

CHANGES IN PLACE AS SPACE USE EVOLVES



DOWNTOWN MARKETING & DEVELOPMENT By Barry Cassidy

I have worked in several different sections of Philadelphia, and recently both of my former streets have been in the news. Repeated shootings on South Street have left the street shell-shocked and led to retail store vacancies far greater than anything I remember in my 30 years in Philadelphia. Kensington Ave (The Avenue) has continued to experience problems like those I experienced during my time there in the early 1990s.

They are two completely different situations, but it appears to me there is a common solution. In managing commercial districts, I always looked to create a crowd. In a place like Phoenixville or Lock Haven, there were few people downtown, and the goal was to have people spend time downtown. Listen to some music, and create exciting and compelling leisure or sales events to drive sales.

The cities are a different situation. When you have a street like South Street, you always have a crowd and a legacy reputation as the place to be. The idea was to keep people moving so they did not block the sidewalks. My strategy was to create a more congenial atmosphere and have less

chance for fights or sexual assaults. Those were the days of transitioning the lawlessness of the sexual assault practice of "Whirling" to a safer environment without hurting the "edge" of the street. People like to go to edgy places but are not too inclined to go to a dangerous street.

I had The Avenue from Front to Lehigh. I concentrated on my time at the corner of Kensington and Huntington, where the kids had a problem crossing the street to attend Visitation Catholic School. There were sexual exhibition issues as a vehicle income, and I had to have that activity cease when kids went to school.

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DOWNTOWN MARKETING & DEVELOPMENT

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There was a methadone clinic on the street, and things were a little dangerous at times, but it was more in the area of prostitution and how that related to school kids coming and going to school that garnered my time. This was an area where we were buying a house for a dollar, putting \$60,000 in rehabilitation, and selling them for \$30,000... the problem was that people who owned the property next to the houses we were rehabilitating were walking away from their equity. So the neighborhood was on the decline.

Fast forward to the current day, where a much more violent situation has evolved with people m being shot randomly on the streets. South Street has evolved into a dangerous gathering space because of all the vacant storefronts and the street shutdown. The Avenue has become a place for clustering for many homeless people with a strong drug culture overtone.

Just as shutting down the streets on South Street, there has not been an effort to close off the streets on The Avenue. If they closed down the street, they may never be able to open it again because people would move onto the street to live. If you go down to The Avenue and

watch, you will see the castoffs of society living on the sidewalks and all of society's ills on display.

A common theme needs to be reinforced to address these issues: #1. The streets are for cars and #2. the sidewalks are for people to transverse the street. It is not a hard concept, but it fits both situations. It would be best if you made people move.

When moving people was proposed, the Philadelphia Inquirer reported:

"Clearing one corner just pushes people to the next one over, police say, and many of those living on the street face compounding, unaddressed health and other problems."

I laughed when I read that, as the problem is not on the corner but the entire street length. When place-making on the street, you look at a street in 100-foot intervals. The issue will have to be looked at in a larger context. Make people continue to walk. Do not allow loitering; everyone has to keep moving. What is happening on The Avenue is a long-standing problem that has only intensified. The garbage and litter are completely out of hand. You have

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“medical” people banging people up with some concoction on the street.

I also believe that the streets need to be hosed down in the morning to clean up after a night on The Avenue. Several issues with sanitation probably cannot be controlled at the time of the littering infraction. Then there is the vomit, urination, and other secretions and bodily fluids. So, I recognize the need to hose it down in the morning... not too early, but maybe about 7:30 or 8:00 am. That is when I used to hose down South Street before the stores opened. Not sure how many stores are left on The Avenue, but they should have the same opportunity city-wide.

This is not a wholesome environment for the neighbors or the people on the

street. Quality of life for the neighbors needs to be derived as does an honest and fair treatment for those clinging to existence. That said, no one wants to walk down the street and have their 8-year-old witness people banging heroin on the street. No one’s grandmother wants to walk down the street in fear of having her purse snatched. But, on the other side, no homeless person wants to fall asleep only to be awakened by being pounded by Kensington youths.

There needs to be some common sense applied to the situation, and I believe the easiest thing to do is to make people move.

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