

The Entertainment Zone: Unplanned Nightlife and the Revitalization of the American Downtown

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ABSTRACT *This paper describes informal, small-scale leisure and nightlife districts or entertainment zones (EZs) which have developed in or near the downtowns of mid-sized and large American cities in recent years. Occupying older vernacular buildings in marginal areas of downtown, the bars, cafes, restaurants, nightclubs and performance spaces of EZs have developed largely without the large-scale design, planning, government action or subsidy common in formal urban entertainment districts. EZs demonstrate the popularity, resilience and flexibility of small-scale, vernacular architecture and urbanism and its importance in generating a vibrant and diverse downtown. The paper documents the design and performative characteristics of EZs in American cities and locates these places within current urban design and development theory. The findings from a Milwaukee, Wisconsin, case study together with evidence from other entertainment zones indicate that EZs possess individuality and a vitality lacking in formal urban entertainment districts. The paper concludes with recommendations for designers, planners and policy makers to reform current urban entertainment development practices.*

Introduction

It is 10.15 on a Saturday night in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and the crowds are gathering in a cluster of dilapidated buildings along Water Street at the edge of downtown. The loud music blaring out of the bars and the abundant drinks being served within indicate that these crowds are here for one thing: fun. By midnight the streets are jammed as revellers drive by to look at the scene before disembarking from their cars to join the activity. By 3 am all is quiet again, with the last stragglers, often somewhat the worse for wear, making their way back to their cars for the journey homeward.

This boisterous scene repeats itself weekend after weekend in the downtowns of cities across the United States. Even as downtowns remain regional centres for commerce and culture, they are fast becoming the principal locus for another form of urban activity: nightlife. The new urban nightlife is neither the sophisticated

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entertainment of the theatre, symphony or ballet, nor 'high-end' entertainment serving the needs of corporate clients. The new urban nightlife is more basic: middlebrow partying for young city dwellers and suburbanites who want to drink, dance, watch sports and have fun. Responding to this need, a new type of urban district is evolving: the entertainment zone.

What is the Entertainment Zone?

Entertainment zones (abbreviated in this paper as 'EZs' or 'zones') are concentrated nightlife districts occupying the margins of downtowns in former commercial and industrial areas, underutilized retail corridors or underdeveloped waterfronts. These areas have been left behind by the voracious development processes that have filled American cities with corporate skyscrapers, freeways, acres of car parking lots and mega-scaled retail projects packed with chain stores. Although they are well known by their thousands of regular patrons, entertainment zones have largely been ignored by architects, planners and geographers. EZs' ephemeral, temporal quality and their occupation of seemingly marginal buildings, spaces and urban precincts belie the critical vitality that they contribute to otherwise dead spaces in American downtowns (see Figure 1).

Entertainment zones exist within the shadows of more prominent downtown development projects such as entertainment and retail destinations, museums,



Figure 1. A typical Saturday night in Old City, Philadelphia: the streets are jammed with revellers. (2004). *Source:* The authors.

convention centres, performing arts centres, stadiums and casinos. As physical entities, EZs are impermanent: their buildings are flexible vessels that can shift or evolve into other types of uses. Similarly, the programmes and content of EZs constantly change in response to regional demand for nightlife that is located in an authentic urban setting marked by local creativity and entrepreneurialism. The temporal rhythm of EZs leans towards invisibility during the day and dynamic activity at night. EZs do not possess the permanence or dominant physical presence of chain-oriented megaprojects, but their design and content is discreetly rooted within existing urban fabrics in a way that megaprojects scarcely achieve.

With little guidance from those charged with enhancing the physical and economic functions of downtowns, the development of entertainment zones is incremental and unplanned. The self-organizing ecologies of EZs emerge as the product of many individual actors who transform small pieces of the urban landscape without drastic physical interventions or a unifying plan. Yet these independent actors collectively contribute to the larger-scale thematic nature of EZs, creating a coherent cultural geography within a larger and often undistinguished urban context. Paradoxically, successful entertainment zones are often viewed by the urban establishment as both a vehicle to be exploited as well as a hazard to be contained, controlled or circumscribed.

Attributes of the Entertainment Zone: Location, Form and Performance

To better understand the prevalence of entertainment zones in American cities, the authors performed a preliminary survey of these districts. Using visual and experiential criteria established through examination of EZs in Milwaukee and Philadelphia and combined with the authors' prior knowledge of the American downtown, an examination was made of the popular press, Internet sites and other, more ephemeral sources of information to assemble an initial inventory of entertainment zones. The surveys (Table 1) found that these districts share many attributes related to their location, form and performative qualities.

First, EZs are generally located near downtown, often in former industrial or commercial districts. This location makes them easily accessible to downtown workers and nearby residents while placing them in relatively familiar territory for suburbanites. The boundaries of entertainment zones are often sharply circumscribed by waterways and railroad rights-of-way, as well as the highways and urban renewal sites that were the products of mid-20th century planning. In addition, the intimate relationship of many EZs with water gives them a sense of place difficult to find elsewhere in the metropolitan area.

While much of the unique appeal of entertainment zones to both city and suburban dwellers lies in their critical regionalism of site and content, the architecture of EZs also has underlying physical commonalities. The key physical components of every district surveyed are vernacular industrial and commercial buildings that have outlived their original uses and have survived large-scale development and planning programmes. In many zones, small parcels of vacant land that are used for surface parking also play a contributing role.

The study found that EZs occur in four distinct district typologies. The first district is a mixture of industrial buildings with relatively nondescript multi-storey lofts and single-storey sheds with open plans (e.g. The Flats, Cleveland; SOMA, San Francisco). Expanses of minimally columned or column free floor space in these buildings are ideal for conversion to nightlife uses, and their industrial aesthetic

Table 1. Selected entertainment zones in United States Cities, 2007. (New districts may be added and others dissolved by the time this paper is published.)

City	District
Albuquerque	Downtown-Central Avenue
Atlanta	Buckhead
Austin	Warehouse District
Baltimore	Fells Point
Boston	Allston
Buffalo	Cheektowaga Street
Charlotte	South End
Chicago	Rush Street
	Wrigleyville
	River North
	Wicker Park/Bucktown
Cincinnati	Main Street
Cleveland	The Flats
Dallas	Deep Ellum
Denver	Colfax Avenue
	Larimer Square
	Lo-Do
Fort Lauderdale	Himmarshee Village
Houston	Richmond Strip
Kansas City	Westport
Milwaukee	Historic Third Ward
	Water Street
Louisville	Bardstown Road
Los Angeles	Hollywood and Sunset Boulevards
	Santa Monica Third Street Promenade
	Venice
	Newport Beach
Minneapolis	Warehouse District
New Orleans	French Quarter
New York	Bleecker Street/West Village
	East Village/Lower East Side
	Smith Street, Brooklyn
	Williamsburg, Brooklyn
	Woodside, Queens
	Astoria, Queens
	Hoboken, N.J.
Philadelphia	South Street
	Old City
	Rittenhouse Square
	North Delaware Waterfront
	Manayunk
Pittsburgh	Strip District
St. Louis	La Clede's Landing
San Diego	Gaslamp Quarters
San Francisco	SOMA/Warehouse District
	Lower Haight Street
Seattle	Pioneer Square
Tampa	Ybor City
Washington DC	Adams-Morgan
	Georgetown

often contributes to the character and vibrancy of individual establishments. A second district typology is the old downtown or faded commercial corridor or district (e.g. Water Street, Milwaukee; Old City, Philadelphia; Main Street, Cincinnati; Central Avenue, Albuquerque). In these districts, boarded up retail properties, sometimes with vacant residential units above, are minimally renovated to accommodate nightlife uses (Figure 2). A third district typology found in the newer, high growth cities of the South and West consists of constellations of nightlife venues cloaked within generic mid-20th century 'suburbanscapes' of strip malls and freestanding commercial buildings along arterial roads (Richmond Strip, Houston). These districts, a model of post-war suburban prosperity but now eclipsed by newer areas farther from the core, are ideal locations for nightlife venues intermingled with other uses typically associated with urban maturity and decline. Finally, some entertainment zones exist within and are physically integrated into traditional and mature urban neighbourhoods (New York zones, Rittenhouse Square, Philadelphia and Georgetown, Washington). Like other commercial uses in these areas, EZ venues generally occupy ground floor space in multi-storey buildings along streets where a full range of commercial, residential and institutional uses are closely co-mingled. These venues may also be spread out across a larger area and may therefore be perceived as an entertainment zone only at night when few other commercial uses are active.

Although this paper focuses on the physical and urban design qualities of entertainment zones, their temporal and performative dimensions are also important. EZs exhibit great temporal variations in activity over the course of a typical day, week and year. Bars, restaurants and nightclubs have hours of operation that differ from other commercial and downtown office uses, creating different peak levels of use and traffic. Seemingly desolate during the day, the streets of entertainment zones often teem at night and are active during weekends when most



Figure 2. Survivors of the large-scale planning and voracious redevelopment programmes of the 20th century, the buildings of Old City have been minimally renovated to accommodate nightlife uses. (2004). *Source:* The authors.

downtown uses are quiet. With people moving to and from parking lots and establishments, and bar- or club-hopping among establishments, both buildings and streets become social venues, the place of chance encounters and unexpected happenings. At certain times, even parking lots may be transformed into social space.

Entertainment Zone Case Study: North Water Street, Milwaukee

The downtown of Milwaukee, Wisconsin is much like that of other mid-sized American cities. Once a tightly-knit grid of warehouses, shops, breweries and housing, Milwaukee's central business district has been transformed into a nondescript matrix of office buildings, freeways and parking lots by the same inexorable forces that have reshaped downtowns across the nation. The North Water Street entertainment zone is one of the few places in Milwaukee's downtown where the vernacular 19th-century and early 20th-century urban fabric has survived.

Downtown Milwaukee, the city's central business district, (Figure 3) is divided by the north-south-running Milwaukee River, which once provided shipping access to downtown for Great Lakes trading vessels. Much of Water



Figure 3. The Water Street entertainment zone is located a few blocks north of Milwaukee, Wisconsin's central business district. *Source:* The authors.

Street parallels the river's east bank, providing valuable access for commercial establishments in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Today, north Water Street's old buildings reflect the street's historic mercantile and manufacturing nature, while the southern portion of the street has been mostly rebuilt with cultural, government and office buildings.

Ironically, the preservation of North Water Street can be attributed to the same freeways that decimated much of the rest of Milwaukee's downtown. In the late 1960s two sides of a proposed loop freeway were constructed along the north and south edges of the Milwaukee CBD. The freeways demolished hundreds of buildings in their path, but they also made buildings immediately adjacent to their rights of way, such as those on North Water Street, less attractive for redevelopment because of highway noise and traffic.

By 2007, only two blocks of vernacular 19th and early-20th-century commercial buildings survived at the northern end of Water Street, next to the site of the recently demolished Park West Expressway. The Water Street EZ's buildings are surrounded by parking lots, parking garages and the vacant freeway site (Figure 4). While hardly of landmark quality, the buildings of the EZ retain



Figure 4. Plan of Milwaukee's North Water Street entertainment zone. Buildings containing entertainment establishments are shown in black. *Source:* The authors.

a modest scale, pedestrian orientation and ornamental quality that is now rare elsewhere in Milwaukee's downtown. While the immediate neighbourhood context of the Water Street EZ is unattractive, the centre of downtown is only a few blocks to the south and the Milwaukee River, located one block to the west, is an appealing open space resource with a pedestrian riverwalk along its banks.

The modest buildings of north Water Street would seem an unlikely candidate for the densest concentration of bars and restaurants in the Milwaukee region. Nonetheless, in 2003 the two small blocks of north Water Street and parts of two adjacent blocks contained 14 entertainment establishments. This number increased to 16 establishments by 2007 (Table 2). The audience of these establishments is distinctly middle-class, the food and drinks that they offer is in no way distinctive, and their location, while convenient, is unspectacular. Yet Water Street is the Milwaukee region's dominant entertainment zone, giving downtown a nightlife reputation far larger than the district's limited physical footprint. One of its patrons said the district is "our epicentre, our nucleus". "Whatever you make of it, Water Street is our namesake, our Bourbon Street, the place to be" (*Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel*, 1997a).

North Water Street EZ: District-scale Qualities

The North Water Street EZ contrasts with the surrounding cityscape in several ways. Although it is one-sided (almost the entire east side of Water Street in the EZ is occupied by a series of surface parking lots), it possesses several features lacking in nearby redeveloped city blocks. Below, nine district-scale qualities of the North Water Street entertainment zone are enumerated (see Figures 5–8).

- (1) *Narrow, small buildings.* Only one building occupies more than 25% of the block frontage, and no building is more than four storeys high. Most are one or two storeys tall. The interior sizes of establishments vary: most are between 2000 and 5000 square feet. Only one establishment appears to exceed 10 000 square feet.
- (2) *Diverse and understated architecture.* EZ buildings run a stylistic gamut ranging from vernacular Victorian commercial to Beaux-Arts and Moderne industrial. Despite these diverse styles, the EZ buildings share a common architectural feel that many people are likely to perceive simply as 'old.'
- (3) *Flexible facades.* At the street level, the design emphasis of entertainment establishments is on distinctive and colourful facades and signage. Traditional, 'historic' architectural details are not always emphasized and several structures have been substantially altered.
- (4) *No formal open space.* There are no parks, plazas, or other places of repose in the EZ. Other than parking lots, the only outdoor open space is private and is associated with bars. These spaces contain table seating and are located either to the side or in the back of buildings. Water Street's sidewalks are relatively narrow, and there are no sidewalk cafes.
- (5) *Continuous commercial frontage.* Every building in the EZ contains commercial space, providing the zone with nearly continuous activity, accessibility and visual interest. Buildings are punctuated by doors and windows that advertise the activity within. Of course, not every linear foot of Water Street frontage is commercial; some buildings' front facades have limited stretches of blank walls, generally less than ten feet in length.

Table 2. Establishments in Milwaukee's Water Street entertainment zone, 2003 and 2007

	Address	2003	2007	Comments
1	1101 N. Water St.	Water Street Brewery		
2	1111 N. Water St.	Rosie's Waterworks		
3	1114 N. Water St.	Brew City BBQ	Bar Louie	Recently opened; used to be BrewCity in 2003
4	1127 N. Water St.	Fitzgibbons Pub		
5	1131 N. Water St.	–	Tequila Rita's	Two-storey building developed on vacant lot in 2005; Opened as Terrace Bar (by neighbouring owners of Fitzgibbons); Closed in Spring 2007, reopened in Summer as present
6	1135 N. Water St.	McGillycuddy's		
7	1139 N. Water St.	The Guitar Bar		
8	1213 N. Water St.	Oak Barrel	Brother's Bar & Grill	
9	1215 N. Water St.	O'Danny's		
10	1225-7 N. Water St.	Skky Lounge/Malibu Beach/Lukes Sports Bar Complex	Sullivan's	Skky Lounge Complex closed 2004; The Swig opened 2005, Sullivan's opened 2006
11	1247 N. Water St.	The Corner		
12	113 E. Juneau Ave.	The Harp Irish Pub		
13	125 E. Juneau Ave.	–	Brew City BBQ	Moved to present location—combination of existing building and new construction—in 2006
14	134 E. Juneau Ave.	The Lodge		
15	154 E. Juneau Ave	Mel's on Water	Scooter's	Mel's closed in 2006; reopened later that year as two distinct venues with separate entrances
16	158 E. Juneau Ave.		Duke's on Water	
17	1122 N. Edison St	Rudy's Mexican		



Figure 5. The unpossessing and incomplete urbanism of the Water Street entertainment zone is home to the largest concentration of nightlife establishments in the Milwaukee region. (2003). *Source:* The authors.

(6) *Commercial frontage is not entirely entertainment-related.* While Water Street contains many bars and restaurants, they do not monopolize commercial space. Other businesses found in the EZ include a design centre, a delicatessen, a frame shop and a silver plating establishment.



Figure 6. The north block of the Water Street entertainment zone. (Since this photograph was taken all of the establishments on this block front have experienced changes of ownership and configuration.) (2003). *Source:* The authors.



Figure 7 and 8. The buildings of the Water Street entertainment zone will be perceived as 'old' by their patrons, but are hardly of landmark quality. (2003). *Source:* The authors.

- (7) *Entertainment establishments are similar.* All 16 Water Street EZ businesses sell alcohol and the majority serve food. All can be considered bars, taverns, nightclubs or some variety thereof. The related content of the establishments gives the district a consistent, distinct image and provides potential patrons with a predictable forecast of the district experience.
- (8) *Independent businesses.* Of the 16 Water Street entertainment establishments, only three are part of national chains. The rest are independently-owned and operated, providing the district with a distinct 'Milwaukee flavour'.
- (9) *Frequent changes in configurations and ownership.* In 2003 the Water Street EZ had 14 spaces containing entertainment establishments (Table 2). By 2007, two new entertainment spaces had been added, one as new construction (a single-use, infill building on a narrow, previously vacant lot between two existing establishments) and one as an adaptive re-use of an existing industrial building combined with new construction. Other changes also occurred. One existing establishment was subdivided into two, and two other existing establishments were consolidated into one. No entertainment establishments were replaced by non-entertainment uses during this period. Thus, between 2003 and 2007, there was a net gain of two entertainment businesses (four closed and eight opened, two of which subsequently closed). This small sample of change underscores the dynamism of this zone.

Nothing about the Water Street EZ's urban design is unique. In fact, many of these nine characteristics were typical of urban commercial fabrics prior to the 1950s. Yet these seemingly ordinary commercial streetscapes are no longer so common in Milwaukee, nor in other large American downtowns dominated by office buildings, parking garages, highways and megaprojects. Although the seemingly cramped pedestrian realm of Milwaukee's EZ lacks many of those design features conventionally labelled as 'good urbanism', such as wide sidewalks, park spaces, sidewalk cafes, uniform façade, signage and planting schemes, the district's

modest scale and visual variety create a lively streetscape that modern downtown development processes cannot easily replicate despite substantial subsidies and national corporate involvement. This paradox will be discussed in a further section of the paper.

North Water Street EZ: Establishment-scale Qualities

The urbanistic qualities of the North Water Street EZ are mirrored and augmented by the buildings' and establishments' architectural and functional characteristics. The Water Street establishments are ordinary, but it is this very ordinariness that enables them to well serve their entertainment functions. Below, five primary establishment-scale qualities of Water Street establishments are listed.

- (1) *Functional predictability.* Just as the Water Street establishments share a common commercial use, much of the inside experience, including food and drinks, follows a standard formula (burgers, sandwiches, pub food, pizza, continental and Tex-Mex cuisines), that is both expected and enjoyed by patrons.
- (2) *Historic atmosphere.* The interior of most establishments in the EZ have a historic character, with details such as high roofs, stamped tin ceilings and wooden floors. These interiors provide patrons with a different experience than that offered by establishments located in new buildings, which have a larger scale and lack historic details.
- (3) *Flexible outdoor spaces.* Several of the Water Street establishments have outdoor spaces which are converted to seating in the warm months of spring and summer. Some of these spaces are enclosed and heated during winter months. Milwaukee has a strong German heritage, and Water Street's small 'beer gardens' follow that country's tradition of drinking alcohol in the outdoors.
- (4) *Aggressive advertising.* Almost all Water Street establishments announce their image and contents to the public with brightly lit signs on their exteriors and large plate-glass windows. Many play music outside at night to advertise the good times being had within.
- (5) *Open late.* Water Street establishments have temporal characteristics that reflect their activities. Establishments are most active at night, especially on weekends between 10 pm and 2 am. Most are also open during the day, although their activity level is modest and is restricted to the establishment interior.

History of the North Water Street EZ

The Water Street EZ is no more than 20 years old. According to the *Milwaukee Sentinel* (1991) as late as the early 1980s the EZ area was a declining wholesale and retail flower district. As flower merchants moved away, the buildings fell into disuse and semi-abandonment, a fate typical of de-industrializing areas in other cities. Politicians and bar owners give different reasons for why bars started to move into the area (*Milwaukee Sentinel* and *Journal-Sentinel*, 1991, 1997b). According to an alderman, the city "let the word out" in the 1980s that downtown could accommodate a larger number of tavern licences than currently existed, spurring new applications for bars in and around the CBD. Some bar owners credited the opening of an indoor arena several blocks away

in 1988. In either case, in 1989 there were only four nightlife establishments in the EZ area. One of these was a large, two-storey sports bar that many credit as having "helped to spur development" in the Water Street EZ (Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel, 1997b). The number of establishments expanded to 13 by 1997 and 16 by 2007.

The growth of the Water Street EZ was not necessarily foreseen. "We never dreamed of the explosion of Water Street and the surrounding area ... that was a special bonus", said one of the early tavern owners. One conscious promotional step was the self-organization of businesses as the Water Street Association in 1990. But Milwaukee's planners did not play much of a role in the district's growth. Instead, planners focused on the development of large-scale, formal interventions like the riverwalk and corporate office towers (*Milwaukee Sentinel*, 1991).

The exact mix of forces which 'caused' the Water Street EZ are probably impossible to determine. But it is certain that the district could not have existed without the flexible, small-scale urban fabric that survived amidst the large-scale megaprojects and street widenings that demolished or reshaped much of the historic cityscape around the EZ.

North Water Street EZ: Future Challenges

While the Milwaukee entertainment zone has continued to evolve incrementally, its continued expansion and its current character face three challenges: limited expansion room for new businesses, cooption by future large-scale megaprojects linked to publicly-funded redevelopment initiatives, and the expansion of high-end residential development in the vicinity of the EZ.

Water Street's EZ does not have much room to grow. It is surrounded by large-scale uses that inhibit street life and lack commercial activity. The block directly to the south is occupied by a 1960s multi-storey parking garage, which provides a definitive edge to the EZ with an urbanistically hostile design that retreats from the street and is surrounded by plantings. Other nearby blocks to the south contain large-scale government, cultural, commercial and parking structures. These monumental buildings contribute far less to the active life of Water Street than the more modest buildings of the EZ.

On its other sides, the Water Street EZ also has limited potential for expansion. Paradoxically, there is abundant available land around the district, most of it empty of buildings. District expansion would require new construction, which would be highly unlikely to possess the urbanistic and architectural qualities of the current district. Nor would this new construction likely be affordable to independent entertainment establishments such as those presently in the district. The Milwaukee EZ is too isolated from any similar, but less active urban fabric that could accommodate a spread of entertainment uses. Without this adjoining fabric, it is unlikely that the Water Street will catalyze compatible development.

The North Water Street EZ's second challenge is its potential loss of character and distinctiveness through incompatible development that may overwhelm the district. The demolition of the Park West Expressway left several vacant, county-owned city blocks available for development. Milwaukee's *Downtown Plan* (1999) envisioned a megadevelopment for the area, including a 'signature entertainment centre', a 'landmark hotel' and a Harley-Davidson museum. Although the museum has since found another site south and west of the zone (*Milwaukee*

Journal-Sentinel, 2007c), the plan's overall entertainment-related recommendations are typical of urban entertainment districts across the country (Beyard *et al.*, 2001).

Plans for the vacant land around the Water Street EZ remain embroiled in disputes over land disposition and subsidy levels (*Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel*, 2006, 2007a, 2007b). However, none of the proposed luxury condominiums or large-format retail facilities are particularly compatible with the scale and character of the EZ. In a few years, if current development proposals cited in the local press come to fruition, Water Street's variety of small businesses may be surrounded by luxury condominiums, office developments and chain stores similar to those in other American cities. These uses may initially contribute to the patronage of Water Street establishments, but over time the character of the area as a regional entertainment destination may be diluted or even destroyed if district space is occupied by uses catering to wealthier consumers and residents.

Finally, the growth of downtown living near the EZ establishments may stimulate 'quality-of-life' initiatives that may limit or push out entertainment venues. The activity generated by EZs, together with a rise in the desirability of downtown living (Birch, 2002) in cities such as Philadelphia, Cleveland and Tampa have encouraged new residential development and loft conversions in or near these cities' respective EZs. Luxury condominiums and rentals not only contribute to rising real estate values, but spur new plans, infrastructure improvements and ordinances whose goals are to limit, sanitize, hinder or entirely shut down the nightlife establishments that initially gave rise to the district (Bullard, 2001; City of Philadelphia, 2002; Danner, 2003; Durham, 2003; Harris, 2003). A similar fate could befall Milwaukee's EZ if luxury residences proliferate nearby.

Siting Entertainment Zones in Literature

Although the growth of entertainment, nightlife and tourism uses in contemporary downtowns in both the USA and the UK has been well documented, there is little research on the physical evolution and design of these districts, particularly of the smaller-scale venues that comprise entertainment zones.

The following review of current leisure-based urban revitalization practice provides both a context for and a contrast to the EZ. The subsequent section provides a literature review and analysis that provides a theoretical framework for the entertainment zone.

Planning for the Urban Entertainment Destination (UED) and Entertainment District

With the economic rationale of cities changing from physical to cultural production, municipal economic development programmes often emphasize entertainment, leisure and tourism facilities and districts. Attempting to capitalize on these growing urban markets, public leadership working together with private commercial developers have subsidized and constructed new forms of leisure infrastructure. The complex development processes and the resulting large structures can fairly be described as 'megaprojects'.

While megaprojects take many forms, including festival marketplaces and urban shopping malls, stadiums, arenas, convention centres, performing arts

centres, museums, aquariums and casinos—or various combinations thereof—these structures all demonstrate a remarkable similarity in the way they are developed. Megaproject development is characterized by substantial outlays and blending of public and private capital, long and sometimes contested public review processes, long build out periods and the need for large plots of land and standardized development formats (Sagalyn & Frieden, 1989; Hannigan, 1998; Beyard *et al.*, 2001; Petersen, 2001; Sagalyn, 2001; Altshuler & Luberoff, 2003; Hollands & Chatterton, 2003; Laslo, 2003; Metz, 2003).

Although megaprojects are a staple of economic development programmes and are popular among many in municipal leadership positions, critics have generally been sceptical about their ability to create jobs, enhance municipal net tax growth and revitalize downtowns and other inner city areas (see Knoll & Zimbalist, 1997; Judd & Fainstein, 1999; Judd, 2004; Hoffman *et al.*, 2003; Sanders, 2005 among others). The urban design of megaprojects has also been criticized. Sternberg (2002) and Campo (2005) argue that megaprojects fail to make significant connections to the surrounding urban fabric and thus fail to catalyze additional urban development.

A recent downtown, leisure-related form of the megaproject is known as the urban entertainment destination (UED). UEDs are also known as entertainment centres, cultural centres, lifestyle centres or site-based entertainment projects. UEDs have significant nightlife components and are often constructed in or near downtown and on former industrial sites, rail yards or maritime facilities. The performative and economic qualities of UEDs somewhat resemble those of the entertainment zone, although they do so in a sanitized and enlarged form much as shopping malls mimic traditional retail districts. But unlike entertainment zones, which emerge with little planning or formal administration, UEDs and entertainment districts require significant, centralized development, often of long duration.

While UEDs vary modestly in form and format, their uses include restaurants, bars and nightclubs, movie theatre multiplexes, video arcade and virtual reality games, theme park rides and attractions and sometimes hotels and conference centres. Ample on-site, structured parking is always included (Hannigan, 1998; Davis, 2000; Beyard *et al.*, 2001; Muhlenbach & Muhlenbach, 2003). UEDs may also incorporate more traditional cultural attractions such as theatres and museums. In addition, many UEDs stage a wide variety of events and ephemera ranging from popular music concerts and historical re-enactments to individual street performers stationed in recreated cityscapes. UEDs sometimes preserve and reuse existing buildings, as at the Power Plant Live in Baltimore, but their large scale and heavy parking requirements generally necessitate new construction. Prominent UEDs include the Sony Metreon (San Francisco), Bayou Place (Houston), Universal CityWalk (Los Angeles), Fourth Street Live (Louisville), Centro Ybor (Tampa), Block 37 (Chicago), Newport on the Levee (Newport, Kentucky) and the Denver Pavilions (Figure 9).

The design of UEDs is characterized by large size and an inward focus. UEDs usually range from 250 000 to 600 000 square feet, although newer facilities can be even larger. Much like casinos, UEDs are wholly contained, inward-oriented environments, designed to create and maximize a captive market (Hannigan, 1998). Patrons arriving by car drive directly into a venue's garage before spending several hours within the facility eating and drinking, shopping and partaking in



Figure 9. Urban entertainment destinations, such as Louisville's Fourth Street Live, are usually filled with chain amusements and their scale makes them difficult to site within existing street patterns.

Source: The authors.

various forms of entertainment, all under one roof. By design, there are often little or no spillover effects to nearby businesses. Indeed, Sony developed the concept for the 400 000 square-foot Metreon after executives watched patrons leave its profitable cinema multiplex on Manhattan's Upper West Side to spend money in nearby neighbourhood restaurants not owned by the corporation (Muhlenbach & Muhlenbach, 2003). The expansive size of UEDs makes them difficult to fit within existing urban street patterns and their development therefore often requires the use of public property, the acquisition or condemnation of private property, or large, isolated parcels.

Retail space within UEDs is dominated by familiar national or global chain retail, amusement and dining facilities such as Gameworlds, Dave and Busters, the Cheesecake Factory, PF Changs, Disney Stores, Warner Brothers Stores, The Museum Company Store, House of Blues, Wolfgang Puck Café and Hard Rock Café (Beyard *et al.*, 2001; Hollands & Chatterton, 2003; Muhlebach & Muhlebach, 2003). Some of these merchants, such as the Cheesecake Factory, have evolved primarily as tenants in such developments. Some UEDs have flagship retail or entertainment outlets like Warner Brothers Stores or Niketown whose purpose is as much to promote a brand in a highly visible urban location as it is to sell merchandise (Hannigan, 1998; Hollands & Chatterton, 2003).

As noted earlier, the complexity of UEDs necessitates significant planning and development. As such, they are carefully designed to maximize economic return. The Urban Land Institute (ULI) provides a series of pro-forma templates upon which to plan, finance, market and measure the success of such developments (Beyard *et al.*, 2001). Generally, the development templates for UEDs leave little to chance. These templates include prescriptions for how to design and market UEDs to women, 'Generation X' and 'Generation Y' members.

Formally-designated 'entertainment districts' have some of the same qualities as UEDs, but these districts focus on performing arts and traditional cultural convocations. The planning, administration and goals of these districts are more likely to be governed by a specialized public, quasi-public or not-for-profit entity, as opposed to the often purely private-sector-administered UED. Most entertainment districts have a significant historic or heritage component, incorporating existing buildings within an existing network of streets and public spaces. Examples of formally designated entertainment districts include Times Square in New York, Avenue of the Arts in Philadelphia, Sundance Square in Fort Worth, the Arena District in Columbus, the Wholesale District in Indianapolis, Bricktown in Oklahoma City and Old Town in Pasadena. There are approximately 90 officially sanctioned entertainment or cultural arts districts in the United States, with several more in various planning stages (NTC Foundation, 2003). While the cornerstones of many of these districts are traditional culture venues such as performing arts centres and museums, many also have nightlife components, as well as hotels, sports, conference and convention facilities and the same chain retailers and amusements found in UEDs. Entertainment districts such as Old Town Pasadena and the Chicago Theatre District, have even included UEDs within their larger district programme.

While entertainment districts are seemingly more city-embracing and organic than UEDs, formal design and development prescriptions also exist to dictate design characteristics, mixes of uses and phasing strategies for these areas (Beyard *et al.*, 2001). Since entertainment districts often reuse older buildings and retain historic urban design characteristics, they can bear physical similarities to entertainment zones. Yet the entertainment zone's flexibility, informality and dynamic capacity for change cannot exist under the rigid planning frameworks and complex financing strategies that govern entertainment districts.

Much of the literature on UEDs and entertainment districts is frankly promotional, but some scholars have criticized the multinational corporate media and retail conglomerates that have significant ownership or tenancy stakes in many UEDs and entertainment districts. Hollands & Chatterton (2003, pp. 361–362) noted that increasing corporate ownership, branding and theming and conscious attempts to segment markets are usurping and commercializing public space, causing gentrification, the "marginalization of creative and alternative local economic development," and a general decline of real consumer choice and diversity. Davis (2000, pp. 133–135) criticized "location-based entertainment projects" in or near downtowns for "displacing small businesses and the heterogeneous uses of the streets" and creating public spaces "defined by marketing criteria and shaped to the most profitable audiences." Huxtable (1997) bemoaned the lack of authenticity of new entertainment and cultural developments in American cities, calling this the replacement of the real with the unreal. Eisenger (2000) worried about the social implications of essentially building a city for visitors, noting that large-scale entertainment and tourist projects skew civic agendas to the detriment of fundamental city services.

The public sector is complicit in the creation of UEDs and formal entertainment districts. Few of these areas would exist without public subsidies and complicated financing mechanisms (Sagalyn & Frieden, 1989; Beyard *et al.*, 2001; Petersen, 2001; Sagalyn, 2001, Laslo, 2003). Nor could UEDs, and to a lesser extent entertainment districts, exist without the fiscal and governance

infrastructures of public-private partnerships (Fosler & Berger, 1982; Sagalyn & Frieden, 1989; Clarke, 1998; Walzer & Jacobs, 1998; Beyard *et al.*, 2001).

An Emerging Theory for the Entertainment Zone

To frame the definition and description of the entertainment zone, the paper draws upon two bodies of interdisciplinary urban theory: 'everyday urbanism' and 'heterotopias'. These theoretical areas place the EZ in strong contrast to the UED and entertainment district development formats described above.

Everyday Urbanism

Commentators have long recognized the importance of many of the entertainment zone's underlying characteristics in creating lively and economically successful urban districts. Jacobs (1961), Rudofsky (1964), Banham (1971), Venturi *et al.* (1972) and Jackson (1986) found informality, accident and lack of unifying plans to be key factors in good urban design. Lynch (1960), Jacobs (1961) and Alexander *et al.* (1977) praised dense neighbourhoods of modestly-scaled buildings while expressing scepticism concerning the planning and large-scale design of urban development. Alexander *et al.* (1977, p. 3) in particular advocated "piece-meal" development, arguing that dwellings and cities must develop organically and that they cannot be created "by centralized authority, or by laws, or by master plans".

Building on this tradition, 'everyday urbanism' argues that "lived experience [is] more important than physical form in defining the city" and city building is a "human and social discourse" (Crawford, 1999, pp. 8–9; also see Harris & Burke, 1997). Crawford (1999) notes that everyday space, where we carry on our ordinary daily routines—commuting, working, relaxing, walking, shopping, eating and running errands—"stands in contrast to the carefully planned, officially designated and often underused spaces of public use that can be found in most American cities" (pp. 8–9). Everyday urbanism emphasizes the *evolution* rather than the *creation* of urban space, and everyday vitality is the product of messiness, conflict and "eliminating of distance between professionals and users" (1999, p. 12) rather than formal design visions or grand gestures.

The research for the current paper found that the necessary physical precursors for the Milwaukee entertainment zone—including flexible, low cost, modest-sized spaces in existing buildings together with a general lack of planning and development schemes—are consistent with everyday urbanism. In the Water Street EZ, the fabric is the same two- to four-storey narrow masonry buildings, squarely fronting the street, that were once the vernacular building blocks of the American downtown. Few establishments are over 5000 square feet and while the buildings are old, there is nothing remarkable about their architecture. The Milwaukee EZ's buildings have not been protected by landmark or historic district designations and the lack of such preservation measures has allowed entrepreneurs to flexibly renovate these buildings for new uses. The lack of such designations has also allowed new additions to existing structures and modest infill development without drawn-out permitting or apparent subsidy. Water Street's vernacular architecture does not create the vitality of the area, but it provides an underlying flexible framework with which diverse actors can (re)shape through use.

The baseline urban design conditions that permit entertainment zones are in many respects the same ones that Jacobs wrote about over 40 years ago. In arguing against the heavy hand of urban renewal-era planning, she asserted that the most successful city districts were those with modestly-sized, everyday-quality building stock that evolved without planning. Jacobs' (1961) advocacy of older buildings was both a foreshadowing of the conditions that permit EZs and an indictment of the development practices that create UEDs:

Cities need old buildings so badly it is probably impossible for vigorous streets and districts to grow without them. By old buildings I mean... a good lot of plain, ordinary, low-value old buildings... If a city area has only new buildings, the enterprises which can exist there are automatically limited to those that can support the high cost of new construction... Chain stores, chain restaurants and banks go into new construction. But neighborhood bars, foreign restaurants and pawn shops go into older buildings... (pp. 244–245)

Alexander *et al.* (1977) and Brand (1994) also commented favourably on older buildings' contribution to the vibrancy of urban districts. The observations in Milwaukee and elsewhere strongly suggest that old buildings in relatively poor condition are necessary precursors for the generation of an entertainment zone.

Heterotopias

Perhaps the most fundamental characteristic, and asset, of the entertainment zone is the relaxation of the rules, regulations and social conventions that characterize much of the environmental experience in North American cities and regions. EZs exist in locations within the city where plans have failed to be implemented, failed to materialize or have just been ignored. The resulting state of 'benign neglect' and a relative lack of desirability for other uses provide ideal conditions for nightlife operators and their patrons (Figure 10). While dense inner-city neighbourhoods are often nearby, in their formative periods EZs often have few residents, i.e. those most likely to complain about noise, litter, loitering or other public problems associated with nightlife. This vacuum of attention facilitates celebratory, boisterous, sexual and sometimes rowdy social behaviours that are less acceptable at other times and places in the city.



Figure 10. Heterotopic space: nightlife flows out of the bars of Old City, Philadelphia, reappropriating the sidewalk and street for social use. (2004). *Source:* The authors.



Figure 11. Old City patrons seem undeterred by the congestion, noise and detritus of the entertainment zone. (Philadelphia, 2004). *Source:* The authors.

Foucault (1986) considered places without rules, or with minimal rules, outside conventionally structured society by design, social convention or rule of law to be ‘heterotopias’, or those spaces that were neither utopian nor dystopian, but a paradoxical combination of both. Foucault’s concept included a wide variety of places including prisons and asylums, theatres and cinemas, libraries and museums, cemeteries, festival sites, vacation villages, brothels and ships. All of these places have incongruent, contradictory or paradoxical qualities and are structured as much in time as they are in space. For Foucault and others (Genocchio, 1995; Hetherington, 1997; Campo, 2002, 2004), these spaces of difference, incongruence or ‘other’ have disruptive and transformative powers and excite the imaginations of those more rooted in conventionally structured, everyday experience.

With its patrons temporarily free from expectations, responsibility and everyday routine, the entertainment zone provides a setting for escape, play, intimate engagement with others and with the urban environment. This escapism from authority can also be problematic. Recent authors have decried the social problems associated with nightlife and alcohol consumption in urban settings (see Hobbs *et al.*, 2003; Roberts & Turner, 2005; Roberts, 2006.) But raw release, extreme behaviour and crime are not the only libratory or ‘other’ social characteristics of the entertainment zone. The observations for this study in Milwaukee and other EZs indicated that the vast majority of social behaviours in these areas were more modest than the extremes noted by these authors.

EZs also provide a venue for what Ehrenreich (2007, p. 10) calls “collective joy” or “collective ecstasy”, a phenomenon marked by the “incommunicable thrill of [a] group deliberately united in joy or exaltation”. She suggests that this experience is a vital part of human existence and that it has historically been mistaken for abnormal, deviant or dangerous behaviours. In Ehrenreich’s view, modernity has swept aside manifestations of collective joy such as medieval feasts and carnivals, non-Western rites, rituals and dances, and other so-called ‘primitive’ or ‘pagan’ group behaviours. The occasional street festivals, Oktoberfests and regional ephemera staged in EZs are certainly a manifestation of what Ehrenreich believes to be a lost Bacchanalian heritage. But the entertainment zone also serves the need for collective joy on an everyday basis as well. EZ establishments are some of the principal places where people collectively experience rock or popular music performance and watch sports—two of the modern activities that Ehrenreich identifies as fulfilling the need for collective ecstasy.

The final heterotopic quality or experience engendered by the entertainment zone is that of exposure to the ‘urban’ itself. In American cities such as metropolitan Milwaukee where most of the population resides, works, shops and gets on with their lives in recognizably suburban environments, the entertainment zone may provide one of the few opportunities residents have to escape newer, more sedate, more ordered or less urban environments. This interaction with the urban—including crowds, congestion, noise, oldness and decay—provides a uniquely urban experience that cannot be easily replicated in suburban or more planned milieus (Figure 11).

Evaluating the Entertainment Zone: A New Paradigm for Urban Redevelopment?

From this study of entertainment zones in Milwaukee and elsewhere, it can be concluded that entertainment zones not only provide social opportunities for

metropolitan residents, but also contribute to the uniqueness of American cities, boosting the identity and sense of place so desperately sought by designers, planners and urban citizens, and which is correspondingly absent in conventional entertainment-related urban developments. The entertainment zone provides a creative and compelling alternative to the dominant megaprojects paradigm of current entertainment development practice. The fact that EZs are small-scale, incremental and low-cost makes them fiscally attractive as well.

While EZs evolve organically and cannot be created or planned anew or by fiat, their underlying characteristics may provide a foundation for a new paradigm for downtown development practices based in ordinary American urbanism and consistent with contemporary social life. The study offers three strategies consistent with the EZ paradigm for consideration and discussion among urban designers, economic development officials, public leaders and others interested in downtown development practice. The strategies complement a range of contemporary urban cultural initiatives being pursued by both American and European cities including the 'twenty-four hour city', the 'creative city', the 'cool city', and efforts to encourage downtown living (Heath, 1997; Landry, 2000; Birch, 2002; Florida, 2002; Michigan Cool Cities Initiative, 2007).

First, *'preserve' older districts, but not as landmarks*. While historic preservation has led to the retention of many areas, the primary criterion for preservation remains high architectural quality. EZs generally do not possess such qualities, but the older buildings that house entertainment uses should be preserved nevertheless, while also permitting substantial alteration. Where older buildings have been demolished, new buildings should retain the scale (width and height) of older buildings so as not to overwhelm the urban fabric. Parking requirements that would alter the scale of buildings should be waived and construction of new above-ground parking structures should be discouraged or prohibited. A major obstacle is the rampant demolition and redevelopment which has removed many of the older downtown districts that could be revitalized through incremental growth. However, most cities retain at least some vernacular districts in or near downtown. Preserving the scale and quality, if not every historic detail, of these districts for future informal development is especially important.

Second, *reconceptualize and reduce the scale of new urban development*. Current urban redevelopment practice generally permits developments only at a large scale—one or two development parcels per city block. In many cases, city blocks are combined to permit the gargantuan scale of facilities such as casinos, convention centres and UEDs. This large-lot development practice conflicts with the historic design of most downtown blocks, many of which were developed with up to 50 parcels per block. Large-lot redevelopment not only requires large buildings that lack the differentiated scale of the EZ, but also usually prohibits the participation in development decisions of any actors except large-scale developers and national retail chains. There is little reason why cities such as Milwaukee that are creating new city districts should not consider an alternative development scale permitting smaller-scaled, less costly buildings at a scale of at least six to eight new parcels per block. Smaller-scaled developments will permit local entrepreneurs to have a stake in new development, adding to the variety of retail and entertainment establishments and to the creativity and uniqueness of new urban buildings. Smaller-scaled development is also much less likely to require the public subsidies involved with so many mega-developments.

Finally, consider designating 'free zones' or 'free moments' within the city, to heterotopically activate districts or neighbourhoods. Although they have radically different built forms, cities such as Las Vegas and New Orleans are among the most popular entertainment destinations in the United States in large part because the normal rules of social engagement are more flexible in these places and activities which are ordinarily forbidden, e.g. gambling, prostitution and public intoxication, are permitted or at least tolerated. European cities such as Amsterdam and Copenhagen have gone even further by officially designating districts where otherwise illegal activities such as prostitution and the selling of soft drugs are tolerated. A similar relaxation of rules for gambling is becoming evident in American cities as municipal and state governments seek additional revenue. Today, major American cities such as Milwaukee, New Orleans, St. Louis and Detroit all have large casinos. The state of Pennsylvania is planning for the development of two casinos in Philadelphia, and Chicago is also considering legalized gambling. Yet the development of casinos concentrates revenues in the hands of a few multinational corporations, requires new mega-buildings with over-sized parking facilities, and consumes the urban fabric while engendering little spillover revitalization. Designating heterotopic districts, rather than building megaprojects, will spur local entrepreneurship, generate a sense of place and add to, rather than subtract from local character. Since it may be contentious, heterotopic transformation can begin with modest changes like the liberalization of local tavern licensing laws. The positive effects of such modest efforts can be seen in places such as Milwaukee where the liberal licensing of taverns allowed Water Street to flourish.

A time-based 'free zone' strategy similar to that suggested by Lynch (1972) might include designating heterotopic periods in otherwise regulated districts. Cities such as Philadelphia already hold monthly events such as 'First Friday' in Old City. While this event is on the surface about attending openings at the area's numerous art galleries, the overall experience more resembles a public celebration as people spill out of galleries and make their way down streets crowded with craft sellers, musicians and other revellers. During these events, people can be seen carrying drinks from one venue to the next, and normal prohibitions concerning the consumption of alcohol in public places are informally relaxed.

Although the authors endorse and promote the entertainment zone as a paradigm for downtown revitalization, they also note the potential connection between nightlife and social problems. The excessive consumption of alcohol in such settings has been associated with criminal activity and found to negatively impact on urban life (Danner, 2003; Hobbs *et al.*, 2003; Roberts & Turner, 2005; Hadfield, 2006; Roberts, 2006). But it is also thought that concentrated nightlife and the communal experience it engenders are an integral part of the contemporary urban experience. Roberts (2006) argues that the expansion of nightlife in Britain has transformed many city centres into 'no-go areas' filled with 'crime and disorder' and that nightlife makes little contribution to urban cultural development, but the experience in US cities seems to be different. The resurgence of downtown living in America (Birch, 2002) suggests that entertainment zones are far from being 'no-go'. While concentrated nightlife and middle-class residences in close proximity will perhaps always have a somewhat uneasy coexistence (Roberts & Turner, 2005), this proximity has not stopped luxury condominium development in Philadelphia's Old City, the Cleveland Flats and most recently, in Milwaukee's Water Street district. In fact, proximity to nightlife

uses in Milwaukee seems to have stimulated development: 'The Residences on Water' is a mixed-use development whose sales pitch boasts that it is "strategically located in the heart of the entertainment district at the corner of Water and Juneau" (The Residences on Water, 2007). The fact that EZs have developed independently in nearly every large American city (Table 1) strongly suggests that they serve an important social need and that attempts to suppress them or otherwise legislate them out of existence will prove counterproductive.

Conclusion

Entertainment zones are beacons of individuality, informality and flexibility in the increasingly rationalized, controlled, subsidized and homogenized landscape of urban entertainment in US cities. As entertainment becomes the dominant arena in which cities hold a competitive edge over their growing peripheries, the heterotopic qualities of entertainment zones should be emulated rather than rejected. If the physical and experiential qualities which give entertainment zones their unique nature continue to be ignored, repressed or destroyed by conventional development, the American city of the future will be a less interesting, productive and fulfilling place to live and work.

While this study documented some of the physical and experiential characteristics of entertainment zones and their benefits to cities, the social and economic characteristics of EZs should not remain unexamined. Although a closer investigation was beyond the scope of this study, the authors believe that the social and economic benefits of these districts are probably substantial. Unlike European cities, many American downtowns are devoid of significant activity after 5 pm. Therefore, it is difficult to argue that these areas do not benefit from an influx of hundreds, if not thousands, of pleasure-seekers after dark. The probable economic and social benefits are thus financial and perceptual, as the image of downtown is transformed from a place of danger to one of excitement, and as otherwise inactive properties experience additional economic activity.

Current American downtown development practices still favour large format design, chain stores and parking garages, but this study concludes with the conviction that urban designers and planners still have the capacity to support, replicate and encourage the spontaneous, informal and vigorous atmosphere of EZs, whether for entertainment-related or other uses. While there is hesitation to offer simple prescriptions, the authors believe that the entertainment zone provides an important model for informing future development practices in cities.

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