

WHAT IS DEFINING THE EDGES?

Defining the Edges happens when the limits of a place are identified and held as gateways, boundaries, and form-giving functions.

UNDERLYING PATTERNS AND ELEMENTS

- Natural Boundaries: rivers, ridgelines, soil conditions, vegetation, topography, open expanses, tight borders.
- Human Constructions and Conditions: bridges, highways, rail lines, focal points, fortress walls, viewsheds, walkability, etc.
- Spiritual Meaning: spatially-defined relationship to the universe through myth, ancient planning, sacred mountain or view may define a boundary of place.

WHY DEFINE THE EDGES?

In Defining the Edges we can better strengthen the Center. This happens by inhibiting the energy from sprawling out and by enhancing the community activities within. The Edge condition may look like a Chinese gate at the entrance to a particular district, a sign which says “Welcome to our Town,” the remnant of a historic wall surrounding a city, or a natural rock outcrop which identifies the character and entrance to your village. Edge conditions (much as the buffer zone between open field and forest) are dynamic places of overlapping functions. But when trying to build a more sustainable community the dissipating action of new commercial or housing on the periphery tends to extract social and financial capital, demands additional services, and impacts natural resources at the expense of a healthy core.

COMMUNITY EXAMPLE

Morrisville, Vermont held a day-long community design workshop to work through concerns about the functionality of their downtown, connectivity to their designated growth center, impact of the proposed highway by-pass, and to define overall community connectivity.

The teams brainstormed, studied the issues, went on site visits, worked out conflicting concerns, ate lunch and developed coherent win-win solutions. The results were presented as drawings and recommendations at a community-wide pie-social. The hit was a cherry pie, along with a new way of seeing the town. This new perspective in the form of a drawing showed the town framed by its natural boundaries—the river, water reservoir, and rolling agricultural hills... an obvious, but not seen before, perspective.

Embracing this, Morrisville has gone on to work on shaping its downtown, forming a land trust, working on by-ways concerns, developing a community arts center and food marketplace, and establishing a trails network all enclosed within the frame of natural boundaries.



Defining the edges of redevelopment potential in White River Junction, VT.



Mapping town boundaries, key destinations, and gateways in Morrisville, VT.



Identifying natural boundaries in Morrisville, VT.

HOW DO WE DEFINE THE EDGES?

The Edge is a critical perceptual place that is used to structure or define our act of place-making. Defining the Edge is a combination of observation, mapping, history-telling, and “drawing a line in the sand.” Ninety percent of the Edge is obvious to most community members understanding of their town’s boundary. However there can be small zones which are less definable. When these occur leaving them more fluid is acceptable and often less disruptive than trying to establish hard and fast boundaries in arbitrary places.

RECOMMENDED IDEAS AND PRACTICES

- Identify natural and man-made boundaries through community mapping and story-telling.
- Define existing gateways with community-agreed upon signage, flags, temples, sculpture, monuments, etc.
- Establish a “no growth boundary,” “green zone,” or informal perimeter through policy, density zoning, or land trust practices.
- Establish new gateways to define a particular entry point (places are often accessible from multiple directions and yet there may be only one recognized “front door”).
- Protect viewsheds, waterways, ridgelines and other natural boundaries using land trust models and other broad-based ownership models.
- Establish buffers (trails, open fields, shoreline protection) when converging uses overrun the natural distinction.
- Implement watershed boundaries, topographic zones, soil layers, and local nodes which strengthen community identity, agricultural health, and wild lands.



Protecting viewsheds as community identity in Charlotte, VT.

FIVE PRINCIPLES OF COMMUNITY DESIGN

The Vermont Design Institute has developed Five Principles of Community Design based on spatial forms, patterns, and design concepts observed and used over the course of their work.

PREMISES:

- * Community design is a collaborative planning process with the immediate goal of improving the quality of life for all community members of the ecosystem—from the smallest insects to us humans, and from, the waterways to the skies above.
- * Effective community design creates economic opportunities for local residents at different scales of interest—from global connections to bioregional needs and immediate solutions.
- * Sustainable communities depend on alternative forms of energy and transportation.
- * Sustainable lifestyles include changing our daily patterns, consumption habits, and production technologies to accommodate “closing the loop” and living with a no-waste policy.
- * Sustainable community landscapes allow for protection of open space, regeneration of native vegetation, stormwater mitigation, increased green space, local food production at various scales, and sensitivity to public-private zones.
- * Successful community design increases community knowledge of local history, cultural landscape, and sacred ground.

ASSUMPTIONS:

- * We need to be re-constructing our patterns of habitation, transportation, energy, water, waste, and food systems.
- * We believe individual empowerment and reconnection to place leads to transformation and healing for Earth.
- * People do care and have an amazing strength of vision if given the chance to be heard.