Placemaking: the Role of Downtown Streetscape Improvements

The details of a downtown, whether it be street lights, park benches or a public water fountain, reflect the depth of community planning and the civic pride that emanates from downtown property owners and merchants. Part of the charm of a small town business district is the unique physical elements – the details – that set it apart from more sterile commercial areas. A successful downtown finds the right balance between uniformity and diversity in these physical elements.

A downtown thrives with pedestrian activity. In this type of environment, it is critical that the streetscape be designed at a human scale. By carefully selecting a streetscape standard and applying it across an entire downtown district, the community can not only establish community character elements, but also accomplish the goals of safety and comfort of those living, working and visiting downtown. Development of these standards is called “placemaking,” and as the name suggests, the overall goal is to create a sense of place for the downtown. Some character element may be thematic, others may have a more basic objective: quality, aesthetics, function, and durability. The presence of a defined streetscape alerts visitors that they have arrived.

Starting with the outside edges of the roadway, on-street parking is one of the main visual cues that drivers should slow down. On-street parking is highly desirable because 1) parked cars buffer moving traffic from pedestrians, 2) on-street parking serves abutting land uses, and 3) parked cars serve to “calm” through traffic, typically resulting in lower speeds. When on-street parking is not provided, the street appears to be more open and motorists tend to feel more comfortable traveling at higher speeds.

Landscaping is another element of the streetscape and is a key factor that also influences driver and pedestrian behavior. The following benefits are excerpted from “Urban Street Trees, 22 Benefits, Specific Applications,” by Dan Burden (www.walkable.org).

- Reduced and more appropriate traffic speeds – Urban street trees create vertical walls that frame streets and provide a defined edge

Pedestrian-friendly downtown Kalamazoo

Landscaping, street lights and traffic calming elements define Main Street in Zeeland, MI
Safer walking environment – The visual walls and defined edges help to announce that the road right-of-way is a shared space with pedestrians and landscaping, not a freeway

Better placemaking – Trees define a space for pedestrians that is separated from moving vehicles by landscaping

Less drainage infrastructure – Trees absorb the first 30% of most precipitation through their leaf system, allowing evaporation back into the atmosphere. An additional percentage that hits the ground is held by the root system

Protection from rain, heat and sun – For light rains, pedestrians may find rain protection under trees. Temperature differentials of 5 – 15 degrees are found when walking under tree canopied streets. A properly shaded neighborhood can reduce energy bills for a household from 15-35 percent.

Increase value – Realtor-based estimates of street tree versus non street tree comparable streets reflect a $15-25,000 increase in home or business value when street trees are present.

Other elements that add to a distinctive streetscape and create a unique downtown environment include:

Public art: art adds another dimension to the sense of place for downtown. It provokes thought and conversation. Downtown art pieces can also function as landmarks for wayfinding

Flowerbeds: Thriving colorful flowers say so much about a downtown and can bring a space to life. Maintained flowerbeds show that there are people who care about downtown. They can also break up the hardness of a streetscape. Flowers add sights and smells to the downtown that attract people of all ages.

Banners: Attractive banners can enhance a downtown streetscape by adding color and interest for both pedestrians and motorists. Their consistent design and placement can help unify a downtown, identify its boundaries, and strengthen its identity. Banners can be uniform or varied; however, too much variation can detract from or clutter the streetscape. Banner color, size, shape, and content should be deliberate, and variations should be meaningful. For example, different colors can be used to mark different seasons or themes or to identify distinct districts or streets.

Outdoor dining: Outdoor dining provides a great opportunity for downtown visitors and businesses. Diners are able to enjoy dining “al fresco” and watching people go by. Passersby on the sidewalks can enjoy the smells and sights of food—tempting them to perhaps stop and enjoy a meal as well.

For more information, visit www.walkable.org or www.birchlerarroyo.com

References