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Atlanta's Claim To Flame



Artist Siah Armajani designed the Olympic Bridge between Olympic Stadium and the Centennial Olympic Cauldron. Below, one of the more than 2,000 new lampposts brightening major streets and avenues.

Art Spans the Gap Between Visions and Reality

By Benjamin Forgey
Washington Post Staff Writer

MY first glimpse of the Centennial Olympic Cauldron, the largest and most significant of the many public artworks placed in the city as a result of the Olympics, was the image on a hotel television screen during a broadcast of a Braves baseball game.

The camera gave a beautiful view, lasting about 30 seconds, focusing first on the red-painted cauldron, where the Olympic flame will burn during the Games, and then panning down the gray-painted steel tower and along the bridge connecting the structure to the Olympic Stadium.

The baseball announcers remained atypically silent until, at the end of the shot, one asked the other what he thought of the thing. "Well, I don't know," came a hesitant reply. "I guess I'll have to think about it."

This was a fitting response. What the announcer then thought about it I do not know, but it seems clear that when the subject is this very big, very prominent artwork, it is advisable to think before speaking.

See CAULDRON, D2, Col. 1



Beyond the Dull Olympic Architecture, A Glimmer of Gold in the Streets

By Benjamin Forgey
Washington Post Staff Writer

THIS is not Barcelona. At the risk of belaboring the obvious, sponsors of the 1996 Summer Olympic Games here repeat this refrain when talking about Atlanta's efforts to organize the Games and make the city look good in the global media spotlight.

Barcelona is a hard act to follow. In preparing for the '92 Olympics, the Catalan capital commissioned many of Spain's—and the world's—best architects to design Olympic venues and related facilities. Atlanta did not aim so high.

Quite the contrary. There are a few happy exceptions, but basically, Atlanta is offering a display of Southern architectural competence. The sports facilities will stand up, they will serve athletes and audiences well, and in many cases they will prove useful long after the Games are done.

Rarely, however, will they inspire emotions or thoughts that go beyond the event itself. Nor will they do much to change the perception the outside world has of Atlanta or, indeed, that Atlanta has of itself.

This is hardly a disgrace, but it is certainly a missed opportunity. The idea of inspirational architectural quality simply was not part of the script for these Olympics. Yet it would have been simple and natural to celebrate athletic excellence with architecture to match.

Then, there is the crucial matter of the long-term legacy of the Games.

See CITYSCAPE, D2, Col. 1

Atlanta's Olympic Design

CITYSCAPE, From D1

That is what is truly important to the sponsoring cities—never mind the deserved but oft-inflated burst of hometown pride that comes with the Olympics. (For sheer puffery, Atlanta and the many corporate sponsors may already have established world records.)

And never mind the television images. Olympic cities all look good on the tube, and they always look a lot alike. Sure, there are mandatory shots of local color, but with fountains, flagging and throngs thronging on clean, tree-lined boulevards, cities as different as Los Angeles, Seoul and Barcelona (to name the last three Olympic hosts) take on the homogenizing look of the Games.

Hosting this global spectacle, however, does provide a rare opportunity to focus a city's energies on its long-term problems and prospects. How well a city takes advantage of this opportunity is what really counts.

Here, again, Barcelona set a new standard. It leveraged its Olympic moment to build roads, bridges, parks and other public facilities on an unprecedented scale. "Barcelona used the Olympics to accomplish a 20-year city plan in four years," as one Atlanta official wistfully put it.

Atlanta did not do this. But for a city with no planning tradition to speak of

tions, and it employed Atlanta-based firms whenever possible.

The number one need was for an Olympic-caliber stadium for track and field events. ACOG President Billy Payne, the lawyer and University of Georgia football star who first "dreamed the outrageous dream" (his own words) of luring the Olympics, envisioned such a stadium downtown. His idea was to build it on parking lots south of the existing Fulton County Stadium, a 30-year-old multi-purpose structure along the lines of Washington's RFK.

Other than the inherent waste involved—though still serviceable, the existing stadium will be torn down later this year—this worked out well. The new, \$209 million, 85,000-seat stadium will be a fine, if inevitably sweltering, container for this summer's athletes and crowds. Then, after 35,000 seats are removed, it will become a baseball park for the Atlanta Braves. (As ACOG paid for the whole thing, this makes the baseball team by far the biggest single legatee of the games.)

Happily, the new stadium is one of the more satisfying architectural works. Designed by a four-firm team in which Atlanta's Heery International figured prominently, it ingeniously accommodates the different geometric shapes the sports demand—the oval track now dominates, but in the tuck of the stadium's southwest corner you can see the baseball diamond in nascent form.

Today's visitor also can imagine what a splendid baseball park this will become when the track's northern bleachers are removed. A stadium in the neo-traditional, baseball-only mold of Oriole Park at Camden Yards, it will suit the team and the fans just fine, with its corporate suites, broad concourses and thrilling views—the complete package.

Of course, the design is a bit formulaic—the neo-trad ballpark is a formula, but a very good one. People love these places, and for excellent reason: They are designed with people in mind.

Two extraordinary gestures save the Braves ballpark from being a Camden Yards clone—the powerful march of brick piers and arches that distinguish its exterior walls, and the astonishing cascades of exit stairwells on two sides of the stadium. Right now, these great stairwells play a sort of second fiddle to the extra Olympic seats. But by opening day next spring those seats will have been replaced by an entrance plaza, and the great stairwells will provide the building with a unique architectural identity.

The out-and-out best-in-show award for the architecture of the '96 Games, however, goes to the stables in out-of-the-way Conyers, Ga., about 30 miles east of Atlanta. Conyers itself is a long-shot story within the saga of Atlanta's long-shot Olympic bid—a town of 8,000 that convinced ACOG it could handle the equestrian venue and then spent \$13 million getting it built. (ACOG spent \$24 million.)

The 1,139-acre package, with a grand prix arena, practice fields, steeplechase oval and so on, was laid out on hilly terrain. Much of the architecture is mundane at best, although mention should be made of the jumps on the cross-country obstacle course. Designed by Ralph Haller, constructed of wood and based on aspects of Southern life and history, they are impressive, telegenic and fun. The horses will sail over Indian mounds, Civil War embattlements and even a gigantic rattlesnake.

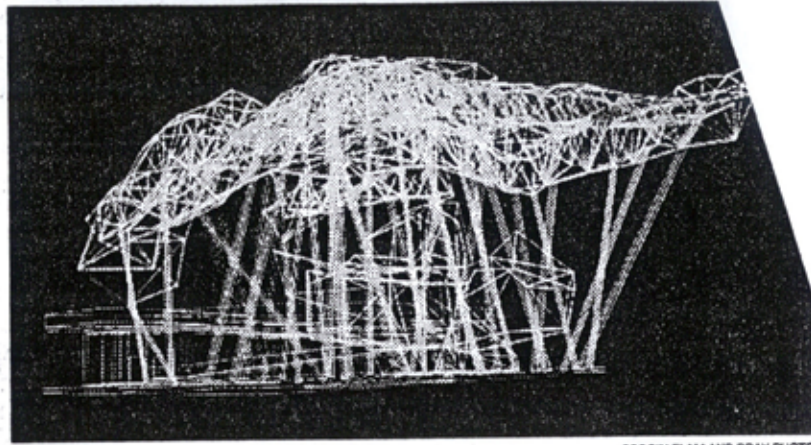
But the barns, my, there's a touch of poetry in these utilitarian structures. Designed by the Atlanta firm of Lord Aeck & Sargent with open sides to attract prevailing breezes, along with modular movable stalls made of wood, vented pitched roofs made of metal, and curving steel beams to hold them up, these buildings are everything they should be—simple, economical, comfortable, efficient. Despite being packed together on a dusty, treeless expanse, they're quite beautiful.

The Aquatic Center on the Georgia Tech campus (by Atlanta's Stanley Love-Stanley and Smallwood, Reynolds, Stewart, Stewart and Associates) is outstanding in its way. The structural skeleton is the architecture here—this is a high, open pavilion whose exposed steel trusses provide plenty of visual punch. It makes a dramatic silhouette against the broad Southern sky.

And that's all, folks, for memorable architectural moments of the '96



An overview of Centennial Olympic Park, showing the main plaza with towers and downtown Atlanta in the background.



Computer drawing of the airy Atlanta pavilion, which was planned for Peachtree Street but didn't get built.

drous, airy, celebratory Atlanta pavilion on a prominent Peachtree Street site, designed by Scogin Elam and Bray, the city's most adventurous architecture firm. But it was a complicated deal and, alas, time fell short, and it didn't get built.

In any event, what did get built is significant. The centerpiece of the new public realm is Woodruff Park, formerly a burrowed, depressing hardscape, transformed by architect Nimrod Long and others into a splendid undulation of grass, with a bandstand, a powerful fountain perfectly placed, and other welcoming features—a true center for downtown.

There are other, smaller parks at key locations, including a "folk art park" vivifying otherwise forgettable chunks of urban real estate where a couple of very ugly bridges cross a 12-lane interstate highway at downtown's northern edge. All of this isn't enough exactly to transform downtown Atlanta, but, along with Olympian greed, it already has stimulated a little surge in downtown housing. Up to 500 market-rate units have been built in converted commercial buildings, according to Paul Kelman of the downtown business group Central Atlanta Progress, financed largely by outlandish rental fees possible during the Olympic month.

In the long run, these improvements may signal a healthy change in Atlanta's attitudes. The most important totems may be the handsome new "Atlanta lights"—2,000 street-light fixtures designed by Long that now demarcate Peachtree Street and other significant public areas.

Even ACOG got into the spirit of going outside the fences by helping to support the Olympic Village—high-rise housing for the athletes, rather adroitly designed by Atlanta's Niles Bolton Associates to fit the collegiate setting of Georgia Tech. These buildings will become dormitories for Georgia Tech and Georgia State University after the Games. Another of ACOG's pet projects, jointly financed with the state and private donors, is Centennial Olympic Park, a \$50 million public park taking up 21 acres of underused or abandoned downtown real estate.

During the Games it will be hard even to recognize this as a park, much less get a reading on its ultimate importance, for it will be a sort of corporate carnival, with Coca-Cola, Swatch, General Motors and others occupying most of the turf. But afterward it will be an important addition

to the city—if, that is, it is completed according to its estimable design, which combines a grid of walkways with looser, more "natural" landscape elements. (The landscape architecture firm EDAW headed a large design-engineering team.)

The "if" factor is even greater when you turn your attention to the beleaguered neighborhoods inside the Olympic Ring—most seriously from depopulation and disinvestment and most won't be greatly affected one way or another by the Games.

For instance, all the strenuous huffing and puffing of the last four years by CODA, Habitat for Humanity, various neighborhood groups, a few private corporations and the federal government produced a pitiful total of 290 new housing units in these areas, according to the Atlanta Journal and Constitution.

Yet numbers do not tell the whole story. If you walk along Auburn Avenue, near the birthplace of Martin Luther King Jr., you will see newly paved sidewalks, rows of young willow oak trees and dozens of the new "Atlanta lights." You will come across a new public marketplace (under a disfiguring freeway bridge) and a welcoming new park. If you turn onto Howell Street, you will see nine new and eight rehabilitated houses, where a few years ago there were boarded windows and rubble-strewn vacant lots. A street has been remade—no small thing.

Not all of these changes in the Sweet Auburn neighborhood were driven by the Olympics. But many of them were. And here as elsewhere, most were undertaken after many intense, CODA-inspired public meetings that produced genuine community plans and that helped to galvanize neighborhood leaders and groups.

It may be that in the neighborhoods, and all through Atlanta, public spiritedness will decline and public business will return to a depressed norm after the Games. Then again, maybe not. "We have learned a lot in three years," said CODA President Clara Axam. "We'd be awfully stupid if we don't capitalize."

FOR MORE INFORMATION
For more information about Atlanta's history and culture, click on the above symbol on the front page of The Post's site on the World Wide Web at <http://www.washingtonpost.com>



One of two grand staircases at the new Olympic Stadium, which will become the Atlanta Braves' home.

and with a history of woefully neglecting its public realm, Atlanta didn't do so badly in the legacy department.

The city added to its already impressive stock of athletic facilities. It built significant new parks in its stressed downtown, and rebuilt old ones. It greatly improved the streetscape along fabled Peachtree Street, Auburn Avenue and other key downtown thoroughfares. In addition to the remarkable Olympic Cauldron and Bridge, it placed more than 75 new works of public art within the city limits. Most hearteningly, it made what one observer called "a good-faith effort" to improve conditions in depressed city neighborhoods.

Whether such positive developments produce all or even any of the hoped-for effects in coming years—improvement in the center city economy, increased amounts of close-in housing, more and better public spaces, neighborhood stabilization and so on—remains to be seen. It could all fall apart after the Olympics with a return to business as usual.

But the fact that these things happened at all comes as something of a surprise, in view of the disorganization and bitter squabbling that followed the exhilarating announcement—"It's Atlanta!"—six years ago.

Like Los Angeles in 1984 (and unlike every other recent Olympic city), Atlanta based its Olympic bid on private financing. This made accomplishing broad public goals inherently difficult. Such troubles were compounded when the organization set up to oversee the Games—the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games (ACOG)—took a hard-line, "inside the fences" approach to its responsibilities. Basically, this translated as "We'll build the venues and somebody else can do the rest."

ACOG's plan was to use as many existing facilities as possible—above all, the downtown Omni arena and Georgia World Congress Center. Even so, ACOG budgeted about \$550 million for new construction. The organization emphasized technical expertise in its architect-engineer selec-

Games. The other sports buildings aren't so much actively awful as just blah. Things you might expect a hard-pressed county government to put up. Cautious, unambitious, workable facilities, including a gymnasium, a tennis complex, outdoor stadiums for field hockey and bicycle racing, covered shooting ranges, a medical testing lab and more. This stuff wouldn't make it to the trials for the trials of an Olympics of architecture.

Fortunately, there also is an architecture outside the Olympic fences. Downtown Atlanta is the primary beneficiary, for two reasons. The first is that, right from the beginning, the Games' private sponsors decided to concentrate most of the major venues within an "Olympic Ring"—a circle with a 1.5-mile radius centered at the Georgia World Congress Center downtown. Consequently, if there were to be improvements in the city's deficient public realm, downtown is where they would have to be made. The second reason—to oversimplify a bit—is former mayor Maynard Jackson.

Atlanta's underfunded, politically fragmented city government operated at a big disadvantage in its negotiations with sharply focused ACOG over such issues as infrastructure costs, neighborhood needs and overall fairness. But in the fall of 1992 Jack-

son put his weight behind the Corporation for Olympic Development in Atlanta (CODA), a nonprofit, public-private organization set up to plan and oversee public improvements downtown and in inner-city communities. And, as it turned out, CODA (with the support of Jackson's successor, Bill Campbell, and others) performed beyond expectations.

Downtown Atlanta, it should be said, has long been a strangely alienating place. Physically, it is dominated by two opposite elements: the hefty buildings of architect-developer John Portman, with their connecting bridges and sci-fi atria, and vacant sites operated as parking lots, by land speculators. There also are two conflicting street grids and steep hills to contend with. All told, it is safe to say that, with the possible exception of Houston, no American downtown has devoted less attention to pedestrian amenities and traditional public gathering places.

Obviously, with this as a context, almost anything could be seen as an improvement. But, thanks mainly to CODA's leadership, Atlanta did a lot more than the minimum.

Even a noble failure speaks to high ambitions: Working with a consortium of corporations, CODA commissioned what would have been the aesthetic high point of the Games—a won-

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