new life
for your
business
district

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Residents of many Illinois communities are becoming increasingly concerned about the decline of downtown areas as business centers of the community and centers of social activity. This circular points out flaws found in many business districts, flaws that cause people to take their business away from the downtown area to outlying shopping centers or to other communities, and suggests ways to correct these flaws.

Major flaws that keep people away from the downtown area include:

- Inefficient street systems;
- Inadequate parking facilities;
- Poorly designed sidewalk systems;
- Neglected open areas such as squares and vacant lots;
- Lack of attractive street furniture;
- Ugly, cheap-looking store fronts and run-down buildings;
- Poorly designed, obtrusive advertising signs;
- Lack of trees and plantings.

As these flaws are discussed below, see if you can recognize any that are present in the business district of your community. It is not possible to discuss each specific situation that might exist in your community because each community will have its own unique problems. But the general description of each flaw will help you to become a more critical observer of your downtown area and should give you ideas for possible solutions to your particular problem.

If your community’s downtown area does suffer from one or more of these flaws, it is important that corrective measures be taken. People choose to do business in attractive and convenient surroundings. Communities that have neglected their downtown areas have seen their central business districts decline; communities that have improved the appearance of their business districts have a downtown area that competes vigorously with outlying shopping areas and is able to provide services that the outlying centers do not have.

**Inefficient Street Systems**

In most communities people reach the business district by automobile. If traffic patterns to and through the business district are uncon-
gested, orderly, and easy to use, more people are likely to go downtown to shop and to conduct other business.

Unfortunately downtown streets in many communities tend to impede the potential shopper driving into the business district rather than help him reach his destination, park his car, and go about his business. Movement of traffic is interrupted by cars entering from alleys and sidestreets and by cars entering and leaving parking spaces along the street; traffic lights are often poorly sequenced; delivery trucks often obstruct traffic by double-parking; and pedestrians try to cross the street in the middle of the block instead of at corners or special pedestrian crosswalks. Such annoyances are not conducive to a leisurely, pleasant shopping trip.

A careful block-by-block examination of your business area will show which of the following traffic-flow and street modifications might alleviate the problems in your community's downtown area. Consider taking the following steps: (1) eliminate left turns; (2) install special left-turn lanes; (3) improve the sequencing of traffic lights; (4) eliminate daytime parking on major streets; (5) change angle parking to parallel parking; (6) strictly enforce no-parking zones; (7) forbid
These illustrations show the effect of parallel street parking and angle street parking on traffic flow. With use of the parallel system (top), lane one remains open to traffic. Traffic in lane two is interrupted by cars maneuvering in and out of parking spaces. Lane three is reserved for parking. If angle parking (bottom) is used, traffic in lane one, the through lane, is interrupted by cars backing out of parking spaces. Lanes two and three are reserved for parking. Although angle parking allows more cars to be parked in a given area, it is least desirable because of the traffic congestion it causes.
double-parking and ticket all offenders; (8) improve and widen downtown streets; (9) try to restrict downtown deliveries to hours when stores are not open; (10) establish a one-way-street system; and (11) separate automobile traffic and pedestrian areas as much as possible.

Inadequate Parking Facilities

When the potential shopper has arrived in the business district, he will want to park as close as possible to the stores or offices where he has business to transact. Since business establishments are usually concentrated in a comparatively small area, it is not possible to provide equally convenient parking for everyone. This problem can be solved if one realizes that there are basically two types of shoppers — those who wish to purchase one or two items quickly and those who intend to do more extensive shopping.

The shopper who only wishes to pick up one or two items usually knows exactly what he wants and where to get it. He will not require long-time parking. Street parking is best suited for such shoppers. The parking spaces should be metered for short periods of time — 15 to 25 minutes, for example — to allow more cars to use them. Streets used for this purpose should be wide enough to allow for continual parking of cars without interfering with traffic movement.

The shopper who wishes to visit several stores, to make comparisons of products, and to spend several hours shopping requires different parking facilities. Parking lots on the fringe of the downtown area and lots in vacant areas within the business district provide the best solution. These lots should be metered for one, two, or more hours to allow ample time for shopping without having to worry about an expired

Some communities allow parking in the center of downtown streets as this illustration shows. Such parking is dangerous and adds to the congestion of the area. Such situations should be eliminated.
meter. It is important to landscape parking lots by planting trees and shrubs. More information on parking facilities may be found in Circular 931, "Planning for a Better Community Landscape," which may be obtained from your county extension office or by writing to the College of Agriculture, University of Illinois, Urbana, Illinois 61801.

**Poorly Designed Sidewalk Systems**

The shopper as a pedestrian requires different circulation patterns from those he needed when he was a driver. A basic characteristic of pedestrians is a tendency to take the shortest route from point to point. The block, or "gridiron," street system found in most downtown areas requires the pedestrian to follow paths that do not allow him to take the shortest possible route. Crossing at corners instead of in mid-block is a good example. A second example is the necessity of usually having to go around the block to get from one store to another even though the stores are located back to back.

In order to provide better circulation patterns for the pedestrian without interference from automobile traffic some communities have developed shoppers' malls. This is done by closing some downtown streets to automobile traffic and limiting them to pedestrian use. Pedestrians can then cut across from one store to another at any point along the street. Thus the street itself is changed from a traffic artery to a mall. Plantings can be installed, benches constructed, and the entire area designed as a pleasant court where shoppers can relax in comfort and safety. Cars are parked in parking lots near such malls but clearly separate from them. The entire area is designed with the pedestrian shopper, not the driver, in mind.

A mall is not necessarily the answer for all communities. However, with professional assistance, you might be able to find some means of at least partially separating cars and pedestrians and providing more direct pedestrian access to stores and offices in the downtown area.

**Neglected Open Areas**

Many downtown areas contain dead, unused open areas that could serve several useful functions if they were cleaned up and developed. Two examples of such areas are open spaces between and behind buildings in the interior block and vacant lots where buildings have been torn down. These open areas are often littered with trash, empty packing crates from nearby stores, and other miscellaneous items. They are an eyesore and do little credit to the community.
The shaded areas in the drawing at the top of the facing page designate wasted space found in the interior of a typical city block. There are two buildings—the residence and the industrial building—that are empty and decaying. The rest of the area is used for haphazard parking and is not maintained.

The drawing at the bottom of the facing page shows what could be done with this blighted area. Note that the empty industrial building has been removed and in its place there is an orderly parking lot. Other parts of the interior block have also been cleaned up and have become useful areas for people who work in the business district or shop there.

The illustration at the top of this page shows a pleasant, well-designed pedestrian mall. This area once was a seldom used, run-down alley.
The top illustration shows a handsomely designed and well-maintained area that can serve as a change of grade in a hilly business district. The small pedestrian rest plaza shown at the bottom makes good use of a one-time downtown dead space. Notice the tasteful furniture and the plantings.
Areas behind and between stores can be made into pedestrian courts or malls that also serve as second entrances to the stores in question. The shopper can leave one store through a back door, cross the court, and enter another store that could previously be reached only by going around the block. The court itself can contain trees, some benches for public use, and perhaps a water fountain. Such an improvement need not cost a great deal of money. The space can be surfaced with cut stone, paving brick, or exposed aggregate concrete. In addition, some cleaning up and painting and installation of tub plantings will often do the job. Merchants who would benefit from such a court can share the cost of the improvement. They are likely to receive handsome dividends in added business.

This sculpture, placed in a shopping plaza, is a work of art to be enjoyed by adults as well as an example of play sculpture to entertain children.
The top photograph shows a well-designed, well-placed, durable wooden bench of the type that can be conveniently located in a square, park, or pedestrian relaxation area. The two illustrations at the bottom show excellent examples of well-designed trash receptacles. The receptacle pictured at left has been placed near a bench for the convenience of users of the bench. The receptacle at right is located on a downtown sidewalk where users of the area may conveniently discard trash instead of throwing it on the street.
An alternate use for dead open spaces is to make them into parking areas. Some merchants have improved open spaces behind their stores and constructed free parking lots for their customers. Vacant lots where buildings have been torn down can also be made into pedestrian courts or parking areas. However, it is not advisable to construct a parking area if the space will hold only five or six cars. In such cases it is better to install a pedestrian court.

Another open area whose potentialities are often neglected is the town square. This area can also serve as a place where shoppers and businessmen can relax. A small playground can perhaps be constructed in the town square for use by children while their parents are shopping.

In general, remember that unused, neglected open spaces suggest carelessness and a lack of pride in the community to the visitor. Once he begins to wonder about the quality of maintenance you have in the business district, he will also begin to question the quality of your services and merchandise. Many potential customers can be lost in this way. Therefore do everything possible to eliminate unattractive, unused dead spaces.

This open space in a downtown area has been made into a small pedestrian plaza. With landscaping and installation of planters and benches many unused areas in the business district can be made into attractive and useful places such as this one.
Lack of Attractive Street Furniture

Most downtown areas lack attractive, functional street furniture. Any benches, drinking fountains, and trash receptacles that do exist are often poorly designed and uninviting and are often not properly maintained. The pedestrian malls and courts that have been discussed above provide an ideal opportunity to install appealing and functionally and visually integrated benches, trash receptacles, and light standards as well as directional signs and telephone booths in the business district of your community.

Street benches should be attractive and comfortable. They should be constructed of materials that are able to withstand the weather and also resist abuse. Remember that durable and simple street furniture is no more expensive than the unattractive pieces found in many communities. It is easy to stylistically integrate other features of the street scene such as trash receptacles, light standards, and directional signs with benches, drinking fountains, and tub planters to provide a pleasing overall effect. A landscape architect will be able to offer you suggestions about what designs are preferable in your situation.

This attractive wooden bench is sturdily constructed and placed in a convenient location in a landscaped pedestrian mall.
The backless concrete bench in the top photograph serves as a place where employees may relax. The area shown in the lower picture is located in a downtown square. Shoppers find such an area a convenient place to rest for a few minutes and employees of nearby stores and offices can come here for breaks and lunch periods.
Unattractive Store Fronts and Run-Down Buildings

The business districts of many towns have grown haphazardly over the years with no long-range plan of coordinating the architecture and color scheme of new or remodeled buildings. When a store owner decides to repaint his building or construct a new front on it, he often picks colors and materials that are incompatible with surrounding buildings. The result is that many towns have business districts that have old and new buildings side by side, large and small buildings in unpleasant contrast, adjoining buildings with clashing colors and architectural styles, and a few completely neglected, unpainted, and often vacant buildings. The total effect is not pleasing to the potential shopper. As all merchants know, people often judge a product by its package. In the same way, many people will judge the quality of a store by its exterior appearance.

The most effective and most inexpensive immediate step that can be taken to remedy this situation is the use of a coordinated color plan in repainting downtown buildings. A professional consultant can sug-

Shrub and tree plantings can be used to screen large buildings and also to channel traffic and delineate streets and drives.
These two photographs show how brick and masonry walls can be used to screen areas where privacy may be desired.
gest how the good architectural features of buildings can be emphasized and the effect of the unpleasant ones greatly minimized by using certain colors that will unify the appearance of buildings with different heights, masses, and styles. As a general rule, light-valued colors such as gray, off-white, or cream are best for this purpose.

Another way in which clashing architectural styles can be given unity is by constructing fronts for several adjoining stores from the same materials. Each merchant can finance the cost of materials for his store and money can probably be saved by all store owners employing the same contractor and then sharing the cost of his fee.

Every effort should be made to rent vacant buildings and stores in your business district. If a vacant building is an eyesore, the owner should be asked to clean it up, perhaps with the help of owners of adjacent stores. Such merchants can then display their products in the vacant store's windows until the store is rented. Old buildings that have obviously outlived their usefulness should be removed unless they have some special value such as historical significance in which case they should be renovated. If a building is removed, the vacant lot can be used as a pedestrian court or a small parking lot until a new structure is built on the site.

This hotel lost an opportunity to capitalize on its period architecture by installing a false front on the lower part of the building. This destroys the original character of the structure.
The store in the top photograph has been allowed to deteriorate while the building next door is well maintained. The bottom illustration shows that it is not necessary to install new store fronts. Cleaning and painting together with appropriate plants will enhance the appearance of many buildings and also preserve their original characters.
The top photograph shows a business at a major downtown intersection. The signs and flashing lights can easily confuse a stranger to the community trying to find the right highway. The bottom picture shows how a number of stores can erect a common front and display similar advertising signs.
Poorly Designed Advertising Signs

The streets of community business districts are often lined with a series of poorly designed, tasteless, and offensive advertising signs. These signs, usually illuminated in bright colors, compete and clash with each other until any message they hold is lost in the confusion. Frequently a sign will advertise a business that no longer exists. Such signs often confuse the shopper and may even drive him away.

One way to solve this problem is to establish an ordinance controlling size and location of advertising signs. Large rooftop signs and signs that hang over the sidewalk are the worst offenders. These signs should be prohibited or their size severely restricted. In any case, each business should be allowed to display only one sign that hangs out over the sidewalk. All obsolete signs should be removed.

This well-designed, easily readable sign placed on an attractive stone wall clearly identifies a parking area and will leave a good impression on the customer.
Ordinances of this type can only be enforced with the cooperation of the merchants concerned. The merchants will cooperate if they realize that the ordinance is not "anti-business," but is rather concerned with increasing business by improving the appearance of the business district. An added benefit from such an ordinance is the money saved by merchants when costly competitions for bigger and more elaborate signs are eliminated.

**Lack of Trees and Plantings**

One reason why many shoppers go to outlying shopping centers instead of the central business district to make their purchases is that the outlying centers have been planned to include attractive trees, shrubs, and flowers, while the central business district lacks these items. Trees and plantings contrast pleasantly with architectural regularity and with the steel, glass, and concrete often found in downtown areas.

Trees planted along a downtown street can do much to alleviate the barren look a street would have without the trees. In the above illustration notice how a few properly placed trees seem to give life and character to what might otherwise be an unattractive scene.
These two illustrations show how trees and shrubs can be used to offset the effect of large buildings. In the top photograph trees have been planted in an open downtown area to provide a pleasant contrast with the fence and the sidewalk. In the lower illustration the space between the building and sidewalk has been designed to provide light for the building’s lower floor and to give visual relief from the effect of the large structure.
Planters of this type can be a pleasant feature of the downtown area. However, they must be carefully maintained to remain attractive.

The tree in this planter is placed near a large building to provide contrast with the steel and glass architectural elements.
One area where plantings are desirable is the mall or pedestrian plaza discussed previously. It is also desirable to plant trees along the streets of the business district. This can be done in several ways. Trees can be planted in underground vaults. A more common practice is to plant smaller trees in concrete, wood, or fiberglass tubs that are placed on the sidewalk. Small shrubs and underplantings can be planted near the trees. A landscape architect will be able to advise you concerning the best solution for your community. More information on trees for the business district may be found in a section of Circular 934, "Trees for Your Community," which may be obtained from your county extension office or from the College of Agriculture, University of Illinois.

If planters are well designed and properly placed, the result can be very pleasing as is shown above. However, poorly designed planters, improperly placed and not maintained, may eventually resemble the example at left.
A program to clean up streets, alleys, and vacant areas will greatly improve the appearance of many downtown areas. This downtown apartment area once was a little more than a run-down alley. The appearance has been greatly improved by cleaning, painting, and planting of trees and shrubs.

Whatever you decide to do to improve the appearance of your community's business district, the time to do it is now. Order, dignity, and attractiveness must be restored to the downtown area if it is to serve the community in the way it should and if it is to successfully compete with outlying shopping centers.

Existing organizations such as the Central Business District Improvement Association, the Retail Merchants Association, and the Chamber of Commerce should take the initiative in developing a feasible program. These organizations can consult with a landscape architect and present a comprehensive plan to merchants and to the community as a whole. A well-planned, carefully and soundly estimated, and competently executed program can increase property values in your downtown area, bring shoppers back to it, and, perhaps most important, give your community new pride in its business district.