

**Exploring the Experience of  
Vacancy in a Rural Village**

This proposal is submitted in partial fulfillment of the Masters of Landscape Architecture  
Capstone Project for the Faculty of Landscape Architecture, State University of New York, College of  
Environmental Science and Forestry.

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## **Abstract**

The rural village of Red Creek, N.Y. has undergone a decline in recent decades in its economy, its population, and other factors that influence residents' quality of life. These changes have led to widespread vacancy, which has caused a decline in the condition of property and availability of services. Community members have raised the issue of vacancy as critical in their current participatory visioning process for the village. This study will further examine the issue of vacancy and its effect on residents' perception of their community through facilitated small group discussion. From analysis of these discussions, the researcher will identify potential sites and ideas for remediation that are noticeable and meaningful to residents. Based on this more complete understanding of vacancy, the researcher will develop design proposals, using the residents' input, to contribute to a design addressing vacancy at one site.

## **Introduction**

Many towns, villages, and cities in upstate New York have been battered in recent decades by declining economies and population, along with other visible changes that affect residents' quality of life. A major result of these changes is the loss of businesses, customers, residents, and tourists in significant parts of downtown, in addition to many empty former industrial sites and houses or apartments. Vacancy is often clearly evident to passers-by and residents alike, in contrast to what many know were vital, vibrant places of commerce and social activity up to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. To many residents of these communities, seeing this decline has a devastating emotional effect. In a case study, this Capstone project will explore in detail the effect that widespread vacancy has had on residents' perceptions of one community.

## **Background – Visioning Process**

In September 2004, the Red Creek Revitalization Committee and the Wayne County, N.Y. planning department hired the Council for Community Design Research (CCDR) to conduct a vision planning process. It also hired an economic consultant to analyze the economic opportunities available to the village and provide this information to CCDR researchers. The CCDR is associated with SUNY ESF in Syracuse, NY and is staffed by Cheryl Doble, the major professor for this student research project, and Maren King, a committee member. The vision planning process includes three public workshops being conducted over a four-month period to explore change in the village, residents' perceptions of change, and strategies for revitalization. This information is being gathered and analyzed through January 2005. Results of the process will include recommendations for action to address prioritized concerns.

While the Capstone research is separate from this process, its focus was derived from early discussions between the CCDR and Red Creek community members, who raised the issue of vacancy as a serious concern. The Capstone will take place during the latter part of the vision planning process and extend later into the semester; it will incorporate materials and findings of the vision planning process as appropriate. The

Capstone will also draw upon residents' experiences and priorities, as discovered in this project, to create a potential design response to vacancy.

### **Problem Statement**

As in many communities throughout the American northeast, the rural village of Red Creek, N.Y. has undergone a marked decline in recent decades in its economic base, population, condition of private and public property, availability of services, and other aspects of its quality of life. Most of these changes occurred in the past ten years, as the largest employer and small core service businesses closed. One effect of this change has been widespread vacancy in its major industrial complex, its historic Main Street commercial buildings, and houses within the village. This is visible in the lack of people—visitors or residents—downtown.

Residents in and near the village have cited these conditions and other issues in their decision to develop a collective vision for its future through a participatory process headed by visioning experts (explained in the preceding section). Perceptions of vacant spaces at or near the core of the village will be documented and discussed as part of that process, as many residents have stated that the condition of these spaces affects their perception of the village as a whole.

The Capstone will gather a sample of residents for discussions in smaller groups. The student researcher will facilitate community discussion of perceptions of vacancy, in greater depth than will be done in the vision planning process, focusing on spaces at the core of the village. From analysis of these discussions and the visioning process recommendations, this study will improve understanding of the experience of vacancy and develop a design response to address it.

### **Central Research Question**

How do people experience and perceive vacancy in the village of Red Creek?

### **Subquestions**

1) Do residents' experiences of vacancy differ according to age group and years of residency? If so, in what ways do they differ?

2) How can a design strategy respond to residents' experiences to reduce negative perceptions of vacancy?

**Goals**

Goal 1) Understand the conditions of vacancy and the experience of vacancy in communities, along with its underlying cognitive, perception, and behavioral factors.

objective a) Conduct a review of relevant literature on vacancy in rural and urban communities. Summarize findings in written format.

Goal 2) Document insiders' and outsiders' perceptions of the physical conditions of vacancy in Red Creek.

objective a) Map vacancy that is obvious to an outside observer; obtain community residents' mapping of vacancy throughout village.

objective b) Evaluate the extent and visibility of vacancy in the village, both to insiders and to an outsider by determining from the data of each 1) all vacant or underused properties and 2) any structures in visible external disrepair.

objective c) Analyze and write summary of findings.

Goal 3) Understand residents' varied experiences and perceptions of vacancy.

objective a) Determine topics of discussion for focus groups from residents' comments raised in CCDR visioning workshops, and from literature review.

objective b) Conduct focus groups; facilitate a focus group discussion using developed road map.

objective c) Document discussion in audiotapes, and later in transcribed format.

objective d) Analyze discussions by coding information according to qualitative research methods.

objective e) Summarize descriptions of different experiences.

Goal 4) Apply this understanding of vacancy by generating a design response to address it.

objective a) Establish criteria for site selection. Base criteria on vision plan recommendations and understanding of residents' perceptions from vacancy focus groups. Choose a site where vacancy can be addressed with a design response.

objective b) Create a design response to vacancy in Red Creek.

objective c) Document the design response in appropriate graphic or physical format.

objective d) Present design to the Red Creek Revitalization Committee and appropriate local officials; incorporate feedback into revised design.

### **Summary of literature on the landscape of communities**

Of the many areas of research on the landscape of communities that relate to vacancy, I will focus on the following areas of environment and behavior research. These have been selected because they clarify the basis for people's perceptions of place that may impact or be impacted by perceptions of vacancy:

- sense of community and lifescape (Kim and Kaplan 2004; Edelstein 2002)
- perceptions of contaminated community environments (Edelstein 2002)
- place attachment (Taylor 1985; Altman and Low 1992; Brown et al. 2003)
- length of residency (Hugill 1985, Brown et al. 2003)
- personal identity relating to landscapes (Stewart and Strathern 2003)

Other areas of research on the landscape of communities that may have a bearing on the project topic include:

1) conservation of the historic meanings behind rural form and land use through economic strategies, such as establishing farmland cooperatives or public-private investment to spur entrepreneurial development programs in town centers (Ratner and Ide 1985, Stokes 1989).

2) design-oriented approaches for mitigating vacancy in urban environments (Maeda 1998 thesis; Bowman and Pagano 2004; Willis and Genevro, 1989).

3) narratives about place and community identity (Potteiger and Purinton, 1998).

4) theoretical approaches to design that address vacancy and its historical context in general categories of urban, suburban, or rural land use (Corbin 2003; Corner 1999).

These topics will not be included in this literature review; however, additional sources might be consulted as the project progresses.

## **Literature Review**

### **Sense of Community, Lifestyle and Lifescape**

In working with a small community that has chosen to come together to help improve their village, it is important to gain an understanding of what drives people's sense of community. Community has been defined as "sets of people who may identify themselves with a place or places in terms of notions of commonality, shared values or solidarity" (Stewart and Strathern 2003). A community is usually conceptualized as rooted in a place, or taking place. "A place is a socially meaningful and identifiable space to which a historical dimension is attributed...Landscape refers to the perceived settings that frame people's senses of place and community" (Stewart and Strathern 2003). The landscape of the village includes many facets: residents' homes and properties; the downtown; the village as a whole; key sites within it; the countryside and towns beyond it; and more.

People's lifestyles encompass everything about the way they live, "including their pattern of activities and the relationships, places, and props needed to sustain these activities. Lifestyle embodies the core assumptions of a society" (Edelstein 2002). These are reflected as one sets personal goals and understands social expectations on the path to attaining a certain "quality of life." Significant "lifestyle impacts" occur when the fundamental patterns that comprise community life and private life are disrupted (Edelstein 2002). Edelstein refers to impacts from environmental contamination over the short or long term. While the decline over time of a

community's physical and social "props" relating to vacancy is a less severe or immediate threat, it might have similar elements such as the degree of emotional trauma it inflicts on residents.

Beyond routine activities, and before altering impacts occur, Edelstein terms our assumptions about life our "lifescape." This is centered around five core ideas: "health, personal control, home, environment, and social trust...As with other cognitive paradigms, lifescape is generally invisible until it is disconfirmed by an anomaly [such as] a contamination event (Edelstein 2002). As will be discussed later, personal control, environment, and social trust are factors significant to the study of vacancy.

Carrying out residential and other daily life activities in a compact, distinguishable place, as in a village, contributes to people's sense of community; places, props, and relationships with fellow residents (even if simply recognition) are reinforced when there is repetition with fewer of them concentrated in a small area. A compact, distinct community such as a historic village is an appropriate place to apply questions about sense of community. Kim and Kaplan found that in a residential neighborhood of similar layout and character to a historic village, "residents perceived a substantially greater sense of community" than those living in a neighborhood with suburban layout; residents of the former neighborhood "express stronger attachment to their community and sense of identity with it. Physical features such as layout, architectural styles, natural features and open spaces all contribute strongly to their sense of community" (Kim and Kaplan 2004).

Many of these relationships to place, people and props are longstanding, and occur in the center of town. "The close proximity of a village's core to its residential areas is one characteristic that distinguishes it from an urban setting" (Stokes 1989). This compact form is one of its most visible characteristics, and one that can provide continuity in one's sense of community and perception of place over a great length of time. This can extend for one's lifetime, if lived entirely in one place, and can even extend beyond it conceptually, when one confronts the archives of images, texts, and orally shared knowledge of place histories.

Sense of community arises from "emotional bonding or ties" residents feel with their community—"feeling at home" in it. Some ways that this is expressed include "satisfaction with homes and community" and a "sense of connectedness...to their community when it reminds them of their personal and community history...and familiar environmental characteristics." Other expressions are a "sense of ownership [and] control over their homes or community (Kim

and Kaplan 2004). Another way in which people express how they feel at home and belonging to the community” is through place attachment, which Kim and Kaplan consider “a key domain of sense of community” (Kim and Kaplan 2004).

“Community attachment [is] based on individual experience and perception of sense of community, [whereas] community identity...[is] more related to collective and social perspectives of sense of community” (Kim and Kaplan 2004). Thus the individual feels attachment due to personal experience, yet comprehends the identity of his or her community through understanding others’ collective perspectives of it.

### **Place and Time**

This understanding, combined with one’s lifescape, or landscape, can be understood to exist in past, present and future. Stewart and Strathern write that it is a “contextual horizon of perceptions, providing both a foreground and a background...[and] may apply equally to urban and rural sites because they are all equally molded by human actions and/or...perceptions.”

People’s molding of places over time makes landscape “a *process* because its shape at any given time reflects change and is a part of change. Nevertheless it often serves as a crucial marker of continuity with the past, as well as a reassurance of identity in the present and a promise for the future” (Stewart and Strathern 2003). When the landscape changes because new forces are shaping it, and individuals or those they know are no longer agents of change, individuals might feel confused or distressed. Having been familiar with a certain pattern of changes shaping their landscape, such as mostly positive actions, individuals might not see it the same way when an unfamiliar pattern of changes noticeably molds their landscape. It might cease to function as a marker of continuity with the past and a reassurance of present identity.

### **Place Attachment**

According to Taylor, place attachment is “a deep-seated feeling that one has a bond with one’s residential environment...[which can be] a home range of typical activities or larger—region, state, country.” This is larger than an individual’s territory. Attachment is strongly influenced by the physical and social qualities of the place—when these are positive, it is easier to be attached to place and to feel a sense of territorial control or responsibility (Taylor 1998). Attachment “involves dynamic but enduring positive bonds between people and prized sociophysical settings, such as homes. These bonds reflect and help cultivate group and individual identity. Residential place attachments often translate into feelings of pride in the

residential area and its appearance” (Brown et al. 2003). A study of Cazenovia, another upstate New York village, determined that the longer a resident had lived there, the greater his or her commitment to the “quality of place” (or place attachment). This was evident in the town’s traditional aesthetic valuation system, which emphasized the desirability of older houses and the upkeep of privatized views and open spaces (Hugill 1985). Thus longer residency in one place meant greater place attachment. This influenced people to value its appearance more than did those with shorter residency.

When there are disruptions in people’s attachment to place, such as the erosion of its physical and social qualities, there can be negative consequences for the individual or group affected. One of these is an increase in fear of crime and disorder (disorder refers to deterioration of the physical or social status quo) (Taylor 1998, Brown et al. 2003). Groups may be attached to a location and respond together when it is threatened (Taylor 1998). If their attachment to place “is related to social and physical indicators of decline, then efforts to reverse decline require understanding...of place attachment bonds” and the potential to use them as inspiration for action to effect change (Brown et al. 2003).

Individual perceptions of place typically arise from routine experience, while shared perceptions of experience help create common identity across communities (Hirsch in Stewart and Strathern 2003). Experiences of place over time lead to place attachment (Kim and Kaplan 2004). Place attachment is also tied to perceptions of place:

“Perceptions [of landscape] shift, either gradually or dramatically, over time, so that landscape becomes a form of codification of history itself, seen from the viewpoints of personal expression and experience” (Stewart and Strathern 2003).

### **Identity**

Place has been a focus of meaning and identity in people’s lives throughout history (Jakle 1987). Shaping identity are “two crucial elements...notions of memory and notions of place” according to anthropologists Stewart and Strathern. “For [some] people...senses of identity...[are] often most forcibly tied up with senses of landscape, of how a place appears as an ordered form of environment *within which* place and community are perceived” (Stewart and Strathern 2003).

Community identity is defined as personal and public identifications with a specific physically bounded community with its own character...Many of the characteristics of identity also find expression in the physical environment,” though the social roots of identity have been the subject of more studies...“Community identity implies that local features of the built and natural environment characterize a physical identity of place, which in turn affects residents’ personal and group identity” (Kim and Kaplan 2004).

Kim and Kaplan hypothesize that several qualities contribute to personal identity: 1) a feeling of “uniqueness [or] distinctiveness...from others through associating with a group or a place.” 2) the continuity of links between residents’ past and present environments, which are kept strong by the “physical properties of community.” 3) the “significance” of a place through the “self-esteem” and “pride” that arise from “a positive evaluation of oneself, the group, or the place with which one identifies.” 4) “compatibility, [or]...a ‘good’ fit...[which] exists when the environment facilitates people’s everyday lifestyle and when they can perform well in that environment 5) “cohesiveness—the strong character of community expressed by a sense of homogeneity, intimacy, and compactness.” These qualities combine in various ways so that “community identity can thus contribute to residents’ sense of [individual] identity” (Kim and Kaplan 2004).

### **Length of Residency/Residential Place Attachment**

Another aspect of sense of place that this study proposes to explore in detail is how length of residency affects perceptions of place attachment when vacancy has occurred. Brown et al. confirm past research findings that “long-term residents and home owners reported more positive overall place attachments” (Brown et al. 2003). The percentage of homeowners on a block was a significant predictor of attachment to the block/neighborhood, but average years of residence on a streetblock did not directly relate to block attachment. Length of residency leads to place attachment, which, when related to the residential area itself, often are seen in “feelings of pride in the residential area and its appearance and a general sense of well-being” (Brown et al. 2003).

Residential place attachments can change over time as places change. “Residential attachments provide stability, familiarity, and security. Yet attachments also change as individuals and households develop, environments age, or the processes supported by settings

alter...Place attachments are often related to, but not determined by, changing housing and neighborhood conditions” (Brown et al. 2003).

In Cazenovia, a long-thriving village two hours east of Red Creek, residents’ concern for “quality of place” has been tied to “rootedness” in place, or place attachment, and length of residency (Hugill 1995). In this village, Hugill found that this concern for quality of place was tied to its appearance and had a strong influence on social interaction. He found that “two factors distinguish the use of landscape in communication between social groups: (1) its longevity and (2) its susceptibility to control by a small group of individuals,” those whose families have lived there longer than others (Hugill 1995).

For most of the commuters [those who have lived there less long than the major component of village residents]...the more purely social gesture of length of residence” is recognized as significant. But “few seem to realize how fundamental it is to village social life...Length of residence in Cazenovia is critical” to those whose families have lived there longer (Hugill 1995).

“Concern with the landscape is also crucial...The ‘best’ landscapes are old, have been manicured by old elite families for a substantial length of time, and have excellent views of Cazenovia Lake or the surrounding country. The old elite have consistently shown concern with this aesthetic and its development since first settlement; the village record is filled with ordinances governing the appearance of the village...Today these families are prime movers behind the preservation foundation...and other ventures concerned with both the maintenance and the extension of their aesthetic. Old elite families without money, not that uncommon, behave similarly in all respects with the exception that their private residential landscapes are less lavish” (Hugill 1995).

Length of residence is thus deeply meaningful to one’s personal experience of place, as “long-term residence...helps lead to long-term social integration into the local area...creat[ing] an emotional bond between residents and their homes and community” (Kim and Kaplan p 315).

## **Territoriality and Perception of Disorder**

In places that have seen such changes occur, there is often widespread vacancy. One result is that there are not enough people traversing or populating some visible spaces to make them appear lived in, cared for, or watched over. This absence of people, in places such as streetblocks, means there are fewer for nearby residents to perceive daily or frequently. This degrades the ‘social legibility’ of the street, which erodes their feeling of vigilance or control. Those who spend time outside more often find a place more “socially legible;” they “have a better sense of who’s who”—an idea first called “eyes on the street” by Jane Jacobs in her early writings about Greenwich Village (Taylor 1988). Potential criminals (“offenders”) perceive they are more likely to be noticed when others are visible. Offenders may be deterred on blocks where many people are present, but as they become familiar with a site they can become aware of how willing others are to keep an eye on happenings and/or intervene (Taylor 1988). The lack of people in a place can be perceived by vandals or criminals as an invitation to act. When they do take action, such as vandalism, graffiti, or burglary, and when properties are deteriorating, residents tend to be less attached to a place. “Residents are less attached to neighborhoods perceived as physically disorderly or deteriorated” (Brown et al. 2003).

Vacancy also refers to the absence of people from spaces in front of buildings and from indoor spaces that are no longer used. This vacancy can be evident to a passer-by if a building shows signs of disorder and disuse, such as limited maintenance, lack of lighting, and deteriorating façade or sidewalk materials. These signs, if clear or persistent, signal that no one cares about a place the way they would if it were a place where they live or work—where they might install visual indicators that show they take care of it and will continue to do so. Such visual “cues to care” are termed territorial markers. In his research on territoriality in spaces near the home and streetblocks, Taylor found that markers such as beautification or upkeep suggest caring, vigilance, and willingness to intervene in problems.

Offenders read the degree of property upkeep as an indication of how the owner will act if property is harmed. In public spaces, such as a downtown streetscape, a lack of investment in such markers may stretch over a significant amount of adjacent space if a large property or series of them is not in use. The public, while potentially concerned about the space, often does not take responsibility for it even if it disturbs them to see it in disrepair. In a study of lower income neighborhoods with vacant lots and residents concerned about crime, residents were not likely to

assert control over these spaces unless they were manageable and the residents had been authorized to manage them (Taylor, 2002).

Taylor found territoriality in public spaces to be minimal—more restricted than in residential settings and same limited spatially, temporally, and behaviorally. This was due to public spaces’ open settings, program, and uses of settings by groups for functional needs only (Taylor 1988). Thus it is not surprising that the only publicly/collectively designed territorial markers evident in downtown Red Creek are the village signs restricting youth activity on sidewalks and the placement of a few planters. Many properties in Red Creek’s downtown and other sites have a low degree of upkeep.

Brown et al. studied “whether residents’ place attachments to their homes and neighborhoods relate to perceived and observed physical decline and incivilities, rental housing, crime fear and victimization, and low levels of social cohesion and control” in a first-ring suburb (Brown et al. 2003) While that study involved gradual physical decline over long periods of time, it focused on housing and largely on social interactions and social fears. It did not focus on vacancy itself, but did address one of the factors of vacancy: poor housing upkeep and appearance. It states that this relates to other social indicators of decline, such as residents wanting to move out of the neighborhood. It often goes hand in hand with graffiti or litter or unchecked minor vandalism, which signals financial disinvestment due to a lack of control of the neighborhood, and an erosion of the social fabric of the community (Brown et al. 2003).

However, the Brown study found that place attachment was stronger in those who were homeowners with longer terms of residency and a lower fear of crime. Similar categories of information would result from inquiries to residents in the proposed study, with the added information of how these categories influence their perceptions of vacancy. Depending on their length of residency and/or their age, those perceptions might be more social and memory-related, or relate more to the physical landscape they view when moving through the village.

## **Visual Literacy, Experience and Perception of Vacancy**

### **Case Study Village**

Designers describe landscape perception in terms of the relationships between the spaces, structures and natural features we view within it. Jakle, a designer who writes about landscape perception, states that gaps in the landscape produce rhythms or patterns

of alternating enclosure and openness; these add to the character of many townscapes even though they are often unnoticed. But he notes that a gap must mean something in a sequence of visualization or the experience breaks down (Nairn in Jakle 1987). Space must relate to other spaces and solids in a rhyme of openness and solidity, and spaces must appear pervaded by “visual substance” (Arnheim in Jakle 1987). He describes emptiness as the absence of relationship as well as of matter. Gaps in a landscape “disrupt” rhymes, as they usually result from the removal of elements that are not replaced in visual kind (Jakle 1987).

This is precisely the situation at the end of the main street into downtown Red Creek from the east, where a row of two-storey historic buildings burned down and now two tiny, shed-like structures and an unimproved lot are the central view when one approaches the primary village intersection. “Buildings are expected to show how they can be used. People expect correspondence between visual properties and functional characteristics” (Jakle 1987).

For those who remember the former functional commercial buildings, the unclear use, from a distance, of the newer ones might contribute to the perception of vacancy in the village, though they are also filled with three small businesses. Jakle writes that buildings are remembered “more for what they do than for how they look” (Jakle 1987). When remembering a building that is gone or in disuse, one’s cognitive mapping of it “appears to relate less to form or visual appearance than to utility or use, although visibility and ease of linguistic labeling are important also” (Jakle 1987). However, residents of Red Creek have already pointed to appearance as one of the major factors in their perception that the village is in a condition of great concern (ongoing CCDR research). It would be important to understand which reason is of greater importance to residents in their perception of vacancy in order to know what the priorities are in addressing it.

These newer buildings also lack the detail that enables viewers to find a “human quality in place,” something most strongly perceived in traditional buildings with windows prominent in solid walls (Jakle, 1987). “Windows, like human eyes, imply ‘intelligences behind them, looking out’” (Campbell in Jakle, 1987). Though the newer buildings have windows, they are small and don’t allow a view into the stores; the size of

the buildings is so small that they do not command as much attention as do the rest of Main Street's building facades. Traditional facades with significant windows "make the city appear social and thus alive" (Jakle, 1987). A lack of social interaction and liveliness in the village center, visible to residents and tourists alike, are two aspects of decline that residents have cited in the vision planning process (ongoing CCDR research).

In studying how tourists perceive place, Jakle refers to their shared perceptions of places as "place consensa." He writes that these are influenced by:

"beliefs, attitudes, and icons...Beliefs are understandings about places around which behavioral expectations are formed (the sense of place utility pervading) whereas attitudes are the associated positive or negative charges inclining people toward or away from places as behavior settings." Icons "are features in the landscape to which beliefs and attitudes attach" (Jakle 1987).

Icons symbolize beliefs and attitudes that help define the meaning of place. More commonly referred to as landmarks, they are the "most prominent parts of people's mental pictures of place" (Jakle 1987).

One facet of the vacancy downtown is the lack of people, including tourists; residents have raised the point that the village must attract more of them to help stave off its decline. In this study, it will be possible to inquire whether there are icons that generate strong 'place consensa' for village residents, and whether they believe these will function the same way for tourists. Residents have mentioned that they are concerned about the way outsiders view the village; this may have an influence on their sense of identity for the village.

As in Red Creek, "many rural communities...are struggling to escape the grip of economic stagnation and decline." Many also "tend to be more vulnerable to such changes than cities because they are often dependent on a single business or commodity for their economic well-being." This decline can be caused by national or international trends, or local problems "such as the bankruptcy of a major business, the closing of a rail line, or the construction of an interstate highway bypassing the community" (Stokes 1989).

All three of these, in some degree, have happened to Red Creek. State route 104 that brings tourists to Lake Ontario was rerouted around town over 20 years ago, and the main employer in the area shut down five years ago, eliminating hundreds of jobs. As commuters and residents disappeared, local businesses saw fewer customers; this resulted in the closure of the community-founded bank, the independent pharmacy, and the independent grocery in Red Creek.

“Few rural towns...are the diverse, largely self-sufficient communities they were when settled, or even 25 years ago. Rural Americans are increasingly making their purchases in regional shopping malls or in larger towns. As a result, many smaller towns...have suffered. Not only have businesses gone under, but also key social institutions, such as the local school, church, or post office, have often become the victims of consolidation in the name of cost-effectiveness. With the loss of their stores, schools, post offices, cafes, and gas stations, many villages survive as little more than a collection of houses, alone and out of context” (Stokes 1989). “Many neighborhoods eventually decline, as housing stock and residents age, owned homes convert to rentals, and poor renters move in” (Brown et al. 2003).

While much of this is a problem in Red Creek, there is one bright spot: the school district centralized and Red Creek is the central school to which all area children are bussed, which brings many people to the outskirts of the village, where the new facility was built. Even the old village school is being used again for a daily summer educational program for agricultural workers’ children. Added to that, tourists come through the village on their way to Lake Ontario via the state’s seaway trail, which shares Main St. There is already a reason for many people to come to Red Creek, and that base of visitors represents part of the village’s hope for the future.

## **Conclusion**

This review of the relevant literature has shown that residents of a clearly discernable place form individual and collective senses of community and identity, develop significant place attachment, and act out varying degrees of territoriality in private and public spaces. These develop over time with their residency in one place and resultant perceptions of its degree of community, its character, and the shaping of its physical setting. How do those with a strong sense of community, identity, and place attachment experience vacancy in certain village elements that led them to form their

original perceptions about the place they live? How will this differ from the experience of those who are relative newcomers, or young people—those for whom the changes have not altered links to their personal past? How has vacancy, in existence for most or all of their village life, affected the way they develop a sense of community and identity in their hometown? Has it led them to have little attachment to place?

This study will seek to understand whether or not vacancy has a similar effect on the ways residents of different ages and terms of residency perceive and experience their village. From there, it will consider ways to address these perceptions with a design response. Such a response will be driven by the place attachment that some residents might express as a desire to mitigate the visual appearance of vacancy in a place where they plan to remain:

“Given the reality that many residents of declining neighborhoods will not accept or cannot afford a move, it may be sensible from the standpoint of both psychological health and policy efficiency to focus on programs that can translate residents’ positive bonds of place attachment into place improvements....Place attachment may also be a resource for neighborhoods struggling with issues of physical decline, loss of social cohesion, and threats of crime. The next step is to understand how place attachments can be mobilized to enhance neighborhood quality of life.” (Brown et al. 2003).

The potential agreement across categories of participants in this study could inspire a meaningful, effective way to address the changes about which all participants are concerned to some degree. Even without a strong consensus on the perceptions of vacancy, the sharing of divergent viewpoints on alternative designs could result in agreement substantial enough to inspire residents to taking their ideas forward.

## **Methods**

As the difficult problem of vacancy afflicts many of our upstate communities, listening to residents' of one place can be a powerful tool for determining ways to address this common concern in other places as well. It is even more powerful because those within the community would likely support its results, as they were involved in the idea generation.

The following sections explain how residents' input will be gathered, analyzed and molded into a design response.

### Literature Review

Method 1) Consult literature on three main topics relating to this study: experience of vacancy, sense of community, and place attachment.

### Outsider/Insider Perceptions

Method 2) Obtain an outsider's view of the conditions of vacancy in the village by helping that person conduct a photographic inventory of downtown and the remainder of the village to note visible evidence of vacancy.

- a) Bring outsider along each village street and take notes of outsider's observations while outsider takes photographs of conditions.
- b) Print out photos in black and white.
- c) Type up notes of observations and map photographed sites.

### Focus Groups

Method 3) Form and conduct focus groups; analyze data.

- a) Form Focus Groups:
  - 1) Select focus groups of residents from the age and residency categories listed in the tables below.
  - 2) Rely on community leaders to identify residents representative of each category. Within each age group at left of table will be two people from each category of residency at right:

Table 1: Focus Group Categories:

CATEGORY	AGE	VILLAGE RESIDENCY	# of participants	Total # of participants
1	9-14	- less than 5 yrs	3	6
		- more than 5 yrs	3	
2	15-29	- less than 5 yrs	2	6
		- 5 to 15 yrs	2	
		- more than 15 yrs	2	
3	30-49	- less than 5 yrs	2	6
		- 5 to 15 yrs	2	
		- more than 15 yrs	2	
4	50+	- less than 5 yrs	2	6
		- 5 to 15 yrs	2	
		- more than 15 yrs	2	

#### Focus Group Residency and Age Categories

Categories to be drawn upon in making up focus groups were determined based upon the recommendation of the committee. These will allow the researcher to understand perceptions of vacancy held by a wide range of residents. One group will be made up of youth, who might not have been old enough to notice, or feel affected by, changes that have occurred recently. A second group will include young adults, who might or might not have noticed, or been strongly affected by, recent changes. A third will include those of middle age, and a fourth will include those of later middle age up to elderly, who might have noticed and been affected by recent changes the most, due to potentially having lived there longer before changes occurred.

Length of residency categories, to be found within each age group, have been based on the year the major changes that resulted in vacancy occurred in the village, 2000. Before this time, only one or two small businesses had closed in the downtown. Those who lived in the village before that time are therefore significant and will be specifically included in each focus group. Those who lived there at least that long but not

their whole lives, considered 5 to 15 years, are the next category. Those who lived there a significant portion of their lives, more than 15 years, are the final category. Two people from each residency category will be included in each focus (age) group. For the youngest age group (#1), a length of residency longer than ten years will not universally apply. The groups will be made up of those who lived in the village before or after the major changes occurred, including three of each residency category.

#### b) Conduct Focus Groups

##### Focus Group Techniques—General

In employing focus group interviewing to learn residents' perceptions of vacancy, standard interviewing question techniques will be used. These will include formulating a set of topics that will serve as a road map to guide the discussion that allows room for exploring relevant points from respondents. In receiving the responses, the interviewer will make standard questions, or probes, in order "to get a respondent to clarify a point, explain further what she meant, to continue talking, or to shift the topic...

- Addition probes encourage respondents to keep talking.
- Reflecting probes determine in a non-directed way which of the analyzed topics in the interview guide are significant to the respondent and which new ones to add because they were overlooked.
- Transitional probes make sure that the respondent discusses a broad range of salient topics.
- Situational probes stimulate the respondent to specify what parts of a situation prompted the responses.
- Emotion probes encourage discussion in depth of how the respondent feels about each specified part of the situation.
- Personal probes get respondents to describe how the context of their lives influenced their reactions" (Zeisel 1981).

In addition, attempts to ensure each person has time to speak will include: mention of the need for equal time directly after one person responds; paying attention to body language and silence by some individuals that might indicate they have a point to make but haven't had a chance to speak; and asking for votes to respond to an opinion

put forth by one respondent (Zeisel 1981). At least one activity will involve asking each respondent to comment in turn.

During the week of January 17<sup>th</sup>, the researcher and committee will finalize road map for focus group discussions.

#### Focus Group Techniques—Specific

The focus group will be structured loosely around a road map of topics that the researcher determines should be discussed. These topics are selected based on the findings from the literature review and the discussion with the committee. Within the road map, props and activities that help foster discussion will be included. The road map will be finalized during the week of January 17.

#### b) Conduct focus groups (continued)

- 1) Solicit these participants for small focus groups to be conducted in late January 2005 at the Red Creek Community Center.
- 2) During focus group sessions, solicit verbal descriptions of their perceptions of vacancy throughout the village, using photographs, a large-scale map on which other residents already marked vacant sites, and a 'road map' of topics to prompt discussion.
- 3) Record discussions of the focus groups on audiotape. Transcribe conversations.
- 4) Organize sites into a table listing sites by category, such as open space, commercial structure, domicile, and by location such as within village core, outer residential area, outer commercial area, etc.

#### Analysis and Summary

Method 4) Analyze focus group findings.

- a) Code conversations according to numbers of comments on each idea raised.
- b) Sort comments. Chart data.
- c) Summarize data to describe how people experience vacancy. Note any majority of experiences within or across categories. Note also those held

in common (by less than a majority of people) or diverging experiences within or across categories.

d) Develop criteria for site selection.

1. Identify priorities residents have for addressing vacancy and scale of change that can be addressed with a design response.
2. Analyze sites in village that correlate most closely to residents' priorities and scale of design response.
3. Select site for design response.

### Design Response

Method 5) Apply understanding of data analysis to explore ways to use this information to develop design responses for the selected village site, using information from the literature and from residents.

- a) If time allows, present design ideas to Revitalization Committee, town officials, and two people from each focus group
- b) Obtain feedback; note feedback and incorporate by revising design alternatives.
- c) Provide village Revitalization Committee with a copy of final project.

## Schedule

The schedule below indicates the expected time needed to carry out this study. While it might need minor adjustments, early and end dates will not change significantly.

Topic	January			February			March			April		
Outsider's site inventory/ documentation			■	■	■							
Arrange focus groups			■	■								
Meet with groups, record				■	■	■						
Analyze findings						■	■					
Summarize findings								■				
Interim reviews						■			■			
Design/representation/ group feedback								■	■	■	■	
Final presentations												■
Final Capstone report												■

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