

In spring of 2010 the UNL College of Architecture is in its second semester of partnering with the citizens of Boone County to "re-pioneer" this rural area. After 45 new building designs/building renovations were created by UNL students in Fall 2009 and were displayed in the State Capitol in December 2009, in Spring 2010 4th year architectural students under the guidance of German bioclimatic architect and educator Martin Despang is working on more projects in the towns of St. Edward, Petersburg and Albion.

As a local citizen involved in this project, I was recently asked to explain "re-pioneering" -- what hopes are built around the concept, how it benefits the larger community and why it could help with redevelopment efforts.

"Re-pioneering" is an attempt to revitalize rural areas by recapturing the core values and motivations of the original pioneers. The original pioneers were motivated by many factors, but among them were a love of the land, a spirit of self-reliance, a willingness to help others and a desire to raise families in a safe, supportive and prosperous environment. Most of all, the pioneers were motivated by a desire to be free, to build and lead lives best suited to their needs and temperaments.

Are our hopes that different today?

The pioneers were, of course, people just like us, good and bad, skilled and unskilled, successful and unsuccessful. But in looking back at those who succeeded, those who shaped the landscape we inhabit today, certain qualities become apparent, qualities that not only created successful communities but can help revitalize them today.

Not to romanticize, but the pioneers were courageous. The pioneers persevered. The pioneers made sacrifices in order to realize their dreams.

The pioneers were builders, innovators and entrepreneurs. They built farm homes and barns, dry goods stores and mills, roads and bridges. And the pioneers utilized the latest technology everywhere they could.

The pioneers cared about community. They created organizations that brought people together to quilt and to husk, to sing and to pray.

The pioneers weren't afraid of diversity -- people from vastly different places, with vastly different customs and languages, worked together to settle the Plains.

The pioneers didn't just farm and raise livestock -- they were at the same time carpenters, teachers, politicians and planners.

The pioneers were visionaries. They could see in their hearts what the future could be and understood that through hard work and focus, they could achieve their visions.

The pioneers were optimists -- they didn't let the challenges of rural life dissuade them.

Imagine if more people in rural areas could once again be as inspired by a vision of what the future holds, as reluctant to let challenges stop them, as open to new ideas, as willing to do what has to be done as their predecessors were. We'd still have farms and ranches, but we'd also have more green spaces, cleaner air and safer water. We'd still have co-ops and sale barns but we'd also have a wide range of businesses utilizing technology to do business globally.

We'd pay more attention to non-economic development factors. We'd include more women in our decision making processes and seek to recruit and retain entire families instead of just businesses.

We'd recognize the vital importance of bringing people together and thus do more to incorporate the arts and humanities into the development process.

The original pioneers were perhaps too successful -- we've been riding on their coattails in many ways. But if they could see us today wouldn't they ask why we haven't done more to build on the foundations they laid? Wouldn't they tell us how much harder it was for them yet point to all they achieved? Wouldn't their eyes glaze over at the technological frontiers they could pioneer today?

They proved that people with vision and determination can reshape life on the Great Plains, something we desperately need to do again today. What they failed to teach us was that reshaping is a never-ending process. We are forever staking our claims to the frontier of tomorrow. By reclaiming the best of our pioneer heritage, by applying past lessons to the future, we can, like the original pioneers, make rural areas prosper.

What we lack, though, is a strong guiding vision. At its heart re-pioneering is about recapturing hope for the future and embarking on a voyage to that future with the same perseverance and faith the original pioneers possessed.

By inviting young people to develop their visions here, Boone County is regaining a sense of excitement about its future. The students seem excited too, and excitement is essential to both pioneering and rural redevelopment.

This documentation showcases the young designer's proposals for the town of St Edward and their investigations in the human event of "gathering", looking into why and how people get together in our contemporary times and how a global perspective might change and architecturally challenge this.

Paul Hosford, Albion/Nebraska January 2010