**Reusing the Commercial Center**

The motto of Detroit, written after a fire leveled the city in 1805, is *Speramus meliora resurget cineribus* (“We hope that better things will rise from the ashes”). It is the motto of anyone who lives long in one place. The cycle of “creative destruction,” building over the foundations of what came before, can be seen everywhere in cities. My own house was first built around 1880, but every owner every decade since did something to it (I have been no exception) until it only vaguely resembles the original farmstead.

I had not yet moved here when urban renewal removed the old railroad-workers’ tenements (they had become the “student ghetto” after that) in the early 70’s. But I can remember the old shopping street on South Front, and roofing it over to make the Mankato Mall, and demolishing part of it to make way for the Civic Center. For a number of years the “Downtown Mall” held its own against Madison East, until River Halls Mall finally put “vacant” signs in the shop windows of both malls.

Since Southdale was built in the 50’s, retail shopping had shifted away from individual shops strung along a main street to “shopping parks” anchored by big-box stores built on vacant land on the edge of cities. Now that model is in decline, too, as increasingly we shop online for the greatest variety of mass-produced goods at the lowest price. But downtown Mankato held on into the 90’s, well past many cities. It was a good run, and River Hills was only the warrant-server, not the cause of its demise.

Mankato’s city center declined for two reasons: Unintended consequences of well-meaning decisions, and the shifting sands of time. The “renewal” of Pike Street removed almost half of the pedestrian traffic that would naturally flow through the core of the city—and with it, a large part of the consumer base for the city center. “Build it and they will come” is not a workable business plan for most retail and entertainment activities. Yes, people will travel from all over to get to Disneyland or Dollywood or even the Mall of America, but most of the time shopping and entertainment comes from attracting the local people. The density of city centers discourages casual trips by automobile—they depend on people who work in the area, or who stop in the area because of transit stops, or who walk through the area because they live there.

The second reason is changing times. As automobile use became the norm (we now have almost as many vehicles on the road as we have people), assembling shopping and eating venues together with easy, available parking became more important. And the major franchises for shopping and entertainment demanded easy parking and buildings that could conform to franchise specifications. Now times are changing again, and franchise shopping seems to be moving away from bricks-and-mortar to online (think Best Buy). The consumer is also changing. Society is aging; the target population is no longer the young family with children, but an aging population of empty-nesters and a young population of singles and professional couples.

So, what does this mean for the Mankato City Center? Fifty years ago, Jane Jacobs warned of the danger of “cataclysmic money”—too much money funneling in so fast that it chokes the liveliness that attracted it in the first place. New money has to be counterbalanced by “vintage capital”—older buildings and activities, already paid for but still having useful life. Innovative, risky ideas need cheap digs to prove their worth; new talent needs inexpensive venues. The trick is keep these two forces in balance—enough investment in enough diversity to foster growth and meet the needs of changing times, balanced against older, established activities, and peppered with crazy things that just might work (maybe). Twenty years later, Christopher Alexander described the process by which this occurs—a timeless way of building that grows organically, each new thing arising from and transforming what was already there. The great activities require many small ones to succeed—the soaring cathedral needs many ranks of buttresses to hold it up.

The city center needs to build on what it has and fill in what is missing if it is to unfold into its future. I am curious to see what that will become, but if we are successful it will include retaining more of the young talent attracted here by education (they leave now for better opportunity and higher pay in other cities) and engaging the interest and imagination of active seniors. Both of these groups are attracted to the higher density and unique, idiosyncratic quality of buildings and activities in the central city. The character of retail shopping will change, too. Seniors are done shopping; shopping no longer excites us, and besides we don’t need any more stuff. And the youngsters are looking for the unusual and high-quality handcrafts (including food). Where we live will change. Seniors will want to get around without a car (and besides you don’t *want* us driving). And how we live will change. Seniors will want single-floor, smaller units—with elevator access, if need be. Youngsters also won’t be looking for large places—they got their fill of roommates in college, and besides they can’t afford the rent for space they don’t need. We don’t need to *attract* people back downtown—the demand is there, we just need to provide attractive places that meet it.

A friend asked me recently whether I thought we had too many bars downtown. My reply was, “No, we have the right amount of bars. We don’t have enough other things.”

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