

Building Toward a Walkable Downtown in the Aftermath of a Natural Disaster

Town of La Plata, Maryland

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On April 28, 2002 a tornado destroyed much of downtown La Plata, Maryland. Over 80 buildings were destroyed and 150 businesses displaced. About 40 homes, 1 school, and 6 apartment buildings were also damaged. Almost immediately following the destruction, La Plata embarked on a planning and design process to guide rebuilding efforts. This paper describes that process and elaborates on the essential elements we believe critical for a community wishing not only to re-build following a disaster but to re-build in ways that attain a walkable / livable downtown. These elements are (1) a collective acknowledgement and understanding of urban design gained through citizen participation and (2) an interactive and collaborative planning process backed-up with incentives for reconstruction.

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I. Introduction

This paper describes the planning, design, and reconstructive process one town followed in the aftermath of a natural disaster. It illustrates, what we believe, are essential elements of an appropriate response to a natural disaster that impacts a downtown of a small to mid-size community. We hope that this assessment contributes to the work of other communities and professionals should they face the challenge of rebuilding.

This assessment is by no means a comprehensive listing of the public and private organizations, programs, and individuals who responded to the needs of La Plata following the tornado of April 28, 2002. It is enough here to mention that the motto of the Town of La Plata, "Best of All Possible Worlds", embodies a collective vision, aspiration, and optimism that pulled La Plata through one of the most devastating natural disasters in Maryland. The Town received meaningful technical and financial assistance from federal and state agencies as well as contributions of financial and in-kind assistance from private corporations and individuals.

This assessment focuses narrowly on the practice of town planning, urban design, and architecture as emergency relief. It explores the power of citizen-based planning and the role of the practitioner in helping a community (of downtown property owners, in this case) to become what it envisions. The elements that proved essential in the case of La Plata include collective acknowledgment and understanding of urban design and an interactive and collaborative process with the practitioner acting as broker and negotiator of interests.

II. Primed for Downtown Planning

A Brief History

The Town of La Plata is located in the southern region of the State of Maryland about sixty miles southeast of Baltimore and thirty miles east of Washington, DC. La Plata Station, as it was known in the 1870s, developed aggressively as the Pennsylvania Railroad extended rights-of-way through the rural settlement.¹ La Plata quickly positioned its agrarian economy to benefit from the new advances in transportation: a cannery and gristmill were soon established along the railroad tracks. Designation as the county seat of Charles County soon followed and with it, political and economic prominence. Today, La Plata has a population of nearly 7,000. About 20,000 people live within a five-mile radius of downtown.²

La Plata's urban plan evolved in the context of the railroad and the railway station. The formation of a coherent grid in downtown was disrupted by the presence of the rail tracks. The railroad bounded the eastern edge of the growing downtown, but with only one major railroad crossing (Maryland Route 6) the Town's streets were largely oriented parallel with the railroad, which limited east-west connections, city blocks were necessarily large and "urban" settlement relatively dispersed.

The prospects for developing a lasting town center at the intersection of Maryland Routes 6 and 3, the primary north-south county artery, were lost when a modern four-lane divided highway, Maryland Route 301, was constructed one-half mile west of the Town's emerging core.³ Modern retail development and merchandising trends through the 1970s and 1980s drained valuable commerce from downtown as shopping centers with highway frontage were developed beyond the traditional borders of the Town.

Meanwhile in downtown, conventional zoning and auto-oriented site design facilitated vehicle traffic over pedestrian traffic: parking lots immediately off the streets became the overriding site development model. La Plata's downtown evolved largely into a linear pattern of single-story convenience stores and office buildings fronted by parking lots. In 1998, the Town of La Plata identified this demise and began devising a plan to revive, or finally actualize, a downtown core as an economically sustainable entity.

An Adopted Vision Plan

Coincidentally, the tornado that destroyed downtown struck La Plata not long after the Town had embarked on a long-term planning and design initiative set forth in "The Vision Plan for Greater La Plata", adopted in 2000. The Vision Plan addressed several major concerns including traffic and highways, public sewer and water services, population growth, and La Plata's role in the broader geopolitical context of Charles County and the State of Maryland.

¹ Wearmouth, John, M. La Plata Maryland 1888-1988, 100 Years The Heart of Charles County, Town of La Plata, Maryland, 1988.

² Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, Claritas Marketview Comparison Report, and Jakubiak & Associates Inc.

³ This is consistent with "The Problems of Urban Design Today" noted by Roger Trancik in Finding Lost Space: Theories of Urban Design. New York, NY: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1986.

Most notably, the Vision Plan sought as its core value to preserve “the Town’s distinctive small town charm and its own identity and sense of place”.⁴ In retrospect, two accomplishments of the 2000 Vision Plan proved critically important to the rebuilding of downtown after the tornado. First, the process of preparing, reviewing, and adopting the Vision Plan established a network of dedicated town residents and property owners – the Vision Team. Second, the Vision Plan specifically recommended as a priority the preparation of a detailed urban design plan for downtown. This urban design plan, or more accurately, this downtown master plan, was approved in March 2001, a year before the April 2002 tornado.⁵

Town Planning Principles

La Plata’s downtown plan encompassed a large geographic area, including the area later destroyed by the tornado. Key to the visual expression of the plan was the idea of a “Small Town America,” a town as destination, rather than as throughway. Specific civic projects were proposed to establish anchoring focal points. Basic urban design guidelines were drafted addressing building alignments, increasing density, streetscape improvements, issues of pedestrian scale and amenities, landscaping strategies, signage, and parking.

Identifying the lack of a town core as a major shortcoming, the plan proposed that one be created on a downtown site currently occupied by a warehouse and distribution center. The area ultimately destroyed by the tornado, to the south, consisted of traditional mixed-use buildings. This area, south of Charles Street, was proposed for gradual infill with a mix of housing office, and recreational uses. This area was not a priority in terms of redevelopment or public investment. Laudable as the downtown plan was, the priorities of the plan were to be dramatically refocused on April 28, 2002.

The Tornado

Severe thunderstorms and a 260-mile-per-hour Fujita Scale Category Four (F4) tornado struck La Plata and its environs.⁶ The tornado traveled in an easterly direction over nearly 35 miles of land before reaching the Chesapeake Bay, marking a path on the landscape that averaged 1,000 feet in width in Charles County.⁷

The twister peaked just as it was moving into La Plata maintaining the full F4 strength for the sixty seconds it took to level much of downtown. Satellite imagery depicts a clearly discernable swath carved through the center of downtown. In and around downtown, over 80 buildings were destroyed and 150 businesses were damaged or displaced. The economic core of the town was devastated. The mature urban forest that had grown throughout downtown was decimated. Throughout the southern Maryland region, five lives were lost and at least 120 people were injured. Property damage was estimated in excess of \$100 million.⁸

As one of the most critical responses to the event, the Mayor and Town Council of La Plata confidently pronounced that downtown would be reconstructed better than before. The success of the Vision Plan and the subsequent downtown urban design plan provided an ideal point of departure: rebuilding would be guided by the adopted downtown plan. Some of the key participants of the former planning studies now faced the task of actually applying the very principles they had recently advocated. Fortunately, the plan included basic design guidelines that could be interpreted and developed, in short order, and applied to the area now devastated by the storm.

⁴ “Vision Plan for Greater La Plata: Final Report”, March 10, 2000, p.2.

⁵ “The Plan for the Future of Downtown La Plata, A Design for A New Downtown”, March 15, 2001.

⁶ Factual data is derived from weather reports listed within the following:

<http://www.cnn.com/2002/WEATHER/04/29/storm.deaths/>, and

http://www.erh.noaa.gov/er/lwx/Historic_Events/apr28-2002/laplata.htm

⁷ Gailey, David, Regional Forester, “Tornado Damage Assessment Report”, Maryland Department of Natural Resources, May 2002.

⁸ <http://www.weatherbook.com/laplata.html>

III. A Deliberative Process: Visualization

The Town of La Plata immediately defined the event as a unique opportunity to rebuild in a way that could make downtown more diverse in its commercial offerings and civic spaces and more pedestrian friendly than it was before the tornado. This section and the next describe a process in which the Town went from identifying opportunities to achieving results.

On the Town's behalf, the State of Maryland's Department of Planning contacted the Washington Architectural Foundation (WAF) Community Design Services on Tuesday, May 14, 2002. This was 16 days following the tornado. The task: help the Town with emergency master-planning work sessions. WAF assembled a volunteer team of architects and architectural interns. The following Saturday, the team convened at the La Plata town hall and began the process of designing a plan for the storm-damaged sections of downtown.

A process involving focus groups was established. First, the storm-damaged section of downtown was divided into planning sub-areas. After an address from the Mayor of La Plata, the property owners joined the focus group that corresponded to the location of their property. From the perspective of the WAF team, the objectives for the focus group work sessions included:

- To listen to property owners describe their properties and specific concerns, challenges, and aspirations vis-à-vis reconstruction.
- To engage property owners in a discussion about their property, its land use, development constraints and opportunities, and its relation to a new plan.
- To evolve a coherent illustration of these collected data and aspirations.
- To propose a series of immediate and medium-term strategies toward forming a more detailed plan in the future.

The WAF Team focused on four urban design criteria drawn from the original downtown plan: increase density, create unified street edges, internalize parking, and improve streetscapes.⁹ The information gathered from each property owner was synthesized in plan sketches corresponding to planning sub-areas. In response to individual concerns, design constraints and opportunities, and the evolving nature of the information, the drawings were continuously refined and expanded. A final presentation to the property owners, the town administration, and the local press took place on Saturday, June 8th, forty days following the tornado. Based on final feedback, the drawings were reworked and refined one last time and a report was compiled.¹⁰

The Town of La Plata demonstrated a strong sense of community and united under the pressures of reconstruction. The property owners religiously attended the rapid-fire planning sessions to establish the rebuilding plan. By accepting the challenge presented by the Mayor and adhering to good design guidelines, they acknowledged collective commitment to rebuilding in concert with the principles of the original downtown plan.

⁹ These fundamental criteria are developed from text including Jacobs, Allan B. *Great Streets*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993, and Duany, Andres, Elisabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff Speck. *The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream*. New York, NY: North Point Press, 2000, and Lynch, Kevin. *The Image of the City*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960.

¹⁰ "Town of La Plata, Maryland Emergency Urban Planning Charette", Washington Architectural Foundation – Community Design Services, Principal Team Leaders: Todd Ray, AIA and Jonathan Chung, Assoc. AIA, June 27, 2002.

This is not to say that there were no disagreements or emotionally charged discussions. After all, many downtown property owners held deeply rooted and longstanding connections to their property, buildings, and the businesses they operated. Continuous illustrations and refinements of the rebuilding plan were critical to building the confidence of many participants that their family heritage and investments would be protected. The illustrations were not deemed complete until property owners could envision how their individual property fit coherently into the whole.

It is important to note that more often than not, the collective compassion of the property owners surpassed specific property boundary issues. This openness to make things better helped set the groundwork for requisite cross parking and access agreements. In any downtown where property lines are firmly established, such agreements are essential if the goals of internalizing parking, increasing density or facilitating pedestrian traffic are to be met.

Within the final report, the WAF team stopped short of developing prescriptive design guidelines for downtown. However, it did offer insights gained from the focus group sessions and did make recommendations the team considered key to bringing about the vision. WAF also recommended that a citizens' task force be created to fully develop the draft guidelines promoted within the original downtown plan. Since the guidelines were still in draft form, the opportunity existed to revise the document incorporating needed changes for reconstructing versus infilling.¹¹

As the aforementioned process came to an end, pressing questions remained: How could property owners apply the new vision plan for their properties and implement the design recommendations given the urgent need for reconstruction? How could these ideas be accomplished with uncertain financial assistance and resources?

¹¹ With the assistance of the Maryland Department of Planning, Local Planning Assistance Unit, the Town of La Plata began refining the Design Guidelines incorporating changes and revisions to mould reconstruction efforts. These Community Design Guidelines were formally adopted January 14, 2003, but had actually been in use since weeks after the tornado.

IV. A Deliberative Process: Actualization

To assist downtown property owners in rebuilding according to the new plan, the Town created a team consisting of the writers of this article and representatives from the Maryland Department of Planning and the Governor's Office of Smart Growth. Shortly thereafter, it also created a volunteer design review board of local residents and property owners. The Town also commissioned a market study. Each of these topics is addressed below.

Interactive Process

The team met with each of the twenty-eight participating property owners to discuss each owner's situation and to consider each situation within the context of the overall plan. Discussions focused on land use, building program needs, income flows and cost issues, lot size and configurations, parking requirements, and stormwater management issues.¹² The team organized the interviews to correspond to the same planning sub-areas delineated previously so that the unique relationships among properties, and property owners, could be fully explored and negotiated in the context of the new rebuilding plan.

The team served as facilitators of many discussions, focusing on the mutual benefits gained by the property owners and the Town. For example, one mixed-use building owner, understanding that pedestrian access would be key to his future retail tenants worked with the team on concepts for a common green and pedestrian way in the interior block of his property. This requirement necessitated an access agreement with an adjoining property owner. When certain opportunities such as these presented themselves or when long-held property disputes became apparent, it was necessary to bring the interested parties together for joint discussions.

The process had considerable success in establishing a strong urban edge along one major north-south street, LaGrange Avenue. The street had previously been sparsely developed with single-family homes and single story prefabricated structures converted to offices with relatively large setbacks. (A prime example of the area set aside in the downtown urban design plan for gradual, mixed-use infill.) Through the rebuilding planning process, property owners were encouraged to and did re-build on new foundations. Every owner added space to the pre-tornado total, nearly doubling the square footage of leasable area.

On LaGrange Avenue, the team worked with two adjacent medical offices (which were completely destroyed by the tornado) to evolve a mutually compatible design that also reinforced the envisioned streetscape. Previously, both offices were contained in one-story buildings setback far from the street. Sketch plans were prepared and building cost/income models created to illustrate the potential build back of each office. With the use of incentive grants, both medical offices constructed new larger buildings, demolishing their existing slabs to move their buildings to the street edge. One of the offices opted to provide rental apartments on the second floor. With this success, neighboring buildings on the entire block were placed on the newly established build-to line and parking was completely internalized.

The collected information, market data, and site layouts were compiled in a report.¹³ The report provided property owners with tools needed to have meaningful discussions with insurance settlement adjusters and financial institutions. The conceptual site plans, in particular, provided a vital "brainstorming of possibilities" for property owners as they worked with their own design and construction professionals.

¹² It is important to note that the team conducted the interviews with questionnaires established in conjunction with the Maryland State Highway Administration (SHA) and the Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE). This informed the SHA and MDE of how build-back plans would impact their respective programs for streetscape and stormwater management improvements.

¹³ Vision Plan Implementation for Storm Damaged Area, Studio 27 Architecture and Jakubiak & Associates, Inc. October 18, 2002.

Design Review Board and Incentives

The design review board was empowered to review the design of the buildings set for rebuilding and to determine equitable financial assistance.¹⁴ This latter power proved decisive as the Town positioned itself to provide property owner incentives. Those property owners that agreed to build in accordance with the plan were offered direct grants.¹⁵ The Maryland Department of Business & Economic Development (DBED) provided over \$250,000 to reinforce its commitment to the rebuilding plan. The Town distributed these funds through a DBED incentive grant program managed by the design review board. The board, with the concurrence of the Mayor and Town Council, provided grants ranging from \$5,000 to \$25,000 to property owners who reconstructed in accordance with the plan and its basic design guidelines.

At this stage, the board used the draft design guidelines supported by observations of the WAF. The board's recommendations were only voluntary as no official guidelines or approval procedures had been adopted; however, the board retained power to promote good design and adherence to the plan with incentive grants. In general, the intent of these grants was to bridge the gap between the amount insurance companies paid to rebuild and the actual cost of rebuilding according to the new plan. It was found that moving buildings up to the street, or adopting preferred building materials, or consolidating parking, added unanticipated costs to the property owner.

Market Study Addresses Risk

Finally, the Town commissioned a market study to lend assistance to property owners considering both rebuilding plans and the specifics of space programming new buildings.¹⁶ The market study showed that sufficient strength existed to support not only the rebuilding of all commercial space lost, but also a sizable increase of new specialty retail and office space. Indeed, the study showed support for an additional 30,000 square feet of retail space and 24,000 square feet of office space in downtown—that is, 54,000 square feet of space over the pre-tornado total.¹⁷

¹⁴ With the infusion of direct cash grants from state and federal agencies, the Town was able to provide incentives to assist property owners in re-building according to the new vision plan for downtown.

¹⁵ It is important to note that the Town did not penalize property owners who opted not to follow the plan's recommendations. The Town fast-tracked building permit approval for owners who sought to replace exactly the building that was lost.

¹⁶ "Downtown La Plata Market Study", August 2002. Jakubiak & Associates, Inc.

¹⁷ Recent developments in downtown bear out this conclusion. Three new specialty retail or restaurant uses have opened since reconstruction began.

With the market data available, the team was able to inform most property owners that those businesses displaced by the tornado could expect positive market conditions when they re-opened.¹⁸ The market data also encouraged property owners to consider adding leasable space to their pre-tornado sites, supporting the goal of increasing density. The market potential supported the notion that as new buildings were rebuilt, their design should accommodate street level retail, even if the near-term use was envisioned to be something other than retail. Finally, the market data (including anticipated lease rates per square foot) provided the land use programming basis for developing income and cost models for individual properties.¹⁹

Most property owners have prepared preliminary build-back plans or actually completed reconstruction. In total, these plans will add about 6,100 square feet of retail space and about 25,200 square feet of office (and related service activities) space to the pre-tornado commercial base. The number of residential rental units in downtown significantly increased. Not all property owners have rebuilt, however. For example, a lumber and building supply company²⁰ has moved away from downtown and a former family-run grocery store site remains undeveloped. Also, not all the office space that was added has been immediately occupied; in part due to significant new office condominium development that is now occurring on the edge of downtown.

¹⁸ This was not always the case and indeed the writers of this paper worked to encourage one group of property owners to redevelop a relatively large site for a mixed-use town center project rather than rebuilding the pre-tornado use, which in our view fell well short of being the highest and best use of the property. This site is centrally located with excellent potential to become the “center” still missing in the downtown La Plata. The property owners have since relocated the business and the site may be available for creative redevelopment.

¹⁹ *ibid* 13

²⁰ This was determined not to be the highest and best use for the downtown site (See footnote No. 18).

V. Essential Elements

The forgoing sections have described the planning response to a natural disaster that destroyed much of the downtown of La Plata, Maryland. Based on most criteria, we conclude that the process was a success. Within 18 months of the tornado, most destroyed buildings had been replaced, re-occupied or were currently under construction. It is important to note that this rebuilding occurred in light of a sizable amount of new construction (unrelated to the tornado) in downtown La Plata, which one might anticipate would help suppress demand for the newly rebuilt space.

New development has, for the most part, been consistent with the urban design concepts of the aforementioned planning process. Parking has been internalized within sites, with parking lots being located to the rear of sites and connected with cross access easements to adjoining lots. New commercial buildings now embrace the street, creating unified street edges. Density, or overall floor-to-area ratio, has been increased considerably as new two-story buildings have replaced older single-story structures. Through the coordination of access, parking, and property lines, the foundations have been laid for future public investments in streetscape projects throughout downtown. One such project is underway and is set for construction spring 2004. Based on our direct involvement in the processes described above, we conclude that two elements contributed to the success. These are described below.

Collective Acknowledgement and Understanding of Urban Design Gained Through Citizen Participation

First, education about and exposure to principles of town planning and good urban design proved essential. Well before the tornado, La Plata had embarked on a vision process. Citizens were engaged in the task of looking forward and envisioning a future for downtown as a central place for community life and economic development. The deficiencies in downtown including a lack of a sense of place, conventional automobile-oriented site design, poor definition of space along streets, uncoordinated signage, were fully discussed. Basic design guidelines had been recommended and an urban master plan for downtown had been adopted.

The collective understanding, acknowledgement, and acceptance of good town planning examples and methods fostered fruitful property owner workshops and hence a sound reconstruction plan for a walkable / livable community. Indeed, perhaps more important than the adopted plans themselves was the fact the Town had established a forum for meaningful planning. Note that the section of downtown destroyed by the tornado was not the focus of the 2001 downtown plan. The property owners in this section of downtown had never contemplated replacing their buildings, increasing density or internalizing parking. These design recommendations were meant for other areas of downtown—the warehousing area slated for future redevelopment. The involvement of the town residents and property owners in the previous visioning process was essential: the design principles were readily transferable to the storm damaged area.

Interactive and Collaborative Planning Process Backed-up With Incentives

The second element that proved essential was the planning process the Town used following the natural disaster and the fact that the process was backed up with financial incentives. The process was collaborative and interactive. In developing the vision for the storm damaged area, it started with the needs and aspirations of the individual property owner. The needs of individuals were synthesized into a whole, guided by the collective understanding of appropriate planning and design principles.

Secondly, after a vision was designed, the Town focused on immediate implementation. A team of professionals was tasked with working with each participating property owner to facilitate build-back in conformance with the overall plan. In the work sessions that followed, the goals of each individual were given expression and various alternatives for each redevelopment were tested. This process was aided by the availability of sound and useable market data and analyses. Such information allowed some property owners to consider land uses and space-programming plans they had not previously considered. The data also strengthened the position of the practitioners in negotiating better designs while promoting higher densities and a greater mix of uses.

Lastly, the role of the design review board and its use of incentive grants cannot be underestimated. For many, the cost of rebuilding on a new relocated foundation would have prevented adherence to the plan. The role of the design review board in reviewing projects and in providing assistance to those projects that implemented the plan was critical. But the collective acceptance of town planning and design principles came first and with it clarity on the use of incentive grants.

Conclusion

The La Plata experience shows that capitalizing on the opportunities created by a natural disaster, rather than simply rebuilding, requires that a community have in place a vision—a vision reinforced by basic understanding of sound urban design principles. A collective vision of the future and a process that introduces planning and design principles allows a town to react with efficiency and intention. This cannot guarantee the development of a walkable community; a downtown is a complex and evolving place. However, it guarantees a step in the right direction.