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Creating happy spaces

Commentary

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Where do you go to be happy? This isn't a trivial question.

Just ask the folks who came to the Sept. 23 effort to make a happy space on State Street, when the Farmers Market, normally tucked into a parking lot, blossomed into the center of town. On that sunny day, I was amazed to see people interacting with others in a way that spoke volumes on the power of taking back the streets for human interactions. Over and over, I heard people say, "They should do this every weekend." There was a palpable sense of happiness in the crowd that playing on our central street offered. Bringing the market up on the public street and out of that sunken parking lot created a different feel. The event really did begin to demonstrate what a public happy space could be right in downtown.

Those of us working to spark a sustainable future for Montpelier find ourselves following the designer Buckminster Fuller's dictum: "In order to change an existing paradigm, you do not struggle to try and change the problematic model. You create a new model, and make the old one obsolete." Locally, the Sustainable Montpelier Coalition hopes to translate that advice into the process of bringing our community together to build a better model right here at home. Part of that quest is figuring out how to make sure our little city is increasingly a place where one can find happiness.

Right now, many of us enjoy a notably good, if expensive, quality of life. The super-upscale Travel and Leisure magazine recently named Montpelier as one of America's most "European cities."

That's truly an honor. "The smallest state capital in the United States does feel a bit like a French countryside village," the article noted, "with its farmers markets, quaint shops, smattering of traditional European architecture and green hills. Great, locally sourced restaurants and a literary crowd only add to the French feel." What if we grew that feeling?

If we want to play ahead of the curve, then we should now begin working toward a broader, more democratic vision of our future downtown, where public spaces define a truly livable place. If you look at beautiful towns of Europe, they are all built around smallish town squares — typically built around a water source, like a fountain. Water is a pleasure source and a symbol of communication and enjoyment. It's also a symbol of beautiful fluidity of life.

City planners call these gathering places "third spaces," aka "happy spaces." The first space is the personal dwelling; the second space is where we work and have a commercial life; the third space is where we share our common, joyful leisure time — a non-commercial public space where we interact with other people for relaxation and public endeavor. Such third spaces, like our farmers market, are places where someone's economic or social status do not matter and allow for a sense of commonality among its occupants.

Montpelier wants very much to be a happy place. The farmers market is our best candidate for demonstrating a third space, but there are other places, too, like Hubbard Park, the State House lawn, the Pocket Park on Main Street. Sadly, too much of our current cityscape is now devoted to happiness-sucking parking lots. Much of this has to do with the legacy of our Puritan founders, practical folks who saw the rivers in town as sources of power, but mostly as an aggravation — prone to flood and not seen as a public treasure. They walled up the riverbanks for local industry. The streets were designed for commerce and traffic. Since those times, Montpelier has stuck to the same dismal, perfunctory, old-fashioned, commercial street layout trod by horse and wagon, and then by the automobile. And instead of replacing the lots vacated by earlier industry with cosmopolitan-style waterfront happy spaces, we created parking lots.

European towns and cities don't operate like this. For one thing, it's very expensive to own a car there. For another thing, public transportation is easy, quick and sensible. If Montpelier wants to be a super-attractive downtown that would draw tourists, entrepreneurs and great energy into itself, what would that entail? First of all, it will require re-imagining the misused parking spaces as a potential source of pleasure rather than simply a source of utility. In fact, wouldn't we all love to find a way to make parkland along our rivers, rather than weeds and waste trees atop old rock walls? All of this will require rethinking our transportation priorities — a subject for future pieces.

If we want that kind of fun and desirable future, then we have to start the work to create those third spaces right here in town, where we can assemble and enjoy each other. Last year's Langdon Street Alive effort proves how valuable a walkable downtown third space could be. Next year, we could begin to reclaim the riverfront from parking lots to something much happier, people-centric and beautiful.

Montpelier is already wonderful, but it has unrealized potential not just as a tourist destination, but also as a model of a sustainable city. Here, we could demonstrate how humans, not cars, are central to a vibrant city. To allow for the creation of happy spaces downtown, we must focus next on the fun alternatives to the car that will create happy spaces in Montpelier, much of which will be walkable and bikable.

This vision will be key to motivating all of us to work together building a desirable future.

To see an expanded vision of our happy space concept, come down to State Street on Saturday, when the street will be closed for the whole day. In the afternoon, there will be a local arts fair while entertainment is provided by some of the best of our local musicians. Come get a glimpse of the power of third spaces in our little city.

Dan Jones is Sustainable Montpelier Coalition managing director.

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