PRINCIPLE 5: Foster distinctive, attractive communities with a strong sense of place
Smart Growth for Small Towns Series

Smart Growth for Small Towns is a cooperative project between the Extension Service faculty of the Department of Landscape Architecture and the Stennis Institute of Government and Community Development at Mississippi State University.

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View the entire Smart Communities series at www.sig.msstate.edu/smartgrowth and www.msucares.com.smart-growth-for-small-towns
Introduction

Smart Growth for Small Towns relates the principles of Smart Growth to towns and rural communities, providing examples, discussion, explanation and advice on community design and development.

The educational information provided on this site is intended to contribute to an understanding of the intent and purpose of the Smart Growth principles. However, planning for the future of our small towns requires input from a variety of fields and includes issues of design, policy making and governance. This series is focused primarily upon design issues associated with small towns and is intended to serve as a resource for government officials, teachers, designers, and the general public.

The explanation of each Smart Growth principle includes the following:

A. Discussion of the purpose of the principles and why it is important.

B. Strategies that communities can use to help achieve the goals of the principle.

TEN PRINCIPLES OF SMART GROWTH:

1. Mix land uses
2. Take advantage of compact building design
3. Create a range of housing opportunities and choices
4. Create walkable neighborhoods
5. Foster distinctive, attractive communities with a strong sense of place
6. Preserve open space, farmland, natural beauty, and critical environmental areas
7. Strengthen and direct development toward existing communities
8. Provide a variety of transportation choices
9. Make development decisions predictable, fair, and cost effective
10. Encourage community and stakeholder collaboration in development decisions
A. DISCUSSION

Why does it matter?

Communities that have a very high quality of life are sought after as locations for new businesses as well as homes for families, retirees and entrepreneurs. A community’s reputation may be built on a whole variety of factors, but impressions do matter and the reputation that a community has for attractiveness, hospitality, standard of living, satisfaction and uniqueness can affect outcomes over the long-term.

How can a community become “distinctive” and “attractive”?

Being distinctive and attractive isn’t just about beautification. A distinctive community is special for identifiable reasons and distinguishable from surrounding communities in clear and obvious ways. An attractive community doesn’t just look good, but also is capable of enticing and entertaining visitors. Beautification has its place, but this principle should inspire the community to think about more than just aesthetics. Becoming a distinctive and attractive community is about deciding what kind of place you want to be and how you can build a more compelling and enriching place to live or to visit.

What does “sense of place” mean?

“Sense of place” is a phrase often used to distinguish those places that have a unique character rooted in both the local culture and natural environment. The Neshoba County Fairgrounds, the Oxford Courthouse Square and the Natchez Historic District are just a few examples of Mississippi places that most people would consider to have a strong sense of place. While these examples are partially valued for their rich history, we can also build new places that have a strong sense of place by designing in concert with our local climate, environment and culture.
How can we avoid “placelessness?”

One of the most difficult challenges any contemporary community faces is how to attract development while avoiding the bland sameness of automobile-oriented chain stores, big box retailers and fast food restaurants. It takes considerable will and dedication for a community to overcome the momentum built up over the past fifty years of suburban development. While there are no easy answers, there are plenty of actions that communities can take to turn things in the right direction. Below is a list of strategies to get things started.

B. STRATEGIES

Identify your community’s assets and unique features

If you don’t know what you value, it’s difficult to capitalize on it. Spend some time considering what is significant about your community. What are the economic, environmental and organizational features that people in the community care most about? Try to be as specific as possible about what is unique or special. Are your streets unique because of the massive canopy trees? Is there a distinctive character to the public spaces? Are there particular buildings, neighborhoods or features that should be preserved or enhanced? Once you have some clarity about what makes your community different, it’s a whole lot easier to take action to maintain, enhance or mimic those features.

Consider first impressions and the “postcard factor”

It’s easy to become complacent about appearances once you’ve lived in a community for a few years. But it’s critical to consider what visitors’ first impressions will be. Take some time to reevaluate the message your community is sending. Does it appear that you care about the physical environment? Is your community welcoming and easy to navigate? Are there some easy steps that could be taken to communicate a better first impression?

Another way to think about this issue: If someone were going to send a postcard from your community, what would it show? Would there be parts of town that would be unsuitable for a postcard? If the busiest and most important parts of town aren’t suitable for a postcard, then it’s time to consider what changes need to be made to make things more presentable.

Focus effort where it will have the most impact

It’s difficult and expensive to improve all parts of town at once, so try to focus on improving those areas that are most valued by the community. The smaller the area, the more impact a minimal amount of effort and money can make. In many cases, downtown is a great place to start. Downtown is the historic heart of the community and its metaphorical living room. But in most cases, our downtowns have failed to keep pace with contemporary practices regarding retail development. Today’s new shopping malls and retail districts benefit not only from newness, but also from over fifty years of retail psychology, which has taught us that shopping is a form of entertainment. Today’s shoppers have come to expect an extraordinarily clean, convenient, comfortable—and even beautiful—setting. This can be very challenging for downtown’s small businesses to compete with. By paying very close attention to streetscapes, sidewalks, seating and the rest of the public realm downtown, a community can help to create a special setting that will provide a memorable experience for visitors and more favorable setting for small businesses.
Develop distinctive, diverse experiences for a variety of people

Consider what activities are available for residents and visitors. When considering even a short outing, most people plan several events at once. Visiting a farmers’ market or museum, window shopping, stopping for lunch and visiting a park could all be part of a single visit. But if there’s not enough for residents or visitors to do in very close proximity, it’s unlikely that they’ll be willing to take the time or make the trip. It may require considerable creativity and programming to devise activities for residents of all ages and incomes, but it’s worth the effort.

Lead by example

In most communities, there is a considerable amount of publicly owned property. This may include the town hall, public parks, and even road right-of-ways. These places provide an opportunity for the community to lead by example and set a standard for private owners. Focusing on the most visible and heavily trafficked areas of town is one easy way to begin making improvements.

Provide forums for local producers, farmers, artists and entrepreneurs

If we want our communities to have authenticity and a strong sense of place, we have to provide opportunities for our citizens who are producers, artists or entrepreneurs. Communities can often help in very simple ways, such as beginning a producer market. Such markets can become a critical community gathering place and thereby lead to many other positive outcomes. However, there are a myriad of other ways to empower local citizens to invest in their community such as starting a targeted business incubator, allowing vending carts for restaurant start-ups or providing inexpensive studio or exhibition space for artists or craftspeople. A few small steps to help local producers now can lead to much greater possibilities down the road.


Aberdeen, Mississippi’s historic Elkin Theatre provides a unique experience in a town that is distant from many entertainment options. The Elkin Theatre is run by a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving the historic building and providing the community with additional entertainment for local kids, teenagers and parents (Photograph: ©2014 Michael Seymour).

The recent local food movement has caused many rural communities to establish farmers’ markets in order to provide an outlet for local farmers. These markets empower the local farmers as well as provide the residents with fresh, healthy, and local food (Photograph: ©2014 Jeremy Murdock).
Jeremy Murdock is a Research Associate II with the John C. Stennis Institute of Government and Community Development at Mississippi State University. He is heavily involved in ground-level community development issues, especially those related to design and planning. His current work is aimed at educating the communities of Mississippi about sound design and planning principles and their impact on economic development.

Mr. Murdock, a native of Olive Branch, Mississippi, obtained both a bachelor’s and master’s degree in landscape architecture from Mississippi State University. Following graduate school, Mr. Murdock entered the world of community development and has worked with numerous Mississippi communities. He is passionate about downtown revitalization and small town development, and he uses design as a tool to enhance the quality of life in the communities of the state.

Mr. Murdock is heavily entrenched in community development, both professionally and personally. He is an active volunteer and advocate for quality of life issues and serves on numerous boards and committees in his own community of Starkville, Mississippi. These include the Planning and Zoning Commission, Convention and Visitors Bureau Board of Directors, and the Starkville Main Street Design Committee. In recent years he also served on the Starkville Area Arts Council Board of Directors, Starkville in Motion Board of Directors, and the Starkville Beautification Committee among others.

Michael W. Seymour is an Associate Extension Professor and the Graduate Coordinator in the Department of Landscape Architecture at Mississippi State University where he has taught a wide variety of courses including landscape graphics, history of landscape architecture, golf course design and both undergraduate and graduate design studios. He has an undergraduate degree in fine art from Centenary College of Louisiana and a Master’s degree in Landscape Architecture from Louisiana State University. He is a licensed landscape architect and has prior professional experience in the public sector as the Director of an Arts District and in private practice at Lucido and Associates in Stuart, Florida. His practice experiences included a wide variety of neighborhood, commercial, civic, institutional and residential developments. His research has focused on landscape history, including the evolution and growth of small towns and the courthouse squares of Mississippi. Professor Seymour’s teaching has been recognized with a number of awards including the university’s highest teaching honor, the Grisham Master Teacher award, and the national Excellence in Teaching recognition of the Council of Educators in Landscape Architecture. He has been involved in many teaching training sessions and workshops for faculty and currently serves as Faculty Associate with MSU’s Center for Teaching Learning.