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## Research Paper

## Keeping it fresh: Revisiting an historic tourist city's streetscape improvement project

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## ABSTRACT

This research examines a downtown streetscape improvement project in a heritage tourism destination. A survey, conducted in Charleston, South Carolina, USA, provided data on merchant attitudes about the project following completion of the work, adding to two previous studies that have looked at the project pre-construction and mid-construction. The results indicate that the merchants grade the project favorably but do not credit the project for the significant recent tourism success enjoyed by the city. Concepts and issues borrowed from the urban conservation literature are considered and suggestions are provided that should be of value to destination management officials in heritage cities.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper is third in a trilogy spanning eighteen years that has studied a major downtown streetscape revitalization project in the historic and tourism oriented downtown of Charleston, South Carolina. The first study (Crotts & McNitt, 1998), conducted prior to the commencement of the streetscape project, provided insight into the attitudes of the city's downtown merchants toward the proposed project and their willingness to pay, via ten-year annual tax assessments based upon their properties' King Street frontage: their \$4.3 million share of the \$12 million project cost. The second study (Litvin, 2005) was undertaken mid-project as work progressed in the retail core. That research exercise provided downtown merchants an opportunity to review and reflect upon the streetscape improvement project, and the aggravations associated with its construction, before the project's promised benefits had been realized. This final research effort, again an attitudinal study of the city's main street merchants, revisited the streetscape revitalization project five years after its completion, providing an opportunity to reflect back over the life of the project. Collectively, the longitudinal nature of these three studies offer valuable feedback to City of Charleston officials as they review the impact of their project and plan future initiatives affecting the city's retail

core. More importantly, from a macro perspective the findings will be of value to city planners and tourism researchers in historic cities elsewhere as they consider similar revitalization efforts in their communities.

## 2. Background

King Street is Charleston's historic retail core. Litvin and Jaffe (2010) commented, however, that as of the turn of the century, the street had lost much of its charm. A quote from a merchant included in their paper stated that 'King Street, like people, after years of use and abuse, has developed wrinkles in its face. It's time for a facelift' (Meyerson, 1999: B1). City leaders and merchants understood that both to maintain the residents' quality of life and to sustain Charleston's tourism success these 'wrinkles' needed attention. Such recognition led to formation by Charleston's Mayor and City Council, in concert with the downtown merchants, of the King Street Improvement District, a legal body given the charge of funding and overseeing a major downtown streetscape revitalization project. Project construction commenced in 2002 and was completed in 2009. As this paper is written, the ten-year property tax assessments have been paid in full (these had ranged from \$174 to \$20,000 annually, see Behre, 1999) and the District's bond debt has been extinguished.

The streetscape project, as recommended by the City and approved by the merchants, encompassed installation of new curbs

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**Table 1**

Accommodation tax collections, Charleston, SC.  
Source: City of Charleston Comprehensive Annual Report, Department of Budgets, Finance & Revenue Collections (City of Charleston, 2015).

Year ended	Accommodation tax collections (\$000 s)	Year-on-year change (%)
2003	5922	–
2004	6261	5.7
2005	6739	7.6
2006	7288	8.1
2007	8087	11.0
2008	8160	0.9
2009	6886	–15.6
2010	7000	1.7
2011	8375	19.6
2012	9586	14.5
2013	10,932	14.0
2014	12,965	18.6

and brick crosswalks; the concealment of utility wires; the planting of palmetto trees; the addition of period-appropriate lighting fixtures; and the laying of bluestone slate sidewalks, which Crotts and McNitt (1998) noted, was controversial, being seen by a significant number of merchants as an expensive and unnecessary part of the plan.

Since the project's completion, the city has received much positive recognition. While such rankings are good for marketing but clearly arbitrary and subjective, recent accolades have included *Condé Nast Traveler* having named Charleston the number one tourist city in the USA four years running and *Travel+Leisure* designating the city the number two destination worldwide (behind Kyoto) and 'America's Most Charming City'. In addition, King Street was included among a *U.S. News & World Report* list of 'best shopping-streets' in the USA. Likely benefiting from the positive press and exposure, the city's tourism industry has enjoyed significant recent growth. Documentation of this growth is provided by the city's accommodation tax [A-tax] numbers. The majority of Charleston's hotel rooms are located within the city's downtown historic district. As such, the city's A-tax data provide a useful barometer of downtown tourism trends. Table 1 displays the city's annual A-taxes collections since the streetscape improvement construction began in 2002. It can be noted from the table that during the construction stage, Charleston grew at a positive yet modest rate. Following a turndown coincident with the 2008 economic recession, however, tax collections surged, with double-digit increases recorded in each of the last four years, reaching a level twice that recorded pre-project. No argument is made that the rise in tourism can be attributed solely to the streetscape project but it is worth noting that the many accolades received from travel magazines were bestowed post-project.

### 3. Literature review

Numerous tourism authors have commented upon the importance of retail as a foundation of a community's tourism infrastructure. As noted by Murphy, Moscardo, Benckendorff, and Pearce (2011), 'while shopping is seldom mentioned as a primary reason for travel, it is perhaps the most universal of tourist activities, and of great economic importance to local merchants'. According to the *Domestic Travel Market Report* (Miller, 2014), which aligns with an earlier study by Goeldner and Ritchie (2003), shopping is the single most-popular activity among US adult travelers, with 61% incorporating shopping time into their vacations. Weaver and Oppermann (2000) observed that 30% of Australian tourism dollars were spent shopping, a number consistent with

Snepenger, Murphy, O'Connell, and Gregg's (2003) estimate that one third of American tourism dollars derive from retail expenditures, ranking second only to accommodations as a source of tourism revenues (Turner & Reisinger, 2001). For many travelers, shopping is a relaxing and fulfilling source of recreation (Timothy & Butler, 1995), and there is a strong and consistent symbiotic relationship between shopping and tourism satisfaction (Michalkó, Rátz, Hinek, & Tömöri, 2014). Tourists thus enjoy shopping and a community's tourism economic success is likely dependent upon providing a strong retail presence (Lehto, Chen, & Silkes, 2014; Wu, Wall, & Pearce, 2014).

A proliferation of options has made shopping an ever more attractive form of entertainment. Though Shim and Santos (2014) have commented that many retail options have become 'placeless', specifically mentioning mega-malls and the ubiquitous outlet mall, these have become major tourism draws (Tarlow & Muehsam, 1992). Similarly, festival marketplaces, for example, Sydney's Darling Harbour, Seattle's Pike Place Market, Boston's Faneuil Hall and Toronto's St. Lawrence Market, offer upbeat shopping in historic or quasi-historic settings (Law, 2002). Further, as noted by Snepenger et al. (2003), heritage communities can be found across North America working to preserve their downtowns as these historically significant locations are recognized as lures for tourist shopping and as important sources of tourism revenues.

As stated by Johnson, Glover, and Stewart (2014), 'a city's heart lies in its downtown core'. Florida (2003), who provided seminal work on the rise of the creative class, stressed the criticality of providing a vibrant city center to attract the young 'hip' residents that progressive cities today rely upon to fuel their success. Commenting on the role of government in creating and/or maintaining a successful retail core, Henderson, Chee, Mun, and Lee (2011) used as example the Singapore government's management of the 'hardware aspects' of the city-state's vaunted main shopping street, Orchard Road. The Singapore government's stated goal: to have Orchard Road 'one of the world's greatest shopping streets... through constant revitalization'. Yüksel (2007) similarly noted that the 'exterior environmental cues and physical components in a shopping location...help tourists form a holistic picture of the overall place ... The shopping environment deserves attention, as the exterior climate (e.g. building architecture, the surrounding area, storefronts, activities, density, noise level, social temperature, etc) is the first set of cues normally seen by a tourist'. Yüksel (2007) further comments that managerial attention to the exterior shopping environment is critical, as this must be pleasing to shoppers before the interior of the shops is ever experienced. As such, the creation of an attractive and inviting downtown streetscape is important.

As defined by Rehan (2013: 174), '[s]treetscape is a term used to describe the natural and built fabric of the street'. Lillebye (2000) adds, more tangibly, that the streetscape encompasses the quality of the materials used and the street's level of maintenance. The issue of quality and maintenance is important, as downtowns go through cycles, and with down-cycles comes the need for physical and organizational strategies to regenerate a city's retail core as an attractive and competitive place (Balsas, 2014). This is important for both locals and visitors. With Charleston's *fin de siècle* loss of luster, one can appreciate the need for the streetscape project at the heart of this research.

It should be noted, however, that it is difficult to find the right approach when conducting a public works redevelopment project as significant as the King Street streetscape revitalization, particularly in a heritage area. While the benefits of investing in heritage for livability, job creation and local economic development have been increasingly studied and debated over the last few decades, no clear answers as to the best way to implement the work, from a political perspective, have emerged (Kyte, 2012: xiii).

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