Revitalizing the small town mainstreet

Edward A. Cook and Marion T. Bentley
Business & Economic Development Services
Utah State University

Many small towns in the western United States face the persistent problem of physical, economic, and social decline in their main street, or downtown areas. Even in communities where there is growth and development, as in many small towns, there is also decay, and a decline of activity in the central business district.

Small towns with a population of 2,500 to 20,000 are historically an important economic component of American societies and their importance continues today. In the United States, only about 2,000 cities have a population exceeding 10,000 inhabitants, but there are more than 15,000 municipalities of less than 10,000 people (Williams, 1977 p.9). The problems of many small town mainstreets, such as deteriorating buildings and facilities, poor business conditions, visual blight, apathetic attitudes, and absence of aggressive business management practices, are real and important.

These problems must be remedied if a healthy economic and social environment is to be maintained in the “heart” of heartland America.

This paper will treat current theories, trends, studies, and development practices pertaining to downtown revitalization in small towns, and is intended for use by local business people and by government officials interested in increasing their awareness of small-town downtown revitalization. The information presented here is general in nature and does not provide specific recommendations. Rather, it presents a base of information that people who are involved with downtown revitalization in small towns should be familiar with in order to understand the range of options available and the factors that will influence the outcome of any downtown revitalization program.

The paper is divided into three main sections. The first section describes the work of organizations and authors who have presented a relatively comprehensive program of downtown revitalization, along with the elements and concepts they feel are critical to program success. Each of these programs is described, and the major thrust, area of emphasis, or significant elements briefly noted. The second section summarizes the relevant literature and organizes it according to various program components. The third section focuses on the unique characteristics associated with downtown revitalization in small towns, and establishes the basis for an alternative approach.
The five organizations or authors whose work is discussed in this section have all developed fairly comprehensive programs which will be considered in the following order: The National Main Street Center - National Trust for Historic Preservation (NMSC); Private Revitalization of Downtown, Inc. (PROD, Inc.); Craig Aronoff; Irwin Davis; Robert Craycroft.

NMSC is the most active group in the U.S. in publication and participation in downtown revitalization programs, particularly for small towns. They have published several books and other materials, including audio-visual presentations, that are directly applicable to small town downtown revitalization. The National Main Street Center Training Manual describes the NMSC preservation-based approach.

The NMSC (1982, p. 35) recommends an approach and provides assistance that concentrates on four primary concepts: organization, design, promotion, and economic restructuring.

Organization. Bankers, city government, merchants, chambers of commerce, or local preservation groups can work together more effectively in the downtown as organized groups rather than as separate entities.

Design. The visual quality of buildings, signs, window displays and public areas are considered a crucial element of revitalization.

Downtown promotion. Recommendations for promoting and advertising the downtown as a shopping center which offers many services and kinds of merchandise are part of the NMSC assistance.

Economic restructure. Communities can diversify the downtown economy and fill gaps by recruiting new stores to balance the retail mix; by converting unused upper floors into housing and offices; or by improving management skills through seminars and workshops.

The NMSC program is perhaps the most comprehensive and valuable resource for those interested in downtown revitalization in smaller communities. There is an emphasis on historic preservation, which is clearly understandable, given the roots of the organization. In fact, for many communities, a valid, if not critical aspect of their program would be to embrace this principle and build upon the heritage and intrinsic character displayed in the downtown area.

PROD, Inc. has documented an approach based on experiences with downtown revitalization in Santa Cruz, California. The PROD, Inc. approach relies on private initiative to generate long term physical, economic, and social rejuvenation. PROD, Inc. (1975 p. 30) notes: “Through carefully planned physical rejuvenation, economic benefits should occur and these two go hand in hand to generate the third, the social benefits of a viable downtown area.” Major components of the PROD, Inc. program include:

Physical revitalization. Beautification and restoration create a milieu that shoppers find exciting. PROD, Inc. recommends sign ordinances, remodelled facades, a design review board, updated merchandising techniques, waste receptacles, and restoration of old structures.

Traffic, parking, and public transit. PROD, Inc. suggests that circulation can be altered, or at least improved. Through traffic can be re-routed to bypass the Central Business District (CBD) and parking should be added behind shops.

Restoration of residential areas. Residences that are in or near the CBD should be restored, if feasible. PROD, Inc. maintains that if the CBD is flourishing and beautiful, there is every reason to live near it, and some residences could be converted to office space. They recommend a plan for complete coordination of improvements in the CBD and surrounding area.

Economic revitalization. When good design is utilized, investment in the physical appearance of the downtown structures can be a significant attraction. Downtown should be more than a place to buy goods and services; it should serve as the focal point of the community, and promotional activities such as sidewalk sales, art shows, and fairs will help to achieve this by providing social as well as commercial activity. The social activity becomes part of a circular process, contributing to the economy.

Craig Aronoff, in his 1979 study, Model Program to Assist Small and Midsized Communities with Downtown Development, presents a series of recommendations which he feels are key aspects of a successful program. He stresses organization and management as the foundation of a revitalization program. Specific recommendations include:

Cooperative thinking. A central focus is necessary, and it is important that merchants and community leaders work closely with their neighbors, even though they may be business competitors.

Full awareness. It is foolish to spend money on aesthetic and physical improvements without considering the problems associated with management, advertising, marketing, and public relations.

Task oriented organizations. A merchants association, or an advisory commission must be organized to deal with specific problems and to influence elected officials, business people, and individual citizens.

Independent action. Local merchants should not depend on government to solve their problems. Aronoff notes that the essence of the problems that plague downtown are competitive in nature and thus primarily within the realm of private enterprise.

Once merchants have taken the initiative and organized themselves, they must break the problem into component parts and establish task forces to deal with each area. Members of the political, professional and general communities must be involved to achieve structured and continuous input from a broad based population and consensus developed before major changes in the status quo are initiated.

Irwin Davis identifies strategies in Seven Requirements Determine the Success of Downtown Revitalization Projects (1980) which he feels will yield success in a downtown program for large and small communities. Like Aronoff (1979), Davis (1980) deals more with organizational and administrative aspects than technical elements. He suggests that the following factors have been present in those communities where the downtown effort has had a “high achievement quotient.”

Concern. There must be concern among business leaders, city administrators and the general public about the state of the downtown and its future.
The inability of New York state to appropriate funds to pay for the water pollution control program and the Environmental Protection Agency's inability to appropriate funds to the New York State program is leading many to conclude that the state is not seriously committed to abating pollution. This is a mistake. New York state has demonstrated its commitment to pollution control. The state has already appropriated $30 million to the program. This is a significant sum, and it demonstrates the state's commitment to pollution control.

In conclusion, the New York state pollution control program is well-funded and well-planned. It is a model for other states to follow. The state has shown that it is committed to pollution control and is taking the necessary steps to achieve its goals.

The focus of this report is to provide a detailed analysis of the New York state pollution control program. This report will cover the history of the program, the goals and objectives, the funding, and the implementation of the program. It will also outline the challenges and successes of the program and provide recommendations for future improvement.

Critical revitalization concepts treated in most of the small town development literature generally include: organization, leadership, and planning. These concepts are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Organization is a key element in most downtown revitalization programs. The literature on downtown revitalization generally cites the importance of strong, cohesive and well-organized downtown business districts. The literature also emphasizes the importance of a downtown business improvement district (BID) or a similar organization to coordinate efforts and resources across various stakeholders.

Leadership is another crucial element. Effective leadership is necessary to mobilize resources, establish partnerships, and overcome challenges. A strong leader or coalition of leaders can provide direction, inspire action, and ensure sustained progress.

Planning is essential for successful downtown revitalization. A comprehensive plan should include goals, strategies, and actions to address a range of issues, such as physical improvements, economic development, and community engagement. The plan should be developed with input from various stakeholders and should be flexible enough to adapt to changing conditions.

Critical revitalization concepts are also reflected in successful downtown revitalization efforts across the United States. Many small towns have implemented comprehensive revitalization plans, involving public and private sector partners, to improve downtown areas.

In Lincoln County, Georgia, a small town in rural Georgia, a revitalization effort was launched in 1980, with the goal of transforming the downtown area into a vibrant and attractive space for residents and visitors. The effort involved a mix of strategies, including physical improvements, economic development, and community engagement. The revitalization was driven by a diverse group of stakeholders, including local businesses, government officials, and community organizations. The result was a transformation of the downtown area, with new businesses opening, improved infrastructure, and increased tourism. The revitalization was also accompanied by increased civic engagement and a stronger sense of community among residents.

Similarly, in Lincolnton, North Carolina, a small town in the Piedmont region of the state, a revitalization effort was launched in the mid-1980s. The effort focused on physical improvements, such as the renovation of the main street, and economic development, including the attraction of new businesses. The revitalization was led by a community-based organization, the Lincolnton Downtown Development Corporation, which was formed with the support of local businesses and government officials. The result was a revitalized downtown area, with increased tourism, new businesses, and a stronger sense of community.

These examples demonstrate the effectiveness of revitalization efforts in small towns, showing that they can improve economic and social outcomes and enhance the quality of life for residents. The key takeaway is that revitalization efforts should be community-led, involve multiple stakeholders, and address both physical and social aspects of the downtown area.

In conclusion, critical revitalization concepts are essential for successful downtown revitalization. They include organization, leadership, planning, and a focus on community-led efforts. Small towns can learn from these examples and apply these concepts to their own downtown revitalization efforts.
The need for a "theme"—and more help than that. But for others, among them citizens of a city whose value for 55,000, in the "theme" concept may do more harm than good. Not only does the term "theme" bring to mind economic revitalization eradicate genuine community character, but also the "authoritarian" image of a theme that grows old fast. Kitchis becomes dated quickly. In financial terms, rather than aesthetic terms, the"new" changes are not always desirable over the long term if it is made in a consistent manner.

The NMSC is one of the strongest proponents of restoring original character in downtown buildings. The NMSC (1983, p. 51) states: "Because buildings have been altered in a variety of ways, patches of the city's past and charm have been removed. The removal of the incompatible elements and enhancement of the original ones can be quite a pleasant task if it is done in a visible manner." Other downtown revitalization efforts have only one element needed to improve economic conditions: downtown, is the most prominent and often the first accomplished.

The NMSC (1983, p. 31-52) identifies three approaches to accomplishing this goal:

1. The NMSC also offers specific recommendations regarding building structures. They note the condition of the building is a very significant factor in the public's overall impression of the CBD. The NMSC (1983, p. 65) notes that, "...superficial paintup (fix-up campaigns) results only 'skin deep' results. If we are to revitalize our downtown areas with common sense and care, we must maintain what we have done."

2. The NMSC suggests reconstruction of a period storefront, or construction of a new storefront, as alternative approaches.

3. Conservation revitalization is the design treatment that can be applied most often in downtown revitalization efforts. Although the term is a new one, the NMSC defines it as "improving the storefront appearance by minimizing the least attractive elements and adding simple, inexpensive elements to emphasize positive character.

Other recommendations do not relate solely to remodeling to achieve an aesthetic change, but also to improve the character of the downtown. Some significant areas are also under consideration (Alexander [February 1981, p. 1]), such as front facades and storefront fronts; the main focus should be on clearing, repair and remodeling to make them more compatible with the building's original architecture. Sidewalks and elevators: Although the "front facade" and "storefront" are not new, the "new" changes are not always desirable over the long term if it is made in a consistent manner.

The NMSC is one of the strongest proponents of restoring original character in downtown buildings. The NMSC (1983, p. 51) states: "Because buildings have been altered in a variety of ways, patches of the city's past and charm have been removed. The removal of the incompatible elements and enhancement of the original ones can be quite a pleasant task if it is done in a visible manner." Other downtown revitalization efforts have only one element needed to improve economic conditions: downtown, is the most prominent and often the first accomplished.

The NMSC (1983, p. 31-52) identifies three approaches to accomplishing this goal:

1. The NMSC also offers specific recommendations regarding building structures. They note the condition of the building is a very significant factor in the public's overall impression of the CBD. The NMSC (1983, p. 65) notes that, "...superficial paintup (fix-up campaigns) results only 'skin deep' results. If we are to revitalize our downtown areas with common sense and care, we must maintain what we have done."

2. The NMSC suggests reconstruction of a period storefront, or construction of a new storefront, as alternative approaches.

3. Conservation revitalization is the design treatment that can be applied most often in downtown revitalization efforts. Although the term is a new one, the NMSC defines it as "improving the storefront appearance by minimizing the least attractive elements and adding simple, inexpensive elements to emphasize positive character.

Other recommendations do not relate solely to remodeling to achieve an aesthetic change, but also to improve the character of the downtown. Some significant areas are also under consideration (Alexander [February 1981, p. 1]), such as front facades and storefront fronts; the main focus should be on clearing, repair and remodeling to make them more compatible with the building's original architecture. Sidewalks and elevators: Although the "front facade" and "storefront" are not new, the "new" changes are not always desirable over the long term if it is made in a consistent manner.

The NMSC is one of the strongest proponents of restoring original character in downtown buildings. The NMSC (1983, p. 51) states: "Because buildings have been altered in a variety of ways, patches of the city's past and charm have been removed. The removal of the incompatible elements and enhancement of the original ones can be quite a pleasant task if it is done in a visible manner." Other downtown revitalization efforts have only one element needed to improve economic conditions: downtown, is the most prominent and often the first accomplished.

The NMSC (1983, p. 31-52) identifies three approaches to accomplishing this goal:

1. The NMSC also offers specific recommendations regarding building structures. They note the condition of the building is a very significant factor in the public's overall impression of the CBD. The NMSC (1983, p. 65) notes that, "...superficial paintup (fix-up campaigns) results only 'skin deep' results. If we are to revitalize our downtown areas with common sense and care, we must maintain what we have done."

2. The NMSC suggests reconstruction of a period storefront, or construction of a new storefront, as alternative approaches.

3. Conservation revitalization is the design treatment that can be applied most often in downtown revitalization efforts. Although the term is a new one, the NMSC defines it as "improving the storefront appearance by minimizing the least attractive elements and adding simple, inexpensive elements to emphasize positive character.

Other recommendations do not relate solely to remodeling to achieve an aesthetic change, but also to improve the character of the downtown. Some significant areas are also under consideration (Alexander [February 1981, p. 1]), such as front facades and storefront fronts; the main focus should be on clearing, repair and remodeling to make them more compatible with the building's original architecture. Sidewalks and elevators: Although the "front facade" and "storefront" are not new, the "new" changes are not always desirable over the long term if it is made in a consistent manner.

The NMSC is one of the strongest proponents of restoring original character in downtown buildings. The NMSC (1983, p. 51) states: "Because buildings have been altered in a variety of ways, patches of the city's past and charm have been removed. The removal of the incompatible elements and enhancement of the original ones can be quite a pleasant task if it is done in a visible manner." Other downtown revitalization efforts have only one element needed to improve economic conditions: downtown, is the most prominent and often the first accomplished.

The NMSC (1983, p. 31-52) identifies three approaches to accomplishing this goal:

1. The NMSC also offers specific recommendations regarding building structures. They note the condition of the building is a very significant factor in the public's overall impression of the CBD. The NMSC (1983, p. 65) notes that, "...superficial paintup (fix-up campaigns) results only 'skin deep' results. If we are to revitalize our downtown areas with common sense and care, we must maintain what we have done."

2. The NMSC suggests reconstruction of a period storefront, or construction of a new storefront, as alternative approaches.

3. Conservation revitalization is the design treatment that can be applied most often in downtown revitalization efforts. Although the term is a new one, the NMSC defines it as "improving the storefront appearance by minimizing the least attractive elements and adding simple, inexpensive elements to emphasize positive character.

Other recommendations do not relate solely to remodeling to achieve an aesthetic change, but also to improve the character of the downtown. Some significant areas are also under consideration (Alexander [February 1981, p. 1]), such as front facades and storefront fronts; the main focus should be on clearing, repair and remodeling to make them more compatible with the building's original architecture. Sidewalks and elevators: Although the "front facade" and "storefront" are not new, the "new" changes are not always desirable over the long term if it is made in a consistent manner.
of uses. By combining office and retail with residential in a mixed-use project, for example, it is often possible to generate the kind of critical mass that will make an otherwise uneconomic project feasible. Being receptive to the needs of specific types of projects, a local government, through its zoning, can literally transform a town that might otherwise have gotten off the drawing board.

Private-public partnerships become very important in making the policy work.}

**Small town situations**

Many of the concepts presented in this paper have originated in larger communities. Although the concepts may be applicable, there are some significant differences between small towns and larger communities which should be recognized. In general, the presentation in small towns is considered.

**Taziker (August 1982, p. 3)** lists a number of practical tactics for small town downtown revitalization.

- **Stop dreaming about finding a major developer to come in, plan a project, design it, finance it, build it, rent it, and operate it. There are few developers around with major opportunities.**
- **Instead, identify and work with local and regional developers.** They know the area, the markets, the local financial channels, the prospective tenants. They are likely to work you on a lower cost.

One of the key issues is to develop market and economic analyses of any project: converting an old department to shops, building a downtown office building again even constructing public projects like parking. In the smaller, local economies there is little room for error. A big weakness in many small downtown planning projects is that adequate, professional, and financial research and analysis have not been done. Following from the previous point, it is necessary to get the project in scale. It must fit economically. At the same time they must fit physically in the scale of the downtown. While thinking big is good, thinking too big, with its own economic constraints, is fatal.

Do not imitate heavily publicized ideas from big downtowns. Many of these ideas can’t be shrunk to fit small downtowns. Also many of them are hyped by public relations techniques and are much less successful than you might think. At the same time, be sure to be well informed about big city projects, developments and their presentation in small towns could be applied, modified, and cut to fit smaller towns.

**Investigate and use local concepts, themes and trends.**

Local variations on markets, materials of construction, historic themes, specialized tastes and more, all exist. They can add to the success of projects by upping the appeal and influencing markets just as they can improve a better thematic and design fit into the downtown community.

**Finally, always stress fit.** This means economic fit, of course. It means physical, conceptual and human fit as well. With the tight situation most small downtowns the concept of accurate fit is of prime importance.

The element mentioned above is a number of differences in the approach to small towns as opposed to larger communities, and provide some direction in undertaking these projects. Michael (1986, p. 12) states, "The very elements that combine make the unique places to live and work are the same ones that can be lost or become a town's revitalization. Familiarity, a strong sense of community, personalized
Downtown revitalization programs have been initiated in many cities and have proven to be an effective way to restore vibrancy and vitality to the town center. Many of these programs have not only yielded renewed interest in the downtown, but have also paved the way for future development projects. Although a number of small towns have undertaken and implemented successful downtown revitalization programs, there are still many more that have potential to do so. Projects that do not proceed beyond concept planning due to a lack of implementation, or the failure of those involved to recognize the significant differences between small towns and the larger communities where most downtown revitalization approaches originate. Although some of the same approaches may be relevant, and have indeed contributed to the rejuvenation of downtown, it is important to recognize that small towns are different and warrant an alternative perspective.

Many of the more realistic approaches to small town downtown revitalization, stress an incremental approach to program implementation, and grass roots support toward that end. Craycroft (1980, p. 2) maintains: "It is clear that these negative trends can be reversed only by those having a vested interest in a vital main street — its property owners, businesses, financial institutions, and political leaders. They have the most to gain if revitalization is successful and the most to lose if it is not. Reversing decades of decline will require a considerable investment of time, energy, and money. It will also require open minds, a belief in the possible and a continuing commitment. The results will not be immediate; Main Street’s problems have evolved over a long period of time and its revitalization can only be incremental."

Maloy (1982, p. 18) quoting Scott Gufford of NMDC, states: "Local communities always want to tackle the hardest thing first," he says. "They want to get a new department store downtown, for example. We’ll tell them to forget it, that it’s not going to happen." Instead experts urge simple, low cost projects given first priority. Splashy new graphics, spurred up store windows, attractive brochures with a directory of downtown merchants. An incremental approach needs to be undertaken with careful consideration. An important factor for success is public awareness that change, or improvement, is occurring and some immediate success is apparent. Paumier (1982, p. 79) reports: "Rapid completion of short term tasks builds confidence and generates interest in longer term projects, such as attracting new businesses and residents." This suggests that the initial actions must be of manageable scale, but significant and successful, so the community perceives that improvement or change is occurring and so that merchants do not become discouraged and disillusioned with the process.

All of the various aspects of downtown revitalization discussed in this paper are important and need to be addressed in some manner. Costly improvements or major programs need not be initiated, but awareness of the range of relevant issues and their effect is imperative to maintaining a vital main street.

"The success of the program will depend on the extent to which the municipality and the community at large can perceive their interests in common and can integrate all components— from zoning and municipal works to beautification and promotion— into a unified approach to the rejuvenation of the downtown core and its surrounding area." (British Columbia Ministry of Municipal Af- fairs 1980, p. 7)

Promotion and marketing strategies, public policy and zoning, as well as physical improvements and beautification are projects applicable to small towns and larger communities alike, but the implementation needs to be carefully accommodated differences. One of the most important things for the development of the central business district is that the officials, merchants, and planners receive adequate encouragement and assistance to make informed decisions when they assign priorities to the steps under consideration in their revitalization program, so that they begin with an effective first step, that can be built upon incrementally, and restore confidence in the downtown commercial area without an initial major expenditure that may preclude any further work. Ronald Young, mayor of Frederick, Maryland, (1982, p. 78) cautions, "Communities that have only a general idea of what they want, can expend money and time and yet miss the mark because they fail to harness available expertise. By studying what has been done elsewhere, what has been successful, and by using consultant assistance, Frederick has found fresh solutions and has avoided others' mistakes."

References


Aronoff, Craig. 1979. Model Program to Assist Small and Midized Communities With Downtown Development. Georgia Inter-University Task Force.


Craycroft, Robert. 1982. Revitalizing Main Street: Small Town Public Policy. Center for Small Town Research and Design, School of Architecture, Mississippi State University.


