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Wisconsin Cities,
Mt. Horeb

VISUAL ASSESSMENT

VILLAGE OF MT. HOREB, WISCONSIN



Graduate Research Center
Dept. of Urban & Regional Planning
The University of Wisconsin
Music Hall, 925 Bascom Mall
Madison, Wisconsin 53706

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*Greg Baker
Branden Born
Scott Coggins
Darren Fortney
Jan Reek
Heidrun Walter*

INTRODUCTION

Six members of a graduate level planning course, Introduction to Planning, visited Mt. Horeb for an afternoon on November 15, 1996. We sought to get a "sense of place" from the Village and to identify its unique features -- the elements that contribute to its identity as a community.

In James Howard Kunstler's book, Geography of Nowhere, the author notes what life in a real town had to offer: "It was scaled to people, not cars. It had the variety that comes from a mixed-use community. Its amenities lay close at hand. It offered ready access to genuine countryside, mostly farms and apple orchards." (Kunstler 1993, p.14) The Mt. Horeb we saw on our exploratory trip mostly fits that description of a "real town," and therein lies its appeal.

The Mt. Horeb we saw is threatened, however, by increasing development pressures. Many of Mt. Horeb's residents and leaders are concerned about what the future will bring. In the early 1990's, Mt. Horeb's plan for the physical growth of the community was updated. In its Statement of Purpose, the Comprehensive Plan notes, "History has numerous examples of the damage done by uncontrolled growth."

These pressures come from a multitude of sources. While some developments offer opportunities for an improved quality of life, others threaten the very fabric of village life so treasured by residents. Brian Durtschi, a member of the Economic Development and Tourism Committee, notes in his letter to Professor Bunnell, there has been a "negative reaction to some ... developments which are viewed as threatening the old downtown charm and ethnic fabric/flavor of the village." He also comments that since most of the development pressure is coming from residential developers and businesses from outside of Mt. Horeb, "a great deal of anxiety and apprehension has evolved because of what appears to many to be rapid, unplanned, unwanted and unnecessary change." (Durtschi, March 18, 1996, p. 1)

Several times during our class meeting with the Mt. Horeb representatives, they said that Mt. Horeb was not an "ordinary" place, but a community rich in heritage -- a quaint, small town. They are afraid of getting ordinary, as well they should be.

Yi-Fu Tuan, in his article "Place: An Experiential Perspective" says: "Sense of place is rarely acquired in passing. To know a place well requires long residence and deep

involvement. It is possible to appreciate the visual qualities of a place with a short visit . . . (but) to know a place is also to know the past: one's own past preserved in a schoolhouse, corner drugstore, swimming pool, and first home; the city's past enshrined in its architectural landmarks." (Yi-Fu Tuan, 1975, in: Geographical Review 65, No. 2)

It is just this sense of place which the pressure of development can obliterate. As Kunstler notes, "Ever busy, ever-building, ever-in-motion, ever-throwing-out the older for the new, we have hardly paused to think about what we are so busy building, and what we have thrown away." (Kunstler, 1993, p.10)

Our visual assessment highlights the features that we, a group of outsiders, see as unique and valuable -- features that contribute to Mt. Horeb's sense of place. We also note where development has begun to compromise Mt. Horeb's uniqueness.

We hope that our assessment will help the leaders and residents of Mt. Horeb to decide on their priorities for the community. As the Comprehensive Plan notes, "Our Village has provided a unique community for its citizens for years past and it can continue to provide the same for years yet to come with adequate planning and effort" (Comprehensive Plan, p.5).

ENTRANCES AND THE SURROUNDING LANDSCAPE



The entrance to a community via any form of transportation is very important. The entranceway is the community's welcome mat. It invites the visitor to enter and explore and it welcomes the resident home again. A community's entranceway is like the cover of a book, Travelers and other visitors will assume that the cover equals the content because, like it or not, many people still do judge a book by its cover. Thus communities should attempt to show their best side in these areas.

Communities located along major highways and interstates, like Mount Horeb, often attract travelers who are simply looking for a restaurant or gas station. As is often times the case, once travelers fill their stomachs and/or their gas tanks, they leave. This results from the fact that many times restaurants and gas stations are located on the outskirts of town, near the highway or interstate, and there is little or no connection between the actual community and these outlying businesses. By establishing some sort of connection between the downtown and these outlying businesses a traveler could be lured further into the

community thus giving them the opportunity of discovering some of the other shopping opportunities the community has to offer.

The resident and, to some extent, the possible future resident obviously must not be forgotten in these discussions. The aesthetics of a community's entranceway is important to people currently living there and to people who are considering locating in the community. As mentioned earlier, a community's entranceway often has a great impact on the overall feel of the community and people are certainly going to be more willing to remain in or relocate to an area that has a pleasant, quaint feel to it. The overall look and feel of a community is very important to this group, especially given the fact that a home is typically the largest investment one will make in a lifetime.

The entrance to the village from the east along Business 18-151 is an extremely unattractive part of town. Many people enter the town via this route and it is unfortunate that this is their first view of the community. The west edge of town is a perfect example of the type of strip development that is common throughout the U.S.. Fast food restaurants, video stores and other retail establishments align themselves on a major thoroughfare and an often unorganized arrangement of commercial developments results. The buildings of chain franchises are all the same and this also makes it appear ordinary. This type of development must be stopped. In addition, there is no cohesion between the retail establishments in this area and therefore it is visually very confusing. Overall, this area of the village causes Mount Horeb to look like any other city, town or village in the U.S..

Upon passing under the railroad/bike trail bridge, it becomes evident that you are now actually entering the village. The bridge acts as a pseudo gateway into town since there is a completely different image once you pass under it. No longer could you be in just any town - you were now in Mount Horeb. If you could ignore the strip development to the east of the bridge, the entrance to Mount Horeb would be quite intriguing and inviting as there would be a sense of mystery as to what lay beyond the bridge.

The west entrance to the village along Business 18/151 is a polar opposite of the east entrance. Other than the Do-it Center and the Bacardi billboard, the west entrance is quite typical of an entrance to any small, rural village. Although it is not a spectacular entranceway, it is one that does not detract from the overall aesthetics of the village as the

east entrance does. The grain elevators and storage containers add a very agricultural feel to the village. As you enter the community you also get a sense for the rolling hills that surround the village, for you are able to catch a glimpse of some dramatic views to the north. The town also came to an abrupt end, unlike the east side of town where the sprawling strip development seems to linger. The “Mount Horeb, Velkommen” sign, the carved troll, and even Trollway Liquor, give you the sense you are in a unique place and, as a result, this entrance is much more successful.

Both the north entrance to the village along 78, and the south entrance along 92, are like the west entrance in that they are fairly typical and not detract from the overall aesthetics of the community.

Mount Horeb is also blessed with a beautiful, surrounding landscape. The rolling topography of the Driftless Area provides a scenic backdrop for the village; from many places within the village one can see for quite a distance. We liked this aspect of the community, and felt that it sets Mt. Horeb apart from other similar size towns. Protecting the farmland on the outskirts of the village is crucial. In the face of increasing development pressure the village must make a strong and concerted effort to stop sprawling development. If this is not accomplished, the rural setting of the village will be forever gone.

It cannot be stressed enough how important the village’s entranceways and the surrounding landscape are to the overall aesthetics of the community. Often times aesthetics are considered a subjective and trivial issue, but there is certainly no argument when it comes to the value of an attractive community.

DOWNTOWN



Downtown Mt. Horeb is a pleasant, interesting place with a variety of small shops in well-maintained, older buildings. The area has a sense of tradition and history which relates nicely to the numerous troll statues. There were no vacant shops; the economy in downtown seems to be vital, yet, not extremely busy at the Friday afternoon of our visit. Gift and antique shops dominate. They rely to a great part on outside customers, as we were told. The Hoff Mall, an enclosed mall, looks friendly and inviting; its street-oriented pedestrian walkway provides vistas to the stores within, as well as the street outside. We can imagine that people enjoy to sit and relax for a while.

There was the impression that some of the upper stories of the downtown buildings were vacant or utilized for storage space (though this is not something we could know for sure). Signs hanging above the buildings were unique and done tastefully.

The downtown architecture invites individuals to spend time on the street, but the automobiles do not. Even before the rush hour began, there was a lot of traffic as cars and trucks streamed by at an increasing level. Given the high traffic volume of the Main Street,

crossing the street safely even in the pedestrians' crossing path was difficult. In addition, parked cars blocked your view across the street and were quite disturbing, especially if you happened to be sitting on one of the benches located along the sidewalk. Additionally, we found the sidewalks to be rather narrow. Although these items of concern are not major they do tend to negatively affect our experience downtown.

Main Street, just before and just beyond the oldest part of downtown, had some older houses adaptively reused as nice country craft and antique shops. This is an attractive way to extend the downtown area while retaining its small town character.

RESIDENTIAL



Overall, the residential portions of town left us with mixed feelings, and a somewhat missing “sense of place”. Initially we were impressed, and felt good about the residential areas just north of downtown that retained an older, more authentic look and feel to them. Many of these residential areas located around the perimeter of, and adjacent to the beginnings of, the center of town were more than adequate in projecting an original ambiance - mainly, that of a small quaint town with character.

However, as we got off the beaten path of the downtown area, we began to lose the original feeling we had closer to town. Instead what we were presented with was a seemingly limitless expanse of twisting, turning pavement in residential areas that had very little to none of the qualities we had begun to associate with Mt. Horeb. The architecture appeared generic and mass produced - qualities endemic to so many other character less suburbs one would find in larger cities whose growth was beginning to exceed the limits of the original town. The colors often appeared drab and lifeless, while the form and structure of the streets and houses served the purpose of causing us to lose our geographic setting -

both truly and figuratively. Occasionally a painted mailbox or seasonal decoration would crop up and disengage the aesthetic monotony, but we were largely struck by missing sense of community as very few residents seemed present, and the sidewalks appeared forsaken in lieu of the large, car dominated right-of-ways. We were also struck by the lack of adequate lighting, and the fact that many of these developments ran streets directly up hills in an manner that rendered the beauty of the natural topography impotent. The fact that many houses were on large lots, and that the many roads meandered into cul-de-sacs, heightened our sense of isolation and sprawl.

However, we enjoyed the fact that there were parks placed next to some of these developments. These parks, at times, were directly adjacent to large roads with no barrier between them- something we thought might decrease safety for small children, should development continue around them.

PARKS AND OPEN SPACES



The town provides a very nice park system and is the local beneficiary of a county park as well. We liked the fact that parks were not only very accessible to many if not all of the areas of town, but also the fact that they provided a good mix of recreational resources. These include sports fields, a community swimming pool, and children's play equipment, as well as open space and picnic areas. The county park also has a network of hiking trails.

Another regional resource is the bike path that runs through Mt. Horeb. Not only does it run essentially right through the downtown, but continues for miles and connects with trails running through much of southern Wisconsin. This provides opportunities for local residents to use the bike path, but also for tourists who may come to town for it (or on it).

A REGIONAL DESTINATION



One of the major strengths coming out of Mt. Horeb is its strong sense of a regional attraction, as well as a deep culture, history and background. Mt. Horeb is a community fortunate enough to have both aspects occurring simultaneously, and should continue to promote these strong attributes as they add to Mt. Horeb's overall sense of place.

As a regional destination, Mt. Horeb enjoys a variety of attractions both in and around the community. Within Mt. Horeb there are plenty of strengths which you should continue to promote. The commitment to preserve the community's historic structures such as the Hoff Mall and the Opera House and your addition to the National Register of Historic Places will help in preserving the history and culture of Mt. Horeb while also bringing in tourism and other economic benefit from outside the community.

Within the area there are also a variety of park and recreational opportunities which draw visitors to the community. Stewart County Park, Mound State Park, Grundahl Park, Boecks Park, Jaycee Park, Waltz Park, Lions Park, Foster Park, and Neshem Park all offer

opportunities for individuals to come and enjoy the outdoors in Mt. Horeb. The parks we saw appeared well maintained and had mixed use capabilities.

An additional asset is that of the positioning of Mt. Horeb along Military Ridge State Park Trail. Currently, the trail is used for bicycling, hiking, jogging, snowmobiling, and cross country skiing. This opportunity is one which Mt. Horeb could further promote and capitalize on. The trail is an excellent way to attract users into Mt. Horeb to enjoy a day or afternoon.

Other attractions within Mt. Horeb which are unique and attractive include the Mustard Museum, Hoff Mall and the variety of specialty and country craft shops which all add to the quaint, friendly, small town character. These are all great attributes of Mt. Horeb and can be regional attractions.

We also felt that Mt. Horeb was blessed with a variety of surrounding attractions such as Tyrol Basin, Blue Mound State Park, Cave of the Mounds, and Little Norway.

Mt. Horeb's deep cultural and historical heritage is also a strength of the community. The community's strong Norwegian offers a unique opportunity to further instill a sense of cultural identity and heritage. Currently, area events such as the Scandinavian Fiddle Fest, the Song of Norway, and the Sons of Norway Foundation promote both Mt. Horeb, and the region's, Norwegian cultural identity. Many of the local businesses also seem to be using this theme for local promotion.

SUMMARY

Overall we felt the Village of Mt. Horeb had a very strong “sense of place”. We all enjoyed the small town atmosphere of the community and greatly appreciated its rural character. Yet, we couldn’t help but see the problems that new development will cause for this image. The village must make a concerted effort to maintain its unique character. If it does not, the community must prepare to accept its status as an “everyday”, ordinary town. The village must see its image as an asset and a resource that should be protected and managed. Mt. Horeb has much to offer and it would be shame to see such an exceptional community surrender itself to commonality.

Since the attempt of our project is primarily to provide you with a fresh look at your own town, and given that other groups involved in this project will delve into more substantive issues, we felt it unnecessary to concentrate on specific techniques for resolving what we perceived as potential problems. However, we did agree on the following general issues as being worthy of consideration when attempting to preserve, maintain, and expand your village’s positive qualities:

Entrances:

- Strive to enforce design and zoning controls in an attempt to preserve existing viewsheds.
- Revitalize former railroad bridge and nearby area to function as thematic gateway to community.

Downtown:

- Enforce design control with regard to signs and architecture.
- Encourage pedestrian friendliness in downtown area by rerouting traffic away from Main Street, widening sidewalks, and limiting parking on Main Street.

Residential:

- Encourage conservation design and development.
- Develop and enforce neighborhood plans.
- Encourage architectural variety and mixed use neighborhoods.

Parks and Open Spaces:

- Consider connecting existing parks through a trail network.
- Extend bike path to connect with regional parks.
- Beautify and promote the portion of bike path that passes through downtown.

Regional Connection:

- Enhance social activities in Mt. Horeb by further promoting restaurant and bar / pub sector.
- Stimulate creation of recreational lodging facilities such as a “bed and breakfast.”
- Push for the perception (by outsiders) of Mt. Horeb as a gateway, or link, to other regional attractions.



