Commentary...

A community's identity with art

By Chris Morin
Correspondent

Small towns in America typically aren't associated with art.

Their identity is usually based on one of the following: remote location; nearby job-related industry such as agriculture, mining, ranching, logging, commercial fishing, or manufacturing; serving as a bedroom community to a nearby larger town. When the identity shifts, due to loss of the original causation, the town will wallow and gradually stagnate, or it might attempt to gain a new identity, which carries a certain risk.

Small towns that are art destinations rarely start out as such, they evolve into it.

Twenty years ago, John Villani authored the book "The 100 Best Small Art Towns in America. " A back-cover summary of a small art town:

"[It] is the type of community people love visiting on a weekend getaway. They might stay at a gorgeous B&B, have dinner in a great (but undiscovered) restaurant, wander around art galleries, antique shops, and flea markets.

"A small art town is the sort of place urbanites move to after selling their condo and finding a renovated farmhouse on five forested acres. On weekends these new residents enjoy art gallery openings and local musicians performing at cafes. On weeknights there are concerts and dance programs at the local arts center.

"A small art town is the sort of place where people can find a true sense of community. Families value small art towns because they have a high priority on neighborliness and security. Kids can walk home from school in safety. Crime rates are reassuringly low."

Visiting an almost "ideal" place is one thing; living there brings a greater dose of everyday reality. Nonetheless, the kernel of truth in this glowing perception is palpable. Art as a commanding presence genuinely does exist in a small percentage of towns and helps influence the atmosphere of these locations toward the kind of place envisioned by Villani's book.

For a community to be considered an art town, per capita, a fairly large number of artists call it home. Works of art are out and visible in the community. Performing art venues have been set aside and dedicated to music, dance, or theatre performances. Opportunities annually occur for individuals to study, learn, and practice various art genres. Finally, art galleries and antique stores offer take-away works.

The iconic small towns of the American West are always noted for having three things: 1. amazing outdoor scenery that provides recreational opportunities; 2. a strong cultural component with an art community as one of those foundations; 3. a wide selection of good-to-great restaurants. Thereafter, each has a unique quality that makes it distinct. Jackson Hole, Wyoming, is renowned because of the nearby wildlife; Sedona, Arizona, provides the mystical energy angle; Durango, Colorado, has the Old West persona; Taos, New Mexico, offers the deep heritage of Pueblo and Spanish cultures.

These locations have a wide range of locals, with a plethora of attitudes, lifestyles, and perspectives, but overall, they exemplify those initial three qualities. They have learned how to make the alchemy of egalitarian and unified coalesce. This, in turn, attracts visitors who seek out those very things to include a lack of monochromatic thinking, which is more indicative of generic small towns. These attributes are also likely to influence who will consider moving to these locations.

Other iconic towns offer much different unique identities. One is known for a massive motorcycle gathering, which provides a certain persona and attracts a different crowd. Yet another town is developing its image to include being a cannabis destination, due to the change in recent state laws. Another town, in the heart of red rock canyon country, annually holds 18 major, town-filling, traffic-altering weekend festivals or events along with an equal number of smaller venues. Locals there have come to resent this town's popularity on those weekends. Yet, none of these popular locales are viewed as art destinations.

A town can gain the art identity accidentally or through guided effort. Taos and Santa Fe, New Mexico, became art centers in the early 1900s after several artists relocated there over a period of 30 years. It wasn't planned. Whereas some communities, particularly ski towns of the West — Aspen, Squaw Valley, Telluride, Deer Valley — sought out art festivals and art galleries so as to infuse this aspect into their identity.

Ouray, Colorado; Poulsbo, Washington; and Homer, Alaska, began as mining, agricultural, and fishing communities, but eventually faced a downturn in those industries. Each reinvented itself as a small-town destination, though not as an art community per se. They've become highly respected destinations where art is recognized as playing an important and respected role. If a community could be said to have a "soul," then it would be fair to say that spiritually, in addition to economically and culturally, these three towns have been prospering over the past 30 years.

Sisters, Oregon has a solid identity driven by the outdoors, the Western frontage motif, and three major events. These factors might very well be sufficient and sustaining as the town continues to grow, and growing it is. The foundation exists for it to also become a true art community. Whether or not to attempt to direct the progress of Sisters in any direction, let alone an art community direction, would be debatable. After all, contentious debate serves as the norm for anything anymore. Determine, fate, acquiesce, status quo, intervene … these are fancy words for saying hands-on or hands-off. However, every town has, at the very least, hands in place around it, be they interested or passive, proactive or reactive. Whatever hands there are in place around this community, whatever they may or may not do, let them hold a healthy, positive desire for the future of Sisters — in its entirety.