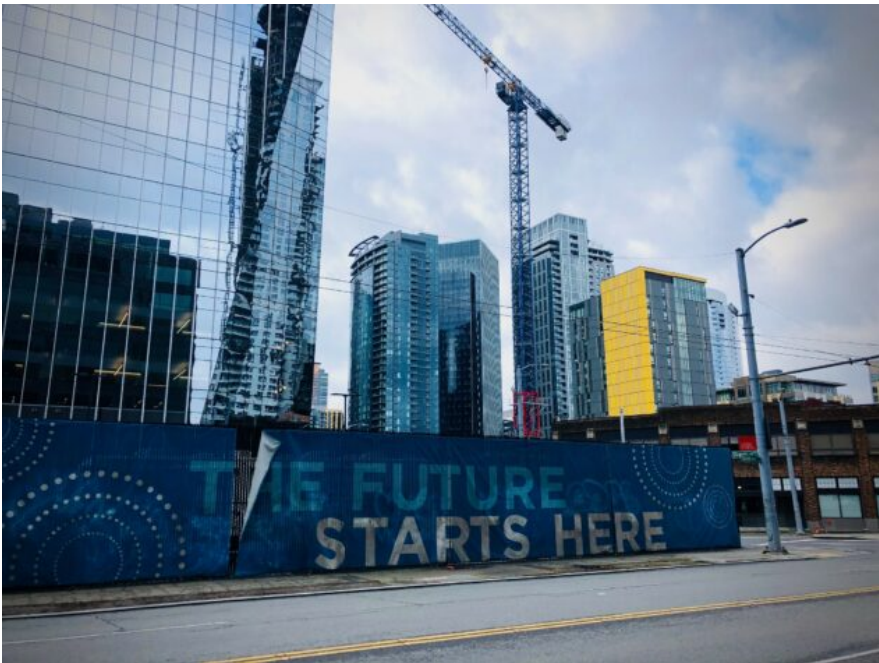Trending: 'Dungeons & Dragons' in 2023: Wizards of the Coast reveals 'Planescape' revival and more (https://www.geekwire.com/2023/dungeons-dragons-in-2023-wizards-of-the-coast-reveals-planescape-revival-and-more/)

It's not just about bringing workers back to the office: 10 indicators of a downtown resurgence

BY CHUCK WOLFE (HTTPS://WWW.GEEKWIRE.COM/AUTHOR/CHUCKWOLFE/) on May 22, 2023 at 12:54 pm

(https://news.microsoft.com/on-the-issues/)

Downtown Seattle and Amazon's headquarters campus during the COVID-19 pandemic. (GeekWire Photo / Kurt Schlosser)

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about significant transformations to cities worldwide. The road to recovery is complex and not always predictable.

Some cities such as Salt Lake City or Bakersfield, Calif., are now seeing more downtown activity (https://downtownrecovery.com/dashboards/recovery_ranking.html) than before the pandemic.

Seattle has a different reality. Fewer than half of downtown workers have returned to the office here, one of the slowest rates of return in the U.S. And according to data from the Downtown Seattle Association (https://downtownseattle.org/programs-services/research/economic-recovery/), worker foot traffic is declining this year after hitting a peak in February, a trend also seen elsewhere (https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-return-to-the-office-has-stalled-e0af9741).

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City leaders praised Amazon for forcing its workers back to the office. The new mandate appeared to boost business for the bars and restaurants and doggy daycares (https://www.geekwire.com/2023/amazon-workers-and-a-familiar-energy-return-to-seattle-hq-as-new-in-person-office-policy-kicks-in/) around the company's headquarters when it went into effect earlier this month.

But there is more to recovery (https://www.geekwire.com/2023/amazons-great-return-to-the-office-is-just-one-aspect-of-a-downtown-seattle-comeback/) than the "Amazon Great Return."

There must be a holistic and practical approach, anchored in local context and community-driven initiatives, that promotes livability, safety, and sustainability. This is how cities can set inspirational goals beyond the necessary, yet often pessimistic discussions of empty offices, business receipts and attention to drug addiction.

RELATED: 'Huge news for downtown': Cinerama reopening in Seattle follows Amazon's office return (https://www.geekwire.com/2023/huge-news-for-downtown-cinerama-reopening-in-seattle-follows-amazons-office-return/)

Some envision a traditional return to the commute-based office-residence split. Others say downtowns must rethink their purpose and redesign underused spaces to attract more people.

"If people do not need to go downtown for wages, they must instead desire to go there," Harvard and MIT academics wrote in the The New York Times (https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/05/10/opinion/nyc-office-vacancy-playground-city.html). "A place to live and play rather than work: This is the dream of the Playground City."

Below I list ten signs of ongoing processes that indicates a city's ongoing recovery and regeneration. These guideposts, backed by real-world examples, might offer a roadmap to inspire resurgence.

Innovative interventions. Many would claim the first indicator, and perhaps the most important one, is government interventions in critical areas such public transportation, and affordable housing, or the range of services assured by the recently renewed and expanded (https://council.seattle.gov/2023/05/18/whats-the-mid-seattle-city-council-approves-major-community-led-investments-in-downtown/) Metropolitan Improvement District in Seattle. But there are other forms of market interventions that can make a dramatic difference in a recovering downtown, such as SIFF's purchase (https://www.geekwire.com/2023/cinerama-is-saved-seattle-film-nonprofit-siff-acquires-historic-theater-from-paul-allen-estate/) of the iconic Cinerama theater, which sat vacant throughout the pandemic.

Mixed-use spaces. The second indicator is to create temporary and permanent mixed-use spaces. The government and private sector can collaborate to amplify parks and privately-owned public spaces with community gardens, bike lanes, or renovated old buildings for mixed-use purposes. Such designs provide opportunities for social interaction and can reinvigorate the public realm. The crown jewel reference is usually the High Line in New York City, a former railway that now serves as a public park and walkway, attracting both tourists and locals alike. But Seattle has its own examples (https://www.planetizen.com/node/63315).

Encouragement of artistic expression. The third indicator emphasizes the importance of artistic expression and its impact on a city's interdisciplinary character. City stakeholders should prioritize artistic expression and fund public art installations, cultural festivals, and

creatively, fostering social connection and engagement. Seattle is blessed with the Olympic Sculpture Park as well as a variety of public art. The Art in Public Places Program in Miami, Fort Collins, Greenville and many other cities allows artists to transform everyday spaces into artworks.

Seattle's Olympic Sculpture Park. (Chuck Wolfe Photo)

Community subsidies. The fourth indicator is for businesses, nonprofits, and the public sector to fund community-building initiatives. These initiatives may include investments in small businesses, additional funding for community centers and programs for youth and seniors, and public infrastructure such as schools and parks. Such investments help rebuild trust and improve a city's social fabric while creating opportunities for economic growth. In Detroit, Greening Detroit (https://www.greeningdetroit.com/) provides funding and resources for community-led greening initiatives, generating urban green spaces and improving the city's air quality.

Safety assurance. The fifth indicator focuses on ensuring safety through police presence, environmental design, and "eyes on the street." Furthermore, cities must include citizen feedback mechanisms in their safety assurance frameworks to monitor residents' perceptions of their safety. Perception of safety is not limited to crime avoidance but results from pedestrian safety mechanisms now common in Seattle, Atlanta, and other cities, such as signalized crosswalks and bike lanes to improve pedestrian and cyclist well-being.

Embracing creativity and color. The sixth indicator emphasizes the importance of embracing creativity to repurpose and add color to spaces and buildings. City officials and urban designers must repurpose abandoned buildings as canvases for street art or host community street art events. In Los Angeles, the LA Mural Ordinance (https://culturela.org/murals/#:~:text=The%20Mural%20Ordinance%20was%20established,and%20community%20participation%20in%20the) is a citywide initiative that encourages artists to transform buildings into urban mega-canvases, not unlike the ornately illustrated building walls of Lisbon and Berlin.

Street sounds and scents. The seventh indicator aims to enhance streets' sound and smell to improve the city's quality of life. Cities can hold live music performances, outdoor food markets, public fountains, and water features. In New Orleans, street musicians contribute significantly to the city's vibrant culture, drawing tourists and locals to the streets. In Grasse, France, the home of three famous perfumeries, Fragonard releases scents as people stroll through one section of the town.

Colorful street art lines the streets of Lisbon, Portugal. (Chuck Wolfe Photo)

Encouraging children's participation. The eighth indicator emphasizes the importance of children's active engagement in building resilient urban areas. Children should be an active part of street life and engage in public playgrounds, after-school programs, and community-led events like parades or seasonal celebrations. In New York, the Summer Streets (https://www.nyc.gov/html/dot/html/pedestrians/summerstreets.shtml) program closes the central business district for seven miles on three consecutive Saturdays in August, allowing children and families to play and explore car-free streets. Mayor Harrell has proposed similar efforts in Seattle. Internationally, there is a growing movement around children's roles and opportunities in urbanism.

Highlighting scenic views. The ninth indicator is to incorporate and highlight scenic views wherever possible by options such as rooftop gardens, scenic byways, or public lookout points to accentuate a city's beauty. In San Francisco, the Lands End Lookout (https://www.nps.gov/goga/planyourvisit/landsend.htm) is a public viewing point, with information panels that provide a comprehensive view of the city. Views can serve as major downtown assets, and their enhancement and celebration can help fuel a sense of recovery.

Places worth visiting. The tenth indicator follows from the ninth. Cities need a "places worth visiting" mindset, with a map designed to entice both residents and visitors alike. These may include wayfaring systems, historical landmarks, scenic vistas, locally owned businesses, or cultural centers. With the Cinerama purchase and the ongoing waterfront redevelopments, Seattle will soon have many worthy additions to such a list.

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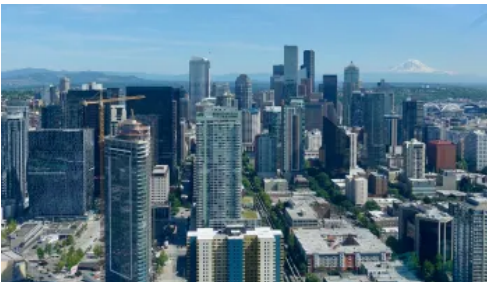

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