

Superlative Atlanta

12 ✓
Chester Smolski

ATLANTA — With the passing of each year a new superlative is added: the third largest convention city; the third city in the post-war period to construct a rapid transit system; the second busiest airport in the world; the safest mass transportation system in the country; and with direct flights to London in the offing, this major commercial, industrial and financial center of the Southeast can truly claim to be a New International City. Atlanta is all of these.

Just as important as the ratings is the sense of pride that one sees here, together with the warm feeling with which local residents speak of their city. Whether it be the tallest hotel in the world downtown or the major league sports activities centered here, Atlantans can rightly be proud of the achievements of their capital city. At a time when too many cities in this country are conjuring up a familiar litany of urban woes, Atlanta is one of the few cities that offer hope for urban America.

Atlanta is also different in another way. The car radio, on the 250 mile trip through southeast Georgia from Savannah to this city, delivers little but country music, but once within the range of the Atlanta stations, the country offerings are replaced by soul. Approximately 60 percent of the population is black and, with the nationally known Maynard Jackson at the helm, Atlanta is the second largest black majority city with a black mayor. It was here that Martin Luther King was born, would preach at the Ebenezer Baptist Church and draw attention to his quest for equality, and it is here that he rests in a monumental setting next to his church on Auburn Street, with an eternal flame reminding us of the major contributions he made in his brief lifetime.

The vitality of this urban center is best seen in the downtown where at nearly every turn a new hole appears, complete with building forms, heavy equipment and hard hats. There were 36 new buildings built between 1960 and 1970, and the building boom continues with the \$70 million, 14 story, 11 million cubic feet under one roof Omni International Atlanta; with the 10 year booked-in-advance Georgia World Congress Center; and with John Portman's other great hotel, the 70 story Peachtree Center Plaza, representative of some of the recent additions to the downtown skyline.

Interestingly, the newest building soon to rise is the Southern Bell office tower originally to be sited at the Fox Theater, slated for demolition. Much like the Ocean State in Providence, this majestic old-time opera and movie house had the opulence of a bygone era and deserved to be helped. "Save the Fox" became the rallying cry, and today this non-profit operated theater still stands as a testimony of community support for its heritage. Performances by artistic groups will continue to be performed in the building because Southern Bell will shift its building to an adjoining site.

Happy as this case was, the Lowe's Grand Theater where Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With The Wind* was first shown in 1939 with Clark Gable and other film stars here for the premiere, was less fortunate. The nearly empty building, under study by the city for a restored use, was badly burned, perhaps by arson, in a spectacular fire witnessed by the writer.

The downtown construction explosion is a result of private efforts with, significantly, the planning and design for most of what takes place here done by the private, non-profit Central Atlanta Progress, Inc. (CAP). Very similar to the Providence

27 Feb. 1978

Foundation and its growing out of the Chamber of Commerce, CAP came into being in 1941 and was incorporated in 1954. Having established credibility based on a good track record, CAP still continues to be the principal planning agent for the downtown, even contracting with the city planning department to do various jobs.

John Leak, a young, black bank officer who came to CAP on loan from one of the banks, was invited to stay on and is now Vice President of CAP. He told me that CAP's role is to serve as a catalyst for public and private investment in the downtown. And it has been successful because 80 percent of the 120 member organization have their businesses in the central business district and it is in their self interest to promote construction and activities there.

Another reason for CAP's success is the use of task forces, so that as the need arises a single purpose committee hits the problem fast and hard to get the job done. A most recent example was crime in the central business district.

After conducting their own research, CAP discovered that only 6 percent of all city crime occurred in the downtown, yet they felt that the public had the wrong perception of the situation. The method used to allay the fears of the public and the 300,000 daytime population² was to convince the police to open a second station on the edge of the downtown, opposite from the existing station. The result was the 120 police assigned the downtown area moved through here more frequently and greatly increased their visibility without any increase in manpower. Leak felt this a far more effective means to combat downtown crime as compared to setting up a small booth in the downtown and manned by police, as is done in Providence.

A second related activity was to establish a three year, CAP funded program to institute a horse patrol in the downtown. To this end they are sending six horses, together with riders, to Washington, D.C. to receive 90 days training from the Capitol police. At the end of the three year funding period, the city will determine how effective is the horse patrol and whether the city will continue the funding.

Recognizing that a healthy downtown is also based on other parts of the city being strong, CAP got city officials, citizens and property owners together and using economic clout, not legislation, they are clearing out the porno part of nearby Peachtree Walk. Fourteen massage parlors in the area have been closed over the past eight months.

A major effort on Leak's part was getting banks together to set up a \$63 million loan pledge for housing rehabilitation in city neighborhoods. More than \$30 million of this money has been used in the first 18 months of the program.

CAP is a non-profit, private group specifically working for a healthy downtown. Without any institutional ties to the city or any government group, it has had a remarkable success in carrying out its charge in both the downtown and some neighborhood spin-offs. It is not constrained by bureaucratic red tape and this another explanation for its success.

Atlanta is not without problems but its downtown is going through perhaps one of the greatest construction booms of any city in the country. A bus system that charges 15 cents to get downtown from anywhere in the city and then brings you anywhere in the downtown on your transfer obviously helps.

They are putting it all together here in Atlanta. The vigorous leadership of the business community, working through Central Atlanta Progress, is making it happen.

Chester E. Smolski, Director of Urban Studies, Rhode Island College, is touring several Southern cities.