

The BeltLine: The Art of the Urban Corridor

Atlanta is, as architect Rem Koolhaas has noted “a city in perpetual motion,” a moving landscape that emerged from overlapping transportation systems that resists meaningful urban experience and successful integration of cultural infrastructure. Founded as a hub of rail lines from Tennessee, the Atlantic coast, and the south in the nineteenth century, Atlanta has extended along two major interstates, I-75 and I-85 since the early 1950s. Those interstates cross in downtown, creating one of the worst traffic corridors in the US. In the late 1960s the city was encircled by a ring of interstate highway, I-285, which cut off the city from the adjacent suburbs and inscribed the racial polarization between primarily African American city and the until recently white suburbs. Atlanta has also built a system of airports starting already in the 1920s when the predecessor of today’s Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport, now the largest international air hub in the world, was placed in service. Railway, interstate highways, and airport have promoted circulation, fluidity, porosity, and economic development but thwarted any kind of sophisticated urbanism.

Atlanta could offer the perfect cinematic experience that urban development has brought us since the 1950s if the city had a functioning transportation network. However, instead of floating by stadia, malls, Olmsted designed parks, gleaming towers, and edge cities, one is more likely to get stuck in traffic and, involuntarily, jolted to an earlier historical era of urbanism when cities were laid out as a theatrical stage: a scenography created by topography, main streets, public squares, civic, religious, and cultural monuments, and distinct neighborhoods. The regular traffic jams, encouraged over decades of urban renewal projects, that bring Atlanta’s moving landscape to a halt, regularly set in relief the lack of that stage.



Atlanta 1853: street grids and incoming railroads with the gulch

The 1853 map of Atlanta captures the city's cosmogony and visualizes the twin competing forces of cinematic experience and flawed theatricality in Atlanta's urban experience that remain obstacles toward meaningful urban design until today. Three main rail lines curve in and out of the city; several square-shaped street grids--including the historic south of downtown--orient themselves toward the rail lines at various points creating a disjunction still noticeable today and challenge any attempt at an eloquent urban scenography. The train stations that traditionally serve as focal points and urban set pieces in nineteenth-century cities have been demolished by now; more consequentially, the incoming rail lines have left a dead space, the gulch, where three railroads join downtown from the south, east, and north that still forms an unresolved urban wasteland. In many cities, this would have been the space from which a functioning downtown would have been planned; here, it is now surrounded by sports arenas, Mercedes Benz Stadium and Phillips Arena, as well as the still defunct historical downtown. In the early 1900s, the city began to piece together the BeltLine, yet another layer of Atlanta's transportation networks, a railway encircling the entire city (at its edges in the above map). The BeltLine was designed to link the major rail lines to enable freight exchange outside the city center not to create urban destinations.

It is this BeltLine that has recently been elevated to the holy grail of Atlanta’s renewed efforts, a blueprint for urban definition, the arts, and a strategy to transform its urban destiny. Re-discovered at the end of the millennium in a Georgia Tech master’s thesis, the Atlanta BeltLine is a 22-mile former railroad corridor that surrounds the city’s historical core as it existed until the late 1960s before the city tore down its downtown train stations and experienced exponential growth along its major highways. Ryan Gravel, the thesis’ author who now oversees the Atlanta City Design Project, envisioned the BeltLine as “catalyst” for Atlanta’s ambition to be a “great city” as well as an antidote to suburban sprawl and Atlanta’s traffic woes. Gravel invoked Paris’ Le Viaduct des Arts and New York City’s High Line as inspirations for the Beltline’s future development. Since then, the BeltLine has been fraught with messianic hopes: creating critical urban mass, establishing a rail system linking current MARTA lines with the small neighborhoods that make up Atlanta, achieving walkability in a city notorious for traffic, building affordable housing, and constructing a corridor for the arts.



The BeltLine: railway line encircling the larger downtown area

Assessments of success to date have wavered considerably. Given the current lack of any significant contribution to Atlanta’s urban design, the *New York Times* recently called the BeltLine a “glorified sidewalk” (<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/12/us/atlanta-beltline.html?ref=todayspaper>). Since the end of the 1990s, only the Eastside trail, a narrow walkway that passes by retail on the affluent east side of downtown, has been finished. A large retail development at Ponce City Market, a converted Sears warehouse with high-end stores, offices, and apartments that connects to yet another retail mall, the Fourth Ward Park, and the Krog Street Market (basically a food court in a former industrial building) is located along this stretch of the path. However, live rail lines still prohibit any serious progress in some areas.

In contrast, admirers such as Allison Arieff have invoked the Golden Gate Bridge to call the BeltLine as “one of the largest, most wide-ranging urban redevelopment programs currently underway in the United States” (<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/13/opinion/what-happened-to-the-great-urban-design-projects.html>). While Atlanta still awaits the transformative quality of San Francisco’s icon, the idealistic hope for affordable housing inside the city has also rapidly given way to brutal economic realities: as BeltLine access has been in high demand and concrete visions in short supply, rising land prices have begun to price low and middle income residents out of the area. This has made the BeltLine project appear yet another gigantic development scheme matching, if not outlasting, urban renewal projects of the 1950s and 1960s.



Urban Design or Glorified Walkway?

Productive thinking about the BeltLine corridor as an urban space has been particularly challenging. Other cities with significant narrow urban corridors such as Vienna (the Ringstrasse sports a university, the Vienna Opera and the home of the Vienna Philharmonic, just to name a few world-famous items) or New York (Highline) have deployed the arts to shape urban corridors and enhance urban identity. In contrast, Atlanta has left this task of taking advantage of limited space along the railway corridor to chance and the good will of private entities. Perkins+Will, the large design firm in charge of the BeltLine Corridor Design, invoked the cinematic experience of the railway and articulated the standard as shaping “diverse landscapes through which the Atlanta BeltLine travels, creating an episodic experience in harmony with the urban fabric of the city” (<http://perkinswill.com/work/atlanta-beltline.html>). In this vision, there are few plans for urban definition, character, and scenography—a visual narrative—that would confront and creatively engage the economic and racial divides that have left deep marks in the city’s landscape.



Berlin: a former train station as museum

In other large cities, the art of the urban corridor has led to distinguished city design and deeply appreciated experiential space. The corridors created by the removal of both an ancient city wall in nineteenth-century Vienna or the artificial political wall acting as bulwark in post-world war II Berlin in the late 1980s presented challenges similar to the

vast unused railroad corridors in Atlanta. Both cities extensively used cultural infrastructure to shape a narrative, promoting the cities identity, activating memory, and developing dead urban areas. Creating new gathering spaces that turn urban corridors into destinations or connecting pieces have long been proven strategies to make cities highly identifiable, even creating a memory theatre.



Art and Urban Gathering Place: the new Whitney Museum at the New York High Line

In Atlanta, a city notorious for disregarding its past, the BeltLine emerged like a second chance to articulate Atlanta's relationship to its origination myth and *raison d'être*: the railways, as much cosmogony as a chance to redeem the multiple edge cities and perimeter malls via deliberate connections. Unlike Chicago which employed its railroad to create a highly visible urban definition of its downtown area and access to a vibrant business district, Atlanta had created a massive highway system that, above all, split the downtown area and severed and harmed the African-American business area; unlike Paris, which built an opera house (Bastille Opera) on the existing rail terminal footprint or Berlin which transformed a defunct railroad station from the past into a hypermodern transportation hub modelled on modern airports (Berlin Main Train Station), Atlanta had demolished its railroad terminals that were integral to shaping downtown. Instead, there is "the Gulch," a massive gaping hole downtown that defines an in-between space where the three historical rail lines which flow together downtown, a space that defies urban thinking in default street grids.

Can the BeltLine have the same transformative quality for Atlanta as the Golden Gate Bridge did for San Francisco? The Golden Gate Bridge was a paradigm of vision, aesthetic

beauty, engineering prowess, direction, connection, and expansion. The BeltLine was originally about creating railway transfer points outside the downtown area--a loop that the later I-285 mirrored on a larger scale when it linked I-75, I-85, and I-20 and encouraged the development of perimeter cities. I- 285 also went through the same piecemeal construction that the BeltLine is currently undergoing. Thus, in its efforts to stimulate billions of dollars in development, the BeltLine re-enacts more the traditional urban renewal projects that have brought us sprawling cities.

Atlanta's circular BeltLine will not magically produce urban definition, solve downtown problems, and improve connections in a global city defined by edge cities, perimeter malls, and an insufficient transportation system. The current BeltLine map shows that there are only a few areas that are logically connected, and communities struggle to link themselves to the BeltLine via parks and bike paths. Just passed the halfway point of its anticipated completion date in 2030, Atlanta's BeltLine appears to be heading for re-inscribing and re-enacting the experience of circulating traffic: not an aesthetic of regional destinations but the aesthetics of looping and circulating enacted by the neoliberal economy. As Georgia's political class divorced cities from economic development by creating special downtown development authorities, it has placed the public in the role of solicitors and assigned the matter of vision to developers--with the inevitable results.

The arts which often support creating a deeper urban vision and may be located at strategic sites have not been allocated a viable place in this investment scheme. Unlike Chicago, New York, Paris, Berlin, Vienna, Houston, Dallas—to name only a few global cities—which have been enriched by strategic use of museums, educational institutions, symphony halls, memorials, or theatres, the BeltLine has set aside the railway corridor to stage the “largest outdoor public art exhibition in the south.” Murals, sculptures, and street performances along the corridor inscribe the sense of passage that is inherent in the railways, highways, and the circulations of merchandize these days. Thus, an annual lantern parade in September has become the most prominent art event on the corridor.

It will take creative thinking, place-making skills, and collaboration between multiple

stakeholders to create a profound urban experience. For example, the city of New York collaborated with a high-profile architecture team that specialized in architecture and urban performance to turn the High Line, one of the ostensible models of the BeltLine, into a prominent art work itself, deploying the new Renzo Piano-designed Whitney museum at one of the High Line entry points and a flexible performance space, The Shed, at its destination. The firm Diller, Scofidio + Renfro developed an urban park that links parts of the city and situates cultural institutions as a destination that can be reached via the railroad turned urban park. Here, as in many parts of the world, markers and destinations, cultural infrastructure contributes to or provides a conduit for urban design that creates an experiential space and a narrative for a city's identity.