

Downtown Idea Exchange

Retail

Retail ecology: Organic patterns and networks that make downtowns thrive

Downtowns have two qualities that distinguish them from most other retail areas: They are inherently organic and diverse. Viewing these qualities from a naturalist’s perspective suggests a framework for understanding downtown retail and planning for sustainable growth. Edward A. Shriver, a principal of architectural firm Strada, calls this approach “retail ecology.”

“By using retail ecology as a method for understanding urban activities, we can learn how to build more effective, financially

viable commercial districts, repair existing retail cores, and strengthen our downtowns,” he says.

Shriver suggests that downtown leaders consider the interconnect-edness of downtown retail districts and their ability to change over time when planning for the future.

Retail districts are discrete yet connected

The best way to analyze a site’s “retail ecology” starts with the study of retail patterns, includ-
(Continued on page 2)

Business Recruitment & Retention

Position downtown to plan and prepare for recruitment and retention opportunities, Part II

Recruiting and retaining for the best business mix downtown involves ongoing research, relationship-building, networking, and strategic planning.

The March 15 issue of *Downtown Idea Exchange* covered strategies for creating a business and building inventory and for determining the types of businesses that are preferred and sustainable. The next two steps are:

- An ongoing willingness to establish and cultivate relationships with key stakeholders.
- A strategic plan that identifies each downtown parcel as an opportunity for recruitment, retention, or both.

Let’s first look at downtown relationship-building, and apply a private-sector rule of business to downtown development.

(Continued on page 5)

Stimulus money for street work

The City of Troy, NY, is pushing to collect its share of federal economic stimulus money by proposing a key street construction project that is directly beneficial to downtown.

Troy is seeking \$6.4 million to pay for the Congress-Ferry Street reconstruction, which will improve downtown accessibility.

According to an aid to Mayor Harry Tutunjian, “We’ve been placed in Tier One for economic stimulus funds.” To facilitate the project if the federal funds come through, city council acted aggressively to authorize necessary land transfers that will enable the construction to begin June 15.

Inside this issue

Ecological view of downtown leads to more rational decisions and smaller interventions 3

Three goals for today’s downtown leaders. 4

Strategic merchandising plan not as hard to do as it sounds. 5

Capitalize on natural assets, and develop residential base. 7

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Retail ecology: Organic patterns — continued from page 1

ing occupied and vacant properties, in order to assess existing retail shops and traditional sites of commercial activity as the basis for growth.

For example, Strada and retail developer MadisonMarquette partnered in developing a market-based strategy for a mixed-use development spanning 16 blocks in the retail core of Pittsburgh, PA (est. pop. 312,800).

Although the study area encompassed only a portion of the downtown area, the team mapped individual first-floor retail tenants within the commercial core's entire 45-block area. This broad analysis of downtown retail served as the basis for a redevelopment strategy to reanimate the project area.

The same analysis of retail patterns served as the basis for linking together separate, physically discrete retail districts, to increase connectivity between them.

"Retail corridors do not necessarily need to be contiguous, but in order to attract shoppers, they cannot be far apart," Shriver explains.

The Pittsburgh study revealed that vacant storefronts served as both connectors and physical barriers that disrupted connections between different areas. Blank walls and reflective glass broke the connection as much as vacant storefronts. A single dead storefront (typically 25- to 30-foot wide) did not make a noticeable break, but two or more empty storefronts (a 45-foot break or wider) did. This finding correlates

with studies by urban observer William Whyte, who noted that the average person walking down the street looks about 100 feet ahead. A single storefront comprises only about 25 to 30 percent of a person's sightline, but 45 feet represents nearly half.

The findings of the study suggest that infill retail in strategic locations — either new build-

ings or new tenants — can have a significant and positive impact, because they connect existing corridors in order to create larg-

er areas. It also explains in part the importance of corner sites, and the design of ground-floor and second-level storefronts that must attract people from the sidewalk.

Retail areas can adapt and grow

The customer base of a retail district will evolve over time, as retailers respond to the various urban networks they serve. This happened at the Boylston/Newbury retail district in Boston's Back Bay, which originally catered to mostly neighborhood residents.

Over the years, the Back Bay's mix of high-end retailers and quality restaurants attracted a second customer group: tourists. As a result, the customer base has changed, as spaces that once housed boutique retail and cozy neighborhood eateries have been re-leased at higher rents to tourist restaurants and retailers. Although the customer base has changed, the area continues to thrive.

"To attract shoppers, retail corridors cannot be far apart."

Urban commerce is like a food chain

Much as different species depend on other species in a food chain to survive, retailers are co-dependent on the same customer base. Thus, most retail communities are collections of related, but not necessarily similar, retailers.

For example, a small specialty store like a bookstore might depend on the customers who come downtown to buy coffee, go to the dry cleaner, or grocery shop. These retailers are interlocked in a complex retail "food chain" which, as it grows in size, becomes increasingly robust and resilient as different combinations of businesses are frequented by downtown's various market segments.

That overlap provides retailers with increased customer opportunities and prospective revenue. The flow of money, or the "food chain," grows larger and more diverse to the benefit of all.

Retail ecology drives success

"Recent landscape ecology research shows that system size, rather than productivity, is the key determinant of community strength. The same concept, applied to retail ecology, suggests that the total value of the money flow, rather than the individual retailers, determines the overall health and resilience of the urban ecosystem. Preserving, improving, and connecting retail is critical," Shriver says.

"Thinking about downtowns as ecosystems helps to give you a scientific basis and logic to why things happen, as opposed to the usual: 'We're making this up as we go along,'" Shriver says.

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Ecological view of downtown leads to more rational decisions and smaller interventions

Downtown thinkers "have done a really good job of explaining what's out there, but there's been less effort and thought put into why it's like that," says Edward Shriver, a principal of the architectural firm Strada, who champions an ecology-based approach to downtown retail development.

The best inspiration he found for understanding the mechanisms that cause things to happen downtown came from an unexpected place: nature.

Reading books on landscape ecology brought the urban designer and architect to see, "maybe there's actually some science undergirding all of this that might help us make more rational decisions about urban design, and how downtowns work," he says. He saw the difference between a lifestyle center and a downtown as analogous to that between a tree farm and a rain forest. In any given downtown, a little of "everything's in it. It's all interconnected, and it's all dependent to some extent on everything else that's around it."

In ecology as in downtown development, the preponderance of unplanned and unmanaged interactions between diverse elements creates something that's more than the sum of the parts. Those interactions are what make downtowns exciting, different, and sustainable.

This suggests, "that the retail mix is not just an economic picture," Shriver says. "There's so much more to the mix than most developers and retail brokers think about. The retail mix needs to be looked at in a much broader context. It is much bigger than most developers and brokers try to make it," and also less predictable.

This model also suggests that over-regulating retail is problematic, he says, "in that we don't really understand the implications of the regulations. ... There are too many people out there trying to save downtowns not because they want to save them, but because they want downtowns to be what they want them to be. Downtowns are actually much more resilient, and much more capable of correcting bad decisions on individual planners', architects', retailers', and developers' parts, than government is."

Once we begin thinking about our central business districts in the broader context of ecosystems, he says, we see that there are things that we could be doing to help that don't require massive investment or redevelopment.

"So much of downtown retail could be strengthened simply by going in and making small interventions to reconnect the existing patches of retail that exist in downtown," Shriver says.