

MIDTOWN ATLANTA
Privatized Planning in an Urban Neighborhood

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(ABSTRACT)

This paper covers the planning process in the Midtown neighborhood of Atlanta, Georgia. Midtown is an urban neighborhood with high concentrations of office and residential development, both new and old. Recently, after a prolonged period of decline, Midtown witnessed an impressive wave of new development. The business community, working through the Midtown Alliance, its primary association, has reacted to this renewed interest by initiating a number of planning efforts. These efforts are intended to work towards a goal of creating a functionally-integrated and walkable, mixed-use urban community. While the business sector's efforts have included impressive applications of recent new urbanist concepts, several issues arise when one analyzes the implications of their plans. The foremost problem is the Alliance's concentration solely upon the section of Midtown that the neighborhood's major interests dominate, thereby geographically limiting the scope of all planning-related improvements. Resultantly, the residential sections of Midtown will not receive the enhancements and development controls designed to benefit the area's major business districts. In addition to the issues resulting from the territorial limitation, Midtown residents are also concerned the Alliance's planning efforts may cause permanent changes in Midtown outside the Alliance's core area. These concerns include escalating property values, the shifting of crime to residential areas and the loss of traditional neighborhood characteristics. Analysis of the local planning process indicates the emergence of a privatized planning mechanism that has the potential to affect the equity of municipal service delivery within Midtown and the city as a whole.

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I. Introduction

Midtown Atlanta, after having suffered a prolonged period of decline from the beginning of the 1970s to the early 1990s, experienced a profound comeback at the end of the 1990s. Long a major business center within the Atlanta area, Midtown suddenly became a prime location for new residential development as the limits of Atlanta's outward expansion became apparent in the form of excessive travel times and traffic jams. This comeback was a major boon for local residents, business leaders and other advocates of "in-town" Atlanta, who believed that the center city had long been overlooked during the metropolitan area's history-making growth. This boon has been seemingly continuous, as a string of announcements regarding new or proposed major developments saturates the local press.

In order to capitalize on the benefits of this boom, planning efforts have been undertaken on a local basis to ensure that the recent growth's cumulative outcome transforms Midtown into a more complete, cohesive urban community. It is the aim of this paper to examine these local efforts at

planning, noting the involvement levels of the area's different constituencies and determining the inclusiveness of the process.

Inclusiveness has long been a major issue within Atlanta's local governance. As Stone (1989) noted, Atlanta has long been controlled by a "governing coalition" between local officials and the more powerful reaches of the city's business community. This coalition, Stone asserts, does not gather its strength from the formal machinery of government. Rather, the city's business community enjoys a position of sustained power "because it excels in getting strategically positioned people to act together, thereby expanding its realm of allies and imposing opportunity costs on those who decline to go along" (xi). This has led to a long-term collaboration between the business community and the city government, whatever its contemporary political or racial makeup, that has withstood the numerous changes Atlanta has undergone since the mid-20th Century.

While this coalition has technically relied on citizen votes to

sustain its existence and has made overtures for voter support, extensive resident involvement has been quite rare. Neighborhoods within the city, while occasionally mobilizing in the face of local crisis issues, have largely been omitted from the crucial elements of the city's regular decision-making processes. Stone and others have attributed this fact to the fragmented system of sub-city governance that prevents coordinated citywide political action. It is one of the key objectives of this paper to determine whether recent planning efforts in Midtown are a continuation of this process of "Regime Politics" or whether a new, more integrative form of governance is being innovated in this highly diverse area.

A related question is whether the publicity machine maintained by the private sector is the primary source of information regarding the local governance process. As argued in both Rutheiser, (1996) and Newman, (1999) Atlanta leaders in both business and government have often taken an "image is everything" approach when making crucial decisions regarding the city and transmitting these decisions to the affected audiences. In most cases, this

process has been employed to the distinct advantage of the city's elites. In an area such as Midtown, reliance upon such an approach could have important implications for determining whether recent neighborhood planning represents a truly participatory process or the usual media-driven method of "selling" decisions made in closed environments to the parties they affect most.

A close analysis of recent planning efforts in Midtown Atlanta reveals that while a process that takes steps to include residents does exist, an overall domination on the part of the neighborhood's business community can be detected. Working with the city's government, Midtown Alliance, the Midtown business community's main association, has created a planning agenda that overwhelmingly places the needs of the business community at the forefront. In addition to the power issues created by this domination, key issues related to inequalities in urban service delivery are also raised.

The details of Midtown's growth, including key statistics and projects, will also be provided in addition to the main analysis. To place these recent developments and current

processes in context, a description of the neighborhood and its history follows.

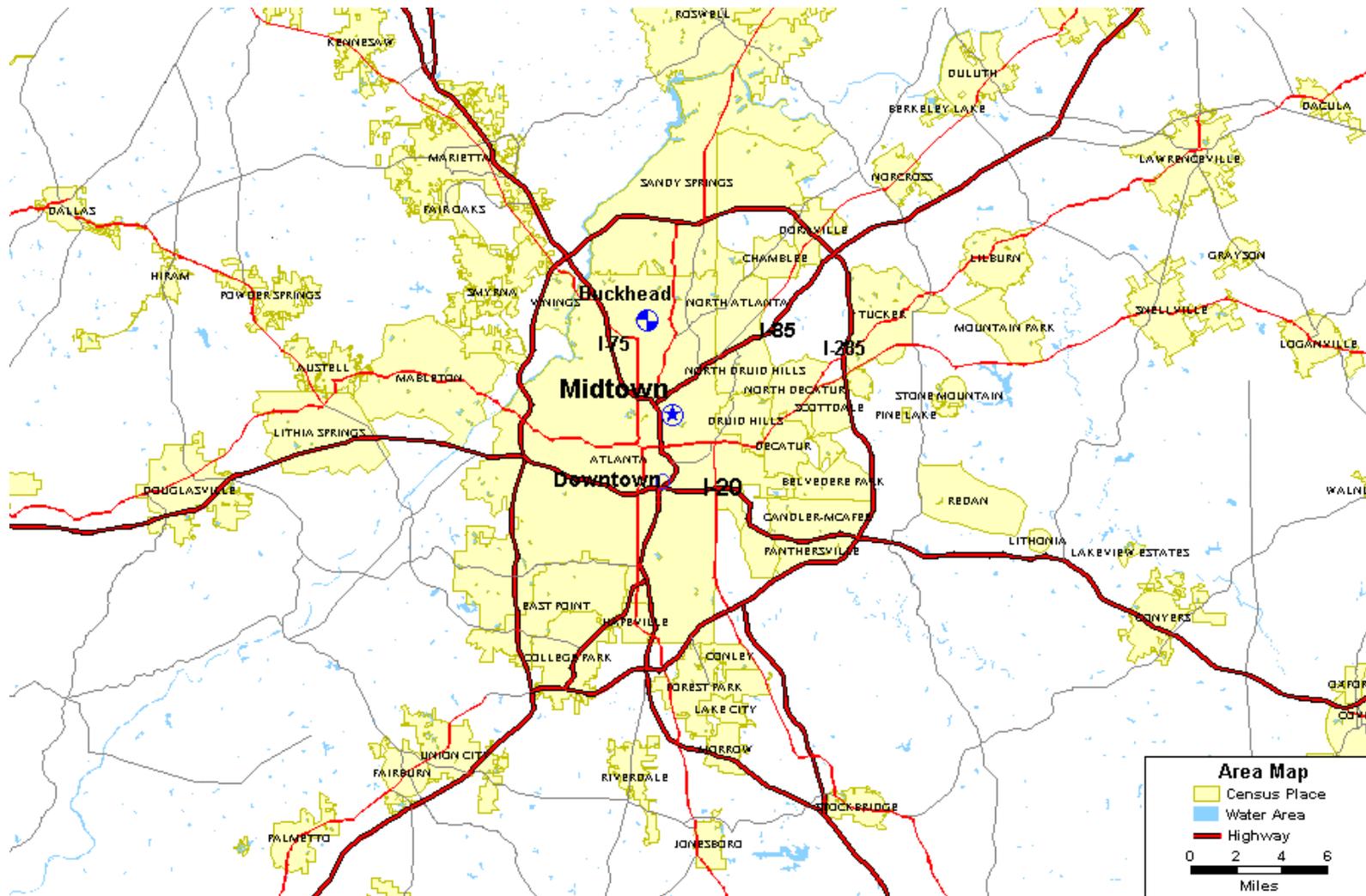


Figure 1, Midtown and Other major areas of Atlanta

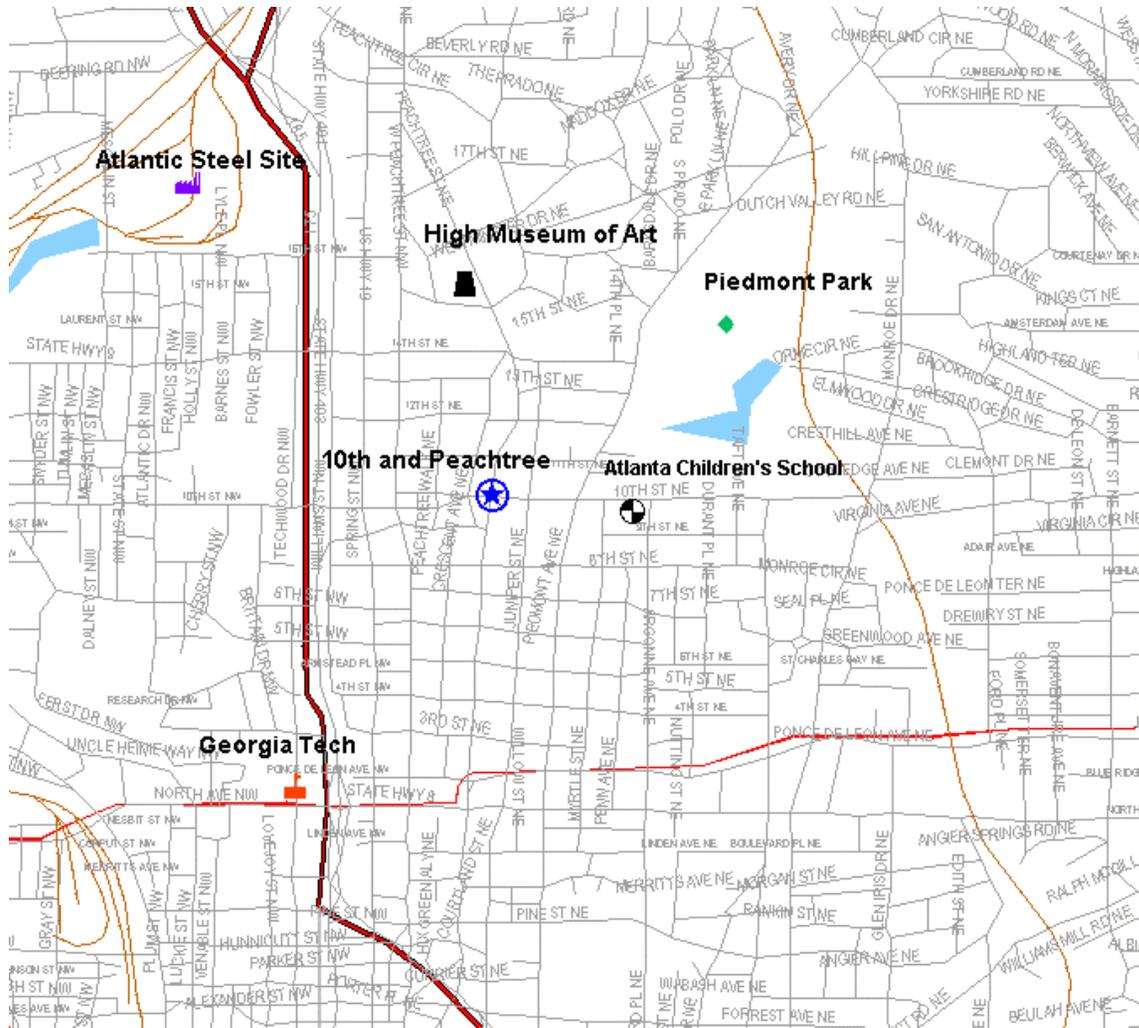


Figure 2, Midtown Atlanta and Environs

II. Midtown's Place in Atlanta and the Region

Midtown Atlanta has a rich history that has often been central in the creation of Atlanta as it is experienced today. Midtown has experienced cyclical patterns of growth and decline, attention and neglect, mirroring the city of which it is an important part. This section covers the history and position of Midtown Atlanta within both the city and metropolitan area. Not only are these entities inextricably linked, the history of each also reflects and is resonated in the history of others.

Midtown's Location

Midtown is located just north of Downtown, the city's central business district and the site of Atlanta's original settlement as the terminus of three railroad lines (Williford, 1962: 4-5). Midtown's development into something other than an agricultural hinterland outside the city limits began as Peachtree Street extended northward past North Avenue. The area now known as Midtown was not a part of Atlanta proper during the Civil War. It was well after 1900 that Midtown's core territory

along Peachtree became part of the city (Preston, 1973: 135).

In the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, Midtown, especially along its central Peachtree corridor, served as a site for the expansion of the city's elite residential area as Downtown became more heavily developed (Williford, 1962). During this period in 1887, Piedmont Park, the city's highest-profile municipal recreation area was also developed (Kunkle, 1990). At the same time as the expansion north along Peachtree, the Piedmont Driving Club, one of the city's most elite social clubs, was founded immediately north of the park. During this expansion period several of the city's most prominent churches, such as Peachtree Baptist, were formed. These events combined to lay the geographical and institutional foundation for an area that eventually came to include the Fox Theatre, The High Museum of Art, The Atlanta Botanical Garden and several other long-standing foundations of Atlanta's cultural life.

Until the major annexations accompanying the Plan of Improvement in 1952 dramatically increased the area of the City from 37 to 118 square miles, Midtown was at Atlanta's northern fringe, surrounded by streetcar suburbs to the north and west (Bayor, 1996; Preston, 1973). Prior to this annexation, many of the areas now considered to be prime components of Midtown's residential sector were outside the city limits, part of the city's inner ring of suburbs. With the annexation of 1952, these areas, including Ansley Park and the residential blocks bordering Piedmont Park on its western side, were brought into the city.

The annexations included in the Plan of Improvement also completely changed the geographical position of Midtown within Atlanta. No longer the city's northern fringe, Midtown became a centralized area within a city that greatly expanded to the north thanks to the acquisition of the much larger Buckhead community. Buckhead now stood (and still stands) as the city's northern limit. Also changing over time with the greater centrality of Midtown was the role that Midtown played within the social and economic geography of

Atlanta. As the primary use of Peachtree Street between North Avenue and 14th Street gradually changed from residential to commercial, the area increasingly became a sort of "Downtown North," developing a more intense mix of uses leading to the skyscraper-dominated profile that currently defines the area. Midtown currently has over 15 million square feet of office space, over 50 percent of which is designated Class A (Midtown Alliance, "Midtown Demographics"). This figure represents over ten percent of the Atlanta area's total office space.

Despite the high-profile commercial uses that have developed over the last several decades, the area still has many unique qualities. Midtown contains a beguiling mix of residential, recreational, institutional and commercial uses, often within amazingly close proximity. In addition to the area's signature office buildings, over 20,000 residents live in housing units of all types (Midtown Alliance, "Midtown Demographics"). Unlike many other large U.S. cities, expensive single-family housing, low-rise apartments and expansive park space can all be found within a short walk of the tallest

buildings in the metropolitan area. This diversity and juxtaposition of uses is a source of both pride and conflict within the area.

Midtown in Atlanta's Physical Development

Several very important trends in physical development occurred in the development of Atlanta between the period immediately after the Civil War to the boom years of the 1990s. Midtown was often at the center of these trends, or otherwise reflected key changes that transformed the city and the metropolitan area. An analysis of the changes the Atlanta experienced throughout the Twentieth Century places in better context Midtown's often-surprising collection of disparate elements from a number of different eras.

In the period of southern retrenchment after reconstruction, commonly referred to as the "Jim Crow" era, Atlanta, like many of its southern counterparts, developed a highly rigid system of segregation. This segregation was particularly strong in terms of shping residential location. A pattern emerged in which the north side was almost entirely populated by White

residents, while the south side increasingly became overwhelmingly Black.¹ This residential segregation was not accidental, but was an overt matter of public policy. As Bayor (1996) notes, this residential segregation was enforced through the creation of numerous barriers, both subtle (major divided streets serving as terminal points for the northward settlement of Black Atlantans) and overt (actual barricades blocking access between White and Black territories along otherwise continuous streets). This separation was further enforced in the minds of local residents through the practice of changing north-south street names as they crossed major east-west axes. Several examples of this practice are still evident within Midtown and its vicinity: Monroe Avenue-Boulevard, Highland-North Highland and Moreland-Briarcliff. In each case the streets change names as they cross either North Avenue or Ponce de Leon. As the southern edge of Midtown is generally considered to be one of these two streets, Midtown has

¹ As a dramatic passage in Wolfe (1998) in which the Mayor takes a prominent black lawyer for a limousine ride through wildly contrasting areas of Atlanta shows, this race-based spatial division still exists in Atlanta and is intimately

always existed at the edge of a major racial transition line within Atlanta's geopolitical makeup. At many times in the past, Midtown has represented the first predominantly white neighborhood as one travels north from downtown. Although this characterization has become less absolute over time, Midtown is still the southernmost neighborhood within Northeast, Atlanta's wealthiest and most predominately white quadrant. This proximity to major racial transition lines and its location near Downtown have been the major factors that have lent the area its identity.

Originally a suburban area outside the city limits, Midtown has both profited from and been hurt by Atlanta's growth into a large, polynuclear primary urban center. When the area's traditional business interests left the Downtown "Five Points" intersection that once defined high-profile Atlanta commerce, Midtown was often the destination of choice. However, later office development trends in the Atlanta area favored continuing outward expansion. Midtown, along with

linked with related issues such as income and power.

Downtown, ended up at the southern end of a 15 mile-long strip of commercial and retail uses rather than at the center of Atlanta's business community. By the time the metro area developed several key examples of what Garreau (1991) termed "edge cities," including Buckhead, the Perimeter Center, Cobb Galleria and Gwinnett Place, the importance of both Midtown and Downtown was diminished in terms of central location and economic power². This set of changes has had the effect of separating Midtown from the northward migration of the area's affluent residents, as well as much of Atlanta's business community.

Other issues that seemed to have potentially crippling effects on Midtown in addition to the increasing suburbanization of the metropolitan area included the reactions to desegregation and the consolidation of African-American dominance of city politics occurring from the mid 1960s to the late 1970s. Following the desegregation of Atlanta's schools, the city lost a great number of white residents. The

² Cf. Hartshorn and Muller, 1989 for a description of Atlanta as an area with multiple "downtowns," two of which exceeded the CBD in office space.

population of Atlanta, having peaked in 1970 at 496,973, dipped below 400,000 by the time of the 1990 census (Bayor, 1996). During this time, the city's white population dropped appreciably, including a decrease of over 80,000 between 1970 and 1980 (Rice 1983). By 1990 the African-American population topped 283,000, having gained 28 percentage points between 1960 and 1990, (Bayor, 1996).

Accordingly, many business leaders, especially those located in areas close to the city's core, worried about the potential of large-scale disinvestment due to the perception of Atlanta as a largely poor, minority-controlled city. Indeed, many of these fears rang true as Downtown vacancy rates increased and a definite northward shift in the business community could be detected. Midtown suffered the consequences of this transition, becoming an area that, despite the presence of several major businesses and cultural institutions, had a reputation tarnished by the presence of disreputable businesses, decaying housing, high crime and the presence of nontraditional groups such as gays and hippies. These latter groups were often found to be loathsome to an Atlanta area business

community that was still rooted in its conservative southern heritage.

Despite these drawbacks, Midtown still possessed many of the strengths that originally made the area so desirable. Midtown included most of the area's premier cultural institutions, including the High Museum of Art, Symphony Hall, Atlanta Botanical Gardens and Piedmont Park. Midtown also included some of the area's most distinctive restaurants and entertainment venues. Added to all these factors was the fact that Midtown had remained one of the Atlanta area's main centers of commerce. Obviously, Midtown, while experiencing some difficulties in a period of suburbanization and inner-city neglect, had key resources in place that could be utilized in revitalizing the area.

It was in the context of these events that the Midtown Business Association, later the Midtown Alliance, was formed. While this group later developed an all-encompassing approach to foster the advancement of Midtown, it initially was created to "stop the bleeding," protecting the investments of the area's business leaders as well as the traditional aristocracy that had developed Midtown decades earlier.

Luckily, the efforts of the Midtown Business Association were made easier by several events which caused the area to rebound, eventually gaining a vitality that would have been hard to predict ten years earlier. These developments will be covered in the section that follows.



Figure 3, Outdoor Café along Piedmont Avenue. Source: Midtown Alliance

III. Midtown's Resurgence

Despite Midtown's pronounced slump in the 1970s and 1980s, several events occurring during this period served to lay the groundwork for the area's revival. While many of these developments at first did not appear as if they could lead to a major revival of the area, the opposite turned out to be the case. In the wake of these foundational events and a number of external events that made conditions favorable for increased central-city investment, Midtown has blossomed in recent years. This section covers the most important of these foundational events and the major recent developments that followed.

The first major development that laid the groundwork for the revival of Midtown was the 1970s creation of MARTA, the area's mass transit system. The system was barred from serving suburban counties other than Dekalb, thereby severely limiting its effectiveness as a comprehensive solution to the area's emerging transportation problems. Still MARTA, especially its rail component, established

itself as a major force in shaping development patterns within its service area. Midtown was the recipient of three stations, North Avenue, 10th Street and Arts Center, all on the system's north-south line. While these stations at first seemed to be an underutilized resource, their importance has increased in recent years as several decisions to build major office and residential projects in Midtown have centered around the ease of access provided by the transit stations and their feeder bus routes in increasingly traffic-addled Atlanta.

Another event that eventually benefited Midtown was the development of Buckhead, immediately to the north of Midtown along Peachtree across Interstate 85. Throughout the 1980s, Buckhead established itself as a strong center of nearly every urban use type. Not only did Buckhead develop the two most prestigious malls in the Atlanta area in Phipps Plaza and Lenox Square, it also became the core of Atlanta's financial services sector, an upscale housing area (for both apartments and single-family residents), as well as

Atlanta's largest bar and restaurant district. All of these accomplishments made Buckhead an example of successful and burgeoning development within the city's boundaries at a time of central city disinvestment. This development also made Buckhead very crowded. Midtown became a prime area for the expansion of Buckhead's burgeoning development without crossing city limits. This expansion has only recently begun to take place, and only in some of the sectors in which Buckhead had experienced its phenomenal growth. Midtown is still dogged by a lack of several important business types within the retail and service sectors. These sectors are continually targeted by the Midtown Alliance as priorities for growth in order to create a more complete urban environment for Midtown's workers and residents.

Another factor that has helped Midtown's development over recent years is the very phenomenon that caused such a major threat to its vitality in years past—the increasing geographical spread and decentralization of the metropolitan area. As Atlanta became one of the United States' top

cities in terms of time spent stuck in traffic and assumed the worldwide lead in vehicle miles per driver per day, residents and business leaders began to question the viability of continued outward expansion of the metropolitan area. Consequently, Midtown, having much developable space available, a pre-existing business community and numerous amenities, became a prime site for locating new office and residential development at the core of the metropolitan area.

Key Milestones in Midtown's Rebound

What started as a forward-thinking effort to locate workers more centrally on the part of a select number of businesses has since expanded into a larger movement as numerous office buildings, housing developments and condominium conversions have been completed since the mid-1990s. From these numerous projects it is possible to select a few key developments that have been instrumental in redefining Midtown as a viable and booming urban center. These developments have not only added needed jobs and residents into Midtown, but have also provided the impetus to think of Midtown as an area needing

guidance as it matures into a premier multi-use center.

Federal Reserve Bank

Perhaps the first major event that had the potential to permanently transform Midtown was the 1998 announcement that the Federal Reserve Bank was moving its Atlanta facilities to the northwest corner of 10th and Peachtree Streets (see illustration below). This announcement was especially important due to the fact that the site had long been empty, occasionally being utilized for events such as the Cirque de Soliel and the Music Midtown festival. The fact that such a high-profile location in a very high traffic area, directly across from a MARTA station, had long sat empty was indicative of the slump the area had suffered throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. The Federal Reserve



Figure 4, artist's rendering of Federal Reserve Bank

Source: U.S. Department of the Treasury

branch is nearing completion and should be occupied by late 2001.

BellSouth

Another important event in the transformation of Midtown was the announcement in 1998 that BellSouth was going to centralize its facilities in the Atlanta area in three buildings to be added in the 5th and Peachtree-West Peachtree area. This project will include 1.055 million square feet of office space, 35,000 square feet of retail space and a 2,170-space parking garage (Saporta, 2000a). This reflected a major shift in the company's office location strategy. Despite being headquartered in a building above the North Avenue MARTA station, BellSouth had previously scattered over 75 other locations throughout the metropolitan area. Although one of the area's major historic churches was slated for demolition as a part of this process, the plan was generally perceived as quite beneficial overall, in that it targeted one of the most lagging sections of the Peachtree corridor for large-scale construction and infusion of jobs. Reflecting increasing concern over rapidly worsening Atlanta traffic,

BellSouth stated that the impetus for the consolidation was to make the firm's offices accessible by MARTA rail.

Atlantic Steel Redevelopment

In the late 1990s, the process of converting a 140-acre site owned by Atlantic Steel (see Figure 5) from a rail yard to a mixed-use development named Atlantic Station began. Tentative plans for the site included a mix of office buildings, commercial uses, hotels, residences and a lake (see Figure 6). This development would not only infuse the area with needed retail and new residents, it would also potentially expand the scope of what was typically referred to as Midtown west across the I-75-85 Connector. Since this site was immediately south of Georgia Tech and its Home Park neighborhood, the developers worked closely with both the Midtown Alliance and Georgia Tech to determine the appropriate scope and content for the development. Technical assistance from Georgia Tech's departments of City Planning and Architecture was also utilized in developing options for the eventual layout of the project.



Figure 5, Cleared Atlantic Steel site (outlined). Major Midtown office buildings are left of the interstate connector at center
Source: CB Realty

One constituency that had to be satisfied before the Atlantic Steel project could be completed was the residents of Ansley Park, an upscale, single-family residential neighborhood surrounding a country club that lies at Midtown's northeast corner. One of the key elements needed to make Atlantic Station a reality was increased access to the site from Midtown's main corridors. This was seen as necessary due to the already crowded condition of 14th Street (which is the site's southern edge) as it crosses the I-75/85 connector. To create this access, a bridge was proposed over the connector, extending 17th Street onto the redeveloped site. This potential development greatly alarmed the residents of Ansley Park. This neighborhood's residents threatened to

sue to stall the project due to worries about traffic created by the bridge using residential streets to connect to Piedmont and Monroe Avenues north of Piedmont Park. In order to prevent the stalling of the project, it was agreed that Jacoby Development Inc. (the project's developer) would provide the Ansley Park Civic Association with \$3.1 million for traffic impact studies and traffic calming measures (Simmons, 2000).



Figure 6, Atlantic Station Site Plan
Source: CB Realty

Georgia Tech Expansion

Long located adjacent to the Midtown area but never really considered part of it, Georgia Tech decided to participate in Midtown's redevelopment when it announced its intent to build a \$148 million multi-use facility on the corner of 5th and Spring Streets, immediately across an existing bridge from the Institute's campus (see figure 7).

Included in the facility would be a bookstore, a hotel, a parking structure, a continuing education center and the new home of the Du Pree College of Management. Tech's leadership claims the move is being made to change the image of Georgia Tech as an isolated enclave, disconnected from the neighborhoods surrounding it. In wake of recent changes that have greatly transformed Midtown and resulted in the demolition and replacement of many of the housing projects that once bordered the Tech campus, the Institute is now ready to embrace areas outside the traditional campus boundaries. In the words of Georgia Tech President Wayne Clough: "The edge of our campus is becoming more blurred, and that's intentional" (Wilbert, 2000).



Georgia Institute of Technology
Fifth Street Project *Aerial Perspective*

Figure 7, Proposed Georgia Tech Center
Historic Blitmore Hotel is at rear.
Source: Georgia Institute of Technology

This multi-use center is being designed with the assistance of the Midtown Alliance, as well as the input of the area's business community. The location of the center should be an especially effective transition between Tech and Midtown, as the complex will be near the new BellSouth facilities and only a short walk to major businesses located within Midtown. In addition to fitting into the established business community in Midtown, the Institute's expansion plans are also designed to help foster the creation of a "silicon valley" area in Midtown where new technology companies can have access to the knowledge and energy of Tech's faculty and students (Saporta, 2000).

To facilitate a smoother transition from Midtown and the new center to the main campus, Governor Roy Barnes and Georgia Tech have recently proposed widening the 5th Street bridge over the I-75/85 Connector to include park space and greatly enhance bicycle and pedestrian access (Bennett, 2000). Similar to the Atlantic Steel project, the Georgia Tech Center has the potential to greatly affect how future residents of the Atlanta area perceive Midtown—in terms of both its territorial

dimensions and the types of developments and activities one would expect within its area.

Other Key Developments

In addition to these extremely high profile developments, other building and redevelopment projects smaller in scale have greatly affected the nature of Midtown. The real difference between Midtown's former identity as an area marked by high-rise office buildings irregularly spaced apart from one another and the area's potential to develop into a fully-functioning urban center is the great number of smaller projects filling the gaps between the "trophy" developments.

A couple of recent trends have served to both diversify and complete the office market in Midtown. Several mid-rise office buildings are under construction, hopefully to fostering greater continuity within the area's otherwise disjointed streetscape. Additionally, a recent trend has been to create technologically-current sub-class A office space in the low-rise areas on the western edge of Midtown. This is seen as a crucial step in ensuring that



Figure 8, Major recent developments in Midtown. Source: Midtown Alliance

not only will current large corporate interests be served by Midtown’s revitalization, but that Atlanta’s future business leaders will emerge from Midtown as well.

Perhaps the most important recent trend in Midtown’s development has been the construction of many new upscale apartments and townhouses. In addition to the number of newly-built units that have come on the market in recent years, several obsolete office buildings have been converted into

trendy new loft residences, most of which are owner-occupied. All of the new owner-occupied units have shown incredible investment value, with some units being re-sold two or three times prior to completion (Holbrook, 2000). This competition for units underscores the reality of Midtown’s transformation from a declining residential and commercial market plagued by problems of crime, disinvestment and negative image to arguably the focal point in the overall trend of renewed interest and reinvestment in Atlanta’s central areas.

To truly understand the scope of Midtown’s recent surge of reinvestment, it is necessary to examine the numbers describing the wave of development. A page on the Midtown Alliance’s web site shows 1,730 new residential units as having been constructed between 1995 and 1999. Additionally, 1,620 units were listed as “Under construction (or nearing construction)” (Midtown Alliance, “Midtown Residential Development”). The page also listed 3,169 units forthcoming under the heading “Planned Residential Development,” including 3,000 units in the Atlantic Steel site project. In the office sector, 3.3 million square feet of

space was under construction with another 2.8 million proposed. The organization forecast that an additional 1.5 square feet would be delivered over the next five years (Midtown Alliance, “Market Analysis Executive Summary”). Retail is perhaps a lagging sector with only 79,146 square feet under construction but 745,000 additionally proposed, much as part of Atlantic Station.

It is the hope of the Midtown Alliance and other local groups that the new construction will not only increase the area’s supply in each of these sectors, but also transform the character of Midtown. The Alliance hopes these new developments will fill in the longstanding gaps between major developments to create a cohesive urban community, with mutually reinforcing retail, residential and office sectors. The following section details the efforts that have been undertaken to assure that such a community does emerge.



Figure 9, Parkside by Post, a recent mixed-use development at the corner of 10th and Piedmont. Source: Post Properties

IV. Attempts to Shape Midtown's Future Development

The wealth of activity that has contributed to Midtown's resurgence has been encouraging to the area's long-time constituents. In order to maximize the benefits gained from recent increases in investment in Midtown, several organizations have engaged in attempts to control and direct the area's future development, augmenting the efforts of the city's planning department. The major efforts of these organizations, and the manner in which they fit into the greater picture of Midtown Atlanta are covered below. As shown below, Midtown Atlanta is by no means a unitary area with a common set of definitions, problems and solutions. Midtown Atlanta means widely different things to different groups. These differences are the basis of several of the key issues that Midtown's stakeholders must confront to successfully create an integrated community.

Midtown Alliance

Among all of the organizations that have been involved in recent efforts to create a process through which the future development of Midtown Atlanta is

envisioned and controlled, none has assumed a higher profile than the Midtown Alliance. The Midtown Alliance was originally founded in 1978 as the Midtown Business Association. The organization's original purpose was to foster the revitalization of the commercial core of Midtown. To accomplish this initial goal, early efforts focused on cleanup, crime reduction and promotion (Midtown Alliance, 2001; Nutman, 2000).

Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, the Association continued its initial mission, largely serving a promotional and general enhancement-oriented role. A major change in mission occurred in 1996 when the organization became involved in planning for the first time. At this time, to reflect the organization's desire to be seen as more than just a business-oriented entity, the name change to Midtown Alliance took place (Hourigan, 2000). This change in names was not merely a cosmetic operation. Instead, the change reflected a substantial commitment on the organization's part to become centrally involved in shaping

the physical development of the neighborhood. The Alliance currently has four planners on staff, augmented with regular student interns from the City Planning department at the Georgia Institute of Technology (Hourigan, 2000; Midtown Alliance, “Board of Directors”). Additionally, the Alliance utilizes the services of planning, demographic and architecture firms as needed to provide detailed designs, codes and standards to implement the organization’s efforts towards visioning the area’s future character.³

The products of the Alliance’s forays into planning have been varied and numerous. These efforts have ranged from specifying which streetlights and tree planters to use to give the area a uniform image to the commissioning of outside firms to create streetscape plans as well as large-scale comprehensive plans and ordinances (Cf. Midtown Alliance, “Piedmont Avenue Streetscape Improvements” and “Streetscape Corridors”). The Alliance is currently

³ Despite the changes that have occurred in both the Alliance’s staffing and mission, one could easily argue that the organization is still most responsive to its business-sector roots. The roster of the Board of Directors and Executive Committee of the Alliance still largely reads like a ‘who’s who’ of major corporate interests in the area (Midtown Alliance, “Board of Directors”).

making its first attempt at creating a zoning ordinance tailored to Midtown’s needs.

In its planning efforts, the Alliance has consistently pursued a vision of a Midtown that not only looks better, but also functions more successfully as a fully integrated 24-hour city complete with all compatible types of urban development. The major products of the Alliance’s efforts which have the greatest potential to achieve these goals and shape the future appearance and development patterns within Midtown are Blueprint Midtown, The Midtown Improvement District (MID) and the Special Public Interest (SPI) zoning districts 3 and 4. Each of these efforts will be detailed below. In addition to these planning efforts, the Alliance’s forays into sanitation, public safety and community development will also be covered.

The Midtown Alliance’s Midtown

One important fact regarding the Midtown Alliances planning efforts is that the organization has deliberately limited these efforts to a specific geographical area within Midtown. As is seen in the maps on pages 28-31, the

Alliance focuses on an area that is defined mostly by its inclusion of and proximity to Midtown's most powerful commercial interests. Included in this area are Peachtree, Piedmont, West Peachtree and all the other primary north-south corridor streets that make Midtown a bridge between Downtown and areas to the north such as Buckhead. Conversely, areas generally identified as Midtown but not part of the core commercial area are omitted from Blueprint Midtown and the Alliance's other planning efforts. When speaking to Midtown Alliance officials and employees, as well as businessmen in the area, one will often hear the term "Midtown Neighborhood." This refers to the largely residential segment of the whole of Midtown that is outside the high-focus, Peachtree-centered, business corridor. In making this distinction, the Midtown Alliance is demonstrating that, while it has greatly expanded the scope of its activities, the business interests who prompted the group's foundation are still at the core of its operations. Resultantly, these interests, along with relative newcomers in the upscale residential and mixed-use development

industry are the primary stakeholders in the Alliance's efforts.

The definition of Midtown that is operationalized in the Alliance's activities may soon change. The design of the forthcoming Atlantic Steel site redevelopment, as well as that of the Midtown center Georgia Tech is planning, have both frequently involved the input of the Alliance. Potential exists for these areas to become included in the Alliance's future planning efforts. In addition to these areas of expansion, the often-ambiguous expanse between North Avenue and the I-75/85 connector, frequently referred to as "no man's land" which lies between core Downtown and Midtown areas has become partially incorporated into the Alliance's planning efforts.

Despite the expanding nature of the Midtown the Alliance covers, there are areas that will likely remain outside of its jurisdiction, but that nonetheless are usually considered part of Midtown. These include the "Midtown Neighborhood," Ansley Park, Home Park (the neighborhood south of Georgia Tech), and The Ponce de Leon corridor between Piedmont and City Hall East. As an analysis of the larger context

within which the Alliance works shows, this partial coverage focusing on the area of highest-profile business and institutional activity can lead to conflicts related to different interpretations of what Midtown is and who the area's primary constituents are.

Blueprint Midtown

The most all-encompassing document that has been produced as a result of the Midtown Alliance's planning efforts is *Blueprint Midtown*. The *Blueprint* represents the most general articulation of the vision created through the Alliance's meetings with business leaders, residents, city officials and design professionals. To establish the preferences of area workers and residents, Visual Preference Surveys were employed. The surveys were followed up with questionnaires, workshops, and follow-up review sessions (Midtown Alliance, "History of the *Blueprint*"). The surveys were used in formulating the specific character elicited in the *Blueprint*'s text and images (Midtown Alliance, 1997). The aims of the *Blueprint* are numerous, providing guidance on nearly every aspect of physical development in a

relatively short space. However, despite the wide-ranging nature of the document's content, the principal purposes of the *Blueprint* are clear: to enhance the sense of place the area's residents, workers and visitors experience, to create a more livable and workable community, and to create a more functionally integrated, accessible and sustainable urban neighborhood.

Despite the brevity (only nine pages of text) and overall generality of the *Blueprint*, very specific details are evident regarding the form the Alliance envisions the physical development of the neighborhood taking in order to achieve the area's preferences. The *Blueprint* covers general land use, high rise offices, housing, open space/landscape, parking, pedestrian, retail, street types, and transit. Each section contains a combination of general goals and specific standards. In the paragraphs that follow, the characteristics of each element of the *Blueprint* will be detailed to allow the reader to understand the nature of the Alliance's vision.

The *Blueprint*'s introduction defines the goals that are the basis for the standards that are detailed in the

sections that follow. The greatest emphasis in this section is on improving the area's physical landscape in order to create an urban community that has the qualities of a primary destination with a more human scale. To accomplish this goal, it is stated that the area needs to be infilled with mid-rise buildings with a uniform orientation towards the street. As the Blueprint text states:

Today, Midtown is best described by signature tall buildings and surface parking lots. This medium height would encourage densities high enough to promote diversified uses, but low enough to create a pedestrian-scale environment. Medium-size new buildings would also blend the area together to create a continuous urban landscape (Midtown Alliance, 1998: 1).



Figure 10, Simulation of Peachtree corridor with desired density and streetfront retail
Source: Midtown Alliance

The remainder of the introduction focuses on the need to create a pedestrian-friendly environment through the use of street trees and wide sidewalks as well as the creation of a locally oriented feel and traffic pace

through signage, traffic calming and the deployment of street-level retail.

The “general land use” section details eleven principles to guide future development based upon the location of specific land use types. Although certain portions of Midtown are occasionally singled out, the principles listed generally follow for all 23 sub-districts the Blueprint identifies. The most apparent aspect of this section is its orientation towards working with the resources already in place within Midtown and designating certain nodes within the area for specific land-use emphases. This process involves both identifying portions of Midtown needing to be bolstered in order to further emphasize their strength as well as reconfiguring some areas to create new strengths. Examples of this approach are the desire to keep pre-existing institutional land-uses (including cultural, religious and medical) in place, the desire to concentrate new office development in the West Peachtree Street/Spring Street Corridors north of 10th Street and the 14th street Corridor between I-75/85 and Peachtree. Also notable is the desire to confine retail to key locations in order to reinforce the

general strength of that sector as new businesses arrive. Perhaps the most interesting feature of the General Land Use section is the designation of places where “architectural emphasis” is required. As stated in the Blueprint:

These are key visual locations where the orientation of a street makes that specific spot a termination point for the view down that street. Rather than allowing billboards to be located in these key locations, the character of Midtown can easily be enhanced by requiring the architecture of the buildings in these locations to address this key visual opportunity (Midtown Alliance, 1998: 2).

Consistent with the rest of the Blueprint, even when designating districts or areas of emphasis within Midtown, a general mixed-use orientation is adhered to throughout the General Land Use section.

The transit section is formatted in a manner entirely different from the general land use section that preceded it. Instead of eleven principles, seven “options” are presented. Despite the implications of being so labeled, the “options” are not mutually exclusive. Additionally, many of the “options” are not intended for a single party to choose. Rather, the options represent key innovations that can be made to enhance the service of the neighborhood’s

already rich transit infrastructure. These enhancements are to be made through additions including pedestrian passageways to speed access to transit stations, the extension and creation of shuttle bus lines and the creation of on-demand limo services within the area to expand the geographical reach of the area’s MARTA Stations. The parties listed for the innovation and execution of these options include planning officials, MARTA, Georgia Tech and private firms (Midtown Alliance, 1998: 2-3).

The Pedestrian section specifies the precise dimensions of the sidewalks in residential and commercial areas and the improvements needed to enhance Midtown’s overall pedestrian environment. The residential sidewalk dimensions range from five feet in low-density sections to 8 feet in high-density sections, with a variable width system in effect for medium-density sections. For commercial areas, a minimum 15-foot sidewalk width no less than six feet from the curb is prescribed. This width increases to 40 feet with no separation from the curb in front of large retailers. The pedestrian environment component, typical of much of the rest of the Blueprint, specifies materials and design

standards used to distinguish the area and its component districts and use types.

The Open Space/Landscape section specifies the standards to be used regarding intersections and plazas, parking lots, parks, open space development and mid-block parks. Perhaps the most stringent standards are found in the open space development, street trees and parking lot sections. Notable among these sections are the requirements that one tree must be planted for each 4 cars interior to the lot in parking areas, one tree is required for every 25 feet of residential frontage and especially that “mid-rise buildings are required to set aside and maintain pocket parks that are equal to or greater than the area of the building extending above 5 stories” (Midtown Alliance. 1998: 4). In addition to these standards, the precise location and contents of new pocket parks to be created are listed.

The section entitled “Street Types” delineates different levels of streets, ranging from “Expressway/highway” to “Residential Alley,” and the appropriate dimensions and landscaping for each. Perhaps most important to the place-building agenda

of the Blueprint are the categories of “Signature streets” This category includes the area’s main arteries, such as Peachtree, Piedmont, Juniper, 5th, 10th and, somewhat surprisingly, the mostly non-Midtown Ralph McGill. These are all seen as important “image streets,” requiring sidewalks of 20 feet with the most intense streetscaping and landscaping and the minimum number of curb cuts. Perhaps the most important change that is envisioned for these corridors is the provision of parallel parking on both sides of each street, something currently lacking.

The parking section is perhaps the strongest in its potential to affect the overall look of Midtown. The section’s opening regulation, “No parking in front of a structure unless marquee or hotel drop off” (Midtown Alliance, 1998: 6) embodies the Blueprint’s goal of creating a more urban feel in a very decisive manner. Similarly, the desire to confine decks to the interiors of blocks and to place them in a manner that allow for shared office/retail/entertainment usage also reflects the desire to create a more urban feel in a mixed-use environment. The size, design and ratio

of parking spaces to square footage of each use type are also specified.

The retail section specifies two general categories: Mixed-use and Entertainment. For each type, three to six stories is envisioned as the ideal height, with additional 15-foot heights allowed for “emphasis” in the mixed-use areas. In the mixed-use areas, housing is required above the ground floor. In the entertainment areas, a 40-foot setback is required but there are no residential requirements.⁴ It is in this section that auto retail and other more highway-oriented activities are authorized, with appropriate signage allowances.

The high-rise office section provides very specific guidelines to make sure that the area’s principal economic resources and signature landmarks (Class A office buildings) are developed in a manner that is consistent with the overall goals of the Blueprint. Foremost among the requirements in this section are that taller buildings must

occupy the highest-profile intersections of the area, corners of buildings must have unique architectural treatments, and parking garages constructed for specific buildings must mirror the appearance of the main building. To encourage the mixed-use character desired for Midtown, retail is encouraged on ground floors of office buildings, while internal cafeterias for employees are discouraged. Mid-block connections are encouraged to provide passageways between buildings to shorten pedestrian trips. These are accomplished both through the creation of spaces between adjacent buildings as well as between buildings and their parking structures (connected via atriums) (Midtown Alliance, 1998: 7).

Housing, the final section of the Blueprint, focuses on three types of new housing development: Low-rise courtyard housing, Multi-family townhouse flats and Urban courtyard apartments. The type that is notable for not being included is detached single-family housing, a type that is quite prominent in the area’s existing housing stock despite the area’s overall urban character. Despite the specific parameters described for each type of

⁴ This requirement is consistent with the assessment made in the General Land Use section of the Blueprint which states that “housing is less dense on the eastern edge of Midtown, and gets generally denser the further you go west into Midtown” (Midtown Alliance, 1998: 2). The eastern edge of Midtown (East of West Peachtree) is where the bulk of the Entertainment commercial is targeted for location.

housing, the section only covers housing types ranging from two to six stories. Also notable is that for each type of housing, parking is specified for location under the buildings or in some sort of structure—a form of residential parking that is currently not a common practice in Midtown. In general, the over-specificity and limited scope of the housing section could potentially make this final section of the Blueprint perhaps the least effective in responding to and prescribing solutions to Midtown’s problems.

As can be seen from the above paragraphs, the text of Blueprint Midtown maintains a fairly general level in describing the appropriate solutions for creating a more desirable Midtown. While the charts, buildout simulations, and maps that accompany the Blueprint text do make the intent of the text somewhat more clear, the document is still decidedly broad overall. Perhaps the most perplexing aspect of the Blueprint is that as a fairly short document, it serves as a stand-in for a much more complex and refined vision that has yet to be released to the public in full. As such, when one hears Midtown Alliance representatives or

other Midtown officials refer to the “Blueprint,” what is really being referred to is the sum total of the larger body of decisions that have been made and the consensus that has been reached regarding the ideal future of Midtown and the physical forms it will assume. To make the vision of the Blueprint more concrete and enforceable, specific strategies were pursued. The most prominent of these strategies, a tax-improvement district and Special Public Interest legislation, will be detailed below.

Midtown Community Improvement District

In order to capitalize on the momentum created through the process through which public opinion was sought and the Blueprint created, the Midtown Alliance next began the process of creating a method whereby the principles of the Blueprint could be officially agreed upon and acted on by area businesses and developers. The method sought for this process was the creation of a Community Improvement District (CID). This district type imposes an additional tax on commercial property owners for a period of six years. The goal of imposing this additional tax was

to create a pool of money to be leveraged towards additional federal funds. As the Alliance states in its own *Midtown Journal*, “Federal grants generally require a 20 percent match of private funds so a Midtown CID can maximize private investment at a ratio of 1 to 4” (Midtown Alliance, 1999b: 2). Estimating the yearly yield of the tax at \$3.3 million (Hairston, 2000), the Alliance expected to generate \$90 million in public and private funds over the course of the six-year life of the CID.

The bulk of the funds planned to be generated from the CID were earmarked for three major areas: traffic and transit improvements (\$20 million), pedestrian and other streetscape enhancements (\$50 million), parks (\$12 million) and security (\$8 million) (*Ibid.*: 5). Perhaps most ambitious of the activities planned for the incoming funds were improvements to the area’s pedestrian environment covering over 26 miles of streetscape (*Ibid.*: 3). Also ambitious was the use of the bulk of the public safety funds to create a private security force, an issue that will be covered below.

Aside from the impressive dollar amount expected to be generated and the

broad scope of many of the planned efforts, the most notable aspect of the CID is the urgency apparent in the Midtown Alliance literature and other media accounts of the effort. The Alliance’s publication on the effort quotes Tad Leithead, who helped develop a CID for the Cobb Galleria area in Atlanta’s suburbs and acted as a consultant to the Alliance:

Things will either deteriorate or undergo dramatic improvement. They won’t stand still. With a comprehensive plan in place and a committed community standing behind it, we have every reason to move quickly on this CID (Midtown Alliance, 1999b: 6).

The Alliance’s press release on the CID “From Blueprint to build-out: Midtown is ready for a CID” also mirrored Leithead’s “the time is now” philosophy. The major writers in the Atlanta press also expressed similar support and urgency, providing the effort much publicity (cf. Shropshire, 2000; Hairston, 2000). The CID, which required the approval of a simple majority of the affected property owners holding 75 percent of the assessed property value of the area (Midtown Alliance, “Midtown Community Improvement District”: 2), was approved easily in late 2000.

Special Public Interest Zoning

In addition to creating the Midtown Improvement District, the Alliance has been pursuing a process of rendering the visions of the Blueprint into official ordinance status. In order to do this, special Public Interest Legislation (SPI) has been sought for the area covered in the Blueprint. To get this legislation enacted, the Alliance has relied upon the City of Atlanta planning department to work as the primary conduit through which such legislation would be presented to the City Council, who must approve such legislation. In order to determine the appropriateness of promoting changes to the City's zoning code, and later honing the sometimes-general provisions of the Blueprint into something more fully resembling zoning code, the Alliance has worked closely with City planners assigned responsibility in Midtown, as well as with neighborhood representatives serving on the Midtown Neighbor's Association and attending Neighborhood Planning Unit E meetings.

The motivation for initiating the SPI legislation was to create a set of zoning codes specifically tailored to be responsive to the character and needs of

Midtown. In addition to creating a set of locally-oriented codes that would be more effective than the rather general zone types used throughout the city, the SPI legislation was also designed to create a more simple and user-friendly code that would replace the arguably more complex and confusing set of city codes currently in place. As a Midtown Alliance publication states: "It was...obvious to city officials and property owners that Midtown's zoning had become chaotic (see next page for current zoning map). Over the years, numerous modifications, overlays and variances have left a set of regulations that is not only outdated but often lacking any discernable rhyme or reason" (Midtown Alliance, 2001: 3). To replace this chaos and best implement the visions outlined in the Blueprint, the Alliance and the City of Atlanta saw writing a brand new, comprehensive zoning ordinance strongly favoring mixed-use without any overlays (and itself not an overlay) as the best strategy.

The result of the Alliance's collaborations with the City's staff are two zoning districts that are unique to Midtown Atlanta and tailored to the

area’s needs, labeled SPI 3 and 4 (see maps, pages 32-33). SPI 3, named “Midtown” to denote its status as the much larger of the two SPI districts, covers the bulk of the Blueprint area and is divided into sub-districts labeled Midtown Commercial, Midtown Residential and Juniper East Residential. The latter two districts are at the eastern edge of SPI 3 and border the areas that cover SPI 4 at the eastern, more residential and transitional edge of the Blueprint territory. SPI 4, named “Piedmont” after the street that serves as the north-south spine of the zone, consists of the areas that border the “Midtown neighborhood” and Piedmont Park. This zone is designed as a buffer between the commercial and mixed-use focus areas of the Blueprint and the more wholly residential areas that are largely outside the Alliance’s area of focus. The three sub-districts that are identified for this area are labeled Piedmont North, 10th and Piedmont and Piedmont South. In keeping with much of the new urbanist leanings apparent in the Blueprint, high-profile strips along major streets such as Peachtree, West Peachtree and North Avenue, as well as 5th, 10th 14th streets, have been

designated as “Storefront Corridors” (see map on next page) in order to create the mixed-use, pedestrian friendly vision the Alliance advocates.

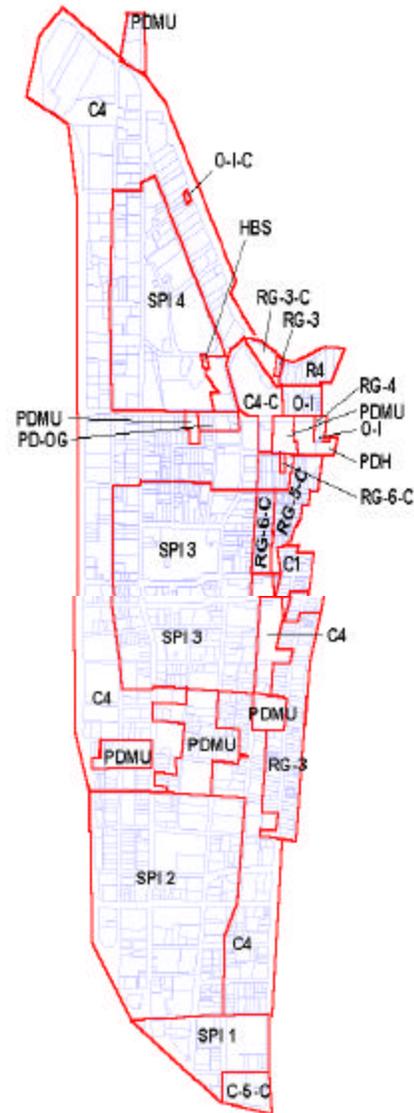


Figure 11, Current Midtown Zoning
Source: City of Atlanta

These strips are found primarily in the SPI 3 zone, but are also found directly

adjacent to areas in SPI 4 (Midtown Alliance, 2001; 6-7).



Figure 12, Designated Storefront Corridors
Source: Midtown Alliance

Despite the fact that the proposed SPI areas cover much the same territory as the Blueprint, there are significant areas of Midtown that these zones are not designated for coverage. A significant portion of the Blueprint area are in the areas surrounding Midtown's three MARTA stations, each of these stations has its own denser zoning generally covering a two to three-block

radius around the actual station facility. In addition to the portions of Midtown left out of the SPI zones due to transit station area designation, the so-called "no man's land" at the southern edge of the Blueprint area is also not included, instead being designated as an area to be covered in later work. As can be seen from looking at the Alliance's maps of the SPI zones, the area between North Avenue and where Peachtree and Piedmont cross I-75/85 has been left out, reserved as "Phase II" of the SPI zoning process, to be covered at a later date.

For both of the areas covered in SPI 3 and 4, the objective is to achieve the following goals:

- Create an urban environment where people can live, work meet and recreate
- Improve the aesthetics of the built environment
- Facilitate safe, pleasant and convenient pedestrian circulation
- Protect the historic character of Midtown and its adjoining neighborhoods
- Encourage community-oriented retail uses
- Provide sufficient, safe and accessible open space for active and passive enjoyment by resident and workers (Midtown Alliance, 2001: 2)



Figure 13, SPI 3 Territory and Land-Use Designations. Source: Midtown Alliance

To achieve these goals, several general principles were enacted. Foremost among these principles are primary entrances to buildings occurring on public sidewalks, keeping curb cuts and

driveway entrances to a minimum and requiring landscaping and screening around areas such as service entrances and surface parking. Parking is also required to be placed behind, beside or beneath buildings, or otherwise made to look like buildings if located in structures. The Blueprint's Storefront Corridor strips also play a vital role in achieving these goals. Sidewalks are required to be 15-20 feet wide and bicycle racks were required at fixed ratio of 1 for every 20 parking spaces (Midtown Alliance, 2001: 6).

The ordinances for SPI 3 and 4 state both the general conditions and permitted uses that lend each zone its thematic unity, while also specifying the distinguishing requirements and conditions that differentiate the sub-districts within each SPI zone from one another. Common to all areas within SPI 3 are 24-foot minimum building height, 20 percent minimum public space requirements, and street tree, grating and landscaping requirements.

All areas are also expected to have 15-foot minimum sidewalk width, except for Peachtree Street, where 20 feet is required. Permitted uses for all areas

within SPI 3 include all types of dwellings, cultural and entertainment

facilities, offices, retail and single occupancy residences and boarding houses. Prohibited in all sub-districts are park-for-hire surface lots, drive-through facilities (except on the western edge) and all new adult businesses. Of a list of land uses potentially permitted in each of the three sub-zones, Midtown Commercial has the greatest number of permitted uses, while Midtown Residential has the fewest. Similarly, Midtown Commercial has the highest allowable floor area ratios (up to 8.2), while Midtown Residential has the lowest with a value of 3.2 (City of Atlanta, 2001a).

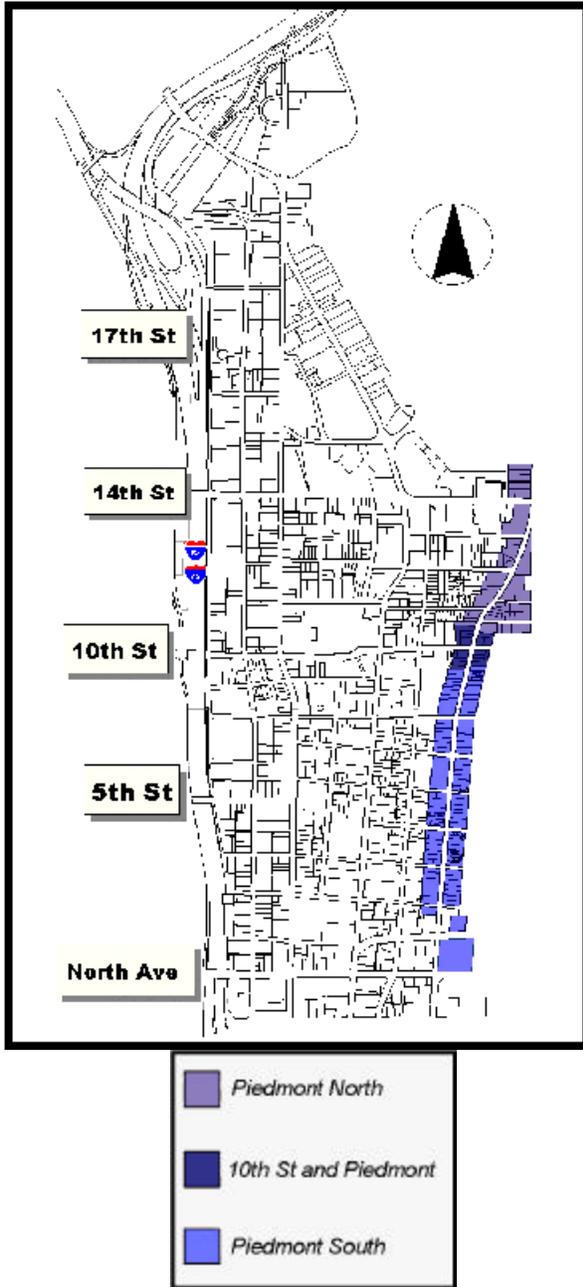


Figure 14, SPI 4 Territory and Land Use Designations. Source: Midtown Alliance

For SPI 4, (opposite) which largely runs along Piedmont Avenue, adjacent to Piedmont Park and the more residential portion of the neighborhood, a different set of standards are suggested. Generally, each of the guidelines suggested for the area evokes a designation of the SPI 4 area as one that is of lesser intensity than that covered by SPI 3. Floor area ratios for the sub-district within SPI 4 range from 1.50 for 10th and Piedmont to .696 for Piedmont South. Building heights are also tightly constricted, ranging from a 24-foot minimum in all areas to

maximums of 35 to 50 feet in each of the sub-areas. The only uses permitted in all areas are dwellings of all types and structures/uses for MARTA. Only the 10th and Piedmont sub-area is designated for commercial uses other than those at street level and on street corners of less than 5,000 square feet. As in the SPI 3 area, all park-for-hire surface lots, drive-through facilities and adult establishments are prohibited (City of Atlanta, 2001b). As can be seen from the details of the proposed SPI 4 ordinance, the Piedmont area is intended to be of less intensity than the SPI 3 area, meeting Alliance wishes that the area serve as a buffer between Midtown's commercial core and the Midtown neighborhood (Hourigan, 2000).

The process of approving the proposed SPI zones to become official in their designated areas is currently in the Neighborhood Planning Unit review and recommendation stage. According to the schedule published in the Alliance's pamphlet on the SPI zoning procedures, the ordinance should go through Zoning Review Board (a City Council subcommittee) public hearings in April 2001 and be put up for City Council

adoption in June of the same year (Midtown Alliance, 2001: 8).

Midtown Blue and Other Public Health and Safety Efforts

In addition to the physical environment-shaping efforts outlined above, the Midtown Alliance has also been heavily involved in trying to improve the overall cleanliness and safety of the district. As the area has always had a tarnished image in the eyes of many due to significant crime and has often had problems with sanitation, these efforts were integrally a part of the organization's initial efforts to improve the outward public perception of Midtown. One of the first substantive efforts the Alliance undertook was the location of an Atlanta Police Department mini-precinct in near the intersection of 10th and Peachtree. In operation since 1991, this precinct has remained open because its operating costs are underwritten by the Alliance (Midtown Alliance, "Community Development").

In fall 2000, the Alliance announced that it intends to expand its efforts to improve public safety in the Blueprint area by creating a new private security force called Midtown Blue.

This security force was inspired by Downtown's "Ambassadors," created shortly before the 1996 Olympic games and widely considered a success by that area's business interests and visitors. Like the mini-precinct (and unlike the Ambassadors), Midtown Blue will employ Atlanta Police Department officers. The major difference between Midtown Blue and the mini-precinct is that the new security force will employ off-duty city officers. These off-duty officers will have full powers of arrest and will work in cooperation with the Atlanta Police Department (*Ibid.*).

While the mini-precinct has generally been regarded as a success, the announcement of the formation of Midtown Blue has met with mixed reactions. Residents of the neighborhood have argued in meetings that the creation of a force that very tightly patrols the Blueprint area could have the effect of shifting the often property-focused crime in the business district to areas outside Midtown Blue's purview. In this argument the neighborhoods are placed at risk due to its lesser patrol levels. (Holbrook, 2000). Other criticisms of the new force have focused on the fact that the launch of the Midtown Blue

represents a new foray into the privatization of public services in an urban setting. While perhaps suburban office complexes in unincorporated areas such as those profiled in Joel Garreau's *Edge City* (1991) have commonly had private security forces with full arrest powers, observers were taken aback to see such an entity created to patrol public streets within Atlanta City limits. Criticisms of Midtown Blue's formation have taken both the Alliance and the Atlanta Police Department to task. The Alliance has been criticized for usurping the duties usually performed by city-level officers who do not work for local business leaders. The police have been criticized for essentially ceding their usual responsibilities through under- or non-performance of patrolling duties.

Other efforts outside of law enforcement have included the development of the Midtown Porters, a sanitation patrol that attempts to work to improve the day-to-day cleanliness of the Blueprint area. Specific targets are graffiti, illegal handbills and signs, and other street refuse. Although mostly the work of one individual, with additional help added as needed, the Alliance claims that over 1,600 bags of trash were

collected in the program's first year (Mendheim, 1999).

The Alliance in Midtown

As can be seen quite easily, the Midtown Alliance has engaged itself in a full slate of neighborhood planning activities, carefully articulating its desires for the future state of the area it covers while seeking official mechanisms to fully consecrate its vision.

Also evident is the fact that the Alliance very much "sells the sizzle," painting a picture of an idealized, dramatically improved Midtown that can only exist if the group's initiatives are supported. Using nearly every type of media presentation at its disposal while also seeking publicity in all major Atlanta media, the Alliance has aggressively, and thus far successfully, marketed its ideas to both neighborhood stakeholders and Atlanta area observers. Missed in much of this publicity is the fact that the Alliance's efforts are still firmly rooted in the Peachtree Business community that gave the organization its start, despite the deceptively general labeling of the area planned for as "Midtown."

However, since Midtown extends beyond the boundaries covered in the Blueprint and serves constituencies broader than the Alliance's business base, other organizations participate in the neighborhood-level planning process as well. These organizations and their missions are described in the following section.

Other Organizations Involved in Shaping Midtown

Midtown Neighbors' Association

The Midtown Neighbor's Association has a unique role within the planning and governance process in Midtown. While representatives of the Association's board are included in Midtown Alliance proceedings, the Association also has taken an opposing role at times, speaking up when proposed initiatives or developments are believed to be in contradiction to the best interests of the residential portion of greater Midtown. As is noted below, the interests of the area's long-standing, often counterculture-leaning residents are frequently in sharp opposition to the economic development and value enhancing-oriented approach the

Alliance takes, both for financial and deeply personal reasons.

SHAPE

SHAPE (Shaping Historic Atlanta in the Ponce de Leon Environment) is an organization devoted to promoting and influencing the redevelopment process along the Ponce de Leon Avenue Corridor at the southern edge of the Midtown Neighborhood. The Street that gives the organization its name is a major east-west axis in the area covered in Blueprint Midtown. However, the vast majority of the avenue is outside of Midtown, both the area covered by the Blueprint, and that otherwise considered the “neighborhood.” Other neighborhoods the street traverses or borders include Virginia-Highland, Poncey Highlands, Druid Hills and Little Five Points. For these reasons, SHAPE is producing its own plan to create a vision that meets the particular needs of this corridor which, while a prominent part of Midtown, is largely not addressed in the Blueprint.

Specific problems that have been identified along the Ponce de Leon corridor include the area’s predominantly strip development style, a

large number of physically obsolete commercial buildings, high rates of crime and an intensive concentration of social service agencies⁵. To address these issues, SHAPE is developing its own development standards, hopefully initiating the process of codification eventually resulting in official adoption of the standards by the City of Atlanta currently underway in the Blueprint area. The organization is also conducting corridor studies to better assess the impact of potential developments on the corridor.

According to Susan Edlein, President of SHAPE, recent development activity along the corridor has been both encouraging and discouraging. While the numerous loft projects that have been initiated in the recent years have brought needed high-end housing to the Midtown-related sections of the Ponce de Leon corridor in an aesthetically-desirable fashion, much of the retail development that has recently been added has been less successful in contributing to a new

⁵ Examples of the social service locations which dot the Ponce de Leon Corridor include A halfway house for the State Penal System, an abortion clinic, (now demolished) a drug rehabilitation center and a disabled veterans residence.

urbanist transformation of the corridor’s strip orientation. According to both Edlein and Midtown Neighbors’ Association President Jim Holbrook, the two newest retail developments in the area have mirrored the layout and feel of suburban “big box” developments surrounded by parking lots, serving as reminders of the need to create a coherent and binding plan to guide the Ponce de Leon corridor’s development (Edlein, 2000; Holbrook, 2000). In general, the issues which SHAPE addresses are similar to those faced by residents of the Midtown Neighborhood—wanting to attain the many of the increased design standards and enhanced urban feel sought in the Blueprint, but not being included in the Alliance’s efforts.

City of Atlanta

As noted above, the city of Atlanta plays its largest role in Midtown’s planning process through the forum of Neighborhood Planning Unit E (NPU-E, see map on next page). This is a localized planning body that essentially acts as the neighborhood’s planning commission, making recommendations for action at the city level. It is through

this arena that concerns of residents, businesspeople and other stakeholders are collected. It is also through NPU-E that proposed rezonings or changes in local ordinances must be routed before hearing at the City Council’s Planning subcommittee, before final vote in the City Council.

While the NPU system allows residents to assess proposed developments or ordinances, voicing their approval or disapproval, this level of the planning process does not have the power to make binding decisions on such matters. Final decisions are made at the citywide level, meaning the opinion of NPU hearings can be ignored. To a great extent, the NPU process can be seen as a confirmation of Stone’s (1989) thesis, as it allows residents to express their opinion on vital matters while leaving a clear path for the workings of the established business-city government axis.

One question that arises when examining the current process of gaining approval for SPI 3 and 4 is whether the proposed zoning changes are being designed in by the Atlanta Department of Planning or whether the Department is formalizing the Alliance’s wishes.

An examination of the Midtown Alliance literature and the Atlanta press certainly suggests the latter. If this is the case, theories expressing a dominant role for businesses within the Atlanta regime are affirmed.



Figure 15, Atlanta Neighborhood Planning Unit Map. Midtown is included in NPU E.
Source: City of Atlanta

Summary: Midtown Planning

The neighborhood planning process in Midtown is currently producing some strong initiatives designed to direct present and future growth to re-create the area as a dense traditional urban community in otherwise sprawling Atlanta. However, the planning process as it currently exists in Midtown is clearly dominated by the influence of its business community in the form of the Midtown Alliance. As a result of the vast resources of the business community that formed it, the Alliance

enjoys the ability to market its initiatives in ways no other local organization can. In addition to this advantage business community resources creates, the Alliance also utilizes these resources to position itself as the primary planning organization in Midtown, outstripping even the efforts of the City of Atlanta to effectively privatize planning within Midtown's core. The effect of this privatization and the preeminence of the Alliance in Midtown planning creates tensions within the neighborhood as different sections are afforded quite different planning attention. These tensions are especially acute when efforts are made to deal with the lingering negative externalities that still exist despite the area's recent growth and dramatically increased investment.

V. Lingerin g Issues facing Midtown

In spite of the recent boom in investment activity occurring in Midtown, as well as the increased efforts to develop local solutions to the problems the area faces concerning its built and social environments, many issues linger as threats to Midtown’s sustained future success. Many of these issues represent problems that have yet to be addressed by any of the major policy-making groups at the local level. Others are problems that have been created through the area’s recent spate of growth. Perhaps most problematic are the problems resulting from lack of fit between competing visions of what Midtown should be. This section will identify the major problems facing Midtown that many of the area’s competing constituencies have identified.

Area-Wide Issues

One problem that continues to linger, despite the best efforts of the Midtown Alliance, is the fact that the neighborhood has a relatively weak retail sector. At this point in time, it is

not really possible to purchase the usual range of products required to maintain a household and a professional career within Midtown. Especially notable within this general deficiency is the lack of big-name major retailers. Although the new Atlantic Station development is expected to include a great deal of retail space, including a walkable outdoor shopping area called “the block” as well as several “big box” stores, the desire of both the residents and the business community is to see more retail along Midtown’s traditional high-profile corridors, closer to existing businesses and residences. Although the Blueprint and the pending SPI zoning have been designed to facilitate retail location throughout Midtown, there is no guarantee that the desired stores will in fact locate in the designated corridors. In the words of Dan Hourigan, Planner with the Midtown Alliance, a “bell cow” major retailer is needed to establish the area as practical for new store locations before other, more cautious, retailers will locate in the area. This is because retailers often have a “follow the leader”

mentality when locating stores in new areas. The Alliance is currently undertaking efforts to recruit such retailers to Midtown, as well as conducting studies to see what measures need to be taken to make the area more attractive to key retail segments that are presently absent (DeGross, 2000). The recruitment of a number of high-profile retailers is generally seen as the factor that will be the “clincher” as far as proving that Midtown is fully recovered from its days of disinvestment and has developed into a full-fledged urban center (Hourigan, 2000).

Another problem that continues to persist, despite the best efforts of the Alliance and other Midtown groups is crime. Midtown’s image is still hampered by a perception of having high crime levels, especially property crimes such as auto theft and break-ins. The area is also strongly associated with street crimes such as drug dealing and prostitution. For much of the 1980s and 1990s, 14th Street west of Peachtree and Ponce de Leon east of Peachtree were among Atlanta’s most notorious prostitution strips. The creation of the APD mini-precinct and Midtown Blue are signs that local leaders are

committed to solving these problems. However, the need to create a local security force also demonstrates that the city police force is not doing an adequate job on its own. As such, Midtown, despite its efforts at creating localized solutions to the crime problem, is stigmatized by the recent wave of bad publicity the APD has generated due to poor event control and slow response times in recent years.

Perhaps the issue that has the greatest potential to bring the recent surge of development in Midtown to a halt is traffic, along with the related issue of parking. Despite the proximity of Midtown to four MARTA stations, and its location on the I-75/85 connector, Midtown still has numerous accessibility problems. Recent efforts at planning and promoting Midtown have tried to emphasize usage of MARTA rail to overcome reliance on the area’s crowded streets and highways. However, since Atlanta is a heavily single occupancy vehicle-oriented metro area with poor intra-metropolitan accessibility (Helling, 1998) and will probably remain so for a long time to come, the fact that Midtown is located within the most high-congestion section of Atlanta’s roads

and freeways remains a problem. Similarly, the area is currently poorly equipped for parking on the part of visitors to the area. While the employees of the major office complexes generally have ample parking in decks adjacent to their place of work, convenient parking for trips to retail, services or visits to other businesses is in short supply. Unless thoroughly addressed, parking may be the one externality that thwarts Midtown's transformation from an inner city office park feel to that of a fully integrated urban neighborhood.

Issues of Concern to Residents

Midtown has once again become an area that is desirable for new residential construction and conversion. Numerous new high-end units have been completed in recent years that cater to a class of residents long thought to have no interest in living in Midtown. Despite this encouraging change, several drawbacks are also evident as results of this increased demand. In general, as the local office and residential market has heated up, average prices for pre-existing residential units have also increased. In many cases the residential

market has become so hot that, in addition to the expected rental increases, many rental units have been converted to condominiums. In some cases, rental units under construction have been converted before completion (Holbrook, 2000). This trend, combined with the recent demolition of some older units has put the low-to-moderate income renter, once the mainstay of the Midtown Neighborhood, in severe jeopardy as the area shifts to a higher income mix than in its recent past.

A related concern of many long-standing residents is that as Midtown becomes a pricier, higher-demand area, it may lose its traditional character as a "funky" neighborhood largely composed of young people with commitments to various alternative lifestyles. Long a Mecca for gay men, musicians, artists, students and other predominantly youth-oriented segments, Midtown may see a de-emphasizing of these groups as it becomes a more mainstream, high-end residential and commercial area. Indeed, one concern that has been expressed at neighborhood meetings is that Midtown may be headed towards a residential composition that is similar to Buckhead, the area's 'yuppie' neighbor to the north

(Holbrook, 2000). Some have even proclaimed that they miss the ‘seedy’ days of Midtown’s past.

Despite the obvious amenity that having the city’s major park nearby provides, many residents have expressed concern about Piedmont Park and the rest of Midtown being over-utilized for events enjoyed predominantly by individuals from outside the neighborhood. In a typical year, Piedmont Park hosts the Atlanta Jazz Festival, The Dogwood Festival, the Summer Arts Festival, the Peachtree Road Race, Gay Pride festivities as well as a plethora of other events too numerous to mention. Many of these events, especially the athletic ones, require disruption of Midtown’s traffic patterns, including the removal of street-parked cars.

After numerous arrests and other incidents occurred during Freaknik and Atlanta Pot Fest activities in the park in 1993, residents and local merchants organized to complain of the adverse effects of large events occurring so frequently in Piedmont Park. Although the city has expressed concern to this issue and often provided a stronger police presence at many events in the

area, Piedmont Park continues to be used heavily for large events. This has led area interests to complain of Midtown being Atlanta’s outdoor entertainment center at the inconvenience of local residents with very little sign of this status changing in the near future⁶.

Across from Piedmont Park’s southern edge lies another source of conflict for Midtown residents. The Children’s School, a private grade school on 10th Street a quarter mile east of Peachtree (and outside the Blueprint area), has recently announced its intentions to expand, including the construction of another building and a driveway for student drop-off. The Children’s School, which currently enrolls 360 students, is located on what is otherwise a single-family strip of older houses along 10th Street. Many former residential sites are part of the school’s grounds, which includes parking structures built into the school buildings. To accommodate the expansion, four additional houses would have to be demolished (Carter, 2000). The school’s

⁶ One source of solace to local residents and merchants on this issue is that with the construction of the Federal Reserve Bank at 10th and Peachtree, the empty parcel which had been used for events such as Music Midtown festival,

proposal is controversial not only because it would further encroach upon a residential area that staunchly defends itself from disruption (as in the Piedmont Park issue above), but also due to the fact that the school is not generally viewed as a resource primarily benefiting the community's residents. Instead, the common perception is that the school's students are largely the children of suburban residents who may work in central Atlanta including, but not exclusively, Midtown workers. Accordingly, nearby residents are concerned further expansion of the school will generate noise and traffic, remove historic or otherwise valuable residences without great benefit to local residents (Holbrook, 2000).

Perhaps the largest concern for Midtown residents (at least those outside of the Blueprint area) is that their neighborhood is not integrated into the efforts of the Midtown Alliance. In addition to lacking the innovative zoning districts and design standards the Blueprint area is developing, the Midtown Neighborhood and other similar residential areas also are not

getting the same enhanced crime protection and sanitation that the high profile corridors are receiving. As noted above, certain corridors, such as the Ponce de Leon strip to which SHAPE attends, are decidedly out-of-sync with the unified appearance emerging in the Blueprint area. Besides missing out on these enhancements made possible by having a well-financed, business-sector dominated organization on one's side, the residential areas are often finding themselves in an opposing role to the decidedly more high-dollar and grand scale Midtown Alliance efforts. Whether this fissure will lead to an eventually stronger distinction between the business sector and other neighborhood areas in the future is a question that needs to be resolved.

The presence of these lingering issues highlights the fact that while the Midtown Alliance and all the other partners involved in Midtown's planning have made great strides towards improving the overall environment of the neighborhood, several key weaknesses remain. In addition to the environmental weaknesses that exist due to Midtown's location in a congested inner city area with high crime and other

Cirque de Soleil and other large entertainment uses is no longer used for such events.

urban problems, a lack of overall organization to unite the residential and business communities also poses a significant threat. Future efforts at planning Midtown should take a more

holistic and integrative approach to attempt to avert the tensions that arise due to the cleavage of a coherent large neighborhood into narrowly specialized sub-districts.

VI. Conclusion

Midtown Atlanta has undergone a remarkable transformation from a declining, poorly organized inner city commercial area into one of the premier centers for new development in the Southeast. The area's business leaders have engaged in a systematic process of planning to ensure that the benefits of the recent development boom are not short-lived. Creating a neighborhood plan, a business improvement district and a zoning ordinance unique to Midtown are steps that have great potential for transforming the built environment of this uniquely diverse area. With proper execution these efforts should not merely preserve Midtown as a marketable location for office development. The business community's efforts should additionally transform the neighborhood into the only traditionally urban mixed-use business district in the Atlanta area.

However, great danger exists in that along with this new local planning process has come a bifurcation of Midtown into two distinct sections—its high profile business-dominated core and its considerably less powerful

residential periphery. This bifurcation not only has the potential to highlight divisions within the larger community, it also has the potential to break a distinctive neighborhood formerly perceived as largely unitary into distinct sub-areas defined by levels of power and efficacy as well as development types.

In a larger context, the division of Midtown into separate areas also highlights the dangers present in the privatization of the planning process. Having no authority making it necessary to create a plan and local improvement process that includes and benefits the entire Midtown community, the Alliance chooses to focus on the area inhabited by its most powerful constituency. In doing so, the Alliance has shown that the Midtown planning process does not operate contrary to the regime paradigm of Atlanta's governance outlined in Stone (1989). Because of this set of circumstances, Midtown's governance represents another example of Atlanta's ruling coalition between government and business, operating largely to the exclusion of neighborhood residents. Similarly, in continuing the Atlanta

tradition of heavily valuing image and marketing in the political and development processes, the Midtown Alliance walks a fine line between soliciting media support and drowning out dissent.

In the specific areas of neighborhood planning and urban service delivery, Midtown's privatization could have serious implications for future residents. The Alliance, having judged many of the core services the City of Atlanta delivers to be substandard, has begun the process of creating or contracting for these services itself. It is entirely possible that in order to further enhance Midtown, or simply keep it competitive with suburban locations, the Alliance could expand into the provision of more and more basic services previously thought to be "public" goods. In the face of such locally enhanced service provision, the residents adjacent to the Blueprint area would be excluded from the benefits their business corridor neighbors enjoy. If this privatization of services continues unchecked, what currently appears to be a series of strategically targeted enhancements may soon resemble a deep-seated inequality between

Midtown's business interests and its surrounding neighborhood residents. Unfortunately, the mere expansion of the Alliance's efforts into the broader community would not eradicate many of the problems apparent in Midtown. Instead, of merely forcing the Alliance to cover a larger section of Midtown to avoid artificially dividing a long-standing neighborhood, the city should assume a more active presence in neighborhood governance to ensure equitable participation of all affected parties.

At present, the City of Atlanta allows an economic power-based, geographically coherent inequality to develop unchecked, not working to ensure equal provision of basic services to all its citizens, regardless of their proximity to major business interests. Maintaining a neighborhood planning system that is only able to offer opinions and recommendations, the city fails to protect its citizen's from being overpowered in the presence of economically stronger groups able to independently produce a planning process tailored to their best interests.

While the products of Midtown Atlanta's private sector directed

planning process are impressive in terms of vision, scope and resources, the implications of the structures of power and allocation within this process raise serious questions regarding its fundamental equity. The ideal equity, which could be measured both in terms of comparable levels of services enjoyed and the possession of an equal voice in planning decisions, seems to be compromised by an increased willingness to allow business interests to set the agenda when providing privately-funded substitutes for processes that otherwise would tax the city's limited resources. Not an issue simply in Midtown, the inequality evident in Atlanta provides a dangerous example of the consequences that could result from the expanding privatization of urban services.

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- Currently enrolled in Masters of Urban and Regional Planning program; degree anticipated May 2001
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University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina (1994-1996)

- Completed two years of study in Ph.D. program in Anthropology
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University of Rochester, Rochester, NY (1987-1992)

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EMPLOYMENT

Economic Development Assistance Center, Blacksburg, VA, Graduate Assistant, August 2000-present

- Work with economic, census and other data sets to assist Virginia localities with economic development decisions
- Currently conducting wealth assessment for a rural county in Virginia
- Performed feasibility studies for small business incubator location

Summer Leadership Employment Program, Blacksburg, VA, Student Intern, May 2000-August 2000

- Planned academic year activities for Graduate Student Assembly
- Received training in leadership skills, working with administrators, diversity and meeting management

Virginia Center for Housing Research, Blacksburg, VA, Graduate Assistant, August 1999-June 2000

- Performed statistical and demographic analyses, and wrote reports detailing the analyses and policy recommendations
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- Maintained contact with officials in local governments and professionals in housing and economic analysis fields

Waterhouse Securities, Atlanta GA, Broker Trainee, March 1999-August 1999

- Received training in securities markets in preparation for Series 7 exam
- Provided customers with stock quotes and account information
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Guitar Center, Atlanta GA, Accessory Sales/Assistant Department Manager May 1997-March 1999

- Sold and provided service for a wide variety of musical instruments and accessories
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- Microsoft Excel, Access, Power Point and Word
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HONORS AND AWARDS

- Awarded Virginia Citizens Planning Fellowship as Outstanding First-Year Student, Virginia Tech, April 2000
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ACTIVITIES

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