



# Brilliant!

25 big ideas from 30 geniuses for how to make Charlotte a better, more interesting city—and how to make it matter

By Miriam Durkin, Jarvis Holliday, Tamela Rich, Jen Pilla Taylor, and Richard Thurmond  
Photographs by Chris Edwards

@charlottemagazine.com Look for more Big Ideas online—and submit your own. Also, check up on geniuses we've profiled in the past.



Look for more Big Ideas throughout the pages of this issue.



## Todd Mansfield The environmentalist developer

**Todd Mansfield**, fifty, is seemingly a study in contrasts. He's the CEO of Crosland, one of the Southeast's largest developers of apartment complexes and shopping centers, but he's also an active environmentalist. And while his firm's biggest projects have been in the suburbs, he's preparing to take over next year as chairman of Charlotte Center City Partners. He doesn't see the contradiction. —J. P. T.

**"There's no doubt** that we have to have a viable and healthy region in order to have a viable and healthy downtown. They're mutually reinforcing. The reality is that, when we get back to a more traditional level of population and employment growth here, there's no amount of densification of the city core that will absorb all that growth. The outer edge will expand. But the growth shouldn't be like peanut butter—spread around anywhere and everywhere. I think if you roll the clock forward, what we will have and should have are these nodes of development in the inner city and also on the periphery."

**"Studies have shown** that when you have more compact development, it reduces the need for car trips and therefore reduces greenhouse gas emissions. Another one of the advantages of more compact development is that it allows for more land preservation, and that's very important for Charlotte. What has made this city a vibrant place has been the beauty and natural appeal of Charlotte. I'm hopeful that through the preservation of land for parks and bikeways that we can preserve that, because if we spoil that quality of life and the attractiveness of Charlotte, that will be our undoing."

**"What we need is a consistent vision**, developed as a community for what we want Charlotte to be like in the future that will help serve as a guide for how we make decisions about growth issues. I do wonder if we have that clarity of vision."



Have the Urban Land Institute (for which Mansfield just finished a two-year term as national chairman) put on a "Reality Check" like the one recently done in the Triangle area. A few hundred community leaders would participate in the process to come up with a vision for the region's future.

## SAVING US FROM SPRAWL

**TOM LOW** will not rest until we all think differently about planning and design

**I**f you've got an idea, Tom Low has the perfect place to discuss it: the wide, columned veranda of the 1920s Greek revival mansion where his urban planning firm makes its Charlotte office. Nestled behind a Texaco station, between the old Myers Park Hardware building and Providence Café, it's a comfortable spot to contemplate ways to make Charlotte better, with the hum of Providence and Queens roads traffic in the background.

Recently, for example, Low, fifty-three, spent an hour there with former Bank of America CEO Hugh McColl, talking about Low's latest plan: rather than using trailers to ease school overcrowding, construct "learning cot-

**"We're just kind of crazy passionate people like that."**

tages," attractive, low-cost buildings modeled after the "Katrina cottages" being used to house hurricane victims along the Gulf Coast.

And while the school system hasn't signed on to the idea yet, Low's huddle with McColl shows how, after fourteen years of preaching about how better planning and design can improve quality of life in Charlotte, he has the ear of influential folk.

The learning cottage initiative actually was birthed from the Civic Design Forum, a monthly confab founded by Low five years ago as a way to give the design community a stronger voice. Topics have included public art, tear-downs, bike paths, and Eastland Mall. The group's e-mail list has grown to about 2,000, and attendance has varied from as few as ten to as many as 250, Low says, including various public officials.

Eventually, Low envisions the forum morphing into something like Nashville's Civic Design Center, a nonprofit formed to help improve that city's built environment.

All this civic work comes in addition to Low's real job, leading the Charlotte office of Duany Plater-Zyberk & Co., the influential Miami-based firm where Low has worked for twenty years. Locally, DPZ's new urbanist ethos of creating sustainable, compact, walkable, mixed-use communities can be seen in Huntersville at the Vermillion development, but the firm has had a hand in planning hundreds of neighborhoods, cities, downtowns, and other projects across the country.

Low says he knows that he and his staff could work many fewer fourteen-hour days if they would spend less time discussing ideas on the veranda and stick to the work they get paid for. But he sees himself as a new urbanist "movement activist," out to save Charlotte from the scourge of sprawl and bad design.

"We're just kind of crazy passionate people like that," says Low. "I can't really stop myself from instigating this stuff." —J. P. T.



The floundering economy put the breaks on Low's school buildings initiative, so he came up with a plan to create a nonprofit organization through which people could volunteer to help build learning cottages—similar to Habitat for Humanity. The cottages could be constructed in a few days for a fraction of the cost of conventional school buildings.

# HOUSING THE HOMELESS

KATHY IZARD thought someone here should start a program offering permanent housing to the homeless. Then she thought, "Why not me?"

Graphic designer Kathy Izard had volunteered at the Urban Ministry Center for fifteen years when an inspirational speech by a former homeless man changed her life.

"All that good we do in a day," she says of meals, showers, and other services provided for the city's 6,500 homeless people, "but we lock them out to the bad at night. I tried not to think about what happened to them. They're sleeping under the bridges."

She was haunted by the speaker's stories and knew many people in his shoes. Though the city has up to 1,000 temporary shelter beds (the exact number depends on the season), there was still a great need for permanent housing for the chronically homeless.

With others at the center, Izard researched successful housing models in New York City, Philadelphia, and other cities. The key was to have a caseworker help new residents stay healthy and find income. Why didn't someone here start something? Then she thought, "Why not me?"

Izard's graphic design firm is now closed and she's at the helm of UMC's Homeless to Homes. First she created a pilot with thirteen clients in an apartment building. She learned taxpayers benefit because housing keeps those clients out of jail cells and hos-

pitals. She learned the pilot cost about \$30 per night per resident, compared with a \$110 jail stay or a \$1,029 ER visit. And most important, residents received drug treatment, found work, or secured such benefits as food stamps and Medicaid. Those who have income pay rent.

Now Izard, forty-six, has rallied a team to create an eighty-five-unit apartment complex. David Furman has donated architectural services. Volunteer Matt Wall led the search for land and UMC has an option on two acres in north Charlotte. Joann Markley is the case manager, and the C. D. Spangler Foundation has committed \$500,000. Total needed: \$10 million.

"I answered a call," Izard says. "If I'd known how hard it was going to be, I'm not sure I would have picked up the phone. But getting up every morning under a bridge is a lot harder than doing this." —M. D.

## BIG IDEA

"We have to have units available all over Charlotte so people can live near employment opportunities," she says, "and to achieve this, all districts need to work together to create a citywide locational housing policy."



## Sharon Portwood

### Working on the nonprofit holy grill

UNCC's impossible task: find someone with an undergrad in advertising, a law degree, and a doctorate in cultural psychology and hire him or her to head up the university's Institute for Social Capital Inc. (ISC). Fortunately for the university, and for the Charlotte community, Sharon Portwood has that exact set of degrees. Although the institute is only five years old, its role as facilitator and evaluator of social services programs will be increasingly critical as budgets tighten, demands for services increase, and the United Way deals with its distractions.

The forty-eight-year-old Portwood will draw on the persuasive skills of an ad exec when encouraging community organizations to allocate resources to a collaborative effort (for example, homelessness). Under Portwood's direction, participant and program data from dozens of collaborating community organizations and faith communities that provide services to children, youth, and families will be analyzed and efforts will be evaluated. And, hopefully, those groups will learn whether their programs are working. "This is what universities should be doing," Portwood says. "They can't serve the world's problems at arms' length."

But the ISC does more than computing. It provides administrative expertise and resources to plan and evaluate large-scale, multipartner collaborative efforts. Persuading dozens of agencies to collaborate on a project and share confidential data can be daunting, but the former litigator says she's up to it. "This is the job I was meant to do." —T. R.



## Josh Thomas

### Accidental environmentalist

This spring, at the culmination of a leadership seminar, Josh Thomas told 250 community leaders that he was going to get Charlotte's kids outside.

"Since then," says Thomas, thirty-seven, "three different people have come up to me to say, 'Aren't you the guy who's going to take kids outside in Charlotte?'"

Thomas is a principal at strategic communications firm Topics Education. When *An Inconvenient Truth* came out on DVD, Topics and Thomas developed the corresponding curriculum. He's also the chair of the local Sierra Club.

The father of three is also co-founder of the N. C. Children in Nature Coalition. The coalition is scheduled to launch October 14 with an event and lecture by Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods*. —R. T.

"If people aren't outside in the middle of nature, they're not going to care about it. We need to get people outside to know what it is that we're asking them to help protect."

"You don't have to be a trained artist to understand that Da Vinci was a master. And you don't have to be a trained botanist to understand that those redwoods are pretty freaking awesome."

"There's gotta be a reason so much art and poetry was focused on nature."

"I've coached soccer, and the kids are generally having fun, but not like when they're in the backyard and no adults are around. There's freedom and uninhibited joy in unstructured play."

"Taking your kids on a hike can't be about the destination. Even if it's 500 yards away, it may take you an hour. Because there's so much along the way to see if you're willing to see it."

# SPEAKING OF ART...

MANOJ KESAVAN's lunchtime salon has grown into a full-blown support group for creatives

It didn't take Manoj Kesavan long to start making an impact on his new home. A few weeks after Odell and Associates, an uptown architecture firm, recruited him to Charlotte in 2002, he began organizing regular salons over lunch in the Odell conference room. Six colleagues attended the first one. Kesavan doesn't remember the topic, but the idea was for the architects to, as he says, "remember why we became architects."

Before long, he was inviting neighboring gallery owners and artists. Fast-forward seven years. The group has a name

presenter gets twenty slides and twenty seconds per slide. There are no other guidelines. Point8 has hosted three Pecha Kucha nights (which is why the forums are on hold) with a fourth to come early this fall. As many as 300 people have attended.

While others in the creative community complain about a lack of support or media coverage, Kesavan says that's a waste of energy. "It's more what we can do, not what others should be doing. ... Creative people need to step up and create an impact so people notice it." Even if it's just six people talking over lunch. —R. T.

Creative people need to step up and create an impact so people notice it.

(point8), a Web site (point8.org), a mushrooming e-mail list, and 50 to 100 attendees at its forums (although the monthly forums are on hold for a reason we'll get to later). The mission has long expanded beyond architecture. Each forum still has a topic (past examples: "Stadium: The Disposable Cathedral" and "Transcending Pop"), "but they are all framed in such a way that whatever medium you are in, you can relate to it," Kesavan says. Point8's goal, Kesavan adds, "is to find common ground that ties together otherwise unrelated creative fields."

Kesavan, thirty-eight and a native of India, thinks Charlotte, if for no other reason than its size, has potential to be an artistic hub. "Any decent-size city has a large number of creative people," he says, "however, what is often lacking is this kind of venue for critique. ... There should be strong, objective, critical attention being paid to whatever is being created, so that some standards are set, so the people who create the stuff get some feedback so they can improve their stuff."

It's that line of thinking that led Kesavan and point8 to bring Pecha Kucha to town. A Japanese concept for which cities have to submit a rigorous application, Pecha Kucha is like an open mic night for the arts. Each

## BIG IDEA

"Let's face it: even though we like to pretend (and sometimes believe) otherwise, Charlotte is still a provincial town on the cultural map, far away from the spotlight. However, the world has changed: everyone, almost anywhere in the world, is more connected to everyone else. Moreover, the traditional media and the associated power structures that defined the cultural centers have eroded in recent years—things have opened up. As the history of art shows, great new ideas and movements rarely develop in the power centers. The relative privacy of being away from the spotlight often spurs the growth of original ideas into fresh new movements, which eventually command attention from everyone elsewhere."

"After a decade of a self-conscious adolescence of fast growth, Charlotte needs to stop looking outside for ideas and direction and draw inspiration from the often-unfashionable realities around us. We need to value what we have here, and encourage, challenge, and critique each other. We also need to hold on to the faith that something good can come out of Nazareth, as it could from New York."

"Our Lady of Incessant Tweets will take care of the rest."

MOORE PLACE  
When it opens, the eighty-five units will house the chronically homeless.



COURTESY OF KATHY IZARD



**BIG IDEA**

## MATCHING NEEDY TENANTS WITH AFFORDABLE HOUSING

A middle-of-the-night epiphany spurred frustrated social worker Van Gottel to launch **Socialserve.com**, a nonprofit Web site that matches people with affordable rental housing. Though other rental-search Web sites exist, Gottel's model is so innovative that he now has contracts for its use with government housing agencies in twenty-seven states and major cities including New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Houston. While most sites are run to benefit landlords, Gottel's site puts the tenants' needs first, says marketing director Beth Leysieffer. Prospective tenants can search by price, location, proximity to hospitals or public transportation, availability of subsidies, wheelchair access, or even by whether a criminal background check is required. Socialserve.com also offers a call center whose staffers take a personal interest in resolving the tenant's housing needs. Landlords post their property for free. And true to Gottel's sense of mission, many of Socialserve.com's fifty-plus employees are former homeless people. "We believe that we've all been given a chance in life, and we give chances here," Gottel says. "I asked myself why was I here every day, until the middle of that night when the idea for Socialserve came to me."

—M. D.

## THE URBAN FRONTIERSMAN

**RICH DEMING** is an evangelist for self-sufficiency—while still living an urban lifestyle

**W**hen you learn that Rich Deming is modifying a wine cooler into an extreme low-energy-use fridge, building a solar oven, and converting a discarded water heater to solar power, you might form a mental picture of a man in a tool belt. But when you learn that he's a biofuels entrepreneur and a certified beekeeper who has started two community gardens, the mental picture becomes more collage than snapshot.

Deming wants to live as far off the grid as possible while living in the city and thinks more people would want to do the same if they had the tools. Six years ago, Deming was running a construction firm that he built to \$24 million in annual revenues. Now he subleases 350 square feet in the Cherry neighborhood, where he lives in part to minimize driving. So far he's winnowed it to about five miles a week, which takes two gallons of fuel a month. "I had the big stupid life and then woke up. Now I'm so much happier."

Once he decided his "big stupid life" wasn't going to get better on its own, he moved in with a friend in Waxhaw and planted a half-acre garden. Something sparked. He followed his new agricultural obsession to farm conferences, which led him to enroll in a boot camp for making diesel out of vegetable oil. He partnered with a fellow boot camper to open Fat City Formulae. Fat City turns discarded vegetable oil from restaurants and culinary schools into the partners' personal biodiesel supply. It also makes tiki torch fuel, fire starter, and a wood treatment coating (available in some area Earth Fare stores).

**RICH DEMING** ▶ He's a beekeeper, community gardener, and sustainability guru.

**"I had the big stupid life and then woke up. Now I'm so much happier."**

This summer, Deming joined South End-based Calor Energy, a sustainability and renewable resources consulting company. One of his projects is to help the nine-county Centralina Council of Governments apply for federal Energy Efficiency Conservation Block Grants. "I'm intrigued by how to pull the levers," he says, smiling. —T. R.

**BIG IDEA**

"If everyone bought their fuel and their food from someone who made it themselves within a couple hundred miles, and no one felt the need to build monuments to themselves in the form of McMansions, we wouldn't have an environmental crisis." Deming's community garden at Friendship Trays epitomizes his philosophy. The plot uses captured roof water and provides culinary students with a working food lab. Friendship Trays is a community organization that prepares and delivers meals to the elderly and infirm. So its clients also get the freshest and most healthful food possible.

