

Urbanism blossoming near Georgia university

A Mercer University initiative, with aid from the Knight Foundation, and a class trip to confer with Richard Florida result in "The Lofts at Mercer Village."

With construction of "The Lofts at Mercer Village," a more urban style of living has arrived at Mercer University in Macon, Georgia.

The \$10 million mixed-use development, in Macon's College Hill Corridor, brings to fruition an idea that was suggested in a Knight Fellows charrette in 2001 and was later advanced by Mercer undergraduates as part of a class on "The Fate of the City."

The development, which hugs the street in traditional urban fashion, opened in August, offering three stories of loft-style apartments on top of 13,750 square feet of commercial space. Half the ground-floor space is occupied by Mercer's bookstore, operated by Barnes & Noble. Three other businesses, two of them food-related, make up the rest of the development.

In "Anchoring 'College Town Cool,'" in the Fall 2011 issue of *The Mercerian* alumni magazine, Jennifer Bucholtz reports that the idea of creating a lively, mixed-use area — to attract Mercer students and people from nearby sections of the city — took years to catch hold, and received crucial help from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Mercer, like many universities near declining neighborhoods, had cut itself off from its troubled surroundings — closing roads and bridges, acquiring some of the area to build a new medical school, and buying up nearby properties, according to Mercer Professor Peter C. Brown and Alex Morrison of the University of Georgia. Brown and Morrison carefully examine Mercer's urban revitalization efforts in "Redevelopment: A Case Study at Mercer University." Their article appeared in the Summer 2009 issue of *CUR Quarterly*, a journal published by the Council on Undergraduate Research.

THE UNIVERSITY REVERSES COURSE

In 1997 the university began to do an about-face, forming the Mercer Center for Community Development. Brown, a philosophy teacher, was appointed the center's director, and in 2001 he became one of the initial group of the University of Miami's Knight Fellows in Community Building. The Knights and others, including Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, dean of architecture at Miami, conducted a charrette in the fall of 2001 that aimed to revive the adjacent, mostly low-income Beall's Hill neighborhood and to improve the university's physical connections to the city.

Although College Hill development was recommended in the Knight charrette, for a while the idea failed to get off the ground, Brown told *New Urban News*. Later, the idea attracted renewed interest when Washington, DC, architect Dhru Thadani — a key member of the 2001 charrette — returned to Macon and highlighted commercial possibilities during a review of the progress being made around Mercer.

Next, in 2006, Brown, who was teaching a senior "capstone" class on "The Fate of the City," interested a group of students in studying the work of Richard Florida, author of *The Rise*



The lofts at Mercer Village



PHOTOS COURTESY OF MERCER UNIVERSITY

of the Creative Class. "The students decided to consult with Richard Florida himself, and he invited them to come up to Washington, DC, to meet with him and his research team at the Greater Washington Initiative," Brown and Morrison recount in their *CUR Quarterly* article. The Knight Foundation paid their way.

Out of this came a growing realization that amenities needed to be developed to encourage students to walk or bike off campus. "These amenities would also give the area a 'college town' vibe that would attract young professionals and their families to the area," Brown and Morrison observe.

The students enlisted an organization called New Town Macon as a champion for their ideas. Eventually they met with the mayor, C. Jack Ellis, who proved receptive. The Knight Foundation continued to help, providing \$5 million in grants — \$2 million to establish a College Hill Alliance and \$3 million to the Community Foundation of Central Georgia for projects to improve the two-square-mile corridor, including Beall's Hill.

Applicants compete for challenge grants to carry out their own ideas, both large and small, on College Hill. Among the results so far have been installation of an agility course; creation of furniture and sculptures for a newly established dog park;

restoration of historic homes inhabited by the elderly and disabled; and the launch of a down-payment assistance program that helps Mercer faculty and staff buy eligible houses in the corridor. Many of the participants now walk to work.

The College Hill Alliance uses its funds to implement a master plan that was drawn up in 2008-2009 with support from another Knight grant. The plan improves and beautifies public spaces, makes a business case for private investment in College Hill, and upgrades the area's transportation choices — building bike routes to provide better connections to downtown, for example.

Gradually, retailers in food, coffee, and other specialties increased their presence near Mercer. Macon-based Sierra Development, working with the

university, decided to construct the Lofts project, the first phase of which is now filled. Its apartments house 117 students.

"The master plan is what spurred me to be part of this project," says Sierra Development president Jim Daws. "It certainly provided inspiration. The first phase mirrors almost exactly what they had" in the plan. No financial incentives were provided to the developer. "It's all private investment," Daws says.

Construction began this September on a second phase, containing housing for up to 87 students and space for three retailers. As part of the project, three houses that served as rental properties or university offices are being moved a few blocks to the Beall's Hill neighborhood, where they will be restored by the Historic Macon Foundation and sold as

single-family homes.

Brown expresses optimism about the direction in which events are going. In addition to Mercer Village, he says, "money is finally coming into Tatnall Square Park" — a public space that was the subject of redesign in the charrette a decade ago. The park is seen as "the hinge for the entire area, connecting Mercer to Beall's Hill, and to downtown," he emphasizes.

Of Beall's Hill, Daws says, "It's doing great." He points out that a house soon to be built in Beall's Hill recently was sold — from plans — for more than \$100 a square foot. "The neighborhood is probably doing better than anything else in Macon," he says. Brown agrees, observing: "The Beall's Hill comps are now setting the bar for the whole city."

Persistence pays. ♦

BOOK REVIEWS

The Plazas of New Mexico

Edited by Chris Wilson and Stefanos Polyzoides

Photographs by Miguel Gandert

Trinity University Press, 2011, 338 pp. \$45 hardcover

REVIEW BY KEN HUGHES

"How was your day?" I ask my visitor, who splits his time between Maui and Shanghai. "It was amazing," he says. "I never experienced any place like the Santa Fe plaza, and yet I felt at home. Are there any other places like it in New Mexico?"

"Sure," I say, "dozens of them. On your way to Arizona, eat lunch in Albuquerque's Old Town Plaza, then drive an hour west to Acoma Pueblo's 1,000-year old mesa, where all the homes are sited around the plaza 5 degrees east of due south, perfect for passive solar gain. Just before you leave the Land of Enchantment, stop in Gallup to check out the brand-new courthouse square, featuring a round space in its middle ideal for dancing and selling crafts."

Such is life in New Mexico, home to dozens of compelling public spaces. *The Plazas of New Mexico*, a book ten years in creation on a topic evolving for ten centuries, unearths why plazas work so well you feel at home from the first time you arrive, and why you have such a keen sense of longing when you leave. The book will help share why we Santafesinos adore our plaza and appreciate the dozens of other plazas, Native American gathering places, and courthouse squares adorning the Land of Enchantment.

Beyond the brilliant insights by co-editors Chris Wilson and Stefanos Polyzoides, three writers who grew up steeped in the plaza milieu contribute cogent essays. The Native American sense of space, says Santa Clara Pueblan Rina Swentzell, is manifest in a larger natural context: "People prayed, danced, talked, slept, and ate with the outdoor community space. All the while, the swirling energies contained in that space re-

PHOTO BY MIGUEL GANDERT, THE PLAZAS OF NEW MEXICO



Toas teenagers at the Fiesta, 1996

mind them to be respectful of the clouds, mountains, plants, and other animals.... Pueblo community space encourages humans to see themselves as one with the forces in the sky and earth and discourage egoism."

Beyond the famous plazas in Taos, Santa Fe, and Albuquerque, Don Ussner points out that many plazas in rural communities lack a government building, are void of shops, and mute their celebrations. The economic functionality of these plazas slowly was lost to other places, which caused the plazas to physically decline or disappear. Long-time residents, to gain livelihood, moved to cities, only to return home on weekends.

Some of the deepest conflicts form around differences in how locals want to deal with change. Conflict has paralyzed action, weakening plaza-inspired villages in the face of accelerating change. "Once plaza people expressed their pride by maintaining a beautifully intact plaza," Ussner says. "Now some show their pride by resisting all efforts to maintain or restore it, thereby ensuring that it crumbles into dust....If the plaza is to survive people will have to work hard and reach across a deep divide to strike a balance between conflicting viewpoints, even as more plaza homes slowly slip toward ruin."

The Taos Plaza and its fiesta, notes Sylvia Rodriguez, have