

Strong Central Social Districts: The Keys to Vibrant Downtowns©


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CSDs and Some of Their Frequent Components

Since antiquity, successful communities have had vibrant central meeting places that bring residents together and facilitate their interactions, such as the Greek agoras and the Roman forums. Our downtowns long have had venues that performed these central meeting place functions, e.g., restaurants, bars, churches, parks and public spaces, museums, theaters, arenas, stadiums, multi-unit housing, etc. (see the chart below). They are all essential elements of a downtown's Central Social District (CSD).

Some CSD Components: (EN = entertainment niche)

- Movie theaters (EN)
- PACs (EN)
- Concert Halls(EN)
- Museums (EN)
- Art galleries (EN)
- Arenas (EN)
- Stadiums (EN)
- Libraries, senior centers, community centers (EN)
- Pamper niche venues (gyms, nail & hair salons)
- Restaurants and drinking places (EN)
- Parks/public spaces (EN)
- Ice cream parlors; pizza, hot dog sausage joints (EN)
- Places of worship
- Social clubs, (EN)
- Catering halls (EN)
- Public markets (EN)
- Housing



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The public's reaction to the social distancing sparked by the Covid19 pandemic, and the closure of so many CSD venues, was a natural experiment that demonstrated how much the public needs and wants these venues.

Richard Florida and Joel Kotkin have noted that knowledge/creative workers have strong concerns about their quality of life, and that concept has gained considerable attention and traction in the economic development field. CSDs may be viewed as the venues their local downtowns offer that define the potential social activity aspect of the quality-of-life local residents might enjoy.

CSDs are certainly areas in which much of the downtown's types of social infrastructure identified by the sociologist Eric Klinenberg reside. He points out in his 2018 book, Places for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life, that many physical spaces have very important social aspects and consequences. (He also, for example, is a big fan of libraries.)

The earliest uses of the term Central Social District, to my ken, were by William Hudnut, the distinguished mayor and urbanist, and Richard Rosan, the former CEO of ULI, when both held positions in that organization. In one ULI discussion, Hudnut noted in 2001 that: "Cities serve a need for people to get together. Priority attention should be given to

public places and establishing a sense of place. The city should determine what urban design considerations to implement or retrofit to make people feel safe. Young people are going to places where they can experience a high quality of life. They are deciding that quality of life comes first and the job second." In 2002 Rosan wrote: "Throughout America, there is a renewed focus on restoring a sense of community to urban areas torn apart by segregated land uses, clogged roads, "leapfrog development," and inconsistent planning."¹

CSDs are found in all types of downtowns, be they in large urban cities, or in suburbs, or in small and rural communities. As the table nearby shows, in Wisconsin's towns in the 1,000 to 10,000

The CSD's Portion of the Retail and Service Business Mix in Wisconsin's Smaller Downtowns

Cities/Villages with 1,000-2,500 Pop. - Averages of 143 Downtowns				
NAICS Description	Number	Percent	Rank	
Full-service restaurants	3.19	19.7%	1	
Drinking places (alcoholic beverages)	2.17	13.4%	2	
Beauty salons	2.15	13.3%	3	
Other amusem't (bowling,golf,fitness)	0.98	6.0%	7	
Barber shops	0.5	3.1%	14	
Totals	8.99	55.5%	NA	
Cities/Villages with 5,000-10,000 Pop. - Averages of 45 Downtowns				
NAICS Description	Number	Percent	Rank	
Full-service restaurants	7.93	20.9%	1	
Beauty salons	6.69	17.7%	2	
Drinking places (alcoholic beverages)	3.91	10.3%	3	
Other amusem't (bowling,golf,fitness)	1.93	5.1%	6	
Barber shops	1.33	3.5%	11	
Totals	21.79	57.5%	NA	
Cities/Villages with 25,000-50,000 Pop. - Average of 13 Downtowns				
NAICS Description	Number	Percent	Rank	
Full-service restaurants	12	23.7%	1	
Beauty salons	9.46	18.7%	2	
Drinking places (alcoholic beverages)	6.08	12.0%	3	
Limited-service eating places	2.31	4.6%	8	
Nail salons	1.62	3.2%	10	
Barber shops	1.54	3.0%	11	
Totals	33.01	65.3%	NA	
Data from : Bill Ryan, Beverly Stencel, and Jangik Jin, "Retail and Service Business Mix in Wisconsin's Downtowns, Downtown economics, Issue 173, April 2011. https://fyi.extension.wisc.edu/downtowneconomics/Files/2012/08/retail-and-service-business-mix.pdf				

population range, CSD-related businesses accounted for between 55.5% and 57.5% of these downtowns' retail and service businesses. For towns in the 25,000 to 50,000 range that percentage rises to 65.3. One might reasonably argue that these data indicate that the need for CSD type functions emerges early in the agglomeration process. As the recent pandemic has demonstrated, in large towns and small ones, we humans have strong basic needs for social interaction, and we are very distressed when we are deprived of them.

Greatly strengthened CSDs have been an important factor associated with the emergence of magnetic and popular downtowns. In an increasing number of them, their CSD functions have become more important than their traditional CBD functions, e.g., retail and office-based activities. However, as with most good things, strong CSDs, are not always easy to develop, and some of their elements will do better in some types of downtowns than in others.

Comparing Suburban and Urban CSDs

While CSDs are in all kinds of downtowns, for the sake of brevity, this analysis will focus mainly on those in the suburbs and in our large urban downtowns.

CSDs Are the Core of Strong Suburban Downtowns. Strong suburban districts tend to have strong CSD functions and venues, *since they are unlikely to be major office employment centers* – though they usually have some offices for professional services such as accountants, doctors and lawyers. This is a major differentiation from large urban districts. They are not just smaller CBDs. While some suburban towns may indeed attract office development, it is usually in office parks within about a 5-minute drive of the downtown.² That means, for instance, that within about nine minutes these office workers can get from their desks to a downtown destination, usually by car. Nine-minute trips were identified by Larry Houstoun as the average travel time for downtown office worker lunch-hour trips.³ Today, while it is the ideological fashion of the day to hammer all car use, the fact remains that because of the way our suburban communities work and are dispersely laid out, they remain heavily dependent on travel by cars. That may change as micro-mobility vehicles come more into fashion, especially if they are weather protected. Until then, car use will be a key factor for suburban downtowns.

It should be noted *that many suburban downtowns are now proving that being a major office employment center is not essential to a downtown's success*, though being close to one can be an important asset.

The strongest retail in suburban downtowns has usually been modest - predominantly operations selling neighborhood level goods and services such as groceries and drugstore items. Their GAFO operations (basically comparison-shopping goods) usually are overwhelmingly small independents. National chains passed them by because they lacked the customer traffic, potential consumer market size and spending power the chains require. Of course, there have been some notable *exceptions* such as Wellesley, MA, Westfield, NJ, and Greenwich, CT, but they were located in relatively dense high income market areas. That said, the downtowns without national chains have not been as hurt as the malls and our larger urban districts with chain stores by the creative destruction that the retail industry has been experiencing over the past decade, or its acceleration during the Covid crisis. They simply had little to nothing to lose.

The recent Covid19 crisis has created a natural experiment showing that suburban downtowns retained higher pedestrian flows and their restaurants retained higher customer traffic than our large major urban districts. One reason was that the suburban merchants are seldom dependent on tourists. Another was that many of their office worker customers based in local office parks, being auto dependent, were still working in them in meaningful numbers, and not remotely at the high levels found in the urban

districts. A third is that the local residents who did work in the large urban downtowns were working remotely in high numbers (usually in the suburbs), and they have become a new and very active part of the suburban downtowns' daytime populations. It will be interesting to see how many of these workers return to their urban places of work as they "reopen" and how many remain remote workers.

In the vast majority of suburban downtowns, the CBD-type office and GAFO retail functions were never very robust. Aside from professional offices, any office development in a suburb is not usually clustered in its downtown. Their retail offerings were very limited. Even pre-pandemic, their CBD functions were relatively weak.

The CSD elements in the suburban districts are usually led by their restaurants and watering holes. For instance, back in 2010, in downtown Morristown, NJ (town population 18,529), there were 77 restaurants and nine cafes/coffee bars, and this niche drew more customers downtown and had higher sales than any other non-auto related economic segment in the district. A ballpark estimate of this niche's sales then was \$79.4 million+.⁴

Pamper niches – hair and nail salons, spas, gyms, Yoga and Pilates studios, etc. -- are often the second most important component in suburban districts. They are cheaper and easier to open than retail operations since they require little investment in inventory. Indeed, because of that some can pay higher rents. Across the nation they have taken over spaces from small retailers who could not afford to pay as much rent, causing considerable consternation among downtown leaders and stakeholders. While many downtown leaders have in the past had snobby negative views of such operations, the truth is that they bring in a lot of people with lots of discretionary dollars to spend who also visit other types of



TOD Housing in Downers Grove, IL

nearby shops. Also, their storefronts are often more appealing and entertaining than those of some nearby retailers. As the Covid19 crisis showed, they also are very prone to shutting down in any crisis, but many are proving resilient during the recovery.

More and more suburban downtowns located in large urban metro areas are benefiting from relatively substantial housing development, particularly Transit Oriented Development (TOD). For example, just take a ride on a Metra train from downtown Chicago to Aurora and you will ride by town after town (see Downers Grove photo nearby) with lots of new residential units near their rail stations. However, a cultural preference for single-family homes and auto use, the flight of young people, and low numbers of live workers have dampened similar development in the less dense metro suburban downtowns.

Formal entertainment venues also can be found in suburban downtowns. When looked at from a relative perspective, they can be far more substantial than if viewed in just absolute terms. Movie theaters -- that have been in jeopardy since the advent of TV -- are frequently found in these downtowns. They have been essential entertainment

magnets for their communities, often for decades.⁵ Theaters and PACs are also to be found in some. Unfortunately, many of them are poorly programmed and in almost continuous financial stress. However, an elite few such as the Count Basie Theater in Red Bank, NJ can stage over 200 performances a year and earn significant ticket sales revenues.⁶ Yes, the Basie pales in size and revenues to Lincoln Center in NYC, but its importance grows when you consider the size and population of its drawing area, and that it is not geographically positioned to attract huge numbers of out-of-state and international tourists. Most formal entertainment venues in suburban downtowns very often:

- Are closed dead spaces during the day and most nights
- Are financially in jeopardy
- Have far weaker positive economic impacts than arts advocates thought or promised – more on this below.

Surprisingly, suburban downtowns are usually weak when it comes to having the popular, well activated parks and public spaces that can be anchoring CSD components. Often there are none. When they do exist, they are too often just dead ceremonial spaces, or have a poor peripheral location off the main commercial corridors where it is hard to attract users or to have positive impacts on other downtown operations. They also are often badly programmed, focused on just a few events, so their magnetism is weak. This is unfortunate, since creating vibrant spaces is usually substantially cheaper than creating a viable enclosed formal entertainment venue, and their operational costs per visitor are also usually much less – more on this below. Creating better public spaces is how many, even some of the strongest suburban downtowns, can substantially increase their magnetism.

Their CSDs Made the Large Urban Downtowns Truly Successful. Historically, prior to about 1990, these districts were seldom major residential areas. Many started out as vital places for financial transactions, trading, retailing, light manufacturing, and entertainment venues. At some point in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries they became major locations for high rise office buildings and major office employment centers. After the devastating decline of our downtowns in the 1960s and 1970s, the 1980s saw a whole bevy of them -- such as in Charlotte, NC, Richmond, VA, Stamford, CT, Houston, TX, and Manhattan's Financial District -- adopting office growth as the major engine of their downtown revitalization efforts. The results were strong clusters of

office workers in fortress-like buildings, dead streets save at lunchtime, and especially after dark and on weekends. Despite low crime rates, they all suffered from high levels of user fears of becoming a crime victim.

Then, in the 1990s, the elements of their CSDs began to strengthen and reinforce each other. Downtowns and urban living suddenly became popular. Not everyone liked them. Most folks still preferred suburban living as they

Where People Live Today and Would Like to Live in 5 Years (2014)

	Urban Areas	Suburban Areas	Rural Areas
A) Live Today	25%	53%	21%
B) Would Like to Live in 5 Yrs	22%	50%	28%
Delta B- A	-3%	-3%	7%
Source: Trulia 2014 survey of 2,008 Americans. Jed Kolko. "Urban Headwinds, Suburban Tailwinds." Trulia. January 22, 2015. https://www.trulia.com/research/cities-vs-suburbs-jan-2015/			

still do today, but more than enough liked them to make these districts much more successful. (See nearby table). Of particular importance, housing in and near the downtowns began to grow, along with a trend of their residents also working in the district. These new residents, and particularly the live workers, provided significant amounts of new close-in customers for restaurants, bars, retailers, public spaces, and formal entertainment venues who came after 5:00 pm and on weekends. The notion and brag of 24-hour downtowns emerged as a consequence. These CSD venues all reached a point where they began to attract loads of people downtown not to work or make business transactions, but to live, play and *to spend quality time with people they valued*. This new success in turn attracted tourists, domestic and foreign.

About the live workers, one may argue about whether those who get jobs in the downtown then seek to also live there or do those who like living and playing in the downtown first decide that is where they want to live, and then look for employment there as well. The decision about where to live is probably the primary one for these workers. For example, those in creative occupations notoriously have a very strong regard for their quality of life and tend to first choose where they want to live and then look for a job afterwards. To repeat Hudnut's observation: "Young people are going to places where they can experience a high quality of life. They are deciding that quality of life comes first and the job second." Furthermore, this theme of quality of life guiding where creative/knowledge workers will want to live, and its priority over job choices, also can be found in the writings of Richard Florida and Joel Kotkin.

These large downtowns already were large office employment centers while they still were struggling in the 1980s. It was the housing development that later kick-started a strengthening of their CSD-type multifunctionality, that in turn generated their robust revivals – and made several of them superstar districts.

Restaurants and watering holes also flourished in these downtowns as they switched into high revitalization gears in the late 1990s and early 2000s. They benefited not only

**Attendance at Major NYC
Entertainment Attractions Compared to
Bryant Park's (millions/yr)**

Attendance	NYC Attraction
3.3	Yankee Stadium
2.1	Citi Field
4.0	Madison Square Garden
6.2	Metropolitan Museum of Art
3.0	MoMA
5.0	Lincoln Center
12.2	All Broadway Theaters 2013-14
6.0	Bryant Park

from growing residential, office worker, and tourist markets, but also from the sharp drop in the fear of crime that the growing day, and especially evening, pedestrian flows strongly helped produce.

Well activated parks and public spaces such as the Boston Common, Bryant Park in Manhattan, Millennium Park in Chicago, Discovery Green in Houston, and Campus Martius in Detroit have all been strong elements in their downtown's CSDs and attract huge numbers of visitors. For example, in 2014, Bryant Park had about 6 million

visitors, while MoMA had about 3 million, Lincoln Center had about 5 million, and Madison Square Garden had about 4 million (see above table).

Some Key CSD Components

There are many potential elements a CSD might have, but for purposes of brevity the discussion below will be limited to those that are usually among the most important, and a few that are unwarrantedly overlooked.

Restaurants.⁷ They are perhaps the most basic elements in a CSD, especially in smaller communities. Moreover, they are particularly important for downtowns not only because they can provide people with needed nourishment, but also because they are places where folks go to have fun, be entertained and, most importantly, enjoy the company of other people. They are one of the essential drivers of a downtown's vitality, and often the niche that "pioneers" their revitalization.

Truly able restaurant operators understand the drawing power that can be created by an eatery that responds across the board to our needs for sustenance, pleasure, and social interaction — and they include themselves in the equation. For example, Jean-Claude Vrinat — under whose ownership Taillevent dominated the Parisian restaurant scene for decades — once explained that great food, outstanding wines, and impeccable service were necessary, but insufficient reasons for his restaurant's success.⁸ The key factor was to treat all of his guests as if they were members of his family. His guests, he believed, were looking, most of all, for an enjoyable, entertaining experience and this had a very important social component to which his restaurant had to respond. Of course, his food and wines had to be exceptional (his wine cellar was legendary), but it was the ability to make his guests feel at home while having an exceptional experience that made Taillevent truly extraordinary.

Restaurants also provide pleasure through their ability to function as informal entertainment venues. People-watching is perhaps the simplest and most widespread form of entertainment, and restaurants can provide copious opportunities for watching the ways that fellow diners and restaurant staffers behave. Many of the staff's activities are like well-practiced performances: flambéing food, opening wine bottles, filleting fish, mixing drinks, making pizzas and tandoori foods, etc. Indeed, some restaurants even have chef's tables where guests pay extra to be able to watch their food being made, and to interact with the staff.

Restaurants are sometimes special neighborhood meeting places where people who live or work in an area go to be with their neighbors, coworkers, and friends. British pubs, the "locals," are great examples of this, but their functional equivalents can be found around the world and in places large and small. In the USA, some examples are the coffeeshops or diners filled most mornings with local farmers and businesspeople in many of our rural communities. Eateries can function as the "third places" that help generate a sense of community in a district, and structure its cohesion.

Few, if any, of the other types of downtown operations can respond to a similar full package of basic human needs. Restaurant operators who understand that they are selling a lot more than just the calories needed to keep their customers' bodies functional are much more likely to be successful.

The growth of strong downtown restaurant niches and clusters has been another strong characteristic of successful downtowns of all sizes. They help bring downtowns alive after dark. Even though independent merchants are unlikely to be open during dinner hours and thus benefit from the restaurants' customer traffic, they do benefit from the restaurant patrons' lunchtime visits, the patrons being visually reminded of their presence, and the general improved perception of the district. Retail chains, with longer operating hours, are more likely to benefit directly from the restaurants' customer traffic than smaller merchants who close at 6:00 pm.

In small and medium sized communities, restaurants are relatively easier to startup because of the relatively small market share they must win to be viable, as well as their districts' comparatively low rents and labor costs. For example, in Sherwood, WI, (pop ~3,000), startups in the restaurant or pamper niches only need to win a 28% trade area market share to have a good chance of survival, while one in an apparel niche would need 167%, and one in a home and heart niche would need a 168% share. The latter plainly need a much larger trade area.

Sherwood WI: The Trade Area Market Share Needed to Support One Store in Some Downtown Niches

Needed Entry Mkt Share	Niche
28%	Restaurant Niche
28%	Pamper Niche
167%	Apparel Niche
168%	Home & Hearth Niche

The consumer market for restaurant fare is enormous: households in pre-pandemic America usually spent relatively similar amounts for eating out as they did for meals prepared at home, but in some years it was more. "In 2019, food spending by U.S. consumers, businesses, and government entities totaled \$1.77 trillion. Food away-from-home accounted for 54.8

percent of total food expenditures, up from 50.1 percent in 2009."⁹

Running a restaurant is widely acknowledged as a very tough business, but the industry's low survival rate has often been exaggerated at 90% of the startups failing within the first year of operation. Research has shown that only 26% of the first-year restaurants fail, with the number rising to 60% after three years. After that, longevity becomes a strong predictor that a restaurant would stay in business. However, restaurants do have a bigger failure rate than many other types of start-ups.¹⁰

The failure to differentiate from competitors is one of the strongest causes of restaurant failures. Downtown restaurants, more than those in other types of locations, will need to be able to strongly do so because they are so often in dense clusters, niches, or restaurant rows along major downtown corridors. On the other hand, research has shown that if a restaurant is really good, it can succeed in less than prime locations.¹¹

Over the years, many discussions with restaurant owners and managers revealed that rent levels are very important to their success. There is near unanimity that rents over 10% of annual sales are unaffordable and stresses their financial viability.

We are now, as a nation, about to start a real recovery from the pandemic. Far fewer restaurants have failed than several industry groups feared, but the number of failures will still be substantial.¹² Suburban eateries dependent mainly on local residential markets and workforces have done far better than those in our superstar downtowns that were very dependent and tourist and office worker customers. Their future

successes will likely be diminished by the growth in remote work, while the eateries in suburban districts are very likely to benefit from the new remote workers in their towns.

Many restauranteurs have been forced by the pandemic to learn how to trim the fat from their operations and /or how to either use the internet and deliveries, or to use them more effectively. This may well mean that the surviving operators will be better skilled than those of the pre-crisis era!

While discussions about future changes in the industry have mentioned things like ghost kitchens, the most important emerging challenge may be a growing shortage of people who still want to work in restaurants. According to a pre-crisis report by the BLS, about three-fifths of all workers paid at or below the federal minimum wage were employed in the leisure and hospitality industry, almost entirely in restaurants and other food services. For many of these workers, tips may supplement the hourly wages received. Recent reports indicate that many former restaurant workers have found better paying and more stable jobs, while many others are looking for such jobs:

A Pew Research Center survey this year found that 66 percent of the unemployed had “seriously considered” changing their field of work, a far greater percentage than during the Great Recession. People who used to work in restaurants or travel are finding higher-paying jobs in warehouses or real estate, for example. Or they want a job that is more stable and less likely to be exposed to the coronavirus — or any other deadly virus down the road.¹³

Restaurant owners may have to substantially increase their workers’ wages and job security during the recovery, and that might impose substantial new financial stress on their operations.

On the other hand, there are strong signs that the pent-up demand for dining out is probably enormous and supported by a lot of money saved during the pandemic by those who continued to be employed. Those people tended to have above average income and education. The nearby table reflects a long-term trend for expenditures in

Average Expenditures for Food Away From Home by Quintiles: 2017

		QUINTILES				
		1st 20%	2nd 20%	3rd 20%	4th 20%	5th 20%
Quintile Income Info						
	Low	n.a.	\$20,739	\$39,609	\$66,898	\$109,743
	High	\$20,738	\$39,608	\$66,897	\$109,742	n.a.
Mean Incomes		\$11,394	\$29,821	\$52,431	\$86,363	\$188,103
Average Quintile Expenditures						
Average HH consumer expenditures		\$26,019	\$39,300	\$50,470	\$67,604	\$116,988
Food away from home HH \$s		\$1,488	\$2,049	\$3,023	\$3,863	\$6,402
Quintile's % of food away from home \$s		8.8%	12.2%	18.0%	23.0%	38.1%
Source: BLS: Table 1101. Quintiles of income before taxes: Annual expenditure means, shares, standard errors, and coefficients of variation, Consumer Expenditure Survey, 2017						

restaurants to strongly correlate with household incomes. In 2017, the top income quintile accounted for 38% of all household spending for food away from home, while

the next quintile accounted for another 23%. The 60% of the households with incomes below about \$66,898 only accounted for 39% of these expenditures. This strongly suggests that, even more than in pre-crisis times, downtown restaurants in relatively affluent market areas, will have much stronger demand than those in less affluent districts. Some supporting evidence: restaurants in these areas have done better during the pandemic.

Downtown Housing—the secret sauce of downtown revitalization. Since the early 2000s, observers noted that our larger downtowns in the 1990s had been attracting significantly more residents. In the years since, housing development has become increasingly seen as the secret revitalization sauce for a large number of downtowns, including those in numerous suburbs, and almost all of our largest cities. These new residents help activate their downtowns after 5:00 pm on weekdays and over the entire weekend. Downtown Dallas is a good example of this. Formerly it was a district perhaps known best for its underground tunnel system. As one observer noted about its recent resurgence: “After decades of efforts—and some missteps—the core of Dallas has been transformed. No single strategy or project is credited for the turnaround. But the emergence of residential development is widely acknowledged as having been a spark plug.”¹⁴ Notably, this downtown’s revitalization effort also focused on two other major elements of CSDs: attractive public spaces, e.g., Klyde Warren Park, and formal entertainment venues, with more than a dozen visual and performing arts institutions clustered in a downtown arts district. Gone is the underground tunnel system that drew pedestrians and sucked vibrancy from downtown sidewalks.

Less Successful in Smaller and Rural Towns. However, not all downtowns experience household or population growth. For example, Eugenie Birch found that about 27% of the larger downtowns she studied had declining numbers of households over the 1990s.¹⁵ In a 2020 study, Ryan and Milder looked at the downtowns in all 259 cities of 25,000 to 75,000 population in seven Midwestern states and found that 31% of the suburban downtowns had negative population growth, while 46% of the independent cities – the core cities of small metro areas – had negative growth!¹⁶

*Ryan and Milder argue that most people who move to the suburbs do so because they, as most Americans, prefer a lifestyle based on single family homes, on decently sized lots, and the frequent use of cars.*¹⁷ Consequently, the potential market demand for market rate housing in suburban downtowns will tend to come from niche segments such as young adults who have not nested, empty nesters, and commuters who use a nearby rail or bus station. However, according to one report, NJ Transit has found that only 12.5% to 25% of the residents in the TOD projects developed around its stations are NJT commuters.¹⁸

Live Work. Downtown housing growth and district activation is thought to be strongest when downtowns have attracted large numbers of “live workers” (those who both live

Employment Nodes With Highest Live-Work Percentages

Employment Node	% of Workers Living Within One Mile of Downtown Who Work Within One Mile of Downtown
Midtown Manhattan, NY	55.90%
Downtown Chicago, IL	51.80%
Downtown Washington, DC	50.50%
Strip - Las Vegas, NV*	50.50%
Downtown Rochester, MN	50.20%
Downtown Ann Arbor, MI	49.30%
Downtown Honolulu, HI**	44.50%
Downtown Portland, OR	43.50%
Downtown Seattle, WA	41.00%
Center City - Philadelphia, PA	40.70%
Avg live/work of all 230 employment nodes	28.50%
Percent of nodes under 20% live/work	60.00%
Percent of nodes with 10%-19% live/work	42.20%

Source: Paul R. Levy and Lauren M. Gilchrist DOWNTOWN REBIRTH: DOCUMENTING THE LIVE-WORK DYNAMIC IN 21ST CENTURY U.S. CITIES. Prepared for the International Downtown Association By the Philadelphia Center City District

and work in a district). They are there after 5:00 p.m. and on weekends. They do not spend much time in vehicles commuting, but often will walk to and from work, or make short trips on public transit. For example, in several zip codes in Manhattan over 50% of the residents who are in the labor force walk to work. The live workers very often are also creatives with high salaries.

In a seminal monograph published in 2013, Levy and Gilchrist researched the percentage of live workers in 231 major employment centers located in the nation's 150 largest cities and within a one-mile radius that surrounds each of these centers. Their work showed that many of the downtowns in the nation had

very significant levels of live workers of 40.7% to 55.9% (see above table), especially those in superstar cities.

However, the vast majority of our largest employment nodes had considerably lower levels of live workers: 60% had fewer than 20% of their workforce being live workers,



Since 2006, TOD projects have brought 366 new residential units into downtown Cranford, NJ

and 42% were in the 10%-19% range.¹⁹ DANTH, Inc has found that a cluster of about 300 residential units is needed in a downtown core or node for the residential units to have appreciable nearby positive impacts on pedestrian flows and merchants' sales. Consequently, if the live work population is 300+ units strong *and suitably clustered*, their positive impacts probably can be felt in the 42% of the employment nodes where the live workers constitute 10% to 19% of their workforces.

Affordable Housing. Unfortunately, market rate downtown housing seems more and more to be only for

the affluent and very wealthy. A study in 2014 found that: “On average, more than half (52 percent) of all rental households in the top 25 cities spend more than 30 percent of income on housing.”²⁰ As a result, some new ideas are being tested out, e.g., projects with “micro-units,” small houses, or communal living are being built to provide affordable

solutions. The pandemic caused changes in many downtown office markets will likely make a number of older office buildings candidates for conversion to residential uses. Likewise with closed hotels. Many downtowns have substantial experience with such projects. The question is will they be priced just for the very wealthy, or to meet the needs of middle-income families who are now being priced out of the market?

Will downtowns stop being everyone's neighborhood? In the 1970s and 1980s, many feared downtowns were destined to house only our poorest, most disadvantaged residents. Now, will they be ghettos of the very wealthy? (Which raises the issue of the negative impacts of gentrification – but that is a complex issue for another time.) Can they be a place for our middle class, too? Should policies be put in place to assure economic as well as racial diversity in our downtowns?

Despite these issues, the value and viability of downtown housing as a strong growth engine continues. These residents are critical close-in customers for other CSD venues such as restaurants, bars, museums, parks, theaters, cinemas, etc. Things would be far more just if there was greater diversity in race and income. It is high time that essential ethical concepts, that defined our liberal democracy's political culture, such as justice, became operational in our downtown revitalization processes.

The Pandemic. Some experts assert that the pandemic will wring excess housing rents and prices out of our large cities and urban districts, allowing for the return of more young and middle-income creatives. Much data, often conflicting, has been published about the character of downtown and big city population flight, as well as on housing's current costs, supply, and demand. It is probably best to now wait for the data dustup in the housing market to settle, so we can grasp a clearer view of the situation. Prudence may allow an expectation of appreciable overall change, but not any valid anticipations of specific disruptions. However, this much we do know:

- Crises tend to exacerbate trends and cull the weak.
- The millennials are still a poorer and career lagging age cohort, but they are now nesting and climbing up their career ladders. However, those with jobs in some key industries, often found in our large downtowns, have done much better than the average millennial.
- Remote work is here to stay in some form and will influence housing choices depending on the form it takes at the corporate level.
- Aside from existing municipal housing programs, a number of older and out-of-date downtown office buildings and hotels will be available for conversions into housing. How many of these new units will go to the homeless, the middle class or to the top 5 percenters remains to be seen.

Formal Entertainment Venues. These include such venues as museums, PACs, concert halls, stadiums, and arenas. They often are held in great esteem within their communities, and especially among the local social, business, and political elites. However, they also tend to be relatively expensive to build, maintain and operate. Many were intended venues for types of arts events that have suffered significantly decreased attendance in the past decade, even before Covid. There have been a substantial number of failures among these venues and a much larger number that struggle financially each year because their true costs for each admission cannot be sustained

by their admission revenues. They consequently need to constantly ask for lots of donations and grants to remain solvent. Far too often, it is not a sustainable business model.

Many of them also are seriously underutilized: closed during the days and only “lit” some of the evenings. Most performance venues in medium-sized downtowns probably will have under 90 events a year, so they are closed about 75% of the time, about 264 days a year. They can have positive impacts on local eateries and watering holes to the degree that they are active, and they draw patrons. Their major impacts on retail, if any, have an overwhelmingly indirect and contingent route – through the new residents they might attract. Conversely, dark cultural centers can be detrimental to a downtown’s sense of vitality.

Ticket prices for these venues are usually relatively expensive – far above the price of local movie tickets, for example – so a substantial portion of middle-income households are discouraged from attending their events.

Here again household incomes in their drawing areas can be critical, though these areas probably will be larger than their downtown’s retail trade area. As can be seen in the nearby table about quintile expenditures on entertainment, 73% of the expenditures

Average Expenditures by Quintiles for Entertainment: Fees and Admissions in 2017

QUINTILES						
	1st 20%	2nd 20%	3rd 20%	4th 20%	5th 20%	
Quintile Income Info						
Low	n.a.	\$20,739	\$39,609	\$66,898	\$109,743	
High	\$20,738	\$39,608	\$66,897	\$109,742	n.a.	
Mean Incomes	\$11,394	\$29,821	\$52,431	\$86,363	\$188,103	
Average Quintile Expenditures						
Average HH consumer expenditures	\$26,019	\$39,300	\$50,470	\$67,604	\$116,988	
Fees and Admission HH \$s	\$214	\$278	\$509	\$796	\$1,955	
Quintile's % of fees&admissions \$s	5.7%	7.4%	13.6%	21.2%	52.1%	
Source: BLS: Table 1101. Quintiles of income before taxes: Annual expenditure means, shares, standard errors, and coefficients of variation, Consumer Expenditure Survey, 2017						

for entertainment fees and admissions are made by those in households with incomes above \$66,898, and 52% comes from households earning more than \$109,743 annually. Formal entertainment venues selling expensive tickets should be sure they have a lot of these more affluent

households and/or a lot of affluent tourists in their market area.

In our largest cities, many famous arts and cultural venues charge admission fees that only the very wealthy can afford. Museum entries are often two or three times more expensive than going to the movies. Going to hit plays or music concerts can cost hundreds of dollars at the box office, and thousands on the secondary market. In these superstar cities, the problem of equity extends beyond housing and employment into even having the potential to visit their famous entertainment assets. Their parks and public spaces, and movie theaters, have become the lone bastions for providing broad public access.

Much has been made about the substantial economic impacts these formal venues can have on a community, but research on communities with populations under 25,000 has shown that:

Average and Median Per Person Audience Spending by Resident and Non-Resident Attendees to Nonprofit Arts and Cultural Events in 23 City/ Town Study Regions With Populations Under 25,000 During 2016

Expenditures for...	Means		Medians	
	Resident	Non Resident	Resident	Non Resident
Hospitality	\$12.57	\$29.57	\$10.70	\$20.03
	62.0%	68.9%	61.7%	63.5%
Refreshments/snacks	\$3.35	\$4.42	\$2.55	\$2.78
Meals/drinks	\$8.84	\$13.52	\$7.95	\$11.12
Overnight Lodging	\$0.38	\$11.63	\$0.20	\$6.13
Retail Prone	\$5.97	\$8.36	\$5.15	\$7.24
	29.5%	19.5%	29.7%	23.0%
Gifts/Souvenirs	\$4.54	\$6.69	\$4.12	\$6.07
Clothing-- accessories	\$1.43	\$1.67	\$1.03	\$1.17
Other Expenditures	\$1.73	\$5.01	\$1.50	\$4.27
	8.5%	11.7%	8.6%	13.5%
Local Ground Transp	\$1.23	\$4.00	\$1.12	\$3.75
Childcare	\$0.35	\$0.49	\$0.29	\$0.32
Other	\$0.15	\$0.52	\$0.09	\$0.20
Total Expenditures	\$20.27	\$42.94	\$17.35	\$31.54
SOURCE: Arts and Economic Prosperity 5, Americans for the Arts, 2017. Available at www.AmericansForTheArts.org/EconomicImpact .				

- About half their impact goes through their organizations' direct expenditures, but most expenditures will not go to firms in their downtowns because local business mixes are too thin or incongruent with the arts venues' expenditure mixes. Instead, they may go to firms in the surrounding county or region.
- Firms in the downtown can capture the expenditures of the arts venues' audiences, be they resident or non-resident, but those dollars go overwhelmingly for food and accommodations. Comparatively little goes to the types of shops local residents frequent such as groceries, drugstores, hardware stores, apparel shops, etc. See the above table.
- Average audience member expenditures related to an event/performance are rather modest: \$20.27 for an area resident, and \$42.94 for non-residents. Moreover, these expenditures go overwhelmingly to hospitality type operations, with little going to the types of retail local shoppers typically need and want. See above table. Also, these expenditures will not be captured unless there are capable merchants in the downtown who can do that.
- However, strong formal entertainment venues, such as popular museums, can have positive impacts on real estate values and prices even a mile away.²¹

That said, there is little doubt that formal entertainment venues, when properly configured and operationally successful, can be wonderful assets for a community. However, they do demand a lot of resources and management expertise. Before a downtown decides to create a new one, local leaders must realistically assess whether they have the resources and management skills to not only build it, but also to maintain it and to run it well into the future without continued financial stress.

Threats: New and Old. The pandemic forced many of our museums, stadiums, arenas, and theaters to close or to severely reduce their operations. Employment and organizational revenues in the entertainment and arts industries plummeted. According to Americans for the Arts, arts and cultural organizations, were "experiencing \$3.6 billion in devastating losses." This crisis, as might be expected, has culled the weak, and the strongest will survive. Pre-crisis there were a lot of weak arts organizations. As one study by Americans for the Arts noted: "In 2013, a time of improved economic health, 42 percent of arts nonprofits still failed to generate positive net income—a figure that raises concerns about the long-term sustainability of arts organizations that are unable to achieve a break-even budget." ²²

The Importance of Tourists to Attendance at Some Major NYC Entertainment Venues

Est. Number of	Tourist Percent	Tourists	Venues
18,900	14%		Joyce Theater*
121,000	22%		Brooklyn Academy of Music
8,052,000	66%		Broadway League
1,587,000	46%		Lincoln Center**
4,650,000	75%		Metropolitan Museum of Art
2,250,000	75%		Museum of Modern Art*
957,000	87%		Guggenheim Museum*
12,000,000	30%		Central Park
1,200,000 to 2,400,000	20% to 40%		Bryant Park
*Nontourist= NYC and met area residents. Otherwise= NYC residents. **Based on ticket sales numbers. Data from 2014			

The larger organizations, with their larger endowments and stronger networks for tapping financial resources, are far more likely to survive than the smaller ones. Their level of recovery, however, will be strongly constrained by their dependency on tourist admission revenues. In NYC that dependency can be very strong: about 66% for

Broadway theaters and 75%+ for the major museums. See nearby table.

On the other hand, a huge number of arts organizations have very small budgets, under \$50,000/year, so a good number may have been able to survive by shutting down and hibernating.

Movie Theaters.²³ Because of their importance in suburban and smaller downtowns, and in our general culture, movie theaters deserve special attention. Though they have passed the digital projection/distribution divide that threatened to put many out of business, downtown movie theaters remain vulnerable. They are still threatened by home and electronic device movie watching – that is how most movies now are viewed. More importantly, they are vulnerable to some influential Hollywood executives who, because theaters provide such a small slice of their overall revenues, want same day release of new films through the theater and purely electronic distribution channels. Goodbye to first run theaters.

For most downtowns and neighborhood commercial districts, cinemas are important parts of their CSDs. They are broadly accessible and have fewer user frictions than many other kinds of formal entertainment venues. Indeed, Latino patrons have become one of the industry's most important market segments. Cinemas have comparatively reasonable prices, are open afternoons and evenings almost every day, and present frequent showings throughout the day. They also occupy large spaces, usually in highly visible locations. Failed cinemas are hard to redevelop and can be terrible eyesores.

When they get in trouble, there is usually not a lot of time available to save them. Savvy downtown EDOs should have an action plan ready to go, should their cinema face closure. In dealing with the digital divide many communities used new tools such as community-based businesses and crowdfunding to save their theaters. These tools can be used readily by other downtowns should the need arise. Cinemas that have eateries or are close by to one have a greater chance of surviving. The Cinemart in Forest Hills, NY, has a café and office space it rents that provides other revenue streams. It is also just across the street from Eddie's Sweet Shop, a famed old time ice cream parlor that has been around for over 50 years. (See the above photo).



The Cinemart Theater and Eddie's Sweet Shop in Forest Hills, NY

Parks and Public Spaces. These are not just green or open urban spaces where people can retreat for quiet relaxation. They also can be venues for events, and great for that most fundamental of entertainments, people-watching. Importantly, they also are very equitable in the sense that it is relatively easy for folks of all incomes and races to use them.



Bryant Park, once a festering venue for drug use and drug sale is now an exemplar engine of economic growth

often have performance spaces for events such as movies, plays, dance recitals, concerts, lectures, etc. The smart ones use temporary stages, so the same spaces



Ice skating rink in Central Park Plaza in Valparaiso, IN.

Annual Expenditures Per Visitor of Formal and Informal Entertainment Venues

Type of Entertainment Venue	Annual Expenditures (Ms\$)	Annual Visitors (Ms)	Expend/Visit or (\$)
Formal Ent Venues	Avg: \$121.4	Avg: 1.55	Avg: \$64.11
Larger Communities	Avg: \$206.1	Avg: 2.82	Avg: \$82.35
Smaller Communities	Avg: \$3.51	Avg: 0.08	Avg: \$42.83
Parks and Public Spaces	Avg: \$11.74	Avg: 7.05	Avg: \$2.00
Larger Communities	Avg: \$18.50	Avg: 11.16	Avg: 2.02
Smaller Communities	Avg: \$0.48	Avg: 0.21	Avg: \$1.99
Source: Downtown Curmudgeon Blog. Note: Formal venues include arenas, PACs, theaters, concert halls, museums. Study of 25 venues.			

Infrastructure and Event

Programming. Great parks and public spaces also usually have the infrastructure and equipment that allow guests, at little or no cost, to engage in a range of leisure behaviors. Among them are a pond for sailing model boats; a boules court; a ping pong table; chess and checkers tables; a carousel and an ice rink. The resulting activities constitute performances that other people-watching visitors can observe and enjoy.

Great parks and public spaces also often have performance spaces for events such as movies, plays, dance recitals, concerts, lectures, etc. The smart ones use temporary stages, so the same spaces can be used for multiple purposes over the year.

For many small and medium-sized communities, this is the most cost-effective venue they can have for entertainment and arts performances. But public space programming is not (at least initially) self-generating and government or some other entity must have the capacity to book and produce public events.

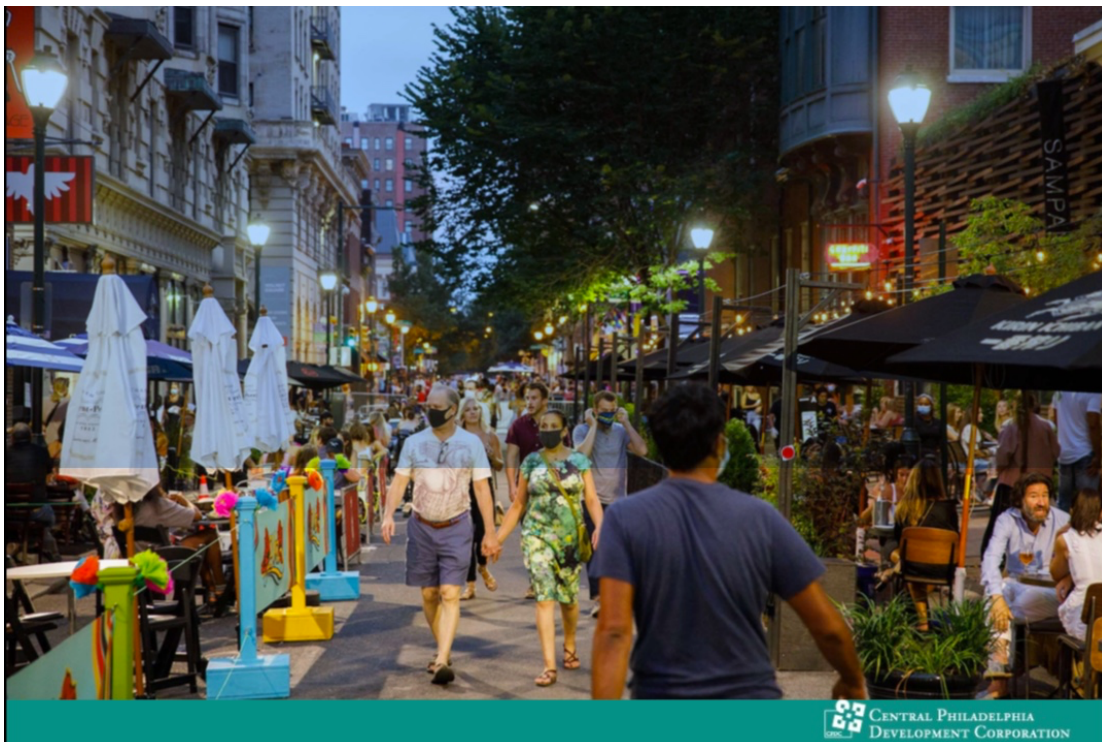
Less Expensive to Build and

Maintain. DANTH, Inc.'s research has indicated that well-activated parks and public spaces are usually much cheaper to build, maintain and operate than any of the formal entertainment venues. Most large cities already have them in key locations. Even where they are absent, the cost of a new build is generally far less that of a new enclosed venue. They have, by far, a lower ratio of operating expenditures per visitor (annual expenditures in

the nearby table). That table compares such costs for formal entertainment venues with those of parks and public spaces. The costs were estimated from data obtained from 25 venues on their annual operating budgets and reported number of visitors and calculated by dividing the latter into the former. For formal entertainment venues, on average, expenditures per visitor are 31 times larger than those of the parks and public spaces. Such a stark difference suggests this finding would be confirmed by a study with a larger sample.

Fewer User Frictions. Parks and public spaces also have the fewest user frictions. Access is free. Use of their infrastructure and equipment is either free or very affordably priced. They are open all day and often well into the evenings almost year-round (with an obvious advantage for those in warm weather climates). No one must make an appointment to use them or buy a ticket in advance of their visit. Visitors can stay 10 minutes or several hours. They are a perfect oasis for the many downtown visitors who have 30-to-45-minute holes in their schedules. *For suburban and small rural downtowns that want to build up their CSD functions, they should give higher priority to creating well activated public spaces than to developing new formal entertainment venues.*

Positive Impacts on Property Values. Furthermore, successful parks and public spaces have a proven ability to increase values for properties from which they can be seen – even those 480 to 800 feet high and about 0.25 miles away. They also have a proven ability to improve adjacent property values to levels equaling the costs of initial construction or later renovation.²⁴ For communities that derive revenue from real estate taxes, that can be important.



Outdoor dining on 13th St in Philadelphia's CCD during the pandemic. It sure looks like a real busy pedestrian mall. Photo used with permission of the CCD.

The Pandemic's Positive Impact. In response to the pandemic many downtowns had some of their streets closed to allow for outdoor dining, and possibly other activities. It



Division Street Plaza, Somerville, NJ: a one block pedestrian mall in a town of 12,000 people

increasingly looks like many of these closures will be made permanent. This could add a significant amount of permanent public space to these downtowns. While outdoor dining is now their primary use, there is no reason that other entertainment and commercial uses such as those found in Bryant and Millennial Parks could not follow. In suburban and smaller communities, these closed streets can provide the public spaces their downtowns need so badly. These closed streets if properly programmed could positively disrupt their downtowns or neighborhood districts.

Pedestrian Malls. For decades now, pedestrian malls have had an understandably strong negative reputation—about 80% of them are considered failures. Despite that, these days, if you talk about them with well-

regarded downtown managers and consultants, you'll hear a lot of favorable and often envious comments about the successful pedestrian malls in Burlington, VT; Charlottesville, VA; Boulder, CO; Denver, CO; Santa Monica, CA (it's now being redone); Miami Beach, FL, and Somerville, NJ. You also may hear about some that are gaining substantial strength such as Ithaca Commons in upstate NY. What is emerging as the primary, though far from sole factor, in determining if a pedestrian mall will succeed or fail, is how it has been tasked. Those tasked to save or revive a downtown will fail, while those that are charged with taking an existing downtown corridor to an increased level of success, acting much like an economic turbocharger, will do much better.

Also Interesting is the fact that so many of the new "closed streets" have taken on a lot of the same characteristics and functions that the pedestrian malls have, or their close cousins, the transportation malls. What is notable about the closed streets is that they were created rather quickly and at a much lower cost, and often with much quicker municipal approvals than most pedestrian malls. On the other hand, the closed streets have not yet offered the variety of different uses and activities, or streetscape amenities that can be found in pedestrian malls.

It would not be surprising to see a wave of new pedestrian malls and de facto pedestrian malls developed as the pandemic eases.

Downtowns of all sizes can have successful parks and public spaces if they have adequate intent and vision – the needed resources will follow.

One note of caution: As Andy Manshel notes in his insightful book, Learning From Bryant Park, the success of a park or public space has far less to do with how beautiful it is – though it definitely should be attractive – than with how it is programmed by its infrastructure, equipment and events, and the people it attracts.²⁵ Unfortunately, this is not widely recognized.

For more about pedestrian malls see Mike Berne's insightful article also posted to The American Downtown Revitalization Review (<https://theadrr.com/>) in July 2021, "Pedestrian Malls: The Newest Fad?"

The Pamper Niche. For many years I was not alone among downtown revitalization specialists and leaders in having a low regard for personal service operations and seeing them as undesirable tenants for downtown storefronts. However, while vacationing in Beverly Hills, CA in 2005, my wife — knowing of my then low-regard for personal service operations — pointed out how many hair, nail, and skin salons, as well as spas and gyms, we had seen as we strolled the downtown area. We did a quick count and stopped at 35. Photos of those storefronts taken in 2007 can be found at: <https://www.dropbox.com/sh/z8sty32lmug31xa/AAAOAHd9xu308-LFfs9b5l7na?dl=0>

Discussions with relatives and friends who live in LA evoked knowing smiles. These



A great combo, hair salon and cafe in the same location

establishments, they said, were key elements in the way that Beverly Hills operates. The wealthy like shopping, but love having their bodies and personages pampered. And shopping and pampering often go together. It stood to reason that if the personal services were such an asset in such a chic district as Beverly Hills, then I should reconsider my attitude toward these operations.²⁶

The unique competitive asset that downtowns can have is their ability to generate large numbers of multi-purpose trips. Financial, insurance, and real estate services have long been key assets in many downtowns, be they small

or large. But personal service operations, such as the salons of prominent hairstylists, skin salons, and spas, also have long been important attractions in some of the greatest American and European downtowns.

But prominent owner names are not a necessity. In many poorer Black and Latino neighborhood centers barber shops and hair salons are important neighborhood third places, and essential channels for distributing news and information. This is clearly demonstrated in Lin-Manuel Miranda's recently released movie version of *In the Heights* where a beauty salon is a prominent location.

As noted above, pamper niche operations are relatively easy to start up, with little need to invest in inventory or to capture large market shares. Since for *most* consumers –but certainly far from all –they do not respond to basic needs, their spending in pamper

niche establishments will depend a lot on the amount of discretionary dollars they have. Also, since they usually involve a lot of close personal contact, they were very weakened by the social distancing sparked by the pandemic. Many were legally forced to close, others closed voluntarily.

Nationally, hair salons are a big industry. For example, industry revenues increased at an annualized rate of 1.4% to \$46.5 billion over the five years from 2014 to 2019. That was more than the global box office in the motion picture industry in 2019, \$42.3 billion. Ibis World estimated that there were about 972,000 hair salons in the US that have about 1,352,772 employees, or an average of only 1.4 employees per establishment.

**Hair Salons Will Need a Number of Employees to Afford
Downtown Rents**

Factors	Scenario 1	Scenario 2	Scenario 3	Scenario 4
Size (SF)	2,000	2,000	2,000	2,000
Rent/PSF	\$10	\$20	\$30	\$40
Total Rent	\$20,000	\$40,000	\$60,000	\$80,000
Sales to afford rent	\$200,000	\$400,000	\$600,000	\$800,000
Sales/emp	\$34,743	\$34,743	\$34,743	\$34,743
# Emps to afford rent	6	12	17	23
Data source: https://www.ibisworld.com/united-states/market-research-reports/hair-salons-industry/				

The average sales of a salon is just \$48,350. The sales per employee in the industry is also low, about \$34,743.²⁷

In small and rural towns, hair salons are often found in the owner's home. Their small revenues make paying rent difficult. The average sales per worker in the industry is relatively modest.

Weaker salons with fewer workers are likely to seek low rent spaces, often in subprime locations. That means they are often good tenant prospects for a downtown's side streets that often are so hard to properly activate. Those that can afford prime locations either have more workers and/or their workers will be much more productive in terms of the revenues they generate. (See the table nearby). Prices for a basic haircut and blow dry can range from \$20 in a local neighborhood to \$750 from a famed stylist. They are the ones that typically have outbid retailers for desirable downtown storefront locations.

In 2018, a survey of US adults found that on average they spent about \$396/yr on gym memberships, and about \$420 for gym clothing and accessories.²⁸ The expenditures by downtown gym goers could be captured by other downtown shops with the appropriate merchandise. During the pandemic, the sales of workout equipment that could be used at home, like Peloton, soared. Whether that will result in substantially lower gym attendance post-pandemic remains to be seen.

The nail salon industry had total sales in the \$6 billion range during the 2000s; that grew with the recovery from the Great Recession to the \$8 billion range since 2014.²⁹

There are about 9 million yoga students in the US. In 2016, a study conducted by One Poll and Eventbrite found that dedicated yoga fans will spend about \$1,044/yr on yoga lessons. Another survey found yoga students spend \$1.17 on apparel, mats and headbands for every \$1.00 they spend for classes.³⁰ Many yoga operations closed down during the pandemic. A good number went online. A general rule was that

personal service that involved some form of teaching could gain survivable revenues online.

Pilates studios were harder hit during the pandemic since they have very strong dependence on the use of a particular “machine.”

Reliable data has been hard to come by about how many pamper niche establishments have closed permanently as a result of the pandemic. However there has been a good deal of data about their foot traffic nationally:

- By mid-April of 2020, foot traffic at hair salons had dropped by 60% from the previous year, but by June, when legal restrictions in many states had lifted, the annual decline was down to 30%.³¹
- An analysis by Foursquare in July 2020 of foot traffic found that health and beauty services were industries where consumer behavior is returning to normal.³²
- Safegraph looked at the fall off of foot traffic in 197 six-digit NAICS codes in April of 2020 and found that nail salons had a substantial decline of -63%. However, there were 70 industry sectors that had higher declines including jewelry stores, -65%, and clothing stores, -81%.³³
- Day spas and tanning salons were down -58%.³⁴
- Fitness and recreational sports centers saw very significant declines in business foot traffic, -80.8%. Included in this category are: aerobic dance or exercise centers-, ice- or roller-skating rinks, gymnasiums, physical fitness centers, handball, racquetball, or tennis club facilities, swimming or wave pools.³⁵

One reasonable conclusion to draw from these data are that pamper niche operations were not hit harder than their retail peers when looking at customer traffic. The quick rebound of the hair salons, when legally permitted, suggests many others may be quite resilient when allowed to operate. Other reasons for expecting the pamper niche firms to rebound are:

- They are so comparatively easy to restart, requiring low investment, and can be viable in lower rent non-prime locations.
- Their patrons have typically been people with solid discretionary incomes. The pandemic has created a large number of upper income households with large pent-up demand and lots of saved discretionary dollars to spend on being pampered.
- Many downtowns are seeing a significant decline in storefront rents. However, this may cause competition among various possible uses.

Media reports suggest that post pandemic, the new internet activities of the yoga, dance, and some martial arts studios may turn many of them into multi-channel operations. How that will impact their long-term viability will probably take some time to spell out. How many of those that closed will reopen also is still in question.

Media reports about gyms suggest that some customers and operators were so ardent that they were prepared to ignore the need for social distancing, but other customers spent loads of money to do gym-work in their homes by buying equipment like Peloton's. How this all will play out post-pandemic also is still uncertain.

Churches and Libraries. It is surprising how often downtown analysts overlook two major types of institutions when they analyze downtowns: churches and libraries. Both have performed important CSD functions in the past, but they were going through some important changes prior to the Covid19 crisis, and those changes may have been significantly accelerated by it. The roles of churches in and near many of our downtowns have been diminishing, though some very recent evidence suggests the erosion may have stopped. Libraries more clearly will probably be growing.

Churches. Look at a sample of photos of New England downtowns, and chances are that one or more old churches with distinctive steeples will be featured in many of them. Churches have been key institutions in town and city cores for centuries, if not always at their 100% intersections. In colonial New England, the community meeting house and church were one-and-the same.

Creating and caring for a community are often essential parts of a church's mission. This may be manifested in a focus on a community of faith, and when those in and near a downtown are strong, their CSDs are likely to be as well. However, many churches also become involved in charitable programs for the elderly, homeless, foodless, and others in need. They also can spark the creation of schools, housing, and neighborhood development. The group of Camino Nuevo Charter Academy schools is a good example; It is located in the Westlake/MacArthur Park area of Los Angeles. The school was founded by Philip Lance, an Episcopalian priest and community organizer. Another example is Trinity Church in Lower Manhattan. It gave numerous grants for housing development to help assure that the CBD's shift from being a unfunctional office district to a multifunctional downtown also had some affordable units. In South Jamaica, Queens, NY, the Allen AME Church built housing for seniors and others in need and used the revenues of ground floor commercial spaces to subvent reasonable rents for the residents above. The Catholic Church in NYC and many other large cities had for decades run complex school and hospital systems, many of which have closed in the face of rising costs, strong competition, and reduced parish revenues.

The Decline of Christianity? Prior to the pandemic many mainline Protestant denominations and the Catholic Church had lost considerable membership, and the evangelicals had grown to be the largest church tradition in the nation. At the same time, the percent of people who did not identify with any organized religion was growing.

A report by the Pew Research Center in 2019 found that: "The religious landscape of the United States continues to change at a rapid clip." Its telephone surveys conducted in 2018 and 2019 found that "65% of American adults describe themselves as Christians when asked about their religion, down 12 percentage points over the past decade." On the other hand, it found that the "religiously unaffiliated share of the population, consisting of people who describe their religious identity as atheist, agnostic or "nothing in particular," now stands at 26%, up from 17% in 2009." ³⁶

The differences in the rates of religious affiliation of different age cohorts suggest that the present rate of decline may accelerate in the future. There is a wide gap between

the older Baby Boomers and the Silent Generation (the demographic cohort following the Greatest Generation and preceding the baby boomers generally defined as people born from 1928 to 1945), and the younger Millennials in their levels of religious affiliation and attendance. Over 80% of the Silent Generation identified themselves as Christians, as did 76% of the Baby Boomers. However, only 49% of the Millennials describe themselves as Christian. Moreover, 40% of the Millennials identified as religious “nones.”³⁷

According to Pew, Christians had declined and “nones” grown as a share of the adult population in all four major U.S. regions. Catholic losses have been most pronounced in the Northeast, where 36% identified as Catholic in 2009, compared with 27% today. Among Protestants, declines were larger in the South, where Protestants now account for 53% of the adult population, down from 64% in 2009. Also of note: Catholics no longer constitute a majority of the U.S. Hispanic population.³⁸

However, according to one media report, in July 2021, The Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), issued its 2020 Census of American Religion, which found that:

- White Christian decline has slowed.
- White Christians, have expanded their share of the population between 2016 and 2020
- The nones has declined in number
- White Catholics has grown a bit.³⁹

It will be interesting to see if other reputable research organizations confirm either Pew’s or PRRI’s findings. Until then, it is probably prudent to conclude that after a period of significant decline Christianity among Whites may have stabilized. However, the media report did not indicate what if any findings the PRRI study had about Black or Hispanic Christians.

The Growing Importance of Evangelicals? About a quarter (25.4%) of U.S. adults identified with evangelical Protestantism, according to Pew Research Center’s 2014 Religious Landscape Study. The evangelical share of the population dropped slightly between 2007 and 2014, from 26.3% to 25.4%, but that was far less than the mainline Protestant and Catholic populations. However, when looking at the absolute numbers, there was a different story, with the absolute number of evangelicals growing as the U.S. population grows. Between 2007 and 2014, the number of evangelical Protestant adults grew from about 59.8million to 62.2 million.⁴⁰

Evangelical Protestant adults are not distributed evenly around the nation. About half, 49%, reside in the South, which has 37% of the overall U.S. adult population. “Nearly one-quarter of evangelicals (22%) live in the Midwest (as do 21% of all U.S. adults), and 20% live in the West (along with 23% of Americans).” Just 9% of evangelicals live in the Northeast where 18% of the U.S population resides.⁴¹

Here, again, the PRRI findings reportedly counter Pew's: the mainline protestants denominations now outnumber white evangelicals, and the latter appear to have been reduced in numbers.

Once more, it will be interesting to see if PRRI's or Pew's findings are confirmed by other researchers. Prudence might support a hypothesis that while the level of Christian affiliation may have stabilized, there is still substantial churn among its denominations.

Will Weakened Churches Close? Reports indicate that the pandemic has greatly increased pastors' use of digital technologies. These changes may have altered the "fundamental relationship that many young adults have with their churches," according to one consultant who does research for many religious groups.⁴²

Many religious leaders are now concerned about "how many people will return to their pews when 'normal' life returns." Will high-risk older congregants stay away even after vaccines are available? Very importantly for the future, will younger members keep watching their local services, or switch to big name digital churches located elsewhere?⁴³

While many observers are concerned about an increase in church closures resulting from the pandemic, in many instances it was just the final shove for those already standing at the cliff's edge prior to the crisis. Crises have a way of culling the weak. For example, the consultant mentioned above believed that as many as 1 in 5 churches would close in the following 18 months, with the mainline churches that have long been losing members and churches being the hardest hit, with 1 in 3 of their churches closing.⁴⁴ While the precision of that forecast is alluring, it might be better treated as a sign that the evidence is sufficient to draw a Bayesian conclusion that the closures will probably be significant in number.

Even that amended view may need some exceptions added to it. In my neighborhood, and those nearby, there are some churches with Korean congregations, and several storefronts with Hispanic evangelical churches as tenants. They appeared over the past decade or two. A few miles away is the Jamaica neighborhood with its large Black population, and its several large Black churches. In The Bronx, my visits to areas such as Mott Haven, Fordham Road, Belmont, Kingsbridge, Norwood, Melrose, The Hub, Concourse, and Morrisania found similar new churches. One reasonable hypothesis to draw is that prior to the crisis church numbers were not dipping as precipitously in dense urban neighborhoods with substantial immigrant, Hispanic and Black populations, so much as they were shifting. Among Hispanics, for example, there probably was a shift from the Catholic Church to the evangelical ones. Given that these churches can help provide some of the organizational and social connection assets our less affluent neighborhoods need, that was probably a very good thing. However, what has happened to them during the pandemic is now an open question. Many of their congregants are most likely low skilled and apt to have been hurt financially by the crisis, which would have probably, in turn, hurt church revenues.

However, in other areas, church closures will probably continue post crisis based on their individual financial situation and the loss of Christian adherents in their neighborhoods. In the Northeast, many mainline churches in solidly middle-income suburban towns, that are often located in or near their downtowns, may close if the Pew findings still hold, or remain open if the PRRI's findings are on the mark.

One might reasonably deduce that any in the number of people who identify with any organized Christian denomination, combined with the associated reduction in the number of active churches, would result in a lot of people looking for or even needing new social and spiritual attachments. Can their local CSDs help provide the people, organizations and venues that can meet such needs? Or will they be met by an intensification of existing social assets they already have such as their families? A reasonable conclusion is that at least some of the newly religiously detached will look for new social attachments in strong and attractive CSD venues.

Today's Libraries: Knowledge-Based Community Centers. Decades ago, libraries were places where one went to: borrow books, because they had a lot of them; maybe read periodicals, again because they had a lot of them; maybe do research for a school paper, etc. In any event, you always had to keep quiet. Today's libraries are totally different, in small towns and large cities. They still are the repositories of knowledge, but no longer just in printed formats. The librarians still advise and help patrons, but not just about printed reading materials. They have gone big into computers and the internet. Most importantly, libraries have changed their missions to using their knowledge assets and physical spaces to help members of the public solve some of their problems and meet some of their needs. They are there to preserve and distribute knowledge, but also to serve community needs, wants and objectives.

At times, the public just forced the libraries to play certain roles. For example, around 1989, I observed lots of parents in the high crime areas of The Bronx sending their kids to the libraries after school, thereby giving them safe place and childcare roles whether they were wanted or not. And this continued when I later observed these libraries around 2003. My conversations found that some of these youngsters even read a book or two or did some homework, but more were exploring the computers they had free access to, and almost all were eager to get on the internet. The only thing that seemed more popular was trying to be a rap "poet" or performer. These libraries were jam-packed, and most of the children were smiling.

However, most libraries have made this important shift in direction for the basic reason of survival – they needed to assure their future financial support. Municipalities were facing intense financial pressures and they were dialing back on core services, such as libraries. Some library leaders realized that they faced a fundamental problem: "If they could not reach the people they needed to reach and deliver real value to them, then they could not fulfill their mission effectively, and by implication, could make no compelling claim on increasingly scarce public and private support." One influential librarian argued that because "libraries are no longer central to broad information access, we must become more entrepreneurial and act more emphatically as a community-based institution. Our goal is to make ourselves indispensable so that we are not 'discretionary'." That sort of recognition was then followed by the realization that

libraries “could contribute value in multiple areas of community life such as workforce development, small business support, and citizenship development, etc.”⁴⁵

This shift is reflected in the statistics that the American Library Association issued about library programs:⁴⁶

- 73.1% of libraries provide programs that assist individuals apply for jobs, create resumes, and prepare for interviews.
- Nearly 100% of public libraries provide Wi-Fi and have no-fee access to computers.
- 90% help patrons with basic Internet skills.
- 76.8% of libraries provide online health resources.
- 59% provide programs on finding health insurance.
- 58% provide programs to help people find and evaluate health information.
- 97% help people complete online government forms.
- 23% offer fitness classes.

It may not be the case with all public libraries, but a good deal of them offer weekly workshops and meetups for business owners. And all over the country, public libraries often are where chapters of the SBA-supported association SCORE have meetings or work with their small business clients.

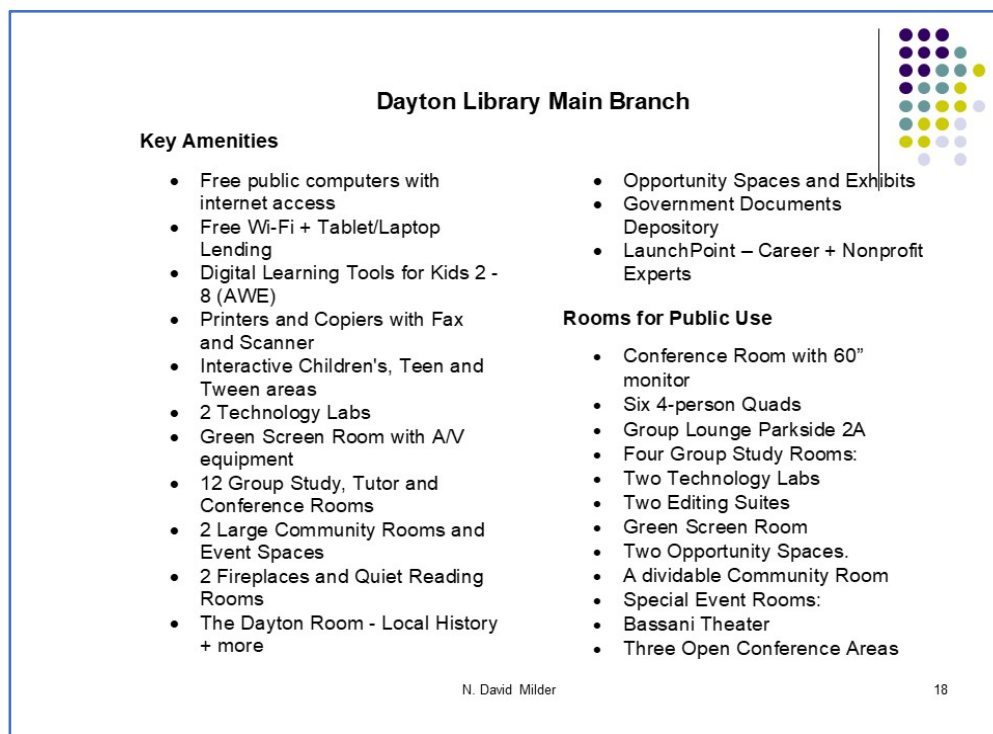
While these statistics certainly are interesting it is useful to look at some specific examples.

Philadelphia: In 2010, the Free Library of Philadelphia provided more than \$4 million of direct support to local businesses⁴⁷

New York: “The NY Public Library’s Science, Industry, and Business Library provides a wide array of free services for small business operators. Entrepreneurs can reserve meeting rooms where they can meet their clients. They also have access to “sample business plans, model employee policies and subscription-based databases that provide community demographic info, industry trends or even sophisticated mailing lists.”⁴⁸

At local library branches new immigrants can access materials and online resources to prepare them for citizenship. Some of the resources available to help patrons who are studying for the Naturalization Test include English practice, test materials, and other interactive resources.⁴⁹

Dayton, OH: This city is trying to reshape its entire library system, making each branch an important “third place” besides home and workplace, and a venue “for everything from family reunions to wedding receptions; theater to video production; virtual reality to cooking; and of course, reading, writing, and research.” Each branch will be programmed to meet its



neighborhood's needs. The library system floated the largest bond issue in the state's history, about \$187 million to pay for the updating.⁵⁰

This approach is modeled on a Danish library, DOKK1, that was intended to be a library and community center rolled into one. The leaders in Dayton also intend their branches to serve as community centers.

The library's Main Branch is in the downtown, about a seven-minute walk from City Hall. As can be seen in the figure nearby, it has many assets and meeting rooms that can be used by small business operators, nonprofit executives, and the general public.

MakerSpaces: In recent years, in my travels and in my research, I have increasingly come across makerspaces in libraries in suburban and rural towns. These spaces attract people who want to make things, and they require a good deal of special equipment ranging from special scissors and sewing machines to computers and 3D printers. The users can be crafters there for recreational reasons, or tech tinkerers there to build products that can be sold or become the foundation for a startup business.

As a report by the National League of Cities noted: “Makerspaces are also increasingly being seen as a hotbed for entrepreneurship. Unlike many of the craft makers, the technical entrepreneurs on the other end of the spectrum are interested in moving beyond DIY or DIWO tinkering and into small-scale industrial production.”⁵¹

A community often develops among their frequent users. In many ways, they are a very powerful demonstration of how our libraries have changed over the past 20 years or so.



Makerspace in library in Westport, CT

The library in Westport, CT, has created a makerspace, see photo above. It is described as “a place for creation, collaboration, innovation and entrepreneurship. The makerspace provides users tools and training to learn how to create a wide variety of inventions, product prototypes, crafts, and DIY projects.”⁵²

CSD Guardians: Protectors, Stewards and Service Providers

Rereading Patrick Sharkey’s insightful and thought-provoking book, Uneasy Peace: The Great Crime Decline, the Renewal of City Life, and the Next War on Violence, made me realize that I have been overlooking the important roles that guardians play in our strong downtowns and how the organizations playing those roles are essential components of our CSDs. The modern-day conception of a guardian is not that of Plato’s philosopher kings, but it certainly includes the function of providing protection. In legal terms, guardians are there to represent and maintain what is in the best interests of a child. Translating that best interests notion to our downtowns seems to bring two others into play: that of stewardship to protect and nurture a district’s physical features, and service providers who protect and nurture the people in the district. BIDs, CDCs, Main Street programs, LDCs, EDCs, PDs, economic development departments, chambers of commerce, traffic departments, organizations that deal with the homeless or runaways, etc., are downtown and CSD guardians. Downtown landlords and developers, depending on their behaviors, also can be included.

Our experiences in the 1970s to 1990s showed that CSD activities were particularly vulnerable to being severely weakened by heightened fears of becoming a crime victim,

so having ample and savvy protectors is essential to their success. Our enjoyment of CSD venues is also heightened when they are physically attractive and there is a variety of uses, so a strong CSD requires good stewards. CSDs benefit from effective service providers who can help residents in and near the downtown who are in need, and because for many people, their personal comfort levels are greater when they do not have to directly confront people in severe need whom they cannot immediately help.

Without effective guardians, CSDs will likely languish and decay. They create, regenerate, and maintain the CSD.

Personal Note

This article is the first full explication of my concept of Central Social Districts. That concept has provided the basic analytical framework for most of the research I have been doing since 2007, as the frequent citation of my previous articles in the endnotes below demonstrate.

Other downtown specialists and leaders have focused on some of the CSD elements I have discussed above, but few have taken the more comprehensive view that I strongly believe is necessary. Moreover, a lot of their attention has focused on advocating silver bullet solutions for downtown revitalization, or advocacy for one type of venue or another.

For example, the argument that the arts are a prime engine for economic development is one that I think has a good deal of merit to it, but its advocates too often overestimate its power and overlook the many necessary conditions needed for it to work. They also often use the wrong variables and data to operationalize positive impacts, and thus also ignore the correct multivariate causal structure needed to explain them. They also are motivated most by their advocacy, so their impact analyses are aimed at the information potential funders want. Such analyses overwhelmingly fail to meet the information needs of downtown stakeholders and leaders.

Similarly, I do believe that downtown housing has been a true driving engine for many strong downtown revivals. However, many of these districts are attracting lots of high earning knowledge workers, and when the existing housing supply for them is inadequate, then they will take units that were being used by households with less income, directly or through rehabilitation, or demolition and new construction. The result is a problem of affordable housing for middle income households in and near the downtown. That problem is now widespread nationally.

Many observers looking at how our major downtowns would recover from the pandemic caused economic crisis fretted about their weakening as employment centers. Yet many of today's suburban downtowns show that vibrancy and economic success can still be achieved when a downtown is not a major office employment center because of their relatively strong CSD venues and functions.

I could go on to several other similar examples of wrong-headedness about and lack of appreciation of CSDs and their components, but my main point here is that while I strongly believe that much greater attention should indeed be given to the growth and development of such venues, I equally believe that it must be done carefully. There are

no silver bullet solutions, and potential projects and programs need to be carefully thought through. For example, how many times has a community devoted considerable energy and thought to raising capital funds to renovate an old theater, but failed to consider how it should be programmed or its needed operating revenues after that job was done? Or how many times a community has built a new public space, but located in either a peripheral location or surrounded it by traffic so few people are likely to visit?

Those who want to strengthen their CSDs need to also make a proper appreciation of their current CSD venues and how they can be leveraged to grow new ones. They also should consider which types of venues are easiest to start, develop and maintain, and which provide the least frictions to use. I have argued, for example, that public spaces, if well done, provide the greatest bang for the buck of all entertainment type venues, and pamper niche operations can suddenly appear like wildflowers.

I have seen many comprehensive downtown revitalization plans and strategies, but I have never seen a similar comprehensive approach focused on a CSD. The arts are just one subset of CSD venues. I think the time has come for such an approach because CSDs in our post pandemic world may well be even more important than ever before. They already are the assets that make our downtowns vibrant and popular. However, the coming years promise to bring more and more people to their downtowns to visit CSD venues, and fewer will be coming just to work. Moreover, I think CSD venues may well become important parts of the extended offices that more and more downtown workers experience in the coming years. More about all this in a future article.

It is time for CSDs get the love and comprehensive attention they deserve.

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