

Rural Commercial Districts

Best Practices for Preservation and Design



Ned Crankshaw

Department of Landscape Architecture
College of Agriculture
University of Kentucky



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Ned Crankshaw

Department of Landscape Architecture, College of Agriculture, University of Kentucky

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RURAL COMMERCIAL CENTERS

Rural commercial centers are clusters of retail business buildings in small settlements, unincorporated towns, and incorporated towns that are smaller than the county seats in the region. The smallest of these are truly crossroads communities. The larger ones are more similar to county seat towns but are smaller in scale and population. These towns don't have courthouses to anchor them, nor do they have the law and other offices that occupy space in the center of county seat towns. Their commercial buildings were typically built to house banks and retail establishments. Groceries, convenience stores, and branch banks have largely moved out of these historic small commercial clusters, leaving behind a need to occupy them creatively. Rural commercial centers have the potential to be focal points for heritage tourism and to provide dining and retail opportunities for visitors.

Landscape and Architectural Characteristics of Rural Commercial Centers

Streets, buildings, and open space. In the commercial districts of larger county seat towns, blocks of buildings create an architectural mass, and streets are the primary open space. In downtowns, building mass creates strong enclosure around the spaces of streets. This characteristic differentiates

downtowns from other districts.

Building mass is less consistent in crossroads communities because there often is just an intersection or a single block with more densely spaced buildings. Even within the central area there may be a less organized feel. Building heights, materials, and forms can vary significantly and buildings may be spaced more widely apart. Because the number of important buildings is so small and each building often has a distinct identity, building preservation has additional importance in these very small communities.

Stand-alone public parking lots are usually not present in small rural commercial centers. Parking lots are most often built for newer businesses, such as branch banks and convenience stores. Street parking is usually considered ample for businesses that occupy traditional buildings. Public spaces like parks, squares, or other gathering areas are also not typical in rural commercial centers. When public space is needed, sidewalks and streets have usually sufficed.

Architectural character. Building types, time periods, and happenstance all contribute to varied building form and character in rural commercial centers. Larger centers may have a small collection of brick multi-story and closely-spaced buildings like those found in larger downtowns. Smaller centers may have a few masonry buildings – often a bank – along with frame buildings. Buildings that combine commercial space with a residence are common and these may be side by side or residence above and commercial space below.

The collection of commercial buildings in Salvisa, Kentucky



Salvisa





provides a good example of the mixture of building types found in a small commercial center. Salvisa is a Mercer County crossroads community located between Harrodsburg and Lawrenceburg on US Highway 127. The highway used to run through the middle of Salvisa, but now bypasses the village along its western edge. The center of Salvisa is where east-west Kirkwood Road intersects north-south Old Louisville Road.

A small cluster of business buildings situated around this intersection form Salvisa's center. Eleven commercial and institutional buildings occupy three of the four corners at the intersection. One of these is a two story brick former bank building. Two buildings are larger two-story combined commercial and residential buildings – both of frame construction. There is a large one-story former grocery store. Two buildings are constructed like many country stores; a shotgun house with a street-facing gable that is masked by a rectangular false front. One of these is one level and the other two. There are two other large one-story frame commercial buildings, one of which has a brick canopy that once sheltered a gas pump. A church and two newer brick clad buildings housing the Salvisa Fire Department round out the commercial center of Salvisa.

All eleven buildings are in good condition, though not perfectly preserved. Vinyl siding covers most of the clapboard. The essentials – a maintained roof, and original window openings – are, however, intact on most of them. There is little consistency of building type, but that is actually the potential charm of a place like Salvisa.

Design Practices for Rural Commercial Centers

Building preservation. Building demolition deteriorates the already tenuous mass-space relationship in crossroads towns. As larger vacant areas interrupt the building line, views are opened to service areas and to the rear facades of other buildings that were not designed to be exposed to public view. In larger communities, consistent building widths create strong rhythmic patterns. In crossroads communities, consistent patterns are less prevalent and individual building identities become much more important. There really is no ‘expendable’ building in a crossroads community.

Buildings represent past investment of materials, energy, and human capital. For the most part, historic buildings are composed of brick, wood, iron, and plaster, all of which are closer to an organic state than a synthetic state. The new materials that would replace them would be largely synthetic and represent a higher energy and environmental cost. Historic buildings that are demolished go to landfills, generating an opportunity cost in the loss of existing space and a real cost in their disposal.

Denser building patterns save energy and encourage walking by concentrating multiple activities within walkable distances. No community, small or large, can be walkable without a closely clustered building and activities. This is important for heritage development because clusters of



A single distinctive and well-preserved building can be an anchor for a rural commercial district.



Parking and commercial buildings on Perryville's Merchants Row are within a 500 foot diameter circle, making the district easily walkable. Plan by Will Cooper, Lauren Fraley, and Evan McDaniel.



When the needs of pedestrians are balanced with automobile traffic, they are provided walks with a sense of refuge.



Small communities adjacent to highways often have poor provisions for pedestrians. Photograph: Dan Burden.

businesses that are within easy walking distance of each other are more likely to be travel destinations.

Clearing sites to create parking lots or to build inexpensive small-box new businesses are two reasons for downtown building demolition, but in crossroads communities the most frequent cause of building loss is prolonged building neglect. For this reason, the most important design and preservation issue is really a financial issue: developing creative and economically sustainable uses for existing buildings.

Pedestrians. The twin attractions of very small commercial districts are the visual-spatial ambience of old buildings arranged in a loose downtown formation and the ability to experience the place safely on foot. The characteristics of good sidewalks and pedestrian paths are that they are accessible to people of varying physical abilities, are visually connected with building interiors, are punctuated by landmarks, and provide buffers between pedestrians and auto lanes. The major issue for very small commercial districts is that they are so often dominated by automobile traffic. Their challenge is to develop respectable pedestrian space that brings pedestrians' needs into balance with vehicular traffic.

A goal of every town should be to constantly improve physical accessibility for its population, including elderly and very young residents, disabled people, and those in wheelchairs or pushing strollers. If sidewalks and pathways work well for the least able walkers, they will work for

everyone. Some improvements, such as curb ramps at every street corner and ramps at steps, are obvious. Others are more subtle and must be discovered by surveying the routes taken by pedestrians and then analyzing the obstacles to a completely accessible route. Such obstacles can be so simple that they may be overlooked, such as a poor paving surface in an alley or inadequate directional signage coming out of a parking lot.

Some sidewalks and pedestrian paths are more important than others. Walks on major commercial streets, primary neighborhood connections, and walks that connect parking and destinations deserve a higher level of design and should provide for higher pedestrian capacity than walks that are less significant. In a small crossroads community the area of town that requires particular attention to pedestrian ways may be quite limited and so investment can be concentrated. With a small population of users casual arrangements in neighborhoods may suffice.

Choices for walk materials should consider the aesthetic context created by buildings and other materials, the level of maintenance required, and the appropriate balance between the unifying effect of material themes and encouraging a diverse materials palate focused on individual properties. All paving surfaces require eventual replacement or, in the case of unit paving materials, resetting. In addition, pavements are frequently cut and patched for utility repairs. Pavement choices should be made with this in mind so that they can



Walks in a traditional rural commercial district provide walking space that is distinctly separated from auto travel lanes.



Low traffic streets in crossroads communities may not need walks to provide suitable pedestrian facilities.



Boldly marked crosswalks remind drivers that pedestrians have right-of-way. Drawing by Will Cooper, Lauren Fraley, and Evan McDaniel.



Alignments of crosswalks, curb ramps, plantings, and street furniture should create a clear pedestrian zone.

be matched or replaced in the future. Historically, decorative features in paving focused as much on individual properties as on repeated unifying features. Allowing differences in pavement type and detail to occur may help avoid a standardized revitalization aesthetic and will reduce costs to property owners.

Accessibility

- Evaluate walks for pedestrian accessibility and ensure that accessible routes from adjacent neighborhoods or parking areas to downtown destinations and between destinations meet dimensional requirements for accessibility. All ramp slopes, cross slopes on walks, widths, and other critical dimensions should meet the ADA Accessibility Guidelines for Buildings and Facilities.
- Drop the curbs at all intersections and crosswalks to make them accessible to wheelchairs. Curb ramps should connect directly to the crosswalks.
- Stripe or pave crosswalks with materials that allow them to be clearly seen by pedestrians and vehicle drivers. Traditional narrow stripes are not easily seen in all conditions.
- Maintain clear zones so that a direct linear path unobstructed by street furniture or planting is available.

- Make sure that public entrances into buildings have accessible connections to walks.
- Wherever possible, consider additional elements that increase pedestrian safety and convenience. Examples include:
 - walks that are widened at intersections to create shorter crosswalks.
 - mid-block crosswalks on longer blocks where safe crosswalks can be built.
 - low, visually non-obstructive plantings near the ends of crosswalks to bring attention to pedestrian crossings
 - improvements in signaling, such as installing pedestrian-activated walk lights and ensuring adequate walk signal time.

Quality of Pedestrian Space

- Connect buildings along primary walks visually to the walks. Windows should allow sight into building interiors, should display merchandise, or should provide other interesting displays.
- Individual buildings and their signs provide visual variety along walks and should be expressive rather than standardized.
- Landmarks at the large scale, such as a church or a



Carefree variety, even when the design is not the very best, can give character to a small commercial district.



Preserved historic landmarks can provide an orienting focus for a crossroads community that commercial buildings may not provide.



Planters and parked cars shield a walk and dining tables from the street.



Awnings and other projections, recessed doorways, and posts all help create sheltered space for the sidewalk.

prominent corner building, orient pedestrians over a larger area. Smaller landmarks that punctuate paths might be provided by sidewalk cafés, the color of a building facade, variations in awnings and overhangs, or the design of an unusual sign and should be encouraged.

- Parked cars in parking lanes, street lamps, street trees, planters, and other furnishings all may help create a sense of refuge from vehicular travel lanes. A sidewalk should not be cluttered, but these elements can be placed strategically to enhance pedestrians' comfort. This is especially true in crossroads communities because highways pass through many of them.
- Building awnings, projecting signs, recessed doorways, and other architectural elements create variety in street walls and enhance experience by creating a more sheltered sidewalk space.

Materials

- Document the historic or locally traditional paving materials in a particular downtown before making paving choices. Use the historic paving material as a model for contemporary paving, if it consists of a material suitable to contemporary construction and accessibility standards.
- If sidewalks or other pathways are rebuilt, retain special

existing paving features, including street numbers, steps, building name inlays, and decorative details. Use the same details as a local model for other similar features on downtown walks.

- Evaluate contemporary decorative paving materials for their compatibility in color and design with existing buildings.
- When selecting paving materials, consider the community's financial and technical ability to maintain them. Choose paving materials that can be relaid or duplicated in the future when inevitable utility repairs are made.
- Simple pavements, such as well-finished concrete, are thoroughly appropriate when considered as a background element that allows street furniture, planting, and other features to provide detail.
- Consider the financial and environmental costs of different paving materials over their life cycle along with their initial installation cost. Many unit paving materials have a higher installation cost but can be reset or relocated in the future. This lowers their life-cycle cost and requires less energy than producing new paving.

Parking. Parking is much less complicated in most crossroads communities than it is in larger towns. The low



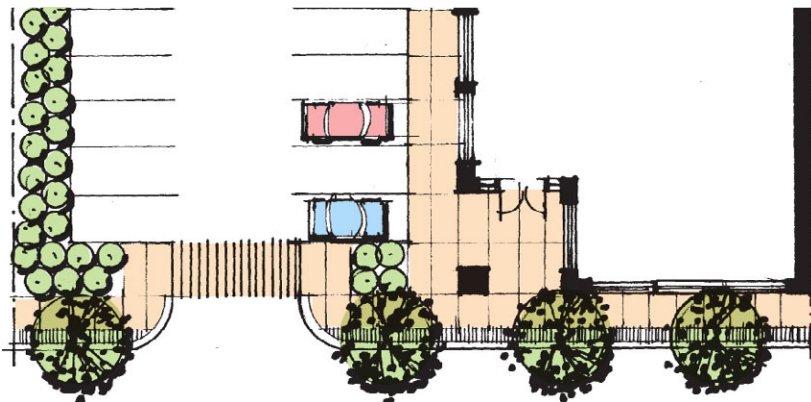
Authentic paving materials can have a patina that is compatible with historic buildings.



Well finished plain concrete can be a suitable walk surface when other decorative elements are placed on it to enliven its character.



On-street parking is almost always perceived to be more convenient than parking lots.



When parking lots are placed beside, not in front of, buildings they allow the buildings to be more Prominent. Landscaping and continuous walks maintain street character.

density of businesses means that on-street parking can supply a greater amount of the parking needed. For additional parking, even a single off-street lot can often be placed within easy walking distance of all businesses. Parking quantity receives a great amount of attention in all commercial districts, but how parking is located, organized, and designed are also important.

Parking should be neither undersupplied nor oversupplied. Problems with undersupply are well-known, but their effect is sometimes exaggerated. Oversupply of parking is also detrimental because it often involves demolition of historic building stock, it wastes opportunities for infill building construction, and it contributes to the appearance of an underused commercial district.

How parking is arranged and designed determines the perception of availability and convenience. Parking that is well located and organized will enhance the experience of driving and walking. It will be conveniently accessible for a person driving a car and finding a parking space. It will also be at one end of a convenient and comfortable walking route leading to a destination. This second part is often forgotten, and pedestrians who have just parked a car may find themselves walking in poorly maintained alleys, alongside trash containers, and in other undesirable situations.

Parking Organization

- Do not demolish buildings to create parking.

- Maximize on-street parking. On-street parking is desired enough by shoppers and others that even some traffic constriction is worth having more on-street parking.
- Parking location and design should not reduce the continuity of street edges.
- The walking experience after leaving a car in a parking lot should be as convenient as the auto access to the parking. Avoid creating paths through undesirable areas. Design parking and paths so that destinations are visible early in the walk.
- If parking is located behind commercial buildings, coordinate private improvements so that they enhance the aesthetics of the parking area.

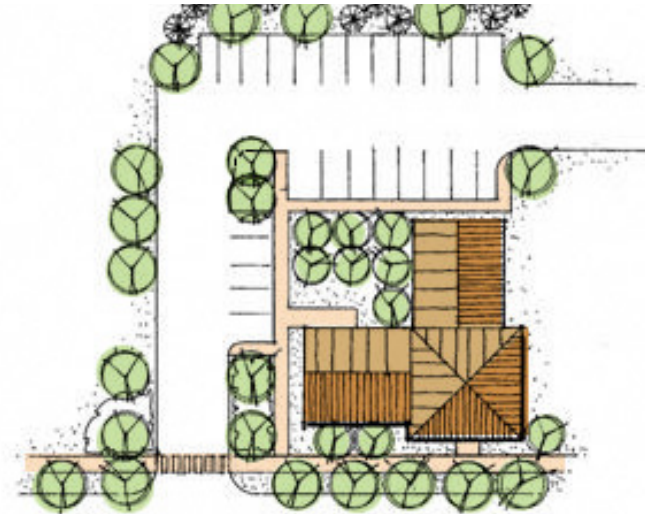
Parking Design

Parking lots should be designed to fit the needs of automobile drivers and pedestrians, instead of being formed by simply paving over available land. Good parking design requires carefully considering a given site, starting with the basic guidelines below.

- Make smaller lots on individual properties more efficient by consolidating them into a single larger lot.



Moveable signs, a distinctly-colored aggregate parking surface, and a marked pedestrian crossing all create a low budget pedestrian system in a crossroads community.



Well-designed parking areas typically include easy movement in and out, good pedestrian connections, and adequate landscape material.



Space for farmers markets and other activities can be designed into parking areas.

- Two-way travel is preferred in aisles, for greater flexibility.
- Dimension spaces between eight to nine feet wide by 18 to twenty feet long. The travel aisles should be between twenty and twenty-two feet wide.
- Provide adequate numbers of parking spaces for disabled users.
- Choose continuous circulation over lot design that has dead-ends and requires drivers to back out when no spaces are available.
- Landscape parking areas appropriately. Emphasize pedestrian areas with planting, paving, or other elements. Provide shade, especially over walks.
- Develop islands for shade trees and other landscaping in the interior of all but the smallest (twenty or fewer cars) parking lots. Islands can be many small areas parallel with the parking spaces, or long strips perpendicular to the parking spaces. Use islands at the end of rows of parking spaces to separate parked cars from moving cars.
- Parking areas can provide space for other functions like farmers markets. They can do this especially well when designed with shelters for weather protection,

walks for shoppers, and electrical connections for vendors.

- Design accessible pedestrian connections into parking lots. Pedestrians should not be forced to compete with cars at the entrance of a larger parking lot.

Signs

Private signs are placed because they advertise businesses, but they have other potential as well. Signs are a form of graphic design, and sometimes of sculptural design. If they are treated as an art form that provides information, they can contribute strongly to the liveliness and variety of street environments. Private signs are mounted most frequently on buildings in historic commercial districts, so they also need to work within the geometry of building facades.

Regulation of private signs should not be too restrictive. Encouraging a variety of individually designed signs serves many commercial centers well. Most communities' commercial buildings do not represent a single time period or style. Private signs, like the buildings, should represent a range of styles, periods, or individual preferences. Sign ordinances should be adaptable enough to allow creative use of design and materials and should not force a uniform appearance.

The most important consideration for sign design is the sign's relationship to the building on which it is placed. Signs on commercial properties should fit within architectural spaces



A traditional sign band.



A larger sign proportioned into a facade panel.



A transom sign.



A painted awning sign.

and features. Most historic commercial buildings have a “sign logic” that should be considered in design. The following elements are appropriate on different buildings.

- Sign bands should be utilized where available.
- Larger-facade panels above the first-floor windows may be the most appropriate place for signs on single-story buildings. In this case, larger signs that are well proportioned to the facade panel may enhance the presence of a small building.
- Where transom windows have been removed, the transom location may be appropriate for placing a sign and offers a generous area.
- Functional fabric awnings are traditional locations for business identification. Narrow-width plastic awning signs are incompatible with historic buildings.
- Window signs may be more appropriate than a sign that intrudes on architectural features. Simple window signs are often used in conjunction with other signs. Window signs should preserve transparency. Well-designed window displays should be integrated with window graphics.
- Unarticulated side walls of buildings have historically been used for painted advertising signs. Preserve such

signs where extant. Consider opportunities to develop new signs in a similar manner through conditional use or variance provisions in sign ordinances.

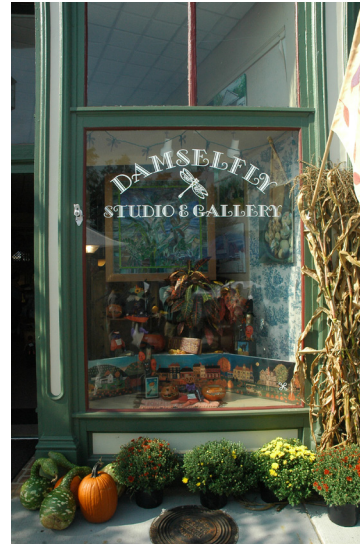
- Make sure sign materials are of a quality and material type that is appropriate to the building fabric on which they will be placed.

Additional Considerations for Rural Commercial Centers in the Kentucky Crossroads Region

Preservation Techniques. For more guidance on preservation techniques or advice on implementation please see the National Park Service Technical Preservation Service's *Preservation Briefs Series* <http://www.nps.gov/history/hps/tps/briefs/presbhom.htm> and *Interpreting the Standards Bulletins* <http://www.nps.gov/history/hps/tps/tax/ITS/itshome.htm>.

Tax Credits. Properties listed on the National Register of Historic Places, either individually or as part of a district, qualify for state and federal rehabilitation tax credits. State credits may be used for owner occupied residential properties or income-producing properties. Credits may apply for up to 30 percent of qualifying expenses for residential properties and 20 percent for other properties.

Federal tax credits may be used only for income-producing properties. Credits may apply for up to 20 percent of qualifying expenses. When state and federal credits are used together,



Lettering and a window display coordinated to function as a sign.



A traditional advertisement painted on the side wall of a building.

up to 40 percent of expenses may be credited. For more information on state and federal tax credits, see the Kentucky Heritage Council website at <http://heritage.ky.gov/incentives/>.

Historic Districts and Scenic Highways. Tax credits are only applicable to properties on the National Register or deemed eligible for the National Register. It is advantageous for commercial districts and other historic properties to be listed so that they are in essence pre-qualified for tax credits and for other preservation assistance. There is one National Scenic Byway - the Lincoln Trail, and one state-designated scenic byway - US 68 in the crossroads region. These highway designations qualify the communities along them for federal financial assistance with heritage tourism development.

Locations of Crossroads Communities. There is no standard definition of a crossroads communities, but these guidelines for best practices were written for the many communities in the Kentucky Crossroads region that have identifiable business districts but that are smaller than the county seats. This includes the following communities in their respective counties:

Boyle County
Perryville
Green County
Summersville
Larue County
Buffalo and Magnolia

Marion County
Bradfordsville and Loretto
Mercer County
Burgin and Salvisa
Nelson County
Bloomfield, Fairfield, and New Haven
Taylor County
No crossroads communities
Washington County
Mackville

Of these communities, only two - Bloomfield and Perryville - include a National Register Historic District. Unless other communities are listed as districts or individual buildings within them are listed, their property owners cannot qualify for federal or state tax credits. One important priority for heritage development, then, is to nominate appropriate districts and buildings to the National Register of Historic Places.