

A vision for Georgetown - an outdoor mall?



John Sommer
IDEAS AND THE ARTS

The fact that Main Street in Georgetown is not a thoroughfare is so unique (all other towns I know of have a highway as Main Street), that I can never stop to speculate how we could turn this fact into a prime asset.

Having seen and very much enjoyed the pedestrian shopping districts in European towns, I have started to look at Georgetown with the eyes of an imaginative townplanner.

I want to tell you about my ideas in the hope that you might ponder over them and let me know what you think about them. Here we go!

We are fortunate to have already a ring-road around downtown Georgetown. It consists of Back Street-Mill Street-Park Avenue-Market Street (continued past Wesleyan Street to James Street)

and James Street linking with Back Street. I propose that everything within this ring-road becomes a district for pedestrian use only.

In order to provide space for parking motor cars we would have to build at least two large parking garages, one near the present old Hydro Office on Mill Street, and another one on Market Street in the present parking lot behind the Legion Hall.

These garages would have many levels, some underground and some above ground. The parking garages could be connected to Main Street by underground walkways lined with shops. All the present parking lots, on both sides behind Main Street, could be developed with buildings containing shops, offices and apartments.

A network of lanes and small squares, either open to the sky or roofed over, would allow 3 to 5 storey buildings to cluster densely on these now open spaces. Architecturally these new buildings would have to blend in with the already existing older buildings but they would not have to imitate them. These buildings would have basement garages for the inhabitants.

With a scheme like this, old Georgetown could become a lively district where people live, work

and seek entertainment. The small and medium sized downtown apartments and condominiums could easily house several thousand people and most of their spending money would stay right where they live, in the shops and restaurants of downtown Georgetown.

A teeming and yet noise-free urban setting like this, enhanced everywhere with trees, flowers, benches, fountains and outdoor restaurants, would draw people from every other community around and accommodations would therefore be needed. There is no reason to believe why the grand, old McGibbon Hotel, after a facelift and modernization behind its venerable facade, could not become an elegant hotel on the lines of the old mills in Alton and Elora.

Outside the pedestrian district we could restore everything that is fine, to give the tourist scope for further exploration.

The United Church on Guelph Street should get its vanished spire back. Berwick Hall, designed by the great architect, Lennox, who also designed Toronto's old City Hall, could be restored to its turn-of-the-century splendour and turned into luxury apartments. The Armoury in the Fair Grounds could become a museum.

The whole area around the Odd-fellows Hall could be developed for living and shopping with the Hall restored as a distinct feature.

The splendid former art deco Post Office on Mill Street could become a posh restaurant or night spot with a roof garden on top. We could call the district "Heritage Town" and demonstrate for other communities that density does not have to mean high rise.

In order to make all this possible the town would have to change some of the existing rules and restrictions. That should not be too much of a problem since the rules often get changed anyway if somebody with power and influence wants them changed.

The developers would also be happy because they could make a tidy bundle building all these things. Well, how about it?

I hear that the "Campbell House Gallery" on Main Street in Georgetown will close its doors soon. The gallery has been in operation for only one year. The art exhibited in this gallery was always interesting and at times inspired.

Ms. Campbell was one of those rare dealers who offered original works of art only to her customers. Her's was a gallery for the true connoisseur. I would like to thank her for a year of pleasurable viewing.

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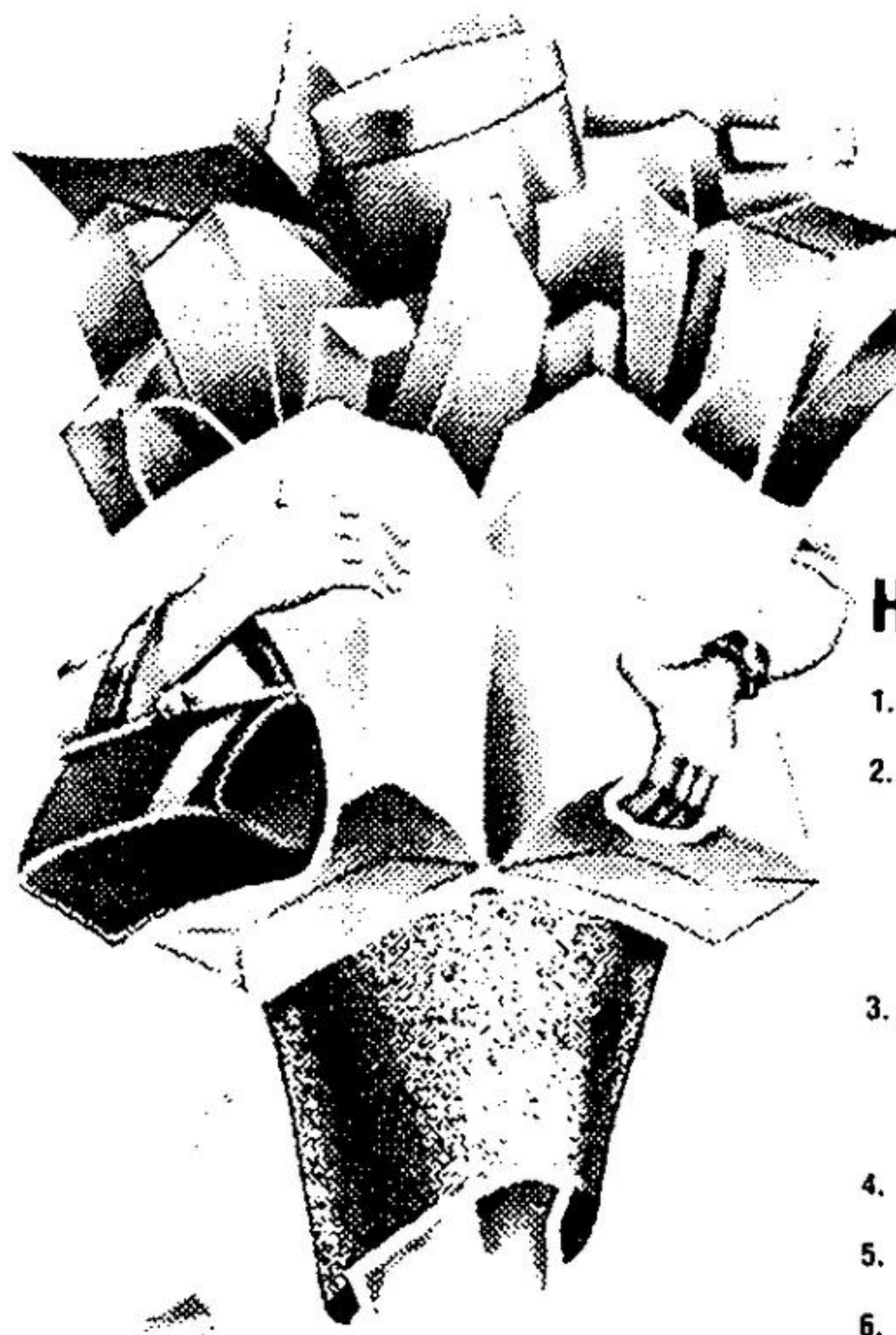
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