

Characteristics of Successful Downtowns

Attributes of Outstanding Small & Mid-Sized Downtowns

What characteristics or attributes are shared by outstanding small and mid-sized downtowns? Research by Gary Ferguson of the Ithaca (NY) Downtown Partnership addressed this question in a recent study of successful downtowns. The cities selected for study all have reputations for outstanding downtowns. They include: State College, PA, Burlington, VT, Providence, RI, Northampton, MA, Portland, ME, Madison, WI, Ann Arbor, MI, Boulder, CO, Charlottesville, VA, Chapel Hill, NC, and Wooster, OH. Ferguson's findings are summarized in the following 12 downtown characteristics.

1. No Single Organizational Model Exists. The variety of organizational models among the "great downtown" communities suggests that the type of downtown organization is less important than the overall ability of the community to deliver needed services. While organization models varied considerably, nearly all of the sample communities were able to obtain services including: district marketing, retail promotion, special event planning, downtown advocacy, landscaping & beautification, environmental management (litter, graffiti), safety & security, business attraction, retention & expansion, business assistance, project planning & facilitation, and strategic planning. In most of the sample communities, there were three to five service providers. Each model reflects the institutional strengths present in the community.

2. Successful downtowns tend to have multiple traffic generators that supplemented the presence of a larger institution(s), all within short walking distance. Most of the sample communities have a university or college. However, the impact of higher education goes beyond students and staff. Campuses are repositories for museums, performance halls, sports venues and other attractions that regularly draw thousands of visitors. The communities also share an expansive list of attractions and amenities that serve as pedestrian traffic generators. All are within walking distance of each other, creating tight and effective traffic generating zones. When combined with the universities, these attractions are crucial drivers of patron traffic for downtown and helped to explain the economic vibrancy of each downtown. Some of the communities

reported that much of the growth of key traffic generators appeared to be serendipitous and not planned. It is likely that the environment created for downtown development and the community affection for downtown are key motivating factors to cause projects to site downtown.

3. Successful downtowns are beloved by citizenry. Community leaders in the sample cities recognize and appreciate the value and significance of downtown to their communities. Civic leaders routinely reported that their communities harbor strong and intense affections for their downtowns. In nearly all of the sample cities, the downtown area appears to have regional significance. These downtowns regularly drew traffic from beyond their immediate neighborhoods. Even though affection may be strong, there is controversy in these communities pertaining to downtown development and management. Users of these downtowns have been very expressive in opinions about how their city centers should grow and develop.

4. Successful downtown have been and are continuing to overcome challenges and obstacles. These cities share an innate ability to respond to and overcome challenges. In this manner, they distinguish themselves from other cities that struggle with overcoming the obstacles of community life that regularly confront them. The future of retail is cited as a key challenge in half of the cities. The other prevalent challenge facing a majority of the downtowns is the availability of affordable housing.



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5. Successful downtowns are walkable. They possess street level pedestrian scale and are well used. One felt at ease walking the streets and plazas of these cities. Most are single node centers, with a central place, street, or pedestrian mall. There is no single physical design. Some have pedestrian malls, linear main streets, public squares, and multi-zone downtowns. Walkers are rewarded with sensory experiences ranging from public art to active storefronts to attractive landscaping and sidewalk amenities. While each community approaches street character in its own way, all share the attribute of active, vibrant storefronts and cafes that engages the pedestrian.

6. Successful downtowns, by and large, had a commitment to mixed use development. Uses are generally not geographically separated in these downtowns. The various uses tend to be integrated into the downtown fabric. Even when they are separated, they generally remain within walking distance of each other. These downtowns also share an affinity toward mixed-use development for new projects. They recognized the importance of mixed use and their more recent projects tend to reflect that priority. While these cities do not appear to have formal policies mandating mixed-use development, they have an implicit understanding of the importance of the mixed use concept to urban life and design.

7. There is broad public/private investment in the future of downtown. All of the “great downtowns” surveyed in the study are actively planning for the future. All exhibit broad public/private investment in their future growth and development. They are implementing new projects that broaden the appeal and scope of their downtown. Many, of these projects have public sector involvement. In general, the host cities tend to be pro-active in facilitating this new generation of downtown projects.

8. The nature of downtown retail appears to be in flux. As clothing or other traditional retailers close or choose to relocate, these cities report that the resulting vacant storefronts are being filled with restaurants, bars or other food & beverage oriented businesses able to pay higher rents. Local, independent retailers continue to be the dominate form of retailing in most of the sample downtowns. This may reflect the dominance of national retailing in suburban or strip centers elsewhere in the area, leaving downtown with a niche in specialty boutique, independent retailing. One exception, Burlington, has a strong representation of national chains.

9. Entertainment is a driving market segment. While retail appears to be shifting, nearly all of the sample cities report growth in the area of entertainment. According to downtown and city leaders, entertainment is a driving market segment in these downtowns. All have been able to

extend the life of downtown beyond 5:00 pm. Nearly all of the “great downtowns” boast strong and growing restaurant sectors. Restaurants are leading traffic generators for downtowns and to be independent and one of a kind. Ethnic and thematic restaurants are common in these successful downtowns. Entertainment anchor projects are also evident including movie theaters, performing arts centers, historic theaters, and brew pubs.

10. There was a prevalence of strong, adjacent residential neighborhoods that are within walking distance of downtown. Nearly all of these in-town neighborhoods are upscale, with some containing the higher priced housing of the city. They are not necessarily places for student housing. Residents appear to place a premium on living within an easy walk of downtown and all the amenities it has to offer. The neighborhoods benefited from the dining, shopping and entertainment options, all within easy walking distance. The downtowns benefit from the additional daily flow of traffic provided by these neighborhood residents.

11. Downtown (CBD) housing was either prevalent or underway. The market for housing in downtown was strong and growing. People want to live downtown in these exciting, dynamic urban places and developers are working hard to satisfy that need. These downtown residents provide key activity and life to shops, restaurants and entertainment venues. Affordability is clearly emerging as a significant issue facing the downtown housing market.

12. Universities help but are not the sole answer. The presence of an institution of higher education does not by itself appear to be the deciding factor in determining downtown excellence. There is no question that the proximity of a university to downtown provides a ready source of patrons, from students and/or faculty/staff. In some communities, that impact is extensive and pervasive; in others weak. Regardless of the impact, these institutions are traffic generators for the downtown in some form.

Summary

Based on this study of eleven cities with reputations for downtown excellence, it appears that there is no single factor that is responsible for the success of great downtowns. Instead, this research supports findings from previous studies that identify a variety of attributes that converge together. If enough of these positive attributes can cluster together, a downtown will be successful.

Source: Gary Ferguson, Executive Director, Ithaca (NY) Downtown Partnership. gary@downtownithaca.com, (607) 277-8679. Research findings conducted for the Cornell University Civic Fellows Programs. This summary was drawn from the full report which is available at: http://www.cardi.cornell.edu/main_street_revitalization/index.php