

New Downtown Retail and Restaurant Site Design Factors.

The New Active Zone of Shops and Restaurants.

Whether you are worried about the new normal, returning to the old normal or figuring out the expected hybrid, the future of the downtown in every small city and town will depend on the continuity of successful retail and restaurant businesses; usually small and locally owned. Given the continuing experience of 2020 and the expectation that there are more pandemics to come, how do we protect main street businesses; what do we know that will drive the future?

Small businesses of all types are fragile. Slight changes have big consequences. Care needs to be taken when tinkering with the traditional formula of window signs, comfortable sidewalks, on-street parking and well-lit streets for extended hours shopping and dining and a continuity of successful businesses in downtown's "Active Zone".

Remember, the Active Zone is that block, or two blocks or maybe three where storefronts open directly to sidewalks adjacent to on-street parking spaces; the core of downtown's retail/restaurant district. The Active Zone usually has businesses on both sides of the main street. The Active Zone is a walkable, continuous, easily-navigated main street where people may visit more than one destinations on a single trip. Anchor stores are located strategically in the Active Zone. Downtown "third places" are located on or near the Active Zone.

Retail shops in the Active Zone have specific needs.

- First, they rely on **the image and power of main street** as their location identifier. An interesting main street with a protected Active Zone is important to every downtown shop and restaurant.
- Second, they need visible, accessible, convenient and safe **parking**. On-street parking is a must even if shoppers end up in a back-of-store lot once they cannot find a space on the street. Preserving on-street parking for customers is hard given the "entitlements" shop owners and employees feel for these ultra-convenient spots.
- Third, the **accoutrements of a safe and inviting setting** are signs, street lights and sidewalks with benches, plants and merchandise displays; all of which set the mood for attracting and protecting daytime and after hours shoppers. Storefront pick-up zones will become more common.

Restaurants have similar needs plus others specific to restaurants. In addition to the factors mentioned for shops, restaurants will require spaces for outdoor seating, zones for take-out pick-up and, more and more, drive thru lanes.

- **Outdoor seating** has grown in popularity over the past few years. With the pandemic, the demand soared. With future pandemics predicted, this is a sustainability feature for main street restaurants as well as all others in the city.
 - Sidewalk seating is inviting to diners, especially if all-weather features are provided.
 - Sidewalk seating even when the pedestrian lanes are between the seating and the restaurant still works.

- Across the street seating, in a park, seems extreme but is very effective in the right circumstances and on the right streets.
- Side-yards work well, especially on corner lots.
- **Zones for customers to pick up** take-out orders will continue to be in demand. The “battle for the curb”, written about by many others, is real as the use of the curb intensifies. What was once a competition between cars and buses has now expanded to include a variety of car demands; not to mention the interface with bike lanes and dedicated bus lanes.
 - On-street parking spaces must be reserved for customers that enter the store or restaurant to pick-up their meal or goods.
 - Parking spaces must also be reserved for in-car delivery from the restaurant or store. Safety of the employee is a consideration.
 - Important on-street parking spaces should not be used. Sounds like a conflict; well, here we are. Finding places for pick-ups and deliveries requires site specific solutions that meet the needs of the shop and restaurant owners.
- **Drive-thru lanes** are useful, effective and in high demand by both customers and restaurant operators. While they are great and need to be downtown, they do not need to be in the Active Zone on the core retail/restaurant blocks of downtown unless the drive-thru lanes are in the back parking lot with no access to main street...tough but important to the integrity of the Active Zone on main street.

“Pop-ups” offer a new twist to a static setting. Examples abound in large and small cities around the Nation. Pop-up stores appear in storefronts that are temporarily vacant. Pop-up restaurants appear in parks, roof-tops and other “funky” spaces that have appeal because of their quirkiness not their long-term prospects. Pop-up parks and coffee bars appear in main street parking spaces. They are temporary, they are unusual, they are designed with extreme safety in mind and they add to the character of main street, especially in the Active Zone.

Food trucks are similar but different. Zones or places for food trucks is another challenge for main street. They are best located in existing parking lots, parks or interstitial spaces that are safe for pedestrians and folks passing by in a car who stop for a sample. Food trucks in the Active Zones are generally not a good idea unless specific sideyard parking areas or open areas are available. Locations near but not in the Active Zone are best.

Regulations and infrastructure can anticipate this situation. As conflicting needs arise, the basic principle is the preservation of the main street Active Zone. With that “stake in the ground”, entrepreneurs, city officials and customers will figure out creative and effective ways to address new conditions of more outside dining and more take-out goods and meals.

Regulations and design standards promulgated by the city before the intensity of demand arises are more comfortable for all. Historic downtowns have absorbed the transition from horses to cars and buses; they can adapt to the new conditions without losing their character and economic vibrance. Proper infrastructure and regulations can anticipate this new normal.