

Nashville and Its Neighborhoods: Fanning the Flames of Place

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SOBRO

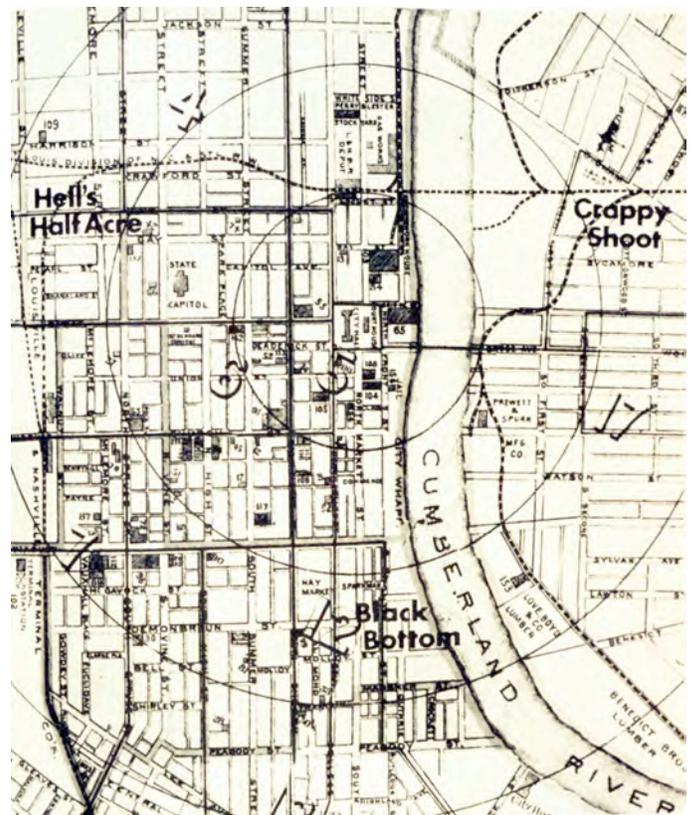
Then and Now

“SoBro” is a relatively new name for the district of Nashville that stretches south of Broadway to the interstate and west to the Gulch. The designation was coined by the *Nashville Scene* in the mid 1990s, during the controversy over state and local government plans to build a six-lane corridor through the area, bridging the Cumberland to connect I-24 to the east with I-40 to the west.

Historically, the district was rarely considered as a whole, perhaps due to the striking changes in topography, land use and social geography among the floodplain near the river, the hill to the south and gradually rising ground to the west. The lowland to approximately Fifth Avenue emerged after the Civil War as “Black Bottom,” not because its population was largely African American—although it subsequently became so—but because of “frequent flooding and the ever-present black mud and stagnant pools of filthy water,” according to historian Bobby Lovett.¹ The neighborhood was first home to poor white immigrants, soon joined by working class freedmen, who together supplied the labor for the growing industries to the south. By 1870 Black Bottom had over three thousand residents crowded into 741 tenements.

As the white immigrants increasingly occupied the higher rent properties on the slope up to the west, the Bottom became overwhelmingly black, and African American institutions appeared to serve them. St. Paul, the second oldest African Methodist Episcopal Church, still stands on the southeast corner of Fourth Avenue and Franklin Street (now occupied by Everton Oglesby Architects). The Pearl School was founded in Black Bottom in 1883, subsequently relocating to North Nashville in 1917 at the request of middle class blacks distressed by the surrounding shanties, saloons and brothels.

Equally distressed were white Nashvillians who proposed various “urban renewal” schemes—the first, in 1888, a park—to obliterate the slum. In 1893 the city condemned some tenements for construction of the Hay Market, where farmers migrated from the public square to sell hay and swap horses. In 1907 the South Nashville Women’s Federation lobbied for a city bond issue for the park, as well as a bridge across the river, to eliminate Black Bottom. The Sparkman Street Bridge (now Shelby Bridge) was constructed in 1909 to terminate near the Hay Market, displacing some shanties as industrial warehouses



Downtown and South Nashville, with Black Bottom indicated. Map, ca. 1900: Tennessee State Library & Archives

¹ Lovett, *African American history of Nashville*, 73-74.

located nearby. But the park bond issue failed in 1910, in part, according to historian Don Doyle, “because of fears that slum dwellers would only migrate to middle class neighborhoods.”² The industries utilizing Black Bottom’s labor pool were largely devoted to grain. The Gerst brewery was located in South Nashville, as were mills for the processing of flour and meal, which by the turn of the last century were Nashville’s leading wholesale products. Large roller mills were constructed on the river bluffs, leading to the name “Roller Mill Hill” (now called “Rolling Mill Hill”).³

Slightly to the west, Rutledge Hill had a different tone entirely. The name derives from one of South Nashville’s first families, Henry Middleton and Septima Sexta--”76”--Rutledge, South Carolina natives whose fathers had both signed the Declaration of Independence.⁴ In 1814 the Rutledges constructed a large villa with elaborate terraced gardens on the slope leading to the hill’s crest which they called “Rose Hill.” (Portions of the villa were incorporated into the house which still stands at 101 Lea Avenue).

The Rutledges and other early residents were attracted by what crowned the hill: Davidson College (1803-1806), which became Cumberland College (1806-26) and then the University of Nashville (1826-1875). The campus, known as College Hill, which also served as the early meeting place of what became the Vanderbilt Medical School, ultimately featured several distinguished buildings, including the central Gothic Revival structure designed by Adolphus Heiman (1853) that is now occupied by the Metro Planning Department. Surrounding this collegiate center were fashionable townhouses. South Nashville was the first



Map showing the proposed changes in the Plan of Nashville. (Drawing, 2003 NCDC)

Nashville suburb to be incorporated as a separate city in 1850; in 1854 it was annexed by Nashville proper. But after the University of Nashville became Peabody College and went west along with the medical school, Rutledge Hill was gradually abandoned as a residential neighborhood.

² Doyle, *Nashville in the New South*, 80-82.

³ Doyle, *Nashville in the New South*, 45.

⁴ Rutledge Hill history from Historical Commission, *Nashville: Conserving a Heritage*, 32-33.

The river bluffs east of Rutledge Hill have been occupied by government services since the location of the first reservoir there in 1833. The Tennessee School for the Blind opened nearby in 1872 (razed in 1959). Nashville General Hospital followed in 1890, to take advantage of the proximity to the medical school, occupying the first building of what would become a sprawling complex.

The arrival of the electric streetcar in Nashville in 1888 opened up land to the southwest and west of the city for suburban development. Inscribed by railroad tracks and yards, South Nashville, with the exception of Rutledge Hill, was increasingly dominated by industrial uses. Residents who could afford to leave did so. By 1920, those who remained composed a racial crazy quilt of mill hands, carpenters, coal haulers and common laborers living in poor working-class residences interspersed among warehouses and factories.⁵

As heavy industry peaked and declined in South Nashville, replaced by the smaller sheds of light industry, South Nashville became increasingly depopulated. Many residences were demolished, and those remaining were taken over by businesses. To the south, public housing projects were constructed in the Cameron-Trimble neighborhoods in the 1940s and 50s; INTE 1960S the interstate created one-way high speed access routes on Second and Fourth Avenues. The Nashville Thermal Plant began to burn garbage on the riverbanks in 1972 and Metro government offices took over the College Hill campus.

So much of the historic architectural fabric was replaced by incompatible infill that the National Park Service rejected the nomination of Rutledge Hill to the National Register of Historic Places in 1976 on the grounds that too many structures had already been lost. (A smaller district consisting of 11 structures was listed in 1980). New apartment construction flanking the hill was largely on the suburban model and contributed little to the streetscape. Vacant and underutilized parcels littered the landscape. Adult entertainment businesses and homeless shelters moved in.

In 1995, when Metro's Planning and Public Works departments announced plans to construct a seven-lane high-speed corridor through the area roughly on the irregular path of the much smaller Franklin Street, it seemed that the sacking of South Nashville was about to be complete. The battle to tame the corridor into an avenue took almost five years to win. In the process, however, the focus on the area south of Broadway, now called SoBro, created a new awareness of the area's latent promise, a promise articulated in *The Plan for SoBro*, published by the *Nashville Scene* in 1997, and reaffirmed by The Subarea 9 Master Plan Update later in the same year.⁶

Despite all the demolition, SoBro is still home to significant architecture of diverse styles. On the south side of Broadway are Union Station, the Frist Center in the old Post Office, and

the Customs House. The industrial monuments of Cummins Station and the Cannery line the eastern side of the Gulch, and other warehouses worthy of rehabilitation are scattered throughout the district. On Rutledge Hill, landmarks include Lindsley Hall, Litterer Laboratories, James Geddes Engine Company Number 6--the last firehall in the city to use horse-drawn equipment--and the Lindsley Avenue Church of Christ, as well as a number of late 19th century homes. On the river bluffs, the historic segments of General Hospital as well as the 1930s Metro car barns are to be incorporated into new development planned for Rolling Mill Hill (see below).

New architecture of distinction includes the Nashville Arena (now Gaylord Entertainment Center) and the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum. Construction began on the Schermerhorn Symphony Center in 2003, the same year that the undistinguished architecture of the Thermal Plant began to be demolished. The city is currently studying options for the redevelopment of the Thermal site.

New and rehabilitated transportation infrastructure will supply better connectivity to and within the district. The Gateway Bridge and Shelby Pedestrian Bridge provide access across the river from the east; the Demonbreun viaduct--under reconstruction--is a major entrance across the Gulch from the west. The future Franklin Corridor-turned-Gateway Boulevard will furnish better east/west circulation.

Perhaps the most important step in realizing the potential of SoBro was taken when Metro government began to explore the creation of a mixed-use neighborhood on the river bluffs formerly occupied by the roller mills and General Hospital. The Metro Development and Housing Agency subsequently commissioned a master plan for the 35-acre site and has commenced installing the infrastructure--streets, sidewalks, water and sewer lines--necessary for redevelopment.

Today SoBro, with its acres of surface parking, is wide open and waiting for redevelopment.

“Make the politicians come across Broadway.”

Zach Liff, community workshop participant

The Plan

The Plan of Nashville's vision for the SoBro builds on that of the 1997 community charrette that produced *The Plan for SoBro*. The latter assessed the strengths and weaknesses of the district, proposed that the Franklin Corridor plan be modified to the design of an urban avenue, and in general called for the

⁵ Benjamin Walter, "Ethnicity and Racial Succession in Nashville, 1850-1920," in Blumstein and walter, *Growing Metropolis*, 28-30.

⁶ Everton Oglesby Architects for the Metro Development and Housing Agency, *Subarea 9 Master Plan Update* (December 1997).

redevelopment of the district into a mixed-use neighborhood of a more dense urban character than is found in East Nashville or the River District, yet of a lesser scale--mid-rise not high rise--than is found in downtown. The Plan of Nashville endorses these basic concepts, and expands upon them.

Natural Features

The topographical variety of SoBro--river banks and river bluffs, bottomland and hills, rising ground to the west abruptly terminating in the Gulch--gives the district its unique character. In response to this topography, the orthogonal grid is skewed to accommodate the historic pikes that pass between the hills to the southwest. As a result, the texture of SoBro's streets--their irregular frequency, length and termination; intersections where more than two streets cross; triangular lots; diagonal sightlines--is distinct from that of downtown. This pattern should be emphasized by better definition of the street walls as consistent planes of architecture.

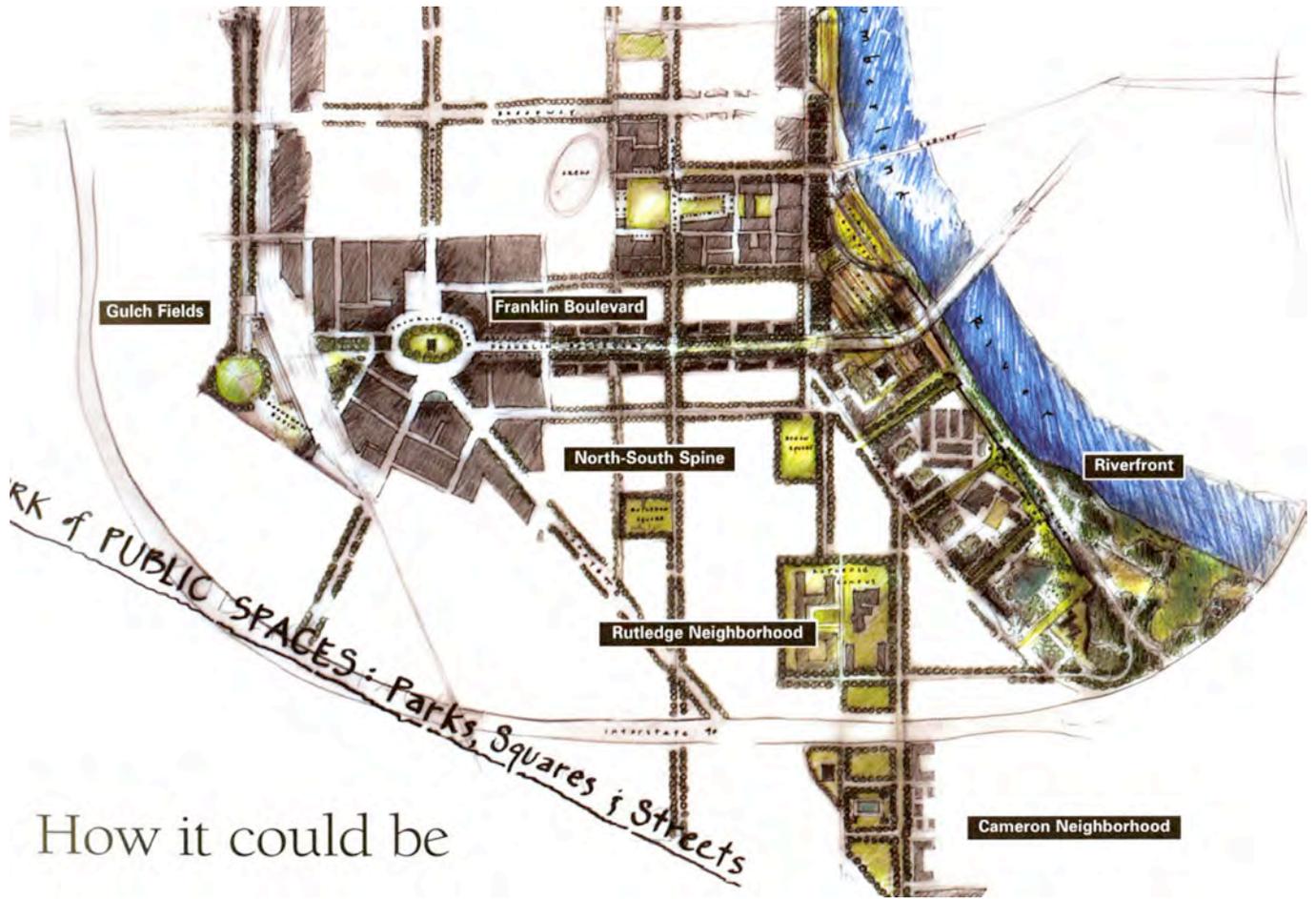
On one of the hills to the southwest lies the ruins of Fort Negley, constructed in 1862 by fugitive slaves overseen by the occupying Union troops, and reconstructed under the federal Works Progress Administration during the 1930s. After years of neglect, the fort is currently being reconfigured as an educational venue to interpret the city's Civil War history, and will

serve, along with the historic City Cemetery on the hill's flank, as a green buffer at the edge of the SoBro district.

The most obvious strategy to capitalize on the river edge of SoBro is to develop it with uses for which a river view is an amenity: public greenspace and mixed-use structures featuring retail--such as restaurants and cafes--at first level and residences above. This is already in the works on the bluffs of Rolling Mill Hill, where the Metro Development and Housing Agency is in the preliminary stages of plotting a new urban neighborhood.

The clearing of the Thermal site in 2004 also opened up valuable river real estate for redevelopment; the fact that the 11 acres are Metro-owned enables the city to dictate its highest and best use in a way that advances the public interest. Current discussion centers on a baseball stadium for the Nashville Sounds, surrounded by mixed-use buildings.

For 30 years Nashvillians have looked away from this section of the riverfront because of the ugliness of what it contained. Even before the land was cleared and its dimensions and contours visually apprehended, however, citizens in the community workshops suggested that a park would provide a welcome amenity for a district conspicuously lacking in civic and park space. In determining the future of the site, the analysis should



"How it could be," *The Plan for SoBro*. (Drawing, 1997: Warren Byrd for Nashville Scene, City Press Publishing)



Top Left: Aerial view of South Boulevard at 4th Avenue South. The urban boulevard allows for high levels of traffic in the center lanes, and lower speed neighborhood traffic with on-street parking in the outer lanes. Note how public transit is incorporated into the median of the boulevard. (Digital Illustration, 2004: ESA, Corey Little) *Middle:* Perspective view corner block along South Boulevard. The mixed-use building type is activated at the ground level with transparent storefronts, shops, and cafes that spill onto the street. Residents in the units above also help to populate the street. (Digital Illustration, 2004: ESA, Corey Little) *Bottom:* Looking south along 7th Avenue; note the Adventure Science Center to the left, no longer isolated by the interstate. With the transformation of the interstate inside of I-440, 7th Avenue South becomes a grand urban avenue. (Drawing, 2003: Metro Planning Department, Jerry Fawcett)

consider what SoBro needs for the district to become a quarter of neighborhoods that serve as a strong support to downtown.

Whatever proposal is realized, care should be taken to enable public access to the Cumberland River in the form of a greenway along the edge and the creation of strong sightlines to the river from east/west streets. The treatment of First Avenue should produce a pedestrian-friendly thoroughfare with continuous street walls of sufficient transparency at ground level to reinforce the sociability of the space. Height restrictions should preserve sightlines to downtown from the rising ground to the south.

Due to the varied topography, the treatment of building heights is an important issue for all of SoBro. The district boasts fine views of the downtown skyline as it steps up the hill to the north. Establishing limits to the scale to preserve these views from the rising land to the south and west will enhance the entire district's development potential. The Plan suggests, therefore, that building heights guidelines for SoBro be devised to maintain a consistent view shed for the district.

Hierarchy of Streets

While the north/south streets provide a great deal of connectivity between "NoBro" and SoBro, the wide dimensions of Broadway form a strong boundary between the two parts of town. The perception of Broadway as borderland is enhanced by the superblocks immediately to the south. This sense of distinction need not be a negative, if the rear facades of the buildings on the south side of Broadway, as well as the streetscape entering the district, are recognized as border elements worthy of design treatment that announces "this is where SoBro begins" rather than "this is where the nice part of downtown ends."

PRINCIPAL STREETS

South Boulevard

An even more obvious manmade boundary is the interstate to the south of SoBro. The elevated highway forms a barrier between neighborhoods and concentrates high volumes of traffic at the access points. Cars racing to and from downtown turn the one-way pairs of Second and Fourth Avenues into high speed corridors that fracture the district and deter pedestrian travel. In the community workshops, citizens complained that the volume and speed of traffic, and the noise and air pollution are detrimental to the quality of life of residents on both sides of the interstate divide.

In the Plan, this south loop of the interstate is transformed into South Boulevard, a heavily landscaped surface road whose capacity is designed for large volumes of traffic at moderate speeds and is integrated into the existing street system. Instead of the existing five links between SoBro and the South Nashville neighborhoods, the Plan envisions 13, dispersing traffic to lessen its impact. Significant housing and retail of medium density can be programmed into the former interstate right-of-way. What was once a divider becomes a zipper, pulling the neighborhoods together. (For further information on the inter-



Neighborhood Centers

Unlike the River District and Northeast and East Nashville, SoBro today presents few clues as to neighborhood centers. This is the result of dramatic changes in the pattern of buildings and use of land in the district over the last 100 years.

Parks and Civic Space

The lack of parks and civic space is a striking feature of SoBro. The Hall of Fame Park on Demonbreun Street between Fourth and Fifth Avenues is a small, prosaic space that is rarely used. The Plan strongly suggests that the original design for the park, which included a covered performance space and programming to activate the park, be implemented.

Location for new elementary school and park in SoBro. White dashed line: school site; green: park space. (Diagram over

state transformation, see “Weaning Ourselves from the Highway: The Four-Step Program in the REGIONS chapter of the *Plan of Nashville*)

Demonbreun Street has been previously considered in the Plan as a cultural axis (See “Cardo and Decumanus,” in the chapter “Nashville and Its Downtown: Creating Civic Space of the *Plan of Nashville*); here the focus is on the street as a well-designed urban avenue that will link the cultural venues. Artist Jack Mackie is currently working with the Metro Arts Commission to incorporate public art into the *Demonbreun* streetscape, which will extend the cultural theme into the public right-of-way.

LOCAL STREETS

Fifth Avenue south of *Demonbreun Street* needs an infusion of urban character; the terminus of the avenue at the City Cemetery should be strengthened with a ceremonial marker or gateway.

Neighborhood parks on Rutledge Hill were all but eliminated

when the area ceased to be residential. In 1980, the two-acre Howell Park at Third Avenue South and Peabody Street was sold for a condominium development. At the same time, South Park shrank to little more than the size of the tennis courts that flank the building housing the Metro Planning Department, when over 10 acres of the park was sold for another condo project. Selling off park space for residential development for which park space would be an amenity seems, to say the least, to be counterintuitive.

The Metro government campus, which occupies the former precincts of the University of Nashville, makes no pretensions to civic distinction despite the presence of the fine architecture of Lindsley Hall at its center. The placement of later buildings blocks sightlines to this landmark, and the rest of the site is largely devoted to surface parking, some of which is surrounded by chain-link fencing topped with razor wire. Future development of this campus should consider, not merely the needs of Metro for office and parking space, but the relationship to the Rutledge Hill and Rolling Mill Hill neighborhoods.

The Plan provides new park space as part of the campus of the new elementary school proposed for a site between 4th and 5th Avenues South (See “Back to School” below).

This open space will be shared by the students, who will use it during school hours, and residents during the hours after the children have departed. The site is centrally located between the Lafayette and Rutledge neighborhoods, and one block south of the Demonbreun neighborhood.

Housing

The most obvious issue with regard to housing in SoBro is its absence. According to the Nashville Downtown Partnership, the district currently contains only 257 residential units; of that number, 98 are rental, but many more are leased by their owners. For the district to succeed as a collection of neighborhoods, it must contain a variety of housing for diverse ages and incomes, with a sufficient percentage of owner-occupied units to support the formation of strong and active neighborhood associations. The recent location of a number of design-related and high-tech businesses in SoBro suggests that one avenue for residential development is to cater to the design professions utilizing the existing warehouse stock for lofts and studios.

The other major housing issue lies outside the bounds of SoBro proper. During the community workshops, citizens expressed concern that the existence of the Tony Sudekum and J. C. Napier Homes south of the interstate, public housing projects which together total 923 units, is a severe deterrent to residential development in the SoBro district, and the Rutledge Hill neighborhood in particular. These housing blocks, wedged behind the barriers formed by the interstates, industry and the wide dimensions of Lafayette Street, form a concentrated pocket of poverty that has negative impacts on nearby commercial and residential property.

Repairing this condition will require more than a federal Hope VI grant. SoBro as a whole must be programmed to disperse affordable housing for people of lower incomes throughout the entire district, which will enable the Sudekum and Napier projects to be redeveloped along more diverse lines. This is eminently possible because so much land in the district is currently vacant or underutilized.

Addressing the large homeless population of SoBro will require similar strategies of dispersal, some of which lie outside the bounds of urban design. It is understandable that people who require, not merely temporary shelter but a wide variety of social services, are more efficiently and easily provided for by centralizing shelter and services. But warehousing the homeless concentrates the negative effects associated with their presence and deters development catering to other segments of the population. Services for the homeless are needed in SoBro--but not only in SoBro.

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