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How to revitalise city centres for social, economic and environmental resilience

[Spotlight On: Urban Growth and Revitalisation](#)[Transport](#)[Urban Planning and Design](#)Author(s): **C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, C40 Knowledge Hub**

Diminished demand for office space due to flexible and hybrid working patterns, and shifts in consumer behaviour, have led to a decline in footfall in many city centres (downtowns, high streets, historical centres and other forms of urban core), especially since the COVID-19 pandemic. These worker and consumer preferences are expected to be here to stay.¹ As more commercial property leases and loans come to an end in the coming years, many more city centre buildings will prove no longer fit for purpose.² These trends, which compound problems that have been decades in the making in many places, are putting strain on city-centre businesses, driving up vacancy rates and draining these areas of life.³ The causes, impacts and solutions to the decline of urban cores are closely linked to many other challenges that cities are grappling with, from housing crises to declining tax revenues and rising downtown crime.⁴ Cities facing these issues have an opportunity to reassess the uses and urban form of their centres to turn these into vibrant areas where people want to live, visit and set up business.

This article sets out interventions that can help to revitalise city centres. Cities should take an integrated approach that includes a wide range of actions to create socially, economically and environmentally sustainable city centres that can thrive in the face of changes and challenges in decades to come.

The climate connection

There are many reasons why thriving city centres and revitalisation projects matter from a climate perspective, in particular:

- City centres offer the best opportunities for dense, transit-oriented, walkable, mixed-use development and '15-minute city' living. If this is lacking in your city, the urban core is the place to start. City centres

are also areas where municipal services, transit access and buildings already exist – revising these English areas in the urban core offers greater efficiency and emissions savings than sprawling outwards to develop new areas.

- City centres and other dense, mixed-use urban places are typically the most financially productive parts of the city. High vacancy rates and declining downtown tax revenues can leave a hole in city finances, undermining the city's ability to deliver programmes and investment, including on climate change.
- The scale of change and investment involved in many cities' long-term downtown revitalisation plans means they have huge potential to boost or reduce the city's emissions in key sectors (particularly construction, building energy efficiency and transport), as well as to shape the city's resilience to climate hazards.

Promote a wider mix of uses for land and buildings in city centres

City centres with a diverse mix of uses have recovered faster from the impacts of the pandemic than those with an overreliance on offices and retail and an oversupply of commercial property.⁵ A mix of uses in city centres promotes resilience by reducing dependence on a single sector, creates 'complete' neighbourhoods that offer a density and diversity of services and amenities, fosters a diverse and inclusive community, and reduces transportation needs by helping more people to access services close to home. To promote mixed-use development, cities can:

- **Implement mixed-use zoning or amend city codes to allow for flexible zoning to accommodate the widest possible range of activities and uses.** Flexibility from restrictive zoning helps cities to accommodate new uses and adapt buildings to meet the needs of new or existing tenants. Implementing zoning regulations that promote mixed-use development allows for a combination of residential, commercial and cultural spaces. This creates a lively and diverse downtown atmosphere, attracting people for work, leisure and living. For example, a key component of Seattle's Downtown Activation Plan includes updating zoning policies to allow more flexibility in building use and height, and allowing for more residential development while incentivising the inclusion of amenities such as childcare and education facilities. In San Francisco, the Roadmap to Downtown San Francisco's Future amends planning codes to maximize the flexibility of downtown zoning.
- **Expand the range of street-level uses and for retail and recreation uses on all floors of buildings and require active street-level frontages in new developments.** Cities can offer floor-area ratio exemptions, allowing additional square footage at all levels in a structure, for retail, restaurants and entertainment, or waive building-code retrofit requirements to enable temporary uses or a return to former use.

"The twin gods of Smooth Traffic and Ample Parking have turned our downtowns into places that are easy to get to but not worth arriving at."

City planner Jeff Speck (United States)⁶

- **Develop underused parking lots to bring land into active use.** Cities with current or historical parking minimums – regulations mandating a certain amount of parking for new developments – often have excessive amounts of parking in their downtowns, limiting the space that can be used for anything else, such as housing and transit stations, and driving up the cost of development.⁷ Cities with struggling downtowns, housing crises and parking minimums can incentivise the development of parking lots for new uses⁸ or the sharing of parking (for example, access to private parking on commercial property can be opened to weekend visitors) and replace parking minimums with maximums. In London, for instance, the supply of new parking fell by 40% after minimum parking requirements were replaced with parking maximums in 2004, showing that the market can still provide too much parking in some areas unless maximums are in place.⁹ The Parking Reform Network tracks land dedicated to parking and ongoing parking reforms in cities across the United States. Also read Ideas to accelerate parking reform in the United States and Less parking, more city: How Mexico City abolished parking minimums.

Cities should also provide financial incentives to property owners and developers who invest in the development, retrofit or restoration of buildings and vacant or underutilised lots in city centres:

- **Density bonuses:** Cities may offer developers the opportunity to build additional square footage or height beyond standard regulations if they incorporate a mix of residential, commercial and cultural spaces in their projects.
- **Simplified and expedited permitting and approval processes** to attract investment to city-centre development: Fast-tracking approvals reduces the time and cost associated with bringing a project to fruition, making it more attractive for developers. Cities should also develop clear guidelines to encourage property owners to undertake conversion, retrofit or restoration projects without facing excessive red tape.¹⁰ For example, Salt Lake City has focused on making it easier to build housing in its downtown by making the permitting process very straightforward for developers seeking to build new housing, leading to a reversal in the trend of downtown decline seen in other North American cities.
- **Low-interest loans, grants or subsidises:** For example, Calgary offers a grant programme, its

Downtown Retrofit Challenge, to offset the design, construction and performance costs of conversion and retrofit projects in its city centre.



Prioritise repurposing and retrofitting and minimise demolition and rebuilding to avoid a surge in construction-sector emissions

Demolition and the construction of new buildings are major sources of waste and emissions in cities. To minimise environmental costs, preserve local character and heritage, and create more jobs, cities should introduce policies to minimise the demolition of existing buildings and prioritise their repurposing, retrofitting and adaptive reuse. Follow the links for articles looking at ways to do this for private and residential buildings and municipal buildings. Where buildings need to be removed, promote their deconstruction.



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Increase the proportion of housing in city centres

Increasing the proportion of housing in office-centric areas can transform them into vibrant neighbourhoods that are home to and frequented by a diverse local population. New homes should also include affordable housing alongside amenities and services, catering to the varied needs of different family types and incomes. Cities can achieve this by:



Facilitating the conversion of underused commercial spaces and vacant offices to English helping to boost property values and create more active, vibrant neighbourhoods. This could include:

- **Legalising conversions and expanding conversion eligibility** to anywhere in the city that residential uses are allowed, such as in New York.
- **Waiving or modifying development standards and making regulatory changes** to facilitate office-to-residential conversions, such as in Seattle.
- **Allowing commercial buildings to convert to a wider range of housing types**, like shared housing, where apartments share kitchens and other facilities.¹¹ Rio de Janeiro's Reviver Centro plan includes a series of tax incentives and new use permits to encourage the construction of new housing and the retrofit of commercial buildings, converting them into residential or mixed-use buildings.

Legalising new housing above businesses on commercial streets. This can unlock space for affordable housing, help local residents live close to small businesses, and build vibrant mixed-use neighbourhoods, as in New York's City of Yes for Housing Opportunity strategy to build more housing in every neighbourhood, including downtown areas.

Ensuring that new residential development in city centres includes affordable housing to maintain a balanced community that includes young people, retirees on fixed incomes and families, by:

- **Earmarking vacant office space for conversion to affordable housing**, such as in Detroit.
- **Including specific zoning measures** to allow for more affordable residential housing, such as in Seattle.
- **Requiring or incentivising affordable housing** in mixed-use developments.
- **Fast-tracking permitting** for developments with a significant amount of affordable housing.



Photo credit: Steve DiMatteo via Unsplash



Support businesses in city centres

By investing in and supporting city-centre businesses, cities can strengthen their local economies, create jobs, attract residents and tourists, enhance the city's sense of community and identity, and maintain a dynamic urban environment.

Set up a fund, team or entity to help businesses navigate city processes and connect them to resources and workspace. For example, Seattle created a Small Business Navigation Team to help small businesses understand city processes and access financial resources. In Montréal, the Chamber of Commerce launched an online platform to help companies find takers for their surplus square footage, where they can list space they have for lease or sublease, aiming to pull in new businesses that previously would not have considered the downtown core.

Provide direct funding or incentives for businesses to set up shop in city centres. This could include tax breaks, grants or other support mechanisms to attract a diverse range of businesses, from small local shops to innovative startups. San Francisco has extended its First Year Free programme that eliminates city permit costs for new business ventures in its city centre, while Edmonton has offered grants for entrepreneurs wanting to move to the downtown core.

Offer financial support for underserved business owners. For example, Montréal offers assistance to vulnerable businesses in its downtown. Boston launched a multi-million-dollar commercial subsidy programme to support underserved businesses and fill vacant space and offers low-rent or rent-free spaces for minority and women-owned business enterprises on buildings' upper floors. Boston also expanded entrepreneurship opportunities for street vendors/food trucks, which are approximately 70% owned by black, indigenous and people of colour entrepreneurs, by allowing them to operate in more areas and at later times, while San Francisco waived fees for food trucks and carts and small-to-medium-scale street and sidewalk events.^{12, 13}

Ease permitting regulations for ground-floor commercial spaces. Cities can make it easier to start and grow a business by creating transparency, streamlining processes and building out systems to support new businesses opening in city centres, such as in San Francisco. Boston's PLAN Downtown seeks to promote the retention, growth and diversity of active ground-floor use, especially legacy and small businesses.¹⁴

Create programmes to fill vacant storefronts with artists and small businesses. San Francisco's Vacant to Vibrant programme matches aspiring entrepreneurs and artists with vacant ground-floor space in city centres. Cities can offer direct underwriting of lease rates or make connections between potential tenants and landlords to keep storefronts occupied.¹⁵

Enable meantime use and pop-up options at vacant premises. Cities should aim to offer both short- and long-term solutions for mixed use that balance long-term regeneration projects with longer lead-in and

delivery timeframes and short-term measures to bring life back into urban centres.¹⁶  English cities can implement temporary projects to activate storefronts in the short term.

Make transport and streetscape improvements to activate the public realm

Providing new and exciting opportunities for people in city centres, both day and night, helps create a sense of place and provides patrons for restaurants and shops. Cities should create permanent streetscape infrastructure changes and amenities, while also offering temporary solutions to activate the public realm.

- **Offer new parks and play areas.** In city centres where large green spaces and play spaces are not easily accessible, cities can take advantage of underused spaces and parking to create networks of outdoor infrastructure. For example, Seattle is converting a city pier to a new open green space; Miami has transformed the land below the Metrorail into the Underline 10 mile linear park and urban trail; Paris has opened schoolyards outside of school hours to create pocket parks and play areas; and Melbourne has installed unique play infrastructure in its central plaza. Creating new pocket green spaces also supports the delivery of local biodiversity, including pollinators, and a network of connected open and green spaces in the city centre, as outlined in Glasgow's City Centre Recovery Plan.¹⁷ Our guidance on how to develop people-centred streets offers more examples.



Typoe Sculpture Garden, The Underline in Miami – Photos credit: Phillip Pessar via [Flickr \(CC BY 2.0\)](#)

- **Facilitate the creation of welcoming outdoor seating and public spaces.** Sidewalk cafes and outdoor seating can enhance the social experience and encourage people to spend time in city centres. The National Association of City Transport Officials offers guidance on how cities can widen sidewalks to accommodate outdoor cafes. Cities can also improve and facilitate sidewalk café culture by implementing lower traffic speed limits, sidewalk bollards and planters.^{18, 19}
- **Consider road pedestrianisation and converting on-street parking spaces to other uses** (for example, seating for adjacent restaurants), including temporary street closures, such as San

Francisco's Sunday Streets or Bogota's Ciclovia. Barcelona has reclaimed busy  English intersections to create pedestrian zones, parks, and playgrounds in its urban core through its superblocks programme.

Work with communities to drive placemaking and champion local culture. Cities should involve local communities in the decision-making process for city-centre development. This ensures that the needs and preferences of local residents are considered, fostering a sense of ownership and pride in city centres. The Inclusive Community Engagement Playbook offers guidance on how to develop a working relationship with communities to achieve positive change.

- **Support community-driven art installations, activations, events and cultural celebrations.** Cities can foster a vibrant city-centre culture by organising events, festivals and cultural activities. These events create a sense of community and draw people to city-centre areas for entertainment and socialising. For example, Edmonton's Downtown Vibrancy Fund and Meet Me Downtown Grant provide funding to businesses and organisations for events, festivals and activities designed to activate and increase the number of people visiting the downtown area.
- **Consider implementing a special events strategy** to bring more events to city centres and hire leaders to promote this vision and advance the creative economy. Some cities have appointed directors of citywide special events and/or creative economy managers to help champion arts and culture in city centres.²⁰

Improving transport and streetscapes in city-centre areas enhances urban life by creating more accessible, pedestrian-friendly spaces. It attracts people, encourages local business activity, and fosters a sense of community. These improvements not only enhance the quality of life for residents but also attract visitors, boosting economic activity and reinforcing the city centres as a vibrant focal point of the city.

- **Improve transport access and infrastructure.** Revitalisation strategies should include updating transport links to make city centres easily accessible. Further guidance is available on how to create connected places, how to make public transport an attractive option, and how cities can make public transport inclusive, equitable and accessible for everyone.
- **Improve pedestrian and cycle access and safety.** Implement policies that prioritise pedestrian infrastructure, such as wider sidewalks, pedestrian zones, and well-maintained walkways. Create a pleasant and safe environment for people to explore on foot and repurpose underused, dark or unwelcoming spaces, such as alleyways or underpasses. Cities can also improve wayfinding by installing a network of navigation kiosks and better signage. Detailed guidance is available on how to develop people-centred streets and mobility.
- **Promote safer freight in city centres.** Urban last-mile delivery creates traffic congestion, noise pollution, traffic accidents and safety concerns for pedestrians and cyclists. Cities can work with local

businesses to implement safer delivery strategies and mechanisms that both support businesses and make streetscapes safer and more enjoyable. [Read our guidance on city-centre freight here](#).

Expand the availability of public services in city centres

Downtowns that have a wide range of public services are more successful at addressing the diverse needs of urban populations. City centres dominated by offices and commercial buildings may lack basic public services that will be needed by a growing downtown population. In addition, city centres may have a higher concentration of vulnerable populations, including those facing homelessness, mental health challenges and unemployment, who will need targeted support. As well as helping those individuals, addressing these common downtown social challenges can lead to greater safety for everyone and a more positive perception of the city centre.

Incentivise the inclusion of childcare and education services in developments in city centres, also by allowing greater building heights when these facilities are included in new buildings. Calgary provides [incentives for vacant office space conversions into educational institutions](#), as well as homes, hotels and other uses, to revitalise its downtown. Co-located universities, associated firms and research labs in city centres benefit from proximity, leading to innovation and knowledge sharing, even at the neighbourhood level.²¹

Implement training programmes and access to employment opportunities. Cities can also work with employers to integrate [supportive services and training into city centre jobs](#), such as on-site childcare services, and to introduce on-the-job training and apprenticeships to drive employment in city centres.

Offer targeted homelessness services in addition to [expanding affordable housing in city centres](#). For example, Vancouver's [Downtown Eastside Plan](#) integrates housing and support services for vulnerable populations in the downtown area.

Expand services for public health issues that affect city centres. For example, Seattle issued an executive order to address the open sale and use of drugs in public places in downtown neighbourhoods. Actions include the pilot expansion of overdose response programmes, research-based drug abatement programmes and expanding access to treatment services and overdose reversal medications.²²

Partner with organisations and community safety programmes to improve safety. The physical environment signals whether an area is safe and encourages or discourages people from feeling welcome, though safety looks different to different communities. For example, San Francisco has invested nearly US\$50 million in non-police, community-based ambassador programmes as part of its [Downtown Revitalisation programme](#).²³

Improve cleanliness and waste management. Maintaining clean walkways and public spaces is also key

to creating a welcoming city-centre environment where people feel comfortable to stay  English. To address this, in Washington, DC, the Downtown Business Improvement District has implemented a corps of safety/hospitality and maintenance (SAM) workers, known as known as SAM Ambassadors, who act as caretakers of the downtown area, serving as roving concierges, law-enforcement aides and goodwill ambassadors. To help with cleanliness and to make the area welcoming, ambassadors remove litter, trash, recycling, posters and graffiti from downtown streets. They also landscape, paint, hang banners, power wash and meet other public-space needs.

Develop a communications strategy to promote city-centre development

A well-crafted communications strategy can generate community engagement, attract investors and create excitement about city-centre revitalisation, helping to convey vision, benefits and progress, and fostering support and participation from residents and businesses in the city centre.

Create a dedicated website and expand advertising for city centres as places to live, work and play.
A dedicated website serves as a centralised hub for information, showcasing plans, progress updates, and upcoming events, such as that of Montréal Centre Ville. It enhances transparency, accessibility and engagement with city centres.

Consider a city-centre ‘ambassador’ programme, such as Calgary’s, which connects residents, businesses and visitors to information on events, places and services nearby. Ambassadors build ties with local businesses, community organisations and vulnerable to gather feedback and identify resources and support.



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