HC.21 Buildings that Disappear

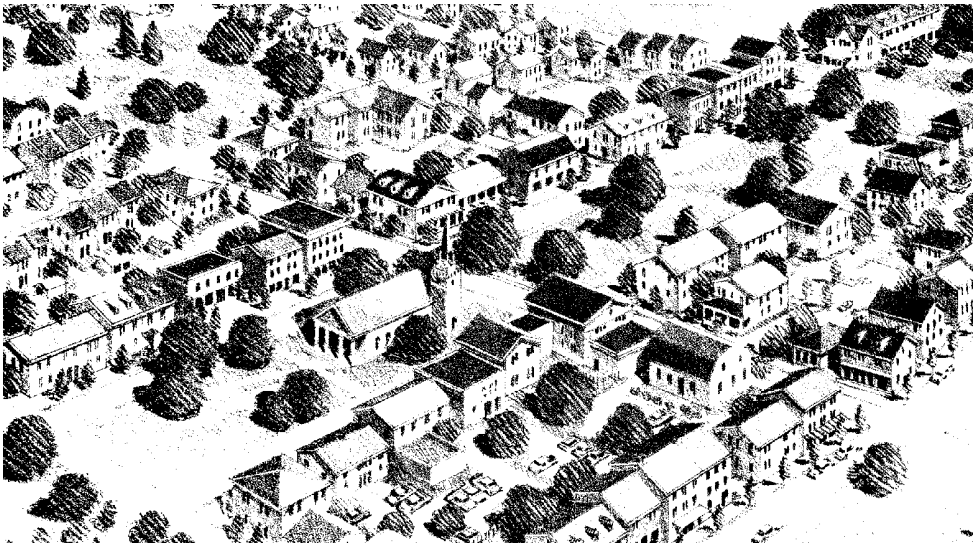
One of the nicest things about commercial strips is that their buildings generally have a design life of no more than 25–30 years, and that most community residents can look forward to seeing them replaced within their lifetimes. Forward-thinking communities learn from their past mistakes or oversights and ensure that history does not needlessly repeat itself, by adopting standards which are more in line with the wishes of their residents, as expressed in visual preference surveys such as the one conducted in Cattaraugus County during the autumn of 1999. The results of that survey revealed strong preferences for more modest front setbacks, parking locations

that are less visually prominent, greater shade tree planting, and signs that communicate messages effectively without dominating the roadside view.

Village Commercial

VC.1 Central Green

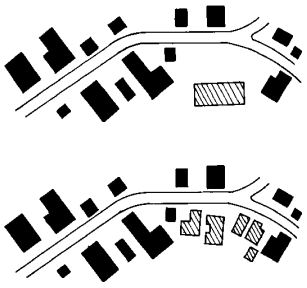
Village and town centers should always possess a central green or common to serve as a community focal point, both visually and functionally. For example, in Little Valley the village green serves as location for the bandstand and the weekly farmers' market. In Franklinville, it provides an attractive oasis that enhances the center's character and boosts property values all around it. Opportunities occasionally arise when buildings burn down and when, in the course of redevelopment, existing buildings are razed. When local officials have previously thought about the desirability of creating such greens within existing centers or neighborhoods and are ready with "big picture" thoughts when the hour arrives, these opportunities are more likely to be seized for the long-term general good. This aerial perspective sketch from Sasaki Associates illustrates a number of principles described in this section of the design guidebook, including formal community open space, rear parking, infilling, maintaining the street line, modulating building massing, and planting shade trees.

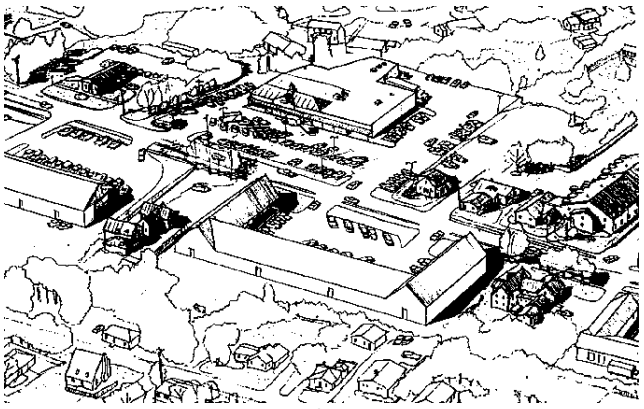


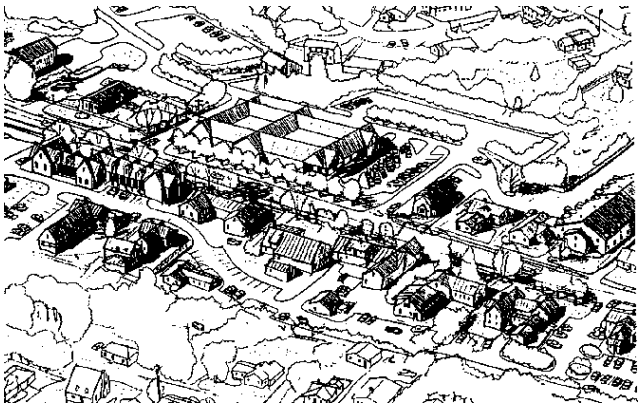
Courtesy Sasaki Associates, Watertown, MA

VC.2 Infill Principles

Following some of the same principles applied in the highway roadside situation, and for similar reasons, it is recommended that new shops built within the village context be situated very much toward the front of their lots if not at the sidewalk edge itself (which is often the most preferable location). By lining up with older nearby buildings, new construction can fit better into their surroundings with the contents of their display windows far more visible to the passing public. If off-street parking is needed, it can often be provided to the side or rear even on small lots not served by back lanes or alleys, by rotating the new building 90 degrees and orientating its gable end toward the street, as was commonly done in earlier times, so the structure does not stretch across the entire frontage. Infill buildings that are considerably larger than those older structures around it should either be constructed as a series of smaller structures, or designed with projecting elements and multiple gables to reduce their overall visual "massing." The photo above shows a large professional office building harmonizing with a residential neighborhood of 1920s bungalow homes through architectural designs that are sympathetic to the period and to the massing of the surrounding modest houses.



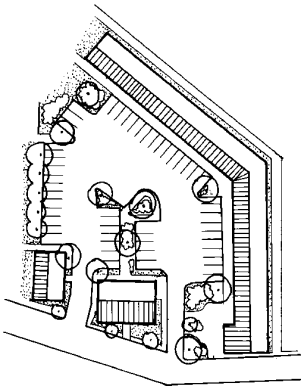




Courtesy American Planning Association (all)[2]

VC.3 Infill Example

The site plan and accompanying photo illustrate an example of infilling that rectified a bad situation created by the initial developer who had thoughtlessly blown a hole in the town's traditional streetscape. After a 1960s developer acquired and pulled down two handsome Victorian homes (in good shape) to erect a long two story motel typical of a highway strip, set back behind 250 feet of bare asphalt along the main street, the lodging business faltered and the premises were sold to a more imaginative soul who saw the opportunity to utilize the front edge of the property more efficiently with two-story buildings once again.



There he constructed three buildings which effectively concealed the parking and provided more leasable space. The entire complex has enjoyed a high occupancy rate since it first opened nearly 20 years ago, with mostly professional offices and service businesses located on the second floor, above retail below. Also worth noting is that trees grace not only the public side of the property but also the interior parking courtyard.

Courtesy American Planning Association (both)[2]

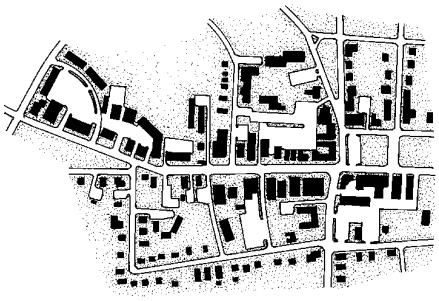
VC.4 Street Trees Bridging "Gaps" in Streetscape

Even when streetscape gaps are inevitable, such as is the case with existing single-story buildings set back much too far to relate to the street, a line of deciduous trees can hold the "street line" reasonably well, as shown in this pair of filling station photos.

VC.5 Street Trees as Unifiers

Trees along the sidewalk edge are an essential component of village streetscapes, and are possibly the single most critical component of a community's overall visual character. In addition to providing welcome shade during hot summer months and brilliant color in the autumn, they can produce a remarkable unifying effect in tying together buildings of different ages, heights, materials, and setbacks.

VC.6 Expanding Parking Opportunities



The ownership of land behind shops in village centers is often highly fragmented, posing obstacles to its efficient use for parking. Sometimes public initiative is helpful to spur discussion and to promote cooperation among the various parties. In a larger, combined parking area without internal fences reducing its efficiency, each owner would typically be entitled to a percentage of spaces based on the proportion that his or her land comprises of the whole. Costs incurred in paving, drainage, lighting, and removing internal fences or sheds could be pro-rated among all participants in the same way. The benefits of cooperation frequently outweigh the costs.

VC.7 Fences and Trees as a Parking Lot Screen

When parking areas cannot be located behind buildings their visual presence within village centers can be attractively screened by picket fencing and shade trees, elements of the traditional streetscape that also reinforce small-town community character.

VC.8 Added Height and Income

These new shops blend in well with the community's historic two- to three-story village center building tradition and reduce the need to occupy twice as much land for the same identical purposes, thus also reducing sprawl. Whether they are apartments, offices, or service uses (such as hairdressers, travel agencies, copy centers, etc.), the second-floor uses can provide a supplementary income stream for the building owner while enhancing the overall appearance of the main street. To the extent that they can also provide the additional wherewithal enabling the developer to go the small extra distance to design the facade more in keeping with the village's older commercial blocks, even greater results can be achieved, as illustrated by the two brick structures in the accompanying photos.

VC.9 Alcoves

The general rule that shopfronts should be positioned no farther back from the street than the "build-to" line is worthy of an exception when alcoves are proposed. These shops with the deeper setbacks are part of a planned ensemble or group of buildings, designed to increase the display window frontage. A secondary feature is the opportunity for enhanced landscaping (typically more trees and planters) and the provision of park benches to allow shoppers to rest their weary feet and regain their strength so they will be inclined to spend more time (and dollars) on discretionary purchases.

VC.10 Rediscovering Basic Vernacular Building Design

Design manuals have been produced by many communities within recent decades helping builders and architects better understand the elements possessed by even some of the simplest, most basic shopfronts built 80–120 years ago. The term "vernacular," which originally applied to local dialects and speech patterns, is also used to describe the early architectural styles found in any particular community or region. The patterns of window sizes and proportions, the heights of window sills and ceilings, the wall treatment between sills and sidewalks, the use of transoms above doorways and display windows that add more height and dignity to facades, and the location of sign panels which neither overwhelm nor obscure any of the above features are all very important elements of a total "composition."

These classic, timeless facades appeal to many shoppers, who enjoy spending more time (and often more money) in surroundings they find to be pleasant and attractive.

Courtesy Lowell Building Book

VC.11 Building Facelift 1

This building was given a new use along with a new life, and owes most its dramatic turnaround to simple actions such as removing plywood boards nailed over second-story windows, replacing plastic signs for wooden ones, and painting it to look more like a downtown building than a fire hydrant (it had been bright red from top to bottom).

VC.12 Building Facelift 2

This second building underwent more serious facial surgery, based on photographs taken before its original facade had been altered. Fortunately, the second-story historic window openings had not been changed so restoration costs were not major. When the ground-floor display windows were replaced, their original greater height was restored, with transoms above them. Because ceilings today are generally lower than they were long ago, such windows are often painted black on the inside to hide the ducts and wires above the newer dropped ceilings. From the outside, such blackened glass actually looks very similar to the clear glass on other windows, and they play a significant role in bringing back the building's original appearance.

Before

After

VC.13 Chain Store Signs

Even national chains comply with local sign regulations and participate in community efforts to regain the attractive appearance which they gradually lost during many decades when the importance of such details was overlooked. Just as the erosion of community character occurred over a long period, sign by sign, storefront by storefront, turning this situation around usually takes many years and occurs in the same way, shop by shop. In this case, the sign I designed was made of durable exterior plywood with a special (but not expensive) coating called "medium density overlay" or "MDO." The painted surfaces were lettered in colors and styles selected by the business owner, choosing from many shades and styles contained in the guidelines accompanying the community's ordinance standards.

Courtesy Lincoln Institute of Land Policy[1]

VC.14 Soft Drink Signs

National soda bottlers have paid for thousands of ugly plastic signs on local stores across the country. A little-known fact is that they will pay for signs of wood or metal as well, as long as at least ten percent of the area displays the company logo. Local officials who are aware of this corporate policy work with these company requirements and help shopkeepers obtain free signage that reinforces the positive elements of their community's traditional character. In the example above, the shopkeeper selected the colors and lettering styles from numerous choices available in the City's pattern book. Based on local requirements, the sign painter used durable MDO plywood which retains its smooth surface and paint for more than a decade, in contrast with standard plywood whose surface cracks and splits within several years, necessitating more frequent repainting.

VC.15 New Village Greens

Occasionally the demolition of dilapidated buildings offers special opportunities for communities to work with developers to erect new structures surrounding highly visible open spaces which create a distinctive community character. Such was the case here, when previous uses in single-story buildings were intensified in new structures adding two floors of housing above a row of shops. Upward sloping ground enabled the developer to access both the residential and commercial uses "at grade," with parking for the dwelling units located behind the buildings near their ground-level entrances.

Courtesy American Planning Association[3]

VC.16 Fast Food in a 19th Century Farmhouse

Town officials succeeded in pressuring McDonalds to abandon their original plans to demolish this house and instead to re-use the old building, expanded with a new addition that relates to the traditional "connected architecture" of an el (passageway), a summer kitchen, and a barn. This was accomplished with much vision, leadership, and persistence by the local officials, who had no ordinance powers at the time to compel this result.

VC.17 Continued Success

After succeeding with McDonalds, the Town decided not to leave its future to chance and to corporate goodwill, and adopted ordinance provisions setting standards for new construction in its central area, to ensure that designs would blend with the community's established character. This building was the first to come under the new ordinance provisions, and one of its earliest tenants was Arby's Roast Beef.