

center city[©]

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MEMOIR OF A DOWNTOWN EXILE

by Irvin Sachritz

David Bowman's article on the Shrine Building, in the August 18th issue of CENTER CITY, moves me to put on paper some reflections that have been on my mind for several months. After operating from downtown Memphis for the past thirty years or so, my company moved its offices "out East." We had been in the old First National Bank Building then moved to the Shrine Building (at the time of the foreclosure sale when New York Life took over the building), then we moved to the Home Federal Building (now the First American Bank Building), then we moved to the new First National Building at Third and Madison. In December, 1974, we left downtown and relocated in the Clark Tower. After being with the company twenty-one years, all of which were spent downtown, my personal base of operation was moved "out East."

Are things really better "out East?" Let's examine several aspects of "out East": It is true that there are many empty buildings and vacant store-fronts on Madison, Union, Monroe, Second, Third, Main and Front Streets that glare at you as you walk down the sidewalks of downtown Memphis — but out East there aren't any sidewalks or spots to walk on. At lunchtime office workers eat on the premises or get in their cars and drive to some other eating place. It is also true that the downtown streets are congested; but when you try

to get out of the Clark Tower or the White Station Tower parking area onto Poplar Avenue at 4:30 in the afternoon, you realize that downtown Memphis does not have a monopoly on traffic congestion; and if a train happens to be crossing at Mendenhall and Poplar between 4:30 and 5:00, traffic conditions equal the worst downtown has to offer.

The cry is: "You can't park downtown." After having lured us "out East" by the offer of free and easy parking, we now find that many of the parking spaces outside the Clark Tower are now reserved for customers of first floor occupants — which is fair and reasonable — however, automobiles now crowd into every available empty foot of pavement making it impossible to safely navigate along any of the traffic lanes. If there were a fire in the building, fire equipment would never make it off of Poplar. There is free parking inside the building — this is a help — but time after time you find inconsiderate drivers have taken two spaces or don't know how to put an automobile between two yellow lines on the floor; consequently, I would estimate that a third of the parking spaces are unusable because of lack of consideration for the next fellow.

It is true that we have a beautiful view from the 30th floor of the Clark Tower — but of what? A Southern freight train going east or west on Poplar,

tying up traffic at White Station and Poplar or at Mendenhall and Poplar; you can feel the frustrations of the drivers waiting for the train to pass. How different it is to watch a barge tow moving slowly down (or up) the Mississippi River and disappearing around the bend below the bridge. And in the Spring when the river is on a rampage, we could watch Mud Island getting smaller and smaller until finally only the airport hanger is above water and the river is lapping at the edges of it.

And another beautiful view – watching the girl watchers watching girls on a windy day at Third and Madison. The Clark Tower has its share of good looking girls – but there is something lacking about indoor girl watching in a mall.

A factor that is missing “out East” – we got used to seeing the same faces on the streets of downtown Memphis and even if we didn’t know the people by name, we said “Hello” to them as we passed because we were all members of the same “downtown neighborhood community”. Rushing through the malls and lobbies or the parking lots of the “out East” high-rise buildings, you realize that this “neighborliness” doesn’t exist.

There are no *characters* “out East”. There is no Tony Casada (Monk) asleep by the fountain at the First National Bank Building or anywhere else with his two sticks jammed inside his belt, and his cigar sticking out of his mouth at that jaunty angle. There is no Eddie O’Conner, the friendly policeman standing in the middle of the intersection urging traffic to let an ambulance or a fire engine make its way through the crowded streets. There is no “out East” counterpart of Zelma Quinley, the now retired receptionist at First National Bank – truly one of Memphis’ finest good-will ambassadors.

There are advantages to being “out East” of course, but there are also many factors that should be considered before writing off downtown Memphis completely – a feeling, an atmosphere, some intangible quality that does exist downtown is missing “out East.” Out East has its fine buildings and its beautiful real estate, but downtown still has *people – human beings*.

A LETTER TO THE EDITOR

IT’S RENEWAL

Dear Mr. Editor,

[In] reference ... to your feature article [“Not Another Expressway” – Bowman] in the August 28, 1975, issue of CENTER CITY, it is unfortunate that writers permit their prejudices to cloud their judgment.

I refer specifically to the statement “.....Urban Renewal has made a vast wasteland of Old Memphis.” It should be understood that before an area can be designated as an Urban Renewal Clearance Area a preponderance of the structures must have deteriorated to a point that rehabilitation is not feasible or that mixed uses preclude the successful operation of businesses or residential structures. Thus, the deterioration was not the *result* of Urban Renewal, but rather the *cause*.

Included in one of the “vast wastelands” of Urban Renewal are City Hall, the State and County Office Buildings, the Federal Building, and the Convention Center. In others are expansion of hospital and medical school facilities into one of the finest Medical Centers in the nation; in another is St. Jude Hospital; in another is French Fort, Church on the River, WREG-TV, and the Rivermont; in another is the Georgia Street Elementary School; in another is Breakthrough – the site of over 500 dwelling units; in others, sites for the Downtown Campus of Shelby State Community College and supporting facilities; in another is the Light, Gas and Water headquarters, an expanded and redesigned Church Park, facilities for a cultural and entertainment area. Overall some 600 units of public housing for the elderly have been provided as well as over 600 non-public housing units.

Memphis Housing Authority is not unmindful of the problems included in relocation of both families and businesses. However, it should be noted that over 95% of the families have been relocated into homes which meet both local and federal standards of “decent, safe and sanitary” housing. In a few cases, admittedly, small businesses were inconven-

enced, and some found it impossible to survive. This, in all probability, would have occurred eventually even had they not been displaced. The day of supermarkets, convenience stores, etc. have made small operators almost a historical rather than a living entity.

It should further be noted that conversations were held with great numbers of people, including owners of property, operators of apartments and businesses, and interested citizens. With very few exceptions — Eldridge Wright, Joe Holland, the Phelan brothers, among others — the response was not encouraging. Owners and operators were not interested in spending the funds necessary to restore the buildings, and the citizenry did not appear interested in financing that which they proclaimed to be of importance.

The miles of new and improved streets and sewers, the eradication of open bayous by construction of culverts, the elimination of unsightly overhead electric lines, and provision of adequate gas and water facilities could be the subject of an extensive report.

We do not claim that Urban Renewal has been an unqualified success. Neither do we feel it has been an unqualified calamity as your writer implies. This is an attempt to speak to some of the positive accomplishments of the program which are frequently ignored.

RANDALL A. P. JOHNSON
ASSISTANT EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
MEMPHIS HOUSING AUTHORITY

POLITICS '75

In response to the questions put to candidates by CENTER CITY readers and published in our July 10th issue, Mike Cody, candidate for the City Council, at-large position 6, has submitted the following answers:

CENTER CITY READERS: Do you favor holding back on tax increases even at the expense of the public welfare and the qualitative growth of Memphis?

CODY: I do not favor blind adherence to any policy regardless of the consequences. The key is to be able to recognize when increased revenue measures are necessary and when they become self-defeating.

CENTER CITY READERS: In your mind, what is the purpose of a city? And what would you do to move Memphis towards the realization of that purpose?

CODY: A City should fulfill the twin needs of its inhabitants for diversity and community. Unfortunately, Memphis has failed to meet those needs, and has allowed divisiveness to be substituted for diversity, and disunity to be substituted for community. New City leadership is needed which facilitates creative inter-action among diverse groups, while at the same time uniting them all around common goals and purposes for the City as a whole.

CENTER CITY READERS: Would you support an amendment of the City Charter which would eliminate the seven at-large council seats and restructure the Council to nine or eleven members chosen by districts?

CODY: No. The at-large positions are important to bring people to City government who can be advocates for a city-wide point of view, rather than the views of a particular district.

CENTER CITY READERS: How would you go about organizing and utilizing the ideas and efforts of the neighborhoods in public affairs?

CODY: I think a promising model has been established in the Central Garden Area Association's sponsorship of a comprehensive plan for the future of their area, which has been approved in principle by both the Planning Commission and the City Council. Irrespective of whether neighborhood groups can afford to commission their own planning study, the City should make available members of the Planning Commission staff to work with these groups in identifying long-range community goals and, if possible, establishing a plan for implementing those goals. I favor, in short, a true "partnership" between City planners and those most affected by City planning.

CENTER CITY READERS: Do you favor a no-annexation policy — at least until we get the old city back in shape?

CODY: No. I think it would be short-sighted to declare a moratorium on annexation. A no-annexation policy would not make us any more

earthly delights

DOWNTOWN EXHIBITS

National Bank of Commerce (Lobby)

September—Eight artists from the Memphis Chapter of the National League of American Pen Women display their work*

First National Bank (Lobby)

September 22-27—Bronze sculptures by Clark Bronson*

Sterick Building (Lobby)

September—Watercolors by David Wade*

Memphis Area Chamber of Commerce (Lobby)

September—Photographs by Allen Rankin*

FILM

Lyceum Film Theatre

September 30—"Marat Sade"—First National Bank Auditorium—7:30 p.m.

Center Film Society

October 3—"McCabe and Mrs. Miller"—UT Student Activity Center Auditorium—7:30 p.m.

MUSIC

Brooks Art Gallery

October 5—String Quartet: Ann Spurbeck, violin; Lilah York, violin; Mary Ann Snyder, viola; Ann Ray, cellist—2:30 p.m.*

*FREE

capable of solving our present problems, and would be creating future problems if the City later finds itself surrounded by a ring of separately incorporated bedroom communities.

CENTER CITY READERS: Would you favor the City using general obligation bonds to build a Convention Center Hotel?

CODY: No. It would be a mistake to commit the City's full faith and credit for the benefit of a handful of private developers. But some creative alternatives should be considered, such as the establishment of a downtown redevelopment district with its own bond-issuing authority, property tax abatement or other tax incentives, or a joint venture between the City and the private sector.

CIVIC CENTER COMMUNITY CULINARY CLUB

NEW HOURS: 11:30 - 1:15

First Presbyterian Church, 166 Poplar Avenue

PRICE: \$1.50 per serving, including drink

MENU FOR SEPTEMBER 25 - OCTOBER 6

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 25

Barbecued Chicken, Lima Beans, Apple Sauce, Rolls

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 26

Ham, Macaroni-cheese, Turnip Greens, Corn Bread

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 29

Steak w/ onion gravy, Green Beans, Buttered carrots, Rolls

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 30

Turkey-dressing, English Peas, Cranberry sauce, Rolls

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 1

Spaghetti, Cole Slaw, French Bread

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 2

Fried Chicken, Cream Corn, Squash, Rolls

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 3

Meat Loaf, Whipped Potatoes, Turnip Greens, Corn Bread

MONDAY, OCTOBER 6

Roast Beef, Whipped Potatoes, Green Beans, Rolls



166 Poplar
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