

## Rural Routes - Rural Roots; Challenges and Opportunities<sup>1</sup>

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When I was invited to speak at this conference, I accepted without hesitation. First, the conference theme, "Rural Routes: Rural Roots," was very intriguing to me. I knew exploring the related concepts of routes and roots would be both interesting and challenging. An added challenge was address the theme in a way that would be of interest to an architectural conservancy group. Second, I have an abiding interest in rural people and rural places. I grew up on a farm, attended a two-room rural grade school, and graduated from a small-town high school in a senior class of 28 students. I have since lived in some larger towns and even cities, but I have spent my entire professional life working with people who farm, work, and live in rural communities.

I began my preparation for this presentation by looking more deeply into the meaning of the two words, routes and roots. Like most words, each has multiple uses in the English language. The particular uses of "root" that seemed most relevant to rural issues were: a source, origin, or starting place; a cause, basis, or foundation; a core concept or central idea. Together, they suggest that the fundamental purpose and meaning of a thing can be found by exploring what brought into existence, what most clearly defines it, and what continues to sustain it – or leaves it vulnerable. The purpose and meaning of rural communities can be found in their rural roots.

My first thoughts of "rural routes" were the country roads and small-town main streets that characterize rural places. These are the routes by which people relate to each other, as they move from place to place within the community. These are also routes that connect people in rural communities with the outside world – physically, socially, and economically. However, the uses of the word "routes" that seems to juxtapose most effectively with "roots" are: an itinerary or road map; a path, direction, or way; a means, method, a course of action for getting from a starting point to a destination. When rural roots and rural routes are considered together, they suggest the *route* to a better future for rural communities can be found by reexamining their *roots*. As for their relationship with architecture, the physical structures that remain in rural places today – the roads, streets, bridges, buildings – are not only artifacts of the past but also guideposts to the future.

The challenges confronting rural people today are formidable – at times even frightening. Both the history and present of rural America are marked by relentless extraction and exploitation. Priority to the arrival of European settlers, the land was being used more or less sustainably by the indigenous people. Admittedly, they occasionally misused the bounties of the

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land and engaged in periodic conflicts, but they were well intentioned. No single tribe had the tools and technical ability of doing lasting harm either to nature or their native society. The native people understood that the long run sustainability of their way of life depended on the preservation and regeneration of both nature and culture. Some tribes explicitly considered the implications of their actions for those of the seventh future generation.

When the first European settlers arrived in America, the continent's vast bounty of natural resources seemed infinite. The forests and fields were filled with wild game and the streams and lakes were brimming with fish and water fowl. The Native Americans didn't understand the concept of private property. They didn't own the land because they couldn't conceive of things of nature being *owned* by anyone. The Europeans felt free to partake of nature's bounty but also found ways to gain ownership of the land. They bought, bribed, coerced, or simply claimed the rights to the land, wildlife, timber, minerals... They took ownership of nature. River towns, logging towns, and mining towns sprang up all across the frontier. The settlers wasted perhaps as much as they used, but it didn't seem to matter because there was so much. Their destruction of nature destroyed both the livelihood and way of life of the Native Americans. Once the resources of one place were "used up," the settlers moved on ever westward, leaving "ghost towns" where the river towns, logging towns, and mining towns had once thrived, as they moved.

Most of the rural North American communities that have survived were farming towns. Agricultural land proved to be the most durable resource in most rural areas, surviving many decades of abuse. The Dust Bowl of the 1930s was one of the earlier visible sign of blatant abuse of the land. Government soil conservation programs were initiated to address the misuse of land. However, the abuse continued and even accelerated with the adoption of industrial farming strategies – specialization, standardization, and consolidation. Widespread use of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, beginning in the 1950s, destroyed the economic incentive to conserve and renew the natural fertility of the soil. The fencerow-to-fencerow farming of the 1970s rolled back previous gains in soil erosion control. Farms were turned into factories without roofs and fields and feedlots into biological assembly lines. The streams and groundwater of rural areas were polluted with agricultural wastes, small family farms were consolidated into large farms – more accurately, agribusinesses – and American agriculture became an industry.

With economic globalization, American farmers were forced to compete economically with the most exploitative and extractive agricultural operations in the world. Many could no longer afford to care for the land or care about their neighbors. In a struggle for economic survival, many farmers turned to comprehensive production contracts leaving them as little more than corporate serfs on their own land. Independent, middle-class farmers were replaced by fewer low-paid farm workers. Larger farming operations meant fewer farms, fewer farmers, and fewer farm families. Farming towns suffered the equally inevitable consequences. It takes people, not just production, to support rural communities and economies. It takes people who shop on Main Street, attend local schools, fill local church pews, and serve in the volunteer positions essential to viable rural communities. Economic exploitation moved beyond land to rural people.

With fewer farm families, many rural communities turned to light manufacturing to replace the jobs lost to industrial agriculture. Industry recruiting not only opened the door but put out a "welcome mat" to corporate exploitation of rural areas. Corporate manufacturers were attracted

to the strong work ethic, absence of labor unions, and low wages that characterized many rural areas. People in rural areas were also more tolerant, or less informed, of the environmental, social, and cultural degradation industrial development inevitably leaves in its wake. A corporation is not a person. It has no family, no friends, not sense of ethics or morality, and thus no real commitment to any particular place or community. Wherever rural people demanded decent wages and working conditions and began to resist industrial pollution, the corporations simply moved on to other communities where people were more desperate for jobs.

With economic globalization, this means corporations move their operations to wherever in the *world* they can find people who are willing to work the hardest for the lowest wages – which increasingly is not America. Many rural communities today are left with empty factories, polluted environments, and local residents who no longer remember how to make a living without being told what to do, including farmers who no longer know how to farm. Under corporate influence, often outright control, the extraction and exploitation of rural areas continues unabated, with little apparent concern of ever running out of places to exploit.

This is a critical point in time for rural America. Rural communities simply cannot survive if they continue pursuing the economic development strategies for the past. Rural areas eventually will become nothing more than big empty spaces where our industrial society dumps its wastes. Even today, many rural communities compete for prisons, urban landfills, toxic waste incinerators, nuclear waste sites, and even giant confinement animal feeding operations. All of these so-called economic development opportunities are nothing more than selling space to dump the human, chemical, and biological wastes created by an extractive, exploitative industrial economy. This approach to economic development isn't working and isn't going to work in the future. Change is no longer just an option; change is a necessity.

This is a time of crisis in rural areas. The word “crisis” is most often associated with a situation that poses a threat or grave danger. The Chinese word for crisis is composed of two symbols; one meaning danger and the other opportunity. Scholars tend to agree on the “danger” part of the word, but some suggest “a critical point in time” most accurately reflects the second part of the word. A crisis then is a point in time when we are forced to make choices that will fundamentally change the future, for either better or worse. Rural communities are at such a critical point in time today. They are being forced to make choices that will fundamentally affect their future for either better or worse.

This is a time of peril in rural America, but also a time of great possibilities. The industrial era is coming to an end and with it will come an end to the forces threaten rural America. We are in the midst of a great transition in human history, at least as great as the industrial revolution and perhaps as great as the beginning of science. This is a time of crisis, not just for rural North America but for the whole of humanity. We have a unique historical opportunity to make decisions and take actions over the next few decades that will shape the future of humanity, for either better or worse. Within the crisis there is great opportunity.

The great transition is being driven by questions of sustainability. How can we meet the basic needs of all in present generations without diminishing opportunities for generations of the future? Fortunately, more and more people are beginning to accept the uncomfortable reality

that nature and society are both finite and fragile. Equally important, a growing number of people are beginning to understand that everything of economic value must come from the fragile and finite resources of nature and society. All of the dominant public issues of today – economic recovery, global climate change, depletion of fossil energy, growing economic disparity – are all symptoms of the same basic cause. We are depleting our sources of economic value. If we allow the extraction and exploitation to continue, there will be no source of economic value for those of future generations. We are destroying the future of humanity.

As Albert Einstein once observed, we can't solve problems using the same thinking we used when we created them. We need to understand up front, we cannot meet the challenges of sustainability using the same thinking we were using when we created them. The most fundamental problem with industrial economic development is that it reflects a mechanistic way of thinking. Industrialization assumes the world works like a big, complex machine. Machines are very efficient means of extracting and exploiting resources to create things of value, but they are absolutely incapable of self-renewal or regeneration the resources they extract and exploit. They eventually run out of resources from which to creation anything of value. The industrial way of thinking is irreconcilable with sustainability.

Sustainable development must be based on the paradigm or mental model of living organisms rather than inanimate mechanisms. Only living organisms are capable of self-renewal and regeneration and thus capable of offsetting the inevitable depletion of natural and human resources. Green plants have the ability to capture energy from the sun and store useful solar energy in their tissues to offset the depletion of fossil energy. Plants are biological solar energy collectors. People are also capable of capturing solar energy; we just use windmills, water impoundments, and photovoltaic cells. People also have the ability and natural tendency to produce new generations of people to offset the depletion of human energy. People, being biological beings, are inherently dependent on the energy stored by green plants. Sustainable development, including sustainable rural community development, must be based on the principles of renewing and regenerating living systems. The shift to a paradigm of sustainable living systems will create a whole new world of opportunities for people in rural communities.

To seize the opportunities presented by this time of crisis, people in rural communities must be willing to rethink their future. This doesn't mean they have to abandon their rural roots. In fact, they must return to their rural roots – to the fundamental purposes for people to live and work in rural areas. Rural communities were established in the places where they are today because there were compelling reasons for people to live and work in these particular places. These are their rural roots. People will need compelling reasons to choose to live and work in rural communities in the future. The rural *routes* of the past – the old ways, means, or road maps – will not guide rural communities to a sustainable future. Uniquely rural natural and human resources will be as critical in sustaining rural communities in the future as in the past.

Humans are inherently biological beings and we will always be dependent on biological energy from the plants and animals that provide our food – energy from the land, from agriculture. While urban agriculture may grow in popularity, humanity will continue to be dependent on the agriculture of rural areas. People also have an inherent need to connect with nature. That's why we value the things of nature, even things that have no economic value –

wildlife, old forests, prairies, scenic landscapes, and open spaces. Industrialization has separated people from nature, from the earth, and many are beginning to feel an urgent need to reconnect. Sustainable rural communities will be places where people can reconnect with the land, the source of their food, and with the other things of nature.

Sustainable rural communities must also be rooted in rural culture. Rural communities were once places where everyone knew everyone else. Most had grown up together, played together, gone to school together, dated each other, married each other, and raised their families together. Farmers once shared the labor-intensive work of farming and shared responsibility with the people in town for the future of their communities. Everyone had a sense of their identity or place through their interconnectedness within the community as a whole.

People still need meaningful relationships with other people. For some people, the connections of rural communities of the past were too close; they didn't want to know everything about everyone or everyone else. That's why many people left rural communities. However, the relentless competition and striving for economic success has separated people from each other. We see the consequences of growing social isolation in drug abuse, broken families, mental depression, ill health, and a nagging dissatisfaction with life. More people are beginning to realize we really do need other people. They need the sense of identity and connectedness that once characterized rural communities. They are looking for opportunities to reconnect – not to return to past relationships of necessity, but to establish new relationships of choice. Sustainable rural communities will be places where caring people can reconnect with other caring people.

As sustainable rural communities choose their new and unique ways, means, or routes to the future, they must remain true to their rural roots. The generic purpose of sustainable community development is *permanence*. Non-human communities – meaning living natural ecosystems – are *designed by nature* for permanence; their ways and means are encoded in their DNA. Human communities must find their unique ways, means, and courses of action for getting from where they are today to where they want to go in the future. Unlike non-humans, we must make conscious, purposeful choices that shape the future of our individual lives and lives of our individual communities. Thus for sustainable human communities, the purpose of permanence is not predetermined, but instead is a matter of collective choice.

Sustainable rural communities must be organized and governed as living organisms, rather than the inanimate mechanisms. Mechanisms function according to physical laws, which can often be expressed as mathematical formulas. Living systems function according to general principles which are more difficult to define and quantify – but no less real or unchanging. When we do something to a particular plant, animal, or person we never know for sure how they will respond. We know “in principle” how they will respond, but not how a particular plant, animal, or person will respond in a particular situation. Living things are guided by principles not by laws. Likewise, sustainable communities must be guided by the same basic principles that guide other sustainable living systems.

Living systems are holistic. A living organism is something more than the sum of its parts; it is a *whole*. They have properties that emerge from the whole that are not contained in their individual parts; relationships matter. Living systems are *diverse*. Diversity is necessary for

biological systems to capture and store the solar energy needed for resistance, resilience, renewal, and regeneration. The payoff from holism and diversity is realized through the living principle of *interdependence* or mutuality. Mutually beneficial relationships make it possible to create sustainable whole communities from a collection of diverse individual enterprises, organizations, and individuals that separately are simply not sustainable.

Sustainable human relationships – families, communities, societies – also depend on a core set of social principles. Sustainable relationships must be based on *trust* rather than laws and contracts. Laws can restrain only the incorrigible and antisocial. People must choose to be honest, fair, and responsible in their dealings with each other. Sustainable relationships must also be based on *caring* and kindness. We humans are fallible beings; we need mercy as well as justice; we need empathy, respect, and compassion. Finally, people must find the *courage* to trust and care in a world where such things are seen as naïve or idealistic. Sustainable communities must be made up of people with the courage to trust and to care.

Sustainable rural economies must be based on the basic economic principles that reflect the innate nature of individual human behavior. We value things individually that are *scarce*, not things that are necessary but also abundant, like air and water. Sustainable rural economies must produce things that have economic value. We need to get as much usefulness as we can from whatever we have; we need to use our time, money, and energy *efficiently*. Sustainable rural economies must function efficiently. We also need to make independent decisions; we value our *sovereignty*. Sustainable economies must protect the right to choose – the sovereignty of people.

Finally, sustainable rural communities must have ecological, social, and economic integrity – all three. These same basic principles must permeate all aspects of community life. The principles of holism, diversity, and interdependence must permeate rural societies and economies. The principles of trust, kindness, and courage must also be reflected in ecological and economic relationships within rural communities. And, the principles of scarcity, efficiency, and sovereignty must be used in managing rural natural ecosystems and maintaining social relationships. Sustainable rural development requires a renewed commitment to integrity based on organismic ways of thinking about how the world works and our place within it.

The basic principles of courage, sovereignty, interdependence will be particularly important to the future of rural communities. Faced with economic globalization, rural communities must find the courage to proclaim their sovereignty. They must reject continuing exploitation and extraction and participate only in economic and social relationships that are mutually beneficial. Sustainable communities must reestablish the social and economic boundaries that once defined local economies and local social networks. The purpose of such boundaries must be to protect local natural and human resources from economic exploitation. The purpose of such boundaries is not to prevent communications or transactions with those outside the community, but instead to allow communities to be selective in their outside social and economic relationships.

Every healthy living cell, organism, and organization is defined by boundaries that are semi-permeable in nature, meaning they are selective in what they allow in and out. It is this selectiveness – this ability to let some things in, keep some things out; keep some things in, let some things out – that allows living organisms and organizations to live, grow, renew, and

reproduce. Every sustainable community must have the ability to protect its resources and its people from outside exploitation, while benefitting from mutually beneficial communications and trade with other communities. Sustainable communities must find the courage to declare their economic sovereignty and participate only in relationships of choice, rather than necessity.

Sustainable rural communities of the future will have their own unique identity, including their own local economies and cultures. They will not be isolated but will choose which social and ethical values they welcome into their communities and which they discourage or keep out. They will not be economically self-sufficient, but locally owned and operated businesses will be capable of meeting most basic day-to-day needs of the community. Local businesses will be sustained by the commitment of the community to support its local economy. Large corporate manufacturers and retailers will be supplemental or secondary providers of goods and services, if they survive. Local farmers will provide sustainably-grown foods. Local builders will provide affordable, energy-efficient housing. Manufacturers of consumer durable goods – washers, dryers, refrigerators – will provide additional local employment, but will not dominate local employment. Energy-generating residences and locally-owned electric utilities will meet most of the energy needs of the community with wind, water, and solar generated electricity.

Natural living systems are inherently *dispersed*, as well as diverse. Things in nature move away from the areas of highest concentration and away from sameness toward diversity. In a post-industrial society, populations will be more geographically dispersed, providing new opportunities for rural areas. The big cities are relics of industrialization; masses of workers had to be gathered in central locations to work in the factories and offices of large industrial organizations. Cheap fossil energy allowed the cities to survive long after their initial economic advantages were lost. Raw materials could be shipped to cities from anywhere and products could be shipped from cities to people everywhere. But the industrial era is over as are the days of cheap fuel energy. The logical response will be population dispersion and economic diversification – not the urban sprawl of today but densely-populated, geographically-dispersed, rural communities integrated into a new energy-efficient transportation network.

Sustainable rural communities of the future will also be more diverse in their social and economic relationships. Many will be “intentional communities” in the sense that more people in the future will choose places where they want to live and work and then find a way to make a living in those places. People will be looking for places to live with clean air and water, scenic landscapes, open spaces, and opportunities to connect with nature. They will be looking for places where people know and care about each other where they can find a sense of identity and belonging. Many of the communities considered the most desirable places to live by an increasing number of people in the future will be in rural areas.

Finally, what does all this have to do with architectural conservancy? Architecture – design, style, and structure – is the physical manifestation of a community's sense of place. The architecture that remains in any community at a particular point in time is a reflection of cultural values of the community. It reflects not only the things they have chosen to construct and to use, but also which of those things they have chosen to conserve and preserve for the edification and advantage of future generations. Architecture is a reflection of their most lasting and enduring cultural values of a rural community – its rural roots

Rural people today are at a time of crisis, a critical point in time when their choices will fundamentally shape the future of their communities, for either better or worse. As with choices related to architectural conservancy, they must choose what aspects of their past culture they must preserve for the edification and advantage of future generations and what aspects of their past they must let go and destruct or allow to decay. The sustainability of their communities depends on their ability to find harmony and balance between the old and the new, to choose new rural routes without abandoning their rural roots. They must integrate the lasting purpose and core principles embodied in the designs, style, and structures of the past into the new designs, styles, and structures that will be necessary for the future. They must preserve the best of rural places and cultures, their roots, as they explore and travel new routes to a better future.

Rural people of the future can build the durability, functionality, and understated elegance of rural and small town residences of the past into residences of the future. The disposable, superfluous, boxy houses of the past several decades will be preserved only as examples of the decay of rural American values during the latter stages of the industrial era. The new American farmers of the future can gain valuable insights from the principles of sustainability that were built into farmsteads of the past. The huge confinement buildings that now house factory livestock feeding operations and the mobile homes of migrant farm workers will be razed and buried, but their shameful legacy hopefully never forgotten.

The farmsteads that have been preserved – farmhouses, barns, and outbuildings – were organized to accommodate the whole of farm life – living, working, learning, growing, and relating to the larger community. The classic old barns reflect the diversity of enterprises that will be required to farm sustainably. They provided shelter for horses and a variety of livestock; storage for grain, hay, silage, and farm machinery. They integrated all of these functions into a single, functional but still elegant structure – the embodiment of interdependence or mutuality.

The stately old churches of farming towns stand as symbols of the necessity for farmers, landowners, and other rural residents to work together to sustain a desirable quality of life both in their community and in the larger society, not just for current generations but for all generations of the future. The designs, styles, and structures of the future must be different from those of the past to accommodate a world that is running out of fossil energy and filling up with industrial wastes. But the architectural principles of the future will be essentially the same as those rural people have chosen to preserve in rural places.

Rural communities today face many challenges but also have many opportunities. Many are still places with clean air, clean water, open spaces, scenic landscapes, and opportunities for peace, quiet, and privacy. Many are still places where people have a sense of belonging, friendly places where people know and care about each other, where crime rates are low and a strong sense of safety and security still exists. Preservation of rural architecture is often the most visible characteristic of the lasting qualities people value most in rural communities. They reflect the rural characteristics people value in considering places to work and to live. These values are the foundation for sustainable community development. The tasks ahead will not be easy. The dangers are many but the so are the opportunities for those rural communities that can find the courage to confront their reality, reclaim their sovereignty, and choose a new and better future.