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Debunking Time 12 Myths About Downtown

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Successful downtowns are distinctive and unique.

Still, many communities seeking to improve their downtowns hold a set of beliefs about problems and solutions which may - or may not - be consistent with the way their specific downtowns function.

One dozen myths about downtown redevelopment are so persistent that they regularly reappear. By examining them, it's possible to ferret out what can be truly useful in downtown development.

Moreover, it's possible to discern that approaches to revitalization that are

impulsive, emotional, or copied from other successful downtowns have very limited application.

Myth #1: What We Need is a Film Festival

Some downtown advocates take the Silver Bullet approach to revitalization. They base an entire revitalization effort on

landing a department store, baseball team, library, or major event like a film festival. This approach is a house of cards because if that one thing doesn't come downtown, the rest of the plan doesn't work.

The most successful revitalizations are the result of partnerships between the community, city government, and local developers.

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Many communities have proven this myth by actually attracting the Film Festival or department store and then thinking that their revitalization work was done. They waited for customers and investors to return. And they waited for customers and investors to return. And they waited.

Unfortunately, these communities discovered that attracting one major user does not result in renewed downtown vitality. Instead, the lesson to be learned is that a Silver Bullet only works when it's in conjunction with economic, design, and other promotional elements to support revitalization.

Myth #2: Zone for Vertical Mixed Use

Think of this as Silver Bullet, Part Deux. It's a revitalization strategy based on the notion that one type of land use solves everything.

Due in part to California's housing shortage, new urbanists think that mixed use is the new panacea. Mixed use can be good for a downtown if it isn't forced into areas where it may have never been historically.

A downtown without mixed use is not predetermined to die. There are several successful downtowns without mixed use zoning in place. This occurs primarily where there is single-story retail on Main Street, and housing is in close proximity. Typically, if residential uses are allowed close to Main Street, then introducing vertical mixed use for the sake of nostalgia can be a controversial forced effort. What's critical is to have a local residential populace within walking distance, say within four or five blocks.



Myth #3: Get a Theme

The Disneyfication approach to downtown revitalization is rarely successful. Downtowns are a reflection of a community's past, and the past can be translated into a variety of architectural building styles. People consistently return to what's real, to areas with a sense of place and scale, not thematic shopping centers with franchises and plastic signs erected and finished in an eight-month construction span.

Of course, downtown merchants sometimes equate the economic success of suburban malls and lifestyle centers with thematic architecture and consistent sign programs. They believe that if a place has order and control, then all they need do to sit back and reap the benefits.

Two notable downtowns have used the theme approach successfully, and both are principally tourist stops. One is Solvang, California, and the other is Leavenworth, Washington.

One is Bavarian, and the other is Danish. It has to be the pastry!

Myth #4: Parking is the Problem

Every downtown likes to blame its woes on parking.

Frequently, people perceive that there is a parking problem if they cannot park directly in front or behind the actual business that they are visiting. Often, the supply of parking in downtown is adequate; yet, the directional signage to the parking is non-existent. In those instances, it is only the savviest of residents who know where the best parking spots are.

This circumstance surely makes the case for better downtown parking management, consistent clear signage, and enforcement of parking regulations. It's almost never about more spaces.

Myth #5: McDonald's Will Ruin Our Quaintness

This attitude is another version of *David v. Goliath*: if we keep Goliath out, we'll be fine!

Turns out that quite the contrary is true.

Franchise businesses weigh their location selections very carefully before committing to an area. The fact that a reputable franchise wants to make its home in your downtown should be viewed as a very positive economic indicator. What your downtown has to do is make sure that the franchise storefront fits with the architectural character of its location. You certainly don't want your downtown transformed into a row of

gaudy plastic signs, false mansard roofs, and illuminated blue awnings. You have the right to control it.

So how does a downtown stay true to its unique character, retain local business, and be successful?

Downtown Coronado, California is a National Main Street "Best Downtown." It has adopted zoning regulations limiting the number of franchise establishments allowed in its downtown. Coronado's approach was to allow enough franchises to show a healthy economic picture, but not so many as to homogenize the flavor of local entrepreneurial establishments. Coronado adopted design guidelines and standards that essentially prohibit the corporate look of chain stores.

Myth #6: Everyone Should Open During the Same Hours

During the last ten years, downtowns across the country have attempted to standardize the hours of operation kept by retailers. Think about it for a minute.

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Should the children's toy store stay open as late as the Starbucks? Or as late as the local tavern? This is the "Let's-Pretend-We're-a-Mall" approach.

Given the independent nature of local business owners as well as the costs involved in staying open late, this approach has failed repeatedly.

Recognizing that a single set of uniform business hours is difficult to achieve, and possibly not advantageous to the district's retailers as a whole, the most successful efforts are promoting "customer-driven" business hours. With this approach, retail businesses stay open late one evening per week. Once customers get comfortable with those hours, expand the hours later on other nights. Uniform retail hours are impossible to achieve in a downtown setting. Instead, customer-driven hours, kept and coordinated by businesses that can share customers, are the secret to success.



Myth #7: Competition is Bad for Business

This is the "Head-In-The-Sand" plan for revitalization; a better approach would be "Head-to-Head."

The most successful commercial districts have compatible businesses located side by side in convenient clusters, proving that groupings of compatible merchants are actually good for business.

Rather than providing dangerous competition, retail clustering expands and magnifies the focused audience that retailers want to draw. This occurs because convenience and variety attract customers.

Prime examples of successful downtown retail clusters include the art galleries clustered in Laguna Beach or Palm Springs, offbeat clothing boutiques on Melrose in Los Angeles, and antique shops in Pomona, California.

Myth #8: Brighter is Better

While an unsafe downtown is bad for business, making streets as bright as a prison yard is certainly not the answer either. There is a fine line between providing an adequate amount of light and giving the appearance of solving a crime problem.

The approach to lighting public spaces has to consider two elements.

First, lighting sources must be varied. Simply providing streetlights is not enough, and streetlights alone are often not attractive to pedestrians. The warmest type of light is reflected off building surfaces. This light is more sensual and avoids overly bright hot spots. Look for alternative light sources such as storefronts, bollards, and architectural wall wash lighting.

Second, the brightness and color of the light must be correctly matched to the public space. Super bright streetlights with a yellow tinge make pedestrians cringe and give off the wrong message about a place.

Myth #9: Downtown Will Re-emerge as the Community's Retail Heart

It is time we all start admitting that for most downtowns, reestablishing or becoming the retail heart of the community is unattainable. Once the malls opened and then the big box Costcos and Walmarts moved in, the game was pretty much over for most small independent retailers who sold similar goods and didn't offer extraordinary service.

Some downtown organizations are just too stubborn; they refuse to see the writing on the wall. The fact is that unless the small, independent downtown retailer offers unique product lines or superior customer service, the big retailers maintain a huge price point advantage. While we all like to think we "buy downtown," we still go to K-Mart to buy anti-freeze for our car.

Americans love our big boxes. They give us discounted prices, easy parking, and endless retail choices. Making

matters worse is that many of us are now shopping online.

Turning our downtowns into cultural/entertainment or specialty retail areas will dominate the restructuring of our inner cities, and create a truly thriving destination for communities. Also, housing in and around an urban center has suddenly become vogue. Empty nesters, young urban professionals, and two-income couples will stabilize the market for downtowns. Inner cities that cater to this market segment can provide entertainment, government, specialty retail, culture and restaurants that are interesting and upbeat.

Myth #10: Design Controls Scare Developers Off

Pure nonsense. In fact, quality developers prefer to do business in communities that demand quality projects. By using design guidelines, they know their investment will be protected. Developers do not want to create a beautiful building design if they suspect that the vacant lot next door is going to be an architectural atrocity.

The most successful revitalizations are the result of partnerships between the community, city government, and local developers. These partnerships can be highly successful in providing a quality project for the community and an economically successful project for the developer. The essential ingredient for making the partnership work is attitude. All parties in the partnership must agree to cooperate, so that a mutually beneficial project derives from all the hard work.

Myth #11: Don't Do Anything Until We Have a Market Study

While this myth presumes "A Technical Study Will Protect Us," it's more like a CYA approach. Instead of first performing a market study, downtown stakeholders should envision what types of uses they want. This serves two purposes. First, it

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shortens the list of potential targets the economist will study, and it also avoids having the economist report to the downtown association that a Costco, Home Depot, or auto dealership shows real promise in downtown. Yikes!

Keep in mind that it is the mix of retail uses that is most important in making a downtown successful. An economist can rarely pinpoint the actual uses that are specifically needed for a successful

downtown district. What an economist does is report the market segments that could be fulfilled within the city limits. The economist can suggest business sectors that are saturated, neutral, or needed. So, figure out what mix of uses you want in your downtown, and then hire an economist to ascertain if the market will support that mix.

Myth #12: Downtown Needs Drive-By Traffic

This is the largest myth out there! It presumes that the more cars that drive by a business, the better retail sales are. This is the highway strip approach to downtown revitalization. This premise is partially true but for only a few select market sectors, such as convenience stores or gas stations.

What is important is to have cars that have downtown as their destination, not a place they drive through to get to another place. Pedestrian-friendly downtowns need walkable, human-scale streets, with easy parking, not two-lane mini highways.

Countless cities across the United States have state highways running through the heart of their downtowns. In most places, the highway

commercial uses that originally located along the state highway have relocated outside of downtown.

And in Conclusion . . .

Myths are exactly that – myths – and are not real solutions. A collaborative solution between planners, designers, the community, and public agency decision-makers is the answer to a community's needs. Communication throughout the process is the key to a successful



downtown revitalization effort.

Though solutions to any downtown revitalization are as varied as the downtowns that implement them, it is critical for each downtown to

start with an open and honest dialogue about its strengths and weaknesses. Adopting solutions that may have been right in Timbuktu are foreign to your community's environment.

Remember, by engaging downtown stakeholders to find local answers, the community is less likely to fall prey to the most common pitfalls.

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Waterfront Coalition Wins International Award!

Representing the Vallejo Waterfront Coalition, Marti Brown and Stephanie Gomes accepted the Clearwater Award in Savannah, Georgia in November for grassroots citizen efforts in waterfront planning.

The Coalition was one of 14 groups honored as part of the 19th "Excellence on the Waterfront" program. The nine-member Vallejo Waterfront Coalition Steering Committee was saluted by the Waterfront Center for being vocal advocates of good planning, urban design, and architecture.

Anne Breen, Co-Executive Director of the Waterfront Center said, "This kind of effort highlights the importance of citizens caring about the waterfront and committing their precious time. This dedicated, grassroots citizen effort is substantial and is bound to importantly increase community awareness about the issues and increase dialogue."

Solano County Supervisor Barbara Kondylis, who nominated the group for this award, reacted to the news: "This is community activism at its best, and to get rewarded for the effort is phenomenal!"

"Accepting this award in Savannah was my last official act as Chair of the Vallejo Waterfront Coalition. I have resigned my position as chair after being elected to the City Council — but what an honorable way to step down! I am proud of this group and everything we have accomplished."

Moving forward, Marti Brown and Katy Miessner will be the new co-chairs of the Vallejo Waterfront Coalition.

Brown said, "This award is a validation of all the community's hard work. Being in Savannah and seeing all the remarkable possibilities for waterfront development around the world reinforces our commitment to excellent waterfront development and our dedication to making sure that it happens in Vallejo."

The Vallejo Waterfront Coalition Steering Committee consists of Marti Brown, Katy Miessner, Diana Lang, Debbie Surani, Kim White, Mark Hutchins, Robert Boyce, and Elena DuCharme.

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