

June 6, 1989
Letters to the Editor
The Vindicator
P.O. Box 780
Youngstown, OH 44501-0780

To the Editor:

Each time I have recently visited Downtown Youngstown, I pause at the corner of Phelps and Commerce Streets. I stop because I am jolted by the presence of new construction in our city. I am told, through enormous accolades in the local media, that this new structure is the Historical Center of Industry and Labor. I remain unimpressed by all of the hype. In fact, I am disturbed that no one has yet presented the obvious irony that results with the appearance of a so-called "Steel Museum" in our valley. Has it not occurred to anyone that a steel museum in the heart of Youngstown is almost as cold blooded a symbol as when Stalin erected statues of himself in the Ukraine, where he was responsible for the deaths of millions?

While construction workers put the finishing touches on the new museum, less than a few miles downstream, the demolition of what once fueled our valley proceeds. As unemployed steelworkers and their families scrape up a meager living, museum attendees will pause in silent admiration before photos of an era passed. As merchants in the downtown area fail to meet another loan deadline and more store fronts are boarded up, a museum director will earmark additional funds for the Historical Center's opening gala.

I wonder if anyone stopped and asked the thousands of unemployed mill workers if they wanted to be continually reminded of an industry that hastily retreated with little to no warning. How many steelworkers want to recall the morning they arrived for work only to find locked gates? What good to honor a disappointing past, an enterprise that failed thousands of Youngstown residents? If we feel an urge to remember what the steel industry has done for us, all we need to do is survey the demolition of the mills or the blight that dulls once thriving neighborhoods.

Is this the new America . . . a land of unemployed citizens who can ponder their lost livelihoods in a luxurious and extravagant setting? Are we to be left with mere remnants of real jobs, pretty architectural derivations of actual working places?

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Not that I don't anticipate and applaud great things for Youngstown. However, I do suggest that we evaluate more sensitively the price we are willing to pay in terms of our city's collective consciousness. Or are we hoping to drown out our guilt and shame with all the rantings and boasting about the new Historical Center of Industry and Labor?

And now we read about the possibility that the Center may never open due to lack of funding. There's a certain ironic justice that accompanies the thought of an empty steel museum in Youngstown. As the gates of Sheet and Tube were closed in 1979, the gates to the Historical Center of Industry and Labor may never open here in 1989.

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A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Ron Thomas".

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