Press Conference - Mayor of Atlanta

Africa Atlanta 2014

Monday, February 24, 2014
City Hall Atrium
3:45 – 4:15 p.m.

How privileged I feel to live in Metropolitan Atlanta and to work in Midtown at the Georgia Institute of Technology. I find it totaling invigorating that Atlanta is so historically relevant and at the same time so poised in our contemporary context for leadership and excellence, not only in terms of our nation’s past in symbolizing so iconically what it means in the United States to be “southern,” but also to be here in this southern city in 2014 when Atlanta, once again, is at the very epicenter of what it means to be a nexus for action in the face of the challenges and opportunities of the twenty-first century—both locally and globally. Quite literally, in 2014 Atlanta sits at a point of leverage in the trans-Atlantic triangle of Africa, Europe, and the Americas. When you look at a map, you can see it—boldly, clearly, a geographic relationship that does speak, certainly, to a pretty horrific socio-political past, but also speaks to a present and future in which we can re-invent ever evolving historical relationships in more respectful, more dynamic, more positive ways.

I shouldn’t really need to make these next points here in the city, but I feel it important to do so: Atlanta is the home of the busiest airport in the world in a state where we have a seaport capable of quite conveniently connecting three continents. It is the home of core governmental and non-governmental organizations who are coming together to address our most challenging and long-standing human issues. It is a place where all sorts of people from all sorts of places are coming together around scientific,
economic, social, political, cultural and cross-cultural issues and concerns. It is a center for innovative research and education, not only from the perspective of science, technology, engineering, and medicine, but also in full awareness of the roles that the arts, humanities, and social sciences must play if we are to be successful. Indeed, Atlanta is a place of amazing vibrancy, where, despite ever-present problems, we are persistently inspired to do better today and tomorrow than we did yesterday.

Symbolized by the phoenix, we’ve been called upon, in part or in whole, since the days when our city was a whistle stop called “Terminus,” to be bold and adventurous at the same time that we are rational and practical, creating among us the habit of being quite un-afraid of challenge or change.

This type of highly energized spirit of engagement is exactly what has made the idea of Africa Atlanta 2014 a true possibility. Typically, I describe the project as a serendipitous opportunity to bring to Atlanta some of the most remarkable African art in the world, and indeed it is that. The Ivan Allen College of Liberal Arts at Georgia Tech, the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium, the Harn Museum at the University of Florida, and the Jimmy Carter Library and Museum here in the heart of our city are collaborating to bring the remarkable exhibition, KONGO across the WATERS, to Atlanta. Opening on May 16th, this exhibition will be a distinctive moment for celebration, knowledge-building, and cross-community engagement—a moment not to be missed.

Africa Atlanta 2014, however, is more. Those of us who have a well textured view of Atlanta understand that serendipity in Atlanta is often not very serendipitous at all. It is the way that things happen here. Africa Atlanta 2014, quite simply, was a moment whose time had just come. We have the reputation of rising well to new
occasions, and African art became a perfect new occasion to think again about who we have been, who we are now, and who and how we might be going forward.

Modeled on France Atlanta, 50 partners from across the city and beyond have come together to carve out an idea: What would it mean to “feel the soul of Africa in the heart of Atlanta?” With a goal of collaboration and cooperation, instead of isolation and competition, *Africa Atlanta 2014* seeks to generate a new model. Quite deliberately, this initiative draws connections across the arts, humanities, sciences and technology; across education, business, and innovation; across local and global concerns—past, present, future. In just under 18 months, we have organized, not by prescription but quite organically, an array of spectacular events under a thematic umbrella, with arts and culture as a springboard by which to engage un-tapped potential.

In the beginning, the idea was to have a great art exhibition and two or three weeks’ worth of cross-sector engagement. What we quickly found, however, is that there is so very much going on in so many places in so many ways that, without blinking an eye, we now have in motion a full 15 months of events and activities with lots of energy and achievements to spare.

Since October, we’ve had some amazing moments: Reflections on Africa, A Conversation with Haskell Sears Ward and Leah Ward Sears; the Atlanta Premier of the documentary film, *Alice Walker: Beauty in Truth*; the theatrical production of the South African play, *Mother to Mother*, at the Balzar Theatre; the Soweto Gospel Choir at the Rialto Center, and again, so much more. Right now we have a full slate of wonderful exhibitions, including: Romare Bearden: A Black Odyssey at Emory; James Pate’s Kin Killing Kin at the Clark Atlanta University Galleries; African
Masks/Masquerade at the High Museum; Health is a Human Right at the CDC; and, again, much much more.

The truth of the matter, though, is that we’re just getting started. This week, we are sharpening focus with Mapping Place: Africa Beyond Paper, an exhibition on the Georgia Tech campus at the Robert C. Williams Museum of Papermaking. In this exhibition, we acknowledge western traditions of mapping with some of the oldest and most beautiful paper maps of Africa in the world, but we also acknowledge that there are other ways of mapping, taking as our exemplar a Lukasa board from the Luba people in the Congo. These remarkable sculptures are memory boards that encode conceptual maps of Luba life and culture, and we pay tribute to them for having inspired us, in Georgia Tech fashion, to use digital technologies to make our own conceptual and narrative connections—beyound paper.

After Mapping Place, there is even more to come—Pan African Week at Kennesaw State, the Rodney Symposium at Clark Atlanta, the Five from Five Literary Series at Georgia State, an amazing series of events focused on historic and contemporary connections to Brazil, China, South Africa, South Korea, and Turkey. There are many more exhibitions around the area, poetry readings, symposia and conferences—I’m literally breathless just thinking about all of the wonderful events ahead, and I haven’t even made it to May. What this richness suggests is that you probably should consult our website: www.africaatlanta.org frequently, just so you have a convenient mechanism just to keep up.

There’s just one last thing that I’d like you to note. What has emerged through the sequencing of our events is an arc. We started in October with visibility, awareness, and audience building. Now, we’re gaining momentum in building networks for
dynamic action. In the fall, we’ll focus on the work ahead in business, science, and innovation; health, education, and human rights; and yes arts, culture and creativity—as we develop and sustain longstanding and new networks, and as we think again about what it will mean going forward to know, not only that Atlanta is in and of the world, but also that so much of the world is now right here with us.

On behalf of all of the partners of Africa Atlanta 2014, we joyfully say to you that over the course of this year we celebrate the potential of our city as a nexus for action, and we invite all of you to join with us and to stay engaged as we forge new paths and new connections.