



MDT Principles, Process, and Results

by Janet Whitmore, PhD Adjunct Assistant Professor, CALA, U of M.
reprinted from Minnesota Cities November 1995.

1

The principles

The work of the Minnesota Design Team (MDT) is based on three fundamental principles. First is the belief that purposeful grassroots planning is the most effective tool for community development. Without grassroots involvement, numerous problems emerge: no control over large development interests, burn-out for those individuals who always take the lead, and citizen apathy. Grassroots planning involves the whole community, and the Design Team emphasizes the need for comprehensive participation by everyone.

The second principle of the Design Team's work is volunteerism. Since the beginning of the organization, the MDT has functioned as a group of volunteers. Professionals from architecture, landscape architecture, planning, education, historic preservation, tourism, community development and a wide range of other fields donate their time and talents to the planning of a particular community's future.

Similarly, representatives of the community must volunteer their time and skills in organizing the MDT visit, and in implementing the strategies developed during the visit. For many communities, a visit from the Design Team is an uncommon opportunity to work cooperatively with neighbors and colleagues.

Finally, the Design Team is committed to the value of quality design in community development. Part of the Team's goal is to demonstrate the benefit of thoughtful design through the drawings and plans that are presented at the conclusion of each visit. By thinking and talking about design issues, communities begin to realize that they have considerable control over what does or does not happen in their town. The "big box" retail developments that may be economically crucial do not inevitably have to be ugly.

The process

The Design Team process begins when a community requests an application for a visit. A review committee then conducts a screening visit with the community to determine whether or not a Design Team visit would be appropriate. Once accepted, community representatives begin organizing the logistics of the long weekend visit. Community representatives agree to find host families with whom team members will stay during the visit, develop publicity to include the entire community in the process, and plan the details involved in arranging meals, bus tours and town meetings.

Each Design Team is unique. Team leaders invite professionals to participate on a team based on the specific needs of the community. For example, one town might need a specialist in pollution control while another may need an architectural historian to evaluate 19th century structures.

The visit begins on Thursday evening when team members arrive. Generally, the community plans a small reception to introduce team members to their host families. Early Friday morning, the Team gathers with community representatives to learn about the history, economics and culture of the area. These formal presentations are followed by a tour of the community by bus or on foot. This allows team members to develop a physical context for the information they have heard in the morning. On Friday evening, usually after a potluck supper, the MDT conducts a town meeting. Everyone is asked to participate by discussing the issues that most concern them about their town.

Saturday is a day of intense work for team members. All of the information and intuitions gleaned on Friday are filtered through lively discussion among team members. As the day evolves, small groups begin to work together on specific issues, designing responses that are then articulated in large graphic plans and renderings.



By Saturday night, the Team is both excited and exhausted. At the second town meeting, team members present their drawings and invite questions from the community. The presentation always includes at least two sections: design ideas and strategies for implementation. The community then has the opportunity to view the drawings first hand and discuss specific recommendations with the team.

On Sunday, the team members and their host families breakfast together and say their good-byes. Without exception, the Sunday morning atmosphere is hopeful and enthusiastic as the community embarks on a new road into the future.

Six months later

A small group of Design Team members returns to the community six months later. Again, they meet with representatives of the town, discussing successes and failures and helping to develop strategies for further implementation. Team members offer suggestions for overcoming obstacles and researching new resources as needed.

The results

Although each Design Team community responds differently, some patterns emerge repeatedly.

The Design Team's arrival in South St. Paul in 1987 was just the right catalyst for a new way of thinking about community development. South St. Paul not only embraced the Design Team recommendations, but extended, expanded and enlarged them. The results are remarkable. Today, the Armour plant site is a thriving - and attractive - industrial park. The Mississippi River has been reclaimed through trails, fishing piers and boat landings. Kaposia Park is freshly designed for community events. There are plans for new housing and a marina along the river. The list goes on and on. By being open to change, South St. Paul has not only revamped its future, but also reinvigorated the strong sense of community that united its residents during the depressed years of unemployment and poverty.

A recent visit to Barrett in western Minnesota revealed concerns about the town's image and its potential for growth. Central to the discussion was the development of a new high school that would actually double the population of the town during school hours. Located on the edge of town, residents expressed both fear and hope about how the school would fit into their community. The Design Team responded with a recommendation that the school building be physically connected with the community through landscape architecture and a more sensitive treatment of the site.

The community of Barrett responded by working with the University of Minnesota Extension Service to obtain the services of two professionals who are currently developing the Design Team ideas into real projects. When their work is completed, Barrett will not only have an improved high school design, but a fresh, new image for the community itself.

The Design Team visit to Clearwater in the spring of 1994 illustrates a different response pattern. Clearwater is a small Mississippi River town with a rich history, but no strong sense of how to develop its potential. Located along the Interstate 94 corridor between the Twin Cities and St. Cloud, Clearwater residents realize that they are now living in a prime development region. How they respond to this fact will determine the future of the community.

As often happens, the Design Team visit to Clearwater unveiled a town that residents had forgotten.



MDT Principles, Process, and Results

by Janet Whitmore, PhD Adjunct Assistant Professor, CALA, U of M.
reprinted from Minnesota Cities November 1995.

Where team members saw delightfully untouched Creek revival buildings, Clearwater residents saw only shabby, old houses. Where team members envisioned new development along the river, residents focused on strip mall development along the highway. In the 18 months since the Design Team visit, Clearwater has undergone significant changes- some of them painful. The process of re-creating a community can be emotional and difficult, especially if one group of people has had long-term control over local affairs. The results, however, can be spectacular. In Clearwater, the changes are just now becoming visible. There is new landscaping along the highway; a strong new interest in preserving its truly unique past; and a degree of community involvement that hasn't been seen in decades. The process is just beginning.

More than anything else, the Minnesota Design Team is a catalyst for change. The Team listens carefully to the stated information and to the unspoken, "between-the-lines" implications. Ultimately, the Minnesota Design Team hopes to provide communities with a grassroots process for continued development, as well as the design recommendations to get things started.