



Live Local. Live Small.

A new approach to city planning

by: *Gwenyfar Rohler*



I have talked a lot about the power of thoughtful planning and design for not only urban renewal but sustainability, and the impact that these can have on a local economy. Toby Keeton, a local designer who works with the firm Kersting Architecture, has had his design “Span the Strip” short listed in “Strip Appeal; Reinventing the Strip Mall” charette. The design will

be included in a forthcoming book by Curb Magazine and the University of Alberta’s City Region Studies Center. However, local folks can see the design currently on display at Projekte Gallery and Lounge’s (523 S 3rd Street) “Urban Transformation” exhibition, hanging through July 31st.

Toby was kind enough to open up to encore about his thoughts and design process and how they interplay with our local economy.

encore (e): Were you working on this design before the competition? How long did it take to complete, and what inspired you?

Toby Keeton (TK): The disconnect between the way our city currently exists and the way it seems that growth should occur in the future is impossible to ignore as a designer, if you are paying attention. It’s something that we talk about in our office a lot. Sprawl is becoming an obsolete planning mechanism, and smart growth will be inward growth in the future.

There are a lot of forces which are making this so; we are driving less and more people are choosing to live in denser, walkable environments. Our city is entirely dependent on the automobile, which is a direct response to how cities grew in the past. Thus, you see lots of structures which plug right into this infrastructure; the

best example of which is the strip mall.

I had been sketching and thinking about ways to cross over the major vehicular corridors in Wilmington (Market Street, 17th, College), but it had never really occurred me that our strip malls—perhaps obsolete in their current state in a walkable city—might be able to be reclaimed in a new walkability strategy. Then, I saw the call for entries for the Strip Appeal design competition. I sort of snapped my fingers and said, “Duh—that makes sense.” I did some driving around and some research for a few days, then knocked out the drawings over a long weekend—the whole thing took about a week of afternoons.

e: How did you select the site, and did you have any others in mind? How do the ideas in your design translate to other sites in our area?

TK: This was a competition for what I would call “paper architecture.” This kind of thing is mostly a forum for designers to indulge our tendency toward utopian fantasy. We are given all these tools for design, and I think a lot of us find it hard to resist an impulse to just flesh out how we think things “should be” from time to time. So, there is definitely an element of what the Italians call “capriccio” (a sort of semi-realistic architectural fantasy). The actual site I chose was what I thought was the most general, blank canvas to work on: two strip malls that happen across from each other near the hospital on 17th Street. This was a national competition, so I wanted there to be all the elements of your most typical and recognizable underutilized strip mall—a giant, mostly empty parking lot and a very straightforward, common structure. I also wanted to show how “spanning the strip” could really reconnect divided neighborhoods. In that area there is a mix of professional, commercial and residential uses on either side of 17th Street. For example, someone living across 17th could now comfortably and safely walk to work at the hospital or one of the surrounding professional centers.

After I submitted this proposal, I started to learn more about “food deserts” here in Wilmington. The USDA has a great website where they map this phenomenon, defined by a certain number of folks who live under or near the poverty line who cannot depend on walking or transit to access reasonable food (grocery stores, etc) close by. Sure enough, when I laid a map of the USDA designated food deserts over a road map of the city, the boundaries of these areas are major vehicular corridors with no controlled crossings.

I think that is where this sort of proposal has major value in the

future. It works on an additional level because most strip malls are in areas that have been left behind by sprawl, with the more affluent population moving to the outskirts and suburbs. So, the people who are left behind are those that can least afford to operate an automobile, but are also the ones who are left with the most vehicular- dependent environment.

I live just west of Market near New Centre Drive. I can walk to Food Lion on Market and Kerr, but most days I don't really feel like cheating death by darting across Market. I can't imagine making that trip with small children or a stroller—but you see that every once in a while. I think this area might be the most ripe for this kind of thing, but there might be some personal bias there. College has potential as well. Just think how nice it would be to allow students to properly access both sides of College on foot or bike.

e: Are there any plans to implement the design; what would need to happen to make that possible?

TK: This is totally speculative at this point. I haven't spoken to any developers or city officials. It's really just what spilled out of my head and on paper. I honestly didn't really know if anyone around here would ever even see it. The main point is just to get people thinking about the way their city is constructed and what the future might hold. I find that if you hit people with the extreme end-result of a line of thinking, they pick up on small parts along the way and hold on to them. Someone might look at this and say, "This seems pretty extreme, but why is it we have almost two miles of road on Market Street without a controlled crossing?"

e: How does your design, which puts a heavy emphasis on re-developing pedestrian connections, work with the East Coast Greenway Initiative?

TK: Trails are great, and I definitely support what the Greenway is trying to do; however, what I hope I am getting people to think about is true, functional walkability. I find that because we have been so dependent on automobiles for such a long time, we see walking or riding a bike as totally outside our everyday experience in a lot of places. A lot of times the conversation frames walking or bike-riding as recreational experiences, which they definitely can be. There is real value in implementing those types of projects. I want to create space where being able to walk to do most things is a given and fits seamlessly into the life of a citizen.

Trailways tend to happen where it is pretty and there is already lots of green space. What I want to see is an effort to re-envision the concrete jungle, in places we now see as the dominion of the

car. This kind of network can connect to something like the East Coast Greenway to create a wide, connected network of walkable environments.

e: What would be the long term economic benefits of implementing this plan?

TK: I think concentrating on smart growth—dense, well-planned, mixed-use neighborhoods that are walkable and bikable—is good for everyone. It shrinks the area that the city has to maintain and invest in, and the economy of having more people use less area and amenities kick in. It allows for more diverse, economically viable neighborhoods and is more equitable to people of varying economic classes.

It makes it easier for folks to walk to the corner and put their money in the pocket of a local business owner, who will then reinvest in the community, rather than getting in a car and driving to the chain on the outskirts of town. This particular strategy also allows municipalities to kill more birds with fewer stones by incorporating green space, storm-water management, and pedestrian and transit infrastructure all in one place. A park is nice. A park you can walk through to pick up a dozen eggs is even better.

e: You are working toward your architecture license; will this help the process?

TK: Not at all—becoming licensed as an architect is a bureaucratic endeavor where you jump through a lot of hoops and sit and take some tests. The license is mostly a mechanism to limit competition, really. They don't really put much of an emphasis on spending time, engaging with the community.

To be honest, working on things like this sort of get in the way of the whole process. One of the major reasons I decided to enter this field is the fact that I don't really like what it has become. Architects tend to be really cloistered away from the community. We use laws and lobbyists to make sure that we are always involved in the building process, instead of relying on our talents as designers and being real stakeholders in the health of our communities. That's part of the reason why you don't see a lot of really good community-centered design, I think. I am not saying that architects shouldn't be qualified and competent, I just think that we need to rethink what our place is in the community. Good design is what is going to solve the problems we face now, and I think that the only way to get there is to listen to your neighbors, roll up your sleeves, and get in there.