

# Design Ideas for Strengthening Downtowns

Drawing from his new book, *Rural by Design*, an experienced observer of rural and small town design reports on some of the more successful downtown revitalization strategies in use around the U.S.

By RANDALL ARENDT, FRTP

CREATIVE DESIGN INITIATIVES have helped enliven and strengthen downtowns in many communities, and are often part of broader strategies. The central lesson from Holland, Michigan (pop. 33,644), whose downtown is particularly successful and vibrant, is that no single action or approach will provide the answer. Complete solutions require initiatives on several different fronts. Many of them involve physical improvements, but intangibles such as commitments, relationships, and trust are equally important. The examples described here focus on the physical aspects, many containing important design components.

## Maintaining traditional form and function

Town centers inevitably change over time, but such changes need not erase a community's special character.

According to Phil Walker, AICP, author of APA's *Downtown Planning for Smaller and Midsize Communities*, "One of the greatest victories a downtown plan can achieve is a clear set of development policies to ensure that the traditional urban form of a downtown is protected and reinforced by future development." Here is a close corollary: A pleasant and useful mix of uses and activities must also be achieved and maintained.

Officials should think through the possible unintended consequences of current regulations. Better zoning provisions include establishing "maximum front setbacks" (or a "build-to" line), minimum height (or a "build-up" line), and requiring buildings to have traditional windows and front doors facing streets, plus off-street parking located behind buildings. (Alcoves are an exception to maximum setback rules; see photo on this page)

When multistory infill replaces single-story buildings, downtowns benefit in several ways. Such an approach is offered by form-based coding, detailed in "Simplify That Code!" (June), although a combination of basic form-related design standards can provide excellent protection as well. In Davidson, North Carolina, zoning requires all new commercial buildings to have at least two functional stories above grade, with floor space that can be occupied.

Promoting upper-story uses, particularly residential, is key. Most of the upper floors along Hol-

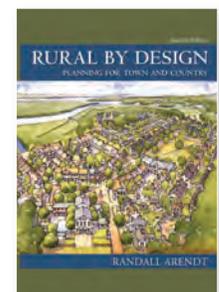


An exception to the "build-to" (or "maximum front setback") line is illustrated by this alcove in Southern Pines, North Carolina, where a recessed building arrangement allows for two shade trees and a bench—and also increases the number of shop windows visible to pedestrians, benefiting both customers and shopkeepers.

land's main street are occupied. Not counting two large senior housing blocks with about 750 units, nearly half of that floor space is residential, ensuring that downtown streets stay lively after shops close.

## Metrics that work

One of the more remarkable small town examples is Oxford, Ohio (pop. 21,782), where a dozen new multistory mixed use buildings have been built downtown since 2007. One basic rule is that at least 70 percent of the front facade must meet the right-of-way line, and a minimum height of two stories is required. In practice, however, most new infill proj-



**Rural by Design**  
2015; APA Planners  
Press; 552 pp., \$109.95  
(APA members \$79.95).

ects have been taller, better matching the scale of many three- to four-story buildings.

Results are impressive: 12 new mixed use, multistory infill buildings providing 97 residential units housing 331 occupants (mostly students from Miami University), with eight new units housing 43 more residents in redeveloped buildings, above a total of 81,600 square feet of new ground floor commercial space. Although building height is limited to four floors, four-story slabs are avoided by limiting building area to three times the lot area. The upshot: Top floors are smaller than the rest, often stepped back beyond prominent third floor cornices, creating variety in apparent building heights. Limiting residential density to one occupant per 200 square feet of lot area allows more variety in the number of bedrooms in each dwelling unit.

Ground-floor commercial must cover at least 70 percent of the lot area, and 30 percent more may be located above or below that. Because downtown land is valuable, there are no on-site parking requirements, a key aspect of Oxford's approach. Although some residents do not own cars, many who do park them in lots they can either walk to or reach by the free local bus service. These metrics have worked very well, according to local architect Scott Webb, de-



The two photos above show an inappropriately low infill building from the 1960s in downtown Oxford, Ohio, that was replaced by a new four-story mixed use building. With a shared vision and cooperation between officials and entrepreneurs, downtown streetscapes can be restored to their previous form and function.

signer of many of the new infill buildings. Notably, these results have been achieved without form-based coding.

Holland has provided parking on land behind its main street buildings, with maintenance provided by the municipality or by a business improvement district. These rear parking lots have been created, expanded, and landscaped over the years as parcels have become available or as buildings have come down. The city controls some parking through ownership and several lots through leases. The downtown development authority maintains all city-owned and leased lots and a relatively new downtown parking deck, which are funded through an annual assessment program. All on-street and public lot parking is free, although residents pay overnight parking fees.

Many merchants increase their business by opening rear doorways, allowing customers to enter from parking lots. Even when people use shops as shortcuts to the street, some retailers see this as an opportunity to display their wares and say hello. Interviews with shopkeepers have shown that most of them like the idea, and they report virtually no increase in shoplifting.

Creating attractive environments helps increase the number of downtown visitors and the frequency and length of their visits. Shade trees and benches are basic; they should be supplemented with colorful planters, widened sidewalks to accommodate dining tables, and a small fountain or two. Street musicians, performance artists, and public art help create a welcoming ambience, inviting shoppers and others to linger and enjoy their surroundings.

Holland attracts thousands of visitors every year during its annual springtime tulip festival; it also closes several blocks of its main street to cars every Thursday evening during the summer, converting it into a popular pedestrian promenade. Crowds of residents and visitors fill the street, enjoying food, music, aromas, shops, and each other's company.

When large downtown buildings become vacant, creative solutions are essential. In Northampton, Massachusetts (pop. 28,554), a three-story department store with 55,000 square feet of floor space was sensitively reconfigured (preserving its historic staircase, tin ceilings, and woodwork). Rechristened as Thorne's Mar-



Attractively paved and landscaped footpaths along municipal parking lots behind "main street" shops in Holland, Michigan, lead into many businesses through rear entryways.

ketplace, it leases individual spaces to dozens of small retailers and food purveyors, creating what has been described as a “contemporary bazaar.” This imaginative and highly successful conversion has brought customers back to the downtown shopping and dining district. According to town planner Wayne Feiden, FAICP, “Thorne’s was the single most important retail pioneer that helped bring downtown back alive.”

### Public space is valuable

Whether in new mixed use areas or retrofitted town centers, creating comfortable public spaces can provide economic as well as aesthetic benefits. A 1989 study of 21 rural towns in Georgia conducted by James Kenyon of the University of Georgia found that the vitality of the centers (expressed by their peak pedestrian volumes) was related, in part, to the physical form of the central business district. Of four broad physical forms identified (courthouse square, multiblock, cruciform, and stem), pedestrian activity was by far the strongest in the towns with courthouse squares.

In the West, plazas created by Spanish settlers anchor hundreds of downtowns, where artists display and sell their jewelry, pottery, weaving, and other works, fulfilling an age-old need for meaningful public places.

Such a need was recognized in Lewisburg, West Virginia (pop. 3,939), after a corner building dating from 1897 burned down in 1997. A 5,600-square-foot park was built in stages between 2005 and 2013, a result of joint efforts by citizens, officials, and two local foundations. Downtown foot traffic near the park—the heart of the shopping district—increased dramatically, according to Mayor John Manchester.

In the city of Bainbridge Island, Washington, a similar, but less elaborate, amenity was created when three buildings were replaced by a mixed use development designed in an L shape, facing a four-way intersection across a newly created green. Notably, this park

would have been impossible had the new building maintained a traditionally close relationship to the streets, underscoring the need for flexibility in building siting.

### Public art

Sheridan, Wyoming (pop. 17,916), is one of many communities recognizing that public art displays help revitalize downtowns. In any given year between 20 and 30 sculptures, on loan from artists around the country, are displayed in Sheridan’s public spaces. In addition, the city has acquired 42 permanent sculptures for its parks and downtown. Those sculptures were donated by local businesspeople and residents, or purchased with commissions from sculpture sales, or funds raised by an annual golf tournament and the county’s one percent sales tax.

Artists whose work is selected for display receive a \$500 honorarium from the city, which collects a 25 percent commission on works sold during exhibition periods. Even in a slow year such as 2011, loaned sculptures were sold for \$104,000, generating \$26,000, which the city spent on new sculpture acquisitions. Similar programs exist in Grand Junction and Loveland, Colorado; Lewiston and Coeur d’Alene, Idaho; Sioux Falls, South Dakota; and Gillette and Green River, Wyoming.

### Small parks and parklets

Even modest downtown spaces can become much more special, as shown by the conversion of a remnant triangle of asphalt at a wide intersection in downtown Auburn, California (pop. 13,960).

PHOTOS THIS PAGE BY RANDALL ARENDT



Grass, shade trees, brick paving, benches, planters, public art, and a children’s play fountain have transformed a vacant parcel at one of the main intersections in Lewisburg, West Virginia.



This statue of a heron was one of more than 20 pieces of art on display in 2010 in Sheridan, Wyoming, which recognizes that public art helps revitalize its downtown.



Nevada City, California, installed a moveable wooden platform to create a sidewalk seating area to test the public's acceptance of parklets.

A small triangular park built in 2009 has greatly improved the attractiveness of a formerly very broad intersection with three small traffic islands. It is now filled with outdoor seating, trees, landscaping, a fire pit, and a rain garden to pretreat stormwater. The park became a possibility when an awkwardly angled intersection was rectified, freeing about 6,000 square feet of land for music, movies, square dancing, and service club events.

Having seen successful parklets in curbside parking spaces in other downtowns, Nevada City, California (pop. 3,068), has approved a removable boardwalk seating area as a multiyear experiment, occupying three parking spaces on Commercial Street. The 50-foot-long parklet, with eight-foot-wide wooden planks level with the sidewalk, and separated from vehicles by bollards, provides space for benches, planters, and bike racks.

These small oases create synergy when located in front of businesses such as coffeehouses and sandwich shops. They work best on streets with low speed limits and in mid-block locations away from corners, where they could block views and impede turning movements. Parklets can help create innovative new public space, and their low cost allows cities to experiment with various forms and locations.

### A tale of two bridges

Turning lemons into lemonade, a local women's club transformed an abandoned trolley bridge into a major tourist attraction in Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts (pop. 1,731). Since the late 1920s, lush plantings have lined both sides of a central meandering footpath crossing this bridge, whose surface is covered by several feet of soil. This "Bridge of Flowers" attracts as many as 36,000 visitors annually from more than 100 countries.

Spanning Sand Creek in downtown Sandpoint, Idaho (pop. 7,365), is the Cedar Street Bridge, reconstructed as an enclosed linear retail walkway in 1982 by local entrepreneur Scott Glickenhau. An outside walkway, four feet wide and roofed, allows pedestrian access when the shops are closed. This historic bridge at the end of Cedar Street, linking downtown businesses

with the train depot, was closed to vehicular traffic in 1971, and condemned nine years later.

This project was influenced by Glickenhau's visit to Florence's Ponte Vecchio ("old bridge"), and by the transformation of Boston's historic Faneuil Hall Marketplace into a lively urban space for meeting and eating. "People like to sit; they love sun, shade, and water," Glickenhau says. "Those are the things you need to have a vibrant downtown, the colors and the smells. Those were the ingredients that went into (and) helped create the flavor of the bridge."

This addition to the downtown business district is thoroughly modern. The southern wall was built with 4,500 square feet of insulated glazing, creating a long solarium that lights and heats the space on sunny days. The north side resembles a traditional covered bridge, wood-clad with few openings. About 100,000 square feet of insulated concrete flooring absorbs the sun's energy and serves as a passive heat sink. In the winter, when the sun is lower on the horizon, its rays warm the enclosed airspace. The overall effect of walking through or sitting inside the bridge is extremely peaceful, with food aromas circulating throughout.

The bridge, 60 to 80 feet wide and more than 400 feet long, contains 26,500 square feet of retail space, divided into numerous shops and restaurants. A long, wide ramp provides easy access to the second floor. According to the Sonoran Institute, upon completion the bridge became an instant landmark and tourist attraction, drawing new customers to Sandpoint's downtown business district. The Cedar Street Bridge has evolved into a collection of cart vendors, restaurants, gift shops, jewelers, and boutiques.

### Daylighting a downtown creek

After several decades of gradual economic decline—the result of Interstate 84 bypassing town—officials in Caldwell, Idaho (pop.



Landscaping has transformed a disused trolley bridge (above and immediate right) into a major tourist attraction in Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts. It is now called the Bridge of Flowers.



The reconstructed Cedar Street Bridge in Sandpoint, Idaho, is now an enclosed linear retail walkway linking the train depot to downtown businesses.

46,237), a once-thriving industrial center, identified Indian Creek as a potential key to downtown revitalization. They subsequently requested assistance from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to determine the feasibility of uncovering, or daylighting, Indian Creek as it flows through the city center. This impressive municipal effort, involving several departments, restored the creek to its former natural openness, creating a 120-foot-wide greenway with six acres of open space, paths for walking and biking, natural rock features, and a vastly improved natural habitat.

The creek corridor defines the geometry of downtown development and creates a framework for special districts and placemaking spaces with paved walkways, interpretive nodes, and historic lighting for people-centered and community-supported development in front of the restored train depot, according to the *Downtown Framework Master Plan*.

The large number and variety of creative approaches initiated by individual entrepreneurs, municipal governments, and volunteer groups interested in strengthening small downtowns across



the country are extremely encouraging. In addition to the extra care taken in regulating the height and setbacks of new infill buildings, promoting residential occupancy and creating new and inviting public spaces are key aspects of successful strategies.

From displaying public art and daylighting covered waterways to finding new uses for vacant department stores or old bridges, there is virtually no limit to what can be accomplished when challenges are met creatively and cooperatively.

Randall Arendt is the author of *Rural by Design: Planning for Town and Country*, published by APA Planners Press. This article is adapted from the completely revised, second edition of the book, issued in April: [planning.org/store/product/?ProductCode=BOOK\\_ARDP](http://planning.org/store/product/?ProductCode=BOOK_ARDP).

## RESOURCES

### FROM APA

*Downtown Planning for Smaller and Midsize Communities*, Phil Walker, AICP. In print and e-book format, available at [planning.org/store/product/?ProductCode=BOOK\\_AE1450](http://planning.org/store/product/?ProductCode=BOOK_AE1450).

"Simplify That Code!" Randall Arendt, *Planning*, June 2015, [planning.org/planning/2015/jun/simplifythatcode.htm](http://planning.org/planning/2015/jun/simplifythatcode.htm).