

Nothing 'local' about CentrePointe

I'm no architecture expert, but I've been a casual appreciator for some time now. I have always liked the simple but substantive aspects of life, and my taste in architecture is no different. The prettiest areas of Lexington have always been the oldest—the historic buildings that line Upper and Mill Streets, are stunning in their simplicity and elegance, and the same goes for the Gratz Park neighborhood. I owe a considerable debt to the Blue Grass Trust for Historic Preservation for keeping my favorite parts of our fair city standing and making the historically and architecturally-significant buildings more noticeable.

Those homes and businesses in Lexington's historic neighborhoods are what make our city unique. While the simple and durable styles of these buildings can be found in other cities around the state and country, they are a living repre-

sentation of a history that many of us have forgotten. They are built in the same styles as the buildings that warrant historic place markers on our city streets—Henry Clay's law office, a past home of Jefferson Davis, the Hunt-Morgan House or the home of Mary Todd Lincoln. These buildings are of a significant era in our city's and our nation's history; they are what our city was built around. The image one has of Lexington is a direct result of those buildings' presence. The fact that they still stand is magnificent in itself; that they are so well used and maintained is a testament to the work of people who have made historic preservation their calling in life. Their work allows me to walk through our city and wonder at the beauty that has persisted for nearly two hun-

dred years, sometimes more. I would guess that the proposed 'development' of the CentrePointe tower, to stand on the block bounded by Vine, Main, Limestone and Upper Streets, will also be historically significant someday. Unfortunately for us all, I believe that it will be remembered for the wrong reasons. Rather than representing Lexington's successful history as an intellectual center for the frontier throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, it will be indicative of Lexington's downward spiral. Rather than being the architecture that the city was built around, it will be the architecture that the city was destroyed for.

The kind of design that should be most important in Lexington is the design that *fits*. Lexington isn't a big city, but that isn't a surprise to most. The majority of people who come to Lexington are people who live here already. So why demolish

The short answer, for many Lexingtonians, is that we don't want to be

Guest Opinion by Taylor Shelton

Atlanta, nor do we want to be Louisville, or even Austin, and we certainly don't want their skyscrapers.

A successful future for Lexington, especially in the wake of the 2010 Equestrian Games, cannot be based on homogeneity and corporate ownership of downtown. Lexington is special not just because our buildings are old or because we had a bar that attracted national musicians who wouldn't even venture to Louisville or Cincinnati, but because Lexington as we know it has been built by

A successful future for Lexington, especially in the wake of the 2010 Equestrian Games, cannot be based on homogeneity and corporate ownership of downtown. Lexington is special not just because our buildings are old or because we had a bar that attracted national musicians...but because Lexington as we know it has been built by Lexingtonians for Lexingtonians.

the buildings that fit, regardless of how dilapidated or unimportant they are according to Dudley Webb, for a building that definitively does *not* fit? There is nothing local about CentrePointe. Not only does it lack the scale or design that would mesh with Lexington's already existing buildings, it was not created by Lexingtonians, nor was it created for Lexingtonians. CMMI, the Atlanta architecture firm that designed the forty-story phallice, sold the plans to the Webb Brothers when the structure's original plans to be built in Atlanta fell through. Lexington isn't Atlanta; and of all the big cities Lexington could aspire to be, Atlanta would be the worst. So if Lexington isn't Atlanta, why do we want Atlanta's architects and skyscrapers?

Lexingtonians for Lexingtonians. The Dame, Buster's, Mia's and the rest of the thriving businesses in our downtown became popular because they were here for us, and we used them. CentrePointe has nothing to do with Lexington, nor you, nor I, except for the fact that it will *be* in Lexington. Our city will never be 'world-class' if it looks like every other 'world-class' city in the world. Preserving our city's history and locally-grown businesses and culture is our only hope for maintaining the current successes we have accumulated. Lexington isn't Atlanta, nor is it Austin, and to me, there could be nothing better. It is only when we try to imitate these places that we truly fall short of our potential. ■



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My 15 Minutes

Money Talks and So Does History

By Sarah Nix

My fifteen minutes of television fame occurred at age 18 as an extra on the *Elvis* mini-series filmed in and around Memphis.

Geez, I thought I was hot stuff taking a day off school to become a movie star. The bus picked us up at 5am and took us to a fairly run-down catfish joint in Walls, MS.

Wardrobe then put me in a super-tight 100 percent polyester khaki cow-girl suit that seemed to have been ripped right off of Flo on the *Alice* television set. We were showed where to two-step and when to rush the stage. We did this numerous times to “That’s Alright Mama” until the director got the exact two minutes he was looking for. Was this my ticket to stardom? Nope. But I did make \$80 and faux-Elvis did kiss me more times than any of the girls.

What impresses me now is the huge amount of cold, hard cash that went in to those two minutes. The crew for this minor shoot alone was well over 50, not including the caterers. “How is all of this relevant to Downtown Lexington?” you are probably asking yourself. I’ll tell ya...all this to-do was made to film in an authentic, historically preserved building. Not as a catfish place, but used as a Texas honky-tonk. Well-preserved historical buildings must obviously a pretty big deal in the industry.

To test my theory, I contacted some friends active in the Memphis film industry to ask them about the role of such buildings in the industry. This is what I got:

David Merrill of Ronin Production Services says “Preservation vs. ‘Progress’, seems to be the theme of developers and the city councils and mayors that love them.

into an emotional response. To use another term, they’re looking for character. Which in architectural terms isn’t something that can be constructed in a day or a month, though they can be lost in an equally short time. These productions often employ hundreds of local people in various aspects of a project, and utilize the services of local businesses and establishments having a very real economic impact on a city. Each person employed by a production, by extension employs others through the goods and services that they in turn purchase and pay for.

To this I can only say, that there is such a thing as heritage and a sense of self that comes from knowing ‘from whence we came’. The external reflects the internal, a greater sense of self extends from mere bricks and mortar when we understand our history and shared past.”

Martin Lane responded, “As a location manager in the commercial and feature film world—I can certainly attest to the fact that a large part of the reason that Memphis continues to thrive in the film industry is due to the availability of older, historical architecture in the downtown area. While some projects are more geared to feature more modern urban architecture, more often than not it is the availability of older, historical buildings that projects are more attracted to. And certainly for any period projects, older buildings are a necessity. In the past several years, the film industry has brought millions of dollars into the local community, but by and large, the projects that have filmed here came here because of the mix of old and new buildings—and projects like *Walk the Line* would not have considered filming here if not for the readily available historical buildings.”

“Preservation vs. ‘Progress’, seems to be the theme of developers and the city councils and mayors that love them. ‘Progress’ being the code word for the financial incentive to ‘develop’ (read demolish) older urban areas and build newer, grander (blander) structures that are ‘modern’ and ‘cost effective’...As one who has brought many multi-million dollar film and commercial productions to Memphis, I can tell you that historic and unique neighborhoods have a real value beyond the aesthetic.”

‘Progress’ being the code word for the financial incentive to ‘develop’ (read demolish) older urban areas and build newer, grander (blander) structures that are ‘modern’ and ‘cost effective.’ The financial incentive for development in cities is a strong one, everyone likes the jobs and money.

As one who has brought many multi-million dollar film and commercial productions to Memphis, I can tell you that historic and unique neighborhoods have a real value beyond the aesthetic. Most of the filmmakers and creative directors who I’ve worked with are looking for locations that are unique, unusual, and off the beaten path. They often speak of looking for the ‘heart’ or ‘heritage’ of a city, to give a project a visual impact that will translate

Joel T Rose of Big Head Films agrees, “Well, absolutely, even a small historic area can have a gigantic impact. By preserving one historic street corner in downtown Memphis, the corner of Main Street and G.E. Patterson, our city has wooed the likes of, and this is just off the top of my head: Sidney Pollack’s *The Firm*; Wong Kar-Wai’s *Blueberry Nights*; Alejandro González Iñárritu’s *21 Grams*; Jim Jarmusch’s *Mystery Train*...Every single one of these films has major scenes at this one intersection. The architecture, the trolley, all preserved much as they were more than a century ago, are certainly major factors in these film makers’ decisions to film in our city, period.”

And this from my sister in Baltimore:

Quote of the Week

Here is what architect Richard S. Levine wrote in the Sunday July 6 edition of the *Herald-Leader*: “Lexington is a third-class city in the heart of a first-class landscape. Lexington has not been an innovative place.

Architecturally and urbanistically, we have been content to build weak, secondhand copies of trends and projects found elsewhere.”

[Okay, “urbanistically” might not actually be a word, but you get the gist.]

The Fayette Alliance Withdraws Support from CentrePointe

The Fayette Alliance issued a statement earlier this week withdrawing their conditional support of CentrePointe.

The Fayette Alliance is a coalition of agricultural, neighborhood, and development interests whose aim is to promote urban and rural vitality in Lexington-Fayette County.

In their statement, Executive Director Knox vanNagell writes, “After reviewing the latest design plans, it is apparent that the developer is unwilling to work with policy leaders and civic advocates to substantially address the issues of scale, layout, and the integration of existing structures into CentrePointe’s final development plan.”

The statement concludes “We respectfully ask that LFUCG and the developer establish a transparent and structured public participation process to meaningfully address the aforementioned community concerns.”

Read the statement at:

www.Fayettealliance.com/docs/CentrePointe_statement_7_18_08.pdf

“We live in historic Union Square in Baltimore. This neighborhood has seen better days, but movie makers are attracted to its authentic streetscapes. In 1997 they filmed

Washington Square there, transforming the entire square into a nineteenth-century New York neighborhood for three weeks. Several years ago producers picked a vacant florist shop circa 1900 on a commercial strip to serve as the primary set of *The Salon*. They scouted nearby neighborhoods for houses to use as the home for Vivica Fox’s character and ended up renting our 1856 brownstone for two days. The production put us up in a chic downtown hotel and paid us \$1,000.”

Let’s start thinking outside the box, Lexington. Historic Preservation I\$ Progress. ■

Welcome to Lexwebbington

By David Schankula

July 1st, 2008: 11:15PM

I left Los Angeles this morning. LAX to LEX. I stare out the window and spot roads, neighborhoods, memories.

I was born at Central Baptist Hospital in 1979. The first place I learned to love was Chevy Chase. True Value was Botkin Cox, Rite Aid was Begley's, and the entrance to Kroger's is now a brick wall. It was a land of parking lots, and each one held its own secret, like the alley behind The Owl and the Pussycat.

When they demolished a block to build Chevy Chase Plaza my parents complained, but I liked the empty halls—like a mall no one knew about.

And back when Woodland Pool was Olympic-sized, I hit that ripe-old age when every kid wants to be an architect and the Webb Brothers—Donald and Dudley—were busy revitalizing downtown Lexington. Festival Market had a merry-go-round, Victorian Square had two glass elevators.

And that Big Blue Building, a colossal monument to everything I'd learned about America from the opening credits of *Dallas*.

The plane lands and suddenly I'm out in the warm Lexington summer air. Jonathan Rodgers, one of this city's remaining impassioned defenders, is there to pick me up and we stream down Versailles Road toward the light at the top of the Big Blue Building that glows like a giant bug zapper.

July 2nd, 2008: 9:00AM

Ten years ago, as the Webbs were beginning to buy up a block at the center of Lexington, the state was reclaiming millions of dollars it had given the city.

Rather than develop a way to use the money for a community center for the youth and arts at the corner of Main and Lime, Lexington's power class had let the offer lapse. In its place, they began designs for two new courthouses. Some had the audacity to claim these judicial structures would "revitalize" the city's ailing downtown.

I was graduating high school at the time, and the city offered nothing for the creatively inclined. Even Common Grounds had turned itself into a wine bar and wouldn't admit anyone under 21 after 9pm.

My friends—aspiring doctors, engineers, musicians, writers, schemers—couldn't wait to get out. And we did. To Nashville and Berkeley, to DC and New York.

And now in 2008, we're having the same conversation we had in 1998, which we already had in 1988. What's best for downtown? How does Lexington revitalize its core?

Twenty years ago we built two commercial boondoggles—Festival Market and Victorian Square. Ten years ago we built a courthouse.

Today we bulldoze a block of our oldest buildings, home to the epicenter of our city's nightlife, to build a hotel with a jumbotron.

A third hotel downtown. Fifty percent more expensive than the Hyatt or the Radisson, neither of which sees occupancy rates much above half each night.

This morning, through the glories of checks and balances, a judge halts the demolition. A court date is set for July 22nd. (Info www.preservelexington.org.)

July 3rd, 2008: 9:00PM

I eat dinner with Joe Sonka, a leader of the grassroots opposition to CentrePointe, at Tonio's, the Mexican restaurant on Vine Street. Joe toys with the idea of leaving town.

I spend most of the meal staring across the street at what's left of the Triple Crown Lounge. It's a bombed out shell of a building, a little promise of the bigger pile of rubble we'll soon see stretching across Main Street.

Three weeks ago, 250 of our city's leaders traveled to Austin, Texas to learn how to mix art and culture with a brimming economy, all built on the backs of young people and the creative class. Back when CentrePointe was first announced, the Webbs claimed they'd have their monstrosity erected in time for the 2010 World Equestrian Games.

In 2005, developers in Austin announced plans for a 40 story skyscraper in that city's downtown. They said it would be completed and open by early 2007. Groundbreaking was delayed for months pending city approval, and once it finally happened in 2006, construction was delayed by rain. Rain. In Texas.

From announcement to completion, the building took almost three years.

I emailed Tom Eblen, the *Herald-Leader* reporter touring Austin with this group of Lexingtonians. I suggested he visit the building while in Austin, talk to the developers and city officials about the prospects of building a 40 story building and starting it in 2008 and finishing it by late summer 2010.

Eblen wrote back that the Webbs' pledge to complete CentrePointe in time for the 2010 games had long since been abandoned.

A week later, Dudley Webb was quoted in the *Herald-Leader* saying, "I would like to see the project buttoned up by the 2010 games," adding that he didn't want visitors to find a construction site when they arrive.

But that's what our visitors will see: a pile of rubble or a hole in the ground.

After dinner, Joe and I went to Thursday Night Live at the Old Courthouse. A soft smattering of Lexingtonians barely filled out the lawn where once slaves were traded. It's one of the last remaining places to see live music in Lexington. In the background, the Dame and Busters sat shuttered.

When the courthouse clock struck 7, we headed to the City Council chambers. Our elected officials are debating whether to ask the Webbs to ask us to give them our money. The Webbs want \$70 million from the taxpayers. But only if we want them to want it. The motion passes.

I sit in the second row of the empty chamber and watch them do this dance. If it wasn't real, it would be satire.

July 4th, 2008: 4:30PM

Independence Day. Parade time. Lexington's best and brightest congregate downtown on Main Street between Lime and Upper, in front of The Dame, the city's now disappeared music venue.

Mayor Newberry passes us by—he who stood beside the Webbs when they first announced their CentrePointe plans, he who failed to tell his citizens what was coming down the pike, he who left his city council in the dark.

We booed him. Loud and hard. He turned the other

cheek, busily studying the other side of the street.

Lexington's nightlife is dead. There's nothing to see here. After the parade, I hitch a ride with my friend Willie Davis—a writer (from central & Eastern KY) home for the weekend from our nation's capital—and we speed out of town.

We will celebrate Independence Day in Whitesburg in the hills of Appalachia at the Summit City Lounge. They have live music there and a creative community.

If Lexington wants to learn how to develop a downtown, it need look no further than a coal-mining city of barely a thousand people in Letcher County. The Webb brothers are from Letcher County. They left town and a thriving city emerged.

July 5th, 2008: 8:00PM

Back in Lexington, I spend my day with friends and family. One of them, the very talented Marcie Crim, is moving to Louisville after securing two fabulous jobs neither of which requires her presence in this Athens of the West. Another creative mind bolts from home.

We talk of CentrePointe and of Lexington's future. What can you do when the money's stacked against you? Another bad idea. Another decade of mistakes. Maybe we'll get it right in 2018 when we again look to revitalize our downtown in the face of snake oil developers who tell us history is nothing and the future is theirs.

July 6th, 2008: 5:00PM

I eat lunch at Ramsey's. It's empty.

The condos at Main and Rose are empty. The Civic Center is empty. Thoroughbred Park is empty. Triangle Park is empty.

Half of Victorian Square is for rent. The commercial center at Festival Market has been turned into offices. Chevy Chase Plaza is a ghost town. Lexington Green has only survived because Joseph Beth pays the heating and cooling bill.

July 8th, 2008: 4:30AM

I watched Lexington power-player and lawyer Foster Ockerman defend CentrePointe on KET tonight.

He explained the history of the block: buildings existed there, and then they were torn down, and new buildings were built. The buildings that remain are facades of the past.

It's 4:30 in the morning, Mr. Ockerman. You're asleep right now, and I hope you're dreaming of something closer to your conscience. I don't know how much they're paying you—it doesn't much matter—but maybe in your dreams you can see a brighter future than the one you espoused tonight. I hope you wake up in the morning and realize your mistake.

Progress is not made in building up, but in building intelligently.

There was finally, finally the kernel of a downtown worthy of its citizens. But developers bought it up for yet another vacant hotel. ■

David Schankula is a founder of The Lexicon Project and a member of Ace Weekly's Community Advisory Board. He can be reached at david@lexiconproject.com.