

Downtown history favors clearing block, building up

By Foster Ockerman, Jr.

I am about to commit heresy.

I have been a supporter of historic preservation all my adult life. For four years I was chairman of Kentucky's Historic Preservation Review Board, the body which reviews every property nominated to the National Register of Historic Places.

My wife and I restored a National Register property as our residence. My former law firm restored a National Register property for offices. I

helped found the Lexington History Museum which has among its goals restoration of our historic former Courthouse. I am the historian for my church, a congregation begun in 1789, where we worship in a National Register-listed sanctuary.

I support the new hotel and office project.

Before the brickbats fly, let me offer some historical perspective to this discussion.

In the mid-1960s our community took a radical step for a small town looking to grow and prosper. We decided to remove the railroad tracks which sliced through downtown, together with the warehouses, sheds, and ancillary buildings. We adopted an Urban Renewal Plan which resulted in Vine Street as we know it today, the Civic Center, Rupp Arena, and, ultimately, Triangle Park.

The block on which the hotel and office project is proposed is the last undeveloped block in the Urban Renewal Plan. Its time has come.

We decided over 40 years ago to change the layout, scope, feel and scale of part of downtown. The scale of Vine is not two or three stories like

the north side of Main. The scale, from the top of Park Plaza to the top of the Financial Center, is higher than one realizes, as will be the towers on top of the transit center. We have decided to develop the Vine Street corridor on a different model.

I learned from the professionals and experts who do historic preservation for a living that a critical element of determining whether a building is sufficiently "historic" (versus just "old") to warrant inclusion on the National Reg-

ister is context. I remember particularly a pre-Civil War farmhouse nominated for its representation of farm residences of its era, with broad porches overlooking the fields.

The problem was the farm around it had been subdivided into house lots. It had lost its original context. Our board voted not to send it on to the Register.

Victorian Square was a valid preservation effort because it retained its context. There is no context left to the project block. The Rosenberg building stands alone as an early commercial building; but its windows no longer represent the original facade. The former Levas' restaurant building is of a different era and architecture. The Main Street buildings at Upper are of a third era. There is no context, no unifying theme, no sense of history remaining.

If there is a unifying theme to a business district, it is that buildings become functionally obsolete and are removed to make way for new buildings. A good example is the recent re-zoning of part of Manchester Street to create a down-

town Entertainment District and proposed changes to those buildings; a solution for the entertainment venues being displaced.

Finally, we must confront another decision made by our community. In adopting our most recent Comprehensive Plan we elected not to expand the Urban Service Boundary in favor of infill and "up not out" growth. The proposed project is a natural result of that decision. Instead of another hotel far from the core of downtown, or another motel at an interchange, it proposes a first-rate hotel to support the expanded Civic Center. Instead of another office park or strip mall on a former horse farm, it proposes more office space and retail downtown.

Now is not the time to say, "Oh, wait a minute, I didn't mean infill downtown."

Where else can it be? Our success in historic preservation has put a stranglehold on downtown. The historic neighborhoods surrounding it, coupled with our two universities, have limited expansion of the downtown business district horizontally. Building up is the only answer.

A city is either growing or declining. I am not one of those in thrall to the notion every decision must be made in the context of the 2010 Games. Some decisions have a broader reach in history, such as our decision to remodel Vine from a railroad and warehouse district to a commercial and business corridor.

When a project comes along which comports with our communal decisions, we should recognize it and support it; or confess that our decisions to preserve farmland and neighborhoods were wrong.



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