

A LITTLE URBANITY

VIEWS FROM AND ABOUT URBAN LIFE IN GREENSBORO, NORTH CAROLINA

MONDAY, OCTOBER 03, 2005

The Road to Greenville

Action Greensboro loaded a couple of buses full of city & county political leaders, high-ranking city staff members, business movers & shakers, press people, philanthropists, and a couple of ne'er-do-wells (me and **Hoggard**), and hauled us all down to **Greenville, SC** last week for a look at that town's successful downtown revitalization.

First things first: thank you to the gracious people at Action Greensboro for an enlightening and entertaining trip, and to the many people in Greenville who educated and entertained us.

Here follows an account of what I saw.

Greenville is a small town of about 54,000 that has a big-town downtown. Downtown Greenville has 80 restaurants, a luxurious downtown hotel, a sports arena, a concert hall, a beautiful downtown park, and a booming downtown residential real estate market.

The question on everybody's mind was, *how did they do it?* We got the answers in increments.

DOWNTOWN BUS TOUR

When we reached Greenville, we were treated to a short, guided bus tour of the downtown area, with commentary on my bus supplied by Greenville's young and articulate director of economic development, Nancy Whitworth. She emphasized 3 things that have been key to Greenville's success:

(1) Greenville's Mayor Knox White takes a keen interest in the details of urban planning. She noted, for example, the mayor's enthusiasm for "sidewalk lawns" -- the little strip of grass between the sidewalk and the street -- because they make pedestrians feel safe and comfortable while wading on busy streets. She said that the city

ABOUT ME



DAVID WHARTON
GREENSBORO, NORTH
CAROLINA, UNITED
STATES

David Wharton lives in the Charles B. Aycock Historic District just north of downtown Greensboro, North Carolina, USA. He is a member of the Greensboro Neighborhood Congress, a commissioner on the Greensboro Historic Preservation Commission, and is a member of the Citizens' Advisory Team for the rewriting of Greensboro's Land Development Ordinance. In his professional life he is an associate professor of Classical Studies with interests in Latin poetry, Latin linguistics, and Greek philosophy.

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council, too, is "open to new ideas about urban planning and design."

(2) Greenville has adopted design standards for downtown development and has preservation standards for the historic districts adjacent to downtown. Whitworth attributed the attractive appearance of new condominiums and businesses to these standards, and noted that all new construction -- "even if you want to change a sign" -- must be approved by the Design and Preservation Commission, which is similar to Greensboro's Historic Preservation Commission.

(3) Greenville has entered into many "public-private partnerships" (about which more below) to spur development. One of these is a new baseball stadium downtown, which is currently under construction, and which apparently was the object of considerable controversy (imagine that!).

WORDS FROM THE MAYOR

After the tour, we heard a presentation from Mayor Knox White himself in Greenville's 70s-modern icky council chamber. (The original Romanesque revival city hall was torn down).

Mayor White said that Greenville's downtown renaissance began in 1971 when the city hired a San Francisco landscape designer to plan a streetscape for Main Street, and that efforts have been ongoing since then. The mature trees planted in the early 70s give Main St. much of its current appeal.

The mayor said that the biggest turning point in the downtown's success was the outstanding restoration of the 1920s-era [Poinsett Hotel](#). "Don't doubt the power of historic preservation as an economic development tool, or as a political tool," he said. "We really got everybody on board when they saw how beautiful the Poinsett was, especially the older folks."

HISTORIC WALKING TOUR

I took the walking tour led by Robert Benedict, who is both a [real estate developer](#) and the [chair of Greenville's Design and Preservation Commission](#). After a lunch at the charmingly restored [Mary's Restaurant](#),



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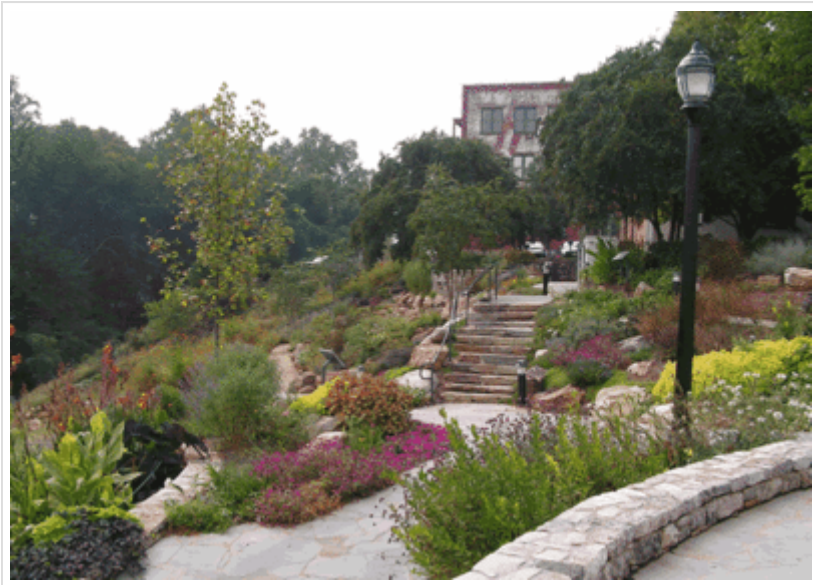
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he showed us some of the more successful historic rehab projects in Greenville, including a downtown park,



the Poinsett Hotel,

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and a restored mill that serves as restaurant and office space.



(Note the new condominiums to the left, with their parking garage behind the building facade.)

Greenville has a good stock of historic downtown buildings, some of which are being put to good use, but some of which are also vacant and uncared-for. On the whole, I think Greensboro's inventory of reasonably well-maintained historic buildings is as good or better --

though we do lack the Poinsett.

PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS

After the walking tour, we got a briefing on the public subsidies that helped make all this happen in Greenville.

"Public-private partnerships" was the watchword and mantra of how Greenville government has pushed downtown growth forward. The city has used a number of innovative ways to boost investment.

For example, in order to entice developers to build this building,



the city offered to build and maintain a parking garage beneath it for its tenants and for the public. The city owns the land; the developer owns the "air rights" -- whatever they build on top of the garage.

Greenville seems to have built such crypto-parking decks (I call them that because they always hide the parking behind a residential or retail facade) for a number of projects; for other undertakings, such as their downtown baseball stadium, the city donated the land or offered other incentives to private investors.

Greenville government has taken financial risks and incurred debt to an extent that widened the eyes of Greensboro Interim City Manager Mitch Johnson and his retired boss Ed Kitchen, who, at one point in the presentation, exchanged looks of amazed incredulity.

URBAN PLANNING

But Greenville has not done this without an overall urban plan that is well understood by city elected leaders and staff.

"Build anchors" was the advice given several times. And so Greenville did. They have invested in major attractions like the [Peace Center](#) concert hall, the Poinsett Hotel, the [Bi-Lo Center](#), and the [West End Market](#), all in walking distance from one another. They have connected them with high-quality pedestrian corridors that display fine brickwork, landscaping, pleasant little corners to sit and rest, and a generous scattering of public art.

Most impressive to me, the city has been fearless in pushing major anchors like their baseball stadium and the West End Market into truly blighted areas where private developers had feared to tread, hoping to draw them out of their comfort zone. It's working.

"Distribute parking" was the other main piece of advice from Greenville's leaders. The city deliberately did *not* place big parking decks right next to their anchors in order to generate pedestrian traffic -- and business -- for restaurants and downtown retail.

GETTING TO GREENVILLE

Can Greensboro get to Greenville in terms of downtown development? That will depend on the answers to these questions:

Will Greensboro find the economic and political value in historic preservation that Greenville has found? Will there arise in Greensboro a new class of developer-preservationists *a la* Robert Benedict who will bring to preservation an entrepreneurial spirit that will spur both civic pride and investment?

Will Greensboro's elected officials develop a heretofore unaccustomed, top-to-bottom interest in urban planning, and a resolve to devise a cohesive and detailed development plan for downtown, with well-placed anchors and first-quality pedestrian amenities? Will they stick to this plan over a period of a decade or more and dedicate themselves to persuading the public of its value? Will they commit public resources to it?

Will Greensboro enter into "public-private partnerships" in order to facilitate the construction of major anchors downtown? Will elected officials have the political will to get out in front of the private sector and place those anchors in areas that really need them, like South Elm St.?

I'll let you answer the questions.

6 COMMENTS :

[Kim](#) said...

When we first moved to NC, we lived in Asheville for 9 months. Asheville is close to Greenville so we'd visit Greenville when we grew tired of Asheville. We didn't spend a lot of time there, but when we were there we enjoyed it. It was a very nice little city.

8:01 AM

[joelblog](#) said...

David, Great post! Thanks. Hey, I would appreciate your critique of the following. I actually wrote this as a comment on David Hohhard's blog also about the Greenville trip. This subject interests me but I want to know where I may be off the wall or unrealistic. Please critique in a comment here or e-mail me at jsgillespie@mindspring.com. Thanks. Joel

Greenville does have a "can do" attitude, and it is a cool place. Many memories of my days at Clemson...though it is a much better city now...But you raise an important and oft overlooked, yet obvious point. Greenville has a river running through it AND a mountain just to the north. Richmond is on the fall line, and it also has a river and falls. Columbia is at the convergence of two rivers into another, is on the fall line, and has great riverfront development potential, and the city sits on a hill overlooking it, plus the capital grounds like Raleigh....Chattanooga has a river...and mountains...I moved here from Vancouver...river, ocean, harbor, mountains...So, all these places have terrain and natural features to give them character. Also, in their early development, many of these cities planned early on for wider streets and open spaces, including downtown churches and cemeteries (which lend quiet and calm to a city) as well as parks, large and small. They are inherently more human-person friendly. OK, Greensboro lacks much of that stuff. The new one block open space is nice, though a bit contrived. The baseball park is good. But....personally I think we need to think more radically....For example. I think the whole courthouse/police center needs to go – it is butt ugly for one thing. Tear it down and move it out of the city. Leave the old courthouse and let the rest become mostly open space maybe with some residential development. Let the proposed greenway thing happen, that's pretty cool. Offer tax incentives to preserve and remodel every worthy (that is, structurally sound) old building we have. Quit tearing down old houses and old buildings. Use brick, preferably old brick in new structures. No more concrete!

As to the ugly concrete buildings not being used, implode them....Establish open spaces wherever possible, particularly where there may be 'views.' Greensboro is claustrophobic. There are no vistas, no lines of sight. These need to be opened up if possible. Rivers and views and even cemeteries all allow for a quiet reflective opening up of the inner person, a calm relaxed feeling of being at home. Being by a river is like being by a fire. We don't have a river so we have to create that ambience in other ways. We could use gardens downtown, gardens which attract birds and butterflies, and by birds I don't mean pigeons. Gardens offer the same benefit to the spirit. So, along with the hub bub of good commercial development we need these spaces. This is one thing I like about New York City, and about Toronto, and about London, and about Paris. Despite the masses of people, and the crush of commercial activity, there are little places everywhere to take a break, to sit and rest, and these places are used by people all the time, not just street people, but the people who live, work, and spend money in the cities. Downtime Greensboro really just is a pretty crummy place to go spend any time. So I would want to think, what would encourage and inspire people, not just to come down here and party on the weekends, but come down here and spend 3-4 hours during the day? We need good shops. Good places to rest the feet. We need open spaces so the spirit does not feel crowded and closed in. We need public bathrooms. We need beauty. We need accessibility, the ability to park fairly close to where we're going and not half to walk too far. Well, that's enough for now. I'm keen about it, as you can tell. Joel.

11:26 AM

David Boyd said...

Beautiful pictures. I had no idea Greenville looked like that. Amazing.

11:36 AM

David Wharton said...

Joel, just about everything you say sure resonates with me. Greensboro does lack a river or interesting geography, and Elm St. is just too narrow.

But Davie and Greene and Church and Washington are wide, and I think there are opportunities there for the kinds of spaces people love.

Your thinking reminds me a lot of the kinds of spaces created by the Olmsteads in the 19th & early 20th century, who are responsible for many such parks and urban retreats in cities all over North America.

12:49 PM

Giraffe Web said...

Hi David,

I happen to be married to the preservationist/developer Robert and you have no idea how nice it is for you to be so complimentary of him and his role.

I wasn't certain about what Nancy Whitworth covered with all of you for your beginning tour but I will tell you that the resurgence of Greenville's downtown began with a vision and a plan developed for that vision. About 20 years ago, the Mayor of Greenville created vision 2005 for Greenville's downtown (with a lot of input from the community at large and community leaders) which resulted in several of the accomplishments you mention on their wish list.

Greenville is in a good location geographically because it is almost halfway between Charlotte and Atlanta, and it is close to a lot of wonderful amenities (lakes and mountains), but it was the vision that was the spark that lit the fire to begin with.

Right now Greenville has been in the process of forming the Greenville Vision 2025, and this vision has been taken over by the Leadership Alumnae of the Greenville Chamber's Leadership Greenville.

Visiting other cities and towns to see what they have done is a wonderful step to getting great ideas about what can be done for Greensboro, and it looks like you already have a good basis of key people to help put a plan into reality.

Good luck with it all and thanks for coming to our city!

-Judy Benedict

2:20 PM

Anonymous said...

I just thought I'd point out that Greenville is no small place. It maybe be a "small town of 54,000", but Greenville County has over 400,000 residents and Greenville is the center of a metro area (Greenville-Spartanburg-Anderson) of over 1 million people.

3:18 PM

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