

Reverse Engineering a Strategy.

The Role of Strategy.

Remember that strategy is the pivot point between vision and action. Therefore, it is important to think of strategy in the context of the community's vision and its many action plans. Strategy is not a plan in and of itself; a strategic plan provides instruction of how to turn a vision into a series of implementing actions; the strategic plan is an implementing agent not an end or aspiration.

- ***An effective strategy demands a community-based vision.***
- ***Actions reflect the presence or absence of a strategy to achieve the community's vision.***
- ***Visions and actions are connected and implemented by strategy.***

Since strategy is between vision and actions, the flow of thought can go either way, i.e., from vision forward or downstream to action(s), or from action upstream to vision. This upstream or reverse flow of thought from action to vision is the subject of this paper. One can start with an action or set of actions and divine the strategy that underlies the actions, knowingly or not.



The normal flow of thought: vision through strategy to actions.



The reverse flow of normal thought: start with actions to discover what vision the actions are implementing, knowingly or not.

The Idea of Reverse Engineering.



LINK: <https://astromachineworks.com/what-is-reverse-engineering/>

“Reverse engineering, sometimes called back engineering, is a process in which software, machines, aircraft, architectural structures and other products **[or city actions]** are deconstructed to extract design information from them. Often, reverse engineering involves deconstructing individual components of larger products. The reverse engineering process enables you to determine how a part **[or city vision]** was designed so that you can recreate it.”

SearchSoftwareQuality, LINK: <https://searchsoftwarequality.techtarget.com/>

“Reverse-engineering is the act of dismantling an object **[or a city policy]** to see how it works. It is done primarily to analyze and gain knowledge about the way something works but often is used to duplicate or enhance the object **[or to determine the underlying thought behind an action]**. Many things can be reverse-engineered, including software, physical machines, military technology and even biological functions.”

Reverse Engineering at the Community Level.

Translating the engineering idea into a city planning idea, reverse engineering is an examination of a city’s actions to determine the implications of those actions on the direction of the city’s development, or its vision of the future.

- For example, if a city is building stormwater retention ponds on its main thoroughfares with rectangular shapes enclosed by fences, one can surmise that the vision of the city does not include any interest in community aesthetics. The city’s “vision” may not be to create ugliness, but its actions indicate that ugliness is ok and not inconsistent with city values or vision.
- On the other hand, if the city has an active grounds maintenance program this action reflects an interest in the appearance of the city whether or not that is an explicit statement in the city’s vision plan.

As they say, actions speak louder than words; and in the municipal context, actions reflect the city’s vision of itself. A city’s vision, expressed or not, can be constructed from its actions towards its appearance, its civic presence, its social demeanor or any of a wide variety of expressions – appearance, attitude toward residents, civility or public safety practices.

Actions reflect, or not, the community's vision.

Actions and action plans reflect a direction the city has chosen. Ordinances, budgets and programs fulfill a vision, even if unspoken. Actions and plans that change direction frequently reflect the absence of a consistent vision of the future and a direction aimed at a community-wide objective. Strategy cannot correct a wandering vision.

One way to seek long-term goals of the city, even when unspoken, is to reverse engineer the actions that have persisted over time, over changing administrations. Programs, budget expenditures and regulations that have been in place over political cycles may expose an otherwise inexplicable vision.

If a strong tree ordinance has been in place for many years, one can safely assume that trees are an important community asset that has broad-based support. If not, someone would have caused it to be rescinded. If economic development has been consistently supported over the long-term, or if programs for the elderly or the young have consistent support, these may be part of the community's vision. If other actions have a longevity, they may reflect a community-based vision. A reverse-engineering approach can reveal the reasons for the actions which may lead to visionary conclusions.

Conclusions.

A community consensus must drive the town's strategy for action-oriented progress to be possible. Visioning workshops, public dashboards that evaluate existing actions and reverse engineering long-running actions reveal either an underlining strategy that is working towards a meaningful conclusion or it reveals a waste of time and treasure that may be achieving some political ends without serving the community.

An analysis of a city's actions can reveal the over-riding purpose or community vision behind the actions, good or bad. Exclusionary policies reflect a bias against diversity. The absence of tree protection or conservation area ordinances can reflect a disregard for the natural environment. On the other side of the coin, historic preservation programs can reflect the city's interest in preserving its past. A public education workshop can reflect a general interest in community education.

Every action can be and should be justified by its implementation of the city's vision. Make the connection between vision and actions transparent.