

ONE

The Shape of City Places

CITIES CHANGE, yet remain the same. This simple observation is the key to everything that ever has or ever will occur in cities. Inevitably, cities have moments of ascendancy, interludes of stability, periods when they barely survive, and occasions to recreate themselves in order to flourish and prosper again. New York City, for instance, soared with the advent of office towers, department stores, and mass transit at the turn of the twentieth century, sank into the despair of poverty, crime, and suburban flight at mid-century, only to rise again as a hub for finance, entertainment, and tourism at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

Human affairs—economics, diseases, demographics, and public policies—cause cities to change, as do natural occurrences—tornados, earthquakes, and sunny days. Yet even as these variables play out in the course of history, there is at least one feature of cities that withstands the effects of time, namely, the central gathering points that furnish cities with their character and sense of community. Whether it is Copley Place in Boston, Pike Place Market in Seattle, the Riverwalk in San Antonio, Little Italy in San Diego, Clark Street in Chicago, the Strand in Galveston, the Nicollet Mall in Minneapolis, or Times Square in New York City, cities of all sizes and shapes have special places that endure as life evolves in and around them. Ask anyone where they are at and most anyone will know, even though people may disagree on their exact size and shape, or precisely what they should be called (a downtown, the central business district, main street, a plaza, a square, a pedestrian mall, a public place, or something else). A city would not be a city without these places, even when new architecture appears, even when one generation views them differently than another, and even when the public uses them less. Sprawling retail stores and spacious shopping malls have certainly traumatized thousands of central business districts, yet most of these districts survive, albeit struggling at times, but still surviving.

Throughout history, cities have always had central assembly points for commerce, politics, worship, and pleasure. Surveying three thousand years of history, Lewis Mumford concludes in *The City in History: Its Origins, its Transformations, and its Prospects* that relatively well-defined gathering places have been vital to cities because they have encouraged a civic spirit to coalesce and flourish.¹ A strong sense of place encourages economic activity and the emotional attachment to special spots may elicit the willingness of individuals to be taxed and regulated on behalf of others.² Public places establish a common identity among diverse populations and are storehouses for social memories because they frame the lives of innumerable people and outlast generations.³ Although robust locales are not always associated with overall city prosperity, they provide the communal attachments that permit residents and nonresidents alike to enjoy the good times and weather the bad ones. The constructive steps it takes for people to form interesting locations are redoubled by the positive effects the very places have on those who shaped them, as well as for those who come after. For example, the evocative streets of Charleston, South Carolina, have survived and thrived because of the collective effort in the 1860s to keep the city intact as other cities were destroyed during the Civil War, followed by the collective decision in the 1960s to emphasize historical preservation as other communities were ripped apart by urban renewal projects.

Obviously, the aim of every city is to progress, to continue to be a good place to live, work, shop, and visit. Jobs, health, security, affordable housing, transportation systems, and educational opportunities are some of the essential ingredients in this effort, but if history holds true, an equally fundamental way to move cities forward is to economically and socially develop their business districts, neighborhoods, and other special places in a manner that does not unnecessarily alter their unique character and staying power. This is manifestly a difficult balancing act, one that has vexed cities around the world throughout history. The temptation is to rebuild what exists for greater profit in good times and to demolish what exists out of frustration in bad times. It is truly a challenge to improve the places that need to remain the same.



The prospect for America's cities is on an upswing again after several decades of persistent suburbanization and years of thinking the best days for cities were long gone. There is an emerging recognition that central business districts and main streets are important to civic life, commercially viable, and socially engaging. Compared to the monotony of the shopping mall experience and the prospect of endless stopping and starting on infuriating roadways, city places contribute to the enjoyment of life, whether it is through the

pleasant experience of viewing distinctive architecture or the simple pleasure of walking outdoors while shopping.

The upsurge is palpable. It is now commonplace for local governments to have quality of life programs that focus on reducing street crime, eliminating graffiti, and enlivening streetscapes. Most state and local governments offer tax incentives to assist downtown retail businesses, provide grants for historical preservation, issue bonds for the construction of center city sports stadiums, and create enterprise zones to reclaim blighted areas. The federal government has appropriated millions of dollars to local empowerment zones to support a comprehensive social and economic renaissance in rundown neighborhoods. Nonprofit civic associations and community development corporations (CDCs) are changing both big cities and small towns by refurbishing city parks, rejuvenating waterfronts, and restoring historic buildings. With and without government support, private businesses are engaged with cities, reclaiming retail outlets, constructing residential housing, and opening new markets for products. Simultaneously, a host of innovative financial and administrative public-private partnerships have materialized to make city renewal truly a reality, such as real estate investment trusts, local tourism councils, and business improvement districts (BIDs).

Among the various initiatives at the local level, BIDs are especially significant because they are designed to independently shape the unique places within cities. BIDs put into practice the idea that cities can progress by aggressively developing business districts and other special locales economically and socially, yet in a manner that keeps them intact. The attraction to BIDs is that they exist primarily to make particular places attractive—safer, cleaner, and more marketable.

BIDs have caught on. Since the 1990s, they have been accepted by community leaders from across the political spectrum and embraced by Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York City, as well as hundreds of other large and small communities in forty-eight states (Wyoming has no BID legislation and South Dakota's cities have yet to create any BIDs). BIDs have been featured in the pages of the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the weekly papers of small towns. Cities around the world are latching on to BIDs—from Buenos Aires to London, from Johannesburg to Toronto. City planning and urban affairs books refer to the contributions of BIDs, doctoral dissertations explore their influence, and web sites detail their activities. Every year conferences and seminars examine BID operations and educate BID advocates and managers. Who knows how many consulting firms have been put together to make money by assisting business and community leaders in getting BIDs up and running. The emergence of BIDs supports the conviction that city places should be, and can be, significant once again.



BIDs are similar yet different. Most BIDs are called BIDs, the name used herein, although in some places they go by other names (for instance, special service areas in Illinois or special improvement districts in New Jersey or community improvement districts in Georgia). All BIDs have a local orientation, yet no two BIDs provide identical services because each is focused on the particular problems and issues in its own area. In small communities there may be only one BID operating, such as in Grass Valley, California, Waterloo, Iowa, Patchogue, New York, or Red Bank, New Jersey. In metropolitan areas, multiple places may exist, each with its own improvement district and idiosyncratic mixture of uses. The District of Columbia has a BID located next to the national mall, another close to the U.S. capital, one situated in the Dupont Circle neighborhood, another in Georgetown, and one more in the Adams Morgan commercial area. It does not matter, however, if a BID is in a small town or one among many in an urban area because the perspective is generally the same—the prosperity of specific locales is the key to the general improvement of cities.

BIDs are distinctive in that they are both a place-based designation with official borders and a bureaucratic mechanism for providing services. Geographically, a BID may encompass anywhere from a few blocks and a smattering of properties to a mile of streets and hundreds of structures. The typical district embraces both private and public uses. There are usually banks, restaurants, variety stores, and law offices, as well as government offices, community parks, museums, and residences. BIDs almost always have spaces that are open to public activities—from farmer's markets and sidewalk sales to Christmas parades and protest marches. In sharp contrast to shopping malls, BIDs contain amenities—sidewalks, bus shelters, parks, and the like—with free access for anyone (with or without a justifying purpose), at most any time of the day or night.⁴ BIDs thus manifest a civic character—multiplicities of self-interested pursuits are tolerated and collective practices and rituals are permitted, if not encouraged.⁵ Times Square in New York City is perhaps the ultimate example; it is managed in part by the Times Square Alliance, and its responsibilities include picking up the litter left by millions of fun-seeking tourists every day and dropping the Tiffany ball each New Year's Eve for the enjoyment of millions of cheerful celebrants and billions of television viewers.

Legally, a BID is a professionally-managed organization whose purpose is to improve a locale using funds from mandatory special taxes or fees paid by property and/or business owners in a designated area. Authorized by state legislation, a local government is normally responsible for establishing a district, collecting the assessments, and then transferring the funds over to the BID to use as it sees fit. The managing agent for a BID is usually a nonprofit organization, although in some cities public agencies and public-private partnerships may be responsible for a BID's operation. The governance of a BID is the

responsibility of a board comprised of various combinations of property owners, businesses, and government officials. The management of a BID is the job of a paid administrator who oversees a small full- and part-time workforce of mostly sanitation workers and security guards. Although constrained by legal statutes and government procedures, BID governance and management is characterized by considerable latitude about how best to improve city spaces.

BIDs accomplish two important objectives: first, they fill in the gaps between the public and private sectors by accomplishing tasks that each sector is unable to accomplish alone, such as nonstop trash collection and cooperative marketing; and second, they offer an influential voice for civic places that can be heard by public officials, businesses, and the public. By being part service delivery mechanism and part political advocacy group, BIDs are expected to take care of the small details and champion the big goals that will efficiently and effectively improve the overall character of city places. As BID workers are giving visitors directions to a tourist site, the BID manager may be meeting with city officials to encourage the relocation of new businesses to the area.

An example is the Center City District (CCD) in Philadelphia. Established in 1990, the CCD represents over 2,000 property owners, commercial tenants, and employers in downtown Philadelphia. Through supplying supplemental security, hospitality, and promotional programs to an eighty-block area, its purpose is to make the downtown of the nation's fourth largest city clean, safe, and attractive. Financed by self-assessments on the downtown property owners, as well as grants and other income, the CCD has a budget of well over \$10 million. Its tasks include clearing debris from streets, preventing street crime through the presence of its own security force, and aggressively advertising the center city throughout the region. Through multimedia advertising campaigns, one of its marketing strategies is to highlight the comparative advantages of downtown life over the suburbs.

Other BIDS engage in similar activities:

- The Alliance for Downtown New York operates a BID in lower Manhattan in New York City. Covering the Wall Street financial district, the Alliance provides an array of services: providing funds for retailers to upgrade their storefronts, operating a jitney for downtown workers, and showcasing the area as a place to work, live, shop, and dine.
- Central Atlanta Progress seeks to make downtown Atlanta safe and clean, to increase the number of local jobs, and to promote the development of housing. To improve safety, the downtown district has a fifty-person Ambassador Force, which provides street patrols for security and conducts a hospitality campaign for conventioners, visitors, and residents.
- The Downtown DC BID in Washington D.C. provides supplemental cleaning and security services to an area of over 100 blocks and more than

- 800 properties; works with businesses on a consistent program of signage; develops promotion materials to better inform the public about downtown D.C.; and enforces a zero tolerance policy toward graffiti in the area.
- The Downtown Community Improvement District in Kansas City was established in 2003 to provide security, public maintenance, and landscape improvements in the central business district. Led by a seventeen-member governing board, its aim is to create a friendly, inviting atmosphere for those who reside and work downtown.
 - The Historic Third Ward Association is responsible for BID #2 in the area adjacent to downtown Milwaukee. The BID comprises over 350 business and 400 residences and is listed as a national historic district. The BID supports the conversion of manufacturing and warehousing structures into commercial enterprises and residential dwellings.
 - The Hollywood Entertainment District spans an eighteen-block stretch of Hollywood Boulevard and is funded by over 200 property owners. The BID provides security, cleaning, and marketing services. The purpose is to maintain the area as a tourist destination and as an inviting location for business investment.
 - The Downtown Mesa Association works on behalf of 300 commercial properties and 600 business owners in the town center of one of Arizona's fastest growing communities. It generates and provides downtown information and research, works with the local police department on security issues, and attracts new businesses to the area.

The general aim of BIDs is to put public places within cities on the same footing as the private places outside them—shopping centers and strip malls. The effort is to effectuate a culture in which Americans recognize the potential of cities to accomplish social aspirations and to improve the human condition. When people “see beyond the pathology of cities and notice improvements in [the] quality of their lives,” former Milwaukee Mayor John O. Norquist notes in his book, *The Wealth of Cities: Revitalizing the Centers of American Life*, they also begin to “notice the excitement, beauty, and value of cities.”⁶ If nothing else, the fact that BIDs spend so much capital on public places sends an important message about the commitment of government and business to city life. The mayor of New York, Michael Bloomberg, has declared: “BIDs are a proven example of how public/private partnerships can promote economic development.”⁷ It is certainly noteworthy that the more than fifty BIDs located throughout the five boroughs of New York City collectively spend well over \$50 million annually on marketing, cleaning, and security services.⁸ In the Big Apple and elsewhere, the belief is that BIDs have the administrative flexibility and enough funding to shape cities in meaningful ways, to help bring about a true civic epiphany.



BIDs are contemporary creations yet they are married to a distant past. The paradigm for BIDs is the ancient Greek *agora*, the preeminent civic space. Although BID managers and workers rarely pose philosophical questions to tourists and never referee nude wrestling matches in open-air gymnasiums, they promote the same kinds of ideals and practices that made the Greek *agora* a special locale.

The Greek *agora* (gathering place), was the heart of Athens and other city states in the second century BCE.⁹ Comprised of gymnasiums, shady colonnades, temples for the gods, and parks with elegant statues of the leading citizens and heroes of the time, the *agora* was the centerpiece for political meetings, law courts, religious festivals, and theatrical and athletic competition. Unplanned, yet geographically distinct, the *agora* was “a jumble of crowded downtown streets and irregular open spaces where shrines and alters, public buildings and monuments stood in the midst of workshops, market stalls, and taverns.”¹⁰ The marketplace of the *agora* supplied every need and met every desire. All kinds of local and imported food were available: wine, chickpeas, beesting puddings, myrtle berries, raisins, olive oil, and lamb. The shops included barbers, cobblers, and perfumers. There was an *ichthyopolis*, where fish could be purchased, the *cycloi* for fruit, and the *himatiopolis* for clothes. There was even a place where stolen goods could be bought and sold—the *kerkopes*.¹¹

Occasionally “the haunt of the dregs of the populace,” the *agora* nonetheless accomplished the highest aims of civilization—encouraging human encounters, stimulating commerce, enhancing civic participation, broadening viewpoints, engendering self-government, and harmonizing the individual’s inner and outer self.¹² Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and other philosophers of the time developed western thought along its paths. There is even a compelling claim that democracy was born and bred in the Athenian *agora*.¹³

Remarkable as the essence of the civic experience, the ancient *agora* is also of considerable consequence because it illustrates the staying power of a public place in the ebb and flow of history.¹⁴ From its heyday in the second century BCE, the Romans under Sulla in 86 BCE sacked the *agora* in Athens. It recovered five decades later when the Roman statesman Agrippa moved several old temples to the site, rebuilt the existing structures, and erected the Odeon, a grand concert hall on its axis. Later on, the Romans added a colonnaded collection of shops that sold wares from around the Mediterranean. Then, in 267 CE, the Heruli overran Athens and the *agora*’s structures were stripped for their stone. Rebuilt as a housing complex in 400 CE, the area was devastated again less than two hundred years later and habitation gradually ceased. In the tenth century, the Church of the Holy Apostles was built in the *agora*. Short-lived as a place of worship, the area was overrun by invaders in 1204 and laid desolate for several centuries. In the 1930s, the *agora* was excavated to reveal many of the temples and columns from antiquity. As

irony would have it, the agora was transformed into its present condition as a tourist destination, a favorite gathering spot for people from around the world as they descended from the wonders of the Parthenon with digital cameras and camcorders in tow.

The Greeks were certainly not the first and were definitely not alone in their pursuit of civic space. The Chinese, Egyptians, Japanese, Mayans, and Ottomans also developed prosperous centers of community life, equally resplendent with marketplaces, places of worship, and palaces for sovereigns. Nonetheless, the Greek agora is a good starting point for considering the development of similar places in the tract of history.

In first century western society, the agora was replicated in Rome's Forum, which added to the Greek ideal of innovative architectural forms and the republican system of government. The Forum contained the Roman Senate, as well as hundreds of grand temples, several banking facilities, and some of the first churches in Rome. The Forum was abandoned in the seventh century when the Vandals vandalize its structures and pilfered its wealth. For decades, the Forum was in ruins, a pasture for cattle to feed. It was rediscovered when Napoleon ordered the excavation of its remains in the early 1800s. Revitalized as a tourist attraction like the Greek agora, the Forum has regained its splendor by being a place to stroll among the marble vestiges of the marvels of western civilization.

After Rome's fall, the agora took the form of medieval fairs and markets in the environs of cathedrals, castles, and commercial ports. It arose again in the Renaissance of the fifteenth century when ruling families and merchant guilds in Bruges, Krakow, Florence, Seville, and other cities fashioned the piazzas, plazas, and market squares that provided centerpieces for art, literature, music, and architecture. In the golden age of Dutch culture of the seventeenth century, Amsterdam, Leiden, Utrecht, and other cities turned their public places over to the play of children so that their behavior could be scrutinized "in light of their incipient citizenship in the commonwealth."¹⁵ By the eighteenth century and the Age of Enlightenment, a newfound philosophy of cosmopolitanism—combining consumerism, public education, eclectic architecture, religious tolerance, and democracy—formed multiple centers of civic, religious, and commercial activity along the Royal Mile in Edinburgh, La Rambla in Barcelona, and the Champs Elysees in Paris. In the nineteenth century, London's Great Exhibition of 1851, held in Hyde Park's Crystal Palace, laid out the cornucopia of consumer goods that could be produced by art and industry—introducing a new form to business districts—the department store.¹⁶



Americans joined the progression of city history late, but it did not take long for them to develop thriving agoras in the business districts of Chicago, Philadelphia, New York, and San Francisco, as well as along the main streets of hundreds

of other communities. America's business districts prospered and expanded, not only in terrain, physical height, and architectural exuberance, but also in the consciousness of millions of people who experienced firsthand the excitement and beauty of city life.¹⁷ Listen to anyone who lived or worked in a big city in the first half of the American century and they will grow excitedly nostalgic when recalling the exciting department stores, offices, restaurants, theaters, and street life that existed at the time. New York's Times Square, for instance, was a central gathering point for liveliness and culture, the location of an entertainment extravaganza and an assortment of gaudy signage. In the smallest of towns, Main Street was the heart of the community, a synonym for the soul of American life and the focus of countless books, plays, and movies.

The good times were short-lived. Paradoxically, it was when America's empire reached an apotheosis—its cities figuratively and literally collapsed in a tornado of technological and sociological events. From the 1950s onward, the trinity of modern existence—cars, highways, and single-family houses—propelled people and businesses away from many cities. One business district after another was left to wallow in poverty, crime, and neglect. From New York's Times Square to Seattle's Pioneer Square there appeared a jumble of seedy smut shops, dilapidated buildings, forlorn streets, and an eclectic assortment of n'er-do-wells lingering on dark street corners. City leaders tried to thwart the decline with urban renewal projects and social service endeavors, but to little avail. By the 1970s, shopping centers and strip malls located in distant fields and accessible only by cars dominated the physical and cultural landscape. The city places that had once been exciting and inviting were seemingly transformed overnight into an anachronism in many minds.

But all was not lost. Optimism abides in the lessons of history—cities and city places tend to rise, fall, and rise again. Like the ancient Greek agora, the Roman Forum, or the European market square, the possibility has always existed that America's main streets and central business districts might live to see a better day. And perhaps that day is coming closer. BIDs and an assortment of other economic development initiatives symbolize a newfound interest in the special locales within cities. The message of the BID phenomena is that businesses, consumers, and tourists can be persuaded to rediscover why people of many creeds and nationalities have tended throughout human history to gather in close confines in one way or another. The expectation is that the places within cities can be revitalized to arrive at what Malcolm Gladwell has called the tipping point, that is, when the value of an old idea is recognized and transformed into a new fad.¹⁸



The challenge for BIDs is how to help make the renewal of cities a reality, to tip them into prosperous modern agoras. The key word is “help” because no

one organization or program will ever hope to be the sole catalyst for the revitalization of complex civic spaces. A collective endeavor is required involving a mixture of public, private, and nonprofit initiatives. Along with programs and public administration, shifts in the values and opinions that guide society are essential. The American dream may have to become less about large cars, expanding concrete, single-family dwellings, super-sized stores, and consumer democracy. Simultaneously, it may have to become more about pedestrian activities, dense residential districts, small shops, and civic-minded projects.¹⁹

From the perspective of BIDs, there are some heartening developments. The exteriors of suburban shopping malls are increasingly viewed as uninviting eyesores with potentially unsafe parking lots.²⁰ The insides of malls are equally dismal—more boring than exciting—if you have been to one of them you have been to them all. Whether frightened or jaded, consumers are spending less time in malls and the number of trips has declined.²¹ The amount of money spent in malls is also decreasing and there is an emerging impression that malls have lost their allure.²² In fact, some 300 malls around the country have been shutdown since the 1990s, and experts predict that of the remaining 2,000 malls nearly 400 may be on their way to extinction.²³ Things are so bad for a few struggling strip malls and office complexes that they have been attracted to the BID concept and created self-assessment districts to further their commercial potential.

In tandem with mall malaise, there is a weariness with senseless sprawl and endless commuting on gridlocked roads not only to work but also to merely buy a loaf of bread. Bowling alone is the phrase coined by Robert D. Putnam as a metaphor for the depressing isolation of a commuter society built around forlorn highways and detached single-family housing.²⁴ It has become commonplace for suburban lifestyles to be made light of in literature, photography, film, and music. Malls and cul-de-sacs are more uncool than cool in many minds. In the same vein, there are a host of skillful gadflies and professional screeds who spend all of their waking moments ranting and rallying against the perceived hideousness of the American landscape—repetitious commercial strips, housing with garages for front doors, tacky billboards, polluted waters, and seemingly endless swaths of dull asphalt. One book from this genre, *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream*, has predicated that the nation's ecology, social fabric, and economic potential will eventually be destroyed if the pace of growth in the hinterlands does not slow considerably.²⁵

In the context of dissatisfaction with suburban life, cities look better all the time. People are discovering that they like the variety and spirit of community provided by city life. Individuals from all walks of life are becoming more inclined to live near their jobs so they can walk to work and others have found shopping in a colorful downtown more interesting than roaming an

antiseptic warehouse in a paved field. In one city after another, traditional downtown neighborhoods have been gentrified and old waterfronts reclaimed for public uses. A rising tide of immigrants has created a new workforce and a willingness to invest in start-up enterprises in central business districts. Tourists from around the world increasingly make city centers their favorite destinations to traipse about and photograph. Historic districts have multiplied, with well over 1,200 in existence, and many more in the works. To keep them up-to-date, real estate firms, such as the Rouse Company, have developed retail and mixed-use urban marketplaces, including Faneuil Hall Marketplace in Boston, South Street Seaport in New York, the Gallery at Market East in Philadelphia, Harborplace in Baltimore, Bayside Marketplace in Miami, Westlake Center in Seattle, and Pioneer Place in Portland. Under the banner of New Urbanism, cities such as Atlanta and Chicago are developing mini-towns, replete with wide sidewalks, ample street parking, neighborhood schools, and attractive loft residences above interesting retail stores.

The level of commitment to cities is increasing and optimism is on the rise, yet problems persist. Many cities are still struggling, to say the least. Storefront windows are often shuttered with plywood instead of filled with sale displays. Updated Victorian lamps merely shine a bright light on extended spaces of emptiness. Criminal activity, racial segregation, and a crumbling infrastructure remain stubborn stumbling blocks. James Howard Kunstler, the author of *The City in Mind: Notes on the Urban Condition*, observes that the

center of Detroit's metropolitan doughnut has gotten larger and emptier instead of redeveloping . . . St. Louis is a virtual mummy's tomb between its empty downtown and the West End . . . Baltimore has become a flyblown carcass . . . Buffalo looks as if it suffered a prolonged aerial bombardment . . . and, a giant vacuum cleaner seems to have sucked the populations out of Memphis, Nashville, and Little Rock.²⁶

In Appleton, Wisconsin, a city with a BID, Kunstler found himself the sole pedestrian in the downtown one spring day because all of the commercial activity had been shifted as he put it, "to an asteroid belt of highway strips and architectural garbage five miles outside town."²⁷ Kunstler engages in hyperbole, perhaps, but nonetheless the point is made, there is a mere glimmer of progress in the renewal of communities of all sizes and shapes throughout the nation.

One predicament for city places is that the nation's largest retailers have not yet fully turned toward city places. It is rare for Wal-Mart to be located anywhere near a BID or a city center (although the mavens of Bentonville, Arkansas, have promised that more stores will be located in cities). It has thus far been the exception rather than the rule for big box stores—such as Best Buy, Home Depot, Ikea—to open in the close confines of central business districts.²⁸

If anything, the message of the retail giants is that the best way to make huge profits is to locate as far away from everything as possible. The wisdom of this strategy is in the numbers. Wal-Mart tops the list of all Fortune 500 companies with billions in revenues, its sales far surpass that of any nearby central business district, and its competitive power often puts downtown businesses out of business, not the other way around.²⁹

Consumers likewise understand where their self-interest is best maximized. Given the choice between the fantastic array of products and cheap prices in supersized stores and the poor selection of products and expensive prices found in many downtown stores, smart consumers desire the former. Experienced shoppers know downtown stores are often unkempt and under stocked, while the distant Wal-Mart is usually clean and well-maintained. In most downtowns, there are few grocery stores, thereby constraining the capability of people to live downtown. Even eating in a central city is problematic because there is often no where to park. But then, many people have no interest in walking downtown or anywhere else for that matter, especially if the walking is in extreme cold or heat, in rain or snow. A sizable proportion of the American population wishes to drive to where they shop and to park as close to the front door as possible. An op-ed in the *Minneapolis Tribune* by former Minnesota State Senator Frederic W. Knaak put it this way:

The economic success of this region (Twin Cities) is not in spite of sprawl, but to a remarkable degree because of sprawl. What makes the American economy, and this region in particular, thrive is our collective mobility that is the result of our road grid and lower density.³⁰

In a culture fixated on movement, city places are essentially forlorn islands in a landscape of capriciousness. In *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* J. B. Jackson writes that America is a country “where land and buildings are increasingly thought of in speculative terms, where families move on the average every five years, where whatever is old is obsolete, and whatever is obsolete is discarded.”³¹ In a *Country of Exiles: The Destruction of Place in American Life*, William R. Leach observes that the country “emerges more than ever as a transparency without a history and as a land of free-floating individuals without strong loyalties who view life as a theater of never-ending options.”³² David Brooks notes in *On Paradise Drive: How We Live Now (and Always Have) in the Future Tense* that where people reside is no longer a destination, but merely “a dot on the flowing plane of multidirectional movement.”³³ Because nearly half the country is on the move at any point in time, it is difficult for BIDs or any other organization to build an enduring commitment to the improvement of any city place for any significant period of time.

The bottom line is that customs and habits have not met up with the rhetoric of downtown revitalization. Business leaders are increasingly

involved with placed-based city projects, there is much contemplation in the corridors of universities about economic development programs, and governments are becoming more engaged with inner cities through various policy initiatives, but it would be presumptuous to pronounce that America's towns and cities have regained the level of vibrancy they had before everyone jumped in their cars and left for the countryside. In most places, the revitalization process is far away from the promise of revitalization.



As BIDs go about the tough business of revitalizing and shaping city places it is important to understand what the BID phenomenon is all about. This is true for scholars and journalists who study and write about cities, for policy-makers and policy advocates who work hard to shape city places for the better, and for anyone who believes cities should be symbols of inspiration rather than shrines to despair.

There is much to study:

- Why have BIDs become a key device for revitalizing cities?
- What theory guides their operation?
- How are they organized and financed?
- Who is governing and managing them?
- Where can they be found?
- How are they shaping public places?
- What problems do they confront?
- How do we know whether they are successful or not?
- What does the future hold for them?

This book provides answers to these questions using both primary and secondary sources. Information has been gleaned from surveys of BID managers, interviews with those knowledgeable about BIDs, a review of BID web sites, and an examination of anything and everything that has been written about them in the past two decades. Through systematically organizing the extant information, the aim is to provide an unbiased description of BIDs that details key characteristics and places them in historical context and perspective. In doing so, the BID movement is used as a metaphor for thinking about how contemporary cities are revitalized.

The assessment of BIDs mirrors what people think is appealing and worthwhile about cities. The specific ways BIDs affect particular places is indicative of the varied ways that cities may be transformed generally. The fact that BID activities are pertinent to so many fields of academic interest—architecture, business management, city planning, civil engineering, criminal justice, economics, history, law, political science, public administration, and

sociology—says much about the complex nature of contemporary city development. It follows that the complex economic and social problems confronting BIDs are similarly faced by cities using something other than BIDs to revitalize their downtowns. The caricatures of BIDs—that they are too consumption-orientated, undemocratic, and unaccountable—are likewise criticisms of city administration in many policy areas. In the end, to know about the business of improvement districts is to appreciate how cities are changing yet remaining the same.