

# Heart of Atlanta can't be allowed to wither and die

By David F. Haddow

**M**uch has been written lately about the plight of Five Points and Rich's decision to close its flagship store. News reports have expressed both surprise and foreboding, while some editorials have served up naive panaceas for the central city's ills.

The decline of Five Points and the departure of Rich's have been in the works a long time. Neither is a surprise. Why have so many people not noticed until now? The sad truth is that they have not been around to notice, or they simply chose to ignore the symptoms.

The central business district's dominance began to erode in the mid-1960s, and the focus shifted northward along Peachtree Street. This trend has simply gained momentum in recent years, finally sounding an alarm.

## The rot could spread

Why should we care? Many Atlantans never go Downtown except to occasional events at The Omni or to visit the new Underground. Besides, not all of Downtown is wasting away. The government district con-

tinues to expand, and Underground just triumphantly celebrated its second birthday. A skyscraper recently opened across from Macy's, and John Portman's biggest edifice is rising at the north end. Midtown is fast merging with Downtown, providing ample room for future development.

The reason we should care is that Downtown Atlanta is rotten at the core. Amid its vital parts are an area known as Fairlie-Poplar, once a thriving office, hotel and entertainment district. What was once Downtown's pulse is now a flickering light.

If the light goes out, the heart of Downtown will be greatly endangered. The victims could be Underground, the convention industry, Georgia State University, property owners and the city's tax digest.

## Area needs a new niche

The gradual abandonment of Five Points can't be cured by trying to recapture the past. Irreversible market forces and natural life cycles have erased its traditional role. The challenge is to find a viable new niche for the Downtown core by establishing links to the activity centers that surround it. Georgia State

Atlanta Market Center, the Georgia World Congress Center, the government district, Peachtree Center and the convention-hotel district.

Here are some of the ways to forge those links:

► Georgia State should establish a College for the Performing Arts in Fairlie-Poplar to anchor a sorely needed arts district. Other arts-related groups should move their offices there. Some events of the Cultural Olympiad that precedes the 1996 Summer Olympics should be housed in Fairlie-Poplar to reinforce this arts theme.

► Some of the wholesalers and manufacturers in the Atlanta Market Center should establish a retail presence in Fairlie-Poplar. This could lead to the emergence of a discount shopping district and design center that would attract residents and visitors.

► The various governmental entities should satisfy their office needs through lease or purchase of buildings in the Five Points area. The city of Atlanta must lead by example, keeping its office-related activities concentrated in the Downtown core.

► Woodruff Park should be expanded southward to Underground. This would enhance the physical environment and provide better links between Five Points, Underground and Georgia State.

► Tax and other financial incentives should be instituted to encourage housing in Fairlie-Poplar, initially through reuse of existing

storefronts, empty office buildings and marginal hotels are the logical places to start. Students, artists and other "urban pioneers" would be the first residents.

## It'll take commitment

The formation of a Five Points Task Force by Central Atlanta Progress is a long-awaited recognition of the need for action. The political and business muscle of this group must be directed at realistic remedies—not lofty visions or false cures, such as the grandiose redevelopment scheme for Fairlie-Poplar that was publicized a few years ago. A good beginning would be a public statement by task force members of their commitment to remain in Five Points.

Mayor Maynard Jackson is the key. So much depends on a firm commitment from the city of Atlanta to maintain a safe and clean environment and to rally the support of private business interests. The revitalization of Five Points should become Mayor Jackson's Underground.

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