

Public Buildings Keep Town Centers Alive

by Philip Langdon

If you exit Interstate 80 and stop in Hudson, Ohio, 14 miles north of Akron, you might not sense that anything is amiss. People from throughout northeast Ohio love visiting that picturesque old town, settled two centuries ago as part of Connecticut's Western Reserve. People walk Hudson's well-kept Main Street business district. They shop in stores built more than a century ago. They stroll across a tidy "village green." Hudson seems, on the surface, a place where the center remains intact.

But in the past several years one aspect of Hudson has changed for the worse: in 1997 the post office left its longtime location on Main Street, reducing the role of downtown in local people's lives. "The post office was important to downtown because it was a huge generator of foot traffic," says Julie Lindner, a planning consultant who lives in Hudson. "You could not go there without seeing someone you knew. It ensured that local people would be downtown. It made downtown necessary, not just a bunch of cutesy shops in a quaint setting."

Now that the post office has moved to an automobile-oriented location just beyond the central retail area, those who live in Hudson have "no compelling reason" to go downtown, says Lindner. Though the Main Street business district

contains two restaurants, a bar, banking and real estate offices, and a collection of stores, Lindner believes "the stores must rely on attracting customers from a larger area who will come to Hudson on nice-weather days and browse through the gift shops." As she notes, "this further alienates the local shopper who might want a shoe store or something 'real.'"

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The harm done to downtown Hudson is mild compared to the damage that other communities have suffered when one, two, or even more of their principal public buildings moved out. A planner in a Southern city recalls that his downtown lost part of its liveliness when the post office shifted to a location outside the central business district. A while later, city officials decided the old city hall was too small, so the municipal offices relocated to a building that had become available beyond downtown. Then, because so much money was tied up in the new

city offices, local leaders passed up an opportunity to build a new library downtown, even though that was where the library's director said the facilities should be. One by one, the departure of public buildings left the center ever weaker.

In Hudson, many local people realized what was lost, and a campaign has been initiated to build a new mixed use development, including a large downtown library, to try to offset the impact of the earlier decision. Regrettably, however, officials in many other communities still don't recognize how the location of public buildings helps cause a downtown to rise or fall. When public facilities move out, the downtown may spiral downward as its retail activity withers and local people invest their energy elsewhere. *Boosting the Downtown Economy*. This article examines the vital role post offices, municipal halls, libraries, courthouses, and other public buildings play in downtowns and town centers, and what several communities have done to keep these uses from leaving.

SAVING THE POST OFFICE IN AMHERST, MASSACHUSETTS

Amherst, a western Massachusetts college town of 35,000, first became anxious about the possibility of losing its downtown post office in the 1980s. The Postal Service announced that its building on North Pleasant Street was no longer large enough and would have to be replaced by a new one in an outlying commercial area.

The old post office, a Neoclassical building constructed in 1925, "was important to business people downtown, who relied on being able to walk to do their postal activities," says Amherst Planning Director Robert P. Mitchell. For years, many residents had rented boxes in that building, just one long block from the center of town. "People met there to get their mail and exchange local gossip," Mitchell says. "Many have rituals where they pick up their mail and then go get coffee at a downtown restaurant or coffee shop. That business would have been lost." A major bus stop just down the front steps made the existing post office convenient for people who did not or could not drive.



Hudson's Post Office was relocated to this spot outside the town center.



PHILIP LANGDON

The Amherst Post Office is a popular gathering spot.

Consequently, according to Mitchell, “political pressure was brought to bear,” and the Postal Service eventually relented. But the Postal Service remained unhappy about the old building’s ability to handle large truck deliveries and sorting operations. “So five years later they said again, ‘We need a new facility,’” Mitchell recalls. This time the Postal Service, recognizing that a total pullout would not be accepted, offered an agreeable compromise: many functions would relocate, but the downtown building would remain in service.

To this day, the Post Office is a pivotal building in a thriving business area. When I visited last summer, three individuals – one of them blind – were sitting on benches out front, waiting for a bus. On the lawn, a young man sat reading a book. At a table shaded by a big umbrella, a vendor enticed passersby to pause and inspect African crafts and jewelry. “It’s a popular spot for vendors,” Mitchell observed, “and a gathering spot for both locals and students. If you go there at seven in the morning, you’ll see regulars chatting. The building itself has a civic presence.” For a downtown to flourish, says Mitchell, “you want to have things to walk to. The Post Office is one of those.”

A five-minute walk away is Amherst’s Town Hall, a rugged Romanesque red brick structure built in 1889. There was talk of selling the building in the early 1990s, when it was dilapidated, but the chamber of commerce, among others, didn’t like the idea of moving the municipal offices from such a central location. Instead, the town renovated

it and made it handicap accessible.

“If you need to get a birth certificate or a building permit or a passport, or you have a problem, you come to Town Hall,” Mitchell says. Citizens who serve on Amherst’s more than 50 boards and commissions continually attend meetings there, keeping it open

from early in the morning until late at night.

When Amherst needed a new police headquarters, it too was built downtown, a couple of blocks from the main retail street. The downtown station makes it easy to respond to drunkenness and disturbances when the downtown bars close. The town has also constructed a downtown community center to serve senior citizens and provide space for nonprofit organizations and other activities. Adding to the mix of downtown uses is the public library. Plenty of things happen downtown, most of them good. The

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Town Hall in downtown Amherst, Massachusetts.

Boosting the Downtown Economy

Experts in downtown development and commercial revitalization say public buildings are important both socially and economically. “A typical public library draws 500 to 1,500 people a day,” says Robert Gibbs of Gibbs Planning Group in Birmingham, Michigan. “That’s close to the draw of a small department store. A typical town hall draws 200 to 500 people a day.” Those people help to enliven the sidewalks and put money in the cash registers of nearby stores and restaurants. In addition, Gibbs says, public buildings “add to the authenticity of a town. They make it less of a shopping center and more of a town center.”

When developments like Seaside, Florida, and Mashpee Commons on Cape Cod were started in the 1980s, their owners were unusual in providing space for small post offices, which they realized would bring people to their communities and support local enterprises. Now, says Gibbs, the value of post offices is recognized more widely. “A number of large [retail] developers are putting civic uses into their developments as an insurance policy,” he says. In an economic downturn, the presence of a post office will help the retail development continue pulling in customers.

Donovan Rypkema, principal of Place Economics, a Washington, D.C.-based consulting firm, says public buildings boost a downtown’s economy. Individuals who go downtown to the post office to mail a letter, to a municipal building to pay a parking ticket, or to a courthouse to serve on a jury are all good prospects for spending money downtown. Government offices can be a boon. “A downtown worker will spend between \$2,500 and \$3,500 a year in the downtown economy,” Rypkema says.

Monetary considerations aside, Rypkema says it’s important to have the institutional leadership of a community based in the downtown because they can work together there, benefiting the community as a whole. If the downtown looks neglected and the institutional leaders, including government, are not located there, any business that’s considering moving to the community may notice their absence and conclude that the community lacks leadership.

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combination of busy public buildings and stores, restaurants, and other enterprises in a walkable setting has made downtown Amherst remarkably successful.



Saratoga Springs' Post Office is a critical component of downtown.

**SARATOGA SPRINGS PRESERVES
A POST OFFICE, BUILDS A LIBRARY**

In the 1970s the Postal Service threatened to vacate a Classical-style post office at Broadway and Church Street, the “100 percent corner” in Saratoga Springs, New York. “Because the city government couldn’t or wouldn’t move fast enough, the mayor at the time, Raymond Watkin, sued as a private citizen to stop the process, and it worked,” recalls former resident Mary Hotaling.

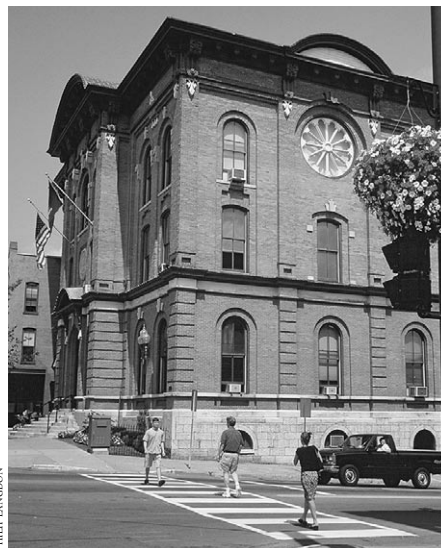
Though most mail-handling for the city of 26,000 was transferred by the Postal Service to a new building about a mile away, postal officials bowed to local pressure and agreed to continue offering window service in the 1910-era building – a landmark with marble columns framing its entrance. By 1995, however, the Postal Service had chopped up the interior with partitioning and had refused to make major investments in what was, by its calculations, an inefficient old structure.

Despite its semi-dilapidated condition, the downtown post office had continued to draw 1,500 customers a day, mainly because it stood amid restaurants, stores, banks, and local institutions. “We thought that if the Post Office moved, it would be a disaster to downtown,” says Geoff Bornemann, the city’s planning director.

Fortunately, an imaginative local developer, Jeffrey W. Pfeil, negotiated an unusual response to the Postal Service’s neglect. Pfeil calculated that if he installed a rent-paying business (Coldwell Banker-Prime Properties) in half the building, over a period of years the stream of rental income would generate the \$400,000 needed for restoration and improvements. That included bringing the grand lobby back to its former splendor and adding a discreetly designed handicapped-access ramp. Pfeil had to devote three long years to pushing

his plan through the postal bureaucracy, but with the backing of the late Congressman Gerald Solomon, the building once again became an impressive anchor for downtown.

Across Broadway from the post office is City Hall, a tall, Italian palazzo-style structure that continues to generate local foot traffic 131 years after it was built. From City Hall it’s a short walk to the Saratoga Springs Public Library, built in 1995. That 58,000-square-foot structure, which replaced a much smaller facility,



Saratoga Springs' City Hall.



Saratoga Springs' Public Library is downtown

was constructed a block east of Saratoga Springs’ main retail street as a result of a consensus that the library should remain downtown.

Its executive director, Harry Dutcher, sees the library as important to “keeping downtown healthy” and “keeping downtown relevant to the people who live here 12 months a year.” “I’m sure it would have been a lot easier to build on a suburban strip,” he says. “The building could have been one-story.” That would have cost less to build and operate than the three-story structure that ultimately came into being. The costs, in Dutcher’s view, are justified by the fact that residents of close-in neighborhoods can walk to it and by the role the library plays in the community.



Public buildings have helped spark commercial activity in downtown Saratoga Springs.



Saratoga Springs is prospering. Developers are filling parking lots on Broadway with new buildings, some of them two, three, or four stories high, with a mix of retail, offices, and sometimes housing. Downtown storefronts, half-empty in the 1970s, are now full. The city's core looks handsome and distinctive. Public buildings helped make the revival possible.

to give the police the second floor and the basement. Most of the ground floor is now occupied by a highly successful upscale restaurant called First & Last Tavern. In fair weather, sidewalk dining enlivens the frontage of this striking mixed-use building.

Monroe Johnson, community development specialist for the city, says the



In Middletown, Connecticut, a new police headquarters was successfully integrated with a ground-floor restaurant.

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE MIXED USES

Some communities bolster their downtowns by mixing government operations and for-profit enterprises in a new building or a new complex. Middletown, Connecticut, a city of 43,000, is one of those. In the mid-1990s, when the time came to build a new police headquarters, Middletown considered a dozen sites. The choice the city settled upon was a Main Street block occupied by a vacant Sears store. Local leaders hoped the new building, if it was attractive, would knit the street together and aid the recovery of a business district that had endured lean times.

Middletown officials realized that the new police headquarters would do more for Main Street's customer appeal if the building had stores or restaurants in its ground floor. The city decided to construct a signature building with towers at each end – recalling a towered city hall that had been demolished in 1960 – and

police headquarters enhances confidence in downtown safety, and he observes that the stylish restaurant has become “probably the most important commercial presence on Main Street.”

Other cities have put government functions in privately owned buildings as a way of jump-starting rehabilitation in depressed blocks. A notable example is the effort led by Art Skolnik in Seattle's Pioneer Square Historic District in the early 1970s. Skolnik, operating from the mayor's office, enticed municipal, county, and other public entities to rent space in Pioneer Square buildings. That enabled the buildings to qualify for renovation loans. The lease commitments from governmental entities helped spur neighborhood revitalization. Once the private market rebounded, government offices were free to go elsewhere. Skolnik says, “Pioneer Square is now mostly restored, and it's become an active, vital part of the city.”

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Mixing Books, Housing, and Coffee

One of the best ways to enhance an area's liveliness is to mix different uses closely together. That can be done even in buildings that serve public purposes, such as libraries. The Hollywood Library in the Hollywood neighborhood of Portland, Oregon, (shown above) occupies part of a four-story building that opened in May 2002 in a joint venture between the Multnomah County Library system and Sockeye Hollywood LLC, a private developer.

Officials wanted a mixed-use project, preferably with housing on top. That idea fit the revised zoning in a part of the city where residential and commercial development had previously been kept apart. “Mixed-use development allows people to live near the services they want to enjoy,” explained John Warner of the Portland Development Commission. Thomas Hacker Architects of Portland designed the building to accommodate a 13,000-square-foot branch library, 47 mixed-income apartments, and 815 square feet of ground-floor retail space – now occupied by Caffé Uno.

The upper floors contain 28 market-rate apartments and 19 apartments reserved for people earning less than 60 percent of the area's median income. The county owns the library, while Sockeye owns the residential and retail space. The new library is one key element of Portland's plan to strengthen the center of the Hollywood Neighborhood, also home to the restored 1,500 seat, Art Deco style Hollywood Theatre and (of special interest to fans of author Beverly Cleary) young Ramona Quimby and her family.



A Downtown Campus ... for Government

A “public service campus” is the answer some communities have used to serve the public efficiently and in some cases bolster the downtown. In the 1980s the City of Midland and Midland County, Michigan, were both in dire need of new government facilities, says Mark Ostgarden, city planner for Midland (population, 41,000). The city offices were downtown, and the county offices were scattered in several locations.

Relocating the city offices out of downtown was considered but rejected in favor of consolidating city and county offices as part of a “campus”-like redevelopment project, located at the west end of the downtown Main Street business district. Also part of the government campus, an abandoned Woolworth building has been converted to offices for The Mackinac Center, a public policy research organization. According to Jennifer Adamcik, Midland’s Downtown Coordinator, this has enabled the approximately 250 city and county employees to easily shop or eat downtown during lunch hour or after work.

Another advantage of the project, Adamcik notes, has been that parking is shared by all the entities in the nine-block redevelopment area, including governments, churches, and stores. Three local foundations – The Herbert H. and Grace A. Dow Foundation, The Rollin M. Gerstacker Foundation, and The Charles J. Strosacker Foundation – provided \$3.8 million of the project’s \$14.3 million cost.

Though a campus-like organization has been used in other communities as well, it will produce only limited spin-off benefits for downtown retailers unless the government buildings are located within easy walking distance of the stores, restaurants, and other businesses downtown.

Governmental Campus area in downtown Midland, Michigan.

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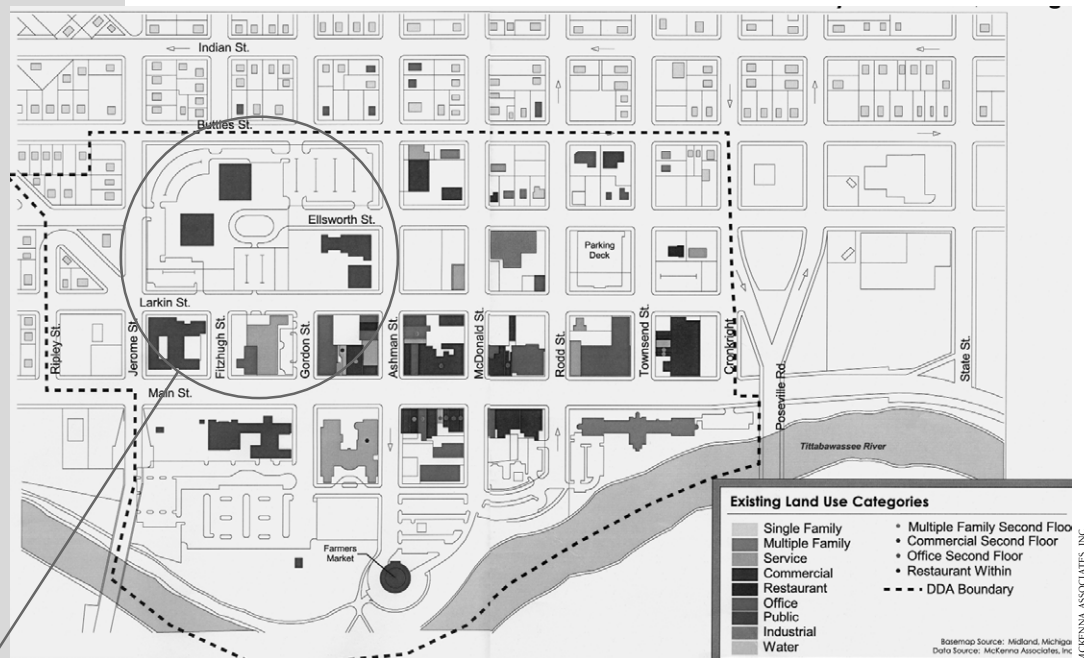
LESSONS FROM COURTHOUSE TOWNS

In Maryland, former Gov. Parris Glendening, as part of his Smart Growth program, attempted to concentrate government offices in central locations, such as downtowns. One example is in Snow Hill, the 2,409-population seat of Worcester County. About four years ago the county government planned to build a new office annex outside of Snow Hill, near the jail, to replace cramped facilities in town. “The governor went to Snow Hill and said if they built it downtown, he’d put state money in the project,” recalls John Frece in the Governor’s Office of Smart Growth.

Considering the \$1.5 million incentive offered by the state, the county decided to build the new space, for approximately 120 employees, as an annex to the existing county courthouse in the town’s center. The results have been good. A new café opened, a restaurant expanded, and a drug store continued operating despite earlier plans for closing. Michael Dresser reported in *The Baltimore Sun*. Other renovations and business openings have also been planned in Snow Hill – attributable in large part to the investment in the county offices.

Proximity exerts an enormous influence. Moving a public building even a short distance can have a large impact on a downtown’s economy. In Boise, Idaho, Ada County recently consolidated all its offices – including the courthouse, the county administration, prosecutors, and ancillary staff who were scattered all around downtown – into a single building roughly five blocks south and six blocks east of the old locations. “Lots of the smaller law firms are following the courthouse in that direction,” says Elaine Clegg, co-executive director of Idaho Smart Growth. “It seems crazy that such a short-distance move could make such a difference, but the 500 or so employees no longer eat, shop on their lunch hour, or even drive through downtown much anymore. It has only been six months, and the businesses downtown are beginning to feel the effect.”

Experiences in two courthouse towns in Pennsylvania illustrate some of the nuances of siting decisions. In Doylestown, the Bucks County seat, county officials debated whether to build a new courthouse down the hill from the community’s hub. The new location would have been only a five- or 10-minute walk away from the old courthouse, according to planning consultant Thomas Comitta, who conducted a community impact study for the borough.



Carson City, Nevada



Nevada's state capital, Carson City (population, 54,000), has experienced what may be a unique twist when it comes to the location of its city hall. About ten years ago, city hall was relocated from downtown to a site about a mile north of the city's center. Unfortunately, nothing too unusual about that, as many municipal offices have moved away from their historic downtown locations. The twist in Carson City: city hall has returned to downtown (shown below).

According to Walter Sullivan, Carson City's planning and community development director, the return to downtown reflected local leaders' desire to "make a statement about the importance of downtown," and "to strengthen the city's efforts at downtown redevelopment." The return has involved about one hundred employees, including the mayor and city manager's offices, as well as the city's board of supervisors. The downtown relocation was eased when a rehabbed former bank building became available.

Sullivan notes that the move back downtown has added to downtown's vitality. In addition, local officials have benefited from now being within walking distance of the State Capitol building.

Also reinforcing Carson City's downtown revival: the opening of a new downtown post office in 2001. In addition, downtown has seen the construction of a new main fire station and the remodeling and expansion of the public library.



City Hall is back downtown in Carson City, Nevada. The State Capitol can be seen in the background



The new Lawrence, Kansas, Arts Center has helped boost the small city's downtown.

But that distance would have been long enough to harm the downtown of the 8,227-population borough. "If the courthouse moves, the retail shops, stores and restaurants will suffer," said Comitta. " 'Mom and pop' businesses would be the first to go." His warning seems to have registered. Bucks County now appears likely to expand the existing courthouse rather than erect a new building away from the community's center.

In West Chester, the 18,000-population seat of Chester County, the initial thinking among the county judges was somewhat different. The judges were inclined to construct a nine-story court building right in the borough's center, close to the existing one. The problem was that the new facility would have required demolition of about a dozen small buildings. Helpful though public buildings can be for a community's vitality, it can be a mistake to put them where they displace tax-paying buildings – especially tax-paying buildings that contain local businesses.

The stores and other enterprises in West Chester's town center were important to the community's character, says Comitta, who lives in West Chester and occasionally consults for its borough government. Eventually the Chester County commissioners and judges decided to build the new court facilities a block and a half away – an outcome that Comitta regards as nearly ideal. Existing businesses and buildings will continue to be, and

the employment base will remain, within easy walking distance.

ARTS CENTERS IN THE CENTER

While the focus of this article has been on buildings such as post offices and town halls, in many communities an arts center can provide the linchpin for strengthening downtown.

In Lawrence, Kansas, debate centered on a community Arts Center in an old Carnegie library building owned by the city, which the arts group had outgrown. Meanwhile, a local industry made an attractive offer to build a new center on a donated site outside the downtown.

Linda Finger, city/county planning director, said the mayor and the governing body established an ad hoc committee to review options for renovating a downtown building or finding another downtown location. Through the efforts of several local business owners and developers a better alternative was devised. A new arts center, as well as commercial buildings, apartments, and a retail center were developed within the downtown district. The Arts Center continues contributing the vitality of the arts community to the central city and has been an anchor to redevelopment, Finger says.

Near the Arts Center a new Municipal Court building has also gone up. "None of this happened quickly," Finger notes, "but over a three- to four-year time span, with a lot of public involvement and

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working together creatively to meet both public and private-sector needs.”

The distance between local government and the arts is literally the length of a flight of stairs in the small town of Antrim, New Hampshire. As former Antrim planning commissioner David Essex recounts, “two years ago proponents of a \$900,000 Town Hall renovation won a surprising Town Meeting vote from notoriously frugal residents in part by demonstrating the Town Hall’s importance as a venue for civic organizations, notably a very active theater troupe that would have been without a performance space if the upstairs auditorium had not been renovated and brought up to code.” According to Essex, the plan passed in large part because of the “homework” done by a committee that carefully worked through the details of the renovation plan before the Town Meeting vote.

DESIGN MAKES A DIFFERENCE

Public buildings that generate community activity and social life are more critical to a downtown than are more routine government office buildings. Post offices, for example, serve and attract individuals from throughout the community, giving them opportunities to socialize and filter through a town or city center. The same is true for town halls, libraries, and arts centers.

Government offices that have less daily involvement with the public can be

useful for giving downtown a boost, but they have to be skillfully integrated into their surroundings. Since the bombing of the Oklahoma City Federal Building, this has become harder to accomplish, especially for courthouses and federal facilities. In New Haven, Connecticut, Mayor John DeStefano Jr. worked to get a new FBI building erected in the downtown, but it has turned out to be not much of an asset. The building stands far back from the street behind a black metal fence and an array of barriers. The barriers and the retreat from the street make for an unfriendly environment. Pedestrian life, which is critical to downtown vitality, cannot tolerate much of this.

But responding to security concerns is not necessarily incompatible with community-sensitive design. Even large federal office buildings and courthouses can be integrated with their surroundings in an attractive manner, and remain vital components of downtown districts.

According to Joe Moravec, Commissioner of the General Services Administration’s Public Buildings Service (responsible for the siting and design of federal buildings), GSA remains firmly committed to “using the federal presence



The landscaping in front of the federal courthouse in downtown Minneapolis integrates security and aesthetics.

as a force to help strengthen downtowns.” While federal buildings need to satisfy “the paramount concern of worker and visitor safety,” they do not have to become fortresses. Moravec also points to the use of berms and other landscaping techniques to provide sufficient “stand off distances” for vehicles, while offering an aesthetically pleasing environment. As Moravec notes, it is essential to have high-quality architecture and design that will result in buildings that can “be a source of pride for generations.”

SUMMING UP:

The presence of public buildings is one of the keys to a strong and vibrant downtown or town center. Many communities have seen economic and social benefits when the post office, the municipal building, the public library, and other important public buildings stay or expand downtown. Conversely, when they leave, the fabric knitting downtown together can start to unravel. ♦

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ANTHONY RECICCO



Online Comments:

“Besides creating activity downtown, public buildings have another quite important role: they connect us to our community’s past and carry our identity into the future. While popular culture focuses on individuality, rebellion, and rootlessness, civic spaces are one of the rare manifestations we have left of community and depth of common values and culture through time. They provide that sense of comfort, continuity, and place so important to the human psyche.”

– Ilene Watson, Planner, Kelowna, British Columbia

“Holly Springs, Mississippi, is a town of around 9,5000, southeast of Memphis. In the mid-1980s, the Postal Service announced that the downtown post office, on the town square, would be moved to a location on the western city limits. The Chamber of Commerce and the Downtown Merchants Association, bolstered by three downtown banks, launched a campaign to keep the post office downtown. After much negotiation, the Postal Service agreed to leave the downtown location open for specific services, while moving other services to the new location. This arrangement has worked for everyone.”

– Ivy Owen, Community Development Coordinator for the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians (and former C.D. Director, Holly Springs, Mississippi)