephen Davis, "Civil War: Atlanta Home Front," *New Georgia Encyclopedia* (March 10, 2003) <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/civil-war-atlanta-home-front>. One-fifth of Atlanta's population was comprised of enslaved African Americans at the beginning of the Civil War. Atlanta's prominent role as a central transportation node in the Deep South must also be noted. Portman's ignorance is revealing as the architect capitalizes on what is virtually the same transportation system in designing his architecture for conventioners.

Portman's architecture in *The Hunger Games* marks the final realization of his design effort to create placeless architecture.

The role of the Marriott Marquis in *The Hunger Games* marks the fulfillment of Portman's fantastic fiction and further supports the reality of spectacle as urban amenity. Donning the big-screen maquillage, the Marriot's true identity is paradoxically revealed. It is a grand space of placelessness, calling for an artificial theater of action within the emptiness. To find representation of Atlanta outside of Portman's fantasy, look no further than *Atlanta*.

Atlanta is about Atlanta today, which means that *Atlanta* is about hip-hop; the industry for which contemporary Atlanta is best known. A show titled *Atlanta* is as obviously about hip-hop as *The Walking Dead* is about zombies. In detailing hip-hop culture and chronicling an "authentic" urban experience,¹⁰⁴ *Atlanta* becomes a show about space; it is about the street, the neighborhood, and addressing an urban reality in reaction to stereotype and derivative representation. The series endeavors to ground the commodified glamour and fantastic image that represents Atlanta (in both the city's hip-hop culture and John Portman's architectural fantasy) in the reality of its place.

¹⁰⁴ *Atlanta* is a fictional show, but in its narrative of the mundane it argues its authenticity purely in contrast with the stereotypes attached to hip-hop culture. Donald Glover, the creator, co-writer, and star of *Atlanta* (as well as a musician and participant in hip-hop culture), explains, "I think, like, the stereotype of rappers, like, loving that life and, like, glorifying it as far as, like, wanting everybody to live that way, I think that's kind of - I think that's just, like, a false stereotype." (Fresh Air, "Donald Glover Challenges Stereotypes About Rappers In 'Atlanta,'" NPR.org, last modified November 1, 2016, <http://www.npr.org/2016/11/01/500225189/donald-glover-challenges-stereotypes-about-rappers-in-atlanta>.)

The promotional video for *Atlanta* captures the atmosphere of the show.¹⁰⁵ The nearly four minute diptych-like split-screen promo perfectly fragments Atlanta's complexity within a consistently somber tone. The video begins with an image of midtown skyscrapers on the left and an out of focus highway on the right. Text reading "ATLANTA" emerges in the foreground as the beginning of Rihanna's "Same Ol' Mistakes"—a cover of Tame Impala's "New Person, Same Old Mistakes"—provides the perfect rhythmic backing as the screens cut between images of suburbia and forest. The opening seconds of this vague split-screen promo, set to the sounds of a Barbadian pop-star's rendering of a song by an Australian psychedelic pop-rock group, perfectly prepares the viewer for a show about Atlanta and its hip-hop culture. This song captures Atlanta's ambiguous-but-recognizable hip-hop identity as defined by a mutated form of the foundational hip-hop practice of "sampling."¹⁰⁶ Atlanta's hip-hop sound is a postmodern pastiche of musical styles and sounds processed through the city's own deeply referential artistic ancestry. The result of this is a collective hip-hop identity defined by individual eccentricity. I argue that these individual idiosyncrasies are held together by Atlanta's symbolic image in the Peachtree Center's sculptural form.

After the quick opening sequence in the *Atlanta* promo, the music abruptly cuts out and the viewer is hit with a remarkable silence. Sounds of the city reverberate as aerial shots of burnt-down houses are juxtaposed with Atlantans walking (at times backwards) along the city's shady streets. It's confusing. It's distant. Is it Atlanta?

¹⁰⁵ "Atlanta Season 1 'Inhale' Promo [HD] FX, Donald Glover, Bret E. Benson, Carra Greer," video file, 03:54, YouTube, posted by We Got This Covered, September 1, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z7OB6CIZeOY>.

About a minute in to the promo, a longer split screen shot of the Peachtree Center skyline is juxtaposed with a concrete tunnel overgrown with weeds (Figure 4). The sound of an airplane landing grows louder and an airport announcement is heard. The recognizable skyline and the rumble of a landing airplane exemplifies the experience many have in Atlanta: arrive at the enormous airport, take a cab to the enormous hotel, then take a cab back to the enormous airport. This shot provides the recognizable image of Atlanta to a viewer while reminding them of their distance from it in reality. As the noise of the airplane landing grows louder, the camera on the right flies toward the daunting tunnel at a disorienting pace while the image of the Peachtree Center remains mostly still. These are the two Atlantas, side-by-side, disjointed but together. *Atlanta* is guiding the viewer to Atlanta at street level, defined in contrast to the city's identifiable aerial image. It is no surprise that the Peachtree Center is absent throughout most of the series about hip-hop culture and life in Atlanta.

The split screen image depicts the Peachtree Center as the symbolic representation of Atlanta from afar while embodying one side of the "two Atlantas" within the frame. The isolated complex provides a place for the city to define itself against. In the *Atlanta* promo, the Peachtree Center is set in opposition with the "authentic" Atlanta on the street level. The Peachtree Center clearly communicates a divide within the city. The enclosed complex contrasts with the expanding bounds of the city to superficially fulfill the representational requirements of a major urban center.

In a 2009 article on Atlanta hip-hop artist Gucci Mane, pop-music critic Jon Caramanica identifies Atlanta as "hip-hop's center of gravity." Caramanica locates the key Producers in the industry and explains their contribution in defining Atlanta's sound

as “triumphant but moody, synth-heavy with sharp snares, all sprinkled with almost gothic overtones.” Read in isolation, this set of adjectives better describes The Phantom of the Opera theme song than it does any song on *The State vs. Radric Davis*, the Gucci Mane album that Caramanica is reviewing. Atlanta’s hip-hop sound is incredibly hard to pinpoint but remains curiously recognizable. Caramanica does well in describing this aspect of the city’s sound, explaining that the handful of Atlanta producers (few of whom are native Atlantans) all bring different approaches to construct “a style that has trademark elements but is flexible enough to accommodate a range of influences.”¹⁰⁷ This flexibility has been doggedly tested in the eight years since Caramanica’s 2009 article but Atlanta’s powerful position in the hip-hop industry has only strengthened. In 2016, Caramanica again wrote about Atlanta’s hip-hop dominance, this time in an article about the self-described “bubblegum-trap”¹⁰⁸ of the self-proclaimed “King of the Teens,”¹⁰⁹ Lil Yachty, who Caramanica likens to the folk-rock band Bon Iver while outlining the connection between the rising star and the established Atlanta hip-hop icon, Gucci Mane.¹¹⁰

The unusual sonic descriptor “bubblegum-trap” carries a complex semantic history that speaks to the traceable lineage of fragmented quotation that defines Atlanta’s constantly mutating hip-hop culture. It is a derivative form of the “the trap,” a term popularized by Atlanta’s creative class that is used to refer to a physical place, a concept,

¹⁰⁷ Jon Caramanica “Gucci Mane, No Holds Barred,” *New York Times* (December 11, 2009).
<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/13/arts/music/13gucci.html>.

¹⁰⁸ Chris Martins, “Lil Yachty, Rap’s Next Big Thing, on His Unapologetic Approach to Hip-Hop: ‘I Honestly Couldn’t Name Five Songs’ By Tupac & Biggie,” *Billboard* (August 25, 2016),
<http://www.billboard.com/articles/news/7487023/lil-yachty-interview-fall-preview>

¹⁰⁹ *King of the Teens*, performed by Lil Yachty, 2016, compact disc.

¹¹⁰ Jon Caramanica, “Lil Yachty and 21 Savage: Atlanta Shows a Range of Hip-Hop,” *New York Times* (July 27, 2016).

and a style of music.¹¹¹ Killer Mike, an Atlanta hip-hop artist, describes his understanding of the term: “Nowadays, it’s transformed into a culture of sorts. . . . But the literal term ‘trap’ meant being in a physical place of selling dope and being able to trap the money because there was only one way in and one way out.”¹¹² Killer Mike is explaining the prevalence of narratives of the “trap house” in Atlanta’s hip-hop industry. The physical space has become synonymous with Atlanta’s sound and hip-hop identity. The sound of “the trap” has ranged from the funk-influenced rhythms of OutKast¹¹³ to the simplified, but “dirtier,”¹¹⁴ rolling snare-snap over rumbling-bass that defined Atlanta’s sound in the mid-2000s.¹¹⁵ The stark differences between these “trap” sounds indicate that “the trap” is not as much a term to describe a literal site or a musical style as it is a product of a spatial discourse in which a sound must situate itself in a place to contextualize and legitimize it within a larger hip-hop conversation. That being said, Lil Yachty’s “bubblegum-trap” holds little weight in a conversation of the evolution of a Southern sound.

Lil Yachty’s music is not grounded in reality yet the artist situates his work within Atlanta by employing the city’s spatial vocabulary. His first mixtape, *Lil Boat*,¹¹⁶ is ostensibly a concept album in which the 2003 children’s film *Finding Nemo* is the central theme. The addition of the term “trap” to “bubblegum,” an already apt descriptor

¹¹¹ Rodney Carmichael, “Culture Wars” *NPR* (March 15, 2017).

<http://www.npr.org/sections/therecord/2017/03/15/520133445/culture-wars-trap-innovation-atlanta-hip-hop> In this article, “Traplanta” is introduced as yet another nickname for Atlanta.

¹¹² “Stankonia 15: Killer Mike on ‘Snappin & Trappin’,” OutKast’s Legacy + The Birth of Trap,” *Okayplayer* (2015), 2. <http://www.okayplayer.com/news/killer-mike-on-stankonia-trap-origins-outkast-legacy.html>

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ “Trap Music: Under Lock & Key,” *DJ Mag*. <https://djmag.com/content/trap-music-under-lock-key>

of his playful sound on its own, indicates an awareness of the importance of place in the hip-hop industry. Lil Yachty is often labeled an “internet artist”¹¹⁷ who reflects the movement of the hip-hop industry toward a post-regional period. If this were to be the case, why would the “internet-artist” endeavor to situate his sound in a tangible place with the place-based “trap” label?

In his book on hip-hop culture and space, cultural critic Murray Forman argues, “...the discursive spaces of rap are distinct, providing a unique arena for particular kinds of expression and articulation that in various instances reinforce, challenge, and play with the dominant social codes.”¹¹⁸ The discursive space (i.e. “the trap”) of Atlanta’s hip-hop industry adheres to Forman’s argument that a spatial vocabulary provides a conceptual domain to assert ones identity in reaction to dominant social codes in the urban sphere. Artists often identify with the culture of “the trap” to authenticate their counter-cultural character and corroborate the machismo identity that many hip-hop artists boast as they strive to achieve pop-stardom. Atlanta’s space-based identification is also importantly grounded in its place to permit the deviation from conventional hip-hop tropes. The fossilization of Atlanta’s inequity in the symbolic-but-exclusionary Peachtree Center complex allows for the African American re-imagination of Atlanta’s identity outside of the concentrated image of its political power structure.

In Atlanta, hip-hop’s discursive spaces are also vitally grounded in physical place as a result of the city’s transparently polarized built environment where social divisions are communicated in urban form. This is perhaps best illustrated in the song “Welcome to

¹¹⁷ Jon Caramanica, “Lil Yachty, Lil Uzi Vert and Playboi Carti, Oddball Rap’s Children, at Play” *New York Times* (February 28, 2016).

¹¹⁸ Murray Forman, *The ‘Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2002),

Atlanta” in which a number of Atlanta artists ask one another where they are from and, somewhat surprisingly, all provide different answers. Rich Homie Quan raps, “A-T-L-A-N-T-A, GA is where I’m from/ East Atlanta that’s where I stay, AKA the Slums.”¹¹⁹ The identifiable image of Atlanta’s skyline comes to mind in the Atlanta that Rich Homie Quan is “from,” but it is left behind as he elaborates in contradistinction to this image to define his authentic identity in the “slum” in which he “stays.”

Rich Homie Quan’s spatial distinction between “from” and “stay” adheres to Geographer Yi Fu Tuan’s distinction between space and place. Tuan argues that space and place are related to one another by definition but there is a transformative process in which space becomes place once given social meaning. He gives an example of a castle’s space transforming into a meaningful place once one imagines that Hamlet lived there.¹²⁰ In isolation, Atlanta’s skyline is a sculptural conglomeration of concrete and glass, barren of social meaning but symbolic of the city. Without the cultural relevancy of hip-hop culture, Portman’s placeless complex is the empty castle, superficially devoid of historic significance in its form. Atlanta’s hip-hop culture implanted meaning into the concentrated image of the city in the Peachtree Center. Furthermore, the hip-hop industry utilizes the image of the city in the Peachtree Center to ground its sound, but artists also employ a specific spatial vernacular to situate their identity outside of the reflective glamour and commodified sculptural forms of the complex. This is evident in the number of music videos in which the city’s skyline is represented in quick cutaways to situate a viewer in Atlanta before zooming in on the hip-hop artists in the suburban streets, inside

¹²⁰ Yi Fu Tuan, *Space and Place* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 4

their homes, or in the woods.¹²¹ Atlantans identify with the image of the city in the Peachtree Center and utilize it to symbolize a collective identity. In “Welcome to Atlanta,” the artists celebrate their city and find camaraderie in its image, but each artist identifies with specific neighborhoods outside of it, in “the trap” in which they “stay.”

Outkast, the esteemed Atlanta hip-hop duo most responsible for putting the city “on the map” musically in the early 1990s, took a large risk in addressing place-based subject in their music as they earned national recognition for their avant-garde sound.¹²² Outkast’s identification of neighborhoods like “East Point” and “College Park,” meant little to a national audience whose attention was almost exclusively been focused on hip-hop music coming out of New York and Los Angeles.¹²³ At the 1995 Source Awards, the announcement that Outkast had won the award for Best New Artist was met with collective jeers from a hip-hop industry audience comprised of bicoastal players who had, up to that point, only directed their energy toward maintaining hip-hop’s foundational east-west coast rivalry. As Outkast accepted the award, Andre 3000, one-half of the Outkast duo, delivered a famously prescient remark: “The South got something to say!”¹²⁴

It was exactly Outkast’s geographic freedom from the bicoastal pull of the hip-hop that permitted the city’s rise as an eccentric alternative to the hip-hop coasts before quickly becoming “hip-hop’s center of gravity”¹²⁵ Outkast put Atlanta “on the map” within the rigid dichotomy of the hip-hop industry as the group gained celebrity and fully

¹²¹ See, for example, “We Still Here” by Bleu Davinci <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-2Q-ryjqN6Y>

¹²² T. Hasan Johnson, “Outkast” in *Icons of Hip Hop: An Encyclopedia of the Movement, Music, and Culture, Volume 2* (Westport: Greenwood Press) ed. Mickey Hess, 460.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Paul Cantor “How the 1995 Source Awards Changed Hip-Hop Forever,” *Complex* (Aug 03, 2015). <http://www.complex.com/music/2015/08/how-the-1995-source-awards-changed-rap-forever>

¹²⁵ Jon Caramanica “Gucci Mane, No Holds Barred,” *New York Times* (December 11, 2009).

infiltrated the national pop-cultural consciousness. More importantly, the group's identification of specific neighborhoods also put Atlanta's urban organization into the mental maps of listeners.¹²⁶

The concept of attaining a cultural position on a large-scale map complicates this chapter in which Atlanta's hip-hop industry is being analyzed to provide a lens in to life on the street. That said, viewing the way in which Atlanta's hip-hop industry maps the city will provide a case study to understand the way in which the city's organization is navigated by its users.¹²⁷

Atlanta's 1971 Central Area Survey borrowed from Kevin Lynch's *The Image of the City* in an attempt to superficially fulfill the requirements for imaging a city. In his book, Lynch explains, "Environmental images are the result of a two-way process between the observer and his environment."¹²⁸ In the first chapter, it was argued that Atlanta's planning is a one-way process within which the city's users are not considered. If not considered, Atlanta's users still must relate to their environment. In the music video for Jermaine Dupri's "Welcome to Atlanta,"¹²⁹ Dupri and Ludacris, another Atlanta hip-hop artist, take a viewer through the streets of Atlanta on a "crunk" sightseeing bus-tour. A Lynchian analysis of this video will reveal the way in which Atlanta's users relate to their environment.

¹²⁶ Atlanta's infrastructure was even driven in to the national limelight with Outkast's "Spaghetti Junction" on the 2000 album *Stankonia*, named after the city's tangled automobile interchange.

¹²⁸ Lynch, *The Image of the City*

¹²⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j5W73HaVQBg>

It must be noted that this song has the same title as the Migos song mentioned earlier. The earlier song is clearly an intentional quotation that indicates a generational gap stylistically but is working within the same general framework. Mutating form defines the industry.

In Lynch's study of the recognizable image of the American city, he identifies paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks to be the five physical forms that are loosely identifiable most city images.¹³⁰ To locate the referable forms, Lynch asked a sample group of city dwellers to illustrate their city. He requested "descriptions, locations, and sketches, and for the performance of imaginary trips."¹³¹ Lynch explains that the five physical forms he recognizes throughout most citizens mental mapping are largely subjective (i.e. one's path is another's edge).¹³² The "Welcome to Atlanta" video is the performance a virtual tour through which Atlanta's image can be identified by understanding the meaningful places that the artists choose to depict within a 3'45'' tour of the city. Applying the Lynchian model to the video will provide insight in to the hip-hop artist's perception of Atlanta. With insight in to the virtual tour, what descriptions, locations, and sketches are provided by the video?

The video begins in Downtown Atlanta. The artists are outside of the Phillips Arena, Atlanta's famous event space where athletic events and concerts are held. Rather than beginning in the Peachtree Center to illustrate "downtown," the artists align their image with the home of the Atlanta Hawks, communicating that this will be a tour of Atlanta's cultural hot spots. The façade of the Phillips Arena spells out "ATLANTA" in its structural frame. In the video, it operates much like Robert Venturi's concept of the postmodern "decorated shed" that communicates its program in its structure.¹³³ The Phillips Arena does not function as a site on the tour; it is solely the referable descriptor of the video's message: welcome to Atlanta.

¹³⁰ Lynch, *The Image of the City*, 47

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 48.

¹³³ Robert Venturi, *Learning From Las Vegas*.

Kevin Lynch recognizes urban paths as one of the most crucial forms in the city that contributes to one's mental image of the city as users predominantly engage with the city through movement within it. Paths are largely absent from the "Welcome to Atlanta" video. The use of the map to cut between neighborhoods communicates that these cultural pit stops define the city much more than its built environment. The paths between neighborhoods are insignificant in this representation of Atlanta. There are shots of the artists on the tour bus but these do not qualify as identifiable paths as the figures on the bus are in the foreground and most recognizable features of travel are forgotten.

As the bus departs from the Phillips Arena in Downtown and heads toward the neighborhood of College Park, the image of the Peachtree Center is set in the background. It's telling that the Phillips Arena serves as the starting point and represents "Downtown" on the map but the Peachtree Center is illustrated as the recognizable remnant of their downtown departure. Lynch explains that landmarks are external points of reference in the city. He says, "They are usually a rather simply defined physical object, building, sign, store, or mountain." There is little indication that the Peachtree Center is anything other than a sculptural form in Atlanta. Its function is not communicated in its two-dimensional representation and the city's "new Downtown" is entirely avoided in the tour. That said, it serves an important purpose as a landmark in the city. The Peachtree Center projects the image of the city in its condensed form, anchoring the "Welcome to Atlanta" tour as it moves between tree-lined neighborhoods and night clubs that lack identifiable elements of a specific city. The isolated, enclosed, and placeless Peachtree Center gives place to Atlanta's ambiguous urban space in its distant image.

Lynch explains that landmarks “are frequently used clues of identity and even of structure...”¹³⁴ The Peachtree Center serves to anchor the hip-hop identity projected in this video. The tour takes us through the sprawling bounds of the city without ever entering the central complex. The Peachtree Center serves as the point of departure and the central location on the city’s map to superficially structure the expansive cultural tour without structuring the sprawling city.

The enclosed Peachtree Center acts as a distant landmark rather than a defined edge. In fact, the “Welcome to Atlanta” tour is a largely edgeless tour in form. Lynch defines edges as “Linear elements not used or considered as paths by the observer” that demarcate boundaries.¹³⁵ By moving over an aerial map, Jermaine Dupri seems to have unlimited access to the city. More importantly, Dupri seems to be crossing over social edges in the city. The tour begins in Downtown and can be viewed as Dupri’s tour of his Atlanta given to residents of the other. As he takes the tourists to different Atlanta neighborhoods, he is showcasing his Atlanta to the other Atlantans he picked up in downtown. As result of the “Welcome to Atlanta” tour, the tourists ultimately adopt a stereotypical hip-hop style and vernacular before returning on the bus home.

Lynch explains, “This analysis limits itself to the effects of physical, perceptible objects. There are other influences on imageability, such as the social meaning of an area, its function, its history, or even its name.”¹³⁶ It’s clear in the “Welcome to Atlanta” video that the artist’s understanding of Atlanta’s is defined by associated social meaning much more than physical form. What’s most telling about the video is the artist’s reliance on text and external elements to identify their city in its form. It’s clear that Atlanta, outside

¹³⁴ Lynch, *The Image of the City*, 48.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*,

¹³⁶ Lynch, *The Image of the City*, 46.

of the ordered image of the Peachtree Center, lacks the formal qualities of most American cities. For this reason, the distant sculptural form of the Peachtree Center complex is incredibly important to anchoring the city's eccentric cultural identity.

To return to Yi Fu Tuan's explanation that space becomes place once injected with social meaning, it's clear that the Hip-Hop industry and John Portman's Peachtree Center have a reciprocal relationship. The Peachtree Center grounds the placeless sites of social meaning in the city, and the city's hip-hop identity provides social meaning to Portman's sculptural space.

Atlanta's character is grounded in the city's symbolic image but exists outside of it. A highly spatialized Atlanta identity exists within the hip-hop industry that is defined by one's mental map of the city as informed by hip-hop culture. The city's cosmetic attempt to formalize a sprawling metropolis in the 1970s solidified the narrative of two Atlantas. In the effort to pave over the city's history, Atlanta's power structure fossilized it, thus permitting Atlanta's identity to finally be defined by complexity and contradiction as the hip-hop industry utilized a concentrated image of the city to give a collective identity to an industry defined by mutation and eccentricity. The Peachtree Center protects the city's contemporary identity from succumbing to disintegration and sprawl in a way that it only pretended to do for the city's form.

A recent article on the hip-hop website *Genius* quietly claims that Lil Uzi Vert, a Philadelphian, is the future of Atlanta's hip-hop sound.¹³⁷ Like Lil Yachty, Lil Uzi Vert is considered to be a post-regional "internet rapper."¹³⁸ Atlanta's spatialized hip-hop identity has adopted a unique form that allows the city's image to remain a referable

¹³⁷ Christina Lee, "Secret Weapon: K. Lee is Engineering the Sound of Atlanta's Hip-Hop Future," *Genius*. <https://genius.com/a/secret-weapon-k-lee-is-engineering-the-sound-of-atlanta-s-hip-hop-future>

force without requiring the reality of place. This mirrors the placeless and nearly fictional image of Atlanta in the Peachtree Center. Charles Jencks explains, “Eclecticism is the natural evolution of a culture with choice.”¹³⁹ In the highly spatialized hip-hop discourse, Atlanta’s concentrated but placeless plan perfectly permits idiosyncrasy in its image.

¹³⁹ Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*,” (Rizzoli, 1984), 127.

Images

Figure 1.



The development of the Peachtree Center.

Retrieved from: Portmanusa.com

Figure 2.



The Peachtree Center.
Retrieved from: Portmanusa.com

Figure 3.



The SunTrust Plaza.

Retrieved from: Portmanusa.com

Figure 4.



Split screen still from the *Atlanta* promo. The Peachtree Center is on the left.

Retrieved from: "Atlanta Season 1 'Inhale' Promo [HD] FX, Donald Glover, Bret E. Benson, Carra Greer," video file, 03:54, YouTube, posted by We Got This Covered, September 1, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z7OB6CIZeOY>.

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