

NASHVILLE CIVIC DESIGN CENTER

From Nowhere to Somewhere

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The City in Mind

The cultural memory of what many of our cities once were has followed their physical fabric into oblivion. In the 1990s, a downtown with little sign of human presence and endless stretches of blank, lifeless walls once placed Nashville firmly among these lost cities. Everywhere, one could see the signs of Nashville's eroded identity. Urban renewal had converted a whole set of neighborhoods adjoining downtown into an asteroid belt of surface parking. The country-music nightclub district ran barely two blocks on Broadway and the street itself had the unpleasant and desolate character found in many failing "main streets" in the era of American suburbia. Even the Ryman Auditorium was locked up in mothballs.

A walk from the Vanderbilt campus across the river to Five Points in East Nashville is comparable in distance to a stroll in central Paris from Gare St-Lazare to the Luxembourg Gardens. The difference is that the journey in Paris is rewarding to the spirit every step of the way, whereas the journey in Nashville takes you through moonscapes of urban desolation, deserts of parking lots, demoralizing walls of submerged and elevated freeway and past desultory one-story industrial and commercial bunkers, for which there is not enough Prozac in the world to mitigate the psycho-spiritual punishment.

So why shouldn't Nashville want to be as good as Paris? This is a fraught question, especially in Nashville, which as the Country Music Capital of America is held hostage by the crippling popular notion that country life is the only acceptable manner of living and the highest expression of democracy and decency. Hence we get suburbia, which has been the attempt to deliver that idea materially to the masses. The result is a sordid, puerile cartoon of country life, not real places but consumer products devoid of both natural and civic amenities.

However, I returned to Nashville in 2002 and found a city on the brink of substantial rebirth. After years of civic self-destruction and inertia, Nashvillians saw that the city wasn't growing very well, believed Nashville should be a beautiful city, and were trying to be intelligent about how to make it so.

"Nashville is a city that is no longer afraid to admit it made mistakes," Mark Schimmenti, the design director of the new Nashville Civic Design Center, told me. And, as the conversion of the failing Church Street Mall into a proud, grand library

demonstrates, Nashville is a city that's not afraid to begin to correct them either.

This time I got excited about being in Nashville. It has only been in the fifty years that the idea of the city fell into utter disrepute among the American public. Everywhere I go now I detect a yearning for the kind of urban excitement that the 'burbs' just haven't been able to deliver, even in the best malls (if such oxymorons exist). The knowledge for how to accomplish this urban revival is now institutionalized in the civic leadership of Nashville, a city once known as the Athens of the South.

Nashville begun to make important steps to recover its lost "cultural memory" by turning towards the city again and away from the myths of suburban life.

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