

PLANNING
COMMISSIONERS

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For America's Municipal & County Planning Boards

Planning for New Downtown Development

by Suzanne Sutro Rhees

Almost everyone has a mental picture of the "traditional" downtown: a Main Street lined with two- or three-story block buildings with

ground-floor retail or office uses and offices or apartments upstairs. The building walls frame the street, which

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Design Guidelines:

STILLWATER, MINNESOTA

Stillwater, known as the "Birthplace of Minnesota," is a city of 12,000 on the St. Croix River about 25 miles northeast of the Twin Cities. Its historic downtown has helped make it a popular tourist destination. Between 1989 and 1991 the city replaced its downtown light industrial zoning with a new Central Business District, established a National Register historic district, and adopted downtown design guidelines. The guidelines, which deal with both rehabilitation and infill, state that:

The basic principle for new construction in historic Downtown Stillwater is to maintain the scale and character of present buildings.... The reproduction of historic design and details is expensive, artificial and is recommended only in some special cases of infill or small scale construction.

The guidelines include standards for setbacks, height, proportion, and rooflines for infill construction. They also cover elements such as rear entrances, screening of utility areas, percentage of window openings, signage, landscaping, and building materials. Parking lot screening is required, and parking structures must be designed according to the standards for other buildings. Trademark building design (chain architecture) is prohibited.

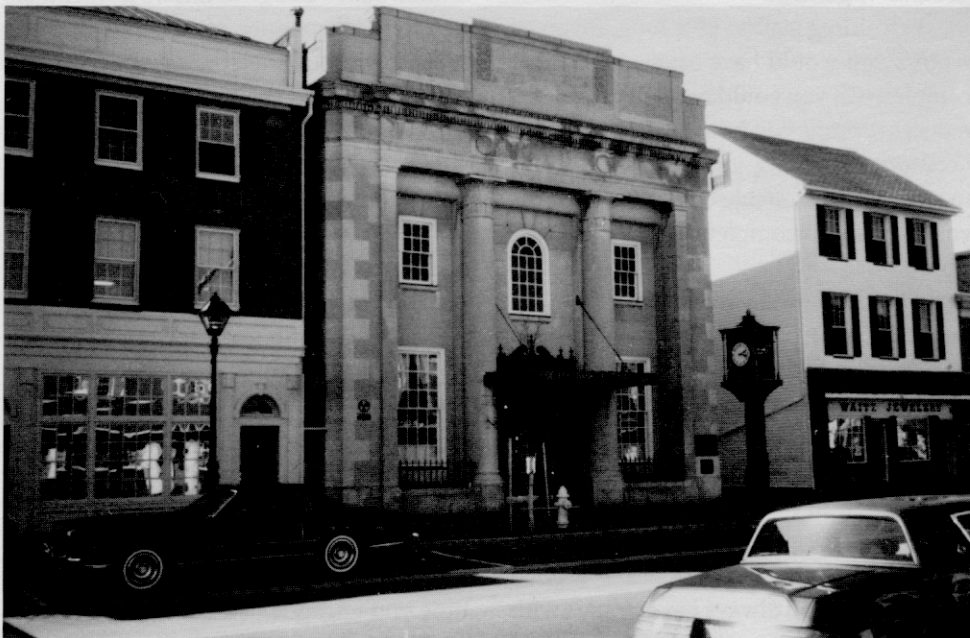
Since the ordinance was adopted, most downtown development has consisted of remodeling projects rather than new construction. These have been extensive: city staff estimate that \$5 million has been spent on rehabilitation in the last three years. During that period, the city invested \$7 million in downtown improvements to streets, sidewalks, utilities, and lighting.

For a copy of Stillwater's Design Manual, send \$5 to City of Stillwater, 216 N. Fourth St., Stillwater, MN 55082-4898.

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in turn is lined by sidewalks, on-street parking, and sometimes amenities such as shade trees and street furniture. It is a familiar, reassuring image, assuming that the downtown economy is healthy and that the storefronts are occupied. Contrast this with another image: the one-story "mini-mall" with parking in front; the single-purpose office building set in the middle of large parking lots; the chain restaurant with its drive-through lane and "Anywhere USA" architecture — all separated from



Traditional downtown "Main Street" in Burlington, New Jersey — population 10,000.

each other by ubiquitous parking lots and driveways.

Now ask this: how can the traditional downtown attract needed new development without reducing the first image to the second one? Can new buildings and uses be added to the existing fabric of downtown without destroying its character? An understanding of some basic zoning techniques and design principles can assist the planning commission in finding a good "fit" between old and new.

ZONING FLEXIBILITY

First, examine the downtown zoning. Although it seems self-evident that the zoning should permit or encourage desirable uses, many downtowns still contain outmoded industrial districts in areas now more suitable for retail, office or residential uses. Where retail uses are permitted they should be defined narrowly enough to keep certain intensive "heavy commercial" uses (for example, auto-oriented businesses such as car dealerships, service stations and repair shops) some distance from Main Street.

A useful zoning technique is to only permit the larger or more intensive commercial uses on a "special permit" or conditional use basis. In other words, such uses may be permitted only if they can meet a number of clearly specified conditions, covering issues such as traffic, noise,

and compatibility with surrounding uses. Used judiciously, the special permit/conditional use process is a good way to place these issues on the table during the development review process. [Editor's Note: See "Special Permits: What They Are & How They Are Used," in Issue 3 of the Journal for more on this zoning technique].

In addition to specifying certain uses downtown, the zoning ordinance should be designed to encourage reuse of existing buildings and construction of compatible new buildings. This means that lot sizes and setbacks, as well as building coverage or impervious coverage limitations, should be based on what already exists in the downtown, rather than on some suburban ideal. If a "one size fits all" commercial district is used for both downtown and new suburban development, it is more than likely that the existing downtown will fail to meet the zoning requirements.

In general, the traditional downtown will contain a mix of retail, office and residential uses. To encourage more of a certain use, say second-story apartments, a useful technique is to offer a density bonus for this type of development. For example, an increase in maximum building coverage or floor area ratio might be permitted, or residential units might be exempted from density requirements. Second-story apartments can help to provide affordable housing while keeping downtown buildings occupied. Many communities have also found that the downtown is an ideal place for elderly housing (apartments or some type of congregate housing) often in a rehabilitated building such as a hotel.

Parking is often a constraint on new development in urban settings that predate the automobile. However, a thriving downtown encourages pedestrian movement between several destinations, reducing the need for separate parking for each use. Permitting shared parking for compatible uses (residential and office uses, or offices and restaurants) can create a more efficient parking pattern. Other flexible parking strategies include allowing the use of off-site parking — a municipal lot, for example — and adjacent on-street parking to meet zoning requirements. [Editor's Note: For more on how to make our streets

more "pedestrian-friendly," see "Taming the Automobile," in Issue 1 of the Journal].

DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

Design issues are vital to maintaining the traditional "look" and character of the downtown. A few simple principles can be expressed either through the zoning ordinance itself or through a set of design guidelines with illustrations of "good" and "bad" examples. Drawings or photos give both the planning commission and the applicant a much better grasp of the pre-





A walkway links parking structure in Edina, Minnesota, to downtown commercial district.

ferred development pattern than words alone can provide.

Respect the street line. Most Main Street buildings meet the sidewalk with no intervening setback, and new buildings should generally do the same. Zoning ordinances usually specify a "minimum" setback; why not a "maximum" as well? This leads to another rule of thumb:

Don't let a parking lot separate the building from the street. Instead, encourage parking on the street itself, in the rear or side yard, or in an off-site community parking lot. This rule will conflict with a basic principle of modern retailing: maximize visibility of and access to parking. Nonetheless, many Main Streets have improved and sustained their commercial viability through a combination of on-street, rear yard, and off-site parking.

 "Santa Barbara..." p. 6 Both parking and driveway access can be centralized and shared by a number of businesses, creating safer, clearer traffic patterns. Where side yard parking abuts the street it should be screened by a low hedge or an attractively designed fence or wall.

Encourage architectural compatibility. New buildings should reflect, but not slavishly replicate, the rhythm and scale of existing ones. Building height, roof shape, the rhythm of openings, and predominant building materials are all design elements that can be specified without dictating a certain historical style or stamping out originality. Many towns and cities have produced their own design guidebooks that illustrate their particular stylistic elements.  "Design Guidelines" p. 4

Encourage pedestrian-friendly spaces and coordinated landscaping. Presumably all new downtown development would include extensions or upgrades of sidewalks. However, new development can also create additional spaces: small plazas, landscaped walkways between buildings, and wider sidewalks that can accommodate outdoor cafes and other seasonal uses. Creation of such spaces can be encouraged through bonuses and incentives in the zoning ordinance. Likewise, a coordinated plan for landscaping and street furniture — planters, benches, light standards — establishes a coherent framework into which new buildings can easily fit. Of course, some public investment, perhaps combined with strategies such as special service districts or tax increment financing, is usually needed to initiate these improvements in the existing downtown.

Require appropriate signage. Small hand-crafted signs are appropriate for a downtown environment of narrow storefronts and pedestrian or slow-moving vehicular traffic, while large plastic back-lit signs are usually out of place. Free-standing signs are generally not feasible where buildings meet the street without a front yard; instead, wall signs (both flat and projecting) are common. Sign size, type and location can be controlled by the zoning ordinance, while design guidelines can specify preferred materials (wood, metal,

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Downtown Markets

Many communities, both large and small, are making use of downtown parking lots or streets during the weekend for farmers markets or for the sale of local crafts. Not only does this bring people into the downtown area, generating spin-off benefits for downtown merchants, but it provides a low-cost way for farmers and craftspeople to sell their products.

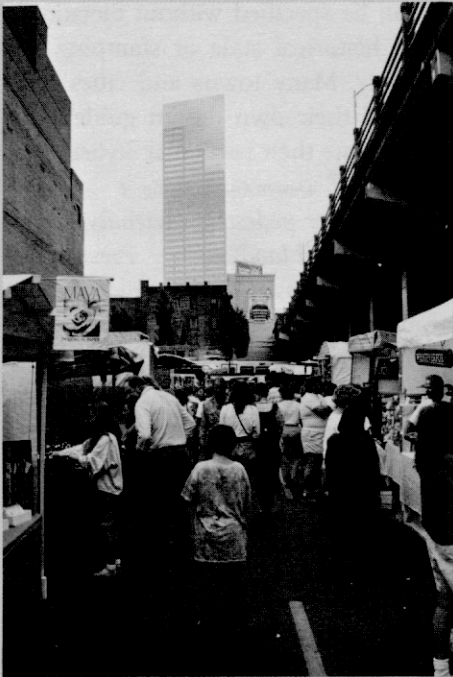


PHOTO: PORTLAND SATURDAY MARKET

Portland, Oregon's "Saturday Market"

One excellent example of this is Portland, Oregon's "Saturday Market" — now in its twentieth year of operation. Some 270 vendors sell crafts, food and produce at a site located partly on a parking lot next to the City's downtown district. A



PHOTO: DOWNTOWN DEVELOPMENT BOARD

The Downtown Orlando Farmers Market.

newer, but equally successful, weekend market is Orlando, Florida's Downtown Farmers Market. Located underneath an elevated portion of Interstate 4, the site was designed with the possible use of a farmers market in mind, and has electric outlets, pedestrian walkways, benches, and flattened curbs (which make life easier for vendors and their carts). In operation since 1989, the Market has 46 stalls where fresh produce, plants, and baked goods are sold. It has quickly become a popular downtown "meeting place" on Saturday mornings.

EDITOR'S NOTE:



Santa Barbara's Downtown Parking

Santa Barbara, California, has an especially aggressive strategy of providing public parking to support its main downtown retail district. Started in the 1960s as a way of stabilizing the City's retail core, there are now twelve public parking lots (four of them multi-level) located behind nine blocks of State Street. Access to the parking is from side streets, and the lots are connected to State Street by paseos (pedestrian walkways).



Wal-Mart Study

In a recent article in *Governing*, Alan Ehrenhalt examined the impact of Wal-Mart stores on small towns. He cited an Iowa State University study that found that in thirty Iowa towns where Wal-Marts had located, total retail sales went up — but at the expense of local businesses, which lost sales to the big discount store. One exception, however, was the town of Carroll, Iowa, which required Wal-Mart to locate on a vacant parcel within three blocks of downtown, creating a synergistic, rather than competitive, relationship with downtown retailers. See "Up Against the Wal-Mart," *Governing*, Sept. 1992, pp. 6-7.

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neon) and color schemes for signs.

LARGE NEW USES ON THE EDGE OF DOWNTOWN

The preceding strategies are easiest to apply to a single building that fills a gap in the downtown core. But what happens on the periphery, where vacant lots or surface parking may predominate? Is it possible to assimilate a really large new use — a discount store or a corporate headquarters, for example — into the fringes of downtown? "Wal-Mart Study" How about a parking structure, which may be necessary to the overall economic health of the district?


In fact, a downtown location for such uses is usually better than their typical placement on the edge of town, in a commercial strip, or in an office park. The ideal situation is to convert an existing building, such as a vacant warehouse, to accommodate a large office, retail, or even storage use. In many cases, however, new construction will be necessary. Since these new businesses often have very specific parking and circulation requirements, it may not be possible to follow the design principles listed above to the letter.

The key is to preserve a pedestrian scale, especially on the side of the building adjacent to downtown. This could mean a double-fronted retail complex where one side preserves the street line and scale of adjacent buildings while the other side provides easy vehicular access and parking. Even a new shopping center can be linked to its surroundings by placing smaller buildings along the street frontage, screening the view of the parking lot. In cases where these strategies are not feasible (for instance, because of grading problems), the presence of sidewalks, parking lot screening and landscaping, and street furniture can help to link a large new building to its downtown setting.

The development of a large vacant site can sometimes yield a major public amenity such as a town square or plaza that can act as a link between new and existing



A franchise convenience store fits into the block in Chestnut Hill section of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

development. Even a new parking lot can be landscaped and designed for public use on weekends for farmers' markets or craft fairs.  "Downtown Markets."

Parking structures can be greatly improved by insisting that retail stores be located on the ground floor and by employing a "false front" design, with building materials that echo those of surrounding buildings.

FRANCHISE ARCHITECTURE

One of the most difficult challenges planning commission face is dealing with franchise restaurants or stores in the downtown. The standardized architecture, parking, and site plans for franchises often ignore local character. However, many communities have stuck to their guns and succeeded in requiring compatible and context-sensitive designs. Edward T. McMahon, a Senior Associate at the Conservation Fund, has been conducting research on place-sensitive franchise design. He has found that franchise location is first and foremost an economic decision — and that once a company decides to locate in a particular area, it is often willing to occupy an existing building (often at considerable cost savings) or to construct a new one that responds to its downtown context. McDonald's is one example of this: its Cedarburg, Wisconsin, restaurant is located in a new limestone building with a low monument sign; in Stowe, Vermont,

the McDonald's looks like a traditional New England building; while in Raleigh, North Carolina, the fast-food restaurant occupies a former movie theater and uses the marquee for its sign.

Some communities require compliance with design standards through a historic district ordinance or a special overlay district that applies to specific areas or uses. Scottsdale, Arizona, for instance, encourages a "Southwestern" architectural style for commercial and multi-family buildings, while New Orleans requires that fast food restaurants in certain districts go through a site plan review process to ensure compatibility with their setting. Others have relied on negotiation to bring about voluntary compliance with design guidelines.

BUILDING SUPPORT FOR NEW DOWNTOWN STRATEGIES


Implementing the strategies suggested in this article is not always easy. The planning commission may face opposition from business owners or developers who feel that zoning changes, site plan review or design guidelines would unreasonably restrict their freedom to develop their properties. It is important to build support for any actions affecting the downtown by involving those groups in the planning process. The National Trust for Historic Preservation's Main Street program (the inspiration for many statewide programs) offers a useful model for involving the business community in

positive actions for downtown revitalization, including coordinated store hours, events and promotions, and joint marketing efforts — in addition to building renovations and design standards. Many towns have also found that establishing an advisory committee or task force on downtown planning and zoning is a good way to educate and involve the various interest groups and the public that will ultimately benefit from a healthy and attractive downtown.

Suzanne Sutro Rhees is a planner and writer living in Minneapolis. She formerly worked as a community planner with the Montgomery County Planning Commission in South-eastern Pennsylvania, providing planning and zoning assistance to a number of that county's municipalities. Suzanne is the author of "Reinventing the Village: Planning, Zoning and Design Strategies."



Resources:



The National Main Street Center is a membership organization which produces a monthly newsletter, the *Main Street News*, as well as other publications on various aspects of downtown planning, design and economic development. The Center is located at the National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1785 Massachusetts Ave., N.W., Washington, DC 20036; (202) 673-4000.

Reinventing the Village (Planning Advisory Service Report No. 430, 1990), by Suzanne Sutro Rhees, focuses on how to adapt the design strategies of the neotraditional town planning movement to protect and even expand existing village centers. It is available for \$24 from the American Planning Association Bookstore, (312) 955-9100. Ms. Rhees would also be glad to answer any questions you may have about her article; she can be reached at: (612) 823-5896.