

Downtown Evanston Revitalized

1956 - 2006

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FOREWORD

My introduction to the existence of downtown Evanston came at Washington Park High School in Racine, Wisconsin (1949-1952). I considered the boy sitting next to me to be the best dressed in my home room, and I asked him where he purchased his clothes. He answered, "My mother buys them in Evanston when she goes there to shop for herself." Immediately, I thought Evanston must be a pretty special place for someone to travel that far, when downtown Milwaukee was even closer.

My initial visits to downtown Evanston occurred when I was a student at the University of Wisconsin (1952-1957). The first was to attend a Wisconsin-Northwestern football game, when I and my friends discovered that Evanston was "dry," so we celebrated near Howard Street. The second was when I ushered in a friend's wedding and rented my tuxedo from a downtown Evanston business. Although downtown seemed small and quiet, especially compared to Madison, it was obviously successful, attractive, and the focal point of a very livable community.

My more intimate relationship with Evanston and its downtown started in 1961 when I began work as an urban planning consultant with Barton-Aschman Associates, Inc. at 600 Davis Street. I took up residency along Sherman Avenue just north of downtown, within walking distance of the office. I remember being immediately impressed with the fine restaurants and outdoor cafes, the Orrington Hotel's horse and buggy, the well-maintained landscaping (especially along Chicago Avenue), the upscale apparel and furniture stores, Marshall Field's, the movie theaters, the convenient transit service and more. I was in "planners' heaven."

Alderman Frank Hoover discovered my vocation and recommended me for a seat on the Plan Commission in 1965, when the commission started work on a new vision for Evanston and its downtown. By then downtown was no longer the retail hub of the North Shore, but it was experiencing healthy growth as an employment center. Thus, we on the Plan Commission introduced the theme of "The Headquarters City."

In 1976 the City Council created the Business District Redevelopment Commission. Mayor Edgar Vanneman appointed me its first Chairman (1976-1982). Before, between and after these public service appointments I participated in numerous consulting assignments focused on the revitalization of downtown, since 1975 as founder of Teska Associates, Inc. and since 1992 as co-founder of its companion firm, Business Districts, Inc. Both firms are headquartered in downtown Evanston. In 1980 I also founded Design Evanston, a non-for-profit, volunteer organization of design professionals dedicated to the concept of "Good Design is Good Business."

Having spent most of my weekdays in downtown for over 45 years, plus many of my evening and weekend hours, I have come to know and love this special place and this extraordinary community. Above all, I respect and celebrate the leadership, talent, and energy of the many persons who have been committed to downtown Evanston's revitalization throughout the past five decades. This is a story of not just dollars and cents or bricks and mortar, but vision, perseverance and all those other precious ingredients that make up a community, not just a place.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, it is essential to acknowledge that this book is based on one person's experiences, research, files, interviews, and observations - - mine. Facts are facts, but this downtown revitalization story is a reflection of my own perspective—as much as I have attempted to be objective. With so many participants over so many years, stories from dozens of different perspectives could be documented and told, all valid.

Second, there are innumerable stories behind the story. Resources and logic have restricted the nature of this book. Hopefully, others will be inclined to put more “meat on the bones” and highlight the important contributions of key persons not mentioned herein or not given the full credit they deserve. For such oversights, I apologize.

There are those who have assisted me by providing information and exhibits, giving interviews, or reviewing drafts, and to whom I owe extraordinary gratitude. They include: Judy Aiello, Lee Brown, Frank Foster, Bruce Goodman, Ira Golan, Terry Jenkins, Ronald Kysiak, Jay Lytle, Jonathan Perman, Diane Teska, and Diane Williams. Historical photos in Chapters 2 and 3 were provided by the Evanston Historical Society. Recent aerial photographs on the cover and in Chapters 9 and 15 were taken by Lawrence Okrent and provided by Okrent Associates. All other photos are mine.

The production of this document has been a challenge made easier by the talent, perseverance and pleasant personality of Antoinette Balachowski, Administrative Assistant at Teska Associates, Inc. Thank you, Toni. Computer graphic assistance was provided by Steve O'Hare, Associate Planner, at Teska Associates, Inc. Thank you, Steve.

My gratitude and that of many in the community also extends to those who always had faith in downtown Evanston, despite the claims of some citizens (even professionals) that it was dead or dying. There were times when the patient was in serious condition, granted, but this patient was one that wouldn't give up. That is what revitalization is all about.

Finally, this story is never ending. The patient has recovered, but has not yet achieved full potential— and may be subject to future hazards. Knowing the depth and quality of existing and new leaders in Evanston, therefore, it is also reasonable to extend gratitude to those who will champion continued revitalization.

January, 2007

CONTENTS

| | | |
|-----|--------------------------------------|----|
| | FOREWORD | |
| | ACKNOWLEDGMENTS | |
| 1. | FUTURE SHOCK (1956) | 1 |
| 2. | THE FIRST 100+ YEARS (1854-1955) | 4 |
| 3. | THE INITIAL RESPONSE (1956-1962) | 9 |
| 4. | FIRST IMPRESSIONS (1961) | 11 |
| 5. | A COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGY (1963-1976) | 16 |
| 6. | DOWNTOWN TWO (1977-1982) | 23 |
| 7. | COMMON GROUND (1983-1995) | 30 |
| 8. | THE NU/EVANSTON RESEARCH PARK | 38 |
| 9. | EVMARK AND THE CITY | 44 |
| 10. | AFTERSHOCKS | 48 |
| 11. | THE BIG BANG (1996-2006) | 50 |
| 12. | AMENITIES | 71 |
| 13. | EVENTS | 79 |
| 14. | THE CITY | 84 |
| 15. | LOOKING BACK | 91 |
| 16. | LOOKING FORWARD | 94 |
| | REFERENCES | 97 |
| | ABOUT THE AUTHOR | 99 |

If we look around us today, we see the people of the world crying out for a sense of community, at all levels. On the one hand, people are identifying with their ethnic groups, or with their own republics or their nations to gain a sense of community. On the other hand, there are movements underway which stress that humanity as a whole is one community. But, it should also be apparent to us that the goal is not complete unless there is also a sense of place.

Let me distinguish the two. Sense of community is that which could be defined as "a common cause". It's belonging to something important. A sense of place is that which can be defined by "a common ground," a geographic orientation. Therefore, I suggest to you that the unique role of downtowns of all sizes is to provide both a sense of community and a sense of place.

It is worthwhile to look at what has happened over the last three or four decades. In the 1960s and 1970s our attention was focused on the elimination of blight and on physical improvements to downtown. In the 1980s, largely as a result of the recession of the late 1970s and early 1980s, our attention was focused on economic development. Both physical development and economic development continue to be very important.

But, for the 1990s and the 21st century I would suggest that our emphasis must be placed on what I would call the spiritual vitality of downtown. I'm not talking in religious terms. Rather, I'm talking in community terms. I'm talking about something that grabs you in the heart or grabs you in the gut and makes you want to be there, work there, shop there, meet your friends there, participate in activities there, and receive sustenance and nurturing from that location.

Downtown revitalization is not a luxury. It is an essential prerequisite to the health of the entire community. Each one of your communities, as well as the community that I live in, must be engaged in what I would paraphrase as a common cause to build a common ground, which is downtown.

From a talk by Robert B. Teska to the DuKane Valley Council in Batavia, Illinois, April 15, 1992.