

Citizen Planners: Documenting the Process

“What is the city but the people?”

William Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*, 3.1.199.

It is fitting that the Plan of Nashville is rooted in the concept of community-based planning, because citizen activism enabled the very possibility of the Plan. In 1995 a group of Nashvillians, fearing the negative effects of Metro government’s plan for a six-lane highway called the Demonbreun--later Franklin--Corridor through the area of downtown south of Broadway (SoBro), organized the Nashville Urban Design Forum to bring public debate to the shaping of the city. Education was the initial aim of the forum; the long term goal was the creation of an urban design center as an independent entity to chart a future for the city’s built environment. To advance community education, forum members approached the dean of the University of Tennessee’s College of Architecture, Marleen Davis, with the request for a faculty member to teach a class in Nashville on urban design.

The college sent Professor Mark Schimmenti. His classes gave interested Nashvillians a basic understanding of urban design principles. Perhaps even more important, the classes provided a common language with which to discuss planning and design issues facing Nashville.

The next step was to establish a positive vision for SoBro as an alternative to Metro’s “corridor fixation.” In January of 1997, the *Nashville Scene* newspaper sponsored the “SoBro Charrette,” a three-day planning workshop led by Schimmenti with 18 other design professionals drawn from across the nation, and attended by more than 100 Nashvillians. The result was published by the *Scene* as *The Plan for SoBro*. One of the most significant aspects of this document was that the citizens of Nashville--rather than a government department or a small group of property or business owners--had instigated a plan for their city.

In consequence of these initiatives, urban-design-activists became a political force in the city. In his campaign for mayor, forum-member Bill Purcell made urban design issues and the founding of an urban design center part of his platform. After his election in 1999, Purcell appointed a task force to explore the form

the center should take. In December 2000, the mayor announced the establishment of the Nashville Civic Design Center.

The term “Plan of Nashville” as applied to the present project was first used publicly at a lunch meeting of the Nashville Downtown Partnership in early 2001. After a presentation about the then-fledgling civic design center by Mark Schimmenti, Partnership members asked the design director what was the center’s major goal. Schimmenti’s answer: to produce a plan similar to the Plan of Chicago as phase one. The second phase would be to shepherd the plan to fruition. In the spring of 2002, after the mission and operation of the center was clearly established, the center’s board voted to pursue the Plan of Nashville.

“Begin at the beginning,” the King said gravely, “and go till you come to the end; then stop.”

Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865)

Who

The Plan of Nashville was orchestrated by the staff of the Nashville Civic Design Center (NCDC). Staff members organized and assigned the tasks, staged the community workshops and panels, and compiled the resulting information, maps and diagrams.

Stacy Battles, Administrative Director (2003-present)

Lara Brewton, Administrative Director (2001-2002);

T.K. Davis, Design Director (2004-present)

Andrea Gaffney, Design Intern, (2002-2003)

Gary Gaston, Associate Design Director (2002-

Raven Hardison, Design Intern (2003-2004)

John Houghton, Executive Director (2002-2003);

Kate Monaghan, Executive Director (2004-

Mark Schimmenti, Design Director (2001-2004).

Metro staff assigned to the Plan of Nashville:

Randal Hutcheson, Metro Planning Department (2001-2004)

David Koellein, Metro Development and Housing Agency (2002 - PRESENT)

Judy Steele, Metro Development and Housing Agency (2001-2003)

Early on in the preparation, the staff determined that they would need advice, hands-on expertise and critical review. To get them, they formed two committees.

The Steering Committee provided oversight for the process and reviewed each stage of the development of the Plan. This committee gave advice on matters political, logistical and promotional.

Rick Bernhardt, Executive Director, Metro Planning Department

Ed Cole, Chief of Environment and Planning, Tennessee Department of Transportation

Mike Fitts, Architect of the State of Tennessee

Steve Gibson, Interim Executive Director, Nashville Downtown Partnership

Kim Hawkins, Hawkins Partners Landscape Architects

Christine Kreyling, writer and architectural historian

Mark McNeely, McNeely, Pigott & Fox, public relations

Jeff Ockerman, attorney, Stites and Harbison, PLLC

Doug Perkins, Associate Professor, Human and Organizational Development, Peabody College, Vanderbilt University

Phil Ryan, Executive Director, Metropolitan Development and Housing Agency

Ralph Schulz, President and CEO, Adventure Science Center

Butch Spyridon, Executive Director, Nashville Convention & Tourism Commission

Seab Tuck, Tuck Hinton Architects

The Design Committee provided design expertise for the development of the Plan. The committee was composed of nine teams; each team had two leaders or captains. To ensure a diversity of expertise, no team had leaders of the same profession. The leaders recruited the additional members of their teams. Each team was responsible for a section of the Plan's study area. To ensure that the Plan was truly community-based, the teams did not begin designing until after the completion of all the community workshops.

The Design Committee also met regularly with the Steering Committee to report on progress and engage in a collective critique of the work.

Team Leaders:

Study area A

Keith Covington, Urban Designer, Metro Planning Department
David Minnigan, Earl Swensson Associates Architects

Study Area B

Ben Crenshaw, Landscape Architect
Kem Hinton, Tuck Hinton Architects

Study Area C

David Coode, Lose and Associates Landscape Architects
Gary Everton, Everton Ogelsby Architects

Study Area D

Gary Gaston, Associate Design Director, NCDC
Andrea Gaffney, Design Intern, NCDC

Study Area E

Hunter Gee, Looney Ricks Kiss Architects
Cyril Stewart, Director, Space and Facilities Planning, Vanderbilt University Medical Center

Study Area F

Joe Hodgson, Hodgson Douglas Landscape Architects
Gillian Fischbach, Fischbach Transportation Group

Study Area G

Gary Hawkins, Hawkins Partners Landscape Architects
Bert Mathews, Developer, R.C. Mathews and Sons

Study area H

Jerry Fawcett, City Planner, Metro Planning Department
Blythe Semmer, Preservation Planner, Metro Historical Commission

Study Area I

Debbie Frank, City Planner, North Nashville Community Development Corporation
NCDC Staff

Study Area J

Frank Orr, Hart Freeland Roberts Architects
Phil Walker, City Planner, The Walker Collaborative

Study area divided into sections. The solid colors indicate the prime area of focus of each design team; sections in lighter colors are those which the teams considered as necessary to establish additional context for the Plan. Note that the river is never the edge of a section. Map, 2002: John Houghton, Randy Hutcheson and Andrea Gaffney

What

The Plan of Nashville process had three aims:

- Establish, through community participation, a long-term vision and core set of design principles to guide current and future development in Nashville.
- Increase public awareness and understanding of the physical environment through community participation in historical research and design workshops.
- Produce a book that serves to record and illustrate the vision plan, design principles, and the process that established them.

Where

The original concept for the Plan's area of study was inside the inner loop of the interstate. But after discussion among NCDC staff and the committees, two considerations emerged that caused the scope of the plan to expand to include the surrounding first ring neighborhoods. First, the study, while focusing on the downtown, should examine the organic boundaries of the city rather than the artificial ones created by the interstates. Second, the river should not be treated as an edge but always studied as a whole.

The next step was to divide this study area into smaller, more manageable chunks. Each design team needed a section of focus that was cohesive, included

whole neighborhoods and was at a manageable scale. The historic pikes were used to delineate each team's section--because the pikes were the traditional divisions between neighborhoods--and embraced the river's east and west banks. The exception to this was Jefferson Street; although not strictly speaking a pike, this street's historic importance made it the edge of four sections.

The pairs of team leaders were then assigned a section, with two cautions: the boundaries were to be considered as soft to allow for overlapping and combination when issues warranted, and that eventually the sections would have to be reassembled for consideration as a whole.

The high degree of participation by first ring neighborhood residents and business owners in the subsequent community workshops validated the decision to expand the study area to consider the relationship between downtown and the surrounding neighborhoods.

“We can chart our future clearly and wisely only when we know the path that has led to the present.”

Adlai Stevenson, speech, Richmond, Virginia, September 20, 1952

The Process of the Plan

The Plan process was structured in five overlapping stages: research, community input on history and existing conditions, community vision development, synthesis and production.

Research

The first step toward a plan was looking backwards. In June 2002, the Design Committee team leaders formed ten study groups to investigate Nashville history and current conditions; each group was assigned a particular topic:

- Natural history and topography
- Cultural history Economic history
- Social and political history
- History of urban form
- History of urban proposals and plans
- Nashville as downtown of the region
- Existing conditions and land use
- Transportation; local and regional systems

- Contemporary case studies; comparing Nashville with other mid-sized American cities.

The purpose of the research was to expand the consciousness of the design professionals who would be shaping the citizens' vision, thus ensuring that the Plan would be grounded in its historical context.

In September 2002, the research culminated in a preliminary draft of the Nashville timeline, an edited version of which appears in "Nashville's Past and Present."

"To listen acutely is to be powerless, even if you sit on a throne."

Cynthia Ozick, "Italo Calvino: Bringing Stories To Their Senses," *Metaphor & Memory* (1989)

Listening to the Community

The community collaboration phase in the Plan process occupied roughly six months. The backbone of this phase was the community workshops. These workshops were augmented by panel discussions and presentations by experts in particular fields needing a focused critique: public art, transportation infrastructure and regional issues. All sessions were open to the public, and advertised on the NCDC website, the Urban Design Forum and neighborhood list serves, media community calendars and at meetings of neighborhood organizations. Each community meeting was held at a location within the study area section familiar to residents and business owners, such as a church hall, branch library or school.

After research into numerous methodologies for community-based design charrettes and workshops by Randal Hutcheson, NCDC staff selected the organization and sample worksheets presented in *Planning for the Future: A Handbook on Community Visioning*, produced by the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute for Public Affairs, Center for Rural Pennsylvania (second edition, 2000). The Plan of Nashville: Avenues to a Great City (Urban Design Forum, Nashville Public Library, September 19, 2002)

NCDC staff presented the concept of the Plan and explained how the process would be organized.

Community Organization Meetings (October-November 2002)

The design teams introduced themselves to the community, explained the scope and process of the Plan of Nashville, and ascertained the best time, day of the week and location for future meetings. The team captains also asked those attending to identify the names of community activists, historians and special interest groups who should be recruited for participation. Building a City (panel discussion, Nashville Civic Design Center, October 24, 2002)

While the design team leaders were organizing the community volunteers for each section, NCDC presented a panel discussion to address urban theory and practice from diverse perspectives. The idea was to establish a “big picture” ground on which to build the Plan. Experts representing the disciplines of architecture and planning, urban geography, environmental psychology and community development banking were asked to define what is a city and then consider what makes a city “great,” before answering questions from the audience.

Among topics the panelists discussed were the need for greater population density in the central city, how to build wealth and sustain human contact in cities, the relationship between transportation and settlement patterns, and what distinguishes urban from suburban form.

Panelists:

Jon Coddington, Head of the Graduate Program in Architecture, University of Tennessee

Ron Foresta, Department of Geography College of Arts and Sciences, University of Tennessee

Susan Saegert, The Center for Human Environments, City University of New York Graduate Center.

Steven Weiss, South Shore Bank of Chicago

Moderator:

Betty Nixon, Director of Community, Neighborhood and Government Relations, Vanderbilt University

Community Assessment Workshops (November 2002-January 2003)

The focus of this workshop series was on history and present conditions in each section of the study area. The design team presented data derived during the research phase and then formed breakout groups of no more than ten community members. Each group had a design team member as a lead, a note taker, and a sketch artist.

During a series of exercises, group leaders asked participants to consider the following:

Identify significant or defining events in your community in the past few years/decades.

- Describe your community (physical, social, communal) as though talking to a stranger.
- List three places you avoid taking out-of-town visitors.
- Name three or more sites that you consider public places where people can meet to discuss community issues.
- Name at least three natural and manmade features that make your community special and unique.

Natural features may include mountains, streams, and vegetation. Examples of manmade features may include the community's streetscape, architecture, and parks.

- Share any other reflections on the past or lessons learned.

Responses were simultaneously recorded on large maps, written notes, and graphic sketches. At the conclusion, all groups were brought back together and each presented its findings. NCDC staff subsequently compiled all the information into one list of issues and on to one map for each section of the study area.

Participants were also asked to review the draft of the Nashville timeline and add dates and events significant to their community.

History Caucus (Nashville Civic Design Center, January 24, 2003)

Nashville historians received copies of the timeline draft in advance of the caucus for critical review. They then gathered to suggest changes and additions to the timeline, and answer questions about local history from the audience.

Panelists:

Dr. Jeff Coker, Department of History, Belmont University

Dr. Don Doyle, Department of History, Vanderbilt University

John Egerton, author of several books on Nashville history

Douglas Henry, State Senator

Jim Hoobler Curator of Art, Tennessee State Museum

Carol Kaplan, Librarian of The Nashville Room, Nashville Public Library

Christine Kreyling, writer and architectural historian

Dr. Bobby Lovett, Department of History, Geography and Political Science, Tennessee State University

Dr. Reavis Mitchell, Department of History, Fisk University

Annette Ratkin, Archives Director, The Jewish Federation of Nashville

Ann Roberts, Executive Director, Metro Historical Commission

W. Ridley Wills II, author of several books on Nashville history
George Zepp, "Learn Nashville" columnist, The Tennessean
Moderator: Mark Schimmenti, design director, Nashville Civic Design Center

Community Vision Workshops (February 2003)

This workshop series asked the community to consider what they wanted to see in the Nashville of the future. At the suggestion of the participants in the community assessment workshops, sections of the study area were combined for the vision workshops to produce a broader consensus. These combined sections were ultimately used to define the treatment of the first ring neighborhoods.

Each session began with team leaders presenting a summary of the Plan process to date, the data derived from the previous assessment workshop, and a list of potential major projects on the civic agenda--a convention center, baseball stadium, federal courthouse, civic square in East Nashville, etc.-- so that the citizens could consider possible developments when addressing their respective sections of the study area.

Then breakout groups were formed. Each group had a design team member as a lead, a note taker, and a sketch artist. The group was led through a series of questions about their dreams and aspirations for their neighborhood:

- If you could have three or more attractions to take out-of-town visitors in your community, what would they be? (Examples: restaurants, parks, museums, stores, churches, public art, or a great street(s), etc.).
- Name three or more sites you want to be public places.
- Name three or more natural and manmade features that could make your community special and unique.
- Name three or more streets, paths (i.e., greenway or trail), and edges (i.e., river) that could make your community better.
- What areas of your community do you want to change (and what kind of change do you want to see) and what areas do you want to keep the same?
- What ten things would bring the biggest improvements to the city in the future?

As with the previous community workshops, responses were simultaneously recorded on large maps, as well as written notes and graphic sketches. At the conclusion, all groups were brought back together and each presented its proposals. Team leaders subsequently compiled all the information into one list of issues and on to one map for each section of the study area.

How to Create an Urban Renaissance (Urban Design Forum, Nashville Civic Design Center, February 20, 2003)

Presentation by Nancy Graham, developer and former mayor of West Palm Beach, Florida. Graham discussed strategies for revitalizing a downtown.

Contemporary Issues in Urban Design (Urban Design Forum, Nashville Civic Design Center, March 26, 2003)

Presentation by Victor Dover, urban designer with Dover Kohl firm of Coral Gables, Florida. Dover discussed planning techniques to supply urban character in the redevelopment of under-utilized and abandoned sites in a city.

The Mayor as Urban Designer (Urban Design Forum, Nashville Civic Design Center, April 9, 2003)

Presentation by Joseph P. Riley, Mayor of Charleston, South Carolina. Riley discussed how local public policies focused on good urban design can restore historic building fabric, create new infill, add affordable housing and in general revitalize a city.

Building Consensus Workshop (Nashville Convention Center, April 12, 2003)

This second vision workshop, which considered all sections of the study area as a whole for the first time, was designed to develop agreement on the principles of the Plan and consolidate the vision for Nashville. Over 250 people attended the Saturday morning session. The agenda included a kick-off speech by Mayor Purcell, an introduction on basic principles of urban design, a presentation on the previous vision workshop results from a citizen representing each of the sections, followed by an extensive electronic survey.

The survey was developed in consultation with Betina Finley President of Turn-Key Video and New Media in Seattle, and involved 82 questions in ten categories. The questions established the demographics of the participants and then asked their opinions on issues relating to the Cumberland River, cultural attractions, the natural and built environment, neighborhoods, transportation infrastructure, economic development, housing, urban design and education.

This initial survey was then augmented by an online survey to which an additional 300 responded. The information derived from the survey was used by NCDC staff and design team leaders to finalize the Plan's goals and principles,

which were in turn used to produce the design of the Plan. The workshop concluded with an inspirational speech entitled "Painting a Canvas" by the Reverend Ed Sanders.

Sample Survey Questions and Responses

- On average how often do you use public transit?

Never 88%

1-3 times a month 7%

1-3 times a week 3%

every day 2%

- Should all future riverfront development require public access to the river?

Yes 83%

No 17%

- To what degree do you value historic buildings and the effort to preserve them?

Very important 94%

Somewhat important 6%

Somewhat unimportant 0%

Unimportant 0%

- Should neighborhoods adjacent to the river incorporate it as part of their identity?

Yes 93%

No 7%

- Does Nashville need design guidelines for new development and civic space?

Yes 89%

No 5%

Nor sure 6% • If there was a convenient, extensive public transit system located within five blocks of your house, would you use it instead of your car to commute to work?

Yes 77%

No 23%

- Should future public / affordable housing be dispersed throughout the community?

Yes 96%

No 7%

- Should a plan be created and financed to place overhead utilities underground?
Yes 93%
No 7%

- Should a downtown elementary school be built for people who live and work downtown?
Yes 90%
No 10%

Envisioning Public Art in the Plan of Nashville (Nashville Civic Design Center and Shelby Bridge, April 26, 2003)

Workshop conducted by Jack Mackie, public artist, Seattle, Washington. The Metro Nashville Arts Commission teamed with the design center to sponsor two workshops that explored the numerous ways that public art can serve as a tool of urban design and identified the most favorable locations for Nashville's initial public art projects.

The first workshop began with a slide presentation analysis by Jack Mackie that examined how artists are currently working in public art, followed by a discussion of the Plan of Nashville's principles and goals. Participants formed teams, then studied maps and evaluated locations suggested as public art sites during the Plan's community meetings. Photographs plus historical and cultural notes helped the teams choose areas where public art could be tools for accomplishing the Plan's goals. At the close of the workshop, the teams gathered and voted for the top three locations. The Shelby Street Bridge area was identified as the favorite site for an initial project within Nashville's public art program.

In a second workshop, participants explored and evaluated the breadth of public art opportunities on the Shelby Street Bridge and in the surrounding area. Participants heard presentations about the site: its history and ecology, function and symbolism and then walked the bridge. From this removed-from-the-city yet surrounded-by-the-city point of view, participants now saw the Plan of Nashville and the Nashville Public Art Program as merged or complimentary methodologies to produce good urban design and unique icons for one of the city's best public places.

The Role of Public Space in the American City (Urban Design Forum, Nashville Civic Design Center, May 15, 2003)

Presentation by Fred Kent of the Project for Public Spaces. Kent discussed how to create successful public places and critiqued the urban design values and open space in Nashville's downtown.

Synthesis and Production

By late April, NCDC staff had completed draft versions of the Plan's principles and presented them to the Steering Committee. The staff and interns then began the task of pulling the results of the vision workshops and the work of the design teams into a unified vision. Maps of the complete study area were derived by using multiple overlays of maps and diagrams generated by the workshops and refined by the design teams. Eventually the completed maps were transferred to the computer and diagrammatic information was extracted for analysis of the emerging Plan.

NCDC staff then coordinated a series of meetings with the team leaders to resolve issues that transcended sections, such as interstate transformation and the treatment of the Cumberland River banks. The result was a vision map for the entire study area.

Putting the Plan Together (Urban Design Forum, Nashville Civic Design Center, June 19, 2003)

NCDC staff presented the vision map and analytical composite diagrams that summarized the results of the community vision workshops for feedback and discussion.

The Plan of Nashville: Cultural Policy at the Grassroots (Curb Center for Art, Enterprise and Public Policy, Vanderbilt University, July 10-11, 2003)

This symposium focused on how public policy effects Nashville's cultural life. A series of paired presentations--the Nashville perspective and the national perspective--addressed topics such as arts education, cultural tourism, affordable housing and artist venues, concluding with a group discussion on the role of arts organizations in the Plan of Nashville.

National consultants:

Vincent Marron, Executive Director, North Carolina A+ Schools Program

Jane Polin, philanthropic advisor, New York City

Barbara Steinfeld, Director of Cultural Tourism, Portland Oregon Visitors Association

Laura Weathered, Executive Director, Near NorthWest Arts Council, Chicago

Facilitators:

Bill Ivey, Director, Curb Center

Ellen McCulloch-Lovell, President and CEO, Center for Arts and Culture

“Sprawl is the common enemy of the farmer and the downtown merchant, but they’re not working together.”

Steve Gibson, Nashville Downtown Partnership, at “Downtown and the Region” forum.

Transportation: Walter Kulash (Urban Design Forum, Nashville Civic Design Center, July 17, 2003)

Nationally known traffic engineer Walter Kulash made a presentation on new theories of transportation infrastructure and responded to questions about how they might apply to Nashville. He also worked with the design committee and NCDC staff specifically to address issues about the interstate system that had arisen during the Plan process.

In his talk, Kulash said he thought it feasible to explore dissolving Nashville’s interstate inner loop, and that the political challenges of interstate reform outweighed the engineering challenges. He advised that to build a case for change, Nashvillians should study the value and amount of land that could be reclaimed--especially around interchanges--and establish comparisons with peer cities on the number of lane miles of inner city interstates. Kulash also suggested the degrees of change to the limited access highway--from cosmetic improvements to conversion to boulevards--that were subsequently incorporated into the Plan.

Downtown and the Region (panel discussion, Urban Design Forum, Nashville Civic Design Center, August 21, 2003)

This panel was presented to bring added consideration to regional issues in the Plan. Topics discussed included: the health of the Cumberland River watershed, the lack of appropriate limits to development in floodplains and on steep slopes, declining air quality, greenways as wildlife habitat not merely recreational space, Nashville as the hub of the region’s transportation infrastructure, the city’s role as a jobs center, and the absence of state planning to guide development in ways that balance economic and environmental needs.

Panel:

Ed Cole, Chief of Environment and Planning, Tennessee Department of Transportation

Mark DeKay, College of Architecture, University of Tennessee

Margo Farnsworth, Executive Director, Cumberland River Compact
Mike Fitts, Tennessee State Architect
Bridget Jones Kelly, Executive Director, Cumberland Region Tomorrow
Trip Pollard, Senior Attorney, Southern Environmental Law Center
Wendy Smith, Environmentalist, World Wildlife Fund
Kathleen Williams, President & Executive Director, Tennessee Greenways
Moderator: Christine Kreyling

Visions for Nashville (Urban Design Forum, Nashville Civic Design Center, September 18, 2003)

During the summer, design team leaders had worked to bring specific plans and highlights within their sections, such as the Ellington Parkway terminus and the Governor's Green, to a high level of design resolution. At the September forum, each pair of team leaders present-ed the plan for their section within the context of the entire study area.

This forum was thus the culmination of the Plan of Nashville process, and marked the conclusion of the year spent in developing the Plan. At this point the teams turned over all their designs to NCDC staff, and the staff began to prepare final illustrations and develop rationales in preparation for the publication of the Plan.

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