



The block

Case Study 5: Town Center, Cornelius, North Carolina



PROJECT AND CONTEXT DESCRIPTION

Our final case study is dramatically different from those that have preceded it in many ways. This difference is not simply a matter of scale; the personnel and the procedure varied, too. The authors and other professional colleagues featured in previous case studies were heavily involved, but all played very different roles. And this project was not produced by a charrette; rather it evolved over a decade, beginning in 1993 as a series of academic projects by architectural students. For a few years it lay fallow while the property at the heart of the town of Cornelius was enmeshed in a legal dispute and the focus of the authors and others was elsewhere, helping to reformulate the town's development plans and zoning ordinance on New Urbanist principles. Finally, the project re-emerged in 1997 as an innovative public-private partnership between the town and a private developer.

The particulars of the Cornelius town center project are relatively localized but the site is enmeshed in a much larger tale of regional collaborative planning. We'll briefly describe the planning context as the prelude to the story of the block's dramatic redevelopment, but first, the site itself. It comprises a 10-acre (4 hectares) urban block in the historic center of Cornelius, a small town 20 miles north of Charlotte. The site is located at the intersection of a major north-south regional road, Highway 115, and Main Street, which until the mid-1990s was a main connector to points west. For decades, the block was occupied by a textile mill, housed in a random series of brick and tin sheds of no architectural quality. These industrial buildings were served by a long-defunct rail spur from the nearby freight line, and they lined one side of Main Street with a long, blank

brick wall. In 1990, manufacturing ceased on the site, and the vacant buildings soon became a derelict eyesore at the center of the old town, casting a shroud over the development potential of the surrounding area. Partly as a consequence of this blighted environment, extensive suburban growth sprouted a couple miles away on more pleasing property along the shores of Lake Norman, a very large man-made lake formed for the generation of electricity. Figure 11.1 shows the site with the demolition of the old industrial buildings in progress.

This new development was separated from the old town by Interstate-77, which acted as a barrier between the two parts of the community. This is the same interstate that played a key role in the Mooresville case study in Chapter 9, and Cornelius is situated



Figure 11.1 Aerial Photo of Cornelius Old Mill Site. This photo from 1997 records the early stages of demolishing the old mill buildings, ugly sheds of no architectural quality. (Photograph courtesy of Shook Kelley architects)