

Downtown Idea Exchange

Perspectives

What exactly is a “downtown”?

By David Feehan

Years ago, the answer to this question was relatively simple: It's the center of town where all the tall buildings are, and the place to shop.

During the past decade or two, that definition has become dated and inadequate — but what should replace it?

As Rich Bradley, former president of the International Downtown Association (IDA) wrote, “If downtowns and town and city centers ever held a franchise on ‘place’ and urbanity, there are now many other destinations that want a piece of this action. In some respects, this is a good thing for the culture and society, given the centripetal forces of a fossil fuel, automotive dominated economy and the way of life it has bred. It is clear that for a variety of reasons there is a global need to reassert long-standing values of compactness, centrality, and walkability. However, the onslaught of multiple efforts to rethink, re-plan, [and] redesign suburban shopping centers, suburban residential communities (new urbanism), office parks, theme parks, edge cities, col-

lege towns, and retirement communities, drawing on the values and practices previously attributed to downtowns and town centers, is creating a need to reframe the meaning and importance of downtowns.”

Writing the downtown charter

Beginning with a flurry of phone conversations, emails, and informal discussions at conferences, the process of creating a downtown charter culminated at the IDA World Congress and Annual Conference in New York in September. Along the way, groups of downtown experts met in Washington, DC, to try to define the questions. Later on, a series of email and phone focus groups involving participants in North America and elsewhere in the world wrestled with concepts, implications, and word meanings.

The results of these many discussions were vetted at IDA's mid-summer board retreat in Billings, MT, and were ultimately presented to members and nonmembers alike at the World Congress for review and adoption.

Formulating and adopting what now is called the IDA Charter was, however, only the first step in what IDA hopes will be an ongoing, lively conversation among those who “live, work, shop, and play” in downtowns, business districts, and town centers.

Drafters of this document intended to identify the core attributes of downtowns and town centers, but they were careful not to exclude places that are evolving into downtowns. In this way, they intended to be both inclusive and aspirational. There is a recognition that most places are on their way to achieving these attributes, and that, as an old saying goes, “There is no best way; there are always better ways.”

Key attributes that downtowns aspire to

Downtowns and town centers are an important (some would say essential) part of society. As such, the attributes they aspire to might be grouped in three categories: place, experience, economy.

- As social places, an essential part of society, downtowns should be inclusive, sustainable, and authentic. They should be a place of

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open exchange, a place that encourages creativity and the sharing of ideas.

- As physical places, they should be well designed, dense, and should exhibit a number of different and often integrated uses.

- As experiences, they should be welcoming, accessible, clean and safe, engaging, and memorable.

- As a key part of the local and regional economy, they should be competitive, adaptable, and supportive of business and entrepreneurs.

As the Charter states, “Downtowns play two critical roles in metropolitan areas. First, they are

mixers of people, places that welcome all and facilitate human interaction. This makes downtowns ideal places for doing business, as they put buyers, sellers, and producers in proximity. But it also makes them ideal places for entertainment, culture, learning, governing, and living. Downtowns, then, are places that are owned by people of all types, where everyone feels welcome.”

So how do we know one when we see one? Chris Leinberger, a fellow at the Brookings Institution and a professor at the University of Michigan, has identified a num-

ber of “downtown types.” Robert Lang, at Virginia Tech’s Metropolitan Institute, describes “accidental cities” on the fringes of major metro areas that are creating micro-downtowns. Major hospitals and universities are finding themselves at the center of still other downtown forms. Perhaps “downtown-ness,” like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder.

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To view the IDA Charter, visit www.DowntownDevelopment.com and click on Documents Plus. ◆