



Posted on Sun, Mar. 08, 2009

Downtown Lexington can hold past and future

2 cities made Main Street live again

By Tom Eblen
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Just a few years ago, two of America's most downtrodden Main streets were those in Los Angeles and Louisville. Their once-grand buildings had been abandoned or mangled. Vagrants wandered the streets.

Many people in those cities — like those in Lexington who cheered demolition of the Main Street buildings that stood where CentrePointe is planned — thought the only hope was to bulldoze and start over.

Louisville and Los Angeles now have very different stories to tell about their Main Streets. At a symposium last week sponsored by the University of Kentucky College of Design, those stories were told by the architect/developers whose innovation and determination made them happen.

Tom Gilmore of Gilmore Associates is the force behind what is now known as the Old Bank District — three 100-year-old buildings in downtown Los Angeles that have been converted into 230 lofts surrounded by a neighborhood of restaurants, shops stores and cafés. He also saved a historic downtown cathedral the Catholic Church wanted to tear down. It has become a popular concert and event venue that is paying for its restoration.

Bill Weyland, managing director of CITY Properties Group, led the renaissance of Louisville's West Main, where he built the Louisville Slugger museum and baseball bat factory and the Glassworks complex of art studios, offices and lofts. He also restored the abandoned Henry Clay Hotel building on South Third Street into a popular complex of lofts, shops, restaurants, theaters and event space. He has several other projects under way.

At the heart of both stories was each man's vision for restoring beautiful old buildings for new uses, and the tenacity it took to convince bankers, city officials, real estate agents and bureaucrats that it could be done profitably.

The developers had many great war stories, but my favorite came from Weyland.

He had bought an old building that he thought had potential for something, but he didn't know what. Then he read that Hillerich & Bradsby was looking to modernize its Slugger factory in southern Indiana and build a tourist attraction. Weyland pitched his building, but Slugger executives wanted visibility from Interstate 64.

To get interstate visibility from a downtown site, Weyland's company proposed creating a 120-foot tall baseball bat to lean against the building. Slugger executives loved the idea, but city bureaucrats were aghast.

A huge bat would violate Louisville's restrictive sign ordinance, and the trademark Hillerich & Bradsby brand disqualified it from being considered public art. But Weyland wouldn't give up. If city officials wanted to bring Louisville Slugger back to Louisville, they had to find a solution, he said.

Finally, a code enforcement officer asked Weyland if it would be possible to vent plumbing up through the bat. Weyland was puzzled. "The guy then pointed out that there is nothing in the Kentucky building code that restricts the shape of a plumbing vent," he said. Problem solved, new Louisville landmark created.

The American Planning Association last year named Louisville's West Main Street one of "America's 10 Great

Streets."

What can Lexington learn from these examples and similar ones elsewhere? Weyland and Gilmore offered these thoughts:

Downtown historic preservation can't be solely about preserving the past or creating museums; it must be about adapting the best of the past to the economy of the present and future.

"It's a touchy subject in the preservation community, because the first word in 'adaptive reuse' is 'adaptive,' " Gilmore said. "You can't just save old buildings; you have to find ways to get people into them."

Old buildings are often worth reusing because they were built to last and are more structurally sound than they look. They have craftsmanship that can't be replicated, and they convey a sense of a city's history and culture. Still, some buildings must occasionally be sacrificed to save more significant structures around them.

Developers, bankers and city officials must be innovative, flexible long-term thinkers. Cities must abandon precise, restrictive rules in favor of more flexible processes that allow for dialogue and big-picture thinking.

"West Main Street's transformation almost seems magical, but it was a 30-year war in which we had to overcome the status quo and the thinking of bankers who said, 'There's no way to redevelop something like that,' " Weyland said.

Downtowns must be designed for people and not automobiles. The key is creating a place where people want to walk and gather. Successful downtowns must work around the clock, allowing people to live, work and play in the same area.

"It's about building communities," Gilmore said. "And local mom-and-pop businesses are the lifeblood of cities. They make them unique."

Downtown housing is most attractive to young people and empty-nesters; growing families usually prefer the affordable spaciousness of suburbs. "Cities are for people who are young and people who are young at heart. It's not about age, it's about attitude," Weyland said.

"Ultimately," he said, "the success of our cities are about the experiences people have in them and the memories they create."

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