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Planners' Perspectives on British Columbia's Small and Mid-sized Downtowns: Strengths, Weaknesses, Challenges

Rylan Graham

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Aller au sommaire du numéro

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Résumé de l'article

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Planners' Perspectives on British Columbia's Small and Mid-sized Downtowns: Strengths, Weaknesses, Challenges

Rylan Graham [a]

[a] *University of Northern British Columbia*

Abstract

Downtown revitalization remains a key priority for planners working in communities across North America. In small and mid-sized cities, downtown decline and disinvestment has been particularly noticeable, long affected by the patterns of suburbanization, and more recently, by the lingering effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. This study, based on a survey of planners working in British Columbia, evaluates the state of downtowns in British Columbia's small and mid-sized cities. These findings highlight the strengths of downtowns as broadband availability, civic events and street-oriented retailed, whereas the most pronounced and common weaknesses are the absence of post-secondary institutions, high-density housing and frequent transit. The findings also illustrate that strengths and weaknesses vary across the cases, accounting for variations in city size and regional contexts. Additionally, this study highlights the prospects and impediments of downtown revitalization into the future, with six major impediments.

Résumé

La revitalisation du centre-ville demeure une priorité clé pour les planificateurs travaillant dans les communautés de toute l'Amérique du Nord. Dans les villes petites et moyennes, le déclin et le désinvestissement des centres-villes ont été particulièrement visibles, longtemps impactés par les modèles de suburbanisation et, plus récemment, par les effets persistants de la pandémie de Covid-19. Cette recherche évalue l'état des centres-villes situés en Colombie-Britannique, examinant leurs forces et leurs faiblesses, ainsi que les obstacles à la revitalisation des centres-villes. Les résultats suggèrent que les forces et les faiblesses varient selon la taille de la ville et la géographie, alors que les obstacles au changement au centre-ville sont communs dans toute la province.

Keywords:

downtown, small and mid-sized, urban planning, Canada, British Columbia

Mots-clés:

centre-ville, petites villes et villes de taille moyenne, aménagement, Canada, Columbie -Britannique

***Contact**: Rylan Graham , 3333 University Way, Prince George, BC, Canada, V2N 4X9
Email: rylan.graham@unbc.ca

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Introduction

Traditionally, downtowns have functioned as the heart of a community, bringing together retail, employment, services, housing, and an array of other essential community functions. These unique neighbourhoods have played a pivotal role in shaping community identity, fostering social connections, and driving economic growth. However, in the years following WWII, downtowns across North America began to experience a dramatic decline (Birch, 2005; Jamal, 2018c). The decline of one function set off a chain reaction, triggering a prolonged downward spiral. For example, as retailers relocated to newly constructed indoor shopping malls in the newest suburban neighbourhoods, the appeal of downtowns faded. With fewer downtown shopping options, there were fewer patrons to attend an event, take in a show, or enjoy a meal – further testing and ultimately undermining the viability of these other functions (Filion & Hammond, 2008; Sands et al., 2022).

In response, planners have focused their efforts on developing downtown revitalization strategies. Typically, early strategies attempted to replicate the suburban model, prioritizing features such as ample parking, while later strategies sought to strengthen the downtown's unique identity and features (Robertson, 1995; Sands, 2007). Despite these efforts, success has been mixed, and downtowns—particularly in small and mid-sized cities—continue to face challenges (Bunting & Filion, 1999; Filion et al., 2004; Sands et al., 2022, p. 202). For example, Filion et al. (2004) note that only a handful of downtowns in smaller North American cities can be considered "successful." In Canada, cities like Victoria, Halifax, and Kingston stand out as the rare few cases (Filion et al., 2004). In contrast, mid-sized cities typically exhibit an urban form that is dispersed and decentralized (Bunting et al., 2007). Although planners have worked to shed this profile, entrenched development patterns, compounded by the shocks of the Covid-19 pandemic, continue to hinder progress.

British Columbia, located on Canada's West Coast, is home to numerous small and mid-sized cities. Victoria, a mid-sized city, is the provincial capital and boasts a high concentration of government jobs and is also an attractive destination for both tourists and retirees. The Vancouver metropolitan area includes several mid-sized cities, such as Burnaby, North Vancouver, New Westminster, and Richmond, along with smaller cities such as Maple Ridge, Pitt Meadows, Port Moody, and White Rock. In the North and the Interior, cities like Prince George, Kelowna, and Kamloops serve as regional hubs, providing essential services such as education, healthcare, and retail for a much larger catchment area. Other mid-sized and small cities are spread throughout British Columbia's vast landscape. Like their counterparts elsewhere in North America, these communities have experienced similar challenges of downtown decline and disinvestment.

In understanding downtowns, the framework developed by Filion et al., (2004) defines the characteristics and qualities of a "successful" downtown. More recent work by the same authors (see Sands et al., 2022) offers insight into how the Covid-19 pandemic has influenced this framework. This research builds upon both studies. While the previous projects clarified which characteristics are key to building successful downtowns, this study assesses the extent to which these attributes present as strengths in the downtowns of 57 small and mid-sized cities in British Columbia (see Figure 1). In doing so, the paper addresses the following two questions:

- What are the strengths and weaknesses of downtowns in British Columbia's small and mid-sized cities?

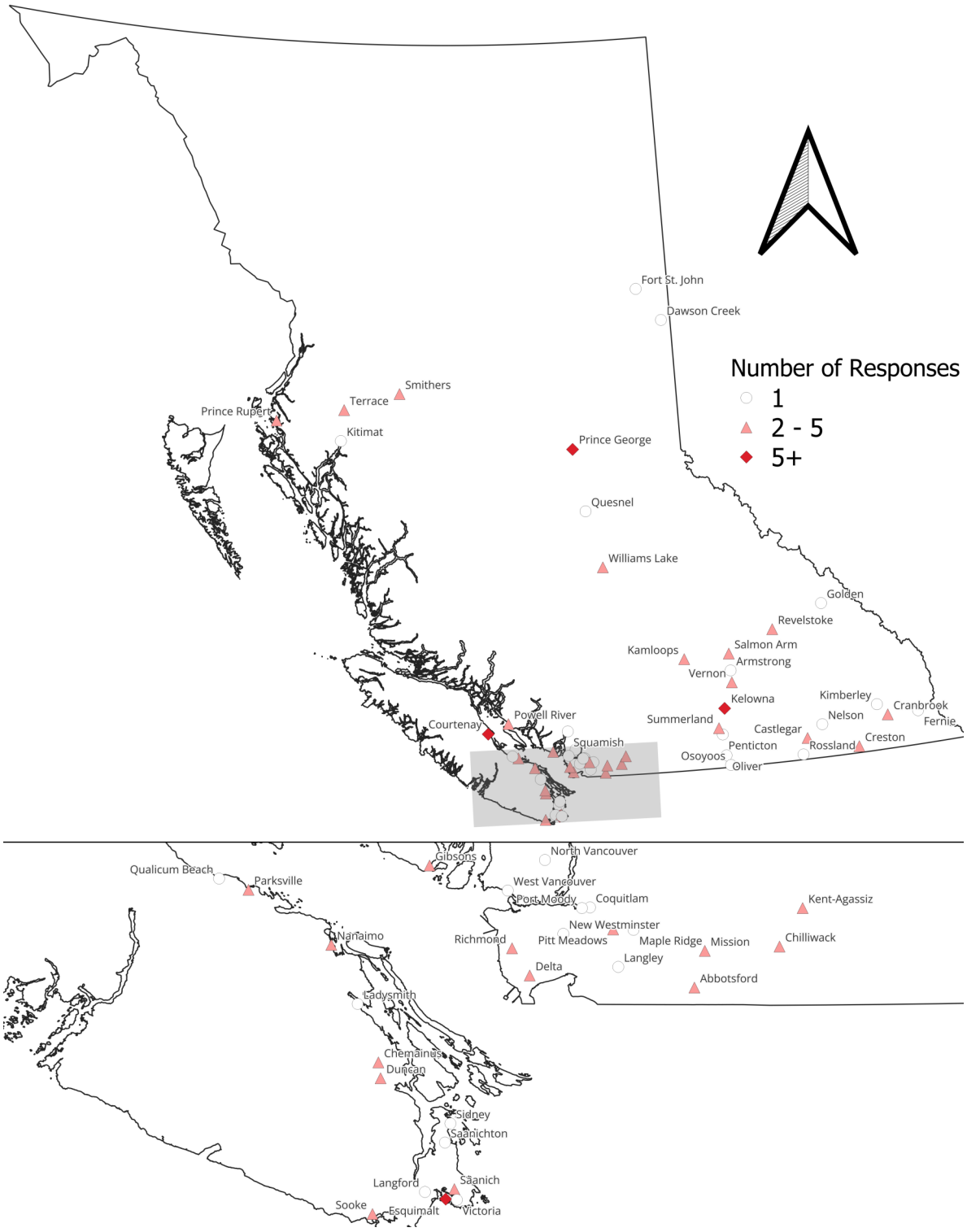

Figure 1. Origin and number of survey responses.

- What are the key barriers to downtown revitalization in British Columbia's small and mid-sized cities?

Prior to addressing these questions, the subsequent section offers an overview of the literature. The next section explains the methods employed in this research. This is followed by an overview of the findings, which are then grounded in a broader discussion. This paper concludes with some reflection on possible directions for future research.

Literature Review

Downtown Decline: The onset post-WWII

Over their histories, the health of downtowns has ebbed and flowed. Pre-WWII, downtowns were places where people came to socialize, shop, dine, and access a wide range of services (Filion & Hoernig, 2003; Jamal, 2018a). However, for the last half-century, downtown decline has been a prominent feature of North American cities. As Leong et al. (2023) state, "the dominant narrative about downtowns has been one of the 'doom loop.'" (p. 142). The patterns of decline set in immediately after WWII, and once definitive features relocated to new suburban communities (Filion & Hammond, 2008; Sands, 2007). For instance, department stores, vital to the downtown shopping experience, were one of the first to leave (Birch, 2009). Other retailers followed, opting to relocate to suburban shopping malls. Similarly, corporate headquarters relocated to sprawling business parks. This put shopping and work near rapidly growing residential enclaves. Connections between work, shopping and home were made possible through an enlarged network of state-funded highways and roads (Filion et al., 2004; Filion & Hammond, 2008). Over time, as Jamal (2018c) notes, this established a strong and enduring market for suburban living, supported by "a planning framework and development industry that fueled greenfield development" (p. 25). Ultimately, these forces transformed Canada into a "suburban nation" (Gordon & Janzen, 2013).

The impacts of suburbanization and decentralization have affected large cities differently than their smaller counterparts. While the downtowns of large cities also experienced the loss of key functions, such as retail, they were able to counteract the effects with an increase in office space, high-density housing, and additional cultural and entertainment amenities, resulting in more workers, residents and tourists in the downtown (Filion, 2024).

Downtown Revitalization Strategies

Over the years, planners, pushing against downtown decline as an inescapable fate, have made revitalization the subject of much attention (Sands, 2007). Early downtown revitalization strategies attempted to position the downtown to better compete with the suburbs, recreating downtowns in their forms with wide streets and ample parking (Hagen & Walker, 2024). Recognizing that these initiatives were doing little to stem decentralization, by the 1970s, planners began to develop strategies that celebrated the uniqueness of downtowns (Hagen & Walker, 2024). Commonly, municipalities pulled from the same playbook, and Robertson (1995) provides a comprehensive overview of once prevalent strategies. These include attempts to improve the pedestrian experience through public realm improvements, bring indoor shopping malls into the downtown, restore and preserve heritage buildings, enhance and redevelop waterfronts, increase the share of office space, and construct festival marketplaces, arenas, stadiums, and convention centres (typically referred to as "special activity generators").

Filion (2024) separates downtown revitalization strategies into three phases. Phase I focused on

reshaping downtowns to compete with suburban environments. These strategies emphasized the development of downtown shopping malls, the provision of ample parking, and widening streets to improve traffic flow and accessibility.

Phase II strategies shifted and promoted quality urban design, the creation and improvement of public spaces, and adding housing and public sector activities, including government offices and services, libraries, theatres, arenas, and postsecondary institutions. The notion was that additional housing would increase the demand for more retail and entertainment options, increase vibrancy, and improve safety (Bunting & Filion, 1999).

Phase III strategies aimed to replicate the successes from elsewhere. Halifax, Kingston, and Victoria, which met retail decline with an evolution "into districts dominated by the service sector, especially hospitality, entertainment, culture, and tourism" offered lessons for downtowns across Canada (Filion et al., 2024, p. 17). Other strategies emphasized the need for additional services, institutions, and public sector agencies, as well as an increase in housing. Quality urban design is also a priority of Phase III, with an emphasis on improving the environment for pedestrians and public transit. Filion (2024) acknowledges that most of the current downtown plans in Canada reflect Phase III strategies.

As Jamal (2018c) explains, much of the literature on downtown revitalization is aimed at practitioners and shares "operational steps towards repairing ailing downtowns" (p. 25). For example, Robertson (2001) proposes eight principles to guide downtown redevelopment. Similarly, a report released in 2005 by the Brookings Institute outlined steps for downtown revitalization. Recommendations here include developing a strategic plan, revising zoning regulations, fostering private-public partnerships, creating a catalytic development corporation, and establishing an entertainment district. Additionally, affordable rental and for-sale housing, a strong office market, and local retail are identified as important characteristics. More recently, Burayidi (2018) proposes a framework that is specific to downtown revitalization in small and medium-sized cities, with recommendations emphasizing the need for a long-term vision, public-private partnerships, and mixed-use development. The success, however, of revitalization strategies has been mixed (Sands, 2007). For example, the initial optimism around pedestrian malls as a strategy to revive downtown retailing quickly faded. As Gregg (2024) notes, "the economic force of suburban decentralization in the post-war was stronger than the impact of downtown pedestrian malls, and the hopes of the malls maintaining let alone revitalizing downtown retail were never realized" (p. 20). In many cases, housing-based revitalization strategies have also underperformed. For example, only about 1% of the Saskatoon metropolitan population resides downtown (Hagen & Walker, 2024). Similarly, in Prince George, less than 0.5% of the population lives downtown (Graham, 2024).

However, Sands et al., (2022) argue that the wave of more recent strategies emphasize relationship building over "cookie-cutter projects" and a greater awareness that "one-size-fits-all approaches were unlikely to be successful over the long term" (p. 395). This could be tied to a response to the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. For instance, Sands et al. (2022) acknowledges that the pandemic brought new challenges, particularly for those downtowns with a prominent entertainment scene. Moreover, increasing levels of remote work have led to fewer downtown employees and an increase in office vacancies. This has had a domino effect whereby retailers and service providers who rely on the patronage of office workers, have also experienced a drop in visitors and sales (Graham & Dutton, 2021).

Leong et al. (2023) note that activity in the downtown has not been restored to pre-pandemic levels. As such, post-Covid strategies emphasize converting vacant offices to housing, using public space for outdoor dining and entertainment, and making Wi-Fi readily available to respond to more unique work arrangements (Sands et al., 2022). The importance of housing to downtown revitalization is said to have intensified post-pandemic. In a survey of planners working in mid-sized cities, 38% of respondents noted that high-density housing would be very important to downtown revitalization – double the percentage of those who felt the same pre-pandemic (Sands et al., 2022; Hagen & Walker, 2024). The impacts of the pandemic, however, have been felt differently between large cities and smaller cities. As Filion (2024) explains, large cities have had to respond to address the impacts of remote work, whereas in mid-sized cities, the pandemic has had a less pronounced impact on revitalization strategies.

Attributes of a "Successful Downtown"

What makes for a successful downtown? Filion (2024) identifies several key indicators including tall office buildings, a vibrant retail, entertainment, and services scene, high-density housing, busy sidewalks, and quality public transit. Additionally, successful downtowns are characterized by a concentration of activities, a range of land uses, high-density development, accessible by both transit and foot, and where there are obvious synergies between functions. Filion argues however, that these features are more typical in large cities, and less so in mid-sized cities. Earlier work from Filion et al., (2004), and later updated by the same authors (Sands et al., 2022), offers a more nuanced definition of "successful downtowns" in mid-sized cities. In this work, the authors identify 21 characteristics – some tangible and others less so. Few mid-sized are said to contain these characteristics in full (Filion et al., 2004). Instead, downtowns in these cities are frequently described as fragile ecosystems (Jamal, 2018b). One contributing factor is the lack of a critical mass of tourists and concentrated employment (Filion & Hammond, 2008). Furthermore, mid-sized Canadian cities tend to have lower population densities (Bunting et al., 2007), partly because many residents prefer the space and privacy afforded to them through suburban living (Brewer & Grant, 2015). Another common feature of these cities is an increased dependency on the automobile, made possible through relatively quick and congestion-free commutes between home and work (Filion 2024). Additionally, ample opportunities for greenfield development makes the market for intensification less appealing (De Sousa, 2017; Graham & Filion, 2024).

The success of downtown revitalization in smaller cities, as previously mentioned, has been described as "mixed" (Sands, 2007, p. 249). This is because strategies that have been imported from larger cities often underperform when replicated in these contexts (Eberts & McMillen, 1999). In the same way, strategies imported from the few successful mid-sized cities cannot be generalized, as not all places have downtowns that appeal to tourists and wealthy retirees, host universities and government buildings, or have exceptional natural amenities (Filion, 2024; Sands, 2007). While many specificities cannot be easily replicated, the literature does offer some universal insight. For one, the 'silver bullet' mentality should be avoided. Instead, progress comes through incremental improvements, brought about by constant vigilance (Filion et al., 2004; Jamal, 2018c).

The intention to focus growth and development in the downtown, a process known as recentralization, aligns with well-established planning frameworks such as Smart Growth (Nicol & Biggar, 2024). Emerging in the United States in the 1990s, Smart Growth is a policy framework that encourages redirecting development towards mature neighbourhoods. This approach challenges the dominant model of peripheral growth, which extends

the urban footprint, producing low-density, car-dependent communities that encroach on natural landscapes (Bunce, 2004; Downs, 2005). This framework has had a major influence on Canadian planning policy, (Graham et al., 2019), including in British Columbia, where Smart Growth BC – a dedicated advocacy group – helped to shape plans and policy in Maple Ridge, Squamish, Oliver, and Prince George (Jackson et al., 2012). Like the challenges with downtown revitalization, implementation of Smart Growth has also been underwhelming. For instance, in Downs' (2005) article titled "Smart Growth: Why we discuss it more than we do it" they acknowledge while "some places follow Smart Growth policies, they are outnumbered by those where such policies are commonly discussed but rarely practiced effectively" (p. 367). The disconnect between visions and actual outcomes – often referred to as the "say-do gap" – reflects the difficulties with implementation (Grant, 2009). Similar challenges with implementation have been observed in mid-sized Canadian cities (Graham et al, 2019; Graham, 2024; Graham & Filion, 2024; Grant et al., 2018; Groulx et al., 2022; Hagen & Walker, 2024).

Thus, building upon the literature, the intent of this research is two-fold. First, in extending the framework developed by Filion et al., (2004) and later refined by Sands et al., (2022), this research assesses the extent to which the attributes identified as critical for a successful downtown are present in British Columbia's small and mid-sized cities. Secondly, through this assessment, this study provides insight as to the successes of the Smart Growth movement in British Columbia. In addressing these gaps, this research also contributes to the scholarship on small urban areas, a context which has been identified as historically understudied (Bell & Jayne, 2006, 2009).

Methodology

This study was designed to address two key research questions: What are the strengths and weaknesses of downtowns in British Columbia's small and mid-sized cities? And what are the key barriers to downtown revitalization in British Columbia's small and mid-sized cities? To address these questions, a qualitative approach was deemed as most appropriate. This research builds upon the framework developed by Filion et al., (2004) and Sands et al. (2022). While alternative frameworks are available to evaluate downtowns, I selected this framework because it has been recently refined, reflects current thinking on downtowns, and considered Canadian cities in its development.

After settling on this framework, I adapted it into an online survey hosted on Survey Monkey (see Appendix). I chose an online survey to maintain consistency with the original framework, ensuring that comparisons between studies would be meaningful. Moreover, the survey methodology is an effective way to gather data from a larger sample, which aligns with my goal to capture a broad range of responses from across British Columbia.

While developing the online survey, I also compiled a list of all the small and mid-sized cities in British Columbia. To assist with this task, I used well-established definitions of "small" and "mid-sized." Specifically, small cities are defined as those with a population of 5,000 to 50,000, and cities with a population between 50,000 to 500,000 residents are considered "mid-sized" (Hartt & Hollander, 2018; Seasons, 2003). I made a slight modification to the definition of small cities to include communities with populations just shy of 5,000 residents. For instance, in 2021, Gibsons had a population of 4,968, and based on growth trends, has likely surpassed 5000 residents since then. Based on these criteria, 88 small and mid-sized communities were identified.

Having compiled the list of relevant cities and with a survey ready to launch, invitations to participate were sent to planners across British Columbia. Given their professional expertise, it was surmised that planners living in these communities would provide important insight on the topic. The survey was launched in June 2023.

Two methods were used to recruit participants. The first approach involved sending personalized invitations to planners based in the applicable communities, using publicly available email addresses. Simultaneously, information about the project and a link to the survey were shared in the monthly e-newsletter circulated by the Planning Institute of British Columbia. The e-newsletter is distributed to all registered planners across the province. This notice was advertised four times before the survey closed in September 2023, once it became clear that recruitment efforts were no longer yielding additional responses. A total of 148 responses were collected, with a completion rate of 73%. These responses came from planners working in both the public and private sectors. Responses came from 57 communities, as illustrated in Figure 1, with 64% of responses from planners based in small cities, and 36% from those working in mid-sized cities. Of the four regions, as presented in Figure 2, 12% of responses were from planners in the Vancouver metro, 21% from those based in Northern BC, 31% from planners on Vancouver Island-Coast, and 40% from planners working in Interior BC.

Survey participants were asked to provide some basic personal information, including their location. To address the first research question, respondents were then asked to reflect on the downtown in their community and assess its strengths and weaknesses. To assist respondents with this task, a table of 21 characteristics and attributes was provided. This table was based on the work of Filion et al. (2004) and Sands et al (2022), who define a "successful downtown" as one exhibiting these qualities. Participants evaluated each characteristic on a scale from "significant weakness" to "significant strength." To clarity the scale, participants were informed that ranking a characteristic as a "significant weakness" indicated that it is either absent or present in a minimal way, while ranking it as a "significant strength" means that it is a prominent and defining feature of the downtown.

Following this, respondents were prompted with a series of open-ended questions, inviting to them to share their perspectives about the challenges that impede downtown revitalization. These responses were instrumental in addressing the second research question.

The data analysis involved reviewing and interpreting the responses to identify key insight and broader trends. A quantitative analysis assessed the distribution of responses, identifying trends in higher rating, while qualitative analysis focussed on extracting key themes. The data was filtered to examine variations based on city size – comparing small cities (4,500 to 50,000 residents) and mid-sized cities (50,000 – 500,000 residents) – and by region, including the Greater Vancouver area, Vancouver Island and the Coast, Interior BC, and Northern BC.

Findings: The current state of downtowns in British Columbia

The findings presented in this section provide valuable insight into the state of downtowns in British Columbia's small and mid-sized cities. This section is organized into two subsections. The first subsection discusses the strengths and weaknesses of downtowns, accounting for differences in city size and regional differences. The second subsection shares respondents' perspectives regarding the key impediments to downtown revitalization.

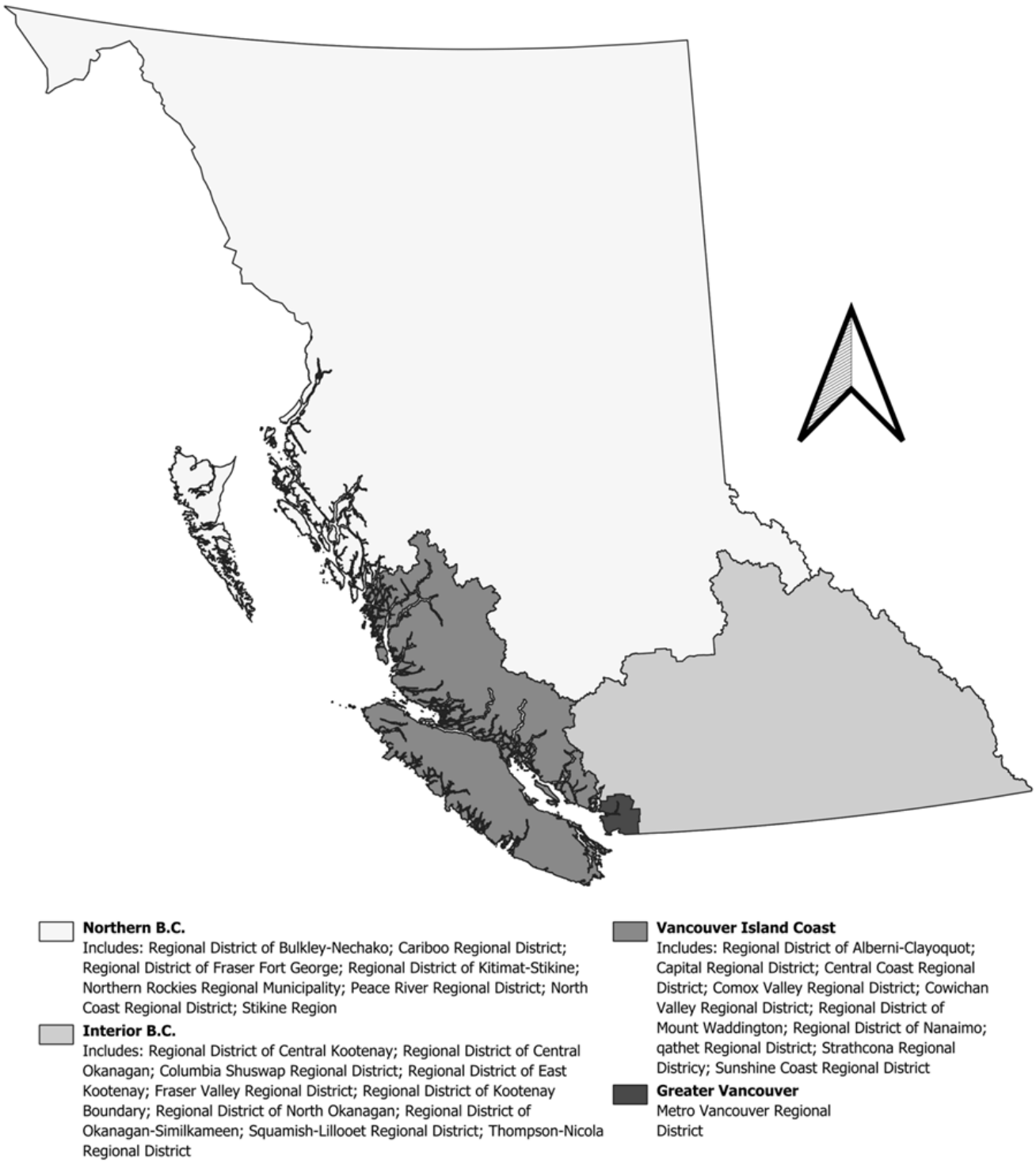

Figure 2. Regions of British Columbia.

Table 1. Strengths and weaknesses of British Columbia's downtowns.

Characteristics	Significant Weakness	Weakness	Neither strength nor weakness	Strength	Significant strength	Weighted Average
Broadband availability	1.04%	6.25%	18.75%	31.25%	42.71%	4.08
Civic events	2.80%	10.28%	10.28%	36.45%	40.19%	4.01
Street oriented retail	1.89%	13.21%	11.32%	40.57%	33.02%	3.9
Public sector presence	0.00%	11.11%	15.74%	48.15%	25.00%	3.87
Green space	4.59%	16.51%	8.26%	39.45%	31.19%	3.76
Employment (i.e., a concentration of jobs)	1.89%	11.32%	23.58%	38.68%	24.53%	3.73
Active retail scene (i.e., stores that are well frequented by patrons)	3.70%	13.89%	15.74%	38.89%	27.78%	3.73
People on sidewalks	3.67%	14.68%	19.27%	37.61%	24.77%	3.65
Well preserved neighbourhoods (i.e., residential areas in or adjacent to the downtown that have not experienced decline)	0.93%	17.76%	23.36%	31.78%	26.17%	3.64
Parking (note: in this context, ample parking is considered a strength)	2.75%	13.76%	23.85%	37.61%	22.02%	3.62
Tourist activities	4.59%	21.10%	14.68%	29.36%	30.28%	3.6
Cultural activities	2.80%	20.56%	21.50%	37.38%	17.76%	3.47
Historical character	4.67%	21.50%	22.43%	34.58%	16.82%	3.37
Effective advocate	5.88%	17.65%	29.41%	35.29%	11.76%	3.29
Social services	8.49%	22.64%	22.64%	38.68%	7.55%	3.14
Distinctive architecture	5.50%	39.45%	12.84%	25.69%	16.51%	3.08
Frequent transit	14.95%	28.97%	18.69%	26.17%	11.21%	2.9
High density residential	20.18%	27.52%	14.68%	21.10%	16.51%	2.86

Strengths and Weaknesses: The state of downtowns in British Columbia's small and mid-sized cities

To address the first research question, survey respondents were asked to reflect on their respective downtowns and assess whether they perceive a predetermined list of characteristics as either strengths or weaknesses. These results are presented in Table 1. The "Weighted Average" is a key indicator of strengths and weaknesses, where strengths are represented by higher scores (i.e., '5'), and lower scores (i.e., '1') indicate weaknesses.

The findings reveal that the greatest strengths are broadband availability, civic events, street-oriented retail, a public sector presence, and green spaces. Comparatively, the greatest weaknesses are the absence of higher-education institutions, indoor shopping malls, the ability to serve multiple markets, high-density residential, and frequent transit options.

Of the 21 characteristics, thirteen are regarded as strengths, as most respondents rated them as either a "strength" or "significant strength." In contrast, the remaining eight characteristics are not viewed as strengths by the majority of respondents.

City Size: Any influence on downtowns?

The data was then analyzed to understand possible divergences between small and mid-sized cities. The results are presented in Table 2.

To assess the influence of city size, the responses of planners representing small cities (with population between 4,000 and 49,999 residents) were compared to those from planners representing mid-sized cities (with a population between 50,000 and 500,000 residents). Of the 21 characteristics, 12 scored higher in mid-sized cities.

In the downtowns of British Columbia's mid-sized cities, "broadband availability" emerged as the greatest strength, while "civic events" were identified as the greatest strength in small cities. Conversely, "indoor shopping malls" and "post-secondary institutions" are the greatest respective weaknesses in small and mid-sized cities, respectively.

Regionalism: Any influence on downtowns?

In addition to assessing differences between small and mid-sized cities, the data was analyzed to explore regional differences. The province was divided into four regions: "Central-Northern British Columbia," "Greater Vancouver," "Vancouver Island-Coast," and "Interior British Columbia." The results of this analysis are presented in Table 3.

Figure 3. "Street Oriented Retail" is one of the strengths of downtowns in British Columbia, like this example from a new development called "District 1881" in Downtown Chilliwack.

Table 2. Differences in strengths and weaknesses between small and mid-sized cities.

Characteristics	Small City Weighted Average	Mid-Sized City Weighted Average
Parking (note: in this context, ample parking is considered a strength)	3.54	**3.86**
Social services	3.07	**3.11**
Higher educational facilities (e.g., university; college)	2.18	**2.81**
Public sector presence	**3.9**	3.81
Distinctive architecture	**3.16**	2.92
Tourist activities	**3.62**	3.56
Historical character	**3.46**	3.2
Frequent transit	2.66	**3.39**
Well preserved neighbourhoods (i.e., residential areas in or adjacent to the downtown that have not experienced decline)	**3.68**	3.53
Broadband availability	3.73	**4.67**
Civic events	3.93	**4.06**
Green space	**3.77**	3.75
Street oriented retail	3.79	**3.89**
High density residential	2.64	**3.31**
Serve multiple markets (i.e., serves both daytime and evening populations, such as office workers and nightlife patrons, or some other variation)	2.56	**3.06**
Cultural activities	3.49	**3.56**
Employment (i.e., a concentration of jobs)	**3.75**	3.69
Active retail scene (i.e., stores that are well frequented by patrons)	3.7	3.7
People on sidewalks	**3.68**	3.58
Effective advocate	2.67	**3.89**
Indoor shopping mall	2	**3.95**
Collective Average Weighted Score	**3.28**	**3.59**

Amongst the four regions, the downtowns of "Greater Vancouver" exhibit the most strengths, with the highest overall weighted average, and the greatest weighted averages for 16 of the 21 characteristics. In contrast, the downtowns in "Central-Northern British Columbia" show the most weaknesses, scoring the lowest weighted average and having the lowest weighted averages for 18 of the 21 characteristics. The downtowns of "Vancouver Island–Coast" and "Interior British Columbia" have comparable weighted averages, with fewer strengths than the downtowns of Greater Vancouver but fewer weaknesses than those in Central-Northern British Columbia.

Ongoing Barriers to Downtown Revitalization

After evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of their respective downtowns, respondents were asked to share their views on the factors that impede downtown revitalization within the context of their own communities. Several key themes emerged from the responses, which are summarized in Table 4. The data was analyzed to assess potential differences across city size and regions. While the barriers cited were generally consistent across all groups, suggesting that the challenges to downtown revitalization are similar across British Columbia, some nuances did surface, which are teased out here.

The most commonly cited barrier according to respondents is the lack of housing in any form, including the absence of affordable housing. Notably, this was a less pronounced concern from planners working in the Vancouver metro area. However, the issue was strongly felt from planners elsewhere and was captured by respondent #64, who stated:

"I think a significant barrier is the cost of housing downtown and lack of variety - most people that work downtown still have to commute from other parts of the city."

As respondents indicate, the lack of housing supply poses a significant challenge to downtown revitalization by limiting the growth of a residential population. The lack of downtown residents undermines the viability of existing businesses and limits commercial growth. Respondents emphasized that a critical mass of residents is essential for activation of the downtown, providing the customer base necessary for retail and service providers to thrive.

The second most frequently cited barrier was the unique constraints associated with downtown development. This includes community opposition to new development, the costs and risks of brownfield remediation, and the complexities of land consolidation, construction, and navigating onerous

Figure 4. Housing is a shared weakness in cities across British Columbia, however, mid-sized cities score better than small cities. This new housing development in Prince George is indicative of attempts to bolster the residential population in downtowns across the province.

Table 3. Regional differences in downtown strengths and weaknesses.

Characteristics	Weighted Average Central - Northern BC (9)	Weighted Average Greater Vancouver (10)	Weighted Average Vancouver Island – Coast (17)	Weighted Average Interior BC (21)
Parking (note: in this context, ample parking is considered a strength)	3.94	4.15	3.53	3.40
Social services	2.82	3.23	3.26	3.12
Higher educational facilities (e.g., university; college)	2.53	3.00	2.34	2.07
Public sector presence	3.47	4.08	3.94	3.93
Distinctive architecture	2.53	3.46	3.15	3.07
Tourist activities	2.94	3.46	3.70	3.82
Historical character	2.76	3.23	3.47	3.53
Frequent transit	2.41	4.00	3.13	2.61
Well preserved neighbourhoods (i.e., residential areas in or adjacent to the downtown that have not experienced decline)	3.06	4.31	3.63	3.65
Broadband availability	3.79	4.42	3.89	4.28
Civic events	3.76	4.54	4.06	3.88
Green space	2.94	4.08	4.06	3.82
Street oriented retail	3.35	4.08	3.91	4.02
High density residential	2.00	3.85	3.06	2.77
Serve multiple markets (i.e., serves both daytime and evening populations, such as office workers and nightlife patrons, or some other variation)	2.41	3.08	2.44	2.89
Cultural activities	3.13	3.69	3.50	3.45
Employment (i.e., a concentration of jobs)	3.81	3.54	3.71	3.73
Active retail scene (i.e., stores that are well frequented by patrons)	3.29	3.77	3.84	3.75
People on sidewalks	2.88	3.85	3.76	3.75
Effective advocate	2.67	4.20	3.09	3.29
Indoor shopping mall	2.25	2.75	2.46	2.92
Average Weighted Score	**3.06**	**3.75**	**3.42**	**3.41**

zoning regulations. For instance, respondent #62 explained, "properties are small, and consolidation is difficult due to high land values. This can make new development challenging." Many respondents emphasized that these factors increase costs, risks, and uncertainty throughout the development process. Another challenge raised by respondents was the lack of interest from developers to build downtown, compounded by landowners who hold property without any intentions of development. For instance, respondent #54 stated, "infill development on private land [is a challenge] - we have a number of private land owners who have been sitting on vacant land for many years. There is no incentive to develop." However, planners in the Vancouver metro, while also acknowledging like challenges that thwart downtown development, did not identify the lack of suitable developers as a significant issue.

Attracting and retaining businesses in the downtown was also presented as a challenge. Respondents identified several factors that undermine attraction and retention, including high commercial rents, poor building conditions, and competition from other retail types in different locations. These issues were identified as undermining the viability and success of the downtown retail scene, and hinder efforts to attract more patrons into the downtown. This was partially explained by respondent #21 who stated:

"There are lot of vacant commercial buildings in the downtown. However, our Main Street is much more active. Small businesses do struggle to keep their doors open due to cost of rent and how the number of home-based businesses is increasing."

Similarly to this, respondent #61 stated:

"Attracting and retaining diverse businesses [is a challenge] due to online shopping or shopping at other places. Downtown is very quiet during the weekends and most shops do not open Mondays, weekends, or have extended hours."

Furthermore, respondents highlighted the legacy of car-centric planning and design as a barrier to revitalization. This includes the prevalence of surface parking, a defining feature of the downtown, and street-design that prioritizes automobiles over pedestrians. As numerous respondents noted, this harms revitalization efforts in that the absence of human-scaled design discourages downtown visitation. This is an issue that is prevalent in some small cities, where the main streets also function as a highway. As respondents note, car-centric planning persists because of insufficient investment in other mobility options including public transit, cycling, and walking.

Safety concerns were also identified as an impediment to revitalization. For instance, respondent #146 stated: "downtown feels less safe than ever in the past 20+ years and it lacks vision from downtown businesses and the community at large." For the most part, respondents linked these concerns to broader social issues, including the interconnected crises of houselessness, mental health, and addictions. Additionally, others expressed that a lack of vibrancy contributes to safety concerns, creating a sense of emptiness and unease in the downtown. The lack of vibrancy is especially apparent during evening hours, as many respondents highlighted that their community lacks a thriving nightlife. Some respondents from small cities added further nuance, noting that their communities which are heavily tied to tourism, see the issue exacerbated outside of peak season, as downtown activity tends to slow in the off-season, affecting both daytime and evening activity.

Finally, respondents stressed that downtown revitalization is contingent on public sector leadership and investment. As respondents note, however, municipalities often lack the fiscal

Table 4. The observed barriers to downtown revitalization in British Columbia's small and mid-sized cities.

Themes	Description
Housing supply	• Lack of residential uses/population base in the downtown
Constraints on new development	• Community opposition to development • Costs of downtown development • Lack of interest from development industry/landowners • Unique complexities of downtown development (land consolidation, brownfield remediation, construction practices, zoning regulations)
Business attraction and retention	• Lack of amenities for a "complete community" • Limited business hours (seasonality, weekends, after regular 9-5 hours) • Cost to operate (rent, taxes, building maintenance) • Poor condition of buildings
Car-centric planning	• Streets designed to accommodate vehicular flow • Proximity to/located on intrusive highways • Parking requirements • Insufficient transit
Safety concerns	• Lack of vibrancy/feelings of isolation
Public sector investment	• Deteriorating aesthetics of public infrastructure and buildings • Limitations of available public funding for transformative projects

resources to catalyze downtown revitalization efforts. This issue is exacerbated in small cities, where the tax base is insufficient to fund transformative infrastructure projects. Furthermore, as respondents note, investments related to downtown revitalization is often met with opposition. Due to competing priorities, community groups and local politicians often scrutinize and oppose public money earmarked for downtown initiatives.

Discussion

Drawing on existing literature to define what constitutes a "successful downtown," this research, informed by planners' perspectives, provides an assessment on the health of downtowns across British Columbia. Considering the numerous challenges confronting downtowns, including the ongoing and persistent impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, this assessment is particularly timely.

The findings reveal that small and mid-sized downtowns in British Columbia exhibit a range of strengths. Of the 21 characteristics deemed essential for a successful downtown, 13 are identified as strengths. The reported strengths provide a snapshot of British Columbia's downtowns, where sidewalks see a steady flow of pedestrians. Many people come downtown to shop, attend events in nearby parks or

plazas, or for work, including those employed in the public sector or who rely on broadband access. Tourists also are drawn into the downtown, looking to experience local attractions, cultural amenities, and the unique historic charm and character.

Overall, the positive perception of downtowns in British Columbia suggests that they are relatively healthy. This contrasts with the negative narrative that is typically associated with downtowns. However, despite this optimistic view, the findings do reveal several common weaknesses. Most significant among these is that downtowns in British Columbia lack key attributes such as high-density housing, frequent public transit, post-secondary institutions, and distinctive architecture. In addition, downtowns face difficulties in attracting daytime and evening patrons. Since these attributes are essential for a successful downtown, their absence limits its potential.

Strengthening any one of these characteristics, however, is no simple task, and in many cases, not all can be easily replicated. For instance, in a period of government austerity, the likelihood of any community attracting a post-secondary institution into the downtown seems slim. Similarly, the prospects of a new downtown shopping mall presents as equally unlikely, given more contemporary models of retail including big box stores and online shopping (Filion & Hammond, 2008). Furthermore, "historical character" does not materialize suddenly nor is it something that can be artificially created. Consequently, addressing the weaknesses is a complex undertaking.

Moreover, given the complexity of downtown revitalization, even the purported strengths require further reflection. For example, a downtown indoor shopping mall with low vacancy rates and a range of retailers and services is generally considered a positive. However, if such a mall cannibalizes the downtown retail scene, increasing vacancies along main street, it can hardly be considered a strength. In some cases, too much of a good thing can be detrimental – further supporting the notion that these downtowns are fragile ecosystems (Jamal, 2018b).

An important finding to emerge from this research is the differentiation across city size and geography. Specifically, the downtowns of small cities have fewer strengths than mid-sized cities. In the same way, cities in Northern British Columbia have less strengths than cities in Southern British Columbia. Several factors could help explain these differences, including population decline and economic restructuring (Hartt, 2018), differing rates of suburbanization (Graham et al., 2019), the influence of tourists and affluent retirees (Sands, 2007), or the impact of a colder winter climate (Curry & Llewellyn, 1999). Regardless of the underlying causes, it is evident that downtown revitalization is a more complex and onerous undertaking in small, and northern cities. This aligns with Filion (2024) who argues that there is diversity among the successes of downtowns, where the downtowns of smaller mid-sized cities typically have fewer activities and lack the critical mass found in the larger mid-size cities. Filion also reflects on the long-standing challenges of downtown revitalization in Sudbury, located in Northern Ontario, compared to Kingston.

This research tests the framework established by Filion et al., (2004) and Sands et al., (2022), exploring how the characteristics deemed necessary for a hypothetically successful downtown have been realized in practice. This research provides valuable insight into whether such downtowns exist in Canada.

Is Downtown Revitalization possible?

This research identifies several key barriers to downtown revitalization, including the absence of housing and few downtown residents, the added risks and challenges with downtown development,

difficulties with business attraction and retention, a legacy of car-centric planning and design, safety concerns, and limited public-sector investment. These barriers help to explain why so few smaller cities have attained the status of "successful" (Filion et al., 2004). Instead, these factors reinforce the identity of smaller urban areas as decentralized and dispersed (Bunting et al., 2007).

There is a dearth of research focussed on smaller Canadian cities (Hartt & Hollander, 2018; Nicol & Biggar, 2024). Of the existing studies, the findings of this research align with previous work. For instance, other studies highlight the ongoing challenges posed by the lack of housing options and from the absence of an established residential population (Brewer & Grant, 2015; Grant et al., 2018; Graham, 2024, Hagen & Walker, 2024). De Sousa (2017) explains how the additional costs and risks associated with downtown development creates friction that is generally absent in suburban environments, while Graham & Filion (2024) note that the absence of developers specializing in downtown development is another notable barrier. Consistent with this, Nicol & Biggar (2024) identify that overly complex regulations and approvals pushes developers towards greenfield development. Furthermore, Sands (2007) notes the lack of amenities as a significant impediment to downtown revitalization.

Ultimately, this research underscores the difficulties with implementation of downtown revitalization strategies and larger frameworks such as Smart Growth. For example, this research, which illustrates downtown housing as a weakness, suggests that Phase III strategies, which emphasize increasing housing in the downtown, have underperformed. Similarly, design strategies to enhance the pedestrian environment, appear to have faltered, as respondents note the legacy of car-centric design persists. Given these circumstances, the findings suggest that planners have insufficient tools to catalyze change. This relates to Sands (2007) argument that "public policies may have only limited potential to effect marginal improvements" (p. 251). Instead, significant public sector investment is needed to facilitate bold strategies that promote change, but as the findings suggest, smaller communities usually have insufficient fiscal capacity. Therefore, if downtown revitalization is to occur, then incremental change or "urban husbandry" would be a more feasible approach (Jamal, 2018b). Local governments and Business Improvement Associations have a critical role to play, and collaboration between actors is essential for change (Burayidi, 2018; Jamal, 2018b; Sands, 2007). Collaboration is particularly important in light of the growing resistance from the electorate to downtown investment, and the presence of suburban interests which often "dominate city councils" (Filion, 2023, p. 20).

Defining the smaller urban experience

These findings underscore the contrast between smaller and larger cities. These findings emphasize that the downtowns in smaller cities are not merely smaller versions of large city downtowns (Filion, 2024). Instead, many of the weaknesses of small and mid-sized cities, as identified in this research, are prominent features in the downtowns of large Canadian cities. For example, the downtowns here enjoy more robust transit systems, feature major universities and colleges, host a thriving office scene alongside a vibrant nightlife, and have a well-established residential population (Filion, 2024). The latter of which has been bolstered by young adults moving into the downtown (Moos, 2016; Moos et al., 2019). This suggests that downtowns in smaller cities exhibit distinct strengths and weaknesses compared to their larger counterparts.

Importantly, these findings also illustrate that smaller cities face unique barriers to revitalization.

For example, where smaller municipalities have insufficient resources to construct transformational projects, large cities can and have led through investment. Moreover, developers' lack of interest in pursuing downtown development varies from experiences in large Canadian cities, where private actors finance major downtown developments (Coiacetto, 2000; Rosen, 2017). As Leong et al. (2023) position, increasing vibrancy requires drawing large crowds into the downtown – likely an improbable task for the typical small and mid-sized city. Given these differences, popular downtown development strategies in large cities cannot simply be replicated in Canada's small and mid-sized cities. In the same way, given how the findings denote strengths and weaknesses differ across city size and regions, blanket strategies are to be avoided. Instead, cities should work from their points of strength and be realistic about which weaknesses can be addressed.

It is important to acknowledge however that revitalization strategies can exacerbate inequities. For instance, downtowns in BC, like elsewhere in Canada, shoulder the brunt of society's most pressing social issues including increasing rates of houselessness, and the ongoing toxic drug and overdose crisis. These experiences are no longer confined to "big cities" and instead have become more widespread. While often framed as "downtown issues," these issues are symptomatic of broader societal failures that governments at all levels have not adequately addressed. Revitalization strategies, which aim to transform downtown by attracting new patrons, notably the creative class (Graham, 2023), can inadvertently lead to the displacement of low-income residents who rely on affordable housing, and key amenities and services typically located in low-rent areas of the downtown (Filion, 2024).

Conclusion

In communities across Canada, downtown revitalization remains a priority. From the perspective of planners, this research assesses the state of downtowns in British Columbia's small and mid-sized communities. The findings indicate that downtowns offer a range of strengths, have notable weaknesses, and where city size and geography have an influence on both. While downtown revitalization remains a priority, these findings highlight the barriers which impedes progress in building a "successful" downtown.

While this research offers a timely assessment of downtowns in British Columbia, there are notable limitations – but which can also be considered as opportunities for future research. For one, this survey captures only the perspectives of planners, and their views towards the state of their respective downtowns. A future project could collect and analyze other types of data such as development permits, housing starts, pedestrian counts, and vacancy rates to assess the current state of downtowns. Moreover, in reflecting on the barriers to downtown revitalization, it is only the planners' perspectives captured here – other perspectives, including those who work in the development industry, could provide additional insight. Finally, this research can only speculate on the differences that emerged by region and city size, a future project could more fully assess the reasons for the divergence.

Finally, an important avenue for future research is understanding which downtown revitalization strategies are most effective. While numerous programs exist to guide planners with their policy and program development, there is little research that assesses their actual impact and effectiveness. Addressing this gap could help to ensure that

initiatives undertaken by planners lead to the development of successful downtowns.

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Appendix

Survey Questions

Q1. I have read the information letter about this study.
- Yes

Q2. I have read the contents of this consent notice, and by accepting, I am providing informed consent to participate according to the terms above.
- Accept
- Refuse

Q3. From the drop-down menu, please select the community that you are based in (herein referred to as "your community").
- Drop-down list of 86 BC small and mid-sized communities

Q4. What is the population of your community?
- 4,000 -4,999
- 5,000 – 9,999
- 10,000 – 49,999
- 50,000 – 99,999
- 100,000 – 249,999
- 250,000 – 500,000

Q5. From the drop-down menu, please select the regional district that your community is located in.
- Drop-down list of 29 regional districts in BC

Q6. A "successful downtown" is defined as one which has the characteristics from the list below (Filion et al., 2004; Sands et al., 2022). In thinking about the current state of the downtown in your community, please rate the following characteristics as either a strength or weakness. Please note that a "significant weakness" is where the characteristic is lacking or absent in the downtown, and a "significant strength" is where the characteristic has a strong presence in the downtown.
- Parking (note: in this context, ample parking is considered a strength)
- Social services
- Higher educational facilities (e.g., university; college)
- Public sector presence
- Distinctive architecture
- Tourist activities
- Historical character
- Frequent transit

- Well preserved neighbourhoods (i.e., residential areas in or adjacent to the downtown that have not experienced decline)
- Broadband availability
- Civic events
- Green space
- Street oriented retail
- High density residential
- Serve multiple markets (i.e., serves both daytime and evening populations, such as office workers and nightlife patrons, or some other variation)
- Cultural activities
- Employment (i.e., a concentration of jobs)
- Active retail scene (i.e., stores that are well frequented by patrons)
- People on sidewalks
- Effective advocate
- Indoor shopping mall
- Other (please specify)

Q7. In this study, "downtown revitalization" is defined as: Strengthening the social, physical and economic value of a community's traditional central business district. And where the primary goal is to: Improve the livability and quality of life in a community. And where this is achieved by: Expanding and attracting housing, employment, shopping, and social activities to the downtown. Given this definition, what do you regard as the most significant barrier(s) to downtown revitalization in your community?

Q8. Do you have anything further you would like to add about
the topic of downtown revitalization in small and mid-sized cities in British Columbia?
If yes, please add your comments to the box below.

Q9. If you are willing to discuss the topic of downtown revitalization
with the research team via an interview, please enter your email address below.