DOWNTOWN IS DEAD.

America is busy rebuilding its downtowns. But these are not the downtowns of yesterday.

BY VANESSA SUMO

Greenville, South Carolina

LONG LIVE DOWNTOWN!

D eb Ayers Agnew remembers the thousands of people who had gathered in downtown Greenville, S.C., waiting for eggs to drop from the sky. It was a few weeks before Easter day of 1958. A helicopter, an uncommon sight at that time, was about to drop prized plastic eggs that contained candies and gift certificates from participating Main Street merchants.

Downtown in those days was accustomed to the crowds that habitually converged there to work, shop, dine, and amuse themselves. After all, downtown was the center of everything. "All the main things that you would need in life could be purchased strictly by walking up and down Main Street," Ayers Agnew says. Her family owns Ayers Leather Shop, which opened at the bottom floor of the grand Poinsett Hotel almost 60 years ago (it has since moved to another location on Main Street). Throngs of locals and out-of-towners would patronize Greenville's downtown amenities, she recalls.

But like most downtowns across America, the automobile portended the decline of Greenville's city center. Stores

and businesses followed the people who moved their homes to the suburbs. Even Greenville's Easter event was organized to compete against the shopping centers that were starting to come up, says Ayers Agnew. When the first indoor mall opened in the area in the late 1960s, the downtown exodus began. As malls prospered, the big department stores and smaller stores moved out. Even Ayers Leather Shop opened a store in this mall. It kept its downtown store, though, because the rent there had become cheap and it made sense to keep it for storage and repairs. Downtown Greenville in the 1970s had become fairly abandoned and somewhat seedy.

Today, cities all across America are busy reviving their downtowns. From Richmond to Raleigh, and from Charleston, W.Va., to Charlotte, business and government leaders in the Fifth District are trying to build up their downtowns, with mixed results among them. Greenville, a city of about 56,000 people, has been slowly rejuvenating its center for more than 25 years. Other cities have visited downtown Greenville to take notes on how to proceed with their own revitalization efforts.

It is clear from the crowds that walk around on a warm summer evening that Greenville is achieving much of what it had set out to do. On a typical Thursday night, there could be a concert playing by the river against a backdrop of restored industrial buildings, while another band plays to mostly 20- and 30-somethings after work, drinks on hand, in an outdoor plaza on tree-lined Main Street. Shakespeare could be performed in the park to delighted families sitting on the grass and enjoying the outdoors, while a minor league baseball game plays to sports fans in a new stadium down the street. All these events would likely be well-attended and all within reasonable walking distance (it is about a mile from one end of Main Street to the other end). Main Street is lively even after 5 p.m., when many other city centers would look like ghost towns after office workers have gone home.

Downtown Greenville will never be the center of industry that it was in the 19th and early 20th centuries. It will no longer house most of the offices or shops. There will, on the contrary, always be a mall or an office park just a few miles away. "The day of downtown as the center of the regional economy is dead almost everywhere," says Joel Kotkin, an expert on cities and author of *The City: A Global History*. There is simply no way to reverse the speed and comfort of the automobile, which will take you anywhere, anytime you want. Greenville understands this. "We realized that we couldn't make it into what it was before," says Nancy Whitworth, director of economic development for the city. Greenville's city center bears little resemblance to what it was in its heyday — save for the bustle of people.

Today's downtowns are different, as they surely have to be if they hope to compete with various concentrations of shopping, business, and entertainment. What they offer is an urban lifestyle where one can live, work, and play, and where walking is a predominant form of transportation. As such, downtowns today may not be for everybody. They are a niche product, likely geared to a certain demographic or two, and whose broader payoffs are important to the city. In this sense, downtowns today are really being reinvented rather than restored to their former glory.

An American Invention

The word downtown was coined in America. In the early 19th century, New Yorkers referred to the northern section of Manhattan as "uptown," and to its southern end when speaking about "downtown." But the words gradually took on a more functional meaning. The business district became commonly known as downtown, while the residential area as uptown. By the 1870s, writes Massachusetts Institute of Technology urban studies and history professor Robert Fogelson, the functional meaning had largely taken over the geographical because in very few cities was downtown south and

uptown north. "Downtown lay to the south in Detroit, but to the north in Cleveland, to the east in St. Louis, and to the west in Pittsburgh," notes Fogelson.

In the early days, American cities clustered around water-based transportation nodes, says Edward Glaeser, an urban economist at Harvard University, in an interview. Eastern cities formed in spots that hit the sea or a harbor, while inland cities were built on riverways or canals. One of New York City's great manufacturing industries, sugar refining, was located close to the water. Because sugar crystals coalesce during a long, hot sea voyage, raw sugar was shipped from the Caribbean to New York. Moreover, to take advantage of economies of scale, sugar refining was consolidated in one place so refineries were set up close to the port. From here, refined sugar could be transported to the rest of the country and to Europe.

People and businesses then gravitated toward this center of activity. "Ports and railway stations were massive pieces of infrastructure, and they could not be produced willy-nilly throughout metropolitan areas," wrote Glaeser and Matthew Kahn of Tufts University in a working paper for the National Bureau of Economic Research. Even when other forms of locomotion such as buses opened up the city, it still made sense to cluster commercial activity around transportation hubs. People would then move around by hub and spoke — they would arrive by train or bus and from there walk to their destination.

Another transportation innovation that encouraged the formation of a high-density urban area was the elevator (in particular, the "safety elevator" invented by Elisha Otis). By allowing people to move vertically, downtowns could build higher and higher, instead of pushing farther out.

But just as transportation technology shaped downtown's dominance, the internal combustion engine weakened its relevance. "The car and the truck have had an immense decentral-

izing effect," says Glaeser. Cars and trucks allowed people to travel from point to point, rather than move by hub and spoke. The economies of locating by ports and railway stations greatly diminished. Moreover, because nothing could beat the speed of the car (it significantly reduced commuting time), residences and jobs became increasingly spread out. "I think of transportation technology as very much driving the urban form," says Glaeser. As a result, Americans today live in less-dense areas miles from the city center, and traditional downtowns contain only a small share of metropolitan employment, Glaeser and Kahn note. For instance, across the 150 metropolitan statistical areas they analyzed, only about a quarter of total employment is within three miles of the city's center.

Although downtowns are more robust in bigger cities like Boston and San Francisco, these are still a far cry from what they once were, writes Fogelson. "Nowhere in urban America is downtown coming back as the only business district … The almighty downtown of the past is gone — and gone for good. And it has been gone much longer than most Americans realize."

Reinventing Downtown

Today, many centers of activity can exist almost side by side because they serve different functions at different levels of density, says Barry Nocks, an urban planning professor at Clemson University.

In Greenville, Haywood Mall and the shopping belt along Haywood Road are less than a 15-minute drive from downtown. A few miles farther out is a big-box strip on Woodruff Road. Right across is Verdae, a planned mixed-use development with homes, offices, a shopping center, and a golf course. A cluster of new office spaces is located
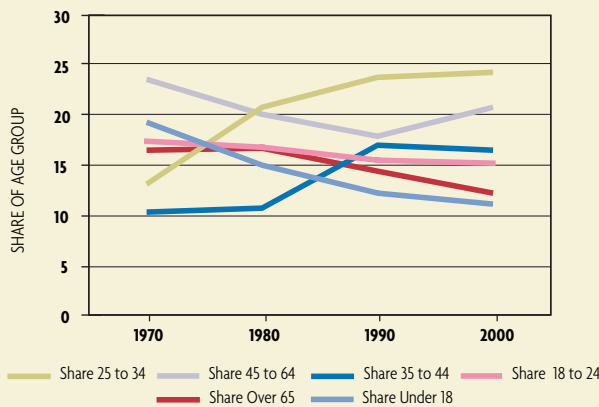
nearby composed of the Millennium Campus (a technology and research office park), and Clemson University's International Center for Automotive Research. And then there's downtown. Because cities can support these various concentrations, downtowns that are making a comeback have had to reposition themselves to offer something different, knowing that they can no longer aspire to be the centers of everything. And just as transportation has defined the urban landscape, the renewed interest for downtown is rooted in the most rudimentary form of transportation: walking.

Some say that there is a growing interest in "walkable urbanism," or the privilege of walking between restaurants, entertainment venues, the grocery, the shops, and possibly to work. Christopher Leinberger, a downtown redevelopment expert and visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution, thinks that there is a very strong demand for a walkable urban environment, including downtowns. Many city and business leaders seem to think so, too, and they've been reinvesting in their city centers to capitalize on these trends. Downtowns may be a good place to do this because they are already workplaces, and there

is often a lot of architecture and history there to make them authentic and interesting places. But cities are adding another dimension to their downtowns today. They are remaking them into a place where people can live.

That is perhaps the biggest difference between the downtown of today and yesterday, and one of the keys to sustaining its growth. "The downtowns that we're building today are being driven by housing," Leinberger says. In the early days, people didn't really live downtown. The city center contained offices, warehouses, factories, and stores, but typically not residential dwellings. Those who did reside there often had relatively low incomes. But today, people who choose to live downtown are often those who can afford to live anywhere they please.

The demand for downtown living seems to be driven by the tastes of those in their 20s and 30s as well as by empty nesters tired of keeping big homes and big yards and wanting the convenience of many things they need close by. A November 2005 Brookings Institution report that analyzes the downtown population in 44 cities, finds that downtowns have a higher percentage of young adults and college-educated residents than the country's cities and suburbs. (In this study, the city is defined by the political boundaries at the time of the census and includes the downtown. The suburb is the metropolitan statistical area and includes the city.) Twenty-five- to 34-year-olds made up about 24 percent of downtown residents in 2000, closely followed by 45- to 64-year-olds at 21 percent. As baby boomers age, more empty nesters may opt to live downtown.

The report also finds that the downtown population grew by 10 percent during the 1990s, a sharp turnaround following 20 years of overall decline. The same trend is observed in the number of households — an

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Where the Young and the Baby Boomers Want to Be

Twenty-five- to 34-year-olds made up 24 percent of all downtowners in 2000, compared with only 13 percent in 1970. The group of 45- to 64-year-olds was a close second, comprising 21 percent of downtown residents in 2000.

NOTE: Based on author's analysis of selected cities using data from the U.S. Census
SOURCE: "Who Lives Downtown" by Eugenie Birch. The Brookings Institution, November 2005

important driver for the housing market — that grew by 13 percent in the 1990s. In downtown Baltimore, Md., for instance, the number of households grew very rapidly in the 1990s, in spite of a dip in the city's overall household population during the same period.

Downtown residents are important in providing the base needed to support shops and the restaurants as well as to ensure that people will still be around on weekdays after 5 p.m. and on weekends, hence making the streets safer and more pleasant. But how can a city entice potential residents and nonresidents to come to downtown after years of ignoring it? Perhaps by paying attention to the kind of place people are looking for.

A Place Built for People

"Lawrence Halprin loved manipulating water," says Robert Bainbridge, former director of the South Carolina Design Arts Partnership. Bainbridge is talking about a public plaza that Halprin, one of the finest landscape architects in the country, designed for downtown Greenville around the late 1970s. "Halprin believed in touchable water. There is no railing between you and the water," says Bainbridge. In a way, the new downtown Greenville is just like that: People can touch it.

This is evident in Halprin's streetscape design of Main Street, the starting point of downtown's reinvention. In 1979, Main Street was narrowed from four lanes to two in order to widen the side walks. This allowed more space for people to walk around and for restaurant patrons to dine outside. Trees were planted and parallel parking spaces were replaced with diagonal ones along the street. The sidewalk pavement blends into the intersection, giving pedestrians a feeling of continuity even while crossing the street. The plans were careful not to exclude the automobile and make the place entirely pedestrian. "Americans come by car," says Bainbridge. The combination of a narrower street, wider sidewalks, and

a canopy of trees creates a sense of enclosure to what used to be an unfriendly wide-open space.

The streetscape may have created a fresher-looking downtown, but the businesses weren't going to go there just because it looked pretty. "Anchor projects" were needed to spur interest in the area, and these have been planned and placed over a one-mile stretch of Main Street.

The Greenville Commons — a cluster of buildings that includes a hotel, a small convention center, an office building, and a public park — opened in 1982 at the point where the new streetscape begins. Less than half a mile away by the Reedy River is the Peace Center for Performing Arts, which opened in 1991, so that people could get into the habit of going downtown on evenings and weekends. The Westend Market is just a few blocks down, an old cotton warehouse converted into a mixed-use of office, shops, and restaurants in 1994. And at the end of the current concentration of activity on Main Street is a new baseball stadium that opened in 2006, which was modeled after Fenway Park. (The stadium is home to the Greenville Drive, a minor league affiliate of the Boston Red Sox.)

These catalyst projects have spawned other private developments, from the construction of new buildings like the RiverPlace, the largest private investment so far in downtown Greenville, to the rehabilitation of old buildings. Downtown revival has sparked interest in the preservation of many historical structures with fine architecture, which in turn has helped downtown set itself apart from the competition. "It conveys the character of the market," says Robert Benedict, a historic preservation consultant in Greenville.

Throughout downtown's revitalization efforts, the city has made sure that buildings all come down to a level that engages people walking by. For instance, the Wachovia office building on Main Street used to be set back far from the sidewalk. Following the city's design guidelines, a private developer

built a new low-rise structure that wraps around the part of the office building that faces busy streets, effectively aligning it with the rest of the buildings. Restaurants and shops occupy the ground floor of this new mixed-use structure while apartments were built above.

The city has planned its parking garages in a way that they are, as much as possible, out of sight from the street. A good example is a mixed-use project called the Bookends, which occupies a whole block in a street off Main. The city wanted to rebuild a parking garage that stood there but didn't really need all that space. So it sold off a slice of the property on each side facing the street, while the parking garage was constructed in between, hence the name.

The same mixed-use philosophy repeats in almost all the buildings on Main Street. Restaurants and shops are placed at the street level, residents on the upper floors, and sometimes office spaces in between. It works well because no one wants to live on the ground floor, and many people don't want to walk up a flight of steps to enter a store. The result is an almost continuous row of restaurants and shops on Main Street.

Greenvillians will say that public-private partnerships, perhaps a fuzzy concept for some, have played an important role in successfully putting together many of the projects downtown. "The public-private partnerships are really what have made downtown Greenville what it is today," says Mary Douglas Neal, the city's downtown development manager. In the early days, Greenville had a downtown development organization, but it later decided to completely assume the rebuilding efforts within the city's economic development department. Rebuilding downtown required a tremendous amount of coordination from all the departments of the city (police, fire, building codes, planning, public works, etc.).

The city has taken on many roles at different levels of involvement, but it is mainly in charge of making,

facilitating, and following through the plans for downtown. "We promote ideas," says Mayor Knox White, who has been at the helm of the city since 1995. Sometimes, it will pitch in more investments to take on the risk that a private developer is not willing to bear. The only time that the city developed a project entirely on its own was in rehabilitating the Westend Market. The city could not get a private developer to come. But the old cotton warehouse's location (the building was donated to the city) was important to the city to anchor that end of Main Street. The Westend Market was eventually sold in 2005 at a profit.

But the city sees its role as stimulating private investment, in doing things that would enable the private sector to do business in downtown Greenville. "The private sector is the real engine here. No matter what you're doing from the public-sector standpoint, if you don't get the private sector ... you're going to stall out," says Whitworth. In every project, an agreement is reached as to what the city can do for the developer and what the developer can do for downtown. In general, the city builds and operates everything outdoors that is on public grounds, which usually includes the parking garage, while the private developer takes care of everything indoors.

Most of the public infrastructure has been paid for by Tax Increment Financing (TIF), an arrangement designed to capture the tax dollars from an increase in an area's property value thanks to public investment. The new tax revenue collected is used to pay for development costs of that "TIF district." Greenville has two such districts. But the city has also been able to tap funds from other sources, such as a 2 percent "hospitality tax" on prepared meals and beverages to pay for a pedestrian bridge in Falls Park. In all, the city has spent about $150 million in rebuilding downtown, with Greenville leaders believing the investments would benefit residents as a whole.

And it takes time. "One of the key things is that it really does take 25 years. You have to think that far ahead and commit to doing it. This place will still be a great place in 25 years because it was done right," says Bainbridge. And if there's any doubt as to Greenville's seriousness in rejuvenating its downtown, one need only be reminded of that vehicular bridge on Camperdown Way that formerly crossed Main Street and the Reedy River. A few years ago, a decision was made to tear down that section of the bridge to expose a beautiful 60-foot waterfall, which many residents did not even know was there. An elegant cable foot bridge now stands in its place. Today, Greenvillians not only have a unique piece of nature to enjoy at the heart of downtown, but also something to put on their postcard.

When Does it Make Sense to Rebuild a Downtown?

Rebuilding their centers is understandably on many cities' wish list. There is something unsatisfying about letting a place just wither away, especially if it is one with much history and great architecture. Also, an eyesore of a downtown may tarnish the city's reputation. Some think that a vibrant city center can jumpstart — or is an important element of — economic success, while others are more skeptical of pinning a city's hopes on a downtown. The bottom line of whether efforts to bring downtowns back to life is tricky to find.

Greenville, it seems, has benefited from public-private partnerships aimed at reviving the city center. But such development may have happened organically, without government involvement. Also, it's unclear that other cities hoping to revive their downtowns could replicate Greenville's success with similar redevelopment programs. In short, there is no uniform rule, so cities must look hard at whether there is a clear demand for a downtown revitalization or clear benefits from doing so.

Such a demand is probably less likely to be found in struggling cities like Detroit and Cleveland. "The last thing you want to do is build excess infrastructure in a declining region," says Glaeser. After all, the hallmark of a moribund area is when there is too much infrastructure relative to demand. A downtown may not be a silver bullet either. Glaeser cites the experience of Buffalo, N.Y., where a snazzier downtown hasn't done much to stem the population outflow. Job growth in the Buffalo-Niagara area has been dismal for a very long time.

Glaeser also casts doubt on a popular reason why cities want a cool downtown. Cities want to appeal to the "creative class," but it isn't clear if that is mostly what these types are attracted to. "There is some confusion about who the creative people are," says Glaeser. He notes that the cappuccino-sipping young professional is just a small fraction of this group. Creative people may just as likely be highly educated 40-year-olds with two kids. As incomes increase, more amenities are demanded, but safe neighborhoods, good schools, and fast commutes are probably paramount for this group. Thus, if the intention is to recruit those high-value-added workers, it might be best if a city pays attention to those basic amenities first.

But many think that while schools and safety are important factors, a city can capitalize on the growing interest in downtown living and use it as a starting point to uplift an area. "Leaders are starting to realize that while a downtown isn't a guarantee to a strong economy, it is certainly somewhat of a prerequisite for success," says Jennifer Vey, a fellow at the Brookings Institution. Leinberger likewise thinks that part of the reason why some metropolitan areas are healthy is because they've rejuvenated their downtowns. In this view, a strong downtown can aid in recruiting companies and workers, bolster the regional economy, and help adjacent lower-income neighborhoods.

In Greenville, the economy wasn't doing badly in the 1980s and early 1990s when the push to turn around

downtown began. Once a textile giant that made the city very prosperous in the early 20th century, Greenville has been trying to make up for that lost manufacturing power by diversifying into services and durable goods. "We didn't have to make choices about where we would put our emphasis," says Whitworth. "The natural growth was happening in the suburbs so we focused internally, in downtown." South Carolina also has very limited annexation opportunities, so the city had to redevelop areas that they already had. Moreover, they hoped that a strong city center would help the low-income neighborhoods around it, by bringing in not only jobs but also the attention and eventual support for these downtrodden areas.

But Greenville leaders say that they are getting much more in return. And Brian Reed, a market researcher at the real estate firm The Furman Company, says that part of the reason why the suburban office market is catching up is because of downtown. This draw of downtown is a selling point for a lot of professional service-type organizations that choose to locate in the Greenville suburbs, Reed notes.

The growing activity there is also why Clemson's business school decided to locate its Renaissance Center in the historic Liberty Building on Main Street. (Clemson University is about 30 miles from downtown Greenville.) The center serves as a work area and meeting place for students working with companies in Greenville like Michelin, a large French manufacturer of tires, whose U.S. headquarters is based in Greenville. Caron St. John, director of Clemson's Arthur M. Spiro Center for Entrepreneurial Leadership, says that the business school wanted to be associated with downtown "because it's attractive, so dynamic, and a fun place to be."

Sustaining the Downtown Option

For now, Greenville is a work in progress. It is difficult to get a precise estimate of the number of people living in downtown Greenville, but there are about 1,215 residential condo units and more are on the way. This can be thought of as roughly equivalent to the number of households in downtown. The flurry of residential condo building in recent years has been well-received, with some units going for more than $1 million. Other projects that have been eager to get off the ground have not yet done so, because construction costs have risen faster than the price that these condos can fetch in the market, says Charlie Whitmire, developer of the Bookends.

There are middle- to upper-income residential neighborhoods around downtown, which some say has helped to support its growth. But unless these Greenvillians are avid walkers, these households will have a choice on which direction to take the family car: downtown or out to the mall. This makes downtown residents a crucial aspect of the sustainability of downtowns, says Clemson economist Curtis Simon, because these are the people who will likely patronize a downtown grocer, for instance.

Office workers are important, too, as they bring in another aspect of demand. The office market in the central business district seems to be doing very well, with rents high and vacancy rates low. The restaurants are enjoying good business, partly because of a very strong lunch crowd of office workers. Stores, on the other hand, have not fared as well, and there have been a number of closings. People seem to prefer shopping in the mall, but regional stores like North Carolina-based Mast General seem to be doing well in downtown. The retail space is changing, however. A Publix grocery store and a Staples office-supply store just opened in downtown.

The success of a downtown revitalization depends on a number of factors. Part of it is about commitment, having good leaders, and executing a plan well. But there are other elements that are more uncertain than guaranteed. If you build it, will residents and businesses come? Will it be a center of ideas? Will people have fun there? Will it uplift the neighborhoods around it?

The only thing that is certain is that downtown's roles have changed and diminished greatly from their once very powerful position. This is what cities must understand. The car remains king, and downtowns might have a hard time competing with that, with other centers of ideas and of consumption. Downtown has become an option that will, like it or not, simply exist side by side with malls, big-box retail strips, and office parks. But a downtown does not have to be obsolete. If the demand is there and if it is done the right way, a downtown may be able to hold up well against its competition.   **RF**

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