Gateways: Creating Civic Identity

by Suzanne Sutro Rhees

What image comes to mind when you think of a "gateway"? It might be a real gate at the entrance to a country estate, a landscaped sign at the entrance to a new development, an arch over a neighborhood street, a park at a highway interchange, or an entrance corridor into a city with its own distinctive sequence of signs, lighting, and landscaping. In each case, the purpose of the gateway is to tell you that you've arrived in a new place. This article examines some of the types of gateways that have recently been developed by cities, towns, neighborhoods, and regions.

The Highway Interchange

The approach to a city or town is usually along a highway, often by way of an interchange with a limited-access interstate. The interchange area is susceptible to its own set of problems. It tends to attract commercial travel services — gas stations, fast food, motels — usually in a uniform franchise-architecture style. If an excessive amount of commercially-zoned land is made available, additional strip commercial uses can proliferate, creating a new business district that can eclipse the real downtown and increase traffic congestion. Some municipalities are trying to avoid this result by designing the highway interchange as a "front door" to their community.

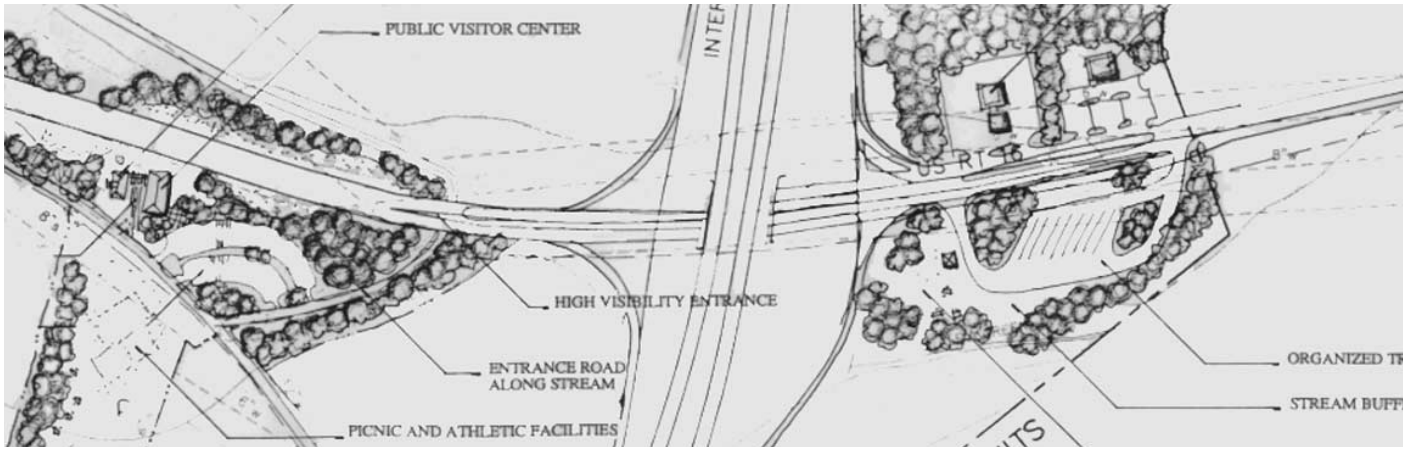
SUZANNE S. RHEES

Minneapolis' Harrison neighborhood gateway detail

The city of Chubbuck, a small community near Pocatello, Idaho, recently created a park on a nine acre parcel at its interchange with I-86. The city used federal ISTEA "enhancement" funds, state transportation funds, and additional tax increment financing revenues to irrigate and landscape the site with trees, grass, and ground cover. Chubbuck developed as a bedroom community for Pocatello, and thus lacks a well-defined center. The interchange project is part of an effort to develop the one-mile highway corridor between the interchange and the city's existing center as a new "downtown."

Virginia's I-81 Corridor Council, established to deal with economic, community development, and environmental issues along the 328-mile highway corridor running between the Blue Ridge and Allegheny Mountains, has developed design guidelines for the corridor's interchanges. The guidelines resulted from a 1992 planning study prepared by Hill Studios, P.C., of Roanoke, that closely examined four typical interchanges and proposed design standards for each, based upon historical land use patterns, natural and scenic features, and ongoing economic development. The overall goal is for interchanges to serve as entryways to adjacent town and village centers.

For example, the "historic town" gateway



Drawing of interstate gateway for regional center at Marion, Virginia. From Interstate 81 View Planning Project, Hill Studio, P.C.

for New Market, Virginia, centers on a group of small buildings close to the road with parking lots tucked between or behind them. On the other hand, the design for the "regional center" of Marion aims to create a gateway to surrounding parks and recreational areas. The guidelines emphasize the importance of the scenic views by keeping signs and light poles below the mountainous horizon. The "college gateway" guidelines for the town of Dublin call for a landscaped boulevard linking the interchange and the nearby campus, as well as a grid system of new roads parallel to the crossroute to alleviate congestion on the commercial strip.

Since the study was completed, several communities along the corridor have begun developing their own gateways. One example is the small city of Lexington, home to Washington and Lee University. Lexington is working with Rockbridge County, where the I-81 highway interchanges are located, to create a "college gateway" showcasing its historic resources.

The Highway Corridor

When one approaches a city or town by car, the sequence of views from the road determines one's first impressions of a place. If we think of a gateway as an entrance corridor, then gateway planning means linking this sequence of views together with common elements that give the corridor its own identity. *Gateway.*

The most important and frequently used element is landscaping: a continuous row of shade trees on either side of a road, a planted median, a landscape buffer composed of native plant materials, can all help define the corridor. Landscaping can also provide a sense of enclosure which accentuates the transition between the openness of the surrounding landscape and the density of the town or city center. Placing of utility lines underground, ornamental lighting, sign controls, and sidewalks or parallel paths can also contribute to the overall image of a highway corridor. *Resources.*

CAPITOL AREA ARCH. & PLANNING BOARD

Bridge over Interstate links downtown St. Paul with the Minnesota State Capitol.

In Martinsville, Virginia, a small group of business leaders have organized the nonprofit "Gateway Streetscape Foundation" for the purpose of funding gateway and other beautification projects in and around the city. One recently completed project consists of a five-mile landscaped road corridor linking the old city courthouse to a new county courthouse. The foundation, which has received funds from both the city and local corporations, pays for a full-time horticulturist to maintain its projects.

A distinctively urban gateway has been created along Interstate 94 through the city of Saint Paul. The interstate, built like so many others in the 1960s, slices through the urban fabric, severing the downtown from the State Capitol just to the north. Reconstruction of the area

continued on next page

Gateway

One good definition of "gateway" is: "[A]n entrance corridor that heralds the approach of a new landscape and defines the arrival point as a destination. The goal of gateway planning is to arrange this landscape so that it rewards the viewer with a sense of arrival and a positive image of the place." From Michael Barrette, "Planning Basics for Gateway Design," *Zoning News* (December 1994).

Resources

A good source for information on design and landscaping standards for roadway corridors, including sample local corridor ordinances, is Kirk Bishop's *Designing Urban Corridors* (PAS Report 418, 1989), available from the APA Planners Bookstore, 312-955-9100.

Other useful resources on gateways and highway interchanges include: Suzanne Sutro Rhees' "Zoning the Interchange," *Zoning News* (December 1993) and Michael Barrette's, "Planning Basics for Gateway Design," *Zoning News* (December 1994).

Contacts for the projects cited in this article:

• *Chubbuck, Idaho, gateway park.*
Steven Smart, City Planner, City of Chubbuck, 208-237-2400.

• *Minneapolis neighborhood gateways.*
David Hansen, Minneapolis Arts Commission, 612-673-3006.

• *Philadelphia Chinatown "friendship gate."*
May Yee, Chinatown Development Corp., 215-922-2156.

• *Pima/Salt River, Arizona, highway corridor.*
Charles R. Schiffner, Architect, 602-954-7442.

• *Radnor, Pennsylvania, gateway.*
Ronald Lee Fleming, President, The Townscape Institute, 617-491-8952.

• *Rock Hill, South Carolina, gateway project.*
Chuck Chorak, City of Rock Hill, 803-329-7080.

• *St. Paul Capitol gateway.*
Paul Mandell, Senior Planner, Capitol Area Architectural & Planning Board, 612-296-7138.

• *Virginia I-81 corridor study.*
David Hill, Architect, Hill Studio, 703-342-5263.

Gateways...

continued from page 7

began in the late 1980s in order to complete an intersecting interstate, I-35E, and untangle a "spaghetti junction" of twisting concrete ramps. The Capitol Area Architectural and Planning Board, working with the state transportation department, the city's planning and public works departments, and a host of other agencies, managed to secure about $6 million in additional "beautification funds" (a small fraction of the $80 million project) to create a new and distinctive character for this freeway segment.

Larry Millett, architectural critic for the Saint Paul Pioneer Press, described the project's results in a 1992 column as "the Freeway Beautiful ... a sort of roadside new-Renaissance fantasy [with] rusticated retaining walls, old-style street lamps, decorative iron railings and, most notably, a series of ornate bridges ... that come complete with obelisks, urns, gatehouses and other antique references never seen before on the great American interstate." The Cedar Street bridge in front of the Capitol even features an enclosed, barrel-vaulted walkway, an important pedestrian amenity in this northern climate.

The gateway design signals to the pedestrians and motorists who cross the bridges and to the drivers passing under them on the freeway that they are in a city with a strong sense of its historical roots and architectural heritage.

CITY OF ROCK HILL, SC.

Statue symbolizing creativity is part of Rock Hill, South Carolina, gateway project.

A local highway can also be designed as part of a gateway. One such project was undertaken by the city of Rock Hill, South Carolina. In the 1980s, Rock Hill initiated a strategic planning process in response to economic decline caused by the closing of more than a dozen textile mills. One of the results has been a gateway project, consisting of a mile-and-a-half long landscaped corridor leading from the nearby highway interchange to the edge of the historic city center, where a new "gateway structure" has been built.

The structure consists of a large circle of trees and shrubs encompassing all four corners of the intersection, centered on two columns (rescued from the ruins of a famous Masonic temple in nearby Charlotte, North Carolina) and four statues. Each of the statues holds a different symbol of the city: the gears of industry; the flame of knowledge; a cluster of stars to symbolize creativity; and a lightning bolt to symbolize energy and infrastructure. The temple columns symbolize the "historic city," while the surrounding landscaping symbolizes the "garden city."

The project costs, over $1 million, came largely from bond financing and private donations. While a project on this scale may seem high-priced for a small city, gateway architect Michael Gallis points to its remarkable success as an economic development tool. Forty new businesses, 38 of them international in scope, have located in Rock Hill since the gateway's completion. Gallis also sees a turnaround in the city's image from that of a rundown mill town to a place that's "on the move," and a resurgence of civic pride.

Neighborhood Gateways

Urban gateways into districts or neighborhoods are becoming increasingly popular, in conjunction with a renewed emphasis in many cities on neighborhood planning and revitalization.

Sometimes a gateway is literally a gateway. In the early 1980s the Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation installed a traditional Chinese entrance gate at the south end of 10th Street, one of the major entrances to the Chinatown district. Known as the "Friendship Gate," the 40-foot high structure is the product of a cultural exchange between the sister cities of Philadelphia and Tianjin, China. Brightly lacquered in red, yellow, blue, and green, the gate was constructed by a team of master artisans from China. It clearly identifies to pedestrians and passing traffic that they have entered the Chinatown district.

PHILADELPHIA CHINATOWN DEVELOPMENT CORP.

Philadelphia's "China Friendship Gate."

The Minneapolis Arts Commission has a neighborhood gateway program that has developed four gateways since 1993. Funding comes from the city's capital budget under an unofficial "one percent for art" arrangement. Some neighborhoods have also contributed additional funds or raised private contributions. Neighbor-

> *"Any part of a town — large or small — which is to be identified by its inhabitants as a precinct of some kind, will be reinforced, helped in its distinctness, marked and made more vivid, if the paths which enter it are marked by gateways where they cross the boundary."*
>
> *"Many parts of a town have boundaries drawn around them. These boundaries are usually in people's minds. They mark the end of one kind of activity, one kind of place, and the beginning of another. In many cases, the activities themselves are made more sharp, more vivid, more alive, if the boundary which exists in people's minds is also present physically in the world."*
>
> — From Christopher Alexander, et al., *A Pattern Language: Towns-Buildings-Construction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) 277.

hood associations apply to sponsor a gateway through a competitive process; two neighborhoods are generally selected each year. Once selected, the sponsors organize a steering committee to help select a site and an artist to design the gateway.

Each of the constructed gateways has its own distinctive design and character. For example, the Elliot Park neighborhood gateway is an open frame of stone and brick with a metal sign extending over the street, while the Harrison neighborhood gateway features two cast bronze figures of children atop columns decorated with African-inspired motifs, and the Northeast gateway (developed cooperatively by five neighborhoods) incorporates motifs reflecting the many different ethnic groups residing in Northeast Minneapolis.

Developing Gateways

How can a region, city, or small town begin the process of creating a gateway? A good starting point is for the planning commission to identify the gateway concept in the comprehensive plan, and then promote its implementation through the zoning ordinance, and reviews of development proposals. For example, where new roads or highway interchanges are planned, zoning districts can be created for adjacent lands, with guidelines and incentives for gateway development. *Resources.* Land use regulation is equally important to preserve the integrity of "constructed" gateways. The visual impact of a specific gateway site or corridor, whether it be a gate, a set of columns, or a tree-lined median, can easily be diluted by overly obtrusive signage and commercial development unless suitable regulations are in place.

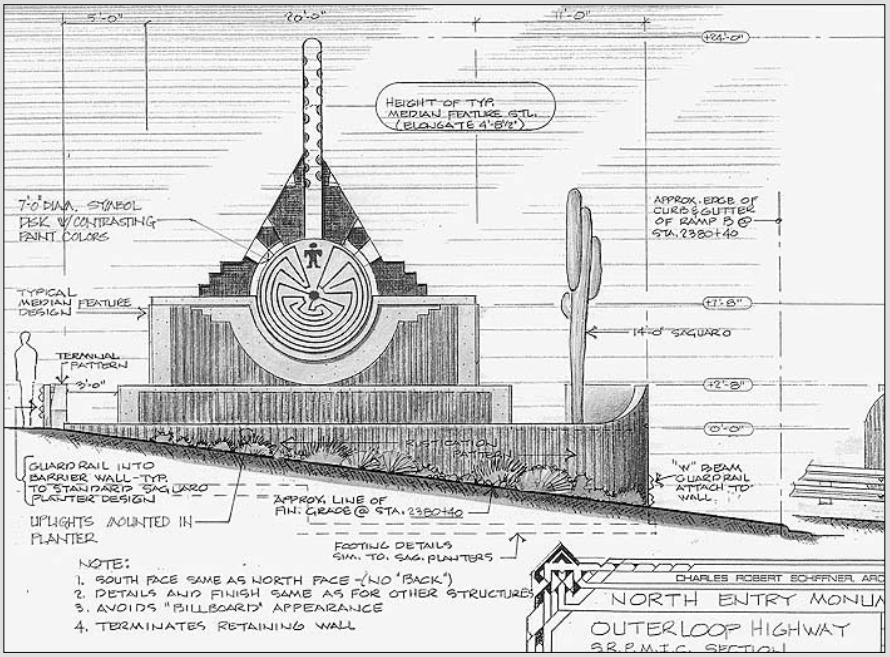
Looking at the projects profiled in this article, it also becomes clear that highway construction, in which many millions of dollars are routinely expended, offers perhaps the best opportunity to add aesthetic and pedestrian-oriented features at a small percentage of the total costs. The availability of what are known as "enhancement funds" under the federal "ISTEA" legislation is providing an impetus for many such projects.

In addition, since most gateways blend elements of art, architecture, and landscape architecture, the "one percent for art" programs in place in many cities offer another avenue for gateway development. Bear in mind also that the scale and cost of gateway projects can vary greatly, from a major project like the Rock Hill gateway to the much smaller-scale Minneapolis neighborhood gateways, designed and constructed for $30,000 to $60,000

Summing Up:

In many ways today's gateways can be seen as successors to the monuments of the early 20th century City Beautiful movement, which spurred the creation of innumerable war memorials, plazas, and grand boulevards in an effort to beautify and humanize the American city.

continued on next page



Drawing of North Entry Monument for the Outerloop Highway, Pima/Salt River, Arizona, by Charles Robert Schiffner, Architect Ltd.

Pima, Arizona

A recent example of how gateway design elements can be integrated into new highway construction is that of the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community, a small tribal area just outside of Phoenix. After lengthy negotiations, the community and the Arizona Department of Highways came to an agreement to construct a new freeway, part of the city's "Outer Loop," along the community's western edge.

Under the agreement, highway funds were used to design and build a series of esthetic elements designed to identify the tribal community as a unique area. These include noise walls, landscaping, entrance monuments, and ten distinctive bridges that incorporate motifs from tribal legends, Pima basketry, and Maricopa pottery. The concrete from which the bridges, walls, and planters are constructed is not "freeway beige," but a deep earth red, in keeping with the surrounding landscape. Monuments at either end of the bridges bear the seal of the two tribes, a design based upon an tribal legend of "man in the maze." Design guidelines for an adjacent commercial corridor have been written, according to project architect Charles Schiffner, "to inspire creativity and create images appropriate to the tribe."

Schiffner also reports that his firm is now engaged in a similar project on lands of the Paiute tribe outside Las Vegas using designs based on Paiute astronomy, including a kind of "compass rose" pattern at interchanges.

—*S.S.R.*

Rocks excavated from the Blue Route in Stonehenge-like circles mark the eastern entry to the township along Rte. 30 on the Lower Merion boundary line.

The Radnor Gateway

by Ronald Lee Fleming

Construction of the new "Blue Route" (I-476) arterial highway through Philadelphia's western suburbs prompted Radnor Township's efforts to enhance the design of the highway corridor. The township's goal was to create a stronger sense of place and a feeling of continuity along the old Lancaster Pike (Route 30), especially where it intersected the new Interstate.

Griffin made of trap rock in a wire mesh casement defines the entry ramp leading from the Blue Route into Radnor Township at Rte. 30

The design strategy for the five mile corridor "reimagined" the Neolithic stone landscape of Wales, home of Radnor's original Quaker settlers, while also recalling the 18th century stone walls and milestones of the Lancaster Pike, America's oldest turnpike. Rocks excavated from the Interstate were grouped in megalithic structures - including a 23 foot high cairn, and a 90 by 100 foot griffin — that marked key entry points along the turnpike.

Community and corporate support allowed for comprehensive tree and flower plantings at important vistas, as well as changes in the design of service stations along the Lancaster Pike. What was once a stretch of shabbily developed roadway is now a community identifier, conjuring up visions of the township's origins and giving motorists and residents visual indicators of their locations in time and space.

Radnor residents have also benefited. As William H. McCoy II, chairman of the Radnor Township Design Review Commission, notes, "As a stockbroker, I don't know a better investment that we could have made as a community. When the Blue Route went in, everyone thought property values would go down, but with the Radnor Enhancement Community Strategy in place, property values are rising."

Ronald Lee Fleming, AICP, is president of The Townscape Institute in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The Townscape Institute worked with Radnor Township officials, the landscape firm of Coe, Lee, Robinson & Roesch, and artist William Reimann, to develop and implement the Radnor gateway project. A more detailed description of the project can be found in Fleming's report for the American Planning Association, "Saving Face" (PAS Report #452, 1994).

The township seal on sound-barrier panels of two bridges along the Blue Route.

Gateways...

continued from page 9

[Editor's Note: For a short introduction to the City Beautiful movement, see Larry Gercken's "Community Aesthetics & Planning," in PCJ #7].

The new emphasis on gateways and corridors reflects a growing trend toward "place-making" — creating identifying landmarks that, in a national landscape grown increasingly homogeneous, help the traveler to distinguish one place from another, and give residents and businesses a renewed sense of civic pride. ◆

Suzanne Sutro Rhees, AICP, is a community planner with BRW Inc. in Minneapolis. She also edits "Planning Minnesota," the state's APA chapter newsletter, and is the author of "Reinventing the Village," (PAS Report No. 430, 1991) and "Planning for New Downtown Development," (which appeared in PCJ #9). Ms. Rhees would be glad to answer any questions you have about her article; contact her c/o BRW, Inc., 700 Third St. So., Minneapolis, MN 55415; (612) 373-6509.

> *"The areas around interchanges have also proved to be prime targets for roadside commercial development. Since businesses were prohibited from having direct access to interstates, land around the interchanges became highly sought after and extremely valuable .... Consequently, the big winners in the interchange land rush were the shopping-mall developers, oil companies, and the national franchise organizations that dominated roadside business by the mid-1950s.*
>
> *Today the interchange has become both town center and oasis. Once trolley lines from all over the city brought thousands of shoppers downtown. Now the interstate makes it possible to speed out of the city, exit the interchange, veer into a giant parking lot, and then stroll along a climate-controlled, indoor Main Street at the mall."*
>
> — From Chester H. Liebs
> *Main Street to Miracle Mile*
> (Boston: Bullfinch Press, 1985).