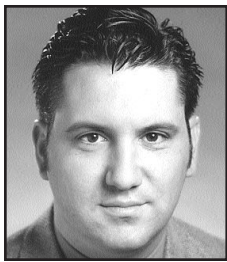


Birmingham needs more 'great streets' not more bickering

The recent heated discussion regarding the implementation of the 2016 Plan has unearthed some interesting and confusing accusations. Specific concerns are with the construction of an additional



Mark Nickita

— although set back and smaller — floor on top of new four-story residential buildings in the center of downtown.

Additional proposed changes are in regard to the allowable vertical distance from floor to floor. The issue at hand is simply the height of these new residential/retail buildings currently being built downtown. The “H” word (height) is often used to scare people into a frenzy about new structures in the developing downtown.

Charges about these developments often include statements about the downtown becoming “inhuman” and streets that will become “canyons” if the building height is too high. These discussions and arguments about height should be faced head-on with factual information and clear examples of precedent.

Understanding the actual effect, not the perceived effect, should put many residents at ease. Will a maximum height of 54 feet before rooftop set-back really create a canyon? Do these new buildings create an “oppress-

sive” environment? Are the downtown users walking adjacent to these new structures feeling robbed of light and air, believing that Birmingham is becoming such a dismal environment that they will cease to shop and live in the downtown? I think not.

Simple study may answer these critical questions and ease the fears of some Birmingham residents. If you have ever walked the streets of the Marais district in Paris, Mayfair in London, Siena in Tuscany or even Ann Arbor to name just a few, you would have experienced some of the most successful and sought-after urban environments ever built.

All of these areas are considered quintessential pedestrian environments and all have taller buildings with narrower streets than Birmingham could ever have or that the 2016 Plan dictates. In the book *Great Streets* by Allan B. Jacobs, street-width to building-height ratios are discussed and beautiful illustrations show some of the most significant and beautiful streets in the world.

Many are far more grand than anything in Birmingham; however, many examples identify that a ratio of 1-to-1 is very appropriate for a “Great Street.” This ratio would equate to a 60-foot-wide street and sidewalks from building facades in relation to the height of a building wall of 60 feet (a specific example in Birmingham would be Hamilton Row which is 70 feet from building facade to opposite building). In the eyes of the experts, this

would be a great street for people.

Birmingham is no longer the sleepy small town that it may have been a century ago. It has had the title of “city” for many decades, providing offices and shopping for a significant portion of Metro Detroit reaching far beyond our tight little borders. Downtown Birmingham could not survive as it exists with the sole support of its 20,000 residents, many of whom rarely set a foot in our much rivaled center.

Our 2016 Plan states that we need more residents living downtown and more foot traffic for the stores and restaurants to flourish into the future. Without question, Birmingham downtown development will never be similar to big-city downtowns like Chicago or New York as some people have suggested. Even at a full buildout of the 2016 Plan, we will only see the few center blocks of downtown partially built to a height maximum of only a handful of floors.

Many of our existing buildings, including the historic ones, will remain untouched for generations to come. With an eventually completed 2016 Plan, the sky will not fall; however, the quality of the downtown environment will increase dramatically.

Maybe all of this energy to stop development downtown, because of a few feet on top of a building, is misdirected.

Mark Nickita is an architect and urban designer and a Birmingham resident. He is also the former chairman of the Birmingham Planning Board.