

Top Ten Myths of Downtown Planning

An excerpt from a new Planners Press book.

By Philip L. Walker, AICP

The 1970s were an innovative era in design for many facets of American life, including clothing, hairstyles, architecture, and, yes, urban planning. By the early 1970s, a number of forces were already in full play, resulting in unparalleled residential and commercial growth in the suburbs and a steady spiral downward for many downtowns.

In a desperate attempt to turn that situation around, numerous downtowns across the country jumped onto the pedestrian mall bandwagon. In an effort to compete head-to-head with suburban shopping malls, these downtowns blocked off vehicular access on their primary retail streets in order to create open-air pedestrian malls.



Because the market forces that were causing the downtowns' downfall were much larger than the issue of vehicular access, these panic-stricken efforts, not surprisingly, did little to reverse the fortunes of these downtowns. In fact, in most cases, the "mallings" of Main Street only exacerbated downtown's problems, resulting in a slow and painful death for many of them.

During the 1970s, Burlington, Iowa, then a town of 26,839 people, converted the block of Jefferson Street between Main and Third streets into a pedestrian mall. By the late 1990s, it was clear that the pedestrian mall was not helping businesses along that block, so the downtown organization, chamber of commerce, and business association pressured the city to reopen the block to automobiles.

Downtown Allentown, Pennsylvania, erected a canopy along Main Street on the same day that its first suburban mall opened, but it was recently dismantled and replaced with historic streetscape furnishings. Even major cities with seemingly critical masses in their downtowns, such as Louisville, Memphis, and Seattle, have undone their downtown pedestrian malls to reintroduce vehicular traffic.



These failed examples are not an indictment of all pedestrian malls. Some large downtowns, such as those in New York City and Baltimore, can support them. College towns, such as Charlottesville, Virginia, can support them. Those cities constituting both, such as Madison, Wisconsin, can clearly support a pedestrian mall, as evidenced by State Street.

However, because the "mauling" of Main Street resulted in failure for so many other communities across America, not to mention the tragedy of "urban renewal" programs that razed countless blocks of historic architecture, the 1970s are rarely recollected by most downtown advocates with any degree of nostalgia. In short, any downtown master plan proposing a pedestrian mall should be met with extreme scrutiny before receiving a stamp of approval.

The true essence of every downtown plan is a collection of ideas. The misinformed notions below are among those frequently voiced by citizens, sometimes voiced by elected officials, and occasionally voiced by professional planners and downtown "experts" who should know better. Many have some element of truth, but none is entirely accurate.

1. Our downtown just needs one "big ticket" development to turn things around.

Rarely does a "quick fix" really repair a downtown over the long haul. Developments such as sports facilities and casinos can vanish as quickly as they arrived, and even if they stick around, their novelty to the public may not.

Downtowns that have reversed their downward spirals to become success stories have typically done so incrementally, through numerous small steps over time. Most struggling downtowns did not reach their current conditions overnight, so turning them around overnight is unquestionably unrealistic.

2. Replacing some existing buildings with parking lots will bring more shoppers downtown.

Buildings are the most fundamental element of any downtown. Generally speaking, more buildings in a downtown — particularly occupied ones — are better than fewer buildings

because the activities that occur inside them attract people and their money. People do not visit downtowns to park their cars.

Furthermore, in the case of historic or unique buildings, it is their character that helps make the downtown unique. While parking lots located interior to their blocks are necessary, those fronting directly onto streets create dead spaces along the streetscape and are visually unattractive. Parking is a challenging issue for most downtowns and one that must be addressed, but razing buildings is rarely the long-term solution.

3. Our strategy for revitalizing downtown should focus on retail.

Successful downtowns enjoy a rich mixture of diverse uses, including offices, housing, institutions, entertainment, and, yes, retail. However, a singular focus on retail is usually an ill-advised strategy, despite that fixation for so many downtown revitalization programs.

In fact, given its importance to most downtowns, housing is often the best bet of any component of downtown to promote — though success with housing is frequently difficult to achieve. In addition to providing further market support to retail and other uses, residents make their downtown feel inhabited and safe, thereby attracting those living outside of downtown to visit for shopping, dining, cultural events, and other activities.

4. Attractive new brick sidewalks will bring more people downtown.

New sidewalks, as with streetscape improvements in general, are certainly useful in broadcasting a message that downtown is important to the community. As part of a comprehensive urban design strategy, they will sometimes even stimulate adjacent private development, which can indirectly attract more people to the downtown. However, very few people visit downtowns simply to enjoy their high-quality sidewalks, so their value must always be kept in perspective.

5. Downtown needs a large national department store to compete with the suburban malls.

Unless a downtown is large enough to enjoy the market support of thousands of people on any given day, in most cases time should not be wasted trying to recruit a national department store. National stores' numeric criteria for trade-area employees, residents, and vehicular traffic, as well as sales volume potential per square foot, are typically too high for all but the largest downtowns to meet. Instead, most downtowns are better served by focusing on niche retailing that suburban malls are not filling, in addition to other uses such as offices, housing, and institutions.

This principle does not preclude targeting smaller stores that happen to be national chains or franchises, as a limited number of such tenants are usually desirable to supplement

locally owned businesses. However, unique, independently owned stores are among the strongest draws for most downtowns.

6. On-street parking should be converted to another driving lane to improve traffic flows for the benefit of downtown.

The inability of vehicles to flow quickly through its streets is not the root of a downtown's problems. A lack of destinations to attract vehicles and their drivers to the downtown is more likely the challenge. On-street parking is important as a convenience to shoppers and diners, as a traffic calming device for drivers, and as a physical and psychological barrier protecting pedestrians from moving vehicles. The conversion of on-street parking to driving lanes simply results in faster moving traffic that makes downtowns less pedestrian-friendly and less business-friendly.

7. Existing one-way streets should be maintained for traffic flows that will benefit downtown.

Even more alarming than simply maintaining the status quo, some communities that are still stuck in a 1960s mind-set will proactively contemplate the conversion of existing two-way streets into one-way couplets. One-way traffic is more beneficial to through traffic than it is to traffic for which downtown is the destination.

For most downtowns, one-way streets prove unnecessary and even counterproductive because they encourage speeding, limit the visibility of retailers, and are confusing to new visitors to downtown. Confused visitors can easily become irritated visitors, and irritated visitors may never return. From a traffic flow perspective, one-way streets create many of the same problems caused by the conversion of on-street parking into driving lanes, which, in turn, can generate the need for remedial traffic calming measures.

8. Downtown special events are a waste of time and money because few dollars are spent in businesses during the events and a great deal of preparation and cleanup are required.

In most cases, special events are more important for their long-term benefits than for their short-term gains. Special events often attract some people who rarely or never frequent downtown, but their attendance at a downtown event makes them aware of businesses or activities that they might seek out at a later date.

Furthermore, a positive visitor experience during special events can reap tremendous future rewards, including word-of-mouth advertising. Given the relatively low costs of preparation and clean up, particularly if volunteers are mobilized, special events are a worthwhile form of promotion when strategically linked to the downtown's particular marketing strengths.

9. One of downtown's primary streets should be closed to traffic and converted into a pedestrian mall.

While that concept was in vogue during the 1970s, downtown experts are now recommending that these streets be transformed back to drivable ones. Most Americans are still, and might always be, too automobile dependent to completely abandon their cars. Pedestrian malls typically work only in downtowns that have a high resident or employee density, large volumes of tourism, or some other unique circumstance, such as an adjacent university.

10. Too many regulations will kill downtown's businesses.

Perhaps in theory it would be possible to regulate a downtown to death, but not in political reality. Politicians enacting a detrimental level of regulation would likely be voted out of office. Well-crafted and detailed codes, such as design standards for buildings and signs, might be considered overly stringent by some, but they can clearly elevate the quality of the built environment if used properly.



A physically and aesthetically enhanced downtown typically results in increased property values because of one simple principle: Real estate values are ultimately based upon the degree of a place's desirability. While the associated increased rents can result in some businesses having to relocate, they are usually replaced by more profitable ones.

Some of the most highly regulated downtown districts in America, such as Princeton's Palmer Square, Charleston's King Street, Cambridge's Harvard Square, and New Orleans's French Quarter, are also some of the most commercially successful. In fact, in 2005, the Old Town district in Alexandria, Virginia, added yet another regulatory layer to limit chain stores and ground-floor offices, yet its virtues as a fertile environment for prosperous businesses show no signs of abating.

Philip Walker is the principal of The Walker Collaborative in Nashville, Tennessee. This article is excerpted from Downtown Planning for Smaller and Midsized Communities, published this spring by APA's Planners Press.

Resources

Images: Top — A 'flatiron' building in Troy, New York, has been a landmark for more than 100 years. Middle — This Louisville street was blocked off during the '80s but reopened two decades later. Bottom — Special events are a great way to attract people downtown. Photos the Walker Collaborative.