



Imagineering Atlanta: The Politics of Place in the City of Dreams (Haymarket)

Charles Rutheiser

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In the age of decentralization, instant communications, and the subordination of locality to the demands of a globalizing market, contemporary cities have taken on place-less or a-geographic characters. They have become phantasmagorical landscapes. Atlanta, argues Charles Rutheiser, is in many ways paradigmatic of this generic urbanism. As such, it provides a fertile ground for investigating the play of culture, power and place within a “non-place urban realm.” Rutheiser uses the mobilization for the 1996 Olympics to talk about the uneven development of Atlanta’s landscape. Like other cities lacking any natural advantages, Atlanta’s reputation and built form have been regularly reconfigured by generations of entrepreneurs, politicians, journalists and assorted visionaries to create a service-oriented information city of global reach. Borrowing a term from Walt Disney, Rutheiser refers to these successive waves of organized and systematic promotion as linked, but not always well-co-ordinated acts of urban “imagineering.” Focusing on the historic core of the metropolitan area, Rutheiser shows how Atlanta has long been both a test bed for federal urban renewal and a playground for private capital. The city provides an object lesson in internal colonization and urban underdevelopment. Yet, however illustrative of general trends, Atlanta also represents a unique conjunction of universals and particulars; it exemplifies a reality quite unlike either New York or Los Angeles—two cities to which it has often been compared. This book thus adds an important case study to the emerging discourse on contemporary urbanism. It goes beyond providing another account of uneven development and the “theme-parking” of a North American city: Rutheiser reflects on how contemporary American society thinks about cities, and argues that, ultimately, despite the ever-increasing virtualization of day-to-day life, the obliteration of locality is never complete. There always remains some “here,” if only deep beneath the “urbane disguises,” in the interstices of social activity, in the contradictions of experience and in the residues of individual and collective memory.

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