

# Reimagining New Jersey's Downtowns

A collaborative journey of transformation

*Jaime J. Izurieta-Varea, Founder, Storefront Mastery*



**A** transformative approach to community revitalization is reshaping downtowns and urban landscapes. This initiative rests on two pillars: elevating the environments where small businesses operate and amplifying the unique value they bring to their downtowns.

### Strategic Process

The goal is twofold: to enhance the environment in which businesses operate and to improve their contribution to the vibrancy of local streets and districts. This is achieved through a process in which local development agencies and firms like Storefront Mastery assess the environment, identify key issues, and propose actionable strategies. These strategies often include a blend of marketing, environmental psychology, storefront design, and retail consulting. The process extends to consulting with local businesses, helping them to implement design and service improvements that are both quick and cost-effective.

### Case Studies

#### Chelsea District, Atlantic City

In the Chelsea district of Atlantic City, a remarkable transformation recently has taken shape. Aesthetic enhancements, innovative tools, and practical knowledge that empowered local businesses to incrementally improve their storefronts have created a ripple effect, revitalizing entire blocks and creating a noticeable uplift in the area's appeal.

Elizabeth Terenik from the Chelsea Economic Development Corporation highlights the bespoke nature of this approach, "This rejuvenation has not only beautified the storefronts but has also fostered a stronger sense of community and collaboration among



Above top: City Grocery in Atlantic City before intervention. Above bottom: City Grocery, proposed intervention rendering.



New Brunswick, Joyeria Minor opening day.

local businesses, leading to a more cohesive and inviting district. Terenik added, "Many of the business owners had never thought about their business in that way, and the experience was beneficial. Our organization and local businesses can now envision creating a better storefront, being part of the greater business community, and expanding their customer base."

#### French Street District, New Brunswick

The transformation in New Brunswick's French Street district has garnered exemplary results and has been pivotal in reflecting the entrepreneurial spirit of the city, particularly among its vibrant

## Reimagining New Jersey's Downtowns

immigrant community. The strategic urban design interventions here have created lively attractive spaces that not only look inviting but also tell the stories of the diverse cultures and people who make up the heart of New Brunswick.

This approach has not only improved the aesthetics but also strengthened the socio-economic fabric of the district. New Brunswick Mayor Jim Cahill described the project as “transformative work that not only revitalized storefronts but energized our community creating vibrant spaces that reflect the pulse of our city.”

### Montclair Center Business Improvement District, Montclair

In Montclair, a unique approach was taken with the Montclair Center Business Improvement District. An extensive data collection and analysis project was undertaken to survey every aspect of the commercial spaces within the downtown improvement district. This data collection was not an end but a means to inform and guide significant advances within the township, both at policy level and for place management.



Jason Gleason, (r) Executive Director of Montclair Center Corporation, surveying downtown commercial spaces in Montclair with Jaime J. Izurieta-Varea.



KM Sazon Restaurant in New Brunswick before intervention.

A comprehensive digital dashboard to take advantage of data is in development. This tool is a game-changer for Montclair Center, enhancing the way public spaces are activated, managed, and experienced.

It has become a vital resource in the recruitment and curation of commercial spaces, ensuring that every aspect of Montclair Center is aligned with the overarching goal of creating a dynamic, diverse, and engaging urban environment. The

Mercator Project is a testament to how data-driven strategies can lead to more informed decisions and impactful urban development.

### Addressing Challenges

In the realm of urban revitalization, a nuanced approach can yield significant benefits. While there's a place for traditional methods that offer support to a broad range of small businesses, an impactful strategy involves homing in on the top performers. These busi-

## Local Leadership's Future Vision

Integrating exceptional public spaces with business attractions should be a central theme in urban development discussions. Devising sustainable strategies and tactical moves are critical to make these visions a reality. The role of mayors and high-ranking officials is crucial to the success of tactical urban interventions. Their endorsement and support are essential for BID and Main Street managers to initiate and implement these transformative strategies smoothly. Local leaders have an opportunity to be proactive in supporting the revitalization of their downtowns.

The renewed vibrancy is a testament to the dedication and leadership of local organizations, which have been instrumental in these urban rejuvenation efforts. These revitalized spaces represent not just physical enhancements, but a deeper commitment to fostering thriving urban centers. They stand as inspiring examples, showcasing the potential when local passion is matched with targeted expertise.



KM Sazon Restaurant, proposed intervention rendering.

nesses, often the backbone of sales and foot traffic in our towns, have a magnetic effect.

Their success and vibrancy not only elevate their own ventures but also act as catalysts, inspiring and provid-

ing opportunities for other businesses to carve out their distinctive roles in the community.


This approach creates a symbiotic environment where the achievements of one contribute to the prosperity of

## Reimagining New Jersey's Downtowns

all. It's about nurturing an ecosystem where leading businesses thrive alongside their peers, collectively enhancing the dynamism and appeal of our downtowns.

Looking to the future, the experiences of these New Jersey towns highlight the importance of creating harmonious environments where local businesses and community interests align.

This narrative serves as an invitation to other towns and cities to consider similar collaborative paths, underscoring the pivotal role of local leadership.

In this journey of urban renewal, the blend of grassroots dedication and strategic input can pave the way for meaningful and lasting change, inspiring new approaches to urban revitalization. 

---

Jaime J. Izurieta-Varea is Founder and Lead Consultant at Storefront Mastery, based in Montclair. He can be reached at [hello@storefrontmastery.com](mailto:hello@storefrontmastery.com).