The New American City

BY ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

'Atlanta is a twentieth century urban phenomenon'

ATLANTA.

THIS is Instant City. Downtown Atlanta has been built in the last 10 years. What you see in the mile-and-a-half of Atlanta's business heart is what you get: a concentration of totally new office towers, hotels, shopping facilities, landscaped streets, plazas and parks that are a product of the sixties and early seventies — an incredibly unified achievement in an unbelievably short time, when other cities were struggling with piecemeal renewal.

In the seventies, Atlanta stands as the new American city in microcosm, still rising from the rubble of demolition and the dreams and determination of its business leader. It is a 20th-century urban phenomenon. In addition to Peachtree Center, where $200-million in related office buildings, shopping and the much copied Regency-Hyatt Hotel with its roof-high atrium and glass capsule elevators have already set the city's image, there are enough finished, in process, and announced and financed new projects to make any Chamber of Commerce swoon. (Atlanta's doesn't; it just keeps them coming.)

Peachtree Center's ultimate price tag will be $700-million, with design, development and ownership by architect John Portman, another 20th-century phenomenon. Mr. Portman is the first of a new breed of architect-entrepreneurs who match design with a stake in the financial action and a vastly increased power over urban planning. Among his other city-changing projects, based on Atlanta's successful example, are the Embarcadero Center in San Francisco and Renaissance Center in Detroit.

*

Atlanta developers have been quick to follow the Portman effort. A new sports center, the Omni Coliseum, is being joined right now by a 10.5-acre, 14-story, $65-million Omni International "megastructure" that will include a hotel, office space, an "international trade pavilion," 10 movie theaters, a swimming pool, ice skating rink, tennis courts, shops and restaurants and, for some curious reason, the world's longest escalator.

Seven more hotels appear to be approaching reality, including Portman's $50-million, 71-story Peachtree Center Plaza now under construction, and a 35-story Hilton that will be part of more shopping and office facilities called Atlanta Center, Ltd. All will be served by a projected World Congress Center, less euphemistically known as a trade exhibition hall, to rise nearby, not far from the all-new Merchandise Mart.

The $150-million Peachtree Summit office, shop, restaurant and garage complex will be a multi-level development integrated with Atlanta's new rapid transit line, now in the design stage. Its first structures are on the way up.

Farther north along Peachtree Street is the $100-million Colony Square group, well under way, which will have another hotel, office buildings, condominium apartments, skating rink and heaven-knows-what. Not to mention a clutch of individual office buildings with heavy emphasis on mirror glass, and three downtown university campuses. Delegations of architects, planners and urbanists keep coming to see what Atlanta hath wrought. The Old South was never like this.

But Atlanta was never the Old South. Its business center, Five Points—now marked by a brand new park—was the spot where the Zero Mile Post was driven into the ground for the end of the Western and Atlantic Railroad in 1837. From that point the town grew, and the railroads arrived, until four met in the eighteen-sixties. It was a bustling, brawling, railroad frontier city that was totally destroyed by Sherman on his celebrated Civil War march to the sea. What rose out of the ashes in the late 19th century was poor and not very beautiful; Atlanta did not make its fortune again for many years. Surprisingly little has been lost to the new Atlanta in art or history.

In fact, Atlanta has not been a typical Southern city at all. An unusual economic and social structure has made the new Atlanta possible. The rebuilding is a completely private undertaking. It is the work of a privileged group of the city's moneyed, white bankers and merchants, with their roots in the business community and their feet (until recently) in City Hall, able to move with unopposed, concerted action.

These men formed a surprisingly visionary and somewhat incestuous coalition dedicated sincerely, if purely economically, to the city's future. They provided that nebulous quality called leadership. Today the white power élite is being joined by a black power élite, with a black mayor, another development that is being watched by the rest of the country. The power structure is changing, and more of the community is being heard from, but the building phenomenon goes on.

This private rebuilding has admittedly been a commercial rather than a sociological achievement. It has emphasized the downtown business base, and if the buildings on Peachtree Street are strange, so are the faces. Atlanta is now the number three convention city in the country. Its hotels, shops and restaurants are predicated on still more convention business, and apparently no one is asking when the glut will set in. The new office buildings cater to more out-of-towners in regional headquarters.

Atlanta has its own image. It is not made up of the dropped-in, anonymous, interchangeable parts that characterize so many other cities. The Atlanta style is recognizable, and it has been sparked by one man, John Portman, the 49-year-old architect, who not only started the boom but set the design standards. This style combines a kind of Buck Rogers flash with an extremely astute and experienced sense of urban design. ("Architecture," he says, "is an old man's game.")

Portman's most characteristic buildings are totally Portman. There are the razzle-dazzle Regency Hotel with its counterparts now in Chicago and San Francisco and imitators everywhere, and the soaring glass silo of the Peachtree Center Plaza under construction, billed as the world's tallest hotel with New York's Waldorf-Astoria and Moscow's Ukraina, an appropriately surreal comparison. It will have a lagoon ground floor with cocktail islands served by gondola, exterior glass elevators with city views, and trapezoidal rooms.

A projected apartment house, also for downtown, is designed with cantilevered "arms" in a star-like geometry. At first glance, all this seems a jazzy, nostalgic try for the 21st century, or some of the "dream building" producers' literature of the nineteen-forties come true.

But when one is tempted to call these designs the stuff of which adolescent architectural fancies are made, one is drawn up short by their expertise as well as their showmanship. Their effects are shrewdly calculated in both architectural and functional terms. The efficient use of prefabrication and other technology, the skillful dramatization of space, the knowing manipulation of both the structure and the street, the way they are joined together in a pattern of bridges, plazas, promenades and shopping connectors on several levels with water, plants, trees, cafés, stores and (unfortunately) a little too much dubious art — all serve to create unusually good relationships of use and amenity.

Not many people know how to put a city together, or have the opportunity to do it. Portman does, and he is making downtown Atlanta an object lesson in people-spaces and people-pleasures. The demonstration involves extreme sensitivity to the human passages of urban design, and what happens is often a delight.

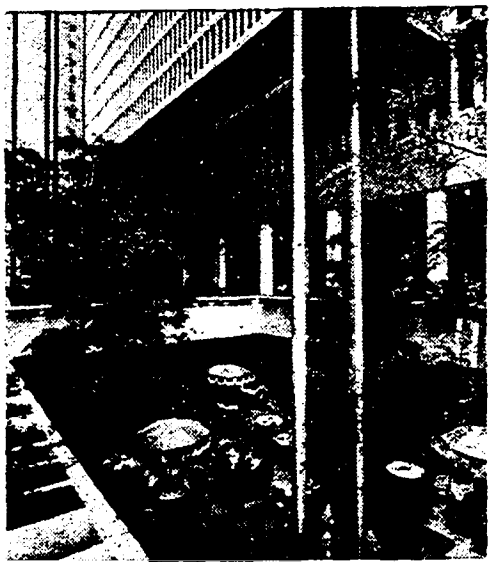
Unusual among architects and planners, Portman understands both the scale of the big building and of the pedestrian on the ground. The heart of Atlanta is a pedestrian enclave. The reservation is that his big buildings are sometimes more readable as objects, or things (Zippo lighters and gift-wrapped cylinders not too far from the Popvision of Claes Oldenburg) than as structures of human purpose—an element of his architecture that is still, for this viewer, unresolved. But he knows exactly what to do when he gets the building to the street, and everywhere in between.

With other city-size projects proceeding in other parts of the country, the Portman style is becoming an established part of American urban culture. Superficially, it means that more and more hotel guests will be whirling around in double-decker rooftop flying saucer cocktail lounges. Much more significantly, he is teaching developers—by being one—how to give the city an essential connective tissue of use and amenity, to make it workable and attractive in function and design. This has been the missing element in both speculative building and bureaucratic renewal.

Without denying this success, there are those who claim that Atlanta's rebirth has left poverty and misery untouched. The city's leaders point to their latest undertaking and first foray into housing and urban renewal, a 78-acre housing complex. This housing, however, is designed primarily to bring middle- and upper-income Atlantans back from the suburbs to support the downtown core. At the same time, it is expected to bolster and provide services for neighboring low-income communities. The rapid transit line is also meant to benefit this group.

Characteristically, the plan, by consultant David Crane, has been produced, sponsored and bankrolled by members or affiliates of Central Atlanta Progress, the nonprofit, private business group largely responsible for the new downtown.

There is no doubt that big business and big buildings came first in Atlanta. But it is equally clear that financial success can be harnessed to social efforts, and that is the kind of vision that will insure the city's future now.



Peachtree Center Development, Atlanta
"The Old South was never like this"