"Can design help create unique spaces in rural communities?"

CAPSTONE THEISIS

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Picture yourself sitting in an old bar in a town smaller then 700 in the dead center of Nebraska. What do you see? An old run-down bar with the same flooring that it had when it opened? A long building with a bar in the front and seating in the back? An old man sitting at the bar having his nightly drink, and only a few people sitting in the back? Now picture yourself sitting at a up and coming bar in the heart of a big city. Are you in an old building that is newly renovated with new floors walls, LEDs lighting up the bar? Is there music in the playing in the background? Are there so many people you can't find a seat? What makes the urban bar so much more popular? A large reason is obviously the amount of people that live in the large urban areas, but why are the rural spaces always so dead and empty? People are getting older, and the younger gyrations are moving to college and finding out that the urban communities have way more to offer for them then the dying rural communities. Young people are not coming back to their rural hometowns because there is nothing to come back to, creating small towns that have nothing left but a gas station. For my thesis, I am exploring how we can get these small rural communities up and thriving again. Can design help create unique spaces in rural communities? If we take these amazing small companies and give them a little face lift by combining modern cultural desires with small town rural morals will they become more appreciated by younger people?

Brand identity is one of the biggest ways people recognize a company. This can be a logo, color, signature saying, products, symbols, and more. Many companies have successful brand identities, however there are many companies who are stuck on their outdated brands and traditions. Could this be a reason why rural businesses

are dying off so fast? Small town rural businesses may not realize their ideas and traditions are outdated. I intend to show how design can make an impact to create unique spaces for rural communities. People are more likely to be interested in a company or even a community through brand loyalty, consumer satisfaction, and trust. My plan is to re-brand and create beautiful spaces for the companies throughout my hometown rural community. I want to get these small-town companies who are set on old traditions to open up and learn to adapt to new ideas. I plan to re-brand companies in this small community to fit the needs of not only the older generation but as well as the younger generation, by creating designs and atmospheres that excites everyone.

One of the steps to creating a unique space for these rural communities is establishing a brand for a business. A brand is a signature way to identify a specific company or community. The practice of branding is far from new. Early man began the custom of learning mark on objects to signify ownership of property, to reflect a person's membership of a group or clan or to identify political or religious power. A brand is far more than the name, logo, symbol or trademark that highlights its origin; it is imbued with a set of unique values that defines its character and works as an unwritten contract, promising to deliver a satisfaction by delivering consistent quality each time it is experienced (Slade).   The problem is most small-town companies and communities have no sense of what a brand identity is. They do not realize the importance of a brand. A brand should encompass a lifestyle, give consumers something to identify with, and give the company substance and meaning. Most rural communities do not effectively have brands and can result in many people having no idea who they are. There are many

different things a brand could be. Let's look at Nike for example. Every knows the Nike Swoosh. The Swoosh is easily one of the most recognized brand logos in the world. By building a brand, a company is taking a series of steps to create value, brand visibility, and make their company desirable. Nike has had success and dominance in the world of sports and thrived on their ability to construct their brand image, visibility, and giving the company logo extremely high value. No one does brand identity better than Nike (McNaney). They have re-defined the power of a brand image. Nike's logo only has encompassed a brand that reflects aspects that people strive for. They allow consumers to identify with Nike not for their product but form the image that the brand embodies. They became popular because they had a purpose and stuck to that purpose. They were unique and stood out from their competition.

People desire things that make them feel happy. If you are business that is outdated and not up to date with the new and exciting things, you are going to lose consumers to businesses that are doing things to stand out. Being a consumer is about identifying one's needs and satisfying them by choosing, buying and using a product or service. These needs can be as varied as consumers themselves, although there a basic requirement that are fundamental for all humans, namely food, clothes and shelter (Slade). People desire things that make them feel happy. Branding is a whole process. It is more than just a design. It is designing and marketing and has to consequently become vital to the success of any product or company. In the twenty-first century, the manipulation and control of a brand image becomes, in many cases, more important than the real thing the brand represents, with the design of the product now often acting as a vehicle for the

brands values. Rather than a brand existing to sell more of a particular product, prices are now developed to extend and reinforce a brand success and the image making designers ad agencies and brand managers have become central to our modern culture (Slade). Brand identity is such a huge part of our daily lives, we see brands everywhere. "The primary function of brands is to reduce our anxiety in making choices. The more we sense we know about a product, the less anxious we well." (Ind). This is key when creating a brand, you want the consumer to feel comfortable when decided what to buy.

During my research, I found that many people were more likely to purchase either a product or an experience if the company they were buying from had a strong brand and a strong value of who they are. These companies did not only have a strong visual brand but they also had a solid sense of what their brand embodied. People are drawn to things that make they feel happy and comfortable. For example, if you are in a store and are buying a product, you are more than likely to buy a "name brand" product rather than an "off brand" product. We do this because we know that the "name brand" product is safe, and familiar to us. In my research, people said they were drawn to "name brand" products but were open to buying "off brand" products only if they knew the product was safe. This brings up an interesting point. People are still buying "off brand" products because even these companies have developed a brand over time. "I like to buy things from name brand companies because I feel more comfortable with the product. Knowing it is a name brand company is a sort of security blanket." This quote is from someone I surveyed throughout my research. This is very true, people love to be comfortable, and they are how some of these big companies have a successful brand. They put themselves

in the consumers shoes and figure out what is best for the people purchasing their experience. I intend to explore what it is people are looking for in a brand. The modern world offers us a seeming endless array of goods and services, as brands jostle to stand out in a densely crowed marketplace. Companies are therefore constantly seeking to make strong emotional connections with their customers, to become irreplaceable in their lives and create long-lasting relationships (Slade).

Why are brands important to small communities? Brands set the experience a person is going to have. There is a small town a few miles away from where I grew up and as I have gotten older I have realized something. This town has a main street filled with a variety of small town businesses. From restaurants, to clothing stores, to grocery stores. I have realized that most of these stores only last for a few years. I firmly believe it is because people do not create unique spaces for themselves and do not know how to get their companies to stand out from the others. They are all the same, one business closes, another business swoops in and opens, then eventually it goes out of business just like the one before it. It is a continuous cycle in some of these small towns. I don't think a restaurant has stayed in this town for more than four years without closing. I can name five different restaurants that have been there in my lifetime. What is happening now is these big corporate companies are coming in and taking over. In the last two years they have got a Subway, and Dollar General. The Dollar General has already made one store go out of business and the hometown grocery store is almost there. As much as I love the convenience of these corporate stores, I miss having small town stores who are unique.

The real question is how can we save these small town businesses from the storm of corporate stores coming in and putting people out of business.

For my thesis project, I intend to create a new and unique experiences for a few of the companies in my hometown. I hope that by designing a more modern feel that other companies will notice and jump on the wagon as well. One of the first companies I plan to help is called Whitefoot Market and Catering. I grew up around this company and I have known about them my whole life. This company is a grocery store and catering business in the small town of Boules, Nebraska. I choose to re-brand this company because it is a company who has great values but does not have a 21st century brand that is desired by most people. Coming from a small community this company does not think much of having a logo or a website because a lot of people just know who they are. I want to create a logo, website, menu, and commercial to get their name out there even more than it already is. Whitefoot Market and Catering does not meet the needs of a modern brand in their looks, but I do believe that their purpose does. Their website is not up to date nor is their logo. I want to give this company a brand new look that still fits the needs of their current costumers but still gets new costumers to join them! These rural businesses are all about community. One of the best things Whitefoot does is have lunch every day for the farmers. They take their left-over catering food and create a lunch for the farmers in the community. It started out as one table and a to go lunch, and they now have ten tables and feed more than forty people a day. I really want to incorporate this into the brand. I think it shows that this business really cares about the people in the community. I want to create a lunch tagline called, "Feed the Farmers" and make this a

page on their website. They sell each meal for $4.25 and it is all made from scratch. Each day the meal is a surprise, and if you don't like what they are having, they whip you up something different. As this is an amazing thing, one thing I can't help but notice is the only people going here for lunch everyday are men all over the age of 40. I want to create a better atmosphere for the younger generation.

My hope for this project is to re-create a rural community who has a bright exciting spaces for more people to enjoy. It only takes one business to do this in a small town and then the others will see the success and start doing the same. Hopefully creating a whole cycle of new exciting spaces. Many younger people are not moving back to these amazing rural communities because they do not fit the needs of the modern lifestyle. I want to start by creating spaces that incorporate old traditions as well as bring in new traditions.