

Artist shares vision for city

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NORTH ADAMS -- What if the Route 2 overpass emptied traffic onto Marshall Street, if Center Street became a building lot and the St. Anthony's Municipal Parking Lot was eliminated to host commercial and residential space?

Artist Andrew Davis' latest art project, "North Adams Makeover," tackles what he describes as ill-advised urban renewal decisions to "create the model of an excellent, very small city using the best of what already exists as our point of departure."

Davis has crafted large detailed blueprints to depict that changed city. The exhibit is slated to open Sept. 30 at the Avalon Seafood Gallery, 7 Holden St. Blueprints of the current city design as well as old downtown photographs are included in the show.

"For a small city, North Adams is cut up a lot," Davis said during a Saturday interview at the gallery.

The Route 2 overpass, also known as Veterans Memorial Bridge, divides the city "at its core," Davis maintains. His makeover would shorten the overpass, enabling left turns from Marshall Street toward the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art and right turns toward Route 8, eliminating the current, complicated six-way intersection at the bottom.

"The way it [the overpass] passes over Marshall Street -- not only is it a no-no in urban development, but I couldn't get why it goes back so far," Davis said. "I thought, 'Why not have it meet at Marshall Street and make it a four-way intersection?' The six-way intersection is confusing to me."

He believes that the overpass acts as a deterrent to Mass MoCA visitors coming downtown.

"A lot of people come to the museum and don't come to the downtown because they don't want to walk under the overpass," he said. "Boston, for one, has taken extraordinary measures to get rid of an overpass that cut the North End off from the rest of the city."

Boston's effort brought a revival to the North End, Davis said. He also pointed to Shelburne Falls and the town's Bridge of Flowers as an example of good urban design.

Davis' work grew from a desire to create a practical art project, he said.

"I'm trying to do things that are reasonable proposals," he said.

His plan incorporates proposals from the Hoosic River Revival Coalition to open up more riverfront and create parks, and suggests widening the Main Street meridian to 40 feet. The black-painted chains currently lining the meridian's flower beds should be removed, he said. His vision also includes a Main Street park.

"I think chains running down Main Street is a horrible metaphor," Davis said. "All the chains would go. People could cross at any point and it's fine. Any hoppin' downtown doesn't have barriers across the street. Those kinds of things are for state highways. It seems self-evident to me, and I wouldn't understand a debate on that."

He said he also supports eliminating vehicle traffic from Eagle Street downtown and creating a pedestrian venue and would like to see the traffic pattern at Main Street's eastern end (near the Civil War statue) improved to create a safer route. He would also like to see a traffic pattern that allows left turns from Holden Street onto Main Street.

According to Davis, Main Street's L-shaped Mall needs aesthetic improvements, and his self-described "fanciful" Holiday Inn would be taller, leaner and would include a gym and a swimming pool. The pool venue would also serve as a YMCA, he said.

"Then the Y would be centralized," he noted.

Davis said his project is meant to generate discussion. He is aware that changes of the magnitude he envisions would

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involve regulatory issues and vast amounts of financing.

"But how does anything get paid for?" he asked. "I know there are legal and zoning questions, rights of way concerns, but things can be done. Where there is a will, there is a way."

Most downtown artists are committed to the area, Davis said. He noted that as part of Downtown Art, a seasonal art initiative, he has no lease with building owner Scarafoni Realty and may be evicted with 30 days' notice if a full-time tenant rents the space. Davis and gallery co-owner Claire Fox renovated the former pet grooming site at their own expense and pay a reduced rent while the gallery operates, he said.

Davis said he believes art is a strong component of the city's revival, but he emphasized that art alone cannot support the region.

"The single biggest thing that I believe would help is a significant employer, or several smaller employers, that provide secure jobs and pay decent wages," he said. "I'm talking about the kind of job that you can work at and the income allows you to buy a home."

Like most residents in the area, he said, the arts community wants a thriving downtown that would be filled with local businesses rather than vast numbers of part-time, seasonal galleries. A city design that encourages aesthetic improvements while adhering to regulations and codes is part of the solution, he said. Success would change the city's art dynamic, he noted, because more space would be occupied in a traditional, year-round manner.

"The long-term goal is that there are no empty storefronts for us to do this in," he said.

For more information about Avalon Seafood Gallery, visit www.davisartservices.com.

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