

The Urban Charrette Adds a Fresh Young Voice in Community Design

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I recently heard the question, “Do we really need another group joining the downtown design conversation?” The Urban Charrette makes the case for having the right voices at the table. Young, talented urban planners and architects add a dimension of expertise and creativity to the conversation that is worth hearing, and currently missing.

The Urban Charrette held the first of three forums last Saturday — called Tampa Small — and participants envisioned the region’s walkability and livability through good design. Measuring by months, the Urban Charrette is a young organization. Co-Directors and meeting organizers, Adam Fritz and Taryn Sabia, both architects and twenty something’s, have taken a serious look at how planning and design can impact the region. The turnout of about 50 people and the content were diverse, emphasizing that the conversation about design should not be limited to a select few, but inclusive of community.

Education of the community holds an economic benefit for everyone. Vikas Mehta, assistant professor at the School of Architecture at the University of South Florida, presented his work on urban design, public spaces and social interaction. Using his study of three cities he demonstrated how layout of sidewalks, joined with local business and the utilization of public spaces, make an engaging community. This engagement leads to businesses that thrive and communities that are livable and walkable. Businesses that attach their storefronts to the sidewalk and engage pedestrians are prosperous. Join enough of them together, add trees and benches and you have the start of community. Prof. Mehta’s study doesn’t insinuate that by having the right ingredients the recipe is easy. In fact there are many variables and no certain outcomes, but having the right elements of design greatly increase chances of development with purpose, and not by happenstance.

We learned from Ralph Bosek and Grant Rimbey that even if a city has good bones, redevelopment is not for the faint of heart. Ralph is the community services director for the City of Temple Terrace and Grant is president of the 4,000 strong Citizens for the Revitalization of Temple Terrace. Their tale of the Temple Terrace redevelopment from the inside out was nothing short of stirring. Starting with a brief history of Temple Terrace and leading into present day, they recounted their story, rife with obstacles that included seemingly insurmountable challenges like voter rejection of financing. After four years, they are still on a mission to build the town center that was originally planned

for the city in 1922. They have held thousands of community meetings, raised funds, pursued grants and left an indelible message: we won't get there without community engagement and strong public private partnerships.

Dr. Marc Yacht provided the final layer, speaking to the importance of health promotion to urban design. He provided another key message: preventable diseases can be impacted by lifestyles in communities that are livable and walkable. Urban sprawl has contributed to the advancement of many of these diseases. There are concerns about safe levels of chemicals, air emissions, asbestos, lead and mercury in our daily environment. These are not merely local issues, but global issues. We must battle obesity, homelessness and address basic health issues like the health of minority populations to have sustainable communities.

This half day forum produced highly competent speakers and information relevant to any citizen in any community. Design of new communities is best taken up in partnership with public and private concerns and inclusive of citizens. It is an imperative for those involved in community development to understand the impact of good design and planning. How refreshing to see young professionals leading the way in delivery of the message. Move over, make room. The Urban Charrette is a new and deserving voice. The next forum, called Tampa Medium, is November 10, at the USF Alumni Center in Tampa. I plan on being there, and you should, too. To learn more visit <http://www.urbancharrette.com/>.