

## Increasing Uncertainty in Vine City

KEVIN MOORE

Auburn University

This paper will present a history of the changing urban fabric of Vine City, Atlanta, noting connections to larger political and economic changes in the city. It will extend an understanding of how local change, tied to unpredictable forces outside of any neighborhood, could be embraced as an architectural strategy of increasing uncertainty.

Vine City is an historic African-American neighborhood in Atlanta with a strong local identity. Among its many cultural assets are nearby Spelman and Morehouse Colleges, Clark Atlanta University and Washington Park, the first park in Atlanta open to African-Americans. This neighborhood of large trees and distinct houses is punctuated with landmarks but also with shuttered properties and vacant lots. 78% of housing units are renter-occupied, and house values are almost a third of the value in the rest of Atlanta.<sup>1</sup> This poverty is long-standing.

The challenges and prospects of Vine City have been tied to larger political and economic changes. Over time, property has been pieced into larger and larger developments such as Eagan Homes and the Georgia World Congress Center. Similar to the large-scale residential projects Dana Cuff details in her history of L.A., *The Provisional City*, pockets of Vine City are now “convulsive.” In these areas, change is more volatile both in space and time. In fact, Vine City is fascinatingly unpredictable but resilient. Recently, the subprime mortgage crisis stifled investor activity betting on its immediate proximity to downtown and two rapid-transit stops. The neighborhood is poised for change, but the future is uncertain.

Now, a “community incubator” at the Ashby MARTA stop is the subject of a national student design competition. For such a project, change is built in; it’s the goal. If successful or not, an incubator will inhabit a new context and should hopefully adapt to new demands. As a largescale development, however, the challenge may be to conceive of an architecture that is more resilient by increasing uncertainty. Rather than appeal to the complete or provisional, an uncertain architecture would be comfortable with and confident in an unpredictable future. In this case, iterative design procedures would refine a scheme by approaching multiple possible scenarios. Paradoxically, uncertainty in the design process attempts to create a building of poise, one that affords options in the future to add value over time.<sup>2</sup>

### A LOCAL HISTORY OF GLOBAL CONCERNS

The Vine City neighborhood is west of downtown Atlanta. It is best known for the historic colleges immediately to the south including Atlanta University (1865), Spelman College (1881), Morehouse College (1867) and Morris Brown College (1881). These iconic institutions were established on high ground starting in 1867.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the neighborhood was forged out of the advantages of high ground. During the Civil War, Sherman bombarded Atlanta from a ridge west of the city. “Diamond Hill” was the Confederate line, and Atlanta University was quite literally built on the ruins of a defeated Confederacy. The colleges were the center of a burgeoning African-American elite, and they occupied this high ground both physically and symbolically.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, the working class neighborhood of Vine City occupied flood-prone bottomlands:

"Behind Atlanta University on the north was a similar section, known as 'Vine City' or 'Mechanicsville,' where slums, dumps, hovels, crime, and want prevailed."<sup>5</sup> The history, however, is more fascinating than this lowly description suggests.

### Segregation And Expansion

Following the crisis of the 1906 Atlanta Race Riot, strict color lines were enforced through the threat of violence.<sup>6</sup> Established African-American neighborhoods such as Vine City and Auburn Avenue became tight housing markets. This encouraged substandard housing on poor land but also created a diverse and active African-American community. In response to the riots, Lugenia Hope<sup>7</sup> created the Neighborhood Union and "brought women from Atlanta's west side together across class lines to provide many of the social services city officials denied to black neighborhoods."<sup>8</sup> Pioneering entrepreneurs such as Alonzo Herndon extended the work of benevolent societies by founding the Atlanta Life Insurance Company. By 1915, he was also the largest African-American property owner in Atlanta. Most of these properties, including his own home, were in Vine City.<sup>9</sup>

As a result of segregation and a severe housing shortage following World War I, Vine City became a predominately African-American working class neighborhood by 1925.<sup>10</sup> The Great Atlanta Fire of 1917 destroyed large sections of the Auburn Avenue district, further increasing demand for housing on the west side. In response, Heman Perry developed the area immediately west of Ashby into the suburb of Washington Park. A peer of Alonzo Herndon, Perry launched a financial empire in 1913 starting with the Standard Life Insurance Company of Atlanta. His collection of companies provided insurance, banking and modern housing to the African-American community, all without support from white investors. Perry handled real estate and construction for Washington Park, offering bungalows with indoor plumbing and electricity to the African-American professional and middle-class.<sup>11</sup>

Perry also secured services not available in other African-American neighborhoods. In 1919, he deeded two parcels of his investment property to the city to create Washington Park, the only public park in Atlanta open to African-Americans, and Booker T. Washington High School, the city's first public African-American high school. This expan-

sion west including public services was tacit agreement from white officials to cede areas west of Vine City.<sup>12</sup> By 1922, a racial zoning ordinance further enforced these color lines. By 1930, Ward 1 including Vine City and Washington Park housed the largest African-American population in Atlanta; only 3.8 percent were white.<sup>13</sup>

Although racially stratified, the west side was socially diverse. The Atlanta University Center, Washington Park and Vine City are all within blocks. The area also helped launch an unprecedented expansion of African-American suburbs to the west from 1945 to 1960.<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, as middle and upper class African-Americans moved to suburbs, property in Vine City shifted from homeowners to absentee landlords.<sup>15</sup> This helps explain the poverty that alarmed Martin Luther King, Jr. when he moved to Vine City in 1967.

### Slum Clearance

The drastic crisis of the Great Depression resulted in an equally drastic national housing policy. Beginning in 1933, the Public Works Administration began funding slum clearance as a way to create jobs and provide modern public housing. In Atlanta, federal policy financed a wholesale disruption of established communities. African-American "slums" adjacent to city institutions such as the State Capitol and the Georgia Institute of Technology were demolished and replaced with public housing for whites.<sup>16</sup> This uprooted entire neighborhoods, further isolating African-American communities and exacerbating a severe housing shortage during the height of the Depression. Additional "slums" were cleared for African-American public housing, but again, entire neighborhoods were disrupted and replaced with fewer units of new housing. Atlanta adopted New Deal housing policy early and aggressively. By the end of World War II, Atlanta had completed more public housing per capita than any other American city. A full 20 percent of Atlanta's African-American population had been displaced.<sup>17</sup> It was a radical reconfiguration of Atlanta's racial geography.

In Vine City, the John J. Eagan Homes were built over Connally Park, abandoned land that was used as an unofficial garbage dump. Although no residents were displaced, this location was only chosen in 1939 following protests and vigilante action from whites against its proposed location on a color line

south of Washington Park.<sup>18</sup> Within a mile of Eagan Homes, however, four slum clearance projects erased existing communities (see full list below).

University Homes, for example, replaced the infamous African-American neighborhood of Beaver Slide south of Spelman. As Karen Ferguson explains, elite African-Americans supported slum clearance. Reformers were anxious to create a new neighborhood to match the prestige of the Atlanta University Center while uplifting neighbors to full citizenship.<sup>19</sup> Ferguson notes, "...by becoming active participants in the low-income housing program, black reformers could finally put their ideological convictions into action, with material consequences for the entire black community."<sup>20</sup>

Vine City's messy diversity started to give way to large-scale projects. These projects remain large discontinuities in the urban fabric today. In response to the crisis of public housing in the 1990's, the Hope VI program has erased public housing projects and replaced them with mixed-income developments, once again with fewer total units. Eagan Homes is now Magnolia Park, but its gated street pattern is still wholly foreign to Vine City. In the next couple of years, every housing project in the immediate area will have been remade. Here is the list:

- University Homes (1938-2009); now in progress
- John Hope Homes (1940-1999); now Villages of Castleberry Hill
- John J. Eagan Homes (1941-1999); now Magnolia Park
- Herndon Homes (1941-2011); now in progress
- Joel C. Harris Homes (originally white-only) (1956-1999); now Ashley Collegetown

Additional large-scale projects to the east of Vine City have also proven antagonistic. The Georgia World Congress Center (GWCC) opened to the east of Vine City in 1976. It expanded in 1985, 1992 and 2002. The adjacent Georgia Dome opened in 1992. These large-scale civic projects serve Atlanta, but they have consistently eroded the eastern edge of Vine City, leaving mostly parking and vacant lots.

### GLOBAL CONCERNS for a LOCAL HISTORY

In *The Provisional City*, Dana Cuff provides a framework to understand the spatial and temporal impli-

cations of these "large-scale operations." Spatially, they are internally logical and consistent. As a result, they are radically discontinuous with the surrounding city. Temporally, they are convulsive, creating civic upheaval as they "lurch into existence" to erase the past life on the site.<sup>21</sup> In this way, large-scale operations are insistently global and ideological rather than local and circumstantial. There is a clear experiential difference, too. As Cuff explains:

"When an area is composed of independent, small bits of land, the buildings, use, and ownership make a certain sense that can be discerned by a situated observer. When it is taken over, pieced together, and reworked, it no longer makes phenomenal sense. Instead, it destabilized, disorients, and perplexes. Its authorship had unclear roots, except that something big was behind it."<sup>22</sup>

This explains the comfort of the remaining small-scale urban fabric of Vine City. But it also explains the allure of a large project. It is impressively optimistic. It proposes a new world, an alternate future. Consequently, large-scale operations make sense at a time of crisis. But large projects are also provisional. They deteriorate uniformly, suggesting their replacement, also at a large scale.<sup>23</sup> This has consistently been the case in Vine City.

Global ideological forces such as segregation and slum clearance have shaped Vine City. As its history suggests, however, messy local circumstances are potentially more interesting and resilient over time. A neighborhood that responds to uncertain events such as fire, war and flooding also encourages entrepreneurship, innovation and community.

### INCUBATOR

A "community incubator" at the Ashby MARTA stop is the subject of a national student design competition sponsored by the National Organization of Minority Architects (NOMA). The project takes advantage of Vine City's poised position as an historic neighborhood adjacent to downtown. The neighborhood still has many older bungalows, and although too small for many Atlantans, they could appeal to singles, young couples, retirees and lower income families. This same constituency is increasingly likely to use rapid transit. Here, then, is the start of productive diversity.

But the project site is large. A simplified understanding of the neighborhood could present a clear

narrative, and therefore a clear trajectory. As projects in the surrounding urban fabric increase in size, however, fewer options emerge for change and local diversity. In this case, an ideological architecture removes options. Adding options, on the other hand increases uncertainty.

Large projects are less nimble, and a concentrated community incubator needs to address this problem. At the same time, a large building provides opportunities not possible with a distributed strategy. For example, making the MARTA station an event in the city has the potential to create an urban public dimension at the scale of the building. In urban design, typologies are arranged in space. Here, typologies could be arranged over time.

Stuart Brand describes this process as "scenario planning."<sup>24</sup> In this process, a multidisciplinary team imagines predictable and unpredictable scenarios. "College Boom," "Crime Wave" or "The World-Cup!" are options for Vine City. Then, solutions are generated that anticipate multiple scenarios. This process attempts to remove the burden of symbolic and functional clarity by multiplying possibilities. Paradoxically, this requires specificity by overlapping and resolving competing desires. In this way, proliferating alternate futures actually narrows design decisions. This process does not appeal to rapid flexibility. As frames for experience,

buildings are more obdurate than this. This process also makes no great claim on what the future should look like, only that buildings that afford change are absorbed into their community over time.

Buildings change in layers,<sup>25</sup> and the most immediate layers change continuously. Small experiential discontinuities in rapid succession are the patterns of everyday life, weekly events, seasonal cycles and weathering. In general, the larger a discontinuity, the slower its pace. Tenant improvements, for example, are more frequent and less disruptive than major renovations. The goal of an uncertain or poised architecture is the enjoyment of continuous change with options at moments of convulsive change. For example, a parking garage with more access to light and air can be a joy. With forethought, it can also become a farmer's market on weekends or housing in the future. Alternatively, housing that acts more like parking, with stout and connected floor plates, can become a combination of live/work or even parking.

Here, tension between global and local is productive. This could, in fact, be considered a working definition of the public realm. In Vine City, local conditions rub against city-wide events and infrastructure. This is its poised position. But it has also been its historic disadvantage. Tensions with clear ideological trajectories have rarely embraced Vine City as a diverse community. At such a critical point of contact, a community incubator should attempt to generate productive tension. This requires embracing uncertainty, at least during the design process. The danger is a deep ambivalence about the future, caused by the erosion of a unified public realm. With all futures open, an architecture of affordance may simply defer to future ideological goals. The hope, however, is a productive diversity of immediate experience and alternate futures.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Tunnell-Spangler-Walsh & Associates with The Collaborative Firm, Marketek Inc., Croy Engineering, and Contente Consulting, "Vine City/Washington Park Livable Centers Initiative Study Part 3: Existing Conditions," 30. [http://www.noma.net/EventsPrograms/events\\_2011conference.aspx](http://www.noma.net/EventsPrograms/events_2011conference.aspx)
- 2 I borrow the theory of affordances from James J. Gibson, *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1966), 23.
- 3 Carole Merritt, *The Herndons: An Atlanta Family* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2002), 48.
- 4 Merritt, *The Herndons*, 48.
- 5 Louie D. Shivery, *The History of Organized Social Work among Negroes in Atlanta, 1890-1935* (M.A. thesis, Atlanta University, 1936). Quoted in Ridgely Torrence, *The Story of John Hope* (1948; repr., New York: Arno Press, 1969), 139. Also see 127 for a vivid description of Beaver Slide.
- 6 Karen Ferguson, *Black Politics in New Deal Atlanta* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 21.
- 7 Lugenia Hope was the wife of John Hope, first African-American faculty member at Morehouse College (1906) and first African-American president of Atlanta University (1929). Merritt, *The Herndons*, 62.
- 8 Ferguson, *Black Politics*, 26.
- 9 Merritt, *The Herndons*, 65.
- 10 "Sunset Avenue Historic District in Vine City: Draft," 4. [http://74.228.95.7/historicdistrict/Research%20Data/2010\\_11\\_03\\_14\\_24\\_36.pdf](http://74.228.95.7/historicdistrict/Research%20Data/2010_11_03_14_24_36.pdf)
- 11 Ferguson, *Black Politics*, 30.
- 12 Ferguson, *Black Politics*, 29.
- 13 "Sunset Avenue Historic District," 8.
- 14 Andrew Wiese, "African American Suburban Development in Atlanta," *Southern Spaces*, September 29, 2006. <http://www.southernspaces.org/2006/african-american-suburban-development-atlanta>.
- 15 Harry G. Lefever, *Undaunted by the Fight: Spelman College and the Civil Rights Movement 1957-1967* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2005), 238.
- 16 Ferguson, *Black Politics*, 166.

- 17 Ferguson, *Black Politics*, 168.  
18 Ferguson, *Black Politics*, 181.  
19 Ferguson, *Black Politics*, 193.  
20 Ferguson, *Black Politics*, 187.  
21 Dana Cuff, *The Provisional City: Los Angeles Stories of Architecture and Urbanism* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2000) 5.  
22 Cuff, *The Provisional City*, 13-14.  
23 Cuff, *The Provisional City*, 332.  
24 Steward Brand, *How Buildings Learn: What Happens After They're Built* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1994), 178-189.  
25 Referred to as shearing layers of change in Brand, *How Buildings Learn*, 13.