



Joe Riley, meet Chris Leinberger, meet Fred Kent

In the past few years the Hourglass has given us the opportunity to hear from three of the nation's most knowledgeable and best-respected experts on how to revitalize downtowns, making them more exciting places to live, work, and visit. They remind us that what we do defines who we are, what we value, and how we want to be perceived. While we may not agree with every recommendation they have made to us, there is great wisdom and consistency in what they had to say.

Joe Riley -- Mayor of Charleston, SC

Every successful city-revitalization begins with a vision. People realize they have the power to decide what their city and downtown want to be. They set out to understand, define, and communicate its greatest resources and unique character. They realize the need to involve everyone in making it happen – preservation groups, economic development, civic groups, neighborhood associations, schools/colleges, hospitals, retailers, businesses, government, and interested individuals. And they know that public buy-in and public trust is necessary to accomplish their goals.

A vision requires a plan; a short and long-range plan that is periodically updated to meet changing needs. The plan outlines the actions, the initiatives, and how to stay true to the vision, for everything that is done affects something else. It is important to understand that a downtown is a living, delicate, complicated ecosystem. To avoid unintended consequences, every decision, even the smallest tactical execution, must consider its impact on the broader vision – economic, environmental, neighborhoods, infrastructure, preservation, streetscape, beauty, parking, traffic, walkability, tourism, and overall quality of life.

Great caution must be taken to avoid easy solutions that aren't well thought out or aren't executed with attention to detail, beauty, quality, smart design, and achieving the vision. It is important to create beauty as the standard to judge decisions. Beauty makes people's hearts sing. Lives are enhanced when a downtown is made more beautiful. When you do good stuff, good things will happen. Beauty and quality will catch on, and people will come to expect and appreciate it every time

The cornerstone concept of successful urban design is to honor the street. Everything must be judged as to whether it enhances and energizes the street. How buildings meet the street determines if people will want to walk along the sidewalk, how they will feel, and whether they want to be there. Building designs must be compatible, and of human scale that people can relate to. The sidewalk is the stage where everything happens, where experiences begin, and impressions are made. The best urban design moves people along the sidewalk from one interesting place to another. It pulls them along to discover even more stores, restaurants, and

beautiful buildings and gardens. Downtowns must beware of creating barriers like blank walls and bland places that stop the movement of people and choke off the development of nearby areas.

The look and feel of downtown streets, sidewalks, parking, and public spaces should not be determined by engineers focused on maximum efficiency, cost savings, or the convenience of the automobile. What a vibrant downtown really is about is emotion and experience -- a mother holding a smiling child's hand, walking past beautiful storefronts, enjoying unique moments, admiring real buildings and real spaces, and feeling happy about being there and being part of the downtown environment.

People want real, authentic downtown experiences that can't be found in me-too towns, mega shopping malls or faux street-front strip malls. A downtown must be passionate about respecting its history and preserving memories, for that is what creates its unique character. Every time a historic building is torn down, the downtown forever loses a piece of its identity and a memory that can never be put back. Tearing down an old building in need of repair is too often the easy thing to do, but hardly ever the right thing to do.

A downtown must also keep focused in its public spaces. After all, downtown is a public realm; a place for everyone. People need places to meet others, places for eye and elbow contact, beautiful places where they can go to feel good and energize their soul. Public spaces should welcome people and bring them together. Done right, they remind people that they are part of something bigger, they instill citizenship, and promote respect for others. In every downtown, the beauty and vitality of the sidewalk, the place between the building and the street, is the finest and most important public realm. It affects how long people will want to stay and how often they will return.

Christopher Leinberger – Urban Land Use Strategist

Successful downtowns are the result of an ongoing private/public partnership led by the private sector and managed by the public sector. It all begins with a vision, strategy and implementation plan. It is the responsibility of government to facilitate the process by providing good communications, and by creating new zoning and building codes that make doing the right thing easy.

The most important asset a downtown has is memory and emotion. It's what makes the downtown unique and special. It's what makes people want to improve their homes, move their businesses there, and visit the downtown often. Memory and emotion is the reason historic buildings are renovated and new businesses want to be part of the downtown experience.

People are increasingly bored with homogenous houses and buildings. They are alienated by design that meets the needs of cars and not people. They hunger for the authentic; real places and experiences that are fun and interesting. They want unique character rather than more of the same. They appreciate architecture that has personality and that has a story to tell.

The best downtowns offer walkability. People enjoy being part of the downtown streetscape experience. The creation of a walkable urbanity requires a complex mix of uses that includes retail, hotels, grocery stores, restaurants, homes, offices, and artist studios. Walking allows people to enjoy interesting buildings and storefronts with different styles of well-crafted architecture meant to be experienced up close. A person can have a different experience nearly every time he or she takes to the street, whether for a shopping adventure, a romantic stroll, meeting friends, or exercise that helps clear the mind. People are willing to walk about 1500 feet before pursuing an alternate means of transportation if they are engaged by a streetscape with interesting things to see and do.

The challenge for jump-starting a mix of uses at a pedestrian scale is to create a critical mass as quickly as possible. Which means for a visitor there must be enough interesting activities to occupy them for four to six hours. For someone wanting to locate their home downtown it means that enough of life's daily needs can be met, and for a developer it means rent and sale prices that justify the renovation of existing buildings. The more activity that happens, the more people that will be attracted. And those people will attract even more people. Successful revitalization is people-focused; creating pleasant experiences.

Fred Kent – President, Project for Public Spaces

Placemaking is all about creating places people will enjoy. It's a community-driven approach, led by "zealous nuts", to make downtowns and neighborhoods more appealing by creating authentic destinations that are full of life. Places that offer a wide variety of fun and interesting things to do; special public places people intuitively like, and where they want to be. Placemaking is beautification, human empowerment, and bringing people together. Remember -- when you design your community around cars, you get more cars, and when you design your community around people, you get more people.

Effective Placemaking involves the convergence of many people, skills, movements and interests, working together: community/economic development, civil society, public health, environmental activism, sustainable agriculture, transportation, historic preservation, city revitalization, smart growth, etc. It can't be done alone. It takes a community to create a great place. You have to take a holistic approach, because no government department or community organization is concerned exclusively with quality of life and attractive public spaces. So everyone has to be. In the beginning many will say it can't be done. When you focus on a place, you do everything differently.

A community-driven approach to creating places differs dramatically from the conventional project/discipline-driven approach that is often initiated because of an impending crisis or a political need. The project-driven approach has narrow goals, and starts with defining both the problem and solution. An engineer or design professional is called in to put form to the solution while being careful to avoid constraints and minimize community resistance. They do what pleases them, not what pleases the people. Public input is after the fact and typically for appearances only. No real consideration is given to unintended consequences or the impact on the total vision, which may not even exist.

A community-driven approach to creating places starts with the people who will use it. They evaluate the place, define the needs, set the priorities and articulate the goals. The community is the expert. A shared vision is created that is responsive to unique assets of the place, the character of the people, and the desired experience. The vision is communicated, stakeholders are assembled, and the work is begun. The task is to create a great place, not a great design. Engineers and design professionals are brought in only to help implement the vision. The place evolves over time to meet changing needs.

What all great place have to offer –

1. Uses and activities: fun, active, vital, special, real
2. Comfort and Image: safe, charm, clean, attractive, historic, unique identity
3. Access and linkage: connected, walkable, convenient, accessible
4. Socialibility: welcoming, inclusive, cooperative, neighborly

Sidewalks and streets can also be great places offering –

1. Attractions and destinations: clustered elements and activities, points of interest, amenities that make people feel comfortable, seasonal strategies, design appropriate to adjacent buildings/land uses.
2. Identity and image: authentic, unique, showcase local assets, management of programs and maintenance/security, respect for the vision, narrowed traffic lanes for safety and to connect both sides of the street, and human scale buildings supporting the desired image.
3. Active and connected uses: activate the street with ground level uses, create social/commercial/aesthetic experiences, blended and changing uses, trees and setbacks to heighten pedestrian experience. Avoid blank walls and unconnected spaces for they declare the supremacy of architecture over humanity and buildings over people.
4. Diverse user groups: design for use by all (ages, ethnicity, incomes, interests), no one group dominates and no groups excluded.

Placemaking has to be a well-orchestrated campaign driven by the community; many people with many interests and skills sharing a vision. When you start, you can't know what you are going to end up with. Money is not a problem – if everyone wants a great place, they will find the money. Parking is not a problem – people will enjoy an interesting walk. A helpful tool for effective Placemaking is **The Power of Ten**. Every city/town/neighborhood should have 10 destinations. Every destination should have 10 places, and every place should have 10 things to do.

The Placemaking process --

1. Develop a vision that attracts partners
2. Become great communicators
3. Search for impediments and creative solutions
4. Organize and empower a strong and diverse team
5. Attack complacency; insist on excellence
6. Produce short-term wins; build on successes
7. Take on bigger challenges
8. Connect change to the culture of the community