

# American downtown pedestrian 'malls': rise, fall, and rebirth

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*Questo articolo fornisce una panoramica storica della pianificazione urbana pratica e teorica relativa al centro di zone pedonali o 'centri commerciali' negli Stati Uniti dal 1960 ad oggi, tenendo conto di questioni sociali, economiche e problemi di progettazione.*

*Si cerca anche di spiegare il sistema della maggior parte delle zone pedonali negli Stati Uniti e di delineare le strategie che si sono occupate, in alcune città, di questa metodologia.*

*Questo studio potrebbe essere particolarmente utile nella pianificazione pedonale e nelle modalità di trasporto alternativo, un tema che è stato recentemente rilanciato negli Stati Uniti.*

## 1. Introduction

From the 1960s through the early 1980s, as part of the center city revival movement, over 200 downtown pedestrian zones (a few blocks of public downtown streets converted to pedestrian-only areas) were created in American downtowns with great enthusiasm (Robertson, 1994). Usually, and especially in their beginnings, they were exclusively commercial with no residential uses, replicating suburban shopping centers or 'malls'. For this reason, the typical term used to describe downtown pedestrian zones in the United States is 'downtown pedestrian malls'. They appeared in every region of the country, in both warm and cold climates. California was one of the states with the highest number of malls.

By the late 1980s, it became clear that most downtown pedestrian malls had turned out to be unsuccessful. Many communities found that malls, in spite of the care put in their design, did nothing to revitalize their downtown commercial zones. Indeed, in many instances, they accelerated their decline. Therefore downtown pedestrian malls fell into disfavor. In the 1990s, only about 30 of them were left (West, 1995).

As pedestrian malls started fading away, so did planning literature on them. The literature about the old downtown pedestrian malls, written during the brief period of their success, left a legacy of detailed design discussions without much consideration of broader commercial strategies and locational viability. The literature written after the demise of the downtown pedestrian malls, which was brief, had little analysis of the causes of their failure. Although much work is being done today in the United States on new urbanism, sustainable urbanism, active living, and healthy communities by various professional associations (including Urban Land Institute, the American Planning Association, Project for Public Spaces, and Council on New Urbanism), there is very little recent research on pedestrian malls specifically. However, in recent years in the U.S. interest has reappeared in the revitalization of downtowns including the (re) creation of pedestrian only or pedestrian-oriented zones. Some unsuccessful downtown malls from the 1980s, such as the ones in Santa Monica, Santa Cruz, San Luis Obispo, Pasadena, and Riverside in California, have become successful after they were redeveloped. In spite of the car-oriented American society, some planners are optimistic about the potential for improvements in favor of pedestrians. In many cities the focus has shifted from pedestrian-only malls to pedestrian-oriented design and zoning.

The concept of car-free streets was introduced in the 1960s in North Europe. Consequently, pedestrian areas spread in most European countries as they proved to be beneficial to trade and mobility. Today, pedestrian areas are extensively used everywhere in Europe. They are popular with the public. Pedestrian malls in the U.S. were meant to replicate the success of European counterparts.

It is not realistic to compare European pedestrian streets with American pedestrian malls because European cities often have higher density, good public transportation links, a high quality city center built environment with beautiful historic buildings, and a population with a cultural inclination to walking. In fact, traditionally most Europeans have been familiar with car-less city centers as central plazas, which date from the medieval era, often have such narrow streets that it is impossible to accommodate cars while in many U.S. cities the automobile has determined the urban form. This article focuses on U.S. experience with pedestrian malls taking into account social, economic, and design issues. It also attempts to explain why most pedestrian malls fail and to come up with strategies on how to make them work.

## 2. History of pedestrian malls in the United States

### 2.1. The Emergence of Pedestrian Malls – The Optimistic 1960s

In the mid twentieth century, as the U.S. suburbanized and became a more car-oriented culture, the social role of public places changed. Suburban shopping malls became the gathering places for teenagers to hang out on Friday nights and for recreational shopping, supplanting the historic role of city centers (Bednar, 1989).

By the 1960s, the population started feeling negative consequences of suburban lifestyle. Men were enervated from long commutes to work; women were bored and isolated. Whatever anxiety people experience in their lives was made worse thanks to America's ugly, chaotic, visually and decaying central cities (Gruen cited in Hardwick, 2004). Victor Gruen, one of the main propagators of pedestrian malls, attempted to demonstrate that there is a strong relationship between central city business decline and overall economic and social decline. The dire consequence of the unattractive retail situation could be the breakdown of consumption and production cycle. As the specter of the Great Depression was still alive in the minds of many Americans, these predictions struck a chord among planners and the public (Test, 1988; Hardwick, 2004).

Although some planners and theorists kept arguing that the US society should plan for a decentralized, car-oriented way of living, most understood that unrestrained car use would result in traffic congestion that would keep increasing in space and time. New theories about the interchangeability of suburban and downtown spaces were formulated (Hardwick, 2004). While in many American cities efforts to revitalize downtowns were limited to new freeway construction and car parking development (Test, 1988), others experimented with the creation of open-air pedestrian malls. Several European experiences with pedestrian areas had turned out very positive in terms of traffic containment, city center revitalization, business turnover, and air quality. Following the

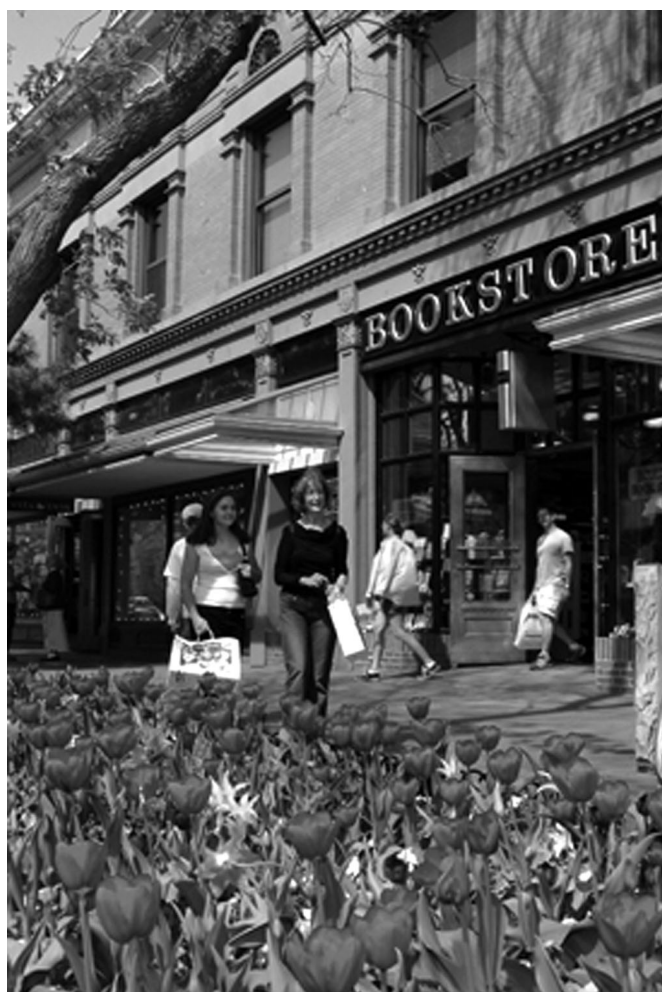


From the top:  
 – Kalamazoo, Michigan: Burdick Street Mall, the first mall project to be completed in the Usa, as it appeared in the 1970s.  
 Source: Photo courtesy of J. Penrod  
 – Burbank, California: Golden Mall in the 1970s  
 Source: Photo courtesy of W. Clark and M. McDaniel  
 – Denver, Colorado: 16<sup>th</sup> Street Mall today  
 Source: Photo courtesy of the Denver Convention and Visitors Bureau

European example, by 1959, 700 American cities had published downtown revitalization plans (Hardwick, 2004).

Downtown pedestrian malls were envisioned as ways to bring shoppers back to the central cities. Unlike in Europe, where pedestrian malls were created by closing streets to traffic, in the U.S. pedestrian malls were often built new from scratch. Enclosing existing city streets was too complex and expensive for many cities to consider (Brambilla and Longo, 1977). The initial design criteria for downtown pedestrian malls followed – ironically – the suburban shopping center model allowing few distractions to the basic shopping mission (Brambilla and Longo, 1977; Robertson, 1994). However, in the 1970s pedestrian malls came to be thought of as social and communal centers attempting to incorporate transportation and open space. They were to be the modern equivalents of medieval plazas (Fruin, 1971; Brambilla and Longo, 1977). Malls were packed with sitting and play areas, skating rings, walkways, brick paving, trellises, canopies, shade trees of varied scale, palms and other exotic trees, fountains, ponds, rivulets, playgrounds, sitting areas, garden and picnic areas, sculptures, graphic murals, and stages for performances (Brambilla and Longo, 1977).

Initial evidence from these malls fully justified the optimism that accompanied these experiments. A number of successful malls led to the view that they increased sales; positively impacted the revitalization of the city center; halted urban deterioration; and provided human interest and interaction within their area (Fruin, 1971). Cities kept providing public open space, launching beautification programs, and granting bonuses for pedestrian amenities. In 1977, two experts on pedestrian malls, Brambilla and Longo (1977) projected these feelings into the future in wholehearted terms: «A new era of pedestrian malls is coming. Major cities and residential neighborhoods, both urban and suburban, will be included». Borrowing language from the social revolution of that period, two other experts, Breines and Dean (1974) formulated the Pedestrian Bill of Rights, which stated that: «Cities shall exist for the care and culture of human beings, and shall not harm the pedestrian; the streets belong to the people, and shall not be usurped for the passage and storage of motor vehicles; and the sounds of human voices shall replace vehicular noise on city streets». They pictured idyllic downtowns transformed into pedestrian districts with no street curbs, no damaging vehicles, and no air pollution where walkers and mini-vehicles would have freedom of movement. American planners in the 1970s not only had a genuine and fervent confidence in pedestrianization, but also the support of the public and merchants, who were willing to pay higher taxes in order to accommodate downtown pedestrian malls. Property owners along and near the mall were taxed according to the benefits they expected to derive from the mall construction, and in proportion of the size of their property (Brambilla and Longo, 1977). Part of pedestrian amenities were paid for through ‘bonus zoning’, which traded added development rights in exchange for the construction of desirable pedestrian improvements (Fruin, 1971). In addition, the U.S. federal government made available (massive) urban renewal funds for remaking downtowns. Also, a number of organizations, including the Urban Mass Transportation Ad-



From the top:  
– Charlottesville, Virginia: the downtown mall  
Source: Photo courtesy of City of Charlottesville  
– Boulder, Colorado: Pearl Street Mall today  
Source: Photo courtesy the City of Boulder

ministration and the Community Development Program Funds financed pedestrian malls (Rubenstein, 1992). Some states updated their legislation to accommodate pedestrian malls. California, for instance, adopted the Pedestrian Mall Law.

### 2.2. *The Honeymoon is over*

By the 1980s, the expected benefits of pedestrian malls had not materialized in most American downtowns. Users only showed up to celebrate a mall's opening; they rarely returned to shop. Often malls were detrimental to businesses located in their territory. Typically, rents were lower on the pedestrian mall, and vacancies higher. Only few department stores persevered on pedestrian malls over the years. In some cases, the whole downtown area suffered the consequences. Some malls had bad reputation as dangerous places to go at night, where the homeless would camp taking advantage of the lack of traffic. Left to their fate, malls ended up with increasing amounts of dead space from failed businesses, or demolished buildings (Rubenstein, 1992; Robertson, 1994; West, 1995). As a result of the dissatisfaction with their performance, very few new downtown pedestrian malls were constructed during the 1980s and 1990s (Robertson, 1994). By the mid 1990s, over one hundred cities had ripped out their pedestrian malls and/or turned them into traffic thoroughfares (West, 1995; Blaha, 2003). A number of these cities felt that getting rid of their pedestrian malls was a major step in saving businesses (West, 1995).

In many cities, reopening the street to cars resulted in immediate increased sales on the mall, increase in property values, and decrease in vacancy rates (Blaha, 2003). However, in other cases, car traffic did not restore the mall's businesses or popularity (West, 1995).

### 2.3. *Why Most Pedestrian Malls Failed*

Planners in the U.S. believed that by applying the European formula to decaying American downtowns, these would be cured from their malaises, namely neglect, abandonment, and disinvestment. But in the U.S. as a result of low population density, foot traffic in the downtown area was often insufficient to maintain consistently high levels of street activity (Robertson 1994). There simply were not enough users crossing paths in the downtown pedestrian mall.

By the 1960s and 1970s when malls were built, Americans were already well set into car oriented suburban lifestyle. Downtown pedestrian malls were not able to change street use patterns and stimulate the suburbanized population into new habits. There was no reason to go to these malls, just as there was no reason (i.e. attractive retail, entertainment, and activities) to go into the rest of the downtown except for business purposes. The general lack of appeal of American downtowns was responsible in large part for pedestrian malls' failure.

Furthermore, part of the attraction in European car-free city centers lay in their high quality built environment. American malls were often roofless replicas of suburban malls. They were only overseen during the process of planning and design, with no provision for ongoing management (and funds)



From the top:  
– Ithaca, New York: the Commons today  
Source: Photo courtesy of the Ithaca  
Downtown partnership  
– Burlington, Vermont: Church Street Mall  
Source: Photo courtesy of the Church Street  
Marketplace

based on the mistaken assumption that malls would self-regulate once they were built (Robertson, 1994).

In some of the malls, certain design elements even had a negative effect on safety. Some malls were perceived as too cluttered with beautiful things that potential aggressors could hide behind (Robertson, 1994). In others, snowplows and street cleaning equipment were unable to navigate the various design features (West, 1995).

Not only did most downtown pedestrian malls fail as community centers but also as shopping centers. Many malls' retail selection was average and soon-to-be old fashioned. Suburban shopping centers, on the other hand, were up to date on economic trends, had climate control, and ample free parking. Most downtowns could not replicate these features; therefore they spiraled down into decline (Cunningham, cited in Robertson, 1994). Even if they did, in the 1960s and 1970s, suburban malls alone created more retail space than a community could realistically support (West, 1995). Most downtowns had to rely on design to attract users. But decade-old malls were often dull for the design sensitivity of the 1980s. Therefore, a large part of Americans continued to do their shopping in suburban shopping centers and strip developments without any quality design in sight. Even in successful malls chain businesses gradually replaced independent locally owned enterprises (Robertson, 1994).

#### 2.4. A Handful of Successful Pedestrian Malls

While it is true that most downtown pedestrian malls failed, some have thrived. Often, neighboring circumstances and continuous substantial public investment have been the engine of their success. Some people believe that open-air pedestrian malls can only work in places like California with warm climate all year around. However, some of the few successful malls are located in states where it is cold in the winter. The achievements of these malls in the midst of the car-oriented American society are nothing short of inspirational. The reopened malls in many cities remained pedestrian-oriented although not car-free. Indeed, redesign occurred in many cases to add or upgrade pedestrian amenities (Blaha, 2003).

A number of cities, including Portland, Oregon, and several cities in California, have adopted special zoning standards for pedestrian districts. This type of zoning, although it does not provide for pedestrian-only areas, regulates maximum in addition to minimum building setbacks, building density (both maximums and minimums), parking requirements (both maximums and minimums), landscaping, and signage in order to make areas more desirable to pedestrians.

Pedestrian friendly features have found their way into the federal Surface Transportation Act (Tea-21). The act earmarks funds for bus shelters, landscaping, street furniture, walkways, public art, transit connections to parks, and other transit enhancements. In addition, in a number of states, state and local funds are available for the same purpose (including California, Michigan, Illinois, and Oregon) (Highway Safety Research Center, 1999c; Ewing, 1999).

The Main Street idea – a friendly, lively, pedestrian-scale place – started reviving the imagination of American retail-



From the top:  
– Cape May, New Jersey: Washington Street Mall today  
Source: Photo courtesy of the City of Cape May  
– Miami, Florida: Lincoln Street Mall in South Beach  
Source: Photo by author

ers, developers, and shoppers in the late 1990s. Also, a number of major national chain businesses are seeking a district identity, with individualized storefronts or buildings that suburban shopping malls cannot offer. The new Main Streets are not necessarily conceived downtown any more. By the end of 1990s, every major metropolitan area had two or three new suburban Main Street projects in both existing communities and new developments (Local Government Commission, 1998).

### **3. Characteristics of successful downtown pedestrian malls in America**

In line with the classic real estate principle, location is the first factor in the success of a American downtown pedestrian mall. Most successful malls in the U.S. are in small to medium size cities. Smaller cities have less complicated and less congested downtown traffic patterns, and a scale more suitable to pedestrian malls. Only five big cities in the U.S. contained a downtown pedestrian mall in the 1970s: Baltimore, Dallas, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Denver (Brambilla and Longo, 1977; Robertson, 1994).

Also, many of the well performing malls are located in proximity of a source of specialized, readily available market segment such as a college campus (Robertson, 1994) or a tourist destination. Charlottesville in Virginia, Boulder in Colorado, Ithaca in New York, and Burlington in Vermont are examples of college towns with a popular mall in their downtown (Robertson, 1994; Branaugh, 2002; Great Streets, 2003b). However, some of the cities with unsuccessful pedestrian malls did include a university campus within their area – for instance, Eugene, Oregon which houses the University of Oregon (Branaugh, 2002).

Examples of successful malls in tourist destinations can be found in Cape May, New Jersey and South Beach, Florida. Their successes might be unique to these cities, and not easily transferable to other communities. Cape May's [and South Beach's] tourists tend to spend less time on the beach and more time browsing, shopping, and visiting historic centers (West, 1995).

Given the right location, design is the second factor to the vitality of a mall. Santa Monica California's run-down mall, for example, became an overnight success in the 1980s after it was redesigned in the same location. (Conversely, some very popular pedestrian areas in European city centers were created without any public intervention besides traffic barriers.) The downtown pedestrian malls that have survived through the years have had an ongoing careful management devoted to their preservation. (Conversely, it has only been possible to maintain in good shape pedestrian malls that have worked well economically.) Certain elements such as: vandalism signs; vacant buildings; thrift stores; antisocial activities; litter; unpaved sidewalks; and discontinuous storefronts in urban spaces are associated with blight and decay in the American psyche (Tcrp, 1997) and where any of them have been present, mall's success has been deterred.

There is extensive literature on design features that appeal to pedestrians. Allan Jacobs and William Whyte are among the leading American researchers on this topic. Pedestrian malls are a category of urban spaces that lies between streets

and plazas. They are shaped as streets and intended for movement along businesses on their sides, but the fact that cars are absent encourages their use as plazas. For this reason, urban design features that make good plazas, and those that make good streets, including weather-protection elements, unified design themes, and space articulation are combined in successful pedestrian malls.

It is arguable whether the size of American pedestrian malls is responsible for their success or failure. The literature on pedestrian malls suggests that some of the most extended malls did not succeed because suburban users were unaccustomed to walking long distances. On the other hand, a single block converted into a car-free area – like the ones built or proposed in a few smaller cities in California – might not make any difference at all in a city's fabric.

American cities that have successful downtown pedestrian malls have employed multifaceted development strategies. Pedestrian malls have been coordinated with other downtown development strategies (for instance, transportation, tourism, housing, retail, and open space). Most pedestrian malls, especially the larger and more successful ones, cannot function without a large supply of low cost parking. Cross streets that allow traffic have often resulted useful as well. Some cities have radically altered circulation patterns in order to decrease traffic congestion and redistribute vehicular traffic flow in the area of the pedestrian mall by developing one-way streets, restricting turning movements, limiting access to certain categories of vehicles, redesigning intersections, and retiming traffic signals (Highway Safety Research Center, 1999a).

Business selection is the third factor of a mall's success. A few successful malls consist of convenience-related businesses, but only if they are located in downtowns where there is enough concentration of workers and/or residents. Successful downtown pedestrian malls that rely on residents outside of the immediate vicinity (which is the case of most malls in the U.S.) have typically employed strategies such as: the provision of an exclusive shopping environment, which makes worth the trip; the installation of larger 'anchor uses' (i.e. department stores) that generate foot traffic, which in turn supports malls' smaller businesses; the inclusion of entertainment-type businesses, which keep the mall lively past business hours; the promotion of public events such as parades, street fairs, farmers' markets, concerts; and the encouragement of street performers and street vending (Robertson, 1994; West, 1995; Highway Safety Research Center, 1999a). However, the balance between indoor-oriented and street-level activities; national chains and local independent entrepreneurs; and restaurants and retail shops is a delicate one even in successful malls. In Santa Monica, outdoor restaurants which attracted users initially were later being pushed out by retail shops that increasingly wanted to move in. As a result, the city put a moratorium on the conversion of restaurants to retail use. Also, there have been cases where large enclosed shopping malls meant to help outdoor pedestrian malls have sucked street users indoors. In any case, successful pedestrian malls work in downtowns where the tenants and property owners on the mall are supportive as it is often them who pay for maintenance.

#### 4. Today's reasons for pedestrian malls in the United States

There are two main reasons why it is still worth having downtown pedestrian malls in the U.S. today. First, to provide people with pleasant, safe, dignified, and lively outdoor places to socialize, congregate, and interact in place of watching TV, working, mowing the lawn, or spending time in suburban shopping malls. A case study conducted for the National Bicycling and Walking Study postulated a three to five fold increase in bicycling and walking given favorable circumstances (Highway Safety Research Center, 1999b).

The second reason is the loss of vast amounts of money from unused business opportunities in office-only American downtowns that are now ghost towns at night and on weekends. If appealing, downtowns could be local economic engines at all hours.

Environmental and equity concerns too are mentioned in public policy theory when pedestrian areas are discussed. In practice, these issues have a far minor impact in the United States or are even counterproductive. It is true that air pollutants decreased significantly in several European city centers when these were pedestrianized. In the United States, however, air pollution benefits may be quite marginal or conceivably negative. If thousands of motorized trips formerly going to an exurban mall are diverted to a successful pedestrian mall, it could be possible that more people than before are being exposed to unhealthy air.

Similarly, the equity factor – pedestrian areas as a way of offering equal opportunities in a city to groups less likely to have car access – is irrelevant in the U.S. as in reality a major problem reported in existing pedestrian malls is the presence of the homeless and/or teenagers on skateboards in the area. Besides, suburban users have to drive to reach downtown pedestrian malls. Moreover, pedestrian malls often do well in gentrifying communities with shopping potential who press for recreational urban spaces, such as the case of Santa Monica; therefore, they can hardly be considered a provision for the poor.

#### 5. Conclusions

Downtown pedestrian malls are highly likely to fail in cities that have unappealing downtowns. Unfortunately, at present, this is the case for most U.S. cities. Malls even fail in cities that, without the downtown pedestrian mall, are left with nowhere to walk in town. American cities have now understood that a pedestrian mall alone cannot revitalize a downtown; if car traffic is cut out of an area where there is no reason to go to in any case, this will deteriorate further. The successful creation or upgrade of pedestrian malls occurs in conjunction with other downtown improvement strategies. The success of a few pedestrian malls tells us that Americans enjoy walking in pedestrian areas if these are created in the right place, with the right design, and offer the right kind of activities and businesses.

Ideally, pedestrian malls should be created in areas that already function as community gathering places. It only makes sense to block cars out in streets that naturally belong to the pedestrians, where pedestrian activity dominates the urban scene even if cars are present. But pedestrian spaces can be

desirable even in lower density places to fulfill human needs such as walking and experiencing other people. As natural pedestrian activity resulting from high density of the surroundings is a rare scenario in the United States, some cities induce it artificially by placing malls near anchor uses. These can be different depending on cities' own assets, including movie theaters, concert halls, college campuses, some major employment centers, outdoor dining; and tourist attractions. Healthy pedestrian areas contain a variety of businesses geared towards the particular market share of their city. Also, they are well designed from pedestrians' point of view.

The main push that makes cities and private owners organize for the renovation or creation of pedestrian malls are often not environmental, safety, or equity concerns, but rather unused business opportunities and the lack of a community center.

Pedestrian malls are artificial creatures in today's motorized and suburbanized American cityscape. Ironically, most users of pedestrian malls need to reach them by car. In the U.S. it will take time before cities become dense enough (if they ever will) to naturally support continuous street activity without any business or design artifacts. In the meantime, while urban planners dream about a faraway future, people desire places to go as an alternative to suburban shopping malls and a dreary car culture.

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Santa Monica, California: the Third Street Promenade today  
Source: Photo by author