Revitalizing City Centers with Real-World Planning

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Fresno shows how a developer-led planning process can build on downtown’s specific strengths.

In commissioning The Ratkovich Company, a developer, to produce a plan for revitalizing its downtown, Fresno, California’s sixth largest city, took a bold and unconventional step. Cities, after all, generally turn to professional planners for their urban renewal and redevelopment plans.

But too often, plans remain only plans—reports merely taking up space on planning department shelves. Downtowns deserve better blueprints. As the economic and social lifeblood of cities, and for the sake of whole regional economies, downtowns must be restored to health. Therefore, they need, first and foremost, revitalization plans that work. The elements that will make the city centers work are economic feasibility, tangible economic benefits, and community support.

Fresno’s downtown had been in a state of steady decline for more than two decades when the city initiated its unusual but highly effective planning process. The process and the plan—one that will indeed bear fruit—together say a great deal about the potential for the renewal of American city centers.

Few Development Opportunities

A California city that recently celebrated its 100th anniversary, Fresno is almost equidistant from the major metropolitan areas of San Francisco and Los Angeles. With the foothills of the Sierra range visible to the east, the city is widely known as the gateway to Yosemite National Park.

Agriculture sustains this community. Fresno stands at the center of California’s San Joaquin Valley, one of the world’s richest agricultural areas. The frontier town grew up around the Southern Pacific rail line as the region lured farmer immigrants from distant lands. Today, modern agribusiness generates some $3 billion in revenue annually in Fresno County.

Explosive suburban growth after World War II boosted the city’s population, now close to 400,000. At the same time, Fresno’s business core—like those of many other mid-sized cities—began a gradual decline. During the early 1960s, the city commissioned noted urban planner Victor Gruen to develop a new downtown plan. While this plan sparked ambitious urban renewal projects, it ultimately was set aside. And a series of subsequent planning decisions only hastened the downtown’s isolation.

The installation of a three-block outdoor pedestrian mall in the city center created a distance too long to walk. Reconfiguring streets into one-way avenues put traffic back on the northern end of the mall and moved traffic quickly through the downtown. Demolition for a freeway bypass left a gash of vacant land through residential neighborhoods graced with stately Victorian homes. Rezoning this area for apartments allowed further physical deterioration and precipitated a decline in housing.
We believed that an overall strategy for downtown was necessary. The city was interested in the possibilities we foresaw and invited us to prepare a downtown urban renewal strategy. We retained an architectural firm known for its urban planning skills and vision, the New York– and Los Angeles–based firm of Ehrenkrantz & Eckstut, as a key part of the team. New Jersey–based Travers Associates was selected as traffic consultant and civil engineer.

Listening to the Community

Too often, planning task forces pay lip service to community involvement without providing a sense of genuine participation. We were anxious to apply and demonstrate the skills of our planning team, but we realized our first task was to listen.

Craig Scharton, a former city council member, was retained to direct the effort to tap community opinion. With a passionate interest in cities and the quality of urban life, Scharton had long been concerned about downtown Fresno’s decline.

“We faced a certain cynicism about whether the city had the capacity to solve its problems downtown,” he says. “And for many people, the city center appeared relatively unimportant. But a community that has no interest in its downtown isn’t that different from a person who remains unconcerned after being told he’s healthy, except for his heart.”

The process of gathering community opinion galvanized public interest. This show of interest caused us to broaden the scope of the community research phase more than anyone had anticipated. More than 400 individuals—city officials, concerned residents, and community organization and business leaders—contributed through interviews or attendance at town meetings.

A strong public and media relations program played a pivotal part. Members of the planning team met in the first week with the Fresno Bee’s editorial board and with the general managers of the local television affiliates. We prepared special presentations for the media at the end of each planning phase. The result was wide, positive publicity for the plan that provided a broad and informed base for dialogue.

The community research phase ended with the articulation of a set of well-defined principles that would form the foundation for a plan to renew the downtown. Among these principles was the tenet that the plan should be “uniquely Fresno.” The downtown, said the community, should reflect small-town values, preserve the city’s historic identity, and aim at Fresno’s becoming—one more—“The Best Little City in the U.S.A.” Another key principle held that the downtown should be developed as a regional center. And a third was the concept of encompassing many small projects that could easily be implemented and that would add up to “something big.”

values. Despite the best of intentions, Fresno’s downtown lost its historic strength as a social and business center.

In 1991, a core group of Fresno business leaders invited The Ratkovich Company to explore the possibility of developing a downtown project. A day-long tour of a seemingly tired city center revealed few development opportunities, but, as outsiders, we brought an objective eye to the city’s opportunities and obstacles.

Later, conversations confirmed our early impression that the city might restore the downtown’s economic promise by reestablishing its historic role as the regional capital of the San Joaquin Valley. Making Fresno a center for services ranging from education to government, entertainment, and health care would “set the table” for future development appropriate to the region’s needs.
Preserving (and Building on) the City's Identity

With the planning principles in place, we were ready for the last three phases: analysis, options, and the final plan. By the end of the analysis phase, we had developed a set of design principles, including land use recommendations, densities, circulation, bulk, phasing, physical constraints, and open space. During the options phase, design options were further refined. The final plan set forth a specific blueprint for change, along with a detailed implementation program, and identified public financing sources.

Pointing out that the assumption that "bigger" and "new" are better than "smaller" and "old" has dominated urban planning in the United States, architect Stan Eckstut says that planning often loses "that sense of urban fabric based on the small scale that attracts people, forms the basis of a sense of belonging, and creates economic value. We found in Fresno that larger-scale planning that creates a framework for many smaller development initiatives may be the best economic hope for many downtowns."

The planning team did not attempt to impose a grand vision for downtown. The open-endedness of the process gave rise to a series of surprising discoveries, which were incorporated into the final plan. In many ways, the principles depart from traditional planning:

Thinking Small. The plan's most significant idea is to think smaller, to avoid large-scale projects and initiatives that would take years to implement. It builds on what exists and links small-scale initiatives with distinguished public spaces and tree-lined streets.

Letting the Market Work. Relying on the development of a top-quality public environment as a framework for diverse and changing uses, the plan avoids specifying future land uses in certain districts, so that development can respond to market fluctuations.

Regional Focus. The focus is on strengthening the downtown as a regional center capable of attracting new development. The blueprint does not rely on large-scale, prime office and retail projects and luxury condominiums to create the city center's primary value.

Emphasis on Infill. Realizing the plan will require no condemnation. It will count on the better use of existing vacant land with infill projects, eventually producing a fully developed downtown.

The View from the City

In 1991, I was elected to represent Fresno's southwestern council district. This district includes downtown Fresno, which has been suffering from many of the problems affecting many center cities: low property values, loss of business to the suburbs, and a perception of crime. The previous city council had adopted a downtown plan that had been prepared by a large citizens' committee and the city's planning staff: a three-inch-thick document that few people ever read.

City council members knew that, to attract business and reinvestment, we needed a cohesive plan for the revitalization of the downtown. But this plan had to be prepared and presented in a way that made sense to the community. Why did we hire a developer to prepare this plan? Many plans have won awards but have never been implemented. We wanted a plan that appealed to businesses and the larger community, not just to planners.

I don't want to give the impression that any developer could have produced this plan. The Rakovich Company was first recommended to the city by a group of businesses who had heard Wayne Rakovich speak at a seminar on urban revitalization. It was important to us that the firm had completed urban development and historic restoration projects and that it was well received by the community, including the business community. Rakovich made the case that we needed the best planning team available. The credibility that this team brought with it went a long way toward diffusing the skepticism that had resulted from many previous unsuccessful revitalization attempts.

The planning team's community relations effort was a critical element in the plan's success. Craig Scharfen assembled the community's thoughts and feelings about what a downtown should be, then gave the plan's recommendations a political testing before they were brought to the city council for adoption.

The council hearing for the plan's presentation was the first ever held in the new council chambers. We were impressed by the dozen or so speakers from business, downtown, and community groups who spoke in favor of the plan, and by the more than 250 people who attended the presentation wearing orange "Downtown Yes!" buttons.

The result of the plan's adoption has been the beginning of renewed activity. The council has entered into an exclusive agreement for a downtown Triple A baseball stadium on the site recommended by the plan. The council has entered into an agreement with The Rakovich Company for the development of the Fresno Farmers' Market; one of our landmark buildings has been purchased for restoration; a group called Tree Fresno has begun a campaign to landscape the downtown; and a team of city department heads has been assembled to implement the plan.

Looking back, I recognize that hiring a developer to oversee this planning effort was politically risky. But conventional steps hadn't worked, and the risk paid off in community support and greatly renewed interest in downtown Fresno.—Robert E. Smith, member, Fresno City Council.
for apartments had driven homeowners away, caused the loss of many Victorian homes, and resulted in a steep drop in property values.

Reconfigure downtown streets for two-way traffic, emphasizing convenience rather than rapid flow of automobiles—a pivotal factor in making the downtown less isolated.

Renew a portion of the downtown as a "bright-lights" arts and entertainment district, a significant regional attraction for the San Joaquin Valley.

Create a campus district, with pedestrian-oriented superblocks, that will serve as a center for regional educational and institutional uses.

Establish a permanent farmers’ market to draw people downtown and to showcase the region’s agricultural products and ethnic diversity.

Locate a sports stadium in the heart of the city. The stadium will contribute powerfully to the downtown’s vitality and diversify, reinforce a sense of civic pride, and bring other community and regional events to the center city.

Eliminate most regulations specifying land uses in one of the primary downtown commercial areas. This move should encourage a variety of small-scale business activities driven by market factors, rather than by ordinances.

Make downtown’s Fulton Mall more inviting for pedestrians by shortening it and by reintroducing cars to its northern portion.

Establish a visitor and transit center adjacent to the Southern Pacific rail line at the birthplace of Fresno. The location—beneath a community landmark, the Clock Tower—will become the strategic entrance to the downtown.

Landscape the downtown with planted open spaces and tree-lined streets to reflect Fresno’s location in a region where nature thrives.—W. R. and C. L. R.

Lively Streets. Convenience, rather than speed, is stressed for traffic management. Slowed traffic and street parking elevate the safety and status of pedestrians.

Being Fresno. The plan strives for a balance between preservation of the community’s heritage and new development that draws from the community’s historic strengths. New development is not a matter of historic replication, Eckstut says, but of contemporary interpretations of a city’s character and history. It is also a matter of preserving the small-town feeling so treasured by Fresno’s residents.

One of the largest crowds ever to attend a city council meeting gathered on October 14, 1992, for the presentation of the downtown plan. The council surprised everyone by adopting it that day, without further review. It also approved a set of measures to begin rezoning and other procedures required to assure the plan’s implementation.

Fresno Mayor Karen Humphrey testified at this meeting: “I knew it would be good, but I’m not sure any of us was hopeful that it would be this good.” Reflecting on the planning process later, Humphrey pointed out that the “underlying principle is very good. It builds on what we have, rather than trying to create something entirely new from the ground up. The plan responds to the values of this community. You can’t pick this plan up and apply it in cookie-cutter fashion to another city.”

Coming Full Circle

In several ways, the Fresno experience showcases the strengths of a developer-led process involving top planning consultants and the community. A development company perhaps knows best what creates real estate value and what does not. The Fresno plan is grounded in what can be achieved economically and with the greatest efficiency; it offers a specific action program for embarking on downtown revitalization within funding constraints.

A further advantage is that, as outsiders, we were in a good position to solicit community opinion and listen objectively.

The plan identified a key new development for downtown: a permanent Fresno Farmers’ Market. The Ratkovich Company has committed to building the project, which will in turn serve as a catalyst for other development downtown. We have come full circle. The plan to revitalize downtown has created the development opportunities that we were originally invited to explore (but could not find) in Fresno.

America’s downtowns are in need of revitalization approaches that work. The Fresno plan is a prime example. It affirms ten planning principles that we believe are essential to creating “doable” blueprints for downtown revitalizations:

1) Every city, every downtown, is unique. Unlike suburban shopping centers, which can be de-
A downtown plan must be custom-designed. Rather than attempting to compete with the suburbs, a downtown must identify a logical role for itself. That role may be social, cultural, government, economic, or—in the best of all worlds—a combination of all four. But success comes easier if it is clearly articulated.

Solutions to urban problems will most likely be found in time-proven urban traditions applied to the individual conditions of a given city. To mount a search for a hot new real estate product as a downtown's salvation is almost always an unnatural and ineffective solution.

Strategies to preserve, strengthen, and improve residential neighborhoods and around the downtown are more effective than those requiring demolition and replacement of housing. Many cities, while aiming to increase the number of downtown residents, contradictorily implement redevelopment strategies that destroy neighborhoods.

A major value shift in the use of the automobile can often make a downtown inviting and accessible. The human environment deserves more importance than the storing of cars. The goal of traffic management should be convenient access, rather than speedy ingress and egress.

A good plan should be judged by its economic success; if it does not increase land values and stimulate economic activity, it should be labeled a failure. If it does succeed, the rewards can be enormous. For example, if the Fresno plan stimulates a land value increase of $10 per square foot within the center city, the total value increase will be $570 million. With this gain will come needed city revenues and beneficial economic activity.

Revitalization plans should be entrusted to the most talented and experienced minds that can be found. The task of shaping a city that will serve future generations for decades and perhaps centuries deserves—and should attract—the best effort possible.

While downtown planning almost always must be done by professionals and on a large scale, it should also strive to encourage many small-scale development initiatives. The best economic hope for downtowns rests in local entrepreneurs and their many, diverse enterprises.

A plan should be flexible enough to restore and maintain harmony in the community. Respect for private property rights and for historic preservation is an important community value. When it conflicts with a proposed plan, planners should accept the challenge to change and adjust.

Finally, the goal of every city should be to serve its own citizens. Great cities succeed by serving their own citizens so well that visitors are also attracted. In a 1982 Time magazine cover story, Jim Rouse is quoted as saying, "The only legitimate purpose of a city is to provide for the life and the growth of its citizens." Success comes to those cities that follow this wise counsel.

However, down on their luck, almost all cities harbor tremendous assets, both in real estate and in community values. Our job was to help Fresno define its assets and move forward with a "doable" plan—offering tangible benefits—that could realistically be achieved. With strong community support, we succeeded.

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