



Pedestrians and cyclists use the BeltLine
Photo Credit: Tim Beatley

Revisiting the BeltLine a Decade Later

By Carla Jones

Now touted as one of Atlanta, Georgia's treasures, abandoned railroads around downtown have been transformed into a lively trail for pedestrians and cyclists called the BeltLine. The Biophilic Cities Project has been following the BeltLine for years and had a chance to learn the latest news on the project now that almost a decade has passed since breaking ground. Ryan Gravel, the designer behind the BeltLine concept, shared with us the story of the BeltLine from its beginning as a Master's thesis to being embraced by the public and implemented.

What is the BeltLine?

The BeltLine is a 22-mile loop of pathways connecting and revitalizing neighborhoods across

the city. The idea was developed by Ryan Gravel, Founding Principal of Sixpitch, when he explored the idea as his Master's Thesis at the Georgia Institute of Technology.

History

Gravel's interest in infrastructure flourished when he studied abroad in Paris during his senior year as an undergraduate student. "It just became really clear to me that the design of the physical city helped well-being" Gravel emphasized at his studio in the repurposed Sears & Roebuck building now known as Ponce City Market adjacent to the BeltLine. Upon returning to Atlanta, he nurtured that

interest and began looking at the networks of infrastructure in the city and how they shape the ways in which people live. His interest in old, disenfranchised, industrial areas led to him seeing potential in a unique loop of railroads around downtown Atlanta.

Railroads in Atlanta

Atlanta became the largest city in the south due to its extensive railroad network and hub. Railroads were built after the Civil War to expand industry as reconstruction was rapidly underway. According to Gravel, industry was being driven out of the city, so four railroads were constructed to move goods in and out of the city.

The railroads became a boundary as the city grew and neighborhoods expanded. Neighborhoods separated by the railroads were drastically different racially and socioeconomically. Eventually, rail was abandoned for trucks and suburban sprawl ensued.

When Gravel first began exploring these forgotten areas, Atlanta had lost a fifth of its population to the suburbs, but there were signs that suburbanites were interested in moving back. The railroad loop and 4,000 acres of land associated with it sparked an idea for redevelopment, which led to his thesis.

With graduate school

completed, Gravel began working at an architecture firm focused on mixed use development, mostly on the east side of Atlanta. One of the firm's projects was a 20-acre site adjacent to an abandoned railroad. The designers were trying to determine how to address this eyesore when Gravel shared his thesis idea with co-workers.

The more they spoke with about the idea, the more people wanted to hear about it. The idea was received positively, so they packaged letters and maps to the governor, mayor, regional planning agencies, and the Georgia Department of Transportation. While the idea didn't resonate with all

recipients, Cathy Woolard, City Council member and Chair of the Transportation Committee, responded. She had been receiving questions about what the committee was doing for the urban core of the region. A heated meeting brought forward debates of mobility for those who live in the city and use the public transportation system, MARTA. Plans at the time didn't include residents of the urban core, which frustrated Woolard. When she arrived back to her office, the letter from Gravel and colleagues was on her desk. She met with them to learn more about their idea. Quickly a Town Hall was organized in Woolard's district, the Virginia Highlands neighborhood.



Map of the BeltLine
Image Credit: Atlanta BeltLine



Ponce City Market is an example of Adaptive Reuse on the BeltLine
Photo Credit: Tim Beatley



Milemarker blends with natural landscape
Photo credit: Tim Beatley



Atlanta skyline from the BeltLine
Photo Credit: Tim Beatley



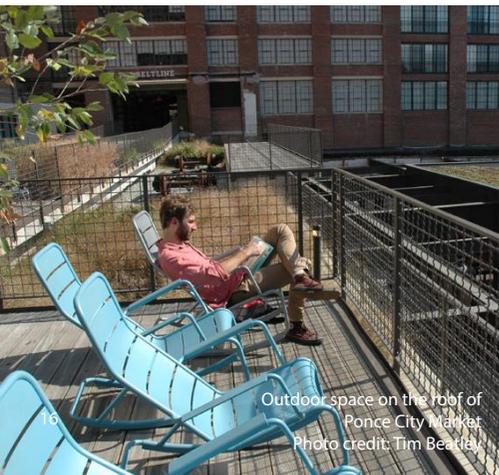
Entrance to Ponce City Market from the BeltLine
Photo Credit: Tim Beatley



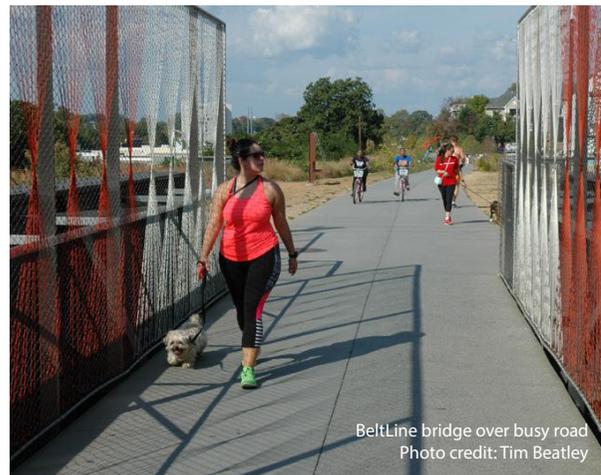
Ryan Gravel was the visionary behind the BeltLine
Photo Credit: Tim Beatley



Directional signs help with wayfinding to attractions along the BeltLine
Photo credit: Tim Beatley



Outdoor space on the roof of Ponce City Market
Photo credit: Tim Beatley



BeltLine bridge over busy road
Photo credit: Tim Beatley



The BeltLine is designed for a variety of users
Photo Credit: Tim Beatley

More conversations and neighborhood meetings took place. Woolard was elected City Council President and took the conversation citywide. It took two and one-half years and countless meetings to create this grassroots movement that took on a life of its own.

There were three groups of people who expressed support for the development. The first were the community members who opposed undesirable development for years, but saw the BeltLine as something worth fighting for. The second group were developers who were interested in the population growth and the potential profit from improving

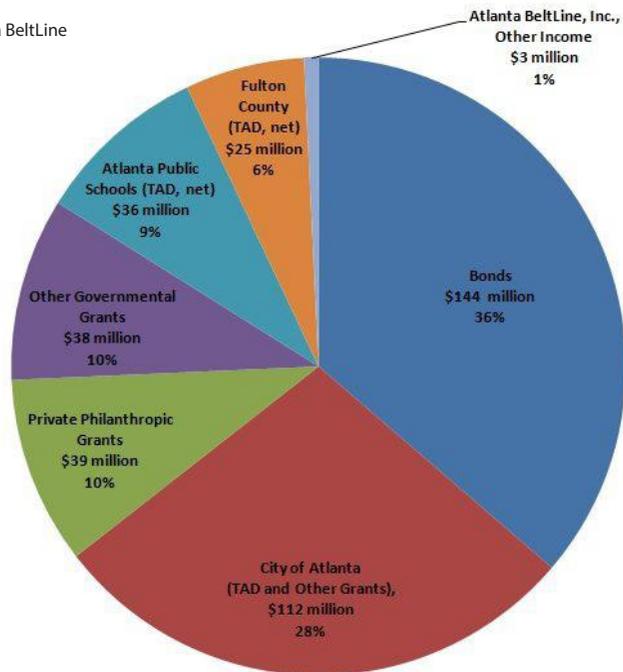
these landscapes. The third group were non-profits with various foci, such as public art and affordable housing, who saw that this project aligned with their missions. It was the coalition of these interested parties that made the BeltLine a reality.

To date, 4.5 miles of the mainline trail have been built, which have cost \$450 million dollars, but the area has seen over \$3 billion in private-sector development. Another 4.5 miles is currently under construction. It is estimated that over a million people use the Beltline in any given year.

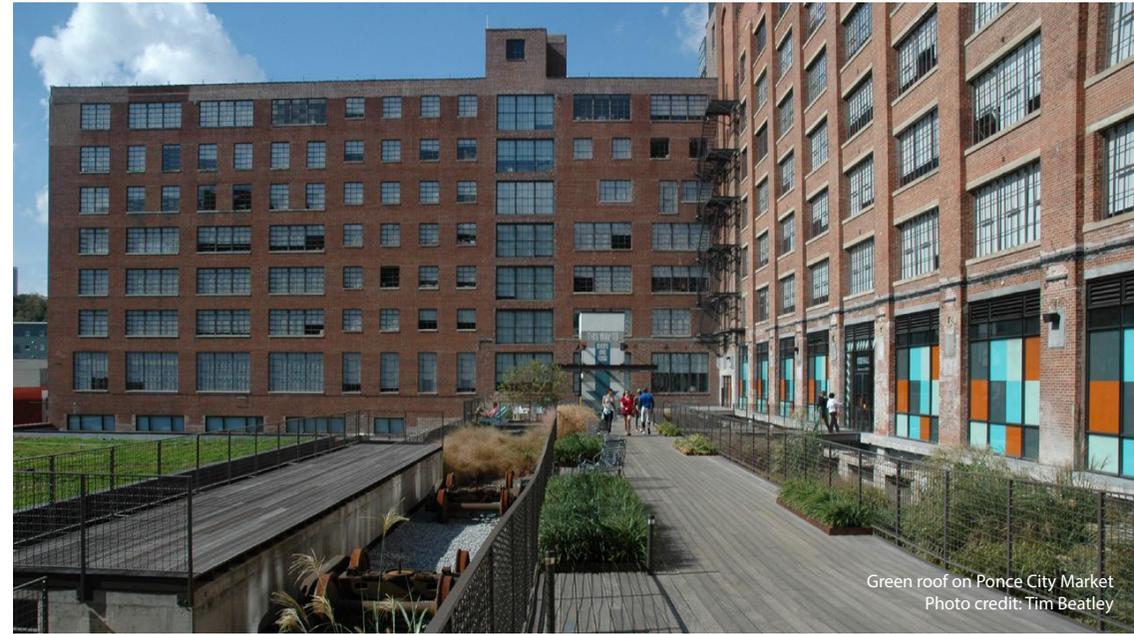
Funding the BeltLine

The BeltLine was funded as part of a tax increment finance district. In Georgia, there is a designation called a tax-allocation district. A tax-allocation district does not contain single family homes, but includes commercial and industrial properties that are prime locations for redevelopment. In 25 years, the tax will generate \$1.5 billion over 25 years. This special status provided significant funding to the project since 2005, but is not the only source of funding.

BeltLine funding
Image credit: Atlanta BeltLine



* Totals are through FY 2014, plus funds committed for the Westside Trail



Green roof on Ponce City Market
Photo credit: Tim Beatley

Transit

While no transit has been built yet, there are plans to incorporate a new light rail system alongside the trail. Once developed, the plans are to connect the light rail with the existing transit system. The compass layout of the current underground train system, called MARTA, will connect with the light rail system at the North, East, South, and West points.

Lantern Parade

A citizen had an idea several years ago to do lantern parade where residents make lanterns to carry down the BeltLine one night each year. The inaugural lantern parade had around 200 attendees. The second lantern parade had approximately 400 attendees. It has continued to grow: in September of 2016, over 70,000 people attended.

The Lantern Parade illustrates the demand for infrastructure like the BeltLine and highlights its ability to bring communities together.

Nature Connector

The BeltLine serves as a way of connecting communities, but it also is helping get people outside to explore nature in the city. It can be thought of as a linear park that also connects parks of all sizes across the city. The BeltLine has partnered with environmental organizations and agencies, such as Trees Atlanta, U.S. EPA, The Conservation Fund, Trust for Public Land and Park Pride. Along the trail, there are identification signs with species names to help improve ecoliteracy.

Once fully implemented, the BeltLine will feature 22-miles

of trees planted by Trees Atlanta, according to the Atlanta BeltLine Arboretum. They describe it as “an urban forest, an ecological connector, a corridor for scientific research, and a collection of remarkable public spaces.” There are plenty of opportunities for volunteers young and old to help remove invasive species and plant more plants, such as the 109,000 individual plants and 43 different species of grasses and wildflowers that have been planted on the Eastside Trail (Atlanta BeltLine Arboretum, 2017).

Nature appears in other ways on the BeltLine. Public art is plentiful along the the BeltLine, and many of the sculptures and murals reflect nature in form and interpretation. This artwork complements the landscape while also enhancing the user’s experience with variety.

Equity and Affordability

Communities along the BeltLine represent racially and socio-economically diverse communities. Part of the vision for the BeltLine was to be inclusive and bring disparate communities together. People with lower incomes became fearful when learning of the BeltLine because they worried that they were not going to be able to stay in their homes and neighborhoods. Because of their concerns, affordability was a priority. The BeltLine is trying to address this by accompanying the physical changes with policies, such as affordable housing subsidies, inclusionary zoning, and job training. For example, 15% of the the tax increment finance district goes to affordable

housing, which equals about 5,600 units. The BeltLine is not the only pressure on gentrification. The City of Atlanta is growing rapidly, so affordable housing will continue to be an urgent concern. Gravel recently stepped down from the Atlanta BeltLine Partnership, along with Nathaniel Smith, Founder and Chief Equity Officer at the Partnership for Southern Equity. Both stepped down due to concerns about equity and affordable housing. As the birthplace of the Civil Rights Movement and Dr. Martin Luther King, Atlanta has a unique history that is an omnipresent reminder of the continued need to reexamine equity.

Future Opportunities

The BeltLine provides a perfect

laboratory for experimenting with different policies for affordable housing and equity. There have been unintended consequences of the way we have developed our cities. We have a unique opportunity now to reimagine cities, reinvigorate forgotten places, and reconnect with nature. It is also a time to recognize and develop strategies for addressing the consequences of new developments, like the BeltLine.

Gravel is surprised the BeltLine is being implemented. He remarks "I mean, honestly, it's remarkable that we're doing it. What's remarkable is how much people love it and that's why we're doing it. You can walk down the BeltLine and overhear people talking about how in love they are with their city again. That love means something.

It means that they love their lifestyles, this place, and when they love a place, they're going to make better decisions about it."

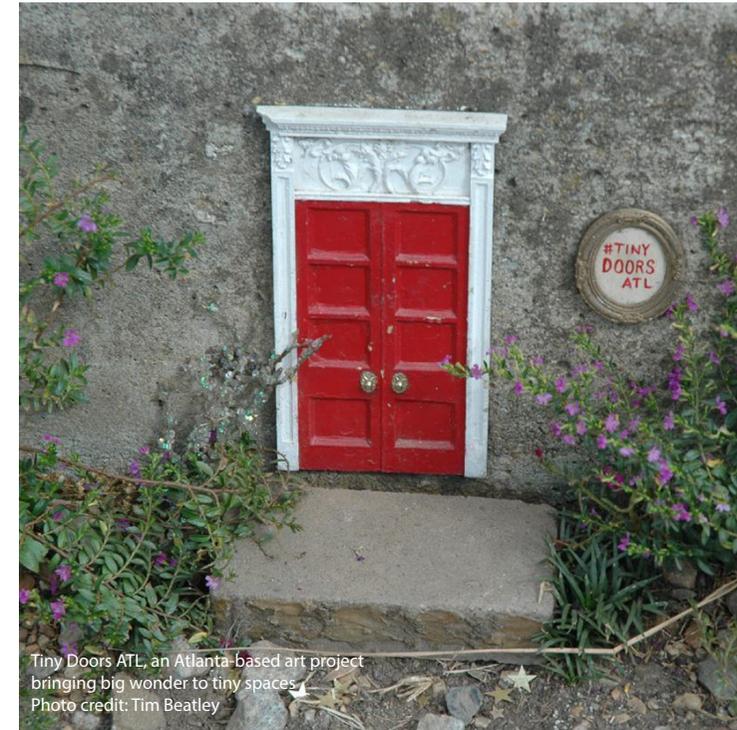
For more information about Ryan Gravel's work, read his latest book *Where We Want to Live: Reclaiming Infrastructure for a New Generation of Cities*.

Resources

Atlanta BeltLine. <https://www.beltline.org>.

Biophilic Cities. Atlanta Beltline [video file]. <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCR1OKw8CA2IsK-TnEJdDflw>.

Ryan Gravel (2016). *Where We Want to Live: Reclaiming Infrastructure for a New Generation of Cities*. St. Martin's Press.



Tiny Doors ATL, an Atlanta-based art project bringing big wonder to tiny spaces
Photo credit: Tim Beatley



Entrance to Ponce City Market from the BeltLine
Photo credit: Tim Beatley



Sculpture entitled Ear and Conch by Jason Smith
Photo credit: Tim Beatley



Biophilic pattern on the BeltLine
Photo credit: Tim Beatley



Skateboarding sculpture on the BeltLine
Photo credit: Tim Beatley