Chapter 8
Atlanta: Scarcity and Abundance

Laurel Paget-Seekins

Abstract The Atlanta, Georgia metropolitan region exists solely as the result of the intersection of transport infrastructure—railways, interstate freeways, and the world’s busiest airport. However, neither vehicle drivers nor public transport passengers are happy with the state of their mobility. Racism, poor planning, and rapid economic growth have worked together to create a low-density urban fabric and a transport network that limits accessibility. Atlanta’s development cannot be separated from its history of racial and class segregation. Mobility in Atlanta suffers from an abundance of vehicles on the roads and a scarcity of public transport services. Atlanta built roads to serve its low-density suburbs, and refused to invest in public transport. Drivers are inconvenienced, but the public transport passengers, mostly poor and Black, have limited access to the majority of the region.

Introduction

Atlanta, Georgia is a tale of two regions—one in which people complain about traffic, and one in which people complain about public transport services. No matter what their method of mobility is, Atlantans are unhappy about it. The traffic report is often the top story on the website of Atlanta’s daily newspaper. Reports warn of when to expect abnormal levels of congestion, and when an interstate is blocked owing to an accident, it is breaking news. Mutual frustration at the traffic situation provides Atlantans a basis for unity, and a convenient topic of conversation.

Public transport passengers are, likewise, brought together by their frustration at the quality of the service. If strangers start a conversation, it will probably be to complain about how the bus is always late, or to wonder out loud why the train is not moving. The buses and trains are full of advertisements for used-car dealers hoping to take advantage of that frustration.

L. Paget-Seekins
Departamento de Ingeniería de Transporte y Logística, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Vicuña Mackenna 4860, Macul, Santiago, Chile
e-mail: laurel@gatech.edu
While both groups are unhappy, their actual experience of mobility is very different. Atlanta is designed for car drivers; yet they are inconvenienced because of their abundance. The public transport passenger suffers from scarcity; the Atlanta region has deliberately not invested in public transport. These issues are not unconnected, and are both linked to the history of Atlanta’s urban development.

While Atlanta’s mobility woes can be attributed to poor planning, some of that planning was, in fact, intentional. Atlanta’s development of transport infrastructure and urban form cannot be separated from its history of racial and class segregation, and has resulted in a megacity with limited mobility, especially for people without a vehicle.

This chapter is divided into five sections. The first section presents the history of Atlanta’s development and of its transport infrastructure. This is followed by an analysis of Atlanta’s spatial and demographic patterns. The third section examines the available transport infrastructure and mobility behaviour. The fourth section examines the policies and perceptions which shape that behaviour. Finally, concluding thoughts are presented.

A Brief History of Atlanta

Atlanta is a major metropolitan region for no reason other than the location of transport infrastructure. Atlanta has no navigable waterway and no stock of natural resources, nor indeed any other feature that explains its location. The city sprang up at the nexus of several railway lines, and was officially named Atlanta (from a suggestion by the Chief Engineer of the Georgia Railroad) in 1847. It was a railway city until it became a car and airport city. It remains an important freight railway hub, but also hosts the world’s busiest airport and is intersected by three major US interstate highways.

Atlanta became a main railway hub and supply centre during the US Civil War (1861–1865). Despite being burned by Northern troops, the city continued to grow as a regional centre after the war. By the turn of the century it had 15 railway lines, with over 100 trains a day passing through it. In 1889, Atlanta opened its first streetcar (tram) line and electrified it two years later; by 1901 it had 214 km of streetcar track. As the city grew, the streetcar network continued to grow with it, reaching 354 km of track in 1924. However, at the urging of the city government, the streetcars were replaced by cars, buses, and trackless trolleybuses. Ironically, the city leaders thought that this would reduce congestion and modernise the city [3, 12]. The last streetcars ran in 1949, but now the city has started building a new streetcar line in the downtown.

The 1950s brought significant federal legislation, building the interstate highways and subsidising housing mortgages, paving the way for urban sprawl. It also brought Atlanta its first year of hosting the world’s busiest airport, as a consequence of the leadership of Mayor Hartsfield [7]. Urban growth was facilitated in the first instance by the streetcar network, but then amplified by the growth of car...
As seen in Fig. 8.1, growth in the regional population took off in the 1950s.

The growth of the suburbs was also driven by ‘White flight’ from the City of Atlanta. The US civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, which was headquartered in Atlanta, forced desegregation of public facilities, such as schools, swimming pools and restaurants. In response, many White residents left the cities for newly constructed suburbs. By 1970 the City of Atlanta was majority Black, as over 60,000 White residents had fled the city during the previous decade.

Despite the rising political power of Blacks in the City of Atlanta, the construction of the interstates and associated ‘urban renewal’ projects left a permanent mark on their communities. Transport projects were in some cases actually designed to divide the Black and White communities. The building of the ‘Downtown Connector’ (the main interstate freeway through the city) cut off the thriving Black business district from the White downtown [8]. The legacy of segregation is still evident in Atlanta in the street names—the names of major streets were changed as they crossed the boundaries between Black and White neighbourhoods, in order to create an impression of separation and allow people’s race to be identified by their address [9, 15].

Racism also impacted the development of the public transport system. A rapid rail system was proposed in 1960 (just 11 years after the last streetcar was removed). The state legislature created the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) to build and operate public transport in the five core counties in the region. However, the funding measure was approved only in the two counties that contain the City of Atlanta. Much of the anti-public-transport sentiment centred around fears that public transport would allow poor Blacks access to the suburbs and bring in crime and ‘urban’ problems. The Whites who fled the city for car-only suburbs did not want the people they had just left behind to be able to access their new communities [8]. MARTA took over the privately operated bus service and opened its first rail service in 1979, but it is still confined to the two counties around the central city.
Despite the impact of racism on its transport infrastructure and land-use patterns, Atlanta pressed on with its economic growth, adopting the image of ‘The city too busy to hate’. The slogan was developed by civic and business leaders during the civil rights movement in an attempt to distinguish the City of Atlanta from the racial turmoil taking place in other southern cities in the USA at the time. A compromise between Black political leaders and the downtown business community kept racial tension in the background and economic growth in the foreground. The region’s business climate, good weather, and network of transport infrastructure attracted new businesses and new residents. Without any physical barriers or land constraints, Atlanta’s land area kept growing until it became one of the lowest-density metropolitan areas in the USA.

In order to keep up with its growth and the increasing problem of traffic congestion, Atlanta kept building highways and runways, but not public transport. The Atlanta airport (Hartsfield-Jackson International) opened the world’s largest terminal in 1980 [7]. Highways were built and expanded, in some places doubling from three lanes to more than six in each direction. But MARTA received no new source of regional or state funding; public transport was seen as a social service for poor Blacks, not a major transport investment.

Atlanta’s growth spurt, and the final touches to its image as a city, were completed when it won the bid to host the 1996 Summer Olympic Games. Ironically, this bid would probably have not been successful without the MARTA rail system, and MARTA played a major role in transport during the games.

The first major crack in Atlanta’s attempt to build its way out of congestion appeared in 1998, when the US government declared the Atlanta metropolitan region to be out of compliance with the Clean Air Act. The region was ineligible for any federal transport funds until it demonstrated that it could reduce its creation of ozone and other pollutants to a level that met the national standards. This crisis led to the first attempt at creating a regional public transport system—a network of commuter bus services. A local bus service was started in each of the remaining three core counties that originally voted out of MARTA.

A growing coalition of civic, business, and political leaders are currently calling for increased investment in public transport for environmental reasons, the infeasibility of building more roadway capacity and a desire to keep Atlanta economically competitive. Despite the growing political support for public transport, actual services in the Atlanta region are decreasing. In 2010 a lack of funding led to the cancellation of all bus services in one of the surrounding counties, and forced MARTA to cut 10% of bus service and 14% of rail services.

People and Places

A Small City in a Sprawling Region

The actual City of Atlanta is very small, in terms of both area and population, when compared to the entire metropolitan region. The geographic boundaries of the Atlanta
region vary depending on how it is defined. The United States government uses several different methods to define metropolitan regions. The Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) is determined by urbanised areas with economic integration. There are 28 counties and 144 cities in the Atlanta MSA. The MSA covers 21,690 km$^2$, of which only 347 km$^2$ (or 1.6%) is in the City of Atlanta [18].

However, transport planning is undertaken by Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPO) whose boundaries are determined by urbanised area and air quality regulations. The boundaries of the Atlanta MSA and MPO can be seen in Fig. 8.2.

The region possesses no physical boundaries to slow its growth. There are no navigable rivers, no mountains of any size, and no coastline. However, geography is only part of the reason why Atlanta was able to sprawl so far. The region lacked policy and planning controls on growth. Land-use planning is the responsibility of local governments: all 144 cities and 28 counties in the region control their own planning. The federal and state governments kept on allocating funding to build highways, so there were few incentives to limit growth.

Recently Atlanta’s MPO, the Atlanta Regional Commission, has started to provide incentives for denser development, and local elected officials have begun to advocate increased density, recognising the economic and environmental benefits. However, there is a very negative perception of density amongst Atlanta residents. The preference is for single-family housing on large plots. Even in

![Map of Atlanta region](source)
neighbourhoods in the City of Atlanta, proposals to increase density are opposed by residents worried about the impact that this would have on property values, traffic, and the quality of life. Even increasing density along proposed new public transport routes is opposed by neighbourhood groups.

**A Region Divided**

The Atlanta MSA region had a population in 2010 of 5,268,860, but only 8% lived inside the City of Atlanta [18]. As seen in Fig. 8.1, the regional population continues to grow, while the city population, having declined in the 1970s and 1980s, at present remains steady. The region’s density in 2010 was 2.43 persons per ha (hectare, 0.01 km²). The density of the region is at its highest in the centre, and decreases toward the edge; over 65% of residents live in the five core counties [18].

As seen in Fig. 8.3, Atlanta is a segregated region: the north side of the region and outer-ring suburbs are majority White, while the inner-ring suburbs, especially

![Fig. 8.3 Atlanta 2010 residential racial concentrations (Source created by author using data from Atlanta Regional Commission, US Census Bureau [18])]
on the south side, are majority Black. There are pockets of immigrants from Asia and Latin America in the north-eastern suburbs, and resettled African refugees in the eastern suburbs. According to the 2010 census, the region is 54 % White, 30 % Black, and 10 % Hispanic. The City of Atlanta is 53 % Black (an 8 % point decline since 2000), 36 % White, and 5 % Hispanic [18].

In a reversal of the previous pattern of White flight, the City of Atlanta has been gaining White residents since the 1990s. City neighbourhoods are being gentrified, and the city has demolished all of its public housing projects. Over the last decade the city gained 22,000 White residents and lost 30,000 Black ones [18]. At the same time, the number of people of colour and people in poverty living in the suburbs has increased. By 2010, 85 % of Atlanta’s poor were living in the suburbs [4].

The City of Atlanta is divided by income: high-income households, mostly Whites, live on the north and east sides; low-income households, primarily Black, live on the south and west sides. It has the highest income inequality of any city in the USA, with a Gini coefficient of 0.57 [19]. In 2009, over 22 % of City of Atlanta residents lived below the official poverty line. In contrast to the city, the region as a whole has less income inequality than the USA overall, and only 13.4 % of its population living below the poverty line. For a reference point, the poverty rate in the USA in 2010 was 15.1 % [5].

Infrastructure of Abundance and Scarcity

*Streets and Cars*

The City of Atlanta is at the crossroads of three major US interstate highways. Two north–south highways run at an angle and merge for the length of downtown Atlanta. Called the ‘Downtown Connector’, the combined highway is 16 lanes wide at points. In the centre of Atlanta, the combined highway intersects an east–west interstate highway that runs across the southern USA. The city is also surrounded by a ring road. Less than 2 % of Atlanta’s 42,312 km of road centre line (multiple lanes are not counted) are freeways. Local streets comprise the vast majority. But 36 % of the vehicle kilometres travelled (VKT) are on the freeways [1]. It is worth noting that this includes traffic generated outside of the region and travelling through Atlanta to destinations in other parts of the country.

Because of availability of data (or lack of it), the transport infrastructure supply for the Atlanta region is given for the slightly smaller MPO region, rather than for the MSA. According to the 2010 Texas Transportation Institute Urban Mobility Report, 74 % of peak VKT is driven under congested conditions, a situation which lasts for five hours a day. This results in an annual waste of 35 gallons (132 L) of fuel and 44 hours of delay per peak car traveller. The travel time index is 1.22, which means that it takes 22 % longer to travel during peak hours than in non-peak hours [17].
When people complain about traffic in the Atlanta region, they are for the most part complaining about the freeways and the major roads. Owing to the nature of Atlanta’s street network, there are often few alternative routes. The suburbs were built largely on a local, collector, arterial model; this system funnels all the traffic onto the main streets. Because of the prevalence of cul-de-sacs, in some places you have to drive a number of kilometres to get somewhere less than one kilometre away in linear distance. There is a small grid network in downtown Atlanta, but the city is divided by interstates and railway tracks. There are limited numbers of streets that cross all of the barriers.

This network design creates even more difficulties for pedestrian and bicycle trips. Not only are trips longer, but the limited routes available are dangerous because of high traffic volumes. There are few bicycle facilities, and sidewalks are in short supply along many major arterials, and in residential neighbourhoods too.

Compounding this lack of routes is the fact that people also drive long distances. In 2009 the VKT per person per day was 46; this is above the average of 40 VKT per person per day for the largest 100 metropolitan areas in the USA [1]. This can be attributed to the low density of the region, the lack of mixed land uses, and the spatial mismatch between jobs and housing.

The City of Atlanta contains the primary central business district of the region; however, there are major employment centres outside the city, primarily in the northern suburbs along the freeways, and to the south of the city at the airport. The job density for most of the region is extremely low. Despite having the highest-density job districts, only 17% of the 2.2 million jobs in the region are in the City of Atlanta [5].

The majority of people in the region cross county boundaries to work. Fewer than half of the employed residents of the City of Atlanta work in the city itself, and only 18% of people employed in the city live there [5].

The Atlanta region in 2009 had 3.6 million registered personal vehicles. This equates to an average of 2.2 vehicles per household in a region with an average household size of 2.7 people [1]. The abundance of vehicles contributes to more than just congestion in Atlanta—as noted above, the Atlanta metropolitan region is not in attainment with the USA’s air quality standards for ozone and particulate matter.

Over the past decade, Atlanta has averaged 24 days per year exceeding the standard for ozone, with a high of 40 days in 2011 [20]. High levels of ozone are unhealthy, and can trigger respiratory illnesses such as asthma. Asthma is the number one reason for admission to the Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta Pediatric Hospital, and 10% of children in Georgia suffer from asthma. In addition, transport sources are responsible for 36% of the greenhouse gas emissions in Georgia [14].

Public Transport

Atlanta does not have the public transport infrastructure to serve the majority of journeys people need to make—many trip origins/destinations are in locations not
served by public transport. There is only 77 km of railway line in the inner two counties, serving 38 stations. Local bus services are available in only four of the 20 counties in the MSA, and in one city outside those four counties. There are peak-hour-only commuter bus services from 12 counties to downtown and midtown Atlanta.

Only 12% of the Atlanta MPO region is within half a mile (0.8 km) of a public transport service. That 12% of the land area contains 58% of the jobs and 39% of the population. Travelling by public transport, the average Atlanta resident can reach only 22% of the region’s jobs within 90 min. This is 7% points below the average for the 100 largest regions in the USA; in a combined job and housing public transport accessibility index, Atlanta ranks 91st [2].

In addition to having limited coverage, the Atlanta public transport system runs on very low frequencies. The trains run every 15 min during peak hours and every 20 min during off-peak hours and on weekends. MARTA buses run on average every 30 min during peak hours, and every 45 min during off-peak hours. The buses in suburban counties are even less frequent. Some bus routes have no service at all on Sundays.

Given the lack of access to public transport, and the inconvenience of what access does exist, it is not surprising that very few trips are made by public transport in Atlanta. The average number of weekday public transport boardings in 2009 was 550,000 [1]. In a 2011 travel survey in the region, the personal vehicle was used for 83% of trips, and public transport for 3% [13].

The majority of people travelling by public transport in Atlanta are doing so because they have very few other options. On average, public transport passengers in the Atlanta region come from households earning 37% of the median household income. Half of MARTA passengers report “no car available” as their main reason for using public transport. MARTA passengers are 76% Black, 13% White, 8% Hispanic, and 4% other races [11].

Both the lack of access to a vehicle and low income limit the mobility of a household. Lower-income households make fewer trips than higher-income households. In the latest regional travel survey, households bringing in less than US$10,000 annually make 9.3 trips per day, compared to 12.7 trips per day for households whose income is over US$150,000 per year [13].

As a consequence of the limited number of destinations accessible by the system, together with the low frequency of the service, it is difficult to live in Atlanta without a vehicle. This means that majority of low-income households own cars, despite the great expense. Low- to medium-income households spend on average 32% of their income on transport, higher than the average 29% that they spend on housing [10].

There is a public transport option for high-income commuters who want to avoid the traffic. A Georgia state agency operates an express bus service from the suburbs to downtown and midtown Atlanta. Almost half (49%) of the express bus passengers have a household income of over US$75,000, compared to just 7% of MARTA passengers. This public transport service only serves the peak-hour work trips, and 97% of the passengers own at least one car [16].
Politics and Perceptions

There is a feeling in Atlanta that you cannot survive without a car—that no one in their right mind would choose to live there without one. In part this is due to the poor reputation of public transport in general and of MARTA in particular. The common wisdom amongst public transport promoters in Atlanta is that MARTA has an ‘image’ problem. The general public thinks that MARTA is unsafe, inconvenient and poorly managed. This perception is not always linked to reality, but persists because of media reports, the demographics of MARTA passengers and employees, and insufficient funding for public transport.

Historically, the public transport system in Atlanta has been seen as a social service for the poor, rather than as transport infrastructure. Over three quarters of MARTA passengers are Black. Perhaps in part because of this(11,170),(988,800), MARTA is considered to be unsafe. The media perpetuates this narrative by highlighting any crime committed on the public transport system.

One of the original arguments against extending public transport to the suburbs in the 1970s was that it would bring crime with it. Even in 2011, the Atlanta newspaper the Atlanta Journal-Constitution finds suburban leaders who are willing to say, “Criminals catch that kind of transportation into our county… and I’m not going to support anything that works toward increasing our crime either [6]”. Code words such as ‘criminals’ and ‘urban problems’ are used to mask blatant racism. While it still occurs, it is no longer socially acceptable in Atlanta for people to express explicitly racist opinions or discriminate against individuals based on their race.

However, racism is still ingrained in the institutions and funding structures of transport. MARTA is the largest public transport system in the USA that receives no funding from the state in which it is located. The Georgia legislature, which is dominated by rural and suburban White conservative politicians, funds highways, but refuses to fund public transport. At the same time it maintains control of the finances of MARTA, dictating how much of its own tax revenues the public transport agency can spend on operations and how much on capital expenses. This limits the level of service that MARTA can provide to its mostly low-income and Black passengers.

In the early 1960s, three regions in the USA started to plan new heavy rail subway systems. The new systems in Atlanta, Washington DC and San Francisco were considered as the renaissance of heavy rail in the USA. Owing to limited local funding, Atlanta only built 77 km of track. Meanwhile San Francisco and Washington DC continue to expand their systems. The Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) system in San Francisco is 167 km in length, and the Washington DC Metro 171 km. Given the same opportunity for federal funding to develop a regional rail transit system, it was perceptions and funding policy that led to a different outcome for Atlanta.

In addition to funding structures, the policymakers in Atlanta are orientated toward solving the problems of drivers, and not those of public transport passengers. The dominant transport narrative in Atlanta is that the problem with the region’s transport
system is congestion. When the problem is defined as congestion, the solutions considered are increased capacity, intelligent transport systems, and peak-hour public transport that serves commuters who own cars. A competing narrative is emerging that defines the transport problem as the lack of choice. However, this narrative does little to improve the mobility of those dependent on public transport, because it still focuses on providing public transport that serves the needs of car owners.

Conclusion

Atlanta is a transport city. It exists solely as a result of the intersections of transport infrastructure—first railway lines, and now interstates and the world’s busiest airport. However, ironically, despite the transport infrastructure, no one in the region is happy with their mobility. Both drivers and public transport passengers are frustrated by the lack of reliable travel times.

Atlanta is identified as a Hybrid City in the preliminary study (see “Chap. 2”), but it has the mentality of an Auto City. Drivers complain about long trips and slow traffic, but the option of not driving is much worse. Public transport services are limited and infrequent, entire neighbourhoods have either no sidewalks or a severe shortage of them, and bicycling is difficult because of the long distances involved and the limited number of alternative routes. Moreover, the low-density land-use patterns and indirect street network inhibit mobility regardless of the mode considered.

Atlanta did not somehow end up as the epitome of urban sprawl and car use just by chance. ‘The city too busy to hate’ was indeed busy, as the region grew at a fast pace without any physical impediments. However, this growth took place in the context of land-use/transport planning that permitted low-density development and spent large sums of money on building new roads and expanding existing ones. And while the battles of the civil rights movement were not fought in Atlanta, the impact of racism cannot be denied. White flight from the City of Atlanta fed the growth of the suburbs. The term ‘urban’ became code language for Black, poor, and unsafe. The funding and extent of public transport services was limited in order to contain the spread of ‘urban problems.’

This lack of investment in public transport created a barebones system that serves primarily people who—for reasons related to disability, income or age—have no other options. This leaves a segment of the population, who are primarily poor people of colour, with limited mobility and access to opportunity. It also makes owning or travelling in a private vehicle practically a necessity for the vast majority of Atlanta residents. The scarcity of public transport contributes to the abundance of vehicles, causing congestion and air pollution.

It has come to the point where business and political leaders recognise that in order to remain economically competitive, the region needs to invest in public transport. However, Atlanta’s period of rapid population growth was orientated to highways, and has left a low-density landscape that is less conducive to public
transport. In addition, Atlanta now has to catch-up in an environment characterised by fewer federal funding opportunities and higher construction costs.

If Atlanta wants to restore balance to its mobility, and end the twin problems of scarcity and abundance, it will have to change its perceptions of public transport and higher-density development—but this will require the underlying racism and inequity in the region’s mobility to be addressed.

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