

Design Assistance for Iowa Communities

"The Community Design Program of the Iowa Architectural Foundation is a gem. What it provided for our community in 48 hours has given us years worth of strategic development." — Ed Malloy, Mayor of Fairfield, Iowa

By Edward Matt, AIA, Genesis Architectural Design



An alleyway sketch produced during the Fairfield, Iowa design charrette by a design team member. Sketch: Anna Aversing, ISU Student

Many small communities throughout Iowa have struggled for decades to maintain their downtown core, be it a main street or town square. Over the years many have experienced transportation shifts, loss of downtown retail, or a loss of general population. Changes such as highway bypasses have made commercial development outside of downtown attractive to developers. While economic development opportunities may have shifted to the fringe, the true heritage of these communities remains rooted in the traditional downtown main street or town square. These are the areas that tell the true history of Iowa. They still display the pride and heritage of the citizens that once made them thriving small communities. But many need help.

Today there is a boom in re-emphasizing and promoting the cultural and regional heritage of our rural communities as a part of boosting our state's tourism attractions. Many of these small rural communities still have perfectly preserved historic building facades that display all of the traditional storefront elements: cast iron columns, prism glass, canvas awnings, Victorian window hoods, and tin cornices. Many of these same small communities also have valuable natural resources adjacent to them such as parks, lakes, and trails.

This is where the Iowa Architectural Foundation comes into play. A program offered by the foundation, the Community Design Program (CDP), provides design assistance teams to communities that request help. The general intent of CDP is to provide design ideas or concepts that will improve the quality for any future redevelopment projects in the older,

established areas of downtown. The guiding principles promoted by the CDP teams help ensure that future downtown improvements will: (1) compliment the character of existing buildings, (2) ensure that infill projects are compatible within the downtown context, and (3) reinforce the design features and amenities that are unique to that community.

Suggested revitalization and infill projects for downtowns take advantage of existing infrastructure such as streets and utilities. This is critical to protect and improve the character of a main street or downtown while restoring a density that

and landscape architecture services in order to deal with the problematic issues at hand. The workshop is usually a two and half day process that starts with input from community organizations and culminates with the design concepts resulting from the CDP workshop team.

The types of projects and scope vary greatly from one community to another, appropriately so in that no two towns are alike. Design scope has included town squares, main street façade improvements, streetscape designs, downtown image studies, Central Business District evaluations, signage and gateway entrance studies, riverfront planning, and planning for transportation, infrastructure, or trail improvements.

After conducting a Community Design Workshop, the community is given a presentation on the design concepts and ideas that were developed. The presentation identifies goals in the form of short-term and long-term objectives. Beautification committees are suggested to attain the easily achievable short-term goals in order to start momentum within the community. This builds confidence and civic pride while sending a message out to the whole community that design and image are crucial to produce identity and vitality.

What kind of results has CDP produced in our communities? The benefits are many for those who follow through. Since 1991, more than 22 Iowa communities have benefited from the Community



Community Design Program designers work on concepts during the design charrette in Fairfield, Iowa.

Photo: Kirsten Anderson, Iowa Architectural Foundation

emulates its original vitality. The message is made clear — design creates identity and identity promotes image. And it is the image projected by a community that distinguishes its ability to attract residents, businesses, and visitors. This also promotes design as a good choice for economic development efforts.

The process starts with a community that is dedicated to improving its physical environment. Groups of active citizens, community leaders and organizations gather to create a shared vision. This group of community leaders then invites a Community Design Program Team in as an outside, objective group of volunteer professionals. The team members are carefully selected specifically for each workshop. Team composition varies based on the scope and needs of the community. The teams are a mix of professionals that provide planning, architecture



A design team member working on concepts during the design charrette in Grinnell, Iowa.

Photo: Kirsten Anderson, Iowa Architectural Foundation

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Design Program process. These communities include: Denison, Vinton, Eldora, Waterloo, Muscatine, Jefferson, Sioux City, Spirit Lake, Ankeny, and Ames. Communities completed more recently include: Hartley, Mason City, Fairfield, Estherville and Grinnell.

The most recent workshop was conducted in June at Grinnell. This workshop focused on the proposed restoration of historic fountain designed by Walter Burley Griffin, the famous architect protégé and long time employee of Frank Lloyd Wright. The result not only included an evaluation of possible locations, but also suggested design improvements to the city park that will host the fountain.

The key to success is planning and organizing teams or committees to drive momentum, prepare timelines for implementation and, most importantly, active participation from the community. There are follow up visits from CDP representatives typically after one year to follow up on short term goals and again after two to three years to follow up long term progress. If there are barriers to progress, the team will recommend alternatives.

Fairfield Mayor Ed Malloy was impressed with the workshop results. "The Community Design Program of the Iowa Architectural Foundation is a gem. What it provided for our community in 48 hours has given us years worth

of strategic development," stated Mayor Malloy. "The outcome recommendations were beyond my expectations and awakened a sense of purpose for our community. The foundation representatives and the team of experts were a delight to work with and an inspiration to behold as they planned our downtown revitalization."

Edward L. Matt, AIA is principal and owner of Genesis Architectural Design in West Des Moines. He has chaired the Iowa Community Design Program and served as a board member for the Iowa Architectural Foundation since January of 2001.

For more information on the Community Design Program please contact Executive Director Kirsten Anderson at the Iowa Architectural Foundation at 515-244-1888. Or write to the Iowa Architectural Foundation, 1000 Walnut St., Suite 101, Des Moines, Iowa 50309. You can also visit the website at www.iowaarchfoundation.org to download the CDP application.