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The rise and fall of The Courtyard

Article Text:

In the late 1970s, the transformation of West Franklin Street began. Slowly, what had been the neglected stepchild of downtown, transformed itself into the fashionable playground of the local non-student population.

It started with what had been a milk distributor, with a dairy bar in front, becoming The Courtyard, a mini shopping and office center. This was mixed-use before that term became a commonplace of urban planners and local politicians.

With hip shops and restaurants, The Courtyard spawned more hip shops and restaurants and the west end of Franklin Street saw new life. The transformation came at about the time the previously more robust East Franklin Street -- particularly the 100 block -- began to see the life drained out of it.

That area of downtown now is pockmarked with empty storefronts, while the restaurants of the west end draw a steady clientele. The area looks like it's thriving -- except if you look more closely at where it all began, The Courtyard.

You can't tell from the street, but what had been so successful is now desolate. As The Chapel Hill Herald reported earlier this week, much of The Courtyard appears to be vacant. At least a dozen store windows -- out of perhaps 25 -- are adorned with yellow signs tempting someone to "Lease this space."

In an area that appears to be weathering the economic storm, it didn't have to be this way. But The Courtyard appears to be the victim of a series of controversies and unpleasanties since Spencer Young brought the property.

Young has engaged in a feud with adjoining property owner P.H. Craig over the lease of parking spaces;

Feuds With Everyone

he has feuded with some of his own tenants, and he has forced some of them to leave and threatened at least one of them. He has belligerently argued with the town of Chapel Hill, and he has been sued by a variety of plaintiffs, for a variety of reasons.

He has apparently made no friends at The Courtyard or in the broader business community.

It is difficult to figure out what Young may be up to, since he doesn't return calls from the press. We hope there is a method behind the madness, but the vacant storefronts unfortunately indicate otherwise.

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