

URBAN REVITALIZATION IN THE HEARTLAND:

A 21ST CENTURY PERSPECTIVE FROM TEXAS

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Economic growth and population migration have driven urban sprawl in the American Sunbelt for decades. Some cities have been particularly effective in parlaying windfall growth into visibility and unique urban identities. The 'it' status that attracts national curiosity rests on a balance of growth, livability, and edginess – traits that cannot be engineered or purchased alone. Post-COVID economic recovery is an opportunity for cities to revitalize their urban cores in manifold ways, even amidst growing turbulence and uncertainty. This article examines these shifting dynamics and considers whether a modestly sized heartland American city – Waco, Texas – is poised to achieve transformational change in its urban core.



DOWNTOWNS ARE BACK

Downtowns are the soul of a community, but 20th century American history shows that their fate fluctuates across social and economic cycles. From the 1960s to the early 1990s, suburbanization emptied many urban cores of their economic vitality. Low-rise office parks, shopping malls, and highway expansions promoted sprawl, as privileged urban residents chased space, greenery, cheap mortgages, and distance from the perceived ills of city life.

In turn, downtowns struggled to fill the void. For the typical suburban resident, trips to town were necessary for sports and cultural events (where these amenities had not themselves moved to the suburbs). Absent the street life enlivened by a critical mass of stores, restaurants, coffee shops, and recreational outlets, evenings at the ballpark or symphony hall would end for many in a brisk walk to the car and a rush to the interstate. Urban vitality on nights and weekends could be found only in isolated clusters of nightclubs and around universities.

Amidst rapid suburbanization, cities fought to enliven their downtowns by luring people to events in renovated or new facilities (e.g., Baltimore's Camden Yards and Fort Worth's Bass Hall). The goal was for visitors to not only attend events but also linger – a stroll and dinner beforehand, some shopping, and a nightcap afterwards. Fort Worth introduced free parking in city garages at nights and over weekends in an effort to address one of the many complaints that famously kept drivers from venturing downtown. Other efforts common across cities included periodic events and festivals centered on music, food, and arts and crafts. With more people and more activity, the "eyes upon the street" would also improve the feeling of safety.

SAN DIEGO'S HORTON PLAZA



HONOLULU'S ALOHA TOWER

BALTIMORE'S CAMDEN YARDS



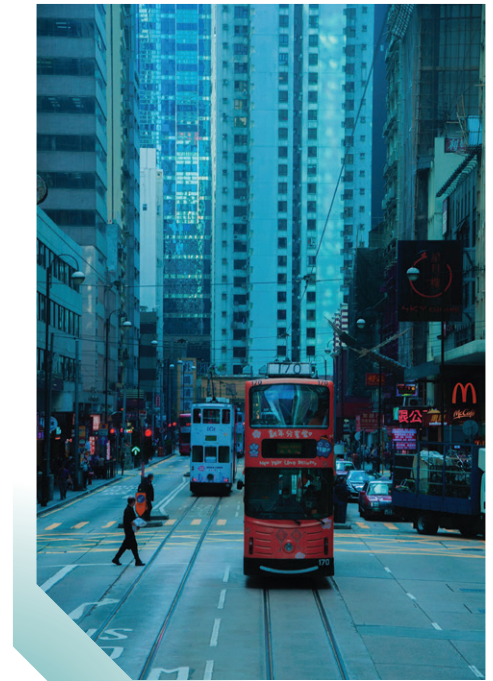
FORT WORTH'S
BASS HALL



Construction also led the way. For example, American cities experienced a wave of 'festival marketplaces' – cheerful outdoor malls that aimed, within the confines of a predetermined envelope, to recreate the serendipitous vitality lost in neighboring downtown streets. Examples are Jacksonville (Florida) Landing (now defunct), San Diego's 80s-fabulous Horton Plaza, and Honolulu's Aloha Tower. Similarly, new convention centers became a popular but often ill-fated way to boost hotel and restaurant demand. By the 2000s, a second wave of revitalization sought in some cases to repurpose sites built during the first wave. For example, Nashville's Church Street Centre (a downtown mall that opened in 1989) was razed after only a decade in favor of a new public library. Both were premature efforts to inject life into an urban core that years later rejuvenated itself for other reasons.



SOHO (NEW YORK CITY)



SHEUNG WAN (HONG KONG)

Art districts also become popular engines of revitalization, particularly in once-industrial neighborhoods and buildings. Scholar Elizabeth Currid-Halkett coined the term ‘Warhol economy’ to describe how fashion, art, and music generate vitality through informal social settings and creative spaces. The elusive property of creative emergence cannot be engineered or planned top-down, least in the corporate-driven development that commonly anchors revitalization. Rather, it emerges from a mix of social and cultural conditions that come together in places like Soho (New York City), Sheung Wan (Hong Kong), and Fitzroy (Melbourne, Australia). According to Ireland-based geography scholar Greg Spencer, creative industries also appear in neighborhoods with other pre-existing characteristics – density, mixed use, and proximity to urban cores.

Early generation revitalization was anemic without residential demand, while mainstream retail and leisure experiences (e.g., movies) were easily found in the suburbs. Trips to town for sports and cultural events did not convince people to move there, until shifting economic and demographic forces eventually drove a residential renaissance (seemingly out of the blue in many cities). The early stages of this urban residential boom outstripped leisure and shopping capacity in many downtowns, and cities caught up

at varying paces. Urban leaders had to balance two spinning plates, as commercial and residential growth were mutually dependent.

The urban vitality now enjoyed in many cities were an impossible dream as recently as the early 2000s. Lifestyle choices explain part of this happy surprise. In the new millennium, many young professionals have chosen not to commit to mortgages and backyards but are also put off by the isolation of suburban cookie-cutter apartments surrounded by moats of parking and highways. These newcomer residents have become early signs of gentrification – particularly in inner ring neighborhoods near urban cores, where housing capacity is easy to ramp up in redeveloped buildings and vacant land.

Many cities have finally achieved what they hoped for, but not without displacement and strain on infrastructure. The Faustian pact of urban revitalization was to trade one identity for another – a political choice, justified for supposedly economic reasons, that played out with similar results in most cities. The vitality that many cities pursued has looked at best like a simulacrum of imagined authenticity and at worst like a cynical land grab resulting in corporate sameness devoid of character. The more elusive goal is to achieve ‘it’ status.



DENVER

THE BUSINESS OF 'ITNESS'

Sunbelt boomtowns like Denver, Phoenix, Charlotte, Raleigh, Oklahoma City, Las Vegas, and much of Florida and Texas exemplified suburbanization even into the revitalization era. While growth advantages are often circumstantial, the winning formula seems to be good weather, low taxes, modest metro population size (even with high-percentage growth), sufficient infrastructure and travel connections, and a handful of competitive industries and corporate champions within them.

Despite their success, Sunbelt giants are not known for the dynamism of their urban cores. Two modest exceptions, Denver and Phoenix, have experienced significant downtown residential and commercial development in the past decade. But even these are pedestrian stories of revitalization, predictable beneficiaries of economic and demographic trends that sloshed capital around the country and within metro areas.

Beyond such cases lurk the truly interesting ones, the 'it' cities. These cities have it – something indescribable that others covet: status and magnetism that becomes almost mythical. New millennium examples are Austin, Portland, and Nashville. Population growth in these cities has outpaced that of most others, but they also distinguish themselves in perceived quality-of-life and tourist attractiveness. However, 'it' cities also run the risk of collapsing under the weight of their own economic success, devolving into commercial caricatures of themselves. As traffic backs up and property values soar, the people and enterprises that made these cities special (see Schumpeter's theory of creative destruction) seek more livable and affordable environments elsewhere – provided they have the means to relocate.



PHOENIX



AUSTIN



NASHVILLE

At this stage, the next batch of emerging cities is ready to inherit the role. Currently on-deck are Charleston, Asheville, Fayetteville, Chattanooga, and Boise, among others. These urban strivers are attractive first for their affordability, livability, and job-producing economic growth. Over time, however, they may also develop unique reputations that sustain external curiosity. Whether early or late-stage, 'it' cities are distinguished not by their highways, shopping malls, or new stadiums, but by their soul – the atmosphere experienced not in a planned development but in a naturally evolving neighborhood with random, small-scale enterprises (see Jane Jacobs) and historic path dependencies that entrench uniqueness.

Unique identities are the anchor of 'it' cities. Austin and Nashville have live music, while Austin and Portland have an image of 'weirdness.' Charleston is a foodie city with beautiful architecture and Southern mystique. Asheville and Bend (Oregon) are brewery-laden gateways to natural beauty. The atmosphere of these and similar urban cores cannot be quantitatively measured but can indeed be felt. Depending on personal preferences, this feeling can come from walkability, safety, ease of access, and shopping affordability. It may also come from architectural heritage, street art, independent shops, the absence of chain stores, the presence of nature, and a general sense of artistry or quirkiness.

The physical manifestation of such atmospheres comes in many forms. Are planters, park benches, gas streetlights, pedestrian bridges, and food trucks enough? These infrastructures are consequences rather than drivers of vitality – infrastructure that supplements the real reasons people come. One such reason is the opportunity to experience something meaningful that is not available or

replicable elsewhere (within the surrounding metropolitan area or across the country). People also appear to be attracted to 'human-scale' (smaller) places – the grand and monumental are not as aesthetically pleasing as they once were. Consider the massive open-air plazas surrounding brutalist public architecture in the mid-20th century, later deeply maligned and only recently appreciated again (if ironically). Repurposing old buildings can give a feeling that something interesting (a textile factory?) came before, as can the balance between sanitization and grit – a string of tungsten lights hung across an unfinished factory wall, for example. But in the end, nobody can go wrong with beer and live music in the courtyard of a blacksmith shop-turned-brewery.



PORTLAND

IS WACO POISED FOR ITS MOMENT?

Waco has recently committed more than \$1 billion to downtown revitalization, for both public and private projects. This sum is substantial for a metro population of 280,000. Is Waco at the precipice of an 'it' style renaissance? Untapped potential flows past downtown on a daily basis. Riverfronts offer a place-based uniqueness that can be a focal point for revitalization. According to a report by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, "Through strategic planning, multisector collaboration, and long-term visions, cities can lead the transformation of neglected waterways into mixed-used assets that address a number of local priorities and play a role in solving major global challenges."

Savannah's historic River Street pedestrian promenade is one example of how a unique natural environment intersects a historic sense of place. The very identity of San Antonio is centered on its world-famous River Walk. Tempe (Arizona) is using its waterfront (at the artificially made Town Lake) as a catalyst for developing recreational, sports, and cultural facilities near the Arizona State University campus. Fort Worth has massive plans on the books for enhancing the attractiveness and livability of areas around the Trinity River, including the creation of an island.

Waco's ambitious Brazos Riverfront project reflects the transformational and integrated (mixed-use) thinking that can, when done right, ensure long-term durability in urban core revitalization. Several anchor projects, independently planned but collectively linked, help push this vision forward. With completion of the Paul and Alejandra Foster Pavilion (basketball arena), Baylor University will be the only Power-5 school with waterfront facilities for all three major sports – a unique advantage in developing the waterfront beyond the immediate urban core and in helping burst the 'Baylor bubble' by integrating the campus into its urban surroundings. Additionally, projects like the eventual return of the Downtown Farmer's Market to the waterfront extends the list of reasons people come to town and ensures more even continuity in patronage.

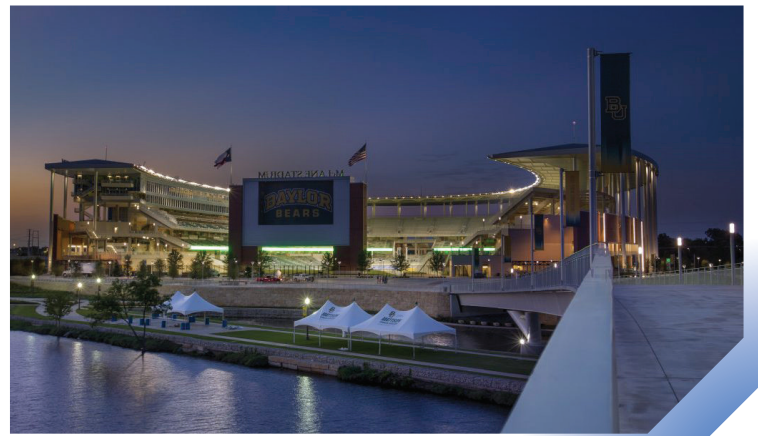
A well-known catalyst for Waco's recent popularity is, of course, the HGTV show 'Fixer Upper!' and 2023 marks a decade since it premiered. The show has brought attention to Waco and, specifically, the now-thriving Magnolia Silos area. An image windfall of this sort – again, seemingly out of left field – is the dream of urban planners almost anywhere. The district also features the type of unique architectural atmosphere and mix of boutique vendors that presents visitors with a vision of distinction – an experience they may not have elsewhere.



Waco's future looks bright, but the challenge is to avoid turning downtown into a mere amusement park – something people drive in to enjoy and vacate during off hours. Previous generation revitalization projects around the country often focused on amenities and attractions, missing a crucial piece to the revitalization puzzle: housing. Vibrant downtowns have around-the-clock buzz generated not by events alone but by residents going about their daily lives (a masterplan published in 2010 explored one scenario in which downtown Waco is home to an additional 60,000 residents). Who will come? A younger generation of prospective residents may not desire the ample living space of suburbs but instead seek convenient housing in walkable neighborhoods near urban amenities.

Urban scholars like Richard Florida have studied the preferences and behavior patterns of young, educated professionals (what he labels the 'creative class' and what today we might consider millennials). Florida promotes 'three T's' for generating revitalization: talent, tolerance, and technology. While his concept is almost two decades old, it remains relevant if a bit controversial given the perception that it promotes gentrification-induced displacement. Notwithstanding such debates, recent research suggests that developers are better considering the preferences of young urban residents, who seek diversity of activities and uniqueness of place. The core driver, however, is an economy that provides jobs for these young professionals. Accordingly, Waco's building and infrastructure projects should go hand-in-hand with economic development and branding efforts.

'It' status cannot be designed or engineered any more than it can be simply wished into existence. Sleek new live-work-play projects often come with a heavy whiff of corporatist planning and can fail to substitute for independent vendors and pop-up enterprises in creating authentic experiences. For free-market proponents, this point should be obvious; the wisdom of individuals and markets creates more interesting places than an out-of-town team of design experts and financiers. Floods of



MCLANE STADIUM

bachelorettes do not descend on Nashville to behold the marvels of corporate redevelopment. They do so to feel alive and connected in an atmosphere that often teeters on the ecstatic. Nashville's Lower Broadway on any given Saturday night is among the liveliest places I have seen, including Shanghai's Bund, London's West End, Hong Kong's street markets, and Sydney Harbor. Not every city should necessarily aspire to this level of energy, but aiming in that direction means coming up short still produces a good outcome.

Waco has two existing pillars – national visibility through HGTV and Baylor sports. Bricks-and-mortar can get revitalization moving, but locking-in the durability of urban core transformation requires altering the very DNA of a city. Waco may

not seek to be an 'it' city in the mold of Austin, Portland, or Nashville (and likely wants none of their traffic and high living costs), but it can endear itself as a mid-sized but feisty community where the best of the Texas spirit shines in urban spaces and, most importantly, in people.

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DOWNTOWNS OF THE FUTURE

In closing, it is appropriate to consider where cities are going in a rapidly changing world. It is prudent for urban leaders and planners to respect and retain aspects of a city's old DNA. Factors giving 'it' cities their spark are partly the product of existing identities and advantages. Nashville did not miraculously turn a corner only in the 2000s, as the city had a successful and dynamic music scene

for decades prior. What changed was something that catalyzed growth based on a variety of newly emergent factors, with the city's music reputation adding a bonus flair that few other cities could match. Nashville and similarly successful cities respected the past while remaining open to new opportunities, industries, and communities. One folly of urban revitalization is that it can be retrospective, drawing on successful models elsewhere and on what communities used to be. Future-building requires a dive into the unknown and the seemingly impossible, relying on existing identities for strength while reaching for novelty.

Much of what draws people to urban cores will probably never change. People love to be out and about, strolling, dining, and generally vibing in places where they can watch others doing the same. There is indeed a market for the lone traveler, the peace-seeker, and even the misanthrope – we can all sometimes understand the allure of the isolated mountain cabin. But humans are social creatures and cities run on this energy. As such, the prospects for urban growth and revitalization are bright in any place gaining population.

At the same time, we live in an unsettled age and the world is not always a jolly and carefree place. We struggle in the U.S. with political divisions, higher living and housing costs that worsen inequality, and the prospect of increasingly disruptive natural disasters in coastal and other weather-vulnerable areas. We must also consider societal shifts that are less visible but no less consequential. For example, there is increasing discussion about the surprise emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics, and their impact on work, livelihoods, and online interactions. How these trends will affect cities is not well understood, but for the moment a sunset beer on the waterfront is better in person than through virtual reality goggles.

How can we anticipate characteristics that will make urban cores thrive in a turbulent 21st century? Much depends on what people feel is important, a politically determined factor. The 'smart cities' perspective suggests that urban quality-of-life is improved by better public sector technologies. The sustainability perspective suggests that a continuation of how we produce, consume, and dispose will accelerate climate change and catastrophically degrade the natural environment. The social justice perspective suggests, among many other things, that efforts to improve livability in cities benefit only the few at great cost, inconvenience, and threat to marginalized individuals and communities.

Regardless of one's political inclinations, the third decade of the 21st century is a time of grave consternation. Getting urban revitalization right seems almost trivial in the face of impossibly complex problems. However, one should not underestimate the power of place to generate pride, identity, and community in positive ways. These factors are not guaranteed to solve all of society's problems, but with the right motivations and policies, they can make cities enjoyable, productive, and meaningful settings where people come together to address the bigger issues. I am a strong believer in the power of quality environments to elevate human ideas and motivations; people shape space, and space shapes people.

As a graduate of Baylor University, I hold the same hopes for Waco. My urban planning research and personal curiosities have taken me to hundreds of towns and cities in the U.S. and around the world. I have seen revitalization work and fail. Waco's downtown transformation looks great on paper and will undoubtedly be a physical marvel that dazzles longtime residents. But at the end of the day, it is the people – their creativity, openness, and sense of spirit and adventure – that will make Waco's urban core everything it can be. ■



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