

## Swifton was the city's retail hub

Now-demolished Bond Hill shopping center was state-of-the art when it was built in the 1950s

**By Steven Rosen**

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For the past few months, all that's been left of the old Swifton Shopping Center in Bond Hill has been the rubble and dirt from recent demolition.

There is hope that the Port Authority of Greater Cincinnati will be able to find a new, productive use for the massive space. And there are also the memories.

For those who follow issues related to urban and neighborhood economic development, those memories are painful. For the past 40-plus years, there have been various efforts to revitalize the shopping center, which opened in 1956. (In its last phase, Swifton was known as Jordan Crossing.) Business began to slump in the 1970s amid new rivals and a migration of the middleclass away from areas reasonably close to Swifton. As Aharon N. Varady writes in his book "Bond Hill: Origin and Transformation of a 19th Century Railroad Suburb," Realtors used panicky "blockbusting" tactics to hasten that neighborhood's racial transition.

For others, though – especially Baby Boomers raised in the city neighborhoods and inner ring of suburbs – the demolition has elicited memories of a time when Swifton was Cincinnati's retail, social, and cultural hub. In its radical newness and openness, it was the promise of the 1960s.

"Us kids LIVED at Swifton on the weekend, and many times during the week," said Brian O'Donnell, longtime Cincinnati radio announcer with WGUC-FM and WEBN-FM, via a Facebook message. And as Linda Kreindler messaged on Facebook's Cincy Kids from the '60s group page, "If you have any photos or memories of Swifton ... please post on page. (It was) such a big part of so many of our lives back then and very little out there."

Cincinnati hadn't seen anything like Swifton when it opened. Even while in the planning stages, it was ballyhooed as a game-changer. An Enquirer clip from 1952 says the then-planned shopping center was planned to cause "Cincinnati to be abreast of the development taking place in many other American cities."

It was adjacent to a new gardenhousing development, an apartment community of 57 brick buildings and almost 1,200 units called Swifton Village that itself was considered a model of post-war New Urbanism. (It now is gone, too.) And Swifton Center was, as the name connoted, a true centerpiece. Some 50 stores surrounded an openair, landscaped pedestrian plaza. There were a few shops on a lower level – including a barbershop, pizza parlor and state liquor store – but most everything faced the central plaza or its wings. A tunnel below the 500,000-square-foot of building area kept delivery vehicles away from pedestrians. Parking for several thousand cars existed in the surface lots.

Original plans, shown on the website [www.mall-hall-of-fame.blogspot.com](http://www.mall-hall-of-fame.blogspot.com), show an 11-story office building had also been planned to connect to the center via skywalk.

Stores – like Max's Gentry Shop (men's and boy's clothing), Ludwig's Shoes, Lillian's (women's apparel), Marlboro Books, Garson's (children's clothing), NuMark Melody Shop (records), Olan Mills Photo Studio, Herteurs, schel York (optometry), the Honeycomb (snow cones, etc.) and the G.C. Murphy variety store with its lunch counter – became legendary. There were two groceries, Kroger and Liberal's, plus a butcher shop.

The department store – the threelevel, hometown Rollman's – also was Downtown. (It was replaced by Mabley & Carew; that building was not demolished and is used for socialservice agencies.) The Comisar family, the city's pre-eminent restaurateur, opened a new restaurant, a branch of Downtown's popular Colony.

Bob Elkus and his brother Gene had owned a Downtown men's clothing store, Max's Gentry Shop, when they decided to open their first branch in then-new Swifton. Bob initially ran the branch – he eventually left for Downtown again, to start the famous Dino's in 1962.

"It was an exciting, interesting mall," he said. "And it was an entirely



**Youngsters and parents throng Swifton Center in 1961 for Skipper Ryle's TV show. Behind the crowd is the Mabley & Carew store, which took over from Rollman's as the anchor department store.**

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**The huge Rollman & Sons Co. department store in Swifton Center had entrances on the lower level as well as on the mall level.**

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**Cars jam Swifton Center in 1960.**

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