

# The Citification of Small Town Plans

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*Unnecessary length and jargon and inadequate analyses are limiting the effectiveness of plans in small communities.*

Nearly two decades ago, there appeared a most insightful report on the form and content appropriate to plans for small towns (Project Planning 1968). Derived from a study of Newfoundland communities, it cited repetition, excessive length, unnecessary jargon, and inadequate recognition of the problem orientation of small communities as recurrent flaws in small town plans. As it said (p. 7):

These faults are not restricted to planning reports on small towns. Their impact, however, is likely to be much more serious than in a large community. A small municipality is not just a scaled-down version of a city. It differs in kind as well as in degree and lacks administrative interpretive, and mass communication facilities of large centres.

This research report revisits the terrain of Canadian small town plans. It aims to ascertain the progress that has been made in shaping planning practice to the conditions of small towns in the ensuing 17 years. For this purpose, a total of ten small town plans for five Canadian regions are examined and evaluated according to a framework appropriate to towns and villages. The allusion, of course, is to Schumaker's (1974) notion of "appropriate technology" to suit the conditions in small scale situations instead of adopting that designed for use in large-scale, sophisticated development situations (i.e., cities). It is not unlike the plea of Cohen (1977) nearly a decade ago.

Not unexpectedly, our plan-making practices are city-derived. This is understandable since planning grew up largely in response to the problems of cities; i.e., to fast, large scale, often disparate land development. Our community plans, planning structures, professional styles, and planning principles and standards, it might be said, are *citified* (Hodge 1981). Take, for example, the planning concepts based on notions of density, congestion, and accessibility. Moreover, most planning practitioners tend to be urban bred and urban trained, and so these tendencies are perpetuated and disseminated.

The issues here are more than esoteric ones of planning constructs and educational orientation. Small town plan-making must be recognized as dealing with a different milieu governmentally, socially, and analytically as well as developmentally. Let us briefly explore the milieu for small town planning and thereby identify criteria which may be used in evaluating plans for towns and villages and possibly help in making more appropriate plans.

## The Milieu of Small Town Plan-making

The appreciation of small town situations is inseparably bound up with the dimension of *size* of the community. Smallness affects not only what is in a town or village but also what might be there; the resources, both physical and social, that are there as well as the prospects and the processes of future development. The planner's plan, methods of analysis, and program of implementation are all affected by this smallness. (In a paradoxical way, these are the same sort of lessons the planner had to learn in regard to planning

very large metropolitan communities.)

As the Newfoundland report suggests, the plan may not be able to perform its most important function, of guiding growth and change, unless it can be implemented within the governmental milieu of a small town. Typically, small towns in Canada, where they are incorporated, have a small council and an administrative staff of only a few people who are responsible for everything from collecting taxes to road repairs. They are unlikely to have much experience in community planning or to have readily available a professional planning advisor to interpret the plan and relate it to day-to-day development problems. The effectiveness of a plan for a small community is, thus, tied up in no small way with the way in which it communicates its ideas for future development as well as its limitations on land use. For the advent of a plan intervenes in the history of a community, perhaps a long history, and one that is widely shared. The plan must, therefore, be understandable both to those who must administer it and also to those fellow community members who participate in its implementation.

As a first criterion, the *style of presentation* of the plan is cogent for it is through its presentation that the plan achieves and retains its relevance for the populace and government officials. If the plan is too lengthy, given to jargon, and lacks an immediacy with community conditions, both people and officials will lose interest in it and either ignore or pay only lip-service to it.

It is instructive to note that this criterion is difficult to meet in the Canadian setting. Planning practice in Canada is conducted within an elaborate statutory framework that thrives on formal approvals, legalisms, and regulatory procedures (Hodge 1985). A province's Planning Act, or similar statute, is the permissive legislation under which communities may prepare plans and regulate land use. All provincial planning statutes apply their provisions universally to both large and small municipalities. Elaborate planning statutes, as we shall see, have not prevented good quality plans being made by and for small communities, but it takes extra effort.

A second criterion relates to the substance of the plan. Conventional physical planning is based on concepts of city development and the problems cities experience: land use conflict, sprawl, traffic congestion, physical blight, etc. They have little direct relevance to the small scale, small growth, and limited land use situations of most towns and villages. People in small centres tend to see their development as a set of discrete problems (Hodge and Qadeer 1983, 159-161). A few will help illustrate their general nature: inadequate street lighting, poor condition of sidewalks and roads, lack of care and maintenance of vacant lots, garbage dumps, and cemeteries, dangerous railway crossings, pollution of wells, and so forth.

While the lists of development problems differ from one small community to another, they all possess similar features. First, the problems are quite specific. Second, the issues are very pragmatic. A town or village plan that deals only in the generalities of land use arrangements and regulations likely will not have much effect on the problems that are considered important or receive much support. Such a plan may not even be a needed plan. Thus, as a second criterion for assessing small town plans, there should be an explicit *problem-solving orientation*.

A community plan is only as good as the knowledge it is based on and the prognoses that are made. Surveys and forecasts should be appropriate for the scale and conditions of small communities. Elaborate studies of land use and economic base will probably be irrelevant. Statistical analyses involving correlations, sampling, and so forth usually cannot provide reliable estimates because of the small overall populations involved. However, the small size of community can facilitate the collection of information about housing, population, and jobs and very often in a "richer" form than would be possible in cities.

Central to making an appropriate choice of analytical tools for small town planning is a clear perception of the nature of physical development in towns and villages. Utilizing four simple dimensions of development — the scale, the range of types, the intensity, and the pace of development — will help in grasping its character in small communities (Hodge 1978). Regarding scale, the components of physical development are small — the number of houses or stores — and the area they occupy. The population they house or serve are also small, as is the overall area of a small centre. The range of types of development is modest compared to that of a city. Residential development usually means single-family houses, or when an apartment building is built it is likely to be a small one. Moreover, when a town or village experiences growth, it will tend to add more to the same kind of development it now has rather than embark on some new forms of land use and buildings. Generally speaking, the intensity of development in towns and villages is low; it tends to be in discrete units and not concentrated in its location. Residential densities in Canadian towns and villages, for example, average about two or three persons per gross acre. Only in places above 5,000 population do the densities approach those found in suburban areas of cities. Lastly, the pace of change or growth cannot simply be looked at as a percentage rate increase over, say, a five- or ten-year period. For one thing, the increments of change are usually small and, for another, growth is uneven. Considered along with the scale of population, this pace of activity is understandable.

Even from this brief overview it can be seen that planners in small communities will need to carefully consider the methods of analysis they use. At the same time, the methods can usually be simpler than those used in cities. Linear extrapolations often prove best for forecasting populations and housing (cf. Isserman 1977). Locational analyses of places of employment of a town's residents may be more important than an economic multiplier analysis given the extensive commuting that prevails among rural communities. Similar interchanges in shopping patterns oblige the use of regional approaches to analyses. How well small towns plans respect these contextual elements in their analyses is the essence of our third criterion: *analytical perspective*.

## Performance in Small Town Planning

In order to test the performance of plan-makers who prepare small town plans in Canada, ten plans are reviewed.

The plans are from five provinces and one northern territory, cover a range of population sizes, and derive both from consultants and public agencies (see Table 1). They are each considered in light of three criteria identified in the previous section: (1) style of presentation, (2) problem solving orientation, (3) analytical perspective. A summary of the performance under each criterion is given below.

**Style of Presentation:** Two different formats are used for small town plans: the poster plan or the multi-page report. The choice is not related to the size of community, for the British Columbia town of Terrace at 10,000 population utilizes a poster plan while its sister community, Kaslo with only 854 people, has a 41-page plan. Further, when the report format is used the average size is 40-50 pages, regardless of size of community or province or agency producing it. It should be noted that each of these plans meets the standards of its province.

TABLE 1: CANADIAN SMALL TOWN PLANS UNDER REVIEW

Town	Province	Population (at time of plan)	Size in Pages*	Prepared By
Cowley	Alberta	284 (1976)	35 pp.	Regional Plan Commission
Alma	New Brunswick	435 (1971)	51 pp. (plus maps)	Consultant
Aklavik	Northwest Territories	797 (1978)	64 pp.	Consultant
Kaslo	British Columbia	854 (1981)	41 pp. (plus appendix)	Reg. District Plan Dept.
Kensington	Prince Edward Island	884 (1964)	12 pp.	Consultant
Brussels	Ontario	1000 (1981)	56 pp. (plus maps)	County Plan Dept.
Crossfield	Alberta	1330 (1982)	poster plan (16 pp. equiv.)	Regional Plan Commission
Grand Falls	New Brunswick	4158 (1966)	58 pp.	Provincial Ministry
Merritt	British Columbia	5860 (1970)	68 pp. (plus maps)	Consultant
Terrace	British Columbia	10000 (1976)	poster plan (9 pp. equiv.)	Municipal Staff

\* Based on 8-1/2" x 11" pages.

The poster plans are, clearly, the most concise and the two reviewed here contain background information on the town, analytical tables, policy and program statements, as well as a generous concept development plan map. The poster plan for Terrace is noteworthy in its use of an oblique

map for its plan which gives a three-dimensional aerial view of the community; the plan is also printed in three colours. The longer report plans tend toward wordiness and repetition especially when they adopt a doctrinaire planner's approach to arraying goals, objectives, policies, programs for every major land use and activity. In the plan for Brussels, Ontario every section includes:

- (a) Introduction
- (b) Definition
- (c) Goals
- (d) Policies
- (e) Location
- (f) Implementation.

It makes for tedious reading, even for another planner. Several of the report plans relieve the austere looking text with the use of photographs. In the case of Alma, New Brunswick historical photos of the town and its residents give a sense of immediacy. The plan for Grand Falls, also in New Brunswick, uses photos effectively to portray problem situations in the town. The Brussels plan referred to above benefits from finely drawn sketches of buildings in the community.

Half of the plans in the sample suffer from dreary, if not pedantic and esoteric, wording. Here are two examples:

*For items such as main road systems, development and location of trade and industry, systems of regional school units, etc., it is essential to elucidate the project's bases and their correlation to other communities. (Kensington, P.E.I.)*

*The purpose of the municipal plan is to assure the highest qualities of efficiency, economy, and livability by identifying the planning and development context for the area with which it is concerned and by establishing a framework in which more detail and immediate development can be designed and implemented. (Alma, N.B.)*

One further note: many of these lengthy plans also contain an overabundance of maps. The Brussels plan has 13; the Alma plan has 9, including three large maps in an accompanying envelope. The plan for Merritt, British Columbia contains eight double foldout maps that are difficult to handle. They cover the agricultural land base, topographical limitations on development, areas for potential development, the directions for future development, a short-range and a long-range land use plan, a road network plan, and a pedestrian network plan. All this for a town of under 6,000 people covering about four square miles.

Before leaving this section, some examples of thoughtful wording in small town plans need to be cited. The Oldman River Regional Planning Commission (south of Calgary) is noted for its sensitivity to the small town milieu and its plan for the village of Cowley, Alberta exemplifies this. Its goals, derived from a survey of households, are simple, such as: "stimulate growth, but at a slow to moderate rate." And its policies are straightforward, such as: "To improve the street lighting system in the Village," "To improve the appearance of the Railway Street commercial area by providing street landscaping."

**Problem-Solving Orientation:** Only one of the ten plans under review has an explicit orientation to solving the problems identified by citizens of the community. The plan for Cowley, Alberta derives its goals statement directly from the opinions expressed in a survey of citizens and, in turn, the

policies reflect these wishes. The strongly felt need for more outdoor recreation facilities for both children and adults, for example, is responded to in the following policies:

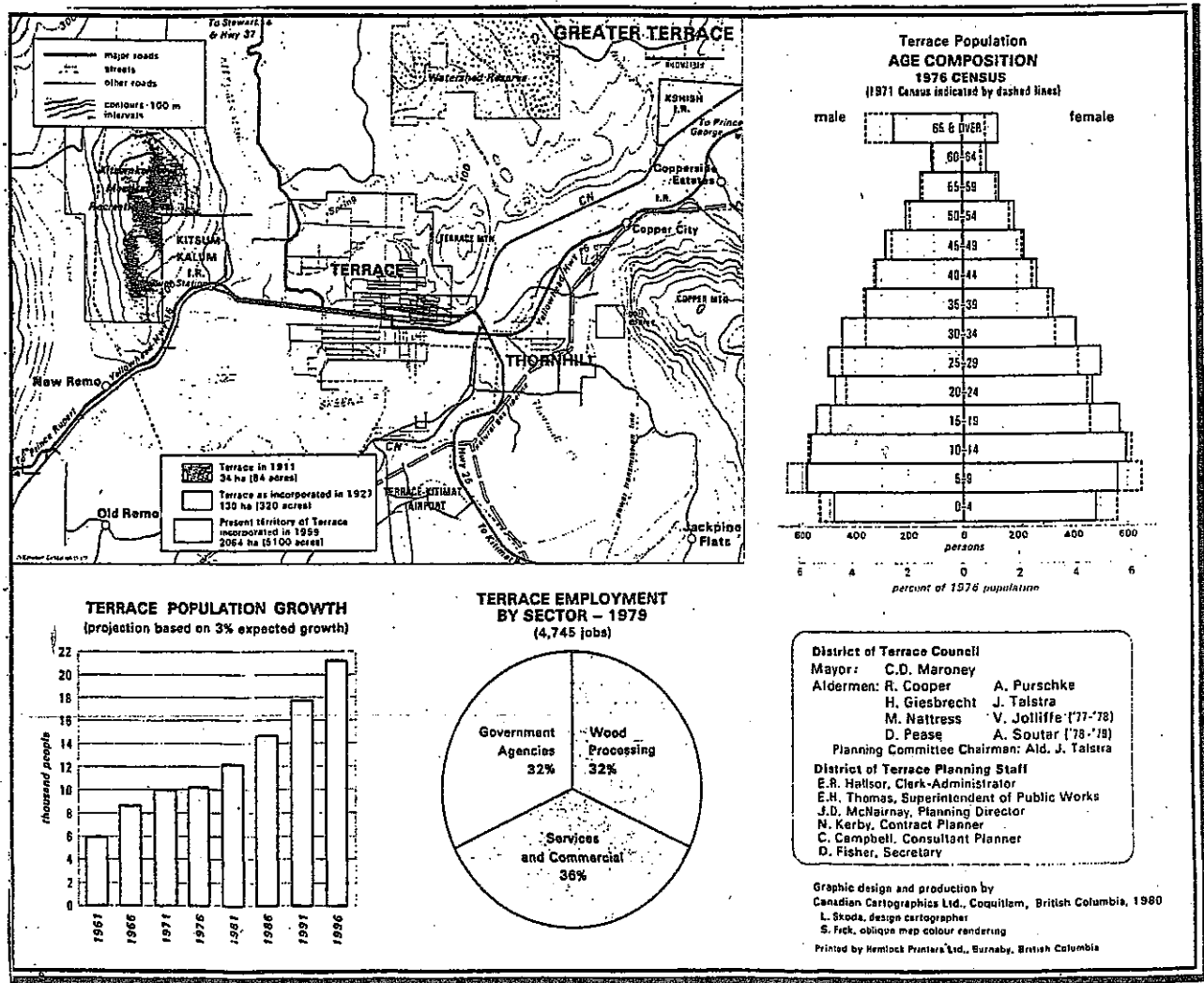
- “To initiate a tot-lot design for one of the two heritage parks . . .”
- “To landscape and develop a ball park on the west end of the Village.”

Several other plans indicate that a survey of residents was undertaken (Crossfield, Merritt, Brussels). But they, like the remaining plans, cast their statements of issues, needs, and policies in “planner-ese,” viz. “in order to achieve the objective of preserving the integrity of existing low density neighbourhoods, land use in the areas shall be restricted to low density residential uses, thereby preventing intrusion by new, incompatible uses” (Merritt). Or, for example, “the first concept to introduce in providing a settlement with a good street system is that of a ‘hierarchy’ of streets,” in the Grand Falls plan. It is not just that the language may be somewhat daunting to the few officials of a small town, rather these plans leave the impression of being the “planner’s plan.” That is, they seem like the planner’s idea of what the problems are. At best, these are simply abstractions of the community’s problems. At worst, they are citified constructs which presume a need for a planning solution. In either case, when the plan has been completed

and the planner has gone — which is the normal situation in a small town — one might ask if the citizens and officials will “recognize” the problems they hoped to get solved through planning.

All but two of the present plans focus on land use regulations to implement planning proposals. Zoning, development controls, and subdivision regulations are favoured by these plan-makers. This further indicates the tendency of the planners to cast small town plans in familiar professional tools regardless of their applicability. For example, subdivision regulations are recommended for one of the largest and fastest growing towns, Merritt, B.C. even though it is only expected to accommodate 150 additional dwelling units and require 23 acres more of residential land in the first five years of the plan. For Crossfield, Alberta the plan recommends four residential zones and specifies maximum allowable residential densities within two decimal places, e.g., single family up to 7.86 dwellings per acre.

When planners invoke urban-type planning tools in small town situations, as in the case above, two related issues must be addressed. The first concerns the need for them; the second concerns their administration. Such tools assume both a routine, fairly continuous process of development and the availability of routine administrative skills to apply them, neither of which is the normal case in small communities.



Part of the poster plan of Terrace, B.C. — colour, oblique map, diagrams and useful and understandable information.

The scale and pace of development as well as its discrete nature fits better with a combination of planning policy statements and a development permit system used as required. This is akin to the notion of performance zoning which has been proposed for small communities (Kendig 1981; Herr Assoc. 1981).

**Analytical Perspective:** The plans under review here have not been over-burdened by analyses. But, with only a few exceptions, neither have they been well-served by them. In two cases (Kensington, Alma) no analyses are included. In the latter case this is especially puzzling since the *raison d'être* for the plan for Alma seems to be problems of traffic and parking in the summer months. Yet no traffic data are offered in the plan to justify a major revision in the road network. In two other plans (Terrace, Cowley) the age structure of the population is analyzed along with a population pyramid but the findings are not used in the plan.

The most common analysis, in eight of the ten plans, is a population forecast. However, all but one employs a geometric projection model wherein a percentage rate of increase is extrapolated. An examination of past trends for several of these centres indicates that they are erratic, a phenomenon that is not uncommon among towns and villages (cf., Johansen and Fuguitt 1984). Only one plan (Aklavik) recognizes this tendency and employs a linear projection. Little attempt is made to project land needs in the majority of plans; the exceptions are those for Crossfield, Grand Falls, Merritt, and Aklavik. Analyses of employment sources, commuting, and shopping patterns are almost totally neglected in these plans, although many do include a bland description of the "regional setting" of the community. One might have expected that the extensive planning reports produced for most of these plans comprised an abundance of analyses, but this is not the case. Thus, the wordy planning documents do not even have the excuse of analytical indulgence.

## Reflections on Canadian Small Town Plans

From this, admittedly, small sample one takes a risk in generalizing about Canadian small town plans. But pending access to the full array of such plans, this selection will suffice to make three observations. First, current plans are, by and large, too long and too wordy and often read like a litany of planners' phrases. Second, few of the plans address those problems that small town people regularly raise (e.g., recreation opportunities, job prospects, local transportation, care of the environment, and so forth). And, third, the analyses used to support the plans are, variously, too elaborate, too meagre, or not integrated with the planning proposals.

From these observations it is cogent to ask: *for whom are these plans made?* One would hope it is for the community. However, the performance in plan-making described above seems to belie this. Given the elaborate planning machinery in a Canadian province it is more likely that many of the plans were prepared with an eye to satisfying expectations of the provincial planning ministry. Or they may be an attempt to influence local officials with the "weightiness" of the planning process. Regardless of the precise reason, if the plans are not for the community, one must ask: *are they*

*really needed?* Could it be that planners are *defining the need* for a plan, or at least a particular style of plan, as Illich (1978) has noted professionals are prone to do?

The somewhat anomalous situation of small town plans which exist but may not be filling a useful role suggests three challenges for plan-makers who work with small communities.

**Respect the differences among communities:** Planners have the inherent inclination and the technical capability to perceive and analyze the differences and problems among communities. Communities may differ and so may their plans. There is a relentlessness about the technology in any field, including that of planning, which begets standardization. It may more easily overwhelm a small community and, in this, planners shall need to be much more aware.

**Risk the notion of comprehensiveness in favour of problem-solving:** The planner is one of the few environmental professionals small towners see; he/she has the opportunity to help solve a community's problems. However, the planner who stays aloof from the pragmatic concerns of residents and officials and insists upon a comprehensive land use plan and set of regulations will probably find (a) the plan will be ignored in *all* respects; (b) the problems will remain unsolved; and (c) there will be a residual disenchantment about planning as a useful activity.

**Risk "letting go" the small community to plan for itself.** The planner should try to leave a plan with the community that *it* can implement in as many aspects as possible. Small communities have a strong inclination toward self-reliance and this is a characteristic which a planner is well advised to tap into both for administration of the planning process and for harnessing local resources to realize local projects.

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