



Atlantic Station: The Suburbs Come to the City in Atlanta

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Atlantic Station is a new development near the core of Atlanta that is being built on disused railroad tracks. It combines residential, housing and retail uses and, among proponents of the new urbanist façade movement, is a model for developments to come.

Atlantic Station is rather full of itself, noting that people can reduce their journey to work time by living and working there. The Atlantic Station website¹ notes that “Atlantans spend more time commuting to work than most anywhere in the world.” False. Atlantans spend less time commuting than most people who live in large urban areas outside the United States. True, Atlantans spend more time commuting than most people in the United States and that is to be expected with what is close to the most underpowered freeway and arterial street system.²

What sets Atlanta’s Atlantic Station off is not so much its unique design as the circumstances that allowed it to be developed. Atlantic Station is new urbanism --- not in the sense of the architectural façade movement, but rather that it is new and it is urban. What made it possible was the abandonment of old freight rail yards near the center of Atlanta. The same kind of disuse made Portland’s Pearl District possible, and an abandoned airport made Denver’s Stapleton possible. They are all attractive, in my view. But as attractive as they are they cannot be replicated without using large swaths of abandoned land, which is not readily available or massive condemnation (takings), which only the city of Portland’s radical governance machine seems to be insensitive enough to do.

Yet promoters would claim that Atlantic Station is a manifestation of the new urbanism façade movement. On the surface, Atlantic Station appears to fit many of the new urbanist design criteria. The buildings start at the sidewalk (pavement) line, rather than being behind parking lots. There are no indoor shopping malls. Instead the stores are directly on the streets, reminiscent of old downtowns or the first shopping centers, like Country Club in Kansas City.

Some of the normally superficial new urbanism, however, is even more superficial in Atlantic Station. The new urbanist lynchpins, anti-automobile design, pedestrian orientation, transit

¹ <http://www.atlanticstation.com/concept.php>.

² <http://ciprg.com/ul/gbt/atl-report-20040621.pdf>.

orientation, paid parking, banning of big box stores are frankly not to be found in Atlantic Station.

“Subway Entrances:” Throughout the development there are entrances at sidewalk level that look like New York subway entrances. As in New York, they go down. But they don’t go down to a subway --- that’s well beyond walking distance, across one of the nation’s widest freeways in Midtown. Atlanta has built the largest new subway (metro or underground) system in the United States outside Washington, DC. Yet, MARTA, as it is called, has been no more successful in stemming the inevitable decline in transit’s market share than Washington’s Metro. The stairs --- at least 16 such entrances --- lead down to a parking lot that is three stories tall and appears to be under the entire development. The architects did not design Atlantic Station from the ground up --- they designed it with three levels of parking under the stores, residences and streets. Thus, this “pedestrian oriented development” sits on a foundation of automobile orientation. And don’t think that the parking lots are only below the surface. Virtually all of the tall office and residential towers have a number of floors above the parking lot platform, though to the credit of the architects, they are not obvious.

Paid Parking: A staple of current urban planning is that parking should not be free. The opponents of free parking believe that if only free parking were outlawed, people would flock to inner cities and transit. There is little need to discuss that fairy tale any further. Little on street parking is provided in Atlantic Station and it is metered, which means people must pay. But on all of the parking meters there are signs to the effect that two hours of free parking are offered in the parking lots.

Banning Big Box Stores: As one enters Atlantic Station, it appears that there are no big box stores. True enough, there is a large *Dillard’s* department store, behind and under which are acres of free parking. There are blocks upon blocks of stores and no big box store. A policeman, however, found one for me, directing me to the 160,000 square foot (15,000 square meters) *Target* hypermarket, away from the east entrance to the development. But, at least this hypermarket looks European. Like many urban hypermarkets in Europe, all of the parking is underneath, on the ground floor (and perhaps below). The store is all on the second floor. There are stairs, elevators and escalators to the store. But that’s where the European resemblance ends. There are no long moving ramps that allow people to take their goods to cars in shopping baskets, while preventing the carts from moving. Further, the *Target* store is not really a hypermarket (or to use the American term, a supercenter), because it does not provide a full line of food. It appear that the grocery franchise was awarded to supermarket operator *Publix*, which has a store in the middle of the facades.

Pedestrian Orientation: As would be expected in a development designed for pedestrians, the sidewalks are sufficiently wide. Indeed, the sidewalk on the 17th Street overpass from Midtown to Atlantic Station is more than 30 feet wide (perhaps 10 meters). Yet it is a lonely place and ultimate proof that if you build it they may or may not come. In this case they have. The bridge is a majestic creation. It is one of the widest surface street overpasses of an urban freeway and crosses the combined Interstate 75-85 freeway near where it reaches 14 lanes. There are two general purpose lanes in each direction. There is a bus lane in each direction, just as empty as the ideologically driven bus lanes in Paris that have done so much to worsen traffic congestion.

There is a reserved bike path in each direction. One wonders what not yet discovered mode of transport will lay claim on overpass space, requiring expansion of the roadway. Fortunately, with a grossly overbuilt sidewalk, there is room for a larger roadway.

Pedestrian Orientation II: There is another pedestrian oriented dimension in which Atlantic Station Fails --- for all the sidewalks and sidewalk store entrances, the Atlantic Station provides a free shuttle bus for travel around the development.

Civic Architecture: Toward the west side of the development is a “Millennium Gate”), which the Atlantic Station calls “Atlanta’s greatest monument.” Hyperbole in the extreme. Millennium Gate is an imitation of the Arch d’ Triumph in Paris, even to the point of Latin inscriptions around the top. One doesn’t need the American flag hanging from the center to realize that this miniature imitation fails abjectly --- it is reminiscent of the Paris Arch d’ Triumph no more than the pathetic Eiffel Tower on the Las Vegas. Something original would have been more appropriate.

Affordability: There is general agreement that new urbanist designs tend to be more expensive, yet there is a strange alliance between advocates of affordable housing and advocates of new urbanist facades. The lowest priced apartments in Atlantic Station rent for \$1,100 per month, at least one-quarter above the median rent for the Atlanta metropolitan area. The lowest priced tow bedroom residences appear to sell for at least 2.5 times the median house price in the area, except that the median house is almost four bedrooms.

Where Atlantic Station Succeeds at New Urbanism: This is not to suggest that Atlantic Station is simply faux new urbanism. There are some legitimate new urbanist touches.

Heavy Subsidies: Perhaps the most important is subsidies. Like Portland’s Pearl District, Atlantic Station has been heavily subsidized, and the empty bridge over the freeway is just a part of it. There is also the scaled back housing. The housing is higher density, with townhouses and high rise condominium buildings. The rest of the development --- the office and commercial uses --- consumes plenty of space. Where people live, however, things are much more confined.

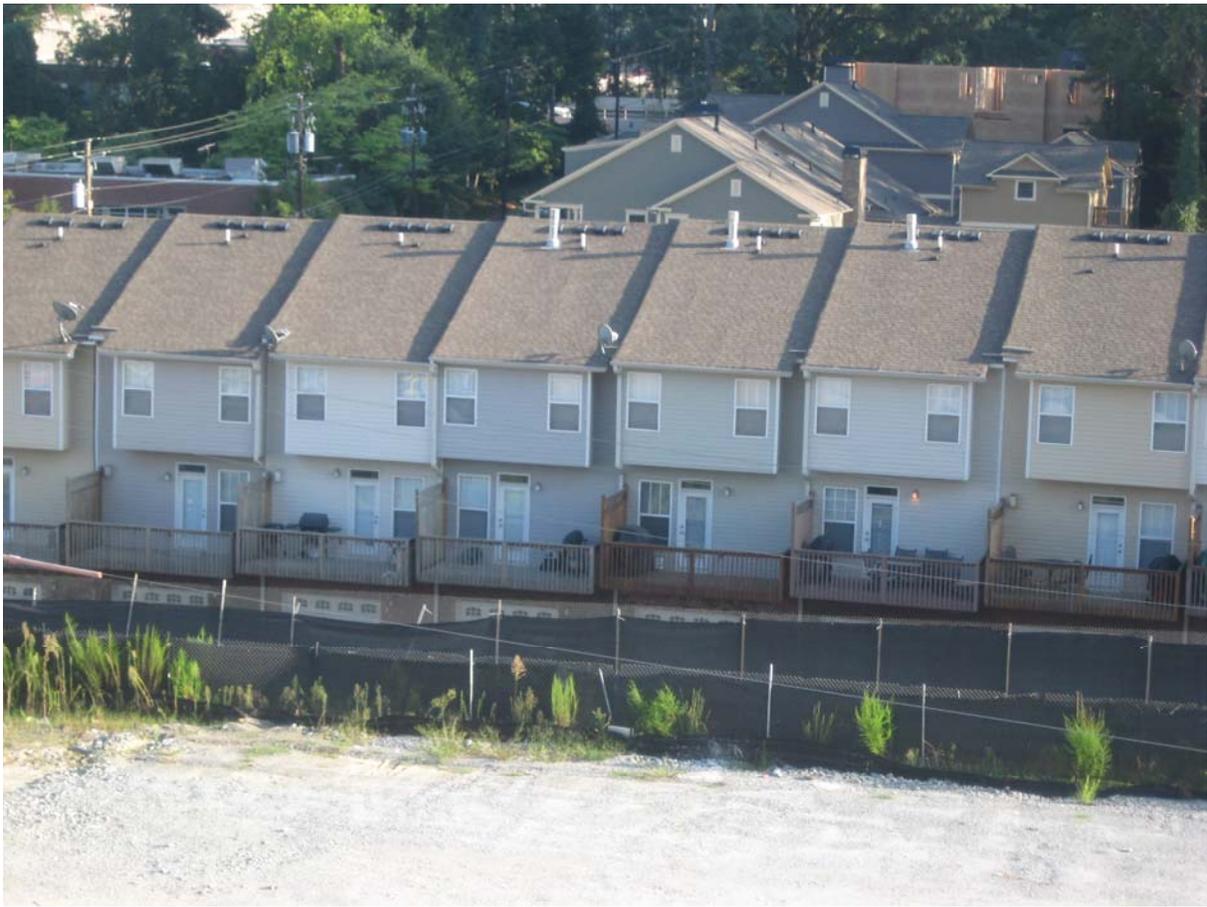
Further, Atlantic Station appears to be urban on a much larger scale than other developments. Its buildings are much larger than in the Portland’s Pearl District and its retailing more intense. But that is to be expected in Atlanta, which has long since achieved world class “city” (read metropolitan area) status.

In a sense, Atlantic Station is an architect’s dream. It approaches being a planned city. For all of what has been written about planned cities, there are few of them. Cities grow organically and generally without any overarching plan. Indeed, many of the most beloved urban cores had virtually no planning.

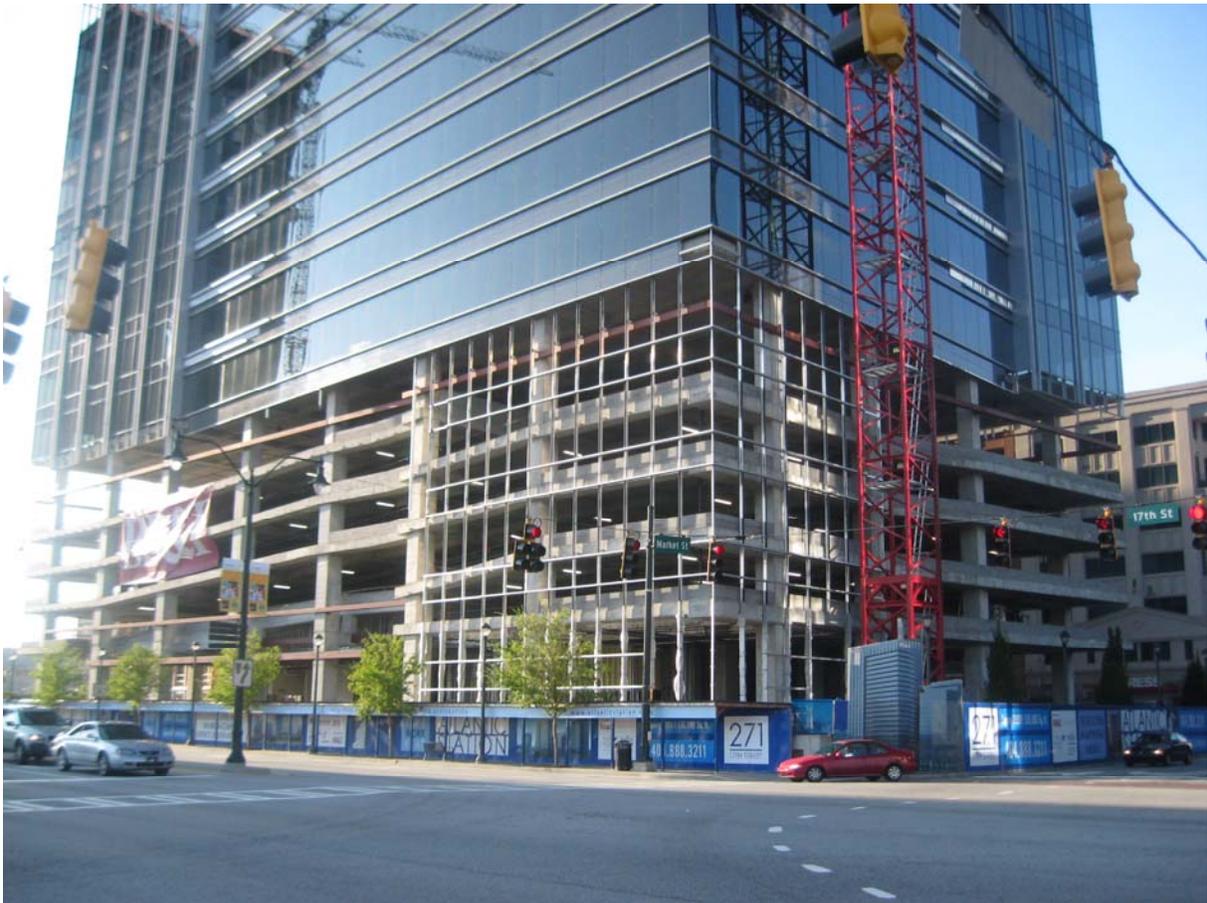
Planned Atlantic Station, however, is the result of new urbanist ideology running into the market. Yes, there is the odd bow to new urbanist facades, but at its heart, Atlantic Station is auto-oriented and suburban and expands suburban living options to the center city.



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