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Downtown Revitalization

Robert Bass, past chairman of
the National Trust for Historic Preservation

In the past 40 years, America's downtowns have changed drastically. The creation of the interstate highway system and subsequent growth of suburban communities transformed the ways in which Americans live, work, and spend leisure time. With improved transportation routes, people found it easier to travel longer distances to work or shop. Roads that once connected neighborhoods to downtown now carried residents to outlying shopping strips and regional malls. Throughout the nation, in town after town, the story repeated itself. Downtown businesses closed or moved to the mall, shoppers disappeared, property values and sales tax revenues dropped. Some downtowns sank under the weight of their own apathy. Neglected buildings, boarded-up storefronts, and empty, trash-strewn streets gradually reinforced the public's perception that nothing was happening downtown that nothing was worth saving there.

In many communities, downtown merchants and property owners tried to halt the spiral or decline by imitating their competition—the shopping mall. They covered traditional commercial buildings in aluminum, plywood, or multicolored panels and tacked garish, oversized signs onto upper-floor facades. Some communities tried to reverse the decline with even more expensive and permanent methods: closing off the entire downtown to vehicular traffic in attempts to create pedestrian environments conducive to shopping. In most cases, though, these well-meaning (but usually ineffective) efforts did not stabilize downtown sales or property values. Instead, these attempts reinforced the decline by isolating the downtown from consumers even more.

The need to revitalize downtown commercial districts is clear. A healthy, viable downtown is crucial to the economic health and civic pride of the entire community for several reasons. A healthy downtown retains and creates jobs. A healthy downtown also means a stronger tax base; long-term revitalization

establishes capable businesses that use public services and provide tax revenues for the community. A revitalized downtown increases the community's options for goods and services, whether for basic staples like clothing, food, and professional services or for less traditional functions such as housing or entertainment. Finally, revitalized downtowns are symbols of community caring and a high quality of life, factors that influence corporate decisions to locate to a community.

Information furnished by The Main Street Project
From the National Main Street Center
National Trust for Historic Preservation
1785 Massachusetts Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20036



Fig.1 Architectural drawing of proposed restoration of the Hundley Building facade, 128 South Side Square.
Courtesy Marc Goldmon of Fuqua, Osborn Architects, P.C.