

Evolution of a city's character: the Midtown story

Something really big is happening downtown.

More than six acres of property in the very heart of our city is being transformed into new streets, parks, buildings and exciting urban spaces. Midtown Plaza, the vast indoor complex that for many years symbolized downtown Rochester, is coming down. At virtually the same time, an exciting new urban district is being born.

To my knowledge, nothing else like this is happening nationwide.

The impact this new set of structures and spaces will have on Rochester is almost certain to be a game changer. An entire section of the city will open up to its surroundings, taking on a new character with new opportunities.

Midtown Plaza was unique in its time; it put Rochester on the map as an innovative community that was reinvesting in the downtown district at a time when retail business was ebbing away to the suburbs. The complex was a visionary endeavor sprung from the creative genius of architect Victor Gruen and galvanized by retailing leaders Gilbert McCurdy and Maurice Forman. For Rochesterians, Midtown quickly became synonymous with downtown, and for many years it preserved a sense of vitality.

For more than 20 years Midtown Plaza was the center of retail activity for our region. It began to struggle in the 1980s as shopping malls continued to open outside the city. Population increasingly spread outward from the city center into suburban areas. Other problems began affecting midsize urban centers across the country, contributing to the gradual decline of Rochester's center city.

Midtown struggled to keep tenants. These struggles increased in the mid-1990s when the mall's two anchors, McCurdy's and B. Forman, shut down. This was quickly followed by the closing of the Midtown store of Wegmans.

Midtown reached its "tipping point" a few years ago when an 11th-hour effort to renovate the complex failed to gain traction; the complex quickly lapsed into crisis.

It fell to our local civic leadership to



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evaluate the options and formulate a plan to retrieve this important core sector from potential oblivion. The bold decisions that were made reflected uncommon courage. The purchase of Midtown Plaza by the city of Rochester and the commitment to demolish it, while at the same time remaking it, was fraught with risk.

Once again, business interests led the way. The agreement between Mayor Robert Duffy, New York State and Arunas Chesonis to bring Paetec Holding Corp.'s corporate headquarters to Midtown established the anchor for a new, revitalized city center.

On days when I walk or drive down Main Street past the Midtown Plaza site, I marvel at how rapidly something so substantial can be dismantled. At the same time there is a deep sense of anticipation and excitement about what will come next. For those familiar with the plan, it is truly exciting.

In many ways the current vision for the Midtown District holds closely to Gruen's original vision. His intention was to create a pedestrian-friendly town square for Rochester. He incorporated art, benches, fountains, a 400-seat auditorium and a sidewalk cafe into his plans, hoping to encourage the sort of social intermingling that he saw as the enriching essence of urban life.

Times have changed, but the desire for a pedestrian-friendly town square has not. The new district will have, when fully realized, most of the ingredients essential to a modern American center city: a corporate headquarters, culture (in the proposed Rochester Broadway Theatre League performing arts center), civic space (in the park at the center of the district), residences (in Midtown Tower), retail uses and business opportunity sites for new build-

ings. It will also connect via streets and walks to facilities like Xerox Square (with its generous public spaces and auditorium), Manhattan Square Park and the East End.

There is a fondness for all that Midtown Plaza was, but at the same time we acknowledge there were aspects that have become antithetical to modern urban design thought. Midtown provided the convenience of all-weather shopping enjoyed at suburban malls with the added feature of connections to nearby buildings via the Skyway system. It was a vast enclosed facility, separating itself from much of the surrounding urban life it was striving to preserve. The new urban district that will be created has the potential to enhance and reconnect the urban fabric of our community.

It takes a very long time, often centuries, for cities to evolve their essential character. In these terms the new plan for Midtown will be a lightning strike. The transformation from enclosed urban fortress to open urban district, with fully constructed buildings and streets, is set to happen in just a few short years.

Both the original Midtown Plaza and the new, remade Midtown District were the result of business and civic leaders coming together to do something bold, powerful and, yes, risky.

What was behind the decision to take it apart and make it new? What have been the surprises encountered along the way? What are the ground rules by which all this is being coordinated?

My thoughts on these questions and more will be discussed in the next installment of this column, to be published July 22 in the Rochester Business Journal Special Report on Commercial Construction and Engineering.

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