

Downtown Marketing and Development

By Barry Cassidy

The Importance of a Sense of Place

One of the hardest things to do as a main street manager is to develop a sense of place for the town. Many times when someone is hired to revitalize a town there is really just a thought of what the town “used to be” back when it was in it’s heyday. People talk about how the crowds could not be accommodated on the sidewalk because there were so many people shopping. In most cases that perception of what it “used to be” is not relevant to what it is now.

There was a time when the downtowns were more centered toward providing goods and services to local populace in the surrounding neighborhoods, or a prime employer located near the downtown. In Lock Haven that employer was Piper Aircraft, In Downingtown it was the paper mills and in Phoenixville it was the Phoenix Steel plant. Those kinds of uses in many cases defined the downtown in the past, but they are now just a memory.

The Main Street Program advocates the use of historic restoration as a means of repositioning the downtown and creating a sense of place. Normally some town buildings have had some renovations that do not conform to the overall design and architectural influence of the town. Infill construction often complicates the situation like in Downingtown, where a Quonset hut was built in the middle of town with an odd faced front. Much of the effort is then spent to restore some of the facades back to the original to ensure a continuity of design.

The use of historic restoration in place making is an important part of the downtown revitalization effort. The Commonwealth Department of Community and Economic Development is so committed to the use of historic restoration in place making that they offer façade grants for good design through the main street programs. Identifying the opportunities is key in the revitalization process. Sometimes just trying to get the “slip covering” on the building off to access what is underneath is the biggest part of the challenge.

If the downtown has a good building stock it is a big plus and the historic restoration of the downtown helps set the stage for the next steps. Providing amenities to enable the downtown to have a continuous look is an important part of the “place making” process. In Downingtown there was a streetscape project and a couple of abandoned industrial building demolitions, on South Street it was some murals and later a streetscape, in Phoenixville it was the famous streetscape with the blue lights. In many cases the streetscape improvements can turn the perception of a town around.

One really has to be careful with a streetscape project to make sure that what you have designed will work for the community and attention must be paid to detail. When establishing a sense of place you do not want to make it look like a strip mall.

For example the lights have to be the correct height and have some semblance of historic context. One of the most important considerations is the material used for the amenities.

I always like to use cast iron for the light poles because it is more like an original material that was used from the period when most downtowns installed the original light poles. I always look down on the use of aluminum or fiberglass in light pole installations because they end up looking nasty in a couple of years. Dents, obvious cheap looking materials make it hard to create a sense of place in a downtown. There are times when a main street manager has to deal with less than adequate design professionals and try to do the right thing. There are times that the administering entity like Penn Dot has a project manager that feels everything is cookie cutter....sort of a one size fits all methodology. I call that the "homogenization of America". It creates difficult situations at times, but if a main street manager does his or her job, the necessary adjustments are made to make it look right and stand the test of time.

Amenities like benches and fountains can be added to enrich the atmosphere created by the restored buildings and the other streetscape improvements. Depending upon what kind of activity you have, installation of a bench could be a double edge sword. The same with fountains, in Phoenixville we had to explain to people that they could not bathe in the fountain. Some of the amenities eventually turn into good skateboard ramp or a good place to sleep and that alternate use sometimes leads to place making that was not in the original plans. Design elements need to be evaluated for functionality and purpose.

One of the hardest parts of place making is getting the right uses in the downtown buildings. Everyone wants retail, retail, retail but the truth is that retail comes and goes, along with the bank accounts and dreams of ambitious people. Getting the right mix of retail, that is relevant to your demographic, is important because it tends to make the store more successful in the marketplace.

Activities sometimes can define spaces although they happen intermittently. To have events aid in the place making they normally have to be standard events. Events that happen on a regular schedule add more than intermittent events. In Phoenixville the Friday night concerts during the summer tend to define the space as an arts district.

The problem is that all of these functions need to be done simultaneously and the manager needs to show vision in explaining each of the elements to those participating in the program. The people making investments in the buildings need to see public improvements, and need to see the stores moving in and need to see the people on the street. Is that hard to do? Yes, it is very hard. A downtown manager has to have a special skill set just to create the atmosphere necessary to have a successful program.