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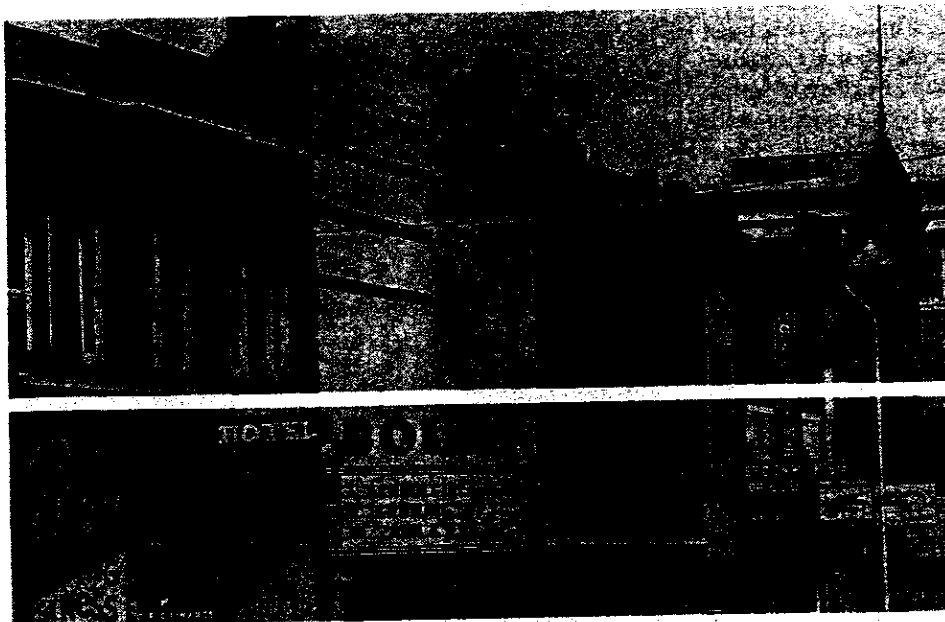
GIVING THE SHAH EVERYTHING HE WANTS

If You Haven't Paid Tribute Yet, You Will

L. J. Davis

TEARING DOWN BOISE

One day there may be nothing but a shopping center left of Boise, Idaho



Friends of Old Buildings

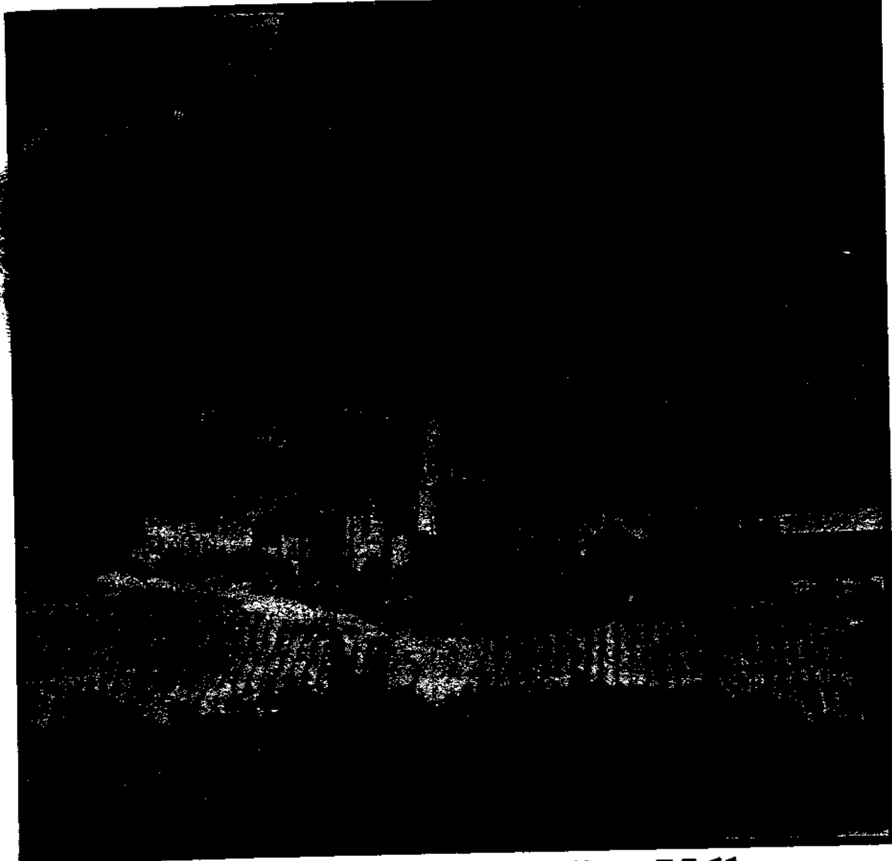
ONLY TWICE in this century have other Americans had much reason to think, for good or ill, about the modest metropolis of Boise, Idaho. The first time was in 1907, when Clarence Darrow unexpectedly persuaded a local jury to acquit Big Bill Haywood, the labor organizer, who had been accused of hiring the bomb-murderer of a former Idaho Governor. The second time was in the 1950s, when Boise was shaken by a homosexual scandal that briefly made it something of a national laughingstock. Now, unhappily, the place is about to get a third crack at notoriety. If things go on as they are, Boise stands an excellent chance of becoming the first American city to have deliberately eradicated itself.

Boise is the capital of Idaho, the seat of Ada County, and the only significant business center between Salt Lake City, Utah, and Portland, Oregon, a distance of some 750 miles. At the time of the 1970 census it had a population of 74,990 people, 28,000 of them Mormons. In addition, there were about 7,000 Basques—whose ancestors had been imported to herd sheep—160 Amerindians, 136 Japanese, 89 Chinese, 4 Filipinos, and 268 blacks, 69 of whom were fortunate enough to hold jobs. The city is said to owe its curious name to a group of wandering French fur traders who stumbled on the site in 1811, beheld the cottonwoods lining the river that wound through the broad alluvial plain at the foot of the mountains, and immediately (if the heroic mural that graces the front of South Junior High School is taken as an authority) began hollering, *"Les bois!"*—a logical notion, considering the vast sagebrush desert these gentlemen had been crossing for days on end. Boise still styles itself "The City of Trees," although at the moment it is in serious danger of becoming The City of Stumps. Dutch-elm disease has arrived, and 600 of the city's 7,000 majestic elms have recently died.

Despite its isolation and small population, Boise is a headquarters town. The Boise Cascade corporation has its main offices there, in a large, squat new building constructed of a material that local people politely refer to as "brown." Trees grow behind glass in its lobby, while men with New York haircuts, carrying Italian briefcases, move in and out of the doors in a steady stream. Morrison-Knudsen, one of the world's largest construction companies, is headquartered on the other side of town; the Continental Life and Accident Company is renovating a structure on Main Street; and J.R. Simplot, who made his stack in dehydrated potatoes during World War II, will locate his headquarters in a fourteen-story office building now going up nearby.

Boise treats big business with the same tenderness with which Panama treats ships. The working class is homogeneous, industrious, and fiercely docile; people go to work at eight, head for home at five or later, and the two-martini lunch, while not unknown, is not much in evidence. The city has no slums worthy of the name and, therefore, no militants. It is rock-ribbed Republican territory; perhaps the only reason Idaho currently has a Democratic Governor is that his Republican predecessor rashly tried to give the White Cloud Mountain Range to a mining company. Boiseans still smoke Camels, drink Scotch on the rocks, wear miniskirts, and believe in progress. The companies understandably find this moral climate helpful; they pay good wages, and their workers give good value. The result is the kind

L. J. Davis's latest book is Walking Small, *a novel, to be published by George Braziller.*



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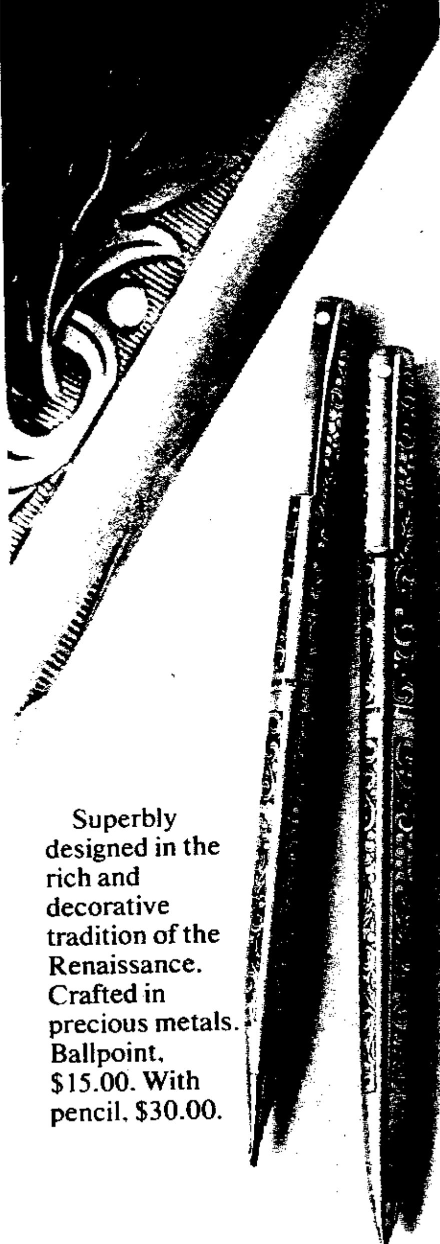
of economic vigor and social peace that has become utterly alien to much of the rest of the country. Yet Boise is a dying city.

It is dying for the same reason so many other small American cities are dying, have died, or will shortly begin to die: an overdose of a fatal witches' brew composed of automobiles, greed, bad planning, good intentions, idiotic architecture, and civic pride run wild. Depending on which way you come into town, Boise appears to consist exclusively of used-car lots or fast-food restaurants, among the latter an incredible chain called Sambo's, in whose restaurants diners eat (guess what?) pancakes beneath cute, glassy murals depicting episodes in the life of the weirdly yellowish (jaundice? hepatitis?) little hero of the once-popular nursery tale. In the part of Brooklyn where I now live, a place like that would be firebombed fifteen minutes after it opened its doors.

Downtown Boise gives the impression that it has recently been visited by an exceedingly tidy bombing raid conducted by planes that cleaned up after themselves. Main Street is virtually deserted. A few eerily patronless stores still stand on the north side, the offices above them empty, while across the street a small inland sea of parking lots stretches as far south as the railroad tracks two blocks away. The old Bouquet tavern is still there, with its heroic, golden-oak bar, and a new office building is going up a few hundred yards away, but in the midst of all that desolate emptiness they look as forlorn as buffalo standing in the rain at the zoo. On the corner of Eleventh Street, the Grand Hotel has been obliterated by a California-style face-lift of mansard roofs and gray stucco; it has been renamed the Safari Motor Inn.

Downtown still makes a brave show of doing business in the principal canyon of trade along Idaho Street, but no one seems to be paying much attention; on a recent warm, bright Tuesday morning—perfect shopper's weather—a cannonball, if fired the length of the sidewalk, would have struck exactly nineteen people. At six o'clock in the evening the town closes up completely, with light still in the sky. Then there is a fifteen-minute traffic



jam on the roads leading west, toward the suburbs, where more than half the county's population now lives —a traffic jam Boiseans find intolerable, and they are thinking of building a whacking big freeway to eliminate it—and after that, the central business district belongs to the newspapers blowing in the gutter, its vacant pavements illuminated by new streetlamps topped by giant aluminum coolie hats.

In the East the reason for much of the suburban exodus is colored black; in Boise it has four wheels and honks. The automobile, however, is only a passive instrument, the executor of a policy that has its real roots elsewhere.

Planning came late to Boise. Until the early Seventies, politics in the city was of the time-honored good-ole-boy variety, with the Mayor and members of the city council going about their jobs as a sort of sideline to their private businesses. A few years ago a number of the city fathers stood to make a good deal of money off the way the city was sprawling to the west, out into the best farmland in the county, and they saw nothing wrong with doing so. The Mayor himself was a prominent builder. "They had no notion whatever of what the planning process entails," said a local official. "It was a simple matter of feathering their own nests. I never heard of a place where the vested interests were so blatantly in control. They had no notion whatever of public service, of what being a public servant entails. You can't plan in a situation like that. The pressures get to be unbearable."

The head of the Ada Council of Governments, Bob McAbee, resigned in July 1973, after two futile years of trying to keep the city from turning into a mini-Los Angeles. Within the next two months, eight of the ten professionals on his staff followed his example. Although a new city government has since come to power, his successor, Alvin Marsden, is understandably a cautious man.

So much for checking urban sprawl. Meanwhile, in another part of the forest—the central business district—other forces were energetically at work. They were tearing the place down.

The Boise Redevelopment Agency was formed as long ago as 1966. Like so many similar agencies across the country, its goal is to arrest urban decay and stem the flight from the inner city. In its eight-year pursuit of this commendable purpose, it has gone through three developers—Urban Properties, Inc., of Pittsburgh, which decided it couldn't afford the project; Boise Cascade, which overextended itself in other fields and had to withdraw; and the current designee, the Dayton-Hudson Corporation of Minneapolis—but almost from the beginning, BRA and its appointed commissioners have been inflexibly wedded to a single concept: a megastructure. As currently envisaged, this would be a single vast building, housing under one roof an air-conditioned shopping mall, over 800,000 square feet of commercial space (including three department stores), 300,000 square feet of office space, a hotel of over 250 rooms, and 2,444 parking spaces. An additional 1,800 parking places are planned for satellite structures scattered around the site. It would be, in effect, a super-suburban shopping center. The construction of this monolith entails the total clearance of eight blocks in the heart of the city and portions of three more—a good half of downtown. The only building to be retained is the Bank of Idaho, a 1964 edifice of numbing mediocrity that resembles nothing so much as a stack of giant toaster ovens. The total cost of the project ranges between $70 million and $200 million, depending on whom you talk to.

THE MEN AND WOMEN OF BRA are engaging and civic-minded people; they are without a doubt the nicest bunch of urban planners I have ever met. The agency's chairman, Carroll Sellars, is a charming merchant of the old school, and the executive director, Gary Hughes, is an earnest and disarming young man. They are neither villains nor fools and, by their lights, they have achieved much. For example, they have cleared almost all the land south of Main Street. Relocation of the businesses that existed there has been carried out with a lack of casualties that should make the managers of most clearance projects envious. (They have lost exactly three; the owners of two chose to retire, and the third, a Basque hotel owner in his eighties, was shot dead

by one of his tenants in a non-clearance-related dispute.) The city treasury will lose no tax moneys if the megastructure is built, and private industry will bear nearly half the cost. Perhaps most important in a city afflicted by both an inferiority complex and an outspoken affection for such local wonders as Arrowrock Dam (the tallest in the world between 1915 and 1932), there is no denying that the megastructure will be the biggest thing of its kind for miles and miles.

At the same time, it is hard to shake the feeling that the people at BRA are affected with a species of tunnel vision. BRA has no fallback position, no alternative plan. As far as BRA is concerned, the megastructure must be built, come hell or high water. Damn the objections, full speed ahead. The objections are many.

"My God," says Bob McAbee, "when I got there and saw what they were doing—the kind of total clearance that has been discredited on both coasts for years—I simply couldn't believe my eyes."

It is not just that total clearance is currently unfashionable; total clearance is out of favor in most cities because it has never worked. Leveling a business district takes time, sometimes years, and it does not take a great deal of thought to perceive that turning it into a temporary prairie of parking lots only increases the centrifugal forces that caused the area to decline in the first place. If the only thing you can do when you come downtown is park your car where the place used to be, most people are pretty much inclined to say the hell with it. They go to the suburban shopping centers instead—not just some of the time, but all of the time. Once the megastructure is built—*if* it is built—there is absolutely no guarantee that these people will suddenly come streaming back. Except for its sheer bulk, it does not differ substantially from the suburban malls these people will have increasingly accustomed themselves to. It is no easier to get to, and in many cases it is harder. Parking will cost money; in the suburban centers it is free. Nor can the managers of those centers be expected to take competition from the megastructure lying down. BRA proposes to overcome these difficulties by holding concerts in the mall. It is a solution that strikes more than one observer as the equivalent of whistling in the dark, except that in Boise's case it more closely resembles fiddling in a dirigible hanger.

The buildings already torn down or in the path of further demolition were low and sturdy structures, put up before the advent of such modern miracles as elevaters and air conditioning. They were adapted to the climate of the high desert as best they could be, with thick walls, tall ceilings, and windows that went up and down. The megastructure, by contrast, is elevatored, escalatored, and air-conditioned to a fare-thee-well; the enclosed central mall itself is a couple of stories high at least, which is a lot of empty space to cool off or heat up, as the case may be, especially when you consider that it also has an immense glass roof. Moreover, the entire concept is almost totally dependent on the automobile, with all its integrated and satellite parking spaces designed to accommodate the sort of vehicles that, in New York, are driven by black pimps. The energy crisis hasn't yet hit Boise with anything like an instructive impact. Gas is not only plentiful but a good deal cheaper than it is in the East, even though the nearest refinery is on the coast, 400 miles away, and television pictures betray no tendency to shrink alarmingly on hot days. There can be little doubt that the energy pinch will eventually creep up on Boise, however—no place in the world can escape it, not even rock-ribbed Republican territory—and the megastructure's enormous need for power will do its bit to chivvy matters along. It is at least possible that in a decade or so Boiseans will wake up one morning to discover that their $70 million or $200 million (as I said, it depends on whom you talk to) has bought them the largest potting shed in the Intermountain West.

There is also the possibility that the megastructure may never be built at all. The actual building of it hinges on the three department stores that will form its commercial heart; if there are no department stores, there will be no megastructure. As a recent letter in the local paper remarked, they might just as well plant sagebrush in the parking lots and give the town back to the coyotes. Of the three, the essential store is J.C. Penney. If Penney moves in, a domino effect is expected, with two other companies falling neatly into place. If Penney does not come in, however, everyone will have to put his thinking cap on again. At the moment, Penney betrays no inclination to commit itself to anything. It already has a perfectly good store in downtown Boise, and it also has somewhere else to go, if it wants to.

The last fly in the ointment is a man named Harry Daum, and he wants J. C. Penney's, too. Harry Daum appears to have vowed that grass will grow in the streets of Boise before his days are done. He is a small, round, intimidating man (he didn't seem to blink once in the course of a forty-five-minute interview) who came up from California in 1960 with the notion of building shopping centers. This he has proceeded to do in the suburbs with considerable panache and uneven success. Now he proposes to build a grand shopping center close to the city: the West Boise Mall or, as his opponents would have it, Daumtown. Like the downtown megastructure, the new center would include over 800,000 square feet of commercial space. Its 600 acres would also support light industry, office space, a golf course, and 1,200 units of housing. Needless to say, Harry Daum would like to have J.C. Penney's just as much as BRA would, for the same reasons. The Daumtown site stands spang in the population center of Ada County. It is adjacent to a railroad line that could easily be converted to mass transit if the county planners ever come to their senses. Harry Daum has done his homework, and if he gets his way, not only is the megastructure finished, but so is downtown Boise.

MEANWHILE, A LOT OF the citizens of Boise have reached a point where they don't want a bit of it. No megastructure. No Daumtown. Not any of it at all.

Boiseans are an amiable, even-tempered people. Slow to anger, relatively untouched by urban traumas, they have had little experience in community organization outside their churches. Not long ago, though, a great many of them made the common discovery that cars were parked where their childhoods used to be, that their city was in serious danger

of ceasing to exist, and that directly in the path of the bulldozers lay virtually all that remained of their architectural heritage. It made them mad as hell.

BRA's Phase II area, north of Main Street, is still standing and only partially vacated. It is on this ground that the battle has been joined. On one of the threatened blocks stands Idaho's only Richardsonian Romanesque office building. Nearby is the Eastman Building with its cornice of lions' heads, almost empty now, its shredded canvas awnings blowing in the wind like tattered flags; the handsome, massively rusticated Union Block; and, perhaps most important of all, the Ada Theater.

The Ada is one of the last Egyptian-style movie palaces in the United States. Built in 1927 by a local architect named Fritz Hummel, it has a tile roof, walls three feet thick, and interior decoration that must be seen to be believed. A pair of lovingly detailed lotus columns support the proscenium arch, on which are painted a gaggle of barechested but oddly nippleless dancing girls who appear to be either shaking their fists at some musicians or desperately imploring them to stop. Above is a giant scarab that looks as if it weighs a ton. Flanking the stage itself—where once, incredibly, I sang "Ghost Riders in the Sky" at Uncle Don's (or was it Uncle Jim's?) kiddie matinee—are a pair of crosslegged Pharaohs, curiously tricked out with more of those nippleless breasts and holding bowls of red neon in their laps. I'm told there used to be a mummy in the lobby, but that was before my time.

The theater was opened to the public on a recent morning by a group called Citizens for a Better Capital which began its program with a recital of longtime favorites on the old pneumatic organ. In addition to *vox humana* and the rest of the usual stops, this wonderful machine can also do sleigh bells and tambourines, and did. (There used to be a stop for horses' hooves, too, but it was broken long ago.) Then we saw a movie made about twenty years ago for the Chamber of Commerce. It told us what fine fellows our local merchants are, and it exhorted us to go to church every Sunday. Every time an old landmark appeared on the screen the audience cheered, and when the lights went up again, 700 people were present. A girl went up front and told us in tones of the purest Virginian why it was essential to stop Harry Daum and save the rest of downtown from BRA, and the director of the local art museum, who comes from California, told us why he hadn't liked it there and why he liked it here. Many of the most ardent preservationists in Boise come from outside the state, and a good many of them live in huge, handsomely restored Victorian houses in the oldest part of town.

BRA's answer to these people is one that will strike a wearyingly familiar note in the ears of preservationists everywhere: nothing can be done. Boise is in a class-two earthquake zone, and the old buildings have wooden foundations. They provide none of the amenities of modern structures. The cost of rehabilitation is prohibitive. "Let's face it," says Carroll Sellars, "most of these old buildings are junkpiles. We're not tearing down a damn thing that's worth anything. If the historic preservationists had been around in olden times, the whole world would look like the Parthenon."

Setting aside such an alarming spectacle, it must be admitted that Sellars has a certain amount of right on his side. It *would* cost a bundle to rehabilitate the old buildings, although a number of them appear to be in absolutely splendid condition even now. In Boise, as in almost everywhere else, the cause of historic preservation is an uphill fight because it is subjective. It is impossible to put a price tag on the value of a city's culture, although it is childishly simple to put a price tag on the cost of obliterating it forever. "It's a question of context," says Arthur A. Hart, director of the state historical museum. "A question of knowing who we are and where we come from. A question of our human identity. The megastructure is inhuman. Not only that, but it could be anywhere in the world."

These are good words, and one has heard them before, often while a wrecker's ball was swinging somewhere in the background. An old tale is being played out in Boise, and it probably will not end well. Irreparable damage has already been done. If Boise succeeds in obliterating itself for a shopping mall, there exists a sinister likelihood that at least some other small cities will follow suit, not because the megastructure works, but because it was built at all. The lessons of New York City's public housing projects, of Los Angeles's catastrophic freeway system did not prevent hundreds of other cities from following their path, with similar, inevitable, and easily predictable results. If a technology exists, somebody will use it.

On my last day in Boise, I went down to the corner of Capital Boulevard and Front Street, where Chinatown used to be. A little park occupies the site now, on the edge of the vacant lots, with a couple of concrete benches and a few shrubs in pots and no shade at all. It was a hot day without a breath of wind, not a cloud in the sky, and the desert making itself felt just over the horizon. I sat down on one of the benches and tried to remember what had been here, where the Hip Sing Association had been, where the herbalist's had been, thinking about the legends of tunnels under the streets. I found myself wondering—okay, not without a certain amount of bathos, but what the hell, this was my history somebody had just wiped out—what I would tell my son if I ever brought him here. I remembered that I'd once written about a character in a novel who had felt much the same way. The character in my novel was sixty-five years old.

After a while I became aware of something odd. People were flashing past in their cars out there, no doubt on their way to some distant shopping center or other. As they went by, they stared at me. It was clear that they'd never seen anybody sitting in the little park before. I was interesting: not as interesting as Chinatown used to be, but interesting. They were wondering what was wrong with me, why I'd chosen to sit out there on that hard bench in that worthless little scrap of park at ten o'clock in the morning in ninety-degree weather, surrounded by roads and cars. I had to admit that it was pretty damned peculiar, all right, and I immediately got up and walked away across the parking lots toward what was left of the town where I was born, thinking about the words of Harry Thaw on seeing a particularly atrocious new building. "My God," he said, "I shot the wrong architect." □