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2015 Research at Andrews

Andrews University

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Andrew von Maur, professor of architecture, creates Master Plans. Much of his work involves taking an existing location and developing a design that would transform it. “Master planning is a long range view,” he says. “What you are trying to do as a planner is strike a balance between being flexible—the plan can’t be too rigid—and offering a useful and powerful direction.”

His work as a professional, however, is not exclusive of his role as a teacher. “The things that I learn on projects make their way back into the classroom,” he says. Some of his biggest projects have begun with students.

In 2012, von Maur began working with 20 graduate students on the Andrews University Campus Plan, “A Campus for Health & Wellness” (andrews.edu/campusplan). During the summer months, the team made a 3D model of the campus. Then, in the fall, they conducted a number of “information-gathering meetings” with staff to gain a better understanding of the current issues affecting campus function and design.

Once their analysis was complete, they began the participatory process with the University. This involved having workshops with campus leaders, conducting surveys, and participating in a two-day design charrette, or intensive planning session, with seven Andrews University architecture alumni.

“The most useful part of this project was the [development of] design principles that are supposed to guide the designers,” von Maur reflects. “Our built environment reflects our values.” Simplicity, economy and restraint are all principles illustrated on the Andrews University campus. Buildings, for example, are “a more restrained background to other things like the life of the campus or the natural characteristics, such as the arboretum or more formal green spaces.”

Von Maur cites Ellen White, the co-founder of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and E.A. Sutherland, the first president of what is now Andrews University, as particular sources of inspiration for overarching design.
principles. Sutherland “advocated the use of smaller, simple buildings to avoid debt” and to “improve access to natural light and fresh air, and to promote a student culture of self-government and independent thinking” (“Finding E.A. Sutherland in Virginia,” Campus Master Plan Blog, http://www.andrews.edu/campusplan/?p=225).

Using these principles and information gathered from the analysis and participatory process, the team developed a final draft of the Master Plan, which was developed and submitted in March of 2013. The June 2013 University board meeting voted to accept the plan, and in the President’s report President Andreasen stated that “it was a very important board meeting—it decided what the campus would look like in the next ten years. This was a constructive board action and decision, and I personally attach a great deal of importance to that.” The plan also received a student honor award from AIA Michigan, a Society of the American Institute of Architects.

While the plan will take time to implement and may evolve as the leaders feel impressed to make changes, it presents a long-range vision for a campus that promotes healthful living both in aesthetically pleasing buildings and out in the beautiful natural surroundings of Andrews. The University is currently fundraising for a new Health & Wellness Center, which is a step towards implementing the plan.

From the campus plan, von Maur turned to the greater surrounding area: the Village of Berrien Springs and Oronoko Township. His interest in a community plan began in 2011 when he and fellow architect Jesse Hibler were preparing to teach a graduate level architecture class together in the fall. The client they had lined up for the class project suddenly backed out and von Maur and Hibler needed a new project idea. They had been paying attention to the local news and knew that, sooner or later, the sewer line in Berrien Springs would be extended, creating an opportunity for change and growth. Larger business would suddenly be able to plug into the sewer lines, potentially changing the look of the existing town. Hibler and von Maur seized the opportunity to examine the existing regulations and create a plan for how development should take place in a way that would match what the community wanted instead of simply allowing haphazard growth.

That fall, they worked with students to create a vision for the Village and Township, which they published in a book, “A Vision for Growth and Conservation: Berrien Springs & Oronoko Township, Michigan.” Hibler and von Maur informed the leadership of the Village and Township of the project and invited them to review the vision the students had developed.

The leadership, to the surprise of the design team, became very excited about the project and bought multiple copies of the book, which they showed to politicians and developers. The students won the 2012 Congress for the New Urbanism Charter Award for the project, but for about a year no further contact was initiated.

Then, following the completion of the University Master Plan in 2013, von Maur received a call with an offer for the graduate design students to do the project again, this time involving the community and leadership in the development of a concrete plan. Von Maur agreed and the students began working on a project proposal.

Berrien Springs is comprised of two municipalities: the Village of Berrien Springs and Oronoko Township. The Village begins at the Lutheran Church and extends east, while the Township begins at Baguette de France and extends to the west. The town spreads fluidly across the municipalities with only a small green sign in front of Chemical Bank indicating the change of governance. For many permanent residents and University students living in and around Berrien, there is little external evidence to suggest differences between the two. However, on the level of governance, the differences become more obvious. The Township and Village have separate public codes such as zoning and levels of taxation.
Larry Schalk, vice president for Financial Administration at Andrews University and Oronoko Township treasurer, commented on the collaboration: “The township specifically, and the village as well, wants to develop a deeper relationship with the university. They want to engage, where possible, faculty, staff and students to work with them when they have the expertise.” For the M-139 plan, von Maur and his students had exactly the kind of expertise the village and township needed.

It became quite clear at the beginning of the project that zoning was a big issue in the village and township. The students researched all the properties and their zoning along M-139, assessing what the existing zoning allowed property owners to do, and what changes needed to be made to the current zoning. “We were blessed with students who were genuine in their willingness to be of service and make a difference. They had a humble spirit and enough drive that they were able to connect well with the people involved,” he reflects.

Von Maur and his students invited property owners and stakeholders to learn about and discuss the current regulations. “It was fantastic because the students were able to educate the property owners about the existing zoning and walk them through these diagrams, explaining what they could do with the current zoning,” he says.

According to von Maur, it had been very rare for members of the public and general property owners to collaborate on a common initiative that affected both the village and the township until this project. “Everyone was thinking about their collective future in a way that was constructive, positive and forward-thinking,” he says.

The general consensus among property owners, following the meetings, was that the existing zoning was not conducive to what the property owners wanted to do with their land and how the community as a whole hoped to develop.

For example, both the Village of Berrien Springs and Oronoko Township had Master Plans, but the plans did not match the zoning. And while the Master Plans are intended to serve as guides for town planning, they do not carry the force of law. Zoning does. “Both Master Plans emphasize a walkable environment, so people can walk from business to nearby residences,” von Maur notes. But the zoning did not enable or promote such an environment. “Everything was basically automobile oriented, forcing you to separate the residential from the commercial to the extent that walkability becomes either very difficult or impossible.”

Many residents were not pleased with the aesthetic results of zoning that emphasized automobiles. Buildings have to be set further back to allow for parking in front, which means bigger signs to attract the attention of potential customers. Whereas if cars park to the side of the buildings, it leaves more room for sidewalks and the buildings themselves, allowing stores to have smaller signs on the buildings instead of larger signs out front.

“It changes the way everything looks,” von Maur remarks. “People didn’t realize that the existing zoning didn’t promote the kind of things they were hoping to see happen.” Von Maur and his students met with community officials and decided to propose a new code that would meet the vision set out in the Master Plans. They published their plan as the “M-139 Corridor Improvement Plan: Berrien Springs & Oronoko Charter Township, Michigan” (available online at andrews.edu/andrewssaad/uds/).

The Township and Village hired a planning company that took the work the Andrews team had done and turned it into a legally adoptable document. “They [the planning company] kept telling us that they didn’t know of any precedent in the state where two political entities, the Township and Village, have collaborated so successfully. It’s a really great testament to the ability of our students through their academic work to be involved in real service-oriented projects that intend to improve people’s lives. I suppose it’s a form of ministry and a way to be a missionary,” von Maur says glowingly.

“There is something about working with a client in order to build something that will help improve their lives and then seeing the outcome in a visually manifest way,” he continues. For von Maur, putting his students to work is highly rewarding. “The thing I love most about teaching is getting the students out of the classroom and doing real work while they are in school. That’s where the soul of the work is. It’s not in the theoretical work; it’s in the application. That’s where you learn the most.”

Von Maur’s work has not gone unrecognized. In addition to receiving a number of awards for his work, Andrews University awarded von Maur the Siegfried H. Horn Excellence in Research & Creative Scholarship Award and the J.N. Andrews Medallion, which are given as recognition for excellence in research, teaching and service, this last spring.

On April 28, 2015, the Oronoko Charter Planning Commission unanimously voted to recommend the adoption of the new code. The Village has already had a public hearing. The Township board will be voting on it during a joint meeting with the Village of Berrien Springs.

“It’s not perfect,” Von Maur admits, “and there will be some people who disagree with the way this ended up going. Some of it will not turn out the way we were hoping it would. But we found that it was better for us to do something than to do nothing. I think the best part of the whole process was working with the people and helping to educate them about that aspect of their community and helping them build a vision and consensus about where it should go.”