

COMMENTARY

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A Window Into the Heart of America

Elegant Christmas displays are fading in most downtowns

By Roberta Brandes Gratz

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It's holiday season and store windows are filled with goodies and colorful, even riveting window displays. Just look at the crowds that good windows attract. Imagine the potential for downtown streets beyond the holidays.

But in too many downtowns, pedestrian life is eroding store window by store window. Just at the season when people want to stroll Main Street, the tradition of viewing Christmas windows is fading along with the displays themselves. Even the biggest downtown chain stores make no effort to appeal to acquisitive impulses.

Except for a handful of great and walkable cities like New York, Chicago, and Boston, storefronts with black glass, drawn curtains, and papered-over windows are more common. A promising year round opportunity to strengthen pedestrian-oriented centers is assuredly being overlooked. What's more, we're gradually eroding our downtown holiday economy along with erasing the opportunity to simply observe American creativity.

I know from my own experience how many items I might never have bought if I hadn't spotted them first in a delightful sidewalk window. Budget cuts eliminated or diminished that silent salesman. But more significantly, the empty window has undermined the pedestrian pleasure of the downtown street.

If America's downtowns really want to get more customers out of their cars and onto their feet sidewalks must serve as pedestrian boulevards distinguished by interesting sights and appealing destinations. When I was a little girl living in New York's Greenwich Village my family enjoyed a wonderful holiday tradition. We took the bus up from Washington Square to 59th Street and walked all the way back down Fifth Avenue. We took enormous pleasure from the extraordinary array of finely-crafted, joyous Christmas windows. Miniature storybook characters danced, skated on authentic-looking ice, jumped rope, sang carols on balconies, wore delicately made silk dresses and velvet coats, and rode in elegant horse drawn buggies.

It was a challenge among the four of us to decide which was the best window. Lord & Taylor invariably won, but occasionally, B. Altman and Company or Saks Fifth Avenue topped the list. Intricacy, novelty, surprise, and artistry were worth the visit. Gum drops, sugar plums, elves, and Santas were everywhere.

In New York, it wasn't only the department stores that took seriously the challenge of entertaining the pedestrian during holidays. Travel agencies, banks, jewelry stores, and every imaginable business artistically filled their street front windows almost as a matter of civic pride.

We were among the thousands of families who knew businesses by their windows and eagerly awaited next year's Christmas season display. When my family moved to a Connecticut suburb in the 1950s, we returned every year



Imagine if the visitors who flock to New York City during the Christmas season just to see windows, like the ones drawing crowds at Lord And Taylor's in New York City, had an Avenue of Windows to explore in their own hometown all year long.

by train to walk down Fifth Avenue.

Years later, married and with young children, my husband and I renewed the family tradition. This year, Macy's, on 34th and Broadway, is the winner. One window depicts Santa's workshop and the North Pole Toy Express. Another, based on the movie *Miracle on 34th Street*, shows a courtroom judge declaring Kris Kringle Santa Claus and includes a film clip of little Natalie Wood not believing his beard is real.

Lord and Taylor's windows display characteristically American Christmas scenes from years past. They include Radio City's first Christmas spectacular in 1933, the White House Christmas in 1856, and the store's own first Christmas party in 1826 — the year Lord and Taylor's was founded. The windows at Saks describe the story of the little tree in the forest dreaming of being a Christmas tree and riding the train to the big city apartment.

Imagine the economic, cultural, even the spiritual strength that America could generate if more cities and suburbs devoted care and creativity to developing local Avenues of Windows. Imagine, and it's not hard, if the visitors who flock to New York City during the Christmas season just to see the windows had an Avenue of Windows to explore in their own hometown all year long.

Store windows add interest where it matters most: On the street. Uncommon or unexpected, window displays add character to a community and reflect local tastes and sensibilities. Rockefeller Center is attracting huge crowds just as it always has. Young children are hoisted to the broad shoulders of their fathers and squeal in delight as they stroll past the lovely windows along the arcade that leads to the fairytale brilliance of the Rockefeller Center Christmas tree.

Real community is about life on sidewalks, active storefronts, and interesting streets. Merchants energetic enough to design original displays make a profound statement about themselves and their communities. Their displays say they are a vital thread in an enduring financial, social, and spiritual fabric. Their windows become conversation pieces and connect customers directly to their community's downtown. These are some of the essential economic facets of our cultural life that simply can't be experienced from the front seat of a car or a visit to a formless mall.

At Christmas, appealing displays are a window into a community's energetic heart. They reflect the spirit and intimacy of the season and remind us of what we still hold dear as a nation.

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