



Making The Case for Downtowns and Cores

There are many examples of efforts to make the case for better planning and implementation of downtowns and cores. Although times change, the arguments are, naturally, often quite similar. Some of these are reproduced here. Although the emphasis has changed from concerns about blight and fear about the future of the city to concern about the role of cities in an international economy, preservation of the environment, sprawl, reducing the demand for transportation and using it more efficiently, making urban opportunities more accessible, providing housing for seniors and youth and saving energy etc. Here is an example of one such a case written and published in the 1970's.¹ Many of the points are still valid today.

AN ESSENTIAL NEED: TO IMPROVE BUSINESS DISTRICTS AND COMMUNITY CENTERS¹ Rodney E. Engelen

Many people might ask why anyone other than a few property owners should care what happens to the commercial districts of a region. Unfortunately, not enough people are aware of the important roles that these centers can and do play in the social and economic life of the region. As a result, many business and community centers have been allowed to deteriorate, many are struggling for existence, and many have become liabilities instead of assets to their communities.

Business and community centers all over the region are affected. In addition to the Chicago Loop, the "granddaddy of them all," a dozen or more centers within the City of Chicago are involved. These include major concentrations of activity at such famous six-corner locations as Lincoln, Lawrence and Western; Irving Park, Milwaukee and Cicero; and Lincoln, Ashland and Belmont. They also include more recent but somewhat aging developments as those at 95th and Western and Ford City.

Older suburban centers are often even more vulnerable to obsolescence and deterioration than those in the city. Some, such as those in Oak Park and Evanston, have suffered heavily from the competition of newer developments and changing modes of transportation. However, reasonably high concentrations of population in nearby neighborhoods and good public transportation, as well as strong community support, permit these centers to be maintained and even improved.

However, downtowns in older outlying communities, such as Gary, Aurora, Elgin, or Waukegan, are highly vulnerable to competition from newer centers. Many of these older downtowns will have

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to change dramatically in function and many may actually fail to survive as true and vital community cores.

Of course, not every older center can and should be maintained or enlarged. Some are badly located to serve their market areas. Some are not well planned and cannot be transformed to meet today's needs. Strip centers are especially vulnerable. And still others have been so badly damaged by competition and change that they probably cannot be recovered. However, there are still many important functions to be played by most older downtowns and business centers. Often, the very strength and vitality of the communities in which they are located will be dependent on the degree to which these multipurpose activity centers are maintained and strengthened.

What are some of the important values and potentials that must be realized in these areas? There are many more than can be fully discussed here. Therefore, let us consider a few.

Community and Business Centers Generate Revenue

An indirect but nonetheless important value of these centers is that they are important generators of tax and other revenue for the communities within which they are located. Even though these revenues presumably could be drawn from other sites, such sites may not be available. Moreover, if older centers are allowed to decline, they will probably generate less tax revenue and demand even more in services than if they could be stabilized or improved. In any event, a declining center tends to initiate or accelerate a deterioration of values in surrounding areas. This deterioration could have a domino effect on an ever-larger ring of neighborhoods.

Strong Activity Centers Generate Conditions Significant to Quality of Life

At another level, strong activity centers can generate a number of conditions of fundamental significance to the "quality of life." The importance and value of activity centers has been described by Margaret Mead in this way:

"This value is the value of the freedom of interchange which follows unexpected routes, permits individuals to make new contacts, to maintain or break old ones, and brings together in face-to-face, multi-modal relationships, individuals of diverse temperament and vocation, the opportunity to meet and talk, to plan and confer, to argue and wonder in groups of the diversely gifted and experienced is still, in any present projection of practical technology, dependent upon a great many people being together in one place. In such centers, they can meet and part, talk formally or informally, listen to music or look at a play, together, and learn-in an interchange which is dependent upon the alert uses of all five senses-what the others think and feel, catching the half fledged dreams of other men, which would otherwise die, and giving them life." (Mead, Margaret: "Values of Urban Living." The Annals, November, 1957.)

Strong centers are needed to achieve the goals and objectives described by Miss Mead.

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The strengthening of centers could also help to achieve a number of basic national objectives, such as those cited by Congress in establishing The Urban Growth and New Community Act of 1970.

The Strengthening of Centers Could Achieve National Objectives

Specifically, the effective conservation and rejuvenation of centers could:

1. Make more efficient use of land by finding new and more intensive uses for areas that are now frequently underutilized and by reducing the erratic scattering of central functions to other areas. Almost every center contains lands that are not effectively utilized. These are sometimes occupied by unneeded streets or railroad rights-of-way, by inefficiently organized parking and service facilities, or by obsolete buildings. Every center in the Chicago region that we have studied has some land that could be used more effectively. In some instances, well over 100 acres could be assembled for new development.
2. Conserve and protect natural resources by making more effective use of already developed sites, thus reducing the need to absorb more vacant land into development and also, in some instances, restoring and enhancing naturally attractive sites. A number of centers in the Chicago region are built along rivers or in other areas with potentially attractive natural qualities. The improvement of these centers could restore and recapture some of these qualities and make them available for many people to enjoy.
3. Create greater efficiency and effectiveness in the provision of public services and facilities. Most activity centers are already well supplied with utilities and other necessary public and institutional facilities and services. In most instances, these could be used more intensively at a relatively small increased cost. Certainly, costs in this area may be less than those incurred in the extension of services to new areas.
4. Reduce the amount and cost of travel by increasing the potentials for achieving many purposes in one trip, for making more trips on foot and by increasing the feasibility and effectiveness of public transportation. It is generally much easier to organize transit, taxi, and similar public transportation services around one or more multipurpose centers than to scattered destinations.
5. Make it possible for the home building industry to help increase the supply and range of housing options by providing sites for housing for adult families, the elderly and others that are well located with respect to transportation and public and commercial services and that can be utilized with a minimum of disruption to the natural environment, and with few if any extensions to utility, street and other systems.
6. Improve employment and business opportunities in "central city" locations by increasing potentials for retail, office, and service employment in areas where people already live and which are readily accessible to established residential communities.

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7. Reduce segregation by age, race, and economic status by strengthening and stabilizing older "central area" neighborhoods and by providing opportunities for the construction of new housing in areas that are hospitable to and appropriate for a variety of housing types.

Improvement Programs Must Be Comprehensive

Certainly, the benefits to be gained through the stabilization and rebuilding of business and community centers are substantial. However, to be effective, improvement programs must be comprehensive and must provide a broad range of facilities and high standards of environmental quality. Paint-up, fix-up campaigns and minor traffic and parking improvements will seldom have an impact that is large enough to be effective.

In most instances, auto-free, pedestrian environments must be created. Ways must be found to divert through traffic to the edges of the center or to otherwise separate vehicles from pedestrian and activity centers. Priority should be given to public transportation. Where rail commuter or rapid transit stops lie within or near the center, they should become a featured aspect of the design.

The core retail facilities of each center should be strengthened through consolidation and renovation of selective enlargement. Ways should be found to add or strengthen restaurant, theatre, and entertainment facilities. Where possible, library, YMCA, and similar intensively used cultural and recreation facilities should be brought into or strongly tied to the center.

The areas surrounding centers should be carefully related to them. Where they are largely vacant and underutilized, consideration should be given to assembling parcels for redevelopment into new office, housing, or community facilities. At the very least, activities should be undertaken that will improve the environment and that will stabilize and rehabilitate structures in the area.

Even with tremendous advantages to be gained and with a reasonably clear range of actions to be taken, the rejuvenation of older centers may not be easy to achieve. Although some may need to be improved, most of the basic tools required are available.

However, relatively few communities have developed the sense of urgency and agreement that is needed to undertake an improvement program. And relatively few have the personnel and the organization required to plan and implement such a program.

The policies and capabilities of most communities are necessarily oriented to the conduct of "caretaker" functions: maintenance, repair, protection, and the review and monitoring of private activities. Somewhat different skills and attitudes are needed to achieve the kinds of improvement required. These are most commonly found in organizations of large private developers, who must, to be successful, build total environments that are attractive in all respects and that meet a wide range of human needs. The building of such environments requires an active, positive -- even aggressive -- policy and style.

¹ Engelen, Rodney E., *Need For Strong Cores...*, Chicago Association of Commerce and Industry, CHICAGOLAND DEVELOPMENT, 1970's (It should be noted that in the thirty years since this paper was written, Evanston and a number of other communities in the Chicago Area have

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undertaken programs that have been very successful in renovating and strengthening their downtowns, some with spectacular results. On the whole, Chicago suburbs have generally been exceptionally strong in this area.)

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