THE OLDEST 'NEW URBANIST' IN DALLAS

Bill Densmore sees visions of his childhood on Columbia Avenue, and a new generation hopes to make them a reality

By KERI MITCHELL
Photo by RASY RAN

Bill Densmore believes in the concepts of geographical and architectural determinism — that the way cities are designed and built have a direct impact on the happiness and prosperity of their residents. He uses terms such as "walkable community" and "mixed-use" to describe his hopes for Old East Dallas.

Densmore, a retired Bryan Adams High School history teacher, doesn't identify himself as a new urbanist, but his beliefs fit squarely with the tenets of new urbanism and its approach to planning and development: "Human-scaled" urban design with housing and shopping in close proximity, and accessible public spaces.

The movement found its footing in the early '90s, when planners, architects and the like began calling for a return to the design principles that had characterized towns and cities for centuries. New urbanism has continued to gain ground since then, often appealing to millennials who may have grown up in the suburbs and now are attracted to city centers.

Densmore can empathize with this attraction but for a completely different reason — he actually lived in the bygone era to which these young folks long to return.

Munger Boulevard in the 1940s morphed almost daily into a football field for Densmore and his friends. They called themselves the Munger Mongrels, one of several neighborhood pick-up teams in the era of sandlots and five-and-dimes.

Automobiles hadn't yet replaced streetcars, so Munger Boulevard's broad median strip, which Densmore refers to as an "esplanade," remained unmarred by the traffic demands of later decades. It was still a two-lane road and looked much like Swiss Avenue, but unlike Swiss' tree canopy, which cuts through the center of the boulevard, Munger's tree canopy outlined the esplanade, giving Densmore and his friends ample space to run plays.

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If they ever tired of football, they could catch the streetcar on Columbia Avenue and ride it all the way to Southern Methodist University to shoot hoops. Columbia was then the hub of neighborhood activity and commerce, says Densmore, now 84 and living in Lakewood Trails.

Everything in his universe was accessible by either foot or streetcar, and it knit together the neighborhood in ways he felt but couldn't yet put into words.

By the 1950s, busses and automobiles had grown popular enough to render streetcars outmoded. In 1954, the Dallas City Council ordered the Dallas Transit Company to dispose of all streetcars within two years. The streetcars ran their final route in January 1956 and the system was dismantled.

"It was a horror when they did that," Densmore says. "At the time I didn't know. I was a teenager and all I wanted was a car."

Two decades later, Dallas' new thoroughfare plans called for a six-lane road that would snake through Old East Dallas' historic but dilapidated neighborhoods, connecting Abrams Road to Columbia Avenue and curving down to Main Street. The goal was to move cars Downtown as efficiently as possible.

In Densmore's view, it was the nail in the coffin of Columbia's heyday as "the Agora of Munger Place," when pedestrians easily traversed the street to catch a flick at the Rita Theater, enjoy a malt at one of the soda fountains or jump on the streetcar to head Downtown for work or Uptown for fun.

He's not alone in this view. A movement is afoot to give Columbia Avenue a "road diet," shrinking it from six lanes to four and repurposing the space for pedestrians and cyclists.

"Because of its six oversized lanes and the large distances between pedestrian crossings, this road has been a source of division in the neighborhood ever since it was constructed," the Change.org petition states. "The people on either side of this road were once close neighbors but can no longer reach the friends, services or parks on the other side without significant difficulty."

The petition gained enough steam that the roughly $8 million Columbia Avenue project was included in city staff recommendations for the proposed $1 billion-plus bond, slated for November's election. City councilmembers have since been given more purview over their own districts' projects, however, so "it's kind of in their hands now," says Nathaniel Barrett, the Munger Place resident who wrote the petition.

Both District 2 and District 14 councilmen Adam Medrano and Philip Kingston have indicated their support of the Columbia Avenue project, but "there's a very big difference between being supportive and putting limited resources toward a project," Barrett says.

Still, he's optimistic that Columbia Avenue will make it through the grinder once Council finalizes the bond later this month. First of all, Barrett says, "it's cheap," requiring merely "plastic, paint and planters to go from a big nasty seven-lane road [with turn lane] to one a lot smaller."

Traffic projections indicate that just three lanes could accommodate the vehicles traveling between Lakewood and Downtown, he says. Outside lanes could be converted to bicycle lanes with wide sidewalks and on-street parking, or even bus-only lanes, utilized in other cities but not yet in Dallas. Such a "road diet" would force cars to travel at "more reasonable speeds," Barrett says, and pave the way for more Main Street-type development along Columbia.

"Main Street connects directly into Columbia," Barrett notes of the thoroughfare's design. "It's an opportunity waiting to happen."

News of the petition and potential changes on the avenue gave Densmore renewed hope for the neighborhood he knew and loved.

"It can't be what it was. Nothing ever comes back," Densmore says, but he adds that such redevelopment "would likely cause Munger Place to again find Columbia to be a vibrant retail area for the neighborhood. ... This would certainly help to bring back something of a walkable community."

"They wanted to have fun. They wanted to marry the girl next door and live on Main Street in a little town."

Densmore's family moved to Munger Place in 1938, nearly three decades after the neighborhood was developed. After the Great Depression, it wasn't the upscale haven it had been in the early days but was still a nice place to live, he says.

The death of the streetcar, hastened by technological advances that made automobiles and busses less expensive and more readily available, wasn't the only turning point for the neighborhood.

Before and during World War II, movie theaters were cool bastions of respite where people gathered to watch the latest flick or, during the war, newsreels of the fight overseas. By the late '40s, Densmore recalls, television sets began to dominate neighborhood living rooms, making the communal experience of theaters obsolete.

Almost simultaneously, soldiers who had returned home from the war were ready to settle down, but not necessarily in urban areas.

"Those poor guys had lived through the Depression and the war," Densmore says. "They wanted to have fun. They wanted to marry the girl next door and live on Main Street in a little town, so they moved to Garland and to Richardson and those little towns all around."

The smaller towns had smaller homes, which were more affordable to the young war veterans and easier to clean and cool. So streetcar lines were replaced by parking lots, movie theaters by TVs and urban proximity by suburban amenities, "and that left the big homes there falling apart," Densmore says of Munger Place and the surrounding historic neighborhoods.

The Munger Mongrels were too young to fight in WWII, but several of them, including Densmore, fought in the Korean War. When he returned home in the mid-'50s, Densmore didn't recognize what he saw.

"I thought, 'Something's wrong with this country,' " he recalls. "I just didn't know what was wrong. It took me a while to find it."

What was wrong, he much later realized, was the loss of community. The ample boulevards built in the early 20th century gave him and his friends space to gather and play, and the Frank Lloyd Wright-inspired prairie-style homes with their wraparound porches offered a cool place nearby to sit and talk afterward.

They walked everywhere. Two grocery stores and an icehouse were within walking distance, which was crucial since refrigerators weren't yet common. Buckner Park was within four blocks for occasional football games with opposing neighborhood sandlot teams, the Tremont Kids, the Alley Cats and the Owls. If something was too far to walk, they jumped on the streetcar at Columbia and Collett, which was the hub of neighborhood activity.

"We got together, and the whole group stayed together, because of geographical and architectural determinism," Densmore says.

Dallas has disregarded its own urban fabric for decades, he believes, but he sees the tide beginning to turn. At one point, he thought the house he grew up in on Tremont was destined to be demolished for apartments, until the urban pioneers of Swiss Avenue successfully campaigned for residential historic districts in the 1970s.

"I heard a guy was fixing it up, and I went over and helped him work," he

says of his family home, then laughs, "I'm sure I got in his way."

At the time, he thought Munger Place might evolve into an artist community. The fact that the front porch neighborhoods that brought together him and his friends in the '40s are sought-after places to live today is nothing short of astounding to Densmore.

It was music to his ears to hear Dallas Mayor Mike Rawlings recently call for "efficient and flexible public transportation" and for correcting "some of the injustices" of the past caused by the construction of highways and demolitions of neighborhoods, as noted in a June 16, 2017 Dallas Morning News story. News of the petition for a Columbia Avenue makeover sent Densmore over the moon.

"They need this. They need a good street. They don't have it," Densmore says. "When I was a kid, Columbia Avenue was the place you went for everything."

Barrett agrees wholeheartedly. The Main Street-style structures that once fronted Columbia mostly have disappeared, with the avenue now fronted by more parking lots than shops.

"It's not that it's boarded up shop fronts and hotels," Barrett says, but Columbia no longer has the elements of connectedness that unite neighborhoods. What it does have, he believes, is good bones — "qualities that are timeless and will withstand the test of time, with a little bit of love."

A streetcar is not currently part of

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Barrett's vision, for one glaringly obvious reason — cost. But "what I would love is for this project to get underway and the city would take another look at Columbia Avenue," he says. The city, in prior planning efforts, came up with code for "complete streets" and "form-based zoning" that could translate into exactly the type of Columbia Avenue that he and Densmore envision.

"I would like the city to use some of these tools it already has," Barrett says.

If it happens, Densmore may not be around to see it. Most of his fellow Mongrels already have passed on. But that doesn't quell Densmore's passion for people in his former neighborhood to experience the same connection and quality of life that he did.

His ideal is the left bank in Paris, a place he visited several times during the 37 years he taught European history at Bryan Adams. Densmore fell in love with Paris' small shops and cafés with tables that often spilled out onto the wide sidewalks with trees. People resided in apartments on top of the businesses they frequented and parking lots were tucked away from view — a walkable community that reminded him of Munger Place.

"I'd love to see Columbia be like that," he says. "Dallas will never be Paris, but if we had a little more of that, it would be helpful."

"It would be tough to do it, and it would cost a lot, and it may be too much to do," Densmore reasons. "But it's worth it to be that type of people, I think."

URSULINE'S GOTHIC EAST DALLAS PAST

With its intricate peaks and filigree, the original Ursuline Academy looked like something out of Hogwarts and the land of Harry Potter. Construction began in 1882 and noted Galveston architect Nicholas J. Clayton was tapped to bring his ornate gothic style to the newly acquired land in Old East Dallas on St. Joseph at Live Oak. It took more than 15 years to complete the expansive design, which served as both a convent and school. In the 1940s, Ursuline made plans to relocate to Preston Hollow, and the land was put up for sale. Beard & Stone Electric Company paid $500,000 for it in 1949, and the demolition team was called in. According to a 1949 Dallas Morning News article, "A workman applied a crowbar to a high window casing of the old convent and remarked: 'I sure hate to wreck this one. It's like disposing of an old friend.' " Today, most of the land is filled by a parking lot.

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