

Charles Rutheiser. *Imagineering Atlanta: The Politics of Place in the City of Dreams*. London: Verso. 1996. 322p. \$18.95 paper.

Intended “as a critical introduction to the multiple manifestations of Atlanta, an exploration of its peoples, places, and politics, its myths and realities, as well as the processes that define, align, and produce them,” *Imagineering Atlanta* is a richly detailed, colorful, and quite well-informed anthropological case study of a major American city, or rather metropolitan area, that demonstrates many of the contradictions and failings of such areas.

Borrowing from Walt Disney, Rutheiser uses the term “imagineering” to capture the unflagging efforts the city’s boosters have made to create a felicitous image of the city to project to the country and, more recently, to the world at large. This image has alternately and simultaneously been represented through four predominating myths: “Atlanta as symbol of the antebellum South, as self-proclaimed capital of the New South, as Black Mecca, and as cosmopolitan technopolis,” but these myths, of course, conflict rather drastically with the realities, just as the white-supremacist dreams of a Henry Grady contrast rather starkly with those of a Martin Luther King. Here he adroitly cites the film versions of books such as *The Clansman* (famously made into *The Birth of a Nation* by D. W. Griffith) and Selznick’s *Gone With the Wind* as vivid illustrations of these mythical distortions.

These discrepancies, and the efforts to gloss over them, include a city in denial of its history and politics, though the actualities of these are quite perceptible to anyone who traverses the city’s streets which, as Rutheiser reminds us, often change names where neighborhoods change color. It is physically divided even more in a way that still powerfully bespeaks the racism behind its construction. Interstate 20, to cite only the most lapidary example, serves as a barrier keeping poor blacks below it (the well-to-do ones have begun to move north of it in recent years). The actual center of the city has likewise steadily moved north as whites and their wealth progressively moved out beyond it to more affluent counties and their suburbs which, to his ethnographic sensibilities, are “sterile and ludicrous.”

What’s not ludicrous about these suburbs, however, is that it is pretty much they which wield economic and thus political clout in the metropolitan area in which the city of Atlanta proper holds only about 25% of the area’s jobs and less than 14% of its population. In the multiplicity of so-called public-private partnerships, typified by the Olympics, he sees “the emergence of a new kind of urban regime...in which the city is reduced to the

stature of junior player or partner, while the crucial decisions are made by a coalition of private business leaders and quasi-public state authorities.” Students of urban politics will not be surprised by this conclusion, nor will careful readers of newspapers who can read almost every day about the developers transforming public space into private domains, from restrictively zoned suburbs to gated communities. As he acknowledges himself, “Planning and urban design, such as they exist in Atlanta and most of the rest of the United States today, reflect the vision of private, rather than public, interests.” But that has, of course, been the case pretty much throughout American urban history, as countless studies have documented.

Similar studies have also shown that hyping cities, boosterism, has a long history in American urban development. One thinks of the Allen brothers, founders of Houston, selling their site—now this is ludicrous—for its “salubrious” climate. And just as cigarette manufacturers promote their products via positive “imagineering” rather than via the familiar ill health consequences, cities can only be expected to “sell” themselves by projecting their most positive images. Rutheiser of course understands this, and that economic development thrives on attracting investment. And he is right, therefore, that the selling of the city for the Olympic games, like Disneyland, “conjured realms in which the boundaries between advertisement, entertainment, and education have been permanently effaced by a more profound pecuniary truth,” Or, as some might put it less obliquely, “money talks.”

Such foregone conclusions aside, Rutheiser has certainly done his homework and adduced a wealth of detail, and his thick ethnographic descriptions of the city and its suburbs are illuminated by a number of helpful maps. Though the writing sometimes belies his “modest attempt at producing a cultural critique that is accessible to a wider audience” and seems more like that of the “cadastral history” he refers to, such a wider audience could probably get a broad sense of “the principal political, economic, and sociocultural features of the metropolitan landscape” that is greater Atlanta.

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