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Downtown Huntsville

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DOWNTOWN HUNTSVILLE

The First Alabama Bank was designed by George Steele in 1835 in the Greek Revival style which adapted the Greek temple form to every conceivable use. It is a beautiful example featuring the raised portico with six Ionic columns supporting a triangular pediment, a low gable roof, and a plain entablature that encircles the building. The sides are



stuccoed brick to match the masonry facade which originally contained only the massive central entrance. The structure is smooth, white, and elegant.

I. Its Architecture and Preservation

This article is a patchwork of lengthy excerpts from a recent book by Randolph Langenbach entitled A FUTURE FROM THE PAST: THE CASE FOR CONSERVATION AND REUSE OF OLD BUILDINGS IN INDUSTRIAL COMMUNITIES. It is this editor's belief that a knowledge and understanding of the material in this report is vital to the success of local preservation efforts in downtown Huntsville. Since the book cannot expect to reach a wide audience, this condensed version has been assembled featuring those sections most pertinent to local conditions. Surely Langenbach will forgive.*

Although Langenbach is writing about the industrial communities of the Northeast, specifically those textile towns that have lost many of their mills, what he has to say about the future of these towns seems particularly applicable to Huntsville's central business district since it shares many of the features typical of these towns such as numerous cleared lots that remain undeveloped and a variety of vacant older buildings awaiting either a new use or the wrecker. His insights and proposals are equally valid for underutilized and threatened buildings everywhere; he understands the need to preserve older commercial structures not only for the sense of historic identity they provide the town but also for sound economic reasons.

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Langenbach begins with a description of Cologne, Germany, after it was leveled by bombs during World War II, and he goes on to write that

the results are the same in America where large areas have been leveled by cranes and bulldozers. There is, however, one difference - Cologne was completely rebuilt. With the careful restoration of what little survived, and the construction of new buildings in that same urban pattern and scale as the older city, Cologne today gives the impression of a city filled with history and character despite the fact that it was almost 90 percent destroyed during the war. Despite all odds, Cologne has put the sense of "time" back into its city fabric, while cities in the United States have seemed bent on removing what historic identity they might already possess, trading it for a homogenized and standardized appearance calculated

to be that which is the least offensive because it is so basically unstimulating.

In the face of economic hardship, communities have frequently undertaken massive clearance. In hope of renewal and rejuvenation, they have stripped away the principal features which gave them their identity, their industrial and commercial buildings, in the misplaced hope that they might somehow suddenly achieve a new and more modern identity without them.

This is a particularly destructive process, since not only has it robbed many communities of their visible past, but it has also failed frequently to attract the intended new development. Even at giveaway prices, developers do not always come, and the land often remains fallow for years, with a debilitating influence on the adjacent areas.

When new development is thwarted by the cost of assembling and clearing land, Urban Renewal can help, but clearance itself does not create that demand. In many old industrial cities, it is the lack of any real need for new development which has distorted the Urban



More typical of the majority of early commercial buildings in Huntsville is this structure at 313 Franklin that was erected in 1841. Only seventeen feet wide and three stories high, it is a straightforward, functional design built of brick and relieved by the most restrained ornament. The upper windows retain the original twelve panes per sash, and the stone lintels are incised with a rectilinear pattern. The doorways have simple transoms, and even the balconies are plain except for a small trefoil centered in each arch.

Renewal Program into a process consisting mostly of demolition.

This belief in perpetual progress became deeply rooted in the nation's consciousness during the period of massive and rapid industrial growth

portance. It is essential to the health and humanity of a community environment.

Stability in the built environment is needed to instill confidence in the future, whereas constant destruction

Italianate became so popular for commercial buildings following the Civil War that most of the structures on the Square were in this style at one time. The Donegan Block on North Side Square illustrates its elements admirably - a smooth brick wall sharply pierced by individual round or segmental headed windows of tall, thin proportions. Each opening is draped with a bulging cast iron molding and accented by a keystone. The building is crowned by an elaborate, bracketed metal cornice, here combined with a row of huge dentils. The Donegan Block was built in 1870 by James Donegan to replace a previous building of the same name that had burned in 1867. In 1967 the Italianate windows were restored and the ground floor remodeled.



and westward expansion which the United States experienced during the late nineteenth century. Indeed, the Industrial Revolution itself inculcated the concept that "new" is almost inherently good. A state of almost continuous change has become a condition of life in modern industrial society. In a context such as this it is easy to confuse the PRODUCT of change with the PROCESS, and to place positive value on anything that is new and different without understanding its true impact on a community.

What underlies this discussion is the conviction that building conservation is of more than just practical im-

and rebuilding can tear at the very heart of a community. The dislocation and emotional feeling of loss can break down the pride and respect which ordinary citizens may have in their home town. That which they had identified as being their world ceases to be part of them. The civic image can often seem abstract and foreign as familiar old structures are replaced by glass and steel and concrete - or worse, by dead asphalt.

A community needs to preserve its historic identity, not simply in order to profit from tourists, but to give strength and permanence to its local community. How can a Huntsville citizen "say nice

things to strangers" if his or her image of the real Huntsville has been carted away in a wrecker's truck?



A Good Book Store, once T.T. Terrys, on South Side Square is also an Italianate style building erected about 1880, but its design incorporates another 19th century material - cast iron. Its use became so widespread at mid-century that entire commercial facades were created of cast iron and attached to brick party walls. It was thought, falsely, to be fireproof, and it permitted a greater proportion of window to wall than did masonry. But local builders used it mostly as columns on ground floor facades as seen here. Although the building burned last summer leaving nothing but the front wall, it should be preserved as the facade for a new structure. Its original first floor design and cast iron columns with ornate support brackets are rare in Huntsville.

One of the long-term benefits of preservation is that old buildings do not depreciate in the way that new construction almost always does. This is not to say that the normal tax rules do not apply to renovated old buildings, but that in terms of their future value, it can be shown that old buildings often increase in value as they become older. This applies not only for great examples of period architecture, but also for more modest, but well preserved, examples of the local vernacular styles, and holds true for both the value of the property as real estate, and its ability to generate income from commercial activity.

Even the finest buildings of a recent period do not have the chance to last until the public interest in their antiquity and history can protect them. The existence of cranes and bulldozers makes it possible to wipe out whole districts in a matter of days, eliminating one of the major past impediments to redevelopment - the difficulty and cost of demolition by hand. Understanding this, it is important that cities plan for their future by protecting the significant buildings of a more recent vintage so that they do have a chance to last, allowing the surrounding areas to acquire the depth of character which only time can provide.

Planning for the eventual historic value of a particular building or group of buildings is like buying a long-term bond which will mature to produce a worthwhile dividend for the whole city in the future.

The heart of Langenbach's report is a discussion of six conservation techniques that can be

used to encourage reuse of older buildings and to protect them until such uses emerge.

1. PRESERVE MIXED USE WITH-
IN URBAN AREAS. In order to make use of old buildings and districts to the fullest, especially in smaller cities, mixed uses must be encouraged. Traditionally, renewal efforts have tended to wipe out diversity from areas under the notion that decay is caused by uses which appear to be in conflict. The notion that residential areas, commercial districts, and industrial areas should be homogeneous and isolated from each other is apparently based on the observation that in areas which are experiencing decline, the mixture is often unpleasant, with businesses replacing fine old homes, and slum apartments filling the upper floors of deteriorated commercial buildings.

Yet, mixed uses can also be extremely beneficial, especially when an old area is being improved by adapting existing buildings into new uses. While slum housing in the upper stories of commercial structures frequently coincides with the deterioration of a downtown area, it is not the housing per se which is at fault, but conditions under which it has been introduced. Downtown areas of older communities can clearly benefit from the placing of renovated apartments on the upper floors of buildings which would otherwise remain vacant.

The introduction of residential uses into commercial areas means that these areas can function on a twenty-four hour basis, and shops located there can develop a stable group of customers. In this way buildings which might have been replaced by one-story structures can thus be preserved.



As the 19th century advanced, architectural styles became more exaggerated and picturesque as is amply demonstrated by the Schiffman building on East Side Square. It was erected prior to the Civil War, but in 1895, the owner completely remodeled it in the Romanesque Revival style. Although it retains the tall, narrow proportions typical of antebellum building, everything else has been changed. The wall is quarry-faced, gray masonry, the fenestration is irregular and varied, arches are used for openings and as accents, bays bulge out, turrets spiral skyward, and exquisite foliate designs decorate keystones, capitals, and piers. No surface is left untouched; it is a massive, vigorous, slightly outrageous, and absolutely delightful design. Stylistically it is the antithesis of the First Alabama Bank, and it is fitting that they should face each other across the Square.

Cities in the past rarely developed areas which were dominated solely by a single use, and there is no justification for insisting that they are better off today without that mixture of uses.

2. LET THE BUILDINGS BE THE GUIDE! One of the important qualities of old buildings is their ability to generate ideas for reuse based on their inherent qualities. Cities grow up because of the actions of the people in them. These actions can best be generated from a sense of personal pride and feeling for the environment.

Old buildings representative of a community's history and character have the power to excite people to develop economic and educational activities which would not have otherwise even been thought of.

3. DESIGNATE HISTORIC DISTRICTS. Historic districts in large cities have usually been enacted to prevent redevelopment, but in depressed areas they can serve to promote renovation and development. The problem in depressed areas is that deterioration feeds on itself; pervasive decay discourages an individual from fixing up his property. The lack of stability created by the uncertainty of what other people will do with their property ends up causing everyone to do nothing.

The selection of an area as an historic district can be a positive force because it stimulates outside interest in the quality and heritage of the area, controls the changes which people can make on buildings within the district, and helps to encourage people to improve their properties consistent with a common purpose and plan. It can also serve to

As the 19th century ended, more restraint was applied to commercial design. The Struve-Hay building at Jefferson and Holmes is a structure in transition from the picturesque to the functional. Built in 1900, it has lost the second story above two of its stores, and the ground floor is altered beyond recognition although several of the cast iron pilasters are discernable. The Victorian influence erupts in the corner tower capped by a pyramidal roof and peak finial.

There is a metal cornice, but it is greatly simplified and the brackets are minimal. The handling of the second floor indicates a more modern approach; the windows are grouped under a single lintel, the sill runs unbroken across the entire facade, and there is some use of brickwork to create pattern. This is the start of a movement away from APPLIED ornament.



Even though the Everett building on Washington was built in 1899, it is more contemporary than the Struve-Hay. Towers, metal cornices, and elaborate moldings have all been eliminated; instead the building derives its design from an imaginative use of brickwork and from its pattern of fenestration. The facade is divided into bays by brick pilasters which set up a repetitive pattern across the wall that is reinforced by the identical, closely spaced windows. The flush masonry lintels span each bay and would have created a color



contrast before the building was painted. The store is terminated by a brick parapet that alternates courses of stepped brick with a band of brick dentils. The center bay repeats the end bays while its increased height provides a focal point. It is an elegant, even delicate, design achieved through a thoughtful use of material and structural elements. There is nothing applied; everything is integral to the structure.

attract outside funds in the form of preservation and rehabilitation grants and loans.

This legal designation places a recognized value on the buildings which may have formerly only been considered "old" and "run down." It protects property owners who want to rehabilitate their property but who are fearful that such rehabilitation might be negated by drastic and inconsistent changes made to the nearby properties.

4. RENOVATE A SINGLE STRUCTURE IN AN AREA. Another approach to community renewal is spot renovation. This approach, which can be particularly effective in residential areas, has potential also in commercial and industrial areas if the conditions are right.

The concept is for some private or public organization to renovate one key building in a rundown area in order to stimulate similar improvement nearby. In many instances this strategy is successful, with owners of adjacent properties following the example.

There are certain key factors which must be observed to make spot renovation and rehabilitation work: (a) The support of local financial institutions must be obtained so that people may borrow the funds necessary for improving their properties. (b) The renovation on the prototype building must be suitable for the neighborhood. (c) The area must have a degree of cohesiveness, community spirit, and identity. (d) There must be a reasonable proportion of

owner-occupied buildings in the area.

5. LEAVE SOME OLD BUILDINGS ALONE. To "leave buildings alone" does not necessarily mean that they will continue to run down, or that they will cause further decline in the community, since it is not often the buildings alone which cause a community to decline.

In fact, there are real advantages which may accrue to a town which has mills or commercial buildings remaining in an unrenovated state. The reason is that, as construction costs are driven higher, more industries will seek to buy and renovate existing older buildings. If a city has cleared away all its older buildings, then firms moving into the community must build new structures.

Since costs of new construction are so high as to prohibit cheap rental space in most new buildings, it will in turn be difficult to attract industries as investments which depend upon the availability of inexpensive space.

6. ESTABLISH A "SPACE BANK" FOR THE FUTURE. The conventional belief has been that the existence of buildings is justified only if they are fully used. Cities have traded the blight of underused buildings for the blight of vacant lots. Neither condition is healthy.

As long as buildings exist, there is hope that they might someday be used. With empty sites there is often only the unsubstantiated dream that someone for some reason might eventually build upon them.

The real problem, therefore, is how to conserve the buildings long enough so that, when the use for the space finally emerges, the building will be there to provide it.

What is proposed is that communities, instead of viewing excess unused space as a liability, see it as a potential asset to be preserved for the future. Just as forests and wilderness areas are held in reserve, and deserve being retained even when we have no present need for them, so too



Harrison Brothers erected this double store on South Side Square in 1902, and nothing seems to have been altered since. Although it has a metal cornice, it is not bracketed, and it serves to emphasize the strong horizontal lines of the upper floors created by bands of contrasting stone which continue even across the piers. The street level retains the standard late 19th century storefront design. Huge sheets of plate glass provide display space while the band of vertical panes above increases the natural light inside the store. The double doors are centered, recessed, and up one step. An unusual feature are the two exposed metal beams that span each bay and support the brick wall of the upper stories.



During the late 1920's, a new commercial style became fashionable called Art Deco which was not a revival but a new style appropriate to the modern machine age. The Kress building on Washington, now the Breakers, was built by the Kress Company in 1931 in this style. Its emphasis is vertical and sharply machined. Terra cotta mullions separate the grouped windows which are recessed and highlighted at the top with stylized polychromed terra cotta. The cornice is a narrow strip of geometric low relief.

the empty space within industrial and commercial buildings is a resource for the future which we would be wise to retain.

What is needed is a plan which takes positive action to preserve old buildings when they become vacant or when they are being only partially used. It is suggested that, in effect, a "space bank" be created in these cities and towns, that a certain amount of empty floor space be expected and protected from demolition or neglect under the belief that unused floor space is better for the community than empty lots.

The first step is for the

city or town to adjust the taxes on a property so that the unused floors are taxed at a lower rate than those in use, or that for tax purposes the building is considered to be smaller than it is in reality.

On a community wide basis, the taxes should be determined by taking into account the amount of space which is in use or in demand, and not the amount of space which is in excess of that demand, and, therefore, for which some immediate use is unlikely. This would help to prevent the demolition of partially used buildings to save on taxes.

There may even be room for a more direct approach. The

city, or some civic organization, might purchase easements on the unused space, a procedure which is commonly applied to protect building facades. In this way responsibility would be transferred to the community for a period of years, and the space maintained, with any subsequent rentals of that space returning funds to the central kitty.

How can anyone really say that destruction is justified because "something better is built in the place of the buildings destroyed." Is it not better to add to the sum total of the record of human creativity than to subtract from it? Is it not better to allow people to be enriched by the products of all ages rather than just those of our own?

The Henderson National Bank was built in 1948 in the Art Moderne style which was an outgrowth of Art Deco. It was part of the national obsession with streamlining that affected the design of everything from toasters to airliners. The bank is a smooth masonry block with a rounded or streamlined corner, sharply cut windows flanked by bands of reeding, and two panels of stylized low relief at the cornice. The foundation and doorway are of contrasting green masonry.



The reveals of the entrance are stepped back to create a vertical emphasis that contrasts with the widely spaced, horizontal ribbons of ashlar on the wall, which create bands of reeding where they cross the entrance frame. Streamlining, vertical reeding, geometric low reliefs, and polychromatic effects were all features of Art Moderne. It is important to recognize the architectural merit of recent buildings while they are still relatively young so that they can survive to be old and venerable.

The key to the success of the "space bank" concept is building management. Buildings must continue to be maintained and all efforts should be directed to avoid complete abandonment of any single structure. Tax relief can be made contingent upon preservation of a well-kept appearance and of proper fire protection and security.

In a postscript, Langenbach asks:

What is it that says that a particular structure has to go? What are the rules that say that a new building, a new road or etc., must be exactly in the particular location, displacing the old building in question? Is not the present generation at least creative enough to meet the current human needs without destroying those things which give the cities the kind of character and identity which make them worth living in? *

II. Its Revitalization

It is unrealistic to assume that the downtown will again be a major retail area for Huntsville, but it is ideally suited to become the financial, professional, governmental and cultural center for the region.

Some of the small-scale, 19th century buildings have already been demolished, but those that remain are perfect for conversion to offices and specialized retail businesses. This is apparent by the increasing number of persons who are rehabilitating these buildings or erecting new ones on vacant land within the district. At the present time, 90% of the attorneys in private practice and 50% of the architects have their offices downtown or in the adjoining historic districts. Both the city and county government offices are located downtown in new structures, and many of the city's financial institutions have either their main office or a branch there.

The downtown is also suited for historical development as a tourist attraction. On the west is the Von Braun Civic Center which is already bringing many people into the downtown area who would stay longer if there were more attractions for them. On the north is the 1860 railroad depot which is being renovated for use as a transportation museum. One block south of the Square, the re-creation of Constitution Hall Park is currently underway.

The Weeden House, an early antebellum home, is being restored by the Huntsville Housing Authority. And on the east boundary of the downtown are two residential historic districts containing over 500 homes representative of 150 years of domestic architectural styles; both districts are already listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

While the development of the downtown should focus on its suitability as an office and cultural center, it also needs retail establishments to serve the office workers and tourists with goods and services, especially restaurants and speciality shops. The area should encourage small, specialized businesses that would attract the type of clientele who frequent the area for other reasons.

The Alabama Space and Rocket Center is already attracting 266,000 people to the city each year, and in 1977 the Civic Center brought 51,500 people into the downtown for conventions and trade shows who spent about eight million dollars while in Huntsville. The creation of additional museums and historic attractions would encourage a great percentage of these visitors to stay longer which would increase the amount spent in the city by them.

If the downtown museums and surrounding environment could attract at least a quarter of the out-of-town visitors expect-

ed by the Civic Center and the Space and Rocket Center this year, that would bring close to 100,000 people into the area who would require goods and lodging. In fewer than five years with good public relations, the downtown should be attracting tourists on its own.

The increased activity and development created by a large influx of tourists would give the downtown area a vitality and attractiveness which would make the area desirable for non-tourist related development. By stressing the unique, historic character of the area, it would achieve an ambiance favored by people who are tired of plastic, mass-produced shopping malls and suburban, car-dependent sprawl.

Much demolition, in the name of progress, has already taken place in the downtown, but enough notable 19th and early 20th century structures remain

to give the district a unique flavor if they are rehabilitated and put to a contemporary use. There are today in the downtown approximately 325,000 square feet of vacant space in existing buildings. The majority of it is eligible for the historic rehabilitation tax advantages. At the present, the downtown employs almost 4,000 people; however, if the vacant space were occupied by offices and/or stores, approximately 1,000 more jobs would be created. In addition, there are numerous tracts of empty land available for development which would become highly desirable with the increased activity in the downtown.

Rehabilitating the downtown to create a total historical area will provide Huntsville with a prime tourist attraction that, in turn, will benefit the city by revitalizing the area and making it a desirable place to work and conduct business.*



This photograph shows North Side Square in 1939 - before the age of aluminum siding. At the far right is the old Henderson Bank before it burned. The next four buildings have been hopelessly "modernized." Watson's (Marja's) has only had the street level changed. The Donegan Block to its left looks even better today since the three square windows on the second floor that Montgomery Ward installed have been replaced by replicas of the originals; notice that the building was then light with dark moldings. The building on the far left bears faint resemblance to today's structure. Each store sported a cloth awning and the street was paved with brick.