

**Urban Transformation and Individual Responsibility: The Atlanta BeltLine**

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# Urban Transformation and Individual Responsibility: The Atlanta BeltLine<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

We consider the case of the proposed Atlanta BeltLine to shed light on what may be crucial limits to ethical decision making and responsible action in shaping or reshaping the built environment, especially as those limits enter into the lived experience of individual residents of metropolitan areas. Drawing from theoretical sources in the humanities and social sciences, we consider the scope and limits of responsible individual conduct within complex urban systems, and derive insights that may be of value to planners and others who have visions for urban transformation. We will also draw from the ongoing analysis of our survey of Atlanta area residents, for purposes of illustration.

## Introduction

The BeltLine is an ambitious, three-part proposal to transform the area immediately surrounding Downtown and Midtown Atlanta, Georgia. The original idea, proposed by Ryan Gravel (1999) in his master's thesis for the City and Regional Planning Program at Georgia Tech, begins with existing railroad rights-of-way, some of which are unused or underused, around the central parts of the city. The concrete goal of the project is to create a continuous, 22-mile ring of 1) trails and parks, 2) mass transit, and 3) urban redevelopment.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The Beltline connects neighborhoods and economic development centers to existing and planned parks and transit, as well as regional landmarks. The transit component is planned to include 22-miles of pedestrian oriented rail-based transit such as modern streetcars or light rail. It will connect 45 neighborhoods surrounding Metro Atlanta directly to the existing MARTA rail system. As of 2011, approximately half of the total right-of-way was secured and the first

The ambition of many supporters of the BeltLine goes well beyond providing a new set of amenities for residents of Atlanta and the surrounding region. They hope for nothing less than a fundamental change in the fabric of the Atlanta area as a whole, its structure and its function. Some even hope for a fundamental cultural change, a reimagining not only of what it is to live in Atlanta but what it is to live in a metropolitan region in the United States. Current Atlanta Mayor Kasim Reed referred to the BeltLine project as “something transformational and wonderful for our city” (Atlanta BeltLine 2011). Reed was continuing the rhetoric of his predecessor, Mayor Shirley Franklin, who proclaimed that “the BeltLine will transform Atlanta” (City of Atlanta 2007). Either way – through physical design or through cultural change, or through some intertwining of the two – the abstract goal of some BeltLine advocates is to change how people behave, moving them toward civility and sustainability in a distinctly urban context (see Alex Garvin & Associates 2004; Atlanta Development Authority 2006). The BeltLine is not unique; many cities (e.g., Seoul, New York, Paris, Minneapolis) have pursued similar projects for similar aims (see, e.g., Swyngedouw, Moulaert et al. 2002).

We examine the BeltLine case here to shed light on one aspect of the normative dimensions of urban transformation, wherever it may be attempted. In particular, we are interested in what may be crucial limits to ethical decision making and responsible action in shaping or reshaping the built environment, especially as those limits enter into the lived experience of individual residents of metropolitan areas as they make choices and pursue their various projects. Drawing from theoretical sources in the humanities and social sciences, as well as from the ongoing analysis of a survey of Atlanta area residents, we consider the scope and limits of responsible individual conduct within complex urban

segment of transit is scheduled to be built between 2016 and 2018. The trails are planned to establish 33 miles of pedestrian friendly public area surrounding the 22-mile transit loop. As of 2011, 10 percent of the total planned trails, approximately 3.5 miles, have been constructed. Upon completion, the parks component of the Beltline will add nearly 1,300 acres of new parks and greenspace and connect them with the 700 acres of existing parks. In addition to connecting businesses to transit, trails, and parks, the project is also projected to create more than 5,000 new units of affordable housing.

systems, and derive insights that may be of value to planners and others who have visions for urban transformation.

In this, we take it as read that evaluation of the BeltLine project is, in part, a matter of ethics writ large, where ethics is understood as a domain of critical inquiry into the question of what it is to choose and act responsibly in pursuing any given project. In particular, the motives behind the BeltLine project may be held up to ethical scrutiny as well as the consequences of the project for the well-being of those affected by it and the character of those who push for or against the project's completion (Kirkman 2010).

Our main contention is that, if evaluation of the BeltLine project is a matter of ethics writ large, then it also magnifies the limits of responsible choice and action on the part of individuals. In short, for those planning and implementing it, the BeltLine project is difficult. On the way to successful completion, the project will have to overcome or work around constraints – and take advantage of opportunities – afforded by the physical geography of Atlanta, existing physical structures, political institutions, legal arrangements, financial resources, and so on.

Our main focus, though, is not on those who are driving the project, the planners, politicians, and business leaders who are at the center of the action. Rather, we focus on individuals on the periphery of the project, who may in fact have nothing at all to do with the project as it unfolds, but who are nevertheless implicated in the project by the fact that they live in the region. In particular, we are investigating the special difficulties of being responsible as an ordinary resident of a metropolitan area.

Aside from the intrinsic interest of questions regarding the scope and limits of individual responsibility, we will suggest that careful attention to the particular ways in which individual responsibility may be complicated or compromised can and should inform a sense of what responsible planning entails, in Atlanta and elsewhere.

## I. Responsibility

For purposes of analysis, and as a starting point for our investigation, we posit that questions of responsibility in choice and action are complicated by a duality at the root of human moral experience: we may see our own conduct and that of our fellow humans either as *behavior* or as *action* – though, in practice and in deliberation, the two may be intertwined. In the ethical tradition, this duality shows itself as a rift between those who favor an empiricist approach (e.g., utilitarians) and those who favor a humanist approach (e.g., Kantians) to understanding value and moral choice (following Kirkman 2007)..

Behavior is an empirically observable event, a natural organism's response to physical, biological, or social conditions (e.g., "stimuli"). Fields of inquiry that focus on behavior, particularly in the social sciences, tend to view human conduct from the outside, as an object of empirical study. From such a perspective, an individual human being is regarded mainly as a natural object, the conduct of which may be observed, predicted, and perhaps manipulated. In the history of ethics, a focus on behavior manifests itself in an empiricist tendency, according to which *value* is a function of *response*: to say that something is good is to report a positive emotional reaction to it, a preference, a feeling of approval, or even just a warm glow (Hume 1978; Darwin 1981).

Action, by contrast, is what a person does by choice, on the basis of deliberation. Fields of inquiry that focus on action tend to view human conduct from the inside, through the lived experience of individuals who are perceiving, inquiring, understanding, judging, choosing, and acting. The individual human being is here understood as a person, a moral agent capable of reasoning about means and ends, capable of choosing freely among alternatives, capable even of judging and resisting the impulses of sentiment or instinct. In the history of ethics, a focus on action manifests itself in a humanist tendency, according to which, to again state the matter a little too simply, *value* is a function of *principle*: to say something is good is to make a judgment based upon a general (or even universal) standard of conduct, a standard that can be discovered and elaborated through reasoned deliberation (Beck 1960; Kant

1998). In short, the humanist conception of value is cognitive rather than emotive, while the empiricist conception of value is emotive rather than cognitive (following Sagoff 2003).

Taken at face value, these two traditions in moral theory seem to be mutually exclusive. As a practical matter, though, there is some merit in drawing from both traditions at once, fully accepting the tension between them, on the grounds that neither tradition reveals everything that is of interest about human moral experience (Weston 2001; Kirkman 2007). In other words, when people are trying to make decisions in particular circumstances, it may be useful to construe ethical conduct as behavior, as action, or perhaps, in some circumstances, as both at once.

If this sketch of the duality of moral experience has any validity, it has profound implications for questions of responsibility, in both its positive and negative senses. In the positive sense, to be responsible or conduct oneself responsibly is to be attentive and careful in choosing a course of action and consistent in carrying it out. In the negative sense, to be responsible is to be held to account for the motives and consequences of a particular course of action, which usually means being singled out for blame when something goes wrong. In either sense, a moral agent is responsible only to the extent the agent is *free*, able to choose among real alternatives with full understanding, without coercion or constraint. Putting this the other way around, if human conduct is nothing more than behavior conditioned by circumstance, then it does not seem to make sense to single people out for praise or blame, because it is far from clear they are able to do otherwise than they have done.

But then, as a matter of practical experience, human conduct is subject to conditions and constraints of various kinds, insofar as humans are natural beings with a particular evolutionary heritage and particular cultural and personal histories that shape perception, cognition, and behavior in ways that are beyond the individual's control. This is not to say the idea of free moral agency is irrelevant, only that it may be worth thinking in terms of what Margaret Urban Walker (1993) has called *impure agency*. In contrast with the pure agency envisioned by humanist philosophers like Kant, impure agency

is understood as always already situated within particular, concrete circumstances such that the boundary between free choice and causal determination is often difficult to discern.

To shed light on the scope and limits of individual responsibility in relation to urban form, we have drawn from theoretical resources in both the social sciences and the humanities. In the next section, we begin with a view from the outside, drawing from social sciences to characterize possible constraints on individual responsibility within metropolitan areas understood as systems.

## **II. Urban Systems**

Metropolitan areas in the United States present variations on the theme of decentralization. Since at least the early twentieth century, the dominant and persistent pattern of metropolitan growth has been characterized by the strict separation of land uses, limited options for transportation other than the automobile, low-density residential development around the fringe, and the clustering of residents of similar socio-economic status. The Atlanta region has sometimes been held up as a paradigm case of this pattern.

To say the pattern is persistent is in part to say that it resists efforts to change it. But why should it persist? Why should metropolitan areas not be flexible enough in their form and function to respond nimbly to residents' changing values and preferences? Given broad, stated support for the BeltLine (see below) on the part of Atlanta area residents, why should its vision not just become reality?

The answer lies in the fact that nothing as large and complex as a metropolitan area arises simply and directly from the choices of individuals. Rather, their genesis is itself a complex process that brings those choices together with laws and institutions, social and cultural dynamics, technical hardware and software, natural conditions, and other factors. For this reason, it is fruitful to think of metropolitan areas as *systems* of interaction, systems that exhibit emergent properties and that can shape the values and choices of those participating in them.

### *a. sociotechnical ensembles*

One set of tools for analyzing such systems comes from the field of technology studies, according to which metropolitan areas can be construed as large and complex sociotechnical ensembles (Bijker 1995). This is to say that the social and technical aspects of the metropolitan environment shape one another mutually: roads, buildings, power grids, and so on take their form and their meaning from values, institutions, and so on, while at the same time the those very values and institutions are shaped by the technical apparatus of which they make use.

Thomas Hughes provides a simple but effective image of the increasing difficulty of changing existing arrangements, taking momentum as the guiding metaphor. When a sociotechnical ensemble first begins to develop, society shapes technology: the first outlines of the ensemble (what Hughes calls a technological system) are set down by decisions, interests, economic activities, public policies, and so on – in short, the full array of social dynamics. However, the system gains momentum as it develops, until technology begins to shape society (Hughes 1994). The metaphor here implies that as the system gets moving in a particular direction, it becomes harder and harder to stop or even to deflect toward some other goal. This metaphor may have its limits, but it is at least an accessible introduction to the notion that sociotechnical ensembles come to exhibit *obduracy*, which means they resist efforts by society to change the meaning and the form of the ensemble (Bijker 1995; Hommels 2005). We will consider one variation on this theme, from an approach to technology studies called actor-network theory, later.

In the mean time, take as an example just one of the subsystems of an American metropolis: the system of transportation. The automobile is arguably the dominant technical artifact in the Atlanta region, as it is elsewhere in the United States, but it does not exist in isolation. It takes its meaning and derives its influence in part from its interaction with other technical artifacts (roads, traffic signals, surveillance cameras), with social institutions, and with the values and aspirations of residents. In a sense, contemporary Atlanta and the automobile grew up together, the region taking its form from

what the automobile makes possible and what it demands, from dispersed settlement patterns to rapid and flexible mobility, to the vast infrastructure of roadways and parking. Even in the face of rising gasoline prices and growing concern over dependence on fossil fuels, it is not possible for the residents of Atlanta to walk away (literally or figuratively) from that established pattern. At the very least, patterns of development and the infrastructure that support it are literally, materially hard: changing them involves physically breaking things, which costs time, money, and energy. More than this, the infrastructure is bound up with vested political and economic interests and with a culture that all but equates freedom with mobility and engenders a distaste for public transit.

*b) equilibrium*

The obduracy of sociotechnical ensembles can be seen as a function of what people have invested in those ensembles, materially and culturally. This account of metropolitan systems from the perspective of technology studies meshes, to some extent, with accounts from economics. One such account would cast the dominant urban form as a stable equilibrium resulting from forces of agglomeration, economies of scale, specialization, and spatial sorting. Put another way, the ensemble of technologies and institutions follow, at least in part, from the distribution of people, their tastes, and their resources (along with geographic features).

The equilibrium urban form can be conceived as a Nash equilibrium, defined by every actor choosing their best option given that everyone is also choosing their best option. In this instance, a Nash equilibrium may be viewed as an emergent property of a complex urban systems. A number of factors have been singled out as contributing to the stable equilibrium observed in American metropolitan areas in recent decades. Land markets (Mieszkowski and Mills 1993) and housing subsidies (Persky and Kurban 2003), tastes (Margo 1992) over neighbor and neighborhood types (Anas 2002; Ihlanfeldt and Scafidi 2002; Vigdor 2003; Nechyba and Walsh 2004), and school quality (Mieszkowski and Mills 1993), subsidized infrastructure for developers (Sullivan 1985; Baum-Snow 2010;

Cho 2011), commute costs (Mieszkowski and Mills 1993; Anas, Arnott et al. 1998; Glaeser and Khan 2004), and even telecommunications infrastructure (Ioannides, Overman et al. 2008) have all been used to explain the stable equilibrium observed in American metropolitan areas.

Consider one example of a Nash equilibrium (following Knaap, Hopkins et al. 1998) where commuters drive from their current homes. An individual resident could relocate or trade their car for a bicycle, but doing so unilaterally would leave them worse off in equilibrium, perhaps because they will dislike their new neighbors or suffer as the lone cyclist. If this particular Nash equilibrium is worse for society as a whole than some other state of affairs, then society faces a policy dilemma: it may be desirable for society as a whole to reach that new state, but it is difficult to reach precisely because it is not Nash, and individual actors have an incentive not to go that way.

To make this more concrete, even if all Atlantans swapped their autos for bicycles and it suddenly became safe to cycle, any particular commuter might realize huge personal gains from returning to their car, and the “better” cycling equilibrium unravels. Indeed, urban denizens engage in strategic interactions with each other: individuals choose on their own account a residential location, transportation mode and so on, but their choice is conditional on what everyone else is doing.

The stability of equilibria is analogous to the obduracy of sociotechnical ensembles. Incentives being what they are, the emergent properties of U.S. metropolitan systems are likely to persist even if those systems are subjected to modest external shocks. The durability of urban infrastructure has long-lasting effects as their long lifespan constrains current and future development and, especially for transportation infrastructure, economic momentum and path-dependence play major roles (Anas et al. 1998). The rise of New Urbanism in the 1980s, based in part on claims of strong demand for different urban designs, was not followed by substantively different urban growth patterns (Glaeser and Shapiro 2003).

Suppose, for example, an urban redevelopment project along the BeltLine succeeds in improving nearby neighborhood quality. Such a change induces higher property prices, as would-be residents bid up property values in the desirable neighborhood. The selfishly optimal choice for a poor resident of the neighborhood is to sell out and so capitalize on those gains, but ultimately to relocate to another poor neighborhood. The equilibrium condition of having poor residents concentrated in declining neighborhoods persists, even if those concentrations of poverty shift to new locations (Banzhaf and Walsh 2010, 2008).

Failures of collective action may also stand behind the maintenance of equilibrium. The BeltLine project in particular is predicated on the hope of a convergence of expanded public transit, viable mixed-use developments, and accessible green space to create a new, presumably better urban lifestyle that will both meet and foster consumer demand. Developers, however, are reluctant to incur costs for a project for which there may not be any such demand: “if you build it, they will come” is not generally considered a good business model (Gyourko and Rybczynski 2000). There arises a chicken-and-egg problem: the demand for the project cannot be demonstrated without the project, and the project cannot be built without the demand.

*c) everything at once*

Drawing all these threads together, we are left with an image of metropolitan systems that may not be as good as residents want them to be but that are difficult to change. The situation is not entirely bleak, however: changes do happen, and policies have demonstrably shaped outcomes for urban systems. Federal housing and financing policies have mattered a great deal in shaping urban form (Persky and Kurban 2003).. The Interstate Highway System has had a demonstrably big impact on urban form, too (Baum-Snow 2010). Policy interventions can address publicly acknowledged shortcomings in current urban form, though such plans will certainly have to take into account the incentives already structured into the urban landscape, whether understood in terms of obduracy or Nash equilibrium.

In a sense, the problem of obduracy may be part of the impetus behind ambitious, “transformational” projects like the BeltLine: half-measures will not do. To overcome resistance to the transformation of urban space seems likely to require coordinated action on a grand scale, across decades, backed by a massive investment of capital and perhaps guided by a broad consensus on a comprehensive vision. Somehow, urban fabric, public policy, and individual choice have to be brought into alignment. Ordinary residents have to drop their car keys and pick up transit passes and quit their suburban yards in favor of public green space. At the same time, more influential actors, including civic leaders and developers, will have to change policy and practice to both foster and respond to those changes in residents’ behavior. If it is to work, it seems, everything would have to happen at once.

### **III. Responsibility and Systemic Context**

Such is the systems perspective, which considers human beings as natural entities engaging in behavior that is causally intertwined with the behavior of other components of the system. As noted, however, a full account of responsible conduct will involve considering human beings as moral agents, freely choosing their course of action on the basis of reasoned deliberation about values, ideals, principles and obligations in the context of human moral communities.

From the point of view of a moral agent, constraints on responsible choice and action can be seen as lying along a continuum. At the one end are *limits of efficacy*, which occur after a decision has been made: action is blocked or its results deflected in spite of the decision maker’s best efforts. At the other end of the continuum are more elusive kinds of constraint, which occur before deliberation even begins and which usually occur below the level of consciousness. We call these the *limits of autonomy*, since they are constraints on the range of viable options a moral agent can perceive or imagine. There are all sorts of complications in between, including what might be called *limits of integrity*: entrenched conflicts among a decision maker’s motivations, at least some of which are beyond the decision maker’s direct control.

*a) limits of efficacy*

Limits of efficacy arise when a moral agent makes a decision and acts upon it, but either the consequences do not play out as expected or action itself is stopped or deflected. This common experience for ordinary moral agents meshes readily with the systems perspective. Considering the built environment as technological system, obduracy in the system plays itself out in human experience as an array of paths for possible action. Some of which offer more resistance; some of which offer less. Given the task of moving around in the built environment, for example, some physical and design features, like railroad tracks and fences, are paths of greater resistance, while others, like bridges and sidewalks, are paths of lesser resistance (Kirkman 2005; Noonan 2005) Likewise, there are bound to be social, cultural, economic, and political points of resistance as well.

To illustrate, the original vision of the BeltLine calls for a 22-mile loop of both public transit and multiple-use trail, with new parks and urban redevelopment along the way. The project begins, however, with five discrete rail segments, some of which are still in use for long-haul freight transport. Some of the segments are separated from one another by major physical obstacles, including a major rail yard on the east side of the proposed loop. At other points, the existing right-of-way is too narrow to accommodate both trails and transit (Ross, Meyer et al. 2005). Such physical barriers can in principle be overcome, but at considerable cost. Aside from existing rail rights-of-way still in use, other segments are likely to be mired in legal controversy. For example, ownership of the right-of-way in the southeast quadrant of the proposed BeltLine is fragmented. More than 100 parcels of land are involved, to which the railroad, CSX, acquired right-of way by fee simple ownership, easements, or leaseholds (Alex Garvin & Associates 2004). Records on those various arrangements are held privately by the railroad, not in the public domain. Just sorting out the legal status of each fragment of the right-of-way requires full cooperation from a private corporation. A democratic society predicated on the rights of private individuals and private enterprise cannot coerce such cooperation.

From the point of view of those at the center of the decision, realizing the goals of the BeltLine will be a matter of making difficult trade-offs to accommodate competing interests in the face of various constraints. They have had to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of various routes around the rail yard, or of splitting the rail and the trail in segments where the existing right of way is too narrow for both together. As a general strategy, the BeltLine project has started with the trail and park components, as they are the most feasible. Transit development has been delayed and may never be completed.

Now, consider this from the vantage of an ordinary resident who is generally supportive of the BeltLine project. What can such an individual do to help ensure the projects goals are reached? One option would be publicly to declare support, perhaps by displaying a bumper sticker (to draw attention to the project and encourage support) or by voting for supporters of the BeltLine (though such choices are complicated by other issues). Other options include investing a little money in BeltLine projects, volunteering for trail cleanups, or even just touring the BeltLine and learning more about it. Otherwise, there seems little to do but to watch and hope for the best.

Also, in fairness, consider this from the vantage of an ordinary resident who is opposed to the BeltLine. What can such an individual do to help thwart project goals at minimal cost? The fact of the matter is that the BeltLine project has taken on some momentum of its own, with trails and parks already in use or in development. An individual who thinks the whole thing is wasteful folly may be hard pressed to do anything to stop it at this point.

But a sly limit of efficacy comes in just here. Despite the BeltLine project's momentum, will it really take us where its advocates intend? The BeltLine could, perhaps, become the engine that transforms Atlanta into a new kind of American city, or it could become just an expensive white elephant – much like the Atlanta Underground project (see Keating 2001) - with empty trolley cars trundling pointlessly around a loop through neighborhoods that continue to deteriorate, or something in

between. In other words, for all its apparent momentum, the BeltLine project could be deflected toward something quite a bit short of the grand vision, perhaps even something that people find to be worse than what they had before. But then they would still be stuck with it.

*b) limits of integrity*

Integrity is wholeness or unity among the motivations of an individual, including moral principles, value judgments and other inclinations. Needless to say, integrity is difficult to achieve. In lived experience, it is common enough for moral agents to run up against conflicts among values and motivations deeply entrenched in their character and circumstances, with no easy choice and no easy prospect for reconciliation. Someone might support the BeltLine, in principle, but have no intention of actually using it. Someone might, perhaps, favor transportation alternatives for people inclined to use public transit, while still maintaining her or his own strong preference for driving everywhere, perhaps coupled with a strong, personal aversion to public transit. Likewise, a middle-class homeowner may, as a matter of principle, support diversity and the availability of affordable housing for those of more limited means, yet oppose any move away from homogeneity in her or his own neighborhood.

In the face of the limits of integrity, it may be tempting simply to tell people to change their attitudes or raise their consciousness, but there is little help here. Even if someone consciously adopts new principles and sets out to live accordingly, she or he will likely still have strong and persistent inclinations toward the former way of living, however fervently it has been rejected (see Middlemiss 2010). Personal transformation, as Lisa Tessman (2000) argues, is no easy thing: “one cannot simply will one’s character to change.”

Our own empirical research is especially salient here as an illustration of what we mean. After extensive pre-testing, we administered an online survey to Atlanta area residents in the summer of 2009 (just two years after the Atlanta City Council approved the BeltLine Overlay District). Survey Sampling International provided a random sample, which oversampled City of Atlanta residents, for participation

in a 37-question online survey. 946 respondents completed surveys about their attitudes toward the BeltLine and the future of Atlanta.<sup>3</sup>

We observed a pattern in the data that suggests limits of integrity, where general support for the BeltLine is coupled with an apparent reluctance to make choices to facilitate its success.

Respondents appear uneasy about their city's current trajectory, as 70% of respondents expect it will be harder to get around Atlanta in 5 years, and nearly half fear "quality of life" will get worse.

There is widespread support for the proposed solution, as 73% of residents stated the BeltLine is a good idea. In fact, given the choice between an Atlanta "as it is today" and an Atlanta that has been transformed by the BeltLine, supporters of density and transit outnumbered detractors almost 3 to 1. Furthermore, 70% of respondents think that the project will likely be able to transform Atlanta according to the project's stated goals. So, public support is there, in principle.

But then, when respondents are asked how often they expect to actually use the proposed parks and transit, as well as how often they expect *others* will use it, the numbers diverge. Overall, roughly 1 in 5 respondents plan to use the BeltLine transit and parks frequently, while fully half of respondents expect many others to use the BeltLine. There is a disconnect here, as many respondents seem to be saying, in effect: I approve of the BeltLine, but I will leave it to others to make it possible,

<sup>3</sup> The survey followed a year of preparatory work, plus background interviews with city planners and other officials. A series of focus groups were then conducted with members of the general public, followed by pilot surveys to design and revise the survey instrument. After a final pilot survey with an N of 60 was administered online, the survey instrument was finalized. We drew a random sample from SSI's large online panel, selecting adults in the Atlanta metropolitan statistical area (with 60% from within the City of Atlanta). Selected panelists were contacted via an e-mail invitation to an online survey that took, on average, 9 minutes to complete. (Respondents were directed to one of two types of the survey, randomly, where the surveys differed by whether a map of the BeltLine project was included.) SSI reported a 5% overall response rate, which compares favorably with other web-based surveys. The invitation letter indicated that it was an opinion survey for Atlanta area residents on the topic of "housing, green space, and transportation." The survey questions asked about household characteristics, transportation behavior and park use, and assessments and expectations of Atlanta's future development. Finally, a series of questions about the BeltLine (awareness of, opinions of, intent to use, etc.) followed, as described in the discussion. We can compare our sample to Census population statistics on several dimensions, such as age, household size, vehicle ownership and commutes, income, and education. By and large, our sample averages are similar for age, income, car ownership, and household size. Our sample does appear to have shorter commutes (consistent with oversample from the urban core), less tendency to move, and higher educational attainment.

and I will leave it to others to change their own patterns of travel and recreation while I go on as before. This is consistent with the kinds of constraints discussed in the previous section.

From the perspective of economics, limits of integrity may be understood as a function of what people have invested in the status quo. This can be observed in any case in which a decision-maker sees certain changes as desirable but simply not as desirable as the status quo. Investment in durable goods, in particular, plays a role in limiting integrity because of the very durability of the goods involved. Houses, cars, and pieces of public infrastructure (e.g., roads, buildings, utility networks) do not last forever, but they do last. As a consequence, individuals are tied to the durable goods they have purchased, which influence their future choices.

For example, respondents who own cars expect to ride the BeltLine transit much less than a non-car owning counterpart. Still, investments in durable capital, like homes or cars, seems to alter intended behavior without altering general project support. Homeowners and car owners both have the same support for the BeltLine as those without houses or cars. This suggests that support is strong even when the direct personal benefits are disproportional.

### *c) limits of autonomy*

Constraints on responsible choice and action may arise at the very heart of the decision-making process, perhaps beneath the level of conscious awareness. Autonomy is a central notion for moral philosophy. One prominent tradition in philosophical ethics holds that an action is moral only to the extent that it is chosen freely. For Kant in particular, to choose freely is to transcend any sort of compulsion or coercion from without or from within, to reason for oneself on the way to formulating a rule of conduct that might accord with universal moral law (Kant 1998). The limits of autonomy, then, would be found in any instance where people are in effect subject to laws they did not make for themselves, whereby they surrender their own moral reasoning either to the judgment of someone else or to the influence of the systems in which they find themselves.

For our purposes, the most interesting cases are those in which people do not know they are not free: they think they are choosing entirely for themselves when in truth their understanding of what is possible and even the moral principles on which they act have been shaped in advance by the situations in which they find themselves. A resident of Atlanta leaving for work picks up her car keys and heads to the garage, never really considering the option of telecommuting, carpooling, or using transit. Or someone moving into the Atlanta region chooses between two, newly constructed subdivisions on the periphery, one with a golf course and the with tennis courts; other possibilities are closed off in advance, including the possibility of moving to a revitalized urban neighborhood along the BeltLine.

Such limits pose a methodological problem: How can outside observers find constraints of which people themselves may well be unaware? One way of getting at the limits of autonomy within the lived experience of individuals is to acknowledge the possibility of moral learning through a process of critical moral inquiry. -Looking back from any point in this learning process, individuals may be able to see the ways in which their autonomy had been constrained, their options artificially narrowed.

Critical moral inquiry could also use some outside help from the systems perspective. One variant of technology studies, actor-network theory, is especially useful. Bruno Latour (1992) argues that human actors in effect delegate moral competencies to non-human actors by inscribing them with particular meanings and particular ways of programming or channeling human effort. Those non-human actors in turn prescribe certain behaviors to the human actors who interact with them. In effect, technical artifacts provide and enforce “scripts” for human activity, channeling effort in various ways.

As a socio-technical ensemble, the built environment is full of such scripts, which human actors “read off” by interacting with non-human actors in various ways (Latour 1992). It may well be that the scripts inscribed in the landscape are originally written by humans, but not necessarily by any one human. The resulting delegation, according to Bernward Joerges (1999), is not “seen as the result of

planful or intentional action, but as a result of consequences of action; consequences of by all means ‘intentional’, but in principle ‘blind’ . . . actions of many small actors adapting to the circumstances at hand.”

The problem for autonomy arises when scripts become naturalized, and hence unnoticed. They serve as background conditions of what come to seem perfectly normal ways of living and acting in the world. (Akrich 1992; see also Graham 2001). As a consequence, individuals may find it very difficult to determine when they are writing their own scripts (i.e., acting autonomously) and when they are merely reading off scripts that have been presented to them for no particular reason by no one in particular. The lines of force that run through the built environment can only be revealed by a critical process of inquiry into the particular circumstances in which particular artifacts and sociotechnical ensembles came to be as they are.

The survey data are difficult to interpret on this point, since we are seeking evidence of something of which survey respondents are, almost by definition, unaware; this is not something likely to be detected by multiple-choice questions. In our preliminary research, however, we carried out an exploratory qualitative analysis of two sets of interview data: 1) a set of open-ended interviews carried out by one of the others in 2003, as part of another project (Kirkman 2004), and 2) a set of new interviews specifically tailored to the BeltLine project<sup>4</sup>. We looked in particular for statements referring to constraints on action, from which we were able to derive a rough taxonomy of types of constraint.

<sup>4</sup> The main purpose of this qualitative phase of the project was to inform the development of the survey, described earlier. The material from the 2003 project comprises complete transcripts of 19 extensive, semi-structured interviews with public officials, business people, activists, academics and professionals with some direct involvement in issues of metropolitan growth and development. For that project, one reader (Kirkman) identified passages that asserted or implied *limits* or *constraints* on choice and action, then tagged each passage with up to three indicators of the type of constraint involved, in rank order. So, a given statement might be taken as primarily indicating a *technological* constraint, but with *economic* and *cultural* components as well. The new material comprises complete transcripts of 14 short-form and 10 long-form semi-structured interviews, all with questions directly related to the BeltLine, conducted in 2008. With those transcripts, two readers worked independently to identify passages indicating limitation or constraint, also noting whether the constraints applied mainly to the respondent her- or himself, or mainly to others.

Interview subjects were much more likely to refer to cultural, cognitive, political and economic constraints, with very few references to physical, technological, or design-related constraints. This suggests that, from the point of view of interview subjects, people rather than systems are the problem. In our interviews about the BeltLine, we also distinguished “constraints on self” from “constraints on others” and subjects were much more likely to refer to constraints on others than on themselves. This is a suggestive finding, in that there may be a kind of blind spot regarding systemic constraints on autonomy, which leads to a shifting of blame to the misbehavior of other individual agents. The suggestion merits further investigation.

#### **IV. Responsibility and Planning**

We have begun to identify ways in which ordinary residents of metropolitan areas may find their environment resistant to change, even if that change is regarded as desirable, if not imperative. The many possible constraints on human moral agency cast into doubt the possibility of effective action in many circumstances, and perhaps even the possibility of responsible choice itself in more extreme circumstances.

We would not counsel despair, however. In the language of technology studies, the obduracy of socio-technical ensembles is not monolithic, but can be highly variable: if one aspect of the system resists change, another aspect of the system may be more pliable. If we cannot push in one direction, we may well be able to push in another. The result may not be what we might wish for in the best of all worlds, but it might be better than what we have.

We emphatically should not assume such decision making is an easy matter, or that translating decision into action into result is ever likely to be a straightforward process. Careful attention to all the many, specific ways in which the process can go awry, however, should inform our approach to decision making and our expectations, as private citizens, public officials, or planning professionals.

Why should planners pay special attention to the limits of individual responsibility in urban systems? We offer three reasons.

First, there is the question of legitimacy. In principle, decisions about the common good, including the shape of the built environment itself, derive their legitimacy from the consent of the governed, or at least from the approval of public bodies that derive their authority from the consent of the governed. On the ground, though, consent is complicated to the extent ordinary residents confront obstacles to responsible choice and action: they may be constrained to live in certain kinds of dwellings and use certain modes of transportation simply because alternatives are not available to them, and they may lack access to or influence over the institutions that help determine which alternatives are available (Kirkman 2010).

To the extent they claim to act in the public interest, and to the extent they incorporate public input into their plans, planners need to be aware of all the many ways in which the choices and actions of individual citizens may be constrained. It might be tempting, especially when autonomy itself might be compromised, to resort to paternalism, on the grounds that private citizens clearly do not know what is good for them. This argument is outside the scope of this article, but we hold that paternalism would be an unfortunate response with little claim to legitimacy. Rather, knowledge of the limits of responsibility can guide planners to find effective ways of engaging the public and contributing to democratic deliberation. One response to the limits of autonomy, for example, might be to engage the public imagination so as to expand the range of perceived options for individual and collective action, so fewer citizens are locked in to a small, conventional range of choices.

Second, there is the question of effectiveness. Ordinary residents will be part of the context in which any large-scale project of place-making is to unfold, and success may depend on a change in individual behavior. That change may not be forthcoming, and not only or even mainly because the public does not understand or does not share the grand vision embodied in the plan. In short, if

residents are stuck with particular ways of acting, whether because of sunk costs or the obduracy of systems, then the project may also end up getting stuck.

The success of the project, then, may have less to do with citizen “buy-in” than with the possibility of offering residents a “buy-out”, that is, a way of recouping sunk costs or otherwise breaking free of some of the bonds that entangle them with the status quo, perhaps by finding and exploiting “soft spots” in the obduracy of the urban system. Our built environment, after all, is not only an array of constraints, but an array of opportunities as well. Finding ways to overcome obduracy in a particular context, with all the financial, political, technical and other constraints that impinge on planners themselves, is a work of careful attention and bold creativity. Doing this in the context of democratic processes may also enhance legitimacy.

Third, there is the question of modesty. Planners are human beings, too, and, as such, are limited in their capacity to choose and act responsibly within the constraints imposed by their context. This applies to them as ordinary human beings, of course, and as residents of particular places, but it also applies to them as professionals trained in a particular discipline and working in and through particular institutions. They will encounter limits of efficacy and of integrity in that they work in and through those particular institutions, without necessarily being able to shape those institutions to their will. They will encounter limits of autonomy both in their training and in the context of their work, giving a particular shape to their way of thinking about urban form, and to their sense of what is possible and what is appropriate in reshaping urban form.

In short, planners may get stuck, just like everyone else. This should make them more circumspect in carrying out their professional responsibilities, and perhaps also more patient with ordinary residents who seem unable or unwilling to do what planners want or expect them to do.

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