

The Atlanta Hospitable Ethic:  
How A Southern City Approaches Hospitality with A Global  
View Pt. 1  
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The other day, I was thinking about how on the exterior - the pomp and circumstance surrounding the College Football Playoff National Championship Game seemed so... lackluster. I didn't hear about many events. I didn't see very many fans and the banners came and went less captivantly than even Chicken Pluckers. Then, I saw a long-winded tweet from a city agency about the weekend and all of the work that went into coordinating. Again, given my exterior perspective, I could respect it. It also *was* incredibly cold. It did make me genuinely curious, however, about whether or not people actually had a good time. I'm sure the game was great, but how would I actually measure that if I wanted to? Did people genuinely enjoy their time here? That's really the most important indicator when it comes to experiences in what I refer to specifically as hospitality entertainment. Except, we know that it's not. The most important measure of our wide-spread touristic efforts is revenue. We want to make money. We need to. When it comes to the level of investment we've made in Atlanta in recent years, generating profit is undoubtedly in our best and highest interest.

We should have a general desire to - yes, make money, but to also create authentically meaningful cultural engagements for people who come to visit us. The only way to do that is by recognizing that money is the second most important element in hospitality. Applied empathy (through education) is the first. We know how our emotions are connected to our consumer habits, but we have to use our understanding of that relationship to assess and improve what, we, as collective hosts have to offer. We need to establish a standard, based on applied measurable empathy, to serve as a city-wide gauge for international hospitality readiness. By applying a system like this to our hospitable experience design, we create a common benchmark that will allow us to determine if the threshold that we want our guests to reach is being met. The better our guests genuinely feel, the more we open our business community to increased earning potential. The more we make, the more competitive our tourism sector becomes. And the compound impact of higher revenues and higher quality human experiences will surely lay an innovative, foundational example, that - like with everything else from Atlanta - the world is sure to follow.

Almost 30 years after the Olympics, Atlanta has positioned itself as a global powerhouse across various industries. Sectors like transportation, supply chain management, and health sciences continue to not only produce, but maintain unparalleled production - and growth in some cases. One of the most obvious examples is the absolute burgeoning of Atlanta's (and Georgia's) film and television enterprise. Another maybe not so obvious example is the hospitality business - specifically food and restaurants. There have been signs, both subtle and not so subtle, that our foothold in the market is not only fair - but increasing in significant ways: so much so that food processing companies make up GA's top manufacturing class (1). First and foremost, Gainesville, GA has been widely recognized as the Poultry Capital of the World since the late 1940s (2). National companies like Chick-Fil-A and Waffle House were founded - and are based here. Even international snack giant Frito Lay has roots in Atlanta (3). Independent of these pretty massive brands, the list does indeed go on in a way that illustrates that Atlanta, and the nearby markets, are no stranger to the food business.

Alongside the food manufacturing business, recently the Atlanta restaurant scene has been brought to the forefront of some dialogue - both voluntarily and involuntarily. Tourism has a lot to do with that - which will come up again. It has created pathways for commerce unlike any other, and the expansion is only poised to continue. The exposure is going to increase. And our food presence, is inherently going to continue to expand with it. Speaking of exposure, we're only a little over a year past our first ever round of entries in the Michelin Guide (4). While the ACVB is fulfilling that capital obligation over the course of a three year deal, we as a city are now paying for that in other ways - merely by association. It appears that someone is trying to edify our food profile from a style perspective. But we also have to take the substance part just as seriously. We have to capture chance we're being given to actively lead in the ways of hospitality entertainment. Through the basic human need for food, Atlanta has not only the opportunity to distinguish itself on the world's stage - but also several obligations.

If we're not sending our food out to people; we're having people come here to have it. Either way, our systems of nourishing others, and ourselves, are, and will be under the world's microscope even more and we need to be prepared for it. Population numbers spanning the past decade will show that, even outside of tourism, Atlanta has absolutely drawn a crowd. People have been moving here in swaths. Since 2020, Atlanta is fifth highest in employment base increase in the country (5). According to a Fortune 500 report last year, Atlanta currently ranks eighth in country for Fortune 500 companies (6). And if

population growth is merely one side of the coin; job creation is the other. We're inviting businesses in and the people that come with them. We've created suitable environments for all businesses for sure, but the impact of the film and tv industry is a peak all its own and has resulted in a number of shifts in the city's landscape. Since the signing of the 2008 HB1100, film and television production has been an immense part of the Atlanta economy - somewhere along the lines of \$24 billion dollars worth of revenue and approximately 60,000 jobs in 2022 alone (7, 8). And in our courting of the silver screen, we've indirectly attracted a growing demographic of professionals and families. Of all the reasons to relocate, most of the transplants between 2022 and 2023 not only came for jobs - but came from either New York or California (9). But they are coming from all over. So whatever Atlanta is doing to pull people in is working.

We are cultivating a certain economic gravity and we're attracting a ton of people. As a result, Atlanta - and its surrounding areas to a great extent - is also investing large amounts of resources on the necessary spaces to sustain them. In a very practical instance, the thing about people coming here to work is that they have to have somewhere to live. So it makes sense that we're building apartments at a nationally aggressive rate with the fifth most apartment deliveries in the country last year (10). A one and a half mile stretch of Midtown alone has seen upwards of 8 billion dollars worth of development since 2018 (11). We are absolutely building it. And they are coming. We're building places for people to work and places for them to live. In addition to the residential buildings, we're also building places for people to entertain themselves. Lately these things are often even combined! As recently as two years ago, Atlanta stood at number six in Live-Work-Play developments nationwide (12). Entertainment is obviously important enough to us to incorporate it into our residential spaces. But Atlanta has taken it a step further. We're prioritizing entertainment experience to what some may consider a fault. Whether you agree or disagree: the ambition Atlanta has shown over the past few years in the sports realm cannot be ignored.

It's important to note that some would say our hospitality entertainment pursuits have done more harm than good. Between the consequences of construction, displacement of families, and use of public funds, many still oppose with deep conviction the steps our city has taken to raise its profile. In early 2019, "the Atlanta metro area [had] debuted \$2.4 billion worth of new/renovated stadiums for its three professional teams" (13). The Atlanta Falcons and Atlanta Braves both got an entirely new facilities; the Hawks got near full renovation. And it's not simply the existence of these establishments; people love stadiums and family-oriented outing spaces. It's the public spending that's driving people nuts. Sure, the Mercedes-Benz Stadium (MBS) is the first stadium worldwide to receive an LEED Platinum certification (14). It just cost the taxpaying constituents of both Atlanta and Georgia nearly 700 million dollars to do it (15). That's 200 up front and 500 over time in rebates and incentives. I certainly understand the outrage, but at least the MBS is making money. The Braves have won a World Series since the completion of their home turf and Truist Park is still costing residents nearly 15 million dollars a year (16)!

If you add the public MBS contribution to the 300 million Cobb County put into the Truist pot, that's basically one billion dollars. The sound of it is borderline absurd, certainly. But those buildings are built now. All that's really left to do is to fill them and somebody over at MBS understands that. Since its opening in 2017, the Mercedes Benz Stadium has hosted major sporting events from the Super Bowl, the College Football Playoff National Championship Game, and the Major League Soccer All-Star Game. Atlanta United spent its inaugural season breaking one attendance record after another - even becoming the fastest MLS club to achieve 5 million supporters (17). Similarly, the state as a whole broke tourism records in both 2022 and 2023 - fielding 171 million visitors (18) and our airport remained the busiest in the world according to a Business Insider report from last year (19). And this is all before we welcome the onslaught of visitors that are slated to join us for a portion of the World Cup. Tourism has always been a part of our bread and butter, but now the bakery is really opening for business. The numbers show that we're intentionally working to increase our presence and improve tourist appeal. We just built our tallest hotel in 40 years Downtown. Convention business appears to be maintaining its position - if not growing in some ways. And tourism is "the state's second-largest economic contributor" (20). So we have always been entrenched in tourism to a degree. We are, and have been, very good at it - but kind of passively. Now, it's important to be good at it, but even more on purpose.

With the amount of people that are anticipated to visit or move here in the next few years, that international platform calls into question the relationships between our business, tourism, hospitality and entertainment spectrums. The Atlanta Regional Commission projects that the Metro Atlanta Area population is going to increase to 7.9 million by 2050 (21). We've created the jobs. We've built the infrastructure. What happens now? They can come, be left to their own devices, and we can hope it works out. I'm not saying that's been the approach, but it doesn't have to be. But for the sake of civic pride - among other reasons - we have to, or should at least want to, ensure that appropriate systems are in place to sustain that level of exposure. We have a responsibility to do this, all the while making sure people are enjoying their civic and cultural outlook.

It's important to reemphasize how this is both an opportunity and an obligation. As with so many other industries, the next few years provide incredibly prime conditions for Atlanta to be decisively innovative when it comes to hospitality entertainment. This is a really good chance to set an example. We know what can happen to the engagement level of a place or thing when the world's eyes are on it. We know why Atlanta Influences Everything is painted so poignantly on city walls. Because we do. We absolutely do. From transportation, Civil Rights, to music, food and beyond. The entire planet is always watching what we do. With that in mind, we have a duty to execute the care and hosting of visitors at high level. The duty is historical, moral, and commercial in nature; it is also scientific.

As an interdisciplinary artist in this city for the past 20 years, I've lived in and, have become, deeply enthralled by our creative terrain. The present nature of it all is so beautifully underscored by yes - the history of entertainment here, but also its relationship to hospitality and food. "Atlanta is a city built on food"; the countless Peachtree inspired streets names are derived from the large peach tree upon which the first iteration of the city stood (22). It's even told that the very first phone call placed in Atlanta was about food. Food and parties have long been a way of life in Atlanta dating back to the 1930s. I've written about this before, but longtime Mayor William Hartsfield immediately knew the implications of having the *Gone with the Wind* premiere here as opposed to somewhere. It was one of the most important novels of the time, written by a local artist. The party he was able to curate "made history and everybody knew it" (23). Atlanta exhibited its hospitality prowess on that large of scale once, but also perpetuated that spirit everyday in some of its restaurants. During the American Civil Rights movement, restaurants like Paschal's and Busy Bee's fed the proponents of the movement on a daily basis, providing physical safety, solace, and restoration through nourishment.

There is tons more material to illustrate the historical obligation we have to be good at hospitality. But that's just a part of it. We've got a moral obligation, too. As visitors of some other place at some other point in time, we owe it to ourselves to properly welcome people into the city. The word hospitality is even said derive from a word that means "guest master" or "lord of strangers" (24). We will all be strangers to someone somewhere and our ability to mitigate that discomfort is absolutely a part of our human relationship to each other. It may be more necessary than ever now, too. We are seeing cases of mental illness rise nationwide. Children and young adults are reportedly suffering with depression and anxiety at alarming rates. A study by Mental Health America last year polled Georgia as third in the country for prevalence of mental illness (25). With the state of national and international affairs, Americans are in the throws of some critical emotions and the chemical responses that come with them. And that doesn't stop when people walk into a hotel, restaurant, or sports stadium. We have to recognize the massive part that hospitality entertainment plays in our human interaction and take seriously the task of taking care of other people.

Why? Because connected to that moral duty comes with another duty, too. This is absolutely a dialogue for another time but, hospitality entertainment (and restaurant work) is also profoundly scientific. Because energy is neither created nor destroyed, hospitality is thermodynamic (26). It is and we can no longer ignore it because that hospitable thermodynamic is what creates the fuel our city runs on. It's the entertainment. It's the influence. It's the art. Our ability to shape the world's trajectory has to do almost exclusively with our art. Whether it's the literary art, hip-hop, music, visual art, or food, our art has consistently decided the cultural direction of our country at large - and on our planet. And hospitality is art. That's not the argument here because there isn't one. Anything you do with the use of your body as instrument is art. And art is good for you - which means hospitality is good for you. Your Brain on Art dives into this at length and I will too at another time, but the fact base is there. A 2021 study by Lancet Psychiatry was able to identify nearly 600 mechanisms that are influenced by participation in the arts. The

arts are already being used in six distinct ways to heal the body (27). Keeping all this in mind, we have to ensure that we're doing our part to deliver the best possible performance. We now know it can have significant implication for the health of ourselves and our populous, but also because quite simply there is money on the line if we don't.

While I appreciate the symbolism of all the other angles, perhaps the most important of all is that we have a real commercial obligation. That depends on your values, but certain things are undeniable. Entities and businesses have loans and are in relationships with banks to produce what they project. We've built all these buildings. We've imported things and manufactured products and have implemented tools and experiences. We've invested in all of this displacement and change and all of the other things that come with trying to craft a global city. We owe it to ourselves financially, and our pursuits, to create the most suitable conditions for those investments to thrive. We have to give ourselves the best shot to make our money back; otherwise, we could be potentially facing a large amount of waste. We would have wasted a ton of time and a ton - more like almost five hundred tons worth of public capital. And if we do not properly manage ourselves (in the management of others) inevitably, it will wander into waste.

Fortunately for us, we can approach this task effectively and comprehensively. Because we know it's simple. We have to treat people better. We have to treat people better than we ever have and better than everybody else. We have to treat people as best we can, consistently. We have to design a metric for us to figure out if, in the way we treat others, people are representing Atlanta: themselves, you, the business itself and so on, in a way that creates multi-dimensional positive outcomes. When we do, we can make certain our ability to guide the impressions people live in and/or leave our city with. We solidify our stake in the world's conversation about what civic and lived value you can actually extract when you care about how a city, and the people in it, function.

When we think about all these things together, it can seem overly robust in ways. But when we pull the strings in closer, we realize the connections are there. The need to examine the relationships we see unfold in our daily lives is more pressing than ever now. We have to use the interrelated nature of our evolution to do just that - evolve, and get better sustainably. The hospitable experience is just as important of an interaction for both the guest and the host. It's good for us and we have to execute for its benefits. When we don't, when you subtract an inherent good, what remains is either neutral or negative. Culturally, chemically, communally - at this point in time we frankly can't afford neutrality. The negative alternative is just that. If we're not good, we're either hospitably ambivalent, identity void, and useless or bad.

As a homegrown artist and hospitalitarian, I feel a keen sense of responsibility. I know we can show the world how to treat people well. And if we don't it'll be a perpetual mess that will ultimately sabotage any of our future efforts. In an effort to avoid that, I've designed a system - a method if you will that will. The primary purpose of, what we'll tentatively call, the PEACH (Performance, Enriched, Art-Based, Comprehensive Hospitality) method (and corresponding certification) will help us use common language about the quality of experience we want people to have all across our city. The PEACH Method is simple way to use the application of measurable empathy to gauge if we're ready to care for our local and global communities. It's how we decide if we've met the new Atlanta Hospitable Ethic. Because I'm not saying there is no hospitality in Atlanta.

I'm simply saying we need a standard. And what happens when we have one? We, by our own volition and vernacular, ultimately codify the Atlanta Hospitable Ethic - the way people can be expected to be treated in a Southern city with a global view. That's what it's called. It's that applied measurable empathy and how we use it, what it tells us. We reimagine and implement how we fully recognize ourselves in public, interpersonal transactions to make each other feel good. Well, what about Southern Hospitality? It's great, but it's outdated. Our new ethic is different from Southern Hospitality - more contemporary, more curious, but also more informed. I discuss this in detail in another dialogue, but this is the solution. And before we can take steps that are going to move us in the right direction, we have to say it out loud. So that it can be done. The PEACH Method is how we do it. However, the collective realization of the new Atlanta Hospitable Ethic is why. And once we do, as with everything else Atlanta does, the entire planet will be a better place.

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