

THE AMERICAN HISTORIC DOWNTOWN: CHARACTERISTICS, HISTORY AND POLICY¹

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Introduction

Most towns and cities in the United States have what is considered to be an historic center, even if the historicity of the place is not officially recognized in law, but rather through community understanding. The older the municipality, the more likely the city center will be considered to be officially historic, however. Because the land that would become the United States was colonized starting on its east coast, this area contains the oldest urban areas, many of which date to the seventeenth century. The middle of the country was largely settled in the earlier part of the nineteenth century while the west coast (with a few exceptions, such as San Francisco, California and Portland, Oregon) was settled in the latter part of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Americans do not often use the phrase “historical center” and instead prefer to refer to this area as the “historic downtown”. (In some cases, such as Philadelphia, the phrase “center city” may also be used, but is the exception, rather than the rule.) Downtown is a uniquely American term coined in New York City to define the original location of Manhattan that developed in the 1600s. It was “down” because lower Manhattan could only grow “up”, or to the north (as maps are traditionally oriented); hence, “downtown” was associated with the business district while “uptown” became the word that described the affluent residential areas (Fogelson, 2003, pp. 10, 11). In the nineteenth century, the term spread across the United States and became associated with the oldest sections of American towns and cities. Downtowns have always been defined as the areas with the most commercial activity in a community, along with high degrees of density and pedestrian orientation.

American downtowns have both unique and common characteristics and challenges compared to other parts of the world. This article will address the physical and socio-cultural characteristics of historic downtowns in the United States, their decline and more recent revival, and areas of policy that impact the revitalization of these areas.

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Physical characteristics of historic American downtowns

The overall design of an historic downtown is dictated by the age of its building stock, which is representative of prevailing styles, functions, and needs of the time. Broadly speaking, American downtowns can be divided into four periods: Antebellum (about 1620 to 1865), the Gilded Age (about 1865 to 1900), early twentieth century (about 1900 to 1940), and Modern (about 1940 to 1970). In addition, the population of the community had an impact on the physical design of the downtown, with larger communities being able to afford more grand and large buildings. This brief analysis is not meant to be comprehensive, but rather will present an overview of the dominant characteristics of downtowns in the United States in order to familiarize the reader with the subject.

The Antebellum downtown



Fig 1. Downtown Bristol, Rhode Island. (Photo by author.)

Small, human-scaled buildings, often no more than two stories in height, characterize the antebellum downtown (figure 1). Building forms include both flat (parapet) roofs and gabled roofs while buildings, especially in smaller communities, may be predominantly free standing. It is very difficult to find any part of an American city or town with intact blocks of antebellum commercial buildings outside of the non-Anglo

traditions; typically, buildings from this era will be interspersed between later construction. Typical architectural styles include Georgian, Federal (Adamesque), Greek Revival, and early Italianate. The urban plan can use a regular grid, but organic Medieval street layouts are also common, such as in Boston, Massachusetts or Newport, Rhode Island.



Fig. 2. Palace of the Governors in Downtown Santa Fe, New Mexico, built in 1610. (Photo by author.)

Because the American southwest originally was part of Spain and then Mexico, many downtowns in the states of California, New Mexico, Arizona, and Texas and the commonwealth of Puerto Rico exhibit cultural traditions from these countries, which are often significantly different than Anglo-influenced traditions of antebellum downtowns from other parts of the country. Building materials are typically adobe or stone with architectural styles derived from Native American and Spanish building techniques (figure 2). A few relatively intact examples of this type of downtown exist in Santa Fe, Albuquerque, and Taos, New Mexico; Laredo, Texas; and Monterrey, California. Old San Juan, Puerto Rico, is perhaps the best-preserved example of a former Spanish colonial downtown that is now part of the United States.

The Gilded Age downtown



Fig. 3. Downtown Galena, Illinois. (Photo by author.)

The gilded age downtown represents the rise of the consumer economy and industrialism in America and reflects new ideas and trends in storefront retail (figure 3). For the first time, the ground floor of commercial buildings feature large plate glass windows in order to display goods for purchase. Buildings are often three or more stories in height and arranged, side-by-side, in dense rows. Gabled roof forms are largely absent on commercial buildings.

Ornamentation is prominent and often ostentatious, especially on high style buildings found in large American cities such as New York or Philadelphia. Representative styles include Italianate, Renaissance Revival, High Victorian Gothic, and Richardsonian Romanesque. In large cities, early skyscrapers become prominent in downtowns starting in the 1890s, but are entirely absent in most of America. Gridded streets in a regular pattern are increasingly common, except where the topography makes this layout difficult.

The early twentieth century downtown



Fig. 4. Downtown Chicago, Illinois. (Photo by author.)



Fig. 5. Downtown Kennewick, Washington. (Photo by author.)

The early twentieth century downtown manifests in dramatically different ways, depending on the size of the community. In medium to large cities, skyscrapers begin to dominate the downtown (figure 4) while smaller communities choose to construct buildings that are much lower in height (figure 5). Many smaller towns in the western half of the country feature buildings that are only one story in height with a greater emphasis on horizontal forms. Styles include Art Deco, Colonial Revival, and Art Moderne. Because of early urban planning influences, streets can be very wide and, unless topography makes it difficult, are always in a regular grid pattern.

The Modern downtown



Fig. 6. Downtown Phoenix, Arizona. (Photo by author.)

After World War II, many older buildings were demolished in American downtowns. The replacement buildings were much more massive in terms of scale and height and often abandoned storefront retail that was so prominent in earlier eras. They also reflected the Modernist-style influences pioneered by Le Corbusier and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Sometimes, as in figure 6, the replacement buildings mirrored the setback of the buildings that were demolished, but it was also very common to introduce a suburban-style aesthetic to the downtown, with large setbacks and parking lots in front of buildings. Very few downtowns were created in the post-World War

II period, so American downtowns that feature Modern era buildings and landscapes are the result of urban renewal projects.

Sociocultural characteristics of the historic downtown

There is probably no better example of what downtown represents in the American consciousness than the popular song, "Downtown", composed by Tony Hatch and sung by Petula Clark. It reached number 1 on the Billboard "Hot 100" list in 1965. Hatch was inspired to write the song after a visit to Times Square in New York City (Adam, 2007, p. 1). The lyrics describe downtown as a place filled with people and cars that excited the senses with noise, lights, movies, and music. Hatch conceptualized the American downtown during the time at which the influence of the new suburbs and sprawl were rapidly eroding the vitality of these commercial centers.

Today, Americans intuitively understand downtown to mean the commercial core of cities and towns that retains the community's oldest building stock and is associated with density, pedestrian orientation, mixed uses, and history. Conceptually, it is difficult to draw a discrete physical boundary around a downtown because there are no commonly accepted definitions of what is "downtown" and what is "not downtown".

The geographical definition of downtown therefore relies on how community stakeholders define this boundary (Birch, 2007, p. 33). As such, downtown is as much of a concept or way of thinking as it is a physical place. It is where Americans go to shop, eat, and recreate as well as live and work and is connected to community identity. Downtowns, as Michael Burayid (2001, p. 294) explains, "occupy a special place in the psyche of many Americans. These are places where colorful festivals are held and where civic activities bring the community together."

American downtowns are both romanticized and reviled. Larry Ford (2003, pp. 25-27) describes how downtowns are associated with the myth of a "golden age", roughly between 1880 and 1960, when these places had sufficiently modern infrastructure, such as paved streets, water and sewer systems, and electricity. In reality, downtowns in this period were not as clean, functional, or organized as believed and many social ills were concentrated in cities. Because of these factors, Ford focuses on three possible dates that best represent this golden era: 1910 for its association with the City Beautiful movement; 1928 because it represents the height of the Roaring Twenties; and 1950 because it is still within the memory of living people and lies just before the explosive growth of the suburbs. Even with this romantic aura, today many people avoid downtowns because they are associated with crime and parking difficulties. It is this latter issue that comes up most frequently in surveys administered by downtown revitalization organizations; for a number of Americans, downtown represents too great of a challenge in finding a place to park their car and so they simply avoid traveling there. This situation is especially true for families with young children.

As Petula Clark's song emphasizes, people go downtown for the emotional experience, which is related to the historical authenticity of the environment. Research in anthropology and environmental psychology reveals that what makes these downtowns authentic is the presence of patina (age value/decay), layering, complexity, and a sense

of discovery that helps to increase the level of people's emotional attachment to place (Wells and Baldwin, 2012; Galindo and Hidalgo, 2005). In order to conserve the ability of the environment to catalyze this emotional attachment, many downtown stakeholders who are not trained as historic preservationists want infill construction to replicate the form, massing, scale and orientation of older buildings, but also wish to see the historical ornamentation and materials replicated in perfect detail as well. This latter characteristic often results in conflicts between most stakeholders and heritage and planning experts who are charged with conserving the historical authenticity of downtowns (Wells 2010).

Lastly, there are many common stereotypes in terms of how various dominant and minority groups value and perceive the historical authenticity of American downtowns. The revitalization of downtowns is associated with the process of gentrification, which is typically driven by the middle- to upper-class. In effect, because of the demographics of the United States, inevitably, this gentrification process is seen as white people displacing minorities. A common stereotype in many of these communities is that minorities, especially those individuals who were not born in the fifty states, do not value the historic environment because it is not "their" heritage. In my research with the Latino community of Allentown, Pennsylvania, I found this stereotype is not accurate (Wells, in press). Latino property owners, primarily representing cultural groups from Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico, expressed similar sentiments and values for the historic environment as did the dominant, white cultural group.

The decline and revival of the American downtown

After World War II, Americans began to believe that downtowns were anachronistic, dirty, messy, and chaotic compared to the clean orderliness of the new suburbs that emphasized the technological prowess of the automobile. By the late 1960s, the American downtown was in clear decline. Increasingly, businesses were leaving downtown for the suburbs, resulting in empty or underutilized storefronts. Fewer people were living downtown as well, abandoning the hustle and bustle of the city for the predictable uniformity and quiet serenity and security of homes that were far removed from any commercial or cultural activities. There was a sociocultural element to this change; the middle and upper class, who were overwhelmingly white, left downtowns while many minorities, who were often poor, remained. As a result, downtowns became less diverse socioeconomically and poverty became increasingly concentrated (Dreier, 1996, pp. 103-105). While social factors and discrimination were driving factors in this exodus, the federal government also encouraged the decline of downtowns through a series of programs, collectively known as "urban renewal", in which taxpayer funds were used to finance the systematic destruction of old urban fabric. Cities used these funds to demolish old buildings and put new, suburban-style style versions in their place, often with large parking lots. Large-scale projects such as sports stadiums and freeways destroyed entire commercial districts and neighborhoods (Jackson, 1985). As

a result, downtowns became less pedestrian friendly, less diverse, with fewer businesses and little or no residents.

Jane Jacobs was a seminal figure in renewing the interest in downtowns in the United States through her book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), which represented one of the few dissenting voices against wholesale demolition and rebuilding of cities by rejecting the rationalist planning that epitomized post-World War II development. By 1960, the prevailing viewpoint was that the idea of the traditional downtown—density, mixed use, pedestrian friendly, with old buildings—was obsolete and ought to be replaced by a suburban model with separated uses, automobile transportation, modern buildings, and rigid, rational planning efficiency. Jacobs challenged this prevailing viewpoint by arguing that downtowns were the cradle of cultural creativity because of their chaotic nature. Rather than a liability, Jacobs framed the chaos of a traditional urban area as its key asset, which was fostered by a variety of building ages and designs, density, mixed uses throughout the day, and pedestrian-friendly design that encouraged interactions between people.

While downtowns have always been synonymous with old buildings, the association of “historic” with “downtown” is a twentieth century phenomenon. By at least 1921, the phrase “historic downtown” was being used to describe lower Manhattan (“The Bridge”, 1921, p. 474) and thereafter began to be increasingly used to describe downtowns across the country, to the extent that “historic downtown” and downtown were used interchangeably, as they are today, in common usage. Until 1966, there was no federal recognition of historic downtowns and, across the country, the number of downtown local historic districts, which were under control of local municipalities, before 1970 was less than 20. This situation meant that the tourist guides, books, and periodicals that referred to an historic downtown often did not mean an officially listed historic district, but rather a common or colloquial understanding of what “historic” meant.

But with the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act in 1966, which gave the federal government the ability to carve out downtowns as officially listed historic districts, businesses and local governments found that describing the central commercial district as an historic downtown (especially when it was officially recognized as such) to be a powerful tool to attract tourists. In the 1970s, freeway signage began to advertise historic downtowns, which was part of the general lead-up to the bicentennial celebration of American independence from Britain in 1976, in which historic preservation played an increasingly important and central role in American culture. In this decade, the National Park Service, which is the federal agency charged with promoting historic preservation in the United States, joined the fray by posting special brown-colored signs on interstate freeways inviting drivers to take the next exit to explore a particular historic downtown.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation, a non-profit (NGO) organization, which is recognized as the nationwide advocate for historic preservation, has had a significant influence on American’s renewed interest in historic downtowns, chiefly through their “Main Street” program. The Main Street approach is widely recognized

as one of the most effective downtown revitalization strategies and has spawned similar efforts in Canada and the United Kingdom. The Trust created the Main Street program in 1976 as a way to help revitalize the downtowns of small towns (less than 50,000 people) suffering from disinvestment, decay, and abandonment. The program focused on using historic preservation and the “four point approach”, which directed communities to create a strong organization, restructure the economy of the downtown, engage in good design, and promote the downtown as a place to shop and recreate. Starting with three pilot communities, there are now over 2,000 Main Street programs across the country representing a similar number of historic downtowns (Dono and Glisson, 2009).

The Main Street program has helped to refocus Americans’ attention on downtowns by recognizing the value of the existing built environment. While the historical qualities of downtown buildings and places are central to the revitalization argument, so was the fact that downtowns were places that already had much of the infrastructure for growing business and represented a significant portion of the tax base of towns and cities. Successful revitalization of historic downtowns was therefore linked to community pride, economic development, and vibrant communities. Because the Main Street program emphasizes grass-roots efforts and large numbers of volunteers, there is a direct relationship between a community’s passion for its historic downtown and how successful its revitalization efforts are.

While there has been a general trend for people to move back to downtowns in many areas of the country since the 1970s, more recently Millennials (those born between 1977 and 1994) and childless couples represent a majority of individuals choosing to live in urban areas because these are places best represent access to arts and culture. Not all Millennials are choosing to live downtown, however. It appears that only those individuals that Richard Florida (2002) would describe as the “creative class”, or well educated knowledge workers, are part of this trend. These individuals are typically highly educated and well paid professionals that drive the rehabilitation and adaptive use of historic buildings, such as old warehouses or industrial buildings (Bereitschaft, 2014). Creative class Millennials are specifically attracted to downtown living and working because of the historic nature of the environment (Gotham, 2005; Ponzini & Rossi, 2010).

The movement of Millennials into downtown areas results in their gentrification and transformation into “creative-cultural districts,” as Bradley Bereitschaft (2014, p. 160) describes, that “owe their existence to ... efforts by historical preservationists and other urban activists to preserve historic, human-scaled urban environments in central city locations.” The high value of historic buildings in urban contexts is not unique to the Millennials: In a survey by Sasaki (2014), an architecture and planning firm, 54% of people of all ages that were polled across the country wanted “to see their city invest in renovating existing historical buildings to retain character while making them more useable.”

Officially Recognizing Historic Downtowns

There are two ways to officially recognize an historic downtown in the United States, and both methods involve the creation of an historic district. The first method is to list the district on the National Register of Historic Places, which is curated by the National Park Service, and the second method is to list the district in a local municipality's historical register. Practically speaking, only the latter case attempts to protect the authenticity of the properties listed in the district. Because of the nature of the United States' Constitution, the federal government cannot regulate private property; this power is delegated to the states and then to local municipalities. With the exception of cases where there is a required federal permit or some kind of federal funding, the federal government cannot interfere with the ability of a private property owner to make changes to an historic building or demolish it.

Local historic districts that are under the control of a municipality, however, have the ability to regulate, often with great detail, the exact nature of changes to historic buildings and landscapes and limit the ability of a property owner to demolish a building. Typically, the process begins with a property owner submitting an application for a "certificate of appropriateness" that details the desired changes. The application then goes before an historic preservation commission, which consists of volunteers appointed by a city council and/or mayor. These volunteers review the application and then approve or deny the changes. Legally, preservation commissions are quasi-judicial in nature, which means that the decisions made by these volunteers hold the full weight of the law and technically must be honored both by the local municipality as well as the property owner and can be enforced in a court of law. The same city employees that address building code compliance typically handle non-compliance issues with certificates of appropriateness.

The federal process for recognizing an historic district requires that the district possesses integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association, which is an objective way of assessing historical authenticity. In addition, the district must be significant for its association with historical events, a person or persons from the past, architectural design, or archaeological value. Any citizen can submit a nomination to create a National Register district and as long as it meets the criteria specified by the National Park Service (1997), and a majority of the owners do not object to the listing, the district's nomination will likely be successful. Many local municipalities have processes similar to the federal one, and will often borrow concepts from the National Register, such as historical integrity and significance, but will differ most significantly in terms of requirements for owner consent and who can submit a nomination. National Register nominations are largely processed and reviewed by the staff of state historic preservation offices; city staff members also review local nominations, but it is the volunteers on the local historic preservation commission that approve or deny the application for the district which is then sent to a city council for final approval.

In practice, historic district nominations will sometimes, but not always, include the entire downtown area that the public considers to be historic. Because of the objective

nature of the nomination process, however, the opinions of heritage experts often overrule values from most community stakeholders, especially when there are conflicts. The overall process can be quite political, with boundaries drawn to include or exclude properties based more on perceived support for the district than on the qualities that make a property officially historic or not. Because members of the public usually drive the historic district nomination process, certain socioeconomic classes are overrepresented. The result is that most district nominations define historical significance through the lens of wealthy white males; minority and women's perspectives are often absent, although this is slowly changing. The National Park Service, for instance, is promoting the recognition of historic places that represent lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Americans and "minorities and women who have made significant contributions to [United States'] history and culture, including studies related to the history of Latinos, women, and Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders."²

Historic downtown policies

Over the past few decades there has been an increasing focus from policy makers in recognizing and revitalizing historic downtowns in the United States. In addition to historic preservation, parallel movements, such as "smart growth" and sustainability, have resulted in renewed interest in urban living. But, in all of these cases, historic preservation helped pave the way for the newfound desire to live in historic downtowns. In addition, the preservation movement in the United States is largely responsible for the fact that many of these historic downtowns still exist with a large amount of their older commercial and residential housing stock relatively intact.

Most policies that impact downtowns address the reuse of buildings, infill construction, and business relocation, independent of retaining the historical authenticity of the downtown. A few policies, primarily related to financial incentives and design review, seek to retain the historical authenticity of the downtown. These latter policies are always tied to the official recognition of the historical nature of the buildings, structures, and landscapes, primarily through listing (individually or as part of a district) on the National Register or on a local municipality's historical register.

Historic preservation and the "smart growth" movement share a common interest in downtowns, but in the latter case the goal is to direct development into dense, pedestrian friendly urban areas as a counter to suburban sprawl rather than focus on conserving the historic environment (Duany, Speck, and Lydon, 2010). Smart growth's major proponents are associated with the new urbanism movement that recognizes value in traditional urban patterns of development that existed before the automobile. While smart growth emphasizes new development, it does incorporate built heritage conservation into its principles by advocating building reuse and capitalizing on existing urban infrastructure that is already dense and walkable. For instance, in the state of Rhode Island, where I teach and practice, the regional smart growth advocate, Grow

² <http://www.doi.gov/news/pressreleases/secretary-jewell-announces-new-national-park-service-theme-study-to-interpret-commemorate-sites-related-to-lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender-history.cfm>

Smart Rhode Island, was instrumental in partially restoring the state historic preservation tax credit in order to incentivize the rehabilitation and reuse of existing historic buildings. Historic preservation, downtowns, and sustainability are also linked. Numerous studies indicate that residents of dense urban areas use fewer resources and less energy than those living in suburban environments (Ko, 2013; Jabareen, 2006). Existing buildings represent a tremendous amount of embodied energy in their fabric, which cannot be recouped quickly through increased energy efficiency in new construction (Jackson, 2005). In addition, we are discovering that traditional building technologies are inherently more sustainable, in that their environmental impact is lower. Even when considering issues such as historic windows, which are inevitably less energy efficient than the best contemporary windows, there are cost-effective interventions, such as sealing air leaks or adding storm windows and interior curtains, which can dramatically improve efficiency (Sedovik, Walter, and Gotthelf, 2005). Historic environments are also more sustainable in terms of local economies; with new construction, the highest cost is in construction materials while with building rehabilitations, the highest cost is typically labor. In the former case, the money spent on a building construction project is likely to not only leave the local area, but the country as well. In the latter case, because local construction workers are being paid, the money stays in the local economy (Rypkema, 2005). The natural conclusion is that an historic downtown may well be the most sustainable environment on the planet, even when factoring in mitigating issues. In the United States, one of the most powerful economic incentives for revitalizing historic downtowns is the federal historic preservation tax credit. Developers can receive 20% of qualified rehabilitation expenses for an historic building as a credit that can be applied to offset taxes owed to the federal government. Any property on the National Register of Historic Places can qualify for this tax credit, including contributing properties in historic districts. This tax credit is an important factor in motivating municipalities to establish National Register historic districts, including those in downtowns, as a way to spur economic development. Many states also have similar tax credits, which are generally between 20% to 30% of qualified rehabilitation expenses. In the case of the federal tax credit, the property must be income producing. Some states also have this requirement, but many also allow the tax credit to be used on non-income producing (e.g., residential) properties as well. In most cases, state tax credits can be used on properties listed individually or contributing to a district listed on the National Register, state historical register, or local historical registers. When combined, in some states (such as Connecticut or Iowa) the federal and state tax credit can fund up to half of the rehabilitation costs for an historic property and play a significant role in the rehabilitation of entire blocks of buildings in downtown areas.

Other financial incentives that may be available include tax abatement programs and easements. In the United States, most local municipalities assess a tax on the market value of a property. The more desirable and valuable the property, the higher the amount of tax that an owner has to pay. This situation can actually be a disincentive to property owners who wish to rehabilitate, repair, or restore historic properties because such activities inevitably lead to higher taxes as the property's value increases. As a

way to offset this disincentive, some municipalities have a financial incentive that freezes the amount of tax a property owner pays based on the value of the property prior to any rehabilitation work. This value remains frozen for several years (typically 10 years) after which the assessed tax for the property reverts to its current value. In addition, owners of properties who donate an easement to a non-profit organization can deduct the value of this easement on their federal and state income taxes. Typical easements include the façade of a building or an important character-defining feature, such as decorative elements designed by a prominent artist.

Unlike other countries, grants play a fairly insignificant role in historic property rehabilitation projects in the United States and they are typically not available to homeowners or for-profit businesses. In some cases, for-profit developers and owners can take advantage of grants from federal and state governments in partnership with a non-profit organization. For the most part, however, grants can only be used by non-profit organizations for repair, maintenance, and rehabilitation work. This was not supposed to be the case as the original 1966 National Historic Preservation Act passed by the United States Congress intended to make a significant amount of grant monies available to each state, which would then be distributed to public and private entities. In subsequent years, however, Congress never completely funded the program, and as a result, these grant monies are very minimal or non-existent.

While financial incentives are designed to encourage the conservation of historic buildings, a number of policies actively discourage developers from undertaking projects in downtown areas. In the United States, the regulatory environment (e.g., zoning, building codes) discourages the rehabilitation and reuse of existing buildings and incentivizes development in the suburbs. In most municipalities, it is much easier and predicable from the perspective of a developer to build on farmland or open space than it is to reuse existing buildings in a downtown area. Municipalities will often pay for the installation of utilities (water, sewer, electricity) for developers who agree to build big-box retail stores, but will not offer similar incentives to update or add utilities in urban areas. In addition, the regulatory environment is much simpler in the suburbs, where there are fewer stakeholders. In urban areas, zoning can be particularly complicated and the larger number of stakeholders more difficult to please. Lastly, building codes are designed for new construction and, as such, require very expensive retrofits of existing buildings. Some states, however, have implemented smart growth policies to encourage urban/downtown development. Such policies limit growth to designated urban or downtown areas, promote infill development and brownfield redevelopment, and preserve open space and farmland. For instance, the states of Colorado, Pennsylvania, and Maryland reduce the regulatory burden on developers wishing to engage infill development and/or streamline the permitting process; Illinois and Maryland promote brownfield redevelopment; while Ohio and Arizona preserve farmland and open space, respectively. A number of states, such as Connecticut and New Jersey, also provide tax incentives for businesses to locate in downtown areas. Many states also have a special historic building code that relaxes or makes required building code requirements more flexible.

The authenticity of historic downtowns is assured through a design review process controlled by law at the local municipal level. While there are some variations, in general this process begins by submitting plans for alterations to a local historic preservation commission. Staff, and in most cases, volunteers on the preservation commission, review the plans for their ability to safeguard the authenticity of the building, structure, or landscape. If this process is successful, the applicant receives a “certificate of appropriateness” which functions in a manner similar to a building permit. The staff and volunteers associated with these preservation commissions typically use a set of design guidelines to assess the appropriateness of certain changes to buildings and places. The majority of these guidelines are based on the National Park Service’s Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation,³ which are in turn based on the principles contained in the ICOMOS Venice Charter. While the Standards are a federal document, originally intended to be used with the federal historic preservation tax credit, their use has become ubiquitous at the local level, even though the federal government never required this to be so. (Technically, it would not have been constitutional for the federal government to impose design review standards on private property owners.). In terms of historic preservation policy, a disturbing trend in the past decade has been for municipalities and states to revise their preservation ordinances and statutes to require the consent of all property owners to agree to be included in a proposed local historic district. This is an impossibly high bar to achieve, and as a result it effectively makes it impossible to establish a local historic district, including in a downtown. Because local historic districts are the most effective way to protect the authenticity of historic downtowns through design review, the inability to put these districts in place makes it more difficult to conserve built heritage in these environments. Similarly, federal law requires all property owners to agree to be included in a World Heritage nomination. Because of this requirement, there are no privately owned properties in the United States on the World Heritage list and the probability of including a district containing many private properties on the World Heritage list is very low.

Conclusion

The American downtown is a place of romance, myth, culture, business, and vibrancy; it also represents decay, disinvestment, and significant policy challenges. In the United States, as it is often said, “the car is king” and much of our built infrastructure since World War II is based on this assumption. The historic downtown is therefore both anachronistic and the vanguard of innovation; in the former sense it represents an inefficient, dirty, and regressive era and in the latter sense, a return to environments designed for humans to improve quality of life. Assuming that the importance of sustainability and heritage continue to increase, the downtown offers the ideal intersection of these concepts to aid in overall human flourishing, even if it parking the car becomes less convenient.

³ See <http://www.nps.gov/tps/standards/rehabilitation/rehab/stand.htm>

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