

A Search for a Clearer and More Useful Vocabulary for Talking About and Analyzing Downtowns

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Over the past decade I have become increasingly focused on what I have been calling Central Social Districts (CSDs). The simple analytical framework I've been developing saw downtowns being composed of two major components: Central Business Districts (CBDs) and CSDs. However, over the past year or so, email discussions with members of The ADRR board, and an interview by Rob Steuteville at CNU's Public Square have prompted me to take a much closer look at the vocabulary we use to describe and analyze our downtowns. My objective in this article is to start a discussion of the topic. I don't claim to have definitive answers, but certainly aspire to getting such a discussion off to a very good start.

Here are some thoughts:

1. Downtowns often are not really downtown or in the center of their city or region. Moreover, they often are not at the center of their true retail trade areas or true labor sheds. What I quickly learned many years ago moving to Charlotte, NC, was that its "downtown," its central place, was called Uptown. The same is true in several other cities. Here in NYC, our truest multifunctional "downtown" area is in Midtown. And in my neighborhood, about seven miles away, we often say we are going "to the city" rather than downtown or midtown. I strongly doubt that many places in our large cities that are called downtown are at the precise geographic center of their city or economic regions, though they may be at the center of its mass transportation system. Re trade areas, Jamaica Center in Queens, NY, sits at the northern top of its market area, while Downtown Englewood, NJ, is well into the southern part of its TA. However, the "downtown" may be the most important part of the city's and region's economy, and have its strongest entertainment and cultural assets. *What seems most significant is not it being at the geographic center but that it has central importance for many social and economic functions that are closely entwined. It's the functional characteristics, not the geographical ones that are important!* Consequently, I think City Central (CC) would be a much more useful term than downtown for larger cities and Town Central (TC) for small communities.
2. Are the terms CC and CBD synonymous? For those who want to define a downtown/CC purely or mostly in terms of "doing business" and/or dense employment clusters that may be fine, but that ignores some important facts:
 - a. In our largest "CBDs" the purely office districts proved to be massive failures and they only began to prosper when "non-business" venues such as housing, public spaces, entertainment and cultural spaces were added to them. If that is the case, then why should the geographic area designated as the CBD or CC be confined to a dense cluster of office/retail spaces? Why shouldn't the geographic boundaries be expanded to include nearby dense clusters of these

other types of venues? Doing that, however, really means that a pure business/employment definition of a CBD or downtown is impractical.

- b. Many suburban and small town TCs are not major employment centers, though such clusters may be elsewhere in the town or in a nearby town. Also, in these TCs pure retail tenants may be outnumbered by restaurants, drinking places, hair and nails salons, barber shops, amusement and fitness operations, etc. – see for example the WI data in table nearby. These suburban downtowns have relatively weak CBD functions.

The CSF's Portion of the Retail and Service Business Mix in Wisconsin's Smaller Downtowns

CSF %	Municipality Size
55.50	Cities/Villages with 1,000-2,500 Pop. - 143 Dtns
57.50	Cities/Villages with 5,000-10,000 Pop. - 45 Dtns
65.30	Cities/Villages with 25,000-50,000 Pop. - 13 Dtns
Data from : Bill Ryan, Beverly Stencel, and Jangik Jin."Retail and Service Business Mix in Wisconsin's Downtowns, Downtown economics, Issue 173, April 2011	

- 3. The CC and It's Component Parts. I would argue that a CC can have three main groups of functions, and CCs are strongest when they are strongly entwined:
 - a. **CENTRAL BUSINESS FUNCTIONS (CBF):** These are money based, dealing with business transactions, and the creation and management of wealth and job creation
 - b. **CENTRAL SOCIAL FUNCTIONS (CSF) :** The CC's collection of activity venues that facilitate people having enjoyable experiences with other people, usually relatives and friends, but, importantly, sometimes strangers
 - c. **CENTRAL SUPPORT FUNCTIONS (CSUPF):** These industries support the proper operation of the CBFs and the CSFs.

Downtown ---> City Central

Central Business Functions (CBF)	Central Social Functions (CSF)	Central Support Functions (CSUPF)
Are money based, dealing with business transactions, and the creation and management of wealth and job creation	The downtown's collection of activity venues that facilitate people having enjoyable experiences with other people, usually relatives and friends, but, importantly, sometimes strangers	These industries support the proper operation of the CBFs and the CSFs
<u>Major Types of Venues</u>	<u>Major Types of Venues</u>	<u>Major Types of Venues</u>
Retail FIRE Industries Manufacturing Professional Services Manufacturing Advertising Telecommunications Mgmt.	Restaurants Public spaces Arts & cultural venues Religious venues Sports venues Personal service venues Community, child and senior venues Housing	Police and Fire Depts Transportation Water and Sewer Healthcare Government Offices Telecommunications infrastructure

CBFs have usually garnered most attention, with both CSFs and CSUPFs brought in on an individual category basis such as restaurants, public spaces, police, parking, mass transit in relation to how they support the CBFs. My work in recent years has been focused on drawing more attention to the growing importance of CSFs. In doing so, it recently dawned on me that the central support functions as a group also needed to be noted.

4. Districts or Functions: CBDs or CBFs? CSDs or CSFs? These functions are performed by various organizations/venues located in the CC. All the establishments associated with a function are seldom all clustered together in one dense area, though they probably do indeed cluster. However, the clustering usually looks more like an archipelago rather than one solid mono-functional area, though some of its “islands” can be quite large. Even in Manhattan, there are 41 theaters in the famed Broadway area, but there are many others all over the borough, and the theaters these days are far from the only economic activity in the Broadway-Times Square area.

In my own work, I began to realize that talking about central social districts was problematic because some readers were assuming that it referred to a specific geographic part of a “downtown,” while in fact if one looks at all of its constituent establishments, they usually are dispersed all over the CC/downtown. *The latter point made me realize that the functions and their venues were more important than the geographic denotation in the term district.* Much the same is true with the use of the term CBD, though offices and retail tend to be more densely clustered than are the social function venues. Nevertheless, there is a large amount of office and retail spaces located in the Midtown area that is outside of the core CBD area that runs from about 59th St south to 42nd and from 3rd Ave west to 6th Ave. And the opening of a huge amount of office space in and near Hudson Yards shows the potential dynamic nature of Midtown’s office and retail archipelago.

Then there is the issue about the different uses use of the term district. It is often used as a synonym for downtown or CBD. It also is associated with legally bounded areas such as BIDs, SIDs, etc. And it is used as a synonym for cluster as in “the theater district.”

5. CCs as geographic units and socio-economic entities. Any definition of a CC needs to have some geographic component to it. Ideally it describes the geographic areas in which the CC socio-economic system resides. That is more easily said than done.

Many downtown/CC researchers define the geographic area first, say a 0.5-mile radius or commensurate walk/drive time for a smaller town or city, or a 1.0-mile radius or commensurate walk/drive time for a larger one, and they then gather data appropriate to their research for those areas. The basis for choosing these radii/trip times may be based on reasonable walking or driving distances from the CC’s core location. The underlying assumption is that the CC’s socio-economic system resides in such geographic areas, certainly at least regarding those variables the researchers are interested in. I have never seen that assumption validated. Moreover, using the same radius or drive time to define the CCs in a large multi-city study probably counters the

fact that not all downtowns, even among those grouped as large, medium and small cities are the same geographic size.

Others may look at zip codes that together may not be congruent with the CC. If the zips are smaller than the CC, then there is an obvious problem. However, if they are larger the situation may be more forgiving since they could cover the CC as well as some of the immediate surrounding neighborhoods that are often so integrally attached to it that they may be deemed to be part of it..

The appropriate way for these researchers to use these radii/trip times and zip codes is to state that they define not the CC's, but their study areas that overlay to some unknown degree these CCs.

Another possible way of defining a CC, the system approach, might start by assuming that CCs are complex socio-economic systems and then sets the CC boundaries based on the locations of the functionally related establishments/venues, while acknowledging that CCs can often be changing in geographic size and composition. Some downtown experts have noted that the boundaries of downtowns are not hard edge and easy to discern but seem to bleed out. It is much like looking at the ROYGBIV color spectrum where almost everyone can agree where some red and orange areas are, but substantial disagreement emerges about where red ends and orange begins. Also, I cannot tell you how often I've heard reports from people who have not visited a CC for a few years and then come back astounded by how it has changed in terms of its "contents" and/or extent. This approach can define a CC very narrowly or broadly depending on the number of functions assigned to the CC's socio-economic system. *Seeing a CC as only having central business functions will tend to exclude the housing and entertainment venues that are not marbleized within its core area, yet may be vital to its operation, while seeing it as more multifunctional will probably expand its geographic reach and increase the difficulty of identifying any hard-edge borderlines.*

Analogizing from the ROYGBIV discussion above, this approach might involve identifying transition areas around its edges that stand apart from those areas that are more certainly geographically part of the CC.

The system approach will have a better fit between a CC's socio-economic system and its geographic definition but makes its identification more complicated and difficult to do. For studies of large numbers of CCs, this approach may be too costly to utilize. Yet such studies are mostly concerned about the causal relationships between variables, for which the study area definition route described above should be adequate, though not perfect. The system approach is best suited for those wanting to learn more about the characteristics of a particular CC and to better understand how it functions.