

“Taking a (Grand)Stand: Maynard Jackson, Media, Racial Politics, and Atlanta Public Housing in the 1970s”

Katie Marages Schank

On Friday evening, October 18, 1974, nine months after becoming Atlanta’s first African-American mayor, Maynard Jackson arrived at the Bankhead Courts public housing project in a chauffeur-driven Lincoln Continental. He would spend the weekend on a cot in the living room of a resident, see the housing project’s problems first-hand, and bring increased media attention to the project. Notorious for its severe maintenance issues and a recent rash of violence, Bankhead Courts was already making headlines before Jackson’s visit brought even more visibility to the housing complex. Yet, Jackson intended for his stay to shift the narrative. While acknowledging that conditions were poor and unacceptable, he wanted to demonstrate that they could be fixed – that they needed be fixed – and that residents should not be expected to live in substandard environments. Accused by some for using his weekend stay to grandstand, I argue instead that Jackson used his visit to take a stand against the conditions in the city’s public housing. Succeeding in bringing increased attention to public housing and in securing federal funding to address maintenance issues, Jackson’s stay demonstrated the vital role of media and images in impacting the built environment, policy, and public perception.

Katie Marages Schank will earn her PhD this spring from the Department of American Studies at George Washington University. Her recently defended dissertation, “Producing the Projects: The Cultural Creation of Public Housing, Atlanta, Georgia 1933-2011,” explores the vital role of images and public relations in the history of public housing and investigates how Atlanta’s housing was not only a physical place and a social program but how it became a cultural commodity. This semester, Katie is a Visiting Research Scholar in the Geography Department at the University of Georgia.