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The Olympic Class: The Politics Behind the 1996 Atlanta Centennial Olympic Games

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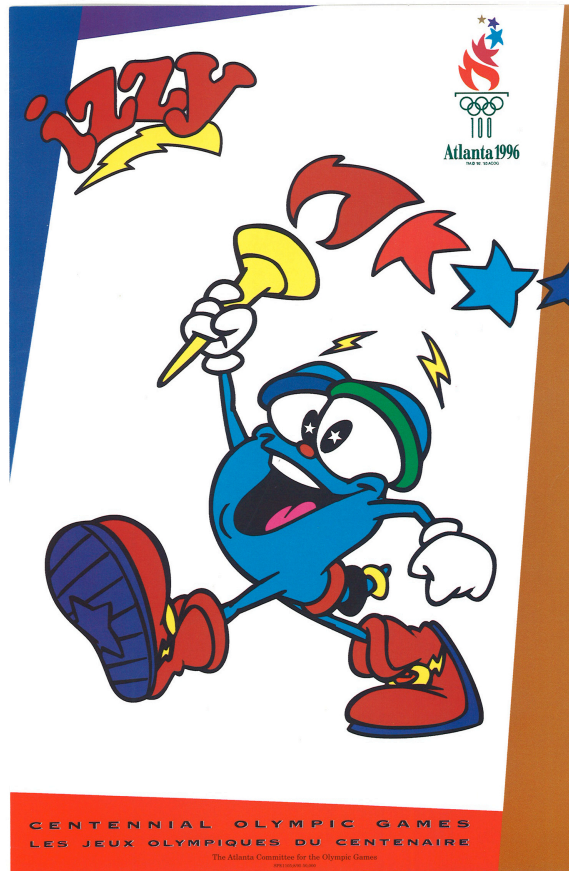
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**The Olympic Class:
The Politics Behind the 1996 Atlanta Centennial Olympic Games**



**Michelle Lacoss
History 4990, Dr. Larry Youngs
May 1, 2009**

Olympese is the official Olympic rhetoric that rises like a vapor over Switzerland, sounds better in French than in English and is mouthed painfully by Billy Payne...Otherwise intelligent people talk about complicated human events (which are, naturally, full of commerce, failure, nationalism, even lies) *entirely* in terms of excellence, humanity, beauty, spirit, etc.¹

-Colin Campbell, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

To promote Atlanta as an international city worthy of attaining the 1996 Atlanta Centennial Olympics, Atlanta's regime of public and private city leaders did not create a single image of Atlanta. Rather, they maintained ambiguous and contradictory myths to appeal to various audiences, regionally and internationally. The commercial power of the Olympics as a municipal investment between the public and private sectors was proven possible with the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics and provided a template for the Atlanta Olympic Committee ("AOC").² To achieve their projected financial goals, Atlanta expected to take revenue generation to new heights and reach a broader audience. The Atlanta Committee of the Olympic Games ("ACOG") asserted that the 1996 Atlanta Centennial Olympic Games ("Games") would reach unprecedented levels in audience size through television and technology to entice corporate sponsors to support them with sponsorship agreements and dollars.³

Critics claim that ACOG struggled with defining Atlanta's image. When the image was revealed as a mascot in the form of a little blue "creature from outer space" named "WhatIsIt," later morphing into "Izzy," the response at home and abroad was anything but positive.⁴ Why did Olympic planners maintain a mascot so ridiculed and reviled? Planners thought this little

¹ Colin Campbell, "Bye-Bye, Olympese," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, August 6, 1996, C1:1.

² Drew Whitelegg, "Going for Gold: Atlanta's Bid for Fame," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 24, no. 4 (December 2000): 802; Harvey K. Newman, *Southern Hospitality: Tourism and the Growth of Atlanta* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999), 256.

³ Atlanta Centennial Olympic Properties, *The Unprecedented Opportunity of the 1996 Atlanta Centennial Olympic Games and the 1994 and 1996 U.S. Olympic Teams* (Atlanta: Atlanta Centennial Olympic Properties, 1991), 46.

⁴ "Mr. Olympics' Still a Minister," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 22, 1996, SS:28.

spermatozoa with two rings on his eyes and three on his tail provided the opportunity to embrace the ambiguities in the many contradictory perceptions of Atlanta, hoping to capitalize on all facets of these contradictions while ensuring there is no *image* of alienation.



“Izzy in Costume.”⁵

Scholarly work within this area argues that Atlanta hid behind an image of integration and falsehoods⁶. Charles Rutheiser, for instance, points out the myths of Atlanta as a city of the “New New South” in *Imagineering Atlanta*, focusing on a reworking of the boosterism of the “New South” and modernizing the concept by incorporating racial integration and harmony as the home to Martin Luther King, Jr. and a “Black Mecca.”⁷ This paper chooses to focus not on boosterism or the white business elite, but argues how influential African-American politicians worked in conjunction with the elite white in power to create an economic dynamic that would win the Olympic bid for Atlanta in 1988, and carry it through until certain truths were exposed in the 1999 Salt Lake City “bribery scandal.” While the image that Atlanta portrayed during the

⁵ Los Angeles Newspaper Group, “Izzy,” Los Angeles Newspaper Group Web site, JPG file, <http://www.insidesocal.com/tv/olympics-mascot-izzy.jpg> (accessed April 29, 2009).

⁶ Whitelegg, “Going for Gold: Atlanta’s Bid for Fame,” 805. Whitelegg argues of the inconsistencies endemic within Atlanta defined as “‘the city too busy to hate’ (its ‘claim to fame’ from the late 1950s)...and that of Atlanta, ‘home of the Ku Klux Klan.’” He further claims that ACOG intentionally tried to avoid references to *Gone with the Wind* which seem unsubstantiated.

⁷ Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta: The Politics of Place in the City of Dreams* (New York: Verso, 1996), 3.

Games represents a snapshot, it espoused the long-held faith among key political figures in corporate dominance and aspirations for economic affluence through sport. Neighborhoods were wiped out not based on the fact that they were predominately African-American, but that they happened to sit in the way of “progress,” while neighborhood leaders lacked the financial esteem or political influence to make their voices heard. According to regime theory, “policy inertia” is thwarted through urban regimes, defined as,

...an informal coalition between local business leaders and city officials that unites the resources of business with the formal authority of government to carry out policies of mutual interest, most commonly economic development.⁸

Chaired by former Atlanta Mayor Andrew Young, affluent, connected African-American and white political and business leaders who made up the Atlanta Games Regime determined the process together.

When Andrew Young and Maynard Jackson fought for an end to racism during the Civil Rights Movement, both Atlanta visionaries understood that the fight was made possible not only by appealing to the moral compass of those in power, but also through economic means. The economic boycotts and marches led by the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) became an impetus for change. In 1996, Mayor Maynard Jackson stated that, “When Birmingham had fire hoses and cattle prods in the street, Atlanta went to the bargaining table. We knew that cattle prods are bad for business.”⁹ Furthermore, the argument of trade disruption

⁸ Matthew J. Burbank, Greg Andranovich, and Charles H. Heying, “Mega-Events, Urban Development, and Public Policy,” *The Review of Policy Research* 19, no. 3 (Fall 2002): 184.

⁹ As quoted by Paul Goldberger, “Atlanta Is Burning?” *New York Times*, June 23, 1996, SM:52.

and loss in tourism dollars from the segregated African-American traveler was made in 1964, encouraging Johnson and congressional leaders to enact legislation to end discrimination.¹⁰

Consistent with his reverence toward capitalism as a solution, Mayor Andrew Young, as Mayor Maynard Jackson's first-term successor, saw the potential in the 1996 Atlanta Centennial Olympic Games to revitalize Atlanta economically and, possibly, solve the concentrated poverty problem within the public housing complexes, such as Techwood Homes or Clark Howell Homes.¹¹ What was created through racism would be redefined through classism. Urban renewal within the downtown Atlanta core and concentrations of poverty and crime within the African-American public housing complexes were considerations for Mayor Maynard Jackson to revitalize in the 1970s and early 1980s. However, this time Jackson's suggested solutions rested with policies such as affirmative action.¹² With President Reagan's 1984 elimination of several federal aid programs geared toward urban policy, cities were required to look elsewhere for funding and, for Atlanta, the Games provided the perfect economic impetus to focus on the revitalization of downtown Atlanta.¹³ Contemporary public policy strategies include the promotion of tourism to "justify" local development and mega-events such as the Olympics provided such a promotional outlet, reaching a broader audience than otherwise possible.¹⁴

¹⁰ Susan Sessions Rugh, *Are We There Yet? The Golden Age of American Family Vacations* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2008), 90. This golden age refers to the defining of the ideal nuclear family as a white, patriarchal family structure with dad making the decisions; reinforced by automobile advertisements and guide books that portray gender and racial stereotypes. Rugh touches on the subject of the African-American middle class family and the complexity of their situation. She explains how consumerism, and the "grounds that segregated facilities disrupted trade," ultimately provided the impetus for greater Civil Rights legislation under President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964.

¹¹ Harvey K. Newman, *The Atlanta Housing Authority's Olympic Legacy Program: Public Housing Projects to Mixed Income Communities* (Atlanta, GA: Research Atlanta, April 2002), 10.

¹² *Ibid.*; Whitelegg, "Going for Gold: Atlanta's Bid for Fame," 805.

¹³ Burbank, Andranovich, and Heying, "Mega-Events, Urban Development, and Public Policy," 182; Larry Keating, *A City for All: A Report* (Atlanta: Atlanta City Council Gentrification Task Force, 2001), 1.

¹⁴ Burbank, Andranovich, and Heying, "Mega-Events, Urban Development, and Public Policy," 180.

During the planning process of the Games, then Atlanta Mayor Andrew Young summed up his philosophy on public policy toward this mega-event: “the commercialization of sport is the democratization of sport.”¹⁵

In voicing his support of the development of the Georgia Dome as an opportunity to retain the Atlanta Falcons and for hosting future events, one member of the Atlanta Games Regime who dominated the Games planning, Billy Payne, stated that, “the Olympics eventually comes down to money.”¹⁶ Succumbing to economic bullying by sports franchises who threaten to leave and hosting sporting events of the caliber of the Olympics both served to promote an image of a “major league city” or “international city” with relatively small immediate returns.¹⁷ While the financial cost of pursuing such events was considerable, the recognition and marketing attained served as justification for entering the race.¹⁸ The economic failure of the publicly funded Montreal Olympics in 1976 precipitated the change to include private enterprise in the process, as seen with the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games.¹⁹ The Atlanta Games Regime exploited the opportunity seen within Los Angeles’ example and was rewarded by the International Olympic Committee (“IOC”) for the amount of private support garnered.²⁰

¹⁵ As quoted by Christopher R. Hill, *Olympic Politics* (New York, NY: Manchester University Press, 1996), 243. Citation of this quote not provided by author. Based on context within *Olympic Politics*, this author assumes this quote was made during the planning process of the Games.

¹⁶ “Supplement,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 17, 1988, D:42.

¹⁷ Burbank, Andranovich, and Heying, “Mega-Events, Urban Development, and Public Policy,” 183-184.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 180; Whitelegg, “Going for Gold: Atlanta’s Bid for Fame,” 802.

¹⁹ Whitelegg, “Going for Gold: Atlanta’s Bid for Fame,” 802; John Bevilaqua, “Commentary,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 17, 1988, E4:1.

²⁰ Robert Knight Barney, *Selling the Five Rings: The International Olympic Committee and the Rise of Olympic Commercialism* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2002), 250.

WhatIsImage?

Various images of Atlanta worked to sell the city to different regional and international interest groups. Initially created by Atlanta boosters as a transportation and commerce hub, Atlanta had struggled in recent decades to create itself as a tourist destination to generate revenue.²¹ The lack of downtown tourist attractions and poverty did not aid in this struggle. In preparation for the Games, Atlanta not only had to define itself through an advertising hook but it had to create the infrastructure to support that hook.

One approach included the theme of “southern hospitality” that prevailed in many publications, including the official bid and sales circulars for promoting the Games to sponsors.²² “Southern hospitality” presented a problem in that it is a cultural signifier for the region, not particular to Atlanta. While it has cache and was referred to at times by Games planners, the notion that everyone in the city is nice does not lend for a strong marketing campaign. “Southern hospitality” is meant to signify an all-embracing spirit toward others where truth rests within polite, sometimes evasive terms. It evokes uncertain calm and represents a lack of conflict through passive-aggressiveness. Building a marketing platform on the idea of a “conflict-free” environment can be problematic: “One is its skewed version of history, as though conflict, negotiation, struggle and controversy are somehow anathema to progress when in actual fact they are often its lifeblood. The other...is its reliance on image ‘management.’ Images cannot be controlled.”²³

²¹ Newman, *Southern Hospitality: Tourism and the Growth of Atlanta*, 277.

²² Atlanta Centennial Olympic Properties, *The Unprecedented Opportunity of the 1996 Atlanta Centennial Olympic Games and the 1994 and 1996 U.S. Olympic Teams*, 21.

²³ Whitelegg, “Going for Gold: Atlanta’s Bid for Fame,” 810.

“Southern hospitality” might have been attributed to Atlanta, but an actual image in the form of a marketing tag line for Atlanta was never able to come to fruition.²⁴ Neither ACOG, Atlanta residents nor Atlanta politicians could come to agree on the one theme to embrace once the Games were awarded, with meetings held between key public and private agencies to create one slogan to no avail.²⁵ Some options incorporated by various agencies include: “Come Celebrate our Dream,” “Look at Atlanta Now,” “Atlanta: What the World is Coming to,” and “Atlanta: Hometown to the American Dream.”

Evidence supports that Olympic planners appreciated the stock of its many, often contradictory, images. While scholars argue that the lack of definition within “Izzy” as the Games mascot represented Atlanta’s own identity crisis, the lack of specificity intended the necessary ambiguities to appeal to a broad audience and subsequently give rise to the possible increase in economic potential and viewership.²⁶ Charles Rutheiser asserts that “Atlanta’s most appreciated and defining characteristic seemed its ability to morph, to reconfigure itself in response to the demands of capital.”²⁷ The indistinct blue slug “Izzy” served both as a cop out for developers who were still trying to figure out site plans and funding, while it attempted to play into the appeal of Atlanta as a hospitable place to everyone.

Rutheiser claims that the abandonment of the overall “Whatizit” concept was not an option after the negative press reception given that Payne himself chose this marketing

²⁴ Newman, *Southern Hospitality: Tourism and the Growth of Atlanta*, 275.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 254, 275; Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta: The Politics of Place in the City of Dreams*, 246.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 1; Newman, *Southern Hospitality: Tourism and the Growth of Atlanta*, 275. Rutheiser and Newman both suggest that Atlanta suffered from an identity crisis, therefore creating problems for ACOG in defining an Olympic image.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

platform.²⁸ Both Payne and Young, however, seemed to understand that either the contradictions that existed within the Atlanta identity could enhance marketing opportunities and target audiences, or conversely, to settle on one theme runs the risk of alienating a segment of viewers. During the Games in 1996, Young contends that “Izzy” was a symbol of diversity and that “Izzy is breeding a new level of tolerance for things that look different from you and me. It’s a weird little futuristic creature that you have to learn to love.”²⁹ If ACOG and city planners decided to overtly embrace southern heritage as the image to portray, not only would this threaten the potential of corporate sponsorships but it would undermine the notion of internationalism and alienate a large percentage of tourists, resulting in decreased economic returns. A more covert way to incorporate the complexities of Atlanta’s contradictory history and provide room for change in developing the sites was required. The obscure nature of “Izzy” provides a perfect example of ACOG walking the tight-rope between the modern and nostalgic without fully giving in to either side.

While ambiguous in identity, the Games created a myth and hero to follow it through its marketing collateral. In 1988, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* newspaper promoted the mythical plight of Billy Payne to convince Georgia and Atlanta politicians into bidding for the Games. Mayor Young’s surprise in proclaiming Payne “a nut” at the notion appeared to perpetuate a myth of the unyielding spirit of this one man who recreated Atlanta into the international, modern city it had *now* become.³⁰ This myth harks back to the nostalgic plight of Atlanta itself as a city that continued to redefine itself against all odds. *Atlanta Journal-*

²⁸ Ibid., 2.

²⁹ “Mr. Olympics’ Still a Minister,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 22, 1996, SS:28.

³⁰ Ed Hinton, “Payne’s Group Has Carried Torch for Atlanta in Run for Olympics,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 24, 1988, D1:1.

Constitution headlines and commentary link Atlanta to a “dark horse” and “underdog.”³¹ The media reported the story whereby Payne literally dreamed of the Olympic Games in Atlanta one night in 1987.³² In truth, former city leaders attempted to rally behind a bid for the 1984 Olympic Games with the private sector, namely Coca-Cola, squelching these attempts.³³ Rutheiser notes that the support of Coca-Cola and Mayor Young enabled Payne and the AOC to pull this off, with the “symbolic capital” and international connections of Young crucial for support of this venture.³⁴

The truth, however, did not keep the myth of this former football star as an American hero from prospering. In response to Atlanta’s nomination by the United States Olympic Committee (“USOC”) in January 1988, Payne was portrayed as an American pioneer. A newspaper commentator associated Payne to the admirable, entrepreneurial American spirit, one who was the ideal American businessman who succeeded from “hard work and enterprise.”³⁵ Subsequent articles presented Payne with other prominent Atlantans. An expose of Payne himself includes an endorsement from the regionally revered University of Georgia football coach, Vince Dooley, who compared Payne to a humble man of great fortitude.³⁶ As a former longtime coach of the University of Georgia football team, Dooley himself was a Georgia icon

³¹ “As Dark-horse Atlanta Pulls It Off, A Nutty Dream Approaches Reality,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 30, 1988, A10:1; “Making the Pitch for ’96: IOC,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, September 16, 1988, E1:2.

³² Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta: The Politics of Place in the City of Dreams*, 228; Newman, *Southern Hospitality: Tourism and the Growth of Atlanta*, 253.

³³ Burbank, Andranovich, and Heying, “Mega-Events, Urban Development, and Public Policy,” 188; Whitelegg, “Going for Gold: Atlanta’s Bid for Fame,” 805. According to these sources, a negative feasibility study drafted by Research Atlanta in the 1970s based on the economic failures of the publicly-funded 1976 Montreal Olympics attributed to Coca-Cola’s lack of support to bid for the 1984 Olympics. Subsequent “approval” by Coca-Cola to proceed with a bid for the 1996 Centennial Olympics was based on the success of the private sector’s involvement in the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics.

³⁴ Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta: The Politics of Place in the City of Dreams*, 229.

³⁵ “A Boost for City’s Spirits,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 3, 1988, A18:1.

³⁶ Ed Hinton, “Payne’s Group Has Carried Torch for Atlanta in Run for Olympics,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 24, 1988, D20.

with loyal supporters. The selling of the Olympic image to Georgians appeared to be through classic football themes that were tangible and persuasive to its audience - the image of the humble underdog, former football star, American idealist, with strong comparisons to another Georgia legacy.

The promotion of the Games turned the American hero Payne into a modern day apparition of Georgia's own legacy, Martin Luther King, Jr.: "If you dream big enough, you never know what's going to happen. I have to believe we're trying harder than any of the cities in the bid process." As chairman of the bid sponsor Georgia Amateur Athletic Foundation (GAFF), Billy Payne spoke these words the day before the USOC was scheduled to arrive in Atlanta for their 1988 evaluation.³⁷ The use of the term 'dream' was made throughout the bid process, harking back to the famous speech made by Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1963 during the Civil Rights Movement. Within the Atlanta Centennial Olympic Properties ("ACOP") Partnership Sales Circular, not only was King prominently represented but allusions to Payne as the modern day King were made. Shown opposite to images of King was a description of Payne's dream that Atlanta, and the American South, would host the 1996 Olympics.³⁸ One questions whether Payne was to be considered the business elite version of King, brought forward with his dream to remove the downtown Atlanta core from its stagnation and bring prosperity to Atlanta corporate interests.

Rutheiser argues that *Gone with the Wind* represents the "real" Atlanta. Although the city was not constructed by plantation culture, it survived as an "elite folk history, one that derives its

³⁷ "USOC coming to see the sights for Atlanta's '96 Olympic bid," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, February 4, 1988, D1:2.

³⁸ Atlanta Centennial Olympic Properties, *The Unprecedented Opportunity of the 1996 Atlanta Centennial Olympic Games and the 1994 and 1996 U.S. Olympic Teams*, 18.

‘truth’ not from its correspondence with the historical record...but from the collective, and highly selective, memory of a particular group.”³⁹ In contrast to the assertion that planners dismissed the traditional southern heritage, the myth of Tara remained prevalent throughout the process from the moment the USOC arrived in Atlanta. Just prior to the first visit by the USOC, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* coincidentally headlined a pitch to preserve Margaret Mitchell’s former house, dubbed “The Dump,” with Mayor Andrew Young *finally* agreeing to save the site.⁴⁰ On the one hand, Atlantans and the African-American community preferred to move beyond the contemporary fiction of plantation life and slavery for the sake of a vision of integration. Yet, Atlanta’s national and international identity was based in large part on this image as a draw for tourism so it paid to keep this myth in play.⁴¹ “The Dump” was eventually purchased and rehabbed by Games sponsor Daimler-Benz as a meeting facility for entertaining their guests in 1996, proof that social capital abroad existed within the myth of *Gone with the Wind*.⁴² The irony of Young as he vows to spare “The Dump” and not allow its demolition makes a statement signifying inter-racial harmony and moving beyond the past of slavery. Young, as a Civil Rights era icon who accepted the image of Tara, alluded to the world that the African-American community as a whole accepted this image and permitted city officials and Games planners the use of this lucrative marketing image without fear of stigma.

³⁹ Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta: The Politics of Place in the City of Dreams*, 41.

⁴⁰ “Mayor [Young] won’t allow razing of “Dump,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, January 26, 1988, A1:2.

⁴¹ Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta: The Politics of Place in the City of Dreams*, 45.

⁴² Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta: The Politics of Place in the City of Dreams*, 277.

“They bought it,’ Young says with a sly grin.”⁴³

During the events in 1996, Izzy the official mascot came and went with a flash, conspicuously missing and co-opted instead by an unofficial mascot - Scarlett O’Hara. Impersonator Melly Meadows was in such demand that numerous Scarlett impersonators were stationed throughout the sites at all times during the Games.⁴⁴ While one wonders if in reality the dreaded Izzy was created to be intentionally loathsome so that the public would find Scarlett O’Hara more palatable, *The Official Report of the Centennial Olympic Games* published in 1997 provides a different perspective. Whereas the adult public disapproved of this icon, children adored it. ACOP recreated the design to make it “more adaptable to licensed products and animation” for the sale to children, providing the opportunity to inculcate consumerism to the youngest citizens.⁴⁵ The more obscure the message the better in the game of profiteering, for the power in ambiguity relies on its ability to adapt to the right audience.

Foreshadowing of what was to come can be seen during the Atlanta USOC presentations in 1988. An article in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* by Bud Simpson praised Atlanta’s public and private leaders for their focus on southern hospitality as the pre-eminent concern in the face of the presentation’s technical gaffs.⁴⁶ When the Games finally arrived, the truth behind Atlanta’s claims would become apparent to the world through a frustrated stream of journalists, citizens, and IOC members. Games planners placed considerable importance on image for the sake of logistics.⁴⁷ The “advanced technology in transportation” promoted within ACOP

⁴³ “Mr. Olympics’ Still a Minister,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 22, 1996, SS:28.

⁴⁴ Jim Auchmutey, “‘Scarlett’ Fever All the Rage at Games,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, July 27, 1996, SS42:1.

⁴⁵ Ginger T. Watkins, ed., *The Official Report of The Centennial Olympic Games: Planning and Organizing, Volume I* (Atlanta: Peachtree Publishers, 1997), 131.

⁴⁶ Bud Simpson, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, February 6, 1988, A1:2.

⁴⁷ Whitelegg, “Going for Gold: Atlanta’s Bid for Fame,” 810.

sponsorship sales circulars proved a farce.⁴⁸ Traffic congestion existed within normal work-week days in Atlanta, so how could ACOG have overlooked the impact from the concentration of an additional 500,000 people within the Olympic ring areas?⁴⁹ “Hell on wheels” was the moniker that the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* reported for the transportation system to the Lake Lanier venue, with buses behind schedule, breaking down and even getting lost.⁵⁰ Transportation problems were so bad that spectators were delayed in making it to their scheduled events in time. On July 24th, five days into the Games, ACOG attempted “damage control” in response to negative press world wide and promised to refund money for individuals, namely journalists, who were late due to transportation delays.⁵¹

In addition to debunking the idea of advanced transportation systems, journalists “regarded the Games too commercialized, and described Atlanta as a cheap carnival with so many vendors selling their wares to the public.”⁵² Reflecting unabashed commercialism, Centennial Olympic Park was created by ACOG, Coca-Cola and the State of Georgia (with City of Atlanta officials purposely excluded) to provide corporate sponsors the opportunity to market themselves. Centennial Park was not based on any need relevant to the Games in athletic terms.⁵³ City Council exercised its disdain for being excluded from Games planning in general, and from economic benefits derived from Centennial Olympic Park specifically, by offering deals to direct competitors of Games sponsors and selling commercial kiosks outside of the

⁴⁸ Atlanta Centennial Olympic Properties, *The Unprecedented Opportunity of the 1996 Atlanta Centennial Olympic Games and the 1994 and 1996 U.S. Olympic Teams*, 14.

⁴⁹ Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta: The Politics of Place in the City of Dreams*, 234.

⁵⁰ “Extra,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 21, 1996, 15:1.

⁵¹ “ACOG Takes Damage-control Approach With Media,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 24, 1996, 22:4.

⁵² Newman, *Southern Hospitality: Tourism and the Growth of Atlanta*, 277.

⁵³ Burbank, Andranovich, and Heying, “Mega-Events, Urban Development, and Public Policy,” 189.

Olympic mall of Centennial Olympic Park. The tension and competition between ACOG and the Atlanta City Council for a voice in planning and gaining financial rewards came to a head. In selling the Games to corporate sponsors, ACOG promised exclusivity and vowed to thwart ambush marketing tactics, yet they had no control over city properties outside of the established Games' venues. The city offered American Express the exclusive right to be the "official credit card of Atlanta," much to the disdain of ACOG with Visa's premier sponsorship of the Games.⁵⁴ City Council continued to challenge ACOG's attempts to monopolize economic opportunities of the Games, creating an overload of commercialism with vendor kiosks throughout what became known as the Olympic "merchandise mall" of Centennial Olympic Park.⁵⁵

As with many organizations, the framers often set the tone for the entire group. The over-indulgence in commercialism transpired into all aspects of the Games, from the venues and licensing rights to the athletes themselves. Foreign athletes cashed-in on the money-making opportunities while some American consumers considered their purchases an act of charity for "less fortunate." Throughout the Games, athletes from around the world headed to a tent at the Varsity to sell t-shirts, uniforms, and free gifts received from corporate sponsors. Dubbed a "garage sale," many athletes "ran back to their rooms to see what items they could offer."⁵⁶ With the zeal of American exceptionalism, one consumer stated that "...meeting the athletes at the Varsity is more of what the Olympics are about, seeing people from other parts of the world, getting to hear their stories. I feel sad for them. They've worked so hard to get here and some of them go back to jobs making \$80 a month."⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta: The Politics of Place in the City of Dreams*, 248.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 272.

⁵⁶ Al Levine, "Athletes Selling Shirts Off Own Backs," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, August 5, 1996, SS2:2.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

After the August 5th closing ceremonies, Juan Antonio Samaranch, president of the IOC, “declared the Atlanta Games great -- not the greatest -- but trounced the city’s zealous vending efforts and vowed that future Olympic committees would have control over their municipalities’ moneymaking schemes.”⁵⁸ Although recognizing the need to fund the Olympics, Samaranch argued that the IOC and Olympic committees should maintain the power to do so. Popular perception by Atlanta residents to this affront to “southern hospitality” was negative. The next day, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* journalist Colin Campbell addressed Samaranch’s comments as “tacky commercialism” unto itself, with the IOC, ACOG and City of Atlanta all pointing fingers at one another.⁵⁹ Little did anyone realize what was to come in 1998.

“Bye-Bye, Olympese” - The 1996 Atlanta Centennial Olympic Legacy



”The Disposable Olympics.”⁶⁰

⁵⁸ “Great, But Not Greatest: Samaranch: Commercial Efforts Must Be Limited,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, August 5, 1996, SS19:5.

⁵⁹ Colin Campbell, “Bye-Bye, Olympese,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, August 6, 1996, C1:1.

⁶⁰ Kerry Soper, “The Disposable Olympics,” *Southern Spaces* 18, no. 2 (Summer 1996): JPG file, <http://www.southernspaces.org/contents/2006/baker/1a-001-ss-06-zbaker.htm>, (accessed April 29, 2009).

Before his mayoral term ended, Young entitled ACOG with the authority to develop venues without input from City Council.⁶¹ Ironically, in 1992, this co-chair of ACOG and board member of the USOC stated “the Olympics were ‘not a welfare program, [they are] a business venture. If they [the city government] wanted to be more involved they should’ve voted to pay their own expenses.’”⁶² As such, the buying power of Dunwoody residents and the significant middle-class gay population provided the impetus for ACOG to react in favor of the citizens, whereas those with less ability to consume were marginalized. This is evidenced by ACOG’s agreement to move the tennis venue to Stone Mountain amid angry resident protests from the original site in affluent Dunwoody. ACOG also responded to controversy and was quick to move the volleyball venue away from Cobb County based on Cobb’s “family values” ordinance opposing gay and lesbian lifestyles. Alternatively, ACOG proceeded with the construction of the Olympic Stadium in predominately poor Summerhill despite neighborhood resistance.⁶³ The Olympic Villages on the former public housing complex Techwood Homes also proceeded without regard to resident displacement. Why would ACOG refuse to respond to Summerhill and Techwood residents, predominately poor and African-American neighborhoods, whereas they act in the face of affluence and gay rights? While it appears to be racially inspired on the surface, the reality is economics.

The poor African-American neighborhoods being displaced existed within the core of downtown Atlanta, in close proximity to the Olympic Village where athletes would be housed and other Olympic sites. Additionally, Techwood Homes was near two esteemed Games

⁶¹ Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta: The Politics of Place in the City of Dreams*, 237.

⁶² As quoted by Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta: The Politics of Place in the City of Dreams*, 238.

⁶³ Newman, *Southern Hospitality: Tourism and the Growth of Atlanta*, 257.

planners, Coca-Cola and Georgia Tech.⁶⁴ The process of the tenant displacement and demolition of public housing and neighborhoods such as Summerhill lacked in “southern hospitality.” While the result ultimately removed large concentrations of poverty and crime from the view of visitors to Atlanta, the opportunism that provided the impetus to break up this core of poverty did not actually provide resolve to the residents. Within Techwood Homes and Clark-Howell Homes, the Atlanta Housing Authority demolished these complexes without a mechanism to assist those that were being displaced in finding housing.⁶⁵ Furthermore, the poverty concentrations were merely transplanted to the southern suburbs, beyond areas of business or tourism.

It is important to note that the “manifestation of power and ideology” is reflected in “how urban public culture is defined and shaped by competition over the right to conceptualize, control, and experience public spaces.”⁶⁶ Through a relationship between the State of Georgia and business elite, an image of public-private enterprise was maintained with those in public political positions who might serve as obstacles or opposing forces sidelined, as seen with the exclusion of the Atlanta City Council in overall planning. By replacing “the *citizen* with the *consumer* as the focal point of urban public life,” the Games enabled Atlanta the opportunity and funding to make significant changes to the downtown infrastructure that were considered only dreams of many local business professionals and politicians for decades.⁶⁷ Today, upscale high-rise condos tower over Centennial Olympic Park with tourists running about the Georgia

⁶⁴ Larry Keating and Carol A. Flores, “Sixty and Out: Techwood Homes Transformed by Enemies and Friends,” *Journal of Urban History* 26, no. 3 (March 2000): 288.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 291.

⁶⁶ Mark Douglas Lowes, *Indy Dreams and Urban Nightmares: Speed Merchants, Spectacle, and the Struggle over Public Space in the World-Class City* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 8.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, Preface xv.

Aquarium and shrine to Coca-Cola. The lasting image of the 1996 Atlanta Centennial Games among many academics and journalists predominately refers to over-commercialism and the process of victimization of the poor for the sake of profits.

Conclusion

Pierre de Coubertin's founding of the Modern Olympic Movement in 1894 was based on his belief that "the pursuit of excellence so characteristic of athletic competition could help in the development of the whole person" and promoted sport in public education.⁶⁸ What was created for the pursuit of personal excellence and in search of moral grounding has transpired into the pursuit of economics and a testament to social hierarchies. In 1999, "the Salt Lake City scandal" surfaced, leading to U.S. Congressional Hearings on corruption charges against the IOC with regard to allegations of bribery in the Atlanta and Salt Lake City Olympic bid processes. Payne and Young both attended these hearings, where Payne admitted to participating in "excessive actions, and even thought processes that today seem inappropriate."⁶⁹ Young confirmed the bid team "overextended ourselves with our Southern hospitality" toward individual IOC members, with gifts of university scholarships to the children of IOC members, luxury hotel stays and expensive goods.⁷⁰ If the IOC were truly concerned with how the commodification of the Olympics was controlled by host cities, as mentioned by its 1996 president, maybe they should begin with establishing guidelines to combat the victimization of those who are citizens, not necessarily consumers, and avoid the encouragement of trumping ethics for profit.

⁶⁸ Atlanta Centennial Olympic Properties, *The Unprecedented Opportunity of the 1996 Atlanta Centennial Olympic Games and the 1994 and 1996 U.S. Olympic Teams*, 5.

⁶⁹ Melissa Turner, "Payne: We Made Mistakes," *Atlanta-Journal Constitution*, October 15, 1999, A1 and A19.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

Unfortunately, alienation of the poor proves to be an overall Olympic legacy - Atlanta's treatment of the poor was mild in comparison.⁷¹ One does not have to think hard to consider cities where cases of class marginalization occurred for the sake of the Olympics -- Seoul in 1988 and, more recently, the 2008 Beijing Olympics are prime examples. The economic implications of the policy where mega-events provide a viable solution to local development are often highlighted over any social and political consequences.⁷² The tale of the 1996 Atlanta Centennial Olympic Games reflects the tale of many cities with opportunism in the name of sport and the projected "spirit" of the Olympic Games applicable only to those at the apex of the social hierarchy, while poverty continues to oppress amid the prosperity of the Games.

⁷¹ Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta: The Politics of Place in the City of Dreams*, 282.

⁷² Burbank, Andranovich, and Heying, "Mega-Events, Urban Development, and Public Policy," 181.

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