

Best Practices to Achieve Vibrant Main Streets

by Dan Burden

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hat makes a main street so captivating, so vibrant that people are repeatedly drawn to it? Much of my life has been spent trying to discover the answer to this question. Having photographed more than 2,400 towns, villages, and cities—focusing on the identity, character, center, edges, mixes, and pulse of each place’s main street—I have developed a sense of what works and what doesn’t.

Mainly, I’ve learned that a complex set of ingredients is woven throughout all flourishing main streets. Whether I’m strolling along “The Greatest Walk on Earth” called Las Ramblas in Barcelona, Spain, or any main street in the United States, it’s obvious that they have several best practices in common.

This wasn’t by chance. These rules of the road lay the foundation for successful, energetic main streets. Here are some of the best practices I have discovered thus far.

Visionary leadership is required. With a leader in place, the focus can turn to creating a vibrant main street. Just as great books are written by great authors, compelling main streets are products of compelling leaders. Without that visionary—a person willing to take bold steps—an idea will remain simply a figment of someone’s imagination.

But with a forward-thinking, engaging, business-oriented, passionate pioneer, that concept can come to fruition. Española Way in South Beach Miami is a perfect example of the difference one leader can make. Developer and entrepreneur Linda Polansky purchased the initial land and set out to create a world-renowned main street.

At first, the city didn't support her plan. But she persevered, overcoming hurdle after hurdle. As the story goes, the city tried repeatedly to shut her down. In fact, the situation got so bad that the U.S. Supreme Court ended up hearing her case and subsequently ruling in her favor.

Polansky is an example of a leader who had a vision. Thanks to her dedication and resolve, South Beach today is an international destination. Her part was an essential early achievement that eventually brought international recognition for South Beach.

Main streets are like magnets. Walking along Las Ramblas, one can frequent the many shops, street vendors, and restaurants, and observe the human statues, musicians, jugglers, and other performers. This 1.2-kilometer hub of Barcelona is regarded as one of the world's preeminent main streets. But what makes it so appealing that people keep coming back again and again?

Aesthetically, people are drawn to the street's color, along with its richness and its complexity. Structurally, the street is partially tree lined and framed by a variety of colorful five- to seven-story buildings diverse in architecture. Thanks to the pedestrian-oriented design with a 60-foot central walkway and sidewalks less than 10-feet wide, plus trees separating cars from walkers, there is never a shortage of "people traffic."

Despite the high level of activity on this street, it's not intimidating. That's due in part to the synergy of building height, street width, landscaping and overall scale of design. This street is a model of what any great walking place strives to be.

Having walked Las Ramblas dozens of times, I continue to feel a sense of excitement as I peruse the thoroughfare. That's because the strongest main streets are multilayered, offering a variety of adventures. Whether it's for their first or their hundredth walk, undiscovered nuances continue to lure people back.

Depth, character attract visitors to main streets. Yogi Berra once said, "Nobody goes there anymore;



Both of these photos show the same sidewalk on Colorado Boulevard where the annual Rose Parade is held; however, they are on different blocks. The one that is bustling is located in the historic Old Town section of Pasadena, California, and the other one is further up the street in Pasadena.

it's too crowded." On the contrary, place-making studies have shown just the opposite. The collection of people—shoppers, diners, tourists, explorers, and wanderers—creates an energetic destination that visitors want to experience.

The question is: what design strategies should planners implement to attract people to main streets?

Offer diverse options. Looking at the two photos on this page taken just outside Old Pasadena, California, you can see clearly that only one setting is thriving with the hustle and bustle of a successful main street, while the other is sluggish. The street and sidewalk dimensions are basically the same. The differences can be found in the depth of the design—in the variety of stores, restaurants, and entertainment—and the frequency of building entrances. Those details make one street livelier than the other.

A structurally well-designed street

can appear dull if it lacks depth and variety in the design. In this example, there are not enough store fronts to entice shoppers, and too many commercial office buildings interrupt the street's flow. Despite a downtown mall anchoring the corridor, people don't linger on this street. Instead, visitors complete their tasks, get in their cars, and drive off. Unfortunately, it takes only a few planning mistakes to eliminate depth, thus robbing a block or street of its energy and vitality.

Break some rules. What makes a quality main street? Generally, we look for ample green space and distinctive adornments; however, those aren't the only attributes of quality main streets. In fact, I've enjoyed main streets that lacked such traditional features as historical elements, unique buildings, substantial green space, or good plazas.

That's what makes every main street different. Rather than copying

2008 Annual Conference: Back to Basics

In so many places, it's rare for people to walk when they go out on an errand or meet a friend for lunch. Typical routines of daily life depend on driving because walking, even when it's safe, is so often impractical, inconvenient, or unpleasant.

But many local government managers are putting their communities on a path to change. Pedestrian-friendly design is fast becoming an essential quality-of-life feature as communities try to adapt to an aging population, rising rates of obesity, growing fatigue with traffic, and rising gas prices.

The champions of walkability tout its economic development benefits as well as its importance to public health and environmental protection. The challenge is trying to achieve it in diverse settings, particularly in existing communities where the majority of development occurred at a time when planning and decision making focused on moving cars as quickly and efficiently as possible. The question for cities, counties, suburbs, and small towns is: What are the core elements of walkability that are equally critical—whether the goal is to retrofit an older neighborhood or build a new one?

To explore the answers, ICMA is hosting an interactive workshop titled "Walkable Communities – Building Prosperity by Getting Back to Basics" at its 2008 Annual Conference in Richmond, Virginia. The workshop will be led by conference presenter and *PM* author Dan Burden.

Burden will be joined by Glatting Jackson colleague Edward Erfurt, a senior urban designer, and Harrison Rue, who recently joined the consulting firm ICF International, Inc., as a principal focused on integrated transportation and land-use planning, smart growth, and climate change.

The workshop will cover the gamut of features that make getting around a place on foot or by bicycle easy and pleasant. Participants will also hear about walkability in a variety of settings, from a revitalized downtown historic district to a new community in the suburbs where a two-car (or even three-car) garage has long been considered a must-have.

The workshop will include a walkability audit, during which participants will visit a Richmond neighborhood and review its walking conditions, as well as a box lunch and small-group reviews of actual development plans to assess their strengths and weaknesses on walkability.

Attendance is limited, and participants must pre-register for the workshop, to be held Sunday, September 21, from 8:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. For more information, contact Christine Shenot at ICMA; e-mail, cshenot@icma.org.

a successful project, understand the local climate, terrain, and other contextual influences that should dictate the main street's design.

Holland, Michigan's main street illustrates the benefits of rule breaking. Almost all successful main streets are two-lane, two-way streets; however, planners in Holland created a set of parallel streets to carry part of the traffic load.

As a result, the main street was converted from four lanes down to just one with angled parking. This

shift maximizes the street's pedestrian capacity, and the parking provides a buffer between traffic and shoppers.

Likewise, Las Ramblas breaks traditional rules. The pedestrian walkway is situated between a two-lane, one-way road on one side and a one-lane, one-way road on the other.

Think creatively. Whether planners opt for pavers, creatively placed street furniture, green edges, a sense of enclosure, or a sense of security, the best main streets balance scale,

diversity, and complexity. The result? Character.

The strongest urban places take on a character of their own. For some, like Chicago's Michigan Avenue, this personality stems from a constant state of freshness, elegance, and charisma. Meanwhile, such other main streets as Duval Street, Earnest Hemingway's favorite in Key West, Florida, offers a comfortable and homey yet edgy atmosphere.

One noteworthy point: creativity enhances character. Planners must make a conscious effort to think outside the box. When transportation and community planners solely focus on the math—designing a street and its buildings to exact proportions—originality is almost nonexistent.

Instead of producing exceptional main streets, such linear thinking forces planners to design to the lowest common denominator. As a result, places look cookie cutter and boring.

Don't underestimate the value of artistry. Instead of placing so much emphasis on numbers, planners and designers need to spend more time thinking about artistry. For example, consider the interplay of light, shadows, textures, colors.

Throughout architect Antonio Gaudi's famous Block of Discord, along Barcelona's Avenue Diagonal, buildings with contrasting architecture seem to interact with elegant streetlamps, mature trees, decorated balconies, and colorful facades of drug stores and eateries. Such an artistic and innovative approach can strengthen a block's persona.

INFRASTRUCTURE KEY TO MAIN STREET SUCCESS

For any destination to be successful, it must be easy to find. For main streets, that translates into a strong infrastructure with adequate signage, accessible streets, and ample parking. People shouldn't just stumble upon a main street; they should be drawn there by smart design, with streets leading guests from every direction.

Upon arrival, parking—whether on side streets, in the rear, or in

garages—should be hassle-free. Santa Barbara's State Street has no parking on the shopping street but plenty of surface lots and garages to the rear. The backs of buildings watch over these spaces, providing double-entry doors.

Streets take on greater comfort when street "furniture" coordinates with the style, color, and character of buildings. East Aurora, New York, incorporates its reputation as the home of the arts and crafts movement into its main street with well-placed, meticulously crafted wooden litter cans, colorful fire hydrants, and other works of art. Wayfinding signage and iconic buildings also provide a sense of comfort and welcome.

Frequently, people think too much or too little traffic can impede a main street's success. In fact, both views are inaccurate. There are countless examples of flourishing main streets with little automobile traffic.

Madison, Wisconsin's State Street, for example, sees little or no auto-

mobile traffic. Yet this pedestrian-friendly, transit-focused core seems to always be packed with people and bustling with life.

On the other end of the spectrum, bustling Granville Street at Broadway in Vancouver, British Columbia, is choked with buses and cars many hours a day, yet people relax here and the stores thrive. Somewhere in the middle, Bozeman, Montana, and Carmel-by-the-Sea, California, both offer cozy main streets that lure people back.

In each of these examples, it is not how low or high the traffic volumes are but how well traffic adjusts and learns to behave in order to complement great street and great building design.

ROAD TO VIBRANT MAIN STREETS

No two main streets are identical. Although many similar planning principles are incorporated, each street acquires its distinct personal-

ity. To achieve such vitality and success, planners and designers followed generally accepted best practices, but they weren't afraid to take risks.

No matter where in the world you are, though, one thing remains true: dynamic main streets provide a community with energy and excitement.

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