

1980 Plan: Creative renewal

By JAMES SHAMP
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"Right now it's about time to take another long look at where we want Kalamazoo to be in 1999."

That's the way Ralph J. Stephenson thinks. In long terms. And in Kalamazoo, he's been doing that for a long time.

Stephenson, 58, has never lived in Kalamazoo. But he's had a lot to do with making Kalamazoo what it is today — and what it will be in the future.

A Detroit native, Stephenson is an engineer by training. His engineering skills were put to work when he was a member of the Victor Gruen & Associates architectural and planning team that designed Detroit's Northland Mall in the 1950s. It's generally considered the first of America's suburban shopping malls.

Shortly thereafter Stephenson found himself getting more involved in planning than engineering with the Gruen firm. And it was Stephenson who did most of the Gruen firm's work in developing the "Kalamazoo 1980" plan, which led to America's first permanent downtown pedestrian mall.

Stephenson now runs his own firm as a consulting engineer. He's still located in Detroit. It was 1958 when he finished the major work on the plan that pointed the way for Kalamazoo to develop as it is today. But Stephenson still provides consulting services periodically to the Downtown Kalamazoo Association.

"This original study only cost something like \$40,000," says Stephenson. "A study like that today would cost between \$200,000 and \$400,000. We spent every penny we got on this job, and a few more. We were carried away by it. And it's still a good plan. It's not a dead plan, even though this is 1980. The concepts it contains are still valid."

The fact is that Kalamazoo is still a far cry from what was proposed by the thinkers of Gruen & Associates in the "Kalamazoo 1980" plan.

The plan called for development of a low-speed "ring road" around the central business district, with broad surface-level parking lots between the stores downtown and the access road. It was a concept based on the feeling of plunking a Northland-like shopping center over Kalamazoo.

The plan called for using some four million square feet of land around the downtown area for parking spaces. And the "criss-cross" pattern of parallel streets was to give way to a sprawling mall system incorporating not only Burdick Street, but also most of the rest of the business district.

The mall was to surround buildings for hundreds of feet around Bronson Park, essentially making the park a central focus of the pedestrian-centered downtown.

It called for closing the downtown travel of Rose, Church, Park, Edwards, Portage, Eleanor, Water, Academy, South, Lovell, Cedar and Walnut streets and Michigan Avenue. Since some 60 percent of the traffic moving through downtown Kalamazoo is headed elsewhere anyway, the plan was to close all those downtown streets and then provide a fast-moving bypass for traffic merely heading through the city, a slow-moving ring road to provide access to parking for people headed downtown, and electric shuttle buses a la Disneyland to take people downtown from the far reaches of the parking lots.

Stephenson says the street realignment plan met with initial opposition "because everybody missed the idea stated in the plan that the ring road was to have been for low-speed traffic. People envisioned it incorrectly as a high-speed expressway. Nothing could be further from the truth."

"I'd still like to see a little better method of distributing traffic around the outside edge of the downtown," says Stephenson. "I guess I see the ring road ultimately existing whether anybody wants it or not, because of the inevitability of traffic. But when we were preparing Kalamazoo's 1980 plan in the late 1950s, we saw this was going



LOOKING AHEAD — Ralph Stephenson, a professional engineer and planner who was one of the major figures in the shaping of downtown Kalamazoo, checks the Kalamazoo Mail during his most recent visit to the city. He says he likes what he sees — but warns against complacency and stagnation.

—Gazette photo by Carl Bennett

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—Mall designer Ralph Stephenson

to happen and thought we ought to handle it creatively.

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Stephenson seems to feel it would have been unwise to use four million square feet of downtown area for parking lots. "I think it's inevitable to go to parking decks, as long as they don't destroy the aesthetic nature of what they're next to. The advantage of multi-level parking is that it brings you much closer to where you're going. And walking distances are quite important," he says.

Another thing that's important for Kalamazoo is the upcoming rail consolidation project, says Stephenson.

"In my mind this represents the key to unlock a development process for the next 20 to 30 years. It goes much farther than the overpass. That's a superficial feature of it. What the rail consolidation project does is to free up bits and pieces of land, especially on the southeast side of the central business district, to provide better street connections, development of new buildings and improved traffic flow. It's also a key to such things as more one-way street pairs."

But Stephenson's challenge to Kalamazoo is in the area of people — not trees, bricks and mortar.

"So far there's been a good balance maintained in Kalamazoo between her neighborhoods and her downtown," he says. "There's a balance of concern between the downtown and the rest of the city. That's always been the case in Kalamazoo, and it's what

keeps it successful.

"And one of the secrets of continued success in Kalamazoo is to continue to have leaders not as concerned about receiving credit for their accomplishments as they are in making sure things get done.

"There are very few communities that could have brought off Kalamazoo's kind of downtown development in the late 1950s. But Kalamazoo has been a 'we' kind of city. The trick is to make sure everybody wins something. There must be no losers — only those who don't win as much as others this time.

"And Kalamazoo developed with the help of people like Irving Gilmore, Garrett VanHaften, Ray Dykema — the list goes on and on. When a city has people like this, it can't help but have a lot of winners.

"The thing that will ensure a constant stream of those kinds of people is that you must see that those in leadership aren't preoccupied with their own navels.

"The torch is already being passed to interested new blood for the fascinating process of planning Kalamazoo's downtown future," says Stephenson.

"You'll find all kinds of pragmatists in downtown planning. They're a dime a dozen. But they don't make a whit of difference if you don't also have the dreamers who keep you from getting two feet on the ground too frequently."



RALPH STEPHENSON TAKES NOTE OF WHAT'S HAPPENING ON KALAMAZOO MALL IN DOWNTOWN KALAMAZOO

"It still looks like one of the most promising and most fulfilled cities I've seen" —Gazette photo by Carl Bennett

Who's he?

'Outsider' helps shape city's downtown

Most Kalamazooans have probably never heard of Ralph Stephenson — even though he's probably had as much input as any "outsider" on the shape of the city's downtown.

For more than 20 years, Stephenson has been paid by various "movers and shakers" in Kalamazoo to help bridge the gaps between their dreams and reality. And they've logged some major successes in the process.

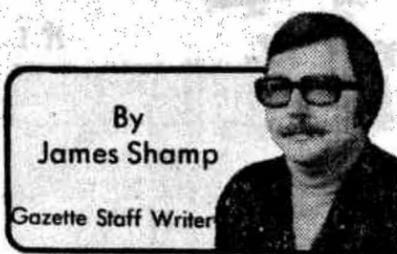
Stephenson was the Kalamazoo project director for a 25-year planning study on the city, which was started in 1955 by Victor Gruen Associates, of Detroit, and Larry Smith & Co., of Washington, D.C.

The study by the two professional planning firms was commissioned by the Downtown Kalamazoo Planning Committee Inc., an eight-member organization of prominent Kalamazoo businessmen determined to keep Kalamazoo's central business district viable.

Stephenson worked for Gruen at that time. Since then he's established his own consulting firm. And the Downtown Kalamazoo Association (DKA) has brought him back at least four times to help grease Kalamazoo's slide into the 21st century.

Things like the Kalamazoo Mall don't just happen. They start as tenacious little ideas that catch the thinking of the power brokers. They evolve through conceptualization and into capitalization through the suggestions of outside planners like Stephenson. In fact, the Kalamazoo Mall is one facet of the "Kalamazoo 1980" plan developed when Stephenson was still with Gruen.

"Part of what I do here is to



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identify the people who are effective," Stephenson said bluntly during his most recent visit here this week. He lives in Detroit, but travels throughout the nation.

"Those people change from time to time. I might find that someone in City Hall or the business community is particularly effective in making things happen at one time, and then come back later to find some totally new forces at work."

"Your asset here in Kalamazoo is that you have these people who make it all work," says Stephenson. "Over the years they've included people like Irving Gilmore, Garret Van Haften, Ray Dykema, Russell Powell, Bob Goldacker, Paul Morrison, Ray Hightower ... the list is almost endless.

"And now you have some younger people, too, like Roger Kooi, who's come along to replace some of those people. And Carol Roberts, at the DKA."

"As I work with these people in preparing plans for 1999, I feel this city has the same potential it had in the mid-1950s when we started preparing the 1980 plan," he says.

"It still looks like one of the most promising and most fulfilled cities I've seen," says Stephenson. "It's hard for people to realize Kalamazoo has achieved what it has. It's a sophisticated town. It's looked to by many in the United States and the world as a forerun-

ner. Sometimes people here lose sight of what's been done here.

"But progress has to be assembled. If we simply allow an evolutionary process to control development here, it'll deteriorate. Evolution in development of a city usually follows whatever path is easiest. But we have to decide how Kalamazoo will evolve — and how we'll direct it."

Stephenson warns that "complacency is one of the biggest dangers for Kalamazoo — complacency and indifference, and making judgments before they should be made, by trying ideas in an emotional public marketplace too soon.

"I think Kalamazoo has always enjoyed a relatively high level of economic health. It's very diversified. So there's perhaps a trend to becoming satisfied a little too easily. That shouldn't be allowed to stifle the motive to improve.

"But there's also a little too strong a tendency here to be highly self-critical. I think it's important for Kalamazoo to maintain a sense of humor about itself."

As a long-range "seer" in the Kalamazoo scene, Stephenson says one of the most important projects on the horizon — though it's not particularly glamorous — is the rail consolidation plan aimed at combining railroad routing and trackage at the east side of downtown, and concentrate crossings near Kalamazoo and Michigan Avenues in a vehicular underpass.

"The rail consolidation plan is the key that can unlock all kinds of things that need to be done downtown," he says. "Easy access to downtown Kalamazoo has always been one of our objectives, and rail consolidation is one way you can do

it."

That's one of some 23 proposals Stephenson has gleaned from analyses of recent "skull sessions" with downtown business leaders and city planners.

The proposals also include the parking ramps that are likely at the south end of the Kalamazoo Mall. And downtown multi-family housing developments for all income levels. And upper-level business development that could lead to pedestrian walkways across the mall, similar to that leading from the Kalamazoo Center to the nearby parking ramp.

The list also includes such future "dream" projects, such as turning the sub-surface Arcadia Creek running under the north end of the Kalamazoo Mall into an attractive waterway. And improving the shopping appeal along the west side of the mall north of Michigan Avenue.

Stephenson plans to keep filtering the ideas of Kalamazoo's dreamers, and helping to channel them into realities, once priorities are agreed upon.

"I'm here to provide some external checks and balances — and to help motivate," says Stephenson. "We're dealing with a scale of time that most people never cope with. My job here is more or less an advisory role for something I did here a long time ago. But we've got to look ahead, and decide which ideas have substance and which ones are just feathers."