

Downtown Idea Exchange

Perspectives

Redeeming downtown's rooftops

By John L. Gann Jr.

Retail follows rooftops, as do offices, jobs, and most everything else these days. But it's not only those new greenfield rooftops that count. Among downtown's under-appreciated potentials are the older residential neighborhoods close to downtown, rooftops that can serve as a trade area for downtown and a nearby source of labor supply.

But if these often blight-free neighborhoods have been invisible to retailers, they've been even more invisible to most home buyers. The result is often aging demographics, conversions of homes to rentals, deferred maintenance, and depressed home prices. Yet paradoxically these areas offer amenities like non-look-alike homes, high-quality construction and architectural features, and mature landscaping unobtainable at any price in newer subdivisions.

Downtown programs have always sought ways to get people to come downtown. But there's also something to be said for making downtown a place people don't

have to "come to" because they're already just a few blocks away.

If they had appeal to a larger number and broader demographic of home buyers, in-town neighborhoods could do wonders for our downtowns. For more people, downtown could become the most convenient place to work, shop, or recreate instead of the least convenient.

There are things cities can do to foster that appeal, and the time is now right. High gasoline prices are making suburban living less practical, as are bloated new home prices. Suburbs are now old hat, and many people are ready for something new. And making in-town living more attractive is a kinder and gentler way than controversial growth controls to combat sprawl.

But it's still not an easy task, and every local situation is different. That means we need fine-tuned, bottom-up strategies to boost older neighborhoods rather than top-down, one-size-fits-all programs. Cities must be free to focus on the complex social, real

estate, and market factors involved rather than the historic preservation and simplistic cosmetic measures.

It should be more than obvious by now that urban neighborhoods can be managed most effectively by local leaders who know their communities. The best bet, therefore, for funding programs to revive neighborhoods would be devices like special assessment or tax increment districts or other totally local measures. Local funding will allow neighborhoods to pursue their own needs rather than having to comply with formulas dictated from outside.

Examples for other downtowns to follow might be indigenous local initiatives like Mayor Fred Brereton's of Belvidere, IL (pop. 20,820). His initial plans include a Neighborhood Development Day featuring a formal luncheon presentation to local leaders and an interactive workshop to explore neighborhood potentials, and the later creation of a staff position devoted to neighborhood programs.

Making his own home in an older part of town, Brereton's best idea, however, may be that of prevention. Although his neighborhoods are beginning to change demographically, they are still

This article was reprinted from the March 15, 2006 issue of *Downtown Idea Exchange*.

Interested readers may subscribe to the twice-monthly newsletter by visiting <http://www.downtowndevelopment.com> or phoning (212) 228-0246.

© 2006 Alexander Communications Group, Inc. All rights reserved.

No part of this article may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise without the prior written permission of Alexander Communications Group.

largely sound, and the mayor wants to strike first to keep them that way. Local initiatives like Belvidere's simply have too much to offer cities to be stopped much longer by turf-protecting bureaucrats. That's because these newer ideas share a common understanding that it is not pretty buildings or streetscapes but people that make or break our neighborhoods and downtowns.

The central reality missing from many of the programs of the past is that the more compelling we make downtown — and its nearby neighborhoods — as places to be for all kinds of people, the healthier our downtowns will become.

There's nothing better to put on downtown sidewalks than people. And there may be no more

effective way to do that than to get more of them living in neighborhoods around downtown, and have them filter through.

John L. Gann Jr. has devised a grass-roots model of marketing in-town neighborhoods to home buyers known as MORNING, Marketing Older Residential Neighborhoods to Invite New Growth. Contact him to learn more at (800) 762-4266 or citykid@uwalumni.com. ◆