

## Pedestrian Malls: The Newest Fad?

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My oh my, how quickly fads can shift.

For nearly a generation, the idea of closing a Downtown shopping street to automobile traffic and turning it into a pedestrian mall had been strictly off the table, viewed as an unqualified failure in (American) city building that one would only revisit at the risk of professional ostracization.

Now, at the tail end of a pandemic in which the public right-of-way was repurposed so as to provide more room for social distancing and outdoor dining, it is once again in vogue (along with other long-maligned concepts like the superblock, with calls in some quarters for making such “experiments” permanent.

On one hand, this frustrates me, as it underscores the faddishness, dogmatism and groupthink that pervades the planning and urban design community. On the other, I am exhilarated by some of the opportunities that it presents, for I had never quite agreed with the received wisdom on the subject to begin with.

### The Pedestrian Mall and the Derivative Downtown

A great many of us have had the experience of returning from vacation in Europe, from days spent wandering its narrow and twisty medieval streets without concern for autos, and asking the question, “why can’t it be that way here?”

“Oh, that can’t happen here,” we are often told. “America is just different. We love our cars. Look what happened when we tried pedestrian malls? It was a disaster.”

There is little doubt of our love affair with the automobile, but that fact does not mean that pedestrian malls in this country are always destined to fail. Not only



Kalamazoo's Burdick Street (pedestrian) Mall  
Source: Western Michigan University archives

have a number of them survived to this day, but also, the traditional enclosed mall itself – an inward-facing pedestrianized concourse surrounded by parking facilities accessible from a ring road -- thrived for decades with the same basic layout.

Indeed, the designer of the nation's first pedestrian mall, along Burdick Street in Downtown Kalamazoo, was none other than Victor Gruen, who had pioneered the suburban mall five

years earlier, at Northland Center, and who was trying to recreate the model in an urban context.

Gruen's approach reflected the conviction – which defined the era of what I have called the “Derivative Downtown”<sup>1</sup> from the 1950's through the 1980's – that the rapidly declining core could only be rescued by copying the suburban planning paradigm and development model, which would enable it to recapture a share of the spending that had been lost to the periphery.

When the majority of pedestrian malls proved incapable of doing so, the whole experiment was labeled a failure, something that was just “not possible” in the states. “We just do not like to walk,” it was concluded. Which ignores, among other things, the plain fact that walking is precisely what we do in malls (and in, or more accurately *across*, mall parking lots).

In my mind, the problem did not lie with the basic concept, but rather, with the timing.

### **A Good Concept... at the Wrong Time?**

For one thing, the pedestrian malls of the 1960's and 1970's tried to stick with the same retail mix – focused on destination shopping and larger chains -- that had become available at the newer suburban centers. And because the former was losing more and more of those tenants every year, it offered comparatively less selection; it simply could not compete head-on.

My colleagues David Feehan and Carol Becker have also noted how the initial round of pedestrian malls predated the emergence of Business Improvement Districts (BID) or other entities charged with and capable of managing, maintaining and marketing public spaces.<sup>2</sup> They were hard-pressed, then, to match the oversight of motivated, sophisticated and well-capitalized mall owners.

Also, while it might be difficult to imagine today, American culture in the postwar era was all about the new, the modern and the spacious. The historic preservation movement did not really start to build until the mid to late 1970's, and there was little of the affection for urban patina and personality that would take hold in the 1990's, nor much appreciation for the benefits and virtues of dense urban living that exists today.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In “Suburban Remix: Creating the Next Generation of Urban Places”, edited by Jason Beske and David Dixon (Island Press, 2018), my chapter on retail (p. 105 to p. 107) described the various stages through which Downtowns in the U.S. have passed, starting with the “Dominant Downtown”, then the “Declining Downtown”, the “Derivative Downtown” and finally, “Distinctive Downtown.”

<sup>2</sup> David M. Feehan and Carol Becker, Ph.D., “Pedestrian Streets, Public Spaces, and Business Improvement Districts”, *Journal of Town & City Management*, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> One might counter that dense urban living has lost favor with the arrival of COVID-19, but there is little evidence of that beyond New York City and San Francisco, nor does this author necessarily believe that the urban flight which those two cities experienced during the pandemic will amount to much

All of this meant that suburban motorists were not about to drive past the new enclosed malls in their midst and shop instead in the now-pedestrianized Downtowns, as Gruen had initially envisioned.<sup>4</sup> The latter, as a result, was left to depend heavily on the weakening demographics of the central cities, which proved incapable of sustaining such a retail mix.

In this reading, it would be fairer and more accurate to think of the pedestrian malls of that period as a post-hoc response to rapidly-deteriorating market conditions that they were ultimately unable – and, frankly, should never have been expected – to overcome. Their struggles represented a symptom of the problem more than the basic concept was its cause.

Indeed, we are left to ponder some intriguing counterfactuals. Like, would those same Downtown shopping streets have performed any better had automobile traffic continued to course through? What if they had remained pedestrianized long enough to enjoy the fruits of the urban renaissance that started in the 1990's? And would they have struggled so mightily in earlier decades with the more differentiated focus on food, beverage and entertainment that would prove so successful later on?

Indeed, Mitchell Silver, the acclaimed planner who served as New York City's Parks Commissioner from 2014 to 2021, believes that one of the problems with pedestrian malls has always been their near-exclusive focus on shopping, and that they can never truly realize their main street or town square potential without introducing other street-level uses, like outdoor dining, and the vitality they generate.

### **The Ones That Have Thrived**

Of course, a fraction of the pedestrian malls from this initial round have experienced periods of vibrancy and unqualified success, in many cases with retail mixes not all that different from the ones that characterized Downtowns in their heyday.

These tend to be situated in tourist destinations, with foot traffic driven primarily by leisure-oriented visitors. Examples include Santa Monica's Third Street Promenade, Boulder's Pearl Street Mall and Miami Beach's Lincoln Road Mall,

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more than a temporary phenomenon (although if continued unabated, the former's surge in violent crime and the latter's struggles with problematic street behavior could have longer-lasting consequences).

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, the mistake was repeated with the enclosed Downtown malls that proliferated in the 1970's and 1980's. Derivative in retail mix, projects like Cleveland's Tower City Center followed a similar trajectory, starting with an impressive array of upscale brands that could pull from far afield, then losing ground once those same retailers expanded to suburban rivals.



Boulder's Pearl Street Mall  
Source: MJB Consulting

each of which have long hosted sizeable collections of national and international soft goods brands.<sup>5</sup>

It is worth pointing out, though, that none of them really started to gain traction until the 1990's. Indeed, the Third Street Promenade, first opened in 1965, had become an eyesore by the 1980's before its revival. Lincoln Road Mall, dating to 1962, also endured a couple of rough decades prior to its reemergence.

This subset of pedestrian malls also currently finds itself in a state of transition, and not just due to the collapse in tourism amidst the pandemic. Indeed, ones like the Third Street Promenade and Lincoln Road Mall had been suffering from elevated levels of storefront vacancy even before then.

To some degree, they have been victims of their own success, with their (normally) high pedestrian counts combining with the rise of large experiential “flagship” stores in the 2010's to drive rents to stratospherically high levels that then became untenable as retailers started to retreat from that approach in the later part of the decade.<sup>6</sup>

I expect these sorts of malls to stabilize in the months and years ahead, however, as landlords start to realign their expectations and as retailers increasingly realize that (more modestly sized) store locations along such high-visibility corridors offer the most economical way of acquiring and retaining customers for a “clicks-and-bricks” business model at a time when online advertising is effectively ruled by an oligopoly.

In addition to tourist destinations, college towns have proven to be fertile ground for pedestrian malls, ostensibly because students have both the time and the inclination to “promenade.” Oft-cited ones include Ithaca's Ithaca Commons, Burlington's Church Street Marketplace, Charlottesville's Downtown Mall, Madison's State Street and Boulder's Pearl Street Mall.

That said, the reference to these examples has long struck me as insufficiently nuanced. After all, Ithaca's, Charlottesville's and Boulder's are in fact located at

<sup>5</sup> Another one that often receives attention, though not always positive, is Denver's 16<sup>th</sup> Street Mall. Out-of-town visitors account for a sizeable amount of its foot traffic as well, with a significant number of larger soft goods brands clustered at its Denver Pavilions Mall. Its overall retail mix, however, is somewhat more diversified than the others, also including, for instance, value-oriented concepts like Ross Dress For Less and Famous Footwear.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Berne, “The Storefront Vacancy Crisis: Superstar Cities and their Ghost Towns”, *LinkedIn*, February 2020. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/storefront-vacancy-crisis-part-1-michael-berne/>

some remove from campus, while more traditional “college drags” – Collegetown<sup>7</sup>, The Corner and University Hill, respectively – sit just across the street.

The case of Boulder is particularly instructive. Even though students represent as much as 40% of citywide residents, they accounted for just 4% of the foot traffic on or near Pearl Street Mall in 2017 and did not appear to represent a major driver of its retail mix. And while I worked on a retail strategy there in 2017/2018, we encountered pushback to the idea of trying to attract more of them.

I have yet to see any rigorous data-driven analysis on this point, but I suspect that the cherished status of pedestrian malls in such communities might have just as much (if not more) to do with the lifestyle preferences of the broader university community – academics, other intellectuals and creative professionals drawn to such places – than those of college co-eds primarily interested in fast food, caffeine, beer and courtship.

To the extent that they play a role, both the size and the demographics of the enrollment matter. The college towns with healthy pedestrian malls are ones with tens of thousands of students, whereas smaller schools – especially those filled mainly with the sons and daughters of budget-constrained parents struggling with the exorbitant costs of higher education -- offer considerably lower levels of consumer demand.

### **The Subjectivity of Failure and the Elephant of Race**

The way in which we talk about pedestrian malls also reveals a blind spot in how we discuss revitalization and retail more generally.

Consider, for instance, one of the higher-profile flops: State Street, in Chicago’s Loop. According to the prevailing narrative, the historic shopping street’s conversion into a transit mall in 1979 was a colossal failure, with the corridor’s resurgence in more recent times credited to its reopening to automobile traffic in 1996.

Not only, however, do I wonder whether its reversal of fortunes starting in the late 1990’s would have happened anyway, given the broader upward trajectory of that city’s urban core during that time, but also, the narrative itself leaves me questioning how we define success versus failure.

With suburbanites showing little interest in the initial round of pedestrian malls, these zones came to rely increasingly on an underserved urban demographic, which would not only feed and reinforce perceptions that Downtowns were unsafe

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<sup>7</sup> The other college in Ithaca, Ithaca College, also sits at a distance (and up a hill) from the Ithaca Commons pedestrian mall. Its enrollment of roughly 6,300 is much smaller than Cornell’s 24,100, though it also does not have a district like Cornell’s Collegetown, leaving its student body more reliant on the Downtown core.



and to be avoided, but also, spawn and sustain retail mixes that those same suburbanites did not recognize and would typically dismiss.

After all, these pedestrian malls were not necessarily littered with boarded-up storefronts. Just as often, they were filled with names like Rainbow, Ashley Stewart, Fallas Paredes and Ritmo Latino – not the staples of the traditional enclosed mall, but still, retailers offering products that a significantly-sized submarket wanted, at prices it could afford.

Chicago's State Street in the 1990's did not have the broad-based appeal that it had enjoyed in its heyday, but it was far from abandoned. On the contrary, it contained a panoply of national and regional brands that happened to cater largely to the low and middle-income minority residents on that city's severely under-retailed South and West Side(s).

Now, did that make it a failure? Well, maybe from the perspective of property owners, tax collectors and civic boosters, though it is worth noting that many of the stores along such corridors actually enjoyed very healthy sales levels, a point that I argued vociferously in a number of *Urban Land* articles in the early 2000's.



Indeed, even before its Bloomberg-era “renaissance”, retailers along Brooklyn's pedestrianized Fulton Mall, catering overwhelmingly to low and middle-income Blacks from across the borough, regularly grossed well over \$1,000 per sq ft in sales -- higher even than “Class A” malls at that time.

The Fulton Mall of the 1990's may not have looked like Montague Street in Brooklyn Heights or 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue in Park Slope, but it was both wildly successful as a shopping street and, at least from the outside, seemed also to function as a true gathering place for its core customer.

To what extent, then, were some pedestrian malls deemed failures simply because of who they served? After all, the Fulton Mall of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century was rarely mentioned in the same breath as, say, the Third Street Promenade or the Pearl Street Mall, but in terms of foot traffic and gross sales, it should have been.

In 2020, the *Journal of Urbanism* published one of the most rigorously data-driven studies on the subject<sup>8</sup>, using longevity as a measuring stick for success.

<sup>8</sup> Samantha Matuke, Stephan Schmidt & Wenzheng Li (2020): The rise and fall of the American pedestrian mall, *Journal of Urbanism: International Research on Placemaking and Urban*

Longevity, however, is a function of whether those with influence in political, policymaking and editorial circles felt these pedestrian malls were worth preserving or should be removed. And quite clearly, such determinations can be rooted in subjectivities (if not thinly veiled racism).

Perhaps, then, we should be revisiting the pedestrian malls that were said to have “failed” and reexamining them on different terms. Maybe some of them might have been salvageable had policymakers worked closely with landlords to add a few better known off-price and fast-fashion anchors to the mix(es), as my colleague David Milder and I have both been recommending for years.

At the very least, reinterpreting the performance of pedestrian malls like the Fulton Mall forces us to expand the range of conditions that could potentially give rise to vibrant ones. No longer should it be argued, for instance, that they only stand a fighting chance in tourist meccas or college towns.

### **So, What Does It All Mean for Today?**

Many planners and urban designers are looking to ride the momentum generated by sixteen months of experimentation and enact permanent changes to the public realm. And while some of it feels transparently opportunistic, championed by purists who never believed that cars have any place in our cities, I cannot deny that this is incredibly exciting stuff. And not just because of those trips to Europe.

Downtowns no longer have department stores; most of them do not have large-scale retail draws of any kind. “Place” is one of the new anchors that can take their place, an attraction capable of driving foot traffic and consumer spending. It can take many forms. A sublime waterfront. A glorious park. An iconic pedestrian zone.

Unlike commodified shopping centers, Downtowns need differentiation, something that sets them apart. Indeed, that’s how they eventually settled on a formula for reinvention in the 1990’s: after decades of wandering in the wilderness, trying one version after another of the “Derivative Downtown”, they finally started to embrace what made them unique – the “Distinctive Downtown” -- and it turned out to be their salvation.

However, some of the new magnets that emerged from that embrace, that were initially pioneered in and exclusive to the urban core – the chef-driven restaurants, the artisanal food halls and the like – are now being co-opted by conventional shopping centers, which means that Downtowns need to find a way to stay ahead

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*Sustainability*, DOI: 10.1080/17549175.2020.1793804.  
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17549175.2020.1793804>

of the curve. The aforementioned sort of pedestrian zone seems to present just such an opportunity.

Meanwhile, my colleague David Milder has noted how, especially in suburban Downtowns with few office buildings, such spaces, if properly programmed, can also lure well-heeled submarkets -- like retirees, young parents and now perhaps, remote workers -- that help to compensate for the relatively small amount of daytime foot traffic.

Given, however, the checkered history of pedestrian malls, it is admittedly a gamble.

Of course, a few things are different this time. The demographics and lifestyle preferences of many close-in neighborhoods have changed markedly. They are dominated now by upwardly mobile Millennials and Gen Z'ers who have only known cities as safe and vibrant places, who prefer the rough edges and lived-in feel of urban spaces, and who care more deeply about the planet's future.

Meanwhile, BID's and other such "urban place management organizations" have emerged as effective stewards and champions of the public realm, capable of spearheading the creation of such a space as well as the ongoing management of it (assuming they are not forced to retreat in response to increasingly complicated political dynamics).

Finally, there is the experience of the pandemic, during which the re-purposing of sidewalks, parking spaces and streets proved to be not just wildly popular with the consumer public but also, a saving grace for countless restaurants and bars as well as a possible cover for risk-averse policymakers who can point to a sky that did not fall.

All of that said, the age-old principles of retail still apply. While a singular design can no doubt attract attention and create buzz, the longer-term sustainability of such a project will ultimately rest on market conditions, including not just consumer demand but also, the threat posed by existing (and future) competition, the talents and resources of the merchants themselves, the expectations and capacities of the property owners, etc.

Perhaps most promising in this respect is a central location vis-à-vis large numbers of leisure visitors. In the absence of that, however, two factors are likely essential: high population densities in the surrounding neighborhoods, especially if foot traffic on the street itself is not already well-established; and limited competition, with high barriers-to-entry for new retail development.

Suburban day-trippers might be a bit less resistant today than they were in the 1960's and 1970's, particularly since a growing number of them will be Millennials who begrudgingly left the central cities not long ago for reasons related to



affordability and/or life-stage.<sup>9</sup> Communities, however, should not make the same mistake of counting on them as the primary source of consumer demand.

Finally, a word about weather. Analyses of pedestrian malls often conclude that warm weather is a necessary ingredient for success, but the record seems to suggest otherwise, with several of the college towns in particular -- Burlington, Ithaca and Madison, for example – subject to harsh conditions throughout the winter months (including the holiday shopping season) and only heating up once school empties out.<sup>10</sup>

### Some Advice from a Retail Consultant

I try to stick largely to what I know best, which is retail. So, here's just a few bits of advice on the practicalities of siting, planning and designing such a space so that it works optimally for the ground-floor tenants, their property owners and the business district as a whole:

\* Ideally, the pedestrian mall is installed along Downtown's primary retail corridor, between its major demand generators – just like the concourse connecting department store anchors in a traditional “dumbbell-shaped” enclosed mall.

Closing a major street to private automobiles, however, can have a profound impact on adjoining streets, and a (relatively enlightened) traffic engineer should be actively involved before such a decision is reached and implemented.



For this reason, streets with existing retail fabric that do not figure all that prominently in the broader roadway network often make more sense, though only if the dumbbell layout can somehow be maintained so as to ensure foot traffic.

My colleague David Milder has pointed me to the Downtown of Somerville, NJ, where the Division Street Arts and Pedestrian Plaza sits perpendicular to the primary retailing corridor, Main Street, yet attracts pedestrians because it connects on the

<sup>9</sup> I have given several presentations in recent years on this phenomenon, which I have called the “suburbanization of hip.” It has only accelerated amidst the pandemic: indeed much of the “urban flight” that was so widely reported throughout 2020 would almost certainly have happened anyways, given the demographic bulge of the Millennial generation; COVID-19 merely pulled it ahead by a few years.

<sup>10</sup> If one believes that weather is in fact a decisive factor, that also strengthens the argument that the student presence in college towns with successful pedestrian malls is merely incidental, since most students are not in town during the warmer summer months.

other end to two major anchors, the town's New Jersey Transit commuter rail station and its main U.S. Post Office.

In such cases, though, expectations for the tenant mix might need to be realigned so as to reflect the secondary position in the leasing hierarchy. In Downtown Somerville, for instance, landlords along Main Street are still far more likely to land the most coveted retailers and fetch the highest rents.

\* The length of a given pedestrian zone should be carefully calibrated to the tenanting potential at street level. Even the most successful ones generally do not extend beyond three to four blocks, and in suburbs or smaller cities with less foot traffic, they should be shorter still. Downtown Somerville's, for example, is just a single block.

\* Pedestrian malls almost always elicit pushback on the grounds that they remove precious on-street parking for businesses. This should not simply be dismissed. Planners and urban designers often fail to appreciate that merchants do not have the luxury of waiting for modal splits to change; they must cater to the current reality, or they will not be around for long.

That said, such complaints should always be assessed with a critical eye. Business owners sometimes grumble about the loss of in-front parking *even* when their stores also provide entrances from large (and grossly underutilized) surface lots immediately behind the main street. In some particularly egregious cases, they simply wish to avoid losing the space in front of their shop for their own vehicle!

I would certainly want to consult any recent surveys or datasets showing what percentage of the customers are arriving by car (versus other modes), indicating how many stalls are available for them within walking distance and shedding light on the extent to which they actually all that bothered about having to hike one, two or even three blocks to/from their destinations.<sup>11</sup>

It is true that some retail categories – convenience-oriented ones, for instance -- rely more than others on quick "in-and-out" parking, but generally speaking, businesses that insist on in-front parking (when alternatives exist in close proximity) do not belong in a Downtown setting, and certainly should not be allowed to hijack or preempt discussions about broader revitalization efforts.

\* Some business owners also complained during the pandemic that street closures were precluding them from taking full advantage of the rise in curbside pickup and delivery. As long as these channels remain popular, this is a legitimate gripe.

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<sup>11</sup> Anecdotally, feelings about such inconveniences seem to vary across generations. That is, having to park further away from and then walk to a destination is less likely to be a dealbreaker for Millennials than Baby Boomers.

Alternatives include drive-up access via rear parking lots (if possible) or from loading zones specifically designated for this purpose at the intersections with the nearest cross streets.

\* Finally, I am working in a Downtown right now where, owing to licensing and permitting imperatives, the restaurant patios are flush with the building facades, such that pedestrians are usually too far away to take notice of and engage with the shopfronts and their window displays, thereby depressing in-store traffic.

This, too, is an understandable frustration, as windows are one of the only tools that merchants have to communicate with and draw the attention of harried or easily distracted pedestrians. Indeed, savvy retailers tend to invest significant time and resources in such staging.

Fortunately, it can be remedied by creating a clear pedestrian pathway between the frontage and the patios, necessitating just a few extra steps on the part of servers.

\* Even with all of these tweaks, a pedestrian mall remains a gamble, for the Downtown overall as well as its individual businesses. It will almost certainly engender opposition from some corridors and incur political risks for its champions.

The last sixteen months, however, have demonstrated how quickly and cost-effectively communities can approximate the model -- in less radical forms and with clearer exit strategies, thereby reducing risk. In other words, public space was able to be “reclaimed”, and some of the benefits enjoyed, without ripping out the streets entirely.

With this in mind, municipalities might want to start first with a trial street closure customized to those blocks where and times when foot traffic is heaviest – for example, adjacent to and during the peak hours of a hugely popular farmers’ market – and then iterate from there (or not).

Going one step further, I am currently working in the Downtown of a major seasonal destination and recommending that the main street be pedestrianized during the peak summer season, but open to cars for the rest of the year.

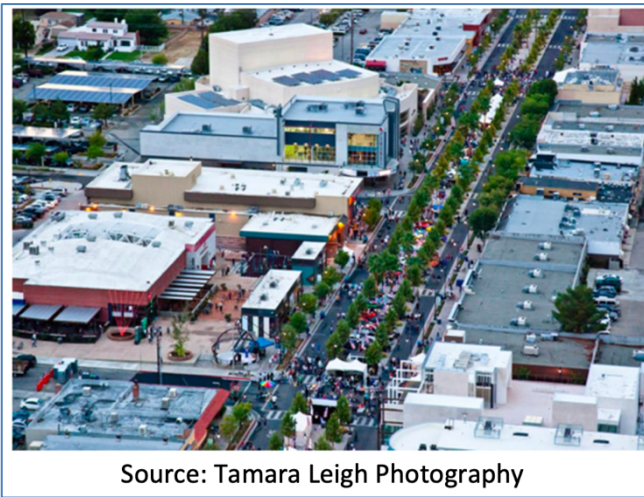
Or, instead of full-on pedestrianization, streets can be road-dieted and beautified, with traffic lanes reduced and/or narrowed, sidewalks expanded, medians installed, trees planted, streetscapes upgraded, etc.

This last option is the most broadly applicable, even to Main Streets in lower-density, automobile-oriented communities where market conditions could never sustain a true pedestrian mall (see inset box below).

Especially in these settings but even in urban ones, however, designers of such hybridized streetscapes and their component parts – most notably, semi-enclosed dining patios – will need to be more careful to retain the visibility of business signage to passing motorists, which was often obscured by the hastily-constructed installations of the pandemic era.

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The Downtown of Lancaster (CA) would not suggest anything even this progressive. A majority-minority middle class exurb roughly sixty miles north of Los Angeles, its population of roughly 160,000 equates to a low density of just 1,700 persons per square mile, and the broader Antelope Valley region contains a slew of competing automobile-friendly shopping centers.



Source: Tamara Leigh Photography

Yet in 2010, amidst much skepticism, it introduced “The BLVD”, a revamped nine-block stretch of Downtown’s Lancaster Boulevard where five lanes had been reduced to two, speed limits lowered and a tree-shaded ramblas added as a median. (Interestingly, it went a step further during the pandemic, closing a section entirely for outdoor dining on Friday and Saturday evenings).

While no one would mistake The BLVD today for the Pearl Street Mall, its retail mix appears to be a modest success, especially in light of the aforementioned challenges: ten years after its debut, it can still point to

a three-screen arthouse cinema, a brewpub, a bowling lounge, a Starbucks Coffee, a host of restaurants and a handful of specialty boutiques.

One should keep in mind that as stunning as its ramblas might be and as visionary as the city’s leaders have been, The BLVD’s retail mix has only been possible because the real estate fundamentals were aligned. Specifically, it has benefitted from the risk-taking and investment of one particular developer, Scott Ehrlich of InSite Development, which partnered on a number of these projects and tenancies.

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## A Brave New World

Pedestrian malls have not been on the table for decades, but as we enter a new phase of city-building in the aftermath of the pandemic, as we talk about “building back better”, it is worth revisiting whether they were really even such failures in the first phase, under which conditions they could thrive today and in what ways we might want to mitigate some of the attendant risk.

I hope that this piece has provided a useful starting point for some nuanced discussions on the subject, and look forward to your feedback.

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