



Taking it to the Street

What a group of consultants learned from unpaid field trips around the South.

By William T. Eubanks

Cameron Clements (far left), Haley Weeks, and Bill Eubanks size up a street in Pendleton, South Carolina.

What does a design firm do when times get tough? It can bury its head in the sand and wait for things to get better. It can take the “chicken little” approach: panic and prepare for the worst. Or it can try to have some fun. That’s what my firm decided to do. We decided that taking the initiative fit our style much better than waiting passively for good times to return—or bad times to worsen.

Our firm, called urban edge studio, decided to use the slow economic times to build our case study library by visiting small towns and documenting their street dimensions. Doing this also gave us an op-

portunity to do some creative marketing—something that is essential in a depressed economy. We decided that if we couldn’t be as billable as we might like, we could still be productive.

Before our first trip we consulted three people whom we admire for ideas about where to go. All three have a feeling for what makes a great community: James Barker, president of Clemson University, who still teaches a class on small towns; Rodney Swink, who guided the North Carolina Main Street Center for many years; and Vince Graham, a client of ours and the developer of successful new urban-

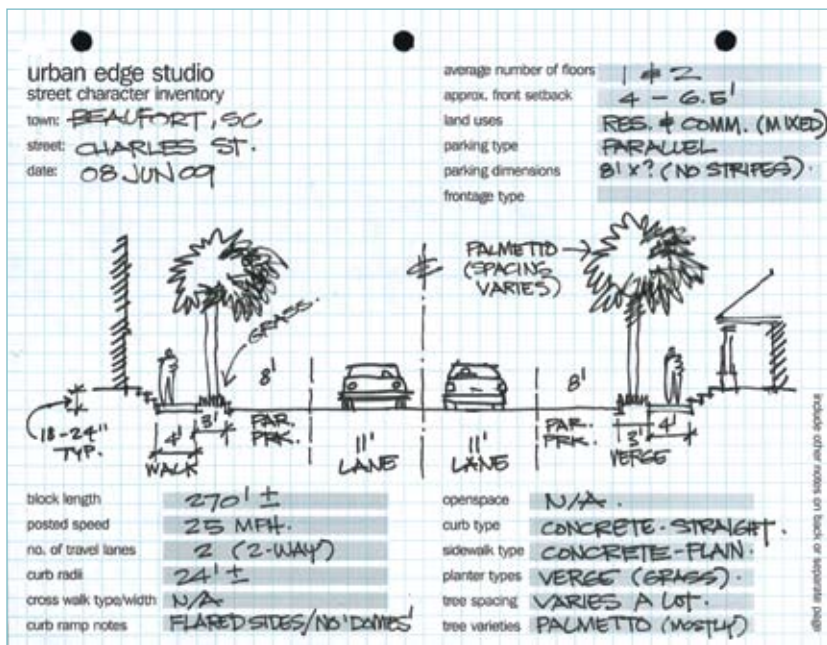
ist communities such as I’On, Mixson, and Newpoint.

Once the itinerary for the first trip was established we divided up the trip planning work. We researched each town to learn about its history and demographics, and reviewed aerial photos, maps, ordinances, and photographs. We also wrote letters to each town’s mayor, town manager, or planning director to let them know we were coming and why. This was part of our marketing effort. Follow-up letters would go out after the visits.

Our first field trip—a three-day event—was conducted last April. Four of the five

members of the studio covered 12 towns in the Carolinas. To keep costs down we used accumulated hotel points for our lodging, paid for our own meals, and split the time between office and personal time. We used a company-owned vehicle, and the firm paid for gas. We left early on a Thursday morning and returned on Saturday evening. The itinerary was created with an eye toward making our drive time efficient and our time in each town productive.

On the way to each town we reviewed our background information and decided which streets we felt would best serve our needs. (We also held democratic discus-



Here's how Charles Street in Beaufort, South Carolina, measures up.

sions regarding which iPod playlists got the most air time.) It was important to us to hit the ground running in each town we visited because our time in each was brief.

We had prepared a form to use in measuring and documenting the streets and several copies were printed on grid paper and stored in a metal clipboard. Each person had a job: Russ Seamon was the main photographer (although we all carried cameras); Haley Weeks and Cameron Clements did the measuring; and I was the recorder. Zach Bearden, who had a conflict that weekend, was with us in spirit and the occasional text message.

We typically measured three to five streets—both residential and commercial—and took dozens of photographs in each town. It was important to us that we explore not only what worked but also what could have worked better. At the end of each day we discussed our impressions over dinner and then gathered in a hotel room to write our blog, which was posted on the company website, www.urban-edge-studio.com, with links to our Facebook page.

Eye-openers

We have taken four day-trips since that first weekend adventure and have now done some level of research in more than two dozen towns. We don't plan to ever stop this effort and have been known to press spouses and friends into service on vacations to measure and photograph interesting streets. The effort is proving to be a valuable source of information for charrettes and public workshops. It is especially

useful to us in conducting visual preference surveys with the public or in finding precedents for form-based codes.

For example, we used photographs of homes and commercial buildings from Beaufort, Bluffton, and McClellanville, South Carolina, as precedents for the form-based code we created for the new urbanist Nebo Settlement in Awendaw, South Carolina. Also in South Carolina, we showed charrette participants in Florence a green similar to the one in downtown Pendleton.

However, the most useful result of this experience is our realization that most towns are currently set up for failure. Many towns have wonderful, successful downtowns that possess character, charm, and a true sense of place. They have good human scale, are walkable, and are truly memorable. They also have, at their fringes (and sometimes along the exact same streets), the worst kind of placeless, scaleless, automobile-dominated sprawl that one could possibly imagine.

"Why?" we asked. Why does a community, when it knows what works, allow this kind of junk to be built?

One answer lies in existing ordinances. Almost without exception the compact, urban, walkable downtown areas we admired are now illegal. They simply can't be replicated under the current regulations. Sometimes these controls are embedded in zoning ordinances. Sometimes they are found in transportation department requirements.

Some of the sprawl-inducing, zoning-related culprits include excessively deep

front and side setbacks, lot size and minimum frontage requirements, landscaped buffer yards, and unnecessary parking requirements. Some of the major street-related culprits include lane width requirements, minimum curb radiuses, regulations restricting on-street parking, and lack of adequate sidewalks and crosswalks.

Jane Jacobs once said: "If a city's streets look interesting, the city looks interesting; if they look dull, the city looks dull." She knew what she was talking about.

Taking action

We suspected these things but had not actually researched them before. Now, armed with actual examples, we knew we had to start acting. Since that time, we have seized every speaking opportunity to talk about reforming zoning and transportation regulations and the use of alternate means such as form-based codes to change the way we look at town-building. We also presented the findings of our field trip series at the 40th anniversary meeting of APA's South Carolina Chapter and in a presentation on streets and sprawl at Pecha Kucha 4 in Charleston, both in October 2009.

The key question, we believe, is this: "What are we building that will be worthy of preserving in 50 years?" When you look at the suburban sprawl that encircles our communities, you would be hard-pressed to find anything worth protecting. The world of development has gone through many changes over the years and we believe a paradigm shift in the way we look at town-building is imminent.

We need to rediscover the importance of the public realm in our communities. Our streets are the most important part of the public realm and we have relegated them to an element of utility, so that success is measured solely by level of service. In doing so, we have stripped streets of their role as important public space.

We need to rediscover the dignity of the street. We need to respect the street, revere it, and grace it with beautiful buildings that create, shape, and reinforce the public realm. Only then will we create communities worth loving and protecting.

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