

Students as Town Planners

"When you are an adult, will you want to settle down in Coventry?"



by Ted Mitchell

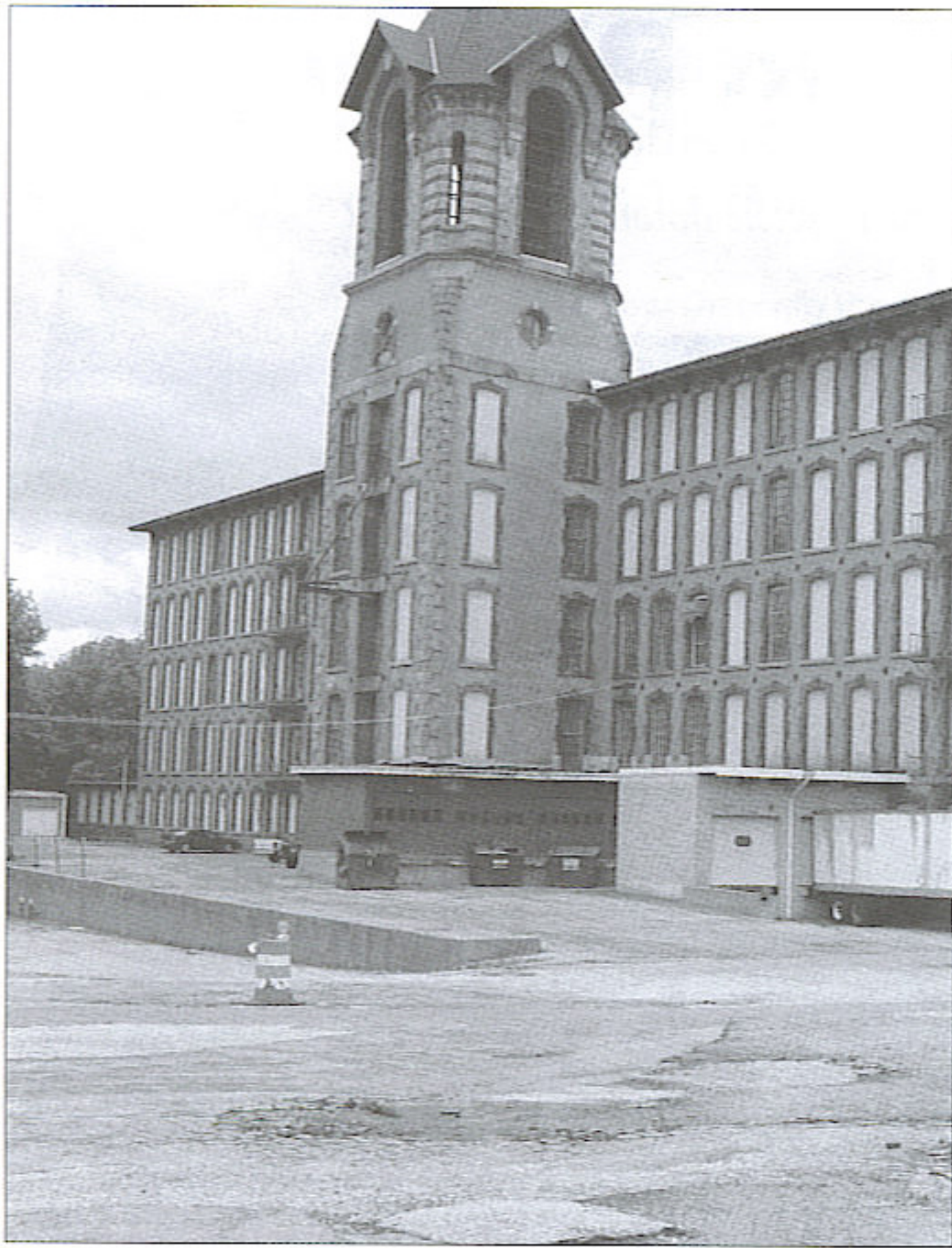
DURING FACULTY ORIENTATION in my first year as a teacher, my principal hosted an historical walking tour of a mill village in our northeastern Connecticut town. Little did I realize at the time that this tour would be the inspiration for my career in civics education. Mr. Babcock showed us the train station, the small ethnic neighborhoods, the churches, the workers' houses, the company store, the owner's mansion and, of course, the mill where most of the townspeople worked long ago. His family had emigrated from Sweden during the Industrial Revolution and he was proud of his heritage and community. When school got underway, I asked him to take my ninth grade geography students on a walking field trip of the town so that they might gain more background in the history and geography of their environment. To my surprise, the students were enthralled as they learned about their own community. They asked a million questions and made many connections to their own families, relatives and friends. From that point on, it was easy for me to talk about faraway and abstract places by making analogies to our local community.

Over the years, I added to this strategy of using my students' hometown to teach geography by incorporating topics related to community growth and development. For example, when I moved to my present position at a middle school in Coventry, Rhode Island, the local papers were running stories about the town's rampant population growth and sprawl. I had my students predict — with

frightening results — what the town's population would be if it continued to grow at the current rate for 10, 25 and 50 years. The students then created PowerPoint presentations and posters describing what they believed would happen to their town if the population growth trend continued and, most importantly, what they thought should be done about it. They presented their results at a town council meeting, using real data and broaching issues that the council was currently considering. The students were proud of their accomplishments and had a greater feeling of attachment to their community and responsibility for helping it to change in positive ways.

Initiatives such as these have now evolved into a civics-based community-planning curriculum called Students as Town Planners. At the beginning of the project, I ask all of my students, "When you are an adult, will you want to live and settle down in Coventry?" Most students respond in the negative and talk about living in New York City, California or other popular and exotic locations. I then ask them to think about what needs to happen to Coventry to change their mind.

In order to get at this question, I assign student groups (four or five students in each) to research topics within the six categories of our town's Comprehensive Community Plan, a long-term development plan that includes thematic maps, tables of information, narrative histories, demographics and other data that define the town, as well as development goals and objectives that have been established by community leaders. The plan is divided into the following categories:



Photos by Ted Mitchell's students

Left: Students suggested making use of the state's historic preservation tax credit incentive to renovate an old mill for office and commercial space. Right: Students wanted an ordinance for trees to be planted in this supermarket parking lot.

1. Land Use (zoning)
2. Circulation (transportation: roads, sidewalks, bike paths, etc.)
3. Natural and Cultural Resources (historical sites/ landmarks, distinctive natural areas)
4. Open Space and Recreation (management areas, preserves, parks, playgrounds, boat launches)
5. Community Services and Facilities (schools, police headquarters, fire stations, senior and teen centers)
6. Economic Development (local businesses, tax revenue)

I provide each group with a folder of information from the Comprehensive Community Plan, including maps, tabulated data, and other information about the economy, natural resources and built infrastructure that pertain to their topic. The students enjoy gleaning through these folders, especially given that the information is all about their own town. Their curiosity is sparked initially by the challenge of finding where they live on the thematic maps, but eventually their interest expands as they learn about watershed areas, historical landmarks near their homes, and other features of the community.

Once the students have reviewed the materials, I ask them to translate the goals and objectives in the Comprehensive Community Plan into language familiar to middle school students. Most importantly, I ask them to add their own goals, ones that serve their interests, given that they are the future of their community. For example, one of the

objectives stated in the Land Use section of the plan is to "Continue to improve sign ordinance in order to enhance design and aesthetic guidelines." The students change the wording of this to make it easier for the others in class to read and then add their own ideas for regulating signage in the town. One group working on this topic stated that billboards and neon signs should be prohibited by law, while another wanted all signs to be approved by the town council prior to being constructed.

Each group presents the goals in their planning category to the rest of the class. This includes the group's plain-language translations of the objectives stated in the official town plan, as well as their own ideas. They use overhead maps of the town, software such as Google Earth, and a computer projector with the tables and charts they worked with in their subject area. During each presentation, the other students in the class question the group's work and discuss how the ideas they have presented might affect plans in other areas. For example, the students working on Circulation might propose a new road that crosses existing Open Space. The group from Open Space may offer objections to the road and then consult their maps to help find an alternative route that would preserve wilderness or scenic areas. Finally, once all goals and objectives have been scrutinized, the student groups create a combined visual presentation for the town's Planning Commission and Council. Students use PowerPoint, overhead transparencies, posters and handouts as needed.

Each time my students have presented to Coventry elected officials, they have proposed ideas and solutions that are either currently being considered or later adopted in some form by the town. For example, one group of students proposed that a traffic light be installed at an intersection that stood out to them when they were reviewing the town's traffic accident data. The next summer, the light was installed. Another group made a case for historic renovation of a dilapidated mill in town. They proposed using a state historic preservation tax credit program to fix up the mill and use it for office space and local businesses. (This program offers tax rebates to contractors who renovate old buildings, as opposed to constructing a brand new building and letting the historic building deteriorate and become a community eyesore.) The authentic, real-life proposals the students have presented have always impressed town-planning officials. In fact, after watching my students, one Coventry town council member stated, "The future of Coventry is in good hands."

At the end of the unit, I again ask my students whether they would like to live in Coventry when they are adults. Each time, the large majority answers that they would like to come back to their community once they have attended

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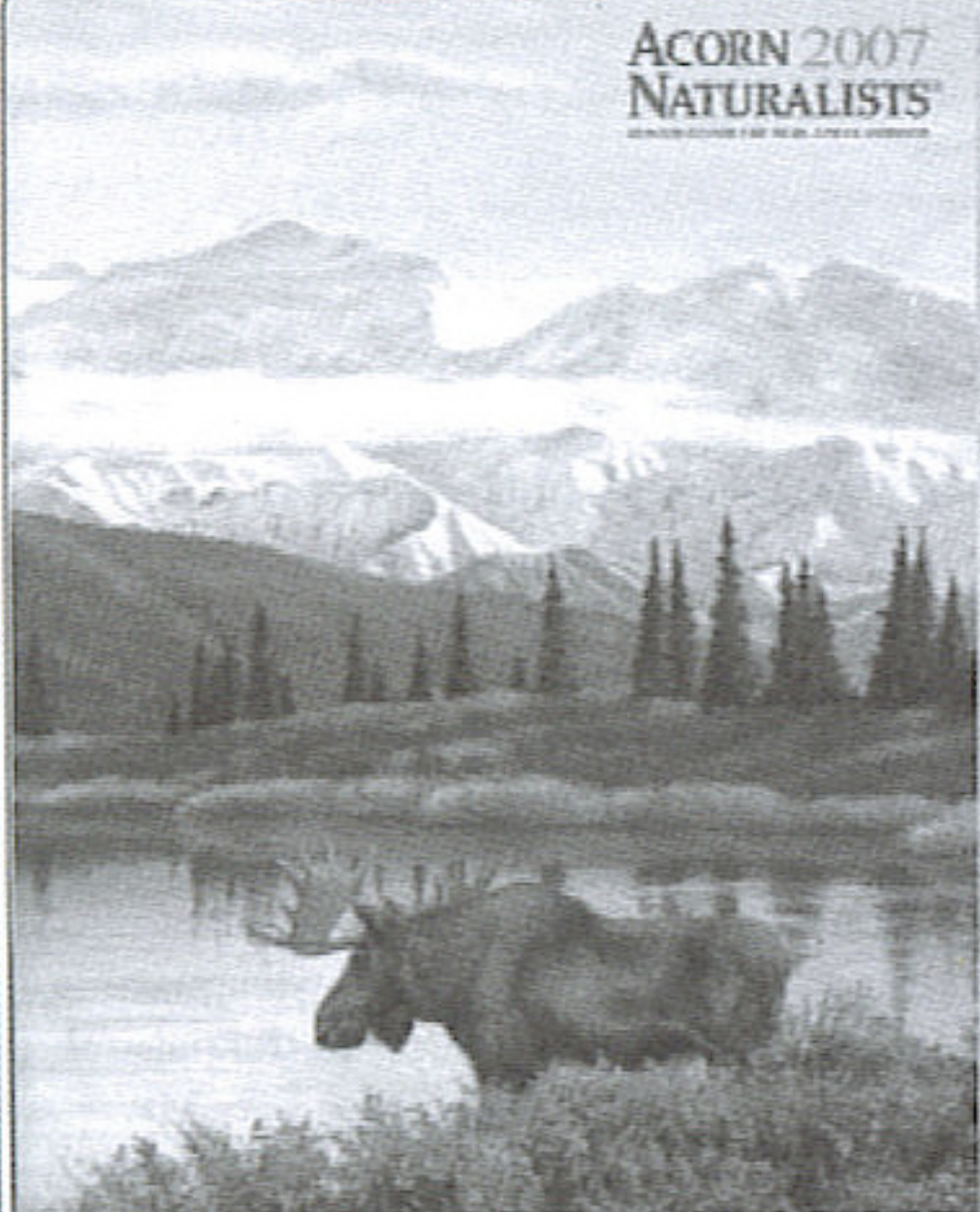
college and traveled. By discovering and working to better the future of their community, students are instilled with a greater pride and feeling of attachment and responsibility to it. They begin to realize their place in the future and understand that

they can be the principal architects of that future in their own community.

Why not give your students a real say in determining what their future holds? Not only will they enjoy learning about their community, they may become active citizens who care for their environment as adults. Besides, the elected officials of your community will appreciate their youthful perspectives and suggestions. After a student presentation to Coventry planning officials, one town council member noted that what had taken the adults years to propose had taken my students only weeks to develop in this middle school civics project. Smart kids, these student town planners!


Ted Mitchell is the Social Studies Curriculum Coordinator at Alan Shawn Feinstein Middle School in Coventry, Rhode Island. For more information about his curriculum, including student presentations, assignments and helpful links, visit the "Our Community Project" section of his website at www.mitchellteachers.org/mrmitchellsocialstudies.htm.

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