

HISTORIC DESIGNATION STUDY REPORT
WEST MITCHELL STREET HISTORIC DISTRICT

I. NAME

Historic: None

Common: West Mitchell Street Historic District

II. LOCATION

The district includes the buildings on both sides of West Mitchell Street between South 5th and South 14th Street, including the former Sears Store at 1337 Forest Home Avenue.

III. CLASSIFICATION

District

IV. OWNER OF PROPERTY

Multiple

V. DESCRIPTION

A. Boundaries

The Mitchell Street Historic District includes all of the properties with frontage on either side of Mitchell Street and Forest Home Avenue Pedestrian Mall between South Fifth Street and South Fourteenth Street. See attached map.

B. General Character

The Mitchell Street Historic District is a nine-block commercial strip of late nineteenth and early twentieth century, brick or frame commercial structures. Although most of the structures are two stories tall, there are several one-story buildings and a number of buildings ranging from two to four stories in height. The Kunzelmann-Esser Building, at eight stories, is the tallest building on the street and one of the tallest on the South Side. There are approximately ninety buildings within the district. In addition to commercial structures, there are two large church complexes within the district.

The buildings were built between 1870 and 1940 with most dating from the period between 1890 and 1920. Many of the present structures were built to replace earlier buildings. They illustrate a wide range of architectural styles popular for commercial buildings in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. False-fronted wooden buildings, brick Queen Anne structures, early Twentieth Century Chicago Style commercial blocks, Classical Revival banks and Modern

storefronts can be found within the district. Good examples of each type are present ranging from 511, a one-story wooden false-front structure, or 801, a two-story example; to 501 and 546, two brick Queen Anne commercial blocks; or 600, an imposing and over scaled Colonial Revival influenced brick structure. The district is rich in early Twentieth Century commercial architecture ranging from historical revival style buildings such as 527-29, 624-28 and 601, through Chicago style-influenced blocks such as 710, 828, 906, 1020, 1135 and 1225, to the small gem-like bank buildings and terra-cotta storefronts such as 806-10, 929, 935, 959 and 1039-41. In addition there are several excellent examples of the relatively rare Art Modern Style including 723 and 1000-1006 West Mitchell Street and 1337 Forest Home Avenue. The two churches within the district are both fine examples of Victorian ecclesiastical design. St. Stanislaus Roman Catholic Church, begun in 1872, is a notable example of Eastern European Romanesque influenced design executed in cream brick while St. Anthony's Roman Catholic Church, began in 1877, is an unusual example of Victorian Gothic architecture built of rusticated limestone. St. Anthony's has a large complex of handsome accessory buildings adjacent to it including a Chateausque rectory, a Victorian brick convent, a paneled brick church hall and a parochial school, while St. Stanislaus has a notable Art Deco parochial school and a small, Victorian cream brick rectory.

VI. SIGNIFICANCE

Date Built: 1870-1940

Mitchell Street is architecturally significant for its fine assemblage of commercial structures and churches representing a wide range of architectural styles and periods. It is historically significant as the commercial heart of the South Side, as an important center of Polish Commercial, religious and cultural life, and as one of the most important retail areas in Milwaukee between 1880 and 1970.

VI. HISTORY

Although Mitchell Street was laid out in 1857, little settlement occurred until the later 1870's when this farm studded portion of the South Side began to attract Polish settlers. As late as the mid-1880's, however, agricultural enterprises such as the Enos and Company Nursery and the Comstock Celery Farm could still be found in the neighborhood. Gradually commercial buildings began to appear in the vicinity of St. Stanislaus Church, which had stood in lonely grandeur at Mitchell and South 5th streets for years before it got its first neighbors. As Polish settlement increased, Mitchell Street developed into the commercial, cultural and religious center of the Polish community. Eventually, Mitchell Street became known as the 'Polish Grand Avenue' and ranked second in commercial importance only to downtown, a position it maintained until well after World War II. The substantial commercial structures erected there, including the enormous Kunzelmann-Esser, Schuster's, Sears Roebuck and Company and National Hardware Buildings, were a testament to the thriving retail trade. Only Milwaukee's central business district had as many large stores at Mitchell Street. Another indication of the street's importance were the many banks established there, as well as the two movie theaters, the Granada (razed) and the Modjeska.

After 1970 Mitchell Street slid into a precipitous decline that witnessed the closing of most of the large stores. Attempts were made to revive the street by building a landscaped pedestrian mall and a farmer's market in 1975, but the results were disappointing. In spite of the high vacancy rate, only two important structures on Mitchell Street have been razed, the Granada Theater, formerly at 1127 West Mitchell (razed 1973), and St. Jacobi Church, formerly on the site where the farmer's market now stands (razed 1975).

VII. STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that Mitchell Street be designated a historic district in accordance with the provisions of Section 301-81 of the Milwaukee Code of Ordinances.

VIII. PRESERVATION GUIDELINES

The following preservation guidelines represent the principle concerns of the Historic Preservation Commission regarding this historic designation. However, the Commission reserves the right to make final decisions based upon particular design submissions. These guidelines shall be applicable only to the Mitchell Street Historic District. Nothing in these guidelines shall be construed to prevent ordinary maintenance or restoration and/or replacement of documented original elements.

A. Guidelines for Rehabilitation

The Mitchell Street Historic District is important because of its concentration of period commercial buildings from the 19th and early 20th centuries. Throughout the district's history a sense of integrity has been maintained by the consistency in scale, setback, siting and materials. This has resulted in visually distinct blockfaces. These guidelines are based upon those contained in Section 301-81(10) of the historic preservation ordinance. These guidelines are not intended to restrict an owner's use of his/her property, but to serve as a guide for making changes that will be sensitive to the architectural integrity of the structure and appropriate to the overall character of the district.

1. Roofs

Retain the original roof shape. Dormers, skylights and solar collector panels may be added to roof surfaces if they are not visible from the street. Avoid making changes to the roof shape that would alter the building height, roofline or pitch. This includes parapets, pediments and cornices.

2. Exterior Finishes

a. Masonry

- (i) Unpainted brick or stone should not be painted or covered. Avoid painting or covering natural stone and unpainted brick. This is likely to be historically incorrect and could cause irreversible damage if it was decided to remove the paint at a later date.
- (ii) Retain painted masonry surfaces. Removal of paint could cause irreversible damage to the masonry. If it is decided to remove the paint from masonry surfaces, use the gentlest method possible.
- (iii) Repoint defective mortar by duplicating the original in color, style, texture and strength. Avoid using mortar colors and pointing styles that were unavailable or not used when the building was constructed.
- (iv) Clean masonry only when necessary to halt deterioration and with the gentlest method possible. Sandblasting brick or stone surface is prohibited. This method of cleaning erodes the surface of the material and accelerates deterioration. Avoid the indiscriminate use of chemical

products that could have an adverse reaction with the masonry materials, such as the use of acid on limestone or marble.

- (v) Repair or replace deteriorated material with new material that duplicates the old as closely as possible. Avoid using new material that is inappropriate or was unavailable when the building was constructed, such as artificial cast stone or fake brick veneer.

b. Wood

- (i) Retain original material, whenever possible. Avoid the indiscriminate removal of architectural features that are in most cases an essential part of the building's character and appearance.
- (ii) Repair or replace deteriorated material with new material that duplicates the appearance of the old as closely as possible. Avoid covering architectural features with new materials that are inappropriate or were unavailable when the building was constructed such as artificial stone, brick veneer, asbestos or asphalt shingles, vinyl or aluminum siding.

c. Terra Cotta

- (i) Unpainted terra cotta should not be painted or covered. Avoid painting or covering naturally glazed or finished terra cotta. This is historically incorrect and could cause irreversible damage if it was decided to remove the paint at a later date.
- (ii) Clean terra cotta only when necessary to halt deterioration and with the gentlest method available. Sandblasting terra cotta is prohibited. This method of cleaning destroys the material.
- (iii) Repair or replace deteriorated terra cotta with new material that duplicates the old as closely as possible. Pre-cast tinted concrete or cast fiber glass are recommended replacement materials as long as it is finished with a masonry coating to resemble the original appearance. Avoid using new material that is inappropriate or does not resemble the original.

3. Windows and Doors

- a. Retain existing window and door openings that are visible from the public right-of-way. Retain the present configuration of panes, sash, lintels, keystones, sills, architraves, pediments, hoods, doors, shutters and hardware except for the restoration to the original condition. Avoid making additional openings or changes in the principle elevations by enlarging or reducing window or door sizes. Avoid changing the size or configuration of windowpanes

or sash. Avoid discarding original doors and door hardware when they can be repaired or reused.

- b. Respect the stylistic period or periods the building represents. If replacement of window sash or doors is necessary, the replacement should duplicate the appearance and design of the original window sash or door. Avoid using inappropriate sash and door replacements such as unpainted galvanized aluminum storm and screen window combinations. Avoid the filling in or covering of openings with materials like glass-block or the installation of plastic or metal strip awnings or fake shutters that are not in proportion to the openings or that are historically out of the character with the building. Avoid using modern style window units such as horizontal sliding sash in place of double-hung sash or the substitution of units with glazing configurations not appropriate to the style of the building.

4. Trim and Ornamentation

There shall be no changes to the existing trim or ornamentation except as necessary to restore the building to its original condition. The historic architectural fabric includes all terra cotta ornament; all pressed metal elements including cornices, pediments and oriels; and all carved and cast stonework. Replacement features shall match the original member in scale, design, color and material.

5. Additions

Make additions that harmonize with the existing building architecturally and are located so as not visible from the public right-of-way, if at all possible. Avoid making additions that are unsympathetic to the original structure and visually intrude upon the principal elevations.

B. Guidelines for Streetscapes

The visual character of the streetscapes in the Mitchell Street Historic District is maintained by the consistency of the block faces in terms of height, scale, siting and density. This has resulted in compact, cohesive building stock with no intrusions that detract from the district's historic character.

1. Maintain the height, scale, mass and materials established by the buildings in the district and the traditional setback and density of the block faces. Avoid introducing elements that are incompatible in terms of siting, materials, height or scale.
2. Use traditional landscaping, fencing, signage and street lighting that is compatible with the character and period of the district. Avoid introducing landscape features, fencing, street lighting or signage that are inappropriate to the character of the district.

C. Guidelines for New Construction

It is important that additional new construction be designed so as to harmonize with the character of the district.

1. Siting

New construction must reflect the traditional siting of buildings in the Mitchell Street Historic District. This includes setbacks, spacing between buildings, the orientation of openings to the street and neighboring structures, and the relationship between the main building and accessory buildings.

2. Scale

Overall building height and bulk; the expression of major building divisions including foundation, body and roof; and individual building components such as porches, overhangs and fenestration must be compatible with the surrounding structures.

3. Form

The massing of new construction must be compatible with the surrounding buildings. The profiles of roofs and building elements that protect and recede from the main block must express the same continuity established by the historic structure.

4. Materials

The building materials that are visible from the public right-of-way should be consistent with the colors, textures, proportions, and combinations of cladding materials traditionally used in the Mitchell Street Historic District. The physical composition of the materials may be different from that of the historic materials, but the same appearance should be maintained.

D. Guidelines for Demolition

Although demolition is not encouraged and is generally not permissible, there may be instances when demolition may be acceptable if approved by the Historic Preservation Commission. The following guidelines, with those found in subsection 9(h) of the ordinance, shall be taken into consideration by the Commission when reviewing demolition requests.

1. Condition

Demolition requests may be granted when it can be clearly demonstrated that the condition of a building or a portion thereof is such that it constitutes an immediate threat to health and safety.

2. Importance

Consideration will be given to whether or not the building is of historical or architectural significance or displays a quality of material and craftsmanship that does not exist in other structures in the area.

3. Location

Consideration will be given to whether or not the building contributes to the neighborhood and the general street appearance and has a positive affect on other buildings in the area.

4. Potential or Restoration

Consideration will be given to whether or not the proposed demolition is a later addition that is not in keeping with the original design of the structure or does not contribute to its character.

5. Replacement

Consideration will be given to whether or not the building is to be replaced by a compatible building of similar age, architectural style and scale or by a new building that would fulfill the same aesthetic function in the area as did the old structure (See New Construction Guidelines).

E. Fire Escapes

Additional required fire escapes shall be designed and located so as to minimize their visual impact from the public right-of-way.

F. Signs

The installation of any permanent exterior sign other than those now in existence shall require the approval of the Commission. Approval will be based on the compatibility of the proposed sign with the historic and architectural character of the building.

HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION POLICY ON SECURITY GATES AND BARS FOR COMMERCIAL BUILDINGS

All Security bars and grates, whether mounted inside the windows or on the exterior, require Historic Preservation Commission review and, in most cases, a permit from the Department of Building Inspection.

The Historic Preservation Commission disapproves of the use of security grates, bars or solid roll-down doors because they are out-of-character with the traditional appearance of Milwaukee's commercial areas. They create an unsafe appearance and harm the economic vitality of the neighborhoods where they are installed by discouraging pedestrians from frequenting commercial establishments. The Commission believes that there are less intrusive ways to secure storefronts from glass breakage and vandalism including break resistant glazing and alarm systems.

- A. The Historic Preservation Commission will not under any circumstances approve:
 - 1. Permanently fixed-in-place exterior bars or grills
 - 2. Exterior mounted retractable scissor gates
 - 3. Interior mounted bars or retractable scissor gates
 - 4. Roll down exterior or interior mounted solid security doors.
- B. The Historic Preservation Commission may, under certain circumstances approve:
 - 1. Roll down type open work grills mounted inside the display windows that are not readily visible from the street
- C. The Historic Preservation Commission believes these treatments are more appropriate:
 - 1. Break-resistant glazing
 - 2. Alarm systems
 - 3. Neighborhood security patrols