

Ten Steps to a Living Downtown

Excerpts from a paper prepared for the Brookings Institution*

Housing is a critical component of a vibrant downtown economy. While strong market demand is necessary for a residential downtown to thrive, city governments can facilitate, rather than impede, the working of these forces. This article summarizes a paper prepared for the Brookings Institution that describes steps city officials and others can take to foster a living, 24-hour downtown.

While public policy cannot create demand for downtown housing, it can accelerate potential into action by educating, providing incentives and removing regulatory obstacles. Specifically, public policy can be used to address two preconditions for successful downtown housing efforts.

- **The physical environment must be of a character and quality that people will want to live there.** Downtown must be perceived as a comfortable and safe place. It should have boundaries, be of human scale, and have clusters of housing that are obviously distinct from businesses. Neighborhoods must provide places to play, direct access to food shopping and services, and neighbors. Downtown neighborhoods must be clean, and must above all be safe from threats and crime.
- **Downtown residences must offer an investment motive for home ownership.** For downtown housing to take root, people must be willing to purchase their homes, not just rent. For this to happen, they will have to have confidence that they will eventually be able to sell their home for a profit. Like the suburbs, downtowns must meet at least these two conditions – be a safe, quality environment and provide investor confidence – before they can effectively compete for residents.

These two preconditions should be an organizing agenda for the proactive role that city governments can play.

Each of the “Ten Steps to Downtown Housing” that follow outline ways that local public policy might strengthen the

two threshold conditions – a strong quality of life and market conditions – that are necessary to attract residents to American central business areas. While these steps were developed based on experiences in larger cities (i.e. Denver), many are also applicable to smaller communities.

1. **Housing Must Be Downtown's Political and Business Priority.** Key downtown interests – business owners, government, residents – should all agree on housing as a priority.
2. **Downtown Must Be Legible** - A “legible” downtown is one with delineated and distinguishable boundaries. Neighborhoods are created in many ways – ethnic or religious concentrations, similarity of architecture, landmark buildings or landforms. Comprehensive plans, common streetscape furniture and good signage can give a neighborhood definition and cohesion.
3. **Downtown Must Be Accessible** - For the downtown economic environment to grow and prosper, its physical infrastructure needs to be in good shape. The better the access points – such as entrances and exits – into downtown, the higher the quality of the streetscape, the more effective and efficient the water/sewer services, the more attractive it will be to prospective residents.



- 4. Downtown Must Have New and Improved Regional Amenities** - If regional amenities are located within or close to downtown, legions of newcomers in the form of sports fans or arts patrons will be exposed to the diversity of downtown's entertainment and shopping choices. The more familiar and comfortable the area becomes, the less threatening it seems. This promotes a sense of habitability.
- 5. Downtown Must Be Clean and Safe** -The density of a downtown neighborhood, particularly with public amenities nearby, means that downtown housing backers must pay more attention to safety and cleanliness than their suburban counterparts.
- 6. Downtown Must Preserve and Reuse Old Buildings** - Most downtowns in American cities have a stock of old buildings, once used for manufacturing, storage or small offices, and now largely vacant. Old buildings are generally obsolete for today's office. In the last 20 years these buildings have created the skeleton for affordable residential development in center cities. These buildings have elaborate decorative construction, and their preserved historic character distinguishes downtown from suburban residential development.
- 7. Downtown Regulations Must be Streamlined and Support Residential Growth** - Much of the zoning and building regulation on the books of American cities today actually discourages or even blocks the economic and demographic forces that support downtown residential revivals. Specific code provisions, as well as the attitudes of the regulators themselves, should be reviewed and adjusted to promote housing in the urban center.
- 8. City Resources Should Be Devoted to Housing**
 - Leadership, good information for the private sector, and financial resources must be leveraged in order to boost the production of downtown housing.
- 9. The Edge of Downtown Should Be Surrounded By Viable Neighborhoods** - The downtown of most U.S. cities has become isolated from the rest of the community, ringed by surface parking lots and empty, boarded up buildings – an intimidating moat that makes getting to downtown an unappealing trip. Like the empty buildings downtown, these next-to-downtown

neighborhoods are substantive assets to a city's downtown housing and revitalization strategies.

- 10. Downtown Is Never "Done"** – Some of the challenges that will continue to face downtown include managing conflicting uses, keeping downtown affordable, exercising patience with retail (ensuring that retail serves residential uses), keeping up green space, and making downtown home for families.

Finally, the past forty years have shown how quickly downtowns can be abandoned. Maintaining a healthy downtown takes leadership, commitment and hard work. Public policy must encourage, manipulate and, where possible, direct the development not just of housing, but of sound, distinct residential neighborhoods from which owners can expect appreciation in their housing investment...just like the suburbs, and for an increasing number of Americans, better than the suburbs.

*Source: Jennifer Moulton, Ten Steps to a Living Downtown: A Discussion Paper prepared for The Brookings Institution, Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy. October 1999. To view the full paper, see: <http://www.brookings.edu/es/urban/moultonexsum.htm>

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