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Downtown Placemaking

Short-term strategies for creating a vibrant space for people

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Downtown Placemaking

What is Placemaking?

Placemaking is a term commonly used in planning and downtown revitalization circles. What does placemaking mean? A quick Google search of the term will provide a wide range of definitions and interpretations. Some focus on the physical space, others on the psychological connections people have to a place.

While all of these interpretations are valid, at **Downtown Strategies** we tend to keep it simple. At the most basic level, placemaking is about creating a space that is welcoming, inviting, comfortable, and safe for people.

Our client cities all face similar challenges, including:

How do we fill vacant storefronts?

(checkout our “Creative Strategies for Backfilling Downtown Vacancies” resource)

How do we get property owners to renovate their buildings?

How do we bring more activity into the downtown?

How do we get stakeholders and volunteers engaged in making downtown better?



Downtown Placemaking

4 Steps to Placemaking

While truly solving these problems is complex and challenging, it starts with creating a space for people. Placemaking. If you want others to invest in our downtown, you must create some excitement about the district. Create a spark, show progress, and build momentum.

So where do you begin? What is the next step? That will be different for every community, but here are four basic placemaking strategies that you can employ to create excitement and add vibrancy in your downtown.

4 Steps

Signs of Life along Sidewalks

Activating Storefronts

Outdoor Dining

Creative Installations





Add **Signs of Life** Along the Sidewalks

A Mayor that I worked with early in my career gave some advice that I have never forgotten. He said,

"If you expect people to invest in your town, it can't look like it is going out of business."

When you drive through your downtown, what do you see? Are the sidewalks full of activity or are they empty and boring? Whether you have two businesses or 200, is it obvious to visitors that there are active businesses in the downtown? Oftentimes there are great businesses inside of the storefronts, but the sidewalks are bare and vacant. There needs to be "signs of life" along the downtown sidewalks that show visitors there are destinations worth exploring.

Simple, low-cost elements like potted plants, sandwich board signs, merchandise displays, seating, or other elements add life to the sidewalk and show visitors that there is activity. These elements showcase the personality of the business and add vibrancy to the entire downtown district. Adding these details can make an immediate impact on the entire downtown.

Remember that you do not need every single storefront to participate. Getting 2-3 businesses on a block to participate in these efforts can make a tremendous impact.



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Add **Signs of Life** Along the Sidewalks continued

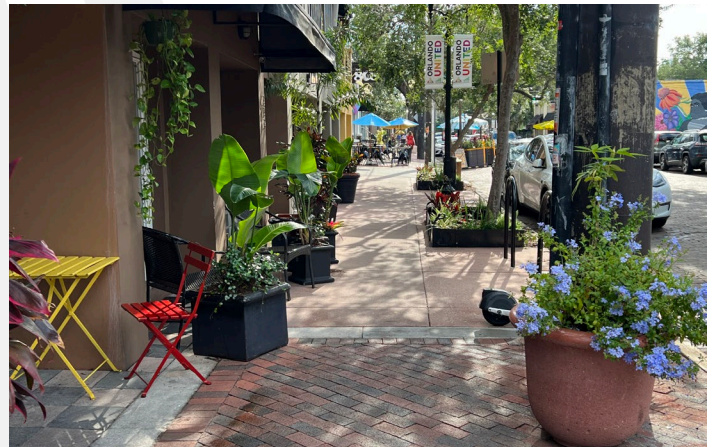
Can you think of 3 **business or property owners** that would be willing to add a few potted plants and a sandwich board sign to your downtown sidewalks?



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Make it Interesting by **Activating** **Storefronts**

As people walk around downtown, much of their experience is influenced by the storefront display windows as they explore downtown. Activated storefronts create an enjoyable experience for visitors and encourage them to explore the entire district. Vacant, underutilized, or blocked storefronts create an unwelcoming and unsafe feeling and give a negative impression of the area.

Similar to showing signs of life along the sidewalks, it is important to show signs of life in the storefronts. While retailers understand the importance of window shoppers, oftentimes other types of businesses (attorneys, insurance agents, salons, etc.) have empty displays or even add shades or blinds to block views into the space. How can you encourage other business and property owners to activate their storefront display windows? There are a variety of low-cost ways to add interest to display windows so they contribute to the overall character of the downtown. Even vacant storefronts can contribute in a meaningful way.



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Make it Interesting by Activating Storefronts continued

Storefront windows can be activated with a variety of ways that can include local art such as photography, pottery, or sculpture; historic photographs of the building or community; curated displays of items related to the business, like vintage barber equipment, law books, etc.; or seasonal decorations to celebrate current holidays or seasons. Vacant storefronts can be activated with window clings or public art as a temporary solution. Any small gesture adds interest to the storefront and creates a more vibrant downtown.



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Show Activity Through Outdoor Dining

Nothing attracts people more than seeing other people. Creating opportunities for outdoor activities can really generate excitement in the downtown district. Working with restaurants to provide areas for outdoor dining is the easiest way to create activity. These areas can range from a small bistro table to a large patio area. Any type of outdoor dining creates a tremendous impact on the district. Adding details like brightly colored café umbrellas or string lights can further enhance the area and create a sense of vibrancy.





Create a Spark Through Creative Installations

Sometimes the best way to attract people to your downtown is by creating a spark. Two methods for creating instant sparks of vibrancy are through creative installations like lighting or public art.

A current trend in downtowns across the country are overhead string light, also known as festoon lighting, installations. String lights can be installed over the street, in plazas, pocket parks, or other public areas. They can also create a lively atmosphere in outdoor dining areas. In addition to enhancing the ambient lighting downtown, they immediately become popular photo op destinations and locations for events.





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Create a Spark Through Creative Installations continued





Create a Spark Through Creative Installations continued

Public art installations have long been used as a way to add vibrancy and interest to downtowns. For decades murals have been used to tell the history of the community, often depicting scenes or significant moments from the city's past. Current trends focus on generating social media engagement and capitalizing on our society's desire for photo ops and "Instagrammable" moments. These installations can include "selfie wall" murals or selfie stations. Selfie walls are public art installations that use simple and bold graphics to serve as a photo backdrop or destination to attract visitors into downtown.





Create a Spark Through Creative Installations

continued

These murals can follow a “post card” style with a “Welcome to Downtown” message, use a quote, or simply use bold patterns and attractive color palettes to create a backdrop. Similarly, selfie stations are short-term photo op installations that can be used to strategically attract visitors into downtown. Stations can be created from backdrops, oversized letters, lit marquee letters, or seasonal displays. These creative installations add vibrancy and create a much-needed spark in the downtown core.





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Next Steps?

When creating a place that is welcoming and inviting to people, remember to begin with simple enhancements that add life and activity to the downtown core in order to create an interesting experience for visitors. Adding layers of details such as potted plants, lighting, outdoor dining, and art over time will begin to shift perceptions of the district and create the spark needed to make your downtown a special place for locals and visitors.

Downtown Strategies specializes in identifying small-scale, short-term initiatives that will incrementally enhance your downtown.

Contact us if you would like to discuss how we can help you create a spark in your own community.

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