

## **Boom, Bust, Boom: Renewal and Reinvention of Downtown Ithaca**

Ithaca's initial development in the early 1800s set the downtown commercial core on a progression of construction, demolition, rebuilding, and, eventually, revitalization over the next two centuries, its growth and transformation still underway today. At a time of rapid, almost hyper change that characterizes the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is fitting to consider how Ithaca's downtown came to look like it does, and why.

Appointed New York's surveyor-general in 1784, Simeon DeWitt would acquire thousands of acres in what is now Ithaca in the 1790s and platted an area at the base of east hill. Grist mills were located on nearby waterfalls and west hill was only accessible by boat due to the swampy terrain, so the settlement consisted of little more than the area bound by Cayuga, Court, Aurora and Green streets.

DeWitt encouraged residential growth by setting aside land for a church and school just west of Tioga Street, between Buell (Buffalo) and Seneca streets, and adjacent to a public square that was later renamed DeWitt Park in his honor. In order to secure the county government for Ithaca, a courthouse and jail were erected on the north side of the public square in 1817, fronting on Mill (later Court) Street.

The Owego Turnpike, completed in 1811 and part of the Catskill Turnpike, connected Ithaca to New York City, Pennsylvania and points south. Owego (State) Street became Ithaca's primary east-west thoroughfare, the site of shops, offices, several public houses, and the Bank of Newburgh, a flush-board, temple fronted structure built in 1820 as a branch of the Hudson River Valley bank. The building would remain at this location until 1912, when it was moved to Court Street to make way for an automobile dealership.

With the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825, traffic on Cayuga Lake and the Inlet gained importance, as did Cayuga Street, opened in 1828 as the village's principal north-south road. It was at the southwest corner of Cayuga and Seneca Streets that construction began that year on Ithaca's most imposing structure, the Clinton House, completed at a cost of \$22,000.

A large number of building lots on east hill, the flats, and fall creek were placed on the market upon DeWitt's death in 1834, sold by his estate. The Ithaca and Owego Railroad was completed that year, connecting the growing village to the Susquehanna River and the coal mines of Pennsylvania. These events spurred a wave of development, brought to an abrupt halt by the nationwide Panic of 1837. The depression dampened interest in settlement, industry and construction, from which the local economy would not recover until the 1840s. A return to prosperity was signaled with the construction of the Clinton Block, a 3-story brick commercial

building located south of the Clinton House, and a brick Village Hall with a large meeting hall and space for a fire engine at the northwest corner of Seneca and Tioga Streets.

Ithaca's growth was steady, greatly encouraged in the 1860s by the philanthropy of industrialist Ezra Cornell. Cornell began acquiring farm land on Ithaca's east hill in the 1830s and, after successfully establishing a telegraph business out west, became financially able to construct a magnificent 3-story brick public library at the southeast corner of Seneca and Tioga Streets in 1864, across from the Village Hall. A year later, New York State accepted Cornell's offer to endow a university on east hill, named in his honor and built on land donated by him. Construction of the new Cornell University was a decades-long process, resulting in a substantial population growth that depended on downtown businesses for a variety and sophistication of retail, hostelry and professional needs.

In 1871, Ithaca's largest fire destroyed a significant number of downtown buildings on State Street. Rebuilding began almost immediately, however, and several handsome commercial blocks were constructed, including the cast-iron fronted Griffin Block at the northwest corner of State and Aurora streets.

By the early 1870s, four additional railroads served Ithaca, their depots located in the industrial west end, near the Inlet. A trolley system connecting downtown to east hill was established in the 1880s. Ithaca was incorporated as a city in 1888 and the municipal boundaries expanded to include new residential, commercial and industrial development.

While over half of the county's industries were located in the city at the turn of the century – such as Morse Chain and Ithaca Gun Works – by then, Ithaca was primarily considered to be an educational center, a significant change from its industrial and transportation roots. Residential development went hand in hand with the university's expansion, when four subdivisions – all located on east hill and served by the new electric streetcars – were laid out in the 1890s and 1900s.

Significant changes to DeWitt Park and downtown Ithaca were heralded by the founding of the Ithaca Conservatory of Music in 1892 and its acquisition of the Boardman House in 1911. This handsome brick Italianate style residence served as the Conservatory's headquarters as affiliated schools were established over the next 20 years when, in 1931, it incorporated as Ithaca College. The college purchased existing buildings and constructed others, until the campus consumed much of the north business district and DeWitt Park neighborhood.

The stabilizing effect of higher education buffered Ithaca from the worse consequences of the Depression, and positioned the city well to meet wartime opportunities. As elsewhere in the country, post-war expansion was driven by the automobile, and downtown Ithaca would forever change as a result. Ithaca's steep hills on the east, south and west, and lake to the

north, funneled traffic into the city on just a few through streets: State (east-west) and Cayuga (north-south). Before the war, Cornell students remained on campus but the automobile allowed them to shop, and live, elsewhere. Two suburban shopping centers with convenient off-street parking were developed at this time, the Plaza, located just south of the city limits on the Elmira Road, and Community Corners, in Cayuga Heights.

Just as higher education cushioned Ithaca during the Depression, it shielded residents and businesses from viewing their community as blighted or deteriorated. By the mid-1950s, however, the lack of parking downtown, traffic congestion, vacant stores and competition from suburban shopping centers forced the realization that Ithaca was not immune to the problems that beset larger cities.

The 1954 amendments to the 1949 Federal Housing Act made urban renewal funding more widely available to cities the size of Ithaca. Still, it took another six years for Ithaca to apply for, and receive a grant, which would study a 100-acre area of downtown. The initial phase, called "Project I", recommended a complete rebuilding of downtown, with the construction of a motor lodge, middle-income housing and expansion of shopping. While convinced of the benefits of urban renewal as the path to modernity, many members of the public were leery of wholesale clearance. Project I's recommendations were announced just after the demolition of the Cornell Public Library in 1960 – creating a parking lot for the First National Bank next door – which motivated the city to support another, more detailed survey and economic analysis of downtown.

The resulting proposal, called the "Center Ithaca Renewal Project", was a 25 acre area concentrated on Green Street, the "Tuning Fork" block on Aurora Street, and the south side of East State Street, where property owners were active supporters of urban renewal. The Tuning Fork project, completed in 1958, was the city's first attempt to reroute traffic and ease congestion by creating an east-west loop around State Street, using Green and Seneca Streets to carry traffic around downtown or feed it directly into the shopping area.

The basis for the proposal's demolition and rebuilding phase was a color-coded map that identified substandard buildings. Removing clusters of "outmoded" buildings and re-assembling the land for renewal by developers would, it was thought, eliminate the most blighted conditions adversely affecting the rest of downtown. The success of the proposal relied on constructing a modern motor lodge and shops on the site of the Ithaca Hotel block at Aurora and State Streets, served by public parking behind the complex on Green Street. A companion project was a major rehabilitation of Rothschild's Department Store, located to the west at State and Tioga Streets. Parking was a key component of the plan, targeted for the periphery of State Street. This included the site of the old City Hall at Seneca and Tioga streets, which was

vacated in 1964 when municipal offices were moved to the former New York State Electric and Gas building on Green Street.

The demolition of the Cornell Public Library, uncertain future of the imposing yet dingy Clinton House Hotel, and proposed clearance of the 200 block of East State Street ignited interest in saving threatened landmarks. Preservationists were inspired by local adaptive use projects in the mid-1960s, such as the conversion of Sunny Gables on Elmira Road and the abandoned Lehigh Valley Railroad Station near the Inlet, both into successful restaurants. These initiatives showed there was an alternative to demolition, encouraging members of the public to protest wholesale clearance of city blocks. The dilapidated condition and desirable downtown location worked against saving City Hall, however, and it was demolished in 1966. This was the rallying point for the founding of Historic Ithaca, Inc., a non-profit organization dedicated to historic preservation. Almost from its beginning, urban renewal's effect on the business district was considered inevitable; as a result, the members of Historic Ithaca turned their attention to saving landmarks outside of the "Project I" boundaries – the Clinton House, Boardman House, and DeWitt Junior High School.

When the city established the Urban Renewal Agency in 1964, it was charged with implementing the "Center Ithaca Renewal Project" within five years. One of the first initiatives was the demolition of the Ithaca Hotel block, which took place in 1968 although the URA hadn't yet selected a developer for the site. Several proposals were considered, including that of James Rothschild to build a new department store on the site. These plans fell through but were later revived; Rothschild eventually broke ground on a new store in 1974. Demolition of the old department store took place the following year, to be replaced by a mini-mall called "Ithaca Center". The original developer bowed out because of financial difficulties, as did subsequent developers. It wasn't until 1981 that the site – once called "a graveyard for developers' dreams" – was filled with the Center Ithaca Mall, a complex of shops, offices and apartments.

One of the primary reasons for implementing an urban renewal program in Ithaca was to fight the loss of retail businesses to suburban shopping centers. A proposal to build a large mall with franchised stores and ample free parking in the Town of Lansing in the early 1970s sparked interest in taking immediate action to create an outdoor pedestrian mall, inspired by the success of an open-air mall in downtown Kalamazoo, MI. The proposal – called the Ithaca Commons – closed off part of State and Tioga Streets and replaced the asphalt with brick pavement, and included installation of a playground and covered pavilions, all complementing the newly completed department store and planned mini-mall. Construction took six months and opened in time for the 1974 holiday season, one month before the Pyramid Mall project broke ground. Merchants were invited to participate in a façade improvement scheme, which

several did, most notably the former Browning, King and Co. store at the northwest corner of State and Aurora Streets, now a restaurant named after Simeon DeWitt. The “now or never” attitude of urban renewal in the 1950s and early 1960s was softened by the 1970s, rooted in the inherent difficulties of development and possibility of rehabilitation.

Part of the threat to downtown was the result of Ithaca College’s construction of a new campus on south hill, vacating several buildings on and near DeWitt Park in 1968. Tompkins County purchased many of these structures, planning to demolish many of them for expanded offices. Historic Ithaca received a grant in 1971 to assist in the restoration of the park’s primary landmark, the Boardman House. At the same time, however, the Clinton House was threatened with demolition although the owner was willing to sell the building to Historic Ithaca. The organization refocused, using the grant instead to purchase the Clinton House in 1973, and a multi-year renovation project was begun.

The DeWitt Junior High School, located just south of DeWitt Park, was vacated by the Board of Education in 1970 but was saved from a limbo-like existence in 1971 by local architect William Downing. Downing’s DeWitt Mall was an early, creative adaptive use of a former school transformed into retail, offices, apartments and restaurants.

The fate of the Boardman House remained in the air because of the high cost of renovation, but efforts were bolstered by the new Ithaca Landmarks Preservation Commission and their designation of the first historic district in the city, the DeWitt Park neighborhood, in 1971. The County applied to ILPC to demolish the Boardman House in 1973 but it was denied. ILPC cited the County’s expensive restoration of the Old Courthouse on DeWitt Park as proof it could afford to preserve the structure. Additionally, preservationists pointed out that the county had drawings made in the late 1960s showing the replacement of Boardman House with a new office complex, further proof of the county’s lack of sincerity when stating that all options to demolition had been explored. Historic Ithaca’s advocacy kept rehabilitation on the table until the building was purchased in 1982 by the owner of the Station Restaurant, Joseph Ciaschi, who restored the Boardman House and adapted it into professional offices.

By the mid-1980s, preservationists and developers had turned their attention toward other projects, leaving downtown to the merchants, residents and tourists. The Commons lost its retail anchor store, Rothschild’s, in the early 1980s, and Woolworth’s, an early urban renewal project at Green and Cayuga Streets, closed in mid-1990s. The Commons has been the home of independent, specialty stores, with periodic vacancies and continued under-utilization of the upper stories.

The Tompkins County Public Library was a fixture of DeWitt Park since 1969, when the Cornell Public Library was re-chartered as a county library and a new building erected on a site cleared

of former Ithaca College buildings on N. Cayuga Street. It grew out of its new home in just 30 years and purchased the vacant Woolworth's store, converting it to library space in 2000.

Education continues to stabilize the local economy, providing the county with the lowest unemployment rate in the state and rising property values, even during the recession of the late 2000s. The city's interest in increasing downtown density - to compete with suburban strip development, bring residents back to the historic core, and reduce reliance on the automobile – resulted in a major rezoning of the downtown business district in 2013. This, plus the greater availability of financing and tax benefits, will make the 2010s a decade of unprecedented growth on State Street. Another boom begins.

*Excerpted from Johnson, Julee, An Examination of Three Historic Preservation Organizations in Ithaca, New York. MA Thesis, Cornell University, 1985.*