



## WILL THE LIFESTYLE CENTER REPLACE TRADITIONAL DOWNTOWNS?

By Michael Stumpf

Out on the edge of town, you may notice something that, at first glance, looks a bit like a traditional downtown or neighborhood commercial district. It wasn't there a few years ago. It might be attached to an enclosed regional mall. Chances are it is surrounded by suburban housing tracts rather than walkable neighborhoods. That thing, of course, is the new retail format that most people call a lifestyle center.

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It has been over a decade since the heyday of new enclosed mall construction. That is not to say that enclosed malls have become obsolete. Most continue to be highly effective competitors in the retail marketplace.

But by the end of the 1990s, nearly all of the best regional mall locations had been developed. A shrinking number of department store chains were available to anchor new malls, while a predictable assortment of smaller uses filled the remaining spaces. Consumers were growing weary of the increasing homogeneity of the format, and this showed in sales.

Lifestyle centers were the response of developers to the changing retail landscape. At its most basic level, the lifestyle center is smaller than a regional mall and often unanchored by traditional department stores. It caters to the specialty retailers, restaurants, and service chains that continue to add new store locations. The open-air format, design and amenities, and

concentration of entertainment uses seek to create a more exciting environment to attract customers.

By most industry measures, this format has been a success. Lifestyle shoppers shop more often and spend more than visitors to traditional malls. According to the International Council of Shopping Centers (ICSC), the average number of stores shoppers entered was 2.9 at lifestyle centers versus 2.3 at conventional malls. The average retail expenditure per visit was \$75.70 at lifestyle centers versus \$73.30 at the malls. Lifestyle shoppers made 3.8 visits to their centers in a 30-day period, while mall shoppers paid 3.4 visits to their centers in the same period. These statistics speak volumes about why so many new centers wear the “lifestyle” label.

### Learning from Downtown

Developers of lifestyle centers looked to traditional downtowns as an inspiration



The pocket park (above left) in this lifestyle center takes its inspiration from parks like this one in Chillicothe, Mo., (above right) but lacks the history and unique architecture that distinguish downtowns that have developed over the years.



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*Lifestyle centers reject the enclosed mall design, featuring instead “streets” and amenities, such as fountains (above), plazas, playgrounds, and even bandstands (above right) that mimic those found in Main Street districts (right).*

in creating the new format. Buildings are often made to look like multiple storefronts that have evolved over time. Shops open directly to the sidewalk. Cars have even been introduced into the center with streets and parking. The center will usually have entertainment uses, such as theaters and fitness centers. Residential or office uses may also be incorporated into the mix.

There is perhaps some irony involved in the ascendancy of the lifestyle format. As downtowns struggled in the 1970s and '80s, they were often admonished to learn from the mall. Some even took this to an extreme, building downtown malls by enclosing streets or creating pedestrian malls. More often than not, these were spectacular failures. Now as the malls struggle, their owners are looking at downtowns for the answer to their problems, and they may have found it. But do lifestyle centers really succeed in recreating the experience of a true downtown?

Mall operators have an advantage over traditional downtowns in that, as private property, they are able to better regulate many of the issues that present challenges for downtown programs. This starts with location. A lifestyle center, as a new creation, can be located in the best place relative to population and transportation networks. Designed from scratch, it can also create a pattern of uses, circulation,

common spaces, and parking that addresses the desires of tenants and customers alike. Ownership allows it to approve or disapprove of potential tenants, determine where they can locate in the center, regulate facades and signs, and establish policies for hours of operation. Tenant fees, paid by all, go toward providing security, maintaining common areas, and promoting the center, without the need for a member-based organization or business improvement district.

All of these advantages might be on the wish list of any downtown manager. It might even seem that lifestyle centers are something of an improved version of downtown, incorporating the best of downtown design with management efficiencies. Of course, downtown advocates would argue differently.

### **Different Design, Same Shops**

While there are some very good examples of lifestyle malls as “new town centers,” the majority fall short in their design, more closely resembling the open air malls that were built until enclosed malls became the norm in the 1960s. Even the best of the



centers, though, still miss the mark in a few key areas. Despite their design appeal, lifestyle malls are filled with the same shops selling the same merchandise and the same restaurants with the same food as every other mall in America. Although safe and clean, they may also appear a bit sterile. A close look at the buildings reveals them to be large structures with tacked-on facades, rather than individual structures with their own history. In fact, it is history that is missing from the picture. A true downtown has a patina, a unique feel, a randomness that can't be duplicated.

Downtowns will not compete by trying to be like lifestyle centers, even though there are lessons to be learned from their design and management practices. Instead, downtowns will succeed based on their ability to differentiate themselves from the

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## IMITATION IS FLATTERY

By Andrew Farrell, NTCIC

The predominant trend for large-scale retail development over the past 15 years has been the creation of the “lifestyle center.” Most everyone is familiar with these centers and the concepts and strategies they use to attract customers and keep their shopping dollars on-site. These projects reject the enclosed mall scheme and instead feature walkable “streets,” water fountains, maybe a unique landscaping feature, and a green space or plaza to serve as a “village-esque” square. That square might also be anchored by a bookstore or downsized department store to enhance the experience. Sound familiar? It should, since the concepts that underpin the lifestyle center come straight out of traditional Main Street design. So the question then becomes, what are Main Street programs around the country doing to re-develop and enhance the physical assets that major retail developers around the country are spending millions of dollars to replicate? Here are a few examples:

### Downtown Park and River Walk

In 2006, Seguin, Texas, approved a bond issue to “put some polish on the city” and bring back some incredible local assets that had been in decline for years, says Main Street Director Mary Jo Filip. Funds were used to restore and renovate two public spaces downtown—the two-block Central Park and Walnut Springs Park. In Central Park, the fountain was restored, a bandstand was added, and sidewalks were repaved. Walnut Springs Park, a river walk amenity created during the Great Depression by Robert H. Hugman, who also designed the famed San Antonio River Walk, was restored by stabilizing the river bank and constructing trails, pedestrian bridges, seating, and lighting features. Wildflower areas and natural spring falls were incorporated into the design, and graphic signs describe the history and natural resources in the park.

## POSITIONING YOUR DOWNTOWN TO COMPETE

- Know what role downtown plays in the regional market.
- Determine the optimal mix of uses.
- Use the story of downtown to create an emotional bond.
- Create an urban design pattern based on the desired uses and your story.
- Build relationships among businesses, property owners, organizations, and customers.
- Build ties to strengthen surrounding neighborhoods.

homogeneous aspects of these malls. They will build on their history, promote their unique shops and restaurants, incorporate residential and employment uses, provide flexibility in design, and celebrate the quirks, scars, and oddities that have appeared over time. All of these characteristics tell a story that can be compelling, if the district tells it well. These things have an emotional appeal. People will talk of loving their downtown. How many people love the mall?

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*In Washington, Mo., the town library has been converted from a combination police station/library to a grand two-story educational center that offers people another reason to make downtown a destination.*

The results have been remarkable. Building occupancy around the Central Park is at its highest level in years, and there has been increased interest by area citizens in holding various events in the park. Downtown merchants have noticed that people are coming downtown from outside the primary trade area to enjoy the unique amenities Seguin has to offer.

“THE CONCEPTS THAT UNDERPIN THE LIFESTYLE CENTER COME STRAIGHT OUT OF TRADITIONAL MAIN STREET DESIGN.”

### Downtown Library

In Washington, Missouri, the town library was re-opened in April, 2012, after undergoing a \$4.3 million dollar renovation that converted the building from a combination police station/library to a grand, two-story educational center. The city utilized proceeds from a dedicated account funded by a special one-half cent sales tax to fund the transformation. The facility now offers the community a children’s library and garden, computer training, and meeting space for local organizations.

“It’s another reason downtown is a destination,” says Bridgette Epple, executive director of Downtown Washington, Inc., a 2012 Great American Main Street Award winner.

### Pocket Parks

In Blackstone, Virginia, the local community is beginning to enjoy a pocket park that was just completed in June, 2012. Several years after fire destroyed two downtown buildings, proceeds from a Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) were used to create an open, green space. The local Main Street program now serves as a liaison between community groups that wish to use the park and the city which owns the park.

“The Hometown Jams Concerts held in the park are already creating positive vibes,” says Lafayette Dickens, executive director of the Main Street program, Downtown Blackstone, Inc. Planned uses for the park in the near future include a gospel concert, zumba fitness classes, plays put on by the local community theater group, movie showings, and special activities at Christmas.

In Chillicothe, Missouri, the community has been enjoying a pocket park that was

completed in 2010. After three contiguous buildings were demolished in 2007 and the land donated to the local Main Street organization, the design committee started generating ideas to create an open space with a stage for the community to use. Using funds from the Missouri Downtown Revitalization and Economic Assistance program, an architecture firm took the committee’s ideas and created a blueprint for the park.

“The architect took a paper towel and sketched the plan right there, at a local BBQ restaurant,” says Crystal Narr, the director of Main Street Chillicothe.

Money to pay for the construction was raised through fund raising and park sponsorships. Today the park is used for a wide range of events, from summer concerts and school programs, to a customer appreciation event hosted by a local bank. The park has brought life back to the surrounding neighborhood streets and helped trigger the renovation of two nearby vacant buildings.

So take a look around your community. You might notice some hidden or forgotten gems that could really make a difference.

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