

Arts & Entertainment

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Culture goes downtown

Georgia-Pacific High branch to foster free arts exhibits

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Culturally speaking, the city that proclaimed itself too busy to hate was, for a long time, too busy to care. Atlanta's skyline matured, but downtown remained a child in terms of the arts. Scattered and sporadic efforts, though often of quality, have not filled downtown Atlanta's cultural void.

The year 1986 may make local history as the year downtown grew up. The High Museum of Art and the Atlanta Historical Society are opening branches, and the Atlanta-Fulton Public Library has expanded

its cultural offerings. How appropriate that all three cluster around Margaret Mitchell Square, once the site of the world premiere of "Gone With the Wind" and a monumental red neon Coca-Cola sign. And how propitious: Their proximity helps form a base, a visible and symbolic center for the development of the arts downtown.

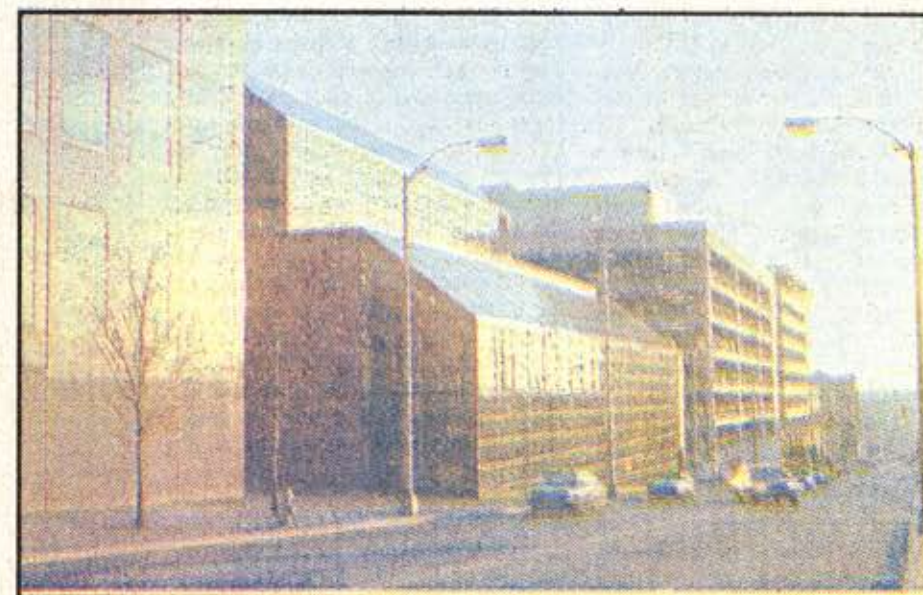
The cultural revolution begins officially on Monday, when the High Museum at Georgia-Pacific Center opens to the public with an 11 a.m. ribbon-cutting. The museum's very

See **MUSEUM**

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AT MUSEUM: George Tooker's 'Highway.'



ON HOUSTON STREET: High Museum at Georgia-Pacific Center.

Museum

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existence is a model of community participation. Georgia-Pacific and its partner, Metropolitan Life Insurance, have supplied the space, paid for its \$2 million renovation and will cover the overhead costs — security, utilities and maintenance. The Fulton County Arts Council will provide those operating costs (projected at an annual \$300,000) not covered by profits from the museum shop and rentals of the space.

The High will run it. Elizabeth Bacchetti, a High museum staffer, has moved to the Georgia-Pacific facility as branch manager. The High's curatorial staff will determine the exhibition schedule, which will include installations drawn from the permanent collection as well as traveling exhibitions. The new museum will offer its own decent tours and educational programs.

"The Colonies and Young Republic" is one of two opening exhibitions. The first in a series called "Arts in America," the exhibition uses paintings, decorative arts and prints to trace the history of America and its arts from the colonial period through the 1830s. Curators Judy Larson and Donald Peirce selected works from the private collections and solicited loans from major museums and private collections.

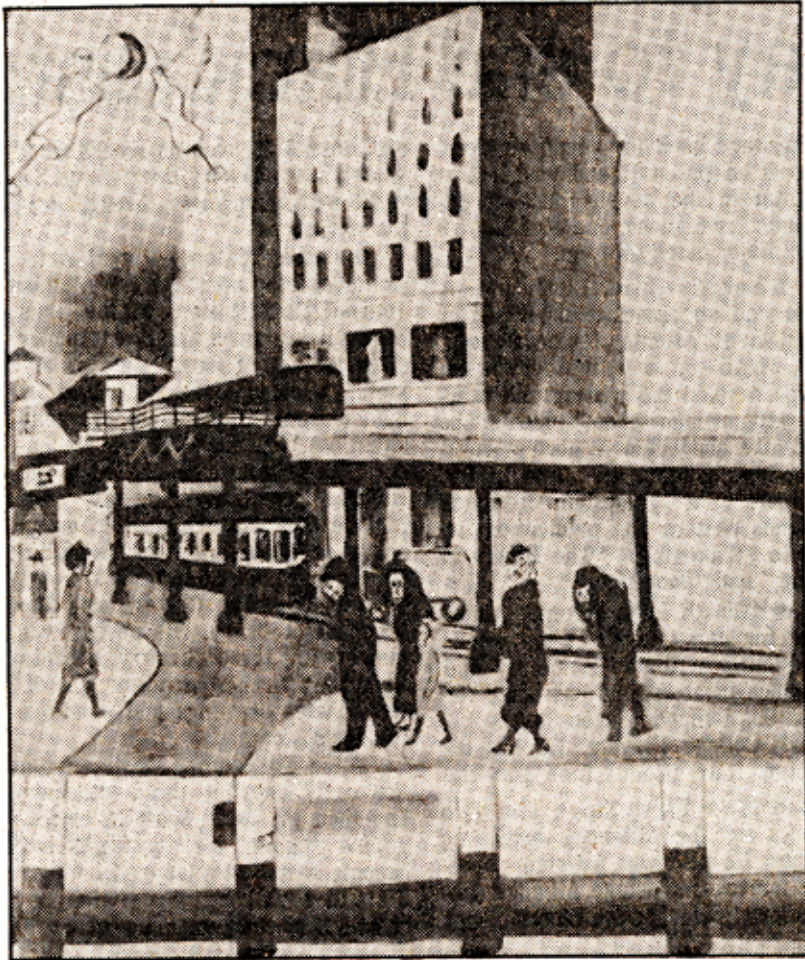
This exhibition offers an experience not available at the main High, where works of a single medium are usually displayed together. A visitor who follows the series, which will not necessarily be chronological, to its completion will have a complete survey of American art and history.

Also debuting at the opening is "The Surreal City: 1930s-1950s," a painting exhibition organized by the Whitney Museum of American Art at Phillip Morris (one of its branch museums.) The exhibition includes 20 paintings by 11 artists — among them George Tooker, Philip Evergood and O. Louis Guglielmi — who used Surrealist techniques to convey the despair and dislocation the Depression visited on urban life.

Gudmund Vigtel, High Museum director, sees the downtown museum as an extension of its parent, maintaining the same quality level in exhibitions and programming. The size and architecture of the new facility affirm that the High and its corporate and governmental sponsors mean business.

The new High is no makeshift annex. Occupying 12,000 square feet in the glass enclosure on the Georgia-Pacific Center's south facade, the museum boasts 4,800 square feet of gallery space, a museum shop, offices, receiving and staging areas. It also has the use of Georgia-Pacific's adjacent auditorium.

Architect Mack Scogin of the Atlanta firm Parker and Scogin



ON EXHIBIT AT GEORGIA-PACIFIC: Alice Neal's 'Synthesis of New York (The Great Depression)'.

stresses the museum's self-sufficiency by giving the space a distinctive identity. Their plan was to create "architecture within architecture," and they achieved that goal in their choice of materials and attitude toward the space.

They divided this long, narrow shoe box of a space into three levels and three parts. The three-story section that abuts the auditorium becomes a symbolic "facade." It contains the entrance at the top level, the shop and administrative spaces on the middle level and galleries and staging areas on the bottom." This section stands apart from the ramp system that occupies the eastern half of the greenhouse space, and the two levels of galleries on the western side.

The galleries' fluidity and variety mirrors the effect of the design as a whole, which offers a number of disparate architectural experiences without interfering with the display of art. It is rather like a labyrinthine path garnished with plenty of pauses and stops. One would never guess that a structure this complex is housed in a glass box.

Unlike the main High, this museum will be free to the public. Director Vigtel sees the branch as a public service. If it is an important amenity for downtowners, the museum also helps the High. "The new museum gives us a brand new audience," Vigtel said. "We might get

people here who never go to the museum, and hopefully they will be interested enough to visit the main museum."

It has already generated enthusiasm, according to Kermit Birchfield, senior vice president of legal and governmental affairs for Georgia-Pacific, who initiated the project and brought all the parties together. "We put out a request to our employees for volunteers to help during the opening festivities, and we were flooded with responses."

Establishing a cultural base downtown, though important in itself, has broader implications. As Birchfield says, "That's the beginning of getting people to think about living downtown." And that's when we begin to live up to our slogans.

■ High Museum at Georgia-Pacific Center. "The Colonies and Young Republic," through June 6. "The Surreal City," through April 25. 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Monday-Friday. Free. **■ Noontime Film Program:** "Filming the Surreal City," Georgia-Pacific Center Auditorium, 12:15 p.m. A 30-minute program of four films. 577-6940.