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## Reclaiming the center

By Casey Ross

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Just when you thought downtowns were dead, a renaissance is taking shape in cities across Massachusetts.

In Quincy, officials are plotting a \$1.3 billion plan to reinvent the city center with hundreds of new homes, restaurants, and stores. In Lowell, a developer is moving forward with an \$800 million project to rebuild a large section of the downtown. Similar efforts are planned or underway in Worcester, Springfield, and New Bedford.

The trend is rooted in the belief among many developers and city planners that the era of the monolithic shopping mall is over, and that people want to live, work, and shop on Main Streets that reflect a community's culture and history.

"People are looking for variety, and they want their downtowns to feel more like an experience," said Ken Narva of Street-Works LLC, a New York development firm spearheading the Quincy project. "We're starting to get away from the homogenized malling of America."

Midsize cities across the country are rediscovering downtowns that were once thriving commercial districts, but deteriorated into sleepy collections of retail stores lacking the options and convenience of suburban shopping malls. Over the past half-century, urban planners have tried many strategies to bring new life to struggling central business districts, from creating pedestrian malls to relocating government offices to building vast indoor shopping plazas.

Today, the principle behind revitalization efforts is to make downtowns not just shopping areas, but 24-hour neighborhoods with homes, offices, and entertainment venues where residents can shop, dine, and mix at movies and concerts. Such efforts helped transform downtown Providence, for example, into a thriving cultural center and business district with local artists, new restaurants, and popular retail stores.

"We're developing these spaces with the idea of civic life being part of a lifestyle," said Tim Love, a principal of Utile Inc., an architecture and planning firm in Boston. "These [downtowns] give people the ability to walk to the retail store, the community meeting, or the Italian restaurant. People have choices that are immediate."

In Massachusetts, many downtown projects seek to restore the historic fabric of communities by renovating old mill buildings or reestablishing street patterns torn apart during the urban renewal movement of the 1960s, when huge sections of downtowns were bulldozed to make way for modern housing complexes, retail centers, and government buildings. Examples of that era include Boston City Hall and its massive plaza, which replaced a warren of city blocks, and the downtown Worcester mall, which opened in 1971 after the demolition of a 20-acre commercial district of traditional storefronts and offices.

Supporters of downtown redevelopment say the mixed-use projects will attract residents and businesses to decaying city cores that have sapped their communities of vibrancy and tax revenues. But beyond the money, officials say, the projects will help to restore a deeper sense of civic pride.

"Downtown remains the one part of the city that belongs to everybody," said Adam Baacke, director of planning and development in Lowell. "The success of a downtown reflects positively on the city as a whole, and we think the project here will have a transformative impact."

Lowell's revitalization efforts stretch back more than 30 years, to the creation of the Lowell National Historical Park. Over the decades, they have included everything from a corporate training center to an arts district to loan programs for retailers and restaurants. The latest redevelopment effort, along a canal once used to power textile mills, involves construction of up to 725 homes, 424,000 square feet of commercial space, and 55,000 square feet of stores and restaurants.

It will remake about 15 acres of the city's downtown, with many of the new structures reflecting the style of the historic mill buildings that still dominate the area.

Developer Trinity Financial Inc. of Boston is nearing completion of its first new building, a 130-unit apartment complex marketed as affordable live-work space for artists. Next is a 50,000-square-foot office complex, plus two more residential buildings. As with any development, however, the pace of the work will be dictated by the economy, which in recent years has made it difficult for developers to find businesses to fill new offices, and people to buy homes.

Redeveloping a downtown is not for the faint of heart. It typically requires years, if not decades, to win permits, placate naysayers, and proceed with construction through unpredictable economic cycles.

The project in Worcester, for example, has suffered through years of fits and starts. The Boston firm Berkeley Investments Inc. proposed a \$560 million development in 2004, but the effort stalled when the housing market collapsed, the recession hit, and financing dried up.

Then last year, a new investor, Hanover Insurance Group of Worcester, bought about 10 acres from Berkeley and is now pursuing a \$110 million project to replace the former outlet mall with homes, offices, and stores. City Manager Michael O'Brien said the development will restore city blocks destroyed to make way for the mall, which forms a barrier that cuts the city in half.

"We're going back to the roots of what makes a downtown successful," he said. "We want more intimate streets and city blocks that complement each other."

He and others said a key element is bringing residents back to downtown commercial districts that now empty at 5 p.m. When people live downtown, the streets tend to stay active after nightfall, with people shopping, dining, and milling around.

In Quincy, Street-Works plans to develop up to 1,200 homes, 1 million square feet of offices, two hotels, a health and wellness center, and 600,000 square feet of stores and restaurants. Plans also include a 4-acre public green, new roads, and parking garages.

Narva, a cofounder of the firm, said people have predicted the death of American downtowns for decades. The first dire threat was the strip mall, and then came Internet shopping, which caused some pundits to speculate that retail centers would slowly wither and die.

But as baby boomers become empty nesters, he said, they are being drawn to downtown living for its activity and ambiance. Young people are attracted by shorter commutes and closer proximity to friends and nightlife.

"Human beings like to interact with one another," Narva said. "They want the scale and intimacy and immersive nature of being downtown. And if you make downtowns relevant to people, it spills over into everything else, from tax revenue to the way the city brands itself to the pride people take in living there."

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