

# The Decline and Rebirth of the Central City

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## Dallas' inner city provides the textbook example

When Dwight Eisenhower signed the Interstate Highway Act in October, 1956, he was literally paving the way for businesses to move out of downtowns all across America.

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The early roads were two lanes, and would connect city center to city center. As cities grew, businesses needed to communicate and meet with customers, so they located near the telegraph office in downtown, where they could take a road directly to the next city or catch the train.

This contributed to the growth in demand for downtown office space, and eventually led to the vertical development of cities.

As construction techniques evolved in the 1920s and 1930s, skyscrapers were built and a downtown office became a sign of prestige and power. In many cities, inter-urban and commuter railroad systems, along with local streets, created a true hub-and-spoke system. This made downtown the most convenient place to conduct business and get to and from customers and one's home.

Beginning in the mid-1960s, regularly scheduled airline service became a new travel alternative for many businesses.

Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport is a prime example of how a well-planned and -located facility changed the entire development pattern of a major metropolitan area. Completed in 1973, D/FW Airport put this area on the map due to its mid-continent location.

In the ensuing 20 years since the opening of D/FW Airport, major corporations moved from central business district locations across the United States to relocated to Dallas-Fort Worth; however, for the most part, they did not locate in downtown.

Instead, they found new homes in the suburban cities surrounding Dallas that could now accommodate them due to their interstate highway access and convenient airport.

## The central city fades

By 1975, the dominant role that a central business district played in the community was coming to an end.

Shopping centers and small office buildings were being developed along the bypass roads and provided services that used to be available only in the central city.

The first small suburban office buildings began appearing as these towns grew after the interstates were completed. However, the office parks and suburban buildings one sees today were built during the last 10 years, fueled by an oversupply of capital. More office space was built during the 1980s than previously existed in the entire history of this country.

## Technology changes business

Telecommuting, mobile commuting and video conferencing will have a profound effect on the way Americans do business, resulting in a fundamental change in our lifestyle.

During the next 10 years, millions of workers will do their jobs without going to a central office. While this might appear to have a detrimental effect on the central business district, ultimately it will benefit the city centers.

People who work alone, only connected electronically to an office, will demand more human interaction when they are not working. This need will put inner-city housing at a premium because it is close to the cultural and entertainment districts.

The people most likely to feel the need to live in an urban environment are those with no children who work from their homes on most days.

## Central city benefits

The central business district's pulse as the heart of the city has continued in spite of the departure of so many workers to the suburbs. The central city has numerous attributes that include:

- The best access in the region, including public transport and the highway hub
- Center of culture, including museums, symphony halls and theater
- Sports and events halls
- The best hotels in the city
- Restaurants and clubs
- Farmers markets, flower markets and fish markets
- The main library, courthouse, city hall and police headquarters
- Underutilized and vacant old warehouses and historic office buildings that are available for reuse as restaurants, lofts, apartments, art galleries and studio/offices.

■ Dallas provides a textbook case of an inner city that during the 1980s had a daytime population of more than 100,000 and nighttime population of less than 100 people.

During that time, the stage was set for the eventual residential rebirth that is occurring today. In the '80s, the city downzoned two areas next to the CBD: Deep Ellum and the West End, which then flourished with restaurants, clubs and retailers.

Also, developers built more than 8 million square feet of office buildings in and around the CBD, which by 1992 housed nearly 20,000 employees.

Artists, entrepreneurs and urban pioneers began to occupy the smaller vacant industrial loft buildings in these and other fringe districts near the CBD.



Downtown Dallas is not unlike other Sunbelt cities.

## Residential boom

All of this led to a residential boom that began in 1990 with the construction of the first new upscale apartment complex next to downtown, The Meridian.

Its success proved that there was demand and it became the symbol of the residential rebirth.

Other luxury apartment projects soon followed in some areas that previously had been regarded and unsafe and without residential amenities.

By 1995, more than 5,000 new residents were living within the CBD or within one mile of it. The demand for housing, which originated with luxury apartments, broadened considerably to include loft condominiums, townhouses, rental units in numerous 1- to 3-story industrial buildings and the renovation of Victorian homes.

Retailers such as Albertsons and Target, along with traditional convenience stores, bookstores, dry cleaners and others have moved in to support the growing population.

With the Mayor and City Council's support and assistance, some of the largest empty industrial complexes and office buildings are being converted for lofts and apartments within the city's core. This public/private investment has been a critical catalyst to bring the residential development into the CBD itself.

## Dallas is not alone

What became evident in Dallas will occur in numerous other Sunbelt cities.

While travel and communication advances have made it possible to do business from even the most remote parts of the earth, man remains a social being and has deep-seated desires to be part of a community or village.

The inner-city environment can satisfy that need by providing the housing stock, entertainment and dining, shopping and cultural requirements of its residents.

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