



## MEMORANDUM

**TO:** Caren Thomas, Chair, and Members of the Glencoe Plan Commission  
**FROM:** Lee M. Brown, FAICP  
**DATE:** July 7, 2015  
**SUBJECT:** Glencoe Tune-Up: Urban Form

The following discussion of urban form is intended to bridge the gap between the analysis necessary to come to an understanding of urban form, and the recommendations that will, hopefully, be included in the Tune-up plan document. This gap derives from the fact that urban design is not familiar ground for many of us, and is often perceived as a derivative of subjective perception and professional voodoo. Complicating this is the fact that there is a very distinct separation between the techniques used to analyze and understand urban form, which are forensic and often abstract and didactic, and process of setting physical and programmatic goals for urban form in its planning documents.

***Urban form goals will be articulated through Plan graphics (maps and illustrations) for Downtown, and thus move the planning discussion from the abstract to the concrete—from idea to action.***

Developing a plan for urban form in Downtown Glencoe should involve several steps, including identifying what exists, (recognizing our oft-repeated starting point, "Downtown is not broken, we wish to enhance it"), characterizing its strengths and weaknesses, and recommending how to enhance strengths and diminish weakness. The first part, described below as Visualization, is the inventory and the characterization of Downtown Glencoe from an urban design perspective, and may be perceived as too academic for inclusion in the plan; the second part, the recommendations, are the planning responses to the characterization.

### Visualizing Downtown Glencoe

The standard nomenclature of the analysis of urban form<sup>1</sup> includes 5 elements that derive from creating personal mental maps of places and development patterns and the way we perceive and relate to them: **Paths; Edges; Districts; Nodes; Landmarks**. There are, of course, many other "elements" of urban form, (massing, void, texture, rhythm, etc.), but in the lexicon of visualization, these 5 are key. Planners use these terms in the forensic analysis of urban form; not because we want to create paths, edges, districts, nodes or landmarks (and in so doing create places), but rather, we use them to better understand how a place is perceived. Each of these elements may be found in various sizes/scales with varying impacts and importance. For example, paths may range from the occasionally meandered space between buildings, say, from a parking space to a store, or may be as significant as a freeway moving through a district; nodes may be the stoop of a favorite ice cream shop, or may be the Piazza del San Marco.

**Paths** are the channels along which the observer customarily, occasionally, or can potentially moves. To a considerable extent, we perceive places (districts, village's, regions...) as a memory of observations made while moving through it; a visual narrative of sorts.

Green Bay Road and the Union Pacific Right of way that it parallels form the most significant, highest volume path associated with Downtown Glencoe. Park Avenue and Vernon Avenues are secondary paths which carry the most traffic into and through Downtown; Hazel Avenue, Tudor Court and Temple

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<sup>1</sup> Lynch, Kevin, *The Image of the City*. Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1960

Court provide a tertiary pathway serving a portion of downtown, and Glencoe Drive and Old Green Bay Road act as peripheral paths. Each of these are, for the most part, paths for automobile access into and through downtown, and secondarily serve pedestrian (and maybe bike) access within downtown. There are several pedestrian paths worth noting: the pedestrian path along the west side of the Harris Bank Drive-up, which connects Park Avenue to Tudor Court; the sidewalks that radiate out of the Village Court parking lot to the retail core; the short-cut along the western edge of the post office; the sidewalk connections to Central School, Kalk Park, the Metra station and parking. Much of the bicycle path is peripheral (Green Bay Trail and to a lesser extent the North Shore Trail) but we cannot ignore the connections at Hazel and Park, and into the neighborhood from Vernon.

**Edges** are the linear elements not used or considered as paths: they are usually, but not quite always, the boundaries between two kinds of areas.

Downtown has both strong edges that enclose and define, and weaker edges which allow spill out or leak in from the surrounding neighborhood. Green Bay Road and the Railroad combine to be a very strong edge, and in fact create a barrier to the perception of Kalk Park, the train station and the east side parking lot as part of downtown. There is little to define the edge between the Friends Park/Writers Theatre and the northern neighborhood. The homes facing Greenwood appear to be separated from downtown by an edge comprised of an alley or side wall of a multifamily dwelling. There is an edge between the Temple Court Lot and the residences to the south, and an edge along the southern side of Hazel Avenue, comprised of wall / façade of the public works building as the street dives below Green Bay Road, and of the suburban, paved setback to the Shell station. The result of these latter two edges is perceived as a district of a different character and image lying south of Hazel, separated from the balance of the Downtown.

**Districts** are sub-sections of the place, having a two-dimensional area, which the observer mentally “enters” and which are recognizable as having some common identifying character

The heart of Downtown, to many, is the core retail district, either side and facing Park Avenue between Vernon and Village Court. Though other commercial activities adjoin these buildings (and there is residential uses above in several cases) this district distinguishes itself in character. Other commercial niche districts include: the Arts district emerging either side of Tudor Court; the Personal Services district west of Vernon either side of Park; the Food District on both sides of Vernon south of the Core and Personal Services districts; the Professional Services district either side of Hazel west of Vernon; the Civic District (Library/Wyman Green/Village Hall/Post Office); and the No-Man’s Land district south of Hazel.

**Nodes** are points, the strategic spots in a place into which an observer can enter, and which are the intensive foci to and from which she is traveling, and often become a reference point along a path. They are often junctions, or intersections or simply concentrations which gain their importance from being the concentration of some activities or physical character, as a street-corner hangout or an enclosed square.

Glencoe’s nodes vary in intensity and cause. The node at Park Avenue and Green Bay Road may be the most intense, as the confluence of traffic volume, turning movements, pedestrian crossing, and the “gateway” to downtown. Park Avenue and Vernon is the “100% intersection for retailing, and pedestrian activity, and dogs; the Village Court Parking Lot is a node of departure and traffic; the Friends Park is a node for families, the Library and Post Office and coffee shops are networking nodes.

**Landmarks** are another type of reference point, but in this case the observer does not enter inside them, they are external. Landmarks can be great or small, including signs, store fronts, trees, doorknobs, church steeples, buildings, or other urban details, which help knit together the many separate images

made by the observer along a path. Landmarks attract the eye and draw one further ahead, while at the same time leaving impressions that form, over time, natural mental maps and comfortable orientation.

Glencoe's landmarks also vary in scale and distance from which they are referenced. The Village Hall and the Library sit in positions and have a scale that commands reference from a distance, as does the emerging Writers Theatre building. The Harris Bank, the cell tower on the roof of the apartments at 373 Hazel, and the Chimney above the Public Works Building all have significant height and visibility. The Wienecke flag and sign, the many other unique building cornices, and other architectural features are pedestrian landmarks and reinforce the predominant two-story scale of the district.

### Strengths and Weaknesses

Given the underlying and fundamental acceptance of the limits of Downtown, our plan must emphasize, enhance, and extend the strengths, and eliminate and diminish weaknesses.

**Scale and Walkability** are strengths over much of the downtown. The sidewalks and streetscape are attractive, comfortable, paralleling the storefront accesses. The diagonal parking lining both sides of a two-way roadways has a traditional feel that most drivers perceive as convenient and easy to navigate. Building and awning-mounted signs serve to inform drivers, and window signs inform pedestrians of the goods and services provided. Face-to-face (store-front facing store-front) retailing and small store spaces appears to support comparison shopping. Proportionately high number of first floor windows supports window shopping, and evoke a sense of security. Second and third story uses frame the path and create outdoor rooms through which downtown users (on foot, bike or in vehicles) move and perceive the downtown in sequences that engender a positive, memorable image. Pedestrian scale lighting and building/interior highlighting extend the hours of safe, attractive walking.

This positive scale and walkability are apparent along the Park Avenue and Vernon Avenue paths through the Core Retail and Personal Service districts. It is diminished slightly on Vernon Avenue through the Food district due to the loss of consistent second story framing of the outdoor room. It is similarly diminished by the unevenness of framing and unevenness of activity on either side of Tudor Court and either side of Hazel Avenue; especially East of Vernon, neither of these paths enjoy store-front to store-front retailing, nor an even balance of parking on either side. The Village Court (street) is not a pedestrian friendly path. It is relegated to the side orientation of every building that frames it...(the library and Village Hall on the east, the Grand Foods and Chase Bank on west (Chase has one entrance off the parking lot and one at the corner of Park and Village Court with plenty of windows facing Village Court). The sidewalk configuration south of Wyman Green and Village Court Parking lot discourages anyone from circumnavigating around the central block of Downtown and is one of several elements which contributes to the disconnect of the No-Man's Land south of Hazel. Temple Court offers no comfort or attraction to a pedestrian, and no welcome to anyone entering Downtown from the south.

### Diversity and Differentiation

Park Avenue is the primary gateway into Downtown Glencoe, in part because of the rail station/rail parking, and in part because of very limited access from Green Bay Road into Downtown. Luckily, this path is visually the strongest, creating the first impression of overall balance, scale, walkability, vitality and architectural diversity. Despite the zero setback condition along Park Avenue, and along a portion of Vernon Avenue, the path is anything but monotonous. No single building exceeds 15% of the block face and most business spaces are less than 10%. There is similarity in cornice line, lintel levels, window lines, and building rhythm, yet there is no uniformity. It is a mix of one, two and three story buildings. Harris Bank, a visual landmark, is a story taller than its neighbors, but does not dominate or tower incongruously. From one end of Park Avenue to the other, there is lots of glass and brick, but there are a dozen colors and patterns of brick and differences in style and trim and entries and embellishments. This adds up to a character that is at once both unifying and diverse. It is the result of

organic development and change over time, reflecting the unique perspective of individual property owners and changing tastes. It is the opposite end of the spectrum from conventional shopping centers and big box strip centers, or planned neo-traditional business districts. Where Downtown Glencoe becomes weakest is where it loses its diversity, pedestrian orientation and framing of the outdoor room along the path (becoming predominantly single-story; longer, more massive buildings along the path; “missing teeth” in the framing wall to setbacks and auto accommodations; diminishing store-front glazing or orienting building-entries away from the path).

## Recommendations

Given the conclusion that a contributor to the strength of the urban form of Downtown Glencoe is its organic development, we make planning recommendations at some peril. That said, there are lessons here which will allow the Village and property-owners to extend the strengths into the remainder of the Downtown vessel.

- Eliminate the disconnect between the stronger portion of the downtown and the “no-man’s land” by introduces uses, spaces, building massing and public spaces where people will want to be.
  - Be watchful of the spacing of streets and the massing of buildings so as to diminish the potential for monotony or over-orchestration
  - Establish guidelines for new development that require being attentive to specific, key design characteristics like cornice lines, windows, doorways and building orientation, etc.
- Extend the comfortable walking environment of the framed “outdoor room” throughout downtown, paying particular attention to Village Court, Hazel Avenue and the southern gateway into Downtown, with a priority on windows and doorways on the street.
  - Consider eliminating the boulevard element of Village Court, and encourage display windows and the relocation of the loading dock on Grand Foods
  - Can Village Hall ever have an entry on Village Court?
  - Activate the Wyman Green frontage on Village Court.
- Build in diversity and differentiation into architecture through enhanced design guidelines for public and private buildings and site improvements.
- Allow vehicles and pedestrians the greatest opportunity to circulate without needing to exit out of Downtown.
  - Consider extending Village Court through to the southern gateway
  - Formalize and enhance the pedestrian spine from Tudor to Temple
- Enhance the gateways, particularly the southern gateway from Green Bay Road, to draw in visitors and users, and enhance the sense of arrival and uniqueness of Downtown that differentiates it.
  - Celebrate the arrival into Downtown with visible gateway enhancements, streetscape and public art.
  - Consider lighting improvements to enhance the usable, comfortable hours of the day, which enhance the festiveness and joyful character of Downtown
- Maintain the healthy on-street parking balance, and require extraordinary parking demand to be served by non-visible parking resources.
  - If there are parking structures, give them storefronts along the street/sidewalk
  - Be thoughtful with the position and orientation of potential parking improvements, and the wayfinding that contributes to their utility.
- Encourage the creation of nodes where paths will cross (without conflict) and where folks are comfortable gathering, informally, randomly, as part of their daily life.
  - If there will be additional or enhanced parking, encourage places (nodes) along the path (to and from the parking) where activities and spaces are attractive (to sit or explore) and in so doing, shorten the perceived distance to the destination.

- o Encourage building siting and building types which support uses that enliven and diversify the economy and uniqueness of Downtown Glencoe, bringing people into Downtown for a variety of reasons, at a variety of times during the day and evening.