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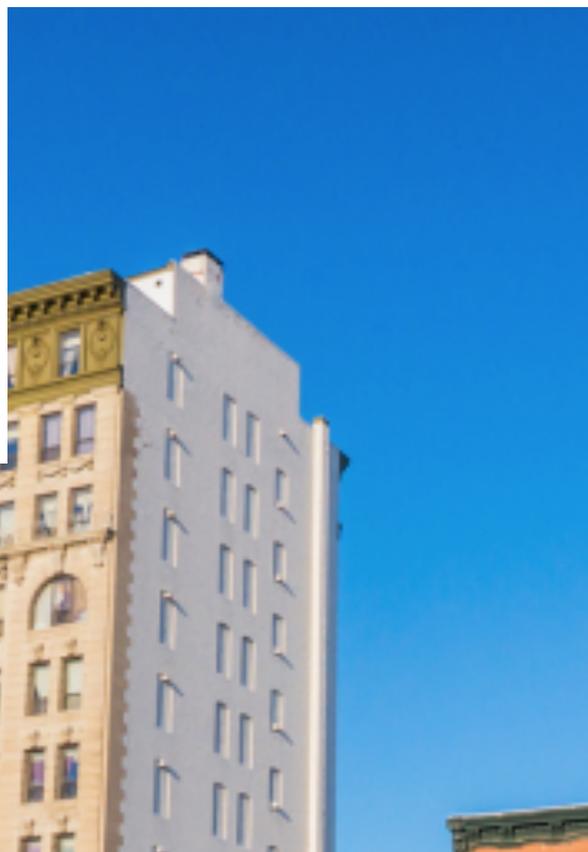
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# THE BIG URBAN MISTAKE: BUILDING FOR TOURISM VS. LIVABILITY

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BY ARIAN HORBOVETZ



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Phoenix. The following essay is reprinted from his blog.

As our cities slowly rise to prominence once again, and as droves of Americans make their way back to their urban centers, the decisions our developers and city governments about the future of our downtowns are suddenly magnified.

Proposals to create high-priced condos, sports complexes, auditoriums and even casinos clash with calls for greenspace, affordable housing, walkability, practical and attractive transit and neighborhood amenities like small grocery stores.

Developers throw lavish plans on the table that will surely usher the wallets of the wealthy, while residents new and old call for a more livable downtown for everyone to enjoy. This conflict is currently playing out in countless cities across the nation.

I'm painting with a bit of a broad brush, but essentially, what so many cities are currently experiencing is the dilemma of whether to invest in large urban draws that will bring outside money in, or to invest in a growing and changing downtown residential population. To put it simply, do cities invest in big projects that create an entertaining space that grows tourism, or do they invest in the people that have already taken a risk by moving back into their long-dormant downtowns?

Often, developers and city governments will say they can improve both by investing in large-scale, big ticket projects and complexes. But what if cities took the opposite approach and catered first to the real world needs of their new and existing downtown residents instead of simply counting them at the turnstile and moving on to these other projects?

Herb Kelleher, Southwest Airlines founder and former CEO, is credited with being one of the most forward thinking business minds of our time. His simple yet beautiful philosophy regarding business is exemplified in his quote below.

*"Your employees come first. And if you treat your employees right, guess what? Your*



Schenectady's pedestrian-only Jay Street is filled with small business owners that cater to both the downtown residents and visiting shoppers. A casino just opened less than a mile away. What impact will it have on an already thriving downtown?

*customers come back, and that makes your shareholders happy. Start with employees and the rest follows from that."*

With this in mind, let's think of the people moving into all those beautiful new apartments in your downtown as the "employees." They are the face of your city, the sales force, the best representatives your city has. Next, the visitors that come into the city occasionally for events and attractions; those are your "customers." They can be suburbanites or even tourists, bringing important money from outside your city and spending it in your local economy.

Finally, the "shareholders" are the movers and shakers, the developers, the investors, even local governments that spend taxpayer money... the people tasked with funding the ever growing downtown revitalization. These financial and developmental resources are key to building a vibrant city for residents and visitors alike, but in a perfect world their influence should follow the needs of residents and tourists respectively. Unfortunately, this is often not the case as the biggest wallets are typically the ones dictating the direction of our urban rebirth for obvious reasons. I would never imply that these financial sources are "wrong" or paint them in a bad light, rather I believe they serve better (and ultimately are better served) when they respond to the needs of cities rather than direct them.

Too often, our downtown revival follows the incorrect pattern below:

1. Small businesses, artists and investors breathe life into our long vacant urban centers.
2. People begin to "make the leap" and move back downtown as developers begin to create more downtown apartments, unique restaurants, coffee shops, cocktail bars and breweries... and occasionally local retail.
3. Local pride follows as the pioneers of the new city revitalization begin the movement of urban excitement once again. I call this the "[champagne phase](#)."
4. Local government and developers see the writing on the wall and begin to collaborate on ways to continue bringing downtown back to its former prominence.



Tower280, one of the most ambitious residential projects in the heart of downtown Rochester. Many residents recently vocalized their frustrations when

5. Developers put forth large-scale development project proposals with plenty of “ooo and ahhh” effect, promising to feed the needs of downtown. **This is where it starts to go wrong...**

the mayor chose to develop a new performing arts center instead of mixed-use public space in the land adjacent to the apartment building.
6. As downtowns begin to fill with people again, these pioneer residents begin to ask for the simple additions of “livable amenities” like parks, a grocery store, light retail, affordable housing, walkability and transit. Instead, these new residents are suddenly ignored, as “sexier” projects geared more toward tourism and bringing outside money in, begin to take shape in the urban landscape.
7. Residents grow frustrated as large-scale projects and big money deals begin to eclipse their desire for a livable downtown. Local government promises that these projects will create jobs and make the city more attractive, meanwhile offering outside investors huge tax incentives, thus giving them an unfair advantage over local businesses. A rift begins to form, and residents receive the tap on the shoulder from above, a sort of “thanks for getting us to this point, but we will take it from here.”
8. Residents become bitter and will not stay, leaving downtown vacant yet again, causing everyone to look back at the progress we’ve made in our cities simply as a fad that never took hold.

When we think about residents first, we have the opportunity to turn a “fad” into a sustainable and LASTING way to invigorate our urban centers once again. Here’s how the model *should* go:

1. Small businesses, artists and investors breathe life into our long vacant urban centers.
2. People begin to “make the leap” and move back downtown as developers begin to create more downtown apartments, unique restaurants, coffee shops, cocktail bars and breweries... and occasionally local retail.
3. Local pride follows as the pioneers of the new city revitalization begin the movement of urban excitement once again. I call this the “champagne phase.”
4. Local government and developers see the writing on the wall and begin to collaborate on ways to bring downtown back to its former prominence.
5. The powers that be begin first by listening to the new and existing downtown residents and what they want, building a development plan around the people that live there. This should be intermixed with a tremendous amount of research into what has worked for other successful urban revivals.
6. Local government should facilitate resident-driven projects, giving the tools and incentives to businesses and developers who live in the communities they help develop instead of awarding tax incentives to out-of-town financial interests.

7. Residents who feel their voices heard and see that city government and developers share the vision that they pioneered stay downtown instead of moving away. This has the potential to build pride, and even create a multi-generational sense of ownership and self-direction.
8. Ready for the kicker? By creating a downtown where residents want to live now and continue to live long(er) term, we create a happier, healthier community with a sense of pride and ownership over their urban center. And when you have a place with happy people, they create cool things. And cool things... you guessed it... usher in tourism, as outsiders travel from outlying areas to see the city that "does it the right way." And when you have a healthy local economy where people live, work and play, as well as tourism based on happy, healthy communities with a unique local flavor, developers, investors and local governments will have a multitude of opportunities to see a return. And what does this all-positive end create that is as important as anything? A thriving attractive place with happy, motivated residents where businesses want to expand and relocate, bringing jobs to your area.



Utica's Bagg's Square, a long dormant urban canvas that has recently sprung to life with local business and residential development. Less than a half mile away, massive proposals for a downtown hospital and an entertainment district featuring a casino are in the works.

I understand the complexities of urban dynamics, politics and financial pressure, and I know the above examples are not always so cut and dry. I also understand that often residents don't always fully understand what actually creates a a strong local economy and livable

environment. The positive financial and community impact of narrow streets, traffic calming and cycling infrastructure instead of increased parking and highway access is often a foreign concept for the average voter. Sometimes these decisions have to be made in the best interest of the city fabric based on a wealth of data and examples from other cities. But for the most part, people moving downtown know what additives are needed to keep them living there, working there and playing there. We simply need to listen.

*“You can facilitate local small business and community development, or you can create a short-lived wow-factor by opening the floodgates to developers and business interests who take money out of our communities.”*

City leaders, this one’s for you. You can either cater to your new residents by going into the downtown apartment buildings and listening to real people, or you can hop on the big ticket project train en route to a revolving door downtown. You can either build for livability or build for fleeting, often overrated promises of tourism revenue.

You can facilitate local small business and community development, or you can create a short-lived wow-factor by opening the floodgates to developers and business interests who take money out of our communities. You can empower and invest in your new downtown residents and let *them* be the ambassadors for our growing

urban paradises, or you can ignore them and build casinos and other flashy complexes that cater to the outsider and likely line the pockets of someone beyond the boundaries of the community.

The choice, as always, is yours to make. Choose to invest in your residents and local business owners—the people that invested first. Tourism, development and financial success will likely follow. Empower your people, honor the risk they took by taking one yourself, and like happy employees of a strong company, they will take care of everything else.

*(All photos by [Arian David Photography](#))*

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**Jonathan Walford** • 4 months ago

The article alludes to but doesn't really specify that there are different types of tourism. Sports complexes, theme parks, casinos etc. draw in weekender 'get in and get out', and "let's eat at a chain restaurant" tourists. The most successful tourist towns I have seen are ones that have a reason for tourists to go and a bigger reason for them to stay, ie: Corning New York (reason to go - glass museum -- reason to stay - beautiful town, architecture, restaurants, countryside, local history...) Stratford Ontario (reason to go - Shakespeare Festival -- reason to stay - beautiful town, architectures, restaurants, natural setting, galleries, museums...) So really its about which tourists you want, not precluding all tourists until the locals are happy.

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**helentroy4** • 4 months ago

A very interesting article that is so relevant to what has happened to the city of Lancaster, Pennsylvania. The Penn Square Partnership, a partnership that includes the city's newspaper has taken in millions upon millions of taxpayer money, received all sorts of tax forgiveness, and removed many properties that were once on the tax rolls to build a hotel and conference center in the center of town. Historic buildings have been leveled and in their place is a cookie cutter monstrosity that towers above what was once historic buildings. The Historic Preservation Trust which is supposed to protect historic buildings has never denied the PSP.

Legislators backed by the newspaper have created pathways for millions more to be given to the project. In the meantime, the streets are filled with potholes, the schools are certainly less funded due to the tax roll reductions, and over 20 unsolved murders hang over the city's thin veneer.

Because the newspaper is in partnership in this project, there has never been any sort of adequate critique of the project. Reporters don't ask the pertinent questions and neighborhoods south of the "garden district" are in woeful

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