

Rules of retailing cannot be ignored -- you've got to have action, stores must face the sidewalk. Remember the old Main Street?

## Downtown's Big Mistake

BY JOHN WALLACE

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It lies at the heart of one of the world's newest and largest concentrations of wealth. Fast approaching one million in population, it is the only major city between San Francisco and Los Angeles. Architects are utterly transforming it. Ever promising, ever disappointing -- it's downtown San Jose.

Here, someone invited a city, and nobody came. Everything is in place, the theaters, convention center, hotels, public transportation, squares, scenic walkways and arcades -- everything except for the people. The retailers are staying away in hordes. Fire a cannon down the award-winning Paseo de San Antonio shopping development, and you'll hit nothing but pigeons. Most of the store space is empty.

San Jose has worked tirelessly and invested heavily to solve these deficiencies. Its Redevelopment Agency has brought in hotels, jobs and transit. But downtown remains unconsciously at war with itself -- is it a city or a suburb?

Downtown's problems reflect the lingering bias of America's postwar experience. We don't like cities. We associate them with crowding, crime, traffic and stress. We do like cars, with their privacy and insulation. This is why downtown San Jose's planners have created retail spaces like The Pavilion that eschew the street, placing two stories of shops off street level, around a courtyard in the interior of a block. Cut off from the city that surrounds it and far from the madding crowd, The Pavilion is far from successful. It is aesthetically pleasing and largely vacant, like much of downtown's retail areas.

The rules of retailing are as old as the Bazaar of Baghdad and downright stodgy compared to those of architecture and urban design, yet they cannot be ignored. Look at the downtowns of San Francisco, Chicago, New York. People and traffic jam together, and retailers get as close as possible to both. The street is where the action is. It's where people peer through plate glass at everything from Steinways to Beanie Babies. Glance up Fifth Avenue or Geary Boulevard, and from block to block there's a sense of retail excitement -- uninterrupted by plazas, setbacks or blank walls. Here, you can easily see where you've shopped and where you might want to shop. Despite the urban crush, or because of it, people flock to these places. This is where retailers achieve critical mass.

In San Jose's downtown too much development is headed in the opposite direction. The new buildings stand alone. They face the street reluctantly, often set back and shielded by ample landscaping. Some, like the new Tech Museum or Repertory Theater, greet the world with massive blank walls. Few build retail space out to the sidewalk. As for the future, backers of the planned 350-room Westin hotel intend to "generate foot traffic along the Guadalupe River" by

placing restaurants and terraces on the bank, while bushes screen the sidewalk frontage. The Westin's design would fit well at a freeway off-ramp in some nondescript suburb.

It's an inner city envisioned as open, green, spacious and suburban, where workers can park and get to offices without using the sidewalk. And there's nothing wrong with this, unless you plan to run a retail establishment -- or create a world class city.

Let's take the Paseo de San Antonio. It's designed to convey pedestrian shoppers along a wide, attractive concourse lined with stores (someday), from a grassy downtown square to San Jose State University. The Paseo leads past The Pavilion, then the San Jose Rep, before it deliberately angles to break the straight-line monotony. In short, the Paseo is an architectural gem -- and a retail nightmare.

Even worse is the fortress-like Park Center Plaza. With its street frontage dominated by concrete slabs, parking driveways and pedestrian entrances off street level, it does not connect with its surroundings.

The fact is, no one has ever improved on Main Street. When it comes to merchandising, nothing works better than an attractive procession of uninterrupted street-level stores facing a thoroughfare. Shopping malls replicate Main Street indoors, with rows of retailers lining a walkway. In fact, the mall amplifies this effect by placing "anchors" -- generally big department stores -- at either end. In mall parlance, it's a "dumbbell" design. The big stores draw foot traffic up and down the length of the mall, past every retailer on the way.

Nothing substitutes for this conventional retail layout or some variation -- which helps explain why the Paseo, and so much of downtown San Jose, isn't working. First, the Paseo has no "anchors." It leads from an empty, park-like plaza to an obscure corner of the state university campus. It's no accident that McDonald's, with its infallible eye for retail location, is two blocks away on San Carlos Street, near the palm-lined entrance to the campus.

Pedestrians who happen on the Paseo find just that, a walkway. This is no calle and certainly no camino. There's too little action -- and that aesthetic bend in the road doesn't help. Shoppers cannot look up and down the Paseo and see an exciting array of stores. The Rep's empty wall and The Pavilion's impossible levels (80 percent of casual shoppers avoid steps) break up the space -- which is precisely what architects want and retailers don't.

Though downtown San Jose hasn't come together, its backers keep opting for open, spacious designs -- suburban in spirit -- that pull it apart. In fact, a feeling of empty space dominates much of the rebuilt downtown. But crowds and, yes, crowding, is what cities are all about. Density is desirable. In established cities, space is used sparingly. It provides contrast, as in San Francisco's Union Square, without diffusing the vital sense of hubbub. The millions of dollars San Jose has spent on urban spaciousness would have been better invested in preserving parkland in the surrounding hills.

Downtown's future leads up -- in the same direction as property prices. Someday, The Pavilion may catch overflow shoppers from San Jose's booming downtown streets, but for now, turn it into

office space. Even better, throw a big party, invite everyone from Architectural Digest, then tear it down -- and build a 15-story apartment building fronted by ground floor retailers. As for the Westin, there is still time to develop a bold, urban design.

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