

# Curb appeal matters

If you're selling a home, one of the first things you do is evaluate and enhance its curb appeal — the attractiveness of the exterior of a property.

While the term curb appeal became part of the vernacular during the U.S. housing boom, it remains a core aspect of downtown revitalization in the current down market. If you're selling the downtown area to shoppers, tourists, business owners, and others, it needs good curb appeal.

Exactly what that means and how to achieve it varies from location to location. For some it means multi-year, multi-million dollar streetscape improvements, for others it means filling vacant storefronts, and for still others it means attaining a basic level of cleanliness.

In the following pages, we present seven approaches to enhancing downtown's curb appeal. Each was selected because it is relatively low-cost and quick to implement, with a significant impact on the downtown area. For instance rather than focusing on a downtown-wide streetscape project, you'll find two approaches to repurposing unsightly and underused space within the public realm. You'll also find techniques for facade renovation, cutting visual clutter, reducing unsightly trash, reducing panhandling, and sprucing up vacant storefronts. These techniques are divided into two sections: physical improvements and operations and management. However, this is not an exclusive distinction and many techniques rely both on physical and operational changes.

And while curb appeal is important, Randy Wilson, director of design services for the Mississippi Main Street Association, takes a contrarian approach and cautions that downtown leaders should not try too hard to make downtown attractive.

"It's ironic, but sometimes we work too hard to make our downtowns look too pretty," says Wilson. "While it's essential to make our downtowns look attractive, it's more important that we make our downtowns look authentic."

One example of a successful downtown that has avoided becoming too polished and homogenized is Charleston, SC. "If we were to evaluate some of Charleston's streetscape and open space, by some standards, it would get a very low score. Not every bench and light pole matches. The sidewalk textures and crosswalk designs are not all the same. But they're authentic, and they show the evolution through time," Wilson says.

"The fact that all of their light fixtures look good — but they're different because they evolved over time — is a sort of patina that reveals an age and an authenticity to the place."

Conversely, some downtowns have the look of being frozen in time, when all of the fixtures were purchased. "Everything looks too clean, too new. That can look great, and it always looks better than the opposite. But I think sometimes we need to relax. It makes sense to just let our downtowns evolve incrementally, as opposed to trying to fix it all up in one fell swoop, so it all looks the same," Wilson says.

Downtowns evolve over time, and it's only natural for their physical appearance to reflect that, but there are a range of actions that downtowns can take to enhance curb appeal, which are surprisingly low cost and respect the authenticity of the downtown.

## Setting the stage

Impressions of the downtown area are often formed miles before arriving on main street. In many areas the corridors that lead into downtown have evolved into an

unplanned mix of strip centers, fast-food establishments, parking lots, competing signage, and superstore eyesores.

With the help of entry corridor guidelines, cities such as Charlottesville, VA, have significantly improved the entrances to their downtowns.

The goal of entry corridor guidelines, says Jim Tolbert, director of Neighborhood Development Services for the City of Charlottesville, is “to preserve the integrity of development leading to downtown, respect the scale and character of what’s in downtown, and make sure its quality doesn’t detract from what’s in the historic downtown.”

Design guidelines specify what’s

appropriate in things like the size of entry corridor structures, setbacks, placement of lots, landscaping, signage, materials, and building articulation. Corridor guidelines typically don’t impact buildings already in place unless they are substantially renovated.

Guidelines can set the tone for any community, Tolbert says. “If you turn off the interstate and you’re a mile from downtown, what you drive through to get there impacts your experience when you get to downtown — or if you even want to make it all the way. If you’re going through an area that is very unsightly — no matter how nice the core area is — it still detracts from it.”