© *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, Volume 11, Number 4, p. 91, (2006)

One Block at a Time: Win-Win Situations for Community Design

Danny Bivins, Pratt Cassity with Ann Allen, Jan Coyne

Abstract

Citizen participation and community education are critical to encouraging attractive and sustainable growth. The Alliance for Quality Growth (AQG), housed at the University of Georgia, was formed to increase awareness and understanding of the wide variety of planning and growth management tools available, including the charrette, a proven technique for delivering design solutions in a short time through an intensive community-based process. To help in situations not appropriate for a full charrette, the AQG has developed a "mini-charrette" that combines a team of experts and a shortened input/local education component. This article documents how the mini-charrette was used in restoring a portion of downtown Warrenton, Georgia. Through this technique, the town obtained expert advice that enabled it to visualize untapped potential at minimal cost, and students gained real-world experience by creating a design that fit the town's character and aesthetics.

Introduction

Georgia is experiencing a period of unprecedented growth and, along with it, an unprecedented consumption of land. The Atlanta area alone consumes an average of five hundred acres of fields and farmland every week. The economic, social, and environmental problems are far-reaching, profound, and permanent.

To help Georgia manage its unprecedented growth, the University of Georgia (UGA) developed the Alliance for Quality Growth (AQG), a multidisciplinary collaborative effort composed of faculty, staff, and students, along with state and federal partners. Members have expertise in fields as diverse as economic development, ecology and environmental resource management, historic preservation, housing, landscape architecture, planning, public policy development, and recreation and parks management.

Education and community involvement are critical to encourage attractive and sustainable growth across Georgia. AQG works to increase awareness and understanding among Georgia policymakers, planners, and developers, as well as the general

public, about the wide variety of planning and growth management tools available to promote efficient and sustainable land use and natural resource development.

The Alliance for Quality Growth, through the University of Georgia's public service and outreach programs, is developing new tools for encouraging quality growth, quality design, and service-learning in small towns and areas where funds are usually not available for that kind of assistance. This article describes the "mini-charrette" and the community education process for determining compatible infill.

The Mini-Charrette

Charrette is a French word that means "little cart." At the leading architecture school of the nineteenth century, the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, students would be assigned a tough design problem to work out in minimal time. They would continue sketching as fast as they could, even as little carts (*charrettes*) carried their drawing boards away to be judged and graded. Today, *charrette* has come to describe a rapid, intensive, and creative work session, usually lasting a week or more, in which a design team focuses on a particular design problem and arrives at a collaborative solution. Charrettes are product oriented. Most begin with public input from affected citizens and provide ways to involve the public as the process continues. The public charrette is fast becoming a preferred way to face the planning challenges confronting American cities.

The charrette is a proven technique for delivering design solutions in a short time through an intensive community-based process. Some problems, however, do not need the full charrette process. The AQG created a program called the mini-charrette to address these kinds of problems and to assist communities that could not afford the full costs of a community-wide design charrette. It combines a team of experts and a shortened input/local education component. The design process occurs on campus, and the product is delivered to the client community.

The mini-charrette process saves costs because production time is shortened, only one faculty person along with students conducts the input session, and the target area is significantly smaller. It represents an unprecedented opportunity to export a new methodology to "the little guy" in the average town. In other words, small locales without big budgets, but with big dreams, are able to tap into a pool of expertise that until now would have been available only to the well-funded and privileged few.

The mini-charrette team is made up of historic preservation professors, professionals, and graduate students; landscape architecture professors, professionals, and graduate students; ecology professors, professionals, and graduate students; housing specialists; and land use lawyers. The team, in essence, creates a crystal ball for planning and design for small towns in Georgia.

The goals of a mini-charrette are straightforward:

1. Increase visual literacy of the client community.
2. Engage students by having them work as colleagues with AQG faculty and staff.
3. Create achievable revitalization projects for a small town (usually there is little impetus and less funding for these kinds of visioning projects).

Community education is a very important part of the mini-charrette. To help local citizens advance their cause of community improvement, AQG produces posters, brochures, and presentations. These are given to community leaders to help them deliver their message more effectively.

Knox Theater Block

The city of Warrenton, Georgia, is a good example of how the mini-charrette process works. It was the locus of the first of three mini-charrettes performed by the AQG. The city came to UGA's AQG coordinator, Danny Bivins, for design assistance for one entire city block around the county courthouse. The commercial block included several historic buildings and the Knox, a vintage early-twentieth-century movie theater. Bivins met with city officials and citizens and discovered that their design needs were great but their financial capability was not. The private sector option for redevelopment assistance was out of the question, and a full-blown charrette was well out of reach, too. The mini-charrette solution seemed the best approach.

The team that was formulated to work with Warrenton has developed gradually through collaboration on previous projects, mostly for external clients on a contract basis. Over time, professional relationships have become friendships, and a phone call is all it takes to get the right people at the table. AQG has been fortunate in forming relationships with people who genuinely care about communities and want to help. Eleanora Machado and Pratt Cassity, design professionals at the Center for Community Design in the College of Environmental Design (CED); Mike Sutton, Will

Hart, and Julia Reed, landscape architecture students; Chrissy Marlowe and Carmine Fischetti, revitalization specialists at the Georgia Department of Community Affairs; and Bivins, from the Fanning Institute, formed a team to address Warrenton's need. They spent one full day on campus brainstorming solutions to the redevelopment of this block and settled on appropriate options. In addition, the majority of the practitioners used a virtual site tour to view the block. Therefore, the AQG mini-charrette team developed guiding principles to ensure that recommendations fit Warrenton's sense of place. The solutions were illustrated by the design students and presented to the city in a few weeks.

The mini-charrette team developed a three-part process for planning the redevelopment of Warrenton's Southside commercial block. First, they created guiding principles for site development. Second, they decided on an approach for the area. Third, they developed site-specific design solutions for each property on the city block.

Guiding principles for site development:

- The character of the downtown area is informal; informality in new design should perpetuate the existing character.
- Lots flow from one to another without strong physical separation. These sites will continue that tradition when considered as a whole.
- No tree canopy should be lost.
- No historic buildings should be demolished.
- Permeable surfaces are the rule; asphalt should be the exception.
- Unpainted surfaces should remain unpainted.
- Informal groupings of plants and street decorations should be in odd-numbered clumps instead of in straight rows.
- Linkages between activity areas are the primary goal.
- A repetition of greenspaces connected by pedestrian and vehicular paths creates a vibrant cityscape.
- Overhead wires and other public utilities should be minimized and co-located where possible.

- Signs should relate to buildings in scale and placement; signs should not be plastic or internally lit.

Approach:

- The approach taken on these three lots should set the standard for additional downtown improvements.
- Improvements and arrangements of plants should become less formal as downtown transitions into neighborhoods, and more orderly and formal closer to commercial row.
- When making streetscape improvements downtown, new features should be simple and functional. Many communities have a tendency to select ornate and historically themed sidewalk decoration. This detracts from beautiful historic buildings rather than complementing them. The same applies to awnings, signs, and all contemporary changes taking place in a historic downtown.
- All improvements must be accessible to persons with disabilities and persons of all ages. Universal design is a better solution than having to retrofit areas solely for disabled access. It is better to have no curbs and surface-level sidewalks than to have to put ramps and handrails on new design and better to have restrooms that are accessible to all persons than specific ones for people with disabilities.
- New paved areas should be permeable so that mature trees are not damaged and storm water percolates rather than gushes from paved surfaces, causing erosion. Creative paving surfaces exist that are ecological, functional, and beautiful—the best of all worlds!
- Any other large site consideration can take its cues from these simple standards. In many cases this approach has less negative impact on the environment, and it is often less expensive.

The design solutions dealt with each property on the city block: the Knox Theater, the train depot, and two service stations. A rehabilitated small town theater, a beautiful parklike area to park cars, and rehabilitated service stations make the perfect urban ensemble.

The Knox Theater is a jewel in Warrenton's crown. Development that surrounds this building should enhance the building and not

compete with it. Theater parking should not dictate the design of the surrounding lands. It is important, but not more important than creating a successful development. The team's approach to the Knox and other sites is to minimize the presence of parked automobiles and emphasize buildings and trees.

Next to the Knox Theater was a vacant lot that was mostly a grass field with a pecan grove at the rear of the property. The community had recently received state funds to return to it the Warrenton Train Depot that had been placed in a museum in Augusta, Georgia. The depot was now ready to make the journey home and be rehabilitated and used as the town's welcome center.

This building, while being moved to a location where it never existed before, should be faithful to traditional siting of depots. It should be placed in the center of the parcel parallel to the transportation corridor, not perpendicular to it. Traditionally, depots and other train-related structures are surrounded by open space usable for multiple functions: gathering spaces, car parks, goods storage, or pedestrian platforms. Depots are rarely lusciously landscaped and are often simple utilitarian buildings that we now value a great deal. The tendency is to overrestore or overlandscape. A better approach is one of simplicity and informality.

"The team's approach to the Knox and other sites is to minimize the presence of parked automobiles and emphasize buildings and trees."

Warrenton has two vintage treasures sitting side by side. They are classic examples of twentieth-century automobile-oriented architecture. The buildings are functional and can accommodate a variety of uses. It costs more money to demolish and build a new building than to rehabilitate and use an existing structurally sound building. Georgia, and the nation, has several great examples of successful conversions of this type of architecture into clever reminders of the past. Many communities have used them as welcome centers and spaces for community functions. Flea markets, antiques stores, consignment shops, sandwich shops, ice cream parlors, or farmers markets fit easily into this building type.

The first building, which at one time faced the greatest threat of being demolished, is the corner lot service station. The value of saving the structure is confirmed by looking across the street at the contemporary convenience store: an eyesore representing

highway architecture incompatible with downtown Warrenton's historical architecture, including a jumble of power lines, signs posted on every surface, and freestanding signs occupying any space not used for parking. Rehabilitation of this historic service station would be the catalyst for recognizing other vintage buildings from the early to mid twentieth century.

The team also paid special attention to another fifties-era building, referred to as the Yellow Station, located next to the corner service station. Sensitive color schemes and well-utilized outdoor space will make the buildings eye-catching and attractive to travelers passing by. The two twentieth-century buildings can easily be rehabilitated into great contributing units of the "Knox Block."

The design team's ideas were transformed into a series of posters, brochures, and a PowerPoint presentation for the City of Warrenton. The report was given to the County Commission and the Downtown Development Authority director, who in turn delivered it to the Warrenton community. The materials were designed to be both instructive and inspirational, illustrating the possibilities for the block while explaining the reasons for redevelopment.

The Warrenton mini-charrette was a win-win situation for everyone involved. The city of Warrenton received design assistance that was otherwise well out of their reach; they did not make a crucial and unchangeable planning mistake by demolishing historic buildings, but instead chose to implement new urbanist designs to create a healthy and vibrant downtown. The students gained real-world experience in their discipline in a service-learning setting, and UGA fulfilled both its teaching and public service missions. All of this work was completed for little or no cost to the community and was done as part of each design team participant's regular job duties.

The team learned valuable lessons from the process. They found that a shorter charrette process can work for smaller, more manageable design problems; that a picture is truly worth a thousand words; that putting the training materials in the hands of locals is effective and efficient; and that their work can leverage investment.

"Build it and they will come" works only in the movies. In real life it takes forethought, analysis, impact studies, critical thinking, comparisons, assessments, evaluations, projections, and the tools to make them all happen. In the real world there is homework to be done where problems can be researched and then solved; the impact of specific decisions can be foreseen, analyzed, and

improved upon; and resources such as Georgia's Alliance for Quality Growth can be tapped to make a positive difference. The goal is to offer a unique and rarely seen level of planning and design that will positively influence the way a community moves forward. Through providing a team of experts, we can educate and give direction to leaders, decision makers, government employees, and citizens about how to shape their communities using a quality growth approach that enhances their environment, sense of place, and quality of life.

About the Authors

- Danny Bivins provides expertise in a quality growth approach for community development to the Fanning Institute. Currently, he coordinates the Alliance for Quality Growth at the University of Georgia. Mr. Bivins is also helping develop the Forum for Medium Metropolitan Regions and serving as staff for the Southeast Regional Directors Institute (SERDI). He has experience in the field of design, historic preservation, preservation planning, quality growth, strategic planning, and regionalism.
- Pratt Cassity is public service and outreach director for the School of Environmental Design and coordinates the Center for Community Design, Planning & Preservation in the College of Environment and Design at the University of Georgia. Mr. Cassity teaches graduate courses in historic preservation and landscape architecture and supervises thesis research. He has provided leadership for the NEA's Your Town: Designing Its Future workshops throughout the southeast, as well as over forty-five community design charrettes within Georgia.