

# Marching Down Michigan Avenue

## Downtown Ypsilanti Since the 1950s

BY ELLEN THACKERY

### A Sleek New Look

The health of downtown Ypsilanti since the mid-twentieth century has followed the trajectory of many downtowns, especially perhaps in the Midwest. Downtown Ypsilanti was thriving in the 1950s and 1960s, followed by a downturn in its fortunes in the later 1960s through the 1980s, a concerted revitalization effort from the 1980s through the 1990s, and a continuing effort to nurture a vibrant downtown from the 2000s through the early 2020s.

In the early 1950s, much of the downtown's late-nineteenth-century architecture was still intact and in good condition; commercial Italianate buildings still had their ornate bracketed cornices and window hoods.

By 1958, downtown Ypsilanti, at least along Michigan Avenue, was starting to try to shake off its nineteenth-century appearance. Some stores had begun to install colored glass panels or enameled steel panels around the storefronts to give them a more modern appearance. A few stores had even begun to cover up the windows of their second and third stories to bring that sleek, modern appearance not just to the storefront, but to the whole building.

Into the 1960s, downtown businesses were thriving and expanding. By 1963, the idea of modernizing by covering the upper stories of older commercial buildings had really taken hold. In a 1963 photo (see page 210), almost all the stores downtown along Michigan Avenue featured slipcovers or panels (sometimes resembling cheese graters) hiding their nineteenth-century facades. Hartman's, Mellencamp's, Rexall, Moffett's, Seyfried, Moray's, and Brian & Peterson, striving to look modern, had all installed complete coverage from the storefronts to the roofs by 1963. Sleek panels upstairs also allowed for the whole building above the storefront to become the signboard, catering to automobile traffic.



Parade on West Michigan Avenue at Huron, 1951. Much of the Italianate architecture is intact, but there is evidence of signs becoming larger to appeal to drivers as well as pedestrians.

### **Downtown Gets a Facelift**

Two different types of pressure began squeezing downtown Ypsilanti in the 1960s and 1970s: convenient parking and retail competition from outside downtown. By 1960, the historic buildings near the corner of North Huron and Michigan Avenue had been identified as a location for a new parking lot. By winter 1972, the parking lot behind Michigan Avenue at the corner of South Huron—the Huron and Ferris lot—was open. The other pressure on downtown, which was likely helping to drive the desire for convenient parking, was the competitive retail pressure created when regional shopping center Arborland opened in 1961, followed by Briarwood Mall in 1973.

Something else now came to the fore to interact with these pressures: the historic preservation movement. Written into federal law in 1966, historic preservation was enabled at the state level in Michigan in 1970. Ypsilantians knew that they had a unique history and a special collection of historic buildings, and they worked to document and preserve them through the 1970s and 1980s. By 1978, the City of Ypsilanti had adopted a historic district ordinance and established a historic district. These local protections would help prevent the demolition of historic buildings.

Ypsilanti was not alone in facing these various pressures. Older downtowns across the country were trying to compete with regional shopping malls and struggling with sprawling, auto-focused development. In response, in 1980, the National Trust for Historic Preservation created the National Main Street Center. The Main Street approach was based in historic preservation, and strived to help historic downtowns identify and emphasize their strengths, while seeking a diverse downtown business mix

and supporting promotional events. The goal was to help revitalize Main Streets across the country by capitalizing on their historic character and focusing on their assets and people. In 1984, Ypsilanti adopted the Main Street model.

Sue Mosey served as director of the Ypsilanti Downtown Development Authority (DDA) and was the Main Street coordinator from 1984 to 1989. In late 2022, she described that period as a very challenging one for downtowns and one in which downtown Ypsilanti still had several longtime businesses, but, unfortunately, a number of vacancies. Her focus, she said, had been on façade improvements and business recruitment.

To help guide façade improvements, in 1980, the City of Ypsilanti commissioned a façade improvement plan. To help fund the improvements, they applied for Small Cities Community Development Block Grants. A commercial loan review board was formed in town to review applications to the program. Later, façade improvement grants were funded from a portion of the funds that the DDA collected from local businesses.

That initial Small Cities initiative spurred building investment after a period of disinvestment. A 1987 *Ypsilanti Press* article reported that Moray Jewelers, Darby's Shoes, and the Mack & Mack Building received façade funding in that year's grant round. The funds they received were for removing modern coverings and restoring the original historic character of the buildings. These types of façade restorations are examples of the building investments, such as awnings, masonry repair, and painting, that were taking place in this period across downtown.

During this challenging time, in addition to businesses investing in façade resto-



North side of West Michigan Avenue looking east, 1958. Panels surround doors, and storefronts, and cover entire upper façades.



North side of West Michigan Avenue looking northwest, 1963. Almost every building has covered its upper floors entirely, and almost every parking spot is taken.

ration, others were closing. Kresge, a longtime downtown anchor, closed in the mid-1960s, but the 1980s saw Darby's Shoes, Willoughby's Shoes, and Mellencamp's Men's and Boys' Wear close, among others. Moray's closed in 1990, and Pear's Clothing Store in 1997.

Newspaper articles in the 1980s quoted store owners blaming a declining downtown for the business closings, but they also cited the changing nature of retail. In a March 1986 *Ypsilanti Press* article, Tom Willoughby of Willoughby's Shoes said that "the deterioration of the downtown" was one factor that contributed to his store closing, but he also noted that the shoe business seemed to be "gravitating away from the small independent business to the chain, the discounter, the mall locations." In that same article, Sue Mosey said, "You're seeing a trend of some of the old family-owned businesses where they have owners who are near retirement age closing up. . . . We are sorry to see these long-time merchants close, who have served the community for so many years." Mosey continued, "We don't see this as the demise of retailing in downtown Ypsilanti. We see it as getting new types of businesses coming in. We've got a whole list of business types that we're looking for."

One example of a business that opened during that challenging period, and has remained open, is Puffer Red's on Michigan Avenue. Owner Eric Williams opened the store in 1981, and he said that several things happened around that time to help keep downtown's revitalization on track. People were investing in the downtown and participating in the façade rehabilitation program, and property owners in Ypsilanti were watching nearby markets like Ann Arbor to make sure that Ypsilanti remained an affordable place for people to do business. Additionally, the downtown area began reaching out to Eastern Michigan University to bring young people in, and as longtime business owners moved on, new people came in with new ideas.

## Preserving the Past for the Future

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the DDA continued to recruit businesses and offer façade grants and low-interest loans, but it also expanded its focus to improving the downtown environment. In 1992, the comprehensive report *Downtown Ypsilanti: Economic Revitalization Initiative* was published. The report analyzed the market and compiled feedback from town hall meetings and surveys and, according to lifelong Ypsilantian and former member of city council Barry LaRue, the publication spurred bond issues for streetscape improvements and encouraged continued enthusiasm for façade work, wayfinding, and traffic calming. Bonds were issued for streetscape improvements like the installation of medians on Michigan Avenue to create a boulevard, improved street lighting, and tree planting.

During the 1990s, another focus was the historically sensitive rehabilitation of the city hall at 1 South Huron. In the 1960s, an aluminum “cheese grater” façade had been installed to hide the traditional stone-and-brick building. The city had purchased the building in 1977 for use as the city hall and, in partnership with the DDA, removed the modernizing cover as part of a series of projects that began in 1991.

Other Ypsilanti DDA initiatives in the 1990s and 2000s included partnering with the Friends of the Ypsilanti Freighthouse to restore and open the Ypsilanti Freighthouse for public use. Also work continued on the renovation of the Riverside Arts Center, which the DDA purchased in 1995, and turned over to a nonprofit organization to operate. The Ypsilanti DDA was still following the Main Street model throughout this period, until about 2016, and the focus areas throughout this period were: continued façade rehabilitation grants, downtown improvements (lighting, banners, planters, parking improvements, dumpster improvements), and regular special events downtown, including annual festivals.

Christopher Jacobs, who became the executive director of the Ypsilanti DDA in 2018, said that a grant from the Michigan Economic Development Corporation Façade Restoration Initiative was transformational at that time in activating several key vacant or underutilized downtown properties. A key focus area for the DDA around 2020 was issuing grants to help stabilize businesses and to help build outdoor cafes during the COVID-19 pandemic, which, as Jacobs noted, “threatened to unravel the work we had been doing for years to economically stabilize downtown.” In recent years, Jacobs says that DDA work has expanded significantly into placemaking, special events programming, and new grant programs like the Solar Rebate Initiative.

In a 1984 *Ypsilanti Press* article about Mellencamp’s closing, Sue Mosey acknowledged that “traditional retailers are having the hardest time battling competition from shopping malls. Downtowns like Ypsilanti’s must recognize the need to find a new structure and carve a new niche in the marketing arena, possibly emphasizing specialty shops.” In 2022, specialty shops are a vital part of downtown Ypsilanti, along with restau-

rants, bars, and entertainment. Downtown Ypsilanti in 2023 is full of historic charm, unique retail, and good food, but history shows that thriving downtowns are not happy accidents. Vital downtowns require planning, nurturing, maintenance, positive policies, and community involvement and support.

According to Christopher Jacobs: “On the horizon there are incredible opportunities with the Downtown Tax Increment Financing Revenues and our fund balance growing to support new efforts and major investments in our streetscape and public infrastructure so that downtown continues to attract visitors for the next twenty years. As we look ahead, it remains incredibly important to engage the student and faculty population at Eastern Michigan University following a return to on-campus classes, activate the former college of business at 300 West Michigan, develop Water Street, invest in activating more residential units above commercial storefronts, and solve the parking deficit in Depot Town. If these things are able to come to fruition in our short-term future, it will position Downtown Ypsilanti to prosper well into the future.”

Downtown Ypsilanti has experienced ups and downs over its long history and will continue to do so, but with a clear vision, a passionate commitment to people, places, and sustainability, policies that embody that commitment, and a supportive community, downtown Ypsilanti will remain resilient and vibrant for many years to come.

### **A Note on Sources**

Information for this essay comes from the *Ypsilanti Press*, *Ypsilanti Gleanings*, *Downtown Ypsilanti: Economic Revitalization Initiative*, Main Street America, “Our History” (<https://www.mainstreet.org/aboutus>); DDA meeting minutes; and interviews with Sue Mosey, Barry LaRue, Eric Williams, and Christopher Jacobs. The photographs come from the Ypsilanti Historical Society Archives.

### **About the Author**

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