

# NASHVILLE CIVIC DESIGN CENTER

## Ideas into Reality

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**“Our lives are not totally random. We make commitments, we cause things to happen.”**

Wendy Wasserstein, “The Messiah,” *Bachelor Girls* (1990)

It is important to understand what urban planning is--and isn't--when considering avenues to the realization of the Plan of Nashville. In 1914, New York City's Committee on the City Plan gave this explanation:

“City planning does not mean the invention of new schemes of public expenditure. It means getting the most out of the expenditures that are bound to be made and the saving of future expense in replanning and reconstruction. With or without a comprehensive city plan, the City will probably spend hundreds of millions of dollars on public improvements during the next thirty years. In addition, during this same period property owners will spend some billions of dollars in the improvement of their holdings. To lay down the lines of city development so that these expenditures when made will in the greatest possible measure contribute to the solid and permanent upbuilding of a great and ever greater city--strong commercially, industrially, and in the comfort and health of its people--furnishes the opportunity and inspiration for city planning.”

With the Plan of Nashville, we have a similar intersection of inspiration and opportunity.

The Plan “lays down lines of city development” that are to be used as the litmus test for Nashville's urban future, the measure by which proposals for individual initiatives are evaluated.

The publication of the Plan is, therefore, not an end point, but a point of departure. The Plan must now be tested against the realities of Nashville. Those realities include some government policies that run counter to basic principles of urban design, tight government budgets, and vested interests that would prefer “business as usual”--the development patterns we've practiced for the last 50 years.



Schermerhorn Symphony Center under construction. Photograph, 2004: Courtesy of Vanderbilt University

The converse reality is the citizens who came together to make this vision. Transforming ideas into facts will depend on the collective will of this same public, as well as political representatives and government officials, neighborhood and corporate leaders, developers and educators, architects and planners--and the degree to which they can and will cooperate.

This will only happen with strong education and action programs that establish broad awareness of the Plan and position the vision in the forefront of Nashville development. Education is the first step. The Nashville Civic Design Center will develop a program that includes:

- A speakers' bureau to present the Plan to civic groups, professional and neighborhood organizations, politicians, Metro Council members, government officials, senior citizen and parents' groups, etc.;
- The publication of articles about the Plan in local, state and national media;
- The incorporation of the Plan into the continuing education program at the Nashville Civic Design Center;
- The development of a simplified version of the Plan that can be used in Nashville's public and private schools.

The intention of the Plan is to steer development and redevelopment, as they occur, into channels of good urban design. One of the crucial tasks in implementation, therefore, is the modification of existing public policies that would obstruct the Plan and the establishment of new ones that would further Plan goals.

Such policies exist at two levels: the daily operational methods and design standards of government agencies and quasi-government agencies such as the public utilities, and the planning documents and building codes that guide growth and establish construction standards. Metro policies are spelled out in the *General Plan*, the *Major Thoroughfare Plan*, and the *Community (Subarea) Plans*, as well as the Capital Improvements Budget, which establishes funding priorities. The Metro Board of Education defines its construction standards and building program in *Educational Specifications*, *Specification Guidelines* and *Metro Nashville Public Schools: Facilities Master Plan*. The Tennessee Department of Transportation is also formulating its Long Range Transportation Plan that will have a major impact on patterns of growth and development. The modification of these documents and policies to accommodate the principles and goals of the Plan is, therefore, a top priority.

Other implementation strategies include specific initiatives recommended in the Plan: design guidelines for selected areas, master plans for downtown parking and civic space, traffic calming of streets that need it, the integration of affordable housing into new residential development, and the incorporation of public art in individual civic and private development projects.

## Politicking the Plan

The Plan of Chicago is a model of the effective comprehensive plan, serving as a reference point for development for several generations. The Chicago Plan's success was in part because of its "persuasive diagnosis" of the city's problems and its "convincing proposals" for solving them, according to Alexander Garvin in The American City. Once the Plan was published in

1909, the City Council established a 328-member City Plan Commission, published and distributed 165,000 copies of a 93-page booklet summarizing the Plan, and in 1911 formally adopted the Plan as city policy. Within a decade of the Plan's publication, the city had spent \$327 million in public improvements and acquired 14,254 acres of forest preserve. More important, the City Plan Commission proved to be not a money-spender but a money-maker, "generating increased property values and city revenues in the areas immediately adjacent to these improvements."

**"No town plan can be adequately described in terms of its two-dimensional pattern; for it is only in the third dimension, through movement in space, and in the fourth dimension, through transformation in time, that the functional and esthetic relationships come to life."**

Lewis Mumford, The City in History (1961).

"The most important reason that so much of the Plan of Chicago was implemented, however, was effective politicking by its supporters," Garvin writes. "In the ten years after the plan's publication, slide shows illustrating it were presented to more than 175,000 citizens. During 1912 alone, the Plan Commission placed articles that appeared in 575 magazines, periodicals and trade publications." Champions of the Plan "even persuaded the Board of Education to produce 70,000 copies of a simplified version of the Plan that became the eighth-grade civics textbook in the city's public schools."

The Plan of Nashville could become a similar action agenda, or--like so many previous Nashville plans--be filed away as a dust catcher on a shelf, ultimately devolving into a mere historical curiosity. The fate of the Plan will depend on the willingness of the public to embrace it, and on the Metro government bureaucracy's readiness to respond. Our work has just begun.

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