

The Minnesota Design Team

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SUMMARY

The Minnesota Design Team (MDT) has completed 100 community visits in the program's 24-year history. Over the organization's lifetime it has partnered with community development organizations, adapted to changes, and shown the benefits of successful teamwork through quality community design.

BACKGROUND

The MDT is a grassroots, volunteer-based project to help Minnesota's small communities develop a vision for a healthy future. The MDT was formed in 1983 (then known as the Governor's Design Team) and was initially affiliated with the Minnesota Environmental Quality Board (MEQB) and Department of Trade and Economic Development. In 1992 the MDT left the MEQB and became an independent organization with ties to AIA Minnesota.

MISSION

The MDT has three objectives:

- Increase awareness of the benefits of quality design in community development
- Preserve each community's unique identity
- Inspire an ongoing, participatory, grassroots process that helps people to better understand their community, one another, and the future

STRATEGY

In the beginning, the MDT loosely followed the AIA's Regional/Urban Design Assistance Team (R/UDAT) model with a team of volunteer architects, landscape architects, and other community development specialists who worked together on a two-day charrette.

The evolution of the MDT from state-supported effort to private organization catalyzed operational changes. Now the program provides resources for implementation and relies on a network of affiliate and nonprofit organizations with staff and resources to provide continual assistance.

The MDT is managed by a volunteer steering committee that meets monthly. Each site visit requires 14 to 20 volunteers and extensive planning before the volunteers arrive at the selected community. Once in town, volunteers stay with local host families and everyone gets together on Friday night for a group potluck. The work is typically conducted Friday and Saturday, with a closing presentation to the community on Saturday night.

RESULTS

Each community requires the team to address specific concerns and listen to citizens' needs. Many of the past projects like the ones listed below have led to tangible, relevant, and necessary community improvements.

Taylor's Falls (1990)

- Created a comprehensive plan, formed a planning commission, and established a zoning ordinance
- Constructed a \$480,000 pedestrian underpass providing safe access between the city and St. Croix Riverfront at Interstate Park
- Installed planters, sidewalks, and lighting improvements in the downtown area

Little Falls (1991)

- Partnered with the National Trust for Historic Preservation to develop plans for adaptive use of two historic mansions and their grounds
- Applied for and received National Historic District designation for the downtown commercial area
- Restored a historic railroad station, designed by Cass Gilbert, for use as a visitor center and headquarters for the local Chamber of Commerce

Winstead (2004)

- Broke ground in 2007 on a new City Hall, Police, and Community building

- Broke ground on a promenade oriented to the lakefront

Since 1983 the MDT program has involved more than 600 individual volunteers, including approximately 180 architects, 140 community planners, 100 landscape architects, more than 30 representatives from specialized disciplines, and students from two local universities.

RESOURCES

More Best Practices

The following AIA Best Practices provide additional information related to this topic:

- 21.06.02 The Art of Practice: A Gallery Show of *Process and Design*
- 21.06.04 AIA Iowa Celebrates 100 Years, Increases Architecture Awareness
- 22.02.01 AIA Houston Launches Regional Green Building Conference

Feedback

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Key Terms

- Leadership
- Associations
- Design associations
- Architectural associations
- The American Institute of Architects
- AIA components