Essential Information For Downtown Revitalization
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Perspectives

Downtown parking: It is not as bad as it seems

By Roberta Brandes Gratz

Stimulating the regeneration of a downtown or even nurturing the process after it has started is not rocket science. In fact, so many success stories abound that understanding what works and what does not is easy to learn. Interestingly though, with all the success stories to learn from, many downtowners make the same mistakes that were made when only the most observant few knew better.

The first mistake concerns parking: It is what too many point to first when they look for what's wrong.

"We don't have enough parking" comes forth like the chorus in a Greek play. This assumption is so pervasive that it can be a roadblock to confronting more substantive issues of downtown rejuvenation. The over-focus on parking interferes with thinking about the genuinely innovative solutions necessary to either jump-start downtown revitalization or give a boost to an ongoing rebirth momentum. Many downtowns unwittingly have more parking available than reasons to park.

Downtowns need parking, of course. But amazingly, in many downtowns, the actual number of existing spaces and how well they are used is often unknown. Worse, downtown merchants and their employees often park in front of their stores or in other choice parking spaces and then complain they lose business because parking space is insufficient. The least desirable, often-inconvenient spaces are left for the customers everyone wants.

The more fundamental question is rarely asked: What do we need to do to make downtown worth coming to? When a downtown's appeal is strong, people find a way to come.

So much about parking is psychological. Isn't it interesting the long distance — often the equivalent of several blocks — people will walk across a mall parking lot to get to a destination? Yet, in downtowns, they want to be able to park at the front door for free. It is often not that there is a shortage of spaces, just a shortage of free spaces where people want them to be.

The obsessive desire for adjacent or close parking too often leads to the loss of important buildings — important because they are often historic but also because they offer potential for uses to attract people downtown in the first place. The most tragic example of this happened last year in St. Louis, MO (pop. 348,200), where unyielding judges required across-the-street parking when they moved into the splendidly restored Old Post Office Building. Despite available parking already nearby, the historic Century Building — a classic 19th century office block — was demolished even though developers were ready to renovate it into apartments with street level retail.

Something similar almost happened in Catskill, NY (pop. 4,390), when a new County office building required demolition of an historic row of classic main street retail buildings with conversion potential above. In response to community opposition, the county redesigned the building, sacrificed a few extra parking spaces, and built a fine addition to the street

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with no complaints about parking.

What is often overlooked is that many downtowns have more space devoted to parking than buildings in active use. As much as half of many downtowns is given over to parking. The more space devoted to parking, the less "place" exists, and the fewer buildings there can be containing economic uses to generate visitors. Some experts believe that once a downtown devotes more than 30 percent of its space to parking, it loses its "sense of place."

The continuous ripping apart of the already torn urban fabric in downtowns of all sizes continues in the name of the need for more parking. Each case diminishes the potential of increased and improved downtown life.

The good news is that many communities have learned the benefits of traffic calming — wider sidewalks, curbside parking, and sidewalk amenities like benches, trees, and cafes. But more can be done. In particular:

• Restore the street grid where possible. Reopen closed streets that were not built on in the superblock era. The grid provides the most opportunity for economically productive buildings and pedestrian activity that add up to the street life every place longs for.

• Undo one-way traffic as much as possible. Two-way makes getting around town easier.

• Banish mall parking standards. Everyone has to drive to a mall; many downtown visitors achieve multi-trips on foot.

• Increase living opportunities, especially upstairs, to create a critical mass of people who can walk to everything.

• Reconsider the parking provisions required in most new projects. They are one-size-fits-all formulas that often don't apply.

• Give downtown residents parking privileges. One should enjoy a bonus for not having to drive everywhere.

• Provide for on-street parking, angled or curbside. If a street is not wide enough for both sides, at least do one.

• And, of course, make downtown worth coming to. In other words, give people a reason to come.

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