

ARCHITECT

By Anish Kumar, Hillier

Downtown RX: assembling the vital elements for positive growth

Cities are defined by their downtowns. To the exurbanites who fled downtown in the 1980s for suburban office parks and haven't been back since, "downtown" means crime, vacant office towers, abandoned department stores, and decaying infrastructure. Nothing could be further from the truth. Cities throughout the US and in our region in particular are bouncing back. Careful planning, involving



multiple constituencies and a thoughtful process, is turning the tide for many urban areas, and making Downtown, once again, the place to be.

According to the *New York Times* "the nation's largest cities grew nearly twice as fast in the 1990s as in the 1980s, with three out of every four urban centers gaining population." We have seen it in Philadelphia, which positively sparkled during the Republican Convention; it is happening in Pittsburgh, where stadiums for the Pirates and the Steelers have given downtown a sporting chance; and most famously in Times Sq., where

a mouse has sparked a revival and created a clean, safe place to take the kids.

Another example is Trenton, which has taken advantage of favorable regional trends to reshape its image as an attractive place in which to live, work and visit. The City's "Opportunity Triangle" redevelopment strategy, created with the help of a partnership with the State and County, has succeeded in creating regional destinations in and around downtown. These destinations are attracting visitors to the City and private developers are scouting for investment opportunities. To guarantee

continued success, two issues must be kept in mind:

- Land must be available for private mixed-use development within Downtown.

- The Downtown plan must guide the actions of all the City's public and private developments.

Developers frequently cite lack of available land as the single greatest reason for not building in downtowns. A recent study of the development potential of downtown Trenton revealed that although significant *planned* capacity exists, there is virtually no land avail-

able to build on. Prime waterfront land, devalued by the separation of downtown from the Delaware by Route 29, is not available for activity generating development. The designation of Downtown Trenton as the State's Capital District – a place to house thousands of government workers and their automobiles – has resulted in a sprawling complex of government buildings, roadways and parking lots on the waterfront. Redesign of Route 29 can establish a strong visual connection between downtown and the river, reclaim waterfront land for public open space, and create high-value waterfront development parcels.

Before that happens, it is critical to focus on attractive development that can take place on some strategically located smaller parcels and have a big impact on the vitality of downtown. Trenton is changing and with the strength and intelligence of Trenton's supporters, planners and investors, the outlook is optimistic.

Design it Right

Just building doesn't make a city interesting. Urban design is the key. It is the generally accepted term for the art of giving physical design direction to urban growth, conservation, and change. It is primarily concerned with the quality of the urban public realm and the making of places for people to enjoy and respect. It is design that encourages people to walk and gives them something to look at and go to -- not parking lots, parking garages or walled off buildings.

Urban design captures the feel of what we all like in old cities, a human scale at the street level, inviting doors, lights in windows; streets that treat cars and pedestrians as equals and provide shade for walking. The image created through good urban design is critical because popular perceptions of cities can influence the investment behavior of private developers, locational decisions of businesses, housing choices of individuals, and the recreation, entertainment, and shopping decisions of the public.

Anish Kumar is director of Hillier's Urban Design practice in Center City Philadelphia, Penn.