

Malls' popularity fading

Comeback coming for country's downtowns

The 1960s saw the boom of neighborhood shopping centers. The '70s saw the rise of malls and supermalls. With 1980 just around the corner, the logical question is, "What's next?"

According to Malcolm Drummond, an urban planner from St. Louis, Mo., and a professor at Michigan State University, the next trend in the way America shops will be the revival of older downtown areas.

"Downtowns were designed for a different era," Drummond said.

"When they ceased to meet the needs of the people, we saw the growth of the shopping center and later the mall and the loss of money and businesses from downtown."

"Now the pendulum is starting to swing back," he said.

"THE INCREASING COST of transportation and new housing is stimulating a return to the older housing areas of our cities. You can't very well ride your moped 20 miles to shop at the supermarket on the city's far side, but you can easily go a mile or two or three to get downtown. If you prefer public transportation, most medium to large city downtown areas are already well served by bus lines."

From the business owners point of view, the cost of new construction and high mall rents are major considerations.

"Only about 20 percent of the businesses in this country can afford to pay the typical shopping center rent of \$12-\$18 per square foot," said Drummond. "Downtown, rent is more likely to be

around \$5 per square foot, and that's making these old buildings look pretty good."

In many cases, structurally sound and architecturally interesting older buildings can be renovated much more cheaply than a new structure could be built, he points out.

Another pressure in favor of reviving downtown areas is the widespread interest in historical preservation in this country. If the bicentennial celebration did nothing else, Drummond said, it got people to look around and see the value of old buildings as a part of this nation's cultural heritage.

"People have tended to see the value of preserving an historically famous building or a building related in some way to a famous person, but they have

not always appreciated the fact that once the stores, schools, homes and barns of the 1800s are gone, there will be no replacing them," he said.

"TEN YEARS AGO we'd have torn them down without a thought. Now we're taking a second look, because we realize they represent a part of our history."

A large portion of Drummond's work with Harland Bartholomew and Association in St. Louis is related to historical preservation and revival of downtown business districts. A planning consultant, he works with citizens and business groups to devise plans for revamping faded shopping district to bring people back.

His visits to more than 300 cities

throughout the Midwest have given him the opportunity to make a lot of observations that form the basis for some predictions.

Some small towns — which he notes have not had the best of things since World War II — he predicts will experience an economic resurgence in the near future as industries looking for a labor pool take the work where the workers are.

Another phenomenon he said we'll see in small towns is the transformation of rows of old storefronts into unique and imaginative living and working places. The cumulative result should be that many small towns will once again become centers of activity and business.

The suburbs, he said, will not dry up

and blow away, but they will stop getting 95 percent of all the new housing starts. By 1985, only about 20 percent of the housing starts will be suburban single-family dwellings, he said. Apartments, condominiums and other types of housing will predominate, along with efforts to restore existing homes.

DRUMMOND PREDICTS that some of the supermalls will survive but he expects to see a lot of the older strip developments and open, outmoded corner shopping centers anchored by a grocery store go out of business.

"The supermalls that fold will be those that were built out in the middle of nowhere with the expectation that the city was going to grow out to meet them," said Drummond.

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