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A Museum for a Small Town

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ABSTRACT

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by Dewey Ervin

What role does a museum play in small towns in the United States? This thesis uses as a case study the town of Florence, South Carolina (population 30,248 in 2000) and proposes a design for a museum in the former commercial district of the town. By assessing the developmental trends of the town and its infrastructure, a site was chosen that reflected the desire of the town to retain and/or establish an identity through its built environment. Though suburban trends have moved the commercial activity and residential centers of the town away from the historic commercial district, interest in revitalizing the old downtown has led to the construction of several cultural facilities in that area, including a new public library, a new playhouse for the local acting troupe, and a new performing arts center for the local university. This thesis acts upon this trend by choosing a site in the old commercial district, and further integrates an existing building, the abandoned public library, into the design. The problem of dense parking requirements in the former pedestrian infrastructure is considered.
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An identity crisis has arisen based upon the homogeneity of small towns across the country. One such town is Florence, South Carolina. Though it thrives as an economic center for its region, its importance lies in its possessing the same amenities as regional centers of comparable size anywhere else in the nation. What, then, makes its identity anything more than just an exit number along the interstate?
The town as a political, social, and commercial unit developed to support its function as a contributor to a larger system.
The latter half of the twentieth century has seen a massive regional reorganization of the United States in response to an increasingly global economy. Franchises and national retailers have become the new identifiers for towns along the high speed infrastructures of the nation. If Florence is defined by the global economy today, what was its identity when it started? Founded at an intersection of three railroads, its initial development was based on its location for carrying cotton to market. Cotton was carried to Charleston and Wilmington to contribute to the global market of textile production.
The identity of a place comes from the adaptation of its settlers to the environment in order to contribute to a larger economic system.
The geographic location of any town is its unique feature. Ecological systems uniquely form the natural features of a specific location. Therefore, in seeking a truly unique identity, one must look at what effect the geography and natural features of a place have had on its development. The cultural identity of a place comes from the adaptation of its settlers to an environment in order to contribute to a larger economic system. A place’s identity, then, is the place itself. It is not occupied over time by one group with one identity. Instead, newer inhabitants continually replace older ones with newer means of exploiting the geographic location.
That strategies of environmental education have been rendered obsolete by more immediate issues that further close the gap between environmental influence and its existence in a larger economic system.
of an absolute link up to a larger system, town inhabitants could not side-step technologies and discarded more localized inputs.

An identity crisis arises when the shift became too great in the town's relations from the influence of the local geography. With each move toward this last stage of homogeneity, more homogeneous with other components of a larger system.
Present inhabitants do not have to prove themselves against the environment. If technology fails, it is an inconvenience, or a class-action suit, not an opportunity.
In the past, a town’s identity was tied to the local environment. Inhabitants dealt with their local environment directly on some level, either by working the land, conducting business, or providing services in the local climate, be it hot or cold, wet or dry.

Present inhabitants, however, do not have to prove themselves against the environment in order to live in an area and be economically viable. Technology has rendered environmental separation almost complete. Because of this disconnect, one can live and contribute to an economy anyway anywhere, while being wholly unaware of the local climate.
Remnants of past strategies worked to attain homogeneity in a system of their own time. Restoring an image from the commercial past is not enough to sustain a true identity.
Ill-fated attempts to "revitalize" remnants of past economic strategies reveal their reasons why these remnants were abandoned to begin with. Rejoicing at the remnants, however, does not necessarily address the uniqueness of an area. The consequences of remnants worked to attain homogeneity in a system of their own. As California lived the idea of towns qua towns to be "Main Street, USA," which that was the national identity, there was a drive to de-extinct in 1995 today.
Identity Gap
What are the area’s ecological and cultural identities, and how do they conflict or overlap with its current economic identity?
2003 effective buying income (EBI)

city: $0.5 billion

county: $2.0 billion
$1 billion in retail sales in the city in 1997

Estimated Buying Income (EBI) for the city in 2003: $5 billion (US Census Bureau)

Attractors: 2 Wal-Mart stores, #621 and #630, Wal-Mart Supercenter #270

multiple locations of several fast-food chains around the county

The much maligned spread of national retailers is an indicator of economic vitality.

Because of the homogenous model under which they operate, however, such entities are seen as major contributors to the loss of uniqueness in small towns across the country.
Who’s hiring?
Healthcare is the largest employer in the county.
56,726 non-farm jobs in 2001, +7% from 1990.

8.5% unemployment rate in 2003. (U.S. Census, Florence County EDP, Hunter Interests Inc.)

2 Hospitals with 5,700 employees total serve 1 million people in a 12 county region

13th largest employer in the county:

GE medical diagnostic imaging equipment plant (450 employees)
Agriculture
in the county,
however,
products.
200 employees in Florence County; processes 80 to 110 million inshell pounds of pecans a year; found in major labels such as Haagen Dazs & Ben & Jerry’s

McCall Farms growing plantation

40 employees; 2,000 acres of improved sawtimber

3,000 more in the Queensland plant; international sales products internationally

Charles Ingram Lumber Co.

125 employees, 80 million board feet of yellow pine annually
Florence County is within the Yadkin-Pee Dee River watershed, but the river gradient of the Yadkin River in North Carolina, the river winds its way south-

tric dams before emptying into Winyah Bay near Georgetown. In the 1950s and 60s, water wells. Florence had been supplying 12 million gallons per day (mgd) of water to its

inhabitants, the maximum amount of groundwater available at that time. In 2002 the city opened the Pee Dee River Regional

supplies an additional 10 mgd directly from the Pee Dee River.
Florence is halfway between New York City and Miami. It is also a necessary turnoff for virtually all out-of-state traffic traveling to Myrtle Beach, one of the fastest growing vacation destinations in the country. Since the construction of the national highway system, and the subsequent interstate system, local businesses have attempted to exploit the town’s relationship to a national infrastructure.
On the way to somewhere

New York
640 mi

Myrtle Beach
60 mi

Charleston
110 mi
Dubbed the "Magic City" by the boosterism of the early twentieth century, Florence has been the center of entertainment and commerce for inhabitants of the surrounding rural areas since its beginning. Today economic, social, and political ties to Florence are veritable lifelines for these areas.
Water under the bridge?

Founded when slavery was the backbone of the southern economy, Florence shares a controversial past with the rest of the American southeast.

Florence Army Airbase during World War II. The airbase would become the Florence Airport after the war.

Watercolor of Confederate prison stockade at Florence by a Union prisoner. More than 2,802 Union soldiers died in 5 months at the prison during the Civil War.

Francis Marion, portrayed by Leslie Nielson in the 1960s Disney television show Swamp Fox, was a Revolutionary War hero who fought in the swamps of the Pee Dee River near Florence.

Carolina Indians depicted by John White in 1585. The last mention of the Pee Dee Indians in state records occurs in 1808.
Celebrity means a lot in a small town

Harry Carson (b. 1953, Florence)
former linebacker for New York Giants, 2006 Pro Football Hall of Famer, first pro-athlete to dump Gatorade cooler on coach after win.

Ronald E. McNair (b. 1950, Florence Co. - d. 1986)
NASA Astronaut; died in Challenger explosion, January 28, 1986.

Melvin Purvis (b. 1903, Florence Co. - d. 1960, Florence)
FBI agent who shot John Dillinger, first Public Enemy #1, in 1934; also got Charles “Pretty Boy” Floyd and George “Baby Face” Nelson.

uncelebrated in life, his artwork is now internationally appreciated.

Henry Timrod (b. 1828, Charleston, SC - d. 1867, Columbia, SC)
schoolteacher on Florence area plantations; Poet Laureate of the Confederacy.
Culture Makers
With over $160 million in assets, the Doctors Bruce and Lee Foundation is one of the largest charitable organizations in the country. Based in Florence, its mission focuses on development in the county. In 2001, the Foundation donated $10.6 million toward a $17.5 million library facility that now bears its name (pictured). The Foundation has donated millions more since, including $5 million in 2004 for a nursing school facility and $10 million in January of 2006 for a performing arts center, both affiliated with the local university. Such an economic presence, essentially a windfall of funding, will dramatically reflect the image of the entire region.
CHAPTER ONE

The Town

Small communities in America have plugged into national infrastructures and global economies at the expense of local identities. Commercial districts have moved from pedestrian scale infrastructures to the clover-leaves of the interstates in order to survive. A case-in-point is the small town of Florence, South Carolina (U.S. Census 2000 population 30,258). In an attempt to revitalize its former commercial district, much money is being spent on cultural institutions in the abandoned downtown. It is hoped that such new construction will attract commercial ventures and reintroduce a live-work community at a pedestrian scale. The proposal is ambitious, including a new public library, several performing arts venues, and a museum. The latter is the focus of this research. This chapter will evaluate the evolution of the town, its changing commercial center, and a proposed downtown site for a new museum.

The town of Florence, South Carolina began in the 1840s as a railroad terminal for the Wilmington and Manchester Railroad. The railroad itself was a business venture of cotton merchants and growers from Wilmington, North Carolina. The town got its name from the daughter of the railroad’s first president, W.W. Harlee, a large landholder
in a region located at about the middle of the rail’s length, between Wilmington, and Manchester, South Carolina. Commercial development for the town grew around its connection to the then new national infrastructure of rail transit, much as big box retailers would do some 150 years later around the national highway and interstate systems.

Whereas Florence is not the oldest town in northeastern South Carolina, it is today the most economically viable due to its connection to these larger systems. Though thriving as an economic center for its region, the town has constantly adapted to pervading economic trends, particularly the influence of changing modes of transportation. When the automobile culture supplanted the pedestrian downtown with the suburban model of strip malls in the 1950s, a commercial exodus left the dense urban grid derelict. Since the 1950s, successive plans to retrofit an automobile infrastructure to the pedestrian main street have been implemented and ultimately abandoned.

One such plan of the late 1960s cored a surface level parking lot out of the central block of the business district. Street fronts were turned into back-of-store entrances, a promenade was created on the block interior facades, and a strip-mall was essentially recreated within the urban grid. When this failed to stop the flight of businesses to a new shopping mall near the interstate, the main commercial street of downtown was blocked
A portrait of progress---THE PROMENADE

Downtown renewal project, 1966, showing strip mall typology inserted into the interior of the central block of the old commercial district. (Image from Florence: All-American City, Florence Chamber of Commerce, 1966.)

Aerial photograph from the early 1970s showing the appearance of surface level parking in the downtown grid. Note the tall city-county government building in the upper right, its large surface level parking, and the adjacent demolition of an older courthouse. Railroad tracks run behind the tall building in this image, showing the tracks’ orientation to the original urban grid of the town. (Image from postcard in possession of author)
off in an attempt to turn storefront facades into the new shopping mall typology.

Many more plans of varying scale have been tried, and none have brought back the commercial activity once centered downtown. But the downtown is not empty. Though storefronts are dim, parking lots are full, so much so that parking garages have begun to appear in the old street grid. Though the loss of main street culture has been bemoaned, it can be argued that the downtown is still heavily used, just not in the same manner as it was one hundred years ago. Structures that have succeeded in the old downtown have allowed for dense parking programs. People are not seen bustling from building to building, but their cars are, and so surface-level parking and parking garages have begun to replace the buildings of the former commercial district. The remaining business transacted downtown is public and governmental, not commercial, and the major tenants downtown are the city and county government offices, the public library, and regional healthcare facilities, all of which have allowed for intense parking programs. One would deduce that any design proposal for the old commercial district must allow for a dense parking program.
Postcard showing downtown promenade in the 1970s, with contemporary awnings. An attempt to retrofit the suburban mall typology into the urban grid, the face-lift failed to stop migration of commercial activity to the interstate cloverleaf. (Postcard in possession of author.)

Parking structures have begun to appear in the downtown grid, such as this one, right, for the downtown campus of the local technical college. A Masonic lodge stands next to it, left, showing the strange juxtapositions of a more pedestrian scale architecture and the faster paced activity of the parking program. (Image taken by author.)
CHAPTER TWO

The Collection

The existing museum in the town of Florence wants to expand. It has always wanted to expand, but has been unable to do so or improve its existing facility due to budget constraints and lack of local interest. It is a private museum, and has as its mission to display artifacts of historical, scientific, and artistic value for the edification of the community. Its collection is wholly eclectic, and consists of rare artifacts of local and international significance.

The collection began with a large selection of Pueblo Indian pottery gotten in the 1920s with funds raised during World War I in a community tea room, established for that purpose. In the following decades, the museum’s guiding spirit, Jane B. Evans, began collecting pieces of ancient Asian artifacts, culminating with the acquisition of the Florence Nightingale collection of Asian artifacts, bequeathed by a Mr. and Mrs. League, Baptist missionaries to China in the early twentieth century. Mrs. League gave the collection its name in honor of the famous care-giver from whom she alleged to have been descended.

The Pueblo and Asian collections found their first home in the basement of the
Pueblo Indian pottery acquired in the early twentieth century on display at the Florence Museum. (Photo by author.)

Detail of a piece from the Asian collection of the Florence Museum. (Photo by author.)
Florence Public Library when that body received a new building in 1924. Mrs. Evans was a founding board member of both the library and museum and saw a natural relationship between the two. By the 1950s, the museum had outgrown the basement of the library and sought a new facility. It found one in the former residence of Mr. Sanborn Chase, an erudite and successful local citizen who had established in Florence what would become the international steel producing outfits of Vulcraft and Nucor steel.

Chase had dabbled in architecture while an engineering student at Auburn University (the famous architect Paul Rudolph was there his junior by one year). As a senior in 1939 he designed for himself a home in the *Art Moderne* style and built it in Florence along the northwestern border of the city park, Timrod Park. In 1954, Chase offered his home for sale to the city as a new museum. When a public referendum for the purchase failed, the museum itself raised funds and acquired the property.

Since 1971, the museum has been presented with fleeting opportunities to acquire another important collection, that of one of Florence’s natives sons, and arguably the first important African American artist of the twentieth century, William H. Johnson. Johnson died in a New York state hospital in 1971, unknown and uncelebrated. More than 1,000 of his pieces were acquired by the Harmon foundation and ultimately the Smithsonian
Sanborn Chase designed the current museum facility (below) as a residence for his family in 1939 while a senior at Auburn University. (class photo, left)
Institution. The Smithsonian contacted the Florence Museum upon this acquisition and offered to the artist's hometown museum whatever pieces the small institution could restore. The museum received two pieces from this deal, and has only recently been able to restore them. In 2006, the museum once again contacted the Smithsonian, and secured a promise of as many pieces from the Johnson collection as they wanted if a suitable facility could be constructed. By 2006, the economic climate for support of cultural institutions in Florence had changed to where such a proposition could be seriously entertained.
CHAPTER THREE

An Existing Building

This thesis proposes as a site for a new Florence museum the original Florence County Public library, built in 1924 and where the Florence Musesum began. Replaced by a new facility in 2002, the old library has since been used for various functions, from voting records storage to art exhibits, all temporary. It is a cast concrete structure with a brick veneer of a Georgian Revival style. The building was designed by Florence architect William Wilkins, whose firm would, in the year 2000, become the oldest continuously operating architecture firm in South Carolina, outliving Wilkins, its founder, by over fifty years before being bought out and dissolved in 2005. Though in many ways the library seems typical for its day, immulating what was the style for municipal buildings, it possesses unique features that speak to its location.

The library was constructed using locally raised funds, an anomaly for the time and place when most rural small towns relied on charitable organizations, such as Andrew Carnegie’s, for such undertakings. Proud of this accomplishment, the town had local and regional authors’ names placed on plaques above the windows of the building, further displaying some sense of cultural achievement for the area. The original reading
The first Florence County Public Library, built in 1924 and designed by Florence architect William Wilkins, was constructed using only local funds. The names of local authors and others associated with Southern literature were placed above the windows of the building. (postcard in possession of author)

The original reading room of the library contained the latest periodicals and newspapers, as well as African game trophies and Mrs. Evans' pots. (photo courtesy of the Florence Museum)
room was furnished with the latest periodicals and newspapers as well as curiosities from around the world, including animal trophies from Africa and Mrs. Evans’ Pueblo pots.

Situated along Irby Street, which is highway 52 and 301 running north and south, the library held a prominent spot on the main business artery for the county before the advent of the interstate system. Because of this, it was always surrounded by hotels and later motor lodges and motels that now stand obsolete and vacant as well. Like these hotels and motels, the library attempted to adapt and accommodate an eminent car culture, and expanded accordingly. By the late 1970s, an addition moved the main entrance to the rear of the building to accommodate a surface-level parking lot. A frequently sited reason for its current obsolescence is lack of adequate parking.
The library building underwent several expansions and renovations to accommodate both library expansion and the demands of a car culture. The final expansion of 1979 moved the main entrance to the side of the building for access from rear surface level parking (below).
CHAPTER FOUR

A Modest Proposal

While appropriating an old building, a new museum must also allow for a dense parking program. Following the trend of current, unregulated downtown development, a parking structure must be considered. How then does an early twentieth century building of a modest scale accommodate a parking structure, or vice versa. Movement through the older floorplan can be seen as static and nonlinear, whereas that of a parking garage is more fluid and dynamic, constantly moving the occupant in a direction. Several contemporary museums have taken this cue, most notably Frank Lloyd Wright’s Guggenheim Museum of 1959 in Manhattan. Others include B. H. Zehrfuss’ Gallo-roman Museum Lyon-Fourvière, 1967, and Rem Koolhaas’ Kunsthall of 1992 in Rotterdam.

Taking an extreme approach, the entire available site might be appropriated for the footprint of a three-story garage, the existing structure being ignored. Should the old building appear, incidentally, it becomes an object along the progression of the automobile, a piece in the collection on display, even a roadside attraction.

But what about getting out of the car? How does a design engage the “distracted viewer” while continuing the progression? Because the old floorplan of the library is
more of a point-to-point progression, it may be considered disruptive to the route of the ambulating user. What if the floor plan was somehow broken into a more fluid trajectory, dissolving the didactic stop-and-go of the Beaux-arts organization? In this thesis scenario, the old building is cored out. The main entry is placed at the rear of the building, on axis and at the same level as the original front entrance. The patron still enters at the level of the piano nobile, but this valorized entry is now subdued and merged with the second level of a parking deck. As the patron enters the old building from the parking deck, he is carried through what was once the stacks of the library, now a double-height atrium with a glass roof. Once through the atrium, he is taken to the old reading room, also a double height space with a glass roof. This space is now occupied by a series of ramps spiraling at right angles to ascend the patron to the upper floors, mimicking the spiraling route of the car garage. As the patron travels up he is put out into a new surrounding museum building, also encapsulated in the footprint of the garage. As he steps off the ramp into the new building, he is led through a series of galleries that circle a central auditorium, and ultimately back to the old building, where his progress is repeated at a higher level until he is ejected onto the roof of the museum and garage. The roof is landscaped into a public park, accessible to automobiles and pedestrians.