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Spring 2004

Planning for Retail Activities in Small Downtowns: Towards a Pragmatic Approach

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/john_mullin/35/

Planning For Retail Activities In Small Downtowns: Towards A Pragmatic Approach

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Introduction

Over the past twenty years there has been an enormous shift in terms of retail activity in our downtowns. The changes that have occurred have influenced where and how we shop, where we live and how we define the centers of our communities. As these have evolved, planners have constantly attempted to react and adapt. At times, they have been quite successful while, more often, they have been frustrated. What is most perplexing is that the shifts show no signs of abating. It is an exciting time to be undertaking downtown planning!

On Process

Downtown Retail Planning requires professional assistance. While we applaud volunteerism, we consistently have noted that busy people only have a minimum amount of time to give and that "burn out" occurs quite rapidly.

Downtown Retail Planning requires outsiders to come into a community to critically assess the assets and liabilities of a downtown. What is most interesting is that liabilities (ie., an old "white elephant" building) according to local merchants are frequently assets to outsiders.

Downtown Retail Planning requires the participation of both the most negative local building owners and merchants, and the most enthusiastic new comers. Those that are negative typically provide the most pragmatic base line upon which to begin to resolve issues while the newcomers will be able to explain what they saw that stimulated them to invest. It is essential to be coldly rational at the start, while still realizing that change is possible.

Downtown Retail Planning requires the participation of both, building owners and building renters (the merchants). We have consistently found a major difference in age between the building owners and the renters. The former are typically at a stage in their lives when they are looking to collect from their investments while the latter are looking for building improvements. Bringing these two parties together requires great diplomatic skill!

Downtown Retail Planning requires a public-private partnership involving local government and the downtown community. After all, downtown is as much the

center of the civus as it is a place to shop. It is here where one traditionally finds the seat of government, courthouses, post offices, monuments and town commons, greens and squares. The future of these structures and uses will impact the retail environment and vice versa. Moreover, local government controls the regulatory environment, infra-structural maintenance and policing. It can dictate the hours of operation, parking policies and even when events will occur. This will not be an easy issue to resolve: We have found a great deal of distrust on the part of merchants toward government and a perception on the part of government that the merchants are complainers and that they are often making money at the public's expense.

In summary, the process for beginning Downtown Retail Planning must begin with a professional, outside perspective, and the participation of local merchants, building owners and government officials. We are convinced that none of this is startling to most planners. However, we can note many examples where these elements have not been considered and where the plan failed.

Analytical Issues

The most fundamental issue is to define the borders of downtown. This is often quite contentious. Does it include just Main Street? Does it include the neighborhood? Does it extend along a highway strip that expands commercial activity to highway business districts at the edge of the community? There is no one answer to the above questions. However, it has been our experience that tightly defining downtown to its retail - civic core works quite well. This often means leaving critical decisions to larger planning exercises. However, it is better to focus on issues in depth than to spread to planning issues that are fundamentally different.

It is essential to inventory the uses, activities and condition of all lands and structures in the downtown. The importance here is to begin to recognize where strengths and weaknesses occur, where non-compatible uses exist and to determine the state of investment. We are consistently surprised how non-related uses are being more frequent along our Main Streets. Indeed, it is safe to state Main Street today is more often dominated by service uses and restaurants than the buying and selling of goods. We are also noting the rise of "store front" churches, the decline of banks and the shift of social services onto Main Street. These are all critical issues facing the revitalization of the core of our communities.

It is important to determine what the market catchment area is for downtown: Where do customers come from? Is downtown a regional, community or village shopping area? Most merchants can intuitively tell you about

their customer bases. Yet, rarely do they share this information and, even more rarely, is this information quantifiable. There are survey instruments and marketing companies that can help to clearly identify the customer base. We urge that this quantifiable data be collected.

The downtown planner must be able to articulate the key trends that are happening within and around downtown. We urge this to be undertaken in two ways. First, it must address the trends in retail occupancy, types of uses, customer purchasing power and emerging competitive areas. It would also include large economic trends including who is moving into the community and the state of the local economy. Secondly, the trends report must help local retailers to clearly understand how and where people are buying their goods. It is essential that the current and expected impacts of malls, the Internet and catalog purchasing become known. Without this data, it will be difficult to stimulate any retailer to invest.

Finally, we urge that a formal survey of the downtown merchants be undertaken to obtain their insights into the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to their future success. This will help the planner and the committee to obtain their personal insights and to agglomerate them in a meaningful manner.

In sum, the Analysis must include an inventory of uses, activities and conditions, a recognition of the downtown boundaries and market area; an explanation of key internal and external trends and a survey of downtown merchants. These should all be consolidated into a State of Downtown Report.

On Principles

We have created a set of principles that guide us in our Downtown Retail Planning efforts. They are "working principles" in the sense that we have not been able to apply them equally on all occasions. However, we offer them to you as "consideration" in your own planning efforts.

- 1) Downtown Retailing in the future will be fundamentally different from the past. The consumer today has a wide range of choices ranging from the mall to the Internet and the catalog.
- 2) Mobility dictates buying. The speed with which shoppers can get to the market place is important. Moreover, one must be able to park conveniently and cheaply.
- 3) Shoppers demand security. If there is a crime problem or even a fear of crime, shoppers will go elsewhere.
- 4) Shoppers desire to have a pleasing experience. They do not want to be reminded of poverty, illness or cultural issues while shopping. How to meet their needs, as well as other groups, will be a challenge.
- 5) Uniqueness, specialty and cachet are a decided advantage. Shoppers who can find different products in a dramatic location are willing to pay a premium.

Moreover, if your setting is historic and culturally significant, you have a significant advantage.

- 6) The needs of Inner City Neighborhood and the Retail Experience are often incompatible. If the market is more than the immediate surrounding area then it must reflect the needs of the latter. Otherwise it will not prosper.
- 7) Vehicular movement should never have precedence over the pedestrian. The faster the traffic through a retail district, the more apt it will become divided: One side will gain over another. Moreover, it will cease to be a pedestrian friendly place.
- 8) Government facilities should remain downtown. The more apt they are to withdraw, the less viable will be downtown. Stated alternatively, downtown is a mixture of buying and selling, on one side and the civus on the other.
- 9) The merchants and owners of downtown buildings have different needs. These must be recognized and great care must be taken to insure that the needs of both groups are met. This will require patience and skill.
- 10) There is too much land designated for retail use in downtown. The boundaries need to be tightened and incentives limited to the central area far more than to fringe. Otherwise, the meaning of downtown retail will be lost.
- 11) Downtown should reflect the multiple publics that make up a sixteen hour day. Successful downtowns are able to mix workers, housewives, teenagers, seniors and singles. It must be able to adapt to these needs as the day progresses.
- 12) Good architecture counts. Downtowns that have historic or culturally significant buildings have a decided advantage when the buildings are carefully adapted to current uses. Conversely, buildings that are poorly adapted can be counterproductive.
- 13) Pedestrian street movement is highly positive. Shoppers like the excitement of a busy pedestrian street. On the other hand, gangs of children (particularly teenagers) can be counterproductive. (It is important that these crowds be monitored and that they have places of their own.)
- 14) Cultural features should be celebrated. Shoppers are highly desirous of places that are different. For example, a town famous for its silver or brass manufacturing should sell these products in its downtown.
- 15) Landscaping adds value to the shopping experience. Well dressed tree cover, shrubs, benches, signs, parks and "line of sight" connections from parking areas to shops are essential.
- 16) Restaurants and movie theatres bring potential shoppers to downtown. Social service functions do not. The former should be encouraged to build in retail areas while the latter should be placed off Main Street.
- 17) Downtown Retailers must coordinate hours of operation and sales events. Given their independence, this is frequently a difficult task. We know of one town where, out of 100 retail shops, there were 16 different closing times.

18) Cleanliness counts. Shoppers do not want to walk through trash, by dirty windows or through neglected buildings. The experience, to repeat, must be pleasing.

19) Downtown retailers that attempt to sell the same goods as malls will fail. They can compliment the malls, but they cannot compete. They must, once again, be unique, special and have cachet.

20) The revitalization of downtowns for retailing will take time and patience. However, it can be done quite successfully.

Conclusion

We are convinced that downtown retailing can succeed. It will have to be undertaken with careful planning and the full participation of the local government, the merchants and the building owners. The market will have to be clear-

ly defined, the key trends noted and all activities will have to be carefully coordinated. The experience of shoppers is essential. If the experience is safe, secure, efficient and unique, shoppers will come back. If not, they will go someplace else. Moreover, it is essential that downtown retailers build on their special qualities, their strengths and their cachets to build markets that are different. If they are able to take advantage of their qualities then we believe there will be a high probability of success. Finally, we are convinced that downtown revitalization requires professional, strong leadership. We have found no one pattern or forum for directing the project. At times, some one has risen from the ranks or a public official takes charge. We do know, however, that there is no substitute means or methods for the one-person approach. It is an exciting time to be a Downtown Planner.