

## *14.0 URBAN DESIGN AND APPEARANCE*



*MIDDLETOWN PLAN OF DEVELOPMENT*

## 14.0 URBAN DESIGN AND APPEARANCE

### 14.1 Introduction

The results of the 1999 resident's questionnaire showed that Middletown residents are especially interested in the physical appearance of the City and are anxious to ensure that historic and attractive areas are protected in the future. Large numbers of questionnaire respondents noted that the mix and contrast of rural and urban areas give the town a special character; in addition, the City's relationship to the Connecticut River and the quality of the Wesleyan Campus are other attributes listed as being especially liked (see Figure 14.1). In contrast, many residents felt that the appearance and general image of the downtown needs significant improvement, despite the existing historic character and architectural quality of many of the downtown buildings. Of particular note was the fact that almost 75% of the questionnaire responses gave support to the idea that city government should encourage greater design review of new development.

The design of residential, commercial, institutional and industrial buildings, as well as the look of streetscapes and public open space areas, together contribute to the quality of Middletown's overall image and character. This section establishes the following goals:

- *Preserve existing natural features in order to maintain the City's unique mix of rural and urban environments.*
- *Improve aesthetic quality of downtown through stronger architectural design and signage controls, and improved streetscape programs, following the guidelines outlined in the 1994 Vision Report.*
- *Upgrade the visual quality of strip commercial development, especially within the two commercial districts along Route 66.*

### 14.2 The Downtown Area

Downtown's strong image and character is largely due to the presence of a variety of historic buildings that are largely intact. Many of these older buildings are located along Main Street, which was already established as a grand thoroughfare during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, as illustrated in the city view published in 1877 (below). The broad width of this street creates an impression of



1877 View of Main Street



a. Existing Farmland



b. Connecticut River



c. Wesleyan University

an elongated plaza rather than that of a traditional shopping street (Figure 14.2a). Buildings that line Main Street generally vary in height from two to four stories and the presence of street trees and wide sidewalks provide an attractive pedestrian environment (Figure 14.2b). One of downtown's major assets involves the south portion of Main Street, which has been carefully redeveloped as an historic district through the relocation of a number of well-preserved historic structures adjacent to Union Park. Carefully restored landscaping gives this area a quintessential New England Character (Figure 14.3). Two churches at either end of Main Street – St. John's Church and the South Congregational Church – also help to give the street a strong identity.

In the 1970's and 1980's the area's strong historic image was damaged by selective building clearance and inappropriate redevelopment, although to a lesser degree than in many other historic downtowns. This failure to relate to the existing historic context is, however, now recognized, and as an example the new Police Department building, completed in 1999, follows to a large extent a new design standard for development in downtown.



**Middletown Police Department**

The improvements in the appearance of downtown have been, in part, a response to a number of city initiatives designed to safeguard and enhance the area. The City's advisory Preservation and Design Review Board, for example, has been successful in encouraging higher standards for façade treatment, signage, and streetscape design. The Board is currently working on developing a revised set of design guidelines to be applied to development proposals in order to improve the overall design quality of new construction. These guidelines will build on the work carried out in 1997, which focused on architectural design guidelines to be applied to the Downtown Historic Districts.



a. View of Main Street.



b. Streetscape, north of Washington Street.



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***Figure 14.3 The Historic Character of  
South Main Street and Union Street***

In addition to this work, the City has initiated a number of studies for downtown over the past decade. The 1994 Vision Report<sup>2</sup> involved the preparation of an overall conceptual plan as well as recommendations for several sub-areas of downtown. The plan included a number of urban design proposals that remain relevant in 2000. The more important recommendations from this study can be summarized as follows:

- The need to create a stronger identity for downtown, including the establishment of a central focal point that could provide a clear sense of place.
- Provision of an upgraded, cohesive streetscape treatment that is sensitive to the historic character of downtown.
- Improved façade renovation, commercial signage, etc. in order to enhance and preserve the character of Main Street.
- The establishment of visual “gateways” at the main entry points into downtown.
- The creation of stronger physical and visual links to the river waterfront.

The 1996 Market Study by Mullin Associates Inc. endorsed many of the Vision 2000 findings and emphasized that the architectural quality of buildings and the historic character represented downtown’s greatest strengths. The study’s design recommendations included the need to expand landscape beautification within downtown through new plantings, sidewalk improvements and the use of banners. The study also noted that additional public amenities (i.e. information kiosks) were also required for downtown.

A design workshop focusing on the North End Neighborhood<sup>3</sup> also examined design issues relative to Main Street and the surrounding CBD. The workshop examined ideas to strengthen the visual unity of Main Street and to encourage pedestrian activity. To this end it advocated additional, better-designed pedestrian crosswalks in order to overcome the difficulty of crossing Main Street, and suggested a new signage program throughout the downtown area.

These ideas were explored in more detail in concept plans prepared on behalf of Middletown’s Main Street program in 1999<sup>4</sup>. These plans illustrated a variety of streetscape proposals for Main Street that included plans for shortened crosswalks through the widening of sidewalk areas at street intersection points. Ideas for new street furniture were also proposed, including designs for light fixtures, banners, signage, information kiosks and outdoor sculpture. This study, as well as others mentioned above, will provide useful input to the work being undertaken by the Preservation and Design Review Board on the update of design guidelines for the city.

### **14.3 The Riverfront**

The Waterfront remains as an untapped asset, particularly in terms of its relative isolation from downtown. Pedestrian access is extremely limited due to Route 9, and most views of the river from the downtown area are cut off by development along DeKoven Drive. Fifteen years ago the City developed Harbor Park and encouraged the construction of a waterfront restaurant. The success of these efforts has led to an increased awareness of the potential of further revitalization of downtown through increased linkage with its waterfront. In particular the City recognizes the need to re-establish pedestrian links between downtown and Harbor Park as well as to other sections of the Connecticut River.

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<sup>2</sup> Downtown Vision: 2000 and Beyond; - Planning and Zoning Downtown Subcommittee

<sup>3</sup> North End Community Workshop 1998: Yale University

<sup>4</sup> A Streetscape Concept Plan for Middletown: 1999 Hoisington Koegler Group, Inc.

The Vision 2000 report advocated the creation of plaza areas over Route 9 in order to improve pedestrian access between downtown and the riverfront. This recommendation was later adopted in the Harbor Improvement Agency Study<sup>5</sup>, which illustrated a concept plan for a staged redevelopment of the riverfront areas that involved decking across DeKoven Drive and Route 9, connecting to Harbor Park. This report also made proposals to improve the existing linkages involving the tunnel from the Courthouse site and the vehicular and pedestrian access from Union Street to the riverfront.

An alternative proposal for better integrating downtown and waterfront, initiated at a downtown workshop in 1999, involved the transformation of Route 9 from its current highway character to an on-grade, tree-lined boulevard as it passes the downtown area. This study argued that such a change would allow for easier pedestrian crossing of the Route 9 corridor, and help knit downtown with the river.

A major opportunity to extend public access to the waterfront exists to the south of Harbor Park and Sumner Brook. The Peterson Oil Company, the Wastewater Treatment Plant and other adjacent properties together provide an 88-acre waterfront site that could accommodate a variety of new uses including public open space and a marina. Part of the City's planning initiatives include acquiring these parcels and creating a development program that would help integrate the area with downtown and Harbor Park.

#### **14.4 Commercial Strip Areas**

Middletown has been successful in limiting the spread of strip commercial uses to relatively few areas along the City's major arterials. The more prominent commercial districts are located along Route 66, Newfield Street, and, to a lesser extent, to the south along the Route 17 corridor and adjacent to Route 9. Route 66 represents one of the major access routes into the city and downtown, and its entry into Middletown is marked by careful landscaping that underlies the rural character of much of the city as shown below. Route 66 is scheduled to be widened to four lanes to relieve traffic congestion along the roadway. Every effort should be made to replicate the landscaping that exists and to retain its scenic qualities.



**Route 66**

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<sup>5</sup> Back to the Riverfront: 1998 [Office of the Mayor/Harbor Improvement Agency]





a. Middletown and Washington Plazas.



b. Strip commercial near downtown.

Moving eastward towards downtown, the two commercial districts along Route 66 exhibit the characteristics common in strip commercial areas such as buildings set back from unscreened surface parking areas, and large scale signage located near the highway right-of-way, and frequent curb cuts to provide access to individual lots and building entries. Businesses located to the east of Washington Plaza and Middletown Plaza comprise a mix of small-scale retail, fast food and automobile-related uses that create an untidy array of buildings, signs and infrastructure with virtually no landscape treatment. (Figure 14.4b)

A number of recommendations designed to address these issues were included in the 1990 Plan of Conservation and Development. These recommendations included:

- The need to increase landscape treatment (street trees, planting beds, etc.) within front yard areas along highway rights-of-way.
- The provision of road connections between individual parking lots in order to reduce the number of curb cuts on Route 66.
- The placement of parking areas within rear and side yard areas to improve the visual quality of the corridor.
- The need to apply additional restrictions on the size, number and type of commercial signage.

## **14.5 Summary**

The results of the resident's survey carried out in 1999 showed that citizens have a keen interest in preserving the City's visual assets and are anxious to see that a higher design quality is incorporated in future building development.

### **Major Assets**

- Existing woodland and farmland areas that form a key ingredient of the City's unique mix of rural and urban environments.
- The Connecticut River, despite the current limited public access to its waterfront.
- The architectural heritage found within the five Historic Districts of downtown, where much of Main Street's early architecture has been carefully preserved.
- Wesleyan University, which includes a variety of mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century architecture set within an attractively landscaped campus.

### **Issues and Opportunities**

- Implementation of selected streetscape improvements that were initially prepared on behalf of the Main Street Program, including transforming Main Street into a landscaped boulevard with a center median.
- Establishment of a new set of design guidelines in order to upgrade the quality of new renovation and development in downtown.
- Installation of a larger, more permanent outdoor art and sculpture program for the major public open space areas.
- New zoning and design guidelines should also be initiated for the Planned Commercial Zone along Newfield Street to limit the spread of strip commercial development and to upgrade the visual quality of the corridor. Similar actions should also be considered for the B2 zones.

- New sign regulations for more aggressive zoning enforcement within the B-2 commercial strips to eliminate illegal signage, outdoor displays, and temporary signs and banners.
- Investigate designating city roads as scenic roads. Public Act 87-280 authorizes the State to designate state highways, or portions of state highways, as scenic roads. A scenic road is defined as any state highway that: 1) passes through agricultural land or abuts land on which an historic building or structure listed on the National Register of Historic Places or the State Register of Historic Places is located, or 2) affords vistas of marshes, shorelines, forests with mature trees, or notable geologic or other natural features that set the highway apart from other state highways as being distinct.

The State has not created any standards for local roads to be named as scenic roads. Towns and Cities are free to designate scenic local roads, but the local municipality must either adopt state standards or create new road standards for the designation to have an effect.