

Shlockton Greets You

By Ada Louise Huxtable

The last time I went to St. Louis, I found that I wasn't in St. Louis at all. I was in a place called Clayton, ten miles from downtown St. Louis, and it seemed that a considerable part of downtown St. Louis was there too.

In downtown St. Louis, there was the Arch and the river, a sports stadium, parking garages and some high-rise buildings that were part of an urban-renewal effort of the 60's in which local government and businessmen had pushed and pulled and pleaded and cajoled and used tax incentives and land writedowns to get builders to invest in new construction that was meant to "revive" St. Louis's central business district.

But no one had to cajole anyone into building Clayton. The investors have flocked to the outskirts of the city along the freeway as if they had discovered gold. Obviously, they have; buying up open land and putting up new offices and hotels just beyond the older core is a universal speculative pattern in American cities today.

But no one is questioning that practice in terms of the center city it helps to kill and the quality of the environment it creates. It does not appear on mayors' anguish agendas; it is never discussed in the how-to-save-the-cities seminars.

And yet this dispersal is probably the single most destructive physical force operating in American cities. It is an act of anti-planning with severe and complex repercussions in the older city's life and economy. The damage is irreversible. The center cannot hold. The city's viability and coherence are drained. And no amount of austerity budgeting, administrative reorganization, courting of business, or appeals to the exurban middle class will reverse the city's decline while this phenomenon continues.

It is hard to come to grips with what the speculators have produced in the country's Claytons. There are unrelated office buildings in any one of the manufacturers' current models, concrete or glass, mirror or plain, punched out of a cash-flow computer. There is a lot of convenient parking, beautiful blacktop as far as the eye can see. And a view of the garage or the freeway from the schlock-modern hotel.

In Clayton itself, there is no sign of the Mississippi; where there was gentle Missouri farmland there is new motel-America. Architecturally it vacillates between stock-part modern and inflated Colonial Williamsburg. Its big virtue is its squeaky-clean newness, which deteriorates rapidly.

One of the most striking and instructive models is Dallas. In Texas,

naturally, they do this kind of thing in a big way. Dallas's downtown, unlike Houston's, shares some of the problems of the older cities. Instead of strengthening the core, the spreading new development is weakening it relentlessly.

These undertakings are clearly immensely profitable. The new Dallas landscape consists of towers spotted senselessly (but conveniently) in open land along a freeway, ranging from gymnastic caricatures of current architectural styles to the slick, standard commercial developer's package.

Sometimes they come in pairs; if one makes money, two make more. There are matched, gold-mirror glass twins that create blinding glare and are a menace to motorists on a sunny day. One drives past a Paul Rudolph (real, but bowdlerized by more mirror glass), a Yamaski (imitation) and knockoffs of every building fashion rendered as cheap clichés. This is box-top architecture in settings of no distinction or delight.

They are usually called "centers" of one kind or another. All are totally without focus or style. There is no humanity, no sense of place. They look as if they have been dropped by a helicopter flown by a blind pilot, from some giant architectural supermarket in the sky.

Driving to these mediocre buildings masquerading as bits and pieces of cities, parking, spending the day in them, can scarcely offer much in the way of the experiences that cities traditionally provide. There can be no encounters between the individual and the pleasurable accidents or enrichments of the urban condition that the British call amenities and the world calls civilization. This would be a new barbarism if it weren't so completely and boringly banal.

Any public life is in the shopping center, also on the freeway. Its canned climate, canned music and canned merchandising were the first successful developer's formula for draining downtown, and the cities bled and cried. Now, along the macadam and in the former potato fields and prairies the malls are cannibalizing each other. The abandoned shopping center is the 20th-century ruin. Next, the "centers," as new ones compete.

This free-for-all on the freeway guarantees the inner city's demise. It is indictable on a first count of urbi-cide and a second count of non-environment. Its sterility is produced by men with a conspicuous disregard for quality, no grasp of urbanism or design skills, without conscience about cities or society. Are they accountable? The cities had better think so. Their future is at stake.

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