

## DANBURY — ALMOST 300 YEARS OLD AND STILL MATURING

In 1984 Danbury will be 300 years old. For almost three centuries residents have worked with the land, with machines, and with each other to shape a unique place. Every stage of growth: frontier outpost, commercial village, hat city, and currently, corporate base, has left a stamp on the community. The gradual blending of Yankees, Irish, Germans, Portugese, Italians, Blacks, Hispanics, and immigrants from the Middle East have produced a distinct human chemistry. What we inherit is a priceless civic asset, a slowly assembled set of traditions which define and give depth to our lives.

Main Street has always been the focus of life in Danbury. The first settlers built their houses and church on the swampy south end of the street. When the town became a regional supply center the stores and craft shops were located in the same area, and often in the same buildings. Later the railroad and the hat industry's dependence on the Still River pulled settlement northward. Early in the 20th century a network of roads funneled local and long distance automobile traffic past the banks, stores, and offices that flanked the street. Main Street was the setting for major and minor events in the life cycle of its citizens. For generations people have come to Danbury to work and shop; to embark on pleasure trips or to go off to war; to enjoy a concert or a restaurant meal; to watch parades or to observe life as it pulsates in a busy city. And despite suburban residential patterns and the lure of a decentralized mall, Main Street has not been completely drained of its energy and animation.

Danbury boasts a distinct heritage that is not locked in a book but is displayed in the downtown buildings that we enter each day. For Main Street

town is the essential ingredient of a livable city. Only the heart of the community offers a wide range of economic, social, and cultural opportunities in a physical setting that constantly enriches our lives by reminding us of our roots.

In the recent past Danbury has let others run the risks — and reap the rewards — of innovation. But this conservatism has begun to fade. Along with thirty other forward-looking American cities, almost all much larger, Danbury is taking a novel approach to urban planning that will sensitively balance the need to retain significant architecture of the past with contemporary social, economic and cultural objectives. As one of the pilot cities in the Economics of Amenity program sponsored by Washington based Partners for Livable Places, Danbury is seeking to develop its architectural and cultural resources as a stimulus to downtown revitalization.

Danbury was selected for participation in this three-year program for three reasons. An important consideration was the dangerously healthy condition of the local economy. In the path of corporate colonization of the state, Danbury boasts high employment, a sturdy tax base and much new construction. This vibrant economy is a mixed blessing. Uncontrolled development threatens the scale, fabric and traditions of the community. With Partners' assistance, Danbury is striving to harness growth so that it enhances rather than damages the quality of life in the area.

In the last few years a new breed of leader, less provincial and more aware of the importance of professional advice, has emerged in the community. Organized in 1978, the Danbury Preservation Trust has convinced many of the wisdom of making the preservation of the large stock of 19th century commercial buildings on Main Street, a tangible reminder of Danbury's era of

present. Youthful Mayor James Dyer concluded that \$30,000 from private sources over a three year period, in order to gain access to Partner's network of experts, was a bargain.

Finally, Danbury faced a set of issues that dovetailed with Partners' emphasis on the arts as a planning tool. Historically dependent on New York City for cultural enrichment, the city lacks quality museums, galleries and theaters. Such factors as the energy shortage, the proliferation of local arts organizations and the expansion of Western Connecticut State College's music and drama departments called for an upgrading of area arts facilities. Frightened by the prospect that an immense shopping mall would soon be constructed at a nearby suburban site, the city is searching for a strategy that will induce people to continue to patronize the downtown.

The third ingredient in this mix is the presence of two under-utilized historic structures on Main Street that have potential as arts facilities. The larger building, the 2,000 seat ornate Palace Theater (1928), has recently been purchased along with the adjacent Martha Apartments by Portugese immigrant Joseph DaSilva, the city's major property owner. Further to the north on Main Street is a Victorian brownstone masterpiece, the 1878 former library, that is languishing as an overflow for city offices.

The immediate task of the Danbury-Partners collaboration was to explore the feasibility of giving this pair of buildings, which make such a pointed statement about the heritage of the community, a fresh life as a cultural core that would animate the downtown and, in the process, spur satellite retail activity. The Downtown Council, appointed by Mayor Dyer to be the local liaison with Partners, raised \$10,000 in contributions from local industries to engage Ralph Burgard, an arts planning consultant. In January



graphic scope of the study, it became clear that without sizable clientele the two cultural centers, no matter how attractive, would be financially impractical. Consequently the study expanded into a full scale arts plan that would seek new ways of bringing the arts and people together.

Presently, the downtown arts effort is entering a second phase. A sophisticated market analysis that will measure the drawing power in the region of all types of arts offerings is being undertaken by Economics Research Associates of Washington, D. C. The architectural firm of Hardy, Holzman, Pfeiffer will provide engineering analysis and a range of design options for both buildings.

During the second six-month stage, Mr. Burgard will continue his efforts to strengthen the arts groups in the region. Contemplated tasks are the inauguration of a regional arts council directed by a professional staff, and the establishment of a corporate fund for the arts. If this vision materializes, the preserved Palace Theater and library will bring the finest educational and cultural programs to the region and strengthen the local character of Main Street. The animation and vibrancy brought by people enjoying downtown's diverse activities will ensure the celebration of Danbury's architectural heritage and community identity in 1984 and for years to come. **Dr. Herbert Janick**, Professor, Western Connecticut State College.



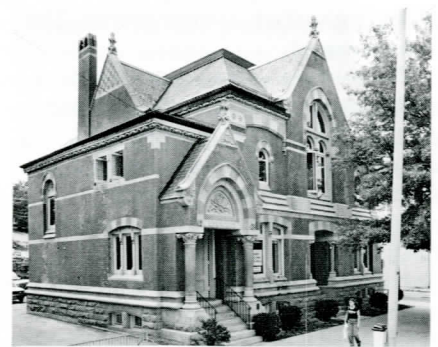
The architectural fabric of Main Street, despite losses from neglect, natural disasters, and misguided renovation, embodies Danbury's past.



photos for this article by Tom Zetterstrom



Projected plans for the Palace Theater have been fostered by the cooperative efforts of Drew Painter, Joseph DaSilva, and Herbert Janick.



Library, Danbury

