

# Revitalizing the American Downtown

ANDREW PAYNE

Savannah College of Art and Design

LEE DINWIDDIE

Savannah College of Art and Design



Figure 1. Main Street expansion in Franklin, Kentucky with the courthouse clock tower beyond. (Dinwiddie, 2010.)

The objectives of this paper are to put in motion a practical application of re-growth and, specifically, recentralization in America's downtown districts. This thesis will provide a model for similar urban areas that exist and are without the leadership and foresight to solve the continuing problems of an over-extended city.

This will apply to a range of independent small cities that need a resurgence of population, revenue,

and sales in the central core. The thesis will specifically include those cities that expanded quickly with a growing industry but have since struggled to establish order and find a use for even the densest blocks of the downtown area.

This paper will review a case study that was conducted for the city of Franklin in south-central Kentucky—a county, city, and downtown that is not unlike many other suburban-stricken districts across America. This report will allude to detailed analysis and solutions that were provided to Franklin as a means to describe both the problems and the potential of America's struggling downtown districts.

## Project Statement and Definition

This paper explains the process of investigating the viability of the small-scale city center of Franklin, Kentucky that is currently suffering as the community expands. The paper will express the long process that could re-establish the downtown area as an economically viable social setting. While there are many various reasons to save the American downtown, this paper is most concerned with the long term economical benefits and the resurrection of a community-based lifestyle. The research and design process for Franklin manifested a process that could be applied to the multitude of cities with similar struggles.

## General Problems

Since its beginning, the American city center has always housed a changing population. Economic growth and the opportunity for success always

bring people into these dense urban areas, while expense, overpopulation, and unfavorable conditions will later drive them back to the fringe. This cycle, led by the people and chased by the municipality, not only creates an irregular tax base but it also yields tomorrow's suburban blight.

Capitalists, however, are the most intrinsic pursuant of this moving population—quick to set up shop and quick to elude the blight. Thus along with suburban housing, we immediately experience the development of business and shopping in the ripest of fringe regions.

This is especially pertinent with the continuing economic conditions because we now experience a ne-

cessity of reconfiguration that is both enlightening and intimidating. We are living in the environment that our skewed and often extemporaneous post-war motifs created. The suburbs that were once affordable, pleasant family locations are now unstable investments.

We're also realizing that, as our cash flows contract, we have few or no affordable, socially pleasing options in our immediate radius. We've driven out community and public functionality to make way for commerce and convenience. The renaissance on the horizon will be one of affordable recreation, local commerce, and interdependence within a smaller radius.

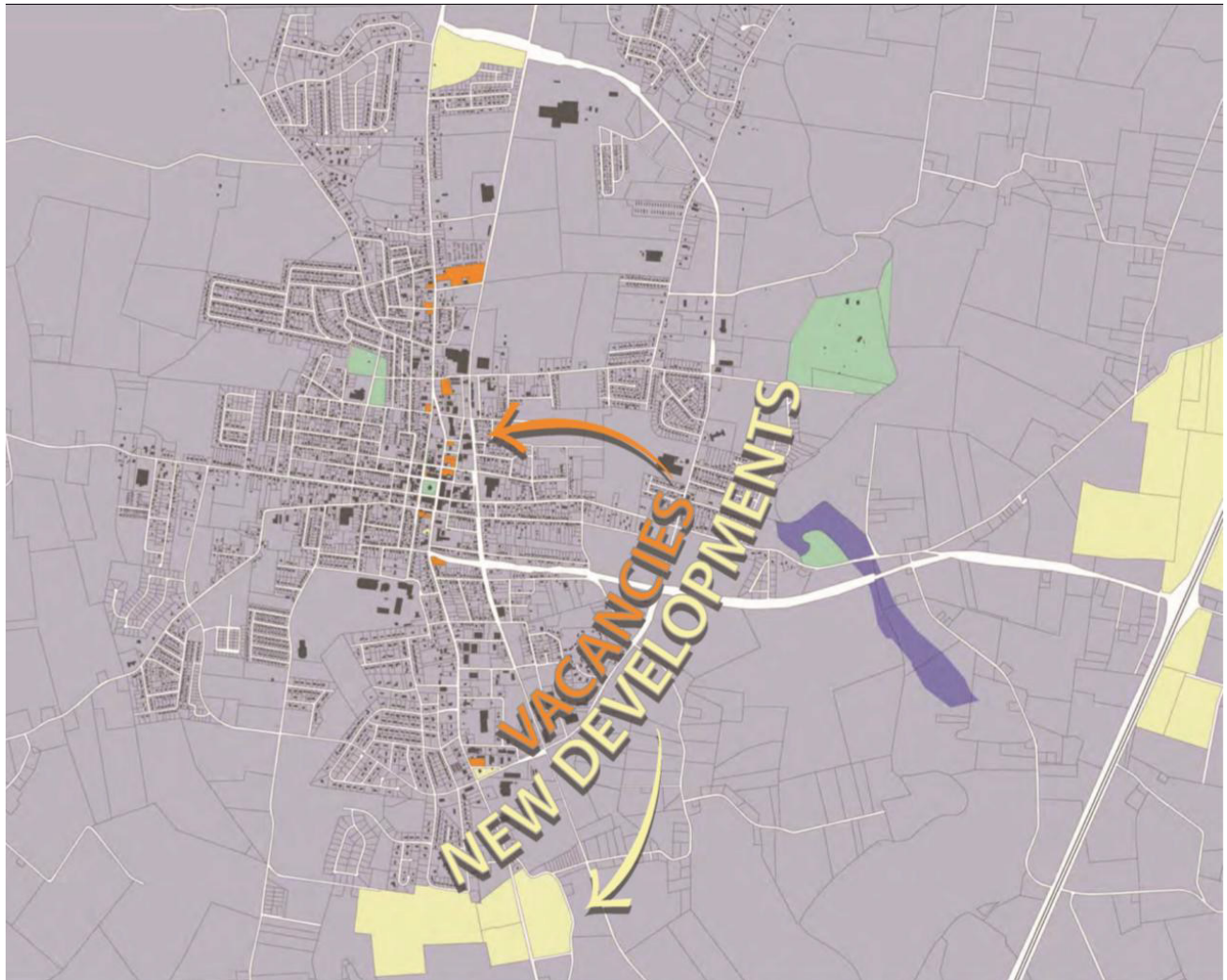


Figure 2. Franklin, Kentucky with building footprints and current building trends. (Dinwiddie, 2010.)

The target area, “downtown,” contains buildings that are dated, vacant, and less appealing to tenants than spaces located along the urban fringe. The urban fringe in Franklin is comprised of arbitrary clusters of white box commercial spaces and neighborhoods that spring up wherever land is most affordable.

The urban fringe is generated by a number of subdivisions have become increasingly popular. We’ve also seen the decline of local markets and civic spaces that were once supported by communities of all sizes. Also contributing is the relocation of America’s commercial spaces; small businesses have left their downtown location for a space that is built quickly and efficiently on a lot large enough for their own parking spaces.

These spaces along with new industrial facilities have created a circular pattern of growth away from the city center with each new development leapfrogging the next.

Random suburban areas of cities are becoming very densely populated and are wreaking havoc on various infrastructures. This trend is detrimental to the city government that already operates so close to the margin. These factors have continued to stretch the membrane of the city core to extents that are counterproductive to growth.

Thus these premature suburbs are counterproductive twofold: on their own frontier and to their native community. Financially, they hurt the overall setting by spreading the same tax dollars over a greater annexed area and by instilling a throw-away mentality that we see in abandoned big box stores that struggle to find new tenants. This blight and a lack of foresight create a short-lived suburban community that is less than desirable.

### **THE ARCHITECT**

The architect is the most suitable because of his understanding of the comprehensive urban environment balanced with his attention to detail—but most importantly how each of these are rooted in his instinctive allegiance to the end user.

What Franklin and so many other cities need is a realistic plan with realistic solutions—solutions based on urban principles, architectural know-

how, and a heavy consideration to the economics of downtown business. These professional services are often hard to come by for a small town budget, but active research and architects within our local government can certainly contribute.

### **Mission**

With so many urban master plans being proposed each year, one must begin to wonder where they begin and where they end. Ironically, planners cannot sell a vision without first determining the end. One should continually ask, “what’s the goal here?” This could be as vague as a catchphrase or as simple as the ever popular need to fill vacancies.

It will be the duty of the designer to walk the fine line that balances respectful style with a utilitarian nature—after all, these were the original parameters of what are now nostalgic landmarks. Architects will also be called upon to cater to the small town conveniences in a denser downtown setting—a pursuit that will require great amounts of research and innovation.

### **Objectives**

The first variable that must be determined is: how much activity should be centralized in the city center? While this isn’t immediately known, one must realize that every city presents a unique circumstance for revitalization or (in some cases) reconfiguration.

Many clichés come into play here—some are fundamental urban design goals and some simply make sense. For example, much of Franklin’s agrarian and industrial commerce lies outside the downtown area; this juxtaposition works well for Franklin and most every city in the region. However, the implied formula of encouraging residence lofts above street level businesses within historic buildings is not yet successful in downtown Franklin. This is often an immediate proposal, but the fact is that many housing markets are too saturated to offset the initial investment that these spaces require.

Basic urban practices show us that the downtown scene is a great place to mix modern themes with existing character to make the city intriguing for visitors and welcoming to locals. The downtown area should be equally appealing to business ten-



Figure 3. Downtown investments that are vacant years later. (Dinwiddie, 2010.)

ants as it is to the public. Ambitiously, we would design these downtown spaces for the charming local businesses and the stable franchise chains.

But before we begin to compose a solution, we must determine what the extent of this specific project might be; we need a target scale, density, and boundary to improve Franklin's central business district. Cities must be prepared with long-term goals to decide which changes are best. Thus we conduct extensive urban analyses and study demographics to later arrive at a master plan.

### Urban Understanding

Establishing goals and identifying the problems that stand in the way are the earliest steps. For Franklin, the problems can be interpreted a number of ways, but one dilemma is clear and it will be the architect's role to find a solution before it's too late.

Franklin's downtown development authorities are continually challenged to provide amenities comparable to suburban developments in a restrained historic space. Small cities, like Franklin, are perhaps the most challenged as they try to provide urban amenities within a smaller sect and on a smaller budget.

Furthermore, small city development cannot be planned on the precedents of the American metropolis. "There is a distinctive difference in the forces that shape these small cities versus those of the large urban centers or their suburbs." Michael Burayidi further states that "we know very little about the pattern of economic activity shifts in free standing small urban areas..." (Burayidi, 28.) The move to the fringe of these areas has caused a decentralization and disinvestment in the downtown area. Small city markets cannot fill the new fringe spaces and the established downtown vacancies as well. The ripple effect is that the city government struggles to provide supporting infrastructure to newly-incorporated areas. The cost of amenities exceeds city revenue and further limits the ability of the struggling city.

The great difference here from the metropolis setting is that land is more readily available in the small city. When a vacancy is created in a large city, the demand for the space makes it viable for reuse (because there are few opportunities for new construction.) Small cities do not have the luxury of concentrated spaces or various districts for an urban categorization. The unique qualities of the small city, its history, and its future growth make this paper very timely and broadly applicable.

Architects have a serious role to play in the development and redevelopment of city centers across America as we attempt to merge aging, unsystematic developments and the confusion they cause. The voids the Baby Boomers are leaving in suburban developments are creating a unique problem that needs a predetermined plan. Designers need to intervene in city commissions and fix instead of *expand* America's existing suburbs. In time, designers will undoubtedly sacrifice the tabula rasa we've come to take for granted. The coming generations will otherwise witness entire subdivisions and strip malls fail into depressed slums and terminal abandonment.

### STRATEGIES

The strategy will synchronize short term and long term goals that will attempt to revitalize the most viable areas first. This will create a draw that will justify the development costs of what are now impractical projects. Such a strategy would also seek to limit the supply of newly annexed spaces as the



downtown becomes lucrative; this would keep the demand for future vacancies high and keep the district from over-expanding. Potentially the best solution will be to establish a downtown district and subsequent bookend developments that will serve as density placeholders.

The theory here is a hybrid development that begins outward and moves into the most central blocks—in Franklin's case it's the courthouse square. New construction could replace vacant lots and insufficient buildings just beyond these central historic blocks, keeping in mind the downtown language and character of the city. The economy these spaces create would then make the existing spaces a lucrative investment as the demand for spaces moved to the central points of the city. The result would be a tightly knit economy whose adjacencies benefit one another in lower overhead, increased customer traffic, and the aesthetics of a civic-controlled landscape.

Such margins will help centralize activity and limit the sprawl of commercial spaces into residential neighborhoods. In many cases, historic districts can be created to protect the nearest downtown residences from expansion. Historic districts can also warrant the allocation of resources to improve streets and make living downtown more attractive. Most importantly the strategy will need to be governed with an understanding that the best growth will happen at an incremental rate. Frequent reflection on individual developments can often disseminate a need for alterations in the master plan.

This strategy will preserve the context and the language of the area while incorporating modern ideals that will promote activity. This will keep the surroundings familiar while encouraging dynamics that endorse longevity.

### **Theoretical Justifications**

Too often, we mistake a simple boom in the economy for city growth, and when the economy levels out we realize the city is over exerted. The long term effects of over-expansion are catastrophic to American cities of all sizes. There are few economies that can sustain the long term effects of non-interventionist suburbia. Larger cities such as Detroit, Baltimore, and Buffalo have become recent examples of the shrinking city syndrome.

Cities benefit from centralized developments in many ways. These districts provide the city with income, a distinguishable character, and potential for profitable, planned expansion. Citizens can appreciate a close proximity of destinations, decreased transportation stress, affordable living, and a stronger sense of community whether they live in the downtown area or not.

Businesses, however, may have the most to gain from a centralized community. New businesses have the luxury of dense, slow moving traffic in a downtown space while established businesses can create a familiar presence in a local market. These possibilities combine to create a stronger local economy with less dependency on expansion, all while reinstating more convenient lifestyles for all transects of the population.

While this concept seems both overly simplified and wistful at the same time, it's certainly an obtainable compromise. Furthermore, it's the next big thing for an array of professionals such as: architects, designers, politicians, economists, and sociologists. These professionals are entering into an opportunity for America's downtown to rebuild community ideals from its scattered shambles along the fringe. The idea that American's have conceived about owning a home with a yard and multiple cars will be difficult to overcome, but nothing may ever aide professionals more than a housing crisis and a realization that we've lost the community that our ancestors enjoyed in the same downtown environment.

One misconception this paper is founded on is the misconception that all cities were once centrally populated and successful examples of localism. This paper, though loosely using the term "recentralization," will be applicable to those numerous downtown areas that have never been especially successful. Too often, it's assumed that "downtowns have declined from some golden age when current problems were less pronounced or even completely absent." (Ford, 23) This paper is specifically concerned with creating a communal environment that is based on the needs of today as opposed to a recreation of dated lifestyles. This "myth of decline from a golden age" becomes misplaced motivation for centralizing community activity—as needs change, the built environment must either evolve or be replaced. (Ford, 23)

Alongside this argument, “the big design and development project of the next 50 years is going to be retrofitting suburbia.” (Jones, 2010) The return to America’s downtown spaces is the first step to repairing our suburban communities. Without a viable core, the adjacent suburban spaces are not worth the investments of subsequent generations. Until the core is both popular and profitable, it will remain financially beneficial for developers to claim green parcels and lure the consumer further along the horizon.

### Theoretical Strategies

Creating an architectural language that is pleasing and cost effective will be imperative as the preliminary spaces must rival their suburban counterpart’s most appealing qualities. This is not to say that the upcoming design trend is going to revolve around an urban-suburban rivalry. In order to entice the initial crowds downtown, designers must find something that the suburbs don’t offer—or introduce a function that is better than the suburban compliment. The user is not likely to choose the downtown market over the neighboring Wal-Mart for the simple sake of buying local. The previous generations chose Wal-Mart over their fundamental neighborhood merchants; it’s not likely that today’s generation will choose an up-start retailer for those same principles either.

Following this initial draw to the downtown area, we can “redirect a lot more of our growth back into existing communities that could use a boost and have the infrastructure in place.” (Jones, 2010) The suburbs will experience a much needed re-inhabitation of vacancies and thus subsequent developments

among second generation tenants toward the fringe. The grand scheme would be one that periodically returns new developments to the core and extends to the fringe, rehabilitating and replacing the least successful spaces with modern programs.

The most successful implementations will find that, for all parties involved, the metaphysical facets of the downtown region are enriching and outshine suburban public spaces. Effectively, we would create a downtown that finds a draw in the same reason that created the suburbs generations ago: a better way of life.

The suburban resident is becoming restless and citizens of all ages are missing the solidarity that previous generations enjoyed. We continually see more neglected spaces in our downtown areas, and we experience daily the hardships of basic transit through suburban mazes.

The neglect that small cities have suffered from is creating a desire to return community ideals to their scattered developments. This proposed care and attention to the small city is all coddled in what John Nolen calls “the new civic spirit” as he opens *New Towns for Old*. (Nolen, 8) He goes on to describe this spirit and the realization that town planning is everyone’s concern as a “civic awakening.” (Nolen, 10) Nolen states that “the form of this civic awakening that is most significant and promising is the recognition of the need of comprehensive planning and re-planning, especially of the smaller cities.” (Nolen, 11)

The execution of such planning will be a movement, both public and private, that will seek to maximize



Figure 4. Panorama of downtown Franklin including courthouse square and adjacent blocks. (Dinwiddie, 2010.)

the comforts of community while capturing a modern lifestyle in a scale more comfortable than the metropolis setting.

### OBJECTIVES AND APPLICATIONS

Specifically, Franklin finds similar frustration in a variety of areas: industrial areas that aren't easily accessed, neighborhoods coexisting with access routes, and secluded public areas.

Some of these initial developments may have been directly linked to the indigenous downtown area, but suburbia has gradually grown into what feels like a lawless disorder. While suburban developments can become very successful communities, too often they lack the basic elements a true community needs.

Ideally, we would begin with a comprehension of the tendencies of small city centers and use this to develop a discretionary language, open for interpretation nationwide. However, American downtowns are a relatively new study—especially those of quaint proportions, and we don't have the luxury of public spaces that are densely populated by nature. "We don't have thousand-year-old cathedral plazas and market squares of older cultures" (Kunstler, 2004) so we rely on our ability to attract users to the sidewalks and parks with something recreational. Theaters, retail, and restaurants are the most common but sometimes we employ the essential: drugstores, courthouses, and groceries.

Moreover, these few sidewalks and urban parks are the rare opportunities we have to define (and redefine) the urban space. This is not too dissimilar to the plazas and sculptures that made 1960's plazas in the metropolis landscape, but the object here is to create an appeal more so than to please the existing users.

### Process overview

Urban analysis and site selection make up the bulk of the urban renewal process. Site selection is a practice that is rooted in many different theories and too often is the achilles heel of a project. It's difficult for designers to find a site within a context they're not familiar with, especially in a reasonable amount of time.

A site that looks great on paper can very easily be met with public opposition and cripple the entire urban development. This project used a balance of statistical data and subjective observations to analyze the downtown area in three phases: overall in its boundaries and axis, block-by-block with building analysis, and lastly four sites were evaluated to determine the one that would serve as the best starting point for Franklin's downtown revitalization.

### Site Selection

Franklin is in need of a comprehensive urban proposal on two fronts: to slowly repair various parcels and to actively protect successful areas.

Determining which sites that an area needs to improve is simple enough, but deciding which are the most important can prove to be much more intricate. For this scenario, it should also be taken into consideration which site could provide the biggest spark for a downtown regeneration.

### Urban Transects

The site analysis should also be mindful of the importance of regulating the downtown boundary. Small town centers tend to fade quickly into adjacent neighborhoods and suburban developments. This is typically because the metaphysical downtown area lacks a specific language that is subconsciously noticed by the end user. However, this is also because smaller cities often have minimal transient zones that lie between two distinctly different neighborhoods. For example, the separation between "downtown Franklin" and the historic Cedar Street neighborhood is a corner gas station.

When planning a rebirth of a downtown district, a relative boundary should be established and designed to prevent the negligent spread of the resulting fringe into a successful downtown neighborhood.

The urban designer can try to govern future development patterns, as executed by the individual designers of city spaces. This is achieved by proposing specific variables that often lie within the limitations of the local ordinances; such opportunities might include: site access, building mass, building orientation, and spatial programming.

## Urban Inventory

This investigation should initially establish the urban inventory based on physical and metaphysical boundaries. It will then remove from the catalog of parcels and buildings those elements which are sustaining. This will include buildings and lots that are currently viable and likely to endure numerous urban changes. Historic buildings, civic entities, and churches are some of the more obvious examples of the urban preserve. From there, the process calls for an examination of elements that are in need of redevelopment and those specific areas (such as corner lots) that could be better employed to achieve a successful downtown language.

A number of factors contribute to determining viable repair opportunities: current conditions, location, surrounding properties, and the current uses of the area. These aspects will not only reflect a site that can serve as the face of this movement, but they will also yield a location that is best for the re-introduction (and the ensuing spread) of downtown activity. For Franklin, this process yielded four parcels that seemed to provide equal opportunity for re-adaptation.

## Initial Phases

After a closer review, a site that was nestled between Main Street and the College Street neighborhood was selected. It could serve as both the new face of the downtown for the passerby and as an intimate location for local residents.

As previously mentioned, the best starting point for Franklin's downtown is also a stopping point. The site that will be the epicenter of activity and development is also a bookend; acting as a placeholder, it will keep the downtown landscape from spreading into the historic neighborhoods.

Because of the nature of small downtown areas, the site is only two blocks from the central courthouse lawn. Along this axis are vacant lots and neighboring historic spaces that provide opportunity for new construction and viable renovation investments. It will do three things which are most important for Franklin's success: it will create an axis that promotes adjacent blocks, reconnect a successful downtown neighborhood to the central business district, and create an icon that portrays a unique character.

## Further Analysis

After the site is selected, the designer should look to user analysis and material studies. A proper node for recentralization seeks to employ a wide array of the population. Foremost is the population that lives within a 10-minute walk of the downtown area, but one should also understand the importance of the automobile in a sparsely populated city.

The values of the user groups are based on the likelihood that they will become frequent users of the downtown spaces. Users will range from the casual visitor to the downtown resident/employee. Creating a market for these users will not only include a vibrant downtown block but also a proposal for more-appealing neighborhoods surrounding the downtown area.

A serious consideration of the downtown neighborhoods will not only lead to more financially stable properties but also an enduring context that promotes community and emphasizes the distinct character of each respective locale.

## CONCLUSION

Successful downtown areas walk a fine line between activity and congestion, leisure and livelihood, and historical myth versus modern reality. These communities are not at all lost, and future projects will portray the potential of the lost metaphysical hub. Downtown areas (such as the one studied in this project) are prime candidates for community recentralization, definition of regional character, and the proper restructuring of a dynamic economical and social standard.

## REFERENCES

- Burayidi, Michael A. *Downtowns: Revitalizing the Centers of Small Urban Communities* (Contemporary Urban Affairs). New York: Routledge, 2001.
- Ford, Larry R. *America's New Downtowns: Revitalization or Reinvention?* (Creating the North American Landscape). Illustrated edition ed. Bal.. more: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003.
- Jones, Ellen Dunham. 2010. "Retrofitting Suburbia." [http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/ellen\\_dunham\\_jones\\_retrofitting\\_suburbia](http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/ellen_dunham_jones_retrofitting_suburbia) (accessed November 3, 2010.)
- Kunstler, James Howard. 2004. "James H. Kunstler Dissects Suburbia." [http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/james\\_howard\\_kunstler\\_dissects\\_suburbia](http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/james_howard_kunstler_dissects_suburbia)



Nolen, John, and Charles D. Warren. *New Towns For Old: Achievements In Civic Improvement In Some American Small Towns And Neighborhoods* (American Society of Landscape Architects Centennial Reprint). Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005.