Apartment Living Downtown

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Downtown living has attracted quite a following among the residents of the Twickenham and Old Town neighborhoods who enjoy gracious front porches, a diversified range of historic architecture, and a sense of community with their neighbors. But living above the store in the heart of commercial downtown still has not caught on in Huntsville. Although residential apartments on the upper floors of commercial buildings previously were not permitted by the Zoning Ordinance, such is no longer the case. In November 1979, the City Council approved an amendment to the Zoning Ordinance that would allow the renovation of upper floors for apartments in downtown Huntsville.

It has long been recognized that combining residential and nonresidential uses in the same structure can create a potential hazard for the occupants. It is unwise to allow persons to reside above businesses that utilize certain volatile or explosive processes or materials that produce noxious fumes or offensive odors. Living above a dry cleaners, for example, could be most unpleasant, and presumably there are persons who do not care for the aroma of garlic wafting through the vents from the little bistro below. For this reason, several precautions have been built into the zoning regulations to ensure that when upper floors are redeveloped for apartments, they are suitable for habitation.

Before an apartment over a business or office can be occupied it must have been granted a special exception by the Board of Adjustment. A special exception is a zoning technique to allow a use in a district when it is important for the details of the specific proposal to be studied prior to approval. The Board of Adjustment reviews the request for a downtown apartment to
verify that the conditions required by the Zoning Ordinance have been met and that there are no other circumstances that would render the request unreasonable. It is not necessary to prove hardship when applying for a special exception. In the case of a downtown apartment, the applicant is required to have the development plan approved by the inspection department to ensure that it will meet the building codes for residential use, by the fire prevention bureau to ensure that it will be safe and adequately protected from incompatible first floor uses, and by the city traffic engineer to verify that there will be reasonable parking and unloading space available for the occupants. When a city fails to provide adequate oversight, the quality of the rental units frequently declines until an upper floor slum evolves in the downtown, which is precisely the situation that led to the prohibition on downtown apartments earlier in this century.

The development of downtown apartments could spur revitalization of the area and provide an additional income for building owners. Apartments are an untapped resource because most upper floors are currently vacant. Downtown businesses are primarily located on the street level, even professional offices, which do not rely on impulse customers, because there is insufficient demand for retail space to force these firms upstairs. Consequently the building owner is receiving only a partial return from his property. Commercial uses might provide a greater financial return than residential, but when there is little of no commercial demand for this space, conversion to residential use could be an alternative.

If it were possible to create a stable residential population in the business district, several advantages could accrue. Currently the downtown empties at five o'clock each evening leaving the area mostly deserted. If enough apartments were created, a second group of people, the residents, would enter the area as the
employers left. In time, a resident population could create a neigh­borhood market for small specialty shops and restaurants, espe­cially when combined with the already settled populations of Old Town, Twickenham, and the neighborhoods to the north and ease in the Five Points area and Blossomwood.

While downtown apartment living does not appeal to ev­eryone, there are those who would be attracted to such an envi­ronment. Presumably they would be predominantly single people, young couples without children, and the retired—part of the grow­ing segment of the population that consists of one and two-per­son families.

Undoubtedly the greatest deterrent to development of apartments is the considerable expense necessary to convert raw space to residential use. Most upper floors in the downtown have no plumbing, and electricity consists of a bare light bulb hanging from the ceiling; access for habitation does not meet the building code because these spaces were not conceived as living areas. Most were never finished for any use but storage. In the past simple economics has made conversions impractical; the range of rental rates simply has not provided sufficient return to make renovation an attractive alternative for the building owner.

For Huntsville’s downtown to become truly revitalized, it must develop a variety of attractions and functions. If a resi­dent population could be added to the pool of government and professional employees, and the tourist potential of the Depot Museum, Weeden House, and Alabama Constitution Village could be realized, then the downtown would develop a life of its own capable of supporting shops, restaurants, and entertainment fa­cilities. The simple truth is that people like to be where people already are.