

No Better Way? The Kalamazoo Mall and the Legacy of Pedestrian Malls

by
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On August 19, 1959, the battle to save America's crumbling downtowns opened a new and important front. In Kalamazoo, Michigan, about fifty thousand reporters, citizens, and dignitaries witnessed the unveiling of the first pedestrian shopping mall in the United States. Amid a carnival-like atmosphere featuring clowns and a live band, the Kalamazoo Mall opened to throngs of curious shoppers. Once clogged with automobiles, this shopping area now featured two full blocks reserved solely for pedestrians.

Nearly forty years later, another throng of residents and dignitaries clustered in downtown Kalamazoo. On October 9, 1998, the party atmosphere of 1959 was again on display, with concerts, fireworks, and entertainers. However, this time the ceremony was to mark the reversal of what had been so highly praised decades earlier. The Kalamazoo Mall, so long an icon of downtown renewal, was reopening to automobile traffic, having failed to restore the city's flagging downtown economy.¹

What happened between 1959 and 1998 to cause Kalamazoo to give up on its pedestrian mall? The answer to this question has a significance that reaches beyond the city's history. The mall on Burdick Street was the first step in a movement that resulted in the creation of more than two hundred pedestrian malls across the United States.² Those who embraced the concept sought to restore American downtowns by making the urban center a more attractive place for pedestrians. By the late 1970s and throughout the following years, designers began to look on these malls with a more jaundiced eye. Planners revised their theories, arguing that pedestrian-only environments were actually harmful to downtowns. The same cities that had once removed

¹ Kris Rzepczynski, "From Wheels to Heels: The Mall City," see the Kalamazoo Public Library website, <http://www.kpl.gov/local-history/general/mall-city.aspx> (accessed January 28, 2010).

² Jennifer Steinhauer, "When Shoppers Walk Away from Pedestrian Malls," *New York Times*, November 5, 1996, sec. D.

automobiles from areas of their downtowns now enthusiastically brought them back.

Although numerous reasons have been proposed for the failure of pedestrian malls, their lingering effects on urban development remain underexplored. Despite good intentions, most pedestrian-mall projects ignored the extent of the social and economic problems facing downtowns, focusing instead on aesthetic issues. The intense debate about reopening these malls to automobile traffic is instructive. Those opposed argued for tranquility and aesthetics and tended to ignore economic issues, while proponents of the return of automobiles saw this as the answer to all difficulties facing downtowns.

Using the Kalamazoo Mall as a case study, this article will examine the legacy of pedestrian malls by depicting how these malls have been perceived by city planners as well as the public at large, both at their creation and at their demise. Many Kalamazoo residents felt that the issue of automobiles vs. pedestrians was of paramount importance. This belief was shared by planners and citizens throughout the United States, reflecting a broader search for quick solutions to the problems of urban decay, in spite of increasing scholarship arguing for more sophisticated approaches to urban renewal. Ultimately, the history of the Kalamazoo Mall demonstrates how the creation and downfall of pedestrian malls worked to distract policymakers and citizens from discussing the basic problems facing America's downtowns.

The pedestrian-mall movement originated in western Europe. In 1926 the first reported instance of a street being turned into a car-free zone occurred in Essen, Germany, as part of a successful plan to increase retail sales.³ Over the years, the pedestrian-mall concept became popular throughout Europe, especially after World War II. Harvey Rubenstein attributes the success of European pedestrian malls to "increased urban growth, affluence, a large number of cars, and the dense urban fabric with a relatively high residential population."⁴ Automobiles clogged the narrow streets of older European cities, while a large population of apartment dwellers lived in or near the urban core. Unlike their struggling American counterparts, European urban areas were ideally suited to maintain successful pedestrian districts. As Kent

³ Witold Rybczynski, "Space: The Design of the Urban Environment," in *Making Cities Work: Prospects and Policies for Urban America*, ed. Robert P. Inman (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009), 99.

⁴ Harvey M. Rubenstein, *Pedestrian Malls, Streetscapes, and Urban Spaces* (New York: John Wiley, 1992), 15.

Robertson notes, "The objective of downtown *revitalization* . . . was a low priority in Europe," because urban centers still were vital.⁵

America's situation was quite different. Beginning in the late 1930s, and continuing during the following decades, urban areas within the United States suffered major declines. The rate of population growth fell and so-called economic dry rot was becoming familiar in central city areas. Wealthier residents moved to the more appealing suburbs. They were closely followed by businesses, which found "the highways and wide-open spaces of suburbia . . . increasingly attractive."⁶ The evisceration of their downtowns was distressing for city leaders, not least because of the decline in crucial tax revenues. These areas also ceased to serve as landmarks for residents and tourists. By the 1950s, downtown retail districts paled in comparison to the new suburban shopping malls, which had become economic powerhouses. The malls had state-of-the-art climate control, provided a protected environment away from urban crime, offered shoppers a great variety of stores, and supplied acres of free parking. If they were to keep the urban core economically viable, city leaders and those retailers who had remained downtown needed a solution that would reverse the tide and coax shoppers back downtown.

Even though America's and Europe's central cities faced different challenges, many policymakers believed that the European pedestrian mall was the solution to reviving American downtowns. This conclusion was based on several theories that appear, in retrospect, to have rested on specious assumptions. In 1956 the first serious blueprint for a pedestrian mall in the United States was created by the architectural firm Victor Gruen Associates. Designed for Fort Worth, Texas, the plan called for "an area of roughly a square mile [to] be circled with a ring road feeding into six huge, oblong garages . . . which would each penetrate from the ring-road perimeter deep into the downtown area."⁷ The downtown would be kept free of automobiles, with a pedestrian

⁵ Kent A. Robertson, "The Status of the Pedestrian Mall in American Downtowns," *Urban Affairs Review* 26, no. 2 (1990): 251 (emphasis in original). Also see idem, *Pedestrian Malls and Skynwalks: Traffic Separation Strategies in American Downtowns* (Brookfield, Vt.: Avebury, 1994). These two sources provide the best historical overview of the pedestrian mall in the United States and also offer a brief discussion of European pedestrian malls.

⁶ Jon C. Teaford, *The Rough Road to Renaissance: Urban Revitalization in America, 1940-1985* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 18.

⁷ Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961), 448.

mall as the centerpiece of the new urban core. Aesthetically, the mall would be similar to suburban malls. There would be plenty of benches and greenery, and the plan even suggested building canopies and glass-enclosed walkways in order to create a more comfortable experience.⁸

Although Gruen was a well-known architect, he was a curious choice for the task of remaking America's downtowns. Gruen had earned his reputation as a creator of the very suburban malls that were destroying the central cities. He had designed such famous structures as the Northland Mall near Detroit in 1954, and the Southdale Mall (the first enclosed shopping mall in the country) in Edina, Minnesota, in 1956. Despite Gruen's lack of experience planning urban centers, he was confident that his approach would work. Indeed, Gruen claimed that downtowns and suburbs were "interchangeable spaces that begged identical solutions for their merchants."⁹ Thus, his solution to the problems faced by deteriorating downtowns was to use the same strategies so successfully employed by suburban malls, including attempts at climate control and free parking (albeit in garages instead of parking lots). In effect, Gruen called for downtowns to be transformed into large shopping malls. *U.S. News and World Report* stated that Gruen's plan would transform downtown Fort Worth into a "Big Shop center," noting with a trace of skepticism that Gruen felt that "the same techniques that have made shopping centers so successful can be applied with equal value to downtown areas."¹⁰

As dubious as Gruen's reasoning may seem now, it fit in perfectly with the ideology and beliefs held by numerous city leaders at the time. In the wake of urban decline, many blamed physical problems, rather than political or social ones, for downtown decay. As Jon Teaford describes it, "The principal strategy of the older cities in their battle for continued supremacy was to beat suburbia at its own game . . . a physical renovation of the city could erase the existing flaws in urban

⁸ The pedestrian mall itself is a prototype of a series of urban-renewal projects in the 1950s and 1960s which were designed to create the "simplified, managed commercial environment" of the suburban mall within a downtown landscape. Other examples include Toronto's Eaton Center and various "festival marketplaces" in, for example, Boston and Baltimore. See Alison Isenberg, *Downtown America: A History of the Place and the People Who Made It* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 198 (quotation). Isenberg's book provides a useful analysis of the concept of urban renewal modeled on suburban shopping centers. Also see Teaford, *Rough Road to Renaissance*.

⁹ M. Jeffrey Hardwick, *Mall Maker: Victor Gruen, Architect of an American Dream* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 163.

¹⁰ Quoted in *ibid.*, 183.

life.”¹¹ To this end, city planners pushed aesthetically oriented approaches such as gentrification and the elimination of pollution.

Other planners saw a need for physical redevelopment specifically designed to improve social conditions. These leaders subscribed to the ideas of writers and activists like Jane Jacobs, who advocated designs that would create and support a traditional “walking city,” where people would necessarily interact with each other. According to these planners, “human-scaled and active streets [were] the key to achiev[ing] successful urban renewal in both commercial and residential districts.”¹² Although the specifics of these groups’ plans differed, each faction assumed that physical changes to the city would be the primary means of reinvigorating downtown business districts. Taken in this light, Gruen’s plan, and his insistence that architecture “must relate directly to . . . the physical shaping of human environment,” appeared quite logical.¹³

Ultimately, Gruen’s proposal was rejected by the citizens of Fort Worth, who balked at the project’s high cost. By that time, however, Gruen’s designs had become known throughout the country. Despite having “no more experience than the ambitious Fort Worth drawings [and] his suburban shopping mall successes,” Gruen became a major figure among urban planners.¹⁴ In April 1957 another city with a declining urban core recruited Victor Gruen Associates to examine its struggling downtown. Kalamazoo, Michigan, was suffering from problems that were rampant in many American cities. Once prosperous due to its thriving paper industry, Kalamazoo was facing the same problems of deindustrialization and urban disinvestment encountered by many other midwestern and northeastern cities in the late 1950s. As industries automated production and simultaneously relocated plants to the Sun Belt, the so-called Rust Belt was left to cope with increasing economic stagnation.¹⁵

¹¹ Teaford, *Rough Road to Renaissance*, 7.

¹² Robertson, *Pedestrian Malls and Skywalks*, 24.

¹³ Ray Herbert, “Rebirth of Nation’s Cities Owes Debt to Architect Victor Gruen,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 18, 1960, sec. D.

¹⁴ Hardwick, *Mall Maker*, 191.

¹⁵ Kalamazoo’s economic situation was a small version of much larger economic trends. See Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, 2d ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005), for an examination of postwar deindustrialization. Academic studies of deindustrialization in Kalamazoo are lacking. For brief histories of Kalamazoo industry, see the Kalamazoo Public Library’s website, <http://www.kpl.gov/local-history/business/> (accessed January 28, 2010).

Both deindustrialization and suburbanization had taken a toll on Kalamazoo's urban core. According to City Manager Clarence Elliott, downtown property values had decreased by more than one million dollars by 1959. Concern centered on the highly congested strip of South Burdick Street. Surveys reportedly showed that 60 percent of automobiles in the downtown area were "just passing through."¹⁶ City leaders hoped that Gruen could devise a way to change that pattern.

As it turned out, Gruen's method rested on familiar underpinnings. In 1958, after a year of study and analysis, he unveiled to city planners his proposal for downtown renewal. Titled *Kalamazoo 1980*, the plan was written from the perspective of a resident of Kalamazoo in that year, when the city would be enjoying great success in the wake of effective urban revitalization. The plan described "a peripheral road [ringing] the central business district, gathering traffic from the tributary thoroughfares and funneling it into the perimeter parking areas."¹⁷ The central city streets were reserved for pedestrians, although a shuttle bus might take tired shoppers back to their cars. Like any good suburban mall, portions of the area were roofed and climate controlled. Speakers placed along the streets would play Muzak. *Kalamazoo 1980* was almost identical to Gruen's earlier designs for Fort Worth. In his highly critical biography of Gruen, M. Jeffrey Hardwick suggests that Gruen intended to recycle his Fort Worth plan from the beginning of his work in Kalamazoo. For example, Gruen reused old Fort Worth speeches, with notations that reminded him to "Insert Local Data" about Kalamazoo.¹⁸

Kalamazoo 1980 appealed to local planners because it confirmed their belief that downtown renewal could be accomplished through physical change. "If automobiles are to continue using our downtown streets, there will soon be little room left for those person-to-person activities that are the essence of our business, social, and cultural life," the plan stated.¹⁹ By changing the physical layout to increase pedestrianism, *Kalamazoo 1980* would restore the human presence necessary for a great downtown. On a more pragmatic level, the plan seemed feasible. It

¹⁶ Clarence Elliott, "Long-Term Benefits of a Shoppers' Mall," *American City* 79 (March 1964): 91.

¹⁷ Victor Gruen Associates, Larry Smith and Company, *Kalamazoo 1980* (Detroit: Victor Gruen Associates, 1958); available in Kalamazoo Mall: Historical Files (1958-1999), City of Kalamazoo Archives (hereafter Kalamazoo Archives), Kalamazoo, Mich.

¹⁸ Hardwick, *Mall Maker*, 191.

¹⁹ Gruen Associates, Smith and Co., *Kalamazoo 1980*.

centered on construction as the answer to urban woes and would require an overhaul of Kalamazoo's layout, not its social structure.

Although *Kalamazoo 1980* was appealing, the problem was how to finance it. Thus it was easy for politicians and businessmen to decide to implement the project in phases, beginning with "the simplest aspect of Gruen's grandiose urban plans," the downtown pedestrian mall.²⁰ City leaders and merchants believed that a mall would be far easier to construct than a ring highway or massive parking garages and that by itself the mall could achieve some of the positive social effects promised by the plan. Accordingly, they gave approval to begin construction of a two-block car-free mall on South Burdick Street. The Downtown Kalamazoo Association, a coalition of two hundred local merchants, agreed to split the \$65,000 cost of construction with city government.²¹ Construction proved to be relatively swift and problem free, and in mid-August 1959 the Kalamazoo Mall opened for business.

The decision to make construction of the pedestrian mall the first step may have made sense on a pragmatic level, but it would have serious negative ramifications. The pedestrian mall became the centerpiece for Kalamazoo's urban renewal, not only overshadowing further physical alterations planned for the city center but also precluding discussion of the deeper economic and social problems plaguing most downtowns. From the beginning, several city leaders recognized the potential problem of premature complacency and tried to forestall it by controlling the public's perception of the mall, reiterating that it was merely one component of a larger plan and not a solution in and of itself. For example, the 1959 *Polk's Kalamazoo City Directory* describes the mall as "the first step in a long-range program designed to convert the entire downtown area into a shopping plaza."²² City Manager Clarence Elliott was similarly cautious in interviews. In 1963 he stated that "a pedestrian shopping mall is no cure-all for downtown problems," again stressing the necessity of "a continuous, long-range plan."²³ In 1964 he warned readers that "malls are not wonder drugs," disdainfully noting that "some people, even in Kalamazoo, fail to realize this."²⁴

²⁰ Hardwick, *Mall Maker*, 196.

²¹ "Kalamazoo's Mall Is 30 and Prospering," *New York Times*, August 10, 1989, sec. C.

²² *Polk's Kalamazoo City Directory* (Detroit: R. L. Polk and Company, 1959), vii.

²³ Clarence Elliott, "An Evaluation of the Kalamazoo Mall," August 1963, in *Kalamazoo Mall: Historical Files (1958-1999)*, Kalamazoo Archives.

²⁴ Idem, "Long-Term Benefits," 92.

Elliott could doubtless recall many exaggerated presentations of the Kalamazoo Mall's potential. When Mayor Edward Brantley of St. Petersburg, Florida, attended the opening festivities, he commented effusively that "the entire nation will be watching this practical approach to the solution of a serious problem," neglecting to mention the other components of Gruen's plan.²⁵ A 1959 article in the *Kalamazoo Gazette's* magazine section said that the "bold auto-ban plan could become the salvation of Downtown America." The article quoted one confident Kalamazoo resident: "A lot of cities'll build a mall like this. It's the only thing that's going to save these has-been downtowns."²⁶ For these people the pedestrian mall was not a small component of a complicated plan but a complete solution. Even Ray Dykema, head of the Downtown Kalamazoo Association, got caught up in the mall fever. "Most downtown people are itching to get on a wagon that's going places. They're looking for a program that is achieving action. I think they'll find it in our mall," he boasted.²⁷

This perception of the Kalamazoo Mall as the savior of downtown led to exaggerated celebrations of its initial success. A *Life Magazine* article in October 1959, barely two months after the mall's opening, marveled at how "business is booming [and] property values are up."²⁸ The following year, *Polk's Kalamazoo City Directory* crowed over "the success of the program," pointing to "increased retail sales, a higher volume of pedestrian traffic . . . and a rapid climb in property values."²⁹ Those eager to view the mall as the solution to urban woes were quick to rejoice at its early achievements, ignoring those who thought that this initial wave of success was due more to curiosity and heavy advertising than anything else. Gruen was not surprised at the turn of events. In February 1960 he commented hopefully, "By doing the last step first . . . one gains promotional value . . . and may spur overall downtown redevelopment faster than would otherwise be possible."³⁰ A few months later, however, Gruen had changed his tune. Blasting Kalamazoo as "lucky" so far, he compared building the mall first to "having a cocktail for breakfast" and then warned that if more action did not follow, "you will set back planning in the United

²⁵ "Compliments to Kalamazoo," *Kalamazoo Gazette*, August 19, 1959.

²⁶ Homer F. Dowdy, "The Nation's First Downtown Shoppers' Mall," *The Great Lakelands* (magazine supplement to the *Kalamazoo Gazette*), October 1959, 9.

²⁷ Quoted in *ibid.*, 23.

²⁸ "Downtown Gets Uplift," *Life Magazine*, October 26, 1959.

²⁹ *Polk's Kalamazoo City Directory* (Detroit: R. L. Polk and Company, 1960), vii.

³⁰ Hayden Bradford, "Keep Plan Moving: Gruen," *Kalamazoo Gazette*, February 14, 1960.

States by ten years.”³¹ Jane Jacobs agreed with Gruen, possibly making a veiled reference to the Kalamazoo Mall in her criticism of “dinky and timid designs . . . [that isolate] a few shopping streets in the fashion of suburban shopping malls, and [surround] them with dead borders of parking and access.”³²

Kalamazoo residents ignored these warnings, finding their new mall to be sufficient by itself. In 1963 voters rejected a bond proposal to fund the remainder of the *Kalamazoo 1980* plan, effectively rejecting Gruen’s proposal except for the mall.³³ Doubtless finances played a major role in the voters’ decision, but it also seems probable that they had been lulled into a false sense of security by the continual stream of reminders of the mall’s success. *American City* printed an article in 1960 filled with praise for the mall, which now included a third city block. A Maytag representative who worked on the mall declared: “The mall brings people downtown. We have noticed that we are getting more business than ever before.”³⁴ Four years later, the *Kalamazoo Gazette* noted that since 1959 gross retail sales for downtown stores were up and there had been a 30 percent increase in pedestrian traffic. In this article, Elton Ham, of the Kalamazoo Municipal Research Bureau, remarked, “All indices indicate success . . . it [the mall] has done more than we could have hoped for.”³⁵ Even Clarence Elliott, who still had doubts, boasted in *American City* of the mall’s success and the “almost unanimous enthusiasm for the move.”³⁶ Thus, while city planners were disappointed that Gruen’s entire plan had failed to secure financing from voters, they felt comfortable about the mall’s effect on downtown. Richard Salvati, Elliot’s administrative assistant, spoke for many when he said that the mall was “just a start, but it’s paid off in the fullest sense.”³⁷

Numerous city planners across the United States shared Salvati’s perception about pedestrian malls, and many cities began planning their

³¹ Idem, “Planner Urges Speed-Up of Downtown Program Here,” *Kalamazoo Gazette*, May 10, 1960.

³² Jacobs, *Death and Life of Great American Cities*, 448.

³³ Jerry Morton, “Kalamazoo’s New Look Nearly Five Years Old,” *Kalamazoo Gazette*, August 16, 1964.

³⁴ “Merchant Views on Kalamazoo’s Shopping Mall,” *American City* 75 (December 1960): 95.

³⁵ Morton, “Kalamazoo’s New Look.”

³⁶ Elliott, “Long-Term Benefits,” 92.

³⁷ Quoted in Jess Solters, “The Burdick Mall: Another Viewpoint,” *Kalamazoo Gazette*, February 25, 1965.

own malls in the wake of the tremendous publicity surrounding the Kalamazoo facility. According to the International Downtown Association, about two hundred cities opened pedestrian malls during the two decades following the Kalamazoo Mall's creation.³⁸ These ventures were greeted with the same sort of hyperbole as in Kalamazoo's case. A *New York Times* article, written about three months after the pedestrian mall's inception in the United States, featured the bold headline, "Shopping Malls Proving Success." The author was less exuberant than the headline writer, admitting that "the jury is still out on the efficacy of city shopping malls," but he swiftly asserted that "the verdict is expected to be favorable to their continuation and expansion." Although the article ended by noting that "some of the mall planners . . . point out that the mall itself is not the ultimate solution," this remark appeared only after numerous comments from enthusiastic retailers and shoppers.³⁹

Early successes reinforced the public's perception that building a pedestrian mall was the central component of urban renewal. In 1962 the *Los Angeles Times* declared that the pedestrian mall was emerging as "an accepted part of the physical and economic life of many . . . urban centers," pointing to the recently opened malls in Pomona, California, and Rochester, New York, as effective examples. Even though the Pomona mall was brand new, the article noted that "to some extent the success of Pomona's mall . . . already is assured."⁴⁰ With Pomona reporting a 20 percent increase in retail sales after the mall's opening, the *Times* seemed to be justified in its praise. Two decades later, the *Journal of the American Planning Association* voiced a similar judgment, reporting that "an early review of fourteen pedestrian malls . . . found retail sales in the first post-construction year to have increased by 7 percent to 30 percent."⁴¹

Initial criticisms directed at pedestrian malls generally centered on physical issues, especially parking. In 1960, the Montgomery Ward store located on the Kalamazoo Mall moved out, reportedly because of lack of support from management for the mall concept—the company

³⁸ "Kalamazoo's Mall Is 30."

³⁹ Edmond J. Barnett, "Shopping Malls Proving Success," *New York Times*, November 15, 1959, sec. R.

⁴⁰ Ray Herbert, "Mall Plan May Reach into L.A., New York," *Los Angeles Times*, May 21, 1962, sec. A.

⁴¹ Glen Weisbrod and Henry O. Pollakowski, "Effects of Downtown Improvement Projects on Retail Activity," *Journal of the American Planning Association* 50 (June 1984): 148.

believed the lack of convenient parking was a major deterrent to attracting customers.⁴² Indeed, parking issues provoked most of the criticism of the mall during the years immediately following its creation. When the Kalamazoo Mall opened, there were five major parking lots downtown, and city planners assured citizens that more would be built. In 1960 a survey revealed that although two-thirds of downtown shoppers liked the mall, they felt more parking space was necessary. Gruen had anticipated the need for convenient parking for shoppers entering the urban core, and his original plan included large parking garages. Many other pedestrian malls faced the same "parking problem." Harvey Rubenstein describes how other mall designers concluded that "if a downtown mall is to compete [with suburban malls], convenient low cost parking is essential."⁴³

City planners and citizens soon realized, however, that the lack of parking was not the only problem facing the pedestrian mall. By 1969 interest in the Kalamazoo Mall had waned to the point that no celebration was planned for its ten-year anniversary, in direct contrast to the grand hoopla over both the mall's opening and its five-year anniversary. "We'd rather do something else with that kind of money," Floyd Greenberg of the Downtown Kalamazoo Retailers Association explained a bit sheepishly in the *Kalamazoo Gazette*.⁴⁴ In another article written the same year, the author notes that "little has been done in terms of major renovation" in the mall since its opening. A merchant quoted in the article put it more succinctly: "Hell . . . all they've done in 10 years is to plant a few flowers."⁴⁵

What had happened to Kalamazoo in the decade from 1959 to 1969 was the same problem facing cities all across the country. Over the years, the thrill of the pedestrian mall had worn off. The same cities that had eagerly reported huge increases in retail sales found that "the large positive effects reported initially were not sustained and likely were exaggerated."⁴⁶ After a brief burst of positive economic growth, most likely fueled by publicity and customer curiosity, downtown areas generally resumed their downward spiral. Pomona, the city whose mall was proclaimed an instant success by the *Los Angeles Times*, saw its downtown go into economic freefall in the years after its pedestrian mall

⁴² "Merchant Views," 95.

⁴³ Rubenstein, *Pedestrian Malls*, 32.

⁴⁴ "No Celebration Planned," *Kalamazoo Gazette*, 1969, in Kalamazoo Mall (clipping folder), Kalamazoo Public Library, Kalamazoo, Mich.

⁴⁵ James Stommen, "There's No Pall on Mall," *Kalamazoo Gazette*, August 17, 1969.

⁴⁶ Weisbrod and Pollakowski, "Effects of Downtown Improvement Projects," 148.

opened. Such malls became magnets for office workers on their lunch breaks, low-income residents who lived downtown, and street people, who caused great harm to the malls' public image. In the short term, pedestrian malls had provided a quick shot in the arm for ailing downtowns, but as Gruen had predicted, the mall could not be the sole remedy. A 1984 study by Cambridge Systematics revealed what should have been obvious from the beginning: "It is difficult to associate changes in retail sales with pedestrianization."⁴⁷ In other words, using a pedestrian mall to improve a downtown's appearance without addressing other problems was a simple approach to a complex crisis. City planners had finally realized that the pedestrian mall would not be the "salvation of Downtown America."⁴⁸

In Kalamazoo, the already floundering mall faced new competition. In August 1971 the Maple Hill Mall opened in a suburban area near West Main Street. Advertisements proudly proclaimed that at Maple Hill, "the spotlight is on accessibility [and] parking convenience," an attractive proposition to drivers frustrated with trying to find a parking space downtown.⁴⁹ Even more threatening was the Crossroads Mall in nearby Portage, which opened in July 1980 after a construction process plagued by long delays. The new mall, with its glitzy décor, convenience, and free parking, was a clear challenge to downtown businesses. Crossroads Mall made an immediate impression by poaching the J. C. Penney store located on the downtown mall. Faced with attractive new options, shoppers were less willing to head to the Kalamazoo Mall.

Kalamazoo's officials soon noticed that the downtown faced competition. In July 1970 a "\$300,000 beauty treatment" was launched to spruce up the mall. *Gazette* columnist Edd Snyder noted afterwards that it was "time to give the mall a facelifting [*sic*] as the pressure from suburban shopping centers continued to be felt."⁵⁰ The project, which lasted more than two years, improved the mall's aesthetics by planting flowers and refinishing a fountain; it also added trellises, a Japanese garden ornament, a clock on Water Street, and more benches. The newly renovated mall was opened with a celebration, which included appearances by George McGovern and Governor William Milliken. In another move to attract shoppers, the mall was expanded to include a fourth block in 1975 in

⁴⁷ This older study is quoted in Larry Houstoun, "From Street to Mall and Back Again," *Planning* 56 (June 1990): 5.

⁴⁸ Dowdy, "Nation's First Downtown Shoppers' Mall," 9.

⁴⁹ "Maple Hill Mall Advertisement," *Kalamazoo Gazette*, August 1, 1971.

⁵⁰ Edd Snyder, "Our 'New Look' Mall," *Kalamazoo Gazette*, April 14, 1972.

response to accusations that retailers suffered from a lack of space.⁵¹ The most notable project to enhance the downtown and the mall was the creation of the Kalamazoo Center in 1975, which included a hotel, a convention center, and shops. According to *Progressive Architecture's* Suzanne Stephens, the Kalamazoo Center linked "two strongly traditional urban forms [shopping center and convention center] . . . to create urbanity," a magnet to draw citizens downtown.⁵²

Unfortunately, these alterations did not dramatically reverse the mall's decline. In 1982, an article in *Planning* noted that the mall "had not really been competitive with the area's five suburban shopping malls." The same article discussed how Kalamazoo had hired architects to suggest ways to smarten up the mall. One architect, Stanley Tigerman, sniffed that the mall was "too wide . . . and too boring." Another suggested that a hotel be built on the mall with a permanent dirigible attached to it.⁵³ As ridiculous as this may sound, it indicates that city leaders were now painfully aware that their once-prized mall was in serious trouble.

Across the nation, a new solution to the problem of downtown renewal was finding favor with city planners. Although they now understood that the pedestrian mall was an oversimplified response to urban decline, they did not abandon their emphasis on physical solutions. Once again, communities and their leaders failed to consider broader social or economic policies. Instead, the blame for the ills faced by downtowns nationwide could now be placed on the failure of the pedestrian mall. Newspapers that once effusively praised such malls now featured numerous articles accusing the malls of actually harming downtowns. In 1976, for example, the *Washington Post* published store owners' complaints about the F Street pedestrian mall in the nation's capital. The *Post* article quoted several shopkeepers, including Nancy Hertz, a greeting-card retailer who lamented: "It used to be beautiful down here. The store was packed. . . . It [the mall] has hurt us terribly." James Mangum, the manager of an appliance store, judged that the mall had been "ruinous to business."⁵⁴

⁵¹ Rzepczynski, "From Wheels to Heels."

⁵² Wayne Attoe and Donn Logan, *American Urban Architecture: Catalysts in the Design of Cities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989). See <http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft5k4006v5/> (accessed February 20, 2010), 78.

⁵³ Ruth Eckdish Knack, "Pedestrian Malls: Twenty Years Later," *Planning* 48 (December 1982): 18.

⁵⁴ LaBarbara Bowman, "F Street Mall Plan Called Failure by Shopkeepers," *Washington Post*, December 15, 1976.

A host of urban analysts provided more scientific explanations for the failure of pedestrian malls. In 1987 the Urban Land Institute (ULI) concluded that “by excluding the auto, pedestrian malls in effect excluded the customer.”⁵⁵ The institute noted that greenery and outdoor furniture merely cluttered the retail environment and attracted loiterers. Furthermore, the expansive landscaping combined with a lack of automobiles to create an off-putting feeling of isolation. Richard Bradley of the International Downtown Association agreed, stating that “in pedestrian malls, the space is too big. It feels empty, even with [many] people.”⁵⁶ The ULI summarized its problems with pedestrian malls in a 1988 book, which concluded that “the application of essentially suburban concepts to the design of downtown spaces was destined to fail.”⁵⁷

Once city planners and citizens began believing that pedestrian malls were having a detrimental effect on downtowns, it became increasingly popular to conclude that eliminating the mall would improve the central city. This conclusion shows the persistence of people’s faith in physical solutions to urban problems. Once again, the urban landscape could be modified to save the downtown. This time, however, bringing back automobiles instead of banning them would accomplish the sought-after result. Thus, many cities with pedestrian malls brought back the cars that they had earlier eliminated.

By the end of the 1980s, it was becoming quite common—and profitable—to rescind the downtown car ban. A 1989 analysis conducted by Hyett Palmer examined ten cities with pedestrian malls. According to the study, “most of the cities reported that retail sales had decreased after their mall was built—but all of the cities that later reopened malls [to cars—five of the ten] reported ‘an increase in property values, sales, and number of businesses’ as a result.”⁵⁸ A larger study conducted the same year by Eugene, Oregon’s, Planning and Development Division examined thirty-six cities with pedestrian malls. By 1977 nearly half of these malls had reopened to automobile traffic or were planning to do so. By 1989 seven more malls had made the same change. The study examined nine former pedestrian malls and

⁵⁵ Laurie Grossman, “City Pedestrian Malls Fail to Fulfill Promise of Revitalizing Downtown,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 17, 1987.

⁵⁶ Joe Bower, “Kalamazoo Keeps Stalled Mall,” *Preservation: The Magazine of the National Trust for Historic Preservation* 49 (January/February 1997): 18.

⁵⁷ Cyril B. Paumier, *Designing the Successful Downtown* (Washington, D.C.: Urban Land Institute, 1988), 76.

⁵⁸ Todd Bressi, “Retrofits,” *Planning* 56 (June 1990): 5.

determined that more than half of these saw improvements when they welcomed automobile traffic again; only one suffered a decline.⁵⁹

Across the nation, cities burdened with failing pedestrian malls were elated at finding a possible solution. Even though urban planners admitted that they had exaggerated the pedestrian mall's early success, they saw no problem with heaping equally extravagant praise upon the reopening of such malls to automobiles. Waco's reopened mall was barely a year old when Assistant Planning Director William Falco declared it a success in the *Wall Street Journal*: "Opening the street brought new life into the area, because it was designed to function that way," he effused, pointing to the drop in store vacancies from 80 percent to 40 percent.⁶⁰ In Poughkeepsie, New York, the creation of a one-lane street through part of the former pedestrian mall brought high praise from civic leaders. "Even though it's only been opened a short time, we've already seen very positive results," marveled Kathryn LaVanche of the Poughkeepsie Partnership, pointing to the decline in the mall's vacancy rate from 31 percent to 10.7 percent.⁶¹

Just as closing streets to automobile traffic was once seen as the panacea to rescue downtowns, the reopening of the malls to such traffic was thought to be all that was needed for downtown revitalization. The Poughkeepsie Partnership included 160 local business representatives, who, the *New York Times* reported, would be closely watching the mall's success or failure when it reopened to traffic. According to LaVanche, "if the success is compelling enough, we probably will open up the rest."⁶² The obscuring of deeper issues by this focus on one "solution" was typified by the apparent complacency of Russ Brink, the director of Downtown Eugene, Inc., who stated, "I think [opening the mall] has been probably the most important thing that has happened downtown."⁶³ In a striking example of this opportunistic approach, expediency and short-term gains crowded out long-term planning. Santa Monica, California, reported that opening its pedestrian mall "to traffic attracted many new businesses . . . [and] so many people now use the mall that the city has temporarily banned cars." Downtown Manager

⁵⁹ Marc Ott, "Downtown Plan Background Data," April 15, 1996, in Kalamazoo Mall: Historical Files (1958-1999), Kalamazoo Archives.

⁶⁰ Grossman, "City Pedestrian Mall Fails."

⁶¹ Quoted in Mary McAleer Vizard, "Some Downtown Areas Are Coming Full Circle," *New York Times*, December 29, 1991, sec. R.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Quoted in Steinhauer, "When Shoppers Walk Away."

Tom Carroll added that the city might open the street again “if business slows down.”⁶⁴

Kalamazoo offers an example of the trend toward reopening pedestrian malls to automobile traffic but an unusual one, because mixed attitudes toward the mall delayed action. Although there was “some talk of taking out the mall . . . and introducing limited traffic” as early as 1977, Kalamazoo was reluctant to take this step.⁶⁵ Despite criticisms of the mall and attempts to “fix” the problem during the late 1980s and early 1990s, many media presentations still portrayed the mall relatively favorably. In 1989, in response to the mall’s thirtieth anniversary, the *Kalamazoo Gazette* featured a series of articles that heaped praise upon the shopping center. Headlines read “Mall Keeps City’s Center Prosperous,” and “How the Mall Got Started—and Why It Works.” Beneath the bullish headlines there were hints of unease—but only hints. F. Hayden Bradford, a downtown observer, offered slightly guarded praise, saying that the downtown “remains in really good shape compared to most cities of its size.”⁶⁶ Nancy Huggins of the International Downtown Association said she was “very impressed” by the mall, but she confined most of her praise to how well “manicured” the streets were and could not help commenting on the empty storefronts along the mall.⁶⁷

The pedestrian mall was also declared a success because it offered an alternative to the crowded suburban malls. The owner of Flipside Records said he enjoyed his store’s reputation as “esoteric.” It attracted a more sophisticated clientele, even if larger numbers of shoppers patronized Crossroads Mall. He even admitted that “I like the winos. I like the urban folks.”⁶⁸ This comment reflected the belief that the Kalamazoo Mall did not attract a general retail clientele. Ray Dykema, the former head of the Downtown Kalamazoo Association, remarked in 1988 that “people usually have specific items in mind when shopping downtown . . . because of the specialty shops” that dominated the mall landscape.⁶⁹ Although some merchants appreciated their uniqueness, others were not so enthusiastic. A far more critical response was

⁶⁴ Vizard, “Some Downtown Areas.”

⁶⁵ Ott, “Downtown Plan Background Data.”

⁶⁶ Hayden Bradford, “The Kalamazoo Mall: People Made It Happen,” *Kalamazoo Gazette*, August 16, 1989.

⁶⁷ Quoted in Lisa Perlman and Matt Roush, “How the Mall Got Started—and Why It Works,” *Kalamazoo Gazette*, August 13, 1989.

⁶⁸ Matt Roush, “Kalamazoo Mall Turns 30,” *Kalamazoo Gazette*, August 13, 1989.

⁶⁹ Al Jones, “Ray Remembers,” *Kalamazoo Gazette*, October 9, 1988.

featured in the same issue of the *Gazette* in 1989 that printed Bradford's reasonably positive remarks. Harry C. Benjamin, a downtown businessman, described the current situation as "the leanest time ever on the mall in terms of businesses."⁷⁰

It was becoming increasingly evident that the mall, even after it was renovated, was not economically powerful enough to preserve the central business district. A 1990 *Gazette* article lambasted the Kalamazoo Center and its hotel as well, saying they provided little economic benefit to the downtown.⁷¹ Public sector declines also hurt the urban core, as fewer employees were working at the state hospital and many community-college students were now taking classes at satellite campuses.⁷² Other physical "facelifts" within the downtown area seemed to make no impact either. In the late 1980s the Arcadia Commons project attempted to refurbish Rose Street by creating, in the words of Robert Oudsema, Jr., "an environment with green space, water and parking." Using language similar to that which greeted the Kalamazoo Mall's renovation, Oudsema said this project would "allow the downtown to compete on an equal basis for major new commercial development."⁷³ However, even after it was finished, Arcadia Commons did not bring major changes to downtown. Greg Flisram of the American Planning Association said the Arcadia Commons project had "the limp [sic] appearance of another dated leftover of the modernist tradition, the civic center," loftily dismissing both Arcadia and, by implication the Kalamazoo Center, as *passé*.⁷⁴

More drastic measures seemed necessary. Thus, like other cities mentioned earlier, Kalamazoo considered bringing automobiles back to downtown. In July 1990 Downtown Kalamazoo Inc. (DKI), an organization entrusted with managing and revitalizing downtown, began studying ways to reopen the mall to automobiles as part of a master plan. The organization examined the 1989 Eugene, Oregon, study of pedestrian malls, which suggested the profits automobile traffic could

⁷⁰ Tom Gromak, "Broker Takes Stock of the Kalamazoo Mall's Status," *Kalamazoo Gazette*, August 16, 1989.

⁷¹ David Feehan, "Downtown Kalamazoo in 10 Years? Sparkling and Different," *Kalamazoo Gazette*, January 10, 1990.

⁷² Greg Flisram, "Post Modern or Post-Mortem? The Kalamazoo Mall Revisited," copy in author's possession. Article available from the American Planning Association upon request.

⁷³ Robert Oudsema, Jr., "Re-invest in Downtown Kalamazoo," *Kalamazoo Gazette*, May 12, 1988.

⁷⁴ Flisram, "Post Modern or Post-Mortem?"

potentially generate. In an April 1996 report, DKI concluded that “the prevailing theory is that busses or cars will provide more steady levels of mall activity.”⁷⁵ Later that year, DKI officially unveiled a ten-point plan titled “Downtown Kalamazoo.” The plan advocated: focusing on downtown “gateways”; improving traffic patterns and access (such as eliminating one-way streets); creating a stronger pedestrian environment; linking downtown to the local colleges; using and developing land in better ways; improving and strengthening cultural attractions; upgrading residential facilities; providing better parking; marketing downtown effectively; and implementing the plan appropriately.⁷⁶ As part of the second point, improving traffic patterns, DKI advocated introducing a one-way traffic lane with parking along two blocks of the Kalamazoo Mall, arguing that “convenience and accessibility have become a prerequisite for commercial retailing . . . [and] pedestrian malls do not address these needs.” Somewhat confusingly, DKI referred to the new configuration as a “pedestrian-oriented street that permits vehicular access.”⁷⁷ Like the *Kalamazoo 1980* plan, this proposal to alter the mall was only one component of a grand design. It became, however, as Rodger Parzyck of the Kalamazoo Commission for Historical Preservation noted, “one of the most controversial issues” of the entire Downtown Kalamazoo plan.⁷⁸

The differing reaction of the public and city planners to the proposed new traffic lane demonstrates how the pedestrian-mall battle continued to obscure the discussion of larger issues. The public’s response in particular reveals that many Kalamazoo residents had a different attitude about downtown than did city planners. These citizens saw the mall as an essential public space with a distinct identity, not simply a commercial venture.⁷⁹ Discussion of reopening the mall to traffic generated a firestorm of public controversy. On April 4, 1996, the Kalamazoo City Commission heard residents’

⁷⁵ Quoted in Ott, “Downtown Plan Background Data.” Though the decline was serious enough to prompt this study, it took six years to complete.

⁷⁶ Barbara Gordon, “Downtown Plan Implementation: Quarterly Report,” February 14, 1997, in Kalamazoo Mall: Historical Files (1958-1999), Kalamazoo Archives.

⁷⁷ *Downtown Plan, City of Kalamazoo, Michigan* (Kalamazoo: Downtown Kalamazoo, Inc., and LDR International, 1996).

⁷⁸ Rodger Parzyck, “Memo to Downtown Kalamazoo Incorporated,” September 8, 1995, in Kalamazoo Mall: Historical Files (1958-1999), Kalamazoo Archives.

⁷⁹ For an interesting analysis of the varied and changing nature of the role of “public space” in American culture, see Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris and Tridib Banerjee, *Urban Design Downtown: Poetics and Politics of Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

comments on the mall plan. The minutes of the meeting record statements such as the following: "The mall is a place that needs to be cherished." "The mall should be improved rather than destroyed." "Cars will ruin its ambience." "None of the truly great open spaces around the world include traffic."⁸⁰ In the minds of these citizens, their downtown was a place that required a certain "ambience" and should be "cherished." In light of these lofty goals, a discussion of commercial business and retail profits was deemed crass and unworthy of consideration.

Letters written to the city commission spell out these feelings, indicating that many citizens saw the mall as an idyllic refuge, not a retail center. One woman opposed the plan because "we come down here to feel good. It's a wonderful place to walk and a great atmosphere." An eleven-year-old girl wrote, "When I think of downtown in Kalamazoo, I think of the downtown mall. I think of trees, fountains, and people; not buildings and cars." "I do not feel that downtown Kalamazoo will now or ever attract much evening shopping again," predicted a male skeptic, arguing that traffic would not revive downtown and only drive away the lunchtime crowds. Clearly, these citizens, who valued beauty, peace, and a lively daytime crowd, had a different definition of downtown than the planners who were concerned with economic revitalization. This was perhaps most evident from a letter by one particularly blunt correspondent, who wrote, "I like your plan except for removing the downtown."⁸¹

Citizens combined to form an organization called "Save Our Mall," which dedicated its energies to combating the plan to bring back automobile traffic. The group's advertisements generally reiterated the sentiments expressed in the aforementioned letters. A 1996 advertisement produced by Save Our Mall described the mall as "our Town Square, the heart of our city," arguing that cars would ruin the mall's "historic" qualities as well as its peaceful ambience.⁸² In a sense, Save Our Mall agreed with the auto-plan proponents: allowing automobiles would have a great effect on the downtown area. Save Our Mall's most notable victory occurred in November 1996, when it managed to place on the ballot a resolution stating that the mall could

⁸⁰ Marc Ott, "Background Materials Regarding Downtown Comprehensive Plan," May 9, 1996, in *Kalamazoo Mall: Historical Files (1958-1999)*, Kalamazoo Archives.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² "Your Mall, Your Vote," Save Our Mall Advertisement, 1996, in *Kalamazoo Mall* (clipping folder), Kalamazoo Public Library.

not be reopened to automobile traffic “without a favorable vote of a majority of the registered electors of the city.”⁸³

Proponents of the reopening plan realized that such a resolution would delay the reintroduction of automobile traffic, so they formed their own organization, called “No Better Way,” which urged that the resolution be rejected. The group also tried to refute Save Our Mall’s charges that automobiles would destroy the mall’s ambience. One of its brochures stressed that the mall would still be “pedestrian-friendly,” even after the introduction of a traffic lane, which the publication noted is “not a typical ‘street.’”⁸⁴ The proposed lane was very narrow and blended almost seamlessly with the sidewalks. In the words of designer Russ Butler, “the vehicle should actually feel like an intruder.”⁸⁵ Thus, concerns that the reopened mall would lead to traffic jams and speeding cars were unfounded.

No Better Way also appealed to logic. In an editorial in the *Kalamazoo Gazette* in support of No Better Way, former mayor Ed Annen, Jr., maintained that Save Our Mall’s resolution was a denial of the true state of Kalamazoo’s downtown. “The facts are that the mall has too many empty store fronts and it is not healthy,” he wrote. The only realistic option, he believed, was to follow DKI’s ten-point plan, but “to be successful the current plan needs to be implemented in its entirety,” meaning that the city could not choose to adopt only certain segments of the proposal.⁸⁶

Despite Annen’s reference to the entire plan, the intense debate about the automobile issue again ensured that the mall dominated the discussion. The 1996 resolution passed by a 55 percent to 45 percent margin, which did not help matters.⁸⁷ Now, in spite of the fact that Kalamazoo City Commission members had unanimously approved DKI’s plan (including reopening the mall to traffic), no action could be taken to reopen the mall until the public voted on the matter. Thus, in 1997, proponents of DKI’s plan placed a proposal on the ballot calling for the allowance of limited automobile traffic on the mall. Once again,

⁸³ Robert Cinabro, “Memo to City Commission,” December 12, 1996, in Kalamazoo Mall: Historical Files (1958-1999), Kalamazoo Archives.

⁸⁴ “No Better Way Advertisement,” No Better Way, 1996, in Kalamazoo Mall: Historical Files (1958-1999), Kalamazoo Archives.

⁸⁵ Quoted in Mickey Ciokajlo, “Heart and Soul,” *Kalamazoo Gazette*, October 4, 1998.

⁸⁶ Ed Annen, Jr., “Vote ‘No’ in November to Let Mall Plans Proceed,” *Kalamazoo Gazette*, September 26, 1996.

⁸⁷ “A Long and Winding Road Led to Mall’s One-Way Street,” *Kalamazoo Gazette*, October 4, 1998.

as they debated this detail, proponents of two different visions of downtown focused discussion on its physical properties.

By this time, several business leaders were growing desperate. Mark Rosenfeld of Jacobson's department store asserted in 1996 that "it would be better for the community to have open streets so that it has a more open thoroughfare."⁸⁸ A little more than a year after this pronouncement, Jacobson's corporate management closed several of its stores in the region, including the one in downtown Kalamazoo. The *Kalamazoo Gazette* noted that both Save Our Mall and No Better Way were disappointed by this closure, but any attempt to reach a compromise and improve downtown (as both organizations advocated) was "so far . . . derailed over the street issue."⁸⁹ An observer could be forgiven for thinking that the future of Kalamazoo's downtown hinged completely on the presence or absence of automobiles and not on economic factors.

As the election drew near, Save Our Mall recycled many of its old arguments. One of its ads, "Vote No Street," interpreted passage of the previous year's resolution as a vote of confidence in a "pedestrian friendly city."⁹⁰ Although this advertisement admitted that some work needed to be done to improve downtown, such as putting in more "mixed usage" buildings, it was adamant that automobile traffic was not a good solution. An issue of *Preservation* interpreted the fight against automobiles as defying "the local political and business establishments," a perception that Save Our Mall leader Michelle Serlin cultivated. "People have a strong attachment to it [the mall]," she stated, implying that this campaign pitted the "people" against soulless and greedy business elites.⁹¹

In response, supporters of DKI's plan painted Save Our Mall as a group dominated by suburbanites out of touch with the true realities of downtown. In a May 1996 memo to the city manager, Rosalie Novara of the Downtown Kalamazoo Task Force described opponents of the automobile plan as mainly "individuals who enjoy the mall on their lunch hours . . . [and] being able to sit outside."⁹² For their regular retail purchases, however, these people drove to the big suburban malls out in

⁸⁸ Al Jones, "Jacobson's Chief: Pedestrian Mall Is a Barrier," *Kalamazoo Gazette*, January 21, 1996.

⁸⁹ Mickey Ciokajlo, "Jacobson's Closing," *Kalamazoo Gazette*, January 26, 1997.

⁹⁰ "Vote No Street," Save Our Mall Advertisement, 1997, in Kalamazoo Mall: Historical Files (1958-1999), Kalamazoo Archives.

⁹¹ Bower, "Kalamazoo Keeps . . . Mall," 18.

⁹² Rosalie Novara to City Manager, "Memo, Re: Downtown Plan," May 15, 1996, in Kalamazoo Mall: Historical Files (1958-1999), Kalamazoo Archives.

Portage. Novara argued that keeping the mall the way it was currently configured might make the lunchtime crowd happy but would do nothing to improve the downtown. Her comments were echoed by Richard Gershon of Western Michigan University and Hannah McKinney of Kalamazoo College, who wrote an editorial in late 1996 in favor of reopening the mall to traffic. The writers charged that the Save Our Mall group was “asking our downtown merchants to preserve a tradition for which they as residents have no financial stake in the outcome.” Gershon and McKinney reiterated that Save Our Mall members were “not the ones assuming any financial risk in the downtown’s eventual outcome.”⁹³ The editorial asserted that the majority of business owners on the mall favored the return of automobile traffic.

The Kalamazoo Historic Preservation Commission, under the leadership of Rodger Parzyck, also attempted to debunk Save Our Mall’s depiction of the Kalamazoo Mall as “historic.” “The mall isn’t historic,” Parzyck argued; “the buildings on the mall . . . are.” And these buildings were in danger of being neglected or demolished unless the area became more economically self-supporting.⁹⁴ In 1998, Pamela Hall O’Connor summarized the commission’s position, noting that “since 1995, the . . . Commission . . . has advocated a return [of automobiles] to the street, along with façade restoration accompanied by design review. Why? ECONOMICS.”⁹⁵ Clearly, the commission regarded automobiles as a way to restore economic viability to downtown.

Ultimately, the financial arguments appeared to win out. In the May election, 59 percent of voters (6,086 people) voted in favor of creating a traffic lane and 41 percent (4,241 people) voted against it.⁹⁶ The reasons citizens gave for voting yes often reiterated the aforementioned arguments, yet they also indicated that these voters recognized that creating a one-way traffic lane and admitting automobiles would mean a dramatic change in the mall’s original purpose and function. For example, Craig Hotreem voted yes because he felt “the downtown needs more than the lunchtime scene,” which echoed Novara’s comments. Geoffrey Halsey voted in favor “because that’s the way the merchants

⁹³ Richard Gershon and Hannah McKinney, “When Does a Tradition Become a Liability?” *Kalamazoo Gazette*, December 30, 1996.

⁹⁴ Bower, “Kalamazoo Keeps . . . Mall,” 19.

⁹⁵ “Preservation Practices,” pamphlet, February 2, 1998, in Kalamazoo Mall: Historical Files (1958-1999), Kalamazoo Archives.

⁹⁶ Mickey Ciokajlo, “Yes to Street,” *Kalamazoo Gazette*, May 7, 1997.

feel and their opinion should be the best barometer.”⁹⁷ The preservation commission's arguments also seemed to be persuasive. Lenore Prine observed that “putting in a street won't change that we were first,” which seems to indicate that the “historic” quality of the mall would not be altered by this change.⁹⁸ Perhaps the most convincing argument was proposed by No Better Way, which argued that even if the mall were reopened to automobiles, it would still retain its pedestrian feel. George Hebben, at the time the proprietor of Athena Books, recalled how he originally opposed the idea, but then relented after he examined the plan for the proposed lane: “It is [still] a pedestrian street . . . there is more space dedicated to the pedestrian than there is to the vehicle.”⁹⁹ When the plan to reopen the mall was first broached, Glenn Allen, Jr., who was the mayor of Kalamazoo in 1959 when the mall first opened, provided what would perhaps be the most pertinent description of voters' feelings about the mall in 1996: “If things have worn out and it's not working, it's worth changing.”¹⁰⁰

Those opposed to DKI's plan did not give up the fight. In March 1998 a group filed an initiative petition that called for a proposal making it unlawful for the city to proceed with the mall reopening “until such time as all other points of the 10-point Downtown Plan, as approved by the Kalamazoo City Commission . . . have been completed.”¹⁰¹ Because of the plan's size and complexity, passage of this proposal would have indefinitely delayed the mall's reopening. However, city attorney Robert Cinabro judged that the proposal was “not a proper subject for an initiatory petition under Michigan law” due to its “improper and unworkable nature.”¹⁰² With the proposal thrown out, construction on the street began in earnest in April 1998, and by October the mall welcomed back automobiles amid the party atmosphere described at the beginning of this article.

Although the reopening proceeded relatively quickly amid a flurry of media attention, the remainder of DKI's ten-point plan has moved at a

⁹⁷ Barbara Walters, “Mall Vote Reflects Intense Feelings on Both Sides,” *Kalamazoo Gazette*, May 7, 1997.

⁹⁸ Ciokajlo, “Yes to Street.”

⁹⁹ Patricia Mish, “Kalamazoo Mall Plan Intended to Spruce Up Downtown,” *Kalamazoo Gazette*, July 28, 1996.

¹⁰⁰ Ciokajlo, “Yes to Street.”

¹⁰¹ Robert Cinabro and A. Lee Kirk, “Inter-Office Memo, Re: Kalamazoo Mall Initiative Petitions,” April 8, 1998, in Kalamazoo Mall: Historical Files (1958-1999), Kalamazoo Archives.

¹⁰² Ibid.

very slow pace, with limited progress in areas like “traffic patterns,” “gateways,” or “linkages.” The slow pace is exemplified by the fact that it took until 2004, six years after the mall reopened, for DKI to complete a “Kalamazoo Two-Way Traffic Conversion Study,” which called for the conversion of several of “Kalamazoo’s one-way streets to two-way configurations”—an idea that the original Downtown Kalamazoo plan had suggested in 1996.¹⁰³ A 2005 progress report by the Downtown Authority also illustrates the slow pace; its writers noted that two-way street conversion was in process, and “signage systems” and “discount programs” for students had begun that year.¹⁰⁴ Again, these were ideas that had been proposed in the original plan. In 2009, DKI was continuing to revise and update its incomplete “comprehensive plan” for downtown.¹⁰⁵ Thus, in spite of the hyperbole (from both camps) regarding the changes that would be wrought by automobiles, reopening the mall to traffic did not dramatically change the physical layout of downtown Kalamazoo.

It was also difficult to determine the economic effects of reopening the mall to traffic. In an article for the American Planning Association, Greg Flisram reported in 2000 that “anecdotal evidence suggests that activity on the Mall has picked up slightly since its reopening.”¹⁰⁶ This belief was echoed later by Kenneth Nacci, the president of Downtown Kalamazoo, Inc. In an interview with a Johannesburg magazine, Nacci declared the opening of the mall “quite successful,” but he admitted that he had “no retail sales or square-foot rental comparisons pre- or post-opening to document ‘success’ but rather anecdotal reports and observations.”¹⁰⁷ Nacci was confident that the ability to drive past the stores increased the mall’s visibility and boosted retail sales.

However, Flisram argued in 2000 that the reintroduction of traffic was “more a matter of perception than of function.”¹⁰⁸ He pointed out

¹⁰³ Land/Design, “Central City’s Tomorrow: Vision for Downtown Kalamazoo,” October 2004, see http://www.central-city.net/downloads/KzooPlan_sm1.pdf (accessed January 28, 2010).

¹⁰⁴ Kalamazoo Downtown Development Authority, “2005 Annual Report,” DKI, see, <http://www.kalamazooocity.org/docs/BoardsAndCommission/DDA/2005DDAANNUAL.pdf> (accessed January 28, 2010).

¹⁰⁵ For the latest information about DKI, see <http://www.central-city.net> (accessed January 28, 2010).

¹⁰⁶ Flisram, “Post Modern or Post-Mortem?”

¹⁰⁷ Neil Fraser, “A Pedestrianized City Is Not the Answer,” *Citichat*, June 20, 2005, see http://www.joburgnews.co.za/citichat/2005/june20_citichat.stm (accessed January 28, 2010).

¹⁰⁸ Flisram, “Post Modern or Post-Mortem?”

that the new, one-way traffic lane through the two mall blocks was extremely narrow, truly making cars feel intrusive. Also, there were very few parking spaces added to the mall (roughly one or two for each storefront), meaning that if drivers were interested in a store located on the mall, they would have trouble finding convenient parking. For that matter, cars parked in the available parking spaces tended to conceal many of the storefronts from the view of drivers in the lane.

It may still be too early to tell what the full impact of reopening the mall will have on Kalamazoo or the nation. It could be argued that scrutinizing short-term economic data entirely misses the point anyway. The inception of the pedestrian mall did not significantly alter the long-term decline of downtown businesses, sap the strength of suburban malls, or halt the decentralization of downtown industries. It is unlikely that merely reopening these spaces to traffic would accomplish those goals either. As early as 1990, Larry Houstoun called the national shift to reopen pedestrian malls to traffic “the latest panacea for downtown retailing,” noting that cities awarded a disproportionate amount of credit to the malls for the successes or failures of the central city.¹⁰⁹ This assessment supports the conclusion reached by an analysis of the failure of pedestrian malls in the first place: it was unrealistic to believe that downtown revitalization could be achieved by aesthetic solutions alone. Urban planners have learned this lesson as it applies to the creation of pedestrian malls. How long will it be before they apply this lesson to the destruction of those same malls?

Ultimately, in Kalamazoo as in other cities, the pedestrian mall has obscured the complexity of problems faced by decaying downtowns. These malls were seen as the panacea for downtowns' problems—a solution that could be achieved primarily through aesthetic improvements and added amenities. This mindset endured throughout much of the late twentieth century, as Rust Belt cities built casinos, sports stadiums, shopping malls, and arts districts in an attempt to revitalize and recreate the glories of their downtowns.¹¹⁰ Indeed, the reopening of the Kalamazoo Mall to automobile traffic is another such relatively low-cost attempt to reverse urban woes. However, the original mall's failure suggests that this solution is inherently problematic. Despite its short-term success, the mall failed to solve the long-range

¹⁰⁹ Houstoun, “From Street to Mall,” 9.

¹¹⁰ Thomas Sugrue outlines this phenomenon in the preface to his revised edition of *Origins of the Urban Crisis* (xxiii–xxvi). He is skeptical about the ultimate success of such projects.

problems facing urban cores like Kalamazoo: deindustrialization, urban disinvestment, and suburbanization. The Kalamazoo Mall and its reopening provide a useful lens through which to view other downtown-redevelopment schemes. The mall's story indicates that simple, cosmetic solutions for urban renewal, exemplified by the pedestrian mall, cannot solve the deeper problems facing America's downtowns.

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