

IN RURAL APPALACHIA, THE MULTIDISCIPLINARY FIRM STEWART HELPS TO STEER A SMALL CITY WITH A HISTORIC OPPORTUNITY ON ITS HANDS.

BY JARED BREY

# THE BIG DEAL



**S**TEVE BAKER HAS NEVER FOUND ANY OFFICIAL RECORDS, BUT HE TELLS THE STORY THE WAY IT WAS TOLD TO HIM.

IN THE LATE 1870s, when Frederick Law Olmsted was laying out the landscape for the Western North Carolina Insane Asylum, he asked every county in the state to send a locally significant tree species to plant on the grounds so that patients and visitors could experience the breadth of North Carolina's arboreal patrimony. At the time there were around 90 counties in North Carolina. They sent ginkgos, magnolias, catalpas, and hemlocks. A handful sent pin oaks, which were planted carefully around the grounds.

**ABOVE**  
Broughton Hospital, originally the Western North Carolina Insane Asylum, was designed to give patients access to manicured grounds and daily exercise.

"And they are *monsters*," Baker says. "Still thriving."

Baker grew up a few miles from what was later renamed Broughton Hospital, in Morganton, North Carolina. His father worked there in maintenance his whole life, and Baker himself was a psychiatric

**OPPOSITE**  
North Carolina has commissioned a plan to develop 800 acres surrounding a historic psychiatric hospital in Morganton.

STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA, TOP RIGHT: JARED BREY, OPPOSITE



**LEFT**  
The hospital's original Kirkbride Plan building was designed to complement the Dorothea Dix Hospital in Raleigh.

**BELOW**  
Patients worked in on-site farms to grow their own food.



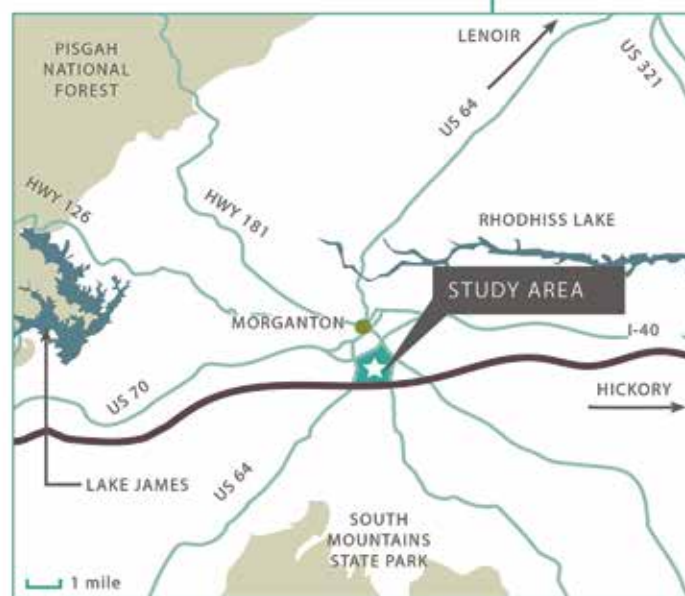
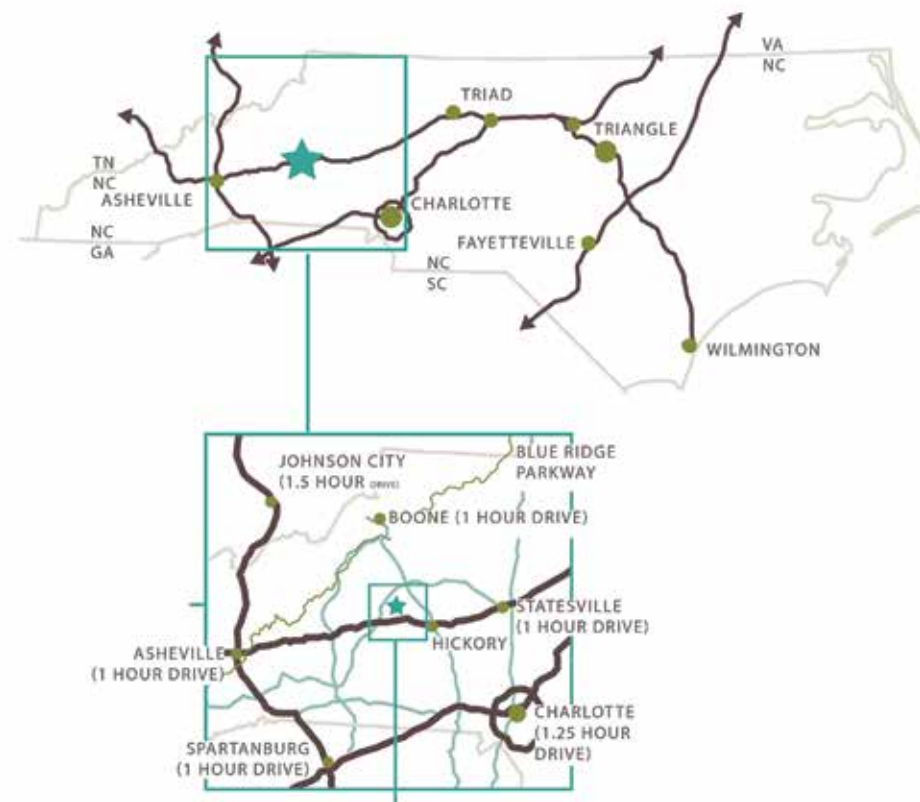
aide at the hospital before he joined the Air Force as a medic. He ran a cell phone store in town for 20 years and then returned to the hospital, training new employees there for another decade before retiring eight years ago. When he gives tours of the old hospital, where patients were treated until 2019, Baker makes sure visitors see the original chapel with its cathedral ceilings—the work of “craftsmen,”

unlike the new facility nearby. He talks about how mental health treatment has changed. And he tells the story about Olmsted designing the hospital grounds, a precursor to his work at the Biltmore in Asheville, an hour west.

It doesn't quite add up. There are no records indicating that Olmsted or his firm ever worked in Morganton, and his name doesn't appear in the hospital complex's nomination to the National Register of Historic Places, where it was listed in 1987. But the story has seeped into the local lore, and people repeat it with a kind of provisional pride, always attributing it to someone else. The landscape has qualities that are plausibly Olmstedian, which says as much about where it came from, and the

people who have kept it alive, as anything you could find in an archive.

In 2014, the North Carolina General Assembly commissioned a study of potential reuses for the historic hospital property, which was scheduled to go vacant when the new Broughton Hospital opened. The state hired the Development Finance Initiative (DFI)—a program of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's School of Government that helps local governments with planning and development challenges—to complete the study. DFI in turn hired Stewart, the North Carolina-based engineering, planning, and landscape architecture firm, to lead a team of consultants and provide design services for a new



improvements and public amenities to unlock the area's development potential.

“The majority of the 800 acres, the heart of it really, needs to be preserved for its cultural heritage,” says Michael Batts, ASLA, a vice president at Stewart who led the master plan. “But within that, there's an incredible amount of [potential for] economic development.”

I met with Batts and Eric Thomas, a senior project manager for DFI, in the parking lot behind the Avery Building, the original hospital building designed by the Philadelphia architect Samuel Sloan. It was a rainy day in November. Fog pooled up between the hills around Morganton, changing colors through the rolling elevations. Groves of mature trees punctuate the neatly mowed lawns that blanket the hills surrounding the hospital. Hunting Creek, flooded and inaccessible on the day we visited, flows across the bottom of the range.

The new district, such as it is, is sprawling and disjointed. To trace the entire perimeter of the study area, we had to drive to four different entrances (caravan style to maintain social distance) and merge onto Interstate 40 to get to the next site. Thomas peeled off for a few minutes to refill his gas tank.

master plan. The study, published in 2016 as *[Re]imagining Broughton*, took a wide-angle view of the site's potential. More than just a massive, historic hospital building, according to the study the area had the “makings of a district”: 800 acres of publicly owned land in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, with dramatic views in every direction. The team, which included Belk Architecture and Gensler as architectural consultants, recommended a strategy that led with landscape

STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA

STEWART



**LEFT**  
The hospital complex was closed in 2014, giving rise to a variety of adaptive reuse proposals.

The Avery Building was built at the top of a high hill, with its 140-year-old cupola jutting into the sky. The prominent site suggests that when the state commissioned the hospital, it wanted to show it off. But it may not have had many options anyway, Thomas said. “It is what you get out here,” he said. “It’s hard to find flat land that isn’t floodplain.”

Parking lots and service buildings have sprung up around the original hospital in the century and a half since it was built, but its immediate surroundings are still defined by rolling lawns and tall trees. The broader landscape is institutional—home to the North Carolina School for the Deaf, which opened in 1894; Western Piedmont Community College; Burke County Jail; and the

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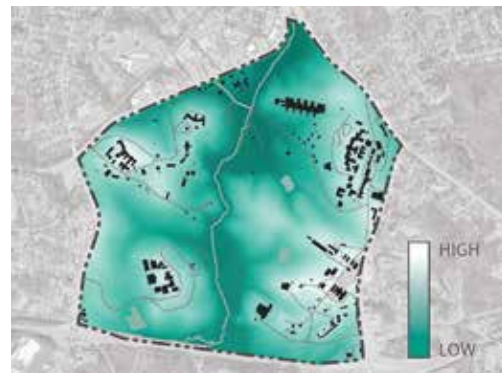
new Broughton Hospital—and agrarian, with hayfields in the middle distance. The Blue Ridge Mountains frame the area, geographically and culturally. “Welcome to Morganton—Nature’s Playground,” says the sign at the edge of town. The neighboring town of Valdese is home to a Foothills Temporary Employment agency and a Foothills Thrift Store, and a mural that depicts

million in private development. That comprehensive approach to redevelopment would cost \$140 million in public investment, according to the plan, while a narrower focus on the hospital campus would cost \$95 million and generate just \$25 million in private investment. And the public would pay millions even if no improvements were made at all.

the emigration of the Waldensians, a religious sect in Europe, from the Alps of Italy to the North Carolina Piedmont. The North Carolina State Parks system is at work on the Fonta Flora State Trail, connecting Morganton to Asheville. Outside Morganton City Hall, an iron bench is cast in the shape of Table Rock Mountain, an iconic peak on the rim of Linville Gorge in the Pisgah National Forest.

*[Re]imagining Broughton* concluded that through a combination of public investment in amenities and green space, selective preservation of historic buildings, and the sale of some public land, the 800-acre district could attract more than \$150

TOPOGRAPHY AND ELEVATION



HYDROLOGY AND AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTIVITY



HISTORIC GROUNDS



**ABOVE**  
The 800-acre district is crossed by Hunting Creek, and constrained by steep elevations and historic protections on some buildings.

**OPPOSITE**  
Rather than plan for the hospital grounds in a vacuum, the team zoomed out to consider development opportunities on surrounding public lands.

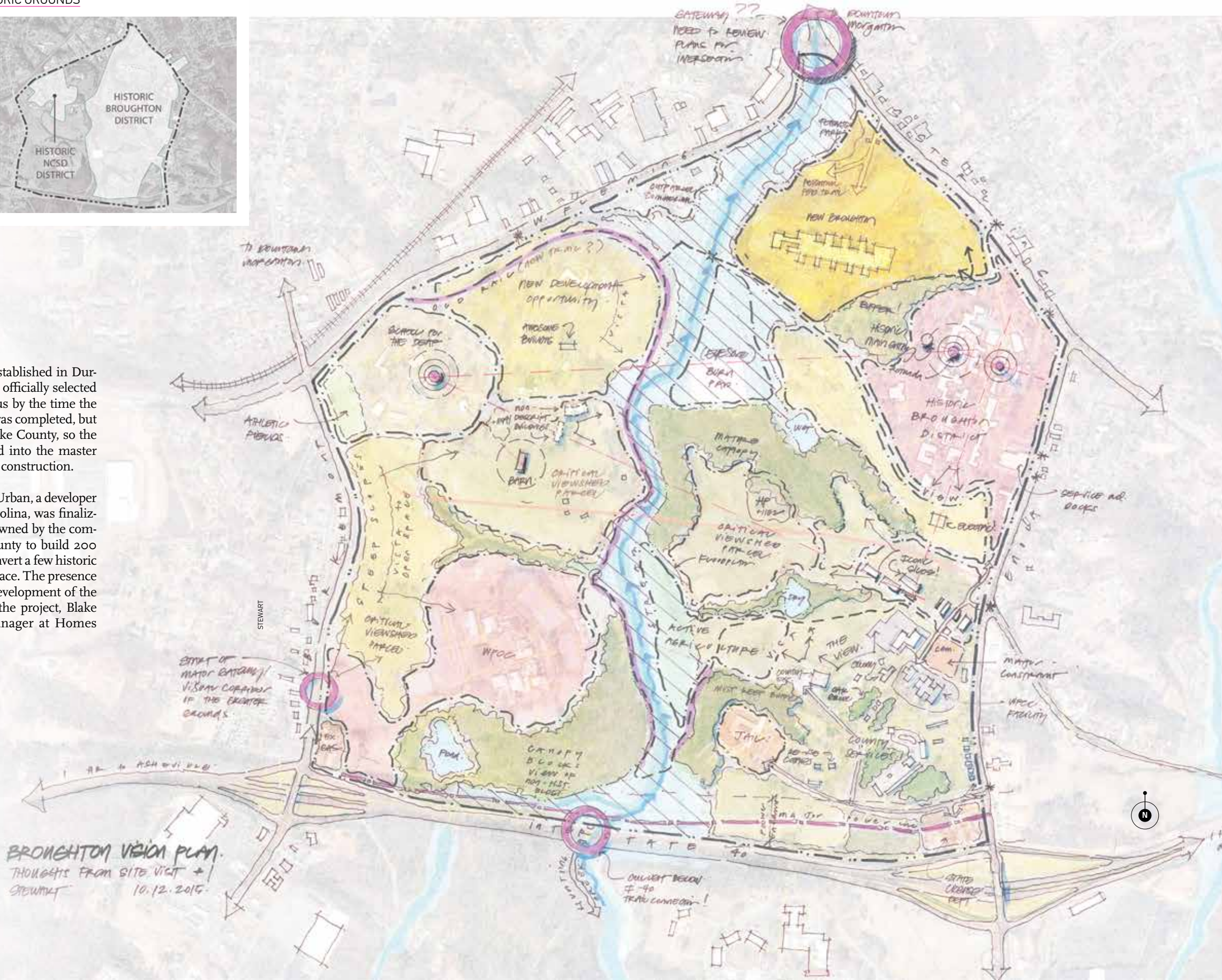
The state of North Carolina is one of the largest landholders in Burke County, and for the City of Morganton, 19 square miles with a population of 16,577, the stakes for redevelopment are high. The Avery Building is visible from the interstate and two gateways into downtown Morganton, and 40,000 drivers pass by it every day. Its presence has an impact on how people perceive the city, says Sally Sandy, who has served as city manager since 1998. Morganton is part of the Main Street America network, and the city has spent a lot of effort to revitalize its downtown, even moving its city hall offices into an old hosiery mill that was converted into a mixed-use apartment building on Union Street in the center of town. Morganton's growth will be shaped by the redevelopment of the Broughton campus, and by the potential of getting land that has been long held by public entities onto the tax rolls.

"When the plans for the new hospital were coming, I was like, okay, folks, we've got some beautiful buildings over here, we've got some not-so-beautiful buildings, we've got some history, but what we can't do is vacate it, build a fence around it, and watch it rot," Sandy says.

Two projects are under way. In 2017, the North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics (NCSSM) completed a master plan for its new campus, placed along a ridge on property formerly owned by the School for the Deaf. The school, a selective-enrollment public high school

for juniors and seniors, was established in Durham in 1980. The state hadn't officially selected Morganton for the new campus by the time the 2016 Broughton master plan was completed, but it was clear it would be in Burke County, so the new campus was incorporated into the master plan. The school is now under construction.

As of the end of 2020, Homes Urban, a developer based in Greenville, South Carolina, was finalizing the purchase of 29 acres owned by the community college and Burke County to build 200 new luxury apartments and convert a few historic silos into office and amenity space. The presence of the state hospital and the development of the new school eased the risk of the project, Blake Muldrow, a development manager at Homes Urban, told me.



“THE MAJORITY OF THE 800 ACRES, THE HEART OF IT REALLY, NEEDS TO BE PRESERVED FOR ITS CULTURAL HERITAGE.”

—MICHAEL BATTS, ASLA

For the planning process, DFI produced a *Developer Deal Book*, illustrating development potential at a few sites within the district. Among the opportunities it showcased were a mixed-use complex on “Silo Ridge,” where the Homes Urban project is now planned, a hotel along Interstate 40 next to the community college, and various residential development sites. The designers also planned for a stormwater pond in the center of the district, improved greenway trails along Hunting Creek, and a public “gateway park” at the entrance to downtown Morganton. The hospital would be moved out of the old building but stay within the district, keeping a critical mass of jobs and people in place.

“It’s not like developers are chomping at the bit to get in there, although we are seeing a lot of interest because the land is beautiful,” Thomas says. “But we determined that it’s going to take public investment in amenities, and relocating certain facilities that were active, in order to make it attractive for a private developer to come in and develop the projects that the stakeholder group wanted to see.”

Stewart is also working on the landscape for the new NCSSM campus. The school wanted the campus to be a contrast to its urban site in Durham. Batts is working a series of wellness retreats into the school’s grounds, areas that give students space to socialize outdoors or frame views to the pond, the farmlands, and the surrounding mountains.

### 2020 DISTRICT PLAN

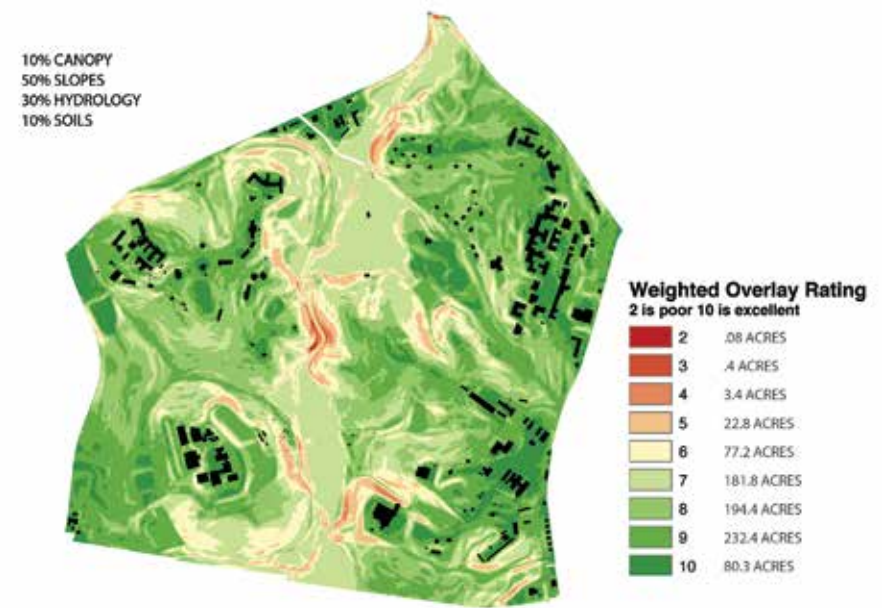
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- 2 MULTIFAMILY RESIDENTIAL
- 3 HOTEL + SPA
- 4 WESTERN PIEDMONT COMMUNITY COLLEGE
- 5 GREENWAY
- 6 SENIOR LIVING COMMUNITY
- 7 SCHOOL FOR THE DEAF
- 8 STORMWATER POND
- 9 PARK AND ATHLETIC FIELDS
- 10 NEW BROUGHTON HOSPITAL
- 11 GATEWAY PARK
- 12 FUTURE INTERSECTION DESIGN
- 13 DOWNTOWN MORGANTON
- 14 ACTIVE AGRICULTURE



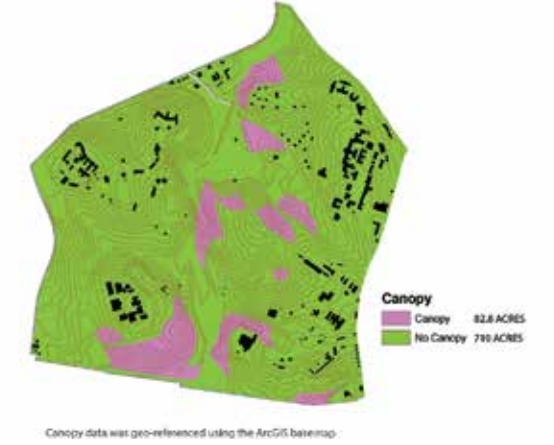
BROUGHTON HOSPITAL SUITABILITY ANALYSIS



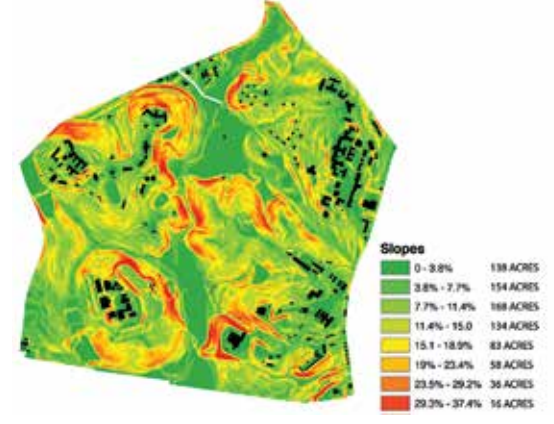
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CANOPY ANALYSIS



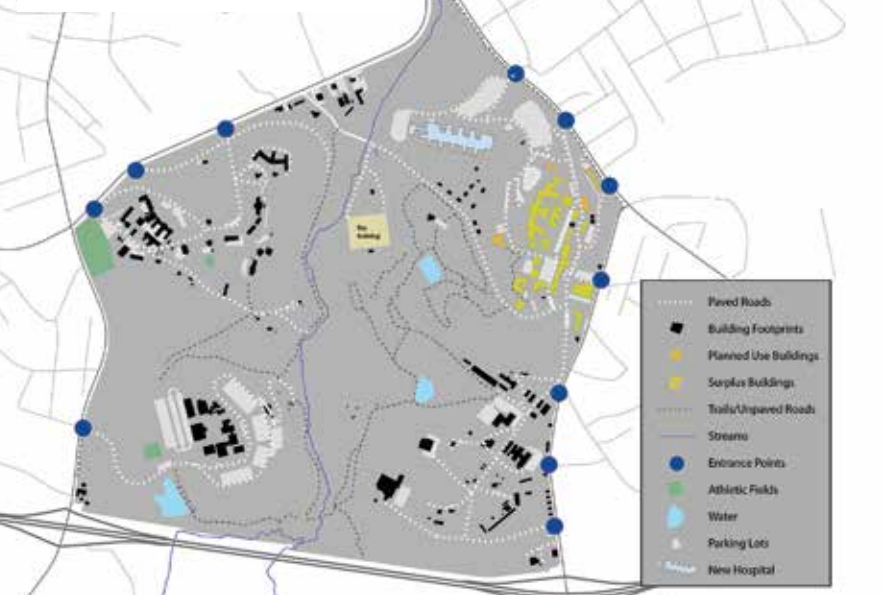
SLOPE ANALYSIS



EXISTING CONDITIONS



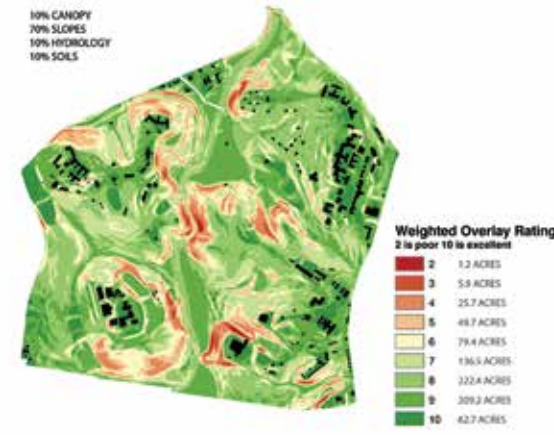
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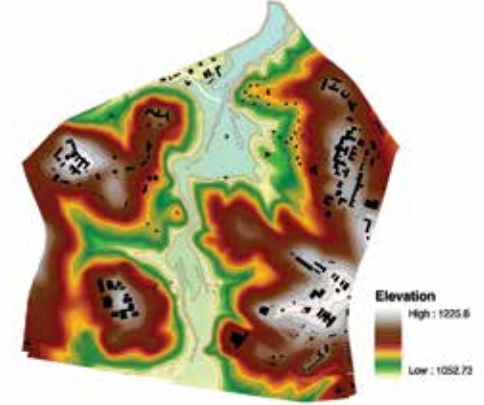
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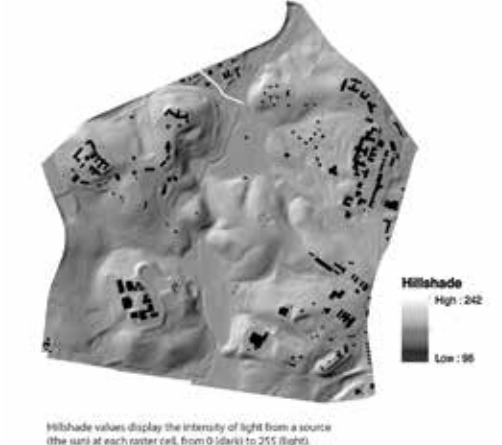
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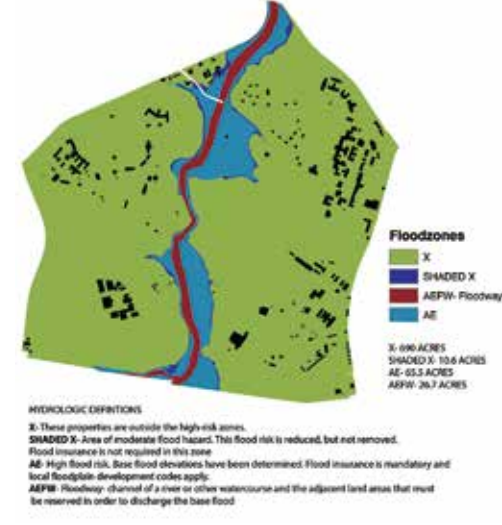
ELEVATION ANALYSIS



HILLSHADE ANALYSIS



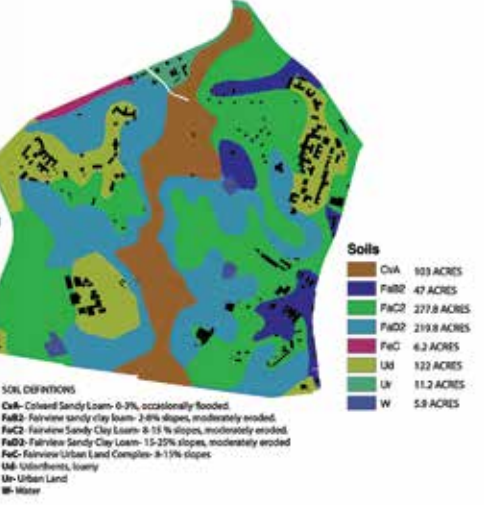
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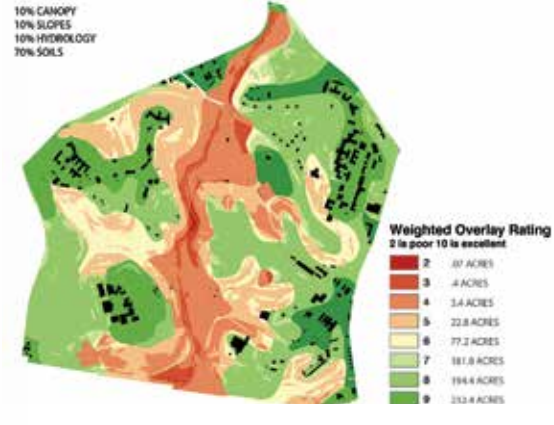
WEIGHTED OVERLAY-HYDROLOGY FOCUS



SOILS ANALYSIS



WEIGHTED OVERLAY-SOIL FOCUS



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CURRENT | HISTORIC BROUGHTON CAMPUS



PROPOSED | RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL



CURRENT | UNDERUSED SCHOOL FOR THE DEAF PROPERTY



PROPOSED | SENIOR LIVING



CURRENT | UNDERUSED COLLEGE AND COUNTY PROPERTY



PROPOSED | HOSPITALITY VILLAGE



→ In November, Kevin Baxter, the vice chancellor and chief campus officer for the school's western campus, walked us through the construction site. The school is fund-raising for future development while completing the core academic buildings and expecting to open in the fall of 2022. It hopes to adapt a historic barn that was once used by the School for the Deaf for assembly space. And it is placing its new buildings along the ridge east of the barn, with views down to the pond and morning light coming into what will one day be the library. "One of the early questions was, do we give kids a chance to go in between buildings

without going outside? And we said, absolutely not," Baxter said. "Force them outside." The biggest challenge by far, and likely the last piece to be finished, even if everything goes better than hoped for, is the adaptation of the Avery Building. The hospital building was designed according to the Kirkbride Plan, named for the Philadelphia doctor Thomas Story Kirkbride, who believed that architecture and other environmental factors could be part of the treatment, or even the cure, for patients with mental illnesses. Kirkbride buildings were designed in a linear fashion

**ABOVE AND OPPOSITE** Projections from a development guide are intended to entice developers to invest in housing and other amenities in Morganton.

STEWART

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PROPOSED RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL CAMPUS



with long wings stretching out from the central structure, wide internal corridors, thick walls, and small, individual rooms with good ventilation. Patients in Kirkbride asylums were meant to have daily exercise in manicured landscapes and to cultivate food in on-site farms.

Kirkbride buildings proliferated in the latter half of the 19th century. While there's little evidence that the architecture helped cure patients, it did serve other social purposes, according to Carla Yanni, an architectural historian and professor of art history at Rutgers University and author of the book *The Architecture of Madness: Insane Asylums in the United States*. The grandeur of Kirkbride institutes was a signal to the families of patients

who resided there "that their relatives were wards of a beneficent state-appointed family," Yanni writes in her book. The buildings also signaled the legitimacy of psychiatrists, who were known at the time as asylum doctors, Yanni says.

"Their building, how well it was built, how well it was maintained, how the heat worked, how the landscape garden progressed—all of that added to their professional prestige," Yanni says. "Their profession didn't exist 50 years earlier. They were creating an architecture that in every way legitimized and amplified their importance in society."

The Western North Carolina Insane Asylum was among the last wave of Kirkbride buildings to be

HOTEL AVERY PROPOSAL



completed in the United States. By the end of the 19th century it was clear that asylum patients were not being “cured” at any appreciable rate, and many of the asylums became an embarrassment to the communities that had erected them, Yanni says. But they were built to last, and the hospital in Morganton, renamed Broughton Hospital in 1959, was also among the last to house patients in the original building.

Kirkbride plans such as the Avery Building are notoriously tough to preserve. Andy Shull, a senior project manager with Belk Architecture, the adaptive reuse consultant for the Broughton district master plan and the new NCSSM campus, says the Avery Building would require a lot of modifications to be used for a new purpose. The floor plan, with 12-foot corridors and thick masonry walls, is particularly unforgiving. Adapting the old rooms for hotel or apartment units would require

“grabbing little pieces of the corridor,” Shull says. But the floor plan is part of the building’s historic value, and it’s not clear whether altering it would jeopardize the potential for historic tax credits.

Included in the *Developer Deal Book* are sketches showing the Avery Building adapted as “Hotel Avery.” The idea was inspired by Hotel Henry, built inside the old Buffalo State Asylum for the Insane, which is now part of the Richardson Olmsted Campus in Buffalo, New York. That project is considered one of the most successful Kirkbride adaptations in the country, but it has taken decades to get off the ground. The Buffalo asylum stopped housing patients in the 1970s. In 2013, Andropogon completed a redesign of the South Lawn, which was meant to reconnect the campus to the city and generate private development (see “When Henry Met Frederick,” *LAM*, April 2015).

**ABOVE**  
The Avery Building, with wide corridors and thick walls, is a challenge to adapt. Another Kirkbride hospital in Buffalo, New York, was converted to a hotel.

STEWART

STEWART

WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA MUSEUM



STEM PLANT



**LEFT**  
Two ideas for redeveloping the historic steam plant.

**BELOW**  
Private developers are planning new housing projects, and the state and county are hoping some historic agricultural structures will be redeveloped.

SILO BARN REDEVELOPMENT





“WE’VE GOT SOME BEAUTIFUL BUILDINGS,  
WE’VE GOT SOME NOT-SO-BEAUTIFUL BUILDINGS....  
WHAT WE CAN’T DO IS BUILD A FENCE AROUND IT  
AND WATCH IT ROT.”

—SALLY SANDY



Kirkbride’s plan was developed at the same time that Olmsted was working out his theories about the curative powers of nature in parks around the country. “[Olmsted] believed, as did many, that the workings of the sane mind and the insane mind were not so different...” Yanni writes in *The Architecture of Madness*. “The subtle, positive influence of nature on healthy people could be applied to sick people, and what was an enhancement for the healthy might be an out-and-out cure for the sick.” Olmsted may not have designed the Broughton landscape, but he did design other asylum grounds, and it’s not hard to see the influence of his ideas here.

“Dotting the landscape with oaks and magnolias, what it began to do was create rooms and human-

scaled spaces. It almost gave the landscape a ceiling,” Batts says. “It gave [patients] a foreground view and immediate connection to nature from their rooms, but it also framed their view to the broader context of nature, the connection to the mountains.

“Everyone has agreed,” Batts says, that preserving the landscape at the heart of the Broughton district is essential to connecting the existing public institutions and potential private developments. More than that, he says, the experience of the landscape, from the oak allées at the old hospital to the expansive Blue Ridge views, is the primary quality of the space. The public has an interest in nurturing that experience and making it more accessible. Standing in the parking lot behind the Avery Building, Batts told me that his firm had

#### ABOVE

Planners hope that preserving the landscape around the hospital will reinforce the area’s rural identity and connection to the Blue Ridge Mountains.

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recently worked on a series of stairways at Chimney Rock State Park, centered around a 315-foot granite spire, an hour southwest of Morganton. The stairways were a technical feat, he said, “but that wasn’t the real story.”

“The real story was, look at the lengths that we go through, and our state goes through, to invest in giving the public access to these moments that are grounded in wellness,” Batts said. “Whether it’s increasing your heart rate to get up to the top or getting you connected with nature, it all comes down to somebody being bold and saying it’s worth this investment. And that’s what’s happening here.” ●

JARED BREY IS A FREELANCE REPORTER IN PHILADELPHIA AND A CONTRIBUTING EDITOR AT THE MAGAZINE.

#### Project Credits

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THE PRINT VERSION OF THIS STORY MISIDENTIFIED THE ROLES OF SOME OF THE TEAM MEMBERS. THOSE ERRORS HAVE BEEN CORRECTED HERE.