

# Dropping the baton

The summer Olympics open in Atlanta, USA this month. In the first of a new series of reports from architects around the world, Merrill Elam, of Scogin Elam & Bray, says the city is missing the architectural opportunities the games present.

It is a strange phenomenon. It is not unique to Atlanta but I cannot think of any city where it happens to the same extent as here. In Atlanta there is a continual process of demolition, or 'erasure', and replacement, and an even more frequent process of erasure with no replacement following at all.

I can count on one hand the buildings along Peachtree Street, the main boulevard, that are older than 50 or 60 years. I do not have enough fingers and toes to count the parking lots and buildings of weak presence with thin pasts that now line the street. As Lloyd Bray, my partner in practice and a native Atlantan, said recently: 'Atlanta is a less mature city now than when I grew up in it.'

So what is happening? Is it simply a denial of history? Is Atlanta a city that relishes only the new, the *au courant*? Is it that the bottom line is the most powerful force in shaping buildings and spaces? Or that the growth of our unbounded geography is dictated only by the highway system? While all are true, none of

these solutions provide the whole answer.

There is also a form of schizophrenia at work. Atlantan domestic and private lives cling to the southern traditions of hospitality and graciousness. Yet the grace and hospitality of these traditions seem to stop short of the architectural fabric of the city. The artfulness, the inventiveness and the generosity of the private realm do not translate into a communal initiative.

This has been especially evident in the preparation for the 1996 summer Olympic games which open here this month. Great swathes of open space have been created for temporary 'tent cities'. Even more surface parking lots have been undertaken with gusto. But where is the long-term planning, the programmes and institutions and their physical manifestation in civic buildings? The games could have been an opportunity to heal and mend, to promote productivity and civilized community in the inner city, the geographical heart of the community. It is an opportunity that has been missed.

But there is hope. The wholesale eras-

ure of Atlanta's past creates the opportunity to take a uniquely Atlantan approach to the city's un-aestheticised spaces. The Atlanta community at large now needs to embrace its public/business self with the care and imagination of its domestic self-image. This is a tradition in need of extension, expansion and a shift in scale.

The process of erasure and replacement is at the heart of architecture. So why is it so hard to surpass the creation of 'fair-to-middling' buildings? For our part, as part of a region only beginning to realise anew its economic potential, we Atlantans are eager to please and succeed. Perhaps this leaves us overly sensitive to criticism, making the task more difficult still.

This thin-skinned business of criticism avoidance is something with which we must grapple lest we continue to regress with maturity.

Like the community at large, there is a need for the Atlantan architecture profession to proceed with a bold and critical vision of what Atlanta's new urbanism might be.

Atlanta - seizing the baton of renewal presented by the Olympics, or falling by the architectural wayside?



Stone Mountain's new cycling venue.



Georgia's International Horse Park.



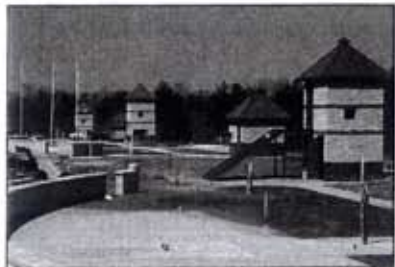
The main Olympic stadium in Atlanta.



Tennis centre, Stone Mountain.



Residential halls in the Olympic village.



Shooting venue at Wolf Creek.