INTRODUCTION: THE NEW DOWNTOWN

The American downtown has undergone major transformations in this century. The downtown skyline has become more vertical and prominent as the skyscrapers of corporate America have competed with one another to assert their presence in the urban panorama. Yet, the visual dominance of the downtown skyline belies the growing threats to its traditional roles and functions. Underneath the physical changes lie more profound transitions. Downtown's primacy as a center of commerce and employment has been challenged for some time as outlying commercial centers have attracted new offices and retail businesses. Its public realm has begun to atrophy as activities of business and commerce have become increasingly isolated and insular and are being conducted within the enclosed and protected spaces of privatized atriums, galleries, skywalks, lobbies, and plazas. The result is a polarized urbanism characterized by the exclusive regime of the “private” downtown of corporate America and its white-collar workers, on the one hand, and the “public” downtown of the blue-collar workers, the denizens, and the destitute, on the other. These two worlds coexist side by side but rarely cross boundaries. Contacts between these two worlds are obviated by architectural and urban design, and this obviation is augmented by continual surveillance by closed-circuit cameras and security guards.

Downtown stakeholders—businesses, property owners, financial institutions, city councils, and the media—have toiled hard over the years to maintain the preeminence of the downtown and to promote its image. Indeed, if we ask the resident of a major American city today the question that Kevin Lynch (1960) asked his subjects nearly forty years ago—“What comes to your mind when you think of downtown?”—we will probably get a range of answers. The downtown skyline of glittering skyscrapers bearing logos of multinational and transnational corporations symbolizes many things to many people: the
accumulation of capital, the concentration of power and influence, the glory of corporate America, the essence of a postindustrial economy, the unfettered spirit of free enterprise and entrepreneurship, and so on.

The contemporary American downtown still remains the dominant center of the metropolitan area, even after decades of decentralization and sprawl. As aptly captured in the title of the book *Downtown Inc.*, by Bernard Frieden and Lynn Sagalyn (1989), downtown is not just a business district; it is an enterprise that is run by the city government and corporate interests. We take this analogy a step further. We propose that American downtowns are more than just an enterprise; they can indeed be seen as an industry. American downtowns today represent an industry devoted to managing the affairs of the economy—local, state, national, and even international. This industry (1) processes, protects, and manages capital; (2) packages ideas and information; (3) brokers influence and power; and (4) produces decisions affecting the accumulation of wealth, the circulation of capital, and the jobs and welfare of people throughout the land and in other lands as well.

The workers are mostly white-collar professionals and managers, with a support staff of white-collar clerical and secretarial workers. As a case in point, 76 percent of all workers in downtown Los Angeles today can be categorized as professionals, managers, salespeople, or clerical workers (Community Redevelopment Agency 1991). These workers and their work milieu are serviced by a very thin layer of blue-collar labor force comprising food service, janitorial, maintenance, and delivery workers. Many of these white-collar workers—those who use computers, process and retrieve data, or rely on communication technologies for their daily work—are increasingly being classified as a part of the information sector of the economy (Freeman 1996).

Like individual firms within an industry, American downtowns now compete with each other to attract businesses, corporate headquarters, shopping complexes, convention centers, sports arenas, and the like. In addition to this external competition, American downtowns also face considerable internal competition. Downtowns of major metropolitan cities no longer enjoy the unrivaled primacy they used to command with respect to secondary districts or suburban centers. As the suburbs have matured, they have created their own downtowns to service the new industries and middle- and upper-class workers they have attracted. The “edge city” phenomenon (Garreau 1991) has created
many smaller downtowns at the edge of the metropolitan urban core. By collectively luring a sizable chunk of the jobs and retail activities generated in the metropolitan economy, they have taken a major toll on the downtown office market. Most American downtowns find themselves saddled with a large inventory of office space. With high vacancy rates and slower absorption of the current inventory of new office buildings, downtowns are now overbuilt (Dowall 1986). A report published by Grubb and Ellis (1992), a real estate and property management company, reveals that of 31.4 million square feet of office space available in downtown Los Angeles almost 7 million, or 21.4 percent, are vacant. Although the case of downtown Los Angeles may be extreme, it is by no means unique; other major American downtowns face similar problems with many completely vacant older office buildings. Leasing rates have dropped in this buyer’s market. Public agencies like school district headquarters, which used to occupy older office buildings at the edge of the downtown, can now afford to lease spaces in new office towers with concierge services. Similarly, having lost the competition for retail activities to outlying shopping malls accessible by freeway, downtowns are constantly struggling to maintain their dominance as the primary business and employment centers. Holding the center together in the face of centrifugal market forces, which are aided and abetted by a public policy of suburbanization, is a major challenge for American downtowns today.

Meanwhile, conventional shopping malls have become larger, more complex, and much more inclusive in use and function. While the original shopping malls—because of their exclusive emphasis on the middle-class consumer market—represented precisely what downtowns were not, today’s malls have become major urban centers, a viable alternative to the traditional Main Street. The script of the contemporary malls is much more deliberate. They now include post offices, art galleries, hotels, counseling centers, extension programs of major universities, and even amusement parks. Witold Rybczynski (1993) calls them “new downtowns” while acknowledging that some observers like Kenneth Jackson (1985) may still disagree. The point made by Rybczynski, is nevertheless relevant because centers like City Walk or the Mall of America pose new challenges to the retail and entertainment functions of traditional downtowns.
This challenge has been further exacerbated in recent years by the dramatic
changes in communication technology, which have significantly increased not
only home-based work—especially for the professional workforce—but also
home-based shopping and entertainment. Nonterritorial offices may make
conventional offices obsolete. This possibility has no doubt increased the poten-
tial for further decentralization and for further obviation of the functions of
the traditional Main Street.

Indeed the public purpose of the traditional downtown—the civitas—is also
threatened. People still go to downtown to fight a traffic ticket or take out a
building permit, or even for an occasional art show or a concert, but how often
do people congregate in front of the city hall for a public address or a campaign
speech these days? In recent history, significant numbers of Los Angelenos con-
gregated in downtown to celebrate only when the Dodgers won the World
Series or the Lakers won the NBA championship. Periodically some downtowns become a focus of public congre-
gation: for an annual parade, like Macy’s Thanksgiving parade in New York, the celebration of the Chinese New Year
in San Francisco, the ceremonial arrival of Santa Claus in Hollywood, or a
public event, like Cinco de Mayo in Los Angeles or the Boston Marathon.

Political rallies rarely happen in downtown civic forums these days, and pub-
lic discourse is even less common. Thirty years ago when the new Boston City
Hall was constructed in historic Scollay Square, the adjacent large open space
was expected to serve the democratic purpose of political rallies or protest
meetings. Yet, even during the Vietnam protest years, when public rallies were
commonplace, the people of Boston chose to congregate in the Boston Com-
mon—a historic open space—rather than the city hall plaza. Celebrating a
Celtics’ victory or a pennant by the Red Sox was deemed a more appropriate
occasion for an assembly at City Hall.

There used to be a time when a campaign appearance with a mayor in a city
hall plaza was a must for a presidential candidate. Today downtown civic plazas
are not always a popular venue even for a presidential or gubernatorial cam-
paign rally. Candidate Ford and candidate Clinton chose Glendale Galleria—
an enclosed, upscale shopping mall in the city of Glendale, twelve miles
from downtown Los Angeles—for their presidential campaign appearances in
southern California. During the 1992 presidential campaign, when candidate
Ross Perot—who made his fortune in electronics and computers—introduced his electronic town hall meetings, Gerald Marzorati (1992) of the *New York Times* wondered if this was indeed the dawn of what he called “cyber-civitas.” Recalling de Tocqueville’s commentary on the American democracy some 150 years ago, in which he spoke of the tension between the autonomous tendencies of individualism and the participatory and communitarian instincts of public citizenship, Marzorati hoped that the emergence of “Perotville” did not mean a decline of the body politic and public life. The imminent decline in the American public life remains a recurring theme in the literature on urbanism. There are certainly indications that the public life of American downtowns is under considerable stress. And Marzorati’s commentary in itself is a sign of the tension that the public downtowns of American cities are experiencing today.

It is no wonder then that today, more than ever before, downtown corporate interests want the middle- and upper-class population to live and shop downtown. This goal can be achieved if the built environment is appealing, attractive, and furnished with amenities for workers and visitors. Urban design, therefore, is an important part of packaging and promoting the new downtown.

In the following chapters we will argue that while the imperative of design is well established, its tenet has changed significantly in American downtowns. For one, design initiative has shifted from the public to the private sector as a direct result of the declining fiscal resources of local governments. As a consequence, public institutions are becoming increasingly dependent on private investments for shaping the built environment and are at the same time relying heavily on regulations and the entitlement process to negotiate the outcome of design.4

According to Frieden and Sagalyn (1989), more than one hundred new retail centers opened in American downtowns between 1970 and 1988: “Developers built where cities greased the way” (172). They note that cities were major coinvestors for three of every four projects built from 1970 to 1985. While in the early seventies private capital bankrolled half of the downtown malls, in later years cities themselves became major financiers. Although coinvestment has accounted for four out of every five new projects and has ranged from raising cash through municipal bonds to land assembly, land write-down, and
infrastructure improvements, the design concepts have largely been dictated by the designers hired by the private sector. The role of public design for the downtown built form has steadily shrunk in the new partnership that Frieden and Sagalyn refer to as “Downtown Inc.” Public domain plazas, museums, civic buildings, open spaces, broad avenues, and civic sculptures have long since faded. The visions that shaped the historical design of cities like Buffalo, Cincinnati, Kansas City, New York, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Washington, and the like have also been abandoned, seemingly for good.

The contemporary urban design of downtown is linked primarily to the redevelopment process and is guided by opportunity or exigency rather than by consideration of the whole. There is not even a vision of how the incremental changes will add up. Downtown urban design is like a jigsaw puzzle in which the pieces are isolated from one another. The specific features of the new urban design can be summarized as follows. First, it is mainly dependent on private initiatives, philanthropy, or outright exaction for creating public amenities, which would have been created through public investment in earlier times. Second, since the private sector response to these demands has been motivated by the desire to maximize and protect the return on the investment, these amenities have been designed for tenants who lease space in these buildings and for their clients and workers, rather than for the public at large. Third, design circumstances are mainly opportunistic and are often a response to public policy that is reactive than proactive. Fourth, such responses are ad hoc, disjointed, episodic, incrementalist, and, in the larger scheme of things, a non sequitur. Fifth, this new urban design has consequently lost the larger public purpose or vision that guided earlier urban design proposals. Sixth, the privatization process has exacerbated the polarization of the downtown form into a public but derelict downtown of the indigents, on the one hand, and a private and glamorous downtown of corporate America, on the other. Finally, this new urban design philosophy is very different from the earlier one that relied on the strategic location of and investment in public projects and improvements to stimulate private developments in a desired pattern.

We believe that the above changes signify a major “paradigm shift,” to borrow Thomas Kuhn’s (1970) all-too popular term. They represent profound transformation in the practice and purpose of urban design. To the extent that these changes have occurred gradually over time, there has been little time to
pause and take stock. Here we propose to examine the process that has led to this transformation. It is now time to evaluate the process that has emerged and been legitimized by evolving urban design. What are the causes and consequences of this new downtown urban design? What is the nature of design episodes—for design has indeed become episodic—within the changing circumstance of downtown development and redevelopment? What are the challenges for future urban design? These are the principal questions we explore in this book.

AIMS AND THEMES

The aim of this book is in part to document this profound shift in the attitudes, institutions, and processes involved in the reshaping of contemporary downtown space and form. Our intent is to focus on the political economy of this shift and on urban design’s role as an agent of this shift. Our work consists of several case studies of recently completed projects in the downtowns of three major California cities: Los Angeles, San Diego, and San Francisco. The aim of these studies was initially to examine the trend toward privatization of urban open spaces and to examine the nature of public life in these privatized domains. Although the specific focus was on open spaces and public places, the case studies incorporated detailed documentation of the overall project complex of which these spaces are an integral part.

In choosing these case studies we do not mean to create an impression that urban design is all about creating open spaces between buildings. Certainly there are examples in the literature that give that impression. But urban design—or city design, as Kevin Lynch (1984) preferred to call this enterprise—encompasses much more than the design of any one component of the urban form (see also Kostof 1992 and Bacon 1974). Of course there are many different interpretations of the importance of the various elements of urban form in defining the public life and urbanism of cities. Authors like Anne Vernez Moudon (1987) and Allan Jacobs (1993) have emphasized the design of city streets as a critical aspect of urban design. We too feel that the larger organization of the spatial structure of cities was often defined by critical street elements, and this approach was very much a part of the synoptic and public tradition of urban design we will discuss elsewhere in this book. Our focus on
corporate open spaces is not an artifact of our personal predilections but simply a result of the very nature of downtown transformation currently underway. Our coverage of corporate open spaces as examples of urban design is not a reflection of a de facto acceptance of their scope but precisely the basis of the argument we make in this book—that in the making of the new downtown we have witnessed a shift from streets and spaces belonging to the public at large to the more discrete, enclosed, isolated, and private open spaces of corporate America.

Before we present the overall scheme of this book we should briefly discuss how our work can be placed within the literature on postmodern urbanism, urban planning, and design. As should be apparent from the title of this book, our work is defined by the intersection of two principal themes: the downtown area and urban design. Our first theme is the downtown area, perhaps the most important and sui generis district of American cities. In particular we are interested in the downtowns of core cities of large metropolitan regions—like Boston, New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco—rather than the downtowns of smaller cities or suburban communities. In establishing this focus we see our work linked to the literature on the spatial structure and organization of cities, especially that based in social sciences. Human ecology, regional economics, and urban geography are the fields that typically offer empirical insights about the structure, organization, and dynamics of the central business district (CBD) in the context of the larger city. While this literature is helpful in describing and explaining the dynamics of spatial change mainly as a market outcome, we are more interested in aspects of the deliberate decisions and processes—by both the public and the private sectors—that lead to piecemeal changes in the built form. Our interest in the political economy of development decisions connects us to the rich literature on the urban history and historiography of American cities. Although our interests lie mainly in interpreting the current trends in downtown urban design, the period histories of individual cities and historiographic accounts of American city development provide the necessary foundation for our work.

Our second theme is of course urban design—the particular creative aspects of conceiving and putting together large-scale development projects, as shaped by contemporary institutions and the inevitable political processes that surround such events. Our aim here is to explain the current transformations of
the built form of the downtown districts from this urban design perspective. In presenting this account we also describe the nature of the design outcome, and the social and political implications of the emerging built form. Doing so takes us to the ongoing discussions on the changing nature of public and private domains, the future of civil society, and the effects of global economic order on local places. We are thus connected to the larger orbit of crossdisciplinary and critical thinking on the postmodern condition (Lyotard 1984) and the condition of postmodernity (Harvey 1989). These are critical perspectives, and in recent years we have seen a rich accumulation of literature focusing on contemporary urbanism and the built environment. These writings have essentially analyzed the built environment as a mirror of the contemporary material culture, deconstructed either as a part of the global culture of consumption (Harvey 1988) or as the “cultural logic” of late capitalism (Jameson 1991). We have depended on this literature for theoretical constructs and critical perspectives. It has helped us to articulate the conflicts and contradictions inherent in the contemporary downtown environment.

But this interpretation of form, as an outcome of historical, cultural, political, and economic processes, is but one explanation, albeit an important one, of the contemporary condition. It is a synoptic, macroscopic, and global interpretation. It does not examine how each increment of change in form is conceived and produced. Thus, unfortunately, it does not inform us about the practice and conduct of the profession in creating these discrete changes in urban form. Yet, it is this behind-the-scenes story that is also critical from the perspective of practice and professional conduct. Since we see our book as an attempt to make the practice of urban design more socially responsible, this inside story is equally important. If the postmodern theoretical frame offers a top-down view, our inside story based on in-depth case studies offers a bottom-up view. These stories add faces, personalities, and agencies—and their aspirations, visions, and uncertainties—to this otherwise anonymous metaprocess implicit in the critical perspectives on postmodern urbanism.

We want to present the story not just of the designer’s vision but also of how that vision is formed and how projects are conceived, scripted, produced, and eventually packaged. Here our work connects with the design literature, and while there is again a rich legacy of literature on historic city design, there is relatively little that discusses the process behind the production of the built
environment. There have been some recent journalistic accounts of how single buildings have been “produced,” but these accounts lack a theoretical or conceptual frame of reference. Here we expect that our work will advance the understanding of the nature of urban design and how it has changed in recent years.

Because our enterprise lies in the intersection of several streams of intellectual thought and tradition, methodologically we are less committed to any one field and, consequently, less constrained by the rigors and predilections of any one tradition than we might be otherwise. While this free-form approach is perhaps more risky intellectually, it allows us to be synoptic in our overview and creative in our interpretation. Since one of our principal aims is to understand and explain the nature of contemporary urban design practice, such a free-form approach is unavoidable. We expect that the following chapters will present a coherent story of urban design downtown today, a story that covers its historical antecedents, its changing economic and political context, its negotiated processes, and the actual production of the built environment.

A GUIDE TO CHAPTERS TO FOLLOW

In the following chapters we present the story of the changing faces of American downtown: its history, its politics, and its poetics. The chapters are organized in three parts.

In the first part we present a historical overview of the evolution of the form and the organization of the structure of major American downtowns and CBDs (as they are called elsewhere in the Western world). We trace this evolution as it was influenced by economic forces, technological developments, public policy, immigration, and urbanization. We also review the major urban design plans and proposals that were developed during this evolution. Our point in this review is to show the shifting roles of the corporate, philanthropic, and public sectors in shaping the appearance and design of the downtown. In chapter 1, we give a historical overview of the changing faces of downtown, tracing the transformations of downtown’s built form and social activities going back to the early nineteenth-century. In chapter 2, we review the major urban design paradigms and the specific plans and proposals for American downtowns during different historic periods. This review shows not only the changing
ideologies for downtown but also the shifting roles of the public and private sectors in downtown development. In chapter 3, we analyze the political economy of privatization and its effects on American downtowns. We examine three spaces in downtown Los Angeles and illustrate the ramifications of the privatization process on the production and physical representation of downtown space.

In the second part, we examine the current downtown condition from a critical perspective. We focus on the politics of deal-making in project development and the disturbing trend toward a polarized downtown and a declining public realm. In chapter 4, we review the politics of place making in the contemporary downtown. Using eight case studies from two cities, we discuss and compare the negotiation and deal-making that underlie the creation of new downtown space. We argue that the last twenty years of redevelopment efforts have generated two distinct worlds in American downtowns: the rich, flashy, corporate downtown of today and the poor, derelict, abandoned historic core of yesterday. In chapter 5, we analyze these two faces of downtown and their human dimensions. We argue that downtown’s urban form can be interpreted as a reflection of broader social changes and the political economy of such changes. In chapter 6, we discuss the forces that have caused a decline of public life and analyze the impact of these forces on contemporary downtowns and their uses. This chapter utilizes case study data to profile downtown users and their activities, perceptions, and feelings.

Finally, in the third part we focus on the behind-the-scenes stories of how various projects were designed, how they were shaped by personal visions and the dictates of public policy or by the imperative of market success. In chapter 7, we use examples from three California cities (Los Angeles, San Francisco, and San Diego) to analyze the poetics of design and to illustrate how it shapes the organization of space and the visual form of the new urban centers. In chapter 8 we look into another important component of downtown’s physical environment: public art. Using selected examples from Los Angeles and San Francisco, we document a sense of diminished “publicness” in art pieces whose primary objective is to increase the marketability of downtown corporate spaces. In chapter 9 we examine the ways that contemporary downtown settings are “packaged” and promoted to prospective users. In some ways, downtown’s urban form resembles a collection of fragmented pieces—stage sets and
theme parks to attract and entertain a specific clientele. In the final chapter we present the major themes that capture the dynamics of postmodern urbanism and urban design, which are amply illustrated in the form of American downtown. We conclude by addressing some of the critical challenges for downtown urban design.

Throughout the book we try to bring in examples from various American downtowns. Here we depend mainly on secondary sources—accounts like those of Frieden and Sagalyn (1989), Robert Beauregard (1989), Susan Fainstein (1994), Michael Sorkin (1992), Deyan Sudjic (1992), Carl Abbott (1993), and Larry Ford (1994). For our case study research, however, we focus on the experiences of Los Angeles, San Francisco, and San Diego. Our geographic proximity to and familiarity with the settings of these cities are two reasons for this preference. Also there is considerably less literature on West Coast cities than on the older cities of the East Coast, a fact that made our examination of the former more tempting. Finally, California has witnessed tremendous growth over the last few decades. Its major urban settings have experienced social, political, economic, and cultural upheavals, enough to qualify them as exemplary products of postindustrial society. It can be argued that Los Angeles, San Francisco, and San Diego resemble windows to the new urbanism of American cities in these waning years of the twentieth century. Through these cities we can see processes and patterns that are happening, or are likely to happen, in other downtown developments. Thus, the examination of development in these cities can help us understand the broader trends that are afoot in other American downtowns.