FROM DISGRACE AND HONKY TONK TO Vibrant Commercial Hubs

BY SUE MASARACCHIA-ROBERTS

Before becoming the pleasant European-styled marketplace that visitors see today, accounts say that Lake Forest's Market Square resembled an old 1880s Wyoming mining town.

Along the Western Avenue railroad tracks, a motley assortment of ramshackle buildings abutted mud and gravel streets. Behind them was a dump, the city weight scale, a dog pound and other eyesores. Aside from being unsightly, these streets and the buildings' uneven wooden stairs were hard to maneuver – even on good days. Yet, located across from the railroad station, this was the first and last vision of Lake Forest that visitors would see. In a 1917 article in *The Western Architect*, architect and architectural critic Peter B. Wight called this area "a disgrace to civilization."

Local residents, architect Harold Van Doren Shaw and businessman Arthur T. Aldis – who worked in real estate management – shared a vision. In 1912, the pair decided to spearhead change by organizing several local businessmen to purchase the land and revise the area. The collaboration, called the Lake Forest Improvement Trust, was the earliest known instance of an organization formed to demolish a well-established town center and replace it with something more lucrative and aesthetically pleasing. However, the idea was not without its adversaries.

Initially, the local reaction was rather cold, according to a

Sandwiched between Kenilworth and Wilmette and once known as "No Man's Land," Plaza Del Lago's reputedly unsavory beginnings were the stuff of rumor and gossip.

In the 1920s and '30s this solitary 22-acre triangle of former farmland owned by the Gage family was left undeveloped and isolated, displaying an array of haphazard development.

During the '20s, No Man's Land lacked police and fire services, a well as restrictions and municipal control. This allowed it to foster a hotbed of what was considered unsavory behavior, like visitors patronizing speakeasies and engaging in gambling.

In George D. Bushnell's *Wilmette: A History*, the area was described as "an unincorporated strip of gasoline stations, hot dog and barbeque stands, tacky buildings where fireworks banned in Wilmette were sold, and where syndicate gambling and slot machines went undercover when investigators" appeared. Conservative Wilmette remained 'dry' (no alcohol allowed) well int the 20th century.

Between 1926 and 1928, despite development of the area facing strong opposition – as well as talk of the enclave becoming a separate village also being hotly contested, developers began construction of a multifaceted entertainment area, including a club called Vista del Lago and the Breakers Beach Club, as well as the

Aldis provided space for a Young Women's Christian Association and a Young Men's Club.

Despite the opposition, the Trust raised enough money by 1915 to buy the land. Between 1916 and 1917, using mostly horses and manpower, they completed construction.

According to the National Register of Historic Places, Market Square is the first planned American shopping center to exist – especially one that catered to automobile traffic.

The subtitle of a *Christian Science Monitor* article by Ruth Powell Wenban, published in 1923, describes the evolution, saying, "Mr. Shaw's plan transforms undignified little street into civic center of rare beauty."

In the 1960s, with the appearance of more shopping centers and Market Square looking tired and worn, revitalization became imperative for its survival. Broadcare Management Company, known for redeveloping other National Historic Register Chicago structures like North Pier, took an interest in the Square. In 1984, the firm acquired the property from original trust-forming family descendants and not only restored its original appearance, but added nationally known merchants, like Marshall Fields, to the local merchant mix. This helped enhance the Square's small town atmosphere, which has helped sustain it through today.

The ramifications of the triangle's isolation were best illustrated during the 1932 Miralago fire, which largely destroyed the two-stor entertainment center. Shortly before this, Wilmette withdrew fire protection and, shortly thereafter, shut off the water supply when property owners refused to pay for water in advance. Evanston wa the first town to respond to the fire, but Kenilworth police chief shu off the hydrant they were using. By the time other villages stepped in, the building was lost.

Around the same time, developers also built the Teatro del Lago and a Spanish-style shopping center constructed along a driveway.

This motor vehicle-friendly mall was calle "Spanish Court," the second shopping mall i the US to provide onsit parking. With the onse of the Depression in 1929, much of the development, like Vista del Lago, halted. However, the theater remained in operation for 39 years, finally closing only in the early 1960s, when developer Plato Faufas bought the Spanish Court property. It was torn down to make roon for additional parking.

As for the reconfigured shopping center with a fountain at its center, although renamed Plaza del Lago, the mall and its specialt shops retained its original Spanish design. Although having little else in common with its No Man's Land past, It remains a shining remnant of that time.

From 1927 until 1942, area residents engaged in an intermittent but ongoing battle over annexation, which ended with Wilmette absorbing No Man's Land, ending a heated struggle summed up i a 1938 issue of Alumni News: "Primitive individualism has its advantages – for some people some of the time, at least, but civilization with all its annoying restrictions and expenses, has more."

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