



August 25, 2002

Racine: Old is New Again

Racine could give lessons to other cities in how to bring a moribund downtown back to life. Its Main St., lined with spunky little businesses in beautifully refurbished old storefronts, is thriving. And no wonder. The street has treasures you'll never find at Wal-Mart; it also has an infusion of new housing - and new office workers, thanks to the Johnson Building; and it's a joy to experience on foot.

Despite the disruption caused by utility construction that has closed several blocks to vehicle traffic, some merchants told me they had the best July ever.

"We're a real city, we're not a suburb of anything and we're not Cedarburg," says Jane Key, the blunt-spoken charmer who owns Inside-Out, a tiny, packed-to-the-gills shop that specializes in Latin American imports. "Most of the people who come here to shop live here."

When I asked her if she could ever imagine her business in a mall, the Oklahoma native shot me one of those you-must-be-kidding looks and drawled, "It would be the same as putting me in Amish country."

That fierce pride of place is evident everywhere on Main St. The thoroughfare is lined on both sides with an almost unbroken row of 19th- and early 20th-century buildings, their keystone arches, bracketed

cornices and quirky corbeling now meticulously restored. With the help of facade grants from Downtown Racine Corp., the non-profit redevelopment group behind the current renaissance, the few remaining eyesores are expected to be spruced up soon.

"Everyone has the fever. Pretty soon we're going to run out of buildings to fix up," said Kathy Hansen, the organization's spirited executive director. And there's more to come, including a new art museum and improved streetscaping.

Much like Milwaukee, Racine is rebuilding its downtown according to a master plan that emphasizes mixed uses (apartments above stores, for example), historic preservation, pedestrian amenities and public-private partnerships.

But Racine is way ahead of us in retail vitality. Thanks in part to savvy marketing and recruiting, this city of 90,000 now has the critical mass of stores - from a new Schwartz bookshop and a women's clothing boutique to flower stores and jewelers - that downtown Milwaukee lacks on any single street.

Maybe our downtown revitalizers should head south for some pointers.