Architecture
New Jersey

Issue 5:1992

The New Jersey Town
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by John DeFazio, AIA

Gloucester City, New Jersey

Cranbury, New Jersey

Sunset Beach, Lower Township, Cape May Point, New Jersey

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—William Carlos Williams

The New Jersey State Plan for Development and Redevelopment passed in June calls for the reversal of growth patterns of the past 50 years. It predicates a move away from suburban sprawl and towards “communities of place,” using the traditional town as model for future settlements. Many architects, planners, and even developers in the state have been questioning the planning tenets of the previous half century, and are proposing both new and old solutions. But first, they say, we must understand how we got here before we can move on. The following essay by ANJ editorial board member John DeFazio traces the development patterns of the last half century, explores the reasons behind these patterns, and then outlines some of the methods being proposed to counteract the resultant problems.
The New Jersey Town

Between Disney and Distopia

During the Post War era, new planning principles and zoning laws acted in concert with State and Federal highway programs to shift growth away from existing urban centers and out into the agricultural and rural lands that lay between them. In a fusion of 19th century Romantic Naturalism and 20th century Scientific Rationalism, the planning criteria sought to objectify the landscape in order to engineer it based on a more “mechanistic” model. This process of abstraction, in turn, accelerated and institutionalized an already existing trend. The compact construction of settlements, long deemed unhealthful, was now considered obsolete. With the Euclid Decision, planning, by law, centered on the separation of uses, so that glue factories, for example, could no longer be adjacent to houses and school yards. Spreading out urban design problems over a larger terrain, planners gave themselves more room to resolve them. At the same time, special provisions were made for efficient, high speed vehicular movement to reduce the effects of the distances planners themselves had created. These new superhighways would also open up previously inaccessible lands for a rapidly expanding post-war economy and population.

The new planning standards, based on land use, virtually ended mixed-use zoning. Soon, Federal Housing and Veterans Administration mortgage loan standards split zoning even further, separating housing types and setting minimum standards for lot sizes. Already etched into the American psyche, the free-standing suburban house, offering the healthful benefits of the open countryside and easy access to the cultural and employment opportunities of the big city, became achievable with the advent of cheap automobiles, 30-year federally-insured mortgages, and mass-produced “Levittonian” (mock Usonian) houses. Engraved into our culture economically and legally, the American Dream gave rise to new industries and a whole new lifestyle. The tract-house subdivision became the building block of New Jersey’s growth.

Forty-five years later, the results of these principles and preferences are all around us. The abstract design standards have flattened the landscape, denaturing it, removing the very qualities people sought in it. Paths connecting settlements and land resources became superfluous, as the New Jersey Turnpike and the Garden State Parkway replaced the old “Kings Highways,” canals, and rivers. Auto-centered design ran roughshod over older pedestrian-scaled towns like Hightstown and Woodbury, as main streets were widened for increased traffic flow and buildings were torn down to make parking lots, leaving gaps in the street wall. Sidewalks were cropped off, taking street furniture and trees with them; rail bridges were removed to allow for new truck routes; and railroad and trolley tracks that once linked the entire state were torn up, cementing our dependence on the automobile. The scale of our towns changed as each element was stripped away. Slow, upright, rhythmic pedestrian movement was replaced by the rapid roll of the car, and the drivers’ perception of detail and their ability to reflect on images were reduced.

Regional centers like Burlington and Bridgeton became increasingly isolated as rail lines and ferry services ceased and the freeways that replaced these services bypassed them completely. No longer way stations to points beyond, they saw their commerce decline and their industries leave for sites along the highway. County seats like Mount Holly and Somerville weakened more slowly, their once-busting commercial centers gradually eroded away by new malls. Today, they suffer from “company town syndrome,” having grown dependent on one industry — government. As small, industrial towns like Beverly, Palmyra, and Riverside diminished, adjacent “centerless” townships of Cinnaminson and Delanco swelled. Buildings that constituted civic landmarks — banks, post offices, libraries, schools, municipal buildings, even churches and synagogues — moved out of the town and onto the strip. Malls acted as surrogate main streets, devoid of any traditional community activities except consumption. Climate controlled, socially controlled, they brought urban-scaled shopping out to former rural areas, and local mom-and-pop stores simply could not compete.

But the newly developing “clean-slate” regions would fare no better. As townships competed for new development in hopes of increased revenues, natural resources became increasingly stressed. In South Jersey, where residents are totally dependent on ground water, a number of factors — the increase of effluent, the re-routing (because of overdevelopment) of storm water run-off, and earth pollution due to inadequate septic systems — are bringing matters to a crisis point. According to Burlington County planner Chuck Gallagher, “Virtually all these competing municipalities are sipping from the same straw. As new development continues, areas formerly available for recharging are being paved over. The Potomac-Raritan-Megathy Watershed aquifer has been cropped more than 100 feet in the last 20 years alone. Limited resources know no municipal boundaries — as development increases, the quality of life of the entire region diminishes.”
Within these rapidly growing townships, the sinuous systems of pseudo-county roads in the new tract-house developments consist largely of cul-de-sacs, preventing natural linkage to adjacent communities. An entire development may be accessed by a single road, causing major traffic bottlenecks. Eventually, these roads are widened, often encroaching on the privacy of the residents they serve, and the situation in turn necessitates berms, dense planting buffers, and 14-foot high barrier walls—quite the opposite of the free and open countryside.

As the laws prescribed the breaking down of residential zoning by type, entire subdivisions were built with houses all the same size and price range, with no diversity or hierarchy. The results amounted to segregation by social class, and eventually precipitated the Mount Laurel Decision, which required towns to attain a certain percentage of moderate and low-cost housing. Community planning boards had long been opposed to high-density cluster-type development, as they feared an influx of moderate and lower income families with children who would require additional schools and public services. Rural areas turned to large-lot zoning in order to achieve low density and attract expensive “executive-style” luxury home developments. These, they felt, would bring with them ratables and increased land values. Builders were happy to oblige: Larger homes bring larger profits. These new luxury tract subdivisions were often built on prime farmland, far from the nearest town center. Cut off from their surroundings, they constituted the social pinnacle of suburban sprawl: “executive home ghettos” of behemoth builder-grade mansions, nervously jostling each other along mock-Olmsdian country drives.

Ironically, these developments ended up drawing out infrastructure over a greater area, leading to the very tax increases these rural townships were trying to avoid. Some townships, for the sake of expediency or to emulate an apparent success, appropriated other townships’ ordinances, often laying inappropriate guidelines over their own particular circumstances. Aping a successful formula from elsewhere, new developments became increasingly alike, never attaining their own identity; anywhere was everywhere. Soon, townships grew edge to edge, leaving less and less open space in which to commune with nature. The necessity to drive, even for the most mundane of errands, became a prescription for congestion—the very curse that precipitated the suburbanites’ flight from the city. Suburbs now had all the congestion of the big city with all the expansion of roadways, and the addition of traffic controls, overpasses, jug-handles, and clover leaves, only increasing the capacity and leading to more congestion. They amount to putting out fire with gasoline. By building more roads to reduce congestion, we have been treating the symptoms and not the disease itself. We have been trying to resolve problems of social and living patterns by dispersing them horizontally across the landscape. The public itself has been trying in a variety of ways to come to terms with the essential issues of development and land use. Witness the no-growth movement; the environmental movement, the outcry for the preservation of wetlands, shorelines, and open space, and the movement to preserve historic structures. People are asking, “What do we want to leave for our children? What do we want New Jersey to become? And how do we achieve what we want?”

The new State Plan is a start. Using what it calls a Regional Design System, it proposes a return to centralized mixed-use developments. These developments—towns, in fact—would provide private, public, and commercial services in a compact pedestrian center, with enough density to sustain an upgraded mass-transit system and accommodate automobiles as well. The State’s plan will dovetail with the policies of other State agencies such as the Departments of Environmental Protection and Transportation to reverse the erosion of our towns and open space.

One program that works towards these goals is the Transfer of Development Rights. In this program, a “Bank of Development Credits” is established, in which developers or owners can buy easements to permit them to build more densely than normally allowed within new or established town cores. The money the developers pay for these easements goes into the Farmland Preservation Program, and is used to pay farmers the market value price for their land with the provision that the land be retained as farmland in perpetuity. In this way, growth is directed
The New Jersey Town

away from farmland to create instead denser town centers. Such a TDR program has been in place in Chesterfield Township for over a decade, and over one third of the township’s farmland has been permanently dedicated. The New Jersey Pinelands Commission has been using a similar TDR banking system, and has protected over 6000 acres of forest without the need of State money. The Middlesex-Somerset-Mercer Regional Council, a non-profit agency concerned with future growth along the Princeton Corridor, is developing a study to determine the optimal locations of TDR towns in its region. MSM hopes that by steering new development to older existing centers bypassed in the building boom of the past 15 years, they can revitalize ailing town businesses and give shape to the currently formless surrounding development.

Unfortunately, the state’s authority to enforce the new plan is limited. The decision to implement it will lie with each of the state’s 567 municipalities. It will take the efforts of groups like MSM to educate the public, planners, and officials as to the benefits of the plan, and to coordinate diverse jurisdictions within a region.

The return to moderate-scaled, mixed-use village cores will not be simple for many reasons. Opposition by entrenched interest groups is strong. The New Jersey Association of Realtors and the New Jersey Builders Association are quite happy with the status quo; they believe all planning is intrinsically anti-growth, and they expect a new layer of bureaucratic delays. Speculators who bought farmland during the boom years and then sat on it in the hopes of an eventual windfall have reasons to fear TDR’s interference with the free market. Even within the TDR village cores, there will be difficulties. Existing residential developments and commercial strips will have to be rezoned and retrofitted. State and federal monies will have to be redirected to upgrading the infrastructure of the cores, rather then out to rural areas for new roads and water and power services.

Changes will have to happen within the planning profession itself. Some basic planning practices will have to be reevaluated. New planning “models” will have to be developed and new successes restudied. Architect Roy Vollmer, chairman of the architecture department at Spring Garden College in Philadelphia, believes that 19th century planned communities, like Samuel Sloan’s Riverton where he lives, will have a lot to teach us about the design of communities. He feels that colonial towns like Haddonfield should be studied for their scale and their ability to accommodate incremental growth over centuries. He says that developers need to restudy true Olmstedian models, like Short Hills, for their complexity and underlying form, to understand why it works as opposed to just how it looks. Architect Michael Mostoller has conducted case studies with his students at NJIT, analyzing towns like Cranbury and Hightstown to provide alternatives to the amorphous development patterns of the adjoining township of West Windsor.

New Jersey state planners point to Crosswicks in Burlington County as the test case for the TDR program and as a physical model for future development. This neotraditionalist approach is promoted by Miami architect/planners Duany/Plater-Zyberk, renowned for their design of the Florida resort town of Seaside and numerous other towns. Duany/Plater-Zyberk’s design principles focus on the physical “what” of town planning rather than the “how” of their political implementation. Their methods require enlightened clients — developers and municipalities who are willing to mandate “top-down” zoning edicts over new developments and in existing communities. Architect Susan Pikaart-Bristol, a member of the MSM roundtable, also puts emphasis on form. She says that architects and planners need to focus on creating the physical elements that comprise a town — the collection of “institutional monuments” that give a town its identity. “Towns were consciously constructed in the past,” she says, “and must be constructed in similar fashion now.” She stresses the importance of traditional town forms and their silhouettes from the distance. “What some call romantic and sentimental,” she says, “is actually an archetypal ideal: It meets our deeper psychological needs.”

While no less concerned with the concrete end results, Nelessen Associates’ bottom-up, common sense approach with which they call “planning by democracy” (in this issue) is closer to the user-based theories of Christopher Alexander, and seems to have a stronger chance of implementation in a cantankerous “home rule State” like New Jersey. Jim Constantin of Nelessen Associates says that we will have to “look beyond the obvious aspects of the neo-traditionalist village, and find ones that can accommodate contemporary building types. There were no corporate office parks, for example, in the 19th century.” He says that taking the model of a university town like Princeton and adapting it for a new office park/retail/housing mixed-use development would be one approach. The resultant town would have “a pedestrian campus of office buildings in the center, parking along the perimeter…and retail/commercial along an adjacent edge. Surrounding this core would be diverse housing types, along a modified street grid. If
The New Jersey Town

you bring mass transit to the core, you’ve even improved on the model.”

It is important to note that neo-traditionalism is not the only model for success. Radburn, based on the garden city planning principals of Ebenezer Howard, though often cited in planning texts, is never used as a model for contemporary development. The pre-World War II town of Roosevelt in Mercer County, with its flat-roofed International Style structures and socialist underpinnings, is unsentimentally based on nearly pure Bauhaus planning principles. Though traditional in form, it is much loved by its residents as a place in which to grow up, live, and work. The important aspects seem to be a compact core, easy access, preferably by foot, to shopping, schools, community institutions, and, if possible, work, and availability of public transportation.

Not all architects and planners believe that the future lies in the past. In a Venturi-esque embrace of the free market, architects Stephen Kieran and James Timberlake, adjunct professors at Princeton, say that we must accept the implications of the automobile age and the realities of Joel Garreau’s Edge City (see review in this issue). In a neo-phenomenalist approach, they say that new growth should be modeled on aspects of physical shape. Habits of lifestyle and law are deeply ingrained. It speaks of what we are to one another — the scale and balance that come with incremental growth.

But the issues influencing the form of future growth are not just economic, and they go beyond the superficial aspects of physical shape. Habits of lifestyle and law are deeply ingrained. In New Jersey, as elsewhere in America, the rights of the individual often go head to head with the rights of the community. Most municipal zoning ordinances favor the owner’s property value over the public’s interest. The redirecting of growth will require the rewriting of law, and compromise will be part of the process. The profit motive is an organic fact, but it must be balanced with social benefit. Democracy is not just about the individual rights, but also about the responsibilities of the community that assures those rights. The free market method of suburbanization has failed us in many ways. Our obsessive pursuit of a sublime, isolated privacy has led to the dislocation rather than the definition of the individual. Increasing distances has increased the need for speed. Our automobile-based living patterns have led to a disjunctive culture: Everything has become rushed. We live in the age of fax machines and the Home Shopping Network; we find ourselves driving to health clubs in order to walk on treadmills.

Humanistic qualities — the sense of community, of place, and of the passage of time itself — need to be restored into the way we live. We learn about ourselves in context to our world, and although we are not our environment, our dynamic relationship with it tells of what we are. The town was America’s first architecture, its spaces between buildings our first civic space. It speaks of what we are to one another and what we can be. Our settlements require an identity rooted in the concrete aspects of real, not abstract, space — subjective spaces that tell us of objective things. We must create new living patterns that allow us to reconnect with where we live, and with one another — places that nurture and challenge us. What was once done intuitively for builders armed with pattern books will now have to be done consciously by planners, architects, municipalities, and developers. As a society, we will have to understand the intrinsic beauty of limits, and the unlimited freedom within them. We can no longer afford to plunder our resources without conscience, or willfully construct rootless “magic kingdoms.” We need the real thing, authentic, human towns, places between Disneyland and dystopia.

John DeFazio, an architect practicing in Hightstown, is a member of the ANJ editorial board.

Lewis and Thower Architects, and Main Street in Voorhees by the Tarquini Organization. Both are intentional hybrids combining aspects of speculative suburban commercial development and traditional towns, both were developer driven, and both have enjoyed mixed architectural and financial success. Canuso Development’s Main Street, with its overt “Disneyesque” underpinning, is certainly too sweet for most architects’ sensibilities, and even too coy for the general public’s tasted. Much stronger architecturally is Toombs Development Corporation’s Forrestal Village, although it has not fared much better financially. Both projects struggle to accomplish in one project.

Crosswicks, Chesterfield Township, Burlington County

fell swoop what may only develop over time — the scale and balance that come with incremental growth.

Halfway between the “archetypal ideal” and the speculative model are two recent projects, Forrestal Village in Plainsboro by Sasaki Associates/Bower

Architecture New Jersey 92:5 11
Gloucester City, New Jersey
Geddes Brecher Qualls Cunningham, Architects, Philadelphia and Princeton

When the historic Coast Guard Station was closed and its ten-acre site given to Gloucester City, this shipping and manufacturing town near Camden planned to develop the site to improve the city's economy and to give recreational access to the Delaware River. GBQC, with Pannell Kerr Forster as real estate consultants, proposed: commercial and/or civic development on the site and pier taking advantage of spectacular views of the river and Philadelphia; public access to the river's edge; guidelines for residents to follow in improving their houses; an overall landscape plan for streets and new open spaces. Specific proposals include restaurants on the pier, renovation of the Coast Guard Building, and a Market Pavilion for exhibits, shows, and parties.
Cranbury, New Jersey
Geddes Brecher Qualls Cunningham, Architects, Philadelphia and Princeton

Cranbury Township, only ten minutes from Princeton and the Route 1 corridor, retains the essential elements of a typical village set within an agricultural landscape. Most of the township's population of 2,500 live in the Village, which has a thriving Main Street, an elementary school, tree-lined residential streets, and a small lake.

To preserve Cranbury's village image in the face of development pressures, to preserve views to the farmland, to protect property values, and to plan for Mount Laurel housing, GBQC prepared a plan based on the refinement of characteristics and principles already existing in the village. These include: a series of critical small dimensions and details that encourage a neighborly environment (front porches and small front and side yards, for example); a variety of housing types, supportive of a varied village population; varied block lengths and shapes; a compact overall village form; and preservation of the existing farmland and wetlands.
Sunset Beach, Lower Township, Cape May Point, New Jersey
John DeFazio Architect, Hightstown, New Jersey

This project, designed for developer James King, is bordered by Delaware Bay, the Delaware/Atlantic inlet, and the New Jersey State Wetlands Preserve. It maintains the block, lot, and range of house sizes of the adjacent turn-of-the-century resort community of Cape May Point, and takes its organizational approach from Seaside, Florida. Large and moderate-sized houses, 126 in all, must conform to guidelines developed to reinforce a New Jersey seaside vernacular style. Contours will be returned to their natural form, planting will be indigenous (pine and spruce, but no lawns), and houses will be set back 400 feet from the shore to allow for natural erosion patterns.

Main roadways, tying into existing traffic loops, ring the new commercial core and terminate at the shore. Boardwalks reinforce shore and village core connections and encourage walking and cycling.

The commercial core is crescent shaped for enclosure and density. Along the outside of the crescent are the post office, library, bus station, and meeting house. The inner edge is lined with shops, behind which is a raised piazza, with covered parking space underneath and seasonal shops along the seaside edge. Twin towers, providing elevator access to duplex condominiums above the shops, frame the sunset at the southernmost tip of New Jersey.
Manville, New Jersey
Michael Burns, AIA, Princeton, New Jersey

The opening of nearby regional shopping malls and the closing of the Johns-Manville plan (which had for decades fueled the growth of this Somerset County town) have had serious social and economic implications for the 12,000-strong community. Local planning mistakes of recent years have included the widening of Main Street, with patterns that encourage fast through-traffic, and the location of a strip mall directly behind Main Street, which erodes the latter’s strength.

The architect proposes increasing the density at the town’s center by creating a new retail street perpendicular to Main Street, which will connect Main Street to the strip shopping mall behind it. Housing is proposed above the shops on this new street. New zoning will compress the allowable retail area to create a more compact center following the contours of Main Street, and the former retail areas close to Main Street are rezoned for high-density housing with neighborhood groceries, taverns, and restaurants allowed at ground level. Retail/housing development is proposed as infill where needed along Main Street.

A new streetscape is proposed for Main Street, with a grove of trees extending from the railroad overpass at the south to the Johns-Manville plant at the north, with gateways at either end. Trees, benches, and lampposts will be rhythmically located and will serve as a buffer between the pedestrian and vehicular zones. Design guidelines for Main Street façades will be based on characteristics of the existing noteworthy buildings, such as Borough Hall.
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Main Street New Jersey and Downtown New Jersey are two of the programs that offer towns in this state assistance in improving themselves. In the following articles, Barbara Swanda, State Coordinator of Main Street New Jersey, and John Houston, consultant to downtown New Jersey, discuss their respective operations. On the opposite page, towns in the Main Street program are illustrated.

Main Street New Jersey

For many people, the mere mention of “Main Street” conjures up childhood memories of a bustling downtown business district. Unfortunately, the contemporary image is frequently one of store vacancies, dilapidated buildings, and empty streets.

Throughout the 1960s and ’70s, the viability of our downtowns was threatened by social and economic turmoil. Fortunately, during the 1980s, interest in the historic fabric of towns revived, and organized efforts caused significant improvements to occur in downtowns across the country. In many of the downtowns, success can be attributed to the Main Street program.

Since 1989, The Main Street New Jersey Program, sponsored by the Office of New Jersey Heritage, has been providing New Jersey communities with the skills, knowledge, and resources to improve their central business districts within the context of historic preservation. Both the Main Street New Jersey program and the National Main Street Center provide service free of charge to chosen communities.

Main Street programs use a common-sense approach to downtown revitalization, to achieve long-lasting changes in a downtown’s leadership and economy. Based on the experiences of over 700 communities nationwide, the comprehensive formula calls for work in four areas simultaneously: organization, promotion, design, and economic restructuring.

Several factors have proved to be vital. Viable downtowns require ongoing full-time management, much the way shopping malls do. Significant changes affecting the health of downtown must occur slowly, and in increments. To shape future growth, strategies for long-term goals and stable funding must be established. And community commitment from business owners, concerned citizens, and local government, in the form of time and money, is paramount.

Through Main Street’s structured process, which includes on-site visits and consultations with professionals in the field, local citizens are taught how to address their downtown’s problems. Through the program, communities have access to vast resources, training, and technical assistance that would otherwise be prohibitively expensive.

Communities apply to the program, and, if they are selected, technical assistance begins immediately. During the first year, communities generally receive aid in establishing their local Main Street organization and in assessing the downtown’s problems and opportunities. During subsequent years, the training and assistance provided is tailored to specific issues facing each individual downtown.

At this time there are six Main Street New Jersey towns. The first four — Bridgeton, Englewood, Little Falls, and West Orange — began their programs in 1990. In 1991, North Plainfield and South Orange joined. The program has helped Englewood, for example, analyze its consumer markets and promote its shops, restaurants, and cultural activities. It is helping with the restoration of historic buildings in Englewood and Little Falls. In Little Falls and South Orange, festivals and holiday celebrations help attract people to the town center. Tree planting and street benches have been added in Little Falls. And the list goes on.

Economic development statistics for these towns have been impressive since their involvement with the Main Street program. Analysis of the numbers to the end of 1991 — representing 24 months for the first four towns and 6 months for the last two — shows the following total gains: 48 net new business gains; 148 net new job gains; 124 downtown improvement projects; and over $4 million in private reinvestment in downtown building improvement projects.

Designation as a Main Street New Jersey community is achieved through a competitive application process, conducted approximately every 18 months. The next application period is scheduled for the fall of 1992. Main Street New Jersey is sponsored by the Office of New Jersey Heritage — the State Historic Preservation Office, Division of Parks and Forestry, Department of Environmental Protection and Energy.

For applications and further information, please contact: Main Street New Jersey, Office of New Jersey Heritage, CN 404, Trenton, NJ 08625. Tel: 609/292-2023.

The Main Street program will continue in the 1990s to help the public and private sectors in communities to work together to create attractive, economically viable town centers.

—Barbara Swanda

Barbara Swanda is State Coordinator of the Main Street New Jersey program.

Downtown New Jersey: Special Improvement Districts

A new client for design services is emerging as a result of a ten-year-old state law that enables Downtown organizations to incorporate, plan necessary business enhancement services, and finance the services with a kind of user charge that is shared by all the businesses benefited. The concept is actively supported by the State Department of Community Affairs and by a statewide organization, Downtown New Jersey, whose role is to help business and local political leaders to recreate viable marketplaces in the centers of the older towns and cities. Two New Jersey architects, James R. Guerra and Edward Rothe, serve on Downtown New Jersey’s Board of Directors.

About 15 of these corporations have been formed, six of which have been in business for three to six years. Cranford, the first organized, has almost completed reconstruction of the public spaces, including sidewalks, trees, street lights, and furniture, and is well advanced in financing façade and sign improvements. Elizabeth has completed design guidelines that are part of the city’s building review procedures, as has New Brunswick. Surveys of business operators suggest that this will be an important part of the programs being developed in Woodbridge, Woodbury, and Vineland.

“Downtown Management” is a concept applied throughout the United States to districts as large as Manhattan’s vast Grand Central area and as small as the business center of Salem, NJ. According to Downtown New Jersey:

Downtown management is the system applied locally to maintain and enhance the economic vitality of business districts of any size. At minimum, a system requires four elements — a manager, a policy body, an assured annual source of funds, and one
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by James Constantine, PP

The Visual Preference Survey, also known as the VPS*, is a technique that enables developers, local government officials, and citizens to participate in defining a “common vision” for an individual development or an entire community. The survey was conceived in 1979 by Tony Nelessen while he was teaching an urban design studio at Rutgers University. The town of Metuchen had asked Nelessen’s studio to prepare a plan for its downtown. Rather than expending great amounts of time and energy on developing a well-intentioned plan that the town might just place on the shelf to gather dust, Nelessen experimented with a different approach.

According to Nelessen, “We began to envision how the people who lived in Metuchen perceived their downtown. What did they feel was positive? What didn’t they like? What type and density of new development would they find acceptable? We photographed the town and picked other scenes from our slide library. The slides were shown to the citizens and businesspeople at a large town meeting. We asked them to give us a positive sign if they liked the picture and negative if they did not. We had no idea what we’d find.”

The results were a little startling. When the town’s evaluations were totaled after the meeting, some scenes were rated close to 100 percent positive and some were close to 100 percent negative. If the acceptable images were incorporated in the plan, Nelessen reasoned, then the plan should find favor with the town. Conversely, the plan should prohibit or upgrade the unacceptable images.

The results of Metuchen’s first VPS were implemented in several successful planning efforts, including a new zoning ordinance for infill multi-family housing. When the survey was conducted, the town gave a negative rating to a multi-family project that had recently been approved and constructed according to the existing zoning ordinance. In contrast, survey results revealed highly positive ratings for several images of higher density urban townhouses grouped around courtyards. By drawing on the results of the survey, the town drafted an infill multi-family zoning code that promoted the design elements of the positive images, while restricting certain unfavorable elements.

After adoption of the code, the first new development was built to extremely favorable reviews from the town. According to the developer, Joseph Miciak, “The project was a huge success. Not only did the units sell, but the people in the town somehow knew that the project was appropriate for Metuchen.”

In the time since the original Metuchen survey, the visual preference technique has been modified and refined, but the bottom line is still the same: determining what type of development is acceptable to a community. One of the greatest strengths of the Visual Preference Survey is its ability to develop a consensus of diverse groups who sometimes have opposing interests in local development.

Visual Preference Surveys consist of between 160 and 240 slides, shown one at a time, to a group of people, each of whom rates them on a scale ranging from +10 to -10. After a survey session is complete, the scores of everyone participating are entered into a computer program that calculates an average rating for each image.

Visual Preference Surveys have been conducted with thousands of people across the nation, and with some interesting results. Generally, the most positive results have been achieved when the survey is conducted with those directly affected by the development. The survey provides developers with a method of determining what type of development will be acceptable to citizens and businesspeople in a community. The survey also helps developers identify design elements that will be acceptable to the community. The survey results can be used to develop a zoning code that promotes the design elements of the positive images, while restricting certain unfavorable elements.

tively rated images are scenes of unspoiled natural areas. The most consistently negative images are those depicting large-scale roads and parking lots or deteriorating urban situations. Surprisingly, most images of suburban development receive negative ratings. And this has been the case anywhere in the country the survey has been run. People prefer to live in small villages and traditional towns, even if it means areas of higher density. Consequently, VPS images of some of today's "neotraditional" developments have received very favorable ratings.

The failing grades earned by brand new strip malls and state-of-the-art office parks have also been telling. No matter where the survey has been conducted.

**VISIONS FOR THE CAPITAL CITY**

**IMPLEMENTING VISIONS FOR STREET**

**Issue 1: Street standards.**

- Revise City street standards with changes specified in this section. Provide sections drawings of each street type. (CP:UDP, DS)
- Adopt new street standards for boulevards, both new and the retrofitting of arterials. Eliminate continuous left turn lane from street standards. Retrofit existing arterials into boulevards; convert continuous left turn lane to median strip with street trees. Add street trees in parkway planting strip at road edge, and move sidewalk further away from street. (CP:UDP,DR:C,DS)

**Left:** Two sections in the Visual Plan of Olympia address the design of state government buildings and confirm the erosion of the city's image as "capital" due in part to the state government's new office buildings.

**Below:** Part of a VPS conducted in Berkeley Heights, this image of a relatively high density, pedestrian-oriented development received a +5.6 rating.

**IMPLEMENTING VISIONS FOR THE CAPITAL CITY**

**Issue 1: Overall Vision.**

- Use photographs and vision statements from this document to illustrate the "goals and objectives" and "intent" sections of other planning documents. (All documents)

**Issue 2: View Protection.**

- Add more specific policies and new ordinance language to protect existing views of the Capitol dome, forested ridgetops, waters of Budd Inlet, and the Olympics. (CP:UDPZ)
- Refine Special Height District — State Capitol Group (existing Zoning Ordinance), to read more simply, expand the area protected, and include reference maps with important views delineated. (Z)
- Delineate important views and vistas on reference maps showing both views (as arrows), and points of visual termination (as asterisks). (CP:UDPZ)

**Issue 3: Civic Architecture and Building Articulation.**

- Civic Architecture (State and other government buildings) should be designed with classic materials and detailing. (CP:UDP,DLD)
- Classical civic architecture should be encouraged for both monumental and standards office buildings occupied by State agencies. (CP:UDP,DR:DT)

**IMPLEMENTING VISIONS FOR NEIGHBORHOOD CENTERS**

- Neighborhood centers should contain neighborhood greens which could be small scale versions of Sylvester Park. (CP:UDP, Z,DR:MF)

**Below:** Part of a VPS conducted in Berkeley Heights, this image of a relatively high density, pedestrian-oriented development received a +5.6 rating.

- Provide IT stops at neighborhood centers. (CP:UDP, Z,DR:MF)
- Focus larger multi-family projects around neighborhood centers and allow higher density housing near neighborhood centers. (CP:UDP, Z,DR:MF)

- Provide retail, services, and office, as well as community facilities, in neighborhood centers. Require housing on upper floors above stores. (CP:UDP, Z,DR:MF)
ducted, people living in suburbanized areas have expressed a phenomenal fear of new suburban development. Is it any wonder that "anti-growth" movements are springing up in the suburbs? In places where anti-growth movements have emerged, elected officials are often reluctant to encourage any new development that their constituents might perceive as "more of the same stuff that's just plain unattractive and worsens traffic." In these situations, the surveys have proved a useful medium for bringing together developers, local government officials, neighboring property owners, and even citizen objectors, in order to begin developing a "common vision" for future development. Reaching a consensus on the type of growth a community finds acceptable can defuse or eliminate the often predictable opposition to new development. By establishing their proprietorship in a plan that reflects a common vision, local officials and citizens can assist rather than hinder development.

From a developer's standpoint, gauging people's preference for various types of architecture, streetscapes, commercial centers, even landscaping, can become the basis for creating a more marketable image for new development. Since real estate marketing studies consist primarily of words and numbers, it should not be surprising that surveys of consumers' visual preferences often contradict conventional marketing studies.

The idea of involving people has evolved over the past couple of years into a whole new process of community design. After teaching and practising urban design and site planning for 25 years, Tony Nelessen became convinced that site plans did not realistically represent how a development would look upon completion. According to Nelessen, "People spend lots of times with blueprints that don't tell you what walking down the street will feel like. Are the setbacks too close or too far, are the buildings attractive, does the development conform to some boiler-plated code that has no relation to the town itself?"

If the Visual Preference Survey proves that people intuitively know how they want their community to appear, Nelessen thought they might also know what type of site plan was acceptable. But since the average person cannot be expected to draw or read blueprints, something that simulated development was needed. That something became several thousand buildings constructed as scale architectural models, known as Hands-On Models. The models consist of everything from single-family houses and apartments to strip malls and drive-in banks. Together with roads, sidewalks and trees, they bring site plans to life.

Nelessen initially devised the models several years ago for a workshop series sponsored by the Association of New Jersey Environmental Commissions. Since that time, the model collection has multiplied and been put to use in several dozen community design workshops across the nation. "When average people are left alone with models, they invariably design some sort of traditional community," says Nelessen, who believes that the model exercises confirm the results of years of Visual Preference Surveys. "We've even given the models to third grades who designed a traditional community with a school, store, and community park at the center. It's amazing — no group we've worked with yet has plopped down a cookie-cutter subdivision."

The Hands-On Models have also been put to the test in actual plans in several New Jersey communities, including Cranbury, Princeton, Tewkesbury, Warren Township in Somerset County, Chesterfield, and Washington Township in Mercer County. "I will never present a plan on paper again," said developer Unger, who has already presented two proposed plans in model form. "The models are a convincing, realistic depiction. If the plan is good, the planning board will know it as soon as they see the model." Nelessen is convinced that planning boards will just as intuitively be able to detect inappropriate development.

Portions of this article have also appeared in Land Development, published by the National Association of Home Builders.

James Constantine, Professional Planner, is a Senior Associate and founding member of A. Nelessen Associates.
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A downtown manager, working full or part time, is the essential component in the system. Volunteers work best when supported by professional managers. And managers work most effectively with a broad-based policy-making body supporting and guiding them. Such a body, which can be governmental or non-governmental, should have downtown as its focal point.

The policy body should be composed of people committed to downtown improvement and representing the major interests, in order to be influential within the community. These include persons who own property as well as those who use property for business and in some cases for residences. Even fairly small downtowns have lending institutions, professional offices, and restaurants, as well as conventional shops; non-profit interests may include hospitals and cultural facilities.

Downtown management requires an assured source of funds. Not only must the manager be paid, but the downtown entity must be able to make commitments for essential services and other activities. Throughout the United States, communities are increasingly relying on what New Jersey calls "special improvement districts" as a means of assuring financing that is equitable and has the character of self-help. That is, the commercial interests within the district should bear all or most of the cost of added services designed to enhance commerce. New Jersey law authorizes a wide variety of property tax-related financial systems and/or a licensure alternative to finance the services. A few communities have sufficient business support to depend on multi-year contributions. Typically, however, this source of financial support produces less money with the passage of time.

The State's District Management Act identifies almost 20 authorized activities, including the following:
1. Fund the improvement of the exterior appearance of properties through grants or loans;
2. Fund the rehabilitation of properties;
3. Accept, purchase, rehabilitate, sell, lease or manage properties;
4. Provide security, sanitation, or other services supplemental to those provided normally by the municipality;
5. Undertake improvement to increase the safety or attractiveness of the district, to attract new businesses and visitors. This may include litter clean-up and control, landscaping, parking, and recreational and rest areas;
6. Publicize the district and its businesses;
7. Recruit new businesses;
8. Organize special events;
9. Provide special parking arrangements;
10. Provide decorative lighting; and
11. Adopt and apply design criteria for signs and façades on privately owned buildings.

In downtown New Brunswick, for example, the most evident business need is better and cheaper parking. Parking changes included: adjusted rates favoring shopper use over daily use by commuters; construction of a new parking garage; installation of parking location signs throughout the business district and especially at its entryways; and two hours of free parking for shoppers and diners. The latter, a validation program, has been widely promoted as an attraction for shoppers and merchants. The cost is shared by City Market, using its special improvement district funds.

Elizabeth's Historic Midtown Special Improvement District is financing retail promotions and the creation of sign and façade design standards. Both Englewood and Trenton operate supplementary Downtown clean-up systems and New Brunswick is supporting a supplementary security force. Both are applying the self-help district assessment feature of the state law. The statute prohibits use of district funds to make up for a cut in sanitation or police services. "Normal" services are expected to be continued. The law recognizes implicitly, however, that the standards of clean-up and security required of contemporary downtowns exceed normal services. Thus, the Trenton Downtown Association operates its own street vacuum cleaners each morning and New Brunswick contributes to the cost of a private security force which patrols the restaurant and Cultural Center areas after dark to assure their continued success.

Downtown New Jersey sponsors two statewide conferences yearly, publishes a newsletter, and recognizes special service to downtowns through an annual award program.

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—Lawrence O. Houstoun, Jr.
Lawrence O. Houstoun, Jr., is Principal of the Atlantic Group, a consulting firm in Cranbury, NJ.
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**Books**

*Edge City: Life on the New Frontier*

by Joel Garreau.


The term “Edge City,” used to describe new development in America, applies the term “city” to entities that have little to do with classical or traditional notions of the term “urban.” Popularized by the author and journalist Joel Garreau and used as the title for his recent book, it defines a trend in commercial development that has been growing since the early 1970s.

According to the author, a “mature” Edge City is defined by the following parameters: a minimum of five million square feet of leasable office space; a minimum of 600,000 square feet of retail space; a population that increases at 9 AM on workdays, a condition that indicates a workplace, not a residential suburb; a local perception as a single destination for mixed use, with such activities as jobs, shopping, entertainment; and a site which, 30 years ago, was overwhelmingly residential or rural in character.

In addition to these characteristics, Garreau discusses many economic, social, and philosophical conditions that lead to Edge City development. One viewpoint sees Edge City as the logical end product of suburbanism. As people sought relief from perceived urban problems (lack of open space, reduced services, crime), the suburbs began to fill up, and people moved farther and farther away from their jobs in downtown. Eventually it became desirable to move the job out to the suburb to be close to the residence again. That is not necessarily the most significant explanation of the Edge City development, but one of many, and the author presents a number of other theories and observations throughout the book. It is, however, a commonly repeated theme in Edge Cities the author has studied throughout the country, and is most apparent right here in New Jersey, at the Edge City known as “287 & 78.”

The story of 287 & 78 began when Bell Labs moved to Murray Hill in the early 1940s, citing problems in Manhattan such as high land and living costs and “the urban noise and dirt.” In 1977, AT&T moved its long-distance division to Bedminster, and soon relocated additional functions to the area and to other similar New Jersey Edge cities, such as “287 & 80” (Whippany-Parsippany-Troy Hills) and Route 1 (Princeton.) The numbers that characterize AT&T’s migration are staggering: 51,000 employees moved, and 22 million square feet of office space, more than downtown Seattle, all located in New Jersey Edge Cities.

Of course, AT&T is not alone. Other major corporations such as TRW, Beneficial, Prudential, Bristol Myers, and Johnson and Johnson all have moved to 287 & 78 for the same perceived benefits: consolidation of operations, lower rental/operating costs, improved quality of living and working environments. In the classic Edge City development scenario, the offices eventually cause the development of more housing (usually townhouse complexes) and the major landmark structure of almost every Edge City, the Mall (or, in Garreau’s assessment, the Village Square). At 287 & 78, the net result is an area, or “City,” with over 16 million square feet of leasable white-collar office space; as the author points out, more than downtown New Orleans.

Comparisons such as these are referenced throughout this well-researched book, and serve to illustrate both the magnitude of the phenomenon and the diverse manners in which it becomes manifest. Each chapter focuses on particular regions where Edge City development is occurring in force, such as New Jersey, Boston, Atlanta, Washington, D.D., and San Francisco, to name a few. In each case, Garreau mixes urban theories and facts with personal interviews and stories of local color to paint a picture of that area’s unique situation and draw conclusions relative to Edge Cities in general.

However, his conclusions are somewhat elusive. This is not a book where one can flip to the last few pages of the last chapter and understand the author’s stance on the issues. Certain chapters and passages imply that Mr. Garreau supports Edge City development while others suggest that he abhors it. He does state strongly that Edge Cities are the physical manifestation of battles in America today over issues of growth and quality of life, which he describes as “amorphous essentials,” presumably because everybody can agree about their importance but few can agree about how they should be realized.

This may be the major point of the book. A segment of the chapter on Washington, D.C., is subtitled “The Machine, the Garden, and Paradise;” here Garreau introduces two contradictory values of land utilization in today’s America. “One sees the untouched land as an object of veneration, a source of spiritual strength. The other sees the land as a commodity to be used and exchanged for money, like any other. This division is crystallized in the reactions people have when they suddenly come upon a bulldozer as it bites into an “unspoiled” landscape. How you feel about this abrupt appearance of the Machine in the Garden is doubtless predicated on your idea of “progress.” What is really at issue is how we come to terms with our relationship to the land and how we determine what we value and why we value it. This awareness is essential in developing any meaningful assessment of Edge City beyond its worth as real estate or its effect on the evolution of the concept of “City.”

The book makes it clear that Edge Cities refute almost every time-tested concept of what is considered good practice in architectural/urban design. But Garreau presents compelling evidence that Edge Cities exist because many people want them and value what they have to offer. This raises some serious questions regarding both the future of development patterns here in New Jersey and nationally and the nature of architects’ influence. As we start to ponder the methods with which we, as a society, assign value to land, the impacts of telecommunications technology, and the relevance of traditional urban design, we may find it necessary to expand our definitions of cities and how they realize their most meaningful and appropriate physical forms. This book is a good place to begin that process.

Alan J. Horwitz, AIA, is an architect with Mancini-Duffy, an architecture and interior design firm located in the Edge City of 287 & 80, and a member of the Editorial Board of ANJ.
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110 Gibraltar Road
Horsham, PA 19044
1-800-284-9834

Underwritten by:
National Casualty Company
of St. Louis, MO, a member of the Nationwide Life Insurance family of companies.

Yes!
Send me the Free Information Kit on the NJSA Employee Benefit Plan.

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Today, architects and engineers are required to build energy efficiency into their plans. With the help of Jersey Central Power & Light Company's energy management team, you can now turn those plans into energy cost savings for your clients.

Jersey Central's energy management team has the expertise to help you focus on the latest energy-efficient techniques and systems and build these elements into all your plans. They'll even provide you with the support tools you need to communicate the values of energy efficiency to the builder and buyer.

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