

WHAT IS STRENGTHENING THE CENTER?

Strengthening the Center happens when the physical, historical and experiential strengths of a community are defined and engaged to build a confluence of energy and identity.

UNDERLYING PATTERNS AND ELEMENTS

Patterns of Place: Density, diversity, complexity

Community Engagement: Leadership, empowerment, equity

Regional Identity: Landmarks, focal points, defining views

Cultural Layers: History, stewardship, opportunity

Community Fabric: Solids, voids, gaps, textures

WHY STRENGTHEN THE CENTER?

Strengthening the Center results in the forming of a unique and special place based on local context and knowledge. Grassroots involvement in visioning and decision-making balance the generic place-making and destructive action of our global economic, environmental, and political conditions. This Strengthening of the Center results in an increased vitality of place, more coherent community identity, and long-term strategies for sustainability.

COMMUNITY EXAMPLE

The Town of Shoreham is an example of a village with a strong physical center, i.e., a Town Commons surrounded by historic buildings, municipal buildings, and open space. Yet its strength was weakened by loss of activity, conflicting functions, and empty buildings.

The town engaged in a coordinated design process which included municipal committee meetings, mapping, interviews with municipal leaders, a transportation impact study, and a building space analysis of historic structures. This work also included a review of the recreational, educational, cultural, and landscape uses by the Town. The result was the development of a stronger vision for their Commons as the heart of their community.

The result of this eight-month process was a set of plans and drawings illustrating how community identity and existing functions could be strengthened by the sharing and overlapping of activities (recreational and municipal uses) and reducing of conflict in others (traffic and school children). The vision also identified missing components critical to a healthy center, such as housing, occupancy of empty historic buildings, and the inclusion of new functions such as a community recycling center.

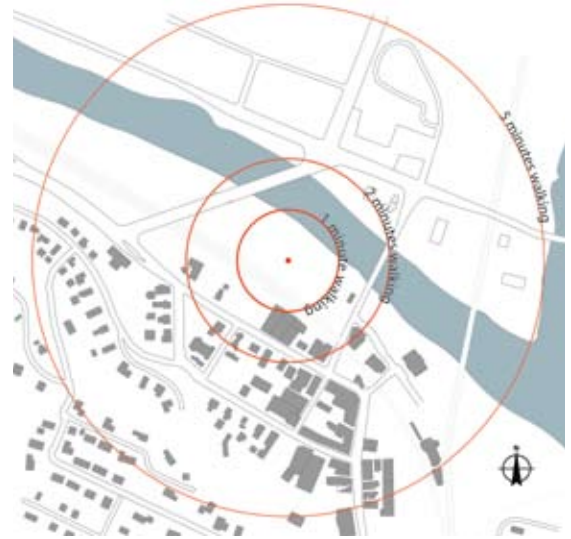


Diagram showing walking distances as concentric circles radiating from the town center, White River Junction, VT.



Meadow trail extends from the town hall into the wetlands for community use while also protecting viewsheds and wetlands. Charlotte, VT.



Master plan drawing depicting a stronger village center. Charlotte, Vermont.

HOW DO WE STRENGTHEN THE CENTER?

There are many visible elements (or forms) and invisible patterns (or functions) within the places we live and these each color the shape, activity, and decision-making within our communities.

Take water as an example. Rivers and streams are a visible part of our landscape. What is our relationship to this flowing water? Do we protect it from urban and agricultural run-off, from sewage waste, from oil and gas? Do we have stormwater policies, raingardens, vegetative buffers, wetland remediation and source protection? What are our personal water consumption habits? How we choose to recognize and value these elements and patterns within our villages and towns is a design decision that influences our collective community health and our particular futures.

RECOMMENDED IDEAS AND PRACTICES

Environmental Goods: Open Space, Parks, Green Space

- Understand local natural resources and their place within the future of the community.
- Define particular special and sacred natural features of a place such as a waterfall or town forest.
- Identify community voids and gaps for unexpected opportunities.
- Use open/green space for focal points, gathering places, pocket parks and formal festivities.
- Greening of sidewalks, streets, and neighborhoods with river walks, rain gardens, shade trees, ski trails, etc.
- Develop a local network and community foods system
- Ensure healthy access to water.

Community Forms: Buildings and Infrastructure

- Develop municipal/merchant partnership for energy retrofits, better access to buildings, and creative reuse.
- Allow neighborhood infill and density of structures to enhance the urban fabric.
- Reclaim roadway and parking space for greenways and public transit.
- Incorporate “Slow Roads” to mix the vehicular, bike, and pedestrian traffic in neighborhoods to support a diversity of uses within the public right of way.
- Ensure affordable housing for the long-term.

Community Functions: Engagement, Visioning, Planning & Policies

- Engage local businesses, schools, and institutions in common goal setting.
- Ensure core services are within walking distance of each neighborhood and conducive to users of all ages.
- Support youth leadership activities such as micro-enterprise, arts, food production, etc.
- Use schools, churches, town greens, etc. as community activity and learning centers.
- Create long-term strategies for annual work programs, budgets, investments, and taxes to promote a desired future.

FIVE PRINCIPLES OF COMMUNITY DESIGN

The Vermont Design Institute has developed Five Principles of Community Design based on spatial forms, patterns, and design concepts observed and used over the course of their work.

PREMISES:

- * Community design is a collaborative planning process with the immediate goal of improving the quality of life for all community members of the ecosystem—from the smallest insects to us humans, and from, the waterways to the skies above.
- * Effective community design creates economic opportunities for local residents at different scales of interest—from global connections to bioregional needs and immediate solutions.
- * Sustainable communities depend on alternative forms of energy and transportation.
- * Sustainable lifestyles include changing our daily patterns, consumption habits, and production technologies to accommodate “closing the loop” and living with a no-waste policy.
- * Sustainable community landscapes allow for protection of open space, regeneration of native vegetation, stormwater mitigation, increased green space, local food production at various scales, and sensitivity to public-private zones.
- * Successful community design increases community knowledge of local history, cultural landscape, and sacred ground.

ASSUMPTIONS:

- * We need to be re-constructing our patterns of habitation, transportation, energy, water, waste, and food systems.
- * We believe individual empowerment and reconnection to place leads to transformation and healing for Earth.
- * People do care and have an amazing strength of vision if given the chance to be heard.