

Preface

Fifteen years after I left my position as vice president for planning, design, and development at the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, where I was in charge of planning the reconstruction of the World Trade Center (WTC), I decided to evaluate the results of the rebuilding.

I was stunned. Lower Manhattan, which for half a century had been a declining agglomeration of single-use office buildings, was becoming a resurgent, mixed-use, 24-hour community. Not because of the rebuilding of the WTC, however.

Millions of square feet of office space at the new WTC were either unoccupied or unbuilt, yet there were 9,000 more private sector jobs in lower Manhattan than had been there before the terrorist attack. There also were 38,000 additional residents living in 18,000 apartments and 6,000 more hotel rooms.¹

How, I wondered, could lower Manhattan be resurgent when it had been in decline since the end of World War II, when, like other American downtowns, it had lost tens of millions of customers to competing business districts and suburbs that were burgeoning everywhere? I knew that other downtowns were resurgent. Were the reasons the same as for lower Manhattan?

In fact, the story was the same in other major American downtowns. Today, 40,000 more people work in downtown Atlanta than did 25 years ago. The number of people working in downtown Phoenix nearly doubled during those same 25 years. But not all downtowns were thriving.

There were three trajectories. Two had been going on for half a century. Downtowns such as San Jose, Houston, Indianapolis, and Jacksonville had never stopped growing. Detroit, St. Louis, Buffalo, and Bridgeport, on the other hand, were in decline or struggling. A third trajectory appeared in the last decade of the 20th century. Lower Manhattan,

downtown Los Angeles, Seattle, and a large group of downtowns had become resurgent.

Whether a downtown had been continuously growing or had become resurgent, if it was thriving, it also was rapidly changing. These vibrant downtowns were being transformed from single-use business districts into high-density, mixed-use downtowns. In fact, the American people had been voting since the 1990s on the future of these downtowns with their feet. As professor Eugenie Birch pointed out more than a dozen years ago, “During the 1990s, downtown population grew by 10 percent, a marked resurgence following 20 years of overall decline. . . . Downtown homeownership rates more than doubled during the thirty-year period, reaching 22 percent by 2000.”² Lower Manhattan, for instance, which had a resident population of 800 in 1950, by 2017 was home to 61,000 people.³ The new residents lived in converted commercial buildings and newly erected residential structures, in rented apartments and resident-owned condominiums. Before 1999, for example, there were only 11,600 residential units in downtown Los Angeles; in 2017, there were 65,000, with an additional 21,000 apartments in construction.⁴

Residents and office workers are not the only people downtown. There are many tourists as well. In 2017, Chicago was the destination for 45.6 million visitors, Miami for 38.1 million, and Atlanta for 35.4 million.⁵ They are the customers who keep downtown sidewalks busy and provide jobs for the people who work in the hotels, restaurants, and stores they patronize.

Downtowns are more than economic engines; they are repositories of knowledge and culture; they are generators of new ideas, new technology, and new ventures. Jane Jacobs explained half a century ago that cities are “the vast and intricate collections of ideas and institutions called civilization.”⁶ Those ideas and institutions thrive downtown. That is why Yale, the University of California at Los Angeles, the University of Pennsylvania, and countless other international universities are major occupants of high-density, mixed-use downtowns. So are the nation’s most important museums, libraries, and medical centers. All of them are changing the downtowns around them.

The importance of such institutions is evident in many downtowns, particularly so in the recent resurgence of Pittsburgh. Ideas about

robotics, artificial intelligence, digitally focused medicine, and other innovations generated at Carnegie Mellon University, the University of Pittsburgh and its Medical Center, gave rise to important startup companies. They, in turn, transformed Pittsburgh, which had lost 190,000 manufacturing jobs in the collapse of the steel industry, into a thriving innovation center that, from 2007 to 2017, gained 25,900 new professional and business service jobs, 22,900 new education and health services jobs, 4,900 new financial jobs, and 29,300 other new jobs in the past decade alone.⁷

As long as downtowns continue to thrive, we can be certain of a prosperous and thrilling future for the 21st-century American city. They are the heart of the city that drives its future. For example, 44 percent of Philadelphia's jobs are located downtown and generate 32 percent of its property taxes, from only 6 percent of the city's land. The situation is similar in downtown Pittsburgh, where 41 percent of the city's jobs are located on only 5 percent of its territory. Thus, the future of our cities is inescapably moored to the health of their downtowns.

If we are to have healthy downtowns, we need to understand what downtown is all about and how and why some American downtowns are in trouble while others are thriving. We need to identify the strategies that are successfully enhancing already-thriving districts, such as downtown Dallas; improving previously declining areas, such as the Boston Seaport; and transforming unoccupied territory, such as the Hudson Yards in Manhattan, into vibrant downtowns for a new century. This book provides the answers to those questions, identifies the elements of a great downtown, explains why some strategies have been working while other approaches have failed, and proposes additional activities that can guarantee vibrant downtowns for a new century.

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Writing in 1932, F. Scott Fitzgerald conveyed the essence of our changing downtowns, explaining that lower Manhattan, which had experienced the worst Wall Street financial disaster in history, "had all the iridescence of the beginning of the world," confessing that he "had erroneously thought that there were no second acts in American lives"

but that “there was certainly to be a second act” for New York City.⁸ In fact, there have been many more than two acts for lower Manhattan and downtowns across America. That is why downtowns are constantly changing, as are the policies and programs for their improvement.

Lower Manhattan did not create its second or third act. Like all downtowns, it is inanimate. Downtowns are unable to change anything. People change downtowns, and those people are the audience to whom this book is directed. Chapters 1 and 2 describe what is happening *now* in downtown America and why we go there, and they discuss changes in the amount and location of territory that downtowns occupy and the buildings that occupy that territory.

Cities do not change themselves. Chapter 3 explains why and how downtowns are changing. Chapters 4 and 5 describe the people, businesses, institutions, and public agencies that are responsible for what happens downtown and how they go about making changes. However, people who want to improve a downtown must do more than identify opportunities. They need to know which actions have *not* been successful and what we should be doing to improve downtowns (the contents of Chapters 5 and 6). Chapter 7 presents five exemplary recent efforts to expand 21st-century downtowns.

The final chapter proposes additional, often controversial actions that can be taken to keep the heart of the city healthy so that our emerging 21st-century downtowns can continue to thrive for centuries to come. I hope that the nation will adopt them so that many downtowns can have even better second, third, and fourth acts.