

## \* PLACES

# State Street

By NICOLE E. ROGERS

Consider that much of a city's identity is contained within its streets.

Think of Beverly Hills and Rodeo Drive. Chicago and Michigan Avenue. New Orleans and Bourbon Street. New York and Broadway. (Or New York and Wall Street. Or New York and Fifth Avenue.)

You get the idea.

Welcome, then, to Madison and State Street. From the heartbeat of the state's government to the nexus of the state's university, State Street is eight blocks of lively bustle, the very heart of the city.

A lush and verdant thoroughfare from Bascom Hill to the Capitol in the late 1800s, it was not yet the center of commerce and activity it would become a few years later.

Horse-drawn buggies gave way to trolleys, trees yielded to wider sidewalks, and homes were vacated for shops to move in. By the late '20s, the Orpheum and the Capitol Theater had added towering neon signs to the skyline, and cars crowded the streets along with the trolleys.

State Street would not stay static for long. The area grew as the city center, restaurants and shops blossomed, and banks and businesses thrived. The trolley tracks were buried in 1939, the last residential home was gone by the 1950s, and though apartments still provide some residents with a State Street address, the street was firmly



Ed Stein

A photo of State Street, taken from the Capitol in January 1974, shows the bustle that characterizes the street.

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## Vibrant and adaptable, it's eight blocks that make Madison's heart race

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established as a business destination.

Because it's a bridge between the UW-Madison campus and the Capitol, State Street is a natural magnet for Madisonians to flex their social conscience muscle. It was the site of many a protest march and anti-war demonstration in the 1960s, and the violence caused many residents to fear coming Downtown. That fear, along with urban expansion to the suburbs and the indoor shopping malls on the outskirts of the city, gave State Street a problem:

Where were the people?

The decline in pedestrian traffic, rising rents and the lure of the malls drove some businesses to pick up shop

and move outward, and others to close their doors altogether. State Street was in peril, and needed help.

In the early '70s, the planners hired to redesign the street had a big idea: Get rid of the cars. Merchants fretted: Without cars, where would the people come from? But the city went ahead with the plan. A pedestrian-friendly mall, it was decided, with limited bus and other traffic, would be just the thing to bring the people back Downtown.

Time is the mother of reinvention, and periodic discussions about the future of State Street echo themes of old: Bring cars back, get rid of bus traffic, install a trolley system. As it evolves, the eclectic Downtown culture is a melange of bicyclists and walkers, students and professionals, homeless and well-to-do.

And still the street changes. The Overture Center has added to the landscape, as have new bus stops and benches. These eight blocks of State Street are the legacy of urban planners many years ago who decided that this was a street that would be endlessly reimagined. ■