

## The Commercial Appeal - (Memphis, TN)

### A Makeover for Memphis Ugly

Coyote Ugly conjures up images of a party atmosphere on Beale Street.

The image of **Memphis Ugly** doesn't bring up much of anything good about the city.

Coyote Ugly recently opened a Beale Street saloon where women dance on the bar. No, it's not a church, but it fits Tennessee's most famous music and club venue. And it's not really ugly. It's just a catchy brand name.

**Memphis Ugly**, on the other hand, is visible block after block and is truly unsightly, unpleasant and dangerous.

That's where we are at the moment.

While Savannah, Ga., Charleston, S.C., and Chattanooga are making the pages of travel magazines for their esthetically pleasing, Southern urban landscapes, Memphis is left behind as a place where you have to carefully guide newcomers around the blight.

Visitors landing at Memphis International Airport get an eyeful when they drive up Airways toward Midtown. More than one company executive, including some managers at The Commercial Appeal, have off handedly suggested new recruits not be driven along Airways, lest they get a bad first impression.

Fans who leave FedEx Forum can be in for a shock, too. Should they turn south instead of north after a big game or a concert, they will soon run into block after block of **Memphis Ugly** that lies near the center of the city's billion-dollar Downtown revitalization.

What word besides ugly can describe the dozens of run-down, overgrown, tacky neighborhoods across the city? The suburbs aren't immune, either. There, the earliest monoculture subdivisions and mall developments are frayed and unfriendly to human beings.

Here at the newspaper, we've talked about a bad neighbor contest to highlight the worst blight in the city.

Now, the Memphis chapter of The American Institute of Architects has a better idea.

The Memphis AIA leadership has begun to ask builders, architects and civic leaders if they would help establish the Memphis Regional Design Center.

The center would be a place where people interested in cleaning up **Memphis Ugly**

could come to discuss ways to improve zoning laws, fight blight and work on master plans to cultivate a more livable, pleasing urban environment.

"We need to do something about the way we are planning what happens in our city," explained Jim Lutz, an architect member of the AIA's design center committee and professor at the University of Memphis. "Some places around Memphis are protected with design review processes, but elsewhere, you can build whatever you want regardless of whether it matches what is to the right and left."

By spring, Lutz will have touched base with more than 50 community leaders to talk about the formation of a Memphis Regional Design Center. In every interview he asks the question that boils down to: Can you think of a place where Memphis looks good?

Often, there follows an uncomfortable silence.

"It's very telling," Lutz admits.

Sure, Memphis has some beautiful places: Harbor Town. Colonial Country Club at dawn. The best of the East Memphis neighborhoods.

Yet there are few places that take your breath away - unless you are inhaling in shock.

A regional design center could help paint a new landscape.

Nashville, Knoxville and Chattanooga all have such programs. Their design centers have helped government and private sector groups work together to plan the best use of open space, redevelop riverfronts and resist unplanned, unsustainable growth patterns.

In a strange way, the lack of attention paid in Memphis to the esthetics of the city has created a rare opportunity for a design center to make a big difference here.

"We really could move pretty quickly," said Lee Askew, the architect who chaired the Memphis AIA chapter's 150th anniversary project, which is the creation of the design center. "In Memphis we're not paralyzed with restrictive covenants, regulations or planning boards."

Askew says design centers work best as autonomous organizations where government, developers and architects come together to imagine how best to create a livable urban environment. "The centers work best when they are inclusive, not just a bunch of pointy-headed architects telling people what to do," he said.

Already, two big names in regional development have signed on to support the design center. Both the Boyle development interests and the Belz development interests have expressed support for the idea.

In the next few days Askew will meet with the city and county mayors to hear their thoughts about establishing a design center to fight against **Memphis Ugly**. In time, Askew believes the center can and should reach across the river to West Memphis and across the state line to DeSoto County.

This discussion of what it will take to make Greater Memphis a more esthetically pleasing city is one that this newspaper will try to foster. It's our job, after all, not just to point out problems - like **Memphis Ugly** - but also to highlight attempts to mediate those problems: creation of a Memphis Regional Design Center.

Who pays for such a center, what powers reside within it, and debate over its recommendations all will be issues to be debated.

The project will need \$750,000 to \$1 million to be launched. It will need the best thinking of those who want the region to grow smart, not just grow sprawled.

But little debate should be required to convince those of us who live here that the idea of a design center is worth our attention. A drive through our overgrown parks and unplanned strip malls and along our neglected riverfront suggests this idea is long overdue.

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