

MARTA: Urban Performance or the Art of the Town Center

For those of us who advocate for sustainable urban communities, the implementation of subway or light rail system has always been about urban performance in the widest sense: efficient mobility, clean environments, urban access, good density, and reaching exciting urban destinations. From this perspective, it would appear to make sense to support the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority's (MARTA) efforts to promote "transit-oriented development" as well as "vibrant, pedestrian-friendly, and genuinely integrated with transit." This vision suggests an image of friendly town centers, a theatre of well-crafted urban sub-areas connected among one another. However, in practice the current developments in planning and execution are distinctly more sobering and revive the specter of urban renewal practices that we had hoped were already left behind. The question is: can a look at the performativity of MARTA help stimulate a more intriguing and, above all, practical approach to its stations as center of urban performance?



MARTA Five Points Station

Edge City

Understanding the underlying forces of history is key to understanding the disparity between vision and reality. Unlike their European counterparts or the New York subway system, which hail from the early 1900s, the MARTA system was developed in the age of suburbanization. The inherited infrastructure directly reflects many of Atlanta's political challenges. The downtown connection network inside the perimeter is rather minimal, reflecting the fact the system emerged when urban flight was in full swing. The city built highways that divide up the

downtown area and the many parking lots are another form of urban inefficiency and barriers to qualitative density, that is, good urban form and interplay of multiple constituencies. MARTA's northern extension into the affluent suburbs of Buckhead, Sandy Springs, and Dunwoody serves business travelers with easy access to the airport while the eastern extension follows the historical railroad line toward the sea. Many of the stations function as collecting points for commuters even farther removed in the metro region rather than as points of destination or dwelling; thus, the large-scale stations become mirror images of the notorious highway system that spawned and reflects Atlanta's suburbanization. Last but not least, the currently existing MARTA rail network inscribes the deep-seated resistance of conservative counties (above all, Cobb) which opted out of a regional rail network, leaving large areas of the metro area disconnected and unserved.



Aerial of Perimeter Center

MARTA's new strategy of creating affordable housing and apartment complexes near existing stations may be reinforcing the historical dynamic built into Atlanta's urban sprawl. Although the strategy is a commendable and well-intentioned effort to make up for some of the large-scale urban sprawl, some of these negative historical forces tend to reappear in reverse. Here the need for affordable housing and mid- to upper range apartments in the current economy have adverse effects as they are being deployed around its stations by developers and encouraged by MARTA.



MARTA Station as Urban Barricade

For example, at the Kensington Station along the blue line, MARTA’s vision of a “Town Center” is still guided by the sprawl from which it was created: what is really being envisioned is by no means a town center but rather an enhanced “park+ride facility” with a “pedestrian network” to guide passengers from cars and buses to the station. Furthermore, the challenges of jurisdictions—the station borders on land owned by DeKalb County and Avondale Estates—make it highly unlikely (short of a political miracle) that a town center worthy of the name with easy access to urban life can be developed at this location. In this new context, “town center” is simply a seductive marketing term for a collection of bus connections to shopping in Buckhead, Midtown, Downtown, and the distant Northlake Mall.



Kensington MARTA Station; The Effect of Urban Sprawl

One stop farther west, the Avondale Station development threatens to re-inscribe the previous sprawl through a new type of edge city, this time consisting of apartment complexes at the nodal points of the original urban sprawl. Edge Cities—suburban formations composed of

business districts and housing remote from traditional downtown centers—have defined development in Atlanta for decades. Quasi-cities such as Perimeter Center, mostly devoid of public space and cultural amenities and thus the antithesis of true town centers, have focused growth along the major interstates of the Atlanta Metro Region. If the ongoing projects are any indication, MARTA’s goal of supporting the building of housing complexes near its stations may reinvent urban renewal by strategically adding edge cities of rental apartments with interchangeable architecture. The new edge cities rapidly taking shape via planned developments around MARTA stations such as the ones around East Lake, Avondale Station, and now perhaps Kensington Station are the latest version—now trailing the existing subway system rather than the expanding highway system.

Edge city developments compete with and have often undermined traditional downtowns or town centers. They express the power of large development firms in the neoliberal economy who build their own privatized, large developments without the need to include traditional communal, cultural, and educational structure. Legally and economically, they encroach on communities, drain resources and potentially reduce needed tax receipts for one or more communities. The architecture of these large-scale developments often has little relation to the area in which they are located but might resemble similar edge cities in other cities or countries. It is thus quite concerning to see Avondale, a unique city that is on the National Register of Historic Places that should be a wonderful destination in the metro network of smaller cities, in danger of becoming the latest outpost of this kind of anti-urbanism.

Town Center

In the documents for its stations, MARTA presents the idea of town centers as a selling point. The idea has a long history, and its invocation is designed to recall several different models. In the best sense, town centers are rich mixed use centers that are comprised of commercial magnets, at the crossroads of major roads or more recently railroads, public institutions such as churches, town halls, courthouses, and amenities such as theatres, libraries, and museums. These kinds of urban areas represent the best-case scenario for dense interaction across all areas of social life thus making town centers both financially and culturally

very valuable. Historically, cities have gone to great lengths to create laws and zoning codes to express and maintain community values. Public Squares, literally the crossroads or central points, have become the symbol for well-functioning cities that provide spaces for citizens to act and interact. In the US, many cities have rediscovered city centers and town centers, and main streets and small town urbanism have been promoted as antidotes to urban renewal and flight into suburbs.

Although some of the stations encompass the size of entire town squares anywhere in the world, few of the MARTA stations qualify for this kind of designation or have the potential to become a true town center. Except for the Decatur and Five Points stations there are no other stations in the network that could serve as the focal point of a commercial, governmental, and cultural center. Roswell, Marietta, Kennesaw, and Woodstock, potential town centers in a well-developed regional system, have rejected MARTA stations for political reasons. Ironically, the Cobb County Town Center, actually a large-scale shopping mall, cannot be reached via MARTA rail. Atlanta's intown Civic Center station never served a traditional civic center (and its namesake is now slated to be torn down and the public function it once fulfilled eliminated) but provides access, instead, to the enormous bus center near the downtown (dis)connector, which has been designed to interface with the expressways converging at this former "urban renewal" area. While the stations near the Perimeter Center serve the conventional edge city of hospital, mall, and office center, the Peachtree Center Station, conversely, services a large edge city within Atlanta's sprawling downtown area. In Brookhaven, neither the new downtown nor Oglethorpe University (also the former home of the now defunct Georgia Shakespeare Festival) are linked in any meaningful way to MARTA. The stations at the end of the Kensington, Indian Creek, and North Springs lines were designed only as commuter collection points, and the airport station is, of course, the symbol of an entirely new type of city devoted to the constant national and international mobility of workers in the neoliberal economy.

One indication that speaks against transforming MARTA stations into town centers or contributing elements of town centers is that planning is often concentrated on transportation and housing alone, rather than on the quality of the destinations that would be the goal of effective and efficient urbanism. In the case of today's dominant market-mediated practices,

art and community spaces for the public sphere are rarely in evidence in the planning process. The BeltLine, the former railway circling the Atlanta downtown area, is in this regard a cautionary example of intra-urban development: a transportation network has been used to create parks and high-end homes throughout the city without serious planning as to how to create effective performance in which design, density, and function interact—or even connect them to other areas in-town (other than turning into a different version of I-285).



The Building as Work of Art:
Eisman Terra Cotta Building Facade inside the Five Points Station

Urban Performance

In the smart, performance-oriented global city, the path and locations of a transit system should play a major role in the construction of the public realm and access to art events. If nothing else, it should offer the means of transportation to enable convenient access to performance venues in a heavily urbanized environment. For example, traditional subway hubs in European and US East Coast urban centers such as New York City sometimes turn into smaller town centers consisting of residential, governmental, and art venues. In Atlanta, MARTA rail service does not connect to many desirable destinations (perhaps Braves attendance would be higher!) and many stations may stimulate what was known in the nineteenth century and still is as agoraphobia, the fear of crossing large empty spaces. As significant spaces of the public realm, the aesthetic quality of MARTA stations contributes to the overall identity of the city and their architecture contributes to the quality of the public realm. The arts, all of them—movies, concerts, theatres, galleries, installations, murals, dances,

architecture -- may all be called upon to play a crucial part by turning them into inspiring connecting points and vibrant spaces of the public realm.