

## The Evolution of a Commercial Strip

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**ABSTRACT.** *This case study investigates the evolution of an arterial commercial strip along a previously residential street in a medium-sized American city. The hypothesis that gasoline stations and other automobile-oriented businesses first colonized the street on a block by block basis is supported. However, equally meaningful relationships between commercial land uses and shifts to multiple-family, absentee-owned housing are also examined as are the relationships between the street's changing social makeup and commercial reorientation. A five stage model of strip development is proposed.*

The development of thoroughfare commercial strips in American cities began in the streetcar era and continued with the widespread adoption of the automobile. Geographers have focused their research on the distribution of land uses and related commercial functions along urban arterials at set points in time.<sup>1</sup> However, little effort has focused on the dynamic aspects of strip development through time. Little attention has been paid to the manner in which commercial strip development has related to changing urban social patterns. This study deals with change through time. It tests the hypothesis that gasoline stations and other automobile-oriented businesses served as the initial colonizers of commercial space newly created in residential zones. It also examines the social geography underlying the disappearance of residential functions—the shift to multiple-family, absentee-owned housing as well as the shift to lower income and lower status households.

### Commercial Reorientation

Champaign and Urbana, Illinois comprise an urban center of approximately 100,000 persons located 130 miles south of Chicago. Since World War I University Avenue, the principal east-west thoroughfare, has evolved from a residential street to a full-scale commercial strip. The avenue connects the eastern edge of Champaign's central business district (CBD) with "Five Points," an intersection at the northern edge of Urbana's central business district (CBD) some 1.7 miles distant (Fig. 1).

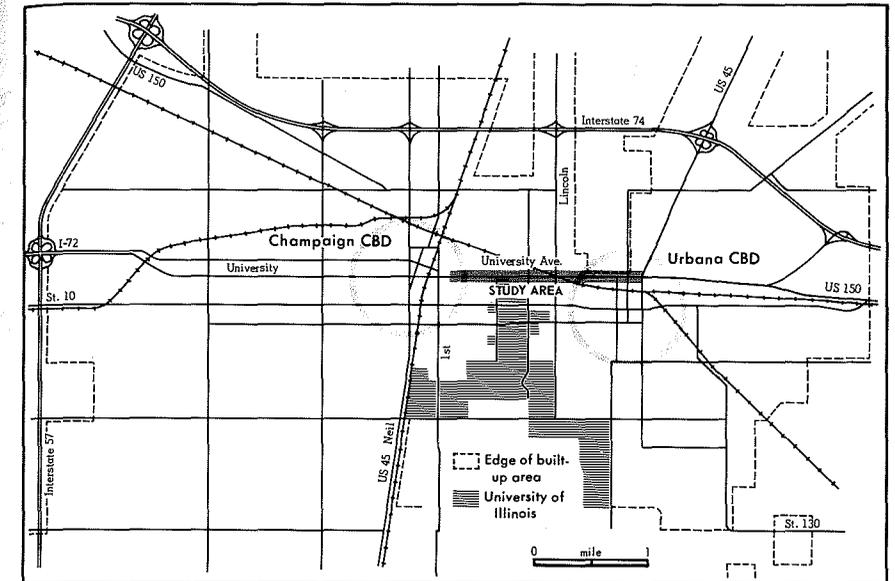


Fig. 1.

The distribution of commercial land use along University Avenue is presented for 1919 and six subsequent dates at 10 year intervals (Fig. 2). Dates were chosen according to the availability of city directories and insurance maps so that change could be demonstrated between evenly spaced time intervals.<sup>2</sup> Selected automobile-oriented businesses are emphasized: gasoline stations, automobile sales, automobile repair and supply businesses, motels and tourist homes and restaurants.

In 1919 eight businesses had already located in the three blocks near the Champaign business district (Fig. 3). Most of these businesses occupied small store fronts, several built in front of houses left standing. None was automobile-oriented or automobile-convenient for parking was restricted solely to the street. Within a decade, commerce, in particular those functions geared to the passing motorist, occupied lots along the length of the street. On the three blocks nearest Champaign's central business district a number of automobile-related businesses, including two gasoline stations, had appeared. Another gasoline station had been located at the street's midpoint at the intersection of Lincoln Avenue and two more near the Urbana central business district at the eastern end of the street. Through 1929 seven residential blocks had been intruded by commerce. Six of these blocks had been colonized by automobile-oriented enterprises, five by gasoline stations located primarily on vacant lots.

Between 1929 and 1939 business expanded into six additional

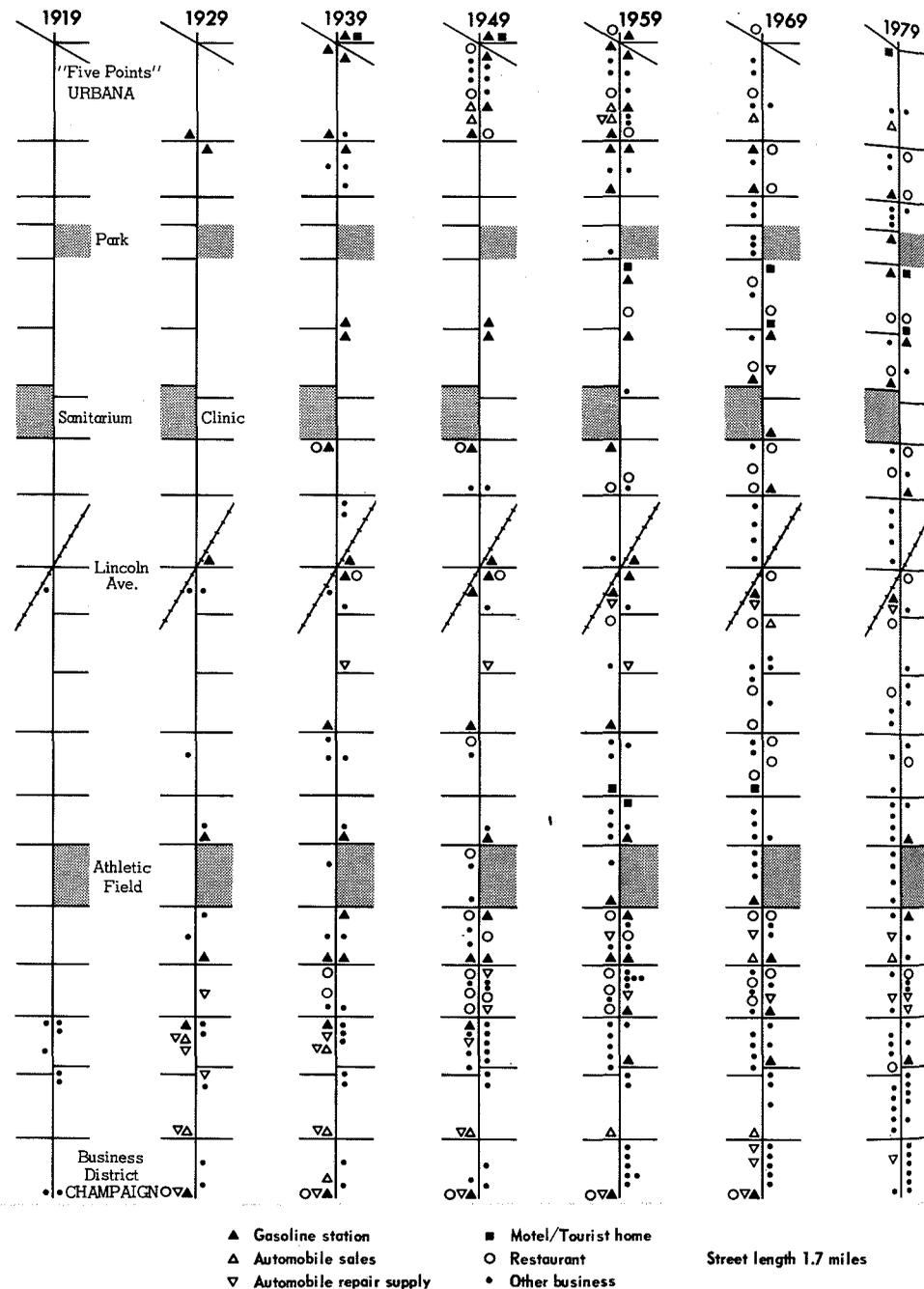


Fig. 2. Commercial land use on University Avenue, 1919 to 1979.

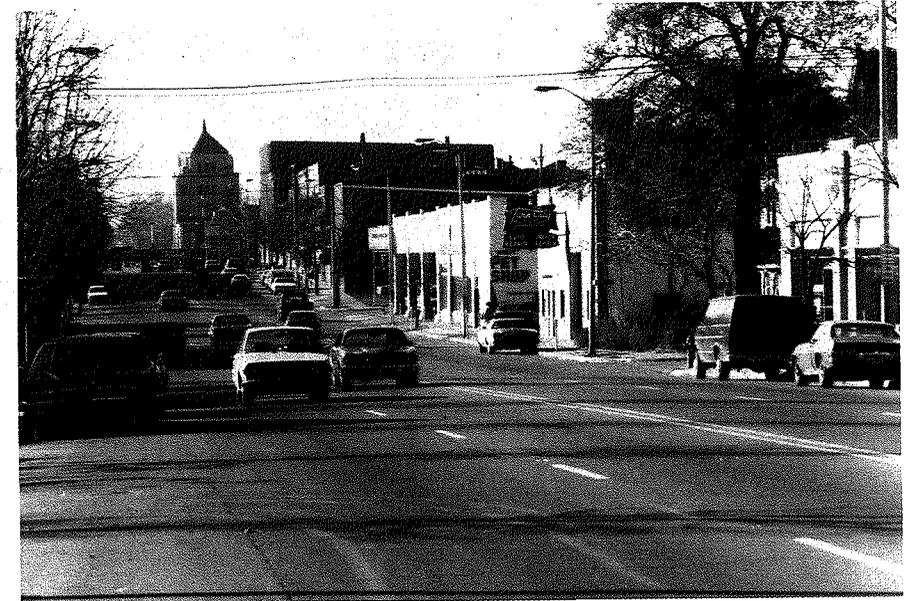


Fig. 3 University Avenue looking west toward the Champaign central business district. Businesses first located along this section of the street after World War I.

residential blocks, five of which were first intruded by gasoline stations. Gasoline stations were clustered at the street's eastern end although they were also located along the remainder of the street at rather even intervals. At Lincoln Avenue a second gasoline station with a restaurant appeared. By 1949 commercial development dominated previously vacant land near downtown Urbana. The area became more and more automobile-oriented as auto dealerships and restaurants joined existing gasoline stations and a cabin court. At the eastern end of the street near downtown Champaign commerce not involved with the needs of the motorist began to fill in the blocks. Storefronts housed several grocery stores and tailor shops among other enterprises. Here also many small restaurants and several auto repair shops appeared.

By the late 1950s the street's character had grown increasingly automobile convenient. Parking lots, associated with new businesses such as motels and drive-in restaurants, made their first appearance. Many older businesses also began to provide off-street parking to the rear of buildings. Commerce now dominated University Avenue, a fact which would be made increasingly clear in the next two decades.

By 1969 franchise restaurants with large parking lots appeared in full



Fig. 4. University Avenue looking east toward Urbana's "Five Points." Large scale gasoline stations, motels and restaurants dominated this section of the street during the 1960s.

force. The number of gasoline stations had declined by half although remaining stations tended to be larger (Fig. 4). The strip was maturing as a commercial area. A greater variety of business types housed in larger facilities now characterized the street, a trend which continued through 1979 (Table 1). The number of businesses located along University Avenue stabilized (94, 92, and 96 businesses in 1959, 1969 and 1979 respectively); however, the size of the average business nearly doubled (.99, 1.33 and 1.76 building lots respectively). The average size of gasoline stations increased from 1.17 to 2.30 building lots between 1959 and 1979, and the average size of restaurants from 1.17 to 2.25 lots.

Between 1919 and 1979 commerce tended to spread from the two ends of University Avenue toward the middle. Our hypothesis that gasoline stations and other automobile-oriented commerce served to colonize residential blocks was supported. Perhaps of greater significance, however, another relationship involving automobile-oriented commerce was disclosed. A second spatial sequence developed after 1959 as a variety of businesses replaced gasoline stations and other automobile-oriented enterprises. This sequence also spread from each end of the street toward the middle. By 1979 a wide range of business types, including gasoline stations, was evenly distributed along the street.

TABLE 1: COMMERCIAL LAND USE ON UNIVERSITY AVENUE FOR SELECTED YEARS, 1919 TO 1979

Year	Number of Commercial Establishments	Size of Average Commercial Property (lots)	Number of Gasoline Stations	Size of Average Station (lots)	Number of Restaurants	Size of Average Restaurant (lots)
1919	9	1.11	0	-	-	-
1929	23	1.07	7	.64	1	.50
1939	50	.69	17	.82	6	.66
1949	71	.87	19	1.29	14	.65
1959	94	.99	23	1.17	14	1.17
1969	92	1.33	13	1.57	23	1.67
1979	96	1.76	10	2.30	12	2.25

Source: Champaign-Urbana City Directory

The turnover of business functions, business establishments and business ownerships was very high in the early period. Mean turnover rates for gasoline stations and restaurants for each decade are given in Table 2. The mean turnover index divides the sum of new establishments, closed establishments and continuing establishments with new owners by the total number of establishments. The amount of instability declined steadily through time. By 1969 the strip had not only become a more varied commercial street, but business life-expectancy was vastly increased. Between 1969 and 1979 the overbuilding of franchise restaurants was reflected in an increased turnover rate for restaurants contrary to this general trend.

TABLE 2: TURNOVER OF SELECTED BUSINESS TYPES

Years	Mean Turnover Index*	
	Gasoline Stations	Restaurants
1922-1929	.835	1.100
1930-1939	.568	.768
1940-1949	.364	.431
1950-1959	.338	.376
1960-1969	.274	.150
1970-1978	.227	.220

\* Turnover Index =  $\frac{E+D+O}{N}$  where

- E = Number of new establishments which occupied a new site during a year
- D = Number of establishments which disappeared,
- O = Changes in ownership (but not in business identity), and
- N = Total number of respective establishments.

Residential Change

The distribution of residential land use along University Avenue between 1919 and 1979 is also presented (Fig. 5). Owner-occupied rented, single-family and multiple-family dwellings are differentiated. In 1919 University Avenue was a residential street dominated by owner-occupied, single-family housing. As indicated in Table 3, several slow but distinct changes occurred between 1919 and 1959. The number of housing units declined by one-quarter (or approximately 10 units each decade from a high of 151 in 1919). The proportion of single-family houses declined as did the proportion of owner-occupied boarding houses and apartment buildings. After 1959 these changes vastly accelerated. The number of houses declined to 25% of the 1919 number (at a rate nearly four times that of previous decades). Between 1959 and 1979 the proportion of single-family houses fell from 49 to 10%. The number of owner-occupied, multiple-family dwellings increased although they still accounted for only 15% of the total. Nearly 60% of the houses contained rental units as opposed to 45% in 1959, and the number of vacant houses rose substantially from four to 17%. Increasingly, the street's residential properties shifted into the hands of absentee landlords and speculators.

Social Change

The social character of the street changed as summarized in Table 4. Although the number of structures steadily declined, the number of households remained high fluctuating from 150 in 1919 to 187 in 1929 and 136 in 1979. There was surprising stability on the street through 1949. At least seven percent of the heads of households held professional or managerial positions. The center of the University of Illinois campus, located six blocks south of University Avenue, made the street reasonably convenient for faculty families. Nonetheless, the street was traditionally dominated by household heads employed as craftsmen, operatives or laborers (between 40 and 48%) and clerical workers and shopkeepers (between 22 and 26%). Retired couples and widows formed a third group (between 18 and 21%). The largest proportion of blue collar families were renters. After 1969 university students came to dominate the street. Whereas only three percent of the household heads had been students in 1949, 46% were students in 1969 and 78% in 1978. To the north of University Avenue lay the predominantly black "North End." But, only along the eastern section of the street adjacent to Champaign's business district did black families predominate among renters in 1978.

Decision-Making Processes

Champaign-Urbana's University Avenue experienced persistent change between 1919 and 1979 although there were clear threshold points, often associated with key governmental decisions, beyond which specific

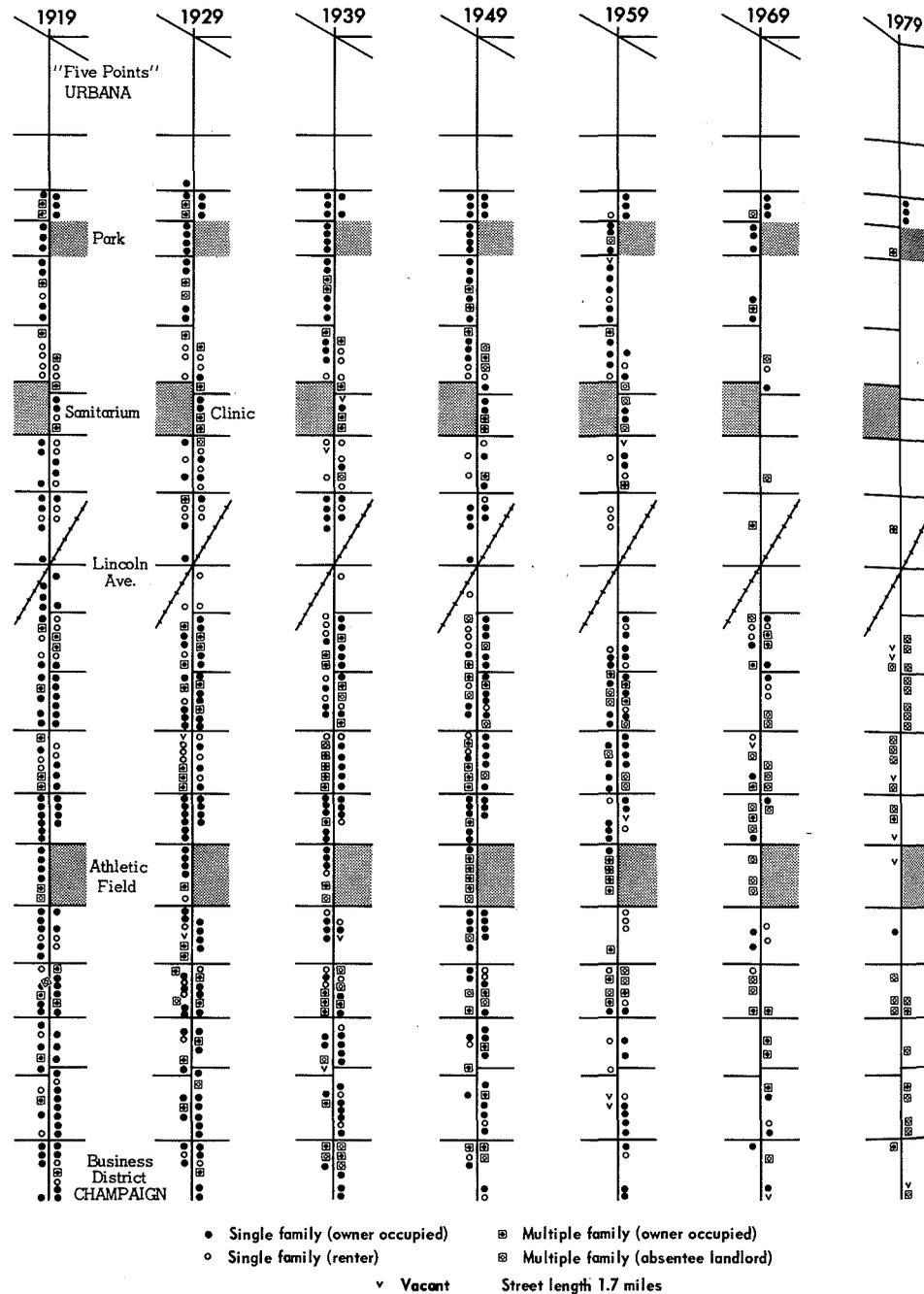


Fig. 5. Residential land use on University Avenue, 1919 to 1979.

TABLE 3: RESIDENTIAL LAND USE FOR SELECTED YEARS, 1919 TO 1979

Year	Number of Dwellings	Percent Owner Occupied	Percent Single-Family	Percent Multiple-Family	Percent of Multiple-family Units owner-Occupied	Percent Rented	Percent Vacant
1919	151	76.8	84.8	15.2	37.1	37.1	0.0
1929	153	67.2	76.5	21.6	17.6	42.5	1.3
1939	145	68.9	72.4	24.1	17.2	44.8	2.0
1949	138	76.0	79.0	27.5	18.8	42.8	0.0
1959	112	61.6	72.3	23.2	11.6	44.6	4.4
1969	69	52.1	47.8	49.3	20.3	65.2	2.0
1979	39	25.5	10.2	74.4	15.4	59.0	17.0

Source: Champaign-Urbana City Directory

TABLE 4: OCCUPATIONS OF HOUSEHOLD HEADS

Year	Total Number Households	Percent Professional/Managerial	Percent Clerical/Shopkeeper	Percent Craftsman/Operative/Laborer	Percent Widow/Retired	Percent Students
1919	150	10.0	22.0	40.6	20.6	-
1929	187	6.9	25.6	45.4	21.9	-
1949	148	10.1	21.6	47.8	17.5	3.3
1969	140	6.4	15.0	19.2	12.8	45.7
1978	136	1.4	5.9	11.0	3.6	77.8

Source: Champaign-Urbana City Directory

kinds of change accelerated. Part of the explanation for these shifts is peculiar to Champaign-Urbana, but in general the processes of commercialization on University Avenue were affected by both public and private decision-making based on cultural and social values universal to American cities.

As individuals, property owners were interested in increasing their equity in real estate. They did not seek collectively to stabilize residential land use as a means of achieving that end. Those property owners who did not favor commercial zoning for University Avenue did not oppose it publically. Thus commercial zoning was implemented in Champaign in 1926 and in Urbana in 1940. Most property owners welcomed the decision to make University Avenue the major thoroughfare connecting the cities' central business districts—a fact accomplished by routing a federal highway (U.S. 45) along a portion of the street.

The first businessmen attracted to University Avenue ran automobile-oriented businesses which thrived on the increased traffic flow. These businesses occupied first the vacant lots upon which houses had not been built, especially on corner lots. Later businesses, both those oriented and not oriented to the automobile, found the strip convenient to customers citywide. Businesses along the strip were rarely related to one another as in the later-day shopping center. Shopping involved single purpose trips as documented in other case studies.<sup>3</sup> Businessmen sought separate identities for their establishments as clearly symbolized in elaborate signs and later with distinctive buildings and off-street parking lots. The accumulation of businesses greatly changed University Avenue's residential image.

Local government's concern with University Avenue was limited largely to traffic control once basic zoning decisions had been made. Increased traffic volume brought congestion.<sup>4</sup> For example, by the 1960s approximately one-quarter of all accidents in Urbana occurred on University Avenue.<sup>5</sup> Widening of the street began in Champaign in the late 1940s and continued in Urbana through the 1950s. A four lane pavement (with parking lanes) in Champaign and a two lane slab (with gravel berms) in Urbana were broadened to four traffic lanes throughout with two parking lanes along most of the street. All trees adjacent to the street were stripped away and most front yards were reduced considerably in size. The placement of traffic signals started in the late 1950s and the elimination of curbside parking along portions of the street in the late 1960s. In the early 1970s the street's three eastern-most blocks in Urbana were totally re-engineered to eliminate the awkward "Five Points" intersection which remains today in name only.

Nothing impacted the visual image of University Avenue more than the removal of the trees. Many houses, mostly small ones of indifferent design and poor repair, were exposed. Businesses, once partially obscured by foliage, now stood bold in the streetscape. Not until the late 1960s did the local government, prodded by a private community development foundation, move to replace the trees through systematic planting.<sup>6</sup> A new street lighting system greatly increased visibility at night, but also

increased night-time glare for residents.

Parking lots were noisy. Dirt, debris and general commotion spilled over onto adjacent residential properties. The need for off-street parking proved a critical turning point in the shift to commercial land use. Parking lots necessitated the grouping of individual building lots for commercial purposes. As realtors acted to assemble large parcels for new businesses, existing establishments expanded onto adjacent properties. The taking of lots with houses as opposed to the taking of vacant lots sealed the street's demise as a residential place—a process that accelerated after 1959.

Changes in the social character of the street contributed to the shifts in land use. Over time, absentee landlords controlled rental housing and more buildings were owned primarily for long term speculation. Rental housing was a transitory form of commercial enterprise. No new apartment buildings were built on University Avenue and increased rental activity was found in converted houses. The departure of blue collar families from University Avenue, largely after 1949, was tied both to the changing physical character of the street and to the development of other low-income housing alternatives in new subdivisions. University students, transient by nature and perhaps less concerned with the street's deteriorating residential environment, proved to be a ready replacement market for the landlords. The ability to rent to students contributed some stability to the area which otherwise might have been rapidly abandoned to commercial enterprise.

The evolution of a commercial strip can be understood in terms of collective and individual decision-making whereby private and public interests shape a linear space. Small, tentative actions accumulate to form commitments which cannot be easily reversed. Ultimately, points are reached where a majority of interested parties adjust in anticipation of a new situation, thereby bringing that situation into fruition. The idea of a commercial strip is implanted, adjustments are made by property owners, key governmental decisions are made (especially zoning changes and street improvements) and a new place is created given wholesale shifts in land use. Once commerce was established on Champaign-Urbana's University Avenue the question was not whether the street would convert to business, but how rapid and how orderly that conversion would be given the street's transitory social character as a residential place.

#### Modeling Commercial Strip Development

The case of Champaign-Urbana's University Avenue suggests a five-stage model of commercial strip evolution. A stable residential street comprised primarily of single family dwellings constitutes Stage One. A few neighborhood businesses are oriented to pedestrian traffic and do not detract from the quiescent quality of a predominantly residential thoroughfare.

In Stage Two, gasoline stations form the vanguard of an intrusive commercial development. Stations serve traffic moving to and from a

nearby central business district. They are located primarily on previously vacant corner lots. Investments in buildings and driveways are modest and give these businesses an impermanent, transient look.

Gasoline station development continues in Stage Three, where it reaches a peak. Indeed, descriptions such as "gasoline alley" or "gasoline row" might be applied. However, the addition of other business types brings commercial diversity to the street. Except where business establishments locate in the middle of blocks, residences and businesses still coexist in relative stability. Although the number of dwellings declines, the number of residents remains much the same as more buildings are divided into multiple units. Fewer landlords live in their buildings.

Commercial functions clearly dominate in Stage Four. A significantly larger number and wider variety of businesses characterize the street. Largely because of competition, gasoline stations decline numerically, resulting in the stations being more evenly distributed in the linear array. Especially evident in Stage Four is the growth of the automobile-convenient establishments such as drive-in restaurants and motels with off-street parking facilities. The sizes of business lots increase through the providing of parking lots. Business buildings tend to be larger and better constructed and a sense of commercial permanence pervades the thoroughfare. Street widening and the removal of trees substantially alters the street's personality in favor of commercialism. The number of residences declines sharply while the number of vacant dwellings increases. Income levels of residents along the street fall substantially and multiple-unit rental housing owned by absentee landlords prevails.

In Stage Five, residential functions along the street all but disappear. Only a few relic rental units survive in what is otherwise a totally commercial landscape. Matters of street beautification and traffic improvement dominate public action. Commercial properties increase in size as more businesses provide off-street parking and expand their layouts to accommodate the growing number of customers.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Brian J.L. Berry, *Commercial Structure and Commercial Blight* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, Dept. of Geography, Research Paper 85 and 86, 1963); Brian J.L. Berry, "Ribbon Developments in the Urban Business Pattern," *Annals, Association of American Geographers* 49 (March, 1959), pp. 145-155; F.N. Boal and D.B. Johnson, "The Functions of Retail and Service Establishments on Commercial Ribbons," in *Internal Structure of the City*, ed. by Larry S. Bourne (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971), pp. 368-379; Gerald J. Foster and Howard J. Nelson, *Ventura Boulevard: A String-Type Shopping Street* (Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1958); Barry Gordon, "The Commercial Strip as an Indicator of American Cultural Themes" (unpublished Master's Thesis, Syracuse University, Department of Geography, 1972 and P.R. Merry, "An Inquiry into the Nature and Functions of a String Retail Development: A Case of Colfax Avenue, Denver, Colorado" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, Dept. of Economics, 1955).

<sup>2</sup>*Champaign-Urbana, Illinois City Directory* (Champaign, IL: Clark-Elwell Co., 1919-1920; Peoria: Leshnick Directory Co., 1922; Champaign, IL: Flanigan-Pearson Co., 1923-1957; St. Louis: R.L. Polk and Co., 1958-1963; Detroit: R.L. Polk and Co., 1964-1970; and Manitowoc, WI: Johnson Publishing Co., 1971-1978); *Sanborn Atlas of Champaign* (Pelham, NY: Sanborn Map Co., 1924, 1929, 1941, 1949, 1959 and 1969) and *Sanborn Atlas of Urbana* (Pelham, NY: Sanborn Map Co., 1929, 1951, 1959 and 1969).

<sup>3</sup>Boal and Johnson.

<sup>4</sup>R.I. Wolfe, "Effect of Ribbon Development on Traffic Flow," *Traffic Quarterly*, 18 (January, 1964), pp. 105-117.

<sup>5</sup>"Widening of University to Help in 'Accident Alley'," *Champaign-Urbana News-Gazette*, Dec. 28, 1961, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup>"University Avenue Corridor First Target in Twenty-Year Beautification," *Champaign-Urbana News Gazette*, March 17, 1967, p. 3.

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