

THE CREATIVE CORRIDOR

A Main Street Revitalization



University of Arkansas Community Design Center + Marlon Blackwell Architect
for
The City of Little Rock



NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
FOR THE ARTS

A great nation
deserves great art.

In fulfillment of an NEA *Our Town* grant



"...a stranger suddenly dropped into the business center of Zenith could not have told whether he was in a city of Oregon or Georgia, Ohio or Maine, Oklahoma or Manitoba...The shops show the same standardized, nationally advertised wares; the newspapers of sections three thousand miles apart have the same 'syndicated features'; the boy in Arkansas displays just such a flamboyant ready-made suit as is found on just such a boy in Delaware."

-Sinclair Lewis, *Babbitt*-

"Main Street became to America what the piazza was to Italy."

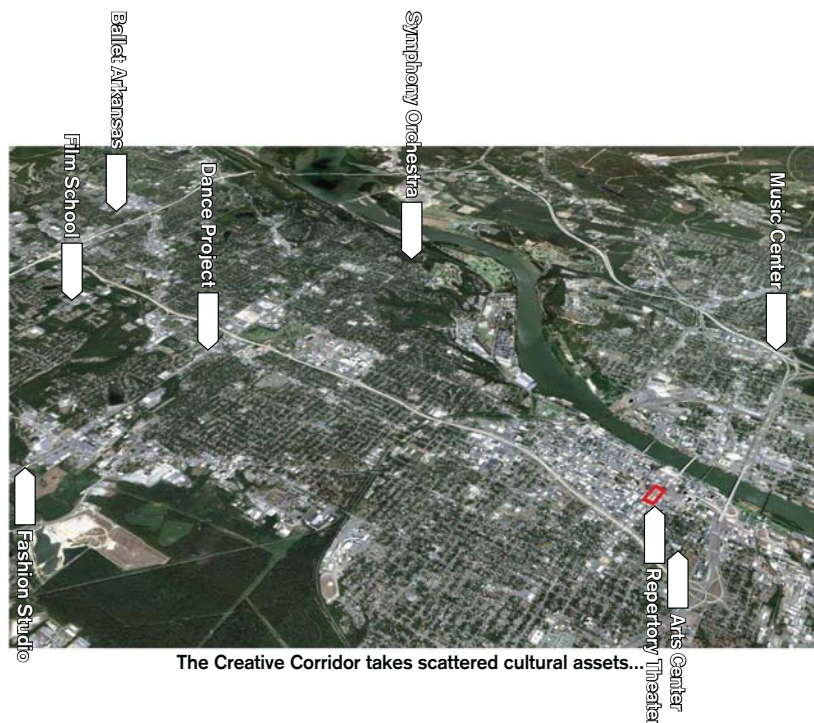
-Richard Longstreth, *The Buildings of Main Street*-



Main Street, Little Rock 1910

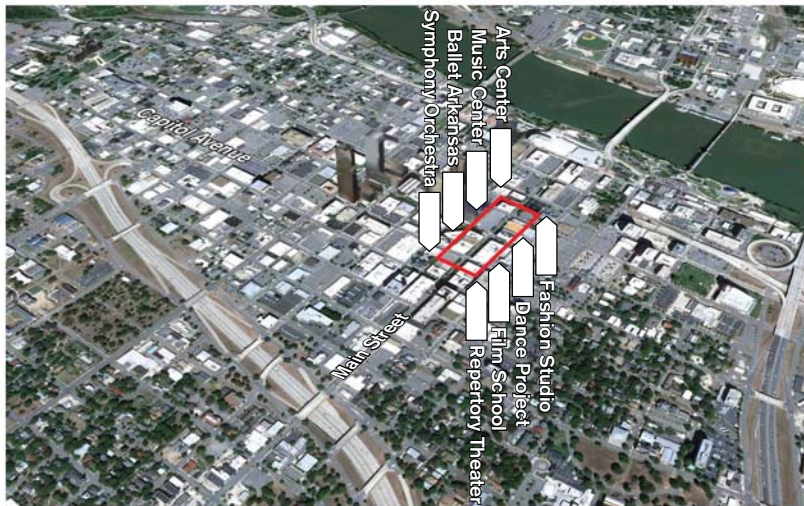
Main Street: From Commerce to Culture

If ecologies evolve through diversification, cities mature through aggregation of talent and resources. The Creative Corridor Plan is premised upon the aggregation of complementary creative organizations currently scattered throughout Little Rock. Some of these groups exist at the financial margin and struggle to stay alive. Their ability to secure greater visibility and support will likely be amplified through new synergies from aggregation. Facilities slated to anchor The Creative Corridor include instruction and production spaces for the symphony, ballet, arts center, visual artists, theater, and dance, as well as a culinary arts economy that triangulates restaurants, demonstration, and education.



The Creative Corridor takes scattered cultural assets...

The Creative Corridor retrofits a four-block segment of an endangered historic downtown Main Street through economic development catalyzed by the cultural arts rather than Main Street's traditional retail base.



...and aggregates them into a district of four blocks.

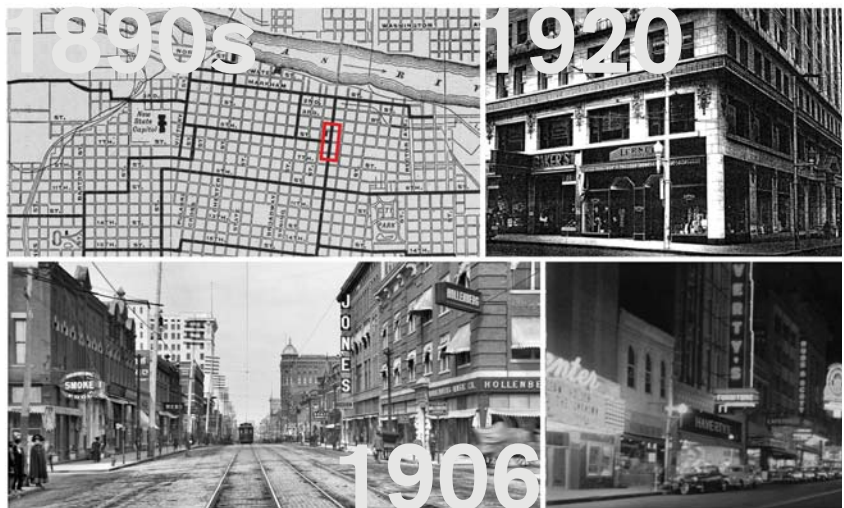
The Creative Corridor retrofits a four-block segment of a downtown Main Street through economic development catalyzed by the cultural arts rather than Main Street's traditional retail base. The design challenge involves restructuring a public realm conceived for workaday commercial activity to now serve 24/7 urban lifestyles with highly amenitized streetscapes. Main Streets traditionally were shopping environments of long skinny buildings with thin frontages that compete for visibility and customer patronage through design, advertising, and convenient storefront parking. To optimize shopping productivity, their sidewalk spaces were simple and generally not landscaped.

The universal language of Main Street's early architecture was fashioned from the expressive order of brick and stone—a scale and fenestration pattern different from glass curtain wall systems prevalent today. Despite technological challenges in the adaptive reuse of historic structures to residential, large-format office, and cultural production functions, the plan generates niche value from the reclamation of a heritage environment whose exceptional place-making qualities cannot be replicated.

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Main Street America

Main Street became a major force of centralization and incorporation in our emerging national landscape. Absent a town square or green, it functioned as the definitive heart of American civic and commercial life by the latter part of the 19th century. While no Main Street is exactly the same, this place type developed a categorical urban form exhibiting distinct morphological and typological patterns based on commercial activity. And, as chronicled in the novels of Sinclair Lewis, Main Street forged shared patterns and social capital that shaped a distributed American experience. But that was then. So goes the city, goes Main Street.



Classic Main Street

Main Street was once a high-density hub of activity in Little Rock—boasting 50% of the county's commerce and housing one of the nation's most extensive streetcar systems (44 miles) for a city of only 40,000!

Urban Renewal

580 acres of the downtown were demolished, including 471 commercial buildings (more than 1600 total in a city of 193,000) and the population density dropped from 18 people per acre to five in 1970.



Pedestrian Mall

Four blocks of Main Street were converted into a pedestrian mall that made up the Metrocentre District. Due to lack of automobile access and a decline in businesses, the mall was perceived as a failure and was demolished.



Main Street Today

Beautification has not sparked any revitalization initiatives...

Now in the 21st century, commerce has long abandoned most Main Streets, including the one in Little Rock's. In Little Rock we are left with a great street space framed by beautifully crafted buildings that represent an irreplaceable tradition of architecture and urbanism. Like any accomplished work of art, music, or literature, Main Street is an important link in our cultural gene pool, representing a placemaking intelligence whose loss diminishes our collective city-building capacities. Tearing down structures with historical significance is an inferior land development solution. The good news is that as new interests pioneer revitalization within the city today, Main Street is once again seen as an important venue for adaptive reuse. Like with most strong urban form types, Main Street is highly resilient and capable of adaptation to new realities without losing its distinguishing spatial characteristics. To preserve and rehabilitate Main Street is prudent and farsighted stewardship regardless of whether one is following an economic, social, or ecological bottom line.

Main Street Decline

The ascendancy and eventual decline of America's Main Streets is the story of the American city's decline. The story includes game-changing transformations in the transportation technologies and retail logistics that originally serviced Main Street. The peak of Main Street's influence parallels the dominance of streetcars and trolleys as urban transit modes—forces of population concentration that facilitate walkable neighborhoods. Whereas rail transit *concentrates* populations, automobiles *distribute* populations. With the emergence of mass automobile ownership after the 1920s new suburban commercial districts derivative of Main Street arose, displacing the function of Main Street as an urban center.



Intersection of Main Street and Capitol Avenue 1955 (above) and 2012 (below)



Main Street 1965 (above) and 2012 (below)

The decline of Little Rock's Main Street happened late; a victim of the city's all too successful efforts in securing federal urban renewal funds during the 1950s. The Central Little Rock Urban Renewal Project began in 1961 as a consortium of the Urban Progress Association, the Little Rock Housing Authority, Downtown Little Rock Unlimited, and the City of Little Rock—eventually to become a national model for urban neighborhood clearance. Over 580 acres of the downtown were demolished, including 471 commercial buildings (more than 1,600 buildings total in a city of only 193,000), and population density dropped from 18 people per acre to five people per acre by 1970. In some downtown neighborhoods the population dropped 75 percent. Primarily sustained by state office tenants, Main Street is an urban island among a few intact downtown districts floating within an otherwise underdeveloped building fabric. Downtown's single largest land use is parking, and the City's retail base is not coming back anytime soon.

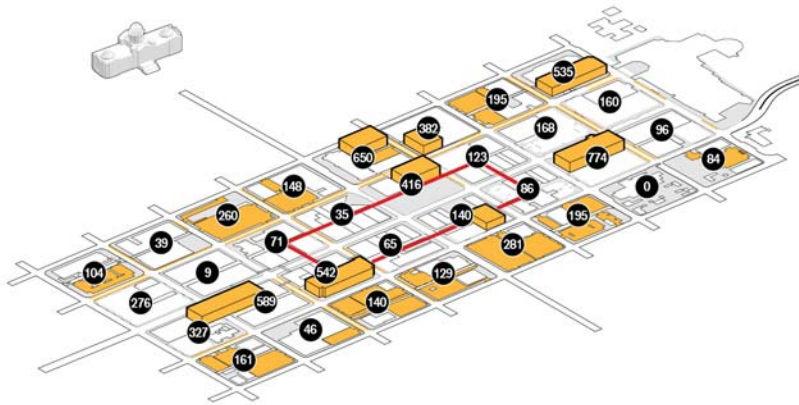
When Parking Becomes an Urbanism

Little Rock has a parking problem: surface parking is now the City's single largest land use. In downtown and urban areas generally, parking should never become its own land use! Successful urbanism incorporates surface parking into the street, or discretely within the block interior, or as structured parking within building footprints. A disproportionate amount of surface parking undermines continuity in building and neighborhood fabric, fatal to urban character and functioning. Of course, parking as its own urbanism is an outgrowth of the City's urban renewal efforts, the latter having never replaced the building fabric it demolished. Parking as a place holder has become a de facto urbanism.



Parking is downtown Little Rock's largest land use and...

In the 1950's downtown Little Rock had a population density of 18 people per acre. By 1970 Urban Renewal efforts demolished 1,600 buildings, dropping the population density to five people per acre.



...there are over 7,000 spaces within two blocks of the Main Street Creative Corridor!

While The Creative Corridor's building fabric is fairly intact with only four vacant sites among the four blocks, a different parking challenge exists. More than 7,000 parking spaces exist within two blocks of The Creative Corridor in structured, surface, and on-street formats. Most of this parking, however, is presently reserved for dedicated parking in structured decks. As The Creative Corridor retrofit eventually leads to higher and better land uses, some on-street parking will likely be lost to installation of new pedestrian amenities within the right-of-way. The reintroduction of rail transit someday will also warrant removal of on-street parking along Main Street. Urbanization of Main Street will necessitate new urban parking strategies fitting of the placemaking principles underpinning conception of The Creative Corridor. Since a primary goal of The Creative Corridor is to develop a superior public realm commensurate with the development of world-class architectural facilities, parking cannot be allowed to drive urban design, but rather should be considered in an integral manner with other public interests.

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Precedents in Main Street Revitalization

Cities everywhere have tapped into the place-based economic development potential of their Main Streets. As with any project of the commons, these revitalization efforts all required public-private partnerships and cooperative agreements among property holders. Most importantly, they could not have happened without powerful city leadership with the ability to envision a different future. Most of the illustrated projects are located in once distressed downtowns with the usual naysayers and opponents who couldn't imagine a reality different from the status quo. These urban corridors have become mixed-use signature streets and destinations in their respective cities.



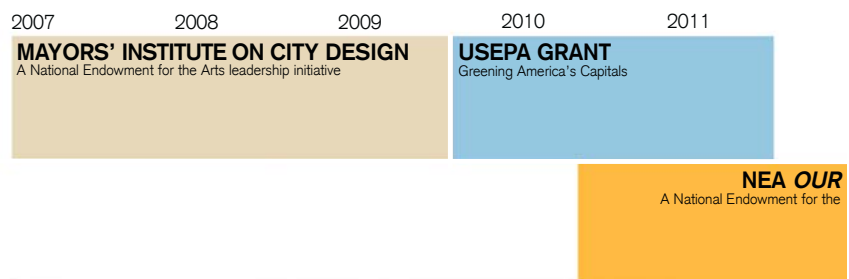
Like many Main Streets, The Creative Corridor neighborhood has a Walk Score ranking of 94 out of 100, considered to be a “Walkers’ Paradise”—a key benchmark for securing high-grade urban reinvestment.



- ① Transit Mall, Portland
- ② Gaslamp Quarter, San Diego
- ③ Promenade, Charlottesville
- ④ Main Street, Memphis
- ⑤ Castro Street, Mountain View
- ⑥ 16th Street Mall, Denver
- ⑦ Transit Mall, Portland
- ⑧ 3rd Street Promenade, Santa Monica

Funding Initiatives and Community Participation

Planning for The Creative Corridor was made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts under their inaugural *Our Town* program in 2011. The City was one of 51 communities out of 447 applicants to be awarded funding under this signature program. Considerable federal investments focused on elevating downtown livability in Little Rock preceded award of the *Our Town* grant. Indeed, leadership under Mayor Stodola has garnered successive grants over the last five years from the NEA and USEPA to develop The Creative Corridor. Working extensively with stakeholders and the design team, the City has shaped a vision for The Creative Corridor ready for further design development and implementation.



2012 2013 2014 2015 2016

USEPA/ANRC 319 (h) GRANT
Water Quality Demonstration and Educational Program for Main Street Little Rock

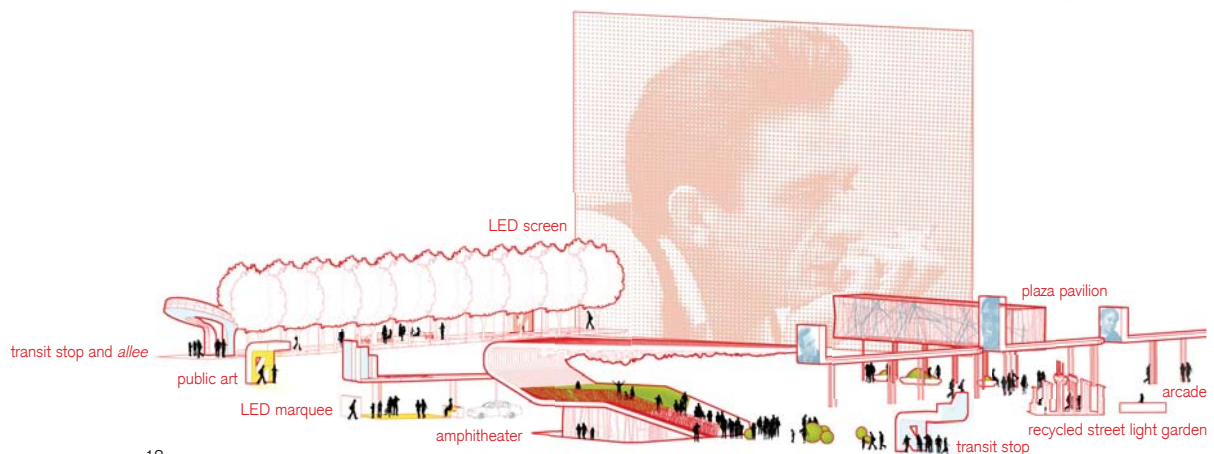
TOWN GRANT
Arts creative placemaking initiative

ISORS Arkansas Building Authority
Stephens Inc. Donaghey Building Representatives
chestra
Convention & Visitors Bureau
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Architects Patals Property Owner
Property Owner **Ballet Arkansas**
Program Mr. Cool Property Owner
KATV Centre for the DansArts
ansas Repertory Theatre

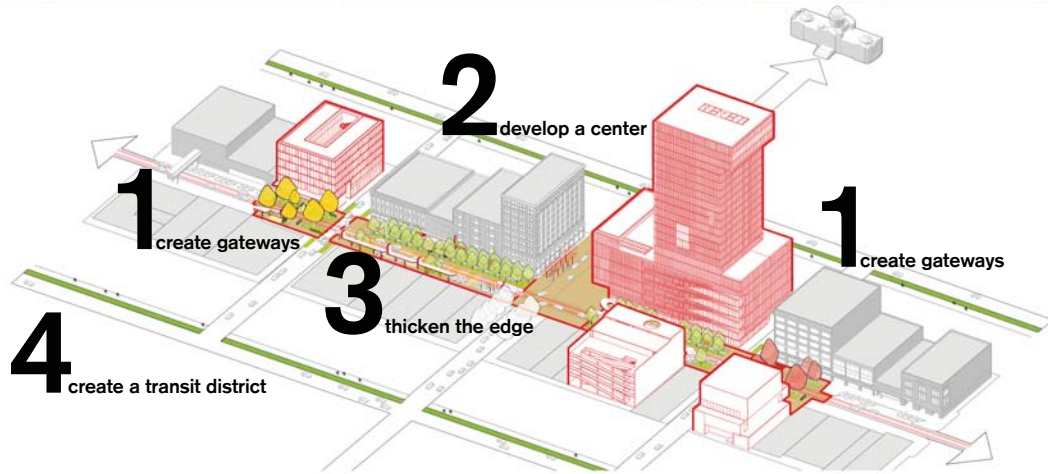
During the project grant period spanning 2011 and 2012, the City and design team met with more than 30 stakeholders, including arts organizations, the Main Street Task Force, and property holders. From these meetings and workshops, a design strategy emerged for incremental implementation of The Creative Corridor Plan. The Creative Corridor Plan also draws upon planning proposals generated from the USEPA's 2011 report: *Greening America's Capitals: Little Rock, Arkansas*. The USEPA focused on the installation of Low Impact Development (LID) streetscapes for Main Street. Based on the Creative Corridor Plan, the USEPA and the Arkansas Natural Resources Commission (ANRC) just committed \$1.2 million in capital funding to implement some of the plan's demonstration LID streetscapes under their 319 Nonpoint Source Pollution program. Meanwhile, development partners are preparing tenant build-out plans for the western edge of the 500 block of Main Street. Other historic structures within The Creative Corridor are either under contract or undergoing tens of millions of dollars in rehabilitation.

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A Peak At The Creative Corridor's Townscaping...



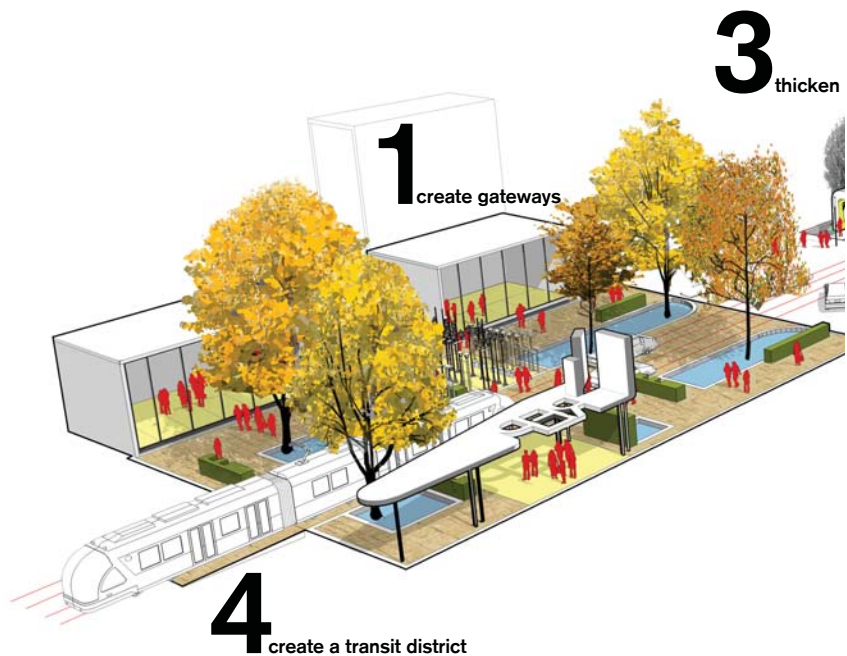
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Design Approach: Creating Urban Rooms

The primary goal of The Creative Corridor is to create a superior public realm commensurate with the development of world-class architectural facilities. The plan structures an identity for The Creative Corridor adaptable to increasing levels of investment over time. The approach employs four phases in the corridor's transformation to a downtown cultural node. Consisting of a series of urban rooms, this node provides a sense of centrality and opportunity for social life that counters the dominance of mobility in corridors. Each phase can be accomplished in succession or all at once as funding and political will permit. Phasing maintains plausible alignment between public and private investments, and between proportional investments in the urban realm and individual buildings.

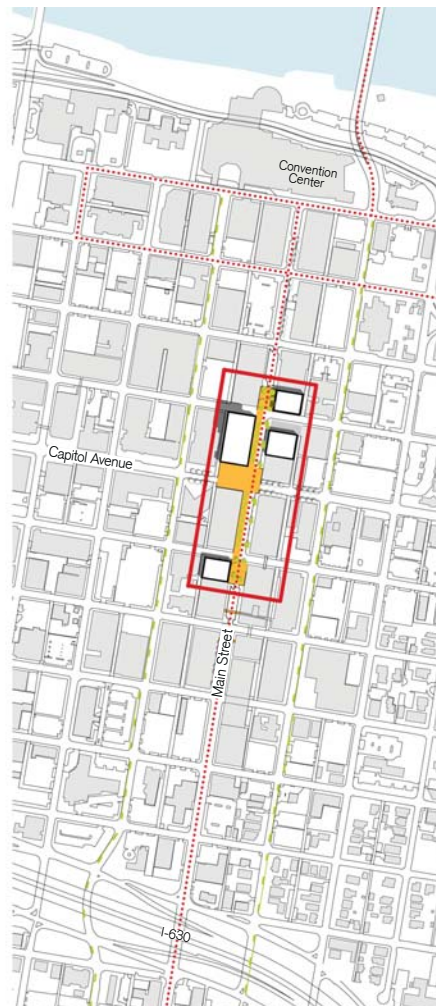
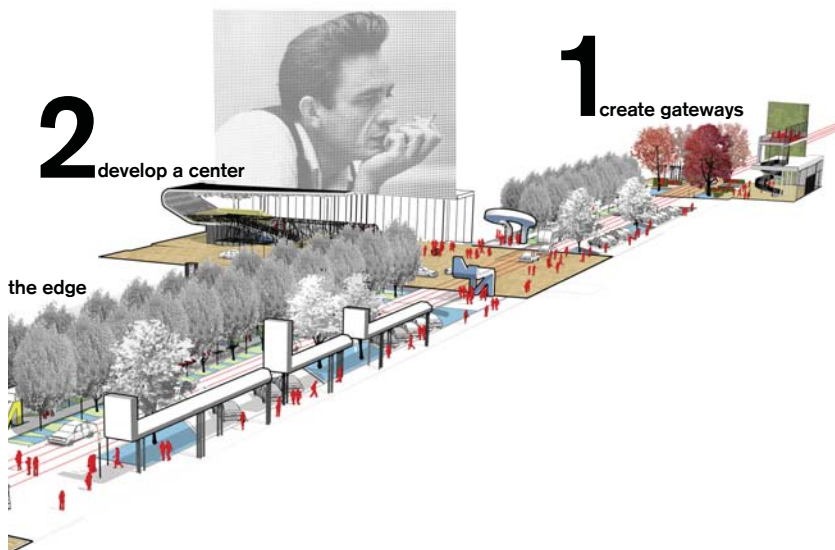
Unlike roads, which efficiently move traffic from one point to another, streets are platforms for capturing value. A well-designed street provides non-traffic social functions related to gathering, assembly, recreation, and aesthetics. Public investments in the right-of-way should align with the development patterns desired along the street.



2 develop a center

1 create gateways

the edge



The Street as a Platform for Capturing Value

Unlike roads, which efficiently move traffic between points, streets are platforms for capturing value. A well-designed street provides non-traffic social functions related to gathering, assembly, recreation, and aesthetics. Public investments in the right-of-way should align with land-use development patterns desired along the street. The plan coordinates Metroplan's proposed expansion of the rail streetcar system with the City's development of ecological-based stormwater management facilities as recommended by the USEPA. Design solutions, then, rely upon the urbanism of streetscapes—landscape architecture, ecological engineering, public space configurations, building frontage systems, and townscaping—to recalibrate the corridor for new uses.



Creative Corridor looking north from the Arkansas Repertory Theater



"A vivid and integrated physical setting, capable of producing a sharp image, plays a social role as well. It can furnish the raw material for the symbols and collective memories of group communication.... Indeed, a distinctive and legible environment not only offers security but also heightens the potential depth and intensity of human experience."

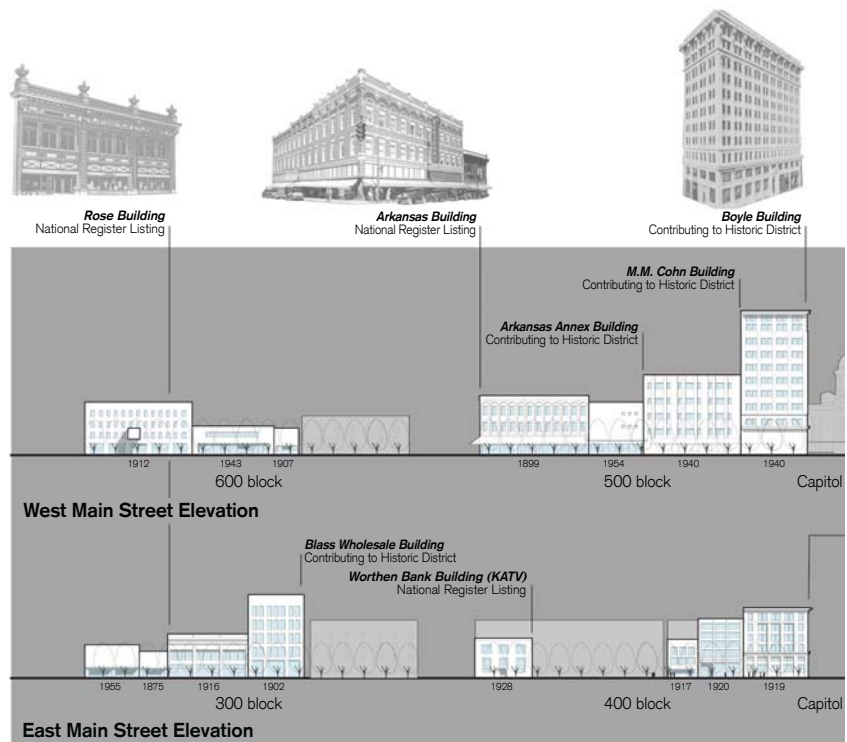
-Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City*-

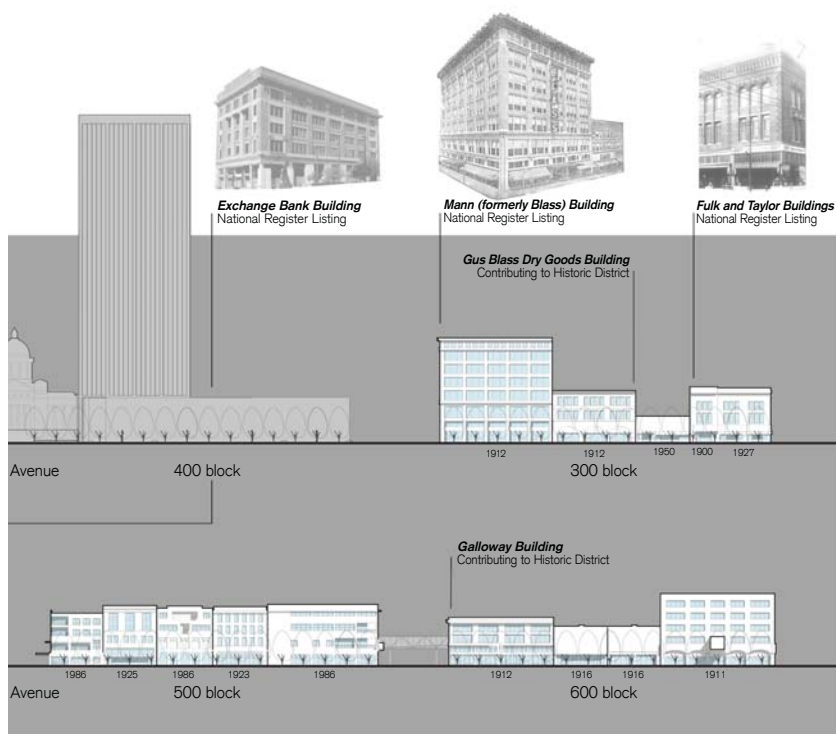
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Alignment between Public and Private Investments

The vision is holistic, but the approach facilitates incremental implementation. Urban revitalization efforts are generally susceptible to failure when they lack either phased participation or balance between public and private investment. Particularly in today's risk-averse financing climate, viable plans will be structured around small-grained infill strategies reliant upon staged or self-financing. Accordingly, project phasing begins with prudent right-of-way improvements proportional to current development activity without getting too far ahead of the market. Each phase establishes self-sufficiency without reliance on the subsequent phase to appear complete—not dissimilar to Main Street's initial growth and development.

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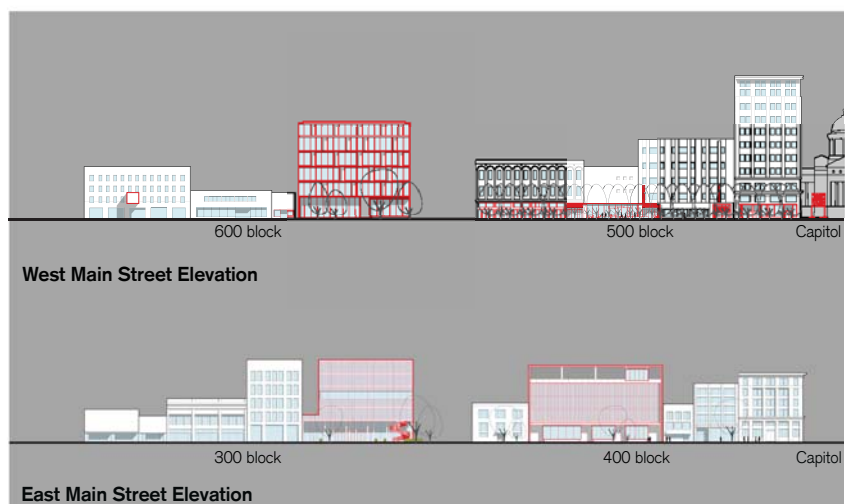


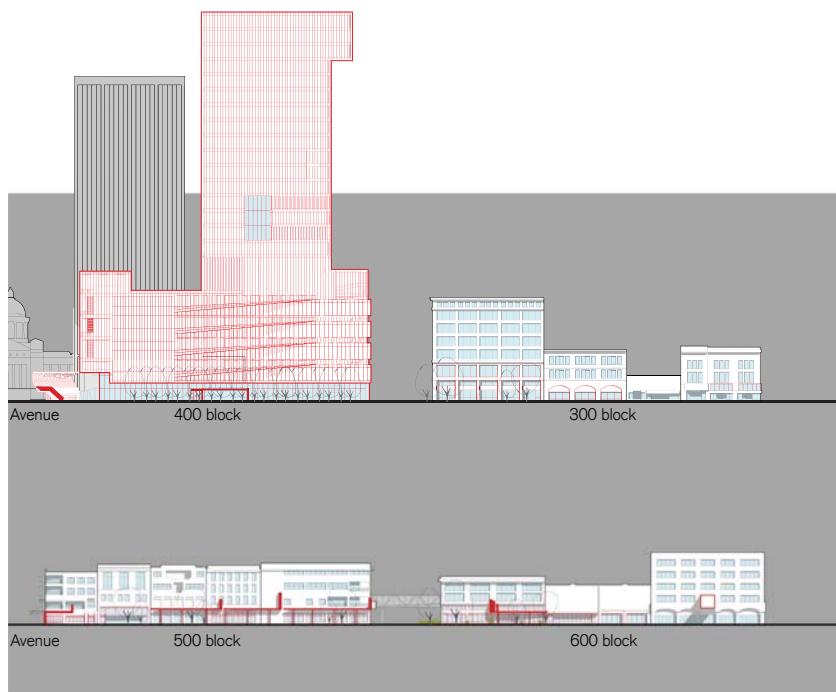


Like any accomplished work of art, music, or literature, Main Street is an important link in our cultural gene pool, representing a placemaking intelligence whose loss diminishes our collective city-building capacities.

Main Street's New Land-Use Ecology

An additional challenge regards the compatibility between proposed larger infill buildings using curtain wall technologies and early 20th century commercial buildings fashioned from the expressive order of brick and stone. Rather than simply rely on historically-inspired frontage guidelines, the plan negotiates conflicting building traditions and scales through the use of townscaping elements like arcades, urban porches, marquees, LED screens, public art, and amphitheaters that bridge street and building interiors. This layer of pedestrian-oriented improvements support ongoing lifestyle shifts within the corridor, while allowing the City to maintain a de facto development momentum.





Since architectural guidelines are not politically feasible, townscaping elements and frontage systems mediate between new and old structures, big and small scales, and create anchoring spaces in the corridor.

A 24/7 Main Street

Main Street lacks vitality after weekday working hours. The design challenge involves restructuring a public realm conceived for workaday commercial throughput to now serve 24/7 urban lifestyles with a high level of livability. Main Street must be safe and inviting at night. The plan introduces pedestrian-oriented shared street configurations that support a new land-use ecology combining residential, tourism, and the cultural arts. Novel townscaping structures link spaces serially *along* the corridor while building frontage systems connect public and private spaces *across* the corridor. These highly amenitized streetscapes reward walking, sociability, and livability throughout the day and week.

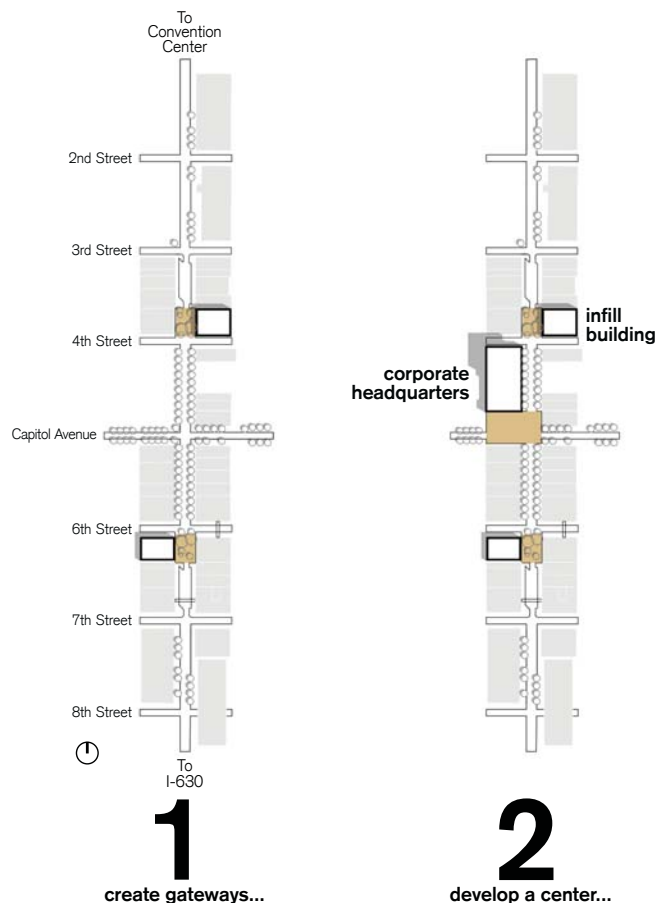


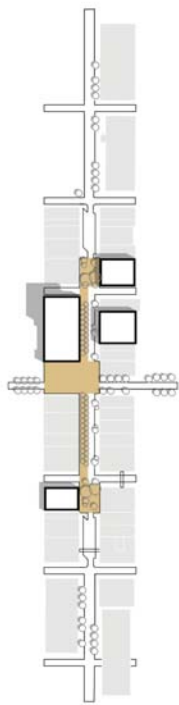


Creative Corridor Phasing Strategy

Phase 1: Develop nodes for enhanced pedestrian activity which serve as gateways marking The Creative Corridor segment of Main Street. Through the introduction of shared street strategies that privilege a pedestrian environment supportive of non-traffic functions like outdoor dining and theater gathering, gateway nodes frame intimate social spaces within an otherwise continuous corridor.

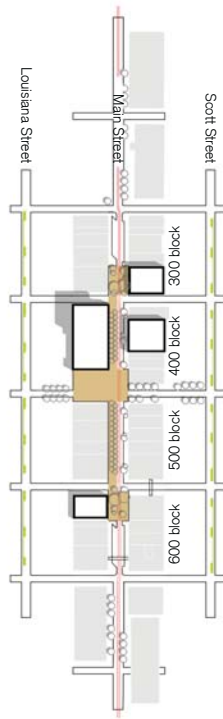
Phase 2: Develop a center to The Creative Corridor, marking the most important intersection symbolically in Little Rock—Capitol Avenue and Main Street. A large central plaza for vehicles and pedestrians accommodates large public events and forms an appropriate gateway to the state capitol building to the west. The space configuration houses an elevated park lawn/amphitheater, arcade, and space for mobile food trucks to serve downtown office workers.





3

thicken the edge...



4

create a transit district!

Phase 3: Connect the three nodes with a thickened edge or pedestrian promenade on the west side of the street. The west side holds the most development potential and borders the proposed plaza north of Main Street at Capitol Avenue. The pedestrian promenade is a two-block *allee* of trees housing outdoor dining courts, public art, and consequential low impact development pocket parks for ecological-based stormwater management to be funded by the USEPA.

Phase 4: Install rail transit infrastructure facilities per Metroplan's proposal for future streetcar expansion, and relocate dedicated bicycle lanes with shading to parallel Scott and Louisiana Streets. The three streets combined offer full multi-modal passage between downtown and urban neighborhoods to the south.

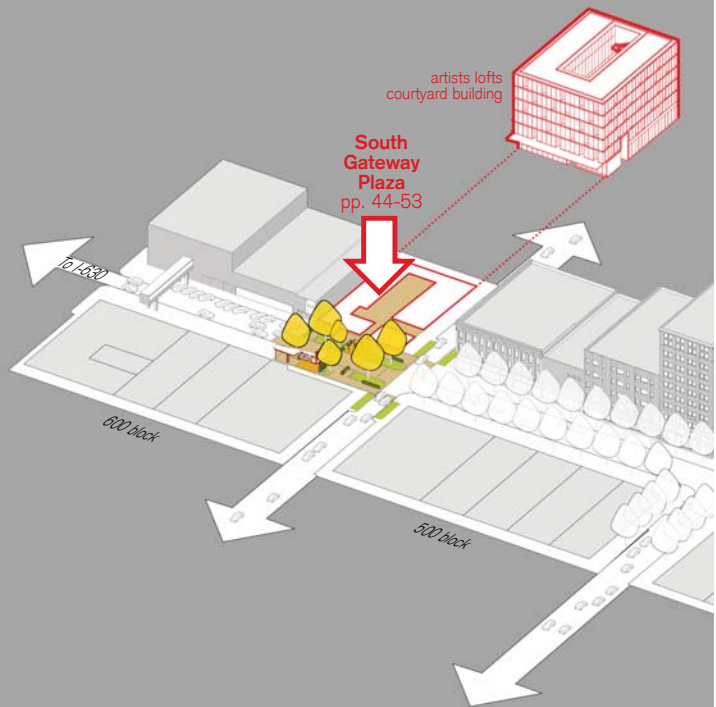
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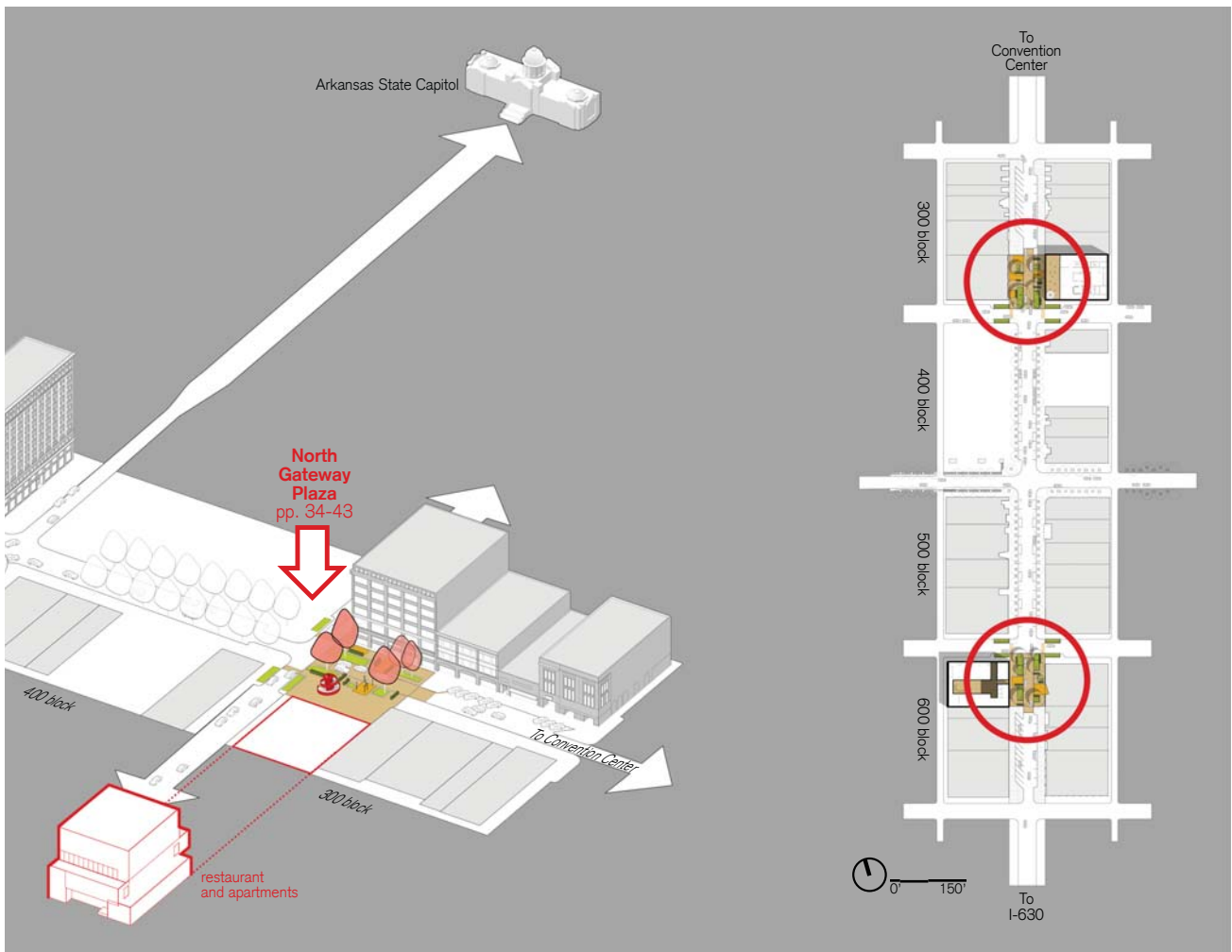
Create Gateways 1

Establish gateways at the Arkansas Repertory Theater and the Mann Building to the north, demarcating The Creative Corridor core. Gateways employ shared street strategies to enhance pedestrian activity and calm vehicular traffic, while establishing a new visual structure for the corridor with minimal resources.

Like conventional streets, shared streets serve both pedestrians and vehicular traffic. Shared streets, however, privilege the pedestrian by inducing social behavior from motorists through the design of streets as rooms. Each gateway room is a raised pedestrian table made from a continuous surface of architectural pavers stretching from building edge to building edge. Table surfaces are flush with the sidewalk without markings that designate transport mode split—including that between auto and pedestrian. This slows traffic. Surface amenities include special townscape elements like lighting gardens that recycle old Little Rock street lights, street furniture, public art, and marquees.

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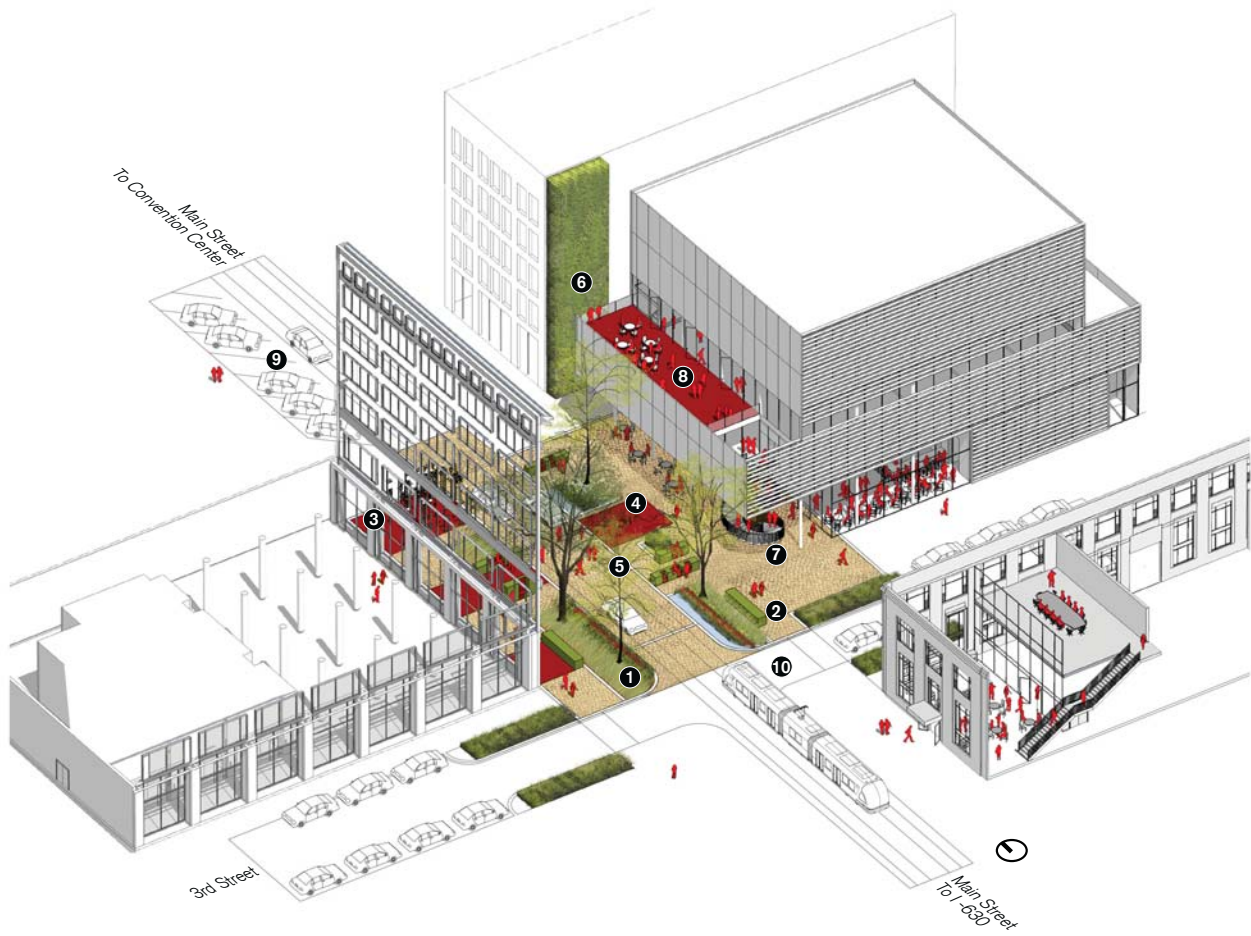
1 North Gateway Plaza

Willamette Street in Eugene, Oregon is an example of a shared street. By shifting transportation mode mix in favor of the pedestrian, shared streets support non-traffic social functions while integrating the automobile. Street design compels slower speeds without sacrificing traffic capacity.

- rain gardens ①
- plaza seating ②
- street light garden ③
- public art pad ④
- continuous pedestrian table ⑤
- green wall ⑥
- urban staircase ⑦
- urban patio ⑧
- back-in parking ⑨
- planned streetcar extension ⑩



Phase 1 Example: Willamette Street, Eugene, Oregon



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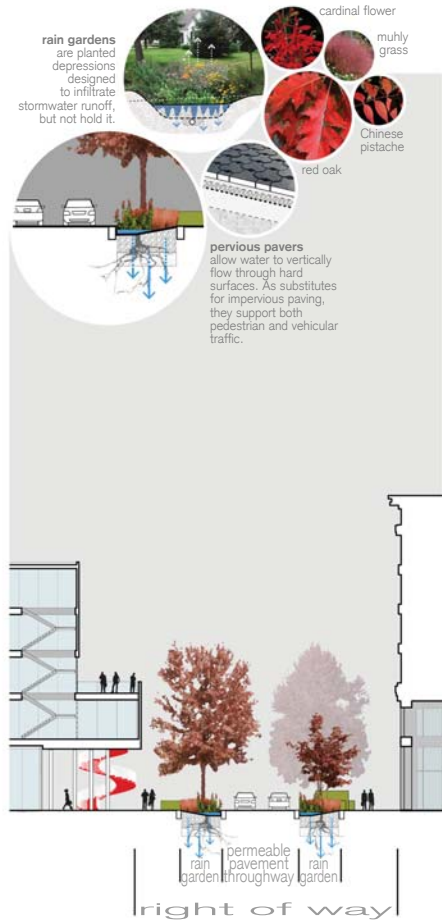


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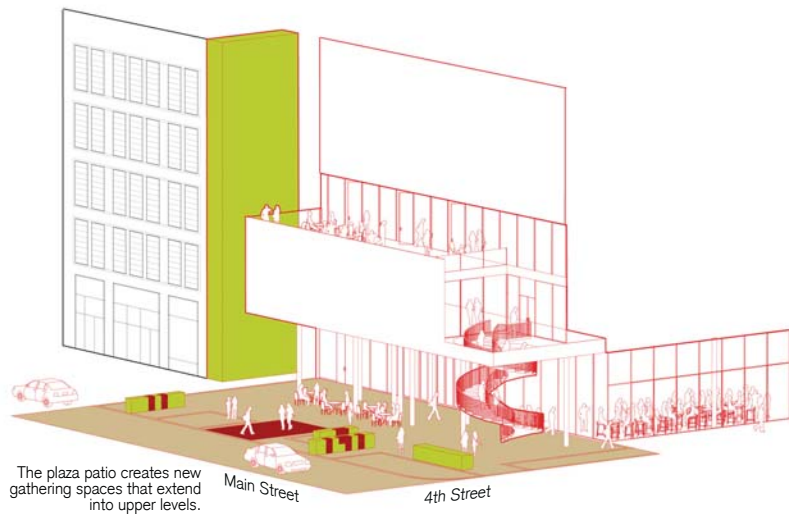


Looking south from the North Gateway Plaza



1

Gateway tables create urban rooms with street furniture, architectural pavement, and manicured landscapes akin to an urban pocket park. The City should consider a form-based code for The Creative Corridor that inspires highly public building frontages for new structures like that shown.



The plaza patio creates new gathering spaces that extend into upper levels.

Main Street

4th Street



East 300 block



301 Main Street:
Menke Building



305 Main Street:
Kempner Building



307 Main Street:
Rose Building

National Register Listing



313-315 Main Street:
Blass Wholesale Building

Contributing to Historic District

Likely Pressure for Greater Density

Historically significant buildings on the east side of the 300 block include the Rose Building and the Gus Blass Wholesale Company Building, for which a sensitive mixed-use renovation is nearing completion. Both are fine examples of classic Main Street building typologies. While the Rose Building has undergone several modern incarnations since its original construction, it remains a classic expression of the arcaded commercial building typology.

Minor structures on the northeast edge of the block, the Menke Building and the Isaac Kempner Building, may possess historic facades beneath their modern veneers, warranting improvement or replacement once comprehensive rehabilitation occurs throughout The Creative Corridor. New investments in The Creative Corridor and the block's proximity to the convention center will likely exert ongoing pressure for elevating densities on this side of the block.

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1

Gateway tables feature a light garden consisting of recycled street lights gathered from the Little Rock area. Lights clustered from different eras and city neighborhoods function as a public art installation portraying an urban history otherwise left unnoticed.

