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Man helps create giant arch monument for Atlantic Station

Rodney Cook Jr. brings his love of classical architecture to Atlanta

By **JIM AUCHMUTEY**
The Atlanta Journal-Constitution
Published on: 06/15/08

The largest monument ever built in Atlanta began as a 6-year-old boy's paper model.

Rodney Cook Jr., the scion of a prominent Buckhead family, fell for classical architecture at an early age, making replicas of buildings that caught his fancy. One of them was the Arch of Titus, a Roman monument that inspired Napoleon to erect the best-known arch in the world, the Arc de Triomphe, in Paris.



Joey Ivansco/AJC (ENLARGE)

Rodney Cook Jr. has tried to put a classical imprint on Atlanta since 1992. The Millennium Gate opens on the Fourth of July.

About the Millennium Gate
COST: \$15 million. Privately funded by Atlanta families, foundations and companies. The arch is owned by the National Monuments Foundation, a nonprofit started by Atlanta designer Rodney Cook Jr.

ARCHITECTURE: A competition produced 10 winners. Hugh Petter of Robert Adams Architects in London honed their ideas, along with Cook. The architects of record are Collins Cooper Carusi of Atlanta.

SCULPTURES: The eastern facade is flanked by two feminine forms —Peace and Justice — created by Alexander Stoddart, who recently did a series of works for the Queen's Gallery in Buckingham Palace.

INSIDE: A museum dedicated to Georgia history and pioneer Atlanta families and philanthropists. One display re-creates a drawing room from the Rhodes-Robinson house, a Buckhead landmark designed by classical architect Philip Shutze and owned for many years by Cook's in-laws.

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Fast-forward a few centuries. On the Fourth of July, the Millennium Gate, Cook's paeon to ancient glory, will open in Atlantic Station, the modern real estate development in Midtown Atlanta. In a city where arches are usually golden and attached to fast-food joints, the new monument should stand out like a toga at Turner Field. It rises 82 feet amid a dense stand of condos and high-rises, across from a Target store and down the street from Ikea.

"It's certainly going to be a conversation piece," says Elizabeth Dowling, an architecture professor at Georgia Tech.

The arch has already started a spirited debate on [SkyscraperPage.com](#), an architecture forum. "I think it's going to be really cool," writes Briantech. "A kitschy McMonument that bespeaks a cultural inferiority complex," scoffs Tombstoner, who dubbed the edifice "Arche d'Ikea."

While Cook did not design the Millennium Gate — he doesn't have an architecture degree or license — he is clearly the project's impresario. He created the foundation that owns it, organized the competition to design it, raised the private funds to pay for it and conceived the history museum that will occupy it.

It's the most conspicuous work to date from one of Atlanta's most controversial designers.

Cook has tried to put a classical imprint on the city since 1992, when he proposed a massive Beaux Arts plaza in Piedmont Park to herald the coming Olympics. An anonymous donor offered to pay for it, and the Atlanta City Council voted to accept the gift. Then, critics lambasted the plan, and the city's Urban Design Commission tabled it.

"I failed my hometown," says Cook, who feels he became too identified with the proposal.

In the intervening years, he did most of his work elsewhere, complaining to the New Yorker magazine there was a "climate of hostility" to his vision in Atlanta.

He still had designs on his hometown. Next time, he resolved, things would be handled differently.

Passion for the past

To understand Cook's aesthetic, it helps to see his home, a neoclassical mansion overlooking a former horse farm on the banks of Nancy Creek in Buckhead. He designed it himself, basing it on Prince Charles' home. Across the top is a Latin inscription that translates: "The family of Rodney Jr. arrived in America at Jamestown, 1610, thanks be to God."

Cook loves to show off the estate, which he calls Alexandra Park, after the younger of his two daughters.

"That house is a little over the top for my taste, but it's so Rodney," says Lovette Russell, a member of Cook's advisory board. "He recognizes that he's different from most people, and he's proud of it."

Inside, the main floor is decorated with larger-than-life paintings of Cook's family and photographs of him with famous associates like the Prince of Wales, Lady Henrietta Spencer-Churchill, Tom Wolfe and the late John F. Kennedy Jr.

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"He used to stay with us on his way to the Georgia coast," Cook says. "He'd put on a ball cap and sunglasses and jog to Starbucks."

After Kennedy and his wife died in a plane accident, Cook erected a private memorial to them: a column he can see every day from his front steps. It was a typically sentimental gesture.

At 51, Cook is the very picture of a genteel aristocrat. Slim, blue-eyed and sandy-haired, he brings to mind the patron saint of Southern romantics, Ashley Wilkes.

Cook grew up in an old Atlanta family that produced two of the city's early mayors. His father, Rodney Cook Sr., was an insurance man and Republican legislator who ran for mayor and governor unsuccessfully. His mother, Bettijo Trawick (she divorced and remarried), was a pioneer preservationist who helped save the Fox Theatre in the 1970s. Her son enlisted in the cause, organizing a group called Youth for the Fox.

Cook wanted to be an architect like his hero, Philip Trammell Shutze, a noted classicist who designed some of the finest homes in Buckhead. When he met Shutze and solicited his advice, the great man warned him that he was out of step with the modernism that ruled the day. "Mr. Cook, I am so sorry for you," he remembers Shutze telling him. "You will have a life of misery."

Instead of attending architecture school, Cook went to Washington and Lee, his father's alma mater, and studied art history and drawing. He returned to Atlanta and married Emily English Robinson, whose grandfather had headed the First National Bank and whose father was chief executive of American Express.

In the 1980s, Cook started designing houses for friends and acquaintances (Georgia doesn't require a license to execute single-family homes). Written up in Architectural Digest, his work provoked strong reactions. Some praised him for evoking a lost world of classical beauty. Others derided him for dabbling in historical mimicry worthy of a theme park.

After the disappointment of Piedmont Park, Cook found consolation in another project, the World Athletes Monument, which he built in 1996 at Pershing Point in Midtown with funds from Prince Charles' foundation.

For the most part, though, Cook worked outside Atlanta in the years after the Olympics. He promoted traditional design on the board of the Institute of Classical Architecture in New York and spent much of his time consulting on the restoration of czarist-era mansions in Russia — hence the onion domes amusingly perched atop the converted horse barn he uses for a studio.

"I got more attention in Russia than I did in Atlanta," Cook says.

A few years ago, his wife urged him to end his professional exile. Classicism was making a comeback — even in Atlanta.

"You need to come home," Emily Cook told him. "Your city is ready for you now."

Barnumlike salesman

The Millennium Gate was not originally intended for Atlanta. Cook proposed it for Washington as a way to mark the new millennium with an arch celebrating peace instead of military triumph. He lined up supporters in the U.S. Senate and organized a competition judged by big-name architects like Robert A.M. Stern and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk.

Government interest flagged after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

"A monument to peace wasn't on everyone's front burner just then," Cook says.

Back home, Atlantic Station, the mini-city rising from the site of the Atlantic Steel mill, was looking for a centerpiece attraction after the Georgia Aquarium decided to build elsewhere. Enter the arch.

"We didn't know if it would fit in," remembers Brian Leary, Atlantic Station's vice president of design and development. "We went back and forth about it."

The discussion wasn't all about the monument; some of it was about Cook.

"We didn't know if he could really deliver," Leary says. "Rodney's a real character. He knows all these important people, but you don't know quite what to make of it."

Cook collects allies like a politician collects endorsements. His advisory board includes members of some of the nation's most renowned families — Susan Eisenhower, Priscilla Roosevelt, Anne Randolph Hearst — as well as one celebrated author, Tom Wolfe, who led the charge for traditional architecture in his 1981 book, "From Bauhaus to Our House."

"I'm interested in Rodney's attempt to recover some styles and forms that were lost when American architecture was lobotomized by modernism," Wolfe says, explaining his involvement. "God bless him for doing that."

The writer does not appear intimately involved, however. Asked his opinion of the Millennium Gate, he demurs. "I'm sure he's sent me pictures, but I honestly don't remember what it looks like."

Robert Stern examined photos of the arch and was pleased. "Very handsome," the architect says. "Atlanta should be proud of it."

Cook approached this monument differently from his stillborn proposal for Piedmont Park. He co-designed that project, but commissioned other architects this time. He built on private land donated by Atlantic Station, so there was no need for city approval. Lacking a single benefactor, he raised \$15 million by appealing to families and foundations, many of whom will be featured in a museum of philanthropy inside the building.

"He's a good salesman," says Atlantic Station developer Jim Jacoby. "I call him P.T. Barnum."

To build buzz for the undertaking, Cook staged a procession to carry the sculptures that will flank the monument across Georgia by horse-drawn caisson. Business and civic leaders from Gov. Sonny Perdue to Atlanta Mayor Shirley Franklin took part in the hoopla.

Among the people who climbed aboard the caisson was Elizabeth Dowling of Georgia Tech, one of Cook's most vocal

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critics during the Piedmont Park deliberations. Back then, she likened his designs to something her sophomores would do and suggested that Shutze would tell him to go back to school.

Her opinion of Cook has evolved.

"What he's doing now in promoting civic monuments is admirable," Dowling says. "He's hired some very good designers for this. I think he's matured."

Good thing, because Cook isn't finished with Atlanta. He's already thinking about another project: a monumental column honoring Georgia's founder, James Oglethorpe.

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