

## ***Be Strategic, Leverage Every Main Street Asset.***

### **The Place Where Commercial, Civic and Residential Lives Converge.**

Downtown's focus is main street; the street with public buildings, gathering places and active open spaces; the street with shops, restaurants, offices and housing. Main street is where all elements of the community converge; and each is essential.

Successful downtowns are magical places. They are places where commercial business is conducted in an office or on a street corner. They are where community leaders confab over breakfast or lunch at the same table year after year. They are the places where business owners and residents meet with local government folks, elected and appointed. They are places where children learn the history of their hometown. They are places where people live. No other place in town has as many planned meetings, casual encounters and random happenings as a vibrant downtown.

### **People Make Main Street.**

The success of downtown is all about its people. People create the magic; people on the streets, in the shops, the offices, the public buildings and the restaurants. The city invites people to main street; it gives people as many reasons as possible to be attracted to main street. Public buildings are powerful magnets as are great restaurants, creative merchants and busy offices. The city's vision is the critical factor.

**“The image of a great city stems largely from the quality of its public realm – its streets, boulevards, parks, squares, plazas and water fronts.” Cy Paumier.**

### **Main Street Disrupters.**

Strong forces of isolation work against the success of cities, downtowns and main streets.

- Society is evolving away from civic gatherings and toward personal isolation.
- The economy is becoming more on-line, e-commerce and work-at-home.
- Public art, beauty and wide sidewalks are treated as costs rather than benefits.
- Public building locations are being driven away from main street by cheaper sites in poor locations that disturb civic cohesion.



People make main street, Winter Park FL.

### **Buildings, Places and Spaces Matter.**

City government has the potential, and perhaps the responsibility, to take counter-measures to confront the trend towards increased civic disconnection, isolation and personal disengagements. The historic civic and commercial roles of the main street are expanding to include the added responsibility for the social and mental health of the town. Main street is one of the few places with buildings, places and spaces that enable and encourage people to interact face-to-face, to participate in civic events and to care about their community. The socialization role of the city, a new role, is a clear and present need.

### **Place Principles**

- **Create an organizing structure.**
- **Foster a distinct identity.**
- **Encourage variety and interest.**
- **Ensure visual and functional continuity.**
- **Maximize convenience.**
- **Provide for comfort.**
- **Emphasize high quality.**

*Creating a Vibrant City Center, Urban Design and Regeneration Principles,*  
Cy Paumier, Urban Land Institute, Washington DC, 2004.

### **Public Buildings Belong on Main Street.**

The city has the power to strengthen main street by locating public buildings on or near main street. Public buildings attract private buildings and draw people to main street. The process starts with city hall. Museums, libraries, theaters, city buildings, parks and plazas collectively make main street work along with restaurants, shops and offices. They all contribute.

### **Civic Buildings Important to Main Street**

- **City Hall**
- **The Public Library**
- **The Local History Museum**
- **The Community Theater**
- **The Post Office**
- **The Central Park or Plaza**
- **A County, State or Federal Building is a Bonus as is any education or health building.**

There was a time when cities followed the exodus of retail out of town to the suburbs. City halls were moved from downtown to the “highway”. Thankfully, this trend is in retreat and new city halls are being located on or near main street. Think about it, if the city won’t invest downtown, why should anyone else?

Small cities with struggling main streets must lead the resurgence with public investments. Infrastructure is important, but the location of a public building on main street is the move that can begin to shift the tide. An institution might lead if a wealthy benefactor has a mind to rescue the town, but this is usually beyond the city’s control. The private sector will not lead and residents can’t be expected to move into a struggling downtown.

City action on main street is the only reliable course to stem the tide of a declining downtown. Cities with strong or tolerable prosperous main streets can follow the same course as a preventative measure.

Start with a plan. **A Long-Term Civic Building, Place and Space Plan** sets the vision and standards for all types of structures. It provides the planning, urban design, regulatory and financial tools to ensure the community-based vision is achieved. The plan’s objectives are:

- to properly locate new public buildings,
- to return lost public activities downtown,
- to rehab existing buildings in-place,
- to encourage mixed-use buildings and spaces for public and private businesses and activities, a mix of indoor and outdoor open space, ample and convenient parking, and
- to recruit other civic assets downtown such as county and state buildings, post offices and institutional buildings.

### **Business Belongs on Main Street.**

Just as city and civic buildings and places are essential to a successful main street, private businesses are really the main contributors. Retaining and recruiting retail and service businesses to main street are important functions of downtown organizations.

While business won't lead a resurgence, the synergy of the public and private offices with restaurants, shops, theaters and museums create a resurgence in the center of town.

### **Residents Belong on Main Street.**

A test for success in any town is whether or not people will spend the night downtown. People who live on or near main street have entrusted their safety and well-being to the downtown environment. People who stay in main street hotels do the same, albeit only as part-timers. Downtown residents and hotel guests prove the concept that main street is a fine place to be in the evening; a "proof of concept" for investors, entrepreneurs and small business owners.

People living near main street patronize the businesses and heighten the city's energy. Public buildings, parks, plazas and walkable, shaded streets connect residents of in-town neighborhoods with the city center. Main street strengthens the entire city as downtown residences and retailers grow in number.

### **Open Spaces Belong on Main Street.**

Open space is a strong organizing element of some towns and the final critical element in others. A beautiful central park for events, casual recreation and celebrations adds to civic pride and real estate value along main street. Main street itself can be a "pop up" park.

Many cities have discovered that overlooked and neglected vacant spaces can become useful small parks or plazas. Mini-parks in unexpected places add character to main street. Every opportunity can be exploited to turn under-utilized lands and spaces into places for people to gather.



**Main street is a great open space on week-ends and special days, Coral Gables FL.**

## Main Street: The Street Itself.

Look at the street. Is it pretty? Walkable? Safe? Clean? Inviting? The street is more than the conveyor of cars and trucks; it is the host to walkers and bikers, to shoppers and diners, to business owners and workers, to buses and trolleys. The street is their only access to and around downtown; don't clog it with vehicles that don't need to be there.

## Remaking Injured Main Streets.

In addition to streets, buildings and places, open spaces are important downtown assets. Parks and plazas become "third places", places for business and pleasure. Trails and sidewalks connect activities. Waterfronts are being re-captured for public use.

Existing main streets always have room for improvement; some need regeneration.

### ***Regeneration Principles***

- **Promote diversity.**
- **Encourage compactness.**
- **Foster intensity of development.**
- **Ensure balance of activities.**
- **Provide for accessibility.**
- **Create functional linkages.**
- **Build a positive identity.**

*Creating a Vibrant City Center, Urban Design and Regeneration Principles*, Cy Paumier, Urban Land Institute, Washington DC, 2004.

## Play The Long Game.

Like public and private buildings, main street will be a part of downtown for a long time. It will be or become vibrant, or not; but it will always be there. When a small city or town has the infrequent opportunity to locate a public building downtown, do it.

City halls, libraries and active public buildings, once built, stay put for a long while. A poorly located library, e.g., may take decades to relocate downtown. Take opportunities and preserve future options when they appear.

## Main Street as a "Third Place".

"Third places", as observed by Ray Oldenburg, are the cafés, bars, shops and parks where people spend time in conversation and relaxation away from home and work. Main street itself can be a "third place" with inviting sidewalks and seating for people going from store to restaurant to plaza to café to bar; as they park and meander.

Be a good host: provide accessible parking, trees and canopies for shade and weather protection, informative business signs, safe crosswalks and creative lighting. Design main street as an outdoor "third place"; a place for people to get together.

## Infrastructure, Entitlements and Parking.

It is almost a given that the basic requirements of downtown development are being met or are planned to be met in the near future. Without these three basic requirements, nothing happens.

When starting from scratch, a strategically phased approach is critical. Which investments go first, which invite a private response and how can the whole process be ratcheted up a step at a time? While the answer for each city is different, time is the factor generally underestimated. Real improvements take time; get the bones right, build assets to last and contribute to the long term value of the city.

## Leverage Public Buildings.

City Hall must be on or near main street to get the full impact of its influence.

Locating the city library, the local history museum, the post office and the community theater on or near main street is important to attract people and private investment downtown. Employees, patrons and visitors to public buildings downtown spend money in shops, walk and talk on the sidewalks, eat in cafés and restaurants, support the historic and arts venues and generally activate main street.

The city's strategy reflected in its **Long-Term Civic Building, Place and Space Plan** is an important element of its downtown comprehensive plan. The plan may take years to implement since the library, for example, may be located outside of downtown and the city needs to wait until a new library is needed to relocate it downtown, but the plan can provide readiness for this eventuality.

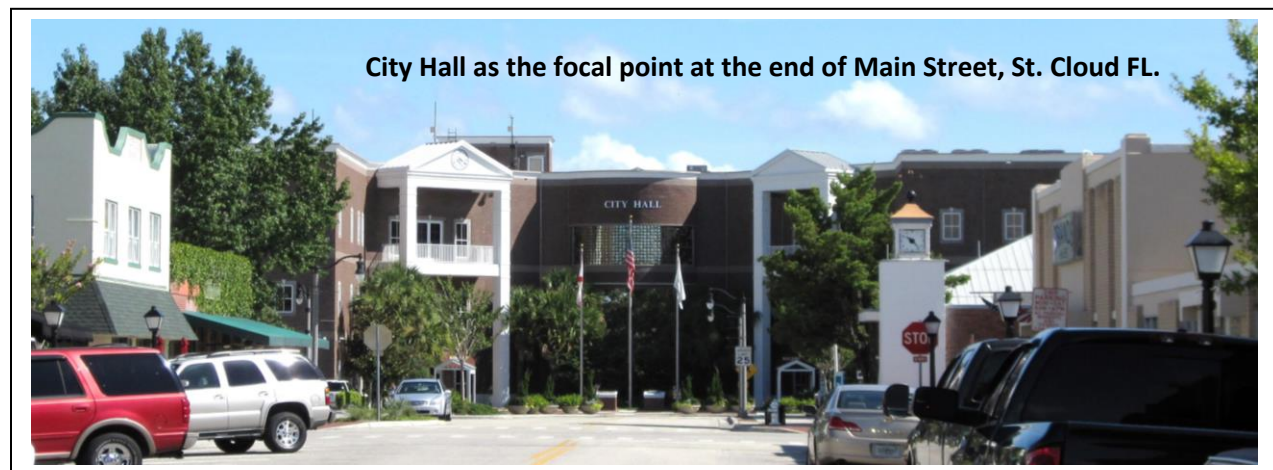
If the city will not invest in downtown, it is unlikely the private sector will build the office buildings, the housing and the hotels that will fulfill the vision for a successful main street.

“A city should be a place with such beauty and order that it is inspirational...the greatest cities are those with the most beautiful places.”

Mayor Joseph Riley, Charleston quoted by Cy Paumier in *Creating a Vibrant City Center, Urban Places and Regeneration Principles*.



City Hall anchors main street at the west end of its Main Street Active Zone, Winter Garden FL.



City Hall as the focal point at the end of Main Street, St. Cloud FL.

## Conclusions.

1. City Hall should be the first building on or near main street.
2. The location of additional public buildings can lead the way to a recovering main street or preserve the strength of a prosperous one. Post offices, public libraries, community theaters and museums are the building blocks of main street.
3. Institutional buildings and those of state and federal agencies add to the stature of main street and downtown. Priority goes to buildings with jobs. Public agency buildings operating week-days from 8 to 5 should be located near main street or on main street outside the Active Zone.
4. Cities with well-located city halls, post offices and other community venues must work to keep these main street and downtown buildings relevant and functioning to serve the community; autopilot is not an option.
5. Infrastructure, including high-speed broadband internet service and parking along with cleanliness and beauty are factors that keep employers and residents interested in their downtown locations.
6. New commercial investments and residents will follow city actions; the private folks rarely go first.
7. Reserving downtown property with interim uses that can be re-purposed when appropriate provides future benefits, such as surface parking lots converted into parking decks or planned layout spaces for main street construction projects.
8. A purposeful plan to use the location of public buildings to attract people and investment downtown is a great strategy. Prepare a **Long-Term Civic Building, Place and Space Plan** to guide incremental city decisions and to influence decisions of other governmental and institutional organizations.
9. Locating new civic buildings downtown takes time; this strategy requires thoughtful focus, persistence and patience. Capital improvement plans for new buildings by other governments are sometimes 5 to 10 years in the future; plenty of time to be ready with a competitive site for a county, school board or state building to be located downtown.
10. Ask for help; find experienced, trustworthy developers; seek assistance from neighboring towns with a track record of success.
11. Planning main street with infrastructure and entitlements needs to be supplemented with a social activities program that attract people downtown.
12. Corridor Development Plans:
  - a. Downtown organizations do not generally worry about the welfare of the “commercial strip” outside downtown. However, when one considers that the “strip” is usually the gateway to downtown, some attention should be paid.
  - b. Special districts can be useful for corridors outside downtown, usually along an older blighted highway. Master systems for parking and drainage become imperative. Since most master systems must be retro-fitted, success usually requires code compromises.
13. Cities and towns exist for a long time. Plan improvements and programs that will stand the test of time. Use the years and decades to position main street for its envisioned outcome; lay in the pieces carefully, logically and qualitatively.

## ***“Hard” Assets of a Character Main Street*** ***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 the entire city being resilient and successful. The full complement of uses and activities to strive for on or near the main street are, at least:

1. **Residences:**
  - Apartments, townhouses and condominiums,
  - Hotels and other over-night visitor accommodations and
  - Accessible close-in neighborhoods.
2. **Commercial Buildings** with:
  - Ground floor retail, restaurants or other active uses beyond week-days from nine to five,
  - Two to four story buildings in the “Active Zone” that has, at most, 4–6 block faces and
  - Front doors that open to a main street that has broad sidewalks and canopy trees.
3. **Streets** that are inviting and safe, not foreboding to walk across, with:
  - Two travel lanes, with or without a median, under city ownership,
  - Building face to building face distances ranging from 60-80 feet; 100’-120’ w/median and
  - Wide sidewalks [min 12’], on-street parking, bus stops, pedestrian cross-walks, street trees, bike lanes, smart street light poles, a wayfinding system and business friendly signs.
4. **Venues for gatherings, formal and informal:**
  - Spaces for spontaneous and scheduled community events like book fairs and car shows and
  - Public spaces at parks, lakes or waterfronts on or near main street including promenades, carousels, playgrounds, fountains and amphitheaters for celebrations and parades.
5. **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 and cafés,
  - Retail goods** including groceries, drugs, convenience shopping, books, gifts, clothing, hardware, automotive parts and discount retail,
  - Personal Services** such as laundry, dry cleaning, barber shops, car care and tech support and
  - Business services** including banks, full service business centers and incubators.
6. **Infrastructure** including “green” basic utilities, master parking and stormwater systems, high-speed, broadband internet service, public art and public safety systems.
7. **Information centers**, physical and virtual, for residents and visitors with:
  - Guides and tickets to local places, activities and recurring events and
  - Notices of non-recurring events and concierge services.
8. **Signature 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 and The Miami Book Fair. More modest affairs can create the same zeal.
9. **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 Dahlonega and
  - Carriage rides touring Fernandina Beach’s historic neighborhoods.
10. **“Third Places”**, downtowns are residential and employment centers; they host the “third places” where people go when not at home and not at work; places to enjoy the in-between times of life.

**In sum**, the “main street” is, or can be, the city’s social center; the intersection of social, civic, commercial, cultural, entertainment, educational and recreational activities for residents, businesses and visitors.