Thematic Landscapes Building a Redevelopment Effort:
The American Main Street

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Abstract

Main Street was historically the most important street in town. The introduction of the automobile into society spurred urban sprawl and suburbanization. Activity moved away from Main Street and onto the edges of the town. Main Street lost investment and vitality, causing it to fall into disrepair, and in some cases disappeared altogether. However, Main Street holds a special place in peoples’ hearts.

As Main Streets were disappearing, Walt Disney built his own version of Main Street at his family amusement parks, Disneyland and Walt Disney World. Main Street, USA presented a commercialized version of the historic Main Street, with high Victorian ornamentation and small, human-scale buildings. Most families in America have visited one of the Disney theme parks, therefore Disney’s vision of Main Street has become a well recognized vision of Main Street.

As people push to revitalize their hometown Main Streets, the character of historic Main Street is being replaced all across the country. Highland, Indiana is no different from any other town. They are a small town in Northern Indiana that functions mainly as a bedroom community for Chicago commuters and Gary steel mill workers. Highland’s Main Street still exists, currently named Highway Avenue, however it lacks any historic Main Street character. The Highland Downtown Redevelopment Plan presents a plan for creating the American Main Street in the downtown district of Highland.

By strengthening Highland’s downtown with the definition of several intersections and nodes within the downtown and the addition of linear connections throughout the downtown, the historic feeling has been returned to Highland’s downtown district. Also, the incorporation of current land uses, such as a rails-to-trails project, into the historic character of the downtown has created new opportunities for Highland’s downtown that were never available in the past. The new character has given Highland residents a pride in their town character that changes the entire attitude about Highland’s downtown. It has the potential to become “the Heart of Highland” like their downtown banners claim, while becoming an example of redevelopment efforts and civic pride to all communities who see or visit it in the future.
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Introduction

Since communities began to form and people began to build permanent places to live, there have always been central Main Streets. Main Streets are an important element in America’s social history. Community residents came together on these Main Streets to sell or trade their farm crops, to get haircuts, to mail a letter, and to have something to eat or drink at the bar or local diner. These uses continued along Main Street through the horse and buggy era and on into the age of automobiles. When cars came into the downtowns, the signs had to become bigger and brighter so that people would notice them as they drove by. However, the activity stayed the same. People still met each other in the downtown, did their shopping, completed their errands, and went to movies. Main Streets were so popular that they were even built at amusement parks as attractions, and people would pay to experience the environment.

Main Street historically was the most important street located in a town. It was located at the heart of the community, and usually carried the largest amount of traffic. It had a unique character of commercial, service, and social land use patterns. However, the introduction of the automobile into society caused a shift in community land use patterns. It spurred the era of suburbanization and urban sprawl began to be developed at community edges. As urban sprawl continued to occur, the importance of Main Street began to be forgotten. People followed the development shift, therefore causing an abandonment of Main Street. This abandonment was accompanied by a lack of business investment, as retail establishments had to move to be in sight of customers and along the major traffic flows, which had
moved to the edge of the community. Main Streets began to fall into disrepair and businesses moved out to the highway intersections. Main Streets became holes of abandoned buildings in the center of towns all across the country. Disinvestment bred a loss of identity and vitality for Main Street, creating hollow cores in the hearts of small towns.

However, Main Streets are still important to people, even if they don’t use them in the same way they used to. People want to know that there is a Main Street in their town, whether they use it or not. Therefore, since they are so important, there must be a solution to drawing people back onto the historic Main Streets. Small towns all across the country are battling downtown situations of despair. Urban sprawl has attracted business and activity away from the historic town centers. However, as driving out to town or regional edges becomes more inconvenient and less acceptable, towns have an opportunity to regain vitality for their centers at a cost comparative of building new developments along the town edges. Current shopping trends today are turning away from community edges and back into the downtown cores, creating an opportunity for Main Street to be revitalized to fill the new shopping niche.

People are still paying to shop at amusement park Main Streets, so the key must be to make the Main Street look like people remember it, and creating activities and shopping opportunities which historically drew people to Main Street, and have the ability to draw them again. Reapplying elements of the historic American Main Street theme creates a new streetscape that restores community identity in the downtown core. As the Main Street theme is easily recognizable by people, it creates an association for them with the historic activities of Main Street, luring them into the town core. This resident draw creates a restored vitality and identity for small American towns. This will add the
remembered life and style to Main Streets and town centers that has been missing for years, recreating the community’s identity.

This study helps towns take notice of the merits of theming their own Main Street. Implementing a Main Street theme to these downtown streets will cause a jump start for these towns to begin a redevelopment effort, which will, in turn, spawn private and individual efforts towards the town’s redevelopment goal. This study creates new vitality for small town downtowns, while also filling a new shopping niche for tomorrow’s retail customers.
Problem Statement

Downtowns in small communities have been struggling to maintain business in the historic cores of the community. They are suffering from a lack of investment and have fallen into disrepair. Rather than shop in such an environment, customers have found alternatives to shopping in the downtown. Current shopping trends draw people to malls, strip mall centers, or big-box retail centers for their shopping needs. This eliminates customer traffic from the downtown environment as well. The sum of these elements of neglect has created a lack of identity for their Main Streets. The lack of vitality, income, and maintenance has led to the loss of sidewalks, benches, and trees. However, new trends see people looking for alternatives to mall shopping, and downtowns provide the perfect opportunity to fill that new shopping niche. By reapplying the thematic elements of the American Main Street so that the new shoppers are greeted by the scenery that they expect to see in a Main Street environment, struggling downtown locations have the potential to regain the vitality of their past.

Sub-problems

The first step towards solving the problem is to identify elements that exist in the visual and physical theme of Main Street and which of those are essential to that theme. Then, these elements have to be replaced in the streetscape to create a place that is identifiable as Main Street for Highland.

The second step towards solving the problem is to find examples where the implementation of Main Street thematic elements has helped revitalize struggling small downtowns. This helps to identify which elements are essential to recreating the theme in downtown environments.
Definition of Terms

Main Street. Main Street is that area of town that historically housed all of the shopping and service needs for the entire community. Historically, it formed the busiest street in town and main gathering place for community residents.

Visual Theme. Visual themes are the way certain objects or areas look to people. They are comprised of small detailed elements that when put together make a place identifiable by sight as being different from any other place.

Physical Theme. Physical theme is the scale at which an area is built. Certain dimensions of the area’s space, such as sidewalk width and building height, create a feeling that is unique for that area.

Small Town. Small towns are those communities having less that 50,000 residents.

Big-box Retail. Big-box retail locations are those stores that build on the edges of current city development and house themselves in large square buildings that support a large square footage of retail floor space (i.e. Wal-Mart, Target, Meijer).
Background

Community development, especially commercial development, has been moving towards the edges of communities since the introduction of the automobile into society. Cars allowed people to travel farther to purchase their daily goods and services. Shopping malls and strip development have become the staple of retail destinations in modern society. Downtowns have lost their customer base, their traffic, and their vitality since this land use development began to occur. However, current trends point to the desire for maintaining historical character of the downtown environment. As William Whyte observed in City, “the rediscovery of the pleasures of downtown has been made in city after city, and there has been a marked increase in the number of people using city center spaces” (1). This is an encouragement for developing downtown revitalization projects, even in downtown environments where the historic characteristics are severely eroded. As stated by Alexander Garvin in The American City: What Works, What Doesn’t, we know how to fix the American city (xii). We can clearly tell by observation what is present in successful downtowns, and what is missing in downtowns that are struggling.

Clay abruptly states in Real Places that it was realized that “increasing populations of the American people no longer shopped in the center, no longer worked in the center, and were spending weeks, months, or even years without going to the center” (4). Daily destinations were missing, such as jobs, the newspaper, city hall, the police station, and the farmers market. Main Street no longer catered
to the people with detailed, human scale design. Plus, it also paled in comparison with the artificial Main Streets that were ornately designed for amusement parks. Main Street needed to evolve with popular culture “to direct, attract, and control the interest of the populace” (Francaviglia, xii). Main Streets must now be planned as special places with unique character that needs to be highlighted. As Schneekloth and Shibley identify in *Placemaking*, “what [people] need to enable us to live well, to dwell, is to trust in the possibility of a beloved place and our significant part in the making of such places” (18).
Site

While the concepts are universal, the site for this case study is the downtown district of Highland, Indiana. The district has developed in a unique way, situated along two traffic arteries rather than along one linear thoroughfare. Kennedy Avenue runs north-south, and commercial development spans for six blocks between its intersection with IN-6 and LaPorte Avenue. Highway Avenue runs east-west, and commercial development spans for five blocks between its intersection with IN-6 and 5th Street. Also, the commercial district is two blocks deep between Kennedy Avenue and 5th Street, stretching to include Jewett Avenue.

Setting and Context

Highland is a small town of 23,700 people. It is located in the northwest corner of Indiana. Five miles to the east is the Illinois border, while Lake Michigan and the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore is 20 miles to the west. It is historically a bedroom community for workers, and their families, from the steel mills in nearby Gary, Indiana, on Lake Michigan. Currently, Highland is considered to be a suburb of Chicago, Illinois, which lies about thirty miles to the northwest of the town. Highland mainly functions as a bedroom community for both steelworkers and commuting workers from Chicago.

While there is a considerable amount of commercial development on the edges of town, the downtown has come to be neglected. The historic drug store and diner have left the
setting for locations more visible from Interstate 80-94, which lies on the north edge of town and carries all of the Chicago commuters to and from work every day. Businesses are also moving to be visible from IN-41, which runs on the western edge of town. The downtown also has another disadvantage. IN-6 runs through town on the south edge of the downtown. As IN-6 is a six-lane highway, it severs the connection between the downtown environment and the southern parts of town, which are the most populated.

However, the downtown also has some advantages. The fire station and public library are still located in their historic downtown locations. The town’s rails-to-trails project connects to the downtown, providing access to the downtown by alternative forms of transportation. The town’s Main Square is located on the east edge of the downtown, which is the site for all of the town’s summer festivals, and is the beginning point for all of their holiday parades. Some stores have still survived, including a furniture store, children’s and men’s clothing stores, an art supply store, a florist, and a movie theater. Most of these stores have been located in the downtown for years, and have a built clientele that still venture into the downtown to frequent their establishments.

Also, there has been a good amount of new business moving into the downtown. Since the announcement by the town officials that a downtown redevelopment project was being initiated, vacancy has dropped to less than five percent. Support of the possibilities that Main Street has to offer has brought such modern businesses as a coffee shop, a sports bar, a delicatessen, craft stores, and used clothing stores which compliment the existing traditional retail uses. These new stores have helped to build a broad range of users and uses for downtown that has never been possible for Highland’s downtown in the past.
Project Requirements

Goal

The goal of this comprehensive project was to implement a creative and dynamic plan for the downtown in a plan to restore character to the downtown. The approach was to identify and evaluate the thematic elements of the American Main Street, and create that character within the downtown.

Objectives

The first step in achieving the goal of the project was to identify the thematic elements of the American Main Street throughout history and identify which of those elements were essential in creating a Main Street scene for Highland. This involved looking at both historical representations of Main Street as well as commercialized ones as represented in theme parks across the country such as Disneyland and Walt Disney World.

The second step was to apply pieces of Main Street to the downtown of Highland, Indiana. Elements found on Main Street but missing from Highland’s downtown were replaced to create a Main Street feeling that was identifiable within the downtown.

The third step was to showcase Highland as a case study for the feasibility of implementing such a program in Main Streets across the country which have lost their identity.
Site Issues

Client

The clients were residents and government officials of Highland, who are looking for a way to start a downtown redevelopment project. Direct contacts for the project included the Town Clerk Treasurer and the redevelopment commission.

Assumptions

The first assumption in the study was that small towns are interested in revitalizing their historic downtowns. While this was definitely true for Highland, whose community initiated the project, for the project to be successful as a case study of character redevelopment within downtowns, it was assumed that other small towns would be interested in such a revitalization effort.

In addition to the first assumption, it was also assumed that people will continue to use places such as Main Street for their shopping, service, and entertainment needs, even in an age where such things are available from their own home via technology connections. Along with that, an assumption was made that people are willing to change their shopping habits if they are presented with a more appealing option than that which they are currently utilizing. This assumption is based on the noted success of downtown revitalization efforts across the country.
Limitations

This study did not evaluate the effectiveness of implementing a Main Street theme in a city setting. Downtown districts of cities have very specific needs that are different than the needs of downtown districts of small towns. Because of these differences, this study was not intended to be applicable in any community other than those similar to the community outlined in the project.
Design Process

Site Map

Highland is located in the northwest corner of Indiana, roughly 30 miles southeast of Chicago and 20 miles west of the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore. It is considered to be a part of the Chicago greater metropolitan region, and functions as a bedroom community for many commuters from the city.

Figure 13: Highland Location Map

Inventory

The downtown district of Highland has some very important traffic connections that provide access and traffic throughout the site.

Highland’s downtown has access to two interstates. I-65 is located four miles to the east for travel south towards Indianapolis. I-80/94 is a very important traffic connection to the north of the downtown. I-80/94 is the main route of travel to Chicago to the west and to the Gary steel mills and the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore to the east. Two of Highland’s three access points to this interstate go through the downtown, Kennedy Avenue is one of the main arteries of the downtown and Indianapolis Boulevard is directly to the west of the downtown.

Figure 14: Lake County Map - Highland transportation connections
Highland's downtown also has direct access to two Indiana State highways. Indianapolis Boulevard, which lies directly to the west of the downtown and is a direct connection to I-80/94, is also Route 41, which travels south to Terre Haute. Route 6, or Ridge Road, creates the southern boundary of the downtown district. This six lane highway creates a physical barrier between the downtown district and the southern half of Highland, which is where the majority of the population is located. This barrier is created by the berm that the highway is built on, making the highway sit twenty feet above the rest of the downtown, physically and visually separating the downtown from the southern part of the town.

Lake County has been a very aggressive county in implementing the rails-to-trails system that has been popular across the country. This is a program where abandoned railroad rights-of-way are taken over by county parks departments and changed into hiking and biking trails. Highland has an extension of this system, the Erie Lackawanna Trail, which is very important to the downtown district. The trail system is very heavily used, and it crosses directly through the center of the downtown district. This brings lots of people using transportation modes alternative to cars to the downtown, which helps to eliminate the need for vehicular parking. Also a spur of this trail forms the northern boundary of the downtown district as it breaks from the main trail to lead to a town park.

The downtown district is located on the northwest side of the town. It is rather unique in that the district developed in a unique shape. The downtown is located around two
major thoroughfares. Kennedy Avenue runs north south through the downtown, and the
downtown district occupies five blocks along this route between Kennedy Avenue’s
intersection with IN-6 to the south and LaPorte Avenue. Highway Avenue runs east west
through the downtown, and the downtown district occupies five blocks along this route
between its intersection with IN-6 on the west and 5th Street on the east. Also, between
Kennedy Avenue and 5th Street, the downtown district is two blocks deep, including
Jewett Avenue. This orientation of streets has made the downtown district of Highland
develop in an inverted “T” shape rather than the typical linear orientation of the majority
of small town downtown districts. This provides some advantages for the downtown,
some of which include visual interest and variety, as well as the creation of a strong
central core at the intersection of the two major thoroughfares.

Another unique advantage that Highland’s downtown has in its favor is that it is
functioning as an economically viable retail district. A Downtown Business Survey was
conducted at the beginning of the redevelopment process, and it cataloged a wide range
of stores and services. A strong base of businesses in the downtown was noted, with the
number increasing as the redevelopment process progresses. The survey identified six
important categories of businesses that exist in the downtown. These categories were
restaurants, office space, services, government, retail, and entertainment.

The restaurant category included ten businesses that included family restaurants, cafés, a
deli, a pizzeria, and bar & grills. This category was evenly split between old and new
businesses. The old restaurants continue to draw families into the downtown to eat, while
the new coffee shops and lounges draw younger crowds into the downtown to gather.
The new businesses are also important because they are helping to build the nightlife that
the downtown has to offer. The lounges and coffee shops have longer hours than the
traditional restaurants, helping to extend the life of the downtown into the evening hours.

The office space category included twenty-four businesses that included lawyers’ offices,
insurance agencies, mortgage and financial services, and corporate offices. This category
has grown significantly in the recent past. This is largely due to a major building conversion that remodeled a historic department store building into smaller office spaces.

The service category included forty businesses that included banks, barbershops and styling salons, cleaners, medical offices, and auto repair. These services are widely used by the residents of Highland, and most have been established in the downtown for several years. This category has been suffering the most from a lack of identity within the downtown. In the recent years, many services such as the historic pharmacy and a few banks have moved out of the downtown and into strip developments on the edges of town and along major traffic thoroughfares to be more accessible, both physically and visually, to vehicular traffic.

The government category included four government offices including a fire station, the post office, the chamber of commerce, and the public library. This category includes some of the most important uses that the downtown district supports. The government uses are ones that Highland residents use on a daily basis, creating constant traffic within the downtown. Also, this category has the potential to draw more traffic in the future. Currently the town hall and police station are separated from the downtown in their own facility further east on Ridge Road. However, the site is small and nondescript. There is the potential to move these uses into the downtown as they outgrow their current facilities, strengthening the government draw into the downtown. Historically, the government uses were the most important uses in the downtown, and all other uses developed around them. It is important that these uses still exist in Highland’s downtown, and strengthening these uses will continue to strengthen the downtown.

The retail category of the survey included forty-four businesses that included florists, jewelry stores, clothing stores, and specialty stores. This category has grown the most since the downtown redevelopment plan has been announced. There is an interesting mix of historic businesses such as furniture stores right next to new businesses such as exotic pet stores. The retail uses have been the most sustaining for Highland’s downtown, and continue to sustain the downtown currently. These uses also have the most potential to
adapt to fill the new shopping niche for downtown, focusing on little specialty shops and lots of variety along Main Street (or Highway Avenue in Highland).

The last category identified in the business survey was entertainment, which included only the Town Theater. This is the category that is the most lacking currently within the downtown. However, some of the new downtown uses such as the sports bar and the coffee shop are working with the Town Theater to extend the nightlife of Highland’s downtown. With the lack of housing in the downtown, this use is the most important to extend the activity of the downtown past the normal work day hours.

The Downtown Business Survey showcased how economically viable Highland’s downtown really is. It also proved that the main problem facing Highland’s downtown was not lack of use by Highland residents, but that the downtown did not look like it was being used. The downtown district displayed a noticeable lack of identity. Currently, there are no visual improvements to tie the downtown district together. The town officials have created banners for the downtown district, which begin to identify the district as unique. They even attach a new logo to the downtown, dubbing it “the Heart of Highland”.

However, the banners themselves are not enough to create the sense that the downtown district is a special district in Highland. Most residents identify historic images of Main Street as the only downtown streets that have shopping. Most historic Main Streets have two-story Victorian buildings with stores with large windows for shopping on the first floor and apartments or offices on the second floor. Streets were narrower.
and had trees planted along them, and lights and building ornamentation brought the streetscape down to human scale.

The image of historic Main Streets became even more familiar as Walt Disney commercialized it in his popular theme parks, Disneyland and Walt Disney World. Main Street, USA was modeled after the Main Street in Marceline, Missouri, Walt Disney’s boyhood hometown. His commercial version of Main Street, with higher building ornamentation and smaller, more human-scale buildings, became an instant success as the ideal shopping environment. As Disney vacations have become a common occurrence for American families, including many of the families that are Highland residents, Disney’s commercialized image of Main Street has become fused with the actual historic image. Therefore, residents expect Main Street to have the identity that both Historic Main Street and Disney’s Main Street has. This identity is what Highland is aspiring for to make Highway Avenue and Kennedy Avenue easily identifiable as downtown, as a shopping district, and, in general, as its own unique district within the town of Highland.
Analysis

The first step in analyzing how Highland’s downtown is different than an historic or commercialized historic downtown was to complete an analysis of the spaces within Highland’s downtown. In looking at a figure/ground study of Highland’s downtown, shown in Figure 20, the spaces where development was not dense like historic downtowns were apparent. Several areas of the downtown became evident that needed attention in the new redevelopment plan. The figure/ground plan made it clear that three separate areas needed to be addressed in the plan: linear connections, intersections, and nodes.

Figure 21: Highland Downtown - Figure/Ground analysis of spaces
Linear Connections

The first area within the downtown that needs to be addressed is the linear connection that is missing throughout the downtown. It is impossible to stand within the downtown district and be able to see the ends of the district. The streets are bare and very wide, causing a lack of connection between both the ends of the downtown district and between both sides of the street within the district. These linear connections are the most important element being addressed in the redevelopment master plan, as they define the character for the downtown. The linear connections need to pull the street together, identify the ends of the district, and identify the central core of the district. Also, linear connections will help tie the eastern businesses to the western businesses along Highway Avenue, where they are currently divided by the large open spaces created by the rails-to-trails system. Without these linear connections, the blocks within the downtown just look like the other blocks within the town, as indicated in Figures 23 and 24.
Intersections

The second area to be addressed in the downtown is intersections. Almost every intersection within the downtown district has the problem of being undefined on at least one corner. The definition is necessary to define both pedestrian spaces and vehicular spaces. Often, the lack of definition is due to a land use on one of the corners that has inspired an open corner on the intersection, such as gas stations, parking lots, and used car dealerships. The intersections of concern within the downtown district have been divided into primary and secondary intersections by their relationship to vehicular access into the downtown.
Highway Avenue & 5th Street Intersection

The first primary intersection defined is located at Highway Avenue and 5th Street. This intersection is a very important connection for the downtown district. This intersection connects the downtown to Highland's Main Square. Main Square is where all of the summer festivals take place, as well as where all of the holiday parades start. This makes the intersection an important draw for both vehicular and pedestrian traffic. However, the intersection is very undefined. It has a used car dealership on the southwest corner, Main Square on the southeast corner, and a large parking lot on the northeast corner. All of these uses cause the intersection to be very undefined and traffic to be undirected. The open character of the intersection is depicted in Figures 26 and 27.
Kennedy Avenue & LaPorte Avenue Intersection

The second primary intersection is located at Kennedy Avenue and LaPorte Avenue, to the north of the downtown district. This intersection is important because it is where commercial uses change from downtown uses to commercial sprawl uses along Kennedy Avenue. It needs to be defined as the beginning of the downtown district so that it is apparent to drivers that they are entering a new district when the intersection is crossed. Also, the southwest corner of the intersection houses the Highland Post Office, which is one of the district’s heaviest traffic collectors. This intersection also has the problem of being very open and undefined on all four corners. Though the Post Office sits on the southwest corner, it is set far off of the street with a wide yard between the building and the intersection. The southeast corner houses a parking lot, and both corners to the north include a spur of the rails-to-trails that runs through the downtown. The trail spur is important because it provides access to the downtown for pedestrians and bikers, and it also allows those users access to a town park that is further to the east along LaPorte Avenue. The intersection is depicted in Figures 29 and 30.
Highway Avenue & Ridge Road Intersection

The final primary intersection is located at Highway Avenue and Ridge Road. This intersection is important because it beings vehicular traffic from the closest highways, IN-6 (Ridge Road) and IN-41 (Indianapolis Boulevard). This intersection must be treated carefully because it is an awkward intersection, forming a Y configuration between the highway and the entrance and exit to the downtown. There is no development on this intersection, making it the widest open of all of the intersections. Also, since the traffic flowing past it is moving at highway traffic speeds, there needs to be a strong visual connection with the downtown that does not currently exist. This intersection in itself also creates the need for two secondary intersections. This is because westbound traffic on Ridge Road is not allowed to turn onto Highway Avenue from this intersection. It makes the other two road intersections with Ridge Road important to carry traffic off of the highway and into the downtown. The intersection is depicted in Figures 32 and 33.
Secondary Intersections

Ridge Road & 2nd Street Intersection

The first secondary intersection created by the Highway Avenue & Ridge Road intersections is located at Ridge Road and 2nd Street. This intersection is important because it has the ability to grab the traffic for downtown before traffic gets trapped on the overpass of Kennedy Avenue, where there is no vehicular access to the downtown. The intersection is undefined due to having Main Square on its northeast corner. It also has a parking lot on the southwest corner and an open playing field for the Christian high school on the southeast corner. This intersection needs to establish a strong visual connection to the activity of the downtown district in order to draw highway traffic downtown. The intersection is shown in Figure 35.

Figure 34: Highland Downtown - secondary intersection - Ridge Road & 2nd Street

Figure 35: Highland Downtown - Ridge Road & 2nd Street intersection
Ridge Road & 5th Street Intersection

The second secondary intersection created by the Highway Avenue and Ridge Road intersection is located at Ridge Road and 5th Street, just west of the Kennedy Avenue overpass. This intersection is important because it is the only vehicular traffic into the downtown after the visual connection is obtained on the Kennedy Avenue overpass. This intersection is the last chance to grab westbound traffic and draw them downtown. This intersection is also undefined on all four corners due to large building setbacks and parking lots. The intersection is shown in Figure 37.
Nodes

The third and last area to be addressed in Highland’s downtown is nodes. There are several essential nodes within the downtown that must be highlighted and planned for well to ensure the success of the downtown district. The nodes all have high visual importance within the downtown, but they also have the highest traffic creating the potential for conflict between vehicular and pedestrian transportation. The nodes have the same problem as the intersections, often being undefined due to the land uses that surround them. They also tend to be undefined because their primary use is not apparent. The three nodes identified to be essential to Highland’s downtown included the crossing of Highway Avenue by the rails-to-trails system, Ridge Road’s overpass of Kennedy Avenue, and the intersection of Highway Avenue and Kennedy Avenue.
Rails-to-Trails Crossing

The first node identified as essential to Highland’s downtown is the node where the rails-to-trails system crosses Highway Avenue. The rails-to-trails system is an important asset to the downtown because it allows alternative traffic access, such as walking and biking, into the downtown district, reducing the need for parking and vehicular dependence within the downtown district. However, the trail is not well defined through the downtown district and creates a potential traffic conflict where the bike and pedestrian traffic crosses the vehicular traffic on Highway Avenue. The trail currently runs through a parking lot until it reaches Highway Avenue, causing the trail to be undefined and also undesirable for recreational uses. Also, since the trail crosses Highway Avenue in the middle of a black rather than at an intersection, crossing the street is hard for recreational users. While the trail system throughout Lake County is very heavily used, the leg of the trail that is north of Highway Avenue is the least used leg of the trail. This is mostly due to the difficult crossing of Highway Avenue. In addition, the lack of destination at the end of the north leg also affects the traffic density on the northern end of the trail.

The other problem that the trail node causes for the downtown is that it occupies such a large expanse of undefined open space. This open space creates a barrier between the businesses on the east end of the downtown and the businesses on the west end. The definition of this node is essential to creating connections of the two ends of commercial development along Highway Avenue. The trail node is depicted in Figures 39 and 40.
Ridge Road Overpass of Kennedy Avenue

The node where Kennedy Avenue passes underneath Ridge Road is important on two levels. First, it is important on the ground level for physical access to the downtown. Ridge Road creates a physical barrier between the downtown and the southern half of Highland, which is the most populated half. Therefore, the physical access is important to draw all of those residents into the downtown. The access for the rails-to-trails also enters the downtown underneath the overpass, making the overpass node important for that physical access as well. There needs to be a strong visual connection to the downtown through the overpass as well, as the ridge that Ridge Road sits on is over twenty feet tall and blocks all physical and visual connections to the downtown, except where Kennedy Avenue goes underneath Ridge Road.

Ridge Road is also important on the upper level to create a visual connection between the downtown and highway travelers. The overpass is the only place where there is a visual link to the downtown while travelling on the highway. All other visual connections are blocked by vegetation along the ridge. However, the visual connection needs to be strong and striking because highway travelers will only get a glimpse for a few seconds while they are travelling at highway speeds. The overpass node is depicted in Figures 42 and 43.
Highway Avenue & Kennedy Avenue Intersection

The most important node within the downtown is the intersection of Highway Avenue and Kennedy Avenue. This intersection is the core of the downtown, or the heart of “the Heart of Highland”. It is the only section of the downtown that is visible from the Ridge Road overpass.

Also, it has the difficult task of directing traffic along Kennedy Avenue from a four lane major traffic artery down into a two lane residential road on the south side of the intersection. The intersection also has to tie all four legs of the downtown district together, both visually and physically. The intersection does have two drawbacks to deal with. The first is that it must direct both vehicular and pedestrian traffic without conflict while still functioning as the busiest intersection within the downtown district. The second limitation of the intersection is the gas station on the southwest corner of the intersection. It has several curb cuts that cross the pedestrian sidewalk that are necessary to get cars in and out of the gas station. Also, the corner is very open and undefined since the gas pumps and awning structure are what front the intersection, so there is a need to define the pedestrian environment and create the fourth building wall to define the intersection. The Highway Avenue and Kennedy Avenue node is depicted in Figures 45 and 46.

Figure 44: Highland Downtown node - Highway Avenue & Kennedy Avenue intersection

Figure 45: Highland Downtown - view northeast of Highway Avenue & Kennedy Avenue intersection

Figure 46: Highland Downtown - view of Highway Avenue & Kennedy Avenue intersection from the Ridge Road overpass
Program Requirements

The program elements were designed to add new luxury to the downtown to take away its vacant, harsh concrete character. The idea was to create a set of program elements that showcased the downtown district. The following elements are intended to do so in Highland’s downtown:

- Increased green space
- Connections between town parks and the rails-to-trails system
- A new trail head for the rails-to-trails system
- Definition of open corners at intersections
- Softening the visual impact of parking lots
- Distinct entryways into the downtown district
- New light fixtures to showcase the “Heart of Highland” banners
- Wider sidewalks for improved pedestrian environments
Concepts

The concepts for the redevelopment master plan focused on the linear connections, intersections, and nodes defined in the analysis of the downtown.

The linear connections were looked at first, as they extended through the entire downtown. Linear greenways including street trees were placed along all of the streets in the downtown district (shown in green dashed lines on the concept maps). The first concept was to place the greenways down the middle of all of the streets. However, the final concept placed the greenways down both sides of all of the streets to better achieve the program's definition for increased green space within the downtown. Also, having green spaces down both sides of streets will help to soften the edges of the streets, helping the wide streets to not dissect the district so much.

The definition of open spaces was next addressed, as it helps to define the linear connections throughout the downtown. Short walls were extended in line with the existing building lines along all of the wide-open spaces (shown in red dashed lines on the concept maps). These wall were placed along the edges of all parking lots, open park spaces, and open use lots such as gas stations and used car parking lots.

The creation of a celebrated entrance feature at the Highway Avenue and Kennedy Avenue was created to indicate the downtown entrance to highway travelers (this area is shown in the blue circle area on the concept maps).
The first concept had only a sign on the larger green space within the triangle. The final concept utilizes both available green spaces to create both a celebrated entry and exit for the downtown district on the west side.

The rails-to-trails node received several forms of attention (shown in the green circle on the concept maps). The linear green space and walls along the building line both help to define the edges of the open space necessary for the access of the trail. A ground plane treatment was included to designate to vehicular traffic that bicycle and pedestrian traffic is prevalent in the area. Also, a new trailhead for the trail system was placed on the north side of Highway Avenue to help draw trail users across the street to improve the use of the north leg of the trail. The trail stop will also give bikers a place to lock up their bikes while they go shopping or eat in the downtown, a service which is not currently provided. In the first concept, this area also included some infill buildings that could add housing and some new retail to the downtown. These buildings would help lessen the expanse of open space between the east and west downtown business uses. However, it was decided for the final concept to not included these building for the first phase of the redevelopment master plan as it would be hard for the city to implement such buildings due to money and development interests. In a future phase of Highland’s downtown redevelopment, such infill building should be explored as a possibility.

The last node focused on in the concepts was the primary intersection of Highway Avenue and Kennedy Avenue (area shown in the yellow circle the concept maps). This node primarily used the linear green spaces and wall definition along the gas station to define the intersection. However, a treatment of the intersection itself was also added to this node. The first concept showed the treatment as a type of monument in the middle of the intersection as a visual draw to the center of the downtown. However, it was decided that such a monument might cause a traffic problem, and could also cause a hazard during the winter when snow needs to be clearly plowed from the intersection. The final concept concentrated on a unique ground plane treatment with the possibility of a special treatment above the intersection.
Master Plan

The master plan was designed to make recommendation for the first phase of development to inspire individual redevelopment efforts within the downtown. The main focus was to improve the downtown’s visual character with improvements that the town could make without disturbing any personal property of the business owners within the downtown. Therefore, most of the recommendations in the master plan involve streetscape improvements.

Each street within the downtown district provided unique problems as they all provide different services within the downtown district. The linear connection, intersections, and nodes were all treated compared to the road that they fronted on.

The linear connections of each street were placed first. Each of the three streets, Highway Avenue, Kennedy Avenue, and Jewett Avenue, had to be adapted to accommodate wider sidewalks and planter strips to house street trees. Fortunately, each street had been developed with excess room within the right-of-way when they were developed in the past.
The first street addressed was Kennedy Avenue, as it carries the largest amount of through traffic in the downtown district. The street currently supports four lanes of traffic as the street carries traffic from Highland to I-80/94 (as shown in Figure 49). It currently has no on-street parking and small sidewalks. The buildings on the east side of the street are typically set far back off of the street and have parking lots or yards in front of them. The driving lanes are twenty feet wide, which is much larger than is required by law for emergency vehicle access. Only eleven feet is required for such vehicles as fire trucks and ambulances, so the street had lots of room to add the new sidewalks and street trees. The new treatment of Kennedy Avenue, shown in Figure 50, reduces the driving lanes to fifteen feet, which is still wider than the requirement and allows traffic to move a little faster on this street than it can through the rest of the downtown district. Sidewalks on the west side of the street, where most of the commercial uses exist, were widened to twelve feet to allow more pedestrian space. On the east side of the street, sidewalks were only widened to eight feet so that they would still fit in with the residential neighborhoods that occupy most of the blocks on the east side of Kennedy Avenue. Ten foot planting strips were added on both sides of the street to both soften the wide expanse of the street and to buffer pedestrian traffic from vehicular traffic.

Figure 49: Kennedy Avenue - existing street section

Figure 50: Kennedy Avenue - proposed street section
Highway Avenue was addressed in the plan second. Highway Avenue currently has two lanes of traffic and a lane of angle parking on each side of the street (as shown in Figure 51). All four lanes are twenty feet wide, and the sidewalks on each side of the street are ten feet wide. This street also had lots of room to give up for new additions. In the master plan, the driving lanes were reduced to fifteen feet, and the on-street parking was changed from angle parking to parallel parking. This was done for two reasons. First, the angle parking is very hard to back out of, as it is hard to see the oncoming traffic, and this increases the danger of accidents. Also, by changing the parking to parallel parking, only ten feet of the street is needed, and ten feet was added to widen the sidewalks and to add the planter strips on each side of the street. This enabled the sidewalks to be widened to fifteen feet on each side of the street. This allows lots of room for pedestrian comfort while strolling and window-shopping. It also allows room for outdoor cafes along the street, which would add life to the streetscape. If necessary, the cafes could even extend into the planter strip if the cafe owner agreed to plant the trees removed with the cafe space. Highway Avenue also had ten-foot planter strips added to each side of the street with street trees to lessen the visual impact of the wide street and to separate vehicle and pedestrian traffic. The new treatments are shown in Figure 52.
The final streetscape adapted is Jewett Avenue. Jewett Avenue currently has two lanes of traffic and two lanes of parking, as shown in Figure 53. The driving lanes are twenty-five feet wide. The south parking is a twenty-foot lane of ninety-degree parking and the north parking is a ten-foot lane of parallel parking. There is a ten-foot sidewalk on the north side of the street along the businesses, and the berm of Ridge Road comes right down to the parking on the south side. This street had the most room of all to give for new amenities (shown in Figure 54). The new plan decreased the driving lanes to fifteen feet to match the rest of the downtown. The parallel parking on the north was kept, but the parking on the south side of the road was removed, as there are no businesses on that side of the road. The sidewalk along the buildings was widened to twelve feet to make more room for pedestrians. On the south side of the road, an extension of the rails-to-trails was created to connect the trail to Main Square. This extension placed an eight-foot bike land and an eight-foot pedestrian lane, which are separated by a low seating wall and plantings. The ten-foot planter strip with street trees was also placed along both sides of the street to separate the vehicular and pedestrian traffic.
The intersections were addressed next. The intersection included the fifteen-foot driving lanes and ten-foot planter strips with street trees, the same as the rest of the downtown district. However, sidewalks were decreased to ten feet to allow for a median planter. This median planter causes traffic to slow at the intersections, as it has to be directed around the median. Also, the median allows pedestrians and bikers to have a safe place to wait if they do not have the opportunity to move completely across the street at the intersection crossings. The medians will be planted with short evergreen shrubs that can be seen over and require little maintenance, such as junipers or yews. Short fencing that matches the fencing on the brick walls that define the corners and parking lots will also surround the planters. These medians also designate to vehicular travelers that they are entering the downtown district. These medians occur at all of the entrances into the downtown district, as well as at any place that there is a potential conflict between pedestrians and vehicles.
Figure 56: Highway Avenue - proposed rails-to-trails crossing

The rails-to-trails crossing received special treatment to try to minimize its impact in separating the two ends of the downtown and the conflict between recreational users and vehicular traffic. The on-street parking is eliminated in this node to reduce the chance of cars driving towards the sidewalk curbs. Traffic is directed around a median planting similar to the ones at the intersections, though the one at this node is a little wider to accommodate more pedestrians crossing the street. Also, the brick-paving pattern from the sidewalks and crosswalks is installed on the whole crossing node section of Highway Avenue to alert vehicular drivers of the possibility of pedestrian crossing. To reduce the expanse of undefined open space, brick and fence walls were extended out from the existing building lines to define the edge of the open space and to shield the parking lots. Plantings of trees are also suggested for behind these walls to help to establish a firm edge along the street.
The overpass node begins to take care of itself with the other improvements taking place within the downtown. The definition of the Kennedy Avenue and Highway Avenue intersection creates a distinct visual connection from the overpass. The median plantings and entrance treatments are placed before the overpass, making the overpass a gateway into the downtown district. A pedestrian crossing zone is placed behind the median planting for the rails-to-trails users cross Highway Avenue just south of the overpass. There are also several treatments recommended for the overpass to help it fit into the historic character of the downtown. First, a railing treatment should be placed along the top edges of the overpass to frame to view into the downtown for vehicular travelers and to designate the overpass as part of the downtown. This railing could consist of the top piece of the fencing chosen for the rest of the downtown treatments. Also, lighting treatments should be placed under the overpass to improve night safety for the rails-to-trails users that have to pass under the overpass to get to the other parts of the trail. This lighting could be ornamental in the high school colors of blue and gold to create a tie between the downtown and the rest of the community. These treatments would help to establish the overpass as an important entrance into the downtown district.
Figure 57: Kennedy Avenue and Highway Avenue Intersection - proposed street section

The final area defined in the new master plan is the Highway Avenue and Kennedy Avenue intersection. This intersection draws the whole plan together in the middle of the downtown district. First, the streetscape was looked at to include the planters and street trees, as well as left turn lanes to make access easy into the downtown district (shown in Figure 57). The sidewalks are reduced to make room for the median planting at the pedestrian crosswalks. There is also a special paving treatment for the intersection. It is a radial pattern of brick pavers, signifying that everything within the downtown district radiates from that point. This paving treatment will also help the intersection to be immediately noticed as a special district from the overpass, since it will be different from everything that surrounds it. The final thing that had to be developed for the intersection was how to reduce Kennedy Avenue from ninety feet wide to seventy feet wide and still include the amenities for the downtown district. On the south leg of Kennedy Avenue, the driving and turn lanes were reduced to twelve feet, the sidewalks to eight feet, and the planter strips to seven feet (shown in Figure 58). These reductions allowed all of the downtown amenities to still work in the reduced space on the south side of the intersection.

Figure 58: Kennedy Avenue & Highway Avenue Intersection - proposed south street section
Putting all of the proposed elements together within Highland’s downtown greatly changes the character of the downtown district. While the plan does not make Highland look like Main Street, USA at Walt Disney World, it does allow Highland’s downtown to have an ideal American Main Street that is unique to Highland. The new plan makes “the Heart of Highland” a district within the town that bolsters civic pride and creates an identifiable character for the town of Highland.

Figure 59: Existing view of Highland Downtown from the Ridge Road overpass

Figure 60: Proposed view of Highland Downtown from the Ridge Road overpass
Details

There are several details existing within the design that help to create the Main Street character for Highland. Paving treatments have been changed throughout the downtown redevelopment plan to create a more historic ground plain treatment. Sidewalks have been paved in brick pavers of a light color. The bricks will be laid in a herringbone pattern and edged by two rows of staggered vertical running bond bricks. This creates a more visually pleasing environment for pedestrians, and the brick patterns delineate the areas within the downtown that are designated for pedestrian traffic. This brick paving pattern also extends into the pedestrian crosswalks at all intersection crossings to mark the pedestrian zones for vehicles, as well as to mark the rails-to-trails crossing on Highway Avenue. A representation of the brick pattern is shown in Figure 61.

Another paving pattern that is changed from the existing downtown treatment is the paving for the Highway Avenue and Kennedy Avenue intersection. The paving treatment is a circular paving pattern of smaller brick pavers in the traditional red brick color. The circular pattern helps to strengthen the feeling that everything within the downtown district radiates from the center of the core node. It also designates to vehicle drivers that they are in the center of the downtown district. Pavers also tend to slow traffic, so the paving pattern will help to reduce conflicts between vehicles and pedestrians. A representation of the intersection paving pattern is shown in Figure 62.
The lighting treatments also help to create a historic Main Street character within Highland’s downtown. The program called for a new street lighting fixture that would highlight the new “Heart of Highland” banners. The fixture chosen will be more human-scale than the current light poles, at eight and a half feet tall. This shorter light pole will bring the banners down closer to eye level for the pedestrian and will illuminate the banners to get vehicular traffic’s attention. This more visible usage of the banners makes them more noticeable, uses them as a form of linear connection throughout the downtown, and creates the potential the new banners can be used to advertise festivals or can change with the seasons. An example of the light fixture is shown in Figure 63. The banner would be placed between the two light globes on the light pole standard.

Bollard lighting for the rails-to-trails area of the downtown was also chosen to create a historic character within the downtown district. Though the lighting is different than that along the rest of the trail, the new lighting was chosen to mark for trail users that the downtown section of the trail was a special district along the trail. No ground lighting is included along the trail currently, so the bollard lighting was also chosen to improve safety along the trail during the evening hours and on dark days. The bollard lighting fixture is shown in Figure 64.
The walls that were designed to border the open corners and parking lots are a combination of low brick wall and open wrought iron fencing. The brick wall is two and half feet tall and made out of the same brick that the downtown buildings are constructed of. An open fence was chosen for the top two and a half feet of the wall to restrict the chance of vagrancy and vandalism from skaters and rollerbladers. It was also chosen so that uses behind the wall would not be hidden when the wall was placed at corners to define intersections and building lines. The fencing chosen for these walls was also chosen to help convey a historical character for the downtown. An example of the fencing is shown in Figure 65.

Signage was also an issue for the downtown. The entrance feature on Highway Avenue provided a chance for the downtown to mirror some of the character already existing within Highland's community. Signage was designed to mimic the entrance signage that Highland places at the entrance to the town along major roads. The signage that the entrance feature will mimic is shown in Figure 66.

The design of the new trailhead for the rails-to-trails was also an important issue. Throughout Highland a modern steel structure is used at the trailheads. However, a more historic gazebo structure was chosen for the downtown trailhead to help maintain the historic character of the district. This new gazebo structure was also chosen to help highlight the gazebo icon that was chosen to represent "the Heart of Highland" on the downtown banners. Though the icon was created from the gazebo at Main Square to the east of downtown, the new gazebo provides a realization of the icon within the downtown district. An example of the gazebo structure for the trailhead is shown in Figure 67.
The last set of design details specified for the downtown is examples for awning options for the businesses in the downtown district. Though awnings are required for every business in the new plan, variety will be maintained by allowing business owners to choose what type of awning they would like to place in front of their business. Some examples of awning styles are shown in Figures 68, 69, and 70.
Summary

Downtown environments in most small towns have been abandoned for commercial districts on the outskirts of town. These empty holes in the community fabric have caused a loss of historic identity for the towns, and that is of great concern. However, there is hope for these historic shopping districts. Studies show that people are turning towards the town core when it comes to shopping, if there are activities to draw them there.

Revitalizing downtowns is a large undertaking for small town governments. There may be a need for the revitalization to fill a niche, or it may just be a desire of the community to reclaim their historic identity. However, the government officials may not know how to begin the process. There is a need for a guidance booklet that outlines how to get money to help implement a downtown redevelopment project, what types of elements should be included in the new downtown master plan, and where to look for inspiration that programs for downtown revitalization work. Creating a booklet that defines how to reclaim a Main Street theme in small town downtowns is a needed resource, so that more downtowns can have the chance to regain their past lives.

Elements of the Main Street thematic landscape are missing from struggling downtown environments. Lack of investment of money and attention has
created a loss of character for the oldest, most identifiable section of town.

In most cases, the disinvestment has lasted for so long that the visual degradation of Main Street makes reversing the trend appear an impossible task. In the past, it has proven to be a very difficult task. However, there are now funds available to help small towns to implement such a project. While it is impossible for small towns to buy whole buildings and renovate them, the funds available for implementing local streetscape improvements makes the initial government investment for the project affordable. Highland has taken advantage of implementing just such a streetscape to recreate the American Main Street within their downtown. Just adding wider sidewalks, street trees, new lighting, and screening the parking makes a big difference in the visual character of Highland. Plus, the effects of the project are already evident in the new support by locals of the downtown. The new redevelopment plan has already inspired more individual development in renovation buildings within the downtown and starting new businesses there. The new civic pride and character created by the streetscape improvements made by the town government will go a long way as it inspires more people to take an interest in Highland’s downtown. Restoring the historic downtown core was the perfect opportunity for Highland to regain its downtown character and vitality.
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**Periodicals**


**World Wide Web**


Appendix A: Site Map and Photos
Highway Avenue - Rails-to-Trails Crossing  
Scale: 1" = 10'

Kennedy Avenue - North E1