

COMMUNITY APPEARANCE AND TOURISM: WHAT'S THE LINK?

The colorful brochures American cities use to promote their charms are always filled with attractive scenes: sunsets, azaleas in bloom, historic house museums beautifully photographed. The reality is often not so lovely. Back away from the great columned house and you'll find, as likely as not, a fast food restaurant with screaming red roof to one side, and to the other a parking lot that is barren except for a flashing portable sign and a towering billboard. The brochure is handsome; the city is not.

There is an immense but too often ignored relationship between community appearance and tourism. As Mark Twain once said, "We take stock of a city like we take stock of a man. The clothes or appearance are the externals by which we judge." Unfortunately many tourism officials are far more concerned with marketing and promotion--creating fancy brochures and compelling ads--than they are with protecting and enhancing the product they are trying to sell.

Tourism involves much more than marketing. It also involves making destinations more appealing. This means conserving and enhancing a destination's natural tourism assets. It is, after all, the heritage, culture, and natural beauty of a community or region that attracts tourists. But today a person dropped along a road outside of most American cities (whether tourist destinations or not) wouldn't know where he was because it all looks the same. Is it Albany or Allentown? Clarksdale or Cowpens? Providence or Pittsburgh? Who can tell?

The truth is, the more a community does to enhance its unique set of assets, whether natural, architectural, or cultural, the more tourists it will attract. On the other hand, the more a community comes to resemble Anyplace, U.S.A., the less reason there will be to visit. Make a destination more appealing and people will stay longer and spend more.

Clearly, certain places have more appeal than others. But no place will retain its special appeal by accident. Without exception those places that have successfully protected their uniqueness--whether natural or man-made--are those places that have used vision, management and control to protect the features that make them special. Without planning and management, tourism can destroy the very attributes--both natural and man-made--that people come to see. As a result, local policies that shape growth and development are critical to the success of tourism development efforts. Many cities have gotten used to ugliness, accepting it as inevitable to progress. But there are others across America who

have begun an active push for a more appealing environment. The tools to make a community memorable and beautiful are not new or rare. But it takes citizen action and political will to put these tools to work. It also takes an understanding of how people, particularly tourists, see and experience a community.

Perception studies reveal significant differences between tourist and commuter perceptions of a community from the highway. Tourists are open and receptive to everything they see, while commuters tend to tune out the familiar environment along the roads they travel day in and day out. This suggests that tourism officials need to become more aware of the overall character of a community. This is particularly true because many tourists decide to spend time and money at a location before they actually see the product. If the character of the destination is at odds with its description in advertising and promotional literature, the tourist will feel cheated. Creation of a false image can spoil a vacation. What's more, it can reduce repeat visitation: tourists may come once but they won't come back. Alternatively, happy memories and word of mouth are the best public relations a destination can have.

Tourism is a voluntary activity, which means that tourists have a choice among competing destinations. Given a choice, where will they go? Virtually every study of traveler motivations has shown that, along with rest and recreation, visiting scenic areas and historic sites are among the top two or three reasons why people travel. Travel writer Arthur Frommer says that, "Among cities with no particular recreational appeal, those that have preserved their past continue to enjoy tourism. Those that haven't, receive almost no tourism at all. Tourism simply doesn't go to a city that has lost its soul."

Preservation-minded cities like Victoria, B.C.; Savannah, GA; Charleston, SC; and Alexandria, VA are among North America's leading tourism destinations because they have protected and enhanced their unique architectural heritage. By contrast, cities which have obliterated their past such as Cleveland, Birmingham and Atlanta attract hardly any tourists at all, except for the highly competitive and notoriously fickle convention business.

Urban planner Andreas Duany says that, "Authentic urban experience has become such a rarity that many places have become tourist attractions simply by virtue of being real towns." Visitors drive hundreds of miles to spend a weekend in places like Fredericksburg, TX; Madison, IN; Sonoma, CA; Stockbridge, MA; and

Edenton, NC, just for the sake of experiencing the pleasures of a "real" small town. Duany also believes this explains the success of Disneyland and Disney World, where visitors spend more time wandering along Main Street USA than they do on rides.

Growth is inevitable. The ugliness and destruction of community character that so often accompanies growth is not. Communities can grow without destroying the things people love. Beauty, heritage, and environmental quality are good for business. Unless the tourist industry thinks it can continue to sell trips to see look-a-like motels, tract housing, traffic jams, and cluttered commercial strips, it ought to share in an agenda to protect the natural and cultural resources on which it relies.

To preserve and enhance those characteristics that make a community interesting, memorable, and attractive, the tourism industry should adhere to the following standards and recommendations:

- Identify all of those places, both natural and man-made, that give a community its special character and identity.
- Make every effort to preserve the authentic aspects of local culture including handicrafts, art, music, language, dress, architecture, traditions, and history.
- Preserve and maintain existing historic buildings, neighborhoods, towns and areas.
- Insure that tourism support facilities--hotels, motels, restaurants, and shops--are architecturally compatible with their natural and man-made surroundings.
- Protect the gateways and entryways into a community and identify and protect streets and roads with outstanding scenic or historic significance.
- Protect scenic views and vistas. Wherever possible install underground utility wires and screen unsightly intrusions on scenic viewsheds or historic settings.
- Preserve trees and existing landscape character. Wherever possible plant street trees and use native vegetation to landscape and buffer parking lots.
- Prohibit billboards and strictly limit the size, height and number of other outdoor signs. Encourage the use of natural materials--not plastic-in sign design.

* * * * *

by Edward T. McMahon, Senior Associate at the Conservation Fund, and former president of Scenic America.

Reprinted from *Heritage Tourism Update*--Winter 1993 (a publication of the National Trust for Historic Preservation).