

10/15/84 ROBERT N. WILSON

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Bob

The clamor begins at 4 P.M. sharp as workers, executives, and students spill out of countless buildings and classrooms to beat a hasty retreat to the suburbs. By 5:30, the central city is left to a handful of shoppers and hangers-on. Merchants are counting the day's receipts, starting to lock up. By 8, it has become a modern-day ghost town, its streets bathed in the eerie glow of sulfur lamps that illuminate an occasional passing cop or a band of youths cruising the downtown area.

This is New Brunswick today, a small, shabby, central New Jersey city with as

Contributing Editor Randy Young considers himself something of an expert on New Brunswick. He lived there for seven years.

familiar a litany of ills as ever filled an urban aid application form. Poverty, unemployment, drugs, crime, neighborhood blight. . . they're all here, compressed into five and a half square miles. New Brunswick, in fact, with its 45,000 residents, may just be the epitome of the small, struggling American city.

Rutgers students, never known for their subtlety, have for years referred to it as the "armpit of the state." Many natives would secretly agree, although they recall the days—twenty, thirty years ago—when New Brunswick was a vital, thriving community with a proud white ethnic base and a commercial strip that boasted top-name stores and eager shoppers jostling one another on overflowing sidewalks.

New Brunswick is indeed one city that seemed destined for a much kinder fate. All

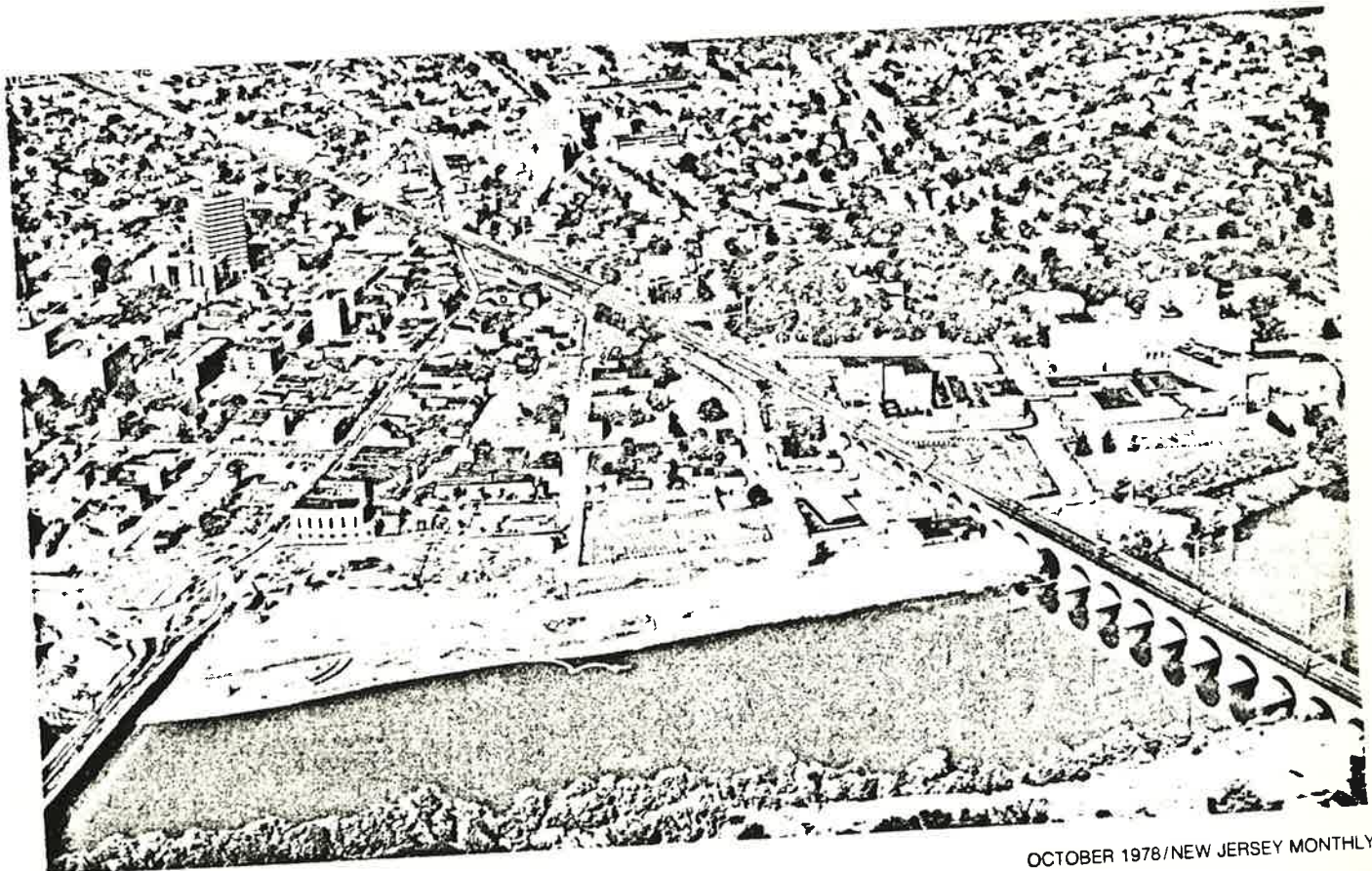
along, it has had so much going for it. Like Rutgers University, the sprawling educational giant with its thousands of students, instructors, and administrators comprising a formidable market for housing, goods, and services. It has also enjoyed the coveted position of county seat, busy hub of government activity for rapidly growing Middlesex County. Add to that its two well-equipped general hospitals (Middlesex and St. Peter's), its proximity to a web of major highways and transportation outlets, and, of course, the crowning jewel: home sweet home for one of the world's largest health products empires, Johnson & Johnson.

But as people began looking to the suburbs for a new way of life after World War II—for fresh air, more space, a dream house—New Brunswick's future, like that of its sister cities, was doomed. The migra-

Can Johnson & Johnson Save New Brunswick?

Corporate altruism and corporate self-interest combine to bring forth a promising experiment in urban redevelopment

by Randy Young



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tion of middle-class families was hastened by zoning laws that permitted the phenomenon known as suburban sprawl. Along with the middle class went the merchants, to the shopping malls that were sprouting wildly along major thoroughfares. Filling New Brunswick's residential void by the mid-1960s were poor, unskilled blacks and Puerto Ricans. The city now had a new tax burden as well as a new image.

By the late sixties the downtown area had become a grim remnant of its former self: second-rate stores and a feeling of gloom prevailed. Its powerful institutions now appeared as oases in the middle of a parched desert. Hardly a place to visit, much less shop.

With the patient bedridden, it seemed only a matter of time before New Brunswick would become another shell-shocked city in the terminal stages of decay. It came as no surprise when rumors spread in the early 1970s that Johnson & Johnson, the city's largest private employer, was preparing to pack its bags and leave town for good.

But then something unexpected happened: J&J decided to stay right where it was, even expand, and with its awesome prestige and financial might set in motion a rehabilitation program that has drawn the

"Retail space that in 1940 rented for \$3.50 a square foot can be had today for about \$3. City tax dollars from the central business district that totaled \$1.8 million in 1943 plummeted to \$300,000 in 1976."

attention of Jimmy Carter's White House and Brendan Byrne's State House. What is being planned is nothing less than the rebirth of an entire city. Impossible? Perhaps. But the way this project is being run could just prove to be the magic formula for success. The program is called New Brunswick Tomorrow.

Johnson & Johnson. For more than ninety years this corporate colossus has conducted business from its peaceful compound on the southern bank of the Raritan River, just across from Johnson Park, a county facility whose land was donated by the company and its owners. J&J's products are marketed worldwide and include everything from Band-Aids and disposable diapers to surgical instruments and dental products.

Inside J&J's colonial brick buildings, impeccably tailored executives and secretaries go about their daily routines in the most pleasant of surroundings. Some of the work force drifts downtown at noon for a hamburger and beer at The Pub or a sandwich at one of the other small shops. But for the most part, J&J spins on its own separate

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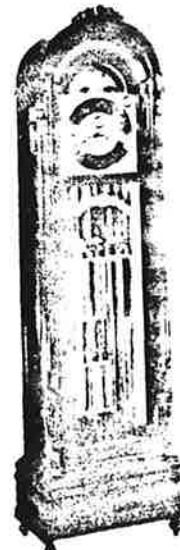
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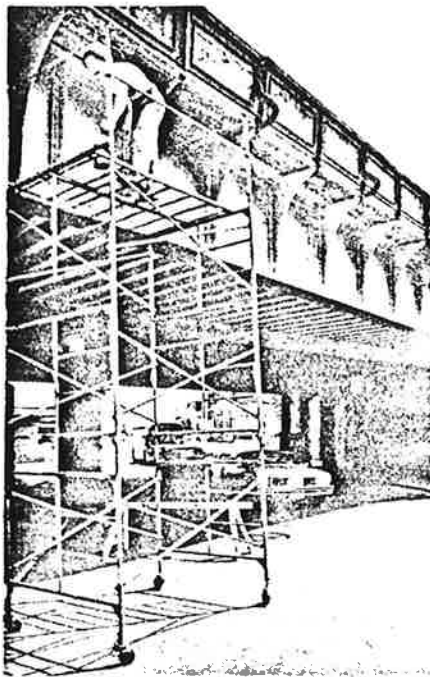
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axis, light-years removed from the grimy business of the city that commences one short block away.

By the early 1970s, J&J was fast approaching a crossroads. It needed more office space, and it wanted to consolidate its operation into one executive headquarters. Should it build on what it already had in New Brunswick, or follow the example of scores of other large firms that were pulling out of the cities and resettling in scenic woodlands and meadows not far from interstate highways?

"The easiest thing for us to do would have been to pick up all our marbles and move out to Somerset on two hundred acres of rolling countryside," says Richard Sellars, chairman of J&J's Finance Committee and former chairman of the board. "You think you've gotten away from the problems of the city, but that's not really so. The social and economic problems of decay—of central business district decay—are something that everyone eventually has to face regardless of his location."

Sitting as he does in a spacious, walnut-finished office with a Walden-like view of the Raritan only a stone's throw away, Sellars could easily be taken for another corporate mogul spouting platitudes about social



Some cynics say painting the railroad pass is about the most visible improvement New Brunswick Tomorrow has made in three years.



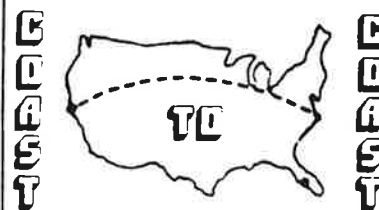
I. M. Pei's model of the proposed Commercial Plaza and the Plaza II Office Building, next to the United Methodist Church on George Street. Plaza II won't want for tenants. J&J plans to rent nearly all of it for subsidiary operations.

awareness and responsibility. But on closer examination, he comes across as something quite different. As he talks, his voice and expression become edged with urgency. "I've witnessed the decay of this city over the years, the dramatic decay. As people left, the central business district became a social and economic wasteland after 5 o'clock. New Jersey now has a series of inner cities stretching from north to south that have deteriorated and decayed; where people are not provided with the same opportunities and benefits; where businesses have moved out. These cities have to be restored as desirable places to live and work. I have a deep conviction that the survival of our nation rests with the survival of our cities. For that reason, we just can't walk away from the problem."

Sellars communicated his concern to other J&J officers and community leaders, and they listened intently. Dick Sellars, after all, was not a man to be taken lightly. A crucial board room decision was soon forth-

coming: J&J would remain in New Brunswick, providing certain conditions were met, such as extension of Route 18 across the Raritan River.

Route 18 was actually considered the key—the only real way New Brunswick could relieve the downtown traffic and parking congestion that had contributed greatly to the general deterioration of the city. With the extension of the roadway from its terminus at the foot of the central business district, across the river and out to Piscataway, traffic that was forced to inch along downtown streets as a means of getting from one end of the city to the other would have a convenient bypass. This would presumably open up the downtown thoroughfares to shoppers and other business people. Work on the Route 18 extension had actually started a decade earlier, but had been halted dead in its tracks by individuals and groups who argued for alternative routes and expressed concern for the environment. It remained that way until only this year.



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Beyond Route 18, J&J wanted further evidence that New Brunswick really did have potential for revitalization before it would commit itself to stay. To that end, a group of local businessmen led by Sellars joined together in 1973 and retained the American City Corporation, a prestigious Maryland planning firm, to assess New Brunswick's redevelopment prospects. Their well-researched report, released in January of 1975, was extremely bullish. Yes, it said, New Brunswick had vast potential for revitalization, although "fragmented strategies and program objectives" had only succeeded in "dividing the community" in the past. It recommended creation of a private, non-profit corporation, which it called New Brunswick Tomorrow (NBT), to spearhead a massive redevelopment drive throughout the city.



Richard Sellars, J&J finance chairman and NBT mover and shaker, beams at model of the new headquarters with Governor Byrne and James Burke (right), J&J's chairman of the board, during an April press conference.

NBT was anything but a conventional redevelopment agency. No massive infusions of federal aid for it. Instead, American City Corporation recommended that the vast majority of its funding come from the private community: banks, corporations, doctors, lawyers, concerned citizens. An initial fund-raising drive resulted in pledges totaling \$1.5 million over a three-year period in amounts ranging from \$1 to \$250,000. NBT has so far collected on 98 percent of those commitments.

The renewal drive began to take off. Internationally known architect and urban planner I.M. Pei was hired to prepare a conceptual blueprint for the revitalization of the downtown business district, including parking and traffic relief. He reported back in May of 1976 with a dramatic program calling for \$150 million in new construction and rehabilitation. Pei's plan suddenly gave respectability to what several years earlier would have been laughable: conversion of dirty, traffic-clogged Albany Street into a tree-lined boulevard; development of George Street, the city's main commercial artery, into a pedestrian walkway with trees, benches, and fountains; construction of a quality downtown hotel with complete conference facilities at the Albany Street en-

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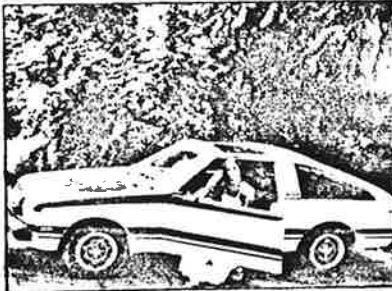
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trance to the city; creation of a new residential community on a ten-acre downtown tract; erection of four new office buildings with a total of 525,000 square feet of space; and development of special traffic arteries and three downtown parking areas to alleviate congestion.

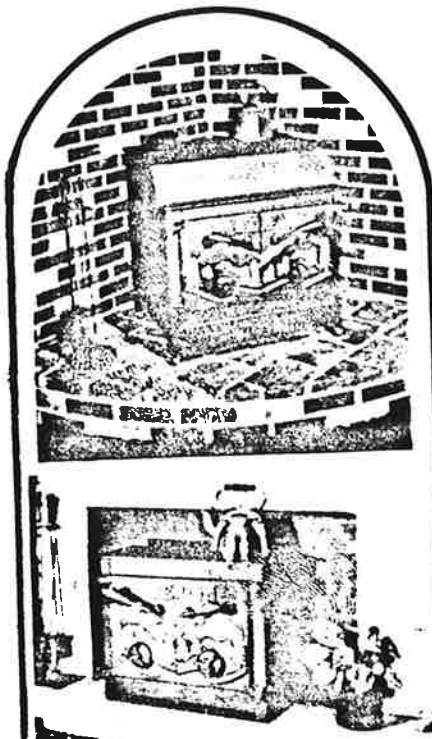
All told, Pei's plan envisioned as many as five thousand new jobs and as much as \$25 million in additional retail sales with significantly increased local tax dollars. Pei was also retained by J&J to design a \$50-million corporate complex that would jut right into the central business area—a twelve-acre park-like setting requiring the purchase and demolition of several blocks of tacky taverns and stores.

The parade of high-powered consultants continued. This time they devised a plan for revitalizing the Second and Fifth wards: improving the condition of homes there, developing parks and recreational areas, creating new housing, and perhaps most important, encouraging young, middle-class families to resettle in the neighborhoods. What's more, one of the nation's leading professional arts consulting firms has been commissioned with an eye toward developing New Brunswick as a statewide cultural center.

Adding muscle to the venture was NBT's twenty-four-member board of directors, a *Who's Who* of powerbrokers and leading lights from the public, community, and business sectors of the city. People like Dr. Kenneth Wheeler, Rutgers University provost; Samuel Landis, president of Landis Ford; George Gibbons, president of People's National Bank; Hugh Boyd, chairman of the New Brunswick *Home News*; Thomas Molyneux, director of the Middlesex County Board of Chosen Freeholders; and Reverend William Capik, pastor of St. Peter's Church.

NBT's private status and financing has proven to be one of its keys. It can pick its own renewal projects and execute them without the political interference, bureaucratic delays, and general inertia that characterize so many redevelopment efforts. "Like any organization in business for profit, we can set our goals, do our job, and look to the bottom line at the end of the year to measure our achievements," says NBT's full-time president, 35-year-old Abraham Wallach, who served as Jersey City's planning director before coming to NBT. For NBT, the bottom line has spelled growth.

Drive through New Brunswick today and you'll be hard-pressed to find New Brunswick Tomorrow. Take the traffic, that god-awful traffic. It piles up with a vengeance at a wretchedly designed circle at the foot of Albany Street, the major gateway to the downtown area, and begins creeping through a network of streets designed for a community of Lilliputians on scooters. Parking can prove even more exasperating. If you're unable to grab one of the few on-street spaces, the alternatives are pulling into an overpriced lot (one by City Hall charges \$3.50 for as little as two hours and one minute of parking) or using a parking deck located on one of several side streets



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and walking to your destination. Unloading facilities are almost nonexistent, and even merchants are obliged to park in the public lots.

The quality stores—the kind that give a shopping center its reputation and its customers—have long since departed: Arnold Constable, P.J. Young's, Littman Jewelers. In their place is a smorgasbord of small shops that sell shoes, records, pizzas, appliances, furniture, dirty books, imported chessboards, corsets, magic tricks, and so on. The buildings that house them have remained the same over the years, two- and three-story structures with bleached façades encroaching on narrow sidewalks. Here and there is a vacant store, although nothing like in 1970, when some forty shops along the main commercial drag lay abandoned, a haunting reminder of the racial riots that devastated the city in the 1960s (and which, in the opinion of many, proved to be New Brunswick's *coup de grâce*).

Statistics tell another glum story. Retail space that in 1940 rented for \$3.50 a square foot can be had today for about \$3 a square foot. City tax dollars from the central business district that totaled \$1.8 million in 1943 plummeted to \$300,000 (in constant dollars) in 1976. "The only place I know where you can rent cheaper is Trenton," claims James Wasas, owner of Artisan's Handcrafted Jewelry downtown. Five years ago Wasas paid \$37,300 for a three-story commercial building that was appraised at \$150,000 in 1950.

As for its neighborhoods, New Brunswick presents a study in contrasts. There's the Fifth Ward, for example, a relatively stable, blue-collar Hungarian enclave. The houses are old but well maintained by proud owners who have lived in them all their lives. The local cognoscenti have even formed their own civic association with a full-time director charged with promoting their special interests. The European *joie de vivre* is alive and well. You can taste it in the authentic Hungarian meals served at several well-known eateries, or see it at the annual Hungarian Festival, which attracts more than five thousand revelers to Somerset Street for a full day of eating, drinking, and merriment.

That mood does not persist. Only minutes away is the predominantly black and Puerto Rican Second Ward. Not exactly a Springfield Avenue in Newark or a Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn, but well on its way. Some of the multi-family homes here are abandoned and boarded up, others are crammed with poor folk who sit listlessly on front porches or steps of sadly neglected buildings.

Unlike the Fifth Ward, some 45 percent of the residents here rent from absentee landlords—slumlords, in effect, who are solely interested in meeting minimum city code standards and often not even that. The Urban League of Greater New Brunswick recently conducted a study of the Second Ward (the site of its headquarters) and reported that 45 percent of all housing units were in fair to poor condition. "It was felt

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that one of the major reasons for this trend in general deterioration had been the dramatic change in ownership patterns over the last twenty years," the League asserted in its report.

The League claims to have found another reason. It conducted a study of lending patterns by New Brunswick-area banks and learned that between July of 1973 and August of 1977, New Brunswick was on the receiving end of only 13 percent of all mortgages originating in Middlesex County (pop. 595,000) by its twelve major lending institutions. It took these institutions to task for creating what it called "a state of disinvestment," particularly in the city's Second Ward, where mortgage monies are most desperately needed.

But New Brunswick's problems really go beyond decaying buildings, even beyond the unemployed and welfare recipients. They go directly to the city's public school system and its 85 percent black and minority-group student body. Where are all the white kids? They're in private and parochial schools like St. Peter's and Rutgers Prep. Says one attorney who shells out \$4,500 a year (on top of \$2,000 in property taxes) to send two children to a local private school: "You find a lot of kids with disabilities in the [public] schools, and I don't want my children to be deprived because of the attention these children need."

Past racial disturbances at New Brunswick High School have done little to enhance the school system's reputation, nor have low achievement test scores throughout the district. Antiquity prevails. Of eleven school buildings in the system, seven were built before 1920. Two schools were built in 1955, but they were situated at opposite ends of the city, almost insuring racially segregated enrollments. The real tragedy of this is that economically sound families with school-age children, the kind New Brunswick needs desperately to attract, are about as likely to homestead here as they are in the slums of Newark or Camden. One rental agent even admits to discouraging white families from moving to New Brunswick—unless, that is, they can afford to put their kids into private institutions.

It is only now beginning to take shape. A pile of dirt here, a steel girder there. But soon the renewal tempo should approach a drum roll. Johnson & Johnson is beginning to raze an entire square block of buildings to make way for its new complex. Construction crews began working in earnest six months ago at the foot of Albany Street, plowing ground and pouring concrete for the long-delayed extension of Route 18.

At the opposite end of downtown, on a lot that stood empty for ten years, rises a giant steel skeleton that will soon become the Plaza II office complex, the first such edifice in over fifteen years. The \$6.5-million cost of the 175,000-square-foot building (designed by I.M. Pei) is being underwritten by a consortium of local banking institutions. It is the linchpin in NBT's program to overhaul the downtown area. Plaza II won't

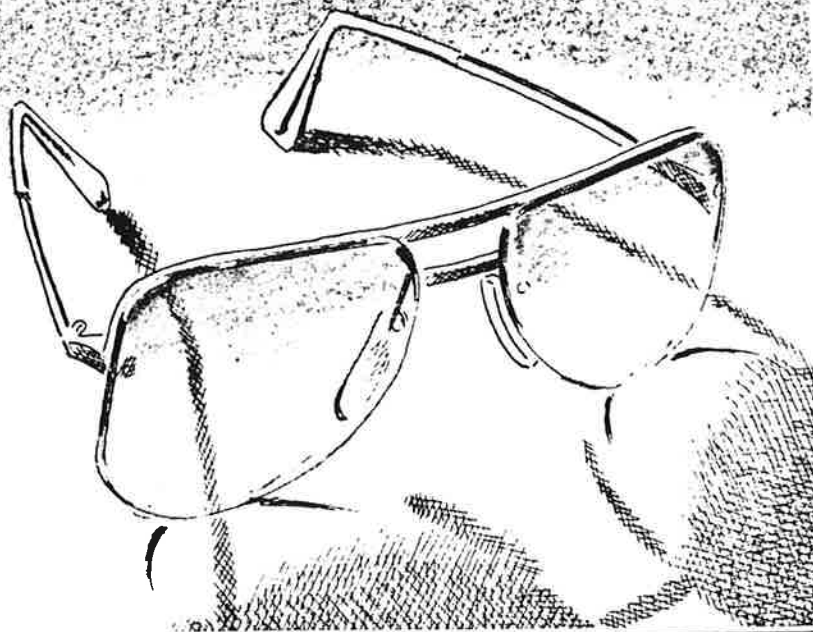
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be hungry for tenants; nearly all of its space is being rented by J&J subsidiary operations.

Fronting another corner on George Street in the building that once housed P.J. Young's department store is the newly opened Mason Gross School of the Arts, offering a graduate program in the creative and performing arts. Other changes are more subtle: a mini-park at the main intersection of town replacing a rubble-strewn lot, improvements to the area in front of the train station, and downtown clean-up projects.

It all seems very promising, an urban Horatio Alger tale. But to say New Brunswick's natives and merchants are jumping with ecstasy at this point would be missing the mark. Though they are glad to see something positive being done, very few residents seem totally convinced that this bold venture can really work. "It should do a lot of good," says John Mangarella, a postal clerk who has lived in New Brunswick all his life. "But there's all kinds of unanswered questions. How do we know, for instance, that the Route 18 extension won't keep people on the outskirts of the city without ever coming in?"

Others are unabashed cynics. "Let's look at what New Brunswick Tomorrow has done," says George Gussis, a former city judge and prosecutor. "They've planted some trees in front of the railroad plaza and put a coat of paint on the railroad overpass. It's been almost three years, and what really have they done?" As for J&J: "They're interested in creating their own little jewel in the middle of the city. It will become another oasis, just like the county complex, just like Rutgers, and just like J&J's present headquarters. Wait and see. J&J's employees will get in their cars at 5 o'clock and take off, leaving New Brunswick as far behind as possible."

Gussis' complaint cuts right to the core of NBT. He feels the corporation has placed too much emphasis on brick and mortar and not enough on the social needs of the city's people. "People with children aren't going to move into the city unless the schools are improved," he insists. "At the moment, we don't even have librarians in our elementary schools. What's being done about that?"

Confusion and fear have also arisen over the question of what will go and what will stay once wrecking crews invade the downtown area. One early renewal plan called for demolition of a section of George Street that houses the highly acclaimed George Street Playhouse, as well as the four-block Hiram Market area. The plan finally approved by the city council provides for their preservation, but scores of other stores will be affected in one way or another. "Renovation is the way to go, but I don't want to see our area destroyed," maintains Betsy Alger, manager of The Catalyst, a quaint little plant store on Church Street that had been slated for demolition under the first redevelopment plan.

"It's going to take time," counsels C. Roy Epps, president of the New Brunswick Urban League and a member of NBT.

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Epps and other community leaders are betting that New Brunswick Tomorrow will work, and, indeed, there are solid grounds for optimism. For one thing, they are dealing with a small, manageable geographic area where investment dollars have a concentrated impact. Put another way, a new office complex that would mean little in a city the size of Newark or Elizabeth can provide an enormous physical and psychological boost to a city like New Brunswick.

Even the neighborhoods seem salvageable. There are not block after block of tenements, and of those houses that have been boarded up, many are not too far gone to repair. There is, in fact, a shortage of dwelling units in New Brunswick for all but those with higher incomes.

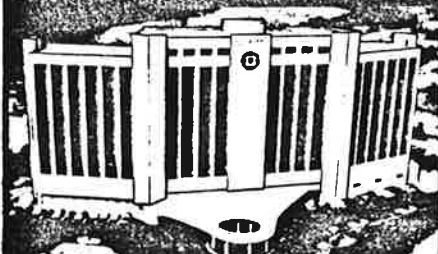
Not to be ignored through all this is the NBT board itself—an imposing collection of community notables who can presumably unlock the right doors and twist the proper arms to ensure a steady flow of investment capital. Which brings us full circle, back to NBT's most powerful and sacred weapon, the chief reason for believing this group can succeed where others have failed: Johnson & Johnson. Though it maintains only one of its executives on the board of NBT (and two on DevCo, the construction arm of NBT), there is no underestimating the power and influence of this corporate Svengali. It was soon after J&J hinted broadly that it might pull out of New Brunswick if the Route 18 extension were not completed that final approvals came last summer from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, followed by clearance in the courts. It was soon after J&J put up one of its divisions as the prime tenant and helped arrange financing through seven local banks that the Plaza II project actually got underway. And it was J&J that first primed the NBT pump with a sizeable contribution (J&J officials will not say how much, but NBT president Wallach recently testified before a state budget commission that contributions were as high as \$250,000).

What is J&J getting out of all of this? Is it motivated largely by self-interest, or pure altruism? Clearly, J&J would benefit incalculably from any rebirth of New Brunswick. It would have on permanent display a handsome corporate showcase for the entire state, even the nation, to see. It would no longer suffer the embarrassment of a New Brunswick address, no longer have to chauffeur visiting executives around the fringes of the city. But the fact remains that New Brunswick is one gamble that Johnson & Johnson did not have to take. It could have followed the parade of major corporations leaving the cities for the suburbs and enjoyed a secure future. It decided instead to stay.

So where does self-interest end and altruism begin? Does it really matter in this case? It is virtually certain that no other company, individual, or public body could have mas-

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tered the resources or initiative to undertake anything as far-fetched as the reconstruction of New Brunswick. Certainly not New Brunswick City Hall, which has not seen strong leadership in years (its current mayor, Richard Mulligan, has departed for Jackson Hole, Wyoming, after a four-year stint in which his greatest accomplishments figured in the areas of what he wore and what he said).

J&J has taken up the gauntlet, and, at the very least, it has given New Brunswick a fighting chance to redeem its future. The firm claims it will act primarily as a catalyst in bringing other firms and merchants to town, and of that, there is already some encouraging evidence. The gaps in the downtown area that were the sites of abandoned stores are steadily being filled by new enterprises, the most recent being a major savings and loan association that will soon occupy a building on one of the busiest street corners. The completion of Plaza II by February of 1979 and J&J's new headquarters by 1981 can only hasten this process. With time, some larger stores may be enticed to the city, although New Brunswick's future may rest more with the small, New Hope-type specialty shops that offer an attractive alternative to the shopping malls.

Drawing middle-class families to New Brunswick will be a far more rigorous task. An improved central business district will help, but these mobile families will demand decent schools and housing. NBT, for its part, says it is deeply concerned about the educational system and will meet this fall to determine what kind of role it can play to improve social functions like education and health care. There are also plans on the books for upgrading the neighborhoods. But at best, New Brunswick is years away from rebuilding its schools and creating attractive neighborhoods that J&J executives would consider suitable places to rear their families. Until that happens, NBT's mission will be incomplete.

It's noon in New Brunswick, and the new mini-park in the center of town is filling with people. At one end of the brick-inlaid square (built by J&J), a four-piece jazz combo is wailing away. At the other end, a smartly dressed young man is blowing up dozens of colorful balloons with the aid of a tank of compressed gas and handing them to outstretched arms. The crowd is modest in size—no more than seventy at its peak—but it includes all types from executives in pin-stripe suits and secretaries on their lunch breaks to small kids clinging to their mothers. Some munch on sandwiches, others focus on the music, but everyone seems to be having a fine time at this NBT-sponsored affair.

As events go, it rated no more than a line or two in the hometown paper, the *Home News*. That it should happen at all is the important story. It is one more indication that New Brunswick just may have a tomorrow, that this ailing little city on the skids may finally be on the road to a most remarkable recovery.

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