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PM Article: Downtowns: 10 Strategies to Ensure Their Resilience and Vitality

Downtowns that fail to successfully respond to changing trends can decline.

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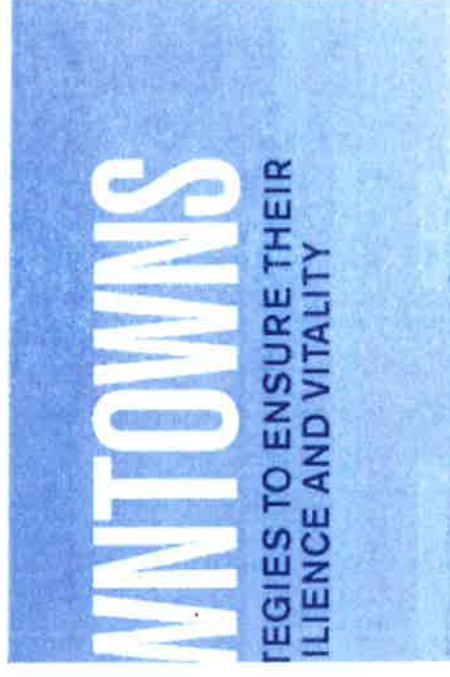
Over the years, downtown economies have been pummeled by suburbanization of the middle class, deindustrialization, economic recessions, and globalization.

Resilient downtowns have been able to successfully adapt to these changes and to even develop the capacity to overcome future hardships.

Downtowns that failed to successfully respond to the changing trends continue to decline. My research has identified 10 key strategies that civic leaders and downtown managers use to ensure the resilience of their downtowns.

1. Realize That Image Is Everything in Downtown Development

Over the years, the image of downtowns across the country has taken a beating. Stories of crime, blight, poverty, and dilapidated and collapsing infrastructure has distorted the public's image of these community centers.



So revitalizing downtowns must be preceded by, or at the very least, go hand in hand with an image makeover. Without a positive image, the private sector is unlikely to take the risk to reinvest in downtown, and it will be difficult to convince people to visit, much less live there.

In Wilmington, Delaware (www.ci.wilmington.de.us), the downtown development organization called Downtown Visions (www.downtownvisions.org) adopted a positive image campaign to change negative public perceptions. This goes beyond a positive slogan and is supported by substantive evidence.

Downtown housing units, for example, increased by 19 percent between 2000 and 2010, compared to city housing growth of only 2.1 percent over the same period. Downtown median incomes also grew by 94 percent compared to city median income growth of 9 percent over the same period.

To improve safety, the organization has a safety division, which hires and trains uniformed “safety ambassadors” to escort downtown patrons to their cars, banks, or any service area within the downtown. It also partnered with the police department to install cameras at 25 strategic locations in the downtown.

Video feeds are monitored by the safety ambassadors to identify suspicious behavior and report it to the police. The program has helped to locate missing children, to identify early stages of fire, and to boost the public’s image of downtown Wilmington.

2. Monitor Surrounding Neighborhoods

Civic leaders of resilient downtowns understand that a vibrant downtown cannot be sustained if adjacent neighborhoods go downhill. Declining property values, crime, and blight in these neighborhoods can easily seep into the downtown if they are allowed to linger.

Thus, while the starting point for downtown renewal is Main Street, civic leaders must monitor surrounding neighborhoods. Some communities start by enlisting in the National Main Street program (www.preservationnation.org/main-street) to take advantage of the expertise and technical support that this organization provides for fledgling Main Street programs.

Thereafter, they move beyond the national Main Street four-point approach (organization, promotion, design, and economic restructuring) as their downtown organization matures. The cities of Mansfield, Ohio (www.ci.mansfield.oh.us), and Holland, Michigan (www.cityofholland.com), for example, discontinued membership in the National Main Street program so they can broaden their redevelopment concerns to address parking, housing, traffic, and revitalization of historic neighborhoods.

In Middletown, Connecticut (www.cityofmiddletown.com) the city led the redevelopment of the North End neighborhood, which is a near-downtown neighborhood, to help stem the decline of this area.

3. Maintain an Active Daytime Population

Human beings are a gregarious species, and we tend to go where others congregate. With the decentralization of economic activity to the suburbs in prior years, increasing the daytime population of downtowns has become a challenge. There are, however, ways to address this challenge.

One of the most ubiquitous strategies around the country has been to hold art walks downtown to attract art lovers. Beyond that, however, managers of resilient downtowns recognize the significance of civic and cultural amenities to increase the daytime population, so they redouble efforts to retain and attract such activities.

While local governments may have little leverage in the location of private facilities, the public sector has considerable influence in the location of courthouses, museums, libraries, police and fire stations, and educational facilities. Resilient downtowns have, at a minimum, half of their civic and cultural amenities located in the downtown or near-downtown neighborhoods, usually within a half-mile radius.

In New Mexico, commissioners of Santa Fe County (www.co.santa-fe.nm.us) dismissed suggestions by developers to relocate the old courthouse outside the city limits of Santa Fe. Instead, the commission opted for a downtown site for a new courthouse built with \$25 million in voter-approved bonds.

In California, several cities including Nevada City (www.nevadacityca.gov) and Santa Barbara (www.santabarbaraca.gov) resisted pressure from the State Judicial Council to relocate their old courthouses outside the downtown area for precisely similar reasons. This

followed the passage of SB 1407 that the state legislature passed in 2008 to raise \$5 billion through court fees, revenue bonds, and court penalties for rehabilitating 68 courthouses in need of repair around the state.

4. Secure a Residential Population Base

Resilient downtowns have, at a minimum, 5 percent of a community's housing units and the community's population living there. This keeps the downtown lively at night when businesses close.

Two population groups are prime candidates for downtown living: millennials and empty nesters who are usually baby boomers. These two demographic groups have different needs, and civic leaders ought to pay attention to their preferences in attracting them to live downtown.

Baby boomers want to stay active in retirement and therefore seek amenity-rich downtowns that provide them with opportunities to experience a diverse culture, exotic restaurants, and outdoor recreational activities. Also important, empty nesters want to continue to enjoy their favorite pastimes in retirement.

Most of the baby boomers I talked to want to be able to garden in their free time. Thus, where land is at a premium, rooftop gardens should be built into downtown housing to cater to this interest.

Millennials prefer the urban lifestyle because it frees them from automobile ownership and supports the goal of minimizing their environmental footprint. An efficient public transportation system, bicycle lanes, and public gathering places that provide opportunities to socialize and network with their peers can support this lifestyle.

Resilient downtowns invest in and provide such public amenities to attract millennials and retired baby boomers. To incentivize the provision of downtown housing that caters to these groups, Chico, California (www.chico.ca.us), provides density bonuses, deferral of impact fees, and priority review to developers for mixed-use buildings to encourage redevelopment of downtown buildings to provide upper-floor rentals and condominiums.

5. Reach Out to Immigrants

New immigrants to the United States can provide the population needed to revitalize a downtown if they are properly encouraged to live there. These immigrants want to experience and be part of the American dream. Many also have skills in the construction trade.

These skills can be tapped by local governments to help renovate older housing stock in and near downtowns and to assist new immigrants with becoming homeowners. Some 13 percent of the Middletown, Connecticut, population is foreign born, for example, and 27 percent of the downtown residential population is foreign-born. To capitalize on immigrants for downtown revitalization, a community must be open and accepting of new and diverse cultures.

Former Schenectady, New York, Mayor Jurcynski's strategy for courting immigrants is legendary. To attract new immigrants there, he sent a bus to Queens, New York, to round up Guyanese immigrants so he could give them a tour of the assets that Schenectady (www.cityofscheneectady.com) had to offer. Afterward, he would treat them to Italian cookies made by his mother-in-law.

In time, Guyanese immigrants moved to Schenectady and have helped revitalize the city's downtown. It is estimated that more than 8,000 Guyanese immigrants currently live in the city.

6. Cultivate Functional Diversity

Resilient downtowns are multifunctional districts with a mix of residential, retail, office, entertainment, and civic and cultural amenities. A multifunctional downtown ensures that the downtown is vibrant at all times, which helps to keep an "eye on the street" and decrease crime.

A downtown that has mixed uses also inoculates the downtown against total economic collapse should one sector of the economy falter. Nonetheless, retail, dining, and entertainment are the main drivers of downtown economies and resilient downtowns usually have about 8 percent of the community's retail businesses located there.

Multifunctional downtowns can be cultivated by attending to a community's zoning regulations to ensure that they support mixed uses in the downtown. Since 1980, for example, Santa Barbara, California's downtown plan has encouraged mixed-use development—particularly housing development to augment the rich cultural and retail businesses in the downtown.

Another example is the city of Nacogdoches, Texas (www.ci.nacogdoches.tx.us), which uses historic preservation to encourage adaptive reuse of its downtown buildings for civic, retail, and residential housing.

7. Leverage Heritage Resources

A community's heritage is concentrated in its downtown, and only downtowns have a history worth seeing. Heritage tourism, therefore, has the potential to bring people downtown.

Although most local governments now have historic preservation ordinances, they fail to link this to the promotion of tourism. When historic preservation is linked to heritage tourism it establishes a symbiotic relationship between the two sectors that benefits the community.

Through tourism, communities are able to obtain revenue from their historic resources, which is then reinvested to upgrade cultural resources. City and county leaders are also able to justify and make a convincing case for spending public funds on historic preservation since there is expectation of return on investment.

Improved heritage resources, in turn, help attract more visitors. In such cities as Fort Collins, Colorado (www.fcgov.com), board members of the Cultural Resources Board and the Convention and Visitors Bureau serve on each other's board. This allows for a seamless flow of information between the two bodies and for the implementation of joint strategies.

8. Develop Catalytic Projects

Resilient downtowns usually have one catalytic project that catapults the downtown from where it is to where it wants to be. Examples abound: the carousel project in downtown Mansfield, Ohio; Charlottesville, Virginia's (www.charlottesville.org) pedestrian mall; and the Peace Center for the Performing Arts in Greenville, South Carolina (www.greenvillesc.gov), all are signature downtown projects that promoted revitalization.

Nonetheless, downtown renewal need not begin with a large-scale project. Localities with resilient downtowns typically adhere to the VIC principle. They start with projects that are Visible, have an immediate Impact, and avoid exorbitant Costs.

To get public buy-in for revitalization, the initial project(s) must have high visibility so as to make a bold statement about the community's goals and vision for the downtown. That is why façade improvements and streetscaping projects are usually the ones that are tackled first before embarking on major catalytic projects.

Following the VIC principle also enables communities to finance these projects from the general revenue fund without going into debt financing.

9. Nurture Quality of Place

Quality of place is a thread that knits successful downtown development projects together. By creating quality public spaces, resilient downtowns are able to attract and keep both businesses and residents because of their exemplary amenities.

The sidewalk cafes in Greenville, South Carolina, and Hendersonville, North Carolina (www.cityofhendersonville.org); the public plazas in Nacogdoches and Santa Barbara; and the exquisite alleys adorned with hanging flower pots in downtown Fort Collins are all examples of such quality places.

There are long-term benefits to creating quality of place. Retail businesses in the downtown Charlottesville mall continued to flourish and the demand for housing did not wane in such resilient downtowns as Greenville, Hendersonville, Santa Barbara, and Wilmington, even during the recession.

10. Find Your Champion

In almost all cases of downtown revitalization, there is a person who rallies the crowd and mobilizes the community. In Santa Barbara, it was Pearle Chase; in Holland, Edgar and Elsa Prince; in Fort Collins, George Mitchell; and in Greenville, Max Heller.

Today, Barbara Hughes, owner of Narnia Studios in downtown Hendersonville, is the community's downtown champion, organizing several downtown events each year and branding Hendersonville with the moniker "Friendliest City in America," with a website to boot (www.friendliestcityinamerica.com).

To succeed and be sustainable long term, the redevelopment of the downtown has to be institutionalized in an organization of which there are three types. The first type is a downtown organization that is housed in a local government department. A second type is a bifurcated organization with one agency being the downtown development arm funded by the public sector and a business improvement district (BID) that is funded by special assessment on downtown property owners. The third type is one that combines functions of a BID and a downtown development authority.

The first organizational structure is tied to the day-to-day politics of the community and the split organizational structure may create conflict in responsibilities. The most successful organization is the third type since it has funding from assessed property in the business district and can also receive funding from local government for its operation.

Regardless of the downtown organizational structure, it bears remembering that downtown redevelopment is best pursued when it is facilitated by the public sector, but driven by the private sector.

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