

## Ending the \$75 Dollar Disaster Samuel L. Scheib

A month ago there was a fine house on Broad Street covered in shakes, one of only a few historic examples of this type in Thomasville. This house could not be reproduced today; the style of construction does not meet modern code and the sap-hardened heart pine that was the primary material has all but vanished. The house was just a few hundred feet from the lovely First United Methodist Church, a few hundred feet from my own home, and regrettably, a few hundred feet from the Dawson Street Historic District whose protections stop at its borders. The home was unique, irreplaceable, in excellent condition, and bulldozed a few weeks ago for a \$75 demolition permit.

The Victorians who built the fine buildings on Broad Street and the stately homes on Dawson had never heard of “design life.” Design life is a modern convention, the time a building is expected to have a functional use before being torn down or falling apart on its own, generally about 40 to 50 years. These buildings are made from cinderblocks and have plain, often windowless facades that can be said to hint at the affordability, to put it charitably, of the products inside. Many modern homes are built in clear-cut subdivisions on nearly uniform plans and covered in plastic siding or Styrofoam with a thin coat of plaster.

Nineteenth century business owners had a very different view of the structures they occupied. The attractiveness of the building reflected the quality of the goods to be found inside. The building said much about its owners and would for generations, even centuries, to come. The structure would stand as long as nature and the good graces of the community would allow. The same principles applied to residential architecture, where new homes were a welcome addition to the community. A new home brought a family, added variety to the look of the street, and expanded the economic base of the city.

Thomasville’s historic structures were built to last, enduring hurricanes, tornadoes, countless rainstorms, the collapse of the resort economy, the Depression, bad owners, and lousy real estate markets. Most importantly, those homes survived the sixties when old buildings were chopped up into apartments or torn down to make cinderblock buildings or parking lots. Let us remember that even the famous Lapham-Patterson House whose pink square on the Rand McNally Atlas of Georgia literally puts Thomasville on the map was scheduled for demolition before a citizens group—Thomasville Landmarks—intervened to save it.

The rights of a property owner are sacrosanct in a democracy, but they are not limitless either. Zoning has for about a century now put clear restrictions on what use an owner may apply to a given property. These ordinances have been used to keep slaughterhouses away from homes and package stores away from elementary schools, among other incompatible land uses, and always with a

mind toward benefiting the community.

While the land and the individual materials of an historic structure belong to the property owner, the sum of its parts has to be said to belong to the community as a whole. The urban core is an "us" place, not a "me" place. It is the part of Thomasville that leaves an impression on visitors, is printed on postcards, reproduced in prints, described in glossy magazine articles, and shown on nationally broadcast television programs.

The owner of the house on Broad wanted more room for a private school and it was less expensive to start anew. The destruction of the house was a benefit for her but a loss for our city; we are all poorer for it but this scenario does not need to be repeated. I would like to propose a 90-day moratorium on the demolition or significant alteration of any structure older than 45 years in Thomasville (the age of eligibility for the National Register of Historic Places). Given a little time houses can be moved, property swaps arranged, funds raised. My neighbor the Dekle House (ca. 1855) used to live in Fletcherville but the owner had different ideas for using his land; with a little time one of the oldest single-story homes in Thomasville got a new life a mile away, disaster averted.

Over the coming weeks a group of concerned citizens will be asking for signatures on a petition to the City Council for just such a moratorium. It will be available at Grassroots Coffee, Hicks Clothing, the Bookshelf and other downtown shops and restaurants and we will be going door to door to ask for your support.

Thomasville has no rivers, lakes, coastlines, mountains, bluffs or any other geographic feature that beckons people to start a life or retire here. The weather is pretty unpleasant for much of the year too. No one moves here for jobs because ours are mostly middle and lower income, decent jobs for a local market but not enough to attract outsiders. Companies like Universal Design and Display down in the Bottom do not relocate here for the Wal\*Mart or the other commercial debris on US 19 or 319. There can be little argument that what attracts people here are the wise investments made by generations past. It is said that the first generation builds it, the second generation maintains it, and the third generation loses it. Let's make Thomasville the exception that proves the rule.