

Downtown Strategies:

Threat of Suburban Development

Buffalo was booming in the post war period. The population hit the half million mark in 1930 and continued to increase up to 1950 when Buffalo's population peaked at 580,132. WWII vets returned home to start careers and families. Federal programs devised to revive the depressed housing industry and to support veterans with low cost GI mortgages made it cheaper to own a home than to rent, and these programs gave preference to single-family detached homes in residential subdivisions. Buffalo's population growth began to wane and suburban development took off. Downtown leaders noticed the downturn and called for action to save the Downtown core.

The City and the business community, represented by the Greater Buffalo Development Foundation, launched several planning efforts over the next decade to evaluate the Downtown business climate and recommend solutions that would improve shopping and office opportunities and retain Downtown's share in the regional market.

Map 1 - 1958-61

Starting with recognition of Downtown's strengths, such as transportation access, the presence of Downtown employees, and the breadth of goods available for sale, recommendations were made to remake Downtown in the new style preferred by suburban residents. The general theme was to rebuild Downtown to more closely resemble a suburban shopping plaza.

Specific recommendations illustrated on the map:

1958 - ***Greater Buffalo Downtown Business Core*** by Buffalo City Planning Commission, Daniel J. McKenzie, chairman

1. Build a perimeter expressway loop around Downtown (Skyway and I-190 were under construction)
2. Geographically separate retail, office, and wholesale uses, primarily to assure adequate, short-duration parking supply for retail businesses.
3. Locate (consolidate) retail uses together and serve them with adequate parking.

Public/private cooperation to make it possible to develop large, multi-block parcels in order to compete with large

suburban developments. The business community thought development in Downtown Buffalo was constrained due to smaller blocks sizes where radial streets met grid-pattern streets.

1960 – *Downtown Buffalo Study*, by Arthur D. Little, Inc.

1. Build the Court Franklin Parking Ramp
2. Change the area's physical appearance to improve its image
3. Private redevelopment on the West side of Main Street between the Liberty Bank building and Shelton Square
 - a. Close Eagle between Main and Pearl
 - b. Create an in-town shopping plaza on Main
 - c. Public plaza on Pearl

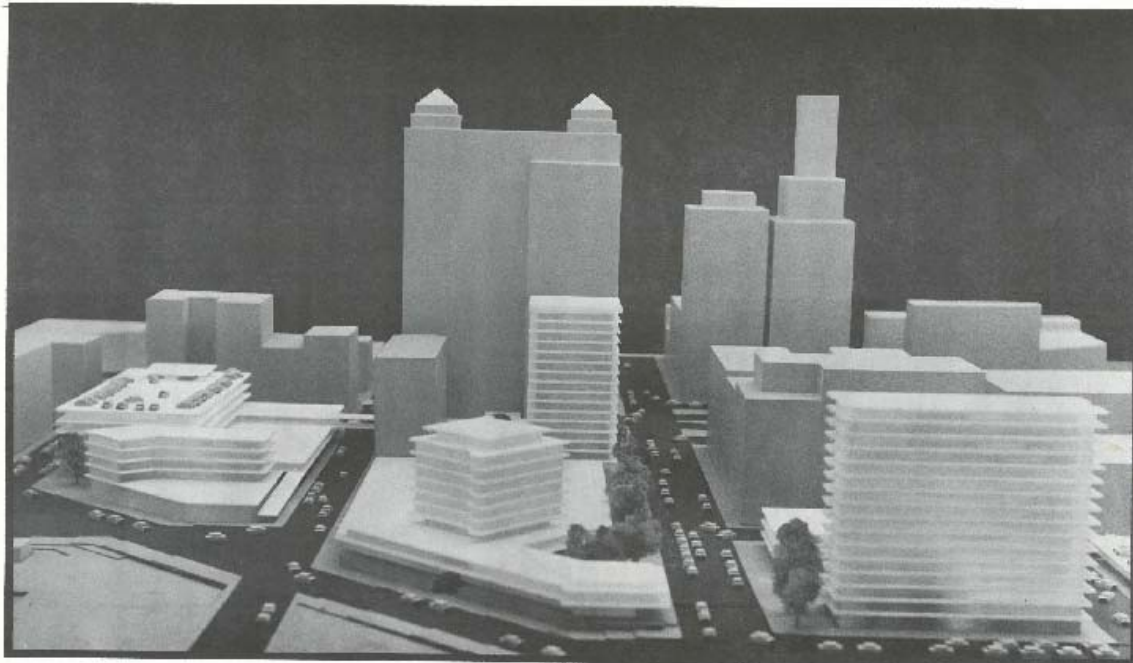


Figure 11-3

VIEW OF MODEL LOOKING NORTH FROM SHELTON SQUARE AT NIAGARA STREET. PROPOSED FRANKLIN STREET, COURT RAMP GARAGE AT EXTREME LEFT OF PHOTOGRAPH; DOWNTOWN PLAZA (CENTER) LYING BETWEEN PEARL AND MAIN STREETS. BUILDING AT RIGHT (NOT INCLUDED IN PLAN) REPRESENTS A VOLUME EQUAL TO THE 210 PEARL STREET BUILDING USED BY ERIE COUNTY. THE MORGAN BUILDING AT THE CORNER OF NIAGARA AND PEARL STREETS REMOVED FOR VIEWING PURPOSES.

Buffalo Downtown Study, Arthur D. Little, Inc. 1960, page 14.

1961 - Proposed Renewal Plan for the Downtown Core, by Frank A. Sedita, Mayor.

1. Widen peripheral streets to increase capacity around Downtown
2. Convert Genesee, Court, Niagara, and portions of North and South Division, Broadway, and William into pedestrian plazas

3. Divert Pearl to the west between Genesee and Niagara streets, to increase the size of the development parcels fronting on Main Street.

Map 2 -1960-71

Following the call to action of the previous years, the City, County, State, Greater Buffalo Development Foundation, and private businesses cooperated to acquire properties, and adjust the historic Ellicott Street Plan to create large, multi-block development parcels, remaking the Shelton Square to Court Street section of Downtown.

1. 1964 Erie County Hall Annex built, fronting on Delaware, often called New County Hall
2. 1965 Pearl Franklin Parking Ramp is built (currently the site of the Family Court Building and Fernbach Parking Ramp)
3. 1966 M&T Plaza is built
4. 1969- 70 Main Place Mall and Tower were completed

5. 1969 North and South Division were reconfigured by New York State Department of Transportation to create the Church Street Arterial
6. 1971 Erie County Rath Building is built

Map 3 - 1966 Downtown North plan

Once plans were underway to remake the Shelton Square area, including construction of a modern shopping center at Main Place Mall, thoughts turned to the shabbiness of the northern part of Downtown. Continuing the theme of redesigning Downtown to better resemble a suburban shopping center, an ambitious plan was developed to build an enclosed office, hotel and shopping mall between Delaware and Main Streets and between Huron on the south and Johnson Park and St. Michaels Street on the north.

A new east-west parkway would link Johnson Park to St. Michael's Street. Chippewa Street and the buildings fronting on either side would be demolished and new connected buildings would offer the large floor-plates, ample parking and the climate control available in the

suburbs. The W.T. Grant Store at Huron and the domed Buffalo Savings Bank Building would be linked to the new structure with their Main Street frontage serving as the entry plaza to the new mall. It was suggested that although not necessary, converting Main Street from Church to Huron into a pedestrian plaza would be “the logical and attractive way to extend the amenity of the Downtown North project and Main Place to the existing stores on Main Street.” Pearl and Franklin Street would remain open but would be tunneled under the development.

Map 4 - 1971 Regional Center Plan

Downtown would secure one third of the office and retail expansion from continued regional growth if three conditions are met:

1. Secure a Buffalo/Amherst high-speed transit line
2. Construct an all-weather Mall on Main Street between Genesee and Church Streets by building a roof over Main Street
3. Increase the parking supply by 1,000 new spaces per year for twenty years

Expressways Serve Downtown

Mass Transit Serves Downtown

Expressways Feed Into Parking Structures

Mass Transit Serves the Mall and Major Uses

Parking Structures Feed Into the Mall

The Mall Connects New Private Development

Design Principles and Dynamics of the Plan

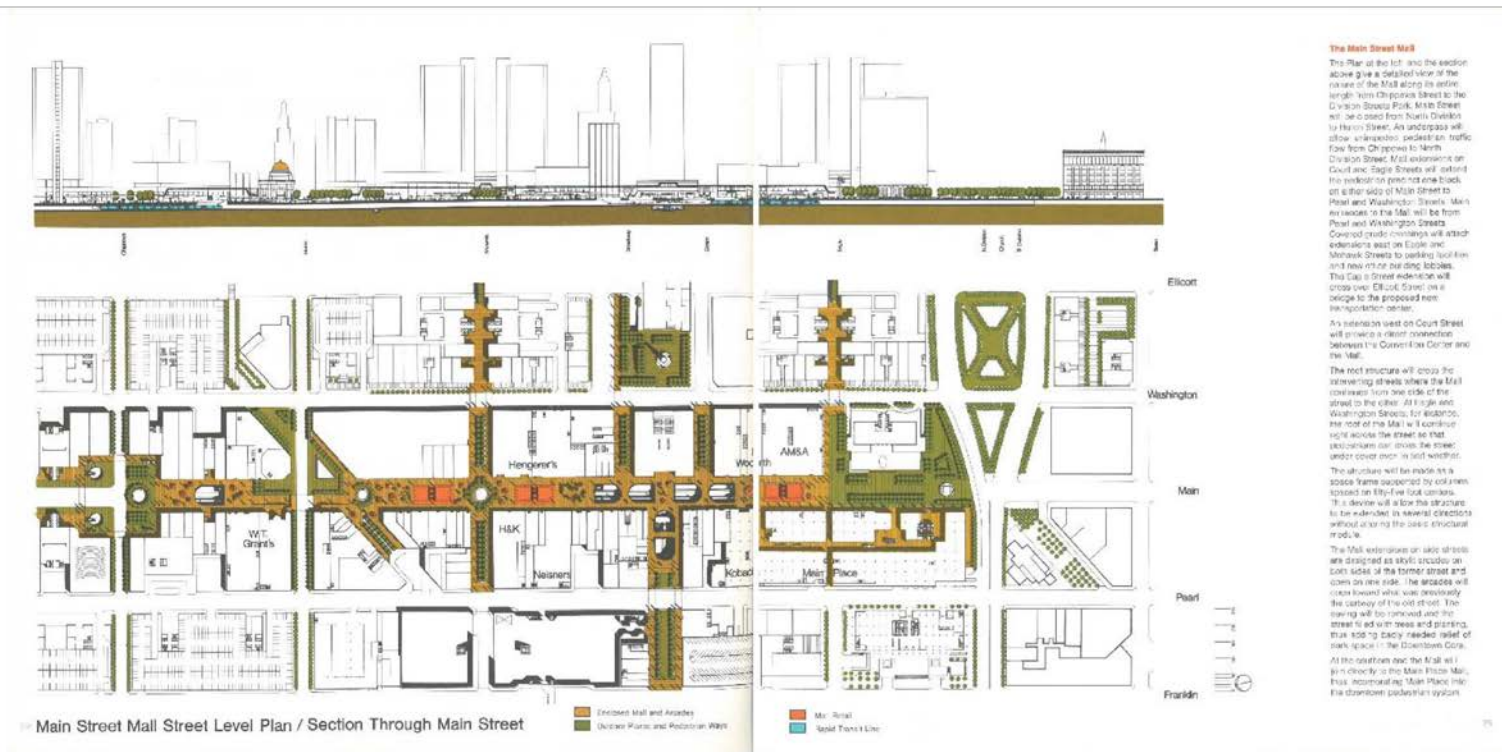
The basic principle of the Plan is to use public investments in public facilities in a connected, mutually supportive way to produce an environment and investment climate conducive to large scale private investment in the Downtown and, thus, improve the City's tax base.

Public investment will be primarily in the area of transportation and movement systems. These are to be designed and located to produce a continuous and sequential chain of events and facilities which will allow people to go to and from their destinations in a convenient, pleasant, safe, visually coherent way.

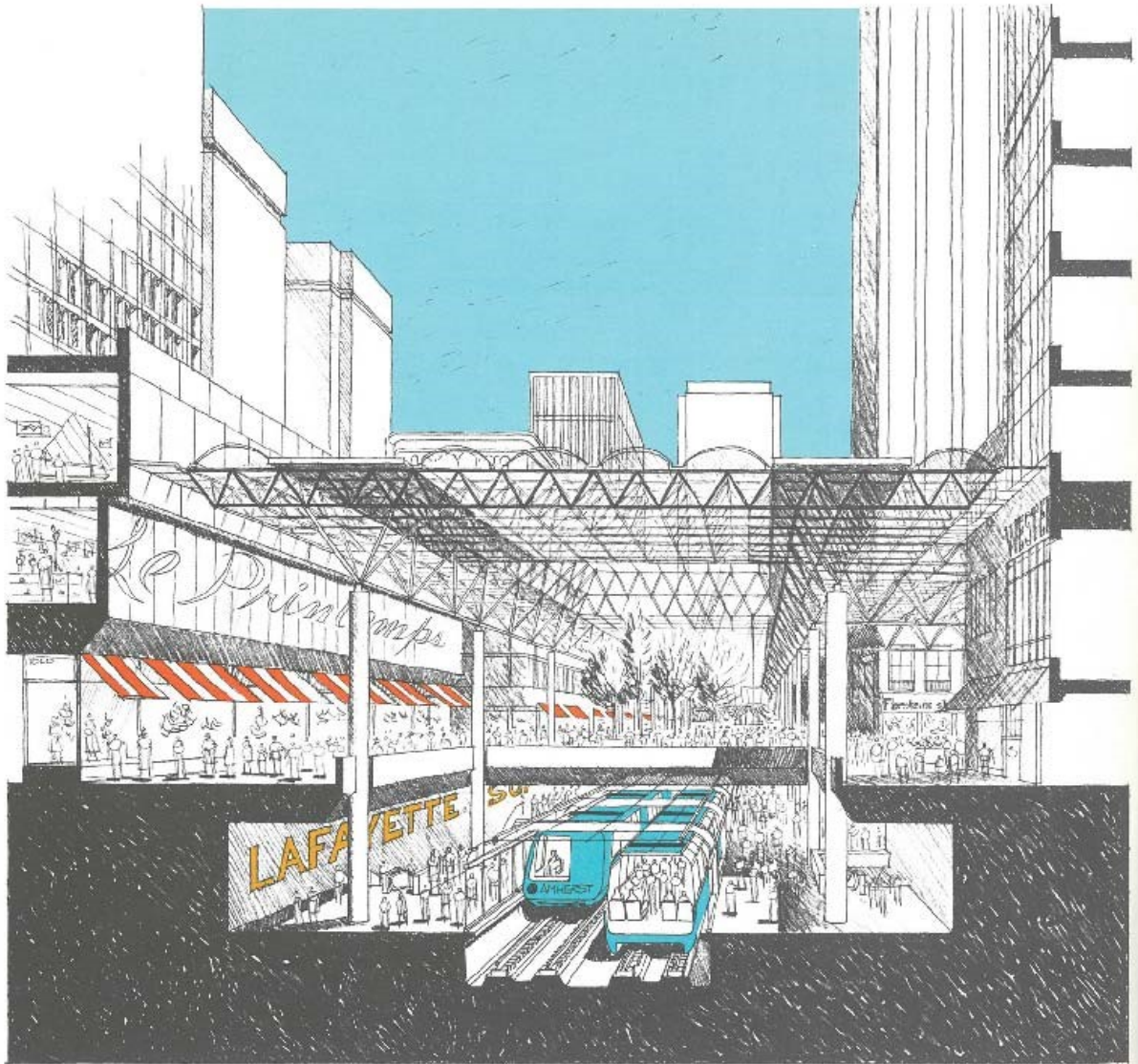
The basic elements of the movement system are:

- 1 Rapid Transit**
A rail subway rapid transit line is a major feature of the Downtown Plan. It is intended to reduce substantially traffic to Downtown; provide a transit stop at existing entrance into Downtown. The first installation of the system is the Buffalo/Amherst line. Ultimately the system is proposed to be completed by the addition of the Kenmore/Albion line.
- 2 Highways**
The highway and expressway system maximizes access to Downtown and allows the relatively small number of drivers wishing to by-pass Downtown to do so easily. A depressed expressway between Elm and Oak Streets, originally proposed in the Niagara Frontier Transportation Study, is being re-examined. The Consultants recommend a surface facility.
- 3 Parking**
New parking structures, and to keep pace with demand for space, are to be located to intercept Downtown-bound traffic before it penetrates the Downtown street network.

The Regional Center, A comprehensive Plan for Downtown Buffalo, New York, Wallace, McHarg, Roberts & Todd, 1971, page9.



The Regional Center, A comprehensive Plan for Downtown Buffalo, New York, Wallace, McHarg, Roberts & Todd, 1971, pages 22-23.



26 Sectional Perspective Looking South on the Main Street Mall at Lafayette Square

The Regional Center, A comprehensive Plan for Downtown Buffalo, New York, Wallace, McHarg, Roberts & Todd, 1971, pages 26.

Map 5 – 1978 Pedestrian Transit mall on Main Street from Tupper to Scott; Hyatt Hotel and Convention center on Genesee Street; Baseball stadium at Seneca Street

After unsuccessfully attempting to secure funding for a subway system, Western New York was awarded a demonstration grant for a first phase of a light rail rapid transit system, which could be built less expensively at ground level. The original proposal was underground Downtown and at the surface in the neighborhoods. After community objections, and in light of the previous decade's discussion of creation of Downtown pedestrian spaces, the concept was flipped. Main Street between Tupper and Scott Streets was to become a pedestrian transit mall, and there would be a subway in the neighborhoods.

The City began to close radial streets and adjust the Joseph Ellicott Street plan in the 1970s. A portion of Genesee Street became part of the City Court Building and parking ramp in 1974. Erie County built the Convention Center in 1978, closing Genesee Street

between Franklin and Pearl. When the Hyatt Hotel was developed in 1980, there was relief that the iconic Genesee building would be saved; additional construction closing Genesee Street between Main and Pearl was not a concern, as the street was already closed in the next block.

Map 6 – 2015

The Metro Rail system opened in 1985 and the Buffalo Place pedestrian-transit mall was completed in 1986. While the years of construction contributed to many small businesses leaving Main Street, pedestrian activity and optimism surged when Main Street was completed. But, by the late 1990s, the Downtown community noticed changing trends.

Growth of national big-box stores and retail buying groups made local store prospects difficult. One by one, our local retail chains went out of business or were acquired by out of town owners less committed to Main Street. By 1999, the Downtown community was aware that loss of automobile traffic on Main Street was related to storefronts remaining vacant. The City of Buffalo, NFTA, and Buffalo Place started working on a design

solution and environmental approval for returning automobile traffic to Main Street.

A design concept for automobiles sharing the trackbed with Metro Rail was completed in 2002. Federal environmental compliance was achieved in 2008. Construction in the Theatre District began in late 2012.

The Theatre District was opened to automobile traffic in December 2014. Fountain Plaza and 500 Block construction started in late 2013 and opened to traffic in the fall of 2015.