Title:
Healthy Communities, Healthy Economies: How design can help create healthy people and places

Abstract:
Arguably, a healthy economy is a byproduct of a healthy place. Therefore, a community’s economic health is inextricably linked to the health of its people. Case studies of three different communities explore how design can be used as a tool for creating healthier communities that are also economically resilient.

The first case study demonstrates how one community with a large underserved population increased its health benefits and outcomes by creating a system of pedestrian and cycling trails to highlight a civil rights campaign begun by Martin Luther King, Jr. The project also demonstrates how the trails revitalize the community’s economy through tourism.

The second case study highlights a community whose downtown square was filled with empty parking spaces but was transformed into a new public domain through the help of nearby community design center and university architecture students. The team developed their own innovative methods of community engagement and produced uniquely artistic and functional pedestrian and cycling paths as a means for economic growth.

The third case study profiles how a community revitalized itself from economic instability and an obesity-driven car culture to take advantage of both the economic and health benefits of their new rails-to-trails corridor.

All three case studies highlight the importance of incorporating pedestrian-oriented projects into the public realm to stimulate better health as well as economic benefits for the communities they serve.
As communities face an increasingly volatile climate, vulnerable populations need tools and support to respond to a variety of challenges. One major challenge communities currently face is a desire to be more healthy, both in terms of its population’s physical health, as well as its economic health. Arguably, healthy communities are inextricably linked to healthy economies. Through examination of three case studies, the Carl Small Town Center (CSTC), a community design center at Mississippi State’s School of Architecture, demonstrates how design can be used as a tool for creating healthier communities that are also economically resilient.

Case Study 1: Marks, MS

Marks, MS is a rural community in the impoverished MS Delta with approximately 1600 residents, of which 30% live below the poverty line. Marks was the starting point for Martin Luther King, Jr.’s historic 1968 Poor People’s Campaign. Yet, the city has never benefitted from public awareness and economic stimulus from such an important historical site.
This first case study illustrates how Marks’ large underserved population increased its health benefits and outcomes by creating a system of pedestrian and cycling trails to highlight a civil rights campaign begun by Martin Luther King, Jr. The project also demonstrates how the trails revitalize the community’s economy through tourism.

The aim of the project was twofold. The first aim was to plan a trail in Marks that would tell the story of the Mule Train. The second objective was to establish an annual event that would commemorate the Mule Train starting in 2018, the 50th anniversary of the event. The commemorative event, called the “Mules and Blues Fest” would bring immediate awareness of this historically significant event and build interest while the routes and markers provide a continuing physical presence to the Mule Train that civil rights and other tourists to the Delta can visit to understand the history and culture of the Delta.

The project consisted of a 12-month planning process that involved residents of Marks, historians, architects, planners, state tourism and historic preservation officials. The process consisted of a number of steps:

1. Historical research and documentation – Along with help from an MSU historian, we recorded oral histories, created a timeline and history of a number of participants in the events leading to and including the Mule Train, and created a mapping of the movements of those individuals and the events of the Mule Train.

2. Community awareness and participation – This was a planning exercise required the involvement of all parts of the community. To recruit and involve a wider group of community members, a series of community wide events were held.

3. Planning exercise – The historical and community work lead up to a design exercise to define the Mule Train interpretive trail. The extent of the planning included not only the specific sites where the events of the Mule Train took place, but also looked generally at downtown Marks to find connections between the trail and the downtown to promote economic development. The design exercise took the form of a two-day long charrette where community members, architects, planners, historians, state agencies and officials participated in discussions, planning and drawing. The charrette was meant to produce a starting direction that the community could follow.

4. Design Development and Community feedback – Once the community defined a direction for the design of the trail, the CSTC developed the design to a stage ready to implement.

Starting with community engagement activities, the CSTC was able to define certain parameters that would give a sense of direction into exactly what the residents of Marks were in need of. By gathering the community together, the CSTC managed to strengthen ties between residents. They were able to work together to determine the best plan of action for ways in which to elevate and highlight the history of their area and to continue the discourse of race relations that were influenced by the civil rights movement that came through the area in the sixties.
After gaining an understanding of the critical points of interest located within the Marks community, the CSTC undertook an extensive analysis of the street infrastructure to examine possibilities for multi-modal trails, including bike and pedestrian trails. At the onset of the project, the community was sorely lacking any recreational parks, trails, or other amenities. Noted for being one of the nation’s most obese states, Mississippi, and specifically the Delta region, have very few means to combat this severe health challenge. The CSTC saw the opportunity to vision a set of trails as a combined solution for developing a more economically and physically healthy community.

Marking the Mule benefits the City of Marks in mainly four aspects:

Healthy Living - This project promotes a healthier lifestyle. The trail provides people with pedestrian and cycling opportunities that impact the entire community in a positive way. The project provides an obesity-ridden community with alternative modes of transportation and means of exercise. A recent nationwide study “strongly correlates greater transportation ‘modal diversity’ with better health for the population as a whole. Results indicate a positive relationship between higher mode share and public health outcomes including healthier behaviors, more leisure quality, more access to exercise, less sedentary living and obesity, more years of potential life lost” (https://www.cnu.org/publicsquare/2017/07/11/more-transportation-choices-better-health).

Tourism - This project encourages tourism and brings many kinds people to learn about the unique history of this town. It is a project that is interactive and engaging and provides an economic boost from the increase of tourism. It also encourages active tourism where participants can engage in healthy recreation while learning about history.

Historical Impact - This project provides a benefit to the community through preservation of 1968 Civil Rights history, education opportunities to experience this history, and providing the next step in seeking funding to complete the next phase of the project. The most significant benefit is an opportunity to strengthen race relations, to help bring about a greater sense of civic and social pride.

Identity – This project helps Marks revitalize and greatly improve the aesthetics of the town. It also provides the community with a consistent look that identifies Marks, Mississippi.

Expected and forthcoming changes in the community as a result of this project include improvements to the infrastructure, including bike paths that encourage healthy habits, such as recreation, exercise, and alternative modes of transportation, in the community while also encouraging safety. In implementing these changes, community gatherings were held in order to get the community to have a sense of self that would strengthen as they worked toward common goals, from minor improvements to major revitalization. These changes help to create diversity in an area that acted as a catalyst for the civil rights movement. In addition to this project helping elevate and highlight their history, the Marks community has gained strength in not only creating
healthy modes of transportation and recreation, but economic platforms as well due to the increased tourism generated by the efforts of the Mule Train.

Case Study 2: New Houlka, MS

The second case study highlights a community, New Houlka, MS, whose downtown square was filled with empty parking spaces and empty storefronts. The community sought the help of the Carl Small Town Center and its design seminar taught in the MSU School of Architecture to help revitalize it from economic instability.

Students in the design seminar first met with community leaders. Then, in order to get a sense of what citizens of New Houlka wanted, the class spent three weeks exploring various methods of
community engagement to assess ways to gather information from New Houlka residents. Students developed an innovative method of engagement by wrapping tables at a local gas station café with craft paper and wrote on the table, “What does New Houlka want?” and various other questions. Café patrons responded with individual comments (in addition to leaving lots of grease stains!) which the class collected and analyzed.

The class then generated a series of proposals that addressed some of the challenges and opportunities identified and observed by the residents in New Houlka. Many of the opportunities centered around promoting and encouraging use of the new Tanglefoot Trail, a 44-mile rails-to-trails corridor that had recently opened and runs adjacent to the New Houlka downtown. The class heard comments about encouraging cyclists on the Tanglefoot Trail to enter the downtown square and visit local businesses; business owners identified an opportunity to benefit economically from the proximity to the trail. Also, the residents wanted more of a space in the downtown area that was needed for public use and activities, such as the annual fall Cornbread Festival.

Preliminary design concepts were shown to the community in a public meeting, and a final design was chosen. The design involved painting striping in wavy lanes around the downtown square. The aim of the design was two-fold. One, the striping extends to the Tanglefoot Trail, and, thus, is a signal to cyclists and walkers on the trail that something is happening in New Houlka’s downtown. Secondly, the stripes reserve space in New Houlka’s oversized street width in the downtown for cyclists, pedestrians, street vendors, festivals, and other downtown happenings. The artistic system of pedestrian and cycling paths that the CSTC designed and painted, encourage cyclists and local pedestrians to actively use the new Tanglefoot Trail, as well as the local downtown businesses. The “walk” and “bike” paths the students painted also incorporate directional signage on the pavement. Students highlighted nearby attractions, like Davis Lake and the local school, pointing out approximate distances from the downtown. In this way, the new pathways recruit visitors to the downtown, promote local attractions, and encourage an active lifestyle in an effort to spark economic interest and revival.

Since the project was implemented, the community has had a positive response to the artistic and functional pedestrian and cycling paths. A new ice cream shop has opened on the downtown square and other businesses are primed to open. Cyclists visiting the Tanglefoot Trail now make detours through the New Houlka downtown and stop to visit with local residents. Local school children and other residents use the paths to access the Tanglefoot Trail, increasing the number of people activating the square and increasing the mobility of its users. Using design as a tool to help this community become more active, livable and economically stable, the CSTC-designed pathways ultimately serve as a means for economic growth.

Case Study 3: Houston, MS
The third case study profiles how a community revitalized itself from economic instability and an obesity-driven car culture to take advantage of both the economic and health benefits of their new rails-to-trails corridor.

The Citizens’ Institute on Rural Design (CIRD) supports communities of less than 50,000 people with funding to host community design workshops. Houston, Mississippi, provided a perfect location for the Carl Small Town Center to seek support from the CIRD to develop and hold a workshop focusing on local design challenges and needs. The workshops facilitate input from design, planning, and placemaking professionals and emphasize bringing together leaders from all aspects of communities.

The center identified Houston as an ideal place for a workshop, which brought together architects, landscape architects, bicycling advocates, and community members in a charrette to provide a direction for the design of the Tanglefoot Trailhead. The CSTC also enlisted the CREATE Common Ground design seminar students, lead by the CSTC, to participate in the charrette with community members.

Houston lies at the beginning of the recently-opened Tanglefoot Trail, a 44-mile cycling and
walking trail that draws riders from the entire Northeast Mississippi region as well as nationally. There are no amenities or restroom facilities at the trailhead site in Houston. Although one is planned, such a facility is critical to the success of the trail. It is also important to connect the trailhead to downtown Houston. The trailhead is located west of downtown, in an economically disadvantaged area with industrial/waste sites. In addition, the Natchez Trace Parkway, a 444-mile scenic drive which is routinely travelled by cyclists, is located seven miles from Houston.

In preparing for the workshop, the Center identified that the immediate challenge was to create a cycling/pedestrian connection between the head of the Tanglefoot Trail and downtown Houston. Otherwise, visitors to the Trail would not have access to Houston’s downtown, or even know of its existence because of a lack of physical and visual connection. The larger design challenge was to create this connection, but also to create a route between the Natchez Trace, downtown Houston, and the Tanglefoot Trail. An additional challenge was to create a route that encourages cyclists to see Houston as a place to start a trip along the Tanglefoot Trail or the Natchez Trace and to spend time in the city. Without this connection, Houston could not benefit economically from the new trail. The final challenge of the charrette was to encourage a healthier lifestyle for locals, and provide alternative means of transportation in Houston, as well as to neighboring towns along the Tanglefoot where many residents work.

The project in Houston demonstrates the CSTC’s mission to use planning and design issues to address larger economic and development issues to make communities more livable. The physical connection in Houston is not just about trail design but the larger scope of landscape design, urban design for rural towns, wayfinding and the important contribution that these factors can make to urban communities and their economy. The design team and residents were encouraged to view bicycle tourism and the connections between these landmarks as critical to the vitality of the city. They were also encouraged to view intra-city routes as an important element of neighborhoods and connections within the city of Houston.

After the workshop concluded, the CSTC continued to work with Houston to develop design development drawings for a new trailhead pavilion, which would house community gathering space, an office, restrooms, and bicycle facilities. The community embraced the Tanglefoot Trail and the idea of making physical connections to the downtown, as well as the Natchez Trace. Just recently, the community erected way-finding signage from the downtown to the Trace, and has worked diligently over the last 2 years with the Mississippi Department of Transportation to create a physical connection from the trail to the downtown, along Highway 8. Since the workshop, many new cycling-related businesses have opened downtown. And schools and local organizations are hosting cycling and running races on the Trail. There is no conclusive data to confirm that all ages and demographic sectors of the community are actively using the trail, but anecdotally, the community reports active participation amongst a wide sector of the population, especially the ageing population and underserved community.

Conclusion
Although initially reticent to change, the communities of Marks, New Houlka, and Houston were open to exploring the new pedestrian pathways and interactions with new trail corridors because they had run out of other options for economic stimuli. In the CSTC’s experience of working with dozens of communities throughout the state of Mississippi, and as is the case in many small towns across America, communities are struggling to develop new, sustainable economies. There is also growing interest in becoming a more healthy population. The CSTC recognizes that pedestrian infrastructure not only helps community residents improve their overall health, especially in obesity-ridden states like Mississippi, but it also serves as an economic stimulus either through recreation, tourism, or other means.

While more urban cities have long-recognized the value and importance in establishing a strong network of pedestrian and cycling trails, many rural populations are just beginning to understand their value. They are not just means to live a more healthy lifestyle and contribute to the environment, These case studies indicate that small towns now recognize the economic importance and value that pedestrian networks bring to the overall economic and physical health of their communities.

KEYWORDS: Pedestrian infrastructure, modal diversity, public health, cycling, healthy lifestyle, Tanglefoot Trail