

CREATING A COMPETITIVE DOWNTOWN

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After decades of decline, in recent years many American downtowns and Main Streets have been experiencing an extraordinary revival. Americans have become fatigued by 50 years of cavernous shopping malls and endless miles of look-alike commercial strips and are increasingly attracted by the simpler pleasures of open air, pedestrian-oriented marketplaces in urban settings. Not all downtowns are succeeding in tapping this trend, however, and suburban developers are already responding by incorporating Main Street and town center formats with conventional shopping centers. These newfangled suburban town centers are poised to directly compete with both aging shopping centers and older downtowns, and it is crucial that historic downtowns like Punta Gorda learn how to maximize their historic urban assets and effectively contend in areas in which the suburbs have excelled. Areas in which suburbs have typically outperformed cities include their amenity package, civic decorum, physical design, retail management, marketing, investment security and permitting. Downtowns must identify what makes them unique and how best to compete in each of these areas.

THE AMENITY PACKAGE

The suburban amenity package includes generous private yards, golf courses, climate-controlled environments (including shopping malls) and private swimming pools and health clubs. To successfully compete with the suburbs, the city must offer a comparable – but distinctive – package of amenities. The most significant amenity the city can offer that suburbs cannot is a public realm, with the vibrant street life that phrase implies. In the case of Punta Gorda, the city is blessed with a rare coincidence of a waterfront located within a short walk of a historic Main Street, which provides the makings of an extraordinary public realm. The city should continue to focus its efforts on creating a high quality public realm that extends throughout the historic downtown core and beyond, and links these two key areas.

CIVIC DECORUM

The first job of city government, as any resident or business owner will tell you, is to “keep it clean and safe.” Suburban developers have excelled at providing both scrupulous security and excellent maintenance through commercial property management practices and homeowners associations. In order to compete, cities have been successfully adopting business improvement districts and neighborhood associations to develop effective strategies for handling trash pickup, removing graffiti, maintaining the appearance of streets, sidewalks and the frontages of properties, and discouraging panhandlers, drugs and prostitution. The faceless bureaucracy of a large city tends to become accessible and responsive if it is broken down into neighborhood, street and district scale increments. Indeed, some issues that seem irresolvable at the city-wide level, such as parking and noise policies, are best addressed street-by-street.

PHYSICAL DESIGN The skeletons of once great cities provide evidence that urban places cannot compete by adopting the physical design of the suburbs, which is antithetical to everything that makes urban life distinctive and attractive. High quality urban settings include a combination of pedestrian-friendly streets and a public realm defined by a fundamentally *urban* architecture. Streets should accommodate two-way traffic to evenly distribute vitality. Street widths should be minimized and on-street parking provided to calm traffic and shield pedestrians. Street trees, awnings and arcades should be provided for shade, shelter and to beautify the street without obscuring the views of shop fronts. Sidewalks should be generous in width, but fancy pavements, banners, bollards and street furniture are much less important than the presence of a consistent streetwall, a mix of uses and activities, and quality gathering places such as urban parks, plazas, courtyards and squares. The buildings of the city should define the streets and urban open spaces of the city, providing a sense of enclosure and the great outdoor rooms that the suburbs lack. The Punta Gorda plan proposes the creation and refinement of several public gathering places, each with their own distinctive character in relation to the types of buildings, mix of retail, civic, residential and workplace activities, and urban landscaping.

RETAIL MANAGEMENT

In order for Main Street to compete with the mall, it must be run with all the expertise lavished on shopping centers. Fortunately, many of the concepts and techniques that mall designers use can be adapted easily for the benefit of the downtown. First and foremost is the establishment of centralized management that can:

- assemble an effective mix of shops, restaurants and services, including anchors such as cinemas and well known retailers to draw customers to the downtown;

- concentrate related retail, arts, dining and entertainment businesses together to create distinctive shopping and dining districts within the downtown as proposed in the retail strategy;
- •strategically arrange anchors and parking to establish a steady flow of foot traffic past smaller shops;
- •carry out joint advertising, merchandizing and events programming;
- •maintain the continuity of retail shop fronts along the full extent of main streets;
- •enable the use of push carts and open air markets as forms of business incubators that contribute to the liveliness and commerce in public gathering places and along streets.

PREPARING THE URBAN MARKET

Suburban developers direct their efforts at the largest market segments only, providing huge tracts of housing and big-box retail. This approach may make sense in the urban periphery, where a critical mass is necessary to attract customers, and where homogeneity is considered a virtue. In the city, however, this approach erases the very diversity of form and activity that makes the best urban places so attractive. In the city, development must be approached on a smaller scale, and with a thorough understanding of the customer base. One of the most effective ways to revitalize an under-built city core is to subdivide undeveloped superblocks into smaller increments affordable to individual investors. In addition to operating at the correct scale, renewal efforts must proceed with realistic expectations about who will move downtown, and market accordingly. To encourage urban pioneers, cities must be prepared to bend the rules a little. Zoning that prohibits housing in commercial and industrial areas – often largely empty and therefore affordable – must be replaced with a mixed-use classification. The on-site parking requirement can be waived, as pioneers can be expected to park on the street, if they own cars at all. Additional municipal initiative is required in order to improve schools that help attract families with children to the city, and to dampen gentrification pressures.

These methods imply the need for a pro-active municipal government acting in the role of the developer. Civic leaders must develop a physical vision for their city which they commit to and then actively promote. Rather than being victimized by the self-interests of the private sector, they must determine the type, scale, and quality of new growth and then act as the lead booster for that growth.

INVESTMENT SECURITY AND PERMITTING

Due to single-use zoning and deed restrictions, suburbia offers developers and purchasers enormous predictability regarding their investment. The best way to ensure predictability in downtown neighborhoods is with an urban code; a physically based code that visually describes the building's volume, articulation, and relationship to the street – in other words, its building type. This code should ensure that all building types are pedestrian-friendly, and that buildings are located near buildings of similar type. It should also specify the building's alignment, in order to shape public spaces. Because these codes specify what a city wants, rather than what it does not want, buildings that correspond to their specific physical criteria can be permitted automatically, and allowed to move forward immediately. To assist in this process, city planning and building departments must be encouraged to see themselves as an enabling staff rather than a regulatory staff. The implementation of such a process would be an important step in leveling the playing field between suburban and urban development, so that suburban developers could be enticed back into the inner city.

MAINTAIN THE COMPETITIVE EDGE OF URBANITY

Although much of the advice here is to co-opt the methods of contemporary retail management in order for downtown Punta Gorda's revival to be successful and sustainable it is crucial to emphasize that *downtown retail development is NOT about making shopping centers; It is about place-making.* The successful downtown is a place that is an attractive destination with great streets and public spaces where people enjoy walking, shopping, dining, and spending time together. People do not typically come to downtowns for everyday shopping needs, they come for the special experience of a walkable place with interesting architecture, an attractive waterfront, interesting things to see and do, to explore, to meet, to be entertained, to dine in places with attractive views, to be around other people in warm, friendly public settings. *People come to downtowns to experience a city, not shop in a mall or strip center. For retail to be successful in Punta Gorda, it must deliver this experience.*