

## REDEVELOPING DOWNTOWN PITTSBURGH — THE LAST 20 YEARS

### **ABSTRACT:**

*Some success, some unfulfilled challenges. Success: advancing mixed-use, new types of housing, entertainment, historic preservation, large destination venues (convention center, stadiums, casino). These have transformed a formerly industrial city to a rich, diversified metropolitan core. Unfulfilled: retail revitalization.*

The history of downtown revitalization efforts in Pittsburgh is similar to that of many other rust belt cities after the Second World War, when the decline of American downtowns began in earnest. The City of Pittsburgh's population peaked at more than 700,000 inhabitants right after the war, but now hovers at around just 320,000. Cleveland has suffered a similar fate, falling from 914,808 in 1950 to 438,042 in 2007. Moreover, the whole Pittsburgh metropolitan area has seen a significant population decline as well, as the earthquake effect of the disappearance of the steel industry continues to send aftershocks through the region some 25 years later. But Pittsburgh—and Downtown in particular—has unique assets that continue to maintain a healthy and growing urban core. Downtown's centrality—geographically, in terms of transportation accessibility and for the region's identity—has supported its continuing role as a professional and corporate business center, for professional sporting venues, and increasingly, for entertainment and residential development.

### **AT ITS CENTER, A HEALTHY URBAN CORE**

Most fundamentally, the landscape has shaped the nature of the city to centralize its form and emphasize the center. Downtown Pittsburgh sits at the confluence of the so-called “Three Rivers” where the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers converge to form the Ohio River. The dramatic setting where they meet is a natural bowl-shaped landform that creates a strong spatial enclosure and sense of place. A geographically-restricted development area for the historic downtown between the rivers has also led to a small but highly concentrated walkable central area known locally as the “Golden Triangle.”

Beyond that, just as all water flows to the confluence, all roads almost literally lead to Downtown, which perhaps more than any other factor has contributed to its continued strength as a business center. This is because the eroded topography—with its numerous steep, narrow valleys flowing toward the major rivers—combined with the population loss and slow-going economy have conspired to prevent the construction of suburban beltways.

Downtown thus remains the most logical and easily accessible location for new business investment. Although some businesses have moved to the suburbs, it is still the undisputed corporate and professional business hub for the region. In addition, in the last two and a half decades, the City of Pittsburgh along with nonprofits and the major employers that have remained there—in particular, the banks—continues to make investments in the city core. The sustained density of the core stands in contrast to rust belt cities such as Cleveland or Detroit, which have large areas of vacant land

in the city center. One bellwether of urban success is the cost of parking downtown; parking costs about three times as much in Downtown Pittsburgh as it does in Cleveland.

This is not to say that there has not been suburban sprawl—there has, and it dates back 50 years. In the Pittsburgh area, major growth has occurred along new radial highways that have been constructed—and Pennsylvania in general now has one of the highest rates of suburban sprawl in the country [see “Back to Prosperity” [http://www.brookings.edu/reports/2003/12metropolitanpolicy\\_pennsylvania.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/reports/2003/12metropolitanpolicy_pennsylvania.aspx)]. In addition to large new bedroom communities, especially to the north and west of Pittsburgh, new employment centers are being built in far-flung suburban locations for major corporations such as Dick’s Sporting Goods and Westinghouse Electric Company’s nuclear engineering group.

#### **CALLS FOR REVITALIZATION**

All of these factors have led to an interesting twist on the traditional dynamic tension between central city decline, suburban competition, and revitalization efforts to bolster Downtown Pittsburgh’s primacy in the region’s economy and identity. Historically, much of the concern over Downtown’s economic position has focused on the retail sector, which was hit harder by the development of suburban malls in the 1970s and 1980s than was the office market.

Until the development of suburban malls, Downtown was the central retail destination for the entire city, with numerous major department stores, movie theaters, and even grocery stores that serviced its surrounding neighborhoods. The district’s density of retail was made more remarkable by its lack of a significant residential population. The major retail concentration was in the heart of the Golden Triangle along Fifth and Forbes Avenues, where the radial streetcar lines converged. Suburban mall development, which in the 1960s began to serve the bedroom communities surrounding the city, accelerated in the 1980s, when it began to out-compete the center city.

A consistent call from government and civic leaders for public intervention to stabilize and revitalize the urban retail district began in the mid 1980s. [Post Gazette editorial, Mar. 2, 1985]. At this point, a number of elaborate plans were proposed to address the problem on organizational and physical levels. Several proposals for public space improvements to the streetscapes of Fifth and Forbes and Market Square were developed, along with a business improvement district or Downtown Management Association in direct response to suburban competition [Post Gazette article, Nov. 14, 1989]

#### **THE BEGINNINGS OF SUCCESS**

Many of these initiatives, including the reconstruction of the public spaces of Market Square and portions of Fifth Avenue, were completed in the early 1990s. At the same time, the Pittsburgh Downtown Partnership was established as the first business improvement district for the Golden Triangle, financed by a tax assessment district. At least partly in response to these efforts to

revitalize the retail district, the movement to embark on a Downtown Plan gained support from government, business, and local foundations, which provided major funding for the project.

Begun in 1996 and completed in 1998 under the direction of project director Michael Stern, the Pittsburgh Downtown Plan was the first downtown master plan to be conducted in 35 years, and was intended to coordinate and capitalize on the major infrastructure initiatives that were then moving forward, which included a growing and successful cultural district, a new baseball park and new football stadium to replace the aging multi-use Three Rivers Stadium, an expanded convention center, transit improvements, and continued efforts to revitalize the retail district of Fifth and Forbes.



The 1998 Downtown Plan envisioned a new focus on the rivers.

#### **GOVERNMENT STEPS IN**

Concurrent with the process of creating the Downtown Plan, the City – in particular, the Mayor’s Office and the Urban Redevelopment Authority—began to aggressively pursue development and investment strategies intended to continue the revitalization of the historic retail core, but in a more active role than previously performed. This approach placed city government at the center of the redevelopment deals, with the viewpoint that forceful public facilitation was the only way to make these very difficult projects happen, given the typical challenges regarding historic downtown revitalizations with land and building assembly, lack of unified ownership, design control, and retail leasing and management.

This retail strategy was focused on creating a more concentrated retail district comprising an area of several blocks between the end of Fifth Avenue at Liberty Avenue and Smithfield Street several

blocks up. This district would be anchored by new or revived department stores and function similarly to a suburban shopping mall. The City brokered a complex deal between the Urban Redevelopment Authority, the Parking Authority, and Federated Department Stores, Inc., to construct a brand new Lazarus Department Store with underground parking in the heart of this newly distilled district. Immediately following that deal, they brokered the sale of the grand historic Mellon Bank banking hall to Lord & Taylor, also for conversion to a department store.

### A SNAG IN THE PLAN

At the same time, the City was also working with the developer Urban Retail Properties to create a unified retail complex in the blocks between Smithfield and Market Streets along Fifth and Forbes. This plan would complete the transformation of the district into an urban mall that could compete with the suburbs, with unified ownership and management and the anchors necessary to sustain a retail district.

While this plan was neo-traditional in its focus on the existing structure of streets and blocks and creating storefront retail, it also entailed the wholesale assembly, demolition, and reconstruction of more than four blocks of the city. However, with the combined resistance of the historic preservation community and the local landowners who were threatened with eminent domain acquisition of their property, this scheme ultimately foundered. When the Nordstrom department store – the retail anchor for the project – pulled out of the deal, it sounded the plan's death knell.



New and renovated projects are now being completed by multiple developers.

### **AN ORGANIC APPROACH**

Over the next ten years, at least four more master plans were produced for the central Fifth/Forbes area, some as counter-proposals, some sanctioned by the City and the Pittsburgh Downtown Partnership, but ultimately, a unified development plan implemented by a single developer was not to be. Through a variety of twists and turns in the market and local politics, a more organic development approach has arisen. This approach involves a number of developers who are emphasizing mixed-use building, adaptive reuse, and historic preservation along with strategic new construction.

Perhaps the biggest divergence of this approach from the Downtown Plan and the original Urban Retail Properties proposal has been its emphasis on uses other than retail, including office, housing—both condominiums and rentals—and hotels. The tradition of ground-floor retail is largely retained in these new projects, although it is somewhat compromised by the size and height of new mixed-use projects, which require considerable ground floor space for lobbies and other public spaces to serve the upper stories. The new 23-story Three PNC Plaza that is just now being completed at the end of Fifth Avenue opposite Market Square—including 320,000 square feet of office, a 185-room Fairmont hotel and 30 luxury condominiums—is a prime example.

### **RETAINING HISTORY**

Adaptive reuse and historic preservation have also become major parts of the current development approach, and two projects by Strada reflect this change. The first to be completed is the adaptive reuse of the Lazarus Department Store, now called Piatt Place, which closed after just a few years of unprofitable operation. A local developer, Millcraft Industries, has been in the process of renovating it for ground-floor retail (currently two restaurants), large floor-plate office space,



Three new floors were added to the existing Lazarus Department Store.

and condominiums in three new floors constructed on the roof. Fortunately, the City and the original architects had the foresight to design the original building in an unusual manner for a new department store, giving it a large number of windows, which has made this conversion considerably easier.

The other project is the revitalization of the G.C. Murphy department store, a much older structure that is one of the centerpieces of Market Square. Market Square was the original public space of Pittsburgh, established in the 18th century when trade goods were dragged up Market Street from the Monongahela River wharfs to be sold to city residents. Later, several iterations of market halls were built in the square, and the areas around Market Square along Fifth and Forbes Avenues continued to be the retail center of the city well into the 20th century, when suburban competition supplanted Downtown's dominance.



Historic restoration of buildings and public spaces will transform Market Square.

The Murphy building was slated to be razed along with the other buildings on that block in order to make way for the entertainment centerpiece of the Urban Retail Properties proposal. Now the building has instead been combined with several other adjacent historic structures to create Market Square Place, a mixed-use ensemble that includes ground-floor retail, a large YMCA, and “workforce” rental loft housing that will be affordable to young professionals. This complex preservation project is designed to conform to the US Secretary of Interiors Standards for Historic Preservation, and uses Historic Tax Credits and New Markets Tax Credits in its complex financing scheme.

### **CROSSING THE RIVER, EXPANDING THE MAP**

The Downtown Plan had goals beyond just coordinating ongoing projects. One was to leverage those major real estate investments in ways that would encourage the development of a 24-hour city. This led planners and developers to a focus on residential development, something that had not taken place in Downtown Pittsburgh in any significant way for 100 years. The other was to refocus the public perception of the riverfronts—traditionally industrial or commercial in nature—as key assets for Downtown that function not as barriers, but as the heart of the city. This was consistent with redevelopment efforts over the last 30 years to convert the original riverfront sites and their steel factories into urban and cultural destinations with places to live, work, shop, and play. The establishment of the Riverlife Task Force in 1999 by the mayor was an important step in confirming the importance of the rivers to Pittsburgh’s future as a post-industrial city focused on riverfront parks and amenities. The most recently completed of these riverfront development efforts, located on the North Shore, is the new Rivers Casino—with urban planning, building exterior, and landscape design by Strada—which opened in August 2009.

### **A NEW URBAN DISTRICT**

The new ballpark, riverfront park, and buildings create connections to the Allegheny River and the Golden Triangle.



On the North Shore, the construction of two new sports venues—PNC Park for baseball and Heinz Field for football—led to a more coherent planning process that has established a new sports/entertainment district of the city. A major recommendation of the Downtown Plan was that the North Shore be redeveloped as a new district of Downtown, organized around a restored street grid with PNC Park at one end and Heinz Field at the other. PNC Park’s design directly engages Federal Street and the riverfront and has strong urban connections to the Golden Triangle via the Roberto Clemente Bridge, which is closed to vehicles during baseball games. Heinz Field anchors the other end of this new district and displays a similar urban design strategy of engaging the landscape with an open end that faces the river and the Downtown skyline.

As part of the infrastructure work done for the new stadia, a new gridded street system was constructed, and the area is slowly being filled with new mixed-use facilities that include large-floor plate office buildings (including two designed by Strada: Equitable Resources and the Del Monte Center), hotels, entertainment, and eventually housing. All of the buildings contain first floor retail,

primarily eating and drinking establishments; when a new subway extension opens in the next few years, it will connect the area to the Golden Triangle. Additionally, a wholesale reconstruction of the existing riverfront park has extended a high-quality park system along the entire North Shore.

All of these efforts are intended specifically to prevent the failures of Three Rivers Stadium, the multi-use stadium that occupied the North Shore since the late 1960s. That concrete structure was also envisioned as the anchor of a mixed-use district, but evidenced a distinctly 1960s-era approach to urban design. The stadium and associated proposed developments were all focused inward, with no connections to the rivers, and were surrounded by a ring of roads that were distinctly unfriendly to pedestrians. In hindsight, it seems no wonder that the longed-for development never materialized. The new configuration of the North Shore is a 180-degree reversal, with emphasis placed on pedestrians and visual and physical connections to the rivers.

#### CREATING A “FIRST DAY ATTRACTION”



The Rivers Casino is the latest redevelopment of a formerly industrial riverfront site.

One of the goals called out in the Downtown Plan for the North Shore for Phase II of its development after the completion of the stadium was what the Mayor described as a “first-day attraction.” This is how it is described in the Executive Summary of the Plan:

“A new high-caliber, first-day attraction will find its place along a restored street grid. While a number of possible development scenarios have emerged for this second phase of North Shore growth, the common denominator is the desire to reposition this area using a high-quality, first-day visitor attraction with regional and national appeal. A combination of retail, destination restaurants, an outdoor performance space and various recreational activities should have broad family appeal, and complement—not compete with—existing retail strengths and programming in the Triangle, Strip, and Station Square. Transportation improvements should be made so this new entertainment niche is easily accessible via regional highways, pedestrian routes and expansion of light rail service.”

The Rivers Casino is poised to fill this role. As the latest project to be built along the waterfront corridor, its construction indicates the success of recent development efforts and illustrates how the industrial city has been transformed. Although gaming was never envisioned, or necessarily desired, as a possibility in the Downtown Plan, and it does not have the same kind of “family appeal” as other projects, the casino will nevertheless meet all of the above criteria. This is because, in addition to gaming, it contains a number of bars and restaurants, a riverfront park with a grass amphitheater that connects to the North Shore Riverfront Park and trails, and major street improvements. The upcoming light-rail extension, which is expected to be completed in 2011, will terminate one block away.

## **CONCLUSION**

Over the last 20 years, planning in Downtown Pittsburgh has produced many outstanding successes. Major infrastructure initiatives have been completed, new districts established, movement toward a 24-hour city created through new and renovated housing, and continued support of the corporate sector maintained. Moreover, a changed consciousness about the rivers is now a given. The Riverlife Task Force—now a 10 year old non-profit civic organization—has helped to firmly establish the central significance of the rivers for Pittsburgh’s future as well as its past, with a focus on the development of high-quality public spaces all along their banks. The transformation so far is truly astonishing.

What remains an unfulfilled promise is complete revitalization of the place where all of this planning started—the central retail core. Much of this relates to the changing nature of retail itself: urban department stores are no longer the economic anchors they once were, and retail in all its forms is struggling mightily in the current recession. Based on both short- and long-term trends, it seems unlikely that Downtown Pittsburgh will ever regain its prominence as a retail destination.

However, what does appear to be emerging is a fuller, richer, and more diversified Downtown, one that can capitalize on its regional centrality and strong sense of place to expand its potential. In so doing, Pittsburgh will continue to add the rich activities of urban life—living and playing—to its already strong role as an employment center. As the United States comes to realize the continued value of its historic cities and more and more people recognize that dense, livable cities are the most sustainable form of development, this density and accessibility should serve Pittsburgh well.

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