

Preface

Collectively, American downtowns are a grossly underused resource. Most possess “good bones” in the form of streets, infrastructure, public spaces, and buildings. Many are still privileged by the presence of important institutions, such as city halls, county courthouses, schools, and post offices. All are living historic artifacts that continue to evolve over time, adjusting to modern needs. It is no coincidence that, in many communities, the existing or emerging entertainment district for shopping and dining is located in the downtown. Savvy business people capitalize on the unique character of downtowns and their historic buildings as a venue for shops, restaurants, housing, offices, and other uses.

Despite this existing scenario, the vast majority of America’s new development is occurring in an extremely generic form, described by some as “Generica.” A new suburban convenience store in Kansas City, Missouri, differs little in appearance from a new convenience store in the suburbs of San Diego or Boston, depending upon the particular franchise architecture pulled off the shelf. As the character-defining remnants of our past are slowly chipped away, a faceless new landscape spreads like a wildfire. Accompanying this nondescript sprawling pattern of growth are numerous negative consequences, including: the loss of natural landscapes; the destruction of historic resources; the neglect of inner cities; fiscal inefficiencies; automobile-dominated environments that generate traffic congestion, air pollution, and groundwater contamination from stormwater runoff; and the social isolation of those too young, too old, or too poor to drive.

A segment of the market will always desire new places. However, public officials have little justification to promote development in undeveloped places until we fix existing places in need of repair. Empirical evidence proves that suburbs can no longer turn their backs on downtowns without harming their overall regional economy. Among numerous examples, the National League of Cities has published reports on this issue, including “City Distress, Metropolitan Disparities and Economic Growth,” and “All In It Together: Cities, Suburbs and Local Economic Regions.” Clearly, the prudent choice is to channel future

growth to areas with existing infrastructure and public services, rather than allowing those resources to go underused and to deteriorate over time. The case for downtowns can be made on all fronts—economic, fiscal, environmental, and social.

This book will teach the reader how to resuscitate struggling downtowns through proactive planning as well as how to sustain the successful downtown. In particular, it focuses on small to moderate-size downtowns, defined here as those serving a metropolitan area of no more than 500,000 people. In a simple and straightforward manner, this book addresses a set of “best practices” for downtown planning. Chapter 2 explores the process of creating a downtown plan, while the subsequent three chapters address the substance of downtown planning. Readers seeking exceptionally novel ideas or “magic bullet” answers to downtown planning will be sorely disappointed, as experience proves that the cutting-edge concepts that occasionally surface quickly become “mainstream” once successfully implemented in a single downtown. Instead, this book examines planning approaches applied over the past few decades, some successfully and some not, and it draws conclusions that will benefit future downtown planning efforts for everyone.

WHAT IS A DOWNTOWN?

Given that this book will use the term “downtown” hundreds of times, a definition at the outset is in order. Without needing to be overly analytical, we can say that most people recognize a downtown when they see one, so a list of discernible clues may appear to be a waste of ink. However, when a downtown begins to lose the following seemingly obvious traits, it starts getting into trouble and moves away from being a true downtown.

Mixed Land Uses

Healthy downtowns host a wide range of activities, including commercial, institutional, and residential uses. The best downtowns manage to strike an equilibrium, usually not through conscious actions, that creates a synergy among different qualities, resulting in a dynamic and sustainable place. Downtowns that have fallen on hard times often become unbalanced and lose this mixture. For example, public institutions sometimes relocate to the suburbs, or a downtown may lose its appeal as a desirable place to live for a variety of reasons. Despite periodic upward and downward trends, a strong downtown features

a balanced mixture of many uses. Unlike “multiuse” developments often found in the suburbs, downtowns are truly “mixed use” because their uses are physically integrated.

Diversity

Unless the downtown is located in an ethnically and economically homogenous community, which is a rarity, it is often the most socially diverse part of town. One of the most interesting characteristics and greatest strengths of downtowns is their diversity. Not only do downtown employees typically range from custodians to corporate CEOs, but downtown residents tend to be equally pluralistic. For example, depending upon their country of origin and associated cultural history, many immigrants are drawn to downtowns. The downtown housing market can range from low-income residents in affordable housing to struggling artists in lofts to young urban professionals in condominium apartments to retired “empty nesters” in expensive town houses. This diversity stands in stark contrast to socially segmented suburban areas where residents of each subdivision are surrounded by people who share their demographic characteristics.

Compact Development Forms

Downtowns constitute the most concentrated collection of buildings found in their community. A downtown’s buildings are usually the tallest in town, and they have the shallowest front setbacks. Downtowns also tend to have the lowest ratio of undeveloped land relative to other parts of their community. Although some downtowns have their share of surface parking, most downtowns lack parking lots as expansive as those of suburban shopping centers. In fact, as downtowns grow in size and density, parking lots are eventually replaced by parking garages if their economics can justify a more efficient use of land.

Historic Buildings

More often than not, downtown saw the genesis of the original community. Although the community’s earliest buildings may no longer exist due to “the great fire,” “the great flood,” or the rapacious developers, its oldest surviving buildings are frequently found in the downtown. Many downtowns started as a collection of modest one-or two-story wooden structures, only to be later supplanted by taller and more architecturally refined brick structures as a result of disasters or

progress. As survivors of the natural evolutionary process, historic buildings are often the primary element that allows a community to retain its identity and sense of place, and the historic character of downtowns is frequently cited in consumer preference surveys as their most favorable attribute.

Central and Strategic Location

Community growth patterns generally exist as a series of concentric rings emanating from a central point—the downtown. Those rings are irregularly shaped because of topography and roads, as well as natural and man-made barriers, such as rivers and rail lines. Annexations and growth trends over the years can also alter the downtown's geographic position within municipal boundaries, and new mixed use centers may emerge, prompting their own set of growth rings over time. Regardless of these qualifying factors, downtowns are usually central to a city's historic growth patterns, and they are commonly located on or near a strategic natural or man-made resource. As the very genesis of their community, most were established at a river, bay, hilltop, canal, crossroads, or railroad.

"Downtown" Designation

While not a startling revelation, perhaps the most convincing clue in detecting a downtown is hearing the term "downtown" applied to the area in question. Despite the citizens of some towns and cities referring to their urban center as "uptown," "city center," "town center," "old town," or a similar term, the name implies that it is a distinct and important place in the community.

So who are the distant relatives and outright imposters that might be confused with bona fide traditional downtowns? The guilty parties include older commercial districts serving neighborhoods located outside of the downtown, and new urbanist "town centers" that have been developed within the past few decades. The most naïve among us might even be fooled by the latest trend—the "lifestyle center," which is essentially an open-air suburban mall with a superficial "ye olde" veneer. While older commercial districts and new town centers are important places for any community and should be nurtured, and many of the ideas in this book can directly apply to them, such places warrant distinction from genuine downtowns.

Nevertheless, "gray areas" exist in some communities. For example, the Pinehurst, North Carolina, village center was developed during

the 1890s by a single developer, as was Palmer Square in Princeton, New Jersey, which was created during the early twentieth century and now serves as the heart of that eighteenth-century downtown. As with most generalizations about downtowns, there is no dearth of exceptions to the rule when answering the question, What is a downtown?

WHAT IS A DOWNTOWN PLAN?

In addition to the term “downtown,” the term “plan” warrants definition in light of its frequent use throughout this book. First, it is acknowledged that numerous types of plans can be applied to downtowns. Examples include vision plans, strategic plans, physical master plans, urban design plans, transportation plans, community facilities plans, and economic revitalization plans, to name a few. On the West Coast, a plan for a particular area such as a downtown is often labeled as a specific plan. Although these various types of plans might be combined and coordinated as individual elements to form a single plan document, not every downtown is in need of a plan. Perhaps a particular downtown’s current circumstances can justify expenditures only on a retail strategy. Regardless of the value that a special plan focusing on just one or even a handful of issues may bring to a downtown, such plans are not the focus of this book.

For many, the term “master plan” brings to mind a document that addresses only physical planning issues. For the purposes of the many pages that follow, however, the terms “downtown plan,” “master plan,” and simply “plan” are used interchangeably to describe the same type of plan: a plan that holistically considers all of the basic dimensions of a downtown—physical, economic, social, and political.

It is also noteworthy that effective downtown plans can and should address downtown management issues, such as marketing, promotion, business development, and special events. Some downtown practitioners view planning and management as two distinct issues. While they are indeed two separate processes, if planning did not occur to address the myriad of management issues, many downtown organizations would be blindly groping in the dark for answers. Consequently, even the ongoing management issues faced by downtowns and their championing organizations long after the planning process has ended should be incorporated into the downtown plan.

PREVIOUS WORK ON THE SUBJECT

Given the significance of downtown planning, it was surprising that a search of the literature identified no single book discussing the topics and perspectives addressed here. While several works on the process of developing "urban plans" exist, such as Larz T. Anderson's *Guidelines for Preparing Urban Plans* (1995) and T. J. Kent Jr.'s *The Urban General Plan* (1990 reprint of a 1964 edition), those books focus primarily on the planning process. Furthermore, they address citywide plans, rather than those focusing solely on downtowns. A related subject that has been covered thoroughly is the urban design facet of downtown planning, but those publications have a singular focus on design. Books about the function of downtowns and how to implement revitalization strategies also exist, but they tend to be program oriented and intentionally lack a master planning context. A good example of this genre is *Cities Back from the Edge* by Roberta Brandes Gratz and Norman Mintz (1998). In sum, this book fills a void.

This book addresses both the process of downtown planning and effective strategies for improving and sustaining downtowns through planning. It also views downtowns from a holistic perspective, believing that one-dimensional approaches to revitalization are generally ineffective.

INTENDED AUDIENCE

This book is meant for anyone interested in revitalizing a downtown through proactive planning. Foremost, it should be useful to public-sector planners and downtown organizations responsible for planning, enhancing, and sustaining their downtowns, particularly those professionals still relatively new to the field. Even seasoned professionals might learn something, as this work draws on the perspectives of many practitioners and academics, as well as the experience of specific communities referenced throughout the book. Those who are less directly involved with downtown planning but still downtown stakeholders can also gain important insights from this book. For example, public officials responsible for hiring consultants to prepare a downtown plan can learn what to expect once the planning begins, rather than having to learn as they go. And finally, this book can provide a solid foundation for students of planning and downtown revitalization.

RESEARCH BASIS

The information and ideas contained in this book are based upon a variety of sources. Much of the research comes from my two decades of experience assisting downtowns throughout the country, both in the public sector and as a consultant. Information found in relevant books and journals has also contributed to this work, as well as interviews with professionals and academics in the field. Research into the experience of communities has likewise proved invaluable, including the review of numerous downtown plans. And finally, the important efforts of groups, such as the National Main Street Center, the Urban Land Institute, and the International Downtown Association have greatly influenced this book.

Special mention must be made of the National Trust for Historic Preservation's National Main Street Center Four Point Approach, which focuses on the issues of organization, design, economics, and marketing and promotion for downtowns. That approach has certainly influenced my work when preparing downtown plans. While the ensuing chapters reflect the four-point approach, they also go beyond it. The Four Points Approach is primarily about programs for downtown management and sustainability. Planners, on the other hand, have done a good job of addressing physical planning issues, as well as some economic and policy issues, but it has been my experience that they often do not address other important aspects of downtown master planning in either as much depth or with as much comprehensiveness as they should. This book may be the first time that anyone has tried to couple the comprehensive and holistic approach of the Four Point Approach with best practices drawn from planning.

HOW TO APPLY THIS BOOK

This book is intended to provide the reader with a set of principles that can be adapted to their particular circumstances. Planning for downtowns is undoubtedly an art rather than a clear-cut science. Not every idea found in this book will be applicable to every downtown, but the general principles will apply to nearly all. Additionally, it should be relevant to older commercial and mixed use districts that may not constitute their community's "downtown" per se but that face many of the same issues. Among others, two key factors in applying the ideas of this book to a particular downtown are: (1) the scale of the downtown, and (2) the resources available to the planners and those implementing the plan.

This book is best suited to those involved with small to moderate-size downtowns. While it can be relevant to larger downtowns—defined here as those serving a metropolitan population of more than 500,000 people—greater adaptation may be required on specific issues to address the complexities of larger downtowns. For example, topics common to larger downtowns but less relevant to moderate-size downtowns and irrelevant to most small downtowns include highways as barriers, panhandlers, violent crime, skyscrapers, and large-footprint public facilities, such as arenas and convention centers. Those types of issues are addressed here, but not in great detail.

The resources available to a particular community for planning will dictate the scale and extent of the planning process. For example, a town with very limited funding for in-house planning staff or consultants will need to employ a streamlined methodology and should have lower expectations for the plan's level of detail. Limited planning budgets can affect various aspects of a plan, such as the degree of market analysis performed, the extent of public input, the volume of text written, and the provision of high-quality illustrations.

Regardless of the size of the downtown or available resources for planning, the following pages can provide a solid framework for any downtown planning effort. It is my goal that this book will be a useful tool for making beautiful and vibrant downtowns the norm, rather than the exception.

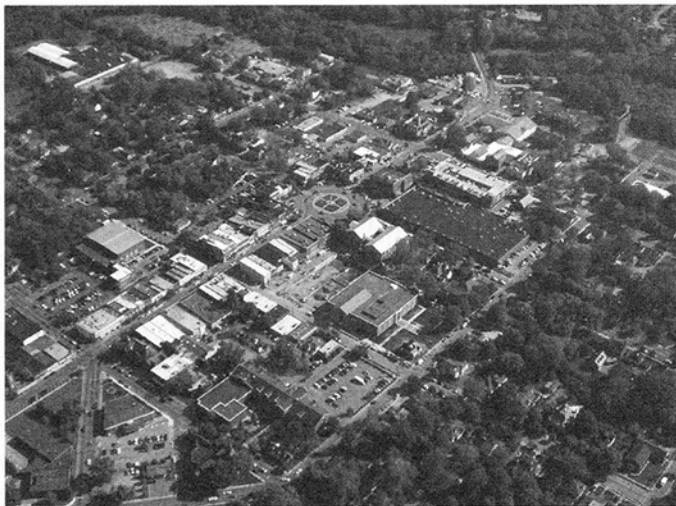


Figure P-1. This anonymous downtown could be virtually anywhere in America. It is typical of the thousands of downtowns to which this book applies. Source: The Walker Collaborative

THE BIGGER PICTURE

So how might downtown planning fit within the broader framework of community planning and growth management? What are its future prospects relative to current planning philosophies and trends? Should downtown planning be a top priority for planners and their communities, or are more pressing matters on the horizon of the contemporary city planning landscape? To answer these questions, one must first recognize today's most popular planning movements, which are unquestionably smart growth and new urbanism.

Smart growth has different meanings for different people. Judging from current debate on the subject, it may be easier to agree on what smart growth is *not* than what it *is*. The antithesis of smart growth is suburban sprawl, characterized by strictly segregated land uses and demographic groups, relatively low development densities, little consideration for the natural environment, architecture unrelated to a community's culture, and the recurring theme of automobile-driven planning. In short, Generica. Smart growth is often associated with the new urbanist movement, a development philosophy based upon pre-World War II principles of planning and design. Unlike the suburban sprawl paradigm, new urbanism promotes the physical integration of varied land uses and people, human-scale buildings, and an emphasis on the pedestrian realm. While automobiles can be easily accommodated by new urbanism, cars are not allowed to dominate the design of a community. Although the definitions of smart growth and new urbanism continually evolve, most planners view new urbanism as a subunit of smart growth, which focuses on the natural environment, fiscal efficiencies, transportation, and regionalism as much as it does on traditional urban villages and towns.

Regardless of their definitions and distinctions, smart growth and new urbanism have thankfully gained steady momentum over the past few decades in shaping the way communities are now planned. Much of the focus to date, however, has been on new development of "green field" sites, even though some of these properties are infill sites within otherwise developed areas. A growing number of new downtowns have also been planned and developed on essentially blank canvases, such as that of Kendall, Florida. In the five years after the adoption of its master plan in 1999, downtown Kendall witnessed approximately \$250 million in new construction permits and 3,400 new residential units built on a 240-acre site that previously had no residential population (Katz 2004, 20). New downtowns such as this, at least in the near-term, will face a different set of issues from historic downtowns. Sadly,



Figure P-2. Although it resembles a traditional downtown in many ways—more so physically than economically or culturally—this town center in Southlake, Texas, was begun in the late 1990s. While this new town center is consistent with smart growth and new urbanist ideologies, it is imperative that greater attention be focused on the well-being of America’s existing downtowns. Source: The Walker Collaborative

the critical role of existing downtowns has often been overlooked in the debate on smart growth and new urbanism. Taking a different tack, this book embraces and celebrates “old urbanism” and explains how existing downtowns can be reclaimed and sustained as part of a more comprehensive smart-growth scheme.

Auspiciously, the critical role of downtowns within the future of the smart growth movement is steadily gaining recognition. In “On Common Ground,” the National Association of Realtors (NAR) stated, “When the Smart Growth discussion began in the mid-1990s among citizens, public officials and planners, the primary focus was on managing growth at the urban fringe. The conversion of large amounts of farm and forest land to low-density development was a major concern then, as it remains today. But over the past few years, it has become more widely recognized that the revitalization of existing communities is also a vital element of Smart Growth, and maybe a more fruitful arena for focused attention” (NAR 2005, 2). If an organization as politically conservative, credible, and influential as the NAR is recognizing and broadcasting the importance of revitalizing existing built environments, hope indeed exists for all of urban America.