



In the book, *Community Development in Perspective*, Donald Voth writes that "the processes whereby communities develop are complex and poorly understood." There has been considerable public rhetoric about the need for strengthening America's communities. However, Voth's statement points out the difficulties inherent in such a process. As a result, real "community" seems to many to be an endangered species.

Yet, a variety of innovative approaches have emerged in order to explore and enhance this vital social life form. During the past decade, for example, the Minnesota Design Team (MDT) has assisted over 50 small Minnesota communities in attempting to understand and work through some of the complexities of community design. As with any plan, the MDT approach possesses both strengths and weaknesses. Nevertheless, over the past ten years, the MDT has contributed to a substantial legacy of quality design throughout the state, while also gaining valuable insights into "the processes whereby communities develop." The MDT has learned how to help create and sustain good places in which communities thrive.

Background

MDT was founded over a decade ago by a corps of young design professionals who wanted to encourage greater community awareness of design issues. Formerly known as the Governor's Design Team, it has been, from its inception, a volunteer organization comprised of design and other professionals who volunteer at least one extended weekend annually to help communities shape their futures. Members of the MDT come from a wide variety of professions. It includes architects, interior and graphic designers, planners, architectural historians, tourism and recreational specialists, with additional support given as needed from other fields or disciplines. A volunteer steering committee meets monthly to provide policy guidance and administration.

A Minnesota Design Team visit involves months of preliminary preparation by team leaders and members of the participating community. The town provides the team with base maps and a variety of valuable data about its physical, economic, social and cultural characteristics. The MDT has also developed a Community Buddy system in which previous MDT communities share their experiences and expertise with localities that will participate in the future. The system helps the newly-chosen towns understand the process of community development and its substantial demands.

The next phase involves three-day design charrette which commences on a Thursday evening when the team members arrive in town and are often greeted by a welcoming banner spanning the town's main street. Families from the community host team members during this week end and they invariably pamper them and feed them extraordinarily well so that the team can best face the tasks at hand. It has been said that an army travels on its stomach-if so, the MDT army has traveled far and well.

The idea of community, the MDT has learned, is a complex phenomenon that has multiple meanings. The team members, therefore, spend their first full day in town (Friday) listening to and observing the community through a variety of lenses. Citizens interpret their community to the team members through the use of formal presentations and numerous types of analyses, visits to schools and senior centers, as well as bus and walking tours.

Building Upon Christopher Alexander's ideas about communal eating, which note that a sense of community is developed when people sit down together to eat and socialize, Friday's activities conclude with a community-wide potluck dinner and town meeting to which all local citizens are invited. MDT involves the citizens in a nominal group process which is folksily called "democratic brainstorming." This



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technique utilizes anonymous responses to key local issues and small group discussions in order to minimize some of the typical communication barriers that are erected in communities. Through this process, the team encourages an open discussion of the full range of community concerns.

Throughout the day, MDT members document this wide-ranging dialogue by means of the facilitation graphics techniques that has been shared with them by community consultant Daniel Iacafano. This visual record of the community's appearance acts as a feedback mechanism that helps integrate the issues that the community faces and also stimulates new ideas for consideration. In addition, the facilitation graphics create a visual archive that members of the community can refer to in the future. On Saturday, the design team synthesizes the information that it has acquired through a day-long design charrette. Team leaders, using a process now known as the Bayfield Maneuver (after the Bayfield, Wisconsin, design team which first modeled it), attempt to integrate the mass of the background information into a distinctive design framework and story board that reflects the unique characteristics of the community. Team members discuss and refine the concept plan, then further develop the key elements of the design framework into a series of graphic images that they will present to the community at another town meeting held that evening.

The MDT presentation at the town meeting is intended to stimulate widespread community interest and effectively communicate the few key design ideas or principles that have emerged. When the Saturday evening presentation proves successful, discussions about the MDT recommendations often range far into the morning.

On Sunday morning the design team members join their host families for breakfast, where additional brainstorming and networking takes place. Then they bid their adopted community farewell.

A follow-up visit within the year offers the town an opportunity for an objective assessment of its progress in implementing its shared vision. Although the MDT process has been carefully studied and rationalized over time, it is clear that each design team and each host community possess distinctive differences and personalities. But, finding the "messy order" of the community is the underlying goal of every MDT visit.

The Minnesota Design Team's Focus

Although the Minnesota Design Team deals with thoroughly contemporary design issues, such as loss of farmland and imperiled main streets, the organization builds upon three surprisingly classical pillars. First, the MDT takes very seriously the classical Roman concept of *pro bono publico*, or, working together toward a public good. Several team members, for example, have been involved with the organization for most of its existence.

At its core, the MDT is concerned with modeling citizenship and community services. One example clearly illustrates this particular focus: Paynesville, Minnesota, a small community located in the central portion of the state, established a 501(C)(3) nonprofit corporation following a MDT visit in order to build a senior center for the community. The city's successful fund-raising drive involved over 200 volunteers who donated over 4,000 volunteer hours on the project. For their efforts, the city of Paynesville received a J. C. Penny Award for Volunteerism. The second supporting concept for the MDT is *civitas*, Latin for citizenship, which acknowledges commitment to one's community. Interestingly, the Romans distinguished between *urbs*, or a physical site, and *civitas*, which refers to the group of citizens who formally acknowledged their bonds to one another and to the state. Daniel Kemmis, mayor of Missoula,



Montana, wrote eloquently in the Fall, 1992, issue of the journal *Places*, of this ancient and abiding need for shared public activities such as parades and community festivals which can be used to build this sense of civitas.

In order to strengthen the concept of community, the MDT tries to emphasize the shared concerns that affect the lives of everyone in the community. In particular, the MDT tries to help the community reinvigorate what Frank Lloyd Wright referred to as the common landscape, such as parks and open spaces, entryways, public facilities and the community's historic main street. For example, the town of Becker rediscovered its historic center as a result of the preparations it made for a MDT visit. A "T-Town" committee, named after the railroad-oriented Main Street, was created in order to help defend this portion of town from the effects of additional highway-oriented development and to give the rapidly-growing community a focal point.

Grounded in these first two concepts, is the third basic MDT idea of sustainability, that is, the ability of a community to maintain itself over time without jeopardizing its natural base.

Because of its fundamental commitment to sustainability, the MDT places considerable emphasis upon achieving a thorough understanding of the natural history and physical setting of each locality with which it works.

When this understanding is achieved, a starting point is established for effective community design, as well as for identifying the desirable economic development patterns that the community should follow. Participating communities are asked to form volunteer task forces to answer a series of questions about their physical, social, economic and cultural environments. Their answers provide the MDT with a preliminary environmental assessment of the town. For example, citizens of Clearwater, Minnesota (originally founded by New England pioneers in the 1850s), developed a new appreciation for their riverfront origins and heritage through their background research. Restoring sections of the historic riverfront "village" and attracting environmental industries specializing in water quality became key elements in the community's future vision. This action research-what planner John Friedman has termed social learning-helps communities to better shape their own futures following the departure of the design team.

The ultimate purpose and rationale for the MDT, however, is to help residents of small communities create a shared vision of their future. Enabling a community to visualize alternative possibilities unleashes latent energies for change. Sonja Peterson, a resident of Battle Lake, Minnesota, observed after a MDT visit, "The Saturday night presentation provided a turn around which was a delight to behold. The MDT members inspired excitement, enthusiasm and-better yet-a commitment by everyone attending." At its best, the MDT acts as a transformer, helping the community convert its often ungrounded and scattered energies into new, more satisfying and productive results.

The Program 's Strengths and Weaknesses

Like most ventures into the terra incognita of community design, the Minnesota Design Team approach possesses both strengths and weaknesses due to its unique characteristics. There are inherent difficulties in the MDT approach, as well as problematic tendencies in implementation which the MDT has attempted to correct. On the other hand, the MDT approach possesses unique strengths-which may, indeed, stem from those same characteristics first perceived as weaknesses.

First, the MDT is often invited by the community's economic development agency eager to "clean up the



Main Street" or "encourage (or cope with) growth." However, the concept of community-based design does not always represent the dominant community concern at the outset. Friday morning information sessions, therefore, occasionally lapse into boosterism.

Consequently, the MDT has had to develop a community inventory of environmental, social, economic and cultural categories, which it derived from the 1969 National Environmental Policy Act, for each community to research and answer. The MDT now asks communities to form teams consisting of representatives from various community interest groups who have analyzed the town in terms of its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. The design team, therefore, calls this the SWOT approach and the team of local experts the SWOT team. The SWOT team approach has provided some valuable structure and balance to the Friday morning information sessions.

Also, a MDT visit is not appropriate for every community. The process works most effectively in communities that have already done a considerable amount of community development and that possess a high degree of consensus that a design team visit is needed in order to take the community to a new level of cooperation. However, the MDT does undertake the process in communities without this level of awareness if the members feel that they stand a reasonable chance of success in educating the community about the need for a more holistic approach to community design. A MDT visit, however, is no guarantee that a community will suddenly learn cooperation and wise use of its resources.

Secondly, due to the limited duration of the team's visit to the community, the design team members have to work extremely hard to understand its host community. As one member remarked, "The design team comes into a community and . . . steps onto a moving train." To give one example of how this effects the process, the MDT often cannot easily discern the community power structure and how it affects decision making. Consequently, members must frequently spend a considerable amount of time educating community leaders about its approach and about the necessity for having broad based citizen participation in community design.

The visit's limited duration also makes it difficult to identify and to include the alienated and excluded members of the community unless the community itself reaches out to those groups. In addition, the team's emphasis upon design of the built environment means that the MDT sometimes finds it difficult to address deep-rooted community social problems. As one MDT member noted, "How do you draw a picture of a drug-free environment?"

Finally, the voluntary nature of the MDT and its limited duration clearly has an impact on the implementation of its recommendations. After the initial outpouring of community involvement and enthusiasm for a MDT visit, communities often tend to slide back into old patterns of exclusive, short term decision making. During a MDT workshop with consultant Daniel Iacafano, for example, team members concluded that implementation was the weakest aspect of the MDT process.

Since that workshop, the MDT has made strong efforts to create a network of affiliate organizations that can assist communities with the ongoing implementation process. For example, Lewiston, Minnesota, acknowledged a MDT recommendation and community leaders met with the local extension service agent within two weeks of the visit in order to begin developing an implementation strategy for its new community vision.

Helping communities create shared visions of their futures is the major focus of the Minnesota Design Team. The emphasis on design helps communities focus more clearly on a tangible, three-dimensional



model of the environment rather than on abstractions. As Wade Vitalis, president of the Taylors Falls Chamber of Commerce observed, "Our community needed someone to draw the pictures so that people could get past that first step of imagining how things might change." A picture is worth much more than a thousand words in terms of community design.

Perhaps because it is keenly aware of each visit's limited duration, the MDT makes every effort during its stay to deepen its understanding of the host community. For example, team members stay with host families and digest the ethos of the community along with their meals. The Friday morning information sessions give team members, as well as participating community members, many new insights into the community.

The team visits community facilities and organizations, talks with senior citizens and students, walks around the town's streets and bends elbows at the local American Legion Hall. Communal eating creates another window into the community: Romanian cabbage in South St. Paul, blood sausage in Biwabik, and lots of jello and tuna hot dish help team members become honorary members of the host communities.

The MDT members believe that achieving this understanding of the community has become one of the keys to MDT effectiveness. The willingness of the outsiders with new perspectives on the community problems and potentials to listen to and join with residents turns a weakness (the short duration of the stay) into a positive asset.

Although members develop a genuine fondness and appreciation for their host communities through the wide range of interactions, the voluntary character and limited duration of the MDT visit allows team members "to say what needs to be said." For example, the city of Caledonia had received a state grant for small town revitalization efforts, which had included covering historic building facades with stucco. Many local residents had been reluctant to criticize local officials, so they gratefully applauded a MDT recommendation which suggested establishing a clearer set of guidelines for use of the grant funds. The MDT's voluntary, pro bono emphasis gives it credibility and is perhaps its greatest strength. The ability to speak frankly and freely give the team a truly powerful tool for community design.

Finally, the multidisciplinary nature of the MDT also increases the effectiveness of community visits. The teams, themselves, are designed to address a broad spectrum of issues facing each community. In addition to architects, landscape architects and planners, design teams have included anthropologists and rural sociologists, agricultural economists, tourism planners and community development specialists. This inclusive approach to community design helps ground the design recommendations in a comprehensive framework that takes into account the needs of the specific community and its broader contexts. Design teams, for example, almost invariably recommend that communities develop linkages such as hiking or bicycle trails to their larger region. The interdisciplinary nature of the teams also afford an excellent professional development opportunity for team members because they can learn from one another and enrich their own understanding of community development.

The Effects of the Minnesota Design Team Visits: Alternative Visions

Despite-or because-of its limited duration, the MDT has effectively contributed to its goal of helping small Minnesota communities shape their futures in a more sustainable fashion. The work of the MDT has improved community design through out the state in a number of important categories, both procedural and physical. These include alternative visions for communities, the identification and



fostering of new community leadership, improved local design decision-making capabilities, increased support for professional design services and the actual physical design improvements.

Helping communities envision alternative, preferred futures is the basic mission of the team. Numerous examples provide clear evidence of its effectiveness in performing this important service. First, the MDT helps a community rethink its fundamental bioregional characteristics. A visit to Embarrass, a town in the state's rapidly deindustrializing northeastern section, has helped this traditionally Finnish community reinvigorate its ethnic heritage. Following closely upon the visit, Embarrass began to reevaluate the old, decaying Finnish log buildings that dotted its landscape. The community has, subsequently, made a dramatic transformation from a declining industrial town to a vital tourism and recreation center. In 1987, the National Trust for Historic Preservation named Embarrass one of America's 16 "Uncommon Places," and said it provided an outstanding example of the preservation of ethnic diversity.

Similarly, South Saint Paul was, at one time, a historically industrial urban center distinguished by its stockyards which suffered heavily from deindustrialization during the 1980s. The state had, therefore, officially designated it as an economically depressed area. The MDT proposed the formation of a new community organization entitled the River Environmental Action Program (REAP) to reevaluate the community's relationship to its most distinguishing characteristic, the Mississippi River. South Saint Paul resident and City Council member Lois Glewwe later remarked, "When I think of what that one...suggestion has led to...I am once again astonished."

A visit to Lewiston, a small farming community in southeastern Minnesota, resulted in a number of recommendations that enabled the Land Stewardship Project (a non profit organization devoted to environmentally sustainable farming) to assume a more accepted and visible role in the community. MDT communities have also served as case studies for a statewide conference on Sustainable Community Development in the summer of 1993. This conference utilized the MDT communities in order to illustrate key sustainable development principles for a statewide audience of civic leaders and economic development officials.

The Development of New Leadership

Minnesota Design Team visits typically stimulate the development of new leaders and community organizations. Persons who may not feel comfortable within a community's existing power structure and its organizations often find a place as they become involved in implementing a MDT visit. For example, Paynesville's Mayor, Joe Voss, followed up a MDT recommendation to clean up the Crow River by asking one of his employees, an avid sportsman, to work on the project. Tom Koshiol involved the young people of Paynesville in dramatic clean-up and beautification efforts all along the river. Tom has received numerous service awards for his efforts, while the River Guard, which now numbers over forty-two young Paynesville residents, has helped to create a new generation of environmentally-conscious citizens.

The Heartland Center for Leadership Development in Lincoln, Nebraska, has found that a hearty acceptance of women in leadership roles is a key characteristic of sustainable small towns. The Minnesota Design Team strongly endorses and acts upon this tenet. For example, Cathy van Rissinghen, a resident of Little Falls who participated in the Design Team visit to that community, subsequently directed the community's riverfront landscaping efforts and now coordinates the local Main Street historic preservation and revitalization program. The strong role of women in leadership capacities was also noted in an article on Gran Marais which appeared in the Minneapolis Star-Tribune. Many of the women



profiled had also been involved in organizing the MDT visit to Gran Marais.

Following the MDT visit to South Saint Paul, a 19 percent increase in voter turnout occurred. Three new council members and 33-year-old Mayor Catherine Plummer were propelled into office, with a strong community mandate to implement the shared vision that had emerged from the MDT visit. Not all communities experience such dramatic infusions of new talent and leadership, but a Minnesota Design Team visit does offer fertile ground for cultivating civic involvement and nurturing new networks for community development.

Improved Community Decision Making

Alternative community visions and reinvigorated leadership also affect how residents of MDT communities make decisions about the future of their towns. A broader understanding of the nature of community and a growing willingness to collaborate with affected groups are key messages communicated by the team. For example, following a team visit to Hallock, the local trailer park owner offered to work with the city on the recommended tree-planting effort. Aware that the Minnesota Department of Transportation was removing trees from rights-of-way elsewhere in the region, Hallock obtained the trees from the department so they could be placed at the trailer park.

Improved communication and collaboration between the city and the surrounding township was one of the central MDT recommendations to Paynesville, where long-time rivalries threatened to seriously weaken development efforts. Paynesville area residents listened carefully and the governments soon became models of regional cooperation. In the past four years, the Paynesville region has developed a regional hospital district, built a naturally-cooled hockey center that minimizes energy consumption, created joint powers agreements on police protection, formed a watershed district and is moving steadily forward on a regional aquatic park.

A clear community vision facilitated by a MDT visit can frequently streamline decision making and eliminate much wasted community energy. "Taylors Falls up until 1990 had no comprehensive plan for . . . development," observed former mayor Steve Gall. "The MDT was instrumental in getting that rolling." Since the visit, Taylors Falls has established a new zoning ordinance and formed a planning commission. Recently, the commission oversaw completion of a major new housing program for the city. "A real logical procedure has been established," according to Wade Vitalis, a local businessman who helped organize the Taylors Falls visit. "We've developed really good communication with the state. They're looking for communities that have their act together. We know what we wanted so we could ask for it."

Finally, a successful MDT visit can result in communities beginning to look toward more sustainable, long-term objectives. South Saint Paul illustrates such an approach. "The Design Team taught us to think holistically," according to Darrol Bussler, South Saint Paul's community education director who helped arrange the visit. He said, "It helped change the politics of the community and the way the community works ." The River Environmental Action Progress (REAP), which grew out of the visit, stimulated a new awareness and activism regarding the riverfront. REAP successfully fought the city of St. Paul's plans to locate a landfill site on South Saint Paul's border and successfully negotiated with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources to create a fishing pier on the riverfront.

In 1990, the National Civic League chose South Saint Paul as an All-American City from 113 national applicants. The league remarked that South Saint Paul's community-based development process, "represented the best of creative, cooperative problem-solving." Both community residents and design



team members believed that the design team was responsible for a major part of that award.

Professional Design Services

One of the missions of the Minnesota Design Team is to promote the visibility and enlarge the understanding of the characteristics and value of professional design services. The team encourages communities to contact its affiliate organizations in order to learn more about the services that members can offer, as well as to learn how to prepare Requests for Proposals and to solicit competitive bids. A successful MDT visit means that communities begin to think of professional design services as resources that they can employ in order to achieve their long-term design objectives.

There are numerous examples of how communities learn to avail themselves of professional services. After Hallock had identified tree planting as a community priority, its Dipple Park Committee hired a landscape architect to help implement its plan. Sandstone worked with a landscape architect to help it design and develop a quarry park utilizing native sandstone materials. The city of Paynesville identified as a high priority the building of a community pool and aquatic center. A committee surveyed thirty communities with similar centers, solicited and screened competitive bids, then hired a professional architectural firm to proceed with the project. Becker hired a planning firm to help it prepare and implement a new comprehensive plan.

However, not all professional design services involve the hiring of private contractors. Several MDT communities have utilized the services of state and national organizations in order to achieve their community design objectives. A MDT task force in Taylors Falls served as liaison to the Minnesota Department of Transportation to oversee construction of a \$480,000 pedestrian underpass that reworked a particularly troublesome downtown intersection. For its work with Taylors Falls, the Department of Transportation received a design award from the Minnesota Society of Landscape Architects.

Following a MDT visit, the City of Little Falls utilized the Preservation Advisory Services Team of the National Trust for Historic Preservation to analyze adaptive reuse possibilities for two historic mansions and their grounds. The willingness to utilize all of these kinds of professional design services represents a natural outgrowth of renewed community awareness and a higher appreciation of the community's bioregional characteristics.

Design Improvements

Despite (or perhaps because of) its considerable emphasis upon the community design process, many design projects result from MDT visits. Often these design improvements exhibit an organic quality because they are so deeply grounded in the values and aspirations of their communities. The challenge is always to find a proper balance between getting projects done and getting them done properly. When that balance is achieved, the results can prove extraordinary.

The design improvements emerging from MDT visits include both building architecture and landscape architecture- and these are often interrelated. Little Falls has restored several historic buildings along its prototypical Main Street and has also involved students and muralists in several outdoor mural projects. It has also restored and renovated its historic railroad depot built by celebrated architect Cass Gilben. The town converted it into a visitor center and headquarters for the local chamber of commerce.

Melrose, Minnesota, constructed its new city hall along the banks of the local river in response to a design



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team recommendation. Embarrass continues to build upon its unique heritage: It has renovated a number of old Finnish farmsteads, constructed a new community using traditional craft techniques, commissioned a series of wooden statues depicting Finnish immigrants, developed a new marketplace and now hosts ethnic festivals in both summer and winter. Several Finnish log buildings were successfully nominated to the National Register of Historic Places.

Several impressive landscape projects identified during MDT visits have also been implemented. Hallock followed up its successful tree-planting program with a community-wide river cleanup. It also developed a walking trail system. The town of Sandstone recycled the materials from demolished buildings in order to create an innovative quarry park, using sandstone blocks for signage and to build an attractive side walk system. South Saint Paul's celebrated REAP has several noteworthy accomplishments in reshaping its community's landscape. These include an extended fishing pier and boat launch along the Mississippi River, as well as a new river walkway on the 26-acre grounds of a former sewage treatment plant. These examples merely hint at the diversity of physical forms that have grown out of the deep-rooted changes stimulated in communities by the MDT process.

Conclusion

Minnesota Design Team visits help demystify the process whereby a community becomes successful. They also reveal common-sense applications of planning and design to local citizens.

At the same time, because the MDT clearly understands that "the processes whereby communities develop are complex and poorly understood," it acknowledges the need for using the best community resource of all: the knowledge and support of its citizens. Community design may indeed be a "black box," but the MDT has learned that community involvement holds the key to unlocking its secrets.

The community of South Saint Paul, notes council member Lois Glewwe, embraced the MDT recommendations because, "their (community residents') ideas made it to those boards." For members of the Minnesota Design Team, community design is not a product that is bestowed upon communities by design professionals-it is a mutual learning experience that transforms everyone who participates into involved community members in the process of creating good places that can endure over time.

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