



Main Street Revitalisation

Alex Henderson

Main Street revitalisation is an extremely useful tool in creating a more age friendly city

In Canada, most city centres have lost significant numbers of people and businesses to the suburbs since the mid-twentieth century. As a result, Main Street revitalisation is a popular subject in planning literature. Revitalisation is often presented as benefiting the overall community. What is not often talked about is how main street revitalisation especially benefits seniors.

A cursory exploration of most main streets will usually tell someone two things: 1. That buildings here are built for a higher density of dwellings, businesses, and services in this part of the city compared to other parts; 2. Because of 1., more amenities are in walking distance and there is less of a need for automobiles. **Walkability** and **access to amenities** are immensely important features for older adults because mobility decreases with aging. Therefore, main street revitalization is an extremely useful tool in creating a more age friendly city.

John Mercer, Director of City Planning for Spokane, recognized the potential for Main Streets to attract seniors. Spokane’s downtown, like most, experienced a sharp decline in population and commerce in the last few decades. Older adults, Mercer said, might be a demographic enticed to move back to downtown because of the close proximity to health services. He said that if other attractive amenities such as restaurants, parks, and stores were developed in close proximity as well, then older adult residents could access most things they needed downtown without a car or bus. What is needed, he said, is a concerted effort on behalf of the city to encourage this kind of development/revitalisation.

Unfortunately, main street revitalisation or downtown renewal does not always connote age friendly imagery. Written in 1976, Frederick P. Stutz’s article “Adjustment and Mobility of Elderly Poor Amid Downtown Renewal” in *Geographical Review* has documented how renewal in San Diego threatened and often ignored an inner city senior population. Segments of older adults are pensioners who often live in cheap, old hotels downtown. Living on a meagre income, these seniors could enjoy many amenities in a short walk or bus ride from their hotel. The residents feared, though, that renewal might cause their hotel to raise rates and force them to relocate to undesirable mission homes or housing projects. Stutz’s point was that though this population was living in substandard housing, they managed to find independence and were well adjusted. Revitalisation in this case threatened seniors already living downtown.



Photo credit: Ian Machern

Approaches to Main Street Revitalisation

When Jane Jacobs published her famous work *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* in 1961 she was criticizing the very approaches to downtown renewal that Stutz talked about. In the 1950s and 1960s “renewal” often meant large-scale demolition of old, dense, mixed-use neighbourhoods and, in their place, the building of large modernist housing projects or highways. Jacobs recommended a different approach which instead left old neighbourhoods intact, tried to retain the existing population, and encouraged an even greater mixture of land uses.

Jacobs had two categories of land uses: ‘primary uses’ and ‘secondary diversity.’ Primary uses are those things which dominate a built environment of a particular area of a city, such as a primarily residential area. Secondary diversity includes those different, minor types of landuses which spring up because of the presence of people who are there for the primary use. A convenience store in the residential area is an example of secondary diversity. Jacobs recommended that city officials encourage more than one primary use in a dense urban area (applicable to a mainstreet). To Jacobs, mixture was a catalyst for revitalisation: “...when a primary use is combined, effectively, with another that puts people on the street at different times, then the effect can be economically stimulating: a fertile environment for secondary diversity” (Jacobs, 1961, p. 162).

Jacobs said that an area can be made desirable for secondary diversity to develop if people are drawn to a primary use during the day and to a different kind of primary use during the evening. That is, the area will be attractive to businesses who want people (potential customers) coming into the area throughout the day.

Many main streets have a problem in that they have only one primary use, such as office buildings which close at 5pm. Office workers are the main clientel of all the other businesses so nothing stays open past 5pm. Main street is vacant at night and becomes unattractive to potential users from nearby neighbourhoods. However, all this could change if main streets had a large number of dwellings in addition to offices. Residents living there could populate the streets and patronize the businesses well into the night. Thus, revitalisation takes place.



People out in the evening time.

Photo credit: urbandreamer



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Store front window design can be art that engages pedestrians, making better public spaces.
Photo credit: urbandreamer

In Dolores P. Palma's article 'Downtown Revitalization' in the anthology *Main Street Renewal* is a strictly business development framework. Her reasoning for doing this is that: "Downtown enhancement programs which are experiencing a great deal of enthusiasm and success seem to have strong management and business-oriented initiatives in place." (Palma, 1994, p. 158). To Palma, renewal strategies will not be as effective unless they address main street **business** problems in a contemporary setting where suburban shopping dominates. Some of her initiatives include: A market analysis of downtown's potential customers; visioning with business owners and residents; identifying the unique niches of downtown businesses; marketing downtown's niches; inviting in new businesses based upon market analysis research; business counselling; public-private partnerships; and finally, hiring a downtown director.

Municipally funded incentives can be an important tool in main street revitalization. Whether it is attracting new businesses to an area of downtown or whether it is used to enhance the streetscaping or facades, public resources can be applied in the form of incentives. In his article, *When to Use Incentives*, Kurt Hahn describes some of the most common forms of incentives, including: expedited or preferential processing of a developer's project; loan or grant of public funds to businesses for private or public purposes (frequent with historic preservation or aesthetic improvements, such as facades or landscaping); lease or sale of public land at below-market rates; public payment to a developer who uses planners or architects who are most familiar with the city's processes; and special utility rates. Hahn also suggests that the city should only use its incentive like an investment, expecting it to make a profitable return for the public purse.

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In *New City Life* Danish planners and architects examine the successes of Denmark's urban spaces. They describe how main streets are being used differently from the past. They try to show how 'necessary uses' of a city's centre, like errand-running is far less common today. New users of main streets are going for optional reasons, like recreation. Optional activities make a higher demand for good quality public spaces. They say urban areas in USA have been abandoned because Americans fail to realize that city life is optional today. As a result of this ignorance, the public realm has been neglected. This is why high quality **streetscaping** and public **parks** are especially important for revitalization.

Streetscaping may make main street more attractive and livable, but it raises serious questions about age friendliness. *Planning Complete Streets for an Aging America* states that there is a serious debate about how best to accommodate for the transportation needs of seniors, either by: A) wider, easily navigable roads; or B) narrower roads with better streetscaping for pedestrians. The authors argue that B is more age friendly, pointing out that wider sidewalks are easier to manoeuvre by wheelchair (link: [mobility](#)). They also point out that wider roads also generally lead to higher driving speeds which often causes seniors to enter into more collisions (link: [traffic calming](#)).

Older adults have much to benefit from main streets that are walkable and rich in amenity. Revitalisation, at its best, makes this kind of city life a reality.

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