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We're so cool! The first step in selling your city is to recognize your assets.

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[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

Some prosperous American cities have long gotten by with incremental improvements--a park here, a boulevard there. But nowadays even those cities--not to mention all the others, whose downtowns emptied in the 1960s and '70s and have only recently begun to refill--recognize that to stay competitive they need an ongoing holistic vision.

Whether they choose to go green or wired, retail-centric or transit-oriented, America's cities are increasingly using planning as a way to strengthen their vitality--and to sell themselves.

Architects and planners once played a far bigger role in cities, a role that has since "fallen into the hands of lawyers and bankers," says Joe Borgstrom, director of community assistance for several initiatives sponsored by the Michigan State Housing Development Authority, including Cool Cities, a statewide downtown revitalization program aimed at attracting and retaining creative young professionals. "It's exciting to see a return to the former," he says.

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Based partly on economic development strategies such as enterprise zones and tax incentives, and partly on snazzier tourism marketing with its commercials and contests, these planning efforts are focused on making cities desirable to new residents.

"This is the sophisticated way to think about cities," says Carol Coletta, president of CEOs for Cities, a Chicago-based nonprofit network of urban leaders dedicated to "speeding innovation in cities." The idea, she says, is "to plan your city so that its very essence communicates its aspirations and therefore its brand."

Savvy Madison Avenue tactics often play a role in this effort. Coletta's example is Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley, who has "claimed the mantle of green not just by doing the grunt work related to sustainability, but also by paying attention to the showy and sexy things that can be photographed and written about--like city hall's now-famous green roof."

In fact, Chicago has always had a "brand" as the city of big shoulders and hog butchery, imagery that described the industrial powerhouse of the last century and is no longer applicable.

"Cities need to recognize that one way or another, they're going to get an identity," says David Miles of Milesbrand, a Denver-based company that creates signs, slogans, and ad campaigns for real estate developments. "But the more intentional cities are about choosing that identity, the more successful they will be at turning it into a reality." Miles describes his job as helping cities "understand what their core values are and what they stand for, and then helping position them so they can best accomplish that vision."

Rebranding in action

Miles is currently applying his lingo and sales artistry to marketing a mile-long, mixed use development in Midtown Atlanta. The new "Midtown Mile" is an expansion of the already up-and-coming neighborhood centered on Peachtree Street. This area is ideally located between downtown and the exclusive Buckhead neighborhood and is well served by MARTA, Atlanta's rail and bus system.

The section Miles is seeking to rebrand and which debuts this fall promises something more--an "urban shopping district" akin to Chicago's Magnificent Mile and Manhattan's Madison Avenue. The \$2 billion project is a literal and physical attempt to connect to and expand "downtown," says Miles.

"This new stretch ends at the High Museum," he says, "so it's already established as a cultural center. And about a dozen residential towers have gone up in the last five or so years." Donald Trump is entering the market with a \$300 million, 563-unit condo building scheduled to open in 2010; more than 100 units are already pre-sold.

"Plans are under way to bring in a new office tower and at least two hotels," Miles continues. "The latest piece--recruiting international, high-end retailers that as of yet have no presence in the region--is going to be transformative," he says. "People will come, park their cars, and have the museum, the Fox Theatre, Piedmont Park, probably 100 restaurants, and a scope of retail that is superior to the best suburban malls."

Midtown Mile's diversity--and the fact that the development is cohesive and planned will be "communicated over and over again," says Miles, "through public relations, advertising, signage, the Internet, and the on-site experience that says this is a safe and exciting place to be."

[ILLUSTRATIONS OMITTED]

It's worked elsewhere

Although Midtown Mile is dramatically large in scope, widening the definition and boundaries of downtown is a planning strategy that's been employed successfully elsewhere.

Baltimore is an example. "There's no central business district anymore," wrote Kirby Fowler, president of the Downtown Partnership of Baltimore, in the Baltimore Sun in August. Kirby argued that the city's traditional business district should be redefined "to attract new employers and residents who want to be part of a diverse urban neighborhood but are misled by the exclusive focus on 'business' in the central business district name."

"Think of a one-mile radius around Pratt and Light streets [the "traditional" downtown] with more than 100,000 employees, 37,000 residents, and \$5.16 billion in ongoing development projects. That's the new downtown," he wrote.

This summer, as part of its "There's BaltiMORE Living Downtown" campaign, the partnership unveiled an "apartment giveaway" that awards a year's free rent in a downtown building to the grand prize winner.

Now check out Boulder, Colorado, which would not seem to need much promotion. It was cited by Business Week this year as one of the "top 10 cities for artists." Last year, Forbes ranked Boulder, home of the University of Colorado, as "America's smartest city."

But things were not so good a decade or so ago, when city officials undertook their own downtown reexamination. The city was then faced with "a perfect storm of issues," says Molly Winter, director of the Downtown and University Hill Management Division.

"The downtown business community wanted to build more parking after a long moratorium. The neighborhoods wanted to do something about the interface zones where residential abuts commercial. Historic efforts were being looked at," Winter remembers. "We decided that all of these stakeholders should put together a planning effort and create a downtown that would meet their diverse needs." That meant planning for new growth and putting new zoning in place.

Since then, the city has extended existing skywalks and traded air rights to better connect the Downtown and University Hill neighborhoods. Housing units have gone from "a number you could count on one hand," says Winter, "to almost 200 completed or approved projects." To better integrate the University of Colorado campus, a small conference facility that would incorporate some of its properties is under discussion.

"Since everyone is on board with this vision, developers can build without going through a lot of hoopla," Winter adds.

Selling brainpower

Arlington County, Virginia, in the Washington, D.C., suburbs, is mounting a different kind of branding campaign. Arlington is already known for its transit-oriented communities, which were in place long before the term existed.

"We already have several amenity-filled communities with their own distinctive character and, to varying degrees, desirable mixed uses," says Terry Holzheimer, AICP, director of Arlington Economic Development, the urban county's umbrella group for a variety of services. "What we're doing now is marketing ourselves through the people who choose to live and work here. We have that highly educated, young and hip class that everyone wants," he says, noting that more than 25 percent of Arlington residents have advanced degrees.

"Think Arlington," a campaign currently running in Metro stations and cars--as well as via a daily e-newsletter that goes out to commercial real estate brokers in the D.C. area--uses the tagline "Brainpower: Arlington's Alternative Energy" and spotlights accomplished local residents.

Based on eight measures selected to reflect the attributes of Richard Florida's "creative class" and described in his 2002 book, Arlington Economic Development undertook a study to determine how Arlington stacked up regionally. The community topped the chart on four of the eight measures studied and ranked second on three others.

It's too soon to see if it's working, says Holzheimer. But success "can't just be about marketing and saying, 'Hey, we're cool.' It's building the envelope that makes people want to be here. If we hadn't built this great community, the marketing wouldn't mean much."

Carol Coletta seconds that. Too often, she says, cities don't get it. "They invest in toy transit, transit that's not a system but just a model; or they invest

in single amenities, like a starchitect-designed museum. One-off projects like these may be easier, but they don't get to the nuts and bolts of planning."

Working with what you have

James Moore, director of community planning and urban design for HDR, the Omaha-based architecture and planning firm, thinks the mistakes made by cities in past renewal efforts stem from a misguided fear of urbanity's inherent disorder. "After World War II, planning became less and less about beautiful colored pencil drawings and more and more about flow charts--about cleanliness and order," he says.

Today, "there's a new-found appreciation for true urbanism, for great streets, for a sense of place. Phoenix, Arizona, should be different from Baltimore, Maryland, and when that happens--that's great. And one of the ways to best accomplish that," he continues, "is to build on what you already have."

These notions are at the heart of Michigan's urban revitalization efforts, according to Joe Borgstrom. Through "facade grants" and "signature building grants," the state is helping communities rescue historic buildings. And thanks to the state's liberal brown field definition that includes blight and functional obsolescence, some \$1.8 billion (\$800 million for Detroit alone) of new public and private investment money has poured into abandoned swaths of inner city land.

One of the smaller successes Borgstrom cites is Niles, a city of 12,000 in the southwestern part of the state. Decades ago, he says, Niles was the headquarters of an aluminum siding company. "And the entire downtown was its catalog!" The state's active Main Street program worked with the community to restore its downtown facades, and, Borgstrom proudly reports, 42 new or expanded businesses have been added to downtown Niles in the last few years.

Other recent projects include the creation of a state-of-the-art gathering space for filmmakers in Ann Arbor and funding for new equipment in a restored historic opera house in Traverse City. "Such grants go a long way toward helping these places become magnets for people looking for that next great urban main street experience," says Borgstrom.

Attracting the millennials'

Everyone wants this group: the "millennial generation"--those born between 1977 and 1996. But what do the millennials want? The answer is cities, and particularly downtowns, says Laurie Volk, of Zimmerman Volk Associates, a Clinton, New Jersey, firm that conducts feasibility studies for developers.

Volk says her market research has shown that cities are cool. "Even in cities where downtowns don't have a lot of, say, restaurants, many people still say they like to live there. It's perceived as the one part that belongs to everyone."

Aside from a preference for being in the thick of things, millennials put environmental sustainability high on their agenda. And cities, particularly those in the West, have made great strides in proving that "urban" and "green" are not contradictory.

"Cities are ripe for playing a really significant role in helping us all reach environmental goals," says Michael McGinn, director of the Seattle Great City Initiative. A former lawyer with a long-standing Sierra Club membership and a record of community activism, McGinn started his nonprofit last year with the goal of pushing the city further along its already green path.

McGinn's main goal is more downtown housing, "including affordable units and housing around proposed light rail and transit initiatives." His second priority is "complete streets." His group helped to pass legislation that ensures that streets are usable by pedestrians and cyclists as well as drivers. The third focus is green space, with a special emphasis on ensuring broader funding.

Quick and nimble

Smaller cities are often nimbler when it comes to launching new planning initiatives. This fall, Annapolis, Maryland (pop. 36,400), will launch an incentive program to boost the use of electric scooters and bicycles.

In partnership with a local bike dealer, the Annapolis Pass program will offer discounts at local shops and restaurants--and half-price bus fares--to bike and scooter buyers. Inspired by European cities, the state capital also unveiled a bike loaner program this summer, and last year it introduced a free bus loop around its central core.

Take a look around the country, and you'll find comprehensive plans for linking 18 blocks of public gardens in Columbia, South Carolina, and for a public art program in Palm Desert, California, that includes 30 main street sculptures. "We may live on tourism," says Palm Desert mayor Richard Kelly, "but an attention to detail tells residents that we appreciate them, too."

Bigger city plans--Dallas's growing downtown cultural district and Philadelphia's Wi-Fi project--are more ambitious and can be subject to layers of bureaucracy, but they too signal a growing recognition of the importance of quality-of-life issues.

Whether anyone moves to a city for its great public art or the ability to surf the Internet from the corner of Fifth and Market is questionable. But as bridges fall and steam pipes explode in our beleaguered cities, these thoughtful and targeted planning efforts work as branding, if not sales, tools.

"Come, give us a shot," these programs say: All is not chaos. "Cities are messy organisms, sure, but they are eminently livable. They can have

structure, they can have beauty..., and they can work."

Resources

Reading. *Brandscapes: Architecture in the Experience Economy*, by Anna Klingman (2007; 378 pp.; \$29.95) is a critical look at branding, particularly as it's used by architects. At its best, says the author, branding is a valuable tool for economic and cultural transformation.

Jo Ann Greco is a writer in Philadelphia. She wrote the lead story on the role of the arts in the city for our February issue on Philadelphia.

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