



Heritage Austin

A community-based vision

A Report to the City of Austin

Contents

Preface	ii
Introduction	i
1. People	9
1.1 Respect Existing Residents In and Around Downtown	10
1.2 Foster Diversity and Interaction in Downtown	12
1.3 Use Downtown as a Community Gathering Place	15
2. Place	19
2.1 Nurture Downtown Austin’s Unique Character	21
2.2 Develop Useful and Inviting Public Spaces	22
2.3 Insist on Thoughtful Planning and Design	23
3. Fabric	25
3.1 Emphasize Austin’s Natural Geography	27
3.2 Develop and Clarify City’s Physical Organization	28
3.3 Ensure Compatible and Equitable Infrastructure Improvements	30
4. Mobility	33
4.1 Support Multiple Transportation Options in Downtown	35
4.2 Optimize Use of Transportation Infrastructure	36
5. Livability	39
5.1 Support Downtown Living	41
5.2 Foster a Healthy and Comfortable Physical Environment	43
5.3 Foster an Inclusive and Supportive Social Environment	44
6. Economic Sustainability	47
6.1 Encourage Economic Diversity	48
6.2 Favor Steady Growth Over Booms and Busts	49
6.3 Encourage Economic Linkages	50
Conclusion	53
Bibliography	57

Cover photo by James M. Innes

Preface



Peter Yang/Austin American-Statesman

Launched at a time when Downtown Austin was poised to boom, the goal of “Heritage Austin” was to develop a community-based vision to help guide future development while preserving our rich past. While the City of Austin wanted suggestions on moving forward with measured growth, the Heritage Society of Austin wanted, as well, to help educate about the need for preserving history.

Under the initiative of Austin architect Matt Kreisle, then president of the Heritage Society of Austin, the project opened a storefront office along Congress Avenue to involve citizens' comments. Public hearings were held. A team of local architects was solicited for ideas. White papers were exchanged.

As the project advanced, so did development in Downtown Austin. By the time the report neared its completion, some recommendations already had come to pass. Others still needed to be explored.

Wanting to put the changes happening in downtown into their proper context, and to ensure that the final recommendations remained timely and useful, the decision was made last year to build

upon the hard work done previously and to re-examine the community-based vision proposed just a few years ago.

The result of that work is in your hands. As you read the report, consider that it is not intended as a final planning guide for Downtown Austin, but rather is focused to offer suggestions for thought and action as Austin plans for the future of its central core.

Thanks go to Kreisle, Larry Speck, Sinclair Black, Juan Cotera, Hal Box, Sarah Meyer and Michael Knox and other city staff who were involved in the first stage of this study, and to Jeff Chusid, Peter Ketter, Wayne Bell and city staff who brought its findings to a most timely completion.

The future of our downtown depends on our ability to set clear goals with a defined purpose, and on successfully knitting these various goals together. This report seeks to demonstrate how, by working proactively and collectively, we can better guide the future of our downtown — and of Austin as a whole.

— Heritage Society of Austin
July 2002

Introduction



Austin American-Statesman

Thousands converge on Sixth Street and Congress Avenue for the A2K celebration on December 31, 1999.

As the heart of our community, Downtown Austin deserves special attention. Development in the central city has far reaching impacts on the entire region, and downtown should reflect and guide our community's dynamic growth and change. Planning for our future requires that we understand the issues facing our city and that we address potential problems thoroughly, before they become mistakes to be corrected. This requires that we consider all of our actions in relation to the overall goals of our community. But what kind of

community do we want Austin to be? What follows is an attempt to answer that question, through the development of a consistent and coherent, community-based vision for Downtown Austin.

The issues facing Central Austin have been, and must continue to be, the subject of ongoing discussions and planning efforts. Those efforts, however, are most often focused on specific problems and their possible solutions. In other words, the plans and discussions are "practical in that (they lay) out a series of objectives that the community realistically intends to accomplish over the coming years."¹ Although many planning processes



James M. Innes

Downtown Austin enjoys a beautiful natural setting along the Colorado River.

include consultation with the communities that they affect, these practical projects are still mostly the realm of planners and other professionals, who have the tools and experience to conduct the necessary research and develop potential options.

A community's "vision" is a different, but equally important, component of a city's comprehensive planning efforts. It is, "an integrated statement of the aspirations of the community (this is what we will ourselves to be) illustrating how the various function-specific plans in the community file cabinet are tied together to achieve a broad array of community objectives."² This vision is supposed to serve as a broader framework, both unifying and guiding the many varied efforts to improve specific aspects of the community. It provides a consistent collection of goals and principles against which to evaluate proposed actions.

The development of a vision is also an attempt to bridge the gap between professional planners and the community at large. For any plan to be successfully implemented, it must be embraced by the communities involved. Most contemporary planners therefore recognize the need of a collaborative process that "provides a more open, inclusive, and interactive way of involving citizens in the total planning process."³ It is difficult for many citizens, however, to engage the endless details and specialized language that often accompany urban planning. By clearly and plainly outlining the principles and goals to be pursued, a vision acts as common ground, translating planning objectives into a form that the whole community can understand and comment on while consolidating citizens' concerns and insights as a guide for planners.

Downtown Austin seems to suffer for its lack of such an inclusive, unified vision. Proposed projects,



Larry Kolvoord/Austin American-Statesman

Congress Avenue's bat colony continues to intrigue visitors and residents.

even when following adopted plans, often divide segments of the population into combative positions. Healthy debate and discussion are essential to any democracy, but with no common ground as guidance, Austin's citizens are frequently reduced to counter-productive arguments. Heritage Austin is an attempt to begin establishing that common ground by compiling our community's goals for downtown into a comprehensive, and comprehensible, vision.

Heritage Austin is, in a few different ways, a "community-based" vision. First, it incorporates the ideas of many of Austin's citizens and community leaders. These ideas have been expressed in a number of previous planning processes and products, as well as meetings organized specifically around the

Heritage Austin project. In all of these efforts, community leaders and interested citizens have interacted with planning teams composed of local and outside professionals as well as other citizens of Austin with special insight or knowledge of the city. Several common concerns and themes have emerged from these discussions, and this document attempts to consolidate the most significant and frequently recurring issues.

Heritage Austin is also a community-based vision in its guiding premise, which is that the goal of a thriving and healthy downtown can best be realized through continuous and substantive investment in the community itself. Contemporary planners frequently cite the importance of "social capital" to



Ralph Barrera/Austin American-Statesman

The direct physical connection between downtown and the capitol indicates the significance of their relationship.

inner-city revitalization. Experience has shown that the most successful initiatives emerge from, and are based in, the community for which improvement is sought. The resources of government and private business are, therefore, best used to enable communities to help themselves.⁴ Such investments in social capital, “simultaneously utilize and enhance the problem solving capacity of inner-city residents and institutions.”⁵

Investment in community-building is today, perhaps more than ever, a sound economic investment. As noted by the Washington State Department of Community, Trade and Economic Development,

“For the first time since the Industrial Revolution, what now constitutes a good business climate has the same criteria as what constitutes a good quality of life.”⁶ Businesses are drawn to locations that, more than anything, can produce and retain a steady supply of competent, productive workers. This characteristic is justly related to the overall quality of a community’s physical and social environments, its livability and its opportunities for education. In other words, a healthy downtown is wholly dependent upon a strong and supportive downtown community. This concept is a defining focus of the Heritage Austin vision.

Fortunately for Austin, many of the community



James M. Innes

Town Lake Park affords excellent views of Austin's nighttime skyline.

building blocks are already in place. Austin has a unique character and is home to many diverse and interesting groups of people. It is Texas's capital city, with five colleges and universities, including the state's largest, within sight of its center of government. With a well-established culture of innovative musicians and an emerging group of equally innovative visual and performing artists (not to mention the buildings to house their work), Austin's arts scene is only getting stronger. The city's high-tech industry has brought a new influx of residents from around the nation and the world, adding yet more layers to Austin's rich multiculturalism. All of this is concentrated within and around downtown, which also benefits from its substantial natural resources and their inter-connection with the city itself.

It is important to recognize that Austin's success thus far, and most likely our own reasons for want-

ing to live here, are tied to all of these unique assets. It is equally important that they not be taken for granted, because without careful planning, we stand to lose the same things that contribute so much to Austin's quality of life. In the coming years, Austinites will have to face tough issues regarding things like traffic congestion, air and water quality, public education and gentrification, just to name a few. While working toward needed improvements, we must also make a concerted effort to support, strengthen and build upon all of those aspects of our community that we value. The Heritage Austin vision is therefore also a community-based vision in that it supports the retention of our most important community assets, including both people and places.

This vision for Downtown Austin is divided into six sections, each of which represents an essential component of any healthy community: People,



Austin American-Statesman

As in most cities, entertainment drives Downtown Austin's nightlife .

Place, Fabric, Mobility, Livability and Economic Sustainability. Each section includes a discussion of the broader principles to be pursued with examples of Downtown Austin's specific strengths and areas of need. Although particular projects or sites are used to illustrate ideas and problems, this is not intended as a comprehensive plan of action or a step-by-step guide to downtown revitalization. It is supposed to supplement our practical planning efforts, not replace or override them.

Other documents, like the R/UDAT Austin reports and the Downtown Austin Design Guidelines, have begun to outline what we can do

to improve the quality of our downtown. Heritage Austin instead addresses the questions of why those steps are important and how they all fit together, providing a common base that can be used to facilitate and structure community interaction in downtown's planning and development. In this sense it is more of a tool than a finished product, and like any tool, it should be reworked routinely based on its successes and weaknesses. Revisions based on future input from community members and planners are recommended.

The particulars of the Heritage Austin vision are based on some general goals for downtown, again



The Zilker Park Christmas Tree adds a festive element to the downtown skyline.

developed from a combination of Austin's previous planning efforts and the Heritage Austin meetings. Downtown should have a 24-hour life, developed through a concentration of mixed-uses including offices, retail establishments, housing and residential services, plus important amenities like parks, art, entertainment and opportunities for education and cultural enrichment. As the center of a regional

economy, Downtown Austin should welcome and encourage visitors, but it should also be a diverse and livable local neighborhood and a comfortable place for any of Austin's residents to work, play or gather. These are not simple demands, and change will not happen overnight, but by consolidating our goals in a consistent vision we can firmly establish what it is that we're working toward.

¹ Larry Gerckens, "Comprehensive Plan," Planners' Web Planning ABC's, <http://www.planner-sweb.com/planning-abcs/c.html>.

² Gerckens, "Comprehensive Plan."

³ Michael Chandler, "The 21st Century Comprehensive Plan," *Planning Commissioners Journal* 31 (Summer 1998): 4.

⁴ Josh S. Weston, "Rethinking the Nation's Urban Problems," in Roger L. Kemp, ed., *The Inner City: A Handbook for Renewal* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2001): 19-20.

⁵ Josh S. Weston, "Creating and Using Social Capital," in Kemp, ed., *The Inner City*, 84.

⁶ quoted in, David B. Bowes, "Creating Globally Competitive Communities," in Kemp, ed., *The Inner City*, 42.

People

“People are a city’s most precious resource. Every structure built, every park cultivated, every landmark preserved is a reflection of a desire to improve our quality of life.”

— R/UDAT Austin, “A Call to Action”

This simple statement must be a guiding principle in any vision for Downtown Austin. A city is first and foremost about people, and all actions should on some level be directed at improvements to Austinites’ quality of life. It is also important that those improvements be equitable, and we must respect all of our distinct cultures as integral components of our city’s fabric.

As self-evident as the importance of people may seem, it is a fact that often gets lost in the practice of urban planning and development. As the 1992 R/UDAT Austin report also discusses, “in striving to advance, a city sometimes alienates and divides members of its population. While people are a community’s most precious resource, they are also in danger of becoming its most neglected.”⁷

There are certainly some Austin residents who can identify with this problem. While investment in downtown has, and will continue to, yielded a number of positive benefits — an increased tax base, more downtown living space, infrastructure improvements, etc. — the success of those investments also brings hardships to the people of Austin, as higher rents and property taxes displace local residents and businesses.

Although these hardships affect everyone, Austin’s lower-income citizens are naturally more at risk. With less leverage in local politics, it is these citizens who have been, and are in the most danger of continuing to be, neglected. Unfortunately, these are often the same people who benefit most from inner-city amenities, with access to work, public transit and social services. In Austin and beyond, low-income families and their advocates have therefore challenged many “Smart Growth” initiatives.⁸ The focus of Austin’s recent downtown development on high-end markets seems to justify their concerns.

Directing growth downtown makes sense, and it has the potential to benefit all Austinites. We must ensure, however, that we do not



Brian Diggs/Austin American-Statesman

Downtown accommodates even the largest collections of Austinites, as in the annual Capitol 10K run.



Austin Symphony

Children’s Day at Symphony Square highlights our region’s rich heritage and interesting characters.



Austin Symphony



James Murff

People who use downtown are the real target of improvements like this West Sixth Street pocket park.

lose our “most precious resource” in the process. As the heart of our city, downtown should be a place where any of Austin’s citizens can choose to live, work and interact. Downtown diversity should not refer solely to mixed land uses. It must also mean that there are opportunities for citizens of all incomes, cultures, and ages.

It is, after all, the whole variety of people in Austin that collectively define the city’s unique character. It is also the concentration and interaction of those diverse populations that make downtown such an interesting and desirable place to be. Our vision for Downtown Austin must therefore always consider the people that inhabit and define the places we seek to alter or create. By respecting existing residents, fostering diversity and interaction and using downtown as a gathering place for the whole community, we can support a rich and unique cultural environment that will benefit us all.

1.1 Respect Existing Residents In and Around Downtown

The neighborhoods within and around Downtown Austin are home to a broad cross-section of the city’s population, who represent significant users of and contributors to downtown’s resources.



Austin American-Statesman

Downtown neighborhoods are not all alike and development must respect the individual character of places like Rainey Street.

While downtown development should encourage visitors and new residents from the metropolitan area and beyond, it should not be at the expense of people already living in the city's central core.

1.1.1 Develop in Compatibility with Existing Neighborhoods

Downtown development should respect the boundaries and character of existing neighborhoods. Not every individual's protests can be accommodated, but a demonstrated, collective concern of a neighborhood's residents should not be ignored. The City of Austin's recent efforts to assist and respect neighborhood planning initiatives are a positive step, and the local government must continue to develop a conscientious and inclusive planning process. Maintaining a consistent, open dialogue with neighborhood residents is the best way to ensure that their concerns are addressed.

While downtown development should encourage visitors and new residents from the metropolitan area and beyond, it should not be at the expense of people already living in the city's central core.



Larry Kolvoord/Austin American-Statesman

Homelessness is best addressed through services aimed at its underlying causes.

1.1.2 Control Gentrification

Although compatible design and land use are important, the City must also take steps to protect existing residents from the economic impacts of downtown development. Increasing property values can be positive, but with a tight central-city housing market and relatively inexpensive property still available just east of downtown, there is clearly a potential for the displacement of lower-income residents and businesses. “If development is to be equitable, if revitalization is to have the essential support of those living in the neighborhood targeted for assistance, if the outcome of these investments are to benefit more than those moving into the city, decision making in the public and private sectors must anticipate these potentially harmful effects and take effective and timely steps to mitigate them now and into the future.”⁹

1.1.3 Ensure Adequate Social Services

Certain social ills — homelessness, drugs, crime, etc. — have historically been more concentrated, or at least more visible, in inner-cities. Downtown’s future will be well-served by continued investment in a range of social services that address these and other problems, and it need not be at the expense of downtown residents or businesses. As the 1997 R/UDAT report “A Call to Finish” states, “In Austin, as in many other communities, the problem of public order has been confused with the problems of the less fortunate...The provision of services can take place in ways that do not create problems for the neighbors of those services.”

1.2 Foster Diversity and Interaction in Downtown

Austin’s diverse citizenry must be recognized as a unique and valuable resource. We should foster that diversity by ensuring opportunities for people of all cultures and income-levels. The



Ralph Barrera

Paved seas of parking lots now dominate potential gateways between East Austin and downtown.

value of diversity is lost with segregation, and downtown must also provide opportunities for those various people to interact. Communication across boundaries can connect the divided parts of our community toward their common goal of a healthy and prosperous city, and downtown is the logical place for those interactions to take place.

1.2.1 Reduce Barriers to East Austin

The physical and psychological barriers that isolate East Austin are by far the most divisive elements of our community, and any attempt to diversify downtown must start with connections across I-35. Central Austin is already a multi-cultural community, but we must better establish the unity and interdependence of those cultures if we are to truly accept and benefit from our diversity.

1.2.2 Support Diversity in Downtown Business

We should support a diverse business climate that accepts entrepreneurs and business owners of all cultures, as well as businesses that appeal to varied markets and interests.



Ralph Barrera

Wide, pedestrian-friendly sidewalks like those on Congress Avenue encourage interaction among people in downtown.

*We should support
a diverse business
climate that accepts
entrepreneurs and
business owners
of all cultures*



Taylor Johnson/Austin American-Statesman

Downtown events like the Pecan Street festival assemble diverse crowds from around the region.

Downtown businesses should provide a showcase of the many unique and interesting aspects of our community.

1.2.3 Develop Mixed-Income Housing and Neighborhoods

People of different backgrounds and cultures are given the most opportunity for interaction when they live in common buildings and neighborhoods, and the central city is the most appropriate location to develop such places. Focusing downtown residential development solely on higher-income markets is not a sustainable long-term approach, either socially or economically. A healthy, successful downtown community must include housing for people of various cultures, incomes and ages.



Rebecca McEntee/Austin American-Statesman

Gatherings like this biker rally showcase particular aspects of our area’s culture.



Larry Kolvoord/Austin American-Statesman

In the summer, people of all ages appreciate an opportunity to cool off while having fun.

1.3 Use Downtown as a Community Gathering Place

Downtown should be a place that invites people to gather, whether it be a few close friends or the entire Austin community. Events and festivals bring people from around the region into downtown, where they can experience new and interesting developments first-hand, and more informal gathering places like sidewalks, parks, squares and museums encourage consistent community activity and interaction. A healthy downtown requires a combination of all these things.

1.3.1 Promote Community Events in Downtown

Downtown Austin already accommodates a number of community events, and it should continue to be the forum for our city’s wide range of celebrations and gatherings. From local traditions like Eeyore’s Birthday Party to the international draw of South by Southwest, these events both bring our own community together and showcase our interests and resources to others.



Deborah Cannon/Austin American-Statesman



Austin American-Statesman

Austin's musicians span cultures, styles and generations.

1.3.2 Continue to Develop Downtown Cultural Amenities

The concentration of cultural amenities in the central city draws many people to downtowns across the country, and Austin will benefit from the continued development of its own. The emerging cultural park just south of Town Lake represents a unique integration of regional events and performances with a pleasant setting and an already popular local amenity. Other large projects like the new Austin Museum of Art downtown and the new Blanton Museum on UT's campus are also important, but the city's many smaller galleries and performance spaces make valuable contributions as well, adding to our varied and interesting collection of cultural gathering places.



Lawrence Speck

A rowing crew uses Town Lake for practice.

1.3.3 Maintain and Enhance Downtown's Recreational Amenities

Recreation places like parks, hike and bike trails, swimming pools, etc. also serve an important role in gathering the community. People need places to relax and enjoy themselves, and this common human interest brings people together from all walks of life. Downtown's existing recreational amenities must be maintained, and we should try to improve on underutilized opportunities.



Lawrence Speck

The Town Lake Hike and Bike Trail is used both for recreation and social interaction.

⁷R/UDAT Austin Implementation Committee, "A Call to Action" (1992): 4-5.

⁸Leah Kalinosky, "Does Smart Growth = Equitable Growth?," Planning Commissioners Journal 45 (Winter 2002).

⁹Maureen Kennedy and Paul Leonard, "Dealing with Neighborhood Change: A Primer on Gentrification and Policy Choices," A Discussion Paper prepared for the Brookings Institution Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy (April 2001).

¹⁰Austin R/UDAT Revisited Committee, "A Call to Finish" (1997): 28.

Place



Austin American-Statesman

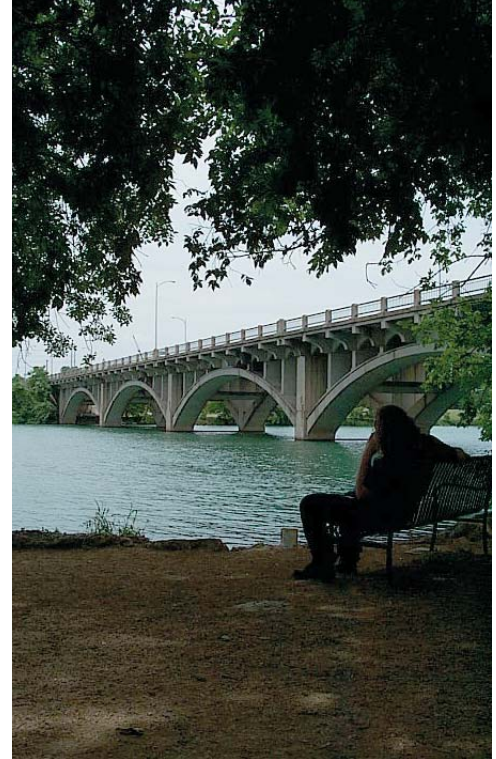
The Stevie Ray Vaughan memorial inconspicuously blends commemoration with an active existing environment.

“It is the story of how places are planned, designed, built, inhabited, appropriated, celebrated, despoiled, and discarded. Cultural identity, social history, and urban design are here intertwined.”

—Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place*

People are certainly a defining component of Austin’s unique character, but residents and visitors alike surely also identify the city with its significant places. Congress Avenue, the Capitol, Barton Springs, 6th Street, the University of Texas Campus, Town Lake, and any number of more personal places are likely to come to mind when one thinks of Austin. Austin’s environment reflects a combination of natural and social forces, as well as various peoples’ values and choices over time, all of which have interacted and evolved to develop a distinct sense of place.

While this sense of place may be slightly different for each Austinite or visitor, together we can identify, and must protect, the most significant and defining features of Austin’s natural and built environments. New development in downtown should be woven into the city’s existing fabric to preserve and capitalize on its important and beloved qualities. We can thus add new “layers” to the city that reflect our contemporary needs and values but also respect and build on the work that has already been done.



Matt Kreisler

Even with Lamar Boulevard nearby, a well-placed bench becomes a place for relaxation and quietude.



Ralph Barrera

Although both are vital commercial corridors, West Sixth Street (above) and South Congress Avenue (below) have each developed their own distinct character, illustrating the range of tastes and attitudes represented in Austin's culture.



Brian Diggs/Austin American-Statesman

This approach does not by any means rule out growth and change. In fact, we should strive to create and adapt places that we will all use and benefit from. Creative, but practical, solutions can accommodate change without sacrificing a place's unique characteristics. In Austin, designs proposed for the Rainey Street neighborhood have illustrated how to incorporate new uses and increased density without destroying its character. Other cities from Denver to Chicago, St. Louis and Pittsburgh have incorporated, and even relied on, their historic character and unique sense of place in successful downtown revitalization programs.¹¹ With careful design and planning, all of Austin's defining places can be successfully and sensitively adapted to our changing needs, and new places can be created that still reflect the continuity of our city's physical and cultural evolution.

By respecting downtown's sense of place while continuing to add our own layers to it, we can provide all of Austin's citizens, whether rooted in its past or recent newcomers, with some sense of connection to the city's environment, as well as its other inhabitants. If we nurture downtown's unique character, develop useful and inviting public spaces and insist on thoughtful planning and design, we can continue to enjoy and further develop Austin's great places.

2.1 Nurture Downtown Austin’s Unique Character

Development in Downtown Austin should always focus on the central city’s unique characteristics. Downtown cannot directly compete with suburbia’s quantity of available space, lower costs, or plentiful parking. In other words, “Downtown can’t out-mall the mall AND it can’t out-discount the discounters. However, the malls and discounters can’t out-downtown downtown.”¹² Development must therefore make use of Downtown Austin’s special qualities, including its natural setting, its historic and cultural resources, and its diverse mix of local and regional businesses.

2.1.1 Capitalize More Fully on Downtown’s Natural Setting

Downtown Austin benefits greatly from its natural resources, including not only the river, creeks and springs but also its abundant trees and inner-city parks. The incorporation of natural elements into downtown development generates inviting and comfortable places, and further emphasis and development of this important strength will continue to do so.

2.1.2 Preserve Historic Buildings and Cultural Resources

Downtown contains an interesting mix of historic districts and modern development, which together illustrate the city’s continuous evolution. We should, by all means, make our own contributions to Austin’s built environment, but we can do so without erasing all previous efforts. Historic buildings contribute significantly to Downtown Austin’s sense of place, and they should be reused whenever possible. We should also recognize the city’s other significant cultural landmarks, including important local establishments and landscapes.



Matt Kreisle

Historic commercial buildings along Congress Avenue (above) and close-in residential neighborhoods, like the Bremond block (below), remain as evidence of Austin’s once compact vertical and horizontal scale.



Matt Kreisle



Matt Kreisle



Matt Kreisle



Matt Kreisle

With little pedestrian traffic to support them, downtown’s public green spaces, like Wooldridge Square, Brush Square and Republic Square, often go unused.

2.1.3 Encourage Local Businesses

Local businesses are not only economically beneficial to the community. By illustrating the unique ideas and interests of our residents, they also help define Austin’s sense of place. We should support unique local businesses and encourage new local entrepreneurs.

2.2 Develop Useful and Inviting Public Spaces

Accessible to everyone, public spaces play an especially important role in defining Austin’s character. These places, including streets, sidewalks, creeks and bridges, as well as parks and squares, must be considered as central components of our vision for downtown.

2.2.1 Continue to Develop Great Streets and Sidewalks

Austin’s Great Streets Program has developed designs for several distinct street types in downtown. In each case, the designs include wider sidewalks, with additional trees and furniture, in an attempt to make Austin’s downtown streets more hospitable to pedestrians. Continued implementation of the Great Streets proposals could help develop the sidewalks into inviting public places of their own.

2.2.2 Enliven Public Parks and Squares

Austin’s downtown parks and squares could make a significant contribution to the city, providing public spaces that gather people together and allow them a temporary separation from the over-stimulation that sometimes accompanies urban life. Unfortunately, many of downtown’s public places — Brush Square, Duncan Park, Wooldridge Square, Waterloo Park, Palm Park, Republic Square — are often empty and lifeless. While a more inviting pedestrian environment is essential to drawing people to these places, we

should further emphasize their importance by better integrating them with sidewalks and surrounding development.

2.3 Insist on Thoughtful Planning and Design

The development of great places in downtown depends largely on a generally thoughtful process of planning and design. Careless decisions and actions lead, more often than not, to destructive effects. The City should maintain oversight of design and planning in downtown and ensure an appropriate level of community input and scrutiny.

2.3.1 Maintain a Consistent but Flexible Vision

Austin's local government should not be afraid to regulate downtown design and development, but to avoid confusion and resentment, those regulations must clearly follow consistent standards and vision. A certain amount of flexibility is positive and helpful, but exceptions and waivers should be reserved for creative projects that conform to the ideals and goals of the community without necessarily meeting all development regulations.

2.3.2 Address All Issues and Stakeholders

The best way to ensure a project's success is to address all the parties that will potentially be affected by it. Not every point of opposition can be resolved, but discussion and compromise are essential elements of any design or planning process. Open and inclusive dialogue about proposed projects should always be encouraged.

Discussion and compromise are essential elements of any design or planning process.

¹¹ Lisa Burcham, "Urban Revitalization: When Rehab Grows Up," Preservation Forum 14:3 (Spring 2000).

¹² Dolores P. Palma, "Myths About Downtown Revitalization," in Kemp, ed., *The Inner City*, 340.

Fabric

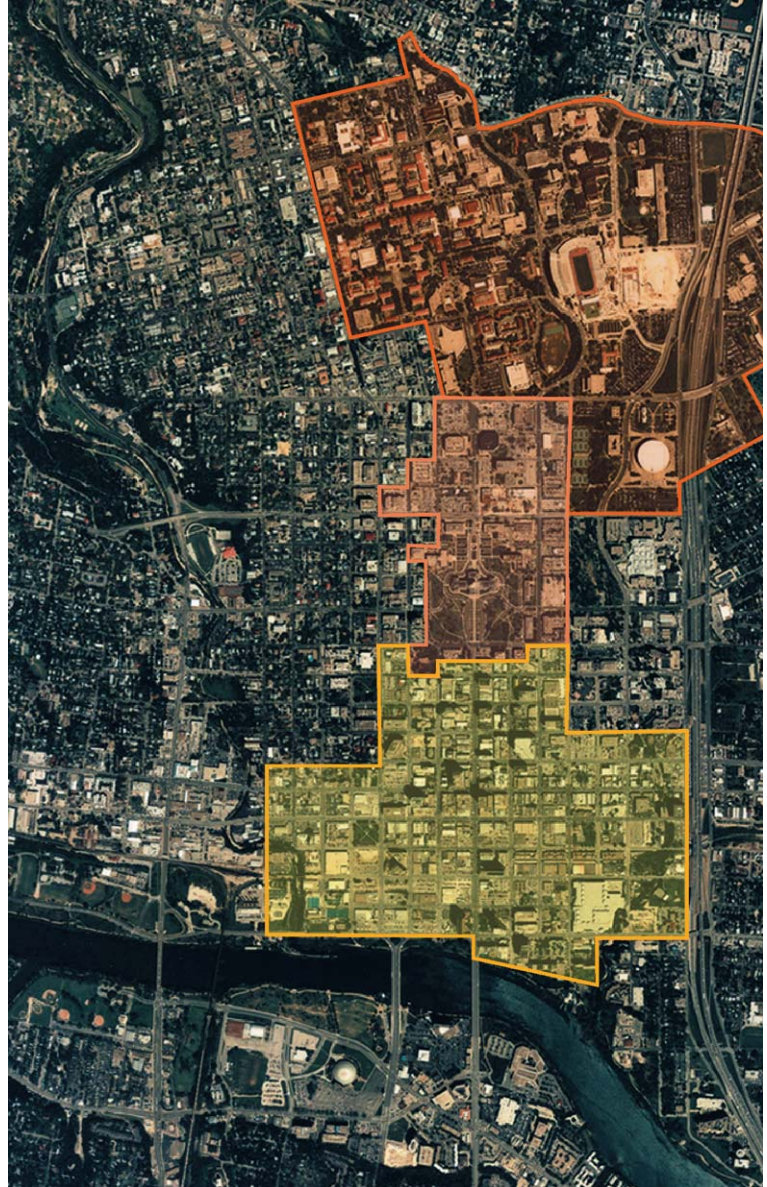
“Careful planning and organization around the realities of downtown’s nodes — with the aim of building upon strong nodes, nurturing weak nodes, or minimizing barriers between nodes and maximizing synergy between them — is the most appropriate framework for downtown revitalization.”

— The Inner City: A Handbook for Renewal

Concerns for our sense of place are centered on the emotional and cultural connections embodied in particular places. Attention to the physical characteristics of our city and their more practical purposes is, however, equally important. A city’s fabric, including its geography, its spatial organization and its infrastructure, necessarily influences all efforts to plan and act within it. Ideally, Austin’s fabric should provide a clearly organized and cohesive framework that facilitates and guides the city’s operations and activities.

The fabric of Downtown Austin has several characteristics that should help to create such a framework, not the least of which is its natural geography. The Colorado River and Shoal and Waller Creeks define the first level of the city’s organization and provide natural linear connections within downtown and its surrounding neighborhoods. Thanks to the substantial hills on which they sit, two of the city’s most prominent cultural landmarks, the Capitol and the University Tower, are also physical landmarks that people can use for orientation from almost anywhere in the central city.

Downtown Austin’s spatial arrangement is equally important to one’s experience of the city. The relatively small blocks of the



Aerotech/Lisa Mangino

Austin’s urban geography is defined both by natural elements and an ordered rectilinear overlay.



Austin History Center

Edwin Waller's 1839 plan for Austin.



Ralph Barrera

Downtown's gridded streets simplify navigation

Downtown Austin has the potential to be a very “legible” city, with several clearly defined, distinct places and easily navigable connections between them.

“Waller Grid” (from the 1839 plan) facilitate navigation, and interspersed public squares and parks provide a respite from the harsher conditions of urban development. Downtown also benefits from having its Central Business District, the Capitol complex, the University of Texas Campus, Austin Community College, and several diverse residential neighborhoods all within a relatively small geographic area.

With all of these elements already in place, Downtown Austin has the potential to be a very “legible” city, with several clearly defined, distinct places and easily navigable connections between them. Instead of articulating and connecting our existing “nodes,” however, development in Austin has tended to devalue and fracture the fabric of downtown, leaving only a collection of self-enclosed and isolated places. Even with the recent resurgence of downtown growth, we have continued to neglect this most important issue. As noted in the 2000 R/UDAT Review, “All kinds of wonderful projects are in the pipeline, but the fabric weaving those projects into a total experience is lacking.”¹³

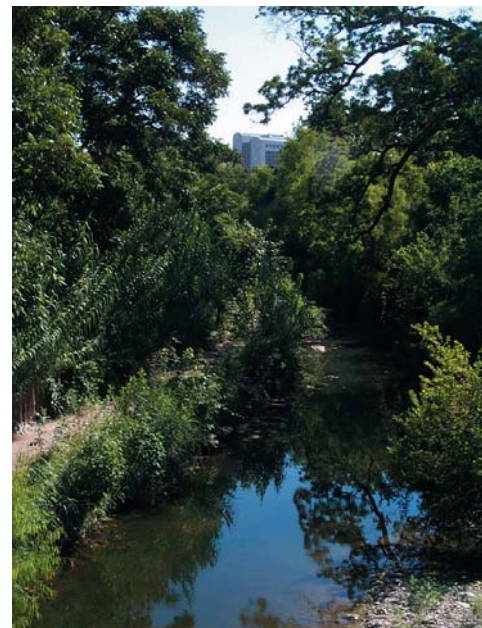
Improvements to Austin’s fabric should center on the unification of downtown’s many separated pieces, transforming isolated nodes into distinct, connected districts within a diverse but integrated whole. This type of organization can be a useful tool for both a city’s managers and its daily users.¹⁴ In Austin, many of downtown’s districts are already established, but they need better definition and inter-connection.¹⁵ Taking steps to emphasize Austin’s natural geography, develop and clarify the city’s physical organization and ensure compatible and equitable infrastructure improvements could dramatically improve the downtown environment for everyone.

3.1 Emphasize Austin’s Natural Geography

We must make better use of the natural nodes and links that connect and unite downtown. The most important of these are Austin’s waterways, and many plans for the city have sought a more prominent role for the river and creeks. The challenge of implementing these proposals will be to maintain the waterways’ parklike qualities and facilitate their use as public, pedestrian corridors while encouraging development that will better integrate them into downtown.

3.1.1 Capitalize on the Network of Downtown Creeks

In addition to generating scenic and inviting public spaces, Austin’s downtown creeks serve an important practical role, providing linkages between different parts of downtown and into surrounding neighborhoods. Better use of the creeks and their existing trails could begin with relatively minor efforts. As stated in “A Call to Finish,” the 1997 R/UDAT Revisited report, “Future emphasis in these areas should be on clean-up, repair, refinement, and access improvements that enhance an already established amenity.”



Matt Kreisle

Austin’s creeks provide green space and linear connections.

Improved pedestrian connections should be developed between downtown and the river and among the various riverfront parks.



Lawrence Speck

Town Lake Park trails system enhances access and use of riverfront green spaces.

3.1.2 Incorporate Town Lake in Downtown

The Colorado River is one of downtown’s most valuable natural assets. Town Lake Park and its hike and bike trail are already frequented by many in the community. And yet, Town Lake remains somewhat separated from downtown. Improved pedestrian connections should be developed between downtown and the river and among the various riverfront parks.

3.2 Develop and Clarify City’s Physical Organization

Downtown has an advantage in being relatively easy to navigate, a trait that facilitates access to, and visibility of, high concentrations of businesses. Downtown development should capitalize on this quality, emphasizing and complimenting the city’s organization and patterns. As noted in the Downtown Austin Design Guidelines, we must “Promote an intuitive understanding of the layout of Downtown Austin,” to facilitate and encourage movement from place to place. The guidelines also recognize the interrelated need to “Foster physical continuity,” which ensures the consistency of those intuited paths.

3.2.1 Define and Integrate Disconnected Places

The proximity of some of downtown's most important assets - the state government, UT, the Central Business District, ACC, surrounding residential neighborhoods - has little value when each one remains an isolated entity. There is little unification of, or distinguishment between, downtown's sub-districts. Perhaps more importantly, linkages between those significant places are seriously lacking. Our city's fabric should build on existing districts and neighborhoods to create consistent but distinct places with usable pedestrian connections between them.

3.2.2 Establish and Strengthen Commercial Corridors

Commercial corridors help stimulate and direct movement within the city. They also enliven streets and sidewalks, adding to downtown's sense of vitality. Some of Austin's commercial corridors that should be supported and strengthened include: East 11th Street, Congress Avenue, West 6th Street, South Congress and East 7th Street

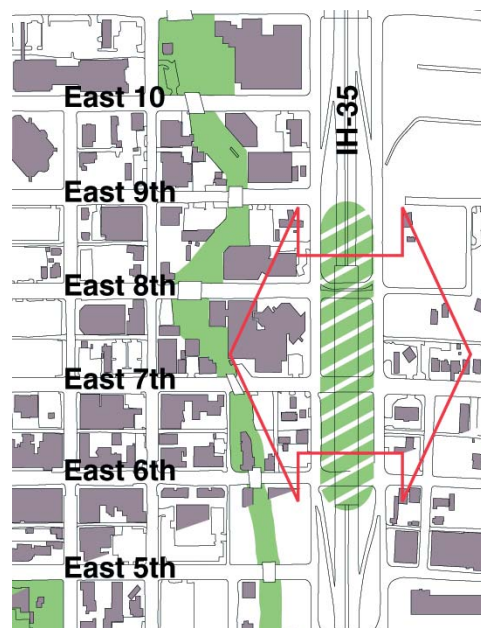
3.2.3 Emphasize Downtown Gateways

"Gateways" leading into downtown serve to draw people in and make them aware of a transition. They are also helpful within downtown to identify different districts, as well as access to public places and transit trails. Gateways are not just created with literal structures that mark transitions. More important are the more subtle "gateways" created by transitions in the character of buildings and infrastructure.¹⁶



Ralph Barrera

Commercial corridors such as Congress Avenue help direct movement within the city.



Lisa Mangino

Depressing IH-35 would allow for more pleasant and effective gateways into downtown.



Larry Kolvoord/Austin American-Statesman

The negative impacts of parking garages can be reduced by incorporating active ground floor uses.



Ralph Barrera

With little space or separation from traffic, many of downtown's pedestrian connections are discouraging.

3.3 Ensure Compatible and Equitable Infrastructure Improvements

In many cases, Austin's connections are limited by a generally inhospitable pedestrian environment, with high-traffic streets and poorly designed, ill-maintained infrastructure. Consistent infrastructure improvements are essential to sustaining a healthy downtown, and we must make sure to keep pace with the city's growth. As long-term investments, however, the character of those improvements should be considered carefully and thoroughly to ensure that they are well-conceived and incorporated appropriately into the city's existing fabric. Infrastructure improvements must also be fairly distributed, with traditionally low-income neighborhoods receiving equitable investment. When unavoidable, all unsightly, loud or otherwise annoying public facilities should be carefully designed and sensitively sited, away from incompatible uses (especially residential).

3.3.1 Give Appropriateness Equal Weight with Efficiency

When dealing with practical improvements to city infrastructure, Austin's local government typically, and understandably, favors the most efficient and cost-effective solu-

tions. Without being careful, however, we can end up with short-sighted, “band-aid” solutions that fix an immediate problem but cause long-range and unforeseen damage to the fabric of downtown. We must recognize the long-term investment that infrastructure represents and give equal consideration to the character and appropriateness of those improvements, especially in downtown.

3.3.2 Differentiate Downtown Infrastructure

As noted by the Citizens’ Planning Committee, “The Austin Urban Core, as the heart of our region, must receive special attention to maintain and enhance attractiveness and encourage redevelopment as a vital, unique multi-use community.”¹⁷ The City’s standard designs for infrastructure may be adequate in many parts of Austin, but improvements in downtown deserve special consideration.



Ralph Barrera

Brick crosswalk like those along E. 6th Street attractively delineate a pedestrian space.

¹³R/UDAT Review, “Creating a Great Downtown” (2000).

¹⁴see Maureen Atkinson and John Williams, “Managing Downtown Revitalization by District,” in *The Inner City*, 79-83; and Moulton, “Living Downtown.”

¹⁵Donna Carter and Associates, “Downtown Pedestrian Gateways,” Issue Paper No. 8 (November 1997), Downtown Austin Alliance.

¹⁶see, for example, Carter and Associates, “Downtown Austin Gateways.”

¹⁷Citizens’ Planning Committee Report, 19 January 1995, 3.

Mobility

“Would you prefer to live in a town where you have to drive everywhere for everything or would you prefer to live in a town where you could walk, ride a bicycle, take public transportation, or drive to where you want to go?”

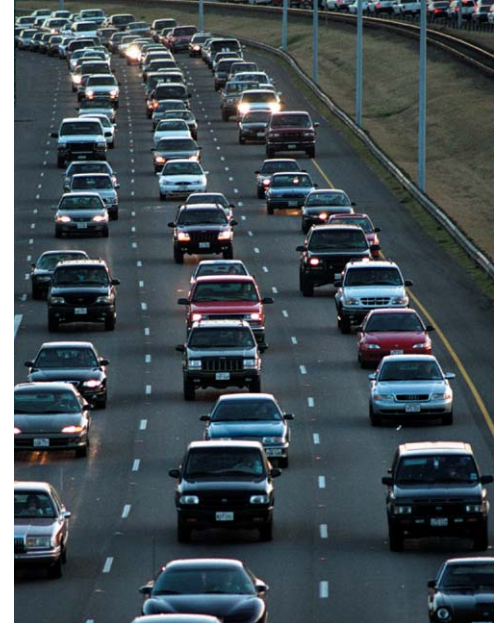
Edward McMahon, *Bicycles and Pedestrians Belong*

Freedom of movement within downtown is key to its success, and mobility should be addressed in all discussions of the city’s development. We must ensure, however, that we do not focus too narrowly on the “efficiency” of that movement. “Using traditional transportation measures based on travel speed and delay, urban area transportation plans and corridor studies emphasize building new or wider roads, or increasing the efficiency (read: increasing speed) of existing roads.”¹⁸ In planning for downtown, we must also consider transportation needs in relation to our desired land uses and community character.

Through our city’s many planning efforts, we have established a common desire to make Downtown Austin an active commercial hub, an inviting residential neighborhood, and a destination place for both locals and visitors. With the diverse, and sometimes conflicting, transportation needs of each these varied uses, Austin faces a number of challenges. The challenges are not insurmountable, however, and with thoughtful planning and creative solutions, Downtown Austin can comfortably accommodate the movement of all its users.

Downtown Austin today clearly favors automobile traffic, and that is certainly no accident. Cars are the preferred mode of transportation across America, and Austin is no exception. Commuters by and large travel by car, and our downtown streets reflect the need to move workers efficiently into and out of the central city. As Tom Petrie, a Downtown Austin Alliance board member, recently stated, “. . .you can’t ignore the fact that the basic life of downtown is the office space. And if people who work downtown, if they can’t get in and out of downtown in a proper manner, downtown is not going to succeed.”¹⁹

The preference of cars, however, should not override all other means of movement within the city. What we can, and must, seek in



Rebecca McEntee/Austin American-Statesman

Traffic congestion on MoPac Expressway.

As we continue to encourage mixed uses and 24-hour activity, we must give the non-automobile traffic that enables and supports those uses a better share of the public right-of-way.



Ralph Barrera

With their own spaces distinguished and separated, as on Congress Avenue, pedestrians and automobiles can co-exist comfortably.

Downtown Austin are more transportation choices and a better balance between cars and other modes, including pedestrians, bicycles and public transit. An unwavering focus on automobile traffic may be appropriate for a downtown dedicated solely to the convenience of its daily commuters, but as we continue to encourage mixed uses and 24-hour activity, we must give the non-automobile traffic that enables and supports those uses a better share of the public right-of-way.

To be clear, transportation choices do already exist. Downtown Austin has sidewalks, specified “bike routes” and buses, but these choices currently face significant obstacles. With few barriers and little separation to protect them from automobile traffic, pedestrians and bicyclists often face perceived and real dangers, and the infrequency of downtown buses must discourage potential riders. The mere presence of choice is clearly not enough. We must work to make each of those choices plausible and effective.

Our planning for mobility must reflect the varied needs and desires of different segments of the downtown community. Our encouragement of diverse uses must be accompanied by development of the



Ralph Barrera

Although most come by car, all of downtown's users eventually become pedestrians.

mechanisms to support them, and transportation plays a key role. We must support and develop multiple options for movement in the city and make better use of our transportation infrastructure if we hope to realize our vision of a vibrant, mixed-use and livable downtown.

4.1 Support Multiple Transportation Options in Downtown

Transportation choices are key to the success of a mixed-use downtown. As different uses and users prefer or require different means of movement, downtown should offer residents and visitors a number of viable options.

4.1.1 Improve Streets for All Users

Cars, pedestrians, bicycles and public transit can all coexist in downtown. As illustrated in the Great Streets plan, the existing right-of-way could, in most cases, accommodate all users relatively comfortably. The plan also outlines

As illustrated in the Great Streets plan, the existing right-of-way could, in most cases, accommodate all users relatively comfortably.



Matt Kreisle

Narrower, tree-lined streets such as West 12th exemplify how transitions in street character identify changes of use.

how differences in design can give more or less weight to particular modes of transportation, based on the uses and needs of each street. This approach ensures that anyone can move comfortably through downtown, whether walking, driving or riding.

4.1.2 Distinguish Access To/Through Downtown from Movement Within

Distinct transportation solutions are required for addressing access to or through downtown and movement within it. We should clearly distinguish between these two goals and decide where and when each one is appropriate. A street’s design should then reflect the particular needs of its uses and users. Through traffic should be consolidated and channeled in or out of downtown, while interior streets should support slower movement and pedestrian modes. After all, once entering downtown, “drivers eventually become pedestrians, an important but often overlooked component of functional streets.”²⁰

4.2 Optimize Use of Transportation Infrastructure

In many cases, it is the mismanagement and not the lack of transportation infrastructure that causes mobility problems, and we should always ensure that we’re making the most of what we already have. Improvements should focus first on better use of existing transportation resources, which will in turn help us identify where and why new infrastructure development is most needed.

4.2.1 Develop More Efficient Parking Strategies

In Austin, as well as many other cities, a lack of public parking in downtown is frequently cited as something that discourages development. Increasing the parking supply therefore seems a logical response. “Unfortunately, commu-

nities that have gone to great lengths in creating downtown parking lots and decks, without making other needed improvements in their downtowns, have learned the fallacy of this myth...In fact, in the vast majority of downtowns where there is a parking problem, it is one of parking management rather than one of parking supply.”²¹ We should therefore focus on improved management of existing parking before encouraging more lots and garages. Improvements could include encouraging access for different users at different times as well as developing better pedestrian and transit connections between parking and destinations.

4.2.2 Improve and Expand Public Transit

Only 8% of Austin’s commuters currently use public transit, a low number even in relative terms. Houston, for instance, manages to get 20% of its commuters on transit, and Portland, Oregon captures 40%.²² The lack of public transportation use has been a consistent problem in Austin. No single or simple solution will remedy this problem, but a need for improvement clearly exists. We should strive to improve the usefulness of our transit services and make sure that we develop and market all of its varied benefits.²³



Ralph Barrera/Austin American-Statesman

The importance of effective mass transit will only increase with Austin’s growth.

¹⁸Whit Blanton, “Integrating Land Use and Transportation,” Planning Commissioners Journal #40 (Fall 2000).

¹⁹Kelly Daniel, “Street plan could change downtown’s direction,” Austin American-Statesman, 7 April 2002.

²⁰Richard Untermann, “Taming the Automobile,” Planners’ Web Transportation Planning Topics, <<http://www.plannersweb.com/wfiles/w579.html>>.

²¹Dolores P. Palma, “Myths About Downtown Revitalization,” in The Inner-City, 339.

²²R/UDAT Review, “Creating a Great Downtown” (2000).

²³For instance, because the costs of car ownership and use are much higher than using public transit, lenders in some cities have begun factoring in those savings and offering “Location Efficient Mortgages” to those that would not otherwise qualify. see, <<http://www.locationefficiency.com.html>>.

Livability



Lawrence Speck

Zilker Park is one of Austin's most valuable amenities.

“Livability is more than a matter of physical design, more than a matter of amenities. It is a matter of essentials — safety, health, jobs, justice, and environmental concerns — that build a sense of community and of individual worth within the community.”

— The Livable City: Revitalizing Urban Communities

In Austin, we often cite our quality of life as one of our most important community assets. Still, what constitutes “livability,” or a good “quality of life,” is never easy to define in precise terms. This is mainly because it represents a combination of so many qualities, not to mention the ways in which they interact. In general, livability requires healthy social, economic and physical environments, which combine to provide the “essential” support structure of urban life and create a comfortable and desirable community in which to live.

Downtown development must be supported by, and integrated with, a diverse community of central-city residents. A livable city geographically unites its economic development with the people necessary to support and maintain it, an underlying principle of “Smart



Live music is an essential and defining component of Austin's quality of life.

Growth” and an important reason for supporting downtown residential development. It is also an important reason for supporting affordable housing in Central Austin, as the varied aspects of a downtown economy require people with equally varied skills and income-levels.

A livable downtown cannot be generated, however, simply by adding residential units. Downtown must be a neighborhood in its own right, with “places to play, direct access to food shopping and services, and neighbors.”²⁴ Although downtown may never be as pristine or protected as some suburban enclaves, it should feel safe and clean. A livable city must also support the development of its citizens, with access to good schools at all levels and opportunities for work. Livability also depends, and not least of all, on maintaining a healthy and comfortable physical environment.

The issue of livability is compounded somewhat in downtown because it must accommodate such a range of uses and users, all of whom “live” a part of their lives in downtown. A livable downtown



David Kennedy/Austin American-Statesman

Downtown's residential developments, many of which occupy rehabilitated historic buildings, have succeeded in attracting residents to the central city.

must therefore also incorporate the needs of non-resident users. We want to encourage people from around the region and elsewhere to enjoy downtown's special qualities, to visit its parks and cultural amenities and to work, shop and play there. So, we must be careful to address the sometimes conflicting interests of residents and visitors. By sensitively integrating all of downtown's various uses, we can develop a truly livable city for everyone.

5.1 Support Downtown Living

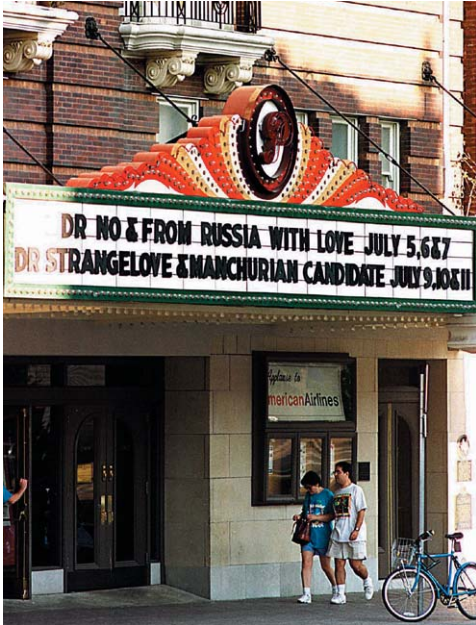
Downtown residents are an especially important presence, creating steady markets and resources for services and businesses and adding more constant activity and vitality to the city. Their consistent presence helps counteract the city's inhuman scale and encourages others to visit and live in downtown.

5.1.1 Continue to Encourage Downtown Residential Development

With high occupancy rates in downtown's existing residential developments and even more projects under construction, there is already a clear interest in downtown living.²⁵ The downtown core is also surrounded by several



Sung Park/Austin American-Statesman



Austin American-Statesman

With films and theater performances as unique as their venues, downtown offers a distinct variety of entertainment.

successful and vital residential neighborhoods, which represent “substantive assets to a city’s downtown housing and revitalization strategies.”²⁶ We must continue to encourage the development of housing in both downtown and its immediate surroundings.

5.1.2 Ensure the Availability of Affordable Housing

Austin faces a significant shortage of affordable housing, especially in and around downtown, and the problem is not at all limited to the poor. Across America, “Firefighters, school-teachers, administrative assistants, indeed, people from all walks of life, often have to pay well beyond their means for their home. . . . Nearly 15 percent of American families — 13.7 million households — pay more than 50 percent of their income for rent or live in a slum, even though some of these families earn up to 120 percent of the median income for the county in which they live.”²⁷ In Austin, there seems to be a common misconception that the development of affordable housing is impossible in the central city, due to the high price of land. Innumerable American cities, however, have overcome similar odds and developed successful affordable housing projects. It is true that we cannot rely on traditional, market-driven development to produce affordable housing, but creative solutions that unite public, private and non-profit support and leadership can succeed.

5.1.3 Develop Resident-Oriented Services and Amenities

Downtown residents require a support structure of services and amenities that allow them to conduct their daily business. Markets, dry cleaners, pharmacies and the like are essential to establishing a functioning downtown residential community. To be truly livable, downtown’s services must also extend beyond these basic amenities to include access to work, good schools and health care.



James M. Innes

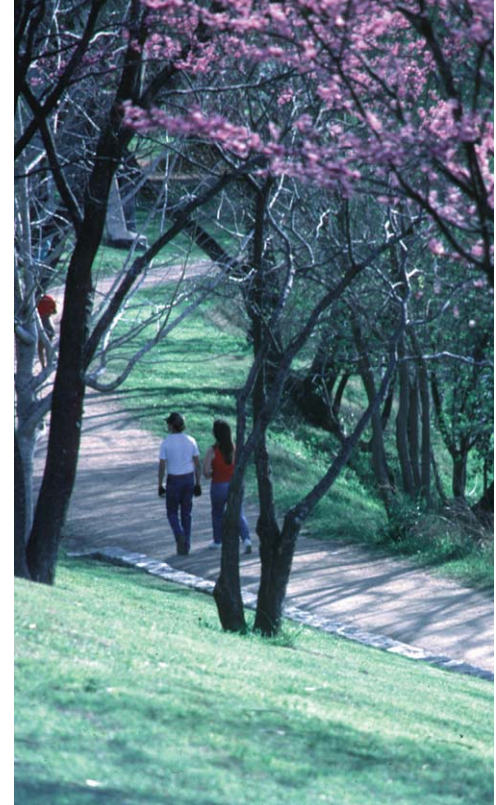
Outdoor concerts consistently draw locals and visitors alike.

5.2 Foster a Healthy and Comfortable Physical Environment

A livable physical environment is important to everyone who spends time in downtown. Clean air and water are essential to the health of all of Austin's citizens, and efforts to protect those resources should focus on downtown, where pollutants are most concentrated. The built environment must also be comfortable. Well-kept streets and sidewalks that are shaded from the summer sun invite both residents and visitors into the city's public spaces, creating an active and vital downtown environment that everyone can enjoy.

5.2.1 Protect Downtown's Natural Resources

A healthy downtown environment depends on the protection of its natural resources. Any Austinite can attest to the cooling value of Austin's trees and creeks during the summer months, but those resources also help filter pollutants, contributing to the maintenance of the city's air and water quality. For downtown development to be environmentally sustainable, we must always consider the extent of our impact on Austin's urban ecology and strive to minimize negative impacts to important natural resources.



Lawrence Speck

Austin's natural resources are important to our physical and psychological well-being.



Austin Convention and Visitors Bureau

Remaining historic buildings help offset the overshadowing scale of downtown's skyscrapers.

5.2.2 Maintain and Enhance Downtown's Built Environment

The built environment of Downtown Austin is also an important component of its livability. The design of downtown's buildings, streets and sidewalks should always consider the comfort of their users and address their contribution to one's experience of the city. Elements that contribute to an inviting and livable exterior environment, such as shade trees, awnings and street furniture, must be incorporated. Maintenance is also an important issue. People's "first impressions" will always influence their general outlook on downtown and will also affect the likelihood of their wanting to live there or visit. Like a house in need of paint, poorly maintained streets and sidewalks often look much worse than they actually are, making downtown seem unsafe and uninviting. Even minimal maintenance efforts help to generate a more positive impression and a more livable environment.

5.3 Foster an Inclusive and Supportive Social Environment

The active and lively environment that we seek for downtown also brings a diverse collection of people together. This social interaction is an important and positive aspect of downtown life, but it must be facilitated by a supportive environment. Encounters with different kinds of people often include an element of uncertainty and fear, and we must ensure that everyone feels safe and unthreatened in downtown. With all the varied interests and habits of downtown's users, conflicts have, and will continue to arise. To ensure a comfortable and mutually beneficial social environment, we must take active steps to anticipate problems and work out solutions that allow for everyone's co-habitation.

5.3.1 Ensure a Feeling of Safety

A mutual feeling of safety is essential to encouraging diverse groups of people to live in and visit downtown.

People's perceptions are equally, if not more, important than the city's actual risks. Creating places that are well-lit, well-maintained, relatively clean and, perhaps most importantly, full of people is therefore the best strategy for generating a safe environment.

5.3.2 Separate Incompatible Users

Conflicts among downtown's users are most frequently related to the proximity of incompatible users. For instance, the late-night noise of Austin's live-music establishments has consistently conflicted with the needs of downtown residents.²⁸ Although we must learn to compromise in downtown if we want to support multiple and 24-hour uses, we should also attempt to steer obviously incompatible users away from each other. Note that the conflicts relate more to users than to uses. For instance, housing for families or the elderly may not mix well with bars and music venues, but affordable housing marketed to service industry workers and musicians most likely would.

Housing for families or the elderly may not mix well with bars and music venues, but affordable housing marketed to service industry workers and musicians most likely would.

²⁴Moulton, "A Living Downtown."

²⁵Shonda Novak, "Downtown residences rising: New apartment projects pick up after slowdown," Austin American Statesman, 23 April 2002, D-1.

²⁶Moulton, "A Living Downtown."

²⁷Michael Bodaken and Anne Heitlinger, "Providing Affordable Housing," Planning Commissioners Journal 45 (Winter 2002).

²⁸Stephen Scheibal, "Noise edict is not yet ready," Austin American-Statesman, 25 April 2002.

Economic Sustainability

“No individual plant or store or business can guarantee long-term economic success to a community. Only by investing in the economic infrastructure - its people, its places, and its networks - can the American community hope to remain competitive during the twenty-first century.”

— The Livable City: Revitalizing Urban Communities

There is no clear or simple path to economic sustainability. Whereas in the past a city may have built its economy around a single, large employer or business sector, that strategy is no longer viable. In the new global economy, where “factories, companies, and even industrial sectors will come and go, often in the space of a few years,” economic diversity is clearly the key.²⁹ Economic diversity cannot be accomplished, however, solely by applying traditional economic development measures, such as subsidies and incentives, to a wider array of business interests. Sustainable economic development requires a much broader and somewhat indirect approach that “depends on a balance between a strong business community, a healthy environment and a good quality of life.”³⁰

When it comes to attracting and retaining businesses, “Competitive advantage is now found solely in the combination of people and place and the networking among people and institutions within proximity of one another.”³¹ It takes a unique combination of assets, consolidated within a region, to sustain investments. A sound economic base depends on that region’s ability to connect and integrate those resources to compete collectively in global markets. In this model, downtown serves a crucial role as the region’s “capital,” a common hub that connects the area’s varied assets and provides networks of support.

The development and maintenance of downtown’s support networks requires several things. Downtown must have a diverse economic base of its own, with businesses and workers that can contribute a variety of skills and resources. To attract investors, downtown must also exhibit a stable and consistent economic environment. Downtown must also be a center for ideas and ingenuity,



Austin Convention and Visitors Bureau

Texas’s state government and largest university add stability to Austin’s economy.



James M. Innes

Larger, anchor retail stores can have both a neighborhood and regional draw.



Matt Kreisle

Small businesses are important to a diverse and healthy economy, and they also reflect and define our local identity.

making use of its “human capital” to develop creative and effective ways of uniting the region’s assets.

6.1 Encourage Economic Diversity

Economic diversity is key to sustaining downtown. A diverse local economy not only protects the city from downturns in a particular market, it also provides a broad range of the many smaller pieces that must be assembled for global competitiveness. By supporting the full range of Austin’s businesses and markets, we ensure ourselves a variety of established economic tools that can be drawn from in present and future endeavors.

6.1.1 Support Small Business Development

Small businesses are a vital component of a sustainable economy. They develop from within the community, filling identified gaps and solidifying our economic base. They can also often become “seed” projects or “incubators” that spur additional investment and new businesses. “A globally competitive community levels the playing field for existing smaller companies and start-ups, declaring them as eligible as large companies for expansion incentives consistent with their potential for creating new jobs over time.”³²

6.1.2 Support Mixed-Use Development

Mixing uses in downtown serves several important purposes. It ensures a distribution of downtown investment among diverse markets, but it also consolidates a broader group of people and businesses, offering more opportunities to pool resources and develop creative partnerships.

6.2 Favor Steady Growth over Booms and Busts

Economic booms and busts take a serious toll on investors' and citizens' confidence in a city. The local government must take a leadership role, investing consistently and wisely toward long-term goals. Market forces are often beyond anyone's control, and hindsight is always 20/20, but Austin's local government must be careful not to encourage or support hasty development based on a booming market. Regardless of economic conditions, the City must examine projects carefully and make decisions that support downtown's success well into the future.

6.2.1 Maintain a Consistent, Long-Term Public Investment

Public investment in downtown should not depend solely on market conditions. An important role of the local government is to temper fluctuations in the private market by investing consistently in the long-term economic health of the community. Those investments eventually demonstrate the community's well-being to private interests. Every successful program for downtown economic development cited in a 1990 study by the National Center for the Revitalization of Central Cities involved the use of public investment as a catalyst to spur private development.³³

6.2.2 Don't Sacrifice Quality for Expediency

The development process should be clarified and simplified for everyone. "Streamlining" a project without appropriate scrutiny, however, is not an acceptable solution. Expediting a project must not allow its quality to be compromised.



Ralph Barrera/Austin American-Statesman

Infill of downtown's vacant lots will draw more people into the inner city and spur subsequent investments.

Many cities have benefited from uniting the varied resources of public, private and not-for-profit entities in single projects and overall development strategies.



Ralph Barrera/Austin American-Statesman

Downtown events increase awareness of new business and improvements.

6.3 Encourage Economic Linkages

As discussed above, a city's competitiveness depends on its being able to unite and support its economic resources. We should encourage people and businesses to establish those linkages in downtown, and to use their pooled resources toward the betterment of our community.

6.3.1 Form Public/Private Partnerships

According to the 1990 study cited above, public-private partnerships are essential to successful downtown revitalization strategies. In fact, "Perhaps no other single strategy has been as critical to the success of redevelopment projects." Public/private partnerships are not limited to city incentives and subsidies for private developers. Many cities have benefited from uniting the varied resources of public, private and not-for-profit entities in single projects and overall development strategies.

6.3.2 Encourage Multi-Source Funding

Many projects will have trouble securing all the necessary funding from a single source. In cities across the country, however, creative individuals and groups have assembled the necessary funds to complete their projects. This, again, requires the involvement and cooperation of all of the city's resources in the public, private and not-for-profit sectors.



James M. Innes

South Congress Avenue has witnessed a number of recent redevelopment efforts.

²⁹Partners for Livable Communities, *The Livable City: Revitalizing Urban Communities* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2000): 81.

³⁰David B. Bowes, "Creating Globally Competitive Communities," in *The Inner City*, 43.

³¹Livable Communities, *The Livable City*, 81.

³²Bowes, "Globally Competitive Communities," 51.

³³Fritz W. Wagner, Timothy E. Joder and Anthony J. Mumphrey, Jr., eds, *Urban Revitalization: Policies and Programs* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1995): xii.

³⁴Wagner, Joder and Mumphrey, Jr., eds., *Urban Revitalization*.

Conclusion



Ralph Barrera/Austin American-Statesman

Cranes, like the the famous Congress Avenue bats, are a familiar sight on the downtown skyline.

When considered together, the six elements of the Heritage Austin vision — People, Place, Fabric, Mobility, Livability and Economic Sustainability — provide a more complete and unified context for discussions of downtown development. Contrary to how planning and development are often approached and perceived in Austin, no single action or plan of action can succeed independently. We must understand all of our choices as related and interdependent components of our broader goals and ensure that decisions are guided by a clear and consistent vision of what we want our city to be.

Heritage Austin is intended to serve as such a vision, illustrating how Austinites' varied goals for downtown can be integrated to create a community that meets everyone's needs. It would be ridiculous to suppose that all of Austin's residents have the same needs or desires, and not every aspect of the preceding vision will appeal to everyone. What is important is that no aspect of Heritage Austin necessarily precludes any other goal contained within it. Support of one aim does not



Rebecca McEntee

Austin skyline at night.



James M. Innes

Downtown Austin rises above the river.

negate the possibility of also realizing many others, even when they may seem to conflict. We can have a downtown that encourages economic growth and physical improvement without alienating our own citizens or sacrificing the qualities of our city that kept or brought us here in the first place.

Although the vision is admittedly hopeful and optimistic, we must understand that these goals are not impossible or even unrealistic. Successful projects in Austin and cities across the country have shown that, with clear goals and a defined purpose, dedicated citizens can accomplish almost anything, often with far more meager resources than are available to us in Austin. Without planning, however, our citizens' energy and will are consumed by negative action and protest. Rather than waiting for incongruous, haphazard proposals that inevitably divide us, we must work proactively and collectively to guide the future of Austin as a whole.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the Heritage Austin vision, then, is that it allows us to step back and see how all of our goals can fit together. The negative effects of development are rarely tied to a single, specific action. More often, it is too heavy a focus, over time, on one aspect of our community's

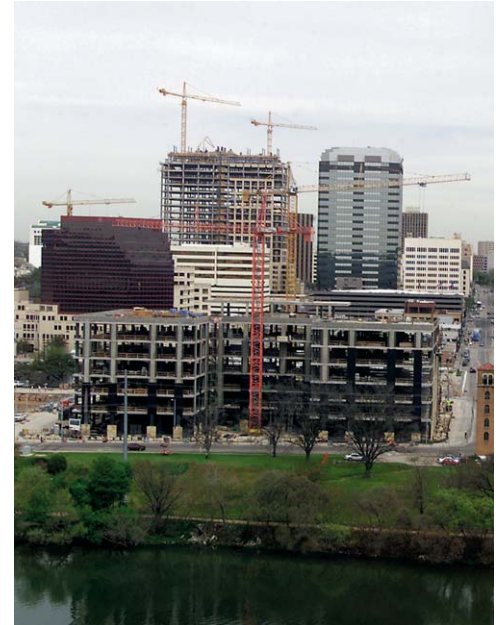


Lawrence Speck

A healthy community considers the needs of all of its inhabitants.

development. The Heritage Austin vision is therefore one of balanced and complimentary development — market-rate housing balanced with affordable housing, new construction balanced with historic preservation, automobile traffic balanced with pedestrians and transit, residential development complemented by services and amenities, large investments complemented by more consistent, smaller investments, etc.

We have learned many times over that we cannot stop people from moving here, we cannot stop the rising costs of our city's success and we cannot stop change. Instead of waiting until the things that we value are threatened by these changes, we must use planning to anticipate future development and actively shape and balance it according to our community's vision. By compiling our goals, illustrating their interrelation and demonstrating the possibility of their integration, Heritage Austin represents the first step in that process. The ultimate success of downtown and all of Austin, however, requires that we all accept a more active, positive role in moving our community toward the realization of our vision.



Larry Kolvoord/Austin American-Statesman

Growth and change are inevitable, but a loss of identity is not.

Bibliography

Austin Planning Documents

- Citizens' Planning Committee Report. January 1995.
- Downtown Austin Comprehensive Parking Study (Draft). 2000.
- Downtown Austin Design Guidelines. 2000.
- Downtown Great Streets Master Plan (Draft). 2002
- R/UDAT Austin. 1991.
- R/UDAT Austin Implementation Committee. "A Call to Action." 1992.
- R/UDAT Austin Revisited Committee. "A Call to Finish." 1997.
- R/UDAT Review. "Creating a Great Downtown." 2000.
- Seaholm District Master Plan (Draft). 2002.
- Town Lake Park Comprehensive Plan. 1987.

Additional Sources

- Blanton, Whit. "Integrating Land Use and Transportation." *Planning Commissioners Journal* 40 (Fall 2000).
- Bodaken, Michael and Anne Heitlinger. "Providing Affordable Housing," *Planning Commissioners Journal* 45 (Winter 2002).
- Burcham, Lisa. "Urban Revitalization: When Rehab Grows Up." *Preservation Forum* 14:3 (Spring 2000).
- Carter, Donna and Associates. "Downtown Pedestrian Gateways." Downtown Austin Alliance Issue Paper No. 8 (November 1997).
- Chandler, Michael. "The 21st Century Comprehensive Plan." *Planning Commissioners Journal* 31 (Summer 1998).
- Daniel, Kelly. "Street plan could change downtown's direction." *Austin American-Statesman*. 7 April 2002.
- Gerkens, Larry. "Comprehensive Plan." Planners' Web Planning ABC's, <<http://www.plannersweb.com/planning-abcs/c.html>>.
- Kalinosky, Leah. "Does Smart Growth = Equitable Growth?" *Planning Commissioners Journal* 45 (Winter 2002).
- Kemp, Roger L., ed. *The Inner City: A Handbook for Renewal* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2001).
- Kennedy, Maureen and Paul Leonard. "Dealing with Neighborhood Change: A Primer on Gentrification and Policy Choices." A Discussion Paper prepared for the Brookings Institution Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy (April 2001).
- Novak, Shonda. "Downtown residences rising: New apartment projects pick up after slowdown." *Austin American- Statesman*. 23 April 2002.
- Partners for Livable Communities. *The Livable City: Revitalizing Urban Communities* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2000).
- Scheibal, Stephen. "Noise edict is not yet ready," *Austin American-Statesman*. 25 April 2002.
- Untermann, Richard. "Taming the Automobile." Planners' Web Transportation Planning Topics. <<http://www.plannersweb.com/wfiles/w579.html>>.
- Wagner, Fritz W., Timothy E. Joder and Anthony J. Mumphrey, Jr., eds. *Urban Revitalization: Policies and Programs* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1995).