

BRINGING DOWNTOWN BACK TO LIFE

Programs that Create Viable Local Economies

UNTIL THE 1960s, AMERICANS SHOPPED DOWNTOWN. Main Street had grocery stores and shoe stores, stationers and milliners. With the ensuing flight to the suburbs, however, and the advent of new and more efficient means of personal and commercial transportation, the nature of our retail lives changed. In his book *City Life*, Witold Rybczynski (1995) observes how personal mobility influenced the shift from downtown shopping to suburban shopping. At the personal level, higher rates of automobile ownership led to increased individual freedom. The shift in commercial practices was even more dramatic:

Large long-distance trucks replaced the railroad. Since trucks arrived in the city on highways, the edge of town was the ideal location for distribution warehouses, the new railroad depots. Small industry and workshops, the kind that earlier would have been downtown, near the railroad tracks, also relocated; small trucking companies distributed services as well as goods around the city. (p. 202)

These changing patterns led to a boom of stand-alone shopping centers and, later, shopping malls. There were 100 such shopping centers in 1950; by 1990 there were more than 30,000. Many of these included large supermarkets which were not suited to downtowns. Their one-story floorplans and onsite parking required large plots of land that were usually more affordable away from the city center (Rybczynski, 1995).

These factors, along with the growth of residential suburbs, resulted in a decline of downtowns and the businesses that had supported them. But as time has shown, the impact was more than just economic. Downtowns provide citizens with a central forum, a place to connect with business, government, and other citizens. When downtowns fall into economic decline, they leave many communities with no place to congregate as a public. The



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shift from downtown shopping to mall shopping reinforced the divide in cities between those who stayed and those who left. Once a bonanza of choices, downtown shoppers were given fewer options and higher prices; downtown merchants were left with fewer customers and falling revenues.

As cities wrestled with how to stem the flow from their downtowns, urban observers and planners weighed in often and consistently. One of these was Jane Jacobs, who contended that four conditions must be met to generate “exuberant diversity” in a city’s streets and districts:

- The district must serve more than one purpose.
- Blocks should be short; opportunities to turn corners must be frequent.
- The district must mingle buildings that vary in age and condition, including a good portion of old ones, so the economic yield varies.
- There must be a sufficiently dense concentration of people.

Jacobs explains that “these four conditions create effective economic pools of use. The potentials of different districts differ for many reasons; but, given the development of these four conditions . . . a city district should be able to realize its best potential, wherever it may lie” (1992, pp. 150–51).

Downtown revitalization and urban development projects are not one-size-fits-all, and they don’t often lend themselves to textbook analysis. Rather, says M. J. Brodie, president of the Baltimore Development Corporation from 1997 to 2001, “questions of urban development challenge traditional methods of planning and implementation, requiring new, sometimes radical—meaning ‘from the root’—ideas, combining seemingly opposite or unrelated concepts into new paradigms, into synthesis of thought and action” (1997). Several principles flow from this observation.

- There must be an understandable physical vision—large enough to excite the imagination of all the participants, but structured so that it can be achieved in the increments that realities of time and funding usually dictate.
- The vision must be grounded in the authentic character of the place (its history, climate, terrain, cultural values) and informed by an articulated set of goals for the future—goals that describe what the city wants to be.
- To implement the vision (the plan), a partnership must be formed between the public and private sectors, each sector bringing its skills



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to the process, to produce a better result than either could have achieved alone.

- The public sector, through redeveloping the city's infrastructure (transportation, utilities, public open spaces), must set the stage for private investment.
- A high level of quality must be set for design and construction (major redevelopment is often a once-in-a-generation opportunity!), in both public and private projects.
- Methods must be developed to broaden the base of the redevelopment project, and to obtain not only cooperation but enthusiasm from those involved.
- A structure for implementation must be created that combines responsibility with necessary authority; that is results-oriented and accountable to the citizens; and that is capable of guiding the process over an extended period of time. (Brodie, 1997)

Downtowns still matter. They are home to millions of Americans and provide a link to economic prosperity for the people who live in them. According to Harvard professor Michael Porter, the inner city has a competitive edge that can and should be tapped. He and others have documented that there is disposable income in the inner city and that residents would be more willing to shop closer to home if there was availability (1995). The Initiative for a Competitive Inner City documented the economic impact of inner-city retailing in a 1997 survey that found that these markets account for 7% of national spending. Some inner-city grocery stores have 40% better sales per square foot than the surrounding metropolitan areas as a whole (Grogan and Proscio, 2000).

Downtown revitalization—whether big city or small town—is not easy, but it can be done. Often the hardest step is the first one. In the case studies that follow, three communities of different sizes and situations illustrate how main street can be the key to a new development strategy. In very different venues and under widely divergent circumstances, these programs all illustrate that downtown still matters in the lives and economies of citizens. In each case, revitalization in the purest sense is a secondary result of the larger accomplishment of citizen reinvestment—in each other and in the place where they live.

Boston Main Streets



Challenge: How can urban communities revitalize their neighborhood business districts?



Background: Boston is an old city of densely populated residential neighborhoods, most of which have traditional business districts. These districts have battled decline and disinvestment for several decades. As families moved to suburban communities, Boston's residential population fell from 800,000 residents in 1950 to 574,000 residents in 1990. In the same period, the population became more diverse, with new generations of immigrants replacing predominantly white residents. Shopping malls lured customers away from traditional shopping areas, which, coupled with the demographic changes, caused many local stores to close. Under these conditions, remaining businesses have struggled to hold onto a vanishing customer base, and potential customers are harder than ever to reach in a rapidly changing marketplace. New kinds of retailers, such as outlet malls, big box stores, and online merchants have further complicated the market for independent business owners, eroding their ability to compete. Social problems like real and perceived crime have also tarnished the image of the city's neighborhood business districts in the minds of residents and business prospects. Boston's city government recognized the problems its neighborhood business districts faced. During the preceding decades, the city had tried a variety of different revitalization strategies, but none was sustained over time. Government officials found that the piecemeal nature of these efforts did not adequately address the complex challenges facing the districts.



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Solution: During the mid 1980s, the city piloted an urban revitalization project in the Roslindale Village neighborhood. Spearheaded by a member of the city council, this project was the first urban site to use the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Main Street revitalization approach. In 1993, when the councilman became the mayor of Boston, the success of the pilot project prompted him to work with the National Trust's Main Street Center to launch Boston Main Streets as the first citywide Main Street program in the United States. The Boston Main Streets program applies an integrated, comprehensive approach to tackle the multiple challenges of creating healthy business districts.



The program is based on the National Trust’s Main Street model. The four-point approach includes design and physical improvements, marketing and promotion, economic restructuring, and organizational development. Since Boston is the nation’s only citywide program, it has adapted the Main Street model to match the individual needs and characters of the 21 designated districts, while retaining the general framework. Each district establishes its own administrative office, with one full-time staff person and supporting local committees made up of volunteers. The city provides multi-year matching funds as well as training, technical assistance, and promotional support. Each district organization also has a “Corporate Buddy” that agrees to invest \$40,000 over four years and provide technical expertise and in-kind support to the district. This broad-based grassroots organizational structure is designed to sustain revitalization efforts over time.

By establishing a vehicle for broad-based civic engagement in improving local business districts, the program brought residents into the process.



Testing 1, 2, 3: Studying a subset of three program neighborhoods, outside evaluators found that all of the districts showed physical, financial, and civic improvements. By establishing a vehicle for broad-based civic engagement in improving local business districts, the program brought residents into the process and fostered cooperation among existing stakeholders and civic organizations. The Main Streets program was a major factor in implement-

ing district-wide physical improvements, and contributed to expanded business activity and higher sales revenues.



Maintenance Required:

- Target large, prominent, and strategically located buildings for renovation and beautification. Improving key buildings has greater visual and economic impact and more potential to shift resident and business perceptions.
- Leverage the program's citywide scope to improve local implementation. Information sharing, training and technical assistance, citywide promotions, and city-led recruitment of corporate and foundation support all enhance local program performance.
- When adding program participants, make district selection a competitive process. Focus resources on districts with broad-based support for the program and an initial implementation agenda.
- Stay in touch with key stakeholders as the process moves past the planning stage. Communicate and build consensus both within and between the districts.



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Warning:

- Keep a long-term perspective. Revitalization of a neighborhood business district often requires 10 to 15 years of sustained effort to succeed.
- Ensuring participation across all economic and ethnic groups requires special effort. Low-income, newcomer communities, and minority groups may require special outreach efforts and new approaches to secure and sustain their participation.

The Boston Main Streets program succeeds by taking the national Main Street model and adapting it to fit the needs of a large, diverse city. Through its citywide approach, hands-on technical assistance, long-term funding, and leveraging of corporate resources, the program has greatly expanded neighborhood capacity to improve local business districts. It has brought significant physical and economic changes to neighborhoods, and contributed to the improved economic performance of local businesses. For more information, see www.bostonmainstreets.com.

HandMade in America Small Towns Revitalization Project



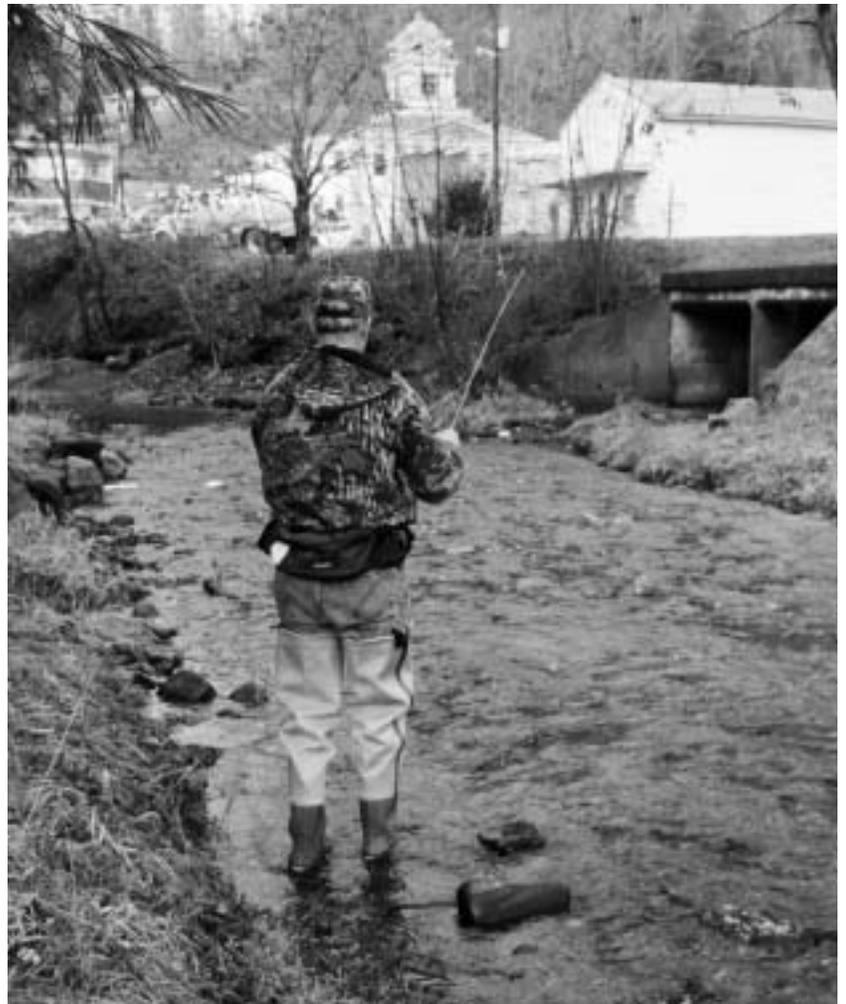
Challenge: How can small communities honor their heritage and maintain their values, yet remain economically viable?



Background: Across America, empty storefronts, deteriorating infrastructures, an exodus of talented youth, and a spirit of malaise haunt many once-vital communities. Some have turned to organizations like the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Main Street program for help. But many small rural communities cannot meet the size and resource requirements to qualify for established revitalization programs. This was the case in rural western North Carolina. In 1993, a citizen-founded organization called HandMade in America initiated a program that linked the rich craft heritage of the region with a plan for civic renewal. The desire to create sustainable local economies resulted in the idea for a craft "heritage corridor" with the Blue Ridge Parkway as the "spine." In 1996, HandMade published a guidebook for the region that included craft and heritage sites in 22 counties. While the guidebook was successful in highlighting many of the region's most valuable economic assets, there were identifiable gaps in its coverage of the smallest towns. Some communities—like Andrews (pop. 1,770), Bakersville (pop. 330), Chimney Rock (pop. 138), and Mars Hill (pop. 1,642)—had few offerings included or were omitted from the guidebook entirely.



Solution: Leaders from these four communities realized that



inclusion in the guidebook would help stimulate their economies and promote civic action. They approached HandMade in America and asked the organization to help “put their towns on the craft heritage map.” The Small Towns Revitalization Project was born. More towns were added to the list between 1997 and 2002, bringing the program total to 12. A philanthropic organization provided seed money for the project, with 50% of the funding tied to dollar-for-dollar matching by the towns themselves. Each participating community entered into an explicit agreement with HandMade and the sponsor, thus formalizing its commitment to the renewal process.

The project began by conducting a needs assessment with each community. The team made recommendations for organization, design and appearance, economic restructuring, and marketing and promotion strategies that communities could use in the next step. Committee members then organized local community meetings and developed work plans for the projects to be undertaken. The towns developed working relationships with one another and each selected a “sister” community from the other towns in the region that had successfully implemented their own economic development efforts. HandMade serves as a central clearinghouse, convenor, and informational resource to the local committees, which in turn organize, plan, and take ultimate responsibility for project implementation in their own communities.



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Testing 1, 2, 3: Outside research results showed that of the 11 towns studied, 10 experienced increased public, private, and volunteer investments as a direct result of their participation in the program. In a two-year period ending in July 2001, there were 77 building or facade restorations and a net gain of 326 jobs. In the same period, the towns logged 31,000 hours of volunteer community service.



Maintenance Required:

- Develop and sustain the seven critical factors for rural revitalization: local commitment, realistic community assessment, a written plan for renewal, key partnerships, timely completion of projects, knowledgeable leadership, and community mentoring.
- Build relationships and partnerships. While 10 of the towns noted tangible, visible improvements in community appearance, most highlighted intangible relationship improvements as keys to their success.

- Focus on organization and visibility in the program's first 24 to 36 months. Articulate a shared vision and plan for renewal. Complete highly visible, doable projects. Get organized. Develop good working relationships with outside resources. Line up needed technical assistance and recruit volunteers.
- Respond to changing needs as the program matures. Plan for leadership succession. Reassess and rejuvenate long-term plans. Maintain projects already completed (including funding, staffing, and physical maintenance). Be patient and persistent; be prepared to stay with the process over a period of years.



Warning:

- Understand that communities face challenges in initiating and sustaining rural revitalization in isolation. Outside resources, including assessment teams and facilitators, help communities develop a realistic action plan and work through difficult parts in the process.
- Bring in local business leaders and naysayers early on in the process. Stakeholders often want to make sure that those involved in the revitalization efforts are “serious” before they commit their time and resources.
- Resist pressure to expand the program too quickly. Due to the Small Towns project's success, many other communities in the region have asked to join the program, but limited resources at the regional level make formal expansion impractical. The towns that are not accepted, however, are invited to attend regional cluster meetings and encouraged to use the participating towns as resources and models. Several towns have taken advantage of this opportunity.

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The Small Towns project has succeeded in stimulating rural revitalization. Participants report increased town pride, a renewed sense of community, and a new “can do” attitude that says residents really can direct their own futures. Leaders of revitalization efforts in small towns and rural areas across America should take a close look at the lessons learned in western North Carolina. For more information, see www.handmadeinamerica.org.

Charlottesville's Downtown Revitalization



Challenge: How can a small or mid-sized city reverse decades of economic decline in its downtown and rebuild it into a thriving civic center?



Background: During the 1960s and 70s, retail sales and real estate property values were on the wane in many urban areas. Charlottesville, Virginia's downtown was no exception. By 1966, retail sales in the central business district had fallen five percentage points in as many years. Property assessments had declined to pre-1960 levels. Charlottesville's city council reacted by creating a Central City Commission in 1971 to consider how to stop deterioration of the downtown. After heated debate, the council's majority concluded that city government should get involved. In 1974, the council approved a master plan for downtown revitalization; central to the plan was the creation of a pedestrian mall.



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Solution: To counter the flow of dollars and people out of the central business district, the mayor and city manager decided to move forward immediately. They adopted the central concepts and policies put forth in the master plan: "that people will use the downtown area if the downtown area is a pleasant place to be"; and "that the commercial activity of the downtown will be substantially enhanced by an environment that is visually attractive, clean, safe, and auto-free." The city moved quickly to begin construction on the pedestrian mall and a new parking garage. Eight blocks of Main Street were closed to traffic and renovations were made to key buildings. The mall and surrounding area were redesignated as a Downtown Historic District, and an architectural review board was created to ensure that all new construction and renovation met the city's standards for historic preservation.

Twenty-five years later, the downtown revitalization effort continues to evolve. Partnerships change as new projects are initiated. The revitalization process in Charlottesville functions as a collaboration between the city government and multiple stakeholders, including private investors, consumers, public/private/nonprofit partnerships, and interested citizens.



Testing 1, 2, 3: Results from a two-year study showed that in all aspects of development, Charlottesville's downtown mall has been a success. Retail sales are stable, business and residential property values continue to rise,

and the vacancy rate on 1.5 million square feet of commercial space is 1%. Data showed that the city center is now a retail destination for people living outside the city limits. There has been a steady flow of investments in the mall over the last decade, including an ice-skating rink, a six-screen movie theatre, numerous new restaurants and shops, and the renovation and relocation of two banks. Perhaps most telling, however, is that despite the presence of city government, three major banks, the main library, and a large branch of the post office, pedestrian traffic is highest on weekends and after business hours, when employees are not present and offices are closed.



Maintenance Required:

- It takes committed leadership in both the public and private sectors to successfully revitalize downtown. Success requires a long-term vision and comprehensive approach, instead of one easy fix. It has taken this community more than 20 years to build a successful downtown, and it is still a work in progress.
- Encourage mixed land and building use, maintaining a balance between public, commercial, and residential zoning. This keeps pedestrian traffic flowing at different times of the day, seven days a week. Success depends on active street life.



- Nurture private and nonprofit investments and public activities that are consistent with the vision and design of the mall. Examples include open-air cafes, a children’s museum, and free outdoor concerts during the summer months.
- Maintain the landscaping and other design features that create an inviting and aesthetically appealing space. Charlottesville’s mall contains 63 trees, with an average height of 50 feet.
- In planning new construction, retain the small scale and rhythm of the area’s historic structures. Preservation of historic resources is a necessary ingredient in creating and maintaining a place where people choose to be.



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Warning:

- Do not neglect infrastructure. Constant attention must be paid to “nonaesthetic” issues such as maintenance, parking, and public utilities.
- Be patient and flexible. Downtown revitalization takes time and involves constant interplay among public officials, private investors, private users of facilities, consumers, nonprofit organizations, and interested citizens.

Charlottesville, Virginia’s eight-block pedestrian mall constructed between 1975 and 1985 provided a catalyst for the revitalization of the central city, helped to stabilize the downtown retail market, and improved the quality of the physical environment in the downtown area. The pedestrian mall clearly is credited locally as being the most important reason for the downtown’s success. Charlottesville has created a public space that integrates commercial, residential, and civic use—a place where public and private, work and play, form and function are intimately and beautifully connected. For more information, see www.charlottesville.org.