

Fresno to South Bend to Louisville: The Elusive Elements of Civic Success

May 5,
2015

U.S.

More cities, more assessments of what works, and why



Louisville's skyline from the river [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Earlier today I mentioned a [video](#) that a public-private alliance in Fresno, California, has produced to explain why they want to bulldoze a historic, artsy downtown pedestrian mall and re-open it to cars. Described that way, naturally the project sounds like a sacrilege. But I said that I'd become convinced of the logic behind their plan, in part based on what we'd seen in a number of other revived-downtown cities across the country.

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Just now I log onto the Internet after a long airline trip to find a slew of messages from people saying: That video is the explanation? There is so much they left out! So for anyone who wants more details on the respective (and sometimes complementary) roles of cars and pedestrians in healthy downtown, I offer these.



1) If you'd like to go into this in the most detail-immersed way imaginable, I encourage you to read the latest version

of the Fresno General Plan. It's right [here, in a multi-hundred-page PDF](#). I wrote briefly about it last month [here](#), but if you want to see the full story, be my guest!

2) If you'd like an elegant journalistic description of the artistic and urban-life stakes in the decision, please read the extensive and beautifully illustrated story, by Mimi Zeiger, on the decision in Landscape Architecture Magazine. You can read it via an online app of the magazine [here](#). I wrote briefly about it [here](#). This is a look at the opening spread.



A presentation of the Fresno mall drama (Courtesy of Landscape Architecture Magazine)

3) I am a fan of the [Fresno Bee and its site](#). You can sign up there, for modest charge, and prowl around in their coverage. (Deceptively important bonus media-market point: Fresno is far enough away from the big centers of L.A., San Francisco, or even Sacramento that it gets little attention in their print or broadcast media. The *Bee* makes local politics and policy a front-page specialty, and goes into it in depth.)

4 & 5) Here are two messages that have come in, one from a person far removed from Fresno and another from a person who lives and works there. They're a useful juxtaposition of some of the earlier "how to save a downtown" themes.

First, from the outlander. This reader lives and works in Louisville:

*I thought the video was interesting because although I've never been to Fresno, I'm familiar with two of the examples given in comparison—**South Bend** and **Louisville**.*

*On arriving in **South Bend** in the mid-1980s, I borrowed a bicycle and figured that if I rode towards downtown, I'd find a store to buy some dorm-room food. Wrong. Downtown was nearly vacant and had almost nothing to offer. The resuscitation of downtown has been unsteady since then, but has generally proceeded in a positive direction. The 800-pound gorilla that is Notre Dame is finally starting to reach outside of its campus and improve the neighborhoods between downtown and the campus that sits just Northeast of it. That, frankly, was long overdue.*

Another project with some transformational potential is the relocation of a Catholic high school to a former hospital campus (which abandoned the area for the suburbs). Both of these are big-money projects that don't seem to be exactly the sort of organic growth that Fresno seems to be hoping for. The South Bend metro area is continuing to relentlessly sprawl towards the east and northeast and if

the core is going to be improved, the University is going to play a role. If I recall correctly, it became the largest employer in the city in the 1980s, with the closing of a Bendix facility.

*The **Louisville** pedestrian mall was built on 4th Street between Liberty and Muhammad Ali, and is visible in the opening scenes of the movie *Stripes*. (Louisville joke: What was Muhammad Ali's original name? Answer: Walnut Street.) I've worked near there for more than 20 years. The Galleria was a fading urban mall in the early 90s, built on Louisville's original retail corridor. But it survived until the last department store (Dillard's) pulled out.*

The replacement is a Cordish development that has all of the positives and negatives of their work in Baltimore, Kansas City, and I'm sure every place else. Bringing them to town is sort of like comparing Times Square now to the early 1980s. It's better by every objective measure, but ... The complex has become a focal point for some area activities, though, particularly the Ironman triathlon, some Derby events, and other sports-affiliated gatherings.

No one, however, would contend that it single-handedly has revitalized downtown Louisville (something that is still definitely a work in progress, but which is unquestionably happening). In rough order, that would be because of:

- 1. The de-industrialization of the riverfront and its conversion into a park that is the epicenter for almost every outdoor event for more than a few thousand people which does not involve a football or horses.*
- 2. The continuation of a vibrant downtown restaurant scene. Louisville long has been one of the best per-capita restaurant cities I've been to, and the best restaurants in Louisville have always been in or near downtown. No matter how far the city sprawled, people have been willing to drive in to them. This has only accelerated with an explosion of hipster-driven (there's no other way to describe it) businesses and restaurants on the East market corridor.*
- 3. People are realizing that they want to live near where they like to eat, and maybe even where they work. One-term Mayor Dave Armstrong tried to make downtown residential development a focus of his administration in the early 2000s. It's taken some time, but the older neighborhoods east of downtown and the even-older ones just south of it have been booming since I moved here, while the wind has gone out of the far-suburban areas, with a few exceptions.*
- 4. The downtown arena. That's a whole other can of worms that was definitely over-sold economically. It exists, however, and has definitely provided some support to the area.*

As an older Gen-X'er, my first impressions of a lot of cities were pretty grim. It's nice to see some momentum going the other way.



South Bend skyline, from across the river (Wikimedia Commons)

Procedural note: In quoting readers' views about cities I haven't yet reported on myself, I realize that I'm inviting the inevitable back-and-forth: "City X is terrible." "No City X is great!" For an example, see the earlier clash-of-the-titans between Tampa and Asheville ([here](#) and [here](#)). Still, I find these exchanges interesting rather than otherwise, and I've been to Louisville often enough and recently enough to recognize what this reader says. And we plan to return.

Now, one more from a Fresnan, about the plus and minus for that city.

My spouse and I have lived in Fresno for eight years. I've read each of your installment with great interest, particularly the essays on downtown and the Tower District [JF: Fresno's [nascent bohemian district](#)], where we bought a charming 1920s bungalow back in 2007.

The real estate market was still near its height, but compared to other places we've lived, we got a deal. I've always said that in any other city, the Tower District is the kind of neighborhood we wouldn't be able afford on our salaries. Its abundance of historic homes and walkability would simply put it out of our reach.



The Tower Theater, center of the Tower District in Fresno (James Fallows)

Alas, while the Tower is a desirable location for some, many Fresnans think living down here is a fate worse than death. (Of course, I think living in a McMansion around the corner from a Walgreen's and an Outback Steakhouse is a fate worse than death, so it goes both ways.)

I hope that your optimism about Fresno is warranted. And I do detect the proverbial 'buzz' you picked up on during your stay. Still, the Tower has not improved markedly since we arrived, and while I like to believe that the recession was the major culprit, I'm increasingly inclined to think the creative class (or whatever term you prefer) is just not big enough here, and that it may not be for a while. Perhaps high speed rail will help, should that actually come to pass.

* To read about and sign-up for our newAmerican Futures email newsletter, see [here](#). Or just go straight to the sign-up [here](#). And another procedural note: Back in the golden age of blogging, maybe three or four years ago, people on this site could post more frequently, briefly, and casually. The guiding idea in those days was "thinking in public" and supporting an ongoing conversation, rather than producing self-contained posts each of which dreamed of "crushing the Internet" through social-media sharing. As a tribute to those hallowed traditions of America's past, I'll plan to return for a while to the practice of shorter, breezier, and evolving-conversation postings. Perhaps even about boiled frogs and beer.

- Previous James Fallows Post [Can Cars Save Downtown?](#)
- Next James Fallows Post [Asking Martin O'Malley to Explain Baltimore](#)

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California's Improbable Navel-Orange Queen

Eliza Tibbets was a suffragist, abolitionist, and spiritualist—and the mother of California's orange industry.



About the Author

- [James Fallows](#) is a national correspondent for *The Atlantic* and has written for the magazine since the late 1970s. He has reported extensively from outside the United States and once worked as President Carter's chief speechwriter. His latest book is [China Airborne](#).

- [Email](#)



Most Popular

- **The Betrayal of Student Activism?**

Santa Cruz is a sleepy college town nestled at the base of a mountain range on California's Central Coast. Recently, the city, famous for its beach boardwalk and redwood forests, experienced an act of civil disobedience by six of the university's students.

This news might seem unremarkable for a college community known for its alternative lifestyle and liberal leanings. But the demonstration—held in early March in opposition to tuition hikes across the state—has led to some soul-searching for the University of California, Santa Cruz, which is coming under scrutiny for abandoning its tradition of political activism and the values it still uses to market itself. Despite lasting only a few hours, the protest has also dragged Santa Cruz into the center of national conversations about student debt, generational divides, and the efficacy of certain protest tactics designed to attract attention.

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- **World War II: The Fall of Nazi Germany**

After the successful Allied invasions of western France, Germany gathered reserve forces and launched a massive counter-offensive in the Ardennes, which collapsed by January. At the same time, Soviet forces were closing in from the east, invading Poland and East Prussia. By March, Western Allied forces were crossing the Rhine River, capturing hundreds of thousands of troops from Germany's Army Group B. The Red Army had meanwhile entered Austria, and both fronts quickly approached Berlin. Strategic bombing campaigns by Allied aircraft were pounding German territory, sometimes destroying entire cities in a night. In the first several months of 1945, Germany put up a fierce defense, but rapidly lost territory, ran out of supplies, and exhausted its options. In April, Allied forces pushed through the German defensive line in Italy. East met West on the River Elbe on April 25, 1945, when Soviet and American troops met near Torgau, Germany. Then came the end of the Third Reich, as the Soviets took Berlin, Adolf Hitler committed suicide on April 30, and Germany surrendered unconditionally on all fronts on May 8 (May 7 on the Western Front). Hitler's planned "Thousand-Year Reich" lasted only 12 incredibly destructive years. (This entry is **Part 17** of a weekly

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- **The Right to Blaspheme**

The name of the poor wretch is lost to history, but the year is recorded: It was in 1631 that last German Jew was [burned at the stake](#), falsely accused of desecrating the Host.

Flash forward a few hundred years. In 1989, the AIDS activist group ACT UP [disrupted](#) services in St Patrick's Cathedral, New York. One protester grabbed a consecrated communion wafer, broke it, and tossed it to the floor. He and some 100 others were arrested. A few of the protesters were sentenced to community service. None went to prison. Needless to say, none was burned at the stake.

From a Catholic perspective, defiling a consecrated communion wafer does violence to the body of God. It would be hard to imagine a more brutal affront to the most cherished beliefs of faithful Catholics.

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- **The *Star Wars* Sequel Lucas Didn't Get to Make**

George Lucas is not involved with the creation of *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*. When interviewed by Stephen Colbert about the forthcoming sequel, the now-retired filmmaker said "I'm excited, I have no idea what they're doing"—they being director J.J. Abrams and his team.

But according to Bruce Handy's [new Vanity Fair cover story](#) on the creation of *Episode VII*, Lucas at one point did have a vision for the story that the new *Star Wars* film would tell. By the time he sold Lucasfilm and related properties to Disney for more than \$4 billion, he'd "sketched out ideas for episodes *VII*, *VIII*, and *IX*," writes Handy, and had already approached Harrison Ford, Carrie Fischer, and Mark Hamill about being involved. Once the property was in Disney's hands, though, the company and executive producer Kathleen Kennedy mostly scrapped Lucas's ideas. Why? Apparently, people involved may have been getting flashbacks to child actor Jake Matthew Lloyd's performance in the first prequel:

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- **Florida Struggles to Pay the Tab for Rejecting Obamacare**

When Florida Governor Rick Scott arrived in Washington on Wednesday to sit down with Sylvia Burwell, the secretary of health and human services, he was fulfilling a time-honored ritual. For generations, governors, mayors, and other local leaders have journeyed up to the nation's capital, proverbial hat in hand, to solicit federal dollars. Scott's one-on-one with Burwell, however, carried a complicating factor: Just a week ago, the governor sued her department over the very issue—healthcare funding—he had come to lobby for.

Not surprisingly, Scott came back empty-handed.

Like most current political disputes over healthcare, this one goes back to Obamacare. Yet the debate over the 2010 law has roiled Florida's politics in ways unimaginable in many other states, especially those like Florida in which Republicans control the government. Florida lawmakers have fought so bitterly over the question of expanding Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act that the Senate last month sued the House for cutting short its legislative session before finishing the state budget.

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- **Spoilers: The Most Joss-Whedon-y Twist in *Avengers: Age of Ultron***

For fans of Joss Whedon, plenty of the writer-director's signature flourishes were on display in his [latest foray into superhero blockbusterdom](#), *The Avengers: Age of Ultron*—the humorous banter, the sudden reversals, the clever callbacks. (That scene with the Vision and Thor's hammer offered perhaps the movie's second-best moment, behind only ... the initial scene with the hammer.)

But in the run-up to the film, the most nervously anticipated Whedon trope was the filmmaker's longstanding penchant for killing off characters to whom viewers had grown attached.

This compulsion dates all the way back to the shocking death of Jenny Calendar in the second season of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in 1998. Over the years, a couple of particular sub-variations on the theme have become evident. First, Whedon enjoys killing off characters on the cusp of a long-awaited romantic fulfillment: Ms. Calendar and Tara on *Buffy*; Fred (who died in Wesley's arms) and Wesley (who, perversely, died episodes later in *Fred's* arms) on *Angel*; Penny in *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*, etc.

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- **Why Should Captains Go Down With Their Ships?**

On May 1, 1915, the RMS *Lusitania* sailed from New York, bound for Liverpool. On May 7, it was torpedoed by a German submarine off the Old Head of Kinsale on the southern Irish coast. The ship's captain, William Thomas Turner, believing himself to be the last living person on board, climbed the halyards to keep from being washed away and to remain with his ship to the end. Eventually, he clung to a floating wooden oar and then a chair as the ship sank beneath him. Only later, when viewing the scene from some remove, did Turner discover to his horror that others had remained on board and were sucked under as the great vessel sunk below the waves. Turner had been denied the grace of being the last on his ship and going down with it too.

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- **Will Pope Francis Break the Church?**

In 1979, almost a year into the papacy of John Paul II, a novel called *The Vicar of Christ* spent 13 weeks on the *New York Times* best-seller list. The work of a Princeton legal scholar, Walter F. Murphy, it featured an unlikely papal candidate named Declan Walsh—first a war hero, then a United States Supreme Court justice, and then (after an affair and his wife's untimely death) a monk—who is summoned to the throne of Saint Peter by a deadlocked, desperate conclave.

Once elevated, Walsh takes the name Francesco—that is, Francis—and sets about using the office in extraordinary ways. He launches a global crusade against hunger, staffed by Catholic youth and funded by the sale of Vatican treasures. He intervenes repeatedly in world conflicts, at one point flying into Tel Aviv during an Arab bombing campaign. He lays plans to gradually reverse the Church's teachings on contraception and clerical celibacy, and banishes conservative cardinals to monastic life when they plot against him. He flirts with the Arian heresy, which doubted Jesus's full divinity, and he embraces Quaker-style religious pacifism, arguing that just-war theory is out of date in an age of nuclear arms and total war. (This last move eventually gets him assassinated, probably by one of the governments threatened by his quest for peace.)

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- **The Chinese Art of the Crowd**

After viewing news photographs from China for years, one of my favorite visual themes is "large crowd formations." Whether the subject is military parades or world-record attempts, mass exercises or enormous performances, the images are frequently remarkable. The masses of people can look beautiful or intimidating, projecting a sense of strength and abundance. Individuals can become pixels in a huge painting, or points on a grid, or echoes of each other in identical uniforms or costumes. I've gathered some of these images below, taken around China over the past several years. (Note: a few of these images can create a dizzying effect when viewed while scrolling, which is fun, but could be surprising.)

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- **What ISIS Really Wants**

What is the Islamic State?

Where did it come from, and what are its intentions? The simplicity of these questions can be deceiving, and few Western leaders seem to know the answers. In December, *The New York Times* published confidential comments by Major General Michael K. Nagata, the Special Operations commander for the United States in the Middle East, admitting that he had hardly begun figuring out the Islamic State's appeal. "We have not defeated the idea," he said. "We do not even understand the idea." In the past year, President Obama has referred to the Islamic State, variously, as "not Islamic" and as al-Qaeda's "jayvee team," statements that reflected confusion about the group, and may have contributed to significant strategic errors.

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- **An Animated History of 20th Century Hairstyles**

From the poodle cut to the mohawk, a century of follicle fashion

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