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CHARRETTES for NEW URBANISM

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In Florida and elsewhere around the country, a remarkable number of ***charrettes*** have been used to launch New Urbanist projects.

These events are typically a potent combination of modern design studio and town meeting, with a dash of the teamwork from an old-fashioned barnraising mixed in. Most start with a hands-on session for citizens and continue in an around-the-clock, energetic push until a plan is finished about a week later. A charrette can be a breakthrough event that helps overcome inertia and creates a meaningful master plan. Properly executed, this technique can produce a master plan that is more useful, better understood, and more quickly produced than one formed by any other method.

Moving Into the Mainstream

In recent years, the charrette has almost become a normal part of the planning process in Florida. This reflects the growing understanding that a broadly shared sense of authorship in any plan is key to its implementation. These events are also increasingly the ones where seminal ideas are born or revived— ideas that are changing our public realm for the better.

"We had literally hundreds of people touching the plan, and that week changed the life of our city," says Tom Cooper, who was vice-mayor of South Miami when a charrette was held to design a revitalization plan for the downtown area. "This was a moment when people were really heard, and the energy from that has been sustained for eight years, keeping the plan whole. People still feel ownership; it's their plan, and they forcefully defend and promote it." South Miami has had two more charrettes, getting detailed plans for other neighborhoods, and plans another in 2000 for more still.

Charrettes have been used to design master plans for buildings, neighborhoods, districts, corridors, whole towns, and regions. Regardless of the scale, most of the modern charrettes follow a pattern that emphasizes speed, results, inclusion, design, and a balancing of issues. The charrette **technique has been refined in recent years** by private firms such as Dover, Kohl & Partners, Duany Plater-Zyberk and Company, Correa Valle Valle and others. Charrettes have also been used by agencies including Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council and South Florida Water Management District, and city planning departments including those in Fort Pierce and Winter Park.

There are many subtle variations on the exact procedure, and more than a little debate among colleagues about what constitutes a real charrette. To a great extent each charrette schedule is customized to the particulars of the place and task, but the following outline is typical of the best charrettes.

Advance Work

Weeks before the charrette, the sponsors and design leaders organize logistics for the event, prepare base information including maps, photos, and historical documents, and gather other research materials as appropriate.

The New Urbanists insist on considerably more detailed base information about the existing physical conditions than just "bubble diagrams"— that's because the plans that will result from the charrette will be more detailed and precise documents, meant to be used. For a new neighborhood project, for example, the computerized base maps might have property boundaries, existing buildings, topographical information, a tree survey, and environmental limitations like wetlands, soils maps, and zoning, plus detailed context maps the designers use to relate the new neighborhood to its surroundings. For a redevelopment plan in an existing neighborhood, the base information is usually even more detailed, indicating lot lines, the condition of structures, street details, parking, tree canopy, historical information, and property ownership.

While the base maps are being gathered, the pre-charrette outreach gets underway. The idea is to invite everyone who will have interest in or influence over the approval of the plan later. The power of the charrette process is in getting busy people to focus so that lasting consensus can be established. This works best when everyone with an interest in the project— from regulators to neighbors to business decision-makers— is on hand.

This approach also typically generates significant free publicity that stimulates more participation. Press coverage is generally promoted for the entire event, to build community awareness and motivate business interest.

During the pre-charrette phase, the professionals work with the client to assemble an interdisciplinary team of citizens, public officials, property owners, developers, environmentalists, professional consultants and whomever else is needed. Specialty experts conduct their analysis, if called for, during this stage; for example, a given project may require the expertise of a traffic engineer, retail analyst, or environmental

scientist. At this point the designers also get familiar with that roomful of previous plans and studies every client seems to have. Just before the charrette, the professional team typically interviews key stakeholders and elected officials one-on-one, off the record, to get an early sense of the situation.

As the charrette begins, a design studio is set up within or very near the site, where the team will work rapidly for seven to ten days or more.

The Kickoff Event

To get things going, New Urbanists often begin the charrette with one or more kickoff events. Usually held the night before the hands-on session, the kickoff might include an informal reception. But it should also include a briefing on how the charrette will work and a slide lecture on basic urban design principles, plus a review of comparable projects around the country. This gives the participants common visual material, which will be very useful the next day as they will try to describe to one another what they would like to see in the plan. Kickoff events can also include a lecture by one of the specialty experts on a subject crucial to the project; for example, if the plan is to help revitalize a Main Street, a talk on state-of-the-art visual merchandizing or traffic calming may be in order.

It is also a good idea to include a visual lecture on the history of the site and its environs, including the step-by-step physical development of the study area and neighboring settlements. This serves several purposes. First, it reminds participants about the basic traditions of regional architecture and urbanism. Second, it reminds participants that their town is not "finished"— they are often surprised to see how rapidly things have changed over the decades, and begin to sense that they can actually make a difference. Third, in most places the audience will see a better public realm depicted in the "old urbanism" slides of their town than the public realm they have today. Pictures from the days of pioneer Florida and the 1920s boom are particularly revealing; even if the town was poor and the streets were unpaved, one can often see a bustling pedestrian scene and good building-to-street relationships lacking in the conventional sprawl built lately.

Where the scale and terrain permits, a walking tour of the area is also usually included. The history lecture, educational talks, and walking tour set the stage for designing the future: we remember our proud past and review how things became as they are, compare our situation to that of peer communities that found answers to our problems (now or in the past), and we relate those experiences to our real world.

The Hands-On Session

The key event in the charrette is next. Toward the beginning of the week, we hold a hands-on session for citizen participants. This occasion is generally open to the public. In this session, attendees are divided into workteams who draw together at tables, working over the maps.

After introductions, the citizen participants actually *draw* what they would like to see developed or preserved, in great detail. Each workteam is aided by at least one professional designer and works within some basic brainstorming rules. (Andres Duany likes to say, "Argue if you must, but argue with your pencil.") There is always time pressure, to be sure, and usually a bit of friendly competition between teams. After a couple of hours, the attendees regroup theatre-style, and each team makes a presentation to the others about their findings. Hands-on sessions are often held on Saturday or in the evening, so lots of folks can join in.

The hands-on session serves primarily as a high-intensity briefing for the professionals. But the educational benefit is phenomenal, perhaps because stakeholders are asked by this process to look at the situation from someone else's point of view. (It is important to be sure that workteams are diverse; don't clump all the developers at one table and all the homeowner activists at another.) After going through this process, participants are usually surprised how the ideas that emerge at the various tables are often similar. There is almost always greater consensus on the big issues than people realized. When striking differences between the teams' plans do show up, this lets the professionals know where special attention and tough choices will

be needed in the next stage.

This session can be energizing for government staff, too. The feedback is rich and immediate, and the progress evident— quite unlike an average business day in most municipal bureaucracies. More than once, local planning department staffers have remarked to me, "This event reminds me of why I got into planning in the first place." One caveat: planning staffers or city managers who stand away from the tables, with their arms folded, "just listening," must be recruited to work hands-on with the teams. Usually it just takes a nudge. These folks often understand the site and constraints better than anyone else, and may have been thinking about design alternatives for years. If they are included, they can share in the authorship of the plan.

Synthesizing the Plan

Next, the design team works to synthesize the useful ideas from the table session into a single plan. We evaluate data, uncover strategies, debate alternatives and propose the form development should take. While the details are being ironed out, new questions arise, and the design team calls upon the experts or regulators who can resolve conflicts. These people should be arranged to be on standby alert during the charrette week.

Meanwhile, illustrators create vivid visuals that will later be used to explain the plan. This critical stage of the process takes up most of the time in the charrette. Members of the public are usually welcome to join in on a drop-in basis during this period, to look over the shoulders of the designers as they work.

The 'Scheduled Train Wreck'

Partway through the charrette, it's a good idea to get additional feedback as the plan takes shape. Some charrette organizers include a midway "pin-up" review of work in progress, and invite the key decision-makers, or even the public, to sit in. We've borrowed the term 'scheduled train wreck" for these events, because a raw, unfinished plan can generate white-hot criticism and spirited debate! Even though the ideal plan is just coming into focus at this point, this session often brings to the surface any contradictions and miscues, and alerts the design team to trouble spots in time to address them.

Town Meeting

At the close of the charrette, the complete designs, and the logical process used to create them, are presented in an open public forum. The details of the plan are documented in sketches, photos, imaging simulations, and drawings inked by hand or via computer. Design codes or land development regulations are often drafted at the same time, and are matched to the intent of the plan. All of these are shown in the Town Meeting as works in progress, typically in elaborate visual presentations. The visuals are crucial; the more realistic, the better.

The New Urbanists usually have a remarkable amount of work to show after such a short time, and the plan reflects the citizen input where advisable. "It is very satisfying to citizens when they look up at the final plan, and see, there on the screen, the evolution of ideas they suggested just a week earlier," says Michael Busha, executive director of the Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council.

Follow-up

Once the charrette has concluded, the planners typically leave for their offices to refine the work and produce documents, then return with a final presentation. It is then absolutely crucial for the sponsors to follow through with rapid implementation of some piece of the plan.

In South Miami, for example, the City Commission swiftly revised the land development regulations to create a New Urbanist code for the downtown, and rebuilt a street as a demonstration project to show how traffic

calming, wider sidewalks and outdoor dining could work well. Gradually, renovations to older structures began. Later, the main street, Sunset Drive, was rebuilt to reflect the plan. Now new mixed-use buildings are underway, reflecting the plan. There have been frustrating lapses along the way, including serious exceptions to the plan and code details for a flawed "entertainment retail" mall on one end of the downtown. But in general, the momentum started by the charrette has been maintained. At one point just before construction, engineers proposed radically altering the design for Sunset Drive, departing from the pedestrian-oriented intent of the charrette plan and returning to a more autocentric design. Scores of citizens turned out for the next commission meeting, and stood up for the plan. As a result the street was built as originally envisioned, and is performing well.

New Urbanism and the Charrette

Why are the New Urbanists particularly drawn to this charrette technique? There are several answers.

First, it is very difficult and time-consuming to obtain development approvals for *anything* today, especially if it doesn't resemble the "as-of-right" conventional sprawl. The adversarial relationships and suspicion that abound statewide and the bizarre tangle of regulations in most jurisdictions make it tough to improve upon the failed development model that engendered the distrust in the first place. It can take many years to obtain permits for development of a new neighborhood, in a mind-numbing parade of hearings. In redevelopment areas, it can also be very difficult for a small property owner to survive the process on their own, and revitalization requires a coordinated effort among government, community groups, and myriad property owners (which tends to explain, at least partially, why so little revitalization is actually occurring). The only way to succeed within these patterns is to quickly catalyze public consensus on the alternatives, to the extent practical. The New Urbanists are using charrettes to help opposing groups unite their agendas for reform. Charrettes help get things done.

Second, the New Urbanists have found this to be an efficient way to work. The charrette is scheduled well in advance, and everybody gets ready. On location, away from the distractions of the office phone and other projects, a crack team of designers can create an excellent plan very quickly. There's pressure from the deadline, there's interaction with colleagues on a tightly focused design problem, and all the basic project information is at hand (hopefully). The site is close by, too, which allows the designers to check things and percolate over the design in a very realistic way. In the charrette one has the attention of decision-makers, and can therefore rapidly sift alternatives while building momentum. Without the charrette, creating a plan will almost always take much, much longer.

Third, the plans turn out better. Partly this results from getting a group of inspired designers together in a room and challenging them to do their best work. But it's also clearly a result of the public participation: citizens from the area tend to know their own territory, and on the whole have first-rate ideas that come from years of observation. Enthusiastic citizens nudge their leaders along toward more ambitious aims, too, encouraging them not to be overly cautious. At the same time the citizens are part of an early-warning system, helping weed out notions that are impractical or can't be achieved politically.

Is it Dangerous to Invite the Citizens?

Why aren't the New Urbanists wary of all this public involvement? Charrette sponsors who are worried that the citizens will have crazy, un-usable or unaffordable ideas often ask us this.

If, as a movement, we were out there advocating, say, esoteric and self-referential object-buildings, banal strip shopping centers, unsustainable office parks or new expressways tearing through historic areas, we *would* have a problem. Most citizens that will give up a Saturday morning and a couple of evenings in the same week to join in on such a process hate that stuff. But the livable community features in New Urbanism have widespread appeal. People simply tend to prefer well-placed buildings that give shape to public spaces; walkable, traffic-calmed streets; doors and windows facing the streets; and other hallmarks of good urban

design. They tend to respond warmly to traditional, climate-responsive architecture, at least more warmly than to abstractions or shock-value compositions.

There's also a natural filtering at work: the New Urbanists are usually invited to work in places and with projects that are friendly to traditional neighborhood design in the first place, and therefore are encouraged to succeed. And even in the most entrenched NIMBY situations, at least *some* headway is usually made with introducing the tougher components like mixing uses, increasing densities, discouraging sprawl, and designing for transit. As neighbors educate one another, the knee-jerk opposition to those important components tends to soften. In many places the charrette marks the moment when design is officially back in the game, and design rebuilds trust. The keys are to focus on design and produce reliable, detailed graphics instead of just words.

The contemporary charrette, as it is evolving in Florida planning culture at least, is different from the citizen involvement pioneered by advocacy planners in the 1960s, in that the New Urbanists place great emphasis on precedent and the skill of the designers; it's not an "anything goes" process but one that is informed by history.

It's not the same as loose "visioning," either. It is not satisfactory to end a charrette with a whole series of different, competing plans and no decision about which approach is preferred. The New Urbanists end charrettes with detailed, physical, visual plans, not just feel-good verbal statements. As John Massengale has said, "The process itself emphasizes that the product is different."

Another reason the New Urbanists are not hesitant to design in public is that the successful charrettes are organized around strong designer leaders, who listen carefully, interpret the contributions, and incorporate the public input *where advisable* in the final plan. Citizens are usually quite respectful of the designers' prerogative to mold and adapt the ideas that work best, and to reject others, provided one explains why. If some ideas come out in the final product that are different from the original suggestions, the designer leaders can present the reasoning behind those decisions. The designers take responsibility for creating one, final plan that reflects to the extent feasible the input of citizens and experts, and also respects best practices, the rules, science, and practical needs. Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk has said, "We recommend as public a process as the client can stand." In our experience, plans just don't get worse with public involvement.

A Big Difference

This whole approach stands in marked contrast to the conventional regulatory planning process, in which contradictions may lie unexposed or the public gets invited to participate in only a perfunctory way. In that system, plans go from meeting to meeting in an endless parade of hearings and workshops. It's tough for citizens to keep up with that process, it's terribly inefficient for public staff, and it's expensive and risky for developers.

It also sometimes seems neighbors get inspired to participate only when threatened by the latest proposal, and at that point the climate of mutual suspicion between activists, developers and government yields mostly negative interaction. In the pro-active, solutions-oriented charrette environment, on the other hand, in which the public is consulted before the big decisions are made, citizen input can be a positive force. John Ludwig, who persuaded several citizen groups to collaborate on the first South Miami charrette, said, "We're always telling City Hall what we don't want. Let's tell them what we do want."

A Historic Moment

Routine planning processes bore the heck out of most citizens, of course. But the charrette can inspire many folks to get involved that have been on the sidelines. The key here is to convey that this is a historic moment in the life of the community, and that their participation will make a difference. Community leaders, the earlier the better, should communicate this message.

A proper charrette is also very visual, with greater emphasis on pictures than words. This makes the planning more accessible. Citizens can more clearly interact with illustrations, and express what they like— and what they don't like— more firmly than with words and abstractions alone.

Caveats

As noted before, there are lots of variations on the process described above, and hybrids among those. Some designers employ the "not-so-public" charrette, in which only stakeholders who are specifically invited may participate. Some developer clients, particularly those in the earliest stages of tying up property or in other high-risk situations, can only handle a "private charrette," which unfolds in the security of a conference room. In those cases the process is similar to the one described above, except that the hands-on session and public reviews of the work might be replaced with a scheduled walk-through by one or two community leaders. It's worth pointing out that the overall cost of such a private process will eventually rise to as much or more than the full-blown public affair, without the buy-in.

We recognize that there are other procedures that work, too, despite our enthusiasm for charrettes. In some laidback small towns, the "big bang" charrette can be overwhelming; a slower, calmer approach might be more appropriate. For example, we've used a "month in residence" approach with a smaller team of professionals working in a storefront location. It is not as efficient as charrettes to work this way, but it can be very effective and less intimidating, as the plan unfolds a little more slowly.

Another caveat: Charrettes are not a panacea for political gridlock, and consensus doesn't happen magically. Participants need to be realistic, and work through their disagreements deliberately. A good rule of thumb is that everyone leaves with something they want, but no one leaves with everything they want. Charrette leaders are responsible, though, for making sure the event does not get seized by special interests, NIMBYs or others. To elected officials and developers: follow through on promises you make in the charrette. Don't just go through the motions. Act upon the plan, and you'll build trust.

One last grumble: Everything is not a charrette! After catching on, the term has been much abused. Some planners have hijacked the term for the same old flip-chart meetings. We've heard one city manager talk of having an "afternoon parking charrette" and another about an "insurance charrette." The New Urbanists use the term to describe the intense, complete affair described above, with a physical plan as the outcome— not quickie seminars or ordinary facilitated assemblies under a new name.

Case Study: Downtown Kendall

Emboldened by the success stories, enthusiasts have begun to take on some of the thorniest issues using charrettes.

The Dadeland-Datran area south of Miami is classic, chaotic, "edge city" stuff— a mishmash that includes a 1960s-style mall, highway ramps, office boxes with blank garages, parking lots everywhere, and a dreadful pedestrian scene. On the other hand, it's also strategically located at the convergence of all sorts of regional infrastructure, including a highway, an expressway, a major arterial corridor, a busway, and two Metrorail stations. And the Dadeland area boasts a booming economy, expressed in rapid development, burgeoning real estate values, employment, and thriving retailers. Almost all of this has been developed in less than thirty years.

When these properties were first being developed, they seemed to be in the middle of nowhere. We were still living in the golden age of the automobile, so traffic wasn't yet a big problem. There was a low-slung building here, another there, a car dealership here and there. Everyone did their own thing on their own property, within minimal zoning limits, as if they were living on asteroids or islands.

But the disconnected pattern continued to accumulate, in bits and pieces. Along with each wave of

development, those asteroids seemed to move closer and closer together. High-rises began to sprout around the transit stops (albeit in auto-oriented forms with poor relationships with the sidewalks). Traffic grew as 'burbs pushed west. The lack of connected street systems in the area began to take its toll, and that golden auto age, well, that's history— just ask any irritated Kendall commuter. By the 1990s, the area had reached the point where each new project really affected all the others, and Kendall residents were increasingly unhappy with the deteriorating image and manner of the place. To get to the next level of economic value and achieve any sustainable form of town life or tax base, individual developments would now somehow have to be coordinated as part of a coherent whole.

Meanwhile the county had rightly seen this as a good place to target more intensive development, in an *"Eastward Ho!"* location served by transit, and had upzoned the area considerably to entice growth there. So many development and redevelopment projects were on the boards that a *Miami Herald* headline asked the question, "Downtown Kendall?" There was the sense, though, that while the area was growing toward greater intensity, no specific plan was in place to guide that growth to shape a *real* downtown. The permitting of ever-larger projects without the design controls to make these developments good neighbors was infuriating to Kendall activists. For their part, property owners were frustrated by both the swirl of controversy that seemed to increase with each new project, and with the disjointed results.

Now what?

In 1995, the local chamber of commerce, Chamber SOUTH, originated the idea of working together with property owners, Miami-Dade County government, and the neighboring community to build consensus on the future of the area. "Our business members and our taxing authorities are both leaving money on the table, and area residents aren't served by the chaos either," says Paul Vrooman of Chamber SOUTH. "We saw that Downtown Kendall could be more valuable, and that the citizens could get a livable downtown they can be proud of, too."

Three years of meetings, phone calls, and great effort by the Chamber SOUTH staff accomplished the organization and fundraising for an extensive weeklong charrette. The planning work was funded by a combination of private chamber donors, Miami-Dade Transit, the state's *Eastward Ho!* program, and the South Florida Water Management District, among other sponsors.

Dover, Kohl & Partners and DPZ were jointly commissioned to run the public design sessions and create the plan. Participants from the community included property owners, neighbors, business people, developers, elected officials, county planning staff, and others. The chamber recruited members from the full range of stakeholders for a Steering Committee charged with oversight of the project.

The Downtown Kendall Charrette was held in June 1998. Over one hundred and fifty individuals joined in. Local media outlets closely monitored the process. Reviews were held each day to discuss the evolving plan, which was presented as a work-in-progress in a town meeting at the close of the charrette. After refinements, the final plan was widely distributed in a tabloid-format booklet, and was then unanimously adopted by the Miami-Dade County Commission. "It's a clear choice," said County Commissioner Katy Sorensen, "to continue haphazard, anywhere-USA, nondescript development, or to create landmarks, atmosphere and charm. Fortunately, the community prefers the latter."

Much work remains to put the plan's ideas into full effect, but serious headway was made during 1999. The chamber reconvened its Steering Committee, armed with fresh funding from the County and other sources, and worked with Dover-Kohl and DPZ to create a brand new Code to govern development in Downtown Kendall. This was the step that made the charrette concepts official and gave the plan the force of law. Because this Code (for the newly established Downtown Kendall Urban Center District) would replace the existing zoning, the ordinance-writing process attracted still more attention, adding to the momentum created by the charrette. Still, there was much controversy among the Committee members over details, and they met over and over for a full year to iron out the conflicts over parking, architecture, open space, height of towers,

and street network.

The final document is an example of the design-oriented, illustrated codes often endorsed by New Urbanists, although this Code is a bit unusual in that it addresses the scale of tall buildings in a metropolitan core. The Code was unanimously adopted by the Miami-Dade County Commission in December 1999. Among other things, the ordinance:

- Requires interconnections between properties, and includes a regulating map showing the network of future streets to be created;
- Requires doors and windows facing streets;
- Regulates height by the number of stories instead of feet;
- Mandates terracing at key levels on tall buildings;
- Reorders the open space policy so that urban squares are created, according to the plan; and
- Requires "liners" of habitable space around garages.

Florida's Leadership Role

"The New Urbanists in Florida have this whole charrette culture, which is much less well developed in other parts of the country, even among like-minded planners," says Peter Katz, author of *The New Urbanism: Toward an Architecture of Community*. The technique is evolving quickly here, and perhaps the prevalent planning model may be shifting from a bureaucratic, verbal-policy mindset to a citizen-driven, visualization-oriented approach. The charrette method is one way to transform the public debate about community design and growth management, moving us away from top-down systems and words and instead toward teamwork and pictures.

The design renaissance of the last decade is frequently compared to the 1920s, when leading practitioners like John Nolen enthusiastically drew ambitious plans for Florida towns, and urged the national audience to study "what Florida can teach and learn." For the present generation of New Urbanists, the big job now is to really get the places built as they are shown in the drawings. If we follow through on the promise of the charrettes, Florida will set a fine example for the nation.