

John Portman and Evolving Downtown Architecture

The Atlanta Architect Who Forever Changed Peachtree Street

Atlanta started with the railroads. The terminus stake marked not only the point at which the railroads would end, but the point from which the city would grow. The railroads were the center of life in the town that became Atlanta. From the time the stake was driven into the ground, businesses and homesteads could be found within a very short distance of the depot. But, that would not last long.

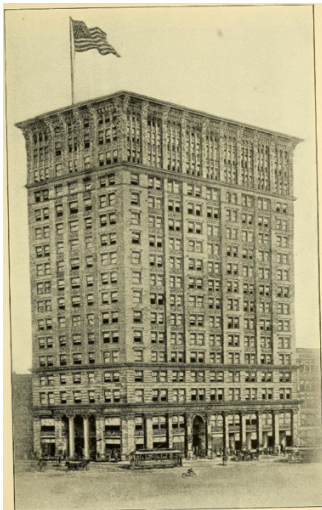
Even before the Civil War, the move northward along Peachtree Street had begun. Well-heeled Atlantans had begun to line the thoroughfare north of Five Points with grand homes. In the wake of the War, those residences that survived were joined by other, newer homes, including one built for future Atlanta mayor, John James.



*The c. 1869 Peachtree Street home of John James
Credit: gwtwscrapbook.com*

This growth continued into the twentieth century. Over time, businesses, including barbershops and hotels, dotted this part of Peachtree Street. By the late-1920s, the grand homes were giving way to commerce. John James' onetime home – which had long-served as Atlanta's first governor's mansion – had been razed. In its place, the 13-story Henry Grady Hotel had been constructed.

Before long, no signs of that section of Peachtree Street's past as a residential thoroughfare would remain. In its place were a growing variety of retailers, hotels, restaurants, and movie houses. Local business titans, including Asa Candler, Amos Rhodes, and J. J. Haverty, had built office towers that bordered the street. All manner of transportation – streetcars, automobiles, buses, and pedestrians – rushed along the street throughout the day. Peachtree Street was continuing – as it always had - to evolve with the times.



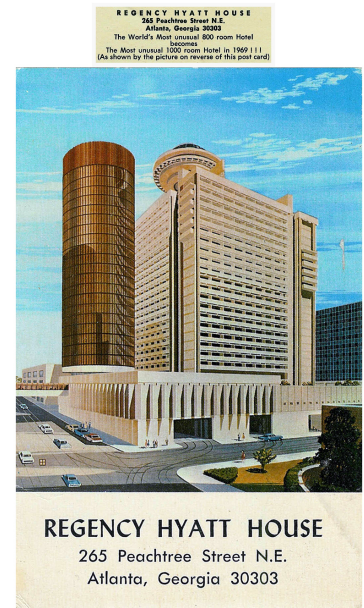
*The c. 1906 Candler building
Credit: Wikimedia Commons*

By the early 1960s, John Portman, a Georgia Tech-educated architect, had begun a project to transform downtown Atlanta, and Peachtree Street, in particular. One of Portman's earliest developments on Peachtree Street was the Merchandise Mart - now known as Building 1 of Americasmart. A wholesale marketplace, it was built in 1961. Today, it contains 22 floors of retail showrooms and offices and is the site of multiple markets every year. Over the next three decades, it would be joined by an Apparel Mart and a Gift Mart, built on adjacent blocks behind the Merchandise Mart.

The complex known as Peachtree Center is situated along Peachtree Street, between Baker and Ellis Streets. Built in stages between the 1960s and 1990s, it includes offices, hotels, retail spaces, and eateries. Situated along both sides of Peachtree Street, the buildings feature street-level entrances, and some are connected by a series of tunnel-like bridges.

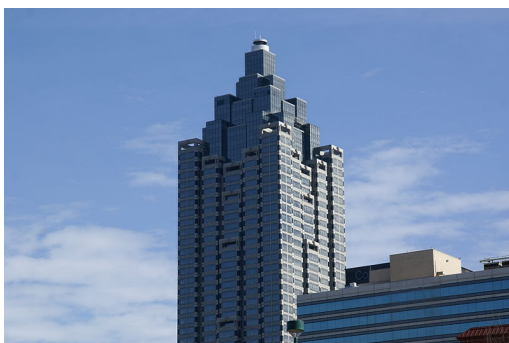
In 1967, Portman began work on a hotel addition to the complex, to be located at Peachtree and the then-Harris Street. For inspiration, it appears that he looked to one of his earlier commissions, Atlanta's Antoine Graves Highrise, a low-income housing development for senior citizens that he had designed in 1965. The apartments in the Highrise opened onto balcony-style corridors and were all grouped around interior, skylight-lit atriums.

When it came to designing the hotel, Portman again drew on the atrium concept. Entering from Peachtree Street, guests traversed a narrow, dimly-lit hallway that terminated in the bright, soaring atrium, lit by the skylights on the roof.. Glass-encased elevators – which Portman, himself, created - ferried guests to the nearly two dozen floors. The guestroom corridors opened not to enclosed hallways, but to views of the hotel's entire interior. Greenery flowed down from planters along every floor. On the roof, a revolving restaurant, the first of its kind in the city. The hotel – which was one of the first to operate under the Hyatt brand – was initially called the Regency Hyatt House, later the Hyatt Regency Atlanta. No hotel anywhere in the world had ever been designed like this. Visitors came simply to gawk at the new hotel and to ride in its elevators.



*Postcard for Regency Hyatt House
Credit: Atlanta Time Machine*

In the years to come, John Portman would build additional structures near his Peachtree Street complex. The Henry Grady Hotel, which had stood at the corner of Peachtree and Cain Streets since 1924, was demolished in 1972. To replace it, Portman had designed another, more modern hotel, highlighted by a gleaming, 73-story cylindrical tower containing 1,100 rooms. At over 700 feet high, the lodging that would come to be called the Westin Peachtree Plaza would be, at the time, the tallest building in Atlanta. When the Peachtree Plaza opened in 1976, it boasted the largest ballroom in Atlanta and featured a 7-story, open atrium that rose out of a small “indoor-lake.”



*Suntrust Plaza
Credit: Wikimedia Commons*

In the 1990s, Portman designed the building that anchors the northern end of his Peachtree Street development. Originally called Suntrust Plaza, it is a 60-story office complex. Once the headquarters of SunTrust Bank, it is now known as Truist Plaza, after the bank's merger.

Over the years, reactions to John Portman's transformation of Peachtree Street have been mixed. It was seen as innovative by some. To others, it was the developments were seen as being too insular, as if lacking “integration with the city.”

Peachtree Street continues to evolve. And, Portman's Peachtree Street developments are evolving with it. The Hyatt Regency and the Americasmart complex have undergone expansions and renovations. The Peachtree Plaza has seen updates, as well, including the removal of its "indoor lake." And, in recent years, the possibility has been raised of adding a residential component to Peachtree Center by converting one of its office towers to living space.

- Takeaways:**
1. Metamorphosis of Peachtree Street north of Five Points
 2. Open atrium was pioneering design
 3. Portman's style previously unseen in Atlanta ...and globally

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