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A WALLACEPANCHER GROUP COMPANY

Avoiding Cookie Cutter Streetscape Designs **Building Successful Communities- Preservation & Revitalization Strategies**

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- I. **Sense of Place** - Every community has the foundation for a unique sense of place. Accentuating the community's historical, cultural, and environmental situations can enhance this uniqueness. In addition, once the Sense of Place is identified and established there are the issues of regulation and interpretation to address.

- A. **History** - History is the most identifiable thing that makes a place unique and therefore, must be carefully considered to avoid cookie cutter design solutions.

1. **Features**-The historic features of a streetscape that are unique to that streetscape's one-of-a-kind built past will provide the greatest influence on what direction to steer the proposed design of a streetscape. In contrast, many communities are succumbing to "Disneyfication" of streetscapes having the same generic light features, paving, banners, signage, etc. from town to town. The following list are just some of the features to look for in the research of the town's past



- a. Original/custom light poles and luminaries
- b. Brick streets
- c. Walks
- d. Hitching Posts
- e. Signs
- f. Plantings
- g. Memorials/historic markers
- h. Steps
- i. Bandstands/gazebos
- j. Water features
- k. Fences/gates

2. **Materials -**

- a. Historic materials- brick, stone, wrought iron, wood, etc. The historic materials of a downtown have an integrity that is unequalled in most modern construction projects. Our communities deserve the same in their historic districts to maintain their integrity. Therefore, to respect the Sense of Place, utilization of these materials should be emphasized. In addition, the materials should be indigenous to the area such as limestone in Columbus, OH and sandstone in Southeast Ohio.



- b. Recycling of salvaged materials in new design. Using these historic materials that have been salvaged from past demolition and construction projects, we can reconstruct areas that hearken back to the original character of the streetscape. For example, the bricks or stone removed from streets and or walks can be incorporated into the new streetscape design.
- c. Authentic vs. simulated -i.e. brick instead of concrete pavers. So often a cheaper alternative is used to stretch construction dollar, such as the use of concrete pavers instead of using historic clay pavers. One City Service Director commented that, "The concrete paver of today's streetscapes might become what aluminum siding was to historic architecture in the 1950's and 1960's". Not only are these materials not as historic as the original, they do not look as good nor are they of equal quality which shortens the lifespan of the new construction. The overuse of this replica brick is a prevalent "cookie cutter" problem in many Ohio streetscapes.

- B. **Cultural -** The cultural background of a community can play an important role in accommodating the activities of that community that play a key role in its Sense of Place. Through the design, streetscapes can hold events, accommodate specific cultural groups, respect past cultures, and house novelty items that represent the community's culture. They become the town "living room" of activity.

1. Events - Local events that are celebrated on the streets and plazas function differently from place to place and can therefore be a part of the design program that will contribute to making these places unique.

- a. Parades
- b. Festivals
- c. Farmers markets
- d. Community events
- e. Historic walking tours



2. Cultural groups - The role of cultural groups can significantly impact the arrangement of streetscapes. This is especially true in Ohio and Pennsylvania communities with Amish residents. Unique design considerations must be made in customizing designs.
 3. Past cultures - Past cultures of Native Americans are the deepest roots in defining Sense of Place. Communities such as Beloit, Wisconsin have successfully incorporated ancient mounds into the landscape of the community. Many towns were founded on lands that were previously inhabited by these past cultures. A wonderful opportunity exists in such locations to draw that into design and interpretation.
 4. Novelty - Anything that is unique to the community that can be presented within the streetscapes and is significant to the history and/or the culture of the community. This most commonly takes the form of art in the landscape. A good example is the city of Chicago, IL. Several years ago, the city of Chicago held an art event in which artists were to take the same white cow and paint it as well as display it on the streets, or above the streets in some cases. The cattle market was instrumental in the advancement of the fledgling city's history; therefore, this incredibly popular novelty event was successful in creatively recalling a piece of the historic sense of place.
 - a. Sculpture
 - b. Murals - Murals can often tell the history of a community while also dressing up unsightly buildings and vacant lots. The City of Steubenville, OH has successfully created a mural program.
 - c. Art districts - Providence, RI created a district where they gave tax incentives for artists to move into a section of downtown.
- C. Built and natural environment - The built and natural environment in which each community is located provides opportunities for distinctive design solutions.
1. Built environments - Built environments are those that have existed historically and can be accentuated or that can be created to enhance streetscape environment.
 - a. Grid vs. organic street systems - Streets can make a difference in streetscape design by the character of their layout. A grid pattern might suggest formal design solutions, while an organic pattern might suggest more informality in design. Also proposed street

alterations should be conscious of these historical patterns and enforce the pattern instead of going against the grain.

- b. Boulevards - True Boulevards, those that are tree lined with medians and wide pedestrian walks, can be enhanced or created to provide a sense of distinction to a streetscape.
 - c. Squares - Squares are the heart of streetscapes and often define the sense of a place for the center of town. If the square looks average, that is how the community is perceived. If the design is exceptionally unique, the community will radiate that image.
 - d. Railroads - Abandoned railroad beds are now becoming an attraction to the streetscapes of communities that convert these right-of-ways to new roads and trails. This provides a chance to experience a unique interaction that will diversify the community experience and sense of place.
 - e. Canals - Ohio and Pennsylvania had many canals that traversed the states. A town along the canal has an excellent piece of history to display and hopefully tie into the streetscape system.
 - f. Scenic Byways - Scenic Byways bring tourists and business to streetscapes. Acknowledge and accommodate for the enjoyment of these in the streetscape design program.
 - g. Focal points - Focal points in the landscape serve to orient and lead people in and through the landscape. They can be prominent buildings or landscape features. The views to these focal points should be unobstructed and enhanced as a contributing visual experience in the sense of place.
 - h. Sense of entry - First impressions are important! The first impression of the image of a community is made at the point of entry. In today's society, entry features can often distinguish and set apart the historical community from modern sprawl development that competes for downtown business.
2. Natural situations - Through holistic design, geographical and natural situations can be integrally tied to the streetscape in a way that makes the design as unique as the natural environment on which it is founded.
- a. Waterfronts - In the past, waterfronts often served as a working landscape with historical significance. However, these landscapes have been neglected and have become some of the least attractive parts of cities and towns. Many cities have reversed this trend and have actively been turning toward rivers as a source of recreation, pride, and identity. Incorporating these areas into the streetscape programs can be the jewel of the design.

- b. Streams - Natural streams within communities also hold distinctive opportunities to be tie into the streetscapes through trails and paths. They offer a natural contrast to the built environment.
 - c. Parks - Parks are the most common naturalistic retreat from city streets yet are often seen a separate from the streetscape project. The interface between the two is an opportunity to do something different that sets that design apart from other towns.
 - d. Greenways - Greenways provide a vital link in communities and a variation on traditional streetscapes.
 - D. Ordinances - Once a community establishes a unique Sense of Place, it needs to protect and maintain it. Building & landscape ordinances, design guidelines, and maintenance standards along with effective enforcement are the tools needed to ensure that all the hard work put into attaining a distinctive image for the community is not lost to future ignorance and apathy toward the unique Sense of Place.
 - E. Interpretation - A brilliant, one of a kind design for a downtown streetscape may look nice, but it can only be 100% successful if the public understands its full design intent. Therefore, a certain amount of interpretation is necessary. This can be done by plaques and signs on site to describe the design intricacies or by providing published materiel available on site, in municipal buildings, or in local establishments.
- II. **Project Approach** - The type of relationship that a community group sets up with a design consultant is the number one factor in avoiding a "cookie cutter" streetscape design. This problem is typically related to budget and surfaces in two different levels of the process. The first is in the client/ consultant relationship and the second concerns the project budget phase.
 - A. Landscape Architect selection - Look for a pattern in projects completed by the Landscape Architecture firm. If the same design characteristics reoccur from project to project, that can be a clue that the Landscape Architect shortcuts though the design process by skipping steps and using the same design details from past projects with little alteration. Look at paving patterns and materials, light posts, banners, tree plantings, and any other detail that might be a clue to repetitive design. Also contact past clients and visit their towns to get their take on the Landscape Architect's ability to provide unique design vs. feeling that they look like the town down the road. The landscape architect should be able to demonstrate how the design solutions are unique to the community's Sense of Place.
 - B. The design process/ scope of work - Defining the scope of work becomes the first step in creating a unique streetscape by making sure that your Landscape Architect is mandated to do the appropriate amount of homework before the pencil hits the paper. Requiring a research report should be a must. It is this

research that subsequently leads into the inventory and analysis steps that are the foundation of the design. Remember a sketch on napkin might seem cheap, creative, and exciting but it may also just be something that occurred to the designer because they have done the same thing in a past design without any relevance to the significance of the community at hand.

1. Historical research - How can a consultant create a design that is specific to your community if they do not know the related story behind the streetscape they are about to design? The problem surfaces when a consultant includes this portion of the design process into a proposal while another does not so as to have the lower cost. The lower cost consultant typically wins the project with the client left unaware that the consultant has no intention of doing in depth design research. The solution is to require this in the scope of work to ensure the fabric of the community is incorporated into the design. If there is a local historical group, some consultant's fees could be reduced by the City directing the group to gather any pertinent info on a particular aspect of the streetscape and providing that info to the designer for review.
 2. Site inventory - A thorough inventory of the site must be completed not only to prepare for construction, but also to gain an understanding of the existing landscape and significant elements that contribute to the Sense of Place.
 3. Site analysis - The next item in the scope of work should be the site analysis. This is the step in the design process that takes the project program and combines it with the site inventory to come up with specific, site-related directives for design.
- C. Project budget constraints - The final challenge comes when faced with determining the construction budget. A Landscape Architect is responsible for giving a realistic design budget based on the client's program. Unfortunately, some consultants will feel the pressure to stretch the dollars further by opting for cheaper, common construction elements and materials effectively shortchanging the community of unique character. It is the obligation then of the Landscape Architect to explain the importance of maintaining community integrity and to propose strategies to prioritize project components to accommodate the available funds.

Remember, there is no one-size-fits-all solutions for the design of a streetscape. Each community must keep an open mind to see the potential for distinguishing design that respects their sense of place.

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