

Introduction: The Plan of Nashville

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“The sustainable city--a human event, not a sculpture.”

Hillel Schocken, “The Sustainable City,” 2003.

Cities are made, not born. A metropolis or town doesn't grow spontaneously, like weeds in a lawn. A city is a willed artifact, embodying the evolving intent of the people who live in it as they react to specific conditions: geography and topography, climate and technology, demographics and economics, history and politics.

This evolving intent may be read in three dimensions. A society projects its concept of the good life in the largest of its public works--its metropolitan form, as constituted in its architecture and landscape architecture, streets and boulevards, parks and plazas. And nowhere is it more evident how good--or not so good--is the life of a city than in its urban core. Those of us who admire Boston or San Francisco, Charleston or Savannah--and feel concern about St. Louis or Houston--have in mind the central city, not the suburbs.

The Plan of Nashville is the latest record of the evolving intent of the citizens of Nashville. The Plan was orchestrated by the Nashville Civic Design Center (NCDC), founded in 2000 as a nonprofit dedicated to the practice of urban design. This design discipline, which integrates streets and buildings, land use and transportation, is a new approach for Nashville.

Also new is the territory encompassed by the Plan and the process that produced it. Since Nashville became Metro in 1963, there have been over 100 plans that have dealt with some aspect of the central city. Most of these plans were developed by Metro departments and their consultants--or by private developers hoping for government subsidies--and were constrained by politics and patronage. We've had plans to take advantage of federal funding, such as windfalls for interstates and urban renewal. We've had plans as prelude to a big development--the Gateway Plan for the city-owned land around the Arena campus--or as a response to disgruntled property owners complaining about struggling businesses--the Downtown Access and Traffic Plan. Some plans came in reac-

tion to specific problems: what to do about a Church Street at rock bottom, or a Fifth Avenue with great buildings and few tenants.

The Plan of Nashville is painted on a broader canvas, and with a broader brush. The canvas is the city center and the first-ring neighborhoods. It is the first plan for downtown that is not bound by the inner loop of the interstate since 1963, when the loop existed only on paper. The Plan departs from the island concept to consider more organic and historic boundaries, and emphasizes the links between the surrounding neighborhoods and the core. The time frame is also expansive; this is a 50-year vision, not a quick fix.

The planning brush was wielded by the more than 800 people who participated in the Plan process. Nashville offers many instances of good intentions and tax dollars producing developments that later necessitate even more tax dollars for re-planning and reconstruction. The public housing projects that the Nashville Housing Authority built and that the Metro Development and Housing Agency is now demolishing, and the downtown shopping mall that was bulldozed for the public library are but two examples. These are manifestations of top-down planning that have proven, over the long haul, to be unsuccessful in solving the problems they were designed to address.

The staff of the Civic Design Center determined on a grass-roots approach because their goal was to enable the citizens of Nashville to realize the choices before us, what directions we want to take and what tools will help us get there. Participants in a series of community workshops set forth the issues, the positive and negatives presented by history and existing conditions, and then described how they wanted the city to look and work in the future. Local planners, architects, landscape architects, preservationists and public artists took this communal vision and, utilizing basic principles of urban design, turned it into the Plan.

The purpose of the Plan is not to engender massive new public expenditures, but to channel expenditures that are bound to be made anyway by government and private developers. The Plan presents a vision of greatness that can encourage outside interests to invest in the city and enable the local community

to measure the worth of individual projects against the collective good.

For example, say someone wants to build a skyscraper on a parking lot that the Plan has designated for a park, or a civic building, or a sightline to a major monument. By comparing proposal with Plan, Nashvillians can see not just the present gain but the future lost. From the published Plan, potential investors are able to see, not just what the city is, but what it wants to be.

Ultimately, the Plan will help Nashville re-imagine itself as an urban entity. As John Houghton, then NCDC executive director, pointed out in a 2002 interview with the *Nashville Scene*, "If you study the rhetoric about Nashville ever since the consolidation of Nashville and Davidson County, we talk about Metro Nashville, about the CBD [central business district], about individual neighborhoods. We seem to have lost the ability to think about the city of Nashville, even though it's still out there." This Plan thinks about the city, within both its regional and local contexts.

Nashville began when land speculators decided that a site that combined river access with game to hunt and a long growing season was a good investment. The founders' intent to rationalize a wilderness is evident in the city's first town plan: a grid of one-acre lots with four acres reserved for a public square on the bluffs overlooking the Cumberland.

From this grid Nashvillians have cultivated a network of spoke and ring roads, lined with neighborhoods and subdivisions, strip malls and big boxes--everything from a Hillsboro Village to a Cool Springs. Today we are sprawling beyond the horizon all the way to the Highland Rim, and the question is whether the center that begot all this will hold.

Downtown Nashville has made great strides since the days of boarded-up storefronts and winos passed out in planters. But land use is still too restricted to 8-to-5 offices and special events. And shaky tourism along with a stagnant office market have made us more conscious of the vulnerability of the central city. A basic tenet of the Plan is that for the central city to hold its place in civic life, we must rebuild it the old-fashioned way, with a mixture of residences and retail, offices and entertainment, schools and civic spaces.

In the 200 and more years of its existence, Nashville has evolved through many self-proclaimed and actual identities: trading post, Athens of the West-then-South, Union Army supply depot, engine of the New South, Powder City, Minneapolis of the South, Wall Street of the South, Music City USA. In this Plan, Nashville is the City of Neighborhoods. This does not imply, however, a city in pieces. The Plan establishes the neighborhood as the basic building block of the city, but places equal emphasis on the mortar between the blocks--the streets that form a network of connectivity and are the principal public spaces of our community.

Other themes in the Plan:

- Understanding the history of Nashville's built environment is crucial to planning for the future. It is only by knowing the hows and whys of the past that we can build on existing strengths and mitigate weaknesses.
- The Industrial Revolution is long gone; land uses established to feed the revolution are very much outdated. Thus the Cumberland River, no longer a major avenue of commerce, is re-imagined as an amenity for new neighborhoods that grow to public parks along its banks.
- Our current transportation infrastructure is dysfunctional and hostile to urban form. The Plan distinguishes among the purposes of specific street and road types, as well as between modes for trade and personal transportation. The Plan then presents a long-range vision for a more balanced system that serves pedestrians and bicyclists as well as cars, and does not sacrifice the long-term welfare of downtown and the traditional neighborhoods to short-term gains in motorizing speed for commuters in the far-flung suburbs and long-distance travelers.
- Even before the automobile enabled us to sprawl, densities in Nashville never reached the degree of compactness of the northeast's urban neighborhoods. The strategy for new infill on the many vacant or underutilized parcels of land, therefore, relies on a low- or mid-rise model rather than high-rise towers.
- The public school is an important component of the successful neighborhood. For downtown to become a viable one, its residents must have access to an elementary school as well as the existing Hume-Fogg High School.
- Nashville's topography offers fine sightlines, but past city planners have done little to protect or enhance them. The Plan maps the best view corridors of the city and presents ways to enhance them.
- The key is remembering people. If what we build connects to human needs--for beauty, for social engagement, for work, for recreation--then we will create a city that is a satisfying experience for all its citizens.

"Design gives form to value," writes architecture critic Robert Campbell. The Plan of Nashville, like the plans before it, explicitly states and implicitly reflects what the makers of plans intend to have worth and meaning. And this Plan, like all plans, is an historical artifact; it does not stand in isolation but is in part a reaction to previous values and intentions that no longer seem germane to current conditions.

But the primary value embedded in the Plan of Nashville is that of urban form itself. The Plan is rooted in the belief that human beings can reach their maximum potential as social animals dwelling in a community. This is a departure for Nashville,

which has always vibrated uneasily between the commercial and industrial creed of the North and the agrarian creed of the South, and for America as a whole.

Historically, Americans as a society have distrusted cities. That is in part because of the nature of the continent as “discovered” by white Europeans--what F. Scott Fitzgerald calls the “fresh green breast of the new world”--and in part because of the timing of its colonization, when the Romantic philosophy that contends that a human being is at his or her best when closest to nature dominated western thought.

The result has been a culture that views the city as a necessary evil. For every Benjamin Franklin, who saw the interdependence of urban life as the tool of progress, we have had many more Thomas Jeffersons, whose ideal was not the city on the hill but the big house in solitary splendor on its little mountain.

The anti-urban tide, however, is turning in this nation. Perhaps because most of us now live in the metropolis, we recognize the need to make it more livable. Or perhaps we have come to realize, if unconsciously, that the city is not a place of confinement but a locus of liberation.

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