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Lessons from Downtown San Jose

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My involvement with San Jose's downtown planning and architecture began in about 1980 with SOM's work on the Silicon Valley Financial Center, and it has continued on and off to this day.

In light of all that has happened, it is interesting to remember that within our team for that early project the most fundamental debate was how "urban" this place should be. Some team members argued for a more suburban feel to the downtown. Their view was of a retail mall, smaller but in the same manner as San Diego's Horton Plaza, broad landscape setbacks between new buildings and streets, and complete acceptance of the car as the primary means of transportation.

The aspirations of the Redevelopment Agency and SOM were quite the opposite. To create the strongest possible sense of place, we wanted downtown San Jose to be urban and in every way different from its surroundings. Yet, to respond to the comfortable climate, we also proposed making downtown uniquely green, with a significant number of street trees, landscaped courtyards, and paseos. As our planning work was concluding, I had the good sense to introduce my old friend and colleague Tom Aidala to Frank Taylor, who was just then beginning his tenure as San Jose Redevelopment Agency Director.

Reflecting back on this experience, it is clear to me how unique and valuable the study of urban revitalization presented in these pages is. In the case of San Jose, one has the opportunity to consider a place where every conceivable incentive has been applied to make a revitalized downtown attractive, diverse, and both economically and environmentally successful. Here, one might say, it is possible to finally discover what works and what doesn't.

The plan for San Jose has also followed the "ideal" mixed-use model for downtown districts. According to this model, a downtown should contain a balance of open spaces and residential, retail/entertainment, cultural, civic, office, and visitor-serving uses, organized into a compact, walkable area so as to maximize amenity, convenience, and economic strength. In the case of San Jose, the means for achieving this model have also followed best-practice principles. This has involved the use of Redevelopment Agency powers to provide incentives, including infrastructure, public facilities, an attractive landscape, and direct financial support to desired private development investments.

With a clear vision, talented leadership, political support — and best of all, the money to back it up — the result has been an extraordinary public realm. In my experience with downtowns throughout the world, I've never seen a comparable situation or such a comprehensively realized outcome. So why, one may reasonably ask, haven't

developers been breaking down the door? Why, after twenty years of intense public effort, in one of the most successful economic environments in the world, is downtown San Jose still struggling to find willing and eager investors?

One answer, it occurs to me, must surely involve the applicability of the ideal model, itself. To show what I mean, let me take a brief detour through two elements of the model and our experience with them in San Jose.

Office Use

It is not easy to build office buildings in downtown San Jose. The city wants density, and yet the nearby international airport puts a severe limit on building height — approximately 16 to 25 floors, depending on location. At the same time, a high water table limits how deep you can go below ground to three levels, and a high parking program is necessary to compete in the regional market place. With every thousand square feet of office space requiring three parking spaces, you must build almost as much area for cars as for people. Dallas and Houston build to these parking ratios, but they have no height limit and no comparable urbanistic aspirations.

We have found these constraints dictate a typical building that is a kind of mixed-use sandwich: three levels of parking below grade; lobbies, shops and services at ground level; five floors of parking above; and finally eleven floors of office — for a total of seventeen floors above grade. Design guidelines appropriately require architectural treatment to conceal the parking floors from public view. For the architect, it is difficult to make such buildings appear graceful.

There are other difficulties facing office buildings in downtown San Jose. From a financial viewpoint, while a downtown location offers unique amenities to workers, these must be weighed against development problems that add an increment of cost and effort. And when compared to other siting options in the region, downtown has strong competition.

Finally, while there is nothing inherently wrong with a low-profile, flat skyline, we know it does not appeal to some developers. They firmly believe corporate America is most attracted to tall, high-image office buildings, and they have a clear record of looking elsewhere for investment opportunities.

Retail Use

As the articles in this issue clearly indicate, retail and entertainment uses also have been difficult to attract and sustain in downtown San Jose. One would not think this

possible given the success of urban “village” main streets in many of the smaller cities nearby, the many new shopping malls within the city, or, most importantly, the growing population of residents, workers, and students within the downtown itself.

For example, Palo Alto’s central, main street area is a good urban place. It has pedestrian scale and interesting one- and two-story buildings. It is also easy to get to, and you can park near your destination. But at this low density, parking is easily provided in small, distributed lots or on the street. To provide a comparable experience in downtown San Jose requires the construction of parking structures, which cost more and seem less convenient. Existing large-scale retail and entertainment centers do not require parking structures, and they also provide stiff competition for new retail development.

Such difficulties in attracting retail have a ripple effect. In particular, they reduce the sense of community and livability. After dark the streets are still empty, and residents of San Jose’s award-winning new residential projects still feel like pioneers.

The Mixed-Use Model

One must consider these problems in relation to the “ideal” of a good downtown. San Jose has renewed its civic center (with the pending completion of its new city hall), its cultural attractions, its visitor services, and its open spaces. But it has had more trouble attracting retail, entertainment, and office uses. Perhaps the fact San Jose has been only partially successful in achieving the mixed-use ideal has more to tell us about the ideal than San Jose.

What I would like to suggest is that it is inherently more difficult to create mixed-use downtowns at San Jose’s mid-density scale than it is at the scale of truly high density, transit-served downtowns like San Francisco and Boston, or low-density “village” centers like Palo Alto. There are many examples today of good urbanism at the extremes of high and low density. But at mid-level densities, where the car must be accommodated and there is strong market competition from surrounding suburban areas, the mixed-use ideal has had problems.

Most mid-density downtowns only partially realize the ideal mixed-use model. For example, downtown Oakland is weak in shopping and housing uses; downtown Sacramento is weak in shopping, entertainment, and housing uses. Interestingly, downtown San Diego is weak in office and cultural uses, but strong in shopping, entertainment,



and housing. But shopping is strong in San Diego because Horton Plaza is bigger than nearby retail competition, and it exists because it was a virtual gift to the city by its developer to stimulate downtown renewal. By contrast, downtown Los Angeles is weak (for its size) in destination shopping, office, housing, and visitor services, but it is extremely strong in specialty retail serving a citywide Hispanic community. All of these downtowns have limitations similar to San Jose.

The Special-Role Downtown

Is it possible to realize the ideal mixed-use model when the downtown is surrounded by strong competitive commercial development? Perhaps these downtowns will always have a slightly more specialized role that is defined by uses that are not otherwise provided in the vicinity. For example, the common core of “the special-role downtown” might be civic, cultural, and visitor-service uses. These uses are most often provided and supported by public funding. The amount and type of other downtown uses, shopping, entertainment, housing and office would be based on their ability to compete with outside forces.

If the “special-role downtown” could be made an acceptable public goal, think how much grief and wasted effort could be avoided. The city of Oakland struggled for twenty years to attract major downtown retail, which never materialized. This was done at tremendous cost, and at the expense of addressing other opportunities and public needs that could have been realized.

Downtowns can be made in suburban metropolitan areas. They are just different. We can and should define mid-density downtowns as the civic and cultural hearts of their regions. Thus, downtown San Jose is the center of the city’s public life. Today it includes government facilities, a convention center, a sports arena, three museums, music and theatrical performance spaces, and the main library — to name some of its principal assets. It is a good example of the “special-role downtown.” This, I believe, is the lesson we can learn from San Jose.

Right: Aerial view of San Jose looking north to San Francisco Bay. Downtown is at the center. Photo courtesy of SJRA.