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Surroundings: Ithaca, New York
a manual for peripheral streets facade improvements

Project Staff

H. Matthys Van Cort
Preston Maynard
Linda Tasker
Deborah Schoch
Lou Scolnik
Judy Kirpich
Jonathan C. Meigs
Bickley Townsend
Peggy Haine

Planner in Charge
Concept, Artist, and Research
Coordination and Research
Editor
Graphic Designer I
Graphic Designer II
Assisting Planner
Assisting Planner
Administrative Secretary

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I Introduction

A discussion of benefits of preservation and adaptive reuse of Ithaca's old buildings, coupled with a guide for assessing and rehabilitating facades.
... buildings have an architectural and economic value that should not be overlooked.

Ithaca residents have witnessed some remarkable changes taking place downtown over the past four years. A major revitalization effort, spearheaded by public officials and private citizens, has transformed the city's physical landscape and strengthened its retail economy. Simultaneously, more and more Ithacans have begun to recognize downtown's value as the community's economic and cultural center.

Surroundings represents a significant step in this continuing process. The study focuses on the "peripheral streets," the commercial blocks around the Ithaca Commons. In the spring of 1976, the City of Ithaca will embark on the construction phase of a $1.1-million improvement project for these blocks, including new landscaping, sidewalks and street fixtures.

As the project handbook, Surroundings has a two-fold purpose. First, it is aimed at increasing public awareness of the value of the buildings lining the peripheral streets. Second, it provides property owners with guidelines and recommendations for enhancing their buildings and for making the street environment more attractive to pedestrian shoppers.

Why have the peripheral streets now become the focus of city revitalization efforts? Since 1973, downtown's aesthetic and commercial appeal has been greatly increased with a variety of city-assisted projects: the Ithaca Commons, two large parking garages, the new Rothschild's department store and countless improvements to older buildings as well as plans for the new Ithaca Center retail and office complex. Yet the commercial blocks surrounding the Commons have received little attention, even though they play a crucial part in the downtown environment.

Preservation and Reuse

Ithaca's older buildings have a historic fabric that cannot be duplicated through modern construction. This fabric is created by a combination of architectural styles as well as the historic period and events those styles recall, and it testifies to Ithaca's development over the years. Thus these older buildings have a special significance to the city, and they should be carefully preserved and put back into serving the present-day needs of the community.

Buildings that were only recently considered obsolete and left neglected are now being rehabilitated for new uses. The Clinton House is a prime example of an outstanding city landmark brought back to excellent commercial use by Historic Ithaca, an organization concerned with the city's architectural qualities of their buildings.

The development of the Ithaca Commons has spurred the recognition and enhancement of its historic commercial buildings. When automobiles dominated the streetscape, the buildings went unnoticed, sometimes concealed under false modern facades and an overabundance of large-scale commercial signs. Now that the street has regained a pedestrian orientation, however, buildings on the Commons have a new prominence. People have time to stop and appreciate the surroundings, including the architecture.

With the help of the Commons Design Advisory Team, merchants and property owners have been restoring the architectural qualities of their buildings, whether these date from the 1870s or 1920s. They have been emphasizing the original features and making improvements to storefronts and signs that complement the original architecture. Simultaneously, the upper floors of these buildings are being rehabilitated for new offices, studios, apartments and commercial shops, another important sign of regeneration.

These buildings have an architectural and economic value that should not be overlooked. Surroundings is geared to conserving Ithaca's historic resources and reinvesting them in uses which meet the modern-day needs of the city. This practice is not only sound from an economic standpoint, given the cost of new construction, but it is also ecologically less wasteful because valuable materials are recycled rather than discarded.

A final note on the integrity of old buildings: Each was built in a certain style and period in history. The events of the past cannot be brought back, but the architectural intent of that past lives on in the present through the built environment surrounding us. In Ithaca, this environment represents more than 150 years of community change. It is this diverse collection of styles, treatments and details that should be carefully managed to ensure its appreciation for generations to come. By understanding the different expressions of a culture that are represented in the building of downtown, one becomes aware of the rich cultural environment of which we are all a part.
How to Rehabilitate

If you own or rent commercial property in downtown Ithaca, you should be aware of that property’s maintenance and rehabilitation requirements. The following section is designed to help you assess the physical condition of your building and develop an improvement program that utilizes the structural and financial resources at your disposal.

Old buildings often have many problems inside and out, due to lack of maintenance over the years. Although this study focuses primarily on the exterior elements affecting the condition and attractiveness of your property, rehabilitating an old building means more than facade improvements. Any overall improvement program must include the interior as well. An important first step is the assessment of the building’s condition, from exterior facade treatment to interior code violations. A phased improvement program should be developed that tackles the critical problems first and then works toward completing the rest.

Assessing your building

Interior: Interior improvements should bring a building into compliance with the basic fire and safety codes. Building codes are designed to provide the minimum safety standards for a given type of property, and they may vary depending on the use and occupancy of the building. For instance, a restaurant where crowds of people congregate has stricter regulations than a small retail outlet. If you are planning improvements to your building’s interior, you must be familiar with the code requirements you will need to meet. A tour of the property with a city building inspector or an architect familiar with building codes can help you identify improvements that must be made to conform with the building code.

Exterior: The exterior appearance of your property is important because it acts as your face to the public. An attractive, well-maintained building is a good advertisement for the businesses it houses. By enhancing the facade features and designing storefronts and signs compatible with its character, you can give your building a unified appearance which benefits not only the business within, but the surrounding area as well.

Structural problems can be identified by cracks in the wall surfaces or by the shifting of windows and door frames. These may be caused by simple settling of the building over the years and need little attention, or they may be evidence of a dangerous problem that should be corrected.

Water damage is perhaps the number-one problem facing older buildings. Due to lack of maintenance, the roofing, flashing and gutters often decay or are damaged, allowing water to settle into roof and wall areas. This condition causes a gradual deterioration of wooden members used in structural or decorative elements. Its effect on brick surfaces is more apparent; the mortar joints begin to soften and crumble away, and minerals in the mortar and brick dissolve and encrustations form on exterior wall surfaces. Before a facade is cleaned or painted, your building’s basic drainage system should be in order. The roof should not leak, and flashing should protect cornices and roof edges from water penetration. Downspouts should be free from obstruction, carrying water away from the building.

While looking at your building, you will undoubtedly realize that it has been altered throughout the years. Changes, both planned and spontaneous, have affected its original appearance. In Ithaca, the most frequent changes are those affecting downtown storefronts. Many were altered in the 1930s and 1940s to make them look modern and “slick.” This trend obscured the original design of the building, which was regarded as old.

Other problems one should look for in assessing a building’s appearance are illustrated in the first drawing. Architectural details are missing or in danger of decay; these are valuable features in the facade and should be restored. The paint on the wall surface and window trim is peeling, adding to the unkempt appearance of the building. Signs added through the years are over-scaled and disregard the original style of the building, creating an impression of visual clutter which affects the storefront and its surroundings. The restoration of a “period” storefront, with the original ground floor proportions, completes the essential elements of the building. Without any additional trimmings the simple storefront with an attractive window display is more attractive than windows obscured with temporary advertising.

The addition of pedestrian amenities, such as awnings, street lamps, and window dressings lend a welcome appearance to the facade. The new sign is both decorative and informative, while complementing the building’s original appearance, as shown in the third drawing.
improvements made to these buildings should restore their architectural integrity.

fashioned. Today, many of these remodeled storefronts are out of date and in disrepair. If your improvement plans include a new storefront, it should be designed to respect the original architectural intent of the building. (See Part III for a discussion of new design in old settings.)

In some cases, however, the condition and style of a remodeled storefront are such that it merits preservation. In these cases, the storefront should be repaired and retained even though it is not compatible with the building that houses it. In the movement to restore the Victorian features of downtown building facades, we should not universally discard the later additions which describe another period and stylistic intent. It is the combination of elements which gives the city its richness.

Rehabilitating your facade

After you have analyzed the physical and aesthetic problems of your building, you should draw up an improvement plan that considers all the elements in your building facade and how they work together. It is foolish to invest in a handsome new storefront, for example, if the upper floors of your building remain in disrepair. It is equally foolish to buy a new commercial sign that does not fit in with the building and its surroundings. The facade should be looked at as a whole and improvements made according to an organized overall plan, even if this takes several years to complete.

Restoring a building’s architectural integrity: Ithaca has a large number of late 19th- and early 20th-century commercial buildings. These simple, straightforward structures create an identifiable architectural and historic fabric in the downtown area. Wherever possible, improvements made to these buildings should restore their architectural integrity. Incompatible elements such as over-scaled signs and false fronts should be removed, and additions should be sensitive to the original style and scale.

One way to begin this process is to find out what original and decorative details still exist on the building. An original cornice may be uncovered behind a false front and restored to its decorative intent. Repairing these architectural features may be more time consuming and costly than simple modernization, but it will insure the preservation of the character of your building, a unique character that cannot be duplicated in new construction.

In your improvement plans, you undoubtedly will find original features removed and will need to introduce new elements such as a storefront, sign or air conditioner. These elements must work with — not against — the character of the building, and they must be compatible with the original scale, proportions and materials.

Treatment of brick facades: An important part of facade rehabilitation is the cleaning and painting of brick surfaces. In their enthusiasm to enliven historic resources, many communities have turned to sandblasting to wipe away years of dirt and bring out the rich natural colors of the brick. They soon discover, however, that this procedure not only wipes away the dirt, but also damages the bricks’ hard protective layer, exposing the softer interior material to the elements and leading to the deterioration of an entire wall surface.

If you intend to sandblast, make a test patch first in an unobtrusive part of your wall surface and let it weather through one winter to determine the extent of damage that seasonal change may cause. Washing the brick with water under low pressure and using a bristle brush to scrub the surface is a cheaper and less risky solution. Acceptable chemical cleaning methods are now also available, and a chemical cleaning can produce the results of a sandblasting without doing any harm to the building. Use of these acidic chemicals should be restricted to experienced professionals.

Many of downtown Ithaca’s brick buildings were painted when they were built, since paint was valued as a protective covering that kept moisture from damaging the brick surface. If your building has been painted in the past, you should not try bringing back the natural brick underneath, since you may discover that the brick used was not a decorative product and instead was meant to be covered. Restoring a brick facade can be the most recognizable improvement you make. An appropriate color scheme can brighten your facade, enliven architectural features and give new identity to your business.

Painting preparation and color selection: One of the most important considerations in painting a facade is preparing the wall surface before painting by removing as much of the old paint as possible and repairing brick and wood elements wherever necessary. Brick areas may need repointing, which involves removing loose cracked mortar between bricks and replacing it with new mortar. A special note about repointing: Most mortar used today contains a high proportion of Portland cement. Unlike the mortar used in the past, this material forms a very hard bond which can crack the softer brick, so a mortar with a high lime content is recommended instead.

Moreover, when a building with a natural brick surface is repainted, the mortar used should match the color of the original mortar to maintain visual unity, and the type of mortar joint should also be matched. Wooden window frames and decorative elements subject to water damage should be repaired or replaced before painting. This is also an appropriate time for removing obsolete sign mountings and carefully patching mounting holes.

Choosing an appropriate color
An appropriate sign for your building is the single most important feature...

scheme for your building also requires careful attention. If an exact restoration is desired, or if you are merely curious, paint restoration techniques can be used to determine the original color of the painted areas. The results may be used to determine the new paint scheme or simply recorded for historical documentation. Staff from the Ithaca Department of Planning and Development can assist you in your attempts to uncover the past.

Generally, a two-tone color scheme is recommended, with a warm, neutral color for the trim and decorative elements. The use of an accent color will bring out the details in a building facade and break up the mass of surface. Earth tones such as browns, grays, ochres and mustards are historically appropriate and blend well with neighboring properties. The proper use of a paint scheme can also help unify a facade's disparate elements, such as a sign or storefront, and the color scheme selected should be usable for the entire building, even if just one storefront is being renovated.

Before a facade is completely painted, a test patch should be made on the building. This can save time and money, since a color chip on a paint chart may change significantly when applied to a large wall area. By testing the color first on the building, you can see how the wall and trim colors work together and how your building colors relate to the paint scheme of neighboring properties. Anyone can choose colors, but not everyone has the experience to choose the right colors; consulting a professional may save the cost of an extra coat of paint.

Finishing details

After the basic physical improvements have been made to the facade, attention should be directed to applying finishing touches and making your building attractive and inviting to the passer-by. Much of the rehabilitation taking place downtown is being oriented to the pedestrian scale. With the introduction of the Ithaca Commons and the construction of centralized parking garages, people are experiencing downtown on foot. Finishing details added to your property increase the attractiveness of the streetscape for the pedestrian and benefit your commercial establishment as well.

Signs: An appropriate sign for your building is the single most important feature you can add once the basic facade improvements are made. The overuse of commercial signs in the past has caused visual confusion in the central business district and worked to the disadvantage of all commercial establishments. Signs should be designed with the following features in mind: identification of your business and compatibility with the building and streetscape.

A sign is one of the first images you present to the public and should relay the function of your establishment to the passer-by. This can be done through a simple statement such as "Joe's Sporting Goods" or treated symbolically with a visual image representing the type of business within. A simple, attractive symbol often has more visual appeal than a lettered sign.

Too often, the design of signs is overlooked; the result is a standardization of commercial signs chosen from a catalogue that makes every business look the same instead of promoting the unique qualities of each enterprise. A custom-designed sign may cost you more, but it will provide your business with a fresh image that distinguishes it from others on the street.

Apart from your sign's design, the second most important consideration is how placement of that sign relates to the building. In the past, far too many commercial signs have been oversized and poorly placed on the building facade. With the introduction of the automobile at the turn of the century, everyone tried to attract the motorist with bigger and brighter signs. This proved disastrous to the streetscape because of the visual clutter that was created. The buildings themselves were obscured and the message lost in the confusion.

Our intent today is to use the attractiveness of the entire downtown environment as an appeal to shoppers. For the individual merchant, this means using the coordinated elements of sign, storefront and building facade as attractions. New signs should be compatible with the building's scale, materials and lines. A sign does not have to be large and full of information to convey your message. In fact, a simplified statement, carefully placed between the storefront and the second-story windows, may be more appropriate.

The materials of the sign should relate to those used in the building. For instance, wood and metal signs — not contemporary plastic signs — are most
A window sign . . . can be an elegant addition that relates to the pedestrian scale.

compatible with the natural stone and wood elements used in older buildings. White plastic in particular stands out next to an older material and should be avoided. The sign's color should be complementary to those colors used in the facade's overall treatment. Finally, you may wish your sign to be lighted to help identify your business at night. External, incandescent spot lighting is recommended in place of the more expensive, internally lit fluorescent or neon signs, since spot lighting is softer and more harmonious with facade features. In sum, many possibilities exist for the design and fabrication of your sign. Just remember to take the time to come up with a sign that both enhances your business's image and is compatible with the building and surrounding street environment.

Awnings: Awnings are a vital part of the downtown streetscape. Not only do they provide protection from rain and intense sunlight, but they can also be used as decorative amenities to soften the hard visual qualities of the buildings and sidewalk and to add color to the streetscape. Awnings no longer have to be the drab grey or brown colors of the past, but can be incorporated into your building's color scheme. The use of canvas awnings is recommended over the use of permanent aluminum marqueses; although they will eventually fade and need to be replaced, they are also less costly, and the material is much more suited to older buildings.

Exterior lighting fixtures: Appropriately scaled lighting not only serves as a decorative element, but also reinforces the pedestrian experience on the block. Lighting display windows at night, even after hours, is recommended, since an attractive visual display will draw people downtown during the evening and illuminate dark sidewalk areas.

Display windows: The attractiveness of your display window is another consideration in enhancing your business's pedestrian appeal. Keep temporary window signs to a minimum and make sure window areas are clean. Stick-on window signs supplied by credit card agencies and those giving store hours can create real confusion on a glass surface, so try to keep these to a minimum. An attractive display or an inviting interior can be the best advertisement for your business.

Pedestrian feature adding to your business identity. Often a person walking close to a storefront will not see the wall sign above that identifies the business. A window sign in gold leaf, for instance, can be an elegant addition that relates to the pedestrian scale. These graphics can range from a simple lettered name to a more elaborate graphic image.

Upper story window areas: Upper story window areas should be kept clean and free of clutter. These are an important part of your facade yet are often neglected, especially if the space above the storefront is not in use. Window dressings such as curtains and blinds need not be uniform on every floor but should be well maintained to give an orderly appearance to the window area. If the upper floors are vacant, curtains or blinds can be installed to soften a hollow-window appearance.

City assistance

The City of Ithaca's Department of Planning and Development has been actively involved with downtown revitalization in all stages of its inception and implementation. Not only does the department play a part in major capital projects like the Commons and peripheral streets improvements, but it also aids in continual upgrading and maintenance of the downtown environment on a day-to-day basis.

By working closely with downtown merchants, the department staff members can assist consultants and provide professional advice for renovation efforts. Our services are primarily design oriented and are aimed at exterior — not interior — improvements. Merchants are assisted with projects ranging from paint selection to complete restorations of store facades. We can supply sketches, sample colors and sign designs and will lend a hand with the technical aspects of restoring buildings and the coordination of a particular storefront design with the surrounding streetscape. Our services are carefully coordinated with the other professionals and craftspeople working on the job.

Department activities are also synchronized with those of the Commons Design Advisory Team (CDAT), a committee of the Commons Advisory Board. These services are provided free of charge and are not limited to those merchants on the Commons.

Lyceum Theatre, 128 South Cayuga Street, 1920s

For more information, drop by our offices on the second floor of City Hall, 108 East Green St., or call 272-1713.
II The Blocks

A look at each block of the study area, noting important architectural and historic features, and making suggestions for facade improvements.
East State Street
(north side)

1. Oriel bay window allows more light in interior spaces, adds major design interest to facade
2. Castellated or battlemented parapet crowns theatre entrance
3. Original carved stone building sign
4. Festooned panels flanked by ornamented capitals of monumental pilasters

Wanzer Block

The architectural features here are intact and reinforce the historic nature of the block. A cleaning and restoration would accent the richness of the facade.
Clean wall surface and paint window trim and cornice
Repair and reorganize storefronts
Remove projecting sign
Redesign signs
Paint storefront area a lighter color
Minimize temporary window signs

Casey’s Bar & Andrews’ Confectionery Shop

Fortunately the 1930s alterations to the ground-floor storefronts have not detracted from the building’s architectural quality. Ground-floor tenants should repair and enhance the existing storefronts or have new ones designed to blend with the building. Decorative awnings and signs could also be added.
Redesign signs to complement building
Clean wall surface and recessed doorway areas
Paint window trim
Clean second floor windows
Replace broken glass tiles
Coordinate new awning for both stores

Strand Theatre

The 1977 rehabilitation of the Strand Theatre brings new promise to the revitalization of this block. The entrance is an unaltered example of Jacobethan Revival style. The original features of this unique facade should be restored, not altered, and banners and lights could add a festive quality.
Repair and paint window trim
Restore missing architectural features
Repair exposed marquee foundations
Add pedestrian-oriented amenities such as decorative awnings, banners, and lighting
Consider restoring marquee

Mayers Smoke Shop, Toy Store & Pet Paradise Inc.

This recent rehabilitation of this Jacobethan Revival building modernized the interior commercial spaces while maintaining the original features of the facade. Tenants, however, should coordinate their sign designs.
Clean stonework
Remove projecting signs
Add awnings or remove existing frame

Parking Lot

This parking lot is in need of substantial improvements and currently detracts from its surroundings. Large plantings edging the sidewalk would shield the lot and close the gap between the buildings.
Relocate utility lines
Redesign parking area

T. G. Miller’s

The Miller’s building represents a unique example of classical revival style with Italian Renaissance overtones. Although it has been renovated to modern commercial space, the exterior’s architectural quality has been respected. Pedestrian-oriented features such as decorative awnings and identifying graphics could be added to soften the stark facade.
Add awnings or graphics
Aurora Street
(east side)

1. Brick pilaster with decoratively carved stone cap; only remaining original elements of fire-devastated building
2. Two-over-two window with terra cotta hood molding
3. Decorative iron balcony

Contemporary Trends
This building is a good example of Brutalist contemporary design. The architecture is in sharp contrast with the rest of the block, but has an integrity and value of its own.

Hal's Delicatessen
The 1977 rehabilitation of Hal's insured retention of a popular dining place on the block. Any improvements here should be aimed at increasing pedestrian amenity.
Add decorative awning for scale
Keep main window free of clutter and signs

Vacant Storefront
Rehabilitation here should be in keeping with the recent improvements to Hal's. An awning could be added to reinforce eye-level interest.

Vacant Lot
This site presents an excellent opportunity to contribute to the block's vitality and interest through good design. Care should be taken to design a new structure which does not "fight" its neighbors in terms of style, proportions, details or color. Meanwhile, the lot should be kept clean and free of litter.

Leonardo Hotel
The present use and condition of the Leonardo have a negative effect on the revitalization efforts underway elsewhere on the block. The existing storefront treatment is out of character with the building and of no special value by itself.
Clean ornate limestone and brick front
Remove projecting sign and oversized marquee
Upper stories should be maintained; windows should be cleaned and freed of clutter
Rehabilitate ground-floor area with storefronts compatible with the original building design
1. Fan light window flanked by decorative cast iron column
2. Red tile pent roof with bracket supports
3. Brick corbel table cornice

Simeon’s & McBooks
The 1975 restoration of the ground floor and reuse of upper-level spaces in this important location set the trend for downtown revitalization. Decorative window-head details show the richness of Italianate commercial architecture.
Paint brick wall and fire escape
Paint window trim and lintels in accent color
Coordinate tenants’ signs
Relocate phone booth
Shield air conditioner

Ragmann’s & Mini-Deli
This building has no specific architectural significance, but it is an important link in the continuity of the block. Improvements to the Mini-Deli storefront should be aimed at restoring original building amenities.
Maintain upper-floor color scheme

Deja Vu
Both the interior and exterior retain much of their original character and should not be altered. The building relates well to the historic and architectural qualities of the block.
Clean brick
Repair or remove marquee

Parthenon Restaurant
This is one of the original buildings on the block and adds to its historic and architectural character. Simple improvements would restore its design integrity.
Remove projecting sign
Install decorative sign and new awning
Clean wall surface and repaint
Paint window trim
Paint or remove decorative iron work

Micawber’s, United Cigar Store & Wes’ Corner Diner
This is the architectural and historic cornerstone of the block, dating from the 1870s. Its unique cast iron storefronts, although obscured by later additions, remain intact. Rehabilitation of the building is critical to the downtown revitalization effort.
Remove false mansard roof
Remove existing and projecting wall signs
Restore cast iron details; paint with a unified color scheme
Clean and paint wall surfaces on upper floors
Reorganize sign areas above store windows
Shield air conditioners
Remove or clean awning
Aurora Street (east side)

1. One-over-one window with louvered shutters
2. Neon sign from 1940s

Coordination of exterior renovation efforts by merchants in the same building is important; simple improvements, as shown at right, could result in a very attractive building.

Mobil Station
The building and site are well maintained, and no changes are necessary.

Nite Court
The architectural character of this building has changed over the years, but the Italian influence is still evident. Its distinctive form makes it the anchor of this block of North Aurora Street.
Clean brick
Repair copper cornice and tower window ornamentation

Alumni Association
This small, well-maintained Victorian house is an unusual element in a predominately commercial area. Its unique location between two commercial buildings, although awkward, adds diversity to the block.

Bool's Flower Shop
The Bool's building represents a 1940s commercial style and retains much of its original design. It relates well to the small scale and proportions of the older adjacent buildings. Any improvements should respect the basic design integrity.
Wall sign should be scaled down
Remove projecting sign

Beam Travel Agency
Any improvements here should not detract from the original character of the building. A new color scheme would emphasize architectural features.
Paint building a different color to distinguish it from storefront
Paint architectural trim an accent color
Paint white plastic sign background a color more compatible with the building's color scheme
Shield air conditioning units
Continue use of attractive window displays

Pine Tavern & Oriental Shop
This building retains much of its original character. Its architectural quality and small scale increase the pedestrian orientation of the central business district.
Unify storefronts and front wall with a single color scheme
Paint wall surface and trim
Restore or remove projecting neon sign
North Cayuga Street (east side)

1. Small inset windows emphasize massiveness of smooth-faced sandstone ashlar wall.
2. Simple two-over-two window and decorative metal grill over attic window.
3. One-over-one window with pedimented hood and sill on brackets.

Masonic Temple

The Masonic Temple echoes Egyptian Revival design features, and its sharp contrast with the Clinton House across the street adds diversity to the streetscape. The building facade and fixtures should not be altered.

Clean stone

Luigi’s Restaurant

This unpretentious building contributes to the historic quality of the block, yet its turquoise facade does little to strengthen the link with similar structures across the street.

Remove projecting signs
Paint facade an earth-tone color
Remove or paint enamel storefront

Williams Shoes

The Williams building contributes to the historic quality of both the surrounding block and the Commons. The new paint scheme of the recently rehabilitated facade accents the fine architectural detailing.

Clean up and paint buildings in back alley.
North Cayuga Street (west side)

1. Hood molding accents secondary entrance
2. Balustraded parapet caps Clinton House facade
3. Scroll modillions, plain frieze and Ionic capitals draw the eye to the cornice line of the building
4. Palladian window in tympanum of porch pediment lights attic space

Vacant Storefront

The architectural character of this 1870 commercial building is virtually unchanged and should be preserved. It contributes to the historic quality established by Clinton Hall and Clinton House.

Repair cornice and water-damaged brick
Clean or paint brick wall
Relocate bus stop and phone booth away from storefront
Restore display windows facing Cayuga Street to make storefront more compatible with the building
Paint window trim

Clinton Hall

Clinton Hall, a Greek Revival commercial building, is a valuable architectural and historic resource. Built in the late 1860s, it once served as a theatre. Today, however, interior fire damage and resulting vacancy has jeopardized its continued contribution to the vitality of Cayuga Street.

Because of Clinton Hall's location and architectural heritage, the building should be rehabilitated as commercial space.

Replace broken windows
Repair water damage to brick
Clean wall surface and paint trim
Remove false storefronts and redesign to complement building's original design

Clinton House

The Clinton House is one of Ithaca's best-known landmarks. It was built in 1830 in a Classical Revival style and served as a focal point of community hospitality for over a century.

By 1960, it had lost much of its original charm and was threatened with demolition. In 1973, however, Historic Ithaca bought the building and restored the facade to its original character. Today the interior has been sensitively rehabilitated to new office and museum space.

Repaint columns
West State Street (north side)


Storefront & Angelo Dry Cleaners

Alteration of the ground-floor of this 19th-century building has detracted from its architectural integrity. Storeowners should coordinate the design of new signs and pedestrian amenities. The eventual replacement of the storefronts with a more compatible design would also be an improvement.

Clean brick surface and repoint where necessary
Remove projecting sign
Remove enamel tile on storefront and rehabilitate materials underneath
Design new signs to complement building

Fire Station No. 5

This fire station maintains much of its original character, both inside and out. No alterations should be made to the design.

Clean brick
Paint trim

Fitzie's Irish Pub

The 1940s Art Moderne remodeling of the lower story is characterized by the sleek curving lines, flat baked tile and structural glass blocks. The older upper stories should be kept in good repair.

Paint window trim
Clean tile

Jake's Bar & Mamie Lee's Beauty Salon

Alterations to Jake's have adversely affected the original design of both the building and the streetscape. The storefront should be restored, since the original features still exist. New wall signs and amenities should complement the architecture.

Clean brick surface and window sills
Paint window trim and cornice
Replace incompatible storefront and signs

Unify color scheme between ground-floor and upper stories
2. 1950s Coca-Cola sign
3. Brick corbel table cornice
4. Two-over-two round-headed window framed by brick pilasters. Window head arch accented by projecting springers and keystone

State Street Smoke Shop

This is one of the only examples of a frontier-style building in all of Ithaca. Its past use as The Exchange Hotel accounts for its unique facade. Suggested improvements would enhance the pedestrian character of the building; the facade itself should not be altered.

- Remove projecting sign
- Restore wall sign
- Replace awning
- Repair clapboard
- Paint trim a new color
- Minimize store window clutter

Bern Furniture

Immediate improvements might include painting the facade a color complementary to the earth tones around it.

- Remove false front and restore original features of upper stories
- Minimize window advertising signs
- Replace existing non-conforming sign

Asiatic Garden, Ithaca Diner & Grapevine

This small commercial building was erected as infill between two larger structures. Improvements should be aimed at defining the pedestrian scale.

- Remove projecting signs
- Replace Ithaca Diner sign
- Restore and paint wood trim above signs

Miles Music & Fantasy Fair

Alterations over the years have changed the appearance of this large, dominant commercial building. Improvements might include coordination of signs and decorative elements such as awnings and lighting. Eventually the storefronts should be redesigned to complement the upper stories.

- Clean surface and paint trim
- Remove wall signs
- Add awning to music store

Vacant Store

The charm and unique character of this basically intact building are enhanced by its location between two larger commercial buildings.

- Clean brick and paint window trim
- Remove wall signs and old brackets
- Restore original storefront

Former Freeman’s Building

This building is a cornerstone on a block facing the Commons. It should be rehabilitated to emphasize the original design, and signs should be geared to the pedestrian scale.
1. Decorative pediment embellishes theatre poster display case
2. Ionic columns and entablature enhance newly rehabilitated former telephone building
3. Scroll modillions support cornice above decorative blind arcade of former telephone building

Book Sales Gallery
This older commercial building's design is still intact despite a monochromatic paint scheme and abuse of signs. The original features should be emphasized and signs designed to complement the building and its surroundings.
Remove projecting sign and flashing lights
Remove oversized wall sign
Clean and paint brick and window trim
Minimize temporary window signs

Schmaus Clothes
Recent improvements to this building have taken its architectural features into account and are compatible with the neighboring theatre.
Clean brick

State Theatre
The recent theatre and marquee restoration has preserved a great resource for continued use in Ithaca. The ornate ticket booth, large neon marquee and other fixtures contribute to pedestrian interest on this block; they should not be removed.

Old Telephone Building
Recent rehabilitation has restored the architectural character of the building's facade and contributed to the trend of revitalization on this block.

Ithaca Journal & ILF
These buildings date from the late 1950s, and their lines are simple and contemporary in design, contrasting with the more ornate facades nearby. The scale and form relate well to the rest of the block, continuing the facade line.
South Cayuga Street (west side)

1. Square projecting bay with stick-style influence of studs and corner posts; flat-boarded infill panels
2. Two-over-two window with eyebrow head
3. Classic neon sign of the 1940s

George's Restaurant & Ithaca Liquor
This old building is distinguished by its unusual upper-story extended bay. The basic integrity of the building remains, but the storefronts are incompatible; period storefronts would help give a unified appearance.
Restore or remove projecting signs
Design new storefronts more compatible with rest of building

Freeman's Sportswear
Filling a previously vacant lot, this 1977 building aids in completing the wall of commercial buildings along South Cayuga Street.

Pete's Bar & Roy's Barber Shop
Many original features of this older commercial building remain intact, but the simple facade would benefit from a sensitive restoration.
Restore or remove projecting signs
Clean brick; paint window trim
Refurbish original features of existing storefront
Remove enamel tile at ground level

Morris' Men's Wear
The facades of the two buildings comprising this store have the same brick but different forms. They should be treated separately, and one facade should be painted in a different — but complementary — color. New colors and pedestrian features would enliven the entire block.
Remove projecting sign and aluminum marquee
Reorganize and redesign signs
Paint brick facade
Add awnings and lighting to soften facades
Consider more extensive redesign to strengthen relationship between upper portions of facade

Chanticleer
This stark facade could be enlivened by restoring the neon rooster sign.
Clean stone
Restore neon marquee and rooster
Remove neon signs on Cayuga Street side
Consider treating upper-story windows to reduce blank appearance
South Cayuga Street (east side)

1. Decorative metal window apron
2. Detailed wooden cornice with dentils
3. Round-arched windows accented with decorative keystones and stone banding
4. Ionic capital and fluted column shaft

Commons West
The old Montgomery Ward building is a major architectural landmark in downtown Ithaca. Built in the 1920s, it is an early expression of a modern commercial style. Its scale and form make it an important anchor at the west end of the Commons.

- Paint window trim
- Minimize temporary signs
- Soften massive facade with decorative awnings and additional lighting

Commons Clothing & Greg's Deli
The facade here is representative of the stark style of the 1930s. Although the building lacks outstanding architectural significance, it contributes to the unity of the block.

- Coordinate signs
- Clean windows and reduce number of temporary signs
- Reinforce pedestrian scale with decorative awning

Master Kitchen
This is another distinctive example of 1930s commercial-style architecture.

- Clean brick
- Paint window trim on upper floors
- Add awning

Corner Bookstore
This late 19th-century building established the four-story wall maintained by the later buildings on the block. The original cast iron storefronts are intact, and should not be altered; the attractive window displays add pedestrian interest.

- Paint window trim to complement storefront
- Clean brick
- Replace projecting sign with one conforming to ordinance

City Hall Annex
Returning the ground-floor space to retail use would strengthen the economic vitality of the block. The building is well maintained and retains much of its original character.

- Replace broken window blinds
- Rehabilitate entry marquee
III Selected Buildings

Recommendations for enhancing specific buildings in downtown Ithaca. The highlighted buildings were chosen either for particular architectural or historic significance, or because they are in especially urgent need of attention.
These two buildings have much in common. Both are corner commercial buildings located on the same block of North Aurora Street. Both buildings date from the 19th century, and have many similar architectural features, each has a richly decorated brick corbel table cornice, ornate metal window hoods, and decorative cast iron detailing on the storefronts.

The interior restoration of Simeon's and the accompanying exterior improvements have done a great deal to revitalize this building (on the left), which faces the Commons. Although it still needs much exterior work, the facade is in considerably better condition than its counterpart on the Seneca corner. One immediate improvement would be to scrape and paint the brick.

The building on the right, housing Micawber's, United Cigar Store, and End Corner Diner, has long been neglected. Lack of maintenance has allowed water to damage the exterior brick. Throughout the years, merchants have obliterated the rich cast iron detailing of the storefronts with store signs and advertising.

Although Micawber's made an attempt to accentuate the cast iron, the color scheme is not one that can be extended to the rest of the building. The building needs to be considered as a whole, and renovated as a whole; a piecemeal approach will not be successful. The entire building must be scraped and painted; the layers of old paint should be removed from the cast iron columns to prepare them for repainting. A unified color scheme needs to be chosen for the entire building.

The restoration effort by Simeon's has revealed the potential for their building to become one of the finest downtown. By a similar effort, 118-124 North Aurora could transform this block of North Aurora into the showpiece of downtown Ithaca.
Hibbard Block

Originally known as the Hibbard Block, 102-106 West State Street was the home of the City Club around the turn of the century. The third floor was originally one very large room with a bordered hardwood floor and ornate tin ceiling, and served well for large groups such as the City Club.

Records indicate that as early as 1904 the Hibbard Block was joined to the adjacent building internally on both the second and third floors. The large third floor room has been somewhat reduced by subdivisions over the years; what remains of the large meeting hall is presently a dance studio.

Both the Hibbard Block and its adjoining neighbor are unscathed by modernization; overscaled signs are the only undesirable features apparent, and it is expected that the signs will be removed once new tenants are found. Cosmetic improvements, such as a sensitive paint job, accenting architectural features, or awnings and pedestrian scale lighting, would brighten and enliven the façade.
Clinton Hall

Built in 1860, the fire-damaged Clinton Hall is one of Ithaca’s oldest commercial buildings. Its simple, regular exterior does not reveal its main architectural feature, a 500 seat theatre which occupies the third floor. In its past, the theatre has been used for stage productions and dance classes. After being renamed the Manhattan Theatre in 1910, the building hosted vaudeville shows in addition to stage productions and other activities.

The building hasn’t always appeared as it does now; an 1880 photo depicts an ornate metal balcony extending the length of the second story facade, which added considerable interest to the building. Although a couple of the old storefronts have been lost to modernization attempts, several are intact, and could be restored.

Clinton Hall survived a fire in 1936, and was renovated for another 29 years of commercial use before the fire of 1975, though in latter years only the ground floor was occupied. In spite of the recent fire damage, the building is structurally intact; presently a feasibility study is being done to determine whether a renovation and adaptive reuse project is warranted.

It would be a considerable loss if this building is lost to the wrecking ball; the building is an essential element on this block of Cayuga Street, not only because of its proximity to the Clinton House, a National Landmark, but as an example of an early architectural style.
The Book Sales Gallery is perhaps the one outstanding example of an abused building in the central business district. The entire building is in need of basic maintenance and a new coat of paint; the windows have been insensitive painted over, and should be scraped. Removal of the over-sized sign will be a major improvement; it must be removed by August 1976 to conform to the city sign ordinance. The clutter of posters and advertising creates an unattractive, unwelcome storefront; due to the nature of the merchandise, the display windows might be hung with drapes, and advertising eliminated from the windows.

The building has good potential for restoration as the essential elements of the building are unaltered; however, its existing condition has a definite negative effect on the appearance of this block. 103 West State Street could contribute to the ambiance of the block instead of detracting from it.