

CHAPTER 15

LOOKING BACK

Seemingly blessed in so many respects throughout most of its 152 year history, Evanston has for the past five decades been vulnerable to economic adversity, challenged by external and internal trends, innovative in its responses to those trends, and amazingly resilient. This is especially evident in its downtown and in its neighborhood business districts, as well as its housing market. Despite the impact of Old Orchard and other shopping centers, retailing in Evanston has been reinvented, with big box retailers at one end of the spectrum (outside the downtown) and specialty shops at the other end. Corporate offices have fled to suburban business parks in outlying counties with lower tax rates, only to have their vacant space filled with professional services and other small independent businesses with growth potential. In effect, Evanston has become “the ultimate incubator,” not only exhibiting ties to Northwestern University, but exhibiting cultural trends toward entrepreneurship and working in the same community in which one lives.

After peaking in 1970 at 79,808 persons, Evanston’s population declined to 73,706 in 1980 and has been increasing since, to reach 74,239 in 2000. The ethnic, age, and income diversity of residents has always been apparent, but new groups are arriving: Asians, Hispanics, post-college young professionals without children. In 2000 the racial composition was 63% Caucasian, 22% African-American, 6% Asian, 6% Hispanic, 3% bi-racial & other. Per capita income exceeded that of the state as a whole (\$34,024 to \$31,145), but had increased faster during the 1990s (52.3% to 50.1%).

Evanston and its downtown have evolved from being “The Retail Capital of the North Shore” to “Headquarters City” and to “The Dining and Entertainment Capital of the North Shore.” In addition, downtown has embraced the Research Park and is rapidly becoming its own residential neighborhood. Some would call this an “urban village” - - a concept promulgated by the American Institute of Architects and American Planning Association in the 1970’s.

Real estate values have increased significantly, especially since the 1980s, to the extent that it can be difficult for many residents and businesses to find housing and commercial space at affordable prices.

Downtown has not expanded horizontally. Rather, it continues to coexist harmoniously with adjacent residential areas of equal viability. Its growth since World War II has followed a vertical format, triggered by the zoning amendments of 1966.

The success of downtown Evanston reflects the success of the community as a whole, largely due to:

- Citizens’ commitment to “sense of place”
- Leadership, individual and collective
- Continuity over time of people and visions
- Willingness to invest capital and risk reputations
- Real estate industry confidence
- The city’s need to enhance its tax base

Certainly, the strength of the North Shore up-scale market, the transit accessibility of downtown, and the desirable lifestyle of a “city in the suburbs” are also important factors. But as in most endeavors, it is the human factor that prevails. And Evanston has always been rich in human resources.

Most new residents of Evanston have chosen it as a place to live because of its special qualities. They could probably afford to live elsewhere if they desired more house for the money, etc. Once here, however, they are committed to preserving and enhancing the community, even though its taxes are among the highest in the state.

Public and private sector leaders emerge, often without great fanfare, and usually as genuine public servants - - whether they represent politics, business, the arts, social services, education, etc. In fact, the community reveres leadership; even to the extent that the Evanston Community Foundation created an organization, Leadership Evanston, to educate and empower those who wish to devote their time and talent to this risky endeavor. Leadership Evanston recently celebrated its fourteenth anniversary in 2006.

Two Mayors deserve the credit for creating the momentum of public and private investment in downtown revitalization—Mayors Ed Vanneman and James Lyle. Under their leadership the Business District Redevelopment Commission, the Economic Development Commission, the Preservation Commission, Inventure, Evmark, and the Research Park corporations were formed.

The Chamber of Commerce was the first to wave the battle flag. Its most influential Executive Directors include Jonathan Perman and Ira Golan. In fact, it is not unrealistic to call Ira Golan “an army of one,” to coin the 2000-2001 recruitment message of the U.S. Army. Retired and in his 80s, he continues to be an active public servant on the North Shore.

Continuity and compatibility have played important parts. The quartet of Judy Aiello, Ron Kysiak, Terry Jenkins, and Jonathan Perman have orchestrated revitalization efforts together for over 10 years. They and their organizations share common visions (certainly in principle if not in every detail), and their personalities are such as to put progress above ego.

Perhaps Evanston’s most successful strategy in the early years of revitalization was the acquisition of land for surface parking lots, which together with other municipal properties became the sites for new private development. Subsequently, the City constructed public parking garages, financed in part by fees paid by developers in lieu of providing required on-site parking and, subsequently, by tax increment financing revenues. Yet, City officials will admit they have not yet solved the universal, mundane problem of employees parking in curb spaces intended for shoppers and visitors.

Most observers will agree that the City’s most important single economic decision was to void the century-old prohibition of liquor to be sold in any form within the city. As a result, hotels, restaurants and entertainment have expanded and prospered.

There have been periods during which Evanston has had less than a good and hospitable reputation among the real estate industry. This is not the easiest community in which to develop a project. However, during the past decade Evanston has demonstrated its investment potentials and its willingness to create public-private partnerships with incentives sufficient to overcome risks and other obstacles. The result has

been a list of the region’s finest and most capable developers participating in downtown’s revitalization.

Apparent in recent years has been the flexibility of City officials and the real estate market place to consider and approve of new architectural styles. Not only are taller buildings being permitted and “high-rise” condominiums being purchased as fast as they can be built, but architecture itself has evolved. Once focused on low to mid-rise commercial, research and residential buildings of “red brick or masonry of other earth tone,” City authorities and consumers now embrace a “modernist” style of exposed concrete, glass, and metal - - to the chagrin of many traditionalists.

Recently, a growing number of residents have come to believe the City Council has become too supportive of the real estate development industry, all for the sake of enhancing the tax base. They believe that flexible zoning regulations and a “let’s make a deal” approach has been to the detriment of quality design and public benefit.

In his Chicago Tribune article dated July 4, 2004, “Nowhere To Go But Up”, John McCarron observed: “Evanston is growing and changing, adapting and resisting, cursing and praying. But one thing’s a constant: Most folks here, for all their protest and complaint, thrive on give and take. Wouldn’t have it any other way. Wouldn’t live anywhere else.”

All of this provides a strong model for continued success in Evanston, and a model for other communities to study and possibly emulate.

However, a comprehensive perspective would also suggest that the model is not perfect, and there is much to learn from its weaknesses and shortfalls. For example, the 1989 Downtown Plan is by now out-of-date and lacks sufficient detail to resolve many recent and current issues, especially design issues. Although it represented a wide-spread policy consensus for many years, leadership has changed and consensus has been evaporating.

DOWNTOWN EVANSTON 2004

<u>Housing Units</u>	<u>Existing</u>	<u>Under Construction</u>
Owner Occupied	1,300 units	473 units
Renter Occupied	2,273 units	-----
Office Space	2,462,646 sq. ft.	----
Retail, Restaurants, Services	714,178 sq. ft.	221,222 s. f.
Restaurants (72)	259,181 sq. ft.	N/A
Cinemas	18 screens	----
Music Institute	600 seats	----

Source: City of Evanston
2004 Survey of Downtown Evanston

This is also apparent in the relationship between the city and Northwestern University which, despite numerous successes, is still fragile - - some might say volatile.

At the more detailed level, it has become apparent that some of the zoning ordinance amendments adopted in 1990s have not produced the quality of development desired. The Plan Commission is working hard to correct these problems, but much remains to be accomplished.

Desired progress is slow to be made on the repair or replacement of downtown railroad viaducts, on pedestrian oriented wayfinding and on art in public places. In addition, some observers believe that more affordable housing is merited and that day-to-day maintenance of the public realm could be improved, especially at Fountain Square. Some might even say that downtown deserves full-time oversight and accountability, rather than the cumulative part-time efforts of talented individuals with other obligations.

Lacking an up-to-date vision and consensus regarding downtown's future, civic leadership has become reactive rather than proactive. At times, the perspectives of various municipal and civic bodies, and the members thereof, seem to reflect disparate points of view, sometimes to immediate rather than long-term advantage.

It could be said that this is nitpicking. But Evanstonians have always held the community to high standards. Despite overwhelming success, it is not unfair to conclude that some potentials have been missed or are yet to be captured.



Downtown Evanston Looking North, 2006
Source: Lawrence Okrent, Photographer