

renaissance (ren'e sans; -zans, ren'e sans', -zans') n. to be born anew, a new birth; rebirth.



PLAYER: ALLEN CASEY

Where you see a deserted alleyway, Allen Casey sees opportunity. Creating more appealing pathways is only part of the work of building downtown's brighter future, and Allen has his hands in it all.

HOW DOWNTOWN CAME BACK [AND WHERE IT'S GOING NEXT]

ON A WINDY DAY
LATE LAST DECEMBER,
ALLEN CASEY SHOWED 417
THE STERLING HOTEL, A 1911
BUILDING ON PARK CENTRAL

EAST. This spring, Casey, who is an architect-developer, plans to finish renovating the Sterling. Today, it's a gutted, gritty space filled with pigeons. By June, Casey says, the Sterling will be a classy office building with a street-level restaurant.

Downtown -- consisting of about 50 blocks around the public square -- and the surrounding center-city neighborhoods are being healed after decades of decline. Moreover, say downtowners, this urban rebirth will stop at nothing. People who live and work downtown say the neighborhood is a phoenix rising, that it is their playground, that it had promise even during the dark days of the early '90s.

There are many new signs of life. Today, if you go downtown, you will find that the neighborhood is interesting and safe. It is no longer made fun of on local radio. If you park your car on the street, it will almost certainly not be broken into. If you walk a couple blocks between your parking spot and your destination, whether it be

Mudhouse Coffee or Springfield Pottery or Martha's Vineyard or whatever, you'll see actual friendly-faced people walking on the sidewalk with you, who are likely to say hello.

Downtown Springfield is an interwoven tapestry of different elements: If you're getting a bite to eat at, say, Maria's, on South Avenue, you'll find a furniture store, the regional opera and literacy groups, a recording studio, bars, restaurants and coffee shops all within eyeshot. And behind the second-floor windows above your head, you'll glimpse other people's spacious lofts. (If you wait around until 3 a.m., you'll see chic twentysomethings having afterparties up there.)

Soon, your view of downtown may get even more appealing. Near the square, Allen Casey dreams of changing Robberson Avenue (a grungy north-south alley a block east of the square) into a pedestrian path that will unite Founder's Park with the cultural attractions on Walnut Street. Nancy Brown Dornan visualizes an actually finished, operating Gillioz Theater, and to that end the Gillioz board seeks to raise enough money to give the theater a bare-bones opening sometime this year.

At press time, architect-developer Dan Scott plans to announce a new downtown project soon. Developers Sam Freeman and Tim Rosenbury say they'll reveal new progress on plans to turn the Seville Hotel into a boutique property. City Council member and artist Mary Collette gasps about the garrets-of-Paris skylights that will go into three new lofts near Café du Nord that she and her husband, Paul Parker, are fixing up for this spring. The former McDaniel Elementary building is likely to be converted into offices by developers Matthew Miller, Jeff Schrag and others. And, of course, there are major efforts underway in Jordan Valley Park and Civic Plaza; a few attorneys are adding their presence on East Walnut Street; the Hosmer family is revamping the Hoberman Building at 600 North Boonville Avenue for lofts.

There are, of course, limits to the regrowth. It's an open question as to whether available parking spaces downtown are adequate to serve customer demand (see "Parking Remarkings," page 30). Very few small and medium-sized buildings are still for sale in center city. Three Commercial Street buildings Sam Freeman listed on his promotional web

OR, A TALE OF THE RESTORATIVE POWER OF NICE PEOPLE TRYING HARD

BY GREGORY HOLMAN
PHOTOS BY CHRIS GRAY
PHOTO STYLING BY TIFFANI BARTON



PLAYER: MATTHEW MILLER

When you check out the nightlife events posted on ddec.net, you're seeing the work of Mathew Miller, one of those who ensure that the downtown Springfield scene gets the attention it deserves.

site, www.godowntown4.com, have sold. And some people are moving out: Parkie and Paula Gleason are selling their building at 300 South Campbell. They're retiring to a studio on their farm in Webster County, where Parkie plans to focus on more artistic stained-glass work.

Bringing new retail tenants into downtown spaces has so far been somewhat difficult, say developers. Downtowners and real estate researchers say that downtown needs more apartments to satisfy the pressing demands of people who want to live there. Things like corner grocery stores and flower shops only arrive at the end of the revamping process, when residents want walking-distance services. The conventional wisdom is that any downtown revitalization starts with private developers and small entrepreneurs who really want to be downtown. Nightclubs and bars break in, followed by coffee shops. White-linen restaurants are the tipping point: If a downtown can support those urban pioneers, more businesses follow, along with smart-set residents who want to live near social and cultural hotspots.

"You can't make a thing like this happen," says art dealer Jan Hyde. And there is certainly no one reason for downtown

Springfield's renaissance. Government assistance often helps kickstart private endeavors. Matthew Miller got a small business loan from the city to open The Bar Next Door in 1994 as an inexperienced 24-year-old. Larger projects are made

“DOWNTOWN PEOPLE ARE MORE OF A PSYCHOGRAPHIC THAN A DEMOGRAPHIC,” SAYS MATTHEW MILLER

possible by historical-preservation tax credits from the state and federal governments. Kimberly Harrington of Warren Davis Properties says that converting Heer's into an office space (which may be complete in 2004) will cost a total of \$10 million, \$4.5 million of which will be offset by the tax credits. But "there's a lot of red tape," she says of the National Register of Historic Places requirements. "You really have to

have your ducks in a row."

Community involvement has also played its part, stakeholders say. Springfield-Greene County's Vision 20/20 plan brought together 350 citizen volunteers over 25,000 hours of consensus policymaking about the future, with a hefty emphasis on center city. (Most Missouri counties, of course, have no planning or zoning whatsoever.) "It was a more bottom up approach more than top down," says Mayor Tom Carlson. "And that was a real paradigm shift. In previous years, the tendency was for city leaders to develop a plan and try to sell it to the chamber and the Rotary group and the editorial board." Plans from "the usual suspects," as City Manager Tom Finnie calls them, are never as successful as a broad, grassroots effort to figure out what the community needs.

Thirdly, individuals make a difference. "Downtown people are more of a psychographic than a demographic," says Matthew Miller. The people attracted to downtown are progressive-minded and adventurous, he says. "They're just a little bit more willing to take chances, and they're more attracted to authentic culture." There's also the desire to live in a neighborhood of actual neighbors, ground-

THE DOWNTOWN LOWDOWN

[AREA FACTS BY THE NUMBERS]

- Total private and public investment since 1997 in center city: **\$300 million**
- Amount of this money spent in downtown proper: **\$15 to 20 million**
- Total small-business loans made since 1984 by the City of Springfield: **\$7 to 8 million**
- Minimum number of downtown residents today: **1,589**
- Number of downtown residents 13 years ago: **1,901**

- Number of people living inside Springfield's city limits: **151,580**
- Number of people residing outside any incorporated town or city in the Springfield-Branson region: **200,000**
- Percentage by which sprawl developments can cost taxpayers more than compact ones: **+70**
- Maximum price per night for a downtown parking space: **\$4**
- Cost of a 2-hour parking space downtown (street-side or CID lot): **\$0**
- Number of city-owned parking meters downtown: **0**
- Number of living spaces downtown: **146**

- Minimum number of additional apartments the downtown market demands: **300**
- Average downtown loft rent: **\$715**
- Average downtown apartment rent: **\$395**
- Percentage of Springfield's office space located downtown: **28**
- Average rent per square foot of premium downtown office space: **about \$14**
- National average rent per square foot of premium office space: **about \$25**
- Number of corner grocery stores downtown or on Commercial Street: **0**

SOURCES: BOMA, BROOKINGS INSTITUTION, CITY OF SPRINGFIELD, REAL ESTATE RESEARCH CORP., SOUTHWEST VALUATION, UDA, U.S. CENSUS, 417 RESEARCH

PARKING REMARKING

We spoke to a number of downtown denizens about whether it's hard to find a parking space in the central business district. There are many different perspectives on the subject... many, many perspectives.

"I think the exciting news is that there's a parking problem downtown. Parking was not a problem 10 years ago." -- Tom Finnie, city manager

"Saying 'Isn't it great that we have a parking

ed in a sense of history. For Springfield's city-lovers, knowing everyone on your block and saying hello to the mailman each morning count. It's those incidental relationships created when people live close together in a mixed-use area that add a social spark to daily life. "I think it's Mayberry," says Dan Scott.

Of course, Mayberry relationships can be relationships based on conflict. Depending on whom you talk to, there may or may not be one between the Springfield Police Department and downtown nightlife businesses. Chris Kampa, the 27-year-old owner of the Fine Tastes tobacco and liquor store at 320 East Walnut Street, says that police (whom he calls "quite Gestapo-ish" though some officers are "really good guys") are not effective in keeping everyone safe from belligerent drunks during bar-closing hour.

City officials have heard from people who say that late nights downtown have coarsened over the past few months. But businesspeople, including Kampa, unanimously say they feel safe downtown -- far safer than in decades past.

Nowhere in Springfield is a concern with safety more evident than on Commercial Street, where there are two

problem?" is a platitude."--Mary Faucett, Nonna's owner

"From my time in the hotel business, I can say the best problem we ever had was when we had parking issues." -- Tracy Kimberlin, Springfield CVB exec. director

"If you really want to open up downtown, you take the square and make it parking." -- Jim Shirato, real estate/parking developer

"I hope there are some [big-event] dates when we have some parking issues [in Jordan Valley Park]." -- Tracy Kimberlin

sets of earnest believers: people who live in lofts and own artistic businesses, and a concentration of agencies that serve the homeless. The two sides do seem to agree that social services have a right to exist... but, "it can get very personal," says controversial City Council member Mary Collette, who thinks that the presence of so many homeless people on the street renders business prospects "fragile."

She struck a conciliatory tone when 417 spoke to her just before Christmas. "It is our responsibility as a community to care and provide services for people who need help," she says. "I just feel like there's a better way to provide services" -- by not concentrating so many of them on one six-block street. Collette adds, "The Commercial Club area needs additional support in order to handle the negative impacts of housing the region's social problems, as it were. You can't pretend that we don't."

"I get in trouble when I tell people what I'm doing," says Jim Harriger, executive director of Springfield Victory Mission. When asked if Commercial Street's business and social agencies can coexist well together, Harriger says there are no easy, sound-byte answers.

"You can go to Battlefield Mall and walk a whole lot further to get to your destination than downtown." -- Jim Shirato

"When I ran into an 11-year regular of Nonna's at Steak n' Shake who said, 'I wanted to go to Nonna's but couldn't find a parking space,' then I know there's a parking problem." -- Mary Faucett

"I don't know of anyone who's turned around and left downtown because they couldn't find a space." -- Jan Hyde, Walnut Street Gallery owner

"One of the pieces that I hope would be part of coexistence," he says, "would be the recognition that we are a part of the help; we're not causing the problem."

For their part, Gary and Amy Waldrop, who once lived in the first loft ever on Commercial, recently put their building up for sale. They are leaving to concentrate on their interests in the core downtown area, says Gary, who doesn't think homeless services are a bad thing... but, "It's rather hard to have a gallery or restaurants and have that flourish with that environment. And that's what I'm doing, so that's not the place for me."

If local conditions can sometimes be fractious and fragile, what about the effect of global conflict -- the war on terrorism and a possible war with Iraq? Could national economic problems stop center city from continuing to improve? Downtown developer Jim Shirato, who prides himself on not being a "cheerleader," says no. "[Iraq] will be a very short war," he predicts. "The national economy is still in good shape... I can't find any responsible economic guru who's saying we're going to hell in a Greyhound."

"We do have a bright, optimistic future for Springfield."

PLAYER: CHRIS KAMPA

Looking for fine cigars or cognac downtown? Then you'll find your way to Fine Tastes, owned by Chris Kampa. Chris is just one of the downtown merchants offering Springfield residents more sophisticated, urban options.

