

15 January 2021

Leslie Pielack, Director  
Birmingham Museum  
556 West Maple Road  
Birmingham, Michigan 48009

Dear Leslie,

I am honored to donate my documents from the Birmingham 2016 Master Plan. I had the privilege of assisting Andres Duany with the landmark plan from its inception in 1995. Many of its recommendations were rapidly adopted and built by the City and they have contributed to Birmingham becoming one of the most desirable communities in the country. Duany and I both consider the plan to be an overwhelming success, and the most completely implemented one of our careers.

I have outlined below a short summary of the plan's history and recommendations as a first step for a detailed record I hope to complete later this year. I trust my outline and plan documents will become a resource for other historians or interested citizens over time.

Attached are the following documents for the museum's keeping:

1. Correspondence and contracts between the DPZ planning team and the City
2. Contracts between the City and Duany, as well as the various subconsultants
3. Newspaper articles regarding the plan and the City during the planning process
4. Copies of the plan's first draft (11' x 17")
5. Professional journal articles I authored about the 2016 Plan

### **Background**

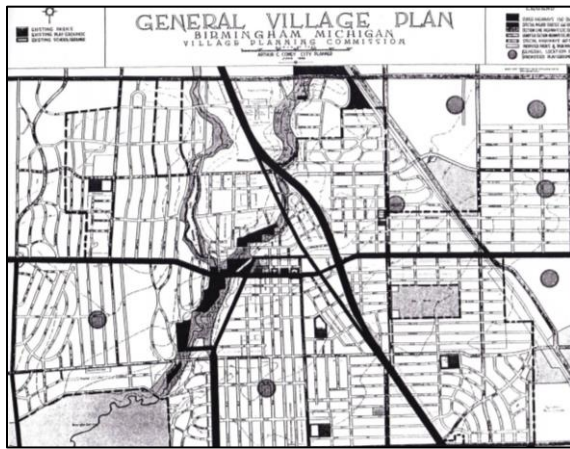
Since its first plat in 1836, Birmingham has been a well-planned and managed city. The original plan was based on Jefferson's small 300' x 300' block grid allowing for a walkable city center, a variety of land uses and growth. For generations, the downtown parks, upscale specialty shops and restaurants have offered the lifestyle of a major city, in a small-town scale.

The city's neighborhoods are based on the traditional principles of Clarence Stein, each with a central school, a mixture of housing types, generous parks and convenient commercial located within a short walk. The Quarton Lake, Poppleton Park, Barnum and Holy Name neighborhoods are especially well planned, and among the most desirable in the region. Quarton Lake's amenities and public access along Lakeside and Lake Park Drives are one of the area's most beautiful civic gestures. The Rouge River corridor also offers a rich natural resource for the entire city.

I have outlined below a brief a summary of my research and personal experiences with Birmingham's planning traditions. I am presently co-authoring the Birmingham *City-Wide Master Plan* with Duany and writing a book on the city's urban design history.

### **1920's Plans**

From 1890 to 1930, in response to explosive growth, industrialization and the emergence of the automobile, many cities embraced the City Beautiful movement, creating expansive parks and grand civic realms. The 1889 Chicago World's Fair, designed by Daniel Burnham and Frederick Olmstead is credited as the genesis of widespread urban beautification improvements across America, including Palmer Park. The fair's grandiose boulevards and Beaux Arts buildings inspired millions of citizens and civic leaders to improve their own cities with classically designed civic centers, boulevards and plazas.



**Figure 1:** Above left, 1929 Comey Birmingham Master Plan's proposed neighborhoods, above right, downtown Birmingham homes being razed to build the Civic Center's city hall, Community Center, library, post office and Shain Park, circa 1928 Source: *The Book of Birmingham*; Jervis Bell McMechan (1976).

Birmingham's Shain Park and civic center are among the finest built in the Midwest and may have been inspired by the Chicago Fair. The early aspirational urban investments ended with the Great Depression in the 1930s and were forgotten during the post-war suburban sprawl's experimental era. Andres Duany and his new urbanist planners reintroduced the pre-war urban design principles in 1990 to American cities and the suburbs with new towns and market-based revitalization plans for historic city centers.

In the 1920's, Birmingham commissioned a landscape architect to plan a civic center. Unfortunately, the planner and his drawing are unknown, but subsequent planners and newspaper articles reference the Civic Plan and its Cambridge based designer. It is plausible that John Nolen, the leading urban planner at the time, was its designer. Nolen's office was located in Harvard Square and he had also completed a master plan for a General Motors employee neighborhood in Pontiac and a civic plan for Flint in the 1920's.

Birmingham's civic plan proposed multiple new civic buildings and a park on six of the original twelve Jeffersonian blocks. Based on the plan, the City purchased and razed entire blocks of existing houses. Shain Park, the city hall, library, post office, community center and possibly one church were all built shortly following the plan. One puzzling aspect of the design is why the library and city hall's primary entries fronted Martin Street, rather than Shain Park, as was a core principle of civic designs then. At the time, the former Baldwin School was located at the west end of Martin Street, possibly making it a civic promenade. In his 1995 plan, Duany proposed that Martin be redesigned as a civic street and the library's entry be returned to its original north location.

Unfortunately, Duany's proposal was scrapped when Martin Street was later widened into a parking lot to accommodate diagonally spaced parking spaces at the expense of the city's hall front lawn and plaza. I had always also hoped that the former post office would become an art museum, to contribute to Martin Street, as well as the community.

In the late 1920's the City retained Arthur C. Comey, ASLA, a Harvard educated, Cambridge, Massachusetts landscape architect (likely associated with Nolen) to master plan the entire city, resulting in a proposal for numerous neighborhoods, each anchored with a school or park. Quarton Lake, Poppleton and several other neighborhoods were built as proposed by the plan. The Comey plan also proposed that the Rouge River park - trail corridor and an outer street network connected the neighborhoods with landscaped boulevards. The proposed boulevards became Chesterfield, Oak, Lincoln and Eton Streets. Unfortunately, our loop's design has not yet been fully implemented along Oak, east of Hunter (Woodward) and Chesterfield, south of Maple Street.

# 'City of the Future' Becoming Reality

By LARRY EVOE  
Staff Writer

The basis for a downtown Birmingham business district of the future is already beginning.

Using the Central Business District Development plan as a guide, the city has started to develop a Birmingham of tomorrow.

The CBDD plan, which was paid for by a committee of merchants,

was first presented to the city in June, 1961. The 28-page report was prepared by Vilican-Leman & Associates, planning consultants.

THE PURPOSE of the report

was to present an analysis of the central business district data of Birmingham and to suggest practical recommendations for the improvement of the CBD to the year 1980.

Birmingham's City Commission adopted the report in principle and has implemented several of its early stages.

The report indicated that Birmingham's business district problems were similar to those of other areas throughout the country. Typical of these were congested streets, insufficient and inconvenient parking, vacant stores and conflicting vehicular and pedestrian movements.

Birmingham's downtown area also had pleasant qualities such as lack of conflicting industrial uses, effectual off-street parking, relative compactness of business buildings, lack of extensive residential blight and the presence of distinctive grouping.

The CBD report was divided into two major categories: existing conditions and resolutions for improvement.

**DIVERSION OF** nonbusiness traffic was urged as a major consideration in the plan, but vehicular access into the business area was termed just as important.

Along this line the city has already signed an agreement with the Oakland County Road Commission for the opening and improvement of 14 Mile Road and is awaiting approval of the Village of Beverly Hills.

included: peripheral route right-of-way, parking area expansion and the construction of the peripheral route.

THE CITY has already constructed a temporary parking lot in the block south of Shain Park to help solve the parking problem in the southwest quadrant of the CBD and is expected to build the permanent lot in the near future.

Property on the corner of Forest and Woodward has been purchased by the city to straighten out the intersection as part of the peripheral route.

In addition, negotiations are under way for the purchase of right-of-way in connection with the widening of Chester and Oakland.

The estimated cost of the peripheral route has been set between \$365,000 and \$1,600,000 including property acquisition and construction costs.

ANOTHER important phase in the development of the downtown Birmingham of tomorrow is the completion of the Civic Center.

Currently the center is made up of the Municipal Building, Baldwin Public Library, Shain Park and The Community House.

A special civic design committee has been working for several months on drafting ideas for possible incorporation in the Civic Center and The Community House has announced major expansion plans including a large auditorium.

In general, the CBD plan calls

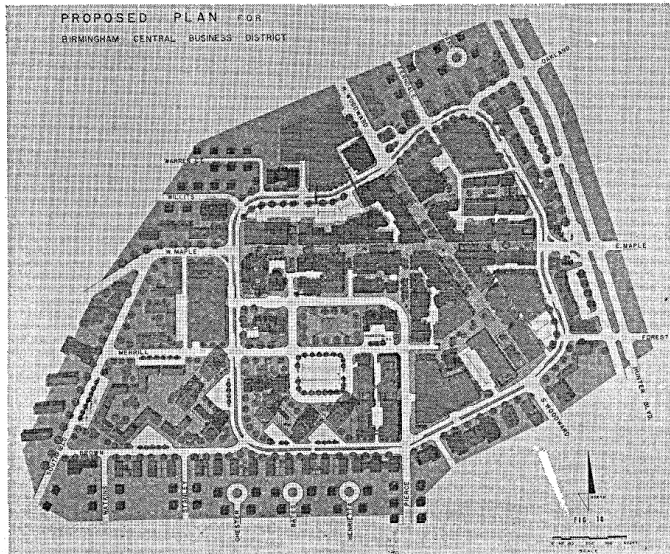


Figure 2: Newspaper article on the 1961 Vilican-Leman master plan. Note the suburban ring road and cul-de-sac streets at the bottom.

## 1961 Plan

The local planning firm, Vilican-Leman prepared the city master plan in 1961, but I have little knowledge of it at this time. Above, an image of their 1961 Birmingham plan.

## 1964 Plan

In the early 1960's, in response to a proposed large commercial auto service garage on Merrill Street, a community group, The Civic Design Committee, and the City retained Luckenbach-Ziegelman and Johnson, Johnson and Roy for a downtown master plan. Birmingham's Carl Luckenbach and Robert Ziegelman along with JJR's Cy Palmer oversaw the planning process and urban design.

This 1964 plan is directly responsible for the downtown's subsequent commercial and residential boom. The architects proposed mid-rise building heights, five parking structures and a ring road to divert traffic around the city center. Under an extraordinary amount of leadership at the time, the city purchased land and built all five parking decks within 30 years. Birmingham is currently struggling with finding the resources to build a planned parking structure in the Triangle District.

The five parking structures allowed new commercial buildings to utilize off-site parking, allowing them to maximize their property for large office buildings and department stores. As a result, Birmingham's over three million square feet of commercial space is that of a city many times larger than its 20,000 population. The large amount of office workers and convenient parking promoted the downtown's thriving shopping and dining district, as well as the development of two major department stores in the 1960s.

As was popular at the time, the 1964 plan also proposed removing all vehicular traffic in the downtown to create a pedestrian mall along Woodward and Maple. The Ring Road was designed (and built) as a four lane, bypass route to accommodate traffic, at the expense of the pedestrian. Fortunately, the pedestrian mall





**Figure 3:** Above left, 1964 Luckenbach, Ziegelman, JJR master plan sketch for a pedestrian mall at Woodward and Maple Street. Above right, Ring Road signage, JJR.

proposal was scrapped, avoiding what would have been a catastrophic mistake. Over 250 other cities built pedestrian malls, and all but a handful were immediate failures, including Kalamazoo. Pontiac's 1964 Wide Track Drive diverted most traffic away from its downtown, contributing to the direct loss of commerce. Today, the Maple – Woodward intersection accommodates over 40,000 cars per day, while maintaining a walkable environment. This traffic is essential for the downtown's shops and restaurants sustainability.



THE CAFE AT BOOTH PARK

THE ENTRANCE TO DOWNTOWN  
~ MAPLE ST. FROM HUNTER BLVD.

**Figure 4:** Above left, 1929 Duany's proposal for a café in Booth Park and a landscape boulevard along north Woodward. The proposed café was designed to offer a family friendly place for park users. Above right, Duany's proposal for Woodward (Hunter) and Maple Street intersection, looking southwest (proposed Kroger canopy in foreground). At the time, gas stations occupied the southwest and northwest corners, and Duany's proposal was considered impracticable. The proposed buildings were designed by architect Charles Barrett during the charrette to reflect Cranbrook's Arts & Crafts and English characteristics.

## 2016 Plan

In response to the proposed 1994 major expansion of the Somerset Mall, Birmingham's leaders were concerned about the downtown losing many of its retailers and restaurants. At the time, downtown Birmingham was the region's most desirable shopping district, with numerous upscale shops and two major department stores, Jacobson's and Crowley's. However, new real estate development had stalled in the downtown, and it was reported by investors that new commercial construction was not economically viable, resulting in numerous large surface parking lots and undersized buildings.

In 1995, the City issued a request for proposals for a downtown master plan. Although several qualified firms submitted proposals, a second RFP was issued to seek additional planners. At the time, I had recently opened a small landscape architectural office on Shain Park, after working as an urban designer for Johnson, Johnson & Roy and the Taubman Company.



Stuart Laidlaw, a Birmingham artist and activist, encouraged me to approach Andres Duany to jointly submit a proposal for the downtown plan. Duany and I had been collaborating on numerous urban plans since 1989 and we were (and remain) close friends. We agreed to submit a joint proposal along with McKenna Associates, and I was assigned to write the proposal and to serve as the project manager and local planner, if selected. During the next two years, Laidlaw became an influential, behind the scenes liaison between me and the city, and he, was much as anyone responsible for the 2016 plan's success.

The Duany/Gibbs group was one of three firms interviewed. However, Duany's presentation was weak, with only a few, poor images representing his work. Utilizing a point system, designed by the City, Duany ranked the lowest of the three interviewed firms. However, the selection committee members all agreed, that in spite of his last place ranking, Duany was their overwhelming preferred planner, and ignoring their score cards, recommended our group. Shortly after, it was disclosed that some city staff preferred another firm, but fortunately, the city commission accepted the committee's recommendations and entered into a contract with Duany after some pointed negotiations over legal, insurance and process issues. Apparently, all legal issues were not fully understood by Duany, and at the beginning of the planning charrette, after learning about the contract's liability clauses, he announced he was canceling the project and left the studio. Fortunately, a compromise was agreed to, and the planning process continued in an upbeat manor.

The Duany-Gibbs 2018 bid to be selected for the City-Wide master plan did not go as smoothly as in 1995. The city council initially ignored its appointed selection committee's recommendation for the Duany – Gibbs team and held their own interviews with planning firms. After several lengthy council meetings, we were narrowly selected on a split vote. After nearly two years, we are in the middle of our plan's first draft.



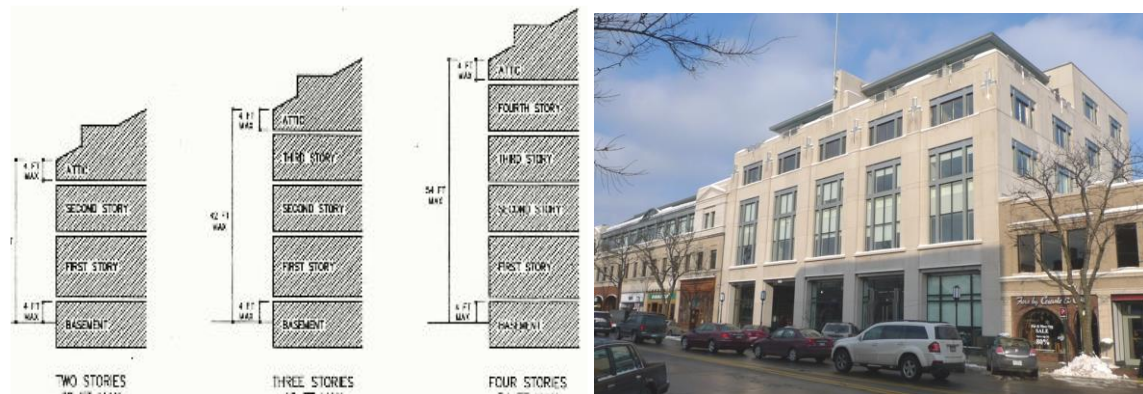
*Figure 5: Andres Duany discusses his proposal at the 1995 planning charrette held in what was then a vacant storefront at 300 Hamilton Street (Currently the Common Grill). Above-left, Victor Saroki, Geoff Hockman center-front, Robert Ziegelman lower-center, steering committee member, Diane McKinnon right. Photo: Stuart Laidlaw.*

The Duany team completed the bulk of the 2016 Plan during an intensive seven-day charrette (workshop) conducted in a vacant Hamilton Street storefront in the spring of 1995. The charrette process, now widely utilized, was then a unique Duany hallmark. For six months prior to the charrette, I led weekly informational meetings with a city steering committee. The committee included citizens, business owners, architects, policy makers and real estate professionals. I introduced planning theory and best practices at each session, followed with round-table discussions about the city's challenges and opportunities. The committee members served as our primary client, offering candid views of the plan's proposals. This feedback was largely responsible for the plan's sensitivity to the city's challenges and unique characteristics. This approach is not possible with a planning commission or city council, whom, are restricted by the legal, public hearing process and are sometimes intimidated by a few outspoken residents.

For the charrette, the entire Duany Miami office set up a temporary Birmingham studio, complete with full desktop computers and drawing boards. In studio, interviews with residents, business owners, city staff and officials were conducted daily, with the architects listening, while designing proposals for buildings, streets and parks in response to the community discussions. The planners each created their own independent proposals and presented them to the public every evening for a week.

The following morning, Duany and the team would then discuss what they had learned during the prior evening and refine the most popular ideas. Frequently, the architects copied, and improved each other's best concepts. Duany's process created a friendly, in-house competition between the designers to create the best plans. Night after night, the planning alternatives were shown to the community, who were more than willing to offer frank opinions. Duany himself, had a charismatic ability to both criticize and complement the architects and public, creating a magical nexus, resulting in an almost complete buy-in to the new plan by residents, business owners, developers, staff and policy makers. The 2016 Plan became a model for the new *Form Based Code* method of planning (see my November 2009 Planning & Zoning News article attached).

Over 3,000 residents, business owners, policy makers and developers participated in the week-long charrette. At the end, most agreed to Duany's proposal to grow the town into a city. Taller buildings, greater density and considerable public investment were widely embraced by the citizens. The 2016 Master Plan was almost fully finished after the exhausting week. The plan included over 300 specific recommendations, of which, all but a few have been fully implemented. Tom Markus, then the city manager, Patricia McCullough, city planning director at the time and Paul O'Meara, former city engineer all are largely responsible for completing the plan's many proposals.



**Figure 6:** Above left, Duany's sketches illustrating proposed increased building heights. Above right, a new five story building designed by architect Chris Longe on Woodward Avenue. The building reflects Duany's code requirements for well-designed masonry elevations, first floor retail, recessed top floor and a minimal amount of residential use.

After the charrette, the planning team led by Tom Low (the DPZ project manager) prepared a beautifully illustrated large sized (11" x 17") master plan, published in two color books. All of us, including Andres, were very proud of the publication and considered as one of our finest urban plans (included in the attached documents). Unfortunately, the draft was rejected by city staff, for reasons that are still unclear to me. I was assigned the responsibility to rewrite the report, in size and prose format. The final 2016 Plan version outlines various topics followed by discussions and recommendations. We all believe that the final draft removed the spirit of the draft and Duany expressed his concerns in the report's cover page (attached). I also have attached full sized copies of the first draft, but I am still looking for the final draft's original copy. A poorly reproduced final report is available on the City web site.

I have outlined below a summary of my recollections of a few of the plan's key elements:

**Building Heights:** Although one of Michigan's most upscale cities, in the 1990's, Birmingham's downtown was littered with unsightly parking lots and aging buildings. Interviews with real estate developers during the planning process revealed that the City's building size restrictions of one to three stories was the primary reason for the lack of investment. At the time, the city counted the basement as a floor, and only two floors were allowed on most properties, unless on-site parking was provided. As a result, many buildings were built over ground level parking lots fronting the streets, creating what Duany labels "ding-bat" buildings. Developers explained that five story minimum buildings were necessary for market rates of returns. Duany quickly responded and proposed permitting five floor buildings as an optional right, if they adhered to stricter design standards.

In exchange for the larger size, buildings were also required to be well designed with masonry elevations, first floor retail and at least one floor of residential. Buildings were also required to recess their top floors to appear as if they were one story lower from the street. Although the increased heights were widely embraced by the public during the charrette, a major outcry erupted when the first five story building, the Willits, was erected. Later, building heights almost canceled the new Palladium Theater and the expansion of the Townsend Hotel.



**Figure 7:** Above left, Willits Road (former Ring Road) looking west from Woodward. The 2016 plan replaced the outer two traffic lanes with on-street parking spaces to improve pedestrian safety and added needed parking for the local businesses. Above right, Woodward and Oakland, looking north east, the 2016 Plan proposed removing the north, westbound turn lane, and one lane of traffic along Oakland to improve the pedestrian connections between the downtown and the north Woodward districts. These recommendations are one of only a few of the plan's proposals remaining to be built.

**Ring Road:** A remnant of the 1964 plan, the Ring Road circled the downtown and was designed to rapidly move vehicular traffic and trucks through the city core. Ring roads were common in the 1960's and are still causing havoc with many commercial districts, including Pontiac. The road's wide lane widths and large street intersection corners favored cars at the expense of the pedestrian. At the time, all thru-truck traffic was required to use the Ring road, instead of Maple or Woodward in the city center. During the charrette, I proposed traffic calming the Ring Road: Willits, Oakland, Chester & Brown were designed to make the downtown more walkable and to improve linkages for the neighborhoods. The Ring Road's existing vehicular traffic lanes were reduced to two lanes with parallel parking along their edges. I also recommended adding parking meters along Willits, Chester and Brown Streets for shopping convenience and to discourage long-term employee parking.

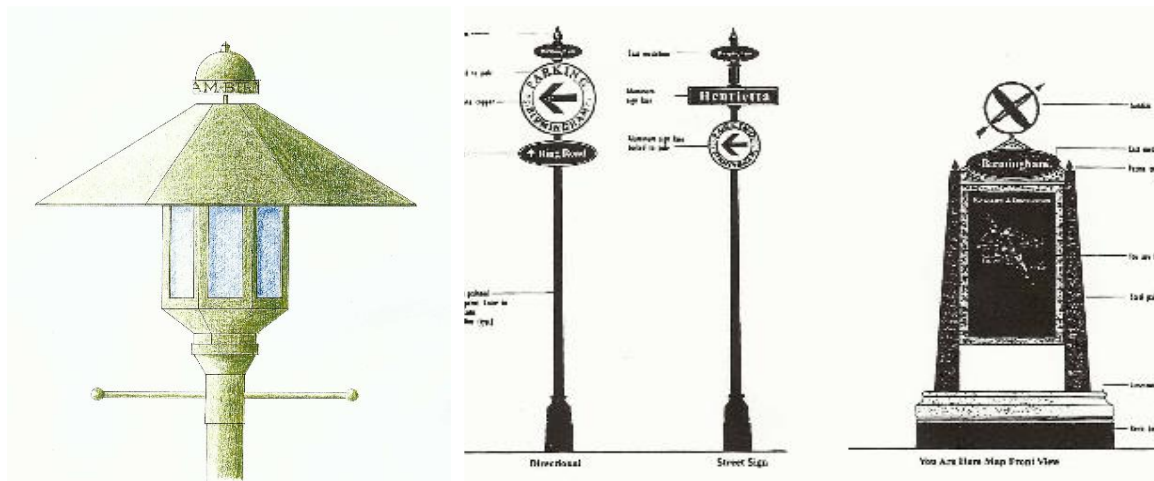
The city quickly implemented the plan on all streets except Oakland and the south block of Chester Street. These two sections should be completed to improve walkability and pedestrian safety. Sometime after the charrette, thru-truck traffic was permitted to drive along Maple and Woodward in the downtown area, causing some unpleasant conflicts with pedestrians and outside diners, as well as traffic congestion.

**Parking:** Parking is almost always the most contentious issue during the city planning process. Frequently, all issues, land-use, density and economics pivot around the car. Surprisingly, parking was seldom raised during the charrette, a credit to both the city's investment in its five parking structures and its market-based management of parking. Several years before the charrette, the city implemented free parking in all decks for



the first two hours of use. This compensated the visitor for walking the extra distance to his or her destination. Unfortunately, ticket-credit card boxes have recently been installed at the entry to parking decks, requiring the visitor to insert a credit card to enter the structure. This is a minor drawback that can be easily corrected.

Conversely, in the 1990's, on-street parking meter rates were increased to \$1.00 per hour, and at the time considered expensive. The higher cost meters detoured some from street parking, freeing up space for shoppers. Birmingham has also retained the old fashioned, but updated individual and parking meters. The meters are more convenient, and much easier to use than the centralized kiosk. The City did install kiosks in the north Woodward area several years ago but removed them and reinstalled the individual meters. The kiosk consistently failed, and the parking space numbers were painted on the sidewalk, and unreadable in the winter.



**Figure 8:** Above left, Ron Ray's design during the charrette for streetlight enhancements. A prototype for the design was built (and remains) on Pierce Street, across from the city hall. Above left, Gibbs' proposal for downtown street signage and business directory signage. Street signage proposed as the international graphic standards. The dining decks were the first to be implemented in the U.S. and have become very popular in numerous cities. The proposed signage hasn't been implemented yet. (Research indicated the city had the authority to install the international graphic standards)

On-site parking is not required for commercial buildings located within the downtown parking district. However, residential buildings must provide their own parking on-site, frequently resulting in expensive underground parking. In 1995, Duany proposed removing all residential parking requirements, and allowing developers to lease spaces in city decks for a 30-year term. This approach was deemed legal, by the city attorney, and embraced by some developers. Unfortunately, the proposal was removed by the city council during their approval of the 2016 Plan. Given the high cost of building the parking, developers prefer building fewer, and larger and more expensive dwellings, over smaller units. As a result, the city is filled with large expensive residences, some of which do not sell. Duany is readdressing the residential parking issue during our current City-Wide plan and re-proposing the relaxing of on-site parking for residential buildings.

Overall, Birmingham's parking program is brilliant, and a model for many cities. My urban retail book highlights the Birmingham's parking system, and I recommend it to most of the cities that I consult for. However, for one reason or another, few cities are able to implement the Birmingham system, with parking remaining one of the major challenges for their businesses and visitors.

**Kroger:** The new downtown Kroger Store was conceptually designed during the 1995 charrette. At the time, Kroger had been seeking to open a new store in Birmingham for several years but, was not able to gather support from the community. Kroger had proposed a conventional store at the northeast corner of Woodward (Hunter) – Maple before the charrette, but it was not accepted by the city and nearby residents because the store was located near homes at the north edge of the site, with a large parking lot fronting Maple Street.



**Figure 9:** Above left, new Kroger Store, conceptually planned during the charrette, Victor Saroki, architect. Above right, Willits and Google Buildings developed utilizing the 2016 Master Plan's optional overlay zoning option. Hobbs & Black, architects of Google Building, Victor Saroki, architect of Willits Building.

The DPZ – Gibbs team met with Kroger during the charrette and they accepted my design of the store fronting Maple Road, with its departments, bakery, bank, coffee, etc. having direct front doors along Maple, with internal counters facing the store and two customer doors for the supermarket (front and back). The store concept plan was also embraced by the surrounding residents and approved in concept by the city during the charrette. Victor Saroki was the architect for the built store. This design represented a new model for Kroger.



**Figure 10:** Above, Andres Duany discussing the plan during the 1995 charrette on Hamilton Street. Standing in the back, Gail Gotthelf, then Director of the Birmingham Principal Shopping District (BSD). I am seated in front of Gotthelf. Photo: Stuart Laidlaw

Other Recommendations: Overall, the 2016 Plan included approximately 300 designs and policies including:

- Traffic calming landscape boulevard for north Old Woodward
- Pedestrian crossing improvements for Big Woodward (Hunter) and Maple
- Streetscape design standards: Specially designed concrete sidewalks, tree locations, street-lights, etc.
- A new plan for an expanded Shain Park. Mary Jukuri, a JJR landscape architect designed the park's new oval walkways during the 1995 charrette. At the time, the south side of Shain was a parking lot.
- The Bates Street extension proposed infill development on the former Jacobson's parking lot along Willits, west of Woodward, to include an extension of Bates to Woodward. The city unsuccessfully attempted to implement the NOW proposal in 2019.
- Rouge River walk: I proposed a paved trail along the Rouge River from Lincoln to Woodward to link many of neighborhoods to the downtown and each other. This remains to be implemented, and I am proposing it in the current City-Wide plan.
- East Maple: Our contract was expanded to include a study of the east Maple area between Woodward and Adams Road. We addressed landuse and streetscape issues, resulting in some infill construction including the All Season's senior residential community.

### Other Recommendations (Cont.):

- International street signage and business directing kiosks.
- South Woodward: We redesigned the five-point intersections of Lincoln, Woodward, Haynes and Bowers. Waler Kailash of Glutting Jackson led the new design, but a slightly different design was implemented several years ago.
- Classical English wooden garden benches in Shain Park and throughout the Historic District.
- City gateways: Ron Ray designed beautiful stone, horizontal wall, signs for north Woodward at Oak and south near 14 Mile Road. I have seen the designs, but currently cannot locate them.



*Figure 11: Above left, Duany's proposal for storefront designs, signage and dining decks. Above right, Charles Barrett's design for the former Crowley's department store, now the Palladium cinema, office, residential and restaurant building. The Palladium's design is similar to Charles's proposal. Note, the building to the right of the drawing is the current location of the Greek Isles restaurant.*

### Other Birmingham Plans:

Following our 2016 Plan, Birmingham has completed several other noteworthy urban design and landuse plans for various areas of city by other firms. Recent plans include:

- Rail District
- Triangle District
- Bates Street Extension Plan (North Old Woodward – NOW Plan)
- South Woodward – Lincoln Plan
- North Old Woodward street and boulevard plan
- West Maple Traffic Calming Plan
- Lincoln Road Diet
- City Wide Maser Plan (currently planning with DPZ and McKenna)

Thank you and the museum for your support and I will continue to collect my plan documents to share with the museum as well as update this letter as time permits.

Sincerely,

GIBBS PLANNING GROUP, INC.

Robert J. Gibbs, FASLA, AICP

President

[rgibbs@gibbsplanning.com](mailto:rgibbs@gibbsplanning.com)

cc Russell Dixon, AIA



# Birmingham looks ahead to fend off new Troy mall

BY LOUISE TAYLOR  
Free Press Staff Writer

Every 20 years or so since the 1920s, Birmingham has redesigned its master plan to ensure the city's well-being for the upcoming decade or two.

This year, the city's eclectic shops anchored by Jacobson's and Crowley's have to consider the August opening of Somerset North, an upscale mall in Troy just a few miles from Birmingham.

Somerset will be anchored by Hudson's and Nordstrom, a mid-priced, fashions and accessories store for men, women and children. It will be Nordstrom's first Michigan store and will be among the largest in the family-owned 15-store chain.

Its reputation is legendary, with a selection of merchandise wide enough to keep you in size 18 EEE shoes if you need them, a sales staff often willing to go to great lengths to find exactly what you want, and a return policy that is so liberal that one of its stores gave money back on tires it never stocked but its predecessor had sold.

"Nordstrom is definitely going to be a pull-away from our retail, and we

need to be prepared for that," said Patrice Uhnavy, a real-estate appraiser in Birmingham.

As an urban planning student, Uhnavy is keeping close tabs on Birmingham's Downtown Plan Advisory Committee, which is helping to develop the city's latest master plan.

The committee is seeking help from anyone with something to say about ensuring the continued success of downtown Birmingham. They are inviting comments about anything — such as trees, sidewalks, loft apartments, business hours, parking — Feb. 28 to March 5. The location and times will be announced later.

The marathon forum on the area's future is called a "charrette," a French term that describes the mad dash architects used to meet deadline: they would pile their plans and designs into a small, horse-drawn cart called a charrette.

Birmingham's modern-day version will be led by Andres Duany, the hottest name around in architecture and urban planning. He designed Florida's Seaside resort, a pseudo-Victori-

See BIRMINGHAM, Page 3A



Todd McInturf / The Detroit News

Birmingham city officials and businesses are studying what attracts consumers to keep them from defecting to Somerset North.

## City takes offensive to keep its customers

By John Larabee  
The Detroit News

Downtown Birmingham is priming to fight back.

The target is Somerset North — the large, upscale Troy shopping center set to open in August.

Birmingham officials and business owners fear the huge new mall, twinning up with the original Somerset Collection across Big Beaver Road in Troy, will pull like a strong magnet on the retail trade that now fuels downtown Birmingham.

That threat has put Mayor Eleanor Siewert, city planners and movers and shakers in the business community on the attack.

They've begun a comprehensive analysis of the business district and the people who now use it to determine what's needed to continue attracting consumers.

The idea, Siewert said, is to come up with new approaches in land use, in how to recruit new businesses, in fixing parking and traffic flow problems and in setting esthetic standards for construction.

"We want to make people stop and look at

*"We want to make people stop and look at what's around them."*

MAYOR ELEANOR SIEWERT

what's around them," Siewert said.

Consultants hired by the city already are at work profiling what types of businesses, drawing what kinds of customers, can best be predicted to succeed.

That information will form the basis for a downtown master plan.

Then, in February, the businessmen and women who represent Birmingham's Principal Shopping District will invite planning specialists, experts in traffic and parking and in marketing to debate the findings with the general public.

"What will come out of all this is anybody's guess," said city commissioner Dante Lanzetta.

"But whether we feel people's perceptions are right or wrong, we'll deal with them. We want businesses and customers to want to come here. Anything we're now doing that discourages that, we want to hear about and correct."

Siewert said Birmingham is "looking for an audit done by fresh eyes."

"Maybe we can do more with lighting, plantings, the general appearance or maintenance of our building's exteriors," she said.

Once all that input is in, the final phase of the work will begin: drafting an urban design plan and implementing it.

Part of that job will be legislative, according to Siewert, who said local ordinances found to be hampering development will be amended or repealed.

City officials freely acknowledge that all this work is not just a periodic relook at the shopping district, but a concentrated effort to thwart losing out to the looming mall giant.

"It's preparation for Somerset North," Lanzetta said.

"Other malls have given the city competition," he said, "but this one's just two miles away. We've got to figure a way to complement what they have with the proper mix of stores and services."

"At the same time, we've got to remain attractive to the people who, by choice, want to come to Birmingham first."



# Gauging the Impact of Somerset North

*While some predict troubling times for local retailers, most see the mega-mall as a boon for the entire region.*

By Donna Raphael, Ci Staff

While Southeast Michigan's retail climate has improved steadily over the past three years, with big box stores booming across the region, nothing has caused the stir and anticipation of Somerset North, set to open in Troy, early Fall 1996.

Few doubt that Somerset North, sister mall to the highly successful upscale Somerset Collection, will position Troy as the premiere retail destination in the state and region. It will feature Michigan's first Nordstrom store, the area's eleventh hometown Hudson's, as well as 130 other stores yet to be named.

"The single biggest reason we made the decision to go ahead with the expansion was that Nordstrom was ready to enter the local market," says Rebecca Maccardini, director of operations for Forbes/Cohen Properties in Southfield. The overwhelming success of the Somerset Collection, owned by Troy-based Frankel Associates, and the waiting list of stores wanting to get into the mall were additional factors, she adds.

The \$200-million, three-story project, which is being built by Perini Building Co. of Southfield, will adjoin the Somerset Collection via a 700-foot long, glass-enclosed skywalk spanning Big Beaver Road. It will encompass 950,000 square feet of gross leasable area (GLA) on 37 acres. The two malls will have combined parking for 7,000 cars.

To distinguish itself from the Somerset Collection, Somerset North will feature "bridge" merchandise that is in a price range between moderate and upscale. "We want to have a broader tenant mix," says Maccardini. The Somerset Collection — with Neiman

Marcus, Saks Fifth Avenue, Tiffany, Gucci, Barneys New York and Bally of Switzerland — is clearly geared to high-end purchasers. At present, tenants in the 72-store Somerset Collection make an average of \$450 per square foot in sales, compared to \$250 per square foot at the average shopping centers across the country. The typical shopper spends \$170 per shopping trip at the Somerset Collection, more than three times the national average of \$55 per shopping trip.

Despite the excitement surrounding the construction of such a mammoth project, there is some concern that the new mall will have a negative economic impact on surrounding malls and retail centers, mainly Oakland Mall and downtown Birmingham. The fear is

two-fold: First, there's concern that key retailers will vacate existing sites in favor of the new mall. Then, there's the worry that shoppers will stop frequenting the older retail centers, prompting more closings or relocations.

The concern is not unwar-

**"The single biggest reason we made the decision to go ahead with the expansion was that Nordstrom was ready to enter the local market."**

*Rebecca Maccardini,  
Forbes/Cohen Properties in Southfield*

ranted. Somerset North is expected to have a primary market of customers within a 10 to 15 mile radius. Within that circle are five regional malls, each with an existing Hudson's store — Lakeside in Sterling Heights, Oakland in Troy, Northland in Southfield, Summit Place in Waterford and Twelve Oaks in Novi. Additionally, the mall is expected to be a magnet for upscale-merchandise seekers from as far away as Toledo, Ohio, Canada and northern Michigan.

At this stage of the game, however, most local mall developers say they welcome the competition and believe the new mall is a plus for the region as a whole. For instance, Christopher Tennyson, senior vice president of corporate affairs for The Taubman Co. in Bloomfield Hills, maintains that the entry of Nordstrom is a good thing for the whole area and that Nordstrom has more than a one-

Commercial inc.



# Birmingham aims to improve downtown

BIRMINGHAM, from Page 1A

an town on the Gulf Coast that is a walker's haven, and its soul mate, Kentlands in Maryland.

With Duany will be a host of traffic and other planners armed with computers that can show anyone who drops by whether his or her idea will work — and what it will look like.

Want to see loft apartments above the Banana Anna, or discover whether the sidewalks along Woodward would be best twice as wide to allow for outdoor cafes?

They'll show you — on the spot — how your idea would work.

Soon thereafter, a master plan will emerge. Among the aims: More walking in downtown, perhaps by changing zoning ordinances to allow loft and other apartments in the main business areas.

Other possibilities: Trolleys, more lighting, low-interest loan programs to help landlords redesign storefronts, and stores on the street level of parking garages.

"We need uniformity of store hours," said Mike Thibault, an owner of the Cooks Garden Cafe on Maple. "We're the only ones on the block open until 9 or 10 at night. We need to increase foot traffic."

And parking?

"We don't have a parking problem," Thibault said. "We have an awareness-of-parking problem."

Evening foot traffic is expected to be boosted when the Birmingham Theatre, which is being restored to its former art deco splendor, reopens later this year as a multiplex movie house.

As Rochester has converted its downtown from dying to thriving in defiance of strip malls and shopping centers, many expect Birmingham to thrive despite new retail rivals in Troy.

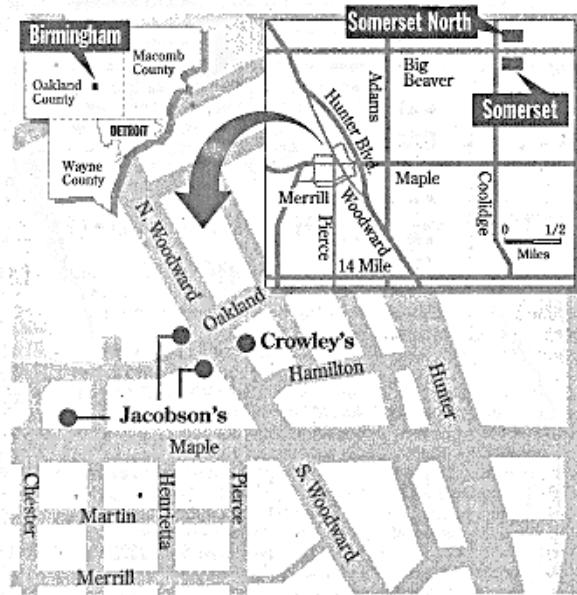
"We expect to capitalize on new customers coming into the region," said Gail Gorthelf, executive director of Birmingham's Principal Shopping District. "We capitalize on what we have that the malls don't — in a real outdoor setting."

Birmingham does have what no mall does. Forty-four art galleries, for example, make the city one of the most artistically inclined in the Midwest, said Geoffrey Hockman, who co-chairs the Downtown Plan Advisory Committee, sits on the school and Principal Shopping District boards and owns the Townsend Hotel.

The downtown also has a mix of stores you can find in a mall, such as the Gap, Express and Victoria's Secret, plus specialty shops selling items from handblown art glass to designer



Downtown Birmingham may soon have wider sidewalks, loft apartments or other changes to keep shopper and residents happy. The upscale shopping district wants to avoid being hurt by Somerset North in nearby Troy



Detroit Free Press

Jacobson's posted quarterly losses for its combined 26 stores last year but actually made money in its Birmingham store, according to James Batterson, Jacobson's vice president of sales promotion.

It is planning renovations to its women's store. "It will be a rather substantial change from what customers see now as they walk in," Batterson said.

He believes Jacobson's and Nordstrom have similar customer-service philosophies.

"The concept of both companies for personal attention and care for customers is very similar — as similar as any two you could compare," he said.

"I'm not a retailing expert but I'm very confident that it can hold its own," Hockman said.

One tribute to Birmingham's downtown: The closer a home is to it, the pricier it becomes. A 2,000-square-foot home near downtown costs at least \$300,000.

"The cost is extremely high — the highest in Oakland County," said Mar. Bollinger, a real estate appraiser who works with Uhnavey. "If you're within walking distance to downtown Birmingham, you're in a very desirable location."

strom's customer service is, they can't act as fast as I can to improve it. I'm the boss."

But Jacobson's, he said tactfully, better watch out: "They need to rise to the occasion."

"The energy of downtown is with the small merchants," said Dr. William Koppin, owner of Shades, an upscale optical store.

"I don't care how good Nord-

# Duany adds to his time on master plan

BY HELEN NIEMIEC  
STAFF WRITER

The time frame to reach a final master plan for downtown Birmingham has been extended by another month, after consultant Andres Duany requested adding another step to give local officials one more chance to discuss the document with Duany and other consultants working on the project.

Duany, the lead consultant in a 20-person team working on the \$320,000 project, is exceeding the terms of the contract with Birmingham without additional cost to give the process an extra step.

The Downtown Planning Advisory Committee, the citizens panel working with the consultant, learned of the change in time schedule this week and was pleased that Duany is going the extra step to insure that all understand the plan and know how to implement it.

Tom Low, a representative from Duany's firm, will attend the next DPAC meeting on Wednesday, July 24. The meeting begins at 7:30 p.m. at Birmingham City Hall.

Duany is a principal in the firm of DuanyPlater-Zyberk of Miami. He is employing the talents of three other consulting firms so the master plan covers everything from building design

to density to traffic.

"This is in recognition of the partnership between the city and Duany," said DPAC co-chairman Geoffrey Hockman. "What we're getting is one more version of the plan. The time line slipped because of the willingness of the consultant. We appreciate that."

The final draft of the master plan now isn't scheduled until Nov. 1.

The added step is a second draft of the master plan. The first was received May 1 and DPAC is getting ready to send off a 60-page document including its review of each of the 12 chapters plus correspondence received concerning portions of the plan. Duany will be in Birmingham on Wednesday, Aug. 14 for a public forum to get feedback on the first draft in preparation of the Sept. 9 unveiling of the second draft. (The Aug. 14 community forum is scheduled for 7:30 p.m. at First Baptist Church on Willits.)

Duany also will be in town, probably on Tuesday, Aug. 13, for meetings with DPAC and other affected groups to get comments on the draft plan in preparation of the community forum.

Duany's decision to spend two days in Birmingham instead of the one that was in the contract is a big plus for the

■ 'What we're getting is one more version of the plan. We appreciate that.'

*Geoffrey Hockman*  
—DPAC co-chairman

local panel, Hockman said.

"I see this as a critical meeting to the overall success of the plan," Hockman said.

The Aug. 13 date is tentative but it is the preferred date for DPAC. Duany gave Birmingham the choice of his returning for Aug. 13-14 or Aug. 14-15.

And it's more than Duany that will be in Birmingham for that two-day period. He'll be bringing back the entire team

that was in town for the kick-off charrette in late February. (A charrette is a free-form series of workshops where ideas are exchanged and then drawings made to illustrate those ideas.)

The remainder of the schedule then becomes:

- Sept. 9 — presentation of the second draft of the master plan to the city of Birmingham.
- Sept. 18 — a joint meeting with DPAC and Birmingham City Plan to respond to the second draft.
- Oct. 11 — the deadline for the city to respond in writing to Duany concerning that second draft.
- Nov. 1 — final plan to the city.
- Nov. 4, 5 or 6 — Duany returns to Birmingham for final presentation of the master plan.

## Action



# Urban planner Duany answers critics

BY HELEN NIEMIEC  
STAFF WRITER

Urban design expert Andres Duany cautioned Birmingham officials Wednesday that his team can design the ultimate master plan for the downtown but its success hinges on quick implementation.

"Ultimately, it is up to the courage of elected officials to do the right thing," Duany said.

The Miami-based consultant

addressed a community forum to give residents a chance to comment and ask questions. The bulk of the comments opposed portions of the plan, which Duany said should be weighed from the standpoint of the greater good rather than the opinion of the few who oppose change.

More than 150 people attended the session held at Pierce School.

One part of the plan that Duany said should be done immediately is

to convert the parking lot across from The Community House into additional open space for Shain Park.

"It would be an enormous gain of green space. You should be embarrassed to have an open parking lot in the center of your town like a Kmart," Duany said.

Concerns raised over Duany's suggestion include the loss of on-street parking spaces and the walking dis-

tance from The Community House to the Chester Street parking deck.

"When those concerns came to us, we thought what can we do for these incredibly lazy, small-minded people," Duany said.

Both, he said, could be overcome. Allowing angle parking on Chester and moving the Ring Road bypass to Southfield instead of Chester would solve both those issues.

See DUANY, A2

*The Eccentric*/ MONDAY, AUGUST 19, 1996

## Duany from page A1

A recommendation to install a pedestrian path along the Rouge River has drawn the ire of some nearby homeowners.

"This bicycle path is horrifying some people," Duany admitted. "But the fears are not well understood on my part that a bike path and a public park will have a negative affect on property values."

Residents said they feared an increase in crime with a path. Duany countered, saying that populated places are safer than desolate areas.

"Six affected can kill the project though 100 will benefit. This is unique about American government, those negative voices are more powerful," Duany said. Even though people who favor the plan don't show up for meetings, Duany urged the city to "do it anyway" even if "as a temporary situation to determine whether the bike path would have a negative impact."

Connie Bouchard, who has opposed the bike path at Downtown Action Plan Committee meetings for months, told Duany that his house abuts the path and he doesn't want the added use because of the noise, potential for vandalism and rowdy behavior.

"It would be better somewhere else. It's a lousy choice for a bike path," Bouchard said. "We're talking about preserving peace and tranquility."

The idea for the bike path originally appeared in Birmingham's master plan from the 1920s. Duany said the thought has endured because it is a good idea and adds to the urban character. Additionally, the path connects Maple Road to Booth Park, which unites two different portions of the shopping district.

Anne Honhart, a member of the parking advisory committee, told Duany she liked the vision presented in the plan but worried that it may never be enacted.



STAFF PHOTOS BY TOM HOFFMEYER

**Consultant caucus:** Lead consultant Andres Duany fields questions from the more than 150 people assembled at a community forum. Serving as back-up for him are (from left) traffic consultant Walter Kulash and Birmingham consulting liaison Robert Gibbs.

ed.

"We need some sort of guidelines. My thought is that there will be compromises along the way," Honhart said. "We need to, as a community, look at the plan as a whole and need to know how to look at the issues and how to judge them."

Duany said that a determination to enact the plan is needed and that it should go forward even though individuals express fear of change.

He asked that the plan be adopted by the Birmingham City Commission in spirit, with the

more concrete changes adopted as the plan progresses.

Duany said Birmingham is in another building boom and, if the plan were in place, could have affected the construction of the new Borders that will be constructed on Hunter Boulevard to replace the former Machus City Grill and affect what will be built at the Comerica branch on North Woodward and Oak that is expected to be sold in the next week.

"This plan should not be held up by a half-dozen problem

issues. It should be passed in principle," Duany said. "Because the plan isn't in place, there are opportunities lost. It's important not to tarry. Let the plan go forward and hold some things back."

The second draft of the master plan from Duany is expected to be delivered to the city the week of Sept. 9. The downtown planning action committee will hold a community forum on Wednesday, Sept. 18 to discuss that draft. The final version is expected to be delivered to the city in early November.





Duane E. Behringer / The Detroit News

Robert Gibbs of Gibbs Planning Group says Birmingham will compete with Somerset for specialty shopping.

## Birmingham plans for face-lift

Urban designer who was hired to revive city's downtown says there are lessons to be learned from retail malls.

By Lynn Waldsmith  
The Detroit News

If downtown Birmingham is to survive and prosper in the years ahead, it needs to borrow a few lessons from the shopping mall.

That's the philosophy of Robert Gibbs, a Birmingham urban designer who specializes in retail planning.

Gibbs has designed master plans for cities throughout the United States — most recently for Beverly Hills, Calif., and its famous Rodeo Drive. Now the noted planner is working on a 20-year master plan for his hometown.

"It's hard to say exactly what the vision will be," Gibbs said. "But we have to have the foresight to know what will work for the next 20 years. If we don't, we could be in trouble."

Trouble may be looming just a few miles away in the form of Somerset North, the upscale Troy mall scheduled to open in August.

"We're going to lose a few stores," said Gail Gotthelf, director of the Birmingham

Principal Shopping District. "But I also think we're going to have a lot moving in. We just have a tired look and the timing is right to start planning for the future."

The city of Birmingham has hired Gibbs, leading national architects, and several other marketing and planning experts to develop an action plan for the downtown area.

This week, Gibbs and the rest of the planning team will first gather opinions from residents, merchants, property owners, and anyone who would like to contribute ideas through an intense planning process known as a charrette.

"It's a chance for people to place priorities on community projects, look at zoning requirements that maybe should be changed, and look at things that prohibit new businesses from coming in," Gotthelf said.

Gibbs is specifically interested in how to shape the future of Birmingham's downtown retail environment. He believes specialty stores, along with restaurants and art galleries, are key to

### Robert J. Gibbs

**Title:** President, Gibbs Planning Group

**Age:** 40

**Career:** A specialist in land development and new town planning, Gibbs has completed site and urban planning projects throughout the United States and Canada. Before forming Gibbs Planning Group in 1988, Gibbs was a site planning coordinator for the Taubman Company.

**Education:** Master's degree in landscape architecture from the University of Michigan, B.A. in social studies from Oakland University

**Personal:** Gibbs lives with his wife and two children in Birmingham.

the city retaining its unique character.

"Birmingham will compete with Somerset by offering specialty retail shopping that you can't buy in national chains and by offering an outside shopping experience," said Gibbs.

Please see SHOPPING, Page 3B

# The Eccentric®

BIRMINGHAM-BLOOMFIELD  
EDITION

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SEVENTY-FIVE CENTS

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## Expert says more housing needed

BY HELEN NIEMEC  
STAFF WRITER

Luring more residents downtown while reserving first-floor space for retail use are the keys to a thriving downtown, a national consultant told Birmingham officials this week.

Andres Duany was in town for two days this week, spending the daytime hours with committees and city staff and saving the evening for public meetings. Duany heads up the 20-member consultant group that is

working on a 20-year master plan for downtown Birmingham. The \$320,000 project is scheduled to be completed in November.

His session Tuesday night with the Downtown Planning Action Committee and the Birmingham City Plan Commission spent two hours clarifying those incentives and urging the city volunteers to look at the document as descriptive rather than specific to allow for shifts in ideas during the 20-year duration of

the plan.

Downtown Birmingham already has changed from what it was 100 years ago, or even 20 years ago.

"A traditional town center like yours has changed. Now they're associated with entertainment — restaurants, theaters, shops you go to occasionally. It's been transformed that way. It plays a cultural role, not a utility role. We want to reinforce the cultural role, not advocate returning to the utility," Duany

said.

Utility downtowns are places that sell the necessities, being a place where grocery stores, drug stores and post offices are located.

"Your downtown definitely is the highest-end economically," Duany said. "We're trying to make the experience as high-quality as possible, worthy of what people are paying for. That's what the plan is about."

See HOUSING, A12

## Housing *from page A1*

Specific ordinance language that makes incentives and other portions of the plan enforceable will be written by McKenna & Associates and unveiled in a later draft of the plan.

Part of the recommendations will be to encourage multi-story buildings downtown rather than single story.

"The marching order is to become a city from a town but not to go back to a village. Single story buildings are the residue of a village," Duany said.

And rather than having first floor retail and several floors of offices, the new plan will call for residential units getting preferential treatment in the building process. One way is to allow taller residential units and limit office to only the second floor use.

All involved still are working on a way to streamline the process of getting building plans approved and permits issued. Duany's draft plan had called for

the formation of a staff action committee that would give administrative approvals if a plan met all building and design codes. City plan board and the Historic District Design Review Committee members objected to the administrative panel, saying that it would limit public comment on projects.

"Structures here are enhanced by going to the planning board," said Brian Blasiesing, of the plan board. "Major improvements, like materials, design, location on the site all occur through the process. Just because a building meets all the code requirements, it's not enough. We don't have a good looking community accidentally."

Because of the large architectural and art community in Birmingham, Duany said that he is recommending a less restrictive master plan. Some communities limit color choices but Duany said that isn't appropriate in Birmingham. "We didn't

limit color here. That's what people care most about," Duany said. "With the large number of artists and architects here, they value the freedom to express themselves."

Midway through the evening Duany vented some anger at members of city staff, DPAC, and The Eccentric for what he considered negative comments about the plan since the process started nearly a year ago.

Questioning his professionalism and the tone of comments, he said, was "just rude."

"Our professional quality has been called into questions," Duany said. "We've done over 90 projects and we've never had our professionalism called into question."

DPAC co-chairman Geoffrey Hookman quelled that discourse, saying that continuing the discussion wouldn't be helpful in the process.



# Confidence grows in evolving downtown master plan

BY HELEN NIEMIEC  
STAFF WRITER

Feelings are a bit more confident these days that the second draft of Birmingham's downtown master plan will be more specific and show planners the way to achieve a more prosperous business district.

Consultant Andres Duany, internationally known urban designer, spent two days in Birmingham last week, meeting with various city officials, city boards and the general public in information sharing efforts.

Duany will be in town again this week for a three-day informal visit to take a closer look at Birmingham before he starts penning the second draft that will be delivered to Birmingham officials the week of Sept. 9. No meetings are planned for this week.

The citizen panel working closest on the master plan is the Downtown Planning Action Committee, which spent nearly the entire two days with Duany and other consultants to clarify the plan and ask questions concerning implementation.

The master plan, when adopted, will serve as a guidepost for development in Birmingham for the next 20 years.

"I believe the sessions were valuable," said DPAC co-chairman Geoffrey Hockman. "There was good interaction between city staff, DPAC and the planning commission. I'm pleased with the product taking shape. It's been very worthwhile."

The first draft of the plan was a general statement and DPAC and planning board members said they needed more concrete examples of the ways to accomplish certain downtown improvements, including enhancing the parking system, encouraging residential units to be built in the downtown and design aesthetics.

Hockman sees that detail as forthcoming in the next draft. "Now something is being fashioned that is specific to our

vision and our future," Hockman said.

Community development director Patricia McCullough agreed that there is a better sense of understanding on both the part of the city/people involved and Duany.

"The meetings have lent to a more comprehensive view of what the city is looking for and what (Duany) is trying to convey," McCullough said. "At the conclusion of the two days, we felt that there is a clear understanding of the best approach for the downtown action plan."

While most of the draft plan was covered during the two-day period, McCullough met with Robert Gibbs, Duany's local liaison, to go over the portions of the plan that the entire team didn't get a chance to review in that short period of time. Mayor Eleanor Sewert said

city staff and DPAC will work on a process that will bring the master plan design to its conclusion, including gathering more citizen input and making sure that all who have been involved contribute to the final draft.

Sewert is hesitant to say the second draft plan will be exactly what the city is looking for but believes that the third version, due in November, will be a plan of which to be proud.

"I hear there will be a lot more detail," Sewert said of the second draft. "But I don't know what to expect."

The benefit of last week's sessions with DPAC, Duany, other consultants and city staff is that all now are working together with a clearer understanding of the mission, Sewert said.

While Duany had asked the city to adopt the master plan in principle already, Sewert said

she wouldn't make that recommendation to the Birmingham City Commission. She favors breaking it out into pieces and then acting on individual sections, fine tuning some aspects and totally embracing others.

Sewert doesn't favor adopting the document as a whole, saying that the more controversial portions could defeat the rest of the plan. And she does want a downtown action plan in place.

One Birmingham resident was excited by the coming master plan, saying that since the work began on it, that he's looked at his city differently.

Marty Rice was one of the residents who spoke at last week's community forum.

"When I walk downtown, I see things differently now. I really compliment the effort that (Duany) and others are making for the betterment of this community," Rice said.

## West Oakland Ob-Gyn

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Jay Fisher, M.D., graduated from Wayne



Laura Gruskin, M.D., is a graduate of the

## Gateway art work ideal for space, Duany says

BY HELEN NIEMIEC  
STAFF WRITER

Proponents of the Alice Aycock sculpture for the entrance to downtown Birmingham got a shot of moral support from internationally known urban planner Andres Duany who said the metal modern art work is perfect for the grassy space.

Although there were more than 150 at the Duany meeting a week ago, members of the Gateway Sculpture subcommittee of the Cultural Council of Birmingham/Bloomfield want to keep these words alive.

The community forum, sponsored by the city's Downtown Planning Action Committee and City Plan Commission, was taped and the gateway group is going to appropriate a portion of that talk for a video tape it is putting together on the sculpture project.

Maureen VanDine, chairwoman of the gateway committee,

said that a videotape will be put together early this fall that will include the comments from Duany as well as artist Aycock and others.

The tape will be taken to various groups and service organizations in the gateway committee's attempt to raise funds for the \$300,000 project.

"What he said was very positive," VanDine said.

She's already gotten one comment from a resident who has changed their opinion about the controversial artwork following Duany's endorsement.

At the Gateway Committee's booth at the Woodward Avenue Dream Cruise, VanDine said she was approached by a resident who has vocally opposed the modern art work.

"She said what Duany said made a lot of sense," VanDine said. "That was wonderful...and totally unsolicited. It really made me feel good."

Duany arrived at his opinion after asking the committee what the intention of the work was. The answer was to mark Birmingham's place on the highway. The sculpture, he said, does that very well.

"When driving 60 miles per hour partially bored and partially terrified, there is no time for artistic discernment. To attract attention, you have to do something enormous," Duany said. "This sculpture is very skillful in attracting motorists to notice it."

He called Aycock's work "truly original, unprecedented, a good first move."

Aware of the negative comments from a portion of the community, Duany urged residents to take a look at the model of it at the Hill Gallery in its three-dimensional view rather than making an opinion based on a photograph.

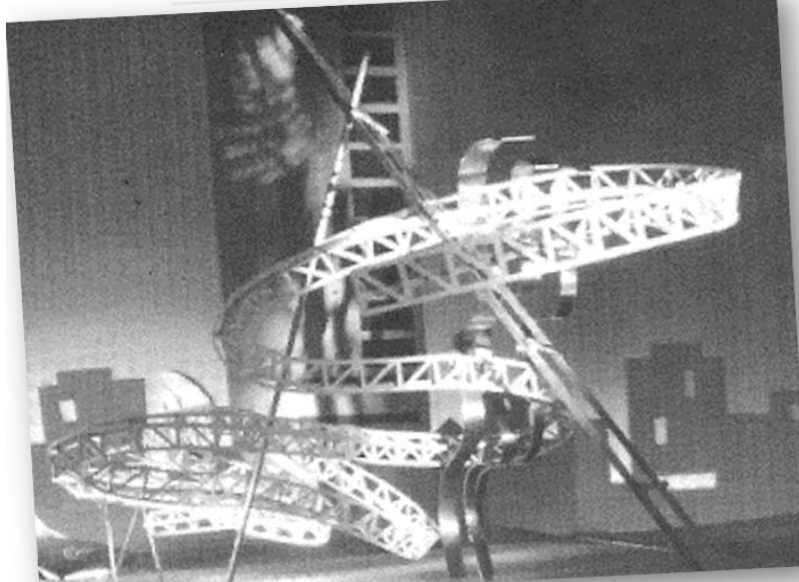
"It's designed to be dynamic," Duany said. "But it has to be taken from the point of view from a car. It twists and turns as you get nearer. You may not like it but you will notice it."

Duany guaranteed that if the sculpture is built, it will become a "buzz for the region."

Because Birmingham can get lost in the blur of Woodward Avenue/Hunter Boulevard, Duany said that the city needs something like the Aycock sculpture to bring attention to its downtown, especially as a way of calling attention to the city for those who don't live or work in Birmingham.

"If the job description is to please a majority of the citizens, it won't do it," Duany said. "If the job is to make a special place, it is extraordinarily good. I'll add that I think you need it."

Turn a simple gift into  
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Birmingham-Bloomfield Eccentric

## OPINION

805 E. MAPLE, BIRMINGHAM, MICHIGAN 48009

### Gateway is an eyesore

I am writing on behalf of the Birmingham Branch of Woman's National Farm & Garden Association about the proposed sculpture "Gateway" to be placed at the southern entrance of the city of Birmingham.

We believe it is going to be an awful eyesore. It looks like an erector set twisted by a cyclone. When approaching Birmingham, this "Aycock" sculpture would give the feeling of a cold and inhospitable city as does Detroit's Dodge Fountain and Joe Louis' arm, although, at least, they have a relationship to Detroit.

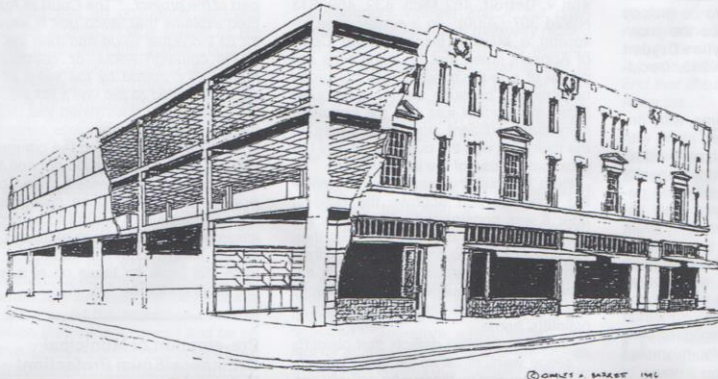
Has anyone on the Downtown Planning Committee thought of moving Marshall Fredericks' "Flight of Freedom" to the "gateway" (centered in Shain Park it is hardly noticed). With all the art fairs, carnivals and other programs in the park, we might better have our more famous Marshall Fredericks' sculpture to welcome travelers to our town at the "gateway."

Mrs. Richard Kaltz, vice president,  
Woman's National Farm & Garden  
Association

## STREAMLINING DEVELOPMENT & IMPLEMENTING MICHIGAN'S FIRST FORM-BASED CODE: Success in Birmingham

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Graphic and photo courtesy of City of Birmingham and Gibbs Planning Group

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# DOWNTOWN BIRMINGHAM: Thirteen Years of Implementation of Michigan's First Form-Based Code

By Robert Gibbs, Managing Principal, Gibbs Planning Group and Jana Ecker, Planning Director, City of Birmingham

**B**irmingham currently has a population of just under 20,000 people within four square miles. Downtown Birmingham is one of the premier examples of a walkable urban environment in Michigan. A charrette-based Downtown Plan prepared in 1996 is one of the principal reasons why.

## Background

Located just 20 miles north of the heart of Detroit, Birmingham is centrally located along Woodward Avenue. Abundant access to great farmland and water from the

Rouge River created a good base for promoting early prosperity.

Birmingham's location between Detroit and Pontiac also linked Birmingham's early small industry and farming concerns to the consumers in those communities and beyond. One of the key assets that lead to the development of Birmingham was access along Woodward Avenue, which was made easier with the introduction of the railroad in 1840, and improved again with the inter-urban railroad in 1896. By the 1920's, the Village of Birmingham was thriving. Birmingham was already being promoted as a desirable place to live, and the City's downtown shopping district grew as additional shops and services were needed to serve the growing population.

Birmingham has a history of implementing innovative plans, beginning with a 1920s City Beautiful design that created a central civic square surrounded by a library, city hall and post office, which was prepared by Arthur C. Comey of Cambridge, Massachusetts. A 1960's master plan for the downtown proposed five parking decks along a new Ring Road, which circumscribed the downtown, and allowed for the construction of high-rise buildings. The community funded and implemented this plan, resulting in over 3 million square feet of new commercial development and one of the most upscale downtowns for a Midwest city with a population of less than 20,000.

However, new high-rise buildings constructed in accordance with the 1960's master plan prompted a citizen backlash, resulting in the city repealing permitted densities and limiting new construction to a floor-area ratio of one (including the basement). As a consequence, new development downtown became financially impractical and literally stalled for 20 years. In the mid-1990s, Birmingham experienced a 20 percent population loss, stagnant economic growth, declining retail sales and competition from a new 1.5 million square foot luxury mall two miles away. Leading retailers and large commercial tenants were lured out of Birmingham, including the closing of two major department stores and two cinemas. In addition, the Ring Road system promoted high-speed traffic, isolating the city's downtown from surrounding neighborhoods and creating an uncomfortable environment for pedestrians. Further, a lengthy approval process for new buildings became a hindrance to development. For example, after two years of community meetings, a grocery store failed to gain

consensus for a new location or approval for a new site plan.

To confront these challenges and to explore market-based opportunities for Birmingham's historic downtown, city officials sought to develop a new 20 year master plan in 1996 to stimulate new commercial activity downtown and spur residential growth.

The 2016 Master Plan that resulted from this effort was based on detailed market research regarding Birmingham's commercial and residential potential. In addition, extensive traffic studies and residential preference surveys were conducted during the planning process. Foremost among the agreements reached by the city's citizens, business owners, municipal officials and other stakeholders was the desire to grow Birmingham from a town into a small city. The 2016 Master Plan reflected and achieved this by recommending numerous policy revisions, streetscape improvements, park expansions, traffic-calming measures and a form-based overlay-zoning district, which prescribed building dimensions and placement, building forms and materials, and permitted uses.

## One of the most successful aspects of the 2016 Master Plan was the public process.

### Public Participation

One of the most successful aspects of the 2016 Master Plan was the public process. The creation of the 2016 Plan set a high standard for community participation that has continued to impact the planning process in Birmingham. The Birmingham 2016 Master Plan included three months of community educational and information-gathering sessions before a seven-day public charrette was conducted in a downtown storefront. Weekly educational lectures were held to educate the public and advisory board on planning principles and techniques. Planners organized and conducted the weeklong planning charrette, including all meetings and presentations. The planning team prepared the entire Master Plan document, including all text, draft codes, and illustrations. The planning team assembled 50 top architects, economists, planners and engineers from around the country to work in a downtown storefront studio as part of a "real time" process of public involvement

## About the Authors

**R**obert Gibbs, ASLA, founder of Gibbs Planning Group, Birmingham, MI, is considered one of America's leading urban retail planners. A specialist in retail development and town planning, with projects throughout North America, Europe, and the Pacific Rim, he regularly consults with national retailers, mall developers, and cities. A leader in the New Urbanist movement, Gibbs has been active in developing innovative yet practical methods for applying modern trends in commercial development to more than 300 town centers and historic cities including Kentlands, The Glen, Rosemary Beach, and Seaside, and the cities of Atlanta, Charleston, Chicago, Miami Beach, Naples, Portland, Seattle, and West Palm Beach.

**J**ana Ecker is the Planning Director for the City of Birmingham, Michigan. She is responsible for overseeing and coordinating all development activity handled by the Building, Engineering, Planning, and GIS Divisions, as well as the Principal Shopping District. The City of Birmingham was recently the recipient of IMAGIN's GIS for Everyone Award for an innovative Retail Market Analysis Mapping Project that was jointly implemented by the City's GIS, Planning and Principal Shopping District staff. Ms. Ecker was previously the Director of Planning and Development for the City of Jeffersonville, Indiana. During her time in Indiana, Ms. Ecker lead her team to win the "Outstanding Planning Project of the Year Award" (2000) from the Indiana Planning Association for Jeffersonville's innovative new Zoning Ordinance, and the "Community of the Year Award" (2002) from the Indiana Chamber of Commerce. □



Photo courtesy of Gibbs Planning Group

The entire 2016 Master Plan was completed during a seven-day public charrette that was attended by over 2,500 participants. During the charrette, the community reached a consensus on its future that is still referred to during policy discussions.

as a means to build broad community support for and ownership of a new downtown master plan. Principal credit for the Master Plan goes to DPZ Architects (Andres Duany & Elizabeth Plater Zybeck), Gibbs Planning Group, and McKenna Associates, along with city planning staff.

### ***Weekly educational lectures were held to educate the public and advisory board on planning principles and techniques.***

Over 2,500 concerned citizens, business owners, shopkeepers, property holders, developers, elected officials and City staff participated in more than 70 meetings during the weeklong charrette. Master plan alternatives were publicly presented twice daily. Direct and frank opinions were exchanged, allowing each participant to gain insight into the overall issues. The planning team worked diligently to gather public input and to produce a 20 year plan for the City. An often divided community was able to reach agreement on the city's future size and character. At the end of the charrette process, the City had a new master plan, known as the 2016 Plan, for downtown Birmingham.

The 2016 Master Plan featured exceptional public involvement in its process, extensive research, high-quality design, practical engineering and detailed graphic illustrations. The plan continues to guide both public and private sectors in determining important policy and investment decisions for Downtown Birmingham.

Subsequent planning efforts in the City have continued this tradition of extensive public involvement, and included the use of renderings, visual preference surveys and 3D computer graphics to illustrate the impact of building form and location on the community. The Triangle District Urban Design Plan that was prepared and adopted in 2007 for the area immediately adjacent to Downtown Birmingham also incorporated a two-day charrette during which the planning team presented photos, illustrations and renderings of select locations to demonstrate the impact of existing and proposed development regulations. At the same time the plan was adopted, a form-based overlay district was also approved for the Triangle District to ensure full realization of the urban design plan. Current efforts utilizing the same approach are also in progress to create a multi-jurisdictional master plan and overlay district in both Birmingham and Troy around a proposed multi-modal transit center along the mutual border separating the cities.

#### **Basic Elements of the 2016 Plan**

The 2016 Plan was designed in 1996 to be a strategic document for the next 20 years. It was meant to be broad and visionary, while at the same time addressing necessary details to ensure the creation of a vibrant, pedestrian-friendly urban experience. Specifically, the goals of the 2016 Plan were to:

- Encourage and direct development within the boundaries of the Overlay District;
- Encourage a diverse mix of uses including retail, commercial, entertainment, cultural, civic and especially residential;

- Encourage first floor retail businesses, services and other activities which are required for everyday living;
- Encourage mixed-use buildings throughout downtown;
- Ensure that all uses relate to pedestrians; and
- Ensure that retail be safeguarded along specific street frontages.

The Birmingham 2016 Master Plan was the first form-based plan in Michigan. An increased density of up to five times the previous amount was permitted as a zoning option downtown to encourage investment and development downtown. In exchange for offering this incentive, the City imposed use regulations to require the appropriate mix of uses, and form and placement standards to ensure that the appropriate walkable urban environment was created as development occurred. In addition, architectural standards were put in place to ensure high quality materials and details were utilized that enhanced the pedestrian experience. All of these requirements were optional. A developer could elect to develop under the old standards and forego the density incentives. In reality, the vast majority of new developments were built under the optional Overlay District standards, allowing the City swift and ongoing implementation of the 2016 Plan. The Birmingham Planning Board is currently conducting public hearings to require mandatory application of the Downtown Birmingham Overlay District standards, given the success with the mandatory form-based Overlay District that has been in place in the Triangle District for the past two years.

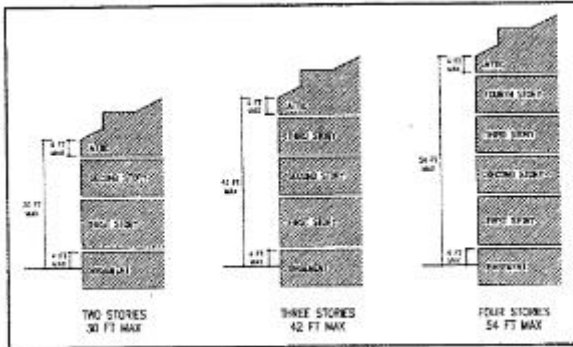
### ***An increased density of up to five times the previous amount was permitted as a zoning option downtown to encourage investment and development downtown.***

#### **Infill Development:**

##### **Building Placement & Massing**

The 2016 Plan extensively examined the urban form that had developed in Birmingham, and addressed changes in the regulations that were required for the downtown to evolve into the future. One of the key problems identified was the large number of surface parking lots that existed within the downtown area, which detracted from the character and streetscape. The 2016 Plan itself encouraged development of these parcels given the density incentives that were available within the downtown, which were not offered anywhere else in the City. Guidelines were also developed to encourage a





The 2016 Master Plan provided incentives for landowners to develop five-level, mixed-use buildings if they appeared to be four-level buildings from the street. This five-story building, located at 111 S. Old Woodward, was constructed in 2008 on a former surface parking lot. It was built in accordance with the Downtown Overlay District standards, as recommended in the 2016 Plan. The first floor contains retail space, with pedestrian entrances to each space, and also includes a pedestrian way in the center that connects the street with the pedestrian plaza and passage system at the rear of the building, adjacent to a parking deck. Upper levels are required to be residential.



Both of the above buildings were constructed under the 2016 Plan regulations, and each are situated on specific corners identified as terminating vistas. Both sites were previously home to one-story buildings with little architectural detail, and huge surface parking lots.



The property at 34977 Woodward, identified in the 2016 Plan as a gateway site into Downtown Birmingham, is currently under construction. The five story mixed-use building will have first-floor retail space, two floors of office space, and two floors of residential. The structural steel framework for the building is complete, and even at this stage of construction, it transforms the streetscape and creates a distinctive gateway into Downtown Birmingham.



form of development for these infill parcels that would achieve the physical qualities necessary to maintain and enhance the economic vitality of Downtown Birmingham, and to maintain the desired character of the city. Sample building placement regulations were included in Appendix H: Implementation of the 2016 Plan. The City Commission quickly adopted these amendments, and created the Downtown Overlay District. Placement regulations mandate the location of buildings up to the street right-of-way, requiring full build-out of the width of the site, thus enclosing streets to create a sense of comfort and safety for pedestrians. Height and mass are also regulated to create the desired urban environment. In addition, the regulations mandated that parking be at the side or rear of a building, and not

within the first 20' of the first floor from the street, even if enclosed within a building. In other words, parking structures are not permitted to abut the street. All of these standards were designed to create a comfortable and inviting streetscape for pedestrians.

### Terminating Vistas & Gateways

The 2016 Plan also looked at different views into downtown Birmingham, and identified specific corners and locations that draw the eye as one walks or drives downtown streets. The 2016 Plan provided that any building terminating a view, as designated on the Regulating Plan which accompanied the Master Plan, shall provide distinct and prominent architectural features of enhanced character and visibility, which reflect the importance of the

building's location and create a positive visual landmark. This language was also adopted into the Zoning Ordinance, and became a requirement for all buildings developed on these identified sites.

The 2016 Plan also specifically addressed in detail the form of buildings that would be developed on two gateway sites that formed the entry point into Downtown Birmingham. Both sites were operating gasoline service stations at the time the 2016 Plan was written. The 2016 Plan called for two, twin five-story buildings flanking Maple Road as one enters Downtown Birmingham. The height and mass of the buildings that were recommended served to enclose the streetscape crossing Woodward Avenue, a 200' wide Median right-of-way, to give both pedestrians and drivers the signal that they were entering an urban downtown. This recommendation was meant to slow traffic entering downtown, and to convey a sense of significance and importance to downtown.

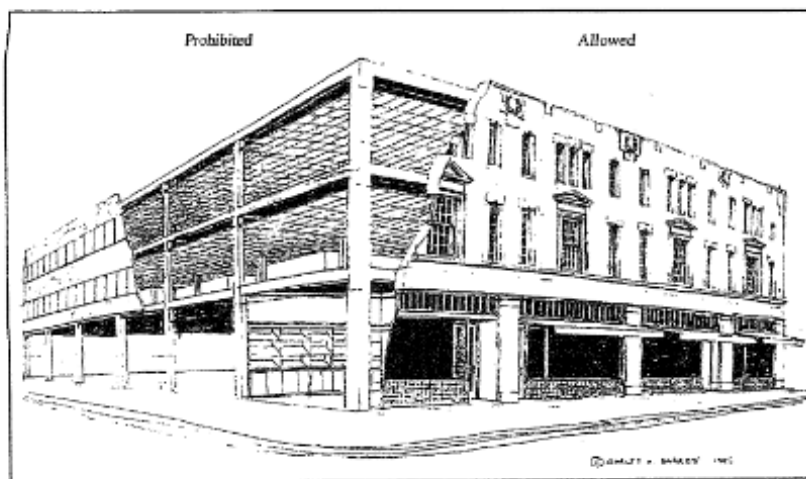
### Design Standards

Architectural standards were recommended in the 2016 Plan, and were adopted into the Downtown Overlay District. These were designed to ensure that that new buildings had pedestrian-scaled architectural features and were compatible with and enhanced the historic districts which reflect the City's heritage. The architectural standards were designed to create buildings and streetscapes that were designed for the safety, comfort, convenience and enjoyment of pedestrians, rather than vehicles, and to ensure that new buildings would be compatible with the historic urban downtown and the desired character of the City. Specific architectural requirements for building in the Downtown Overlay include mandatory first floor storefront window systems for at least 70% of all facades facing streets; pedestrian scaled details such as decorative tile, brick, moldings, lighting and other features that create an interesting experience for pedestrians on the first floor. First floor facades are also required to be differentiated from the upper levels through the use of materials, color, design etc, and windows are limited to no more than 35% of the façade on upper floors, and must be vertically proportioned.

The design standards implemented are intended to maintain the character of Downtown Birmingham, but do not mean that downtown must remain the same as it was historically. The 2016 Plan was specifically designed to encourage renovation and expansion of existing buildings, while also ensuring that the design and character of the additions enhance the historic district, and keep the downtown vibrant.

### Civic Plaza Enhancements

The 2016 Plan addressed the need for inviting civic spaces downtown to encourage informal public gatherings and to pro-



The 2016 Plan contained extensive illustrations detailing the required architectural detail and scale required for all new buildings.



The 2016 Master Plan elicited numerous public and private sector investments in downtown Birmingham. The historic building shown above left, for example, recently added one upper floor, and was designed to blend in with both the historic landmark building below, and the new infill construction next door.



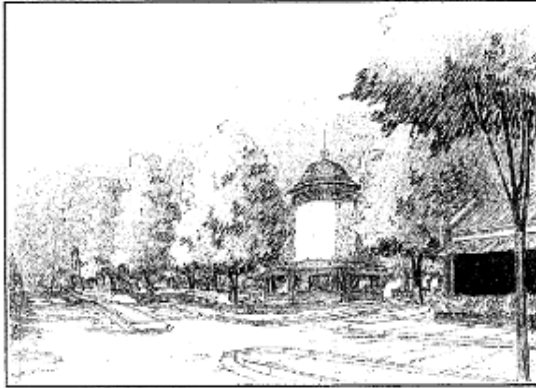


Photo courtesy of Gibbs Planning Group



Photo courtesy of City of Birmingham

The 2016 Master Plan includes innovative, public-realm improvements, including complete redevelopment of two downtown parks. Booth Park improvements as illustrated in the 2016 Plan have been implemented, and the park now draws families from across the region. While children amuse themselves in this interactive play area, adults can dine in an outdoor café and overlook the activities. Many concerts and special events are now held in Booth Park.

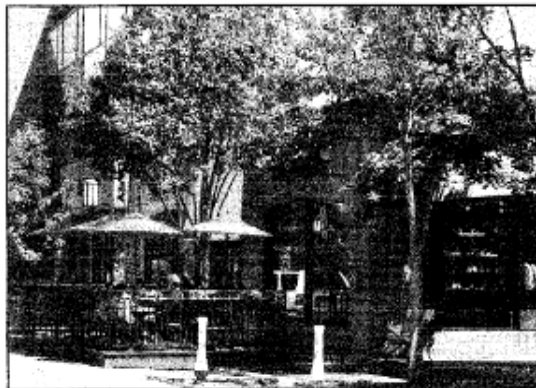


Photo courtesy of City of Birmingham



Photo courtesy of City of Birmingham

Outdoor dining regulations were updated to encourage the use of both the sidewalk and streets downtown for outdoor cafés and to allow temporary platforms as recommended in the 2016 Plan.

vide respites for pedestrians. The overall goal was to enhance the natural environment and integrate parkland and green space into the downtown experience, to create a strong identification for civic buildings and public spaces, and to create appropriate and contextually designed spaces for the integration of art and music into the downtown area. Numerous specific projects were identified in the 2016 Plan, and many have been implemented to date. The primary civic plaza for Downtown Birmingham, Shain Park lies between City Hall to the east and the historic Baldwin Library to the west. The entire park has been redesigned to create a more formal and symmetrical civic space and is currently under construction. Two-thirds of the surface parking lot has been removed to expand the park, a performance area is being constructed at the south end of the park, and a bandshell area is under construction to allow for outdoor musical and theatrical productions.

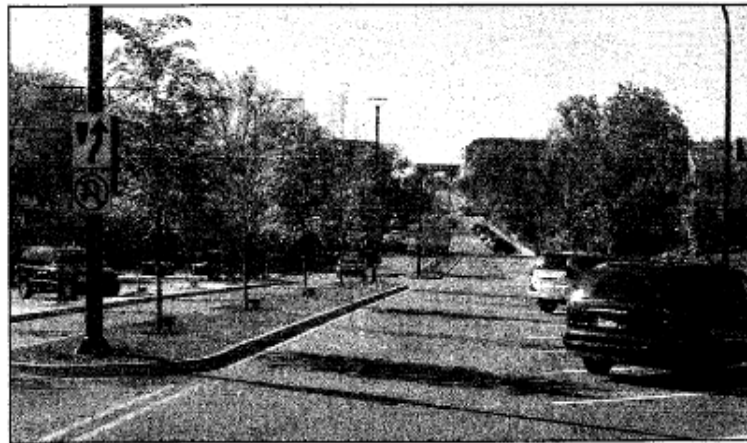


Photo courtesy of Gibbs Planning Group

The city recently narrowed North Old Woodward Avenue from a five-lane highway into a two-lane street by installing a landscaped median and adding diagonal parking, as illustrated in the 2016 Plan. Similar traffic-calming improvements have been installed along the old Ring Road system.



### Streetscape & Street Life

In addition to the form-based building requirements that were recommended in the 2016 Plan, the plan also addressed many other conditions throughout the downtown and made recommendations for other improvements that would enhance the pedestrian experience downtown, while downplaying the role of the automobile. Such improvements included encouraging outdoor dining; allowing the construction of temporary platforms into the parking lane on the street where there was not sufficient space on the sidewalk for outdoor dining; extensive recommendations for the design and color of street furnishings, light fixtures, and newsracks; the addition of public art; and traffic calming measures.

In accordance with the recommendations made in the 2016 Plan, the City has an approved streetscape design for public sidewalks downtown, which includes the type of concrete, spacing for street trees, the style of pedestrian-scaled light fixtures, specific benches and trash receptacles that are to be utilized throughout downtown to provide a consistent and attractive streetscape.

Traffic studies were also completed as part of the 2016 Plan to identify the types of vehicular traffic, both regional and destination, circulating in and around downtown, and to facilitate vehicular traffic without sacrificing downtown's pedestrian experience. Traffic calming measures that have been implemented to date are numerous, including complete redesign of most of the intersections of the old Ring Road system to include pedestrian bumpouts, crosswalks, pedestrian signals, the addition of landscaped medians to narrow roadways, and the removal of many concrete "bunkers" that were in the middle of intersections. All signage encouraging the use of the Ring Road system to bypass Downtown Birmingham has also been removed. On street parking has also been used extensively to narrow streets, and to provide a buffer for pedestrians on the sidewalk from moving traffic.

The city continues to install new streetscape and traffic-calming elements throughout downtown, and mandates that all new developments must bring their streetscape into compliance with the approved streetscape plan for Downtown Birmingham.

### Implementation of the 2016 Plan

The 2016 Master Plan is market-based, offering property owners significant incentives to build high-quality, mixed-use developments that reinforce the community's values. It allows for up to five times the existing floor-area ratio in exchange for street-level retail and upper-level residential uses. Extra parking capacity was achieved by adding on-street parking along Ring Road and throughout downtown. Recognizing the availability of

only limited public funding, the planners minimized costs by specifying concrete sidewalks and minimal upgrades to existing light fixtures. All streetscape fixtures and signage were painted "Birmingham Green," which both improved the fixtures and gave a unified identity to the downtown.

***In the Downtown Overlay District, more than 30 major, mixed-use buildings have been constructed according to the plan's recommendations, bringing more residents and visitors to Downtown Birmingham.***

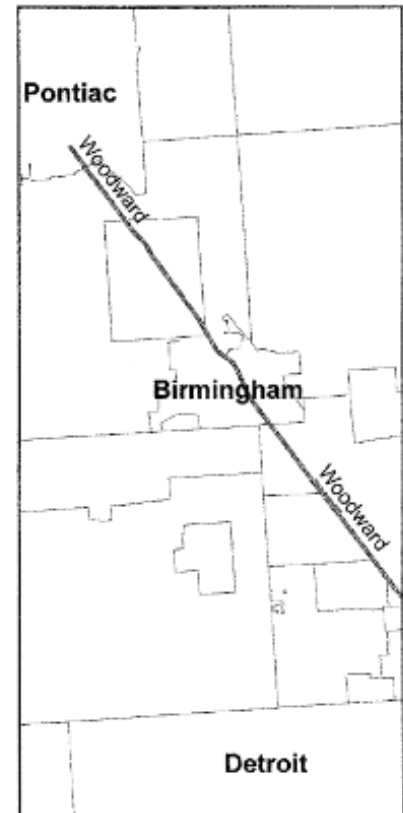
The 2016 Master Plan's primary success has been its rapid implementation, both by the public and private sectors. The 2016 Master Plan detailed simple but practical zoning incentives that have been quickly employed. In the Downtown Overlay District, more than 30 major, mixed-use buildings have been constructed according to the plan's recommendations, bringing more residents and visitors to Downtown Birmingham. In addition, disputes over several controversial private and public sector developments were resolved during the planning process. The detailed form-based regulation and architectural standards have improved the pedestrian experience and brought new life and vitality to the streets. Birmingham now has the highest commercial rents and land values in Michigan and is considered one of the most walkable downtowns in America.

Many of the innovative principles and techniques developed for the 2016 Master Plan have been implemented in cities throughout the country. They have

become the foundation for smart-growth codes, traffic-calming measures and the public charrette planning process. Now common best practices, these then-new planning methods were developed, tested and proven through the development and implementation of the Birmingham 2016 Master Plan process. □

### For more information:

[www.gibbsplanning.com](http://www.gibbsplanning.com)  
[www.ci.birmingham.mi.us](http://www.ci.birmingham.mi.us)



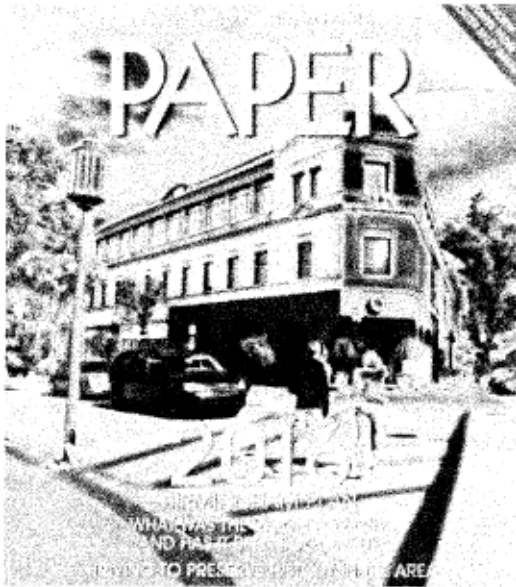
Kroger store in Downtown Birmingham.

Photo courtesy of Gibbs Planning Group



## Progress toward city's 2016 vision

February 26, 2010



The city of Birmingham, in 1996, was at a crossroads. The once charming town had growing pains, not certain if it should grow up and become a sophisticated small city, or to try to recapture its youth as a quaint neighborhood town. The Birmingham City Commission, charged with leading the community, had to decide on a direction for the city: The future was in its hands. Though first settled in 1818, the community was incorporated as a village in 1864, with a total land area of 1 square mile. Birmingham re-incorporated as a city in 1933. Today, Birmingham has a land mass of 4.8 miles, with a population of 19,291 people, according to the 2000 census.

In 1996, as the City Commission sought to determine the future of Birmingham, members looked at "who" Birmingham had become. The population had become varied, a mix of traditional suburbanites who raised their families in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s; singles, couples, young professionals and empty-nesters seeking a thriving and vibrant urban environment with restaurants and night life; and families looking to establish roots in a city with an entertainment area, parks, and excellent schools.

As the City Commission looked at Birmingham's changing demographics, there were other issues the community was dealing with, which made the creation of a master plan important.

"Somerset Mall had announced expansion plans, and that was very threatening to retail in Birmingham at that time," said Robert Gibbs, of the Gibbs Planning Group, of Birmingham, a town planning and retail consulting company. Somerset Collection North opened in August 1996.

At the time, Birmingham had two anchor department stores — Jacobson's and Crowley's. Within the next six years, due to factors outside of Birmingham's control, both would be gone to bankruptcy, leaving holes in the community that remain. "Department stores are essential for bringing in shoppers. They are usually responsible for bringing in 30 percent of shoppers to a retail area," Gibbs said. "In its heyday, around 1973, Birmingham had two department stores; a grocery store (at Continental Market); a Cadillac dealership, Wilson Cadillac, where Ethan Allen's is now; hardware stores; drug stores; and lots of men's and women's fashions," Gibbs said.

The other issue Birmingham was confronting in 1996 was zoning restrictions so severe they stifled growth and development. In 1978, in compliance with relaxation of existing ordinances, the 555 Building was built on South Old Woodward. It towered over Birmingham at 15 stories and caused a backlash, leading to a new zoning ordinance limiting structures to one story, including the basement — meaning that if a structure had to be rebuilt, it couldn't be rebuilt as it was, but with no more than one story, which is a negative growth ordinance. It also wouldn't permit any new development over one story.

"Development had come to a standstill," Gibbs said. "It was an overreaction to the 555 Building." "The ordinance was very restrictive, and wouldn't allow any development or growth of the downtown area," said Victor Saroki of Victor Saroki & Associates Architects in Birmingham.

The City Commission — which at the time consisted of Mayor Eleanor Siewart; Archie Damman, III; Robert DeLaura; Russell Dixon; Dante Lanzetta; Scott Moore (who is still a city commissioner); and Mayor Pro Tem

Mike Wooley — reacting to concerns from the city's citizens, retailers, and commercial office tenants, recognized a change was needed. "I made a very big point when I got elected that Birmingham wouldn't be the isolationist community it had been portrayed as," Lanzetta said. "We had had

development in fits and starts — developers trying to make a buck any way they could, and residents who wanted to preserve old Birmingham — and did not have a clue."

Lanzetta led the commission in seeking a way to create a master plan which would help to determine the future of Birmingham — how it should be developed over time, what direction the ordinances should take, how the public spaces should look, how developers and builders could go forward in shaping the city, how to create beautiful streetscapes, where people would park and for how long, how to direct the traffic flow, how to maximize retail, and if or how to develop an entertainment district.

The eventual outcome became known as Downtown Birmingham 2016: A Master Plan for the City of Birmingham, Michigan. It's a 20-year blueprint of how to create a vibrant, cohesive, strategic plan to develop Birmingham's central business district from 1996 to 2016. Today, Birmingham is 14 years into the plan — one which has been closely adhered to at times, and at others, has caused civic friction and backlash.



FIGURE 1. DOWNTOWN BIRMINGHAM  
2016 MASTER PLAN, 2016

The Birmingham 2016 plan was presented to the City Commission on Nov. 1, 1996. It was created and prepared by Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, architects and town planners from Miami, along with Gibbs Planning Group, Inc.; Glatting Jackson Kercher Anlin Lopez Rinehart, a traffic engineering firm; The Green Group, a market research firm; and McKenna Associates, Inc., community planners and urban designers. However, it's always been referred to as Duany's plan.

"Andres Duany considers (the Birmingham 2016 plan) his masterpiece," Gibbs said.

An article in "The Atlantic" refers to Duany and Plater-Zyberk as pioneers in the architectural and urban

planning movement referred to as "New Urbanism." It's a small but influential movement among architects and urban planners (that) proposes to revive 19th century town-planning principles, using denser development and gridded street systems, among other things, as an antidote to suburban sprawl," the article states.

"I'm a long-term urbanist, and philosophically, my work is aligned with Duany," said current Birmingham City Commissioner Mark Nickita, who served on the Birmingham Planning Board from 1997 to 2009 and is an urban planner and president of Archive Design Studio in Detroit. "We believe in walkability, the character of streets, buildings, the interaction between public spaces and civic spaces, pedestrian interactivity with vehicle activities, and the way they interact in a downtown. The 2016 plan is very sensitive to that.

"Cities are organic," he said. "They grow, change, and evolve. They're not static. It's how they evolve that planners can direct by recognizing their history and envisioning their future. It's not to make the city different, just to allow its growth pattern to evolve in a directed way that has been defined as a community."

Birmingham, as a community, helped determine the provisions of the 2016 plan. According to Gibbs, who brought Duany to Birmingham, they were not originally chosen to create a plan; but Lanzetta, having read extensively on cities, city planning, and what would make a good plan, pushed for Duany.

"I had worked with Duany for five years before then, in Naples, West Palm Beach, and Brown University, and when Birmingham wanted a master plan, I convinced him to come and be interviewed," Gibbs said. "He didn't want to interview for it. Usually, he's just handed jobs. He's Prince Charles' main planner." "The plan



was limited to the central business area, the downtown," Lanzetta said. "How do you retrofit an existing suburban/urban area to New Urbanism? I strongly pushed for Duany because I had done my homework." "Duany felt we had a good town, with good infrastructure, good

in-town parking, and felt we had many good strengths already," Saroki said. "He felt the downtown had to grow to have a 24-hour life cycle. There were five to six neighborhoods around downtown, but no one was living in town, and that was what people wanted. There's been a national trend, a movement away from suburbia towards cities.

"No one was trying to make it a high-rise city, but a good five-story city, with a good mixture of uses, with residential, retail, and commercial uses," he said. "Duany was looking to create a master plan to encourage controlled growth — to have good ordinances in place to allow the city to grow with prosperity, diversity, and have residential growth in the downtown area."

Once Duany was chosen as the creator of a plan for Birmingham, he and Gibbs and others involved in the process spent a week in March 1996 in a charette process to determine what kind of Birmingham was desired. In that one-week period, they met with over 3,000 residents, developers, architects, retailers, zoning officials, and planners, and created a new vision from all of their insights. "In six days, we brought everyone together and created this brilliant new master plan, with a new Shain Park, housing, an Old Woodward Boulevard, the idea for an entertainment area like the Palladium, slowing speedy streets, outside dining, and the first urban Kroger in the country," Gibbs said.



One of the most important conversations held with residents and businesses owners involved whether they wanted Birmingham to remain a town or to become a city. A town has one- and two-story buildings, is a nice place to live, has few downtown residences, no night life, and is more quaint.

A city is more dense and active, has a night life, downtown residential areas, offices, mixed-use buildings, and is more sophisticated. "Overwhelmingly, residents said they wanted Birmingham to grow from a town to a city," Gibbs said. "We met a lot of empty-nesters who wanted to move from their suburban homes to a downtown life." After having very restrictive, no-

growth zoning, developers the planning group interviewed indicated they needed five-story buildings to produce a profit. Architects they spoke with said that Birmingham had been created in a historical Cranbrook/Arts and Crafts English style reflecting the influences of Detroit-area architectural pioneers Eliel Saarinen, Wallace Frost, and George Booth, not a more traditional Victorian style.

"This gave us a brilliant idea," Gibbs said. "We didn't change the zoning for one- and two-story buildings (in the downtown area), but offered it as an option. You can build a five-story building if you do it our way, with stone and brick, designed in the traditional format matching the Birmingham/Cranbrook area." To develop five-story buildings, the first level would have to be retail, the upper two levels (at least) would have to be residential, and the others could be office/commercial spaces.

This was called the optional overlay plan for the central business district in the 2016 plan. On Jan. 11, 2010, after nearly 14 years of having the overlay as an option for developers and builders, Birmingham's City Commission unanimously approved a zoning ordinance amendment to the downtown Birmingham overlay district and made the overlay plan mandatory. Jana Ecker, Birmingham's planning director, said the Planning Board had been working on the change since March 2003, taking the overlay plan from optional recommendations for the downtown area to mandatory zoning requirements.

The ordinance specifies retail on the first floor of buildings. A building can have a minimum width of 20 feet of retail, but no first-floor parking. The ordinance requires no more than two floors of office space, and requires

residential space. Currently, Birmingham buildings can be no more than five floors. It also mandates certain architectural details, such as insuring that the first floor consists of 70 percent windows to increase the walkability of the city. There are other requirements for awnings and materials. The new ordinance language specifies that if more than 40 percent of an existing building is renovated or needs construction, the new construction rules apply, as is practical.

"The overlay district does allow for higher-density development and more square footage, in exchange for tighter controls and details," Ecker said. "Current use is grandfathered in, even if it's not allowed in the overlay district."



"The overlay district was meant to be an enticement to get people away from their vested interests," said former Commissioner Lanzetta. "It was to grant more freedoms, which would work against those trying to preserve a two-story village." Nickita said the problem with having both, at this point, is seeing what developers would do. "Leaving the overlay in place, we could get a lot of things that aren't congruent with walkability and the business district, and we may not get the development we want," he said.

However, Birmingham architect Chris Longe, who worked with developer Ted Fuller to redevelop the former Jacobson's site on West Maple Road,

among others, said, "I take issue with the mandatory overlay. I don't think that's a realistic part of the ordinance in good times, or bad. If the ordinance had been around when Jacobson's was being redone (for McCann Erickson Advertising), it (the building) would be still be vacant. It's meddling with property rights. What's the better asset to the city, a renovated office building with 300 people in it, or a vacant building? It should be on a case-by-case basis. You're asking the developer to empty his pockets, or not do it at all."

Birmingham City Manager Tom Markus noted, however, "It just makes sense now to have a uniform code." Besides detailing mixed-use development requirements in the downtown area, the 2016 plan laid out a wide variety of ways for Birmingham to become the vibrant city most of its residents desired. Duany was focused on every relevant aspect of the central business district of Birmingham in his effort to create a multi-functional downtown. "Every decision should lead to the creation of sophisticated mixed-use public spaces uncontaminated by suburban standards for parking and traffic," it says in the plan's introduction.

"Downtown Birmingham is to be a regional traffic destination, but not a traffic conduit," it continues. "Birmingham, which at this moment straddles the attributes of a village, town, and city, and should not be held to the standards of a village. If Birmingham is to remain the preeminent arts center of the region, then every aspect of its design must be decided in this spirit, and not diminished by legalism, technocratic standards, and/or economic determinism."

He zeroed in on streetscaping, noting that sidewalks and sidewalk repairs should be consistent, built and repaired to a sand finish according to specifications and standards circa 1940 to 1960. He suggested bench styles and where they should be installed, as well as trash cans, bicycle racks, and newsstands; and suggested lighting and lighting styles for street lamps throughout town. He also recommended consistent signage throughout the city. In a city of trees, Duany said that some street-side trees were poorly located, blocking some buildings and storefronts. He also noted that some of the trees were dying, and recommended species that would look and work best in the streetscapes.

To unify the downtown area, Duany felt it was important to have an institutional color and municipal furnishings "as an elemental first step in community consciousness." One of the first things the Birmingham



Planning Board and City Commission did in following adoptions of the 2016 plan was to adopt "Birmingham Green" as the color of Birmingham. It's a deep evergreen, and conveys richness, elegance, and stability.

Duany felt strongly that Shain Park, located in the center of Birmingham, should be recreated as the city's center, extending it to encompass Parking Lot No. 7, a surface lot just south of the park. Shain Park is now in the final stages of its renovation, with only spring landscaping, a children's playstructure in the northern area of the park, and streetscaping left to be finished.

"I think it (Shain Park) will be the town square," City Manager Markus said. "It's going to be a first-rate park." The city expanded the park across Merrill Street, putting Marshall Fredericks' sculpture, "Freedom of the Human Spirit," in the center of the street. Granite pavers were installed over the concrete, and granite columns topped with granite balls were placed around the sculpture to prevent cars from driving across Merrill. The park was extended over three-quarters of Lot No. 7. A permanent band shell was put in, and the city's Civil War and World War II memorials were reinstalled in the park, as was a new flagpole.

The park was designed by residents and architect/designers Ron Rea and Chris Longe, and renderings were completed by the Albert Kahn architectural firm. As part of the streetscaping, Martin Street will be widened and returned to two-way traffic. Angled parking will be added all around the park to replace the existing parallel parking.

The Baldwin Public Library originally faced Martin Street, with a facade similar to the City Hall's. Numerous renovations over the years changed that, with the current entrance situated off Merrill. Duany suggested in the 2016 plan reworking the library to have the front elevation returned to the Martin side, paralleling City Hall; and once Martin Street is reconstructed, the library, Shain Park, and City Hall will present an elegant and formal public face for Birmingham. "They're what ties Birmingham to its roots," said former Commissioner Lanzetta.



Duany looked at Birmingham's retail environment and became extremely innovative. "In certain places, the city's narrow sidewalks make it difficult for restaurants to offer outdoor dining," he wrote in the 2016 plan. "A simple way to expand the width of a sidewalk is to remove one parking space and install a temporary wooden deck for dining. This trade would be in the public's interest because it enhances street life ... If the tables are lined up against the window, the flow of pedestrian traffic distorts. Forced to maneuver around the tables, people are deflected away from neighboring storefronts, effectively decreasing those retailers' chances of adequately showing and selling their wares. Placing tables away from the restaurant window allows passersby to window-shop without interference."

This vision of unfettered pedestrian movement and engaging street life was accomplished when the city created its bistro license ordinance. In April 2007, after much discussion, the Birmingham City Commission adopted a zoning ordinance amendment which allowed for the development of bistro licenses for eateries in the downtown district of Birmingham.

Among the requirements restaurateurs must follow in order to get one of the licenses is having a full-service kitchen at the bistro and a full indoor and outdoor site plan. No bistro can have any more than 65 seats total, including no more than 10 at the bar. They are allowed to have low-key entertainment, there must be tables in windows lining the street and it's mandatory that the bistro have outdoor seating, either on the sidewalk outside the establishment or on a patio platform in a parking space outside the restaurant.

"Duany invented the idea of an outside dining platform during the charrette process," Gibbs said. "It makes the town more walkable." Traffic circulation and pedestrian needs were studied, with the conclusion that traffic was moving too fast on certain downtown streets, it was unsafe for pedestrians, and the cause was

unnecessarily wide streets. "Wide streets encourage speeding, increase the distance a pedestrian must cross at an intersection, and restrict the amount of streetscape available for non-vehicular use ... retail thrives on high volumes of traffic moving slowly past shopfronts," Duany wrote.



He recommended that North Old Woodward be redesigned with a median and diagonal parking on both sides. This was accomplished with a boulevard redesign, which has slowed traffic coming off of Woodward into Birmingham, and created a northern entrance into downtown Birmingham. Additionally, walkability has been increased.

Ring Road had been utilized as a way to avoid driving through Birmingham. Traffic calming techniques were introduced to encourage drivers to drive through the city, not around it. Duany also recommended adding diagonal parking to serve Booth Park, which has been accomplished. Furthermore, Booth Park has been redesigned with an expanded children's playscape and a sledding hill, and is now the home of the popular summer "Music In The Park" series, having moved from Shain Park.

In addition, Duany recommended a cafe or pub adjacent to Booth Park at the corner of North Old Woodward and Harmon, stating, "The reason that parks in some cities are exceedingly popular is that food and beverages are allowed." While there are many new restaurants throughout town, this particular Duany recommendation hasn't been realized. Duany saw potential for retail to grow throughout the downtown area.

"There were several PSD board members involved in the charettes and public hearings in 1996," Heiney said. "Many elements of (the 2016 plan) enhance the downtown experience, such as the ideas of slowing traffic down to make it more pedestrian-friendly. Whenever you're enhancing walkability, you're improving the business community where retailers are relying on foot traffic. Anything the city enacts to get people to walk from point A to point B, past store windows, encourages walking and encourages business."

"A shopping center is just a shopping center with set hours, but Birmingham is a 24-hour city with complementary uses — retail, commercial, office, entertainment, civic, and people living there. They all feed off each other," said architect Saroki. "It's a mature, sophisticated city." The increasing sophistication of the city and its initial rapid redevelopment created a backlash in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Anti-development and 2016 plan opponents were elected to the City Commission, and some early champions of the plan, like former Commissioner Lanzetta, became less supportive.

"Things happened so fast because builders, architects, and engineers were all eager and ready," City



Manager Markus said. "There was a lot of pent-up demand." Clinton Baller, a Birmingham resident, began writing a blog called "Birmingham Buzz" to point out to other residents how these "obstructionists" were slowing down plans to allow Birmingham to evolve.

"I got involved in 2001," he said. "I wasn't around when the plan was developed in 1996. I like the plan, and we're slowly implementing it. The biggest gripe is that the crowd who took over in the late '90s and early '00s put in an obstructionist Planning Board that slowed down and obstructed the height of buildings and created setbacks. They were eventually kicked off the Planning Board and commission; but unfortunately, we lost a few years, and then we had gotten into an economic slump." Baller claims that Lanzetta, who brought Duany to Birmingham and worked to create the 2016 plan, turned against it, becoming one of its strongest opponents.

"They would say 'We don't want Birmingham to turn into a mini-Manhattan,' but they never gave a good elucidation of that," Baller said. Lanzetta responded recently, "I got the tag of anti-development only because I felt it was ludicrous for a 2.2 square mile city that's a suburb to create a city that was a mini-Manhattan. We were too big for a village. But because of grandiose ideas, we had problems now. It seems that town made the most sense."

"Dante Lanzetta was always looking ahead, and he was out there on the edge," Markus said. "He felt the restrictive zoning needed to be looked at, and then turned on it when it wasn't exactly his vision."

Now, almost 20 years in, how has the 2016 plan been followed? Has it been a success in turning Birmingham into the mixed-use city envisioned by all involved at the time? "It's been followed pretty well, largely because staff has been on it," Nickita said. "It's constantly looked at and referenced to by the city staff and boards, especially the Planning Board. The plan is a directive for both public and private development."

Since 1996, when the 2016 plan was finalized, the city has narrowed streets; created uniform signage; publicized the free two-hour parking in its parking structures; made the sidewalks and streetscapes more pedestrian-friendly; conducted crosswalk analysis; redeveloped Shain Park and Booth Park, as well as Barnum Park; revised the city's lighting; created bistro licenses to further entertainment options, night life, and more active streetscapes, as well as utilize the outdoor dining option; developed the Palladium Theater and The Willets; conducted public ordinance studies; redesigned Ring Road; reconstructed North Old Woodward, creating a boulevard and slowing traffic; installed public art throughout the city; changed parallel parking into diagonal parking; developed opportunities for downtown residences; and began the development of gateway buildings at Maple and

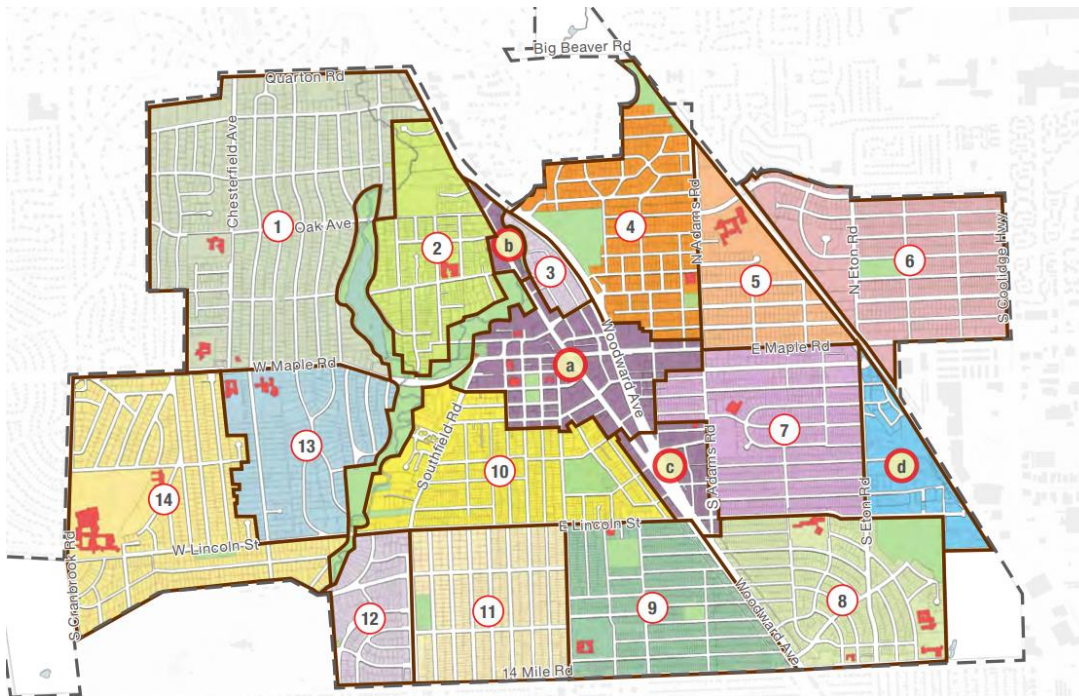
"Duany is a do-them-well, do-them-right kind of guy," Markus said. "He creates things to make them last, not just monuments to architects. As we've gone along, his vision and practical application gets tweaked, because times change, conditions change, and investment objectives change. But everything he promoted, we went after."

Purists see the plan as 80 percent finished. There is a proposal before the City Commission to extend the boulevard design down Old Woodward, continuing the traffic slowing and the beautification project. A pedestrian walkway through the North Old Woodward parking structure, from the surface lot to Booth Park, is being discussed. It would also create the opportunity for a developer to come in and create more residential units. Some would also like to see the Rouge River trailways project completed, as well as additional crosswalk and sidewalk improvements and street narrowing projects to increase comforts for pedestrians.

"It will be interesting to see how it finishes up," Markus said. "We revisit it every year at our long range planning meeting. It will likely go way beyond 2016. We should revisit it on its anniversary." As Birmingham approaches its bicentennial, one can't help but admire its efforts to foster continuous growth and evolution. "Great things can happen when you trust in a vision, which is what (the 2016 plan) was," architect Longe said.



*Andres Duany during his 2016 visit to comment on the city's progress of his plan. (Bert Koseck, planning commission member and me above left)*



Above Neighborhood Map from City Wide 2021 Master Plan DPZ – Gibbs Planning



# **DOWNTOWN BIRMINGHAM 2016**

*A Master Plan for the  
City of Birmingham, Michigan*

1 November, 1996  
FINAL REPORT  
(REVISED)

## **RECOMMENDATIONS, APPENDICES & IMPLEMENTATION**

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To the Downtown Plan Advisory Committee  
City of Birmingham, Michigan

Enclosed is the Final Report for the Downtown Birmingham 2016 Master Plan. It is very different from the first draft.

The premise of the first draft was that the individual members of this particular consulting team, whatever their specialties, are distinguished from their professional peers in being generalists. Because all members are capable of making contributions beyond their specialties, the first draft showed a degree of overlap. For instance, the pedestrian performance of a sidewalk was discussed from the point of view of architects and planners (DPZ), retail consultants and landscape architects (GPG), and traffic engineers (GJKALR). It was assumed that the various angles of vision and the general concurrence of the conclusions would give weight to the recommendations, as well as a depth to the discussions, which were to guide the implementation of this plan over the coming generation.

This assumption proved to be wrong. The format of the report was judged to be confusing because of the very overlap that was thought by the planning team to be its strength. Furthermore, the discursive nature of the writing, while typical of the planning documents of the 1920s (which have guided the creation of the finest places in America), was thought to be, by modern standards, unprofessional and, more seriously, indefensible in the crucible of the highly contested public process and the courts of law through which this plan must pass.

The planning team, after its fact-finding visit of August 27 to 29, has rewritten the report in a manner more closely amenable to the desires of the City's representatives. The planning team strongly believes that the Final Report is equal to the first draft in substance and, although it may have suffered in style and interest, it certainly gains in effectiveness. The change, on balance, is for the best.

Andres M. Duany

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**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

The following people played an active and important role in the development of the Downtown Birmingham 2016 Plan. The planning team wishes to extend its gratitude to them as well as to all the business people and concerned citizens who participated in the public meetings of the charrette.

**City Commission**

Eleanor A. Stewart, Mayor  
Archie Damman, III, Commissioner  
Robert A. DeLaura, Commissioner  
Russell W. Dixon, Commissioner  
Dante J. Lanzetta, Jr., Commissioner  
Scott D. Moore, Commissioner  
Mike Wooley, Mayor Pro-Tem

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Jerry McKeon, Historic District & Design Review Com.  
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**INTRODUCTION**

It is possible that the City of Birmingham suffers from—or perhaps thrives on—an absence of a strong common vision. This is manifested in certain contradictions which have been the planning team's difficult task to resolve where possible, and to adjudicate where not.

Among the important contradictions are the following:

- Dedicating the downtown thoroughfares to the expediencies of traffic, while desiring the comfort of the pedestrian.
- Granting primacy to the utilitarian, the economic, and the efficient in decisions regarding public infrastructure, while wishing to determine all such matters aesthetically.
- Requiring planning policy to be determined on the basis of statistical and legalistic data, while evaluating issues on the basis of anecdotal and empirical observation.
- Understanding the advantages of a relatively frictionless permitting process, while maintaining layers of scrutiny of detail.

Accordingly, this Master Plan is eclectic, making proposals buttressed by data and precedent where available, and by observation and professional judgment where not.

Those who believe that the evolution of towns is an exact science or a subcategory of case law will feel a measure of discomfort, as some of the recommendations are less than proven. Those who have confidence in the human ability to evolve and resolve situations contingently may be disappointed by the limits set on the vision.

Nevertheless, despite such contradictions, this Master Plan, when it recommends a course of action, does so with confidence. It is a confidence born of the combined experience of a team of consultants who individually and collectively have seen, felt, walked, driven—in a word lived—that which is proposed for Birmingham. The planning team's resources are not always technical manuals, legal texts, or academic training, for such, it is sad to say, have created some of the most dysfunctional places that humanity has experienced. Sources are sometimes real places, renowned for the quality of life they provide their

citizens. These are places that can be visited and verified by all concerned with this Master Plan.\*

**PREMISES**

Although a singular vision statement is elusive under such contradictory circumstances, it is possible to list some of the *premises* that have guided the planning team in making recommendations, and that may continue to guide City boards and committees through the wide swaths of discretion which a democracy grants to its leaders.

- This Master Plan is a *strategic* document for the next 20 years. It is meant to be broad and visionary. Indeed, the depth of detail of this particular Master Plan may blur the fact that it must be followed by a series of *tactical* studies, designs, events, tests, and partnerships.\*\*
- It is difficult for a Master Plan to transcend its enabling political circumstances, or the staff that administers its detail. History shows that a Master Plan tends to be successful when an individual leader takes ownership. As such a person has not yet arisen in Birmingham, this text attempts to compensate with a hortatory tone and frank discussion of difficult issues.
- The City of Birmingham, being of sound economic health and well known for the quality of life it offers, will attract investments—both residential and commercial. Under such circumstances, growth can be held back only with difficulty and, in a free market, only

*\*Indeed, the planning team recommends that the Downtown Plan Advisory Committee, the Principal Shopping District Board, concerned citizens, and the City's department heads undertake a guided tour that includes Alexandria, Virginia; Georgetown, D.C.; and Charleston, South Carolina. Such a tour was standard municipal planning practice from 1900 to 1930, and continues to be so in the private sector whenever a large plan is being prepared. Such a fact finding trip may well be the catalyst around which a strong common vision for Birmingham coalesces.*

*\*\*For example, traffic studies must follow modifications to verify their effect. Parks and walkways must be designed. Street furniture must be tested. Public-private partnerships must be formed to implement the Special Projects.*

temporarily. The only option for the long-range planning of a place such as this is to assume that growth will come and to channel it in a healthy pattern. In this Master Plan, that pattern is that of Traditional Town Planning and emphatically not that of Conventional Suburban Design.

- Downtown Birmingham is to be a regional traffic destination, but not a traffic conduit.
- Birmingham, which at this moment straddles the attributes of a village, town, and city, intends to evolve gracefully into a small city, and should not be held to the standards of a village.\*
- Every decision should lead to the creation of sophisticated mixed-use public spaces uncontaminated by suburban standards for parking and traffic.
- The surrounding neighborhoods wish to retain their small-town character. Birmingham is able to respect this only at its boundaries, so additional plans are necessary to safeguard the neighborhoods from the forces of degradation both external and internal in origin.
- If Birmingham is to remain the pre-eminent arts center of the region, then every aspect of its design must be decided in this spirit, and not diminished by legalism, technocratic standards, and/or economic determinism.
- Empirical observation and anecdotal evidence are considered to be a valid justification where data is inappropriate or inaccurate. The recommendations of this plan and their subsequent discussion should take observable reality as well as theoretical constructs into account. \*\*

Note: The text submitted may be adopted as a Master Plan; however, it contains no ordinance-ready language. The text must be reviewed and supplemented by the City Attorney for compliance with State Zoning Act procedures.

*\*This, to the surprise of the planning team who had not previously encountered this sentiment, was the clear, virtually unanimous sense of several group meetings during the March 1996 charrette.*

*\*\*For example, the statistical Parking Study prepared by City Staff in 1992 finds that there is a 30 percent deficiency in parking downtown while persistent, empirical observation discovers a 30 percent excess capacity.*

## NOTE ON THE FORMAT

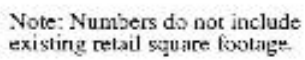
This Master Plan document follows a format recommended by the Birmingham Planning Staff, which has proven to be very useful in organizing and clarifying the issues. It consists of four levels of presentation:

- The *Finding* is the catalyst for identifying a specific situation. The findings were derived from observation by the team, from anecdotal information offered during the public process, and from specific suggestions by City staff.
- The *Discussion* is a discursive, extended argument and opinion on the situation as it is understood by the planning team. It is meant to be the foundation for future discussions to be continued in the public process.
- The *Recommendation* is the suggestion by the planning team to the decision makers of what should be done to correct, ameliorate, support, or otherwise affect the situation identified in the *Finding*.
- The *References* are the documents, sources, experiences, justifications, or other materials that support the recommendation under public scrutiny. For the sake of continuity, expanded references and illustrations have been pulled out the text and placed in the *Appendices*.

Most of the findings concern small problems that can be specifically called out. There is also a category of more complex opportunities, which appear as Specific Projects, and two sectors of special concern to the City, which appear as General Areas.

Note: Within the categories, the issues are not presented in order of priority.





## Planetizen July 13, 2016

Birmingham, Michigan has a history of innovative plans designed to create a beautiful, vibrant city. In the 1920s, its [General Village Plan](#) [pdf] created a central civic square bounded by a library, city hall, and post office. The 1960s [brought a plan](#) [pdf] to build five parking decks along Ring Road, which enclosed the downtown core and allowed high rises to be built. This resulted in more than 3 million square feet of new commercial buildings and a remarkably upscale downtown for a Midwest city of its small population of 20,000 people.

However, despite these apparent successes, citizen complaints led [city officials to repeal permitted densities and limit new construction to a floor-area ratio of two](#) [pdf], including the basement. This stalled new downtown development for two decades.

These decisions resulted in stagnant commercial growth, and decay began to consume Birmingham. By the 1990s, top retailers and commercial tenants had moved out. Ring Road, which was designed for high-speed traffic, cut off the city's downtown from its surrounding residential neighborhoods. The city's approval process grew cumbersome and time consuming. Plus, the city was dealing with a 20 percent population loss. Birmingham faced a crisis that could have decimated it.

In 1996 city officials decided to develop a new, 20-year master plan to address the situation. They selected a team of national and local planners and consultants led by the noted architect Andrés Duany, along with local planners Gibbs Planning Group, McKenna Associates, and The Green Group. This core planning team assembled 50 top architects, economists, planners, and engineers to address the challenges facing the city. Andrés Duany is known globally for his leadership with the plan and code for Seaside, Florida, the first new traditional community. He also works closely with Prince Charles and serves as a consultant for the Prince's Foundation for Building Community, planning new towns across the United Kingdom.

The Birmingham 2016 Master Plan began with three months of community educational and information-gathering sessions, culminating with a seven-day charrette in a downtown storefront. The intensive accommodation of public input was designed to develop community support for, and ownership of, the new plan. This level of public engagement was one of the most successful aspects of the plan, encouraging its members to reach agreement on the city's future size and character. More than 2,500 citizens, business and property owners, developers, elected officials, and others attended more than 70 meetings during the charrette. Real-time feedback was gathered and incorporated into the plan, alternatives for which were presented twice daily. The principles shared were so helpful and successful they continue to influence policy discussions 20 years later.

The decision was made to grow Birmingham from a town into a small city. The 2016 Master Plan reflected this desire by recommending numerous policy revisions, streetscape improvements, park expansions, traffic-calming measures, and the first form-based code in Michigan history. In fact, it was one of the first form-based codes implemented in the United States.

A form-based code utilizes the physical form of the structure, rather than being based on separation of uses, such as commercial, residential, etc. A form-based code offers a powerful alternative to conventional zoning regulation, and is adopted into city, town, or county law. The revolutionary aspect of form-based codes comes from their ability to address the relationship between building facades and the public realm as well as the form and mass of buildings in relation to one another. Form-based codes are integral to a regulating plan that designates the appropriate form and scale, and therefore the character, of development, rather than only distinctions in land-use types.

This allowed the team to create a plan that was based on market research and included a form-based overlay-zoning district, which prescribed building dimensions and placements, building forms and materials, and permitted uses. The city engineered and installed new techniques in urban traffic calming, without reducing vehicular capacity, and expanded sidewalks and permitted adjacent on-street parking to allow for outdoor dining. A public surface parking lot was converted into a park without losing a single stall.

The plan included ten park improvements; a civic square expansion; a traffic-calming boulevard; and specified an entirely new streetscape plan including lighting, benches, and paving. All fixtures and signage were painted "Birmingham Green," which provided an improved and unified identity to the downtown.

With its new plan in place, Birmingham turned a corner during the 20 years that followed. Now, in 2016, more than 30 major, mixed-use buildings have been constructed, including a multi-screen regional cinema, and a new five-level Class-A office building and a luxury restaurant. Birmingham now has the highest commercial rents and land values in Michigan, and is considered [one of the most walkable](#) and [commercially successful small towns in America](#).

Birmingham's success has been noticed. Many of the innovative principles and techniques developed for its 2016 Master Plan have been implemented in cities throughout the country. They have become the foundation for form-based codes, smart-growth codes, traffic-calming measures, and the public charrette planning process. The planning methods that were developed, tested, and proven during the Birmingham 2016 Master Plan process are now common best practices. Birmingham has become a model of urban excellence.

*Robert Gibbs, AICP, ASLA, is founder and principal of Gibbs Planning Group in Birmingham, co-planner of the Birmingham 2016 Master Plan, and the author of Principles of Urban Retail Planning and Development.*



## 14.4 Birmingham and Pontiac, Michigan

Adjacent cities in Michigan, Birmingham and Pontiac demonstrate both the productive and counterproductive influences that urban planning can have on commerce. Only 7 miles apart, both communities are located in Oakland County, one of the wealthiest in the United States. The county seat, Pontiac had a population of 60,000 in 2010, while Birmingham had a population of 20,000 in that year.

At its peak during the early 1960s, Pontiac was the county's center of commerce, with numerous office buildings, department stores, municipal buildings, hospitals, and popular residential neighborhoods. In contrast, Birmingham, while pleasant, was simply a small town. Today, Birmingham can boast of having over 3 million square feet of tony retail and restaurants, as well as some of the highest rents and property values in the Midwest, while Pontiac's downtown has languished and become severely challenged in attracting new commerce.

What happened? How did the two cities reverse their roles?

More than any single factor, well-intended urban planning contributed to Pontiac's economic decline. A 1963 master plan proposed severing Woodward Avenue from the city center by rerouting vehicular traffic onto a new six-lane, one-way ring road circumventing the central business district.

The plan also called for removing all vehicular traffic from downtown and constructing parking decks along its edge, a proposal based on the theory that shoppers would park and then walk to a pedestrian-only shopping district.

When the plan was implemented in 1964, the ring road—named Wide Track Drive after a Pontiac Motors marketing campaign—diverted almost all of the city's through-traffic around its downtown. Concurrently, and coincidentally, the county moved the courthouse and county offices from the central business district to a new campus in Waterford Township, 2 miles west of the city. Shortly thereafter, Sears and many other leading retailers followed when a new enclosed mall opened near the county facilities.

The combined loss of the courthouse and county offices, a major employment center, most vehicular traffic, and anchor retailers contributed to Pontiac's quick decline. Within five years, Pontiac lost its earlier vibrancy, and eventually most of its retail, office, and civic uses. Wide Track Drive had become a metaphorical noose choking the life out of the downtown, and eventually the surrounding neighborhoods.

In 1967, a similar pedestrian-only master plan and ring road were proposed for Birmingham. Fortunately, and unlike Pontiac, the city ignored many of the plan's recommendations and preserved vehicular traffic downtown. Today, more than 40,000 cars pass through the city's primary or "main-main" intersection of Old Woodward Avenue and Maple Road each day.

Birmingham did implement the ring road using existing streets, but the road is optional and mostly used by truckers, while motorists prefer to drive through the street grid into the shopping district. Vehicular traffic, on-street parking, and the construction of five parking decks (as well as other factors) have made it possible for the city center to thrive.

In the ensuing years, Birmingham adopted a series of zoning and building codes that

unintentionally suppressed development and created new competition from a nearby luxury shopping mall. To remedy the situation, the city retained DPZ Architects in 1996 to develop a new twenty-year master plan intended to encourage market-based sustainable growth. The Downtown Birmingham 2016 Plan proposed a form-based code (one of the first) that offered development incentives in exchange for strict building standards. Once adopted, the plan resulted in the development of over 1 million square feet of new commercial and residential land within five years. The DPZ plan also tamed traffic on the 1960s ring road by adding on-street parking and modifying oversized streets with traffic-calming measures, which made the downtown more walkable.

Birmingham is now ranked as one of America's most livable cities, while Pontiac and much of Oakland County are headed in the other direction and severely challenged in their efforts to improve. Urban planning can only do so much damage or good, and there are surely many other significant factors that contributed to Pontiac's decline and Birmingham's ascent. However, even with Michigan's severe recession, Pontiac could begin a steady road to recovery by implementing proven market-based planning and management practices, reconnecting Woodward Avenue to its downtown and removing Wide Track Drive.

The author has lived in both cities for most of his life and has participated in the Birmingham master planning charrette as the commercial planning consultant.  
Birmingham 2016 Master Plan: DPZ Architects, Gibbs Planning Group, McKenna Associates.