



Getting The House in Order:

Practical Design and Planning Tips for Downtown

To Put Your Community's Best Foot Forward

1. THE INVITATION: Branding and Marketing

2. THE FIRST IMPRESSION: Gateways and Thoroughfares

Gateways

- Independent of the corporate boundaries of your community, when and where do you perceive that you have “arrived?”
- At the perceptual arrival points into your community, how are those gateways highlighted?
- At the corporate limits of your community, how is arrival demarcated?
- Are these locations marked with quality signs and landscaping?
- Are non-traditional gateway opportunities being utilized? (e.g. water towers, railroad trestles, billboards, etc.)
- If the community is accessed from an interstate, has the design and appearance of the exit interchange been addressed?

Thoroughfares

- How are the connecting roadways between your gateways and downtown articulated?
- Do the connecting thoroughfares have a consistent and quality appearance?
- If not, what are some strategies you could employ to enhance them?
 - Banners on existing poles?
 - Regularly spaced tree plantings?
 - Ordinances regulating the size and height of signs?
 - Bury utilities and install vintage light poles? (initially at key intersections only)
 - Wayfinding/directional sign system?
 - Litter control?
 - Sidewalks?
 - Crosswalks?
 - Billboard design and control?

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3. THE ARRIVAL: Downtown District Gateways and Streetscapes

Downtown District

- Does the downtown district make a good first impression? Why? Why not?
- Is there a clear sense of arrival to the downtown district? How is the arrival sequence/district gateway articulated?
- Does the downtown area have a generally clean and well-kept appearance?
- Is general maintenance being addressed? (e.g. sidewalk cracks, potholes in roads, etc.)
- Does the downtown area value natural beauty? (e.g. lush landscaping, landscaped buffers, colorful flowers, etc.?)

Downtown District: Safety

- Does it feel safe to cross the street?
- Does it feel safe to stand on the sidewalk?
- Does it feel safe to linger in the area?
- Does the area have hidden corners or large obstacles that reduce open sightlines?
- Is there area filled with debris, graffiti, overgrown landscaping, etc.?
- Do the businesses have bars on the windows or opaque windows?

Downtown District: Staying Power

- Are there food options on the block?
- Are there places to eat outdoors?
- Are there maps, kiosks, games, or other amenities that encourage people to linger?
- Is the identity of the area prominent (arts district, cultural district, historic area)?

Streetscapes: Design

- Are the streetscapes in the downtown area promoting a priority for the pedestrian over the automobile? (e.g. clearly demarcated crosswalks, bump-outs at key intersections, etc.)
- Site furnishings: Are the benches, trash receptacles, newspaper dispensers, light poles, etc. in good condition, of high quality, and consistent in style and appearance?
- Are there enough places to sit? Both in the sun and/or in the shade?
- Does the streetscape feature any distinctive elements? (e.g. flowers, fences, water features, stylistic bollards, textured crosswalks, public art/sculpture, etc.)
- Are the sidewalks wide enough to promote comfortable side-by-side walking, outdoor dining, or other activity-generating opportunities?

Streetscapes: Shared Access

- Do pedestrians have easy and clear access to the area?
- Do bicycles feel welcome in the area?
- Is the area easily accessible from neighborhoods?
- Are there way finding signs that direct people into and out of the area?
- Are there amenities that allow people to linger in the space (seating, tables, etc.)?

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4. THE ENTRY: Building Facades and Open/Park Spaces

Facades

- Have the buildings received any inappropriate treatments such as, but not limited to:
 - Slipcovers that conceal architectural design and/or historic building materials
 - Painted brick
 - Shingled awning structures
 - Stucco over bricks (especially synthetic stucco)
 - Boarded up windows, or inappropriate replacement windows
 - Inappropriate signage
 - Inappropriate paint schemes
 - What can be done to address any inappropriate treatments such as these?
- On vacant buildings, have strategies been employed to mitigate the appearance of an empty building? (e.g. artwork in storefront windows, photos and/or murals applied to windows, community pride campaign posters, etc.)
- Are the rears of buildings attractive? What treatments could be employed to enhance the rears of buildings? (e.g. screens around mechanical equipment, painting, signage, etc.)
- Are general building maintenance issues being addressed?
- Are the visual displays/storefront window designs attractive and welcoming?

Infill Design

- Has new development been constructed in the historic downtown area? Does it integrate well within a historic context?
- What is the design philosophy of the community regarding infill design?
 - Infill architecture should match/imitate the surrounding historic architecture.
 - Infill architecture should interpret historic forms and details, yet use contemporary building materials and methodologies.
 - Infill architecture should be clearly distinct from any historic precedents.
- Do any new ordinances, regulations or design guidelines need to be developed to address new construction within an historic context?
- For empty sites awaiting infill development, what short-term strategies could be employed to activate the space? (e.g. outdoor art gallery, community garden, sculpture garden, etc.)

Parks & Open Spaces

- Is the park/open space well-lit to promote a feeling of safety?
- Has programming been addressed for the park/open space? (Active vs. passive space; playground or park-like setting; target audience; etc.)
- Is the site furniture in good condition? (E.g. benches, trash receptacles, lights, water features, etc.)
- Are there good connections between this space and adjacent buildings and parking lots?
- Does the space function well for people with disabilities and other special needs?
- Are there enough places to sit? Both in the sun and/or in the shade?
- Which parts of the park/opens space are used and which are not?
- Is the park/open space well-maintained?



5. THE MARVELOUS MIDDLE GROUND: Sidewalks and Shared Spaces

“Experience and environment trump architecture every time.”

–Randy Wilson, Recovering Architect

Sidewalks & Shared Spaces

- Have ordinances been developed that allow for a rich layering of the sidewalks/shared spaces in downtown?
- What layering treatments could be considered to help animate downtown? Ideas include, but are not limited to:
 - Flags and banners
 - Sandwich board signs
 - Outdoor dining tables and chairs
 - Planters and/or flower baskets
 - Colorful umbrellas
 - Shade sails
 - Benches
 - Trash receptacles
 - Pet amenities
 - Pop-up parks/parklets
 - Static art
 - Interactive art
 - Interactive games (e.g. corn hole, jenga, checkers/chess, mini golf, etc.)
 - Bike racks
 - Kiosks
 - Creative utility concealment
 - Non-traditional street furniture
 - Color amenities
 - Artistic sidewalk treatments
 - Etc.

Parking

- Is parking quantity adequate?
- Is parking quality adequate?
- Are public parking areas clearly demarcated?
- Are surface lots buffered by trees and landscaping?
- Can you see the parking lot from a distance?

Signage

- Signage: Is quality wayfinding/directional signage present in the downtown area?
- What percentage of the signage in downtown directs travelers TO local destinations versus OUT of town?
- Do streets, parking, and points of interest have attractive signs? Are they well maintained?

CRITICAL DIAGNOSTIC QUESTIONS

- Do any local ordinances need to be changed --or easement agreements developed-- to allow for a rich layering of amenities in the sidewalk realm to animate the downtown environment?
- Should we adopt an amenities or ‘vibrancy grant’ program?
- Should we adopt a facade grant program? If so, should it be a typical facade grant approach or a “component” grant approach?

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