

MESSAGING AND VACANT SPACE



DOWNTOWN MARKETING & DEVELOPMENT

By Barry Cassidy

I have finished my trip across the country trying to assess public/private space in the cities. I was gone from May 15 to June 15 and stopped in many cities along the way.

I took the southern route to head west and used a northern route to return. I perceived that the virus has had different outcomes in many of the cities. A common factor was the vacancy rate, and it appeared to be exacerbated by communities that experienced civil unrest. There is considerably less foot traffic in almost all of the towns.

My experiences in Milwaukee, Minneapolis, and Portland were chilling. I could take pictures of the buildings and the public space and not be worried about cars ... because there were none on the street. They did not have to worry about people as they were not on the street.

I did notice in those towns that the dissident messaging was done through art painted on boarded-up storefronts. In some cases, the owner just painted over, and in some cases, they replaced the boards or turned them around. In Kenosha, WI, the protestors put signs up about not removing the boards. The messaging is quite interesting on the boards that remain.

I am happy to report that there was no sign of protest in the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone (CHAZ) in Seattle, and everything looked normal. While some parts of Seattle had many homeless people camped out on the main streets, Capitol Hill looked pristine.

In some communities, stores with "Black Lives Matter" storefront support were surrounded by "for lease" signs, especially in Louisville. That statement

will lead to people saying I am racist, but I was there ... I have photographic support, and as far as I am concerned ... it is what it is.

I believe the question now for cities now will be, has the contraction in retail and hospitality caused by the virus be enough of a contraction to offset the demand for people to show up at an actual worksite. Depending upon the civil unrest that has occurred, I believe that there will probably be a 25 percent reduction in existing office space that may be subject to a lease or may have a re-opener clause.

I also think that the current contraction in retail and hospitality will probably not contract as much, as the virus has taken many of those businesses away forever. In Chicago, the Magnificent Mile had three "Flagship Store" opportunities. These vacancies are the type that corresponds with the Cartier and Rolex Flagship stores which means that at least three of the high-end players have pulled out. There has been a significant cutback on all levels of retail and hospitality.

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In some towns like Mountain View, CA, many of the vacancies resulted from three large, planned redevelopment projects, while the sister city of Palo Alto has taken a much harder hit with vacancies. La Strada, my favorite restaurant in Palo Alto, was closed as well as any number of retail stores. I was surprised by the difference in towns just a few miles away. Reading, CA had a large development that must have been completed right before the virus hit and the 30,000 square foot expansion of the downtown is now all vacant.

My visit to Portland was of great interest. The town is boarded up. I am not talking about some stores, but pretty much everything is boarded. It looks to have created a culture conflict as many of the boards have been painted with murals for equality and honoring different leaders. I am not sure what it will take to get stores back up and to run. The Target store downtown was open but boarded. The door had a plywood board that had to open manually to gain entry.

I was able to walk down the middle of the street and have no encounters with vehicles; the town was almost a ghost town. I tried to be comprehensive in my documentation, and everywhere I went, it was the same story. It was hard to say if some of the businesses closed or were in holding mode. That will be the big question across America. Many businesses have shut their doors, whether through government order or just fear of the virus, and it is questionable that any of these stores will open again.

This time could bring great opportunity, but again, if there is a general decline in the city's employment numbers, that opportunity could be tempered. There were a few towns that were exceptions to the current wave of vacancies. Towns like Bozeman, MT, and Coeur d'Alene, ID were very much vibrant with very few vacancies, and towns like Sheridan WY had a lot going for it as well.

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