

new downtown housing

Not just the biggest cities

By Martin Zimmerman

The Upsurge

To the relief and surprise of those who savor an urban lifestyle, the housing boom which has flourished in and near downtowns over the past decade shows no signs of abating. Equally unexpected is that this boom is common to cities of widely varying sizes and in all regions of the country. In cities with an industrial legacy, converted warehouses within easy walking distance of downtowns are attracting the young, affluent professional market. Hip and artsy districts are taking root with names like SoMa, Lodo, SoDo and DUMBO...all derived from Manhattan's cast iron Soho district where it all began. Let's call this Type I.

Type II is characterized by the construction of new housing on close-in open sites. Type III is associated with the conversion of vacant but architecturally notable buildings such as department stores or office buildings. Type IV focuses on new infill projects. Type V has just begun to emerge in some of the bigger cities and consists of new luxurious high-rise condos planned for the over privileged.

And what of the loft? Its popularity is so pervasive that it is being replicated in the three other types of buildings...and with no apologies to Soho.

Charlotte, N.C.

The Determinants

However, to truly contribute to an urban lifestyle, downtown housing depends on a support system, i.e. a set of determinants. Based upon a study by the Brookings Institution, these are listed as follows:

- Downtown political and business leadership must be pro-housing.
- City financial subsidies must be allocated to housing.
- Zoning must mandate high-density housing in conformance with compact, coherent districts based on the New Urbanist model.
- Downtowns must express a rich blend of old and new architecture.
- Downtowns must slow down the auto, minimize parking and give the pedestrian and cyclist priority.
- Downtowns need to encourage and tolerate pedestrian-intensive activities such as farmer's markets, street theatre, political leafletting and sidewalk vendors. This means the kind of spontaneous interaction that is impossible in the suburban malls.
- Downtowns must be clean and safe.
- Neighborhoods bordering downtowns should be attractive with unhampered access to downtowns by foot, car or bicycle.
- A downtown management entity must coordinate the affairs of the various facets of a downtown.

Springfield, MO

Downtown Springfield sits within a city of 150,000, including two universities located a few minutes away. Throughout the 1980s and early 90s, downtown remained a fraction of its former size, the only evidence of housing being a few makeshift lofts and rooming houses. Things began to change in 1998 when a maverick developer bought a vacant building and converted it to five lofts. Over the next two years another 55 units were added and a local business pumped \$3.2 million into a start-up brew pub. Soon other pubs and restaurants sprouted, a nonprofit

Downtowns need to encourage and tolerate pedestrian-intensive activities.

Community Development Corporation (CDC) was formed, a downtown plan was prepared and 13 banks pooled money for gap financing. All of this set the stage for the real housing surge. In the last three years another 166 units have been built, 60 are currently under construction and 86 are planned. This raises the total to just under 400. Rents have remained affordable in the \$600-\$1,200 range. In Springfield, virtually all of the housing is Type III — adaptive reuse of older buildings.

"In bigger cities, inserting three- or four-hundred housing units of housing in the downtown does not make much impact. In Springfield it has had a major impact," says John Simmons, director of the Urban District Alliance.

Charlotte, NC

Unlike other cities which stood helpless while businesses fled, Charlotte, in keeping with its corporate ethos, fought back with a vengeance during the 1970s and 80s. Such zeal came at a price as numerous historic structures fell to the wrecking ball, and the Brooklyn African-American community was leveled to make way for a sterile government center.

By the 1990s a consolidation and redirection took place consistent with the determinants stated above, and several blockbuster projects were built. Foremost among these was the Nations Bank headquarters, a centerpiece for uptown (as referred to in Charlotte) which combined an elegant 60-story tower with a home for the Charlotte Symphony. Meanwhile, residential population remained static at 3000 units.

In 1998 the housing upsurge began with a number of different projects moving forward simultaneously. The heaviest concentrations occurred in two projects — Hope VI and Gateway Village. In addition to replacing deteriorated public housing, the

Hope VI effort mixed race, income and housing types to create a model neighborhood of 750 residences, now called the Garden District. Building setbacks, architectural scale and street presence were all conceived in accordance with New Urbanist principles. The Gateway mixed-use project combined 699 units of mid-rise housing with a Bank of America office facility and a New Urban campus for Johnson and Wales University.

As a result, residential units increased in uptown from 3,000 in 1995 to 9,500 in 2005. In the past 10 months developers have unveiled plans for eight high-rises, including one that will soar to 56 stories. It looks like a goal of 12,000 by 2007 is within reach.

Downtown housing is a long-awaited and much-heralded success.

Other Cities

Birmingham, Alabama – By 1998 this city had added 14 apartment buildings with six more planned. Initially rentals, there has been a shift to a 45-percent ownership level. Developers also have been working towards conversion of the John Hand building, one of Birmingham's first skyscrapers, into a mixed-use facility with a bank, residences, offices and a health club.

Memphis, Tennessee – The creation of downtown housing in Memphis has been a mix of large and small projects. Mud Island, an ongoing effort which straddles the downtown zone, has grown to 2,600 housing units since the late 1980s, of which 75 percent are apartments. As of 2003 plans were afoot for another large undertaking mixing Hope VI subsidized units with market-rate units. Financing was being arranged through HUD (\$35 million), City of Memphis (\$18.1 million), private equity and loans (\$58.5 million) and public and private grants (\$14.7million). Other intriguing projects include the conversion of the imposing central rail station to housing and the Rivermark Apartments, converted from a Holiday Inn.

Cleveland, Ohio – Despite an ominous population decline in the city overall, the 2000 census indicated a 51-percent growth in downtown housing to a total of 8,105 units. The regeneration of the Warehouse District has contributed to this change, where an investment of \$133 million has paid off with 1,000 apartments and associated night life.

Planned housing development in Charlotte, N.C.



Mixed housing and affordable housing must exist.



Memphis, Tenn.

Conclusion

Clearly downtown housing is a long-awaited and much-heralded success. But is that really the case? Upon closer scrutiny, it appears that unless several warning signs are heeded, downtown housing may fall short of its full potential. In too many situations, vital services such as grocery stores, hair salons, dentists or dry cleaners are missing. Houses of worship, branch libraries, YMCAs and public schools are also absent.

Lower-income and family living is essential to bring balance to the current dominance of affluent singles and wealthy empty-nesters. Given the rise that has already occurred in land values, such a move will most likely require public subsidies.

Before high-rises are built, their architectural qualities require design review. An ugly building that is three stories high cannot mar the skyline of a downtown as much as a slapdash structure rising 30 stories.

Parking, when allowed to remain at or near suburban ratios, means less walking, biking or

mass transit use and undermines aspirations for a 24/7 lifestyle.

How downtowns will relate to suburbs is yet another issue. Even in larger cities, downtown populations will not likely exceed 30,000 residences while metropolitan regions are in the millions and still growing. Even more foreboding is a recent contingent of suburban developers who have jumped on the bandwagon with plans to construct loft condos "for people who don't want to live in the city."

Nevertheless, the hope is that with each project completed, downtown housing will take another step toward overcoming the warning signs while continuing to enrich the urban experience in the process.

Martin Zimmerman is an architect, planner and urban affairs journalist currently residing in Charlotte, N.C.