

Historic sites, specialty shops, a place to meet the neighbors -- these are visionary plans to get

People Downtown

By EMORY DANIELS

Years back, folks would come into town on Saturday night, park their cars along main street and spend an evening visiting with neighbors.

But towns surrounded by rural land have disappeared from the American scene and have been replaced by sprawling suburbs linked with inner cities by a network of expressways. The massive rush to the suburbs was the deathblow to leisure living.

Persons moved to the suburbs fast, and communities sprang up over night. Regional and neighborhood shopping centers located near the subdivisions.

Large numbers of communities like Warren, Sterling Heights and Livonia were born, but not a single downtown evolved. Downtowns had no place in the mandatory sprawl to house this massive migration.

Instead, investors poured their earnings into the new suburbs, such as Troy and Southfield, and the older communities were ignored and left naked by the boom.

AMONG THE NAKED CITIES is Farmington, which knows rigor mortis is setting in and badly needs resuscitation to reverse the trend. Like its sister old towns, Farmington smelled the odor of a dying city but was not sure which freshener should be used.

The first reaction to this rigor mortis was panic. Unequipped, some cities grasped at urban renewal as a tool for new life to once again become competitive.

The City of Wayne, for example, unleashed the bulldozers and destroyed much of its historical value, leaving large tracts of vacant property -- much more naked than before.

Urban renewal worked well in many cities for residential development. But often, urban renewal has not worked for commercial rebirth.

A planning lag occurred with old towns painfully aware of their problems but lacking the tools to revitalize. Professional planning consultants in the 1960s were too busy planning the new suburbs to serve as morticians.

IF PLANNERS WERE sleeping, however, the social consultants were awakening to problems caused by mushrooming of immune pockets of comfort.

The mobs escaping and settling in subdivisions and apartments became polarized into individual living units, separated from the general community and trapped in their own hibernation.

Instead of communication circulating within the confines of an entire community, communication existed within hundreds of mini-circles -- a subdivision swimming pool, an apartment's clubhouse, a condominium's golf course.

The alarm was sounded by social consultants -- man is engulfing himself with walls and will smother unless planners can design a prison break. A few planners -- very few -- have stirred, and a movement in Birmingham and Plymouth had started to once again get persons to gather on main street, congregate in drugstores and talk with each other on Saturday nights.

THE PLAN FOR Farmington is still being sketched by its planning commission. Progress is slow because of the absence of specific steps to be taken. Available is a general concept which must be fitted to Farmington by local planners who lack support of a model plan.

The new planning approach for old towns like Farmington, Northville and Plymouth could be labeled "transfusion," because of its similarity to blood transfusions for dying or anemic patients. The operation is not major surgery but remedial treatment. The key to success is the planner's ability to make sure the same "blood type" is transfused into the municipal body.

The remedy involves two steps: (1) To make the downtown area again a place for persons to gather; (2) an aesthetic scheme to insure the downtown maintains the historical appearance, or "blood type," unique to that community.

The greatest success has been realized in Williamsburg, Va., which has become a national colonial heritage showpiece. A second success was realized by a handful of merchants in Chicago, who pooled efforts and designed "Old Town."

IN MICHIGAN, merchants in Frankfort, Mich., cooperated for a municipal face-lifting by high-lighting the Bavarian style of architecture. That "transfusion," together with advertising, has drawn thousands into what used to be a beer and cheese town.

The transfusion approach was used by Williamston, Gaylord, Kalamazoo and Birmingham. The city of Plymouth started years ago its program of accentuating colonial architecture to stress its historical background. Recently, Kellogg Park in the city center has been replanted. Northville is becoming a colony of antique shops and is hot on aesthetic control.

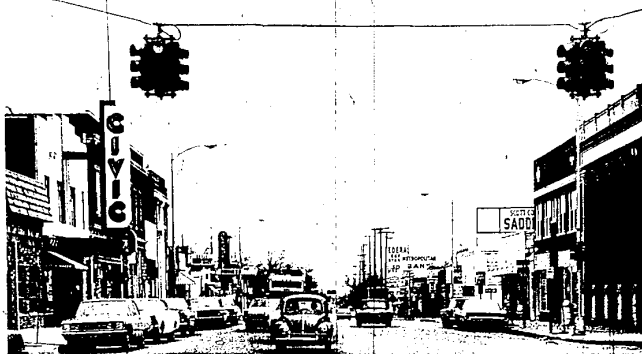
The City of Farmington, after watching neighboring Birmingham and Plymouth, is filling its hypodermic needle with sign ordinances and new commercial zoning's to attempt a transfusion.

If Farmington's city council decides to implement all recommendations being studied by planners, the result will be a model of the complete transfusion process. What Farmington planners envision more than an aesthetic face-lifting is restructuring of its downtown area to become a pedestrian district.

Planners hope parking lots can be relocated along the outskirts of downtown to limit movement of cars within the district to allow a relatively free flow of pedestrian traffic.

THE "BLOOD TYPE" to be used in the transfusion will be basically Early American with some Victorian flavor. The stress will be on Farmington's Quaker heritage, dating back to the 1800s when Nathan and Arthur Power founded a Quaker settlement in a section of Farmington Township.

Merchants and developers will be encouraged to stress Early American, Quaker, and Victorian building designs. Aesthetics cannot be legally enforced, of course, but cooperation among merchants has successfully accomplished this face-lifting in other towns.



RIGOR MORTIS shows signs of setting in in downtown Farmington. Grand River, the main artery, is choked by traffic that discourages pedestrians. The south (right) side is relatively prosperous because of a municipal parking lot, but the north side is suffering. "Visual pollution" is caused by utility poles, wires and overhead signs of non-uniform design. (Everl photo)

The Farmington Historical Preservation Committee has marked off an area of Farmington and designated it as the "Old Village." Planners hope the old village can be saved as a permanent part of the refurbished downtown.

Some residents envision the old village as an area to draw outsiders on weekends for walk-through tours. Some see the old village being surrounded by a white picket fence, with entrance and exit signs announcing the attraction, something like a Greenfield Village.

Visitors could walk through the old village on brick or cobblestone walks. The old homes in the area could be dressed up with picket fences, decorative gas lamps, hitching posts, flower boxes, rock gardens, urns, spinning wheels on porches, and so on.

OF COURSE, the intent is not simply to draw visitors to the Old Village. Farmington hopes its future visitors will also be drawn into the downtown business center.

Careful planning can accomplish this. Parking lots could be located within walking space of not only the old village but also conveniently close to the Central Business District.

The downtown must not only be attractive enough to draw outsiders but also be so structured that it once again becomes a meeting place for Farmington residents.

Present merchants downtown recognize the need for more specialty shops. Some have appeared; and planners and merchants hope there will be an expansion of the small, service-oriented shops.

The idea is to have a wide variety of businesses specializing in one line of goods or services so customers will be drawn to shop for things not available at the big regional centers. But the specialty shops are only one segment of the transfusion.

JOHN ALLEN, a Farmington architect, planner and councilman, is visionary enough to believe people should not only shop downtown but thinks there is nothing wrong with living downtown, too. Allen embraces a concept of "horizontal" zoning in which persons live in apartment's above business places.

Allen also envisions at least one enclosed, climate-controlled mall building with specialty shops located along an indoor corridor.

Another approach to draw people into downtown is formation of a mini-bus line. Brightly colored, mini-buses could transport residents from outlying apartment complexes and shopping centers to the downtown and back again.

The transfusion will involve beautification efforts with an attack on "visual pollution." One step might be elimination of utility poles along Grand River with underground wiring instead.

A step already taken and certain to be expanded is sign control. Frowned on are

numerous, large, over-hanging, flashing and rotating signs in a business district. The final goal is to limit all signs to only those attached to buildings with uniformity of size and good taste in design encouraged.

A big problem, however, will be to draw residents from the northern part of Farmington Township into the downtown. This will require relocation of Farmington Rd., says Councilman Fred Siebert and Planning Commissioner James Platt. It means lots of money and some demolition of buildings.

THE FINAL GOAL may never be realized. But Farmington knows the transfusion must begin soon or else in 10-15 years a ghost town will exist at Grand River and Farmington Roads.

The transfusion means Farmington will build on what it has. Planners feel the transfusion is vital and those who might choose to sit might feel the pain of the hypodermic needle.

The syringe is being filled and the City of Farmington, hopefully, will find its remedy for the anemic condition of an old town.

If it does, Farmington residents may wake up, escape from their dens of isolation, and once again meet their neighbors on a Saturday night at Grand River and Farmington Rd.

The beneficiaries will be residents as well as merchants, because transfusion of the business district will also mark an awakening of the community and return of communication between people.

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PLYMOUTH'S downtown has retained some of the charm of the bygone days when it was isolated in a farming area and the center of trade.

One method has been the rejuvenation of Kellogg Park (foreground). Street lights are ornamental, with no aerial wires. Stores generally carry out the colonial theme.

To fight competition from the shopping centers, Plymouth merchants have begun concerted advertising campaigns, extending their efforts into neighboring towns. (Observer photo by Vince Witek)