

LIFE ON THE ROAD



DOWNTOWN MARKETING & DEVELOPMENT By Barry Cassidy

I'm currently on a the United States to explore vacancies and various types of businesses in American downtowns today. My 70-city journey has already taken me through Memphis, many cities in Texas, and up along the California coast.

Most signs of the 2021 lockdown protests have now disappeared, indicating a return to normal. Many cities have made significant progress in filling some of the vacancies. While some cities have filled vacancies, some previously occupied stores are now vacant. Overall, things have evened out a bit across these cities.

I'm currently in Butte, Montana, and out of all the towns so far, Butte was the most run-down. In many cases, especially in Portland, the vacant spaces were quite large. Seattle also had many large vacant spaces. Butte is a bit different. There are numerous individual storefronts along the streets. Some are doubles, but many are single-storefront locations.

While I am here, they are also attending the Montana Music Festival. Many people are on the streets. It's different from previous

years when no one was outside. They had a large food store called Hennessy Foods. That store went out of business, leaving a big hole in downtown. It looks like they are trying to turn the upper floors into lofts. And they have one or two retail spaces filled on the first floor. Still, there are five or six empty retail units on that street.

On some of Butte's main cross streets, there are nine to ten vacancies grouped together, and that's spread across more than a few blocks. It feels as if downtown has declined. The wood doesn't seem to weather as well as it should. When they painted the wood, they painted over the street numbers. Many of the windows are boarded up, and some have plastic on the inside, so you can't see in.

This was common in many older downtown areas. People placed plants, plates, and light poles outside the store window to create the impression that something was happening inside. I walk up to the window and look in to verify that the store is actually open.

The Hennessy building has 14,000 square feet available per floor. Once the heart of the town, with 30-minute parking signs on the street, it is now abandoned and vacant. When an institutional anchor like Hennessy leaves downtown, it has a lasting and significant impact.

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DOWNTOWN MARKETING & DEVELOPMENT

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I traveled through Texas and didn't see many migrants, if any at all. Many homeless people have found shelter somewhere. Roads were clear, and many towns seemed to be recovering. Do you hear any of them talking about politics? I thought El Paso was doing pretty well. Last time, I made an inventory of the historic district. This time, I inspected the downtown commercial district. It was vibrant — very third world.

The price of gas in California was close to six dollars a gallon. I stayed away from Los Angeles because I did not think it was safe. This is the third time I've taken the trip, and on none of the previous occasions have I surveyed in Los Angeles.

I did get to Palm Beach, though. And for the most part, the downtown in Palm Beach is doing well. At the northern end of town, a significant mixed-use development has been constructed. Much of the retail space remains unrented. Vast expansions on the edge city sometimes struggle to get started.

There has been a significant expansion of retail space in Redding, California, in 2021. They have made some progress in filling the storefronts, but 22,000 sq ft of retail space remains unrented. A town just north of Redding called Dunsmuir

was hit hard by vacancies. The last time I was there, they had many empty stores, but there was an area called Arts Alley by the river near the Amtrak station. When I visited last year, the area was lively, with people sitting outside on the patio, drinking coffee and espresso, laughing, and having a good time. However, this time, all the stores were vacant. Last year, on the main street in Dunsmuir, there was an announcement about a significant improvement planned for a key building in the center of town. When I visited this year, there were no signs of any such announcements, and all the hype had been taken down.

The COVID-19 lockdown significantly changed the cities. Although some seek rebirth, others are left to wither on the vine. It is difficult to watch some of these changes in the cities. You kind of wonder who's in charge. I was talking to a merchant in Seattle, and he said they formed an organization that has dealt with the homeless issue pretty effectively. He told me all the merchants there know each other and are like family. He said they've been through a lot.

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