

**CANOPY FORUM
EMORY UNIVERSITY**

Religion, Property Law, and the Crisis of Houses of Worship

**CATHEDRAL DISTRICT-JAX, INC.
JACKSONVILLE, FLORIDA
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&
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ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL**

The Inspirational Vision

In 1829, St. John's Cathedral was built on a hill overlooking the river in Jacksonville, FL. For many decades, the neighborhood surrounding the Cathedral was full of vitality. It wasn't until the 1950's that things began to fall apart.

This collapse of the urban core in American cities was almost universal, based on a confluence of events as powerful as it was unanticipated. *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 led to so-called "white flight" from inner-city neighborhoods, removing population. President Eisenhower's expansion of the Interstate system in 1956 facilitated travel away from city centers and helped give birth to suburbia.

At the same time, the G.I. Bill passed at the end of WWII was helping Veterans buy a first home. Many of those returning found suburban neighborhoods appealing. All of this had powerful unintended consequences for U.S. downtowns, and Jacksonville was no exception.

Jacksonville has grown to a city of one million people, but like so many others, its urban core was almost empty of residents. To make matters worse, a plethora of churches downtown birthed numerous nonprofit

entities serving the elderly, poor and homeless. St. John's Cathedral alone created 635 affordable housing units for elderly, a nursing home, two schools, a homeless shelter, and a medical clinic for the working uninsured. The result was a blighted downtown neighborhood with five historic churches, a bunch of non-profits serving highly vulnerable folks and very few residents. The plethora of surface parking lots – hot, treeless, inhospitable made people feel unsafe and unwelcome.

Although many Mayors and City Council members had made downtown revitalization a priority in years past, their focus and incentives were directed primarily to property along the St. Johns River and the government area of downtown, leaving the Cathedral District to fend for itself. Because of the city's size -- the largest city by landmass in the continental U.S. -- all revitalization progress was slow and often thrown off track by constituencies who lived outside the urban core.

Dean Kate longed to see the neighborhood flourish. She had a vision of the District as a thriving center, like the communities that sprang up around cathedrals in Europe. But she was the first to admit that seminary had not equipped her for urban revitalization. She called on Ginny a former City Councilwoman and lobbyist specializing in statewide government incentives, who was also a faithful member of the Cathedral.

After many meetings to define and discuss issues, Ginny advised Kate to call on local experts to weigh in on improving the landscape around the Cathedral. They turned to the Urban Land Institute (ULI); a global organization of experts dedicated to good urban planning principles around the world. Through ULI's Technical Assistance Panel, known as a ULI-TAP, seven experts in urban planning, development and branding came in from all over Florida and volunteered their time to laser-focus on the Cathedral District. For two days, they carefully listened to stakeholders and political leaders through 14-scheduled meetings and

walked the District. Then, they produced an in-depth report of recommendations.

In January 2016, ULI-North Florida published that report, laying out 33- recommendations for the Cathedral District. This report became the first “fact-based” directive for revitalization of the Cathedral District ([ULI-Cathedral-District-TAP-report-redx.pdf](#)). The ULI-TAP recommended commissioning a Master Development Plan for the District. CDJ commissioned Torti-Gallas + Partners, D.C. to develop the plan. After the plan was complete, CDJ asked the city to adopt it to provide leverage to promote specific areas of the District for highest and best land use (<https://cathedraldistrict-jax.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/CD-J%E2%80%93Master-Plan-102017.pdf>).

What followed the ULI-TAP was rapid implementation, done with strategic focus. The first items were accomplished quickly: form a 501(c)3, build a board of directors with specific talents, bring in a chief executive officer. The larger and more long-term challenge would be to financially start and sustain the new organization, bring the neighborhood and stakeholders on board, get a level of buy-in from the city, and find a catalytic project to jumpstart the core area.

THE CHURCHES

The Cathedral District is prominent in city history for its five historic churches: St. John’s Episcopal Cathedral, First United Methodist Church, First Presbyterian Church, Mt. Zion African Methodist Episcopal Church, and the Roman Catholic Basilica of the Immaculate Conception - five mainline institutional congregations that historically never had much to do with each other. They rarely conversed about outside community issues and did not meet regularly. The churches were each consumed with their own survival and there was an air of distrust and even competition among them along with risk avoidance.

CDJ wanted to pull these five historic churches together to regenerate the DNA of the former neighborhood and community.

Each church felt that they were doing the work of God, but their good intentions were often misinformed. (Some wanted more parking!) Others insisted on duplicating homeless services that were already being provided just blocks away. For decades, the churches had engaged in ministries to serve the poor, but because of the lack of vision and coordination, their ministries created isolation and ghettoization.

What was lost in their charity was the concept of the church functioning as the hub of the “village.” Building high-rise HUD apartments for seniors and creating homeless shelters pulls properties off the tax rolls and robs the neighborhood of mixed-income residents who provide a balanced economic community...the hallmark of a healthy village where all people thrive.

In the Middle Ages, great sacred places of worship acted as the center for villages. Medieval Cathedrals were community gathering spaces, where art, music, education, medicine, and worship all took place. Universities were born from Cathedrals, hence the title Dean, the head of a Cathedral, was utilized for leaders of the first Universities.

Because of the past strength of five active churches, one would think this neighborhood would be a shining example of community strength. These five magnificent architectural buildings, all within walking distance of each other, should have been stronger than the neighborhoods which literally collapsed in the 50's. The Cathedral District theoretically should have been able to weather the inner-city problems that plagued the U.S. because of the District's sheer number of active churches. But it wasn't.

Much has been written about the crisis of sacred places in the U.S. and the concerns expressed by architectural preservationists (see *Historic Houses of Worship in Peril*, 2020, Thomas Edward Frank). Recently, large conference gatherings have focused on the topic of *Reimagining Property as Mission* and “asset-mapping” (*Episcopal Parish Network Conference*, March 2023, Jacksonville, FL) to help these sacred places find their niche in today’s changing worship practice. We believe that the story of Cathedral District-Jax gives a new perspective to this important dialogue and could help churches envision the redevelopment of their neighborhoods by looking at the whole neighborhood.

DNA & PLACE MAKING

When ULI was called in, they immediately identified the importance of looking at the whole neighborhood, the existing 1,500 residents, seniors who lived in three HUD towers, the 51-existing market-rate townhomes, one grocery store and many small existing businesses. All these components, essentially understanding the assets of the neighborhood, collectively define “place” and singularly point to the DNA of a neighborhood.

*In 1953 it was discovered that the vast complexity of all living organisms is contained in a small and simple set of instructions - DNA. Like an animal species, our favorite places are defined by a set of traits that establish their character. (Erik J. Aulestia, **Architects of Community, Torti Gallas + Partners, 2017, www.vendomepress.com)***

This former great 36-block neighborhood of residents and five historic churches needed to rediscover its DNA.

The buzzword when speaking about revitalization is often *Place Making*. There are many definitions of this popular phrase, which started about 2000. One of the key ingredients to a healthy neighborhood is the attention to the built environment:

...the study of human scale and the perception of urban space remain as relevant today as they were during the Renaissance...

(Charles C. Bohl, University of Miami School of Architecture *Place Making: Developing Town Centers, Main Streets, and Urban Village, Washington, D.C.: ULI-the Urban Land Institute, 2002*).

After the commissioned Master Development Plan, it became abundantly clear that having 50% of the land used for surface parking lots, had defined the neighborhood's "sense of place" as being tired and unsafe. It had lost its DNA bearings.

CDJ went to work on the place making elements of a healthy neighborhood. They set out to offer new residential product, develop parks, plant more trees, re-design traffic, and eliminate the "gap-tooth" street property which lent to the feeling of blight. All this activity garnered favorable branding and public support through the years, as evidenced by published stories and invitations to consult outside Jacksonville. (*J Magazine*, Fall 2017, Summer 2018, Winter 2018-19 issues).

When the Master Development Plan was completed, we started bringing a PowerPoint presentation to all five churches and use their venues for broader stakeholder gatherings. We were fortunate to have the pro-bono talent of a Kettering trained facilitator to present the Master Plan and ask for stakeholder direction on priorities.

Along with the stakeholder meetings we asked each Pastor to sign a support letter for the mission of CDJ, which they willingly signed. But the turnover in pastors in many of these churches prevented us from

building momentum. Within a year of this collaborative signing, four of the five Pastors were new! This required another round of one-on-one chats about the mission of CDJ to ask for their buy-in, which they willingly did, but it's a continual effort to keep in constant contact with these pastors who move on so quickly.

WHAT WE HAVE DONE

In the six years of its existence, CDJ has purchased, a 1.5-acre city block, for debt only, renegotiated the debt and a state loan which had prohibitive zoning on the property, dealt with historic oversight issues, passed 4-City Council bills, and then sold the block at appraised value; all the while advocating, and participating in construction of 600+ apartments and welcoming \$42 million in capital investment into the District. CDJ also concentrated on branding the neighborhood with a signature annual Christmas event which included 5-historic church tours. This activity brought thousands of families to the District.

IMPEDIMENTS TO SUCCESS

1. There is a vast difference between urban development and suburban development. Urban development is substantially more difficult because the rich history of the land makes it inevitably bound up in complexity and often intractably disputed. Making it difficult to gain control over parcels.

Urban development often encounters “unwilling” sellers. These familial parcels of land are often low tax based, or in the case of churches, exempt from taxes. It is therefore difficult to persuade the owners to engage in redevelopment for the sake of the whole. Once a few successful residential developments come to fruition,

the unwilling sellers will decide to hang on and enjoy the ride to improved value and they refuse to sell.

Generational landowners are often less interested in focusing on their role in making the neighborhood thrive. Even if they own a large building worthy of adaptive reuse they persist in silo-thinking about their parking lots, ingress, and egress, or in the case of churches, are often uninterested in discussing use of their property in conjunction with empty adjacent property.

In some instances, the owners live outside downtown or in some other city, and their knowledge of the efforts to create a new sense of place is non-existent. Anecdotally, the demise of local newspapers reporting on local news has diminished the knowledge of downtown revitalization.

2. The homeless usually gather close to service providers and the unintended consequences of “toxic charity” exacerbate the homeless problem in downtowns.

Trying to do good invariably serves the giver but seldom benefits the recipient. That generosity for which the rich are often applauded and that humility for which the poor (are) commended most often leaves the status quo unchallenged, and thus does more harm than good. (The Future That’s Bigger than the Past, Samuel Wells, 2019, Canterbury Press, London, UK)

The topic of homelessness is not part of this thesis and there are many and varied efforts to deal with it. But “toxic charity” is most manifest by churches. (**Toxic Charity, Charity Detox**, Robert Lupton, Harper Collins 2015). Having a collective approach to re-housing, helping the mentally ill and the addicted has proven to be the most successful in reducing the homeless population. An

excellent example of this is the I.M. Sulzbacher Center for the Homeless in Jacksonville (<https://sulzbacherjax.org/>).

Individual church attempts to help the homeless are counterproductive to building new residential living units in the neighborhood. Finding a middle ground must be a collaborative solution in which each party understands the role they play and eliminates duplications.

3. Government regulation is often a major deterrent to private development, whether it's zoning, a community redevelopment agency (CRA), or required approval of conceptual and final drawings. Sometimes these hurdles are helpful for the city's downtown master plan, but because these appointed boards and elected representatives meet infrequently and are fraught with political agendas, they are impediments to the cost of doing business.

These impediments are often offset by government incentives like historic preservation funds, Empowerment, tax forgiveness, and historic tax credits. However, the incentives are only achievable for a developer who has the expertise and relationships to navigate the government system, an additional expense. A developer must be able to create a sophisticated "capital stack" of funding from many different sources which can be daunting because of expense, delays, and the ensuing frustration.

4. Multi-denominational church governance is also a challenge, for it can hinder collaboration. Whether the mainline church governance is top-down, lay driven, ownership disassociated, or a combination makes communication for the good of the mission difficult. It requires substantial one-on-one meetings, scheduling

group meetings and special event(s) where all churches are involved and benefit.

HOW TO SUCCEED

One of the most successful businessmen in northeast Florida, Robert Shircliff, used to say...

“Success requires image, governance and leadership.”

CDJ has tried to use all three ingredients and has enjoyed slow but steady success by adhering to the Shircliff pillars and adding these three principles. We are:

- Fact-Based
- Strategic
- Patient

Our decision to engage outside help from ULI and Torti-Gallas made us fact-based and strategic. It gave us credibility to talk about where to place buildings, working from the core-out, redesigning traffic patterns, branding, outside financial help and gaining admiration from stakeholders, government, and press.

Lastly, we have learned a great deal about the pace at which these changes take place. Our leadership has had to learn patience, but we believe that lives are being changed and a new community is being born around us, and that is worth waiting for.

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