

Country Club Plaza: History and Significance

The development of the Country Club Plaza District, as planned by J.C. Nichols, began in the early 1900s. Several residential neighborhoods located to the south of Brush Creek were planned with curvilinear streets, comprehensive landscaping, landscape features such as fountains and statuaries, neighborhood parks and architecturally compatible homes. These elements collectively helped to create unified neighborhoods with desirable amenities, including neighborhood schools, parks and integrated public transportation. This type of comprehensive neighborhood planning was termed “planning for permanence” by Nichols himself, and complemented and enhanced the Park and Boulevard System being developed and built by the Kansas City Board of Park Commissioners since the early 1900s. Development of J.C. Nichol’s Country Club District started in 1905, with the first 10-acre tract at 51st and Grand. Four years later, his company was overseeing the development of 1000 acres. Today, the Country Club District (bounded approximately by Mission Rd., Holmes, Gregory/71st St. and 45th St.) is the largest contiguous master-planned community in the country.¹

By the early 1920s, the J.C. Nichols Co. had begun developing neighborhood retail business districts to provide shops and services for nearby residents. The principal designer for the J.C. Nichols Co. was Edward Tanner, a position he held from 1919 until he formed his own firm. However, he still maintained a close relationship with the J.C. Nichols Co. until his retirement in 1964, when he served as Vice President of the Nichols Co. for several years. The legacy of the Tanner-Nichols relationship can be seen all around Kansas City. Tanner designed the Crestwood Shops, at 55th and Brookside, which opened in 1922 and the Prairie Village Shopping Center. Tanner designed several stately residences including the Tom Pendergast House at 5650 Ward Parkway in 1927, the Horn-Vincent-Russell Estate at 6624 Wenonga in 1931 and the Bixby Residence at 6505 State Line Road in 1936. Tanner designed over 2,000 homes in Kansas City as well as the Linda Hall Library on the UMKC campus and Danforth Chapel at the University of Kansas.

The master plan for the Country Club Plaza was completed in 1922 by prominent architect Edward Delk and the following year the first shops opened. Delk’s designs are seen elsewhere in Kansas City, such as the Community Christian Church at 46th and Main, which he took over from Frank Lloyd Wright. Delk also designed the open-air Starlight Theatre in Swope Park.

While the local media dubbed the initial concept of the Plaza as “Nichols’ Folly”, he would soon prove them wrong. Nichols was ahead of his time; he saw the future of the automobile as more than a passing fad for the wealthy. The Plaza had eight filling stations in the early years, as well as ample free parking that was discreet and concealed. The Country Club Plaza was the first

¹ Community Builder: The Life & Legacy of J.C. Nichols. 2006

shopping district designed to accommodate patrons arriving by automobile and one of the first to be located outside of the downtown central business district. The Plaza is also significant because it was designed as a special area with a unifying architectural theme; Spanish Revival. The majority of the architectural features, including ornate bell towers, decorative ironwork, brick and stucco facades, colorful ceramic tile, mosaics and clay tile roofs, were designed by Tanner and modeled after Seville, Spain. The Plaza was referred to nationally as "the Nichols towers with that Tanner wham."² Fountains, sculpture and art also brought special character and quality to the Country Club Plaza. These features are complemented by the wide sidewalks, shady street trees and outdoor cafes that add to the ambiance of the Plaza.

While Nichols initially intended for the Country Club Plaza to serve the single-family residential neighborhoods he developed further to the south, he recognized that the Plaza would require greater population density to sustain the businesses. Nichols subsequently developed a plan to erect a series of nine-story apartment buildings on the south side of Brush Creek facing the Plaza. Within the framework of Nichols planning and vision for the area, other developers soon followed suit. Another grouping of apartment buildings on the western edge of the Plaza began construction. This grouping, designed by Nelle Peters for the Phillips Building Co., was erected between 1927-1929 and helped form a ring of taller apartment buildings around the core Plaza shops. During the golden years of apartment building construction in Kansas City, (1924-1927) approximately 1,000 new apartment units were constructed within the immediate vicinity of the Plaza, making it the densest concentration of apartments and apartment buildings in Kansas City.³ This ring of taller buildings around the two-story retail shops has given a bowl-shaped character to the Plaza area that was, and continues to be, a predominant design characteristic of the Plaza area. Many of these surrounding buildings adopted design motifs (primarily Classical Revival and Spanish Revival) that followed or complemented the original design characteristics. Nichols also integrated office uses into the design of the Plaza, but in limited and carefully planned areas--most located on the second story of shops.

By the late 1930s, the Nichols Company had acquired control of more than 4,000 acres of land. Between 1906 and 1953, they developed over 6,000 homes and 160 apartment buildings that included homes for more than 35,000 Kansas Citians. His developments would eventually encompass entire communities such as Prairie Village, Roeland Park, Missions Hills and Fairway in Kansas, and Sunset Hill, Brookside, Crestwood and Country Side in Missouri. Today, the Country Club District includes 53 neighborhoods and over 22,000 homes.

J.C. Nichols died in 1950. He pioneered many innovations such as the mandatory homeowner association for his residential neighborhoods, and the percentage lease for his commercial properties. The percentage lease determined rent based on the tenant's gross revenue and it is

² Biography of Edward Tanner (1896-1974), Architect. 2003

³ Historic Colonnade Apartment Buildings of Kansas City, Missouri. 2003.

now standard practice in commercial leasing. J.C. Nichols was also a critical leader in the creation of the Midwest Research Institute, the Kansas City Art Institute, the Liberty Memorial, and the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art.

J.C. Nichols' innovative design and planning concept for the Plaza remains a national precedent. The Country Club Plaza is significant first and foremost for this urban design concept, but also for its architecture and contribution to the development of Kansas City. The period of significance for the Country Club Plaza is 1922-1969, which represents the beginning of development to the construction of the last major structure built by the Nichols Company in the Spanish Revival motif—the Giralda Tower.* Generally speaking, contributing buildings are those that were built by Nichols Company during the period of significance, and those that were built by other developers within the framework of Nichols' planning and vision during the early development of the Plaza (1920s-1940s).

Today, the Plaza retains much of its historic integrity. The apartment buildings in the district have very high levels of integrity, with very few alterations except for new windows and doors. Within the retail portion, it is very common for storefronts to have been changed and altered a number of times over the years. Usually, these alterations are limited to the ground floor and are most concentrated around entrances and display windows.

*Subject to additional research and refinement

Sources

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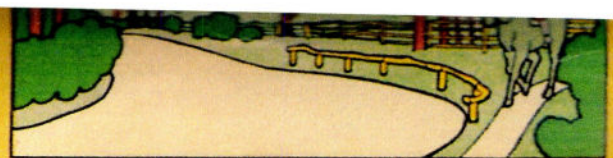
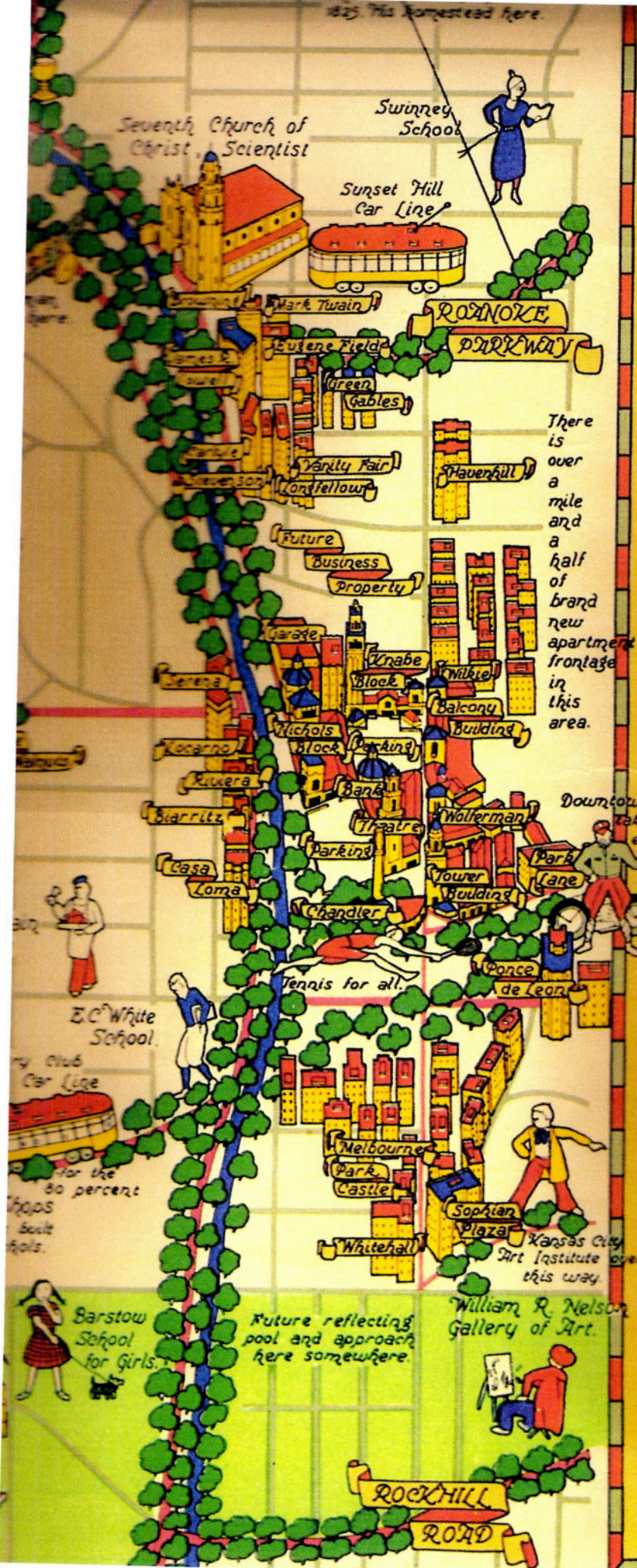
Plans

Plaza Urban Design & Development Plan. Planning and Urban Design Division, City Development Department: Kansas City, MO, 1989.

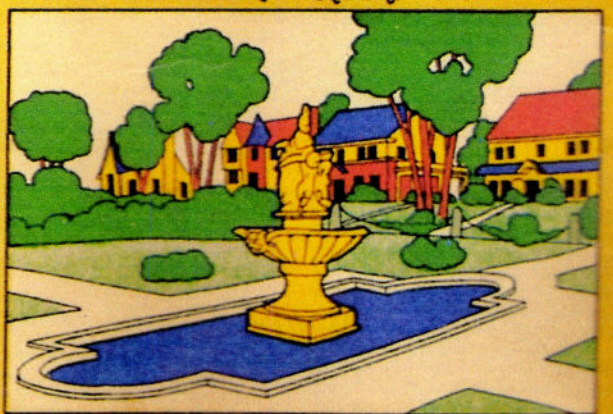
Supporting Documentation

Figure 1: Detail of map of the Country Club District, printed by the J.C. Nichols Co., 1930

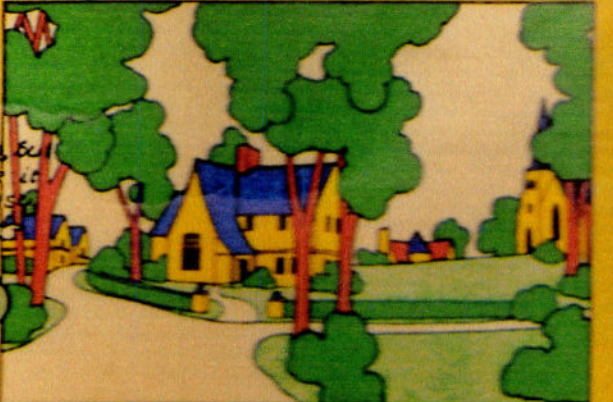
Figures 2-5: Maps excerpted from Plaza promotional material. Missouri Valley Special Collection. (note: colored pencil shows phases of development over time)



Curved streets preserved the natural beauty of the region. Development changed these farms into a glorious home section with curved streets, golf courses, horseback trails, playgrounds and the like—safeguarded by the most scientific protective restrictions known.



In 1920 the J.C. Nichols Companies began to collect notable objects of art through-out Europe and the United States. As these were secured they were placed in small park areas. This inaugurated an entirely new era in the treatment of home surroundings.



The Country Club District, now four thousand acres, is complete in every convenience and utility, is recognized as the world's finest and most beautiful home development and is visited and studied by the foremost city planning authorities in the world.



The Country Club Plaza, a modern, and scientifically planned shopping center in which commercial beauty is created is being developed by the J.C. Nichols Companies at the gateway to the Country Club District.

There is over a mile and a half of brand new apartment frontage in this area.

Future reflecting pool and approach here somewhere.

Figure 1

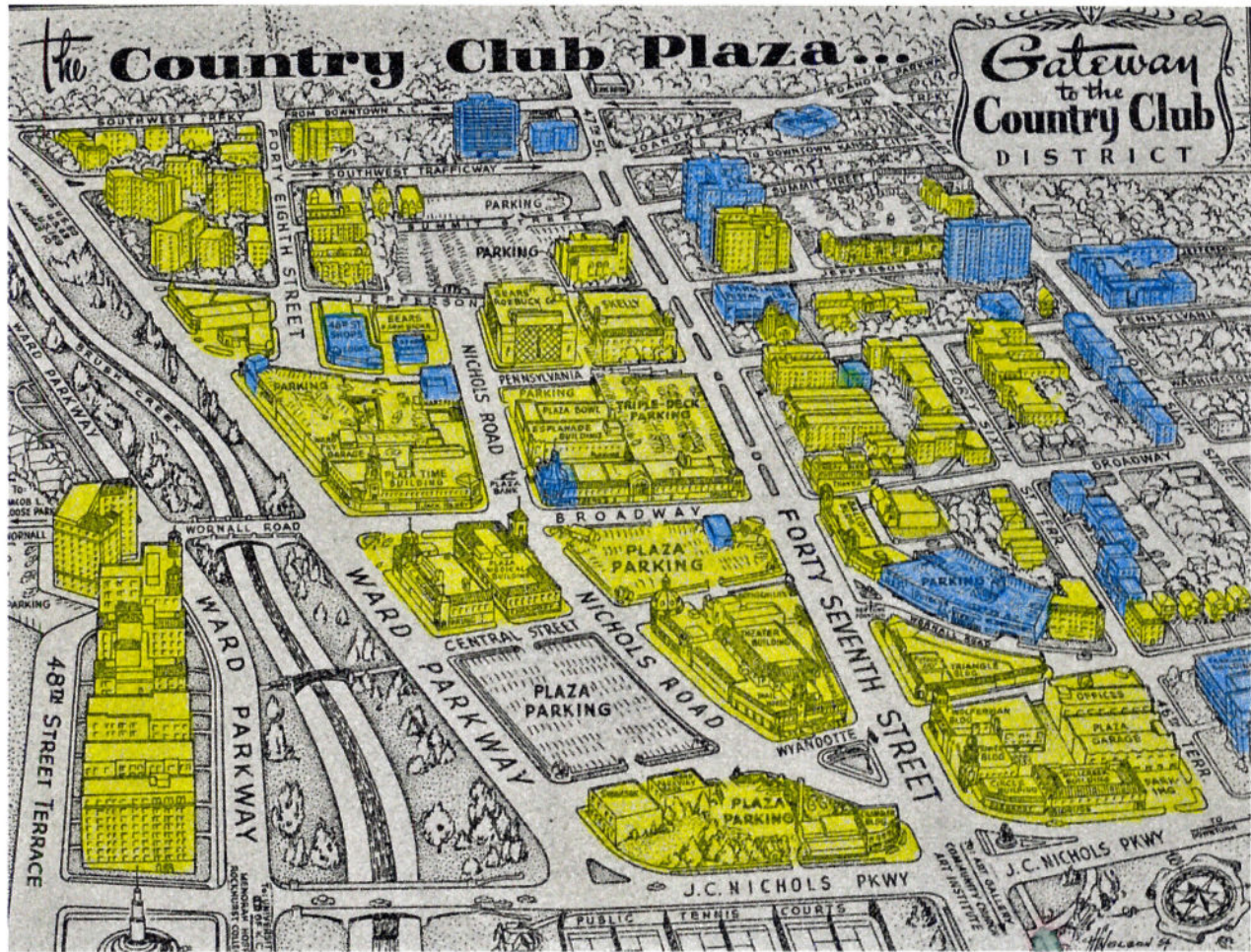


Figure 3: 1956

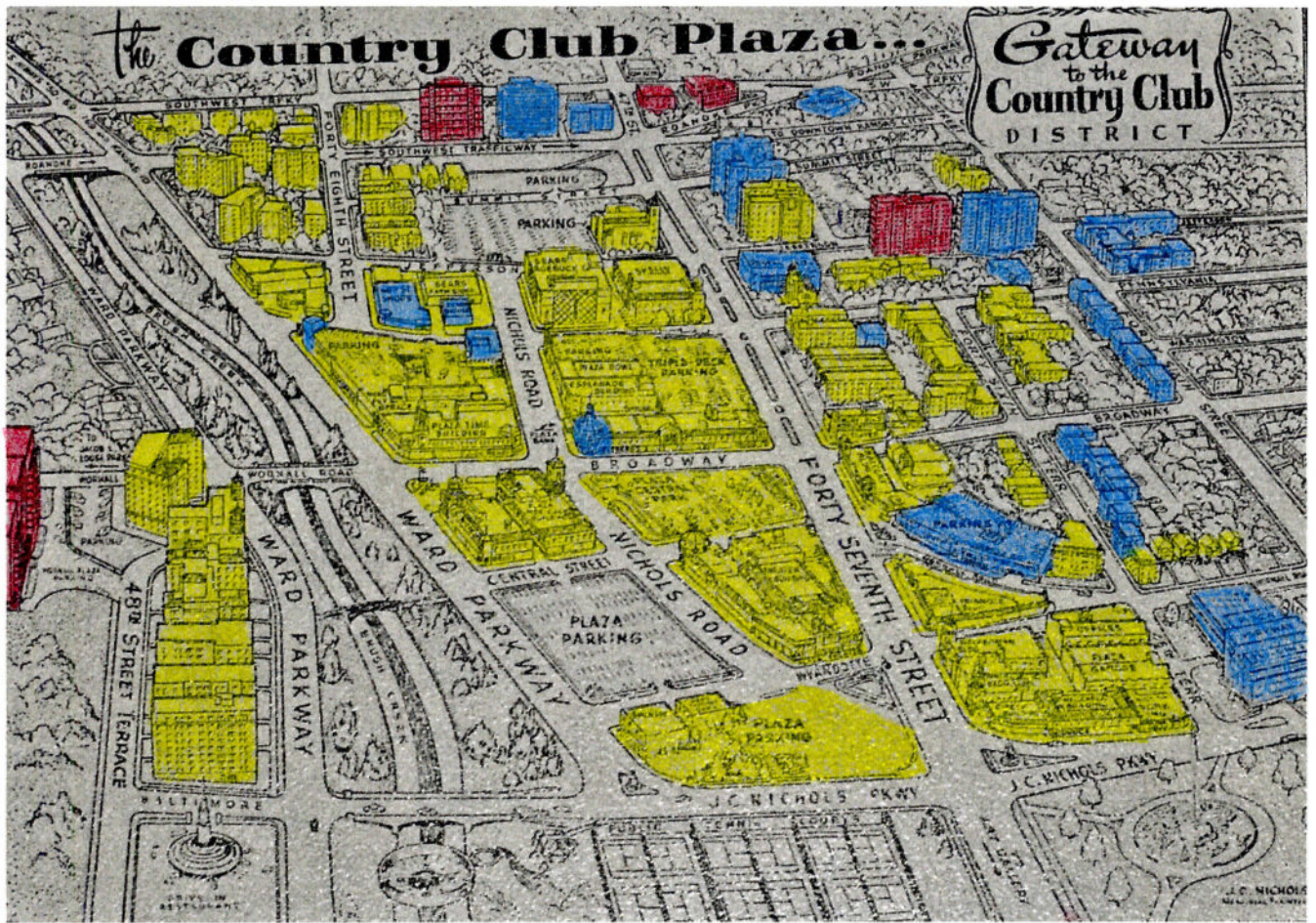


Figure 4: 1967

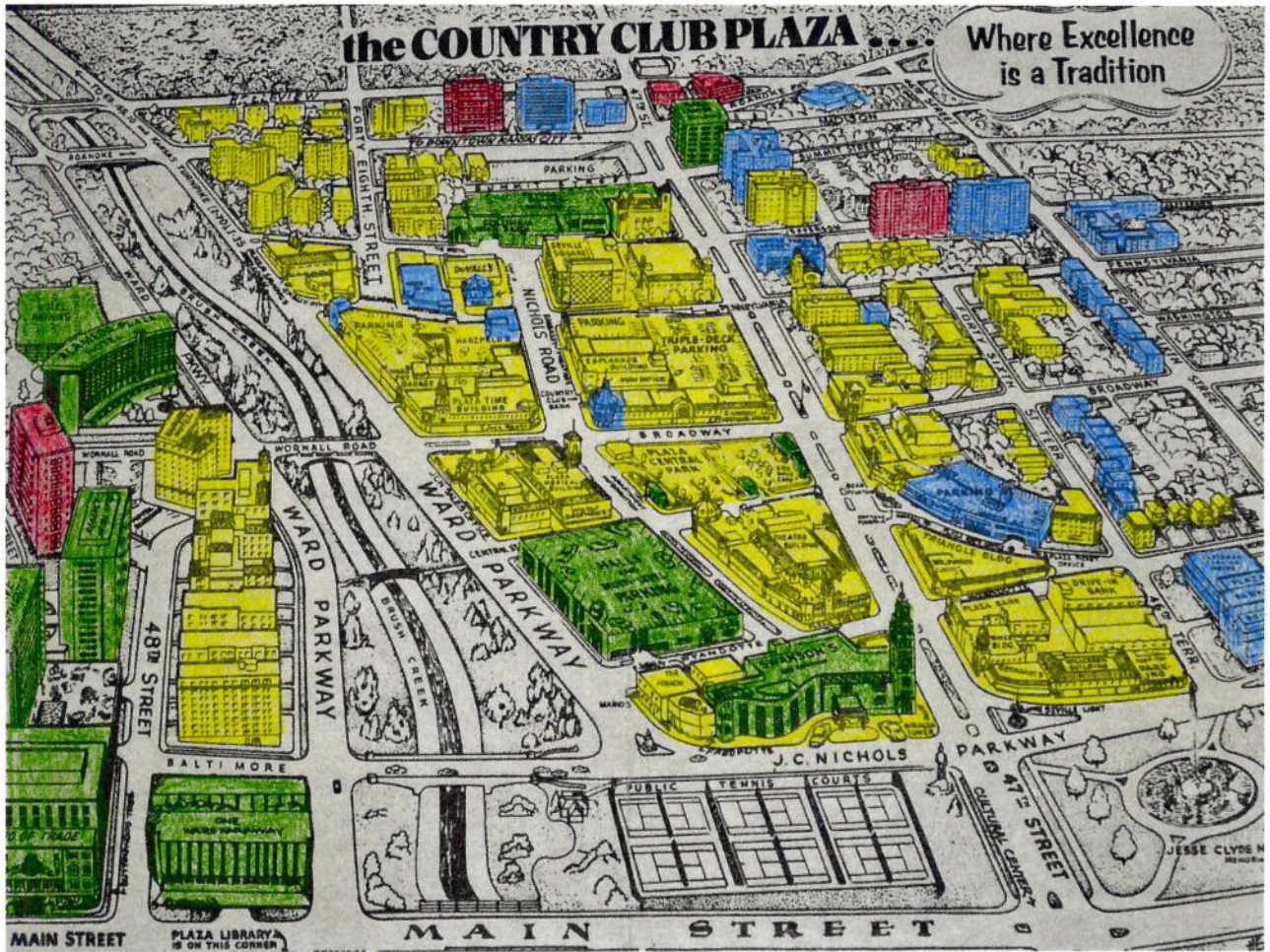


Figure 5: circa 1980

Kansas City, Missouri: An Architectural History

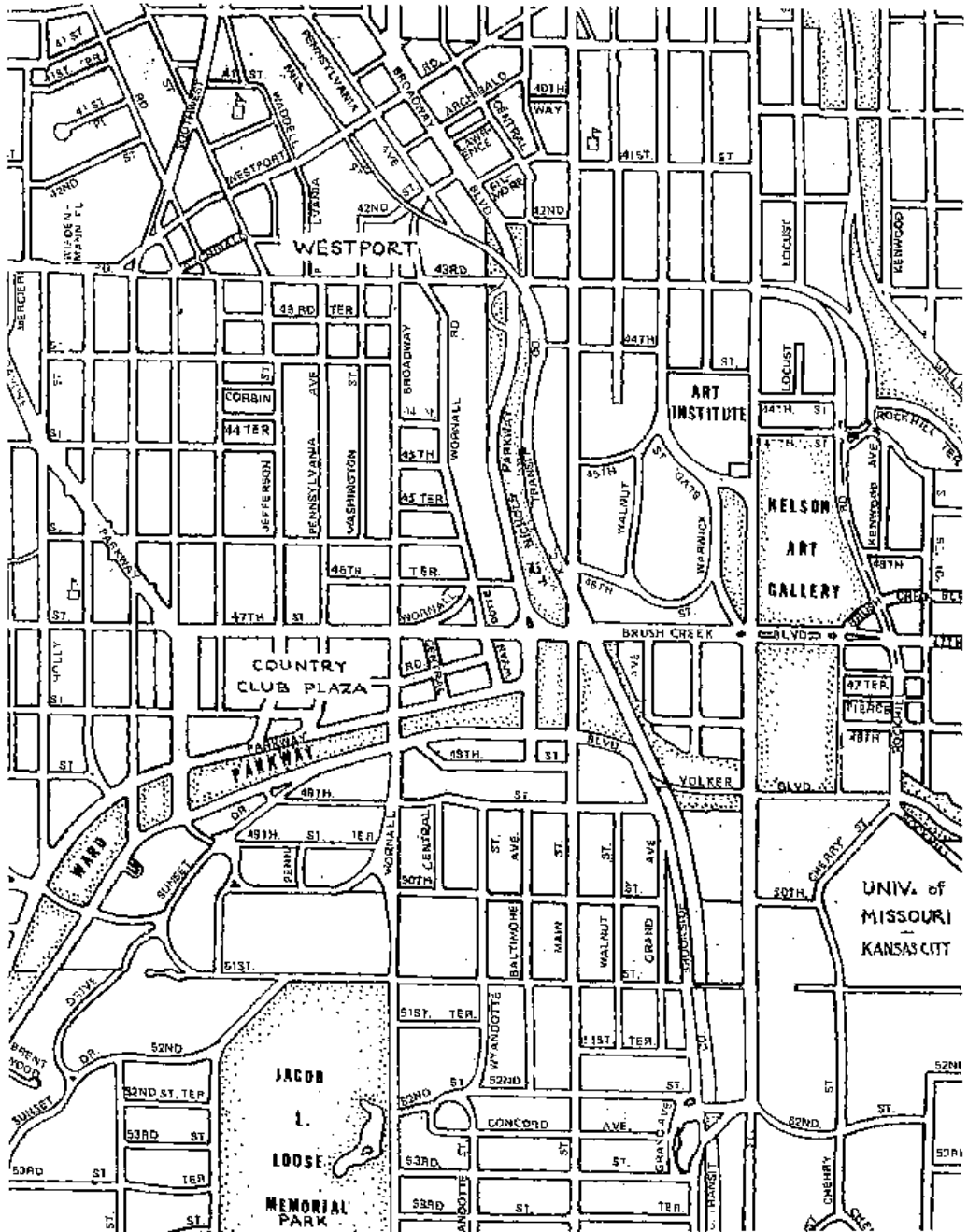
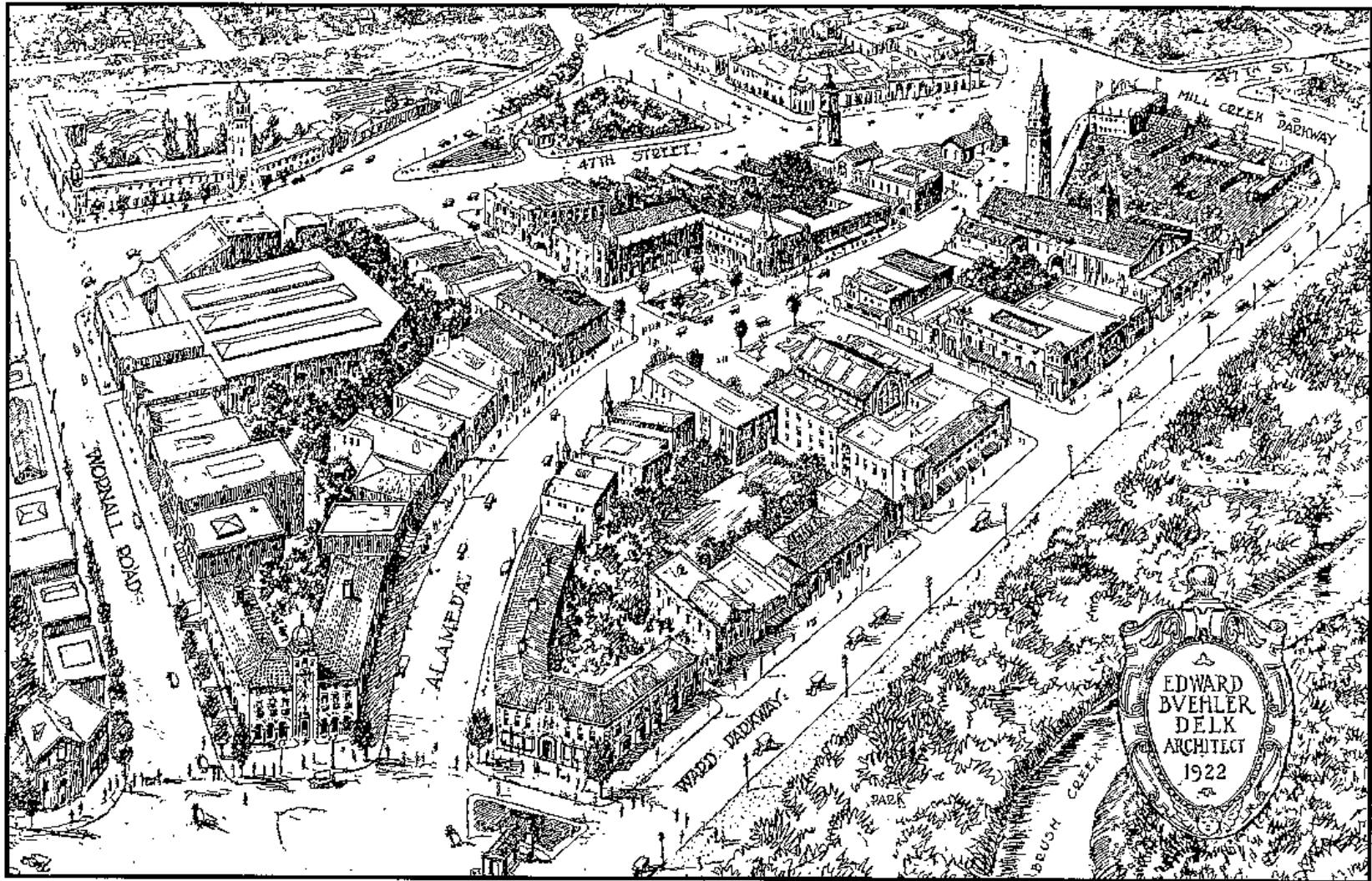


Fig. 231. Detail of map of KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI, including Old Westport, the Country Club Plaza, and adjacent areas.



Edward Buehler Delk Rendering of Plaza Plan, 1922.

Herbert Hare designed the land plan for the Country Club Plaza in consultation with George Kessler. Delk came to Kansas City in 1919 at Nichols' invitation to apply his architectural skills. Because the first publicity of the Plaza plan was designed to convey more of the architectural detail than of the land design, Delk did the rendering rather than Hare or one of his draftsmen. Note that Alameda [Nichols] Road originally followed an "S" curve from the intersection of Mill Creek [J.C. Nichols] Parkway & 47th Street to Broadway & Ward Parkway. Hare and Nichols later adjusted Alameda Road to become an angled east-west route so that more regular building sizes could be accommodated.