



town futures

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where is your town center?

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If a complete stranger asks, "Where is your town center?" what would you say?

Following the success of its first three outreach films, Action: Better City embarked on its most ambitious mission to date: a ten day, nine town safari hunt for contemporary town centers. Armed only with digital film cameras, we piled into a Winnebago and traveled to Mt. Vernon, Lynnwood, Monroe, Snohomish, Kirkland, Renton, Kent, Tacoma, Centralia, and Monroe to ask a simple question: "Where is your town center?"

Traditional American town centers once included proud public plazas, prominent buildings, special streets, and iconic spaces. Now, placeless strip malls, parking lots, and spaghetti-like highway interchanges dominate our communities. It's no surprise our innocent question was met with blank stares and awkward hesitation. Still, many people realize modern urban growth was solely for the sake of economic growth, denying our traditional towns many of the amenities their European counterparts boast. Growth, the 20th century emperor of our American communities, has no clothes.

From as far north as Mount Vernon to as far south as Centralia, we spoke with over 150 citizens, captured over 40 hours of film, and logged over 300 Winnebago miles, all in the name of learning what had replaced the once proud hearts of American towns. What emerged was a realization that choices in housing, retail, transportation, and culture provide the foundation for a prosperous town center.

where do you live?

"We would rather live in an itty bitty place and be here.."

A woman on a bike ride in Redmond would like housing options that would provide her elderly mother with more accessibility to services. It took eight years for a couple in Tacoma to be allowed to live above their downtown store.

"I just need a roof for my kids, you know? That's all I really care about."

To most people, the American Dream is a house in the suburbs. And many of those people are living it. However, the drawbacks of designing neighborhoods around a resident's car, rather than the resident, were apparent in the answers we received:

Do you live within walking distance to a drug or grocery store, or place of work?

"No. I have to drive everywhere."

Are there options available for you to live near where you work, shop, or play?

"No. I have to drive everywhere."

Would you prefer to live within walking distance of amenities?

"Yes, but I have to drive everywhere now."

Do people understand there are alternatives to sprawling across the countryside? Does the market provide these alternatives?

"Sure, I'm surrounded by drug lords, and it isn't the safest environment, but it's affordable."

We found that Puget Sound residents want housing choice, affordability and accessibility. Planning efforts should provide for dense and socially diverse cities where economic and social activities overlap. Town centers provide a place for them to do so.

where do you shop?

Where people spend their money has a direct impact on their community and, in turn, their own quality of life.

From the antique shops of Snohomish to the strip malls of Lynnwood, people say they like the experience of shopping at small locally owned stores, yet they do most of their day-to-day shopping at big-box retailers.

"I come to Wal-Mart for the prices."
—Wal-Mart shopper

"What about the experience?"
—an a:bc member

"Uh, I don't pay attention to that."

So, what do people want? Do they *really* care about the experience, specialization and service smaller stores provide? Or will they stand by and watch as big-box retail puts the mom-and-pop stores out of business with lower prices, larger selections, and a sea of parking?

"If you spend a dollar at Wal-Mart, six cents goes back to the community. If you spend a dollar at a locally owned store, 60 cents comes back to the community."
—Downtown Economic Coordinator, Centralia

If community members want to preserve their town's individual flavor, it's each individual's responsibility to buy locally.



Photography and film stills courtesy action: better city.

a film by action: better city

how do you get there?

"I'll tell you about transportation," said a senior Redmond resident and self-proclaimed old highwayman. "I was a highway engineer, myself."

I restate my question. "What is the role of transportation in your community?"

"Highways are public transportation as far as I'm concerned."

How closely does this interview resemble our nation's transportation priorities? This policy has created a sprawling, placeless landscape dominated by automobiles and eight-lane arterials. Yet we continue to convince ourselves that if we could only solve congestion, we could live as we please.

"Most of these discussions center around congestion, but I think that's the wrong focus...we need transportation choices that create a sense of community" [paraphrased].
—former Seattle City Councilman

What if we ask different questions. Can we afford our desire to live in an American dreamland? Is it transit's job to solve traffic jams or to provide alternatives to congestion? Can we solve congestion or should we use it as a tool to rebuild a sustainable lifestyle?

What if we build great places and link them with transportation choices instead of building freeways and letting sprawl fill in the gaps?

"The word on everyone's mind is traffic...traffic, traffic, traffic."
—Kirkland Mayor

"We need more highways," said the old highwayman. "You can't get me any different."

Can we?

what do you do?

We investigated where people gather and what they do when they get there.

"There's not much to do around here..."

We can tell you where to race remote controlled cars in Redmond, where to play bingo in Snohomish, and eat homemade Popsicles in Mount Vernon.

In Centralia, an eccentric individual has physically created his own world through art.

"Bad kids do good art."

The growing Hispanic population has transformed sleepy downtown Monroe into a bustling community.

Where else but Snohomish can you find a Harley biker church? "Let's do Church!"

Nudist RV camp?
There's one in Mount Vernon.

Enjoy the waterfront marina?
Kirkland has a nice view.

"...but all they want is their big-ass garage..."

Need your hair coifed in Kent?
"...I get my hair done across the tracks at the Magic Style, that's my town center."

what is the future of our towns?

The journey took us up and down the I-5 corridor and in and out of the hearts of its towns. The hearts are indeed still beating, but the lifeblood that feeds them — the housing market, the transportation situation, the cultural communities, and the traditional retail — have been damaged by the mindless profit-driven growth of the last 40 years. Will the next 40 years bring us thoughtful community-driven growth? Or, will we see more cars scrambling to mega-shopping centers, big box retail, and strip malls? Can we, as a society get together and create smarter growth to foster communication and community? Can we create spaces that gather, not divide, our people? Can we, in the 21st century, build a culture that will mature and inspire us for centuries to come?

"Yes, we can."
—action: better city

action: better city is dedicated to fostering and exploring the ideas that link Seattle and its surrounding environment, the connections of its downtown neighborhoods, and the potential for unique public spaces. Established in 1968, the non-profit 501(c)3 organization is alive and well and can be found at www.actionbettercity.org, where you can also purchase a copy of the video.