

# Urban Development 2004

## A road map for cities in transition

***Start with a revitalization strategy to rebuild a neglected downtown.***

By GEORGE M. CRANDALL and DON W. ARAMBULA

Crandall Arambula

How do you turn a neglected downtown area or an auto-dominated suburban setting into a vibrant, pedestrian-friendly town center that will attract professionals, growing families and aging baby boomers while bringing economic vitality and a sense of place back to the urban core?

Many downtown or commercial centers are experiencing some form of transition. Cities across the country are struggling with how to:

- create a vibrant, pedestrian-friendly town center from an abandoned downtown;
- create a charming main street environment out of an auto-dominated suburban strip mall; and
- maintain a community's unique history and character when the area is experiencing a significant increase in population that is leading to sprawling suburbs and piece-meal development

These and other challenges facing our cities are a sign of the times. Cities are competing with each other to attract what author Richard Florida calls the "creative class." They are under pressure to bring economic vitality and renewal to their downtown and urban areas.

### The revitalization process

Architects and engineers often follow a systematic process in their design development. However, a standard process for effective revitalization has never been defined within the planning and urban design community. It is not unusual for urban design and planning reports to end up on a shelf and never lead to built projects.



*Rendering by Crandall Arambula*

### **Portland Harbor Drive development, Portland**

*This project identifies housing and office opportunities for many vacant parcels along a hillside overlooking the Willamette River. The plan is integrated with the surrounding neighborhoods and improves pedestrian connections between downtown and the waterfront.*

Crandall Arambula has developed a systematic process for successful downtown and center revitalization. Following this process and creating highly-graphic and realistic illustrations and financially sound design alternatives inspires change and guarantees implementation.

A downtown without a revitalization strategy is like an orchestra without a musical score: harmony and success do not occur.

This approach has been used by Crandall Arambula on many of its recent projects across the country, and in Northwest cities such as Woodinville and Portland and Milwaukie, Ore. Here is our three-step process:

## 1. Starting

The starting phase of any revitalization effort should involve no more than 10 percent of the project's entire effort. Instead of spending time churning old information, most of a project's scope should focus on phases two and three — designing alternatives and developing an action-based implementation plan.

The starting phase should focus solely on developing ongoing relationships with city agencies, government leaders, stakeholders and the public; identifying the project's boundaries; reviewing background information; determining the area's physical, economic and regulatory opportunities and constraints; and establishing project goals and objectives.

## 2. Designing

During the design phase, it is important to develop a broad range of creative and credible alternatives. Alternative scenarios need to consider a range of intensities and development types. City leaders, stakeholders and the public must have the opportunity to actively review, comment and assess alternative designs throughout this process, comparing the alternatives to the identified project goals established in the starting phase. During this phase, the following illustrations and graphics need to be developed:

- **A concept diagram.** This diagram keeps the big idea in front of decision makers. It is a single drawing that identifies and locates the area's key development projects that must be completed if center revitalization is to be successful, including key attractors and highest priority catalyst projects.
- **Land use frameworks.** These separate diagrams locate housing, employment, retail, open space, cultural, parking, public and other uses necessary for successful revitalization.
- **Circulation frameworks.** These diagrams identify circulation systems needed to support the proposed land uses. Separate diagrams locate transit, autos, bicycles and pedestrian systems.
- **Project illustrations.** These drawings promote public understanding of and support for catalyst projects. Illustrations should include sketch perspectives, sections and detailed plans.



*Image courtesy Newlands & Co.*

### **University City Station town, Spokane Valley**

*This project turns a partially abandoned shopping center into a transit-oriented town center with a retail main street, public open space, new city hall and neighborhood housing. The town center will be connected to future light rail and includes an LRT station and transit center.*

- **A capacity framework.** This diagram illustrates the long-term strategy. It identifies, locates and quantifies all potential development for the area's completed revitalization strategy, including new and renovated buildings, existing stable development and parks, open spaces and parking.

## 3. Implementing

The implementation phase of any revitalization project is crucial. A successful plan must inspire investor confidence to stimulate private investment that is consistent with the community's desires for future growth. A detailed implementation plan must identify: catalyst projects, implementation priorities, responsible agencies, schedule, project costs and financial strategies.

Regulatory documents must also be completed to ensure projects are built in a manner that is consistent with the community's goals. Regulatory documents include: comprehensive plan policies, development codes and standards, public improvement standards and design guidelines.

## Public involvement process

Revitalization success depends on public involvement that is inclusive, systematic and meaningful. Specific public involvement techniques include: ballot response sheets in an easy-to-use checklist format, community meetings and workshops, special meetings with decision makers and interest groups, display kiosks, information mailers and Web sites.

## The result

In the end, a revitalized town center must maintain and enhance the area's character. Whether it's a historic, cultural or working class district — its essence must be preserved. It is also important to connect communities

to their surrounding natural resources. For places to thrive, communities must provide residents with amenities such as parks and open space.

A revitalized town center may ultimately include a "main street" with an anchor grocery store, retail shops, entertainment, restaurants, and pedestrian and bike paths that lead to the water's edge or a public park. Transportation options will abound, including streetcar, light-rail and bus systems. High-density housing will be centrally located near the main street and transit. Following this proven approach will improve the quality of life for area residents and visitors alike.

## The three phases of an urban development project

*Crandall Arambula has developed a three-phase process for urban development and revitalization. The following workshops should be held by the urban design consultant and the responsible agency:*

### Starting workshop:

#### Establish objectives

Establishing the project's goals and objectives must be led entirely by the public, stakeholders and government officials.

*Workshop No. 1* should include an introduction of the team and an educational presentation on fundamental urban design principles. Graphic project examples can be included of common dos and don'ts. During this presentation, the project's schedule, opportunities and constraints can also be reviewed.

The second half of all public meetings should include a workshop in which groups of five to eight people discuss key issues and provide comments on individual ballot response sheets. Use ballots to ensure that all members of the community are heard, not just the outspoken few.

Based on the input received from *Workshop No. 1* participants, a summary of the project's goals and objectives can be developed in a checklist format. This checklist will be used in the designing phase to evaluate each alternative concept.

### Designing workshops:

#### Public review of alternatives

*Workshop No. 2* should include a brief summary of *Workshop No. 1* and review of the schedule and

project objectives. A highly graphic and visual presentation must be given on each of the alternative concepts. During the second half of the meeting, participants can complete the individual ballot response sheets for the selection of a preferred alternative.

#### Discuss refined alternative

*Workshop No. 3* includes a review of the schedule and a summary of the tabulated data, ballots and written comments from *Workshops 1* and *2*. A presentation should be given that describes all of the framework components for the preferred alternative.

During the second half of the meeting, groups can discuss the preferred alternative, complete a final ballot response sheet and provide written comments on plan refinement.

### Implementing workshop:

#### Final plan/discuss strategy

*Workshop No. 4* includes a presentation of the preferred plan and a discussion of implementation strategies and project priorities.

The workshop participants should be asked to comment on implementation strategies and next steps should be discussed.