

LEADING...OUT OF THE BLOCKS

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Pedestrian Malls: Places for People

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If we're asking neighbourhoods to accept more people, then the city has got to create more public space to bring them together. These spaces don't need to be big. They just need to be positioned right smack in the middle of the community."

- Vancouver City Councillor Suzanne Anton



Pedestrian malls are small areas in a city that encourage walking, shopping, dining, socializing and "just hanging out," with automobile traffic often reduced or removed.

These people-focused streets typically work best in compact cities where residents, workers and visitors appreciate access to multi-use outdoor space that promotes community development and social interactions.

In today's climate of rising fuel prices and increasing urban density new pedestrian malls may be coming to an urban space near you – and near our managed real estate assets, with implications for marketing, leasing, and overall value.

History

Before the advent of the automobile, piazzas and squares and certain streets were the centre of commerce, government and social vibrancy in cities. As the popularity of the automobile gained momentum, a shift towards car-centric urban design resulted in a change in land use and human behaviour.

In many Western European cities, some popular narrow streets could not handle growing automobile traffic so drivers avoided them. De facto, they became pedestrian malls, offering vibrancy that was lost on automobile-centred roads.

In North America, in the 1950s city planners looked to these European examples and introduced the first pedestrian malls to combat the economic downturn in older urban areas that accompanied suburbanization. Because society was shifting toward an automobile-based life and spreading out into lower-density suburbs, most pedestrian malls in North America never lived up to their expectations and were eventually converted back to conventional streets.

Today an increasing number of people are choosing to live in higher density urban areas, including downtowns. Cities and their restaurant, retail and entertainment amenities have become the hotbeds for knowledge workers, creative types and others who generate new ideas and economic activity. Recent empty-nester baby boomers have also been moving downtown, appreciating the lower maintenance lifestyle and cultural attractions. People living and working together in a higher density fashion today supports the return of the pedestrian mall.

Pedestrian malls return streets to people:

"A hundred years ago roads were not or cars, because cars were rare..."

It helps us understand what the street was like to city people then, if we think of what a city park is like to us today -- a place where we think of everybody as welcome, provided they don't get in the way of others, don't make a nuisance of themselves and don't endanger other people."

- Peter Norton, Technology Historian, University of Virginia

(Quoted from Anabelle Quince, host, "The Story of Highways," Rear Vision (2008, 20 July), transcript viewed September 2, 2008 at: <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/rearvision/stories/2008/2281165.htm>.)



Not just any street will work as a pedestrian mall. Urban studies specialists have identified some crucial features:

Density – A key element in the success of pedestrian malls

Higher urban densities generate a larger customer base and allow alternative transportation infrastructure to flourish. Higher densities also allow the home, office and amenities to be closer together, reducing the need for a personal automobile. Reduced private automobile use and efficient urban space use will create an environment that is better suited to the concept of a pedestrian mall.

Street 2.0 – The wireless revolution makes its way to the streets

Mobile and wireless technologies now allow and encourage work to be done outside of the office or home; people are flocking to cafes, city parks, and anywhere with wireless internet connections. Pedestrian malls show enormous potential for adapting to this technology driven trend. They create an informal public meeting place that is familiar and highly accessible while offering services and amenities that appeal to urban workers and residents.

Location

Location matters in a variety of ways:

- Pedestrian malls typically require a captive market of people who will flock to the shops and services offered. Dense residential areas combined with a nearby business district can provide an ideal 24 X 7 population base.
- Pedestrian malls that are connected to numerous other short streets make it easier for people to access the mall and improve flow and social interaction.
- Enclosed shopping centres nearby can support pedestrian malls by providing a change of scenery, shelter and parking for patrons of pedestrian malls. Stephen Avenue Walk in Calgary is an example.
- Streets that terminate with a key building or landmark create a sense of place and can anchor a pedestrian mall.
- Historical areas tend to make good pedestrian malls because they offer a unique and authentic backdrop for retail and restaurant establishments.

Scale, Layout and Design

Prominent pedestrian mall researcher Harvey Rubenstein and *Great Streets* author Allan Jacobs identify the following elements as important factors in successful pedestrian mall design:

- Pedestrians prefer an intimate, human scale setting where there is a sense of defined boundaries that make people feel safe.
 - Interesting architectural details help to visually break-up large plain facades and windows create an environment that is more inviting.
 - Large blank walls – a building side with no windows, for example – give the impression that people are far removed from the street.
- Pedestrian malls need to offer shops and amenities that are close enough to make walking the most efficient transport mode.
- The width of the pedestrian mall and the length of the blocks are important considerations.
 - When pedestrian spaces are too wide, people tend to walk on one side, ignoring the businesses on the opposite side.
 - Smaller pedestrian-oriented space – especially if automobiles are prohibited – tend to allow better access and reduce walking distance.

- Restaurant and café patios that extend too far into the sidewalk can obscure small retail stores next door.
- Smaller pedestrian malls that are surrounded by ample economical parking benefit from improved convenience and accessibility.
- Good landscaping planning is needed to ensure that visibility of shops is maintained. Trees can define the streetscape, help establish continuity, provide shade, create seasonal interest and add animation.
- Outdoor furniture and architectural features can be designed and laid out to enhance the flow of pedestrians and minimize attracting crime and homelessness.
 - Park bench ridges discourage activities such as skateboarding or sleeping on benches.
 - Open air seating arrangements in busy areas reduce loitering.



Stephen Avenue Walk in Calgary. This pedestrian mall near Banker's Hall offers trees for visual interest and some intriguing sculpture. It is becoming a lively restaurant and entertainment stretch, with retailers gradually finding their way into the mix.

Tenant Mix

A tenant mix that includes retail, restaurants, cafes and entertainment venues ensures that there is activity in the mall during all hours of the day. Unique offerings such as specialty shops help attract visitors from outside the immediate trade area.

Car vs. Car-free

Many pedestrian malls today feature some limited automobile access. The advantages and disadvantages of automobile access are outlined below.

Arguments for keeping, but limiting, automobile access:

- Automobiles generate activity on city streets. Slower moving traffic – “cruising” – can contribute to a lively atmosphere.
- Automobiles can improve people’s perception of safety by increasing the number of people in the area.
- Motor vehicle access improves convenience and accessibility for retailers and shoppers.

Social and Cultural factors

People attract people and busy pedestrian malls promote natural surveillance which can lead to safer streets. Jane Jacobs, author of *The Death and Life of Great American Streets*, argues that a well developed social system with eyes on the street creates an environment that discourages criminal activity. Pedestrian malls that feel active and busy in the absence of automobile traffic appeal to people who enjoy the bustle of city life.

Some reasons for removing automobile access:

- Car-free areas can allow enhanced outdoor spaces such as cafes and seating areas. For example, on a pedestrian mall in Portland, noise from frequent diesel bus traffic has discouraged cafes from featuring outdoor seating areas.
- They can serve as venues for concerts, special events, and exhibits.
- Car-free areas provide a refuge for pedestrians and cyclists.

Why Pedestrian Malls could be important nearby features for investment real estate assets:

- Dynamic, inspiring office locales will help attract and retain tenants who in turn may be able to attract and retain employees more easily. This could result in higher rental rates and real estate values.
- A new, popular pedestrian mall nearby could enhance a shopping precinct that includes an enclosed shopping centre asset.
- Great walkable urban spaces attract multi-residential tenants, including those with higher disposable incomes who want to frequent cafes, pubs, entertainment and retail offerings nearby.

Lessons from Pedestrian Malls that apply to other outdoor spaces:

- Maintaining a human-focused scale of outdoor entrances to buildings could attract people and make them feel comfortable and welcome, just as this approach works for pedestrian malls.
 - A restaurant or café attached to a building entrance with indoor and outdoor seating may work well in this regard.
- Groups of buildings would benefit from a people focused “Piazza” or plaza surrounded by retail amenities. This could also be a gathering place for outdoor concerts and other events for the business community and others.

Conclusion

A well designed pedestrian mall restores the social aspect of streets that was lost in most North American cities when people retreated into their automobile silos half a century ago.

Making streets into places for people has the potential to enhance both social and economic activity, and with more people than ever interested in moving beyond the automobile age, look for more pedestrian-oriented spaces in a city near you.

This edition of Leading out of the Blocks was researched and written by Michael Musacchio, GWLRA’s summer intern from the University of British Columbia’s Urban Land Economics Program.



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WENDY WATERS
(604) 713-6451
Wendy.Waters@gwlra.com

AMY VANDERVELDE
(604) 713-8918
Amy.Vandervelde@gwlra.com