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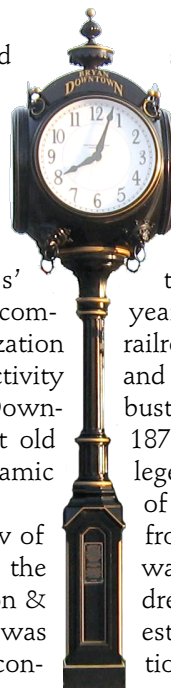
Downtown Bryan

The Revitalization of Downtown The Birth and Rebirth of Bryan, Texas

By Charlie Burris, AIA

Downtown Bryan's birth, death, and rebirth is the archetypal story of the typical Texas town. A major factor in its birth was the coming of the railroad, and ironically that same railroad and its buried fiber optic cable is a significant factor in its resurgence. The demise of Downtown accompanied the sixties' demographic shift characterized by the coming of suburbs and malls. With modernization the center of retail and commercial activity moved ever further away from old Downtown until nothing was left but vacant old buildings and little promise of any dynamic activity.

In 1860, William Joel Bryan, nephew of Stephen F. Austin, sold his interest in the town site to the directors of the Houston & Texas Central Railroad, and the town was named Bryan in his honor. In 1866 con-



struction of the railroad was headed for Bryan, and the county seat was moved there along with much of the outlying population. The railroad facilitated industries that were more permanent, and industry gained on small-scale farming as the economic way of life for the area. Bryan was transformed in thirty years from a rough-and-tumble temporary railroad boomtown into a permanent trade and population center. By 1870 Bryan was a bustling center of commerce. Founded in 1876, Texas Agricultural & Mechanical College was purposely located six miles south of town to insulate the school and students from "evil influences" of Bryan. Agriculture was still the major industry, and the area drew many immigrants including the largest agricultural colony of Italians in the nation. By 1905, Bryan was full grown and ➔



Downtown, continued from page 1. filled with energy and promise. Bryan steadily grew and transformed from a rural and agricultural society to a large and fast growing urban community. More substantial buildings replaced old wood structures to accommodate banking, hotels, commerce, and civic activities along the several main streets of Downtown, and Bryan became the hub of commercial and civic activities for a five-county region.

There was little attention paid to Downtown in the eighties. As late as 1997, Downtown Bryan was still a relative ghost town with rundown streets, dilapidated buildings, and little to draw people. A few private entrepreneurs invested in its properties primarily because of low prices. The collapse of the Palace Theater roof led to its reinvention as an outdoor entertainment venue. The abandoned Central Texas Hardware building began its new life as the now popular Old Bryan Marketplace. The old Municipal Building was reborn as the Brazos Valley Children's Museum. The first national historic structure to receive

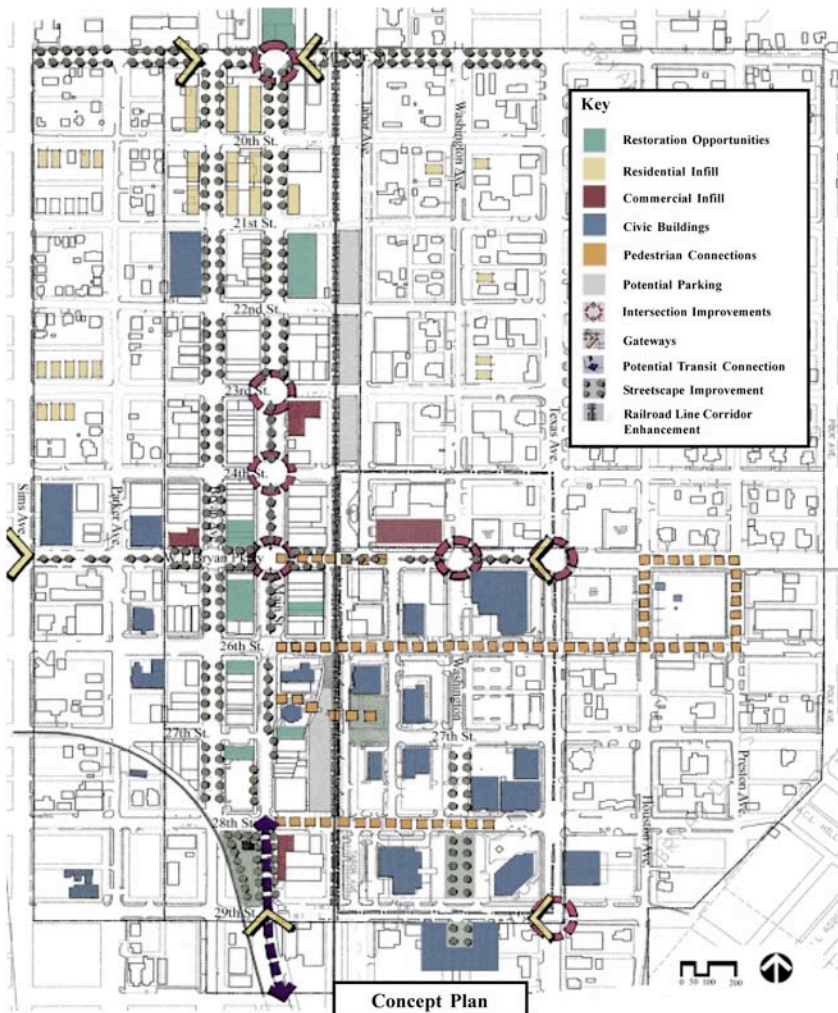


Snow Day, 1918, Bryan

attention was the Carnegie Library Building in 1999. Prominently located in the center of Main Street, it is the oldest Carnegie Library building in continuous operation in the state of Texas. It now serves as the Carnegie Center of Brazos Valley History. Renovation began in 2000 on the 1928 La Salle Hotel, recently named a Historic Hotel of America.

Revitalization began to take off with the serious participation of the City of Bryan. In 2000 the City developed a comprehensive plan and engaged Looney, Ricks and Kiss, a Nashville-based architectural and planning firm, to create a Downtown Master Plan to revitalize the business district and to preserve its historic significance. According to its mission statement, the purpose of the Plan is to "provide a blueprint for making Downtown Bryan a better place to live, work, and play." The Master Plan process was a year of planning activities with input gathered from a series of forums involving merchants, property owners, and other stakeholders. The resulting five-phase Master Plan is a true collaboration between the public, City staff, and consultants LRK.

City leaders made it clear that "this is not a plan meant to just sit on the shelf gathering dust" and, true to intent, implementation of the Plan began immediately. The Master Plan includes: intersection and gateway enhancements; streetscape improvements; the creation of a Civic District; restoration and in-fill opportunities; parking and transit initiatives; economic and marketing strategies; residential neighborhoods; and the necessary implemen- ➔



Bryan Downtown Master Plan by Looney, Ricks and Kiss, 2000

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tation strategy focusing initially on the Downtown core area. The Plan was adopted in 2001, and Phase One (with an investment of over \$3 million) was completed in 2004. Attention focused on rehabilitating four blocks of Main Street where many of the finest of Downtown's eighty historic buildings are located. Phase Two (over \$7 million) was completed in 2007, followed by a purposeful pause before embarking on the next stages of implementation. More than \$25 million in recent downtown development signals the rebirth of vital cus-

tommer service in the heart of town. A big surprise was the City's purchase of six blocks to the north, an area characterized by low-density buildings, which is targeted for new mixed-use development.

Over twenty building owners have taken advantage of a matching funds grant program to upgrade the facades of their buildings. They now house new restaurants, clubs, shops, and twenty-eight loft apartments, which are fully occupied. With the first phases completed, the result has been a remarkable transformation and a tremendous new impetus for further private development. Thousands of visitors have come to enjoy festivals, public art, and events including the award-winning Texas Reds Steak and Grape Festival. Additionally, there are monthly First Friday events and periodic Art Steps which many downtown businesses join in attracting visitors to shop, dine, and to enjoy art, live music, and other activities. Eleven restaurants now call Downtown home. A new park is currently being completed at the south gateway.

Downtown Bryan is alive and well once again and is being rediscovered by the Brazos Valley and beyond. In a mere decade it has been remarkably transformed and is building momentum with each improvement toward a bright new future. ■

