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[The East Side - March 10, 1968](#)

by [Yance](#) » Sun Mar 21, 2010 9:18 pm

This article from the more recent past sketches a view of the east side. Although some things have changed, some things have remained the same. The east side still has kept its individualism and even embraced it as its identity. Things are more permissive and hippies have been replaced by other groups of tattooed hipsters. The story gives an interesting perspective on the Brady Street of the past which was filled with old man bars and hippies.

Milwaukee Journal, March 10, 1968

The East Side - A Way of Living

*By VINCENT BALDASSARI
Of The Journal Staff*

Milwaukee's historic and still prestigious east side is more than a place to live—it's a way of living.

Reviled by some as a haven for hippies and other unmanageable youth, it is prized by others as

the city's most sophisticated, cosmopolitan section.

It attracts those who want the true street life, or life of the city, as opposed to the single family suburban scene.

Young people cross the Milwaukee river boundary seeking what they call freedom from parental and other restraints.

Its heavy concentration of apartment buildings and its swinging reputation beckon single working girls and men.

Geographically and topographically, it is one of the most desirable residential areas of the city. A four mile spine of land bordering Shorewood on the north, it points a bony finger at Jones island to the south.

To the east is its greatest scenic asset, Lake Michigan. On the west, the muddy Milwaukee river cuts off the east side from the rest of the city in spirit as well as physically.

Its ridge and valley contour is a roller coaster ride that hints faintly of San Francisco streets.

The east side is intimately a part of downtown. At its southern end, East Town, once known as Juneautown, has been a residential and commercial center of the city since its earliest days in the 19th century.

The charm of age is usually accompanied by the drawbacks of deterioration, however, and the east side has not been immune.

From East Town to the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee on the north, aging single family homes have sunk into varying degrees of genteel shabbiness or downright sluminess.

There are fine old mansions along the bluff, in the Back Bay and along Lake dr., and simple, faded, but curiously neat, frame houses around the E. Brady st. Polish-Italian area.

There are also old churches next to new, often ugly, concrete block apartments, next to Victorian type homes. Art and antique shops stand next to penny candy stores, next to yarn goods shops on old townish Brady st which exudes a dingy charm through a maze of wooden telephone poles and overhanging wires.

But the east side is lucky where other failing neighborhoods are not. It has the attributes that make for sophisticated type, in-town living and thus is a prime target for apartment developers.

Its destiny lies in new apartments —both expensive and cheap, towers and walkups. Prospect av. and Juneau Village skyscrapers with views of the skyline or the bay from the balconies.

To serve these apartment dwellers, the east side boasts, among other things, a major university, an engineering school, the city's oldest hospital, political, cultural and banking centers, a well known art school, the art center, museums, lake-front parks, a yacht club, beaches and bluffs.

The most impressive new apartment construction in recent years has taken place in the area below UWM, on Prospect and in the Juneau Village urban renewal project.

Prospect and Farwell avs., once bright hopes of city planners as potential models of fine development, have not lived up to expectations. On Prospect, for example, towers have walled up the east side of the street, cutting off the view of the lake, and making the west side of the avenue less desirable.

"Of course, this is crying over spilled milk." says Carl H Quast, city planning director. "However, we have succeeded in restricting Prospect primarily to residential construction."

There are a few surviving office and other nonresidential land uses on the street, but these will eventually disappear because of rising land costs, Quast said.

Process of Replacement

West of Prospect, run-down houses, mostly frame construction, are expected to be replaced by two and three story, walkup apartment buildings.

This process has already begun and the results have been far from pleasing to city planners, who say an attitude of "increase the tax base at any price" has nurtured many "junky, concrete block" structures.

Quast said the quality of construction had improved since the early 1960s, but the buildings with the fancy facades and blank, concrete block sides and back walls were still in evidence.

"The east side is being ruined by some speculative builders operating on small margins and concerned with fast turnover, not the looks of the building," Quast said. "For them it's a short run proposition."

Much more vehement was Richard W. E. Perrin, city development director, who calls the east side one of his favorite areas:

"You've got a real lousy mixture of excellent apartments intermingled with cheap rental accommodations with a few old mansions mixed in. The transition of the area has been unplanned. No orderly process played much of a role. It was mostly opportunism and expediency."

As Milwaukee grows and if the disenchantment with living in the suburbs continues, the lower east side will continue to redevelop itself slowly, with or without government supported urban renewal, Perrin added.

Perhaps typical of the type of person who enjoys the urban atmosphere of the east side is William L. Nelson, urban planning consultant, who refurbished a large Victorian residence at 1733 N. Farwell av. into his office and an apartment for his family.

"For all its flaws. It's a tremendously satisfying area to live in," he said. "All the conveniences, people and things I want are within a few blocks of me — the lake, downtown, shopping, restaurants."

A Little United Nations

Perhaps untypical is the fact that Nelson is raising three children in the heart of the lower east side. Two of the children go to elementary school and have friends from varied economic and ethnic backgrounds, Nelson said.

"Within three blocks of my home you could probably find one of each nationality on earth." Nelson said. "You could have a United Nations right here."

The east side, topographically, is a high plateau formed by the river and the lake, Nelson explained. Historically, the finest homes were on the promontory overlooking the lake and valleys.

It's not Greenwich Village, he added, but it is the educational and artistic center, housing thousands of students and artist types. They attend the Layton School of Art, Milwaukee School of Engineering and the University of Wisconsin — Milwaukee.

Opposition to Hippies

Then, there are the often daunted hippies, who have found even the comparatively enlightened east side sometimes too hostile. For example, their recent efforts to surface in the form of shops selling hippie newspapers and posters, among other items, did not survive the uproar they engendered.

The opposition to this element of east side life has caused one UWM professor, Irwin D. Rinder, department of sociology, to deplore "repression of anything that is different."

"East siders are experimenters," said Rinder, "and are innovative in regard to art, leisure and dress. . . . Cities are historically the places where experiment with the future has taken place."

To stop experimentation is to paralyze the community, Rinder added. To quash poetry readings, far out music and other happenings on the east side because they are strange is barbaric and downright undemocratic, he said.

Shops on Brady St.

The part of the east side with perhaps the most potential for development as a picturesque, ethnically interesting area is Brady st., a compact commercial strip with bars, restaurants, Italian grocery stores, bakeries, hardware stores and sewing shops.

Recently, the springing up of several art and antique shops, a penny candy store and other such specialty stores, on Farwell av. as well as Brady, has encouraged those who would like to see something happen there on the lines of Old Town in Chicago.

The ethnic background of the area dates from the mid-19th century when Polish fishermen settled there.

They built St. Hedwig's church, an east side landmark, in 1886.

For many years, Brady divided the Poles north of it from the Irish to the south. Neighborhood battles were commonplace, then, according to a local parish priest — and also later when Italians largely replaced the Irish.

Ethnic squabbles — the "you stay on your side of the street" type — subsided as both the neighborhoods and the residents, matured, the priest, who did not want his name used, said.

The residents around St. Hedwig's now include — besides Poles and Italians— German, French, Irish, Mexican, Puerto Rican, and southern whites, among others.

Exaggerated Reputation

Comparing the east side with its sometimes wild reputation, the same priest found some of it exaggerated. However, he said the east side has become somewhat of a promised land for escapists.

More startling to the priest was the change in the composition of the population he had noticed as apartments have steadily replaced homes. The parish school which once taught 1,100 children is down to 280.

"In 10 years we may end up being a downtown church," the priest said.

City planning department statistics show that only 22% of east siders are between 0 and 18 years of age compared to 37% in the Capitol Court area. Only 18.8% are in the 0 to 15 age category and 8.6% in the 0 to 5 category. Comparable figures around Capitol Court are 34% and 12.3%.

Dominated by UWM

The upper east side, north of North av., is not as old a residential area, and in better shape generally. However, it is dominated by the UWM and plagued by the uncertainties associated with its plans, or lack of them, for expansion.

Many aging residences around the university have been illegally converted to rooming houses for students who have had no place else to go.

The city has discouraged apartment construction in areas of probable university expansion in deference to university wishes, much to the chagrin of the developers, who feel put upon.

Having the intellectual community added to the mix of the already diverse community that is the east side is a definite advantage. Nelson said, and creates "cosmopolitan interest."

This view may not be completely shared by the tightly knit band of residents east of Lake dr. who fancy their section of mostly fine, old homes as the potential Georgetown of Milwaukee.

A vociferous group of residents — calling themselves the Water Tower Landmark Trust — has successfully fought off any intrusion of the university east of Lake dr. They have also, with sharp legal help, engaged virtually in close combat any developer who would raze a home bordering Lake dr. in the interest of multifamily redevelopment.

East siders say they like living there for a variety of reasons, some of them undefined, and some of them as inconsequential as the sound of foghorns in the night, the seagulls that occasionally pass overhead and the elegant, old trees that have not totally been ravaged by Dutch elm

disease.

An apartment developer, Milton B. Katz, whose Wellston Co has built hundreds of upper east side apartments in the last few years, has monetary reasons for liking the east side.

However, he said it was pure sentiment that moved him to this philosophical appraisal:

"The east side has what good neighborhoods, like good people need — authenticity, awareness, love. The residents are aware of what's going on in the world. They're straightforward and tell it like it is."

The love he spoke of, he said, was the Judeo-Christian variety that man should have for man.



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