

## **A White Paper on Rural Design**

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Rural areas are undergoing profound demographic, economic, cultural, and environmental change, creating considerable challenges and stress for its residents and on the ecosystems upon which they depend for their livelihoods and quality of life. Over twelve years ago architect Dewey Thorbeck noted these challenges, particularly in Minnesota and the Upper Midwest, and realized that the design and planning professions in the United States had generally ignored agriculture, rural communities, the character of the rural landscape, and rural issues. Although there were subdisciplines of the professions addressing urban issues (urban planning and urban design) there was no rural equivalent. In response, he founded the multi disciplinary and intercollegiate Center for Rural Design and began to develop a new discipline: rural design.

Rural design is a method for meeting rural needs and resolving rural issues. This includes:

- helping rural communities make land use, architectural, and aesthetic decisions that enhance their quality of life and the environment;
- promoting sustainable economic development and improving human, livestock, crop, and ecosystem health;
- integrating research and practice across the many disciplines involved in rural issues (e.g., agronomy; applied economics; community development; forestry; rural sociology; rural and veterinary medicine; tourism) and applying it to meet rural needs, provide new data, and provoke new research questions.

Rural design brings a unique approach to rural issues by analyzing and integrating information through the lens of spatial awareness and organization. It encourages participation from all involved at the beginning—whether community members, policy makers, subject experts (e.g. scientists, economists), designers, or other—in large groups or small. Together they engage in a shared process of discovery (e.g., of the hidden assets of the landscape and/or a community), learning (sharing knowledge or co-analysis of data for a more complete perspective), problem-solving (through respectful dialogue) and creation (e.g., a new landscape pattern, farm management practice, downtown streetscape and marketing strategy) to ensure a healthy future.

### **Across Boundaries**

Just as rural design seeks to transcend the traditional barriers between intellectual disciplines, it also seeks to find and apply better concepts for defining appropriate areas for study and intervention than the often arbitrary ones created by political jurisdictions. Problems such as pollution, poverty, uncontrolled-growth, degraded ecosystems, and lack of opportunity don't conform to these boundaries and neither can the search for, and application of, solutions.

Rural design acknowledges political boundaries but attempts to find a common asset or interest that can promote cooperation and unite towns, townships, counties, states, and even nations together. A natural environmental feature such as a watershed or ecoregion (a particular type of landscape) potentially offers a better way to define a region because the feature was created by similar climatic and geologic forces producing a common resource base. Because of the common resource base and influencing forces, the region's economies, cultures, built environment, and rural development are often similar and interconnected, regardless of where in the ecoregion or watershed they reside.

Critical global issues such as climate change, renewable energy, water resource protection, food security, and healthy human development will dominate international and local rural policy for years to come. Rural design provides a foundation by which to holistically connect all rural issues to nurture new thinking and collaborative problem solving from a regional perspective. It recognizes that human and natural systems are inextricably coupled and engaged in continuous cycles of mutual influence and response. Thus, to heal or restore function to any subsystem requires engaging the larger system encompassing it.

Natural and human systems are dynamic. The issues confronting rural regions today will change. If all concerned with rural issues are able to engage in collaborative creation, we will all become rural designers to help define and meet the needs of rural regions.

