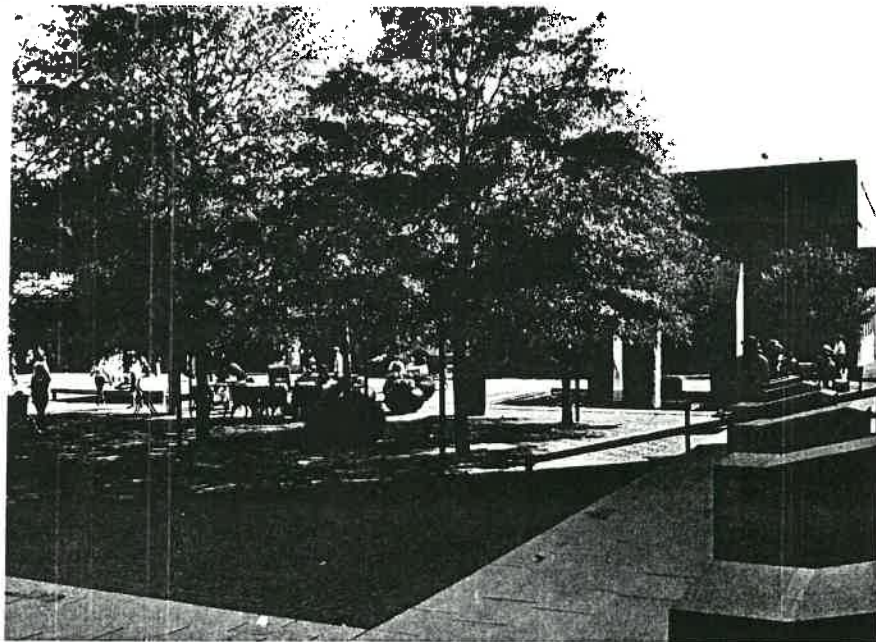


The Pedestrian Mall Downtown

By Kathy Alford



Fifty years ago, downtown was simply "Town." It was where just about everybody worked or shopped or lived. There was no real alternative; nobody wanted one. Things were just fine.

Then, in the fifties, just like in countless other localities across the country, an erosion began in the center city. The economic sands were moving northward, sliding insidiously away from the middle of town. As the first shopping center was built, downtown slipped a notch, clutched a bit.

Urban sprawl was what they called it.

Downtown Charlottesville held its own for quite a while; not quite as pretty as it once was, but still hanging in there. Signs on storefronts were more garish, illuminated, less appropriate for the noble architecture of the turn-of-the-century buildings. A few merchants applied modern facades to their building fronts on East Main Street, trying to compete with the shopping center's style.

But there were still the old-guard department stores downtown,

stores where the elevators gleamed quietly with brass, and Southern salesladies were fragrant with Shalimar. Downtown had its following, people who refused to go anywhere else for an Easter dress, to visit Santa, or to have lunch.

It wasn't thriving, but it wasn't shabby, not just yet. Inconvenient, maybe. Shoppers would drive around sometimes for half an hour waiting for a parking place, watching the clock, watching the children fidget in the back seat. But, like chewing gum on the sole of your shoe, that was just downtown. It was all right.

But then there were more shopping centers, and more subdivisions built on the edge of town. The race was on along the northern corridor. More burger houses and discount stores were going up along a road already thoroughly littered with drink cans and mustard packets.

Back on Main Street, the merchants were wondering if it was worth the effort to polish that window this morning, to update that merchandise order. It was no longer just all right; it had become shabby.

People were beginning to say how it was too bad about downtown. Maybe this was just the

way it was supposed to be, maybe it was natural for a city to wither at its core, and thrive only on the fringes.

Downtown Charlottesville, Inc. didn't think so, nor did the City Manager, Cole Hendrix.

Shortly after coming to Charlottesville in January of 1971, Hendrix spoke to the downtown merchant's group, outlining factors he considered vital to a viable shopping area. These included easy access to shopping, ample parking, a pleasant atmosphere, and a sufficient variety of goods and services. Hendrix pledged his support toward the revitalization of the central business district.

Hendrix and Downtown Charlottesville, Inc. met several more times. Late in 1971, a Central City Commission was formed, consisting primarily of area businessmen, and including representatives from City Council and the University of Virginia as well. The Commission eventually arrived at two basic survival needs of downtown Charlottesville: improved parking, and improved atmosphere. Perhaps, the Commission suggested, a pedestrian mall might answer both needs.

An architectural firm from New York and San Francisco, Lawrence

Halprin and Associates, was selected to do a master plan study for downtown Charlottesville. The Halprin firm had acquired a reputation for turning the shabby into the spectacular, in such cases as Ghiradelli Square in San Francisco, and Nicollet Mall in Minneapolis.

The firm began with two and a half days of community workshops in March of 1973, to determine what the citizens envisioned for downtown. In addition to gaining public input, the workshop also raised the consciousness of the citizens about their city. Why, Charlottesville is a beautiful town, a historic town, the participants discovered. They decided something must be done about downtown.

The Halprin firm conducted master plan studies of the entire central city, involving the economics, traffic, and land use of the area. A pedestrian mall was an economic feasibility, traffic could be easily routed around a mall, and land use could be made far more economically viable. The Central City Commission approved the master plan and the proposal for a pedestrian mall was submitted to City Council. Due to conflicts of interest, only two Council members were allowed to vote on the project, which had by now become highly controversial. There were angry letters, angry phone calls. The business community was split down the middle on the issue. It became a quick trigger to many heated arguments, both in public and private meetings around town.

Finally, the Council members cast their "lonely and courageous votes," as a local editorial phrased it, and the deed was done. Charlottesville would have a pedestrian mall downtown.

Construction began in December of 1975. The final design, a modification of the Halprin concept, included seven blocks of pedestrian mall on East Main Street, bricked in a herringbone pattern. Traffic was rerouted in a clockwise direction on two parallel streets for safe and convenient traffic flow.

A 525-car parking garage was constructed by the City, with space for offices and speciality retail stores. Two large parking lots were built on neighboring streets.

A large open area, known as the Central Place, was built on the mall, leading from a side street. There were trees, lighting, and a fountain; it was ideal for concerts, fairs and exhibits of all kinds.

Construction costs of the mall and the Central Place came to \$3.3 million dollars. Eighty percent of

the project was financed by the City; the merchants paid for the remainder in special tax assessments. The assessment, and the hubbub and inconvenience of the construction only served to further irritate those merchants who opposed the project, which was a significant number in the beginning.

"Many businessmen simply wanted no part of a pedestrian mall," said Cole Hendrix. "In the



beginning, there were little more than a handful of proponents. But we knew that as the bricks were laid, and they became able to actually experience the mall, that they would realize its value."

"That's just what happened," he continued. "By the time the mall was completed, the overwhelming majority was in favor of it."

It has been completed for four years now. Was it a success?

"Absolutely," said Page Foster. Foster is a downtown retailer and property owner. His clothing business on East Main Street has increased by 50 percent since mall construction. "Property values have gone up 18½ percent every year since 1977," Foster said, "and before then they had been decreasing at the rate of 15 percent a year." There's no doubt about it. The future of downtown looks great.

"Perhaps," said C.C. Wells, downtown resident and owner of a bookstore on East Main since 1950, "as far as my individual business is concerned, the mall hasn't really had that much effect. But it was certainly a good thing in many ways.

The street is now free from the noise and dirt of traffic; it is totally safe to children. The mall has also encouraged many new businesses to locate downtown that are small, locally-owned businesses. It's this sort of business, of course, that is the key to the survival of downtown."

Ed Haigh, owner of Dixie News, opposed the project from the beginning, and is only barely resigned to it now. "It's hurt my business," he said. "My newsstand depended heavily on traffic passing by for sales. Now that there's no traffic, my sales are down. I think it would be different if all the merchants would decide together to change our hours, to become competitive with the shopping centers, but I don't think that will ever happen."

"Business gets better every year," said Mary Williams, owner of the Nook Restaurant that has such a fiercely devoted clientele that it would probably survive if it suddenly found itself astride a railroad track. Nevertheless, Mrs. Williams served as president of Downtown Charlottesville, Inc. during the planning of the pedestrian mall. She supported it strongly, simply because she "just knew it would be good for downtown."

"And it has been. It's a very positive thing," she said.

The downtown merchants do all agree on one thing: that revitalization of downtown requires effort, commitment, and hard work. It took twenty years for downtown to become neglected to the danger point. Nobody really expected it to rise up in a blaze of glory overnight, just because it had bricks where asphalt used to be. Problems were caused by a complicated interaction of shortsightedness, narrow vision, and rapid development and the solution was not likely to be simple.

In the four years since the construction of the mall, there has been a huge increase in interest downtown, as a prestigious and profitable place to live and to work. Individual renovation efforts of homes and businesses continue throughout the area; new enterprise is continually coming downtown. Once again, downtown is a proud, very important shopping area in Charlottesville.

It was the first step that was the tough one.

With a firm nod to the legacy and the tradition of a strong central city, the City of Charlottesville took that step, by laying the first brick on East Main Street.

Photos by Linda Peacock