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Reimagining retail for the downtown - by Carol Todreas

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Before COVID-19, downtown retail had been sliding downwards. A few restaurants and stores were hanging on, but the trajectory was headed south. Now with post- COVID-19 lifestyle changes, old-style retail anywhere has lost its market appeal.

Yet, consumers are shopping and buying goods and services at updated physical stores, and there is demand to go out, to shop, to experience the world beyond the home, to be with other people. Therein lies a grand opportunity to consider downtown as a virgin parcel for development and re-imagine it for our world of need and uncertainty—a locale active day and night for diverse residents, employees, and visitors.

Located centrally for millions of people, replete with public transportation, and of historical interest, downtown is ripe for unique retail to provide a vibrant consumer experience.

Questions are always where to begin. To start the process, here are some ideas for actions that are basic to any program for revitalization

Monthly/Weekly Programs: Concerts, farmers/flea markets, art, antique, culinary, seasonal festivals and pop-up venues. Restaurants and bars with weekly discounts, such as mad Mondays for 50% off for food or thirsty Thursdays 25% off for wine and beer. Happy hour daily.

Safe and Clean: Downtown must be safe and clean. Appoint a team and budget for streets, sidewalks, and landscaping to make certain each street has curb and pedestrian appeal. Create plazas and car-free streets for pedestrians with clearly defined parking places and signage, even if only on the weekends. Give Downtown special patrols for security. Consider making it an honor for students to assist with security, and/or designate only women for certain days of the week.

Vibrant Night Life/Entertainment: Boston needs to be appealing as a place for tourists, conventions, and conferences. To compete with other cities and to satisfy a regional void, downtown needs a variety of venues to include speakeasy's, sports bars, jazz and comedy clubs, bodegas, beer halls, wine bars, restaurants, coffee and tea cafes. Strolling musicians and live music in restaurants should be everywhere. Multi-media exhibits, rehearsal, dance, and sound studios, small stages for little theaters, and specialty gyms should reside in retail spaces.

Programs for New Stores and Services: Celebrate diversity. Stores and restaurants inspired from the mix of peoples and culture found in Boston's neighborhoods should abound in downtown. New stores should use larger retail spaces for both sales and distribution. Some larger spaces should be designated for small scale manufacturing of products to sell. The mix should include retail incubators, high tech stores that focus on user participation, such as national brand sports stores and new local concepts that combine merchandise categories, e.g., cafes with books and clothes. Small scale neighborhood retail spaces are needed to provide convenience goods and services for downtown residents.

Downtown can be an exciting and lively destination. The demand by consumers for physical stores is real. Downtown is the frontier for new lifestyles: live, work, and recreation. Retail is fundamental to the change.

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