



## The Importance of Downtown in the 21st Century

Donovan Rypkema,  
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The former mayor of Missoula, Montana, Daniel Kemmis, (1995) writes, *"A good city ... depends not only on imaginative people taking risks in pursuit of opportunities they see in particular locations, but also on those risk takers being widely diverse in their dreams and their manner of pursuing them."* (p.161).

Downtown will also need to have a diversity of meanings. Those diverse meanings should include aspiration, civic pride, prosperity, confidence, responsibility, sustainability, and evolution.

If downtowns are to succeed in the challenge of economic globalization, they will have to be competitive not only with other cities in their region or nation but worldwide. However, their success will be measured not just by their ability to foster economic globalization, but equally in their ability to diminish and mitigate cultural globalization. For just a moment think about the World Trade Center. Now take away the capital letters-world trade center. Now turn it around-the center of world trade. That's what was attacked. Hundreds of the people who died in the World Trade Center (as many as 40% of the total) were citizens of 80 other countries. We not only accepted them in this country, we welcomed them into the economy and society of the city center.

I began this essay noting the title was The Importance of Downtown in the 21st Century and then I proceeded to write that anyone who says they know the future of downtown is a captive of their own hubris. But the future of downtown and the importance of downtown are two different things. I do not know what the future of downtown is, but here is what I am certain of:

- If we are to have an effective environmental policy, downtowns are important.
- If we are to have an effective transportation policy, downtowns are important
- If we are to have meaningful historic preservation, downtowns are important.
- If we want Smart Growth, downtowns are not only important but also irreplaceable.
- If a local official wants to claim the treasured mantle of fiscal responsibility, downtown revitalization is imperative.
- If we want to avoid Generica, downtown is essential to establish differentiation.
- If the community is going to compete in economic globalization without being swallowed by cultural globalization, downtown revitalization has to be central to the strategy.

## The Importance of the Downtown in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

- If new businesses, innovative businesses, and creative businesses are going to be fostered and encouraged, a community will need a downtown where that can take place.
- If we are to have buildings with meaning, buildings with value, buildings with values, they will be downtown.
- If we are to have public places of public expression, we need a downtown.
- If a community is going to embrace diversity instead of hide from it, celebrate diversity instead of deny it, then that has to take place downtown, it ain't gonna happen anywhere else.

In her collection of essays entitled *The Eye of the Story* the widely admired American author Eudora Welty (1990) wrote,

*"It is our describable outside that defines us, willy- nilly, to others, that may save us, or destroy us, in the world; it may be our shield against chaos, our mask against exposure; but whatever it is, the move we make in the place we live has to signify our intent and meaning."* (p. 122)

What is happening in downtown needs to signify our intent and meaning. Communities who assure that their city center is prepared for economic globalization, mitigates cultural globalization, and utilizes its diversity will be laying the groundwork to be economically competitive places in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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