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CANOPY'S BEAUTY WAS ALWAYS IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER (Published May 7, 2005, Columbia Business Times) - 5/7/2005

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CANOPY'S BEAUTY WAS ALWAYS IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

COLUMBIA, Mo. – In 1968, Columbians effectively traded “Coney Island” for “Dodge City” in downtown Columbia.

Supporters complained about the ugliness of throngs of competing overhead signs in garish neon, and an architectural hodgepodge of building fronts that made Broadway look like Coney Island. They also argued that the canopy would be convenient, would shelter shoppers from the elements and would keep them downtown, away from nearby “shopping plazas,” meaning mainly Parkade Plaza, Columbia’s first mall, which would later be superseded by Columbia Mall.

Detractors who thought the new canopy designed by Chinn, Darrough and Co. was no improvement said Columbia’s downtown now looked like a cow-town boardwalk on the frontier. They found it oppressive. It hid from view the stores underneath its dark, massive frame. And it took six months or so after it was built before lights were added underneath to illuminate the shadowy walkways where muggers and assorted bogeymen might lurk.

The architectural device was meant to separate the old from the new by celebrating the unified Victorian upper stories while hiding the ugly hodgepodge beneath. By closing off Broadway to all but pedestrian traffic, the area would become more like a mall. Supporters listed towns that had tried similar ideas including Atchison, Kansas; Keokuk, Iowa; and Fresno, Calif.

But the canopy never quite fit the downtown temperament. Many improvements were suggested over the years, the most notable ideas being an urban designer in the 1970s who thought the canopy should be used as a walkway to access stores on the second floor and an artist a few years ago who recommended that the canopy be scrapped in favor of a crystal roof covering the whole of downtown.

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