

How the Historic East Side of Ypsilanti Came Back to Life

BY JANICE ANSCHUETZ

Ypsilanti's Historic East Side is considered a showplace; the beautiful homes are often photographed and featured in various internet sites. But that wasn't always the case. Fifty years ago, the east side of Ypsilanti was considered decaying and dangerous and was "redlined." Dedicated residents helped to change the zoning back to single-family housing. This, along with the Fair Housing Act of 1968 and historic designation, created the ingredients in the recipe to transform neglected housing into the gems that they are today.

A Personal Experience

When my husband and I purchased the historic Swaine House at 101 East Forest in 1969, we were considered "pioneers." *The Detroit Free Press* even sent a reporter out to our home to interview us for a full-page feature article about a young family buying a very old home. Perhaps the reason that this was so unusual, even for Ypsilanti, was that the area was "redlined." This meant that it was racially integrated and no longer considered a "good risk" for banks which might offer money for a mortgage, home repairs, or improvement, or for insurance companies to cover the dwellings.

My husband and I wanted our children to grow up, go to school, and have friends with children of different backgrounds, both economic and social. The large yards with gardens, alleys, and styles of architecture were as varied as the people who called the East Side home, and this appealed to us. Because people were not able to obtain either a mortgage or insurance, the usual method of sale in the east side was by land contract, with some once-beautiful homes having as many as four land contracts attached to their titles.

After getting a mortgage and an insurance policy, and attempting to do as much work on our old home as we could, we joined with a few hardy souls who also loved our neighborhood in an attempt to insure its existence into the future. We first formed the Historic

East Side Neighborhood Association. We wrote, published, and distributed a newsletter which featured some of the unique homes and amazing people who had lived and thrived in our community. We found an agency that printed the newsletters for free and recruited people to deliver them, aged from eight to eighty years old.

The Work of the Association

We held regular meetings inviting representatives from the city council, the mayor, the police, and anyone else—young or old, rich or poor—to join us in discussing problems and solutions. We added community events such as planting flowers in the once-neglected Prospect Park, raising money for a historic sign there, renovating Luna Lake, lobbying to turn the freight house in Depot Town into a community gathering place, holding a historic home tour, and spicing this up with family events such as Christmas caroling with candle light stops in a few houses for cocoa and cookies.



The Swaine House at 101 East Forest was vacant for several years when Janice and Bob Anschuetz bought it in 1968 and restored it.



Hutchinson House, 600 North River Street, was built by Shelly Hutchinson, an East Sider who was born on North River Street. It was funded by his S & H Green Stamp fortune and restored by the High Scope Foundation.

We had many concerns for our neighborhood, from slum landlords who stuffed as many tenants as possible into each dwelling, to crime and blight issues, zoning and safety violations, and anything else that might make the East Side a place where people didn't want to live, visit, or raise their families.

In 1978, primarily because several homes in our neighborhood were being purchased and converted to offices with a “wink” by the planning department, we wrote the lengthy application to form a historic district, requiring us to fill out a long governmental form.

We had to survey the style of homes as well as provide a history of the East Side with cultural implication. Long essays were required, along with many photographs and sources. In the Spring 2019 issue of the Ypsilanti Historical Society's publication, *Gleanings*, I wrote in detail about our grant application, which included the cultural, architectural, and geographical importance of our East Side neighborhood.

We took petitions door to door and asked neighbors to join us in changing the zoning back to single-family housing, instead of the “slumlord friendly” designation that allowed up to eight families to live in a home. Strangely, it seemed that the people most resistant to this were older residents who had lived in their homes for a number of years and thought that there was no way that they could ever sell their house except to an investor who would change it into crowded rental property.



The Gilbert Mansion at 227 North Grove Street, one of the crown jewels of the Historic East Side, had been boarded up and empty for years before being sold for \$1 and carefully restored.

Changes in the Law

This probably was true at the time before the Fair Housing Act of 1968. This act made it illegal to “discriminate in terms, conditions, or privileges of sale of a dwelling because of race or national origin.” The Equal Credit Opportunity Act of 1974 placed strict penalties on realtors and financial institutions for discrimination in granting loans to applicants, made the process of redlining in our East Side neighborhood a thing of the past, and insured that the diversity in our neighborhood would continue.

There is no question that changing the zoning has done nothing but improve prop-

erty values in our historic East Side. This change in zoning was passed by both the planning commission and the Ypsilanti City Council. Its results can be seen today, when neighbors know each other and have a vested interest in maintaining their homes and property, and children can play safely on our residential streets, which was not the case when landlords stuffed the beautiful old homes with transients. There is still a lot of rental, Section 8, and two-family housing available.

Fortunately for the East Side, there was a “perfect storm” of federal laws coupled with the local and state historic district designation which changed the fast decline of a beautiful neighborhood, not to mention hundreds of hours of combined effort by people who grew up and/or lived in the neighborhood. At the same time, some hardy and hopeful individuals were bringing back to life the buildings and businesses of nearby Depot Town. Please don’t think that this has been an easy task for either the Historic East Side or Depot Town. Blood, sweat, and tears has helped to cement the area into what it is today.

A View from the Front Porch

From our large front porches, we can actually see tourists from other areas, perhaps some from towns that have torn down the old homes that once graced the tree-laden streets, walk slowly down our neighborhood with cameras to record the numerous Greek Revival homes from the 1830s, Victorian-era homes with brightly painted gingerbread from the 1870s, Sears Roebuck and other kit houses from the 1920s, four-square family homes from the turn of the century, and cozy bungalows peppered here and there. Butterflies and bees buzz around the many pollinator gardens.

And now, instead of being afraid to walk the streets of the East Side, we gladly stroll or ride our bikes to the Food Co-op, Depot Town shops and restaurants, Prospect, Riverside, and Frog Island Parks, the B2B trail, and to playgrounds, a skate park, and the tranquil Highland Cemetery. It is high above the river where so many East Siders of other generations rest in peace.

The change in zoning and historic designation, as well as federal laws, has left us a legacy that few neighborhoods can boast. I want to quote Dr. Martin Luther King to end this chapter: “I have a dream.” Well, many of us shared that dream of living in an integrated, pleasant, and peaceful environment. The Historic East Side is a good place to live and die in.

A Note on Sources

Information for this essay comes from Janice Anschuetz’s own experience. Further and more detailed information including much of the narrative contained in the Historic Designation document that members of the Historic East Side Neighborhood Associ-

ation submitted can be found in the article about this process in the Ypsilanti Historical Society's publication *Gleanings*, Spring 2019 issue, which can be found at the Ypsilanti Historical Society website. Images are the property of the author.

About the Author

Janice Anschuetz has degrees in history and sociology from Eastern Michigan University as well as a master's degree in social work with a focus on Community Organization from the University of Michigan.