

NASHVILLE CIVIC DESIGN CENTER

Nashville Past and Present



Nashville's Public Square. (Photograph, 1855: Tennessee State Museum)

Christine Kreyling

The first known photograph of Nashville is of the public square. This is fitting, for it is the public square that is the point of vantage for Nashville's history in three dimensions.

It was with the square that the settlers from North Carolina first began to apply an enduring shape to the land they claimed. That shape was supplied by surveyor Thomas Molloy, who in 1784, before Tennessee was even a state, platted a village of one acre lots, with four acres reserved for a civic square on the bluffs above the Cumberland River near Fort Nashborough. Molloy laid his lines as a grid running up and down and across hills and valleys with no regard for topography—obvious progenitors of the downtown street pattern of today.

The sole offspring of Fort Nashborough, on the other hand, is a small representation of the 1780 fort that was constructed by the Daughters of the American Revolution in the 1930s and functions as a theater in which pioneer life is reenacted for school children and tourists. The original stockade had no real progeny because it was a defensive gesture, a holding pattern to be used until its inhabitants felt safe to venture out and begin to turn earth into property.

But Molloy's four acres are still where blocks coalesce into town. From them we can look out in space and back in time to see Nashville as it has been formed and re-formed for more than two hundred years.

The Shape of the Land

Nashville is at the center of a web of often competing influences. The city lies between the Appalachian mountains and the Mississippi River, between the states of the North and the Deep South. This midway geography predicated the contradictory cultural pulls—the Scotch-Irish homogeneity of East Tennessee and the black/white dichotomy of the delta country to the west, the commercial and industrial impulses of the North and the agrarian ethos of the South—to which the region has responded.

“History is all explained by geography.”

Robert Penn Warren, *Writers at Work: First Series* (1958)

Before Nashville began, the land on which the city rests was a hunting ground for Native Americans, who tracked the animals drawn to the salt lick and sulphur spring that lay just east of the site of the Bicentennial Mall near what is now Fourth Avenue North. Today the Lick Branch stream courses twenty-five feet beneath the Mall, flowing into the Cumberland River through a massive, brick-lined culvert.

Nashville lies in the Central Basin of Middle Tennessee, which is inscribed by the Highland Rim, a horseshoe of ridges gouged by narrow river valleys that opens to the south. The watershed within the Rim is what made the Basin a garden. Leaching from crevices, bubbling up from springs and tumbling over limestone shelves, the waters traced a filigree of streams and rivers in the Basin’s limestone bed and delivered silt to the depression, in which grew cane and grasses and forests. When a handful of French trappers and traders arrived in the eighteenth century, the Basin was a land traversed by all but owned by none.

Permanent settlement depended on the domestication of the land—the chopping of trees for the building of shelter, the clearing of fields for the grazing of livestock and the raising of crops. And that required the social building blocks of families, families intent on making homesteads and towns, establishing institutions of government and education.

The domesticators set out from the Watauga settlement in North Carolina in 1779. Land speculator Richard Henderson

sponsored their expeditions as a means of securing his personal land purchases in what would become Middle Tennessee. Separate parties traveled to the site of what is now Nashville via land and water. James Robertson and his band drove their livestock along a four-hundred-mile overland route and arrived on Christmas Day, walking the final legs of their journey, legend has it, across a frozen Cumberland River. John Donelson led thirty-three boats, ferrying more men, women, children (including his daughter Rachel, the future Mrs. Andrew Jackson), and free Negroes and slaves, as well as household furnishings and seed for crops, in a tortuous thousand-mile journey down the Holston and Tennessee Rivers, then up the Ohio and Cumberland Rivers, to join Robertson’s group on April 24, 1780. The settlement they made was Nashborough—changed to Nashville in 1784 to rid the town in the new nation of all taint of England.

Within the Basin, the principal river is the Cumberland, which scours a serpentine path through the city. It was the river that was the initial lifeline to the rest of the world, connecting Nashville to the Ohio, Tennessee, and Mississippi Rivers—and beyond.

The chain of hills or knobs that encircles the city shaped the underlying structure of Nashville’s historic pikes and railroad tracks, which follow the paths of least resistance first traveled by bison and the natives who hunted them.

The bed of limestone on which Nashville rests for many years inhibited the development of comprehensive water and sewer lines—the city still had fifty thousand septic tanks in 1963—which precipitated the custom of large lots in much of the city. And the historically swampy areas of town—Sulphur Dell north of the Capitol and Black Bottom south of Broadway—have traditionally been problematic for development. In Molloy’s survey, the acreage around the salt lick and spring was set aside for common use, perhaps because this land had more value as a natural resource than if subdivided.

What the first settlers found to work in the Central Basin was rich agricultural land, where the Highland Rim buffered crops and livestock from the downrush of arctic air from Canada, while catching the surge of warm, moist air from the Gulf to the south. This temperate climate, with its not-too-long hot summers, limited the region’s ability to go the way of the Deep South into a one-crop economy, with its vast slave work force—Andrew Jackson himself lost several cotton crops to early frosts—and established a tradition of economic diversity that endures today.

But that diversity would come later. The primary—and most lucrative—economic activity on the frontier was speculation in land.¹

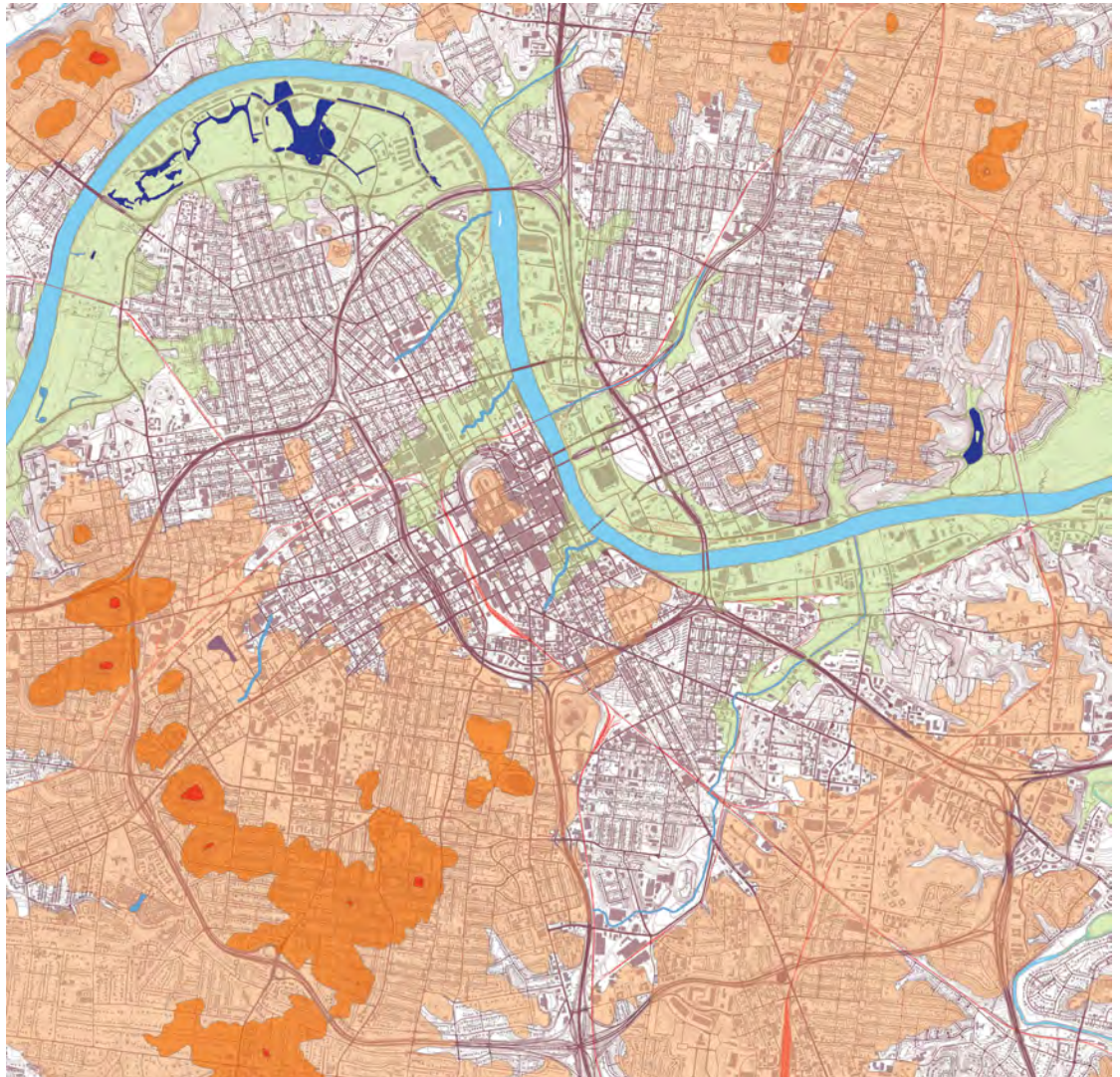
Using the Land

Platting turns land into real estate. And a grid system is the most practical method of parceling, offering simplicity of surveying and recording and the capability of being repeated and extended indefinitely.² The grid as the first step in settlement planning is thus ubiquitous both geographically and chronologically. Orthogonality is also a symbol of human power, freezing spatial structure in an obviously manmade, whether hierarchical or egalitarian, configuration. There are no straight lines in nature.

Nashville's original settlers hazarded the considerable perils of westward migration because they were seeking the wealth to be had from land as real estate. James Robertson, for example, had lived among the Cherokee as agent for North Carolina and Virginia. "He could have claimed land anywhere on this first Indian border, land sufficient for a farmer or a planter," writes Anita Shafer Goodstein in her history of early Nashville. "Obviously, he sought not just this but rather land in quantities large enough to create capital, to speculate with, lands that could be turned into the basis of

position for himself and his children."³ By 1787 Robertson had title to 33,000 acres, much of it his fee for locating land purchases for absentee speculators.

Many of the original settlers, however, "died without ever gaining title to a piece of ground," historian John Egerton points out. Those who stayed and survived, or the heirs of those killed in the Indian fighting, were guaranteed 640 acres when North Carolina organized Davidson County as a political unit in 1784. Similar grants were made to soldiers for service in the Revolutionary War. But war, whether with the British or the Native



¹ Early economic history from Anita Shafer Goodstein, *Nashville 1780–1860: From Frontier to City* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1989), xi.

² The grid and its historical application from Spiro Kostof, *The City Shaped: Urban Patterns and Meaning Through History* (Boston: Bulfinch Press, Little, Brown and Co., 1991), 95–157.

³ Goodstein, *Nashville 1780–1860*, 4.

Americans, was hazardous duty. “At considerably less risk were the ones who came later,” Egerton writes; “they may not have been as diverse or self-sufficient or as courageous a group as their predecessors, but they had more political power, more influence, and more money to begin with—and they got the land.”⁴

The parcels they got were delineated by the National Land Survey of 1785, although in North Carolina—from whence Tennessee sprang—the division practiced by the survey was common from the start. An initiative championed by Thomas Jefferson, the National Survey regulated two-thirds of the United States territory and determined the size and placement of many towns. The survey gridded the territory into “townships” of six square miles, and then into thirty-six sections, each measuring one square mile or 640 acres. Some of these sections were then broken into more manageable halves and quarters.

This national open grid, explains urban historian Spiro Kostof, “is predicated on a capitalist economy and the conversion of land to a commodity to be bought and sold on the open market. The grid is left unbounded or unlimited so it can be extended whenever there is the promise of fast and substantial profit. In this state of affairs, the grid becomes an easy, swift way to standardize vast land operations by businessmen involved in the purchase and sale of land.”⁵

Speculative gridding does not require finesse. The Molloy plat of 1784, as we have already noted, applied a checkerboard to Nashville without regard for the rolling terrain. Proceeds from the sale of the town lots were to provide funds for the necessary civic buildings to be constructed in the square: a courthouse—where the all-important land surveys and titles were secured and recorded—a prison and stocks. But the location of the public square at the edge of the grid, on a high bluff on the west bank of the Cumberland—rather than at the geographical center—acknowledged the primacy of the river to the life of the town.

In the English colonial cities, the omnipresent square or village green tends to be located within the fabric of the town. William Penn, for example, chose a location for Philadelphia’s most prominent square almost equidistant from the two rivers. A different method was followed by the Spanish and French in planning New Orleans, whose square is close to the bank of

the Mississippi River with the streets platted around it.

“Man walks in a straight line because he has a goal and knows where he’s going.”

LeCorbusier, *The City of Tomorrow*, translated by F. Etchells (1924)

Nashville’s streets were laid out around the public square in a pattern much like that of the French Quarter of New Orleans, even though the latter is flat and Nashville has a topography that varies abruptly within the small area of the original plat. But the square’s relationship to the Cumberland is weaker than that of Jackson Square to the Mississippi. The south edge of Jackson Square was lined with wharves and served as the original port of New Orleans.

The port of Nashville was located at the end of Broad Street (now Lower Broad or Broadway) and connected to the market on the public square via Market Street (now Second Avenue). This correlation between port and market is Nashville’s first axial relationship, an urban design technique that was to become a hallmark of the city’s urban form.

Another hallmark is how the grid was subdivided so irregularly. Streets vary in width and length, often failing to connect into a coherent network, especially south of Broad Street. Blocks differ in size, and alleys are inserted inconsistently. Plats just prior to the Civil War reveal the apparently arbitrary division of the blocks; the street frontage occupied by individual parcels follows no obvious formula or mathematical increments.

By way of comparison, the grid exercised a ruthless logic on the development of New York City. In 1811, a commission platted the island of Manhattan with identical blocks unrelieved by open space as far north as 155th Street, when the actual city reached only as far as 23rd Street. Nashville’s development habits were more ad hoc.

Nashville’s street system is also distinguished by what Kostof calls “accidental diagonals,” which he describes as “the result of

⁴ John Egerton, *Nashville: The Faces of Two Centuries, 1780–1980* (Nashville, Tenn: PlusMedia Inc., 1979), 37.

⁵ Kostof, *City Shaped*, 121.

trying to accommodate in a regular scheme a prior stretch of road or the coming together of two disparate sections of urban layout.”⁶ The “prior stretches” were the historic pikes that were layered on top of the bison trails through the surrounding hills and became the farmer-to-market roads into the city. As streets were laid out adjacent to the pikes, they took their orthogonals from them. The result was a series of colliding and incomplete grids that still give an irregular texture and unpredictability to the street pattern.

The layout of streets was the province of the town. The roads to connect Nashville to other commercial centers in the southwest territory—the historic pikes—were an issue for the state and the county. In 1804 the Tennessee legislature authorized the counties to construct public roads and build bridges. All adult white males under the age of fifty were required to contribute one day per month on road work, or pay seventy-five cents per month instead. This method of funding a labor force proved insufficient. It was only in 1834 that bonds were issued for radial turnpikes to Gallatin, Franklin, Columbia, Murfreesboro, and Shelbyville; these toll roads were completed in 1842.

But the Cumberland River was Nashville’s main commercial artery. Barges and flatboats carried materials to the area’s major market, New Orleans, with the crews returning overland via the Natchez Trace. Steamboats enabled the river traffic to flow both ways. On March 11, 1819, the General Jackson arrived at Nashville’s City Wharf from New Orleans, to the cheers of the crowds gathered on the river banks. The Harpeth Shoals, thirty-five miles down river from Nashville, was a hazard to steamboat navigation, sinking the General Jackson in 1821. In periods of low water, however, passengers and goods could be transferred to smaller boats and barges for the rest of the journey to Nashville. The contemporary General Jackson, which ferries tourists between Riverfront Park in downtown Nashville and the Opryland complex in Pennington Bend, memorializes the earlier steamboat.

After 1800 the population of Nashville began to climb steadily, at first without the benefit of the roads and steamboats of the transportation revolution. “The major catalyst for growth was the production of tobacco and cotton in sufficient quantities to support a market town,” Goodstein writes. “By 1816 the unde-

veloped lands of Davidson County had disappeared. Farmers and planters rather than speculators had become the favored customers and clients of the town.”⁷

The arrival of the steamboat provided further impetus to population growth as well as commercial development of the waterfront. In 1823 the first bridge across the Cumberland was constructed by Irish laborers from Pittsburgh. The location was the path now occupied by the Victory Memorial Bridge, linking the market square with the East Bank. Despite the clamor for a second bridge at the foot of Broad Street—to give this street the same kind of access to the countryside enjoyed by the square—when a new suspension bridge was finally built in 1853, the site was at the southeast corner of the square, where the Woodland Street Bridge now crosses.⁸

"The disadvantage of men not knowing the past is that they do not know the present. History is a hill or high point of vantage, from alone which men see the town in which they live or the age in which they are living."

G.K. Chesterton, “On St. George Revived,” *All I Survey* (1933)

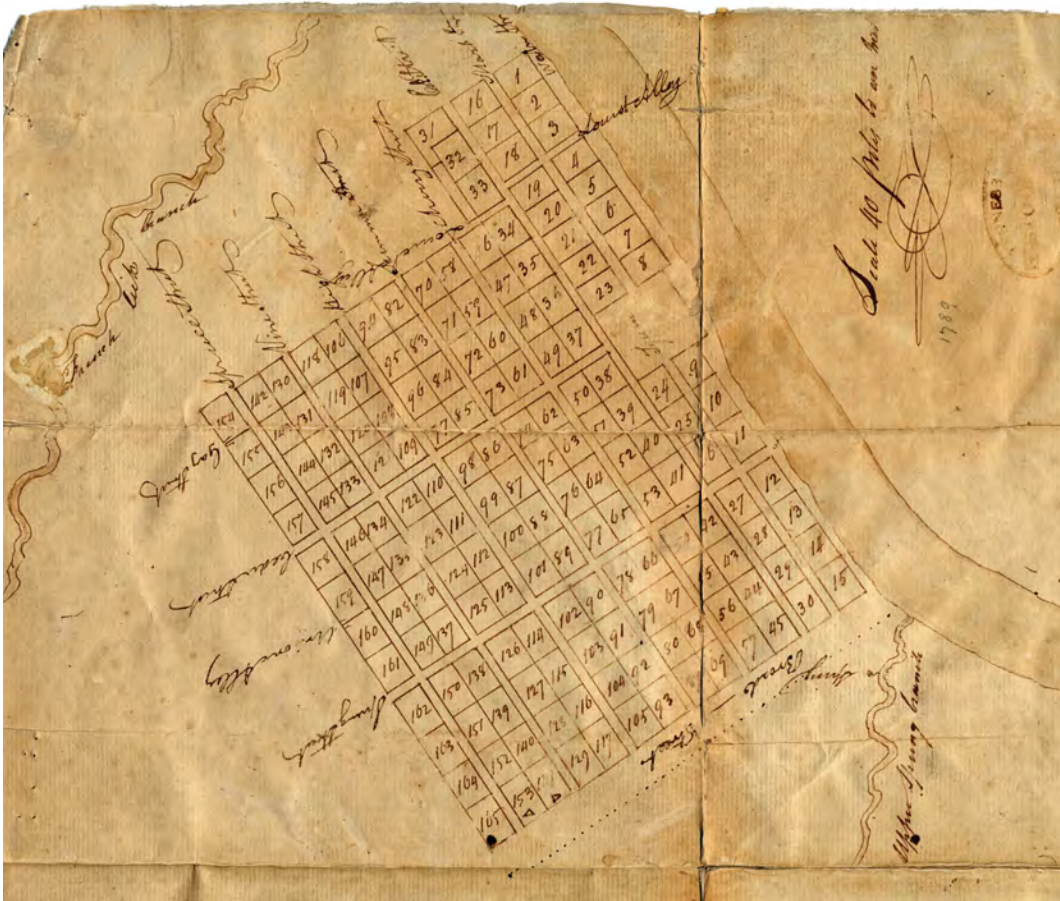
Other municipal improvements included the city waterworks of 1833, with a reservoir on the river bluffs south of town (now Rolling Mill Hill) and a pumping station on the lower bluff.⁹ This water was primarily used for cooking, cleaning streets, and extinguishing fires. Families relied on wells for drinking water, and used outdoor privies, which contaminated the thin soil and the water table in the limestone beneath. Public health was an ongoing problem throughout the nineteenth century. In 1850, for example, 911 people died in a cholera epidemic.

⁶ Kostof, *City Shaped*, 232.

⁷ Goodstein, *Nashville 1780–1860*, 23–24.

⁸ Goodstein, *Nashville 1780–1860*, 106.

⁹ History of water supply from Wilbur Foster Creighton, *Building of Nashville* (Nashville, Tenn.: privately printed, 1969), 44–47.



Original plat of Nashville by Malloy. Note that in the first platting, the city has only three east/west streets: Broad, Spring (Church) and Cedar (Charlotte); the paths of Commerce and Union are not yet present. The public right-of-way is of consistent dimensions: streets are 49.5 feet wide and alleys 33 feet wide; this regularity would be considerably modified as the lots were subdivided and developed. (Map, 1815: The Tennessee Historical Society, Tennessee State Library and Archives)

In that same year the first locomotive arrived in Nashville, delivered by one of the steamboats whose commercial viability would ultimately be eroded by the incursion of the railroads. The Nashville & Chattanooga line reached Antioch in 1851, and Chattanooga in 1854 after the construction of a 2,200-foot tunnel through the mountains. In 1859 the Louisville & Nashville (L&N) line chugged into the city across a new bridge over the river three blocks north of the square. The routes the railroads followed into and through the city were predictable: the bottomlands and ravines that were unsuitable for other development. By 1861, when five lines serviced Nashville, the tracks formed a rough circle around the central core, a circle that would be mimicked by the interstates a hundred years later.

From the standpoint of architecture rather than infrastructure, one of the most significant impacts on the central city was the selection of Nashville as the permanent state capital by the General Assembly in 1843. Prior to this date, the capital had migrated from Knoxville to Kingston to Nashville and then to Murfreesboro, before settling back in Nashville. Four acres on what was originally called Cedar Knob were acquired for the

capitol building and Philadelphia architect William Strickland was hired to design it. The cornerstone was laid on July 4, 1845, and the building completed in 1859. This Greek temple of Tennessee democracy was the physical incarnation of Nashville as the Athens of the South, and established the classical vocabulary as the architectural language perennially favored by the city.

The effect on the urban form was also metaphorically Greek: Nashville now had an acropolis, a sacred precinct to look up to, as a complement to its agora or market square. The connection between these two civic spaces established another axial relationship: Cedar Street (later Charlotte Avenue) led directly from the western edge of the square to the southern steps of the Capitol. This link between state and city was later obscured by the construction of James Robertson Parkway and the tall towers on Deaderick Street.

Despite such formal gestures, however, the planning of Nashville during these years was essentially speculative and entrepreneurial, a laissez-faire approach that respected the wishes of individual property owners and was designed to serve the needs of an agrarian economy.

And an agrarian economy had only minimal need for urban development. A Southern port city such as Nashville served primarily as a gathering and shipping depot for raw materials. The transportation lines, river and rail, were simple conveyor belts to larger cities such as New Orleans and Louisville. With a regional population largely devoted to agriculture, and a labor force of black slaves who were not free to respond to urban opportunities or act as consumers in the marketplace and prompt mercantile activity, Nashville lacked strong stimuli for urban growth. That stimulus would only arrive with the federal forces from the North.

The Business of Making War

For Nashville, the Civil War meant three years of occupation and unwilling collaboration with the Union war effort. But it was the occupiers who laid the groundwork for turning town into city.

Nashville was a strategic prize among the spoils of war, grabbed early—February 1862—by federal troops.¹⁰ The L&N railroad, the only major line linking North and South, was a vital supply route for the invasion. The Nashville & Chattanooga line lay like a dagger, ready to plunge into the heart of Dixie. The town was also the key to usurping Confederate sources of iron and gunpowder. West of the Highland Rim lay an iron belt dotted with furnaces and foundries; along the Cumberland were important gunpowder mills. The iron flowed into Nashville, where—after Tennessee’s secession—factories made cannon, sabers, guns, and ammunition. When the Union army took over, they gained control of these factories and mills, as well as the rail lines that defined the path of penetration.

For the first seven months after federal forces occupied Nashville, a garrison of only two thousand men stood watch as the city was virtually blockaded by Confederate cavalry harassing the inadequate Union defenses. Military governor Andrew Johnson conscripted all the labor he could find, mostly in the form of slaves fleeing from the countryside, and hastily threw up forts on the hills to the south and west. The city was scalped of its trees to build the lines of defense and make it

easier to see approaching attackers. Finally, in November, General William S. Rosecrans arrived with fifty thousand troops to shore up the defenses. By the end of the year Nashville was protected by nearly twenty miles of trenches, breastworks, and rifle pits stretching south and west from river bank to river bank, making it the most heavily fortified city in America besides Washington, D.C. The Union army had decided that Nashville was worth keeping.

In the wake of the troops came more African Americans seeking emancipation and other rural refugees, as well as a motley crew of camp followers and prostitutes. The population, which had stood at seventeen thousand in 1860, swelled to more than eighty thousand. After every major battle in the war’s western theater, the wounded flooded the town; the occupiers confiscated churches, schools, and abandoned homes to use as hospitals.

This huge influx of people understandably strained the transportation infrastructure and building inventory. Private homes were seized to house officers and their families, hotels and commercial buildings for barracks and jails. The army tore up brick streets for tent foundations and requisitioned fences for firewood. Runaway slaves were settled in makeshift “contraband camps” to the east, west, and south of the city; these camps would become the nuclei of African American neighborhoods after the war. By 1865, eleven thousand blacks lived in Nashville, up from four thousand in 1860.



Fort Negley looking northeast. Note the scalped landscape. (Photograph, 1864: Library of Congress)

¹⁰ Civil War history from Egerton, *Nashville: The Faces of Two Centuries*, 117–26, and Don Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South: Atlanta, Nashville, Charleston, Mobile, 1860–1910* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 24–31.



Nashville & Chattanooga depot and rail yard, which stood in the Gulch north of the current location of Union Station. (Photograph, 1864: Library of Congress)

Business was subordinated to military needs; shipments of food and clothing for the citizens were of secondary importance and there were chronic shortages. But the Union army's decision to make Nashville the western depot for food, supplies, and ordnance strengthened the city's infrastructure. A new shipyard rose on the East Bank. Government warehouses were constructed near the railway terminals to supplement existing storage that bulged with supplies—\$50 to \$60 million worth of goods by the end of the war.

The railroads flourished as essentially state-subsidized enterprises. The army took over the Nashville & Chattanooga line and requisitioned more locomotives and freight cars to supply the city. Troops assisted the L&N in rebuilding the river bridge and tracks destroyed by retreating Confederate forces. "Despite constant complaints from L&N officials about financial hardships," Doyle writes, "the company's profits soared during the war; and it emerged from the crisis in a preeminent position among Southern railroads, poised to expand and become the dominant force in the vast territory between the Ohio River and the Gulf of Mexico."¹¹

At war's end, the landscape was denuded and torn up with trenches and fortifications, but the city had suffered no serious physical damage. The downtown needed renovation more than reconstruction. "Nor was the economy significantly disrupted

by blockade or destruction," Doyle says. "Nashville's wartime role, on balance, enhanced its power as a regional distribution center."

Reconstruction was also kind to Nashville. By 1870 Tennessee had a new constitution and the state's Confederate veterans had the vote. Northern funds for educational institutions flowed into the city—to establish Fisk University, Central Tennessee College, Roger Williams University, and Meharry Medical College for the freedmen, and to Vanderbilt University and Peabody College for the reconstruction of the white minds of the South. "This was the Nashville," Doyle writes, "in which J. T. Trowbridge, visiting from the North in 1866, 'could feel the influence of Northern ideas and enterprise pulsating through it.' 'It is a nostril,' he went further, 'through which the State had long breathed the air of free institutions.'"

"Of all major Southern cities, Nashville emerged from the war with fewer physical and political scars and with advantages gained in the war that prepared it for a formidable role in the new order of things."

Don Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South: Atlanta, Nashville, Charleston, Mobile, 1860-1910* (1990)

New South, New Suburbs

In 1881, Union soldier Noble Prentiss returned to Nashville to see what had become of the town he had occupied. The picture he painted is of a city that had shifted from defense to offense.

Standing on the high porch of the Capitol, which overlooks the whole city and the valley of the Cumberland until it is shut in by the encircling chains of saw-like hills, I know of few more impressive pictures. Old Nashville lies in a dark mass of roofs, chimneys, spires and treetops, wreathed in a mist of smoke, on the slopes of the capitoline hill. Up and down the river, north and south, stretches the new town, until the houses become scattered and the country begins; but the most impressive feature is the line of public institutions encircling the city like a line of fortifications. First, on

¹¹ Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South*, 27–28.

the [north], is the great cotton factory; next the massive building of Fisk University; then the three buildings of Vanderbilt University; then the Baptist college for colored people [Roger Williams University]; and thence, on a line drawn toward the river, are Central Tennessee College, a Methodist institution for colored people; the University of Nashville, and the various State asylums. Instead of warlike defenses...the city is surrounded by a cordon reared by Business, Education and Charity—good generals they, who march to the rescue of the world.¹²

What Prentis couldn't see from his Capitol perch was how Nashville was evolving into the "commercial emporium to trade between the Midwest and the Gulf States of the South" with a "solid base of manufacturing and finance as well." The city served "a growing territory of retailers and consumers as a wholesale distribution center linked by rail and river to its hinterland." The leading commercial line was wholesale groceries, a testament "to the rise of the urban South and to the decline of subsistence agriculture in the rural South." People had to buy food because they no longer grew their own. Industry focused on textiles, tobacco and lumber. A chronically depressed agricultural economy propelled people from the farm into the city's labor force. Money from all this commerce flowed into the banks that formed another block in Nashville's economic foundation.¹³

The L&N railroad dominated commercial transport, offering low freight rates for goods that came to and through Nashville, rates that made the city the major milling and distribution center—the "Minneapolis of the South"—for wheat and corn flour. The Cumberland River was the primary avenue for lumber. Trees were felled on the Cumberland Plateau and then lashed together to make enormous rafts that floated to the town's mills and factories, most of them located on the East Bank.

This new scale of transportation, industry, and commerce, which required a large labor force living nearby, had decided impacts on the built environment. The business district grew from the public square along the streets to the south and west, making inroads into what had been residential areas and raising property values. The industrial/transport belt around the city thickened. Local wholesale merchants needed warehouses and offices. Industries set up shop where they would have access to their chosen mode of transport, river or rails. A growing urban

population—including the army of "drummers" or traveling sales agents the wholesalers sent to deal directly with the retail store owners in the small towns and rural cross-roads—demanded places to live and shop.

The result was the "squeeze play," propelling residents out of the city entirely and compressing those without into densely packed slums. Between the expanding business and industrial/transport districts lay old housing that was ripe for real estate speculators, who converted dwellings into tenements for the poor while waiting for more intensive commercial development opportunities. In the lowlands north and west of the Capitol, near the East Bank and south of Broadway emerged the squalid quarters of Hell's Half Acre, Crappy Shoot, and Black Bottom, where disease and vice were rampant.

"In choosing where to live and vacation, we may be setting the stage for the play of ourselves, treating nature as a prop."

Deborah Tall, "Here," *From Where We Stand* (1993)

The moral and physical climate of the downtown in general deteriorated with the crowded conditions. Along Cherry Street (now Fourth Avenue North), gambling and drinking and prostitution flourished. Soft coal used to heat buildings and power locomotives blackened the air and left a patina of soot. Hogs rooted in the muddy streets and alleys. Outhouses reeked and leached waste directly into streams supplying drinking water; cholera and typhoid were constant threats. In 1877 Dr. John Berrien Lindsley, the city's public health official, reported that Nashville had the highest death rate in the nation and the fifth highest in the world. Even when water and sewer lines were laid throughout the central city in the 1880s, few families could afford the hookup, much less the plumbing and "water closets." According to Doyle, "[b]y 1898 the city's population of over 80,000 could count no more than 682 toilets, 212 bathtubs, and 52 urinals."¹⁴

The laboring classes, who had to live within walking distance of

¹² Noble L. Prentis, in *Southern Letters*, 1881, quoted in Egerton, *Nashville: The Faces of Two Centuries*, 144.

¹³ Information on commerce and living conditions in Nashville during this period from Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South*, 39–108.

¹⁴ Don Doyle, *Nashville in the New South: 1880–1930* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985), 83.

their work, were tethered to the city. But those with the funds for the fare were free to flee the democracy of filth and disease, riding the streetcars into the suburban fringe.

Of course, there had been suburbs even before there were streetcars. Access was by horse and buggy or by foot. South Nashville was incorporated in 1850; the first mule-drawn streetcar reached there in 1865, the same year that a line was laid north to Germantown. Residential growth in Edgefield was spurred by the opening of the suspension bridge of 1853; the mule cars arrived in 1872. This animal-powered transit provided reliable service up to roughly two miles from the city center.

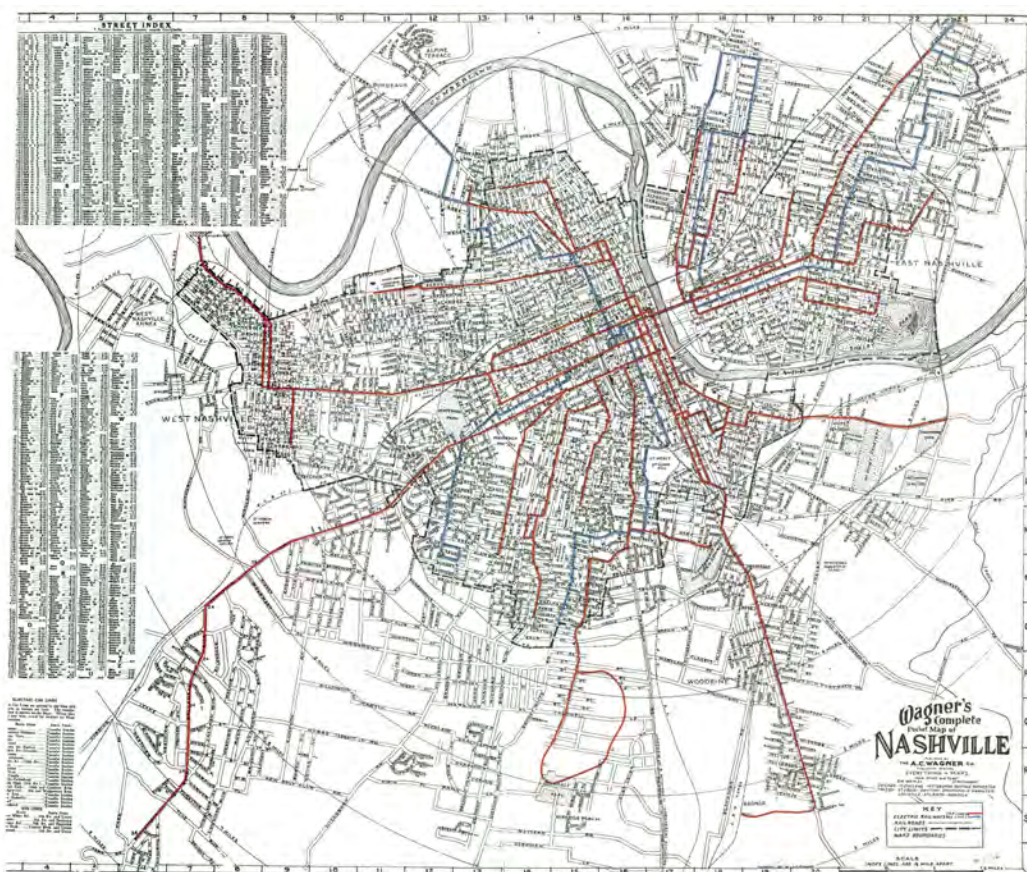
But the conversion of the public transit system to electricity in 1888 opened up more remote territory. The favored path for residential expansion was where industry wasn't, and where the prevailing west-to-east winds kept city smells and soot at bay. Thus, Doyle writes, "[t]he major thrust of suburban expansion in the electric trolley car era was to the west."¹⁵

What the suburbs delivered was more than just a city with a larger footprint. Suburbia was an entirely different pattern of living. Its outlines go back to the ancient Roman patricians, who located leisure villas—daytime getaways—outside the city walls. These places of seclusion and relaxation grew out of the belief in the benefits of country life as cultivated by the urban aristocrat, not the farmer. The spatial remove of the Roman suburban villa from the urban masses defined the social distinction central to the suburb from its beginnings. It was only the wealthy who could afford a town house and a suburban estate, and the private transportation to bridge the gap. In nineteenth-century Nashville, many of those who had made fortunes in commerce and industry constructed suburban villas surrounded by pleasure grounds—for example, the Warner family's "Renraw" on Gallatin

Pike—as shelters for private family life. But with the development of public transportation, the geographical gap between urban and rural became the ideal place for the middle class to emerge in the social gap between rich and poor.

The consequence of the migration to the suburbs was a segregation by race and class unknown in the central city. In general, suburban flight was white, leaving the central city to blacks. But the rising African American middle class also journeyed outward on Jefferson Street, clustering in large homes around the Fisk University campus. Fisk was thus the black counterpart to white Vanderbilt University, which drew development out West End Avenue. In both cases, however, it was the people of means who moved and the poor who remained behind.

The separation of work and home also created distinct male and female zones. Of an evening, men of business shook off the urban dust from their boots, hopped on the trolley, and took refuge at the family hearth presided over by the "angel of the house." The commuter was born.



The streetcar lines at their peak. Note how fine-grained the routes are within the city and how far the lines reach. (For a map of the lines in 1897, see "Midtown," in the "Neighborhoods" Chapter.) (Map, 1927: *Wagner's Complete Pocket Map of Nashville*)

¹⁵ History of Nashville's suburban expansion from Doyle, *Nashville in the New South*, 87–120.

The form these early suburbs took was dominated by single-family homes of various sizes, with the largest usually occupying the corner lots. All the lots were relatively small—50 feet wide by 150 feet deep was typical—and flanked a connected network of streets, alleys, and sidewalks. Corner stores and neighborhood centers such as Five Points and Hillsboro Village supplied the needs of daily life. Schools and churches served each neighborhood. Because men walked to the trolley stop, women to the shops, children to school, and families to church, buildings were clustered closely together and the land uses intermingled.

The architectural styles of the houses were vaguely organic. The irregular profiles and highly textured surfaces—all that gingerbread and other ornament—celebrated the irregular shapes and textures of nature. Later bungalows visually hugged the earth. The signs marking the streets of suburbia often spoke a similarly naturalistic language: Linden and Holly, Ashwood and Cedar. And at the turn of the last century, with the platting of Waverly Place on Eighth Avenue South and Acklen Park on West End Avenue, the street pattern, while still interconnected, relaxed from orthogonals to curves that emphasized the natural topography. All these features were designed to evoke the suburban ideal of buildings in a park, and convey the message that this is the place of green lawns and large trees, the place where the business of Broadway and Market Street is out of place. This is the not-city.

The depression of 1893 temporarily squelched the real estate market. But after the turn of the century the suburban expansion picked up its pace. With the consolidation of the streetcar system in 1902, a consolidation propelled by the high capital costs of generating the electricity, “Nashville experienced a boom on its western frontier,” Doyle explains. Aggressive marketing tactics by real estate syndicates included full-page newspaper advertisements, flyers distributed on streetcars and street corners, billboards and posters. In the wake of the streetcar line extensions sprang up Belmont Park, West End or Acklen Park, the Richland-West End neighborhood, and then Belle Meade. The subdivision of the historic plantation of the Harding family into spacious lots for “country homes” on winding roads was the ultimate symbol of the decline of the landed gentry and the rise of the new commercial class.

Common Grounds

Nashville’s park system had its origins in the great suburban migration.¹⁶ In the nineteenth century, the city had some open spaces like Watkins Grove (subsequently Watkins Park), which



American National Bank Building, Fourth Avenue North and Union Street, the heart of the “Wall Street of the South.” (Photograph, ca. 1930: Metro Historical Commission)

was popular for political barbecues and picnics. And City (1822), Mount Olivet (1856), Mount Ararat (1869), and Greenwood (1888) cemeteries were also shady places for families to stroll on a Sunday afternoon while paying their respects to ancestors.

But real estate developers learned in the 1880s that setting aside part of their subdivision plat for greenspace stimulated sales of the surrounding lots and enhanced overall land values. Because these developers were frequently also principals in the streetcar lines, they located “trolley parks” at the end of the routes to increase traffic on the lines during weekends and to showcase the real estate for sale along them.

The first trolley park was Spring Park, which was laid out in 1885 with a small lake, a bandstand, and a monkey cage at Fatherland and Thirteenth Streets, just when this area of what is now the East End neighborhood was being subdivided. Trolley parks to the west included Richland, Clifton, and Cherokee Parks; the latter, eighty-three acres at the end of the streetcar

¹⁶ Parks history from Leland R. Johnson, *The Parks of Nashville: A History of the Board of Parks and Recreation* (Nashville, Tenn.: Metropolitan Nashville and Davidson County Board of Parks and Recreation, 1986), 33–50.

line owned by the principals in the West Nashville Development Company, featured sulphur springs, concerts, and dances. All the trolley parks were subsequently subdivided for development after they had served their purpose, which was to convince weekend visitors that if such surroundings were a fine place to spend a Sunday, all week long would be even better.

In their short lives, however, the trolley parks provoked demand for permanent public parks. In 1901 the Parks Board was founded and established a plan for a citywide system of four parks of a minimum of fifty acres each, one for each quadrant of Nashville, as well as smaller neighborhood parks to be equally distributed throughout the city. But the board lacked the money to acquire land for parks. In 1902 Mayor James Head negotiated a complex deal with Percy Warner of the Nashville Railway and Light Company that gave the first seventy-two acres of Centennial Park to the Parks Board as well as a percentage of the gross receipts of streetcar fares. Nashville had its first large park and the promise of funding for more.

The plan for large parks to serve the suburbs in each quadrant was frustrated in South Nashville by the difficulty of finding a site, once the concept of turning the slum of Black Bottom into a park roused objections from the local councilman, who wanted more industry in the area. The Parks Board therefore settled for several smaller parks: South and Howell Parks on Rutledge Hill, Dudley Park at Third Avenue South and Chestnut Street, and a park on Eighth Avenue South adjacent to the city reservoir, which had been constructed as part of Nashville's new waterworks in 1889.



The paving of Woodmont Boulevard. (Photograph, n.d.: Charles Henry Butler, Jr. [collection of Richard W. Weesner] in *Nashville: A Pictorial History* by George Rollie Adams and Ralph Jerry Chrisian. The Conning Company/Publishers: Norfolk, Va., 1981)

The board had more luck to the east and north. The original 151 acres of Shelby Park were acquired in 1911 from the bankrupt real estate company that had used part of the grounds for an amusement park in the 1890s. In 1911 President George Gates of Fisk University requested a park near his school that would also serve the new Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial State Normal School (later Tennessee State University), the campus of which had formerly been the Hadley plantation. The following year the Board opened Hadley Park for the black community in North Nashville.

The development of all these parks was an implicit acknowledgement that the open, rural land surrounding Nashville was rapidly vanishing, and that if the citizens were going to have access to nature, the city was going to have to provide it.

Driving on the Wall Street of the South

After World War I, Nashville was poised for a boom, and, like most of the nation's urban centers, boom it did.¹⁷ The industrial giant DuPont had come to town in 1918 to make gunpowder for the war effort. In 1923 the company returned to build a \$4-million plant for the manufacture of rayon, warming the hearts of business boosters eager to expand the city's narrow industrial base. General Shoe Company (later Genesco) migrated to Nashville in 1924, leaving the unions of the North for the cheap labor of the South.

Other industries declined. Nashville lost its favored position within the L&N freight rate system, and there was less grain for the roller mills to grind. The timber supply up river from the city was being rapidly exhausted and Birmingham's rise as an iron and steel center eclipsed Nashville's ironworks. Nashville's real economic strength was in the service sector based on Union Street: banking, insurance, and securities. The shifting nature of the economy was reflected in changes in the city's slogan, from the "Minneapolis of the South" to "Powder City" to the "Wall Street of the South."

The population of Nashville swelled in the 1920s by 30 percent, reaching 153,866 by 1930. The main impetus for the increase was rural-to-urban migration, as depressed prices for their crops led farmers to flee the land. National Life and Accident's WSM ("We Shield Millions") radio station, established in 1925, beamed its Saturday night Barn Dance—dubbed the "Grand Ole Opry" by station manager George Hay—to thousands of good country people come to town but nostalgic for home.

¹⁷ Information on Nashville in the 1920s from Doyle, *Nashville in the New South*, 183–234.

More people earning higher wages meant more disposable income for consumer goods, and merchants were happy to oblige. Nashville's retail district, which had shifted from the public square to the Arcade and Fifth Avenue North before the war, now spread along Church Street. Movie palaces were woven into the retail fabric and increased the synergy of the street; by 1917 downtown Nashville had eight such theaters.

The most significant long-term impact on the built environment, however, was delivered by the rising popularity of the automobile. In 1920 there were 12,000 vehicles registered in Nashville; by 1930 the number had increased to 40,300 and kept climbing. Sales were carefully cultivated by manufacturers and dealers with advertising campaigns designed to persuade consumers that a car was not a luxury for weekend recreation but a necessity of daily life. A 1925 promotion for an auto show declared: "There is no such thing as a 'pleasure automobile.' You might as well talk of 'pleasure fresh air' or of a 'pleasure beef steak'... The Automobile increases length of life, increases happiness, represents above all other achievements the progress and the civilization of our age."¹⁸

"To George F. Babbitt, as to most prosperous citizens of Zenith, his motor car was poetry and tragedy, love and heroism. The office was his pirate ship but the car his perilous excursion ashore."

Sinclair Lewis, *Babbitt* 1922

The growth in the number of cars escalated the pressure for better roads on which to drive them. State legislators mounted a campaign for taxes to improve the pikes used to deliver crops to market to "get the farmer out of the mud." The Commercial Club's Good Roads Committee and the Nashville Automobile Club (founded in 1915) lobbied for the state to assume some responsibility for road construction, which before 1909 had been strictly a county obligation. In response, Tennessee organized a highway department and in 1924 began a \$200-million road building program. Within ten years paved roads connected every county seat and a network of highways

fed Nashville. Counties and cities also added their millions to the building fund. The impact on the local and regional economy, Doyle points out, was tremendous. "Nashville's Caldwell and Company, [for example], built a financial empire by selling southern municipal and county bonds, which were required in large part by the surge of road building."¹⁹

Cars now challenged trolleys for space on downtown streets. A 1928 traffic count taken at Eighth Avenue and Broadway found that twenty-eight thousand cars, as well as six trolley lines, went through the intersection each day. The streetcars could not compete with the comfort and personal freedom of the automobile, and the number of transit passengers gradually declined along with the speed and frequency of service. Downtown merchants, Doyle writes, "at first delighted with this trend, were soon plagued with clogged streets, a severe shortage of parking space, and dangerous traffic that threatened their pedestrian shoppers. New garages were thrown up around the retail district and out lower Broadway, but the number of parking spaces was rapidly outstripped by the rising number of automobiles on the streets."

The automobile's influence on three-dimensional Nashville extended beyond the transportation infrastructure. Cars were not a necessity in the first-ring neighborhoods of Nashville, with their multiple streetcar routes, sidewalks, and compact form, although these neighborhoods could accommodate the vehicles. Residents built garages off the alleys out back or parked next to the curb. Traffic was dispersed through the street network.

New suburbs that were developed beyond or between the trolley lines, however, took a different form because they were organized around the car as the single mode of personal travel. Compact neighborhood form and the weaving of commercial and institutional land uses into the neighborhood fabric gave way to lower densities and compartmentalized land uses. With a car per family and an expanding inventory of roads, distances between destinations became less relevant. Lawns grew larger and sidewalks disappeared. In Nashville the large lot sizes were also the result of all the limestone lying close to the land's surface; water and sewer lines were expensive to install and a half-acre or more was required for a septic system.

The historic pikes became increasingly commercialized with low-density development. Businesses, especially groceries, moved to the periphery to serve the suburbanite with wheels.

¹⁸ *Tennessean*, 18 January 1925; quoted in Doyle, *Nashville in the New South*, 200.

¹⁹ Doyle, *Nashville in the New South*, 199-201.

Auto merchandise shops and service stations also took up positions on the spoke roads into the city. Broadway and West End Avenue to Sixteenth Avenue, in particular, became what Doyle calls “Auto Row,” with showrooms, as well as auto parts and tire stores, displacing the mansions that lined the avenue. Signage grew larger as merchants realized that to succeed in a windshield survey they had to send bold messages to slow down, stop, and buy. Customers had to be provided with places to store their cars while they shopped; buildings gradually retreated from the right-of-way and parking moved out front.

During all these developments, downtown merchants looked out their storefronts at the congested streets and saw retail beginning to leach from the central city. The car was evolving into an urban problem, an evolution that would be slowed by the Depression of the 1930s before picking up speed again after World War II.

Government Steps In

The impact of the October 1929 stock market crash was not immediately felt in Nashville. As late as October 1930, visiting officials from the Publix Theater chain were proclaiming that they found no symptoms of business depression in Nashville. The illness arrived on November 14, 1930, with the collapse of Caldwell and Company, the local banking and brokerage firm. In its wake, 120 banks across the South went under. Nashville’s unemployment rate shot up to 25 percent by the end of that year.

Many of the unemployed were members of the construction industry. To put them to work, the federal government initiated a massive building program across the country. The result was a New Deal for Nashville’s built environment.

Between 1934 and 1940 the city gained a new downtown post office, courthouse, city market, and two public housing complexes, one for whites and one for blacks. Berry Field airport opened in 1937. In 1938 the Public Works Administration funded a school building program that delivered eight new schools, additions to three existing structures, and renovations



The Post Office on Broadway (now the Frist Center for the Visual Arts) under construction. (Photograph, April 2, 1934; Marr and Holman Collection, The Tennessee Historical Society, Tennessee State Library and Archives)

to thirty-two others. Federal dollars paid for the reconstruction of Fort Negley and improvements to the park system; the Warner Parks, the primary beneficiary, got a golf course, picnic shelters, miles of limestone walls, and a steeplechase course. The Works Progress Administration spent \$2.5 million to pave and expand the city’s street system. The state received the Supreme Court Building and John Sevier Office Building. The Tennessee Valley Authority brought cheap electricity rates to town.

As a consequence of all this largesse, local business and civic leaders, who had previously viewed the public sector with suspicion or even disdain, “warmed to the idea of using government to shape the city,” according to historian Robert Spinney.²⁰ This was a pattern repeated throughout the urban South. “[B]ecause the federal funds came to the cities with few strings attached, civic boosters found that the works programs modernized their cities at minimal local cost and left the existing political and social order intact.”²¹

One of the first government tools Nashville’s boosters endorsed for city shaping was a planning commission. The New Deal had mounted a campaign to create local planning commissions, and offered the reward of funding for planning studies

²⁰ Information on the rise of the public sector from Robert G. Spinney, *World War II in Nashville: Transformation of the Homefront* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1998), 1–16.

²¹ Douglas Smith, *New Deal in the Urban South*, quoted in Spinney, *World War II in Nashville*, 8.

if they were performed by commissions staffed with professional planners. Local support for the commission came, not from city bureaucrats or elected officials, but from the Chamber of Commerce, whose members “were concerned about the intrusion of undesirable commercial activities—like gasoline stations—into residential and commercial neighborhoods,” according to historians Lester Salamon and Gary Wamsley. “The four businessmen named to the Nashville Planning Commission therefore made zoning their first priority” when the commission was established and began meeting in 1932.²² An interim zoning code was adopted by the city council within four months, and a permanent code followed the next year that divided the city into residential, commercial, and industrial zones.

Planning director Gerald Gimre secured federal funds for five planning studies in the 1930s: a land use study, a traffic safety study, a public transportation study, a housing study, and a six-year capital improvements program.²³ These studies helped Nashville secure federal aid for the construction of a number of public works projects. But commission members were more interested in zoning than in proactive planning. Because zoning came relatively late to Nashville, the first code lagged behind development. The zoning code was thus used to protect existing land uses—at least those in the locations where the business elite were heavily invested, the downtown and the affluent suburbs—from potential disruption.

The character of this early code is known in planner jargon as “pyramidal” zoning. The code established a hierarchy of land uses and forbade the intrusion of “lower” uses (commercial and industrial) into areas set aside for “higher” ones (single-family residential). But the early codes did not defend higher uses in areas set aside for lower ones. In the areas of the city zoned for lower uses, therefore, any combination of land uses was possible and property owners were rendered defenseless against neighboring land uses with negative impacts.

The original zoning code restricted the residential classification to the suburbs located well beyond the commercial and industrial core, but assigned the commercial and industrial classifications to large chunks of primarily residential areas interspersed with or adjoining commercial or industrial use, principally in the first-ring neighborhoods. “The land classified as commercial by the zoning ordinance,” write Salamon and Wamsley, “was 50 percent larger than the acreage then in use for commercial

purposes in the city, even though the planners at the time saw no need for so much additional commercial property and little likelihood of its development.” As late as 1973, a year before the comprehensive zoning ordinance (COMZO) that eliminated the “pyramid” was enacted, almost 100 acres zoned commercial and 6,600 acres zoned industrial in the inner city were still not used for either purpose. “By adopting a pyramidal scheme and extending the area assigned to less restrictive uses beyond any reasonable expectations, the ordinance denied protection to precisely those homeowners most in need of it—the inner-city residents whose property was threatened by encroaching commercial and industrial development.”

Because of the proximity of the first-ring neighborhoods to the central business district and the industrial/transport belt, and the presence of some commercial and industrial uses within them, the zoning code thus opened up these neighborhoods—even though they were primarily residential in nature—to pretty much any type of commercial and industrial development without regard to the pattern of development. The code implicitly assumed that the urban design of these neighborhoods, with their tradition of fine-grained mixed-use—corner stores and commercial centers surrounded by residential fabric—was in itself a prescription for residential doom. But it was the code that was writing the prescription.

North Nashville, Salamon and Wamsley point out, “provides a classic example of the consequences of pyramidal zoning.” The district housing much of the city’s African American middle class and its two black institutions of higher learning “was early zoned commercial and industrial despite the predominantly residential character of much of it. As a consequence, when the pressures arising from the aging of the housing stock, the slow spread of downtown commercial and industrial activity, and the crushing impact of Interstate 40 hit the area in the 1950s and the 1960s, the zoning code provided the residents little assistance in protecting the character of their once viable residential community.” And the fact that the pyramidal scheme was in effect until 1974 gave “homeowners little confidence that the area would be preserved as a residential area, and this gave little encouragement for home improvement investments.” Pyramidal zoning thus encouraged the “blight” that government would subsequently attempt to cure with public housing projects and urban renewal.

The earliest zoning codes also prevented sensible planning of

²² The evolution of zoning in Nashville from Lester M. Salamon and Gary L. Wamsley, “The Politics of Urban Land Policy: Zoning and Urban Development in Nashville,” in *Growing Metropolis: Aspects of Development in Nashville*, ed. James F. Blumstein and Benjamin Walter (Nashville, Tenn.: Vanderbilt University Press, 1975), 141–90.

²³ Planning history from Randal L. Hutcheson, “A History of Planning in Nashville, Tennessee,” Nashville Civic Design Center, 2004.

commercial development along the historic pikes by indiscriminately assigning commercial zones to the strips of land flanking these major arterials. These zones were mechanically extended outward with subsequent suburbanization. The result has been miles of low-density strip commercial development, traffic congestion, and the deterioration of the residential fabric on adjacent blocks.

The effects of substituting zoning for planning served to limit the role of the professional planners on the commission's staff, even though these planners were well aware of the challenges to the city posed by the car and the expanding rings of suburbs, which would eventually need basic city services. The commission's inattention to proactive land use planning allowed growth to occur without regard for the social, economic, and physical implications for the community at large.

Planning for Growth

World War II "launched Nashville and the South into an unprecedented era of sustained growth," writes historian Don Doyle.²⁴ The war in effect extended the New Deal economic stimulus programs by means of defense industries. The Vultee Aircraft plant touched down near the airport in 1941, employing 7,000 workers to build the "Vultee Vengeance" bomber. Existing industries adapted to make the materials for war. Middle Tennessee's mild climate and rolling terrain were optimal for army maneuvers, which between 1943 and 1944 engaged 600,000 troops. Camp Campbell was established near Clarksville. All these soldiers came to town on leaves and weekends.

But it was the postwar period that concerned Nashville's planners, who realized that the end of the conflict would release the pent-up demand for housing and the associated city services such as transportation infrastructure and utilities. These concerns were echoed by liberal civic leaders such as Silliman Evans, Sr., the publisher of the *Tennessean*, who as early as 1943 began advocating for an official and organized planning process for the city's development. Underlying the push for planning was the ambition to prepare Nashville to take advantage of the expected postwar wave of federal public works expenditures.

In 1945 planning director Charles Hawkins began to meet regularly and informally with officials in the fields of public health, water and sewer service, and public works, as well as representatives of the Chamber of Commerce and the local newspapers, to consider the problems posed by growth. They

discussed the need to do something about Nashville's slums, which had been a health threat and a public eyesore since the depression of the 1890s. They also talked a lot about sewers. Suburban development outside the city limits was served only by septic tanks and private disposal companies. These septic systems had begun to contaminate ground water, especially in the area near Richland Creek.

Hawkins and his staff predicted that the low-density development pattern of the newer suburbs would continue in subsequent decades. They recognized that this development pattern would not provide the tax base to pay for the necessary infrastructure, and that this infrastructure would be more expensive per household because the larger lots necessitated longer utility lines and streets to serve each home. They also understood that suburban commercial development would force the construction of new roads, in particular circumferential streets to connect the major spoke roads. And they realized that as more development occurred outside the city limits in Davidson County there would be escalating demand in these areas for city services, such as sanitary sewers, parks and playgrounds, and fire protection, that the county government had no authority to provide.

These discussions, and the planners' response to them, laid the groundwork for urban renewal, the interstates, and Metro government.



Cheatham Place, the public housing "village" for whites constructed by the New Deal. The federal government used high quality materials to establish a national standard of decency for low cost housing. (Reprint of a drawing in the *Tennessean*, 1938; Photograph by Gary Layda)

²⁴ History of postwar Nashville from Don Doyle, *Nashville Since the 1920s* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985), 108–42.



Boscobel Heights (later James A. Cayce Homes), constructed in the second round of public housing for Nashville. Note the large housing blocks and the obliteration of the street grid in the site plan, which would be typical for subsequent projects. Additions in the 1950s would make this the largest public housing complex in the city. (Drawing, 1940; photograph by Gary Layda)

Housing for the Public

Public housing, urban renewal, and the interstates were inextricably linked in the comprehensive plans laid for the future. But public housing came first chronologically because that was where the federal government decided to target its initial funding.²⁵ The National Recovery Act of 1933 provided for a federal housing program whose purpose was to increase employment in the construction industry and supply decent, safe, and sanitary homes at low cost to the “temporarily poor.”

Improvement in housing conditions was sorely needed. A third of Nashville’s population lived in slums where most housing was “unfit for human habitation,” according to a 1937 report by the city’s Planning Commission. These slums lacked paved streets and had few parks or playgrounds and miserable schools. Some areas were not served by city water and sewer or streetcar lines. Death and disease rates were considerably higher than in the city as a whole.

With the passage of the National Housing Act of 1937, public housing was directly linked with slum clearance. The federal government gave funds to local housing agencies for the construction and administration of the housing projects. The Act stipulated that for every unit built, a substandard one had to be demolished. This gave housing agencies an incentive to tear down houses that may not necessarily have been substandard, and did not increase the amount of housing available to the poor.

Local realtors and landlords fiercely opposed the first public housing constructed in Nashville by the federal government.²⁶ When the City Council proceeded with the housing program, significant concessions were made to these antagonists. The original intention for public housing to serve as a yardstick against which to measure private housing quality and fair rentals was redefined. Instead public housing would be “a mechanism for controlling property values,” Doyle writes. A belt of public housing “would ring the existing slums of the central city and serve as a barrier to protect the residential sections in the suburbs... This agreement allowed existing slums to fester and perpetuated—even accentuated—the residential segregation of blacks and whites in Nashville.”

The original design concept for public housing was an English-style village whose scale would differ little from the surrounding neighborhood. Cheatham Place (for whites) on Eighth Avenue North at the edge of Germantown, and Andrew Jackson Court (for blacks) on Jackson Street near Fisk University were completed in 1938 and turned over to the newly constituted Nashville Housing Authority to administer the following year. The first section of Boscobel Heights (now James A. Cayce Homes) in East Nashville and James C. Napier Homes in South Nashville opened in 1941. These later projects established the pattern of housing superblocks.

In the 1940s planners became aware that much more affordable housing was needed. Almost two thousand Nashville families had been accommodated in public housing, but thirteen thousand more families were still living in substandard conditions according to the 1940 U.S. Census. In response to the national shortfall, the 1949 Federal Housing Act established objectives for slum clearance and new housing, provided funds for the relocation of residents displaced by slum clearance, and encouraged the inclusion of the private sector in redevelopment. The idea was that private developers would be more willing to invest in blighted areas if land acquisition and assembly was made easier by local housing agencies. But private developers did not see a profit in redeveloping much of the land cleared of slums for residential use. So the concept of slum clearance shifted to the redevelopment of cleared sites for commercial uses, with the displaced residents relocated to new public housing projects elsewhere. In Nashville plans were soon initiated to construct 2,625 new units of affordable housing, which were completed in 1954.

²⁵ History of public housing policy in Nashville from Margaret Martin Holleman, “Federal Housing Policy,” Nashville Civic Design Center, 2003.

²⁶ Doyle, *Nashville Since the 1920s*, 97–98.

There were good intentions behind public housing, which initially provided much better living conditions than the private sector alternative for those accepted in the program. But with the rise of welfare in the 1960s the concept behind this housing changed to one of warehouses for the permanently poor, which had seriously negative impacts on the projects and on the stability of the traditional neighborhoods around them. Subsequent federal policy exacerbated this effect. In 1981 the federal government established preferences for those eligible for public housing that ensured the concentration of those with the lowest incomes. Between 1981 and 1996, when the preferences were dropped, the average income in the projects declined from 33 percent of Nashville's median income to 17 percent.

It was only with the federal Hope VI program that the Metro Development and Housing Agency began to deconcentrate the poverty of public housing with the demolition of the Vine Hill and Preston Taylor projects in 2000. In their place the agency has constructed houses that address the street, rather than superblocks that turn away from it, and restored the network of streets. But the remaining housing projects still make it hard to move forward in the first-ring neighborhoods that surround them.

Reshaping Capitol Hill

The late '40s in Nashville featured the first manifestation of the perennial question: "What are we going to do about downtown?"

In the automotive age, the central city was suffering from congested streets, the steady migration of retail to suburbia, and the decay of its building stock because rehabilitation seemed a poor investment.²⁷ A growing number of old structures were being demolished for parking lots. While some civic boosters "advocated a revival of rapid transit as a remedy to the auto-glutted town," Doyle writes, "most retailers feared that if they did not welcome the automobile with more parking space and better [read "wider"] thoroughfares, the rising suburban shopping centers would." The concept of civic renewal thus became linked with the reconstruction of the city for the automobile.

Nashville's planners stood ready for the new wave of federal dollars with a land use study for the Capitol Hill Redevelopment Project. When the Housing Act was passed by Congress in 1949, Nashville's ap-

plication was the first submitted and the first approved. The Nashville Housing Authority purchased ninety-six acres north and west of the State Capitol and proceeded to demolish what



Top: Capitol Hill was a neighborhood, however shabby, before urban renewal. (Photograph, 1952: Metro Archives); *Bottom:* Street scene in the Capitol Hill neighborhood. Note the primitive housing and lack of paved streets. (Photograph, 1952: Metro Development and Housing Agency)

²⁷ History of Capitol Hill and downtown renewal from Doyle, Nashville Since the 1920s, 121–42.

had been Hell's Half Acre, a black slum featuring unpaved streets and dilapidated structures, many with outdoor privies, as well as six historic African American churches. What replaced the slum was the six lanes of James Robertson Parkway, which carried traffic around the base of the hill and across the Cumberland via the new Victory Memorial Bridge. The hill below the Capitol was terraced for parking for state workers and the rest planted with trees and grass. The state constructed the State Library and Archives and the Cordell Hull office building. The city laid plans for a municipal auditorium, although actual construction was not completed for more than a decade because of protests from black business and professional men whose offices would be displaced. Private developers purchased more than half of the land and constructed motels, apartment and office buildings; the land north of the railroad tracks was sold for industrial uses.

One result of the Capitol Hill Redevelopment Project was renewed civic pride and commitment to reinvest in the central city among downtown businessmen. Another was renewed criticism from African Americans that urban renewal was “Negro removal.” From the standpoint of urban design, the problem was that the fine-grained street grid—even if it was a network of dirt—was destroyed and replaced with a wide road and buildings along it that related poorly to it. The city was being reengineered for cars to pass around the city and to be stored within it. And while it was obvious that much of the housing in the neighborhood was in appalling condition, it was nevertheless a neighborhood. The lack of residential replacements for the demolished houses, except for the small number of apartments that came to be used primarily as temporary quarters for visiting state legislators, meant that it was a neighborhood no more. The underlying presumption for all this renewal was that downtown Nashville was to

be primarily a place to do business.

With the Capitol Hill project, Nashville's planners had demonstrated their ability to get federal monies and then use them for massive reconstruction. It was a pattern that was to be repeated through the 1970s, as the ideology of moving residents to make way for commerce and the car played out across the older parts of the city with increasingly radical effects.

The City from the Air

A Hollywood musical is an unlikely occasion for urban planning principles. But the opening frames of the film version of *West Side Story*—released in 1961, the same year that *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* by Jane Jacobs appeared—provide a visual primer that could have been created by Robert Moses, New York über-planner and the target of much of Jacobs's wrath.

The film's musical overture plays against an aerial abstraction of the New York City skyline. As the overture ends, abstraction condenses into reality, then shifts to a panoramic overhead



Capitol Hill after urban renewal has begun. (Photograph, ca. 1964: Metro Development and Housing Agency)



Aerial view of pre-interstate Nashville. (Photograph, 1959: Metro Planning Department)

sequence—bridge to cloverleaf to park to tops of skyscrapers to massive apartment blocks—before homing in on the roofs of tenements. During the overhead sequence, minuscule cars and trucks move in orderly processions—no traffic jams. People are invisible. The soundtrack, except for a lone whistle, is eerily quiet, the cacophony of the streets stilled by the lofty perspective. Seen from this distance, the city has all the beauty of a humming, well-oiled machine.

It is only when the camera comes to earth in an arid playground that people appear. They are the proverbial inner-city youths, troubled kids with time on their hands—hence all that dancing and fighting and finger snapping. And their neighborhood is an ethnic war zone that the forces of civic order—police and recreation director—haven’t a clue how to pacify.

The American planners of the 1950s and ’60s took a similarly lofty perspective because they had a similarly jaundiced view of

city living. For them, the city had become a disorderly, socially dysfunctional, hard and unlovely place. Lots of people living cheek by jowl and mixing it up on the streets was a scenario straight out of Darwin—Jets vs. Sharks.

Unlike *West Side Story*’s cops, however, planners such as Moses had a pacification strategy. To save the city, they reasoned, it must be disciplined, its complexity simplified. Abstract analysis produced plans featuring a simple series of relatively self-contained uses: housing, transportation, recreation, commerce, education, culture. The urban form this arrangement took goes back to the 1920s, when architect Le Corbusier first proposed his “Radiant City”: a series of skyscrapers in a park crossed by limited-access highways and skywalks. In this vertical city, the street is bad for humans, so they must be elevated above it or isolated from it by greenery.

Jane Jacobs calls this civic discipline “pretended order, achieved by ignoring or suppressing the real order”—the intricate social and economic patterns under the seeming disorder of cities—“that is struggling to exist and be served.” This kind of

planning, which Jacobs likens to bloodletting, fails to see how a city really works, disregarding the organized complexity underlying the messy mixture of uses, the intimate if casual social encounters of sidewalks and stoops. The Robert Moses kind of planning—which dominated Nashville’s planning until the 1990s—is made from the air, not the street.

It is an interesting intersection of fiction with reality that many of the scenes in *West Side Story* that were shot on location used abandoned tenements on New York’s Upper West Side. These buildings were available for backdrops because they had been condemned by the mayor’s Slum Clearance Committee (chaired by Robert Moses) for the “urban renewal” that would bring forth in their stead Lincoln Center: ghetto to culture ghetto. The Lincoln Center groundbreakers were led by President Dwight Eisenhower, whose administration delivered the interstate highway system.



Idealized vision of the interstate, from South Nashville. Note how the highway is surrounded by bucolic terrain—not a billboard or parking lot in sight—despite the fact that the urban renewal plan designed much of the riverbank for industrial uses. (Drawing, 1963: Metro Planning Department)

“Beneath this slab / John Brown is stowed. / He watched the ads, / And not the road.”

Ogden Nash, “Lather As You Go,” *Good Intentions* (1943)

What is ironic is that the condemned territory, admittedly grimy and in need of rehab, exhibited all the basic characteristics of good urban form: narrow streets with on-street parking, continuous street walls of five-story (human-scaled) buildings, a mixture of land uses with residential over retail, small shops like Doc’s candy store, fruit and vegetable stands, and a rec hall for social occasions. This urban fabric seems—to the early twenty-first century—a more likely candidate for a makeover than a bulldozer. But bulldozers are what the cities got.

The itinerary for the bulldozers in Nashville was crafted in response to the 1954 Federal Housing Act, which coined the term “urban renewal” and used it to describe a broader, more comprehensive approach to the problems of slums and urban

blight.²⁸ The first urban renewal project in Nashville under the 1954 act was in East Nashville and began in 1959. The targeted area covered 2,052 acres and contained 8,617 dwelling units and 5,750 buildings. While the housing authority initially proposed to tear down only the worst of the housing and repair the rest, the Federal Highway Act of 1956 made rehabilitation less necessary, or even possible.

By the terms of the 1956 act, the federal government would pay 90 percent of the cost for Nashville’s segments of a national, limited-access superhighway system. The city’s planners had determined that one of these segments linking several interstates would go on the East Bank. The urban renewal plan for East Nashville called for 126 acres to be used for the interstate right-of-way and an additional 374 acres to be cleared along the river for industrial uses. The most important impact on the remaining acres was new water and sewer lines for the neighborhood.

As with East Nashville, the 1956 highway act also played a dominant role in the Edgehill urban renewal area, which stretched from what is now Music Row south and east to the

²⁸ History of urban renewal in Nashville from Holleman, “Federal Housing Policy,” and Robert James Parks, “Grasping at the Coattails of Progress: City Planning in Nashville, Tennessee, 1932–1962” (master’s thesis, Vanderbilt University, 1971).

path selected for I-65. It was the job of local planners to establish the routes through the city for the interstates that the federal government had planned to converge on Nashville. City planners hired as consultants the New York firm of Clarke and Rapuano—the same consultants used for the Capitol Hill Redevelopment Project—to recommend paths for the roads after studying population density, land use and street patterns, topography, locations of undeveloped land, existing neighborhoods, and the all-important land values. Edgehill was typical of the kind of neighborhood selected to eat the puree of urban renewal and interstate—lower income, large minority population, and partially blighted.

The urban renewal project in Nashville with the highest visibility, however, was the one for the city center. The Central Loop General Neighborhood Renewal Plan of 1963 was devised by the firm of Clarke and Rapuano, the perennial consultants to the Nashville Housing Authority, for the area inside the interstate inner loop west of the Cumberland River. It is a classic of the Robert Moses school of civic reformation.

In the vision for the Central Loop, new buildings are a gleaming white, while existing buildings that the plan retains are represented in dun colors. And the form these new structures take is the stand-alone surrounded by lavish landscaping and open plazas—the suburban ideal of buildings in a park—decidedly different from the older, shared-wall structures that fill up the blocks and reach to the sidewalks to form continuous street walls. The streets are wide—many of them six lanes—and carry primarily one-way traffic; there are few vehicles and fewer parking lots.

First Avenue North has been eliminated entirely as have all the historic buildings between this street and Second Avenue, which have been replaced by a large park and a series of high-rise towers. Second Avenue itself has grown to eight lanes, the center half of which tunnel under the Metro Courthouse. Of the city's significant historic buildings, only the State Capitol and the Downtown Presbyterian Church are visible in the rendering, although the site map shows the Customs House and Post Office still standing—goodbye Ryman Auditorium. A new baseball stadium lies in Sulphur Dell north of the Capitol.



Central Loop: General Neighborhood Renewal Plan. View from north. (Aerial Rendering, 1963: Clarke and Rapuano for Nashville Housing Authority)



Demolition of the American National Bank Building, Fourth Avenue North and Union Street. (Photograph, 1973: Metro Historical Commission)

Much of the Central Loop Plan was never implemented. But its impact on the heart of downtown between Union and Deaderick Streets, the Metro Courthouse and Eighth Avenue, was dramatic. War Memorial Park was replaced by Legislative Plaza, which was elevated above the street to accommodate parking and offices underneath. The city demolished the existing structures along Deaderick Street, widened the street to four lanes, installed broad sidewalks lined with trees, and sold the vacant sites to the state and to private developers for new office construction and civic space such as the Tennessee Performing Arts Center. The form these new buildings took is that suggested in the Central Loop Plan: stand-alone towers rest on high, blank podiums that provide little visual interest at street level, fail to define a continuous street wall, and lack the mixture of uses that would help to socialize the street.

The public square and the historic buildings around it were bulldozed, replaced with a surface parking lot in front of the courthouse, the giant First American Center (now AmSouth), the Gay Street Connector, and the wide, curving road that connects the Woodland Street Bridge to Union Street.

Nashville was using urban renewal to make a government investment in the business district to entice the private sector to do likewise, at a time when companies such as National Life were contemplating a departure to the suburbs. At the same time the city and county worked out a plan to limit the taxes a 1907 state law gave the county sole power to assess on insurance companies headquartered in Davidson County. The assessed cost of new construction was to be written off as a credit against the county tax so that a dollar spent on building was a dollar saved in taxes. In the short run these strategies worked. Along Union Street Nashville's bankers and insurance barons followed the government's lead and constructed mammoth new office buildings. National Life built a 31 story tower of travertine marble (now the state-owned Tennessee Tower) set back from the street in an expansive plaza.

These gestures toward downtown revitalization were well-intentioned. But the simplification of the core from a complex and finely-woven mixture of land uses into a central business district, and the anti-urban form the envelopes for the businesses took ignored the perspective of the man on the street. The broad sidewalks and open plazas became increasingly depopulated. Urban renewal kept the companies downtown—for a while—but it gave the people employed by these businesses less reason to walk around in the city.

“There is nothing economically or socially inevitable about either the decay of old cities or the fresh-minted decadence of the new un-urban urbanization. On the contrary, no other aspect of our economy and society has been more purposefully manipulated for a full quarter of a century to achieve precisely what we are getting.”

Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961)

“Metro Nashville was the most important thing we did since John Donelson got off the boat at this part of the Cumberland River.”

Mayor Bill Purcell, interview (July 28, 2004)

Going Metro

By 1960 there were more people living in Davidson County outside the city limits than in Nashville itself.²⁹ The car—and most families had one—enabled people to live anywhere on the expanding system of roads and highways. Suburban developers mass produced thousands of inexpensive tract houses on cheap land in the about-to-be-not-country. Low-interest mortgages for this new housing were frequently underwritten by federal programs.

People who migrated to the suburbs were exchanging decaying urban neighborhoods for a brand new house, a green lawn, and new schools and stores. “Many white suburbanites also left the city out of an unspoken fear of blacks,” Doyle points out, “an effort to maintain social distance by creating more physical distance between the races at a time when the legal barriers of racial segregation were beginning to crumble.”

The problem for local government was to plan for future development and provide services to a metropolis that was an economic unit but divided politically. The migration of residents, as well as commerce and industry, eroded the city’s tax base. The county had neither the legal authority nor the funds to provide adequate services. Many suburban communities relied on individual subscriptions to pay for police and fire protection and garbage collection. County residents took advantage of urban amenities such as parks and libraries without paying the property taxes that supported them. As satellite cities such as Berry Hill, Oak Hill, and Forest Hills incorporated, many feared that the political balkanization and fierce competition among vested interests would lead to metropolitan disintegration.

One solution was the annexation of county land by the city, but promoting this was suicide for any politician. Residents of the county paid much lower property taxes, and the resulting poor level of services was less of an issue for them than retaining the personal funds to pay off the mortgage and acquire the car, TV, and other consumer goods that had become de rigeur

in suburbia.

Another strategy was the consolidation of city and county government, which was advocated by a 1952 report, *A Future for Nashville*, published by a joint commission of city and county representatives created to study the provision of services. The report noted, however, the state constitutional obstacles to consolidation, and recommended as a stopgap measure major annexations of sixty-nine square miles and ninety thousand people into a metropolitan government.

In 1953 a limited state constitutional convention enabled the merger of city and county governments, if a majority in both areas voted for the change. In 1958 the first public referendum on consolidation passed in the city but failed in the county. Mayor Ben West then turned to annexation to improve the city’s tax base. The City Council authorized extensions to the city limits that took in fifty-two square miles and eighty-two thousand residents of the county, many of whom were outraged when their property taxes increased and services didn’t. Having experienced annexation, the disgruntled began to call for another referendum on consolidation.

After a brutal political battle that pitted Mayor Ben West against County Judge and soon-to-be-Mayor Beverly Briley, consolidation was approved by the voters in 1962. The charter for the metropolitan form of government differed little from the one proposed in 1958. Both called for two tax districts distinguished by levels of service. Residents of the General Services District (GSD) would pay a base property tax rate for the essential services of schools, roads, and police. Residents of



Urban renewal obliterating the African American commercial and entertainment district on Fourth Avenue North; the Bijou Theater is still standing in the background. (Photograph, 1957: Metro Archives)

²⁹ The coming of Metro government from Doyle, *Nashville Since the 1920s*, 179–221, and Parks, “Grasping at the Coattails of Progress,” 190–234.

the Urban Services District (USD) would pay a higher rate for additional services such as sewer lines, fire protection, and garbage collection. The USD would expand as sewer lines were laid. The distinction between the two charters was the size of the Metro Council. The 1958 proposal featured a Council with twenty-one members. The charter of 1962 had a forty-one-member Council, with five representatives of the county at large, to assuage suburban residents who feared underrepresentation in the new government.

On April 1, 1963, Metropolitan Nashville–Davidson County government became a reality. A city of 73 square miles and 171,000 people became a new political entity of 508 square miles and more than 400,000 people. The city's tax base was stabilized, duplication of government bureaucracies and services was eliminated, the school systems merged, city/county rivalry ceased, and a new civic consciousness emerged in the suburbs. In addition, Nashville now had a coherent government structure for long-range planning that would serve as a magnet for federal public works grants.

But there were downsides for residents of the old city. Because the provision of services was a key component of the campaign platform for consolidation, the coming of Metro refocused the commitment of government resources to infrastructure in the outlying areas.³⁰ The immediate need was for sewer lines in the suburban hinterland, not only in those locations served by septic systems, but also in brand new subdivisions springing up at the periphery. Some of these areas were of such low development densities that the installation of sewer lines was economically impractical. The increased tax base that came from the expansion of the Urban Services District never paid for the high cost of building new sewers. And the hook-up fees charged to residents and developers when the sewer lines arrived did not remotely cover the actual cost of the lines' construction. One result was large hikes in water/sewer bills for residents of the older suburbs that already had sewer lines. Another was deferred maintenance for much of the existing infrastructure in the central city.

The flaw of the new Metro government was that it ignored the implications of land use patterns and thus failed to make more compact development a prerequisite for urban services. In reports and studies of the 1950s and '60s and '70s, Nashville's planners warned that the low-density development patterns of

the suburbs would make the provision of infrastructure and services to these areas prohibitively expensive, dilute the level of services in the traditional neighborhoods, and make it all but impossible to establish an efficient and economically feasible mass transit system for Metro Nashville. Metro government solved many problems, but it missed the opportunity to begin to address the dilemma of sprawl.

“The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line.”

W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903)

The Second Reconstruction

Nashville “was the first major city in the South to experience widespread desegregation of public facilities,” writes historian Don Doyle.³¹ The city's geographical position on the northern edge of the South, its history of Union occupation during the Civil War, and its self-image as a leader of the progressive New South all played a part in Nashville's failure to mount a massive and violent resistance to civil rights of the sort staged in Birmingham and Little Rock. More important was the unique combination of strong local black leadership—lawyers, clergy, and educators—and young activists from other parts of the country who came to Nashville to attend the city's institutes of African American higher education and brought with them an unwillingness to accommodate to the established racial customs of the city.

Those customs were decidedly racist. African Americans had to sit in a separate waiting room at Union Station and use separate bathroom facilities at the city hall and county courthouse. Of the city's thirty-two parks encompassing 3,650 acres, blacks were permitted in fewer than fifty-five acres in six parks. Blacks could buy goods at downtown department stores but were not served at their lunch counters, nor at most white-owned restaurants and bars. The War Memorial Auditorium featured segregated show times for performances by African American musical groups. Jim Crow seating was the rule at the Ryman

³⁰ Insights on the impacts of Metro on the old city from Jerry Fawcett, interview with author, Nashville, Tenn., 2 August 2004.

³¹ Desegregation in Nashville from Doyle, *Nashville Since the 1920s*, 222–60.

Auditorium, the Sulphur Dell baseball stadium, and movie theaters, except for the Bijou, which had been a black-oriented venue since 1916. This historic theater, along with the rest of the black commercial and entertainment district on Fourth Avenue North, was demolished in 1957 as part of the Capitol Hill Redevelopment project, and replaced by the Municipal Auditorium.³²

The job market was also highly segregated. There were almost no African American sales staff in the retail and wholesale trades. The banks and insurance companies employed no blacks except in porter and janitorial positions, and the state of jobs in government was similar. Fewer than 4 percent of the twelve thousand jobs in new industries such as the Ford Glass plant and Gates Rubber were held by blacks.

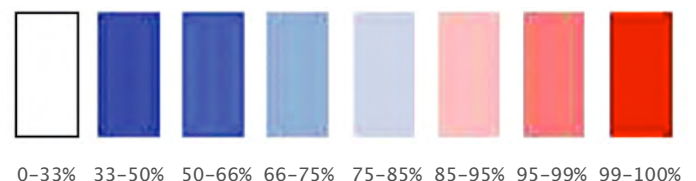
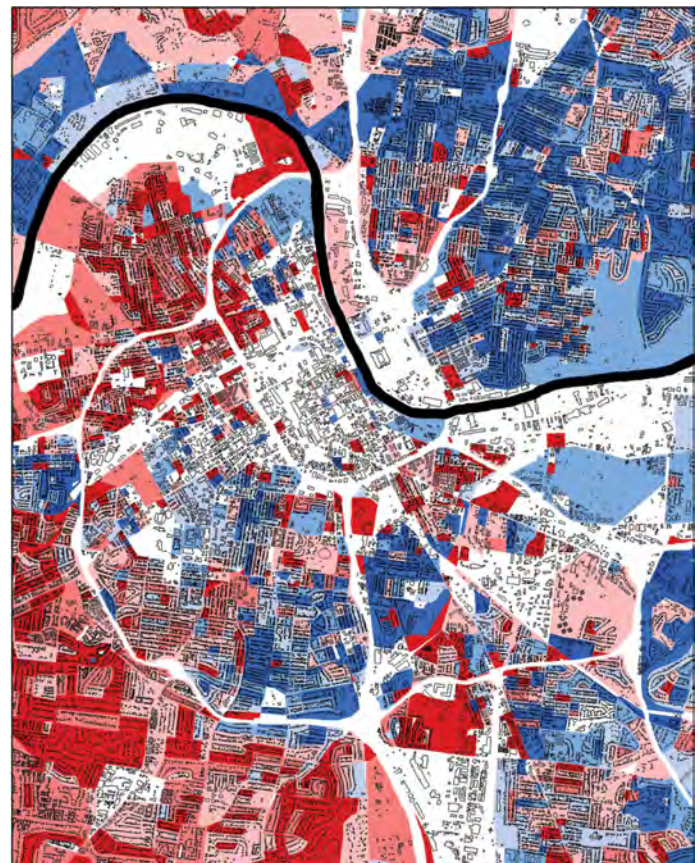
Residential segregation became increasingly pronounced between 1940 and 1960 as neighborhood racial patterns were shaped by public housing and urban renewal, city zoning policies, the practices of home mortgage lenders and realtors, and the exodus of whites to the suburbs. “In 1940, 120,084 whites lived within the city’s boundaries; by 1960 that number had declined to 98,085,” Doyle writes. “At the same time the number of whites in [Davidson] county beyond the city limits grew from 80,386 to 224,826,” where they made up 98 percent of the county’s population outside the city.

Enabled by the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, separate and unequal public schools were the first target of the campaign for civil rights. A class action lawsuit on behalf of Nashville’s black school children led to the court-ordered school desegregation plan of 1957. The so-called Nashville Plan, which was adopted by other Southern cities, allowed one grade per year to be desegregated beginning with the first grade. This gradualist approach included the racial gerrymandering of school zones, which left only 115 of the 1,400 black first-graders eligible to enter formerly all-white schools in 1957, as well as a policy that permitted students to transfer, upon written request from their parents, when they were zoned for a school that was predominantly of the other race. This plan was token desegregation, but it at least started Nashville down the path of compliance, not defiance.

The number of black children in formerly all-white schools grew from nine in 1957 to 728 by 1963. In 1966 the Metro School Board voted to abandon the grade-per-year approach and integrate all twelve grades of the public school system. But by 1970, the combination of residential segregation and the

patterns of neighborhood school zones ensured that the vast majority of students still attended schools with predominantly their own race. In response, federal judge L. Clure Morton ordered the creation of a new plan whose aim was to create a unified public education system in which each Metro school was integrated roughly in proportion to the percentage of blacks and whites in the population of Metro Nashville as a whole. This meant busing, and the gradual erosion of the concept of neighborhood schools.

Yellow school buses began shuttling children across Metro Nashville in 1971; in that same year seven new private schools were organized. Many white parents moved to distant suburbs



Map Key

Percent of Residents that belong to the majority race in the census block group.

³² Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, *Night Train to Nashville: Music City Rhythm & Blues, 1945–1970* (Nashville, Tenn.: Country Music Foundation Press, 2004) 4–5, 62.

beyond the district busing plan, or left the county entirely. By 1979 the white enrollment in the schools ordered by the court to desegregate had declined by 53 percent. The disjunction between the goals of balanced integration, and the American tradition of the neighborhood school that lies within walking distance of a child's home and serves as a center of a community's life and culture, has still not been resolved.

The campaign to desegregate white-only lunch counters at department stores, five-and-dime stores, and bus terminals, which began on February 13, 1960, was a disciplined exercise in the tactics of non-violence practiced primarily by black students attending Fisk University, the American Baptist Theological Seminary, and Tennessee A & I (now Tennessee State University). When the sit-ins failed to yield the desired result, boycotts of downtown stores by supportive shoppers followed. The turning point came on April 19, when three thousand protesters marched from Fisk University to the Metro Courthouse following the predawn bombing of civil rights leader Z. Alexander Looby's house. Mayor Ben West met the marchers on the courthouse steps, and, when pressed to take a personal and moral stand, finally threw his support behind desegregation of the lunch counters.

Subsequent protests focusing on segregated movie theaters and hotel accommodations, as well as fair employment practices—which targeted the H. G. Hill grocery stores—gradually yielded positive results. “Segregation had all but disappeared in most Nashville public accommodations by 1964,” Doyle writes.

The federal government took note of Nashville's comparatively peaceful acceptance of civil rights by showering the city with Great Society program funds. By the early 1970s, Metro Nashville was simultaneously involved in over 170 federal grants and ranked well above larger cities in the South in the amount of federal dollars it received. But as the map of 2000 U.S. Census figures illustrates, desegregation of public places did not bring about integration in the residential living patterns of the city.

Saving History in Three Dimensions

It was urban renewal, ironically enough, that empowered the historic preservation movement in Nashville, and in the nation as a whole.³³ Before what Jane Jacobs calls “the sacking of cities” in the 1950s and '60s and '70s, the preservation of architecture focused on the houses and public buildings where “great white men” lived and worked. As early as 1813, Independence Hall in Philadelphia was saved from demolition, and the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association was formed in 1814 to

guard the home of George Washington. The first local manifestation of this phenomenon was the Ladies' Hermitage Association, which in 1889 acquired the house that Andrew Jackson built from the state to preserve it as a public shrine. These structures were deemed worth keeping, not necessarily because of their architectural virtues, but because of the historical importance of the people who owned and used them.

With the exception of buildings that satisfy our interest in the lifestyles of the rich, famous, and dead, Americans have a tendency to think that a new structure, or even a whole new city, is obviously superior to what it superseded. This attitude is rooted in the nature of our national origins. “History was part of the baggage we threw overboard when we launched ourselves into the New World,” explains California writer Wallace Stegner in “The Sense of Place.”

“The most important thing about preservation is not the creation of the illusion of an old place, but the visibility of the arc of time, of generations of architecture working together to create a sense of place. We preserve not to take us back to the past but to make for a better present.”

Paul Goldberger, *Preservation* (January/February 2004)

The demolition derby of urban renewal threw history overboard with a vengeance. Old landmarks were routinely imploded to make way for new skyscrapers, parking lots, and roads. When the congregation of First Presbyterian Church moved to the suburbs in the 1950s, their historic downtown home in the Egyptian Revival-style church by William Strickland, where many of Nashville's most prominent citizens had worshipped, was scheduled to be razed for surface parking until a core group of members stepped in to stop the bulldozers. The six historic African American churches in the neighborhood of the State Capitol were not so lucky; all were eliminated by the Capitol Hill Redevelopment Project.

³³ Preservation in Nashville from Ann Roberts and Blythe Semmer, “Preservation of the Built Environment,” Metro Historical Commission, 2004.



123 South Eleventh Street in the East End neighborhood, remodeled and restored; a good example of the neighborhood success stories that form the backbone of historic preservation in Nashville. (Photographs, 1986 and 1996: Metro Historical Commission)

Preservationists became a political force at the national level in 1966, with the public outcry over the destruction of the grand vaulted halls of New York City's Penn Station. The protests were motivated, not by the loss of a building that had housed eminent people, but by the loss of magnificent architecture. In that year, Congress passed the National Historic Preservation Act, which established preservation roles for federal, state, and local levels of government, and created the National Register of Historic Places. In that same year, Metro government established the Metro Historical Commission (MHC). The commission's early efforts were primarily devoted to getting such obvious landmarks as The Hermitage, Belle Meade Plantation, Travellers Rest, and Union Station listed on the National Register, and developing a historical marker program.

By the 1970s, some Nashvillians had begun to perceive that the new office buildings, interstates, shopping malls, and subdivisions, coupled with the invasion of chain stores and fast-food franchises, were turning their home place into what urban critic James Kunstler calls "the geography of nowhere"—a city

less and less distinguishable from other Sunbelt cities of similar size. The purging of Nashville's civic heart, with the demolition of the historic buildings around the public square and the supplanting of the square itself by wide roads and surface parking, was a classic illustration of the exchange of local character for generic function.

When National Life and Accident announced its intentions to move the Grand Ole Opry to the new Opryland complex in 1973 and demolish the Ryman Auditorium—and to use the historic bricks to construct the "Little Chapel of Opryland"—preservation in Nashville became a public issue. A sometimes uncivil war broke out between those determined to save one of Nashville's most sacred spaces and the prominent families who owed their fortunes to the insurance company. The turning point came when Ada Louise Huxtable, the architecture critic of the New York Times, challenged National Life's position as "a mixture of architectural ignorance and acute business venality." This national shame campaign kept the building standing, padlocked shut except for the occasional tour group, until the revival of downtown as an entertainment destination. The rebirth of Second Avenue as a tourist hot spot in the 1990s induced Opryland, Inc., to see new revenue opportunities in a structure it once scorned as hopelessly passé. Renovation to the building began in 1993, and the following year music finally returned to Nashville's most hallowed hall.

With the case of the Ryman, local government learned that some civic monuments were so significant to our sense of who we are as a community that Nashvillians would not let them be lost. When the fates of the Customs House and Union Station were in question, their salvation was accomplished, not by public protest, but by a close collaboration between preservationists and city officials. The concept of protecting the character of a whole district rather than a stand-alone structure, however, took longer to sell for downtown.

The warehouse precinct of Second Avenue North was, in 1972, the first historic district in Nashville to be listed on the National Register. In 1985 a fire destroyed an entire block on the eastern side containing the oldest buildings on the street. As a replacement, an Alabama developer proposed a glitzy, twenty-one-story tower that was initially supported by elected officials. But the Metro Historical Commission and the nonprofit Historic Nashville, Inc., realizing that such a structure would seriously erode the architectural coherence of the street, filed a lawsuit challenging the variances for the tower that had been granted by the Board of Zoning Appeals, and won. Efforts to control demolition, exterior rehabilitation and new construction by applying a historic zoning overlay to the district, however, failed in 1986; Second Avenue received this protection only in 1997.

District preservation came sooner to the neighborhoods, perhaps because it was only a small cadre of long-term residents and true believers who saw any value in the older suburbs, and the low property values did not promise windfall profits to developers. In 1977 the Metro Historical Commission published a seminal study, *Nashville: Conserving a Heritage*, that identified twenty-four historic neighborhoods and made recommendations for their preservation and revitalization. Many of the neighborhoods singled out in the study were the same ones that urban renewal had targeted for slum clearance as “blighted.” That same year the city passed legislation enabling historic zoning and created the Metro Historic Zoning Commission to administer it. The following year Edgefield became the first neighborhood to receive this protection from demolition and architecturally inappropriate exterior rehabilitation. In 1985 the East End and Lockeland Springs neighborhoods pioneered the concept of conservation zoning, a slightly less stringent set of rules for preservation.

In the struggle to save and repair Nashville’s old neighborhoods, “preservation was a side issue, really,” says Metro Historical Commission executive director Ann Roberts. “The problems were absentee landlords, lack of codes enforcement, deteriorating properties, and redlining by financial lending institutions.” Preservation overlays were the only means available to neighborhood activists for recognizing the virtues of traditional urban design and enforcing its basic principles. That the zoning has been effective is demonstrated by the rising property values in the districts with the overlays, and the continued growth of the program, which today includes eleven historic and conservation zoning districts covering approximately 3,300 properties.

Other government agencies have become more responsive to the goal of preserving and restoring the traditional urban fabric. The Metro Development and Housing Agency carefully monitors historic structures in its redevelopment districts and has established design guidelines for several of them—the East Bank and Five Points districts in East Nashville and for parts of the Phillips-Jackson district in North Nashville—that mandate compatible infill. The Planning Department now takes historic properties into account in its community planning process, and has put in place an urban zoning overlay to encourage urban rather than suburban development patterns within the pre-Metro city limits.

The recent history of preservation in Nashville is a narrative of victories alternating with defeats. In the former category are the restoration of Cravath Hall on the Fisk University campus, the Nashville Parthenon, and the Shelby Bridge, as well as the

broadening of the definition of what’s worth conserving to include public works infrastructure, such as the City Reservoir and gauge house, and the Omohundro waterworks. Outstanding among the latter are the destruction of the Art Deco Sudekum building on Church Street, the Jacksonian apartment building on West End Avenue, the Nashville & Decatur railroad depot on Fourth Avenue just south of the City Cemetery, and the National Landmark Union Station train shed in the Gulch.

The significance of the preservation movement goes beyond the fact that it has changed the way Nashvillians and their government think about old buildings. By focusing on continuities of architectural fabric in whole districts, preservationists brought attention to the larger issues of traditional urban design and the need to build the future on the solid foundations of the past. Perhaps even more important, the grassroots nature of the movement’s evolution demonstrated that listening to the community is a crucial component of city planning.



The old West End Methodist Church, whose steeple once punctuated the pivot from Broadway to West End Avenue, was demolished ca. 1940 for what became part of West End’s “Auto Row,” an early example of the impact of the car on fine architecture. (Photograph, n.d.: Nashville Public Library, The Nashville Room)

“Cities are like lost souls right now. They’re looking for new religions to glom onto. First it was the religion of the pedestrian mall, then it was the religion of convention centers then it was the religion of ball stadiums and sports arenas. Now it’s the religion of culture. There are elements in all of those that may make some degree of sense, but they’re not the ultimate solutions to the problems.”

Joel Kotkin, “Cities in the Digital Age,” *Metropolis* (January 2004)

Looking for the Soul of the City

The closer the historian comes to the present, the more difficult it is to find the telling detail in the welter of circumstances. For it is only in the fourth dimension of time that significance—the relationships between causes and effects, positives and negatives—can be even remotely apprehended. But some things about the recent shaping of the city can be told, even now.

The past decade in Nashville has witnessed a dramatic animation in the life of downtown. The reopening of the Ryman Auditorium and the Shelby Bridge, the rehabilitation of Second Avenue and Lower Broad, the transformation of the Broadway Post Office into the Frist Center for the Visual Arts, the construction of the Arena (now Gaylord Entertainment Center), the Coliseum, the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, and the downtown library—all these initiatives have brought people back to the streets and sidewalks of the city beyond the eight-to-five of office hours. The change in zoning rules to permit residential construction in the central core has led to a new apartment tower and the rehab of the upper floors of old buildings for urban living, with more on the way. Construction began on the Schermerhorn Symphony Center in 2003 and the Thermal Plant was demolished in 2004, the same year that the city commenced the building of a new park to replace the parking lot that had replaced the public square in front of the Metro Courthouse.

Outside the city center in the first-ring neighborhoods, the Farmers Market and Bicentennial Mall have begun to generate new residential development north of the Capitol. East Nashville got the Shelby Bottoms Greenway and turned the devastation of the 1998 tornado into a great leap forward. The Metro Development and Housing Agency is proceeding with plans for a new neighborhood on Rolling Mill Hill to the south, a mixed-use village is taking shape in the Gulch, and the upper reaches of Demonbreun Street have been transformed from a tourist trap into a hangout for cafe society.

These specific developments were more than matched by changes in the city’s planning policies, but the latter did not come without a battle. The occasion of combat was the Franklin Corridor.

In 1995 Metro’s planning and public works departments announced plans to tear down the 1909 Shelby Bridge and replace it with a new bridge as part of a six-lane high-speed corridor south of Broadway linking two interstates. Also part of the plan was the demolition of the Demonbreun viaduct, to be superseded by a road swooping south of Cummins Station before reconnecting with Demonbreun Street and I-40 to the west. A few incredulous Nashvillians questioned the wisdom of demolishing the city’s only remaining historic bridge and building a Berlin Wall through an area that had the potential to become a crucial buttress in the support structure of downtown. They also challenged the premise that what downtown needed for rejuvenation was more asphalt for more cars.

During the long but ultimately successful effort to turn corridor into urban avenue, south of Broadway became SoBro. The Nashville Urban Design Forum was established to bring public debate to the development of the city. And the Nashville Scene staged the “SoBro Charrette” to create a positive vision for the area as an alternative to Metro’s corridor fixation, and published the results as *The Plan for SoBro*. The Forum eventually led to the founding of the nonprofit Nashville Civic Design Center as a watchdog for the built environment, which was announced by forum-member-turned-Mayor Bill Purcell in December 2000. In 2002 the Design Center began work on the *Plan of Nashville*, a fifty-year vision for the city.

The corridor struggle was evidence of an ever-widening realization by Nashville’s design professionals and interested citizens of the crucial role of transportation infrastructure in determining urban form. It was not enough to preserve old buildings and design fine new ones. Architecture could only play its part in the three-dimensional life of the city if it was considered as part of a larger context that included how a city works as well as how it looks.

The understanding of the interconnectedness of transportation and land use had its counterpart at the regional level with the 840 wars. Plans by the Tennessee Department of Transportation (TDOT) to encircle Nashville with a ring road through the surrounding counties at a distance of thirty-five to fifty miles from the city center initially engendered no opposition; construction on the southeast quadrant began in 1991. But when the route for the right-of-way through southwest Williamson County was announced, TDOT found itself with a fight on its hands. Critics playing catch-up charged that the limited-access highway would beget sprawl that would gobble up forests and farm land, destroy high-quality watershed and the creatures who dwell there, and suck the life out of Nashville proper.

Peace was only restored with a new governor, former Nashville mayor Phil Bredesen, and a new TDOT commissioner, Gerald Nicely, former executive director of the Metro Development and Housing Agency, in 2001. Nicely agreed to the design of the southwest segment of State Route 840 in a more environmentally-friendly manner and suspended planning and construction of the northern half of the road entirely. The Commissioner also mandated more citizen involvement in future TDOT projects, and instituted a long-range planning process whose goal is a more balanced transportation system. By-products of the 840 controversy include an increased awareness of the mutual dependencies between the farmer and the downtown booster, the nature lover and the city dweller, as well as the creation of the nonprofit Cumberland Region Tomorrow as a regional counterpart to the Nashville Civic Design Center.



The Shelby Bridge, which reopened as a pedestrian and bicycle connector between downtown and the East Bank in 2003, is one of Nashville's most recent preservation and urban

Complementary to these specific events were changes in planning personnel and policies. The Roads-R-Us chiefs at the state and local levels were replaced by officials with a better grasp of urban design and the need for a balance among transportation options. Citizen involvement has become an important rite of planning. Nashville's media now covers urban planning and development as major local news rather than ghettoizing the subject in the business pages. More Nashvillians have come to grasp, as the Plan of Nashville testifies, that the way that we form our city in turn forms the quality of the life we lead in it.

The exact form the Nashville of the future will take is still undecided. "Cities are like individuals," explains urban scholar Joel Kotkin. "They evolve in unique ways. Every city has a soul. You have to try to understand what that soul is first, and then you get a better sense of what the problems are. You start by looking at a city's history and thinking about ways to help nurture its intrinsic strengths."³⁴

For more than fifty years in Nashville the tide ebbed from urb to suburb, as people moved to the periph-

ery and government investment followed them. Now it seems, with the citizen-based vision that is the Plan of Nashville, that the tide may be about to turn. The Plan charts the reverse flow of resettlement into the first-ring neighborhoods and back to the city center, to come home to the public square from whence we embarked to first shape the land more than two hundred years ago.

From *The Plan of Nashville: Avenues to a Great City*. Vanderbilt University Press (Nashville) 2005.

³⁴ Joel Kotkin, quoted by Martin C. Pedersen in "Cities in the Digital Age," *Metropolis*, January 2004, http://www.metropolismag.com/html/content_0104/ob/ob01_0104.html (January 2004).