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If They Build It, They Will Come [The Mayor's Institute on City Design]

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Why Build it

I have always wanted to live in the city, to be an urban dweller. But for most of my life I couldn't explain why, I didn't have the language. I couldn't tell you that I wanted to live amid activity; the comings and goings of commerce and entertainment offer excitement and a variety and multiplicity of choices. I wanted the convenience a city offers: driving to its major shopping district, or using public transit to visit a neighborhood shopping area,

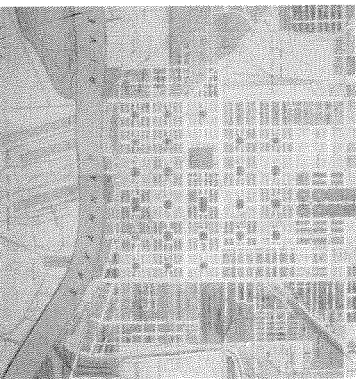
or walking to the local market. And, I wanted the proximity of neighbors: people who share the same excitement and choose to live in a community of similar people – a neighborhood.

A mayor who is faced with rebuilding a part of a city that has been dying for decades must understand principles of urban design – how design contributes to comfortable and successful urban living. The Mayors' Institute on City Design taught me those principles. It gave me the language to enthuse my constituents, to educate them and to encourage them to work together regardless of their separate agendas. And it helped us rebuild our downtown retail corridor, a part of our city that was about to take its last breath.

They Will Come



Opposite page: Broughton Street looking west, circa 1900.
Left: Downtown Savannah, circa 1900.
Background: Savannah city plan. Courtesy Metropolitan Planning Commission.



Top: River Street, downtown Savannah. Above: Savannah city plan. Courtesy Metropolitan Planning Commission.

Savannah, founded in 1733, is the oldest city in the largest state east of the Mississippi. Although the city is 17 miles from the Atlantic Ocean, the Savannah River, our northern boundary, offers remarkable accessibility as a deep water port. Our port, one of the five largest on the east coast, served cotton and rice shipping in the nineteenth century, operates as a container facility now and is home base for the 1996 Olympic yachting events.

Savannah's founder, General James Oglethorpe, created an unusual grid pattern. The city was conceived of as a collection of wards, each anchored by a square of uniform size and unique character. "Trust Lots" for civic and religious buildings were reserved along the squares. Rows of townhouses, built on "Tithing Lots" of equal size, lined most streets. This pattern was repeated into the nineteenth century, with 24 squares ultimately built.

King Cotton provided the wealth that funded the private homes designed by internationally-known architects. And, it was the ladies of Savannah who saved them from burning down. As General Sherman's March to the Sea reached the outskirts of Savannah, her gracious women met him and offered: "We will welcome you, house you, and feed you and your officers. Just promise us two things: Keep your soldiers out, and don't burn us down." That is why Savannah, unlike other Georgia cities,

enjoys two-hundred-plus years of architecture in America's largest historic landmark district.

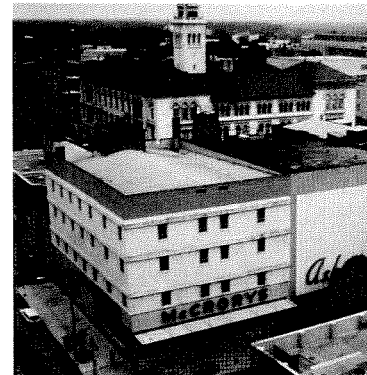
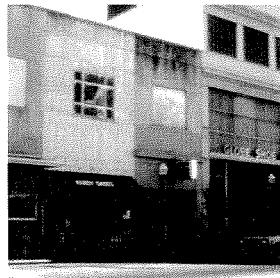
Today, Savannah has a population of about 140,000 in a metropolitan area of about 250,000. Our unique city plan remains intact; only three streets have been converted for one-way automobile traffic and only one square has been lost. Savannah has been rated one of the most beautiful of America's cities and one of the ten best for pedestrians. That is because our city was designed and built on a human scale.

Savannah's downtown is dominated by its squares and the Trust Lots. Today it serves three distinct populations: approximately 7,000 residents, five million annual visitors (including a brisk convention business) and 14,000 employees in our central business district, which includes numerous government offices, banking and shipping concerns, residences, churches, professional offices and the Savannah College of Art and Design.

Terranomics

By 1991, however, Broughton Street, the city's main downtown commercial corridor, was dying. The first-floor vacancy rate in buildings along Broughton Street approached 40 percent. Many buildings were boarded up and upper floors were vacant; others had lost their original facade designs to renovations during the 1940s and 1950s. The lure of the suburbs, the convenience of parking at shopping malls and the general social decline U.S. inner cities experienced during the previous five decades contributed to the problem.

The city was at a crossroads. Twelve studies commissioned by previous city administrations sat gathering dust. Now a developer, Terranomics, was proposing an ambitious scheme. If, over ten years, the city would commit to a \$25 million investment along six blocks on Broughton Street, the developers would spearhead an effort to attract \$52 million in private investment from national retailers. The



Left, center and above: Broughton Street in 1985. Courtesy Metropolitan Planning Commission.

public investment, more than \$4 million per block, would come from the taxpayers' pocketbooks.

The city council debated the proposal intensely; citizen task forces made recommendations and the newspapers published countless letters on the matter. By November, 1991, most of Savannah's citizens were against the proposal and most of the city's political and business leaders were in favor. Adding to the political furor, a municipal election was held that fall. Five new city council members were elected and I, a political newcomer, was elected mayor. The outgoing council decided not to vote on the proposal, leaving the decision to the incoming council.

all, the city would have to commit and spend its \$25 million with no guarantee that the developers would raise their \$52 million.

The new council approved the proposal by a 6-3 vote. I was firm in my belief, however, that it was a mistake. And so, for the first time in 48 years, a mayor vetoed a council resolution. The reaction was swift and strong, ranging from "What do you expect from a political newcomer!" to "She's got guts!" to "That's why we elected her and not the 21-year incumbent."

Those who believed that Terranomics was the last and only hope for Broughton Street mounted a political campaign to get the council to override my veto. Once again, the newspaper was full of reports and opinions. But this campaign was unsuccessful; the veto override failed; and the Terranomics proposal was added to the shelf with the other twelve studies to collect dust. It seemed to me that the entire city, including the council members, were looking at me and asking, "Okay, big shot, now what are you going to do?"

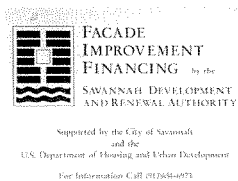
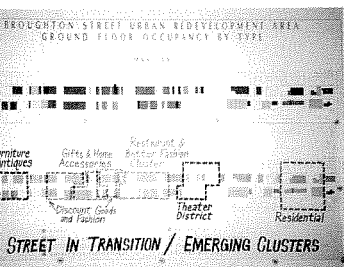
The Mayors' Institute on City Design

Lucky for me, soon after the vote I received an invitation to attend the Mayors' Institute. I suspect Charleston Mayor Joseph P. Riley, Jr., a founder of the institute, must have heard the news from Savannah (only ninety miles south of his city,) and taken pity on me. I recognized the invitation as an opportunity to present Broughton Street's problems to experts in planning, architecture, landscape design, housing and transportation — and to find a workable solution that could win the support of Savannah's city council, business leadership and residents.

Out of all of the lessons I learned during those three days, one has been the centerpiece of the Broughton Street revitalization. In a democracy, the "you" (elected officials) are too often pitted against the "they" (residents). The lesson is: "If you build it, they will not come. But if they



I was against the Terranomics proposal. Only six blocks of the commercial corridor were included in the plan. The plan called for national retailers who already had a presence in the indoor malls on Savannah's Southside. The proposal only guaranteed one job for a Savannahian. Worst of



Signs showing transition: new commercial clusters and facade improvements.
 Courtesy Savannah Development and Renewal Authority.

build it, they will come.” If they (the residents, property owners, retailers and others) decide on, design and direct the street’s revitalization to fit their needs, then they will use it.

My first step was to present this lesson to the city council. The council members were skeptical. I realized I had to build public support for my ideas. So we sponsored a city design institute for Savannah itself, bringing eight experts and more than 500 residents together in our civic center for a day of learning.

A city planner, architect, landscape architect, housing specialist and Mayors’ Institute regional coordinator gave presentations during the morning. They showed slides and films and drew pictures on an overhead projector, teaching the principles of planning and urban design. After lunch, leaders from the many constituencies concerned about Broughton Street offered their perspectives on the problems: inappropriate zoning, lack of racial diversity, lack of upper-story housing, lack of citizen input, poor public transit facilities (parking and bus routes) and crime. They asserted the absolute need to maintain the status of our historic landmark district, through which Broughton Street traverses.

Displays of the previous 13 plans were mounted in the civic center lobby. By lunch time, citizens could be heard reviewing the studies and explaining why each was not a workable solution, because of how they did not use the basic principles of urban design just presented. By the end of the day, citizens were discussing the problems to be overcome, problems of which they had not been aware before.

The Development and Renewal Authority

City Council agreed to form the Savannah Development and Renewal Authority under an act of the state legislature. SDRA’s mission is twofold. First, it conducts and carries out master planning activities for downtown Savannah (restricting SDRA’s authority to only Broughton Street would

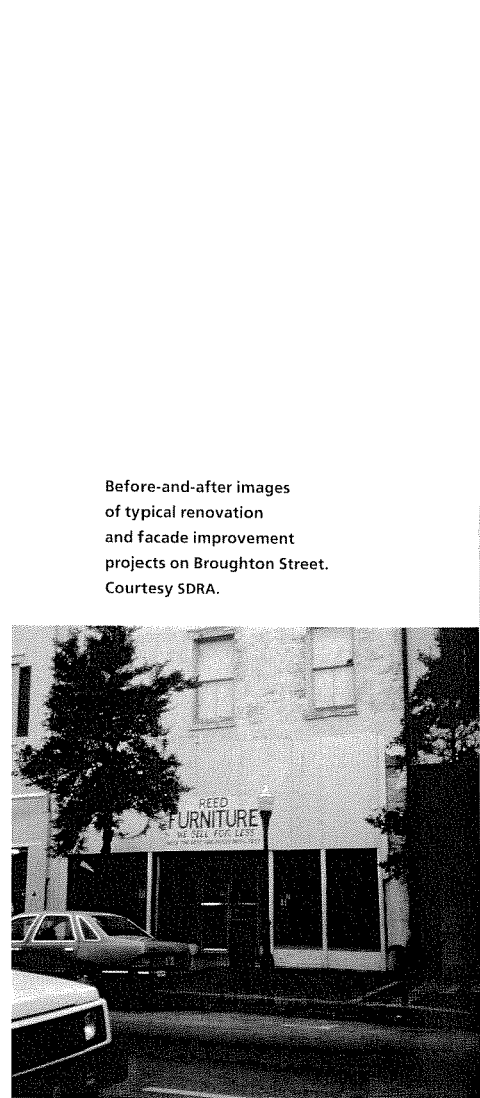
inhibit its success). Second, it seeks to improve the economic climate throughout downtown Savannah, with special emphasis on Broughton Street. The legislative charter gave SDRA the powers it needed to pursue those missions, powers to which only an authority enacted by the state has access.

The authority is governed by board with 25 members, who are appointed by the council. The board is not a blue-ribbon panel of business interests; rather, it includes men and women who represent the diversity of our city, geographically, ethnically and professionally. Members of its technical advisory committee (local experts, including developers, architects and city staff) attend all meetings but do not have a vote. SDRA is supported by three employees: a director, assistant and secretary. SDRA opened its office on Broughton Street, renting the first floor of a newly renovated building.

SDRA does not have final authority in the spending of city funds; that is a power delegated to City Council. Otherwise, SDRA is autonomous, recommending funding packages to the council and implementing those programs funded. SDRA also raises private funds to support certain initiatives.

SDRA began operations in May, 1993, initiating several strategies to stimulate investment on Broughton Street. The authority formed relationships with all the property owners and merchants on the street, developed a centralized inventory of properties, worked with commercial Realtors to market the properties, established a low-interest loan program to stimulate historically appropriate facade renovations and identified opportunities for retail and service businesses. SDRA also began to coordinate improved street cleanliness and holiday promotions and implemented a plan for parking improvements.

Within its first twenty-four months of operation, SDRA has produced impressive results. The street’s first-floor occupancy is up to 80 percent; a net gain of nineteen new businesses have created



Before-and-after images of typical renovation and facade improvement projects on Broughton Street. Courtesy SDRA.





Right: City Lights Theatre, renovated in 1995. Courtesy SDRA.
 Far right: Downtown Savannah. Courtesy Georgia Department of Industry, Trade and Tourism.
 Below: Broughton Street today. Courtesy SDRA.
 Oposite Page: The Firehouse Restaurant, renovated in 1994. Courtesy SDRA.



221 net, new jobs. Twenty-two building renovation projects have generated \$4.5 million in private investment, with ten properties being acquired. Apartments and residential loft spaces have been created on upper floors and zoning ordinances changed to allow this mixed use.¹ The citizens of Savannah have seen more than \$8 of private investment for every \$1 of public investment from SDRA. It has worked: they have built it, and they are using it.

The next priority is parking, a complex and difficult problem given our downtown's need to support residents, visitors and employees within a city plan of squares. The first phase of SDRA's parking recommendations has been approved; a 450-space garage within one block of Broughton Street broke ground in 1995. Other components currently under way are design guidelines for renovation and a business retention and recruitment program.

Local government, the business community (tourism, retail and services) and the residents of downtown Savannah have formed a successful partnership. The community now has the responsibility, the authority and the resources to decide, design and direct this renewal effort. Today in Savannah, the city council is not telling our residents and tax-paying property owners what to do; they are telling us.

Because of this, and because of the lessons the Mayors' Institute offered me, Broughton Street is breathing. Its sidewalks are full of shoppers and visitors; restaurants of all varieties have sprung up; a cluster of shops selling antiques, furniture and home accessories is firmly established. A restored theater district is emerging. This success story has only begun; three decades of decay cannot be undone in two years. But the approach has been determined, the citizens are in charge and I have no doubt that the success will continue.

