

The Authentic, Engaging and Social Main Street.

THE PLACE WHERE COMMERCIAL, CIVIC AND RESIDENTIAL LIVES CONVERGE.

Downtown's focus is main street; the street with the commercial, office and public activities and uses. Downtowns also provide places for people to live in apartments, condominiums, nearby single-family neighborhoods and hotels. Every element is essential. Many main streets have a significant central park or waterfront.

Successful downtowns are magical places. They are places where commercial business is conducted in an office or on a street corner. They are where community leaders confab over breakfast or lunch at the same table year after year. They are the places where business owners and residents meet with local government folks, elected and appointed. They are places where children learn the history and the workings of their hometown. They are places where people live. No other place in town has so many engagements, confrontations and happenings as a vibrant downtown.

COMMUNITY DISRUPTERS.

Many strong forces are working against society.

- Society is evolving away from broad-based civic gatherings and towards isolation with the technologically-homebound.
- The economy is becoming more on-line, more e-purchases and more work at home.
- Research is sprinting ahead with artificial intelligence [AI], virtual reality [VR], autonomous transportation and robotics.
- Physical facilities are deteriorating with deferred maintenance and poor locations of public buildings and open spaces.
- Privacy breaches are entering every household and business.

PEOPLE MAKE "HOMETOWN" MAIN STREET.

The success of downtown depends on the presence of people. People are the essential ingredient; people on the streets, in the shops, the offices, the civic venues and the restaurants. Public buildings on main street provide a powerful magnet drawing people downtown. The location of public buildings and activities is an extremely important strategic decision that builds a "public realm" and shapes the success of downtown.

"The image of a great city stems largely from the quality of its public realm – its streets, boulevards, parks, squares, plazas and water fronts." Cy Paumier.

PUBLIC BUILDINGS SOCIALIZE MAIN STREET.

The city has the power to strengthen main street by locating public buildings on or near main street. Public buildings attract private buildings and draw people to main street.

The process starts with city hall. The more the merrier, in every way. Museums, libraries, theaters, city buildings, parks and plazas collectively make main street work along with restaurants, shops and offices. A few well-designed public buildings along a small city main street can make a really big difference.

Civic Buildings Important to Main Street

- **City Hall**
- **The Public Library**
- **The Local History Museum**
- **The Community Theater**
- **The U.S. Post Office**
- **The Central Park or Plaza**

A REVERSAL OF FORTUNES.

There was a time when cities followed the exodus of retail out of town to the suburbs. City halls moved from downtown to the “highway” to flee a decaying main street not realizing their flight exacerbated the blight. Families left the cities, even in small towns, for homes with yards, good schools and clean streets.

The result is a trend towards increased civic disconnection, isolation and impersonal engagements to be countermanded by the city.

The concerns of businesses and residents were real. Only recently have small cities and towns offered settings attractive to businesses and residents. Cleanliness, safety, activity and attitude are bringing people back. New city halls are being built on or near main street. Think about it, if the city won’t invest downtown, why should anyone else?

OPEN SPACE ORGANIZES MAIN STREET.

In addition to buildings, open spaces are important downtown assets. Parks and plazas become “third places”, places for business and pleasure. Trails and sidewalks connect activities, internally and externally. Waterfronts can be, and are being, re-captured for public use.

Open space is the first organizing element of some towns and the final critical element in others. A central park for events, casual recreation and community aesthetics adds civic and real estate value to any main street.

Overlooked open spaces can become small parks or plazas. Every opportunity can be exploited to turn under-utilized lands and spaces into places for people to gather.

MAIN STREET IS ABOUT CONNECTIONS.

City government has the potential, and perhaps the responsibility, to take counter-measures. The historic role of the city in physical and economic spheres is expanding to include an added responsibility for the social and mental health of the town. The city is one of the few agents capable of building systems that enable and encourage people to interact face-to-face, to participate in civic events and to care about their community. The socialization role of the city, a new role, is a clear and present need.

Place Principles

- **Create an organizing structure.**
- **Foster a distinct identity.**
- **Encourage variety and interest.**
- **Ensure visual and functional continuity.**
- **Maximize convenience.**
- **Provide for comfort.**
- **Emphasize high quality.**

Creating a Vibrant City Center, Urban Design and Regeneration Principles,
Cy Paumier, Urban Land Institute,
Washington DC, 2004.

MAIN STREET: THE STREET ITSELF.

Look at the street. Is it pretty? Walkable? Safe? Clean? Inviting? The street is more than the conveyor of cars and trucks; it is the host to walkers and bikers, to shoppers and diners, to business owners and workers, residents and visitors.

Main street is the street, its parking, sidewalks, street trees, signs, lights and buildings. The street is the only access to and around main street. Protect it; don’t clog it with vehicular traffic passing through.

DOWNTOWN LIVING MATTERS.

A test for success in any town is whether or not people will spend the night downtown. People who live on or near main street have entrusted their safety and well-being to the downtown environment. People who stay in downtown hotels do the same thing, albeit only as part-timers. Downtown residents and hotel guests prove the concept that downtown is a fine place to be; a “proof of concept” for investors, entrepreneurs and small business owners.

People living near main street patronize the businesses and heighten the city’s energy. Public buildings, parks, plazas and walkable, shaded streets connect residents with the city center; main streets strengthen the entire city.

As downtown residences grow in number, retailers return along with city halls, libraries, museums, theaters and local restaurants. The synergy of public and private offices with restaurants, shops, theaters and museums is creating a resurgence in the center of town.

MAIN STREET AS A “THIRD PLACE”.

“Third places”, as observed by Ray Oldenburg, are the cafés, bars, shops and parks where people spend time in conversation away from home and work. “Third places” are the soft tissue of the city.

Main street itself can be a “third place” with inviting sidewalks and seating for people going from store to restaurant to plaza to café to bar; as they park and meander. Be a good host: provide trees and canopies for shade and weather protection, informative business signs, safe crosswalks and creative lighting. Design main street as an outdoor “third place”; a place for people to enjoy being together.

REMAKING MAIN STREET.

Existing main streets always have room for improvement; some need regeneration.

Regeneration Principles

- **Promote diversity.**
- **Encourage compactness.**
- **Foster intensity of development.**
- **Ensure balance of activities.**
- **Provide for accessibility.**
- **Create functional linkages.**
- **Build a positive identity.**

Creating a Vibrant City Center, Urban Design and Regeneration Principles, Cy Paumier, Urban Land Institute, Washington DC, 2004.

PLAY THE LONG GAME.

Like public and private buildings, main street will be a part of downtown for a long time. It will be or become vibrant, or not; but it will always be there. When a small city or town has the infrequent opportunity to locate a public building downtown, do it. City halls, libraries and active public buildings, once built, stay put for a long while. A poorly located library, e.g., takes decades to relocate downtown.

CONCLUSIONS.

The city halls, post offices, public libraries, community theaters and museums are big draws for main street. The purposeful location of public buildings on or near main street to bring people downtown is a great strategy.

Private, civic and public buildings host activities that constitute the life and the business of the city’s society and economy. Locating new civic buildings downtown takes time requiring thoughtful planning reflecting persistence, patience and a willingness to change.

Physical Attributes of an Authentic Downtown The Full Range and Mix of Uses and Activities.

The main thing is to keep “Main Street” the main street. Every town either has one or wants one; and its absence may, in and of itself, eliminate the possibility of the entire city being resilient and successful. The full complement of uses and activities to strive for on or near the main street are:

1. **Residences:**
 - Apartments, townhouses and condominiums,
 - Accessible close-in neighborhoods,
 - Hotels and other over-night accommodations for visitors.
2. **Non-Residential Activities and Buildings with:**
 - Ground floor retail, restaurants, institutional or other active uses beyond weekdays, 9 to 5,
 - Two to four story buildings in the “active zone” that has, at most, 4–6 block faces,
 - Front doors that open to the main street that has broad sidewalks and canopy trees.
3. **Streets** that are inviting and safe, not foreboding to walk across, with:
 - Two travel lanes, with or without a median; intimate building face to building face distances.
 - City ownership of the street, not a federal, state or county highway agency,
 - Wide sidewalks [min 12’] with on-street parking, bus stops, pedestrian crosswalks, street trees, bike lanes, smart street light poles, a wayfinding system and business friendly signs.
4. **Venues for gatherings, formal and informal:**
 - Spaces and places, indoor and out-of-doors, for spontaneous community events,
 - Places for scheduled events like book fairs, parades, festivals and community celebrations,
 - Public spaces at parks, lakes or waterfronts on or near main street including promenades, cafés, carousels, playgrounds, fountains and amphitheaters.
5. **A wide range of sustainable enterprises providing private and public goods and services:**
 - Food and beverage** establishments including restaurants, ice cream and chocolate shops, fruit stands, food trucks and farmers’ markets with regional foods and cafés,
 - Child-care, elder-care and health care venues.**
 - Retail goods** including groceries, drugs, convenience shopping, books, gifts, clothing, hardware, automotive parts and discount retail, sometimes in “pop up” stores.
 - Personal Services** such as dry cleaning, barber and beauty salons, car care and tech support,
 - Business services** including banks, full-service business centers and incubators.
6. **Information centers**, physical and virtual, for residents and visitors with:
 - Guides and tickets to local places, activities and recurring events,
 - Notices of non-recurring events and concierge services.
7. **Signature Events and Activities** that define the town like an annual seafood festival, country music jamboree, or classic car show. Examples of national events are Spoleto in Charleston and The Miami Book Fair. More modest affairs can create the same zeal.
8. **Something authentic**, an iconic person, place or event, unique to the town, for example:
 - Powell’s Book Store in Portland or Haslam’s in St. Petersburg,
 - S. F. Travis Hardware in Cocoa Village or The Little Drug Company on Canal Street in New Smyrna Beach with an “old time” soda fountain,
 - The Lakeside Inn in Mount Dora or The Gold Mine Museum in Dahlonega,
 - Carriage rides touring Fernandina Beach’s historic neighborhoods.
9. **“Third Places”** are interesting, casual places where people go when not at home and not at work; downtowns host the “third places”, and main street can itself be a “third place”.

In sum, the “main street” is, or can be, the city’s social center; the center of social, civic, commercial, cultural, entertainment, educational and recreational activities for residents, businesses and visitors.