

Conversations with Downtown People:

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

*An Interview with
James E. McGehee,
Newly Appointed Chairman of the
Downtown Council*

CENTER CITY: What objectives will the Downtown Council emphasize during your term of office in its efforts to revitalize downtown?

JAMES MCGEHEE: The total action commitment of the Downtown Council, insofar as redevelopment is concerned, is to stabilize and renew the Central Business District through aggressive implementation of the Downtown Redevelopment Plan. This is a formal plan that has these stated objectives currently:

1. To assure construction starts on Volunteer Island—and that is on now, despite what you may have read in the paper about the capital expenditure budget.

2. Certainly, one of the very high priority objectives is construction of the Convention Center Hotel. We are talking with an investor group who wants to build a 600 to 700 room convention facility across the street from the Cook Convention Center. These developers would build it and lease it to the Hilton chain, who is vitally interested in having such a convention facility.

3. Another priority objective would be to complete the planning and financing of the Beale Street redevelopment program. The City Council has already approved the transferring of \$1.4 million in local funds to the Beale Street Project, and is making formal application to HUD for



The sculpture of Harold Day — alive and kicking in Connecticut. (More on page three.)

additional federal funding in the amount of \$629,165. Together, the two grants will enable the city to convey title to the lands in the historic and cultural areas of Beale Street to the Beale Street National Historic Foundation. Approval of HUD grant application could get construction underway by October 1, 1975.

4. To emphasize balanced housing development within the Central Business District.

5. To secure tenants and developers for the Promenade Gateway project. The Promenade Gateway Project is a separate development project of the Marcou, O'Leary Plan that goes from Court Square down to the Riverfront. This is the terraced housing overlooking the River, together with a Promenade and commercial complex. About 2/3 of the funding of the Marcou, O'Leary Plan will have to come from the private sector, about 1/3 will be City or Federal funds. Again here, we have a private group interested in doing that total project. They need and want a major tenant to the tune of about 150,000 square feet. We are talking with several people about being that tenant in the Promenade Gateway.

6. Coordinate construction and promotion activities of the Mid-America Mall. This is more or less a question now of merely coordinating the construction and funding. The contract is let, the construction is underway, and with luck and weather, the Mid-America Mall could be completed within about eighteen (18) months.

7. To complete the financing and implement the Downtown Wall Art Program to the sides of the buildings, with murals, paintings, and so forth.

8. Finally, to find developers for the River-town project. This is the area which sits on the Bluff overlooking the River.

CENTER CITY: Is this plan the fixed and final conception of downtown redevelopment, or is it adjustable to changing realities?

JAMES MCGEHEE: It is essential that the Marcou, O'Leary Plan be flexible to this extent: when you create a plan like that, you do so based upon the then existing economics, the then existing environment, and the then existing political climate. As any of the basic premises or assumptions change, then you have to go back, as prudent business people, and assess the continuing validity of those basic assumptions. Now, if they are no longer valid, if any essential ingredient such as the nation's economy has changed dramatically, then you have to make realistic changes in your timetable and your funding and so forth. This is going

to mean that, while this is a very carefully prepared plan, it will have to be accelerated and decelerated, but [we'll] attempt to stay on schedule.

CENTER CITY: I know there are legal problems in using the public promenade for private development; will there still be an area to be used as a public promenade?

JAMES MCGEHEE: Volunteer Park affords a scenic promenade for people who visit it.

CENTER CITY: O.K., we've heard a lot about the terraced housing, but what other housing is being considered for the downtown area?

JAMES MCGEHEE: The only planned housing in the Marcou, O'Leary Program is that which would be incorporated into the Promenade Gateway. I see housing in the downtown area developing in a three-pointed triangle. The area where I think you most immediately could create and market housing is in the area east of Danny Thomas in the general vicinity of Edison Park, in other words, the area between the Civic Center and the hospital complex. You've got the foothold of Edison Park there, and it is a logical and practical place in which to expand on something that exists, that is successful, that has a waiting list, and is proof of the fact that people can live securely and happily and comfortably downtown. I would like to see an additional 1,000 or 1,500 units put in that area in the combined form of cluster, low-rise and high-rise. I think the one essential ingredient to make that possible would be for the City of Memphis and its Memphis Housing Authority to become realistic about the pricing of land in order that residential development can go on. The present pricing structure precludes any form of residential in those areas which are owned by the City or its housing authority.

The Riverbluff Area essentially would be Front Street, the west side of Front Street, say from Union south. Some of these warehouses are the best built buildings in Memphis. They would lend themselves beautifully to conversion into attractive residential apartments. The opportunity for apartments to have a panoramic view of the River and the Bridge is dramatic, and I would love to see private developers acquire some of those warehouses and spend the money for the conversion; I think that they would be very pleasantly surprised about the market acceptance of units in that location.

I think that balanced housing that would appeal

to all economic strata within the city has got to be put essentially in those 3 locations.

CENTER CITY: In upgrading downtown, won't some improvements need to be made in the public housing projects?

JAMES MCGEHEE: I don't think the complete total healthy redevelopment of downtown ought to rely only on the transient downtown employee or the three-day conventioneer. I think a very essential ingredient to a healthy renewed downtown is balanced housing — that it become a place where people live. We have a survey that indicates dramatically that people would like to live downtown provided that they have a place to shop, a place to get groceries, and security.

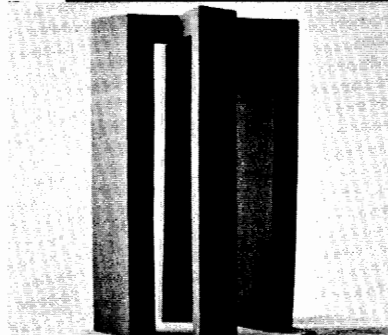
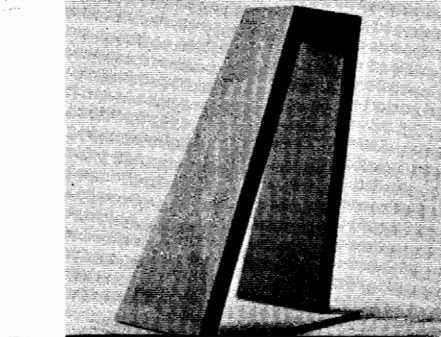
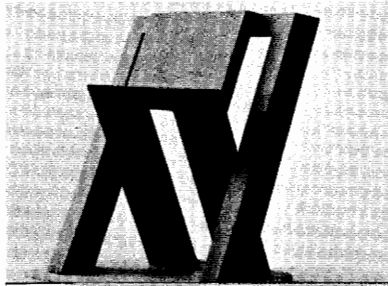
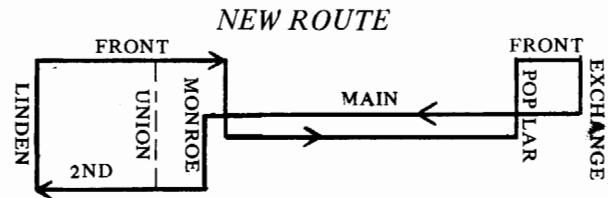
CENTER CITY: You've mentioned the overpricing of land owned by the MHA, but what about private landowners who jack up prices beyond reason at the mere mention of "redevelopment"?

JAMES MCGEHEE: I do not mean that it [downtown property] is overpriced for commercial use.

I think it is essential that the City and MHA come more closely together, and I hope at the same time that the Downtown Council can coordinate much closer with the City and MHA insofar as putting land back on the tax rolls, even if it means, at first, a reduction in the asking price on the vacant land that's off the tax rolls.

MAC REROUTE

The MAC buses will be continually rerouted as Mall construction progresses down Main. As work begins on a segment of Main it will be removed from the MAC route (as one can see the Union/Monroe block was eliminated this week).



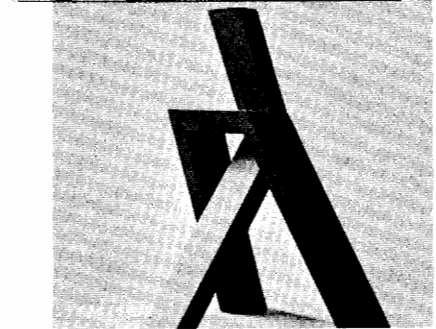
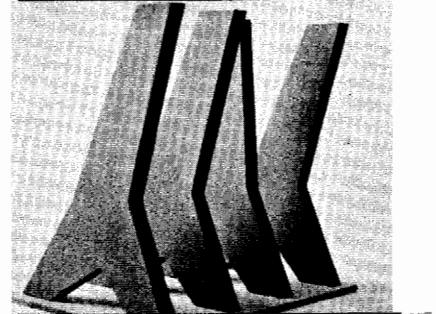
Day is now reduced to making his huge steel sculptures from a few square . . .

Art? Whooney!

Perhaps with a tinge of embarrassment, some of our readers may recall the incident last May which first brought Harold Day and his sculpture to the attention of CENTER CITY. Day had just installed two of his sculptures on City Hall Plaza at considerable personal expense; then comes the Mayor, who, in a somewhat less than regal manner, referred to Day's sculptures as "junk" which had "fallen off the building." And he subsequently ordered them removed, without even so much as a word with Mr. Day directly.

Fortunately, there were grateful recipients, more sincere in their support of local talent. The sculpture still stands before the Child Development Center on Jefferson, where it has been since the expulsion.

CENTER CITY recently contacted Mr. Day at his new place of residence in Newtown, Connecticut. He was asked to send information about his current work. These pictures were his only comment.



. . . feet of plywood and a can of black paint.

earthly delights

ART EXHIBITS DOWNTOWN

National Bank of Commerce (Lobby)

March – Paintings by Marjorie Liebman*
Sterick Building (Lobby)

March – Paintings by Mrs. Helen Chenault
Denman*

FILM

Peabody Library

March 21 – “Mysterious Mr. Eliot”*

March 28 – “Ballet Adagio” &
“Rhythmetron”*

Southwestern

March 26 – “The Loneliness of the Long
“Distance Runner”

MSU

March 26 – “Cartoon Orgy”

MUSIC

Harris Music Auditorium (MSU)

March 26 – Blair Woodwind Quintet*
Auditorium Music Hall

March 27 – Gina Bachauer, pianist –
Beethoven Club Series

Harris Music Auditorium

March 28 – MSU Jazz Bands Concert

DANCE

Auditorium Music Hall

March 21 – “Wuthering Heights” –
Ballet South Spring Concert

*Free

Announcements

PARTICIPATION SOUGHT IN MEMPHIS-IN-MAY PLANNING

As a volunteer working on downtown activities for the Memphis-in-May festival, Carol Coletta has requested suggestions from all interested persons as to the types of events for 1975. If you have an idea, call Carol at 528-2589 or write to CENTER CITY and we will forward your suggestions.

WELCOME "BROWN-BAGGERS"

In the belief that the CIVIC CENTER COMMUNITY CULINARY CLUB offers a time for informal fellowship to those who work in the Civic Center and downtown, we extend a cordial welcome to those who bring their lunch to join us. Tea, coffee, or soft drinks are available for 15¢.

For those who prefer heartier fare the menu for March 20-28 is:

CIVIC CENTER COMMUNITY CULINARY CLUB

Serving from 11:30 to 1:00

First Presbyterian Church, 166 Poplar Avenue

PRICE: \$1.50 per serving, including drink

MENU FOR MARCH 20 – MARCH 28

THURSDAY, MARCH 20

Ham, Sweet Potatoes, Green Beans, Rolls

FRIDAY, MARCH 21

Spaghetti, Cole Slaw, French Bread

MONDAY, MARCH 24

Salmon Croquettes, Hash Browned Potatoes, Tossed Salad, Rolls

TUESDAY, MARCH 25

Roast Beef, Whipped Potatoes, English Peas, Rolls

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 26

Spaghetti, Cole Slaw, French Bread

THURSDAY, MARCH 27

Fried Chicken, Rice and Gravy, Squash, Rolls

FRIDAY, MARCH 28

Meat Loaf, Potatoes Au gratin, Lima Beans, Rolls

Center City

First Presbyterian Church

166 Poplar Avenue

Memphis, Tennessee 38103

*Second-class
postage paid at
Memphis, Tennessee*