In 1970 the controversial decision was made to close Main Street to vehicular traffic and cover it with brick. The resulting ‘downtown mall,’ has been an incredible success and is now considered one of the “most remarkable and vital downtown main streets in America.” One of Charlottesville’s mottos is “our city as a park.” The Downtown Mall holds true to this by being home to about 60 potted plants and numerous trees.

The western most segment of the mall is built upon what used to be the Vinegar Hill neighborhood, which was one of Charlottesville’s earliest settlements. After the Civil War many Black families moved to the neighborhood, and from 1920 to 1960 the area was a thriving Black business district and a vibrant center of community social life. In the 1960s people began to notice the large number of substandard homes, and voters in the Charlottesville area decided to redevelop the 20 acre neighborhood. Because of the poll tax, many residents were denied a say in their future. By March 1965 one church, 30 businesses and 158 families (140 which were Black) were relocated. Today Vinegar Hill remains just a memory.

The map to the right (scale 1”=250’) shows a 1920 Sanborn map overlayed with the existing condition. One can see the dramatic disruption of the neighborhood and its replacement with a few large scale buildings (outlined in blue).
The Downtown Mall may be as close as Charlottesville gets to a public space in the true meaning of the word. It is a non-discriminatory area, available to everyone at all times. It is publicly maintained, though there are many private entities who are invested in its success. The Mall is an extremely important contribution to the public realm of Charlottesville, and a great source of pride. There are not many cities who can boast such a pedestrian friendly, active downtown. There are residences, offices, and a large amount of retail, restaurants, and entertainment venues to attract all sorts of people at all hours of the day. A group of local high school kids expressed their appreciation of being able to display their public opinion through the form of chalk graffiti on the street.

At the West end of the Mall, Main Street shifts south at the Omni Hotel to make the connection out to Water Street and West Main. This segment of the Mall is dramatically different from the original Main Street, and there are a number of factors as to why it is not as active or successful. A primary one is the issue of scale. The new entrance segment was constructed on top of where the Vinegar Hill neighborhood was demolished. The small scale streetfronts of business and residences were replaced with large structures such as the Omni Hotel on one side and the Charlottesville Ice Park on the other. These two massive buildings contrast sharply with the original small scale rhythm of buildings fronting the Mall. There is also much less activity to attract people, as both buildings are oriented inward. While restaurants along the Mall will have outdoor seating and places for people watching, the Omni restaurant is closed off and isolated behind glass. The only use for this segment is to get from one place to another; there is no reason to linger. This area seems too forced and over-designed when compared to the simple principles working for the traditional Mall.

The photographs to the left contrast similar features of the two areas: entrance, body, and eating areas.