

If you could see her now: The city of Syracuse is polishing more than its image.

who anyone

traveled south on Interstate 81 into Syracuse prior to 1990 may share this memory with Joe Mareane: "As you drove over the rise approaching the city, you passed the Syracuse sign, and off to the right was a scrap yard. A huge scrap yard. There was a billboard right over it and from that billboard emerged a three-dimensional nose. That said a whole lot to me about Syracuse."

If you've somehow forgotten the scrap yard and nose, you might recall the acres and acres of adjacent oil tanks. These merged into the abandoned factories and vacant lots of the city's near northwest side. Then you were there—downtown Syracuse.

"What a devastating way to present your community," says Mareane, a 1979 Maxwell School graduate who is vice president for enterprise development at the Greater Syracuse Chamber of Commerce, and former director of economic development for the city.

Travel that same route today and you'll be surprised by the view. On the site of the sprawling scrap-metal yard sits a sparkling \$270-million mall. Carousel Center offers 160 stores, many new to Central New York. Customers flock there daily from as far away as Canada and Pennsylvania.

The last oil tanks are coming down to make way for



Lord & Taylor, and for Carousel Landing, a discount shopping center that will soon stretch to the south.

You're near the southeast corner of Onondaga Lake here. The lake and its grimy urban shore, long treated as the city cesspool, are being reclaimed. Housing, offices, restaurants, and a marina are coming to the parcel known as the Inner Harbor. The New York State Department of Transportation, which has moved barges through here for decades, recently blessed the project with \$15 million.

Continue toward the city and you'll find many of yesteryear's broken streets are now among Syracuse's finest. Stylish streetlamps, brick sidewalks, gardens, and a park complete with benches, pergolas, statuary, and flowering trees replace longtime neglect. Welcome to Franklin Square, where everything old is new again, and everything new blends in beautifully. The abandoned factories now host restaurants, cafés, prestigious office

PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHN DOWLING

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space, and fashionable condominiums. New brick buildings on the square are home to lucky senior citizens who moved fast enough to secure a spot.

Mareane's assessment today? "One of the most remarkable urban transformations in America."

that's
the story of Syracuse University's hometown in 1994: There's a remarkable transformation underway. If it's been five years or more since you visited, you've got a lot of catching up to do.

Head south from Franklin Square and you'll come to Armory Square, named for the series of buildings that once housed New York's 51st National Guard Regiment.

In the mid-nineteenth century, Guardsmen marched in the oval-shaped park here. Stables lined the perimeter. Over the years the stables gave way to hotels, boarding houses, warehouses, factories, and shops. In the thirties, the railroad moved out of downtown, taking with it most of the life and purpose of Armory Square. Decay and decline defined the next five decades.

"Armory Square was our skid row," says Robert Doucette, attorney, developer, and urban preservationist. Its territory was marked by broken glass, vacant buildings, drunks, prostitutes, pornography shops, and down-and-out bars. That was the situation when Doucette, who graduated from the Maxwell School in 1976 and the College of Law in 1983, teamed with landscape architect George Curry to do something about the area.

"We were frustrated by the fact there was no downtown development," Doucette says. "Finally we said, 'Let's not talk about this anymore; let's do it.'"

Their first project was the Labor Temple Building, a four-story Victorian sporting detailed brick ornamentation across a multicolored façade. It was vacant and in desperate straits when Doucette and Curry purchased it for \$45,000 in 1983. Two years and \$600,000 later, the building claimed a share of the Downtown Committee's Environmental Improvement Award

for outstanding renovation. Converted to a multiuse building housing retail, commercial, and residential space, the Labor Temple is best known as the location of Pastabilities, one of Armory Square's first and most successful restaurant/bars.

Through a variety of other partnerships, Doucette has rescued a half dozen other buildings, all charming relics of urban America's golden age. These structures survived because the land wasn't valuable enough to make tearing them down worthwhile, Doucette explains. That curse has matured into a blessing. In 1984, Armory Square earned historic district status.

"That was important because it allowed for tax credits, which were a big thing at the time," says Doucette. "It encouraged more development."

Doucette's latest project rises today in the long-vacant lot that marks the heart of Armory Square. Center Armory will bring 38 two-story townhouses to the neighborhood, 28,000 square feet of retail and commercial space, and underground parking for 120 cars. More important, it will change the face of the square and the city.

"What we are trying to do is create an urban lifestyle in Syracuse," says Doucette. "A lot of people have the misconception that you need to be a really big city to have an urban lifestyle. It's not true. In many ways, Syracuse is the perfect place for this."

He's not alone. "I think this area could explode," says Michael J.

The Carousel Center (with an artist's rendering of the new Lord & Taylor store, which is scheduled to open in October) houses four full-service restaurants, a 13-eatery food court, and 160 stores, many of which are new to the Central New York area.

Falcone, founder and senior partner of the Pioneer Group and Pioneer Development, and a 1957 SU School of Management graduate.

Falcone is speaking from his office at 250 South Clinton, on the dividing line between the historic district and the rest of downtown. A captivating postmodern tribute to brick, stone, granite, and glass, the building rose from a vacant lot to offer six stories of proof that downtown Syracuse has a bright future.

Within its 240,000 square feet, 250 South Clinton houses roughly 600 employees of AT&T, Dean Witter, and Pioneer, among others. Falcone also brought the city's finest restaurant, Pascale, to this site from a much smaller location in a residential neighborhood on the north side.

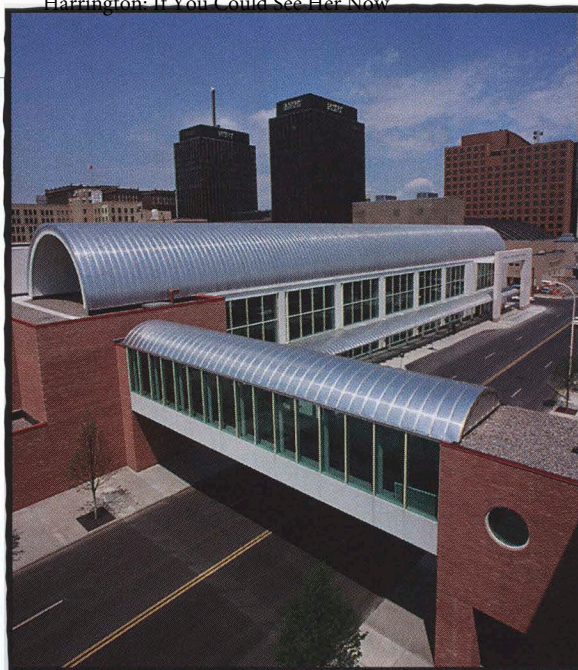
"We've probably been responsible for more development in the down-



COURTESY OF THE PYRAMID COMPANIES

With construction of the \$80-million OnCenter (right), Syracuse has rejuvenated its reputation as a convention city. Many conventioners—and locals—opt to spend their free time in Armory Square (below), home to some of the city's most interesting and eclectic shops and restaurants.

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and an MBA from the School of Management in 1977. "I haven't been there in years." No need.

The once-grand Hotel Syracuse, 70 years old this year, is being restored to its former glory at a cost of \$7 million. Soon SU's popular former football coach, Dick MacPherson, will open a sports bar on the premises. Although the bean counters have said tear it down, new owner Michael Bennett believes the hotel is worth the effort. Like-minded citi-

zens have purchased a second chance for dozens of aging landmarks. In one instance, the hopeless interior was scraped out and a modern parking garage built in its place. Only the most careful observer can discern the garage ramps behind the nineteenth-century windows of South Warren Street's Larned Building.

Center—has rejuvenated Syracuse's century-old reputation as Convention City. Among OnCenter's coups: the 1999 national tournament and convention of the American Bowling Congress, which will bring an estimated 40,000 bowlers and \$38.7 million to town.

There's talk of an expansion across the street for the nationally respected Everson Museum of Art, now 25 years old, and speculation that I.M. Pei himself may return to design the addition.

The castle-like former armory on West Jefferson now houses the Milton J. Rubenstein Museum of Science and Technology. By 1995, it will include an Omnifax theater.

A large and diverse group of investors has united to bring an American Hockey League team to the War Memorial. A test game last December between Binghamton and Hershey sold out easily. The Syracuse Symphony Orchestra survived a test of its viability. Syracuse Stage is thriving. And the city's shopping options, thanks largely to Carousel Center, now rival those of the Big Apple—Bonwit Teller, Banana Republic, Pottery Barn, Williams-Sonoma, Eddie Bauer, Ann Taylor.

When Carousel Center General Manager Barbara Ashkin came to Syracuse from New Jersey to attend SU in 1970, she viewed Central New York as a retail wasteland. "I used to travel to New York to shop at Bloomingdale's," says Ashkin, who earned her bachelor's degree from the College of Arts and Sciences in 1974

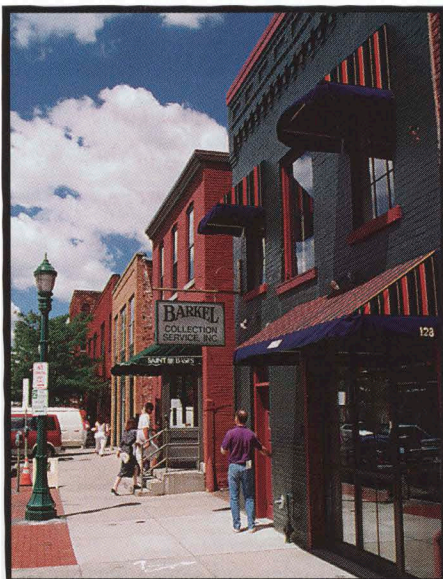
"People have a mindset that economic development means steel girders rising into the sky," says Mareane. "Around here, they should be paying more attention to all the debris chutes coming down from old buildings undergoing renovation."

The city was surprised to learn in 1993 that more than \$1 billion had been invested in new development within its boundaries in the previous seven years. That's a big number for a city encompassing only 25 square miles. "My guess is we had higher investment spending per capita than any other city of our size in the country," says Mareane.

The city recently invested \$10 million in cosmetic improvements to the central business district—trees, sidewalks, benches, and colorful new streetlamps in a historic period design. Some thought it a poor use of dwindling city resources; others, like Doucette and Mareane, viewed it as essential.

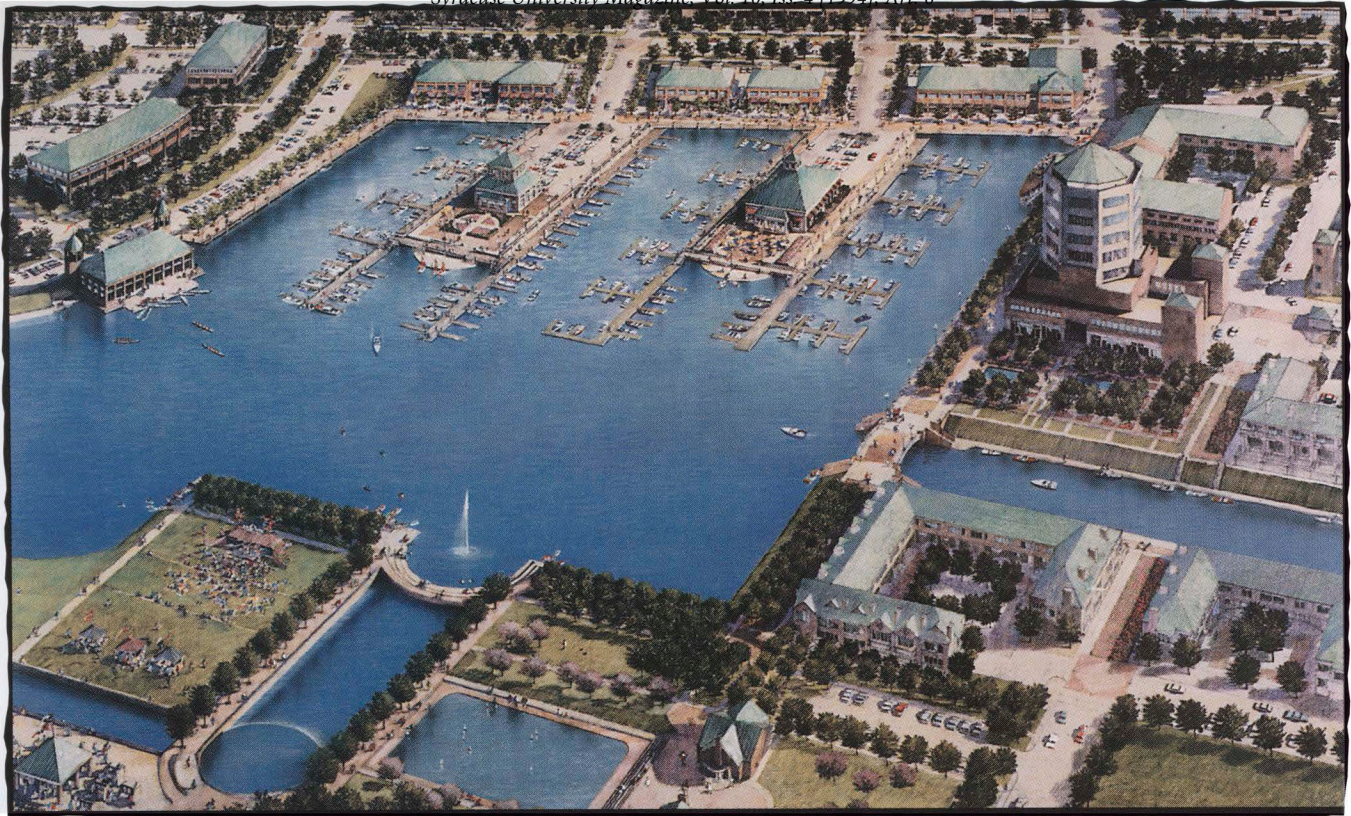
"Nobody respects a place that's not cared for," Doucette says. "If we're not willing to do that for downtown, then we're sending a very clear message—to the person on the street, and to the person considering relocating a business here."

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town area than anyone else over the past 10 years," says Falcone, whose credits include the One Park Place and Financial Plaza office buildings downtown, the new Unity Mutual and Royal Insurance buildings in Franklin Square, a Franklin Square renovation, and many other projects. Both One Park Place and 250 South Clinton transformed vacant lots into prime revenue-generating real estate.

what else is going on? Plenty. In the past five years or so the city has refurbished its airport, zoo, and War Memorial. The \$80-million Onondaga County Convention Center—On-



COURTESY OF THE PYRAMID COMPANIES

when the

optimism gets too heady, Roy Bernardi, a lifelong Syracusan elected mayor last November after 20 years as city auditor, is quick to point out there are problems. Despite real estate investment, property tax revenues are declining while the demand for city services continues to rise. State aid is down to pre-1986 levels. The multi-million-dollar surplus the city has preserved for more than a decade will be depleted this year.

"The cupboard is indeed bare," Bernardi said in his March 1994 State of the City address. But Bernardi, the recipient of a 1973 SU master's degree in counseling and guidance, also said the Inner Harbor project *will* be completed, lakeside development *will* continue, and plans for a new Triple-A baseball stadium, an intermodal transportation center, and regional market renovations *will* go forward.

The mayor and his colleagues in county government, at the chamber, and at the Metropolitan Development Association (MDA) are scrappers. They aggressively—and successfully—sell this town. Despite New York State's reputation for high taxes and fees, employers come, stay, and expand. Although businesses and

employees could probably save money living outside New York State, they find reasons to stay. The locals know the list by heart: easy access to the Adirondacks, the Finger Lakes, and the Thousand Islands; skiing, boating, swimming, fishing, hunting, and hiking all within minutes; major-city conveniences and amenities without urban headaches; there's culture; there's sports; there's no traffic to speak of; the schools are good; health care is world-class; the weather keeps us in the national news.

The challenge is the future, to determine "what next?" and "where to?"

"Let's say you could get a \$200-million loan or grant," suggests MDA President Douglas Barclay, an attorney and former state senator. "What would you do with it?"

The foremost experts in the nation are being assembled to address just that. The MDA, a nonprofit economic-development association composed of area business leaders, will hire elite consultants in urban planning and development to draft—with input from the community—"Vision 2010," Syracuse's road map to the future.

"It will address everything from education to transportation, from health care to jobs," says Barclay, a 1961 SU College of Law graduate and chair of the University's board of trustees. The MDA plans for Syracuse to follow this

Development plans for the Onondaga Lake Inner Harbor project call for shops, restaurants, and a marina. Plans are again in the works to clean up polluted Onondaga Lake.

map to a solid economic base that will support an enviable quality of life and make the city a small-scale rival for Atlanta, Montreal, Houston, or San Francisco.

Really? Syracuse?

Barclay is adamant. "There's nothing you can't do if you put your mind to it," he says. "If there are laws that are not helpful, you can get them changed. If the New York State constitution has to be changed, that can be done. Just because we haven't done it doesn't mean we can't. How did Atlanta, Montreal, Houston, and San Francisco become the cities they are? They just did it. There's no reason we can't."

Maybe he's right. ■

Laurie Root Harrington, who earned a dual bachelor's degree from the College of Arts and Sciences and Newhouse in 1983, and a master's in English in 1985, is a freelance writer who enjoys living in Syracuse.