

AN INVESTIGATION OF THE TRANSFORMATION OF DOWNTOWN EUGENE'S BUILDING AND RETAIL MORPHOLOGY (1965 TO 1985) AFTER THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PEDESTRIAN MALL

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the morphological transformation of Eugene (Oregon)'s Retail Core, which the City implemented as a part of its urban renewal in the late-1960s. Eugene's downtown mall, an open-air pedestrian-only zone inspired by the suburban shopping centers, spanned across eight downtown street segments, and was constructed to revitalize an eight-block large 'retail center.' After less than two decades, however, the retail center began declining, and in 2002, the last street segment of the mall opened back to vehicular traffic, formally signaling the failure of the strategy. The primary question investigated in this research is, how did the CEP and RCPM area's (a) building morphology and (2) retail business patterns transform? The study period is between 1965 (a year before the renewal) and 1985 (beginning of the mall's failure). This paper explains the process of the retail center's transformation across these years by analyzing the area's building morphology and retail business patterns. The literature and methodological approaches related to urban historical research, M.R. Conzen's works on urban morphology, and retail transformation of US cities (particularly the works of Brian J. L. Berry), are critical to this research. The sources used are historical/archival information from newspapers, city reports, historical maps, and business directories. This research found that between 1965 to 1985, the City's efforts completely transformed the urban fabric of its core from a compact concentration of older buildings but high retail business concentration and mix, to a modern, large, and new, but less robust urban and retail center.

Keywords: pedestrian mall, urban renewal, retail morphology, urban history, Conzenian urban morphology

INTRODUCTION

Eugene is a mid-sized city located in Lane County, State of Oregon, USA, which occupies more than fifty square miles (within its Urban Growth Boundary) and has a population of around 170,000.¹ This research explores the transformation of Eugene's downtown core after the implementation of the City's 1969 federal urban renewal program, called the Central Eugene Project (CEP). The CEP aimed to strengthen downtown's economic and cultural position in the region by implementing several development projects. One of the significant projects in the CEP plan was the construction of a pedestrian mall to revitalize the retail core, which opened in early-1971. However, this Retail Center facilitated by the Pedestrian Mall (RCPM) was not successful in improving the downtown's retail business scenario and 'failed' within less than two decades of the mall's opening. This paper is a part of the more extensive study on RCPM's failure and focuses on the transformation of the area between 1965 (before renewal began) and 1985 (starting point of decline). As such, this paper investigates the following question: how did the CEP and RCPM area's (a) building morphology and (2) retail business patterns transform?

A study of both the building and economic morphologies are required to fully understand Eugene's CEP and RCPM strategy because the retail center was explicitly planned for new and displaced businesses (economic morphology), planned to be located inside either the retained, new, or rehabilitated buildings (building morphology).

¹ US Census Bureau. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/eugeneoregon/PST040217>

BACKGROUND

In the United States, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) was responsible for the formal establishment of 'urban renewal' in the 1954 amendment of the Housing Act of 1949, to primarily eliminate the 'blighted' condition existing in American cities (Anderson, 1967; von Hoffman, 2008). Under this program, cities across the nation could receive millions of dollars in federal support if they were able to justify the need to revitalize the 'blighted' portions of their cities, usually located in the central area. The downtown pedestrian mall, which was an independent urban strategy implemented by many cities but was not related to the federal urban renewal program, was usually created by restricting traffic on several major streets and converting them into pedestrianized zones. While adding sociable urban spaces and dramatically improving the aesthetics of downtown areas, the downtown malls primarily intended to revitalize adjacent retail center and tackle competition from the suburban shopping centers (Brambilla and Longo, 1977; Rubenstein, 1978; Robertson, 1994). After the first mall opened in Kalamazoo, Michigan, in 1958, Downtown Eugene's pedestrian mall was one of the approximately 200 malls constructed in the US during the 1960s and 1970s (Robertson, 1990). During the mid-1960s, the City of Eugene envisioned an urban renewal project for its downtown to strengthen its economic and cultural position, which was being weakened by three major 'central city' problems (1) parking shortage; (2) traffic congestion; and (3) high numbers of substandard buildings.² To solve these problems and re-establish the downtown as the City's main economic and cultural center, the City envisioned the CEP to first, improve the aesthetic and physical conditions of the downtown core through infrastructure improvements and second, facilitate new developments and rehabilitation projects. At the time, downtown Eugene had a high concentration of 'older substandard' buildings. According to a 1967 structural analysis by the firm Leonard Mosias and Associates (LMA), out of the 192 buildings in the CEP area, the only 15% of the structures were in 'good' condition whereas 19% were 'deficient but rehabilitation feasible,' 22% were 'deficient and rehabilitation questionable and 44% were substandard. (ERA, 1968)[see figure 2]

(ERA, 1968)

The planning for CEP, commissioned by the Eugene Renewal Agency (ERA), was completed around mid-1968 by the firm of Rogers, Taliaferro, Kostritsky, Lamb (RTKL) (RTKL, 1967a, 1967b, 1968a, 1968b). ERA was responsible for the demolition of substandard buildings and the acquisition of land

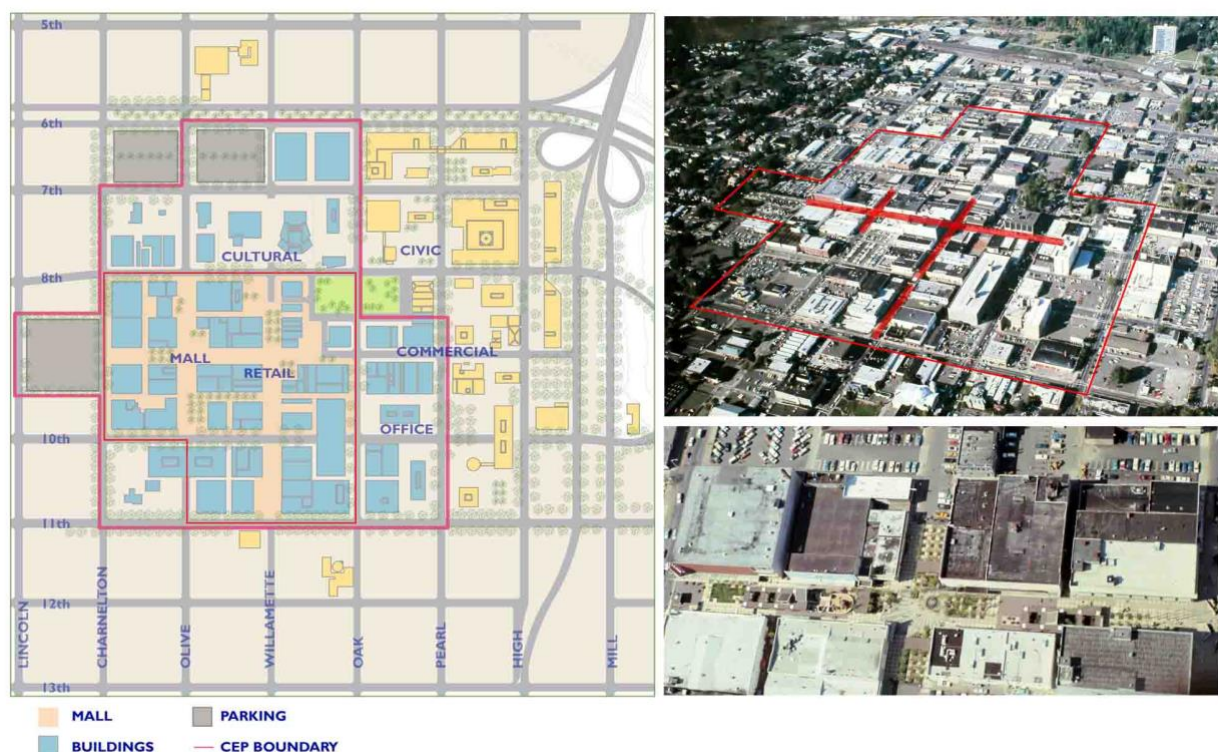


Figure 1 Left: The Central Eugene Project (CEP) plan. Note that the RCPM area is inside the smaller polygon (source: ERA's publications). Right: Aerial view of Downtown Eugene and the CEP area in 1971 (above) and a blow-up of the mall area (below) (source: UO Library)

and preparation of new parcels for development. While ERA did not commission building projects themselves, the primary role of ERA was to facilitate developers for new or rehabilitation projects and improve the public infrastructure. The CEP aimed to establish (1) an active and expanding retail center; (2) a major commercial and business (office) center; (3) a recreation and entertainment center (auditorium); (4) a government center (5) a convention center; (6) a hotel; and (7) parking garages. In the final plan, ERA retained all these goals except the government center. In total, the CEP project occupied seventeen and a half blocks of downtown's core.

Specifically, the development proposal included the following (RTKL, 1968b, p. 76):

- The removal of 200,000 SF of substandard retail space and 15,000 SF of substandard office space
- Construction of 150,000 SF of new retail space; 500,000 SF of new office space; a cultural-convention center; a 300-unit new motor-hotel; and new parking garages for a total of 1,500 cars

In September 1969, the team of Mitchell and McArthur and George T. Rockrise and Associates completed the 'urban design' plan of the pedestrian mall (see figure 1) (ERA, 1969). The design of the pedestrian mall constituted (1) a central plaza; (2) a landscaped shopping plaza; (3) public facilities; (4) permanent and movable shops; (5) mall coverings; and (6) entrance structures. (ERA, 1969) Eugene's pedestrian mall spanned eight street segments forming an 'H' shape. The RCPM area, which this paper is mostly concerned with, constituted eight blocks that were adjacent to the mall. Fundamentally, the strategy followed by the RCPM plan was to (1) retain and expand the existing anchor stores (Bon Marche, Sears, JC Penney, and Montgomery Wards) and (2) retain existing and attract new small businesses between the anchors [see the 1965/68 map in figure 2). This study investigates the transformation of the retail center and not the mall's urban design features itself.

Two developing issues around the mid to late 1960s motivated the city leaders to include RCPM in the CEP plan. First, during the 1960s, the success of the peripheral/suburban enclosed shopping centers was already evident, and downtown authorities wanted to incorporate similar ideas. Particularly for Eugene, as the pressure from the incoming Valley River Center (VRC- Eugene's first enclosed regional shopping center) was escalating around 1967-68, the City wanted to make a bold move to save downtown for potential competition (VRC eventually opened in August 1969). Second, pedestrian malls were enjoying success across the nation. In October 1965, representatives from Eugene visited pedestrian malls in downtown Fresno and Sacramento (California), which played a significant role in the city leaders' decision to also convert downtown Eugene streets to a pedestrian mall (Frear, 1965).

The RCPM strategy that ERA integrated into the CEP plan with high hopes for downtown's financial revitalization was performing relatively well until the late-1970s, but started to lose businesses and could not attract major new retailers in the 1980s. Starting the mid-1980s, the City began converting the eight mall segments one by one, and the last one was taken out by September 2002 (Mosley, 2002). In the process of achieving the CEP's goals, ERA had commissioned the demolition of more than half of the older buildings in the 1970s, consequently altering the downtown's urban fabric drastically. However, although developments in the RCPM area did not develop as ERA, City, and the Eugene community planned for, the CEP (in totality) was successful in implementing other programs within the CEP as listed previously. Additionally, it was also successful in replacing much of the old and 'ugly' downtown fabric and upgrading street and other public infrastructure. Even within the RCPM area, ERA was able to facilitate several new and rehabilitation projects, although they were not enough to sustain the vitality of downtown as expected.

METHODOLOGY

This research follows an historico-morphological approach to urban morphology, i.e., recording the process of town formation and transformation, as forwarded by M. R. Conzen in his 1960 study of Alnwick, Northumberland (Conzen, 1960). First, the significance of Conzen's work in this research is

his view of a townscape not as a unitary object, but composed of three systematic 'form complexes,' which are (1) town plan; (2) town's building fabric; and (3) urban land and building utilization pattern. Following Conzen's original works, this paper aims to discuss the story of downtown Eugene's (RCPM area) transformation. However, unlike the process of evolution of British towns as detailed in the Conzen's Alnwick study and other works, urban renewal in US cities did not facilitate the process of gradual building repletion and adaptive building replacement and metamorphosis. Instead, the processes involved forced a significantly rapid transformation of the City's urban and economic (retail business) morphology as will be discussed further through the Eugene case.

Second, Brian J. Berry's studies on the retail business patterns of cities in the US beginning the 1960s is integral to this research. For example, through a study of the residential structure of Chicago, Berry argued that the business structure of American cities primarily includes ribbons, specialized functional areas, and a hierarchy of business centers (metropolitan CBDs, major regional centers, community centers, neighborhood centers, and isolated convenience stores and street corner developments) (Berry, 1963, p. 4, 1967; Berry and Parr, 1988). In this context, this study contributes to the knowledge of metropolitan CBDs and how a single organized, planned event, i.e., urban renewal, drastically altered a city's historical fabric and transformed its morphology forever.

Finally, the works on the American urban history, specifically those of Robert Fogelson and Alison Isenberg (Fogelson, 2001; Isenberg, 2004, 2017) have been influential to the narrative approach utilized in this paper.

To understand the process of the morphological transformation, the variables used in this study are related to (1) the physical/building morphology (total number of buildings, mean area of buildings, total ground floor coverage) and (2) Retail Oriented Businesses or ROBs (total number and average number in each building and quarter block). The category of businesses within the ROBs are (1) Retail Businesses (apparel and shoe, appliances, equipment, electronics; department and variety stores; furniture and home; personal care; specialty stores; and other retailers); (2) eating and drinking establishments; and (3) selected service-oriented businesses (Banks and Financial Institutions, Barbers, Beauty Salons, Dry Cleaners, Laundries, Printing, and Shoe Repairing).

The primary data sources used are maps and business listings in city directories. The downtown Eugene map for the year 1968 is taken from ERA's publications; 1973 from a map prepared by Bullier and Bullier Realtors (available at UO library) and maps published in the Eugene Register Guard; 1978 from a local newspaper, 'Downtown Eugene;' and 1983/85 from maps produced by the City of Eugene (available at UO library). Johnson Publishing Co (available at UO Special Collections library) published 1965, 1973, 1978, 1985 city directories, which are used in locating the businesses. In terms of the workflow, Autodesk AutoCAD was used to trace the original maps, and ESRI ArcMap was used to analyze the maps and geocode/locate the businesses after listing the addresses from the city directories.

Based on evidence from the extensive study of historical resources, the **crucial years** I have selected to study the phenomenon of RCPM area's transformation are (1) 1965 (a year before the CEP); (2) 1973 (one of the first years of the CEP); (3) 1978 (one of the best years of the RCPM); and (4) 1985 (beginning of mall's failure). Regarding the RCPM area's 'failure,' it was not realized suddenly in a month but was a long process that began with the depletion of core businesses beginning the mid-1980s.

FINDINGS

The findings of this study are divided into three categories (1) general analysis of the scenario, (2) Building morphology, and (3) Retail Oriented Businesses (ROBs).

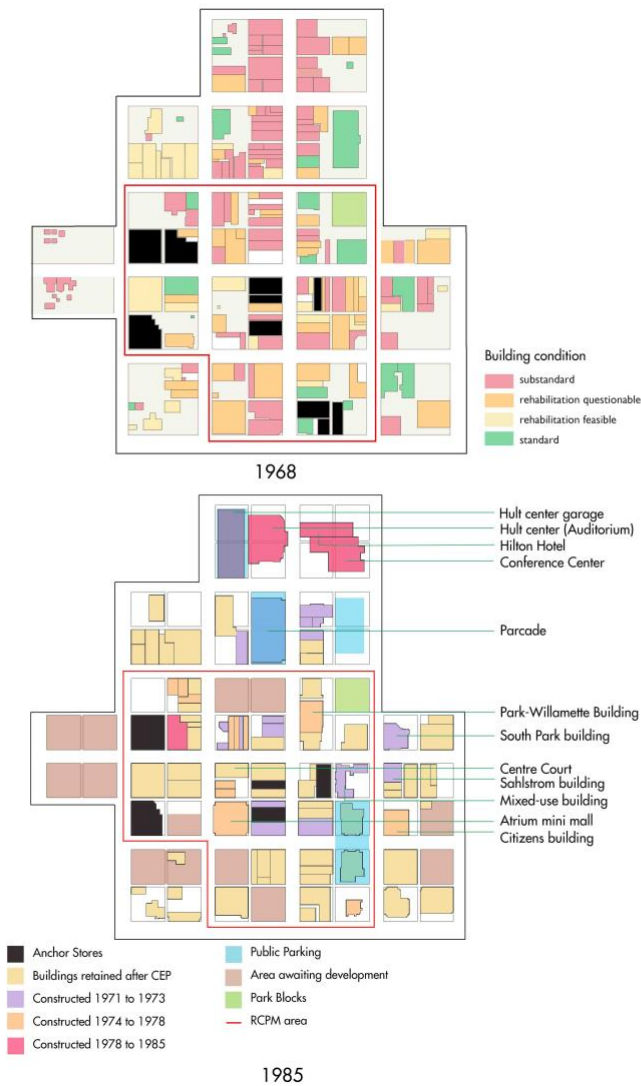


Figure 2 Building morphology of the CEP area in 1965/68, i.e., before the renewal (above) and in 1985 (below).

The CEP area transformed dramatically after the renewal in terms of the building morphology and characteristics of Retail Oriented Businesses. As shown in figure 2, before the renewal (i.e., in 1965), there were at least eight anchor stores, and their location influenced the determination of the mall. One of the reasons for the mall's decline was closely associated with the large anchors leaving one by one between 1975 and 1990 (Wards, Penney's, Bon Marche, and Sears, in order) and a failure to attract a single new large retailer.

The CEP, however, was not only about the destruction of downtown fabric. In the years between 1970 to 1985, the ERA facilitated many large projects (new and rehabilitation) in the CEP area, in addition to smaller businesses (see figure 2). Among the most crucial new constructions were the Sahlstrom Building in 1973; Citizens Building in 1974; Atrium building in 1974; Parcade garage in 1976; South Park Building in 1974; and Hult Center, Hilton Hotel, and Community Conference Center in 1982. Important rehabilitation projects included Broadway Store in 1972, Smeede Hotel in 1972,

and the conversion of JC Penney building into Centre Court in 1977, and Park-Willamette building (with minimal preservation of three historic buildings) in the late-1970s (see figure 2)

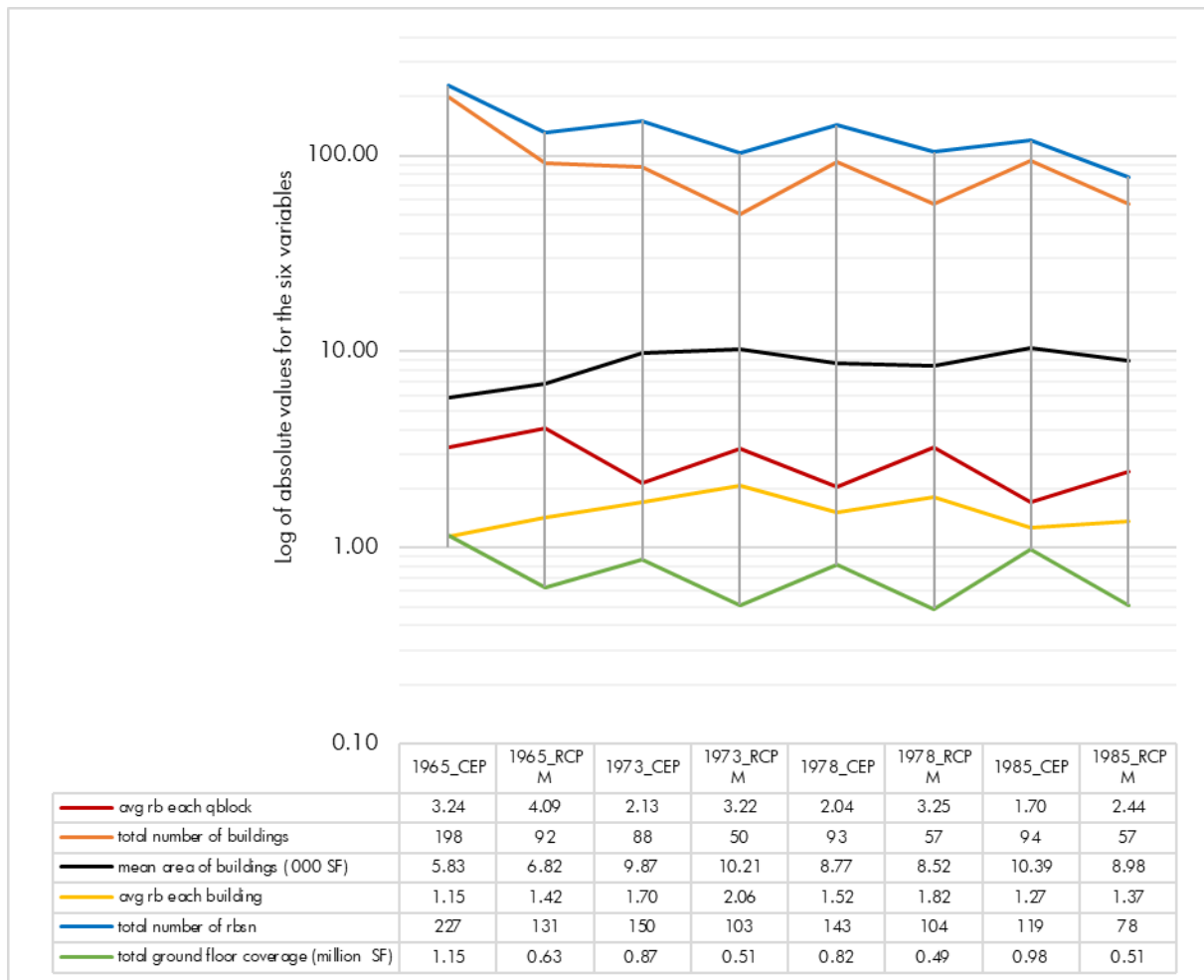


Figure 3 Comparison of various urban morphological and business-related data for CEP and RCPM area for 1965, 1973, 1978, and 1985. The table at the bottom shows the absolute values whereas the graph shows the values on a logarithmic scale.

Following the demolition of substandard buildings, the inventory declined from 198 to 94 (-53%) in the CEP area, whereas from 92 to 57 (-38%) in the RCPM area. However, the total ground floor coverage declined comparatively less, i.e., from 1.15 million SF to just below 1 million SF (-15%) in the CEP area and from 627,500 SF to 512,000 SF (-18.5%) in the RCPM area (see figure 3). One of the important strategies in the urban renewal plan was to provide opportunities for the development of larger buildings bigger parcels created by consolidating smaller and 'inefficient' pre-renewal parcels. According to the analysis, the strong impact of this strategy is clear. In the CEP area, the average area of buildings increased from around 6,000 SF to over 10,000 SF (+78%). Additionally, in the RCPM area, from 6,800 SF to almost 9,000 SF (+32%). In terms of only the post-renewal constructions, the average area of buildings constructed until 1978 in CEP was 7,800 SF (+34% compared to pre-renewal era buildings). In short, the post-renewal buildings got much larger.

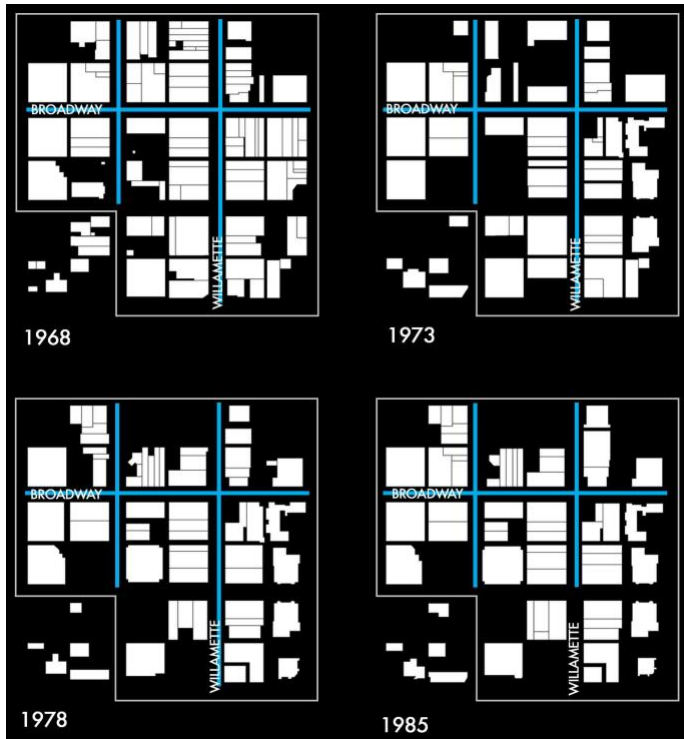


Figure 4 Figure-Ground image of the RCPM area's transformation.

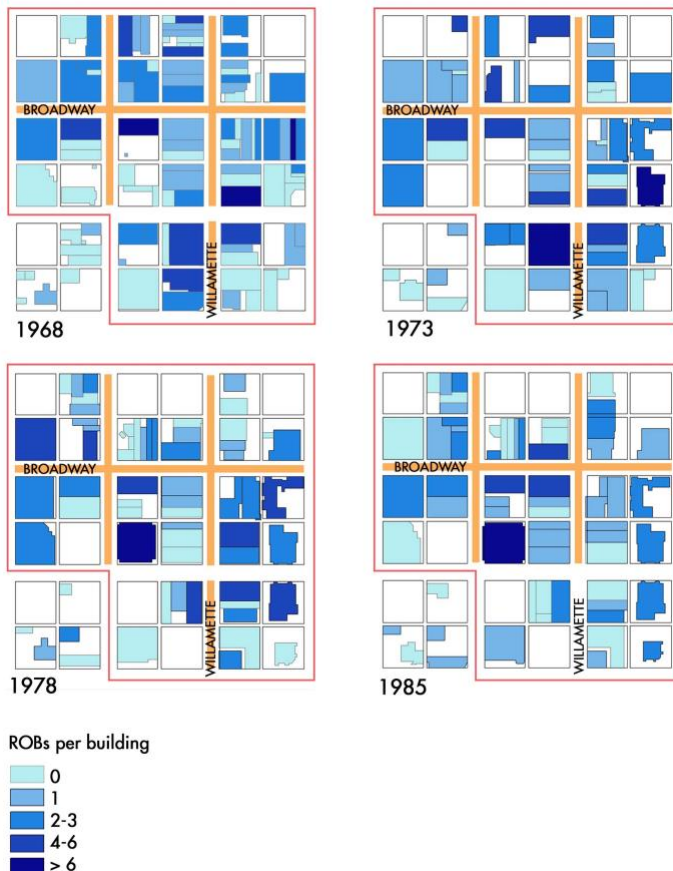


Figure 5 Transformation of Retail Oriented Business (ROB) numbers in the RCPM area.

Within the CEP area, on the one hand, the percentage share of very large buildings (<10,000 SF) increased from 17% before-CEP to 38% by 1985, indicating that comparatively higher proportion of post-renewal buildings occupied larger footprint (see figures 3 and 4). On the other hand, the share of small buildings (<2,500 SF) changed drastically from occupying 25% of all building sizes to only 8%. Interestingly, the share of medium (2,501 to 5,000 SF) and large (5,001 to 10,000 SF) buildings did not change by much over the years (see figure 5). While only 46% of the buildings were in the RCPM before the renewal, the share increased to over 60% in the late-1970s. This finding suggests that much of the building development occurred inside the RCPM area in the 1970s. In terms of the total building coverage, RCPM's share did not fluctuate by much over the years, i.e., it stayed between 52 and 60 percent. However, while the RCPM area had a 60% share in 1978, it reduced to 52% in 1985. This data shows that much of the building development occurred outside the RCPM area between 1978 and 1985.

As discussed previously, improving the numbers or capacity of ROBs in the CEP area and, more specifically, in the RCPM area was one of the primary goals of Eugene's urban renewal program. However, the total number of ROB numbers declined in the CEP area from 227 to 119. More importantly, although the ERA envisioned RCPM to become a concentrated core for retail businesses, the ROBs declined in this area too, from 131 in 1965 to 78 in 1985 (-41%). Even during a 'prosperous' year, i.e., 1978, the RCPM area boasted only 104 ROBs (-21%). However, in terms of the percentage share, while the RCPM area had 58% of total ROBs before the renewal, the share increased to 73% by 1978 and was 66% in 1985. This information demonstrates that comparatively, the ROB concentration in the RCPM area was much higher in 1978, i.e., after the renewal. The decline in RCPM's share between 1978 and 1985, however, shows that ROBs fled to

areas outside the RCPM between 1978 and 1985. This finding further validates the point that beginning the early-1980s, the RCPM was no longer a popular area for ROB owners, and they started moving to other areas of the CEP and downtown.

By 1985, the CEP area did not only lose anchor stores one by one, but it also lost its position as a center for service-oriented businesses, apparel stores, and specialty stores—the three major categories for downtown’s sustenance. While these three categories accounted for a total of 125 ROB in 1965, the numbers declined to 64 by 1985 (-49%). In 1978, the total count ROB count was over 94 (however, still -25% compared to 1965). In new buildings built after the renewal, there were thirty-three businesses in 1973 (22% share of total CEP numbers), whereas fifty-eight in 1978 (41% share). This data shows that by the late-1970s, half of all ROB in the CEP were in newly constructed buildings. Also, only one-third of the buildings at the time were constructed during this period.

CONCLUSIONS

Eugene’s pedestrian mall, which was constructed as a part of the City’s urban renewal, to add urban public space to the City and revitalize the retail center, ended as an unsuccessful strategy. Within two decades between 1965 to 1985, the City’s efforts completely transformed the urban fabric of its core from a compact concentration of older buildings but high retail business concentration and mix, to a modern, large, and new, but an inefficient urban and retail center. In the process, however, although the rich mixture of retail businesses was lost, the urban renewal project was able to attract several large building projects and realize most of the original development goals.

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