

Urban elements Palladium symbolizes downtown Birmingham's new direction

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A decade ago, downtown Birmingham went to bed at sundown on most nights. Today, there's a hustle-and-bustle on mid-week nights.

The cafe crowd flips through newspapers and surfs the Internet on lap-tops. Teenagers gather on the sidewalk to hold court and gossip before catching an early flick.

Couples stroll by shop windows to work off calories from an afternoon dinner. Families pack the Coney Island restaurants to grab a speedy meal.

There's no question downtown Birmingham has changed. But last week's opening of the Uptown Palladium Theater at the corner of North Old Woodward and Hamilton, marks a turning point for the shopping district.

Jacobson's spokesman Fred Marx probably put it best while conversing with patrons at the theater's grand opening benefit: "This is no small town."

Like most downtown districts and metropolitan cities, Birmingham hasn't lost all its small-town character. It's just that in today's increasingly competitive and more global marketplace, a more urban atmosphere appears to be the best way for Birmingham to survive.

Looks aren't everything

The mere physical presence of the three-story, 73,500-square-foot Palladium complex awakens urban sensibilities. The Willis condominium project, just around the corner from the new 12-screen theater, only amplifies the emerging metropolitan ambience.

Of course the impact of both projects is more than physical.

Downtown entertainment and in-town housing are hallmarks of the urban experience, both of which tend to increase the level and time span of foot traffic. And at least one downtown business, Java Hutt Cafe, at 207 South Old Woodward, foresees the future: The coffee house is open 24-hours a day.

Add to the pot a balance of retail, restaurant, entertainment and residential uses and "what you've got is a town that's being used 24-hours a day," says John Heiney, Birmingham Principal



Bright lights, big city: The grand opening of the Uptown Palladium Theater Wednesday brought a flurry of activity to downtown Birmingham.

Shopping District executive director, adding, "I think the trend is definitely towards stores having later hours."

Although Heiney was hesitant to describe Birmingham's evolution as urbanization, saying, "I guess it's more urban," the principal shopping district's materials speak for themselves.

It's new walking map and directory contrasts Birmingham's "Big City feel" against "pedestrian-friendly streets filled with upscale shopping."

The principal shopping district also recently announced plans to link its Internet site, www.enjoybirmingham.com, with CitySearch.com.

Retail perspective

Most downtown retailers embrace the idea of endowing Birmingham with urban characteristics. Many insist it's a matter of survival.

That's partly because the target customer for

downtown merchants is a cosmopolitan one. "From a retail point of view, our customers are getting on planes and going to urban cities to shop," says Cheryl Daskas, a local retailer and principal shopping district board member.

Merchants need to attract shoppers from outside the community, too, says Geoffrey Hockman, local businessman and principal shopping district board chair. "We cannot live on our immediate market."

We also need a regional draw. "Ultimately, Birmingham's evolution doesn't — and shouldn't — hinge on labels like urban and cosmopolitan, but rather on market conditions," adds Hockman. "Yes, the town is evolving to what one would say has a more urban feel. ... Are we a large city? No. Do we want to evolve into a downtown that offers retail, entertainment, restaurants, professional services and residential? Yes."

Santa Claus awaits visitors at area malls, downtowns

Santa Claus has set up shop in retail locations throughout the metropolitan area including at:

■ **Summit Place Mall in Waterford**, during regular and extended holiday mall hours, through Dec. 24 in Santa's workshop in Grand Court; photo packages and group visits available plus each child receives a gift; for mall hours, call (248) 682-0123.

■ **Fairlane Town Center in Dearborn**, 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday-Saturday and noon to 6 p.m. Sunday with extended hours on Dec. 17 and Christmas Eve, through Dec. 24 at Santa Stage in Stage Court; photo packages available and a variety of holiday performances planned; for more details, call (313) 593-3330 or visit www.shopfairlane.com on the Internet.

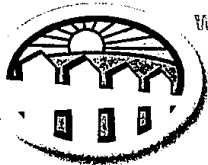
■ **Westland Shopping Center in Westland**, 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Monday-Saturday and 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Sunday, through Dec. 24 in East Court; photo packages available; call (734) 426-5001.

■ **Laurel Park Place in Livonia**, daily hours vary, through Dec. 24 in The Enchanted Forest in Jacobson's court area; for schedule and other information, call (734) 462-1100 or visit www.laurelparkplace.com on the Internet.

■ **Somerset Collection in Troy**, hours vary, Monday-Sunday, through Dec. 24 at the Wynter Castle in North Grand Court; entertainment in Grand Court, shopping bag of surprises for children and photo packages available; reservations are encouraged; call the Somerset Castle Network News at (248) 843-4438 or visit www.thesomersetcollection.com on the Internet; Santa breakfasts are 8:30-10 a.m. Dec. 1, 8, 15 and 22 at South Rotunda; breakfast tickets are \$20 for adults and \$10 for children; reservations required; call (248) 588-2914 or visit www.imaginationtheatre.com on the Internet.

■ **Santa and real reindeer travel from The Townsend Hotel to Shain Park in downtown Birmingham**, joining the mayor and other dignitaries, on stage for ceremonial lighting of holiday tree, 5:55-6:30 p.m. Nov. 21; call (248) 433-3550.

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