

Thursday, April 26, 1984 O&E

(F1E)

Planning helps city find an identity

By Corinne Abatt
staff writer

Birmingham style

CEMENTED SECURELY in the bricks of a dozen new buildings and firmly grounded in the trees that line Woodward and Maple is a Birmingham look.

It is substantial, solid, tailored, no nonsense high quality.

There's no doubt about this city's relationship to the Midwest or the 20th century. But, there's obviously been a concerted effort to avoid the pitfalls of foolish fads and glibly go along that characterize many an American main street.

This city of the 1980s has undergone dramatic changes in the last decade, but its respect for its past is still in evidence. New buildings such as 355 Park Place on the northwest corner of Woodward and Ring Road, designed by Michael A. Boggio and Associates, fit in easily with some of the fine older ones such as 220 Merrill, City Hall and Baldwin Library with their Tudor lines and high pitched slate roofs.

And the Great American Building on North Woodward with its russet brick and gently rounded corners, designed by Rossetti Associates, stands tall in its statement about relationships between past and present.

The jury is still out on Gunner Birkers' addition to the library, Birmingham Place, designed by Savin Wycoff Phillips Inc. and possibly the popular 555 Building on South Woodward, Luckenbach-Ziegelman. The latter two are somewhat remindful of relatives

who camp on the doorstep until the family finally decides to welcome them in.

BIRMINGHAM, once a bustling, friendly, little community perched on high ground north of what was once Oakland County's swamp land, has always had an air about it.

Maybe it was the location — or possibly the industrious early residents themselves. Rosewell T. Merrill more or less picked the name. Merrill, who owned the foundry and thrashing machine factory, obviously saw his home town as the coming industrial center, so in about 1832, he painted the name with the connotation he liked on his business sign — and it stuck.

Today's Birmingham is far from industrial. As often as not, it's the place where the industrialists settle when they want to get away from industry.

THE MAKE-UP of the city's commercial district surely wasn't anticipated by the stalwart early founders, John Hunter, Elijah Willis and John Hamilton — War of 1812 veterans who bought their farm land here for \$2 an acre.

The majority of today's retailers cater to those who pursue the good life with a vengeance — clothing, furniture, interior design, art, accessories

and specialty shops of all kinds along with an ever-increasing number of quality restaurants.

Gone are many of the shops serving basic needs. Ruston Hardware on North Woodward and the Tiger Shoe Repair on East Maple being two of a few holdouts.

Still in the midst of keeping up with the times, Birmingham has managed, as architect Louis Des Rosiers pointed out, "to avoid high tech architecture."

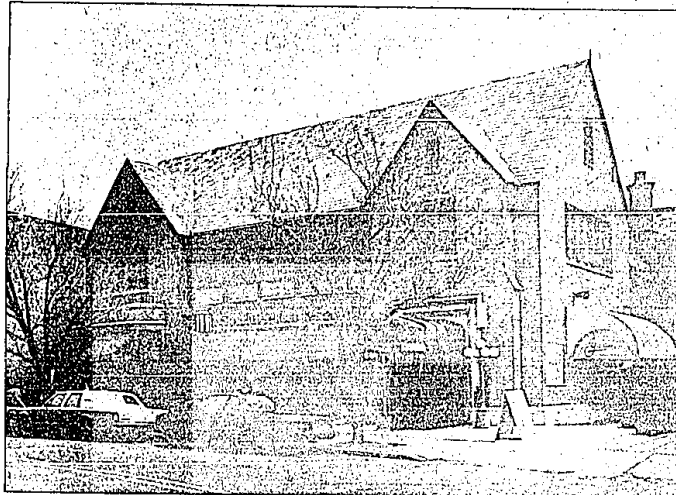
CITY PLANNER Bonnie Cook said it hasn't always been easy to avoid the fads.

"Out biggest problem is with the out-of-town architects who are not interested in our architecture, who want to make their buildings stand out."

"That's sometimes where our conflict arises — with the chain restaurants. And they always say their national organization won't let them put in anything but their nationally recognized building. We've placed a hard line on them. We tell them we don't want that in Birmingham; we know you can do better. Our Kentucky Fried Chicken is the best in the country."

Architect Robert Ziegelman, whose firm Luckenbach-Ziegelman did the Brown Street Center, the national award-winning Bell Townhouses on

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STEPHEN CANTRELL/staff photographer

Before it was converted to a popular restaurant and lower-level gallery, this classic building housed the local Detroit Edison office.

New building . . .

BLOOMFIELD HILLS architect Louis DesRosiers is closely tied with the changing face of downtown Birmingham. He designed the Birmingham Executive Building, 350 N. Woodward, the office building at 300 Park, now under construction, and has his site plan for the building at 350 North Woodward approved.

DesRosiers' buildings are also on the periphery of the city — the Village Professional Building, 300 East Long Lake, Bloomfield Hills, the CMT International Headquarters, 75 W. Big Beaver, Troy and Wang Laboratories, Inc., 300 E. Long Lake, Bloomfield Hills.

It was Des Rosiers who first mentioned the Birmingham Look.

"THE KEY is the city is starting to get this unified look. I used to be opposed. As an architect, I thought that was wrong, stifling creativity. But, now, it's starting to look like European cities — tastefully done whether old or new. There is a similar look because of similar people living in the same area."

"The brick of the Hunter Park Building is very similar to that of the Great American Building and the Fidelity Bank brick is very similar to

the brick in the Birmingham Executive Building.

"We're starting to get a unified look as you go through Birmingham. I don't think that's bad."

He mentioned that much of the brick is "a nice, soft, warm brick," adding that there are no metal buildings in Birmingham. "They're built with traditional materials."

DesRosiers has family ties with this area too. He grew up in Franklin, son and grandson of architects and graduated in architecture from Lawrence Institute of Technology. His father, Arthur DesRosiers, designed many Michigan buildings, among them St. Hugo of the Hills Catholic Church in Bloomfield Hills.

Louis DesRosiers stands in front of the Birmingham Executive Building. It is three floors, more than 31,000 square feet and has covered parking. The lobby floor and walls are black Andes granite with brass detailing.



STEPHEN CANTRELL/staff photographer

Planning . . .

BONNIE COOK, Birmingham's city planner since 1976, combines her refreshingly optimistic view of the city with pleasant objectivity.

"We haven't really adopted a theme," she said, adding there is, however, a plan.

"The urban design plan for the city, done in 1971 (by Johnson, Johnson & Roy Inc. of Ann Arbor) is a super plan. They did an excellent job."

Many of the ideas presented in the plan have come into being either in total or in modified form.

"The most significant thing we did was to adopt the architectural portion of the plan which the Planning Board follows religiously," she said.

One of the statements in the architectural portion of the plan is, "One of the qualities of Birmingham is the blending of architecture of different periods. The design of new buildings should respect older structures in the immediate area, but it is not necessary or desirable for the new buildings to copy earlier architectural styles."

COOK GAVE the Briggs Building as a blending example. First built in 1929, this building on the southeast corner of Maple and Woodward houses the Fidelity Bank, the Midtown Cafe and a number of small shops along Maple.



Bonnie Cook

A third story was added in 1981.

Cook said, "Luckenbach-Ziegelman (architects), in the Briggs Building, blended materials and scale. They've put a third story on that you don't even see, so it keeps the two-story look. It's a remarkable example of what can be done."

She said the use of reflective glass isn't encouraged in Birmingham. "It requires use of more space," explain-

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Restoration . . .

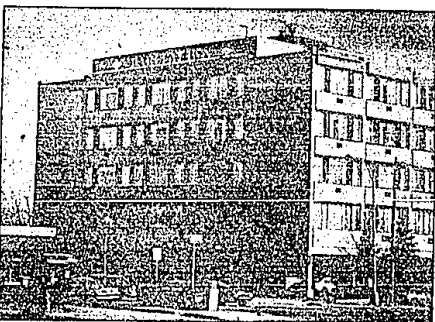
The Barclay Inn, at right, was given a distinct and pleasing appearance when it underwent extensive cosmetic changes about a year ago. Instead of its former rather stark, box-like appearance, it now has a continental look with shades of almond and accents of dark green.

THE BARCLAY Inn on the southeast corner of Hunter and Maple stands as a prime example of a successful architectural face lift.

The renovation of the former Birmingham House Motel was completed last year by Alexander V. Bogarts & Associates.

Bogarts said the greatest problem was that "basically there are five separate buildings on that site — they are very fragmented with a variety of architectural styles."

He said that "to unify them and make one complete statement," the buildings were all painted in the same color scheme (tones of almond) highlighted by a strong color, the dark green of the canvas awnings over the doorways.



DEBORAH BOOKER

THE DRIVE under the new portico to the entrance, the addition of the stair signs for a touch of drama and many changes in detailing give the whole corner pleasing identity that was never there until now.

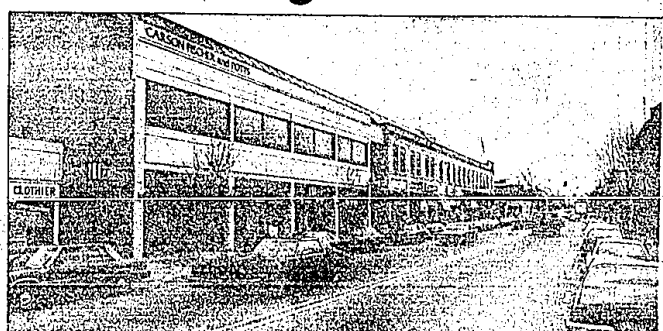
The inn, now owned by Brown and Luis Companies, was built in 1939. It is said that an inn, serving travelers on the Indian Trail from Detroit to

Pontiac, was located on that same site 180 years ago.

Bogarts said, "a lot of energy" on the part of everyone involved went into the restoration."

His firm also did the remodeling for LaStanza, 180 S. Woodward and designed the very contemporary Bond Jacobson home on Mobegan in Birmingham.

Remodeling . . .



Still known as the Briggs Building, the foreground section is now as in the third-floor addition, but both blend so well that the change is hardly noticeable.

THE BRIGGS Building on the southeast corner of Woodward and Maple has undergone several improvements.

Built originally with the commercial growth of the city in mind, the

second floor interior remained unfinished until 1960. The original building was constructed to permit the addition of at least one more floor.

The third floor and a completely new section on the east side of the building fronting on Maple were added

several years ago.

Robert Ziegelman, of the architectural firm of Luckenbach-Ziegelman, designers of the addition, spoke of the challenges the firm faced. "We

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