Storefronts Director Matthew Richter, artist Julia Haack, and Mayor Pete Lewis (l-r) have helped Auburn bring energy to a once-moribund downtown.

# PRIDE OF PLACE

## Creative cities turn sights for sore eyes into sites of civic renewal. By Ted Katauskas

**MAIJA MCKNIGHT AND MATTHEW RICHTER** liken a street with dark storefronts to a smile with missing teeth. Case in point: Main Street, Auburn.

Since the dawn of the recession, the City of Auburn has replaced a seedy block of taverns adjacent to city hall with a gleaming, three-story office building, home to the city's innovative one-stop-shopping permit center as well as its emergency management bunker. Directly across the street, the city razed a delicatessen to build downtown's first public park, a year-old piazza that doubles as the gateway to Auburn Junction, a city-led redevelopment covering four square blocks with boutiques, restaurants, and condominiums all yet to come. And in April, the mayor dedicated the Junction's pièce de résistance: the Promenade, a three-block-long, Parisian-style boulevard with twenty-foot-wide curbless sidewalks, whose rainwater-permeable pavement caps freshly buried utility wires, fiber-optic conduit, and high-capacity water and sewer lines—the nascent urban village's circulatory system—all paid for with federal and state economic development funds.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DANIEL BERMAN

Richter, Haack, and Mayor Lewis (l-r) at the corner of One East Main in Auburn, the site of Haack's temporary gallery storefront

**"The whole point is to bring people to the area."**

"The Promenade is done," declared Mayor Pete Lewis to the crowd that had gathered for the boulevard's April ribbon-cutting. "We are now taking orders. We have three [city-owned] blocks that we are going to sell."

But the trick is attracting buyers. Especially since all of the spit and polish that have been added to downtown Auburn's streetscape have made its blemishes difficult to ignore: namely, the proliferation of dark storefronts. They include a ground-floor corner at One East Main—the new, three-story city hall annex—envisioned as a restaurant but vacant since the building opened in November 2009.

"We have a great historic Main Street, but empty storefronts distract people from seeing the positives," says McKnight, the city's arts coordinator. "Being able to cap those missing teeth, if you will, is a way to get people to look beyond the empty spaces and see the beauty and positives of the community."

She's talking about Storefronts Auburn, a partnership between the city and Shunpike, a Seattle-based nonprofit consulting firm that offers "back-office" business support services to artists and also runs Storefronts, a spin-off that turns vacant storefronts into transitional art galleries.

"We've overbuilt the retail environment," explains Matthew Richter, manager of Shunpike's Storefronts program. "Whether it's because of the economy or the Internet, we're creating this impermeable membrane, this urban canyon where the experience of walking down the street isn't, 'I can window-shop here, drop in there for coffee, or go here to buy shoes.' It's closed door after closed door after closed door. We're activating these vacant retail spaces and giving them life until the next store comes along."

Since launching Storefronts in Seattle's Chinatown and Pioneer Square neighborhoods in 2010, Shunpike has "activated" more than four dozen vacant commercial spaces in a half dozen cities throughout Washington, including Auburn. Typically, this is how the program works: a city, neighborhood, or downtown business association hires Shunpike, paying from $10,000 to $30,000 a year, including liability insurance and walking tour maps. Shunpike then negotiates with commercial property owners in the neighborhood, who agree to sublet vacant window space for $1 a month, and contracts with artists, who receive a stipend of $500 to $1,000 from Shunpike and agree to exhibit their work for three months, or to vacate the space if a tenant is found sooner. Although Shunpike hasn't had a problem attracting artists to the program, asking cities or business associations to buy in isn't always an easy sell. Richter cites the reaction of one potential client, the director of a downtown business association, who balked at the fee, noting that security, marketing, and trash removal were priorities for business owners in that neighborhood, not art. His response?

"You can spend all the money you want on security, you can spend every dime you have on marketing, and you won't get any contemporary art," he says. "But if you spend a little money on contemporary art, you get security, you get marketing, you get brightness, you get all these things. Art money is really an efficient way to get things that communities are looking for: art literally brightens and brings light and beauty to an area, and marketing goes along with it because the press loves to write about these projects. The whole point is to bring people to the area."

And, more to the point, to bring in money.

"We're using the arts as an industry," explains Mayor Lewis, who counts the $10,000 Auburn has paid Shunpike to manage Storefronts Auburn as one of the city's savviest investments. "It's one of those attention-getting devices that brings people down to look at things, including business owners and property owners who might not otherwise come downtown. It brings in more people; it brings in sales and property tax to the city; it brings up the quality of life. Why not put art in storefronts? It makes good common sense."

## RENEW GURU
### Q&A WITH MARK HINSHAW

***Architect and city planner Mark Hinshaw, director of urban design at Seattle-based LMN Architects, talks about what your city can learn from Bellevue and Bremerton—and a cowboy town like Billings, Mont.—when it comes to downtown revitalization.***

**What's one thing you did as a planner in Bellevue that you're proud of?**
When I arrived, it was basically a city of strip malls and pretty much a bedroom suburb that sent its entire workforce to Seattle. And now it's a city in its own right, with one of the more successful downtowns in the country. When I started there in the early 1980s, nobody would have guessed that this would have been in Bellevue's future. In fact, when it was even mentioned as a policy direction, it was roundly hooted as a pie-in-the-sky idea—because who would want to live downtown? Of course, back then it *was* a pretty nasty place to live.

**So how did that transformation happen? What steps did the city need to take to get its downtown to where it is today?**
In my view, the most fundamental shift occurred when people began to think more about the public realm—that being the streets, the sidewalks, the parks, the public spaces—rather than simply what individual residents or property owners care about, which is their own parcels or property. … It was a shift in attitude away from total privatization to this public side, which was remarkable politically because it was a hard-core Republican town.

**How do you get buy-in?**
It can't happen in a preachy, sermon-y way, because people don't accept that. You have to do it incrementally and show things on the ground that are different—and the public sector has to lead with that. In Bellevue, the city council in the early '80s simply bought a parcel of property in the middle of downtown and said, "This is going to be a new park, a new kind of park … not ball fields, not stuff that's cordoned off for certain types of users. But simply a civic park." And they put cash on the barrelhead even though it was the biggest bond issue they'd ever done in their history, and they did not go to voters. They put a stake in the ground and said, "We are going to contribute to the emerging downtown.

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“This is more than a council building. This was a deliberate strategy to make some public investment to attract private investment.”

**FOR THE CITY OF OLYMPIA’S COUNCIL,** it made good common sense to spend $35.6 million on the construction of a new city hall just after the recession hit four years ago. To save money, it could have elected to remodel the old building—a cramped and poorly designed relic from the 1960s—and remain in a familiar, established part of town adjacent to the city’s lush Japanese gardens. Instead, city leaders decided to rebuild and move the seat of local government five blocks north, into the heart of downtown’s blighted East Bay neighborhood, joining an urban renewal district partnership between the LOTT Clean Water Alliance (a regional wastewater treatment agency, which in 2010 opened a $13.5 million LEED-platinum headquarters and museum next to a state-of-the-art treatment plant), the Port of Olympia (which holds the deed to 13 acres of property primed for mixed-use redevelopment with city-financed streets and sidewalks and underground utilities), and the Hands-on Children’s Museum (which will move into a new $18.5 million LEED-rated East Bay campus opening in October, paid for with $8.9 million in public utilities district funding and private donations).

“This is more than a council building; this is the heart and seat of city government,” explains City Manager Steve Hall. “The four of us, with the support of elected officials, are actively working to develop the east end of downtown. This was a deliberate strategy to make some public investment to attract private investment.”

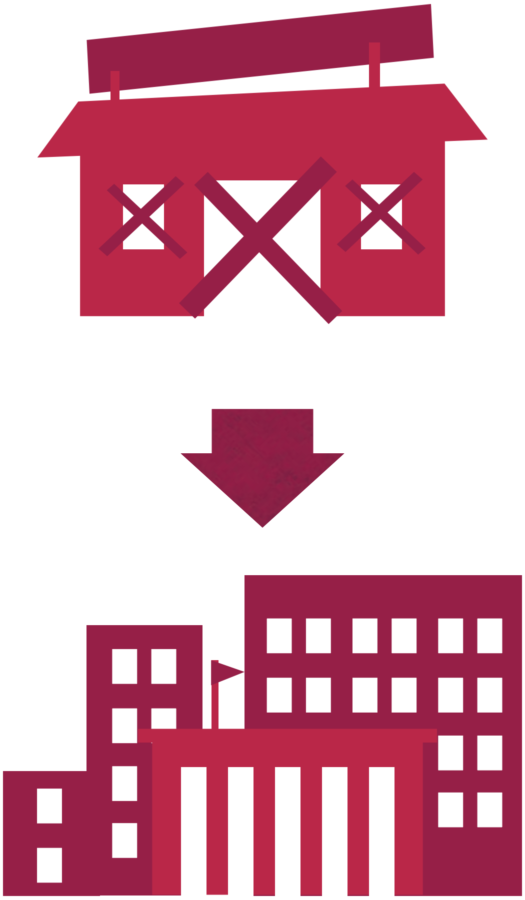
The city could have chosen to build on acreage that had already been optimized for redevelopment. Instead, it decided to purchase an eyesore, a Safeway building that had been abandoned for years and passed over repeatedly by developers, in large part because the property owner stipulated that the site couldn’t be recycled into another grocery store. And so the building moldered until the city came along, vowing to turn what had for years been a drag on the area’s development into a spur.

“We were worried that it would always be an eyesore,” Hall explains. “So we knocked it down and built a modern office building.”

But before that happened, the city had to overcome a significant hurdle: due-diligence soil samples taken from holes drilled through the supermarket’s foundation prior to demolition revealed that residue from a coal gasification plant that had operated four blocks away during the late 1800s had migrated to the property and collected in a vast, underground pool, saturating the soil with hydrocarbons to a depth of 16 feet.

“We could smell it in the air once we started digging,” Hall recalls. “Rather than walking away from it, the council said, ‘This is an important site; if we expect anything to ever happen downtown, we need to clean it up. We’re going to make sure this site is an asset to downtown and not just an abandoned brownfield.” Cleaning up the mess added $7.9 million to the project’s price tag; Washington Department of Ecology’s Toxics Cleanup Program paid for half, and the city plans to recover the rest through the legal process.

Instead of asking voters to approve the project, the council voted to bankroll it, anticipating that the efficiencies gained via the new city hall would ultimately recoup the investment. Previously, the city’s 220 administrative and technical employees had been scattered among eight different buildings; consolidating the bulk of its personnel and departments under a single, 90,000-square-foot eco-roof would save $458,774 a year in rent, not to mention an additional $50,000 a year in janitorial supplies and another $29,000 in copy machine rental fees. When the city put the project out to bid, it promoted energy efficiency by mandating a green building that would achieve a LEED silver or better environmental rating, with costs capped at the budgeted $36.5 million. That



the 2009 ground-breaking coincided with the nadir of the Great Recession proved to be a blessing: the collapse of once sky-high prices for steel and other materials shaved nearly $2 million off construction costs (the project ultimately came in $1.5 million under budget), and during the darkest days of unemployment, the city created 200 construction jobs.

By mandating green construction practices, the city also saved money by using recycled materials: wooden beams from the grocery store were recycled into staircase treads; historic trees that had been planted to commemorate the end of World War II and had fallen in a windstorm were milled into the paneling for the council chamber; cobblestones from the city's earliest days, unearthed by utility workers during a street repair, were repurposed as pavers for the building's entrance plaza. The city even recycled its old city hall; after a $474,763 renovation, on June 28 it was rededicated as the Lee Creighton Criminal Justice Center, combining the city's jail, probation, and prosecution staff in a single building, yielding even more operational efficiencies.

Assistant City Manager Jay Burney now relishes walking down the hall or the recycled Safeway stairs, instead of driving across town, whenever he needs to consult with staff from different departments. Often meetings happen on-site, over lunch.

We are going to build a park." And they did.

**What did that cost?**

They bought the property for $15 million, and it's now worth many times more than that. If you add up all of the investment that's swirled around that park, it's probably eight, nine, ten times that initial investment.

**There was a multiplier effect. Why does this happen?**

When the public sector has committed itself with money—has actually put the money down, not just drafted a policy or a plan—it has virtually always worked; I actually cannot think of an example of where it did not work. The private sector wants to see that commitment. They don't want to just see codes changed. They don't want to just see plans adopted. They want to see the money there. That's what makes them sit up and take notice: the city does have the political will, and they do see that it is in their long-term interest to make that up-front investment without an immediate payback, realizing that it will happen over time.

**What's another example?**

Bremerton managed to turn itself around in the absolute worst part of its economic history, with almost no money, and they just managed to scrape and save and turn over rocks and go for grants and bring in private partners. They used whatever powers they had with the port; they used whatever powers they had as a city; they partnered up with transit; they found every possible way they could think of to make the changes happen. That's part of the lesson, too: you can't do it all by yourself. You have to have multiple partners, and that takes a lot of time.

**Is it important for planners to work with what they have, rather than trying to design some sort of utopia?**

It's not possible to do that. It's always necessary to work with the existing material. Not everything has to be ideal, not everything has to be perfect. Most people would not want to live in a world where everything was carefully programmed, carefully thought out and artificial. There's the pleasure of things that are accidental and spontaneous and unexpected, and you want that.

**What can elected officials learn from your book, *True Urbanism*?**

I wrote it because I believe that urbanism applies to all scales, not just to big cities. ... It applies to lots of community types and sizes and locations. I just got back from Billings, Montana, a place that's sort of cowboy central, and that downtown was humming. I mean, they've got more stuff going on down there than I've seen in a lot of other cities, and they've managed to do it out on the wide-open range. They have a very sophisticated downtown with great restaurants, great street life, great events. It's just a matter of getting yourself organized and deciding to do it. To say you don't have the money is no excuse; everybody's in that same boat. You just reallocate the money so that it makes a difference.

"Instead of eight separate lunchrooms we now have one, and people are getting to know each other," he says. "Our employees are proud of this building. It's good for morale."

But was it worth $36.5 million? It's just one example, but not long after Olympia's LEED-gold-rated city hall opened for business in March 2011, Burney noticed something interesting: the auto repair shop across the street sported a fresh coat of paint.

"They told us the reason they did it was because they wanted to look nice for the new city hall—they wanted to be part of the rebuilding," Burney recalls. "It demonstrates that we are as much a part of this community as all of the citizens, and it puts our development money where our mouth is. We had a goal as a community to improve our downtown, and we demonstrated that we're all-in when it comes to that."

**LIKE AUBURN AND OLYMPIA**, the city of Mount Vernon also has ambitious plans for a city-led makeover of its historic downtown. However, this community has had to navigate around an additional logjam: Federal Emergency Management Agency floodplain regulations that have effectively put redevelopment on hold.

Since Mount Vernon's founding on the banks of the Skagit River in the late 1800s, this city of 32,000 has had to endure periodic, and sometimes catastrophic, seasonal floods. In the last decade, fighting back floodwaters in 2003 cost the city $9.5 million, and during the deluge in October 2006, more than 2,000 volunteers filled 150,000 sandbags in a desperate attempt to keep floodwaters at bay. As a result, as the city grew it turned its back

Public Works Director Esco Bell and Mayor Jill Boudreau test Mount Vernon's new flood wall out for pedestrian-friendliness.

**“A healthy downtown represents a healthy community, so a lot is at stake to make downtown viable.”**

on the river, leaving acres of prime real estate along the Skagit’s banks as a parking lot.

But with its downtown battered not just by floods but by the same shifting economic and retail winds that have emptied Main Street storefronts nationwide, city leaders realized that if Mount Vernon’s city center was going to survive, the community needed to do something drastic, and do it soon. Community & Economic Development Director Jana Hanson summed up Mount Vernon’s predicament this way in a PowerPoint presentation she created for the city’s council and community groups:

“Like many downtowns across America, Mount Vernon’s downtown is under stress. . . . Unfortunately, residents no longer feel strong loyalty to local merchants and because of convenient mobility, they choose to drive to the nearest shopping center, mall or big box. However a healthy downtown represents a healthy community, so a lot is at stake to re-establish downtown as our center of community activity and make downtown a viable downtown. . . . The major public amenity in our downtown is the Skagit River, which also presents significant obstacles to downtown development due to regulatory constraints requiring buildings be elevated to meet floodplain regulations and prohibiting development on properties directly adjacent to the river.”

Starting in 2005, a citizens’ advisory group appointed by the mayor and council convened a series of community visioning workshops to address the challenges, ultimately drafting a master downtown redevelopment plan that the council adopted in 2008. Dubbed “Contain and Celebrate the River,” Mount Vernon’s radical blueprint for downtown revitalization revolved around a permanent flood wall and levy system that would tame the river and keep it within its banks even at 100-year historic highs, satisfying FEMA regulations and eliminating the need to elevate existing or planned structures for redevelopment. Construction of the flood wall in turn would allow the city to transform its riverfront parking lot into an urban pedestrian village that would jump-start the revitalization of downtown Mount Vernon with 125,000 square feet of new street-level retail space, 55,000

square feet of office space, and 200 units of high-density housing, all within a decade. The plan’s economic analysis predicted that the flood control project alone would generate 100 or more construction jobs immediately, while redevelopment would create at least 1,800 construction jobs over 15 years, with the development itself adding 2,548 permanent jobs over 30 years, ultimately reaping $9 million in property tax revenue for the city and $156 million in new sales tax revenue for the state.

Phase I, a quarter-mile segment of flood wall and river walk just north of downtown, was completed in October 2010. Construction of Phase II, another 1,650 feet of floodwall on the banks of downtown with a 24-foot wide promenade and a 30,000-square-foot public plaza, will begin in the first quarter of 2013 and be completed by the end of the year. The flood wall itself serves as a functional design element of the promenade’s landscaping, with gaps that allow pedestrian access to the promenade that can be sealed during flooding, and ornamental lampposts atop the wall that double as structural elements for removable “stop log” flood barriers that can be erected to hold back waters during even the most severe 100-year floods.

Both of these phases of the project have been completely funded, with $17.3 million from a multitude of sources and partners, including $3.3 million from the state’s capital budget, a $1.1 million Washington Wildlife & Recreation Program trails grant, a

$1 million economic development grant from Skagit County, and $4.2 million from the city, which also received a state local infrastructure financing tool grant for transit improvements that allows it to recapture the state's portion of sales tax generated over the next 25 years, or $500,000 a year. The city has yet to raise the $10 million needed for Phase III, the final 1.2-mile stretch of flood wall/levy that will protect the city's wastewater treatment plant from inundation. Once that project is completed in 2015, the city, which possesses a conditional letter of map revision from FEMA, hopes to rejoice when the agency issues a final letter of map revision, lifting development restrictions—a milestone Hanson deems "an almost unheard-of achievement." Given the stakes of the project and the enthusiasm swirling around it, Mayor Jill Boudreau predicts that the budget gap, like the gates in Mount Vernon's flood wall, ultimately will be closed.

"I have a mayor's coffee every other week, and our public is looking forward to this," says Boudreau, a former community police officer who took office in January. "I'm looking forward to lighting the Christmas tree in the riverfront plaza next year. To be standing in that 30,000-square-foot plaza with our public all around us and everybody looking at the river saying, 'Our town did this!' ... what more can a mayor ask for?"

**BACK IN AUBURN,** Mayor Pete Lewis is looking forward to an altogether different sort of redevelopment benchmark: running out of vacant retail space.

Since hiring Shunpike earlier this year, Auburn has "activated" three Main Street storefronts. These include the once-dark corner window at One East Main, which currently is displaying the work of Seattle sculptor Julia Haack: salvaged wooden pallets reshaped into colorful painter's palettes. For the opening of another installation, a collection of three life-size paper dresses at a vacant Main Street gift shop one block east, Seattle artist Josie Davis held an impromptu fashion show on May 15, stopping traffic—and passersby—as she strolled up and down the road wearing her artwork.

"I was just walking around the city and interacting with people. There was so much excitement and enthusiasm," says Davis, who's currently working on a public art installation for a struggling neighborhood in Chicago. "I love doing this kind of stuff. It's all about turning heads in parts of cities that are underutilized and can be beautiful. These are stunning and wonderful buildings to showcase work."

So far, at least one investor in Auburn's downtown seems to have agreed. Recently, a temporary gallery that had inhabited a storefront a few dark doorways from Davis's exhibition had to pack up after only a month when a comedy club decided to lease the space.

"It's been great in Auburn," says Shunpike's Matthew Richter. "That's the Catch-22: we want Storefronts to make neighborhoods attractive enough to rent so that we don't have any more empty storefronts left to program."

The mayor puts it this way:

"The Great Recession hurt us all," he says. "We all lost businesses, and now they're coming back. Pretty soon, we won't have enough empty space. But that's a good problem to have."