CITY OF CHARLOTTESVILLE
PLACE DESIGN TASK FORCE

Annual Report to City Council
Fall 2014

Place, Livability, and Community Engagement
Task Force Members 2013-2014

Rachel Lloyd (Preservation), Chair
Fred Wolf (Architecture), Vice Chair
Richard Price (Architecture), Secretary
Andrea Douglas (Arts, served as Chair through 2013)
Elizabeth Meyer (Landscape Architecture, completed term in August 2014)
Mark Watson (Development)
Claudette Grant (Citizen at Large)
Bill Emory (Tree Commission, completed term in August 2014)
Tim Mohr (Board of Architectural Review)
Kathy Galvin (City Council)
Scott Paisley (Bike/Ped Committee)
Paul Josey (Tree Commission)
Genevieve Keller (Planning Commission)

Purpose and Charge

In the summer of 2012, City Council formed the PLACE Design Task Force to:

- Guide the community in making decisions about place making, livability, and community engagement.
- Act as an advisory body to the Planning Commission and City Council in areas pertaining to urban design and place making.

PLACE’s research and review activities focus on the following charges:

1. Advising on the urban design aspects of development projects on publicly owned or financed land and developing design criteria for such projects.
2. Reviewing the design of city capital projects and changes to existing public facilities.
3. Reviewing the proposals for public art.
4. Reviewing the status of landscape improvements and policies including tree cutting, maintenance and planting.
5. To develop best practices for urban design guidelines and their implementation.
6. Review of special projects as requested by City Council or the Planning Commission.
7. Identify the obstacles and recommend incentives for the redevelopment of our growth corridors.
8. Identify best practices for community engagement in planning and design and recommend processes.

PLACE understands design to be a holistic method of problem-solving and believes that good urban design contributes to safe, welcoming, diverse, functional, attractive, environmentally sustainable, and economically vibrant spaces and systems that reflect the rich natural and historic context of our community.

Actions and Accomplishments

After the 2012-2013 program of study and engagement with a variety of urban design projects, PLACE recommended in its last annual report that the City consider the following options to achieve the charges listed above:

- Commit to constant, comprehensive, and collaborative public engagement during major projects. The city should develop its own guidelines for public engagement that are grounded in the specific context and history of our community. It should not rely on the community engagement protocols of outside consultants. Result: City staff crafting new community engagement policies with PLACE review.
- Undertake an audit of the city’s development framework to ensure that planning goals, policies, codes, and design guidelines are coordinated and clearly communicate the city’s desired urban design character and function.
Result: City staff undertaking comprehensive code audit with PLACE review.

- Pursue the implementation of small-area plans throughout the city in order to realize a variety of objectives (economic revitalization, safe and healthy environments that respect the area’s ecological systems and history, a balance of housing options, and strengthened public schools). Result: City undertaking West Main project and undertaking preliminary preparations for next small area plan with PLACE support.

- Assess the need for new planning coordination and design implementation support within the city staff. Consider the creation of a multi-disciplinary team that includes designers, planners, engineers, and economic development specialists who will be poised to strategically support and implement small area plans and/or plans for city-wide systems including street design or green infrastructure. Result: City hired new urban designer/landscape architect, now serving as the PLACE staff liaison.

- Develop green infrastructure design guidelines for private and public spaces and refine an ecological network plan for the city. Elicit support and cooperation from specialists and partner groups in our community such as UVA faculty and staff. Result: Green infrastructure is being addressed through the context sensitive streets resolution and the Streets that Work plan.

- Consider retaining the consultants for the SIA and West Main projects for implementation of the plans. Result: Neither of these projects has reached the implementation stage.

We meet as a group at City Hall on the second Thursday of the month from 12-2pm. PLACE members, NDS staff, other departmental staff, and members of the public and press usually attend the monthly meetings.

PLACE subcommittees meet on an ad hoc basis throughout the year. PLACE also attended a joint work session with City Council and Planning Commission in November 2013.

PLACE has focused on two related efforts in 2013-2014: review of the City’s design and planning processes and frameworks, and review of public infrastructure projects. The latter activity has continued to dominate our time. PLACE has reviewed 13 separate public infrastructure/urban design projects and proposals in the last year.

In January 2014, PLACE established new subcommittees to address different aspects of the task force’s purpose and charge. These subcommittees included two or more PLACE members and a staff liaison. The subcommittees focused the following topics:

- Belmont Bridge review
- West Main review
- Small Public Projects review
- SIA review
- City Market proposal review
- Code Audit review
- Community Engagement review
- Small Area Planning (in conjunction with Planning Commission members)
- Staff Organization review
- Green Infrastructure/Context Sensitive Streets review

PLACE members assigned to the Belmont Bridge, West Main, and SIA review subcommittee joined the projects’ respective steering committees.

In July 2014, PLACE decided that the subcommittee system was not serving its intended purpose to provide the city with comprehensive independent research and review for topics related to place making,
livability, community engagement and other design and planning processes. Therefore, PLACE agreed to re-integrate the subcommittee topics into the monthly meeting agendas for discussion by the full task force, but also to maintain the project-related steering committee and subcommittee assignments. The small area planning subcommittee also continues to meet with its partner group, the planning commission small area planning subcommittee.

The narrative below documents the work undertaken by the task force in 2013-2014. A concise description of our activities and accomplishments is organized according to the eight topics in our Purpose and Charge.

Advising on the urban design aspects of development projects on publicly owned or financed land and developing design criteria for such projects.

PLACE supported the development of the SIA and West Main projects through membership in the steering committee and advocacy for the principles that guided those designs. Design principles for these projects addressed key issues such as strengthening neighborhood connections, encouraging a mix of land uses, celebrating history, fostering environmental stewardship, and activating public realm spaces.

PLACE provided recommendations for the appropriate design team for the City Market development based on a thorough review of the design proposals. In a memorandum to council, PLACE recommended several design and place-making principles that could guide the design for the market site. These principles were based on City planning documents as well as market development best practices from around the nation.

Reviewing the design of city capital projects and changes to existing public facilities.

PLACE undertook design review for the following city projects: Cherry Avenue Improvements, Elliot Avenue Improvements, McIntire Railroad Bridge Design, Garrett Street Steps, "Best Buy" Sound Walls design, and Monticello Avenue Improvements. PLACE advocated for enhanced pedestrian and cycling infrastructure improvements, sustainable storm water management, context sensitive design, ecological sensitivity, and neighborhood engagement for these small projects.

PLACE recommended that the City undertake any proposed changes to the Downtown Mall with sensitivity to its significant historic design context.

PLACE assisted the City generate the RFP for McIntire Park East and reviewed proposals for the design project.

Reviewing the proposals for public art.

PLACE has not been asked to review any proposals for public art, but has supported the identification of public art opportunities in public realm projects like the West Main design.

Reviewing the status of landscape improvements and policies including tree cutting, maintenance and planting.

PLACE provided tree planting and vegetation management recommendations for urban design projects in the following locations: West Main, SIA, Cherry Avenue, Elliot Avenue, "Best Buy" Sound Walls, Water Street, Monticello Avenue, and Garrett Street. PLACE advocated for the inclusion of large and small native trees on streets and in public lands generally.

PLACE advocated a comprehensive tree management and replacement strategy for the Downtown Mall.
To develop best practices for urban design guidelines and their implementation.

PLACE advocated a comprehensive audit of the City’s zoning code and design guidelines and has continued to support the revision of these documents through the review of the proposed West Main urban design guidelines, the City’s internal code audit, and the development of the Streets That Work process.

PLACE developed an Urban Design Metrics worksheet that calculates the improvements in public realm design, based on the City’s comprehensive planning goals.

Review of special projects as requested by City Council or the Planning Commission.

PLACE reviewed a wide variety of public projects at the request of City Council, including SIA, Belmont Bridge, and West Main. PLACE members were integrated into the steering committees for each of these projects.

PLACE recommended design review criteria for the Belmont Bridge replacement project to City Council in a memorandum.

Identify the obstacles and recommend incentives for the redevelopment of our growth corridors.

PLACE advocated a Belmont Bridge design that maximized developable land for neighborhood growth by recommending a shorter bridge span and new context-sensitive streets that support building and sidewalk construction.

PLACE supported design initiatives that foster smart, mixed use growth of the West Main corridor.

Identify best practices for community engagement in planning and design and recommend processes.

PLACE advocated the City’s continued engagement with the SIA steering committee to support the project as it unfolds over time.

PLACE provided review and feedback on the City’s evolving community engagement policies based on research of best practices conducted between 2012 and 2014.

PLACE has provided a forum for citizens interested in public realm design within their neighborhoods.

Lessons from 2013-2014

Comprehensive community engagement is not an expendable aspect of pre-project planning and public project review. The City may benefit from early community input on project scoping and goals and should not limit community involvement to design review.

Comprehensive project planning is required to optimize the utility of project reviews from advisory bodies like PLACE. Too often, PLACE and the specific project steering committees it was involved with were engaged late in the project process. This resulted in the advisory bodies having a reactive role to inadequate designs. The City may benefit from requesting expert design review early in the project planning process.

PLACE needs clarification to understand when its recommendations are supporting staff actions and when its recommendations are supporting City Council decisions. PLACE needs to communicate its recommendations to City Council directly in concise memoranda as needed for specific projects.

PLACE needs to clarify its role for the city and for the community. It is not an advocacy group
or a decision-making body. It considers public comments, but is only entitled to make recommendations in an advisory capacity.

Suggestions for 2014-2015

Pending Council support, PLACE suggests that we pursue our stated charges through the following tasks:

- Undertake a debrief of the City's typical design project processes through case studies of current local public infrastructure projects (SIA, the Belmont Bridge Replacement, and West Main). The debrief would examine the City's current practices in community engagement, design sequencing, communication with consultants, and communication with the City's decision-making bodies such as Council in order to identify which processes conform to best management practices and which need improvement.

- Identify a range of appropriate design assessment processes for public projects so that City Council has the tools it needs to evaluate which plans provide the greatest design value to Charlottesville for every dollar spent. An appropriate assessment tool may help the city identify the advantages of a specific design, how important the advantages of the design are, and if those advantages are worth their associated cost. The design assessment processes could be coordinated with the city’s CIP process.

- Provide support for scoping and project definition for selected public infrastructure projects through generating or reviewing RFPs. PLACE would rely on City Council or staff to identify appropriate projects requiring assistance.

- Investigate policies for the city that create more opportunities for active neighborhood involvement in the design and planning process for their areas, coordinating through CIP, small-area planning, or other city programs.

- Continue to provide design review for public projects selected by City Council or City staff. (PLACE envisions that the growing design capabilities within NDS will diminish the reliance on PLACE for the design review of small projects.)

PLACE encourages clarification from City Council on our ongoing mission and feedback on our work to date.