

STABILIZING THE DOWNTOWN:
CASE STUDY OF THE IMPACT OF A REGIONAL SHOPPING
MALL ON THE DOWNTOWN OF GRAND FORKS, NORTH DAKOTA

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by
Sheila Vanderhoef
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DEDICATION

To Harry, who issued the necessary imperative.

ABSTRACT

This document is concerned with the importance of retailing in the CBD's of smaller cities and the impact of major retail shopping alternatives on the viability of the CBD. The inquiry is comprised of a literature review and a case study.

The literature review section focuses on the development of the CBD and the problems of a particular type of CBD. The case study examines the City of Grand Forks, North Dakota and the impact of a regional shopping mall on the CBD of the city.

This document concludes with an assessment of the actions which Grand Forks took, to try to cope with the impact of the regional mall.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis is concerned with the downtowns of cities and their problems and prospects. The specific focus will be on downtowns of medium-size cities for whom commercial activity is of primary economic importance. The downtown is also important to the city at another level. It serves as the central focal point of the urban area and as such, is most frequently traversed and readily recognized by residents and non-residents alike. In this respect, the historical or symbolic nature of the downtown is recognized. These two concepts of the importance of downtown, form the underlying assumptions of this thesis.

Within the context of the above assumptions it is generalized that if the downtown district of a city is an important part of the city then there is a critical relationship between a vital downtown and vital urban area. Additionally, the changing relationship of the downtown to the city

city and problems arising from this change will be explored in the framework of the role of downtown from the past to the present and the relationship of city size to the development of this role.

The interest in strengthening and stabilizing the downtown of North American cities is rooted, not only in the symbolic historical basis of downtown, but is also a part of a general trend towards compact or centralized living. In the U.S., which is the primary focus of this thesis, the rising costs of energy has forced all levels of governments to reconsider the economic viability of further spatial expansion versus, reconcentration in the existing core. The timeliness of this inquiry then, is in certainty that energy costs will not decrease significantly in the short term and therefore abandonment of the spatially compact central cities, which has been taken place, must be reconsidered. It is the basic theory here that the abandonment of the older core has taken place because of a conflict between the old lifestyle which created the compact downtown and the present living pattern of a highly mobile population.

This investigation will utilize a literature review to establish the roots of the downtown and a case study to

highlight the predicament of the present downtown.

STATEMENT OF INTENT

It is the intent of this thesis to investigate, in detail, the specific circumstances of a problem-plagued downtown. Certain recommendations will be put forth to resolve these problems, and the recommendations will consider the linkage of city to region. It is suggested that those technological advances which have strengthened the city and region relationship have contributed to the diminished importance of the downtown, and with these considerations in mind, this thesis will examine some strategies aimed at revitalizing or stabilizing a declining downtown.

It is recognized that the city is a central focal point and operates in a regional context. Strategies, aimed at revitalizing or stabilizing a declining downtown, must deal with regional developments which have an influence upon the district. Some of the more profound effects on the downtown are generated by population and commercial shifts at the regional level, and while such regional concerns are the general interest of this thesis, the one specific development that will be focused upon is the regional shopping center.

A regional shopping center, as the title implies, is largely, although not exclusively, a retail/commercial facility and as such has its greatest impact upon those cities whose predominant function is as a regional retail/commercial center. The cities in this group are generally the smaller cities located in historically rural/agricultural regions where agriculturally related industries and occupations still prevail. It is suggested that these cities are adversely affected by the introduction of regional shopping and such effects appear most apparently in the downtown district.

In response to the increasing impact upon the traditional downtown of regional shopping centers, and the general impact of continuing dispersion of economic and social activity, on the whole city; a decision concerning the continued viability of a small city and the role of the larger city must be made. It is the contention of this thesis that the decision must, of necessity, be in favour of strengthening and stabilizing the city by strengthening and stabilizing one key element of the city, the downtown.

This inquiry will be limited to dealing specifically with the smaller city - its problems and prospects. In

particular, it will focus, through the case study, on a smaller United States city, which was experiencing decline in the downtown, and found the process accelerated by the introduction of a regional shopping center on the periphery.

In summary then, the central question of this investigation is; Can municipal governments develop and implement strategies to revitalize, stabilize, and strengthen the downtown? The literature review and case study will provide the information basis and suggest the answer to this question.

Method of Approach

In the course of the study, two distinct methods of approach are used. The first method will be a review of existing literature in the areas of the historical development of downtowns; the emergence of general problems leading to decline, and a review development of the several categories of solutions exercised in an attempt to solve the problems.

For further clarity, the historical section of the literature review can be divided into two parts. One deals with the rise of downtowns and the second part deals with the relationship of the role of the downtown and the size and function of the city. The second part of the literature

review, concerned with general problems, can be divided into large city and smaller city problems as general types. Solutions will also be reviewed in terms of their occurrence with respect to city size.

The second method to be employed here will be a case study. The case study will focus on the specific circumstances of the City of Grand Forks, North Dakota.

The two parts, in concert, will serve as a basis for developing guidelines to ascertain the most appropriate strategy for revitalizing the downtown given certain known precipitating factors, and information about the cities role in the regional context.

Chapter Synopsis

Chapter one, part of the literature review, is a history of the development of the role of downtown. It examines, the role and function of downtowns as they developed from the pre-industrial city's market core. This chapter defines the term downtown and also sets the scene for understanding the importance of the downtown to the city and in the regional context.

Chapter two introduces the concept that the old form of the downtown has in part contributed to its problems.

This chapter stresses the impact of the changing urban character on the old urban form. The old compact settlement pattern has been replaced with a more loosely organized model and this has led to serious problems in many downtowns.

Chapter three takes the problems of downtown one step further and establishes the city size and function relationship, and this relationships' bearing upon specific problems. This chapter also emphasis the importance of the retail-commercial function to a specific category of city.

Chapter four is the first of two chapters which comprise the case study. This chapter will introduce the city of Grand Forks and discuss the city-region relationship.

Chapter five investigates the specific circumstances of the downtown district of Grand Forks, and reviews and examines the response of the municipal government to these specific circumstances.

Chapter six will examine the Grand Forks case with respect to other similiar examples from the literature as a means of evaluating the specific actions taken in Grand Forks. Recommendations based on this evaluation will close this chapter.

The summary, chapter seven, will suggest that the potential for solving downtowns' problems is in the development of radical strategies which redefine the role and function of downtowns to more adequately reflect the present urban society's needs.

CHAPTER I HISTORY - THE DEVELOPMENT OF DOWNTOWNS

A careful study of the development of the whole is an essential first step in the study of any of the parts. For example, the development of the human embryo must be understood before discussions of the development of arms, eyes, or speech are engaged. The human subject though, is a complex living organism, and as such, adheres to the systematic growth pattern of living organisms. This growth pattern is called organic growth and has been applied to inanimate agglomerations such as cities in recent years. If cities do indeed exhibit such organic growth characteristics, various parts of the 'urban organism', are probably best understood if the inception and growth of the whole is clear. In the cases of cities, the rise and growth of urban places is embodied in many different theories, based on conflicting interpretations of historical remains. They range from those which stress agricultural surplus, or economic impetus, to those which rely upon religious, military or protection

considerations, as being of primary importance in the rise of cities. There are also various combinations of the above models and some additional theories of city growth as well. The most appropriate theories here, and favoured by the author, are those which consider agricultural surplus and the rise of economic activity as the main rationale for, not the emergence but continuation and growth of cities. Agricultural surplus allowed for some residents to be engaged in activities other than food related ones and these activities moved the first village to its urban status. In the framework of such theories, the origin of one particular part of the city, the downtown, district will be examined with regard to its historical origin its role and functioning. This discussion will form the basis of chapter one.

Origins of the City

The term "city" differs from "town" or "village". The city can be considered a "higher order" of development of the village or town, and a metropolis another level of the city and megalopolis the highest urbanized order yet identified. But these terms have little relevance unless the full evolution from the original village to urban center is understood.

The earliest recognized urban settlements were in the region of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in 3500 B.C.¹ This area is called the "cradle of civilization", making civilization nearly synonymous with city. In discussing this area, many scholars note that the periodic flooding of the valley provided fertile soil, which contributed to agricultural surpluses. These surpluses meant that not all citizens needed to be directly engaged in food production in order to be supported. Some citizens could provide services in exchange for food. Also, in times of famine in nearby regions, it is conceivable that food was sold to neighbouring areas or wandering tribes. In order for such trading to be viable, written records were necessary. Record keepers, and skilled persons to handle commerce were necessary. Gradually, the presence of items to trade - at first perhaps food - encouraged permanent traders who established trade in a wide variety of items, and over a period of time, regular commerce is established.

The modern city emerged as a distinct city form, thousands of years after the first urban settlements. But the attributes and characteristics of the modern city though were first formed in this period.

From its origins onward, indeed, the city may be described as a structure specially equipped to store and transmit

1. Michael Palmer, Cities, (London: Bit. Batsforo Ltd, 1971), p.1.

the goods of civilization, sufficiently condensed to afford the maximum amount of facilities in a minimum space, but also capable of structural enlargement to enable it to find a place for the changing needs of the more complex forms of a growing society.²

The city, then, is not a collection of previously unknown activities, but is the first agglomeration of such activities in a permanent space.

What happened rather with the rise of cities, was that many functions that had heretofore been scattered and unorganized were brought together within a limited area, and the components of the community were kept in a state of dynamic tension and interaction.³

It is within the nature of the city to accommodate and encourage diversity of people and occupations, but the importance of agriculture, a non-urban function, as a catalyst in the formation of cities cannot be overlooked.

Civilization and cities developed together...In fact cities only became possible when the system of agricultural production became advanced enough to produce food surplus to support towns, where skilled craftsmen could concentrate on activities other than farming.⁴

The history of the city then, is a history of ever changing functions in response to changing needs of the population. While the city changes, certain key elements emerge as constant or nearly constant aspects of urban organization. The market and the market function is one such aspect. The chart on the following page clearly lists the six major eras of city development and describes the market characteristics of each.

2. Lewis Mumford, The City In History, (New York, Harcourt Brace and World, Inc. 1961). p.30.

3. Ibid., P. 31.

4. Op. Cit., Palmer, p.2.

TABLE 1 - 1

THE ORIGIN AND GROWTH OF CITIES

ERA	TIME & URBAN FORM	ORGANIZATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS	SYMBOLIC CHARACTERISTICS
Pre-City	<u>Pre-history</u> Early extended family settlements; often nomadic, ruled by kinship.	Beginning of co-operation and division of labour; necessary pre-requisites for trade.	Later settlements mainly shrines, visited periodically.
Ancient City	<u>3,000 B.C.</u> Tigrus - Euphrates valley area of the city of Ur. A walled city with religious shrine, constantly attended.	Support of ruling elite by peasant worker class. Market area evident and trade is underway with neighbouring cities.	Religious precinct with assembly and protection functions incorporated.
Classical City	<u>3rd Century B.C.</u> Planned cities with limited infrastructure, e.g. water piped in. Rise of privileged middle class.	Commerce is primary activity represented by the Agora and Forum in the Greek and Roman cities. Commerce in both ideas and goods; development of great thinkers and philosophers - Socrates.	Religion still has important role to play. Collapse of the Roman Empire encourages a return to mystic rule.
Medieval City	<u>600 A.D.</u> City services are nearly non-existent in feudal cities. There is some commerce in the market but production is distributed by lord and priests.	Market separate area yet the early feudal was basically an economy of no markets. By 11th Century, commerce and trade are reestablished and agricultural production increases.	Church is a separate area although the influence is starting to decline by the end of this period.
Mercantile City (Pre-Industrial City)	<u>15th Century</u> This city was a bridge from the medieval type of city to the modern industrial city. Manufacturing and manufactured goods take equal place in the market with agricultural products.	Rise of the craft guilds and segregation of the market into single product area and living areas. The guild is main force in the city and remains so until the rise of factories.	In place of the religious precinct, the town halls, guild halls, and civic centers appear.
Industrial City	<u>18th Century</u> The city becomes a necessary form for the continuance of industrial development which relies on a readily available large labour resource.	The outdoor market goes permanently indoors and the large scale manufacturing, necessitates external commerce on a large scale.	Finance and government become the dominant urban forms and functions of the central urban area.

Sources: Mumford, Lewis. The City in History. New York: Harcourt Brace and World, Inc., 1961.
Palmer, Michael. Cities. London: Bit Batsforo Ltd., 1971.

Up to the nineteenth century, there had been a rough balance of activities within the city. Though work and trade were always important, religion and art and play claimed their full share of the townsman's energies. But the tendency to concentrate on economic activities and to regard as waste the time on effort spent on other functions, at least outside the home, had been growing steadily since the sixteenth century.⁵

The industrial city maintains a well organized market area, but the goods shifted from agricultural products to the products of industry. The advances in scientific thought of this period, freed the city for the first time in its history from reliance on religious protection and the religious shrine as a singular area disappears. The industrial revolution, with its need for, manpower, brought many persons from the rural areas to live in towns. The conditions in these early industrial cities were such that the cities could not grow by natural increase. Death rates were so high, that the cities relied for expansion, on a constant in-migration from the rural areas. The cities grew in size and number during this period, since the factories required large pools of local labour to operate.

The market area of the mediieval town has diversified and solidified. It can now be recognized as the commercial core. In it are located offices and warehousing for exchanging and storing manufactured goods. The volume of

5. Op. Cit., Mumford, p. 446.

goods produced encourages external trade and the development of methods for transportation to the far flung markets. Even though the city has come a long way since the early pre-city, the industrial city and the post industrial city still mirror certain of the characteristics of their predecessors.

The medieval market, has become the central business district or CBD, but the layout of like merchants located together, and the whole area within easy pedestrian access, remains. The CBD from its medieval origins as the market and activity center, shifts and refines its role and remains as the recognized focus of the urban area. It has been a constant and constantly involving feature since earliest urban beginning. It is a special section of the city in form and function and is regarded as such by the population.

What is the Downtown?

The "Downtown", "central business district", "metropolitan core", or "commercial core", are just four of the many terms which are used to refer to the urban heart. The importance of the human heart to the well-being of the body makes the term "urban heart" most appropriate. As with the human

body, an ailing or deteriorating urban heart can have serious consequences for the entire urban area.

In approaching the problem of the hearts of our cities, it is essential that we recognize the interdependence existing between them and the surrounding urbanized areas and metropolitan region. A healthy heart with a chaotic region is just as unworkable an absurdity as a metropolitan region with a dying heart.⁶

The urban heart then is an integral aspect and distinct part of the urban form and a key component in fiscal solvency.

The urban heart is characterized by the land use and activities which occur there. All of the names which refer to the district, reflect some aspect of its distinct form. The term "downtown" which originated in New York to differentiate between "uptown" or "midtown", described the area of Manhattan,⁷ the cultural, social, financial, commercial core of New York. It has since become nearly synonymous with the term CBD or "central business district". Perceptually, the term has limitations in that it connotes a business center when actually there are a diversity of activities taking place, although business may dominate the area. The term metropolitan core more aptly describes

6. Victor Gruen, The Heart of Our Cities: The Urban Cities: Diagnosis and Cure, (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1964, p. 266.

7. Ibid., p. 47.

the areas under discussion, but it too has limitations. Towns, villages and small cities, not of metropolitan stature, have an urban heart. The term commercial core, although more broad ranging in its meaning, suffers the same limitations as CBD in that it does not fully reflect the diversity of the area. It excludes cultural activities from its meaning.

For the purposes of clarity, the terms CBD and downtown which seem to be most widely used, will be used interchangeably, in this work to refer to the specific area defined below.

Raymond Murphy, who has done a great deal of work on defining and delimiting the CBD has summed up the form as such:

Traditionally the CBD has been thought of as a somewhat indefinite region of the city that nevertheless has certain distinctive characteristics. It is central, at least in terms of accessibility. It has a greater concentration of tall buildings than any other region of the city, since it normally includes most of the city's offices and largest retail stores. It is the area where vehicular and pedestrian traffic are likely to be most concentrated. It averages higher assessed land values and taxes paid than any other part of the city, and it draws its business from the whole urban area and from all ethnic groups and classes of people.⁸

8. Raymond Murphy, The Central Business District, (New York: Aldine Atherton, 1972) p. 2.

It is clear from the above that the CBD is a diverse amalgam of various types of urban activities. The most critical aspect perhaps which distinguishes the CBD from neighbourhood centers, is the intensity of the various characteristics; highest land values, greatest concentrations, most accessible and most offices and stores. The CBD is the urban focal point of cultural activity as well as government functions. Civic offices and city halls are generally located in the downtown area. All of the attributes which Murphy has described for the CBD are not unique activities, but are set apart by the intensive level at which they occur in this district. The CBD then is the representation of the ultimate urban form. It is that portion of the city which has the highest intensity of those characteristics considered urban, and is recognized as such by area residents.

In addition to being the area of "greatest intensity of activity", the downtown of many older cities is also the area of first settlement and as such contains many of the oldest buildings in the city. In cities which were built largely after the introduction and widespread use of the automobile, the downtown may not be the oldest area not is it likely to be of singular distinction. In fact, cities