

Henry N. Cobb



DISCUSSION SUMMARY

Henry Cobb is principal architect at the firm I. M. Pei & Partners. He provides insight into some of the design and architectural aspects of the redevelopment process in New Brunswick. As part of this knowledge, he also speaks about the history of city planning in New Brunswick, referencing the 1925 plan by Herbert Swan.

“Our involvement with New Brunswick began with our engagement by Johnson & Johnson (J&J) to do a master plan for its new headquarters,” Cobb said. “And, more or less simultaneously, we were asked to do a sort of framework plan for downtown New Brunswick for New Brunswick Tomorrow.” [5] He recognized that although these were two different plans, there were ways that they would be, and could be perceived to be, intertwined. For example, he thought that it was “responsible” for Johnson & Johnson “to place its headquarters in the context of a larger plan,” despite the perception that “strings are being pulled from the corporate center.” [5] Cobb said that his firm did not have contact with Johnson & Johnson for the New Brunswick Tomorrow work, but the chairman of that organization was John Heldrich, a Johnson & Johnson employee. [6] Still, he regarded it as “a completely separate enterprise.” [6] Cobb was the “principal responsible for both efforts.” [11]

The New Brunswick Tomorrow plan for downtown consisted of two studies between 1976 and 1977. [6] This led to the construction of Commercial Plaza, which tied into the concept that “George Street was intended to be the centerpiece of the regeneration of downtown New Brunswick.” [6] I. M. Pei & Partners was involved in urban renewal in the 1960s. It was one of the few architectural firms with this experience and “was engaged by a number of cities to do urban renewal plans.” [9] “By the end of the 1960s,” Cobb said, “we were very much aware of, I would say, more of the shortcomings of urban renewal than of its accomplishments.” [9] This included over-prescribing renewal, a problem that the firm was aware of and “very anxious to avoid.” This reaction led the firm to see itself “as planners helping to develop a strategy for renewal, but eager to avoid prescribing too much, and that our work for New Brunswick Tomorrow was very much strategic.” [9] This work, he reminded, progressed as the firm was also designing the Johnson & Johnson campus. Relatedly, he pointed to letters from people “who were suspicious of us and Johnson & Johnson, and thinking we were simply the tools of a corporate initiative.”

Cobb said that the decision by Johnson & Johnson to stay and expand in New Brunswick was contentious and that J&J “almost went to the suburbs.” [10] He noted that expansion on the site touched on issues of “slum clearance.” Cobb also observed how historic preservation issues had unfolded differently from the way they might have today: On the site there was an old tavern with “some kind of historic tunnel.” It was impossible to preserve because it was in the middle of the site “but today, I think, it might have been a deal breaker,” Cobb said, “because so much more attention is being paid to not just visible, but invisible, historic artifacts.” [10]

He spoke about a 1925 plan for New Brunswick by Herbert Swan, “quite a well-known planner.” [11] “His approach to planning was exactly what we had in mind, but very sensitive to—not at all sort of *tabula rasa*, wipe everything clean—but very much about going in and making a very limited surgical kind of [plan]—and very civically oriented. Very much about the quality of urban space and streetscape,” Cobb said. He thought that the plan was “a wonderful model for how to deal with a city like New Brunswick,” and that it ran counter to the “enthusiasm for wiping the slate clean” of Cobb’s generation. [11]

Cobb then referenced an unnamed March 11, 1976, report on the “appraisal of downtown” and a strategy for development. [12] The appraisal listed the assets of downtown New Brunswick, including “the compactness in the downtown, proximity of residential areas, proximity of major educational institutions, and the presence of J&J,” among other positive assets. [12] It also listed the liabilities: “image of decline—the derelict state of the east side of Hiram Street to Bayard and the proximity of ugly, crime-ridden public housing,” among other things. [12] Cobb further described development strategies for George Street, Albany Street, Livingston Avenue and “the rib streets: Church, Paterson, Bayard.” A “boulevard image” was created for Albany Street, which became “one of the better pieces of urban design that we’ve done.” [13] It was determined that George Street “is and must remain central to any downtown development plan” and should be strengthened through “infill development, major multipurpose development, downtown residential development, Civic Center development, and intercept parking.” [13]

An interesting topic that Cobb touched on was about how Richard Sellars and Jim Burke had different visions for the architecture of the Johnson & Johnson campus. Sellars thought of the headquarters in “monumental terms” and “wanted a skyscraper.” [17] This did not unfold partly because Cobb “wanted to engage [the] property on a scale that seemed sympathetic to downtown New Brunswick.” The idea was “a building in a park, and a park in the city—so we wanted people to feel that they were passing by a park, not just a corporate headquarters.” [17] Burke, contrary to Sellars’ vision, “actually would have preferred to have no tower,” Cobb said.

Another aspect of the initial plan that Cobb mentioned was the expansion of Route 18. Cobb read a letter from faculty and students of the New Jersey School of Architecture protesting the expansion of Route 18. It read in part: “According to my information, Johnson & Johnson, which practically owns New Brunswick and Middlesex County, is using economic blackmail to force this plan by threatening to move out if the bridge isn’t built.” [24]

Cobb returned to issues of design when he discussed the debate over what kind of presence Johnson & Johnson should have in New Brunswick. [27] Some advocated a building on George Street with retail on the ground level and offices above. “In the end, we opted for, as I said, the building in the park—the park in the city,” which had to do with “industrialist” security concerns, Cobb said. [27-28] “The reality is that the park couldn’t just be flung open to people,” he said, so the design “picked up on the Rutgers campus precedent of the low wall with a raised ground level beyond it. It’s an interesting thing that when you have a wall, if you raise the ground level beyond it, it reads much less like a wall.” [28]

KEY QUOTATIONS

[Quotations have been edited for grammar and alphabetized by topic]

Appraisal of Downtown New Brunswick Assets and Liabilities [12]

Assets

- *Compactness of the downtown*
- *Proximity of residential areas*
- *Proximity of major educational institutions*
- *Presence of J&J*
- *Presence of County office*
- *Topography*
- *River and canals*
- *Slope from George Street to the river (very positive in our view)*
- *Attractive nineteenth-century buildings and sites*
- *Sense of history*
- *George Street: Tradition of retail, attractive scale, elevated position on the ground*

Liabilities (Cobb noted that this assessment was made early in the course of the study)

- *Image of decline, especially in the retail area*
- *Derelict state of east side of Hiram Street to Bayard*
- *Proximity of ugly, crime-ridden public housing*
- *Too many vacant buildings and vacant sites*

Liabilities (continued)

- *Fragmentation*
- *Traffic congestion*
- *Inadequate access, circulation, and parking. Any development strategy for the future must be based on a concept for circulation on parking, which will eliminate existing inadequacies.*

Design Concerns

Jim Burke was very supportive of the park idea, but the reality is that the park couldn't just be flung open to people. And so what we did is we picked up on the Rutgers campus precedent of the low wall with a raised ground level beyond it. It's an interesting thing that when you have a wall, if you raise the ground level beyond it, it reads much less like a wall. You know, a wall with the ground on both sides is just a wall, but if it's a change of plane and has a different reading, then somehow I think it works—that you're invited to enjoy the park even though you're not in it. And of course there is public access from one corner, but I don't know how public it is—"Look, but don't touch." So from that point of view it's problematic because it really doesn't do anything for George Street, although arguably George Street is long enough from the point of view of pedestrian traffic. [28]

Development Strategy

Then I came back and described a development strategy as it was emerging. "Based on the circulation concept, we can now define the desirable character of major streets in the downtown:

- *George Street: Retain existing scale, improve conditions for pedestrians, reduce through traffic, strengthen the retail spine.*
- *Albany Street: Widen. Landscape to create a boulevard image."*

As you can see, that was important to us because it was within our power to do that, and that's what led to our treatment of Albany Street between George Street and the river, which I regarded as one of the better pieces of urban design that we've done. [12-13]

Herbert S. Swan's 1925 Plan for New Brunswick (*The New Brunswick Plan*)

His approach to planning was exactly what we had in mind, but in a very sensitive way, not at all sort of tabula rasa, wipe everything clean—but very much about going in and making a very limited surgical kind of plan—very civically oriented. Very much about the quality of urban space and streetscape, and this kind of thing. So the reason I copied this—and I haven't read it for a good many years—was because I thought of it as a kind of a wonderful model, which I hadn't known existed, for how to deal with a city like New Brunswick. And I also saw it as an emblem of something, maybe a lesson that my generation failed to learn in our enthusiasm for wiping the slate clean. So, this actually influenced our thinking. [11]

Johnson & Johnson's Decision to Stay in New Brunswick

Johnson & Johnson was trying to be a good citizen. The decision to stay in New Brunswick and expand in New Brunswick certainly took a lot of debate within Johnson & Johnson. They almost went to the suburbs. [10]

Johnson & Johnson Headquarters

Our work for Johnson & Johnson began under Dick Sellars and continued under Jim Burke; Dick Sellars sort of thought about J&J headquarters in monumental terms. He wanted a skyscraper; originally that's what he wanted—a skyscraper. We sort of talked him out of that because we—well, there were a whole lot of practical reasons, but also we wanted to engage this property on a scale that seemed sympathetic to downtown New Brunswick. The phrase I used was “It's a building in a park, and a park in a city”—so we wanted people to feel that they were passing by a park, not just a corporate headquarters. It has really grown up amazingly. But when Jim Burke came in, his view about an appropriate posture for J&J in New Brunswick was the exact opposite [of Sellars' view]. He actually would have preferred to have no tower. I mean, we have a very slender tower. He said to me several times if he had it to do it over he would have had no tower. I think the tower actually works without being too dominant; I think it's appropriate to the scale of the city. [17-18]

Planning for Johnson & Johnson and New Brunswick Tomorrow

More or less simultaneously, with doing the work for J&J we were asked to do a sort of framework plan for downtown New Brunswick for New Brunswick Tomorrow. And, of course, we clearly recognized that these were two different plans, but at the same time the sponsorship of J&J was so essential to New Brunswick Tomorrow, and we had been in other situations where we had done corporate headquarters and a corporate client has wanted to place—which I think is a very responsible thing to do—their headquarters in the context of a larger plan. It almost always exposes us and the corporate client to suspicion of manipulation: Strings are being pulled from the corporate center, so to speak, even though it's a separate enterprise. We regard it as a completely separate enterprise. We didn't have any contact with Johnson & Johnson with regard to the work for New Brunswick Tomorrow because Helderich was the chairman of it, but the people we dealt with and the people we were reporting to were community, not Johnson & Johnson people. So there were parallel efforts. Obviously, they were interactive in a certain sense. [5-6]

Regrets

I'm sorry that the hotel wasn't a better piece of architecture. [28]

Urban Renewal

By the end of the 1960s, we were very much aware of more of the shortcomings of urban renewal than of its accomplishments. We were very much aware, for example, of the sort of fatal flaw in the urban renewal planning process, which tended to over-prescribe renewal through the medium of illustrative site plans; the phrase I like is to stretch one mind across many acres, which is a fatal thing to do in cities. And the reason I'm mentioning that is by the time we became engaged in New Brunswick, we were very much aware of that problem, and very anxious to avoid that problem. In other words, we saw ourselves as planners helping to develop a strategy for renewal, but eager to avoid prescribing too much—and that our work for New Brunswick Tomorrow was very much strategic. [9]