

Planning Board 2016 Program for National Community Planning Month “Walking Conversations”

Introduction

In October, 2016 the Planning Board continued its tradition of celebrating National Planning Month with a unique form of public engagement we called “Walking Conversations.” Modeled on “Jane Jacobs Walks,” our three walks led nearly seventy residents of Carrboro on themed tours of downtown. Participants offered their own opinions and wisdom on the subjects of the three walks: downtown architecture and history, inclusivity in downtown, and the quality of public and private gathering spaces downtown. The walks continued the tradition of successful Planning Board-led celebrations of the American Planning Association’s National Community Planning Month, which in past years have focused on affordable housing (2012), zoning (2013), climate change (2014), and an evaluation of Carrboro Vision2020 (2015).

What is a Walking Conversation?

Our Walking Conversations were modeled on Jane Jacobs Walks. These are a series of free walks, hosted by urban enthusiasts around the world that allow city residents to engage with the environment of their cities. The walks aim to celebrate the legacy of acclaimed urbanist Jane Jacobs in myriad ways. They help people discover, celebrate, or turn a critical eye on various aspects of their urban environment that they may take for granted or overlook: the quality of public transportation, social history, public art, street furniture, and so on. They also help city residents meet others with common interests, and can serve as a platform for social cohesion and activism. The walks are not traditional guided tours, but instead interactive events in which participants are invited to share their own observations, knowledge, and opinions; guides direct participants along a pre-decided route and stimulate conversations with questions along the way. The first walk was held by a group of Jacobs’ friends in Toronto in 2007, and this year we were proud to bring these walks to Carrboro.

The Planning Board’s Decision to Host Walking Conversations

A graduate student at UNC’s Department of City and Regional Planning (DCRP) organized a series of Jane Jacobs Walks in Chapel Hill in the spring of 2016. Andrew Whittemore, a member of the planning board who had attended these events, suggested that the Carrboro Planning Board bring these walks to Carrboro. The board liked the idea, deciding to call them “Walking Conversations” for the sake of simplicity in advertising. Whittemore worked with Planning Board member Hathaway Pendergrass and Board of Aldermen liaison Damon Seils to draft a preliminary list of fourteen themes around which the board could organize three walks.

Ultimately the board settled on three themes. The first walk focused on the architecture and history of downtown, was held on October 10th, and was led by former mayor Mark Chilton. We chose this theme because we commonly wrestle with the question of what defines a characteristically “Carrboro” building. The second, focusing on inclusivity in downtown (in particular the availability of businesses, institutions, and public spaces to Carrboro’s African-

American community), was held on October 13th and led by Planning Board member Braxton Foushee. We chose this theme because the board is deeply concerned about the lack of affordable housing and the lack of diversity in prominent public spaces and establishments in this historically multi-racial community. The last, held on the 15th, focused on the quality of gathering spaces (public and private) in downtown and was led by Molly DeMarco, PhD MPH, Research Assistant Professor, Dept. of Nutrition, Gillings School of Global Public Health, and facilitated by Planning Board Member David Clinton, an architect and planner. We chose this theme because of the importance of public life, vibrant streets and open spaces, and universal accessibility to the members of the board. Each tour, we hoped, would offer us insights into the thinking of other residents in the town on these matters, and perhaps provide a platform for further engagement and activism on these subjects.

Downtown Architecture and History

This walk was led by Mark Chilton and had 36 participants. Moving from the lawn in front of Weaver Street Market to the Station, the discussion focused on Carrboro's origins as a rail stop in a rural area known as West Chapel Hill, and then its development as a vibrant market for crossties, cotton, grain, and timber, and finally its growth into a small manufacturing center with the construction of two mills. Participants discussed the historic African-American community around Lloyd Street and the construction of Lloyd Street's mill houses as rental stock for mill workers' families. The group learned about the distinguished commercial block at the corner of Roberson and Main Street, discussing the attractiveness of its simple corbeled brick detailing. Participants moved west along Main Street, also noting the use of corbeled brick on the former Baptist Church. The Daniel Building at 103 Weaver Street, participants noted, mirrored the feel of the town's older brick structures, but lacked some of the simple architectural details that gave the other buildings their character. Moving west along Weaver Street, participants discussed the "four-square" and "triple-A" designs of some of the street's older wooden buildings, before finally moving onto Lindsay Street to revisit the conversation on mill houses. At the walk's conclusion, participants noted several characteristics of downtown's architecture: the extensive use of brick, its utilitarian character, its overall quaintness, its green and open surroundings, and its generally more working-class feel in comparison with Chapel Hill. Participants also expressed openness to more thought-provoking design and a diversity of housing types balanced with a need for preservation.

Inclusivity Downtown

This session was led by Braxton Foushee at St. Paul AME Church. Several others presented, including Delores Bailey, Faye Farrar, Dr. Hillebrand, and Quinton Harper. Forty people attended. Due to limited mobility of some of the speakers and attendees, this was a verbal "walk," held in place. The speakers' talks focused on the history of the African-American community's efforts to thrive in Carrboro from Reconstruction through renewed segregation until the present day. The early cornerstones of the built community were St. Paul AME Church and the Rosenwald School in Northside. By mid-century, Carrboro had a small but thriving minority-owned business district which incorporated businesses to provide most daily needs as well as entertainment. Since the 1980s most of those buildings have been torn down or converted to other uses.

The second portion of the session included a lively discussion of present day Carrboro's built environment, in particular the lack of a public social space where minority, low-income, and other citizens feel welcome. The Planning Board members who attended extended an invitation for interested citizens to apply for positions on advisory boards.

The Quality of Public and Private Gathering Spaces Downtown

This walk focused on the practical aspects of gathering spaces as well as their artistic value. There were fourteen participants. It took participants to spaces in the public domain and spaces that are privately-owned but used by the public. Downtown Carrboro has a series of small public spaces, and we began our discussion with a premise: that in order for a series of public spaces to be useful, they must exist at regular intervals of about 1800 feet, the amount of space that can easily be traversed by a middle-aged couple in 5 minutes. Carrboro achieves this, having many regularly spaced public spaces (some intended and others not) throughout downtown. We then visited these spaces, beginning at the Town Hall moving east along Weaver Street and then to the east end of Main Street.

Participants noted the varying social contributions of these various spaces. They believed that the lawn in front of Town Hall is an under-used public gathering space. Some spaces are unexpected: the fence along the sidewalk at the CVS-owned property on Weaver is now a de-facto town bulletin board, and the food truck area at the former dental office on North Greensboro is a great social gathering place. The area between the existing CVS store and Carr Mill has potential, but the lack of connection to the public way discourages its use. The path through and within Carr Mill felt underused to some participants who saw great potential in the building and property for gathering beyond the musical programs organized by Weaver Street Market. The patio at the RISE Restaurant is less engaged in the public way than is Bella's because of its separation from the path of pedestrian travel; the bench walls at the trees in front of the Hampton Inn, by contrast, create a nice relief and encourage visitors to linger.

At the end of the walk, discussion focused on what sort of public spaces could be achieved in Carrboro. A number of large format photos were presented, illustrating how other cities and other countries accommodated these spaces. Band shelters, playgrounds, fountains and lawns were prevalent in these other cities' spaces, often with artistic flourishes. Very often there were small, simple elements that made for useful space: creative benches that were artistic, comfortable, appropriately-scaled, and sometimes attached to buildings or around planters. It was suggested that, in order to facilitate the creation of these spaces, a design competition for creative benches and a funding campaign to sponsor these items could be undertaken.

Conclusion

The board had two takeaways from our walking conversations. The first involved lessons from the walk themselves. Participants on our first walk showed an appreciation for Carrboro's traditional, masonry, utilitarian aesthetic. Participants in the second walk lamented the loss of African-American visibility, and hoped that the town could address sources of this problem including the lack of affordable housing and commercial space. Participants on the third walk wanted to see concrete improvements in the downtown environment that increased walkability and the usefulness of small public spaces.

Our second takeaway was that these walks set the stage for other exciting types of engagement. Each of the conversations offered a fun way to talk about our community by getting people outside and engaged with the community itself. Conversation was lively and inspired. We believe that these conversations could serve as a model for more formal public engagement in the future, and recommend that the Board of Aldermen support this unique type of interactive public engagement as a part of formal planning processes and other matters of importance to the town and its government. In addition, the board looks forward to supporting other forms of direct engagement with the built environment, including “tactical urbanism” events.