Mitigating the Effects of Sprawl and Abandonment in Two Small Southwestern Towns:
A Design Studio

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MITIGATING THE EFFECTS OF SPRAWL AND ABANDONMENT IN TWO SMALL SOUTHWESTERN TOWNS

Small cities and towns of the American southwest are faced with differing challenges associated with either diminishment or encroachment onto rural lands:

- diminishing population with out migration and/or changing demographics as they are newly populated by retirees and vacationers
- vacillating employment opportunity and/or the need for new skills retooling
- de-stabilized transitional economics or the rampant speculation that accompanies rapid growth
- town infrastructures with deferred maintenance and/or new capacity demands
- eroding soils and soil capacity from deferred maintenance or uprooting native vegetation for development, and compromised water resources as demands change.

This bifurcating set of challenges to American rural lands and small towns is accompanied by the disappearance of architects, designers and planners with community abandonment or their ineffectiveness in the face of sprawl. In the small towns of West Texas, population is declining as the population in the remainder of the state increases. In contrast, small towns in the southernmost mountains of New Mexico, the opposite is true. Ruidoso, New Mexico is experiencing a 25% per year growth rate. Population declines are accompanied by demographic changes from young to old (West Texas), old to young in Ruidoso. In West Texas, the shift is toward a Hispanic future majority. Again, the opposite condition is true in Ruidoso, where there is a surge of second homebuyers and retirees in search of relatively low cost southwestern living. The region is fragmenting into several population types, most notably the aged, particularly pronounced in the poor counties of West Texas. Some rural counties in West Texas are characterized by increasing poverty levels that accompanying increasing economic downturn signaled by depressed cotton, oil and gas, and beef prices. The other counties suffer from deep-rooted long-term poverty. A surprising number of counties have no hospital and in many cases only a single physician. In rural Texas and New Mexico, as in other rural parts of the country, this is a time of small town and rural triage-some places irretrievably abandoned, some economically healthy though sprawling aimlessly destroying the environment and others hanging in the balance (Figure 1).

Through interdisciplinary design inquiry, this studio sought to address design opportunities for the American architect in southwest urban settings that are potentially declining, like Plainview, Texas CBD or alternately, that are emerging with unplanned growth, like Ruidoso, New Mexico. In both cases, the focuses of study were to discern appropriate architectural and urban designs for each area that would lead to their preservation, transformation and sustained vitality.

PROJECT 1. MITIGATING SMALL TOWN CBD ABANDONMENT. PLAINVIEW, TEXAS.

Texas Tech University and Health Sciences Center have embarked on a comprehensive region-wide rural assistance initiative to provide interdisciplinary technical assistance to communities. One project within the initiative has sought to make the capital and human resources of rural communities known globally to potential business relocators via the Internet. First, faculty and student researchers completed a building inventory of available commercial and industrial buildings in Hale County with support from the State of Texas Economic Development office. That data was subsequently posted on a website maintained by the Hale County Industrial Foundation.

Subsequently, seven students and three faculty members studied the central business district of Plainview, Texas, county seat of Hale County. Critical to the development of the work were initial presentations by business and community experts who apprised students on small town redevelopment particular to desirable commercial and institutional uses of space. Individual site analyses of factors pertinent to the specific adaptive use design problem followed. Then, each student selected a particular vacant building, wrote a schematic design program for its adaptive use, and pre-

pared a design that was reviewed by faculty from three disciplines, business and civic, and community leaders. Selected appropriate uses included:

- Nursing education facility—a dire need as the nursing shortage deepens with dependence on bringing in nurses from afar;
- Downtown restaurant and club—none presently exists and downtown occupants need to drive to get to alternatives to a diner;
- Rural business incubator—emerging typology that promotes new community entrepreneurship at home via e-commerce;
- Downtown live/work environment—meeting the community housing shortage with CBD apartments above offices/ shops at street level challenging the drift toward mobile homes;
- Downtown health club with racquetball and exercise facilities—none in town and cardiovascular health problems pervade community;
- E-business center—an e-lancers technology center, leaseable office space, with shared facilities like the rural business incubator (Figure 2-6);
- Law offices—across the street from County Courthouse investigating varying spatial requirements of traditional and emerging forms of practice (e-based). With the exception of law offices, none of these facilities currently exist in the central business district.

Students collectively prepared building models with streets, building massing, and details of existing structures. Individually conceived architectural designs as well as three-dimensional modeling followed describing design concepts in detail. The final presentations were copyrighted, made Internet-ready and turned over to the Northwest Texas Small Business Development Center and Hale County's Economic Development office and posted on their websites. In addition to studio based reviews of work, consultant and community reviews occurred mid- and post-project. Architectural critique followed each in the form of written communications to the students indicating strengths and weaknesses in the design from an architectural view—spatial organization, details of design, strengths/weaknesses in drawing and design requirements, and so forth.

Community reviewers strongly affirmed the suitability the designs for proposed business uses in meeting or anticipating community needs and opportunities respectively. The affirmations were particularly pronounced in the final review in which eight community and downtown business leaders showered students with laudatory feedback, in some cases, even playing down inevitable cost concerns and offering gratitude for the vision presented as well as the building type ideas. Plainview, Texas has no architect. The last one retired in 1999. Even when it had an architect, no one was providing the community a vision of itself that these students and their work offered. At their request, the drawings were kept and displayed at the Hale County Industrial Foundation. Business organizations, civic and community groups and citizens of Plainview pored over them. Letters of thanks were written to the COA and to the University President's office. New project opportunities have been spawned in the community. New students are working on architectural features for a five-mile bikeway through the streambed meandering through town (skateboard park, shelters, information kiosks, graffiti park, sculpture park, PAR course, scaled solar system model, etc). The COA was approached to have a design studio work on an assisted living center. And on the last day of the regional conference, Jimmy Dean (home town hero) Day in Plainview, a charrette will be conducted, once again bringing students, faculty, and community leadership together to re-envision a built future for the downtown. Plainview leaders have been invited to present their experience of technical assistance from the university to an interdisciplinary regional forum on rural issues, the first of its kind ever held at the university.

PROJECT II. MITIGATING UNPLANNED GROWTH: RUIDOSO, NEW MEXICO

The second half of the studio focused on Ruidoso, New Mexico (population16,000) a rapidly growing recreational mountain resort community. Describing Ruidoso to one who has never been there is not an easy task. Currently, the rapid growth of Ruidoso and its surrounding environment is largely "first come, first served." No architectural landmark identifies its center. The midtown area on Sudderth Drive, where most of Ruidoso's townscape is located, is a modest version of Venturi and Scott Brown's "Strip City". Ruidoso's citizens call their town a village, however, is anything but what a French villager would recognize as a *village*. Instead of a small sleepy community town, away from the latest trends and innovations, Ruidoso has become a bustling environment with visitors from all over the nation. Like many resort towns in the southwest, rural scale, low density, and casual lifestyle were responsible for originally attracting so many people. Now, in contrast, Ruidoso needs to address urban issues to maintain that which made it attractive. Real estate prices and land values in Ruidoso and vicinity have doubled each year since 1994. As new homeowners have arrived from both coasts, the village has had to construct additions to its health facility, a new post office, and enlargement of the interstate and other major roads. The new Spencer Theater (by Predock 1998) brings internationally known actors, musicians, and dancers to Ruidoso and attracts a large audience interested in cultural events. Economically prosperous times have not necessarily led to better urban planning. With the growth of this small city intimately bound with the economy, politics, and technology of the world at large, current urban planning practices offer no definitive solution for urban development, particularly during these times of unprecedented growth. No strict zoning regulations or infrastructure planning control the multinodal town's growth. Alto, one of the fastest growing residential communities in the Ruidoso area, has no zoning, master planning, or centralized sewage system. Most

single-family residences, the dominant type of new construction, have only septic tanks with ten-year life expectancies.

By encouraging a critical approach to understanding the region in all of its diversity, students identified individual characteristics and for design projects in the center of Ruidoso. They sought meaningful urban design concepts that could help set guidelines for community growth and prosperity and concurrently preserve the historic values of the region. Ruidoso town planning officials with whom discussions were probably the most insightful for the outcome of the projects welcomed students. Town officials of Ruidoso were very aware of growth problems and stated their resolve to initiate comprehensive urban planning, including social and political issues.

The studio approached two problems: (1) Redesigning the main street and public-ness of Sudderth Drive at the commercially based midtown (where most ski rental, clothing, and other retail shops are located), including the problem of village entrance that this street provides; site selections for future public space and public buildings; and circulation, vehicular traffic, pedestrian accessibility, parking on/near Sudderth Drive and a covered parking structure; and (2) CBD housing-in-residence community for visiting performing artists of the Spenser Theater, including a small café, classrooms for seminars in music, and a kitchen with dining hall. By successfully landmarking the main street with a multi-use facility that added people living at the center of town, students envisioned the rapid accretion of related support facilities, increasing property values, and the creation of a true urban core for the town.

CONCLUSION

In the first project, through research-based design, students created programs and designs whose vision and scope enabled them to directly address community concerns for alleviating problems in the increasingly abandoned downtown core. It is premature to know that the intervention produced the long-term goal of stimulating economic revitalization of the downtown area. There is ample evidence to suggest that this initial small perturbation has set in motion a whole series of economically regenerative moves that could not have been predicted without the intervention. We know this through the reports of participating business leaders with long-term interests in the community. In addition, a forty year old master plan for a bike trail has been dusted off and given to the COA to present additional new visions for facilities through which city leaders can approach state and federal funding entities for financial resources. Similarly, community design faculty have been asked to design a new downtown community center in a nearby park

In the second project, students learned that economically prosperity does not necessarily lead to better urban planning. Indeed, unplanned growth may induce stresses whose long-term effects are yet to be fully understood. Discussions with planning officials were most useful in leading to project outcomes that may effectively mitigate the unchecked sprawl of the strip street. Strategic site selection for a new midtown node attempted to energize a dispirited core dominated by an accretion of small scale marginally associated commercial establishments.

The bifurcation of small town transformations, and the related planning and design problems presented here are international phenomena. Population redistribution related to the economics of making a living and leisure time shape built environment decision-making in ways that erode prior economic investments and environmental endowments. In the resulting environmental triage, architects and architectural education can play instrumental roles in mitigating undesirable consequences through providing re-centering visions through location specific design that links to economic sustainability and spiritual renewal. For rurally based architecture programs, accessible projects such as these offer a multitude of learning possibilities.

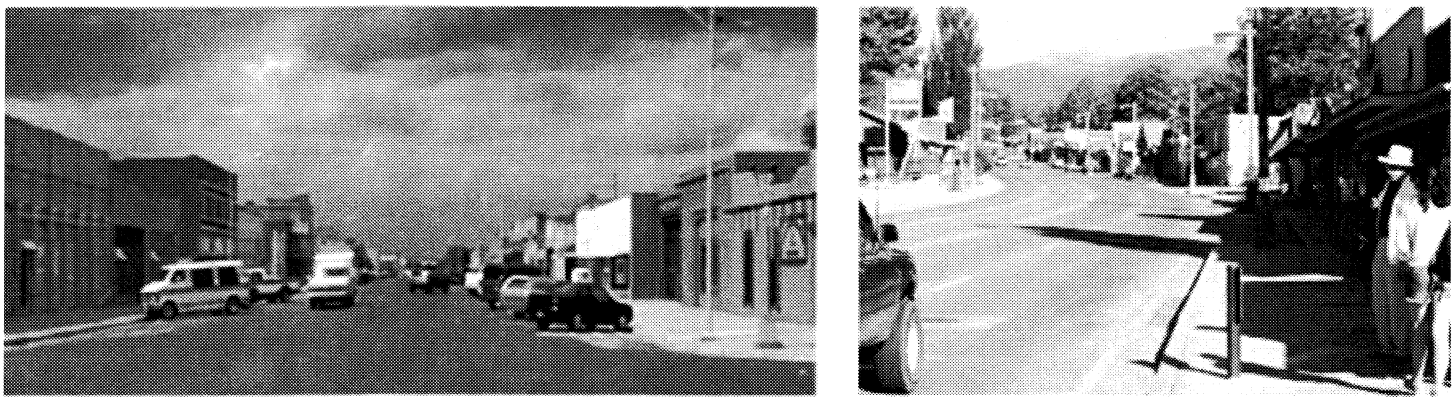
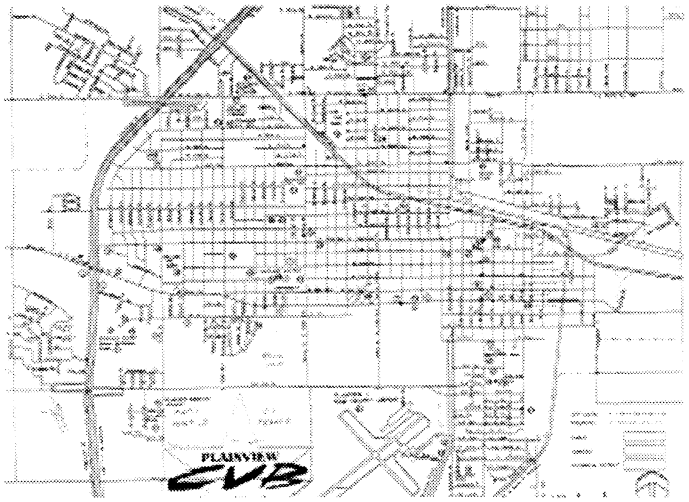


Fig. 1. Main Streets – Plainview (left) Ruidoso (right)



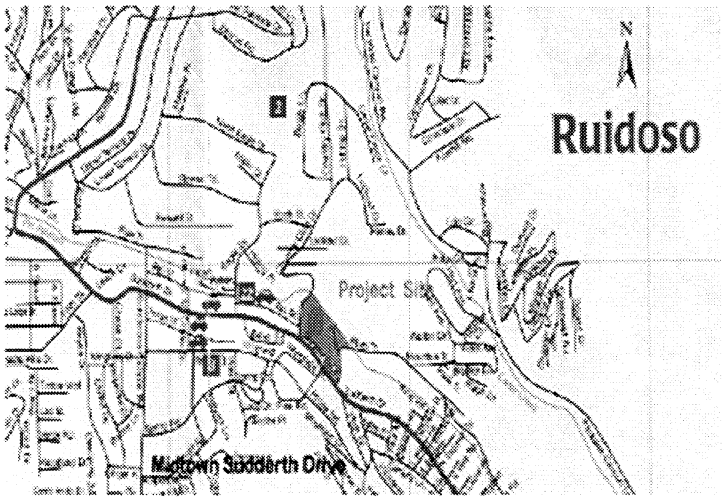


Fig. 2. Town Maps – Plainview (left) Ruidoso (right)

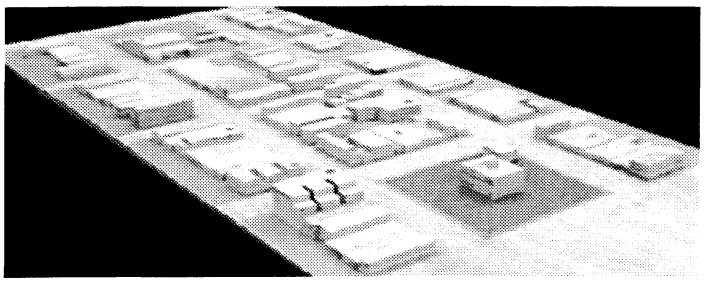


Fig. 3. Central Business Site Model – Plainview

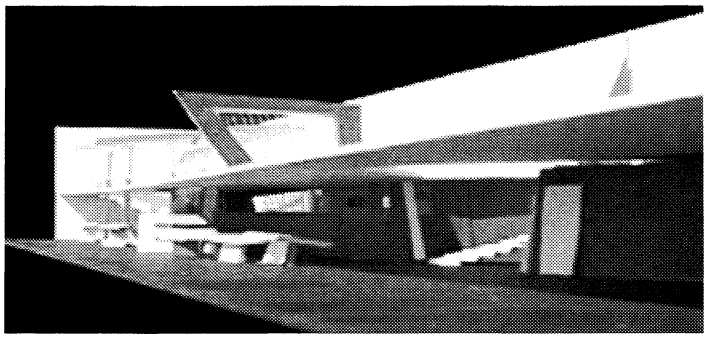


Fig. 4. New restaurant in abandoned boot shop – Plainview CBD

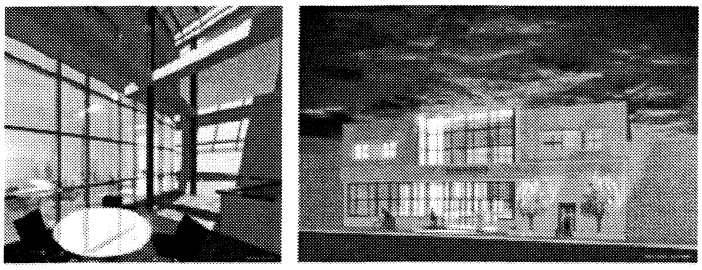


Fig. 5. Rural business incubator in abandoned department store – Plainview CBD

Fig. 6. Students presenting to civic and business leaders – Plainview

Fig. 7. Redesigned main street (Sudderth Drive) at CBD. left and right.

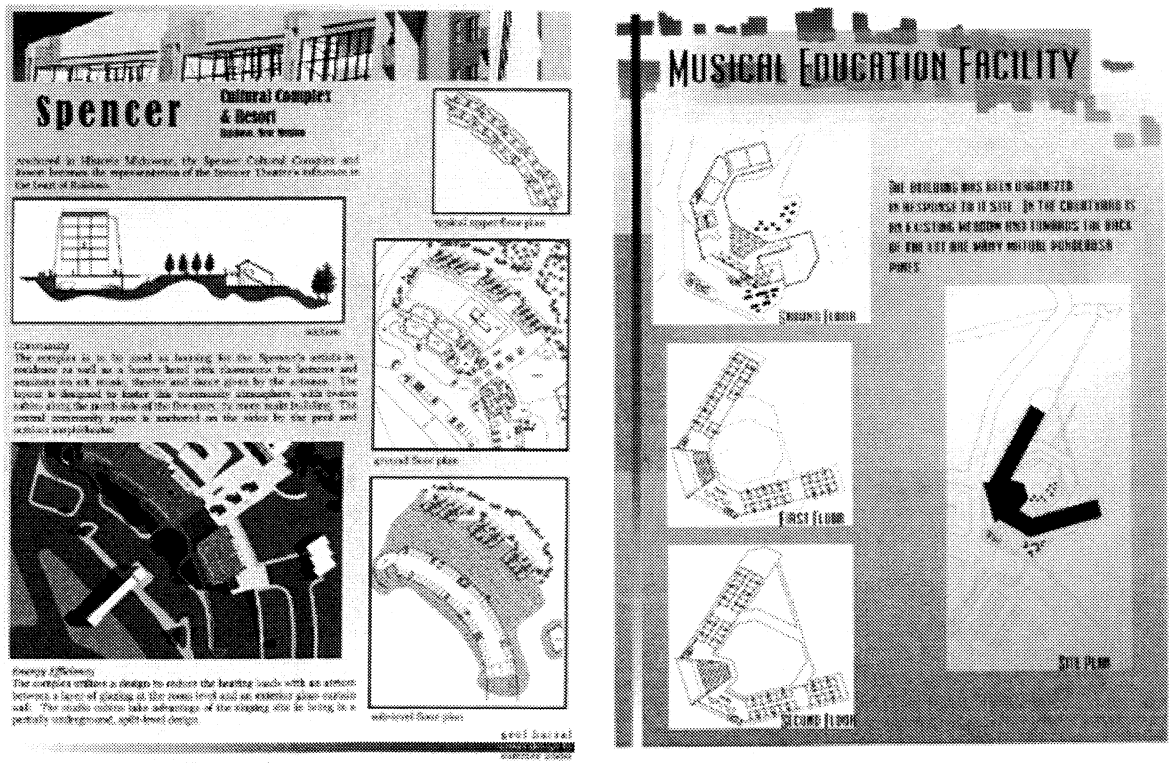


Fig. 8. CBD housing-in-residence community for visiting performing artists. left and right