

# New Jersey's Downtowns are Heart and Soul of our Community



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## *In a World Not So Long Ago*

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Once upon a time there was a magical republic endowed with rich, natural resources that stretched far and wide across crystal clear lakes, breathtaking mountain ranges, and vast oceans blue. The expansive frontier was home to prosperous financial empires and large industrial cities, separated by miles of deep, mighty rivers and enchanting forestry, which all led to many small towns, boroughs, and villages. Nestled within each of these burgs could usually be found a centralized quadrangle bustling with activity. The quaint districts embodied both the lively and mundane aspects of small town life. A lively spirit resonated perfectly amongst the engaged citizenry, who were only too proud to call such intimate neighborhoods their home away from home.

The nomenclature used to identify these hubs of humanity varied by region. Some inhabitants referred to their community gathering spot as the town center. Others called it the square. In slightly larger districts, folks considered these quarters to be the plaza, or the avenue or the boulevard. And in the smaller parishes, it was affectionately known as the village green. No matter its name, this domain was the lifeline of every hamlet, the place where everyone met, where everything clicked, where anything was possible, and at any particular time, day or night, the villagers would have cause to utter a most familiar refrain to friends and neighbors alike, "Let's go Downtown."

### **It's All Downtown**

Downtown (noun): the main or central part of a city or town: the part of a city or town where there are tall buildings, stores, offices, etc.; (adjective): hip, trendy [2014 Merriam-Webster - Online Dictionary]

Most downtowns were vibrant hubs, featuring the sale of goods and commodities in distinctive shops and attractive boutiques. Dozens of one, two and three-story commercial and retail properties lined center cross streets to form pedestrian traffic walkways. These brick and mortar businesses were known to the populace simply by either the friendly proprietor's first or last names; marquees affixed to overhead storefront shingles; or its bold lettering inscribed across front shop windows, displaying the merchant's particular specialty.

The stores were as diverse as they were plentiful. A neighborhood stroll along a typical Main Street was cause for the townspeople to encounter a welcoming medley of establishments, including but not limited to the local book store, candy and newspaper store, bakery, hardware store, ice cream parlor, record store, barber shop, shoe store, florist shop, fruit and vegetable market, pharmacy, butcher shop, pizzeria, liquor store, clothing apparel shop, and the five-and-dime store. Along the adjoining blocks, dwellers might expect to walk past the village park, library, bank, post office, borough hall, and the movie theater. Some folks enjoyed the luxury of living near a train station and bus depot, which were usually no more than a five minute walk from downtown. And in some center districts, passersby could view the



splendor of the village church arches and steeples rising high above the storefronts, aimed directly at the sky.

The distinctive pleasures that came with downtown life were immeasurable. Such moments were as modest as a brisk walk across an expertly manicured park lawn to where the annual fall arts & craft show was held; picking up a favorite author's bestselling novel at the avenue bookstore; rushing off to the music shop after school let out, in hopes of buying the latest hit record before it was sold out; taking a lazy summer afternoon stroll past the majestic fountain and its gently cascading waters, sending ripples into the enchanting duck pond near the south side entrance of the village green; a gracious thank you from the street cart vendor after his handing the retired couple matching ice cream sundaes on a hot August day; utilizing a rainy Saturday afternoon at the town library as the hopeful and "convenient" method of becoming better acquainted with the attractive, new girl from senior year English class, whose family moved to New Jersey from Vermont two weeks earlier; walking the beloved family dog up and down the boulevard, as part of pooch and her master's daily exercise regimen; or casual window shopping in anticipation of a close friend's arrival to take in a movie, with a plan to eat pizza afterwards, and then share stories about the week's latest gossip. And of course, there were those necessary tasks that could all be accomplished on the avenue in one quick swoop, like last minute grocery shopping for vegetables; paying the soon to be overdue tax bill; or the dry cleaning pick-up of the family's clothes for the following work week.

On select Thursday and Saturday evenings in the late fall and winter months the same well-traveled sidewalks assumed a new appearance, as the stores now stayed open later, the crowds grew larger, and the snow began to fall. The entire square would become aglow with a certain colonial charm, bestowed by the overhead gas lamps and rows of shop windows lucent with warm, inviting holiday lights, akin to a Dickensian village at Christmas time.

### Considerations

The diversity and convenience afforded by the prototypical downtown square personified an older town's strength and enduring appeal for more than a century. For many prospective homeowners and apartment renters today, however, this gladsome down-home appeal may have waned somewhat, or at the very least, become compromised by those wishing to explore outside these boundaries for so-called newer and greener pastures. Whether a generational trend or not, there are also indicators showing the opposite sentiment. Numbers of youthful buyers are defining their futures and bucking this tide, with a desire to embrace the past. They are moving to older, more established types of communities and building their nests in smaller, urban towns and villages that afford downtown neighborhoods. Depending of course upon the locale, older towns may be more affordable for young people, and because some of these communities have train stations, there is the added enticement of easy access for New Jersey commuters who work in Manhattan.

There are several reasons why people take up residence in a particular area only to later relocate to another town, or to be more specific, to leave an older, settled community for a newer development. For starters, long held attitudes and perceptions about locations once believed to be desirable, may no longer offer the same benefits for certain people as they once did. The rationale for deciding upon an urban, suburban or a rural area – small town vs. large metropolis, is mostly a matter of economics, demographics, sociocultural evolution, and the environment (e.g., revitalization; gentrification; income; family considerations). The critical planning that influences most decisions includes in no specific order: housing price affordability; personal aesthetic



reasons for choosing new construction vs. old; property taxes; viability of career opportunities in a particular geographic venue; proximity from home to workplace; parenting considerations relative to schools (e.g., rankings); proximity from home to school or day care facility; health care considerations relative to doctors and hospitals (e.g., rankings); proximity from home to doctors and hospital; neighborhood safety (e.g., crime statistics); types and amount of available shopping venues (e.g., town center shops; strip mall; large shopping mall); proximity from home to stores; parents and siblings considerations; and proximity from home to homes of family members.

## **Recognizing the Winds of Change**

There has been a relatively recent transformation of the once dynamic downtown center, the cornerstone of many towns. Many such districts have experienced a considerable economic downturn, resulting in diminished pedestrian shopping traffic, followed by the closings of local businesses. Less affluent towns with serious financial issues have witnessed the crumbling of their downtown infrastructure. Many of the commercial buildings, both inside and out, are in dire need of structural and cosmetic repairs. Some towns are beset with crime, drugs and high numbers of unemployed residents. A number of expensive key flagship store owners realizing no profitability, have fled these communities in droves. As a result, many long standing downtown establishments have been replaced by bargain stores and thrift shops.

The dramatic drop-off in local retail sales appears to have originated with the appearance of the large shopping malls on the scene more than a quarter of a century ago. Some townspeople, abandoning the personal charm and attention to service offered by 'mom and pop' downtown establishments, willingly drive twenty-five minutes or more to the giant highway stores and stockpile their vans and SUVs with food, gifts and every imaginable piece of merchandise. All of this comes with the enticement of one-stop shopping, larger selections and less expensive prices publicized in daily and weekly newspaper circulars and flyers stuffed into mail boxes.

Retail merchants who operated their stores at the same location for decades have been forced to close up shop due to lack of business and spiraling rent costs. In many cases, vacancies exist for months while frustrated landlords desperately await the arrival of new entrepreneurs to pay the rent and peddle their wares.

Big chain stores are certainly not the only perceived villain responsible for the vanishing of many small, retail establishments. The major reason of course, is the internet. Sales from online purchases continue to skyrocket higher each year from the prior holiday season. And most online stores offer even more enticing perks than do the large shopping malls. What online suppliers may forfeit in terms of individual attention to their customers, they make it up with less expensive pricing and faster mail deliveries. Amazon.com, Inc., the world's largest online retailer, is reportedly in the early phases of testing its own delivery service that would reduce the company's reliance on UPS and FedEx and actually improve customer service.

There is a strong counter argument in favor of maintaining a physical store to shop (e.g., clothing apparel shops; grocery stores; shoe stores). In addition to providing individualized quality service, a physical store affords customers the opportunity to examine the merchandise firsthand and receive personal attention and ask pertinent questions about the products. Home buyers will never be able to feel the texture and quality of a man's suit from viewing a computer. The pixels on a monitor screen do not always accurately capture the true colors of a woman's dress. Online customers do not have the capability of trying on a pair of shoes for comfort or a pair of trousers to confirm the label's size is an accurate measurement. Online grocery shoppers can never inspect the quality, color, freshness, and smell of vegetables, seafood, and the butcher's prime beef from their laptops and tablets at home.

In recent years, a saving grace for downtown centers has been the opening of numerous upscale, ethnic, BYOB restaurants and fast food eateries. Other towns have brought in brand name retail stores (e.g., William-Sonoma; the Gap; Victoria's Secret), often to the chagrin of local merchants. While these measures have proven to be a successful approach for increasing downtown traffic and generating revenue, they are not a remedy, but, realistically, only a bandage, a temporary fix. Acquiring and retaining businesses in the community remain at the forefront of any successful downtown operation. Until such time as more innovative plans are developed, approved and aggressively undertaken by the local governing body, it is a realistic fear that the future of many downtown neighborhoods will continue to suffer.

## **Rich Heritage**

The narrative does not end here. No – this is not a story about memories from a bygone era, sentimentality, or a pining with nostalgia for a not-so-distant past. Nor is this to be construed as a tale of woe, but rather the contrary. It is a pitch for the importance and survival of America's downtowns. This is because there is a magical quality of life that can still be found in small towns throughout the United States, especially right here in New Jersey. And the key component for this pervasive and enduring appeal is, by point of fact, its existing downtown districts, which will always represent the heart and soul of the community.

The warm tradition of the downtown has its roots in Europe. Many town plazas and public squares are now being modeled after the “piazza,” as it is known in Italy and “la place” in France. This is the reason why, outside of checking into their hotel rooms, the downtown district is the very first destination to which foreigners to the United States wish to gravitate. It is where tourists can experience this strange, new land first-hand, mingle with the natives, where they can breathe in the language, dress, and customs.

The European influence has led to the emergence of a café culture in the United States. As coffee shops and cafés place their tables and chairs out onto the pavement, towns have developed a more continental atmosphere encouraging people to stay longer and socialize. This is the secret charm of downtown that can be found nowhere else.



Take the time to walk the streets of your own town square and plaza. Run fingers along the exterior of the buildings, touch the bricks and examine the texture and design. These old structures chronicle a rich, local heritage that link visitors to the town’s cultural, as well as historic past. Neighborhood centers provide individuals a sense of place to connect with neighbors, encourage a feeling of ownership, and above all, a true belonging to where they call home.

### **Transformation**

A great many small towns, villages, and boroughs in New Jersey have successively responded to the challenges of difficult economic times by tackling the problems facing small business operations. These communities are showing the way to enjoy prosperous downtown life, thanks in large measure to the workings of active Chambers of Commerce, inventive ideas and the acquisitions of solid business partners.

The United States is in the midst of its largest immigration wave in more than a century. New immigrants have arrived from as far away as Mexico, China, the Philippines, India, Cuba, Columbia, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Vietnam, Jamaica, South Korea, and Guatemala. As generations of earlier immigrants have done, they initially tend to reside in the same general area with people of their own ethnicity, so as to retain a sense of the old country, while becoming acclimated to the language and customs of their newly adopted homeland. The majority are young people with one primary goal in mind, to put food on the table and make a better life for their families and themselves. Most are hardworking individuals, who are injecting a new vitality into this country by sharing the customs, food, music, and dance which they brought to America from their native lands. Many have opened downtown ethnic restaurants, grocery stores, computer stores and convenience stores in the neighborhoods where they now make their homes. They work in various trades, some of which they brought from the old country and other skills which they developed as citizens in the United States. These jobs include work as retail owners, retail sales clerks, chefs, waiters, construction workers, accountants, and auditors.

There are numerous, vibrant downtowns throughout New Jersey, including but certainly not limited to Bergen, Essex, Morris, and Union counties, (which were considered for this article). These regions continue to maintain prosperous town centers that showcase a number of wonderful shops, businesses, restaurants, and community events.

Some towns obviously have more ideal, geographic locations to showcase their exceptional downtowns. However, a number of the older existing communities and the newer developments in the western part of the state must contend with either limited space or local government laws that are not advantageous or exclude designing replications of old style downtown centers, plazas and village greens. This is attributable to a number of factors. Some residents, for example, actually prefer that a central shopping district not be erected within their towns, citing potential traffic congestion and the lack of available parking which will result. Another valid reason is that the construction of downtowns in the conventional street grid design of more than a hundred years ago would be prohibitive today based on current zoning laws, strict code restrictions, and ordinances (e.g., setback requirements: buildings may be too close

to the road; streets and sidewalks can be too narrow; no parallel parking is allowed in many venues; curbside trees may be deemed too hazardous for passing motorists; regulations governing the size of signs and sometimes the size and style of the lettering), unless these are approved by the municipality's zoning board. In such towns where there has been no such approval, the end result has been a major dependence on isolated small strip malls and highway shopping centers.

More fortunate communities with either larger cityscapes or better originally designed street grids (e.g., Cranford, Madison, Montclair, Morristown, Ridgewood, and Westfield), have embraced their town squares. These municipalities heavily promote the downtown areas through street fairs, art, music, and ethnic food festivals. Many towns and villages with smaller boundaries (e.g., Maplewood, Millburn, New Providence, and Union), while also offering a number of these activities, have not stood idly by during difficult times either. They have used creative measures and encouraged direct input from community residents through town hall meetings and the workings of planning boards to promote downtown development and upgrading. In the smaller downtowns, some notable additions have included the construction of a gazebo for a borough park; an increase in the number of park benches; installing more pedestrian walkways inside parks; sidewalk facelifts using Belgian block paving stones; redesigned parking spaces to allow for more vehicles; and new, more attractive storefronts and street lamps. In towns confronted with significant crime levels, drugs, and high school drop-out rates, a number of neighborhood action committees have been formed to work with families and local law enforcement to combat gang violence and promote education.

Another consideration for improving downtowns is through a revitalization process provided by the National Main Street Center, Inc. This is a nonprofit subsidiary of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. National Main Street Center maintains that it is committed to build on its thirty-three year history of advancing the preservation-based revitalization of downtowns and neighborhood business districts throughout the country. The Main Street Four-Point Approach believes this can be accomplished by leveraging local assets from historic, cultural, and architectural resources to local enterprises and community pride. It is a comprehensive strategy that addresses the variety of issues and problems that challenge traditional commercial districts.

### **What Matters Most**

The ultimate decision on whether to live in an older community with an active town center or a newer development devoid of a downtown is obviously personal preference. It is a fairly easy to decide if the major considerations are based primarily on the size and age of the house, and family income. That is because many of the homes currently being constructed are much larger than those built just a few generations earlier. And with that in mind, most new houses are generally being built in areas that do not have the option of erecting the conventional old style downtown for the reasons previously discussed. The choice, then, is living in a new and larger house vs. having a town center nearby a smaller, older home. It is understandable why this can be a very difficult decision.

The latest New Jersey Census data indicates that many younger people are willing to forsake the joy of owning a much larger, modern colonial style home, with more property, for a considerably smaller, fifty-plus year old cape, ranch, or split level home, at prices relatively comparable, depending of course upon the location. The ultimate decision appears quite straightforward if based on the sheer convenience of living in a town or borough that offers the amenities of a downtown area, and sometimes the additional perk of having a nearby train or bus station that provides mass transit for New Jersey commuters who work in New York City, or visit there on a frequent basis. It all comes down to choice and what matters most.

### **Epilogue**

I was introduced to the downtown experience by my loving mother at a very young age. She took me on regular excursions to the shopping mecca of her own youth, where all points led – the intersection of Broad and Market Streets, in Newark, NJ. At the time I would have much preferred to stay home and watch cartoons all day on television. By the age of five, my young eyes became familiar with the insides all of the city's major department stores: Bamberger's, Hahne's, S. Klein, Kresge's, and Ohrbach's. I can recall that we also made less frequent stops to the rows of small boutiques that lined Halsey Street, a side artery that runs parallel to the Broad Street thoroughfare. I went to a few movies downtown with my father by the age of eleven and remember being completely mesmerized by the epic films, *The Ten Commandments* and *Ben-Hur*, which we saw at either the Loew's Theater on Broad Street or the Adams on Branford Place.

Approximately two months after the Newark race riots ended, I started my sophomore year of high school. It was the fall of 1967 and I was now a fifteen year old teenager traveling those same downtown streets to school each day on a public service bus from my home in Irvington. Much of the area had changed considerably in the intervening months, but there were remaining vestiges from my pre-school days spent shopping with Mom in the late 1950s that returned a flood of memories. On those early December afternoons returning home from school, the bus window offered a ringside seat to the visible signs that the holidays were in the air. The streets were alive again with shoppers. Many of the stores were adorned with decorative lighting and Christmas wreaths. I was quite pleased to see a few sidewalk Santas strategically positioned along several sections of Broad Street. It made me smile recalling Dad's explanation,



which perfectly cleared up my confusion concerning why I would see several jolly, white bearded old men in red outfits on the streets preceding the big day: "They are only Santa's helpers, Johnny. The real Santa won't be coming until Christmas Eve, when you and your brother are fast asleep." When the driver would open the back door to drop off passengers along our bus route, I could make out the sounds of Salvation Army volunteers singing Christmas songs next to a small ensemble of musicians, while a single volunteer stood ten feet away, next to a large, red donations kettle pot, ringing the familiar bell.

A great deal of my time was spent in later teenage years with neighborhood pals and high school friends in the old Irvington neighborhood. One of the guys coined our group, "The Boys from the Lot," or the "BFL" for short. This came about because we literally spent years hanging out in a corner parking lot adjacent to a candy store, which was down the block from a Catholic girls' high school. It could not have been a more ideal situation as most of us went to a Catholic boys' school in Newark.

When we weren't playing touch football or baseball after school, we spent most of the time roaming all through Irvington center. Our downtown area encompassed a major stretch of Springfield Avenue and seemed to go on forever. It was a common occurrence to order a slew of burgers and fries or split a pizza with some Cokes, which we devoured effortlessly while sitting on swivel stools at the Woolworth's counter. And there were those hot, July afternoons when we stood in long lines at Dairy Queen, waiting impatiently for deliciously cold vanilla shakes and extra-thick malts.

Most of our sport accessories were bought at Miele's Sporting Goods. We always seemed to be replenishing our supply of rubber coated baseballs, which had a habit of getting lost or simply disappearing through someone's kitchen window or one of the third floor windows in the girls' high school. We used rubber coated balls rather than regulation baseballs because most of our games were played on asphalt parking lots, which we realized early on, would eventually rip the covers off the real baseballs. It was a worthwhile investment.

About this same time, I started buying dress clothes at David Burr Mens & Boys Shop, which most of us considered the hip place in town for the latest shirts, slacks and sport jackets. I had begun to pay for most of my own clothes by now, from the hourly wages I was earning from my very first job at the local A & P Supermarket. And all this sprucing up was mainly to get us ready for the weekly Friday evening C.Y.O. mixers. But more often than not, we found ourselves returning in a pack to Irvington center after the dance had ended, without the company of a date. We usually ended up at one of the two diners in town where we scoffed down some eggs or maybe a slice of cheesecake, with our coffee, but mostly we went there to compare notes from the evening and discuss which girls lost their chances with us.

With the coming of marriage and fatherhood, the appeal of downtowns never ceased for me. My wife and I would semi-regularly spend a couple of hours on Saturday or Sunday afternoons, first as newlyweds, and then later with our stroller

age kids, meandering through town centers in Bloomfield, Chester, Madison, Montclair, Morristown, New Providence, Princeton, Ridgewood, Summit, and Westfield, selecting a different town most weekends. Our neighborhood romps were usually spent perusing book shops, toy stores, and craft shops, culminating with a stopover at an ice cream shop, a Starbucks, or a diner before the ride home.

The wonderful people I have known and the environment that shaped me are remembered for reasons beyond mere sentimentality. They represent the best times from a life well lived, a life shared with special people and special moments in neighborhoods where practically anything was possible. As I write this, many of these exceptional people and the places that thrilled us, are no longer here, except in memory, but always and forever they remain in my heart. I walked with this great crowd, felt their laughter, their tears, their happiness, their enthusiasm, and their pain, as they did mine. I knew the joy of family and friendships. I experienced love and returned it unconditionally. As long as I have my mind, these precious gifts can never be taken away from me. Not ever.

For young and old alike who currently reside in or eventually choose an older community as a permanent address, there is an important message. The winds of change will not cheat or abandon these neighborhoods. Newer does not always equate to a better quality of living. Through a process of good will, hard work, and reform by its citizens, responsible transition will continue for the betterment of the aging towns, boroughs, and villages.

The emotional attachment most people feel today about living in these hamlets is indicative of time honored traditional values that extol the tales of a rich human existence. This can never be underestimated. Within these confines remains a strong sense of pride, belonging, and active service to the community. And there is no better way to experience that solid connection than by going directly to its core, the central cohesive source of support and stability, by heading straight for Downtown.

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