

OPE 05-01

Planning, race, downtown, et al.

Beale Street Requiem

THE QUESTION to be asked about the redevelopment of Beale Street is, how much longer will anyone care?

The Beale Street project has had so many plans, so many false starts, so many schedules, deadlines and new beginnings, so many commissions, boards, foundations, committees and corporations, so much pettiness and failure, that this community must be perilously close to just walking away from it.

That would be a shame and a pity.

Memphis has few more significant pieces of its culture to recapture and preserve, and it has few more important things to say about the competence and cohesion of the city it has become. The effort to save what has survived of original Beale Street and give it new life has been seen as a key to the revitalization of downtown. More important, perhaps, it has been seen as a test of whether blacks and whites could work together and succeed together in this town.

Though new shopping and entertainment remain critical to downtown, they do not have to come on Beale. That void could eventually be filled by continued residential and commercial growth in the warehouse district on the bluffs and along Cotton Row. Or, someday, in the Court Square gateway to the river.

BUT NOTHING CAN replace Beale Street as a symbol of community respect for black history, black emergence and black enterprise, and as a symbol of Memphis' real interest in partnership between the races. And nothing will replace Beale Street in national — and even world — consciousness.

The loss of Beale Street — to time and error and mismanagement and, finally, indifference — would be a heavy blow to an already dazed city.

It is useless here to try to wade through the muddled ramifications of the newest proposal, the city administration's call for "shopsteading" in which building shells would be deeded to entrepreneurs 18 months after they restored them and opened up for business. Like everything else that might have worked, it was immediately gobbled up by lease agreements, contracts, federal guidelines, delinquent construction schedules, personality clashes, greed and politics.

Asked what the Beale Street Steering Committee's apparent rejection of her proposal meant, Community Development Director Gwen Awsumb said, "They may watch all the buildings fall down and be left with a pile of bricks."

John Dudas, executive director of the

Center City Commission and a member of the committee, said, "Ideally, a developer who knew what he was doing could take over the block from Second to Third, finish it, and make the rest of the street work. But the way things are, structurally and organizationally, that isn't going to happen. The city just has to keep on with what it's doing."

The appeal of that was summed up in the lament of City Council Chairman Jeff Sanford: "It's the biggest mess imaginable."

IF THE MESS can be cleaned up, top leaders of this city — official and private, black and white — are going to have to do it. They must get their own acts together, take hold of the Beale Street case, sort out the best possible solution and impose it. There is no other way. Memphis can't be expected to tolerate more of the same, or a pile of bricks.

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Downtown; Beale Street Planning

Enough Is Enough

IT IS TIME to remove two of the obvious barriers to progress on Beale Street — Beale Street Development Corporation and Carlisle Properties, Ltd.

Their record speaks eloquently enough. Neither has leased the first square foot of space to anybody. But when they move deliberately to obstruct two parties ready to put their own money into the project and open up for business, they've gone too far.

There is every reason for the city to give entertainer Cybill Shepherd the building she wants to develop as a nightclub and apartments. That is precisely the usage intended for the properties on Beale, perfectly attuned to the character and history of the street, and she is exactly the kind of national personality important to the long-range success of the project.

Much the same can be said of the proposition of businessman Paul Gallina, whose grandfather owned the building at 175-181 Beale at the turn of the century.

Both want to move under the "shopsteading" idea in which Beale Street sites would be deeded to persons demonstrating a suitable plan and the resources to match. "We're ready to go," Miss Shepherd said.

But along come George Miller, execu-

tive director of the development corporation and Gene Carlisle of the firm bearing his name, to declare that moving entrepreneurs and life into these sites would be a bad thing.

Bad for whom?

For Miller, maybe, who fears any loss of control would cost him a stage on which he's the only player. And bad for Carlisle, perhaps, in his claim to all profits, just in case there ever are any.

BUT SHOPSTEADING in general, and these two offers to use it in particular, can only be good for everybody else, and especially for Memphis. As Mayor Wyeth Chandler noted, they "would be a tremendous catalyst in the private development of Beale." And that's what all of this is supposed to have been about.

Miller and Carlisle have blocked shopsteading as a concept, and want to chase Miss Shepherd and Gallina away, on the strength of a contract which gives them first options on everything that remains of Beale Street. But contracts cut two ways and it's time for the city to use its edge in the name of what is necessary and right and fair.