



Could Atlanta teach Prince George's about smart growth?

DEVELOPMENT By [Bradley Heard](#) (Contributor) October 9, 2013 54

Once [known for sprawl](#), Atlanta has become a bastion of smart growth and transit-oriented development. In our region, it could be a model for Prince George's County, which struggles with the same issues.



Photo by Couse on [Flickr](#).

New research from George Washington University professor Christopher Leinberger reveals that most of the Atlanta region's office, retail, and rental residential construction [now occurs in walkable urban places](#), or WalkUPs. The study, [The WalkUP Wake-Up Call: Atlanta](#), is a follow-up to previous research of [the DC area](#) and reveals several fascinating facts about Atlanta's development landscape during the most recent real estate cycle, from 2009 to the present.

Leinberger, who led the study in conjunction with Georgia Tech and the Atlanta Regional Commission, said it was as significant as the announcement of the closing of the American frontier after the 1890 census. "This is indicative that we're seeing the end of sprawl," he declared.

The study generally follows the same methodology as the DC study, and found similar results. Like in the DC area, Metropolitan Atlanta's 36 established and emerging WalkUPs are located on less than one percent of the region's total land area. 29 of them are located within the I-285 Perimeter, Atlanta's version of the Capital Beltway. And they're 16 times

more densely developed than the rest of the region, in terms of gross floor area ratio (FAR).

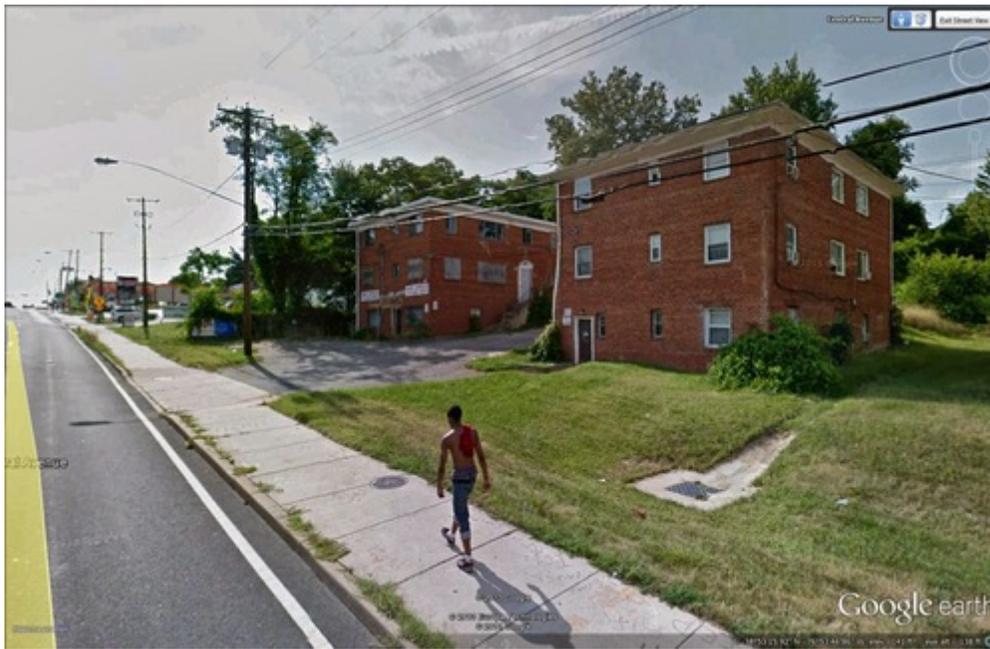
More than 60% of the Atlanta region's income-producing property, which includes office, apartment, retail, institutional, and all other non-for-sale real estate, is located in the 36 WalkUPs. Meanwhile, 73% of the development in established WalkUPs and 85% of the development in emerging WalkUPs occurred near MARTA rail stations, the region's transit authority.

Multifamily rental housing drove real estate growth in established WalkUPs, which captured 88% of the region's multifamily units. And established WalkUPs are home to 50% of the Atlanta region's newly constructed office space.

Leinberger describes the Washington and Atlanta metropolitan areas as “peas in a pod” and “as comparable as any two large metropolitan areas in the country,” in terms of population, character, development form, traffic, rail transit, and status as government and regional capitals.

Prince George's today looks like Atlanta yesterday

As comparable as the Washington region may be to metropolitan Atlanta, Prince George's County most resembles Atlanta in its sprawling past. The county has just three of the region's WalkUPs, even though it has 15 Metrorail stations, more than any other suburban jurisdiction.



Blighted conditions at Prince George's Addison Road Metro Station. Image from Google Earth.

The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission (M-NCPPC) [reports](#) that over the past decade, more than 60% of Prince George's non-residential, income-producing development has occurred outside of the Beltway, in automobile-oriented locations far away from transit.

Additionally, [nearly 80% of the approved-but-unbuilt residential development](#) in Prince George's County consists of single-family homes planned for automobile-oriented outer-Beltway suburbia. Only 11% of the nearly 17,000 housing units in the pipeline are of multifamily homes, and only one-third of those, or 616 units, are planned for inside the Beltway.

Rather than revitalizing and developing around Metro stations and inside the Beltway, Prince George's County prefers to tout greenfield edge cities [like Westphalia](#), or to promote elaborate automobile-oriented venues like a proposed [billion dollar Bellagio-style casino](#) or a [Tanger Outlets center](#). M-NCPPC has long warned that unless the county reverses course, it will be ill-equipped to handle future market demand and get left behind.

Glimmers of hope for smarter growth

That's not to say that there aren't occasionally glimmers of hope for smarter growth in Prince George's. In recent months, the county has voiced support for two significant proposed transit-oriented developments: a [new regional hospital](#) at Largo Town Center and an [FBI headquarters building](#) at Greenbelt. Unfortunately, the county's overall approach to TOD tends to be unfocused and haphazard.

Additionally, as M-NCPPC has noted, the county's occasional TOD successes are vastly overshadowed and undermined by its continued support of massive sprawl projects, which thwart the county's ability to concentrate growth in the right places. It is the proverbial problem of "one step forward, two steps back."

There are lots of local examples of how Prince George's could grow differently, notably [Arlington County](#), which has become a national model for how to embrace TOD. But Atlanta's burgeoning TOD transformation may hold even better lessons for the county. In my next post, I will talk about what Prince George's could learn from them.

This article is cross-posted on [Prince George's Urbanist](#).

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Bradley Heard is an attorney and citizen activist who resides in the Capitol Heights area of Prince George's County. A native of Virginia Beach and former longtime Atlanta resident, Brad hopes to encourage high-quality, walkable and bikeable development in the inner Beltway region of Prince George's County.

54 COMMENTS 

[THREADED](#) [NEWEST AT BOTTOM](#) [NEWEST AT TOP](#)

[Solution Giver](#) on October 9, 2013 at 2:45 pm

Can someone explain where the blight is in this photo of Addison Road Station? It's not fancy but it looks like a far cry from blight. People used to get really angry when a lower income area was called blighted just in order to make way for redevelopment. Have times changed or not? I am cautious in my judgment, but this does not look blighted at all to me. It may be economical to redevelop it and some may find it unattractive, but “under-utilized” and “blighted” are totally different things.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

[ceefer66](#) on October 9, 2013 at 2:47 pm

“Prince George's today looks like Atlanta yesterday’

Wow! That's some coincidence. I lived in the Atlanta area (Smyrna in Cobb County) in the 90's and I visit often for work and to see friends. I've long said that parts of Prince Georges remind me of Atlanta, especially some of the older areas.

My nephew lived in an urban neighborhood called Atlantic Station from 2008 until he moved to Chicago in July. If you've ever seen Atlantic Station, you would agree that it's just the type of development you want to see in Prince Georges.

I would love to see something like Atlantic Station go up at a location like New Carrollton (what a wasteland!) but how do we overcome what is the County's biggest disadvantage - namely the reputation for corruption, incompetence, bad schools, crime, and litter (our roads are the region's dirtiest)?

Honestly, that is job one.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

[Bradley Heard](#) on October 9, 2013 at 3:27 pm

@ Solution Giver,

Actually, I don't think “under-utilized” and “blighted” are totally different things in this context. The standard definition for a “blighted area” in Maryland is “an area in which a majority of buildings have declined in productivity by reason of obsolescence, depreciation or other causes to an extent they no longer justify fundamental repairs and adequate maintenance.” Blighted areas

are distinguished from “slum areas,” which are buildings that have declined to the point where they are a public health or safety threat.

While I don't think the buildings in that picture are “slum areas,” I definitely think they qualify as “blighted.” They're obsolete, depreciated, and are in declining productivity, particularly given their location directly across from the Metro. The cost to bring them up to a productive and economical use would likely exceed their value. In other words, they're “under-utilized” and in need of redevelopment.

@cefer66,

I agree, Atlantic Station is a great development, and a prime example of good brownfield redevelopment. It was just opening up as I was leaving Atlanta to come here. Although, it's a pretty far walk from the Arts Center MARTA Station, they do have great bus connections to the station, and it's in-town.

I think overcoming our bad reputation of corruption and incompetence starts with electing better, more serious, and more accountable leaders. We can't keep accepting mediocrity. Political leadership is where it starts.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

Greenbelt on October 9, 2013 at 3:51 pm

Thanks for another great article. Glad to have the issues out on the table for discussion.

Prince George's isn't the only problem. The State of Maryland is big into suburban highway-ization projects and has not prioritized walkability on state-owned streets. They're starting to talk the talk, but not yet walking the walk—rebuilt major state-owned arteries are still all about increasing speeds and adding car storage space.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

Solution Giver on October 9, 2013 at 4:30 pm

The picture does not show that the area is no longer economically productive enough to be maintained (your quoted definition of blight) because the picture shows buildings that appear to be well maintained. For instance, the grass is mowed, the drainage system appears sound, there is no evident exterior decay to the structures shown. There is no evidence of blight. If it were the case that the buildings were no longer economically justifiable to maintain than we would see a picture of buildings in a state of disrepair, wouldn't we? I don't see disrepair and therefore I cannot say that there is evidence of blight here.

Further, according to the definition you provided, the “majority” of buildings in an area must meet this standard of economic obsolescence. You are only showing two buildings and you are not even showing that they are not being maintained or repaired as needed.

Perhaps you have an argument to make but you aren't presenting very convincing evidence of blight.

These are, of course, not the most attractive buildings but if mere under-utilization and unattractiveness constitute blight than I guess blight is just a matter of personal opinion and I can find plenty of buildings that I think are ugly and under-utilize urban space. Take the Montrose Crossing shopping center, for example. It's ugly, underutilized urban space IMO. It's clearly an area I would call susceptible to change. It's certainly not blight, though.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

[Bradley Heard](#) on October 9, 2013 at 4:55 pm

@ Solution Giver,

There's no real need for us to quibble about the term blight. As you pointed out earlier, blight is a vague term and has been used to justify redevelopment in a variety of contexts. The point is that those buildings, and the larger Metro station area in general, are in need of reinvestment, redevelopment, and revitalization, so that the area can become a quality WalkUP.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

[Bradley Heard](#) on October 9, 2013 at 4:58 pm

@ Greenbelt: Totally agree about SHA. Jim Titus, Richard Layman, and I, among others, were talking about that in another thread.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

[Randy_UMDcp](#) on October 9, 2013 at 6:31 pm

I have not lived in Atlanta for over ten years, but I did grow up there and lived there for most of my first 33 years. One of the reasons I moved away the region's in ability to accept the need to incorporate the entire region to transit development. While its true Prince George's tries to maintain some of its roots to 20th century life of cars and suburban developments. This county does have a better handle on diversity issues (as does the whole DMV region) than does about half of the Atlanta metro population. I would be interested to read your take on this issue, specifically how transit development is often hindered by changing demographic issues. Whether it may be ideology, nostalgia, or just

plain irrational fears stoked by suburban politicians in Atlanta and many other cities mainly in the south.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

ArchStanton on October 9, 2013 at 6:34 pm

Bradley, you are definitely on a roll this week. Kudos to you.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

Bradley Heard on October 9, 2013 at 7:06 pm

@ Randy:

I think a lot of the Atlanta region's historic resistance to transit is just pure old Southern racism on the part of suburban counties (Cobb, Gwinnett, Clayton, Cherokee, etc.). When I was in college there in the 1990s, there were a lot of racial undertones to the negative ads against the referendum to expand MARTA outside of Fulton & DeKalb counties. Also, there's a little bit of an “anti-Atlanta” sentiment under the Georgia Dome, which makes proper state funding of MARTA a bit more difficult.

@ ArchStanton:

Thanks. I've had a little extra time thrust upon me since Congress won't let me do my day job right now. :-)

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

Solution Giver on October 9, 2013 at 7:23 pm

I get your point that you want redevelopment but I want to be precise about something, particularly because you're an attorney and you should be precise, because I think this label of blight confers a negative image of the area which may be very unfair to residents, and because blight typically has a specific legal significance in planning and this is a planning forum.

The fact that a building's current economic return has been outstripped by the potential of the land to make larger economic returns if redevelopment occurs does not mean the building produces an inadequate return to be maintained and to pay for all actual “fundamental” repairs so long as the building is under current ownership. It is often true that when land values increase the current owner has made a windfall in equity but the current owner may have relatively low ownership costs and can therefore continue to make all necessary repairs based on the building's existing revenue streams. The next owner of the land often must redevelop because the old building no longer produces an adequate

return to repay the investment given that the land has become more expensive. However, if we accept that all older buildings where the economic potential of the land has outpaced the building's current economic returns are blighted, then we 1) contradict your definition of the term and 2) expand the definition of blight to include perfectly good buildings that are well maintained and that are able to generate enough revenue to pay for maintenance and repairs. For instance, many older homes in Bethesda are torn down and redeveloped into McMansions because redevelopment is profitable, but that does not mean the prior building was not worth repairing. It merely means that an investor could make more money by redeveloping it and was willing to pay more for it than a private homeowner was willing to pay at the time that the house went up for sale. We would not call the original home blighted before the McMansion was built because the prior owner likely received adequate economic benefits (e.g. housing in Bethesda) to justify making any needed repairs. We could also find a commercial building in downtown Bethesda that sold at a price much higher than could be justified by the building's rental returns. That doesn't mean that building is contributing to blight in downtown Bethesda if a majority of buildings on a given block are of the same circumstance. Many buildings in downtown Bethesda are bought and sold as development companies and speculators attempt to capitalize on increases in land value without much regard for the building, which is under built for the neighborhood. But people don't come to GGW and post a picture of a building in downtown Bethesda and call it blight and say it is in need of redevelopment. The economic parallel is the same but the economic class is different as few people think Bethesda must be redeveloped because it is blighted.

Secondly, I don't see this issue as “quibbl(ing) about the term blight”. I see this as a legitimate question of whether the photo shows blight or whether it does not show blight. I see no evidence of a failure to maintain the property. I have no reason to believe the buildings can't continue to be adequately maintained based on the economic return of their current use under current ownership given what I see in the image. I see what appears to be apartments for less wealthy individuals. I recognize there are good reasons for redevelopment in that area, but I still think that the image appears to show a building is being maintained - the yard is mowed and there's no evident outward sign of disrepair. So there's no evidence that this is not producing an economic return adequate to cover repairs and maintenance; how is it blighted? Calling this blighted really does appear like you might simply be insensitive to the economic circumstances of less well off people who possibly can't afford housing that meets your standards for a metro station area. Perhaps you have pictures that show the blight and you want to post them? Anyway, I just really feel like the picture shows maintained but less affluent building stock, and therefore calling it blight does kind of suggest you are conflating less wealthy and blight, and that seems insensitive to me.

Thirdly, if you put one of those buildings near DTSS, where there are other buildings that look just like this, than people won't say it's blight because people are sensitive to the need for affordable housing in DTSS and because people are not trying to attempt a wholesale redevelopment of the DTSS station area.

Fourthly, I didn't point out that “blight is a vague term”. You are saying it is vague. I think it is not supposed to be vague. However, I am saying that if this is photographic evidence of blight than blight is a vague term and the definition of blight is subject to each individual's opinion. That's the point I was making.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

[ArchStanton](#) on October 9, 2013 at 9:02 pm

Solution Giver:

It is ONE picture of the area...and I don't think Bradley meant it to be the definitive “photographic evidence” to support the usage of the term blight. More than likely it was just a convenient image to grab when using Google Maps. I don't want to speak out of turn...

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

[Bradley Heard](#) on October 9, 2013 at 9:16 pm

@ ArchStanton:

Yes, you are correct. Solution Giver apparently disagrees that those particular buildings (and possibly the surrounding area) are blighted. That's fine. FWIW, the county (M-NCPPC, county council) also considers them blighted, and has considered them as such for well over a decade, so I don't think there's a real debate about that. But yeah, the picture was merely intended to be illustrative of the larger point that most of our county's 15 Metro stations are *not* walkable urban places, and that we have a lot of work to do in that regard.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

[Richard Layman](#) on October 9, 2013 at 9:26 pm

I do agree with Solution Giver about the word blight, which in historical terms, associated with urban renewal, has a very specific meaning, which provided the legal justification for eminent domain, land clearance, etc. (When I write about this, I call it something like “the language of revitalization.” The real issue is under- or dis-investment. The solution to under or disinvestment is investment, not necessarily eminent domain and land clearance.)

In the presentation last week at UMD on Langley Park/Takoma Crossroads, one person commented that while the area looks underinvested, the reality is that the buildings are mostly 100% leased—true for both commercial and multiunit apartments. And that this provides little reason for property owners to do much more than milk the properties and not “fix them up.”

That could be what's going on at Addison Road, although the issue with PG is complicated. THERE IS A LOT OF LAND in the county, and not enough demand to make it all over like Columbia Heights. Not in my lifetime and probably not in your lifetime.

And while Prince George's Plaza station might be the closest, there aren't any good examples (and that one is a marginal one because while it is built up the urban design qualities are wanting) of TOD at stations that could be defined as WalkUP.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

[Bradley Heard](#) on October 9, 2013 at 11:01 pm

@ Richard:

I think one of the main hindrances at Addison Road and many of the other Metro stations is that they lack the basic infrastructure and design to be walkable. The county will need to make significant investment of public money in these areas to make them TOD-ready. The private sector isn't going to do that. I'm talking about basic building block stuff like street gridding and reconfiguration, utility relocation and burial, ped and bike improvements, etc. Once you have a walkable neighborhood design, then you can work on assembling and redeveloping the land.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

[Rain17](#) on October 10, 2013 at 12:03 am

What I don't get about PG County is why it has never really supported Metro of public transportation to the extent that its suburban neighbors have. For example, in nearby Montgomery County, there is relatively decent bus service in the major corridors, such as Bethesda, Friendship Heights, Gaithersburg, Germantown, Kensington, Rockville, Silver Spring, and Wheaton. The waiting time for most buses is no more than 30 minutes,. Montgomery County has also Metro service that goes deep into the county. It goes all the way to Shady Grove.

The only criticism that I ever had with Montgomery County's public transportation system was with its local bus system, Ride-On. Ride-On is great during the week and runs frequently. However, on the weekends, some of the routes stop running pretty early around 6 or 7 PM, especially the ones that

serve Gaithersburg, Germantown, Lakeforest Mall, Montgomery Village, and Shady Grove. And those schedules work well for the proverbial grandmother who gets up at 8 or 9 AM, goes shopping, and is done with her errands by the late afternoon/early evening. But for those who want to go out, who want to go out in the evening, see a movie, or do anything else at night, it doesn't work. And for those who want to commute from those parts of Montgomery County to DC nightlife spots it definitely doesn't work.

But in PG County local public transportation sucks. Their version of Ride-On, the Bus, doesn't even run on weekends. The Metrobus service that does exist there only runs once per hour. On the weekends some routes run only once every 90 minutes. Most of the routes stop running in the late afternoon/early evening. Metro doesn't really go that far into the county beyond the Beltway. For whatever reason, when Montgomery County chose to embrace Metro and public transportation, PG County did not.

And the recent development of National Harbor follows that same theme. With the slight exception of ferries that connect to Alexandria there is no decent public transportation service. There is no subway station nearby to the development. Maybe the Anacostia Streetcar will eventually go there, but that is still probably at least 10-20 years away, if not longer.

Yes racism has admittedly been a factor in why some higher-end retail chains, except for Wegmans and the restaurants and Stores at National Harbor, have ignored PG County. But the other reality is that the county lacks decent public transportation, has a poor school system, and a corrupt local government.

As for Atlanta, though, I'm not sure that it is the best example to follow. Yes it has MARTA inside its borders and to some of the close-in suburbs in Clayton, DeKalb, and Fulton counties. Yes MARTA goes to Hartsfield International Airport. But, beyond that, there is no decent public transportation in the Atlanta Metropolitan area. In the exurbs and suburbs, which have resoundingly rejected MARTA every time it has come up to a vote (although admittedly, when it came up for a vote in the mid 2000s, the rejection rate had fallen to 53%), there is no public transportation. State legislators from exurban and suburban Atlanta are extremely hostile to rail transportation. I don't see what PG County could "learn" from Atlanta.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

[*Richard Layman*](#) on October 10, 2013 at 7:43 am

Bradley—this is a real problem in PG County and Baltimore County. I can't speak about PGC officials, but I have some experience in BC.

In BC, they do community planning differently, the various residential districts group in multiple districts organizations and they initiate community planning processes, in association with the planning office.

One of the districts abuts Baltimore and has some light rail stations. The area by the Falls Road station is part industrial, and some multiunit. But the Baltimore light rail is pretty much unleveraged.

Shockingly, the residential planning group called for dealing with the industrial use (eventually it would have to move out) and replatting the area, putting in a street grid, etc.

I was in a meeting with them and said it would never happen without the road infrastructure being built first and that would have to be done by the county.

Maryland has very few instances of TIF projects and Baltimore County might not have any. Another person from the ec. dev. dept. said some not very intelligent things (about grants under \$10K for facades spurring additional investment and maintaining industrially zoned land is county policy, even though the county has far too much industrially zoned land in terms of how industry is organized today) and I was critical. Too bad for the county she is now the planning director...

Anyway, you are absolutely right that those spaces have to be “reproduced” (in the argot of sociologists) to be able to become walkable-urban in the WalkUP sense. And that is usually done through TIF initiatives and planning (cf. White Flint, although there the initiative has come from the private sector because they see the financial value).

I don't think PGC gets that either.

Plus as Rain17 pointed out, PGC doesn't really get transit.

My presentation on planning transit in terms of subnetworks is something that I've wanted to do in PGC for a long time.

<http://urbanplacesandspaces.blogspot.com/2010/07/metropolitan-mass-transit-planning.html>

Related to both ought to be an initiative by UMD planning and other stakeholders about why PG Plaza land use doesn't really work from the TOD standpoint.

Or your group could do a conference.

Blog entries of mine on this topic are here:

<http://urbanplacesandspaces.blogspot.com/search?q=prince+george%27s+second+chance>

some of the cites within you might want to look into.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

[Richard Layman](#) on October 10, 2013 at 7:46 am

the point of a conference on PG Plaza would be to learn from it (instead of “Learning from Las Vegas” it would be “Learning from PG Plaza”) and resetting the planning land use and transportation paradigm.

In 2007 I was sitting in on a course at UMD on transportation and land use and my class paper was on creating a truly integrated transportation and land use planning paradigm for DC.

That kind of (even more) definitive paper needs to be done on PGC.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

[Rich](#) on October 10, 2013 at 10:10 am

Atlanta is a funny choice for anything and probably the most hype ridden of the hype ridden sunbelt cities.

Atlantic Station is a terrible role mode—an IKEA and a an underperforming mall full of chain restaurants across the street from townhouses that wthat front onto narrow sidewalks along streets with busy traffic. There's no pedestrian life and it's cutoff from the livlier Midtown section by freeway.

The promised mixed use development around Lindberg Station was a major failure. The primary tenant, Bell South, was acquired and never fulfilled its promise as an anchor. The retail space was poorly located and never filled. The 1950s plaza across the street with mostly local businesses was redeveloped as a typically generic Atlanta big box complex and the next proposed development in the area may be a Wal-Mart, whith little pretense of integration with the area landscape. Affordable housing was bulldozed for condos just as the market was beginning to crater.

The one really creative idea from Atlanta is the Beltline, which is taking advantage of largely disused rail right of way to reshape areas that already have some density—interwar and early post-WWII developed areas, some of which are largely gentrified. It now has trails in the areas with most immediate promise

and may one day (and it's a big “may”) have light rail. The Beltline is sparking new development, but some of it is the same old thing like a proposed Wal-Mart anchored shopping center in the middle of a relatively dense neighborhood. So even the Beltline is a mixed bag and isn't restoring Atlanta from the past. Atlanta's celebrated redevelopment of the East Lake housing project is attractive but relatively isolated and carbound despite the inclusion of a Y and a charter school and has attracted little in the way of retail. Atlanta's walking neighborhoods often have surprisingly little retail (Grant Park, East Lake) or attract restaurants but not more useful businesses (e.g., Kirk, where I lived for several years).

The Atlanta area has had some redevelopment of old satellite town downtowns with varying success—Decatur has restaurants but little else. Marietta has a bit more. Tucker is trying but doesn't have a whole lot to work with. Only Decatur has mass transit and it's poorly integrated into the downtown which suffers from remnants of 1960s urban renewal.

PG is usually compared with DeKalb County which has the same kind of roots (a few black towns in a mostly working class suburban area that grew rapidly after WWII, suffered white flight and always has been corrupt and developer friendly). DeKalb has had a few novel ideas and one of them was stymied in court by Wal-Mart. Unlike PG, it has some fairly wealthy areas and has benefited from gentrification of “Intown Atlanta” (which includes the small part of Atlanta proper in DeKalb and inner suburban areas like Decatur) and has draws like Emory University and CDC. As mentioned Decatur is a limited success and the Emory's neighbors have fought rail and despite a small retail strip, the university is effectively isolated from anything else. PG has much more potential for TOD than DeKalb or any part of suburban Atlanta. Places with commuter rail in the NY or Chicago areas may be more useful role models, and PG might find common cause with towns in those regions with substantial African American middle classes that have struggled to attract new development or business that their area's affluence should be able support.

Atlanta, OTOH, is a place of civic failure, hype and projects that are more cautionary than aspirational. The Beltline may have some commonality with the Metropolitan trail, but its ability to attract Wal-Marts and not a lot of creative new development in disused places limits its applicability.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

cefer66 on October 10, 2013 at 10:43 am

“I think overcoming our bad reputation of corruption and incompetence starts with electing better, more serious, and more accountable leaders. We can't keep accepting mediocrity. Political leadership is where it starts.”

I fully agree.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

Tina on October 10, 2013 at 10:52 am

I agree too. That's why I think any projects planned under the Jackson admin should have their permits revoked and made to undergo a review.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

ceef66 on October 10, 2013 at 11:01 am

@ Rain17,

You're spot-on about MARTA's limited service area and the history of resistance and hostility to extending MARTA rail further out into Cobb, Gwinnett, etc. as well as the reasons why.

But if I correctly understood Bradley's post, I don't think he's saying Prince Georges should use Atlanta as a whole as a benchmark. I think he's pointing out what Atlanta has been able to accomplish in many of the areas that already have good MARTA access and he's arguing that Prince Georges could learn a lot from Atlanta in that respect.

I happen to agree. Prince Georges has barely even begun to maximize the potential of its Metro stations. In fact, when you compare what PG has historically done with its Metro stations to what's been done (and is still being done) in Montgomery and Arlington, you have to agree that PG is letting an opportunity go to waste.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

ceef66 on October 10, 2013 at 11:11 am

“I agree too. That's why I think any projects planned under the Jackson admin should have their permits revoked and made to undergo a review.”

Tina, I think you mean the Jack Johnson administration. I'm no attorney, but I would guess that some of those contracts are iron-clad and couldn't be torn up if the current administration wanted to.

Here's a bit of trivia regarding Johnson. Even after being convicted, Johnson was hanging out at the Largo Starbucks BS-ing and joking as if nothing had happened - up until a few days before he had to surrender for prison. The guy had no shame.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

rick on October 10, 2013 at 11:32 am

Very interesting article. However Atlanta unlike PG county, Atlanta has the existence of multiple interstate highways that are between 10 and 14 lanes wide. When I visited Atlanta recently their trains were no where near as crowded as the trains in the dc area, Boston area, Philly area, or the Bay area. Atlanta still feels like a baby Los Angeles.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

Now aint that interesting on October 10, 2013 at 12:01 pm

[This comment has been deleted for violating the [comment policy](#).]

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

BTA on October 10, 2013 at 12:35 pm

Tysons is outside of DC but its right outside of Arlington which is more DC-like than Suburban in practice so Tysons is more comparable to Largo or Greenbelt than further out in the County.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

Rick on October 10, 2013 at 12:56 pm

However Reston, Fair Oaks, Sterling, and Ashburn are outside of the Beltway and is currently or in the plans of extending train service out there to accommodate the large population....

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

[Richard Layman](#) on October 10, 2013 at 1:22 pm

While PGC already defines the rural tier of the county and the urban tier, they could look to Baltimore County for a marginally better example. Baltimore County's Urban Rural Demarcation Line sets the land use purposes very clearly between urban, basically within the Baltimore Beltway and rural.

It's subject to change sure, but they control development by only allowing “city water and sewer” within the urban section of the URDL.

That being said, Baltimore County has exactly the same problem as PGC in that it has way more land than capacity, and has less transit service/stations than PGC and dissipates focus by trying to grow Owings Mills and White Marsh and Towson.

Towson could be great, but without a focus on high quality urban design it will never get up to its potential. The reason so much subsidy for “TOD” is needed in Owings Mills is because there isn't demand. White Marsh doesn't have rail-based transit service...

PGC probably needs at least a three gradation scale for urbanism + one for rural, and needs to reset its planning approvals accordingly.

But the pressure by developers and the land use bar would be intense and the change wouldn't be likely to happen.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

[AWalkerInTheCity](#) on October 10, 2013 at 1:37 pm

“However Reston, Fair Oaks, Sterling, and Ashburn are outside of the Beltway and is currently or in the plans of extending train service out there to accommodate the large population.... “

The Silver Line phase 2 was controversial, and with reason. While I think, on balance, it was better to build it than not, the fact that its retrofitting into existing distant development means the payback is much less than it should be. Note also, Fair Oaks is NOT on the silver line, and may never get rail transit.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

[Rick](#) on October 10, 2013 at 1:49 pm

[AWalkerInTheCity](#), if and when the Orange line is extended it will serve Fair Oaks and Centreville....

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

[AWalkerInTheCity](#) on October 10, 2013 at 1:51 pm

and if its not extended, it will not serve Fair Oaks. given that the study, from what I understand is looking at HOT lanes, HOV lanes, BRT, etc as well, it seems quite possible they will decide against an Orange line extension.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

[Rick](#) on October 10, 2013 at 2:45 pm

@AWalkerInTheCity, either way the I-66/US 50/29 corridor will continue development with or without transit.

REPLY LINK REPORT

AWalkerInTheCity on October 10, 2013 at 3:00 pm

Its not clear that the Fairfax part of that corridor will develop further without transit.

as for PWC, it almost certainly should not develop further in that area.

Whats your point? That some NoVa jurisdictions are allowing sprawl? I think we know that.

REPLY LINK REPORT

Solution Giver on October 10, 2013 at 3:04 pm

I reiterate what I said before: It's not that I think the area is definitely not blighted; however, I am saying the image doesn't convey blight but instead appears to convey a decently maintained lower income rental building. Look at the foreground building carefully and there is evidence it is maintained and repaired. I can see from Google maps that the other building has issues, but the image isn't the right image for your caption. Your caption says, "Blighted conditions ..." and your image doesn't illustrate those conditions. Better to have a caption explaining the area was designated blighted and also better to put some context in the post regarding the designation.

Having said all that, my point before was that the caption seems to suggest the building in the front has blighted conditions, but it doesn't exhibit those attributes and I would revise this post to be sensitive to what you might be inadvertently conveying. So I think the caption and the image kind of send an unwelcome message that lower income buildings are a problem, even if that was not your intent.

REPLY LINK REPORT

Burd on October 11, 2013 at 2:59 pm

@Solution Giver

"Can someone explain where the blight is in this photo of Addison Road Station? It's not fancy but it looks like a far cry from blight."

If you look closely, you can see the boarded up second-storey windows on the building at left. But the first floor appears to be occupied. But I agree that it's

quite a stretch for Bradley Heard to say “blighted conditions...at Addison Road...”

@ceefer66

“I would love to see something like Atlantic Station go up at a location like New Carrollton (what a wasteland!)”

New Carrollton station is in the middle of a business park, across from the IRS Financial Services Ctr. How is that a “wasteland”?? Sure, it could be more dense, but it's definitely not as isolated as Franconia-Springfield or Shady Grove stations!

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

ceefer66 on October 11, 2013 at 6:45 pm

@Burd,

I say the New Carrollton is a “wasteland” because the sidewalks roll up at 6:00.

And it's not just that. There's nothing there besides the office parks and one barely mid-grade hotel.

I've worked at the IRS complex. Except for the on-site cafeteria, there is hardly even a place to go for lunch.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

The Last Democrat in Georgia on October 12, 2013 at 4:46 am

Prince George's County, Maryland = DeKalb County, Georgia

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

Burd on October 12, 2013 at 4:33 pm

@ceefer66

“There's nothing there besides the office parks and one barely mid-grade hotel.”

Exactly. It's surrounded by a suburban business park. Just because it isn't like Bethesda, Silver Spring or Clarendon, does not make it a “wasteland.” But the area around New Carrollton Sta is much better than other end-of-line stations like Franconia-Springfield or Shady Grove.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

Burd on October 12, 2013 at 5:39 pm

@ Rich

“Atlantic Station is a terrible role model—an IKEA and a an underperforming mall full of chain restaurants across the street from townhouses that wthats front onto narrow sidewalks along streets with busy traffic. There's no pedestrian life and it's cutoff from the livelier Midtown section by freeway.”

Great point. Atlantic Station is just a suburban town center in the middle of a major city. Not a good model at all.

“Unlike PG, it has a some fairly wealthy areas “

Unlike PG? PG is much wealthier overall than DeKalb, and has several CDPs with median household incomes of \$100k+. You'd be hard pressed to find any CDPs in DeKalb that are nearly as wealthy.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

Dbeezer on October 12, 2013 at 6:13 pm

This article is very misleading...I just recently relocated to Atlanta from Prince George's county for work. Atlanta although one of the most progressive metro areas in the South, is strip mall HEAVEN. I have been to every suburban corner surrounding 285 and I-85. All I noticed are countless and endless one lane winding roads connect one strip mall to the next. There is poor road configuration and a major upgrade is necessary here to improve the traffic woes in Atlanta. PG does NOT I repeat NOT have as many one lane country roads as there are in ATL.

The issue here is we are comparing a suburban county in Prince George's with the city proper of Atlanta. Because outside of that city proper Atlanta is downright country. I have seen no such edge suburbs in the entire Atlanta metro that PG should be modeling themselves after. Prince George's is levels beyond DeKalb in terms of development at this stage so to compare the two is naive. The only thing similar about PG and DeKalb is they both have a large black populace to the East of each major city.

PG by itself has four different Metro lines where at some point future development will be based around it. Atlanta has 4 Marta lines in their whole metro area. Marta literally is like the train to nowhere. The Beltline will be great for Atlanta and Atlantic Station is a good fill in development, but that is it. PG

should be looking to their neighboring jurisdictions in the DC metro area for TOD development examples, not this suburban sprawlville Atlanta.

Remember this isn't even apples to apples. Instead of comparing edge suburbs the article is comparing PG County to a major city.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

atler8 on October 12, 2013 at 8:41 pm

I see a lot of misunderstanding among the reader comments as to why Bradley Heard has chosen metro Atlanta for a comparative source of ideas that Prince George County could emulate for smart growth. Much of the misunderstanding seems to be rooted in a sort of defensive blow-back given Atlanta's long-standing reputation for poor planning & the resultant sprawl & bad traffic.

Unfortunately, some of the posturing in many comments is more strident, ill-informed or even rude the further out in time they are from the date when the publication of the article occurred. It's almost as if some readers have completely missed the point the author was trying to make or that they never read & comprehended it well in the first place or simply forgot it.

So, my dear metro Washingtonians: Please reread the facts laid out in the opening paragraphs that told of the sea change that has occurred in metro Atlanta development to the extent that in the last several years the vast majority of new developments are occurring in the new style smart, walkable/denser styles of projects that are near transit links & more pedestrian friendly. Much of that growth can be considered as “infill” development

Given the strident nature of some of the readers responses toward learning anything from metro Atlanta, they would apparently be amazed to find that it is the consumer demand in metro Atlanta that is driving the market place into that direction.

A reader comment error that was repeated more than once claims that there is no mass transit other than that provided by MARTA in metro Atlanta & makes much of the fact that various suburban counties have rejected it.

MARTA serves the 1st & 3rd most populous counties while the 2nd & 4th largest counties have their own independent transit systems of bus routes most of which feed into MARTA stations. Collectively those counties have a population of well over 3,000,000 people.

And finally, there is a state run commuter express bus system overlaying metro Atlanta that serves approximately 9 counties & which provides express bus service to far-flung areas, many of which do not have any other source of transit beyond the automobile.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

atler8 on October 12, 2013 at 8:54 pm

By the way, if the 2nd building in the article-accompanying photo isn't the definition of blight, with it's boarded up windows & doors on the ground & first floors, I don't know what it is. Stop quibbling over the finer details of what is and isn't blight & instead focus on what can be done to improve the area, given the potential with Metrorail at it's doorstep.

The fact that the photo typifies the street scape in Prince George on Addison near a Metrorail station is telling that there is a need for using the rail system as a catalyst for redevelopment & smart growth in declining areas near the rail system.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

[Bradley Heard](#) on October 12, 2013 at 9:14 pm

@ alter8:

+1, and +1.

@ Rich:

Atlantic Station is just a suburban town center in the middle of a major city. Not a good model at all.

Actually, Atlantic Station is a pretty good role model. It's a highly successful compact, mixed-use walkable urban place—with offices, hotels, retail, and residences, *and* unobtrusive structured parking. Atlantic Station redeveloped an unsightly and unproductive brownfield in the middle of Midtown Atlanta. While it is not within the traditional 1/2 mile pedestrian shed of MARTA, it is only 1 mile from MARTA's Arts Center Station—a 20-minute walk along very well-lit, active streets. That's the same distance and a better walk than from Morgan Boulevard Metro Station to FedEx Field in Landover. Also, Atlantic Station is transit-oriented. There is a [free shuttle bus](#) that runs in dedicated bus-only lanes every 15 minutes from Atlantic Station to Arts Center MARTA Station.

In other words, Atlantic Station is pretty much the polar opposite of most suburban town centers in PGC, like Bowie Town Center, which are greenfield developments, unconnected with transit, with little office or residential development.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

Burd on October 12, 2013 at 9:49 pm

@Bradley Heard

Oh please...it's unarguably a car-oriented, suburban town center, but worse, it's in the middle of a major city. Above-ground parking garages and uncovered surface parking lots abound...similar to National Harbour.

And you're right to point out that it's not adjacent to any Marta train station, so I'm not even sure why it's relevant to the concept of "smart growth" around PG's Metro stations. If you're going to make an exception to include developments that are 1 mile from rail stations, then consider that that Largo Station has all the amenities that Atlantic Station has within a 1-mile radius.

REPLY LINK REPORT

Bradley Heard on October 12, 2013 at 10:30 pm

@ Burd:

Atlantic Station does have plentiful parking, but most of it is structured and underground. The overall layout of Atlantic Station is pedestrian-oriented, and it has a direct and frequent bus link to a nearby MARTA station on dedicated lanes - thus making it legitimately transit-oriented. It's also a brownfield redevelopment and reuse, which is a form of smart growth in and of itself.

National Harbor is like AS only in its walkable layout. But unlike AS, NH is more than 5 miles from Metro, lacks frequent bus connections, and was a greenfield development and not a brownfield reuse.

Likewise, the existing development around Largo Town Center is not like AS. It's automobile oriented, predominated with surface parking, is not walkable, has no frequent bus connections linking the nearby office parks to Metro, and is generally not even mixed-use (except for the Boulevard, and even that lacks residential uses).

REPLY LINK REPORT

Matt on October 13, 2013 at 6:25 am

Thanks Bradley for the great article and for dispelling some of the myths and misunderstandings presented in the comments. Lots of people seem to have trouble discerning between Atlanta's existing development and what is being developed *now*, which is what we're talking about here. I had to stop reading the comments when someone said Decatur's transit link is poorly integrated into downtown — Decatur has the best MARTA station and transit-oriented development of any place in DeKalb county, and one of the best in the whole sys-

tem. Atlantic Station is FAR from suburban, as you said being a redevelopment of a former industrial site. It's a lot easier to criticize than it is to educate one-self though so no surprise about the comments.

REPLY LINK REPORT

atler8 on October 13, 2013 at 9:03 am

I might point out that much of the trashing of Atlanta's Atlantic Station is off-base due to inaccuracies mentioned here. It is not a suburban style mall plunked down in the middle of the city. Far from it, & a person who had spent any measure of time walking through the complex would know that to be the case.

There are a minimum of row townhouse units that are separated off to the south & at a lower elevation away from the busier streets & the retail area. They do not at all immediately front on the most major traffic-bearing streets much less immediately face the retail component.

Most of the residential population resides either in high rise towers, or in loft & apartment spaces in the stories found above the street level retail & restaurant businesses.

Yet another major component of housing is found in low rise apartment buildings and condos that lay along & on streets off of a winding major street that also includes green space & water.

The IKEA store is the only retail that has above ground parking of note but that is primarily for a pick up & delivery area to serve consumers retrieving purchases & for deliveries to the store. 90% of the IKEA parking spaces are below ground in their own deck.

Other than that, there really is no surface street parking as in terms of parking lots in the retail district which is basically laid out more like an old fashioned town shopping area with out door sidewalks & streets & a central plaza area. There is however, some measure of curbside parking to be found.

Furthermore, when Atlantic Station was built, a transit station was added in where the Beltline is proposed to come through and connect with it on the northern section of that system. In the meantime, for non automotive access, it is a half mile walk to the nearest MARTA station or easily connected to via a very frequent shuttle bus service that operates from the nearest MARTA station.

In terms of pedestrian activity, the main east to west street is a long & winding street & is always seen in use by runners & walkers & in the densest area of the retail component, the streets are used by the people who live up above the

ground level in the multi-story retail structures.

And finally, as regards the nature of the Beltline & the type of development it has & is sparking, there have been inaccuracies posted here by readers.

Walmart is desperate to get in & was not sought out or courted by Atlantans or needed by the Beltline to make it a success. In fact, there is much resistance to the caving from the master plan that the zoning board recently did that would allow Walmart to build near the Beltline. The big box type of store is not what the Beltline was originally conceptualized as nor is presently about hence the stiff resistance to Walmart's plans. I assume that there will be a court case over the controversy.

But for the claims found here that the Beltline is doing little more really than attracting “..Walmarts...” as was basically insinuated, is to grossly mischaracterize the nature of what the Beltline is already doing & will be doing.

I am rather disappointed at the degree of misinformation that is finding it's way into the comments section for the original article.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

Burd on October 15, 2013 at 12:12 pm

@Bradley Heard

“...but most of it is structured and underground. The overall layout of Atlantic Station is pedestrian-oriented, and it has a direct and frequent bus link to a nearby MARTA station on dedicated lanes - thus making it legitimately transit-oriented. “

Dude, I saw multiple open parking lots and above-ground parking garages. No, it's not a model development for any center city, perhaps a model for an edge city like Silver Spring.

And sidewalks and buses don't make a development “legitimately pedestrian-oriented.” Perhaps pedestrian-friendly.

“Likewise, the existing development around Largo Town Center is not like AS. “

Didn't say it was. I said it was like National Harbor. I said Largo Station has similar amenities within a 1-mile radius. LTC has a station, frequent bus lines, sidewalks, movie theater, big box retail, offices, condos, townhomes, etc. all within 1 mile just like Atlantic Station.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

[Bradley Heard](#) on October 15, 2013 at 12:37 pm

@ Burd:

What can I say? You're apparently seeing parking lots that no one else sees. Every time I've entered a parking garage at AS, I've had to take escalators up to street level—which is what is depicted in the link I supplied earlier.

NH, otoh, does have above-ground decks, but they are [mid-block on side streets](#).

REPLY LINK REPORT

[Burd](#) on October 16, 2013 at 9:14 am

@ Bradley

“You're apparently seeing parking lots that no one else sees.”

Or perhaps you just didn't see them. Open air parking lots are on Market St between 16th and 17th, and Market and 20th, and State St between 17th and 18th, and next to Ikea, and next to Target...

Above-ground garages are all over, including next to the movie theatre and attached to some high-rise condos

REPLY LINK REPORT

[Bradley Heard](#) on October 16, 2013 at 5:01 pm

@ Burd:

Okay. You don't think Atlantic Station is urban. I get it. Here's [the map](#). We'll just leave it there and let people come to their own conclusions.

REPLY LINK REPORT

[Burd](#) on October 17, 2013 at 11:11 am

@ Bradley Heard

Obviously I've seen the map since I pointed out the exact locations of the open-air parking lots and above-ground garages...and the map's satellite view shows them clearly for all to see. Again, it's a great project for Silver Spring or Tyson's Corner...but a waste of space for any center city.

REPLY LINK REPORT

[Matt Johnson](#) on October 17, 2013 at 11:28 am

@Burd:

I guess you are unaware of the Atlantic Station Master Plan.

The large “surface” lots on the east and west sides of Market between 16th and 17th are “holes” for future buildings.

If you look along the North side of 17th Street, you can see a “hole” on the block surrounded by 17th, Atlantic, 17th 1/2, and the unnamed divided street.

All of the other high-rises in Atlantic Station except for the Wells Fargo building were originally just holes. But since Atlantic Station opened in 2005, several new buildings have been developed in those holes (which used to be that god-awful surface parking). As the market develops, new buildings will be constructed in those holes.

The surface lot northeast of Market and Tower is also future development.

So, sure. Surface parking is anti-urban. But so are vacant lots. These are not permanent parking lots. They're just spaces that were paved until things are developed there.

The only non-temporary surface parking at Atlantic Station is the *tiny* surface lot next to Target (a typical CVS has more parking than that) and the surface lot far, far from the urban part of Atlantic Station at the Ikea.

The large paved area north of 20th Street is not a parking lot. It's a paved area that they use for events like Cirque de Soleil.

So, yes. There's surface parking. Yes, there's lots of structured parking. But that doesn't make Atlantic Station anti-urban.

In fact, you probably have no idea how transformational Atlantic Station was for the region. Before Atlantic Station opened, nobody and I mean nobody, was seriously talking about building walkable places.

After Atlantic Station opened, developers all over the region wouldn't shut up about it.

I lived in the neighborhood just south of Atlantic Station when it opened. Suddenly, I could walk to a grocery store and restaurants. Lots of people do in fact walk (or take the shuttle).

But what is really most telling is that people drive 40 miles down from Gwinnett County and Forsyth County so that they can *walk* to the movie theater. Now granted, they're walking from their car. But they pass 4 or 5 other movie theaters showing the same movie just so they can have the *experience* of seeing a movie in an urban place. Something they cannot do in upper Gwinnett.

That's why Atlantic Station was so transformational.

Is it perfect? No. But it was Atlanta's very first attempt at anything remotely like this. And it turned out pretty darn well for a first try.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)

Burd on October 22, 2013 at 12:17 pm

@ Matt Johnson

“In fact, you probably have no idea how transformational Atlantic Station was for the region. “

That's not a fact, actually. I've been to Atlanta many times, and AGAIN, I never said this was not a good development. My point is that it's not appropriate for its location in central Atlanta. It's my opinion, which happens to be contrary to yours, but no I don't think townhomes, surface parking lots, above ground parking garages, and big box retailers without development above them, should have been built in that location.

“The large paved area north of 20th Street is not a parking lot. It's a paved area that they use for events like Cirque de Soleil.”

It's also used for parking, btw, and no I don't think it's an appropriate use of land for that location.

[REPLY](#) [LINK](#) [REPORT](#)



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