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Review of The Changing Image of the City: Planning for Downtown Omaha, 1945-1973

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The Changing Image of the City: Planning for Downtown Omaha, 1945-1973. By Janet R. Daly-Bednarek. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992. Illustrations, tables, epilogue, notes, bibliography, index. xii + 292 pp. \$37.50.

The title of this book is a fine indicator of its essential theme, for this is the story of how the prevailing images of Omaha determined the objectives of city planning. From 1945 to 1973, Omaha's economy changed fundamentally, and this reality eventually changed how local decision-makers perceived their community. These new perceptions finally brought a new orientation in planning for the heart of the city.

The author places city planning in Omaha in the context of the principal national currents in the planning profession, but for most of her study period, business leaders, rather than city officials, were the key figures in planning for the downtown area. This business elite was not static, and Daly-Bednarek profiles its changes and the principal changes in Omaha's economy from the 1950s to the 1970s.

As a prelude to her narrative, Daly-Bednarek has a chapter on planning in the period 1933 to 1945. By the 1950s the downtown area as Omaha's retail center was slipping, and the late 1960s brought a fast decline in the meat packing industry and a relative shift from the city's industrial base toward an increasingly important service economy. A significant rise in the educational level of the work force eventually would have an impact upon city planning. The implications of these realities were not immediately evident, for as the author says, "There was a lag between change, perception of change,

and action based on a new understanding of the city" (p. 73). After 1966, however, it was becoming clearer that a "new Omaha" was emerging, and in planning the earlier emphasis upon physical infrastructure oriented toward business needs gave way to planning that stressed making downtown a pleasant place for employment and recreation. Likewise, the public sector became increasingly important in planning as the City Planning Department emerged as a strong professional body. The new stress upon a "livable city" was evident in the 1973 plan that brought forth the Central Park Mall.

This clearly written and well-researched work puts city planning in its social and political as well as economic contexts. An outline map of downtown Omaha showing the results of the 1973 planning program would have been helpful, but the book is a valuable addition to the impressive body of historical literature on Omaha and to urban history in general. From a Great Plains perspective, it is a reminder of the vast potential for the study of the cities and towns of this region.

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