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Design Perspectives: Can Pioneer Square fill the Elliott Bay Book void?

• *Business is booming above the retail ground floors, with professional and tech businesses moving into office spaces.*

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At the corner of First Avenue and Main Street, news of the closing of Elliott Bay Book Co.'s Pioneer Square store has sent shock waves through the city and region.

The loss will leave a hole in the heart of Seattle's first commercial area, where the store has been a retail anchor for more than 30 years, changing hands only once. With its readings, signings and café in the basement, it's been an oasis of literary culture, a meeting place and hub of activity in daytime hours. The rambling interior spaces, with exposed brick and timbers, is a warm reminder of the urban pioneering days of the 1970s.

If Elliott Bay were simply closing, it would be a different story. These are deadly discouraging times for independent booksellers everywhere, who have seen their modest profit margins increasingly threatened by Amazon and other Internet businesses — based in stores or not.

But Elliott Bay is not going out of business. It's moving to a new home in the Pike-Pine neighborhood. So instead of looking for ultimate causes in economic trends, all eyes are on the street. That's where the hopes, the perceptions and the realities of Pioneer Square clash, with discouraging frequency.

In planning circles, there's a strong consensus that independent retail businesses like Elliott Bay are the indicator species of urban neighborhoods, signs of a healthy pedestrian environment.

That's one of the reasons the departure of the anchor store is so disheartening. In form, Pioneer Square has all they might hope for — blocks of historic buildings with lots of storefronts on the sidewalks and back streets, mature street trees, loads of character. Open spaces are modest in scale, but rich in artwork, history and sense of place.

But there is a perception, invoked repeatedly by retail owners like Elliott Bay owner Peter Aaron (who hears it from his customers), that the streets of Pioneer Square are not safe. And for the most part, those customers are blaming it on the victims — the poor, homeless and disabled who have always populated the streets of Pioneer Square. While some of these are guilty of annoying behavior, they are more likely than anyone else to be victims of real crimes.

There's another, related perception that Pioneer Square is losing ground economically, or just not doing well. And that, according to an analysis of city tax revenues published this month by Donovan Rypkema, could not be further from the truth. Rypkema is a specialist in commercial revitalization who has been consulting with the city's Office of Economic Development.

Between 2003 and 2008, the gross domestic product grew just over 30 percent nationwide, 34 percent in Washington state. Gross receipts in the neighboring International District and Capitol Hill neighborhoods grew by 35 percent and 57 percent, respectively. But during the same period, the micro-economy of Pioneer Square grew by an astonishing 126 percent.

Recession aside, Pioneer Square seems to be doing very well. And lest you jump to conclusions about parking, sports bars and other game-day related extensions of stadium traffic, by far the biggest business sectors are professional, technical and personal services, and computer software and Internet-related enterprises.

The future has arrived in Pioneer Square. It has capitalized on its past for decades — with tourists trouping through the underground tours, visiting the Klondike Museum, and reliving the day's of red-light disrepute and Skid Row.

But now, investors and citizens of the neighborhood are painfully aware that the appeal of the street is just as important as it is in any other place, from Ballard to Columbia City.

What's just as important for the future of the neighborhood is what goes on above the ground floor, according Leslie Smith, interim director of the Pioneer Square Community Association. Up there, business is booming. Professional services seem to be moving in, and a few of the tech businesses are doing very well indeed.

Annie Strain serves on the Pioneer Square Revitalization Steering Committee, which has been working with the PSCA and the city's OED to re-set priorities in the neighborhood. She has good "street cred" — her husband is one of those people at work in software development upstairs. They sold a house in the Madison Valley to live in downtown Seattle, first near Pike Place Market and then at First Avenue and Yesler. In Pioneer Square. They found that they could afford more space there for their expanding family.

Strain is one of the few resident voices calling for greater acceptance of the presence of social service providers and their clients, but with a couple of very important points. Along with Rypkema, she is convinced that Pioneer Square is in need of more social services — not less.

They should be strategically targeted to providing daytime centers for the very poor and homeless who don't have a place to hang out, go to the bathroom, get away from the real criminals or hook up with other services. But this must be coupled with more aggressive policing of nuisance behaviors and petty crimes on the streets and in the shops.

One point everyone has agreed on — again and again — is that Pioneer Square needs a significant increase in market-rate and worker housing. Shop owners, residents and planners all expect this will bring multiple benefits to the streets by sending daily, paying customers to the storefronts and eyes on the sidewalks and alleys. It will also help to break the terrible triangle of stunned tourists, street people and transients.

But it's a long time coming. Zoning legislation for all of south downtown, including Pioneer Square, is now in the pipeline and will come before Seattle City Council in the next quarter. It is designed to get things going among and beside the historic buildings that are protected — and also neglected. Potential developers say that adaptive reuse just doesn't pencil out, recession or not.

While the 100-foot limit of most of Pioneer Square would be retained, heights at the edges would be raised to promote construction of infill residential and mixed-use buildings. For instance, permissible heights would be raised to 130 feet north of James Street near downtown, and to 150 feet east of the Second Avenue South extension in the proposed legislation.

At the same time, to promote renovation and reuse of older buildings in the historic core and discourage demolition, legislation would set up a program for sale and transfer of development rights from those buildings to developments just outside it.

Redevelopment will also be encouraged by huge public investments already made in public transportation. The arrival of light rail this summer has made King Street Station — where commuter rail and buses are already building transit ridership — a huge hub of activity and convenient connection to the airport, downtown and beyond. Current planning for the new streetcar has it stopping there, also.

While these new laws would encourage block-by-block, incremental revitalization, there are big projects in the works that will — if built — forever change the south downtown environment and the economic and social equation of Pioneer Square.

When the economy rebounds, as it always does, the redevelopment of the north lot of Qwest Field should commence. Plans by Nitze-Stagen for mixed-use towers would bring more than 600 units of market-rate and affordable housing

right to the edge of Pioneer Square. Meanwhile, the last piece of the Civic Center campus, to the east along Third Avenue between James and Cherry streets, is waiting in the wings, the result of a public-private partnership between Triad Development and the city that will yield an activated plaza and office tower very near Pioneer Square. There are other private projects in the works (see article by Scott Surdyke in the Dec. 10 issue of the DJC).

And finally, to the west, the removal of the Alaskan Way Viaduct and improvements to the urban waterfront may be the most momentous single change downtown Seattle — and Pioneer Square — has seen since the aerial highway was constructed over 50 years ago.

The surviving older buildings along its path, including those that are technically part of Pioneer Square, will not sit in the shadow of a roaring highway, and the whole neighborhood will benefit from predictable investment in their rehabilitation.

While all of these developments might present some competition for Pioneer Square shops and small business, they will also make the unique and edgy historic character of the place even more appealing and precious.

All this will be too late to keep Elliott Bay Book Co. in Pioneer Square. But those who have waited for decades for the future envisioned by the urban pioneers of the 1970s may get more change than they ever imagined, and the rush may make them nostalgic for the “loiterers” that now annoy them.

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