



Located only 13 miles from New York City (above), Montclair, N.J., has long been a popular bedroom suburb. Today, however, it has transformed its downtown into a regional business center and a popular arts, entertainment, and dining district that attracts thousands of visitors every weekend (left).

Craig Cornell, owner of Diamond Cycle, a long-time downtown business, remembers Montclair Center in the 1990s. “Back then,” he says, this area was a little rough, a lot of crime, piles of trash. You would rarely see people walking around at night.”

“The ground-floor vacancy rate was 50 percent when our program started in 2002,” says Luther Flurry, executive director of the Montclair Center BID. Today it has dropped to 12 percent for traditional retail and 1 percent for office space and housing.

And therein lies much of the story of Montclair Center’s success. Once a magnet for creative professional residents, Montclair is now attracting their employers.

FROM BEDROOM SUBURB TO BUSINESS CENTER

“Montclair Center is increasingly a hub for the creative economy,” says Flurry, “whether it is an investment company that funds design-driven startups or the software company that developed the engine most iPhone apps use.”

Once companies experience Montclair Center, he adds, “they don’t want to leave. Both Audible and Diapers.com were

MONTCLAIR CENTER BID, MONTCLAIR, NEW JERSEY

Known for its historic charm and natural beauty, Montclair, New

Jersey, has long been a popular suburban community. Located only 13 miles from one of the world’s great metropolises, New York City, Montclair attracted a diverse, and often upscale, population to its neighborhoods, but most of those residents spent their days and dollars elsewhere, commuting to the Big Apple and nearby New Jersey cities, such as Newark, Paterson, and Jersey City.

The downtown was left behind, suffering years of neglect that left much of the commercial district’s historic architecture decaying behind low-maintenance façades put up from the ’60s to the ’80s.

founded in Montclair and had employees reverse commuting from New York City. Both companies worked hard to stay in Montclair after they outgrew our office market.”

Second-floor office space was unmeasured but primarily down-market and vacant when the Montclair Center BID was started, says Flurry. “We have created an attractive streetscape and worked to build cachet around our brand.”

As a result, office lease prices are at a premium over new construction elsewhere in northern New Jersey, the vacancy rate is under 3 percent, and the downtown has absorbed more than 80,000 square feet of office space, primarily through adaptive use of historic buildings.

One of the most distinctive and successful of these projects is **Hillside Square**, which converted a historic church into 22,000 square feet of office space. Originally built in 1926 as the First Church of Christ Scientist, the congregation over time began to lose members and could no longer maintain the building. “We approached the board,” says Bob Silver, founder and CEO of the Bravitas Group which owns and renovated the building, “and said, why don’t you stay

Montclair Center BID Director Luther Flurry (right center) and members of the community accept their 2015 Great American Main Street Award from NMSC President Patrice Frey (left center) at the Opening Plenary of the National Main Streets Conference in Atlanta.

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BEFORE



“If you have creative office space available, you are going to attract a creative business class,” says Bob Silver, founder and CEO of the Bravitas Group, which developed the award-winning Hillside Square, one of Montclair’s most distinctive and successful adaptive-use projects. Bravitas converted a historic church (bottom) into 22,000 square feet of office space. The First Church of Christ Science, which had owned the building since its construction in 1926, had been losing members over the years and could no longer afford to maintain the property. Silver’s group built a new sanctuary for the church (middle) so they could remain in the building and converted the rest into boutique office space. Fully rented before it opened in 2013, Hillside Square has attracted creative employers from as far away as Cambridge, Massachusetts, as well as New York City and neighboring New Jersey towns.



AFTER



AFTER





Montclair Center BID offers valuable assistance to downtown business owners, from strong social media promotion on its Facebook page (left top and middle), which currently has 4,100 likes and a reach often approaching 10,000, to a variety of business-targeted events. The Sidewalk Stroll (above) is Montclair Center’s most wide-ranging event, targeting the entire 1.3 miles of the district. Merchants and the BID sponsor “Stroll Stoppers,” such as performances at Montclair Center Stage, a classic car show, and fashion shows, to entice people to walk throughout the district.

“They saved this historic church,” says Jef Buehler, state coordinator, Main Street New Jersey, “and gave it an office function” that won a New Jersey Future Smart Growth award for the best Creative Adaptive Re-use project in 2013.

“The culture of Montclair,” adds Buehler, “is to adaptively reuse, where possible, and then promote the heck out of it.”

Owning a business in Montclair brings the added perks of assistance from the Montclair Center BID. “With the help of Main Street New Jersey and local professionals,” says Flurry, “we offer frequent business training sessions.... We work closely with landlords and real estate agents to help land or qualify tenants. We work with incoming businesses to help them understand the local climate and anticipate possible speed bumps.”

in your home of 85 years. We’ll build you a new sanctuary and then we’ll turn the rest of it into boutique office space.”

The building has attracted creative economy employers from New York City, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and neighboring New Jersey townships and was fully rented before it opened in April 2013. “If you have creative office space available, you are going to attract a creative business class,” says Silver.



With 82 places to eat and drink, including 69 fine dining establishments, Montclair Center has earned a reputation as the Food Capital of New Jersey. On a typical weekend, Montclair draws thousands of diners who come from all over the region to sample cuisine from 16 foreign countries, several international regions, and all types of American food.



All of this takes place, says Flurry without any financial incentives, “just the Main Street Four Point Approach, which has transformed Montclair Center from a blighted downtown to a premium work destination.”

“The Montclair BID was extremely welcoming to us,” says Alex Aranoff, co-owner of Heratij, a clothing and winter sports boutique. “And they benefit because we bring energy. We bring a new life to the town. People are coming to Montclair.”

They are coming not just to work but to live, shop, dine, and just have fun.

FOOD CAPITAL OF NEW JERSEY

“With 82 places to eat and drink, including 69 fine restaurants, we are the Food Capital of New Jersey,” says Flurry. We “draw thousands of diners from the region on a typical weekend night.” Montclair’s cuisine is as diverse as its population, representing 16 foreign countries, several international regions, and every type of American cooking.

“In terms of diversity, quality, range, and creativity, Montclair Center’s restaurant niche is extremely strong,” says Buehler.

And it benefits all of the downtown by adding life and vibrancy to the street during much of the day and night. Montclair Center “is like New York City on Friday night, Saturday night, when the restaurants are open,” says Diamond Cycle Owner Chris Cornell. “We even stay open until 11:00 or 12:00 at night on a Friday. Fantastic!”

Dining combines with arts and entertainment to give people lots to do in Montclair Center. With 23 businesses scheduling performances, several major arts venues, and semiannual art walks, Montclair has built a reputation as a regional arts destination. From the Wellmont Theater, a 2,200-seat former vaudeville theater that hosts all types of popular music, to the Montclair Art Museum and the Clairidge Theater, an art-house cinema that screens



“FROM BEING CONSIDERED A DANGEROUS, DIRTY, AND DOWNTRODDEN AREA, MONTCLAIR HAS BECOME THE FOOD CAPITAL OF NEW JERSEY, **HAS AN AMAZING ART SCENE,** DIVERSE SHOPPING, ENTERTAINMENT, AND CULTURAL OPTIONS....”



—Jef Buehler, State Coordinator, Main Street New Jersey



Along with its vibrant restaurant niche, Montclair Center has a strong and growing arts scene. Boasting several major arts venues—the Montclair Art Museum (top), which focuses on American and Native Art and recently celebrated its 100th anniversary; the Wellmont Theatre (middle), a former vaudeville house that hosts all types of popular music; and the Clairidge Theater (bottom), an art-house cinema that screens films rarely seen elsewhere in Northern New Jersey—as well as live performances at many downtown businesses, Montclair’s arts district has burgeoned into a regional destination.



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© Neil Grabowsky, Montclair Film Festival



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films rarely found elsewhere in northern New Jersey, the downtown attracts thousands of visitors from the surrounding region. The 100th birthday of the Montclair Art Museum, for example, recently drew 2,600 guests.

Not surprisingly, Montclair Center is reaping the rewards of its focus on the arts. For the past few years, “we’ve been voted New Jersey’s favorite downtown arts district,” says Flurry. “And by promoting those strengths—the arts—we’re able to piggyback on that image to help boost residents, office, and retail.”



LIVING LOCAL

“As I was looking for a place to live,” says Chris Francois, co-owner of Heratij, “my primary destination was to look for someplace I can ... skate to work or walk to work with a coffee in hand.”

Reasons to live downtown are many and growing. “With downtown walkability scores generally in the high 90s, Montclair Center is a ‘Walker’s Paradise,’” says Flurry. Commuting options range from walking and biking to public transit. And the South Park Street renovation, an award-winning municipal project completed in 2012, offers a beautiful streetscape, new shops, and event space, with a June-to-October farmer’s market, public art exhibits, and other activities for residents and visitors.

“Fifteen years ago, Montclair Center housing was low to moderate income,” says Flurry. “Times have changed, and development is skewed toward moderate to high income. Our challenge has become maintaining economic diversity. New development must meet strong affordable housing requirements [10 to 20 percent

The Montclair Center BID sponsors two art walks a year, in May and October. For 15 years, the downtown has showcased art in unusual places, attracting thousands of people for the evening event, which runs from 6-9 p.m. The BID provides a map, which visitors can use to take a self-guided tour of all the displays. “Our goal is to surprise people with art in unexpected places, to introduce art to people who might not normally see it, and to provide and encourage Montclair businesses to provide venues for art not just twice a year, but as often as possible,” says BID Director Luther Flurry. During the May 2015 event, 22 venues hosted art displays.



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The Montclair Center BID worked for eight years to build consensus to revamp a blighted downtown street. The South Park Street renovation, an award-winning municipal project completed in 2012, has made a significant impact on occupancy and foot traffic. The first major investment by the city in Montclair Center since the 1970s, South Park Street now offers a beautiful streetscape, new shops, and space for activities such as public art exhibits and a popular farmers market.

of new housing units] and the parking challenges of downtown infill, but developer and resident interest remains high.”

Montclair Center’s reputation as a “hip downtown with great food, music, and art attracts young residents,” notes Flurry. Their presence on the street creates a vibrant atmosphere, with many shops targeting the 12-35 age group.

Millennials aren’t the only ones who call downtown home. Empty nesters and retirees are moving in as well. Completed in 2007, The Siena, a mixed-income building with 101 residential units in the heart of downtown, is mostly occupied by mature residents.

Historic buildings are also providing housing space, with people living upstairs in iconic buildings like the Wellmont



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Montclair's great food and entertainment has attracted many young residents who create a vibrant presence downtown and a target market for shops that sell merchandise geared toward the 12-35 age group. But Millennials aren't the only ones moving to Montclair Center. New housing opportunities are drawing empty nesters and retirees. The Siena (left), a mixed-income building completed in 2007, is occupied primarily by mature residents.

Theater. “Pretty much every building in the downtown is a mixed-use building,” says Buehler. “Residential demand is high.”

So high in fact, that Montclair has no need for residential development incentives. The township has negotiated Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILOT) agreements that reduce property taxes in exchange for developer concessions that meet public priorities.

Montclair’s transition to a desirable place to live, says Flurry, “came about through changes in perceived safety, a beautiful historic streetscape, increased downtown amenities, Montclair Center branding, improved public transit, and changing demographics. Most of these are the product of following the Main Street Four Point Approach.”

Main Street has also been key in building partnerships to preserve the downtown’s historic integrity.

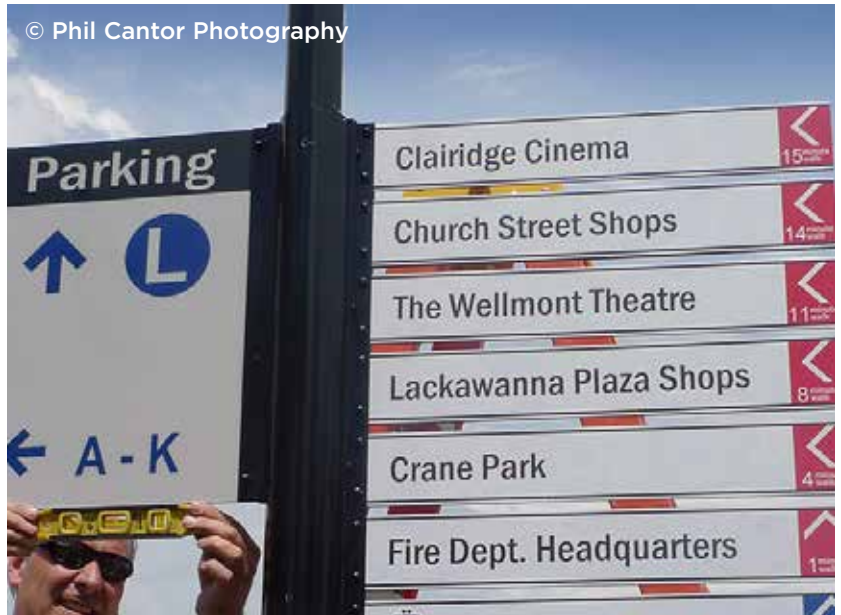


PRESERVING DOWNTOWN: BUILDING BY BUILDING, BLOCK BY BLOCK

“Montclair is avid about historic preservation,” says Flurry. But the downtown’s strong preservation ethic took time to build. In 1994, the Montclair Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) was formed and the first district it established largely overlapped Montclair Center.

At first, however, “the HPC had trouble getting traction and building business support,” says Flurry. But when the Montclair Center BID was formed, things began to change.

The HPC and the BID joined forces and “presented a united front that gave stakeholders the knowledge and confidence



Changes in perceived safety of the district and increased downtown amenities are two of the reasons for Montclair Center’s growing desirability as a place to live. The Montclair Center BID began with a “Clean & Safe” agenda that is still an important part of its work. Montclair Center Ambassadors (above left) clean sidewalks, remove graffiti, tend plants, and help with holiday events; they are the constant face of the BID. Pedestrian wayfinding (above right), installed in 2013, reinforces Montclair Center’s reputation as a “Walker’s Paradise.”



to move forward,” recalls Ira Smith, architect and member of the commission. “The HPC and BID volunteers worked together to form a strategic consensus and we began to make a difference—building by building, block by block.”

The strong partnership forged by the two organizations was crucial to creating an understanding and acceptance of preservation by property owners. “The business community began to appreciate the potential of preservation,” says Flurry, “and the HPC gained an understanding of what landlords considered possible.... Today landlords may grumble about the cost and

oversight of the HPC, but all agree that historic preservation has done wonders for the downtown.”

Since the BID was formed, says Flurry, “we estimate that more than \$220 million has been spent ... on privately funded commercial and residential investment within the district.” In 2013 alone, Montclair Center saw \$2.8 million in private investment, a net gain of 42 new businesses, and creation of 193 new jobs. The adaptive reuse of historic buildings continues to be strong, with rehabbed office space in particularly high demand.



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The deep commitment and strong partnerships between the Montclair Center BID, the City, and other downtown groups has transformed a once-neglected downtown into a perfect blend of big-city excitement and small-town charm.

“Our downtown is both a place of beauty and an engine of economic growth,” says Mayor Robert D. Jackson.

It is the perfect blend of “big city excitement mixed with small-town charm,” adds Flurry. “Working together, the community applied love, hard work, determination, and the Main Street Four Point Approach to transform Montclair Center from a downtown with endless vacancies and knee-deep drifts of trash into a charming, vibrant, historic Great American Main Street.”

[Click here to watch the Montclair Center BID GAMSA Video.](#)



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