Prologue to Urban Renewal:
The Problem of Downtown Lancaster, 1945-1960

David Schuyler
Franklin & Marshall College

Nostalgia for the picturesque character of Lancaster does not retain the tax-paying population nor increase the taxable values of the city.

Michael Baker, Jr., 1945

In the aftermath of World War II, Lancaster, Pennsylvania faced a series of problems ranging from an aging building stock, traffic congestion, and inadequate parking to significant population loss and the flight of effective buying income to adjacent suburbs. The impact of the automobile on urban areas large and small was dramatic, but in an older city such as Lancaster the density of building and narrow streets made efforts to accommodate a large number of cars especially difficult. As traffic worsened and the shortage of parking spaces discouraged shoppers from driving downtown, the compact retail district, which extended two or three blocks outward from a central square, began to experience increasing competition from suburban strip malls. Confronted with a declining economy and signs of imminent commercial blight, elected officials worked with businessmen in a concerted effort to solidify the retail underpinnings of what traditionally had been the destination of choice for shoppers. How they defined the problem of downtown, what strategies they considered in their efforts to reinvigorate the central business district, would shape the city's approach to urban renewal in the 1960s.

Although the problems the city confronted were similar to those experienced in urban areas across the nation, Lancaster's response differed from that of other cities because the debate over the future of downtown in the 1950s did not produce a pro-growth coalition which championed revitalization through clearance and new construction. As a whole, owners of downtown stores were unprepared for the new competition from suburban retailers. Leaders of the city's most important private non-profit institutions, especially the hospitals and Franklin & Marshall College, did not act as if what happened to the central business district was vitally important to the city as a whole, nor did the owners of Lancaster's
largest manufacturing companies, most of which were located along the northern boundary of the city. Lancaster traditionally has been a non-union community, so what in other cities was a mobilized constituency within the pro-growth coalition was also missing. In the absence of a consensus that renewal was essential to the future of downtown, when the City Planning Commission and the redevelopment authority proposed a new retail complex in the central business district in the early 1960s, even the commercial elite divided over the efficacy of the chosen road to revitalization, severely hampering the city's efforts to carry out an ambitious renewal plan.

Still another way in which Lancaster differed from larger cities was the lack of a governmental structure that could address downtown problems effectively. Although the City Planning Commission was established in the 1920s, as late as 1957 it still lacked a professional staff: until the end of the decade its actions generally involved approving plans for new subdivisions or opening and vacating streets, not taking essential steps to promote revitalization. Lancaster's commission form of government, a weak mayor system that vested administrative power in the hands of city councilmen, fragmented authority and complicated the task of undertaking extensive renewal projects. Thus in the same way the business community was unprepared for the onslaught of suburbanization in the post-war years, so was its government ill-equipped for the challenges of revitalization in the 1950s and early 1960s. In addition, a number of the principal roads leading through the downtown were state highways, and the commonwealth failed to take steps to relieve traffic congestion. These structural impediments to effective revitalization would become apparent as the planning process pointed inexorably toward clearance and new construction in the early 1960s, but it seems likely that they also limited the range of discussion during the 1950s, when civic leaders debated how best to address the problem of downtown.

The location of Lancaster's central business district was the product of geography and economics. The earliest transportation link to eastern markets was the King's Highway, which extended from Philadelphia to the Susquehanna River and which, in Lancaster, became King Street. Later turnpikes also channeled traffic to King Street, which made it the principal commercial thoroughfare of the city. Other roads in Lancaster's grid street system were named for English royalty—Queen, Duke, Prince, or Charlotte, for example—or followed the Philadelphia nomenclature of trees, such as Orange, Chestnut, Walnut, and Lime streets. The major provision for north-south travel was Queen Street. When the railroad extended service to Lancaster in 1838, construction of the station on North Queen
Street, two blocks north of King, made that street too an advantageous place for business. Penn Square, a recessed square or diamond characteristic of the Pennsylvania culture region, marked the intersection of King and Queen streets and became the commercial and symbolic center of the city. Occupied until 1852 by the County Court House, in 1874 the city's Soldiers and Sailors Monument, erected to honor Civil War veterans, was placed in the center of the square. Handsome church spires punctuated the skyline, but it was the taverns, inns, and commercial establishments that complemented the public functions of the county seat and defined downtown, while most of the city's industries were located adjacent to the railroad.

By the early twentieth century downtown Lancaster had acquired many of the attributes of a modern commercial center. Within two blocks of the square were the city's three local department stores and the nation's oldest Woolworth five and dime. F. W.

The Beaux Arts facade of the Watt & Shand department store exemplifies the tradition of downtown retailing in Lancaster. The Soldiers and Sailors monument, in the foreground, was erected in 1874 and stands in the center of Penn Square.
Woolworth had paid homage to the community that supported his first retail success by erecting a large store and office building, topped by a roof garden similar to Stanford White's Madison Square Garden in Manhattan, that stood on North Queen Street. Other indications of the transformation of the American economy evident near the square were numerous banks and other financial offices, insurance companies, and similar elements of a service economy that was becoming increasingly important to cities. Trolley lines that extended to the far reaches of the county converged at Penn Square, bringing downtown the businessmen who worked there and the shoppers who supported the growing cluster of retail establishments. Electrical and telephone wires looped overhead, outward manifestations of the modernization of American life that had occurred within recent years. As numerous boosters pointed out, by the early twentieth century downtown Lancaster was a modern city. Civic and business leaders were acutely aware of what this meant, as were residents: a local department store advertised itself as the "New York Store" to attract potential customers and claimed to offer all the goods available in the largest metropolitan area—at reasonable prices, of course. By the 1920s new movie theaters presented the latest releases from Hollywood to an eager public, while the city's first skyscraper, the Griest Building, proclaimed urbanity as it announced Lancaster's status as the pulsing heart of a growing economic region.

Lancaster's prosperity, however, brought problems as well as profits to the commercial center. Foremost was congestion, especially as the number of registered automobiles increased dramatically in the early years of the century. If all roads led downtown, many of the city's streets dated from the eighteenth century, and the Germanic tradition of building attached houses close to the sidewalk made the widening of roadways prohibitively expensive. The volume of local traffic was augmented by Route 30, the Lincoln Highway, which was the first transcontinental roadway, and which brought thousands of cars and trucks destined for other places to King Street in downtown Lancaster each day. Railroad tracks crossing city streets at grade not only impeded traffic but were an omnipresent danger to vehicles and pedestrians alike, while trolleys also competed with cars for space on the narrow streets. Those drivers who successfully negotiated their way downtown faced yet another new problem, parking. Lancaster's first efforts in modern city planning, a 1926 study of traffic by Washington, D.C. consultant J. Rowland Bibbins and a 1929 comprehensive plan prepared by John Nolen of Cambridge, Massachusetts, attempted to relieve congestion and to anticipate the effects of the automobile on city and suburb, but the election of a new mayor and City Council less enthusiastic about the benefits of plan-
ning, together with the onset of the Great Depression, prevented the implementation of either the Bibbins or Nolen recommendations.\(^3\)

A survey of Lancaster real estate undertaken by the Works Progress Administration in 1936 revealed that despite decades of prosperity and impressive population growth, only one in four city residences had been erected in the previous twenty years. Almost a third of the city's dwellings were more than fifty years old, an indication of an aging housing stock, while 32.4 percent of residential structures were determined to be inadequate because of the lack of plumbing, heating, and utilities. The survey also revealed several ominous trends: that the demand for additional dwelling units had been met by subdividing existing structures into two or more apartments; that most new construction undertaken since the onset of the depression was substandard; and that "the marked rise in population in the adjoining townships indicates a trend toward residential development outside the corporate limits" of Lancaster.\(^4\)

As was true of most other American cities, the Great Depression and World War II were years of little investment in downtown Lancaster. Although population increased because of the labor demands of war industries, the additional number of residents crowded within existing structures or found makeshift accommodations. To smooth the transition from war to peace Lancaster's City Council appointed a Post-War Planning Council, headed by businessman A. Z. Moore. Save for the work of the Housing Committee, which investigated the existence of blighted areas such as Barney Google Row and Shantytown, the activities of the council have proven difficult to trace; if it prepared a report, that document apparently has not survived. The council did, however, recommend that the city hire a consultant to update the Nolen Plan, which resulted in the employment of Baker Engineers, of Rochester, Pennsylvania, to undertake this task. Some of the findings of the Post-War Planning Council were reported in the Baker plan.\(^5\)

Using techniques of demographic, economic, and comparative analysis, growth projections, and other tools that were becoming standard practice in the planning profession, the Baker plan provided a snapshot of Lancaster in 1945. This was an economically diverse city, with a mix of heavy industry, light manufacturing, skilled craftsmen, a full range of wholesale and retail establishments, and a growing service sector. It was, however, a community with a far higher density of population than the average of smaller urban areas in Pennsylvania. The product of block after block of brick row houses, this density, almost 78 residents per acre, was more than twice the average Baker, and the planning profession, considered desirable. Although he was confident that Lancaster would continue to be a
prosperous community with a skilled work force, it was clearly also a "middle age" city that, Baker asserted, "must face the necessity of planning for a mature community." How the city prepared for that eventuality was essential, because during seventeen years of depression and war the housing stock had continued to age: in 1945 56 percent of all dwellings had been constructed in the nineteenth century or earlier, and many had deteriorated in the previous decade because of the lack of money for essential repairs and routine maintenance. "Areas of urban blight will not be absorbed in the future by surging growth and expansion," the Baker plan warned, "for population growth in Lancaster, as in the commonwealth and nation, has declined to a relatively insignificant figure."

Given the critical importance of the downtown economy to city planners a decade later, it is significant that the Baker plan paid little attention to the central business district. Provisions for suburban development and the construction of new roads to improve traffic flow between center and periphery had been important elements of planning since the 1920s, but by the end of World War II the pressing need for better automobile access to downtown became the paramount concern in metropolitan areas. As John Nolen had done in his 1929 plan, Baker and associates devoted tremendous energies to proposing new roads (including an expressway north of the city, a circumferential greenbelt highway, arterial highways, and local parkways) and alternative traffic patterns in the attempt to eliminate congestion. The absence of close attention to the retail core was undoubtedly also an indication of the lack of real alternatives to, or competition with, downtown stores: there were only a handful of suburban strip malls in the United States constructed prior to 1945, and the modern, enclosed shopping center was still in its planning stages. Baker's relative neglect of downtown may also have been a reflection of his assessment of the economic vitality of the commercial core and the age of its buildings, the most significant of which dated from the turn of the century. One problem with Lancaster's downtown, Baker conceded, was that too much of retail activities took place elsewhere in the city. Largely because of the absence of zoning, smaller retail establishments were distributed throughout residential parts of Lancaster, not concentrated in the downtown core. Thus Baker called for the "consolidation of the scattered retail stores into neighborhood shopping centers or into the periphery of the central business district." But for the central business district itself, more attractive "window displays," better street lighting, and the introduction of other amenities would be sufficient to maintain downtown's supremacy in retailing.
A far greater problem, however, was the automobile. Baker recognized that "the ability to attract trade depends to a great extent upon the availability of parking space for cars," yet also cautioned that curbside parking was not only inadequate to existing demand but an inhibition to free-flowing traffic. If traffic and the "parking problem" worsened, he warned, "the shopper will seek less congested business districts in suburban centers or in neighboring cities." Thus the Baker plan presented a series of "specific and severe recommendations"—the reduction in on-street parking and the elimination of surface lots where the entry or exit of cars impeded traffic, the construction of two parking garages (one on the site of Central Market, the other underneath the plaza of a proposed civic center), and the development of new surface lots, most on the interior of blocks but located so that they would not adversely affect traffic flow. These proposals would result in an additional 346 downtown spaces, an 11 percent increase over existing facilities.

Particularly in the eventual development of a northern bypass and other road improvements, the Baker plan was a valuable guide in shaping Lancaster's growth in the following decade. Problems of downtown traffic and parking, however, which affected cities across the nation, proved more vexing. In 1952, for example, the City Planning Commission proposed once again to relieve congestion in the central business district by diverting some through traffic from downtown. The proposal would have required the extension of some existing streets, as well as the widening and repaving of others, and generated little enthusiasm as a long-term solution. More prosaic efforts—opening new streets, converting streets to one-way traffic, installing traffic signals, and the like—proved easier to implement, but the Gordian knot of congestion continued to strangle downtown. A 1955 State Highway Department study demonstrated that almost six of ten cars entering the central business district were simply passing through Lancaster on their way someplace else.

Steps to improve downtown parking were similarly half measures: the lack of progress on a civic center, for example, left the largest component of the Baker plan's proposed solution in abeyance. The city opened its first municipal lot, with 17 spaces, in 1954, and the following year added a second, with 14 spaces, while moving ahead with plans for a third that would provide 26 spaces; it also added parking meters on downtown streets to increase parking turnover and the availability of curbside space for potential shoppers. But these limited improvements—only a fraction of the additional spaces Baker had determined as essential—made it obvious that tentative efforts would not solve the parking problem. Given the density of building downtown, demolition of buildings and construction of multi-level garages was the only potentially viable though obviously highly expen-
sive and disruptive strategy for additional space. The lack of adequate parking would continue to haunt downtown in the years to come.11

By the end of 1954, Lancaster Mayor Kendig C. Bare announced that the city should undertake a thorough updating of the Baker plan. As was true of Nolen’s 1929 plan, Baker’s recommendations had covered an area extending three miles beyond Lancaster’s corporate limits, all of which was the jurisdiction of the City Planning Commission. Annexation of adjacent land, generally for industrial use, had almost doubled the size of the old four square mile city, while the growth of Lancaster’s suburbs in the intervening ten years had been dramatic. Thus in the winter and spring of 1955 Bare recognized that revisions to the earlier plan would not address the real issue facing Lancaster, the fate of downtown in a rapidly suburbanizing society, and so called for a document that was more regional in scope.12 He undoubtedly had in mind the kind of intermunicipal cooperation demonstrated by the Metropolitan Lancaster Commission, a public body consisting of the city and adjacent municipalities that had been established the previous year to develop regional strategies for solid waste disposal. In January 1955 City Council directed the planning commission to discuss the feasibility of a “regional planning unit” with leaders of adjacent municipalities and the Board of County Commissioners. H. M. J. Klein, professor of history at Franklin & Marshall College and longtime chair of the planning commission, enthusiastically supported a broader scope for planning: “The regional plan is the key to effective future planning,” he stated, “and then, ultimately, must come the county plan.” John M. Groff agreed: although the city had been able to implement many of the recommendations of the Baker plan, the “tremendous pace” of growth, largely in adjacent suburbs, made planning on a regional scale imperative.13

Adopting one of the suggestions made in the January 1955 discussions, the following September the City Planning Commission hired Hugh Pomeroy, director of planning for Westchester County, N.Y., as consultant. But what appeared to be a bold step forward was actually a temporary retreat from the idea of a regional plan. The City Planning Commission employed Pomeroy to advise on aspects of the Baker plan that needed to be revised, but not to address broader issues of planning on a county or regional level, Klein reported, because “there still has been no answer to such a proposal from any of the surrounding townships or from the county commissioners.” Planning on such a scale was simply not acceptable within the conservative political culture of Lancaster County.14

During the early and mid-1950’s, the City Planning Commission, operating without professional staff, approved literally hundreds of subdivision plans for adjacent suburbs.
The Lancaster City Authority extended water and sewer lines to many of these new residential developments and to new industrial complexes either recently annexed to the city or located nearby, but adjacent municipalities lacked either a planning ordinance or effective zoning. The very problems the Baker plan had attempted to address worsened as unregulated suburban growth sprawled over hundreds of acres surrounding Lancaster, transforming prime farmland into residential subdivisions. Thus Mayor Bare initiated a community forum to focus attention on Lancaster's future. The resulting series of public meetings, organized around the topic Lancaster Looks Ahead, took place on September 18, 19, and 20, 1956.15

On the surface Mayor Bare initiated the planning of the Lancaster Looks Ahead forum to obtain the opinions of a diverse group of community leaders on the problems faced by downtown and on potential solutions. The forum consisted of nine sessions, each chaired by a prominent citizen; three speakers presented their considered thoughts on the topics, followed by a question and answer session open to all in attendance. The panels addressed such economic subjects as "Industry," "Commerce and Retailing," "Positions, Employment and People," "Traffic, Parking, Highways and Transportation," as well as "Housing," "Public and Social Services," "Health," "Recreation," and "Education." The composition of the panels, however, suggests that the forum was less an occasion to debate issues than to generate consensus among community leaders about necessary measures to ensure future prosperity. Only one woman, long active in the local Y. W. C. A. and Community Chest, served as a member of a panel, to speak about private social services; only one man, an officer of the Central Labor Council, was invited to represent the concerns and perspectives of a highly diverse work force; no one spoke on behalf of the city's minorities. Except for a couple of experts from state agencies in Harrisburg, invited to provide demographic and other statistical projections, all other speakers were presidents of major corporations, prominent downtown retailers, officers of the local Chamber of Commerce or Manufacturers Association, or members of the boards or executives of social service agencies. At the end of the final session Mayor Bare praised all participants and noted that he had counted 491 citizens attending the various sessions. But if the people who prepared remarks, asked questions, or otherwise participated in discussions is an indication, the forum represented corporate and official Lancaster, not the working people, not the vast majority of residents, not the poor.16

Perhaps given the composition of the panels, Lancaster Looks Ahead represented a meliorative approach to the city's problems. Yes, downtown traffic was too congested, yes,
parking had to be made more available and convenient to shoppers. James Shand, whose family owned the oldest and largest downtown department store, testified to the degree to which the automobile had “changed the life and habits” of residents of metropolitan America. “It has made possible the multiplication of suburban housing developments; and conversely, the suburban dweller could not exist without his automobile.” The resulting traffic snarls were bad enough, he asserted, but parking had become the “number one problem of the future for retailing, whether downtown or elsewhere.” The solutions he and other speakers proposed were familiar enough: a northern bypass to route through traffic around downtown, more one-way streets to improve traffic flow, more parking, to be achieved through a variety of strategies, including new surface lots on the interior of blocks, pigeon-hole garages, and park-and-shop strategies such as that adopted in nearby Allentown. But these were technical problems that could be solved by experts working in collaboration with business leaders.17

The panels paid more attention to the need for intermunicipal cooperation and the forging of regional strategies for economic development: how to continue to attract industry to Lancaster, how to develop an educated workforce “to the end that an adequate supply of workers may always be available to man our expanding manufacturing plants,” how to provide the kinds of cultural and recreational amenities that would make Lancaster more desirable for companies interested in relocating there. Industrial growth would surely continue, one speaker pointed out, because of the “planned de-centralization of manufacturing plants to avoid a crippling atomic blow by the enemy.”18

And yet, strikingly, the vast majority of participants in Lancaster Looks Ahead, even those professing to look twenty years in the future, were unable to perceive a connection between the decentralization of jobs and population on one hand, which they were sure would benefit Lancaster, and the future of downtown retailing on the other. Speaker after speaker implicitly assumed that with the successful implementation of solutions to traffic and parking problems the central business district would remain unchallenged, despite H. M. J. Klein’s warning that the planning commission had already received three applications for suburban shopping centers and a local architect’s prediction that “families who leave the cities will do their buying in the suburban areas to which they remove.” But whereas Klein insisted that there was “no question” that suburban shopping was the wave of the future, and at least one prominent businessman conceded that the “downtown retailer must meet the competition,” other speakers ignored the bad news. Lancaster was simply too small to support department stores both in the central business district and in
suburban malls. Retailing in the suburbs, most participants confidently assumed, would never supplant downtown.19

Another striking theme of Lancaster Looks Ahead was participants’ collective assessment of the proper role of government, at all levels. Whether the topic was federal funding for roads, a reference to the interstate highway act of 1956, or state assumption of the cost of building the northern bypass, or the county’s responsibility to take the lead in regional planning to promote economic development, or even the need for the city’s financial assistance in providing the parking that would make downtown more attractive to shoppers (so that retailers, who would most benefit, would not have to bear the burden alone), speakers believed that government must serve the interests of business. They were equally adamant that government must not compete with the private sector, particularly in the area of housing. The chair of the Lancaster Housing Authority, attorney Alfred C. Alspach, echoed Senators Jesse Wolcott and Joseph McCarthy, who had castigated the public housing provisions of the U. S. Housing Act of 1949 as “a key to opening the door to Socialism in America.” Any form of subsidized housing, Alspach asserted, was a “socialistic move.”20 Emanuel C. Murry, a prominent local builder, similarly argued that the solution to the shortage of affordable housing “does not lie in government controls or public housing projects.” These “so-called answers,” he warned, “would eventually strangle our very precious free enterprise building system.” Neither of the speakers, nor any other participant, noted that the private building industry had done nothing since World War II to alleviate the critical shortage of affordable housing in the city, as Philadelphia mayor Joseph Clark had pointed out the previous year. Nor did anyone mention that the federal government was already subsidizing suburban housing through Veterans Administration and Federal Housing Administration mortgages as well as through the deductibility of home mortgage interest. In 1958 William H. Whyte, Jr. described these subsidies, together with the Home Owners Loan Corporation’s redlining of cities, as the “discriminatory rules” by which national policy “has been encouraging private investment in suburbia and discouraging it in the city.” One speaker suggested that the forum consider the establishment of a local redevelopment authority, but wanted to limit that agency’s powers: it would use federal urban renewal dollars to acquire and clear a site for a parking garage, which would then be erected by a private developer. This was the only acceptable area of federal involvement in local affairs, given the conservative political and economic culture of Lancaster, whereas public housing, which at least in theory would compete with the private sector, was simply out of the question. Perhaps more important in the long term, as a result of this conserva-
tism there would be in Lancaster no powerful collaboration of commercial, corporate, and governmental leaders in forging strategies for downtown, as had occurred through the efforts of Pittsburgh's Allegheny Conference on Community Development and Baltimore's Greater Baltimore Committee.21

The impact of Lancaster Looks Ahead on the community's attitude toward planning is difficult to assess. To be sure, the local newspapers devoted considerable space to the forum, and particularly to the need for regional approaches to problem solving (one headline proclaimed, "Municipal Boundaries Viewed As Barriers To Working Together For Area's Progress"), while radio and television similarly provided ample coverage of the proceedings. The discussions may well have succeeded in promoting a united front of commercial interests in support of a regional yet limited approach to planning, but whether the proceedings changed the views of the typical resident seems unlikely.22

At the final panel session, forum organizer John M. Groff outlined a plan to pursue the objectives outlined by participants. He proposed to classify discussions by topic, and to present the findings to city and county governments as well as to private agencies. The key to effective planning for Lancaster's future, Groff added, was "that greater assistance from the county—financial and otherwise—will be required." Mayor Bare similarly expressed hope that Groff's report "will start the county thinking, start the county working, start the county planning."23 Despite these calls for county action, and despite the obvious need for planning on a level that could coordinate the efforts of increasingly interdependent municipalities, the Board of County Commissioners refused to act decisively. The county organized a planning commission in 1958, but its powers were severely restricted. It was responsible for reviewing all developmental plans, but could only advise municipalities about the suitability of applications: local governments retained authority for approval or denial. Moreover, the county planning commission's staff was so limited that it could not provide assistance to local governments. Thus by the time the county had developed a vision for the future, in the mid-1960s, the effects of unplanned growth participants in the Lancaster Looks Ahead forum had warned about had already overtaken the ability of municipalities to control suburban sprawl.24

In the absence of any leadership on the county level, efforts to promote regional planning and to address problems affecting the city's central business district took two directions. One was the organization of a committee to establish a Regional Planning Commission for Lancaster. This group, apparently a subcommittee of the Metropolitan Lancaster Commission, invited proposals from consultants to prepare a "master plan for the city and
ten nearby boroughs and townships.” Although the commission did not engage a consultant or employ a professional staff, it continued to emphasize the importance of planning across jurisdictions and tried to influence the policies of the county planning commission. The other direction focused on the commercial center. In late 1956 or early 1957, the City Planning Commission began a series of informal, semi-monthly meetings to discuss strategies for shaping the community’s future. Preliminary findings of the group, tentatively entitled “Lancaster—A Vital City, 1965,” were published as a fifteen-part series in the Intelligencer Journal beginning on July 4, 1957. James Todd Baldwin, vice chair of the planning commission and the “principal developer of the plans,” admitted that the group’s proposals were “highly visionary” but nevertheless insisted that the city had to begin tackling longstanding problems if it hoped to maintain the economic vitality of downtown.

As had been true of previous discussions of downtown, members of the planning commission began by addressing traffic. Adopting a number of suggestions first presented in the Baker plan, they proposed construction of an outer loop of highways, two to three miles from Penn Square, as a means of directing through traffic around downtown. They also sketched the lines of an inner traffic loop, roughly corresponding to the city limits, “to permit easy movement between the various segments of the city,” as well as a new arrangement of one-way streets to increase the efficiency of travel within the central business district.

The “most radical” suggestion presented by Baldwin’s group, an idea that first surfaced a year earlier in meetings of the Citizens Advisory Traffic Committee, was the “elimination of motor vehicle traffic in the downtown area.” This was precisely the solution to traffic congestion architect Victor Gruen recently had proposed for downtown Fort Worth, Texas, which had received considerable attention in the national media. To accomplish the goal of a pedestrian downtown, Lancaster’s planners envisioned a network of parking facilities on the periphery of the commercial core and the conversion of streets in the blocks immediately adjacent to the square into pedestrian malls. If successfully implemented, such an arrangement “would make the downtown area the equivalent of a suburban shopping center” and at the same time, Baldwin asserted, maintain “prime downtown property values and assessments.” However, in emphasizing parking Baldwin’s discussion of a downtown pedestrian mall missed the obvious: the “main purpose” of Gruen’s plan, Jane Jacobs observed in 1958, was “to enliven the streets with variety and detail.”

Paralleling the idea for a pedestrian commercial area was the planning commission’s
call for construction of a civic center just to the north of downtown. The Baker plan had proposed a new civic center, located on a two block site bounded by North Duke, Chestnut, Walnut, and North Prince streets, and suggested that it include various municipal offices (a new city hall, police and fire headquarters, and a social services building), a public library, county and federal offices, a new public auditorium/sports center, and other functions, including the farmers market. The planning commission’s 1957 study envisioned a governmental center on the same site, though without a public library or auditorium/sports complex. Nevertheless, such a civic center would concentrate public services in a single location and remove from the commercial district traditional symbols of downtown, functions that, while essential to a seat of county government, were distinct from retail facilities. “The movement of these offices out of the business district, and out of the shoppers’ way,” the planners asserted, “would provide additional room for the expansion of retail activity.”

The newspaper account of the planning commission’s study pointed out that while many of the recommendations were derived from the Baker plan, “in the specifics of these ideas they represent what might be called an up-to-date approach.” The proposal to convert downtown into a pedestrian mall, however, was “bold and unprecedented here.” The overall tenor of the newspaper accounts, while descriptive, praised the planning commission’s efforts. The reaction of the public to the ideas presented, the Intelligencer Journal reported, “has been one of recognition of the problems that the ideas attempt to solve.” Although even the planners admitted that their suggestions were only a beginning in the struggle to redefine downtown, and that the cost of implementation would be great, “Lancaster—A Vital City, 1965” differed from the Lancaster Looks Ahead forum in its concentration on downtown and its call for specific and energetic efforts to maintain the vitality of the central business district. A number of its suggestions would resurface in the early 1960s as the planning commission and the Lancaster Redevelopment Authority envisioned a new downtown.

The year 1958 marked a break with previous efforts to address the problem of downtown. In the 1957 mayoral campaign, Democrat Thomas J. Monaghan promised to “approach the problems of a greater Lancaster with more imagination” and to “give vigorous wholehearted support to the Lancaster Redevelopment Authority.” That November citizens made Monaghan only, the second Democratic mayor elected in the twentieth century. In his inaugural remarks Monaghan emphasized the importance of Lancaster’s cen-
tral business district: "our cities, most especially Lancaster, have a bright future," he asserted. "The realization of this future, however, will depend on our success in meeting the complex problems of urban life with courage, imagination, and, above all, know-how."  

To provide a level of expertise commensurate with the challenge, Monaghan made new appointments that resulted in a reorganized City Planning Commission, which, for the first time, could rely on a professional staff headed by Burrell Cohen. Together with the city's newly created Redevelopment Authority, Cohen began a period of intensive study and planning that would result in a concerted program of urban renewal. Predictably, the first planning commission document completed by Cohen was *Lancaster's Central Business District: A Study* (1958).  

As was true of almost every previous planning document devoted to downtown problems, Cohen first addressed traffic and parking. His purpose was not to identify the dimensions of congestion and parking woes—depressingly familiar topics to anyone concerned with downtown—but to "determine what must be done in order to solve these
problems and regain the vigor and vitality of the central business district.” The policy recommendations Cohen outlined, however, represented little more than tinkering with the established street system to improve efficiency and called for greater coordination between private parking lot operators, downtown businesses, and the city. More important, he argued for strengthening existing mass transit, which was “responsible for the conveyance of approximately 44% of central business district shoppers and an even greater percentage of central business district employees.” Increased use of buses was the most effective means of reducing the number of cars entering downtown and alleviating the shortage of available parking spaces. But a focus limited to traffic and parking would be foolhardy, Cohen wrote, because “the answer to the preservation of the central business district does not lie in the solution of a single problem, but rather in the comprehensive planning and revitalization of the entire area.” Cohen hoped that the broader strategy presented in this and subsequent reports would “help improve the central business district and permit it to compete successfully with outlying shopping areas.”

Cohen’s report provided a compelling economic justification for immediate attention to the central business district. The commercial area adjacent to Penn Square, which occupied approximately 3 percent of the city, accounted for 21 percent of Lancaster’s total assessed valuation. “If this district is allowed to deteriorate,” he warned, “property value will decrease and the subsequent effects, including tax increases, will be felt throughout the community.” The problem, as Cohen perceived it, was not simply traffic or parking but a more general malady he termed “downtownitis,” which included “vacant stores, decline in the use of mass transportation into the area and the general deterioration and obsolescence of structures and streets.” Lancaster’s affliction was not yet at a critical stage, he asserted, but was sufficiently advanced that it required the effective remedy of planning and renewal: “the time has come,” Cohen wrote, “for the community as a whole and downtown businessmen in particular to organize and plan progressive action to stop its spread which, if not controlled, can spell disaster for the central business district.”

In determining that downtown buildings were obsolete, and therefore in need of replacement, Cohen introduced a new theme in the discussion of the central business district. Previous studies, which had concentrated on parking and traffic, were predicated on the assumption that if these problems could be remedied, downtown would continue to flourish. But in his preliminary assessment of the central business district, as well as in later documents and addresses, Cohen pointed to the age of buildings as a significant drawback to economic vitality. In *Lancaster Moves Ahead* (1959), for example, he argued
that the increasing rate of construction in Lancaster's suburbs, and the lack of moderniza-
tion to downtown facilities, demonstrated that "the replacement of old and obsolete struc-
tures has not progressed with population growth and the increased earnings of business, industry and individual families." To be sure, many buildings erected at the turn of the
twentieth century lacked off-street loading docks and other features routinely incorpo-
rated in more recently constructed retail stores, but many had highly decorated facades—
the "picturesque character" to which Michael Baker alluded—that were simply irreplace-
able given present construction costs. Although the Urban Land Institute had recently
argued for the adaptive reuse of older downtown buildings, Cohen turned the age of
structures into a clarion call for demolition. "The future of Lancaster," he claimed, "is
entirely dependent upon its ability to remove that which is old and obsolete, that which is
undesirable and substandard, whether they be homes, business establishments or indus-
trial facilities and, by so doing, make land available within the city for the construction of
new well-built and attractive facilities that will enable the city to effectively compete with
its suburban neighbors."35

What made immediate action in upgrading the physical condition of downtown essen-
tial, Cohen asserted, was the development of suburban shopping centers that were "en-
deavoring to provide the shopper with the same type of shopping convenience once found
only within the central business district." Ironically, the planner's assessment of the threat
of suburban shopping contrasted with that of downtown retailers, who interpreted record
sales during the late 1950s as an indication of a rosy future for the central business district.
Statistics compiled as part of Lancaster Moves Ahead confirm that downtown was still a
thriving retail area: "even with the new center in suburban Lancaster, the major merchants
in the Central Business District indicate that their total retail sales volume for 1958 sur-
passes all previous years." But as Cohen and other advocates of urban renewal pointed out,
the effect of new competition from the suburban fringe was already evident in an in-
creased vacancy rate in downtown buildings—2.55 percent or more than 95,000 square
feet of retail space—which, according to Cohen, was "a definite indication that something
is wrong within the area itself." Part of the problem was the owners themselves, who while
enjoying handsome profits made little reinvestment to upgrade their stores. Without im-
proved facilities, Cohen argued, downtown would not be able to withstand the challenge
posed by new suburban retail centers.36
Although downtown merchants followed the position of the Urban Land Institute that suburban retailing did not constitute a threat to the central business district, especially for a small metropolitan area such as Lancaster, the city's commercial core was clearly living on borrowed time, just as H. M. J. Klein and Cohen insisted. As historian Jon C. Teaford has observed, statistics reflecting post-war retail activities in twelve major cities "all pointed to commercial decentralization," and Lancaster was not far behind the trend. The City Planning Commission reported in 1959 that increased retail sales downtown the previous year were "mainly a result of the greatly increasing population and buying power of the suburban areas. The implication of this situation is that there will be an increasing tendency to develop suburban shopping centers that will absorb much of the retail sales volume, now enjoyed by the city's Central Business District." Lancaster's population declined significantly between 1950 and 1960, while that of adjacent suburbs increased dramatically, Lancaster Township's by 46.2 percent, Manheim Township's by 59.9 percent (see tables 1, 2). As the middle class moved to new homes on the periphery of the city, purchasing power, represented by median family income, also migrated from Lancaster to the surrounding suburbs (see table 3). Although at the end of 1958 the increasing concentration of income in the suburbs had not yet translated into new shopping habits in places other than downtown, the availability of alternatives to the central business district—new stores that were competitive in price and quality of merchandise, and accessible without having to confront the traffic and parking difficulties downtown—would be a serious challenge to the continuing vitality of Lancaster's retail core.

The opening of the Lancaster Shopping Center on February 13, 1958 was the first such alternative to downtown. Located on a seventeen acre site between two major traffic arteries, the Lititz and Oregon pikes, just north of the city, the new shopping center was 766 feet in length and included a parking lot for 1500 cars. Some five thousand persons braved freezing temperatures to watch a parade, listen to speeches (including one by the city's mayor, Thomas Monaghan), and see this new innovation in retailing. What they confronted was somewhat familiar: among the stores located in the new mall were two large, well known department stores, W. T. Grant's and S. S. Kresge's, such national chains as Rea and Derrick Drugs, Kinney Shoes, Endicott Johnson Shoes, and Sherwin-Williams Paints, as well as large supermarket and a smattering of smaller, locally-owned stores. But participants in the opening also confronted a new retail environment, one not only vastly different from downtown in terms of accessibility and amenities (a covered pedestrian walk, for example) but from prior retail development in suburbia as well. The Lancaster
Downtown served other functions as well as retail, the focus of discussions about the future in Lancaster in the 1950s. The Capital and Boyd’s Colonial theaters, the Romanesque Revival Earle Hotel, and a gas station testify to other uses. Note the storefront for rent.

Shopping Center introduced yet another new element in local retailing, absentee ownership. The developers of the shopping center were Food Fair Properties and Max J. Levine, both of Newark, New Jersey, as were the architects, contractors, and property managers. The mall may have represented new investment in suburban Lancaster, but the profits from design, construction, and management, as well as from general operations, would be reaped more than a hundred miles away, while its retail stores would attract shoppers who formerly had patronized downtown.

A year later developer Max Levine announced plans for Lancaster’s second suburban mall, the Wheatland Shopping Center. This 80,000 square feet retail complex, located on
the Columbia Pike just west of the city, would include a W. T. Grant store and an Acme supermarket as anchors, as well as various smaller retail establishments. At the same time rumors circulated wildly about a major addition to the Lancaster Shopping Center. Levine had taken an option on two properties adjacent to the first mall, and newspapers reported that the expansion would include a Sears Roebuck store, long a fixture of East King Street, as well as a Weis supermarket, a nationally known discount store, and a bowling alley. As if competition with downtown retail was not enough, the developers were negotiating with service industries that were also essential to the economic vitality of the city. According to the Intelligencer Journal, Levine’s rental agent was attempting to persuade the Prudential Insurance Company to locate its local offices in the suburban facility and negotiating with the Post Office to establish a substation at the mall.39

These suburban malls proved to be attractive investments for developers because of another incentive provided by the federal government. In 1954, in the midst of a slump in the building industry, Congress enacted a law that made possible the accelerated depreciation of newly constructed commercial real estate. Because this provision in the tax code allowed developers to increase net profits, and because it did not apply to the renovation of existing buildings, the effect of accelerated depreciation was to redirect capital investment from downtown to the suburban fringe. According to historian Thomas W. Hanchett, in the years following passage of this provision “shopping plazas sprouted like well-fertilized weeds” across the United States. Although Lancaster’s commercial elite, with its traditional ties to downtown, did not turn to developing suburban malls, outside capital took advantage of the opportunity thus provided and constructed new retail facilities in outlying areas to compete with local merchants.40

The first suburban strip malls did not, of course, cause an immediate revolution in shopping habits. Downtown retailers retained their supremacy in certain areas, most notably in furniture and the higher end of the department store spectrum, as well as in more specialized retail services that catered to downtown businesses and employees, and at every level of retail activity fought the suburban threat with aggressive advertising. Nevertheless, the development of three large retail malls, in the midst of rapidly suburbanizing areas to the north and west of the city, was a serious challenge to Lancaster’s central business district. A number of surveys undertaken during the 1950s indicated that while women, who did most of a typical family’s shopping, still preferred downtown when asked about the range of available merchandise, they opted for malls when questioned about convenience and accessibility.41 Together with the shift in purchasing power to the suburbs, the con-
struction of attractive retail establishments near burgeoning residential subdivisions represented precisely this convenient alternative to downtown. And as shoppers' habits began to change, they spent more time and more dollars in suburban malls than downtown. Between 1958 and 1963 the total volume of retail sales dropped in the city, while that of the suburbs increased dramatically: owners of city stores, whose businesses recently accounted for slightly more than 44 percent of total county retail sales, saw their share of the retail trade drop to 28.6 percent over the five year period. Although downtown retailers enjoyed modest gains between 1963 and 1967, the city's total retail sales in the latter year represented a continuing decline in its proportion of receipts for the metropolitan area (see table 4). The battle for supremacy in the retail arena had been joined, and downtown, only a few years earlier the undisputed commercial center of the county, was by the mid-1960s struggling for its very survival.

The same was true of the city. The migration of purchasing power and retail sales to the suburbs adversely affected the assessed value of city properties, especially in the central business district, which as recently as the late 1950s had accounted for 21 percent of total property taxes collected. As sales fell and vacancies increased, the city's income from downtown properties dropped significantly, just as Burrell Cohen had predicted. A countywide reassessment of real estate, completed in 1961, reduced the value of buildings on the 100 block of North Queen Street by $1.86 million, a drop of slightly more than 30 percent. The city and the School District of Lancaster lost approximately $55,000 in annual revenues as a result of reassessment. In August 1962 the planning commission reported that recent real estate transactions demonstrated that downtown properties were selling at prices "considerably less than their market value." As the tax burden shifted to residential properties, the increasing disparity in city-suburban taxes made homes outside the city comparatively more attractive. Equally important, Lancaster did not experience the boom in office construction that occurred in numerous larger cities and that compensated for the loss of some traditional retailing. Although the downtown was "far from being flat on its back," as one consultant observed in late 1959, Lancaster needed to take prompt, aggressive steps to halt the flight of retail activity to the suburbs and to ensure the future of its central business district.42

The City Planning Commission and the Lancaster Redevelopment Authority, which had been studying the needs of downtown for some time, were prepared for a counterattack: in October 1959 Clifton E. Rodgers and Associates, consultants to the planning commission, presented an elaborate vision of Downtown Lancaster 1980, which pro-
posed to modernize and revitalize the central business district through an ambitious program of new construction, while in October 1962 the redevelopment authority completed a survey and planning application for the total renewal of the 100 block of North Queen Street. The planners were ready, but the task was formidable: they had to staunch the hemorrhaging of downtown and at the same time break what Lewis Mumford termed the "cycle of environmental impoverishment," especially the "intensified congestion both in the original center and in the suburb, which wipes out the social assets of the city and the rural assets of the country." Although the future of the city was very much at stake, Lancaster proved unable to generate a viable redevelopment plan. Without a widely shared consensus over the type of renewal that would ensure the continuing economic vitality of the city, Lancaster struggled to define its future. Ultimately, the decisions that planners, administrators, and elected officials made in the early and mid-1960s turned out to be the wrong solution for the problem of downtown Lancaster.

Table 1: Lancaster City Population, 1940-1970

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>% change</th>
<th>Non-white</th>
<th>% Non-white</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>61,435</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>63,774</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>1,123</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>61,055</td>
<td>-4.3</td>
<td>2,682</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960*</td>
<td>59,881</td>
<td>-6.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>57,690</td>
<td>-5.5</td>
<td>4,525</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Population within 1950 area of the city

Table 2: Population of Two Adjacent Suburbs, 1940-1970

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Lancaster Township</th>
<th>Manheim Township</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% of change</td>
<td>non-white</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>6,151</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>6,854</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>10,020</td>
<td>46.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>10,329</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 3: Median Family Income, City and Suburb (in dollars)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>County</th>
<th>Manheim Twp.</th>
<th>Lancaster Twp.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>5,645</td>
<td>5,810</td>
<td>8,000-9,000*</td>
<td>7,000-8,000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>8,635</td>
<td>9,936</td>
<td>10,000-11,999***</td>
<td>10,000-11,999***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*range of median based upon census tract data for the townships
**range of median based upon data from census tracts 0118 and 0119
***range of median based upon data from census tracts 0134 and 0135

Table 4: Retail Sales, 1948-1967 (in thousands)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>City</th>
<th>County</th>
<th>Manheim Twp.</th>
<th>Lancaster Twp.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>90,806</td>
<td>215,371</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1954</td>
<td>120,513</td>
<td>268,262</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1958</td>
<td>139,069</td>
<td>309,049</td>
<td>4,942</td>
<td>1,491</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1963</td>
<td>111,020</td>
<td>387,430</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>138,357</td>
<td>508,209</td>
<td>50,721</td>
<td>20,885</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Census of Business: Retail Trade Area Statistics*, 1948, 1958 (which also contains 1954 figures), 1963, 1967, except city retail sales for 1958, which is based on sales management data as reported in *Lancaster Moves Ahead* (Lancaster City Planning Commission, 1959), p. 45. This figure is probably somewhat inaccurate: the same report for total county retail sales was $296,338,000, 4.1% below the amount reported using census data.
Notes

The author is indebted to John Andrew, John F. Bauman, Michael Birkner, and Eric Hinderliter for their comments on an earlier version of this article. The epigraph is from Michael Baker, Jr., A Comprehensive Municipal Plan: City Of Lancaster, Pennsylvania (Rochester, Pa., 1945), p. 85. Hereafter cited as Baker Plan.

1. The classic formulation of the importance of pro-growth coalitions in the urban renewal process is John Mollenkopf, The Contested City (Princeton, 1983). Aside from well known studies of Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, the history of urban renewal in particular, and twentieth-century cities in Pennsylvania in general, is still largely unexplored.


16. Lancaster Looks Ahead, pp. 269, passim.
17. Ibid., pp. 40-41, passim.
18. Ibid., pp. 13, 16, passim.
19. Ibid., pp. 52, 158, 42, passim.
23. Lancaster Looks Ahead, pp. 268-70; Groff and Bare are quoted in "City, County Gov't To Get Forum Data," Lancaster Intelligencer Journal, Sept. 21, 1956.
26. Ned L. Wall, "Planners' Crystal Ball Shows A New Lancaster 10 Yrs. Hence," Lancaster Intelligencer Journal, July 4, 1957. The only reference to the deliberations or findings of the group in City Planning Commission minutes is a decision, at the meeting of Aug. 6, 1957, to order reprints of the newspaper series.
32. The reorganized planning commission was chaired by John H. Vanderzell, a professor of government at Franklin & Marshall College and an active supporter of Monaghan's Democratic party. Robert M. Going, executive director of the Lancaster Redevelopment Authority, was also named to the planning commission at this time, as was Robert E. Flinchbaugh. "Vanderzell Elected Chairman of City Planning Commission," Lancaster Intelligencer Journal, Feb. 7, 1958; Lancaster City Planning Commission, minutes, Feb. 6, 1958.
33. Lancaster City Planning Commission,

34. Lancaster's Central Business District, unpaginated introduction and pp. 2, 3, 7, 8, passim.


41. See, for example, J. C. Teaford, Rough Road to Renaissance, pp. 129, 338, n. 5.


44. This conclusion is based on the author's continuing research on the effects of urban renewal on Lancaster.