

2018 Most Endangered Historic Places in Illinois

Varsity Theater Block



Credit: Landmarks Illinois

- **Location:** 1706-26 Sherman Ave., Evanston, Cook County
- **Built:** Various dates
- **Architect:** Unknown
- **Current owner:** Privately owned
- **Historic significance:** One of last remaining historically intact blocks in downtown Evanston.
- **Why it is endangered:** Historic buildings on the block do not have landmark protection and are vulnerable teardown targets to make way for future new developments.

Renewed development pressure in north suburban Evanston's downtown has threatened some of the city's architectural and historically significant buildings. With only 29 locally designated landmarks in downtown Evanston, and no downtown historic districts, there are few protections for commercial buildings that contribute to the city's character.

The 1700 block of Sherman Avenue is one of the last remaining historically intact blocks in Evanston's downtown. A survey of historic buildings in the downtown district was conducted in 2007 by the Evanston Preservation Commission. This survey identified the former Varsity Theater, a 1926 J.E.O. Pridmore-designed building located at 1706-10 Sherman Avenue, and the 1922 J.A. Scanlan-designed building at 1712-22 Sherman Avenue, as possessing historical and/or architectural merit, making their landmark potential a topic for further discussion. These buildings are important contributors to the desired physical context and character of downtown Evanston.

The City of Evanston adopted its most recent Downtown Plan in February 2009, and a downtown building condition survey was conducted in 2007 as part of the Downtown Plan process. Incorporating data from the 2007 historic building survey, the Plan identified three "Traditional Zones," one of which includes the buildings in the 1700 block of Sherman Avenue. According to the Plan, these zones exhibit, "A more traditional shopping street character with smaller buildings and shops... with specialty merchants, restaurants and 'neighborhood'

convenience centers.” The Plan went on to state that, “The traditional scale and character of the buildings in these zones should be conserved where feasible through adaptive reuse and façade improvements.” It also recommended improvements to the alleyway between the 1706 and 1712 Sherman Avenue buildings that would enhance the block by facilitating pedestrian movement, as well as creating a special public space within downtown.

Finally, one of this Plan’s main objectives was to, “Protect and rehabilitate character-giving buildings, structures and sites [by promoting] the rehabilitation and adaptive reuse of buildings and sites that provide historical and architectural context to the downtown.” Recommended strategies to help Evanston meet this objective included establishing a Downtown Federal/Conservation Historic District that would coincide with the Plan’s Traditional Zones (making property owners eligible for federal incentives), encouraging landmark designation for those properties identified in the 2007 survey and creating a Rehabilitation/Adaptive Reuse Fund.

While a recent proposal to replace the buildings with a high-rise development was withdrawn, the fate of these “Traditional Zones” is in danger, as none of the 2009 plan’s recommendations were undertaken. Without any individual or district landmark protections in place downtown, such buildings are left vulnerable.



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Landmarks Illinois is advocating for a comprehensive downtown survey to be conducted, identifying architectural and/or historically significant buildings that may be eligible for local or National Register designation, either individually or as part of a district. If considered, such designations could make these buildings eligible for rehabilitation tax incentives, such as the 20% Historic Tax Credit or Class L, a property tax incentive.

While many suburban communities face hard decisions whether to permit new, high-density development in their traditional downtowns, often putting older building stock at risk, there should be a balance that permits new development, as well as preserving a downtown’s historic character.

What you can do:

- Urge the City of Evanston to carry out the recommendations put forth for “Traditional Zones” in the 2009 Downtown Plan, especially in light of new development pressure.

- As well as conduct a comprehensive survey of architectural and/or historically significant buildings in Downtown.

Additional Links:

- “Developers pull the plug on Evanston’s Northlight Theatre Tower,” *Chicago Curbed*, March 2, 2018:
<https://chicago.curbed.com/2018/3/2/17069010/evanston-high-rise-northlight-theatre>
- Downtown Evanston Plan, adopted February, 2009:
<https://www.cityofevanston.org/home/showdocument?id=4020>