

THE OLYMPIC LEGACY IN ATLANTA

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I. INTRODUCTION

With the announcement in 1990 that Atlanta won its bid to host the 1996 Olympic Games, leaders and citizens alike began to dream - dream of Atlanta as a shining star among the elite class of cities deemed worthy enough to bear the Olympic torch. In a city famous for its boosterism, the image mill shifted into overdrive, as an anxious group of visionaries sought to transform a Southern town once burned to the ground by out of town visitors into a beacon of sophisticated hospitality and charm. There was no shortage of plans for leveraging the Olympics to improve everything from basic infrastructure to affordable housing to the arts, with each improvement guaranteed to help Atlanta look and feel like the world class city it so desperately wanted to be. Whether or not the dream was realized is a question that still generates considerable debate.

From the bombing in Olympic Park to the current controversy about the tactics organizers used to secure the Games for the city, Atlanta's image is not quite as shiny as many had hoped. Visiting press commented: "Great athletic performances against a backdrop of emptiness" (Fran Blinebury, *Houston Chronicle*); "Through history it will be tackiness that will be remembered, not the bomb. Atlanta put its worst face forward" (Frank Deford, *Newsweek*); "Atlanta, a small southern town trying to masquerade as a metropolis" (*The Sunday Times*, London).¹

Immediately following the Olympic Games, Research Atlanta, commissioned a series of six essays on Atlanta's Olympic Legacy. The essays were intended to stimulate discussion about how the community could build upon what it gained from the Olympics and what policies and strategies it needed to sustain the momentum for positive change. These essays addressed economic development, community development, downtown revitalization, sports facilities, arts and

* This essay is condensed by Sam Marie Engle MS, MHS, from a series of essays published through Research Atlanta Inc. The original essays were from *The Olympic Legacy: Building on What Was Achieved*. (1997) Atlanta, GA. Contributing authors to that publication included, DL Sjoquist, PhD, RW. Padgett, J Oxendine, L Keating, M Creighton, J Ambercrombie, CV. Patton, ML Lomas, S Kasten, RD Morgan, JM Smith, and H West.

1 Reported in the *Atlanta Constitution*, August 6, 1996.

culture, and leadership. Each essayist was a well known community leader recognized for his or her expertise in the issue area. The final report, *The Olympic Legacy: Building on What Was Achieved* proved instrumental in continuing community dialogue on these issues and helped shape the community's actions in the coming years.

The following represents a summary discussion of the key issues raised in the original essays on economic development, leadership, community development, and downtown revitalization. Not intended as a primer for host cities on the Olympic experience, this essay instead explores the significant lessons Atlanta learned with the hope that other cities may learn from them too.

II. THE LEGACY OF REVENUES

As has been widely reported, the direct, tangible economic impact of the Olympics on Georgia is between \$3.5 billion and \$5 billion, with the Atlanta region receiving the vast majority of that sum. Olympics-related short term job creation has been estimated at 80 000 jobs, with State tax revenues from this economic juggernaut pegged at \$176 million.

As stunning as the direct economic impact of the Olympics may be, it is not the whole story. When one speaks of the 'Olympic Legacy', one also must consider the enormous physical infrastructure investments and the global exposure for Atlanta that continue to yield substantial economic returns. Officials estimate the total investment in physical infrastructure at \$500 million. These include new sports and entertainment venues, streetscaping, road improvements, Centennial Olympic Park, more than 50 pieces of public art, redevelopment of the Techwood/Clark Howell public housing project, 2000 student dorm rooms, and major expansion and improvement projects at Hartsfield International Airport.

III. THE LEGACY OF TOURISM

Atlanta's tourism market, a weak one when one correctly excludes convention and sports attendance from tourism counts, also benefitted from the Olympic legacy, at least in the short term. Visitors spent a record \$14.7 billion in Georgia in 1996, the majority of which took place outside the Olympic time period. Hotels, restaurants and sporting venues built for the Olympics generated substantial revenues during the Games; many enjoyed strong revenues immediately after the Games as visitors flocked to see where the action had taken place.

More long term evaluations, however, have found that tourism has not significantly increased. As one local commentary noted:

The Olympics may have put Atlanta on the international map, but it did not solve many of the problems that faced the city before, most notably the size of [convention venues], a lack of attractions, and a variety of urban issues, such as Freaknik, that keep some conventions from coming here...As one expert said, Atlanta has a perception problem: We are perceived as a city with nothing to do.²

Indeed, convention trade may actually have suffered because of the Olympics. Convention bookings climbed steadily in the years following the Olympics to an all time high in 1999; however, the city faces a significant drop in bookings for 2000. According to hospitality officials, "[t]he root of the 2000 problem lies with the 1996 Summer Games...The ACVB knew that its Olympic efforts would distract it from recruiting long term convention business, which is booked several years in advance."³ Several large conventions have relocated to other cities, often citing lack of adequate space or entertainment amenities and safety concerns as reasons.

The crowds that flocked downtown during the Olympics converged on Olympic Park and venues built especially for the Games. Many of those attractions no longer exist. To maintain the stream of downtown visitors, there must be places people want to visit. The Olympics offered a unique opportunity for the city to develop the trove of cultural, historical and entertainment attractions necessary to sustain tourism and convention interest. The city's failure to seize that opportunity is one of the sadder legacies of the Games.

The problem seems as much local apathy as it an absence of creative vision for what kinds of attractions would prove popular. As with much of the Atlanta Olympic experience, cultural and entertainment initiatives were conceived and crafted by professional promoters, usually an elite group, rather than grown out of the city's own natural resources. The Cultural Olympiad, for example, was designed around discrete and unrelated collaborations with local, regional and national arts institutions as well as with selected Olympic nations. These collaborations, presented under expansive thematic banners – for example "Southern Connections," "International Connections," "Preludes" – focused on unique cultures or outstanding exemplars of specific genres, such as the program that presented living Nobel Laureates in Literature. It presented programs in Olympic venues rather than in existing or newly created cultural facilities. This uncoordinated, short sighted strategy resulted in one-time events that left no lasting relationships, affiliations or programs with which the community could sustain the Olympic momentum. It also failed to create a lasting or new impression of Atlanta as a bold or even particularly vital arts and cultural center.

IV. COOPERATION IS THE KEY

It is this lesson in the need for cooperation that may be the Olympics most important legacy. The Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games (ACOG) held tightly the reins of event planning; however, it sought countless community

2 *The Atlanta Business Chronicle*, June 30, 1997.

3 *The Atlanta Business Chronicle*, September 6, 1999.

partners to successfully stage the Games. It distinctly defined its mission and goals and helped the community focus on strategic action steps. The roles of community partners and organizations were well defined, helping them to successfully meet their responsibilities. Organizations were created and unique public private partnerships were forged to achieve specific goals not directly related to the Games, but important to help Atlanta project the urbane and sophisticated image it sought.

Given the degree of rancor and outright hostility that characterise most initiatives that attempt to cross political or racial lines in metro Atlanta, the most notable accomplishment of the Olympic movement may have been the degree of unity it forged. For more than eight years, the city of Atlanta, Fulton County, the State of Georgia and numerous other local jurisdictions worked together and with a multitude of private interests in an unprecedented collaboration. Strained as those relationships may have become at times, they endured with impressive results. Several examples of enduring partnerships deserve mentioning.

A. Operation Legacy

This partnership created by the private power utility Georgia Power with support from NationsBank, the Georgia Department of Industry, Trade and Tourism; the Governor's Economic Development Council; the Georgia Chamber of Commerce and the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce to utilize the Olympics as a marketing tool for industrial recruitment and economic development. Operation Legacy targeted emerging industries such as telecommunications, technology and a broadly defined sports-and-entertainment industry, with the idea that these industries would respond favorably to the benefits of Atlanta's Olympic Games exposure as well as to the "bricks and mortar" by-products of the Games, for example, fiber optic cable and other technology left behind in the media headquarters and sports facilities. One year after the Games, Operation Legacy had generated more than 2000 new jobs and by the end of the third year, it had exceeded its goal of 6000 new jobs.

B. Corporation for Olympic Development in Atlanta

This public-private partnership allowed the city and private developers to invest \$80 million in funds, \$32 million of which were public funds, in revitalizing several intown neighborhoods. Projects included residential rehabilitation and development, commercial revitalization, and streetscaping. These projects helped pave the way for today's intown housing boom.

Other partnerships also flourished around the housing revitalization effort including the Atlanta Neighborhood Development Partnership, a non-profit created to broker deals between community based non-profits, for-profit corporations and foundations. Together they constructed or rehabilitated more than 1300 units of affordable housing in neighborhoods surrounding Olympic venues.

All of this stands in sharp contrast to the past when the Ford Foundation in 1988 cited Atlanta as an example of a major city that had not developed a

substantial community development corporation sector. The community in large part discouraged nonprofit or joint venture projects for community development; indeed Fulton County, the city's home county, was the largest urban government to decline participation in the federal low income housing rehabilitation program.

C. Olympic Stadium/Turner Field

The plan called for an 85 000 seat Olympic Stadium adjacent to the existing Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium. After the Games, the Olympic Stadium would be converted into a 50 000 seat stadium for the Atlanta Braves professional baseball team and their former home, the County Stadium, would be razed for parking. The \$250 million stadium became reality thanks to a partnership of the Atlanta-Fulton County Recreation Authority, the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games (ACOG), the Atlanta Braves professional baseball team and the neighboring community. The Recreation Authority provided the land and property tax abatements, ACOG financed design and construction of the Olympic Stadium, and the Braves provided several million dollars once construction was underway to secure the architectural soundness of the structure, then invested several million dollars more to convert the Olympic stadium into Turner Field, their new home. CODA worked to renovate the nearby low-income neighborhoods and improve infrastructure.

To further appease the neighborhood residents, the city created a fund into which a percentage of parking revenues would flow to offset the negative consequences of increased traffic. This entire project generated significant controversy as citizens worried about the role of tax dollar financing for the project and neighbors worried about the impact of massive parking lots and stadium construction on their communities. The final product contains fewer parking spaces and preserves segments of the old County Stadium retaining wall and surrounding vegetation for environmental protection. Today, Turner Field has become a part of the community, and the Braves are committed to remaining there for twenty years. It generates significant sales tax and parking revenues for the city and county and as long as the Braves remain a winning team, keeps the city well in the public eye.

V. THE SPORTS LEGACY

The impact of the Games as a sporting event has proven very strong. Atlanta already embraced its professional and college sports teams as community treasures. With the advent of the Olympics, the city grew its stock of venues in which to stage sporting events, thus increasing public perception of the city as a sports mecca of sorts. The Georgia Dome, completed in 1993 for the city's professional football team, offered the city yet another Olympic venue with long term utility. Hosting the Super Bowl in 1997 allowed the city to continue its sporting image.

The city long has embraced sports as an economic development tool. In 1985 the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce became the first U.S. business organization to formally recognize sports as a multi-billion dollar business. It established a council to promote sports not only to the public but also to the business community. That council proved instrumental in convincing leaders to support the city's bid for the Olympic Games.

The challenge remains, however, for the city to sustain the momentum. With respect to sports, the city has acquired a national hockey franchise, negotiated a 30 year commitment from its basketball franchise and hosted numerous college and national sporting events. It will host again the Superbowl and it has hosted the baseball World Series. Atlanta's focus on headquarters relocations combined with opportunities such as Olympic Park give Atlanta a tremendous lead over other cities vying for economic development. To fully harness this potential, Atlanta must continue to generate public-private partnerships. Educating the players in the public private and non-profit sectors as to 'how the game is played' when competing with other cities in the sports business environment will be essential if the city is to succeed. At the same time, the players must mind the rules of the game and not be tempted by the lure of easy money to attempt less than honest tactics to win.

VI. FINAL LESSONS

The Atlanta region has a long history of 'participatory democracy', according to James Vasef, Manager of External Affairs for Georgia Power, a Southern Company, and author of a paper entitled "Post Olympics Atlanta, Starting at the Finish Line" (1996). As Atlanta grows larger, more complex, and strives to be an international city, that unique 'participatory democracy' will be challenged to deliver. The nature of governance in our culture, he maintains, gives us a cacaphony of organizations and activities all trying to do worthy projects in the public arena. "There is a need for efficiency and a reasonable allocation of resources in this open market of ideas and projects. Otherwise it will collapse under its own weight." The call for definition of purpose and roles is paramount.

According to Rosabeth Moss Kanter in her book, *World Class Leaders: The Power of Partnering*,⁴ leaders must become cosmopolitans who are comfortable operating across boundaries and who can forge links between organizations - form networks that extend beyond their home base and bring benefits to their own group by partnering with others. This is a challenge for a population that embraces the rugged individualism of Teddy Roosevelt. Cooperation is a new political tool that feels uncomfortable in the hands of the older leaders. New cosmopolitans, Kanter says, are receptive to new information and are a step ahead of others in envisioning new possibilities.

Such leaders brought the Games to Atlanta. Whether or not the community can accept this new kind of leadership as a permanent fixture remains to be seen.

4 RM Kanter, *World Class Leaders: The Power of Partnering*, Simon & Schuster, 1995.

Today there are more diverse power centers in the Atlanta region than ever before. Each decision-making center has public, private and civic components. The key for success will be for these three diverse elements to come together in partnerships that leverage the community's resources. To sustain the Olympic spirit, Atlantans must learn to give up control and instead embrace the opportunity for collaboration with others. Working together exponentially grows the community's capacity for success. The Olympics proved collaboration is possible and powerful. Atlanta now must learn how to sustain that spirit into the next century.