When bridge-building opened access to the North Carolina Outer Banks in the 1950s, highways built to facilitate direct travel to its beaches passed by the island town of Manteo. Within the next thirty years, Manteo plummeted from being the region’s primary trade center to that of a near ghost town.

Today, as a result of extensive grass roots community development that revived its once-decayed village charm, Manteo has become the home of a reconstructed ship reminiscent of the vessel Sir Walter Raleigh’s lost colonists arrived in 403 years ago and now attracts enough tourism to restore failing indigenous industries.

Manteo’s recovery is a familiar story. A small dying town takes an economic U-turn by capitalizing on its smallness, intimacy, natural beauty, village character, and its rural past. Panacea for poverty? Unfortunately, for many communities, this turnaround spells the eventual demise of existing community traditions, destruction of valued places, and replacement by a phony folk culture.\(^1\)

Recognizing the pitfalls associated with inviting new development, Manteo took unusual steps to avoid both a tourist takeover and a junk culture.\(^2\) As the town’s community designer, I helped the residents identify and preserve their valued life-styles and landscapes in the face of change. Once identified, important social patterns and places, which came to be called the Sacred Structure by locals, inspired our plan for community
revitalization. Because the town’s economic recovery was dramatic and local people were able to maintain control of the development, our plan received national notice. Much of the attention focused on the use of the “Sacred Structure” as both a means to preserve the local culture and the foundation for new development.

In the following pages, I reconstruct the process of uncovering the valued places and discuss the specific impact of the Sacred Structure on the community design plan. I also point out the difficulty of legally protecting valued life-styles and places. And finally I make some general observations about the potential use of “sacred structures” in other communities in transition.

Uncovering Valued Places

I was originally hired to redesign the village waterfront, but it took only a few days on site to realize that a waterfront park would be a cosmetic cover-up. With over twenty percent seasonal unemployment and a declining tax base, Manteo needed a new economy. On the day I discussed this with Mayor John Wilson, the hardware store closed downtown and moved to a nearby resort location. The mayor, a young architect and native, saw the town through the eyes of both professional designer and local insider. He loved the place. He wanted the town to recapture the spirit he had experienced as a child playing on busy docks.

However, not even nostalgic boyhood memories of a bustling waterfront could deny the message of the hardware store. We agreed that day to expand our contract. I outlined a holistic community development process: no more pretty park. The Town Board approved the idea. I moved my office to Manteo. We began immediately a community-wide discussion to design a strategy to overcome the problems besetting Manteo.

As I began talking to more community leaders, I realized that everyone shared the mayor’s passion for the place. I was struck by the emotion with which people talked about how special Manteo was.

This was a happy coincidence for me. In my community design work I search for social nuances to inspire form. I had just finished designing a day care center in which I had used hypnosis to help the staff discover the spatial qualities they wanted in the facility. Startled that their hypnagogic spatial preferences were so different from the questionnaire results, I read what I could find about spatial values and concluded that unconscious attachment to place might be a powerful factor in community planning. I felt that the concept of spatial values would be more useful to designers than our present idea of landscape aesthetics, but the words Sacred Structure had never occurred to me.

I welcomed the opportunity Manteo offered to explore these ideas, but the problems confronting Manteo seemed to require economic development, not studies of emotional attachment to place.

However, through our community goals survey, many of the same points the mayor and leaders had articulated resurfaced. Although the survey, by which citizens were randomly interviewed in their homes, focused on broad community concerns, affection for place was mentioned frequently.

When asked what they liked most about their town, residents often mentioned small town qualities such as informal friendliness (fifty-one percent of those surveyed listed this in an open-ended question, a somewhat higher response than I had gotten in other communities in North Carolina) and being able to walk almost everywhere in town (twenty-two percent, an unusually high response). Places such as the waterfront, the village, and specific shops were mentioned as being important because they represented home or provided roots.

Residents were clear. They wanted new economic development, but they wanted the small town atmosphere preserved. We knew neighborhoods could be protected by zoning, facilities could be located compactly to reinforce walking, and a historic district could save venerable architecture. But that didn’t satisfy us. We felt we were missing the essence of what townspeople were saying. We undertook the task of finding out precisely what life-style and landscape features were essential to the continued functioning of the town’s culture.

Behavior mapping gave us another clue. For several weeks we sat in

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various locations and recorded what people did and where. The resulting maps showed us activity settings for the daily patterns of townpeople. While people had described some of these in the goals survey, most had not been mentioned. Activities like newing (exchanging gossip) at the post office, hanging out at the docks, and checking out the water (tides, shoreline, fishing catches, weather, and gossip) recurred in the same places each day. Life-style and landscape were intertwined. Daily ritual had place specificity, and the cultural dependence on places seemed more widespread than people had reported in our interviews. This meant that changes in land or site use had the potential of significant, disruptive impact on the community.

Still, we did not know which places were most essential to the life of the town. But we had hunches based on our knowledge of social patterns in other towns, the survey results, our behavior mapping, and informal discussions with town leaders. From these hunches another community designer, Billie Harper, and I made a list of the places we thought were important to the social fabric. For example, we both thought the gravel parking lot would be essential because it was the setting for checking out the water and community festivals. We guessed that Jake's Park would be inviolable because the mayor had told us that Jake Burris had built it from ruins as a labor of love for the town. We were right about these. We also thought actor Andy Griffith's house would be important.
because of the status he brought to the community. We were wrong.

We revised the list after checking it with several Town Board members. A newspaper questionnaire was developed for townpeople to rank these places in order of significance to them as individuals. We also asked residents to state which places they thought could be changed to accommodate tourism and which places they were unwilling to sacrifice in order to attract tourist dollars. We used historic tourism as a trade-off because that seemed the most viable economic development strategy that we were developing at the same time.

A series of specific trade-offs were posed, such as whether the respondent agreed that it was more important to leave the Christmas tree in the gravel parking lot downtown than to use the space for parking. The responses to these questions allowed us not only to measure the intensity of attachment to places versus the benefits of tourism but also to recheck the relative importance of places.

A ranked and weighted list of significant places resulted. As I recall, one resident, upon seeing how many places ranked higher than the local churches and cemetery, dubbed the list the “sacred structures,” and thereafter the list was called the Sacred Structure of Manteo. The cemetery and the high school provided benchmarks for comparison, and we used them as cutoff points for the list of places that should not
be negatively affected by new development. The places included the marshes surrounding the town, Jule's Park, a drug store and soda fountain, the post office, churches, the Christmas Shop, front porches, the town launch, a statue of Sir Walter Raleigh, the Duchess Restaurant, the town hall, locally made unreadable street signs, the town cemetery, the Christmas tree in the gravel parking lot, park post lamps placed there in memory of loved ones, and two historic sites.

The newspapers published the results. A map of the Sacred Structure was included with the inventory plans we prepared during the planning process for the town. The map simply showed the places colored with varying intensities based on the questionnaire results. It looked similar to other land use maps. It was immediately clear that the Sacred Structure touched a subconscious nerve in the community. The residents wanted these places protected. One newspaper editor expressed his and local concern that the identification of these places in the survey meant that the designers were considering changing the places to attract tourists. He carefully listed those places that must not be profaned for tourism, stating that they were "perfect jewels" the way they were. His "perfect jewels" play on words referred directly to Jule's Park but also included the other most valued places. Frequently during the planning process that followed, the editor cornered me to remind me that those places were sacred and that local people were willing to sacrifice economic gain to save these places because they had a higher value than dollars.

Sacred Places
What did people mean by this Sacred Structure? The concept of sacred place making, or a community sacred structure, is easy to accept in primitive cultures. We smile knowingly at stories of tribes who proclaim their village square to be the center of the universe, who believe that passing through a doorway changes their state of mind, who designate twisted plants as magic trees or attribute door-yard gardens to the spontaneous generation of the earth, and who set aside these common landscape features as hallowed. It is harder to comprehend that we, in our modern, mobile, and secular American society, hold any place
necessary to our daily lives as sacred. Yet our cultural procreational pattern with placelessness and topophilia suggests that we do highly value some places. In this context, perhaps a useful definition of sacred structure would be those places—buildings, outdoor spaces, and landscapes—that exemplify, typify, reinforce, and perhaps even extol the everyday life patterns and special rituals of community life, places that have become so essential to the lives of the residents through use or symbolism that the community collectively identifies with the places. The places become synonymous with residents' concepts and use of their own. The loss of such places would reorder or destroy something or some social process familiar to the community's collective being.

Manteo's Sacred Structure, for the most part, consisted of humble places, "holes-in-the-wall," that were the settings for the community's daily routine. No more places, they embodied the life of Manteo. While these places combined to express Manteo's uniqueness and probably structure residents' internal images of their town, not one of them was exotic. Yet each was eloquent in its context. They were typical (and often times run down) features of what is commonly found along the Carolina coastal landscape. They were familiar, homey, and homely.

These places were almost universally unappealing to the trained professional eyes of an architect, historian, real estate developer, or upper middle-class tourist. As a result, in Manteo only two places among the Sacred Structure were protected by historic preservation legislation. Only a few were protected by zoning laws. Even to locals the sacred places were outwardly taken for granted. Their value resided in the community's subconscious but loomed large in conscious minds of locals after four things happened.

First, the places were threatened. When we began talking about the changes necessary for economic recovery, town leaders, at first, and then residents became aware that their community was in transition. The dramatic scope of the proposed plans to alter the town forced people to think about the social institutions and the environments that mattered most to them.

Second, the places were legitimized. The locals were emotionally attached to many places that they knew did not match the media images of good environments. (Designers might simplify this as the distinction between ordinary vernacular and high-style architecture.) Since they were somewhat ashamed of these places when outsiders were around, it was important for us outside design experts to say these places were fine. Otherwise townspeople would tell us only about places that tourists were value, and we would never have been able to uncover truly important places.

Third, a collective picture of the valued places was presented to the community. Although each person might not hold value many of the places, he likely didn't know how much others valued the places nor did he see how the separate places created a collective framework. The list of sacred places, the map, and the simple name, "Sacred Structure," overcame this. The list and map provided the townspeople a gestalt of previously known but separated facts. It was similar to putting up a land use map; neighborhood residents who may
be intimately aware of some parts of but not the total land patterns frequently remark, “I didn’t know the business district extended all that way.” The map turned special places into a pattern, previously experienced but not grasped as a whole. The name, Sacred Structure of Manito, was one resident’s way of simplifying the whole. The Sacred Structure became part of the local vocabulary and was debated at the Duchess Restaurant and Betty’s Country Kitchen along with such topics as job opportunities and property tax benefits of tourism. The community’s unconscious concern about special places had become part of the collective and now open conscious expression.

Fourth, the places were consecrated by residents. This required setting aside the most important places from less valued ones. Townspeople did this systematically by responding to the newspaper survey and refining their list of sacred places throughout the planning process. By the time we completed the design plans, the most valued places had been designated invariable, not to be changed in any way to accommodate new development. This, of course, required sacrifice on the part of townspeople. Economic development would suffer to the extent residents judged any given project incompatible with the Sacred Structure. Today, we estimate that preserving the Sacred Structure cost the town over half a million dollars in retail sales alone each year. This sacrifice of financial gain seemed essential in consecrating the places. This was what the newspaper editor reconfirmed when he repeatedly said these places had a higher value than dollars. I should point out that these four steps in making conscious unknowingly valued places seem essential only in retrospect. As we went through the process, we were uncertain about what to do because there were no precedents.

How the Sacred Structure Influenced Planning and Design Decisions

After we presented the Sacred Structure map to the Planning Board, it became part of the formal discussion, influencing planning decisions in several ways, including the following:

1. It transformed the typically vague discussion about loss of valued life-styles and landscapes into a focused and specific debate about what sites should be changed or kept to reap the benefits of tourism. The Sacred Structure map depicted important social patterns and cultural settings more effectively than any other planning document. Most places essential to the social life of Manito were not included in other town documents, not in the zoning ordinance, not in the visual inventory, not in the list of historic sites. In fact, less than half of the Sacred Structure had been uncovered through traditional inventories such as significant historic architecture, the visual image of the town, and culturally important sites as defined in the Coastal Management guidelines. And less than a third of the sacred places could be protected by historic, appearance, and coastal zone legislation.

2. The Sacred Structure inventory was used by residents to objectively evaluate plans in terms of impact on their lives. Townspeople could tell if a particular development violated places they had identified as sacred. For example, one plan was unacceptable because it required changing Bicentennial Park (ninety-five percent of the survey respondents had indicated that changes, even minor ones to the lamp posts in the park, were unacceptable). The Sacred Structure gave residents the rationale to support many of their gut feelings about development plans and proposals.

3. The Sacred Structure directed the final plan chosen. Of seven plans that we developed for the village center, townspeople chose one with somewhat less economic potential specifically because the plan preserved more of the Sacred Structure and interrupted fewer of the townspeople’s accustomed patterns and rituals. In fact, the Sacred Structure inspired weaving the tourist and local places together with a living-learning boardwalk and designating that Bicentennial Park, the Cree-Gauze art work, the gravel parking lot, and the Christmas tree be maintained for their existing uses. Even the visual quality of the new development was inspired by the Sacred Structure, inviting personal participation and interaction; it has an unfinished appearance that makes it open to community change. Locals continue
The places listed by townpeople as most sacred cannot be protected by present law. Of the seventeen most valued places in Manteo, only five qualify for zoning or historic district preservation.
to add new touches. The feeling to be conveyed was that of a homey and unpretentious atmosphere that existed already in people's front porches. As a result, the development is intimate and small in scale.

4. The Sacred Structure provided the basis for negotiation with outside developers who proposed needed but inappropriately scaled projects. Because the valued places were dispersed throughout the waterfront, their preservation precluded wholesale urban redevelopment. Developers balked at this limitation at first because it required small parcel development. We had produced a Guide for Development for the town of Manteo that stated the town's intention to preserve the Sacred Structure. We provided performance criteria for the type of development that would be consistent with the Sacred Structure. Using the guide, the Town Board was able to emphasize to developers the importance of preserving the valued places and building within the existing community framework. For example, a large piece of the new tourist facility was located on previously unused Ice Box Island to prevent development of the marshes. In another case, developers were convinced to do infill development that enhanced the sacred places rather than to rate the buildings for larger scale commercial development.

5. The Sacred Structure provided the basis for ongoing citizen evaluation of zoning and development proposals. In a recent debate over the development of a new marina, residents pointed to the results of the Sacred Structure survey that showed that sixty-five percent of the townspople preferred improved boat ramps and docks for locals to providing more docks for tourists. The private marina has been delayed.15

The Sacred Structure was a significant factor in the planning and design decisions in Manteo. It raised these valued community places to the same level as economic, technical, and political considerations. The result was a community development plan that permitted the town to benefit from tourism and at the same time protect fragile local, place-related social institutions from tourist encroachment.16

Piecemeal Legal Protection

Because the Town Board and the Planning Board in Manteo supported the preservation of the Sacred Structure, they used it throughout the planning and design process. Legally, however, there are few precepts for this approach. Of the seventeen most valued places, only five could be protected by existing legal mechanisms (using historic preservation legislation, the Coastal Act, and the local zoning ordinance).

Four mechanisms were utilized to reduce the legal vulnerability of the Sacred Structure. The State of North Carolina passed a locally supported historic corridor that protected two of the valued sites along the main vehicular entrances to town, the Christmas shop and a church. The corridor legislation also added protection for Fort Raleigh, a historic site, and for neighborhoods already somewhat protected by zoning.

The town formally adopted the Guide for Development, which spelled out the intent to preserve the Sacred Structure. The guide was then incorporated into the local Coastal Area Management Plan to strengthen the Sacred Structure's legal status, but these actions were largely symbolic because the Sacred Structure was not specified by any of the appropriate state enabling legislation.

The legal mechanism the town is relying on most is the creation of a village business district (where the new development is occurring and that includes fourteen of the sacred places). A conditional use permit is required for all new development in this district. Among other things, the petitioner for development in the village business district must demonstrate that local access to the Sacred Structure will not be negatively affected by the change before the conditional use is approved. The conditions for receiving the use permit are articulated in the Guide for Development. The guide mandates that any new development, rehabilitation, or change in the village must be assessed for impact on residents' use of the Sacred Structure and must protect or enhance local pedestrian access, parking availability, and local visual access.17
9 Using a typical visual inventory to identify important landmarks and nodes, designers missed more than half of the Sacred Structure. An ordinary looking place, unappealing to the trained eye, might be an essential part of the community life.
The preservation of sacred places may provide a polite and updated justification for racial or class segregation, although this seems not to be the case in Flintco.
Observation One: A Contribution to Social Design

What can be learned from the experiences in Manteeo that would be useful elsewhere? The Sacred Structure represents a small yet valuable breakthrough in social design, particularly in reconciling tourism with existing community mores and rituals. In fact, the use of the Sacred Structure inventory could be an important mechanism for any neighborhood or city in rapid transition that wishes to maintain valued life-styles and places. The recording of such patterns underscores the fact that not just primitive tribes in exotic places have sacred landscapes essential to a community’s healthy survival. The use of these subconsciously valued places to inspire large-scale community development might be an important precedent in social design.

The success, however, is subtle in Manteeo. For example, at a recent tourist event that attracted nearly ten thousand visitors, local people were still able to walk to the post office, crab, and swim at the waterfront and have a leisurely breakfast at the Duchess diner in the section set aside for locals.

Observation Two: The Need for Enabling Legislation to Protect Valued Places

Clearly, new legal mechanisms are needed to help communities preserve their social structures in the face of rapid tourist development. Zoning, appearance, historic districts, and Coastal Management mechanisms do not preserve the “placid” essence of the social and cultural life of small towns. By providing land use separation, zoning protects Manteeo’s sacred places from the grossest incompatibilities, but little else.

Local governments desperately need state legislation that will facilitate preserving valued landscapes and life-styles that express not just their sense of place but also significant supports for the social life in their community.

Sometimes existing mechanisms actually work against the protection of locally valued landscapes, as in Manteeo, where Lynch-based, image-of-the-city mapping (frequently used as the basis of appearance legislation) identified landmarks that lacked significant meaning to locals. Similarly, historic preservation legislation protected only ten percent of the sacred places in Manteeo. And although Coastal Zone management laws in North Carolina mandate identification of sites of local cultural importance, only historic and ecologically fragile sites are offered legal protection.

The conditional use system has worked well in Manteeo for nearly three years, with all new development conforming to the guidelines, but problems remain. The Planning Board has relied on a professional planner to administer the process. This is an expense unaffordable in most small towns. Furthermore, the process has yet to be tested in the courts and thereby established as an effective legal precedent. And the Sacred Structure protects only social institutions that are place specific; it neglects many vital social traditions and ownership patterns.

Observation Three: Questions about Equity

One troublesome question arises from this type of social preservation: can the preservation of valued places reinforce undemocratic social patterns such as economic or social segregation? In some cases this is likely, in the same ways that zoning and historic preservation typically are used to exclude “undesirables” directly or psychologically. Topophilia might provide a polite and updated justification for racial segregation. Even in Manteeo, the new strip development along the highway is more racially and economically integrated than in the village, where most of the Sacred Structure is located. A recent post-occupancy evaluation of town use suggests that the implementation of the plan has had a positive influence on accessibility, particularly for teenagers, blacks, and poorer citizens. However, this is likely due to other factors in addition to the Sacred Structure. We made a special effort to involve these groups in the planning process, and addressing environmental injustices was a major force of the overall community development plan.

In communities with widespread injustices, the preservation of sacred places would likely prolong those injustices. And in communities trying to overcome an unhealthy past, or in suburban communities
suffering from environmental anomie, identification of a Sacred Structure might be a painful and divisive effort. But for many small towns in transition, the identification and preservation of sacred places likely is a key to successful development that builds on rather than destroys the existing sense of community.

NOTES
5. For a description of the results, see Randolph T. Hester, Jr., "A Womb With a View," Landscape Architecture: September 1979, pp. 470–481.
7. This technique was developed by Billie B. Harper under the direction of Henry Sanford at North Carolina State University. Five percent of Manton's residents returned questionnaires via mail or at a drop in town hall. The sample generally reflected the town's demographic characteristics, but a random sample would no doubt have provided more representative results.
8. This editorial appeared in The Coastland Times on March 24, 1981.
12. Much of my thinking about the Sacred Structure of small towns has evolved through discussions with Ed Blakey, Ted Bradshaw, and Marcus McNally. This definition is largely the work of Ed Blakey.
13. These types of places were first identified as critical to community well-being by Jane Jacobs in The Death and Life of Great American Cities (New York: Random House, 1961) and Herbert Gots in The Urban Villagers (New York: The Free Press, 1964).
14. This is further complicated by the fact that these daily life places, being busy and harmonious and therefore unappealing to outsiders of high status, frequently are subcommunities highly valued yet seen as a negative reflection on the community by poor locals. There exists conflict among people inside the community who want to preserve their life patterns yet remove these places as negative status objects.
15. In the survey, we asked residents to list the places that most contribute to the "image" of Manton. In most cases these places were not the same places "valued" by townspersons. It is essential for the designer to get beyond the surface image of the place. Valued places frequently are ordinary looking, making it difficult for designers and planners to identify these places.
17. From a telephone conversation with Mayor John Wilson, August 1984.
18. The revitalization of poor communities is a delicate balance of promotion and protection. In this article the promotion aspect is stressed. An equally important promotion process paralleled this work.
21. From personal conversations with residents July 15, 1984. I learned that in July 1984 the Town Board terminated the planning position in order to lower their operating budget.

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