

Asking Tough Questions about Creative Placemaking:
Considering the Unbuilt Environment
By Judi Jennings, to be posted on ArtPlace America Website

At its best, working across sectors can be a thought-provoking discovery of new ideas with new allies. That is my experience when I became part of a Health Impact Project cohort funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Our cohort consisted of project leaders in southeastern states and West Virginia all focusing on learning how to use health impact assessments to evaluate policy changes to advance health equity in our communities.

Although Kentucky and Tennessee are fierce rivals in basketball, our states share many similar challenges and assets when it comes to health equity, and I quickly realized how much there was to learn from Fuller Hanan and Gary Gaston at the Nashville Center for Civic Design. Gaston served as project director and executive producer of the National Endowment for the Arts funded documentary film *Design Your Neighborhood* and co-author of *Shaping the Healthy Community: The Nashville Plan*, published by Vanderbilt in 2016. Hanan is the Community Development Coordinator for their Health Impact Project, which focuses on evaluating health disparities created by the built environment and providing policy recommendations and design strategy solutions to improve public health in two rural counties in Tennessee.

Hanan grew up in Birmingham, Alabama, and attended Auburn, where she participated in their “Rural Studio” in the “Black Belt Region” in the western part of the state. She says her work there was a “very humbling” experience, which taught her how “architecture is a means of telling a story of a place.” She explains how that experience shapes her approach to design and community engagement, that community members are the experts, and designers can bring fresh opportunities and challenges that can be hard to see when people are so familiar with their place.

Hanan observes that breaking down barriers between urban and rural areas is a real challenge, and it helped that Gaston grew up in Madison County, one of the two counties in the project. Their first step was to learn about the local built environment from the community. “People there are very passionate and proud,” she observes. “Many feel like that they can’t stay home and find a way to make a living,” so the economy is such a big factor, especially for health.

So that made Gaston and Hanan start thinking about the unbuilt environment in rural areas and creating a new logic model for a different type of economy, a green economy that starts with kids and contributes to the health of the next generation. They realized, for example, how a river can be an important natural asset conveying the history of a rural area. So the natural unbuilt environment became a key indicator for them to pay attention to in their observation and inventory approach to civic design.

Hanan and Gaston acknowledge the very deep distrust between rural and urban areas in Tennessee, but Hanan says “rural and urban moving forward together is the only way we can move forward.” They know their project depends on the dedication of all partners. The Nashville Design Center is bringing access to new resources to community groups, and it’s the work of the community that makes it sustainable.

I checked in about the concept of the unbuilt environment with designer and urban planner Damon Rich since he is the only certified genius that I know. He said the term “built environment” is often used in design and planning, but might not be so familiar outside those fields. He says thinking about the unbuilt environment could be a useful bridge between rural and urban communities. He also sees how the unbuilt environment could apply to suburbs, like the ones around his home town of Saint Louis. He strongly agrees that making connections between health, especially mental health, and the environment is really important.

Rich’s remarks and Hanan and Gaston’s health impact project demonstrate why cross-sector work is so essential in expanding our thinking about how cultural contexts shape our lives and communities.