NORTH DOWNER AVENUE

Downer as the Neighborhood’s Main Street

North Downer Avenue commercial district is a two-block retail strip located along North Downer Avenue, between East Park and East Webster Places. It was awarded a local historic designation in 2001. Situated on the west edge of Historic Water Tower neighborhood, this has always been the neighborhood’s main street, says Thea Kovac, a long-time resident.

The shops and facilities along Downer were originally built to serve “homeowners and apartment dwellers living on the city’s Upper East Side” from the 1900s to the 1930s. In the recent past, there has been some real estate speculation on commercial properties along Downer. The Downer Avenue shopping district is not immune to major developments that could completely change its character as a neighborhood marketplace. Economic interests have led developers to propose larger residential buildings very close to Downer Avenue, and a boutique hotel on the street. The parking structure is a reminder of new developments in this area.

Over the years, Downer Avenue has always been a part of the neighborhood’s life, whether as an everyday shopping district, a public place, or as an endangered historic district.


CVS Pharmacy, 2013.


How we tell stories of Downer

Place-Based Stories
As we talked to the users of Downer Avenue shopping district, we found that many of their memories and stories were connected to specific locations. We have therefore selected those sites that frequently came up during their interviews.

Person-Based Stories
People experience Downer in diverse ways. Some people are customers at shops on Downer. The others are members of a church. There are also merchants and businessmen who operate their stores on Downer. These individuals have spent different periods of time on Downer Avenue and they have been at the street at different times during the day. They have experienced changes of seasons and they have attended events held here. They hold different viewpoints and perspectives on this street. The street becomes the locus where these diverse individuals meet and interact with each other. We provide person-based accounts to give you the biographical contexts of the storytellers of Downer.
Sendiks, 2013.

Sendiks

Built in 1909, this building is the oldest existing building in the North Downer Avenue commercial district. It has a two-block façade, which was common in the United States circa 1800 to 1950. According to Sal Sendik, the current co-owner of Sendik’s on Downer and the first son of the founder Tony Sendik, this store has been operating here since 1933. When Tony Sendik started the store with two of his brothers, he sold only fresh produce while sharing the building with some other stores. Sendik’s gradually acquired the neighboring stores, built a one-story greenhouse (on the south side) and a warehouse (at the rear), and it became what it is today.

City of Milwaukee Historic Preservation Commission, “Final Historic Designation Study Report: North Downer Avenue Commercial District” (Milwaukee: Historic Preservation Commission, 2001), 8

Sal Sendik, interview by Daniel Cho and Yuko Nakamura, Milwaukee, June 20, 2013.
HARDWARE STORE

Downer Hardware, 2013.

**Downer Hardware**

This building was built in 1912, after houses on the 2600 block of North Downer Avenue were removed. According to their Facebook page, Downer Hardware opened in these premises in 1937. Even though it has been a True Value store for at least 34 years, people still call it simply the “hardware store,” regarding it not as a chain store, but as the local hardware store of the neighborhood.


Coffee Trader

According to Margaret Howland and an article in Milwaukee Journal, prior to its opening on Downer, Coffee Trader had a store on East Park Place that sold only beans. This old store was located in the current premises of the Sendik’s fish market. A new store was built in 1975 and it shared the entrance with Henry’s bar and restaurant, which is now located at 2523 East Belleview Place. There was neither Starbucks nor Alterra in Milwaukee in 1975. Coffee Trader was therefore the place to go for the neighborhood members and more generally, for all Milwaukeeans. Coffee Trader faded in the 1990s. At least three tenants have come in and gone in this location. Now Original Pancake House, VIA Downer and AthletiCo share the building, but maintain separate entrances.

Downer Theatre

Built in 1915, the building has always housed Downer Theatre, though its ownership has changed several times. This oldest existing commercial member of the North Downer Avenue Commercial District originally showed silent movies with a Weickhardt pipe organ, a Sohmer piano, or an in-house orchestra. Eventually it began showing movies with sound. The Downer Theater was acquired by Landmark Theatres in 1989 and remodeled into a two-screener with a digital sound system.
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Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, February 24, 2006, 3D.

The Downer Ave. business district includes restaurants, specialty shops, a bookstore and the Downer Theatre.

Theatre view from the rear.

USE OF PUBLIC SPACE

Nelson’s Popcorn Wagon

Built in 1916, Nelson’s popcorn wagon was on East Bellevue Place and North Downer Avenue until 2007. As one of the oldest popcorn wagons in the United States, it was noted as a “contributing structure” upon the district’s local designation (2001). However, the removal was approved by the Milwaukee Preservation Commission upon the construction of the four-storied parking garage. The popcorn wagon still sits in people’s memory, with a strong fragrance of popcorn: salty, sweet, and buttery.
St. Mark’s Episcopal Church

St. Mark’s was originally formed as a Mission congregation in 1893 and had its first small chapel on Greenwich and Maryland in 1894. The current masonry chapel was constructed on North Hackket Avenue and East Belleview Place in 1912, after the wooden chapel on the same site was demolished in 1911. Although it was equipped with a guild hall, with more than one thousand members at the time of World War II, the church decided to have a new parish hall in 1949. Open to a diverse population, the church now also functions as a community center.
Church doors.

Church walkway.

St. Mark's Episcopal Church, ca 1912–1918. Reproduced from St. Mark's Episcopal Church, 15.

Notes: City of Milwaukee Historic Preservation Commission, “Final Historic Designation Study Report: North Downer Avenue Commercial District” (Milwaukee: Historic Preservation Commission, 2001), 8–9, 14–15; St. Mark’s Episcopal Church, St. Mark’s Episcopal Church Centennial Celebration 1893–1993; id., The Parish Outlook 10 7 (1918), 15; Stacy Roller, interview by Fran Assa, Daniel Cho and Yuko Nakamura, Milwaukee, June 18, 2013.
AUTOMOBILE GARAGE

Downer Garage
In the early motor car era or the automobile age (1916), this building was built “to store, service and sell automobiles.” Early automobiles could not be parked outside because they were expensive and they were not weather-resistant. They also needed frequent services by technicians. This garage was built to serve “well-to-do East Siders” who owned motor cars at that moment.

The first floor is now occupied by retail stores and the upper floors are used as storage for these retail shops.

Mulkern's Garage

In 1912, Mulkern's Garage was built to meet the needs of the motor car owners in the surrounding residential area. Mulkern's Garage sold, kept, repaired and rented early automobiles for the neighborhood residents. They were especially known for repairing electronic cars, which were very popular among well-to-do people in the 1910s.

The first floor was converted to ten individual retail stores in 1933. The current residents of the neighborhood tend to have memories about these retail stores, rather than the early garage.

People

Talking about Downer

Stories of Downer are told from diverse perspectives. We have talked to a developer, a merchant, residents and workers in Downer. Some personal perspectives contradicted each other, and others overlapped. This section examines this complex and heterogeneous collective perspective on Downer Avenue. While we have incorporated these personal and collective memories into place-based stories, we have also provided biographies, based primarily on oral histories, in order to give you the personal contexts of the storytellers of Downer.
Margaret Howland

Margaret Martin Elsner Howland lived in the Historic Water Tower neighborhood until she moved out of state for her senior high school. Residing only two blocks away from the Downer Avenue commercial district, she spent a substantial amount of time in Downer as a child in the 1960s and 1970s.

Howland remembers how she grew up in the neighborhood. Knowing most of the clerks by first name and the owners by name, she considers, “I was brought up by a community of people.” Even when she did not have something specific to do on Downer, she passed through Downer and said hello to her mother’s hairdresser, Leoda. Cashiers at Sendik’s let her try the cash register. Having an “account” at each store on Downer, she could make small purchases, such as her mother’s birthday card, on credit – a clerk said, “I know you’re Elsner.”

Although she was away from Milwaukee for several years, she now lives close to Downer and still frequents some of the stores: Sendik’s, Downer Hardware and Paperwork. Asked what Downer means to her, she replies, “There’s definitely emotional attachment. This is where I grew up.”
Vince Katter

Vince Katter has seen Downer Avenue change over the last 25 years as a dedicated parishioner at St. Mark’s Episcopal Church.

There has been a revival on Downer Avenue. Katter believes the area has changed from “being a place for the wealthy.” After a downturn in the neighborhood, when “a lot of houses became rooming houses,” it has revived as “a nice place to live.” The former Coffee Trader building stood empty for a long time, but now that space, and Downer Avenue as a whole, are experiencing a “retail renaissance” as more people continue to move to the East Side, and the economy improves.

There has been a revival in church activities as well. The local church members are joined by others who travel to the neighborhood for church from other areas. Times have changed and people are no longer “expected” to go to church, but there are still numerous activities that gather the congregation in this building. The church has a large hall and ten years ago it redefined what to do with that space. It has transformed into a center for meetings, events, groups, and classes. A UWM cooking class experiments in the St. Mark’s kitchen, which is “fun to watch.”
Thea Kovac

Thea Kovac compares the place of Downer Avenue in the neighborhood to a kind of small town “Main Street.” She should know. Kovac, who is a vice president of the Historic Water Tower Neighborhood association (HWTN), has lived in a home that abuts the Downer commercial block east of Downer theater since 1975.

When Kovac thinks about how to describe the shopping district, she recalls a particular walk she took that brought her to the street from an unaccustomed direction. Seeing it suddenly from a new angle caused a moment of dislocation and wonder: she suddenly felt she was walking into some small charming European town. Kovac is not overly fanciful; that is exactly how the street is described in a 2001 City of Milwaukee study which resulted in the designation of the two commercial blocks as an historic district: “The character of the district is reminiscent of a small European village because at its center lies a picturesque church complex and clustered around it are a variety of small commercial buildings.”

Kovac has worked hard over the years to see that the Downer Avenue commercial area continues to be a place of “small commercial buildings.” To Kovac, the stores offer a unique kind of commercial environment that is neighborly. She knows the shopkeepers, and they know her. They know her children as well, and some of them saw her children grow up. The shopkeepers have a stake in the neighborhood and in their relationships with the residents. She calls it an “important” and “synergistic” relationship.

Kovac believes that recent developers betrayed this relationship when they got permission to build the large, multi-story parking lot across from the movie theater. The developers “cared nothing about the neighbors.” The neighborhood association fought the parking structure but lost, despite the historic district designation. Kovac argues that it is not a good practice to have a general development plan for such a little neighborhood area, and worries that other large developments will ruin the character of the neighborhood that the historic designation was supposed to preserve.

Thea Kovac relates many of the charms of living in the district, and has vivid memories of taking her kids to nearby Lake Park, and the excitement that the Coffee Trader brought to the neighborhood. When she first moved to the neighborhood the corner drugstore still had a functioning soda counter, and the owner talked about having met his future wife at the fountain. Downer has changed over the years to more of an entertainment and restaurant area, but she hopes the neighborliness between storekeepers and shoppers will continue.

Just off Downer Avenue is a three story apartment building, built at the same time as the stores on Downer, in the 1920s. In one of the apartments, now converted to beautiful condos, lives an ordained minister with a remarkable record of social activism. She has been Deacon of St. Mark's church across the street for the last ten years since her ordination, but she has been a socially committed resident of the Downer Avenue neighborhood and the city of Milwaukee for much longer. Michelle Mooney, a vigorous woman with well-cut grey-white hair, sharp blue eyes that concentrate on what you are saying, and a no-nonsense, yet modest demeanor, has an inspiring record of social justice work. She was the first Executive Director of The Gathering, Milwaukee’s premier volunteer group providing meals and other services to the hungry since 1982. She now serves as a board member of Common Ground and the newly formed Common Ground Healthcare Cooperative formed out of the Accountable Care Act. Starting January 1, 2014, the Healthcare Cooperative will offer low cost health care statewide to those who cannot otherwise purchase it. Yet she is just as involved with the Downer Avenue community, where she has created a neighborhood produce garden on unused church lawn. The garden is a place where neighbors can come to meet and work together, while raising organic produce. Mooney’s blue eyes light up when talking about the hours she spends in the garden with her neighbors.

Asked if she has an opinion on how to improve the neighborhood, she replies that while the neighborhood is not “heaven on earth,” it comes close. It is an area “well served”—from the amenities of Lake Park to the local library which will be moving into fine new quarters. While some families who might have stayed in the neighborhood have moved to the suburbs, the neighborhood continues to thrive as more people appreciate the features of the neighborhood. As she put it, “I love Downer.”
In his 78 years in the neighborhood, Sal Sendik has seen a lot of things come and go on Downer Avenue, where he has worked in his father’s grocery, Sendik’s, since age twelve. At fifteen, he graduated from Marquette High School and at age sixteen he was put in charge of the store while his father took off for Italy for three months. While he has a degree from Marquette University and served in the military, Sendik has been devoted to the store ever since, along with his son Tony Sendik.

Sendik often turns the conversation to his father, whose memory he reveres. His father came to America as a child from Sicily. He and his four brothers, their last name was Balistreri, settled in the Third Ward, living in a house so small that they had to work and sleep in shifts. His father had a minimal education and went to work selling fruit along the streetcar lines. Soon he bought a truck and delivered produce to his customers, carrying the orders to their doorsteps. One lady he delivered to noticed that he was limping and suggested he open a store so she could come to him, instead of him delivering to her. Even when delivering produce Sendik’s father had a knack for attracting interesting people. The woman who made the suggestion was the sister-in-law of the world famous violinist, Jascha Heifetz.

At her suggestion, Sendik’s father and his brothers opened a store on Oakland and Capitol in 1929. By 1933 Sendik’s father and two of the brothers leased space for selling produce at an A & P on Downer Avenue (the A & P sold only packaged goods.)

The Downer store had a well-to-do clientele. Sendik remembers some ladies who arrived at the store by limousines, driven by their chauffeurs. The chauffeurs would wait while the ladies shopped and then got into the back seat. His father was able to buy the shops of adjacent small businesses and expanded Sendik’s to the current size.

In his interview with the BLC field school Sal Sendik divulges the secret of how the Balistreris came to be called Sendik. There is a clue in one of the shop windows of the store.

Sal Sendik’s father never stopped learning and reading. He was a lover of art and opera, and his clientele appreciated talking with him. “Everybody respected my father,” Sendik says. At the back of the store, one might see his father in a deep discussion with one of the neighborhood’s wealthy industrialists, perched on an apple crate. Sendik misses his father. “He was smartest man I knew. An honest, honorable man.”
Susan Willets

A chance request from the Priest of St. Mark’s Episcopal Church became a life changing event for artist Susan Willets. The church had received an endowment to be used for art exhibition space, and Willets, who is a member of the church, was asked to hang the art. With her connections to artists in the area she promoted the church space as a place for artists to introduce and sell their work to the public. Now she is in charge of the art gallery and mounts an art exhibition every two months, a challenge that has brought her into broader contact with the Milwaukee art scene. As part of her volunteer duties, she hangs the shows, with the guidance of the artists, advertises the exhibitions in the Journal-Sentinel’s “Weekend Cue,” the church website and newsletter, and MARN-- the Milwaukee Artist Resource Network. She also organizes and hosts the receptions.

Each show lasts for two months, at the cost of only $35, and 10% commission on sales, which go to the church. The works are exhibited in a large, bright hall, and two more walls in a corridor. The artists invite their friends and followers for a reception at the church, elaborate or simple, for which they provide food and drink. St Mark’s supplies wine glasses, coffee, flatware and china, flowers, set up and clean up. Steve Woolf, the church’s music director, and a bass playing parishioner, can play jazz music for the shows on Sundays. Willets greatly enjoys these receptions, and getting to know the artists and meeting their friends. The experience has helped her grow as an artist.

Willets tries to bring variety to her choice of shows, and at least one show a year has multiple artists whose work is selected around a theme. Since St Mark’s has gained a reputation as artist-friendly, Willets is now contacted by artists wishing to exhibit. She gets great pleasure seeing the parishioners and guests enjoy the art, and believes the artists are also pleased with the sales. In her opinion this is a church that really supports the arts, which she finds unusual.

Willett’s own background is mostly in pastel work. She also does landscape and still life paintings in watercolor. She is co-chairman of Wisconsin Visual Arts and a member of Wisconsin Pastel Artists, and has exhibited throughout the area.

Susan Willets, interview by Fran Assa, Daniel Cho and Yuko Nakamura, Milwaukee, June 18, 2013.
Blair Williams

Blair Williams is a young commercial real estate developer who sees himself as a person who understands both the necessity of development and the significance of historic preservation. He is a person with some financial power, but more important, significant political power, because he sits on the Milwaukee Historic Preservation Commission, which has jurisdiction over the buildings and neighborhoods designated as “historic” in Milwaukee. This includes the Water Tower neighborhood. Williams also lives in the locality but is not involved in its neighborhood preservation organization.

In his office overlooking the corner of North Avenue and Farwell, Blair Williams, discusses his philosophy of commercial real estate development. He owns no property on Downer, although he has made an unsuccessful bid. He is the developer of two residential/commercial buildings on the north end of Oakland Avenue in the heart of the neighborhood in Shorewood. He says that his philosophy in those two developments was to understand that a major structure in a neighborhood must appeal not only to customers and users of the commercial space, but to those people who live nearby, or walk or ride their bikes past the building.

A visit to these structures reveals that they have set backs from the street, allowing passers by mingle with patrons at outdoor air dining areas, or explore take in the offerings in the shop windows as they pass. The commercial areas are divided into small shops that appeal to the senses: a local coffee vender, a wine tasting establishment, a frozen yogurt shop, a restaurant. Most importantly, the height of the building and the structural materials used do not draw undue attention or overwhelm the street. They fit the neighboring structures in size and material, without mimicking them. They are architecturally interesting. People accept the buildings as good neighbors.
Parents claim that it's easy to get their children to attend Sunday services at St. Mark’s Episcopal Church because of the music. The music is the product of a remarkable man named Stephen Wolff; and Stephen Wolff, as he tells it, is the product of advanced musical training, and an unusual upbringing that stressed music, literature, and religious devotion. As music director of St. Mark’s, Wolff not only provides organ and piano music for the services, but he also performs at many church events, composes original music, creates jazz versions of traditional hymns, leads the choir; and has even brought in a range of musicians to perform at a concert series for the whole community. Additionally Wolff and these “musicians in residence” provide music lessons at the church on a variety of instruments. When not doing all of the above, Wolff is putting the finishing touches on a book of 100 Sonnets.

If Stephen Wolff seems to overflow with creativity, his upbringing is probably the cause. Wolff is one of 17 children born to the marriage of a piano teacher mother and a Marquette University seminarian, both very devout Roman Catholics who made sure their children were surrounded by and in touch with spiritual and artistic beauty.

Every child had a musical instrument, music lessons, books and pets. There was no TV. Every day was infused with spirituality in the form of daily mass, saying the Rosary every night, and reading spiritual texts. The children participated in gardening, canning food and raising chickens. Every child was given a college education at Marquette University.

To Wolff, music is a way of living a life of the imagination. Music and poetry bring one into association with perfection, and perfection has an influence on the soul. At St. Marks, he feels blessed to be surrounded by the beauty of the church and a friendly body of people. Wolff lives just west of Downer Avenue. The Concert Series offers a variety of music once a month during academic year. Wolff performs three solo concerts in the Series and also accompanies the other performers, and pronounces the church’s acoustics “wonderful.”
The meaning of home and its architecture varies with people and generations. A home serves different social functions and its interiors can hold many worlds under a single roof. Homes can be sites of daily domestic life or labor, be it childrearing or cooking. They can be iconic and the owner may present her identity to a larger world through her home. Homes can serve as commodities with unstable resale value in a real estate marketplace or be valued as esthetically crafted object. Homes are repositories of individual and family memories and testament to the historical past. Interpreting the many different meanings and functions of homes is central to writing stories of the residential landscapes of a neighborhood.

We found that homes in this neighborhood serve the function of generating contact, providing prospect, nurturing labor, and displaying craft. Each of the homes highlighted in this section can be interpreted in multiple and overlapping ways. Thus homes listed under the section titled “labor,” may also be interpreted using the category of “craft.” Our intention is not to pigeonhole particular buildings as representative of a single identity but to engage residents and viewers to begin to read thier homes using all four thematic categories suggested above.