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## NEWSLETTER

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### THE COLUMBUS IRON WORKS—AN URBAN TONIC IN THE SOUTH

*Editor's note: The following article is the fifth in a series on trends in the adaptive reuse of industrial buildings, by Eric DeLony.*

Traveling through many cities of the South can be a heartbreaking experience. Until 30 years ago, most were bustling retail, commercial, and industrial centers. The streets were alive with shoppers, businessmen, and farmers going about their work until the noon dinner hour. Afterward, street activity usually subsided with the afternoon heat. Today, many Southern cities look like ghost towns regardless of the time of day. Unable to compete with suburban shopping malls surrounding the central business districts, downtown stores are abandoned, boarded up, and decaying. The only functioning buildings typically are those providing municipal services, the city hall, police station, and courthouse. A few supporting activities also will survive, such as lawyers' offices, insurance agencies, lunch counters, and office supply stores.

Recognizing too late the hemorrhaging effect of the suburban shopping mall, civic leaders attempted urban revitalization by applying nostrums found useful in other parts of the country, such as "mallings" main streets with brick paving, planters, and designer street lights and furniture. These improvements were vain attempts to limit vehicular access, return the streets to the people, and retain the few businesses that had not fled to the suburban malls. Some

communities went even further by razing the old, abandoned commercial buildings and erecting civic centers, auditoriums, and coliseums with their attendant acres of asphalt parking lots. Such facilities usually are poorly designed and completely out of scale, and many are in dire financial straits because the communities cannot support them.

Like many other Southern cities, Columbus, Ga. [site of the 1979 SIA Annual Conference; *SIAN* May 79:3-6], began to lose its downtown vitality to the suburbs. But before taking radical action, the city asked itself what characteristics made this city different. The answer was its location on the Chattahoochee River where the river falls 125 feet within 2½ miles, producing a potential energy of 99,000 hp. This power potential made Columbus one of the leading industrial centers of the South, attracting investors and entrepreneurs as early as 1828. As the 19th C progressed into the 20th, textile mills, grain mills, and factories were built along the Chattahoochee's banks, allowing Columbus to share the claim, with Augusta, that it was a "Lowell of the South."

Unlike many New England mill towns, Columbus retains much of its industry along the river. When a HAER team arrived in the summer of 1977 to document these industries, it found a remarkable survival of the late 19th and early 20th-C industrial

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#### COLUMBUS IRON WORKS.

*Right: Architect's birdseye rendering of the completed Columbus Iron Works Trade and Convention Center. Pound, Flowers & Dedwylder Architects drawing.*

*Below: Front Street facades of the foundry buildings under rehabilitation. Van Jones Martin photograph.*

