

Top 10 Ways to Make City's Center Great

■ **Los Angeles:** Reinvent the hub of the city to make it vibrant and essential to civic life.

By **CHRISTOPHER B. LEINBERGER**

Los Angeles led the way toward reinventing the shape of metropolitan America from 1945 until 1990. As downtown L.A. in particular awakens from its restless economic sleep of the past six years, it can learn the lessons of what other downtowns have achieved while L.A. was struggling through its worst economic downturn since the 1930s.

With a nod to David Letterman, here are the Top 10 Ways to Make Downtown L.A. Great.

- **No. 10.** Remember that downtowns are no longer essential; 90% of them are moderately declining or severely declining in employment, housing, retailing and entertainment. Those that are stable are national-serving downtowns, such as New York, San Francisco and Chicago. Downtowns must now be willed into continued existence.

- **No. 9.** Downtowns need a private/public (as opposed to a public/private) governance structure, such as a business improvement district to plan, program, clean and ensure safety. Downtown Philadelphia's BID is its major hope for continued viability. The Central City Assn. is proposing a BID for downtown L.A. It should be charged with implementing the recently completed downtown strategic plan.

- **No. 8.** Downtown L.A. has most of the pieces required to make a great place: Little Tokyo, the garment district, the financial district, Chinatown, the expanded Convention Center, the cultural facilities, USC, Olvera Street. They must be linked together by transit, signage and better pedestrian access.

- **No. 7.** Focus on building middle and high-end housing. The Upper East Side and Upper West Side of Manhattan have 20% of all upper-end housing in the region, a primary reason for Midtown's success. The bosses who live in that housing decide where jobs go and they want their offices close to their houses. Keeping jobs downtown means that many of the bosses must live there.

- **No. 6.** Focus on urban entertainment. This includes sports, cultural attractions and night life. Midtown Manhattan has become an urban theme park, capped off by the Disney complex under construction on 42nd Street. Why isn't there a Disney entertainment complex in downtown L.A.?

- **No. 5.** Make downtown L.A. pedestrian oriented. This is the major competitive advantage of downtowns. For thousands of years, walking distance has meant about 1,500 feet. For example, site the possible new stadium or arena within walking distance of existing downtown structures, like Camden Yards in Baltimore.

- **No. 4.** Create a greater perception of community and safety in the area. Downtown L.A. is a relatively safe place, but it doesn't feel that way. The number of panhandlers on the street has produced a climate of fear. A few hundred people have cost downtown a sense of community as well as a decline of billions of dollars in real estate asset value. The proposed BID needs to get them off the street. This starts by individuals not giving them money.

- **No. 3.** Fight to create a West Coast arts district downtown. Soho and Chelsea in Manhattan are booming. The arts have a multibillion-dollar impact on New York City. Why did Pace Wildenstein and Gagosian art galleries locate in Beverly Hills and not downtown?

- **No. 2.** Bring back nature. Do not turn your back on the river. Create more downtown parks. The great downtowns have a strong connection to nature, such as with Central Park and the rivers in New York, the lake and river in Chicago and the bay in San Francisco. Today, there is little relief from the heat and concrete in downtown L.A.

- **No. 1.** Focus near-term economic development efforts on tourism. Why? First, the Southern California area already is one of the largest tourist destinations in the country. So it is only a matter of diverting those who are already here toward downtown. Second, tourists are stupid. They will believe what cynical natives won't: that there is lots to do downtown. After the tourists start supporting the cultural attractions and restaurants, locals will catch on. When Jim Rouse restored Faneuil Hall in Boston in the early 1980s, 80% of the demand came from tourists. Today, 80% of the support comes from natives. Vibrant downtowns get at least half of their retail spending from tourists.

After you have done the above, jobs will start coming back downtown. In the knowledge economy, economic growth goes to those places with high quality of life.

Downtowns in severe decline, with little hope for renewal, become more evident each day. Without an aggressive, concerted effort to change the course, a preview of the future downtown L.A. is easily found—in Detroit.

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MONDAY

JULY 15, 1996