The Paleo Project—Fossil, Oregon

Jenny Young, Rowell Brokaw Architects

In an economically bypassed corner of central Oregon the Paleo Project represents a big vision for a small town. It also provides evidence that planning projects can have as powerful an impact in the life of small communities as large ones.

With 430 residents, the town of Fossil lies three and a half hours east of Portland and is site of the only stop light in sparsely populated Wheeler County. As its name implies, Fossil also sits at the center of paleological treasure trove. The surrounding juniper-studded hills are littered with petrified logs, and the local shale abounds with the fossil remains of redwood, alder, and other plants from what scientists refer to as the "Bridge Creek Flora"—as well as bugs and other small creatures alive 40 million years ago during the Oligocene era. When a cut-and-fill operation leveled space for a football field behind the high school in the 1970s it accidentally created one of the best-known public fossil-digging sites in the nation.

In the past, the county's economic base included sheep-herding and forestry. But the main underlying activities today are cattle ranching and government work. Faced with limited economic opportunity, many young people have no choice but to leave the area to seek a livelihood. This led local residents to consider ways to sustain the town for a new generation. According to Jeanne Burch, a local judge, "we looked around us and realized our future may be in our rocks."

Above: The plan envisions the transformation of Fossil's high school into a Paleo Center that would be a regional edu-tourism site. The existing building will be opened to natural light to create workshop, meeting and display spaces. Section through building, above; view of entry court, below, showing a new Dawn Redwood, a species also extant at the time nearby fossil beds were created.

To help them plan and design their vision, they hired the Eugene, Oregon, architect Jenny Young in association with Rowell Brokaw Architects, also of Eugene. The work that formed the basis of the award involved developing consensus within the community, preparing detailed schematic proposals for a new Paleo Center, tying this work to a consolidation and revitalization of the town's public schools, and proposing an initial phasing and financial plan for the entire effort.

They jury was particularly impressed by the commitment and sensitivity to small town concerns displayed by the planning team. According to one: "this project shows is that really good work doesn't have to happen on a grandiose scale. An urban designer or planner can have a tremendous effect on small communities if they are watchful and care enough."

Besides, the jury noted, where else can a consultant work with a slogan like "Fossil Rocks!"—or be part of a project timeline that spans 40 million years?

Origins of the Plan

The project began with a grant application from Wheeler County to the Oregon Solutions program, which promotes rural development. This led to the establishment of the Paleo Board, composed of local business leaders, county officials, and ex-officio members from state and federal agencies and scientific and educational institutions around the state.

With the initial grant, the board hired Young and Rowell Brokaw to produce a vision and planning document to capture people's imagination. With that plan in hand, the board has now been able to win a private foundation grant to hire a director for the project, the noted Northwest geologist/paleontologist Ellen Bishop.

As a small partnership, Rowell Brokaw has specialized in such public and community projects as buildings for Oregon Head Start, facilities for the developmentally disabled, and assisted living centers for the elderly. Both John Rowell (one of the firm's founders) and Jenny Young are faculty members at the University of Oregon School of Architecture. A main interest of Young's is the structure of small towns, which she feels hold many lessons about quality of place and connection to the landscape. A good building by a skilled architect can have a tremendous impact in such a setting, she notes—particularly when it reinforces local character.

When the RFP for the Paleo Project came out, Young recalls that a friend pointed out how it would be a perfect match for her interests. As a long shot, she sent in her proposal and credentials. She had no idea the work would develop into a commitment that is still vital five years later.

There is precedent in the region for the type of "edu-tourism" site that might be created at Fossil. A similar facility in remote Republic, Washington, today attracts more than 10,000 visitors per year. The bigger idea, of course, is that people who come for the hands-on experience of fossil-digging will also stay for a meal or a night, and buy supplies, artwork and souvenirs.

The vision developed in the Paleo Project is also closely tied to the revitalization of the town's school facilities. With only 100 students, these are currently underutilized, expensive to operate, and in need of renovation. Ultimately, the plan calls for their consolidation on a single site. This would free up present Wheeler High School, located prominently at the top of Main Street, to be redeveloped as a comprehensive learning center for visitors exploring the geology of the region.

As it is envisioned architecturally, the Paleo Center would open up some existing spaces in the old high school to the outdoors and to natural light. Programmatically, it would contain resource, display and interpretive areas, and have the feel of a big workshop. The idea is for it to be a place where boots and rocks and pickup trucks would be welcome, and where first-time visitors could mingle with experts.

The other half of the development/consolidation effort would be accomplished by constructing a new two-story high school wing, containing six classrooms and a shop, behind

Above: The small town of Fossil is located near the John Day National Monument in sparsely populated eastern Oregon.

the existing 1926 Fossil K-8 school. Together with the older building, this wing would create a sunny, sheltered courtyard. The social challenges of a K-12 mix would be addressed by creating age-appropriate spaces and groupings for students, including a second, smaller kindergarten addition.

Both the new Paleo Center and the single-campus K-12 school would be state-of-the-art facilities. As future town landmarks and centers of community life, they would incorporate building elements that reflect the latest research into learning environments and energy efficiency.

Local Problems, Local Charms

Since the vision document was completed, the project has moved in a slightly different direction than initially envisioned. Most notably, Rowell explains, there is now agreement that the conversion of the high school may be too big a bite to take right away. As an interim step, the county has bought a residential property near the courthouse, which Young and Rowell Brokaw are now completing designs to remodel and add on to. As the initial home of the program, this site is a ten-minute walk from the fossil beds. But, as Rowell points out, it is well within an imagined "10,000-square-mile classroom," and will give the project an immediate physical presence.

The conversion of the high school is still the best plan, Rowell says, and is still the guiding vision for the program. Not only is this site immediately adjacent to the fossil beds, but there are good reasons why a combined K-12 school facility would be more efficient in terms of energy efficiency, staff usage, and adaptability to changes in the local school-age population. But, as Young points out, the funding mechanism for the school improvements that were part of the initial vision plan were always uncertain.

The difficulties indicate how—even though discussion in the project documents are all about fossils, education programs, and the adaptive reuse of school buildings—the real story of the Paleo Project concerns developing a vision that fits the tenor of life in a small town.

The Fossil area is home to a surprisingly heterogeneous population, which has only grown more so as electronic communication has allowed closer connection to urban culture, Rowell says. He points out that in addition to those dependent on ranching and government work, it includes artists, scholars and professionals, as well as many who seem to get by with no regular form of employment.

Sample Juror Comments—Paleo Project

McNally: My favorite was also the Paleo Project, because it celebrates a point of view which I think is important sometimes. I have worked with so many small towns that have no money, that think badly about themselves in some way, and have to really dig deep and be resourceful. As we say in our office, they have to "find the fish head," which is taking the landscape and the people and making something out of fish bones and guts. I think they do that brilliantly. And the way they figured out how to phase the thing was just a great move.

Ahrentzen: The story section is very convincing, how they start out talking about a couple that comes there and stumble across a fossil, and take it into town and say "What's this about?" Then they're there long enough so they're looking for a place to stay. It's interesting how they use that to generate all these different ideas.

Hull: They comment "This town is about rocks."

Kelbaugh: This town rocks! It is transformative and very well thought out.

Hull: We saw several projects that were trying to look for an economic reason to do something. But they are still floating around. Here, they were really specific. That's what's so nice about it. And that specificity has all sorts of potential for this community. I thought they nailed it on this project.

Over the last four years, he has come to know quite well how such people don't necessarily want the same kind of progress as those on the other side of the Cascade Range. In some ways, Young also points out, the main reason the town's original form is still intact is that it is not located on a main road.

"Rural towns have a roughness that urbanites sometimes don't understand," Rowell says. "It is that roughness that makes a town like Fossil delightful, and that gives it a special quality of place."

At the same time, in architectural terms, this equates to an understandable suspicion that things will get "too fancy."

"How do you walk that line?" he asks. "You have to ask yourself: If you drive 300 miles to get there and it still looks like every other place, is it worth it?"

Part professional practice, part community service, and part research into rural Oregon culture, it is that sense of commitment that offers much hope for Fossil's future.

—David Moffat

All images courtesy of Rowell Brokaw Architects.

Top: Construction of the new high school wing behind the town's existing historic K-8 school will allow consolidation of all of Fossil's education facilities at a single site, surrounding a sunny courtyard.

Opposite: The present high school is located at the top of Main Street (top site in drawing) next to existing fossil beds (shown as dotted outline). To allow establishment of the new Paleo Center, the plan calls for a new high school wing to be built on the grounds of the nearby K-8 school (lower site in drawing).