

Vibrant Downtowns

Dynamic and Multi-Faceted Centers for Social and Commercial Engagement

CHARACTER TOWNS HAVE VIBRANT CENTERS.

People seem to enjoy life in certain small town downtowns and special places within bigger cities. Something about a special small town center or character place in a big town is evocative; a place with obvious character...such places incite an emotional impact that is visceral and immediate.

Vibrant downtowns and special places are where business people, civic leaders, residents and visitors collide. Successful downtowns and places are active, day and night; they engage all aspects of society in a comfortable, engaging and communicative way.

The challenge for the city-building professions is to preserve and enhance existing downtowns and special places. A more challenging task is to create such places from scratch. The trick is to create places with a vibrancy and character that engender an emotional attachment; places that foster community pride.

Downtowns in small cities, treasured neighborhood corners in bigger cities and popular village centers with character have certain physical traits. They have spaces and features that invite conversation and they have successful businesses. City hall is downtown. More importantly, they are always dependent on character people who love, lead and support the emotional investment in their "hometown".

Towns known for their character and authenticity are the result of much love and attention.



Main Street's Economic Zone

THE PHYSICAL ATTRIBUTES OF VIBRANT

DOWNTOWNS are described on the following page. The framework they form consists of:

- A. *The physical setting is provided by the buildings, streets and venues that serve as the vessels for activity. Their design and maintenance does not have to be elaborate, but it does need to be warm, welcoming and conducive to social intercourse.*
- B. *The economic engine is provided by the enterprises on and near the main street. The shops must do enough business to stay in business and generate taxes and fees for the city. They need to be desirable enough to attract repeat customer loyalty from both residents and visitors.*
- C. *The events and activities need to be programmed by the city, the downtown merchants or civic groups. The system for providing information can be likened to a concierge mentality. Above all, the*
- D. *Authenticity drives everything; the physical setting, the shops and the events are strongest when founded on something real.*

Vibrant Downtowns

Dynamic and Multi-Faceted Centers for Social and Commercial Engagement

Physical Attributes of a Vibrant Downtown **The Full Range and Mix of Uses and Activities**

The main thing is to keep “Main Street” the main street. Every town either has one or wants one; and its absence may, in and of itself, eliminate the possibility of a place being a “character town”. The full complement of uses and activities to strive for on the main street are:

1. **Buildings** with:
 - € Ground floor retail, restaurants or other active uses beyond week-days from nine to five,
 - € Two or more stories of height; but not taller than the tree canopy, and
 - € Doors that open to the street.
2. **Streets** that are inviting and safe, not foreboding to cross, with:
 - € Two travel lanes, with or without a median,
 - € Building face to building face distances across the street no greater than 100-120 feet,
 - € City ownership of the street, not a federal, state or county highway agency, and
 - € Wide sidewalks [min 10’], on-street parking, bus stops, pedestrian cross-walks, street trees, street lights and business friendly signs.
3. **Venues for gatherings, formal and informal:**
 - € Religious services and activities, weddings, funerals,
 - € Programmed activities such as book fairs, parades, festivals and community celebrations,
 - € Parks, lakes or waterfronts on or near main street including promenades, cafés, carousels, playgrounds, fountains and amphitheaters.
4. **A wide range of sustainable enterprises providing private and public goods and services:**
 - € **Food and beverage** establishments including restaurants, ice cream and chocolate shops, fruit stands and farmers’ markets with regional foods,
 - € **Retail goods** including convenience shopping, drugs, groceries, books, gifts, clothing, hardware, automotive parts and discount retail,
 - € **Personal Services** such as laundry, dry cleaning, barber shops, car care and tech support,
 - € **Business services** including banks, full service copy centers, and business incubators.
5. **Information** centers, physical and virtual, for residents and visitors:
 - € Guides to local places and activities,
 - € Notices of non-recurring events and
 - € Tickets to local events.
6. **Events and Activities** that define the town like an annual seafood festival, country music jamboree, or classic car show. Examples of national events are Spoleto in Charleston or The Miami Book Fair. More modest affairs can create the same zeal.
7. **Something authentic**, an iconic place or event, unique to the town, for example:
 - € Powell’s Book Store in Portland or Haslam’s in St. Petersburg,
 - € S. F. Travis Hardware in Cocoa Village or The Little Drug Company on Canal Street in New Smyrna Beach with an “old time” soda fountain,
 - € The Lakeside Inn in Mount Dora or The Gold Mine Museum in Dählonega, and
 - € Carriage rides touring Fernandina Beach’s historic neighborhoods.

In sum, the “main street” is at the center of a full service social, civic, commercial, cultural, entertainment and recreational place for residents, businesses and visitors to commune.

Source: wckplanning.com

Vibrant Downtowns

Dynamic and Multi-Faceted Centers for Social and Commercial Engagement

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE.

A strategic imperative of any city is to find, maintain and enhance its center of activity, especially its downtown and main street. The purpose is to maximize the sociability of the community while improving the local economy's capacity to produce jobs, personal incomes, sales taxes and property taxes.

Once the city acknowledges that the character of downtown drives the real and perceived quality of the entire city, action plans can be constructed to enhance the city's downtown character through physical improvements.

THE VISION-DRIVEN STRATEGIC ACTION PLAN.

The basic tenets of the downtown action plan:

1. To publicly acknowledge that the city's center reflects the quality and character of the entire community.
2. To establish and support a viable "main street" as the city's center for business, government and civic life with the full range and mix of uses and activities, including housing and hotels.
3. To create a formal city/merchant partnership to strengthen and sustain the economic and aesthetic quality of main street.
4. To always consider the impact of city policies and actions on the health of downtown, such as locating public buildings on or near mainstreet.
5. To prepare and maintain a long-range, comprehensive finance plan that identifies the sources and uses of funds to maintain the downtown setting.
6. To prepare and adopt a plan for downtown.



The Office



The Business Meeting



The Latent Customer Waiting to be Discovered

Vibrant Downtowns

Dynamic and Multi-Faceted Centers for Social and Commercial Engagement

CONCLUSIONS

1. Character towns and places have vibrant centers supported by great neighborhoods. In small cities and towns this almost always means “main street”. Main street is an incredibly important community asset that needs constant attention and nourishment.
2. A common vision and partnership needs to be forged among the several downtown interests. The city, the main street merchants and the city’s civic associations can foster an atmosphere that enables downtowns to remain vibrant over time.
3. The people invested in main street, financially and emotionally, are important resources who need to be cherished, even when their character becomes overbearing.



An Action Plan Process for A Successful Downtown

The strategic-driven action plan for downtown:

1. Form a permanent organization and agree on a working arrangement with the city.
2. Develop a scope of work for a “plan for downtown”:
 - € Establish the strategic relevance of downtown to the city,
 - € Identify the preliminary boundaries,
 - € Develop an initial consensus vision,
 - € Secure continuing funding and develop a long-range finance plan,
 - € Outline the scope of work for the downtown plan to include:
 - Understanding the market for goods and services,
 - Prepare a future land use, circulation and infrastructure plan,
 - Align the comprehensive plan, land development regulations, development standards and design guidelines to meet the downtown’s investment needs,
 - Develop marketing programs to recruit new businesses and investment.
3. Construct a stakeholder communication network with websites, newsletters and events, and
4. Establish a system for measuring performance.

Source: wck | planning, inc.

Vibrant Downtowns

Dynamic and Multi-Faceted Centers for Social and Commercial Engagement

READINGS.

1. Collins, James Charles; ***Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap... and Others Don't.*** New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 2001.
2. Daniels, Thomas L., John W. Keller, Mark P. Lapping, Katherine Daniels, James Segedy; ***The Small Town Planning Handbook,*** Planners Press, American Planning Association, Chicago, 2007.
3. Duany, Andres and Plater-Zyberk, Elizabeth; ***"The Neighborhood, the District and the Corridor"***, published in ***The New Urbanism: Toward an Architecture of Community;*** Katz, Peter P. and Scully, Vincent, Jr.; McGraw-Hill Companies, New York, 1993.
4. Florida, Richard; ***The Great Reset, How New Ways of Living and Working Drive Post-Crash Prosperity,*** Richard Florida, HarperCollins Publishers, ISBN 978-0-06-193719-4, 2010.
5. Glaeser, Edward; ***Triumph of the City, How our Greatest Invention Makes Us Richer, Smarter, Greener, Healthier and Happier;*** The Penguin Press [USA], London, 2011.
6. Green, Hardy; ***The Company Town, The Industrial Edens and Satanic Mills that Shaped the American Economy;*** Hardy Green; Basic Books, A Member of the Perseus Books Group; New York; 2010.
7. Hinshaw, Mark; ***Citistate Seattle,*** Shaping a Modern Metropolis, Planners Press, APA, 1999.
8. Lafley, A. G. and Martin, Roger L.; ***Playing to Win, How Strategy Really Works,*** Harvard Business School Press, Boston, Mass., 2013.
9. LeDuff, Charlie; ***Detroit, An American Autopsy,*** The Penguin Press, NY, 2013.
10. Miller, Donald L; ***City of the Century: The Epic of Chicago and the Making of America.*** New York, NY: Touchstone, 1996.
11. Mumford, Lewis; ***The City in History, Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects,*** Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1961.
12. O'Mara, Margaret Pugh; ***Cities of Knowledge, Cold War Science and the Search for the Next Silicon Valley;*** O'Mara; Princeton University Press; Princeton and Oxford; 2005.
13. Peters, Thomas J. and Robert H. Waterman, Jr; ***In Search For Excellence: Lessons from America's Best-Run Companies,*** New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1982.
14. Sandweiss, Eric; ***St. Louis, The Evolution of an American Urban Landscape,*** Temple University Press, 2001.
15. Saunders, Doug; ***Arrival City, How the Largest Migration in History Reshaped Our World,*** Pantheon Books; New York; 2010.
16. Schwab, William A.; ***Urban Sociology, A Human Ecology Perspective,*** ADDISON-Wesley Publishing Company, 1982.
17. Schwartz, Peter; ***The Art of the Long View, Planning for the Future in an Uncertain World.***
18. Vale, Lawrence J. and Thomas J. Campanella; ***The Resilient City.*** How Modern Cities Recover from Disaster. Oxford University Press, 2005.



AUTHOR:
Bill Kercher, AICP, LEED®AP
wck | planning, inc.
bill.kercher@wckplanning.com