

# Downtown Idea Exchange

## Perspectives

### Walk the walk to get the lay of the land

By Laurence Alexander

Downtowners need to deeply understand the land on which the central area is built. Ditto for the tracks, bridges, creeks, and other physical features that exist.

It is easy to neglect this as we study flat aerial photography and look at flat maps. But essentially these show us just a flattened-out, two-dimensional look at downtown. However, the area is often far from a mathematical flatland and never two-dimensional.

Similarly, we tend to visualize downtown as a group of streets, the street facades of buildings, and sometimes the views from the back. But again downtown is laced with creeks, ravines, rail tracks, bridge crossings, and a host of other strong features. Downtown is not just a two-dimensional photo or postcard view.

To gain a deeper understanding of downtown so we can plan better for improvement, we must look into some of these features. For example, many downtowns are built on slopes that range from mild to heart-stressingly steep. This characteristic, if present, is of overwhelming impor-

tance in determining the buildability of sites, the development costs, traffic flow and safety constraints, and critically, where pedestrians will happily stroll and what places they will shun.

#### How to get the “feel” of downtown

Whenever thinking about downtown, consider these actions early on.

- Get a topographic map with contours that show elevations and steep grades. This will help downtowners visualize issues about pedestrians and hills, sloping building sites, etc.
- Check to see if there are existing models of downtown that reveal the topography.
- Get aerial photography. Such images are useful in countless ways. Many times they are available with elevation contours. Even sites like Google offer mapping material like this.
- Absolutely best for general downtown planning, and good for preliminary decision making, walk,

walk, walk. You will feel the topography right in your feet and legs.

This is what shoppers, tourists, and others feel. Take along a good map and note the places where it's a little uncomfortable to walk.

In one study, the downtown main street was built on two plateaus and two steep climbs over the four-block strip. Reflecting the fact that people don't like climbing, the land values on the two flat blocks far exceeded those on the steep blocks. In fact, the land values were inversely proportional to the measured slope. Steeper is cheaper. The density of development on the flat lands was far higher than on the slopes.

Downtowners also need to get personally familiar with other influential physical aspects of the business district. The city planner and the city manager know about this. What's needed is for all downtowners to understand these aspects of downtown.

We tend to have a flat vertical image of downtown as a network of front street walls. Downtowners need to look at all four sides of the structures to see what they look like, how tall they are, what they are built of, etc.

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This includes an especially hard look at building rears and conditions.

Then, check where the rail rights-of-way are. How wide are they to cross? How hazardous and ugly are they?

What open spaces, parks, planting strips and other features are in place? Do they enhance downtown's appearance? Do they block logical pedestrian patterns?

### **Invite critical feedback via walking tours**

There is much more to look at, note, map, and evaluate. The idea is to enable people who have a stake or an interest in downtown to participate intelligently in effective planning and development to make downtown a better place, support downtown's econo-

my, and welcome more people.

To increase the downtowners' understanding of downtown, encourage people to walk around and note what they see, to scribble down their ideas about what's right and wrong. Get them to sketch, photograph, and tape what they observe. A very effective technique has been developed in several downtowns where groups of five or 10 people spend plenty of time touring around observing and noting. They are equipped with appropriate maps. Often a specialist from the planning department or the downtown association walks along as a resource.

After completing careful, leisurely tours, the group members sit together, discuss their observations, and put out a report on what they saw.

At that point, downtown has recruited and trained a solid bunch of people who understand much better downtown's physical strengths and weaknesses. They will know downtown from the soles of their feet up.

Of course, there are other facets of downtown that require equal attention such as population trends, competitive factors, market demographics, financial resources, and political decision-making strategies. Still, a solid, accurate comprehension of the physical downtown as people experience it is one of the foundations for future action.

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