

## **Creating Places In Action**

### **Putting It Together**

Traffic calming, in partnership with a variety of place making elements can help bolster the livability of many types of urban and town environments. The following examples of cities and towns that have made use of such improvements to successfully rejuvenate declining areas and restore their sense of community represent a variety of geographical and different size locales in the United States. Before these areas began to succumb to the automobile or suffer from the changes that it wrought, they were vital centers of community life where people lived, worked, shopped and played. They are not reclaiming their original roles and, in doing so, demonstrating the importance not only of restructuring streets and other public spaces to make way for a balance of activities and uses, but also of enhancing them, so that people can enjoy the comfort and feeling of familiarity and identification that give these places a true sense of ‘home base.’

#### **Portland, Oregon**

Almost 25 years ago, Portland, Oregon decided to adopt a new kind of downtown plan to reverse the ravages of urban sprawl and an ever-growing influx of traffic. Instead of pursuing prevailing policy, which was to plan for accommodating automobiles, Portland veered away from continuous road building and widening and concentrated on creating a lively and livable walking environment. Its innovative plan and some of its results, such as Pioneer Courthouse Square and Tom McCall Waterfront Park, have been mentioned in previous chapters. These and similar feats that have been achieved by going against the auto-centric grain, have made Portland one of the most livable cities in the United States today.

One of Portland’s first actions on the way to its envisioned status as a dynamic and comfortable place for people was to cancel its so-called Mount Hood Freeway project. Freeway funds were redirected to less auto-intensive transportation improvements, including a new light rail system running from Portland’s downtown to the suburbs. The role of this system in leveraging construction funding for Pioneer Courthouse Square, as well as the Square’s complementary role as a major transit hub for the system, have been discussed in Chapter VI. The Metropolitan Area Express or MAX, as it is called, has been in service since 1986 and transports some 25,000 people a day, far exceeding original passenger use projections.

Downtown, MAX travels through streets with mixed traffic as well as those it shares with pedestrians only. Sidewalks have been widened for waiting areas that include cafes, newsstands and other inviting activities. Along the route, amenities like light fixtures and transit shelters reflect traditional local design. In some places, paving includes cobblestones from old Portland streets. At suburban stops, new high density, mixed use development is being spurred by special zoning, to foster lively hubs that are accessible to walkers and cyclists. MAX’s original 15-mile route is now being supplemented with further suburban extensions.

Expanded and improved bus service and a downtown bus mall, opened in 1978, also are fulfilling Portland's vision. The buses, together with MAX, form a transit system used by over 40% of the city's downtown workforce. But the bus mall is more than just a stop-off point to catch the bus. Its brick paved sidewalks have been widened to 24 feet after cutting down four street lanes to two. These walks are lined with trees and furnished with simple, but well-designed, well-placed and well-cared-for amenities, such as benches, information kiosks and public art, which seem to be constantly in use, along with the mall's attractive bus shelters and waiting areas. The surroundings proclaim that people are welcome here, to linger a bit and enjoy the attractions of this unique urban environment.

Since the 1970s when the 'new era' began, Portland has added over 30,000 new jobs downtown, and its share of regional sales has climbed from under 10% to 30%. However, downtown Portland is not just a place to come to work, but a place with a gamut of interesting activities that enrich community life all day long. A new vendor licensing policy has led to colorful food and flower stands on sidewalks. Regulations have been adopted requiring new downtown buildings to allocate a minimum of 50% of their frontage to visible retail use with windows or displays, in other words, no blank walls allowed! Many downtown streets have been closed, while others have been narrowed down, yielding reclaimed space for new parks, walkways and bikeways. There is new housing, developed with the city's support that has created a critical mass of residents who enliven downtown all week long and into the evening, jogging in McCall Waterfront Park, going to restaurants, taking in entertainment, stopping for coffee or just walking around.

An array of festivals and special events also plays a large part in spicing up downtown life, drawing people from around the city and region to share in the revelry and enjoy the experience of strolling and mingling in Portland's public spaces. Hundreds of thousands take part each year in events like Artquake (See Chapter IV), while as many as a million people attend the Spring Rose Festival that takes place in the Waterfront Park and throughout the downtown. In between these annual festivities, there are numerous smaller goings-on, such as free concerts in the parks and a weekly "Saturday Market" for crafts in Portland's historic "Old Town."

This people-oriented approach extends to Portland's residential neighborhoods, where a new kind of classification systems been developed for arterial streets, based on their desired future function in communities, as determined in a broad citizen input process. This means that streets can not be "type-cast" to better reflect the small scale character and uses of the neighborhoods around them and be made more pedestrian-friendly. Another initiative to create streets that foster pleasant and walkable neighborhoods is Portland's "Skinny Streets" program for new residential localities. This program allows 20 foot wide streets with parking on one side or 26 foot wide streets with parking on both sides, freeing up space for non-motorist uses.

In the regional arena, Portland recognized early on that the lasting livability of a community is connected to what's going on in surrounding communities and in the total transportation-land use balance. Metro, the Portland-area regional government, was set up in 1979, to respond to the area's broad needs and foster mutual cooperation in planning for the future. As part of this impetus, an urban growth boundary was established to channel development into already settled areas, so as to discourage sprawl and preserve open space.

When Portland took the reins to redirect its future, it set in motion a new agenda that has put people's positive experience of place before the convenience of automobiles. This has led to new policies, plans and programs, like the ones discussed above, that have transformed downtown into a thriving, pleasing public environment and started to activate similar changes in Portland's neighborhoods and the surrounding region. Whereas air pollution was once a serious problem, it is now virtually non-existent. Whereas motor vehicles were once the only viable way to get to downtown Portland, now there are several transportation alternatives, including bicycling which is accessed by 5,000 daily riders.

All of this has generated a surge in Portland's popularity as a highly desirable place to live. As more and more people come to settle down, it appears that Portland's greatest challenge will be to handle the new growth in a way that will maintain its well-earned quality of life.

### **Third Street Promenade – Santa Monica, California**

It looks like a street, acts like a town square, yet it's neither. Whatever the case, as a place that works for people, Santa Monica's Third Street Promenade is one of the most successful in the country. Four million people come there a year and obviously enjoy rubbing elbows, whether they're shopping, eating at an outdoor cafe, watching strolling entertainers, going to the movies or just hanging out. These flocks include tourists, both foreign and domestic, habitués from all over Greater Los Angeles, plus multitudes of local denizens. It fully confirms William Whyte's observation that "what attracts people most is other people."

But why did people come there in the first place? It may be instructive to point out that people weren't always there. In 1965, following a nationwide trend to emulate the suburban mall in city centers (that later turned out to be misguided and mostly fruitless), Santa Monica turned three blocks of its main downtown street into the Third Street Mall, an ultra-spacious auto-free zone. The problem was that this extra-wide space was too big and too daunting for the pedestrian population. It conveyed a feeling of emptiness and inactivity that literally scared people away. The mall fell into a semi-deserted state and remained that way until the late 1980s, when it underwent a radical facelift, and was transformed into the Third Street Promenade.

Although the mall's overall width was maintained – 80 feet from one side of its building frontage to the other – its space was reshaped with streets and sidewalks, and automobiles were allowed back in on a limited basis. In this case however, the auto, when it was there, didn't dominate. The new two-lane street was only 20 feet wide, confining driving speeds to no more than 10 to 15 miles per hour. At intervals, median "plazas" were constructed, at which point the lanes would split and go around them. These "plaza" were landscaped, concrete islands with big, whimsical topiary statues of dinosaurs, fountains, fanciful newsstands, and ledges that more than fulfilled the sittability requirements of William Whyte's "human backside dimension." The widths of the "plaza" were 12-24 feet, while the new sidewalks ranged from 16 to 24 feet across. The sidewalks' wideness was offset by allocating up to 12 feet for sidewalk cafes, by planting trees and by placing bicycle racks, trash dispensers and other amenities in key places where they would be used. Then, to give people a special reason to come, movie theaters were invited to take part in the rejuvenation. This led to the opening of three motion picture complexes, with a total of 19 screens and 6,000 seats. Crowds were attracted right away and continue to be attracted to what has become a lively and exciting entertainment district. Today the Promenade also boasts six different bookstores, 80 restaurants and 150 big-name and mom and pop retailers, with all storefronts fully rented. Other occupants include a college, some churches and, above street level, apartments and offices, including a new influx of production studios. Sidewalk artists, street performers and push carts are out every day, and there is a large farmers market held on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

Another important part of this renewal has been the establishment of the Bayside District Corporation. This non-profit management arm works in partnership with the City of Santa Monica to oversee the operation of not only the Promenade, but also neighboring, and fully trafficked, Second and Fourth Streets. Maintenance and security of this "Bayside District" are handled by the city, based on the management corporations' recommendations. The corporation also guides the district's small events, such as food festivals, music and book fairs. Although Second and Fourth Streets will continue having car traffic, they now are in the process of being tied into Third with better visual connections.

In 1989, when the Third Street Promenade first opened, a system of flexible car use was introduced that gave entry to motorists at times when pedestrians were few and far between, for example, during the late night and early morning hours. People now get there not only by car, but by bicycles, rollerblades, skateboards, a free area shuttle and the Big Blue Bus System that travels all around Santa Monica and to a few destinations outside as well, such as downtown Los Angeles, Westwood and the L.A. Airport. In fact, the pedestrian influx now is so great that, except for emergency access, traffic has been banned completely. And should things change in the future, the infrastructure exists to allow traffic in again.

## **Dunedin, Florida**

Welcome to Dunedin – 15 mph speed zone. This is the sign that greets you as you're about to enter Main Street in this small west Florida town. The textured wood sign and a smaller one beyond it, repeating the speed limit, are not all that acknowledge your arrival. Between the traffic lane leading into Main Street and the one leading out is a handsome red brick wall, joined by two more that frame the outsides of the two traffic lanes. These walls act as a gateway, or more aptly, signal that you're about to experience a special place. Once beyond these walls, you find that they extend into short medians, with colorful flowers and trees that are followed by a series of other, similar, planted islands. Within the few blocks that make up this unusual little commercial area, a European-type approach to traffic calming has been boldly applied. And it works! Dunedin's special speed designation emulates the 30 km zone common in several European countries. In addition, there is a diagonal parking on alternating blocks, creating a zig-zag pattern that cars must carefully navigate. Landscaped neckdowns jut out at the street corners and mid-block, in line with the staggered parking and reinforcing the sharp bends in the street. The street's design actually self-enforces the speed limit. An extra deterrent to speeding is furnished by brick crosswalks that define the short crossing distances between the facing neckdowns. Brick paving adorns some of the sidewalks too, and in some instances, so does a grass strip trimming. There is no doubt that this is an environment catering to walkers.

Walking is made even more agreeable by attractive, comfortable and well-coordinated amenities, such as special lamppost-style lighting, rustic wooden signage on wooden poles and weather proof benches made of recycled plastic that looks like wood. There are also bicycle racks, with more now being added, to accommodate at least some of the ever-increasing numbers of cyclists (as many as 1300 on a weekend) arriving via the Pinellas Trail, an extended bicycle/pedestrian path that intersects Main Street.

Along Main Street, there are restaurants, clothing stores and specialty shops where there once were vacancies. Dunedin also has become known as a center for antiques: several antique shops grace the street, and two antique fairs are held a year. The community redevelopment agency reports that since the above changes have been in place, more and more local and area resident, as well as tourists, are frequenting Main Street as a shopping alternative to the typical suburban mall. The street's mix also includes a church, several offices, a daycare center and enough businesses providing day-to-day services so that nearby residents can take care of most of their needs without going elsewhere. Many people live on surrounding blocks. They can easily walk over to shop, and many of them do this.

Efforts to improve Main Street began in 1990 in reaction to an overabundance of through traffic that was adding nothing but congestion. Businesses had been hurting, and merchants were eager to make changes to enhance the area. As the project got under way, a Community Redevelopment Advisory Committee was set up composed of all types of professionals, business owners and other citizens. The Downtown Merchants Association was strongly involved, supplementing the improvements by sprucing up many of their own storefronts. The merchants continue to be involved in the street's

revival, sponsoring several events a year with the Community Redevelopment Agency, including the antiques fairs, two arts and crafts fairs, a “mardi gras”, a “wines and blues” festival and an “old fashioned Christmas.” These events drew as many as 20,000 people.

Since improvements were completed in 1992, business has gone up, and ground floor commercial space is 99% rented as opposed to only 80% prior to the project. Pedestrian activity has increased, in fact, the people who come to Main Street now are not just passing through, but are there specifically to shop, dine and walk around. Dunedin’s Main Street is now considered both a destination point on the Pinellas Train and a town center where people can socialize and be part of an active community environment.

### **College/Chapel District – New Haven, Connecticut**

At the southern border of Yale University sits a small neighborhood that belies the common image of what we sometimes think of as inner city New Haven. This enclave, referred to as the College/Chapel District, encompasses two pleasant, people-filled blocks with a lively diversified environment. The traditional look and feel of this downtown area gives the impression that it has existed this way for many, many years. Actually, its condition today is primarily the result of the efforts of one private developer, working in cooperation with the city.

Until the early 1960s, the area was considered to be one of the most popular places in town, with several theaters and shops, as well as a residential population. By the early 1980s, it was practically empty. The buildings were 95% vacant. Most residents were gone, and on one corner, there was a Single Room Occupancy facility. A few deserted theaters remained from New Haven’s heyday as a prime “tryout” center for Broadway-bound shows.

Believing that the area could be renewed, with the theaters as anchors for new shops, restaurants and other varied uses, the developer embarked on an unusual endeavor by privately financing the purchase of buildings and taking on the full responsibility of rehabilitation, leasing and public space management. Although it was hoped that the refurbished theaters would help revive the city’s cultural life, the project was not conceived as a theater district. Rather it was seen as a way to create an active, downtown mixed use neighborhood.

Development work, which largely entailed the renovation of old and historic structures, began in 1982 and continued through 1984, although even now new improvements are always being added. This concentration on the preservation and restoration of existing buildings is one reason why the area’s traditional character has been maintained. The owners’ leasing policy has been another strong influence on the retention of an ambience that seems to have endured from the past. During renovations, efforts were made to retain and upgrade many existing tenants, from a cigar store to a health food restaurant. The leasing emphasis has always been on locally owned and operated retail, and chain stores have been resisted. Retail spaces are now always 90% to 95% rented, ranging

from a jeweler to a bicycle store, and to a coffee shop, with seating outside, that has become the local “hangout,” a place where people meet their friends and classmates and bump into others they haven’t seen “in ages.”

Another important component in the development of the district as a dynamic, congenial walking locale with a distinct public identity was a plan to introduce streetscape improvements. These improvements, implemented by New Haven’s transportation department in 1983, included widening of the sidewalks by three and, in some cases, five feet, along with extensions at their corners, and addition of parallel parking on both sides of the street, leaving two lanes of traffic. Brick pavers were installed in the crosswalks and along the perimeters of some sidewalks. Amenities were also added, including trees, benches, bike racks, trash dispensers, special lighting, plantings and public art. Three outdoor cafes now occupy the extended sidewalk, and, with so many people passing by, a newspaper stand has also opened on one of the corners.

The College/Chapel District today is a well-used, mixed use area that includes 400 residential units, 55 retailers and restaurants and 100 commercial tenants in upper level offices. There are some 25 restaurants in the general vicinity, drawing people from outside the neighborhood for a variety of dining experiences and for pre-theater dinners in the weekend. Two theaters have been completely rehabilitated, the Shubert, which is now run by the non-profit Shubert Performing Arts Center, presenting Broadway shows, opera, dance, musical concerts and family entertainment, and the Palace (formerly the Sherman), which, under the operation of the same private developer, presents a full range of concerts and special events. In addition, there are six nightclubs, adding to the area’s liveliness late at night on the weekends.

The neighborhood is busy both night and day, on weekdays and weekends, with residents, office personnel, shoppers, students and visitors. Whereas before the new changes, no one used the area, now thousands of people come there to dine out, go to shows, shop, socialize, work and walk around. Many Yale students walk to the district. Many people ride in on their bicycles. Police maintain a presence nearby; however, there have been no problems with crime. A maintenance crew operates full-time, paid for by the tenants’ common area charges. This extensive crew helps to sustain the area’s integrity and its image as a viable and secure place, while keeping it running smoothly. The district continues to be managed by the private developer, with little direct assistance from the city, although it is highly supportive of the project. In the developer’s estimation, a centralized management and leasing approach, with one organization in charge, is what has facilitated the success of this area and maintenance of its high standard of quality.

### **San Bernardino, California**

In 1992, the citizens of San Bernardino, California were asked what they thought would make their downtown a more appealing, comfortable and usable place – in other words, a place that people would look to as the real core of the community and where they would

want to come. A series of brainstorming sessions, workshops and interviews were held with community members. An extensive outreach program was conducted with school groups, various neighborhoods and through newspaper “calls for ideas.” Out of these came the raw material that shaped a vision for the rebirth of downtown San Bernardino, one that builds upon the steady progress of a revitalization effort already in the works and that directly responded to the needs the community revealed.

Among the community’s ideas and wish lists, there were two recurrent aspirations. The first was to have more events and activities downtown, which people saw as a potential center for community entertainment and get-togethers. There was an abundance of suggestions for types of events too, from art festivals to outdoor dances. The second desire was to provide for the accessibility of such activities by making streets easier and safer to cross and generally improving the downtown pedestrian environment.

In view of San Bernardino’s development history, this was a logical response. Back in the 1960s, looking to stem the rush to suburban shopping malls, the City had built the million square foot Carousel Mall, right on the site of the downtown’s once lively Main Street. Where once many events and activities took place, there now was an imposing structure that turned inward, surrounded by sprawling parking lots. At the same time, also in mimicry of the suburban model, streets had been widened to make more room for cars. This led to speeding drivers and difficulty in crossing downtown streets.

In response to community views, a long-term plan was developed that included the creation of a mixed-use arts and entertainment district. In addition, a short-term program was put together to introduce improvements that could begin working quickly. What followed was a lesson in how small-scale, community-based changes completed in a short time can provide immediate benefits that set the stage for significant long term development.

The initial undertaking was an experimental diagonal parking program to slow vehicles, increase parking and reduce the width of streets at crosswalks. A “rest run” on one major downtown street not only assuaged local officials’ concerns about potential negative traffic congestion (it never materialized). It also resulted in pedestrian volumes doubling on the street and the number of parked vehicles increasing 25%.

What’s more, once diagonal parking was in place, the street changed personality, from a bare, off-putting stretch to an intimate, welcoming urban environment. The success of this venture led to a permanent diagonal parking program which now has extended four blocks, as well as onto cross streets.

While diagonal parking was shaping downtown’s central streets, in the works was a new vital place where the people of San Bernardino could come together, take part in community activities and enjoy all kinds of events. In less than a year, a spanking new town square arose on a former derelict-space-cum-parking lot right in the center of town. Court Street Square, as it is called, has become a bustling hub of daily crowd – drawing activities, as well as a focal point for community life and involvement. Green laws, beds of flowers, shrubs and flowering trees provide the setting for a variety of town fairs and festivals, weekly vendor sales, art shows and even weddings. A large open air tent with

professional stage and sounds equipment is the venue for continuing concerts, theatrical presentations, dance programs, lectures, fundraisers, fashion shows and other entertainments, including what has now become a traditional Friday “Jazz and Blues” night, a “Shakespeare in the Square” series entering its fourth year and an annual “RocktoberFest.”

As many as five events are held on a weekend at this new public meeting place, all under the management of Main Street, a division of the city’s Economic Development Agency. Main Street not only sees to the maintenance, programming and smoothly running schedule of Court Street Square, but also Arranges for the rental of equipment, such as podiums, chairs, tables, umbrellas and kitchen facilities, for meetings and events sponsored by a variety of private organizations. It is estimated that more than 250,000 people now come to this town beehive of activity in a year, enjoying the fruits of a planning process that really heeded their input.

Another outcome of Court Street Square and other short range improvements has been momentum. A baseball stadium has now been built. A new state office complex is almost completed. New businesses are beginning to rehab and occupy downtown buildings, bringing jobs with them. Development of an Arts District is also proceeding with the conversion of an empty hotel into residential lofts for artists and of a block of deserted buildings into a colony for arts related activities. In addition, permanent neckdowns now abut the diagonal parking, furnished with trees, planter boxes and trash dispensers that coordinate with the lighting, banners and other amenities that are continuing to be installed around downtown. New retail tenants are moving in, and outdoor cafes are opening. There are plans to retrofit Carousel Mall to face the street and relate to pedestrians, as well as to develop a cinema complex.

As longer term projects begin to be implemented, Court Street Square and other shorter term improvements are providing the underpinning that links them together. The community will continue to reap the benefits of these early changes, for they are now an integral part of downtown life.

### **The Role of the Community**

The above five examples are just a tiny fraction of the place making initiatives that are beginning to be put into action in the United States today. Even so, all the initiatives that exist are still minuscule in comparison to the many neglected communities still needing to be nursed back to health. What can communities do to “get the show on the road?” The next chapter addresses this important question.