

# Hoffman believed in New Brunswick

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NEW BRUNSWICK — Samuel David Hoffman died 25 years ago, but his ideas gained a life of their own.

From 1936 until his death in 1957, he tried to prevent the decay which spread into this small city's central business district by promoting a partnership between local government and business.

Hoffman Pavilion was eventually named after the man who helped acquire funding for that senior citizens center and other major housing, road and park projects in New Brunswick, including a modern, 246-unit high rise building for low income residents called New Brunswick Homes.

Scale models of the Hoffman Plan show construction of a sports arena, supermarket, office buildings, apartments, department store, restaurant and, at the corner of New Street and Memorial Parkway, only two blocks from where the Hyatt Regency now sits, a hotel.

Hoffman later orchestrated, as counsel to the New Brunswick Housing Authority, and city attorney, an application for a \$12 million Plaza Commercial Redevelopment Project.

On his deathbed in a Boston hospital, Hoffman wrote revisions of his original ideas to bring the private sector into the city's development of the Plaza project.

Last week, the New Brunswick Development Corp., the land-purchasing arm of the city's revitalization efforts, put a "for sale" sign on the 12-acre site which Hoffman had planned for private development more than two decades ago.

"Hoffman was really probably the only one who really thought New Brunswick had a future," said Isadore Candeub of Candeub-Flessig Urban Planning in Newark, a consulting firm that has a history of involvement in the revitalization of New Brunswick. "He had a broad vision of New Brunswick's future which was considerably beyond what others had. New Brunswick was not in that bad of shape, but it was beginning to lose some business."

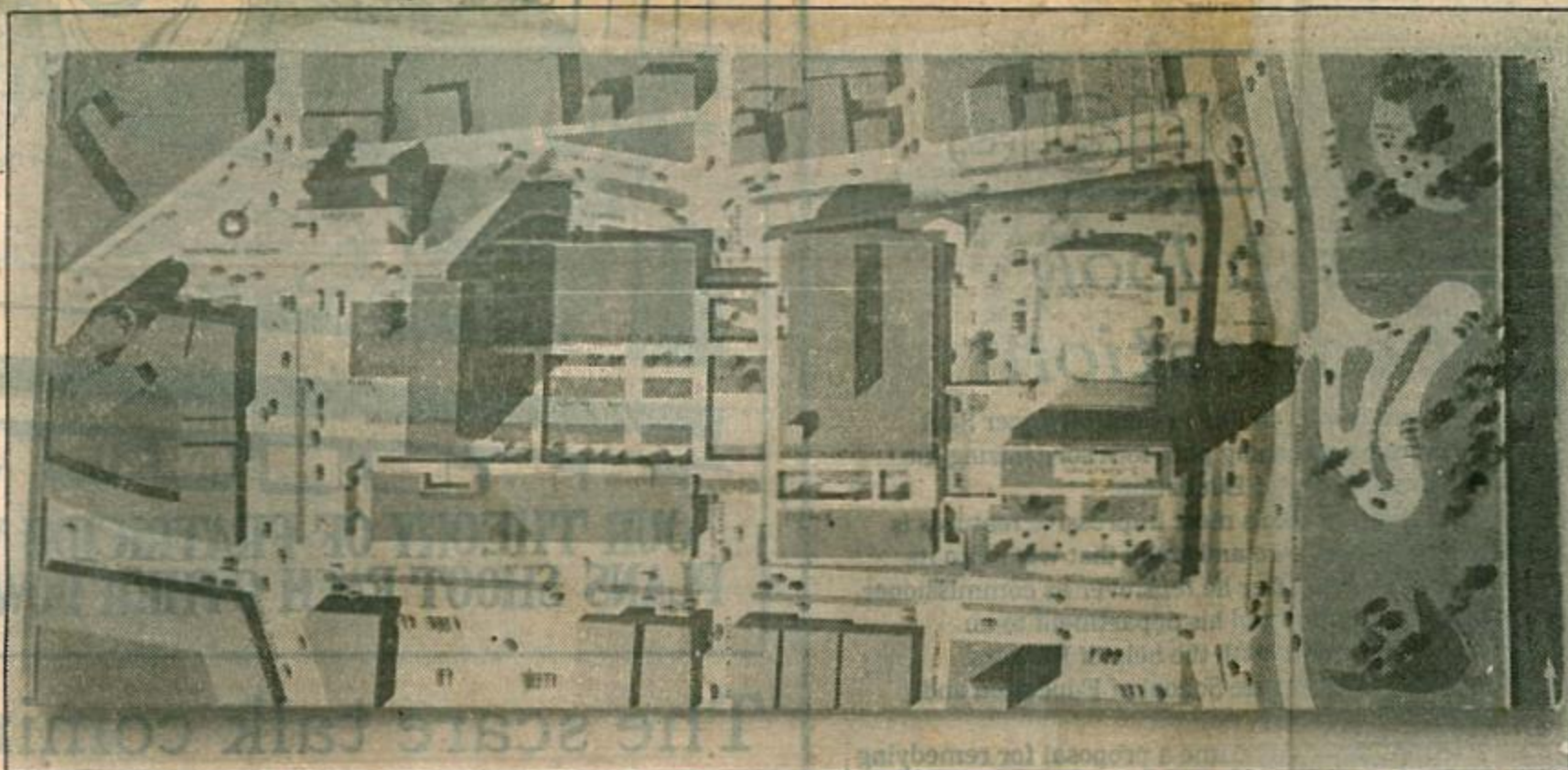
In the wake of the Great Depression and before President Franklin Roosevelt's public works projects, Hoffman, a liberal Democrat who served as city commissioner from 1935-38, emphasized that government could help, but could not and should not finance the reconstruction of a community.

In 1936, he published a "tentative plan" urging private investors — bankers, businessmen and real estate agents — to take responsibility for their community.

Hoffman's ideas for bringing the public and private sectors together — laid out in the seven-page pamphlet he printed himself in 1936 — were revived in 1975. A consultant from the American City Corp., a subsidiary of The Rouse Co. of Maryland, recommended a similar concept now known as New Brunswick Tomorrow. NBT formed that year, followed by the New Brunswick Development Corp. in 1976.

Hoffman died on Oct. 15, 1957. With him died his idea to bring the private sector into financing construction of the Plaza Commercial Redevelopment Project.

"After giving the matter further serious thought, I am convinced that if we wait for state or federal assistance to initiate any plan for the rehabilitation of the lower section of the city that our objectives cannot be accomplished in sufficient time or in the manner calculated to produce the best possible benefits to the city at large," Hoffman wrote in 1936.



**THE GRAND SCHEME** — This is a scale model of the Plaza Commercial Development Project which Hoffman promoted. Route 18, also Memorial Parkway and Boyd Park lie east (at far right of map) of the Plaza block which included plans for a hotel, sports and

convention center, supermarket and stores, and office buildings. Bordering the western side of the block (at far left) is George Street. North is the Hiram Market area. Two blocks north in present-day New Brunswick is the Hyatt Regency Hotel.

His "Survey and Tentative Proposal for the Rehabilitation of the lower section of New Brunswick, New Jersey," was published by The Christie Press.

He continued: "I am satisfied that essentially this is only a quasi-public matter and that primarily the responsibility for initiating a program rests entirely upon those who are directly financially interested in that lower section of the city. The problem must be attacked from a business viewpoint first and a sentimental and aesthetic viewpoint second. These viewpoints are not necessarily inconsistent and I am satisfied that those who harbor both viewpoints can work together consistently to achieve a common objective."

The latest professional urban planning literature promotes the "public/private" partnership, which Hoffman proposed, as the strategy for the 80s, a decade when federal government is less able and less willing to revive central cities.

John Heldrich, chairman of New Brunswick Tomorrow, said he must have

acquired, "by osmosis," the Hoffman ideals for redevelopment. "Well how about that. We should've resurrected that," Heldrich said about the plan, noting that he was 8 years old when Hoffman was a leader in New Brunswick. "That's very interesting. I guess, like many things, some get picked up and some end up on the shelf."

Forty years ago, a state Housing Authority report to New Brunswick described the city's tenements in the lower section of the city as "worse than any community in the state of New Jersey" except for Atlantic City and Newark.

"Would you believe there were apartment houses with outdoor privies?" asked Candeub. "No indoor bathrooms. Can you believe that?"

Declaring that the tenement houses posed dangers to its inhabitants, Hoffman proposed federal financing for two low- and moderate-income housing projects — Brunswick Homes and University Towers (then Bishop Towers) and advocated the construction of Boyd Park.

An activist in civic and religious affairs, Hoffman, the first Jew on the city commission, the forerunner of the City Council, was a political figure, one of two Democrats who overthrew the old machine to gain a seat on the city commission.

## WAR'S END A CONTRIBUTING FACTOR

# Hoffman's death ended a dream

Samuel B. Hoffman's Plaza Commercial Project lost momentum after his death in 1957.

Leadership is one factor which makes or breaks a well-planned project.

Money is another.

Planning had a place in the federal government, temporarily, under the National Resources Planning Board which studied development and economic problems. But the board was disbanded as the U.S. entered World War II, said Israel Stollman, executive director of the American Planning Association.

Herbert Tanzman, an East Brunswick real estate agent, believes New Brunswick redevelopment plans, in a sense, were also a wartime casualty.

"After the Depression, some people moved up (further out of the downtown area) in the city, because they thought it was upgrading themselves," said Tanzman. "When the war came, (World War II) things (business) were good."

Merchants flourished with wartime business from soldiers, estimated at 60,000, at nearby Camp Kilmer. "The streets were jammed and nobody thought about what would happen after the war," he added. "Meanwhile, all the towns started to grow. Shopping centers were in fashion, new and modern housing. All the small towns became big towns. And finally, you ask yourself, 'why should I go into downtown New Brunswick when I'm here and can go to the Mid-State Mall?'"

Isadore Candeub, an urban planner in Newark said two factors affected development during the 1960s and 1970s.

Frequently, the city would sell property to a developer who was either inadequately funded or operating on speculation, he said.

"So it would sit for five or six years. Then the authority would have to go to court," said Candeub. "Unfortunately, there were no special funds to help at that time, no Economic Development money or Urban Development Action Grants. In the 60s or 70s, the developer was on his own."

The second factor was that after 1972, redevelopment "essentially closed down" at the federal level.

New Brunswick's property was no exception, said Richard Keefe, executive director of the New Brunswick Housing Authority.

"Everything was stagnant" in the authority offices when he arrived in 1963. The Plaza site acquisition, begun in 1956 but not completed until 1962, laid vacant, but was purchased by Isaac Arditi of the New Brunswick Urban Renewal Corp. who sold the property in 1967 to Stewart Bainum, chairman of Quality Court Inns Inc., and his partner, Wallace E. Johnson, president of Holiday Inns Inc., Keefe said. As partners, Keefe said Johnson and Bainum financed the Plaza I building but sold it to DevCo "because the money market conditions were not good."

—DIANE RUGG



**A BETTER NEW BRUNSWICK** — Samuel B. Hoffman sits in the midst of New Brunswick city and business leaders, planning ways to build up its central business district and improve housing in the city.

Few people saw what impact the Model T Ford would have on cities like New Brunswick.

New Brunswick survived the Depression well enough to meet its municipal payroll in cash, not scrip. Trolley cars ran shoppers regularly from Highland Park to the bustling downtown area.

Working with a master plan by Herbert S. Swan, the city's planner in 1925, Hoffman warned of the imminent change suburbs would have on the central business district.

"I am satisfied," Hoffman wrote, "that essentially this (redevelopment) is only a quasi-public matter and that primarily the responsibility for initiating a program rests entirely upon those who are directly financially interested in that lower section of the city."

While some had called his plans "Hoffman's Follies," leading university, city, county and business leaders honored Hoffman at a testimonial luncheon at the Roger Smith Hotel on May 28, 1957. A local attorney Hoffman's real love was planning. As author of several articles on local government, and planning, Hoffman and was special counsel and consultant to the New Brunswick Redevelopment Agency.

The luncheon was recorded. "I would like to think of this event as marking the end of one era and the beginning of another in our program of redevelopment," said Hoffman. His voice, weakened by the cancer which plagued him for seven years, never faltered as he thanked all of his friends and colleagues for their role in helping to bring about the redevelopment of the city.

"We have passed from our planning and discussion stages; we have formulated a clear policy; we have demonstrated that we are not impractical visionary dreamers but that the things we talked about not only can happen but are happening in our city," he said. "We have found our direction and are moving forward."

That day, Rutgers University President Dr. Lewis Webster Jones conferred an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters degree to an outstanding alumni, "for persistent and successful battle for civic redevelopment and public housing" and his dedication as a Rutgers Alumni trustee.

That day, a federal housing official also announced that the government had cleared the Plaza Commercial Project, a \$12 million program which let the newly created New Brunswick Housing Authority acquire a tract adjacent to a 246-unit high-rise housing project which sheltered displaced families. The next plan included construction of a middle-income housing project once known as Bishop Towers, now University Towers.

Pleased with the news, Hoffman still sensed that there was much work ahead. Although he was not aware of it, his words spoken 25 years ago proved to be ironically correct.

Most of the property — acquired through Hoffman's pursuit of federal funding — is a parking lot located behind two office buildings owned by DevCo.

Although the Plaza I building was built in 1969 by a private developer, New Brunswick Plaza Urban Renewal Corp. of Silver Spring, Md., later reneged on an agreement with the city's Housing Authority to develop the remainder of the site. The city broke the lease in 1976, and transferred the property to the newly formed DevCo.