Consuming downtown
YULE HEIBEL

What brings people downtown?

For those readers too young to remember, British pop star Petula Clark’s 1964 hit “Downtown” (currently remade by ex-Spice Girl Emma Bunton) celebrated the city, praising downtown for its ability to distract and bedazzle. Just listen to the music of the traffic in the city, Clark sang, Linger on the sidewalk where the neon signs are pretty—How can you lose?

Although mentioning downtown’s aural delights more often than its visual splendours, the song nonetheless is part of a long tradition celebrating urban eye candy: The lights are much brighter there. You can forget all your troubles, forget all your cares, So go downtown, things’ll be great when you’re there.

It’s a tradition that goes back to the 1860s, when Baron Haussmann demolished established Parisian neighbourhoods in order to develop a city that would be safe and luxuriously elegant for the middle class. Paris’s medieval core was transformed from a filthy, crime-ridden moloch of narrow streets, into a cleaner, greener downtown, fit for the owners of the new apartments lining the brand-new boulevards.

In Paris, the less well-off were displaced to the banlieue or suburbs—where, it seems, they remain to this day. Petula Clark sang about a “brighter” downtown in 1964, but the vision originated 100 years earlier in Haussmann’s upscale urban renewal project.

Besides razing entire neighbourhoods and initiating massive development, Haussmann also ensured that the core was well-lit. Neon signs were still decades away, but Paris’s reputation as the City of Lights was given the green light—blue, actually—through the installation of ultra-modern gas street lamps. They might look “traditional” to us now, but they were ne-plus-ultra then.

In addition to the sort of retail we associate with modern cities, this new Paris also offered residents glitzy and glamorous eateries. Here is Charles Baudelaire’s description (c.1860) of one such café, newly installed in a still-unfinished construction zone:

In the evening, a bit tired, we wanted to sit down in front of a new café that formed the corner of a new boulevard, still strewn with debris and already gloriously displaying its unfinished splendors. The café was sparkling. The gasligh itself sent forth all the ardor of a debut, and lit with all its force walls blinding in their whiteness, dazzling sheets of mirrors, the gold of the rods and cornices, chubby-cheeked page-boys being dragged by dogs on leashes, laughing ladies with falcons perched on their wrist, nymphs and goddesses carrying on their heads fruits, pies, and poultry, Hebes and Ganymedes presenting in out-stretched arms little amphoras filled with Bavarian cream or bi-colored obelisks of ice cream—all of history and all of mythology at the service of gluttony. (From The Eyes of the Poor)

Note the visual details emphasized through the words sparkling, blinding, dazzling, and note, too, that the entire spectacle is geared toward consumption. The city is a market fuelled by finery and fashion, decked out so seductively that mythology and history retreat into shadow.

Consumption—the presence of retail, restaurant, recreation—comprised a key element of downtown’s glamour, as well as its ability to bedazzle. Downtown... no finer place, for sure. Downtown... everything’s waiting for you. The city spread its wares for the consumer, enticing him—or more often her—with a dizzying array of merchandise.

Before we were drawn away from downtown by the suburban mall, where we’re fannelled, zombie-like, through atria saturated by the ever-same humdrum of canned music and air, eyes numbed by a wall-to-wall sameness of display, going downtown entailed the possibility of pleasant shocks.

There was shopping, but there was also recreational retreat, and ideally one entered and exited either state freely. “Don’t hang around and let your problems surround you. There are movie shows... Downtown; Maybe you know some little places to go to, Where they never close... Downtown.” The reason for going downtown was for the glamour, provided by amenities. The point of all this rhapsody was romance, literally: “Just listen to the rhythm of a gentle bossa nova, You’ll be dancing with him too before the night is over, Happy again.” Sex sells.

Since the 19th century, visions of downtowns have typically focused on the ability to bedazzle and seduce by offering for consumption the fruits of industrialization. Intimately bound up with this were venues offering possibilities of surprise, even romance, on the one hand, and retreat or anonymity on the other. As consumers, we counted on businesses to provide the setting, but when merchants faced changed market conditions (as we increasingly shopped at malls for goods produced overseas), urban glamour, like make-up in the rain, threatened to smear into tackiness. We still cling to the idea that the urban fabric has to be visually compelling—which of course isn’t wrong, but we kid ourselves if we think that business-as-usual can provide all the stage props.

I was thinking of this after a remark by City Planner Deb Day during an October 25 “Downtown Plan Update.” Staff had just explained a...
flow-chart illustrating the strategic work for the coming months. Not until February or March does the Planning Department expect to present to the public several options or models for a new downtown plan. Why take so long, someone asked? Because Planning won’t ask the public for feedback until after staff has had time to crunch technical analyses, including data reports by consultants. When pressed as to what those consultants could possibly be bringing forward that would extend the “research” phase so far into the coming months, Day answered that consultants might advise that putting more retail downtown is unsustainable.

Quickly that moment passed as we moved on to other questions. But it was to my mind the most startling remark of the evening, even though it went almost unnoticed. Of course it makes sense: malls have already knocked many downtowns sideways, and shoppers continue to diversify consumption, in particular through online shopping. Why add more retail—if it’s not economically viable for the merchants?

What will downtown residential development look like, however, if the street level isn’t enlivened by stores, and new residents are in their apartments behind closed doors, shopping online? Anyone today can easily find internet menus that satisfy appetites for freedom, informality, and leisure, as well as best price. As for sex, there’s plenty of that online, too.

So what will get people on the sidewalks?

More people is one answer: increased density will by default mean more pedestrians downtown.

Amenities that can’t become virtual or outsourced is another. These include things relating to the body’s needs: food and drink, from necessity (groceries) to leisure (cafés) to adventure (“little places” that “never close”), as well as fitness (yoga entrepreneurs do well, but a caveat: sidewalk-level businesses should maintain enticing street presence, not fogged-up windows). Great lighting (taking a cue from Haussmann): long winter nights call for creative lighting on facades. Concentrated activity through retail clustering (but use creative lighting and other visual cues to maintain pedestrian interest in non-retail areas). Unconventional learning or cultural venues, with street-level presence and evening hours (library speaker series, galleries). Nightclubs.

Most of all, however, people get people out. We’re hardwired to be interested in other people: even mall-rats know this. That’s why they’re there: to watch those who are like them, as well as those who are different. No one should want to repeat the Paris experiment, which almost immediately resulted in a first-class core surrounded by often second-class suburbs, and which still reels occasionally from Haussmann’s master plan. Indeed, after Haussmann and then Robert Moses, the words “master plan” should set off alarm bells.

But urbanites can’t shrug off the hold (instilled in Haussmann’s Paris and first observed by Baudelaire) that spectacular consumption has on us, nor how it informs what and how we think of cities. Economic systems of exchange (capitalism) have been our urban master planners for over a hundred years. Does it make sense, in a post-industrial system of production that’s globalized and offered to millions digitally, to rethink reliance on traditional retail? Probably. Does that mean we should spend all our time in front of screens, instead of getting out there to “linger on the sidewalk where the neon signs are pretty”? I hope not. As the song says, I’ll go downtown.

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