

CHAPTER 3

THE INITIAL RESPONSE (1956-1962)

In December, 1956 two Northwestern University professors, Clyde F. Kohn and Ralph L. Westfall, published a study, "The Probable Effect of a New Major Outlying Shopping Center," under the sponsorship of the Center for Metropolitan Studies. It analyzed 14 classes of goods and services and concluded that Evanston could expect a decline of 74 percent in the sales of furniture and over 50 percent for most other categories. Bert W. Johnson (hired in December, 1953 as Evanston's first City Manager) recognized the seriousness of the situation and issued a "call to action" in the form of a letter to the Chamber of Commerce pointing out the emerging problem and stressing the city's commitment to maintaining and strengthening downtown. He stated that city government was pledged to do its fair share to achieve this objective in cooperation with the private sector.

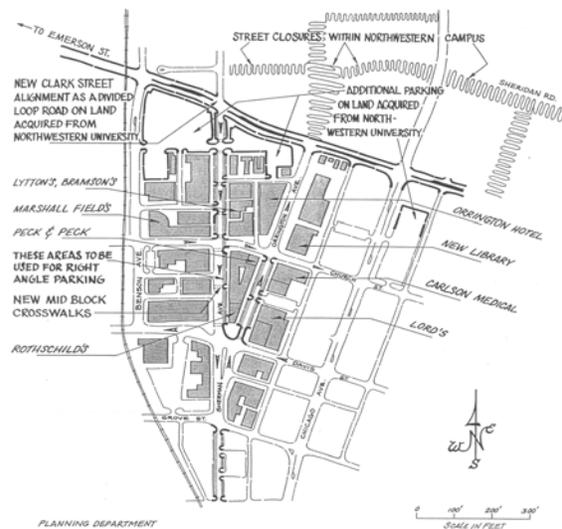
Mr. Johnson directed the Planning Department to prepare alternative plans for the area, including recommendations for improved vehicular access, parking and pedestrian amenities. Immediate actions focused on the expansion of a system of municipal off-street parking lots around the perimeter of downtown, which had been initiated earlier in the 1950s. Ultimately, these sites became the instruments of an even more aggressive strategy of redevelopment and recruitment of private investment.

In 1960 the City Council approved A Fountain Square Planning Study prepared by the Planning Department under the direction of consultant Robert C. Stuart. It provided plans and recommendations for actions to be implemented in two stages. Stage 1 focused on projects to be completed within two years. (1960-1962). These included:

- Construction of a new access road and related CTA viaduct connecting Emerson Street with Clark Street near Chicago Avenue;
- Closures of University Place and Orrington Avenue, even Sheridan Road and Hinman Avenue, to permit expansion of the Northwestern University campus south of the new Elgin Road and Clark Street;

- Conversion of downtown streets from two-way to one-way;
- Right-angle on-street parking on Orrington and Sherman Avenues;
- Mid-block pedestrian crosswalks;
- Expanded parking lot.

FOUNTAIN SQUARE BUSINESS DISTRICT... EVANSTON, ILLINOIS STAGE 1 SCHEDULED FOR COMPLETION IN 2 YEARS, FROM 1960 TO 1962

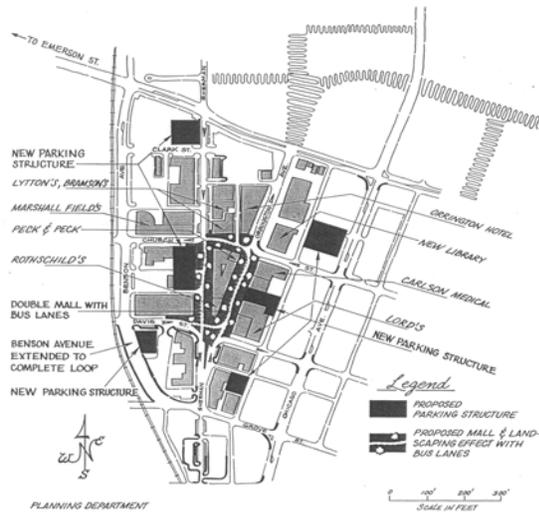


Source: *City of Evanston*

Stage 2 (1962-1970) focused on:

- Extension of Benson Street from Davis Street to Grove Street;
- Six new public parking structures;
- Reversal of one-way traffic on Church Street and Davis Street;
- Pedestrian malls around the Fountain Square (triangle) block with one-lane, one-way bus lanes.

FOUNTAIN SQUARE BUSINESS DISTRICT... EVANSTON, ILLINOIS
STAGE 2 SCHEDULED FOR COMPLETION IN 10 YEARS,
FROM 1960 TO 1970



Source: City of Evanston

Evanston, thereby, was one of the first cities in the nation to prepare such a dramatic revitalization plan for its downtown, influenced by the Victor Gruen concepts for Fort Worth, TX and Kalamazoo, MI. The Gruen concept was to remake downtowns in the mold of a shopping center so that they could compete head on. It may be to Evanston's credit that the pedestrian malls were never constructed, because those constructed in many other cities of the U.S. during the 1960s and 1970s have been removed in the 1980s and 1990s due largely to obsolescence.

By 1959 the downtown had expanded its supply of public parking to approximately 4,000 spaces. Downtown merchants claimed a need to double the supply.

Evanston's bold initiatives did not go unnoticed. In 1961 Architectural Forum magazine carried an article, "Fountain Square Fights Back," heralding Evanston as a model for others to emulate.

Also in 1961, the new headquarters office building for seven boards and agencies of the United Methodist Church was completed at the southwest corner of Ridge Avenue and Davis Street. It was designed by Perkins and Will.

Construction of the new Elgin Road connection to Clark Street was completed in 1962, as was the sale of portions of Orrington Avenue and University Place to Northwestern University. Similar closures of Sheridan Road and Hinman Avenue were never implemented.



Proposed Mall on Orrington Avenue
Source: Evanston Chamber of Commerce