

10 myths of downtown development

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Downtown Idea Exchange

It's been over a decade since Philip Walker published his piece the "Top 10 Myths of Downtown Planning," but his analysis remains timely.

Walker, head of The Walker Collaborative, says residents, city officials, and business owners often fall victim to commonly held "misinformed notions," which can hinder downtown development. They are:

- Our downtown needs just one 'big ticket' development to turn things around. Think that ballpark, performing arts center, or casino is going to single-handedly salvage your downtown? Think again.

While some downtowns have indeed succeeded with sports facilities, a small-scale approach is more realistic.

"Downtowns that have reversed their downward spirals to become success stories have typically done so incrementally, through numerous small steps over time," Walker writes.

• Replacing existing buildings with parking lots will bring more shoppers downtown. The new consensus among urban planners is that surface parking lots damage the fabric of downtown.

- Our strategy for revitalizing downtown should focus on retail. Yes, your downtown probably had a thriving shopping district in the 1960s. And no, it's probably not going to come back, at least not in the way it once existed.

Housing is a more critical element to driving a downtown revival, Walker argues.

- Attractive new brick sidewalks will bring more people downtown. Yes, downtowns should make an effort to look attractive and inviting. "However, very few people visit downtowns simply to enjoy their high-quality sidewalks, so their value must always be kept in perspective," Walker writes.

- Downtown needs a large national department store to compete with the suburban malls. In the decade since Walker first gave this advice, market forces have conspired to all but kill this myth. Most big department stores are in retreat.

But his overriding advice stands: "Unique, independently owned stores are among the strongest draws for most downtowns.

- On-street parking should be converted to another driving lane to improve traffic flows for the benefit of downtown. Traffic congestion is annoying to motorists. But wider traffic lanes can be deadly to pedestrians and to merchants.

Narrower traffic lanes slow traffic, creating a more walkable environment that benefits all of downtown.

- Existing one-way streets should be maintained for traffic flows that will benefit downtown. "For most downtowns, one-way streets prove unnecessary and even counterproductive because they encourage speeding, limit the visibility of retailers, and are confusing to new visitors to downtown," Walker writes.

- Downtown special events are a waste of time and money because few dollars are spent in businesses during the event and a great deal of preparation and cleanup are required. This is short-term thinking. Yes, events can be inconvenient for a few days. But in the long run, well-managed festivals, fairs, and concerts position the downtown as a destination.

- One of downtown's primary streets should be closed to traffic and converted into a pedestrian mall. This concept can work for dense downtowns that have plenty of residents, or high volumes of visitors or university students. For most downtowns, though, the concept is a loser.

- Too many regulations will kill downtown's business. Yes, it's possible to impose too many nitpicky rules. But that's what elections are for — politicians who regulate too heavily will be voted out.

Clear ordinances and detailed codes, properly used, can make downtown a more desirable place for everyone.

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