

# Public is walking away from street malls

It seemed a radical idea: Close off a street to vehicles in the heart of the downtown and open it only to a single use, that of the pedestrian. In today's parlance, this user-friendly pedestrian street or mall would make the shopping experience more enjoyable, safer, lead to more socializing and make it easier for the pedestrian to shop and buy more. And for a while it worked.

The first of the approximately 200 shopping malls that were built in the downtowns of this nation was opened in Kalamazoo, Mich., in 1959. A five-lane street, two blocks long, it was closed to traffic, and well-known architect Victor Gruen filled the space with lawns, trees, flowers, benches and fountains.

An immediate hit in this small city of 80,000, the mall generated increased retail sales and soon expanded to four blocks, while officials came from throughout the country and abroad to witness it. In time, the novelty wore off and sales at mall shops declined, businesses moved out to the suburbs where the new shopping centers were being built, and empty stores were much in evidence on the mall when it celebrated its 30th anniversary last year. Currently, the city and merchants are considering converting two or three blocks back to a street again.

This de-malling of shopping zones that sought to revitalize city centers is taking place in other cities also: Trenton, N.J.; Wilmington, Del.; New London, Conn.; Oak Park, Ill.; and Norfolk, Va., are in this group. Although some malls still prosper and some are being upgraded, the general trend is to make changes or eliminate what was thought to be a panacea for the downtown retail ills. So the reopening of the Westminster Mall to cars in Providence should come as no surprise.



Westminster Mall was reopened to automobile traffic earlier this year as a result of slow retail business and stiff competition from nearby indoor shopping malls. photo by Stephen Spencer

The former Westminster Mall illustrates the forces that operate to counteract attempts to restore retail vitality to city centers. The \$600,000 investment in 1964 to eliminate traffic from six blocks along what was then the main shopping street of the city seemed a good one in the early days. And businesses prospered—that is, until a new phenomenon in the area appeared on the scene: The Midland Mall (now called Rhode Island Mall) opened three years later, to be followed in another three years by the Warwick Mall.

But these malls were different. Not only was the pedestrian able to walk around in an auto-free environment but he or she was also able to do this in a climate controlled setting. There were squeaky clean, all-new shops, major department stores and, best of all, an available and free parking space at the end of a quick interstate highway run. They were major attractions that downtown found hard to beat.

Perhaps the biggest advantage that these new shopping malls had over the downtowns, not visible to the shopper, was single ownership. Thus, the mall could lock its doors at night,

control undesirable elements within this enclosed space, sponsor events, advertise for all of the merchants as control hours of operation and expect certain minimum standards of operation that any downtown retail organization would have difficulty implementing.

These suburban malls were a response to a phenomenon over which cities had no control: the movement of city people to the suburbs. The basic economic consequence was to build in the market areas, and this the malls did with a vengeance. Today, not only has retailing shifted to the periphery of the city. The jobs, services and, in some instances, the institutions that we normally associate with city activities have also moved.

There was a time when people identified with the city because they were a part of it. Older people wax nostalgic about the Outlet, Shepard's Tea Room, the great downtown Christmas displays and a host of other pleasant memories picked up over time. But what of a younger generation which has always lived in the suburbs and shopped, worked and thrived there? Is a pedestrian mall with some fancy lights and planters bring them into the city?

Cities by themselves cannot reverse trends, and one of the inescapable facts of life in this auto-oriented country is that activities that provide easy auto access and parking have a decided advantage in capturing the shopper. City centers, with their high demands for land, are crowded and expensive, while suburban centers are better oriented to the automobile. This suburban site advantage makes retailing less of a viable option for city centers. In fact, today's downtowns are primarily shopping areas in only 21 percent of the communities with populations of 50,000 to 500,000.

This is not to say that city centers will lose their retailing activities, but rather that they will have to be more imaginative in what they do to capture a bigger share of the market. And they must recognize the characteristics of the potential buyer.

Studies have shown the importance of the downtown workers to retailing. For example, the

typical office worker spends \$1800 a year downtown on food and goods, with 60 percent of that spent during the lunch hour. And 80 percent of these shoppers will not walk more than three blocks to a shopping destination. Additionally, the more retail opportunities that are available, the more shopping that will take place.

Knowing these few simple facts, what can be done to capture more of this potential market? In Portland, Ore., there are more people in the downtown on a weekend than there are during the work week. This is not because there are few workers in the downtown during the week, but rather because efforts are made to generate activities on weekends that will bring people downtown, such as festivals, cultural events and city- and business-sponsored activities.

Not every city can be a Portland, but what about the 500 new American Express workers now at Gateway Center in the Capital Center area of Providence? What, if anything, is being done to capture some of this potential market? Would a shuttle bus to the downtown be an option? Is there an organization that addresses such questions? Who is taking the lead in raising such issues? And most important, is anyone doing anything about it?

Changing a downtown mall to a street again is not going to have a major impact on business activity in downtown Providence, but with some leadership, some organization and some cooperation, the downtown business sector can improve the opportunities. A Providence Place mall offers some hope, but also raises questions about its impact on the rest of the city center.

Cities have much more to offer to potential customers than do outlying areas, but only determined efforts of downtown interests and the city can bring about improvement. Time will tell if such groups are willing and able to accept this challenge.

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## 25 Years of Mr. Smiley Face: A Retrospective of His Life and Times...

<p>1965: The Big Debut. Fame &amp; success would soon follow...</p> <p>Have a Nice Day, every body!</p>	<p>1967: The Summer of Love...</p> <p>Like, Have a nice... uh... what-ever!</p>	<p>1969: First drug bust.</p>
<p>1972: The Dick Cavett Show.</p> <p>You sound bitter.</p> <p>No, just older and wiser. The world isn't such a nice place, Dick.</p>	<p>1978: Back Again.</p> <p>Thanks, Jim. Thanks, Tammy. It's always great to be on the show!</p>	<p>1981: The Reagan Era.</p> <p>I'm sorry, but Mr. Face isn't available. Meet in conference with the President.</p>
<p>1984: The famous Giff with the First Lady.</p> <p>And STAY OUT!</p>	<p>1987: Hitting bottom. Convictions on 14 charges of influence-peddling in Washington, D.C.</p> <p>Guilty. Guilty. Guilty. Guilty. Guilty. Guilty. Guilty. Guilty. Guilty. Guilty. Guilty. Guilty. Guilty. Guilty. Guilty.</p>	<p>1990: Comeback City. A face-lift, a best-selling book ("Looking Out for #1"), and a new slogan:</p> <p>Have a Good One!</p>

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