

Brief History of Metro Louisville Planning and Development

by Steve Wiser, AIA

The following is a summary of physical growth within the metro Louisville region.

Louisville's location was predestined. Millions of years ago, geologic forces created cascading rapids within the region's major watershed. These rapids attracted wildlife which drank the water, preyed on the fish, and forded at this environmental junction. Buffalo migrated through this spot, forming trails in the surrounding meadows and forests. This abundance of animals also attracted native Americans who hunted along the banks of this 'beautiful' river or, as in their language, the 'Ohio' River.



Wildlife trails would evolve into today's transportation routes such as Frankfort Avenue and Preston Highway. Thus, the planning for Louisville was well underway before any pioneers arrived on the Wilderness Road (Preston Highway), which terminated near Seventh and West Main Streets.

The French and Indian War, which ended in 1763, had the next significant planning influence. Following this conflict, the victorious British awarded large land grants to its soldiers as compensation for their service. The Falls of the Ohio was a preferred destination, and numerous multi-acre tracts were provided to the British military and their loyal supporters.



The American Revolutionary War brought the first major man-made changes. General George Rogers Clark led a militia group to Corn Island near the Falls in 1778. They then settled on the southern shore to build Fort Nelson in 1780. As with other cities before it, the armed garrison created an organized street system based on a 90 degree grid. This grid has defined downtown Louisville ever since.



The city was named for King Louis XVI of France, who provided French assistance during the Revolutionary War. Louisville was then part of Virginia, and Thomas Jefferson was the governor.

With the street pattern set, there were no formal planning layouts made for the city over the next 100 years.



May 20, 1891 is a landmark date in Louisville planning. On this day, Frederick Law Olmsted spoke before the civic leadership about the merits of a park system. A few days later, Olmsted's landscape firm was hired to plan a network of parkways and parks around the perimeter of the city. The resulting emerald necklace has more than demonstrated the long-term benefit of visionary community planning.

This text is excerpted from the book "Louisville 2035".

"Louisville 2035" is available at both Carmichaels Bookstores, the Arts & Crafts Museum Giftshop downtown, and by mail at www.WiserDesigns.com

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In 1927, community planning took another leap forward with the creation of the city planning commission. This led to the selection of the acclaimed land-use firm of Harland Bartholomew and Associates of St. Louis in 1929. Bartholomew proposed many grand schemes for the city. His plan sought to add 'roundabouts' at strategic intersections, new street connectors, and to link the Olmsted parkways with a full loop around the city, (which still remains disjointed today.) Proposals for the waterfront and Second Street were ultimately implemented some 65 years after he recommended them.

Instead of a compact urban core like Cincinnati or Indianapolis, Louisville's downtown grew in an axial manner along Main Street and Fourth Street. Major projects like the old Post Office (at left), Brown Hotel, Seelbach Hotel and the theater district spurred expansion to the south along Fourth, while the Belknap complex to the east and cast-iron warehouses to the west influenced Main Street activity.

During the 1940's and 50's, various urban renewal development plans were suggested, but fortunately not built. These plans sought to demolish vast sections of downtown, such as the governmental district, and replace the ornate structures with bland box-like high-rises.



World War II did not distract the city leadership from discussing a new transportation network that would dramatically alter the city's planning. An article in the Courier-Journal on August 27 1944, outlined how a limited-access federal road system was in the works. These 'superhighways' would criss-cross the county, allowing the traffic to flow non-stop from the southwest to the northeast. Their design objective was to not form barriers, nor negatively impact the areas they would transverse. The roads would be depressed below street level and they would be similar to park-type boulevards. The interstate highways would be finally finished in the mid-1980's with the completion of the outer beltway known as I-265 (the Snyder Freeway) although the landscape and minimal obstruction goals were obviously, and regrettably, not achieved.

With the residential boom, along with the interstate system, commercial development expanded outwardly along the major arterials during the 1960's. Shopping centers, office buildings and acres of surface parking lots began to populate the suburban streetscapes along Shelbyville Road, Preston Highway, and Dixie Highway.



Left: *5000 Block of Shelbyville Road in 1960*

Right: *5000 Block of Shelbyville Road in 1962. The Mall St. Matthews has just opened and the Watterson Expressway is completed.*



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Above: Gruen plan graphic

To counteract this growth pattern and the exodus of retail from downtown, the Gruen Plan was adopted in the mid-1960's for the urban core. For the most part, this plan was enacted. It proposed a pedestrian mall (the old River City Mall, now called Fourth Street), convention center, hotels, and office building locations. It also envisioned a major central retail complex. This urban shopping district would finally be built in the early 1980's, called "The Galleria" (and later re-envisioned as "Fourth Street Live!", a retail-entertainment district.) The Gruen Plan reshaped and guided downtown growth into the late 1980's.

Below: Original design for the Galleria



Another trend was occurring in the county which was of concern to Louisville. Smaller cities, such as Shively, began to be established in the late 1930's. By the 1980's, there were over 100 incorporated districts surrounding the city. The county became a quilt of independent communities, each having its own regulations and governance. It was extremely difficult for Louisville to annex these areas. This multitude of jurisdictions restrained Louisville's progress.

To address these differing districts and provide more economic stability, the City of Louisville and Jefferson County merged on January 1, 2003, forming "Metro Louisville".

Suburban sprawl is still a significant issue within the region. Options to reverse these inefficient and chaotic developments are the 'smart growth' and 'new urbanism' movements. These synergistic developments are more respectful of natural and fiscal resources, with coordination of land-use densities and the region's transportation layout. In Louisville, "Norton Commons" is an example of these 'new urbanism' concepts (*refer to photo at right*). It features a variety of eclectic residences intertwined with shops and businesses. Although all new, it is modeled on historic inner-city neighborhoods like Cherokee Triangle and Old Louisville. Whether this project encourages other similar developments remains to be seen.



Currently, planning within Metro Louisville is directed by "Cornerstone 2020". Enacted between 1998 to 2002, this comprehensive plan contains twelve 'form districts' that seek to encourage compatible land-use and design within each of the distinctive districts.



From bison paths to form districts, Louisville planning has been both brilliant (Olmsted Parks) and frustrating (small cities). With new visions like the '21st Century Parks' initiative in the suburbs, and the new Arena (*photo left*), 'City Center' and Museum Plaza projects in downtown, planning for our city's future is about to enter its next dynamic chapter.

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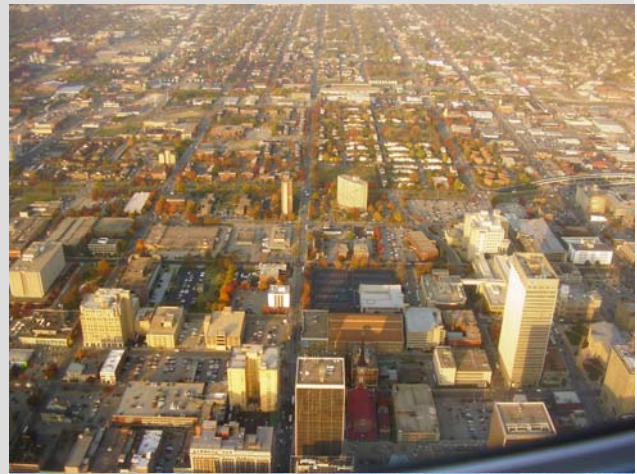
For more information on Louisville's development history, consult the following books:

"Two Hundred Years at the Falls of the Ohio" by George Yater

"Encyclopedia of Louisville" edited by John Kleber

Any book by Louisville historian Sam Thomas

"Memorial History of Louisville" by J. Stoddard Johnson



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