

Downtowns vitality: issues of urban space and public policies in the US and Brazil

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Downtown revitalization continues to be a concern in urban planning worldwide. In the dynamics of urban transformation, city centers have gone through several stages, ranging from moments of strong growth, followed by decentralization processes, and the displacement of population and key economic activities. Downtowns have also faced the competition with new consumption and employment centralities outside the urban core. All these tensions have resulted on the weakening of downtown areas, leading to many socio-spatial transformations through time. While this is a global phenomenon, particularities, a focus of attention in planning, have varied depending on cultural patterns, and social, spatial and economic contexts. In the case of North American cities, the strong process of suburbanization along with the specialization of the CBD (Central Business District) in commercial and management services, among other factors have resulted on the de-population of downtowns. While Latin American downtown areas also went through increasing decay, socio-economic and cultural factors differ markedly from the North American case; for example, there has been a persistent willingness of high-income families to live downtown as symbol of status, or the fast growth of peripheral areas without infrastructure mainly occupied by the lowest income groups, or an observed lower mobility of the population (compared to the US). Different traditions of governance, regulations and community engagement have led to different approaches on downtown revitalization policies in cities.

In this broad context, the objective of this paper is to analyze what are the main similarities and differences in contemporary downtown revitalization efforts in North

and Latin America. Specifically, this paper proposes an in-depth comparative study between two cities: one in the US, Bryan/College Station, Texas, and one in Brazil, Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul. Our methodological approach deals with a two level analysis: socio-spatial issues and the public policies for downtowns.

After a comprehensive literature review focusing on the role of downtown in North and Latin American cities, we pinpoint the main differences (and similarities) in the planning policies and processes on land use regulation and downtown revitalization efforts in the US and Brazil. Our main contribution is on the empirical study of these two cases, Porto Alegre and Bryan/College Station. First, the paper seeks to contextualize the two cities presenting their urban evolution processes, highlighting the way both downtown areas became to be what they are today. The analysis of socio-spatial issues is based on a spatial analysis of land uses, socio-economic patterns of residents and businesses, and natural and cultural landscape qualities of downtown area. Then the paper presents an analysis of the main urban planning policies aiming at downtown revitalization in the two cities. In Porto Alegre the paper focuses on two key programs: 1) a federal (Ministry of Culture) program called “*Monumenta*”, whose objective was to combine restoration and preservation of historical heritage with economic development; 2) a municipal project called “*Viva o Centro*” (*Downtown Alive*) with the objective of improving livability in downtown. In the case of Bryan /College Station we focus on: 1) the “*Main Street Program*” as it is applied in the Texas context along with the Texas Historical Commission with the objective of both preserve the national heritage and revitalize life and economic activity in downtown small and medium cities; 2) the second focus of analysis will be on a public private partnership (PPP) organization called *Bryan Downtown Historical Commission* that recently succeeded on obtaining the designation of “cultural district” to Bryan Downtown.

As some of the main findings, we can highlight the importance of socio-spatial issues in the vitality of downtowns. Both cities have suffered loss of high income population, but the dimension and impact of this in each case was different. In the case of Porto Alegre, middle income groups live in downtown with high residential densities, taking advantage of the presence of a hub of public transportation, and concentration of employment and commerce. In the case of Bryan/College Station (BCS) there is a

lack of public transportation, weak commerce and low density residential uses. Our analysis also shows the importance of the qualities of downtown landscape (natural and cultural) in their potential vitality. Both downtowns have historic heritage, in terms of relevant buildings and urban spaces, but downtown Porto Alegre has also natural landscape qualities, such as the waterfront to the lake Guaíba and a hilly topography that adds value and significance to the area as it a panoramic views of the city and the surrounding lake.

From the planning policies analysis, we find that both cities are making efforts to revitalize their downtowns with the participation of various agents, both at the national and local levels. In Bryan, the strong participation of the local community seems to be making strong impact on the success of its revitalization process. However, the conurbation between Bryan and College Station generates a kind of competition between the two cities, tending to weaken downtown Bryan. Further, both in BCS and in Porto Alegre, downtowns are expected to develop new roles in global economy, which, in some cases, may lead to new tensions and disputes between agents. In both cities we observe a level of displacement and re-location of population. The initial de-population of downtown areas in the US is now reverted by the re-investment in infrastructure, facilities and as a result a more affluent population is going back to city centers. This “gentrification” process is, to say the least, controversial as it reinforces a pattern of segregation in downtowns.

The paper ends highlighting the importance of studies like this, to better understand the complex dynamic of downtowns and to identify new ways of managing their growth and transformation.