

## Chapter 10

# Strengthening Town Centers

by Randall Arendt

After many decades of separating residential, office, and commercial activities into their own "districts", officials, developers, bankers, entrepreneurs, and the public have been conditioned to believe that combining uses on the same parcel or in the same building is inherently a bad idea. One result of such zoning regulations is that owners of older multi-story downtown buildings and developers proposing central area infill are discouraged or prevented from mixing different uses. Similar obstacles are posed by outdated setback and parking requirements. This chapter and the following one examine issues of development (and redevelopment) first as they pertain to town centers and then as they apply to outlying lands alongside the primary road network. As will become clear, many lessons from the former also have relevance to the latter, in terms of "retro-fitting" or "sprawl repair".

### Town Centers: Maintaining their Vital Functions

Because town centers have traditionally accommodated the community's principal shopping facilities, it is understandable that they have become almost synonymous with retail functions. Frequently, this limited perception has led to one-dimensional zoning regulations precluding or discouraging residential options.

Although both civic and institutional uses are also commonly allowed in central areas, their *critical* importance to the continued life and vitality of town centers is often not fully appreciated until the loss is a *fait accompli* and its consequences are keenly felt. In fact, it is probably true that, in order to be successful, town centers must possess both a strong *civitas* (town hall, commons, post office, churches, etc.) plus a healthy retail base and residential uses. When one is weakened, so is the other.

With powerful forces (such as the attracting power of large parking lots adjacent to high-volume highways) operating like magnets to both shoppers and shopkeepers, maintaining the vitality of town centers can be a continual challenge for conscientious public officials. They increasingly find themselves fighting reactive battles simply to retain key facilities (such as post offices) or to locate new or expanded public buildings in central areas.

The challenge is particularly great in small towns (with populations of 35,000 or less) when they are neither tourist destinations nor an integral part of a larger metropolitan area. As Chris Leinberger has noted, "lacking these characteristics, the local serving economy, especially retail, has usually been bled out by Walmart and other big box stores, leaving insufficient critical mass of spending on either retail or housing to support a really walkable downtown." (email 12.14.12) In many cases, such towns, even those with great historic fabrics, have very weak central business districts. Although national surveys indicate that many baby boomers say they would prefer to live in small towns, there is little actual evidence, so far, that they are moving to such communities, according to Leinberger. That said, this chapter includes examples of several exceptional communities which have succeeded, such as Amherst MA, Holland, MI, and Oxford OH, among others.

A map of Amherst's center appears as Figure 10-1, showing a traditional arrangement of small to medium-sized structures lining both sides of the main streets, with a considerable amount of off-street parking tucked behind commercial and mixed-use buildings

With strong competition from an extensive commercial strip along a highway in an adjacent municipality, the traditional retail and service mix in the town center gradually changed, with more eateries and shops

selling nonessentials replacing the old grocery, ladies' clothier, and two hardware stores, all of which relocated to highway parcels. That most shopfronts remain occupied is due in part to a series of very conscious efforts by local officials to reinforce the center. For example, town center zoning goes beyond permitting mixed uses to encouraging them by allowing efficient, multi-purpose parking when complementary periods of usage can be demonstrated, between daytime and nighttime parkers, for example. In addition, a large off-street parking area, pieces of which were owned by the town and two private business owners, was created behind rows of shops. Public-private agreements to allow the parking stalls and circulation lanes to be used by all shoppers regardless of individual property line locations. After nearly 20 years of increasing demand for downtown parking, capacity on this site was essentially doubled by creating underground spaces roofed with a parking deck at the surface, which was substantially financed by a state grant.



**Figure 10-1:** Large areas of the center in Amherst (shown in gray, on the right), provide convenient parking for patrons of local shops and services, while the locations of these parking facilities behind buildings do not intrude on the traditional, shop-lined townscape. A considerable amount of customer parking exists in many communities like Amherst, and it functions well despite the fact that it is largely out of view from the streets (disproving the pervasive myth that businesses will not be viable unless drivers can see parking lots in front of them). The largest of these rear lots is shown in the photo. Source: RA photo

Amherst has also paid attention to the need to ensure that various nonretail land uses remain represented in its center. Recognizing the importance of retaining its downtown post office, town officials and the Chamber of Commerce struggled with the U.S. Postal Service for 12 years, finally succeeding in persuading it to keep its handsome 1930s main post office open as a branch after opening a huge modern postal facility near a state highway intersection one mile away.

A similar view of appropriate central area land uses underlies an earlier public decision to support construction of the town's major elderly housing complex – a six-story building -- in a location convenient to both the original post office and the principal shopping street. When a new police station was needed, a site was chosen just a stone's throw from the Town Hall and the Common, despite difficulties involved in acquiring the land, including relocating a large and somewhat historic building. Town officials also emphasized demonstrated ability to harmonize new designs with the surrounding historic context when selecting architects for the police station and for a major expansion of the centrally located library.

The point is not to spotlight Amherst in particular, but rather to show how many different decisions and actions, both large and small, have been necessary to enable one New England town to avoid the depletion of its center. Notably, officials' proactive rather than reactive stance is an important aspect, since some of these accomplishments might not have been achieved without municipal forethought and initiative.

In an effort to improve the downtown shopping mix by bringing back a grocery store and hardware store, the planning board chair used a guest editorial in the local weekly to advocate for town purchase of a large, downtown commercial building, which could house these desired businesses. Although there is precedent for this type of municipal venture -- in 1836 Lowell, MA built ground floor shop space into its city hall (Arendt, 1994) -- Amherst's leaders were not inclined to take on such a speculative project. A related example, executed by a local entrepreneur in neighboring Northampton, is illustrated in Fig. 10-3.

To promote downtown residential uses, zoning could be amended to require—not simply allow—new and expanded commercial floor space to be supplemented with housing units, above and/or behind the shops. If located behind shops, it could occupy upper stories, leaving the ground level for parking, as is done at the Village Galleria in downtown La Jolla CA, where five dwellings were built above part of the parking lot behind six shops and a branch bank (Arendt, 1994). Business districts could become "mixed use districts," where permission to build new shops or offices would be conditioned on the provision of new dwelling units (with exceptions granted for sites where this would not be practicable).

Several good examples of new downtown construction integrating retail, office; and residential uses, are 199 East Pearl in Jackson WY, Village Commons in South Hadley MA, Winslow Green on Bainbridge Island, WA, and the dozen new mixed-use buildings constructed along the main street of Oxford OH (all described in Chapter 23). On Bainbridge Island, 34 units occupy two floors above 20,000 square feet of ground-level shops (on a downtown corner site behind a half-acre "common"). In South Hadley, 19 residential units sit above shops, restaurants, offices, and a cinema, while in Oxford OH 97 apartments have been provided in 11 new three-and four-story buildings which also contain 81,600 SF of retail and office space. The success of many of these examples is probably due in part to their having been designed to fit harmoniously into the downtown context, applying the basic principles of "form-based coding" (described in Chapter 7) such as maximum front setbacks and minimum building heights.

Such beneficial mixtures routinely occurred before strict zoning advocates instilled in local officials the doctrine of use segregation, an old, ingrained habit of mind that is gradually being replaced by more modern thinking. Where true incompatibility among land uses can be reasonably expected, mixture requirements should of course be relaxed. For example, ground-floor businesses (such as discotheques or fried fish or chicken outlets) that would ordinarily disturb or annoy residents upstairs either be excluded or be required to conform with "good neighbor" performance standards (such as through adequate soundproofing or proper venting of kitchen aromas via tall stacks). These issues are also discussed in Chapter 7. Arbitrarily separating residential and commercial uses is as harmful as it is simplistic. The real world is often a bit untidy, but proper safeguards can help avoid problems.

However, even when zoning does not pose obstacles, building codes often do. For example, adding residential uses to a commercial building typically triggers sprinkler requirements or increases fire ratings in walls and ceilings, adding significant costs. That said, the case example of the Gold Dust building in Missoula, Montana (Chapter 23) demonstrates that such obstacles can be overcome.



**Figure 10-2:** This downtown infill building in Moscow ID, constructed in 2003, accommodates offices on its second level, above an espresso café, restaurant, smoke shop, and Asian grocery. With side and rear parking. Its good urban form (more than a single story, situated at the sidewalk edge) was the result of informal city policy, which was formalized in 2012 with design guidelines that also encourage mixed uses. (RA)

### Sidebar: New Life for an Old Department Store

After a century of use, McCallum's department store in downtown Northampton MA closed its doors, victim of shopping plazas built along the nearby Rt. 5 highway strip during the 1950s and '60s. Three stories in height and containing 55,000 SF of floorspace (including a basement level at grade from the rear), the building was purchased out of bankruptcy by a local developer in 1975, who spent the next year renovating its historic interior, which contained pressed tin ceilings, hardwood floors and staircases, and carved wood detailing. Two years later the Thorne brothers bought the refurbished building, renamed it Thorne's Marketplace, and leased individual spaces to dozens of small independent retailers and food purveyors, creating a lively atmosphere described as a "contemporary bazaar". This imaginative conversion has been highly successful, attracting customers back to the downtown shopping and dining district, and demonstrating that old buildings can be given a new lease on life when familiar challenges are approached with fresh ideas and creativity. According to town planner Wayne Feiden, "Although Downtown Northampton's success, which has been recognized by APA's Great Streets Award, was catalyzed by several factors (e.g., artists, public investment, downtown housing, retail pioneers), Thorne's was the single most important retail pioneer that helped bring downtown back alive." (email from Wayne Feiden, 1.1.13)



**Figure 10-3:** The former McCallum's department store, defunct by the early 1970s, was reborn as a collection of independent marketstalls, adding new vitality to downtown Northampton MA Source: Wayne Feiden

### Proactive Efforts: The Main Street Program

Besides increasing the number of people living in or near downtown, other efforts can strengthen town centers. The Main Street Program, run by the National Trust for Historic Preservation since 1977, has helped more than 2,000 communities and has spurred reinvestment of \$49 billion in their centers. Thousands of historic buildings have been rehabilitated and returned to productive use, maintaining local heritage. Through its Main Street Center, the Trust advocates a four-point approach to boost downtowns:

**Organization:** To compete with well-organized mall marketers, downtowns should adopt similar techniques, such as hiring a manager or program director to develop a retail plan and to attract targeted businesses. This staff person would convene stakeholder meetings to identify problems and generate consensus for a shared vision as the basis for defining, goals, objectives and implementation steps. By recruiting volunteers, creating collaborative partnerships, and establishing an organizational structure with a board of directors and working groups or committees, the effectiveness of a paid manager or director is greatly increased.

**Promotion:** It is critically important to inspire local businesspeople and building owners to reinvest in their enterprises. This goal can be furthered through special events such as "A Taste of..." (where local

restaurants offer food samples), ArtWalks held on first Fridays from May to December, and coordinated sales such as the quarterly Thursday Ladies' Night in Wakefield RI , or the Early Bird sales in towns along Maine's mid-coast regions, which offer deep discounts on Saturdays in November between 6 and 8 am.

*Design:* Also important are physical improvements, often coordinated with municipal governments (such as special sidewalk paving, attractive street lighting, shade trees, benches and planters). Colorful lamppost banners, frequently supplied by private groups, are another example. Shopfront rehabilitation and more attractive signage are other key factors, and are best accomplished within a framework of design guidelines (or better, standards). Public art installations (discussed elsewhere in this chapter) can also help to enhance a downtown's image. Increasing the frequency of litter removal and street- and sidewalk cleaning are also important.

*Economic Restructuring:* Emphasis must also be placed on diversifying the economic base by expanding the range of businesses and the customer base interested in purchasing their products and services, as well as increasing the frequency of those customer visits. Vacant or underutilized floorspace must be filled or used more intensively.

### **Lessons Learned in Holland MI**

In their foreword to *Vision on Main Street* (Luzon, 1994), Van Wyler and Holcombe relate ten lessons learned in Holland, MI (population 33,000), which became one of the first communities to enroll in the Main Street program of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, after witnessing a slow exodus of shops and professional offices to new developments along Route 31. They are:

*Develop a Downtown Vision:* As related by Van Wyler and Holcombe, "one of the most important factors in their success was the early development of a creative, comprehensive vision... for a healthy mix of shops, offices, restaurants, residences and public spaces". The balance they envisioned was to devote one-third of the downtown area to each of three purposes: buildings, streets and parking, and green areas (including river frontage and open spaces on the Hope College campus).

*Maintaining the Grid:* Keeping the main street open to two lanes of slow-moving traffic with angled parking on both sides, bordered by broad sidewalks with numerous large planters, shade trees, and benches, has been key to creating a pleasant, attractive streetscape that works for drivers, shoppers, pedestrians, and merchants.

*Compactness:* To ensure a compact, walkable downtown, emphasis is placed on filling ground floor spaces with shops and restaurants and the occasional bank.

*Building Preservation:* Historic buildings have been sensitively restored by removing inappropriate modern facades.

*Retail Mix and Quality:* Having shops that complement each other and provide quality goods and attentive customer service is also critically important. Locally-owned shops are preferred to national chains, offering opportunities not easily found elsewhere.

*Convenient Free Parking:* Angled parking along the street is supplemented by eight public parking lots located directly behind main street buildings (plus nine others nearby). Parking is free both curbside and in the public lots, which are maintained with funds received through an assessment district.

*Merchant Co-operation:* A downtown business association has been helpful in coordinating sales, events, and opening hours

*Long-term Emphasis on Quality:* A commitment to quality informs many decisions about the choice of materials and design, so short-term thinking does not lead to changes that will be regretted later.

*Patient Capital:* Local investors committed to the long term with a steady income stream, rather than a quick profit, are great assets. (Another example of this approach is the dozen new mixed-use buildings constructed in downtown Oxford OH, discussed in Chapter 23.)

*Downtown Residences:* Promoting new residential construction, and conversion of upper stories for dwellings, helps to keep downtowns busy after 5 pm. A 350-unit life-care senior center in downtown Holland has also been helpful. Despite a number of upper story conversions, demand for living space downtown continues to exceed supply.

Van Wyler and Holcombe conclude with this paragraph: *“There is not a single thing one can do to achieve a quality downtown. Instead, a vital, vibrant downtown depends on and results from a synthesis, often not fully understood, of many different factors. Some of these are physical, involving buildings, streets, and parks. Some of the most important, however, are intangible; they involve commitments, relationships, integrity, trust, and a confidence and hope in the future. Most of all, a quality downtown depends on people of character and goodwill who are willing to give of themselves.”*

### **Town Centers: Maintaining their Traditional Form**

Town centers inevitably change over time, but such changes need not erase a community’s special character. While the potential for change can be easily seen where properties are vacant or underutilized, change can occur even in mature town centers through natural catastrophes (fire, flood, etc.) and man-made catastrophes – insensitive redevelopment. One cannot predict or control natural catastrophes, nor can one predict or control gradual rises in land values that usually precede demolition and rebuilding and which take many by surprise. The most prudent policy is to assume that virtually every building and land use is subject to change.

In *Downtown Planning for Smaller and Midsized Communities*, planning consultant Phil Walker proclaims that “One of the greatest victories a downtown plan can achieve is a clear set of development policies to ensure that the traditional urban form of a downtown is protected and reinforced by future development.” (Walker, 2009).

Municipal officials should be encouraged to think through the possibilities for negative change that are permitted under current regulations.. Better zoning provisions include establishing “*maximum* front setbacks” (or a “build-to” line), *minimum* height (or a “build-up” line) and requiring buildings to have traditional windows and front doors facing streets, plus off-street parking located behind buildings. (Alcoves would be an exception to maximum setback rules, as illustrated in Fig. 10-4.) When multi-story infill replaces single-story buildings (Fig. 10-5), downtowns benefit in multiple ways. Such an approach is offered by “form-based coding” (FBC), detailed in Chapter 7, although the basic design standards noted in the preceding sentence often suffice, and are sometimes called “FBC lite”. In Davidson NC, zoning requires developers of all new commercial buildings to meet a minimum two-story height standard, and to provide functional upper stories with real occupiable floorspace (see chapter 23.3).



**Figure 10-4:** Exceptions to the “build-to” (or “maximum front setback” line) are illustrated above. In Qualicum Beach on Vancouver Island, a two-story mixed-use infill building was designed in 1993 to create a small parklike space at the corner of Fern and Pembroke Streets (top). The alcove in Southern Pines NC where a recessed building arrangement has allowed two shade trees to be planted and a bench to be installed in a pleasant “parklet” – also increases the number of shop windows visible to pedestrians (bottom). In both cases, the number of display windows visible from the sidewalk has been increased, benefitting pedestrians and shopkeepers. (RA both) The Kent Town Center project (illustrated in Chapter 23) created two courtyards, one interior, the other open to the street, inviting shoppers inside to see more shops.



**Figure 10-5:** These photos from Oxford Ohio’s main street illustrates how an inappropriately low infill building from the 1960s (on the site of a three-story Victorian commercial block) was replaced 40 years later by a new four-story mixed-use building. With a shared vision and co-operation between municipal officials and entrepreneurs, downtown streetscapes can gradually be restored to their previous form and function. This infill project is one of nearly a dozen completed by local investors, working with a local architect, that has transformed Oxford’s main street in less than a decade, bringing 134 apartment units downtown, whose occupants help make the area vibrant again, particularly after office workers depart. (see also Chapter 23). Source: Scott Webb

When downtown buildings maintain close relationships to the streets they face, the majority of parking spaces must be provided in off-street locations, typically on land behind those buildings, with maintenance provided either by the municipality or by a “business improvement district” or BID (defined as a specific area within which improvement projects are typically funded by business owners who pay supplemental taxes or levies). In Holland, rear parking lots have been created, expanded, and landscaped over the years as parcels have become available or as buildings have come down. The city controls some parking through ownership and several lots through lease arrangements. The downtown development authority maintains all city-owned and leased lots and a relatively new downtown parking deck, which are funded through an annual assessment program. There are no meters, and all on-street and public lot parking is free, although residents pay overnight parking fees.

Many Holland merchants have recognized an opportunity to increase their business by opening doorways in the back of their shops, allowing customers to enter directly from rear parking lots. (Similarly, when a new parking lot was created on land cleared by the urban renewal authority behind a line of older shops along the

main street of Sanford, ME, secondary entrances were opened at the rear of those shops too.) Even when people use the shop-as a short-cut to the street, some retailers view this as a good opportunity to display their wares and say hello. Interviews with Holland shopkeepers reveal that a majority like the idea, and report virtually no increase in “slippage” of goods by shoplifters.



**Figure 10-6:** Municipal parking lots behind “main street” shops in Holland MI lead into many businesses through rear entryways. Footpaths that are attractively paved, landscaped, and provided with benches run along the backs of these buildings, facilitating pedestrian access throughout the central business district. (RA both)

As mentioned above, promoting upper-story uses, particularly residential, is key. In Holland, with very few exceptions, all of the upper stories along its main street are occupied. Not counting two large senior housing blocks with about 750 units, nearly half of that floorspace is residential, ensuring that downtown streets do not become deserted after shops close.

An imaginative and successful city initiative is the photo contest run by Holland’ social media coordinator on its Facebook page, inviting people to take pictures of downtown shoppers during the town’s festive Christmas holiday season. Coupon booklets usable in downtown shops are awarded as prizes. Winners are chosen daily for two weeks, with their names and photos posted on the Facebook page for extra recognition.

Creating attractive environments are key to increasing the number of downtown visitors and the frequency and length of their visits. Street trees and benches are basic and should be supplemented with colorful planters; widened sidewalks to accommodate dining tables, and a small fountain or two (plus pop-up fountain parks when space is available). Street musicians and performance artists displaying various items of public art help create a welcoming ambience, inviting shoppers and others to linger and enjoy their surroundings. Holland, which attracts thousands of visitors every year during its annual springtime tulip festival, closes several blocks of its main street to motor traffic every Thursday evening during the summer, converting the street into a popular car-free pedestrian area. As a result, crowds of residents and visitors fill the street, enjoying food, music, aromas, shops, and each other’s company.



**Figure 10-7:** Benches, planters, and wide sidewalks in Holland MI create pleasant spaces for sitting, dining, and enjoying the warmth from a gas-fired outdoor fireplace. (This amenity, which fires up automatically when temperatures fall below 65F, was given by the building owner to the city, which owns and maintains it. A timer turns it on and off automatically -- noon to 10 pm in the winter, and 5-11 in the summer.) Other activities making visits memorable include listening to street musicians, watching artists, and viewing street performers such as stilt-walkers entertaining the crowds in a “Green Man” outfit formed of leaves, twigs, and flowers. (RA all)

In addition to the above, one might add extending curbs outward to shorten pedestrian crossings and/or installing pedestrian “refuge islands” in the middle of streets where people can wait to cross, as shown in Fig. 10-8. Other ideas could include creating bike lanes and installing bike racks, which is the preferred option in a downtown walkability report prepared for Brunswick ME by the Project for Public Spaces. However, the town was not ready for another option: converting diagonal stall parking to “back in” spaces to limit safety issues caused by drivers’ limited visibility when exiting spaces in reverse. This conversion would also provide a safer bike lane between parking spaces and curbs. This relatively new idea has been successfully implemented in Pottstown PA, Salem OR, Boise ID, Austin TX, and Tucson AZ. In Tucson, according to data tracked before and after installing back-in angle parking, no bicycle/car crashes were reported during the first four years of implementation, compared with an average of three to four crashes per month prior to the change. (email from Phil Myrick, PPS, 12.10 .12)



**Figure 10-8:** Suggested improvements to Maine Street in Brunswick Maine include extending curbs to shorten street crossing distances, installing pedestrian refuges in the center, and creating bike lanes between the curb and diagonal parking stalls (top). Curb extensions ((or “elephant ears”) such as this one in Ames IA provide additional areas for enhancing the streetscape with shade trees. (bottom). They also lessen the street distance pedestrians must cross. Sources: Project for Public Spaces and RA photo.

Many books have been written on the subject of town center design standards, but a particularly useful one, *Urban Design Revisited*, is structured as a set of ten design exercises (Talen, 2009). Written for planners, it teaches readers how to observe, analyze, and design well-functioning pedestrian-friendly places. The richly-illustrated chapters focus on centers, neighborhoods, mix, proximity, density, parking, and traffic. Another chapter explains how to restructure a zoning map to follow the principles of an urban-to-rural transect (discussed in Chapter 2, above). Readers might want to supplement this volume with information on how greenway planning can also be used to foster pedestrian-friendly development patterns (cf. Chapters 8 and 25, plus and the Radburn case study (20.1).

Although design is a critical aspect of improving the appearance and functioning of many districts, even the best designs fail to be implemented when insufficient emphasis is placed on understanding community values and actively engaging stakeholders to participate in the processes of design, policy formulation, regulatory reform, and implementation. This is the lesson learned from the failure to implement plans and designs developed to guide the rebuilding of eleven Mississippi towns devastated by Hurricane Katrina (Brower, 2011).

### Infill Development as Pattern Enhancer

Appropriate infilling can increase strength, cohesion, and order in many rather formless places, where development has been haphazard or poorly planned (see also chapter 7). In the words of Victor Dover, "Abstract and use maps alone do not constitute a community vision" (Dover et al., 1990). Three examples illustrating design approaches at the contrasting scales of a small village and medium-sized towns are briefly described below (and detailed as case studies in Chapter 23).

The smallest example is Village Square in the hamlet of Cedar, BC, which reinforced the previously weak center of a modest rural community five miles south of Nanaimo, on Vancouver Island. Its two buildings sit at the edge of the sidewalk, facing the main street. About one-third of the parking is located in a visually inobtrusive way between the two buildings, with the balance provided at the rear, where the lower level floorspace is at ground level on this sloping site.

Nearly half of the 37,000 SF of floorspace is occupied by a grocery located above other kinds of shops below it, whose doors open to the rear parking lot.



**Figure 10-9:** Village Square's short row of buildings sits snugly at the edge of the sidewalk. Their roadside placement was so logical and natural, that it probably does not occur to many passersby that this traditional layout resulted from a municipal planning policy to avoid a suburban arrangement, where front parking would otherwise have dominated. The grocery occupies the last building in the row. (RA)

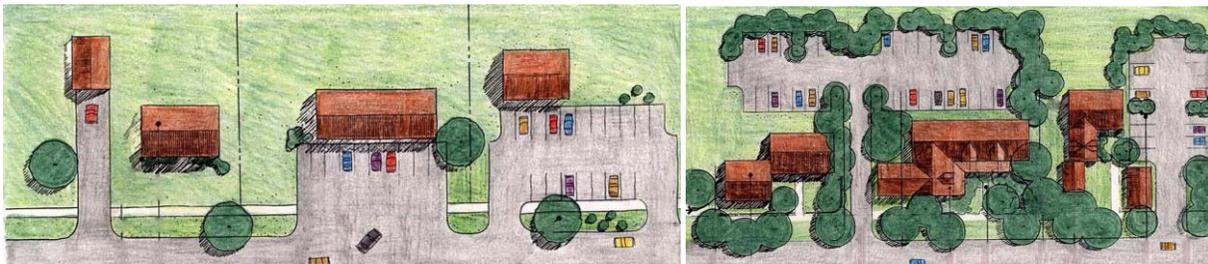
A larger downtown infill example is the Village Common, in the center of South Hadley MA, where the designed spaces between the dozen buildings are sized to function as people-friendly “outdoor rooms”. These internal spaces, key to the success of this sensitive infill development, are easily accessible from both the main street in front, which half the buildings face, and the parking lot in the back.



**Figure 10-10:** The buildings at Village Commons in South Hadley MA are designed with doorways on multiple sides, opening from the street in front, from courtyards in the middle, and from the parking in back. The interior spaces form a quiet, traffic-free pedestrian precinct ideal for strolling, *al fresco* dining, and casual musical performances, in addition to scheduled activities and events enlivening the visitor experience. (RA all)



**Figure 10-11:** The left side of the Wickford Liquor Store in North Kingstown RI encompasses a defunct Mobil station which was enlarged with a second story and an extension bringing the building closer to the street (left). A few parking spaces in front are reserved for handicapped drivers. On the main street of Camden Maine (right), what appears to be three buildings is actually a single structure designed to avoid an inharmonious, monolithic appearance, while providing 12,000 sq. ft of floorspace for RiteAid at ground level. Sources: RA and Chris Glass



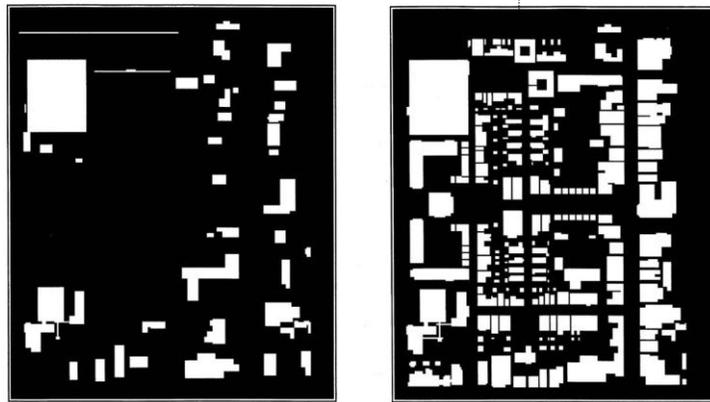
**Figure 10-12:** .When businesses need to increase their floorspace, opportunities arise to improve streetscapes and make them stronger. For example, by expanding existing buildings outward over their old front parking lots, relocating parking to the rear,

and planting shade trees, a more traditional appearance can be created, as shown in this pair of graphics originally prepared for Edgartown MA. Source: Dodson & Flinker

Traditional downtown design principles should be articulated and illustrated in master plans and zoning regulations of any community wishing to retain the best aspects of its central areas. A notable example is the Community Design and Appearance section of the *Sterling Forest Comprehensive Plan*, which describe townscape design objectives for Sterling Crossing, the proposed mixed-use center for a planned community in Orange County, New York (Sterling Forest Corp., 1991). (see Figure 10-13)

These guidelines include requirements such as the following:

- building facades must maintain a consistent street edge, except to provide pedestrian passageways to rear parking areas;
- ground-floor space shall be reserved for pedestrian-oriented retailing and services, with offices and housing above; building height shall be no less than two stories and no more than five, with the third to fifth floors set back to allow sunlight onto the streets year-round
- building designs shall be encouraged to utilize contemporary interpretations of earlier styles, with native stone and pitched roofs with dormers and gables; and
- three major public spaces with major community



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**Figure 10-14:** This pair of figure-ground relationships illustrates how the inefficient low-density pre-existing situation in Davie FL (left) is planned to be given greater urban form and the density needed to create a lively, walkable, mixed-use district. Source: Dover Kohl + Partners

In addition to serving vehicular traffic, the streets were designed to become "significant public spaces." (Dunlop, 1991). Spaces between existing buildings will be filled in gradually and streets will eventually be lined by multiple building types designed according to guidelines based on building form and street/building relationships in older Florida towns such as Winter Park and Mt. Dora. Building uses will also be subject to certain criteria to encourage a mixture of residential, commercial, and civic uses.

Readers are invited to compare this "infill" plan with Fig. 10-1 of downtown Amherst, and to note the similarity in the scale and arrangement of both buildings and parking areas. Towns wishing to retain or enhance their character should adopt well-illustrated regulatory documents emphasizing these important matters of pattern, scale, and context. Otherwise, suburban intrusions will almost certainly occur.



**Figure 10-15:** Aerial photograph of existing conditions, compared with a computer-generated image of potential redevelopment creating a traditional pattern of vernacular buildings containing shops and residences (Davie Settlement, Broward County, Florida). Source: Dover Kohl + Partners

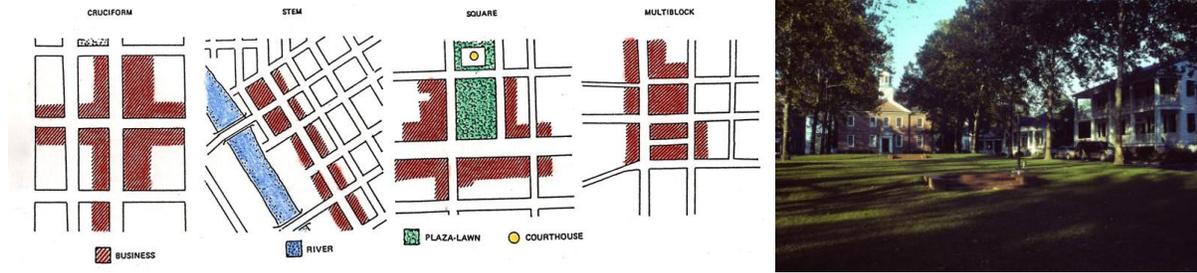
One of the more creative aspects of the Davie plan lies in its use of shared parking facilities for the commercial buildings along the principal streets. Using formulae developed by the Urban Land Institute, parking calculations were performed for every hour of every day from 8 am to 10 pm. Due to the mixture of uses on the site (shops, offices, apartments, civic buildings, a cinema, and a rodeo) many of the parking spaces are likely to be used at different times by different types of people.

Although it is very ambitious, this plan is based upon principles applicable to smaller towns and more modest sites. The need for a coherent street and access plan can be just as critical on parcels in key locations only a few acres in size. Such street layouts should be part of the community's master plan (or town center plan). To quote from the designers: "Today it should no longer be acceptable to approve 'master plans' which are composed only of aggregate figures and bubble diagrams. . . City and county governments must insist on master plans that illustrate real streets, building positions and uses. Otherwise it is impossible to verify that a project uses an integrated approach." (Dover et al., 1990).

### The Value of Public Open Space in Town Centers

Whether designing new mixed-use areas or retrofitting an existing town center, creating comfortable public spaces can provide economic as well as aesthetic benefits. A study of 21 rural towns in Georgia enrolled in the National Trust's Main Street Program found the vitality of the centers (as expressed by their peak pedestrian volumes) was related, in part, to the physical form of the central business district. Of four broad physical forms identified (courthouse square, multiblock, cruciform, and stem), pedestrian activity was by far the strongest in the towns with courthouse squares. (Figure 10-16)

In explaining these differences in pedestrian activity, researchers at the University of Georgia cited the courthouse square's "superior built form in terms of human activity" (Kenyon, 1989). In these towns "the business district is built around, or partly around, a central block of non-business uses. . . The courthouse town is thus compact, yet not heavily concentrated at one intersection, and therefore perhaps most conducive to enhancement as a social center."



**Figure 10-16:** Four basic patterns of public open space in small towns in rural Georgia, where sidewalk pedestrian counts have shown that towns with central open spaces typically enjoy the highest level of pedestrian activity. Prof. James Kenyon calls downtowns with such squares “central social districts”. Although just one-half acre in size, the green in front of the Chowan County courthouse in Edenton NC (population 5,043) exerts a profoundly positive effect on the central area of this small town. Sources: Kenyon 1989, RA photo

In the western states, plazas created by the original Spanish settlers anchor hundreds of downtowns (70 in New Mexico), which artists typically use to display and sell their jewelry, pottery, weavings, and other works “In a depersonalized era of cars, computers, and malls, the need for meaningful public places like the plaza is greater than ever.” (Hughes, 2002). Such a need was recognized in Lewisburg WV (population 3,830), when the opportunity to create public open space in its downtown center presented itself after a corner building dating from 1897 burned down in 1997. This 5,600 SF park was built in stages between 2005 and 2013, as a result of brainstorming sessions involving elected officials and members of two local foundations. After discussing possible uses for this highly visible vacant land, which was being used temporarily for parking, a decision was taken to apply for money from one of the foundations to leverage state grant monies to buy the property. After the city purchased the land, the second foundation collaborated with municipal officials to raise further monies for trees, landscaping, benches, etc. A local physician funded the children’s play fountain in memory of his wife, and the bronze statue, donated by a local artist, depicts a herald welcoming visitors to the town center. . (Fig. 10-17) Altogether, this was a true community effort. Downtown foot traffic in the area of the park – the heart of the shopping district -- increased dramatically, (email from Mayor John Manchester, 1.11.13)

In Winslow WA, a similar, but less elaborate, amenity was created when three buildings were replaced by a mixed-use development designed in an L-shape, facing a four-way intersection across a newly created green (further described in Chapter 23).



**Figures 10-17:** Grass, shade trees, brick paving, benches, planters, public art, and a children’s play fountain have transformed a vacant parcel at one of the main intersections in Lewisburg WV (left). Similarly, in another town that previously had no central square (Winslow WA), one was created as a result of public comments during a design review process for a proposed new mixed-use development located at a highly visible corner (right). (RA both)

To some extent, the economic success of central business districts can be linked to their ability to serve also as "central social districts" characterized by a "pleasant human scale" (Hughes, 2002). These small amenity parks provide space for pedestrians to relax comfortably, and enjoy eating, drinking, socializing, and entertainment with friends and family. The layout and form of Midwestern courthouse squares, New England town greens, and Spanish plazas, which often provide inviting oases of quiet open space in the midst of downtown bustle, are very conducive to the mixing of economic and social activities. Planned correctly, they can function well in different seasons. In winter in Brunswick ME, the Parks and Recreation Department clears snow from a low section of the town green where a farmers' market is held two days/week from May to November and floods the frozen ground to create a skating rink. (Fig. 10-18) In the southwestern context, Hughes writes that "the plaza is the heart of the community, the gathering place for celebrations, the geographical glue that binds a culture together. That is why the plaza must be designed and managed flexibly, to allow freedom of use for people of all ages." (Hughes, 2002)



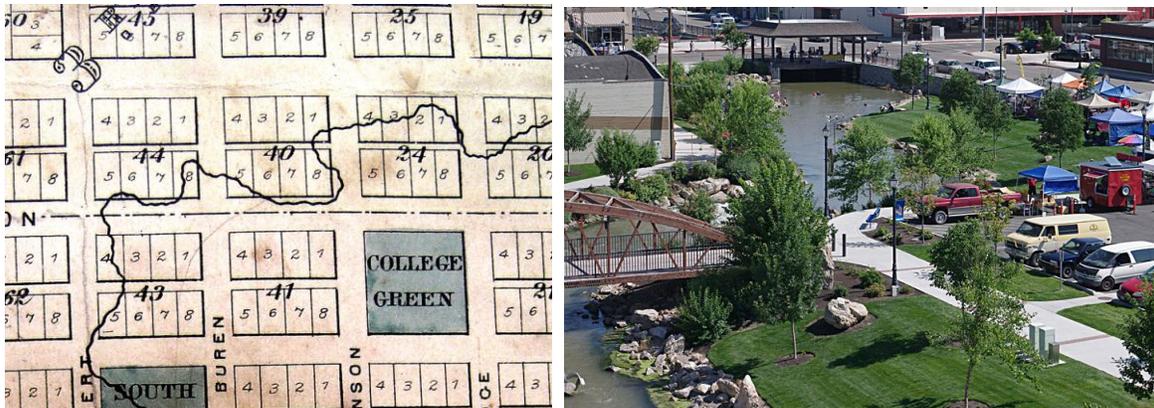
**Figure 10-18:** Social interactions and activities occur on the town green in Brunswick Maine in all seasons, from twice-weekly farmers' markets to everyday winter ice skating, significantly contributing to a more vital and lively town center (left and center). These pleasant green spaces have the potential to offer so much more in terms of community spirit than a similarly-sized park located in a neighborhood or in the countryside beyond. The central square in Sonoma CA, with its weekly farmers market and, until recently, a small flock of resident chickens which roosted on tree limbs overnight, is a well-used and lively spot attracting both residents and tourists (right). RA all



**Figure 10-19:** Widened sidewalks create a pedestrian-friendly atmosphere, providing space for shade trees, benches, public art, small fountains, and tables for *al fresco* dining. Examples illustrated here include Bath ME (left, with the public clock), Country Club Plaza in Kansas City MO (center, with benches and whimsical statues), and Winter Garden, FL (with café tables and umbrellas). (RA all)

Another approach involves "regreening" or restoring a natural feature or landscape erased by prior development. Those who platted towns with grid patterns often did not acknowledge the realities of terrain and hydrology or take advantage of opportunities for creating linear parks either by interrupting the grid or by crossing these areas sparingly and reserving them for open space. In some cases, rectilinear platting has created later problems for owners of buildings constructed over these features. In downtown Philadelphia, for example, 700 square feet of street caved in when the old Mill Creek sewer collapsed. In

1986 the city condemned almost 1,000 houses near Roosevelt Boulevard, which had been built on ash used to fill in sections of the Wingohocking Creek, whose flow had been diverted into a sewer. Subsidence in other areas of the city has been caused by old sewers being undermined by storm flow. (Philadelphia *Inquirer* 7.11.99)



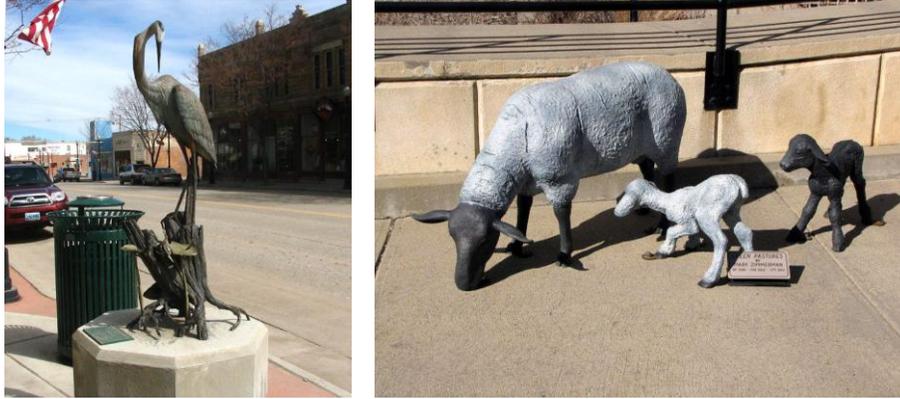
**Figures 10-20:** The grid originally platted in Iowa City IA is typical of many early town plans that paid little or no attention to topography and drainage patterns. The idea of creating linear parks along such drainageways did not occur to city designers until late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the era of Frederick Law Olmsted and projects such as Boston’s Emerald Necklace of greenways and parks. The wisdom of hindsight informed a decision in Caldwell ID to “daylight” a stream long buried underneath its downtown. Source: City of Iowa City, Jan Boles photo)

Recognizing the value generated by greenway open space, a growing number of communities are reclaiming these drainages and waterways. The linear park created along Indian Creek in Caldwell ID, illustrated in Fig. 10-20, is further described in chapter 25. In Hutchinson KS, 800 feet of Cow Creek was relocated from underneath Avenue A and is now “ the centerpiece of a new linear park with a footpath, a grassy amphitheater and stage for shows, and a large waterplay area with fountains fed by city water” (Buchholz and Younos, 2007) On a larger scale, a small river in downtown Providence RI, which had been decked over for decades to provide surface parking, was daylighted in the late 1990s to create a linear park where “Waterfire” events, held a dozen times every summer, draw thousands of visitors to see 100 bonfires in the river and to hear four hours of music ([www.waterfire.org](http://www.waterfire.org))

### Public Art Sidebar

Recognizing that art and culture can help revitalize central business districts, Sheridan WY (population 17,698) is a leading example of a rural community where public art has been fully embraced as a way of amenitizing downtowns. According to city officials, public art is an essential component for invigorating and restoring its core area, and its public art program greatly benefits from the active participation of local community arts and cultural groups.

In any given year, between 20 and 30 sculptures, on loan from artists around the country, are displayed in Sheridan’s public spaces. These loaners are in addition to 42 permanent sculptures which the city acquired during the last decade for its parks and downtown. Those sculptures were donated by local businesspeople and residents, or purchased with commissions from sculpture sales or funds raised to buy specific pieces. A consistent donor has been the annual benefit golf tournament. The county’s voter-approved 1% optional sales tax, which generates between \$10,000 and \$25,000 yearly for the public art program, is used to cover expenses associated with printing, postage, honoraria, and lodging for lending sculptors.



**Figure 10-21:** This heron statue was on display during the spring of 2010, while *Green Pastures*, a sheep sculpture on loan from artist Mary Zimmerman of Paonia, CO added interest to Sheridan’s sidewalks during the 2011-12 display season. Source: RA and Roger Wilson

Artists whose work is selected for public display receive a \$500 honorarium from the city, which also collects a 25 percent commission on any work that is sold during its exhibition period. In 2006 and 2007, half of the sculptures were sold. Even in a slow year such as 2011, \$104,000 of on-loan sculptures were sold, generating \$26,000 which was spent on new sculpture acquisitions.

This program followed discussions during the Downtown Master Plan process in 1992, which recommended that Grinnell Street be designated for street fairs and public art. When “Grinnell Plaza” (comprising two blocks of Grinnell Street) was designated seven years later, the mayor appointed a public arts committee which produced guidelines for selecting art works, such as artistic merit, durability, and size appropriate for street display (minimum height of 16 inches). In its first year, 2002, the program began with four loaned sculptures, but by the fourth year artist response grew so much that Sheridan has had to turn submissions away. This program was patterned after one in Grand Junction, CO. Other western cities featuring loaned sculptures in their streetscapes include Loveland CO, Lewiston and Couer d’Alene, ID, Sioux Falls, SD, and Gillette and Green River WY. For more on public art, see subchapter 23.19.

### **Small Parks and Parklets**

Even quite modest downtown spaces can become much more special places, as the conversion of a left-over triangle of asphalt at a wide intersection in downtown Auburn CA (population 13,330) demonstrates. A small triangular park built in 2009 has greatly improved the attractiveness of a formerly very broad intersection historically known as “Central Square”. Previously, only asphalt and three small triangular traffic islands occupied the “Central Square”, now filled with outdoor seating, numerous trees, landscaping, a fire pit, and a rain garden to pre-treat stormwater. The park ( Figure 10-22) became a possibility when an awkwardly angled intersection was rectified, freeing up about 6,000 sq. ft. of land for better purposes, such as music, outdoor movies, square dancing, and service club events.



**Figure 10-22:** Despite its modest size, this small park created in downtown Auburn CA in 2009 (left) is well used, partly due to its central location. Opportunities such as this exist in many communities, but often remain unrecognized for decades until individuals with fresh vision begin to imagine something better. In nearby Nevada City, a moveable wooden platform was installed (center) to create a sidewalk seating area to test public acceptance of the parklet idea. The third pocket park (right) lies alongside a cross-block footpath connecting two principal shopping streets in Qualicum Beach BC. Both the path and the park were created by the town, which has plans to link it with the municipal offices, in line with policies for pedestrian connections in its Official Community Plan. (RA all)

Observing successful “parklets” created in curbside parking spaces in other downtowns, planners in Nevada City CA (population 3,068) proposed a two-year pilot project along one of its retail streets. After discussions and a public hearing, the city council approved installing a removable boardwalk seating area as an experiment, within three existing parking spaces on Commercial Street. The goal was “to provide opportunities to increase foot traffic by alleviating sidewalk congestion and adding seating areas to enhance shoppers’ experiences, thereby improving the ‘quality of life’ for residents and visitors”. Physically, the 50-foot long parklet consists of 8-foot-wide boardwalk planking level with the sidewalk. In addition to benches and bike racks, planters and bollards provide separation from passing vehicles. At the ends of two six-month review periods, local business owners were asked for their views, which ranged widely. Some merchants who receive deliveries have been somewhat inconvenienced, while others fronting onto the boardwalk endorsed the experiment. Most of the residents who spoke at the Council meetings were very supportive. An initial smoking problem was resolved by expanding the city’s smoking ban and posting more signs throughout the downtown historic district, including along the boardwalk. An anti-loitering ordinance helped to make using the boardwalk and local parks more appealing.

Although most of the parklets created since the idea’s inception in San Francisco in 2005 have been in larger cities, they are beginning to be created in smaller communities, as the Nevada City example demonstrates. In many cases, construction and maintenance costs (typically \$15,000 to \$20,000) are covered by adjacent business owners who see these spaces as a way to make their block more attractive and to stimulate greater foot traffic. These small oases create a positive synergy when located in front of businesses such as coffeehouses and sandwich shops. They work best on streets where speed limits are low, and in mid-block locations away from corners, where they could block views and impede turning. (Patton, 2012) From a municipal viewpoint, parklets represent a very low dollar investment to create innovative new public space. Their low cost allows cities to experiment with various forms and locations, to discover what works best. According to David Alumbaugh, who directs the city design group in the San Francisco Planning Department. “The beauty of parklets is that they’re very transformative yet not very difficult.” (Patton, 2012) In northern climates where snowfall (and snow removal) is an issue, parklets can be designed to be dismantled and reassembled seasonally.

### Sidebar: The Bridge of Flowers

Turning lemons into lemonade, a 1908 trolley bridge in Shelburne Falls MA (population 1,731), abandoned in 1927 when streetcar service ended, was rescued the following year by a public effort led by the local women's club which raised funds for its transformation. The bridge was soon purchased by the water district because it carried water mains over the 400-foot span to a neighboring community. However, without the vision of Antoinette Burnham, who recognized the bridge's potential, this beautiful landscape feature would never have become a reality. Covering this five-arched concrete bridge is a soil layer (varying in depth from 2.5 feet above the arches to nine feet at the ends) with lush plantings of flowering perennials, vines, shrubs, and trees on both sides of a central meandering footpath. The floral bridge attracts as many as 36,000 visitors from more than 100 countries, becoming central Massachusetts' premier tourist attraction. Pupils from nearby elementary schools take field trips to the bridge to learn basic horticultural skills, and master gardeners lead guided tours and answer visitors' questions.



**Figure 10-23:** A disused trolley bridge has been transformed into a major tourist attraction in Shelburne Falls MA by planting it with flowers, shrubs, and trees. (Sources: Rick Darke and Carolyn Halloran.)

Major renovations costing \$580,000 (including replacement of the 1908 water main), were performed in 1983 with funds raised by local organizations. During the restoration every plant was removed, stored, and replanted, many in their former locations. Maintenance is performed by dozens of volunteers coordinated by a paid gardener and assistant. About 80 percent of operating costs are covered by memorial gifts and visitor donations. Another creative use of a downtown bridge is discussed in the Cedar Street Bridge case study in Chapter 23.

### **Pedestrian Streets**

During the 1960s and '70s, more than 100 towns and cities embraced the concept of transforming main shopping streets into pedestrian malls to create a more user-friendly walking environments that would help downtown merchants compete with suburban shopping centers.. Some of the wiser cities, such as Holland MI, rejected this approach. In the words of Roberta Gratz, this was “one of the early planning gimmicks offered as a quick-fix solution for economically troubled downtowns that did not address the fundamental reasons for downtown inactivity” (Gratz, 1995). Unfortunately, most of these transformations actually exacerbated the inactivity that had been slowly sapping downtown strength, partly because – in turning their backs on their greatest assets (their historic buildings) and aping the contemporary design characteristics and landscaping of suburban shopping malls -- they lost their appeal for nearly everyone, except loiterers.

Ironically, within several decades, the novel appeal of those malls declined, and many of them either closed their doors or became seedy and ripe for redevelopment. Sadly, most of the downtown pedestrian experiments also failed, for a variety of reasons: because the shops were not effective magnets, because these downtowns did not possess a good mix of uses, because these places increasingly became the “territory” of loiterers raising safety issues and because there was no residential population as is the case in European cities where such “pedestrian precincts” thrive. After the urban core emptied out after 5 pm, pedestrian streets were perceived as being particularly unsafe places to walk in, especially during the urban crime wave of the 1970s.

Another reason European cities have more vibrant downtowns where pedestrian streets prosper is that those countries have not allowed rampant suburban development to drain the vitality of their urban cores. As the North American pedestrian street experiment got underway during the 1960s, many downtowns had already begun to decline, suffering from increasing shopfront vacancies and marginal businesses attracted by falling rents, pitting these once-proud centers in an uphill struggle against strong economic restructuring forces beyond their control. Independent retailers were also no match for the national chains in suburban shopping centers, with their massive advertising and community entertainment budgets and sales promotions. And in some cases, on-street parking spaces were not replaced with parking convenient to the shops located on the closed streets.

Another mistake was that often too many streets, many of which were principal thoroughfares, were taken out of circulation. By contrast, in Norwich England, where many streets function as pedestrian zones in the historic core, the first street to be closed to vehicular traffic was not a major one. Only after several minor streets had succeeded as pedestrian ways did city officials propose also closing Gentlemen’s Walk, which had carried significant vehicular traffic past the central marketplace for centuries.

Lack of management and maintenance further hindered most North American street conversions, which were viewed as single-event physical improvements rather than as an ongoing process. As noted by Feehan and Becker, trash collection on pedestrianized streets in the US “was spotty, repairs to lights and other street furniture were not made, and street people congregated. This lack of management made pedestrian malls feel unsafe and unattractive. Likewise, there was a lack of programming of special events to draw visitors or to promote the mall as a community gathering place. There also was no active marketing or collective actions by the surrounding businesses to promote the area, leaving it more as a ‘dead zone’ than an attraction for visitors. Pedestrian malls were almost all built before the advent of business improvement districts or BIDs. These public-private partnerships have proven particularly adept at managing, maintaining and marketing public spaces. But by the time BIDs became more common, pedestrian malls were seen as a failed concept and many were being removed. Thus, they never really had the opportunity to benefit from BIDs.” (Feehan and Becker, 2011)

Although the corporation that built the most successful urban model in the country, Rockefeller Center, made no such mistake, the management side of the equation seems not to have even been considered in many municipalities. Perhaps because of the gardens, seating, fountains and public art found in Rockefeller Center, designers of these pedestrian streets tended to overdesign them and to clutter them with the same kinds of “amenities” (including children’s play areas), which added to maintenance costs. By contrast, Europeans simply closed streets to motor vehicles, resurfaced them with pavers, and opened them to foot traffic. Gradually some were planted and occasionally benches were installed, but most remain remarkably free of extraneous elements. \



**Figure 10-24:** Whereas as the eight-block pedestrian mall along the main street of Rockford(top) failed and was removed in 2010, its counterparts in Burlington VT (center) and Charlottesville VA (bottom) have flourished Sources: RA, City of Burlington VT and Bobak Ha’Eri (Wikimedia Commons CC-B Y-SA)

Despite the large number of failures of downtown pedestrian street conversions in the US, it is important to note that, after 40 years, 30 of those experiments (about one-fifth of the total number built) have succeeded and offer valuable lessons regarding what works. By and large, the successful examples are characterized by active management and typically self-financed business improvement districts (BIDs), which keep them well maintained and safe, and arrange various events and activities to attract customers.

Another lesson is that these public spaces really need a large generator of foot traffic to do well. Typically these generators are provided by colleges or tourism. Cities in the former category include Ithaca NY, Iowa City IA, and Madison WI. In Charlottesville VA (population 43,475), which arguably possesses the country’s most successful downtown mall, the university presence is not a key factor, as it is a full 30-minute walk from campus, and even farther from most student dorms. This remarkable space, where 120 shops and 30 restaurants thrive in what is essentially a linear park with over seventy 60-foot tall willow oaks, was created along an eight-block section of Main Street, mostly between 1976 and 1978. These trees provide relief from summer heat: on the hottest days the temperature difference between shaded and unshaded areas can be as much as 18 degrees F. Significantly, this car-free “people’s street” is maintained by the municipal parks and recreation department. The restaurants regularly draw 250-300 outdoor diners at lunchtime on weekdays and 500-700 for dinner on Fridays and Saturdays (at a single sitting), between mid-April and the end of October. It is estimated that about 5,000 people live within a ten-minute walk of this center, which is home to five indoor performance spaces (and four outdoor performance areas), and which is served by two parking garages with nearly 1,500 spaces. Physically, the mall is nearly 1,800 feet long and 67 feet across, with an average distance of 25 feet between shop doors. Most buildings are three- to four stories tall, and their upper floors are nearly all occupied. Several new multi-story buildings have been constructed, replacing single-story structures that were out of scale with the historic fabric. Notably, the mall was strong from the beginning, and survived several challenging periods which saw the exodus of five department stores, two large banks, and roughly ten clothing stores (which later returned as shops for younger clientele). The old cinema, which lay vacant for 30 years, was transformed into a theater in 2005. The public sector has been very supportive in numerous ways, including key decisions to locate both city and county offices downtown, as well as the regional library. It also successfully fought to retain a branch after the main post office relocated outside the center. (Lucy, 2002). Although the word “mall” currently has suburban connotations, it is an 18<sup>th</sup>-century name for a shaded walkway or promenade in London’s St. James’s Park, and therefore is more appropriate in Charlottesville than many might think.

Pedestrian malls where tourism is the driver include Boulder, Aspen, and Denver CO, New Orleans LA, Miami and St. Augustine FL, Las Vegas NV, Riverside and Santa Monica CA, and Honolulu, HI. Those with both universities and tourism include Burlington VT, San Antonio TX, and Atlantic City and Cape May NJ, where pedestrian traffic tends to be greatest during the warm and sunny seasons. (Feehan and Becker, 2011). Notably, college students and tourists typically do not drive cars in these downtowns, lessening the need for convenient off-street parking. In cities without many students or tourists,

convenient parking is absolutely critical, and the availability of parking garages can significantly boost foot traffic in downtown areas.

Communities wishing to experiment with pedestrian streets should begin in a small way on a short side street; work through a BID to ensure ongoing management, maintenance, and activity scheduling; provide visible signage and convenient parking and transit access; and be wary of overdesigning the public space (although shade trees are rarely a mistake to plant, particularly where summers are long and hot, and the occasional fountain or statue can provide attractive accents). However, pedestrian streets are not necessarily for every community, and many can achieve good results by amenitizing their main streets, which could be closed occasionally to motor vehicles for special events or special reasons (such as the periodic street closing during summer in Holland MI).

### The “Smart Math” of Mixed-Use Development

The relative economics of mixed-use redevelopment in town centers, compared with lower-density retail along highway strips, has been examined by Joe Minicozzi of Urban 3 of Asheville NC. According to his figures, the return from mid-rise mixed-use development in downtown Asheville (population 83,000) is 800 percent higher – on a per acre basis -- than that from single-use development on suburban sites, such as Super Walmarts. He cites figures showing that “a typical acre of mixed-use downtown development yields \$360,000 more in tax revenue to city government than an acre of strip malls or big-box stores.” (Minicozzi, 2012)

As one example, he contrasts a renovated 1920’s six-story building with approximately 46,000 SF of floorspace, occupying 0.2 acres, filled with offices and 19 residential condo’s above ground floor retail, with a new Super Walmart occupying 34 acres. Using estimates based on available data released by Walmart, the downtown developer, and municipal governments, it is believed that the former generates a total property and sales tax revenue of \$337,200 per acre *to the city*, while the suburban big box generates \$51,100 per acre. This is a 6.6:1 ratio in favor of the downtown example. (Notably, the downtown building’s taxable value was only \$300,000 in 1991 when it was vacant, but 20 years later it was \$11 million.) According to Minicozzi, downtown redevelopment “is good not just for walkability, its smarter math for dealing with constrained municipal budgets” (email 9.19.12)

	<u>Super Walmart</u>	<u>Downtown Mixed Use</u>
Land consumed	34.0 acres	0.2 acres
Property Tax to the county (per acre)	\$3,900	\$380,400
Property Tax to the city (per acre)	\$2,600	\$253,600
Retail Sales Taxes to the city (per acre)	\$47,500	\$83,600
Residents (per acre)	0	90
Jobs (per acre)	5.9	73.7

One reason this difference had not been more obvious before this kind of analysis was performed is that the numbers had not been viewed through a per-acre lens. Of course, the much larger Super Walmart generates more tax revenue for the city (\$1,836,000 per year, which is 13 times more than the \$143,520 generated by the six-story mixed-use downtown building). However, in order to accomplish this, the big box consumes 34 acres, 170 times more land than the downtown building site

Interestingly, subsidies or shifted costs figure into both examples. Both are served by “free” streets and utility lines. All the parking around the big box is taxed at low rates by local assessors because asphalt is not considered to be a valuable improvement. In the above example, the downtown property depends on a municipal parking garage which the building developer did not pay to construct, with parking costs shifted to tenants leasing monthly spaces.

Taxes on single-story big box construction tend to be lower, per square foot, than on multi-story buildings, because the former have lower assessed values: they are cheaper to construct, usually for a shorter projected design life. By contrast, most mixed-use buildings are greater than one story, require elevators, and are built for a much longer life-span, which big boxes are not, giving a price advantage to developers of the latter. Additionally, the costs of extending infrastructure to serve relatively few users in outlying areas are borne by all taxpayers, who subsidize sprawl development. All in all, the system often works to the advantage of sprawl developers, and against those redeveloping more central properties.



**Figure 10-25:** Three and one-half stories of affordable housing, including flats for seniors, were built above a grocery store in downtown Banff (population 7,584), in the Canadian Rockies. A limited number of parking spaces are available for residents of these units, in a multi-story car park (or “parkade” in Canadian parlance) next door. New infill construction in the heart of Qualicum Beach, BC provides living units above retail, employing building forms designed to relieve the monotony in the streetscape. (RA both)

Communities desiring to capture the added value, per acre, of downtown mixed-use development typically need to provide, or work with developers to provide, structured parking. Because parking garages typically cost at least \$15,000 per space to build, many communities finance them through long-term municipal borrowing. Such debt mechanisms can be paid off through local taxes, income from TIFs (tax-increment financing) on nearby properties, and/or user fees. (TIFs, designed to stimulate and finance new development in areas where the market is weak, essentially borrow against future tax revenues expected to be generated by that new development to subsidize the needed improvements.) In the past, some federal agencies and certain states provided parking garage grants, but such funding has virtually vanished. What little remains has been, in some states (such as CT) reserved for cities with mass transit stations downtown. In special parking districts, however, the property owners within the district share deck construction and operations costs.

### Resolving Parking Issues

When land is scarce and therefore expensive, surface parking becomes uneconomic, and structured parking starts to make financial sense. Grocery stores are beginning to be built above underground parking decks in places as different as Cambridge MA (population 105,000) and Qualicum Beach, BC (population 8,687) on Vancouver Island. In Jackson WY (population 9,577), the new office and residential mixed-use building at 199 East Pearl Street contains 29 underground spaces, and the residential uses at Stewart Square in Oxford OH (population 21,371) are also served by parking beneath the building. In Qualicum Beach, a 35,000 SF grocery has occupied the main level since 1982, on a gently sloping downtown site. Its lower level, accessed at grade from another street, is occupied by a senior

center, pharmacy, computer store, and 21 parking spaces, and its top floor houses a café. The store's location is no accident: Qualicum Beach had had a policy designating its town center as the primary location for commercial uses since 1965, a time when most other communities zoned all their arterial highways for strip development.



**Figure 10-26:** This three-level building in the heart of Qualicum Beach, BC houses the community's principal grocery, sandwiched between a café and offices on the top story and various shops and services at grade on the lower street side of the building. Some underground parking is provided beneath the opposite end of the building, where the grocery is entered at grade, on this slightly sloping site. (RA)

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, parking capacity behind main street shops in Amherst MA was doubled by adding an underground deck below the surface lot. For small communities where such innovations are not yet an option, new mixed-use buildings can be developed with surface parking, when the buildings are two- to three stories in height. This is fortunate because, according to national **retail** consultant Robert Gibbs, “Structured parking frequently does not make economic sense in rural or suburban locations where there is plenty of inexpensive or underutilized land.” (email 1.5.13) . Regarding parking decks, he cautions that not all commercial uses function well with them. For example, “on-street retail requires a balance of on-street and off-street parking. Convenient retail needs convenient parking except in dense urban settings.”



**Figure 10-27:** Contemporary mixed-use development served by rear surface parking in downtown Port Jefferson, on Long Island, NY. Note the presence of a CVS on the ground floor. Drug chains almost always resist municipal efforts to build an additional story or two above their premises, citing burglary concerns (tenants drilling down into the pharmacy area), although they often occupy first-floor locations in more urban areas. (RA both)

In addition to the Port Jefferson project illustrated in Figure 10-27, other examples of contemporary multi-story mixed-use development with surface parking in or near the centers of small towns can be seen in Part Six (such as Village Commons in South Hadley MA, Mill Village in Sudbury, MA, Plainsboro Village Center in Plainsboro NJ, and Old Main Street in Pewaukee WI. Further mixed use examples with surface parking in non-downtown locations are described in the case studies of South County Commons in South Kingstown RI and Mashpee Commons, in Mashpee, MA.

In other situations where the additional costs of constructing multi-level mixed-use buildings are more than the local market can bear at this time, Gibbs recommends “a long range master plan approach to accommodate lower densities for existing market conditions for the early phases that can be infilled with higher densities as the market matures.” In other words, consuming land with single-story structures and surface parking could become a land banking tool for the next urban infill -- if properly planned (and that is the great caveat). Today’s parking lots could become future sites for multi-story mixed-use buildings with parking decks.

## **Sidebar:**

### **Small Town Example of Downtown Revitalization with a Parking Garage**

One small rural community that managed to spur downtown revitalization with the help of a parking garage (to avoid the detrimental impact of covering much of its central area with surface parking) is Rifle, CO (population 9,100), located on the western slope of the Rocky Mountains, 180 miles west of Denver. Construction of the two-story parking structure in 2010, adjacent to city hall (and accessible at grade from both ends due to slope conditions), was spurred by a major expansion of a small branch of the Garfield County Library, in addition to the creation of a downtown civic plaza.

This followed the adoption of a Downtown Master Plan in 2008, whose primary goal was to create a vibrant core, and which envisioned a new plaza or square fronted by the city hall and a large new library serving as a central civic downtown feature. Key to this vision was locating the new library in the town center, where a tiny branch had existed for decades, instead of taking the easy option of building it on the outskirts where land was much simpler and cheaper to acquire.

City staff and officials worked with the Garfield County Public Library District and multiple landowners to designate an entire block housing the existing library, city hall, 35 parking spaces, and several poorly maintained residential and retail properties, as the location of a new center containing a 30,000 sq. ft. library (with administrative offices and much needed public meeting space), a civic plaza, and a 150-space parking structure, while leaving city hall intact. The library district received voter funding in 2006 to realize this expansion. This plan also vacated a 300- foot stretch of city street, 60 feet wide, to make more land available for the library, plaza and garage. Although the library district was concerned about costs, it liked the concept and agreed to work with the city to realize the vision. Together the city and the library found outside funding and 18 months later the new library opened its doors. (email from Matt Sturgeon, 9.20.12)

The rough numbers for this project are that the library building cost \$5.7 million and the parking structure and plaza cost \$2.7 million. The downtown development authority contributed \$118,000 and the city contributed \$400,000 toward land, the plaza, and the garage. The library district became the lead agency and contributed \$1 m, while the Colorado Department of Local Affairs provided a \$1.7m grant to cover the construction costs of the plaza and parking structure. Of the \$2 m required for the

parking garage, it is estimated that the state's share was about 64 percent, a generous grant that enabled this small community to realize its vision without issuing municipal bonds that might not have been politically possible.