

"MISPLACED PRIORITIES"

Atlanta, the '96 Olympics and the Politics of Urban Removal

The following research is guided by the clear need for accountability surrounding Atlanta's bid and subsequent award to host the 1996 Olympic Games. Thus far we know little about the specifics of the bid package nor the specifics of the financial, societal, environmental and individual human impact of Atlanta's hosting of the '96 Games. ACOG has been unwilling to disclose much information obviously vital to the public's interest. This study was initiated in order to fill the gap between vague and contradictory disclosures by Olympic organizers and the reality of the impact the Games will have upon the poor and dispossessed in our city. This research represents an ongoing process. As more information is disclosed and/or discovered, this body of research will certainly continue to expand and make clearer the impact of the '96 Games will have upon the citizens of Atlanta.

This study attempts to begin the research necessary in order to gain an understanding of the relationship of urban revitalization projects to homelessness and poverty, using a more detailed analysis of the effects of Olympic development on low-income and homeless people in Atlanta as a case study.

In recent Olympic history, in particular, careful research and documentation have played an important role in efforts to protect the rights of the majority of citizens against the economic interests of a privileged few. The Toronto coalition "Bread not Circuses," which successfully campaigned against their city's efforts to host the 1996 Olympic Games, emphasizes this point:

"Underpinning the rest of its work was the Coalition's research strategy. B'n'C [Bread not Circuses] realized early on that it couldn't sustain a campaign on such an ideologically powerful event such as the Olympics on rhetoric alone. The Olympics, and its corporate promoters, could easily out-rhetoric the Coalition in such a campaign. The Coalition is determined that it would develop a research base on every conceivable aspect of the Olympics - from finances through to previous events - and use that information at every opportunity to document its concerns...By the end of its campaign, the Coalition was recognized as an important source of critical information...[This] work...allowed the coalition to move from rhetoric to detailed arguments against the Olympics (BnC 1991:16)."

OPPOSING ATLANTA'S BID TO HOST THE OLYMPIC GAMES

"In the mid-1960's, Atlanta, the town that prided itself on being "too busy to hate" was charged with being "too busy to care." As the new Civic Center and Stadium were under construction, even some public officials began to question the city's priorities (Stone, 1976:115)."

This statement from the 1960's could just as easily describe concerns about Olympic-related development in the 1990's. Many in Atlanta felt that the city should have bid to host the Olympic Games. Based on their knowledge of the history of urban revitalization in Atlanta, they knew all too well the consequences Olympic-related development would likely have for Atlanta's

poor and homeless citizens:

"Government activities have displaced 15,500 families during the past nine-and-one-half years, statistics show. From 9,000 to 12,000 of these families were in income brackets low enough to qualify for public housing. Yet during the same period...only slightly more than 4,000 new low-cost units of housing were made available. That leaves a housing deficit of 5,000 - 7,000 units for poorer Atlanta families (Adams 1967:80)."

This report from the November 4, 1965 issue of the ATLANTA JOURNAL tells the story of the massive urban renewal projects that the city undertook in the 1950's through the 1960's. During the time that redevelopment activity was at its height, one-seventh of Atlanta's population was displaced by government action (Stone 1976:3)/

Clarence Stone points out that after World War II, the main emphasis for growth of the city was transforming Atlanta's Central Business District (CBD) into an economic hub; however, the inner-city population around the CBD was almost exclusively poor and black (1976:46-47). While the city government and business interests promised adequate replacement housing for the primarily black citizens being relocated to outlying areas, there were no efforts made to promote neighbourhood renewal, and in the end "relocation housing goals were substantially compromised; CBD upgrading was not" (Stone, 1976:83. Reports show instead that highway construction, the building of a new stadium and civic center, and other renewal projects over this time played a significant role in the poor conditions of housing for black residents (Adams 1967:81). According to Stone, public housing units allocated in 1958 became available only in 1964, and then not as many units as promised. Over that time, at least two thousand eligible families were displaced by urban renewal projects alone, and the supply of low-cost rental units in the city were also drastically reduced - "Overcrowding and racial transition in older neighbourhoods seemed to meet most of the city's relocation needs" (Stone, 1976:80).

A city comparison in 1960 (the "midpoint" of the twenty year period of the city's concerted renewal effort revealed that Atlanta had considerably greater than average poverty. In particular, the study confirmed the extreme race and class polarization in the city (Stone 1976:26-27). A Research Atlanta report found that housing patterns were more segregated in 1970 than in 1950.

For business leaders and city politicians, then, urban revitalization was a great success, boosting Atlanta's image as a thriving economic center. However, many of Atlanta's low-income and black inner-city residents still never recovered from these city policies which caused massive displacement and segregation along economic lines.

"State and local officials, forced to weigh their concerns for the existing residents of gentrifying neighbourhoods against their desire for the increased tax base and economic stimulation that the gentrifiers are expected to bring, may be reluctant to place the issue on the public agenda unless forced to do so by federal mandate or political pressure from below (1984:345).

ATLANTA'S PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP

In Atlanta, the historical partnership between city government and business interests is particularly important. According to Stone, Atlanta's post-WWII political structure (along with the shared incentive of economic growth and the inability of poor whites and blacks to unite across racial lines) allowed the business community to hold tremendous political influence in the city, and this public-private partnership actively worked to divide and fragment opposition forces (1976:33;41). For example, Ivan Allen, who took over as mayor in 1962 was a businessman who believed what was good for business was good for Atlanta (Stone 1976:91). Allen was committed to Atlanta as a national city and his policies were the "embodiment of business prestige in public affairs" (Stone 1976:36).

Nowhere was this alliance more clear than the urban renewal projects of the 1950's - 1960's. As Stone describes, "Renewal policy coincided with the collective interests of the business community because business influence was effectively used to protect and promote those interests" (1976:84). When urban renewal plans were developed, the business community was intimately involved with the process from the beginning, whereas other (particularly neighbourhood) groups could only react to already developed plans (Stone, 1976:36). In fact, the Housing Authority was controlled by business leaders (Stone 1976:84), and it was a "commercial clique" of City Hall and the Chamber of Commerce which instigated development in the 1960's (Schemmel 1972:63). As a result of controlling business interests, for example, conscious decisions were made to clear land housing low-income African-American residents rather than deteriorated non-residential areas. Other policy objectives such as neighbourhood conservation and improvement were often neglected (Stone 1976:87). Clarence Stone outlines one example of wholesale political manipulation undertaken to proceed with redevelopment:

"Three years had been expended testing first the political feasibility and then the legality of urban redevelopment. Two more years were required to put redevelopment on a new legal basis by amending the state constitution and enacting new enabling legislation (1976:61).

The business community was thus the clear winner in Atlanta's urban renewal game (Stone, 1976:58).

PRIVATE-PUBLIC PARTNERSHIP AND THE OLYMPICS

"...born in the corporate boardrooms and political backrooms" (Shapcott 1991:7).

Analysis of Olympic development clearly shows that the strength of this partnership persists in Atlanta and seems to work with much the same effect as in the 1950's and 1960's. However, as Hennig asserts, there are some important differences in the way governments and private interests work together now versus during earlier urban renewal projects:

"What has occurred is a reorientation of the public sector role in urban redevelopment - a reorientation that has resulted in a less direct, if not

necessarily less significant, public role. 'As [government] programs increasingly stress mixed public-private projects and leveraging, the boundary lines between public and private action become increasingly blurry' (Legates and Hartman 1981:37).

As a consequence, there is even less clarity in terms of who is responsible.

Who, for example, should be the target of neighborhood protests? (Henig 1982).

Olympic organizers seem to be making maximum use of these blurred lines of responsibility. The Olympic bid campaign and subsequent Olympic redevelopment grew out of the elite business organization Central Atlanta Progress (CAP), described as "the smooth-running powerhouse whose behind-the-scenes maneuvers have set the course for much of the progress in center city." (As a side note, Dan Sweat, the former president of CAP is now leading the Atlanta Project as executive director) The organization formed to direct Olympic development, the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games (ACOG), is high-powered corporation (For example, William J. Moss, who directed the building of Walt Disney's EPCOT Center was hired as senior vice president of construction to oversee the \$500 million construction program, which pays its top management "hefty six-figure salaries".

Alongside ACOG, the Metropolitan Atlanta Olympic Games Authority (MAOGA) was formed as the public agency ostensibly responsible for overseeing the Olympic organizing effort and protecting public interests. The question, then, is who defines "public interests"? According to the bill enacted by the General Assembly of Georgia authorizing MAUGA, one member must be "an officer of a state authority with responsibility for convention and tourism activities in the metropolitan area." In fact, George Berry, former commissioner of Georgia's Department of Industry and Trade and Atlanta's Department of Aviation, was chosen as chair of MAOGA. Ex officio members must include the mayor Atlanta, the president of the City of Atlanta and the chair of the Fulton County Board of Commissioners. Two members are appointed by the mayor of Atlanta and two by the Georgia House and Senate members whose districts are within Fulton County. There is no stipulation for neighbourhood or low-income representation.

More recently (May 1991), in the face of neighbourhood opposition to proposed development projects, the mayor appointed a "liaison" to oversee the "improvement" of the three (low income, primarily African-American) areas most directly affected by the Olympics [(Or, one writer described, "[Mayor] Maynard Jackson made Martin the city's point player on revitalizing and re-developing some of the city's neighbourhoods that will be sites for the Olympic Games - whether they want to be or not" The mayor's appointee, Joe Martin, was, at the time of his appointment, serving as head of Central Atlanta Progress. One Atlanta journalist describes Martin as "the poster boy of quasi-public/private ventures in Atlanta...part of the local gentry which runs Atlanta" and goes on to argue that Martin is "symptomatic of what's wrong with politics and public policy in Atlanta":

In the meantime, ACOG has continuously argued that the Olympics will be financed exclusively by private dollars - that public monies will not be diverted for use in Olympic development. This claim is misleading. First,

federal, state and local governments already contributed to Atlanta's bid campaign, and the state has committed more than \$300 million to the construction of the Georgia Dome Stadium and the expansion of the World Congress Center (Task Force for the Homeless) Further, most of the Olympic facilities will be located on state property. Georgia is now putting up hundreds of millions of dollars to push ahead the building of dormitories and the completion of improvements to the World Congress Center. A report by the Mayor's Olympic Advisory Committee states, "It is critical that [local governments] provide the monies needed to see that the Games are conducted in the proper manner." Additionally, costs in government services and infrastructure for the Olympics, such as security, postal services, immigration, tourism and economic development, public health, and waste management will be enormous (Bread not Circuses, 1990). Security costs alone for the '84 Los Angeles Games (the last Olympics held in the United States) were \$100 million (Task Force for the Homeless).

Nowhere is the behind-the-scenes public-private collusion more apparent than in the decision to build a new stadium across the street from already-existing Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium (a \$38 million public property). According to a report by the Atlanta Journal Constitution (10/19/91), this decision "was forged in a private circle limited to the city's elite political and Olympics leadership." Even though this decision clearly raises very public issues, no hearings were held, and the "primary parties to the decision - including Mayor Maynard Jackson - were sworn to secrecy by Olympics chief Billy Payne until the deal was signed..." Community leaders point to this "closed-door" process and a long list of information to which ACOG refuses public access (such as contracts, salaries, and meetings of ACOG's neighbourhood task forces) as evidence of ACOG's clear intention to keep neighbourhood groups out of the planning process. As a result, community groups can only respond to already formulated decisions.

Billy Payne, president of ACOG, continues to claim, "We're not spending any public money." However, even if that were true, community, and even some political leaders, argue:

"...the impact of the committee's works cuts across the entire community and involves issues such as traffic infrastructure, public finance and community development. 'If there is a private corporation doing more public business than this, I don't know what it is' said Jabari Simama, an Atlanta City Council member."

ACOG is legally exempt from state laws that require public access because it is a private, non-profit corporation.

Perhaps the only clear winner in the 1996 Olympic Games, then, will be the Atlanta business community and their friends in City Hall.