

RETHINKING DOWNTOWN ENTERTAINMENT NICHEs: NON-FORMAL ENTERTAINMENTS AND WORK AS ENTERTAINMENT: bringing people downtown and keeping them there.

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1. Formal Entertainment Facilities Do Not Match Well With The Needs Of Time Pressed Families. Most economic development experts have come to agree that entertainment niches are good fits with the assets of many downtowns and such niches have indeed flourished across the nation.

Many downtowns – small, medium and large – have invested heavily in such “formal” entertainment facilities as concert halls, legitimate theaters, rehabilitated movie theaters, sports stadiums and arenas. Weston (VT), Rutland (VT), New Brunswick (NJ), Carlisle (PA), Center City Philadelphia (PA), Pasadena (CA), Charlotte (NC), White Plains (NY), Rahway (NJ), Newark (NJ), Englewood (NJ), Torrington (CT), Denver (CO), Cleveland (OH), Cincinnati (OH) and Columbus (OH) quickly come to mind and barely scrape the bottom of the barrel.

All of these facilities share a long list of common characteristics:

- These facilities are often expensive to build, maintain and operate
- They usually require paid performers, e.g., an athletic team, dance company, theater company, etc.
- They generate special occasion attendance which can penetrate large market areas, but requires planning, usually prior ticket purchase, and many hours in attendance from the ticket buyer
- Ticket costs often range from expensive to very expensive
- Food costs before, during or after the event can be significant – the cost for a family of four just to go to the movies can be \$80+ these days
- Attendance by parents alone often will require them to find and pay for a babysitter, who can easily cost another \$40 to \$60.
- Many of these facilities are open on partial schedules, e.g., some nights, some days, some seasons, etc.
- Many of these facilities are dark during most days.
- While some of these facilities have directly generated and/or sustained nearby eateries and watering holes, many have not. NYC’s Madison Square Garden and Yankee Stadium being prime examples
- Many retailers are closed when these facilities are open and many of these facilities are open when retailers are closed. DANTH is extremely skeptical about formal entertainment facilities having *direct* positive impacts on nearby retailing, except for souvenirs, etc. Again in NYC, it took 40 years for the retailing near Lincoln Center to really get going and then the cause was mainly the construction of thousands of nearby luxury apartments.

DANTH believes that the major economic impacts of these formal entertainment facilities are real but primarily indirect: they make the town they are located in a more attractive residential location for highly paid workers who have high expenditures in shops and restaurants.

A critical question is how such facilities mesh with the everyday lives of time-pressured, dual income with children households? Randy White, an expert on the entertainment-away-from-home scene has noted: "A family may have 90 minutes between the end of gymnastics practices and the start of the Little League game. They want to do something fun together and they can't count on luck to make it possible."¹ It is useful to ask how such a family could possibly be served by the formal entertainment facilities described above? The obvious answer is that they almost certainly cannot because:

- The facilities are likely to be closed
- Tickets may be hard to get or too expensive
- The family simply doesn't have enough time!

2. Middle Income Entertainment Expenditures May Be Shifting Away From Formal Entertainments. With the vise closing on the discretionary expenditures of most American households – especially those with working mommies – it is reasonable to assume that entertainment expenditures may be among the first to be reduced.

As can be seen in Table 1 above, in 2006 there were strong differentials in the entertainment expenditures of households in the lowest, middle and highest income quintiles: \$879, \$1,898 and \$5,105 respectively.

Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics indicate that, even prior to the onset of the current economic downturn, household expenditures, adjusting for inflation, were not growing, except in the most affluent households. According to Randy White's analysis of this data:

- Spending on away-from-home-entertainment was basically unchanged between 2000 and 2006.
- Biggest increase was in the top income quintile
- In 2006 the top 40% of all households (according to income), accounted for 75% of all away-from-home-entertainment spending
- In 2006 households with children controlled 44% of all away-from-home-entertainment spending
- Most interestingly, since 2000, households have shifted a greater percentage of their entertainment spending to electronic equipment and services, at the expense of away-from-home-entertainment and other

¹ Randy White, "Time is more than money. It's the minutes, not the moolah: Making your LBE worth their time," http://www.whitehutchinson.com/leisure/articles/minutes_moolah_lbe.shtml.

entertainment and recreation. Increases to education and medical expenditures already appear to have been placing constraints on entertainment spending.²

White's conclusions are consistent with those DANTH presented in our assessment of the future of downtown movie theaters: economically stressed middle-income households are moving away from the formal entertainment of watching movies in public theaters and towards using modern electronic technologies to instead save money and watch films at home. White's findings, however, suggest that middle income folks are also using home film viewing to substitute for other types of formal entertainments – e.g., concerts, plays, dance recitals, professional, sports events. If this is the case, then many downtown entertainment niches will be finding they are dependent upon a narrower and wealthier customer base.

The lost audience will be looking for low- cost entertainment opportunities and it is vital that downtowns be able to recapture it. These days that will mean not only modest or no participation/attendance fees, but also activity venues that are close by and do not require long car trips and expensive amounts of gasoline.

3. The Search For Affordable Entertainments. The term entertainment is used here in a broader manner than is conventional, because it is important to get beyond equating entertainment just with formal venues such as theaters, movies houses, concert halls, cabarets, museums, etc. In this report, entertainment will mean anything that amuses observers. People are entertained when they are amused or pleased by observing something -- most often, other people, but it can be works of art, animals, etc.

Informal Entertainments in Public Spaces. Great public spaces provide opportunities for people to engage in activities that they enjoy and that also interest and amuse nearby people-watchers. Think of the ice skaters drawing the ever-present crowds above the rink in Rockefeller Center. Similarly, in Manhattan's Bryant Park, you'll find young men and women seated and watching each other and chess players, who always attract an audience. Greenport, NY, a much smaller community, has used a carousel and waterfront location to create a wonderful public space where people can watch and be watched by other people. Other downtowns have fostered entertainment with facilities such as:

- A model boat pond
- A children's pony ride
- Tables where people can play chess, checkers, or dominoes
- A Wi-Fi hotspot to access and cruise the Internet on laptops

² Randy White, "The shifting nature of leisure time and expenditures", "Leisure eNewsletter - January/February 2008,"

- A place to catch the sun — a favorite pastime for office workers and young tourists in the spring and summer
- Places to buy food and eat lunch alfresco
- Outdoor cafes for sipping coffee and eating snacks
- Slot car racing for kids
- An interactive that passersby can not resist looking at to see their reflections – and how people next to them react when they see their own.

Visitors will “perform” if the opportunities are there. To sail a model boat, a suitable pond or pool is required. To sit in the sun and people watch requires an attractive place with benches and chairs to sit on.

Sometimes an informal entertainment requires special personnel. For example, in Meredith, NH, local residents, hotel guest and second home owners are really into bird watching; birding tours for them of the Meredith area might require a knowledgeable and experienced “birder” to guide them.

Informal entertainments are usually public and priced right – either free or, when there are fees (e.g., to ride a carousel), affordable. They are also “sticky” activities. Retailers can feed off of the traffic the informal entertainments bring in, as demonstrated by the busy pedestrian traffic on the street next to Mitchell park in Greenport, NY.. Informal entertainments are also liable to be open when the public would want to use them as opposed to theaters, concert halls etc. Most often they are children friendly – and therefore mommy friendly, too.

Work As Entertainments: Arts Based Retailing. Often overlooked is the delight and amusement people can derive from simply watching other people do their jobs. In particular, people have shown a great interest in watching craftsman and artists at work. Historical villages such as Williamsburg (VA), Sturbridge (MA) and Old Town (San Diego, CA) have long had many “demonstrations” by blacksmiths, glass blowers, bakers, weavers, etc.

The Miami Ballet rehearses in a ground floor studio with a storefront windows, which always attracts crowds of passersby and helps build the company’s audience.

The Chelsea Market provides numerous work as entertainment opportunities including the observation of bread being made and baked, knives being honed and tango lessons being given.

Two of the nation’s most successful and innovative downtown/Main Street retail projects -- Simon Pierce’s The Mill at Quechee, VT, and the Torpedo Factory in Alexandria (VA) – are based on “performing arts and crafts.” The latter is a renovated World War I armaments manufacturing building that provides work spaces to artists and craftsman where they can both produce their prints, jewelry,

bows for string instruments, leather goods, etc. and sell them to the public. Each studio has windows, and often open doors, so the public can watch the artists and craftsman as they create.

The Simon Pearce retail store at The Mill in Quechee, Vermont, is perhaps the most brilliantly designed and executed retail project in the United States in an ex-urban location. It combines a superb site in an old mill located over a waterfall with a diverse range of household goods ranging from blown glass to ceramics and superb furniture. In addition, at this diverse destination you can watch glass being blown, ceramics being thrown and decorated, fabrics being woven and enjoy a meal in a three star restaurant that has attractive water views. The retail shop is a strong destination and lots of people leave there with bags full of merchandise..

Berea Kentucky, home of Berea College, has long been a center for keeping and appreciating Appalachian culture and artistic traditions. The state legislature also has decreed it “the Folk Arts & Crafts Capital of Kentucky.” One important reason for this are the Berea Studio Artists, who are selected through a rigorous jury process and derive their livelihoods solely from the arts and crafts they create. As in the Torpedo Factory, their studios have open doors and “these artists gladly share their stories, their creative process, and their work with visitors from around the world.”³

4. DANTH Slide Shows. DANTH has created photo albums relevant to informal entertainments and work as entertainment that can be downloaded, free of charge, from the Internet.

For the show on informal entertainments, visit:

<http://picasaweb.google.com/dmilder/InformalEntertainmentActivities>

For work as entertainment, visit:

<http://picasaweb.google.com/dmilder/WorkAsDowntownEntertainment>

For photos of the Torpedo Factory, visit:

<http://picasaweb.google.com/dmilder/TorpedoFactory121607351PM>

³ <http://www.berea.com/where-arts-alive>