



Excluding Fast and Slow: Charlottesville's Long Battle over Public Space

Frank Muraca

The “Unite the Right” white-supremacist rally in downtown Charlottesville, Virginia, erupted into violence, killing one person and injuring many others. While local politicians distance themselves from the largest hate gathering in the US, a closer look at Charlottesville’s public spaces reveals the exclusionary tactics of local business-oriented leaders.

“It’s definitely been a sad vibe today but if you didn’t know any better looking out the window, you would think it was a typical Sunday,” one business owner told local media.

On August 13, 2017, the day after the fatal race riot organized by alt-right activists in Charlottesville, Virginia, downtown businesses were thankful for the return to calm.¹ In the weeks leading up to the rally, the Mall’s business owners had lobbied city officials to strictly enforce regulations governing public events, citing concerns about property damage and loss of revenue. Amid the violence of the rally, nearly all the small businesses in and around the city’s pedestrian-only mall decided to shutter their doors for the day.

“We’re losing money based on choices of Charlottesville administrators,” one business owner told *C-Ville Weekly*,² and added that most retailers had also suffered during the KKK rally held earlier this year. One city-council member urged city residents³ to “buy twice as much” the weekend after the rally.

But Charlottesville business leaders, in decrying the destructive impact of polarizing alt-right demonstrations, remained unaware of their own acts of exclusion. In the past decade, as the Mall has become a centerpiece of Charlottesville’s famed quality of life,⁴ business leaders have embarked on a campaign to make it less hospitable to the city’s most economically marginalized. Officials have also targeted residential areas near the Mall for housing development that low-income African-American residents fear will result in their displacement.

The Mall as a civic symbol and site of controversy

The Downtown Mall, an eight-block stretch of a pedestrian-only road, is the epicenter of urban life in Charlottesville, a liberal college town in otherwise conservative rural Virginia. In the summer and fall, the Mall is almost completely shaded by large tree cover, with outdoor seating around its many restaurants, and regularly occupied by street musicians and other performers. Originally designed by San Francisco architect Lawrence Halprin and opened to the public in 1976, the Mall has gone through multiple changes in the social imagination of the community. At times, it has been a symbol of inclusion and quaint, small-town life, hosting art shows, concerts, and peaceful political

¹ See: www.cvilletomorrow.org/news/article/28190-downtown-mall-businesses-reopen-post-rally.

² See: www.c-ville.com/bad-business-city-mobilizes-alt-right-rally.

³ See: www.facebook.com/kristin.szakos/posts/10155196204509934?pnref=story.

⁴ See: www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/27/happiness-place-called-charlottesville-virginia.

rallies; at other times, it has symbolized the community's fears about the discomfort and even violence that accompanies social polarization.

Figure 1. Charlottesville's Downtown Mall



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For example, in the days after the August 12 rally, the Mall featured in depictions of an inclusive Charlottesville. One music video montage circulated on Facebook⁵ featured well-known scenes of local life—families at a popular nearby apple orchard, tailgates at UVA football games, students locked arm-in-arm after a touchdown, and, notably, the downtown pedestrian mall. “What happened yesterday does not represent Charlottesville,” reads the caption. “THIS is the Cville we all know, love, cherish, and call home.”

Yet recent controversies around the Mall reveal ambivalence about the limits of inclusion. A day shelter for the homeless located near the Mall opened in 2010. The Mall also offers places where people can sit without having to afford to shop at the boutique clothing stores or cafés. But the Mall's role as part of the “geography of survival” (Mitchell and Heynen 2009) for Charlottesville's homeless has been under almost constant attack over the past few years. The business community was the first to act, prevailing on the city to enact an anti-panhandling ordinance that was struck down by a federal judge in 2015. But business owners were not the only ones to push for exclusionary policies.

In 2012, the North Downtown Resident Association released a report⁶ that expressed dismay about perceived deterioration of the Mall. The report cited an increase in the presence of homeless people and panhandlers that made the Mall less welcoming to tourists, shoppers, and residents. “I no longer enjoy strolling as the people who are allowed to loiter all day, cuss, have pit bulls, and

⁵ See: www.facebook.com/kmcampbell/videos/vb.1084020092/10211543597760590/?type=2&theater.

⁶ Available online here: http://northdowntown.org/images/uploads/NDRA_Report_on_Mall.pdf.

trash the Mall have taken away the enjoyment for me,” the report quoted one survey respondent. “I do not feel safe and cannot enjoy the library, park or walking my small dog on the Mall.”

In the report, the association proposed that panhandlers be held to the same signage regulations as local businesses. That code—Sec. 34-1041⁷—among other stipulations, says that consideration should be given to “the use of compatible colors; the use of appropriate materials; the size and style of lettering and graphics; and the type of lighting.” That is, panhandlers should design cardboard signs to “blend in” with the aesthetics of the surrounding businesses; a regulation impossible to enforce and even more impossible to follow.

The report also recommended that all sitting be banned on the Downtown Mall. Exceptions included medical emergencies, listening to an entertainer, playing a musical instrument, or using one of the public benches.

Figure 2. Individual seating in the Downtown Mall



© Sean Tubbs, *Charlottesville Tomorrow*.

The Downtown Business Association of Charlottesville (DBAC) has indicated that it believes the Mall’s public seating does too much to encourage lingering by the wrong people, and so should be replaced by backless benches. “You often have people hanging out that keep customers from wanting to come in your store. It doesn’t always happen, but in the past it’s been a problem for several businesses,” Joan Fenton, board chairwoman of the DBAC was quoted in July.⁸ “The benches were repositioned several years ago to lessen that impact, and I think it’s been fairly successful.” Those benches were, in fact, simply removed in 2012⁹ in hopes that they would split up

⁷ See: https://library.municode.com/va/charlottesville/codes/code_of_ordinances?nodeId=CO_CH34ZO_ARTIXGEAPRE_DIV4SI_S34-1041DOUNCOARDECODIPERE.

⁸ See: www.cvilletomorrow.org/news/article/27931-efforts-to-change-downtown-mall-seating-stall.

⁹ See: www.c-ville.com/benches.

groups of “panhandlers and loiterers.” Actions in Charlottesville parallel the aggressive role that architecture and urban design have played in pushing out the homeless in other places. (Chellew 2016; Kinder 2014; Ellin and Blakely 1997).

Collectively, these attitudes, and the policies that flow from them, are a manifestation of the fear and discomfort that those with means feel around those without. The language used by home and business owners to describe the homeless is the same language used by proponents of the “broken-window theory” to justify cracking down on seemingly banal behaviors like sitting, lying, or sleeping (Wilson and Kelling 1982). This theory states that more serious crime invades spaces that are tolerable of disreputable or impolite behavior, and has been the source of a host of exclusionary policies being implemented in America’s urban spaces (Beckett and Herbert 2009). In the case of the Downtown Mall, excluding the homeless is characterized as essential to “protecting” the economic value of the Mall and its surrounding blocks.

The shadow of history

This is not the first time that exclusion and displacement have been used as means for economic development in Charlottesville. In the early 1960s, the city dislocated over 150 homes and businesses in a historically black neighborhood, Vinegar Hill, to make way for what city officials thought would be “better” shops and homes¹⁰ as part of an urban-renewal initiative. In the past few years, this episode in the city’s racial history has been revived as leaders plan to redevelop Friendship Court, a public housing project just south of the Mall, into a mixed-use community. Friendship Court is home to families, most of them black, who receive Section 8 rental assistance. In fact, Friendship Court, along with other affordable housing projects in the area, was first created to house some of those black families who were first dislocated in the 1960s. While affordable housing has been a major topic of conversation around the project, those families are concerned that a major redevelopment to attract new residents and businesses will lead to greater economic exclusion. “Why does it take tearing it down and bringing people in with money in order to give us a nice place to live and better units?” one resident said of the redevelopment process.¹¹ “Why can’t you have enough respect for us and the fact that we’re here, and just do those things for us? Because it’s really not for us, it’s for [the wealthier future residents].”

Excluding fast and slow

In the days following both the KKK and alt-right white-supremacist rallies, in the media and online, community leaders were quick to emphasize that rally attendees were not from Charlottesville, but were instead a foreign presence that exploited the city’s public spaces to express ideas that were contradictory to local values. Some did this by pointing out that rally attendees were, in fact, not local. This was most pointedly illustrated by James Alex Fields Jr., the terrorist who killed one and injured 19 others after running a car into a group of counter-protesters, and lives hundreds of miles away in Ohio.

“This is a disgraceful, discredited, out-of-state organization with the sole purpose of inciting controversy and confrontation and getting some celebrity in the process,” the local paper reported Mayor Mike Signer, commenting on the Loyal White Knights.¹²

“Go home. You are not wanted in this great commonwealth,” Virginia Governor Terry McAuliffe said in a statement after the August 12 rally.¹³ “You came here today to hurt people and that is not patriotic.”

¹⁰ See: <https://timeline.com/charlottesville-vinegar-hill-demolished-ba27b6ea69e1>.

¹¹ See: www.c-ville.com/developing-future-friendship-court-residents-want-say.

¹² See: www.dailyprogress.com/news/local/city-leaders-hoping-to-overshadow-kkk-rally-on-saturday/article_afb7af7a-61e2-11e7-8513-373a848e79c0.html.

Yet commentators and local activists have pointed out the irony that, while Charlottesville may routinely vote Democratic, it has done little to reconcile with its longtime and ongoing racialized history of exclusion. Vinegar Hill and the city's history of displacing black families is not unlike how the Downtown Mall's business and homeowner communities justify the restrictions put on the homeless. And, predictably, the extremity of the August 12 rally has upended Charlottesville's small political universe. A number of city-council meetings, and even a Planning Commission meeting,¹⁴ have been stalled or ended early because of protests by residents who think the city didn't do enough to prevent the violence at the rally or, much more generally, do enough to promote racial equality in the city. In the chorus of opinions about how to move forward, residents and councilors have proposed using a \$9 million tax surplus¹⁵ to invest in affordable housing for the homeless, install a 24-hour public toilet on the Mall, and realize a Vinegar Hill memorial already under development.

But for now, the city continues to grapple with the tension between economic growth and equality. The guns and torches may have left Charlottesville, but the prejudices and fears represented beneath the bureaucratic monotony of zoning codes, architecture and policing practices continue to drive out the poor and exclude longtime black residents.

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¹³ See: www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4785590/Virginia-Gov-Terry-McAuliffe-condemns-white-nationalists.html.

¹⁴ See: www.cvilletomorrow.org/news/article/28789-commission-meeting-ended-by-disrupters.

¹⁵ See: www.cvilletomorrow.org/news/article/29317-council-surplus-discussion.

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To cite this article:

Frank Muraca, “Excluding Fast and Slow: Charlottesville’s Long Battle over Public Space”, *Metropolitiques*, 9 January 2018. URL: <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/Excluding-Fast-and-Slow-Charlottesville-s-Long-Battle-over-Public-Space.html>.