

True Urbanity

The Plan of Nashville shows our city as we want it to be

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By Christine Kreyling

Last February I all but disappeared from the pages of the *Scene* and took up residence in the writer underworld. This dim and gloomy landscape is populated by pale, near-sighted souls condemned to dwell there until they finish the books they have contracted to produce. In my case, the book was *The Plan of Nashville*.

At the request of the Nashville Civic Design Center (NCDC), I had agreed to write the words to accompany what would prove to be almost 400 illustrations that present a 50-year vision for the city. This vision represents collaboration between more than 800 citizens and local design professionals. Participants in a series of community workshops identified the issues, the positives and negatives presented by history and existing conditions, and then described how they wanted the city to look and work in the future. Orchestrated by NCDC staff, Nashville's planners, architects, landscape architects, preservationists and public artists took this communal dreamscape and turned it into the maps and drawings that outline the Plan.

That's where I came in. My job was to take the mounds of information and opinions, diagrams and photographs, and fashion the text that would explain it all. Eight months and more than 80,000 words later, I've finally emerged from my personal *purgatorio*, albeit with conflicting impulses. On the one hand, I want to tell the whole world about a book that within 220 pages considers the major promises and problems inherent in the Nashville landscape and presents ways to exploit the former and address the latter. On the other hand, I feel the urge to puke every time I hear the words "Plan" and "Nashville" in the same sentence.

For now, I'm going with the higher calling. So here are the basics:

The Who

The Plan was produced by NCDC, founded in 2000 as a nonprofit dedicated to the practice of urban design, which integrates streets and buildings, land use and transportation. This is a new approach for Nashville.

Also new is the grassroots process the NCDC staff used to help the community realize the choices before us, what directions we want to take and what tools will help us get there. Nashville offers lots of good intentions and tax-dollar-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 premise of the Plan is that the citizens are the real experts in defining the problems and possibilities.

The Where

Another novelty is the territory the Plan encompasses. 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, 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—or as a response to disgruntled property owners complaining about struggling businesses—the Downtown Access and Traffic Plan. Some plans came in reaction 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 study area is the central core and the surrounding first ring of neighborhoods—North, Northeast and East Nashville, SoBro, the Gulch and Midtown. This is the first plan for downtown since 1963 that's not bound by the inner loop of the interstate. The Plan departs from the island concept and emphasizes the links between neighborhoods and core.

The theme of the Plan is not Nashville as the Athens of the South or Music City USA—monikers designed to appeal to the larger world—but Nashville as "The City of Neighborhoods." This does not imply, however, a city in pieces. The Plan establishes the neighborhood as the building block of the city, and defines the basic elements that make a good one. But the Plan 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. The focus, therefore, is on the native experience of place. "Tourists go to cities that are great places to live—like Charleston," Stroud Watson, the urban design emi-

nence *grise* of Chattanooga, once advised a group of Nashvillians. "Make your city good for you, and the rest will follow."

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 downtown's vulnerability. 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.

The Plan identifies some strategies:

1) Embrace the Cumberland River. The Industrial Revolution is long gone; land uses established to feed the revolution are outdated. Thus the Cumberland, no longer a major avenue of commerce, is re-imagined as an amenity for new neighborhoods that grow to public parks all along its banks. More bridges across the river provide better connectivity among the neighborhoods and downtown.

2) Reform the arterials and replace the interstates in the city proper with grand urban avenues woven into the street network. Our current transportation infrastructure is dysfunctional and sacrifices the long-term welfare of downtown and the traditional neighborhoods to short-term gains in motoring speed for long-distance travelers and commuters in the far-flung suburbs. Neither the arterials nor the interstates perform well because the purposes for which they were originally intended and designed have been compromised.

After World War II, the historic pikes by which travelers arrived and farmers had delivered their products to city markets were increasingly shared with commuters dwelling in new subdivisions. The cul de sac form of these subdivisions offered drivers no alternative but the arterial. Zoning rules encouraged commerce to migrate out of neighborhood centers to the arterials. The traffic lights and curb cuts required for all this retail slowed traffic. The arterial, serving long-distance and local needs, served neither very well.

The traffic engineer's solution was to put the high-speed long-distance traveler on a limited-access highway, or interstate. But rather than bypassing the city center, city planners brought interstates right into it to provide local circulation as well. The interstates were asked to serve contradictory needs—just like the arterials—and the result has been escalating congestion.

The Plan presents a long-range vision for a more balanced system that serves pedestrians and bicyclists as well as cars, with mass transit as a key component. Traffic is dispersed onto a network of streets rather than concentrated on arterials and the interstates. The inner loop of the interstates and the arterials are transformed into urban boulevards with commercial centers at key intersections rather than low-density strip malls sprawling to the horizon.

3) Grow together, not up. 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-rises.

4) The public school is an important component of the successful neighborhood. For downtown to become a viable one, its residents must have an elementary school as well as the existing Hume-Fogg High School.

5) 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, especially those to the State Capitol, and presents ways to enhance them.

The Why

The purpose of the Plan of Nashville is not to engender massive new public expenditures, but to channel private and government spending that's bound to be made anyway. The Plan offers a vision for the city that outside interests would want to embrace and that would enable us 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 also the future loss. From the published Plan, potential investors are able to see, not just what the city is, but what it wants to be.

For Whom

Most importantly, the perspective of the Plan is that of the citizen on the street, not the analyst in the air. American planners of the post-World War II period, such as New York's Robert Moses, fell in love with the lofty prospect of the aerial photograph because they had a jaundiced view of city living. They thought of the city as a disorderly, so-

cially dysfunctional, hard and unlovely place. For them, lots of people living cheek by jowl and mixing it up on the streets was a scenario straight out of *West Side Story*—Jets vs. Sharks.

To save the city, the planners reasoned, it must be disciplined, its complexity simplified. Abstract analysis reduced the city to a series of systems, and produced plans with land uses arranged in relative self-containment. Housing was platted in subdivisions or apartment blocks. Personal transportation was single mode—the car traveling from cul de sac to arterial to interstate, rather than multimodes on a connected network of streets. Commerce was restricted to large nodes at interstate interchanges and strips along the arterials—no more corner stores or neighborhood centers like Hillsboro Village. Education was in big-box schools on even bigger campuses. Recreation was at a destination location, the park or gym—forget walking to shops or to work on a sidewalk. Culture was segregated into fine arts ghettos: Lincoln Center, TPAC. The ideal form for the city center was 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.

In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs calls this civic discipline "pretended order, achieved by ignoring or suppressing the real order"—the intricate social and economic patterns beneath the seeming disorder of cities—"that is struggling to exist and be served." The Robert Moses 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 Plan views Nashville as Jane Jacob saw New York: as the place where we can reach our maximum potential as social animals dwelling in a community. This is a departure for Nashville, 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 more 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.

"Design gives form to value," according to architecture critic Robert Campbell. For the people who made the Plan of Nashville, the ultimate value is true urbanity.