

Roanoke Revitalizes Its Downtown According to Public Demand

The city of Roanoke confronted the problems of a decaying downtown by recognizing that a new approach would be required to reverse the flight to the suburbs. Traditional programs had not worked or were stalled by the lack of public enthusiasm. Roanokers had, in the past, believed in downtown. To restore this belief would take more than talk about revitalization and rehabilitation planning. Action had to come from the citizens.

The city asked prominent citizens and business leaders to serve as a steering committee to guide what would be called Design '79. This group became the official decision-making body for the project. The committee would give final approval of the plan and develop specific recommendations for its implementation before submitting Design '79 to City Council. Six objectives were identified:

- 1) Citizen enthusiasm - as citizens explored the potential for their downtown, their enthusiasm would be used to further define the project.
- 2) Downtown as a destination point - downtown would be developed as a destination point, a place where visitors and residents would spend time.
- 3) Recycling old buildings - this new policy would replace the habit of simply bulldozing old buildings.
- 4) Historic city market - preservation and enhancement of this flourishing century-old, outdoor, year-round farmers' market would be another objective.
- 5) Bolstering retail sales - the strength of the tax base and the downtown's position as the true business center were directly dependent upon bolstering of retail sales.
- 6) Developing vacant land - areas which had been scraped clean of buildings by urban renewal in the 60s would need to be incorporated into the central business district through the development of buildings or park areas.

Community planning for downtown revitalization began in the fall of 1978. Fifty community representatives drew maps and pictures and joined in role-playing sessions to prepare for their job which would be that of the on-going resource for community ideas and attitudes. A storefront office in downtown was opened as a full-time design office. All work, even the actual designing, was done in full view of on-lookers whose suggestions were solicited.

Among the more innovative developments were the contributions of three and one-half hours of prime time commercial television programming. Known as "design-a-thons," they aired live telephone discussions by citizens with the consultants and city officials. The sharing of design concepts were made visible through a movable architectural model so that ideas could be dem-



Roanoke Transportation Station: facades

onstrated on the air. Newspaper "ballots" were printed in the local paper on the day of each television show so that the viewers could vote on ideas they liked or did not like. In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted on the streets, and surveys of attitudes and shopping patterns were undertaken.

The final plan was brought together with the assistance of Chad Floyd of Moore, Grover and Harper, from Essex, Connecticut. He developed a catalog of component projects capable of being constructed independently yet interrelated to each other to create a whole. Cost estimates were provided at each step of the way as well as designation of areas for public or private investment.

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Center in the Square

In 1979, at a time when bond issues were being defeated all over the country, a major bond issue was passed in Roanoke to support the downtown revitalization effort. This is credited to the involvement of the citizens in planning. The publicly funded projects became known as Century Projects, and these were to be developed primarily during Roanoke's Centennial Year, 1982. All twenty-six Century Projects have been completely designed. Twenty of them were underway or completed as of July 1, 1982, including two branch library additions.

As a direct result of the community planning effort, the revitalized Roanoke Farmer's Market has become a festival area. A number of specialty shops have opened in the area, facing out on the newly lighted market booths with yellow and white striped awnings. Center in the Square, a regional cultural center, has been funded without any local tax dollars. A local foundation, along with federal and state governments, have provided the funds for this building. A reclaimed warehouse, the Center will house the Roanoke Museum of Fine Arts, the Roanoke Valley Science Museum, and the Mill Mountain Theater. These last two share space in a public parking garage -- a combination of public and private funding in one building.

Extending out from the festival area to the downtown business area are new businesses, new buildings, and reclaimed facades that attest to the continuity of Roanoke's pride and growth. A transportation center, started in November 1982, will reclaim the 1890s atmosphere along Campbell Avenue.

Behind these facades a mini-mart and an intra- and inter-city transportation station with parking facilities will be developed.

The Roanoke City Courthouse is to be dedicated in December as part of the Centennial Year celebration. This courthouse will hold for the first time all three courts of the City of Roanoke: the Circuit Court, the General District Court, and the Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court. This new courthouse faces into a government complex which also added a War Memorial to its downtown park area within this past year.

The faith of Design '79, attested to by the passage of the bond issue, gave assurance to private enterprise that downtown was to be the hub of Roanoke. The mutual trust, the assurance that public and private capital could work independently and still integrate as one within the master Design '79 plan is the stuff that gives credibility to Roanoke's Centennial claim "We're One-Hundred and Still Shining!."

The success of Roanoke's Design '79 project as a public/private venture can be attributed to three key factors:

- 1) the involvement of citizens early in the process;
- 2) the use of innovative community planning tools, including the widespread use of the media; and
- 3) the implicit assurance of citizens (through the passage of the bond issue) to private enterprise that downtown was to be the hub of Roanoke.