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A REPORTER AT LARGE

## WHO BURNED ATLANTA?

*The real story of the all-new city.*

BY ALEXANDER STILLE

**A**T Tenth Street and Peachtree, in midtown Atlanta, the burned-out wreck of a three-story apartment house stands forlorn, catercorner to a sports bar and next to an empty lot. On a wrought-iron fence surrounding the building, signs declare it to be a historic landmark—the home of Margaret Mitchell, the author of “Gone with the Wind.” Anyone who nurses ideas of Mitchell’s having lived in a white-columned antebellum Tara, like her heroine, Scarlett O’Hara, will be disappointed to see the charred and roofless remains of this relatively undistinguished building, which Mitchell herself referred to as the Dump.

When I first began to spend time in Atlanta, about a year ago, the shell of the Mitchell house seemed to me a symbol of modern Atlanta: an example of the perilous decline of Atlanta’s once vital urban core, of the suburbanization of the city, and of the slash-and-burn development policy that had reduced Atlanta’s proudest street to an enormous strip mall. It also seemed symbolic of something more important: Atlanta’s uneasy relationship with its own past, which is a mixture of reverent nostalgia and total neglect.

Last year, a flurry of activity began at the Mitchell house. Inner walls rose up,

and a roof was added. As Atlanta prepared to show itself off to the world, it seemed to be grasping for a tenuous link to the past, albeit a fictional account of a romanticized antebellum life that had never existed. Things took an even stranger turn this spring, when, on the night of May 12th, someone broke into the house and started a fire, the second arsonous blaze to gut the building in the past two years. The mayor of the city, Bill Campbell, who is black, offered a ten-thousand-dollar reward to help find the perpetrator. Although the arsonist’s motive remains unknown, efforts to rebuild the house have met with protest in

*The ruined building (above) where Margaret Mitchell once lived is symbolic of Atlanta’s uneasy relationship with its own past.*

GARY PANTER

some quarters of Atlanta's black community, where the house is viewed as a symbol of racism and segregation—so that what began as a piece of historic preservation has intersected with the city's racial politics.

Atlanta is a city of contradictions. It is home to the largest concentration of black universities in the United States, has a rich and educated black middle class, and has been run by black mayors for the last twenty-four years; it is referred to as Black Mecca. But the Confederate battle flag still flies over the Georgia statehouse. Between 1915 and 1945, the city was the official headquarters of the Ku Klux Klan, and yet in the fifties and sixties it became the cradle of the civil-rights movement. Atlanta seems obsessed with its history: the heroes of the old Confederacy—Jefferson Davis, Robert E. Lee, and Stonewall Jackson—stand watch over the city from their perch on the side of Stone Mountain, Atlanta's version of Mt. Rushmore. When people in Atlanta speak about "the war," they are talking not about Vietnam or any of the wars of the last hundred years but about "the war of Northern aggression." Yet Atlanta is also an upstart city: it is much younger than Richmond, Charleston, or Savannah, and has a brash, openly commercial nature. While Savannah basks in its former glory, having chosen historic preservation over economic growth, Atlanta has become the boomtown of the fastest-growing region of the United States, going from one million to three and a half million people in about thirty years. Unfortunately, in its drive to become a major capital, it has lost much of its regional character, and looks remarkably like every other new American city: it could be Phoenix, Houston, Denver, or Seattle.

**F**IRE is a recurrent theme in the history of Atlanta. Its first and most famous fire was the one set by the Union Army's General William Tecumseh Sherman, after he captured the city, in 1864, during the Civil War. That fire, of course, is featured in "Gone with the Wind," and it occupies a large place in the city's collective imagination. When I asked Marva Brooks, a prominent black attorney on the board of trustees of the Mitchell house, why there are so few historic buildings in Atlanta, she said, "Sherman kind of took care of that," re-

peating a largely unquestioned credo held by Atlantans black and white. This cherished belief, however, is contradicted by every documentary and photographic history of the city. "It's an outright lie," Tommy Jones, a leading historic preservationist, says. Atlanta came into existence in 1837, as a railroad terminus, so there was not much of a city to destroy; the population when the war began was ninety-six hundred. But Atlanta had become strategically important, as the Confederacy built arms factories here to supply its troops through the city's railroad network. Sherman destroyed the business district, railroads, and munitions plants; contrary to legend, however, he spared many of the homes. Some four hundred buildings survived his stay, all but a handful of which are now gone.

In fact, the myth of Sherman's razing of the city has furnished Atlanta with a convenient alibi for its own wholesale bulldozing of most of its historic architecture. I went downtown with Jones, who, with his goatee and his black pickup truck, is a combination of good ole boy and fifties hipster. He is also a walking encyclopedia of Atlanta architecture: as we drove along Peachtree, we travelled through a city that exists now only in photographs, engravings, and Jones's imagination. He recalls a day in the late fifties when his parents took him to see the antebellum houses before they were levelled to make way for highway construction. "My parents were not preservationists, and there was no opposition to the highway, but they realized that something important was being lost and took me to see the houses before they were torn down," he said as we looked up at the massive highway overpass. More than thirty years later, the area still looks as if it had been recently dynamited; it is now a slum, with a few dishevelled-looking people wandering the streets as cars whiz by above their heads on the way to the airport.

We were in the heart of downtown Atlanta, just a few blocks south of City Hall, the State Capitol, and the site of the former train depot that was once Atlanta's lifeblood. Sherman burned the original depot, but a far grander station was built, which, with its tall, twin-towered façade, was Atlanta's version of Notre-Dame. Then, in 1978, Atlanta tore down the station, though it was widely acknowledged to be among the city's architectural glories. (The bowels of the old

railroad system have been transformed into a tacky subterranean mall called Underground Atlanta.) About a hundred yards away is the beginning of Peachtree Street, which cuts through the middle of the city and continues north for more than ten miles. "Our parents used to say that Peachtree went all the way north to New York," an older Atlantan told me. It starts in the financial and hotel district, passes through midtown (where Margaret Mitchell and most well-to-do Atlantans used to live), travels on to the fashionable shopping malls of Buckhead, and then, crossing the city limits, enters the ghastly suburban developments that have grown up around Atlanta. In other words, Peachtree contains the history of Atlanta, from terminus to suburban sprawl.

In the nineteenth century, most of the best homes in Atlanta were downtown. Sherman and his troops not only did not destroy the houses here; they stayed in them. Sherman himself requisitioned the mansion of John Neal, and he left it intact, only to have the government of Atlanta knock it down, in 1928, to make way for its own City Hall. One of Sherman's officers stayed in the Austin Leyden house, a spectacular Greek Revival home with white columns on three sides. The Leyden house also survived the Civil War, but it did not survive Asa G. Candler, Sr., the founder of the Coca-Cola Company, who bought the house in 1912 and tore it down, even though he had no plans to build anything there himself. He felt that the land was more valuable as an empty lot. And he was probably right. He eventually sold the plot to Macy's, and the department store that was built on the site still stands there—on Peachtree between Ellis and Cain Streets.

In "Gone with the Wind," Scarlett O'Hara lived on this same stretch of Peachtree after she married Rhett Butler. Photographs from the late nineteenth century show the block still lined with magnificent mansions, which, one by one, were levelled in favor of commercial real estate; ironically, they gave way to multistory office buildings and hotels that were in many cases distinguished buildings themselves and were levelled in their turn. As we drove along Peachtree, I had the book "Classic Atlanta" in hand, and I could see that virtually all the buildings shown on the skyline from the

twenties and thirties are gone: the Piedmont, the Ansley, the Arragon, the Fourth National Bank, the Hebrew Orphans' Home. Atlanta, city of shopping malls, has been unkind even to its own progeny: the Peachtree Arcade—one of America's first malls, which ran between Peachtree and Broad Streets—was built in 1917 and demolished in 1964.

As downtown Peachtree became commercialized, Atlantans began building grand houses farther up the street, in the midtown area. Among them was Eugene Mitchell, who built a large, white-columned mansion on Peachtree just north of Seventeenth. Margaret Mitchell grew up there, and it may well have served as a model for Tara. With the installation of trolley cars in the late nineteenth century and then the advent of the automobile, Atlantans kept moving north—up Peachtree, out to Buckhead, which is now the principal refuge of white, wealthy Atlanta. And, in the frenzy of deconstruction and construction which accompanied the white flight of the sixties and seventies—office buildings went up as houses and apartments went down—most of the buildings associated with Margaret Mitchell, including her childhood home, met the wrecking ball.

"This is a town with virtually no historical sentiment, all the notions of 'Gone with the Wind' notwithstanding," Rick Beard, the director of the Atlanta

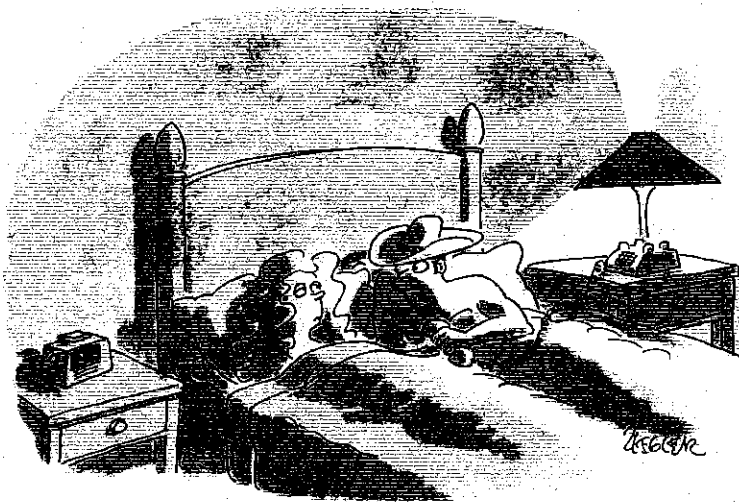
History Center, told me. "If there are some dollars to be made in knocking something down and building something new, the attitude is: Let's do it."

ATLANTA'S relentlessly commercial attitude has, however, been the key to its extraordinary success. Atlanta has always looked to the future, occasionally selling itself as something it was not but managed, miraculously, to become. It deliberately set out to have the capital moved from Milledgeville to Atlanta, in 1868, by offering to build the state government whatever buildings it wanted within the next ten years. The scheme worked: Milledgeville is now a small, handsome, antebellum town, and Atlanta is a rich suburban metropolis. In 1926, Atlanta built an airport in the hope of becoming a major federal postal route and then wooed the Postmaster General until he agreed to the plan. In 1964, the city built a sports stadium even though it had no team, and used the stadium to lure the Milwaukee Braves to the South. And now the city has sold itself to the International Olympic Committee as a world capital, though it is still a fairly provincial Southern city. Yet by hosting the Games it may become the international center it claims to be. As one writer has put it, "If New York is the Big Apple, and New Orleans is the Big Easy, Atlanta is the Big Hustle."

In fact, the city's business-minded pragmatism is probably what prevented it from becoming the site of riots during the sixties. The business community decided that it would be bad for the city's image if it should turn into the next Selma or Birmingham, and urged the white-dominated government to compromise on integration. The city's black leaders have followed in this pragmatic tradition, working hard to keep Atlanta's white business community happy. Not surprisingly, their attitude toward development and historic preservation has been similar. In 1980, Atlanta's first black mayor, Maynard Jackson, allowed the gorgeous turn-of-the-century Carnegie Library to be demolished and replaced with a functional but anonymous-looking concrete building. When the civil-rights leader Andrew Young was mayor, in the late eighties, he favored a demolition program in order to encourage A.T. & T. to build a major office tower in midtown. Slated for destruction was a building known as the Castle, a stone pseudo fortress that is one of the relatively few early-twentieth-century mansions left in midtown. "Why would anyone want to keep that hunka junk?" Young said, in a remark that typified Atlanta's growth strategy. A compromise was worked out that allowed A.T. & T. to build its tower—a postmodern skyscraper—but spared the "hunka junk,"

which sits empty and unused, looking rather out of place, on the corner of Peachtree and Fourteenth Streets, just a few blocks up from the Dump. It was Young, perhaps still smarting from criticism prompted by his cavalier remark, who in 1989 allowed the Mitchell house to be declared a historic landmark.

THIS was the first significant victory for Mary Rose Taylor, the chairman of the Margaret Mitchell House, Inc., foundation, who has championed the efforts to save the house. Taylor looks like a typical Buckhead society matron: a former University of North Carolina homecoming queen, she is tall, blond,



"That was my horse. He's in a whole passel of trouble, and I gotta go."

carefully coiffed, and married to a successful real-estate developer. But she considers herself a product of the sixties and the civil-rights movement. A former television journalist, she worked for "60 Minutes" in the late sixties, was once married to the talk-show host Charlie Rose, and has been an anchorwoman for one of Atlanta's main television stations. She played an important role in Mayor Campbell's 1994 election campaign. "I see the Mitchell house and the debate surrounding it as a symbol of Atlanta's inability to deal with its past," she says. "I want to use the past to stimulate greater candor about racial relations, not to glorify the antebellum South."

Taylor had never read "Gone with the Wind" before moving to Atlanta, in 1980, and hadn't seen the movie since her first date, at the age of sixteen, in 1961. She didn't learn about the existence of the house until 1987, and was surprised to discover that there was no monument commemorating Mitchell. After all, the book has sold some thirty million copies, and the movie has been seen by hundreds of millions. Along with Coca-Cola, "Gone with the Wind" has been Atlanta's most successful export product and is potentially one of its biggest tourist attractions. (Gung-ho tourists have been known to visit Oakland Cemetery in search of the grave of Scarlett O'Hara.)

Mitchell's apartment house on Peachtree and Tenth Street dates back to 1899, Taylor tells me. Mitchell moved into an apartment on the ground floor in 1925 (she was a writer for the *Atlanta Journal* at the time), and she wrote most of "Gone with the Wind" there, before moving out, in 1932. "It was an elegant nineteenth-century home," Taylor says. "This area was still very attractive and fashionable when Margaret lived here. She called it the Dump, but that was part of her off-the-cuff humor. She referred to her office as the Black Hole of Calcutta and to the café where she ate lunch as the Roachery."

The house became a hippie hangout in the sixties, and in 1979 it was abandoned. In her effort to save it, Taylor formed a not-for-profit organization in 1990. "Andy Young advised me to form a board that was fifty per cent African-American and sixty per cent female," Taylor says. "But I think I probably would have done that anyway. Margaret

Mitchell was born into a segregated Atlanta and died in a segregated Atlanta. We have no intention of hiding that, but we also want to show how she evolved over the course of her life."

When Mitchell attended Smith College, after the First World War, she protested vehemently upon being put in the same classroom with a black student. But in the last years of her life she quietly gave scholarship money for students at Morehouse College, one of Atlanta's best black schools, and also worked to improve conditions in one of the city's black hospitals. (Dr. Otis Smith, a physician who is vice-chairman of the Mitchell-house board of trustees, was a beneficiary of those scholarships.) "As a journalist, I was interested in sorting out what is myth and what is fact," Taylor says. "People have a hard time separating the book

from the movie. Only about a hundred pages of the book take place on the plantation; all the rest takes place in Atlanta. The book was written in the twenties, a time of wealth and plenty, but it came out during the Depression, and its story of people overcoming defeat made a huge impression on people. When it first came out, in 1936, it was a huge success, both popular and critical, and won the Pulitzer Prize. It was banned in Nazi Germany and in the Iron Curtain countries, because it was seen as a celebration of the individual over the state." Taylor sees the book as the story of Atlanta itself, a city that overcame adversity and rebuilt itself from the ashes of war. While not everyone will agree with her comparison of it to "War and Peace," the book is vastly superior to the rapid caricature presented in the movie. It contains much sharp-eyed social satire, and in many ways Scarlett O'Hara—energetic and superficial, resourceful and unscrupulous—is a symbol of Atlanta and the New South, determined never to go hungry again.

After the house received landmark designation, Taylor had trouble finding corporate sponsors for the renovation. But when the building was hit by its first fire, in 1994, she was able to persuade the German automaker Daimler-Benz to contribute four and a half million dollars to redo it. Local American businesses appear reluctant to associate themselves with a project that some perceive as a symbol of racism, but, despite mixed

feelings in the black community, three Atlanta mayors—Young, Jackson (who returned to office in 1990), and Campbell—have all stood by it, with characteristic Atlantian pragmatism. If a German company wants to invest several million dollars in creating a lucrative tourist attraction in our city, why fight it? The building was set to reopen this summer along with the Olympic Games—until the recent arson.

ALTHOUGH the house was insured and Taylor fully intends to rebuild, the fire has renewed the discussion about an issue that had appeared settled. "I was not sorry to see The Margaret Mitchell Home burn to the ground," Pearl Cleage, a prominent Atlanta playwright, declared in a controversial article in *The Atlanta Tribune*, a local black magazine. "I don't know who did it. I've never advocated arson, and I was out of town when the blaze ignited. But, I was, in fact, delighted that someone had taken direct action against what I consider to be an insult of monumental proportions to African-American people." Cleage was particularly upset that the Mayor had offered public money to help catch the perpetrator and that, in his public expressions of distress, he had seemed to compare the Mitchell-house fire to Sherman's burning of Atlanta. "We've been scarred by fire in the past," the Mayor said. "We've risen from it and we'll go forward again."

"He can't be talking about that time Gen. Sherman marched through Georgia as part of the effort to defeat the Confederacy, and with it, the institution of slavery, can he?" Cleage wrote.

After the article, Cleage says, she received numerous phone calls from blacks, saying, "Thank God somebody said that." She says, "I told them, 'Why don't you say so publicly?' The whole Mitchell-house business epitomizes the contradictions of Atlanta. You can't expect conscious black people to be happy about a memorial to something that glorifies a time when we were slaves. But there's this Southern politeness, and no one says what they really think."

Like most people in Atlanta, Cleage, a light-skinned black woman in her forties with close-cropped hair, came from somewhere else. She grew up in Detroit



and moved here in 1969, with her first husband, Michael Lomax, who is now one of the city's leading radical black politicians. She graduated from Spelman College, Atlanta's prestigious college for black women, and threw herself into the city's political life. "It was a wonderful time. Maynard Jackson was deputy mayor, and it was clear that he was going to be the city's next mayor," she tells me over coffee at a diner on Peachtree and Fourteenth. "It looked as if black people were finally going to run their city and take control of their destiny. I volunteered for Jackson's campaign, and he then made me his press secretary. After a few years, I ran screaming from City Hall. We were the political majority, but the economic structure was still firmly in the hands of white males. I was bothered by the speed with which Atlanta's black leaders became comfortable with this. They quickly developed the mentality that Atlanta's white leaders had always had: If it's good for business, it's good for Atlanta."

The Mitchell house seems to Cleage a part of this tradition—what she views as black Atlanta turning itself inside out to please the white business establishment. "The fact that there are black people on the Mitchell-house board is a complete Atlanta moment, typical of the weird alliances that occur in this city," she says. "This is a city with huge problems. Poverty, kids who graduate from high school who can't read, drugs, unemployment, teen pregnancy. But that city receives very little attention. The problem is not how do we create a city with no poor people but how do we get them off the streets for the Olympics." In fact, Atlanta's Task Force for the Homeless has helped several plaintiffs win a court injunction against the city for sweeping the homeless off the streets in recent months. "Everybody here, black and white, sounds like the president of the chamber of commerce," Cleage goes on. "When I first moved here, I lived in a building with a lot of little old black ladies who had grown up in segregation and were totally illiterate, but when it came to Atlanta it would be 'Let's pretend that Atlanta is a perfect paradise.' If all the effort that goes into making Atlanta *seem* like the perfect place went into actually making Atlanta

a perfect place, we would be a hell of a lot better off."

Despite her firebrand views about the Mitchell house, Cleage is as polite as the moderate black leaders she criticizes. Although she declined to become a consultant to the Mitchell-house project, she did meet with Taylor and one of the researchers preparing an exhibition at the house, so that the exhibition would take into account black hostility to "Gone with the Wind." Cleage, whether she likes it or not, is part of Atlanta's impressive black power elite. She complains about the city's relentless boosterism, but as we end our conversation she gives way to a sudden burst of civic pride: "There are so many smart, strong black people here. If we can't fix things in Atlanta, we're in real trouble. I'm going to keep making a fuss until they do it right."

**I**N many ways, black Atlanta has done a better job of preserving its past than the white population has. In the early fifties, the Metropolitan Atlanta Planning Commission proposed bulldozing Auburn Avenue, sometimes referred to as "black Peachtree," which was the site of many thriving black businesses, churches, and middle-class homes, including the house where Martin Luther King, Jr., was born and the Ebenezer Baptist Church, where both he and his father preached. The black community protested the development plan vigorously, and John Wesley Dobbs, one of the city's black leaders, made an impassioned speech in favor of saving the street. "The acquisition of this kind of wealth along Auburn Avenue has caused us to call it Sweet Auburn, a name known among Negroes throughout America as a symbol of the development of Negro business in Atlanta," he said. "Your proposed plan would destroy . . . two generations of sweat and toil." The speech helped turned the tide against the demolition plan.

Nevertheless, during the seventies and eighties Auburn Avenue gradually deteriorated, even during the tenure of Mayor Jackson, who is Dobbs's grandson. Black Atlantans moved out to the suburbs, creating their own subdivisions, tract houses, and imitation antebellum mansions south and west of the city, which mirror those to the north and east

in everything but the skin color of their inhabitants. Many of the buildings around the King home—handsome Victorian and Queen Anne-style houses—became dilapidated.

Recently, however, Auburn Avenue has been enjoying a significant renaissance. Many of the houses on the blocks near the King home have been renovated in the last few years. The renovations were not sponsored by the Olympic Committee, but the city's political leaders were able to use the deadline of the Games to lobby Congress. "We flew up to Washington and met with every senator and congressman we could get in to see," recalls Shirley Franklin, a black woman in her fifties who is a senior policy adviser on the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games and, before that, was the chief aide to Andrew Young at City Hall. "We said, 'How is it going to look when we have millions of people coming from around the world and the whole area around the King Center is in this condition?' Franklin's contingent got a special appropriation of eleven million dollars for the Parks Service, which built a visitors' center, containing a well-presented overview of King's life and career. Another two million dollars has gone into renovating the houses nearby, and the Parks Service was careful not to displace the old tenants: several wizened black ladies now sit out on their porches watching as armies of tourists march up and down Auburn.

Although Sweet Auburn has become a kind of public showcase of black Atlanta, the renovations there have had a positive ripple effect in the surrounding neighborhood, where young black professionals have started to move in. Until recently, however, in the eyes of black Atlanta old usually did not mean good. "Take the Fox Theatre as an example," Franklin says, referring to the Moorish-style theatre on Peachtree, which barely escaped the demolition that the other major theatres suffered. "There was strong sentiment for tearing it down. It was a segregated theatre, and black people had to sit up in the balcony. But Maynard [Jackson] felt that it had an architectural value that had to be saved. I think that was a turning point. People realized that we can build something new and functional and be more respectful of the old."

Franklin participated in the original



debate over saving the Margaret Mitchell house. "Andy Young felt it was important to keep the building," she says. "But I would not encourage including 'Gone with the Wind' in the opening ceremonies of the Olympics. The Margaret Mitchell house and the Cyclorama have a place in Southern history that we need to understand."

The Cyclorama—a huge circular painting of the Battle of Atlanta—is an example of a successful mastering of the past. When I first visited Atlanta, in 1982, the painting had appeared to me to be an unabashed apology for the Confederacy. Housed in a neoclassical pavilion in Grant Park, it is exhibited in a huge revolving auditorium, so the audience is gradually led through the narrative of the battle. The show is preceded by a brief introductory video, and on my first visit the video was hopelessly one-

sided and full of references to brave Rebel charges repelling the Northern intruders: the Confederates seemed to win every battle, so it nearly came as a surprise when you heard that Atlanta had fallen and was cruelly burned to the ground. But I visited the Cyclorama again last month, and this time, as the video began, I heard the unmistakable baritone of the black actor James Earl Jones. The narration was far more measured, and the battle was presented simply as a piece of military history. Afterward, a black attendant made a short speech, pointing out various things in the painting, including the fact that there was only one black figure visible, even though there had been some two hundred thousand black soldiers fighting for the Union cause. She also pointed out that the painting had been commissioned by a Northern officer who had fought in the battle (depicted heroically charging on a brave steed toward the line of fire) and hoped to use the picture to launch a campaign for Vice-President. Thus the black government of Atlanta has subtly altered the Cyclorama by historicizing it, defusing what had been a hot political issue when the painting was in need of major restoration, in the early seventies. Jackson's press secretary at the time, Pearl Cleage, advocated tearing it down. Jackson de-



*"This is a very impressive manifesto."*

cid ed otherwise, and that precedent was critical in his decision to save the Mitchell house, as he later told Mary Rose Taylor. "I asked Maynard why he was so clear about all this," Taylor says, "and he told me this story. 'When I was struggling with the Cyclorama restoration, an old black politician, John Calhoun, came up to me and said, 'Maynard, let's not lose perspective on this. Just remember who won the war.''"

**B**EFORE leaving Atlanta, I paid a call on Harold Hudgins, one of the men who have done the most to determine the look of modern Atlanta. Hudgins is the president of Hudgins & Company, Demolition Specialists—the company that demolished the old railroad station, the Loew's Grand Theatre, the old Atlanta Brewery, the Whitehead Building, the Atlanta Peachtree Arcade, Concordia Hall, the Forsythe Building, the old Governor's Mansion, and at least a couple of apartment buildings where Margaret Mitchell once lived. "I figure we've probably wrecked eighty per cent of the buildings in Atlanta," he says.

Hudgins is a native Georgian whose family has lived in De Kalb County since 1835, and he still lives there, about eight miles east of downtown Atlanta, in the town of Decatur. His offices are in a bar-

ren old industrial area of Atlanta that has the look of a junk yard. Here lie the remains of the city's architectural past. In a lot outside the company's back door sits a wooden gazebo from a house he recently tore down. "Actually found a buyer for that," he says. Inside, chandeliers from some of Atlanta's finest homes hang from the ceiling in the waiting room, which is decorated in antique linoleum and fake wood panelling. Hudgins, who is almost seventy, is tall and rangy and still vigorous-looking. He began working with his father when he was eleven, and he has a folksy redneck manner that masks a degree in business administration and a considerable amount of native shrewdness.

"My father wrecked his first building in 1928," he tells me. "It was the Arragon Hotel. He had no experience in that kind of work, and I once asked him why he did it. 'Because I like to eat,' he said." Nearly half a century later—in 1973, two years after his father's death—I Hudgins was asked to destroy the Collier Building, which had replaced the Arragon. "It was a five-story building of reinforced concrete," he recalls. "I was wandering down in the basement and I saw a large object that said 'Arragon Hotel.' It was the cornerstone of the old building, the first my

father wrecked. I kept that." More preservation-minded than most Atlantans, Hudgins has saved bits and pieces of many of the buildings he has razed. "I collect heads," he says. "I'm talking about gargoyles. Don't find much of that anymore."

Reviewing with Hudgins the main demolition projects of his career is like studying the architectural history of Atlanta in reverse. He remembers the Kimball House hotel ("It was a very well-made building—took a hundred and five days to demolish") and Concordia Hall: "A four-story brick structure, very—what's the word?—ornate. Built after Sherman came through. That's where Woodrow Wilson practiced law. I wish I had saved pieces of all of them."

Does he regret tearing down so many beautiful buildings? "We don't make the decisions—we are just the doers of the dastardly deed," he replies. "I don't believe that it would have made economic sense to renovate all those buildings. Obviously, the people who made the decision to pull the plug did so on an economic basis." But in the last fifteen years Hudgins has been getting fewer wrecking jobs and more requests for limited demolition, as part of renovation. "It changed because we started giving tax write-offs to people to renovate buildings rather than tear them down," he explains. "Just about everything in life has an economic factor."

As he shows me out, Hudgins takes me to see some remains of the Loew's Grand Theatre, where "Gone with the Wind" had its world premiere, in 1939. He saved thirty-five thousand bricks from the old building; he has kept them for eighteen years. Now Hudgins' moment has arrived, along with Atlanta's: he wants to market the bricks as souvenirs. "Problem is, I'm just getting this thing going. I'm a year too late. The story of my life." He hands me a brochure. He has formed a company called Historic Keepsakes, Inc., and plans to sell the bricks for \$49.95 each. If he sells all of them, the proceeds will come to \$1,748,250. "A grand piece of Atlanta's past," the brochure reads, "a Gone With the Wind memento, a must for collectors, or perhaps a distinctive gift for the person 'who has everything.' Each brick . . . comes with a notarized Certificate of Authenticity."

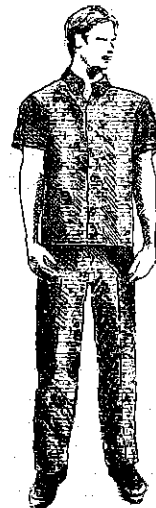
Let the Games begin. ♦

SKETCHBOOK · BY MICHAEL ROBERTS  
LOOKS BRIEFLY NOTED

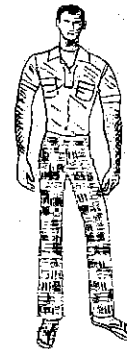
*A Preview of the New York  
Menswear Collections for Spring  
and Summer '97*



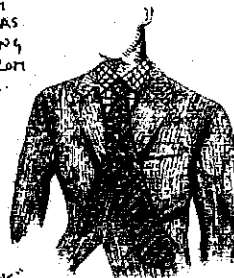
RALPH LAUREN'S  
TWEED LINER SUIT  
FOR NEXT SPRING  
MASQUERADES AS  
A WINTERY-LOOKING  
THREE-PIECE FROM  
A PREVIOUS ERA.



THE MODELS  
AT A CASTING IN  
RICHARD EDWARDS'  
SOHO SHOWROOM  
TRY ON SOME  
NINETEEN-FIFTIES-  
STYLE SHIRTS  
AND MATCHING  
TROUSERS.  
"I LOOK LIKE  
A GAS-PUMP  
ATTENDANT,"  
SAYS THADEN  
FROM FORD MEN.



THE DESIGNER  
GENE MEYER'S  
SEE-THROUGH NYLON  
SHIRTS, PATTERNED  
PANTS, FLIP-FLOPS,  
AND GOLD NECK  
CHAINS REMIND  
HIM OF CERTAIN  
MEN HE ONCE SAW  
IN ROME.



"SOOP! IS  
ALWAYS IN A  
MORE PLAYFUL  
MOOD FOR SPRING,"  
SAYS HIS P.R., EXPLAINING WHY  
THE DESIGNER WILL BE SHOWING TIES  
DANGLING OUTSIDE SUIT JACKETS AS A TREND.



"IT'S IMPOSSIBLE FOR  
ME TO LOOK AT  
SYNTHETICS FOR SUMMER,"  
SAYS JOSEPH ABBOLD,  
WHOSE TRADITIONALLY  
STYLED COLLECTION RUNS  
THE GAMUT FROM  
BEIGE TO GRAY.