

*Final Report of the  
Downtown Historic District Study Committee*



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2

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Part 1	The Downtown Historic District Study Committee: Origin, Assignment and Procedure .....	1
Part 2	Findings of the Study .....	3
Part 3	A General History of the Downtown .....	4
Part 4	Architectural Styles in the Downtown .....	5
Part 5	The Downtown Historic Districts .....	8
Part 6	Categories of Buildings .....	16
Part 7	Standards and Guidelines for Changes to Buildings in the Downtown Historic Districts .....	16
	Secretary of the Interior's Standards and Guidelines .....	17
	1. Guidelines applicable to all historic buildings .....	18
	2. Additional guidelines for row buildings .....	19
	3. Guidelines for residential-style buildings .....	22
	4. Guidelines for other historic building types .....	24
	5. Guidelines for non-contributing buildings and new construction .....	24
	Rehab of interior spaces .....	26
Part 8	Administration of Districts .....	27
Part 9	Benefits of Inclusion in Downtown Historic Districts .....	27
Appendix A	Draft Ordinance	
Appendix B	Photographic Streetscapes with notes on history and architecture .....	(bound separately)

3

1

3

## *Final Report of the Downtown Historic District Study Committee*

### **Part I. The Downtown Historic District Study Committee: Origin, Assignment, and Procedure.**

The Downtown Historic District Study Committee was created by City Council on September 4, 1979. When a city council considers an area to have historic value worthy of protection, under Michigan law they may appoint a study committee. The job of that committee is to identify what is historic and valuable enough for inclusion in a "historic district". The committee then brings its recommendation to the community and the Council for their approval.

After a historic district is adopted, the local Historic District Commission has a role in the approval process for building permits in the area. In Ann Arbor's downtown this would mean that plans for construction, alteration, or demolition affecting the exterior of buildings in designated areas would be submitted to the Historic District Commission for their approval. Clear and consistent guidelines would be followed in their review.

While the membership of the Study Committee has evolved through nine years of service, it has always included the currently appointed Historic District Commissioners plus downtown property owners, downtown residents, business people, and other citizens concerned about the way our downtown looks and feels and functions. The current members, whose names follow, are glad to present the results of the committee's long study at this time when widespread interest is focused on planning for the future of the downtown. Members of the committee are:

Peter Allen	David Evans
Patricia Austin	Mary Jo Gord
Johanna Aztalos	Mary Hathaway, Chair
Cappy Bilakos	Jane Jensen
Rosemarion Blake	Alan Jones, Vice-chair
Peggy Ann Charpar	Barbara Nalli
David Copi	Richard Pasley
James D'Amour	Norman Tyler
George Dodd	Susan Wineberg

Recent years have been marked by unprecedented grass-roots attention to the choices before our town. In addition to this study committee, several other groups have been addressing similar questions from quite different perspectives. "What do we like about our downtown? How can we preserve its special character? How can we make it even better?" The various groups have been remarkably united in their conclusions. The Chamber of Commerce survey and report, the A3-2000 future process, and the Downtown Plan Steering Committee all have agreed that the attractiveness of Ann Arbor's downtown is most evident in those streets which are human-scaled and inviting to pedestrians: streets filled with interesting displays of goods, varied entertainments, services, and of course good places to eat and drink.

These "pedestrian streets" are also the streets where the older buildings are most intact, where the eye can enjoy a variety of architectural styles going back sixty, eighty, a hundred years and more. These are buildings that furnish the human scale, the enticing shop windows, the unique performance areas, the "character" that people identify with Ann Arbor.

The Downtown Plan recently approved by City Council explicitly recognizes the importance of these buildings. Discussing the pedestrian environment, the plan declares:

*What do we  
like about  
our downtown?*

“Image and Identity: The preservation and rehabilitation of historic buildings will be encouraged to establish a positive image and marketable identity for downtown.”

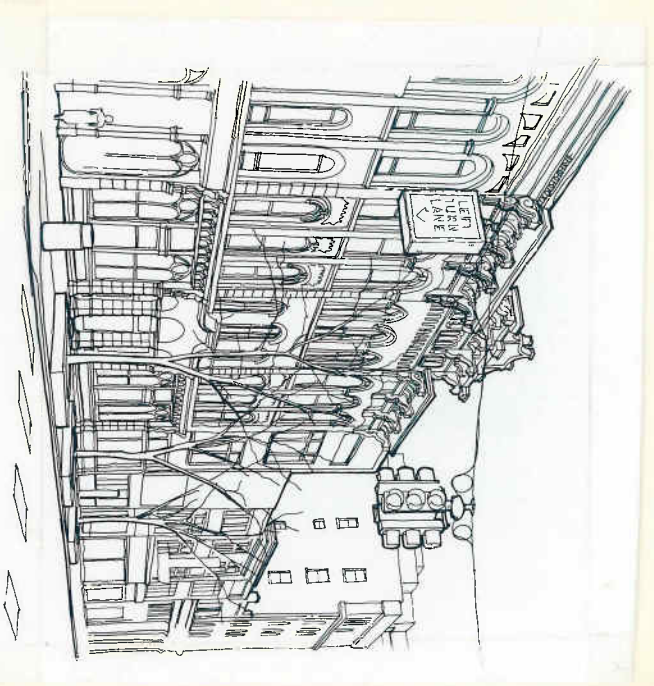
Again, under “Development Character”:

“Objective #3: Designate historic buildings, especially in Downtown’s retail areas, to encourage their preservation: encourage new development which reinforces these buildings’ contribution to downtown’s identity and pedestrian orientation.”

Our Council’s approval of this Downtown Plan has come at a time when cities throughout America are placing a new value on the historic qualities of their commercial centers. Time magazine in November, 1987, affirmed the growing appreciation of historic downtowns:

“...The nation has had a great change of heart. The change has been so complete that it is difficult today to remember how recently people were blithely ripping out and throwing away the warp and woof of America’s cities...”

“Walking along an old street among old buildings, the implicit history and sense of continuity are both reassuring and invigorating. The graceful proportions of facades are not arbitrary but the result of craft wisdom worked out over generations of trial and error. the scale of buildings and streets, based on human size and pedestrian stride, makes intuitive sense. Indeed, old sections of cities embody all sorts of folk and classical principles concerning residential density and building size and materials and zoning. In the very arrangements of alleys and building setbacks is a time-tested plan, a kind of urban genetic code.”



The Downtown Historic District Study Committee is fortunate to be completing its assignment at a time when Council, the public, and the nation at large are attentive and sympathetic to the value of historic streets and buildings.

The assignment received from Council in 1979 was to study the downtown and determine:

1. whether or not there should be a downtown historic district,
2. what boundaries such a district should have,
3. the significance of buildings to be included,
4. how that significance should be protected.

The committee chose for their study an area which falls entirely within the boundaries of the Downtown Development Authority west of the University of Michigan campus. The boundaries of the study area were:

on the east, Thayer Street;  
on the south, William Street (both sides);  
on the west, the Ann Arbor Railroad;  
on the north, Kingsley Street.

Within this area the committee surveyed every structure in order to determine which buildings and blockscapes are the most significant in historic terms.

A number of the buildings in the study area are already listed on the Ann Arbor Register of Historic Places, either as individual structures or as part of historic districts (the Division Street, Liberty Street, Old West Side, and Old Fourth Ward Historic Districts). Some of these buildings will be mentioned in the following report because they are located within the boundaries of the new districts to be recommended. Others will not be mentioned, but this should not be construed as a reflection on their value as historic buildings. The proposed ordinance reaffirms and complements existing preservation ordinances in the downtown.

## Part 2. Findings of the Study.

The historic commercial buildings of Ann Arbor's downtown are now clustered in three distinct areas. A significant remnant of the original residential matrix survives between and around these commercial areas.

For generations, the downtown commercial areas were two, centered respectively on Main Street and State Street. They developed at different times and in different ways. Their separate identities have been recognized by business proprietors, shoppers, and local planners. A city planning study done in 1975 identified them as "Conservation Areas" (along with the Kerrytown area whose commercial identity evolved more

recently) and this concept has endured. The Downtown Plan Steering Committee in its report published in April, 1987, recommended "encouraging preservation and rehabilitation of existing buildings and promoting compatible infill development in 'conservation' areas."

The Downtown Historic District Study Committee's examination of buildings and blockscapes confirms the existing trend in our city's planning policy. The committee found that the Main Street and State Street commercial areas are distinct not only physically but also historically, and their different histories have given each of them a special character. Furthermore, because they "bloomed" at different times, each presents a different architectural palette.

Due to extensive redevelopment of the courthouse area in the 1950's and 1960's, the historic Main Street commercial district now exists in two pieces, one on either side of Huron Street. Their physical separation is reinforced by the lack of a strong pedestrian link between them. The result is that they are now perceived as distinct commercial areas.

The committee concluded that its assignment—to identify the significant historical area of the downtown—requires the designation not of one, or even two, but of three separate commercial districts.

The committee further recognized that the surviving residential-style buildings in the downtown have their own historic significance. Some of them are architecturally unique in the city. Because they are the original setting for the commercial districts, their preservation in certain highly visible locations is essential for interpreting the historic development of the downtown.

*Historically*

*distinct  
commercial  
areas*

