

TBJ

TRIBAL BUSINESS JOURNAL

MAY 2016 | \$7.95

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What Does the Land Say?

SITE ANALYSIS AND MASTER PLANNING: IMPORTANT FIRST STEPS IN LAND DEVELOPMENT

BY TOM MORTENSEN, RLA, ASLA, SITE PLANNER/LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT, R.A. SMITH NATIONAL INC.

Site analysis and master planning are both an art and a science, and an important first step in the land development process. The basis of design for any development project should begin with a deep understanding of the existing site conditions, including slope, soils, vegetation, hydrology, history, subgrade, spatial relationships and adjacent land uses. In many cases, this aspect of site analysis gets overlooked or dismissed as an afterthought, leading to a decision-making process that is led by lowering costs and doing things “the easy way” without exploring viable options that could possibly cost less and lead to a more dynamic, functional and creative design. >

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Gookomis Endaad (“Your Grandmother’s House”) residential treatment house opened this past winter on the Lac du Flambeau Indian Reservation.

Perhaps some of these decisions are spurred by today’s rapid pace of design and the expectations of technology to get us to “the answer” as quickly as possible. But before actual decisions can be made during the planning of a specific site, a tangible relationship to the land must be understood by the entire design team. The technology we have at our fingertips is an important resource, but it doesn’t replace the need to first get out onto a site to experience the “sense of place” and determine the best approach and most meaningful way to develop a successful site master plan.

Different disciplines look at site planning in different ways. An architect may consider the best place for a building is where it can capture the best views for people approaching it for the first time. An engineer might view the site plan from an efficient, purely functional perspective on how to best

manage stormwater. An ecologist may analyze the site from an environmental perspective related to the protection of wetlands and other natural resources. A landscape architect might look at the site from a vegetation, slope or experiential aspect.

All of these viewpoints are valid, but they don’t complete the picture on their own. No single discipline can capture the essence of site planning in the same manner as a well-integrated, multidisciplinary design team that, importantly, includes the owner and the ultimate occupant of the site.

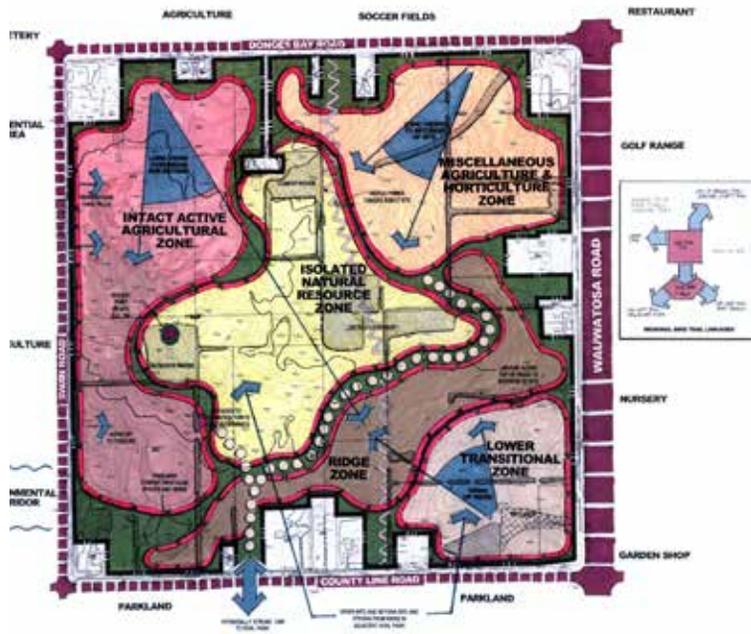
Site analysis and master planning comprise a holistic process that merits spending time and energy upfront to discover the site in several abstract ways, considering spatial relationships, scale and characteristics. In other words, going beyond the obvious, physical and technical, and into the perceptual – the look, feel and potential of a specific site.

It’s important to ask questions such as “What was on this site previously?” and “How does nature interact with this site?”

Over the years, I’ve adopted a philosophy of “Nature ignores design that ignores nature,” which helps the design team understand that each site is unique and that the “typical” does not always apply. I challenge others who think that there is only one way or only one correct solution. Due to time and budget constraints, it seems that there is often a race to find the quickest, cheapest solution without considering options based on perceptual characteristics.

The following are examples of projects in which I have been involved where a collaborative, integrated design approach and early steps in thorough site analysis have added value to the project and community.

The Lac du Flambeau tribe recently developed a CBRF (community-based residential facility) on Lake Pokegama.



Mequon
Nature
Preserve

Concordia College

After gathering all the site information from GIS maps and surveys, the design team walked the site with the developer, architect and contractor to look at the terrain, vegetation, access and views of the lake. Based on that analysis, the team was able to establish the best placement for the building, septic area, roadway patterns/circulation and limits of site disturbance.

The Forest County Potawatomi repurposed an urban college campus near downtown Milwaukee. The existing historic buildings were being adapted for reuse for tribal offices, incubator businesses and a school. The site and landscape were evaluated to determine what trees were to remain to maintain the campus aesthetic, while working out newly proposed plantings based on a list of medicinal and native plants provided by a tribal member. The circulation was redeveloped and a new outdoor playground area for the school was also planned as part of the overall campus.

In Bowler, Wisconsin, a group of Stockbridge-Munsee tribal representatives and council members undertook a residential development that included single-family, elderly and multifamily housing, as well as a large community garden and a future community building. As part of the site analysis, the most suitable sites were determined based on terrain, vegetation



and hydrogeological information. Several visioning sessions were presented to community members to gain their input and keep them involved in the development.

Earlier in my career, I was involved in the master planning for Aztalan State Park in Lake Mills, Wisconsin – the first agricultural community in Wisconsin along the Crawfish River, as well as a National Historic Landmark. The park showcases an ancient Middle Mississippian village that thrived between A.D. 1000 and 1300. The people who settled Aztalan built large, flat-topped pyramidal mounds and a stockade

around their village. A large group of stakeholders, including the Ho-Chunk, archaeologists and historians, were involved in the development of a master plan and a long-term vision for the site.

In summary, site analysis and site planning are an important part of any well-designed project and should be the first step in project development – whether the development is 1 acre or 100 acres, urban or rural. A well-thought-out, collaborative approach that is tested throughout the design process will help to ensure a successful project and result in a more functional, aesthetically pleasing and integrated land use. ♦

TOM MORTENSEN HAS OVER 30 YEARS OF EXPERIENCE IN LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE AND RELATED DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION PROFESSIONS. HE HAS EXPERTISE IN SITE PLANNING, URBAN SPACES, PUBLIC OPEN SPACES, MEMORIALS AND PLAZAS, RETAIL DEVELOPMENTS, RESTORATION PLANS AND CONSTRUCTION MANAGEMENT. HIS PROJECTS INCLUDE DESIGN AND MASTER PLANNING FOR THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, BOY SCOUTS OF AMERICA, THE STOCKBRIDGE-MUNSEE COMMUNITY AND THE FOREST COUNTY POTAWATOMI.