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Downtown Revitalization in St. Catharines

Building the Vibrant Public Space

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by Michael Ripmeester

Recent years have seen the proliferation of newly remodeled downtowns in cities of all sizes. In order to ameliorate the consequences of deindustrialization and its impacts on the city core, urban managers in many cities seek to reinvigorate their downtowns by creating vibrant places that will draw residents and tourists alike. In particular, they seek to attract creative or knowledge workers; individuals who seek to live and work in cities with a high livability index. The hope is that by attracting such workers, cities will also attract the businesses that seek their skills. In other words, cities have been hard at work increasing their quality of life scores and the rationale for this transformation is often based on economic motivations. It is no surprise, then, that across Canada more than 100 municipalities are part of the Creative City Network.

Much of the downtown redevelopment literature highlights the need for "buzz" or "vibrancy." Though this "buzz" as a phenomenon is difficult to pinpoint, the word and its synonyms liberally sprinkle the literature on creative cities. Some authors consider "buzz" a key part of economic development. Indeed, "buzz", as Silver and Clark (2013) contend, has become an important urban resource.

This is particularly true of creative city proponents for whom "buzz" implies an atmosphere of innovation and entrepreneurial vigor (Storper and Venables, 2004; Asheim, Coenen and Vang, 2007). Much of the focus here is on the creation of spaces in which consumption and production are blurred: galleries, cultural and arts centres, and restaurants are among the oft-mentioned features of such spaces.

Others argue that this rather narrow focus does little to advance the overall social value of urban spaces and, in fact, disconnects downtowns from the wider social sphere of the city (Johnson, Glover and Steward, 2014, Lees, 2003, Cattell, et al., 2008). Yet this wider sphere is significant for the health of downtowns. Johnson, Glover and Steward (2014, 30), for example, argue that "the visible presence of local residents engaged in everyday social activities creates a vibrant, authentic, and successful urban core, leaving no doubt that downtowns remain major sites of everyday leisure."

This brief follows this tack. As part of a larger project, I surveyed over 300 residents of St. Catharines for their opinions on the revitalization of downtown. Significant among the findings is that most participants approved of the direction of the redevelopment project. **However, many participants also noted that these were not the things that would draw *them* downtown. Instead, they wished for places of everyday leisure or, in other words, vibrant public spaces.**

ST. CATHARINES

St. Catharines is a city with a population of just over 130,000 located in the Niagara region of Ontario. Once dependent on manufacturing employment, deindustrialization has reduced its numbers from a high of more than 40 per cent of the workforce in 1961 to just over six per cent of the workforce in 2006. The downtown, also hit hard by the suburbanization of retailing, has been

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ABSTRACT

Recent downtown redevelopment efforts in St. Catharines, Ont. have focused on creating a "creative cluster" which includes the building of a 5,000-seat spectator facility (the Meridian Centre, hosting hockey, basketball and other entertainment events), the First Ontario Performing Arts Centre, and a downtown Brock University campus housing the Marilyn I. Walker Centre for the Performing Arts. This cluster helps support the myriad of restaurants and coffee shops that populate the core.

As part of a larger project, the author and research assistants surveyed more than 300 St. Catharines residents for their opinions on the recent revitalization efforts. While most respondents were supportive of the construction of these new facilities in order to attract people downtown, they also suggested that a greater effort was needed to develop vibrant public spaces: that is, spaces that were convenient and attractive to those who were already in the core, such as workers and residents. Suggested improvements ranged from more benches on which to sit to free entertainment and amenities such as a water feature, outdoor chess tables, an outdoor skating rink and more green space.

the focus of repeated redevelopment efforts. In their latest iteration, downtown redevelopment plans are highlighted in the city's 2008 document the *Downtown Creative Cluster Master Plan*. This plan, in large part a local response to Ontario's *Places to Grow Act* of 2005, focuses on downtown employment and residential intensification. Key features of the plan include the newly constructed 5,000-seat spectator facility known as the Meridian Centre, which hosts hockey, basketball and other entertainment events, the First Ontario Performing Arts Centre (PAC), and the downtown Brock University campus that contains the Marilyn I. Walker Centre for the Fine and Performing Arts.

The designation of the main downtown thoroughfare as part of the Niagara Wine Route is another important asset.

During the survey[1], participants were asked if they thought that the revitalization was worth the public investment, whether they believed that they would benefit personally, and what would draw them downtown. Participant responses covered a continuum from disgust to delight. As a way to set context, participants were asked if they participated in the kinds of events the new facilities might host. As Tables 1 and 2 illustrate, about 80 per cent of St. Catharines residents do not attend live performances or sports events more than "once in a while."

Table 1 "I attend Live Arts performances." (%)	
Never	24.01
Rarely	28.25
Once in a while	27.68
Somewhat Regularly	12.43
Regularly	7.63

Table 2 "I attend Live Sports events." (%)	
Never	36.72
Rarely	25.99
Once in a while	22.32
Somewhat Regularly	8.47
Regularly	6.50

It is surprising, therefore, that a majority was fully in favour of the downtown revitalization projects that had little impact on their own lives. Table 3, for example, illustrates that about 80 per cent of participants believed that the PAC, Meridian Centre and Brock campus would be beneficial to the downtown.

[1] *Research assistants and I used a convenience sampling strategy to recruit participants. Recruitment occurred in public spaces along St. Paul Street, Montebello Park, and Port Dalhousie during July 2014. Participants were asked approximately 20 questions that all related to their perceptions of the downtown construction projects. Most questions allowed for the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data.*

Table 3 Will new projects enhance the downtown? (%)	
Yes	79.9
No	8.6
Maybe	11.5

Participants who supported the projects were confident that these new facilities would renew interest in the downtown among both residents and visitors. Table 4 highlights the reasons why participants were positive about the projects.

Table 4 Participants' Perceptions on why the Downtown Projects will be positive (%)	
Bring People Downtown	51.0
Improve Local Economy	20.8
Downtown Vitality	17.2
Downtown Clean Up	11.0

One person stated: "The new PAC and other facilities will provide interest and employment. It will revamp the city scene and add to quality of life. Above all it provides HOPE. If they bring some good head banging music to the sports facility it may keep me here." Another told us, "They will bring more light. It will help people to feel positive, have pride, in the city."

While many participants expressed their support of the downtown's revitalization, many also expressed their desire for a number of other improvements to downtown. Of the participants who held positive views of the downtown's recent development projects, 95 per cent also noted that other things would be more likely to bring *them* downtown. Table 5 summarizes their responses.

Table 5 Participant Suggestions for Improving Downtown (%)	
General improvements	26.5
Family-friendly	14.7
Parking	13.9
Better Entertainment	12.4
Parks & Rec upgrades	10.4
Social Services	8.6
Safety	7.2
Nothing	6.2

Many of these themes reemerge when participants were asked about how their tax dollars were being managed by the city (Table 6).

Table 6 How would you prefer the city spend your tax dollars? (%)	
Infrastructure	55.1
Social Concerns	42.0
Education	2.9

Cast in broad terms these improvements can be grouped into several categories: parking, social concerns (including job creation, poverty, seniors and housing displacement), infrastructure (roads and parking), and public spaces.

In this brief I shall focus solely on public spaces. This theme also encapsulates participants' views on infrastructure and social concerns. In general, many participants felt that the downtown redevelopment did not really touch on things that were overly important or beneficial to them. For example, one person said: "The money gained will be localized and distributed among only the few. No additional benefits will happen. This will only succeed in the destroying the working class." Another said: "Let the rich pay for these facilities because they are the ones who can afford to enjoy them. The Mayor has not put up a single housing project for the city, so why put up these facilities. The Mayor should develop an effort at job creation." Another suggested: "I would like to see more effort put into getting regular jobs for regular people, even part-time jobs, especially for people with disabilities. We don't need this trashy high-class stuff. We need things that are approachable, especially for the people who live here. We don't really need these things. I don't understand why we are making such a big deal out of this."

Many participants would like downtown spaces for "just being". Many of them liked being downtown, and suggested that the downtown needs more convivial spots in which to stroll, sit, or commune with other downtown visitors. For example, several participants noted that they already spend time downtown buying coffee, running errands,

going to shops or the library or just "hanging out." For instance, one person told us: "The city needs more outdoor seating. Maybe upgrade the market and area and add seating there. Make it more like James St. when it was closed." Another said, "I like to have a good time downtown. I visit cafes, eat, drink, do my homework. I'm not sure what would make it better…. It needs improvement. … Maybe more community events and more fashion shops." Many participants desired more spaces in which they could "socialize", "collaborate", and "commune".

In general, participants were concerned that good public spaces downtown are too few and far between. For ease of reference, I have divided their opinions into a number of themes.

STROLLING, SITTING & COMMUNITY

- We need more outdoor places to sit, such as patios or parkettes. Perhaps upgrade the market area and add seating.
- The city needs to do a better job of cleaning up litter and garbage.
- We need more walking areas – a pedestrian-friendly downtown perhaps where streets are closed for pedestrian use only.
- More public spaces for collaboration.
- More movie theatres and arcades.
- More community events

FAMILY FRIENDLY

- We need low-tech and inexpensive (free) attractions for families to enjoy like taking kids to the park with a playground or splash pad, the library or the market.
- More events such as Ribfest and Grape & Wine.
- Old shops should be fixed up.
- Open up James Street as a more pedestrian friendly experience.
- A public pool or "water facility" in the park, a museum or a play centre. Otherwise there is nothing to do there with the kids.
- A museum or a play centre
- Fix the library and make it more attractive to people.

PUBLIC SPACE FOR PLEASURE

- More green space, such as by the court house/library.
- A free splash pad or ice rink. We need places that people can just go for pleasure.
- Downtown needs more activity – more and better businesses. Free shows in the park.
- I like to go to the bars, sit in the park, go to the market. But we need more people here and there is definitely a lack of "cool" places.
- The city could spend money on an outdoor facility - a year-round rink would be great: dry in the summer and ice in the winter.

SENIORS

- A swimming pool and more places to get exercise.
- Add nicer restaurants and places for older people to hang out.
- Take the time to consider environmental issues before the projects go ahead.
- Wait for a better financial time before pursuing projects.
- Add some housing and recreation centres for seniors.

It seems clear that participants believe that the presence of individuals, families, and seniors doing everyday social activities could provide the vibrancy that would attract them to downtown. More, carefully sculpted landscapes are not enough. People want to see places where people are comfortable and engaged in pleasurable, low-cost or free leisure activities. It is also worth noting that other parts of the surveys suggest that participants expressed interest in diversity of population. Some, for example, worried about displacement of "real" people by business people and the middle-class. In sum, public spaces

become socially valuable if they are used by a variety of people.

Participants' responses share strong links to the academic literature on urban public spaces. The literature points to a number of key attributes:

1. Downtown needs to be different than other parts of the city. Research suggests that downtowns are well placed to provide a unique, local experience. This includes things like local retail opportunities, unique configurations of social interactions (a local mix of residents, tourists, employees, leisure users, and diverse others), and the landscape features and amenities that support them (Johnson et al. 2014).
2. Good public spaces are visible and accessible. In their research, Johnson et al. (2014, 35) found that "the visual presence of people engaged in everyday social activities creates a vibrant and successful downtown."
3. Redevelopment based on tourism, or other forms of consumption, bars particular groups from participating downtown. Put simply, many people do not feel comfortable in places where there are few facilities that welcome "street present non-consumers" (Lees 2003, 626). In other words, people feel as though they cannot enjoy "simple pleasures" (Lloyd and Auld, 2003). Successful public spaces support and invite activities that include non-commercial ventures such as meeting people, network building, and other simple everyday activities. In fact, even simple gestures such as nods and waves can form the impetus for other forms of contact (Peters, 2010). Research demonstrates that rich experiences enhance overall quality of life.
4. Planning needs to be supplemented by programs of publicly funded leisure activities. This is particularly true for families, children, and seniors (Auld and Lloyd, 2003; Cattell et al. 2008; Johnston et al. 2014). As Peters (2010) notes, publically organized activities can bring people together.
5. Good public spaces offer welcome to a diversity of people. William Foote Whyte (1943), in his classic study Street Corner Society, claims that overemphasis on the negativity of urban spaces conceals much that is of value. Similarly, Jane Jacobs (1961, 70) wrote of the benefits of an "exuberant and varied sidewalk life." Subsequent research points to similar conclusions (Peters, 2010; Neal, et al. 2015). For instance, Peters (2010, 430) writes: "By welcoming everyone, public spaces can bring together groups of people regardless of class, ethnic origin, or age, which makes inter-mingling possible. A diverse group of people can interact and learn about each other in public spaces."

Larkin Park – Buffalo NY.

Larkin Square is a privately owned public space that is part of the Larkinville redevelopment in central Buffalo, NY. It features opportunity for consumption of food and other material goods. One of its premier features is a weekly food truck event. In addition, however, it features safe and comfortable seating, free parking, free pickle ball and hula hoops, and a series of free events including a local author series and live music as well as a fitness-in-the-park program.

Though it is a fairly new development, reports are positive. Reviews on YELP [2] echo some of the themes that emerged among participants here. People like the variety and the option to attend free events or to make purchases.

Some comments:

Larkin Square has become our default destination for summer nights when we're wondering what to do. A well-programmed lineup of music, food, and other activities makes it a hotspot for relaxed, family entertainment.

[2] *Yelp is a user review/recommendation site. It is, however, a non-academic source of data. Its rigor might be questioned. However, 27 reviewers gave Larkin Square 4.5 out of a possible 5 stars*

The music events in the summer (Live at Larkin) are also terrific. Again, the space is so versatile and pleasant for all types of patrons that it really is "fun for all"…. This is a terrific venue. They continue to improve it as well. Adding new things. Improving on older ones. Changing some things up. I do think it's a "destination" place, and look forward to when it's more blended with the local area and neighborhood.

This is a fun event for the whole family. Challenge your co-workers to a game of pickle ball. Let your kids pound on the keys of the pianos on the wooden decks leading to the concert area. Cuddle in the grass with your sweetheart with an ice cream cone. Buffalo summers demand this kind of outdoor venue, so go check this place out!

Director Park – Portland OR

Director Park is located in downtown Portland, OR and is run by Portland Parks and Recreation. It is intended to function as a public piazza providing "elegant, clean, safe and versatile space that is actively programmed to complement downtown, support arts & culture, and highlight Portland Parks & Recreation" and that can be used in all seasons. Like Larkin Square, it offers a variety of particular uses that range from free "big chess" to water features to an artists' niche to moveable tables and chairs in addition to versatile commercial space. Programming is also a feature of this park. Upcoming events include a health expo, an outdoor knitting event in addition to "concerts, movies, dancing, chess events, poetry readings, cultural celebrations, public festivals, private events, and more!"

Again, public opinion (measured through reviews on YELP[3]) points to the reviewers' positive response. Here are some comments:

It is also fun to watch people play on the giant chess set. It is even more fun to watch kids splash and play in the fountain. In all it is a great urban space and good for people watching.

Always very busy during the lunch hour, but sitting on the stairs or comfortable benches near the spacious fountain until a table opens up isn't the end of the world, and the mix of professionals, children, and other city folk makes for great people watching. There are always a couple of smiley park staff members patrolling around, making sure all is well -- My preferred place to eat a packed or food-cart lunch in the downtown area.

I love this park. It is a nice place to gather. Yesterday we stopped here to soak our feet in the water. In the evenings, the lights on the structure are really cool, very colourful. There were kids splashing and having an awesome time in the water. If I worked downtown, I would hang out here a lot. It is a great place to people watch and just enjoy the city.

[3] *30 reviewers scored Director Park 4.5 out of 5 stars.*

BENEFITS OF GOOD PUBLIC SPACES

Such spaces do far more than simply provide good places for people to hang out. The academic literature on public space, for example, reports the following benefits:

1. Research indicates that good public spaces, those that attract people, lead to improved physical and emotional health. Cattell et al. (2008) refer to good public spaces as "therapeutic landscapes". Several authors point to the ways in which public spaces can raise the overall quality of life in cities.
2. People who enjoy themselves in urban public spaces tend to build identities that are more strongly tied to place. Citing the research of Gehl (1994), Lloyd and Auld (2003, 351) contend "people who enjoy themselves in the streets and plazas of a city… will tend to love the city and protect it." In like manner, Cattel et al. (2008) suggest that vibrant public places promote place-based identity and a sense of pride (v. Beck, 2009).
3. Vibrant public spaces have economic benefits. Lloyd and Auld (2003, 351), for example, suggest that a "lively, lived-in city" will attract visitors and bring in tourist dollars.
   Similarly, the Metropolitan Planning Council (www.sustainablecitiescollective.com,2013) notes that great public spaces that draw people improve both retailing opportunities and real estate values. Furthermore, a UK report entitled *Does Money Grow on Trees?* (CABE Space, 2008) concludes that proximity to high quality public spaces increases value of both residential and commercial properties, contributes to the attraction of tourists, provides both employment opportunities and a motivation to invest inwardly, and to favourable place image. Another UK report makes similar conclusions. Good streetscaping, they conclude, can add approximately five per cent to residential and retail rents (CABE, 2007).
4. Good public spaces raise overall quality of life in communities. Beck (2009) notes that good public spaces can improve a people's sense of where they live, satisfaction with their housing, and feelings of attachment to people and place. In addition, Francis et al. (2012) argue that increased attachment to an area can reduce the effects of neighbourhood disorder. In other words, well-designed public spaces can mitigate fear and mistrust.

RECOMMENDATIONS/NEXT STEPS

Public Space Amenities – urban spaces that have a variety of features and amenities - draw the widest range of users.

These include:

Facilities for structured and unstructured activities including basketball courts, water parks, and ice rinks. Active and passive activities can include picnics and socializing. The Project for Public Spaces suggests that "the more activities that are going on and that people have an opportunity to participate in, the better". (PPS, www.pps.org/reference/grplacefeat). These facilities should function both for daily rituals (lunch time) and for more general use (a day at the park).

It should be noted that Montebello Park is a wonderful green urban space. However, from our surveys, people did not consider it part of the downtown core. It remains a prime location for recreational facilities such as a public ice rink (as has been discussed by the city) or basketball court, or as the site of public events. However, its location is not easily accessible to those working in the core who may not have enough time to get to the park, enjoy its amenities, and then get back to work. Development here would also draw people away from the core businesses.

Creating a vibrant public space in the core can be done with smaller projects that currently fit with the current configuration of St. Catharines'

downtown and are in keeping with the 2012 Downtown Urban Design Guidelines for the City of St. Catharines. The goal should be to create an inviting space where, not only do workers come to spend their coffee and lunch breaks, but also where individuals and families mingle. With this in mind:

1. **Install more benches where people can sit, relax and "people watch".**
2. **Invest in a water feature in the city hall/market square area. Ideally, it could convert to a rink in the winter.**
3. **Add tables to the market square area and an outdoor chess set and a basketball court.**
4. **Landscaping, artwork (such as outdoor sculptures) and creative lighting all make for a more inviting downtown area.**
5. **Arrange for free family-friendly outdoor entertainment in this area during the spring/summer months such as licensed buskers, concerts, movies, and have the space available for local groups to hold festivals and other events**

These are recommendations that can be easily implemented using the space currently available. However, a grander long-term vision may consider the following:

6. **Ultimately, this policy brief would recommend a grander vision which would see the eventual permanent use of James Street between Church and King streets as a pedestrian walkway. This would tie in the library courtyard with the market square and town hall, creating a central vibrant downtown space for residents, workers, and customers/clients to frequent.**

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