Come Celebrate Our Dream—But Don’t Look Past the Silt Fence: The Olympics Come to Summerhill

Alison Hopkins

Agnes Scott College

When Atlanta hosted the Centennial Olympic Games in 1996, community leaders were cautiously optimistic that the venue construction, other developments, and press attention would spur inner city growth and help relieve some of Atlanta’s social ills. In *Come Share Our Dream--But Don’t Look Past the Silt Fence*, I argue that the way developments were approached and divided up by the various organizing bodies of the Olympic Games worked in conjunction with previous municipal developments, shifts in administrative agendas, and a lack of consensus among residents and their organizing efforts to collectively undermine the Summerhill neighborhood’s ability to capitalize on the construction of the Olympic Stadium and the Games as a whole. By combining archival oral sources, written testimonies, and oral sources obtained through personal connections, with existing secondary scholarship on the city leading up to 1990, I examine the impact of the Olympic planning process on Summerhill. The correlation between major developments for sports facilities and other major events, such as the Olympics, and abuse of poor local communities is well established by urban studies scholars. This broad exploration of this occurrence in Summerhill demonstrates a need for a more conscientious approach to urban planning ~~-~~and connects to the systemic racism and classism of American society and its manifestations in local politics of the late twentieth-century that historians are just beginning to explore.

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n the fall of 2013, the Atlanta Braves announced that they would be vacating Turner Field and moving to a new stadium being built in the northwestern suburb of Marietta. The city was stunned, but it dropped out of the news cycle quickly and life moved on. In the summer of 2016, I found myself working on an oral history project to capture narratives of health and violence in the neighborhoods of Mechanicsville, Pittsburgh, and Summerhill, which are situated around the stadium that was to be vacated at the end of that season, and was surprised to discover that the people living in the shadow of the stadium were glad to see the team leaving. In this paper, I intend to argue that the way developments were approached and divided up by the various organizing bodies of the Olympic Games worked in conjunction with previous municipal developments, shifts in administrative agendas, and a lack of consensus among residents and their organizing efforts to collectively undermine the Summerhill neighborhood’s ability to capitalize on the construction of the Olympic Stadium and the Games as a whole. I will use a combination of published and oral testimonies to explore these factors in detail.

There is a well-documented trend of displacement and disruption of life for local residents for what Matthew Burbank, Gregory Andranovich, and Charles Heying term “Mega-Events,” like the Olympics.[[1]](#footnote-1) In 2000, professor of sociology Helen Jefferson Lenskj published a series of case studies under the title *Inside the Olympic Industry: Power, Politics, and Activism* which argues effectively that “the enrichment of Olympic and local elites, which has taken place through the […] hosting processes of Olympiads, has almost always been accompanied by the disenfranchisement of many, and the outright oppression of the least powerful of the city’s residents”—something often ignored by international media. [[2]](#footnote-2) Atlanta is no exception; Lenskj went so far as to say, “it could be argued that Atlanta surpassed most other recent host cities in the degree of direct damage inflicted on disadvantaged populations.”[[3]](#footnote-3) It will be sufficient here to accept that the Centennial Games offered no break in the pattern of disenfranchisement for Olympic development.

**A Growing Metropolis**

The postwar decades brought the Atlanta metro area massive growth, economically and demographically altering the region. The city’s growth in the late 1960s and 1970s greatly increased the need for transportation infrastructure, especially highways. Construction on Interstate 285 (locally referred to as the Perimeter) began in 1969. The 1970s also saw the introduction of MARTA, the Metro Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority, and the construction of a subway system that divided the city along the cardinal directions.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In 1971, Mayor Sam Massell set sights on the city becoming “the world’s next greatest international city,” and many see this as culminating in the city’s hosting of the 1996 summer Olympic games.[[5]](#footnote-5) Maynard Jackson, the city’s first black mayor, took office in 1973 and helped to push the idea of Atlanta as an international city by opening the international terminal at the airport.[[6]](#footnote-6) Regardless of contention over what defines an “international city,” and whether or not Atlanta could call itself one, these globally directed aspirations and pro-business attitudes were and continue to be central to the city’s identity and were important factors in the Olympic bid. [[7]](#footnote-7)

Mayor William B. Hartsfield coined the phrase “the city too busy to hate,” elevating Atlanta’s economic goals above centuries old racial divisions and calling attention to the city’s role in the civil rights movement. [[8]](#footnote-8) Following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, the city tried to highlight his legacy, although exactly how to do that continues to be a matter of contention between his family and the political establishment.[[9]](#footnote-9) Atlanta has been home to a middle-class African American population since Reconstruction, and the city’s native son, Dr. King, was a part of this group.

In spite of Hartsfield’s proclamation, however, Atlanta has systematically disenfranchised its African American populations, through restricted access to jobs, housing, political power, education, and public services.[[10]](#footnote-10) After the desegregation of schools and other public services, white Atlantans moved to the northern suburbs, outside the boundaries of city taxes and the Perimeter, depleting the city’s upper-class tax base, and altering political motives and attentions to favor the upper-class white population. [[11]](#footnote-11) The economic power of the city slowly migrated north with the white populations, worrying city officials.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Across the country, new coded language was being adopted by politicians and citizens alike that ushered in the era of “colorblind” attitudes and policy that failed to address the significant disadvantages that persisted in black communities as a result of racialized policy-making in earlier decades.[[13]](#footnote-13) The late 1970s and 80s saw a gradual but marked shift as the middle-class black communities became involved in and then began to dominate Atlanta’s political structure.[[14]](#footnote-14) This cooperation between the “black political elite and the city’s white business leadership” would help sell the rest of the world on the city’s racial harmony. [[15]](#footnote-15)

**Infrastructure in Summerhill**

The introduction of MARTA rail lines, the I-75/85 corridor and the construction of the Georgia Dome, and the Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium divided up and decimated neighborhoods in the central city and the area that would become known as the “Olympic Ring.” The ‘Olympic Ring’ was an imaginary circle that encompassed most of central Atlanta and would serve as the site for the majority of the Olympic venues and other Olympics-related development. The Ring consisted of fifteen neighborhoods, as identified by the City’s Neighborhood Planning Unit (hereafter referred to as NPU) system of organization. Of these fifteen, the neighborhoods of Summerhill, Mechanicsville, Vine City/Ashby, the Atlanta University Center, Techwood/Clark Howell Homes, Butler Street/Auburn Avenue, and Old Fourth Ward were directly targeted for construction of athletics venues and other Games-related developments.[[16]](#footnote-16)

The Summerhill neighborhood is located south of Downtown Atlanta, below I-20 and east of I-85, which separates it from Peoplestown and Mechanicsville. It belongs to NPU-V. The neighborhood was founded after the civil war by a Jewish[[17]](#footnote-17) and upper class black population.[[18]](#footnote-18) In the 1930’s and 40s it was a highly populated, thriving mixed-income community.[[19]](#footnote-19) By the 1960s, the median income had dropped enough that historian Frederick Allen classified it as a ‘slum.’[[20]](#footnote-20) Many of the neighborhood residents were dependent on public housing and Carol Pittman remembered that leaving Summerhill in 1965 “felt like moving up in the world.”[[21]](#footnote-21) The neighborhood was partially cleared for the construction of the Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium, which until 1996 housed the Atlanta Braves and the Falcons until the completion of the Georgia Dome in 1992.[[22]](#footnote-22)

The new highways cut the neighborhood off from downtown and surrounding neighborhoods and began the process of clearing homes in the community for large public projects. The Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium especially was a controversial construction on the city’s behalf that greatly impacted the 1964 mayoral vote.[[23]](#footnote-23) The stadium displaced approximately ten thousand people, leaving Summerhill partially abandoned. Summerhill anti-poverty organizer Sandra Robertson described the displacement:

They were tearing down a lot of dilapidated housing, but it was the housing of people who needed low-cost housing, and there was no plan to put up alternative housing. They were trying to clear out Summerhill; they were just wiping it away. All of these domiciles that people lived in, and so these people were coming to our meetings, and they were hearing the rumblings, the rumor was going around about people were gonna get kicked out and landlords were telling people they were gonna have to move, so we were organizing around that. And it was some high-hitting officials, you know, that were engaged in dialogue with assistance around that.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Robertson remembered that even the higher-level group organizers would pull back on protesting against developments, in spite of the fact that their community meetings were full of people who were losing their homes. The anxiety among the residents and the political structure would be mirrored down the line with the construction of the Olympic Stadium on property that sat beside the Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium.

Ethel Mae Mathews was a Summerhill resident who had come to the neighborhood with her family from the country, and would be a key player in the Olympic Stadium controversy.[[25]](#footnote-25) She and her children were displaced for the construction of the Atlanta-Fulton County stadium, and she dedicated herself to working with anti-poverty groups.[[26]](#footnote-26) She was displaced a second time when they built the Olympic Stadium, and was one of the stadium’s most vocal opponents. Robertson remembered her by saying, “I knew she was a hell-raiser, and you don’t mess with Ms. Mathews. Ms. Mathews commanded an awful lot of attention from public officials, she could pick up the phone and she could call a public official. And they would pick up the phone and they would listen to Ms. Mathews, because she had a significant base….”[[27]](#footnote-27) The civil rights and poverty organizing efforts that came out of the problems with the first stadium in the neighborhood would lay the groundwork for opposition to the Olympic Stadium thirty years later.

**Social Ills and Welfare Reform**

The Ring neighborhoods had been “ravaged by disinvestment, [and] were among the poorest and most physically neglected in the city,” and were largely inhabited by African Americans below the poverty line. [[28]](#footnote-28) In the early 1990s, “the Atlanta metropolitan region led the nation in job growth…[but] unemployment in the central city grew fivefold,” and almost 75% of those employment opportunities were located outside the Perimeter.[[29]](#footnote-29) There was a significant amount of abandoned housing and derelict property, and the inner city had acquired a reputation for danger. [[30]](#footnote-30) The 1980s saw a rise in crime in most American cities, and Atlanta was no exception, consistently ranking among the most dangerous, with particularly high rates of violent crimes, with the number of forcible rapes reported at five times the national average in 1988.[[31]](#footnote-31) The city had the nation’s second highest poverty rate, a significant homeless population, and an elevated high school dropout rate.[[32]](#footnote-32) Although city officials tried to address the crime problem and drug issue in some of the city’s public housing developments over the years, not much was resolved by the time the Olympics were announced. [[33]](#footnote-33) Reports produced by the Centennial Olympic Development Authority (CODA) in 1993 depict Summerhill and surrounding communities as majority black, with high unemployment rates, single-parent and female headed houses, more than half whom had less than a high school education, with significant dependence on welfare and public transportation, and high vacancy rates that were a result of and contributed to these issues.[[34]](#footnote-34)

State and federal governments were always looking to minimize the number of welfare recipients, but a shift in political rhetoric “in the early nineties [allowed] opponents of welfare [...] to frame removing assistance as a means of helping those on welfare. [...] Making people work in whatever capacity became synonymous with helping people achieve a better life.”[[35]](#footnote-35) While running for Presidential office in 1992, Bill Clinton promised to “end welfare as we know it.”[[36]](#footnote-36) Organizers like Mathews and Robertson spent the nineties on the defensive, trying to prevent the decimation of existing programs and further displacement and homelessness, but notions about the people in the programs changed in the political rhetoric. In 1996, Georgia Governor Zell Miller would sign new welfare reform into law, going along with President’s Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act.[[37]](#footnote-37) The oldest public housing project in Atlanta, Techwood Homes, would be torn down to build the Olympic Village in 1994 and a large number of people came off the welfare rolls.[[38]](#footnote-38) Many Techwood residents were not properly rehoused, and these laws changed the eligibility requirements for welfare access that directly impacted the population of Summerhill, making it harder to replace housing that was lost in the construction of the new stadium or to afford living in any of the new developments that would be put in place after the Games ended.

Estimated costs for redevelopment of the area ranged from $500 million to $1 billion.[[39]](#footnote-39) Although more than seventy-six million federal dollars were invested in aesthetic improvements and renovations for the ’96 games, “efforts to solve the problems of low-income neighborhoods fell short.”[[40]](#footnote-40) The communities had been systematically underserved, and some well-meaning employees of the City and the Atlanta Housing Authority intended to use the Games as an opportunity to bolster employment and infrastructure. [[41]](#footnote-41) [[42]](#footnote-42)

**The Olympic Stadium and the ACOG Fence**

The idea to bring the Olympics to Atlanta was imagined in 1987 by one man—Atlanta businessman Billy Payne.[[43]](#footnote-43) Payne has been cited on more than one occasion that the idea came to him in a dream—hence the slogan “Come Share Our Dream.”[[44]](#footnote-44) Over the next three years, he and a few of his well-placed friends would woo the city’s politicians, business leaders, the United States Olympic Committee (USOC), and the delegates of the International Olympic Committee (IOC). Former mayor Andrew Young played a key role in convincing the IOC delegates that Atlanta was a city that was a “black mecca,” appealing to African delegates to help bring the Centennial Games to the city by capitalizing on King’s legacy and hawking the civil rights angle.[[45]](#footnote-45) The Atlanta bid for the Centennial Games rested on the image of the city as progressive and international, and the intention to place all venues close together and easily accessible for visitors, as well as the assumption of a financial payoff similar to that of the Los Angeles Games in 1984.[[46]](#footnote-46) Based on the experiences of Los Angeles, Atlanta Olympic Committee (AOC) projections for the economic stimulus to be brought to Georgia was $5.1 billion between 1991 and 1997, with a surplus 156 million from the budget for the construction and hosting costs.[[47]](#footnote-47) Huge promises were made: “During the bid process, Georgia residents heard promises of solving a range of social problems—homelessness, crime, poverty, drug abuse, and teen pregnancy—as a result of the Olympic project.”[[48]](#footnote-48)

In September of 1990, the announcement that Atlanta had won the bid brought the city great excitement—longtime Atlanta resident Mike Hopkins[[49]](#footnote-49) said that, “when the Olympics came to town, everybody had dollar signs in their eyes.”[[50]](#footnote-50) On the day of the bid, the local news featured a live stream of the conference in Tokyo and people watching it real-time at Underground Atlanta, with the spectators erupting into jubilant cheers alongside the bid committee in Tokyo. [[51]](#footnote-51)

After the Games had been secured for the city, it was time for the planning and divvying up of responsibilities to begin in earnest. The bid had included a series of plans, most notably to construct venues in the central city, inside the Olympic Ring. Government and community leaders had voiced optimism in the Games as an agent for positive development, but this agreement of responsibilities (and crucially, funding) would be key in making that happen. After a series of negotiations and conferences at the end of 1990, responsibilities for the Centennial Games were divided up between the USOC, the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games (ACOG), the Metropolitan Olympic Games Authority (MAOGA), and the City of Atlanta. ACOG was formed out of the AOC, which had been responsible for the city’s bid and would assume responsibility for hosting the Games and “almost complete control of [the city’s] Olympic Developments.”[[52]](#footnote-52) MAOGA represented the state government and would oversee and approve development planning. The City of Atlanta was not awarded the veto power in decisions made for the Games that Mayor Jackson had been seeking, and their involvement in planning would otherwise be severely limited. The most controversial point of this devised agreement, even upon its release in 1991, was that it had followed Billy Payne’s lead in giving ACOG near complete control of venue development, without much responsibility to the surrounding communities. As early as January 1991, Payne made a distinction between “inside-the-fence” and “outside-the-fence” developments, a strategy saving ACOG from financial responsibility for development efforts not directly related to venue construction. This would be reported later in the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* thus: “The fence is the security barrier that will surround Olympic venues - the domain of the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games (ACOG). To put it bluntly, the fence marks where Olympics dollars end and somebody else's dollars begin.”[[53]](#footnote-53)

This distinction would be a crucial factor in the negotiations with locals over the construction of the Olympic Stadium. The memoirs of Richard Yarbrough, the Managing Director of ACOG, show their perspective of the stadium controversy:

More than any other event in the planning process, the construction of the Olympic Stadium tore away the façade of Atlanta as defined by its chamber of commerce hype and exposed the city for what it was: a town with an enormous racial divide and governed by politicians who are captives to the special interests spawned by racial politics.[[54]](#footnote-54)

Yarbrough maintained that ACOG’s commitment was restricted to only developing the venues for the Games, wanting nothing to do with redevelopment “outside the fence ” and that ACOG saw the stadium as a gift, rather than an inconvenience that forced people to abandon their homes. He quotes Billy Payne as saying “I didn’t realize how hard it would be to give away a $209 million stadium.”[[55]](#footnote-55)

Twenty years before they did it, the Atlanta Braves were making noise about moving out to the suburbs. ACOG’s new stadium would be perfect to convince them to stay. Why would the “politically powerful neighborhood groups around the stadium” not be quiet and cooperate? [[56]](#footnote-56) Yarbrough chalks it up to race, and lambasts Martin Luther King III for getting involved after small concessions had already been made to the community.[[57]](#footnote-57) It is important to note that King acted primarily for the interests of the Atlanta University Center, and not on behalf of the residents.[[58]](#footnote-58) Yarbrough complains that, “every special-interest group with an axe to grind saw us as the world’s largest microphone, and attempted to use us accordingly.”[[59]](#footnote-59) In this case, the special-interest groups being referred to were anti-poverty and anti-homelessness organizations, headed by the very people being affected by the construction process. He claimed that ACOG became a magnet for threats, not considering what a threat the stadium might represent to someone like Ethel Mae Mathews.[[60]](#footnote-60)

Yarbrough said of the whole Olympic endeavor: “Atlanta blew a great opportunity,” and that he doubted “that what I have said on these pages will be warmly embraced by the power structures in Atlanta, and maybe even by some of my colleagues at the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games.”[[61]](#footnote-61) Although his memoir was written five years after the Olympics, Yarbrough failed to address positive changes that the ‘gift’ of a stadium made to the community, noting instead that “a piece of property adjacent to the stadium that would be used for parking during the Games and for housing afterwards…is still a parking lot five years later.”[[62]](#footnote-62) A number of times he came across as though he was trying to defend himself against accusations of racism, but concluded his assessment of the stadium controversy with a bitter, “Not only is it hard to give away $209 million, but it is even more odious when you think who you are giving it to.”[[63]](#footnote-63)

**City Politics and the Mayoral election of 1993**

The crime rates and drug usage in the city worried the Olympic organizers, and they pressured the City to resolve the concerns quickly.[[64]](#footnote-64) The crime problems certainly did not help ACOG and the overall perception of the Games as capitalistic media frenzy—altering the Olympics as we know them today.[[65]](#footnote-65) Most of the existing scholarship during and after the Centennial Games has focused on the role of the media and the extent to which the event was monetized.[[66]](#footnote-66)

The shift in voting power of the previous decades was largely due to the poor residents of the central city, but power concentrated in the hands of those with middle and upper-class status and who walked a precarious balancing act of racial politics in the city, and their own class-based perceptions of morality. By the time the Games came along, the central city had already been divided up by highways and race-based housing policies.[[67]](#footnote-67) That said, there was a desire to reinvest[[68]](#footnote-68) in the dilapidated, partially abandoned, crime ridden city, and organizers were pushing hard to locate venues in central neighborhoods, pulling businesses and people—and tax dollars—back in from the suburbs. The city had successfully retained the Falcons with the construction of the Georgia Dome, and was looking for ways to convince the Braves not to relocate to Miami.[[69]](#footnote-69)

During the bid process and initial planning stages, mayor Maynard Jackson was a champion of development efforts and pushed to make the Games work for the citizens, encouraging Billy Payne and ACOG to do some good for all his constituents. However, Jackson faced health concerns and underwent major bypass surgery in the summer of 1992.[[70]](#footnote-70) These health concerns forced him to drop out of the 1993 race, and he was replaced by Bill Campbell, who expressed interest in maximizing the economic potential of the event, and did not concern himself greatly with the social potential beyond a campaign promise to increase public safety by expanding the police force. [[71]](#footnote-71) It should be noted that the city’s actual power over venue development was limited, but the shift in political agendas should be noted, as they would dictate “outside the fence” efforts and support.

**Summerhill Community Response**

The announcement that Atlanta would host the Games took some by surprise. Athens had been the sentimental favorite for the Centennial, and the Greeks were bitter about losing the bid as late as 1995.[[72]](#footnote-72) Atlanta organizer Anita Beatty would recall that many groups, including her own Task Force for the Homeless were wholly unprepared to mount protests when the announcement came through.[[73]](#footnote-73)

Long-term Summerhill resident and educational professional Obadiah Jordan reported high adult illiteracy rates in the community.[[74]](#footnote-74) He emphasizes the strength of community ties and moved there in 1966, after many had left because of displacement or for better opportunities in the West End.[[75]](#footnote-75) Community ties like these are important because they lead directly into the ability to organize and protest. When interviewed in February of 1997, he said that people in Summerhill, “can still go to each other and borrow a cup of sugar, two eggs.”[[76]](#footnote-76) Jordan made the claim that, “There is no community in the city of Atlanta organized as highly as Summerhill; you have leadership that goes back three generations.”[[77]](#footnote-77) Sandra Robertson corroborated the three generations part of the statement, but the supposedly unmatched organizational efforts made few gains for the community in the Stadium construction contract.[[78]](#footnote-78) Another Summerhill old-timer, John Williams, echoed Jordan’s sentiments of community, and said, “my experience with Summerhill is that it’s always been a very close community, close knit [….] you find that a lot of people know each other by name.”[[79]](#footnote-79) They were also somewhat suspicious of new people coming into the neighborhood—people who were “migrating here now”[[80]](#footnote-80) and could not be trusted like the old-timers.[[81]](#footnote-81) These networks and sense of community would come into play when the neighborhood was selected as the proposed site for the new Olympic Stadium.

The people within Summerhill were divided over the proposed venue. There were people who welcomed the stadium as part of the whole Olympic endeavor to uplift the central city, and people that opposed building the stadium in Summerhill. The anti-stadium residents tended to belong to one of two neighborhood organizations: Summerhill Neighborhood, Inc. (SNI) and Atlanta Neighbors United for Fairness (ANUFF). SNI was formed and formally incorporated in 1989 by resident Douglas Dean.[[82]](#footnote-82) In the months before the announcement in Tokyo, Dean was contacted by the AOC, who promised to address community concerns over the stadium they envisioned building.[[83]](#footnote-83) In October of 1990, Ethel Mae Mathews and her colleagues at the Emmaus House[[84]](#footnote-84) organized ANUFF.[[85]](#footnote-85) The two groups would take different approaches in resisting the stadium, and ANUFF would take a hard line stance against building the stadium in the neighborhood. Dean agreed with Mathews that he did not want “the community to be raped again,” but he was optimistic the Olympics would “speed along the beautification of the neighborhood and make it a showplace.”[[86]](#footnote-86) The NPU-V president Columbus Ward would work in conjunction with both organizations to oppose the stadium plans.[[87]](#footnote-87)

That winter, before responsibilities were formally assigned, Maynard Jackson would introduce his Olympic Neighborhood Improvement Plan that addressed specific target goals for Olympic development.[[88]](#footnote-88) But Billy Payne and the leaders of the AOC were already pushing their “fence” approach to development, put into writing by the January 1991 agreement between USOC, MAOGA, the newly formed ACOG, and the City.[[89]](#footnote-89)

In March of 1991, SNI released a plan that distanced their stance from ANUFF, calling for the destruction of the Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium. This proposal was followed up by a report from the Urban Land Institute, which agreed that the old stadium needed to go, but dispersed some of the financial responsibility for demolition.[[90]](#footnote-90) In an effort to appease these groups, ACOG announced the intention to form a coalition of resident leaders to advise them in the planning stages. Brought together in 1991, the coalition included Douglas Dean, Columbus Ward, and Ethel Mae Mathews, but it did not include a few extremely anti-stadium voices and was intended to convince them that the stadium would be a benefit to the area.[[91]](#footnote-91) This coalition spent the summer of 1991 working out the details for the demolition of the Atlanta-Fulton County stadium, and in September it was incorporated as the Olympic Stadium Neighborhood Task Force.[[92]](#footnote-92)

By February, ANUFF had decided that the coalition was not strong enough to withstand the enormous political pressure it was under, and shifted their tactics to staging protests.[[93]](#footnote-93) In March of 1992, Maynard Jackson would establish the Corporation for Olympic Development in Atlanta (CODA), a semi-public organization intended to promote development efforts in conjunction with the Games.[[94]](#footnote-94) In July of 1992, the flaws in the logistics of stadium construction and use became increasingly clear, with inadequate provisions made for parking and minimal guarantee of employment opportunities for neighborhood residents.[[95]](#footnote-95) The Atlanta Braves officially signed on to move into the stadium after the games, and their business interests entered the fray.[[96]](#footnote-96) A month later, MAOGA presented ACOG with a list of “considerations” for their stadium proposal that suggested but did not mandate that ACOG make larger concessions to resident groups.[[97]](#footnote-97)

That fall, the City introduced a plan for CODA to conduct an impact assessment of the Olympic Ring neighborhoods, which they completed in the summer of 1993, towards the end of Jackson’s term in office.[[98]](#footnote-98) MAOGA approved the stadium designs, but the Braves pushed against ACOG and plans which might have benefitted the residents, trying to sweeten their stadium deal.[[99]](#footnote-99) Within a few months, they would be satisfied with stadium plans, but planners and neighborhood advocates would have to deal with the political influence of Martin Luther King III, who argued that the stadium was a burden to taxpayers and represented the city’s black elite rather than those in Summerhill. [[100]](#footnote-100)

On July 8, ANUFF staged a final protest that would inconvenience the press when ground was broken two days later.[[101]](#footnote-101) But this was only the beginning of the stadium disrupting the neighborhood; the main phase of construction did not begin until January 6, 1995.[[102]](#footnote-102)

This messy situation was complicated further by people in Summerhill who hoped the new stadium would do them some good. An interview with resident Rick Anderson runs contrary to the claims of a strong community: “Most everybody’s mind your own business, but there’s not a community atmosphere like there should be… everybody don’t really know everybody, you know.”[[103]](#footnote-103) He was a newcomer in 1997, having moved in in the last two years. John Williams worked at the Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium, and saw the Olympic Stadium and what it represented as something for community kids to strive for, an opportunity for progress. He noted that the neighborhood had an “entrepreneurial outlook” on life, and pointedly said he had no recollections of people speaking ill of the stadium, but he acknowledged the possibility of a different perspective on the issue. Anderson expressed pride in the community’s role in the Olympics, saying “one of the best things I’ve experienced [here] was the Olympics […] my kids will be able to get jobs this summer, because of the Olympics. Another good thing is that, the potential for growth here, they’re trying to revitalize this community, I can see a lot of potential.”[[104]](#footnote-104)

But his kids may have been among the lucky ones. Sandra Robertson remembered that

Provisions were made: that people, some of the neighborhood would be hired to do jobs. […] How much did that actually happen? It’s probably slim, to none but it did get put in there and it was the efforts of a lot of the organizers that realized what was going on. It got built, the houses got torn down, some of the people got shifted to public housing in different areas, they were given some provisions to move, and they were made spaces for, but it was a shaft just like each time it happened. With each new stadium there was displacement like that. It continued to happen.[[105]](#footnote-105)

The Olympic Stadium that was built in Summerhill is estimated to have cost between $160-$170 million although ACOG routinely cited a figure of $209 million. [[106]](#footnote-106) What this illustrates is that for some in Summerhill, the Olympics brought hope and opportunity, but it was limited and not everyone could capitalize. It is also important to remember that these voices belong to people that remained in Summerhill after the Games had come to an end.

**Concessions Made to the Community**

In the end, ACOG agreed to pay for the demolition of the Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium, as well as financing the conversion of the Olympic Stadium into a baseball-only venue for the Atlanta Braves. It would be renamed Turner Field in 1997.[[107]](#footnote-107) MAOGA and the federal department for Housing and Urban Development and other associated government agencies agreed to fund the construction of mixed-use housing developments after the games.[[108]](#footnote-108) There were an estimated 1.8 million dollars in streetscape improvements made in Summerhill.[[109]](#footnote-109) All other social programs were proposed in conjunction with work from Central Atlanta Progress, a coalition from the private sector dedicated to public improvement projects and other small scale public-private community improvement efforts, some of which were completed in time for the Games.

In their 1997 interviews Anderson, Williams, and Jordan all discussed a recent construction boom, and Williams emphasized the importance of economics: “I think it’s coming together again, […] what’s going on in terms of revitalization efforts, I think it almost gives you the impression that it’s something that was destined to live on, it wasn’t going to just die […] it’s a positive thing, that’s coming back to life, and it makes me proud.”[[110]](#footnote-110) Jordan mentioned the construction with his flair for hyperbole: “you see, we’ve got new houses going up, condominiums, as an individual that has been my pride, to see the community that was really torn down almost, […] today in Summerhill more money has been spent in this community than any other in the city of Atlanta.”[[111]](#footnote-111) They did not mention that the new construction developments were intended to be mixed-income developments.

Realistically, most of these efforts were still tied up in funding allocation as late at 1995, and included things like rec centers, guaranteed employment, and the development of a business district around the new stadium--the hope was that the presence of the Braves would keep focus and need here, but after the Games, the City and the ball club turned a blind eye and many of these were never fully realized.

In the words of Anita Beatty, co-chair of the Olympic Conscience Coalition, “the Olympics have become a commercial circus, using athletes and athletic events to make incredible profits at a cost of great human suffering.” The critics pointed to social costs of the planned urban transformation and focused on the immediate disruption that would result from construction projects. The projects, they complained, were displacing the poor and homeless residents of the city; the “gentrification of neighborhoods would mean a net loss of housing for poor people, and security measures could infringe on the civil rights of the poor.[[112]](#footnote-112)

Clearly, displacement was a big concern for some. But various opinions and uncertainties left Summerhill open for the construction of the stadium, and the reparations and redevelopment efforts granted to the community were underwhelming. Given the hope that hosting the Olympics created citywide and the pressing need for improvements in Summerhill, the factors explored here worked in conjunction to cumulatively inhibit the neighborhood’s ability to capitalize on the venue and the Games as a whole.

**Closing Remarks**

In the summer of 2016, many of the homes in Summerhill were vacant and overgrown with kudzu. The area is still plagued with poverty and crime, but since the Olympics there has been an uptick in gang violence and there are plenty of abandoned houses standing around helping this to happen. The abandoned structures are owned by out of town developers that bought the properties after the housing bubble burst in 2008, who are waiting to cash in on the increase in gentrification the inner city has been experiencing. This gentrification would cause property taxes to rise, forcing current residents out of their homes, in a more subtle way than the razing of public housing for the Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium. Georgia State University purchased the stadium from the Braves, hoping to renovate it for their own purposes. Atlanta is in the process of electing a new mayor, leaving the neighborhood’s future in the balance. Governments and powerful organizations around the globe are still taking advantage of poorer communities, and the media surrounding large events like the Olympics tends to focus on homeless populations and the “danger” that they pose for visitors, rather than the forces that created circumstances which leave people homeless or otherwise economically insecure. This broad exploration of the Olympic Stadium in Summerhill demonstrates a need for a more conscientious approach to urban planning--and connects to the systemic racism and classism of American society and its manifestations in local politics of the late twentieth-century that historians are just beginning to explore.

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49. Mr. Hopkins is in fact the author’s father. His family relocated to the city in 1982, and he moved here permanently in 1988. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
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68. “Gentrify” would be another appropriate verb usage here. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
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81. “Now” refers to February of 1997. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
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84. The Emmaus House is a Christian nonprofit working out of Summerhill. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
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