

Albia, Iowa, Has Lesson to Teach City

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

In southern Iowa there is a town called Albia, pop. 4,500, founded in 1859. To Albia has been vouchsafed a truth still little acknowledged in the city and its suburbs: all change is not progress.

What Albia has done is to renew its central business district through a \$150,000 paint-and-fix-up project called Operation Facelift. In a complete reversal of accepted methods of commercial revitalization in which "modernization" is the key word, the chief tool in Albia has been simple, sensitive, common sense restoration. Albia has taken a new look at Main Street.

It is the kind of thing that could be done in those Long Island and Westchester towns where the village Main Street has been downgraded for the miracle mile or the new shopping center, losing the solvency and sense of community that made it work and gave it life. And Albia's lesson should be borne in mind as physical renovations are made under the city's own Operation Mainstreet. This is a city-sponsored program whose goal is the revitalization of about 40 aging commercial streets in all five boroughs.

Albia's lesson to New York City, pop. 8 million, and all older suburbs is the environmental and economic value of historic continuity and architectural esthetics. The lesson looks, and is, relatively easy, but it adds up to a complex, subtle and sophisticated environmental discipline called urban design.

Although it is becoming fashionable now among avant garde architects to say that "Main Street is almost all right," most small towns have felt that Main Street is all wrong.

Running scared of shopping centers, they have done their best to disguise or destroy Main Street and copy competition. In West Bend, Ind., or Hewlett, L. I., the attitude is the same: old is bad and new is good and if it looks new it's got to be better.

The panacea of "modernization" has consisted of blanking out old building fronts with flat, bland sheets of aluminium, plywood or plastic for



Neighborhoods in New York's five boroughs—not to mention communities in Westchester and Long Island—could learn from commercial renewal methods used on main street in Albia, Iowa. The town is doing restoration, not "modernization."

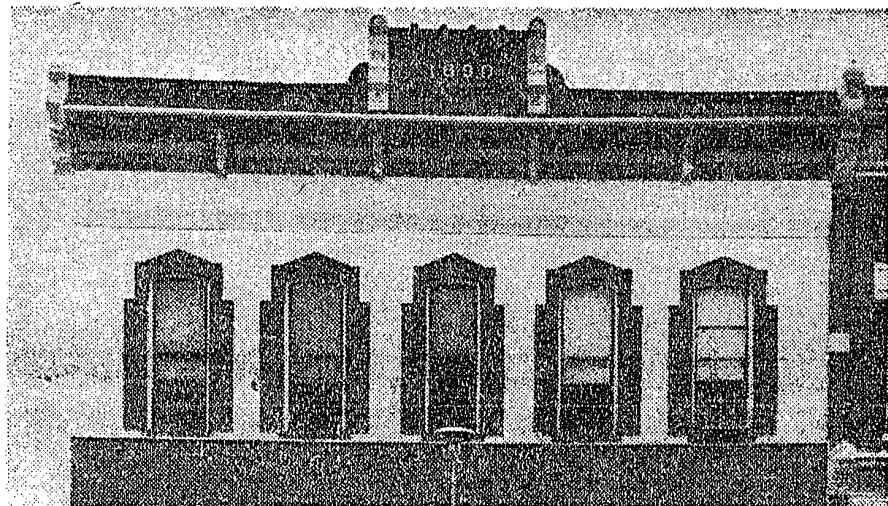
a matched, cross-country anonymity.

This has been completely successful as a building products sales campaign and as architectural and neighborhood character assassination. It has been a total disaster environmentally, if you define environment as a sense of place, or knowing where you are and liking it.

Albia knows where it is. It also knows, in its own words, that "a community cannot separate its past from its future."

In Albia, "Main Street" is the area around its Town Square, centered on the Monroe County Courthouse. It contains stores, banks, commercial,

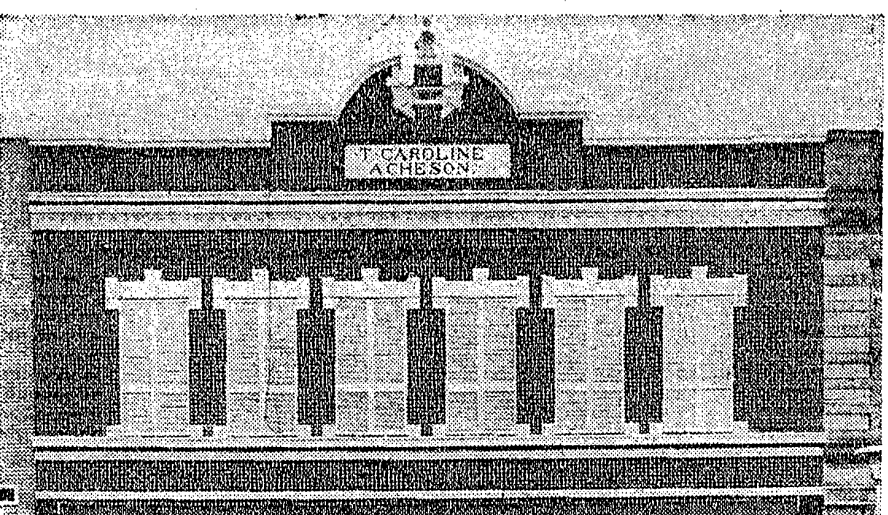
Continued on Page 8, Col. 1



Albia's "Main Street," actually the area around Town Square, has been brightened.



Treatment of the trim and brickwork in "Operation Facelift" is notably effective



The community may have rather more than its share of shutters, but they're tasteful.

Photographs by Jack Hoyt

Albia, Iowa, Has Lesson to Teach City and Suburbs

(Continued from Page 1)

professional and government services.

As a county seat, it offers a wider variety of activities than a shopping center. Like most Main Streets, it consists of rows of two- and three-story buildings in a range of Victorian and turn-of-the-century and later styles.

Albia's buildings have been neither false-fronted nor Williamsburged. There has been minimum sneaky "colonializing" or touches to make Victorian "respectably" fake-Federal. There may be some overshuttering, but it is tasteful.

The important thing is that the buildings are looked at with fresh and appreciative eyes for what is really there. As much is made of the rectilinearity of the near-Prairie Style of 1900 to 1905 (underrecognized and under-

appreciated in its vernacular and commercial versions) and of the kind of brickwork decoration Albert Kahn added to his 1900 factories, as of the elaborate Victorian cornices and lintels of the eighteen-eighties and nineties.

There is a progression of curved, pointed, pedimented, molded, cutwork rhythms above windows and against the sky that makes small museum of architectural styles and a richness of color, pattern and form unreproducible by anything except history and art.

We are just learning that art is in Main Street as well as in museums. These are America's hidden assets, Kawneer-covered on every business block. (A bank in Greenfield, Mass., has just demolished a fine pair of Gothic and classic facades for a "modern" front. More of America down the drain.)

In Albia, the old buildings have been cleaned and sand-blasted, their masonry cut and pointed, cornices and windows scraped and painted, walls grouted and silicone treated, trim matched and occasionally reproduced.

Nowhere, however, have the shops and stores on the ground floor been forced to conform to a false idea of "suitability to period," or to have fancy dress "historical" lighting or signs, with the morass of anachronisms that this brings. Many a restoration has gone wrong at the ground floor and the 20th century. Albia's shops and services are strictly commercial and contemporary in use and appearance, as they should be.

This is no charade. The past is respected and the present is unhobbled. That is among Albia's more important lessons.

The entire operation has

been carried out privately, under the direction of the nonprofit Albia Area Improvement Association. The Association is now exploring available Federal and state funds for programs concerned with bettering "economic and social conditions and educational opportunities for citizens in the Monroe County area."

Operation Facelift has been financed completely by \$25 membership certificates, an initial planning grant by the Iowa Southern Utilities Company, and loans from the Peoples National Bank and First Iowa State Bank, which agreed to provide financing for their customers in connection with the project. There are 83 properties involved and individual building renovations have run from \$200 to \$6,822.

The association's largest expense has been \$3,544 in planning fees to the coor-

dinating architectural firm of Steffen-Stoltz of Ottumwa, Iowa.

Stephen M. Stoltz and Robert T. Bates, an interior decorator who has come back to Albia to live and work, collaborated on details. One paint company furnished colors mixed to specification. A single contractor was employed for the restoration. A maintenance rather than a construction contractor was selected, the J. and R. Building Maintenance Company of Des Moines.

Robert W. Larson of the Albia Newspapers has given support and leadership. Other credits go to the Iowa Development Commission and the Northern Natural Gas Company.

The work has been done as tax-deductible maintenance and repair.

There has been little trouble convincing property owners to join Operation Face-

lift. The chief problem has been to get anxious owners to wait as contracts were organized and executed for an efficient sequence of jobs.

As a result of the renovation, the Iowa Highway Commission canceled three proposed routes through town last July. There will be a bypass road instead.

Like many heartland communities, Albia is concerned about a declining population and uncertain economics. It was a stagecoach stop in 1853, and a railroad town in 1866, with 29 daily passenger trains. By 1909, it had grown to 5,000. Now it looks to tourism for growth, as the center of a 30-mile lake area.

Albia's hopes are pinned on a kind of renewal that comes from more than a pot of paint. It combines a cultivated eye for the past with a careful eye on the future. New York and its suburbs could look, and learn.