

# Preface

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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



















