Design Matters

by Edward T. McMahon

Travel teaches you many things, not the least of which is that the world doesn't have to be ugly.

I first learned this lesson while serving in the U.S. Army in Germany during the 1970s. Heidelberg, where I lived, was clean, compact, and dripping with history. The old town center was packed with sightseers, shops, and sidewalk cafes. Missing were cars, which you really didn't need because you could walk from one end of town to the other in about 20 minutes.

The countryside outside of town was gloriously free of strip shopping centers, billboards, and overhead powerlines. The country inns were packed with tourists. The back roads lined with trees and cyclists. Children walked to neighborhood schools and senior citizens visited friends after strolling to the pharmacy or corner store.

This is not to say that Germans and other Europeans don't love their cars. They do. But they don't have to use them all the time. They can ride the "clean as a whistle" electric trolleys and high speed trains that go everywhere, or they can ride on an extensive network of bikeways. They can even walk.

Footpaths! An entire network, extending all the way from the edge of town, up the hillsides, into the forests — eventually linking up with trails that crisscross the entire country.

I often think back to Heidelberg and other European towns when I observe the changes we are making here at home. From California to Carolina, we are tearing up the good stuff and replacing it with the banal and worse. We're letting look-alike fast-food emporiums, soulless subdivisions, and cluttered commercial strips turn our communities into what author James Howard Kunstler calls the "geography of nowhere."

America can't imitate Europe, and we shouldn't try, but we can learn some lessons. One important lesson is that design matters.

Mayor John Bullard of New Bedford, Massachusetts put it this way, "Challenge anyone to name his or her favorite place and then ask why." Many of the reasons that attractive places are attractive have to do with design. Without thoughtful attention to design, a town will become "Anywhere USA." Design of a community communicates what it is.

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Design is also important because it relates directly to economic development and equals cold hard cash for many communities. Mayor Michael Polovitz of Grand Forks, North Dakota observed that, "Design reflects on the city as a whole. How a city looks to new businesses is very important to whether or not a business locates in your city." Likewise, Mayor David Musante of Northampton, Massachusetts noted, "Design relates directly to an impression of livability and economic vitality. It has a major impact on our city."

Good design is especially important to those communities seeking to attract tourists and their dollars. This is because the more a community does to protect and enhance its unique characteristics, whether natural or man-made, the more tourists it will attract. On the other hand, the more a community comes to resemble everyplace else, the less reason there is to visit.

While good design can mean more tourists, increased jobs, a better tax base, increased property values, and a better quality of life, bad design or no design can lead to polarization and citizen opposition to new development. Without doubt, there would be far less opposition to new developments, of all types, if builders, developers, and public officials paid more attention to the appearance, design, and compatibility of the new development with the existing natural and architectural character of our communities.

Design does matter. All we need to do is to look around to see that this is true. In this new column, we'll look around: at what works and what doesn't. At good design and bad. We'll compare what happens when a development is designed in harmony with nature versus what happens when developers ignore the unique characteristics of a site. We'll discuss scenic roads, open space design, greenways and buffers, retaining farmland and farmers, sign control and view protection, tree ordinances and landscaping, design guidelines and historic preservation; and we'll examine the economic, social, and environmental impacts of these techniques and others.

Travel teaches us that those communities that have retained their unique character are places that use vision, planning, and design to preserve the features that make them special. It also teaches us that progress does not demand degraded surroundings. This column will offer some ideas on how communities can prosper and grow without destroying those things that make them unique. ◆

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