

“It’s Streets are Poorly Paved:”

External Constraints on Civic Character in a New York Village



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A visitor to Hartwick, New York, a small unincorporated village in the Upper Susquehanna region of New York State, might perceive an apparent lack of concern about the community's appearance. The main intersection, aptly named the "four corners," fails to direct the region's hundreds of thousands of tourists to Cooperstown eight miles away. The sidewalks, even those recently constructed, are uneven, and only one street has a curb. Many streets are unmarked as it is assumed that "everyone knows the streets." A visit to the local historical society features photographs that prove downtown has today less than half the structures than it did in 1960. A quick drive through—a recent Department of Transportation study (see below) showed that well under half of drivers actually slow down to the posted speed limit of 35 miles per hour—seemingly demonstrates a local culture with an apparent disregard for its own appearance. This study examines the local and external forces that result in the "civic character" of this village.

Tradition and Character

Molotch et al. (2001) distinguished between “tradition” and “character” in their study of Santa Barbara and Ventura, California. Character is the physical and cultural makeup of a community at a given point in time, and can be represented in part by the physical structure of a community. Character is an important feature of environmental impact statements: a key question for a proposed development is whether it will alter “community character.” Molotch et al. define tradition as the cultural attitudes and relationships across time: it informs character and can be understood as character spread across time. It is tempting to see the current state of Hartwick’s infrastructure as a genuine expression of local culture, and indeed evidence can be found of a long-standing tradition of aesthetic disregard: as early as 1882, a visitor to the village described its streets as “poorly paved” (Weeks 1981: 39). One may argue that this description offered a glimpse of the character of the village in 1882, and a tradition of aesthetic minimalism has been transmitted to the present day resulting in the present character of the village. Such a contention would be overly simplistic: an historical analysis demonstrates the ebbs and flows of this supposed cultural continuity, and must be understood with the proviso that cultural evolution is subject not only to interactions within the community, but also to interactions with external forces such as economic conditions and the state.

Tradition and Character

This study examines the evolution of Hartwick's civic character. Civic character refers to:

the physical infrastructure facilitated in public space. This includes the streetscape, parks, cemeteries, and even parking lots—any space conceptualized or utilized as part of the public realm (Thomas 2013: 43).

Civic character is distinct in that it stresses public investment, through either governmental or other organizational means, in the physical structure. It contrasts with other forms of character, such as economic or residential character, by this group level involvement. Economic character should be understood as the status of business traditions at one point in time, and is reflected in many metropolitan areas, for example, by a shift from downtown retail development to that found in shopping centers and malls. Residential character refers to the status of housing in a community. Indeed, both reflect decisions made at the individual level and any community impacts are the result of emergent characteristics; civic character is most often a planned community impact. Civic character is the result of historical processes manifest in one time and place, and thus becomes the impetus for action in the future.



Above: Entrance to village on North Street

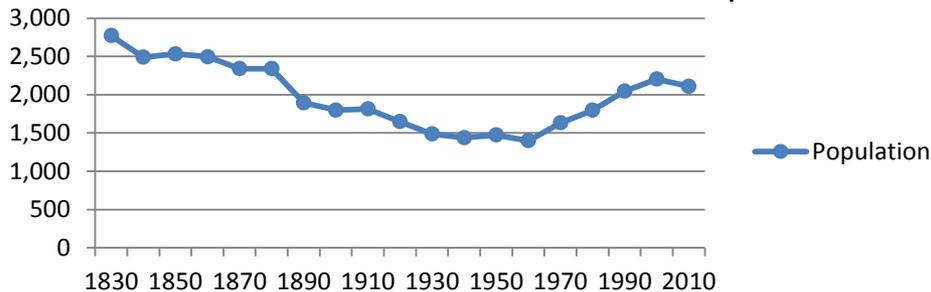
Welcome to Hartwick



Above: Main Street

Hartwick is an unincorporated village of 629 residents within the Town of Hartwick, and is the largest urbanized area within a predominantly rural township of 2,110 residents (Census Bureau, 2013). The town population has fluctuated wildly over its history, from a peak of just over 2,700 residents in 1830 to only 1,400 people in 1960 (see figure 1). Much of this decline occurred during a twenty year period between 1880 and 1900 as local youth migrated to the Mohawk Valley in search of employment in the city of Utica and its nearest suburbs (Thomas 2005). The decline in population meant that the physical structure of the village was established very early, and between 1830 and 1960 relatively little new construction took place (although some new residential streets were added after the arrival of the railroad in 1900). Not surprisingly, the village is rich in structures dating to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but their level of upkeep is uneven. The character of the village today thus reflects a period of stagnation and even decline over about 130 years

Below: Population, 1830-2010



A Little City

The attitude of most villagers during the nineteenth century was that villages were “urban” centers: villages were not “small towns” but rather “small cities.” Even the smallest villages attempted to “keep up” with the advances and fashions found in much larger cities, and in Hartwick this included such basic amenities as paved streets, concrete sidewalks, and a modern water system. As the largest cities grew to immense size this perception of small towns as “little cities” was gradually replaced by an anti-urban sensibility, but even as late as the early twentieth century many small towns were modeled on urban sensibilities. In Hartwick, this translated into a continued desire for “modern” amenities, and the criticisms of the village were often pale reminders of urban criticisms.

Below: Workers installing concrete sidewalk ca. 1900



A Little City

The local cultural concern that the village have the same amenities as any other urbanized setting was apparent in a number of early projects that contribute to the character of the village today. The residential character was established along urban schema from an early stage in the village's history, and houses are of course still relatively close to each other and set to a common setback along the streetscape. During the 1890s, the cemetery was constructed in its present form in a manner inspired by the "City Beautiful" movement (Thomas 2013). Villagers formed the Hartwick Cemetery Association to purchase the fairgrounds next to the original cemetery, laid out a road system, and completed it with a new vault and terraced gardens. Now paved, the cemetery is still used as a park as it is good for bicycling, walking, and other such sports.



Above: The cemetery

A Little City

By the early twentieth century it had become more difficult for a small village like Hartwick to keep pace with much larger communities (Thomas 2013). The building of the high school is a case in point: originally proposed during World War I, it took two elections to get plans for a new building passed by the electorate. The building that was approved did not include plans for a gymnasium—such facilities were becoming commonplace at the time—in order to reduce the cost of construction. The street onto which the building was to face was never built, and as a result the side of the building faces the street and the front of the building a large lawn across which the new street was to have been built.

In both cases external forces were partially responsible for the era's contribution to the civic character. The expectations in both the 1890s and the 1920s were massaged by cultural concerns about what a little city required: a modern cemetery and a modern school. By the 1920s, however, the loss of population (tax base) combined with escalating (urbancentric) expectations meant the village could not afford to keep up with modern expectations. The aspect of the village's civic character that was to be most impacted by external forces, however, was its streetscape.



Above: Side facing street
Below: Front not facing street



Rebuilding the Streetscape

Although seen earlier as a toy for the wealthy, by the mid-twentieth century the automobile had become a means of mass transportation. The 1920s and 1930s witnessed an explosion of new road construction and improvement, particularly after Franklin Delano Roosevelt became president in 1933 and funneled funds to the state for road construction through the Works Progress Administration and the Civilian Conservation Corps (Kay 1998). Through a combination of state and federal funds, existing roads in Hartwick came to be improved.

Photography and historical records indicate that as late as World War I highway construction and maintenance were primarily a local concern. Proper streets had been considered a marker of community identity, but with the expansion of road building activities during the 1920s and 1930s the improved roads came at the cost of local control.

Below: Main Street ca. 1900 (left) and 1997 (right)



Rebuilding the Streetscape

The town first received state aid in highway maintenance in 1907—\$892.50 (Phillips 2002). In 1920, the town bore the cost of paving Main Street from the railroad station at the east end of town to the Main Street Bridge just west of downtown. This particular stretch of road contained the heart of the residential area and the central business district, but other areas of Main Street, as well as all of the side streets, were not improved. In 1921, the town further paved Main Street an additional two miles south of the village. In 1928, however, the county took over the ownership of the street both within and outside of the village, and the “Hartwick-Index” road was widened and paved for a stretch of about 15 miles through the town. With the county taking ownership of the road, the maintenance and appearance of Main Street was now a county responsibility. Instead of seeing this as a loss of local control, however, the town gladly ceded the associated costs of the upkeep. For its part, the county was more concerned with the street as part of a wider transportation network than a focal point of community activity.

In 1931, New York State hired a Massachusetts contractor to build a stretch of highway along South Street for a distance of seven miles. The new route took a number of local roads and linked them in such a way as to make the road seem like a continuous highway, building several new sections in the process. In 1933, the state highway was extended both north and south, and route 205 became the dominant transportation route through the Otego Creek Valley. This had the effect of making Main Street, now a county highway, a secondary street. It also had the effect of ensuring that the two most important streets through the village were no longer under local control. The loss of local control for the main streets would dramatically impact the civic character of the village in the future; the local (town-owned) streets were all paved, but only one would be built with curbs and sidewalks.

Rebuilding the Streetscape

A visitor from even a moderately sizable town would notice the lack of street signs, particularly if they are looking for a specific address. The town government is concerned about the cost of such signs, and as a result only some streets have them. Curiously, only side streets have signs, the two main streets having none. During the 1990s, when the county established an Emergency 911 system, a unified system of addresses was put in place throughout the region. In Hartwick, the state and county highways were renamed: Main Street became County Highway 11 and North and South Streets became State Highway 205. Officially, there is no longer a Main Street in Hartwick. When asked, a town official noted some years later, “well, everyone knows where Main Street is.” This is not true, however, and the local culture and even the few existing street signs demonstrate this. At one corner signs announce both Wells Avenue and School Street: they are the same street, but local residents bicker over the name of the street. Historically, the street was named Mill Street, but with the lack of a formalizing agent such as a street sign the name of the street has now changed three separate times. The names of other local streets have changed demonstrably over the years: in her 1934 history of Hartwick, Pearl Weeks (1981) mentions Parr Avenue and West Street, but neither name is used today. Similarly, when the town erected a street sign for Miller Avenue, its name had somehow become Earle’s Road.



Rebuilding the Streetscape



Main Street, today and in the past



The downtown streetscape is notable for the lack of buildings and businesses. The area has a sparse feel as a day treatment program and the fire department both have significant setbacks relative to other buildings in the area to account for parking. Combined with several empty lots and two vacant commercial structures, the area is a reminder that even in small town America “urban” decay exists. The loss of local control has saved the town money in terms of maintenance of the road, but it has also resulted in an uninspired approach to the streetscape. The county has treated the road as a rural highway and not as a village street. This was particularly apparent in 2010 when the highway department rebuilt the street through the west side of town, including through the remains of the business district.

Rebuilding the Streetscape

On April 12, 2010, County Representative Steve Fournier reported to the town board that Main Street would be rebuilt, but the town board had no chance for significant input as to the design. As work progressed on the project over the summer, local residents began to notice more than changes in drainage: the parking lanes on either side of the street were converted to strips of grass between the sidewalk and the street: all street parking had been eliminated! Throughout the fall, various town officials received complaints: a town board member was told by a member of the fire department that the fire station needed a place for firefighters to park while out on a call; a planning board member was asked by a local minister why the parking in front of the church had been eliminated. At the November planning board meeting the topic was discussed, and in December the planning board passed a resolution condemning the project, particularly in regard to the elimination of parking. The following week, the town board invited the county highway superintendent and the county representative to their monthly meeting.



The highway superintendent noted that green space was necessary to slow traffic through the area, but village residents were not convinced. As one resident noted, “how does somebody who claims to be a professional look at a street with cars parked on it and decide that—what the hell?—let’s just get rid of all the parking?” Another resident stated, “it’s like they’re trying to kill off what’s left in Hartwick so we all have to go to Cooperstown all the time.” When asked at the town board meeting, the superintendent stated that municipalities are not generally consulted as to the design of a new road project.

Rebuilding the Streetscape

The following spring the grass strips were partially paved with asphalt, but a local resident opined in 2011, “they didn’t really fix the problem, just paved some grass. It still looks like hell!” In the July 2011 planning board minutes:

The Board decided that it should be on record that the Planning Board does not support or endorse either the original project, or the subsequent “fix” and the “dumb-ass” responsible should be held accountable for the inferior drainage of the roadway. Further, the Planning Board protests the County initiated action that proceeded without any regard to the Planning Board’s recommendation and without any apparent regard for the Town’s general health, safety, or welfare.

Two years later the county had made no attempt to fix the road and the substantial drainage and aesthetic issues it had created.



Main Street after reconstruction by the county. Notice the water pooling on sidewalks, inadequate parking strip, and generally ugly appearance.

Rebuilding the Streetscape



NY 205 after a moderate rain

It was not just the county-owned Main Street that faced aesthetic issues. The state highway, formerly known as North and South Streets, has had no significant repairs except for occasional resurfacing in decades. The town-owned sidewalks are uneven, with one side of the street having received brand new sidewalks during a water system project in 2009 but the other side of the street making due with the asphalt sidewalks last paved during the 1980s. A blue directional sign erected by the state for which local businesses can buy advertisements sits half empty at the intersection with Main Street, yet a more functional sign directing drivers to nearby communities is not found in the village. The streets have no curbs and poor drainage, the new sidewalks flanked with a strip of asphalt between the street and concrete walks. The local government has asked for some assistance from the state, including a lower speed limit and a sign to direct local tourists to Cooperstown, but to little effect.

A recent attempt on the part of the town government is illustrative of the problem. The Planning Board minutes of January 8, 2008 note that a letter was sent to the New York State Department of Transportation requesting that the speed limit through the village be lowered from 35 to 30 miles per hour—similar to other villages its size—and the speed zone be extended in the south by about a quarter-mile. They also asked for a sign that would direct travelers to Cooperstown along Main Street as the village has a number of tourists. As this was not answered, a simpler letter was sent on June 3. According to the December 2, 2008 minutes, the Department of Transportation agreed to a traffic study.

Rebuilding the Streetscape

After hearing nothing for two years, the planning board unanimously passed a resolution on December 7, 2010 that the:

Town Board request that the State Department of Transportation extend the 35 mile per hour speed limit to the southern extent of the Water District; further, that the Town of Hartwick sign also be relocated to this point. This re-signing of the area would increase pedestrian safety and the safety of the new business growth in this area of the Town.

The loss of local control in this instance had been recognized earlier by other government officials, and in 2008 a town board member remarked that, “I hope this works, but I don’t think the state will do anything. We’ve been through this before.” The sentiment reflects decades of non-responsiveness to local concerns on the part of state officials, and as result a municipal “learned helplessness” has set in: many locals perceive that their concerns are not considered important.



Rebuilding the Streetscape



On February 1, 2011, the town received a response from the State of New York that seemingly confirmed their suspicions. The letter noted, “the Department (of Transportation) has done a thorough and comprehensive evaluation of various expressed concerns pertaining to the Hamlet.” The letter went on to explain why little would be done.

A contentious issue was the speed limit and extent of the speed zone. The “second” speed zone sign is well within the village—at the corner of Poplar Avenue—and concerns included that the speed zone is not enforceable in the area south of this second sign as a speeder could argue they had not seen the first sign. This issue was not addressed beyond a mention that the speed zone would not be extended any further south, but the speed limit itself was addressed.

Rebuilding the Streetscape

The Department referred to the 85th percentile standard used by traffic engineers around the world. The standard is an interesting example of public policy being respectful of what criminologists call “labeling:” specifically that certain forms of crime are the result of laws being set too strictly. A pamphlet by the Institute of Transportation Engineers notes that:

traffic laws that reflect the behavior of the majority of motorists are found to be successful, while laws that arbitrarily restrict the majority of motorists encourage violations, lack public support and usually fail to bring about desirable changes in driving behavior. (ITE, 2013)

What is uncertain is why this same standard is not necessarily applied more often. For example, the *Monitoring the Future* survey has, year after year for decades, shown that over half of high school seniors in the United States have been drunk (on alcohol) without parental consent (Johnston et al. 2012). Similarly, over 40 percent of high school seniors have experimented with Marijuana and tried cigarettes. Indeed, when college students are included, the prohibitions on such substances—particularly on alcohol—approach the 85 percent threshold that the traffic engineers suggest should trigger a change in the law. While an understanding of the potentially negative consequences of the labeling effect is desirable, one expects that a simple “majority rules” approach to public policy, whether in speed enforcement or drug policy, is ultimately unsatisfactory. It ignores conflicts that arise in the creation of policy, and in this case the 85th percentile standard does as well.

Rebuilding the Streetscape

By relying on the perspective of the driver, in most cases people driving through a community, the perspective of other transportation route users are ignored: namely, pedestrians, cyclists, or even those simply using their yards along the street. There is ample research in the social science literature that demonstrates the link between a community's "walkability" and general vitality (see discussions in, for example, Campoli 2012; Daniels 2007; Soderstrom 2009; Speck 2012). Besides well-established health benefits for individuals, walkable communities typically have lower crime rates, higher levels of economic activity, and more stable real estate values. In fact, the ability of families and children to utilize pedestrian services such as sidewalks and parks is frequently cited as a key determinant in the desirability of a new home for young families. By ignoring such research the Department of Transportation is choosing the benefits to motorists over the potential benefits to the local community.



Rebuilding the Streetscape

Of course, the Department's claim that simply lowering a speed limit does not guarantee that drivers will slow down is quite valid (NCHRP 2003). However, according to the Transportation Research Board, the "strongest relationship to 85th percentile speed is with posted speed limits...as posted speed increases the 85th percentile speed increases" (31). In fact, when examining "rural arterials" it was found that a one mile increase in speed limit increases the 85th percentile speed by about two miles per hour. Although the State did not offer to lower the speed limit or extend it far enough so the second speed limit sign would not be a block into the hamlet, it did offer to paint white lines demarcating the side of the road in an attempt to slow traffic. Research has shown, however, that "the absence of either centerline or edgeline markings is associated with lower speeds" (32). The state has similarly banned parking on the street through the village even though "when on-street parking is permitted, speeds are lower" (32). The 2011 letter suggested that both the repainted lines and the parking ban was helpful: "Ideally, the re-establishment of the edge lines will not only serve to slow traffic by visually narrowing the roadway, but it will discourage vehicles from parking on the shoulder of the highway." The language reflects how the state views the road, as a state highway with a shoulder and not a village street with (albeit sloppy) sidewalks.



Rebuilding the Streetscape

Another contention was the placement of blue advertising signs jointly owned by the state and local businesses on the main intersection. The advertising signs replaced green signs in the late 1980s that directed visitors to nearby communities, but they have been half empty and in disrepair for many years. The town had asked that the blue signs be replaced with a directional sign to Cooperstown—the community has about a half-million tourists every year. The Department of Transportation responded that:

additional destination signs are not warranted per the Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices. “Sign clutter” is a very real problem that can cause driver confusion and detract from the overall aesthetics of the Hamlet. The Department will not be adding any additional signing at this time.



The “blue signs” and massive parking sign. The state claims that removing the blue signs and adding a directional sign to Cooperstown eight miles away would create “sign clutter” and be unsightly.

Rebuilding the Streetscape

As with the speed limit, an external standard (the Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices) was referenced as a reason why the local community could not have control over this key intersection in the village. Town officials were concerned not only about the aesthetics, apparently considered appropriate by state officials, but by the safety concerns about tourists staying in Oneonta driving to Cooperstown through the village and slowing down to find the road that would take them there. As a local woman opined, “I’ve seen several near misses (accidents) when people have slowed down, even stopped, trying to see if this were (sic) the road to Cooperstown.”

The Department of Transportation correctly noted that drivers slow down in response to visual cues along the roadway but was unwilling to recognize the role to the state has played in establishing those visual cues. The correct approach to speed is to rebuild the road according to guidelines that would encourage drivers to slow down. According to the Transportation Research Board, drivers slow down when they perceive a street to be “urban” rather than “rural.” To that end, the parking regulation signs erected by the state should be replaced with those that are more appropriate to an (albeit small) urban environment. Rather than restrict parking, parking should be permitted or even encouraged along the street. Studies have also shown that narrowing the street would encourage people to slow down, but not with painted lines (which were shown to increase speed) but with the physical infrastructure. Instead, when new sidewalks were built several years ago, state officials required that the town install asphalt pavement between the sidewalk and the street instead of grass, in effect widening the street and possibly encouraging motorists to go faster. Indeed, traffic controls were also shown to decrease 85th percentile speeds, and although the Department noted that there is not enough traffic to warrant a traffic light, a four-way stop sign would have much the same effect. Given that the traffic studies are fairly recent, the village would at least present an interesting opportunity for studying the impact of these measures. ²²

External Constraints on Civic Character

Civic character reflects not the cultural tradition at a particular moment in time, but rather the accumulation of decisions over the life of the community. Social structure and culture are indeed encoded in the landscape, the result at any moment in time being character. But whereas Molotch et al. (2001) theorized character to be an expression of the local culture, the concept should be extended to account for the fact that external constraints also act on local character.

In Hartwick, the present character of the community cannot be simply interpreted as a lack of care or of economic misfortune. Local officials have been reluctant to invest in the civic character of the village, but it is also true that state and county officials have been dismissive of the village's interests. The fact that the village is not incorporated (and thus legally considered a "hamlet" in New York State) has not helped the situation as the community is not afforded the same respect as incorporated villages. The civic character of the village is thus not purely a matter of local traditions expressed in the landscape, nor is it a matter of county or state government imposing a vision (or lack thereof) on the community, but rather is a dialectic between the two.

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