

## Focus on Aesthetics

Building a community is a lot like running a marathon. It's not speed that matters, but endurance, as making it to the finish line is the ultimate goal. This is not to say that it's impossible to make large strides in the race. As has been proved by multiple cities, large strides are indeed possible, but if you're starting from the ground up, you need to be in it for the long haul. After all, most small cities faced decades of neglect and population losses, and these sorts of trends are not something that can be remedied overnight.

In this chapter, we'll explore the marathon that is small-city revitalization by focusing on the incremental steps certain cities have taken, with particular attention to the role of aesthetics. Many of these steps are common-sense notions and have been borrowed from larger urban areas but have been adapted to fit the needs of a small community. As we'll demonstrate, it's always important to think big and keep your eye on your ultimate goals, but rushing too fast and glossing over the basics of good design and curb appeal are the quickest ways to lose steam.

### *The Science Behind Aesthetics*

As human beings, we are predisposed to prefer beauty and even to seek it actively. We typically perceive it to indicate quality and superiority, and this phenomenon is known as the beauty premium. Interestingly, the inherent bias for beauty is found even in infants, as they prefer attractive faces over unattractive ones.<sup>1</sup> As creatures with five core senses, we inherently want things that look, taste, feel, sound and smell right. Our affinity for beauty is deeply rooted and is reflected in all aspects of our behavior, including consumption.

Marketers recognize that aesthetics is ubiquitous and carefully consider it during product development and promotion. We make decisions

based on our automatic responses to aesthetics every day. We choose one phone case over another at the mall because of its color or choose someone on a dating website because of his or her pleasant appearance. Our affinity for beauty is reflected in our actions and is frequently instinctive. Aesthetic considerations are pervasive and are an integral part of our lives, including our consumption. In this highly competitive market environment, there is an increased parity in the functionality of products, which means that each product functions as expected. However, consumer choices are also swayed by the aesthetics of particular products and services.

The concept of aesthetics is fascinating due to its omnipresence and its almost automatic effects. Aesthetics play a vital role in our lives and are significant in our decision-making processes.<sup>2</sup> Think for a second about your own experience when walking past a bakery or a restaurant pumping out sweet or savory smells through their vents. Chances are you're likely to think about your hunger and make a stop. In fact, so ingrained is beauty in our DNA that there is an intelligence and moral equivalency that comes into play when we interact with each other:

[B]eautiful children are rated as more intelligent than unattractive children, even when their grades are the same (Clifford & Walster, 1973). Similarly, employees with above-average physical attractiveness enjoy the beauty premium regarding higher salaries (Hamermesh & Biddle, 1994), and people demonstrate more willingness to help attractive people than unattractive people [Andreoni and Petrie, 2008].<sup>3</sup>

In addition, studies have shown that employers tend to show preference for those with attractive features and personalities during the hiring process, even going so far as to give the edge to better looking candidates even their skillsets might not match those of other candidates.

As living and breathing organisms in their own right, cities too are judged by humans on their aesthetic values. When driving down the road of a strange and unfamiliar place, for example, our focus tends to be on our personal well-being, which, as we mentioned in an earlier chapter, is driven by instincts. Such instincts are reinforced through our experiences directly related to our comfort level. Foot traffic, shaded trees and well-maintained storefronts are all going to relax our anxiety and therefore increase our likelihood to stay in an area—while unkempt sidewalks, weeded-out parks, and unpleasant odors are all likely to prevent us from exploring the area by raising our danger inhibitors. As Mari Peltonen notes:

In addition to visual features, the city is associated with smells, flavours and soundscapes characteristic of it. This way, various food cultures and urban technologies become part of a multisensory urban experience.... Aesthetic values pertaining to cities are also affected by cognitive, ethical and ecological values. What we find pleasant or aesthetically interesting always reflects, to a certain degree, our knowledge of the subject or phenomenon in question, and whether we otherwise consider it desirable.<sup>4</sup>

Like a residential home, proper aesthetics can be achieved through attention to design and curb appeal. Such curb appeal, with regards to an urban environment, can be broken down into four distinct categories, which include:

- Streetscapes—the sensory elements that enhance the nature of the street (signs, lighting, etc.)
- Greenscapes—the greenery in public gathering spaces (trees, flowers, etc.)
- Townscapes—the general look of the urban landscape (buildings, pocket parks, etc.)
- Soundscapes—the general auditory environment of the area

All these things play a role in determining the success of a revitalizing downtown and are critical to achieving investment from both consumers and business developers. No one, after all, wants to spend time in a place that makes them feel uneasy, so why should we expect anything different in our small cities? By starting small and focusing on the aesthetics, we open the path to creating an environment that is welcoming for all.

### *A Sign for Every Kind: Guidelines from San Marcos, Texas*

When it comes to tailoring the aesthetics of your small community, one of the first things you should tackle is your streetscape, and the best way to go about doing so is through a sign ordinance. As the chief identifiers of businesses, signs are the most impactful visual element of your urban center and can play a leading role in one's decision to spend money there.

By regulating the type, size, and location of signs in a municipality (as well as the process for erecting new signs), a sign ordinance can help preserve or create community character and stop visually distracting sign competition between businesses. A municipality may adopt a sign ordinance as a part of the zoning ordinance or as a stand-alone

ordinance.<sup>5</sup> The National Park Service recommends the following when designing and constructing new signs for historic buildings:

- signs should be viewed as part of an overall graphics system for the building.
- new signs should respect the size, scale and design of the historic building.
- sign placement is important: new signs should not obscure significant features of the historic building. (Signs above a storefront should fit within the historic signboard, for example.)
- new signs should also respect neighboring buildings. They should not shadow or overpower adjacent structures.
- sign materials should be compatible with those of the historic building.
- new signs should be attached to the building carefully, both to prevent damage to historic fabric, and to ensure the safety of pedestrians.<sup>6</sup>

This is something the small city of San Marcos, Texas (pop. 63,000), sought to do as part of their Vision San Marcos Comprehensive Plan back in 2018. To gain a better understanding of how they applied these standards to their own ordinance, I'm including the full guidelines listed below:

#### **Article 2: Sign Guidelines**

##### **Division 1: OVERARCHING SIGN GUIDELINES IN CD-5 AND CD-5D**

###### **Section A.2.1.1 Purpose**

This section provides general design guidelines for signs. Balancing the functional requirements for signs with the objectives for the overall character of the area is a key sign design consideration. A sign is seen as serving two functions: first, to attract attention; and second, to convey information, essentially identifying the business or services offered. Orderly sign location and design should be applied to make fewer and smaller signs more effective. If a sign is mounted on a building with a well-designed facade, the building front alone can serve much of the attention-getting function. The sign can then focus on conveying information in a well-conceived manner. Similarly, for a free-standing sign, landscaping and other site amenities can help to give identity to the businesses located on the site. In this respect, each sign should be considered with the overall composition of the building and the site in mind. Signs should be in scale with their structure and integrated with surrounding buildings.

- A. Consider a sign in the context of the overall building and site design.
- B. Design a sign to be in scale with its setting.
- C. Design a sign to highlight architectural features of the building.
- D. Design a sign to convey visual interest to pedestrians.
- E. Avoid damaging or obscuring architectural details or features when installing signs on historic structures.

#### **Section A.2.1.2 Guidelines**

**A. Historic Signs in CD-5D.** Historic signs within CD-5D contribute to the character of downtown. They also have individual value, apart from the buildings to which they are attached. Historic signs of all types should be retained and restored whenever possible. This is especially important when they are a significant part of a building's history or design.

1. Consider history, context and design when determining whether to retain a historic sign.

**B. Sign Character in CD-5 and CD-5D.** A sign should be in character with the materials, colors and details of the building and its site. The integration of an attached sign with the building or building facade is important and should be a key factor in its design and installation. Signs also should be visually interesting and clearly legible. Signs that appear to be custom-designed and fabricated, and that convey visual interest in the urban setting are preferred. Those that are scaled to the pedestrian are especially encouraged. A sign should also reflect the overall context of the building and surrounding area.

- 1. A sign should be subordinate to the overall building composition.
- 2. Use sign materials that are compatible with the architectural character and materials of the building.
- 3. A sign should not obscure character-defining features of a building.

#### **C. Sign Illumination in CD-5D**

- 1. Illumination should occur in a manner that keeps it subordinate to the overall building and its site as well as the neighborhood, while accomplishing the functional needs of the business. Minimize surface glare and manage light spill such that glare is not created on adjoining properties.
- 2. Where allowed, an external light source should be shielded to direct the light and minimize glare.
- 3. External Illumination, Tube Lighting, Halo Lighting, and Direct Illumination shall be designed to be in character with, and subordinate to, the building facade.

#### **Section A.2.1.3 Specific Sign Types**

**A. Awning or Canopy Sign.** An awning or canopy sign may be placed on either the vertical valance flap, the top, the sloped portion, or on a side panel of the awning or canopy.

- 1. Use an awning or canopy sign in areas with high pedestrian use.

2. Use an awning or canopy sign when other sign types would obscure architectural details.

**B. Projecting Sign.** A projecting sign is attached perpendicular to the wall of a building or structure.

1. Design a bracket for a projecting sign to complement the sign composition.
2. Locate a projecting sign to relate to the building façade and entries.

**C. Sandwich Board Sign.** A sandwich board is a portable sign designed in an A-frame or other fashion, and having back-to-back sign faces.

1. Locate a sandwich board to maintain a clear circulation path on the sidewalk. A minimum of 4 feet in clearance is required.
2. Design the sandwich board to be durable and have a stable base.

**D. Wall Sign.** A wall sign is a sign that is attached flat against the facade of the building consisting of individual cut letters applied directly to the building, or painted directly on the surface of the building.

1. Place a wall sign to be flat against the building facade.
2. Place wall signs to integrate with and not obscure building details and elements.

**E. Directory Sign.** A tenant panel or directory sign displays the tenant name and location for a building containing multiple tenants.

1. Use a directory sign to consolidate small individual signs on a larger building.
2. Locate a directory sign at the street level entrance to upper floor businesses or on facades facing entrances to alleys, rear lanes and parking lots for business way finding purposes.

**F. Pole and Monument Signs.** A monument sign is a sign that is erected on a solid base placed directly on the ground and constructed of a solid material. A pole mounted sign is generally mounted on one or two simple poles.

1. A pole or monument sign may be considered where it has been used traditionally and the building or activity is set back from the street or public right-of-way.
2. A pole or monument sign may be considered on a historic property or within a historic district when it is demonstrated that no other option is appropriate.
3. Design a pole or monument sign to be in character and proportionate with its structure and site.
4. Design a monument sign to incorporate a sturdy supporting base that is at least 75 percent of the width of the sign face at its widest point. Appropriate base materials include, but are not limited to brick, stone, masonry and concrete.<sup>7</sup>

As you can see from the above model, guidelines for a sign ordinance don't have to be overly complicated. They can be achieved by simply

defining the types of signage that exist, with recommendations that any new signage adhere to the principle of enhancing the architectural features of an area. While some ordinances go overboard with trying to cram too much information in, the City of San Marcos actually does a pretty good job with making it user-friendly.

### *The Importance of Trees*

Whether we realize it or not, our personalities are molded through the kinds of stimuli we come into contact with each day. These stimuli can affect our moods, our habits, and most importantly, our anxiety levels.

As mentioned earlier, our anxiety level is often the motivating cause for whether we choose to spend time in a location. This is why natural greenscapes like trees play such an important role in developing a sustainable urban environment. Not only do they provide shade and oxygen, but also, they play a role in reducing anxiety. Two studies examined this phenomenon.

In the first, 585 young adult Japanese participants reported on their moods after walking for 15 minutes, either in an urban setting or in a forest. The forests and urban centers were in 52 different locations around the country and about a dozen participants walked in each area. In comparison to those who walked in urban centers, the participants who walked in the forest were shown to be less irritable, depressed and fatigued and emerged overall less anxious and with more vigor. The



**Having an ordinance to encourage proper signage can go a long way towards giving your downtown a more cohesive look. Here we see an example of a bracketed sign in front of a downtown barbershop (author's collection).**

psychological benefits of walking through forests are very significant, and forest environments are expected to have very important roles in promoting mental health in the future," the authors write. Indeed, various other studies suggest that the practice of "forest bathing"—deliberately spending time among the woods—can help us deal with the stresses and strains of urban living.<sup>8</sup>

In a similar study, participants in Poland were asked to spend 15 minutes gazing either at either a forested landscape in winter or at an urban area devoid of trees. The trees in the forest had straight trunks and no greenery due to the cold and there was no other shrubbery present. Meanwhile the urban landscape consisted solely of roads and buildings. The participants were then asked to fill out questionnaires related to their moods and emotions. It was discovered that those who viewed the forested landscape were more likely to report significantly better moods, more positive emotions, more vigor, and a greater sense of personal restoration afterwards than those who gazed at the urban scene.

As researchers from both studies noted both outcomes are likely due to the effects that trees have on our brains, as it showed people in proximity to trees as having better "amygdala integrity"—meaning, a brain structure better able to handle stressors.<sup>9</sup>

Many of America's earliest urban planners recognized the importance of proper green spaces, which is how both Philadelphia's and Savannah's famous tree-lined squares were born. Today, this way of design is making a comeback, particularly in smaller communities seeking to revitalize their downtowns.



Flowerpots, such as the one above, enhance the aesthetics of a street by providing splashes of color along the pavement. These particular pots are placed each year along Water Street through a program called Water Street Gardens (author's collection).



### *Greenscaping Duluth and Edmonds*

For many of America's small cities, shade trees were often a part of the urban landscape being incorporated in both downtowns and neighborhoods alike. Unfortunately, the ravages of Dutch Elm disease, along with everyday urban stressors, eradicated many of the older trees lining our historic inner cores, leaving barren, sterile streetscapes. This is the predicament in which Duluth, Minnesota (pop. 86,000) found itself when revisiting the topic.

Recognizing the calming effects that trees have on the human psyche, and nostalgic for the era when downtown streets were shade-covered, the Greater Downtown Council launched an initiative to restore 40 trees to the area in the mid-2000s.

"A lot of the trees have died over the years as a result of the harsh urban environment. The soil also gets polluted with salt, or the trees get hit by cars," Greater Downtown Council President Kristi Stokes said.<sup>10</sup> Launching the Adopt-a-Tree program, the Greater Downtown Council approached area businesses for \$500 donations to sponsor a tree and receive a brick with their name on it.

City Gardener Tom Kasper said a lot of the problems were soil- and design-related but said he believes the downtown council's plan will address both concerns. For instance, he said, the plan includes "structured soil," which is a rougher grade that holds up much better. Kasper also suggested planting maples or lindens. With Duluth's well-publicized budgetary problems, the city hasn't replaced a boulevard tree in five years, he said.<sup>11</sup>

Endorsed by the mayor, the program was brought about in phases, the first phase involving the planting of 18 trees. The second phase, occurring a year later saw another 10 trees planted in downtown streets and continued on until all 40 trees were replaced. As was stated in their program:

If you've ever wanted to make a difference in the appearance of your central business district; if you've ever wished you could make a lasting contribution to the downtown; if you have wanted to honor or memorialize a beloved family member or friend, you can do it through the Greater Downtown Council's Adopt-A-Tree program.

For just \$500, you can sponsor a tree, and receive recognition in a permanently etched brick on the sidewalk near the tree.<sup>12</sup>

Like Duluth, the city of Edmonds, Washington (pop. 42,000) also launched a greenscaping initiative that involved private partnership, albeit much earlier.

Launched in 1922, and begun in earnest in the 1970s, the City of Edmonds Beautification Program involved a city-private partnership through the Floretum Garden Club. Growing from a few small flower beds and a handful of baskets, the initiative has since taken off, boasting 186 flower beds and over 138 flower baskets adorning the core of their downtown. As outlined by their website:

**Flower Program/City Beautification by the numbers:**

- Supported by the Edmonds Floretum Garden Club for 97 years (they still assist with planting)
- 138 flower baskets maintained (and 186 individual flower beds)
- 22,000 plants grown in our greenhouse each year (20–30 percent grown from seed)

Baskets are available to adopt for \$100.00 per season (June through September) and corner parks for \$250.00 per season (through early November).<sup>13</sup>



Market Square Park is an example of a pocket park concept brought to life. The work of Augusta Downtown Alliance volunteers, University of Maine at Augusta students, and city officials, the park occupies the site of a former bus stop and has since become a shady reprieve for picnickers (author's collection).

### *Cheyenne Experiments with Pocket Parks*

Pocket parks are a trend that took off in cities in the late 2000s and early 2010s. Originally called vest pocket parks, a term first used in the 1960s, pocket parks are urban open spaces on a small scale, usually no more than  $\frac{1}{4}$  acre, providing an inviting environment for surrounding community members. Meeting a variety of needs and functions, many parks include small event spaces, play areas for children, spaces for relaxing or meeting friends, or taking lunch breaks, etc. Successful “pocket parks” have four key qualities: they are accessible; they allow people to engage in activities; they are comfortable spaces and have a good image; and finally, they are sociable places where people meet each other and take people to when they come to visit.<sup>14</sup>

Often designed in unsightly areas, pocket parks generally differentiate themselves from city parks both by size as well as function, as they are generally tailored to meet the needs of a specific area rather than the city as a whole. Many are funded through grants and organized through community programs, as was the case with the most recent pocket park opened in Cheyenne, Wyoming (pop. 64,000).

Developed through a partnership with the Cheyenne Downtown Development Authority (DDA) and two downtown merchants, Cheyenne’s pocket park was designed to accommodate seasonal patrons in an unused alley for the summer months. The surrounding space was chosen both for the prominent parking as well as for the vibrant art murals that surround it.

“We had the idea to use our parking lot for something more than just parking because it’s such a beautiful space with the vibrant murals. This seemed like the perfect time to make it happen, and thanks to the DDA, it has,” Paramount Cafe owner Renee Jelinek said.

In addition to the collaboration with business owners, the DDA had the support of Cheyenne Mayor Marian Orr and the City of Cheyenne, Wyoming–Government Parking Division, to bring the park idea to fruition. “We are proud to support our small businesses and hope that the addition of this pocket park encourages the public to enjoy our downtown and everything it has to offer while being able to follow the social distancing guidelines,” Mayor Orr said.<sup>15</sup>

Featuring picnic tables with plants, the entrance to the park is free and is the perfect solution for Covid-19 guidelines as it allows for communal gatherings in a socially distanced setting.

“It’s a weird time and so that ability to be able to gather as a community while maintaining those socially distant guidelines and following those rules, it’s a great way to kind of do that and foster that community

togetherness,” Cheyenne DDA Marketing and Events Director Haylee Chenchar said.<sup>16</sup>

As demonstrated through Cheyenne’s most recent addition, pocket parks can be created in a grassroots manner, involving either city or community partnership. In this way they can be quickly installed and adapted to fit a particular area. More importantly, they can enhance the look and feel of the general townscape by making formerly underutilized spots into oases for community engagement.

### *Soundscaping: The Case of Van Wert*

The impact that Covid-19 played upon the psyche of Americans cannot be overstated. From lockdowns to residential quarantines to restrictions on gatherings, the disease had a devastating impact upon downtown businesses and raised the anxieties of many. This is something the small city of Van Wert, Ohio (10,000), sought to allay when reopening by introducing the concept of soundscaping to their community.

Focusing on the importance of positive stimuli in reducing anxiety, Main Street Van Wert took a unique route by lessening fear through sound by installing speakers in their downtown that could play music. Mitch Price, Executive Director of Main Street Van Wert, said that early on in his position it was always one of his goals to illuminate downtown with the sound of music.

“I think it adds a lot to the downtown,” said Price. “There’s a lot of studies that show that having speakers downtown makes people happier, it makes them spend a little bit more money, and it puts people in a better mood.”<sup>17</sup>

Working with Streetscape Speakers, the group installed a series of wireless speakers through several blocks, with the intent of pumping family-friendly music into their downtown.

“The speakers are wireless, so we had to put an antenna on our building that bounces signal to them, but they can also bounce signal to each other too,” said Price. “We can add to it, as well. If we got funds next year or the following year, we could keep adding to it. That’s the plan. We can buy as we go.”<sup>18</sup>

The City of Van Wert and Van Wert County chipped in to give Main Street Van Wert some funding for the speaker system, which can also be utilized for public events and emergencies. Avangrid Renewables also provided funding toward the speaker, said Price.

“When we have parades again, this will be super nice,” explained

Price, who noted that people will be able to hear parade announcements more easily now. The system also came with a wireless microphone. "It's great for emergencies as well. Heaven forbid if we have any, we can alarm people. We can also put promotions or commercials on there. We can honor our supporting partners with it. There's a lot of stuff that we can do."

Currently, the music is being played downtown from 8:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. and is on a family-friendly station that permits the use of copyrighted music.

"I think this will give people another positive for downtown," said Price. "What we're trying to do as a whole—a City and County—through the downtown, I think it just adds to it. It's another tool in the tool shed and adds to the experience of downtown."<sup>19</sup>

While Van Wert's experiment in soundscaping is a relatively new addition to the urban environment, the concept has actually been with us for quite a while. Go into any store or mall around Christmas time, for example, and you're likely to hear Christmas music. This is not done because of the Holiday season, but rather to remind people to shop, and it floods people's subconsciouses with images of family gatherings and gift giving. The same tactics are often used by ice cream trucks in the summer, which can flood a neighborhood with the familiar songs used in carnivals and fairs to invoke a sense of excitement to consumers.

### *Jesse Patkus and the Role of Aesthetics in Downtown Development*

Jesse Patkus is a long-time Augusta resident and downtown building owner who has been involved with improving downtown since 2011. An architect for a Portland-based firm which specializes in constructing residential and vacation homes, Jesse sits on the board of the Historic District Review Board and began his involvement with downtown improvement while still a student at the University of Maine's Architecture Program. In discussing downtown, he says:

Things like signs are a big deal for me because of the way they enhance the elements of a building. For me, consistency is key. Natural elements or natural looking elements can go a long way to complimenting a historic district, but it doesn't always have to be the same. I think there is indeed room for a variety of styles including bracketed and flat signs since historically downtowns were pretty eclectic. What ties them together, is consistency of height and scale. If you look at most historic buildings there's a distinct ribbon line that lend themselves as pretty solid places for the placement of things like bracketed signs.

In terms of sign style, I think natural or natural-looking signs work best. If you utilize the materials around you, you're likely to enhance the features of a particular building. This doesn't mean, however, that that's the only way to achieve a decent look. On the contrary, things like neon signs can lend themselves really well to a place like a diner, and backlit signs can work in certain instances, particularly if scale and height are respected. The only thing I don't think could ever work are changeable signs with moving images. These kinds of signs you're likely to see on the outskirts of a downtown in places like strip malls and are inconsistent with the timeless quality of a downtown area. Development for development's sake does not equate place making and I think it's important for any downtown to recognize that when attempting to tackle a project.

An avid member of the Steering Committee, which predated the formation of the Augusta Downtown Alliance, Jesse worked on a variety of projects related to aesthetics that included green space initiatives and cultural events like an art walk. It was his work on a community gathering space, however, that he looks upon as being among his biggest accomplishments, as it helped change the face downtown:

One of the projects I'm most proud of being a part of during my stint on the Augusta Downtown Alliance was Market Square Park. Where the park sits now was formerly a bus stop that had fallen into serious disrepair and neglect. It had really grimy bathrooms and a large conical tree in the center and was built over the old remains of Capitol Theater which had burned down in the 80s. The city had long supported moving the bus stop to another area of town and turning the area into a green space for the community, and I worked a lot with Dan Nichols from the city in trying to make that happen.

Having already launched the popular Light on Water art walk, Jesse spotted an opportunity for community buy-in on the park by incorporating a vote on elements that the public wanted to see included.

Working with Dan and the university students, we came up with some ideas for how it might look and then asked for those in attendance to give us their feedback. We then incorporated that feedback into one cool design that I put together graphically to present to city leaders.

In describing the changes, he recounts:

One of the first things we called for was taking down the huge tree in the middle. It had been used as a Christmas tree by the city and was way too big for the downtown area. We then worked on bench placement and concert space.

On reflecting on the park as it is now, Jesse states:

There are definitely things looking back on it I would've done differently. I would've probably placed the benches in different areas than where they are now. Right now, when entering the park, we have these benches in front of



**Developer Richard Parkhurst added planters with a self-watering irrigation system to enhance the look of his corner building in downtown Augusta (author's collection).**

the fountain that look and act like barriers. It doesn't really have that open, inviting feel you want for a park like that. I'd also reposition all the benches to face the Olde Federal Building rather than the concert area. The thought at the time was that there would be a lot more music when we placed them. Unfortunately, the park is too small to host huge crowds so what we have now are benches that are essentially facing a wall. It's not really something we could've predicted at the time, but it's always kind of bothered me. To be fair though, hindsight is 20/20 and a park is something you really have to live in and feel around in order to do it right. Still, I'm pretty happy with the way it turned out overall. It's a vast improvement over what was there, and it really marked a turning point for downtown revitalization. It also marked the beginning of a partnership between the Augusta Downtown Alliance and the City. Many people come up and comment on how beautiful the park is and I love watching people use it. It was a little thing that made a big difference for downtown.<sup>20</sup>

### *Key Takeaways on Aesthetics*

The following takeaways are important to recall when discussing ways to improve aesthetics:

1. Aesthetics are an important first step to improving the success of a small city's revitalization.
2. Aesthetics can play a role in reducing anxiety.
3. Aesthetics can be broken down into categories of streetscaping, greenscaping, townscaping and soundscaping.
4. Aesthetics can either be led by the city or through grassroots efforts.
5. Aesthetics can be adapted to tackle different situations.

## *Conclusion*

"Aesthetic matters are fundamental for the harmonious development of both society and the individual."—Friedrich Schiller

Whether we want to admit it or not, we humans are prone to judge books by their covers. This inherent instinct is something we are taught from birth and adapt through experience. When something does not look right, then it does not feel right. This is why aesthetics matter.

Focusing on community enhancements through what we visually encounter every day is more than just putting lipstick on a pig. It's actually one of the first steps we can take to making things better. When you clean up visual clutter, you're not just getting rid of the clutter, you're actually sending out a signal that things are different and that standards will be applied.

By incorporating things like sign ordinances, or by adding things like pocket parks, trees, flowers or soothing sounds, you can help both improve the image of your community and at the same time reduce the anxieties of visitors. All these things can be accomplished through cost-effective measures and will go a long way to improving the chances of long-term sustainability.

Cities are living, breathing entities, after all, and just as a child needs nurturing and grooming to grow, so to do our communities. This is something larger cities have recognized over the years and something that our smaller towns can adapt from them.

A true urban experience requires participation from all levels, particularly from first-time visitors, and a good aesthetics program will help enhance those experiences. The next time you head to your community's city center, stop, take a walk, and make notes of what can be improved; it will make all the difference.