

Downtown Tacoma, continued

If you ignore current economic issues, Tacoma is definitely in a better place than it was, say, 25 years ago. The resurgence of Downtown Tacoma (though some might argue we really aren't "there" yet) has its foundation in changes that started about 30 years ago. Declining as it was at that time, many Tacomans recalled a vibrant Downtown, and wanted to see it come to life again. Several widely varied opinions led to many different actions that were thought to be "the answer." A large, (in the minds of many) "seedy" section buildings in the central core was demolished with the promise to bring in new, modern development that people would flock to. A portion of this land is still vacant, the lone historic structure that survived stands alone, awaiting restoration. [Editor note: Sadly, this building did not survive and has recently been demolished] A street that had, at one time, been the heart of the retail district (the retailers had flown to the Tacoma Mall, about 3 miles south of Downtown), was blocked off and became a pedestrian plaza. People were supposed to be drawn Downtown to shop on the "plaza" but few businesses came and so, neither did the customers. It is now a street again, though it meanders rather than being a straight shot. Though each of these "improvements" didn't ultimately answer the perceived problem of a deserted downtown, they were a part of the process that brought us to where we are today.

Around the same time - this is the one that really began the real shift in energy - people in the community were beginning to talk about historic preservation. There is a theater in the heart of Downtown Tacoma's north end (called the "Theater District"). In the early 1980s, it was looking a little worn. Some people wanted to replace it with a modern structure, but others saw the potential to bring it back to life. The preservationists prevailed, and we now have our Pantages Theater, complete with beautiful terra cotta detailing. This area now has one other restored theater and one very modern one, all joined together under the banner of "Broadway Center for the Performing Arts." They are home to the Tacoma Symphony Orchestra, Tacoma Band, Northwest Sinfonietta, Tacoma Opera, Tacoma Ballet, Tacoma Philharmonic, and many more arts organizations. Tacoma Historical Society's storefront Exhibit Center & Gift Shop is located in this neighborhood, on what is called "Antique Row."

The next challenge was Union Station. This was what many people point to as the pivotal moment in Tacoma's resurgence or "renaissance," as we like to call it. After Amtrak moved its passenger terminal to a new location, some people saw the abandoned and moldering old railroad station as an eyesore. There were many who argued that it should be replaced with something sleek and new, and that there was no way the old architecture could find a new use. Then a grassroots organization, named "Save Our Station," formed and started advocating for preservation. Ultimately, they won. The station was restored and is now a part of the Federal Courthouse complex. More important, it became the centerpiece for a whole new neighborhood. Abandoned warehouses across the street, which had been built to store goods that arrived by train 100 years ago, became the home of the Tacoma campus of the University of Washington. Then, Washington State Historical Society, who had a building in another part of Tacoma, decided to build a new structure in an area that would be more visible. The next museum to be built in the neighborhood was the Tacoma Art Museum, then the Museum of Glass. The UWT campus continues to grow, and restaurant and retail in that part of town is doing pretty well.

There are still parts of Tacoma that feel somewhat empty, but it definitely is a more lively downtown than it was in the early 1990s. It has a lot of potential. There are still many historic structures in Downtown, and people understand their value to the personality of the city. That

having been said, maintenance on an old building is not inexpensive, and retrofitting such a building to guard against seismic activity can be daunting.

Personally, I hope there are investors out there who can take the chance and make the improvements. Those who have to date have certainly had a positive, longterm effect on the city. The latest exciting news is the potential restoration of our old Elks Building, just a block north of the Exhibit Center, which many thought would be lost to neglect. There is now renewed hope and a solid plan to bring it back to life. And so, the transition continues...

Hope this helps you understand. If you haven't had the chance to visit Tacoma, I hope you will sometime in the future. I do love this town. :) Mary Bowlby, Director, Tacoma Historical Society