

CITIES CHANGING WITH THE TIMES



DOWNTOWN MARKETING & DEVELOPMENT By Barry Cassidy

Remote work has changed the office market in many cities. However, things are far from the ghost towns I saw in the spring of 2021 when I visited 70 cities to inventory and chronicle the effect of the lockdown on cities.

In Philadelphia, 87.9 percent of office space was occupied in the third quarter, and by being occupied, it reflected leased space. Comcast Cable corporate ordered workers to be in the office three days a week. The 8,000 employees will work in the two downtown Philadelphia towers and be there on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. Nearly half of the American workforce works remotely at least once a week.

I am not sure how many employers make the same decisions on partial weeks, but it means fewer people on the street. Eventually, it will affect the type of retail located on the ground floor. Many ground-floor retail establishments went out of business during the pandemic. Philadelphia was kind of strict with the limits they created on indoor dining and established the birth of a more relaxed outdoor dining regime.

Some towns were forced to shut down streets to enable dining. During my trip, I saw what looked to be permanent street closures (until further notice) in Mountain View and Palo Alto, CA. Many east coast cities and towns have joined the bandwagon and shut down streets to allow for dining on weekends. I know in Entertainment Districts like South Street, shutting down streets created problems as there were unlicensed vehicles and a general lack of crowd control, leading to aberrant behavior.

I am not a big fan of shutting down the streets. I believe it alters the sense of place created on the sidewalks that place the customers next to the storefront. Instead of promoting business, it promotes gathering and the potential for crowd control issues. I believe it is a question concerning the function of the commercial corridor.

Normally people in cities travel a commercial corridor because that is the primary route. The commercial corridor has stores and a secure street presence through signs and architecture. You could travel the side streets. We have a condo at 16th and Spring Garden in the city, and sometimes we travel 15th and 16th streets to avoid the traffic on Broad Street. I try to limit that now because of the crime, knowing where I am and acting accordingly.

The lack of foot traffic brings on an increase in levels of aberrant behavior. Social control mechanisms are on the decline, and you do not have to have a confrontation to be shot in the city of Philadelphia any longer. People going out to get groceries, children on the front porch, and guys sitting in the car listening to the ballgame are all potential victims of crime.

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DOWNTOWN MARKETING & DEVELOPMENT

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Shutting down streets in Philadelphia leads to necessary diversion to side streets. Many side streets are not streets I want to be on after dark because of the threat of violence. So, you have workers not being required to attend a standard office arrangement and not coming downtown. People like me avoid the city because you never know when you will be rerouted onto some side street where someone will shoot you without even knowing they are shooting you.

Closures have become common in what would be considered street anchors in downtown Philadelphia. Starbucks recently closed their store at 10th and Chestnut. In February, the three-story flagship Walgreens store at Broad and Chestnut, adjacent to City Hall, closed for good. These recognizable stores act as a draw for other stores located next to them on that block.

The big story, though, is the closing of Wawa stores downtown. Wawa has always had a high profile and is a prolific sponsor of events and festivities downtown. However, Wawa closed its 24-hour location at the 901 South Street store on October 17, 2021. The stores located on 12th and Market Street, and

the other at 19th and Market closed over safety concerns.

A crowd of juveniles ransacked a Wawa store in the Mayfair section. Being part of a "Wawa Family," my wife Kitty (the Princess of North Philly) and I are starting to get a little nervous about downtown. She goes in every day to Temple by regional rail. The effect of scheduling is obvious as the number of passengers has dwindled due to remote work.

The way of life we enjoyed as Americans living and working in the City of Philadelphia is vanishing. Our favorite stores are closing; our condo is now subject to gun violence at our doorstep. Kids are being shot on the streets in front of Roxborough High School. Volunteers at Recreation Centers are subject to a stray bullet randomly.

This behavior can be traced back to the interruption of lives because of the pandemic. But, unfortunately, the scene is being played out in cities across America. It is happening before our very eyes.

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