

adoption of New Urbanist zoning ordinance, the town, under the guidance of Tim Brown and Craig Lewis, was able to enter into a public–private partnership with a local developer to redevelop the site with a mixture of commercial and residential uses, and a new town hall.

## KEY ISSUES AND OBJECTIVES

The main objective of the mill site redevelopment was to lay the foundation of what would, over a 10–20-year period, become a thriving town center focused on the commuter rail station.

Subsidiary objectives for the site and its immediately surrounding area were:

- Build a new grocery store to serve the older, eastern half of the community bisected by Interstate 77.
- Revive the civic heart of the community by constructing a new town hall to replace the miserable, windowless brick shed that city staff had worked in since the 1930s, together with a new police station, and nearby on a separate site, a new town library.
- Create a new residential population in the historic core by including market-rate and affordable housing on the town center site.
- Redevelop the site to increase the town's tax revenues.
- Stimulate new development in the older eastern part of town to balance the extensive suburban sprawl in the western parts of town on the other side of the interstate.
- Design the site layout to link with a future train station on adjacent land immediately to the east and future transit-oriented residential development on the other side of the tracks.

## THE MASTER PLAN (PLATE 52)

The master plan for the block was designed by the Charlotte architects Shook Design Group (later Shook Kelly), who worked with town officials and the McAdams Company, the private developer. Highway 115 runs south to north along the eastern edge of the property, paralleled by the rail line that will provide the future commuter service between Mooresville and Charlotte. Main Street runs east to west along the bottom of the plan. The design process began in November 1997, construction documents were finalized in May 1998, and the first phase was completed by December of that same year.

Phase I comprised the 33 000 square feet (3066 square meters) grocery store plus 10 000 square feet (929 square meters) of ancillary retail shops on 4.47 acres (1.79 hectares).

This grocery store was visible from Main Street, with its required parking lot directly in front of the store's entrance to conform to the established suburban stereotype, but this conventional arrangement would later be screened by subsequent phases of development along the street edge (see Figure 11.3). This was a neat solution (presaged in Campbell's plan in Figure 11.2) to the problem of fixed attitudes by grocery and other 'big-box' retailers regarding what is to them a mandatory requirement for parking in front of their stores. This design provided parking where it was needed to satisfy this expectation (and those of the conservative lenders who finance such projects), but it established a larger pedestrian-friendly urban frame around the conventional solution. (Also see Figure 11.5).

Phase II comprised the construction of the new town hall, at 27 000 square feet (2508 square meters) nine times the size of the old civic building. While some thought was given to locating this important structure on the southeastern corner, at the junction of two main roads – for visual and symbolic significance – the town and the designers opted for a Main Street location that could be paired with the future police station in a formal, symmetrical arrangement to give a



**Figure 11.3** Grocery store viewed from Main Street. Two rows of three-storey live-work units line the new Cornelius Main Street, creating a space between them through which the grocery store and its parking are clearly visible and accessible. In this way the large parking area does not dominate the townscape.

sense of civic scale and grandeur to the composition. The town hall was also designed by the Shook Kelly to be reminiscent of older courthouses and municipal buildings, with enhanced vertical scale and massive neo-classical symmetry, in order to stamp its civic presence on what could otherwise appear a normative commercial development. Design of the town hall was begun in October 1997, and the building completed in August 1999 (see Figure 11.4).

Phase III, the most important urban design element of the master plan, comprised the construction of two terraces of three-story live-work units along the northern side of Main Street (see Figure 11.5). Designed by Charlotte architect David Furman, these 25 live-work units illustrate some of the complexities of building regulations designed for suburban situations where every building has its own separate use, and stands apart in its own space. These terraces were constructed as three-story residential townhomes because of the difficulty under state-building codes of dealing with the simple mixed-use arrangement of living above the store – the condition that characterized Main Street America for nearly two centuries. To make these buildings suitable for their true use, Furman made the footprint of the building’s plan deeper than normal townhomes to accommodate ground floor business uses. The town’s zoning code then circum-

vented the limitations of the state building code by allowing the street level ‘living room’ to be used as an office or shop as a ‘home occupation.’

These units were marketed in February 2000 for between \$142,000–\$255,000 and quickly sold out, illustrating the impact of America’s fastest growing business sector, the small entrepreneur working from home (Brown: p. 56). Similar buildings have been designed for the eastern frontage of the site along Highway 115, but these constitute a later phase, tied more to the construction of the future train station on the opposite side of the road than to Main Street’s revitalization. This timing and orientation also applies to the remaining buildings planned at the important intersection of Main Street and Highway 115.

Main Street was also redesigned to allow angled parking, a boon for street level businesses, but even this improvement necessitated the town arguing with higher state authorities. As a state-maintained highway, diagonal parking was not allowed under out-of-date regulations that regarded the parking and backing out of cars to be an impediment to the smooth and speedy flow of vehicles. To achieve the pedestrian-friendly improvements necessary for the success of the overall project, the town had to agree to take over maintenance of the street from the state, adding a cost to its municipal budget. Once the



**Figure 11.4** Cornelius Town Hall, Shook Kelley Architects, 1999. The monumental scale of the new town hall was a shock to many local residents, used to paying their taxes and going to meetings in a single-storey shed for several decades. While this building works well and provides excellent facilities for the town, the authors can’t help but wish the architecture had made a more contemporary statement rather than retreating into historicism.



**Figure 11.5** Live-work units on Cornelius Main Street, David Furman, Architect, 2001. These buildings illustrate a common American quandary: progressive urban design constructed with historicist aesthetics. American taste at the beginning of the twenty-first century has little affinity with crisp, modern aesthetics to match the advances in urbanism. Compare this architecture with that illustrated in Figure 3.9.