



WILL CHARLESTON GET IT RIGHT?

by ANTHONY M. TUNG

AN AMBITIOUS, HOLISTIC PLAN TO REVITALIZE THE SOUTH CAROLINA CITY
MAY SET A NEW STANDARD IN URBAN REDEVELOPMENT



Set against wharfs once lined with deep-water sailing vessels, historic Charleston has long been among North America's most picturesque cities. It is a built environment of striking aesthetic coherence and refinement that boasts a blend of tropical vernacular American architectural forms and those of Georgian England, profusely green with elegant gardening. Though subject to intermittent hurricanes, an occasional earthquake, as well as the damage wrought by the Civil War and the economic decline that followed, Charleston somehow persevered—frayed and overgrown, handsome yet dilapidated. That was the case, at least, until the latter half of the twentieth century, when the city came under assault in the name of urban renewal.

In the lexicon of modern urban planning, renewal has often been synonymous with fracturing and uglification, particularly in the wake of World War II, when cities across America were cleaved by broad multi-lane highways and massive urban housing projects that leveled whole historic neighborhoods. Projects that fed racial schisms and shattered the character of traditional townscapes with unsightly out-of-scale structures. As did the onslaught of oversized office buildings of ubiquitous architectural banality, while suburban highway shopping strips drained the vitality of downtown commercial areas.

Yet in Charleston, a highway didn't quite cross its center, housing projects were smaller, and areas fractured by modern buildings were relatively contained. In comparison to so much of urban America, the continuity of Charleston's singular milieu seemed less damaged. Somehow, the city refused to surrender its Antebellum soul, escaping the vortex of urban decay that plagued so many cities by embracing environmental historic conservation long before other places recognized the need. Today, Charleston is on the forefront of a positive urban planning consciousness that is spreading across the United States—an authentic process of renewal that is regenerating its civic wholeness and offering a model of how we might build and govern cities well into the future.

To understand Charleston's current revitalization, one must understand the nature of the city itself—its social, political, and architectural culture—a place where urban preservation is a way of life—where shopkeepers, lawyers, teachers, architects, home-owners, politicians, clergy, realtors, and horse-and-carriage drivers argue on palm-shaded street corners whenever some large new construction is proposed to be built amid the conservation district that composes the heart of the town.

The history of Charleston, like that of so much of the South, is tied to the business of slavery. For during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when much of Charleston's beauty was accrued, the city was a commercial hub for the agricultural economy of the Carolinas, enriched through the trade of plantation products produced through slave labor. As a result, it became the fourth-largest urban center in the 13 colonies.

Yet wealth is only part of the story. Early Charlestonians could afford to build well—on the peninsula where the Ashley and Cooper Rivers form a bay that opens to the Atlantic Ocean. That they chose to do so extensively seems to be inherent to the culture of the place. The creation of numerous handsome structures bred the need for talented architects and builders that could meet such a standard. This further elevated the general quality of the built environment, each beautiful edifice further refining communal architectural sensibilities.

From the 1750s onward, the seasonal town mansions of plantation owners began to be designed in a distinctive configuration called the Charleston single-house. Here, the short end of narrow residential structures, abutting the streetwall and situated to the side of building lots, left an open patio space, a piazza, that also fronted on the public walkway. The major long façades of the single-houses, a single-room deep (hence their name) and

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two to three stories high, were graced with wide side verandas oriented to this internal formal courtyard. Decorative fences and gateways screened the piazzas from the sidewalk. As the city grew, more modest versions of the single-house were built by small business owners, immigrants, and the working poor. In such neighborhoods, one saw the narrow end of buildings—Adamesque, Greek Revival, Federal, Italianate, and stately Antebellum in style—and intermittent tropical gardens—lush deep emerald, alternating up and down either side of the public way—a uniquely Charlestonian street rhythm.

African-American life was inexorably intertwined with this architectural culture, for it often was slaves that constructed the landmarks. For centuries, a large proportion of black Americans worked as domestic servants and lived in the outbuildings of wealthy homes or in their secondary spaces. Even before the Emancipation Proclamation, a significant number of freed black tradesmen and private entrepreneurs resided in vernacular variations of the single house. After the practice of slavery ended, African-American churches, schools, workshops, stores, and houses were built in conjunction with a thriving black community—comprising 55 percent of the city's population in 1880. Today, few townscapes in the United States record so thoroughly in physical form the spiritual, economic, and social journey up to freedom.

During the recession after World War I, the city struggled to retain its fading historic beauty as various decrepit structures were abandoned and leveled, while other old buildings were stripped of their hand-crafted architectural components, which were shipped to museums or sold to adorn out-of-town historic homes. Local residents were alarmed, thus forming the Society for the Preservation of Old Dwellings, now known as the Preservation Society of Charleston. In 1931, a distinctive preservation ordinance was promulgated, the first historic district designation in the United States: a zoning provision requiring public oversight by a Board of Architectural Review within the city's earliest area of residential buildings, henceforth called the "Old and Historic District."

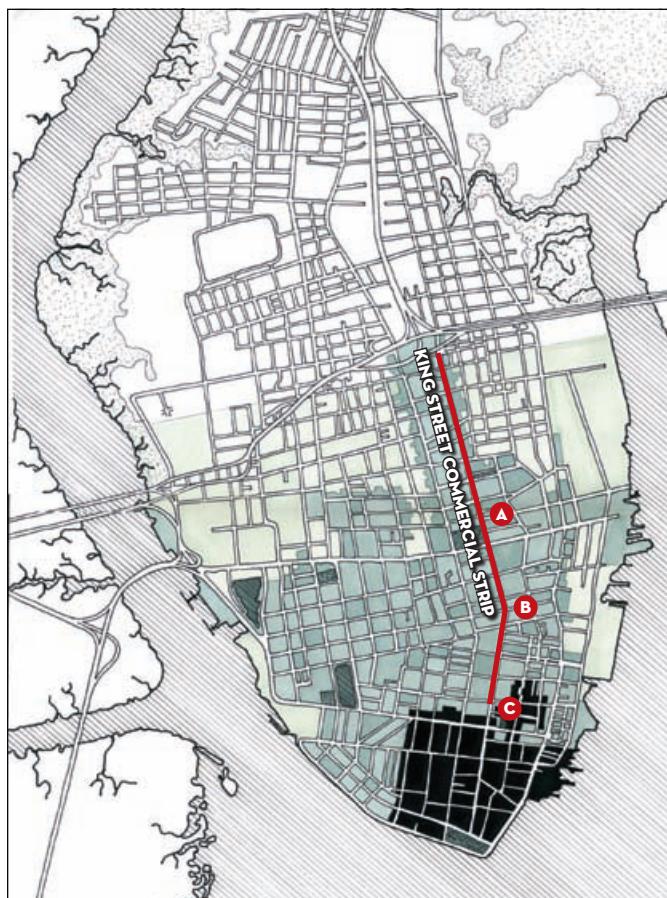
Two important concepts had emerged. First, that saving Charleston required preserving an environmental whole. Second, although the act gave no binding power to regulate either new construction or demolitions—and so was largely advisory—it was the beginning of the formal preservation discussion: a legally mandated community debate concerning the city's aesthetics.

But the original Old and Historic District did not embrace the commercial and governmental center of the town, nor many of its later charming residential neighborhoods. In the decades that followed, several phenomena unfolded concurrently. As more and more buildings were suitably restored, Charleston's beauty was enhanced, thus invigorating its economy. Such prosperity presented promising scenarios for new development, frequently oversized, ugly, and located at the city's core, that caused these very areas to become more fractured.

The limited regulatory authority of the Board of Review and the incomplete designation of the cityscape was succeeding only in part as a defense against the damage of post-war development trends. The morphology of the single-house had compressed the city's chronicles—of the privileged, middle-class, oppressed, and freed—in a tightly woven urban fabric. As in Europe's old cities, this continuity of architectonic arrangement generated a continuity of ambience. There was a place, not just a grab-bag of districts, but an entire townscape with old residential, commercial, civic, institutional, and early industrial elements interrelated. Though partly fragmented, historic Charleston remained a discernible sculptural whole. But would it remain that way for long?

In 1966, the city empowered its Board of Review to say no to demolitions, strengthening the supervision of new design, and thereby matching the precedent-setting regulatory power of the newly formed New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission. In the mid-1970s, the extended Old and Historic District was finally made to encompass the complete traditional townscape. At that critical moment, a rare event in the history of urbanism transpired. An architecturally sensitive mayor was elected. His name was Joseph P. Riley, Jr., and he is still in office as of this writing. Under his governance environmental common sense began to prevail. One of the most encouraging breakthroughs was that municipal garages be designed to blend into the townscape and that public monies not be

- █ ORIGINAL OLD AND HISTORIC DISTRICT
- █ EXTENDED OLD AND HISTORIC DISTRICT
- █ AREAS REGULATED IN PART
- MARION SQUARE
- CHARLESTON PLACE HOTEL
- COUNTY COURT HOUSE





used to ugly the city. Simple enough, but an extraordinary concept when compared to other municipalities of the time.

The city's public-housing program was revamped. Although few modern building types violated the character of residential zones, one of the only intrusions was federally-sponsored public housing, constructed in the 1950s and 1960s and occupied predominately by black Americans. Now, however, a different approach was established.

Adopting the mode of the Charleston single-house, simple contemporary renditions of the city's traditional building forms were constructed. In other words, the structures of the new housing program were an extension of Charleston's unique architectural culture. Housing blocks were arranged in small clusters in different locations throughout the townscape, with the intent of promoting racial and economic diversity. The program was named "Scattered-Infill Housing." Such buildings melded into their surroundings. There were no signs or other physical markers to indicate that they were rent-assisted and, indeed, when searching for Scattered-Infill Housing, one needs to know the exact address, otherwise these complexes are difficult to discern. Also when possible, Scattered-Infill Housing was located on properties that held obsolete intrusive structures, thereby reducing environmental dissonance and raising environmental harmony simultaneously. Sometimes dilapidated historic houses were reclaimed. The program was preservation-conscious, socially-conscious, and planning-conscious, garnering a list of national awards including a certificate of recognition from the United Nations.

Yet the most striking of Charleston's innovations happened on King Street, the traditional commercial spine that ran through the heart of the expanded historic district. In the late 1970s, an out-of-town corporation applied to build a major modern hotel complex, Charleston Place, mid-way along the length of King Street, which at the time had come to be lined with vacant lots, boarded-up structures, modern intrusions, rundown shops, and struggling businesses. Clearly, construction of a hotel at such a location had the potential to stimulate the tourist economy, but the initial architectural proposal was wildly out-of-scale and jarring to both the character of the street and the old city as a whole. Opponents remarked to the hoteliers: "It spoils the very ambiance that your clientele are coming to see." For eight long years, the various stakeholders—elected officials, bureaucrats, developers, preservation-minded inhabitants, and the Board of Review—slugged it out over the proposed hotel construction.

And, while the final result may not be considered a triumph by proponents of contemporary architectural excellence, as a matter of urban design it is thoughtful, perhaps even splendid. The mass of the hotel tower was tucked into the middle of the block, thereby reducing its visibility. A line of shopfronts was created along King Street in the building's base, whose massing was broken into portions that reflected the rhythm of the old façades along the thoroughfare. The use of the streetwall was reinforced. Its look was respected. The colors and materials were harmonious. The scale of the city was retained.

The greatest achievement of the Charleston Place redevelopment was political. Charleston had learned to fight for its future. Such scuffling paid dividends—economic and environmental. In the decades

**THE CITY'S AWARD-WINNING
SCATTERED-SITE HOUSING
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CHARLESTON SINGLE-HOUSE—A
HUMANISTIC ALTERNATIVE TO
FEDERALLY-SUBSIDIZED POST-WAR
HOUSING, TOP LEFT.**



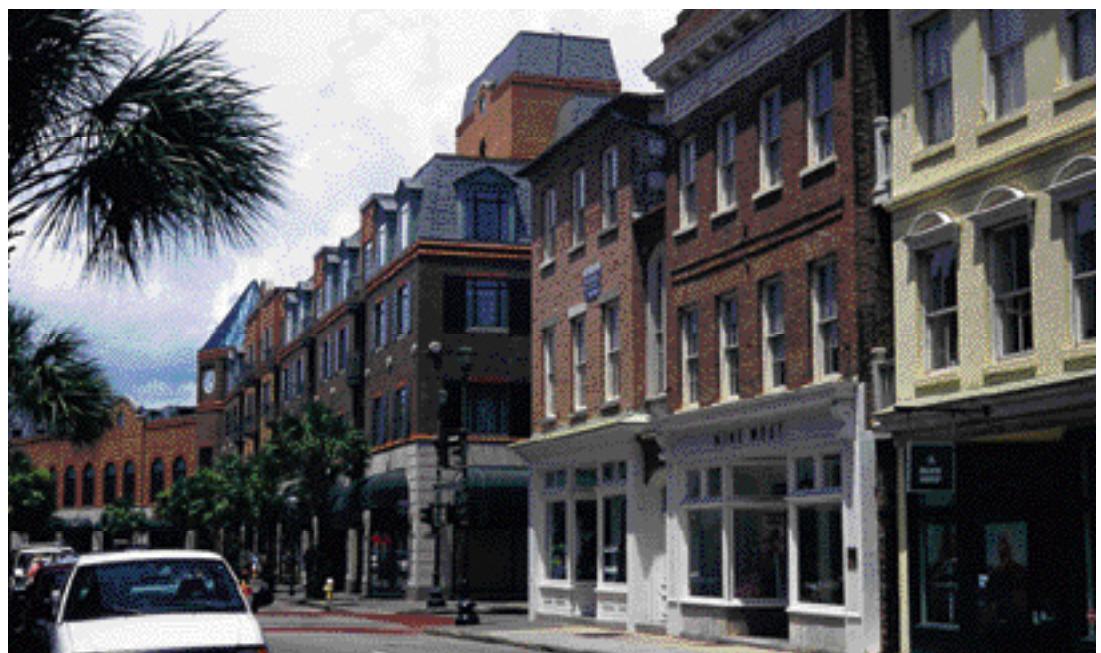
since, numerous key locations on King Street have spawned similar battles, yet they have paid off. Walking down the avenue today, seeing the brilliant metamorphosis—the long line of handsome reclaimed building fronts, the numerous sympathetic infill structures that honor a communal architectural civility, and the crowds of pedestrians drawn to the beauty of the palm-lined thoroughfare—it is important to note that hardly a single location did not require some degree of collaborative effort and struggle.

Meanwhile, other storms have brewed, among them a fierce tropical hurricane benignly known as Hugo, which struck the city on September 22, 1989. The damage was extensive, as were the insurance claims, which numerous Charlestonians directed to restoring the battered attractiveness of their properties. And even in the face of such hardship, with bright blue plastic tarps covering holes in buildings on every block, the Board of Review—temporarily meeting on a weekly basis in order to handle the expanded workload—required a proper standard of conservation. Overnight, the latent beauty of the historic city bloomed in a season of renewal—a season only possible in a place that grew by the rules of preservation law, by a culture of conservation now embedded in the bones of Charleston's inhabitants.

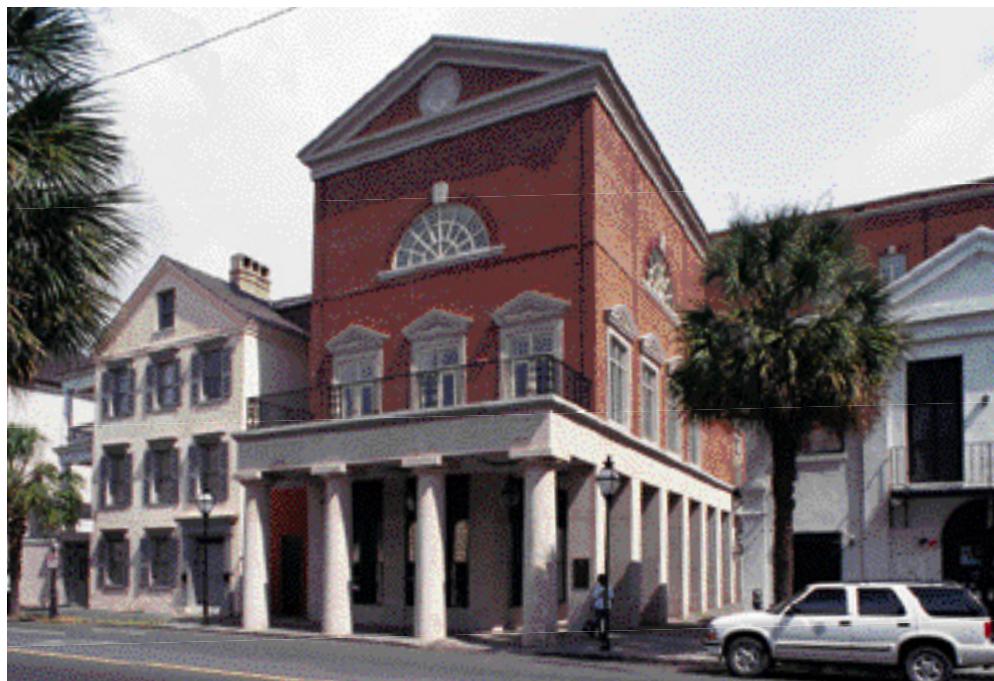
But Charleston's battles were far from over. In the mid-1990s, a new courthouse complex was proposed, a giant mid-block structure with wings that broke through to three principal thoroughfares on the block where the commercial end of King Street connects to the historic civic center, to Broad Street—just a street-width away from the Four Corners of Law. It was a key location in the fractured nucleus where numerous historic landmarks, including City Hall, were juxtaposed with asphalt-covered lots and bulky post-war structures. The continuity of old streetwalls was broken. The importance of neighboring monuments was consummate. The symbolism was unavoidable. More than any other spot, this was Charleston's focal point. Or, it ought to have been, were it not disjointed and spoiled.

Here is the hardest kind of building for any municipality to regulate—one that is proposed by a higher governmental authority, in this case Charleston County, that is generated within the political and administrative thicket, with numerous potential hidden vested interests. It was a proposal cloaked in the virtue of good design by a name-brand imported architect, Jaquelin Robertson of Cooper Robertson and Partners in New York, and several hundred thousand dollars of public funds had already been expended before application to the Board of Architectural Review (BAR). Every design change requested by BAR would then require further public outlays and inter-governmental concessions. Nonetheless, the scheme was out-of-scale. Its facades were unsympathetic to the historic context. Its massing only made the fracturing worse.

A fight went on for years, causing the design to change in increments. Yet, again consensus was



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reached. With the cooperation of their clients, Cooper-Robertson lowered the courthouse's height so that it no longer competed with nearby church steeples. The facades on King and Broad Streets were redesigned to mend former breaches in the streetscape. The Broad Street façade was then given an overhanging sidewalk portico, a somewhat unusual architectural feature traditional to historic Charleston and a welcome enhancement to the townscape. It was a handsome though curious building. Curious, because of its many faces, knit into the cracks of the urban context, a structure unable to be seen as a whole, an edifice of parts, with each part befitting its different setting. It was a socially responsible building, an architecture that healed.

The process of public design negotiation had revealed a fresh potential for Charleston—that incongruent downtown locations might be refashioned. A new urban wholeness now beckoned, rooted in the culture of the past, whose attainment was feasible via the advances of the socio-political culture of conservation regulation—a wholeness that few cities in the United States had so close within their grasp.

Accordingly, within the year just passed, an amalgam of Charleston's civic groups mounted a design charrette. Their target was an area of the city not very charming in old photographs, a part of the city that borders on King Street. It is a location once on the fringe of Charleston's beauty but could, in future years, be at the center of its expanded loveliness, a place known as Marion Square

The drawings are compelling, harnessing the disciplines of sound urban planning and sensitive design. Long street walls of harmonious form delight the eye. Discordant architectural notes are amended. On paper, the scheme is visionary and grand, but it will not be easy to achieve, for the city's success has bred its own dilemmas. Like historic Venice, gentrification due to a super-heated tourist economy threatens the livability of the original Old and Historic District. Landmarks are targeted as trophy houses for seasonal residents, long-time Charlestonians are being driven out by escalating property taxes, the number of full-time inhabitants lessen, and the quality of residential services are declining even as the cost of living spirals upward.

Simultaneously, with real estate values on the rise in almost every neighborhood, housing authorities must procure properties affordable within their limited budgets, and several blocks away from Marion Square, in ramshackle zones already disproportionately subject to poverty and crime, necessary rent-assisted housing is becoming densely bunched, rather than evenly scattered as infill. Residents in adjacent blocks are worried. Racial tensions are mounting.

In the face of these problems, one wonders whether Charleston can sustain its physical and social civility? This very question was posed by President John Kennedy in October 1963, less than a month before his death, in a speech entitled Poetry and Power:

I look forward to an America which will not be afraid of grace and beauty, which will protect the beauty of our natural environment, which will preserve the great old American houses and squares and parks of our national past and which will build handsome and balanced cities for our future.

I look forward to an America that commands respect throughout the world not only for its strength but for its civilization as well.

Will Charleston be that handsome and balanced place? Only time will tell. ■

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