

DOWNTOWN FORT LAUDERDALE:

ITS DEMISE AND RENAISSANCE IN THE POST-WAR ERA

by PAUL S. GEORGE

With the end of World War II in 1945, Fort Lauderdale residents turned to the future with high expectations, for their city had grown and prospered as few others during the conflict. Fort Lauderdale had weathered the Great Depression better than many communities because farming, still a viable industry, provided sustenance for residents, while an expanding tourist trade brought visitors and revenue. By the late 1930s, new construction and retail outlets dotted the downtown sector which centered on Andrews Avenue from the New River to immediately north of Broward Boulevard and stretched from the Florida East Coast Railway Station east to Federal Highway 1. During World War II, Fort Lauderdale had hosted thousands of members of the armed forces. Between 1940 and 1945, the city's population climbed from 17,996 to an estimated 26,000, and soared five years later to 36,328, as many wartime visitors and soldiers returned as permanent residents. The removal of wartime restrictions on the production and distribution of construction materials and

consumer goods, and the presence of a populace eager to spend after years of privation, unleashed a building and spending frenzy that affected every element of the city.¹

Growth and change manifested themselves in a myriad of ways in the postwar years. In downtown Fort Lauderdale, long the economic heart of the city, this new boom was at first

Downtown Fort Lauderdale, historically the city's "heart," shared in the wave of prosperity which swept Broward County and much of Florida following the end of World War II. Ironically, this same explosion of population, construction, and traffic would, within a decade, send the region into a prolonged period of decline. The growth of suburbs and subsequent decline of downtown as a retail area was a widespread phenomenon in postwar America, but one which was intensified in Broward County by the magnitude of the region's population growth and by an almost total dependence on the automobile for local transportation. The story of downtown Fort Lauderdale's deterioration and subsequent efforts for revitalization forms one of the most intriguing and significant chapters in the city's recent history, one which has occupied the attention of businessmen, public officials, the press, and the general public from the 1950s to the present day.

Dr. Paul S. George, Director of the Historic Broward County Preservation Board and professor of history at Florida Atlantic University and the University of Miami, is also known as "the walking historian of southeast Florida" for his popular walking tours of a number of Broward and Dade Counties' historic sections, including downtown Fort Lauderdale. This article is an adaptation of portions of Dr. George's manuscript, "Broward's Flagship City: Fort Lauderdale, 1945-1990," the final volume in a three-part comprehensive survey prepared for the Preservation Board.

reflected by increased prosperity and vitality. In succeeding years, however, increased automobile traffic and resulting parking needs and the expansion of both population and commercial development into outlying areas of the city and surrounding suburban communities threatened and eventually destroyed the district's commercial preeminence.

As Fort Lauderdale catapulted into the ranks of Florida's most important communities and the center of one of the state's most dynamic counties, its downtown, ironically, endured four decades of decline, punctuated by redevelopment efforts of varying degrees of success and failure. Only in recent years has the resurgence of downtown Fort Lauderdale been assured.

Fort Lauderdale embraced eighteen and one half square miles of territory in 1945. In the early postwar years, settlement pushed out in three directions — west from the Atlantic Ocean to within reach of the Seaboard Air Line Railroad tracks, south to State Road 84, and to the north, where some residents lived beyond Tenth Street (Sunrise Boulevard), but considerably below the looping south fork of Middle River.² This growth imposed new demands upon a city unprepared for them. Citizens demanded more housing, schools, additional police protection, new roads and bridges, a better water supply, and an improved sanitation system. Traffic problems in particular plagued the downtown district in the years immediately following the end of the war.³

Fort Lauderdale's first postwar mayor, Harold Holden, described the city's growing automobile congestion, especially in the tourist season, its dearth of downtown parking, and traffic bottlenecks at the approach to bridges. He warned that downtown congestion required immediate action since the sector was in danger of strangling on its traffic. In 1947, Holden spoke of a problem that would bedevil the nation's urban centers: "Modern automobile transport has super-imposed traffic on our streets designed for the horse and buggy."⁴ Holden argued for off-street parking in downtown Fort Lauderdale, but the city, instead, chose to place parking meters along its main thoroughfares, thereby adding to the growing congestion. Nowhere was traffic more congested than on those portions of Andrews Avenue and the Federal Highway that spanned the New River. The Andrews Avenue bridge was thirty years of age and in danger of condemnation in the late 1940s, before the city commenced construction of a new bridge. The fourth span at this crossing, the new structure was molded

from steel and concrete. Broader and stronger than its predecessors, it contained four lanes for traffic.⁵

While construction was underway on the bridge, Powell Brothers, the contractors for the project, built a temporary pontoon bridge at Southwest First Avenue. It was employed briefly, because the Andrews Avenue bridge was completed in nine months, at a cost of \$482,000. The bridge opened in October 1949, relieving congestion; it remained in operation until 1979. The county named the new span the H. C. Davis Memorial Bridge for the veteran engineer who had designed it.⁶

The bridge crossing the New River at the Federal Highway presented even

more serious problems than the span at Andrews Avenue. Built in the mid-1920s, this low, narrow, wooden structure stood in the upright position for hours daily, sometimes causing mile-long backups on the Federal Highway. In the postwar period, this portion of the Federal Highway acquired a reputation as the "worst bottleneck of U. S. 1 from Maine to Florida."⁷ Business leader Emmett McTigue remembers that just a few years earlier the absence of traffic had permitted him to ride his bicycle along the center of the Federal Highway — without his having to grip the handlebars.⁸

Because of the frequency of bridge openings, the city commission in 1945



Above is the H. C. Davis Bridge under construction at New River and Andrews Avenue, 1949. Below is the temporary pontoon bridge at Brickell (Southwest First) Avenue, which served as a substitute crossing during construction.





Preliminary drawing of the U.S. Highway 1 tunnel under the New River. This view, prepared in 1948, faces south with Las Olas Boulevard in center foreground.

directed the city manager to take whatever steps necessary to limit them to one every half-hour. In the following year, several persons organized the New River Boatmen's Association to solve such problems as "unnecessary bridge openings."⁹

For many, however, more radical measures were necessary. As early as 1940, discussion had begun over the prospects of constructing a tunnel beneath the river at the Federal Highway crossing. In the postwar period, tunnel advocates grew louder in their demands. The city employed a consulting firm in 1948 to make preliminary plans for tunnels under the New River at Federal Highway, as well as under the Intracoastal Waterway at East Las Olas Boulevard and Southeast Seventeenth Street. The Florida State Road Department also became interested in tunnel crossings, and engaged its own consulting firm which recommended a tunnel at the Federal Highway and New River, but ruled against the proposed Intracoastal tunnels. Finally, in 1960, a tunnel under the New River at Federal Highway opened to vehicular traffic.¹⁰

Human as well as automotive congestion was evident in downtown Fort Lauderdale in the immediate aftermath of the war. In 1945, the Fort Lauderdale Chamber of Commerce proposed a new city hall to replace the

cramped structure that had served the community since its infancy. After city leaders adopted the idea, the electorate was asked to choose a new city hall from three proposed locations; it selected a tract at North Andrews Avenue and Third Street. Upon vacating the old city hall in 1946, the city moved its operations temporarily into the second floor of the Dowdy Building



The Fort Lauderdale City Hall on North Andrews Avenue, shortly after its 1948 completion.

at Broward Boulevard and Southwest First Avenue. Employees found this new facility cramped and sometimes redolent with the aroma of food arising from the grocery and restaurant that occupied the first floor.¹¹

While the city was preparing its new home, Burdine's department store, south Florida's premier emporium, decided to open an outlet in Fort Lauderdale. For years, city leaders had coveted a Burdine's store for Fort Lauderdale; for even longer residents had journeyed to Miami to shop in Burdine's. In 1946, Burdine's purchased the vacant city hall site from the City of Fort Lauderdale for \$250,000, after a traffic survey indicated that it stood at the busiest intersection in the city. In May 1946, demolition crews razed the old city hall, and construction commenced on the new Burdine's store. The store opened in the following year, and would serve a generation of customers. Many Fort Lauderdale residents shared the sentiments of Cecil Farrington, a prominent Fort Lauderdale attorney, who maintained that, "When Burdine's came to Fort Lauderdale, that's when we became a city."¹² The downtown store closed in 1980 when Burdine's opened a new store at the Galleria Mall on East Sunrise Boulevard.¹³

In the meantime, construction commenced on the new city hall in 1947. In the following year, the city completed the handsome one-story structure at a cost of \$338,850, and occupied it in April. In addition to other city offices, the police and fire departments occupied the building considered large enough to serve the city for many years. Within three years of its opening, however, the city hall was

crowded; in the mid-1950s, it received its first addition.¹⁴

Although the new city hall was a pleasant venue for municipal employees, it was plagued briefly by a contretemps: the restroom windows contained one-way glass, which was reversed when it was installed, thereby preventing employees from seeing out, as it was designed to do, while allowing persons on the sidewalk outside to see in. Upon discovering the problem, the city quickly rectified it.¹⁵

Downtown business boomed throughout the late 1940s. In 1949, downtown retailers experienced an increase of eighteen percent in business over the figures for the previous year. Along with the opening of Burdine's and the construction of a new city hall came the appearance of other new businesses and the growth of more established institutions, such as Sears, McCrory's, and Woolworth's. Montgomery Ward opened a small outlet near the United States Post Office on Southeast Second Avenue. Appliance and furniture stores, along with grocery outlets, appeared throughout the sector.¹⁶

The growth of Robert H. Gore's *Fort Lauderdale Daily News*, the city's lone daily, enabled it to abandon its label as "another country daily."¹⁷ Gore transformed the newspaper plant on Southeast First Avenue and North New River Drive into a modern facility with the addition of more floor space and state of the art equipment. Gore also took control of WFTL Radio, the county's first radio station, and converted the structure at Southeast First Avenue and Las Olas Boulevard that had housed the Pioneer Department Store and the wartime Service Men's Center into the Radio Center Building for his radio operations. In 1948, Gore's WGOR-FM, a sister station of WFTL, commenced operations.¹⁸

Downtown's hotels and apartment houses remained fully occupied during the winter season, while the sector's Sunset and Florida theaters were usually crowded with patrons. Stranahan Park was a favorite area for socializing and recreational activities for tourists and residents alike.¹⁹ Nightclubs operated in many parts of Fort Lauderdale. Downtown, the Federal Highway, Andrews Avenue, and North New River Drive were popular venues for this fare. Most clubs offered dinner and dancing to live music. Some included more exotic entertainment.²⁰

Financial institutions and businesses born in the previous decade also exhibited striking growth after the war. Organized during the Great Depression, Fort Lauderdale's First National Bank (renamed the Landmark First National Bank in 1970) quickly outgrew its original quarters

after the war, prompting a move to a new building on East Las Olas Boulevard and Third Avenue in 1948. By then, the institution had embarked on a course of aggressive lending to help develop the area. Recognizing the growing importance of accommodating the automobile, the bank offered "Drive-in Teller Service."²¹

Even a catastrophe considered Broward County's greatest natural disaster made no permanent inroads on the great expansion of the late 1940s. In the fall of 1947, two hurricanes with high winds caused heavy downpours and severe flooding in Fort Lauderdale and other parts of the county. The second storm deposited eleven inches of rain on Fort Lauderdale in less than three hours, causing the New River to spill over its banks and submerge the downtown in two feet of water. Andrews Avenue was especially hard hit, with high waters entering many stores along the thoroughfare. The rains washed away large segments of other streets as well. Fort Lauderdale required several weeks to dry itself out, and damage estimates were placed at \$1.3 million.²²

Although brief when measured in years, the second half of the 1940s marked a watershed in the history of Fort Lauderdale. Despite a bewildering variety of new demands placed upon the city by explosive, sustained growth, city officials and downtown businessmen looked forward to continued economic and physical expansion and prosperity.

Helped by the huge population migration to the area, sustained prosperity, and a white-hot economy centered on real estate and tourism, Fort Lauderdale began to assume the contours of a metropolitan center in the 1950s. Its population rose to 83,648 by 1960, placing it among the nation's fastest growing cities. By the end of the 1950s, 750 families were moving into the city each month. Broward County shared a similar story. The county's population soared from 83,933 in 1950 to 329,431 by decade's end. During this era, ten new Broward municipalities gained charters of incorporation. Ironically, this expansive decade also witnessed the beginning of the decline of downtown Fort Lauderdale.²³

Perhaps the most dramatic change brought by the new decade was the enormous proliferation of new subdivisions and shopping centers. The largest and most successful of several significant Fort Lauderdale real estate developments in the 1950s was Coral Ridge, which arose in the city's northeast sector. Other areas of the city offered a wide variety of subdivisions and home prices as well. By the mid-1950s, homes in areas of northwest and

southwest Fort Lauderdale were selling for \$8,000, while those in Rio Vista and Coral Ridge fetched \$15,000 to \$20,000. Elaborate apartment buildings in the Birch Estates, northeast Fort Lauderdale, and Nurmi Isles were commanding prices of \$100,000.²⁴ Fort Lauderdale Beach also represented a key center of development. Characterized by one observer as a family destination at the outset of the decade, it became a great commercial resort by the end of the decade.²⁵

Retail businesses expanded across the city too, especially with the opening of the Gateway, Sunrise, Westgate, and Plaza Center shopping centers in newly developed areas of Fort Lauderdale. Sunrise, the most ambitious and successful of the early shopping centers, attracted several nationally prominent stores, including Jordan Marsh and Saks Fifth Avenue. A portion of East Las Olas Boulevard directly east of downtown underwent a beautification campaign during the 1950s, with the planting of palm trees along its center. By the end of the decade, beautiful black olive trees graced the parking lots located just off the street, and many buildings had been redesigned in the Spanish Eclectic or Mediterranean Revival architectural style, giving East Las Olas Boulevard a place among Florida's most beautiful retail districts.²⁶

Downtown, Burdine's, which remained the city's premier department store, embarked on a multi-million dollar expansion, taking over the building north of it on South Andrews Avenue while constructing an addition on the site of its parking lot on Southwest First Avenue.²⁷ Not every downtown business continued to prosper, however. Representatives of the city's charter fishing fleet, a popular tourist draw since the 1920s, complained of a sharp decline in business. Moreover, downtown retailers felt keenly the competition from the new shopping centers with their unlimited free parking and close proximity to growing suburban population centers.²⁸

Indeed, through most of the 1950s, downtown Fort Lauderdale groped for ways to meet the challenge of competition from the new shopping centers on the perimeter of the city. Downtown merchants requested additional parking areas, and the city responded by converting such sites as the old Florida East Coast Railway station just west of the tracks into a parking lot (the railway had built a new station in Croissant Park south of the New River). New parking lots and garages appeared elsewhere in the sector. In addition to Burdine's, other businesses instituted improvements to their surroundings. The long-slumbering Brow-



Mid-1960s view of the Fort Lauderdale municipal parking lot, located on the site of the old F.E.C. Railway depot.



In the 1950s and '60s, new shopping centers such as Coral Ridge, seen in this 1962 photo, drew much retail business away from downtown (photo courtesy of Smith Aerial Photography, Inc.).

ard Hotel, now empty most of the year, underwent extensive remodeling.²⁹

Fort Lauderdale's explosive population growth and development continued during the 1960s, overshadowing everything else as they remained the dominant themes in the city's history. Between 1960 and 1970, Fort Lauderdale's population increased by more than seventy-five percent, reaching 129,590 by decade's end. The decade marked the last great population surge for the city as settlement was pushing out against its borders. City planners estimated in 1967 that eighty-

five percent of Fort Lauderdale was developed. The great population explosion in Broward County was already shifting to a growing area of communities around Fort Lauderdale.³⁰

Reeling under the flight of shoppers to suburban shopping centers, downtown's decline had become acutely apparent by the mid-1950s. The intractable problems of traffic congestion and limited parking, the seasonal nature of the city's retail business, the loss of a large base of shoppers following the decline of the residential area west of the Florida East Coast Railway

tracks, and the relocation of the fishing fleet and luxury yachts, which had traditionally attracted large numbers of people, away from the vicinity of the Andrews Avenue bridge, all contributed to this decline. By 1963, more than 125 downtown stores sat vacant, and Fort Lauderdale High School, a mainstay of the sector since its opening in 1915, had abandoned its old facility for new quarters elsewhere.³¹

At first, Fort Lauderdale reacted slowly to the decay at its core. In 1960, Mayor Edwin Johns was unable to decide "whether we want to (undertake urban renewal) or not. It needs a lot of study."³² In the following year, however, three separate groups were working to revitalize downtown. The Fort Lauderdale Downtown Business Council, with 130 members, lobbied for redevelopment, offering its "Park and Shop" plan as a step in this direction. Under the terms of this plan, shoppers would receive free parking for up to one hour in cooperating parking lots. The Council also called for the return of the fishing fleets, luxury yachts, and tour boats to that segment of the New River that meanders to the south of the downtown. The Downtown Council of the Greater Fort Lauderdale Chamber of Commerce focused on traffic improvements and beautification projects. The Chamber's Planning and Community Development Council, a third group working for the improvement of the city's core, advocated long term planning to catalyze a major transformation of downtown. By then, the city had defined the area targeted for redevelopment. It extended from Broward Boulevard on the north to the New River on the south, Ninth Avenue on the west to the Federal Highway on the east.³³

In the early 1960s, the city commissioned a Memphis consulting firm to create a plan for the revitalization of downtown. The city unveiled the plan in 1964. Ambitious and visionary, it called for the construction of high-rise apartments, pedestrian mall and overpass, riverfront park, and nightclubs. The cost was set at \$30 million, with the federal government paying two-thirds of the sum, and the city the remaining one-third.³⁴

Soon after the appearance of the revitalization plan, 250 residents signed a petition opposing federal funding for the project. Opponents averred that the scheme and its proposed funding arrangement smacked of "creeping socialism."³⁵ The commission ultimately decided against the plan. In the wake of its decision, Mayor Edmund Burry declared that "The people in Germany followed Hitler. People can be misled. If federal aided renewal wins all over the country, you



Downtown Fort Lauderdale in the early 1960s. Note one-way traffic on Andrews Avenue in this view looking north.

won't have a country in fifteen years."³⁶

In 1965, the city proposed another scheme for downtown revitalization. It called for a \$25 million complex that would include a thirty-five story apartment house building, and a twenty-one floor motor hotel on the site of the old Fort Lauderdale High School. This plan was also jettisoned, prompting the Downtown Business Council, desperate to stem the continuing decline of downtown, to search for new, more radical solutions. Fort Lauderdale's city attorney suggested the creation of a special improvement taxing district and a Downtown Development Authority (DDA) to govern the region. The DDA would possess the power of eminent domain. It also could issue general obligation and revenue bonds, acquire and dispense property, own and operate transit facilities, and assess taxes.³⁷

Created in 1965 by a special act of the state legislature, the Downtown Development Authority received jurisdiction over 200 acres of land north of the New River. Soon after its creation, the DDA ordered a Central Area Study by architect Victor Green. Completed in 1967, the study became the DDA's General Plan for Downtown Fort Lauderdale and its blueprint for reversing the area's decline. As the 1960s unfolded, additional state legislation reshaped the Downtown Development Authority. A special act of the Florida Legislature on June 18, 1969, catalyzed creation of the DDA's present constitution, imbuing it with specific power to provide for rehabilitation, clearance,

redevelopment, and revitalization of slums and blighted areas in the targeted downtown sector in accordance with the authority's plans.

The act also extended the boundaries of the Special Taxing District to include the area north of Northeast/Northwest Second Street. The full flowering of the DDA's efforts came with the ambitious construction program that swept downtown in the late 1970s and 1980s. In the meantime, downtown languished, becoming, to paraphrase President Lyndon B. John-

son's irritating comment on the nation's prospects in the Vietnamese War, worse before it got better.³⁸

While revitalization as a whole seemed stagnant, certain individual projects provided sparks of hope for downtown through the otherwise gloomy years of the late 1960s. In 1967, the city commenced construction of an eight story, \$2.1 million city hall on Northeast First Street and Andrews Avenue. Dedicated in 1969, this "modernistic" structure brought together under one roof many city departments. The building's "nerve center" was located on the first and second floors, where the city commission chambers and the offices of the city manager and city attorney stood.³⁹ During this same period, the First National Bank of Fort Lauderdale purchased the site of the old Fort Lauderdale High School, resolving a long-standing problem over the disposal of that valuable property.

Closely tied to emerging redevelopment efforts, although inspired by different motives, was the rise of historic preservation activity. A growing fear by many concerned residents that the "new" Fort Lauderdale was obliterating the old had led to several efforts to preserve the city's past, including the creation of the Fort Lauderdale Historical Society in 1962. The first formal preservation activity came in 1969 with the formation of the Fort Lauderdale Historic Preservation Council, Inc. The Council's primary objective was the acquisition of historic buildings. The organization targeted the New River Inn as its first project. From these beginnings emerged the historic preservation



The 1907 King-Cromartie House, moved to the north side of the New River in 1971, became a centerpiece of the city's historic district adjacent to downtown.



Towering above the city's skyline, the Landmark Bank building, completed in 1971, became a symbol of the "new" downtown Fort Lauderdale.

movement of the 1970s and 1980s, involving a small group of concerned citizens fighting a rear guard action against the formidable forces of development. Understaffed and underfunded, historic preservationists remained, nonetheless, resolute in their determination to preserve elements of old Fort Lauderdale. Their victories came slowly, but each accomplishment added to the precious but fragile heritage of their city.⁴⁰

In the 1970s and 1980s, numerous new trends and developments brought significant change to Fort Lauderdale. For the first time since its incorporation in 1911, the city's population growth stagnated, tourism changed in character, and Fort Lauderdale's famed beach declined markedly. This era also witnessed the striking revitalization of downtown and the city's corresponding emergence as a strong financial center.

Coming after decades of convulsive growth, the population slowdown was surprising. Whereas the population figure stood at 139,590 in 1970, an increase of nearly eighty percent over the total for 1960, the number ten years later was just 152,279. Even more

surprising was the fact that the projected population figure for the final year of the 1980s was 150,681. This development stemmed from the fact that the city's settlement patterns had pushed out even farther against its borders since the 1960s. Accordingly, by the 1980s, Broward County's frenetic growth was confined almost exclusively to the suburbs surrounding Fort Lauderdale where land was plentiful and housing more affordable. Growth figures in Broward County underline this trend. The county contained 333,946 residents in 1960; this figure jumped to 620,100 ten years later, and to 1,018,200 in 1980. The Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood metropolitan area (SMSA) was the fastest growing of the nation's fifty largest metropolitan areas in the 1970s. Broward County's population reached 1.3 million in 1990. These figures indicate the obvious: Broward County and other regions of southeast Florida were, by the century's final decades, among the fastest growing areas of the United States.⁴¹

In this era, Fort Lauderdale retrieved some of its past, as well as plunging optimistically into the future. Most

remarkable of all was the impressive revitalization of downtown. The DDA, the chief engine of revitalization, was still searching for its first major "victory" as the 1970s dawned. That milestone came at the outset of the new decade with the announcement by the First National Bank of Fort Lauderdale that it would build a twenty-eight story financial center on 12.7 acres of land that had earlier hosted Fort Lauderdale High School. The bank envisioned the structure as the locus of finance and commerce in Broward County. The building would also include a plaza designed to serve as a center for social and community activities. By the time the bank broke ground for the structure in 1970, it had already leased seventy-five percent of its office space to an impressive list of clients.⁴²

On the south side of the New River, across from downtown, the Maxwell Arcade, a boom-era structure which had been reduced to skid row status, underwent a reincarnation in the early 1970s. A private developer transformed the complex into a Mediterranean-style village with provisions for shopping and artists' quarters. Several tenants quickly signed leases for spaces in the complex.⁴³

In the meantime, the DDA had sold \$9.5 million in bonds for the purchase of six blocks (twelve acres of land) in the middle of downtown between Andrews and Southeast Second Avenue and Southeast First Street and Las Olas Boulevard. The Authority proposed to raze all of the structures, primarily older homes and stores, to prepare the land for redevelopment. By 1974, the DDA had cleared the twelve acres in a modern day version of a "scorched earth" policy. While awaiting redevelopment, the cleared land served temporarily as a park with tennis courts and surface parking. The core of a vibrant city had been expunged. In assessing the redevelopment area at this juncture, one is reminded of Gertrude Stein's scorching indictment of Oakland: "There is no there there."⁴⁴

With the area ready for redevelopment, DDA unveiled its plans for construction of the massive New River Center by the Rouse Company, a prominent developer of urban malls. The DDA envisioned a complex featuring a shopping mall with 130 stores, civic center, marina, and other attractions. Parking would be available on both sides of the New River, with a monorail carrying people across the stream.⁴⁵

The DDA launched an ambitious public relations campaign to persuade voters to approve \$16 million in general obligation bonds for construction of the civic center portion of the

project, which would consist of two main buildings connected for educational and cultural events. The electorate, however, defeated the ambitious bond issue. Shrugging off this defeat, representatives of the DDA announced that they would proceed with the project anyway because, "We intend to have a civic center in or near downtown."⁴⁶

The recession of the mid-1970s delayed the redevelopment of downtown. By then, a Rouse-developed shopping mall was no longer considered feasible. The DDA, however, continued to acquire and clear land downtown. The Authority received a significant boost from the Gore newspaper interests, which announced, in 1975, a \$13.8 million construction and improvement project for its plant near the New River. A three year building program followed, highlighted by construction of a new plant in the same locale.⁴⁷

The Gore-owned Governor's Club, downtown's premier hotel and meeting place for nearly forty years, experienced the opposite fate. With few permanent residents, the aging hostelry announced its closing in the mid-1970s. By then, Robert H. Gore, Sr., was dead and the city and county power brokers had deserted the Governor's Club for the twenty-seventh floor of the new Landmark First National Bank building. In 1976, the county leased the Governor's Club for office space, and it eventually became the home of several government departments.⁴⁸

Throughout the first half of the 1970s, the DDA remained steadfast in its plans to revive downtown as a major retail center, although Burdine's represented the quarter's lone "status" store. In 1977, however, the Authority announced a broader vision of downtown through its creation of a new masterplan for redevelopment. In addition to new retail facilities, the plan envisioned office buildings for financial and governmental institutions, housing, and park space along the river.⁴⁹

Soon after the appearance of the masterplan, however, the DDA recognized that downtown was unlikely to return as a major retailing center because of the popularity of shopping malls, an increasingly smaller residential base from which to draw, and the perennial problem of parking in that quarter. Accordingly, it redirected its efforts toward transforming downtown into the new financial, governmental, and cultural heart of Broward County. Within a few years of embarking on this path, DDA's new strategy appeared to be succeeding, for downtown showed strong signs of emerging as the county's governmental and



Workmen transform the downtown Burdines store into the Broward County Governmental Center in August 1983. Across Andrews Avenue, in the top right corner of this photo, is the county's main library building, also under construction (photo courtesy of Smith Aerial Photography, Inc.).

financial hub. By then, several significant structures had been completed or were advancing toward that milestone.⁵⁰

The construction of the Federal Courthouse on East Broward Boulevard and Second Avenue was, in the words of William Farkas, DDA's executive director, the project that launched the Authority on the road toward "the role we set out to perform" as the governmental and financial capital of Broward County.⁵¹ Farkas believed that downtown must first become the governmental headquarters of the county before it could develop as the county's civic and cultural "guts."⁵² Clearly, the downtown area was growing; a survey in 1979 indicated that 14,000 persons worked downtown, an increase of 4,000 in just one year.⁵³

The 1980s signalled the full maturation of downtown as a financial and civic center. It also marked the end of major retailing in the quarter, when Burdines departed in 1980 for new quarters in the Galleria Mall on East Sunrise Boulevard and Federal Highway. After Burdines' departure, the county acquired the downtown property, and spent several million dollars converting the former store into the Broward County Governmental Center, which contains the offices and chambers of the county commission as well as most of the departments of government.⁵⁴

The 1980s brought a long string of successes for downtown redevelopment. In the early part of the decade, officials of the Broward County public school system announced their intention of building new administrative headquarters downtown. In the meantime, groundbreaking took place for a new art museum, library, parking garage, and office building in an area framed by Andrews Avenue and Southeast Second Avenue, and Southeast First Street and Las Olas Boulevard, the same area purchased, cleared, and transformed into a temporary park by the DDA the previous decade. Pleased with its string of successes after critics had accused it of moving too slowly, the DDA explained its downtown strategy as "leveraging," or building a government facility in order to encourage private development in the sector.⁵⁵

Downtown emerged as a financial and governmental center because of its central location, its close proximity to major thoroughfares and highways, the relatively reasonable price of property in the quarter, and the DDA's successful promotional campaign. As the 1980s progressed, downtown's steady redevelopment convinced many private developers to build there. Increasingly, it was seen as an alternative site to Dade and Palm Beach counties for businesses seeking south Florida headquarters. By the mid-1980s, William Farkas felt confident

enough in the long term prospects for downtown redevelopment to announce that "We've come a long way in seven years (since the adoption of the Masterplan of 1977). We're now in the very visible payoff years."⁵⁶ Civic leaders believed that the emerging downtown would give Fort Lauderdale an image as something more than a haven for retirees and beach kids.⁵⁷

In 1985, the city unveiled its ambitious, multi-million dollar Riverwalk Plan, which called for revamping a mile-long tract of land along both banks of New River from the tunnel at the Federal Highway crossing to the bridge at Southwest Seventh Avenue. Major components of Riverwalk would include a cultural center as its western anchor, arts and science sector, historic district west of the Florida East Coast Railway tracks, and an entertainment plaza on Southwest First Avenue (also known as Old Brickell Avenue). Each of these elements would be located on the north bank of the river. Several plazas, renovated parks and ramps, street improvements, and landscaping at the river's edge, including a long, linear park, represented other parts of the project. The riverwalk itself would be designed to tie together the major components of the project.⁵⁸

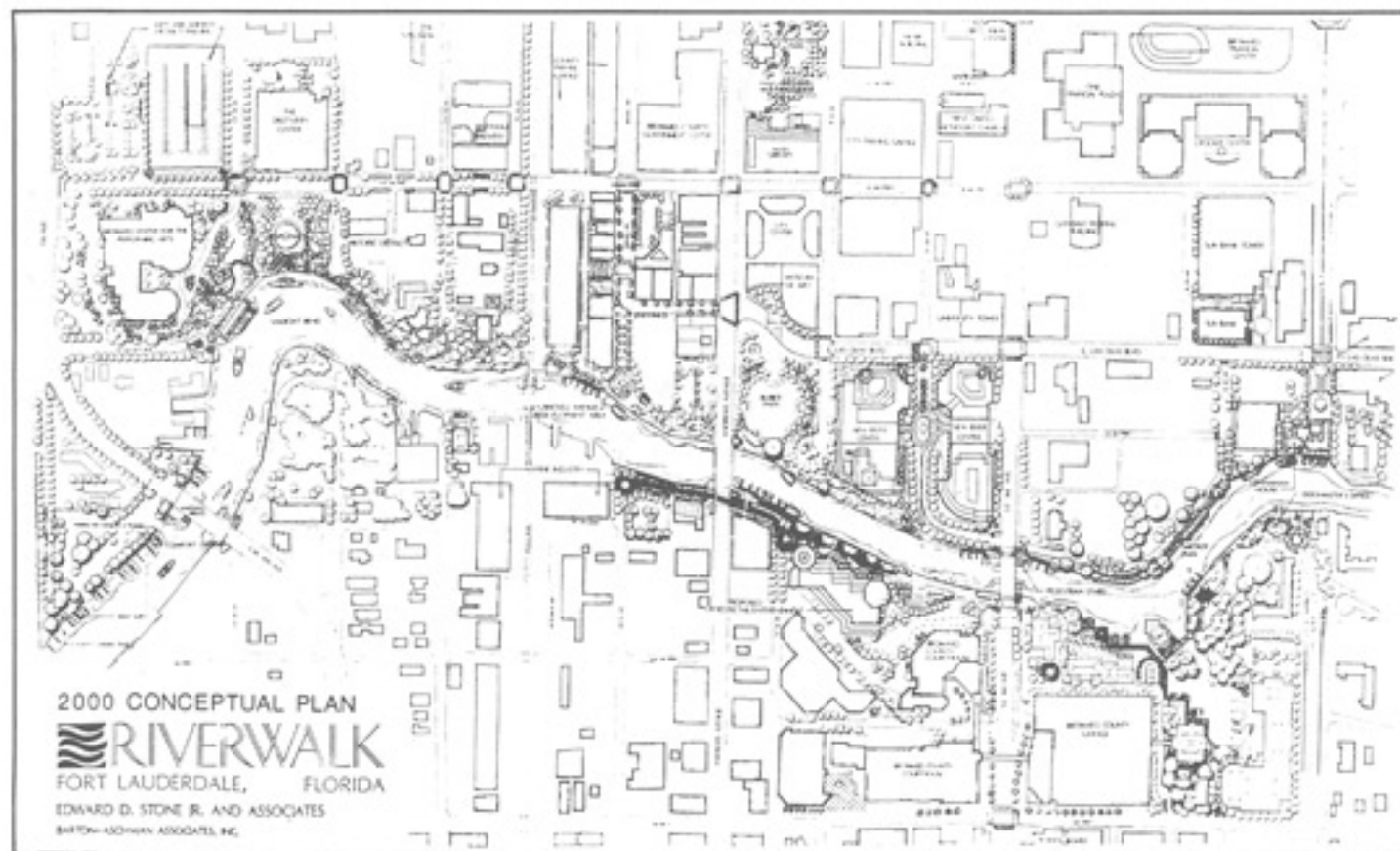
Riverwalk was envisioned as a means to create a pedestrian-friendly area featuring retail elements, such as push carts and shops, intermixed with cultural and marine-related facilities. Planners set 1992 as the date for completion of Riverwalk. Financing was dependent upon voter approval of several bond issues. Clay Shaw, a member of the United States House of Representatives from Fort Lauderdale, believed that "of all the projects, it's (Riverwalk) probably going to have the most profound effect on the city. It's just going to be a fun place to be, and you can't say that about many downtown cities."⁵⁹

The "crown jewel" of downtown's cultural facilities would be a \$33.5 million county performing arts center. A new Discovery Center, a "hands-on" children's museum, in the arts and science district just east of the performing arts center represented another noteworthy facility. With many of its early twentieth century buildings virtually intact, Old Brickell Avenue, farther east, was seen as a splendid venue for the entertainment district.⁶⁰

While planners continued preparation for the Riverwalk project, downtown redevelopment continued at a frenzied pace. By 1986, with the first wave of office buildings completed,

18,000 persons were working downtown; the sector's tax base had risen in approximately ten years from \$120 million to \$400 million. A new wave of buildings followed closely behind the first surge of construction. New construction projects during the second half of the decade included the giant Barnett Bank complex, First Fort Lauderdale Plaza, NCNB Plaza, Broward Financial Center, and University Tower, which hosted branch campuses of Broward Community College, Florida Atlantic University, and Florida International University. By the end of the 1980s, these projects were completed. The occupancy rates of several of the new structures stood near eighty-five percent, a figure superior to that for new office buildings in nearby Dade and Palm Beach counties.⁶¹

A third wave of downtown highrise construction began in the waning months of the 1980s. Major building projects included the New River Center, Capital Bank Center, First Union Center, and the SunBank Center. Many of the city's new skyscrapers bear distinctive architectural styles. Wrapped in shimmering glass, these structures, with their multi-dimensional facades and pleasing contours, have brought a signature



Plans for the Riverwalk project, scheduled for completion in the early 1990s (photo courtesy of City of Fort Lauderdale Planning Department).

style to downtown's burgeoning skyline. As new buildings opened, the number of downtown workers continued to increase. By the end of the 1980s, 20,000 persons worked in the quarter, and its tax base continued to rise in spectacular fashion. Development on the south side of New River across from downtown also proceeded impressively with several sparkling buildings rising in the vicinity of the county courthouse. Broward County's spiraling growth prompted plans for another expansion of the courthouse in the early 1990s.⁶²

Downtown's building explosion was not immediately accompanied by a boom in residential housing in the sector, although many persons advocated such development. Arguing for the construction of downtown housing in 1986, City Commissioner Jim Naugle insisted that, among other benefits, downtown residents would supplant the criminal and homeless elements that descend on the quarter after 5:00 p.m. Naugle believed that by razing large portions of downtown in the 1970s, the DDA had inadvertently caused its post 5:00 p.m. demise. Despite the dearth of permanent residents, downtown's dynamic growth made it the focal point for a bevy of festivals and events that continue to bring thousands of persons to the sector on weekends.⁶³

Downtown's revitalization has also led to the strengthening of such institutions as the First Baptist Church. While many of the older congregations in America's downtowns have abandoned their original locations for the safety and numbers found in the more affluent suburbs, Fort Lauderdale's First Baptist Church has remained on



Downtown Fort Lauderdale's skyline, 1990, showing numerous construction projects underway.

East Broward Boulevard at Northeast Third Avenue. The decision to remain has redounded to the congregation's benefit, since its membership has increased seven-fold in the 1980s. By 1990, the church claimed 9,500 members. Many of its new congregants were youthful. The church completed a \$12.5 million expansion in 1990, adding its impressive new steeple to the city's skyline. The success of the First Baptist Church stems from strong, innovative leadership, downtown's renewed vigor, and the attractiveness of the congregation and its

location to young congregants.⁶⁴

Downtown Fort Lauderdale's future as the financial and governmental hub of a dynamic county is assured. Its thriving building program assures this primacy. Though roundly criticized in its early years, and victimized by several setbacks, the DDA has resurrected and transformed downtown, assuring Fort Lauderdale and Broward County of an expanding urban core highly attractive to investors and corporations searching for a "midway" location along Florida's Gold Coast.

FOOTNOTES

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