

Downtown Davis 1950s-2000s

Tentative Units of a Facebook History

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This draft is available on the web in pdf at
www.davishistoryresearch.org, folder 6, "Research Projects"

Tentative Units

book chapters or sections of other kinds of presentations, such as pamphlets, leaflets, computer slide shows, website units

[The four units presented here:]

1. Introduction
2. Overview of Six Remarkable Decades of Change:
From Dingy District to Robust Downtown
3. G Street 200s:
The Heart of Davisville
4. Second Street 600s:
From Elite Homes to Shopping Corridor

[Other Categories in terms of which face-block histories might be organized:

- G Street: Transformation of the Original Business Area
- Second Street: From UC Davis Entrance to Entertainment Corridor
- Third Street: An Emerging Pedestrian Promenade
- F Street: Major North-South Route
- E Street: The E Street Plaza and the New Town Center
- B Street: From Lincoln Highway to Downtown Edge
- Surprising Face-Block Enclaves]

1

Introduction

Over the six decades of the 1950s-2000s, a succession of Davis, California’s civic leaders transformed that town’s “business district” from a tiny and dingy enclave into a vibrant, forty block downtown. Starting as a handful of enterprises in the early Nineteen-Fifties, by the Twenty-Oughts there were some 500 retail, professional and service businesses and more than 70 restaurants and cafes.

I. This achievement was and is remarkable because it is so rare. Commonly, downtowns that began before World War II were and are drained by outlying shopping centers and flounder in blight. Davis leaders early-on acted to build a different future. They controlled peripheral development and fostered downtown enterprise. The result is Davis’ fame as a leader in robust urban development.

II. In photo-essay form, *Downtown Davis* tells the story of how, street-by-street—and often building-by-building — this exceptional transformation was forged.

Where possible, the account is organized in terms of the **face-block**—the space created on a street between two adjacent cross-streets. Thus, G Street between Second and Third streets is such a “face-block.” By my count, the Davis Downtown consists of 62 of these.

Following an overview, I here report on two face-blocks, the 200 block of G Street and the 600 block of Second Street.

These chapters/units are put forth as experiments. I ask this question about them: Is this a form of historical accounting in which there is likely to be much interest?

III. A few additional historical specifics and generalizations about the history of the Davis Downtown may be helpful in understanding the two face-block units that follow.

1. The story of the downtown begins at the intersection of Second and G streets, the heart of the original 1868 business district next to the train depot. Over the decades, development moved at varying rates north and west along the major north-south streets of F, E, D and B and the main east-west streets of Second and Third.

2. The original business block of G Street—the “200 block”—has changed enormously in many ways but it still shows its pre-automobile scale, a “tightness” of building spacing not seen anywhere else in the town.

3. Mid-block on the east side of that same block we see one of the first acts of building a new downtown: demolition of a string of early buildings to make way for a parking lot, the first of eight (and counting) such lots and multi-level structures retrofitted into the Davis pre-automobile grid.

4. Second Street from the train station to the University Farm campus was the original east-west cross-town corridor. But as the automobile gained prominence, Second faded and was replaced by Third, which has been redesigned as a bike-pedestrian-auto promenade. This cross-town corridor shift began to move the social and symbolic center of the downtown from Second and G to Third and E Streets, where it is today in the form of the “E Street Plaza.”

5. By the early Twenty-Oughts, some two-thirds of buildings existing in the downtown in 1950 had been demolished, removed, or fundamentally rebuilt. Diverse forms of new commercial structures replaced them.

6. All these changes were fostered and sustained by city planning and zoning policies aimed at creating and developing a thriving downtown. Recent key policies have included strong encouragement that new commercial structures be at least three stories tall with retail on the first floor, offices on the second, and housing on the third and above stories. More than half a dozen such buildings existed or were underway by the Twenty-Oughts.

IV. The tight geographical sequences of changes seen in the face-block accounts might encourage one to use them as **walking guides** to Downtown Davis. The past presented in them is forcefully and often shockingly contrasted with what is in front of one.

V. The first paragraphs of this Introduction provides the “bright side” and booster version of the history of Downtown Davis. There is, however, also a dark side and critical version of this same history. It ought at least be mentioned. The so-called vigor of recent Downtown Davis is of a narrow, boutique and entertainment sort. Business offerings are constricted in ways signaled by and lamented in the phrase “you can’t buy underwear in Davis.” While it is not literally true that one cannot buy underwear in Davis, the sentiment expressed by that complaint signals a larger retail reality about the downtown (and about Davis more generally).

In the early years after World War II, there were now long-departed enterprises such as these in the downtown: an ordinary grocery store (two of them and now only a neo-hippie mart), a pharmacy (two), a five and dime store, a large home appliances outlet, television sales and repair, new car dealers, automobile repair and maintenance, a department store, a meat market.

Like the underwear complaint, the waggish local expression that Davis is “Carmel by the Causeway” captures both the direction of the Downtown and the fevered aspirations of many civic leaders for it.

As with depictions of other human groups, the light and booster and the dark and critical characterizations of Davis' downtown are both true. Which of these two (or yet others) you stress or repress is a function of your values and desires.

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Light and dark sides aside, there *were* enormous changes, at which we now look.