

TOWARD A PHENOMENOLOGY OF REVITALIZED DOWNTOWNS: A CASE
STUDY OF DOWNTOWN BRYAN, TEXAS

A Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

Revitalized downtowns are distinct places in contemporary American culture. Yet, the draws they have for consumers have been scarcely investigated. Utilizing an expanded formulation of the consumption experience, this study aims to identify and describe these draws, or environmental amenities, through the application of semi-structured interviews of downtown consumers and business owners and first-hand observation of the cultural landscape.

The results of the study indicate that customers were willing to pay a small premium for the experience of shopping in downtown Bryan. On the other hand, the first-hand observation of downtown Bryan provided considerably more detail than the interviews.

Thus, these findings can be used to inform practical policy prescriptions for downtowns. It is suggested that policies to revitalize downtown should strengthen ‘pull factors’ and weaken ‘push factors.’ As such, community decision makers should identify these factors locally to make their downtown more attractive and less repellant to consumers.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to all who participated in this study and to those who enjoy and support downtown Bryan, Texas.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

For some time, there has been rekindled interest and investment in American downtowns. While not all movements to revive individual downtowns have been successful, the *concept of downtown* itself has been revitalized and reshaped to fit contemporary consumer values and identities. The revitalized downtown is now conceptualized as a unique and idiosyncratic place. While there is some homogeneity in architecture and street design, revitalized downtowns are expected to be, and sometimes are, as varied as the cities and towns they belong to. Downtown revitalization in smaller cities and towns looks markedly different than that which is found in larger urban areas, due to the fact that small city downtowns typically have fewer residents. In general, revitalization in small downtowns rests less on their role as a place to live *and* work and more on their role as a node of commercial and community activity.

What follows is a case study of one of these community and commercial nodes. Through the use of first-hand observation and individual, semi-structured interviews, this study aims to identify and describe the environmental amenities that draw consumers to revitalized downtowns. This introduction begins with a short description of the motivations for the study and the recent history of downtown Bryan, Texas, which is the site chosen for this study. Following this is an overview of the research question, methodology, and findings. Lastly, some important terms utilized by the researcher are introduced and defined.

Motivations for this Study

I have always had an interest in learning, in fine detail, about the places I have lived in, or have traveled to, or passed through. It can be described as an acute, investigatory impulse that starts with a walk through a neighborhood, or a glance out of a car window, and leads to grasping the geographer's principal insight that people and environments affect one another. That notion formed the basis on which I built this case study of a revitalized American downtown.

Growing up in College Station, Texas, I knew of the old downtown in nearby Bryan (location shown in Figure 1), but it was not vital to my image of my hometown and its neighboring city. It was only when I entered high school and was generally more aware of my surroundings that I had any lasting memory of downtown Bryan. One of the first I can recall is of my father and I getting a few pizzas from Mr. G's, one of the establishments owned by a family of well-known local restaurateurs. The pizzeria took up the first two floors of an aged building off of Bryan Avenue, with other establishments making use of the third floor and backside of the building. It was obvious to me that this part of Bryan was unlike the other parts of town, due to the facts that the buildings were compactly arranged and their styles were noticeably ornate. There was also a distinct lack of large parking areas surrounding those buildings. I was drawn to come back to the place because it mirrored what I thought a *real city* should look like.

As I began my studies in geography, I overheard talk of downtown Bryan from friends and acquaintances that had spent some time there. After visiting downtown again, I noticed that more restaurants and shops had opened up and it was not

uncommon to see scores of people window-shopping down Main Street on Friday evenings. It appeared to me that the businesses of downtown Bryan (see figure 2) were attracting more customers from all over the cities of Bryan and College Station.

A desire to better understand this change in attitudes about downtown Bryan is the motivation for this case study, but the specific focus on the draw of a revitalized downtown did not come into the picture until I learned more about downtown Bryan's recent past. The section that follows chronicles downtown Bryan's journey from an often-avoided area of town to a hub for community activity.

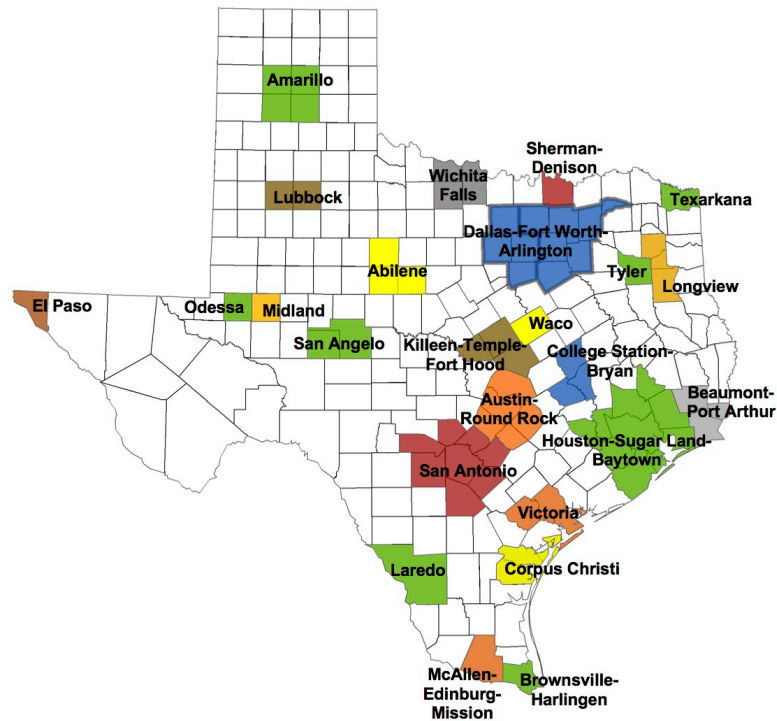


Figure 1. Location of Bryan within the State of Texas. Source: Texas State Data Center

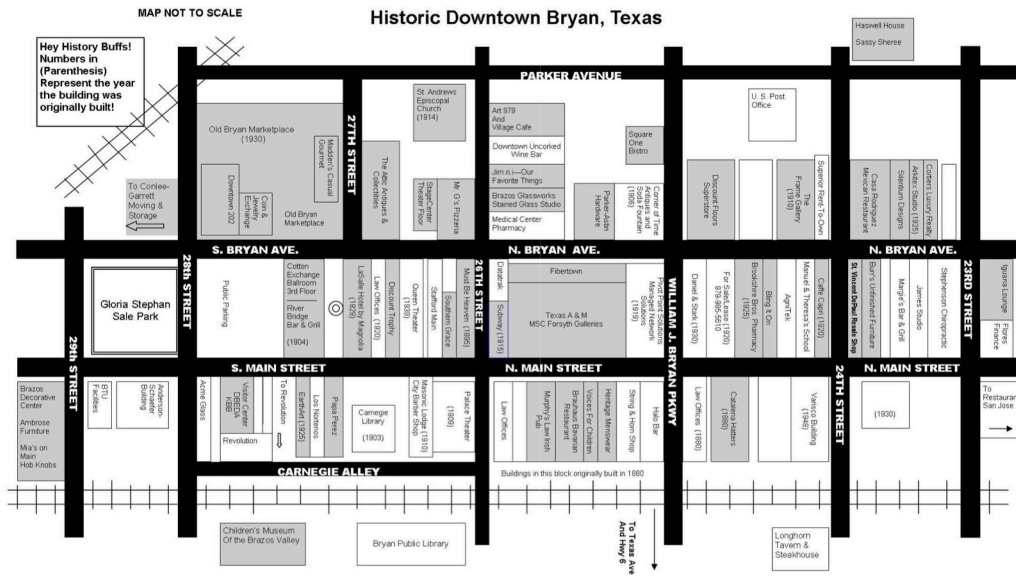


Figure 2. Street Map of Downtown Bryan, Texas. Source: City of Bryan

On Downtown Bryan

A real low for Bryan's downtown was reached in 1980 when the then-current tenant of the La Salle Hotel building closed shop (Levey 2003a). Since the building had not been used as hotel for quite some time, the vacancy was less a comment on the profitability of hotels in Bryan than a reflection of the business community's impression of the state of downtown Bryan. Decline was slow, as many anecdotes recall that much of the city's commercial and civic life was centered in downtown in the decades just preceding the closing of the La Salle. Pragmatically, the City of Bryan adopted historic preservation ordinances to keep the La Salle and other architectural artifacts of Bryan's

history safe from demolition, which was the sad fate of a number of valuable buildings across America (Hamilton 2004a). The closing of Woolworth's downtown department store in 1991 was also significant, due to the fact that it solidified the dominance of the suburban malls that had appeared in Bryan's urban periphery (Hensley 2005).

The La Salle Hotel reopened under new management in 1999 (Levey 2003a), just as some community support and attention was beginning to be paid to downtown. A master plan for a revitalized downtown Bryan was put together by an outside firm, in consultation with Bryan residents and community leaders, and finalized in 2000. Most importantly, the downtown plan led to a \$3 million investment by the City of Bryan toward "streetscape" improvements (Levey 2003b). While the first phase of the improvements would not start until 2003, those committed to downtown were hopeful that the plan would focus community support towards downtown (Restaurant Closes 2009).

Nearly a year later, in late 2001, the City of Bryan bought the once-again-struggling La Salle Hotel for \$1.2 million in a foreclosure auction (Hamilton 2004b). Although not everyone in the community supported the decision or believed the purchase to be particularly wise, such a large building in such a central block of downtown was key to keeping the area relevant. The creation of the Downtown Bryan Economic Development Association in 2002 was another sign that some in the community saw value in these investments (Hamilton 2004c). In June of 2002, business owners set up a walking tour of sorts to show off their establishments and the progress happening in downtown. A few new businesses had opened, and getting more of the

community to take notice was necessary for their success, and for the revitalization of downtown. Around 300 residents showed up (Kavanagh 2002).

At the same time, technology firms began to take an interest in downtown Bryan, due to its proximity to fiber optic cable. The same rail line that led to the agglomeration of economic activity that first made downtown Bryan allowed the site to serve as a prime location for broadband access. The technology firm Trajen owned the old First National Bank Building and operated a data center on the ground floor. Late in 2003, another data center started up in downtown, and eventually took the name “Fibertown” (Peterson 2009). These firms took advantage of the low prices for buildings and property as a way to invest in their own success. Trajen bought Bryan's Queen Theater in November of 2002 with plans for renovation (Denney 2002). The theater, which sits only a few buildings north of the La Salle, had not been working in quite some time.

Increased economic activity downtown spurred greater interest in redevelopment. In August of 2004, the opening of 13 loft apartments in the building that formerly housed the former Charles Hotel more than doubled the number of downtown lofts (Levey 2004). Others saw opportunity as the first phase of streetscape improvements were completed in 2004. Astin Redevelopment Company, in July of 2005, bought two large downtown properties. The Varisco Building, the tallest in downtown Bryan, was the site of Fibertown. The other property purchased was the old Woolworth's building, which Astin Redevelopment decided to rename as the “Wimberly Building” (Hensley 2005).

The second phase of downtown streetscape improvements began in the summer

of 2006 and was completed in 2007 (Restaurant Closes 2009). At the same time, downtown merchants and others were seeking additional means to fund investments in downtown. In Texas, local governments can establish Tax Increment Reinvestment Zones (TIRZ), a type of tax increment financing (TIF), for the purpose of redevelopment. At the time, Bryan had a few TIF districts in neighboring sections of the city, but did not successfully put one in place for downtown until 2006, when the TIRZ was created. This zone included downtown and the corridor along South College Avenue, which connects downtown Bryan to the campus of Texas A&M University in neighboring College Station (Smith 2009).

With the second phase of improvements, downtown Bryan appeared more welcoming to pedestrian traffic and residents who needed to come downtown for local and county government purposes. However, concern over the capacity of downtown to support its growing, and current, consumer base spurred the city to begin construction of a large parking garage on the edge of downtown in 2009 (ibid.). Along with this, the city approved a purchase of property in the northernmost section of downtown, where a number of buildings and lots had been vacant for some time. This decision was an attempt to secure the redevelopment of downtown and to make sure that this section mirrored the improved streetscapes to the south (Avison 2009).

Besides the empty plots to the north, one of the last remaining blemishes in downtown was the Queen Theater. Renovation of the structure had stalled for a number of reasons, and the current owners of the property, Astin Redevelopment, decided to take up offers to sell it. Seeing an opportunity, and recognizing the importance of the building

to downtown, the Downtown Bryan Association (previously known as the Downtown Bryan Economic Development Association) made an offer to buy the Queen for \$185,000 in May of 2010 (The Queen 2010). The group, however, needed additional financial support to complete the purchase, and so the “Save the Queen” effort was put into place to raise the necessary funds. Sustained by community support, the group began the restoration of the Queen’s landmark crown that November (Smith 2010).

The recent purchase of the La Salle Hotel by a local real estate firm from the city of Bryan serves as a coda to the progress of downtown that has been laid out thus far (Falls 2013). In many respects, investments made by the city, the business community, and residents have created a downtown in Bryan that is remarkably different than it was when the La Salle Hotel or Woolworth’s closed, or even since the adoption of the downtown master plan in 2000. It remains to be seen what growth will look like in the northern edge of downtown, and if it will retain the same feel and kinds of businesses (namely local establishments) as the rest of downtown.

Toward a Phenomenology of Revitalized Downtowns

This study will provide a better understanding of how we experience a revitalized downtown and elucidate the attraction that these places have for consumers. Ultimately, the question to be answered in this study is: what, if any, environmental amenities do consumers perceive and value in revitalized downtowns? To start answering this question it is necessary to take a phenomenological approach to this case study of downtown Bryan by interviewing consumers and business owners, interpreting their

ideas and opinions about downtown, and observing the sense of place first-hand to pinpoint the symbolic elements found within its borders.

Our study begins with the assumption that revitalized downtowns appeal to a *particular type of consumer*. Particularly important to this group of consumers is the concept of *authenticity*, which will be elucidated in the following chapter. The working hypotheses presented in the third chapter serve as starting points for the two primary methods used in this study, observation and analysis of the symbolic elements present in downtown Bryan, and semi-structured individual interviews of local consumers, business owners, and stakeholders. The results of these inquiries allow identification of significant symbolic elements and environmental amenities which feature prominently in the view of downtown consumers. The study concludes with the finding that those who shop in downtown Bryan are willing to pay a *small* premium for the experience of shopping there, due to the value they place on the environmental amenities.

A Brief Introduction to Key Terms

In order to make the reading of this study more accessible, it is important to define the key terms that will be used throughout the remaining chapters. The ways in which these terms are defined, and ultimately utilized, are grounded in how I, as the researcher for this study, have understood them. While the goal of this section is not to illuminate the malleability of these terms, they are admittedly open to other definitions. The terms most important to this study are: *downtown, revitalization, consumption, and environmental amenity*.

American downtowns hold multiple identities. They are dense nodes of activity, districts dedicated to commerce and retailing, epicenters for entertainment, and sites for civic actions. Originally the term was location-specific, referencing Lower Manhattan, but as the 20th century progressed it meandered into our vernacular as a means of bracketing spaces that contained some or all of those identities. Somewhere in between, the term “downtown” began to hold the same cultural space as a “Main Street,” although the term Main Street has a more stringent physical definition.

Revitalization is a common umbrella term for activities intended to change the tide of urban neglect. Most published research on the topic explains revitalization to be the result of economic forces and political initiatives, but few have described the hold that the downtown townscape has on the public imagination. Although there has been considerable analysis, and much needed definitional work, on the downtowns of large urban areas (Levy and Gilchrist 2013), for small and even some mid-sized cities and towns the idea of creating live/work and mixed-use districts downtown is a lofty goal that rests on continued local economic growth.

The role of consumers in local-and broader-economies is practiced through acquiring and using goods and services. Most of us play this role everyday when we buy groceries, shop for products, and take in information through media. For this study, however, is important to also consider that we also consume places, identities, and other social artifacts. An example of this in the extreme is that of the theme park, where we make economic decisions to consume specific attractions at the park, as well as the whole park itself. Advertisements, our past experiences, and the recollection of others,

all factor into how we value the park as a place.

For this study, the term *environmental amenity* will be used as a more holistic way of thinking about the reasons consumers are drawn to a revitalized downtown. A place may be said to have an environmental amenity when commodities offered for sale in that place have additional value, and therefore command a higher price, because they are sold in that place. Whenever we consume goods and services under agreeable circumstances, we are consuming environmental amenities. In a place of outstanding natural beauty or cultural interest, the environmental amenities may add a substantial premium to the value of goods and services offered for sale.

A Plan for the Thesis

This thesis is made up of six narrative chapters, including this introduction. The following chapter, chapter II, is a background to previous ways of thinking about revitalized downtowns and a summary of some of the theories that ground the researcher's perspective prior to the case study. The third chapter presents the methodology used, including the questions asked of respondents. Chapter IV offers the results of first-hand observation, which is organized by the symbolic elements significant to downtown Bryan. The fifth chapter features a list of the environmental amenities identified in the interviews and it also highlights particular responses that illuminate larger issues for revitalized downtowns. The final chapter offers a conclusion for the study and recommendations to help ensure the success of revitalized downtowns.

CHAPTER II

BACKGROUND

Apart from our own experiences of place, the written word is another way in which we can compare, test, and reevaluate our theories about downtowns. In this chapter we will consider the perspectives taken to the study of downtown revitalization, classify those perspectives, and point to ways in which other theories and analytical frameworks can help us to begin to understand the draw of revitalized downtowns. Following this is a discussion of our experiences of the environment, an introduction to the concept of *theming*, and a brief description of the concept of authenticity, which as this study explains through working hypotheses in the next chapter, is assumed to be important to those who are particularly drawn to revitalized downtowns.

Three Perspectives: Planners, Preservationists, and Critics

The literature on American cities and contemporary culture is vast and varied. Likewise, numerous authors with wide-ranging backgrounds have addressed downtown revitalization as a *process* and the revitalized downtown as a *place*. The literature has been categorized into three core perspectives (*planners*, *preservations*, and *critics*), based on their treatment of both the means and the outcome of downtown revitalization.

Though not to discredit the insights gained by these perspectives, to find an answer for the question for this study it is important to make note of the analytical gaps present within each. Planners focus on successful strategies employed by public officials

and developers, but largely ignore the causes of consumer demand for revitalized downtowns. Preservationists focus on the significance of conserved buildings and urban landscapes, but often spend more time scrutinizing the antithesis of the downtowns they wish to preserve. Finally, critics focus on political and social groups that promote their own self-interests instead of the equitable sharing of costs, but fail to reveal the complexities of contemporary urban consumption.

Frieden and Sagalyn (1989), in *Downtown, Inc.: How America Rebuilds Cities*, typify the planner's perspective on downtown revitalization. Their work focuses on a number of large-scale revitalization efforts, the reasons for their success or failure, and, of particular note, "the dominant role players and their interactions" (Paradis 2000, 63). Most of the time these domineering figures are public officials who have partnered with private investors, or vice versa. So called 'public/private partnerships' utilize private investments, typically funded by local businesses and investors, to support public goods such as "historic preservation, consumer marketing, small-business development, pedestrian access, and the cleanliness and safety of streets." (Mitchell 2001, 115-116). Public/private partnerships can be mutually beneficial cost-sharing arrangements and have been utilized to great extent in downtown revitalization projects. While Frieden and Sagalyn, and other planners, offer extensive insight into the strategies used by urban planners and developers, they lack a focus on the psychological causes of the consumer demand that contributes to the success and sustainability of downtown businesses.

The next perspective on downtown revitalization is that of the preservationist. The goal of most preservation movements is to not only *conserve* some object, but also

to *fortify respect* for it. Unlike planners, preservationists are less concerned with the strategies and roles that contribute to successes and more concerned with establishing ethical commitments in a community to protect a sense of place afforded by downtown. These efforts can be thought of as landscape or neighborhood preservation, as opposed to simply building preservation, although they can work in tandem.

James Kunstler's *The Geography of Nowhere* is a well-known critique of suburbanization and an endorsement of a kind of urban scene, often referred to as 'Main Street,' characteristic of many small town downtowns (Kunstler 1993). His critique of suburbia resembles the work of Edward Relph, in particular *Place and Placelessness*, which characterizes the *lack of attachment* to a place as the root of a kind of 'placelessness' (Relph 1976). Preservationists would argue that their work takes a stand against placelessness by bringing attention to the benefits produced by attaching oneself to a downtown community. Suburban developments, according to the preservationist, lack any suitable sense of place due to a standardized design of housing and monotonous street layouts. Thus, following the preservationist's perspective, downtowns can attract those who feel the same way about suburbs simply due to the fact that they are not suburbs. Preservationists seldom consider, however, the multitude of reasons why individuals are drawn to downtowns.

The last approach taken to the study downtown revitalization has been that of the critic. 'Critical' approaches are prevalent in contemporary cultural geography and typically draw attention to the costs of redevelopment and preservation, particularly costs born by marginalized or oppressed segments of the population. Kenny and

Zimmerman (2004) use this approach in their study of downtown revitalization efforts in Milwaukee, paying particular attention to the rhetoric used to support downtown revitalization and subsequent campaigns to promote the revitalized area to potential residents and tourists (Kenny and Zimmerman 2004, 76). Others have dissected the discourse of downtown planners and developers and discovered that “organic analogies...likening the city to a biological organism or species...remain powerful in planning,” and that these analogies lead them to naturalize their normative vision of urban places (Grant and Perrott 2011, 192). Highlighting the biases of planners and developers calls into question the equity and real influence that local residents have in shaping their surroundings. While critical studies may help to ensure equitable cost sharing in redevelopment projects, they also fail to explain the consumer demand that makes such projects profitable.

These three approaches can partially explain successful downtown revitalization, but they lack a detailed understanding of the ‘consumer demand’ for revitalized downtowns. Deciphering the particulars of this consumer demand is necessary for understanding why some revitalized downtowns retain vibrancy. To theorize this consumer demand we need to identify the draws, or environmental amenities, of the revitalized downtown. The amenities of an environment are physical things, like lampposts, or immaterial things, like a feeling of security, which we recognize as factors in our consumption choices. We consume not only goods and services, but also the environmental amenities we find appealing. As noted by Gottdiener (2000), Henri Lefebvre used the term consumption of space to denote “the circulation of people

themselves, through built environments that were attractions in their own right” (Gottdiener 2000, 98). It is acknowledged that particular segments of society are willing to pay more to include the environmental amenities of a revitalized downtown to their overall consumption experience.

Thus, the following question will be put to use to begin filling this gap in the literature: What, if any, environmental amenities do consumers perceive and value in revitalized downtowns? To better understand the consumption experience and to expand our explanation of it, a phenomenological approach will be necessary. Phenomenology seeks “to reconstruct the worlds of individuals” and “leads to an understanding of behavior in those worlds” (Johnston 1986, 63). By recreating the life-world of individuals we can begin to appreciate their experience and take our first steps toward *Verstehen*, “an understanding of people in their environments” (ibid., 74).

Phenomenological approaches also focus on the ways in which environments appear to *types* of individuals, since our individual experiences are founded in shared meanings held by groups of people. Our shared, or *intersubjective*, meanings serve to connect us to particular social groups and the identities they make room for. Understanding shared experiences can give us a more fully developed reconstruction of the life-world of individuals. Of particular interest to this study is the fact that it can help us to start identifying the common draws to downtown.

Environmental Experience

Our experience of an environment, be it natural or built, is based in the reality that it is perceived and conceptualized through cognitive processes. Vision may be the least difficult to discuss through words, since sight dominates so much of our daily experiences. When we look out a window we might see an oak tree with its leaves turning brown, a neighbor walking the dog, or a squirrel climbing up a fence. Yet, we do more than simply render them in our mind. As Gordon Cullen noted, “vision...evokes our memories and experiences” (Cullen 1961, 8). Vision can stir up ideas already formed and triggers the creation of new ones.

Similarly, the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan remarked that experience is a product of sensation, perception, and conception (Tuan 1977, 8). These acts can occur without much notice from the observer because they take place so frequently. We only notice our sensations, perceptions, and conceptions of an environment when we take the time to reflect. When we do reflect on a particular environment we use our experience and memory to form an image of it.

To better understand this image, geographers and others have used the concept of *landscape*. Landscapes have a material basis, yet are embedded with specific and sometimes shared meanings. Cosgrove (1984) states, “landscape denotes the external world mediated through subjective human experience” (Cosgrove 1984,13). This means that those shared meanings filter and give a context to the external world. The study of cultural landscapes acknowledges the “landscape as a source and repository of myth, imagination, symbolic value and cultural meaning” (Wylie 2007, 44). Myths are sets of

shared beliefs, and sometimes stories, that attempt to explain things otherwise unexplainable. Since the things we see in the natural landscape can be temporarily unexplainable, we use imagination to form ideas, which create the basis of myths. Landscapes also have symbolic value in that when we view them, we *read* cultural meanings. Elements of the landscape that we pick out can represent other objects or ideas, and in that sense they have value as symbols. Using these symbols we can infer meanings and beliefs specific to our cultural groups.

Landscapes are not only loaded with symbolic value, some are symbolic of social groups and nations. Meinig (1979) argues that symbolic landscapes, such as the New England village and Main Street, are “part of the shared set of ideas and memories and feelings which bind a people together.” (Meinig 1979, 164). This shows that our individual experiences of landscapes are connected to larger systems of meaning, the framework we use to make sense of things, and that landscapes can be read as a text. Schein (1997), following James Duncan’s eminent study of cultural landscapes (Duncan 1990), uses the *landscape as text* concept and argues that these larger systems of meaning, or discourses, make tangible changes to the landscape, and *discourse materialized*.

The landscapes we choose to create and interact with are products of our landscape tastes. Like any kind of taste, they can be used to identify social groups. Duncan (1973) showed how we could identify and map landscape tastes by residential choices. According to his findings, “landscape tastes...are reflected in the resident’s choice of certain artifacts” (Duncan 1973, 347). This observation is grounded by

sociological theory, arguing that, “an individual uses his landscape to indicate to others his values and socioeconomic status” (ibid., 354). By indicating these things to others we are establishing not only our tastes, but also our identities. Values and tastes, among other things, contribute to our sense of self. It is through our sense of self that we can create an identity. Yet, our identities are not unique, but are informed and derived from social traits and an identity that we have created with others.

Those who are drawn to revitalized downtowns have a particular taste for that kind of landscape. Therefore, it is possible that they may share distinct memories, myths, larger systems of meaning, and identities centered on downtowns. Since they favor the downtown landscape, it is likely that they have positive memories about a particular downtown. One myth they undoubtedly share is that downtown is in a state of decline. While this may be true or misleading for any single downtown, it is commonly held and even by those who would like to see downtowns prosper.

The larger systems of meaning, or discourses, that they use to make sense of the world tell them that downtowns serve as the antithesis of suburban landscapes. In this sense, sometimes all the term downtown may mean is *not suburban*. The identity of these consumers follows this discourse because they think of themselves as being anti-suburban in nature, in having values and tastes that are outside or near the edge of the mainstream.

‘Theming’

The revitalized downtown is generally a commercial environment. Although other uses are present in most downtowns, their common thread is their significance to local commercial activity. Consumers of downtowns experience them in the ways in which we have described environmental experience previously, but also through the *themes* presented to them. The significance of themes in commercial environments is, as Gottdiener (1997) notes, that “the themed environment is a tool exploited in business competition or place competition” (Gottdiener 1997, 14).

Themed shopping environments characterize many spaces of consumption emergent in contemporary American downtowns, an outcome of the desire for “dramatizing the retail ‘experience’” (Zukin 1998, 833). An example, provided by Gottdiener (1997) is the Boulderado Hotel, which employs “the appeal of nostalgia,” through references to the hotel’s storied past, to attract tourists to stay at the Boulderado, and not one of the hotels with which they are in competition (Gottdiener 1997, 14). Creating themes with which to associate a product, business, or place results in the commodification of the experience of consumption.

Also of significance is the idea that the use of themed environments indicates a desire to appeal to specific identity groups, with known tastes and distinct cultural traits. Since “individuals belonging to localized cultures possess certain overarching codes for interpreting their experiences,” businesses and commercial developers design the themes they use based on the groups they wish to attract (Gottdiener 1997, 127). Thus, it is

through identifying identity groups and *theming* the commercial environment that products, businesses, and places—including downtowns—compete for customers.

Authenticity

Revitalized downtowns are typically not as heavily ‘themed’ as chain restaurants, hotels, or even suburban shopping malls. However, they do have themes that can be read through the identification of material or immaterial symbolic elements. One important theme found in many downtowns is the concept of authenticity. Things that are authentic are generally also thought to be genuine, original, and sincere. Places that are deemed authentic exist because of human necessity and are typically near to sites of historic significance. Yet, the authenticity of a commercial environment is a bit harder to define.

Goss (1993) describes how ‘inauthentic’ places, namely the suburban shopping mall, are created for the sole purpose of consuming products and, therefore, are entirely different space of consumption because of the unprecedented use of design to influence consumer behavior. His assessment of suburban shopping malls as inauthentic is based on the perception that they lack sincerity. Goss follows the line of thought utilized by Relph (1976), and decries contemporary urban developments as acutely lacking in a sense of place, thereby being awfully inauthentic.

A sense of place is not just the feelings one receives through the experience of a place, but the singular and cohesive image that distinguishes a place from another place. Therefore, when there is no sense of place, our experience fails to be memorable. This sort of ‘placelessness,’ as termed by Relph, can be associated with the paradoxes of

modernity examined by Sack (1988), and later by Oakes (1997). Consumers of revitalized downtowns likely share these views on authenticity and sense of place, since downtown businesses are in competition with suburban shopping malls. Therefore, it is assumed that their definition of authenticity is, for the most part, simply ‘not-suburban.’

Summary

This chapter has presented common perspectives on revitalized downtowns, described past understandings of the ways in which these landscapes are experienced, and introduced the concepts of theming and authenticity. It has argued that consumers are drawn to revitalized downtowns because of particular environmental amenities, and that the place is therefore consumed along with goods and services. Consumers consume places as they pass through them because, just as with normal goods and services, they are drawn to the benefits they afford. Revitalized downtowns, as landscapes imbued with symbols, draw certain groups of consumers because these groups recognize the value downtowns hold. This synthesis of the cultural landscape concept and the theories of the consumption of space is necessary to deepen our understanding of revitalized downtowns.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Recognizing that considerable detail would be needed to answer the question posed in the previous chapter, it was determined that a case study would be the most appropriate research method. Through detailed focus on a single issue and place, case studies allow researchers to fill in the holes of our knowledge of the world. While generalizing findings to all instances of a phenomenon becomes more challenging, if our goal is to understand the lifeworld of a certain type of consumer it is only through a case study that we can flesh out this experience in full. Therefore, a case study is the most opportune method of research to answer the question posed in the previous chapter.

The revitalized downtown of historic Bryan, Texas was chosen for this study in part as a matter of convenience, since it was easily accessible to the researcher, but it was also an attractive object of investigation because the researcher had himself consumed goods and services in downtown Bryan, and therefore had an *insider's* perspective. Bryan, Texas is unique in many ways (e.g. it has a rail line edging it on two sides), but it is also very similar to countless other American downtowns with grid street patterns and a mix of commercial, civic, and cultural functions. Although the borders of any place can be unclear when we try to define them, downtown Bryan has been defined by the researcher as the chiefly commercial district that runs along Main Street and Bryan Avenue, and is bounded by Parker Avenue to the West, 23rd Street to the North, a rail line to the East, and 29nd Street to the South (as shown in Figure 2).

This case study makes use of personal, semi-structured interviews and observations to identify and evaluate the environmental amenities that attract consumers to downtown Bryan. These two methods were chosen because they disclose the phenomenology of the landscape of downtown Bryan, which is to say the manner in which it is perceived and appreciated by the various types of consumer who patronize the businesses of downtown Bryan. Thus semi-structured interviews and observation help us to understand the subjective and intersubjective experience of downtown Bryan.

This chapter begins with a presentation of the working hypotheses that helped to frame the scope of the interview, focus the questions asked, and became a ‘field guide’ for the researcher’s observations of downtown Bryan. Following this is a detailed description of how these methods were put to use in this study.

Working Hypotheses

Before conducting any interviews, the researcher assumed that consumers were drawn to downtown Bryan by the prospect of positive social interactions with individuals of the same social status and identity. They were drawn to downtown to see or be seen with other like-minded individuals. This assumption was then developed into four working hypotheses. These hypotheses were not subjected to rigorous testing or attempted falsification, but instead served as the basis for forming questions to ask respondents. They are perhaps best understood as the framework or schema *within* which this study operates rather than as propositions that this study examines.

Hypothesis One

With an increase in prosperity and discretionary income, consumers direct more of their spending to the *consumption experience*. This kind of experience combines the perceived value of the good or service purchased with the perceived value of purchasing it in an environment that is *psychologically satisfying*. An environment will fit this description if it has *positive associations* for the consumer's social status and cultural identity. A consumer will spend a *premium* in order to consume certain goods or services in an environment that confers social status or indicates a positive cultural identity to his *reference group*. The premium spent acts as payment for the satisfaction of thinking of himself, and being recognized by others, as having an admirable social status or cultural identity (Gottdiener 1997).

Hypothesis Two

Because the revitalized downtown landscape provides a psychologically satisfying consumption experience for a segment of the population (hypothesis 1), merchants who provide goods and services in this landscape are able to charge a premium for their products. Typically, the goods and services sold in the revitalized downtown include art, entertainment, antiques, alcoholic beverages, and trendy or specialty dining. Sometimes this premium will be evident in a higher sticker price for these products, but it more often takes the form of an ability to attract consumers from a considerable distance, bypassing “intervening opportunities,” without discounting the price of these products.

Hypothesis Three

Consumers are attracted to the retail environment of downtown Bryan (as to other revitalized historic business districts) because they are thereby identified as *unconventional*. Consuming the goods and services in the revitalized downtown landscape provides the *psychological satisfaction* of distinguishing themselves, in their own eyes and the eyes of others, as unlike consumers of these same products in conventional suburban settings. The cultural category of *edgy* will be used to describe the cultural identity of this consumer.

Hypothesis Four

Revitalized downtowns can successfully compete with suburban rivals, and thus remain economically viable, because their businesses offer goods that are at least mildly edgy in a mildly edgy environment to consumers who are willing to pay for the psychologically satisfying experience of distinguishing themselves, and being recognized by others, as edgy consumers.

The Value of Interviews

According to King and Horrocks (2010), “interviewing is the most commonly used method of data collection in qualitative research” (King and Horrocks 2010, 1). The objective of the interviews in this study was to get individuals to identify the environmental amenities that bring them to downtown Bryan. It was important for respondents to not only list them, but to talk at length about their experience of specific

elements of the downtown landscape and their general impressions of the place. Personal interviews tap into the experience of an individual through the explanations, opinions, and narrations they provide. They can therefore offer a window into how others view the world.

Interviews also allow the researcher to form a clearer understanding of his own experience of the landscape, because “through close and sustained engagement, not only can you gain insight into the topics you are studying, you can also learn about yourself” (King and Horrocks 2010, 5). This understanding helps researchers interpret the words of respondents in ways that provide more insight into how an environment is experienced. When analyzing the words of others, researchers can refine respondents’ ideas and use them to illuminate overlooked questions. Yi-Fu Tuan argues that, “We have privileged access to states of mind, thoughts, and feelings” due to our “insider’s view of human facts” (Tuan 1977, 5). What this means is that one person is able to understand the experience of another person precisely because he also has first-hand knowledge of human experience. Thus, through interpreting the answers of respondents we can, again, get a glimpse of their worldview.

Finding Participants

The participants sought for this study included business owners, stakeholders, and consumers of downtown Bryan willing to share their ideas and opinions. The goal was simply to meet people with an interesting or informed perspective on downtown. Participants were recruited using a *snowball method*, in which ‘gatekeepers’ and

respondents suggest potential subjects. This method of finding participants worked rather well because it ensured, to some degree, that those recruited for interviews were willing to take the time to reflect on the question they were asked.

Conducting and Recording Interviews

Eight respondents were interviewed using a standardized set of questions concerning their opinions about downtown Bryan: about the architecture and cultural connotations of the buildings that are located there, about the types people frequently encountered there, about the types of people who don't frequent downtown Bryan, about and their experiences with downtowns generally. These interviews were recorded with a digital voice recorder and took place in either downtown Bryan or on the Texas A&M University campus, depending on the preference of the respondent.

The following questions were used as guidelines during the course of the interview:

1. What brings you to downtown?
2. Do you come to downtown frequently? Weekly? Monthly? For what purpose?
3. Do you use downtown Bryan as a place to meet with friends and family?
4. What do you think of the character and feel of downtown?
5. What other downtowns are you used to? What do you remember about them?

How does downtown Bryan compare?

6. What do the buildings and storefronts tell you about downtown? What impressions do they give you?

7. What do you think of other people who use downtown Bryan? What does it tell you about them?
8. What sorts of people never come to downtown Bryan?
9. What images come to mind when you hear the name “downtown Bryan”?
10. Why do you think other people would prefer a downtown environment?
11. Where do you do most of your necessary shopping? What stores do you use?
12. Does it feel different to purchase something in downtown Bryan as opposed to a suburban shopping center or mall? Is it more pleasing? Why do you think so?
13. Do you feel willing to pay more for a good or service if it is consumed in a place like downtown Bryan? Why or why not?
14. How would you describe your place of residence?

These questions were used as guidelines when interviewing business owners, in conjunction with the questions above:

1. Why did you choose to locate your business in downtown Bryan?
2. What kind of customers do you try to attract?
3. What impressions are you trying to give to the customer with the look and feel of your store?
4. Why do you think the public would be attached to a place like downtown Bryan?

Transcribing and Analyzing the Interviews

The recorded interviews were transcribed to digital text files. Identifying

information was removed to maintain the anonymity of respondents. Following this the transcripts were combed through to, first, identify the environmental amenities of downtown Bryan that respondents made note of and, second, to unearth patterns in the answers given by respondents. Smith's Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used as guide to interpreting the transcripts. This method consists of "*familiarisation with the data, identifying themes, clustering themes and constructing a summary table.*" (King and Horrocks 2010, 205). For each transcript a list of themes that illustrate the respondents experiences of downtown Bryan was made, as well as a list of environmental amenities identified in the interview. Following the stages of the IPA method, similar themes were grouped together in each transcript and a table summarizing these themes was developed.

Observing the Symbolic Elements of Downtown Bryan

To complement the interviews, field notes were recorded of the researcher's own experiences of downtown Bryan, and photographs were taken for later inspection. While walking down the gridded streets, the physical and symbolic elements (e.g. architectural styles, mix and upkeep of business, and impressions of buildings) and social interactions were recorded. Photographs were taken of most of these elements and of the buildings and streets. Notes were taken when an element stood out and photographs were captured to carry out analysis later on.

This pattern was repeated throughout downtown Bryan, up Main Street to its terminus at Martin Luther King Jr. Street and back down Bryan Avenue to its

intersection with the rail line that borders surrounding neighborhoods. Side streets and alleyways were used and inspected with the same consideration as the main paths through downtown. Although there was an attempt to cover every inch of downtown, the elements observed and recorded likely do not represent all of downtown Bryan.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS OF FIRST-HAND OBSERVATION

The physical elements of downtown Bryan, as for all the places we interact with, have meaning outside of their functional roles as paths, gathering spaces, and public or private establishments. To view these physical elements as symbols we need to acknowledge that there are specific ideas, opinions, and theories that we reference while trying to make sense of them. Envision, for instance, a three-story, red brick building. The façade features a subtle, yet ornate, cornice and a storefront with large glass windows. The details of the building, which may be representative elements of downtown overall, lead us to infer the age or a past activity the building may have been utilized for, amongst other particulars.

Our associated thoughts and opinions allow us to interpret these elements and reshape our ideas about the place. That “old” building may recall an idea of how downtowns and American main streets used to act as the main arteries of civic and commercial life. Positive interactions and opinions expressed about the building identify us as *sympathetic* to the cause of revitalization and as a bearer of a particular form of *urbane sensibility*. Thus, that red brick building can signify for the viewer an affinity with the movement to revitalize downtown.

To interpret the symbolic elements found in downtown Bryan is to engage with the network of cultural connections found within a lifeworld. For this case study, the process involved a camera, a notepad, and the knowledge of how to maneuver around

downtown Bryan. Reviewing the notes and photographs allowed for development of a list of significant elements, while further reflection produced a semiotic interpretation for each element. The elements featured were chosen by the researcher and reflect first-hand observations of downtown. At the heart of each semiotic interpretation is a discussion of the connotations derived from the element. The photographs used in the following section allow the reader to view the physical elements of downtown Bryan and to contextualize the interpretations.

Interpreting the Iconographic Elements of Downtown Bryan

Landmarks

Landmarks are integral components of the images we collect for places, following the use of the term by Kevin Lynch (Lynch 1960, 48). We know intimately the landmarks of the places in which we reside and frequently visit, but we also collect the images of landmarks connected to other nations and cultures, like the Eifel Tower or the Taj Mahal. Landmarks sharpen our memory of the places we associate with them and help us to remember seemingly less remarkable destinations nearby. For the purposes of this study, we can define a landmark as a building, or structure, that, owing to extraordinary size, style, or some other feature, *stands out* from the *backdrop* of the downtown landscape.

Sometimes a landmark can function as the sole image we have for a place, as if we were to boil down all of St. Louis to just the Gateway Arch. Since these structures have been *authored*, or designed, by architects, engineers, and artists, it is reasonably

safe to assume that they were built with the hope that they would function as focal points. In other words, they were built to serve as a landmark for a neighborhood, district, or an entire city. Thus, downtown landmarks signify the efforts put into creating an enduring and visible identity for downtown.

Downtown Bryan has a few structures that could be considered local landmarks, but its Carnegie Public Library (figure 3) may be the most significant. The neoclassical building, located on Main Street, faces a sizable public space with patterned brickwork. The space surrounding the building acts as a rest stop between the commercial establishments along Main Street. The white pillars and pediment deliver the virtues of the institution to the viewer, while the red brick cloaks its goal of populist enlightenment with humility.



Figure 3. Bryan’s Carnegie Public Library. Source: Nicholas Samuel

As with any neoclassical structure, the viewer may sense a connection to the wisdom of ancient Greek and Roman scholars and to their influence on Western intellectual and civic institutions. Andrew Carnegie's name on the building tells us that it is devoted to the public good and entrusted with bringing a self-taught education to the masses. Public goods, like libraries, can be a refuge of histories, knowledge, and cultural artifacts, and when they serve as a landmark they can relay those meanings to the broader community. The Carnegie Public Library signifies the effort put into entrenching a public good into downtown Bryan.



Figure 4. The Varisco Building. Source: Nicholas Samuel

The Varisco Building (figure 4), another local landmark, sticks out of the downtown Bryan skyline due to the height of the building. The building sits at the edge of the current downtown development, serving as a landmark for downtown growth and as an outpost on downtown's frontier. For some, tall buildings are a sign of progress and continued vitality for downtown, but when situated across from empty lots they can signify decline and stalled economic growth. Although not clearly visible in the image above, the blocks just north of the Varisco Building are empty and they negatively alter our reading of the landmark. With this in mind, the Varisco Building signifies the difficulty in extending the identity of downtown Bryan.

A building's façade is its face to the public. While walking down Main Street in downtown Bryan, unique façades help us find our destinations or invite us to explore the building further. They can offer a preview of the building's interior or the establishments within. For a pedestrian, as well as a driver, it may be the only element of the building we notice and, therefore, is crucial to creating a general image of downtown. In this way, buildings with unique façades can become landmarks, standing out from buildings with boring storefronts or that lack architectural embellishment. Those who own or take care of buildings downtown understand the importance the façade has on the success of the businesses within or the overall value of the property. Unique building façades signify that property owners have found value making sure their buildings catch the eyes of downtown consumers.



Figure 5. The Queen Theater. Source: Nicholas Samuel

The Queen Theater (figure 5) has a newly refurbished, colorful crown that rests on top of the building. At night the crown lights up and rotates, appearing as a beacon for downtown Bryan. Besides the crown and the theater's marquee, the building has a plain white façade. Yet, it stands out from its neighbors with just those subtle touches of flair. The theater, in its current state, contributes a great deal to the personality of downtown Bryan. Being aware that the building has been in the process of restoration for some time allows it to be read as a promise for downtown preservation, but without that knowledge it is surely more difficult to come away with that meaning. For now, the building is a sign of rehabilitation and stands out because the façade looks to have been repaired.

Mementos

When a new establishment makes reference to the structures' past uses it can sometimes be perceived as a gimmick, or even worse, as disrespectful to the history of a place. Yet, in many cases, it is the easiest way to develop a theme that ties the new use to the past and to reinforce an identity for downtown. Although typically considered as a separate district from a downtown, many bygone ports in American cities have attached their former economic activities to new uses as entertainment or tourist destinations. These sorts of references can be read cynically as a way of squeezing out all remaining profits from a glorious past, but in many instances these references to past economic activities serve as a way to inform naïve viewers of the history of a place. While there is certainly a variety in the quality of such references and in their success informing viewers of the past, these artifacts of the past act as monuments (in the understanding of them theorized by Foote 2003), or *mementos* that signify a desire to foster respect for and remembrance of the past.



Figure 6. A Sign at the J. W. Howell Building. Source: Nicholas Samuel

The mementos of downtown are either *relics* or *installed*. In other words, they are either surviving witnesses of the past (relics) or they have been added to make reference to the past (installed mementos). This sign for the J. W. Howell Building (figure 6) faces to the south, toward a small parking lot between Main Street and Bryan Avenue. Attached to a stairway, it is most likely seen by drivers heading north and pedestrians just stepping out of their cars. The sign, an installed memento, identifies the building and instructs the reader on how to enter the building. The words “Brazos Cotton Exchange” on the sign mark an establishment housed in the building currently, but to those unaware of that fact it references a historic use and marks the building as a former gathering site for commerce. This sign of a defunct local economic activity, combined with the general upkeep of the building and its neighbors, shows that despite change, downtown has been repurposed. This installed memento is a sign of downtown Bryan’s

ability to adapt.



Figure 7. Advertisements for Kimbell Feed Company. Source: Nicholas Samuel

The pair of buildings, above (figure 7), sit on Main Street past the Varisco Building and feature painted Kimbell Feed Company advertisements on their façades. The advertisements, as relic mementos, are signs of the previous establishments the building housed. Since they have survived, they can help narrate a history of downtown Bryan to viewers. In this way, relic mementos also contribute to a downtown identity. Despite this, the surrounding blocks, which are mostly vacant lots, make it difficult to come away with an entirely optimistic reading of this section of downtown Bryan. Not only is a part of the past gone, but also so has any other noticeable activity nearby. This relic memento signifies that, although some in the community may still take care of downtown, much has been lost as a result of broader economic shifts.

Period Pieces

Depending upon when the majority of development occurred, some downtowns have a certain style of building that can transport the viewer to another frame of mind. While we are nudged to think back to a period of time in which the structure was built, we understand that that period may be strikingly dissimilar from our own. If that knowledge produces a longing for the past we are said to be nostalgic. The building then becomes a *period piece*, reminding us of what has been forgotten or ignored by our contemporaries. These period pieces, defined by a distinctive architectural style, signify that the ideas of the past may still carry weight.



Figure 8. The Former First State Bank and Trust Building. Source: Nicholas Samuel

The former First State Bank and Trust Building in downtown Bryan (figure 8) is

a fine example of Art Deco architecture. Defined by its status as a building with a distinctive architectural style, the building stands out to pedestrians and to drivers, who may happen to be stuck at the intersection of Main Street and William Joel Bryan Parkway; blaming the stoplight while admiring the detailing of the windows and along the roofline. For those in the know, the Art Deco style symbolizes a last great wave of populist and progressive sentiment in American culture. Yet, even most users of downtown can read the ornate architectural details of the building as an attempt to imbue art and craftsmanship onto a publicly viewable structure. The connotations that we can glean from this highlight that ‘glass box’ buildings of today lack the architectural distinction necessary to give downtown a strong identity.

Backdrop

Not every building or structure in downtown Bryan is remarkable architecturally. Some buildings simply function as shelters for the establishments housed within, without exhibiting flair or eye-catching details. Viewers would hardly take notice of these buildings on an individual basis. However, when amassed together these buildings provide the *backdrop* for the character of downtown. This backdrop signifies downtown’s status as a dense, urban district.



Figure 9. The Queen Theater Sticking out from the Backdrop. Source: Nicholas Samuel

As mentioned in the section on landmarks, the Queen Theater stands out from the buildings nearby, which are a part of the backdrop of downtown Bryan. Yet, the buildings that form the backdrop are necessary, not only because they house business and offices, but because they contribute to the urban feel of downtown and they offer contrast to visually exciting structures. The Queen Theater and its crown would likely be interesting even if it was without neighboring buildings, but the backdrop allows it, and other landmarks, to stand out and excite the architectural mind.

Confines

The spatial experience that downtown streets confer to users is a product of their design. When multi-storied buildings sit close together on a gridded street, the viewer can get the sense of being enclosed in the surrounding space. These *confines* create ‘walls’ around downtown streets and hold captive the visibility of pedestrians. This sort of space is in contrast to the *expanses* of the automobile-dependent landscapes of suburban Bryan that provide, instead, a sense of exposure.

Since sprawling (i.e. less dense) development is common in the areas surrounding downtown Bryan, the confines of downtown alone offer a sense of enclosure. As a result downtown confines tend to attract festive or celebratory community activities, like parades and fairs. Outdoor malls attempt to mimic the downtown confines, but downtown consumers may feel as though they lack any real connection to authentic urban lifestyles. Thus, confines signify that downtown can be an intimate setting for urban communities.



Figure 10. Portraying the Enclosed View along Main Street Sidewalk. Source: Nicholas Samuel

The image above (figure 10) displays a typical view on Main Street, just across from the Carnegie Public Library. From the sidewalk, buildings to the left and, although not wholly visible in this image, to the right block our view of places outside of downtown. The signs overhead almost create a ‘ceiling’ and further enclose the space in downtown. Trees, light posts, and other structures effectively make activity on the street level appear as if it is occurring close by. We can read this effect of downtown design as a sign that community life is supposed to take place here because it where establishments and business owners feel close knit.

Pedestrian Accommodation

Sidewalks not only fulfill the utilitarian need of separating pedestrians from vehicular traffic, but they also make us feel as if they are a refuge for pedestrians. In many cases it is legally ordained that sidewalks are used only by pedestrian traffic, which may embolden this feeling of refuge. If sidewalks are built in an unbroken fashion alongside roadways, it is likely because planners and developers have recognized that pedestrians will use the roadway as paths of their own. Yet, the pedestrian walking along a roadway that was originally designed for vehicular traffic (spaces previously defined as *expanses*) feels like an alien in a hostile environment. In this context, a sidewalk is a meek attempt at *pedestrian accommodations*. Spacious sidewalks, informative signs, and artwork at a pedestrian scale, in contrast, assure the pedestrian that they *belong* in this space.



Figure 11. A Junction of Sidewalks, Crosswalks, and Roadways. Source: Nicholas Samuel

The sidewalks and crosswalks in figure 11 show how pedestrian space can be defined by physical elements and share vehicular space. The addition of flowers and a clock near the median give us a sense that it might be acceptable to linger here and occupy, for a short time, a space usually meant for cars. From here, those who read another suggestion for a leisurely pace succumb to a fit of window-shopping back on the sidewalk. Large sidewalks also suggest to the user that they can ease their pace and casually traverse between destinations, if they have them at all. In some senses, the sidewalk acts as a band of public space wrapped around downtown; disguised as an ordinary pathway.

Some street signs are mandated by administrative authorities and put in place for drivers or pedestrian traffic to make notice of prescribed traffic rules, while other signs present information for the casual observer. These latter kinds of signs can help users of downtown navigate between destinations. While business establishments can employ various tactics, like theming, to differentiate the products and environments they offer, signs informing users how to get to their location are a simple means to draw consumers in. It is in the interest of business owners and other authors of downtown to make sure that users can navigate from one destination to another, as well as find new destinations that may be previous unknown to them. Informative signs signify that the authors of downtown have an interest in directing the movements of users.



Figure 12. Sign with Direction to a Café. Source: Nicholas Samuel

The sign above (figure 12) instructs pedestrians through an alley to get to the Café. If following the sign, the pedestrian is offered views of the alleyway leading to backs of buildings on this block of Main Street. This route to the Café leads the pedestrian physically and psychologically to the edgy environment in which it is found. Along the alleyway are posters for performances and graffiti. The bricks are weathered and the space between the buildings is narrow. While walking through the alley, it is possible to imagine being in a city that is grittier and denser than Bryan. The owners of the Café likely want you to experience this and thereby associate the path through the alleyway with their establishment.



Figure 13. Sign with Directions for a Walking Tour. Source: Nicholas Samuel

This second sign (figure 13), attached to a street light, works in coordination with other strategically placed signs and maps, produced by the Downtown Bryan Association, to guide visitors on the path of a walking tour of downtown. Where as the previous sign may have subtly guided the user through a series of experiences, this sign is explicitly focused on making sure that pedestrians experience downtown Bryan in a certain way.



Figure 14. A Downtown Bench with Sculpture Attached. Source: Nicholas Samuel

Publicly viewable art, like the sculpture pictured above (figure 14), can receive a wide range of reactions, from indifference to passionate acceptance. Sometimes public art can go unnoticed, or its intent may be ambiguous to casual viewers. Yet, like art everywhere, public art is produced to elicit interpretation and for viewers to come away with meaning. Reactions to public art can be thought of as part of a larger cultural interaction that artists or institutions have with their communities. Public art signifies a desire for cultural interaction with the users of downtown.

Available Public Parking

There is a noticeable change in the layout of the street when a driver enters into downtown Bryan. The most noticeable change is in the way in which the driver must behave, that is to say they the driver must *slow down* to watch for pedestrians and to find

available public parking along the street. Nose-in parking spaces along the street in downtown Bryan simplify the act of parking, but cause Main Street to narrow significantly. Vehicles that are already in these spaces can block the driver's view of pedestrians, making it even more important to slow down. Therefore, drivers in downtown feel less like they belong because they are driving and so the desire to be rid of one's car is amplified. Available public parking signifies that downtown is not entirely hostile to drivers, despite alienating them by design.



Figure 15. Occupied Parking Spaces along Main Street. Source: Nicholas Samuel

The image above (figure 15) shows numerous, yet filled, public parking spaces adjacent to downtown establishments. Another image of parking spaces, below, (figure 16) is also seen from Main Street, but with a view of available parking spaces. If the driver is not aware of the other parking options nearby downtown may be largely

inaccessible to them. Making downtown hostile to drivers, in cities and towns where driving is the principal means of transportation, increases the ‘distance’ of downtown and, as a result, the price premium of downtown consumption. Downtown is at reasonable distance from consumers when it is easy for a driver to give up their car and become a pedestrian.



Figure 16. Available Parking Spaces along Main Street. Source: Nicholas Samuel

Sticking Out and Sticking Together

Since downtown is a node of activity it is also a place in which cultural and lifestyle groups intersect. Interacting with members of minority cultures and lifestyle

groups assures the downtown consumer of their *edgy* lifestyle. To be edgy is to near the border of what is considered mainstream culture, which is typically on the *edge* of bourgeois comfort zone. Yet, there are varying tolerances for how far away from mainstream attitudes downtown consumers are willing to accept. In downtown Bryan, most consumers are not looking for genuinely scary or bizarre experiences, and certainly not criminal activity. The edgy experiences they are seeking are watered down versions of the anti-establishment lifestyles that fascinated the Beats and countercultural movement of the 1960s.

A number of establishments in downtown Bryan, like Revolutions Café and Earth Art, aspire to confer edgy, countercultural connotations through the goods and experiences they offer to consumers. Businesses that identify with minority cultures and edgy lifestyle groups can *stick out* in downtown by utilizing identifying names or words, sometimes subtly or other times unmistakably tied to a culture or lifestyle group. Minority cultures and edgy lifestyle groups stick out by concentrating similar or complimentary establishments, or *sticking together*, in a few sections of downtown. By sticking out and sticking together the diversity of cultural and lifestyle groups in downtown signifies its status as a melting pot of identities.



Figure 17. Cerone Family Name on Building Façade. Source: Nicholas Samuel

The image above (figure 17) provides a view of a restaurant housed in a red brick building along Main Street. The name “Cerone” is displayed just above the second story windows. Displaying a family name on the building gives recognition to the owner (or for many restaurants the head chef), but in other instances the name connects the establishment to a cultural group. The restaurant in the image is owned by a member of the Cerone family and serves Italian cuisine. Apart from the name, and the spelling of “caffé,” there is little else that connects this cultural identity to the restaurant. The family name on the building is used, instead, to help viewers connect the restaurant to other establishments owned by the family.



Figure 18. Hispanic Clothing Stores along Bryan Avenue. Source: Nicholas Samuel

This image (figure 18) presents two clothing stores along Bryan Avenue. The names used on the façades reveal the Hispanic influences found in this corner of downtown Bryan, the impression heightened because the stores are located next to one another. Unlike the Mexican (or Tex-Mex) restaurants sprinkled in other areas of downtown Bryan, these businesses exhibit heightened signs of cultural identity; though it may be less apparent in the image. By sticking together they connote stronger cultural meanings to consumers. Therefore, both sticking out from surrounding cultural groups and sticking together with like-cultural groups can give elements of downtown greater symbolic value.

Synthesis

The elements that were observed and interpreted in this portion of the study contribute to our understanding of the lifeworld of downtown Bryan. The interpretations enhance our understanding of the way in which we interact with downtowns. Although this was the goal prescribed to this method of the study, it is possible to also see the hypothesized inner-workings of the revitalized downtown as presented in the methodology chapter. As a consumer of downtown, the researcher interacted with elements that sparked his own interest and that contributed to a more psychologically satisfying environment. Yet, all of these symbolic elements (Landmarks, Mementos, Period Pieces, Backdrop, Confines, Pedestrian Accommodation, Available Public Parking, and Sticking Out/Sticking Together) can speak to the downtown consumers hypothesized in this study.

The next chapter presents the findings from the interviews with downtown consumers, business owners, and stakeholders. As detailed in the methodology for this study, the answers respondents gave were analyzed and interpreted to help identify environmental amenities of downtown Bryan. The symbolic elements described in this chapter can help to contextualize the environmental amenities presented later on.

CHAPTER V

RESULTS OF THE INTERVIEWS

The interviews took place in a number of different locations, many outside of downtown Bryan. However, what they had in common was that those interviewed truly enjoyed spending time in downtown Bryan and, to varying degrees, were passionate about their support for the livelihood of downtown. Most respondents spoke in depth about what they believed drew them to downtown and why others may not respond to downtown Bryan as they did. On occasion the interview process ran longer than the stated window of time, but respondents were very eager to talk about downtown Bryan and their experience of it.

The results of the interviews allow us to see whether or not the respondents related to the environmental amenities in the manner described in the initial hypotheses. To get closer to answering this question we will delve further into what respondents had to say about environmental amenities.

From Common Themes to Environmental Amenities

The unprocessed results of the interviews were the answers respondents gave, but by unearthing common themes those answers began to speak more pointedly to the environmental amenities concept. The themes were distilled so that they identified an environmental amenity. As a result, the following are environmental amenities of downtown Bryan:

1. Presence of notable events with common appeal
2. Unique local businesses with strong connections to their customers
3. Well-maintained buildings that are valued as artifacts
4. Downtown can fulfill a need for nostalgia and niche interests
5. Downtown mirrors and is supported by the wider community
6. A cohesive array of architectural styles and storefront designs
7. Design of building setbacks and streetscape creates a walk-able public space
8. Downtown is capable of attracting large groups of people
9. Downtown is viewed as clean, safe, and welcoming
10. Parking is readily available
11. Availability of basic goods and services to downtown workers and residents

What we can glean from this list of environmental amenities is that our initial hypotheses have been generally confirmed (albeit not in the positivist sense). This interpretation of the interviews shows that respondents recognized the *value added* by a revitalized downtown landscape to their experience as consumers. Since they value downtown Bryan in this way, and find numerous elements of downtown to be psychologically satisfying, they are willing to dismiss *certain types* of intervening opportunities and pay a *reasonable* premium for the consumption of goods and services in downtown Bryan as it exists today. They understand that this may distinguish them from other consumers, those who are not drawn to downtown Bryan or revitalized

downtowns generally, despite the common belief that downtown Bryan has a near universal appeal.

‘Dis-amenities’

Detailing the environmental amenities of downtown Bryan, it is important to quickly address the *other* results attained from the interviews: opinions on why some may be repelled by or dissuaded from a visit to downtown Bryan. A number of these issues could be described as *dis-amenities*. In general, respondents reported concerns about finding parking downtown, issues with business establishments, failures to compete with the strip center retail areas nearby, the nuisance of the rail line in downtown, the perception of prevalent crime downtown, and the presumed intolerance of those who avoid downtown and surrounding neighborhoods.

These issues did not prevent respondent’s use of downtown Bryan, but may have contributed to a limiting or filtering of their choices as consumers. As such, it is important to understand the consumer’s attraction to downtown as not simply as an arithmetic of amenities and dis-amenities, or positive and negative attributes, but as the product of a matrix of ideas, opinions, and theories.

Selected Responses to Environmental Amenities

Presence of Notable Events with Common Appeal

The first amenity that attracted all respondents to downtown Bryan was *notable events with common appeal*. First-hand observation of downtown Bryan failed to

identify this as an important element, but respondents acknowledged the significance of events such as downtown Bryan's "First Friday" and other street fairs. As consumers of these events, respondents noted that they made them feel in touch with the community and more exposed to diverse cultural groups. One respondent mentioned that:

"The parades that they have around Mexican Independence Day, Cinco de Mayo, are always really cool because it makes you realize what an extensive Mexican community there is in downtown Bryan. Driving through...you wouldn't necessarily get that. So, I like that mix. You know, it's not monochrome."

While many of the events that respondents identified were free, participants likely had to incur travel costs. These events contributed to the formation of the consumer's *edgy* identity, because they mainly served as a gathering for consumers to get to know one another and view the unconventional goods offered by downtown vendors.

Unique Local Businesses with Strong Connections to their Customers

Another amenity that respondents made particular note of, and that was not identified first hand, was *unique local businesses*, some of which have *strong connections to their customers*. First hand observation identified the importance of local landmarks to downtown, but connected those landmarks to the imageability.

Respondents, on the other hand, thought of businesses establishments as landmarks in the sense that they used them to navigate through their own perceptions of downtown Bryan. As one respondent put it:

"I think it's easier to put a face with the owner of these places in downtown Bryan

than in a chain [store] or somewhere else.”

This distinction from chain restaurants and retail stores was mentioned many times:

“I prefer to come to downtown Bryan...if I can, just to support the local businesses. [I’m] not a fan of chains in any shape or form. I like unique.”

Another respondent put forward the idea that:

“If you can keep out the chains, I think that's awesome. I think it helps the local economy.”

To explain their draw to local businesses in downtown Bryan respondents mentioned the relationships they had formed with business owners, attaching those bonds to the psychological satisfaction they felt when consuming downtown through local establishments. One respondent put it this way:

“I go and buy a sandwich at her [the business owner’s] place and I know that that money goes into the local economy. It goes into her ability to have an art gallery...in most of her restaurant and those are good things.”

Some acknowledged that unreasonable price premiums could deter them, especially if they needed to be budget conscious, but that niche goods and services were what they sought to begin with in downtown Bryan. So even:

“...if that gap [the price premium] was widened, I might go somewhere else...”

Another respondent noted that:

“...I think if you're careful it's the same...and these places are better.”

Because:

“A lot of times I feel like I can get things downtown that I may not see in other

places. I especially like to shop for gifts or thing downtown.”

For most respondents, the draw of supporting unique, local businesses outweighed the disincentives of costs if the products filled a consumer niche.

Well-maintained Buildings that are Valued as Artifacts

Apart from notable events and unique, local businesses, the presence of *well-maintained buildings* that are *valued as artifacts* was mentioned frequently. While first-hand observation focused on the connotations that buildings imparted to viewers, either as landmarks, period pieces, mementos, or backdrop, the interviews made it clear that the typical valuation of downtown buildings is unembellished. Many agreed with the sentiment, expressed by one respondent, that:

“...I think that I like that we've got the buildings that talk about our past and our history, and that you can look at those historic photographs or renderings and pick 'em out...”

Old buildings have value because they are amongst the surviving witnesses to downtown’s past. Being able to identify the survivors is a particularly satisfying experience for the consumer of downtown. One respondent described what they had gained from such an experience as, “an impression of historical significance.”

Explaining further they remarked:

“You know, wow, these buildings have been here...like, the First National Bank building was built in the late 1800s. It's been here over a hundred years in downtown Bryan.”

To put it another way, the buildings of downtown Bryan are valued because of their age.

Another respondent connected building age with value by arguing that:

“...the history of the town speaks in the quality of the buildings that were built and it said that people cared about this community to build a substantial building that would be here for a hundred years.”

Thus, buildings that are well-made and kept in good condition signify the sustained relevance of downtown.

Downtown can fulfill a Need for Nostalgia and Niche Interests

For some, the experience of downtown Bryan and Main Street is reminiscent of “classic, small town America.” As such, a few of the respondents revealed how downtown *can fulfill a need for nostalgia*. Whereas first-hand observation focused on the importance of mementos and period pieces, the interviews called attention to the idea that:

“...people like to go into older buildings and look at the way things were in the past.”

Places and activities that can satisfy this need include:

“...the antique store, the soda fountain shop, the urban place to have a nice drink on a patio...window shopping...”

One respondent boiled down the impetus for revitalization as:

“...not just, ‘I'm going to have a dry cleaners,’ but it's like, ‘I want to experience life in an old downtown place.’”

Through the process of revitalization, downtowns create demand for a nostalgic experience only they can fulfill.

At the same time they can support the demand for niche products and interests of consumers. As one respondent stated:

“It would be my first choice to come if I wanted a funky piece of jewelry type thing.”

While it is important the unique business establishments are present in downtown, it is also as important that downtown businesses can fulfill the need for niche consumer interests. Niche products and services are ways to distinguish specific businesses and commercial nodes from their competition.

Downtown Mirrors and is Supported by the Wider Community

The first-hand observation of downtown Bryan interpreted the diversity of cultures and lifestyles as a sign of downtown’s role as a meeting place of cultures and identities. While this common American ideal takes hold in the minds of many urbanites, for smaller communities it may be more important that downtown *mirrors the wider community*. In some respects, due to density, downtown can feel more akin to other, sometimes far-flung, urban areas than the surrounding areas of town. One respondent argued that downtown is more “...like the actual world where there’s all kinds of people in one environment.” This is in contrast to suburban areas where, “you have made your little bubble.” Yet, other respondents understood this issue as the ability of downtown to attract the breadth of cultural and lifestyle groups present in surrounding areas.

The consumers of downtown Bryan, a respondent noted, “are as diverse as you’re going to get in this town.” Opinions about who is seen in downtown and who is considered to be a downtown consumer varied to the extent that respondents believed, as noted previously, that while downtown’s appeal was nearly universal, the associated disamenities combined with limits of income and distance have an effect on downtown diversity. Since downtown’s ability to represent the community is clearly debatable, it is satisfying for downtown consumers when they witness a full range of cultural and lifestyle groups.

A Cohesive Array of Architectural Styles and Storefront Designs

Downtown buildings and storefronts are significant because they are hard to miss. Whenever we visit downtown we view its buildings and storefronts, even if only glancing, and form opinions about them based on our experience with them and similar architectural features. Yet, we do not need a wealth of knowledge about architecture or building forms to form these opinions. Describing how they felt about the character of the buildings in downtown Bryan, one respondent mentioned that:

“You have the different buildings with their individual facades, their own unique colors and things.”

This respondent is acknowledging that they see a variety of architectural styles and that this variety gives the buildings and their façades an individual character. While it may be easier for buildings that are truly unique architectural achievements to stand out and attract consumers, it is appealing to some that downtown simply has buildings that vary

in appearance.

Further on the point of the uniqueness of building style and design is the opinion of one respondent who put forward that:

“I think the ones that I like are the ones that have large windows, maybe a sign or a door that has specific character...something that marks the place and makes it look different than the next storefront.”

Windows and signage are significant elements to storefront design. When they are attractive to the consumer they can be used, as noted by the respondent, to remember the location of the establishment and heighten its overall imageability. Unique storefronts and architectural styles afford downtown establishments the ability to be distinguished from their competition.

A sense of uniqueness has positive associations for downtown storefronts, but when the overall architectural style is confusing or unidentifiable the imageability of downtown is weakened. The respondent pointed out that:

“Most towns will end up with a hodgepodge of architectural styles. Downtown Bryan has done a fairly decent job of trying to minimize that, and I don't know if that was intentional or if that has been applied after the thought.”

Although they were unsure if the architectural styles in downtown Bryan have been controlled in accordance with a particular image of the place, the respondent notes that the buildings many downtowns accumulate can lack cohesion and that in downtown Bryan there is a feeling that the buildings belong together. The partnering of these two conditions, that downtown have buildings and storefronts with unique, but cohesive

style, was important to a number of respondents. Almost all noted that they consider the character of the buildings when thinking about downtown Bryan and what they like about the place.

Synthesis

The findings presented in this chapter allow for a better understanding of what draws consumers to downtown Bryan. Respondents were able to identify these amenities as important to their positive associations with downtown. Through doing so they acknowledged that, since they valued the environment of downtown Bryan, those amenities contributed to their overall valuation of the place. Combined with the results of the first-hand observations of downtown Bryan and identification of significant symbolic elements, these environmental amenities suggest that, according to this study, downtown Bryan has been successful at attracting consumers who enjoy shopping in an old, interesting downtown landscape.

This analysis of the interview largely supported the four hypotheses presented earlier, which stated that:

1. A consumer will spend a premium in order to consume certain goods or services in an environment that is psychologically satisfying or indicates a positive cultural identity to his reference group.
2. Merchants who provide goods and services in a revitalized downtown landscape are able to charge a premium for their products and attract consumers from a considerable distance.

3. Consumers are attracted to this retail environment because it provides the psychological satisfaction of distinguishing themselves as edgy consumers.
4. Revitalized downtowns can successfully compete with suburban rivals because their businesses offer goods that are at least mildly edgy in a mildly edgy environment.

Although the responses of downtown customers and business owners generally confirmed the four hypotheses of this thesis, there was no evidence that they had engaged in critical reflection on the precise reasons why they enjoyed or derived value from shopping in downtown Bryan. The theoretical analysis of the motives of downtown customers as presented should not, therefore, be taken as a representation of the actual thoughts of downtown customers and business owners.

Downtown customers were, for instance, willing to pay a small premium for the experience of shopping in downtown Bryan, but it does not appear that this willingness ever appeared to them as a clear and distinct idea. The phenomenological interpretation of the landscape of downtown Bryan was, likewise, considerably more detailed than the actual reported experience of downtown customers. These customers appear to experience the downtown landscape in far more generalized terms, as a place that is "interesting," "quaint," or "different." This does not invalidate the theoretical analysis or the phenomenological interpretation, since they can explain the experience of downtown customers, but it is important to remember that these explanations do not accurately describe the experiences of downtown customers.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS

This study was tasked with searching for a better way to understand the draw of a revitalized downtown for certain groups of consumers. In the previous two chapters, individual accounts of the experience of consuming a revitalized downtown, from the perspective of the researcher and respondents, brought about the identification of the symbolic artifacts and environmental amenities present in downtown Bryan. The findings of this study have shown that consumers who patronize downtown Bryan are willing to pay a small premium for their experience of shopping in downtown Bryan, which they view as a relatively old, interesting downtown landscape. Downtown Bryan has been successful at revitalization because of the fact that enough residents of Bryan and nearby College Station prefer, or simply have a taste for, a mildly edgy shopping experience and because the buildings and design of downtown exhibit sufficient architectural character and uniqueness to attract consumers.

Some downtowns may not find success nurturing the environmental amenities identified in this study, or by following the recommendations put forward in the other sections of this chapter. Revitalized downtowns require a base of residents to support business and public investments. If a community has few with a consumer taste for shopping in an interesting, old downtown landscape, success will be far from certain. There are also downtowns that have buildings and infrastructure that is either unattractive or beyond repair, and thus cannot be made attractive. Simply put, in order to

attract consumers with a taste for interesting, old buildings the downtown need to have at least a few buildings that meet that criteria. In some cases, the street layout or design of downtown hinder any effort to turn it into a place consumers would enjoy. The most typical case is seen when downtowns are bordered or split by highly trafficked roads or highways. For these towns, as well, it is unlikely that the strategies below will be beneficial.

In downtown Bryan, there are a number of elements that, if changed ever so slightly, would make it more or less attractive. For example, there is a rail line that creates a boarder on the East and Southwestern edges of downtown. Respondents noted that if the line were re-routed downtown might become more attractive for hotels, since the train whistle is a nuisance to tired guests. Other elements that could make downtown Bryan more attractive, and that are present in a number of towns across Texas, is a town square or a view of a photogenic, unpolluted river. Specifically for Bryan, the addition of a stately courthouse would add to the attraction of downtown.

Downtown Bryan also happens to be located a few blocks off of an important local thoroughfare. If this roadway split downtown it would make the area less hospitable for pedestrians. Similarly, if the paths through downtown had broken sidewalks, or if walk through different parts of downtown meant one had to pass by loud and grimy warehouses or industrial areas, consumers would be unlikely to traverse the whole of downtown and be less attracted to downtown as a whole. If getting from one end of downtown to another were a particularly tough chore, it would also make visiting downtown an undesirable activity. The precise effect of such changes on the

attractiveness of downtown is debatable, but it is beyond question that the likelihood of success in any downtown's redevelopment will depend on the unique quality of the social and physical characteristics of the place. The success of any downtown is partially a product of these elements that are normally beyond the control of planners and developers.

That being said, the findings of this case study can be used to inform practical policy prescriptions for downtowns hoping to draw in consumers. Policies to revitalize downtown should strengthen 'pull factors' and weaken 'push factors.' In other words, local planners and developers, as well as business and community leaders, should identify these factors locally to make their downtown more attractive and less repellent to consumers. The goal of such policies is to strengthen the consumer's willingness to pay the price premium. The suggestions that follow can help local actors cultivate the downtown environment necessary to meet this goal.

Scaling the Study

Downtowns in smaller cities and towns generally have less varied functions than do downtowns in larger cities. Therefore city size has an impact on the value of this sort of a case study. In larger cities there will be a much wider variety in the uses of downtown, and this will make it harder to generalize about the experience and motivation of the average downtown consumer. Very small towns may not be able to attract enough consumers of revitalized downtowns. Thus, the findings of this study are

most relevant for cities and towns with a local population roughly from 20,000 to 200,000.

Giddings, Texas is a small town two counties southwest of Bryan. The population hovers around 5,000 and is just far enough from the major metropolitan areas of Texas to be out of the way for those consumers. The downtown of Giddings suffers from a number of the ills described previously, such as a major highway that bisects its center, but also has a rather nice looking courthouse on a square just a block or two away. Currently, the highway serves as the major contributor to downtown business traffic, and if traffic were redirected away from downtown, there would likely not be enough consumers passing through to support the restaurants, antique shops, and coffee shops that have found a home in downtown. Nevertheless, the downtown cannot truly be revitalized or helped by the kind of study used here because the small size of the local population prohibits breaking free of the crutch of highway traffic.

Another two counties west of Bryan from Giddings sits Austin. As a state capital, the functions of downtown are different than those of downtown Bryan. The biggest difference may be the fact that downtown Austin is, by far, the largest concentration of employment in the metropolitan area, which is not the case for downtown Bryan. For many large cities, downtown will be the largest employment center, and his primacy in the economy gives the downtown a larger array of functions, uses, and needs, which the environmental amenities of the place must reflect. Instead of being a space mostly devoted to the consumption of goods and services, the downtown of large cities will also be a space devoted to the offices of workers. The kind of study presented here will likely

work best when the activities of the downtown are much more of a monoculture of retail, restaurants, and other small businesses.

The consumers of downtown in a larger city, such as Austin, are also much more likely to have diverse opinions about the amenities of downtown. Therefore, interpreting the general trend in views expressed in one-on-one interviews will likely be a much more difficult task. More weight would need to be applied to the researcher's observations to identify the most important environmental amenities. Given the slight variation between the two methods used in this study, the lifeworld of downtown consumers in larger cities may be misrepresented.

Working within the parameters of medium sized cities, it is possible to scale up, or down, so that this kind of a case study could be made in revitalized downtowns that are slightly larger or smaller than Bryan's. While downtowns have been the focus of this study, urban neighborhoods or older inner-ring (street car) suburbs may also benefit from this sort of study. In some places they exhibit similar a similar concentration of unique, local businesses and niche retailers, albeit with lower building density and a greater numbers of residences. These urban neighborhoods are typically found in larger cities that have downtowns that are too large, functionally diversified, and economically dynamic for the kind of study presented here. Just like downtown Bryan, these neighborhoods can attract consumers from other neighborhoods based on their environmental amenities.

Overall, given enough resources, the methods of the case study presented here and the recommendations put forward in the remainder of the chapter can help planners

and managers of revitalized downtowns to understand the ways in which they operate as a destination for particular a particular type of consumer, and can provide the tools that are necessary to cultivate a successfully revitalized downtown for ones that have yet to reach that stage of growth. Following the recommendations, there will be a discussion on how revitalized downtowns can grow in size when open space is available.

Making Downtown More Attractive

Before a downtown can become a popular site for community events, it must have the infrastructure to sustain these events. This entails planning for the correct peak capacity and designing spaces that feel intimate, yet inclusive. The confines put in to place by downtown streets and the backdrop offered by the buildings can be the setting for events as community members see fit, but if places outside of downtown make more sense to those who plan these kind of events, it will be necessary to determine how to better ‘market’ downtown. Downtown Bryan became more attractive for community events after the streetscape improvements discussed in the introduction, and even more so after additional parking became available on the outskirts of downtown. The streetscape improvements provided a better scene in which these events could take place, and the additional parking accommodated drivers.

The authors and supporters of downtown should develop opportunities for local businesses to find their customers and design incentives to keep local businesses downtown. Ensuring that businesses develop connections to the community is key to their longevity. This can also go a long way toward strengthening the distinctiveness or

uniqueness of a business. Unique, local businesses may be more likely to stay downtown because they can benefit from the downtown environment and the price premium allows them to produce goods and services other stores may not provide. In downtown Bryan, the “First Friday” event extends the hours of downtown businesses so that consumers can learn about the goods and services offered in downtown, as well as the individuals who produce and sell them.

Vacant buildings and vacant lots look unsafe to casual observers. Therefore, those who take care of downtown need to establish supports that maintain buildings and keep them from being demolished. Since they are vital and attractive resources of value for downtown it is important to also protect, keep, or restore *period pieces*. Historic preservation is a central component to sustaining the authenticity of downtown. This could involve creating grants or financing incentives that stipulate owners must use or lease properties, as well as offering grants to improve façades and restore or rehabilitate historic structures. It is important that these tactics work in tandem so that buildings are utilized; yet their historic character is still preserved. Though some buildings were lost, a number of significant buildings in downtown Bryan were protected from demolition. For instance, the Carnegie Library and the La Salle Hotel were saved because the community saw the value that they had for Bryan.

So called ‘odd’ spaces, like narrow alleyways, strangely removed or arresting courtyards and gardens, give downtowns a uniqueness that is hard to replicate. If safe and intriguing, these spaces can make downtown seem more authentically urban and pull consumers to explore their surroundings in more detail. Often secluded, odd spaces can

give those who linger or pass through the feeling that they have witnessed a section of downtown other have yet to find. The narrow alley that connects Main Street to the entrance of Revolutions café (as seen in Figure 12) is a great example of an odd space that encourages passersby to enter in and explore, and that gives an edgier feel to downtown Bryan. In this way, odd spaces make downtown more attractive to consumers.

Making Downtown Less Repellant

One way to encourage downtown hospitality is to ensure that pedestrian accommodations provide safety from vehicular traffic. This is not only a matter of putting in sidewalks and signage, but slowing down vehicles as they enter into the borders of downtown. Pedestrians feel more comfortable when vehicles are moving slower, allowing them to walk across streets and focus on what interests them in downtown, instead of simply dodging vehicles.

Another tactic is to make it easy or advantageous to ‘get rid’ of ones vehicle near the edges of downtown, in order to reduce congestion. This can be done through strategically placed parking garages, nose-in parking, and narrowed and textured roadways. The goal of these policies is to ensure that downtown accommodates pedestrians, but still meets the needs of businesses.

Once pedestrians feel safe to traversing downtown, it is important to then give them a liberating amount of space. This can be done with widened sidewalks that provide room for stopping, standing, pausing, or lingering between downtown streets and buildings. When sidewalks are comfortable pedestrian spaces, downtown welcomes

casual observers and customers who are willing to pay a premium for a downtown experience. The interactions that give these spaces value are not necessarily planned for, which is precisely the point, but designing pedestrian spaces so that social interactions are less restrained makes downtown more attractive to consumers, who will then be willing to support to businesses and community groups.

One obvious element of pedestrian safety that has yet to be approached in this discussion is the fear of encountering individuals that some may deem dangerous or disagreeable. In the eyes of the mildly edgy, middle-class consumer, some individuals that also use downtown may appear unsavory. Ford (2003) lists this fear as one of the common myths about American downtowns:

“Ask a typical suburban American why he or she does not go downtown on a regular basis, especially at night, and the issue of crime is likely to come up.”

(Ford 2003, 33).

Crime is not the only issue that can make some downtown consumers fearful. Some downtowns are home to shelters for the homeless, and even in the eyes of mildly edgy, middle-class consumers, this fact can be repellent. No matter if the fear of safety is real or imagined, the knowledge that downtown draws these types of individuals is enough to deter some from venturing downtown.

To alleviate this fear, the most pragmatic strategy to ensure that downtown is safe for families and their children. There are a number of best practices for crime prevention, but it is beyond the scope of this study and the expertise of the author to suggest them here. It is difficult to make all feel completely safe and comfortable with

the individuals they may encounter, yet, if consumers feel that they are just as likely to face dangerous people or places in any other part of their community, downtown will not appear less attractive to them.

The “broken-window theory” is a well-known hypothesis about how communities descend into disrepair. The theory claims, “if a window in a building is broken and is left unrepaired, all the rest of the windows will soon be broken.” (Wilson and Kelling 1982, 2). This is because, “one unrepaired broken window is a signal that no one cares, and so breaking more windows costs nothing” (ibid.). Downtown consumers, in general, would likely be repelled if downtown were in grave disrepair because the physical sign of the broken window is a sign of social disorder. Although a suggestion of edginess is an advantage, downtowns that are run-down or ‘seedy’ signify social problems that downtown consumers normally do not want to deal with and typically avoid. ‘Old-timey’ and quaint landscapes are preferable, but if they appear run-down, downtown will repel consumers.

To make sure that downtown does not appear seedy or run-down, it is important to make sure that downtown appears clean and building codes are enforced. Making sure that property owners maintain their buildings is essential. In right-of-ways, cities, counties, and state agencies have the duty to keep roads, sidewalks, and other infrastructure in good condition. These practices are central to any strategy for downtown revitalization, since it is all too easy for neglect to repel consumers.

Growing Downtown

As this study has show, one of the most important assets of downtowns are the aged buildings that can offer an authentic sense of place for consumers. Yet, when a downtown has the room to grow, but no buildings occupying those spaces, it is necessary to recreate current aesthetics. Doing so requires smart economic development efforts, informed by significant public input, that stimulate the market for new buildings, nurture local businesses, and incentivize steady employment growth. Slow, yet steady, expansion may be the most desirable outcome because larger developments can sit underutilized if macroeconomic forces put a damper on the local economy.

Communities that support downtown should plan a vision for how they want new spaces to be designed and operate. Each community will have a specific need that can be addressed by the space, but it is important that new growth should reflect the vision of those who reside in or near downtown. Thus, the first mechanism for growth is to create a vision for the space through meaningful public site planning. Engaged members of the public know their downtown well enough to provide a thorough guide for planners and architects to develop new spaces in downtown. This process will ensure, to some degree, that new development reflects the needs and wants of the individuals who use these spaces.

If there is open space in downtown that the community envisions for commercial uses, but economic growth is slow, those spaces should be used to accommodate temporary structures or mobile business, such as outdoor markets, because this will begin to tie these new spaces to the rest of downtown. Permits should be created to

accommodate commercial uses that the community and local officials agree work for these areas. Local ordinances concerning temporary commercial activities should also be revised. Temporary commercial activities and mobile business can also serve as a useful proving ground for the small businesses and entrepreneurs who may one day locate in newly built permanent structures in downtown.

The market for space in downtown must also be ripe for growth, which entails that successful establishments will be looking for larger spaces and that vacancies are few or are limited to properties that are difficult to convert to present uses. Sometimes the market for space can be stimulated by the development of public infrastructure for transportation or other purposes. At other times loans may need to be made available for expansion of current business in downtown, or to attract unique local businesses located in other areas of the community. Growth also requires an increase in the number of businesses. This can be achieved through business incubators for the kinds of businesses that are successful in revitalized downtowns like Bryan's, such as niche retail and local restaurants. Businesses coming out of these incubators would be fitting candidates to fill open spaces in new downtown buildings.

Lunchtime crowds made up of workers from businesses in and near downtown act as the tinder for the expansion of downtown. Ensuring that employment growth remains steady in and around downtown can be done through targeted relocations and expansions of current businesses, and by incentives for a variety of industries. All of these actions should help to stimulate the need for downtown growth when there is available space.

Conclusion

In general, the policy prescriptions for downtown reflect the researcher's interpretation of views provided by respondents. From their perspectives as business owners, consumers of downtown, or both, downtown Bryan has succeed because it offers a unique experience of shopping, dining, and general entertainment that compares favorably to options nearby. At the bedrock of that downtown experience are the practical implications touched on in this chapter that allow downtown businesses to sell their goods and services at a premium. It is likely that similar downtowns can find their own successes if they follow some of the guidance provided above.

Yet, implementing these recommendations should not lead to neglecting the realities of the physical and social characteristics of the place. As stated previously, not all downtowns can benefit from these strategies because not all are, or can be made, attractive to consumers. The findings of this study have shown that the premium consumers are willing to pay is related to the perceived quality of the downtown as an attraction. Overall, what this means is that the draws of revitalized downtowns are the environmental amenities that the physical and social characteristics of the place can cultivate and support.

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