Place-Making on Main Street
Society, Design, and Policy in Small Towns

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Abstract:

Small towns in America offer a type of community which doesn't exist in large cities or suburbs. The ideals of this community are deeply rooted in our American culture and traditions. In the past century, the rate and scale of growth made possible by advancements in technology, combined with the need to accommodate the automobile, have resulted in the loss of the physical and social qualities that defined many of these places.

This thesis is a discussion of how the small towns which haven't lost their "quality of life" might maintain these ideals. It uses as a case study the village of Bethel, Maine, a town undergoing the pressure of growth due to expansion of Sunday River, a nearby ski resort. For the purpose of illustrating these ideals and how they might be reflected in a growth management policy, the thesis presents a design for a new town center along Main Street.

The recommendations call for a reframing of the focus of growth management regulations from individual buildings to the spatial nature of the street and its definitions. This would include the human activities which animate this, the public realm.
Bethel is located 12 miles from the New Hampshire Border in Maine's western mountains
This thesis was originally intended to explore how to implement a vision for a particular place. The place was to be Bethel, Maine, a traditional New England village in the state's western mountains. The vision I would implement would be articulated at Community Conference II: Planning Our Future. This conference, a forum for citizens of the Bethel area to reflect on their past and to plan for their future, was held November 15, 1991. I anticipated the discussion at this forum would focus on aspects of physical changes: architecture, streets, open spaces, and parking. I imagined the thesis would take a form similar to Housing Design and Regional Character; A Primer for New England Towns produced by the Environmental Design and Development Group at MIT, or like Dealing with Growth in the
PLACE MAKING ON MAIN STREET: SOCIETY, DESIGN, AND POLICY IN SMALL TOWNS

Bethel and its surroundings
Connecticut River Valley: A Design Manual for Conservation and Development, produced at the Center for Rural Massachusetts at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Both of these works develop growth guidelines which preserve what they refer to as "regional character."

The vision which did emerge from Community Conference II, however, had very little to do with physical change in the community. Instead, what the citizens articulated were primarily ideas about the social community and the quality of life they enjoy in Bethel. There was very little discussion about the architecture in the town, about the nature of the town's streets and open spaces, or about the need for more parking. The previously cited models for this thesis, while touching on the structure of community life, did not explicitly connect this notion to a specific recommendation or design guideline. The intent of this thesis, then, became to analyze the relationship between the quality of small town life and the buildings, public spaces, cultural institutions, and history of a place. The recommendations resulting from this analysis supplement the growth guidelines which preserve the visual quality of "regional character" with a discussion of the social nature of small town life, as well.

By small towns, I am referring to towns of under 5,000 inhabitants whose economic and social activities are centered
within the town itself. This definition excludes towns which are primarily residential suburban communities of larger metropolitan areas.

The Methodology

On the basis of the initial analysis and ideas from the Community Conference II, I then designed a town center on Main Street. This place is meant to foster a formal, and what is more important, an informal opportunity for public life – what Ray Oldenburg refers to as a "third place."¹ A third place is one which is outside the experience of the home or the workplace. It is "inclusively sociable, offering both the basis of community and the celebration of it."²

My design is not intended to represent an entirely realistic proposal or a panacea for all of Bethel's problems. It is,

¹ Oldenburg, Ray, The Great Good Place, Cafés, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How They Get You Through the Day, New York, Paragon House, 1989

² Ibid.
however, a vehicle for illustrating the ideas about small town communities developed in the thesis, and the unintended contradictions between policy goals and the resulting buildings.

In Chapter 6, I compare what I've designed against what would be permitted "by right" under the existing Town of Bethel Site Plan Review Ordinance. Although my design encompasses the spirit of the ordinance, it would probably not have been approved under that policy. Indeed, as I point out, the ordinance would encourage the construction of buildings, streets, and open spaces which would be counter to the intents of the ordinance.

The final chapter presents my conclusions and contains ideas for a policy which would address more than the use, physical form, or regional characteristics of new development. This new policy would include specific goals for maintaining the social structure of a town. These goals can serve as a guideline against which new development proposals can be assessed. While recognizing the role of physical form in maintaining a visual connection to the past, this new policy would also recognize the need for maintaining and fostering the quality of small town life which is valued by so many of the citizens and visitors of small towns.
Chapter One: Place and Community in Small Towns

The traditional values of the small town stand squarely in contrast to an emerging mass, uniform, plug-in society. Egalitarianism, grass root government, active involvement with place, face to face relations over a period of time with one's neighbors and townsmen, human scale, the personal rather than the impersonal - these are some of the values we should think about preserving along with the material dimensions of small towns. Call it quality of life or whatever, more and more people are seeking these things, and I think small towns could be at the forefront of this movement.

-Richard Lingeman

3Lingeman, Richard, "The Small Town in America: The Recent Past, the Near Future," printed in Change and Tradition in the American Small Town, Jackson, Mississippi, University Press of Mississippi, 1983
In his essay "The Small Town in America: The Recent Past and the Near Future," Richard Lingeman illustrates America's relationship with the small town by comparing it to the Broadway musical *Brigadoon*. He points out that the myth of small towns fades and reemerges in the American psyche as we alter how we see ourselves as individuals and as a nation. With copious literary and cultural examples, he points out the cycles of change, and, what is more important, the persistence with which the myth of small towns keeps reemerging. By citing statistics from the US Census, government studies, and various surveys that identify trends in, where, and why Americans are choosing to live, Lingeman argues that "the small town exists at a deeper stratum of American Culture; the small town makes up our image of community." Not only are many Americans running from the crime, congestion, and pollution of urban areas, but just as powerful an influence in the decision to move to rural towns is the community and quality of life offered by the small town "myth."

In his book *American Myth, American Reality*, James Olivier Robertson writes:

*For Americans who are bewildered or defeated by the freedom of competition and loneliness of the modern world, the image of a static rural community still offers refuge...The stories of hometowns and parents and grandparents, all imply that you "can go home again.". Such stories reflect the fantasy that*
Can the community of Robertson's small town be achieved in a world so drastically different from that in which our parents and grandparents grew up? Or is it only a fantasy in the minds of urban dwellers?

Max Lerner redefined the question of small town myth in 1957 by separating it from the physical place of the small town:

> A number of recent American writings indicate that the nostalgia for the small town need not be construed as directed toward the town itself: it is rather a 'quest for Community' (as Robert Nesbit puts it) - a nostalgia for a compassable and integral loving unit. The critical question is not whether the small town can be rehabilitated in the image of its earlier strength and growth - for clearly it cannot - but whether American life will be able to evolve any other integral community to replace it. This is what I call the problem of place in America, and unless it is somehow resolved, American life will become more jangled and fragmented than it is, and American personality will continue to be unquiet and unfulfilled.5

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4Robertson, James Oliver, *American Myth, American Reality*, New York, Hill and Wang

In the years since Lerner wrote the above, life in America has indeed become more jangled and fragmented. Technological advancements of the twentieth century, primarily the automobile, have worked to change, within a single generation, the way we have accommodated growth in our towns and how we have ordered our lives. But they have not changed the basic human need for a functioning communal society. The concrete contribution of twentieth century technology on America’s built (and natural) environment has been the dysfunctional noncommunities of the suburbs. In addition, small towns who have lost their commercial main streets to the rise of the regional mall or Walmart, have also lost their functioning communities. Much of our society’s public component has disappeared and has been replaced with a more private, individual oriented society. The new generations growing up in these places are denied the experience of an active community. They place their personal situation above that of the public good, and all society suffers.

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6 For an interesting illustration of change in the suburbs over a single generation, see Lemann, Richard, "Stressed Out in Suburbia", in The Atlantic, November 1989.

7 See Sidney, Hugh, "The Two Sides of the Sam Walton Legacy", in Time, April 20, 1992. p.50
As planners and architects in the years after World War II felt the automobile would permit Americans to move from the cities into the new and expanding suburbs, the invention of the modem and computer is hailed by some as the technological advancement that will free Americans from the cities and suburbs completely and to repopulate America's rural towns. But if we as architects and planners cannot figure out how to accommodate growth and change in these small towns without losing their vital communities, then there will not be any place to which we can return. This thesis offers thoughts on how growth in small towns might be accommodated with that in mind.

Community Conference II

The citizens of Bethel, Maine, a town of 2,500 in the state's western mountains, are very aware of the strong community that still exists in their town. They have recently taken measures to maintain and foster its continuation into the future.

In the summer of 1991, the NTL Institute, a cultural and economic piece of Bethel, announced that it was going to be ceasing its operation in Bethel. The NTL Institute provides organizational training to private corporations and to government agencies. A large portion of their business over the past forty years has included a series of seminars every summer.
COMMUNITY CONFERENCE II
PLANNING OUR FUTURE

WHEN? Friday, November 15, 9-4
WHERE? Locke Mills Legion Hall
FOR WHOM? Citizens of the SAD 44 towns who are interested in planning together for the future. From youth to senior citizen, those attending will be able to join in productive discussion and to work together to identify common concerns, set goals and form action plans for "next steps".
COST? No charge. Lunch items will be available for purchase at the Legion Hall, or participants may bring a bag lunch.

WHAT IS THE COMMUNITY CONFERENCE?
* A day long event, preceded by a month of Focus Group meetings, at which over 30 groups with common interests will discuss a series of questions designed to gather data and feelings about the future of the area.
* A Modern Town Meeting where citizens come together to reflect and plan for the future.
* Action-oriented, encouraging citizens to take control of the direction of their communities in an era of change.
* Based on a process of goal setting and action-planning used by many communities, businesses and organizations.
* An investment of time which guarantees results. By the end of the day, participants, as members of working groups will produce action plans based on issues identified as high priority.

RELATED CONFERENCE EVENTS
FOCUS GROUPS: Focus Groups composed of between 8 and 15 individuals with a common role or interest in the community will be meeting during the month preceding the Conference. For information on Focus Groups contact Nancy Davis at 824-2355 or Cathy Newell at the Adult Education Office, 824-2763.
COMMUNITY SPAGHETTI SUPPER NOVEMBER 15 5:30-7
Following the Conference on Friday, Nov 15, there will be a Community Supper at the Locke Mills Town Hall on Route 26 sponsored by the Greenwood Fire Department Auxiliary. There will be a menu of spaghetti with a charge of $4 for adults and $2.50 for children under 12. Don Murphy and Kathy Slack are planning live musical entertainment.

To Register for Community Conference II:
Call SAD 44 Adult and Community Education, 824-2780. Although there is no fee, pre-registration is necessary for planning.

Flyer from Community Conference II.
at their Bethel facility. These seminars bring over two thousand visitors to the Bethel area each summer, which helps many of the inns and restaurants geared for the ski season make it through the summer season. The decision to hold Community Conference II was precipitated by the threatened loss of NTL and by the feeling that it was time to reassess the direction in which Bethel was headed. Six years earlier, a similar conference had taken place. Both conferences were intended to be a forum for citizens of the area to reflect on their past and plan for their future. In the months prior to the day long conference in November, over thirty focus groups representing the diverse interests of the community met to discuss a series of questions designed to gather data about the future of the area. Out of these focus groups surfaced a variety of thoughts and ideas. The majority of these focused on the aspects of their daily lives, in particular, on their relationships with other people:

"Real folks" living here area valued as being without pretense, caring, friendly, accepting, supportive, and family oriented. Also appreciated are the talent, dedication, courage, and power of area people to innovate. 8

"Most focus groups end[ed] their meetings with comments related to the improvements/maintenance of the quality of life in

8From a document distributed to all participants at the day long Community Conference II.
the area. Topics identified include: environmental issues, attitudes toward growth and tourism, and the need to make and keep the unique flavor of the area.\(^9\)

One can question whether the arguments about the small town myth advanced by Lingeman and Robertson are valid or relevant in today's world, or one can believe that the myth never existed in reality. Nonetheless, it is deeply rooted in our nation's history. I believe as Lingeman does, that "the myth owes its durability to a need which persists."

\(^9\) Ibid.
Chapter Two: Change and Tradition in the Small Town

Until recently, the rural landscape and early villages of New England changed relatively slowly. Change which did occur maintained the existing pattern of settlement: village centers where economic, social, religious, and industrial activities clustered amidst the wide open countryside used primarily for agriculture. Some places, particularly where water power was available, changed more rapidly during the nineteenth century and have become larger cities. The decline in agriculture in the past 150 years has resulted in less open farm land and the return of the forests. For the most part, however, patterns in the natural, social, and built environments changed slowly and holistically with each other, resulting in continuities of natural, built, and social orders. Development took place, but in most
New England rural communities, the scale of change was small enough to permit life to go on seemingly unaltered.

Several factors informally controlled the "forced" continuity and gradual growth:

Technologies were limited; building elements could not be larger than a few men or a team of oxen could reasonably maneuver. Transportation was limited to the horse. The choice of materials was limited to what could be gathered or produced locally; wood, stone, or brick. Glass, which came from the cities, was expensive and had to be used sparingly.

Builders, be they private homeowners or small commercial establishments, had to finance construction themselves. Mortgages did not exist. In addition to the limits of technology and the ability to finance new construction, the values of society in general were more republican and less individualistic. Society was less mobile and more homogeneous. In rural towns, there were few new comers from places where things were done differently. Information did not spread as quickly as it does today. Conformity hardly needed to be enforced, it was assumed. Changes and advancements did happen, choice increased, but not at a rate which altered the patterns of physical, institutional, or social form.
"The Original Shapers of the small town area may have decided to settle and seek livelihood in that place for various reasons. They are not likely to have regarded themselves as residing in Small Towns. They were the form-establishers who by meeting their own needs contributed to the aggregate which became the small town. The forms that their environment and their pattern of activities took are likely to have been determined heavily by what seemed the most easily acceptable ways of making their basic technologies work - for securing food and shelter, fashioning or raising goods for external trade, and for other matters they considered important. The actual shape of their environment is likely to have been determined heavily by these practical concerns.10

Modern Times

Much has changed in the past fifty years to radically affect the scale and speed of change in small towns.

10 Hays, Dan, "Concerning Small Towns" in Change and Tradition in the American Small Town, edited by Robert Craycroft and Michael Fazio, Jackson, Mississippi, University Press of Mississippi, 1983, p.114
Availability of new construction technology in small towns has greatly increased the rate and scale of potential change on small towns. Heavy equipment has made possible the construction with elements far larger than any group of men or animals could ever maneuver. The choice of materials is almost limitless; from asbestos to vinyl, concrete to steel. Banks and other lenders are willing to finance any project, regardless of scale, if they are convinced they will make a large enough return on their investment. Society is much more mobile; small towners themselves are different. Many have grown up, lived, or traveled to other places. No longer are their choices contained by the patterns of a single experience. Their diversity of experiences is reflected in their decisions about what and how to build. Certainly a diversity of experiences is good and serves as a basis for improvement. But in the absence of some form of continuity, small towns lose their sense of place that the informal control of the past had instilled upon them.

Practical concerns of modern times also exert their influence on the decision making process. The need to accommodate the automobile is a primary example.

All of these factors have combined to make rapid and drastic change in small towns possible. The first small towns to change were those around the larger cities. Self-sufficient agricultural based towns became bedroom communities of large cities. Well
within the span of a single generation, the formal, social, and economic patterns which had existed for a century or more were completely altered, and often became indistinguishable in the new pattern. Their remnants became indiscernible in the new pattern.

Another group of towns in New England that experienced rapid growth and lost much of what had existed for two centuries or more are those which became popular as tourist or recreation areas. Primary examples of this type would be North Conway, New Hampshire or Stowe, Vermont. During the eighties, towns along the Maine Coast, such as Freeport and Camden underwent phenomenal growth. Because they were unprepared for it, these towns lost much of their small town nature, the quality which made them attractive to tourists in the first place. Life for those who lived in the towns prior to their change was drastically altered.

In response to this rapid change and what many perceive of as a loss of a way of life, some small towns have adopted growth management policies. The stated purposes of these policies usually include: protection of public health and safety, the avoidance or mitigation of adverse impacts of new development on neighboring property owners, the need to check the expensive enhancement of local government services, to promote an economically sound and stable community, to
preserve "local character," or to minimize adverse impacts on the natural environment.

These policies most frequently set out to achieve these goals by instituting certain dimensional requirements and other standards of new construction. They establish maximum or minimum limits on street frontage and yard setbacks, building height, and minimum areas of open space. Developers must also meet standards for parking, landscaping and the use of specific materials. Zoning, a particular form of growth management policy, divides the land of a town or county into areas where only specific uses of the land are permitted.

These growth management policies are a step toward controlling growth in small towns, but unfortunately, they sometimes fall short of their objectives. In addition, they often unwittingly encourage patterns of growth which destroy the social patterns in the town, or which are inconsistent with the policy's stated objectives. Some of these unintended effects of land use ordinances will be discussed in Chapter Five.

Instead of guiding growth toward a collective vision of the community, growth management policies manage only to avoid what are perceived of as negative impacts of growth. These guidelines state very clearly to developers, architects, planners, citizens, and government officials what to avoid. Seldom, however, are they explicit about what the citizens would like
their community to be. Often these policies, in their diligence to avoid problems, would make it a crime to recreate the places they wish to protect.\textsuperscript{11}

Incentive to adopt growth management policies has been greatest in towns where rapid growth has already significantly altered the patterns in the town. There are still, however, a large number of New England villages where traditional patterns remain intact. Some of these towns recognize the adverse impacts large scale developments can wreak on small towns. In addition, there is a greater acceptance of land use ordinances as a tool for regulating growth. Most of these towns have adopted land use ordinances before they were significantly impacted by growth.

One such town, Bethel, Maine, will serve as the focus of my investigation. In examining the existing social, built, and economic patterns in the community, and by combining them with my design for a new town square, I will formulate ideas for a growth management policy which builds on traditional policies by including goals which explicitly address the social patterns of the place.

A bird's eye view of Bethel, 1878.
The town of Bethel has been shaped, since its settlement in 1774, by a variety of forces: its geographic situation, various national and regional factors, and the particular character of the individuals who have called Bethel their home throughout its history.

The origins of Bethel extend back to the 1690 British campaign against French Canada. Veterans of this conflict from Sudbury, Massachusetts, and their descendants, promised land for their

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12 This history is adapted from the "History of Bethel" contained in the 1986 Town of Bethel Comprehensive Plan, pp. 3-7
service, were finally rewarded in 1768, when the Commonwealth of Massachusetts granted them land in the area that later became Bethel. On the Androscoggin River in what was then Cumberland County in the District of Maine, the area was called Sudbury Canada, commemorating both the home town of the grantees and the campaign in which they fought.

It was not until 1774 that the first white settlement in Sudbury Canada was established, on lands that had once been the tribal preserve of the Amiscoggin Indians. Growth of the settlement was slowed by the War of Independence - there were only ten families at the time of the Indian Raid of 1781- but the town grew quickly once peace was declared.

The early settlers were primarily farmers, though there were a number of skilled artisans as well. Homes were built, in most cases near the Androscoggin River, where the soil was fertile and easily worked. Following a major flood in 1785, settlement tended to be in areas of higher elevation. Despite the hardships of life in the young village, the first census in 1790 listed 324 people.

Bethel's first industrial activities, a sawmill and a gristmill, were located on Mill Brook, just below Bethel Hill. They were followed by a series of operations ranging from a starch factory to a shingle mill. The availability of water power dictated the location of the other areas of development within the town.
The major waterway in the town, the Androscoggin River, was not suited for water power.

Middle Intervale, four miles down the river from Bethel Hill, competed with it as the center of Bethel until the mid-nineteenth century. The building of the railroad in the 1840's and its connection to Portland in 1851 gave the edge to Bethel Hill as the primary center of the town.

Goods manufactured in Bethel have almost always drawn on forest resources. Lumber and turned wood products have been of primary importance.

Farming remained an essential part of the economic picture throughout the nineteenth century. The growth of large scale farms in the American West and the rural depopulation that fueled the growth of industrial cities in the Northeast brought significant changes to Bethel. Hillside farms became marginal and were gradually abandoned; the fields so laboriously cleared returned to forest. Today, the harvest of wood from these areas helps to support the forest product industries essential to life in the town.

Many churches, civic organizations, and lodges flourished in town during the nineteenth century and gave impetus to community improvements and activities. Together with the population who worked the farms and shops and mills of
Bethel, the town was home to an important group of business and professional people, individuals dedicated to community service, whose many activities helped to shape the character of the village. They were instrumental in founding many of Bethel’s institutions.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, when residents of the cities of the Northeast began to seek scenic spots for vacations, Bethel had attracted the attention of summer visitors. Summer hotels and boarding houses flourished and brought a new business to Bethel. The first tourists, like many of today’s visitors, were attracted by the beauty of the area in the summer months. But, during the 1920’s and 1930’s, the Bethel Inn began successfully to promote winter vacations.

The development of the ski industry, Sunday River Ski Resort in 1959, and Mount Abram in 1960, initiated the gradual increase in winter tourism. In the late 1970’s, Sunday River began a major expansion of its lifts, trails, snowmaking capacity, and condominiums. This expansion is still continuing, having picked up speed on the last five years. Today, Sunday River is the second largest ski area in New England.

Fortunately the expansion of Sunday River has not drastically impacted the long established patterns in the village of Bethel to the degree of places like North Conway, New Hampshire and Stowe, Vermont. There are, however, growing signs that
economic forces will bring growth pressures to Bethel. Prior to the recent downturn in the economy, the Planning Board had granted permits to construct three highway strip developments outside town. None have yet been built. In recent years several residential buildings on Main Street have been converted to commercial space. Sunday River has filed plans with the state which would permit the doubling of its present capacity.
Chapter Four: The New Design Proposal

I intend the proposed design for a public square in Bethel to illustrate several points. It cannot be a panacea for all of Bethel's problems. It will primarily serve as a vehicle in discussing how new construction in the village could work toward maintaining its existing small town quality of life, instead of destroying it. By comparing the design to what might be built under Bethel's existing site plan review ordinance, it will serve as a means of evaluating the existing ordinance's ability to maintain Bethel's quality of life.
Aerial photo of Main Street. The site is outlined in white.
What I set out to design is what Ray Oldenburg refers to as a "third place." It is "a place to which one may go alone at almost any time of the day or evening with the assurance that acquaintances will be there. There is an engaging and sustaining public life to supplement and complement house and work routines. For those on tight budgets, who live in some degree of austerity, it compensates for the lack of things owned privately, and for the affluent, it offers much that money can't buy." Such places were common fare in the heyday of the small town. They are still prevalent in many European communities. In America, however, the automobile and the private home have led to the loss of much of our public life. Oldenburg cites an illustrative statistic:

While per capita consumption rates for alcoholic beverages in the United States changed little since the end of W.W.II, the proportion consumed in public places declined sharply. One report describes a drop from about 90% to about 30% from the late 1940's to the present....The number of licensed drinking establishments has declined by 40% since the end of W.W.II.

13 Oldenburg, Ray, p.11

14 Ibid., pp. 166-167
Map of Bethel Village.
It is clear that Americans are entertaining and being entertained more frequently in private homes than they were forty years ago. Some may say this statistic represents progress, but Oldenburg suggests, however, that the privatization of drinking and the loss of the "socially solidifying rituals of public drinking within inclusive and democratic settings" have contributed to our nation's drug abuse problem.

"In the absence of an informal public life, people's expectations toward work and family have escalated beyond the capacity of those institutions to meet them. Domestic and work relationships are pressed to supply all that is wanting and much that is missing in the constricted lifestyles of those without community."\(^\text{15}\)

A third place for the citizens of Bethel would have to be similar to a public living room. It should be a place they would have occasion to visit regularly without a scheduled event or an invitation. It should be easily accessible and inviting to locals, tourists, and new comers. It should offer an opportunity to sit outside during nice weather, as well as place to find warmth

\(^{15}\) Ibid.
and shelter during the area's long winter months. It should be a landmark and focus in the village, a place to meet people you know, a place where lost visitors could get reoriented. In essence, it would do everything built form can do to promote and foster the spontaneous and informal public life which are so large a part of the small town experience.

The Site.

In selecting a site for the project, Main Street became the obvious choice for several reasons. It is already the center of public life in the village. Commercial activity is concentrated on upper Main Street between the Common and the Key Bank. The town wishes to keep most new commercial activities within the existing village. Recent new businesses have located in formerly residential buildings along lower Main Street, a pattern which is consistent with the town's goals.

In the center of Main Street at the intersection of High, Summer, Mechanic, and Vernon Streets is an empty lot. It formerly was occupied by a large house and barn which had been converted into six apartments. Adjacent to the site are a NAPA Auto Supply Store, and two filling stations. I have assembled from these parcels the site for the new town square.

This site was ideal for my purposes for several reasons.
CHAPTER FOUR: THE NEW DESIGN PROPOSAL

A wide angle view looking up and down Main Street from the porch of Mahoosuc Realty. Starting from the left, High Street runs south, ending at the steeple of the West Parish Congregational Church. Between the Civil War monument and the Irving Station runs Mechanic Street. In the center of the photo with its gable facing Mechanic Street is the Olsen House. In my design scheme, this house is relocated to the site if the Irving Station and becomes the new home of the Bethel savings Bank. Beyond the Olsen House, to the right, is the existing NAPA Auto Parts Store. In the center of the site is a small house which will be demolished. To its right, back on Main Street, is a single family home which is incorporated into the design. On the far right is the abandoned Gulf Station.
View of site looking down lowe Main Street, at the existing intersection of Mechanic and High Streets. On the left is the existing Irving Filling Station. The white house behind the pumps is the Olsen House. In the center is the Civil War monument. To the right is Mahoosuc Realty, with the abandoned Gulf Filling Station to the left of it.
Its location on Main Street would promote accommodation of new commercial endeavors in the village along lower Main Street.

It is central and within walking distance from almost all homes and hotels in the village.

It is very visible and easily found by tourists visiting Bethel for the first time.

The Program

In determining the program for the design, the primary criterion was to promote the use of this place by the greatest number of people with the greatest frequency. As it happens, Bethel's Post Office has outgrown its existing facility and is planning to relocate. Approximately 50% of Bethel's citizens and almost all businesses receive their mail at a box in the post office. Right now, one is as likely to run into a friend at or outside the post office as any other place in town. It is a perfect draw to this place.

A second need in the town is for a large community meeting space. Several participants in Community Conference II surfaced this need. Right now, town meeting is held in the auditorium of the regional high school several miles out of town. The
auditorium is not ideal for this purpose and is not very central. There is a conference room in the existing town offices, which is used for public meetings, but it is often too small. Recently, attendees of a meeting were turned away for lack of space in the conference room. A group in town is looking for a place in the village to show movies on weekends. Tourist and teenagers alike often cite the "lack of something to do" as a problem in the village. All these needs for a community meeting room could be satisfied in a single large public space, which would work to promote active community involvement in town.

In addition to the new post office and community room, I have identified several other elements for the design program which satisfy existing demands for space and serve to foster community and an informal public life:

A permanent home for the Bethel Farmers' Market. The market now sells organic produce and hand-crafted items from June to September. It is now three years old and has become quite popular among tourists and locals alike. It has yet, however, to find a permanent home which is acceptable to both the growers and the town. During the off season, the same location might be used for other seasonal type markets, such as pumpkin and Christmas tree sales.
A new home for the Bethel Savings Bank. The Bank has been growing quite steadily. It is approaching maximum capacity at its present facility, which was expanded just a few years ago.

Restaurants. Growth in the tourist trade provides continuing need for restaurants in town, particularly for inexpensive restaurants with take-out service. Not many locals can afford to regularly eat at the more expensive tourist oriented restaurants in town.

Small Retail Shops. Locations along Main Street are hard to come by, as was evidenced by three businesses recently evicted by the new owner of the building in which they were located.

Professional Office Space. There is little available space for small professional offices, such as accountants, lawyers and physicians.

Public Restrooms. Every town, especially one with plenty of tourists, needs a readily accessible rest room facility which is available to the public.
Chapter Five: The Design

Bethel's most striking architectural feature is its connected farm houses. Along lower Main Street almost every house is of this form, which Thomas Hubka explains in his book *Big House, Little House, Back House, Barn*.16 This form is very receptive to multiple tenant occupancy. Also, the additive nature of this form permits the massing of a building to be broken down into smaller pieces. Because this form served my program well, and because contextually it was very appropriate for Bethel, I decided to adapt it to my design.

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The site plan.
Organization

The primary organizing element of the design is the public square, which is centered on the existing Civil War Monument. It is open on one side to Main Street and surrounded on the other sides by new structures. Early massing studies convinced me that the square would be too large if I left the existing street organization unchanged. The existing street pattern, although it's been there a long time, disrupts the pattern of continuity which extends along Main Street from the Common to this site. I feel it is the reason commercial activities have not felt inclined to relocate further down Main Street past this site. In addition, the automobile traffic resulting from five streets intersecting in such a small area makes this the most heavily traveled intersection in the village.\(^\text{17}\) While this makes the site a popular place to meet people while in your car, it reduces the attractiveness of the place for pedestrians. The final scheme diverts High Street onto Main Street about 100 feet further south than at present. Mechanic Street is diverted into Summer Street. In the former Mechanic Street right-of-way is a one way connector from High Street to Mechanic Street.

\(^{17}\) Town of Bethel Comprehensive Plan 1986, by the Bethel Planning Board, John Gray, Chairman.
Aerial view of model.
connector are six short term parking spaces for use by Post Office or bank patrons. On Saturday mornings, these spaces become the new site of the Bethel Farmers' Market.

The new buildings define the edges of the square and of Main Street and continue the presently discontinuous street edge from upper Main Street, across the square and into lower Main Street. Because this edge continuity along Main Street is so important in supporting human interaction, I have suggested new buildings at the site of other discontinuities, namely the site of the existing house trailer and at the site of the abandoned Gulf filling station.

Beyond the edges of Main Street and the square, the built density diminishes, in order to accommodate the parking for the project.

Architecture

The main new building in my design represents a new form for Bethel, indeed the form as far as I know is without precedent in New England. It is composed of two buildings of the connected farm building typology, one of which faces Main Street, the other of which faces Mechanic Street. Covering the space between these two forms I have constructed a roof and enclosed both ends with a glass curtain wall. In the middle of this roof is
Plan of the main building.
a glazed hip roof which serves both to bring natural light into this space, as well as to define a special place underneath it. The precedents for this hipped roof form in Bethel are the Gould Academy Field House, as well as several Victorian carriage houses within the village.

The portion of the main building along Main Street attaches to an existing single family house. It contains on the ground level two new retail stores and a restaurant. Some of the seating for the restaurant is contained in the enclosed "porches." In addition, there is the opportunity for outdoor seating on a deck facing the street.

The other "house" of the main building is parallel to Mechanic Street. It houses on the first level the new US Post Office and a public restroom. PO boxes are located along another enclosed "porch." As with the first house, on the second floor is professional office space.

The public meeting room piece of the program is located in the space between the two buildings: the two ends of the space are enclosed with a glass curtain wall. A glass square hipped roof defines underneath it the public meeting space. It is similar in form to the roof of the Gould Academy field house or the barn at the Four Seasons Restaurant along upper Main Street. It also brings in plenty of daylight to brighten the enclosed space between the two buildings.
View of square and main entry. Mahoosuc Realty is in foreground on the right.
I created the community space in this form in order to make it as inviting as possible. While the outdoor square will be the primary focus of the town during the summer months, this interior space can satisfy the same need during the long winter season. The office space on the second floor overlooks and animates this space, as do the restaurant and the post office. I imagine those who sit in the square to eat their lunch, to meet with friends, or just to watch the passers-by would move inside when the weather turns cold.

The entrance to this main building faces south toward the square. Just outside is a small, free-standing restaurant. This establishment would sell such things as sandwiches and ice-cream. It is a perfect place to meet a friend on a summer evening or for a quick Saturday lunch. There would be plenty of tables, as well as walls to sit on, for all to use, whether they bought at one of the restaurants or if they brought their own lunch, or if they just wanted to play checkers. This space faces south and is protected from the cold northwest winter winds. The resulting micro climate would extend the use of the square into the fall and would be the first place in town each spring where the daffodils bloom. During the summer the same spot is shaded by a large existing maple tree. Facing the public square to the west of the new main building is the new Bethel Savings Bank. It occupies the site of the present Irving filling station. It is made up of the former Olsen house, which has been moved
Closed off section of Mechanic Street looking northeast. This is where the Farmers' Market would take place.
from next door and reassembled along the edge of the square. On the opposite side of the reassembled house is a new public lobby for the bank, which employs a form vocabulary similar to that of the enclosure between the two house.

The last new structure located on the site is a small, one-story house at the location of the existing High Street and Mechanic Street intersection. This is a very visible spot. It would be a perfect new home for Bethel Chamber of Commerce, which could dispense information on hotels and recreation opportunities in the area.

**Parking**

The parking became an important aspect of the program. It was crucial to have sufficient parking nearby to maintain the commercial viability of the project. It was just as crucial, however, to maintain the built edge along Main Street and the public square. As a result, the parking was located off Main Street. I have relocated the existing NAPA Auto Parts building in order to define the corner where Mechanic Street is diverted onto Summer Street. Behind NAPA and across Mechanic Street are two parking areas which accommodate the majority of parking for the new development. These areas effectively become public parking lots for use by all, not just the patrons of a particular business. This achieves two purposes. It permits
the driver to park her or his car and then perform several errands, as opposed to driving the car to each separate destination. In so doing, people are out on the street walking, in a position to meet friends they know. This differs from the more typical suburban experience: a honk of the horn and a quick wave.

Linking the two parking lots directly to Main Street are two access ways. The first runs through the lot of an existing one story building which houses a doctor's office. The second runs behind the new Bethel Savings Bank. It was important to organize parking on a continuous loop to Main Street for two reasons. First, to visually connect the parking to the traffic on Main Street without placing it there directly. Second, the loop permits one to drive by all spaces until an empty one is found. This system lessens the frustration associated with single access lots, each of which must be entered separately. Often times all the parking spaces are filled, the driver must then turn the car around and enter another lot, where the same misfortune can strike again.

**The Village Square**

As the drawings and model show, by including the street within the built definition of the square, the square becomes a place along the linear Main Street. In proposing the square and the
CHAPTER FIVE: THE DESIGN

Main Building. Entry Elevation.

Main Street Elevation.
View looking north down Main Street.

View looking south up Main Street.
surrounding buildings, I hope to create one of Oldenburg's "great good places." A place where the citizens of Bethel have occasion to frequent on business and for pleasure. It also would be a focus of civil life: a place for the town's Christmas tree, the beginning of the annual Mollyocket Day Parade, the place to go for town meeting, a place for rallies and protests.

This place in some ways satisfies the roles previously performed by the common or village green. In Bethel, however, the area around the common has been declared a national historic landmark, thereby freezing it, more or less, in its present state. The common is a piece of the town's agrarian past. The new square is better able to accommodate and reflect the changes which have already occurred, as well as those which will occur in the future.

The form of the design is important in creating the desired impacts of the project. It was necessary to maintain and intensify the existing built edges of Main Street. It was also important to maintain this same condition around the square. It creates a favorable micro climate, thereby maximizing the attractiveness of the square as a place to sit. It also confines the human activity to a smaller area which heightens the perceived animation. This form maximizes the opportunity for spontaneous and informal encounters on the street, which seems to embody so well the small town quality of life. The
form of the architecture also lends to the quality of place by fitting among the existing houses on Main Street without duplicating them.

In maintaining the continuity along Main Street, which was built prior to the need for storing automobiles, it became necessary to remove the parking from Main Street and place it along the secondary streets. In order to do this, I took some liberties as regards to reworking of the existing streets and the ownership of the various parcels of land, but I don’t think what I did would be too unrealistic to achieve. Certainly the town should discourage the construction of parking lots along Main Street, yet it still must ensure sufficient parking for new development is provided. This leads to important questions about the town’s existing site plan review policy as it relates to my design. Is my design consistent with the intents of that policy? Indeed, would my design have been permitted under that policy? If not, what sort of buildings would be. The next chapter explores these questions more deeply.
Chapter Six: The Analysis

The Town of Bethel Site Plan Review Ordinance has four stated Purposes:

A. To protect property rights and values by balancing the rights of landowners to use their land with the corresponding rights of abutting and neighboring landowners to enjoy their property;

B. To promote the development of an economically sound and stable community;

C. To integrate new development harmoniously into the existing environment;
Site Plan, my design.
D. To minimize adverse and irreversible impacts on ground water and the atmosphere.

The primary regulations in the ordinance which impact physical form of architecture, streets and open spaces are minimum setback requirements, parking requirements, and height limits. The ordinance establishes requirements based on the location and use of each building. My project for the town square would be subject to the following requirements:

Setbacks:  
- front: 30 feet  
- side: 20 feet  
- rear: 20 feet  

Parking: One space/200 s.f. of building  

Height: 2.5 stories

While designing, I focused on maintaining the nature of the existing street definition rather than rigidly adhering to the requirements of the ordinance. The design fails to comply with two of these requirements; the front setback and parking.

The parking is non-conforming for two reasons. First, there is an insufficient number of spaces. I propose 29,750 square feet of new building. The ordinance requires 149 parking spaces for
Site Plan, Ordinance scheme.
this amount of new building. I provide only 109 spaces or 75% of the required number. Second, the design does not always provide parking for each building on the same lot as that building.

In order to help visualize what sort of development the ordinance would permit, indeed encourage, I've drawn another plan of the same site. The setbacks are shown shaded. Each building is assumed to be two stories tall. I have shown the maximum amount of building that each of the five sites can accommodate, given the setbacks and the parking requirements of the ordinance. The building areas and the parking for both schemes are summarized in the following table:

**Square Footage and Parking Summaries**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lot</th>
<th>Lot Area</th>
<th>Parking</th>
<th>Building S.F.</th>
<th>Parking</th>
<th>Building S.F.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>20,150</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>5,566</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>12,350</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2,800</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>16,250</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>4,200</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>24,865</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>7,800</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>7000</td>
</tr>
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<td>25,350</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>8,600</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>19,750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>98,965</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>29,400</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>29,750</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As it turns out, both schemes contain approximately the same building area. If overall density of new development is
necessary to achieve the goals of the ordinance, then neither scheme is better than the other. The demand for public services, such as water and sewer is comparable in both schemes.

The Town of Bethel Site Plan Review Ordinance can have a particular negative impact on the site planning of new development. The largest required setback called for in the ordinance is that for the front yard. A building cannot be constructed in this area, but parking can. A developer, therefore, if she or he wishes to maximize the use of her or his land, is compelled to place parking in the front yard. The result, as the ordinance design scheme illustrates, can be streets defined by parking lots instead of buildings. Pedestrian movement between buildings requires circumventing cars in parking lots, an unpleasant environment, at best. It almost would be easier to drive a car between buildings. This arrangement certainly doesn't foster a small town quality of life.

The intent of the parking requirement is to accommodate a perceived parking demand, the calculation of which is based in some way on the size and use of a building. All the parking for that building must be accommodated on the same lot as that use. The need to accommodate projected parking demand is necessary in the age of the automobile, but the requirement that each use must satisfy its own maximum projected parking demand is inefficient and wasteful.
If two businesses are adjacent to or nearby each other, and one business, a bank for example, has a parking demand which is maximum during the day before 5:00 PM, and another business, a restaurant, has its greatest parking demand during the evening after 5:00 PM, there exists the possibility to share parking facilities and in so doing avoid duplication of unnecessary facilities. Certainly there should be sufficient parking provided for normal parking demand. A formula for calculating that number, which includes an allowance for shared demand, is beyond the scope of this thesis. But certainly a new policy should consider, even encourage, shared parking among businesses. Shared parking is not a new concept, but it is not often taken advantage of by small towns. Shared lots could be privately owned, or they could be owned by the town. Either way, the waste and inefficiency of duplication can be lessened, while the parking requirements are accommodated.

A comparison of the ordinance scheme and the performance standards section of the ordinance reveals several areas where the regulations of the ordinance contradict the performance standards.

Performance Standard #2 is intended to enhance the relationship of the proposed buildings to the environment. It reads:
Proposed structures shall be related harmoniously to the terrain and to existing buildings in the vicinity, which have a visual relationship to the proposed buildings. Special attention shall be paid to the bulk, location and height of the building and to such natural features as slope, soil type and drainage ways.

This standard works quite well when siting buildings in the landscape, but in the village, the opportunity to design a building which harmonizes with the surrounding environment is greatly reduced by the setback requirements. As the ordinance scheme illustrates, the form of the building is often largely prescribed by the setbacks themselves. The focus on the building in this standard is, I believe, misdirected. The standard would better serve the interests of the community if it focused on the relationship of new development to the spatial realm of the street. Certainly this relationship would encompass the nature of the architecture to its neighbors, but it would also force designers to address and maintain the nature of the existing street definition. This difference may seem subtle, but the explicitly primacy of the street would result in a more continuous and holistic experience of place, as opposed to a singular experience of a building.

Another performance standard which is contradicted by the regulations of the ordinance is #17, which addresses the visual and direct impacts of new development:
The development shall minimize visual and direct impacts on, and shall not have adverse effect upon, historic sites, rare or irreplaceable natural areas, or the scenic and natural beauty of the area.

By compelling designers to place parking lots in front of buildings, the historic organization of the town is destroyed, thereby adversely impacting the experience of the town. It may not be possible to maintain the existing quality of all streets in the town and still accommodate growth; cars are necessary and must be parked. But certainly, Main Street should have a high priority in the new comprehensive plan being drafted by community leaders in Bethel. All parts of the ordinance should guide development in accordance with the collective vision of the community. The ongoing work of groups resulting from Community Conference II would be an excellent opportunity to articulate this vision.
Chapter Seven: Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

My design for a new town center endeavors to illustrate how a town or village might grow, while still maintaining and enhancing the existing social and physical patterns of the place. I compare this scheme with one which strives only to maximize built area while remaining in compliance with the regulations set out in the Town of Bethel Site Plan Review Ordinance. This comparison and my research into the nature of small town social life and change and tradition in small towns lead me to recommend the following ideas be considered when writing a growth management policy for small towns. They may be specific for Bethel, but my intention is that the concepts be general enough that they are relevant to small rural towns across America, particularly those where town life is still centered on Main Street.
Recommendations

1. The most important recommendation is to openly invite the citizens of the town to participate in the process of policy determination. The Community Conference II serves as an ideal process which could be recreated with this purpose in mind. Professional planners offer a broad base of experience and skills for which there is no substitute. They should be a part of every process. But no one understands how a town or village functions socially, politically, and institutionally better than those who work, live, and socialize there. This includes the children and young people of the community. Even a small group or board can become dominated by a single opinion or framing of the issues. There is no substitute for the diversity of opinion and free flow of ideas generated by a town meeting. This process is not the most expedient, nor the most efficient, but it results in a large percentage of the citizenry with a vested interest in the outcome of the policy. The process can take a long time, and shouldn’t end with the adoption of a policy. No policy can be a permanent solution. A good policy will encourage regular review and adjustments, both of which are part of the ongoing public process.

2. Focus the policy explicitly on the civic space of the street and public open spaces. Architecture is important, and
must be a part of the policy, but a policy which focuses exclusively on the properties of buildings neglects the holistic experience of the public street. It is the spatial and visual nature of the street and public spaces, together with the nature of human interaction in this realm, which define the experience of a place. This experience is what policies wishing to maintain an existing sense of place should address.

3. While the nature of street and public space is important, it may not be possible for a policy to protect all streets equally, primarily due to the need to accommodate parking. Priority should be given to those streets which support the most public life, and which best embody the unique spirit of the town.

4. All efforts should be made to contain the expansion of commercial and civic activities within the existing village or town center. In Bethel, for example, everything possible should be done to keep the Post Office in the village center. The town should also do what it can to secure a facility large enough to accommodate town meeting.

It is not as easy to contain commercial activities. Economic factors and retail theory usually compel new businesses to locate on large tracts of undeveloped land adjacent to a busy highway. A policy should address these factors head
on. A use which destroys the scale and continuity of Main Street has no place there. But the town must know where such a facility would work in the community. On the other hand, appropriate uses for Main Street should not have restrictions imposed upon them which would render the Main Street location economically not viable. Nor should business owners be able to extract financial concessions from a town in return for locating on Main Street. Between willing parties there usually is considerable room for agreement. The policy should identify where new commercial businesses can best be accommodated; it may result, however, in a loss of residential uses on Main Street. Also, if it can be done, disincentives for developing rural highways should be adopted.

5. The purpose of a policy is not to design buildings and streets. It is difficult, therefore, for policies to articulate with regulations a vision of what the citizens would defend as acceptable new development. Most policy regulations are only able to prevent what would be unacceptable development. The town can produce a document, including images and diagrams, of examples of architecture and spaces they feel positively convey their expectations. This cannot be prescriptive or regulatory in any way, but rather, it should be informative and educational for developers and architects alike, as well as

Mother's Restaurant.
for the citizens of the town. An example of such a document is *Housing Design and Regional Character; A Primer for New England Town Planners*. Another valuable printed resource along these lines is *The Hidden Design in Land Use Ordinances, Assessing the Visual Impact of Dimensions Used for Town Planning in Maine Landscapes*.

6. It may be necessary at some point to address new development along rural highways. This thesis deals only with growth in villages or town centers. An excellent resource for policy regarding development along rural highways is *Dealing with Growth in the Connecticut River Valley; A Design Manual for Conservation and Development*, produced at the Center for Rural Massachusetts at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

Street space, architecture, tradition, and social patterns collectively interact to affect the quality of small town life. In the name of progress and technology, many of the traditional patterns of small towns were abandoned, resulting in the loss of civic life in these places. While towns cannot refuse to change or grow, indeed, they are necessary for survival, they can refuse to succumb to the loss of their way of life. Kenneth Munsell, the editor of "Small Town," writes about idealistic rational planners from earlier in this century:
They didn’t understand that institutions and cultural values become traditional for specific reasons - not just because of lack of imagination....Society must rediscover what it tried so hard to lose. We need to understand the attributes of community thrown aside so cavalierly and grasp the meaning of the things that animate functional places and nurture community.18

This aspect of place is less tangible than the dimensional and physical aspects. It is difficult for a community to agree what it is that makes a good place, much less a good town. As I learned at Community Conference II, chances are what they imagine probably has little to do with dimensions or other physical properties.

Even though it is difficult to build a community consensus around the notion of "quality of life," it is worth the effort. The ensuing discussion will serve to educate developers and citizens about the values and qualities of the people, which are embodied in the small town quality of life.

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All others are by the author.


**Acknowledgments and Dedication**

I would like to thank my parents, who have always been there for me, and who have given me more than they will ever know.

I also thank the people of Bethel, for sharing their thoughts and their town with us.

But, I dedicate this work especially to Bill, my partner for life. He put up with a lot of selfishness during the past three years. Without his patience and encouragement I never could have made it. I must also thank Polo, our rabbit, for being with Bill when I couldn't. May Polo rest in peace.