



# Downtown Idea Exchange

Essential Information for Downtown Revitalization

April 2015

## *Perspectives*

### **Nineteen things you can do with a roofless building**

by *Becky McCray*

A news story from Garland, TX, got me thinking about what you can do with a roofless building. You probably have one in your downtown. Maybe a building burned, or maybe the roof just fell in. Now you have an empty space, maybe with walls, or maybe just an open lot.

The standard solution for small-town governments has been to make a pocket park: a little green space, a bench or two, and that's about it. Pocket parks are okay, but they aren't the only possibility.

This is a good place to apply the placemaking concepts of lighter, quicker, cheaper. Try cheap and temporary setups to see what people in your town will actually use. Because I've seen a lot of pocket parks in small towns, but I've very, very, very rarely seen a person actually using one and I've never seen a group or a crowd enjoying a pocket park — which is a shame, really.

What could you do instead? My weekly newsletter readers and I came up with this list to inspire action on your roofless buildings. First things first; make sure the space is safe to use. Check the slab or floor for safety, especially if there's a basement. Walls may need weather-sealing or shoring up.

**Not-for-profit ideas** — things municipalities or organizations might do with lots they own, without much expectation of a direct return on investment.

- Start a conversation. Start with the pocket park idea, but add lots of seating for lots of people in conversational groupings. One picnic table isn't enough to draw a crowd and make it a lively place. Schedule a special day to have lunch there. Make it a community event. For example, every Friday, all of downtown has lunch together there.

Hold board meetings, chamber breakfasts, or other regular events there.

- Make it a community garden or flower garden, which is livelier and gets more people involved than a plain pocket park.

- Add a public restroom, like Tishomingo, OK, did in the narrow pocket park between two businesses. Trust me, visitors will appreciate an inviting public restroom.

- Create an event space. Set up a little stage. Start recruiting anyone who gives lessons (music, dance, drama, writing) to hold student performances there. In my hometown of Alva, OK, there is a tiny stage next to the library, big enough for one or maybe two performers.

- Set up games and fun things to do together, such as chess or checkers boards, domino tables, or poker tables. Or install playground equipment, interactive art, bocce ball, croquet, shuffleboard, horseshoes, or other games.

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- Make it a beach instead of a park. All you need is sand and beach chairs — and maybe an umbrella. Schedule volley ball games or sand castle building there.

- Set up an outdoor living room. The Center for Rural Affairs in Lyons, NE (est. pop. 851), created an outdoor living room and convened a series of conversations with local people there. It was a temporary art/community project, but it makes perfect sense to try this for a longer time in a roofless building.

- Create an outdoor museum. It could be a rusted tractor graveyard, or any other weather-resistant or happily rusty artifacts that tell the story of your town. Or get brave and encourage graffiti art.

- Host a walk-in theater. Lots of towns show movies outdoors on the sides of buildings or on inflatable screens, so why not in a roofless building?

- Park on it. Providing parking for adjacent buildings can increase their value, and there is no reason the space can't also serve part-time as a farmer's or flea market venue.

- Let other people decide. Allow community groups or school kids to take over the space for a month at a time, and give them a free hand. I'm betting some great ideas will emerge.

**Not-just-for-profit ideas** — things individuals, municipalities, and organizations could do, and might even make a little money on.

- Rent the space for special events. Host tastings, samplings, demonstrations, lessons, or an outdoor yoga studio. There might be an increased demand during big festivals and events that already draw people downtown.

A roofless building could provide overflow space for booths, food vendors, or performers.

- Food truck dining. Add tables and chairs, and a place for food trucks to park. Or rent the space to a nearby brick-and-mortar eatery for additional outdoor seating during the warmer months.

- Allow street vendors and artisans. One reader tells me that Charlottesville, VA, has a downtown pedestrian mall where the street used to be. They allow all different types of vendors, making for a great environment and fun place to be. The same could be done with a roofless building.

- Make a greenhouse. Another reader came up with the greenhouse concept, suggesting, "Cover the roof area with transparent plastic sheeting, add a fan for heat buildup, restore water and electrical service to the building, and use it as a greenhouse for high-value cooking herbs and spices for local restaurants, tended by the kitchen staffs."

- Pop-up a village of shops. Use inexpensive garden sheds to create a bunch of tiny business spaces, as Tionesta, PA, did in an empty lot. Now the city has a bunch of businesses located there and it's become kind of a business incubator.

Your homework assignment is to go look at an empty lot or roofless building in your downtown. Stand there and think about what might work in your town. How could you make that happen?

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