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Communities can demand more from developers

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Spaces

Mequon - For most of us, a gas station is just a place to fill the tank, grumble about the price of gas and maybe pick up a gallon of milk. One station looks pretty much like another: garish and anonymous, just like the strips they inhabit. Welcome to Anywhere USA.

But here and there, suburban officials are getting pickier about gas station design. And while the results may not be cutting-edge architecture, the shunning of cookie-cutter corporate formulas can help reinforce a community's sense of place, raise the bar for design and shore up property values.

Mequon is a case in point. When the owners of a nondescript, uneconomic Mobil station at Mequon and Cedarburg roads sought to expand and add a carwash, city officials balked. Too much stuff on a small site. The city even toyed with buying the property, a gateway to the Mequon/Thiensville town center, and turning it into green space.



Whitney Gould

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When that idea became a casualty of tight budgets, the compromise that emerged was Towne Market Mobil: a 2,600-square-foot convenience store, deli and gas station that, to judge from renderings, will resemble a picturesque cottage, with a gabled roof, big windows, a cupola and green fabric awnings. The signage is discreet; the gas pumps are in the back; and there's a circular seating area in the front with attractive landscaping and walkways.

The design, by architect Chris Frommell of Lakeside Development Co., is more cute than adventurous, but the building is nicely proportioned; the materials - mostly red brick and limestone - are a pleasant departure from the usual plastic and metal; and the site plan is thoughtfully green and pedestrian friendly.

"The idea was to create a gathering spot, not something to run away from," Frommell said.

"It's going to look nicer than my house," jokes Harvey Pollack, one of the owners, who lives in Mequon.

The big lesson here is that communities don't have to settle for standardized design, whether in gas stations or Wal-Marts. Through their zoning authority, which has long been upheld by the courts, municipalities have broad powers to influence the look and siting of commercial facilities. They would do well to exercise those powers.

As Mequon Mayor Christine Nuernberg puts it: "You don't have to accept yellow arches if you don't want them. We tell people: If you want to build here, here's what you have to do. We're going to insist on good design."

So what *is* good design? Nuernberg says it's like pornography: She knows it when she sees it.

I would be a bit more specific. Good design is scaled to the dimensions of its site. It is original, not formulaic; maybe even surprising. Full-bodied, not superficial, using enduring materials. It balances solids and voids and maximizes natural light. It is welcoming to the street.

Of course, you could argue that upscale Mequon can afford to be fussy about such things. But Nuernberg says that's too simplistic.

"It doesn't matter where you are," she says. "We can show that good design increases property values. If you have tacky development, it will have a detrimental effect on the quality of life, and that comes down to dollars and cents."

Other communities have also caught on. On Delafield's main drag, the 3-year-old Daybreak Mobil station hugs the street, its red brick facade broken up by gables and dormers; the pumps are in back.

As with the Mequon station, this one is a bit too quaint for my taste, but the design (by Johnson Design Architects) is in keeping with the Williamsburg look that Delafield has embraced, and it's a lot more neighborly than the plastic-looking Amoco station across the street. The

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Towne Market Mobil



Rendering

An architect's rendering shows the proposed Towne Market Mobil, which will replace an old gas station in Mequon. "It's going to look nicer than my house," jokes one of the owners.

sunny interior - a convenience store, deli and meat market with hardwood floors and custom cabinets - is about as far from the grungy pit stops of old as you can get.

There's a more contemporary-looking example in Shorewood - a 6-year-old Shell station and convenience store on E. Capitol Drive and N. Morris Blvd. that mixes red brick with terra-cotta stucco. Unfortunately, the pumps are in front, under an oversize, garish canopy.












Lyn Falk, whose Retailworks firm designed the handsome interiors of all three stations, says the market is getting more demanding, especially in affluent communities. "They have higher expectations," she says. "And station owners are realizing that design adds value. The more people see that you have a pleasant place, the more who will stop there."

That was evident to earlier generations, as well. In the 1920s, during a nationwide burst of civic beautification, gas stations blossomed in the shape of Greek temples, English cottages and Spanish missions; Milwaukee's own Wadhams Oil and Grease Co. spawned stations in the style of Japanese pagodas. In 1956, even Frank Lloyd Wright dipped into the genre, designing a Phillips 66 station in Cloquet, Minn., with a crazily tilted cantilevered roof.


By the 1960s and '70s, quirky regionalism had given way to look-alike monotony. My own crazily tilted dream is that gas station design will now move beyond tastefully nostalgic to boldly modernist. If the likes of Michael Graves can design witty housewares for Target, imagine what Frank Gehry could do for Citgo.

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