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# Cultural influences on the design of public transportation in Atlanta

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## Introduction

Everything is designed. From the moment we wake up, nearly everything we interact with has in some way, shape, or form been designed by some person or a team of people. Everything, from the most minute things such as the doorknob to our bedroom, to the public transportation system we take to work or school, underwent a series of decisions. Whether or not these decisions are made consciously, to improve ease of use, or if they reflect a certain cultural paradigm, they ultimately influence the design of the end product, whatever that may be.

In this paper, I'm going to examine the history of Atlanta's public transportation system: how it was influenced by the development of the city of Atlanta, as well as by race relations in the South.

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## Background

In 1962, a referendum was proposed to create a system of public transportation in Atlanta. It failed (Schroeder and Sjoquist, 31). This particular referendum failed because the Georgia State Highway Department believed highways were a suitable solution to the problem of mass transit (*Atlanta Case Study*, 11). In 1964, another referendum chartering a public transportation system dubbed MARTA (Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority) barely passed, with a margin of 403 votes in Cobb County (13). Cobb

County eventually bowed out of the referendum, however. A case study by the United States Congress Office of Technology Advancement suggests that this was because of a fear that "rapid transit would hasten the movement of city blacks into the suburbs (16)."

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## Literature Review

There was, in 1962, a "general unwillingness to contribute to a system they felt would not benefit [Cobb County] directly (16)." A 1975 study by Dajani, Egan, and McElroy suggested that while the benefits of MARTA would ultimately be determined by a family's proximity to it, transit riders not only save time and costs for themselves, but help to reduce travel time and congestion for others (57). In a comment on that study, however, Talley and French dispute Dajani et al.'s findings, although Talley and French merely dispute the use of cost savings as a measure of transportation benefits (837). I think it's a reasonable assumption, however, that Cobb County's dismissal of MARTA as "excessive government spending (*Atlanta Case Study*, 16)" are without merit if, indeed, costs are all-around lowered. As a result of Cobb County's reluctance to participate in the initial MARTA charter, MARTA does not run to Cobb County (7).

Cost effectiveness is, of course, an important metric to consider when examining the design merit of a system and, as such, there have been many studies on the inherent value of MARTA. Another such study, conducted in 1997, suggests

that “MARTA made a mistake in building its costly rail system (Kain, 25).” Kain attributes MARTA’s failure to “higher fuel prices, and even more importantly long queues to purchas [sic] fuel (27)” and dismisses apparent increases in ridership as being based on total boardings, as opposed to considering linked trips (28); in other words, if a rider has to change trains, this should count as one trip, rather than two.

Of course, it’s impossible for a public transit system to cater to the need of every single rider, and inevitably some of those will have to change lines. This is an important feature, design-wise, of a transit system, and one at which Boston’s T often fails (eg. while lines B, C, D, and E all meet at Copley Station, one cannot switch from the E coming inbound to any other line going outbound) (MassDOT, *Map*). In addition to inner-city transfers for the purpose of changing directions or lines, we must look at transfers from suburban communities into the city, an area where MARTA falls particularly short.

It’s important to note that while very little of Cobb County falls within Atlanta’s city limits as defined by Interstate 285, there exists mounting evidence that “auto[mobile]-oriented metropolitan areas,” or suburbs, can benefit from a link to a central business district (Brown and Thompson, 1120). In fact, Atlanta’s Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) encompasses some 20 counties, only three of which fall inside I-285. While Cobb County has introduced its own public

transportation system since the 1962 MARTA Charter, in 2003, MARTA still carried 93% of *all* Atlanta MSA riders (1125). Brown and Thompson cite the decentralization of Atlanta and a 260% increase in jobs between 1970 and 2000 (1121) as evidence that perhaps public transportation systems *should* serve suburban communities. While states such as Massachusetts have instituted commuter rail systems to serve such a purpose, the state of Georgia has yet to institute any such system, or even a system that might link Cobb County Transit or other such systems to MARTA.

A likely explanation for MARTA’s failure to extent into decentralized communities is the fact that MARTA is not Atlanta’s first public transportation system. Atlanta had a streetcar in 1889, and more importantly, was the terminus of a midwestern railroad line as early as 1836, and played an important role in the fall of the Confederacy during the Civil War (Mruck, 268). At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while Atlanta’s streetcar system was the go-to mode of public transit, cities were building upwards.

“Tenements and luxury apartment buildings replaced brownstones,” Glaser and Kahn tell us in their 2003 paper.

“But at the end of the 20th century, urban growth has pushed cities further and further out (2).” Atlanta killed their street car in 1963, shortly after the

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<sup>1</sup> Examples listed by Brown and Thompson are Clayton County Transit (C-Tran), Gwinnett County Transit (GCT) and the Georgia Regional Transport Authority (GRTA) XPRESS commuter service.

original MARTA charter. This could perhaps explain why MARTA stations feel much more like commuter rail stations on any other system, despite not actually reaching outside the city.

While it's far from what one might consider a *scholarly* source, blogger "ATL Urbanist" astutely points out that while many such stations "were originally built to be park-and-ride stations...how we view the function of our MARTA stations should change with them." Similarly, Ph.D. student (and blogger<sup>2</sup>) Derek Edwards examines why it's so hard to walk to a MARTA station, describing MARTA stations (quite accurately, I might add) as "giant bunkers and block-sized compounds."

It's curious, to me, that Atlanta's public transit system caters more closely to the needs of drivers rather than pedestrian. Driving is not cost effective, though Glaeser and Kahn point out the "tremendous time saving advantages" of the automobile (21). In 200, the average commute time to work via car was 24.1 minutes, as compared to 47.7 minutes on public transit. Here, then, is perhaps the real reason people continuously pick driving over public transit, not just in

Atlanta, but overwhelmingly in the United States. The only city I could imagine is possibly an exception is New York City, but I'm writing about Atlanta, not New York.

In Gary Hustwit's documentary, *Urbanized*, Enrique Peñalosa, the mayor of Bogotá, Colombia argues that "The more road infrastructure you do, the traffic will become even worse! The only way to solve traffic jams is to restrict car use..." The logic here, of course, is that if roads exist, people will use them to their fullest extent and then some. This is certainly true in Atlanta. If we restrict roads, and make driving *less* convenient than public transportation, people will be sort of forced into using public transportation. Then, in a perfect world, as ridership increases, so too will funding and ultimately, functionality.

Why, then, is Atlanta's public transportation system stuck in the 1960s? The short answer is, we're working on it. Ryan Gravel's 1999 thesis proposes a system he called the Belt Line. Similar to New York's High Line, it utilized Atlanta's now abandoned railroad tracks and built on

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<sup>2</sup> Believe me, I wish there were more/any academic studies on the design of MARTA stations. But as far as my research has shown, there are none. I guess this will have to be the first! But let the fact that these articles were published in blog-format not detract from the validity of their points.

top of them a walking path that runs a 22 mile ring inside atlanta that (according to the BeltLine's<sup>3</sup> website) encompasses 44 different neighborhoods. 9 years after Gravel wrote his thesis, in 2008, the first BeltLine trails began to open. Today, in 2013, the BeltLine is still underway, but an impressive portion of it is open to the public. The BeltLine continues to serve as a foundation for theses to be built upon, as Joshua Butler wrote his 2006 thesis on wayfinding systems for randomly developed areas. He proposes a unified transit program for Atlanta which he creatively calls *The Atlanta Unified Transit Program*. He discusses the need for a universal signage system across the BeltLine and MARTA, kiosks emblazoned with maps detailing where one can walk to within 5 and 30 minutes of the station, as well as a "macro" view of the entire system. Much to my delight, Butler includes in his thesis actual, tangible designs for kiosks and maps portraying the relationship between MARTA and the BeltLine. *This* is what Atlanta needs! A design that pulls together all the ways to get about Atlanta, including the up-and-coming Atlanta Streetcar project, currently in its infancy, which will run along 2.7 miles and have 12 stops along streets in

Downtown Atlanta, and connect to MARTA as well as the BeltLine. Everything seems like it's coming together, but it's still far from perfect.

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## Conclusion

Atlanta's history is wrought with tumultuous race relations (which people were hesitant to talk about), decentralization, and present-day problems ultimately hearkens back to repeatedly being in the wrong place at the wrong time. MARTA was conceived at a time of decentralization, but not allowed to fully embrace communities outside Atlanta's already sprawling city limits. As the city tried to draw itself back in, and compete with other modern American cities, Atlanta found itself with a transportation system ill suited to any practical use.

Today, Atlanta is trying again to tackle the problem of usable, practical public transit through the BeltLine and Atlanta Streetcar Project, but still lacks an all-encompassing identity.

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<sup>3</sup> Gravel's thesis called it the Belt Line (with a space). In its current, existent form, it's called the BeltLine (no space). Just in case you thought I was being inconsistent.

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