EUCLID AVENUE: A LINEAR NEIGHBORHOOD OF GRANDEUR

By Jan Cigliano

We can all cheerfully admit Euclid Street is a justly celebrated thoroughfare. Some of our best folks--mostly residents of the street in question--go so far as to say that Cleveland's proud highway is several rods ahead of the well-known 'Unter der Limberger' in Berlin, or the equally celebrated 'Roo de Bolfrog' in Paree, Fr-r-rance. The hoy-poley visitor to the street, by wiping his feet on the mat at the lower end of the thoroughfare and showing a certificate of good moral character, will be permitted to traverse the sacred precincts free of charge.

Artemus Ward, the sarcastic humorist, left little to his readers' imaginations when he wrote this colorful cadence in 1860. His view of the "sacred precinct," perhaps tongue-in-cheek, touted the exclusiveness of the street and its residents. It also left no doubt--for those who might wonder or for those who thought otherwise—that Euclid Avenue, more than a static showcase of architectural grandeur, was indeed a neighborhood, a dynamic neighborhood of people, of families, of social bonds and ritualistic traditions. 1/

During the second half of the nineteenth century, Euclid Avenue became one of the finest residential streets in America, distinguished for its architecture and the eminence of those who resided there. Extending four miles from downtown Public Square eastward to Ninetieth Street, the Avenue was a kind of linear roll call of the residences of Cleveland's business and cultural leaders. The houses lining the Avenue were stunning monuments to the city's, and country's, growing prosperity.

A Neighborhood Tradition

The enormous resources residents invested in the creation of both the streetscape and the houses implied an enduring commitment to a special way of life. Yet its origins, its very reasons for being at all, were not so special. It was an urban neighborhood--the gathering of families who lived in one place for the purpose of reinforcing their collective activities. What is remarkable is who these people were, the size and style of the houses they built, and the central position their avenue had in the city's urban development. Euclid Avenue was probably the most important integrating element in the city during the formative years of Cleveland's development.

The grand avenue emerged only gradually through the first half of the nineteenth century, growing with the economic expansion of the city. It began around Public Square and moved eastward toward Wade Park and University Circle as the century matured. In its earliest days, it was an unpaved, unlighted path through the woods, scarred and
rutted by the wheels of stage coaches and frequented by wolves and other wild animals. An important turning point in the street's history came in the early 1830s when a dozen or so leading citizens built their homes along it, most of whom were canal merchants and attorneys who had their offices on Public Square and nearby Superior Avenue. They apparently chose Euclid to live within walking distance of their businesses yet distant enough from the mercantile activity around Superior and the river. All had recently arrived in Cleveland from upstate New York or New England. They worked closely with one another during the day and chose to live among one another, true to the tradition of their native towns.

Euclid Avenue's position as the city's premier residential street was established by the 1850s. Cast-iron fences, uniformly installed by all Avenue residents, reinforced the exclusiveness of the neighborhood, screening the spacious, manicured lawns from passers-by who strolled along the Avenue and stopped to gaze at the splendid piles of stone. Yet just as the residents of this linear neighborhood had a propensity to erect these formidable fences along the public sidewalk, they raised not one barrier between their private homes. For four miles, one yard flowed into another, interrupted only by side streets, and the railroad crossing and commercial blocks at Fifty-fifth Street. Euclid Avenue was a continuous parklike vista of landscaped lawns, finely pruned shrubbery, and shaded walkways.

The vision that took shape on the Avenue, first voiced by residents as early as 1855, was "a continuous avenue of shade running like the Boulevards of Brussels...a drive and a promenade of about 5 miles." Armed with an irrepressible vision from their European grand tour travels, the Avenue's patrons sustained their dream of a boulevard through the early 1870s, to "make Euclid Avenue the finest thoroughfare in the world." 2/ The strongest push by private citizens to make the Avenue the spine of a city-sponsored boulevard scheme occurred in the mid-1890s, but it too ultimately failed.

Rather, the parklike setting was created by the coordinated actions of residents. Such men as Union Telegraph founder Jeptha Wade, Standard Oil founder John D. Rockefeller, and General Electric founder Charles F. Brush built their modern fortunes and Euclid Avenue estates with the belief that they would be passed on to their heirs to preserve. These people, unlike the established gentry in New York or Philadelphia, were not aggrandizing deep-rooted family wealth with their new Avenue residences. They were nouveaux riches and they needed roots. Their desire to stage themselves along the city's principal parade ground reflected the prestige of an Avenue address and indicated a commitment by the family to its residence and its neighborhood.

By the early 1870s, however, Euclid Avenue residents—many of whom owned nearby polluting factories—were "compelled to breathe coal dust instead of pure air." In 1885 the Avenue's most prominent writer and diplomat, John Hay, remarked in a letter to his friend Henry Adams, "the children are well and very grubby from coal-smoke." 3/ Ironically, the tremendous success of Cleveland's industry and commerce, financed by Euclid Avenue's capitalists, nurtured the rise and fostered the fall of this grand avenue. Even so, for decades
house building on the Avenue remained desirable and more compelling than the unpleasant smoke and noise. The Avenue grew from a cluster of fifty-eight houses in 1851 to a neighborhood of 126 residences in 1865, and 254 in 1881. It reached its peak of elegance in the 1880s and 1890s, even in the face of serious smog and commercial encroachments—its residents apparently believing that their homes and neighborhood provided them with a lasting way of life.

The houses were built by and filled with real people—some were extremely intelligent, some ignorant, some very kind, others mean, pompous, boisterous, unhappy, or toughened by situation and experience. The lives of the people who made up this linear neighborhood, carried out in their homes, clubs, churches, and social activities, defined the character of this grand avenue as clearly as their residences did. Their lavish ways and tastes might have appeared products of self-indulgent upbringings, yet the values of most families were really quite conventional, born out of a self-made New England austerity that seemed genuine by its products.

Since Cleveland had only really begun to prosper in the 1840s and 1850s, it was without an entrenched elite tradition in the postwar decades. The residents of Euclid Avenue created this tradition, but they were like youth in the early days of spring when placed beside the denizens of New York's Fifth Avenue, Boston's Back Bay or Philadelphia's Rittenhouse Square. The lives of these eastern elites were charged by the cumulative effect of social habits bred over multiple generations. Affluent Clevelanders were influenced by such customs in fashioning their own culture. Especially with the rise of the city's commercial society in the 1860s and 1870s, families of the Avenue appeared to accept imposed modes of class distinction and standards of cultural excellence. This could be seen in their residences, dress, style of life, patronage of the arts, and letters, and acquisition of old masters and manuscripts—the narcotics of New York, Boston, and Philadelphia society. 4/ Formality increasingly marked convivial occasions, and fashion became a vice-regent of form.

Over the decades intermarriage, friendship, social affairs, and clubs, bonded affluent Clevelanders with one another; most lived on Euclid Avenue after midcentury. The 1916 movie, "Perils of Society," presented a parody of these people and showed the degree to which certain customs had crept into their manner of life. Filmed in Avenue homes, clubs, and Cleveland country estates, and starring Avenue residents, the movie dramatized the trifling tactics an English count and countess used to work their way into this society and mocked the ambitions that drove some among the Euclid Avenue community. But it also portrayed the values that these Cleveland people held sacred by contrasting the success that came to one of "sterling worth" against the vanity of inherited "royal blood." The residents of Euclid Avenue came to respect certain social conventions, to be sure, but it was chiefly governed not by decorum and pretense but by a regard for earnestness and generosity. 5/

The Family

Intermarriages, cross-family friendships, and front-porch meanderings knit this linear neighborhood together, as they did the smaller, divergent groups within it. Most everyone knew everyone
else, at least casually, and each family belonged informally to at least one of the many coteries that distinguished one block from the next. Even John Rockefeller, the infamous loner, had Henry Flagler, William Harkness, Charles Otis, Jr., and Ambrose Swasey for friends. And it is not surprising that if a Mather, Wade, Chisholm, Devereux, Boardman, or Norton lived on one street—even in one house—for decades and through multiple generations they would be bonded, for better or worse, with their neighbors and rooted in the pace and patterns of the place. Because the grand avenue itself loomed so large among these people, their lives were oriented outward to the street and their visibility on it. It was a picture window on their world.

Marriages among the families were the strongest link in the Euclid Avenue chain of bonds. The marital ties abound: Antoinette Devereux and Horace Andrews; Harry Devereux and Mildred French; William H. Boardman and Augusta Bissell; Samuel Mather and Flora Stone; Mary Perry Payne and Charles W. Bingham. And there were many more. The liaison between William J. Boardman and Augusta Bissell might well have been forgotten among the many conventional Avenue courtships except for their shocking marriage. Born into established families and groomed for twenty years through prep school and college, boarding and finishing school, both were thoroughly versed in the rituals of their parents’ lives. But at age twenty-two, when William was a first-year law student at Trinity College and home for spring vacation, and Augusta was scheduled to sail the next morning with her mother on a grand tour of Europe, the couple turned their backs on the conventions of their society and rode off on William’s bicycle to elope. No engraved invitations, no wedding parties, no church. The spirited newlyweds returned together to Hartford, Connecticut, for William to finish law school, then came home to the Avenue a year later and lived with the Bissells until their new home, designed by architect Charles F. Schweinfurth, was completed in 1892. And here the couple remained for the rest of their lives, a marriage that produced four children and lasted over thirty years. 6/

These and all the other Avenue intermarriages had the drapings of extended institutions: they bonded two Avenue families, sometimes more, to perpetuate through another generation the values and property of their parents and the neighborhood. But the Boardmans clearly did not marry to pacify their parents’ institutional interests. They married out of passion, because they loved one another, as did Sylvester Everett and Alice Wade, whom Everett took on picnics and sleigh rides and simply idolized. 7/ The choice of a spouse, whether self-initiated or orchestrated by parents, might have considered the other family’s financial or social status—as Sylvester Everett did when reviewing the bidding for his own daughters—but these alone did not always govern.

Friendships

Indeed, Cleveland society had no code of conduct or single arbiter that dictated the comings and goings of the city’s affluent families—as New York society did in grand dame Mrs. Astor or as Chicago did in the presiding Fields and McCormicks. On Euclid Avenue, the visual continuity of the long street undoubtedly concealed differences among the various households, yet there was much that
bound these personalities together in a common life. Camaraderie seeded this linear neighborhood and perpetuated it over time. Those who grew up on the Avenue came into these friendships quite naturally. Many went to school together, attended the same parties, joined the same clubs, and dined with one another. Business was another gathering force. Many of the men worked together in the same industry or joint ventures, often meeting up with one another in the comingling of professions.

Whatever the circumstance, social or professional, from childhood through old age, these people assumed they were inevitably connected with one another in a distinct community. Such ties constituted invaluable bonds, worthy of careful cultivation, at home and beyond. The famed scientist Charles Brush, whose electric arc light invention illuminated urban America in the late 1880s, reminded his son and namesake, then a freshman at Harvard, that "if Aunt Alice tries to involve you in Boston Society, let her do it by all means. Nothing will keep you socially in Cambridge quite so much as an acquaintance with some of the best society of Boston (nothing but the best is worthwhile). . . ." 9/

Back home, their socializing took in the full array of informal calls and exacting engagements, from casually stopping in on neighbors to arriving at an appointed hour. Impromptu house visits and summer evenings on the piazzas, the simple joy of calling on one another unannounced, were refreshingly informal. Antoinette Devereux, Flora Mather, and Emma Sterling kept copious records in their diaries of daily meanderings, often mentioning how pleasant it was for their acquaintances—the Boltons, Raymonds, Nortons, Paynes, Bingham, and Andrews—to stop in for an evening game of whist or whickham or an afternoon of tea and chatting. On many an evening they enjoyed a light repast, then sat down for a lively game of bridge afterwards. 10/

Social Affairs

Food, drink, and good cheer had a conventional role: To consume it, digest it, and savor it suggested that the rituals of hospitality were carefully minded to keep an evening or afternoon an orderly event. A tea hosted by Mrs. Henry Gaylord and attended by such established couples as the Paynes, Masons, and the Newberrys, welcomed newcomers Henry and Antoinette Devereux to the Avenue upon their arrival in 1873. Out-of-towner John Hay was accorded the same courtesy when he brought his bride, Clara Stone, back to her native Avenue in 1876. Hay, not one to buck the pagentry of tradition nor miss the opportunity to observe social nuances in action, soon became acclimated to his neighbors' indulgences in tea and pastries. But as he told his sister-in-law Flora, "the rebellious Adam" in him rose up against the extravagance of such frequent gatherings. He cited the physical consequences of too much indulgence: "Sam Raymond weighs 164 and visibly gain. . . . Alfred is bursting his jacket buttons off. Schneider threatens momentarily to bloom out into the fuzzy splendor of pop-corn." 11/ He could not understand how his neighbors could eat so much and yet stay so healthy.

Looking back from the safe distance of over a century, one does indeed wonder how these people stayed healthy, not to mention happy,
in light of the food they ate—salted cod, creamed turnips, prune pudding, molasses bread. Their voracious love for outdoor recreation and their boundless good cheer apparently fortified their constitutions; their consumption habits alone certainly would not. Euclid Avenue families could lay claim to an active savoir faire for socializing, their calendars packed with a veritable panoply of affairs. The extravagance that others noted, and some even criticized, simply reflected a joy for formal celebrations.

Not to forget the colorful summer lawn concerts, ebullient holiday celebrations, and high-spirited wedding parties, the Avenue's residents took the greatest pleasure—and invested the most social energy—in dinner parties and receptions. And it is no wonder. These sumptuous evenings consumed a remarkable degree of imaginative planning and took full advantage of the opulent residences—from the spacious entrance hall, up the sweeping staircase, to the grand ballroom on the third floor. With so many social events to attend, Avenue hosts made sure that each affair had its own raison d'être and theme. Mr. and Mrs. Amasa Stone welcomed "a throng of old settlers" and "the beauty and fashion of the Forest City" to christen their new home just after it was completed in 1859. Down through the years, the completion of modern barns and garages also gave Avenue patrons yet another occasion to throw a neighborhood block party. 12/

But even these rather gay festivities paled by comparison to Avenue theme parties, fantastic affairs in which all guests were called upon to dress up in costume. They truly unleashed a jovial spirit in otherwise restrained personalities. Eleanor Hale Bolton's success with a Cake Walk Party—led by red mother hubbards with "blackened" faces, arms, and necks—inspired her in 1889 to host a Dickens Party for "100 of Cleveland's best known society people in disguise," according to the Plain Dealer. Most of those who went to Mrs. Bolton's Euclid Avenue ballroom that evening, draped in the childish garb of fairytales, lived within this extravagant neighborhood. 13/ Such frivolity as might be expected among less self-consciously formal people was repeated time and again. It was epitomized in a baby party at the turn of the century, with guests dressing as infant children and waiters serving champagne in nursing bottles. Lucia and Charles Otis dressed as eight-year-olds in white dresses, and James and Jessie Hoyt came as a naughty little boy and his nurse. The free-flowing alcohol might have assuaged guests' embarrassment, but it also engaged a youthful spirit. 14/

A Tradition of Civic Pride

Just as animated group rituals bonded this neighborhood, so did the exclusive city and cultural clubs and fraternal orders, which were headquartered downtown, some right on the Avenue. For these Clevelanders, the "club" was more than an observed or decorative ritual; it was part of the lifeblood of their street. Simply because much of Cleveland's protocol centered around the clubs after the 1880s, the men of the Avenue played as large a role in the conduct of this society as did their wives and daughters. Yet for these liberal-minded Clevelanders, who took pleasure in diversity, there was a place for every passion, and every group had its place. On or off the Avenue, for sport or culture, the clubs brought the neighborhood's families together in a variety of settings and activities. They ate
together—lunch and dinner—played together, and sat together discussing as broad a range of topics as those that could fill the pages of a modern college catalog. Each club—the Union, the University, the Four-in-Hand, the Tavern, the Rowfant—deepened the ties and extended the geographic boundaries of Euclid Avenue society. For this life of grandeur, the Avenue was as much an institution of social people as it was a panorama of residences. And yet personal pleasures, as great as they might have been, would not fain to deplete Avenue families' civic-minded pursuits to bring pleasure and improvement to others in the city. 15/

The energy Avenue residents invested in the larger Cleveland community in fact exceeded that reserved for their own recreation. They had not only the wealth and community pride—and the women the luxury of leisure time—necessary to direct major philanthropic and cultural endeavors, but collectively they possessed a deep evangelical spirit. Born out of pious New England roots, these Clevelanders were as generous on behalf of others' well-being as they were selfish about their own. They appreciated the fact that they had the means to give something back to the community from which they had prospered so handsomely. Early in his career, Rockefeller stated "I believe it every man's duty to get all he honestly can, and to give all he can." 16/ This philanthropic spirit was one of the few beliefs the oil magnate shared with his fellow neighbors. Euclid Avenue men and women led the way in consistently contributing their time, energy, and money to the development of the city's civic, religious, cultural, and charitable institutions.

They built their greatest legacy at the eastern end of the grand avenue, the magnificent cultural park around University Circle. The ambitions and tastes that shaped the growth of this institutional arena during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were chiefly those of particular Euclid Avenue patrons and benefactors who gave their collections, money, and management to the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Cleveland Orchestra, the Cleveland Institute of Music, Western Reserve Historical Society, and Case Western Reserve University. Jeptha Wade was among the chief benefactors, amassing and landscaping the nucleus of this area, 82-acre Wade Park, then giving it to the city in 1892. Wade and other patrons saw University Circle as not just a socially desirable playground, a pleasant educational amenity, but also as good business for the city. The creation of this campus-in-the-park was a natural extension of Euclid residents' vision of their Avenue as a civic processional. Euclid Avenue alone, a shaded linear landscape connecting the Public Square with University Circle, and the open country beyond, had become the megastructure of the city's urban landscape. 17/

The Neighborhood in Decline

Foundry entrepreneur Anthony Carlin commissioned the last house on the Avenue in 1910–12, marking the end of the age of elegant building. The real legacy of Carlin's house, though, was that it was also the last residence to be occupied in the Avenue's grand tradition. His son John and his wife, who lived there after the patron had died, remained on the Avenue as long as possible—until the noise, traffic, and soot became unbearable. The last residents
memorialized their distinction and departure from this remarkable street in 1950 by throwing the notorious "last dinner dance," a formal farewell party for Euclid Avenue. The Carlins and their guests were memorializing the most genial ritual that had occurred hundreds of times in hundreds of drawing rooms over more than a hundred years. 18/

Euclid Avenue had been envisioned as the grand symbol of a modern American city—Public Square at the western end, University Circle at the eastern, and the residential promenade spanning the four-mile length. By the mid-1890s, this grand avenue reached its zenith: More than 260 residences lined the linear landscape between Ninth and Ninetieth streets in 1896, six times the forty-five that stood there a half-century before. But over the next fifteen years progressive forces weakened the bonds that shaped the social and architectural neighborhood. Cleveland "had but one Euclid Avenue," architectural critic I.T. Frary eulogized in 1918, "no other street could take its place." But by then, he realized, it was too late to redeem the glory of the past; the progressive forces were too great and well-advanced to resurrect the pride that had been at the heart of residents' vision through the decades. 19/ By 1921 only 130 houses were still standing, and in 1950 the last family left the Avenue to make its home in the Shaker Heights suburbs.

The community of shared interests that was centered around the Avenue waned as the street's elegance gradually disappeared. The generation who came of age in the 1910s and 1920s was estranged by the environment their parents had thrived in. This, plus the increasing cost of maintaining a house on the Avenue, utterly destroyed the collective neighborhood spirit. Inasmuch as the soaring value of Avenue property confirmed its lofty commercial appeal, it dimmed the neighborhood's prospects for a prosperous future. Yet these families apparently did not leave with the melancholy that subsequent generations felt in looking back. The patrons of Euclid Avenue, from the early decades to the last, were on the leading edge in all they did. They were as progressive in business as they were in the architectural drama of their residences and where they chose to live. In establishing the new enclaves on the Heights, in Bratenahl, Wickliffe or Willoughby, they deliberately and increasingly chose to disperse their energies and capital in other places rather than maintaining a singular presence on this one downtown avenue. For most, the automobile bridged the miles between Public Square and their enclaves out east. While they abhorred congestion on their own street, they enthusiastically embraced the auto for their personal use. They happily chose to live amidst the grassy splendor of the suburbs and country and commute to their downtown offices, clubs, churches, and shops. 20/

The physical transformation of the Avenue in the twentieth century occurred gradually over five decades, just as the creation of the grand avenue had taken shape in the nineteenth century. The difference now, though, was an absence of a common vision. The modern builders gave little apparent thought to repairing the world around them or building a new one. 21/ Euclid Avenue "is the visual testament to the unwillingness of people to work together for mutual advantages," exclaimed the Architectural Forum staff writer in 1959. 22/ What an interesting counterpoint to testimonials by residents a century before. But after decades of seeking to create a linear
showcase, Avenue patrons had succeeded too well by the early 1900s in creating a pleasure ground open to all. It had become the downtown main street, the geographic center of the city and the hub of Clevelanders' daily lives. Thanks only to the strength of family ties, the legacy of Euclid Avenue has survived in its downtown clubs, churches, and cultural and philanthropic institutions. Withal, the seven houses that stand at this writing are glorious postscripts of the linear neighborhood's historic grandeur.
ENDNOTES


2. Cleveland LEADER, August 16, 1855; April 28, 30, 1874; see Mark Girouard, CITIES & PEOPLE (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 286-91, 170-89.


8. The term "community" is the author's and is based on the interaction of Euclid Avenue families. The community was not limited exclusively to Euclid Avenue families but they were among the great majority; others lived on Prospect and Superior avenues in downtown and, at the turn of the century, in such eastern "suburban" areas as University Heights, Euclid Heights, and Bratenahl.

9. Charles F. Brush to Charles F. Brush, Jr., November 10, 1911, Cleveland, Charles Francis Brush Papers, Special Collections, Freiberger Library, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland.

10. Diary, Antoinette K. Devereux, July 1873, Cleveland, Devereux Family Papers, Manuscript Collection, Western Reserve Historical Society; Diary, Mary Emma Betts Sterling, 1885-86, Manuscript Collection, Western Reserve Historical Society; Flora S. Mather to Samuel Mather, February 2-4, 1900, Cleveland, Samuel Mather Family Papers, Manuscript Collection, Western Reserve Historical Society.

11. Diary, Antoinette K. Devereux, February 15, 1873, Cleveland; John Hay to Flora Stone, March 2, 1876, Cleveland, Samuel Mather Family Papers, Manuscript Collection, Western Reserve Historical Society.
12. LEADER, January 7, 1859; Diary, Harry K. Devereux, April 9, 1885, Cleveland, Devereux Family Papers; Edward Merritt to Myron T. Herrick (in Paris), June 2, 1912, Cleveland, Myron Timothy Herrick Papers, Manuscript Collection, Western Reserve Historical Society.

13. TOWN TOPICS, n.d., 8; PLAIN DEALER, February 9, 1889.


20. PLAIN DEALER, November 11, 1927.
