

**Revitalizing
Downtown Brownsville**
 Active Living: Opportunities to Transform the Built Environment
 Walkable and Livable Communities Institute
 AARP and AARP Texas
 Brownsville, Texas
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Place-Based Planning

Place-driven development benefits all

→ Protect Brownsville Through Place-Based Planning

The economic value of a robust, dynamic place is much more than the sum of its parts. Strong networks of streets and destinations are better at fostering human interaction, leading to social networks that connect people with opportunities, and cities where economies match the skills and interests of the people who live there. Great places and strong economies can only exist when people choose to participate in creating them; they are human-powered monuments. (*Project for Public Spaces*)

Brownsville's revitalization project of the City Market Building Cultural Center is an example of growing consumer interest and investment in food systems, community-building and public space. This kind of public investment isn't just about individual projects, but also about the community as a whole.

"Placed-based planning" shifts the focus of decisions away from individual projects and toward a more holistic approach to solving mobility and community-design issues. By bringing together residents and practitioners of many disciplines, place-based planning produces solutions that collectively solve multiple problems with greater results, and at lower costs. Place-based planning allows a community to maintain its identity while confirming a unified vision.

In Brownsville, a focus on place-based planning can bring greater prosperity, health, security and economic success.

Recent studies have shown that investments in the streetscape not only improve safety of streets, but also help the local economy. For example, the New York City Department of Transportation shows that a boom in retail activity is linked to improvements to a street. For

example, commercial vacancies dropped 49 percent in areas around new pedestrian plazas and reconfigured traffic flow. Retail sales jumped 71 percent where the city improved bus-service efficiency, which cut travel times and boosted ridership.

Also, the word 'walkable' is a new feature for developers and real estate agents in their marketing strategies. As evidenced by Zillow adding "walk scores" (www.walkscore.com) to home profiles, consumers are starting to demand a model for compact areas where they can live and work without being forced into cars for every trip. "The strongest housing market is in walkable urban areas," says Christopher B. Leinberger, a land-use strategist and author of the report, "DC: The WalkUP Wake-Up Call."



There already is much to celebrate in Brownsville, and the town is poised for success. Look to connect the City Market and City Hall to the Multi-Modal Transit Center and then to the University of Texas at Brownsville.



The power of 10

Place-based planning begins with the "power of 10," a tool through which stakeholders identify the assets and under-performing places within a core area. Through a combination of presentations, small-group work sessions, mapping exercises, and group conversation, workshops lead to a plan that stakeholders support.

During the process, stakeholders identify the best, worst, and highest opportunity places. Then, they think through how to create substantive physical and social connections between existing spaces, the strategic creation of new places, and how energy can be generated by creating a network of destinations. For more information, visit www.projectforpublicspaces.org.



Brownsville's plans for revitalizing the City Market building Cultural Center is the perfect candidate to help jump-start the movement for place-based planning. This will become a hub of activity that will give community members the opportunity to develop their small businesses. Use the momentum from this development to further enhance the downtown environment by activating the alleys, which are currently underutilized spaces and to help link destinations —university to market —together.

Other Resources

Walkability increasingly drives developers and real estate market

http://www.washingtonpost.com/realestate/walkability-increasingly-drives-developers-and-real-estate-market/2012/11/15/cfab342-286a-11e2-b4e0-346287b7e56c_story.html

Bike Lanes, Pedestrian Plazas Good for Businesses

http://blogs.wsj.com/metropolis/2012/10/24/report-bike-lanes-pedestrian-plazas-good-for-businesses/?blog_id=147&post_id=16110

Complete the Streets

Policy to support all users

➔ Adopt a Complete Streets Policy

Land use and transportation policy can either contribute to or detract from community building. When thoughtfully integrated, land use and transportation policies and strategies can jointly preserve and even enhance natural and cultural resources and create better built environments that are walkable, livable and sustainable.

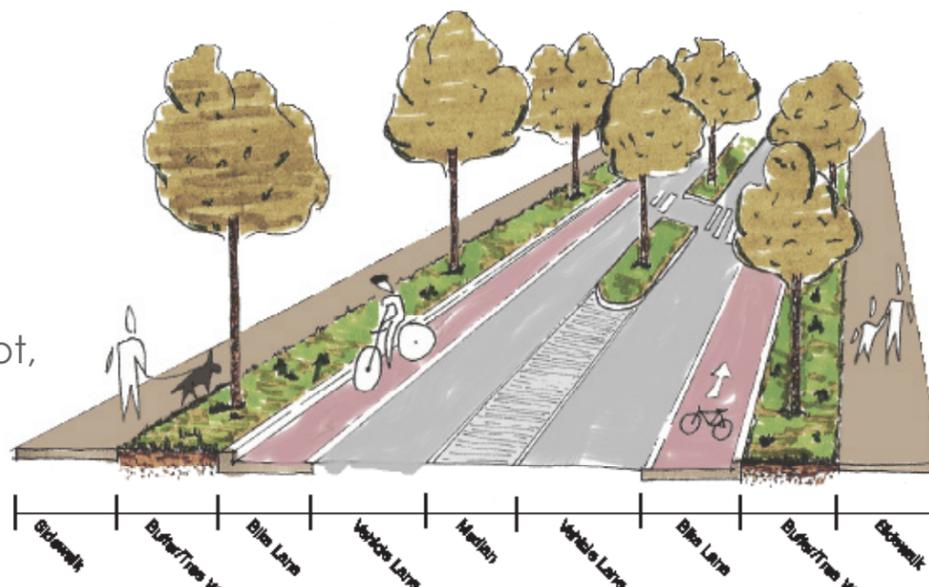
A Complete Streets policy ensures choices are available to the community by making walking, bicycling and taking public transportation convenient, easy and safe. Changing policy so that transportation systems consider the needs of pedestrians, bicyclists and transit users means that people of all ages and abilities are included in the planning and design processes.

The National Complete Streets Coalition has identified ten elements of a comprehensive Complete Streets Policy:

- Includes a vision for how and why the community wants to complete its streets.
- Specifies that 'all users' includes pedestrians, bicyclists and transit passengers of all ages and abilities, as well as trucks, buses, emergency vehicles, and automobiles.

- Encourages street connectivity and aims to create a comprehensive, integrated, connected network for all modes.
- Is understood by all agencies to cover all roads.
- Applies to both new and retrofit projects, including design, planning, maintenance, and operations, for the entire right of way.
- Makes any exceptions specific and sets a clear procedure that requires high-level approval of exceptions.
- Directs the use of the latest and best design criteria and guidelines while recognizing the need for flexibility in balancing user needs.
- Directs that Complete Streets solutions will complement the context of the community.
- Establishes performance standards with measurable outcomes.

A "complete" street is one designed for safe, comfortable and convenient travel for all users, whether they choose to travel by foot, car, bicycle or public transportation.



➔ Create & Adopt a Design Manual

Once a Complete Streets policy is adopted the task at hand is to **develop a robust street-design manual that ensures when a street is rebuilt or maintained, it is made to be more supportive of all roadway users.**

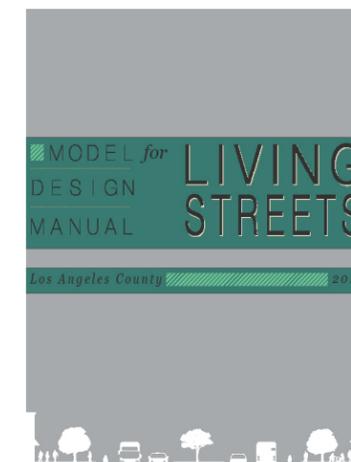
The National Complete Streets Coalition identifies four key steps for successful implementation:

- 1) Restructure procedures to accommodate all users on every project;
- 2) Develop new design policies and guides;
- 3) Offer workshops and other training opportunities to planners and engineers;
- 4) Institute better ways to measure performance and collect data on how well the streets are serving all users.

Municipalities depend on street design manuals as they retrofit or modify existing streets to improve performance and encourage sustainable development. Street design manuals play a large role in determining form by providing guidance to agencies, property owners and investors.

A manual should not prescribe how to design every segment of every street; rather, after clearly designing what a community wants to accomplish with its streets, designers can apply this framework along with the specific treatments guidance to ensure investment meets the community's goals.

Many cities have created street manuals that take into account the function of the street in the community, as well as the function of the street in the broader roadway network and land use. The *Model Design Manual for Living Streets*, funded by the Los Angeles County Department of Health and the U. S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is designed to be a customizable resource to communities across the country. Another model manual is the Town of Collingwood, Ontario *Urban Design Manual*.



Download the free LA County *Model Design Manual for Living Streets* here: <http://www.modelstreetdesignmanual.com/index.html>, and the Town of Collingwood, Ontario: *Urban Design Manual* here: <http://www.collingwood.ca/files/collingwood-urban-design-manual.pdf>



A photo-visualization of a Complete Street created by the WALC Institute for AARP Georgia.

Calm the Traffic

Incorporate traffic-calming tools to improve safety and encourage multi-modal transportation

➔ Design for Target Speed

Fewer than one-third of drivers drive the speed limit on urban and suburban arterials. Rather, drivers tend to travel at the road's "design speed." Therefore, road design should be consistent with the "target," or desired, vehicle speed. Also known as the "desired operating speed" of a street, "target speed" is the speed desired on the roadway to ensure that all modes (vehicular traffic, transit, freight/delivery, pedestrians and bicyclists) can operate efficiently, effectively, safely and with enjoyment. Designing to a target speed means including only those design elements that best reflect the function of the roadway and its land uses. **The recommended target speed for downtown Brownsville is 20 to 25 mph.**

A general practice in the transportation profession has been to set design speeds higher than the target speed. It is now recognized that such actions tend to induce greater speeds, which can cause a significant rise in crashes, especially to the most vulnerable roadway users. Urban area design speeds should match the desired target speed. A lower target speed is a key characteristic of thoroughfares in walkable, mixed use, traditional urban areas.

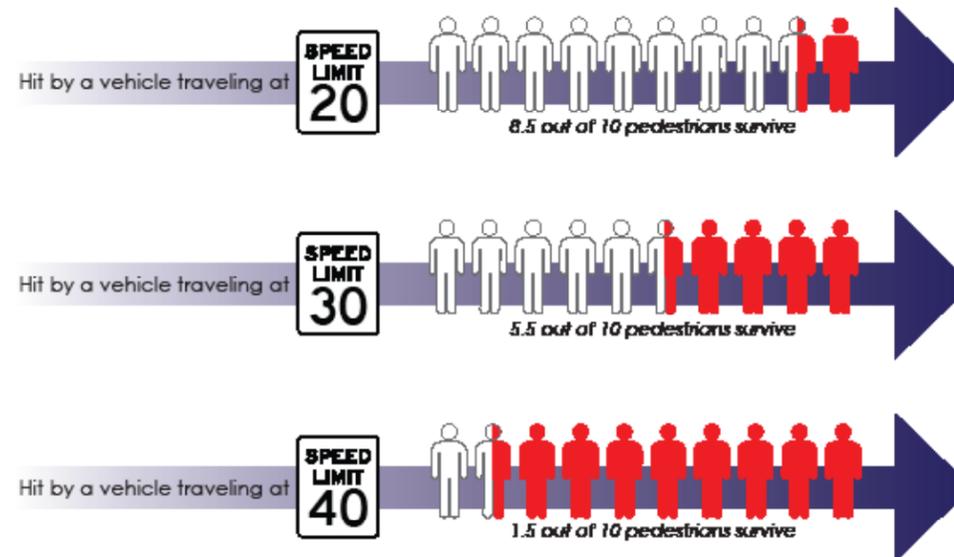
Wide travel lanes encourage faster driving. Adding a colorized bike lane, higher intensity crosswalk markings and increased signage can assist all modes in recognizing the parts of the street, other users and how to respond. The goal should be to reduce traffic speeds so that there is less speeding between traffic lights and improve corridor efficiency through new intersection treatments. Roundabouts, mini-circles and traffic calming features can move cars through an area with lower speeds but improved efficiency.

A person's decision to walk is influenced by many factors, including distance, perceived safety and comfort, convenience, and visual interest of the route. Pedestrians feel exposed and vulnerable when walking directly adjacent to a high-speed travel lane. Vehicle noise, exhaust and the sensation of passing vehicles reduce pedestrian comfort. Factors that improve pedestrian comfort include a separation from moving traffic and a reduction in speed. In walkable urban environments, a buffer zone that improves pedestrian comfort can be achieved through furnishings, landscaping, bike lanes and on-street parking.

In Brownsville, the design speed of many streets is higher than the posted speed limit, especially through intersections. In some areas, sidewalks, bike lanes, and other treatments for supporting active transportation don't exist or need maintenance and upkeep. Street treatments reflect our values. Where we cherish people, history, culture and place, our streets should reflect this. In downtown Brownsville, and the greater city area, streets should be designed to allow for safe and comfortable pedestrian and bicycle travel, as well as vehicle

travel. **They should be accessible and include an extension or more clear links from the Historic Battlefield Hike & Bike Trail into downtown and to the College Park Trail on the University of Texas Brownsville campus to encourage more bicycle and pedestrian traffic throughout the town.**

Moreover, drivers respond to cues that streets provide. Start by addressing target speed by applying street treatments (on the following page) that help calm traffic, and contribute to a built environment in a way that supports all modes of transportation. Nearly everyone, for at least some portion of the day, is a pedestrian. And pedestrians are more likely to be found in areas where traffic is calm. **Thus, where foot traffic is highly desirable, traffic-calming tools should be applied.** Start by considering other "proven safety countermeasures" as identified by the Federal Highway Administration at <http://safety.fhwa.dot.gov/provencountermeasures/>. **Also, consider that Brownsville's history and culture can be celebrated through its choice of street treatments.**



High vehicle speeds bring high risk; speed can "kill" places as well as people.

Source: *Killing Speed and Saving Lives*, UK Dept. of Transportation, London.



In Brownsville, consider road diets, roundabouts, inset parking, tree wells, edges between parking lots and sidewalks, well-marked mid-block crossings, and other traffic-calming treatments such as those depicted in this photo-vision for Kingsport, Tennessee. In the top image, this area is under-performing, even though nearby development creates demand for services and people are frequently seen crossing mid-block. If the street is retrofit to be more supportive of people—not just cars—this can be a prime site for mixed-use redevelopment. This example reflects similar conditions along International Boulevard, a key street to right-size to support the University to downtown connection, a well as an area prime for mixed-income student and elder housing.



Traffic-Calming Tools

→ Use Paint

Narrow Travel Lanes

The wider a roadway, the faster cars tend to travel. Wide roadways also make for wide pedestrian crossings, increasing the amount of time a person is exposed to the threat of being hit by a car and the amount of time that cars are held back. The same is true with auto-to-auto crashes and bicycle crashes. **Throughout Brownsville, there are opportunities to reduce vehicle lanes to 10 feet wide. This should be the default lane width. Mark the outside of the lane with bold edge stripes, 8 to 10 inches wide.**



Above Right: Move the paint to create 10 foot travel lanes, which allows the additional pavement to be reallocated for other uses, such as parking and bike lanes, as seen in Hamburg, NY.

Enhance Crosswalk Markings

High-intensity crosswalk markings benefit all. Different materials can be used to make crossings more visible day and night. Many of the crossings in downtown Brownsville, right, are hard to see, sending conflicting messages to pedestrians and motorists. More-visible markings would send a message that pedestrians should be expected here. The use of materials to create attractive streetscape features can add beauty, function and a sense of place, and should enhance the aesthetics, character and integrity of the street. **Crossing should be remarked with high visibility marked crossings.** Volunteers can help.



Above Left: At most locations in downtown Brownsville enhancing crosswalks is only a matter of applying ladder-style markings with new paint. *Above Right:* Best practice: a ladder-style crosswalk marking is very visible and can be a cost-effective solution.

Bike Lanes

One of the most cost effective ways to reduce speed while improving overall vehicular flow and creating improved conditions for bicycling and walking, is the conversion of overly wide roads to bike lanes. Generally, travel lanes can be reduced to 10 feet. Narrower travel and storage lanes are proving to be slightly safer. **Bike lanes should be at least 5 feet wide and seamless.** Thick striping and regular markings remind drivers to anticipate bicyclists. Bike lanes have an added benefit to pedestrians in that they provide a buffer to moving traffic.



Driver vigilance is increased with bold edge stripes and bike lanes, while bicyclists feel welcome, safe, and included.

Sharrows

Consider “shared roadway markings” - usually paint - placed in the center of a travel lane to alert motorists and bicyclists alike to the shared use of the lane. They help position bicyclists away from the opening doors of cars parked on the street, encourage safety when vehicles pass bicyclists and reduce the incidence of wrong-way bicycling.



A sharrow marking is typically installed on streets that want to encourage bicyclists, but are too narrow for bike lanes. Sharrows send a message to drivers that bicyclists will be on the road, helping to improve the position of bicyclist and motorists, reduce aggressive motorist behavior, encourage correct bicycling behavior and increase comfort of bicyclists on a shared road.

→ Green the Street

Tree Wells

Consider placing tree wells every two to three parking spots downtown to help bring down speeds by creating a sense of enclosure. When the space is too tight to plant trees in sidewalk areas in-street tree wells can be used, which greens the street without the removal of parking. Use of tree wells and curb extensions, in combination, helps bring speeds to more appropriate urban levels. **Choose appropriate shade producing trees for the climate.**



Tree wells in Olympia, WA provide shade, inset parking and help to create a sense of enclosure, all elements that help calm traffic.

→ Street Furniture

Bike Racks

Bike racks should be provided downtown. Brownsville recently installed bike racks at the new bike/hike trail, use these as inspiration. Bike racks are needed downtown, and should be located where they are watched over, but where they don't impact street or sidewalk passage; they can be placed in curb extensions and tree wells, and they also can double as public art, as shown on right.



Bike racks in Brownsville add an element of public art to the adjacent trail.



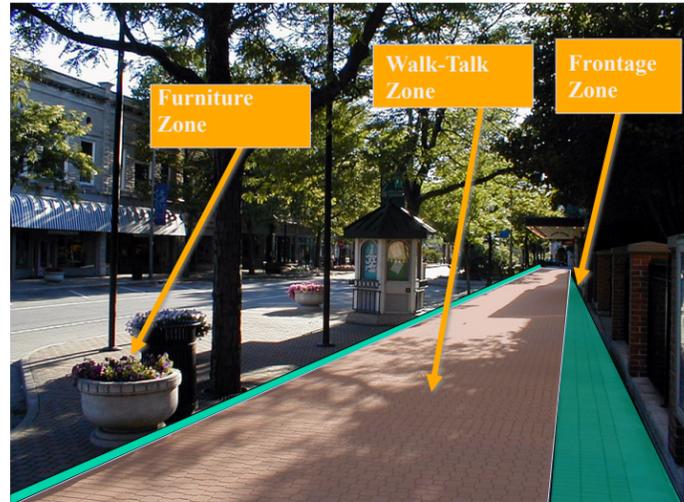
Bike racks are a needed element in downtowns to encourage people to bike...

Traffic-Calming Tools

➔ Other Tools

Sidewalk Design

Sidewalks require high levels of design and care. It is within the protected spaces of a sidewalk where people move freely and spend time engaging others and enjoying public space. Sidewalks work best when they are fully buffered from moving traffic. Color, texture, street furniture and other materials can distinguish functional areas of sidewalks. When building a sidewalk, contractors should be advised that utilizing trowel cuts, rather than saw cuts, creates a better surface for wheelchairs and wheeled devices.



Raised Crossings

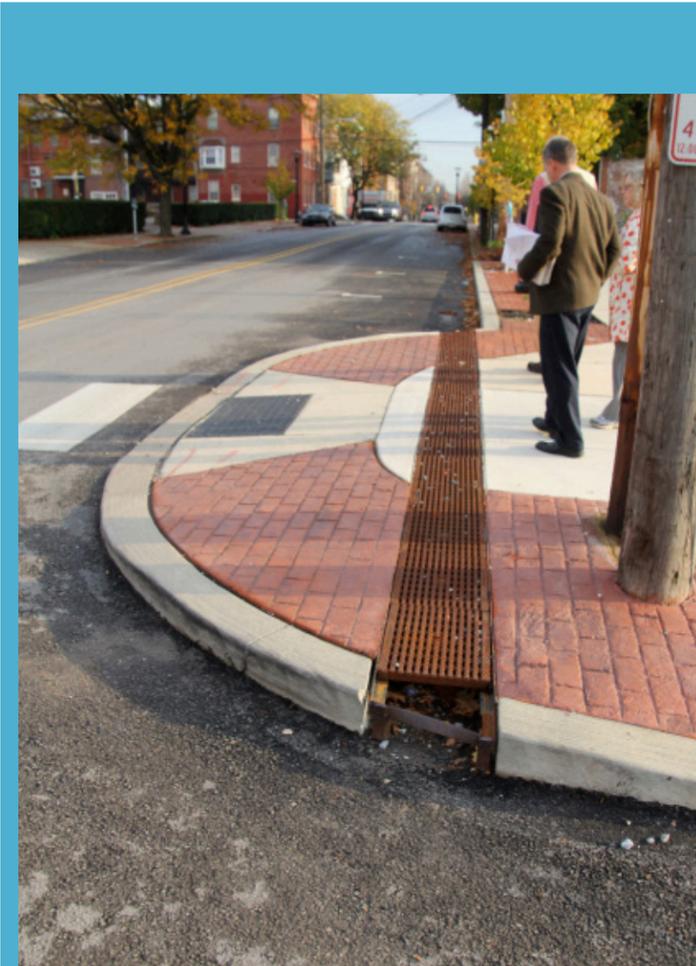
Raised crossings are not only used in mid-block locations, they are used at intersections. They can be used at right turn channelized islands, or at regular intersections. Crossings are designed to restrict all through speeds to 15-20 mph. Color is often used. Features such as bollards, paver stones, colorized concrete or colorized asphalt are often specified. Raised crossings at intersections are used widely in snow cities such as Stamford, CT and Cambridge, MA.



Raised intersections bring speeds under control and help motorists and pedestrians see each other in Birmingham, AL.

Universal Design, ADA

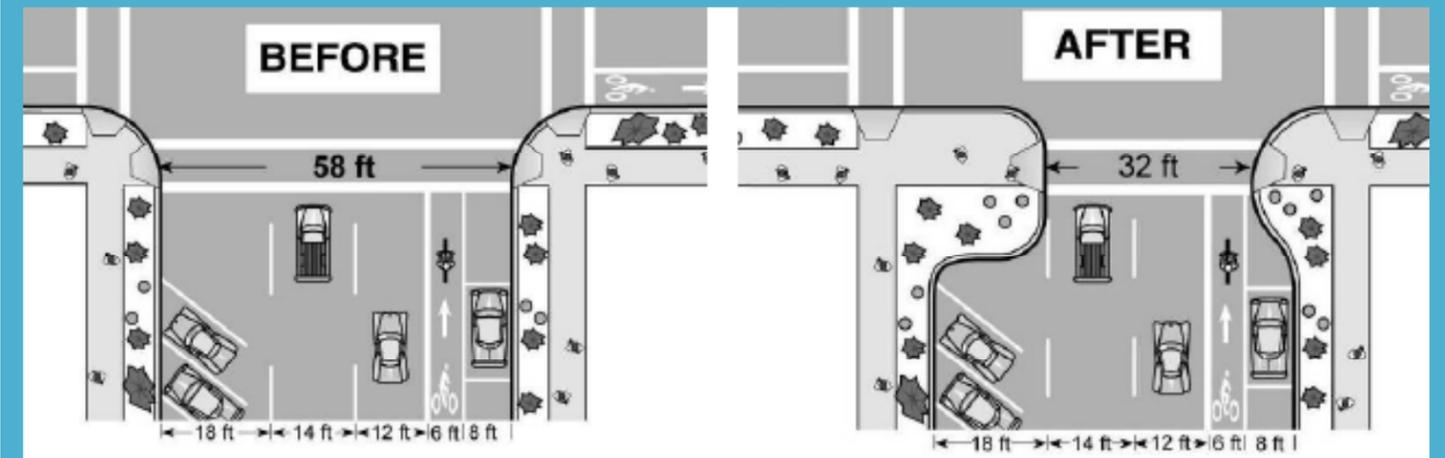
Paths of travel need to be accessible to all. According to the *2010 American Disabilities Act (ADA) Standards for Accessible Design*, "A 'path of travel' includes a continuous, unobstructed way of pedestrian passage by means of which the area may be approached, entered, and exited, and which connects the area with an exterior approach (including sidewalks, streets, and parking areas)." It is imperative that ADA requirements are being considered and met. This is a federal law so it is very important to get our city streets in order to support all residents. To learn more on the most current policies go to www.ada.gov.



Curb Extensions

Curb extensions are a nearly universal tool for transforming overly wide streets. Curb extensions (also known as bulb outs, elephant ears and nibs) bring down vehicle speeds at right turns, identify important crossings, and make it much easier for people walking and people driving to see each other. Curb extensions can be used at intersections, mid-block crossings, inside of parking strips (tree wells) and other locations. Although many curb extensions are kept plain in appearance, at the entry to a neighborhood, they can be landscaped to serve as attractive gateways.

Left: Residents report that the addition of bulb-outs—curb extensions—in York, Pennsylvania calmed traffic considerably within days of installation. Curb extensions should be considered at all corners in downtown Brownsville, to aid pedestrian travel and help calm traffic. Below: The proper use of curb extensions reduces crossing distance, improves safety, increases visibility and reduces speed of turning vehicles. Curb extensions also encourage pedestrians to cross at designated locations and prevent vehicles from parking at corners.



Traffic-Calming Tools

➔ Other Tools

Mid-block Crossings

Pedestrians and cyclists need a safer crossing of International Blvd. **High visibility markings and pedestrian refuges on medians are a first step. Where pedestrians demonstrate a need for mid-block crossing along International Blvd is a great place to start and needs to be a priority area for making these improvements.**

Mid-block crossings are used between intersections, typically when blocks are long, or in other locations where speeds are higher than desired, or where sight distances are poor. Pedestrians and cyclists need a safer crossing of International Blvd. Where pedestrians demonstrate a need for mid-block crossing along International Blvd is a great place to start and needs to be a priority area for making these improvements.

High visibility markings and pedestrian refuges on medians are a first step. Pedestrian crossing islands are one of the best tools to simplify crossing wide streets. Used with curb extensions, they get pedestrians out beyond parked cars and other visual obstructions. Crossing islands are used on all categories of streets, and they have their highest return on investment when they create more courteous yielding behaviors by motorists.

The basic principle behind a median island is that the pedestrian crosses half the roadway at a time, much easier than finding a gap long enough to cross all at once, and making the crossing much safer. The pedestrian looks left and crosses to the island, then looks right and crosses the second half of the road. Well-designed crossing islands achieve motorist yielding rates above 80 percent!



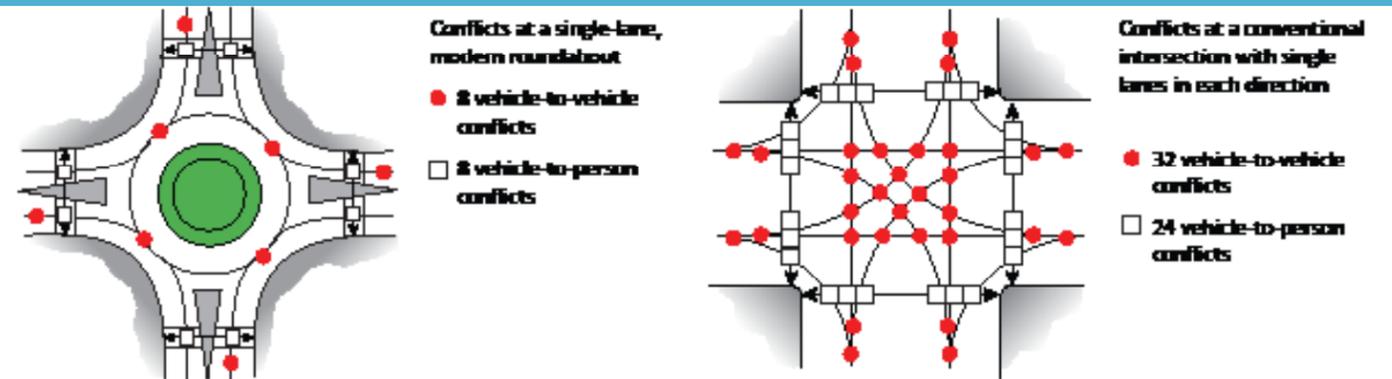
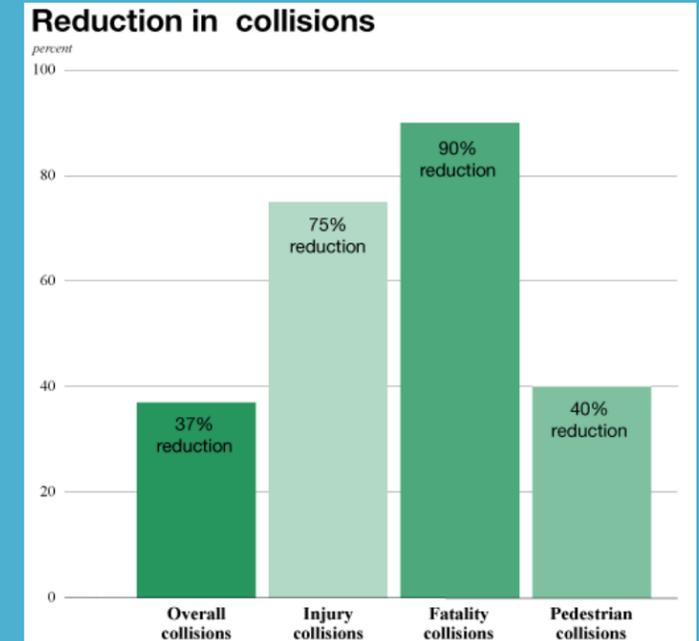
A mid-block crossing on La Jolla Boulevard in Birdrock, CA uses pedestrian activated signals to notify motorists that a pedestrian is present and ready to cross.



A mid-block crossing with curb extensions helps reduce the crossing distance and exposure time of a pedestrian while allowing for on-street parking.

Roundabouts

As pedestrian traffic increases along International Blvd near the border crossing a roundabout will calm traffic, create a safer environment for pedestrians, and become a gateway to downtown, the University and the United States. Roundabouts facilitate through-traffic and turning movements without requiring a signal control. Vehicles circulate around an island that is often used for landscaping, a gateway or for other decorative features, like artwork. The circulating roadway is typically wider than the approach roadways and features an additional 'apron' against the edges of the island; both of these features are for fire trucks, ambulances and other large vehicles. Put in the right places and designed well, roundabouts increase intersection carrying capacity by up to 30 percent and reduce delays for everyone. A roundabout should be studied at the overly wide and complex intersection of International Blvd and the border crossing.



Restore Two-Way Traffic

➡ Designed for Cars: One-Way Traffic



Downtown Brownsville has a strong grid pattern of nearly ideal block form of about 300 to 400 feet. **A traffic circulation study should be done to see if the one-way streets can be restored back to two-way streets.** One-way streets move cars at fast speeds, are not customer-friendly and should be removed from most downtowns. One-way street grids cause “dead blocks” that require circuitous routing to arrive at a destination.



2013 - Elizabeth St.

➡ Design for People: Two-Way Traffic



1920s - Elizabeth St. and 10th St.

Benefits to two-way streets include:

- A two-way downtown street grid allows for simple design and navigation for drivers.
- Narrowing the lanes helps calm traffic and adds important buffer space.
- Allows for easier customer access to local businesses.

Improve Parking Efficiency

Tap into one of Brownsville's most under utilized resources: parking

➔ Raise Parking Rates & Create a Parking Benefit District

We have harmed more land in America by installing massive amounts of 'free' off-street parking. Off-street parking takes up three times more space than on-street parking. On-street parking visually narrows streets and brings down traffic speeds, while providing the most sustainable and affordable parking. Maximizing parking on-street helps to civilize streets that were overbuilt for speed, and provides an economic resource to cities.

On-street parking is one of our most valuable and often under-utilized downtown resources. By managing it well, transportation objectives and other community goals can be achieved. Today, Brownsville's parking meter rate is extremely low—practically free. Working with residents and business owners Brownsville can take better advantage of its parking resource by increasing meter rates, and forming a "community chest," or "parking benefit district," or "business improvement district." These are defined areas in which a portion of the meter revenue is returned to the "district". The revenues help to finance improvements that enhance the public realm, such as lighting upgrades, sidewalk repairs and local plazas and parks, which lead to better retail health, reduced traffic, better access and safety, and an improved, more livable and attractive streetscape

When communities charge fair-market prices for on-street parking and remove off-street parking requirements, they encourage more parking turnover, more walkability, more business activity, and have additional revenue to finance public services. More cities across the nation are recognizing the need to better utilize their parking resource, including Houston. The City of Houston recently created the Washington Avenue Corridor Parking Benefit District. The Parking Benefit District is controlled by a local board of residents and business owners, and makes decisions in how to

invest the money back into the public realm. The public investment enhances the area's economic vitality and quality of life by promoting walking, bicycling, ride sharing and use of public transportation. Houston is not alone in creating parking benefit districts; read about other cities including Old Pasadena here: <http://www.daily.sightline.org/2013/10/04/curb-appeal/>

Other on-street parking benefits include:

- An important buffer between people and cars, and provide "enclosure" that makes a sidewalk more comfortable. It also helps dampen vehicle speeds and makes surrounding areas safer for children, seniors, bicyclists and all other people, including motorists.
- On-street parking only takes up one-half to one-third of the space needed for parking lots and leaves space available for buildings, housing and parks.
- A single parking space in a lively downtown can add up to \$200,000 per year to the local economy.

Of the types of on-street parking available, angled parking is the best:

- It adds from 60 to 110 percent more parking to a street than parallel parking.
- Curb extensions can be much deeper, narrowing exposure of pedestrians.
- Adding tree wells between new angled parking, and also spaced every second space between parallel parking, will do much to help green the downtown area.

Of the types of angled, on-street parking available, "head-out" is the best. Consider that:

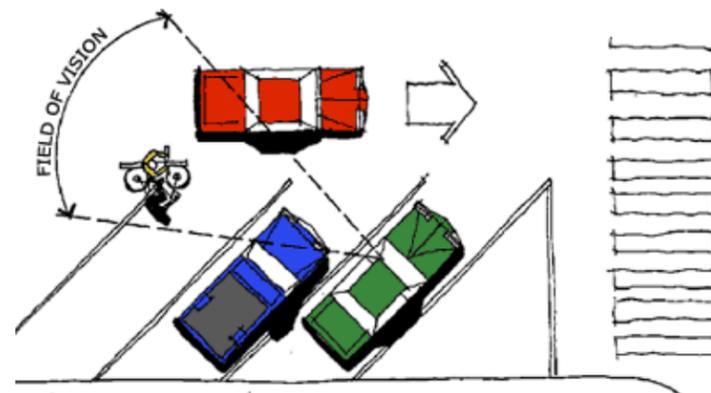
- Normally, the riskiest part of parking is pulling out of the spot. With head-out angled parking, when

you pull out, you have a perfect view of other cars, bicyclists and pedestrians. Head-out angled parking also directs passengers to the sidewalk when car doors are opened, and allows loading of the trunk from the sidewalk instead of from the street.

For examples of how head-out angled parking works, see the free, educational videos available at www.walklive.org.

Start by engaging and educating the business community in the benefits of transforming Brownsville's under utilized resource: parking. Change policies to set a maximum for off-street parking when a new development goes in, instead of requiring a minimum; even better, consider not having a minimum or a maximum at all. Refocus-

ing on on-street parking will help preserve important buildings and allow infill investment. And focus on model projects, such as recreating the historic image of angled parking on Levee Street, only this time with head-out angled parking.



This diagram from the City of Northampton, MA illustrates one of the benefits of head-out angled parking: a driver's ability to see oncoming traffic as they pull out.



Celebrate the arts and beautify downtown by having artists paint the meters in Brownsville; find inspiration from York, Pennsylvania, seen on left.



A business owner joined the walking audit--the business community is ready to be involved in innovative funding partnerships.

Transforming an underused parking area: Pearl Street (Brooklyn)

172% increase in retail sales (at locally-based businesses, compared to 18% borough-wide)

BID held 27 public events in 2012

Maintenance partner agreement

Pedestrian plaza

"Measuring the Street: New Metrics for 21st Century Streets" is a great resource for establishing how performance measures can work for transportation projects and street networks as a whole. Economic value and neighborhood vitality are key concepts. A case study, illustrated above, shows the economic benefit of making better use of under-utilized parking areas. See: <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dot/downloads/pdf/2012-10-measuring-the-street.pdf>

“Town-Gown” Connection

Improved connectivity between the community (town) and the university (gown)

→ Create a More Vibrant and Livable Downtown By Strengthening the City to University Connection

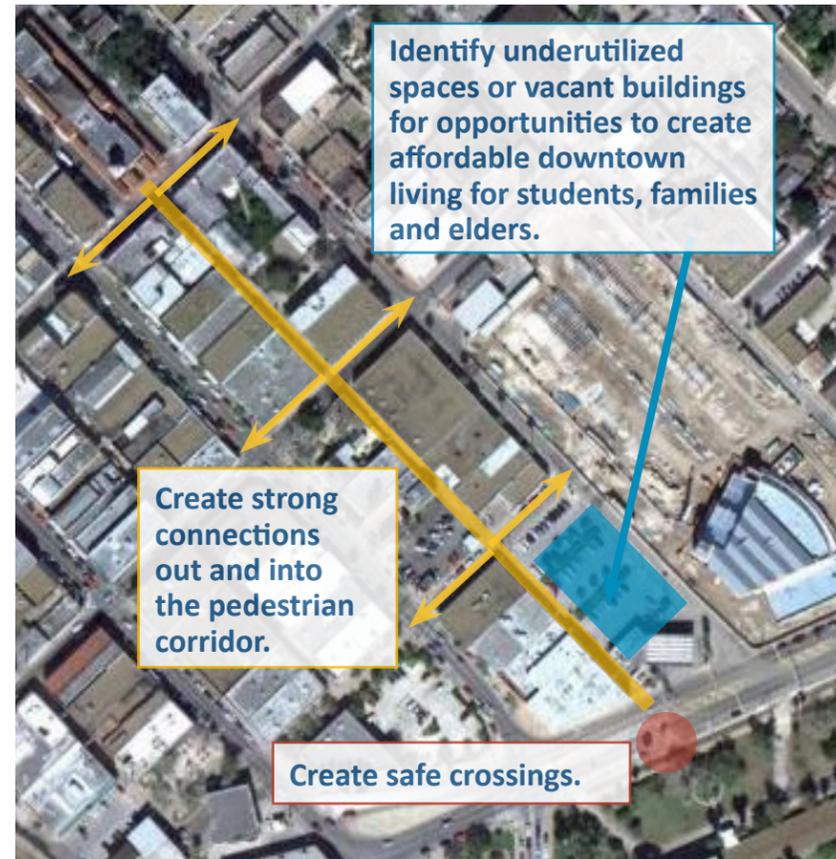
The historic “bones” for a vibrant, thriving downtown are in place in Brownsville. Brownsville is a gem of a city set in the Rio Grande Valley, waiting to be found. The proximity of the University of Texas at Brownsville, the United States’ border with Mexico creates rich opportunities for the city.

The sense of identity through the city’s preservation of its architectural achievements is well established, but the city could use more infrastructure support for modern day active transportation, opportunities for social engagement—places people can gather—and options for living downtown. During the walking audit, it became apparent that the next step for Brownsville should be to honor the past and plan for the future; a future that demands a built environment that supports aging in place, new housing options, mixed-use commerce, and streets that support all users and thus improves the walkability and livability of the community.

Although downtown Brownsville has vibrancy during the day with many people coming over from Mexico to do their shopping, the greater area is still being treated as a place for motorists to pass through, rather than a place to come for enjoyment and enterprise. At the heart of the problem is International Boulevard. International Boulevard is a 6-lane arterial that leads to the International Bridge a physical connection to Mexico, but also a symbol of Brownsville’s history and cultural exchange and ties. International Boulevard bisects the city and the University of Texas at Brownsville, significantly dampening the desire to walk from the campus into downtown. Brownsville, like many communities in America, suffers from the effects of the poorly designed—only built for vehicles—road that has broken street connectivity, creating a barrier between the city-center and college campus.

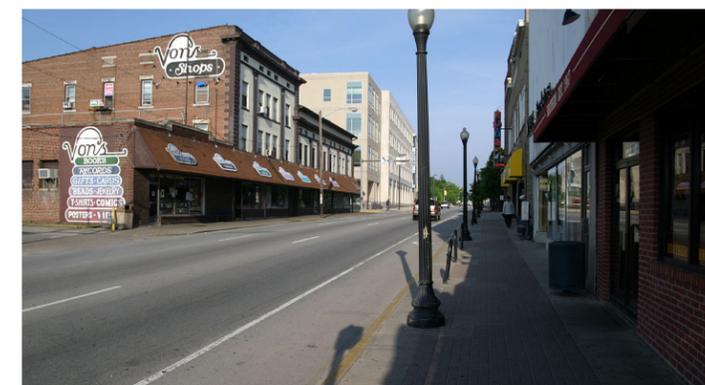
It should be a priority to establish the “town-gown” connection where the community (town) and university (gown) work together to create a safer, more walkable, vibrant and livable city, which includes the University. Brownsville recognizes the need to make a stronger community-to-university, or “town-gown,” connection as stated in the city’s comprehensive plan United Brownsville: “...develop a multi-model alternate concept that provides a plaza with corridor linking University of Texas at Brownsville. This integration of downtown and university will catalyze mixed-use development.” It also will improve the city’s potential for building social capital—the connections between people that tend to be correlated with better public health, higher educational performance and improved public safety.

Revitalizing downtown to create a stronger sense of place that defines Brownsville, based on its history and its original foundation on the Rio Grande River, is critical to attracting Brownsville’s current and future leaders, increasing redevelopment that supports people living downtown and celebrates and promotes cultural attractions. **Start with the downtown core streets and alleys to transform them to places for people, not just cars.** Revitalizing the alleys to pedestrian corridors would provide the natural link from the downtown core to the university. Re-envisioning the alleys could be a catalyst for reinvestment downtown. When there is investment in the public realm private investment follows suit. **Support new zoning that allows for mixed-use and mixed-income residential housing downtown.**



The city of Brownsville identifies the need to strengthen its connection to the university by providing safe corridors for people of all ages. Revitalizing the alley named Bombay Place will help connect key destinations—the university, transit station, central market, bike trail, commerce—and to a catalyst to spur redevelopment.

The two images above are the before and after of an alley in Victoria, BC, Canada.



The transformation of a street in West Lafayette Indiana, in large part due to the city being home of Purdue University.

Re-Envision the Alleys

Envision a healthier future for downtown Brownsville

→ Activating Underused Space

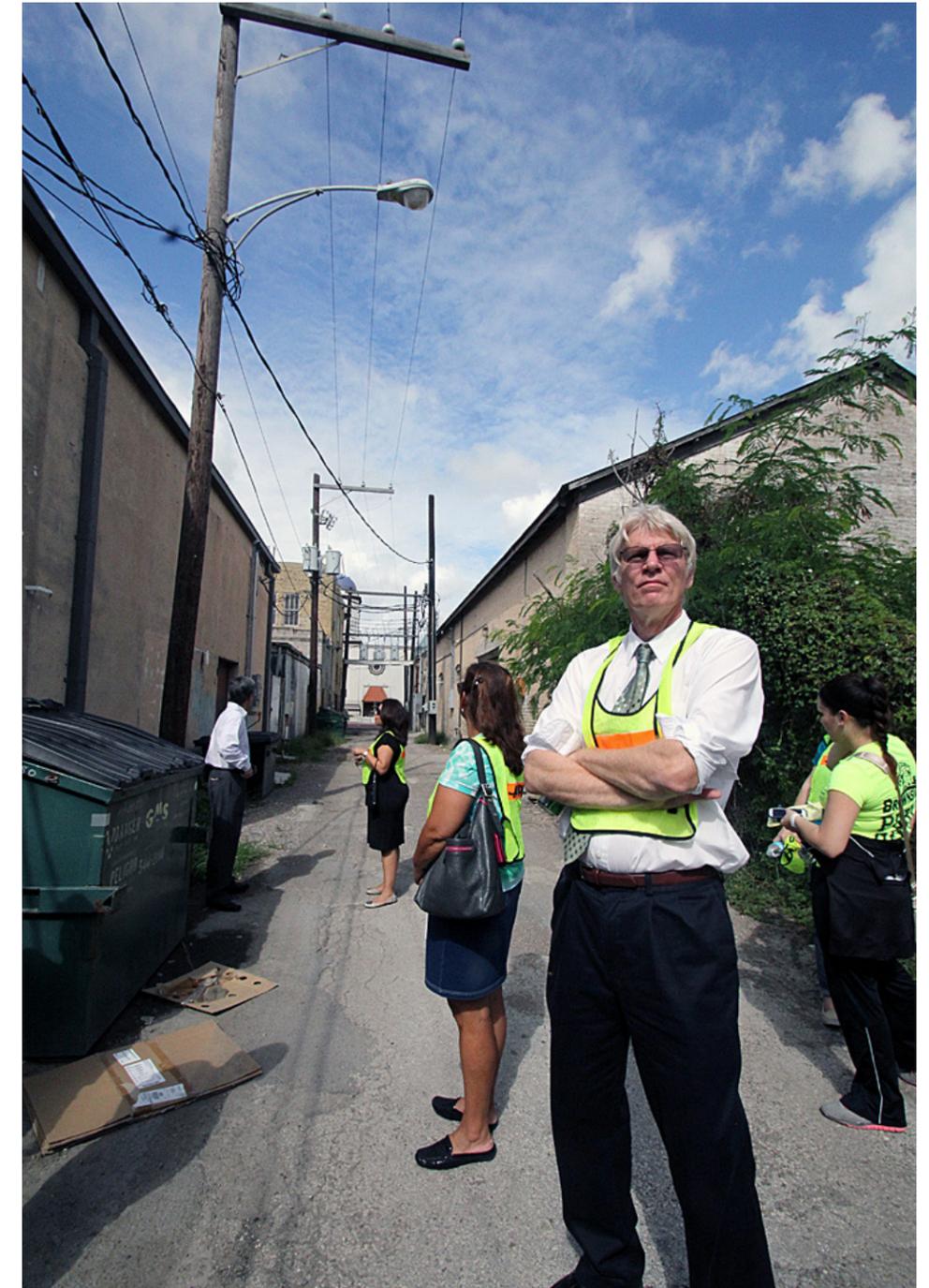
Primary streets in a downtown core are the “A” streets, and in too many places, the “B” streets, or alleys, are left only for parking and deliveries, which doesn’t produce revenue or contribute to a sense of place. In Brownsville there are many opportunities to convert B streets into places where walking trips are important, commerce can take place and people will feel more safe parking.

Reinvestment in alleys, in spaces between buildings, and in other public space brings added value to all buildings and future living units in a town center. Placemaking, like interior decorating, must create a strong, compelling sense that makes time spent in these spaces rewarding and memorable. Consider the public and private realm of a town center as a public/private partnership. Places can be funky and relaxed, but they must be thoughtful, sensitive to place, and maintained.

Alley, plaza, or paseo spaces must be carefully crafted to bring about proper levels of enclosure, transparency, human scale, complexity, imageability and comfort.

In Brownsville there are many opportunities to revitalize downtown, including activating the alleys, which are currently underutilized spaces that don’t feel safe or watched over. Today, the backs, or “B” sides, of the buildings do not honor the alley or plaza spaces or watch over people. When we are observed, we place ‘eyes on the street’ making the community more comfortable, safe and enjoyable. A sense of place is created when buildings watch over the street or alley. Overtime, building owners can create new entrances or store fronts that turn towards the alley. **As this happens, ensure maximum transparency and remove barricades so that 70 percent to 90 percent of the ground floor building is transparent (glass).** The streets and alleys are opportunities for growth by integrating transportation planning, land use planning and economic development together. Integration leads to walkable, people-friendly streets that support individual and community help.

In Brownsville there are many opportunities to revitalize downtown, including activating the alleys, which are currently underutilized spaces that don’t feel safe or watched over.



Envision It

Bombay Place: Photo-vision of a more vibrant, walkable alley



A Vision for Activating Space

First, transform the crumbling and broken alley pavement. Bring new life to the buildings by working with property owners to repair and transform placeless walls into murals featuring the work of local artists and youth. Replace the parking lot with people-focused uses, such as a park or plaza. Celebrate the history of Brownsville and carry the fountains into the activated alley. Minimize the impact of removing the off-street parking by converting extra width in existing rights-of-way to pack streets with on-street parking, which not only is more efficient than off-street, but also has a traffic calming effect. To activate the space more and make people feel welcome and watched over, install pedestrian scaled lighting and shade. Also in the short term, a friendly police presence on foot or bike may be helpful. Consider a city-operated bicycle share program with a kiosk located here. In time, as more people come, new private ventures will be made, as shown with the vacant lot transformed into a new use. Although these transformations are illustrated for a section of Bombay Place, they can and should be applied along the length of the alley towards the University of Texas at Brownsville. By taking the step to build gathering places and quality public space the city is priming the surrounding area for new redevelopment, such as mixed-use buildings, creating a revitalized and more livable downtown.

➔ Transform the alley—Bombay Place—into a true public space that allows people to engage with it and one another.

