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Small Town Design: Getting It Right

Advice from a new Planners Press book says that appearances reflect quality of life.

By Jim Segedy, FAICP, and Tom Daniels

"You've always had the power," the good witch Glinda told Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*. The same is true for preserving the character and appearance of small towns. So how can a small town accommodate and even encourage growth without losing its unique character?



Ask yourself: When your friends come to town, where do you take them? What places do you avoid? What places bring out special memories? How you answer those questions will tell you exactly what you have to work with and work on.

We have a mental image of what a small town should be: a place with tree-lined streets and sidewalks; well-kept houses; slow, easy-moving traffic; and a town square where residents shop and socialize. You can see the surrounding countryside from almost anywhere in town. There is order, neatness, and safety. Although most industries have moved to new facilities on the edge of town, they still give the appearance of being an integral part of the community. The town functions well as a place, both to live and to make a living. It has a sense of identity, a sense of history, and its own special character.

As a community grows and changes, its special character can also change. Just look at the big box retailers and franchise outlets that have located in and around small towns. The protection and continuation of a town's character and appearance involve more than maintaining the tree-lined streets and storefronts on Main Street. A town's visual quality not only defines its character but also tells a story about its economic vitality, quality of life, and how much the townspeople care about their community.

Design basics

Good town design begins with the places that people know and call their own. These buildings, views, and public spaces are often the heart and soul of the community, and the townspeople would feel a sense of loss if they were razed or greatly altered. The first step in good design is to conduct an inventory of the major physical assets of the town and to record them on a map. This information can be made into a series of data layers for entry into a GIS system.

It is helpful to involve the community when doing a character assessment. Groups of people can do a walkabout through the community and identify places that have special significance. Or you can give people disposable cameras and ask them to take pictures of things they like and don't like about the community.

All of these activities can be the focus of a community design workshop or charrette. Working with design professionals, the townspeople can use drawings and diagrams to bring design ideas to life.

Design principles

Even when land uses change and new buildings appear, the character of the community need not be sacrificed. How a new building fits in with other buildings and spaces depends on the building's facade, size, architectural style, and color and materials. Before creating ordinances to regulate the design of new buildings and the renovation of older ones, townspeople should understand how using good design principles can influence the character of their town:

- Make places for people and activities.
- Build with the existing patterns — know the context.
- Celebrate local identity and unique features.

- Make connections.
- Mix uses.
- Invest in quality.
- Be flexible and anticipate change.
- Connect physical features and town character.

Buildings and public spaces, together with the mix of land uses and economic activities, give a small town its structure, character, density, and charm. In many small towns, the downtown commercial area has experienced a decline in economic vitality and physical appearance. This part of town depends on an attractive pedestrian setting, good pedestrian and automobile access, and public activities. It serves as the backdrop for the Fourth of July parade and farmers markets as well as the place where friends and neighbors meet.

The small town also derives character from street furniture, such as signs, benches, streetlights, and planters. These details are often afterthoughts in the town design process, but they can have a notable impact on the appearance of a community, especially when the street furniture matches the pedestrian scale of the small town.

Rules of thumb



There are some simple dos and don'ts for building renovation and new construction. The town design matrix can serve as a guideline for creating a design review ordinance and to help building owners, developers, and a local design review board or planning commission make decisions about new development projects and alterations to existing buildings.

A quality appearance is both an economic asset and a source of community pride. Tourists enjoy visiting aesthetically pleasing places, and prospective businesses are drawn to neat, organized communities. Above all, an attractive town shows that the townspeople care about where they live and that they are willing to invest in their community.

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Images: Top — Gathering places such as cafes form the heart of a town. Bottom — A visually diverse streetscape attracts pedestrians as in downtown Shepherdstown, West Virginia. Photos courtesy James Segedy.

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