



Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

Urbanism Without Effort: Reconnecting with First Principles of the City

By Charles R. Wolfe

The Atlanta Urbanist Book Group met on Feb. 4, 2026 to discuss *Urbanism Without Effort: Reconnecting with First Principles of the City*. Charles R. Wolfe is an attorney and college lecturer.

Urbanism Without Effort has a caution for urbanists: Don't get carried away by urban design concepts and public policies. And do not think that what works in one place will work equally as well in another.

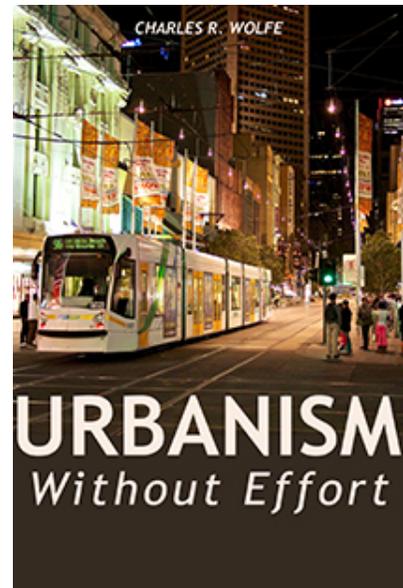
The places that add the most to cities—because they attract people who enjoy being around others—are unique to their locations and for the most part are unplanned, the book says. In other words, they simply work.

The job of urbanists: See these places, help others recognize their value, and nurture them without being overly prescriptive.

In our discussion, we identified some of these naturally occurring urban places in the Atlanta area. And we talked about what it would take for more people in our region to see and appreciate these assets.

Among the successful places: Little Five Points in Atlanta, the town squares in Lawrenceville and Decatur, and Atlanta's Beltline. One place we think may be a highly successful urban place is South Downtown in Atlanta. That's because of its design, location and transportation connections.

All of these places have supporting organizations, from community improvement districts and business associations to local governments and nonprofits. To their credit, the organizations have been careful not to change the character of these places. That, Wolfe would say, is why they have continued to succeed.



Four Big Ideas

The Atlanta Urbanist Book Group highlights ideas from books that we think could make Urban Atlanta better. Here are four big ideas drawn from *Urbanism Without Effort* that we believe Urban Atlanta could benefit from:

1. We need to identify places that naturally attract people in our cities.
2. A useful tool for seeing and understanding these places is an “urban diary.” Basically, it is a collection of photographs of successful gathering places with descriptions of what makes them so appealing.
3. Zoning has hindered the development of naturally occurring urban places. This may explain why most of these places were created before zoning imposed uniformity on cities.
4. We must be careful about transplanting urban designs that work in one place to another. Naturally occurring urban places succeed by being unique. Our aim should be to preserve their uniqueness.

Why Do These Things?

Urbanism Without Effort tells us how unplanned places can succeed and suggests ways of protecting them. Here’s why we should make the effort in the Atlanta area to catalog, understand and protect these places:

- They are often not obvious. If we want to make cities better, it’s important that we search for and see our successes.
- In doing so, it may prevent us from turning successes into failures. There is a tendency in architecture, urban planning and commercial real estate to borrow what works in one place and transplant it to another. As the book indicates, this can kill a successful public place.
- The best thing about naturally occurring public places is their uniqueness. Atlanta does not have enough unique, appealing places, the kinds that residents take out-of-town visitors to see and enjoy. We need more such places and a good first step is recognizing and understanding the ones we have.

What Are the Obstacles? What Are Our Strengths?

Even the most worthwhile efforts create opposition. Our members discussed some of the obstacles or barriers the big ideas might face in Urban Atlanta. Here are some:

- In a word, negativity. It is easier to see our problems than to recognize our successes.
- And, in truth, we have things in the Atlanta area that work against naturally occurring urban places, including our car-centric transportation system and zoning. Lively public places—the ones that encourage people-watching—need pedestrians. They also need the ability to develop in unexpected ways. It is difficult to create surprising interplays of place and people if zoning forbids it.
- As mentioned above, architects and urban planners are trained to borrow ideas from one place to use in another.
- We don’t have groups that actively help people see our unique gathering places and appreciate their value.

Urban Atlanta has strengths that could help us with some of the obstacles. We discussed Urban Atlanta’s strengths. Here are a few:

- We have a strong sense of neighborhood identity in Atlanta. Neighborhood associations could be the leaders in developing public places that make Candler Park or Cascade Heights, for example, distinctive.
- While we have too many cars, we see signs that Atlantans are ready for new forms of transportation that could make the development of naturally occurring urban places easier. The crowds on the Beltline are a sign of this change in attitude.

- The Atlanta Regional Commission's [Livable Communities Initiative](#) has done important work in the past 25 years in helping cities develop walkable places. Among the places LCI has helped are downtown Decatur and downtown Lawrenceville.
- We have respected architecture and planning schools in the Atlanta area. These schools could train future architects and planners to care for naturally occurring urban places.
- Other parts of Atlanta's universities could also be helpful in seeing and understanding unique gathering places.

Ways Around the Obstacles

These are difficult obstacles and impressive strengths. Here are some ideas our members offered for overcoming the barriers, using our strengths:

- Neighborhoods and their neighborhood associations could start talking with each other about the value of gathering places and how they can be encouraged.
- An important part of this conversation should be about why cars work against the development of naturally occurring urban places.
- Our universities could be important to seeing and valuing these unique places. First, by training architects and planners to care for such places. Second, by encouraging other students to catalog and explain the naturally occurring urban places in the Atlanta area.
- ARC's Livable Communities Initiative could add the care of unique urban places into its programs.

A Synopsis of *Urbanism Without Effort*

Urbanism Without Effort: Reconnecting with First Principles of the City is 134 pages, not including notes, preface and index. It has four chapters plus an introduction and a closing chapter. It was published in 2019 following an earlier edition that was offered only as an e-book.

Charles R. Wolfe is an attorney, land-use consultant and college lecturer. He lives in Seattle and London.

As mentioned above, this book has a caution for urbanists: Don't get carried away by urban design concepts and public policies. If you do, Wolfe warns, you won't get the cities you want. That's because, while mixed uses, transit-oriented developments, parking reforms and bike lanes may be helpful and even necessary, they aren't sufficient to make your city come to life.

What's missing? Basically, he argues, the unplanned city of spontaneous meetings, lively corners, unique combinations of retail and housing, street trees, benches and sidewalk cafes. You cannot create these things with a master plan, but you can recognize these places by paying attention. And once they are seen, you can nurture them.

"Understanding what lies beneath an enticing, well-scaled urban setting—a comfortable sidewalk cafe, children playing safely in an alleyway—can inform policy and planning efforts that more fully resonate with the particular *culture* and *context* of a place," Wolfe writes. "Without such a preface of integrity, we are left with merely catchy ideas plucked from a catalog of trendy, oversubscribed options."

If this sounds familiar, it echoes what Jane Jacobs wrote in 1961 in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, when she said that you cannot understand cities using deductive reasoning. (That is, by starting with a set of rules or principles that you impose on places.) Cities are too complex for such things. You can only understand urban places, Jacobs said, through observation and inductive reasoning. Once you see something that works, then you can try to figure out why it works—and how it can be encouraged.

So how can you see success? Wolfe offers a way: with something he calls an “urban diary.” Walk around your city, see where people are congregating happily and safely and take photos of the people and the places. Then ask why these places work and others do not.

Much of this book is Wolfe’s own urban diary, with street scenes from North America and Europe. There are photos of Paris’ Luxembourg Garden and sidewalk cafes, the *passeigs* (walkable boulevards) of Barcelona, small retail courtyards near Covent Garden in London, the pedestrian nightlife of Florence, Italy and an alleyway in Seattle where neighbors watch movies projected on the walls.

What you will notice as you study these photos, Wolfe says, is that the best urban places encourage people-watching as a pastime. Often there’s an interesting mixture of the built and natural environments, such as along waterfronts or at the edges of parks. Some lively places are where transportation connects with appealing land uses. Buses and streetcars bring people into the area, and restaurants and benches give them a reason to linger. (Wolfe calls this “movement” and “settlement.”)

There’s more: Good urban places usually have older buildings that have been adapted for new uses. There is almost always a variety of land uses, from retail and work to residential. There’s density and street life. There may be a number of transit modes, from walking and cycling to cars and transit. There are “porous borders” between public and private spaces, so you don’t find blank walls. Rather, you see windows, gates and doors. There may be landmarks, interesting architecture and colorful plazas.

Wolfe has a particular affection for street corners, which he calls “one of the central places of urban life.” That’s for two reasons: They are crossroads, which increases the activity around these intersections, and they have a three-dimensional quality that makes them “visible and accessible.” Little wonder, then, that stores want to be on corner lots.

Are there such places in Urban Atlanta? Yes, and some are obvious, like the Beltline and Little Five Points in Atlanta or the square in downtown Decatur. What we lack is a place for documenting these examples of “naturally occurring urbanism” and discussing why they work so well.

But even if we did, Wolfe would urge us to be cautious. Jumping to the conclusion that we know why some places work and others don’t, can lead us to do things that could destroy the thing we value. How? Because, he writes, “we sometimes regulate away the urban vitality of our cities by attempting complex, prescriptive fixes—aimed at modeling or reclaiming what use to evolve naturally—and ironically squelch first principles of human shelter and transportation.” So, observe and learn, but go easy on the prescriptions.

Also, he counsels, know that what works in one place may not work in another. Many visitors have been enchanted by the San Antonio River Walk. But when they try to build something similar back home, they are often disappointed. That’s because it isn’t just the river or the walk, but the boats, the bridges, the architecture, the trees, the sidewalk umbrellas and the crowds that make the San Antonio River Walk so special.

About the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

Our mission at the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group is to introduce new ideas to Urban Atlanta by reading recent books about cities, identifying the ideas we think would work in Atlanta, and offering civic leaders a guide to these ideas.

We define “urbanism” broadly. We are reading books about transportation, land use, housing, public safety, government reform, neighborhoods, social infrastructure, education, economic development, regionalism, diversity, politics, arts and culture, volunteerism, and more.

Our aim isn't to review books but to **show how their ideas apply to Atlanta today** and suggest ways of moving from good ideas to good actions.

You can learn more about the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group at atlantaurbanist.com.