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Architect of the Trail of Tears Memorial in Tulsa, Oklahoma

Date: September 7, 2017
To: Dahlonega Historic Preservation Commission
From: Richard L. Thornton, Registered Architect
Re: Proposed new construction at 24 & 40 East Main Street

Professional Comments

Cities evolve . . . They do not leap in final, unchangeable form from the computer screens of architects, the comprehensive plans of urban planners or the financial plans of developers. In fact, they never reach a final form at all, unless they are completely demolished. That is the crux of the responsibility of those charged with administration of designated historic districts. The downtowns of historic communities typically have a pedestrian scale that must somehow coexist with automobile traffic. How does one maintain the ambiance, pedestrian functionality and economic vitality of a historic downtown, while providing flexibility to the private sector as it actualizes economic change?

The preservation of this ambiance, pedestrian functionality and economic vitality in a historic downtown is what gives privately owned properties their economic value. This is a fact that second and third generation investors in a Downtown Historic District often forget. Their property would have had far less value and economic utility, if the preceding property owners had not cooperated in the maintenance of district-wide standards. Not complying with those standards is essentially an act of theft from all the other previous property owners, since their property values will ultimately be diminished.

Downtown Dahlonega is one of the few, if not the only Central Business District in North Georgia, north of Metro Atlanta, which has survived the Great Recession in a healthy state. There are several factors involved with this success, but three of the most important are the hard work of the Historic Preservation Commission and city staff, the expanding enrollment of the University of North Georgia, plus the very enlightened promotion of Dahlonega by its Convention and Visitors Bureau. However, because downtowns are always evolving due to external economic conditions, the work of maintaining this economic vitality never ends.

Claim that historic wood-frame buildings cannot be restored economically

This design professional has been the architect-of record for the restoration of well over two hundred buildings . . . the oldest being built in 1480 AD on Ven Island, Sweden. Most of his historic preservation projects in the United States were for buildings constructed before 1870. He is the author of the only book on 16th century colonial architecture in the United States. He was the architect for the architectural drawings for Mission Santa Catalina de Gualde (1601 AD) on St. Catherines Island, GA – prepared for the American Museum of Natural History in New York City.

His own residence in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia was built in 1763, entirely of wood materials (except for the chimneys) and had been uninhabited for 47-seven years prior to restoration. The house was somewhat larger than each of the houses being considered by the Historic Preservation Commission in this application. It had no internal kitchen, no bathrooms, wiring, plumbing or HVAC. Yet the cost of

restoring the house to a standard of excellence, which won a national architectural award, was about 40% LESS than building the structure entirely new.

This architect, as a standard procedure, places as many of the modern electrical-mechanic features as possible of a renovated structure within a new structure, attached to the rear of the historic structure, which is compatible in all ways with adopted historic preservation standards. This saves a considerable amount on building costs and eliminates damage to the historical interior. It is also a practice recommended by the US Department of the Interior.

One can see many example of this architect's approach to historic preservation in his work on the Savannah Water Front, plus in the Downtown Historic Districts of Asheville, NC, Woodstock, VA, Winchester, VA, Strasburg, VA, Rome, GA, Cartersville, GA, Kennesaw, GA and Clayton, GA. All projects were approved as being compatible with the Secretary of the US Department of Interior's Standards for the Rehabilitation of Historic Buildings.

Compliance of applicant's proposal with applicable standards

Numerous state and federal judges have ruled that the jurisdiction of either a historic preservation commission or an urban design commission extends only to what is viewed from a public right of way or what is listed in the interior of the structure as being historically significant. This is an important rule that local historic commissions sometimes forget.

Building developers and their architects often forget that compatibility of a new building within a historic environment extends far beyond the splashing on of typical period details or creation of a two dimensional "Disney World" façade onto an otherwise modern building. Compliance must be three dimensional and include the consideration of materials and colors. The public's view of the building is three dimensional and dynamic. Ideally, three dimensional renderings or virtual reality computer models should be submitted for review in order to truly understand the proposed structure's impact on its neighbors.

Specifically . . .

Although the applicant's current design incorporated typical architectural details of commercial buildings in Georgia during the 1800s on its front facade, the other three facades, which can be viewed from public rights of way are not in compliance with either the Design Standards adopted by the City of Dahlonega or the Secretary of the Interior's Standards.

1. Two story buildings are the norm in Downtown Dahlonega, except for some public landmarks.
2. Three dimensionally, the new building is very different than existing historic structures in Dahlonega. It is the length of a city block and covers two building lots along East Main St. The essentially *faux façade* of the street frontage on East Main Street will not conceal the building mass to pedestrians visiting the historic district.
3. A multi-level structural concrete parking deck is esthetically not compatible with the urban landscape of Dahlonega. Reinforced concrete is not a compatible building material in this historic district and the mass of the deck is entirely foreign to 19th century architecture. *In all fairness, such a structure, if stuccoed, would be compatible in the Asheville, NC Downtown Historic District, which primarily dates from the early 20th century . . . but this is Dahlonega, not Asheville.*
4. The scale of fenestration and architectural details of the east, west and south facades are typical of large cities such as Atlanta, GA and Rome, GA, but cannot be found in Dahlonega.

5. The mansard third floor was intended to conceal the third floor as was its original use in the buildings of Paris in the mid-1800s. The same technique was also used on the Roselawn Mansion in Cartersville for which I was the restoration architect. However . . . again . . . this building is in Dahlonega, not Paris or Cartersville.

Alternative Land Uses

The number one cause of unprofitable buildings in historic districts is over specialization. As stated in the opening discussion, economic conditions are always in flux. If a new building is constructed that can only have one possible use, it is very vulnerable to the winds of change.

For example, there is a large area of under-developed properties near the intersection of East Main Street and Memorial Drive in Dahlonega, which are ideal for the development of a hotel or motel. Per room unit construction costs would be far lower here than in the congestion of Downtown Dahlonega. Such a motel or hotel would immediately take away much of the patronage for a motel two blocks down the street.

An ideal combination of restoration and in-fill development at that applicant's properties at 24 and 40 East Main Street should be flexible for a wide variety of uses, including apartments upstairs for moderate income downtown employees, UNG students and faculty members.

The real estate market loves multi-use buildings. When I created the Multi-use category for Smyrna, Georgia's new downtown, we totally underestimated the market's response. The land area downtown now devoted to flexible multi-use structures is now over double what I originally allocated in the original Smyrna Downtown Development Plan.

The number one need, right now, for economic development in Downtown Dahlonega are indoor-outdoor music performance spaces combined with restaurants with indoor-outdoor dining. Such a complex (Lexington Park) was developed in the Downtown Asheville Historic District. It played a major role in the remarkable renaissance of Asheville. This development could easily be fitted into the properties owned by the applicant and could include appropriately designed new structures around the periphery of the development.

Without doubt, if the property owner developed a combined restaurant, student apartment and music performance complex, she would earn a far higher return on her investment than possible on the seasonal income of the highly competitive hotel-motel business. If managed properly this facility would quickly draw patronage from much of North Georgia and Metro Atlanta and ultimately make Dahlonega an Ideal location for professional musicians to live.

Sincerely,

Richard L. Thornton, Registered Architect

Brief summary of professional credentials for Richard L. Thornton

Professional Degree in Architecture from Georgia Tech

MS Urban Planning from Georgia State University with some courses being taught at Georgia Tech

Courses in Historic Preservation at Lund University - Lund, Sweden

Passed American Institute of Planners exam first time in 1976.

Licensed to practice architecture by Georgia in 1977.

Projects and Honors

Named one of 40 outstanding Historic Preservation Scholars in the United States by the National Trust for Historic Preservation

Winner of four Certificates of Excellence from the Georgia Trust for Historic Preservation

Outstanding Downtown Revitalization Project by the International Institute of Urban Design

Smyrna named Downtown Revitalization Project of the Year by Urban Land Institute.

Architect for the restoration of well over 200 buildings

Architect of Gamlegårdby Village in Late Medieval Historic District on Ven Island, Sweden

Prepared Urban Design Plan for Midtown Atlanta

Author of the first Comprehensive Plans for Charleston, SC, Auburn, AL and Opelika, AL

First Executive Director of the Asheville Revitalization Commission

Author of the Asheville Downtown Revitalization Plan

First Executive Director of the Asheville-Buncombe County Historic Resources Commission

First Chairman of the Woodstock, VA Historic Preservation Commission (founded in 1751)

Member of the National Park Service Battlefield Protection Program Citizens Advisory Council

Historic Preservation Planner for Cobb County, GA

Principal Planner for Cobb County, GA

Member of the Bartow County, GA Planning Commission

Member of the Cartersville, GA Zoning Appeals Board

Planning consultant for Smyrna, Adairsville and Kennesaw

Prepared award-winning Smyrna Downtown Development Plan