From World War II until the late 1960s, most Americans pursued a suburban dream. Little thought was given to the past and such quaint notions as heritage. As a result, older neighborhoods were abandoned and entire downtown areas were wiped out in the name of urban renewal or left absently behind while people poured into the new shopping centers of the suburbs. The American love affair with the automobile, of course, made this migration possible.

Many of the people who stayed behind on Main Street imitated their more "progressive" neighbors. They covered their 19th century Victorian buildings in a new suit of clothes of aluminum siding or some other modern building material so that they at least gave the appearance of keeping up with the times.

Franklin, Tennessee, was no exception. The antebellum town of 13,000 just eighteen miles

RUDY JORDAN, Executive Director of the Heritage Foundation of Franklin and Williamson County, graciously agreed to share that foundation's experience in creating downtown apartments for Franklin with the QUARTERLY readers.
south of Nashville covered its past as rapidly as the aluminum siding could be put in place and signs from national distributors could be bolted onto the building's facades.

Some buildings on Franklin's Main Street sought to carry out a decor theme. The town's theater went Polynesian. The arched windows of the town's old carriage house accommodated huge plate glass windows that displayed the shiny new cars inside. One of the local businesses completely gutted the interior of its building and tore down its lovely old Victorian brick exterior, replacing it with shiny mirror-like panels, bought at the local lumberyard, that came in prefabricated sheets and fit neatly between structural supports of the latest yellow brick material. Rectangular windows encased in chrome replaced the old brick-arched windows.

When urban renewal was defeated in Franklin in the early 1960s, the Chamber of Commerce showed that it at least sensed the need to do something progressive. And so aluminum canopies supported by steel legs were anchored to the fronts of the buildings to provide some of the comforts of the downtown malls.

These efforts were sincere. They represented the thinking of the day. But, today, that thinking has changed. People in Franklin, like people in hundreds of towns across the country, have rediscovered their past. The "modern" materials can come down just as easily as they went up.

The Heritage Foundation of Franklin and Williamson County, a preservation organization with 1,700 members, became concerned about these buildings on Main Street that had fallen on hard times.

Two years ago, to reverse the "modernization" of Franklin's historic downtown, which is on the National Register of Historic Places, the Foundation became involved in a Main Street Project to try to breathe new economic life into the buildings in the context of historic preservation.

The Foundation organized three professional advisory groups to work with merchants and store owners, as well as with other segments of the general public with requests for advice on renovating old buildings, both residential and commercial. The advisory groups provide professional advice free of charge in the areas of technical and structural problems, design advice, and sign advice.

The Heritage Foundation has sponsored educational programs with the merchants, sometimes bringing in businessmen from other towns who have had success in revitalizing their central business district areas.

Last spring the Foundation hosted an overnight bus trip to Madison, Indiana, which is one of the three towns selected by the National Trust to serve as a demonstration project to determine if renovating buildings affects merchants' pocket books. Government officials, merchants, and other businessmen, as well as Heritage Foundation volunteers, made the trip to Madison where the Foundation hosted a cocktail party and brought together hardware store owner from Franklin with hardware store owner in Madison, banker with banker, etc.
The trip paid off. Once home a Downtown Franklin Association was formed, although admittedly at a slow start. But more importantly, for the short run, the Foundation delegation saw apartments created on the second floors of buildings on Madison's Main Street.

Once home, Foundation members created a model apartment on the second story of a commercial Victorian building on Franklin's Main Street for last year's Spring Tour. A variance was permitted by the Franklin Planning Commission, and the city planner informed Foundation officials that the Commission would look favorably on reuse of space above commercial businesses as long as fire codes were met and the building inspector had inspected the premises.

Soon after the tour last year, the first apartment was rented at $300 a month. The floor space of 1,800 square feet was creatively laid out at angles by its owner to give the illusion of more space and to create privacy. One mistake, according to the present renter, is that the apartment is noisy and hard to heat. The owner opted to leave the rafters exposed for effect and had installed heating and air conditioning ducts above the rafters. But the space above the rafters goes up to roof level, with almost as much space above the rafters as below, creating a real heating problem.

The owner says he spent more money than he had anticipated on the project because the work was done by a contractor and had to be done quickly to meet the deadline of the tour. Also he selected expensive materials to create a luxurious apartment. Since last year's model loft apartment was created, plans for at least three others have been laid. The Foundation is again creating a model apartment above a building on Main Street for this year's tour. This project also involves the renovation of the two storefronts with the business involved expanding to both stores.

The Foundation called on the town's O'More School of Design to help with the design challenges of the storefront and the apartment.

According to Bob Schaffer, owner and business operator of the store in question, Batey's Office Supply Company, the cost of the work on the building so far runs about $15 a square foot. His two buildings also have 1,800 square feet on each floor, and he says he plans to rent the apartments in the $300 to $400 range a month.

Schaffer says that the reaction to his renovation work has been "unbelievable. Since I'm doing a lot of the work myself with one other workman, who can do anything, everybody lets me know that they think I am doing something special. The hardware store man gave me about thirty percent off on every gallon of paint because, he says, it's going to Main Street. The Mayor blew his horn so hard to cheer me on that I almost fell off the scaffolding the other day just to wave. And my neighbors across the street say they are watching me closely because something is going to be done at their building too."

Learning from the experience of the building down the street from him, Schaffer says he is lowering the ceilings in his apartment to twelve feet. 

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