

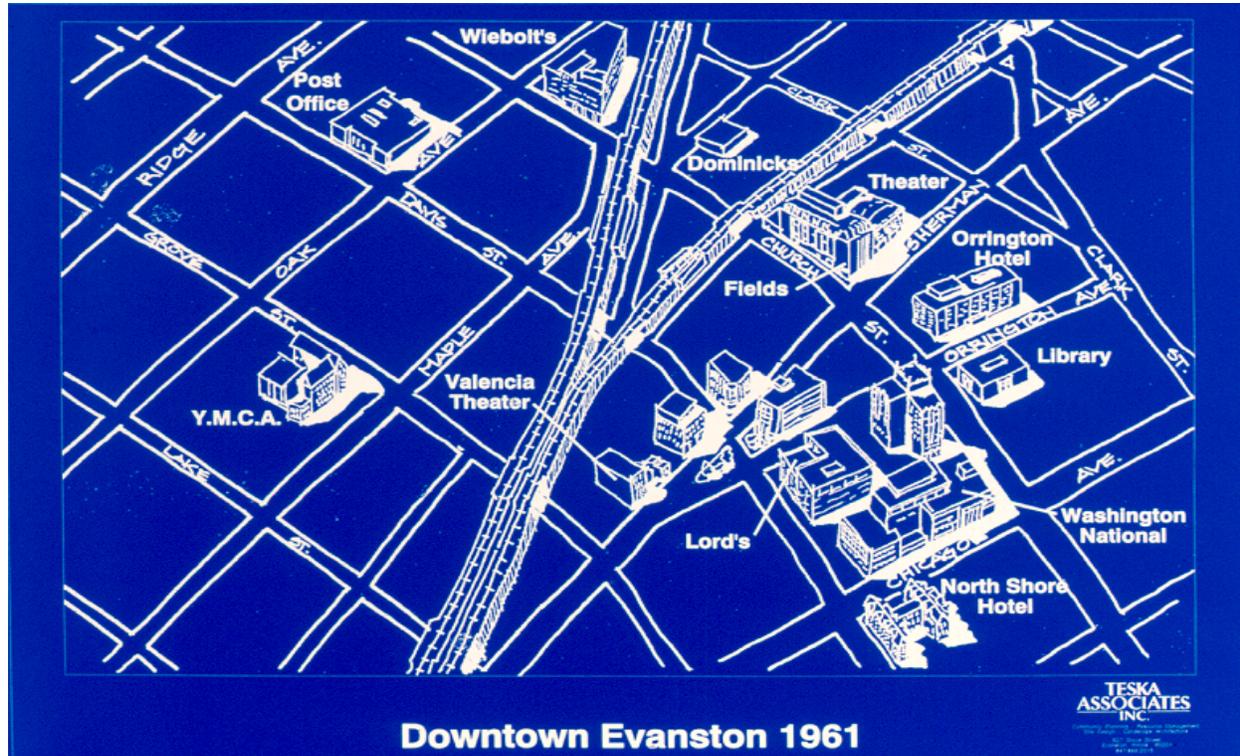
CHAPTER 4

FIRST IMPRESSIONS (1961)

I arrived in Evanston in June, 1961 to begin work as an urban planner with Barton-Aschman Associates, Inc. at 600 Davis Street. My first impressions of the community were that it exhibited extraordinary vitality and diversity at a comprehensible scale, that downtown offered virtually everything one might wish for, and that numerous housing choices existed within walking distance or with bus access for a new resident like me, about to be married and owning but one car.

Downtown had a strong and independent “sense of place,” certainly not overshadowed by the university adjacent to it. Clearly, this was not another “campus town” like those in many other Midwest communities with colleges. Here in Evanston the town/gown relationship was strong, but sensitively achieved.

Three department stores anchored downtown: Field’s, Wiebolt’s, and Lord’s (independently owned). Even Old Orchard had only two department stores (Marshall Field’s and Montgomery Ward’s) when it opened. Furthermore, Sears and Roebuck had a small retail outlet for appliances and catalogue sales, which some said generated the largest sales per square foot in the entire chain. Another independent retailer, Chandlers, was a one-of-a kind hybrid with many departments and extraordinary local popularity. In the basement was a book store and college book exchange; on the main floor were greeting cards, fine stationery and office supplies; and on upper floors were collectable coins and stamps, a printing shop, Boy Scout and Girl Scout supplies, office furniture and more.





Former Marshall Field's Store

Downtown maintained an excellent variety of apparel and fashion stores, including Rothchild's, Baskin's, Lytton's, Betty's of Winnetka, Peck and Peck, the Hawaiian Shop, and more. Furniture, too, was strongly represented, with such highly regarded names as Smythe's, Colby's, and Stein's. The Kroch's and Brentano's book store was one of the prestige Chicago chain's most successful outlets. And, of course, the Student Book Exchange was a big hit with university students.

Walgreen's was located at Fountain Square, Lyman-Sergeant was located at 636 Church, and another popular local pharmacy, Hoo's, was located at Sherman and Clark. For even more variety, Woolworth's was east of the tracks and Lemoi's Hardware was west of the tracks, both on Davis Street. There were two downtown grocery stores, Dominick's and Smithfield's, the latter being popular for its carry-out sandwiches.

Entertainment and dining were well represented by the Valencia and Varsity movie theaters and by such restaurants as Cooley's Cupboard, Tally-Ho, Phoenix, BG Evanston restaurants on Sherman Avenue at Clark Street and at Grove Street, and restaurants in each of the major hotels: Orrington, Pick Georgian, and North Shore. In the summer, the outdoor café at the Orrington was a major attraction. Specialty outlets like Peacock's Ice Cream and the counter service at Woolworth's expanded downtown's offerings.



One of Several Bookstores



Financial Institutions Anchored Fountain Square



Landscaped Median on Sherman Avenue

Fountain Square was the focal point for financial institutions and general office buildings, specifically the First National Bank, State Bank & Trust, and Evanston Federal Savings and Loan. Nearby headquarters office buildings were also evident, e.g. Washington National Insurance Company on Chicago Avenue, and Rotary International on Ridge Avenue.

Finally, downtown was much more than a shopping and business center. It was also the center of civic life, evidenced by the City Hall, U.S. Post Office, Public Library, YMCA, Women's Club, and numerous churches.

For most who lived in Evanston, Old Orchard seemed unnecessary and redundant. Virtually everything one might need was located right here. Unfortunately, Evanston's position in the larger market area, the customers of which it had previously captured, would soon be forever changed.

I also had many first impressions of another variety. For example, downtown was very compact and walkable. Nowhere was beyond a noontime stroll, even the Lake Michigan beaches. Although parking was a challenge at times, transit service was extraordinary. Fountain Square, Raymond Park and the lakefront not only enhanced downtown's sense of place, but provided a variety of passive leisure experiences and active events to complement employment and shopping.

Fountain Square was more of an intersection than a traditional "square". The original Centennial Fountain was long gone, and the war memorial had taken its place as a focal point. Although somewhat photogenic, the area was not particularly pedestrian friendly. Nearby Raymond Park, however, was Evanston's expression of the New England village green, a multi-use grassy open space surrounded by trees and several churches. The new Oldberg Park at Sherman Avenue and Elgin Road hardly merited notice.

Although city sidewalks displayed no special interest, except the attractive Talmadge street lights, some private property owners took special interest in their streetscape. These included the Orrington and North Shore Hotels, Washington National Insurance Company, 1500 Chicago Avenue apartments, and others. In fact, Chicago Avenue was somewhat reminiscent of North Michigan Avenue in Chicago.

I was especially taken by the horse drawn carriage provided by the Orrington Hotel for special events and rides for the public throughout the downtown.

Finally, I was impressed by the "youth population" of downtown. Every day in the summer and even after school in the fall, winter and spring young people (especially high school and university students) would flood the downtown. This was a unique characteristic few other downtowns in America could match.

One ironic twist was the location of Wiebolt's Department Store on Church Street west of the tracks, separated from the retail core by railroad embankments and viaducts. This 1950's building had its own parking structure on the west side of Oak Avenue, connected to the store by a pedestrian bridge over the street. By parking here, however, a customer seldom chose to walk to other stores east of the tracks.

Except for Dominick's food store with its parking lot on the north side of Church Street, the triangle between the CTA and Northwestern railroad tracks was an unsightly and incompatible mixture of land-uses. These included the City of Evanston Public Works facilities and animal shelter, the Northwestern University maintenance facilities, a Commonwealth Edison transformer, and several deteriorated residences. This was clearly not a part of the downtown for which Evanston was famous.



Chicago Avenue Streetscape

On Emerson Street was located an important institution - - the African-American Emerson Street YMCA. When it was consolidated with the “white” YMCA on Grove Street in 1969, the issue of segregation was dealt with, but the African-American community lost what had been a powerful magnet of activity for all age groups. The building was subsequently occupied as a residential “temple” by the Hare Krishnas between 1971 and 1979 when it was demolished.

In yet another respect, downtown Evanston was unique. In addition to being partially bordered on the north by the university, it was completely surrounded by well established, attractive and in some cases very upscale residential neighborhoods. There were no blighted transition areas as is often the case in other cities. This was a “seamless” community.



Nearby Homes

CHAPTER 4 LOCATION MAP

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|------------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1. Barton-Aschmen Associates, Inc. | 18. Lyman-Sergeant | 35. First National Bank |
| 2. Marshall Field's | 19. Hoo's | 36. Evanston Federal Savings |
| 3. Wiebolt's | 20. Woolworth | 37. Washington National Insurance |
| 4. Lord's | 21. Lemoi Hardware | 38. Rotary International |
| 5. Chandler's | 22. Dominick's | 39. City Hall |
| 6. Rothchild's | 23. Smithfield's | 40. U.S. Post Office |
| 7. Baskin's | 24. Valencia Theater | 41. Public Library |
| 8. Lytton's | 25. Varsity Theater | 42. YMCA |
| 9. Betty's of Winnetka | 26. Cooley's Cupboard | 43. Women's Club |
| 10. Peck and Peck | 27. Tally-Ho | 44. Fountain Square |
| 11. Hawaiian Shop | 28. Phoenix | 45. Raymond Park |
| 12. Smythe's | 29. BG Restaurants | 46. Oldberg Park |
| 13. Colby's | 30. Orrington Hotel | 47. City Public Works |
| 14. Stein's | 31. Pick Georgian Hotel | 48. NU Maintenance |
| 15. Kroch's and Brentano's | 32. North Shore Hotel | 49. Commonwealth Edison Transformer |
| 16. Student Book Exchange | 33. Peacock's Ice Cream | 50. African-American YMCA |
| 17. Walgreen's | 34. State National Bank | |

