

Empty buildings downtown remain impediment to growth

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To the west of James Brown Boulevard on Broad Street is a lively retail district tightly packed with small shops, restaurants and nightclubs. To the east, it's quieter. For every two stores that are occupied, one is vacant. Twenty-two percent of Augusta's downtown buildings and storefronts are unoccupied, according to an audit performed by the Downtown Development Authority in March. The survey, performed at the request of *The Augusta Chronicle*, covers Broad Street from Fifth to 13th streets and the cross streets from Ellis to Reynolds.

Separate upper Broad from lower Broad, and the picture becomes even more striking. Only 1 in 8 storefronts west of James Brown Boulevard is vacant. To the east the rate is 1 in 3.

Urban redevelopment theory says the empty buildings discourage shoppers by creating a sense of neglect and deterioration, attracting criminal activity and increasing health risks. Among five shop owners interviewed, three to the east of James Brown Boulevard said they considered crime an impediment to their businesses. Two to the west said it was not.

Augusta, like most U.S. cities, lost its downtown retail beginning in the late 1970s when malls opened in the urban outskirts. Urban redevelopment has since restored parts of downtown Augusta, but in other places whole blocks remain stubbornly blighted.

The difficulty of filling the vacant buildings today, according to downtown stakeholders, lies with owners and architecture.

"You have to look at the condition of the buildings," said Margaret Woodard, the executive director of the Downtown Development Authority. "You have to look at sales price and the condition."

Christopher Bailey, who purchased and renovated the building that became the 100-seat Le Chat Noir theater, said his partners looked on Broad Street first, then settled on their spot at Eighth and Ellis streets.

"They think their buildings are made of gold, and they're falling apart," he said of Broad Street. "This was perfect for the amount of money we had to spend. It was what we could afford."

Developer Bryan Haltermann buys, restores and rents old downtown buildings, usually by remodeling upper floors for apartments and the first floor for retail. There is demand for such redevelopment, he said, but buildings won't sell or rent if they are not fixed.

"There's a category of downtown building owners who haven't invested in their buildings. So, they have obsolete utility systems and finishes that need to be redone," he said. "It's much harder to rent that kind of space."

A second factor affecting whether a building is likely to sell or rent is its architecture. That's why the redevelopment landscape changes at James Brown Boulevard, according to Woodard and Haltermann.

Buildings on upper Broad belong to an older, pre-World War I architecture. Owners built a store on the first floor, an office on the second and an apartment on the third. Those lend themselves easily to mixed-use redevelopment. Buildings east of James Brown Boulevard were built later.

"Instead of small shops, you have a lot more single-use buildings: department stores, movie theaters, office buildings, big furniture stores," Haltermann said. "Some of these fall into the category of white elephant. It's a lot harder to find a use and lot more expensive and riskier to invest in those buildings."

Farther east, in Broad's 500 block, the landscape changes again, back to the older-style buildings. At 566 Broad, Haltermann recently bought a long-empty building.

Situated in an area known for having strip joints or, as Halterman puts it, a "certain kind of entertainment," he acknowledges that it's a riskier investment than he was used to.

Though undistinguished from the outside, on the inside the building is one of the most high-styled antebellum buildings on Broad, Haltermann said. Also, he was able to buy at a relatively low price.

He's not sure yet what purpose the building could fill, but he is encouraged that two nearby owners are also planning to renovate.
