Shaping the City

Studies in History, Theory and Urban Design

**Edited by Edward Robbins
and Rodolphe El-Khoury**

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Edward Robbins and Rodolphe El-Khoury

Cities are shaped in many ways. Economics, politics, society and culture all play crucial parts in this process. Whatever the forces and practices, cities are always the result of design. The design may be conscious and formal, under-taken by architects and planners, as in the case of much of Philadelphia, Barcelona, Brasilia and the Asian Megacities discussed by Richard Sommer, Joan Busquets, Farés el-Dahdah and Richard Marshall in their essays. Alterna-tively, it may be the result of informal cultural, social and economic practices, as illustrated by Paulette Singley in her discussion of Los Angeles, Charles Waldheim in his essay on Detroit and Rem Koolhaas in his discussion of Atlanta. Informal practices also create a new form of urbanism in cyberspace, so well depicted here by Christine Boyer. Design may be the result of social conflict, as described by Sarah Whiting writing about Chicago, or conversely it may be embedded in the search for the security suggested by Edward Robbins in his analysis of the New Urbanist City.

Cities also are shaped by the ways of seeing and understanding we bring to them. Depending on our experiences and our viewpoint, we come to see and understand cities differently. We in effect shape and design the same city differently. Even the same site can be seen through different lenses and experienced through different mindsets. These differences and the way they play crucial roles in the physical design of cities and the mentality through which we shape those designs is at the heart of the essays in this volume.

Urban design, as the essays also reveal, is not defined simply by the acts of urban designers, and nor is it limited to (although it includes) the formal acts of urban intervention taken by governments and by private developers.

oan design is also the result of the actions taken by individuals and
mmunities in their attempts to create a salubrious and supportive physical
d social environment.

Cities are incredibly complex and textured. Any attempt in image,
ɪn or text to fashion an easily ordered, unified and singular whole out of what
often a disordered, spontaneous, and almost infinite variety of places, people
d practices parodies the richness of urban design and urban life. Within even
ɪe city there is a multiplicity of physical forms, social practices and cultural
sponses. Any attempt to examine and understand urban design is therefore
esented with a dilemma. Much urban design is the result of governmental
ɪd institutional practices that attempt to look at the city as a totality, and to
ɪsign with that totality in mind. Yet the city is also constantly being shaped at
)ecific moments by particular local actions and developments. The essays in
is book all grapple with this contradiction in a variety of ways. They recognize
ɪe complexity of the city, yet do not relinquish a sense of the totality and the
ɪportance of grand design.

Similarly, there is the contradiction wrought by time and history. On
ɪe one hand, every day the city is made and remade through the active work-
ɪgs of its inhabitants, by those who write about the city, and also by professional
esigners. More often than not we do this blithely unaware of the historical
rocesses through which the city has come to be shaped. Nonetheless, that
istory provides the stuff upon which we act, even if unawares. Thus there is a
ontradiction between the way we often look at and act in our cities as though
ɪey are timeless and without any history, and the important roles that time and
ɪistory play in setting the stage for our actions. Aware of the weight of history
ɪnd the exigencies of the moment, the essays are strategically situated between
ɪistory and theory. The critical interpretations and analyses they present provide
ɪvenues through which to rethink and realize urban design.

This book is the result of a series of conversations that we, the
ɪditors (one an anthropologist and the other an architect and urban designer),
ɪave had over the years about the shaping of cities and the making of particular
ɔities and their parts. We felt that most books about urban design dealt primar-
ly either with urban form as a kind of autonomous phenomenon or with urban
ɖesign as a technical and professional practice. There was strong agreement
:hat there was little in the literature that addressed the contradictions and
dilemmas of urban design. We were certainly aware that there could be no one
book about urban design that could claim to encompass the whole and all its
parts. What we hoped we could do was present a series of essays that, in dif-
ferent ways and by addressing different themes, would provide an introduction
to the rich variety and contradictions that are a part of the shaping of the city –
i.e. urban design.

We wanted to address the rich variety of critical issues and approaches within urban design, which can be exemplified by different cities. We therefore asked the contributors to present visions and ideas of urban design associated with the different cities or historical moments that they have come to exemplify. The goal was to derive from the context vivid demonstrations of theoretical constructs in their physical and/or cultural manifestation; not exhaustive historical accounts or analytical descriptions of the cities themselves. Thus what follows are not complete descriptions of the urban design of particular cities, but a series of articles that epitomize the world of urban design for student, professional and layperson. Moreover, although it is critical to emphasize the variety and complexity of urban design, we need to be constantly reminded that there are a number of core issues that have persistently reappeared in the discourse about urban design. The essays in this book engage a number of those critical themes.

Central to much urban design is the belief that an understanding of the planning process is central to any discourse about the city, as in the work of Busquets and Sommer. Others would argue that there is a danger in an uncritical adherence to planning regulations, and this is addressed by Schwarzer. A number of the essays struggle with the tension between the plan and its reality. El-Dahdah reveals that what appears as a rigid plan provides a context for its mutation. Waldheim argues that what we see as an unstructured process for shaping the city is rather a highly determined result of the laws of capital. For Singley, the lack of structure is a problem of representation. What appears as an absence of plan is the result of methods of mapping that simply do not address this new form of urban design. Others deal with the implications of scale and size and the cultural and social assumptions that underlie them. Marshall discusses intoxication with "big," while Robbins addresses the reactionary infatuation with "small." Finally, a number of essays address how new economic realities and technologies challenge the very notions of urbanity and urban design as an effective practice. Koolhaas describes the erosion of traditional urban cores by suburban typologies, while Boyer raises questions about the extent to which cyberspace will transform the traditional city.

It is equally critical for the design of this book that different themes and ideas are associated with different styles of writing and presentation. Just as different theories of urban design are associated with different contexts, different ideas about urban design are perforce related to a variety of intellectual approaches and styles of writing consistent with those approaches. For some contributors a more formal and social scientific approach was appropriate; others preferred a more journalistic, plannerly or literary style. The variety is not accidental. It seemed to us, as editors, important to present a volume that not only encompasses the variety of forms of urban design, different urban

ontexts and different ways of understanding the shaping of the city, but also llows the reader to engage the range of stylistic and textual approaches that ttempt in various ways to make sense of urban design. All the variety, though, 3ads to one theme: urban design and its role in shaping the city.

The cities represented in this volume were chosen opportunistically 3s vehicles for important lessons about urban design and ways of thinking about urban design.

Chapter 2

Atlanta

Rem Koolhaas

Sometimes it is important to find what the city *is* – instead of what it was, or what it should be. That is what drove me to Atlanta – an intuition that the real city at the end of the 20th century could be found there . . .

- Atlanta has CNN and Coca-Cola.
- Atlanta has a black mayor, and it will have the Olympics.
- Atlanta has culture, or at least it has a Richard Meier museum (like Ulm, Barcelona, Frankfurt, The Hague, etc.).
- Atlanta has an airport; actually it has 40 airports. One of them is the biggest airport in the world. Not that everybody wants to be *there*; it's a hub, a spoke, an airport for connections. It could be anywhere.
- Atlanta has history, or rather it had history; now it has history machines that replay the battles of the Civil War every hour on the hour. Its real history has been erased, removed, or artificially resuscitated.
- Atlanta has other elements that provide intensity without physical density: one building looks innocent from the outside – like a regular supermarket – but is actually the largest, most sophisticated food hall in the world. Each day it receives three cargo planes of fresh products from Holland, four from Paris, two from Southeast Asia. It proves that there are hundreds of thousands, maybe millions, of gourmets in Atlanta.
- Atlanta does not have the classical symptoms of city; it is not dense; it is a sparse, thin carpet of habitation, a kind of suprematist composition of little fields. Its strongest contextual givens are

vegetal and infrastructural: forest and roads. Atlanta is not a city; it is a *landscape*.

- Atlanta's basic form – but it is not a form – its basic *formlessness* is generated by the highway system, a stretched X surrounded by an O: branches running across the city connecting to a single perimeter highway. The X brings people in and out; the O – like a turntable – takes them anywhere. They are thinking about projecting a super-O somewhere in the beyond.

- Atlanta has nature, both original and improved – a sparkling, perfect nature where no leaf is ever out of place. Its artificiality sometimes makes it hard to tell whether you are outside or inside; somehow, you're *always* in nature.

- Atlanta does not have planning, exactly, but another process called zoning. Atlanta's zoning law is very interesting; its first line tells you what to do if you want to propose an exception to the regulations. The regulations are so weak that the exception is the norm. Elsewhere, zoning has a bad name – for putting things in their place simplistically: work, sleep, shop, play. Atlanta has a kind of reverse zoning, zoning as instrument of indetermination, making anything possible anywhere.

Atlanta has changed at an unbelievable speed, like in a nature film when a tree grows in five seconds. It reveals some of the most critical shifts in architecture/urbanism[1] of the past 15 years, the most important being the shift from center to periphery, and beyond.

No city illustrates this shift, its reasons and its potentials, better than Atlanta. In fact, Atlanta shifted so quickly and so completely that the center/edge opposition is no longer the point. There *is* no center, therefore no periphery. Atlanta is now a centerless city, or a city with a potentially infinite number of centers. In that way, Atlanta is like LA, but LA is always urban; Atlanta sometimes post-urban.

When I first went there in 1973, the notion of downtown in America was in crisis. Downtown Manhattan, downtown Boston, downtown San Francisco: the cores of most American cities were in total, demonstrative states of disrepair – crime, rotting infrastructures, eroding tax bases, etc. There was an apocalyptic atmosphere of downtown doom, doubt that they could ever be rescued.

But Atlanta was an exception. Construction was resuming in former disaster areas. Block by block, downtown was being recovered (literally, some downtowns looked like accidental checkerboards: half-full, half-empty) and actually rebuilt. Atlanta was the test case for an American renaissance, for the

rebirth of the American downtown. And you can't talk about Atlanta's rebirth without talking about John Portman.

John Portman, artist-architect, is said to be a very rich billionaire, his story shrouded in rumors of bankruptcy. He works in offices crowded with his own Pollock-like paintings.

He is undoubtedly a genius in his own mind.

In a book on John Portman by John Portman, John Portman writes, "I consider architecture frozen music."

The lobby of his newest building downtown is a private museum for his own sculptures, gigantic homages to fellow artists such as Dubuffet, Brancusi, and Stella: megalomania as welcome.

John Portman is a hybrid; he is architect *and* developer, two roles in one.

That explains his tremendous power: the combination makes him a myth.

It means, theoretically, that every idea he has can be realized, that he can make money with his architecture, and that the roles of architect and developer can forever fuel each other.

In the early seventies, to a power-starved profession, this synthesis seemed revolutionary, like a self-administered Faustian bargain.

But with these two identities merged in one person, the traditional opposition between client and architect – two stones that create sparks – disappears. The vision of the architect is realized without opposition, without influence, without inhibition.

Portman started with one block, made money, and developed the next block, a cycle that then triggered Atlanta's rebirth. But the new Atlanta was a virgin rebirth: *a city of clones*. It was not enough for Portman to fill block after block with his own architecture (usually without very interesting programs), but as further consolidation, he connected each of his buildings to each of his other buildings with bridges, forming an elaborate spiderweb of skywalks with himself at the center. Once you ventured into the system, there was almost no incentive to visit the rest of downtown, no way to escape.

John Portman is also responsible for single-handedly perfecting a device that spread from Atlanta to the rest of America, and from America to the rest of the world (even Europe): he (re)invented the atrium.

Since the Romans, the atrium had been a hole in a house or a building that injects light and air – the outside – into the center; in Portman's hands it became the opposite: a container of artificiality that allows its occupants to avoid daylight forever – a hermetic interior, sealed against the real. Actually, the evacuation of the center implied by the atrium, the subsequent covering of the hole, the mostly cellular accommodation of its perimeter – hotel rooms, office cubicles –

ake it a modern panopticon: the cube hollowed out to create an invasive, all-
:lusive, revealing transparency in which everyone becomes everyone else's
iard – architectural equivalent of Sartre's *No Exit,* "Hell is other people . . ."

Downtown becomes an accumulation of voided panopticons inviting
eir own voluntary prisoners: the center as a prison system.

Portman's most outrageous atrium is the Atlanta Marriott, a tour de
rce transformation of the slab – democratic, neutral, anonymous – which he
)lits in two halves, then eviscerates to bend its carcass into a sphere – as
:arly as concrete permits.

This interior is not "frozen music" but "arrested maelstrom." Its
:cumulated architectural intensity is beyond a single perceptual grasp. Is the
:sult of this convulsive effort beauty? Does it matter?

The new atrium became a replica as inclusive as downtown itself,
1 *ersatz* downtown. Downtown's buildings are no longer complementary;
iey don't need each other; they become hostile; they compete. Downtown
isintegrates into multiple downtowns, a cluster of autonomies. The more
mbitious these autonomies, the more they undermine the real downtown – its
iessy conditions, its complexities, its irregularities, its densities, its ethnicities.

With atriums as their private mini-centers, buildings no longer
!epend on specific locations. They can be anywhere.

And if they can be anywhere, why should they be downtown?

At first the atrium seemed to help rehabilitate and stabilize Atlanta's
lowntown, but it actually accelerated its demise.

That was Portman's Paradox.

The rediscovery of downtown quickly degenerated into a prolifera-
:ion of quasi-downtowns that together destroyed the essence of center.

By the eighties, building activity had moved away from Portman's
)art of the city, north toward the perimeter highway, then beyond . . .

Atlanta was the launching pad of the distributed downtown; down-
town had exploded. Once atomized, its autonomous particles could go any-
where; they gravitated opportunistically toward points of freedom, cheapness,
easy access, diminished contextual nuisance. Millions of fragments landed in
primeval forests sometimes connected to highways, sometimes to nothing at
all. Infrastructure seemed almost irrelevant – some splinters flourished in com-
plete isolation – or even counter-productive: in the middle-class imagination,
not being connected to MARTA, the subway system, meant protection from
downtown's unspeakable "problems."

The new program was usually abstract – offices for companies that
were no longer tied to geography, fueled by an unlimited demand for insurance
(cruel equation: hell for the insured – Elsewhere; paradise for the insurers –
Atlanta).

Sometimes an area becomes suddenly popular. Attractors appear: it might be the proximity of a new, or even a rumored highway, beautiful nature, or comfortable neighborhoods. Attraction is translated in building. Sometimes the nature of the attractor remains a mystery; seemingly *nothing* is there (that may be the attraction!) – it might be the building itself. Suddenly clumps of office and residential towers spring up, then a church, a mall, a Hyatt, a cineplex. Another "center" is born, stretching the city to apparent infinity.

North of downtown there is a place where a highway starts to fork, leaving downtown behind. There is an area of nothingness, and beyond the nothingness you see outposts of a new architecture that has the intensity of downtown, but it's not downtown. It's something totally different.

In 1987, somewhere near here, two skyscrapers were built facing each other, one hyper-modern (i.e., clad in mirror-glass), the other almost Stalinist (covered in prefabricated concrete). They were built by the same firm for different corporate entities, each searching for its own elusive identity.

Two buildings, so close together, built by a single firm in opposite languages . . . A new esthetic operates in Atlanta: the random juxtaposition of entities that have nothing in common except their coexistence, or – favorite formulation of the surrealists – " the accidental encounter between an umbrella and a sewing machine on a dissecting table."[2]

I wanted to find out what kind of firm could design with such equanimity, what kind of firm could generate the same enthusiasm for such different architectures. So I made a tour of Atlanta's architects' offices.

They were usually located in idyllic situations – dense forests, hills, on lakes. Designed as corporate villas, they were large, sometimes very large: 250–300 people. The typical architect was a southerner, 26, laundered at an Ivy League school, who then returned to Atlanta to produce buildings like these two towers. They could generate an entire oeuvre in one afternoon – receiving instructions over the phone – then have it rejected without pain. They would plan symmetrical projects, then find them distorted overnight by economics – shrunk by failure, inflated by success – and have to perform adaptive amputations or stitch on additional limbs with the urgency of a field hospital: infantry on the frontline of an architectural panic.

The partners were very accessible and eager to talk about Atlanta, their work, the present situation, the dilemmas they faced – a cluster of issues that formed a very plausible argument for the emergence and consolidation of postmodern architecture, the only architecture, it seemed, that could be generated quickly enough to satisfy the needs of the clients.

In a situation where architecture is no longer the construction of city but, like a new branch of physics, the outcome of the dynamics of force fields in perpetual motion, that precious professional alibi of the architect – the

stical "spark" of inspiration – is obviously outdated. No one can wait for it,
st of all the architect. His task is truly impossible: to express increasing tur-
ence in a stable medium.

Architecture has always equated greatness with the breaking of
es.

Now you can be great through their effortless application.

Only a postmodern architect can design building proposals of huge
ile and complexity in a day, any day. Postmodernism is not a movement: it is
ew form of professionalism, of architectural education, not one that creates
owledge or culture, but a technical training that creates a new unquestioning,
ew efficacy in applying new, streamlined dogma.

Post-inspirational, past erudition, intimately connected with speed, a
urism, postmodernism is a mutation that will be from now on part of archi-
tural practice – an architecture of the flight forward.

One of the offices I visited had a room: it was locked. Inside was a
odel of a large piece of Atlanta – particular features: none. Twelve people
ere working on four schemes, each as big as the Rockefeller Center, each
mposition hyper-symmetrical but placed arbitrarily on the huge map, sur-
unded by single-family homes; there was no sign of highways . . . At the last
oment the table had been enlarged to make room for one additional Rocke-
ller Center.

The model was a complete inversion of metropolis as we know it –
ot the systematic assembly of a critical mass but its systematic dismantle-
ent, a seemingly absurd dispersion of concentration. Alarmingly, it suggested
at the elements that had once *made* the city would now cease to work if
ey got too close together. Spaced out, far apart, they needed the neutral
edium of nature or (at the most) the single-family house to ensure further
eir noninterference.

The reason that the room had to be secret – the only vault in the
therwise open office landscape – was that none of the clients of these five
enters knew that the other projects were being prepared. The architects
elieved that there were probably still other architects working on similar pro-
ects, maybe for the same neighborhood – in similar rooms in other offices –
ut nobody could really be sure.

This deliberate disinformation, lack of adjustment, represents a rev-
olutionary reversal of the role architects traditionally claim. They no longer
create order, resist chaos, imagine coherence, fabricate entities. From form
givers they have become facilitators. In Atlanta, architects have aligned them-
selves with the uncontrollable, have become its official agents, instruments of
the unpredictable: from imposing to yielding in one generation.

Working on the emergence of new urban configurations, they have

discovered a vast new realm of potential and freedom: to go rigorously with the flow, architecture/urbanism as a form of letting go...

Atlanta is a creative experiment, but it is not intellectual or critical; it has taken place without argument. It represents current conditions without any imposition of program, manifesto, ideology.

As extrapolation, each site in Atlanta is exposed to a theoretical carpet bombardment of "centers," possibilities hovering somewhere, waiting to be activated by a mysterious process – only vaguely related to money – according to laws not yet identified, at least not by architects.

It is now possible, at any point in Atlanta (and Atlanta is just a metaphor for the world) to create a brutal, often ugly container that accommodates a wide variety of quasi-urban activities and to turn anywhere, with savage competence, into a point of density, a ghost of city.

In the future, a "realistic" frisson[3] about the periphery as a new playground for architects, a field of one-liners, will not be enough. If *the* center no longer exists, it follows that there is no longer a periphery either. The death of the first implies the evaporation of the second. Now *all* is city, a new pervasiveness that includes landscape, park, industry, rust belt, parking lot, housing tract, single-family house, desert, airport, beach, river, ski slope, even downtown.

Atlanta's is a conclusive architecture that will eventually acquire beauty. Sometimes there are prefigurations, occasional schemes that seem to intellectualize the new freedoms: a project by I. M. Pei for a chain of skyscrapers very close to the highway, causing short, stroboscopic sensations for passing cars, even at 55 mph.

Paradoxically, a more convincing premonition of this potential architecture is the prefabricated landscape that is being prepared to receive it. Atlanta has an ideal climate. Because it approximates jungle conditions it was used as training ground for the war in Vietnam. Everything grows there immediately and energetically. Landscaping carries authority, the vegetal sometimes more robust than the built. A thick tapestry of idyll accommodates each architectural appearance and forms its only context; the vegetal is replacing the urban: a panorama of seamless artificiality, so organized, lush, welcoming, that it sometimes seems like another interior, a fluid collective domain, glimpsed through tinted glass, venetian blinds, and the other distancing devices of the alienated architecture – *almost* accessible, like a seductive fairy tale.

Imagine Atlanta as a new imperial Rome – large urban figures no longer held together by small-scale urban cement but by forest, fragments floating in trees.[4]

After John Portman rescued the center, he could only react to its explosion as a developer must – by following the "demand." To outbid its

centrifugality he proposed an entirely new city way up north, beyond the periphery even, and named it Northpark.

It is presented in an impressionistic brochure with a conscious fuzziness (derived from recent breakthrough in science?).

"The first of the series symbolizes the gaseous state," says the caption, "beginnings of an idea with only a hint of structure. The second expresses the solidification of ideas into emerging forms. And the last adds shading, form, and structure, bringing Northpark closer to reality."

Looking at the Northpark renderings, you may laugh, but you may also think, "Where have we seen these forms before?" Are they ugly or accidentally, unbelievably beautiful? Is this the reappearance of the sublime? Is it finally possible to identify them as the same shapes that Malevich launched at the beginning of the century – Architectons – abstract pre-architectures, the vacant but *available* volumes that could contain whatever program the century would generate in its ruthless unfolding?

If the forms of Northpark can be traced back to Malevich's Architectons, the most extreme streak of modernism, Atlanta itself can be described as a mixture of the imaginations of Malevich and Frank Lloyd Wright, whose Broadacre City described the American continent as a continuous urban – that is to say, artificial – condition: homogeneous, low intensity, with an occasional high point of visible concentration. In other words: there was advance warning. It did not come as a surprise. Atlanta is a realized prophesy.

Are these inhabited envelopes in their thick forests the final manifestation of modernization? Is this modernity?

Modernity is a radical principle. It is destructive. It has destroyed the city as we know it. We now inhabit "what used to be the city." In a bizarre way, Portman's Northpark – in fact, Atlanta as a whole – comes close to fulfilling that kind of modernity, a post-cataclysmic new beginning that celebrates revolutionary forms in liberated relationships, justified, finally, by no other reason than their appeal to our senses.

Portman lost his nerve with Northpark.

Maybe it was the economy, or maybe he never believed in it. He returned to the center, this time applying the esthetics of the periphery: a singular tower no longer interested in belonging, in being part of his web, but a needle, standing simply on its own.

It is *in* downtown, but not *of* downtown.

Downtown has become anywhere.

Hiding behind it, a private dream: his very last, most secret project is a touching relic – it shows the depth of his own misreading.

Now, maybe as a personal testament, he wants to bring the European city to the heart of Atlanta: arrogance or sentimentality? A rip-off of Leon