

Ralph Stephenson

REVITALIZATION OF OUR C.B.D.s

Talk Given in Lansing, Michigan, May 23, 1957

In the last five years it has become apparent that we must stand back and look objectively at our C.B.D.s

We are faced with:

- constantly increasing vehicular congestion
- a general decrease in downtown retail sales gain
- increasing age of downtown structures and the fringe properties
- intensive competition provided by suburban shopping districts
- and, in some cases, most discouraging of all, a stand-pat, ostrich-like attitude on the part of responsible businessmen and citizens.

Before we can really understand how these various problems may be solved, we must examine each carefully to see to what degree it really exists.

Usually, the problem of automobile traffic is considered the most pressing of the five. National vehicular registration has increased 75% in the last 10 years. This increase has caused practically every major thoroughfare from New York to California and from Florida to Washington to have its efficient carrying capacity far exceeded, daily. The strange part of this is that practically every highway

report shows that 50% to 70% of the total traffic entering downtown on these clogged thoroughfares have no destination downtown. When we further consider that streets and alleys usually occupy between 40% to 50% of the ground area in the downtown section, we can see that through traffic can no longer be considered a benefit to the merchant-or to any other downtown businessman. In fact, the United States Department of Commerce discovered that only 15% more automobiles enter the downtown sections of cities of more than one million population than enter downtowns of cities between 500,000 and one million. These figures illustrate that a drastic leveling of the automobile absorptive capacity of our C.B.D.s occur as a city grows. This leveling off can have only one meaning - that the number of people entering a downtown to perform business, to buy goods, to attend theaters, to live in hotels, to visit our governmental centers, cannot possibly increase in any kind of healthy proportion to the vigorous population growth needed and expected in most of our communities.

Our second problem is the decline of retail and service sales downtown. In a recent compilation of data from 35 cities, the Bureau of the Census reports that downtown sales between 1948 and 1954 increased only 1½%. Total suburban area retail sales during the same period increased more than 50%. These figures admittedly provide an oversimplified picture of the situation. But they are indicative

and, unfortunately, occur in almost every city in which our firm has been commissioned to study C.B.D. problems.

A recent trend has been to eliminate the so-called convenience goods outlets in our downtown districts. Thus, food stores, hardware stores, drug stores, and other establishments which fulfill the day to day needs of the consumer have tended to decentralize and locate on the fringe or outside of the central business districts. Of course, an ideal downtown should concentrate on the retailing of shopping goods. It should participate to a much smaller degree in the sale of convenience goods, and this natural trend has accounted for some of the disparity in relative downtown and suburban growth patterns.

But, it should also be realized that as distances between the residential areas and the central city grow, the downtown core must be made more and more attractive for it to hold even its portion of shopping goods sale.

How this power of attraction can be retained and increased is the essence of our get-together this evening, and we shall discuss it in graphic form shortly.

The third problem faced by our existing downtown is one of physical deterioration. Starting at the hard core—the former 100% corner—and proceeding outwards a distance of from two to five blocks, depending on the size of the city, we almost invariably find a ring of sub-standard structures and land uses. Needless to say, one of the major efforts of any revitalization program must be to make optimum use of this land, which is now largely wasted. Comprehensive zoning plans and ordinances, reinforced by strong community efforts, must provide well thought out methods for the replacement of buildings contained in this ring. If nothing is done, the constantly declining building and land values lead to declining tax assessments or increased vacancies. Both result in lower tax returns from downtown property and tend to damage the entire community tax base.

In a large city in which we recently made a study, it was estimated that the central business district returns approximately 25% of the total city real estate tax income and 10% of that of the county. Studies in other communities show that downtown can generally be expected to provide between 10% and 20% of the total city real estate tax return.

Such a substantial return cannot be lowered without seriously affecting tax rates in all parts of the community, yet if no improvements are projected for our downtown areas, no planning done, no program of replacement provided, there is no alternative but a lower tax return.

The fourth problem faced by our CBD constitutes the basis of most excuses for downtown decline. This is the actual or imagined effect of suburban shopping districts upon downtown sales. It is difficult, if not impossible, to measure the effect that a new shopping center district will have on the CBD. However, survey after survey of buying habits have proven consistently that the customer will continue to shop downtown. Recently, for example, Ohio State University sampled shoppers in three cities. They found that in 16 out of 23 shopping satisfaction factors, a greater percentage of the sampled groups in all three cities expressed preference for downtown shopping.

Our fifth problem, that of the passive attitude on the part of downtown businessmen, is fortunately becoming easier and easier to solve. Communities all over the U.S. are realizing that they have a bear by the tail. The

automobile, the suburbs, the blight, are all day to day reminders that something has to be done. This awareness is the first step needed to initiate searches for solutions to the previous four problems.

Now that we have the major problems on the table, we can ask what is a constructive, effective approach to be used in restoring the health of our downtowns? At this point in most discussions, I am accustomed to hearing a not-so-small voice from the back of the auditorium saying "Why should we waste our time and our money trying to revitalize downtown? Is it worth saving? Why not be satisfied with our present position? Why not let the trade center move out of downtown?" Of course, these are legitimate questions, and they must be answered.

There are many excellent reasons why downtown, in most cases, not only should, but will, remain where it is. Some of these are commercial, some civic, others are historic or cultural. Commercially, we find that downtown contains the home stores of nearly every major merchandising operation conducted in the trade area. We also find that investment in downtown construction and land is usually higher than anywhere else in the city. If we allow this investment to depreciate continually, it cannot help but seriously affect the economic health of the community.

Commercially, also, we must consider the large downtown population furnished by our government agencies, our offices and our hotels. The significance of this downtown population as a buying potential, is dramatically illustrated in Miami, Florida, where it is estimated that one out of every six employed persons in Dade County works in the Miami CBD.

Consider for a moment the concentration of governmental functions in our downtowns. Downtown still provides the most central location for those citizens wishing to communicate with government departments. The number of businesses which make use of governmental records, and thus are conveniently located near to downtown, is enormous. Attorneys, title abstract offices, mortgage offices, real estate offices, all function around the very necessary municipal, county and state civic centers. Thus, these civic centers provide strong business service anchors for downtown and make it extremely unlikely that a major relocation of these facilities would take place.

Historically, of course, every city develops at a specific point for a good reason. Usually, geographic conditions based on access to trade routes furnished the initial impetus. Around the first business corner, usually developed larger and more permanent structures.

These, in turn, became centers of commerce, culture and government, and well established as the core of the city. From this core, generally, our cities have grown outwards, and downtown has inherited the advantages of central location by virtue of this natural outward movement. Thus, the historical pattern of growth coupled with the strong ties of tradition, make it very unlikely that a major displacement of the CBD will ever occur.

From a cultural standpoint, it is only necessary to take a short walk around downtowns to see that they are the home of the theatres, museums, libraries and other points of cultural interest. Although, here in Lansing many of your cultural activities are concentrated on the beautiful campus of Michigan State University, this is no reason active steps should not be taken to re-integrate entertainment and cultural facilities into Lansing's downtown area.

Most important of all, we must consider the feelings of the people who are the final judges as to whether or not they will use downtown. We must always keep in mind that the essence of urban living is people, not automobiles, not buses, not streetcars, but people. People buy goods, see plays and movies, eat in restaurants, read in the libraries, work in offices and stores and sleep in hotels. These people have indicated that they prefer to

to use downtown shopping facilities. Their reasons are legion, and include such things as greater variety and range of styles, sizes, prices and quality; it is the best place to meet friends for shopping trips; it is most convenient for public transportation; it is possible to combine shopping trips with other things one may want to do; it provides a little outing away from home. These are yardsticks of desires of the people, and when combined with our other reasons, furnish one of the soundest arguments for revitalizing our CBD.

Now that we have all of the facts at hand, and have convinced this voice at the back of the auditorium that we should revitalize our downtowns, just exactly what do we do? Let us look at an actual city where a revitalization program has been prepared. Three years ago, Mr. J. B. Thomas of the Texas Electric Company, retained our organization to study the CBD of Fort Worth, Texas, to see what could be done to provide direction to its growth. The results of this study have been significant. The dynamic acceptance of the program presented is now being transformed to a working reality.

It should be strongly emphasized that the solution for Fort Worth is not necessarily applicable to every city.

Each urban community is unique and the problems encountered are different in every case; however, Fort Worth provides us an example of how good planning principles can be applied.

If we may have the lights out, please, I would like to trace the history of the Fort Worth study as an example of what constructive, positive thinking can mean to a community.

#1.
Slide # 1201

To begin with, we need a set of comprehensive goals. These goals, based upon the philosophy of our automobile age, are

1. The most productive use of the land
2. An even flow of traffic throughout the tributary area.
3. Separation of traffic movement and provision for vehicular storage.
4. A re-integration of commercial and non-commercial activities.

#2.
1202

Now, let's take a look at Fort Worth, specially.

100 years ago this dynamic Texas city was a small settlement with a simple road pattern and few urban problems. However, by 1890 the horse and buggy was already congesting the busier streets of Fort Worth, and by 1954 the entrance of the automobile had caused traffic tie-ups and congestion almost beyond belief. People could no longer come downtown conveniently, retail sales were dropping, and all of the other symptoms of urban deterioration were making themselves felt.

This was the problem we were faced with, and our approach hinged upon these four goals you see here. Let's consider each of these goals.

#3. First, the most productive use of the land.

1203

The main requisite of an effective and efficient downtown is compactness. Therefore, only the most productive use of space should be encouraged in the Central Business District. Offices, civic, cultural, hotels and, in some cases, related services such as wholesale facilities, should all be arranged so as to relate logically to each other and to minimize servicing problems.

#4. Deleterious uses, such as shown here, should

1204

be avoided, and vigorous free enterprise stimulated to remove the blight which comes from poor or inadequate planning. To bring about proper use of the land, we must view the future optimistically and view it within a time span that extends a reasonable distance into the future; a span not so short as to rob the master plan of validity for an extended period, nor so long that we enter the world of science-fiction. Such a time span should probably be somewhere between 15 and 20 years. With this view in mind, let us find out what an ideally organized Central Business District should contain at the end of, let us say, a 20 year period.

#5. This land usage can be depicted on a pie graph

1205

which shows, as this one does, the various space requirements for retail, wholesale,

8-3

offices, hotels, civic and institutional, cultural and miscellaneous. This pattern of uses is what we term conforming, and contains those functions which aid and enhance, rather than destroy, the value of our Central Business District.

We must first determine how much area these various functions should occupy. This is determined in a general fashion by an analysis of the existing and anticipated trade area population. Once this population is determined, we estimate a monetary buying potential and make an assignment of each type of space based upon this statistical analysis. In Fort Worth we found that the trade area population could reasonably be expected to increase from its present 750,000 to 1,200,000 by 1970. We further found that each consumer in the trade area would require approximately 20 sq.ft. of retail space, 40% of which would be located in the downtown section.

Based upon these estimates, the amount of retail space in downtown Fort Worth would have to increase from its present 3,800,000 sq.ft. to nearly 10 million sq.ft. by 1970. This set the stage for our revitalization study.

Let's see what this figure means.

1206 #6. You see here, outlined in black, the outline of Fort Worth as it will be in the future. It coincides roughly with the present downtown, but is slightly less than 2/3 the size. This has been made possible by more efficient use of the land available. Beginning with the retail trade data that we have projected, and inserting our 10 million sq.ft. of retail space, taking into account present buildings and desirable growth characteristics, we find that our retail marketing area, here indicated in yellow, should assume this approximate shape and position within our 1970 Fort Worth downtown.

1207 #7. To this retail space we now add other uses. For example, here we have inserted the wholesale marketing area. This facility is already present to considerable extent, and optimum use is made of the available structures and improvements.

1208 #8. Proceeding on downthrough allotments for office space, hotel facilities, civic functions, cultural and entertainment facilities and miscellaneous land uses, such as parking, we find that we have an efficient, compact downtown Fort Worth devoted to the most productive use of the land.

#9. Now that we have arranged these uses in the most efficient manner possible we can begin a study of our second goal - a free flow of traffic throughout the tributary area. This goal is defined as the provision of a road system, secondary, primary or expressway, capable of handling a free flow of private, public and service vehicles to and from the Central Business District.

1209

The existing and proposed road net must be fully examined as to its abilities to carry traffic originating in all parts of the tributary area in a free flow towards downtown. We must also keep in mind the needs and types of public transportation in our studies.

#10. In respect to free flow of traffic, we may be able to take a lesson from nature. Let's look at a stream and its tributary area. Water originating from an endless number of springs collects into brooks, which, in turn, flow into rivulets and rivers until they all combine into the mighty stream. And the stream rolls freely through the land, terminating in a broad delta and into the ocean.

1210

1211 #11. The stream of traffic simulates nature's stream in many respects. Its springs are the residences in the metropolitan area; they feed brooks or small roads, which, in turn, combine into larger roads, into highways, and finally into the expressways. The expressway, undisturbed by crossings, roll all traffic toward the metropolitan core. But here the comparison ends. There is no ocean provided for the stream to run into. Instead, we either expect the swollen waters of the mighty traffic stream to suddenly disperse into narrow street canyons where, just as water would do, traffic backs up until it swells for miles, like behind a dam.

1212 #12. Here we have demonstrated beautifully such a situation at the rush hour in Los Angeles. Such a scene could be duplicated in nearly any other city in the United States at 5:15 in the evening.

1213 #13. In some cases it has been proposed to let the traffic stream flow right through the business core. (Los Angeles and Boston are examples of this). If the stream is well banked and only the smallest number of entrances and exits for traffic are permitted, traffic will probably move half-way satisfactorily.

The only question is:

"WHERE TO?"

Is it really in the interest of the Central Business District to see to it that as much traffic as possible flows from north to south or south to north, right through the downtown area, or along side it, without the driver ever being able to enter into the business area? If such a traffic pattern occurs, it effects nothing else than that suburban areas to the north are connected to suburban areas to the south, or eastern ones to western ones, in a more efficient manner than they were before; and that the downtown area is eliminated not only from traffic, but also from the patronage and interest of the entire metropolitan population.

On the right half of this slide, you see another pattern. It seems to us to approach the solution in the right spirit. Traffic flows into a broad, many-laned highway surrounding the core of the downtown area.

#14. It functions as a collecting basin for the traffic streams and rivers from all sides and also makes feasible an exchange from one of the expressways to the other.

1214

#15. Such a loop does not necessarily have to be a circle. If a larger pedestrian area has to be serviced, it might take the form of a figure eight or a four-leaf clover, with possible underground connections at the narrow portions of the loop.

1215

Thirdly, we have stated as a goal the separation of traffic movements and provisions for vehicular storage. In the problem drama of downtown, the automobile is undoubtedly the villain.

What is to be done with the automobile?

There are two alternatives:

Either accommodate the automobile--and as hard as everybody has tried, with traffic signals and one-way streets, no city yet has solved the problem by using this alternative;

#16. or, leave the automobile out of the city altogether: the creation of a central core, completely free of all vehicles, a pedestrian environment at the border of which cars will arrive and will be stored, but into which mechanical traffic is not allowed to enter. The concept of a pedestrian downtown environment is the cornerstone of our revitalizing scheme. It is also one of the most controversial ones.

1216

In our present pattern of cities, the streets and roads are used for two purposes. They are the organizing elements along which all structures serving human activities are threaded, but they are also used as rights-of way, as tracks for never-ending streams of automobiles, truck and bus traffic.

We have to separate these two uses from each other, and we have to give each, the automobile and the human, their natural habitats in which they function best.

1217 #17. To the automobile, the wide, many-laned roads, with easy curves, limited access and arrangements for uninterrupted traffic.

1218 #18. To human beings, a truly human environment, undisturbed by noise and fumes, in which human activities cannot only be most effectively carried out, but also enjoyed. Let us look at this matter from another angle.

1219 #19. This graph illustrates the increase in the number of automobiles and projects the automobile population to the year 1975.

1220 #20... In Fort Worth, if we want to bring all the automobiles which would exist in 1975 to a revitalized and vigorously functioning downtown area, we would have to devote to the automobile four times as much space as to all the ground floor area of all downtown buildings together.

#21. In that case, we would have to make roadways more than four times as wide as they are today; and, in so doing, we would have to demolish valuable downtown buildings and would thus cut downtown into ribbons and slices.

#22. If, on the other hand, we make the great decision to eliminate the automobile from downtown, we are regaining something which our cities once had, and which in the past created the truly desirable urban scene which we still admire.

#23. Galleria in Milan

#24. If we do eliminate the automobile from our downtown, how do we handle parking?

The function of a parking facility should be to collect vehicles at the most convenient point and store them so that they are most accessible to their owners. with the least disruption of other functions. We have found that the location of parking facilities in a peripheral pattern on the city side of our expressway look around the central business district is the most efficient location.

#25. Walking distances are then obtained which generally put the furthest point no more than four or five minutes away.

S-11

#26. In Fort Worth, we found the solution best suited was obtained by locating six large parking garages on the peripheral roadway. It is proposed that these garages will each have approximately a 10,000 car capacity.

#27. Separation of service facilities from private vehicular and pedestrian traffic is another problem always present. We could make space for service vehicles at the street level, but there, of course, it would conflict with pedestrian traffic.

#28. In Fort Worth, we chose to have all service run underground. In other cities it is entirely possible that different methods will have to be found, and in studying such possibilities proper attention must be given to economy, efficiency and aesthetics.

#29. To insure this harmonious grouping in a pedestrian downtown, we must make certain that we can properly appeal to the ultimate consumer, King Pedestrian. The objection that walking distances are too great are not substantiated by most surveys. For example, a state road department study in Florida showed that 37% of shoppers in downtown Miami walk more than 800 feet from their parked automobiles.

#30. In New York, we find that by super-imposing a map of downtown Fort Worth over Rockefeller Center, that walking distances assume rather comfortable proportions.

#31. Perhaps some of you are familiar with, and have visited, Northland Shopping Center in Detroit. Here, Downtown Fort Worth is shown at the same scale as Northland. It has been demonstrated time and time again since the opening of Northland, that the walking distances encountered from the outer reaches of the parking lots absolutely do not inconvenience our shoppers. Besides, walking distances cannot be measured by feet and inches alone. The surroundings and conditions in which one walks are very important.

#32. This pedestrian gets a minimum of enjoyment from walking even the shortest distance.

#33. This one, on the other hand, a lady shopper on New York's Fifth Avenue, seems to be perfectly willing to walk happily from 42nd Street to 57th Street, and back on the other side of the avenue because her attention is held steadily by things which interest her: items such as dresses, fur coats and jewelry. The conclusion from these two pictures is that walking is readily accepted when it can be done in a pleasant environment with properly integrated

facilities in which interest is steadily maintained. There are always objections, of course, that the concept of this properly integrated but radically different downtown would not be accepted. However, many building clusters of this type already exist.

1284 #34. Southdale Shopping Center, recently opened in Minneapolis, is a good example of such a building cluster. Here we see the very busy main court, which certainly seems to be suffering very little as a result of its encouragement of pedestrian traffic.

1235 #35. Having now examined our four planning goals, we can put them together to obtain our integrated, well planned Fort Worth Central Business District of 1970. (Explain Plan)

1236 #36. Looking at this plan superimposed on a photo of downtown Fort Worth, we can see what our Fort Worth of 1970 looks like from the air.

1237, 1238 #37, #38. (Aerial photo of model showing downtown core)

1239, 1240, 1241, 1242, 1243 #39, #40, #41, #42, #43 (Downtown perspectives)

The planning which our office has done for the revitalization of the Fort Worth Central Business District is now well on its way to implementation. The concept has been enthusiastically received by the public and accepted by the authorities. It has been made part of

S-14

the official master plan of Fort Worth. At present, detailed plans are being drawn for the belt highway, studies are being made of the garage structures and cost estimates for all portions of the work are being prepared. This action was initiated by one man - but the plan has now become the property of the citizens. Individual action, however, has set the keynote, and it is when the citizens in the community recognize the problems and take the initiative to do something about it that plans, dreams and hopes can be translated into effective and meaningful action. Only by such cooperation can we make our cities more livable, more efficient and more beautiful.

Optional - lion and man -
emergencies don't wait.