



# Downtown Idea Exchange

Essential Information for Downtown Revitalization

## Perspectives

### **How colorless urban districts are being revived by imaginative citizens**

*By Richard Hill*

As a retail real estate advisor, I spend a lot of time looking at the underbelly and backside of cities instead of the preferred chamber of commerce photo ops. I find the more humble districts of a city, the ones somewhat frozen in time and often primarily abandoned and located between first ring gentrified neighborhoods and downtowns to be far more interesting. I call them the in-between zones.

Why are these dead and functionally obsolete districts relevant? My response is simple. We have moved to a knowledge economy, and its raw material is creative talent. Creative talent requires real places of communication and production. Places of creative production require two ingredients: a vibrant local, independent, creative, and entrepreneurial community, and a physical center with inexpensive real estate where this community can evolve. Nothing can be substituted for the continuing experimental flair expressed through the sensibilities of artists, craftsmen, designers, and other creative people working alongside independent shops and cafes in an open and barrier-free district.

However, these marginal zones are almost never truly supported with a real civic commitment. They are seldom re-energized with

significant investments in cultural facilities, meaningful public art, parks, circulation improvements, and other catalysts which could become the engines of an urban renaissance and community regeneration. Ironically, the typical symbols of community progress, often costing hundreds of millions of dollars, such as performing arts centers, science museums, arenas, convention hotels, and exposition halls, are located just a short distance away.

These in-between zones have not been totally forgotten and often exhibit evidence of slapdash improvement plans, poorly defined economic development initiatives, and ill-conceived marketing schemes. Accordingly, the touch of one-dimensional traffic manipulations is prevalent, with one-way streets engineered to move suburban commuters through the areas as fast as possible. Dated streetscape improvement plans, now consisting of broken scored concrete pavers, weed-filled planters, and stylized street lamps with faded banners proclaiming the name of the newly branded acronym district are all too prevalent.

All the while, civic leaders still promote a self-proclaimed notion that they govern a world-class city and put forth as proof their glistening sport venues, performance halls, and convention facilities, while failing to acknowledge that their third-world-like

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neighborhoods within a few blocks of their trophy blocks have died.

### Clusters of creative foundries

To move forward in the new economy, cities must develop clusters of creative foundries and imagination laboratories where social interaction is vital to the development of ideas. This requires ever-evolving communities of substance with cafes, art galleries, beer gardens, art parks, playhouses, theaters, craftsmen workshops, performance venues, and festivals. This type of development cannot be created in dense, high-cost, and land-constrained center cities. High-stake real estate economics are far too unforgiving.

Conversely, the in-between zones provide an unrealized economic opportunity with their wealth of former warehouses, dilapidated schools, abandoned churches, and historic homes that can be revitalized with less risky real estate strategies. Most of all, the underutilized back alley ways, the former loading docks and rear storage yards — the throwaway components of these zones — are the most fertile grounds for innovation and creativity because they have little value in their present form and thus present very few economic barriers to innovation.

It has been my observation that a creative community best evolves from a built legacy and the cultural context of architecturally compelling places that can be sculpted from repurposed buildings. Once these structures are brought back to life with vital activities, social interaction, and cultural production, a new urban narrative unfolds.

### Examples: Portland, Brooklyn, and Miami

It is the complexity of new and old with a well-worn grain that defines a real district of substance. Two examples that come to

mind are the Pearl District in Portland, OR, and the Dumbo district in Brooklyn, NY. Both were former warehouse districts serving working waterfronts. As transportation systems moved away from the water to highways the areas declined. But their authenticity retained a spirit of place that was unique and fertile for redevelopment. Their roughness, tough material qualities, and gritty complexities welcomed change by a grassroots culture of empowered citizens from all walks of life. The result is an urban fabric and aesthetic that facilitates an openness required by the industries of imagination. Today, you will find in these two examples thriving mixed-use districts of tech and design industries, commerce, and housing.

When transformations begin in these diverse districts, spontaneous exchanges occur and new ideas begin to mix, resulting in a new energy that drives innovation and creativity. Perhaps the best example is the Miami Design District in Miami, FL, which has gone through a couple of transformations over the past decades and is now amidst its most dramatic change, which is resulting in a quality of place that could never be created in an urban shopping Galleria or districts around a new convention center, arena, or performing arts center. International cultures, art, design, and fashion are mingling in the Design District. New shops are opening, restaurants thriving, and people are moving into an area once considered to be crime infested to form an entirely new cultural marketplace filled with promise for an entire city.

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