

What If?

DESIGNING OUR TOWN TOGETHER

5



A POET'S ALLEY? PHASE THREE OF THE DOWNTOWN RE-DEVELOPMENT AREA

Much of it is public land.
Q: Can the neighbors work together with the community to create a wonderful public place here?

*Table Leader:
Kevin Wilkes AIA*

HAVING YOUR SAY ON OCTOBER 17, 2009...



HERE IS WHAT YOU SAID:

So our table looked at a block surrounded by Witherspoon, Spring, Tulane and Nassau Streets. What we looked at was the residual after-spaces that were created by the new construction of Phase Two. We looked at these mid-block spaces we colored green. The very core of our suggestion is to further withdraw asphalt, pavement and macadam, cars, bumpers, headlights and windshields...all parking, from the pedestrian environment. We want to extend the pedestrian environment of our peripheral block edges to the mid-block section in the Central Business District. You are most familiar with this concept as Chambers Walk that carries through Palmer Square and down past the Alchemist & Barrister and lands right here on Witherspoon St. So, imagine if that concept continued between Community Liquors and McLoughlin's and continued through the mid-block, landing over on Tulane St. There are a number of things 'in clay' on this block at this point that make us believe there are opportunities that have arrived to pull this off. What we want to create is open, public space. Open space that exists both on Borough-owned property and also exist on some privately-owned parcels in this mid-block, especially parcels on the southern edge of the block. We want to make this space pedestrian-friendly. We want to create a network of pedestrian alleys and linkages that carry through the block, not only east-west but also north-south. We want to create a park-like space that activates, brings energy and people...people who are walking around and looking in windows as they come into the middle of the block.

If you think about how downtown can expand...We can't push downtown to the east. You can't run over Madison St. and Park Place. You can't push to the north. You can't run over the Cemetery or Witherspoon-Jackson. You can't push to the west. You can't run through Greenholm. And we have a big impediment to the south called Nassau Hall. Our boundaries are set. Where can we go? Well, where can we go? We have all said "We can go up!". As you go up, it is less accessible to the public realm. Floors at the third, fourth and fifth level are not appropriate public spaces. They are even hard to rent as offices. They are ideal for residential. So this is a strategy... to go up gives us residential space in the downtown. But we need to find more space for our visitors, for ourselves... for pedestrians...and for bicyclists to walk through, as someone said at our table. Our merchants need opportunities to expand and improve their stores. This idea will give us that opportunity. What we could allow to happen on the back of the Record Exchange, on the back of Labyrinth Books & Landau's, on the backs and on the edges of Starbucks and McLoughlin's [although there some parking issues]. We would allow those buildings to create a second public entrance. It would be opposite the street entrance and allow customers to walk through the stores, allowing merchants to create either a secondary or ancillary retail spaces. Someone mentioned a shoe shop. This poor gentleman here was not able to survive having to pay the on street rent here on Tulane. If he had had a mid-block space that was appropriately-priced, he might have been able to survive 150 ft back off the beaten path. Not all shops have to be on the 'golden mile' of Nassau St. We want to create a magnet space. There is a building in place where this could happen. It is 40 ft square. Its owner would like to renovate it but he can't because he is penned in by Boro-owned property on all sides. He would like to open an ice cream café. He is the owner of Halo Pub. What he would like to do is to bring some of the Halo Farm experience he has going on down in Trenton in addition to the ice cream. He'd like to put that on the ground floor of this building. He like to open up the sides to public space but right now it is truck and garbage alley ways. The Redevelopment Phase Two has plans to create a landscaped courtyard that is mostly brick pavers. It is focused towards the building. It is focused towards the potential of this public space. Our recommendation is that we carry this through and refocus the landscape design to relate to the new mid-block public space.

We imagine that this space carries an Art & Literature theme. My professional colleague, Peter Soderman, here, has spent the larger part of the last 10 years trying to bring landscape beauty to Downtown Princeton. He has done a great job. But it has always been EVANESCENT! Not as gardens. Gardens come and go easily. But is sad when we see them bull-dozed for condominiums. We'd like to find a more permanent venue for people. The idea that Peter has had is a Poet's Alley: a themed, auditory experience as you walk down Nassau St down that alley. You'd arrive at the end having experienced 75 ft of auditory feedback in a landscaped environment. We want to encourage this type of content for the 4 alleys that will enter into the space.

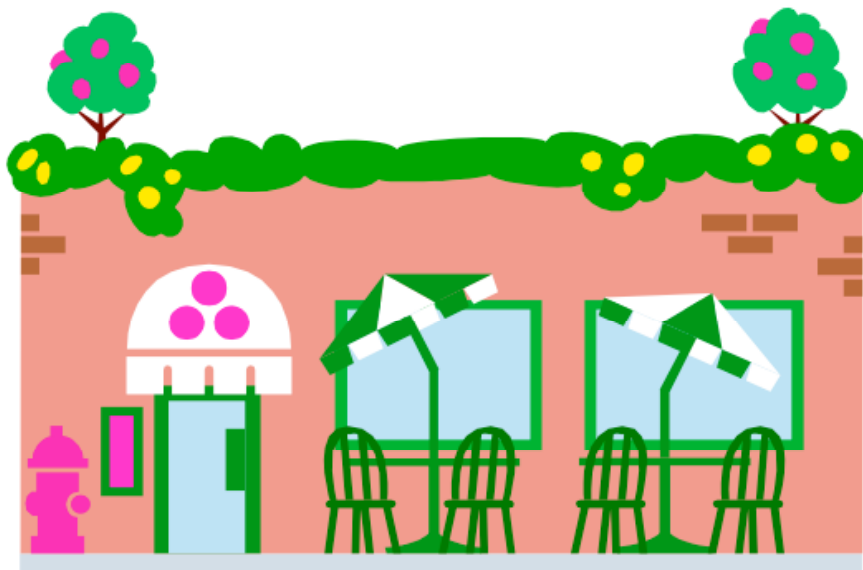
We need to have an early-morning capability for service truck circulation to go through the block. We need centralized trash collection& dumpsters for the entire block. We believe that this shed here, used for parking spaces...and these are privately-owned spaces...We would have to negotiate a strategy or solution to remove them...There are about 20-odd spaces still sitting there. But the amount of space given over for the low gain of parking yield, given that we have a large garage half-a-block away seems less defensible today. So, if we can negotiate a strategy through that, this shed location could be an ideal location for a farmers market. It would bring additional pedestrian activity to this landscaped space here.

That's it. Down the road, we believe that this could be implemented in stages so that we could do, maybe next year, the little piece of the alley next to Starbucks. And, maybe we could convince the developer of Phase 2 to redesign that public space in anticipation of this mid-block delight. Additional spaces could be brought into the block over the next couple of years. If this were all very successful, a member of our table suggested that we could build a subterranean, recessed garden with additional space. Some people suggested rooftops being used as public space. The idea is really to take that mid-block privatized car space and put it into attractive public space that will allow for the opening of small-scale shops, café, retail, bookstore access for the center of the block.

SO, WHAT IF THIS...



BECAME THIS?



NEXT STEPS. HOW MIGHT THIS HAPPEN?

*BY WORKING TOGETHER IN PARTNERSHIP...
GOVERNMENTS, BUSINESSES, ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS AND
OTHER NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS CAN MARSHALL THE
ENERGIES AND CAPITAL, PUBLIC AND PRIVATE, NEEDED TO
CREATE THE KIND OF VIBRANT COMMUNITY THAT PRINCETON
RESIDENTS WANT.*

1. Princeton Future invites all concerned to continue meeting in the Princeton Public Library. We think that all property owners in and around this area, or their representatives and tenants, might wish to meet with representatives of the Master Plan Subcommittee of the Regional Planning Board, of Princeton University, of Borough Council, of Township Committee as well as with Princeton Future participants to explore ways "working together" might become possible.
2. Princeton Future, with the support of local architects and fellow citizens, will continue to hold open planning meetings to develop design guidelines for the area.

FOLLOW-UP CONVERSATION, DECEMBER 8, 2010
REPORT ON PLANNING: POET'S PLAZA

Present: Peter Kann; Susan Hockaday; Robert Geddes; Allan Kehrt; Ryan Lilienthal; Raoul Momo; Sheldon Sturges; Michael Farewell Kristin Appelget, and a 'Poet's Alley group' of Kevin Wilkes AIA, Jerry Reilly, Jason Kann, Jerry Ford AIA, Robert Cannon AIA joined the meeting.

Peter asked Kevin to make a presentation about the area between Starbucks, the Reilly Barn and Community Liquors: an area we have been calling Poet's Alley and/or Poet's Plaza. Jason placed a cardboard model on the table. Kevin said "I like the term Poet's Plaza. I like the energy generated by plazas. What I am wondering: Is it possible that it could become some kind of a plaza? The Downtown needs to grow. There are many strategies for improvement. It can't grow horizontally in any direction. But there are places where it might grow vertically. And, if so, maybe we can create a mid-block experience here...and maybe we can get the 40 spaces of parking out of here. There are 4 alleys into the mid-block: "Dohm's Alley"; the Boro-owned roadway in from Witherspoon + a sidewalk jointly owned by Mssrs Bovenizer & Reilly; the newly-created 10 ft walkway in from Spring St. between the newly named 'Spring Street House' and the former Urkens Building; and the walkway between the new market and the Record Exchange, coming in from Tulane St." Peter asked about the parking spaces. Kevin said that the O'Leary Trust has 7 spaces, 3 of which are rented to Lahieres. "The Boro has 10. Stanley Dohm has 12. Princeton University has 10. 110 Nassau, owned by Princeton International Properties, has none. There needs to be some research as to how many of these are tied to 'use approvals'. There has been a laudable trend to get the surface parking spaces out of the downtown."

Peter asked "If you permit a building to expand, the owner has to create new parking spaces, right? Could Boro Council change that requirement in some way?" Kristin said "Either the Boro Council or the Regional Planning Board, or both." Kevin said "My idea is to look at the Spring St Garage. It has space. The roof has zero cars most of the time. We could assign dedicated parking there to release development."

Kevin said that Peter Soderman has formed a group including Perry Cook and Paul Muldoon and others. It has developed the idea of an interactive auditory,

carefully landscaped, walkway coming in from Nassau St through to the mid-block. Through and around acoustic events. A small space. A green slot. Stanley Dohm likes the idea, apparently. The Boro parking lot is part of the Third Phase of the Boro Redevelopment project. Jack Morrison has a 2-yr option to pursue it from the date of completion of Spring St House. [Editor note: We found out at the lunch later that Jack wishes that a garage be put in this space.] Kevin said that we need to provide trash and delivery access. Perhaps 2 large Boro trash sites with rapid pick-ups. Put bollards up at 11 AM. Can we exchange cars for additional development rights? Small stores, 5-6 shops, modest renovated spaces...ongoing civic activity, a farmers market. Peter suggested "An outdoor café?". "Yes", said Kevin, "And a garden and 4 walkways, creating a balance between Palmer Sq and the rest of the town." Allan pointed out that the mid-block has no visibility from Nassau or Witherspoon Streets. "It will need programming. It will get discovered over a long period of time. We should pump up the pedestrian piece of this. It will be a place to see and be seen," he said. Kevin said, "Plus, it will have sun in the afternoon. We will need a management corporation/group of some sort."

Jerry Reilly said "There is a significant grade change between Nassau St and the barn...maybe 6 ft or so. I would like to be part of such a group. I'd like to get something done with the barn building. If the restrictions surrounding the possibility of a Phase 3 structure going up could be removed, that would be great." Jerry Ford mentioned that at one time, there was a proposal for a building on stilts there. Kristin mentioned the requirements for fire services. Ryan asked what was happening in the back of Jack's building? Jerry Ford suggested that Jack doesn't want that square to become a destination.

Kevin asked "What if Labyrinth Books could spill out in the rear of its building out onto the Poet's Plaza? He mentioned the idea of a series of 250 mews-like 'shoppettes'..to make the loop around the back of Nassau St interesting. "It should be a significant area of relaxation," he said. ? Jerry Ford pointed out that there is a perfect alignment with the walkway and the gate onto the historic campus of the University to the northeast front of Nassau Hall. "I want to underline the importance of Dohm Alley. It is a major route onto the Campus. It should become a ceremonial crossing...to a perambulatory thing through the town", he said.

Bob Geddes agreed that 'routes through the town were very important...such as Rush St in Chicago and Greenwich St South in Manhattan which runs parallel to Broadway. It's going to be a natural...the more like a catacombs above ground

the better. But we need a mechanism,” he said and pointed to the PF ad of last November 2008, included in the agenda package. “A partnership, a condominium, a cooperative, an improvement district...it needs to be managed. From a policy point of view, what are the problems that make it difficult to do this? The particular CAN influence the general! The idea, essentially auditory, is brilliant!”

Kevin agreed that an ‘organizing authority’ was needed. “The Boro is not too good at it,” he said. “It has to be a public entity with those property owners working together... those with lots over 5k SF will need parking spaces. It is not now possible because, effectively, we have a moratorium on downtown development. Only the very deepest pockets can slog it out for 18-20 years. This should be an issue of civic growth,” he said.

In reference to PF’s first efforts at regulation reform, Kevin said “On Tuesday night, we will vote for an ordinance change...what I call a ‘stimulus plan’ zoning change.’ Sheldon pointed out the Packet article on this in the agenda package and said that this had been developed over the summer with Kevin, as a member of Boro Council, in joint RPA [Carlos Rodriques] /PF [Sheldon & Jim] /Master Plan Subcommittee [Marvin Reed]/RPB Staff [Lee Solow]/Boro Zoning Staff [Derek Bridger] meetings with the support of the two Mayors.

On this site, Kevin said, the Boro would have to change the land use to give parking. It would have to remove restrictions. PU would have to give up its 12 spaces. Jack needs to approve. We would be asking owners to relocate parking in exchange for additional development. Peter asked “Government would have to take the first steps?” Kevin “Yes.”

Ryan made the comment “Is the parking requirement based on current demand or future use? As part of a design consideration, could some of the parkers continue to park?” Kevin said that Jack is guaranteed 18 spaces for the new building. Ryan said “We could do permits for the top floor of the Boro Garage, right?” Michael suggested that there might be room for a deck under the plaza because of the slope. Kevin suggested that getting it all going in a modest incremental way might be the most realistic....might then convince 3-4 additional people to invest.

Bob Geddes said “It is a hybrid. No reason to make an absolute. People, vehicles, bicycles coexist. Open-ended. Not finite.” Kevin mentioned that they had just rebuilt all of the electrical underground. Peter asked what PF might do to help.

Kevin answered “The organizing entity can be a group that is an outgrowth, an offshoot of the people sitting here right now. I don’t think that the government should be doing this. Once someone negotiates the rough outline of an agreement, then the Boro will act.”

Bob asked “What about the PIP? Is that still in play?” Kevin said “Yes.” Bob went on, “We offer the government encouragement to explore redevelopment areas that already exist, to improve parking...and maybe you’d have to do a third thing: to have an improvement district for that slot.”

Peter summarized: “Princeton Future’s job is to present a vision...at its best.” Bob warned that the danger of mere visualization is that it is just scenery. Kristin called for ‘the coalescing of community leadership...all to be discussed in a public forum.’

Jerry Ford mentioned that the Princeton Coalition had done an ‘economic contour’ map of the downtown many years ago. “There is a lot of one-story garbage behind the front of Nassau St. It is an economic disaster area.” Kristin said “We need a retail consultant. How should it work?”

Raoul suggested that ‘providing a structure is the right way to go....it’s a special improvement district.’ Bob Geddes said “That is right. If the Boro would only pass it! The problem is that the Boro wants full control of it.”

Raoul went on “The SID identifies the geographical area, raises the capital, creates the design guidelines with the neighbors and property owners, and makes it happen. You need a SID because you have lots of property owners.”

Peter said “Kevin has taken the leadership role in trying to get the government to enable change to take place. And you will continue to meet with the property owners, right? We are obviously supportive.” Kevin “We’ll keep working.”

