

Lessons from Bozeman Montana: Why a Tangible Definition of Town Character Matters

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INTRODUCTION

In the vast landscapes of the west, where the natural environment dominates the man-made, it is often hard to see the need for regulations to control development. In many rural towns which have experienced extended periods of economic decline, growth in any form is as welcome as spring after the harshest of winters. But there is an increasing concern that certain forms of growth, such as commercial strip development, may have negative impacts on the local community. Some negative effects of commercial strip development can be quantified in economic terms such as in the decline in a town's marketability as a tourist destination. Other negative effects of commercial strip development are difficult to quantify in economic terms such as a decline in quality of life for local residents and erosion of their cherished sense of town character.

These concerns prompted the citizens of Bozeman to adopt design guidelines to control development along important roads leading into their town; roads which they call entryway corridors. As a resident of Bozeman, I was interested in learning if these guidelines, instituted in 1992, have been effective in their efforts to change the further development of Bozeman's commercial strip. From the outset it appeared that Bozeman had all the necessary ingredients to make this endeavor successful. Bozeman was geographically isolated allowing growth in the county to be directed without the effects of spin off development from a larger city. The urban community was a manageable size of 22,600 inhabitants. There was great community activism concerning town growth issues. The government institutions which implement planning directives were well established and included a City/County Planning Department, a Design Review Board, a Planning Board, and a Board of City Commissioners. The architecture faculty of the local university served as members of these boards and were there to offer academic expertise in town design and planning. And more importantly, for all those who were not formally educated in town design and planning, the majority of the town of Bozeman provided a physical example of how a successful

community should look and feel. In other words, the physical attributes of town character had not been eroded to the point where they were no longer discernible.

It seemed that if any town could get a grip on sprawl, Bozeman was a prime candidate. The town had the means, the will, and the way to stop the transition of a cohesive western town into, using the words of author James Kunstler, "a geography of nowhere." But, after reviewing the first six projects to be subjected to the scrutiny of Bozeman's new design guidelines called the Design Objectives Plan for Entryway Corridors (DOPEC), I have concluded that these guidelines continue to deter not promote development that is compatible with Bozeman's town character.¹

What follows is an explanation of why these guidelines have, by my assessment, failed. In fairness to those who have authored and supported these guidelines, I should point out their favorable mention in two recent books on town planning. Randall Arendt, in *Rural by Design* applauds Bozeman's guidelines for their clarity, good sense, extensive public involvement process, and attention to design of a pedestrian scale. Philip Langdon, in *A Better Place to Live*, cites the positive effect the guidelines have had on the recent design of Bozeman's Wal-Mart.

While these comments are true, they overlook a more important issue. The DOPEC guidelines have focused attention on individual design elements; such as building color, roof form, and architectural style. As a result of this focus, little attention is paid to the essential design elements that determine the character of a place. These essential design elements deal with the spatial relationships between buildings, streets, and open space; relationships that define urban space.

DEFINING THE CHARACTER OF BOZEMAN

Design guidelines are fashioned with a purpose of producing a desired outcome. In Bozeman, the stated purpose of DOPEC was to promote a physical environment that reflects the local community. But, DOPEC never provided a specific vision, picture, or definition of what this physical environ-

ment was. A clearer picture of what did not fit Bozeman's character was provided. Typical commercial strip development distinguished by single story large rectangular buildings, lacking architectural detail, surrounded by large parking lots, and designed without any consideration for the natural environment, did not fit Bozeman's character. If a typical commercial strip development such as Wal-Mart or McDonalds did not fit, then what did fit?

The answer to this questions is simple. The character of Bozeman is generally *urban* and specifically *small town urban*.² Urban environments are distinctly different from suburban environments like the commercial strip. The DOPEC guidelines recognized that their purpose was to promote apples (urban environments) instead of oranges (suburban environments) but the difference between two was never defined. This lack of definition of Bozeman as an urban place may be indicative of a general confusion about the differences between urban and suburban places that exists in American society, a society that spends more time in suburban than urban places.

To define the character of Bozeman as urban, I used the well documented definition developed by Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk.³ This definition defines urban places by describing the smallest unit of urban settlement, the neighborhood. A traditional neighborhood, whether located in a city, a town, or a rural hamlet, is characterized by six elements describing the size, use, and relationship of the buildings, streets, and open spaces. While the town of Bozeman has changed from origin in 1864 to its current state, the predominant character of the town can be fully described using these six elements.

The first element is distinct size. A neighborhood's size is defined by a center, edges, and the area in-between. The center provides the daily services necessary to for those who live and work in the neighborhood. The edges serve as transitions to adjoining land and mark entrance into the neighborhood. The in-between areas facilitate movement and join all places within the neighborhood to the center. These three areas: center, edges, and the in-between, are bound within a walkable distance. Once the size exceeds a walkable distance the pedestrian connection between the center and the edge is diminished changing the human scale of the neighborhood.

When a neighborhood reaches its limit in size, it grows by duplication or the formation of a new neighborhood and not by expansion or enlargement to a monstrous size.⁴ In the 1960's, Bozeman, like most American towns, grew by expanding the original neighborhood to a size where it could no longer function efficiently and conveniently. A congested town center and street system fragmented with one way streets and traffic lights to control traffic are typical signs of a dysfunctional neighborhood which has grown beyond its optimal size.

The second element is a mixture of uses and users. The form of and functions found within a traditional neighborhood does not limit who can live there. By providing a

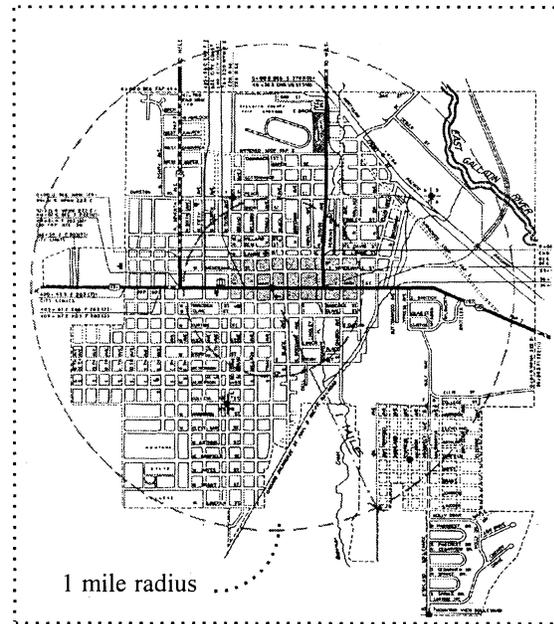


Fig. 1. Bozeman, Montana 1967

mixture of uses in a neighborhood center, residents who do not drive have access to everyday services. By providing a transit depot in a neighborhood center, residents who do not drive are connected to other neighborhood centers for access to a wider range of services and employment. By providing a mixture of housing types, residents of different income and household size are not segregated into homogeneous neighborhoods. The traditional neighborhood creates an environment that facilitates access and independence of all citizens including the young, the elderly, the poor, and the handicapped.

In Bozeman, within a six-block area you can find a townhouse, an apartment building, an apartment above a store, a modest single family detached house, and a grand single family detached house. The residents living in this six block area all have access to the civic functions of the post office, the library, and the town hall and a wide variety of private activities including shopping, restaurants, and cinemas.

The third element is a street design that balances the needs of pedestrian and motorists. Bozeman's streets form a dense interconnected grid with blocks of 300 feet in length. This dense grid allows street traffic to be dispersed evenly throughout the neighborhood at slow speeds and is more efficient than a street pattern that collects traffic into major arterial roads designed for higher speeds.⁵ The dense interconnected grid of streets benefits the pedestrian by slowing car speeds and providing interest and route options at frequent intersections. The pedestrian is further accommodated by the scale of the street, designed not for speed of cars but as a human scaled room, defined by edges of trees and buildings. Bozeman's neighborhood streets provide additional means of mitigating the difference in size and speed of cars and pedestrians using buffers between the street and the sidewalk

such as rows of street trees or cars parked along the street.

The fourth element is the use of individual buildings to define streets and open spaces. The most public and frequently used space in our town is the street. Streets are therefore important in providing the character of the community. The character of the open space of the street is formed by the buildings that adjoin them. For example, the character of Main Street in Bozeman is created by the repetition of buildings which have a consistent relationship to the street. The character of the street is not created by consistent architectural style, building height, roof shape, or building function. The relationship of buildings to the street and of one building to another is one of the most important character giving elements of a neighborhood, and yet in most modern development this element is given the least consideration.

The fifth element is the distribution of open space. Traditional neighborhoods use open spaces such as parks, town greens, plazas, and squares to enable social interaction to occur in the neighborhood. A small residential park such as Bozeman's Cooper Park, joins the houses surrounding it together to provide an outdoor room for small gatherings. Outside of the post office is another kind of open space, a plaza, where a more public social interaction or gathering may occur.

The purpose of the open space; to enable social interaction, is what distinguishes urban open space from suburban open space. Suburban open space such as a front lawn, a side yard, or the landscaped edge of a road may be green and outdoors, but these spaces are not designed for the purpose of human gathering. Bozeman's ordinances, like many American communities, requires development of open space but does not specify the purpose or nature of this space. The result is that most of the open space developed is used as a visual design element and not for human interaction or enjoyment.

The sixth element is the provision of civic functions in prominent locations. Civic buildings enable indoor public life in the same way that parks and town squares enable outdoor public life. Inclusion of civic buildings within our neighborhoods provide symbols of community identity. Civic buildings, such as churches, schools, monuments, and libraries, can organize or mark significant places in the

physical layout of the neighborhood. In Bozeman, an example is the location of a school on residential street where the school serves as an educational institution and a community center.

It is the synthesis of the above six elements, not the presence of each individual element, that provides the intrinsic urban character of a neighborhood, town, or city. The suburban places that we seek to avoid building in our communities can be described by six opposite elements. Using this definition of urban versus suburban, we can then see why the DOPEC guidelines failed to promote development on the commercial strip that fits the character of Bozeman.

LESSONS FROM THE BOZEMAN DESIGN GUIDELINES

What is surprising is that the character of Bozeman is not primarily defined by the western geography, culture, or climate; the things that come to mind readily when we are asked to describe the character of our towns. And, while the western mountains overpower the urban landscape and provide a colorful textured backdrop, they do not make the urban experience of a cowboy in the parking lot of a Wal-Mart any more fitting as a Bozeman experience. Geography, culture, and climate do contribute to the character of Bozeman, but not alone. These regional factors work together with the six elements of urban neighborhoods to define the distinct character of Bozeman.

The following paragraphs highlight the problems with the DOPEC guidelines and demonstrate why they fell short of the goal to promote development that was characteristically Bozeman. In general the DOPEC guidelines addresses issues which improved the existing commercial strip and in this regard the guidelines are successful. These issues include improving the amount of landscaping, providing sidewalks, diminishing the visual impact of large parking lots, increasing site lighting, and increasing the complexity of buildings (discouraging simple unadorned elevations). The typical commercial strip building, a utilitarian box surrounded by parking was required to be an articulated box or series of small boxes surrounded by landscaped parking lots.

All of the projects reviewed in this study were located on entryway corridors and were thus subject to the DOPEC design guidelines as well as all applicable building and zoning ordinances. The study included projects located on sites which were part of the established commercial strip and on sites which were agricultural land emerging as new development. The projects include a Wal-Mart, a car wash, a light industrial park, a shopping complex, a commercial-office complex, and a mixed residential-commercial-office development.

DOPEC guidelines failed to promote element one; neighborhoods of distinct size, because the development on the entryway corridors tend not to have a relationship to any

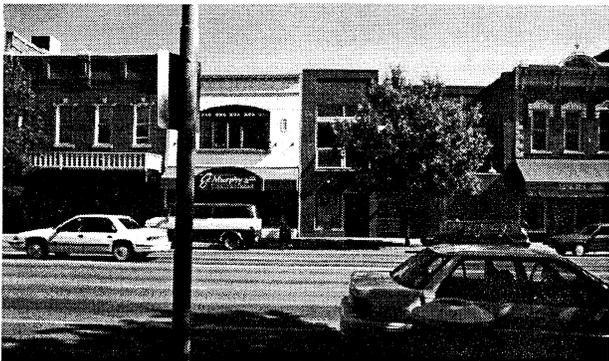


Figure 2. Main Street Bozeman

neighborhood. The commercial strip is, by its linear form and limited road access, a place that lacks connection to the center of Bozeman or to the existing dense grid of interconnected streets. Two of the mixed use projects reviewed, Nelson PUD and Valley Commons, could be considered the beginning of a new neighborhood center. Their ability to become real urban neighborhoods were limited by the lack of human scaled streets connecting them at frequent intervals to the surrounding residential neighborhoods.

DOPEC guidelines failed to promote element two; a mixture of uses and users. The projects reviewed were all single use buildings (even though some buildings were located on mixed-use sites). The greatest impediment to the creation of mixed-use buildings is the current code requirement for parking. Excessive parking requirements force developers to provide low density developments and discourage multi-story mixed use buildings. While the DOPEC guidelines try to reduce the visual and physical dominance of the automobile and provide for pedestrian friendly spaces, the conflict between these objectives and the parking requirements of Bozeman's zoning ordinance is not addressed.

DOPEC guidelines failed to promote element three; streets which balance the needs of pedestrians and motorists. The site planning of the projects provide the opposite of a dense interconnected network of streets, using long blocks, and minimal intersections or connections to adjacent properties. Because all of the developments set the buildings back from the street using large front yard setbacks of up to 150 feet, the human scale of the street space is lost. The projects provide sidewalks along the streets but all lack any buffer of street trees or parked cars between the sidewalks and the street. The DOPEC guidelines regulated the pedestrian environment of the parking lots and building entrances, but efforts to develop the streets, the most public place on all sites, as enjoyable pedestrian spaces, were ignored.

DOPEC guidelines failed to promote element four; buildings which define streets and open space. This occurred for three reasons. First because of the low density site development resulting from parking requirements (parking occupies over 50% of the Nelson PUD 19 acre site). All of the projects reviewed could be described as building surrounded by parking lots, leaving little chance of the street being defined by a building edge. Secondly, DOPEC required that all sides of the buildings be treated architecturally to avoid the creation of a back side. One result was that buildings don't have clear fronts or backs and service entrances, dumpsters, and other mechanical equipment end up weakly disguised along the main street facades. DOPEC should require that building entrances face and define the public streets, not parking lots, and that service entrances face and define service streets.

The third reason that the buildings fail to define the street is the attention the DOPEC guidelines give to architectural style. The guidelines incorrectly suggest that Bozeman's character is created by a western-style of buildings with distinct rooflines, steeply pitched roofs, and deep roof over-



Figure 3. The phony western architectural style promoted by design guidelines.

hangs. A review of the architectural history of Bozeman shows the eclectic mix of building style, form, and materials.⁶ Each period in Bozeman's history leaves physical evidence of the culture, economic conditions, and politics of one time. The result is a rich visual history told to future generations by the buildings, parks, and monuments built during that period. Design guidelines can be dangerous if they promote indirectly or directly one architectural style. In order to assure the speedy approval of their projects, developers may identify one 'approvable' architectural style and that style becomes a developers' standard.⁷ To avoid this institutionalizing of one architectural style, DOPEC should focus the design of projects on the relationship that an ensemble of buildings have to a street as a primary character giving element.

The DOPEC guidelines fail to promote element five: open spaces of a traditional urban character. This is surprising in light of the high percentage of open space provided in most of the developments. The problem is that the open space is in the form of perimeter site green strips; lawns that divide the projects from the streets but are not places for human interaction. Additional outdoor recreation areas required by DOPEC have been developed as plazas, parks, or recreation paths which are all sited in backyard locations away from building entrances or places of activity and interest.

The DOPEC guidelines fail to promote element six: civic uses in prominent locations. There are a number of opportunities to terminate views, mark important places on the development sites, or secure dominance of some buildings over others to create monumental unity. Because the guidelines do not address how developers should relate their projects to adjacent properties in positive ways other than avoiding negative impact such as lighting, noise, traffic, or drainage, and this element is never considered.

CONCLUSIONS

This exercise of looking for evidence of elements of traditional neighborhoods in new development serves as a reminder that the character of our town is not created by the design of separate buildings but by the design of whole

neighborhoods. And, while we use design guidelines to regulate one building project at a time, these guidelines should provide us with a method of determining whether the individual buildings will contribute or detract from the neighborhood when viewed in its entirety.

The lesson to be learned from Bozeman is that we have a choice. We can use design guidelines to dress-up development on the commercial strip. The result of our efforts will be the lowering of street signs, improving lighting in parking lots, additional landscaping, and many hours spent trying to objectively determine appropriate building colors, style, and materials. But, we should not believe that any of these changes will do much to preserve the urban character of a town like Bozeman.

The alternative choice is to use design guidelines to promote urban qualities of traditional neighborhoods. If this alternative is selected, then we must insure that our guidelines make a clear distinction between what is suburban and what is urban. Use of urban focused design guidelines can change the relationships between buildings, streets, and open spaces: relationships that are the most important determinant of town character. Efforts to deter suburban sprawl will not be successful unless they are directed at reinforcing the essential components of a neighborhood with design guidelines that ask the following questions of all development proposals:

Does this project promote neighborhoods of a distinct size?

Does this project promote neighborhoods with a mixture of uses and users?

Does this project promote streets that balance the needs of pedestrians and motorists?

Does this project promote buildings that define streets?

Does this project promote open spaces that enable human interaction?

Does this project promote civic uses in prominent locations?

NOTES

- ¹ The Design Objectives Plan for Entryway Corridors was prepared for the Bozeman City-County Planning Board by Mark L. Hinshaw, of Bellevue, WA. 1992.
- ² I am using the words *urban* and *suburban* to describe the physical quality of space instead of the location of space relative to city boundaries.
- ³ The elements of a traditional neighborhood is taken from Duany, Andres and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk. 1991. *Towns and Town-Making Principles*. New York, NY: Rizzoli. p. 102.
- ⁴ Leon Krier describes the natural form of growth (duplication) and the unnatural form of growth (hypertrophy) in Economakis, Richard ed. 1992. *Leon Krier: Architecture & Urban Design 1967 - 1992*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press. p. 23.
- ⁵ Traditional street systems and conventional suburban street systems are compared in research by traffic engineers Walter Kulash in the following conference paper: Kulash, Walter. 1990. *Traditional Neighborhood Development: Will the Traffic Work?* Prepared for the Eleventh International Pedestrian Conference in Bellevue, Washington. Orlando, FL: Walter Kulash Gating Lopez Kercher Anglin, Inc.
- ⁶ The variety of architectural styles represented in Bozeman are included in the following survey of historic properties: McDonald, James R., Architects. 1984. *Bozeman Historic Resources Survey*. Bozeman, MT: Bozeman City/County Planning Department.
- ⁷ Evidence that one style is labeled as "safe and approvable" and therefore promoted as a result of the design review process is seen in the proliferation of the western-ranch style in the majority of new buildings in Bozeman regardless of their building type: car dealership, research building, real estate office, food store, or restaurant. The western-ranch style is a building that tries to copy a residential ranch: one and a half story, pitched-roof, deep overhangs, expression of logs or heavy timber structure, and doors and windows that are residential in scale and form.