

Edward T. McMahon is a senior resident fellow at the Urban Land Institute in Washington, D.C., a UAB graduate and a native of Birmingham.



Design Matters

Urban Land Institute's Edward T. McMahon has seen ways design affects a community.

TRAVEL TEACHES YOU MANY THINGS, not the least of which is that the world does not have to be ugly.

I first learned this lesson when I returned to Alabama after serving in the U.S. Army in Germany during the 1970s. Heidelberg, where I lived, was clean, compact and dripping with history. The old town center was packed with tourists, shops and sidewalk cafés. Missing were cars, which you really didn't need because you could walk from one end of town to the other in about 20 minutes.

The countryside outside of town was gloriously free of billboards, strip shopping centers and overhead power lines. The back roads were lined with trees and cyclists. Children walked to neighborhood schools and senior citizens visited friends after strolling to the pharmacy or the country store.

This is not to say that Germans and other Europeans don't love cars. They do. But the big difference was that they didn't have to use them all of the time. They could ride the "clean as a whistle" electric trolleys and high-speed trains that went everywhere, or they could ride on an extensive network of bikeways. They could even walk.

Footpaths: An entire network extending all the way from the edge of town, up the hillsides, into

the forests—eventually linking up with the trails that crisscross the entire country.

I often think back to Heidelberg and other European towns whenever I visit Alabama and observe the changes we have made here at home. For many years, all we did was tear down the good stuff and replace it with the banal or worse. For many years, Alabama let look-alike fast food emporiums, soulless subdivisions and cluttered commercial strips turn Alabama communities into what author James Howard Kunstler likes to call "the geography of nowhere."

Alabama can't imitate Europe, and we shouldn't try, but we can learn some lessons. One important lesson is that design matters.

Former Mayor John Bullard of New Bedford, Mass., put it this way, "Challenge anyone to name his or her favorite place and then ask why." Many of the reasons that attractive places are attractive have to do with design. Without thoughtful attention to design, a town will become "Anywhere USA." Design of a community communicates what it is.

Good design is also important because it relates directly to economic development and equals cold hard cash for many communities. Every single day in America, people make decisions about

where to live, where to invest, where to vacation and where to retire based on what our communities look like. Take tourism for example. Tourism is about visiting places that are different, unusual and unique. The more a community does to protect and enhance its unique character, whether natural or manmade, the more tourists it will attract. On the other hand, the more a community comes to look like everywhere else, the less reason there is to visit.

Distinctive community character applies to more than tourism. A key concept in 21st century economic development is "community differentiation." If you can't differentiate your community from any other, you will have no competitive advantage. This is because capital is footloose in a global economy. People can conduct business almost anywhere today. Natural resources (like the coal and iron ore that gave birth to Birmingham), highway access or location along a river or rail line have all become less important. Education, technology and distinctiveness have all become more important. Joe Cortwright, a leading economic development consultant, says, "The unique characteristics of a place may be the only truly defensible source of competitive advantage for cities."

While good design can mean more tourists, better jobs, increased property values and a higher quality of life, bad design can lead to polarization and resident opposition to new development. Without doubt, there would be far less opposition to new development of all types if builders, developers and public officials paid more attention to the appearance and design of new buildings and the compatibility of new construction with the existing character of our communities.

Ask yourself this question: Do you think the character of Alabama should shape new development, or should new development to shape the character of Alabama?

People like Philip Morris, a former executive editor of Southern Living magazine, and Cheryl Morgan, director of the Urban Studio at Auburn's School of Architecture and Design, have long advocated for better design in Alabama buildings. Now their advocacy is starting to pay off. Just look at the new Railroad Park or the new Mountain Brook City Hall or new federal building in Tuscaloosa or even the new Chick-fil-A on Highland Avenue, and you will see that good design is coming back to Alabama.

Travel teaches us many things. Among the lessons I learned was that good design matters. Alabama communities can grow without destroying the things that people love. And for those who think it's too late, think again. Community character deteriorates one building and one project at a time, and it can improve in the same way. Birmingham is proving that this is true! ■

BY EDWARD T. MCMAHON

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