

Memo on the Efficacy in Placemaking of Pella's Design Guidelines

Brief: This memo addresses the effectiveness of the City of Pella's Architectural Design Guidelines as a placemaking strategy, and discusses similar avenues to further achieve the goals of the design guidelines through other related strategies.

Background

Pella, Iowa is a historically-Dutch small town in central Iowa, with a 2020 population of 10,464¹. The city was founded in 1847 from newly-arrived Hollanders, only a year after Iowa's statehood in 1846.² Pella is home to Central College, founded in 1853, as well as the large local employers of window and door manufacturer Pella Corporation and industrial and agriculture equipment manufacturer Vermeer Corporation. Pella is "a unique community that prides itself on its Dutch heritage and a high quality of life."³ The largest cultural event of the year occurs during the city's annual Tulip Time festival each spring.

As the Pella Architectural Design Guide states, "The City of Pella endeavors to maintain its strong vision and retain the historic integrity throughout the community by guiding the character of its buildings and signage."⁴ The goal of this concerted effort is to use the built environment to remind visitors and residents alike that the town is of Dutch heritage, and proudly remains as such.

Framework

Pella has actively utilized local zoning laws and design guidelines to enact an intensive placemaking effort. A design review committee is required to adjudicate over exceptions to the existing design guidelines, such as when a business requests to use an exterior color outside of the

¹ U.S. Census Bureau. Decennial Census. 2020. Accessed from data.census.gov.

² State Historical Society of Iowa. "Historic Pella". Signage. Visited November 22, 2023.

³ City of Pella. "Architectural Design Guidelines". 4th Edition. Published March 7, 2023. Pg. 6.

⁴ City of Pella. "Architectural Design Guidelines". 4th Edition. Published March 7, 2023. Pg. 6.

specified color palette. Design review is required for all new construction, as well as for changes to building exteriors and fixtures. The review process is conducted by a partial or full membership of the Community Development Committee, and reviews may take at least three weeks after submission of materials. The design reviews are present for three districts: The central business district (encompassing the town square and nearby commercial corridors), the Transitional Zone (encompassing the majority of commercial areas outside the town square vicinity), and the Contemporary Zone (across the highway, on the outskirts of town).

The Project for Public Spaces has defined placemaking as something which “facilitates creative patterns of use, paying particular attention to the physical, cultural, and social identities that define a place and support its ongoing evolution.”⁵ Pella has relied extensively on architecture to create a sense of place, and this memo will judge the effectiveness this has had in creating social and cultural distinctions to match. Specifically, does the impact of the design guidelines generate a different culture from surrounding small town communities, who share similar demographic and economic realities. The placemaking in Pella should serve both residents and visitors with communally social experiences that engage with the city’s Dutch heritage.

⁵ Project for Public Spaces. “Placemaking: What If We Built Our Cities Around Places?”. Published 2022. Pg 1.



Figure 1 - A display of model Dutch houses for sale at Jaarsma Bakery, in Pella, Iowa.

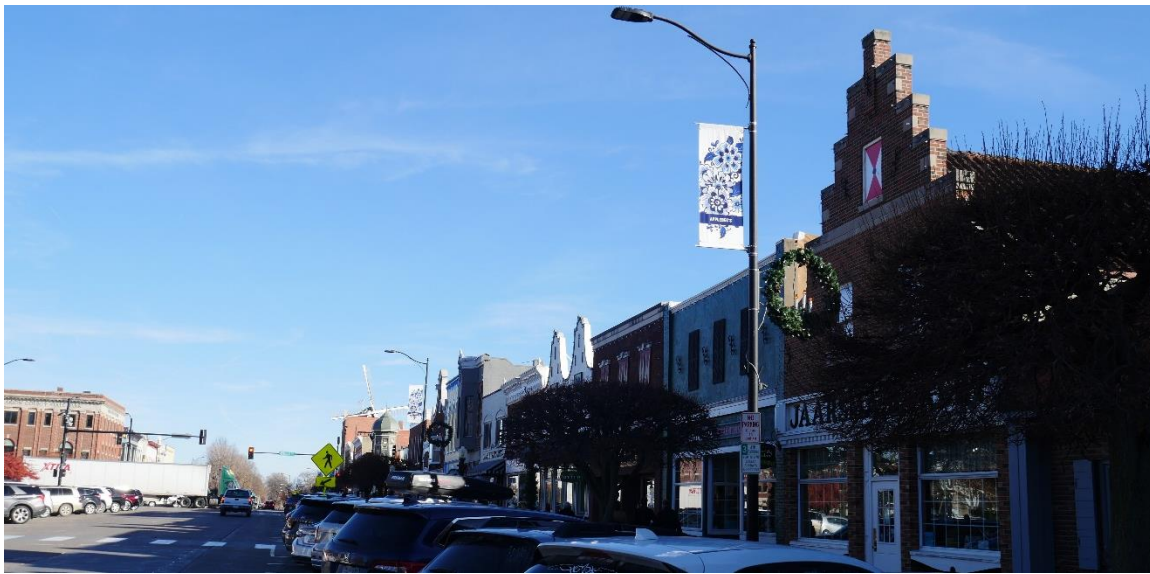


Figure 2 - A view of storefronts along Franklin street opposite the town square in Pella, Iowa.



Figure 3 - A view of a modern strip mall along Oskaloosa Street in Pella, Iowa.

Placemaking Successes

The design guidelines have been successful in constructing and maintaining a relatively unique sense of place, and are successful in drawing in day-tourists to the area businesses. Most businesses have exteriors meeting the majority, if not all, required features in the design guide. It is particularly notable how many existing facades have been updated in ways that match the design guide, as extant structures are not required to be changed. Without the presence of the central business districts' facades, the central town square would be very similar to the nearby small towns of Centerville, Chariton, or Winterset. Pella's architecture reminds locals and visitors of the city's unique immigrant heritage, in conjunction with other cultural touchpoints such as their major town festival (Tulip Time) and high school mascot (the Dutch).

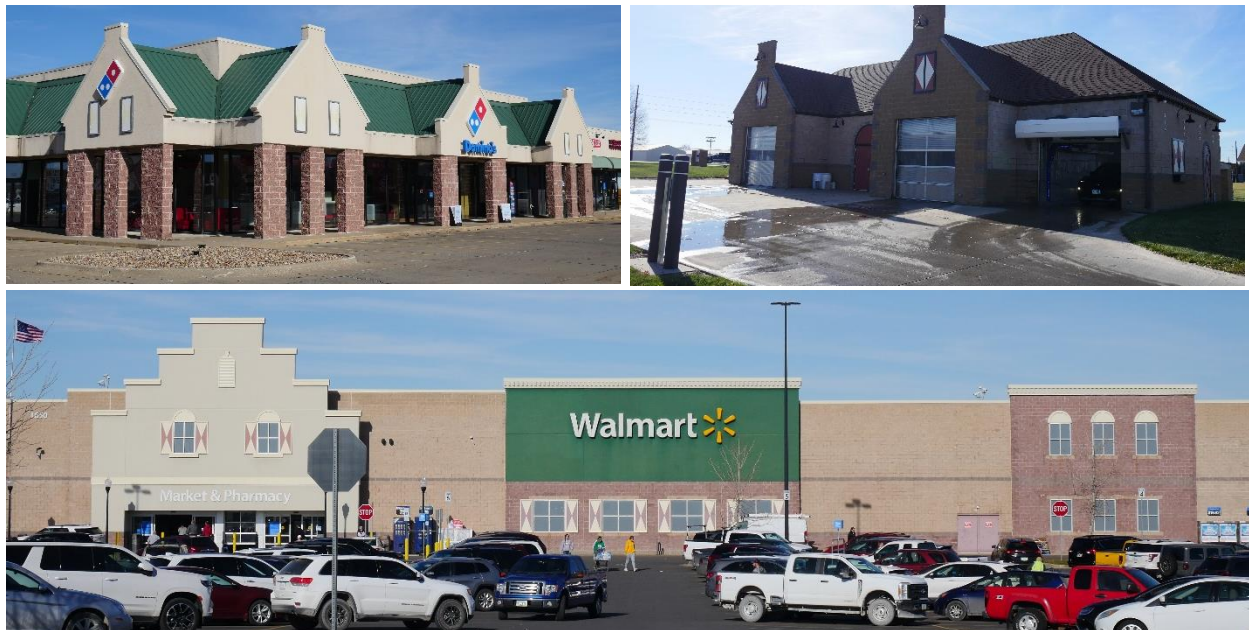


Figure 4 - Examples of modern designs utilizing elements of Dutch architecture in the Transitional District. Top left: a Domino's in a strip mall. Top right: de Autowasplaats, a car wash. Bottom: Pella's Walmart location.

Businesses in the transitional district (outside the downtown core area) have largely embraced the design guidelines, though their visual effect is less successful. Walmart and Domino's are fully in

compliance with the guidelines, but such stylings appear more symbolic than fundamental (Figure 4). The facades of these businesses are not fooling visitors into thinking they are visiting Amsterdam, but they do make clear the powerful influence Dutch heritage still has in the city. Similarly, the overly-compliant car wash de Autowasplaats seems to rely on the sheer novelty of the guidelines as an advertising gimmick. While not these do not create an effective facsimile of Dutch architecture, they do serve to distinguish Pella from nearby towns and establish a unique identity for the city.

When I spoke with a volunteer at the Pella Historical Society, she described the architectural style of the community as providing a sense of a cohesive community, in a way that instilled civic pride and involvement not seen in other nearby small towns. The architecture symbolized a culture that celebrated her won Dutch ancestry. She observed that the design is a draw for tourists and is successful at attracting visitors in high numbers to see something that is unique for the area, but it is also valued by the community members themselves.

Since the design guidelines have only recently been extended to residential structures, the Dutch character of the city is consolidated in the tourist-focused downtown corridors and access roads. Additionally, there is a separate nationally-recognized Collegiate Neighborhood Historic District covering the residential area south of downtown, which preserves both traditional Dutch houses and other rich architectural styles from the turn of the century. Though most residential housing in the city is quite typical for a small Iowa town, with ample examples of American Foursquare and shotgun houses, this is slowly changing. Pella has created a Dutch Residential Overlay District⁶ to

⁶ City of Pella. "Dutch Residential Design Manual". 1st Edition. Published February 11, 2011. Pg. 1.

influence new construction, which allows smaller lot sizes in exchange for including Dutch architectural elements. While townhouses are not allowed in the central business district zoning area, “Multiple-family residential uses permitted in the CBD District provided they are on the second floor or above with nonresidential use on the ground floor.”⁷ This will allow for future residents to live in a denser urban environment more typical of the Netherlands than the Midwest.

Placemaking Shortcomings

The outward physical appearances have only partially permeated deeper into the commercial programming of the area. While some bakeries and gift shops embrace the Dutch theme with their offerings, other restaurants are outposts of regionally-owned institutions (such as Smokey Row), or national chains (such as Anytime Fitness). Additionally, requiring that peddlers have a Dutch theme while not requiring the same of businesses on private property may be an arbitrary rule of law that would lead to legal risk for the city.



Figure 5 - At left, a Taco Bell in the Transitional District. At right, a Pizza Ranch in the Historic Dutch District. Each have met the design guidelines with a design with Mission Revival or Spanish Colonial style elements.

The design guidelines allow for Spanish-style architecture, which is exemplified by modern western-themed and southwestern-themed restaurants (Figure 5). Spanish-influenced styles are allowed in the design guide, which provides options for stucco cladding, curved gable rooflines,

⁷ City of Pella. “Table 165.12-2 Permitted Uses by Zoning Districts”. Accessed on November 25, 2023 from https://codelibrary.amlegal.com/codes/pella/latest/pella_ia/0-0-0-4162#JD_165.12.

brick bonding patterns, and faux shutters. If this is not desirable, a review of the allowable combination of features is recommended to clarify the intended outcome of the design guidelines.



Figure 6 - Top: The current facades along Main Street opposite Pella's town square (November 2023). Bottom: A historical image of main street in Pella during the 1920s, as displayed at the historic Pella Railroad Depot.

Registered historic structures in the downtown core present a conundrum for balancing the design guidelines with historic preservation, when the stated purpose of the design guidelines is to retain “historic integrity”. The signature rooflines and facades of the business corridors are largely non-historic interventions devised with modern sympathies (Figure 6). Dutch immigrants settling Pella did not always bring Dutch architectural styles with them, and often utilized local building styles.

The Pella Opera House is an excellent landmark of the historic city and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, but was constructed in the Victorian Romanesque style⁸ and would not meet the current area's design requirements due to its standard flat roof. The notable Scholte House is also on the Register and was formerly the home of the town's founder, thereby ensuring a Greek Revivalist structure⁹ will remain on the town square. Changing the exterior historic downtown structures would require removing their status on the National Register. The preservation of these buildings meets the 'historic integrity' objective of the design guidelines, but reveals issues with the prescriptive nature in enforcing thematic elements over historic ones.

Several corporate chains have not made particularly noteworthy changes to their standard national designs when constructing or altering buildings in the outlying districts. The Fareway grocery store has updated their exterior signage in recent years, but is fully non-compliant with the design guidelines. The Culvers restaurant slightly altered their standard rooflines, but made no further efforts. The Contemporary District requires even fewer design elements and has built even more generic construction, such as the Chik-fil-A location (Figure 7). In addition, the design guidelines do not apply to industrial zoning, which is more common on the outskirts of town. The parts of town further from the downtown core relate more to surrounding communities than to Pella in design terms, and the limited design requirements are not particularly successful at creating a unique sense of place or heritage.

⁸ National Register of Historic Places. "Pella Opera House". Nomination Form. Published June 2, 1989.

⁹ National Register of Historic Places. "Dominie Henry P. Scholte House". Nomination Form. Published November 9, 1982.



Figure 7 – Top Left: A Fareway grocery store in the Transitional District. Top Right: A Culvers restaurant in the Transitional District. Bottom: A Chick-fil-A establishment in the Contemporary District (External Source: Google Streetview).

Perhaps the most striking difference between Pella and Amsterdam is the predominance of motor vehicles in Pella, compared with the prevalence of bikes in the latter. There are no bike lanes present in the city of Pella, and the city does not provide a map of designated bike routes. During my visit I noticed a few bikes being used on sidewalks nearby, and I have previously utilized the nearby recreational Volksweg trail. The general population clearly does not utilize bikes as a non-recreational form of transportation, a key visual indicator of life in the Netherlands that is commodified in Pella's gift shops but not seen on its streets.

Design efforts intended to mimic the heritage of the Netherlands are nullified by the large amount of street parking and surface parking lots along all commercial corridors. New off-street parking is not required for any use in the central business district, including for potential residential uses:

"Any use within the CBD Central Business District, other than new build residential units, is exempt

from the requirement to provide off-street parking.”¹⁰ Despite this, angled parking is provided on both sides of most business corridors in the downtown core, often blocking the view of the required facades. Street parking also limits the sidewalk width, which is at a premium with many restaurants vying for outdoor seating allowances, and bakeries queueing out the door on many days. Perhaps even worse is the large parking lots outside the Walmart and fast food restaurants in the Transitional District, which are not historic or modern Dutch design, and are entirely American in their conception. This detracts from the unique qualities of the city, and does not help distinguish it from surrounding communities visually or culturally.

Recommendations

1. Historic preservation of the downtown core should be expanded, while new-build construction should adhere to Dutch design principles. This can be achieved by:
 - a. Design guidelines should be clarified to specifically reinterpret examples of existing architecture in town, to embrace Pella’s rich architectural heritage.
2. Bicycles should be encouraged as a means of transportation by:
 - a. Updating design standards to require bicycle accommodations (such as bike racks) to encourage bicycle travel to local businesses.
 - b. Alter street parking along visually-significant corridors in town to allow larger sidewalks, street dining, or a pedestrian mall, to allow for more social space.

The success of active transportation methods and adaptive reuse of existing architecture in a small town would signal that the placemaking objectives of the community have succeeded in creating an outpost of Dutch culture in the Midwest, moving beyond facades and towards a cultural attitude of unified belonging to this place.

¹⁰ City of Pella. “165.32 OFF-STREET PARKING”. Accessed on November 25, 2023 from https://codelibrary.amlegal.com/codes/pella/latest/pella_ia/0-0-0-4162#JD_165.32.