

**Rooted in Place:
The Role of Design in
Small-Town Identity**

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Abstract

Longstanding critical theories on place, memory, and identity can begin to address critical questions that residents, civic leaders, and designers are currently facing in twenty-first century small town America. The rapidity with which many rural communities are now transforming is unlike any previous phase of transition; due in large part to a vastly expanding globalized economy and mass culture. Anonymous, exchangeable environments are quickly becoming a standard condition for these cities, without much attention being paid by neither insiders nor outsiders alike. Often compounding the problem, poor existing social conditions within the aforementioned communities are not only being habitually unattended to, they are exacerbated by the parallel eradication of place. Due to these implications, a new direction in the modernization of rural communities across the nation is required to productively and responsibly plan for their future. A critical look at the roles of memory, place, and the built environment in the formation of collective and individual identities may be an integral step towards steering small towns down this path.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The ever-increasing speed of globalization in today's society has undoubtedly reinforced, by way of action, the need for identity. Culturally-significant places enriched by a sense of history are rapidly being commercially standardized by big-box retailers, misguided growth, and disconnected foreign influences. Lack of vision and awareness, especially in rural communities across the nation, seem to be quickly dissipating any uniquely significant characteristics of place, simultaneously worsening the existing social conditions within those areas. The question remains of how to move forward with a certain spirit of continuity while still incorporating profound changes in the non-urban realm of small town America.

Due to the pointed direction a complex subject such as identity requires to be investigated, understood, and responded to, a simplified outline of what are essential steps in both the revelation and formation of identity has been repeatedly referenced during this process of investigation:

- 1) Acceptance of the past.
- 2) Awareness of the present.
- 3) Acknowledgement of the future.

With this, the parallels of a place and its inhabitants in the formation of identity have become much clearer. In the same way that

people must come to terms with their personal histories—both good and bad—, participate in society with a certain level of self-awareness, and always keep in mind the direction of their future, so too must the city's built environment respond accordingly to these needs. As Christian Norberg-Schulz points out in *The Phenomenon of Place*, "Human identity presupposes the identity of place."

In regards to urban conditions, peripheral, fleeting development has turned its back on the past, including constructive precedents of land-use, architectural "permanence", and space memory. Unfortunately, this temporal attitude towards the development of cities and towns in the present has simultaneously left behind important social histories embedded in the cultural landscape. The dependence of a city's inhabitants on memories of the place in which they reside for the formation and strengthening their personal identities and their collective or social ones has been thoroughly explored by social historians and designers alike, however, the full potential of this relationship seems yet to be realized, or further, applied.

Through this exploration of identity in social and design fields, one can begin to better understand the interdependent relationship of the city and the individual, and the mutual factors that help strengthen their existence.



FIG 1. Historic Wynne
Parade on Front Street, early 20th c. (Photo courtesy of Cross County Historical Society)



FIG 2. Train Depot
Rail passengers in downtown Wynne, early 20th c. (Photo courtesy of Cross County Historical Society)



FIG 3. Agricultural Wynne
Traditional farming methods, early 20th c. (Photo courtesy of Cross County Historical Society)

Chapter 2

Wynne: A Case Study

Wynne, Arkansas, is a small farming community in the northeast portion of the state, less than fifty miles west of the Mississippi River. The city, initially settled at the crossing of north-south and east-west railways, now finds itself at a much different crossroads—the crucial juncture of change and tradition. Like most small towns across the nation, Wynne is faced with the challenge of modernizing itself without losing its identifying character. Several conditions in particular make Wynne relevant in light of this discussion on identity:

- 1) Wynne long ago abandoned its original city center (the downtown area), shifted focus to an adjacent highway, and is now being developed even further away from its origin on another highway that runs along the outside of town, anchored by a new Wal-Mart Supercenter and strip mall developments, emphasizing the need for the city to identify itself as a unique entity and specific place aside from these ephemeral environments.
- 2) Wynne is, rather distinctly, divided—racially, economically, and culturally—by the railroad tracks running north-south through the middle of the city, creating two homogenous communities isolated from each other and absent of much social or personal interaction.
- 3) Wynne has no public spaces or urban platforms for personal and

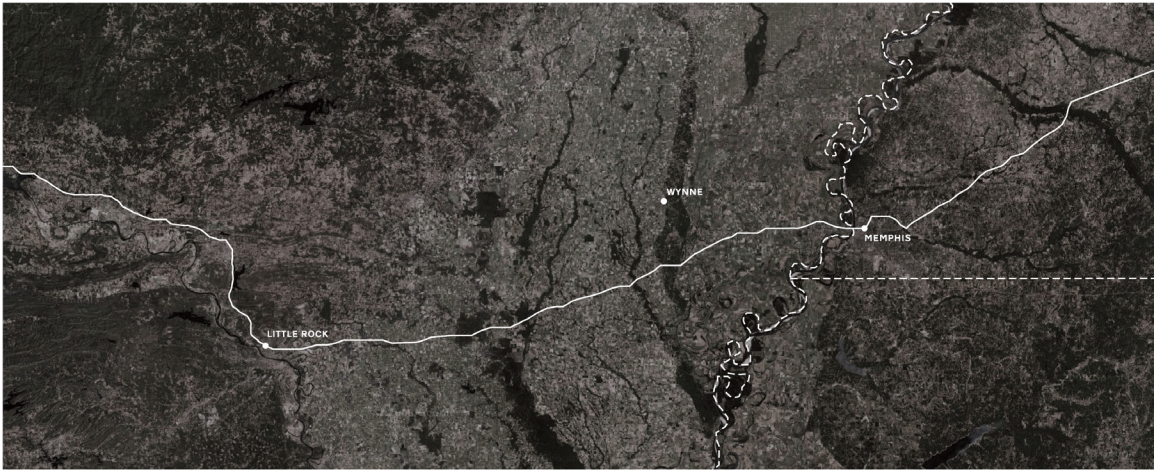


FIG 4. Regional Map

Wynne is located in the northeast portion of Arkansas, about an hour west of Memphis. (*Aerial photo courtesy of Google Maps, <http://maps.google.com/>*)

cultural exchanges to freely take place, an important missing link in both the formation of one's own identity, as well as a shared participation in its public history.

Using these three conditions—and their underlying causes and effects—as a cross-section of nation-wide problems in small town America, we may begin a valuable evaluation of current design practices and move closer to practical solutions.



FIG 5. Downtown Wynne
Current conditions in downtown
Wynne. (Photo by author)

Chapter 3

Collective Memory

Dolores Hayden writes in *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History*, “Identity is intimately tied to memory: both our personal memories (where we have come from and where we have dwelt) and the collective or social memories interconnected with the histories of our families, neighbors, fellow workers, and ethnic communities” (Hayden 36). Because of this phenomenon of associating one’s own identity and that of the collective community with the environmental landscape within which they exist, the role of the built environment, including buildings, streets, neighborhoods, and developments, is of utmost importance in the formation or realization of these identities. This seems especially relevant in situations of social conflict, which may be altered or improved through the architecture and design of “overlapping” spaces in which individuals may share identifying features and mutual memories to help bridge inherent gaps in cultural differences and social acclimation.

Concerning memory specifically, Paul Connerton notes in *How Societies Remember* that our knowledge of the past directly shapes our experience of the present (Connerton 2). Hence, we act out our present situations depending on the connections and references to events and objects of our past with which we are causally connected. This process would ultimately seem to stress, in the design world, an acute focus on the

preservation and revitalization of historical and cultural elements within built landscapes, as well as an avoidance of the proliferate development of indistinguishable entities, in order to better orient ourselves on a daily basis, both cognitively and physically. Socially, this connection of past to present—awareness of how we came to be here, now—and the interrelationship of the two are just as vital in order to move productively towards the future. However independent these two perspectives on the role of collective memory—within the built environment and that of the social landscape—may be studied and analyzed, an integration of one into the other seems necessary for constructive town planning and design decisions in an era of mass globalization.

Edward S. Casey is responsible for defining the trait he calls “place memory,” which Hayden believes can help trigger social memories through the built landscape (Hayden 46). According to Casey, “It is the stabilizing persistence of place as a container of experiences that contributes so powerfully to its intrinsic memorability. An alert and alive memory connects spontaneously with place, finding in it features that favor and parallel its own activities. We might even say that memory is naturally place-oriented or at least place supported” (Casey 186-87). Not only does this begin to more clearly define the influential relationship between place, memory, and identity, it is a theory inherently opposed to the development of cities and towns absent of particularities, such

distinctiveness being a cornerstone for containing memories and, furthermore, formalizing identity. This visceral recognition of identity on a collective level again reiterates that of the individual, with the potential to emphasize similarities among seemingly very different people and backgrounds within one community or city—no doubt beneficial to the socio-cultural landscape of a place. Clearly, however, the productive use of place-memory implies a necessity of place⁷ before the constructive aspects of strengthening identity can be accessed.

Chapter 4

Place and Placelessness

Before attempting to outline the constructive facets of place-making in small towns, it may be beneficial to first understand the destructive role that placeless development is currently playing throughout the country.

Placelessness

According to Edward Relph in his book *Place and Placelessness*, “Placelessness describes both an environment without significant places and the underlying attitude which does not acknowledge significance in places” (Relph 143). This attitude is closely associated with “technique,” described as “the overriding concern with efficiency as an end in itself.” Unfortunately, this promotes place as a highly exchangeable, unspecific entity, as it has so readily become in small towns across the country, under the direction of uninvolved planners and civic bodies. This will continue to undermine “the importance of place for both individuals and cultures” through its extensive replacement by the unguided construction of anonymous landscapes, often absent of any human meaning. Stephen Kurtz offers a specific account of such an environment at the once-popular Howard Johnson’s restaurants: “Nothing calls attention to itself; it is all remarkably unremarkable... You have seen it, heard it, experienced it all before, and yet...you have seen and experienced nothing...” (Relph 143).

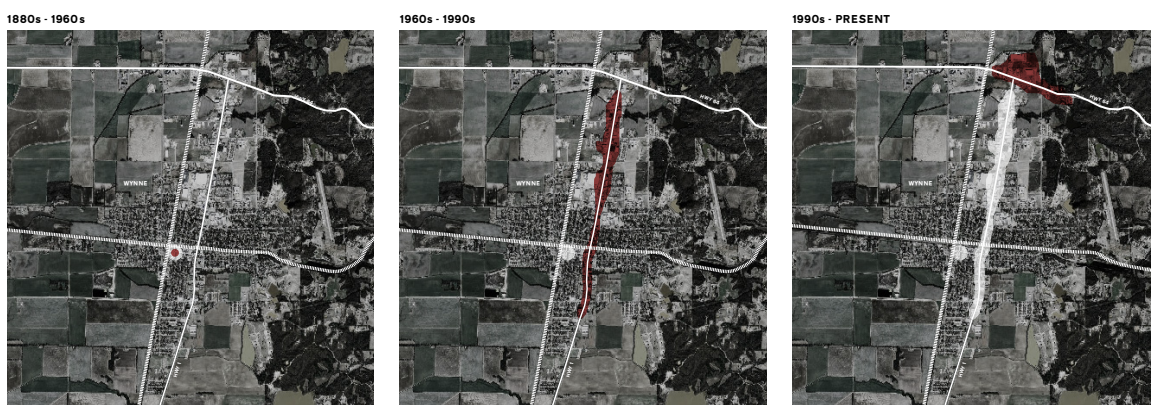


FIG 6. Development Phases

Development in Wynne has shifted over the years from its original city center to a highway through town to, most recently, an adjacent highway on the outskirts of town. (*Aerial photo courtesy of Google Maps, <http://maps.google.com/>*)



FIG 7. Downtown Wynne
Current conditions in downtown Wynne. (Photo by author)



FIG 8. Highway 1
Current conditions in Wynne on Highway 1. (Photo by author)



FIG 9. Highway 64
Current conditions in Wynne on Highway 64. (Photo by author)

Like rural communities across the nation, placeless development and irresponsible land-use in Wynne is quickly becoming the standard condition. Transformation from a centralized, downtown business district, which thrived from the city's origins in the 1880's through the middle of the last century, to linear developments along Highway 1, which runs north-south directly through the town, happened over the course of many years. A more concerning shift has taken place in the matter of a decade from development along Highway 1 to another state route, Highway 64, which runs along the northern outskirts of town—even farther from the central, historical development—leaving vast parking lots and empty big-box stores of the previous development phase abandoned in its wake. Unfortunately, a change in this trend is unforeseen, yet a critical look at this common practice may help bring these underlying environmental and psychological effects to the surface.

As placeless development and transient growth work against the identification of place, that of its residents is simultaneously weakened. As any sense of continuity with place is lost, so too are essential factors for creating these identities and retaining the inherent meaning of places. Again, it is this continuity and meaning of both people and place that may begin to help physical and social problems of small-town cultures.

Place

Alan Gussow writes, "The catalyst that converts any physical

location—any environment if you will—into a place, is the process of experiencing deeply. A place is a piece of the whole environment that has been claimed by feelings” (Gussow, 27). It is with this perspective that we may see the importance, if not absolute requirement, of individuals to a place. Places are not just spaces, built with certain character or centered within a particular landscape; rather, they depend on our immediate human experience of the world. Relph offers his view on the interaction between man, space, and place:

Experience of place can range in scale from part of a room to an entire continent, but at all scales places are whole entities, syntheses of natural and man-made objects, activities and functions, and meanings given by intentions. Out of these components the identity of a particular place is moulded, but they do not define this identity—it is the special quality of insideness and the experience of being inside that sets places apart in space (Relph, 141).

The emphasis place on insideness here is a very important one and one of the key reasons small towns like Wynne are so rapidly losing their identity in the modern era. When aware of the necessity to experience and know a place—regardless of scale—by being within it, current trends of ephemeral development and transient construction along highways and bypasses become clear adversaries in the creation of positive cultural landscapes. In his essay, “The Phenomenon of Place,” Christian Norberg-

Schulz focuses on this important relationship of individual to place by noting that “it is of great existential importance to come to terms with the genius of the locality where [man’s] life takes place. In the past survival depended on a ‘good’ relationship to the place in a physical as well as psychic sense.” Norberg-Schulz goes on to explain the two psychological functions of “orientation” and “identification” in regards to place: “To gain an existential foothold man has to be able to orientate himself; he has to know where he is. But he also has to identify himself with the environment, that is, he has to know how he is in a certain place” (Norberg-Schulz, 133).

As previously established, the creation of place is dependant on the human experience of being within that space; now, we see again (initially, in the realm of place-memory) that our human identities are highly dependant, or at least a function of, places and things. A basic understanding of this reciprocating relationship of place and person is essential if we hope to responsibly guide the growth of any place, especially small towns where little, if anything, is being done to soften the blow of ephemeral development and decentralization. Clear human value on both collective and individual scales must be recognized in existing and future built environments before an adequate change in course is taken.

Chapter 5

Environmental Psychology

While citizens and community leaders may not be immediately aware of the negative affects of their built environment, this does not necessarily mean these factors are not major influences on their actions or behavior. The absence of demand for an improved environment is often due to habituation, the act of becoming tolerant or accustomed to unacceptable conditions over extended periods of time (Brown, 102). Habituation seems not only partially responsible for the lack of guidance and awareness often characteristic of small town physical planning, but also in the inattention that ubiquitous conditions of social, economic, and physical segregation receive. Often continuations of outdated social norms, these lasting effects are no longer perceived as remnants of their disconnected historical causes and therefore left unquestioned as accepted environments, seemingly by all members involved. Consequently, such stated observations or suggestions of change by both outsiders and community members alike may often be met with unfavorable reception by a city's residents, whose conditioned perceptions of a place may outweigh any differing objective data. In fact, this occurrence may be partially responsible for the old adage "tradition dies hard" in small town America.



FIG 10. Division

Wynne has markedly different cultures on either side of the railroad tracks. (*Aerial photo courtesy of Google Maps, <http://maps.google.com/>*)

Wynne seems to be no exception to the influence of habituation. As noted, the town's clear distinction from one side of the railroad tracks to the other implies an unspoken divide between different social and cultural classes. This condition, however, appears much different to an outsider, who may be quick to assume tense racial relations and antiquated social hierarchies are to blame, than it does for a resident of the city, whose awareness seems to end at the acknowledgement of the city's divided physical presence. While neither of these views may be an appropriate or productive one—in racial terms, Wynne is not stuck in the mid-twentieth century, though isolated, homogeneous cultural groupings does not help strengthen the identity of the overall community or its individual citizens—one can clearly see the effects of living within a static environment for long periods of time without historical reference points. If the built environment can reflect a sense of continuation of past to present through responsible development patterns and sensitive design choices, place-memory is able to awaken these pasts as alive and active components from which to learn and build upon.

Chapter 6

Town Planning

In an effort to guide the planning of new towns in the West, based on several qualities of the traditional southern town, J.B. Jackson points out goals that may be retroactively applied to the redevelopment of modern rural communities:

I myself can think of many characteristics—social as well as environmental—I would like to see incorporated in the new towns to be built: a kind of self-sufficiency and independence of metropolitan ways, a solidarity and sense of kinship among people, an intimate and affectionate relationship with the immediate rural surroundings and with those who live there, and lastly a respect for local history and its monuments—an awareness of corporate dignity...On the other hand there are old-fashioned civic traits which are clearly not to be carried over into the future: certain entrenched class and racial distinctions, a dependence on an old-fashioned inefficient agriculture, a feeling of completeness, a disdain for experimentation, and a nostalgic attitude toward a long-vanished past (Jackson, 29).

Here, we see Jackson readily combining social and environmental characteristics in his description of important town assets, supporting the notion that the built character of a place has immediate and literal effects

on the social. Jackson goes on to describe the productive environment that traditional southern town squares created in their communities. The focus, however, is not on ignoring the needs of a twenty-first century, automobile-dependant community; rather, combining some of the existing social values inherent in community-based design. The Strip may have been a natural, if not necessary, planning solution based on the functional requirements of towns, however, its evolution to disconnected and often abandoned developments brings us back to issues of place and placelessness. Opportunities for “kinship” and “affectionate” relationships of a community’s participants, especially in light of “respect for local history and its monuments,” require a certain amount of contained, visible, programmed space in the midst of an unbounded environment like that of contemporary Wynne.



FIG 11. Swap and Shop
(Photo by author)

Program and Design

Recently in Wynne, a large group of people have begun to gather next door to an empty Burger King on the concrete slab of what was, until recently, a lumber wholesaler along Highway 1. This is affectionately known as the “Swap and Shop”: an eclectic gathering of ordinary citizens bartering used or discarded items for other used and discarded items. While this hodge-podge of people, clothing racks, baked goods, and automobiles may not be immediately apparent as an organized or meaningful event, it soon becomes clear that this is as much an excuse for needed social interaction as it is to stock up on “vintage” household items. One may be aware of Wynne’s need for a better public setting, but the full potential of this weekly occurrence on an abandoned city lot deserves a more thoughtful evaluation.

Here is what seems to be the perfect combination of a diverse group of people inadvertently embracing their differences through a series of unique cultural exchanges. Not only is the social interaction constructive, but the bartered objects themselves are extremely personal in nature (often used, worn, made)—tokens of memory that provided simple opportunities for insight and understanding in the presentation of self through tangible forms.

Hayden writes in her book on the opportunities of public and social spaces, “Creating public history within the urban landscape can use the

forms of the cultural landscape itself, as well as words and images, to harness the power of places to connect the present and the past” (Hayden 97). The preservation of these “words and images” is the second facet of programming, facilitated by the design of an oral archive in downtown Wynne. The archive complex nurtures the community’s distinct identity by encouraging users spatially to develop connections with the city, its citizens, and the place’s history. Visual connections to the surrounding historical areas and their contemporary use, subtle material and formal references to traditional agricultural storage buildings in the region, and a monumentality that can serve as a receptacle for the collective identity of the community help to accomplish these goals. Again, this continuity of past to present is of great importance in the creation of identity, a step toward making memories alive and active components from which to learn. This strengthening of identity allows individual character to resonate more clearly within a community, leading to better understanding and closer relationships. The spatial layout not only situates the user in relation to the constructed object but also personally in relation to the site, enhancing their sense of place.

For my site, I see downtown as a relevant historic center of Wynne; its current depleted position an empty canvas embedded with history on which the city can begin to mold itself a new direction. Downtown’s central location at the intersection of the railways seems appropriate

due to 1) the tracks being the physical origins of the city and 2) its highly symbolic role as a boundary between two disjointed sides of the community. Specifically, the cross-scape which is currently the railyard between the intersection of tracts will house all program components, bringing life to what has always been a physical and social chasm in the town.

It seems as though architecture often strives to be the result of community process or culturally significant factors, static in nature. My goal is that, with this project, architecture and design can become active participants—vehicles for new cultural identification and a better future.

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Vita

Todd Sparks was born on October 15, 1985, in Dyersburg, Tennessee. Since then, he has also lived in Mississippi and Arkansas in a variety of southern cities and small towns. This thesis begins to explore many years of experience in rural communities, in light of his studies at Harding University in Searcy, Arkansas, as an interior design student and his graduate experience in architecture at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.