Shopping Downtown
by William J. Craig

Until Southdale opened in 1956, the only significant shopping areas in the Twin Cities were the two downtowns. Since then the dominance of our downtowns has shrunk and the role they play in the Twin Cities retail market has changed. Shoppers now have other options, most of them closer to home and with free parking provided. Yet the downtowns continue to have a special allure, attracting shoppers with stores unique in size and variety. The downtowns continue to be strong retail centers.

The Twin Cities take pride in this strength and are willing to take extra steps to preserve it. Public subsidies are going into new downtown developments to compensate for the high land costs and expensive architecture. New transit systems are being designed to make it easier to get to and from the downtowns and to give them a competitive advantage in an increasingly congested urban transportation system. The hope is that these public investments will be repaid with interest. But much of the impetus for this investment goes beyond that. We see the downtowns as the core of our urban life and we are willing to go to extra lengths to preserve them.

The continued strength of the downtowns and the improved chances for recouping these public investments depend on keeping them attractive to shoppers. We need to know who shops downtown and why some people avoid it. In this way the downtowns can move to build on their strengths and improve on their weaknesses.

This article is based on a survey of 1,006 adults living in the seven-county Twin Cities metropolitan area, people aged 18 and over. They were contacted by telephone as part of the 1988 Twin Cities Area Survey.


How Many Shop Downtown?

Nearly one-quarter of the adult population in the metropolitan Twin Cities shops downtown on a regular basis, once a month or more often (Figure 1). Seven percent shop downtown at least once per week. This means that over 100,000 people weekly and nearly 350,000 people regularly shop the downtown. These are remarkably high figures, but more stunning is the fact that most of these shoppers are going out of their way to make that shopping trip. One-third of these regular shoppers already work downtown, but two-thirds make a special trip to shop downtown.

Throughout this article, downtown is treated as if it were a single place, but, in fact, there are two downtowns in the Twin Cities. Downtown Minneapolis is significantly larger than downtown St. Paul and this is reflected in how people relate to them. Two-thirds of the people (65 percent) who shop downtown at least a few times a year or more, choose downtown Minneapolis most often as their destination, one-third (32 percent) choose St. Paul, and a bare 3 percent choose to shop both downtowns equally. Except for this issue of scale, the study found no major difference between the two downtowns in terms of the type of people who shopped there or the reasons given for not shopping there more often.

The people who do not shop downtown (they shop there less than “a few times a year”) are a substantial portion of the metropolitan population—nearly half (45 percent). This is a cause for concern.

This study asked about shopping, not about going downtown. People go downtown for other reasons than shopping, as a poll conducted in June of 1988 by the Star Tribune showed.* Their Minnesota Poll surveyed 406 people across the seven-county metropolitan area and asked both how many times per week people visited downtown and the purpose of their visit. The Star Tribune study found that only 19 percent said they visited downtown less than once a

* Personal communication with Robert Davies, assistant managing editor for research at the Star Tribune, January 1989.
week or never. Those who did go downtown went primarily for work (33 percent), for dining or entertainment (22 percent), for shopping (17 percent), or for medical or legal services (16 percent).

But when it comes to shopping, the MCSR poll indicates that nearly one-quarter of the people shop downtown regularly and nearly one-half do not shop downtown.

Who Shops Downtown

Three major factors determine who shops downtown: where people work, where they live, and their tastes. Some attention has already been given to the downtown worker. One-third of the regular shoppers downtown (those who shop once a month or more often) are people who also work there.

Using zip codes it is possible to map the residence of those who are regular shoppers downtown. These comments are made with some caution, because of the very low number of households interviewed in any one zip code area, but the pattern makes sense. The downtowns attract shoppers from across the metropolitan area, especially people living inside the 494-694 interstate highway loop. People living in lower income areas and those close to the major malls (especially Rosedale and Maplewood Mall) do not shop downtown. On the other hand, downtown attracts some people living beyond the interstate loop, especially people to the southwest into Eden Prairie, people to the southeast into Inver Grove Heights and Cottage Grove into Hastings, and people in cities on the St. Croix River, including Stillwater.

Determining how people's tastes affect their shopping is difficult to measure, especially in a telephone survey. Instead we can look at household income and other demographic characteristics as a surrogate measure for taste. The people who shop downtown regularly are homeowners. They have household incomes of over $40,000 a year. The chief breadwinner works full-time either as a manager or professional or in a job that is technical, or involves sales, or administrative support. Most often (half or more), shoppers are younger than thirty-five. Most often, shoppers are single.

Another way of looking at the economic and demographic characteristics is to see which types of people appear downtown more frequently than their numbers in the population would indicate. With this approach, a less upscale shopper emerges, one more representative of the broader range of downtown workers and inner-city dwellers who use downtown as their most convenient shopping location. Here we can learn where downtown has its best “market penetration.” This includes people from households earning $20,000 to $30,000 a year as well as those earning over $40,000 a year. Occupational groups that stand out are similar to those just mentioned (administrative support, sales, technical, professional, and management), but now the emphasis is on lower level positions. Women stand out in proportions far higher than their numbers in the general population would suggest. And renters stand out as well. This second way of looking at the socioeconomic status of shoppers shows a broader market, not as upscale, and more representative of the Twin Cities as a whole, and of the central cities that have the downtowns as their closest and most accessible shopping areas.

In summary, three kinds of people shop downtown: those who work there, those for whom downtown is their closest regional shopping center, and those with higher incomes. Each has a different reason for shopping downtown and each needs a different range of goods and services.

Why Do People Avoid Shopping Downtown?

What about the people who don't shop downtown? It could be that these people have an alternative shopping area that is more attractive to them or it could be that they dislike downtown and avoid it.

The metropolitan area is nearly ringed by regional shopping malls. There are seven malls now, with two more proposed, and each one of them offers over 500,000 square feet for shopping. For most people, these malls are closer to their homes than downtown, and many have to drive past a mall to get to downtown. Last October, a survey conducted for the Star Tribune asked people about their shopping activity over the previous thirty days.* Downtown Minneapolis placed third, behind Rosedale and Southdale, in popularity as a shopping area. Clearly, there are alternative shopping areas that are attractive.

The MCSR survey asked specifically about why people avoid shopping downtown. To everyone but those who shop downtown weekly, we read a list of three reasons why some people don't shop downtown and asked that they identify whether or not each reason applied to them. The three reasons for not shopping downtown were: The cost of goods is too high. Parking is too expensive or too hard to find. You are uncomfortable with the people you encounter downtown.

People's response to this question (Figure 2) showed that parking problems are far and away the biggest reason for avoiding downtown. Nearly three out of every four people (72 percent) agreed that the cost of parking or just finding parking is a significant reason why they don't shop downtown more often. This percentage is roughly the same for both downtowns. It is only slightly less of a problem for households with high incomes and it is the most conspicuous and prevalent problem affecting every segment of the population of the Twin Cities.

Next to parking, the upscale nature of the downtown markets deters shoppers. Twenty-four percent agreed that the high cost of goods kept them from shopping.

downtown more often. Not surprisingly, this factor was mentioned more by lower income people and very little by those with high incomes.

Being deterred by the kind of people one encounters downtown was a factor for only 18 percent of the sample. And in this case, Minneapolis and St. Paul were viewed differently. About 20 percent of those oriented toward Minneapolis said that this factor affected them. Only about 13 percent of the St. Paul shoppers were deterred by such encounters.

Figure 2. REASONS FOR NOT SHOPPING DOWNTOWN MORE OFTEN

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Opportunities for Expanding Markets

Downtown can expand sales either by increasing its appeal within already established markets or by creating new types of markets. In fact, downtown has been concentrating its market, focusing on the upscale and trimming out bargain basements and low cost retailers. This has hurt downtown's ability to serve those close-in poor parts of the central cities and has reduced its market there.

High rental costs and higher profit margins have pushed downtown into middle and upscale markets. But are these markets large enough to support an expanding retail complex? The answer appears to be yes if enough of the Twin Cities' potential shoppers can be attracted into shopping downtown.

One obvious place to begin is with people who work downtown. Less than two-thirds (62 percent) of those who work downtown shop there weekly or more often, and 38 percent shop there only once or twice a month.

These figures, in fact, may overstate how much shopping people who work downtown do. The survey did not ask the less frequent downtown shoppers (those who shop there once every few months or less) where they worked, assuming that the chances were slim that it would be downtown. Also, the survey did not ask downtown workers why they do not shop there more often, but a study of their demographic characteristics gives some clues. Less than half of male downtown workers shop downtown weekly. Only 44 percent of downtown workers with household incomes of $35,000 or less shop downtown weekly. Perhaps there is a market for new stores that meet the regular needs of the underserved downtown worker.

Downtown has done well at attracting a special type of shopper—young and affluent. It attracts people under age 35, yet 57 percent of the metro area population under age 35 now shop downtown only a few times a year or less. It attracts people from households that earn $40,000 or more a year. Yet 64 percent of the metro area population with that level of income now shops downtown only a few times a year or less. There is much room for growth if downtown can reach deeper into these markets where it has already done exceptionally well.

The Future

The future could be bright for downtown. New stores are planned, under construction, or just opening that may attract new shoppers downtown. Stores like Saks or Polo Ralph Lauren build on the strength of downtown as a unique shopping area. They add to downtown's allure as a place different from the malls and more attractive to the upscale shopper. This is a market where downtown has excelled and can expand.

New office buildings have been built or are under construction, providing workplaces for more people and thereby for more potential shoppers. The new World Trade Center is expected to eventually hold nearly 2,000 office workers. One-third of the regular shoppers downtown are also downtown workers. More workers can expand this number.

At the same time, Minneapolis is constructing new convention, sports, and entertainment facilities that will attract thousands of people to downtown. They may buy some of what downtown has to offer during their visits, but the mix of goods that will appeal to them is less likely to be upscale and more likely to be gift oriented. At a minimum, these visitors will be exposed to the positive aspects of downtown and may return on a shopping trip at a later time.

About the Survey

The Twin Cities Area Survey is conducted annually by the University of Minnesota Center for Survey Research. For the 1989 survey, 1,005 adults were interviewed, each selected at random from across the seven-county metropolitan area. The survey was conducted from November 10th, 1988 through January 14th, 1989 with 78 percent of the surveys completed before Christmas day. The response rate was 74 percent.

Every attempt was made to produce a representative sample. Households were selected by random digit dialing to include those with unlisted numbers. Up to ten attempts were made to reach each number, calling on different days and at different times of the day. A random adult was selected to be interviewed within the household by requesting the person (age 18 or older) who had most recently celebrated a birthday. Responses presented in this article have been weighted by the number of adults in the household to better represent individuals and remove bias often introduced by single adult households.

In theory, in nineteen cases out of twenty, the results of surveys of this sample size will differ by no more than three percentage points from results of interviewing all 1.5 million adults in the metro area.

The questions asked during the interview were as follows (instructions to the interviewer in parentheses):

- How often do you shop downtown once a week or more, once or twice a month, once every few months, only a few times a year, or less often than that?
- Do you work downtown?
- If you work downtown, which downtown do you shop most often—Minneapolis or St. Paul?
- If you are comfortable with the people you encounter downtown, you are uncomfortable with the people you encounter downtown.
Expansion in the types of merchandise offered would probably attract more downtown workers as well. Hardware and grocery stores are obvious needs, but there may be others. Downtown residents and those in the neighborhoods surrounding downtown also would be attracted to this broader range of goods, adding to downtown’s market potential.

If well designed, new transit systems could make downtown shopping more accessible and more attractive to people who now see downtown as too distant. An improved transportation system would make it easier for both an expanding workforce and potential shoppers.

But parking is the biggest problem for downtown shoppers. Price is part of the problem, especially with rates set highest for the first hour. Some new stores, Nieman-Marcus and Saks, are planning to offer validated parking which will pay the parking fees for those making a minimum purchase. Many ramps have lower prices on evenings or weekends, but more could be made available.

The other part of the problem is parking availability. And new entertainment opportunities downtown may even exacerbate this problem. Sometimes, as one circles unknown blocks (more than one wishes, because of one-way streets) it seems as though no place is available at any price. Some stores are considering valet parking, leaving a professional driver to find a place for your car. Part of the problem is that many downtown firms buy parking spaces for their upper-level employees, making these spaces unavailable to shoppers. New ramps are being built on the edge of downtown Minneapolis to provide inexpensive parking for car pooling workers. That will help shoppers by taking the pressure off close-in lots. Moreover, these new lots will offer shoppers a low rate of $1.50 after 4 p.m. on weekdays and all day Saturday and Sunday. Good security and good shuttle bus service will be necessities if these new lots are to attract shoppers. St. Paul already helps shoppers with their parking. Attractive signs direct the infrequent visitor to a number of locations, including the Civic Center parking lot. Low off-hour parking rates are widely available in St. Paul’s downtown ramps.

The future of our downtowns could be bright indeed. Much hard work, and a fair bit of luck, will be needed to make the downtown of tomorrow a place where we all want to be, where we want to work, where we want to shop, and where we can all find a parking place (even if it is in a park-and-ride lot).

Establishing the World: Hmong Shamans

by Dwight Conquergood

Paja Thao, a Hmong healer, told his life story to Conquergood in 1984.

The Hmong are well known for their strong work ethic, independent spirit, and love of freedom. Outsiders call them Miao or Meo—pejorative terms that mean “barbarian” or “primitive”—but they proudly call themselves Hmong, which means “Free People.”...Like mountain peoples the world over, they have developed a culture of extraordinary integrity, communal self-reliance, intimacy with nature, and resistance to outside authority and official power structures. Indeed, one of their traditional proverbs reveals their resistance to (and sense of humor about) the homogenizing forces of lowland officialdom: “To see a tiger is to die; to see an official is to become destitute.”...

Cosmology and Community

Much can be learned about Hmong society by examining their symbolic projections of the human body. Notions of physical health and illness draw on the most fundamental concepts about the body. According to Hmong cosmology, the human body is the host for an ensemble of life-souls. The number of souls believed to inhabit a human body depends on whom you consult. Some say seven, some nine, others twelve, or even thirty-two. The point is that the body is a site for multiple souls, whereas according to American cosmology, the body is a site for a single soul.

A human body is healthy when all the life-souls are centered in the body, cooperating interdependently and living together harmoniously as a group. Sickness is explained by the isolation and separation of one or more of these souls from the community of the body. Disease, depression, and death result from diffusion, dispersal, and loss of souls.

Therefore, the major restorative measures for this affliction, curing rites, are in fact, soul-calling rituals. The most common of these in Hmong culture is the Hu Pêng (Soul Calling). The ritual specialist summons the soul or souls who have become separated from their bodily community. Whether the soul became separated out-