

# from Olive to Wallace

the urban  
experience  
on four blocks  
of Grand  
Avenue

Carina Gormley

# building modernity, tweaking its landscape

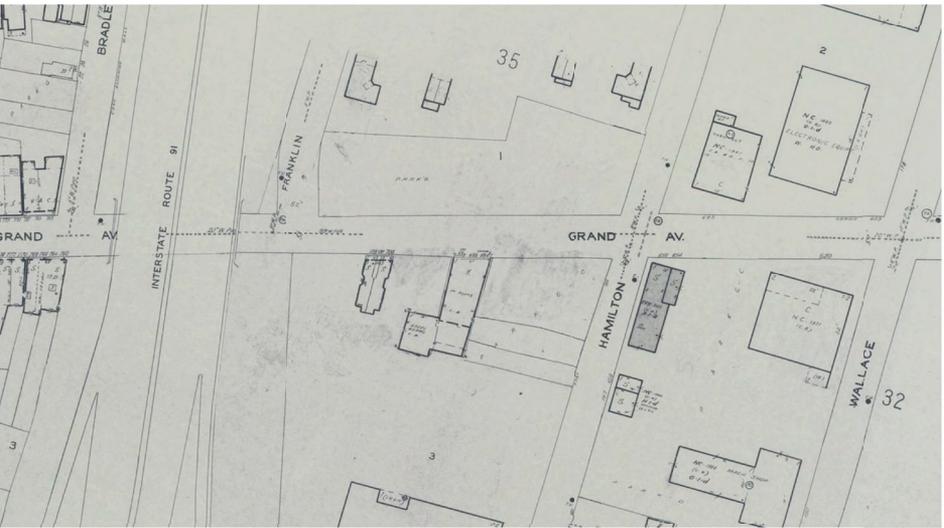
The four blocks linking Grand Avenue to New Haven's downtown offer a complex picture of modern development. Some patterns of preservation, demolition and creation reflect top-down aspirations for an efficient, vibrant society. Segments of the once continuous line of early 20th Century multi-story masonry buildings were cleared to make way for parking lots and interstates. The buildings that remained had their street-level entrances retrofitted to the design standards of mid-century modernity. The number of street-facing businesses went from approximately 157 in 1901 to 47 in 1973. It appears that not a single business existing on this portion of Grand Avenue today was established on the street prior to the street's urban renewal program. Despite these significant changes in urban planning, the four blocks of Grand Avenue have mostly represented the resident communities. Industrialism in New Haven, which occurred in the late 19th and early 20th Century, turned the old Yankee splendor of this portion of Western Grand Avenue into a predominantly Italian and Polish immigrant community. The Great Depression of the 1920s negatively impacted the working-class around and to the South of Grand Avenue.

This general immigrant-and industry-dense neighborhood called Wooster Square had more than 70% of its residents living on \$1,000 a month compared to 40% of the city at large. The Home Owner's Loan Corporation rated the credit risk of this mixed-use neighborhood as the highest possible on its scale. Post-industrial New Haven suffered economically. In combination with the post-war Great Migration from the South and the many displaced African American families from the Oak Street Connector urban renewal project, many African Americans moved to the low-cost area of Northern Wooster Square's Grand Avenue after the 1950s. The city's urban renewal measures—construction of the interstate and reapportioning the street for the automobile—dramatically altered the density and public experience of the neighborhood blocks. Since this last major push towards modernizing the area during mid-century renewal, Hispanic immigrants have grown in their street presence. The four blocks of Grand Avenue—those between Olive and Wallace streets— are host to a diverse array of businesses, nonprofit organizations, and urban residences. For the purpose of better understanding the richness of this area and its



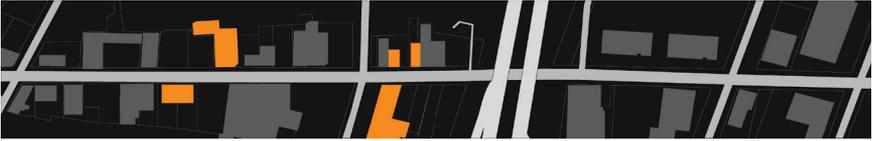


(above) Sanborn fire insurance map from 1901, pages stitch-edited together (drawings from the Sanborn Perris Map Co)

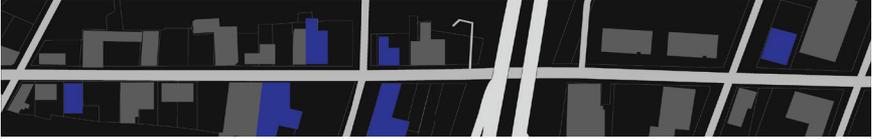


(below) Sanborn fire insurance map from 1973, pages stitch-edited together (drawings from the Sanborn Map Co)

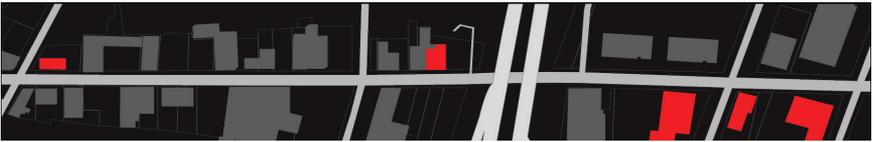
MAP OF GRAND AVE: CHURCHES



MAP OF GRAND AVE: SOCIAL SERVICES/EDUCATION



MAP OF GRAND AVE: GROCERS/BAKERS/RESTAURANTS



MAP OF GRAND AVE: LEGAL/HEALTH SERVICES



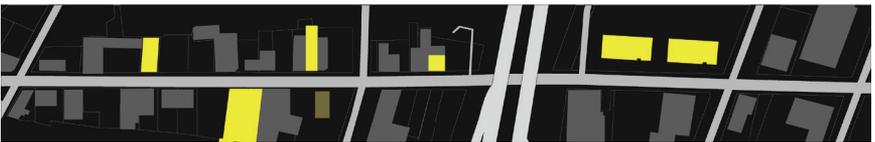
MAP OF GRAND AVE: HOMEWARE/HARDWARE

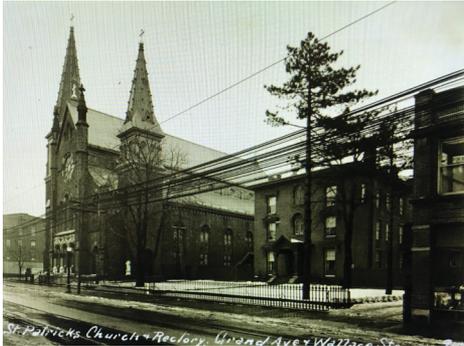


MAP OF GRAND AVE: LIQUOR STORES



MAP OF GRAND AVE: RESIDENCES





Picture of St. Patrick's Roman Catholic Church (image courtesy A. Dana)

CHURCHES: Presently, there are five religious community centers within two blocks of each other. A departure from more traditional church architecture, these congregations

occupy mid-century modern storefronts. The neogothic St. Patrick's Roman Catholic Church, that once stood at the intersection of Wallace St and Grand Avenue, was demolished as part of Mayor Lee's urban renewal project. The newer congregations— Upon This Rock Ministries; Iglesia Centro Misionero de Restauracion; Asamblea de Iglesias Pentecostales de Jesucristo Inc; The 180 Centre; and (AIPJ) Iglesia Pentecostal—reflect demographic changes towards African American and Hispanic communities. The rate of organizational turnover is sometimes high, with some properties experiencing two or three different congregation switches in less than twenty years. Some of the streets' congregation members state that most members are from Greater New Haven, and cannot walk to church from their home or work. Despite having few members who live in walking distance of their place of worship, some of the nearby congregations offer donations to nearby shelters and social services. Many of these congregations are painted a bright color, but have selected to cover, darken, paint over, or board up their street-facing windows. None of the organizations offer front landscaping, entry details, or street furniture. The value of openness and accessibility among congregations, as compared to the closed-off design details of their retrofitted commercial fronts, presents a sort of irony around how these storefront churches contribute to the vitality and warmth of the street.



Two different congregations and facades for the same property (Google street view, 2015 and 2019)

**SOCIAL SERVICES/EDUCATION:** Social services and resources have a disproportionate prevalence on this segment of Grand Avenue, with a youth homelessness walk-in day program; a prison re-entry empowerment program; a job preparation program; a sustainable food practice nonprofit with extensive programming for local refugees; a religious center with extensive alcohol rehabilitation programs; and the city's only men's walk-in homeless shelter. Among some neighbors and city officials, this segment of Grand Avenue is referred to as "social service row." This is partly because the street is ideally positioned for social service—real estate is less expensive than downtown rates, while maintaining close proximity to the city center and its resources. Service clientele—particularly those of the Youth Continuum day program and the Emergency Shelter Management Services walk-in men's shelter—appreciate the proximity. Many of these spaces were previously commercial fronts—the shelter at 645 Grand, for example, was formerly a furniture store, and prior to that, a musical instrument vendor. Some complain that the vast quantity of social service organizations on Grand has diluted the street's commercial vitality. Others muse that the density of social services creates a very specific and disproportionate presence of needy persons on the street. Those who feel like the safety of their assets may be disrespected by this population may be averse to the area. The conversations around the presence of these social services reflects broader social themes of NIMBYism within the immediate and greater community.



(top to bottom, left to right:) Youth Continuum Day Center; Emergency Shelter Management Services; Kiddie Korner Daycare and the 180 Centre (images author-sourced)



(left) photographed interior of Adriana's restaurant (via Paul M, Yelp)

(below) Lucibello's Italian Pastry Shop (author-sourced)



FOOD: The Olive to Wallace segment of Grand Avenue has a few food enterprises that are lauded and beloved by a range of Greater New Haven residents. These include Lucibello's Italian Pastry Shop; Italia Importing Company; Adriana's Restaurant and Wine Bar; and Ferraro's Market. They were established on this street in 1962, 1971, 2005, and 1973, respectively. There are also some industrial food-producers East of the interstate, like Something Sweet pies and the Palmieri food products property. The Mexican restaurant formerly on the Palmieri property, at the intersection of Grand and Wallace street, is now vacant. Some of these businesses, like Lucibello's and Ferraro's, moved their shops from Chapel and State St to Grand Avenue

following Mayor Lee's urban renewal project and its significantly cheaper real estate prices. While many of these restaurants have a presence on New Haven's larger food scene, their popularity and loyal followings do not transfer to increased engagement at other nearby stores and services. Some of these outposts have also made decorative decisions that appear to reflect suspiciously on the intentions of the street-goer. The street-facing windows of Adriana's have been boarded or painted yellow. At Ferraro's, metal posts bar the front entrance to obstruct shopping carts from exiting the building. What might these design or decorative measures suggest or reinforce about notions of the public?

## HEALTH AND LEGAL

**SERVICES:** This segment of Grand Avenue is home to an injury lawyer, a different attorney, a children's dentist, and two chiropractors. It is possible that the offering of injury law help may be strategically positioned among what is felt to be a working-class population, likely to engage in manual or physical labor while at work. The children's dentist office actually opens up predominantly to the adjacent parking lot, with its main entrance thereby being far from the street. While there is limited information about the histories of such institutional types, the availability of such services speaks to the diverse, mixed offerings of the street, and the legacies of different design eras—from the pre-automobile to the post-automobile typology.

(top) children's dental care office  
(right) chiropractor and Gould's Injury law  
(bottom) another chiropractor and attorney  
(images are author-sourced)



Site of the Hollywood Package Store, 1920s. (A. Dana)

Hollywood Package Store, 2019. (author-source image)



**LIQUOR STORES:** There are two liquor stores between Olive and Wallace Streets; the Hollywood Package Store and the Co-Op Liquor Store. Both of these small storefronts have a large street presence for their size, their storefront windows plastered in advertising and obstructing views into the business. These stores bring in spontaneous drop-ins from the street.

Many members of the Wooster Square community lament the presence of liquor stores on Grand Avenue, citing them as reinforcers of destructive habits for at-risk individuals seeking social services along the same street segment. The smattering of ads makes the stores look cheap and obscured, a message that may suggest to some a more closeted attitude towards drinking. Nonetheless, liquor stores form an important part of this commercial landscape. The presentation of a business, and assumptions about the relationships between local businesses and populations, can reinforce stereotypes about the neighborhood's street activity.



The Evolution of Co-Op Liquor store from 2011 to 2015 to 2019 (images credit to Google Streetview)

**RESIDENCES:** This segment of Grand Avenue has much more housing, in the form of second and third-floor apartment units, than the often empty-feeling commercial streetscape would indicate. Some of these apartments, like the units available above CitySeed, are offered at rental rates approximate to the downtown. Since this neighborhood has been historically lower income than the rest of New Haven, the high cost of rent may reflect gentrification or the higher rent costs of New Haven more generally. Former furniture stores and outlets have also been transformed into residential space. 850 Grand Avenue, which hosted a slew of furniture businesses over the course of the 20th Century, has since become an apartment building. 887 Grand Avenue, which was an outlet as recently as 2011, appears to be occupied now as a single-family home.

The street also has an important public housing complex. Initially called Farnam Courts in the early 20th Century, the units were many immigrants' first exposure to indoor plumbing and gas-powered utilities. When the interstate was built, the demographics of the public housing facility shifted, and New Haven fell into the depths of its post-Industrial decline, the public housing facility was often warned for its breeding of violent or illicit activity. Some report anecdotally that they would have refused to drive through the area in the 1980s, for concerns of violence or assault. The New Haven Housing Authority has decided to slowly redevelop the complex, with commercial and office space available on the ground floor. The modern new buildings of the new Mill River Crossing, despite housing fewer units than Farnam Courts, purports to elevate the experience of residence. Many of the more recent developments, both private and public, aim to create a more luxurious, modern experience. Considering the ramifications of modern ideals like car-centered urban renewal, how might the aims of these more high-end looking apartments or complexes affect the local community and public experience?



(above) inside an 817 Grand Ave apartment (via Hill, Zillow)



(right) 850 Grand Ave apartment building (author-sourced image)

## STOP NO. 1: THE I-91 UNDERPASS



The construction of I-91 over the Wooster Square neighborhood, which began in 1956, was preceded by over 6 years of city planning and community resistance. The goal of the Connecticut State Highway Department was to modernize New Haven and increase its relevance by increasing connections into the newly minted Oak Street Connector. They planned to place the highway over the Western part of Wooster Square, what we today see as the Little Italy south of here. The more affluent residents, despite still being working class, of this area fought back. This was the best part of the neighborhood, and deserved protection. The city listened, and even engineers conceded that shifting the highways position to the Eastern side of Wooster Square would be less costly. It was also thought that the highway position would more logically separate the residential west from the industrial east. While a triumph for the Western part of Wooster Square, the Eastern part—the poorest of the neighborhood—were affected by the destruction of their homes of the isolation of ending up on the industrial side of the newly traced separating line. Residents of the Southwestern portion of the city advocated for the equitable resettlement of these poorer citizens but were in the same breath reticent toward the construction of new public housing. It foreshadows many of the tensions between Southwestern and Northeastern residents and businesses of the Wooster Square today. Overall, this project went, from the urban renewal standpoint, quite under the radar—but its influence on the dynamics of this community, and on housing and businesses East of the highway, has been pronounced

(below: Interstate 91, author-sourced image)





(above) archival photographs from A. Dana's scrapbook collection, showing buildings that were demolished for the construction of the Interstate highway. (The top picture is from 1890, and the bottom one from 1940.)

STOP NO. 2: AIPJ IGLESIA PENTECOSTAL, CT AIKIKAI AIKIDO, ITALIA IMPORTING, ADRIANA'S RESTAURANT  
783, 779, 777 and 771 GRAND AVENUE



This block is one of the best remnants of density and mixed use from the turn of the 20th Century. The three buildings are tightly packed, almost continuous, with diverse materials, window sizes, and bracket ornaments to distinguish one from the other. Old photographs of the street showcase a vibrant street scene to complement the continuous front of multi-story masonry buildings. On the street level, stores have signs that reach out into the road. Many of these first-floor fronts reflect mid-century storefront adaptations, but maintain their more architecturally historical roots in upper level ornament and structure. At present, small cluster is home to upper floor apartment spaces, a martial arts studio, a church, a grocer and a restaurant. This mixed-use typology has been ever-present on this street, but was lost in places during urban renewal. With the reclaiming of mixed use as a critical tool for neighborhood development, this particular pocket may be cherished, if not idolized, by new urbanism passerby. Touted for its economic and social sustainability, it may be in the interest of the street occupants to rebuild many other parts of Grand Avenue to model this plan.



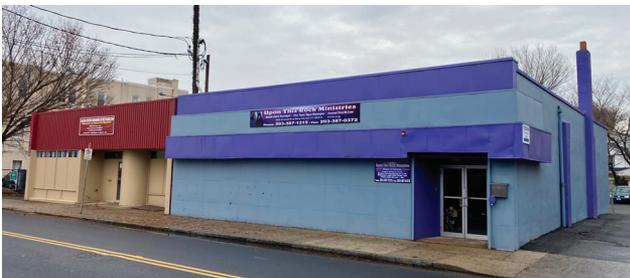
image of the street block (author-sourced)

# STOP NO. 3: ROCK MINISTRIES, ASAMBLEA DE IGLESIAS PENTACOSTALES

884 and 855 GRAND AVENUE



The incredible density of spiritual spaces on this segment of Grand Avenue may reflect important trends in the local population, and in the direction of churches as institutions. The three occupying churches are all quite recent in occupation. Upon the Rock Ministries moved to Grand Avenue from its original place elsewhere in the city in 2016. For a church like Upon the Rock Ministry, most of its membership didn't change. Vehicles are, no matter the church's location, the predominant method for getting to church among these organizations. The two other churches, both with Spanish language names, reflect an existing Spanish-speaking community and the prevalence of the Pentecostal Christianity practiced among some latinx and African American persons. With their recent occupation of old commercial storefronts, one may theorize that as some churches lose congregational power in some areas, they are forced to move to places with cheaper rent. It may concurrently suggest, despite a secularizing city and youth, that spaces and communities of worship have more reason to be on Grand Avenue than in other parts of the city. The correlation between the working class and faith may be part of what is visualized in this trifecta of storefront-style spaces of worship.



images of storefront church sites, taken by the author

STOP NO. 4: UNGER'S FLOORING STORE & FORMER  
STANTON CLEARANCE OUTLET  
915 and 887 GRAND AVENUE



Unger's Flooring represents one of the enduring trends in commercial hardware / large investments into home finishes that appears to have been a prominent part of the commercial offerings along this portion of Grand Avenue. Department stores, multi-story furniture outlets, and additional warehouses once dominated this street. While Unger's appears to have originally served as a realty store and became its current flooring shop in 1996, it reflects a longer history of the sales of such types of services and products. The single-story building's floor to ceiling windows, depressed entryway, front-spanning sign, and recently-added zebra mural makes the entire commercial front more inviting than some of the other commercial services along the street. It simultaneously has an extended back building and parking lot that's hedged in and away from the street. While the greenery is welcome on the street segment where landscaping can be lacking, the lengthy expanse of commercial-less street on either side of Unger's makes any walk by or past the space feel lengthy. The presence of street art along both the front edge and recessed part of the building also may hint at more modern trends for the urban ideals, claimed through public art. How might these types of efforts influence the streetscape? The question also prompts the notion of what legacy today's urban trends may have on future dwellers.



Unger's. Note the adjacent parking lot (below) and the decorative eyes mural. (former facade image via Google Maps 2019; images below are author-sourced)



1929—THE PRICE & LEE CO'S  
ESTABLISHED 1907

**BIG BRIGHT USY BOSTON FURNITURE CO.**  
Pay Less—Get the Best at the  
The Big Five Story Store  
Terms to Suit - - Complete House Furnishers

Telephone Liberty 8373

"FINE FURNITURE FOR LESS" AT  
**SMOLEN'S FURNITURE STORE**  
Floor Coverings  
Refrigerators  
Washers and Radios

**Bengal**  
AMERICA'S BEST  
COAL, GAS and OIL RANGES

850-852 GRAND AVE. Tel. 5-9777 NEW HAVEN, CONN.

**Royal Furniture Co.**  
Oscar Reinkeff, Prop.  
Complete Home Furnishers  
Confidential Terms  
Sole Agents for the HARVARD RANGES

850-852 Grand Ave. Telephone Liberty 4495  
New Haven, Conn.

Three advertisements for furniture stores on 850 Grand Avenue (now an apartment building). Shows both presence and turn-over of furniture stores in the 20th C. (ads from A. Dana)

## STOP NO. 5: FARNAM COURTS/MILL RIVER CROSSING BETWEEN FRANKLIN AND HAMILTON STREETS

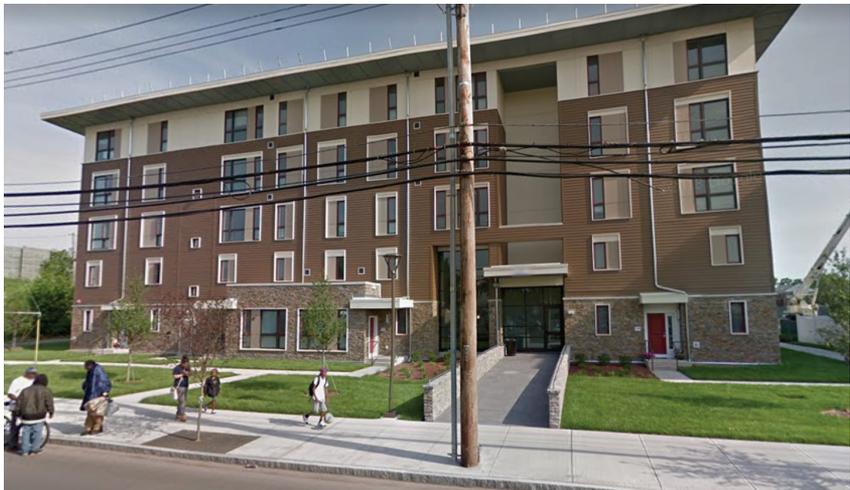


This development has an interesting and dynamic history of uses and names. Currently, we're looking at the Mill River Crossing, a housing development completed in 2018 through the Housing Authority's Glendower Group. The name change reflects an effort to rebrand and disassociate from the failures of the older public housing facility. It was a major redevelopment of the historic Farnam Courts public housing and playground complex from the 1940s. It was in its heyday primarily Italian, racially integrated and lacking stigma. Many families moving in saw access to in-house toilets and gas stoves as luxuries. There was strong community. However, the severing of the Farnam Courts public housing complex from the rest of the neighborhood, by way of the highway, led to the complex' significant decline after the 1950s. So far, the front 120 units of housing were demolished to make way for the new building, totaling to 94 new apartments. 86 of these apartments are subsidized housing. The building process for this was equitable and inclusive, with 90 percent of the people involved being ethnic or racial minorities, and 20 percent being women. 133 families had to be relocated, many of them permanently, for this project. 144 units remain as the Farnam court area on the Northern part of Hamilton Street—these are now divided by a large field, which represents the site for Phase 2 of the project. The original complex's period playground, which faced Grand Avenue, has been replaced by an effort to commercialize and build up the street. This responded to tensions around the prevalence of inappropriate and illicit activities occurring within the childhood play space. This imbalance between accountability and shared spaces with diverse activities are important to parse out. How can we preserve green spaces in this area without feeling that it breeds unhealthy or unsafe practices? Despite the attractiveness of the new commercial ground floor, it was not developed to meet the sizing needs of potential commercial tenants who would want smaller floor spaces or infrastructure for full restaurant kitchens. For this reason, this sparkling new development has done little more than add to the street's patterns of vacancy.



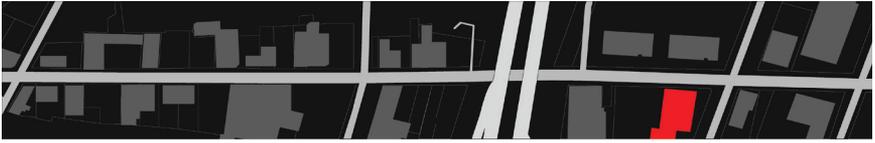
(left) historic photo of Farnam apartment interiors (via Amore)

(below) Google street view of Farnam Courts, 2011



(above) Google Street view image of Mill River Crossing, as the left half of the existing development piece

## STOP NO. 6: FERRARO'S MARKET 664 GRAND AVENUE



(left) image of Ferraro's market entrance and parking lot (author sourced)

Sitting on 657 Grand Avenue, Ferraro's Market pays tribute to the neighborhood's historical Italian migrant population. Stocked with meats and pastas, produce and more, it's loved by the community for its variety and pricing. Built in its modernist style by Carlin and Pozzi Architects in 1973, the building was purchased by Ferraro's and two other then-State street shops as a joint venture to compete against the emerging super stores of the 1940s, 50s and 60s. The land was bought at \$1 per square foot from the New Haven Redevelopment Agency, a cheap price that might have been an effort to encourage occupation of their urban renewal improvements on the segment of Grand Avenue and Wooster Square. The parking lot is an important and very conscious part of the building plan, as the three original owners of the Ferraro's Market joint venture wanted to make sure the supermarket could compete for the increasing numbers of car-based grocery-shoppers within an increasingly vehicle-centered society. Customers love the store as a place for market rate quality, but often review its neighborhood as a caveat to the safety and pleasantness of the experience. One will notice that the front entrance to Ferraro's has vertical gating, a design tactic that makes it impossible for shoppers to walk out with carts. This design feature is a defense mechanism from the surrounding community. Anecdotally, customers and management alike are troubled by the individuals who inhabit the nearby streets, making Ferraro's a bit of a commercial enclave or island on this block. Most customers seem to arrive by driving rather than walking to the location. Its prices help it maintain a reliable market segment in the local community as a long-running family-owned business, one that has become a permanent fixture and staple of the street, but a business that also tries to keep a measured distance from the immediately surrounding community. Its way of designing for permanence—through appealing to outsiders and receding from the street, are reflections of the street's collective perception of itself.

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