

What Happened to Nantucket?

Making the right choices in designing our built areas is important to their success and longevity.

BRIAN BRENNER

A while back I biked with my son out to Madaket on the western edge of Nantucket Island. It was about a six-mile bike ride from the center of the old whaling village. It was cloudy and cool, the type of dreary day at which Nantucket excels. On the beach looking west over the water, you could see every shade of gray imaginable. The mottled sky blended into the gently swelling water. There wasn't a foghorn blaring in the distance, but you could imagine one. Probably out on the horizon floated a lost, seventeenth-century ghost ship.

The beaches of Nantucket are among the most beautiful in New England, which is a large part of the island's appeal. There is nothing particularly unique about a beach in summer, but on Nantucket it's not only summer: it's moody. At Madaket, the blueish gray swells gently lapped the sand, edging against the shells and driftwood. Along with the imaginary foghorn and the real sea gulls, it

was a great place for reflection — in this case, I gave pause to reflect about infrastructure.

In With the Old

In addition to the beach and ocean, Nantucket has an amazing old fishing village. The village — a collection of preserved old buildings and cobblestone streets — is perched on a gentle hill sloping down to its well-protected harbor. In the nineteenth century, Nantucket was the whaling capital of the world. Many blocks feature the large, graceful homes of the former whaling ship captains. For a brief period of time before the discovery and use of petroleum, Nantucket supplied much of the world's whale oil. This substance was used to light the lamps all over the world, so the island was very wealthy. The whaling captains built spacious, grand mansions with widow walks and fancy turrets.

What is impressive about the village is not just that it's old and preserved, but that the buildings and streets are well-designed and appealing. It's not only the individual structures, but the way they come together to form public space as a whole. The structures are situated to create pleasant outdoor spaces. Each street is a human-scaled outdoor room with trees and private structures spaced at just the right proportions to create inviting open public areas. Walking around this village, whether on the bustling main street or in the back alleys and side streets, is enjoyable and excit-

ing. There, in Nantucket village, the sum ends up being greater than the constituent parts.

However, times change and Nantucket is no longer wealthy from catching whales but now prospers because of tourism. A lot of money has gone into restoring and maintaining the old village. Probably the village spaces would be a lot less appealing if they were run down and not maintained. That intimate public street space would feel oppressive and threatening if the surroundings were physically decaying. Also, the island is a vacation destination, populated by hundreds of carefree, happy people. Being surrounded by these people goes a long way towards making a public place enjoyable.

The Best Infrastructure Design

Yet, even with these considerations, it's important to consider how the infrastructure design and layout creates such a worthwhile place. Compare downtown Nantucket village to your local strip mall. The layout of stores, roads and infrastructure in the strip mall creates spaces where the sum is more often than not less than the constituent parts. The implied message by the design of the mall parking lot is that you need to get out of it and into the store as quickly as possible. In fact, this is exactly what is intended and expected.

It's not really a question of old and new, either, but of infrastructure design. The old seems quaint and desirable. The new seems pathetic. However, it's not because one is old and the other is new, but because of the scale of the man-made environment and what the structures and facilities make out of the individual parts. New infrastructure can be well-built and designed. Old infrastructure can be poorly built and designed, although we tend not to see it because badly designed old infrastructure ends up demolished and replaced.

The forces responsible for your local strip mall and office parks are also at work on Nantucket. The island is not immune to them. Between the mournful gray seashore and the village are stretches of moors and scrub pine woods. In the past, there was a distinct edge between the village and the countryside. That edge has now been blunted, suburban Nantucket style. Large summer

homes have been plopped down on plots of land. The homes, while individually beautiful and attractive, tend to have no spatial relationship to each other. In fact, they seem to have been dropped from the sky onto the landscape. Instead of creating a beautiful village like the old whaling captains' mansions, these new mansions create a peculiar "plopscape" of private spaces on what used to be the moors and woods of the hinterlands. You can see this effect most distinctly by biking down the old Polpis Road on the island's northeast side. The hulking summer homes seem to be a chic, gray-shingled parody of housing, and, taken as a whole, the landscape is far from inviting.

How to Handle Development

The residents of Nantucket have been involved in an intense debate about development. Even though it's an island, there are an awful lot of cars in the summer. The vehicles all congregate in congested, fume-laden traffic jams. While the village is dense and walkable, and you can bike to the beaches, it's really necessary to have a car (or two or three) to access the distant summer homes plopped all over the island. To address the problem, the town has introduced a mass transit system of sorts. There are now several bus routes. Yet, the key issue — that of land use and private rights versus public impacts — remains to be addressed in any meaningful way. In that sense, Nantucket is a microcosm of the land use trends and issues faced all over the United States.

You can still experience and imagine Nantucket as it was. To the island's credit, much of the moors and woods have been preserved, particularly along the Milestone Road in the island center. But the twenty-first-century version of Nantucket seems to have been degraded from its past beauty. The beaches and village are still wonderful, but you need to hold your nose at much of what has recently been built in between.

BRIAN BRENNER is Senior Professional Associate with Parsons Brinckerhoff, working with Bechtel/Parsons Brinckerhoff on the Central Artery/Tunnel Project. He served as Chair of the editorial board for Civil Engineering Practice for seven years.