



**INSPIRED LEADERS  
SHAPING CITIES**

# Maintaining Authenticity of Place

A 2016 TOP ISSUES COUNCIL **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This report lists the elements and practices that contribute to the authenticity of a place, geared towards benefiting the daily work of city builders, planners, place managers and community leaders. It also aims to help stakeholders understand the fundamentals of their downtown and recognize the characteristics that build authenticity.

**Downtowns and city centers** are authentic because of the people, the culture, the built environment, the natural environment and physical geography, and signature events.

**Authentic places** are those that accurately reflect the uniqueness, character and heritage of a district, leaving those who use and visit it feeling like they have been in a one-of-a-kind, memorable place. An authentic place will be genuine and have recognizable cultural characteristics.

Our ten-point authenticity checklist addresses the key components downtown stakeholders can employ to maintain authenticity, history and culture while strategically positioning themselves for the future.

## TEN-POINT AUTHENTICITY CHECKLIST

1. Engaged and involved property ownership
2. Commercial diversity and independent businesses
3. An evolving built environment
4. Walkability and accessibility
5. Places that are clean, safe, attractive and welcoming
6. Diversity and attitude of culture and people
7. Public spaces as gathering places
8. Theater, arts and culture
9. Historic preservation
10. Vibrancy and energy

Authentic places **share commonalities** that urban place management organizations can use to identify, evaluate and highlight their district's authenticity. As people seek deeper connections with their surroundings, authenticity can serve as a tool to drive economic and community development efforts.

To a large extent, the authentic character and feel of a downtown is defined by its past and present physical characteristics and uses. To maintain authenticity, practitioners must acknowledge and embrace the fact that downtowns are always evolving and must find ways to keep the individual character and feel of their downtown at the forefront of the planning process.

## OPPORTUNITIES INCLUDE

- Preserve downtown's unique feel and personality
- Engage diverse publics in all that make downtowns different, livable and exciting
- Distinguish downtowns as mixed-use centers
- Attract people who are tired of the sameness of the suburbs and want a lifestyle based on genuine experiences
- Differentiate one downtown from another
- Build a distinctive brand

## CHALLENGES INCLUDE

- Conflicts between gentrification and affordability
- The "me-too" temptation
- Public policy choices that inhibit growth
- Land-use, design and construction decisions driven primarily by the profit motive
- "Skyline Envy"
- Achieving a balance between stakeholders who value authenticity and preservation with those who argue for "modernization"

## SUMMARY

We recognize that authentic places are not "made," but are instead supported, protected and advocated for by place managers and stakeholders. Authentic places often face political and developmental pressures that advocates and stakeholders strive to protect. As practitioners, we must find ways to keep the individual character and feel of our downtowns and urban districts at the forefront of the planning process by making sure that the place remains accessible to all users.

This checklist is meant to be a roadmap for place managers seeking to increase their community's authenticity, while acknowledging that each community's path may be different as the guide to authenticity is not a one-size fits all approach.