

Plan Savannah 2000: Reaching Out with an Unstaffed Component

Contributed by Gerald David Cowart, AIA, AIA Savannah. Excerpted and adapted from a 2001 Component Excellence Award-winning entry. April 2005

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SUMMARY

In 2000, AIA Savannah sought to form a single focus or theme to guide its operations for the year, culminating in a public sharing of information that would highlight all aspects of the AIA to the surrounding community and demonstrate the value of architects to the public. With this in mind, component leadership developed Plan Savannah 2000, a program that would showcase AIA Savannah's talents while contributing those talents to a worthwhile community need. As an unstaffed component, AIA Savannah had to rely on strong leadership and dedicated volunteer efforts to make the program a success.

SELECTING A FOCUS

At AIA Savannah's first executive committee meeting in 2000, component president Gerald David Cowart, AIA, outlined the agenda he wanted to pursue for the year. He challenged the membership to focus its attention on a specific local community issue and devote all of the component's efforts and energies to creating a new chapter of research, understanding, and knowledge of the issue.

The component chose to focus on historic Bull Street as the spine of the city and how it could be returned to its previous role as a main street, serving the midtown area as a center of culture and commerce. AIA Savannah wanted to involve residents, business owners, and the general public in the process of creating an overall vision of Bull Street's future. They addressed issues such as the need for public parks and green spaces, parking solutions, making the street more pedestrian-friendly, encouraging investment and development, and maintaining the rich diversity of neighborhoods. The component sought to develop a conceptual master plan for Bull Street that would be available to the metropolitan planning commission to help guide the redevelopment process in the years that followed.

SURVEYS

Public opinion would be an important element of Plan Savannah 2000. The program needed to obtain a closer understanding of the needs and visions of the residents and businesses along Bull Street. For the project to succeed, the component needed to establish a feeling of ownership with the Savannah community. To do so, it gathered public opinion through a series of surveys and subsequent public meetings:

- Approximately 3,000 surveys went out to Metropolitan and Thomas Square neighborhood residents as part of a neighborhood meeting mail-out notice. More surveys were distributed by hand throughout the area. This advance survey distribution allowed residents to consider the questions before coming to the meetings to share ideas.
- Members of the AIA Regional and Urban Design Committee facilitated a special meeting of the Metropolitan Neighborhood Association to address ideas and concerns.
- The AIA Regional and Urban Design Committee also facilitated a similar meeting with the Thomas Square Neighborhood Association.

MONTHLY EVENTS

AIA Savannah held monthly meeting programs to help move the Plan Savannah 2000 goal forward throughout the year. Each program, including the following, qualified for continuing education learning units.

- Students from the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD) presented their urban planning projects from the previous term.
- A staff senior planner presented the long-range plan that Charleston, S.C., used for a downtown revitalization. The plan showed that new growth, appropriately directed, can enhance the social, economic, and community amenities for existing and future residents.

- SCAD's director of architectural history gave a presentation of Virtual Savannah, a computer-generated modeling program that builds portions of Savannah's historic district on the screen.
- Members of the City of Savannah's management staff gave a detailed presentation of the city's long-range transportation and parking plans.
- The component held mini-charrettes involving practicing professionals, interns, educators, and students.

CULMINATING EVENT

The year of research and special events for Plan Savannah 2000 culminated in the Bull Street public design forum in November. The forum convened AIA members, the mayor and other city government officials, and the general public to discuss ideas for redesigning the Bull Street area. The event included a formal charrette led by AIA members.

The public responded positively to the Bull Street design forum. AIA Savannah incorporated the ideas captured at the forum into a CD and Web page to continue the dialogue among city officials, architects, and the public.

As a result of Plan Savannah 2000, AIA Savannah established itself as an "urban catalyst." The legacy the component established in 2000 continues to be a driving force behind component activities today.

RESOURCES

More Best Practices

The following AIA Best Practices provide additional information related to this topic:

- 22.08.06 The Pennsylvania Bridge Project: Balancing the Public Interests of Aesthetics and Safety
- 22.08.09 Architects Design Rebirth of a Community
- 22.08.11 Revitalizing St. Louis: The Washington Avenue Windows Project

Feedback

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Key Terms

- Leadership
- Associations
- Design associations
- Architecture associations
- The American Institute of Architects
- AIA components