

Urban Design Centers



Design Centers boost inner city revitalization.

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Cities across the country are finding that urban design goes hand in hand with land planning and economic development, especially if you want

long term success. The design of urban space makes the difference between a vibrant Main Street and a dead strip mall, and cities are finding that the cost of even a small staff devoted to the design of the public realm will have an exponentially profound effect on the success of land planning and economic development. This has led to a rise in the number of Design Centers which work in cooperation with city planning offices and economic development corporations, often developed as a sub-office of the latter.

The Experience in Chattanooga

Chattanooga, Tennessee has had one of the most dramatic turn-arounds in urban quality in the last 25 years. In the 1970's, Chattanooga was said to have had the worst air quality in the country. Like many other aging central cities, much of its population was leaving for the suburbs or other regions. Businesses in the city were suffering and half of the storefronts in downtown were empty. Today, however, Chattanooga is a different place. Former Vice President Al Gore labeled the city an environmentally sustainable success in 1996. Business is back in town, and people are returning to Chattanooga's neighborhoods. Much of the success of the city is owed to its Design Center.

A New Way to Plan

Cities with Urban Design Centers are finding that the public investment of energy and money put into the design of the public realm equates to an increase in private investment in the city. There are a number of reasons why private developers see less risk in working in a community that has strong design standards.

- A well designed public realm creates value. People like to live, work and shop in comfortable, beautiful neighborhoods. When the public realm (streets, parks, squares) are well designed, the developer doesn't have to spend as much of their own project cost on beautification and landscaping. This includes the building, as not every building need be an object in and of itself. A simple, well designed building will become part of a greater fabric.

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- Predictability encourages development. Developers and homeowners prefer to build or own in a neighborhood that they can trust will not accept poorly designed developments. An investment is safer when future development will follow a well thought out plan.
- Good design promotes longevity. Communities with a well designed public realm perform better economically over time. Once the public realm is defined, the buildings and their uses can change without greatly affecting the desirability of the neighborhood.

Urban Design Centers brings the art of design back into the hands of the public. In the past, the development industry, following the idea of individual property rights trumping all else, wanted few government regulation put upon them. The problem is that design by the private sector was relegated to the private realm (buildings). Nobody was consciously designing the public realm and we have suffered for that. With the rise of the Design Center, the public realm is again at the forefront of the collective civic mind and we are beginning to reclaim our public spaces.

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