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From the Editor

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from the Editor

This issue of the QUARTERLY is devoted to an examination of Huntsville's downtown and the historic commercial buildings that create its distinctive identity. Since the area lost its primary function as a retail center to the outlying shopping malls, it has suffered a lack of focus and purpose. The older buildings were considered an embarrassment to Huntsville's image of itself as a modern space-age city, and consequently, they were demolished or wrapped with aluminum. Fortunately this attitude is changing, and people are recognizing that the commercial buildings are as much of a cultural and historic resource of the community as are the old houses.

The downtown is now slowly reviving as the governmental, legal, professional, and tourist and entertainment center for the region. The tourists who are expected to visit the Huntsville Depot Museum, Constitution Hall Park, and the residential historic districts will create a market for a variety of specialty shops and restaurants. Conversion of the upper floors of the commercial buildings to apartments would further increase this pool of customers and bring life to the area after the offices are closed as well as provide a viable function for otherwise unusable space.

The value of a National Register listing is already obvious in the areas of Old Town and Twickenham. The city planning commission is currently working on a nomination to the National Register for the eligible commercial structures of the downtown. However, an historic district is not being created at the present time; instead, each building accepted to the Register will be individually listed. This will constitute a formal recognition of its historical/architectural significance while allowing the owner to partake of certain tax advantages.

Obviously much work still needs to be done. Empty buildings remain prime targets for demolition, and the area cannot afford to lose any more of them. The quality of the downtown environment derives as much from its scale, concentration and texture as it does from the individual buildings themselves. Those streets that are most attractive are the ones that are not broken by empty lots or disrupted by structures of inappropriate size or material.

Of course, it is not enough just to save the buildings; a new use must be found for them so that they are financially self-supporting. The goal is to achieve a viable, lively area that attracts people because it is a pleasant place to stroll, visit, do business and live. With the support and encouragement of the community, Huntsville's downtown can become as successful and attractive as Old Town and Twickenham. It can again become the heart of the city.