The Secret to Seattle's Booming Downtown

By Richard Florida
March 23, 2012

The recession certainly didn't bypass downtown Seattle. The city's urban core lost a whopping 12 percent of jobs between 2000 and 2010 (the rest of the country only saw a 4 percent decline), thanks in part to Washington Mutual's collapse. Between 2008 and 2011, 20,000 jobs disappeared.

But the area is in the midst of a true renaissance. As Jon Talton wrote earlier this week in the Seattle Times, downtown Seattle has not only recovered from its slump, it's thriving. Amazon's new headquarters could bring as many as 12,000 high-paid jobs to the area. The Bill and Melinda Gates foundation is opening a new campus. Even Boeing is leasing office space downtown.
These new jobs have created a flurry of new building, as developers create nearby space for workers to live. Apartments and condos are being built throughout the core, and the removal of the Alaskan Way Viaduct will open the waterfront to fresh development. The city is even toying with building a stadium and a basketball/hockey arena.

The result?

Downtown residents keep increasing - to more than 60,000 in 2009, up 77 percent since 1990, and including 3,200 children. Seattle has seen more residents move into its downtown core since 1990 than Boston, Denver, Philadelphia, Portland, San Diego or even San Francisco. Per-capita income is slightly higher than the citywide average.

Many places dream about a "live-work-play" downtown. Seattle actually has one.

It wasn't always like this. As Talton explains, Seattle's downtown went through some rocky times in the 1960s and 1970s. "Seattle nearly killed its downtown with suburban malls and Le Corbusier-style arid building," he tells us via email.

But, unlike other cities, Talton says Seattle never allowed its urban core to collapse. "Stewards with capital coming back, for example reviving downtown retail in the 1990s, and enhancing transit and rail service, and building all its stadiums downtown, and linking nearby South Lake Union to downtown with a streetcar," he writes. "It also invested in saving Pike Place Market. Now Seattle has to keep the momentum going while continuing to preserve historic buildings and street life."

This strategy bore results. A 2000 study by Paul Sommers and Daniel Carlson found nearly half of all high-tech jobs in the Seattle region were located downtown. Today, Seattle provides a good example of the back-to-the-downtown trend that is reshaping cities across the United States as workers relocate to formerly neglected urban cores that offer transit, walkability and central location.

As I wrote in The Great Reset, "A new spatial fix - a new geography of working and living - will be our only path back to renewed economic growth, confidence and prosperity." That's exactly the path Seattle is following.