

What Makes a Town Center a *Town Center*?

by Kennedy Smith

One of the forces that creates value is scarcity, or uniqueness. A baseball autographed by Babe Ruth is worth more than an unsigned baseball. A postage stamp with a misprint is more valuable than one printed correctly. And, town centers with unique characteristics – historic buildings, mom-and-pop businesses, unusual traditions – tend to be more valued by residents (and visitors) than more predictable town centers. When it comes to downtowns, serendipity and individuality can translate into a strong sense of community.

Scores of communities are building new town centers these days, from automobile suburbs that never had them before, to new communities that want them as part of the whole new community plan. Many of these new town centers are handsome places, with inviting public spaces and an appealing mix of uses. And they typically have lots of well-planned details, like arcades that keep shoppers safe from the rain en route from the parking deck to the main street, and trash collection areas tidily fenced off and tucked away behind the storefronts.

While they are far better than the alternative of strip shopping centers, regional malls, and lifestyle centers (see Philip Langdon's article on page 4 for a good discussion of what distinguishes a town center from a lifestyle center), many of these new town centers nonetheless lack a certain ... something.

The stores may look suspiciously like the ones at the shopping mall. The buildings may appear too uniformly clean, with not a single poorly-scaled sign or protruding air conditioner window unit disrupting the streetscape. The odds are good that the town center's stores maintain common hours, opening and closing in unison (anyone familiar with independently owned businesses knows that it's

just not normal for mom-and-pops to agree with each other on things like store hours).

I'm certainly not suggesting that conforming to design standards or having predictable store hours are bad things to do. But the centralized management and all-at-once development of a new town center (or, for that matter, a lifestyle center or shopping mall) can have a stifling effect. A town center should not simply be a gussied up shopping mall. Instead, it should be part of the community's DNA, shaped over time by the people who live there as much as by the developer (or developers) who initially designed and built it. A town center will best succeed if it's an active and animated place, with its own distinct personality.

Fortunately, this organic-ness isn't just a factor of age and evolution; a town center doesn't have to be old or historic to have it. While serendipity itself can't necessarily be planned, the planning process *can* create the sort of fertile envi-

ronment that will allow a town center to evolve over time. Here are some things to keep in mind when planning for town center development:

- *Nexus*: For millennia, main street districts have grown up at the intersection of the two busiest streets in a community. Even if one of those "streets" was a river, lake, or ocean, main streets have always thrived at crossroads. If you're developing a true town center, it should be at such a nexus, not on the fringe of town.

- *The presence of independent businesses*. Independent businesses are the true lifeblood of town centers and are as important as the design of its buildings, streets, and public spaces in creating a unique sense of place and personality.

Neil Takemoto of CoolTown Studios did a survey last year of some of the most successful historic/older commercial districts in the country (places like Ann Arbor, Michigan; Athens, Georgia; and Burlington, Vermont) and found that an



Trying to allow for character, and even individuality, within the context of a planned town center is difficult, but possible, as seen in San Jose, California's, Santana Row (above and next page).



average of only 13 percent of the businesses in these districts are national retailers.¹ While town center developers love those national tenants – their performance is much more predictable – having at least a few highly-visible, well-marketed independents can really transform the character of a place.

Independent businesses don't simply give a town center a distinctive personality; they are also incubators of great new ideas and mirrors of local character. While it might be great to have national retailers, it's the locally owned business, not The Gap or Restoration Hardware, that is likely to spin off a new business or support (or even spawn) local industry. There are many things planners can do to cultivate locally owned businesses, from helping make financing available for small business development to enacting ordinances prohibiting "formula businesses" or limiting the proportion of overall retail space they occupy.

- *Unpredictability.* Independent businesses help make a town center unpredictable. But tossing in some design unpredictability also helps. Historic main streets aren't cute – they're kind of rugged. The signs don't all look alike. They often have one or two unexplainably quirky buildings. They reflect the personalities of many different building

¹ <www.cooltownstudios.com>. The author is a member of CoolTown Studios' "guild" of professionals involved in creating cool communities.

and business owners, not just that of one developer.

- *Traditions.* Really great main streets have really cool traditions – one-of-a-kind festivals that draw people from miles around or that just pull together the neighborhood to kick back for a relaxing evening. Some of the best traditions are things that "insiders" know about, but that visitors don't. Independent businesses, by the way, are better at creating in-store traditions and at participating in district-wide traditions than national retailers, as they don't need anyone's permission to vary from the corporate norm.

- *Mixed uses.* No town center will feel like (or be) authentic without, at a minimum, including apartments and offices to augment its retail businesses. And by also incorporating civic, religious, and even compatible industrial uses into a town center, its character and vitality will be further enhanced.

- *Original design.* Historic main streets work well, design-wise, because they fuse together designs of different eras, ultimately reflecting the community's entire history. Each building tells the story of the time in which it was built, and of the aspirations of its builder. And each new building adds to the overall visual richness of the district.

Having design guidelines for a town center can help ensure a cohesive appearance, so that the buildings work together well in terms of their size, massing, and relationship to each other. However, as I noted, this needs to be balanced with allowing for some amount of design unpredictability. Not an easy task, but an important one.

- *Room for future development.* Our historic main streets grew organically over a period of time. While a core of several blocks of buildings might have been developed at more or less the same time, main street districts grew outward from there, with ongoing infill. This allowed the district to continue to accommodate new uses and reflect the community's ongoing history. Today's town centers should also be planned so they can expand, and evolve, over time.

- *Fuzzy edges.* Real main streets don't

have an abrupt beginning or an abrupt end. They are interlaced into the surrounding community, gradually emerging from the residential or industrial neighborhoods in which they are rooted.

- *Civil rights.* Real main streets let the VFW guys sell poppies there on Memorial Day and let the peace activists do petition drives. Most shopping malls – and some new town centers – don't. Let people feel like the place really belongs to the community, not to the management company, and it will become their community. ♦

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What Can Planners Do?

If you're a planner or planning commissioner in a community that's considering developing a new town center, there are several things you might want to consider:

- Leave room for growth. Start with a strong core – but allow space for the district to become larger over time.
- Encourage individual ownership of at least some of the parcels.
- Use "shopping mall" tools to help create the development – land assembly, financing, etc. – but don't assume that means the resulting development must behave like a shopping mall.
- Cultivate locally owned businesses. Create training programs, provide seed financing and access to expansion capital, and offer ongoing mentorship to new retailers. All of these things will make it easier for developers to lease space to independent businesses.
- Actively participate in the district's management. A town center isn't just a real estate project; it's a dynamic part of the community. The more management is shared, the more local residents will embrace the district – and the more it will become an integral part of the community.