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The Real Deal



**By Sharman Egan**  
*Lagniappe columnist*

OK, I know this isn't the entertainment column but there are so many special events going on right now, I can't resist talking about a couple of them. After all, these aren't just idle diversions. They bring people out, and those people spend money. In the end, it's all about doing bid-ness.

If you were in downtown Mobile on the weekend of Oct. 20, you know what I mean. Between the Downtown Living Tour, Market on the Square and the Gulf Coast Antiques, Food, and Wine Festival, the sidewalks were full and people were spending money. It's clear the times they are a-changin' in old Mobile.

Let's face it, five years ago few people were brave enough to live downtown, and who'd have thought anybody would pay money to see their homes? And while gourmet events are nothing new in the hometown of Eugene Walter, the festival at the Mobile Convention Center set the standard for future events, with more quality antiques than we've seen since "Antiques Roadshow" blew through town, plus fines wines and gourmet food – all at a ticket price even an underpaid columnist could afford.

The Downtown Living Tour featured a nice diversity of homes in three downtown historic districts: Lower Dauphin, Church Street East and DeTonti Square (plus three townhouses in Oakleigh that were apparently trying to bogart on the downtown tour). The homes ranged from historic single-family houses to luxury lofts (St. Louis, Mattress Factory), traditional condos (St. Francis Place), townhouses (Clarkson and Central Park) and three rental apartment buildings.

The oldest house was built in the 1830s (the Williams-Rogers House in DeTonti Square). The newest homes are still under construction or renovation, with quite a few available for purchase. The homes varied in size from small studio apartments in LoDa and a one-bedroom historic cottage in Church Street East, to houses that can only be described as palatial (how about your very own ballroom?).

Carol Hunter of the Downtown Mobile Alliance, the organization that produced the tour, said diversity is the whole idea of downtown living. "The only place you find this kind of

variety is in an urban setting. You won't find it on the Eastern Shore or in the suburbs," she said.

Of course, many people go on home tours just to see the décor. And these homes were nothing if not fabulously decorated. Styles ranged from ultra-chic modern/eclectic (the Switzer Loft and several homes at St. Emanuel Place Apartments) to The-Southern-Living-photographers-just-left traditional. Several were comfortable family homes with children obviously living there. (When I toured, there was even a guy asleep on the sofa in one apartment but that's a whole 'nother story...)

My favorite was the Creole Fire House on N. Dearborn Street. Tilmon Brown (developer of several other buildings on the tour) and his wife have transformed the circa 1872 fire station into a charming home for their family, complete with the original fire pole. And the Browns get extra credit for walking the talk – they moved there a decade or so before living downtown was cool.

The tour also gave me the opportunity to spend some quality time walking the streets of downtown (something I rarely take the time to do) and talking to folks. I picked up a few updates along the way.

Towards the end of the tour, Kevin and I wandered into the soon-to-be Courtyard restaurant (I've heard a number of variations on the name including Courtyard Bistro, Courtyard Manor and The Courtyard on Dauphin Street) at 751 Dauphin St. After grazing at a buffet of yummy appetizers, we made our way back to the courtyard, where we had the opportunity to chat with Cortland Inge, a principal in the new restaurant and one of Mobile's best known chefs.

I'd never seen the courtyard before (we moved to Mobile after the demise of Gus', the restaurant formerly in this space). It was fabulous: comfortable, beautiful and oh, so Mobile. The building owner, Eddie Cornell, has made a number of upgrades to the courtyard, including adding two fireplaces and restrooms. I can't figure out why it won't open until sometime early next year. Based on the appearance of the space, it looked like it was ready to go.

Max Morey, the ever-ebullient project manager for the Crescent Theatre, assured me work is progressing nicely and it will open early next year. It's been a long time coming, but based on what Morey tells me, it will be more than worth the wait. He also promised me free movie tickets for life (I just want to get this down in print so he can't renege on the deal).

I'm already looking forward to the next Downtown Living Tour. Carol Hunter said this first tour was a success with about 500 tickets sold (they're still counting the proceeds which will go towards downtown beautification projects). They're looking at a second tour next fall when there will be even more homes available for viewing.

I couldn't get attendance figures on the Gulf Coast Antiques, Food, and Wine Festival. As we went to press, organizer David Calametti (who also orchestrated Arts! Alive the following weekend) was on a well-deserved vacation. But we spoke just after the event ended on Sunday and he told me it was so successful, he's looking at a repeat performance, most likely next spring.

All I can say is – if you missed these events, don't miss them the next time around.

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