

Docent Sheet for

# Eastown

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A Brief Overview and Information Sheet on Eastown and a  
Suggested Walking Tour

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## History

EASTOWN is a streetcar suburb of Grand Rapids. Like many such suburbs around the nation, Eastown got its start in the late nineteenth century with the introduction of the streetcar, which made it possible for people to live at a greater distance from the city center. (Remember: people didn't have cars back then, and the principle mode of conveyance prior to the streetcar was the horse-drawn carriage.) The Wealthy Street streetcar came out from downtown on Fulton Street, then down La Grave to Wealthy, then all the way out Wealthy to Reeds Lake. The big brick building at 1514 Wealthy—the East Building—was originally built in 1906 by the Grand Rapids Railway Company as a streetcar garage. In 1946, after the demise of the streetcar lines, the building was converted to house office and retail operations. You can still see the arch for the big front door of the garage on Wealthy Street. Another streetcar line—the Lake Drive line—came down Lake Drive. The corner of Lake and Wealthy was the transfer point between these two lines, and is arguably the center of Eastown as we know it today.

Streetcar lines were privately owned and operated. To generate weekend ridership, streetcar companies often developed attractions at the end of their lines. And so it was with the Lake Drive line. Ramona Park—a large amusement park—was built on the shore of Reeds Lake, where John Collins Park now stands. Ramona Park offered water slides, a swimming area, boat rentals, steamboat rides, a theater and large amounts of gin. All that now remains of the amusement park is Rose's Restaurant, which used to be Rose's popcorn stand. Up until the mid-1980s this humble establishment sold hotdogs, hamburgers and caramel corn to those visiting the lake. Today it is an upscale restaurant owned by the Gilmore Group. But even now, if you eat at Rose's, you will be given a small paper cup of caramel corn at the end of your meal in recognition of the restaurant's origins. You can see photos of Ramona Park in the entry of Rose's, in the History Room of the East Grand Rapids Library, and at another East Grand Rapids' institution—Jersey Junction. Jersey Junction is an ice cream shop founded the 1960s by Chris Van Allsberg, the mother of Chris Van Allsberg, the author and illustrator of such well-loved children's books as *Jumanji* and *Polar Express*. The drawings of the main character's house and block in *Polar Express* are modeled on the street in East Grand Rapids where Van Allsberg grew up. When *Polar Express* was made into a movie, set designers came out to East Grand Rapids to document the look and feel of its residential streets.

Streetcar lines, then, established the basic bone-structure of Eastown and East Grand Rapids. Lake Drive, however, owes its existence to an earlier era. Lake Drive traces a

Native American trail from the Grand River valley to Reeds Lake and, eventually, to the Thornapple River. Europeans—largely fur traders and missionaries--came to the Grand River valley in 1820s, widening this path, which was then named the Thornapple River Road. The city of Grand Rapids itself was incorporated first in 1838 as a village and then in 1850 as a city, its eastern boundary set by East Street, now called Eastern Avenue. At the time, fruit farmers settled the Eastown area. With the arrival of the streetcar, city workers—mostly professionals--began to build houses in the Eastown area; stores soon followed. One of the first and most stately houses was built by in the first decade of the 1900s by Frederick Teush (pronounced “toish”), the owner of the Grand Rapids Brewing Company. The house stands on the corner of Lake Drive and Auburn, and is now owned by Calvin College. It was the first of the Project Neighborhood houses.

The residential and commercial sections of Eastown were largely built out between 1900 and 1920. The commercial section is done in the classic turn-of-the-century style of American urban neighborhoods: two-storey brick buildings, Italianate (tall narrow windows on the second floor with decorative surrounds), retail below and residential above. Much of the housing stock in Eastown consists of American Foursquares—square foundations, four rooms on the first floor and four rooms on the second. They vary in roof styles and siding, but they all have the same floor plan. American Foursquares are part of the Arts and Crafts movement that swept though the Midwest and western parts of the United States in the early 1900s. In the domain of residential architecture, the Arts and Crafts movement was a reaction to overly ornate Victorian construction (and the Industrial Revolution that made that kind construction available to the wealthy). Arts and Crafts homes---the foursquare and the bungalow—emphasize simple construction and an honest use of basic materials. Many of them have casement windows with leaded glass and fixed stained glass windows—a reference to the pre-industrial period of the Middle Ages.

Eastown became the home of two Catholic parishes: St. Stephen’s church and parochial school to the south and the St. Thomas church and parochial school to the north. In 1945 Aquinas College—a Catholic liberal arts school--established itself on the old Lowe family estate to the east. The original 1908 Lowe family home—“Holmdene”-- is now used as the administration building for Aquinas. On either side of the front door of this magnificent home are the statues of two lions. “Lowe” in German means lion. Calvin College acquired its campus on the southern edge of Eastown in 1916. Located between Benjamin and Giddings, the main building faces Franklin Street. The buildings are done in the Federal style promoted by Thomas Jefferson as America sought to break with all things Georgian. The portico, columns and pediment of the front entrance of the administration building evokes the architecture of the Roman Republic—the classical model for the new American Republic, no longer a colony of England. The campus now serves as the headquarters of the Grand Rapids Public School District.

Between the 1900s and 1960s Eastown was home primarily to white professionals—doctors, lawyers, and business people. The business district contained a full array of retail stores and services—a movie theatre, a car dealership, several gas stations, a grocery store, clothing stores, barbershops, and hardware store, and the like. In the 1960s “the

neighborhood changed,” as they say. In 1960 .3% percent of Eastown’s population was African-American; in 1970 that figure rose to 25%. That dramatic shift was made possible by the Civil Rights acts of 1964 and 1968, which ended discriminatory home mortgage lending practices sponsored by the FHA. Many African-American families moved into the southern section of Eastown, south of Wealthy Street, and many white families moved out. Eventually many of the businesses left as well. Whether intentionally or not, Calvin College participated in the “white flight” from Eastown by moving its campus to the Knollcrest Farm on the edge of town in the 1960s. Some faculty members still regret this move. Since the 1960s Eastown has been the home to a wide variety of people: Professionals, blue-collar workers and service industry employees; young families, singles, retired people, and college students; whites, African-Americans, and Hispanics. According to the 2000 Census, Eastown has a total population of about 6,000 people—68% white, 26% African-American, 3% Hispanic, and 3% in other categories. About 40% of the houses are rental. College-age people make up roughly 18% of the population. The range of retail operations has narrowed down a bit—people drive to 28<sup>th</sup> Street for their clothes, appliances and hardware now-- but you can always count on finding a good place to eat or have a cup of coffee in Eastown.

## Structure

The big historic dividing line in the way we put neighborhoods together is the Second World War. Before the war neighborhoods were designed for people; after the war they were designed for cars. Pre-war neighborhoods are mixed-use, compact and walkable; they have a center and an edge, and the distance between two is typically a 5-10 minute walk. Within that walking radius people could typically find all they needed on a daily and weekly basis—a grocery store, a hardware store, a post office, a coffee shop, a flower shop, a school and a church. And a transit stop: pre-war neighborhoods were typically served by a comprehensive public transportation system that enabled people to get around town without a car.

Eastown is a typical pre-war streetcar suburb. Roughly one square mile in area, it is bounded by Fulton to the north, Franklin to the south, Fuller to the west and the East Grand Rapids municipal boundary to the east. It contains 1,600 homes and 6,000 residents. It exhibits the structure of a classic walkable, mixed-use neighborhood. From the center, the transit stop at Lake and Wealthy, it is no more than a 5-10 minute walk to its edge. At the center there was a complete range of retail and service stores; from there the neighborhood fans out to the residential areas. The streets are laid out on a fine grid pattern; the blocks are typically no longer than 300 to 400 feet; and all the streets connect, making it possible to get from point A to point B in many different ways by car, by bike, or on foot. Except on Lake Drive, the automobile traffic rarely exceeds 30 miles an hour. From a certain Calvin professor’s house on Hope Street, you are within a five-minute walk of the Kava House coffee shop, Wilcox Park, the Family Fare Supermarket, the Farmer’s Market, the Post Office, the Bombay Cuisine, Blockbuster Video, Aquinas College, the Circle Theater, the Schnitz Bakery, Argos and Redux Bookstores, the

Wealthy Street Theater, Sandman's rib joint, Sichuan Gardens Chinese restaurant and Sami's Pita House.

Compare this pre-war neighborhood structure to the way we build today. If you live in the suburbs, chances are you live in a purely residential area—just single-family houses, no retail, office, or civic buildings within walking range. That's because modern zoning laws prohibit mixed-use. Your work, your school, your church, your movie theaters and shopping malls will be miles away from you. So you'll have to drive to get there; and if you don't drive, someone else will have to drive to get you there. Separation of landuses marks postwar development. Second, consider the differences in street plan. Easttown is laid out on a fine grid. The suburbs today are built around a different kind of street pattern, called a "Street Hierarchy," which is designed to keep through car traffic out of the neighborhoods. Development occurs in areas called "pods"—each with a single landuse—and between these pods run the big four-lane arterials; the pods are served by wavy, unconnected cul-de-sac streets, which empty into collector streets, which in turn empty into the major arterials. The whole mode of development is based on the assumption that the only way to get from point A to point B is to drive a car. The other modes of transit—walking, biking, and public transportation—have been left out of the picture (along with the 90 million Americans who don't drive because they are too young, too old, too sick, or too poor). This kind of development has been strongly correlated to high levels of obesity, diabetes and hypertension. (Guess why.) This kind of development is also based on the premise of cheap and unlimited amounts of gas. That premise is about to be challenged in a big way.

## A Suggested Walk

*This walk takes about 45-60 minutes; it could take longer if you make more of it, and perhaps talk to some of the storeowners along the way. It starts and ends at Lake and Wealthy. Basic urban design concepts are in boldface the first time they appear.*

At Lake and Wealthy. Point out the East Building—the old streetcar garage, now converted into space for restaurants and offices. One of the themes of the walk will be "**adaptive reuse**" of buildings—one of the ways urban structures change with the times.

The antique store on Lake and Wealthy was, until two years ago, the Hammer and Cortenhof hardware store—another neighborhood store that lost out to big box retail on 28<sup>th</sup> Street. The Blockbuster Video store used to be Matt's Foodtown—the local grocery store. The Subway sandwich shop was a gas station, and the Avanti Building, where CVS now operates, was a car dealership. When CVS bought this building, it wanted to tear it down and replace it with one of its generic boxes. The neighborhood rose to the defense of this building, and CVS agreed to save the outer walls, and add on in the same style in back. Unfortunately, it still turned out to be a box, as CVS blocked the windows with interior walls.

In urban retail buildings, **transparency** is important. It creates a lively communication between the street and the interior of the building—inviting people inside--and it renders the street visible to those who work and shop inside the building. Called “**eyes on the street**,” this form of informal surveillance is very effective in reducing opportunistic street crime. You might note how often the rule of transparency is violated in Eastown—not only by solid walls, but by dark, tinted windows (the East Building) and signs plus opaque displays (the Camera Center).

Proceed northwest on Lake. On your left, the Uptown Assembly of God Church. Guess what this building used to be. Right: a movie theater—the Bijou Movie Theater, to be exact. The neighborhood movie theater ran until the mid 1980s when it was sold and converted into a nightclub. The nightclub owner wanted to make it into a strip club. Again the neighborhood protested, so he sold the building to a church. Adaptive reuse again. Unfortunately, with the remodeling for the church, the building lost its great Art Deco façade.

On the right, the local post office—if you bring your dog in the guys at the counter will give it a dog biscuit. On the right again, Kava House. Note: free wireless. This is one of the first coffee houses founded in Grand Rapids (in early 1990s). It was an instant success, trading on the pent-up demand for what some urban theorists call the “**Third Place**.” The first place is home, the second place is work—and the third place is where you can hang out and meet people. The third place is where neighbors can meet neighbors—people who are not intimate friends, but not total strangers either. They are “civic acquaintances”—people with whom you share friendly greetings and casual conversations, catching up on local news. Third Places foster the creation of a network of civic acquaintances, which in turn builds up civic trust and social capital. Other places where this happens: local bars, restaurants, sidewalks, parks, and front porches (all missing from the housing subdivisions we build today—which can be very lonely places).

On the left, a brick building being rehabbed by Tim Ball into—who knows what? This building was another former car dealership that was converted in an RV storage place, then into a women’s clothing store. We’ll see what happens next.

On the right: the old Zondervan building—the home of Zondervan Publishing Company since 1954, which in 1992 moved out to 53<sup>rd</sup> Street and Broadmore. Now it is being used for storing records. Can anyone think of a better use for this building?

To Robinson; point out the two used bookstores and the Brandywine restaurant. Turn right on Robinson, heading east. Note: 80% of Grand Rapids residential stock consists of single family houses; but only 25% of the households out there fit the single-family description (married couple with children); the rest are college students, young singles, old singles, single parents, widows and widowers, gay couples, etc. The detached three or four bedroom house doesn’t really fit the needs of this other 75%, so you will notice, as we go into the residential section, how many houses have be subdivided into separate

units. It shows that we could really use more variety in **residential typologies**—apartment buildings, condos, townhouses, accessory units, and the like.

Turn left on Youell, then up to Milton. Here's Wilcox Park, established in 1911, embedded right in the neighborhood, across the street from houses. Note: no parking lot, people just walk here, or drive and park along the street. On the left: the 1400 block of Hope. (You might walk down about 50 feet or so.) What's different about these houses? (They're set back from the street, and farther from each other, and no front porches.) Why are they different? Well, they were built after the Second World War, and the builders were following new FHA guidelines for residential construction so that the homes would easily qualify for federally insured mortgages. The guidelines were set by suburban standards, not urban standards. Continue up Youell to the playground. Note: this playground is also used by the local parochial school; so during lunch and recess you'll see the Catholic kids, in their uniforms, playing here. It's a good example of **shared use**. Why does a school need its own playground, why not use a public park?

Left on Wilcox Park Street. On the right: St. Thomas church and parochial elementary school. An embedded neighborhood church and school, which for many years anchored the Catholic community in this area. Unfortunately, many of the parishioners now commute; but you can still see many neighbors walking to Mass on Sunday morning.

Continue to Carlton. Looking right, you see the Family Fare Supermarket. This used to be Fulton Heights Market, which, when it was first built, was owned and operated by the De Young family. The De Youngs lived on Carlton, and the store they built was a brick structure that fronted Fulton Street (parking in back), and included, next to the grocery store, a barbershop and a restaurant. In the 1980s that building was torn down and replaced by a suburban style supermarket, fronted by a huge parking lot—not pedestrian friendly.

Jog left, up Hope [note: by prior arrangement, Lee Hardy might be at his home at 1325 Hope, and open it up to students for refreshment and a bathroom break, and a brief tour of a classic American Foursquare).

Left on Benjamin: note the diversity of housing: modest single-family houses, large single-family houses, and several duplexes.

Right on Lake Drive: point out the Teush home, now the Project Neighborhood House at Lake and Auburn; talk about the idea behind the Project Neighborhood houses. For a while, back in the 1960s, this home, and the one across the street at 1245 Lake, served as a dormitory for the Reformed Bible College, which was then located on Robinson. Up on the right, Mangiamo's. This is the old Italianate Wurzburg Mansion, built by the Wurzburg family in the 1890s. Mr. Wurzburg owned a department store downtown. The mansion later became a monastery in the Dominican Order, then a restaurant. A little pricey for students—they should try to get the parents to take them there (stay off of 28<sup>th</sup> Street!).

Up Lake, till you get to the Center of the Universe. This building, only two years old, was done in the traditional turn-of-the-century style, and displays great urbanism (fronted on the sidewalk, good transparency, **continuous streetwall** not broken up by driveways, and parking in back). But it was also the first building in the nation to receive double LEED gold certification. (“LEED”=leadership in environmental and energy design.) Note its “green” features: the light shelves (awnings) that reflect sunlight through the transom windows above into the interior of the building—no need for ambient artificial light during the day. It also has a green roof (plantings) that absorbs the rain and keeps the building cool. Any excess rainwater is piped off to the rain garden in back of the parking lot. It’s a zero run-off site, so no rainwater goes into the city’s storm system (which reduces flooding and erosion). Inside the building: lots of recycled and local material. Home to Marie Catrib’s—one of the best restaurants in town. They bake their own bread on the premises, and use local produce for their soups, salads and vegetable offerings. [This might be a good time to talk about the value of local food systems, and the value of patronizing local business in general.]

Note the #6 bus stop at Lake and Diamond. Students might be advised to get a place close to the #6 bus when they move off campus. Why own a car when you can ride the bus for free? It goes to the front door of Calvin in one direction, and all the way downtown in the other direction.

Down Cherry, east to the Blodgett Building on the left. This building, built by D.A. Blodgett in 1909 as an orphanage, is now being rehabbed by ICCF (Inner City Christian Federation). In the 1950s it had any ugly addition put on the front, which completely obliterated the front (modernism’s disrespect for tradition); by the 1980s the building was largely vacant and being vandalized. ICCF acquired it about two years ago, and is now restoring it to its former glory. When it’s done, it will be ICCF’s new headquarters, with a beautiful courtyard in front. Bazzani and Associates will build 32 townhouses on the grounds around it, and two new streets will be put in. This is a good example of **historic preservation** and **urban infill** development. ICCF, by the way, got its start in the 1970s at Eastern Avenue CRC, when several young couples agreed to rehab a house next to the church. That effort spun off into an organization that has since rehabbed and built hundreds of affordable houses in the Grand Rapids area.

Back to the corner of Lake and Diamond, then down Diamond to Wealthy (pointing out Gia’s, the vegetarian restaurant, on the right). Approaching the corner of Diamond and Wealthy, you will see some new construction on the left—some green features may be visible (as of the third week of August, the foam forms for the concrete walls, left in place for insulation, can be seen). On your right, on the corner, Bazzani and Associates. Guy Bazzani is an enlightened developer who has focused almost all of his efforts in the East Hills area. He operates according to what he calls the “Triple Bottom Line”: Economic Viability, Social Responsibility, and Environmental Stewardship. His office is located in the old Helmus Building. Originally built by the Helmus brothers, parishioners at Eastern Avenue CRC, this building housed a moving and storage business. It was given a green restoration by Bazzani and Associates about five years ago, and now sports a roof garden. Mr. Bazzani lives on the second floor. Across the

street you will see construction underway on the old Koning Kar Korner lot. This development is being done Lighthouse. A two-storey building with commercial on the first floor and affordable residential on the second floor will soon appear on this site; in back, townhouses will be built.

Turn left on Wealthy: you will be walking along a street in transition. Five years ago this street was almost completely abandoned; now it is springing back to life—still patchy in places. Part of the revitalization of Wealthy Street is fueled by its Renaissance Zone designation. Those who conduct business here, or live here, will not have to pay state or local taxes for 10 years—a real incentive. Businesses and individuals benefit by the tax abatement; the state and city benefit by getting properties back up and running, and paying taxes after ten years. It's a win-win arrangement.

You will pass the Wealthy Street Theater. Built in 1911, the building closed in 1973. 15 years later the city wanted to tear it down. But some community people convinced the city to sell it to them for four dollars. They raised 1.5 million dollars for the theater's restoration. It re-opened in 1999, and is now home to the Community Media Center. You will also pass Sandmann's, the best rib joint in town. Then a residential stretch until you hit Eastown. You might point out the seam in the brick pavers in the street, about 10 feet from the curb—that's where the streetcar rails were replaced. At Ethel you see Sami's, a great mid-eastern eatery, and on the left, in the wild organic building, a very affordable and funky Mexican restaurant. Down Ethel on the right you can point out the home of the Eastown Community Association, founded in 1973 with the assistance of Aquinas College and an initial \$130,000 grant from the Kellogg Foundation. Its efforts include crime prevention, building code enforcement, and street beautification. Every fall it sponsors the Eastown Streetfair, when the Wealthy is blocked off and bands are playing on two stages all day and all night—look for announcements in September.

And this brings you back to Wealthy and Lake Drive.