

## TOWARD A CIVIC PLACE TO HONOR THE BASILICA OF ST. LAWRENCE

The Asheville Design Center (ADC) – an independent, nonprofit collaboration of design, planning, engineering and community health professionals serving WNC since 2007 – offers these placemaking recommendations for a civic place at Haywood and Page, a public space that will knit together disconnected uses, discontinuous pedestrian activity, confusing traffic alignments as well as proposed redevelopment on vacant, City-owned land near 68-76 Haywood Street at a pivotal point in downtown Asheville. This civic place will occupy a site between proposed development on City-owned land and the Basilica of St. Lawrence. It could also leverage additional development on approximately two acres of contiguous land. These vital downtown economic development opportunities are surrounded by an array of existing facilities and attractions that draw residents and visitors alike. Major uses surrounding the private development and proposed civic place include:

- The magnificent 1905 Basilica of St. Lawrence (individually listed in the National Register, a contributing structure in downtown’s National Register district as well a proposed National Historic Landmark – the highest designation for only the most important American places);
- The ca. 1926 Grove Arcade, a brilliantly restored mixed-use marketplace that is listed individually in the National Register and is also a locally-designated historic structure;
- Thomas Wolfe Auditorium, a major performance and concert site in downtown Asheville;
- Battery Park Apartments (ca. 1922, individually listed in the National Register) and Vanderbilt Apartments, both offering affordable housing for seniors and both listed as contributing structures in downtown’s National Register district;
- Contemporary nearby structures including 1) U.S. Cellular Center (Asheville’s premier publicly-owned entertainment, sports and convention venue) and 2) the main branch of Pack Memorial Library (a contributing building in downtown’s National Register district);
- A proposed public and private development of undetermined use that is the subject of a City-issued Request for Proposals.

This civic place presents a significant opportunity to add new vibrancy to an uninviting, underutilized area while also highlighting the Basilica’s historic importance; it could also put parts of the entire site back on a tax-yielding basis. Together with other existing and proposed near-by uses, there is opportunity to influence a series of redevelopment and rehabilitation projects that will enhance downtown’s economic well-being, liveliness and sustainability while also fulfilling the goals of the 2009 Downtown Master Plan.

The following seven topics detail ADC’s preliminary placemaking recommendations. Within each, ADC has further delineated the recommendations as either **ESSENTIAL** (of the very highest importance) or **DESIRABLE** (very important, but not necessarily crucial).

The Asheville Design Center welcomes your comments, ideas and improvements.

### A. THE CIVIC PLACE

The Basilica of St. Lawrence must be listed as a National Historic Landmark, the 39<sup>th</sup> NHL in North Carolina. If listed, the Basilica would join Asheville’s two other National Historic Landmarks, the extraordinary Biltmore Estate and the historic Thomas Wolfe House on North Market – just three blocks east of the Basilica. An appropriate space in front of the Basilica should be developed to honor the Basilica’s world-class architecture and one of Rafael Guastavino’s most noteworthy architectural achievements. Guastavino’s final resting place is in the Basilica.

## **ESSENTIAL**

- Develop an open-to-all and inviting civic gathering space in front of the Basilica. Add an important new destination in downtown Asheville. Provide ample room for sitting, looking, listening and people-watching.
- Safeguard the Basilica’s structural integrity in all necessary demolition and new construction.
- Activate a lively pedestrian-oriented retail experience from the Grove Arcade to Haywood Street. Specifically, re-knit the dead zone starting on Page (immediately north of the Captain’s Bookshelf on the east sidewalk and Santé on the west sidewalk) with the dead zone starting on Haywood (immediately north of Vanderbilt apartments and Roman’s on the east sidewalk and Gentlemen’s Gallery on the west sidewalk). This will result in a continuous, pedestrian-oriented and vibrant loop from the Grove Arcade to Haywood Street – a logical step to connect two already-active economic generators.
- Use paving to cleverly identify this civic place as one unified, pedestrian-oriented space, including complementary paving patterns on the vehicular rights-of-way. Wall Street is an excellent home-grown precedent, using different paving materials, patterns, colors and other horizontal textures as well as vertical elements such as bollards, bicycle racks, ornamental fencing and tree grates, street lights, public art, historic markers, trees, flowers and flower boxes, benches, tables, awnings, water features and colors to delineate specific, intimately-scaled areas. This new civic place must be a cohesive “whole” while also offering intimate “rooms” within.
- Skillfully use the 15 foot grade change between Page Avenue and Haywood Street. Avoid large, undefined open spaces without focal points.
- Provide a welcoming, safe “front yard” for overflow audiences attending activities at U.S. Cellular Center and Thomas Wolfe Auditorium as well as for all downtown residents.
- At the same time, recognize that over 300 seniors live in housing directly adjacent east and west of this place. In any redesign effort, we must understand this downtown population and their special needs.

## **B. VIEWSHEDS**

Downtown Asheville’s topography and street alignments create dramatic and surprising vistas for both pedestrians and motorists, e.g., 1) Patton Avenue’s view west to the mountains and east to Vance Monument, 2) College Street as it emerges from Beaucatcher Mountain and again as it enters Pritchard Park, 3) Wall Street as it rounds the corner onto Battery Park Avenue, 4) Pack Square as it enters Roger McGuire Green. There are opportunities to create other important vistas and a sense of arrival – gateways, really – into the civic place, focusing on the Basilica.

## **ESSENTIAL**

- Accentuate direct sight lines between the Grove Arcade and the Basilica as well as sight lines from Haywood Street to the Basilica.
- Create a focal point from which to view the Basilica from within this civic place on the Basilica’s principal north-south axis.
- Promote views into and out of this civic place and other near-by sites to highlight downtown Asheville’s architectural heritage as well as its mountain setting.
- Emphasize pedestrian and vehicular views of the Basilica and the civic place emerging from Flint Street and Hiwassee.

### **C. TOPOGRAPHY**

There is an elevation change of approximately 15 feet across the proposed civic place, from high points at the northeast corner of the Grove Arcade to low points on Haywood Street near Pack Memorial Library. The Basilica’s front doors are about midway between these high and low points, as should be the main entry into any proposed development on City-owned land to the south of the Basilica.

- Position the grade level of the majority of this civic place at the same grade level of the Basilica’s main entry and that of the proposed development. (Instructive examples are Piazza del Campo in Siena, Piazza Petrarca in Padua and Piazza del Duomo in Ravenna – each of which cleverly uses elevation change to create several pedestrian zones or separate outdoor rooms while still calling attention to a “main” place.)
- Use topography to define and link to possible forecourts for future redevelopment sites on the properties to the west of this civic place – especially for possible development on Basilica-owned property.
- Leverage the change of topography via small-scale stairs, ramps, walls, viewing platforms, seating areas, water features, landscaping, etc. Avoid monumental, solitary staircases and blank walls masking abrupt elevation changes.

Emphasize ADA compliance. This civic place will be the “front yard” for several hundred seniors living in the 13-story Battery Park Apartments and the nine-story Vanderbilt Apartments as well as all other downtown residents.

### **D. STREETS, VEHICLES & PARKING**

Street alignments and vehicular flow near the Basilica are an unfortunate blend of clumsy turns and awkward intersections. Irregular parking lots now fill most vacant spaces. These contribute to regrettable and unsafe environments for pedestrians (and a jarringly ugly urban streetscape in one of the potentially most important places in downtown Asheville).

There are at least six past plans for reuse of the immediate area – some of which also treat possible redevelopments on near-by properties not owned by the City. Each offers important lessons. A few relatively modest changes to traffic flow and parking could enhance the size and value of near-by sites.

#### **ESSENTIAL**

- Reconfigure Page Avenue north of Battery Park. Add Page’s right-of-way to the proposed civic place in front of the Basilica as a pedestrians-only zone. This facilitates extending pedestrian-oriented retail along Page Avenue from the Grove Arcade to Haywood Street. This also eliminates a confusing vehicular intersection at Haywood, Flint and Page (which has no

“walk/don’t walk” signals for pedestrians). Such treatment may allow existing service bays at Battery Park Apartments to remain open.

- Realign Flint Street slightly to the southwest to create a direct “T” intersection with Haywood Street. This also creates a much more pedestrian-friendly forecourt for U.S. Cellular Center, the Thomas Wolfe Auditorium and Pack Memorial Library.

## **DESIRABLE**

- Consider an indented staging area in front of the U.S. Cellular Center for public transit, school and charter busses and equipment drop-off.
- Consider extending Battle Square from Page Avenue eastward to a “T” intersection with Haywood Street, aligned with Vanderbilt Place. This may enable parking garage access from a newly extended Battle Square, not Haywood Street. This may also suggest a major entry point for any new development at the corner of Page and the new Battle Square. Battle Square extended might be treated as a small-scale, pedestrian-oriented street akin to Wall Street. (In turn, Battery Alley might evolve into another type of Wall Street.)
- Consider periodic closure of Haywood Street during selected events at U.S. Cellular Center and Thomas Wolfe Auditorium. A new, very short vehicular detour via Page Avenue and Battle Square provides more room and greater safety for pedestrian activities spreading across the entirety of this civic place.
- Prohibit views of any above-grade parking from this civic place (especially from the Basilica), Haywood Street and Page Avenue. Above-grade parking could be visible from the new Battle Square. Auto entries to and exits from required parking should be clearly marked for easy access.

## **E. MARKET FACTORS & LAND USES**

In the absence of detailed market analyses or projections – and given the sites’ locations in downtown Asheville and proximity to proven destinations – the Asheville Design Center has resolved that a variety of land uses are feasible, suitable and desirable, including 1) street-level, pedestrian-oriented retail, 2) a cultural/arts facility, 3) office space, 4) residential uses (with a robust mix of “affordable” housing units) and/or 5) a thoughtful and economically sound mix of all of the above. ADC’s focus has been on the location, impact and scale of this civic place, not on any particular use or set of uses on and near these sites.

## **F. FORM, HEIGHT & DESIGN**

City Council has (in the recent past) mandated that development on this City-owned land be at least 170 feet horizontally south of the Basilica, no higher than 90 feet on Haywood Street and no more than 75 feet on Page Avenue. Parcels in this area fall into the “intermediate height zone (145 feet),” perhaps a twelve story building. Accordingly, ADC calls for careful attention to the following topics.

## **ESSENTIAL**

- Set an extremely high design standard for new and infill development in downtown’s National Register of Historic Places district. Incorporate appropriate massing, materials, textures, colors and fenestration that respect the Basilica and the Grove Arcade.
- Maintain an overall building height (including the remainder of the top floor, roof top mechanical areas and appropriate building cap) so that this civic place will not be in shadow for more than three hours during the winter (southern) solstice.

**DESIRABLE**

- Create a building height “valley” on the south side of this civic place, midway between the nine-story Vanderbilt Apartments (to the east) and the 13-story Battery Park Apartments (to the west).
- Consider building elements along the west side of this civic place to help define and contain the space as a common, integrated forecourt for the Basilica, U.S. Cellular Center, Thomas Wolfe Auditorium and any proposed development on City-owned land. This also might help in re-connecting active retail uses from the Grove Arcade to Haywood Street.

**G. LAND SWAPS**

There are several possible and very desirable land swaps that make good common sense toward achieving all of the above. These land swaps require that all parties enter into and actively participate in good-faith partnership efforts to produce the best results both for individual sites and property ownerships as well as downtown Asheville as a whole, framed by active leadership by the City, the Downtown Commission, Asheville Downtown Association, Asheville Parks & Recreation and Buncombe County Parks & Recreation.

**DESIRABLE**

- Negotiate a land swap between the Diocese and Battery Park Apartments on 1) the parking lot on the north side of Haywood Street (adjacent to the Basilica’s parking lot) in exchange for appropriate Diocese-owned land immediately to the north of Battery Park Apartments – to accommodate about 22 parking spaces, service and delivery access – and 2) the triangle of land jutting eastward into the current alignment of Page Avenue in exchange for additional Diocese-owned land directly behind and adjacent to Battery Park Apartments.
- Facilitate negotiations between the Diocese and Palas/Paly LLC concerning purchase of land to the west of the Basilica, all the way to O’Henry Avenue (and perhaps in exchange for Basilica-owned property north of Battery Park Apartments). This will increase the Basilica’s on-site parking capacity while also eliminating the need for parishioners and Battery Park residents to cross Haywood Street. This land is currently listed as "for sale."
- Consider additional negotiations between the City and AT&T for access to some of AT&T’s holdings to facilitate all of the above.

**COSTS, TIMELINES & DELIVERABLES**

ADC estimates that 1) reconstituting the original "shuttle diplomacy" used to achieve near unanimous agreement among all major stakeholders, 2) shepherding a series of interim, exploratory uses of the site for public purposes, notably at the edges, but also, if feasible, further into the site and 3) producing an interactive computer-driven "model" of the consensus design considerations will cost approximately \$25,000. We further estimate that this work could be completed within nine months of authorization to proceed.

### **IN CLOSING...**

We hope that these recommendations will spark discussions among all interested parties.

ADC stands ready to assist in turning these design considerations into official parts of any final development agreements issued by the City of Asheville toward redevelopment of all parcels within this area. In the process, we strongly encourage the City to engage in facilitated, public dialogue about all proposed redevelopments. We suggest that the resulting, consensus design recommendations be incorporated in the final development agreements between the City and any developers/rehabilitators.

Once the City has reviewed and approved written and graphic design recommendations, any developer should prepare conceptual designs for review by the Asheville Downtown Commission and the Asheville Downtown Association at the 1) conceptual, 2) preliminary and 3) final design stages. ADC also recommends open dialogue on decisions toward use, maintenance and programming of this very important civic place. Given the almost-unique physical, economic and historic significance of what may occur on the sites surrounding the Basilica, design principles must be clearly defined and made mandatory. These should become covenants in any resulting deed transfers.

Please know of ADC's willingness to meet with any private developer, City of Asheville representatives, Basilica of St. Lawrence parishioners or any other stakeholders to discuss these placemaking ideas. We are extremely proud of our diverse accomplishments. Over our first eight years, ADC has donated over 25,000 hours of professional time, the equivalent of more than \$1.75 million in community design assistance. ADC's work seeks to strengthen downtown Asheville. Development of this civic place – as well as other sites adjacent to the Basilica – presents much too big an opportunity for any of us to ignore.

Thank you for your consideration.

## STAKEHOLDER MEETINGS

Asheville Design Center volunteers Tom Gallaher, David Johnson, Chris Joyell and Alan McGuinn have met with the following stakeholders beginning in April, 2012 and continuing into October, 2015.

- Three sessions with initial stakeholders Lou Bisette, Lauren Bradley, John Ellis, John McKibbon, Matt Mores, Sam Powers, Ken Putnam, John Spake, Wes Townsend and Herman Turk
- Marc Hunt – City Council
- Father Thomas, John Ellis, Bud Hansbury and Matt Mores – Basilica
- John McKibbon – Developer
- John Ellis and Bud Hansbury – Basilica
- Sam Powers – COA Economic Development
- Ken Putnam – COA Traffic and Engineering
- Marc Hunt – City Council
- Jan Davis – City Council
- Cecil Bothwell – City Council
- Terry Bellamy and Esther Mannheimer – City Council
- Gordon Smith – City Council
- Chris Pelly – City Council
- Jessica Bernstein and Alan Glines – COA Planning and Development
- Kit Cramer – Chamber of Commerce
- Cathy Ball – COA Public Works (now Assistant City Manager)
- Sam Powers – COA Economic Development
- Judy Daniel – COA Planning and Development
- Marc Hunt and Esther Manheimer – City Council
- John McKibbon – Developer
- John Ellis and Bud Hansbury – Basilica
- John Ellis, Bud Hansbury and John McKibbon – Basilica and Developer
- Marc Hunt – City Council
- Stephanie Brown – CVB
- Jack Thompson – Preservation Society of Asheville and Buncombe County
- Ruth Summers – Grove Arcade
- Eric Fraga, Tony Fraga and Wes Reinhart – FIRC
- Wanda Green – Buncombe County Manager
- Jack Thompson – Preservation Society for Asheville and Buncombe County
- Roderick Simmons – COA Parks and Recreation
- Mike Fryar – Buncombe County Commission
- Ken Putnam – COA Traffic and Engineering
- Bruce Hazzard and Michael McDonough – Asheville Downtown Commission
- Pat Whelan and Jeff Storrow – PIP and U.S. Cellular Center/Civic Center Commission
- Tony Fraga, Eric Fraga and Wes Reinhardt – FIRC
- Byron Greiner and Adrian Vassallo – Asheville Downtown Association
- Matt Sprouse – Asheville Downtown Commission
- Todd Puhl – Battery Park and Vanderbilt Apartments
- Joel Storrow – U.S. Cellular Center/Civic Center Commission
- Unscheduled Updates with former City Council members, current Council members and candidates