

## **Future Kent: Community Design Through Storytelling in the Suburbs**

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## **Abstract**

### **Future Kent: Community Design Through Storytelling in the Suburbs**

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American suburbs are ubiquitous and complex places. They are dynamic and evolving, and popular conceptions of them don't necessarily match reality. Much of this evolution is due to dramatic demographic shifts that have amplified during the past decade. Suburban spatial form does not reflect the diverse needs of changing suburban populations, and the suburban landscape needs to evolve accordingly. For many additional reasons--from climate change, to changing lifestyles, to poor construction quality, the suburban landscape is in need of a retrofit. This fact presents professional designers with the opportunity to examine our preconceptions of these places, attempt to develop a more authentic understanding of their place identities, and make them more resilient and inclusive for the future. In response to stories collected from residents of Kent, WA, this project proposes a design intervention in the suburban landscape that engages a multiplicity of perspectives. This thesis investigates how community design through storytelling can yield a more authentic understanding of a contemporary suburb, and how such a process can include suburban communities in imagining a future alternative.

## Acknowledgements

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## INTRODUCTION

*"There are certain subjects that architectural discourse tends to avoid. These include: the suburbs, the middle-class, marketing... Perhaps their associations with commerce, mass production, and business are what make them so distasteful to those who prefer to focus on architecture as an art-practice."<sup>1</sup> - Ellen Dunham -Jones*

*"Despite all of the problems with sprawl, it remains the predominant model and is immensely popular. Is it therefore appropriate to conclude that this landscape is what 'the people' want?"<sup>2</sup> - William Wimsatt, Washington Post*

### *Why the Suburbs?*

As the fastest growing places on earth for nearly a century, the suburbs cannot be ignored as sites of creative and destructive potential. The American Farmland Trust reports that from 1982 to 2007, "suburban sprawl devoured an area the size of Illinois and New Jersey combined."<sup>3</sup> Accompanying the development of such large tracts of land, between 1970 and 2000 the percentage of the total population living in suburbs grew from 38 percent to 50 percent.<sup>4</sup> For myriad reasons—from federal policy and consumer preference to the enduring myth of the American Dream—the suburbs have grown into the dominant type of built environment in the United States.

As professionals in training who grew up in suburban areas we asked ourselves: why are the suburbs not talked about more in academic architectural discourse? Why is there seemingly a divide between purveyors of architecture and consumers? Why do so many of our peers—who also grew up in the suburbs—choose to study and practice architecture in the city? Architect Ellen Dunham-Jones has observed this professional disconnect with the suburbs, stating that "we recognize that sprawl has undercut the benefits of suburban living and have been disturbed by our professions' general disregard for the vast landscape we grew up in and which now constitutes upwards of 75% of contemporary development."<sup>5</sup> As we try to reconcile our experiences as suburban residents with our formal design training, we want to encourage more conversation between residents of the suburbs and critics of the suburbs, and explore new roles architects can play in shaping suburban environments. How can large-scale suburban development processes be informed by the increasingly diverse needs and motives of suburban residents? Can architects play a role in strengthening the voice of residents in the suburban design process? Can this process be more individualized and incremental to reflect the nuanced but overlooked heterogeneity of today's suburbs?

The timing of this research aligns with the natural aging process of many existing suburbs. Dunham-Jones states that for a number of reasons—from climate change to changing lifestyles to less-than-stellar construction quality, "much of suburbia is due for a retrofit."<sup>6</sup> This fact presents suburban residents and professional designers with the opportunity to decide with intention how the next stage of suburban development should proceed and encourages engagement with the complex and established development patterns of suburbia. This is not just an opportunity to re-evaluate spatial forms and how they relate to the suburban landscape, but a chance to significantly change the suburban design process through conversation and consideration. Professional and academic criticism of the suburbs—while not all unfounded—overshadows the complex lived realities of suburban residents. Paul H. Mattingly, director of New York University's Public History program, has expressed this problem well, stating that "the evidence of most suburban studies ignores testimony of suburbanites themselves and concentrates on the published perceptions of urban planners, architects, realtors, politicians, and publishers whose careers are invariably dominated by urban issues."<sup>7</sup> As we consider how to move forward with suburban retrofits, we must find ways to understand what actually happens in the suburbs, what drives suburban culture, and how residents of the suburbs conceive of their landscape.

Common perceptions of suburbia as a spatially monotonous and socially homogenous place are stubbornly enduring and obscure a more complex story. As architect and critic Peter Lang writes in his book

*Suburban Discipline*, “no longer is the contemporary suburb the stuff of television reruns. Yet television’s diaphanous images have spread a shroud on the American collective conscious. We think we know what happens in the suburbs, but we are missing many sides of the story.”<sup>8</sup> Revealing missing stories is of key importance to developing a more nuanced—and accurate—understanding of suburbia, particularly because individual stories can so easily become buried under the homogenous weight of sprawl’s sameness.

Suburbs are also highly vulnerable to the effects of climate change and peak oil. Prevailing suburban development patterns consume enormous amounts of resources. Sprawling development patterns render the landscape at a low-density and all but require residents to adopt a car-centric lifestyle. The roads, highways, and parking lots that facilitate the suburban lifestyle are all too commonly constructed with no regard to surrounding ecosystems, and their environmental impact grows with each new, sprawling housing tract. And while these environmental conditions certainly warrant immediate action, the rush to use them as excuses to continue the practices of suburban development in an alternative aesthetic guise cannot be expected to produce a socially or environmentally sustainable development process.

Ellen Dunham-Jones contrasts typical suburban development with typical urban development, describing that in urban contexts, “professionals engaged in city making have come to share a pervasive enthusiasm for incremental urbanism—cities that evolve over time through gradual accretions and infill so that the collective form bears the imprint of a broad spectrum of interests.”<sup>9</sup> This piecemeal process was the natural way the built environment developed until the unprecedented scale of suburban development post-World War II. Dunham-Jones believes that current suburban zoning codes and land use practices are too firmly established for incremental processes to take hold today.<sup>10</sup> She also emphasizes that, “at a time when climate change and peak oil prices call for vast swaths of existing suburban areas to be retrofitted on a scale and at a speed that is beyond the capacity of incremental urbanism, it is worth recognizing when the kind of large-scale changes associated with ‘instant cities’ might be welcomed rather than shunned.”<sup>11</sup> Dunham-Jones argues that perceptions of appropriate development methods should be critically examined and the ways in which individuals and communities contribute to the design and development of their suburban places should take center-stage:

“Instead of the traditional ‘good’ populist concerns with collective action for some notion of a public or common good, sprawl shows us the degree to which ‘what the people want’ is no longer considered in collective, populist, or public terms. It is solely measured in terms of individual desires. In this sense, the market now substitutes for the public, and what ‘the people’ want individually has been severed from what ‘the people’ want collectively. Similarly, marketing has reduced any critical notion of counter-publics and multiple publics simply to ‘niche markets.’<sup>12</sup>

In this thesis, we assert that incremental redesign is central to significant change in the suburbs. In spite of emerging environmental and economic crises, socially and environmentally sustainable evolution in suburban form will require incremental change. Desires and experiences of suburban residents must be gathered from individual stories and used in collage to describe what the multiple publics of a place truly want.

The demographic makeup of the suburban public has shifted dramatically over the last 50 years. American suburbs have evolved from their mid-century state of homogenous middle-class enclaves to host

increasingly diverse populations. Since 1980, more immigrants to the United States have settled in suburbs than urban areas.<sup>13</sup> Journalist Alan Ehrenhalt documents demographic, economic, and cultural shifts of the “Great Inversion” that has taken place between cities and suburbs over the past three decades. Ehrenhalt writes that “the U.S. Census Bureau in October 2011 revealed that in the first decade of the new century, poverty increased by 53 percent in the nation’s suburbs, compared to only 26 percent in the cities...[and] in 2005, it is estimated, 4.4 million immigrants went to suburbs and 2.8 million to cities”<sup>14</sup>. Statistics like this highlight the contradictions between suburban reality and our stereotypes about these places. Suburbs are evolving places and our professional perceptions of them should evolve as well.

### *Why Kent?*

To ground our investigation of suburbia we chose a local representative site. We identified three potential sites close enough to Seattle to commute to for research: Shoreline, Issaquah, and Kent. After initial review of the cities and analysis of census data, Kent stood out as being the most in flux: It has a majority-minority population, agriculture and industry, and mirrors some of the issues many other evolving suburbs are facing.<sup>15</sup> In his essay about changing perceptions of the suburbs throughout history, Mattingly emphasizes the importance of these recent demographic shifts, stating “the interaction of distinct social classes needs to become a priority in interpreting suburbia.”<sup>16</sup> Kent is also twenty miles south of Seattle, yielding longer commute times and less connection to the urban center. We found that all three cities have historical museums and a lively community dedicated to preserving their past, but Kent seemed to have the most organized and accessible of the three. This allowed us to connect quickly to an established group of people who are dedicated to Kent’s history as well as its future.

Kent presents multiple suburban typologies built over the last century in stages of development: a streetcar-era historic downtown; tract housing; strip malls; manufacturing and distribution facilities; and a New Urbanism-inspired mall. The dichotomy between new and old is prominent in the city. Layers of history have overlapped, as agriculture led to industry and local and global economies have shifted over time.

First settled in the early 1860s, Kent’s history as an important agricultural area with close proximity to Seattle ports and markets originally attracted a diverse population that significantly diminished during the internment period. In the 1960s, as Boeing began to site operations in Kent, the agricultural valley was transformed into a concrete glacier of factories, offices, malls and warehouses. With the influx of new job opportunities, Kent’s residential districts grew and expanded. Residential development outgrew the historic downtown and sprawled up and over East Hill and west towards the highways of the north/south commute corridor. East Hill was originally comprised of five- to ten-acre farmsteads that continue to be consumed one subdivision at a time. The landscape is now a familiar visual chaos of big boxes, roadside strips, parking lots, and cul-de-sacs.

Kent appears to be a suburban city ripe for change. Developments like Kent Station and ShoWare Center signify a desire for an active and evolving downtown, creating places where people want to be. Organizations exist across the city that work for the betterment of their neighborhood and the city as a whole. Our research and conversations with residents focus on how more voices can contribute to the design of these places and how the stories of various groups and constituencies can inform Kent’s future.

## KENT: A CITY & A SUBURB

### POPULATION

120,916

Seattle  
620,778

### PERSONS (per sq mi)

Seattle  
7,250.9  
3,228.3

### COMMUTE HABITS

74% drive alone

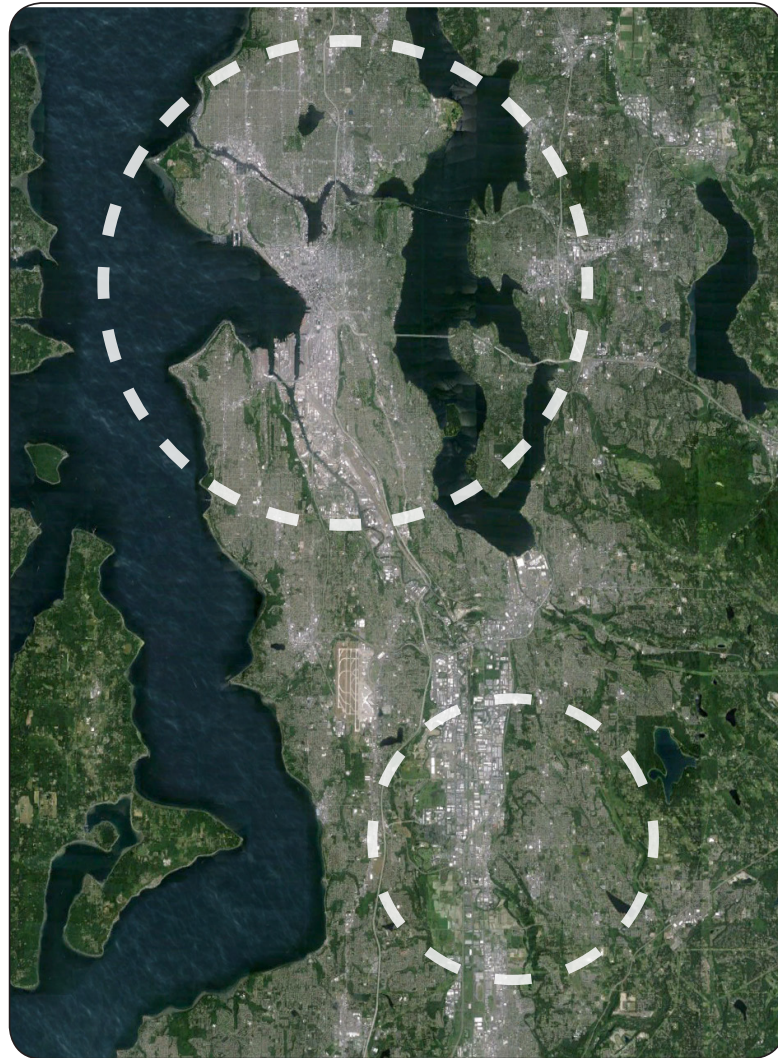
9% take public transit

Seattle  
54% drive alone  
17% take public transit

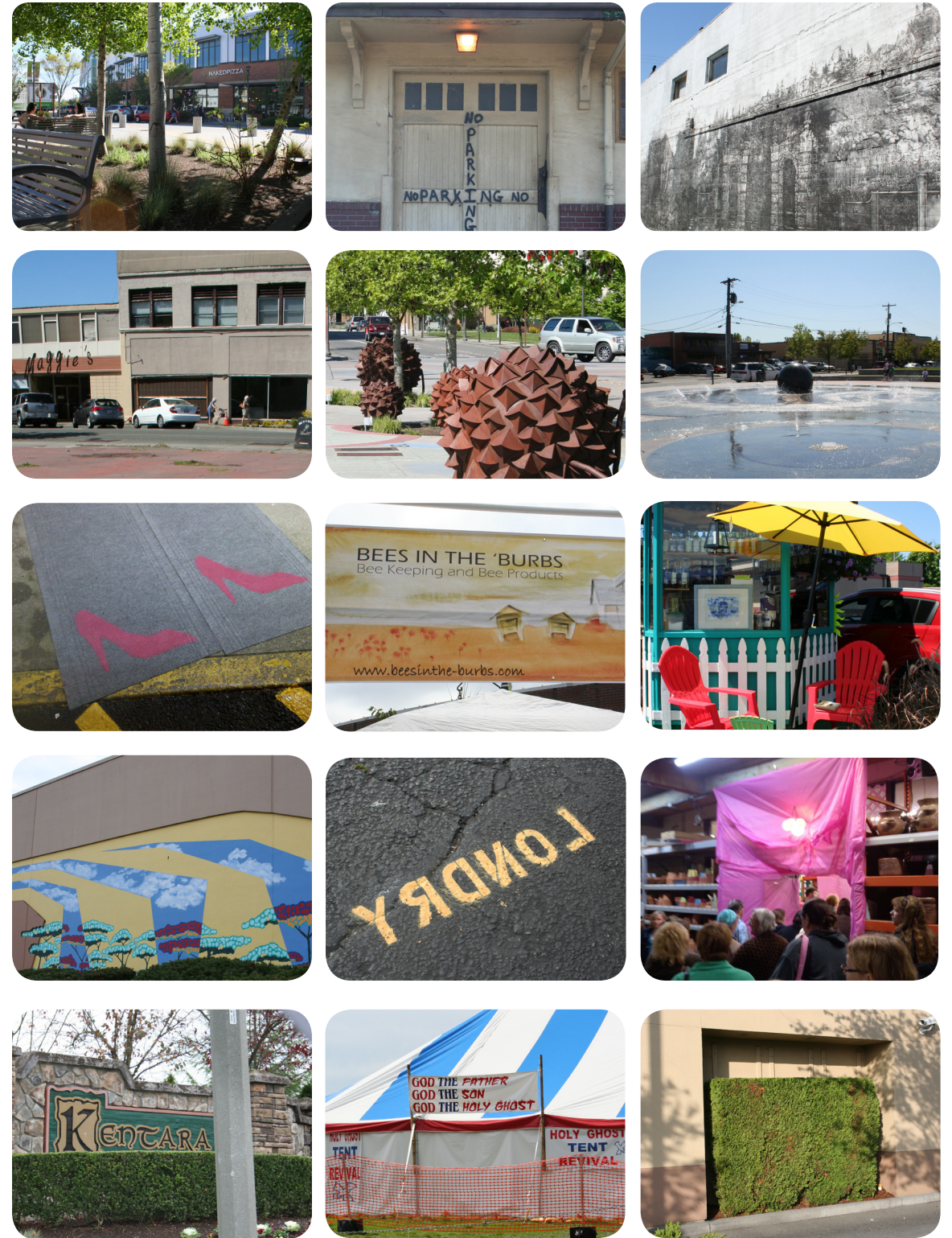
### HOUSING UNITS

Seattle  
308,516  
36,424  
(TOTAL)

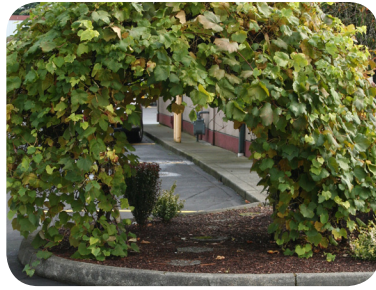
Seattle  
42%  
50%  
(MULTI-UNIT)



(Demographic data from 2010 US Census, United States Census Bureau)



Photos of Historic Downton Kent, Showare, Kent Station, East Hill, and West Hill



Endnotes

- 1 Ellen Dunham-Jones, "New Urbanism's Subversive Marketing" in, *What People Want: Populism in Architecture and Design*, ed. Michael Shamiyeh and DOM Research Laboratory (Basel; Boston: Birkhauser Publishers for Architecture, 2005), 270.
- 2 Ibid, 275.
- 3 William Upski Wimsatt, "Five Myths About the Suburbs." *The Washington Post*, February 11, 2011, accessed December 11, 2013, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/02/11/AR2011021102615.html>.
- 4 "U.S. Population Now 300 Million and Growing," accessed December 11, 2013, <http://www.cnn.com/2006/us/10/17/300.million.over/>.
- 5 Ellen Dunham-Jones and June Williamson. *Retrofitting Suburbia, Updated Edition: Urban Design Solutions for Redesigning Suburbs*. 1st ed. (New Jersey: Wiley, 2011), vi
- 6 Ibid, vi.
- 7 Peter Lang and Tam Miller, eds., *Suburban Discipline* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997), 40.
- 8 Ibid, 7
- 9 Dunham-Jones and Williamson. *Retrofitting Suburbia*, 2.
- 10 Ibid, viii.
- 11 Ibid, 2-3.
- 12 Dunham-Jones, "New Urbanism's Subversive Marketing," 8.
- 13 Alan Ehrenhalt, *The Great Inversion and the Future of the American City*. (New York: Knopf Publishing Group, 2012), 12, 101.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Reuters, "More Poor People Now Live in U.S. Suburbs Than Cities - Study," accessed May 20, 2013 <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/05/20/us-usa-poverty-suburbs-idUSBRE-94JOLF20130520>.
- 16 Lang and Miller, *Suburban Discipline*, 42.

Image Notes

Unless otherwise noted images are original work by authors.

## HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK

*"I admit that I hold the peculiar belief that the value of history is what it teaches us about the future."* - JB Jackson

*"Sustainable or not, the challenge of imagining our transportation future will require a better understanding of our transportation past than most of us now possess."* – Christopher Wells

### *Diversity, Flexibility, and Incremental Development in Early Suburbs*

Popular conceptions and representations of the suburbs tend to focus on stereotypes of spatial monotony and homogenous culture. While this scene was typified by large-scale, post-war, racially segregated tract developments, there have historically been various American suburban typologies, not all of which conform to this dominant image. A re-examination of these past versions of suburbia in the context of current challenges can serve as a helpful starting point for imagining future alternatives. While past and present versions of suburbia seem impossibly different in many ways, they share much of the same spatial and cultural DNA, some of which is latent and awaiting reinterpretation and reinvigoration.

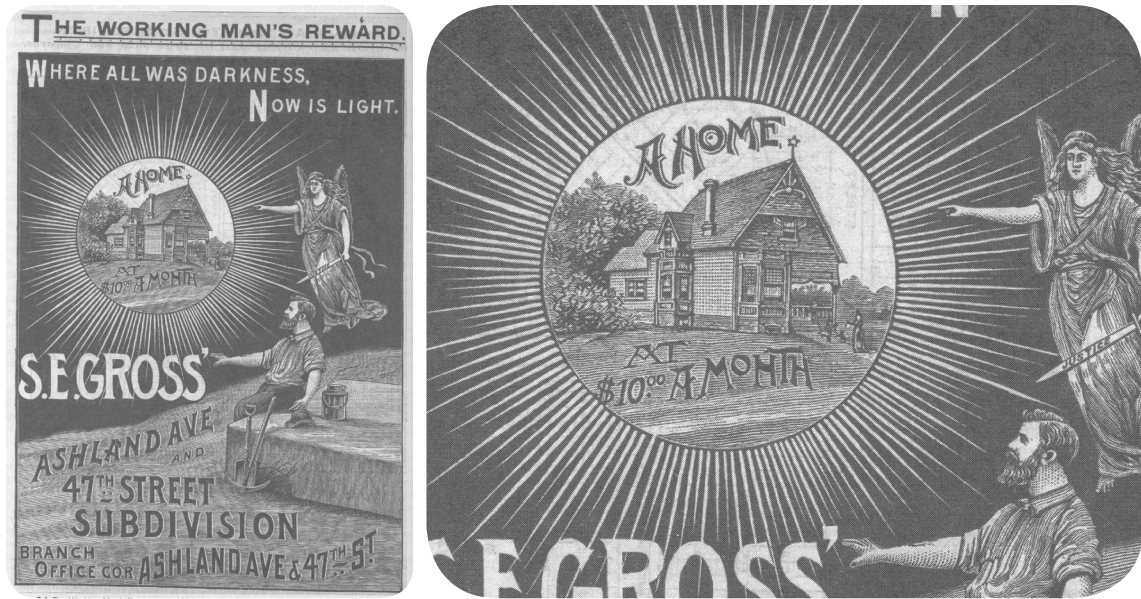
Streetcar suburbs developed in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Various cities on the East Coast provided streetcar service by the early 1850's, and the practice spread to other cities throughout the country in the ensuing decades.<sup>3</sup> Compared to earlier mass-transit options, streetcars presented a faster and more efficient option for moving people from city centers to the urban periphery and made development beyond the city boundaries more desirable and feasible. Named for their location along interurban rail lines, streetcar suburbs were designed to provide working class families with a suburban alternative to inner-city slums. Fast and affordable connectivity via the streetcars enabled workers to commute to blue-collar jobs in the urban core while pursuing the benefits of homeownership.

These working class enclaves were often socioeconomically and racially diverse, and residents often acted as incremental developers of their own plots of land. Urban historian Becky Nicolaides has written extensively on the evolution of these suburbs between 1920-1940, when private property served not only as a place for dwelling but as a financial safety net.<sup>4</sup> While Nicolaides focuses on South Gate, CA as a case study, she emphasizes that the story of South Gate is not unique, but common to the working class suburbs of many other metropolitan regions, including Toronto, Detroit, Milwaukee, Chicago, and Cleveland.<sup>5</sup> Nicolaides describes how many residents capitalized on the newfound autonomy of land and home ownership, building their own homes and using the land as productively as possible. Nicolaides argues that these building practices are a suburban adaptation of a broader pattern of owner-builder informal housing that took root among the urban working class during the Gilded Age.<sup>6</sup> As Nicolaides describes,

*"In many working-class suburbs, residents turned their domestic property into sites of production, growing fruits and vegetables and raising small livestock in backyards as a means of family sustenance.... Seeking to minimize their dependence on cash, many residents built homes for themselves.... Informal housing was frequently self-produced, small in scale, modest, and often jerry-built...the productive ways that residents used their property is yet further evidence that the urbanization process, as experienced by individuals, was an incremental one."*<sup>7</sup>

These patterns of development created suburban environments where layers of investment, initiative, and complexity were added over time in response to individual needs and resources. Rather than tract developments built en masse, these working class suburbs were developed through the wants and needs of smaller scale property owners and individual residents.

While these processes reveal the self-reliance and independence that would come to define working



a) "The Working Man's Reward," 1891.

class suburban identity, they also reveal a mode of suburban development largely suppressed in the post-war era. Nicolaidis describes these suburbs as highly resilient places where many residents had to reconcile urban and rural conditions, and likens this transitional spatial quality to Louis Wirth's description of urban evolution:

"Because the city is the product of growth rather than of instantaneous creation, it is to be expected that the influences which it exerts upon the modes of life should not be able to wipe out completely the previously dominant modes of human association. To a greater or lesser degree, therefore, our social life bears the imprint of an earlier folk society, the characteristic modes of settlement of which were the farm, the manor, and the village."<sup>8</sup>

Working class suburbs exhibited many spatial features and processes seemingly incompatible with the comparatively "instantaneous creation" of the post-war suburb.

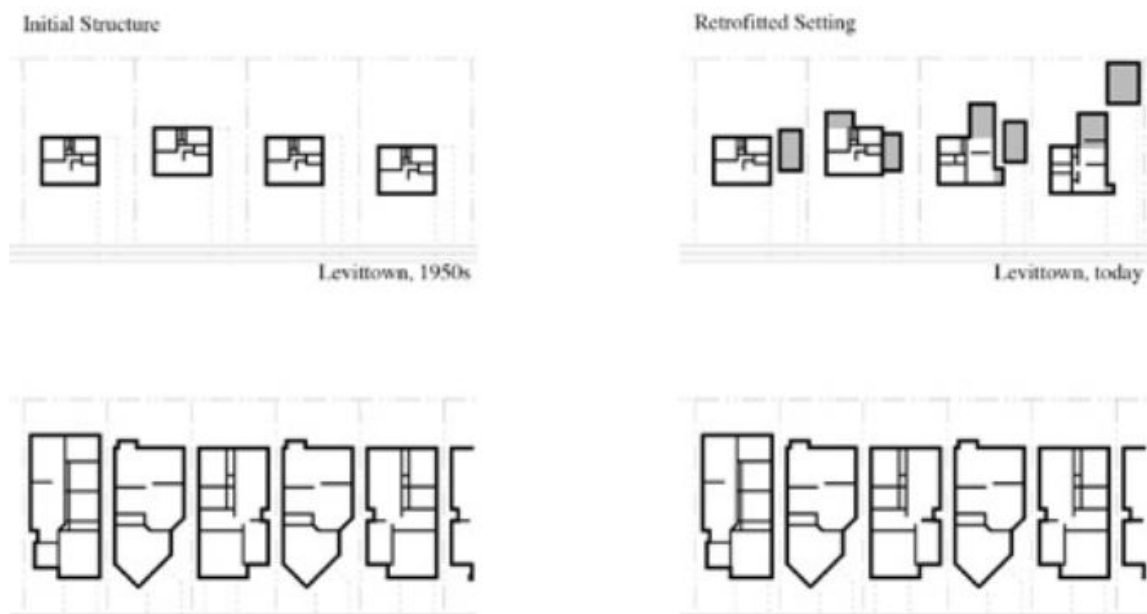
Surprisingly, early renditions of the post-war suburban typology actually did make attempts to allow for incremental development at the large scale of federal housing development. Architect and educator Keller Easterling details federal efforts throughout the 1920's and 1930's by the U.S. Housing Corporation, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), and the Regional Planning Association of America (RPAA) to apply Garden City design methods to new suburb design. Design professionals developed the plans with the best "subdivision science" in mind, carefully balancing "open space, infrastructure, public buildings, and residential areas" and developed complex protocols for "successive growth phases," with individual lots being sold over an extended period of time.<sup>9</sup> However with the National Housing Act of 1934, FHA support of a more nuanced approach to suburban development was abandoned in favor of a more efficient process to make the most of housing as an economic catalyst. As Easterling describes,

"Traditional development protocols were replaced by protocols for product distribution or financial structures. They were often expressed not as functional relationships, developing over time, but rather as templates that formatted the entire organization at once. The intent over the coming years was to establish the subdivision as a relatively inactive organization, one that achieved financial stability by establishing a single static relationship among its parts and maintaining that relationship over the life of a mortgage. The subdivision was primarily formatted to absorb products, and these products would be its chief source of differentiation."<sup>10</sup>

This shift in suburban development protocols crafted the suburbs as a blank canvas for postwar privatization and commodification, when consumerism would come to function as a dynamic applique to the static subdivision.

Compounding the challenges of the economic ethos, a cruel twist of graphic representation seeded many misinterpretations of the RPAA's early suburban plans. The design documents produced for these exemplars of "subdivision science" did not communicate the RPAA's more complex ideas about incremental, phased development or individual lot variances--rather, the completed plans were understood and later applied as prescriptive "planimetrics," a static composition that many thought would yield the ideal subdivision.<sup>11</sup> The potential for suburban development to occur as a phased, incremental project was overshadowed by their formal imagery.

While incremental development was inherent to the design of some early suburbs, it has also been introduced after the fact to existing suburbs. Renee Chow explores the effects of decades of shrinking lot sizes and growing house footprints on the capacity for homeowner-instituted change. As suburbs have evolved and houses have been built to occupy a larger percentage of the lot, the potential for phased additions or alternate lot uses has diminished. This lack of flexibility has discouraged owner personalization and reinvestment and encouraged transitory home ownership: rather than a house that changes with a resident's needs over time, residents move out when their needs change.<sup>12</sup> This prioritizes the house as a commodity rather than a catalyst for community. Chow proposes that Levittown--often used as the exemplar of the ills of the postwar suburb--actually has allowed for more incremental development over time than many of its suburban descendants because of its asymmetrical siting and small house to lot ratio.<sup>13</sup> Beyond flexibility and adaptability, the capacity for incremental development can have meaningful implications for the qualities of a place. Chow asserts that "suburban settings should have the potential to convey and receive impressions, to inspire a dialogue between place and inhabitants that grows rich over time with a range of interpretations."<sup>14</sup> Conceiving of suburbs as incrementally evolving landscapes allows designers to imagine iterative changes to their dominant, existing fabric.



b) (top) Levittown past and present—generous lot to house ratios allow for owner-driven incremental development over time. (bottom) Contemporary lot to house ratios leave little room for incremental development.

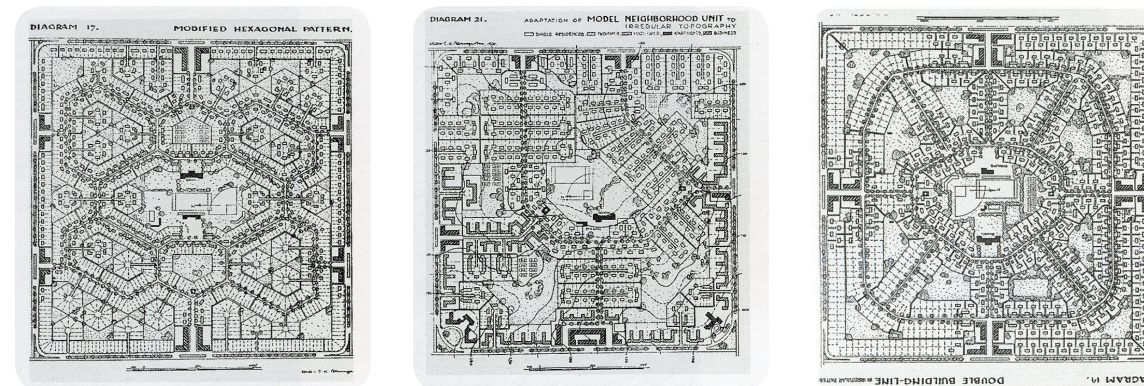
### The Myth of the American Dream

While suburbs existed in various incarnations prior to World War II, the war was a significant turning point in the spatial and rhetorical evolution of the American suburb. The political, economic, and cultural shifts that took place during the war and its aftermath resulted in a complex—and at times carefully calculated—interplay of government policy, mass marketing, and individual aspirations. This mix of factors produced a suburban landscape and culture significantly divergent from preceding examples.

To contextualize the significant shifts in post-war government housing policy and practice, it is necessary to return to the New Deal era. The federal government's first foray into large-scale planned housing development transpired through the work of the RPAA, the Resettlement Administration (RA), and the Greenbelt Towns Program.<sup>15</sup> While the RA was primarily focused on resettling the rural poor in the wake of the Dust Bowl—many of whom had migrated to urban slums—its Greenbelt Towns Program was an ambitious, progressive effort to address both urban and rural issues holistically through suburban development.

The program proposed building suburban new towns at the city periphery to re-house urban slum residents, thereby clearing the blighted urban areas for city parks.<sup>16</sup> The three greenbelt towns that were eventually constructed—Greenbrook, New Jersey, Greendale, Wisconsin, and Greenbelt, Maryland—were professionally designed. The towns employed RPAA devices that were innovative at the time—the super block, the cul-de-sac, and the interior green—but through subsequent misinterpretations have come to function quite

differently from their original intents. For instance, the interior green that ran between and behind housing lots featured an extensive pedestrian network, and the cul-de-sacs were designed to connect to the greens as “exchange points” between vehicular and pedestrian modes.<sup>17</sup> The towns also featured single- and multi-family housing, and employed a variety of siting and grouping techniques to modulate communal space and create a semblance of a street wall.<sup>18</sup> In theory, these elements could have proved a successful formula for introducing public space and spatial heterogeneity to the suburbs, but the functional nuance of the RPAA designs was never realized in later imitations.



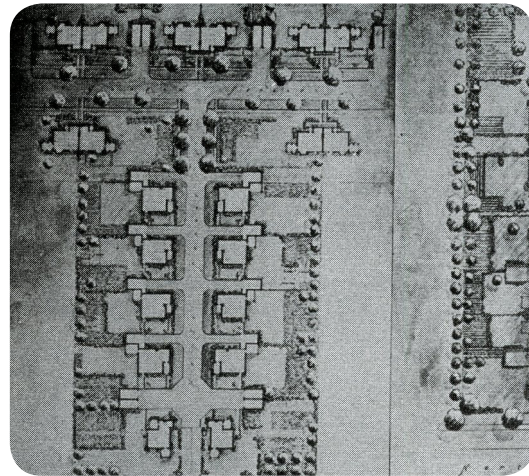
c) Early suburban planners created prototypical development plans that failed to convey complex phasing, timing, and financing strategies. Diagrams from the President's Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership, Vol.1 *Planning for Residential Districts in Washington*, from the Harvard City Planning Series.

Despite the notable planning and design innovations and the apparent promise these towns held for a more nuanced suburban landscape, their success and widespread implementation was hampered by the negative political connotations of overt government involvement. Easterling describes a series of criticisms leveled against these suburban towns that seem shocking when contrasted with post-war perceptions of the suburbs:

“Greenbelt citizens were labeled ‘long-haired New Dealers’ conducting a ‘dangerous communist experiment.’ Some residents were even dismissed from their government jobs as security risks. The towns were criticized for their expense, for competing with private enterprise, and for encouraging social regimentation. Detractors even raised questions about the collective structures of the town like the cooperative grocery store. All these factors gave the conservative private enterprise lobbies ammunition to defeat the greenbelt idea as a model for suburban development after World War II.”<sup>19</sup>

The Greenbelt towns offer a startlingly different interpretation of the suburban landscape, and they were an early front in the battle to politically define suburban culture and identity. They are also an informative backdrop for the tightly controlled narratives that defined suburbia in the post-war period.

The unique cultural circumstances of post-war American society made a unified American identity politically marketable.<sup>20</sup> Wartime propaganda simplified national identity through a series of dichotomies:

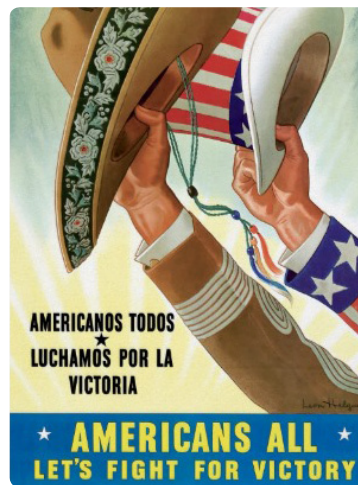


d) Greendale, WI: A "Dangerous Communist Experiment"?

wartime/peacetime, us/them, freedom/tyranny, and right/wrong, and these conventions seeped into post-war residential and commercial advertisements in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. A Kelvinator refrigerator ad from 1944 declares their refrigerator "the heart of your postwar kitchen," but the actual product ad is subordinate to the photo and narrative of the young couple and their dream for a "fairy tale place" to spend their first Christmas together after the war.<sup>21</sup> An advertisement for Victory Homes and General Electric appliances employs similar devices, depicting a soldier and his girl embracing on a park bench while he draws the outline of a house in the sand. The ad copy assures the reader that the house is not merely a house, but "a symbol of faith and hope and courage... [and] a promise of gloriously happy days to come."<sup>22</sup> A film of the "House of the Future," sponsored by Monsanto and installed in Disneyland's Tomorrowland in 1957, portrayed the ideal home as a place where dreams of a better, easier life could be realized through the immediacy of consumer products--from the house itself down to the small objects contained within it.<sup>23</sup> To contrast the "working class" identity of many prewar suburbs, the emerging identity of a postwar middle class homeowner "...came to depend less on occupation, more on possessions and way of life--what a person consumed and how he behaved were more important than what he did for a living."<sup>24</sup>

A lifestyle of consumption fit into the larger myth of the suburbs as a product of the free market. While there were undoubtedly a number of market forces converging to create a growth medium for postwar housing--an influx of veterans in need of housing and wartime industries in need of peacetime production modes--federal subsidies and policies were the driving force behind the postwar housing boom, defining the parameters of the market and ensuring it was adequately funded.

Contrasting the overt government sponsorship characteristic of the New Deal development efforts, the federal government's role in postwar development was obscured through partnerships with private industry and the subsequent privatization of public funds. Cultural landscape historian Dolores Hayden, historian Kenneth Jackson, and others have written extensively on the importance of this process, explaining that powerful groups like the National Association of Real Estate Boards (NAREB) lobbied for federal legislation that



e) "United" f) "Americans All" g) "When You Ride Alone..." h) "After Total War..." i) "Its a Promise" (General Electric) j) "Home, Home at Last..." (Kelvinatory)

would benefit individual homeowners and the homebuilding industry, including "FHA and VA programs for mortgage loan insurance; homeowner mortgage interest deductions from income tax; interstate highway subsidies funded by gasoline taxes; and tax deductions for accelerated depreciation on commercial real estate."<sup>25</sup> Hayden points out that because these policies were more "indirect" than the earlier federal development efforts of the New Deal, the government avoided much of the criticism that characterized the earlier Greenbelt Towns Program:

"By providing subsidies indirectly, through loan guarantee programs or manipulation of the tax codes, the federal government avoided extensive scrutiny of the politics behind public funding for privately owned space. Few requirements for infrastructure (sewer systems, schools, transit), public amenities (open space), or public access accompanied indirect subsidy programs. While all of these programs

have been critiqued, their cumulative impact on private and public space has not yet been fully assessed.<sup>26</sup>

Between 1946 and 1953 private developers built ten million new homes, and the population of the larger subdivisions was between 50,000 and 80,000—as large as some cities.<sup>27</sup> Postwar federal policies funded and facilitated individual homeownership and created a market in which private developers were able to acquire, create, and control large portions of the new residential landscape, without any of the comprehensive design, planning, and oversight that had been central to New Deal efforts like the Greenbelt Towns Program. While there were obvious practical benefits to these policies—affordability, rapid mitigation of housing shortages, and an economic boom, there were of course more insidious, long term effects as well.

The rapid proliferation of suburban housing tracts represented an extensive investment of federal dollars in the form of mortgage loans and subsidies. In economic terms, houses had become commodities and protecting the investment represented therein was in the best interest of homeowners, banks, and the federal government. Attempts to standardize and rationalize building, loaning, and appraisal practices in the interest of managing financial risk led to policies that permitted and reinforced racism through red-lining subdivisions and exclusionary lending practices. Princeton historian David Freund describes this interplay of economic policy and social politics in more detail, stating,

“In addition to creating wealth for some while helping to marginalize others, federal intervention also helped create and popularize a unique postwar political narrative that obscured the origins of race and class inequality in the modern metropolis. Paradoxically, the state helped popularize the myth that “free market” forces, alone, were responsible for the gulf—economic and, increasingly, spatial, that separated the nation’s haves from its have-nots... [white middle class] investment in this story holds special importance for our understanding of politics and culture after World War II, because suburban whites invoked the narrative and constantly elaborated upon it to justify racial exclusion.”<sup>28</sup>

Despite the seminal importance and influence of federal funding and policy, the narrative of postwar development was one of populist economic determinism rather than a more realistic portrayal of the power of big government. The devaluation of public entities in favor of private enterprise had enduring consequences for the spatial and cultural character of the suburbs. This focus directly influenced the nascent and evolving suburban identity. Suburban residents came to understand their new “middle class” lifestyle as one of self-actualization rather than government facilitation—and the more complex social repercussions of that facilitation were overpowered by the dominant narrative of American democracy, capitalism, and individualism.

#### *Privatization and the Public Realm*

As landscape architect and educator Jeffrey Hou succinctly states, “form follows capital.”<sup>29</sup> The policies and economics of privatization in the suburbs led to spatial forms and practices of privatization, which in turn had significant effects on social identity and physical space. The characteristics that came to define what it meant to be a middle class suburban resident were focused on the individual, or individual family unit, from

the realization of an ideal lifestyle within the personal space of the home to the individual wealth represented in the purchase of a home. The spatial reality of the suburbs was one of individualism as well—single family houses were the defining suburban building typology rather than multi-family residences; private retreats in the form of homes and cars prevailed over shared gathering places or other modes of transport.

The marketing and design of the single family detached home reinforced normative (and to many extents, idealized and romanticized) family structures and gender roles: a breadwinner-husband and father who would commute to the city for work and a happy housewife and mother who would tend to the suburban home and the children.<sup>30</sup> The economies and construction methods of mass-produced housing did not provide for much spatial variation within homes for “alternative family arrangements” and reinforced the normative family identity.<sup>31</sup> This image of the family became part of the self-defining and self-reinforcing cycle of suburban identity marketing and manufacturing.

While the single family home was structured around the private life of the individual and their immediate family, the “public” space of the suburbs was structured around the movement and consumption habits of collective individuals. The highways, roads, parking lots, and driveways that facilitate the suburban lifestyle are also its most dominant spatial elements. Richard Sennett explores the consequences to public space of “making space contingent upon motion,” lamenting the transformation of public space as “an area to move through, not be in.”<sup>32</sup> Sennett asserts that such a relationship between the individual and public space can only result in an isolated, non-public existence and concludes that “...as one can isolate oneself, in a private automobile, for freedom of movement, one ceases to believe one’s surroundings have any meaning save as a means toward the end of one’s own motion.”<sup>33</sup> In the suburbs, the “end of one’s own motion” is most typically a venue of consumption—whether a roadside retail strip, a mall, or a big box store.

Given the role private companies and lobbies played in the formation of the suburbs, it is not surprising that they continued to exert influence over the evolution of the landscape. While it is tempting to simply characterize suburban roadside architecture as an opportunistic, “free market” response to pervasive infrastructure, Hayden outlines a more calculated evolution of the consumption landscape, describing prevailing postwar government and industry concerns about maintaining economic momentum after the war.<sup>34</sup> Promotional partnerships between tract developers, appliance companies, and power utilities were quite common, and pushed the notion that household electric appliances were integral to the ideal suburban existence.<sup>35</sup> Federal tax policies that were part of the postwar development package provided significant tax write offs for “every type of income-producing structure... motels, fast food restaurants, offices, rental apartments, and of course, shopping centers.”<sup>36</sup> These types of structures quickly filled the undeveloped land between housing tracts, eventually propagating beyond the suburban edge and encouraging its continued expansion.

The effects of privatization on public space are key to understanding the dominant suburban lifestyle and culture. In his discussion of the “spectacle of ordinary building” that defines the suburban landscape, Mitchell Schwarzer invokes Guy Debord’s definition of spectacle: “the moment when the commodity has attained the total occupation of social life.”<sup>37</sup> Schwarzer analyzes the relationship between spectacle and the

built reality of the suburbs, explaining,

“...the commodity--the central feature of the marketplace system in which needs and desires are channeled through purchases--has come nearly to dominate the built landscape of the United States. Today the weight of relentless consumption lies heavy on ordinary architecture, from single-family houses to big-box stores and office parks.”<sup>38</sup>

Schwarzer points out that the spectacle of commodity is not new or unique to the suburbs, but that the evolution of the suburban landscape has exhibited “new and higher levels of building commodification.”<sup>39</sup> Sennett also discusses the historic trends of the spectacle of commodity and uses the Marxist term “commodity fetishism” to describe the social preoccupation with the “tantalizing mysteries” of consumable products.<sup>40</sup>

Sennett posits that this pervasive culture of consumerism leads to private, individual behavior and compromises the public realm, but is also careful to point out that people are willing participants in the process:

“The interaction of capitalism and public geography thus pulled in two directions; one was withdrawal from the public into the family, the other was a new confusion about the materials of public appearance, a confusion which, however, could be turned to a profit. It might therefore be tempting to conclude that industrial capitalism alone caused the public realm to lose legitimacy and coherence, but the conclusion would be inadmissible even on its own terms. What after all prompted people to believe these physical goods, so uniform, could have psychological associations? Why believe in a thing as though it were human?”<sup>41</sup>

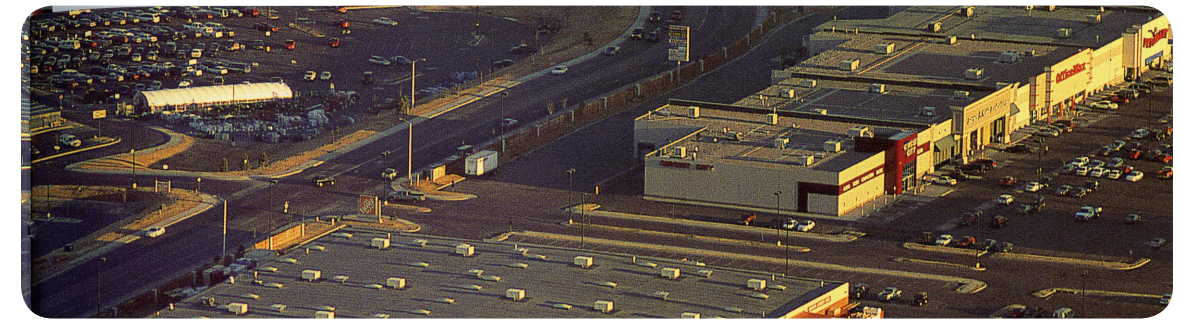
Sennett emphasizes that although the privatized consumption landscape has undeniable influence on the quality of the public realm, its power and resilience is dependent upon the will of the consumer. Residents of postwar suburbs were captive and willing consumers in this rapidly expanding consumption landscape that defined suburban “public” space and suburban community identity. Consequently, consumer goods were essential in cultivating and communicating an individual’s public identity.

The abstract and subconscious interplay between individual identity and consumption has had real, physical long-term effects on the suburban “public” realm. The majority of the suburban built environment not devoted to tracts of single-family homes is engineered to facilitate the collective movement of single-family vehicles between the private home and private commercial establishments. While there are of course public parks, schools, and civic buildings in the suburbs, the dominant spatial structure and experience prioritizes and encourages individual over collective behavior. These structural characteristics define the privatized suburban landscape and have influenced behavior, lifestyle, and culture over time. Hou argues that such forces are not easily overpowered, stating, “in a world defined by private property, the formation of a public sphere that is at all robust and inclusive is exceedingly difficult...the privatization and commercialization of space have turned our complex, multi-use public space into a one-dimensional venue for consumption.”<sup>42</sup> How can we accommodate more varied spaces and social interactions in this postindustrial capitalist landscape?

Designer and critic John Chase has written that “in contemporary American society, cultural meaning

is largely created through consumerism, through the means of consumption and production.”<sup>43</sup> As architects, planners, and other design professionals turn their attention to the suburbs they do so with the hope of creating alternate channels for cultural meaning: places that will allow for more public interaction, a diversity of experiences, and spontaneity and improvisation. Chase argues that if designers are to have a meaningful effect on the suburban landscape and lifestyle, their efforts must engage the will of the consumer.

In *Sprawl and Suburbia*, architect and educator William Saunders acknowledges that the consumer is essential to change, but is not the sole answer. He writes that some critics think that “the ‘popular will’ in the form of ‘consumer preference’ will be the ‘self-correcting mechanism’ that will transform sprawl, but this market optimism underestimates the structural barriers to significant innovation.”<sup>44</sup> But what if the structural barriers



k) The spectacular strip

of suburban development are viewed instead as opportunities--constraints to inspire creativity? How can architects experiment within these constraints, engage the will of the consumer, and apply the established means of development to a different end? Chase argues that architects and designers should not avoid the topic of consumerism, but should rather attempt to “invest consumerist architecture with both traditional populist and architectural values.”<sup>45</sup> Could the elements needed for a public realm be packaged, branded, and positioned within the consumption landscape to engage the consumer in an activity geared towards a collective, public experience rather than an individual, private experience? The methodological framework outlined in this document attempts to understand the structural barriers to suburban redesign, propose ways to engage with them, and create alternative interpretations of those structures in order to envision new kinds of suburban space.

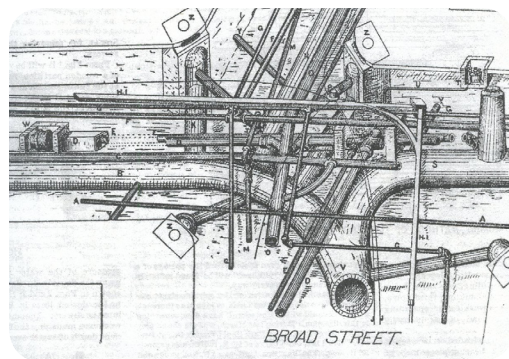
#### *Cars and Parking: An Overview*

#### *Roads Throughout History*

Highways and roads were significant features of the landscape long before the advent of the car. Formal signage designating “Royal Roads” were common in the Assyrian empire during the seventh century BC.<sup>46</sup> Networks of roads in first the Greek Empire and then Roman Empire facilitated economic and cultural exchange, pilgrimage, and expressed a “visible bond of a larger unity.”<sup>47</sup> Similarly, parking has been an issue

whenever and wherever there have been people sharing space. During Julius Caesar's rule from 49-44 BC, chariots and carts were subject to strict "off-street parking laws" requiring them to store their vehicles in special zones to control congestion.<sup>48</sup>

The history of roads and parking in the United States similarly predates the modern technology of the car. Horses and wagons were routinely "parked," "curbed," or stationed at an angle at the side of the road, and your animal or vehicle of transport could even be towed away in New York City as early as 1690.<sup>49</sup> Prior to the 1890's, urban and rural roads served different functions and were used towards different ends. Rural roads facilitated local farming economies and were maintained seasonally by the farmers themselves, while urban streets were increasingly becoming the focus of public health initiatives to combat the unsanitary results of tenement overcrowding, industrialization and poor waste management.<sup>50</sup> The rapid industrialization of urban areas and their increasing cultural influence spawned a shift from conceiving of roads as "organic entities" formed through patterns of use and movement to "man-made instruments for achieving social and economic goals."<sup>51</sup> This also resulted in a general shift from localized to centralized control of roads. In urban areas roads were a figurative and literal lid for a newly engineered landscape to manage waste and disease, organize new infrastructure, and impose order on "nature run amok."<sup>52</sup> This also resulted in improvements that focused on the needs of travellers or machines using the roads, not residents living alongside the roads.<sup>53</sup>



l) Typical rural road conditions in the 1890's m) An engineer's sketch of underground infrastructure in New York City, 1890 n) Horse manure and garbage on a residential street, New York City, 1893

### Roads and Parking Lots as a Social Space

Urban streets served as an impromptu social space--albeit an unsanitary one--during the tenement era: amidst poor living conditions, residents and proprietors often retreated outside their residence to the streets for informal gathering, socializing, and business.<sup>54</sup> In the 1890's, when trying to convince farmers of the virtues of rural road improvements, "good roads" advocates touted the "immense social advantages" of better mobility and connectivity. Advocates portrayed farmers as "lonely" and "isolated," unable to socialize with neighbors for want of a flat, reliable traveling surface.<sup>55</sup>

In the ongoing battle to sell rural residents on the benefits of new paving techniques and materials, roads were treated as a consumable, sellable product. Prior to the mass-production of affordable cars, cyclists were some of the most vocal and organized proponents for roads improvements. The League of American Wheelmen--an organization of urban cyclists--became a powerful political group, lobbying for road legislation, distributing road improvement pamphlets, and even launched a magazine entitled *Good Roads* in 1892.<sup>56</sup> Throughout the 1890's, the Office of Public Road Inquiries (part of the Department of Agriculture) staged publicity events they referred to as the "object-lesson roads program," where they would install a sample stretch of newly paved road for people to try and inevitably covet.<sup>57</sup> They also had "Good Roads Trains," travel-by-rail publicity tours that would show off new road construction equipment, distribute promotional literature, and make persuasive speeches on the benefits of new roads.<sup>58</sup> An important tipping point in the battle to turn rural residents into new road advocates was the advent of the United States Post Office's Rural Free Delivery (RFD) program in 1896.<sup>59</sup> RFD improved upon previous rural mail service (requiring residents to retrieve their mail from the nearest post office) and promised direct-to-recipient delivery of mail and mail-order goods on the condition that roads were "passable."<sup>60</sup> Thus, roads came to be seen not only as a symbol of progress and triumph over nature, but as an important economic tool as well, allowing rural residents to consume a wide variety of retail products without having to travel to the city.

### Cars: Where the Rubber Meets the Road

While the efforts to improve roads and make them more efficient tools for ordering the built environment were well underway prior to the popularization of the automobile, Fordism and the resulting mass-affordability of cars intensified the interest in good roads.<sup>61</sup> The contemporary road, highway, and parking landscape seen today is rooted in the interwar period, when popular will and federal spending coincided to produce significant changes in the American landscape. In 1920, the ratio of registered drivers to automobiles was 7.8:1; in 1940, it was 3:1.<sup>62</sup> Historian Christopher Wells describes the ensuing chain of events and interactions between builders, planners, engineers, and consumers that produced the contemporary car-centric landscape:

"Reliable automobiles and rapidly expanding networks of smooth roads overcame long-standing environmental constraints on transportation, creating new options for personal mobility that sharply contrasted with railroad- and streetcar-based mobility. As motorists experimented with new uses for their automobiles, they unlocked whole new realms of possibilities and began altering their everyday

activities in response.... Rural institutions centralized, diversified, and expanded, while urban real estate developers and retailers experimented with decentralization strategies and car-focused site layout that targeted large and growing numbers of motorists.<sup>63</sup>

Wells' depiction of the novel opportunities afforded by the car and the nascent efforts to facilitate its use conveys a series of actions with unforeseen and perhaps even unimagined consequences. The widespread use of private automobiles yielded rapid cultural and environmental change, and subsequent changes in the landscape were opportunistic explorations of this change. Wells points out that while federal spending was pivotal in facilitating the basic automobile infrastructure, private developers and entrepreneurs had a more profound effect on the emerging car-centric landscape through profit-seeking ventures such as shopping centers, strip retail, and single family housing developments.<sup>64</sup>

#### *Parking as an Amenity*

By the 1920's many US cities offered dedicated off-street lots that enabled drivers to park downtown and at city perimeters.<sup>65</sup> Suburban developers at the time also considered free and ample parking "essential" to attracting consumers and residents, but also expressed a concern that too much parking would be an "interruption to the retail continuity of the shops."<sup>66</sup> These developers envisioned parking as an essential part of an "attractive shopping experience," and described parking lots as places akin to public plazas or gardens, with "masonry walls, vines, flowers, trees, shrubs, and objects of art."<sup>67</sup> Parking was indeed a draw for consumers who had embraced the car-centric lifestyle, and as suburban development boomed urban areas tried to lure consumers back to the downtown core with "easy parking."<sup>68</sup>



0) An artist's rendering of a Philadelphia mall and the "attractive shopping experience."

The aesthetic hopes for suburban parking expressed in the 20's and 30's were outmoded by more engineered approaches to traffic management, spatial efficiency, and "peak use" planning.<sup>69</sup> Equations for ideal parking lots were often expressed (and required through zoning) as a ratio of a certain number of spots to total square footage of the commercial establishment, and were often in excess of realistic patterns of use.<sup>70</sup> This approach produced parking sprawl, where quantity became more important than quality, and ease of use—for the car—became the ultimate metric of design success.<sup>71</sup>

#### *Asphalt Run Amok: Parking and the Legacy of the Car-Centric Landscape*

Today it is estimated that there are more than 500 million parking spaces in the United States, 80-90% of which are located in surface parking lots.<sup>72</sup> In some cities, the lots for these spaces cover more than one third the land area.<sup>73</sup> These lots are of course connected to the larger infrastructure of roads and highways and collectively comprise a landscape that significantly influences how we interact with the environment and each other. Cultural landscape historian JB Jackson has written about the political landscape of the road in American life and argues that "Town, where we become citizens and can be seen, begins directly outside our door, where the road stands for public life...politically speaking, the best of all landscapes, the best of all roads, are those which foster movement toward a desirable social goal."<sup>74</sup> If roads and parking are to be understood as a public, social space, what does a contemporary portrait of the car-centric landscape reveal about American public life?

In the privatized American suburb, the asphalt landscape of roads and parking lots is a dominant landscape feature and a de-facto public space. This suburban space has become a landscape of obligation and offers little experiential or participatory choice. Wells argues that the cliched concept of the American "love affair with the car" masks a more problematic truth, stating, "it is not just that Americans love their automobiles; it is that the landscape we have created for them makes no other options available to us."<sup>75</sup> These would-be public spaces are engineered to enable the movement and interaction of individual cars rather than the movement and interaction of people. As Wells puts it, "large parking lots scream, 'I am for drivers!'"<sup>76</sup> The private automobile enables movement through these potential social spaces, allots spaces for the individual car amidst the collective sea of parked vehicles, but does not encourage interaction between individuals or groups of people.

#### *The Future of Parking*

The social potential of these spaces has not been extensively documented or thoroughly designed, but that is not to say that no such potential exists, or has not been explored and exploited. In his book *Rethinking a Lot*, professor of architecture and urban planning Eran Ben-Joseph celebrates the latent potential of the open lot as a banal but imminently flexible space.<sup>77</sup> Ben Joseph examines a host of underused parking lots that are routinely appropriated by kids, tailgaters, farmer's markets, food trucks, and theater groups, and urges that these unplanned uses can inform new visions of what a parking lot can be.<sup>78</sup>

Are there—as early good roads advocates proselytized—"immense social advantages" to the scale of mobility and connectivity afforded by the car? Have we yet to realize these advantages or recognize their

potential? If a parking lot were to proclaim, "I am for people!" what would it look like? Wells points out that compared to an urban, mixed use landscape, the scale of the suburban car-centric landscape offers a relatively small number of "opportunities per square mile."<sup>79</sup> How can this landscape be reconfigured and re-imagined to offer more "opportunities," and can these result in a new suburban public space typology?



p) (top) Parade at an intersection in Denver, CO. How can the car-centric landscape be retrofitted for people?  
q) (bottom) A mobile flower shop in a grocery store parking lot



r) Improvised sanctuary for Our Lady of Guadalupe in a Los Angeles parking lot

Endnotes

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37 Ibid.

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Image Notes

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## PROFESSIONAL FRAMEWORK

*"Since reform is about telling other people how to lead their lives, there is a streak of the oppressor in every good reformer. City planners, urban designers and architects often try to get the American public to live their lives less for personal benefit, and more for the group. The customary recipe is more public transit, higher density and less autos. Wonderful, fabulous, but often at odds with most people's healthy sense of self-interest." –John Chase*

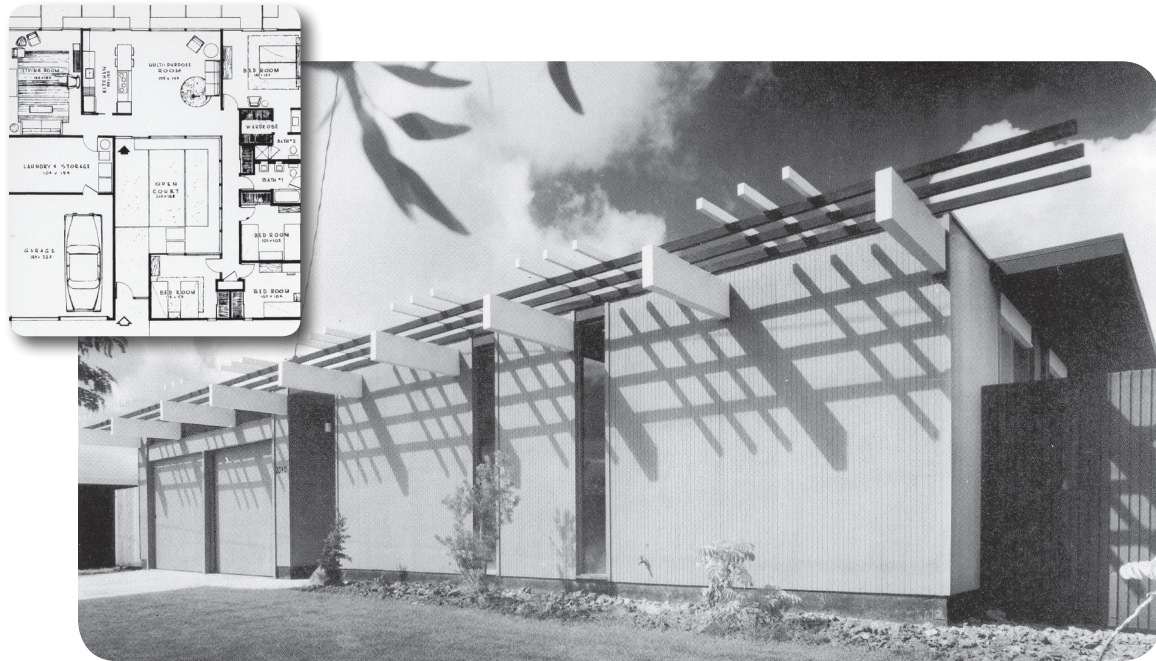
### *Architecture and the Suburbs*

Architects, landscape architects, and planners have been responsible for numerous imaginings of idealized suburban existence in America. Some have been built and realized: Davis' Llewellyn Park; Olmstead's Riverside; the RPAA's New Deal demonstration towns; and Anshen + Allen's work with Eichler Homes. Others have remained in an unbuilt utopian state, such as Wright's Broadacre City. Still others have existed somewhere between, seemingly ideal on paper but when implemented or imitated and re-interpreted, failed to realize their potential: Howard's Garden City, implemented in England and a longstanding inspiration for countless American imitations, could not account for changes in patterns of use and insufficient infrastructure. Garden City residents behaved differently than Howard had envisioned, living at the edge and commuting to the city, altering the intended relationship between the central city and the garden city.<sup>2</sup>

After the mid twentieth century, the architecture profession played a less active role in suburban planning and design. Private developers were uniquely positioned to take advantage of federal policies encouraging suburban development, and most often worked as developer-builders, outside the realm of traditional architecture. As developers began to plan more numerous, massive developments increasingly distant from urban centers, architects and their paying clients remained concentrated in urban centers.

The story of Eichler Homes in California offers a glimpse of this evolution. Developer Joseph Eichler was dedicated to providing quality, regional modernist designs at affordable prices, and collaborated with multiple, well-respected architects and landscape architects (Anshen + Allen, Claude Oakland, Thomas Church, A. Quincy Jones, and Frederick Emmons) to design his subdivisions in the 1950's and 60's.<sup>3</sup> Despite the critical and commercial success of the developments, Anshen + Allen eventually became uneasy with prevailing suburban development trends. As Paul Adamson describes, "the two architects had become concerned with the acceleration of sprawling suburban regions and may also have felt that dropping their work with Eichler meant they would no longer be contributing to what they saw as a socially indefensible trend."<sup>4</sup> Despite the critical and commercial success of Anshen + Allen's contributions towards more nuanced suburban landscapes, their efforts were a statistical blip. While their work with Eichler represented a more thoughtful and measured approach to development than many of Eichler's contemporaries, it represented a small portion of the market—there were just thousands of Eichlers among millions of houses built in more typical developments.

Since the post war period, most of suburban development has been speculative. The function of the suburban house as a mass-produced commodity undermines the opportunity for a traditional architect-client process. This development model disengages potential designers of suburbs from clients in the suburbs. While suburban development patterns have evolved to maximize efficiency—and thereby affordability—architecture simultaneously has evolved in the opposite direction. Large-scale endeavors funded by institutional or corporate clients have traditionally been the most coveted jobs in terms of design opportunity and profit.<sup>5</sup> The traditional focus on large, highly visible projects is undoubtedly a product of the architect's free-market survival instincts, but has resulted in a lopsided service model that waylays more general civic engagement in order to serve the "top one percent."<sup>6</sup> These types of projects are more likely to be found in urban than suburban areas. When architects do step out of their urban comfort zone to work in the suburbs, it is not at the



a) Anshen + Allen's E-11 prototype for Eichler Homes

systemic scale of working with a developer and engaging with the constraints of efficiency and affordability (as Eichler's collaborators did), but predominantly for wealthy residents in single-family homes. The irony that many residential commissions for architects are part of the sprawling landscape they so often criticized in professional and academic contexts is compartmentalized or ignored by most.

#### *Dominant Epistemologies and Realities of Architectural Practice*

Architecture has largely become an expensive, exclusive cultural commodity and as Robert Gutman describes, "the lower one descends on the scale of social status, the less frequently one is likely to find people who are active in the user and consumer movements that relate to architecture."<sup>7</sup> Contemporary models of architectural practice have evolved to serve an extremely limited clientele, and the profession as a whole has divested from large-scale civic engagement. Such criticism is not new, and was publicly leveled against the AIA in an address at their 1968 National Convention, when civil rights leader Whitney M. Young, Jr. said, "you are not a profession that has distinguished itself by your social and civic contributions to the cause of civil rights, and I am sure this has not come to you as any shock. You are most distinguished by your thunderous silence and your complete irrelevance."<sup>8</sup>

While architects' lack of civic engagement might be an understandable result of economic circumstances, their absence from civic life—urban or suburban—is problematic on many counts. The long-standing practice model of client-hires architect has created and reinforced essential inequalities in the built environment. Clients who can afford architectural services have greater control over their surroundings, and can tailor

private spaces to their individual needs. Clients who cannot afford architectural services have very little control over their own surroundings, and have to rely on publicly-financed building initiatives—or mass-produced affordability in the suburbs—that often stress economy and efficiency over individual or community needs.

After an absence from suburban development architects are now attempting to return to suburban areas with professional authority. Armed with the tenets of New Urbanism and Smart Growth, the profession's dominant message regarding the suburbs communicates that only professionals understand the complexity of suburban shortcomings, and only professionals have the vision and talent necessary to fix what is "wrong" with suburban America from the top down.

New Urbanism attempts imbue suburban landscapes with density and authenticity through a hybridization of old town planning and suburban neighborhood development. The proponents of this mode of practice often align themselves with development processes native to the suburbs, and while the intent is to cultivate a more public suburban space reminiscent of traditional small towns or successful urban neighborhoods, economic tendencies towards privatization often muddle or completely dilute the effort. As Jeffrey Hou describes,

"The growing privatization of public space has become a common pattern of experience in many parts of the world where downtown districts as well as suburban lands are transformed into theme malls and so-called festival marketplaces. To emulate successful urban spaces of the past, neo-traditional streetscapes and town squares are reproduced but segregated from the rest of the city to create a supposed safe haven for shoppers and businesses. Whereas the physical form and appearance of the spaces may look familiar to the traditional public space in the past, their public functions and meanings have become highly limited."<sup>9</sup>

New Urbanist ventures often focus on a tabula rasa approach to suburban redesign, emphasizing aesthetic, lot, and land use standards to create unified new places. The application of New Urbanist motifs does not lend itself to engaging with or preserving existing cultural landscapes or processes.

Ellen Dunham-Jones justifies this approach, contending that the "zoning codes and land use practices that produced the conventional suburban form of the twentieth century are simply too entrenched and pervasive for piecemeal, incremental projects to adequately improve the sustainable performance of suburbia as a whole."<sup>10</sup> While codes and development practices are indeed entrenched and problematic, consumer preference and lifestyle are also linked to suburban form, and these cannot be changed as quickly or predictably as codes. Incremental development, however, can give residents a chance to adjust to significant changes and participate in defining the emerging character of suburban places. Despite the acknowledgement of the value of incremental development over "instant" development, Dunham-Jones goes on to frame an argument for a suburban New Urbanism that is rooted in "instant" development and rationalized through the lens of impending climate disaster:

"In alignment with democratic ideals, professionals engaged in city making have come to share a pervasive enthusiasm for incremental urbanism—cities that evolve over time through gradual accretions and infill so that the collective form bears the imprint of a broad spectrum of interests.... However, love of incremental urbanism can also lead to indiscriminate disdain for that which is perceived as inauthentic.... At a time when climate change and peak oil prices call for vast swaths of existing suburban

areas to be retrofitted on a scale and at a speed that is beyond the capacity of incremental urbanism, it is worth recognizing when the kind of large-scale changes associated with 'instant cities' might be welcomed rather than shunned."<sup>11</sup>

This framework is problematic for many reasons. The basic concession of "democratic ideals" in development for environmental gains may be more than the suburbs can afford. This is a classic ends-justify-the-means scenario. While the environmental impacts of the suburbs are very real, the simplification of sustainability as a purely environmental issue is short-sighted and ignores a more comprehensive approach that addresses the social and economic dimensions of a project as essential to the long-term resilience of the design. An alternate definition of "instant urbanism" that addresses these aspects of sustainability has taken root in Berlin, Germany. Urban pioneers employ "instant urbanism" in the form of temporary, open-source, bottom-up adjustments to the built environment. These initiatives serve a variety of neighborhoods, users, and needs. Some remain temporary and fleeting; others evolve into permanent community resources. Communities that are able to adapt and make long term changes involve residents as citizens and community members, not merely as consumers who can be sold a repackaged version of the same problematic suburban development processes.

Dominant architectural visions of suburban improvement rely on the profession's traditions of rationalism and aestheticism to analyze the suburban fabric. However, they ignore important fundamental facts and resilient patterns about suburban life, culture, and form. Strategies to address the drivers of suburban evolution—consumption, privatism, and residents' preferences and perceptions—are largely absent from these would-be solutions.

The architectural profession's current suggestions for how to improve suburbia favor the dominant professional epistemology. It is a problematic paradox of professionalism that becoming a professional—undergoing extensive education and training in pursuit of "expert" status—often creates a cultural distance between the professional and the recipients of their services. As such there is a lack of understanding—and often a lack of meaningful communication and listening—between planners and designers and communities.

Our professional approach to suburban improvement is inherently flawed. We analyze the suburbs simply as if they were an underperforming urban site. While it is understandable that the profession sees opportunity to redesign suburban environments through the lens of architectural expertise and training, it conveniently ignores the fact that suburbs have been developing without architectural involvement—aside from academically distant study and analysis—for decades. We are jumping ahead of valuable information gathering and attempting to "fix" environments from which we have long been absent. In the parlance of cultural anthropology, architects need to sort through the suburban "webs of significance" before both defining suburban shortcomings and trying to fix them.<sup>12</sup> As William Saunders writes,

"A true alternative to sprawl would not be a 'style'—whether Modernist or anti-Modernist—but a profound transformation in the whole system that created the sprawl environment...a 'utopianism of process' rather than a 'utopianism of spatial form.' That is, the goal is not some predetermined 'right form of density but a process that overcomes the social and physical fragmentation of sprawl itself."<sup>13</sup>

In order to discover what such a process might be, it is essential to critically evaluate current processes of pro-

fessional design and develop a self-awareness of our biases as architects, a willingness to learn from residents of the suburbs, and by using unconventional methods to study suburban landscapes.

#### *Architecture and "Disabling Professions"*

As professionals, architects fulfill the role of the expert in shaping our cultural values and discussion of the built environment. This position of power is often overlooked in conversations about architecture as a profession. The dependency implied and cultivated by professionalism in our society bears critical examination, and is an important aspect of understanding the role professional architects could or should play in retrofitting suburbia. In the book, *Civic Engagement in American Democracy*, Steven Brint and Charles Levy outline the history of professional civic engagement in America, and identify the Progressive Era as a key period when architecture often emphasized its broader social purposes as a means for gaining public support and legitimacy for professionalization.<sup>14</sup> In the 1977 book *Disabling Professions*, philosopher Ivan Illich describes the historic paradigm of the "altruistic profession" as "devoted to the good of the weaker and less knowledgeable members of society, thus enabling those who lack the capacity to fend for themselves to lead fuller, safer and healthier lives."<sup>15</sup> The book describes the evolution professions from altruistic enterprises to "disabling professions" and urges, "the question must now be asked whether the professions in fact provide their services so altruistically, and whether we are really enriched and not just subordinated by their activities."<sup>16</sup>

Illich raises the questions of where needs arise, what or who creates them, and how they are studied. These questions have great relevance to potential architectural improvements to the suburbs. Illich describes the mid twentieth century as the "age of disabling professions...when needs were shaped by professional design," when professional hegemony resulted in the manipulation of needs and wants in consumers (formerly called citizens).<sup>17</sup> As marketing and social power condensed in the professions, "learning to identify wants from experience [became] a rare competence."<sup>18</sup> This phenomenon is experienced frequently in the suburbs as packaged lifestyles with homes manicured and decorated in a prescribed manner. Residents are implicitly encouraged by the homogeneity of their surroundings to define their desires based on available commodities rather than from an internal sense of their unique needs.

Illich also describes the disempowerment that can result from attempts to cloak professionalism in the guise of self-help, explaining that "the professional dream of rooting each hierarchy of needs in the grassroots goes under the banner of self-help. At present, it is promoted by the new tribe of experts in self-help who have replaced the international development experts of the sixties. The professionalization of laymen is their aim."<sup>19</sup> When "laymen" are professionalized, censorship and control become internalized. This further detachment from internal needs and wants results in further professional control. Illich demonstrates this phenomenon with a story about American architects visiting a slum in Mexico who are unable to resist imposing their own professional experiences and values on residents:

"My friend, also an architect, wanted to show the thousands of examples... of peasant ingenuity with patterns, structures and uses of refuse not in and therefore not derivable from textbooks. He should not have been surprised that his colleague took several hundred rolls of pictures of these brilliant inventions that make this two-million-person slum work. The pictures were analyzed in Cambridge; and by the end of the year, new-baked U.S. specialists in community architecture were busy teaching

the people of Ciudad Netzahualcoyotl their problems, needs and solutions.”<sup>20</sup>

Rather than understanding and engaging with the circumstances that led to the built patterns and habits of the slum residents, the visiting architects saw the alternative methods only as shortcomings in need of professional improvement, not a complex system of values and solutions in their own right. This paradigm maintains the power imbalance of professional culture, in effect, stealing innovations from lay-people and selling them back solutions to problems they didn’t realize they had—issues they might not even consider problems. The notion of the “disabling profession” highlights important contemporary issues of architectural practice—such as the lack of collaboration and conversation with non-professionals—that could yield more place-based, client- and community-centric design interventions, and cultivate a more thorough understanding of individual and communal needs.

#### *Stories and an “Epistemology of Multiplicity”*

How can architects move beyond the profession’s dominant epistemological interpretation of the suburbs? How can our understanding of the suburbs expand to include other epistemologies and interest groups? Leonie Sandercock has written extensively on the planning profession and its similar shortcomings with respect to dominant and insurgent epistemologies. Sandercock explores the potential role of story and storytelling as a means of discovering an “epistemology of multiplicity” that incorporates multiple perspectives and types of knowledge.<sup>21</sup> In such an epistemology, stories fulfill many roles: they reveal cultural power structures and inequities; they are personal, mutable, and powerful tools for understanding emotions and relationships within and between communities; they are a means of articulating difference and negotiating beyond it; and they create a foundation for political community. An important theme in the exploration of story in planning is the relationship between story, power, and knowledge. As Sandercock describes, “...power shapes which stories get told, get heard, [and] carry weight.”<sup>22</sup> Much like architecture, the dominant story of the planning profession has been that of the “heroic model,” an approach based in the Enlightenment epistemology that values “rationality, comprehensiveness, scientific method, faith in state directed futures, faith in planners’ ability to know what is... ‘the public interest,’ and political neutrality.”<sup>23</sup> The Enlightenment epistemology is the official story that has maintained a narrative hegemony over minority, insurgent stories throughout the history of the planning and architecture professions. It has also narrowly defined the type of knowledge relevant to these professions. In describing what should be the framework for a more inclusive planning or design process, Sandercock stresses that “without discarding these scientific and technical ways of knowing, we need to acknowledge, as well, the many other ways of knowing that exist; to understand their importance to culturally diverse populations; and to discern which ways of knowing are most useful in which circumstances.”<sup>24</sup>

Sandercock argues that in the context of the planning profession, excavating insurgent histories and being aware of current insurgent stories is an essential part of expanding planning knowledge. This should be part of expanding architectural knowledge as well. In the context of the suburbs, stories as a medium can address the types of knowledge missing from the architecture profession’s dominant interpretation of the suburbs. Stories of suburban residents can be editorial and personal; they can convey a range of emotions,

dynamics, and perspectives. As such, no story is the complete story, and therein lies the value of stories to an epistemology of multiplicity. A set of stories, from different constituencies and communities, can begin to explain complex social dynamics and form the basis for a politics of difference, wherein multiple stories—the professional architect’s being one—can coexist and inform one another.

Sandercock posits that stories can help decipher and relate complex systems and structures that otherwise defy categorization (an apt description of suburbia if there ever was one). Rather than whittling down complexities into generalizations, stories help impose “formal coherence on a virtual chaos of events,” and allow us to understand and engage with complexity.<sup>25</sup> Sandercock also identifies five key characteristics that make stories vehicles for communication: they have a “temporal framework;” they “offer an explanation;” they have “some potential for generalizability;” they “have a plot, structure, and protagonists;” and they often “have moral tension or moral ordering.”<sup>26</sup>

Finally, stories have the ability to function as both a process and a product. They can be a means for communication throughout the planning or design process; they can bring new (or previously suppressed) viewpoints into focus; and the act of sharing stories can be empowering. But stories can also be the goal of a planning or design process. As Sandercock describes in discussing Throgmorton’s *Planning As Persuasive Storytelling*, planning is “an enacted and future oriented narrative in which participants are both characters and joint authors.”<sup>27</sup> Stories can change. They can be rewritten, reimagined, and recombined to communicate new community goals and identities. Stories can help enable a politics of difference, in which the rights of different groups and their corresponding needs and desires are negotiated within a shared public realm. Sandercock describes the apparent contradictions inherent in such an argument, stating,

“Thus we arrive at a lived conception of identity/difference that recognizes itself as historically contingent and inherently relational; and a cultivation of and care for difference through strategies of critical detachment from the identities that constitute us. In this multicultural imagination, the twin goods of belonging and freedom can be made to support rather than oppose each other.”<sup>28</sup>

Stories are an essential tool for engaging with diversity. They enable the communication and exchange of individual and group ideas, convey emotion, and provide a basis for understanding others. This personalization of diversity is essential to achieving changes in habits and patterns. Simply put, “stories have to be told for reconciliation to happen,” whether that be a reconciliation of different wants, needs, perspectives, or values.<sup>29</sup>

In a creative call-to-arms for the planning and design professions, Sandercock declares,

“I want a city where...I don’t have to translate my ‘expertise’ into jargon to impress officials and confuse citizens...; where city planning is a war of liberation fought against dumb, featureless public space; against STARchitecture, speculators, and benchmarkers; against the multiple sources of oppression, domination and violence; where citizens wrest from space new possibilities and immerse themselves in their cultures while respecting those of their neighbours, collectively forging new hybrid cultures and spaces. I want a city that is run differently from an accounting firm, where planners ‘plan’ by negotiating desires and fears, mediating memories and hopes, facilitating change and transformation.”<sup>30</sup>

Such dynamic changes to spaces and social interactions are not unimaginable—even in the suburbs—but they cannot be achieved without an epistemology of multiplicity. This will require flexibility and self-awareness

on the part of the architecture profession. Successful suburban revisions and renewals should systemically acknowledge and incorporate multiple stories, multiple ways of knowing, and multiple publics and communities. Such efforts should include an allowance for bottom-up methods of place-and space-making alongside top-down methods. And such efforts will require a willingness on the part of the profession to continue to evaluate, discuss, and evolve our professional story and identity as we learn from others.

#### *Architecture's Insurgent Practices*

The use of story as a means of critiquing dominant epistemologies has powerful implications for the architecture profession. Architects are hamstrung by a professional landscape in which dominant practice models are driven by an outdated client-firm power relationship. The economics of this relationship have increasingly isolated architecture as a luxury service, and much of the profession no longer has the means or the skills necessary to engage with the clients or communities outside of the dominant practice model. This renders the profession ineffective with respect to creating meaningful places and spaces in the suburbs, and highlights a need to revisit architecture's own insurgent histories and revise the story of the architecture profession.

Pro bono design, community design centers, and more recently public interest design all represent insurgent histories within the architecture profession--challengers to the dominant ways of providing professional service. It is unsurprising that these types of practice also more readily employ story—not only as a means of communicating about their work but as a process tool in working with various constituencies outside of the traditional client base. Brian Bell, a leader in the public interest design movement, describes a process reminiscent of those for which Sandercock advocates. Bell states that public interest design “does not mean, however, that design is a patronizing gift from architects to communities. In all the projects, there is mutual exchange between the designer and the client, and in the best cases, a mutual benefit for both.”<sup>31</sup>

Architects need to incorporate a diversity of voices, perspectives, needs, and desires into redesigns of the suburbs.

James Rojas—a professional trained in both architecture and planning—practices to gather and express a diversity of voices. During his visit to UW CBE in September 2013 we spoke with James about his process and methods. Working with found objects as modeling materials, Rojas hosts interactive design workshops for communities to share stories and design ideas for local planning projects. His theory and working method, “The City as Play,” is employed to engage communities creatively and inspire them to discover their desires. Communities participating in a Rojas workshop are given a simple question or prompt such as, “design a space for yourself and your grandkids,” or “build a favorite memory.” Participants are then given 20 minutes to design and build models, which they then explain to the group for 2 minutes each. This process allows participants to reflect on their needs and desires, creates an awareness of the built environment, and builds community trust and capacity while working alongside fellow community members. The stories that accompany such a discussion can have a formative effect as well, and can empower individuals and communities to shape their own environment.



b) James Rojas workshop with students

#### *Public Art and Guerilla (Sub) Urbanism*

Art has always served as a medium for transmitting new ideas, posing questions, and rebuking authority and tradition. Public art takes this function out of the gallery and into the streets. Many artists and architects have used public art to engage and communicate with communities. In New Orleans, artist Candy Chang launched a public art and survey campaign framed by the statement “I wish this was...” The phrase was printed in a graphic ‘name tag’ style on stickers that could be attached to vacant buildings and storefronts. These tags served as a “low-barrier” tool to address the future potential of vacant storefronts, and allowed individuals and groups within the community to express their hopes, wants, and needs for their neighborhood.<sup>32</sup>



c) Candy Chang “I Wish This Was” tags, and d) tags in context



e) Banksy, "Follow Your Dreams"

In her introduction to a 2008 issue of *Public Art Review*, art and design critic Mason Riddle questions why relatively few public artists work in suburbia.<sup>33</sup> Riddle reasons that "If history is indeed a guide, artists have promoted and participated actively in change. There is no reason why public art cannot be a growing, meaningful force in promoting future cultural understanding. And the suburbs should be part of this"<sup>34</sup> In the same issue, graphic designer and curator Andrew Blauvelt counters that the lack of suburban public art is due to the apparent placeless quality of many suburbs. Blauvelt describes suburbs as sites "without history" and without place identity and asks, "is it any wonder that most suburbs are busy rebranding themselves—revitalizing the remnants of an old downtown, and thus reclaiming a past, or when none exists simply inventing a new one?"<sup>35</sup> But can public art play a transformative role in the suburbs and reveal latent or insurgent place identities?

Riddle urges that "it might again be time for artists to don the mantle of the avant garde and provoke and define new approaches and ways of thinking that can elevate the cultural vitality of the suburbs."<sup>36</sup> Public art has the power to act subversively. It can exist below the threshold of legitimacy to communicate untold stories and question dominant stories. It can alter perceptions of the everyday landscape and convey possibility. Blauvelt cautions that "the public art recipes developed for urban conditions do not automatically transfer to suburban spaces."<sup>37</sup> What are the potential place-specific forms or modes of suburban public art?

One example of uniquely suburban public art that blurs the division between art and architecture is SITE Architects work for the BEST product showrooms of the 1970s. These stores were retail merchandisers of hard goods based in Richmond, Virginia. SITE designed 9 commercial buildings for BEST and worked within



f) (top) Towson, MD, 1978 g) (bottom) Milwaukee, WI 1984



the vocabulary and site of the roadside strip. SITE describes their design methods for critically engaging with these showrooms, describing that “by means of inversion, fragmentation, displacement, distortions of scale, and invasions of nature - these merchandising structures have been used as a means of commentary on the shopping center strip.”<sup>38</sup> Blauvelt applauds SITE for creating public art that requires reflection and challenges the viewer rather than the “plop art” that characterized so many corporate art programs.<sup>39</sup> SITE argues that the BEST showrooms were powerful because people were able to identify with their built form on one level, and forced to question it on another level:

“By engaging people’s reflex identification with commonplace buildings, the BEST showrooms also explore the social, psychological and aesthetic aspects of architecture. This approach is a way of asking questions and changing public response to the significance of commercial buildings in the suburban environment.”<sup>40</sup>

SITE’s work suggests that a critical suburban public art is possible and its effects may be overt or subversive. The BEST product showrooms directly engaged with convention in order to question it and propose alternatives.

As professionals, the role of architects in shaping built form as well as the discourse on the built environment is not to be understated. Conventional practice can leave communities, as well as clients, disempowered and “disabled.” The use of insurgent methods of engagement with communities can support an evolution in the relationship between professionals and non-professionals. This change can yield a more participatory process and cast the professional in the role of listener, facilitator, and collaborator. Through this professional transformation, we must read the phrase ‘architectural practice’ literally, because creating a new paradigm of inclusivity and diversity will undoubtedly require practice, self-evaluation, and revision.



h) (top) Sacramento, CA 1977 and i) (bottom) Miami, FL 1979

## Endnotes

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## METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

*"To understand why public space is missing, Americans must remember that after 1945, most of the built environment was never planned or designed--it was shaped by old Commerce Department programs devised with the aid of the real estate industry just before the Depression. It would be funny if it were not so unfair." -Dolores Hayden<sup>1</sup>*

### *The Suburbs as Cultural Landscape*

How should architects engage with a culture and landscape that has developed outside the realm of architectural influence? How can we learn, interpret, and work within the rules that govern the suburban landscape? The interdisciplinary field of cultural landscapes offers one possible approach. At its most general level, the study of cultural landscapes concerns the exploration and understanding of "ordinary, everyday built environments."<sup>2</sup> As cultural landscape geographer Paul Groth describes, this type of study encourages the understanding of a place from the perspective of the people using it and sustaining it over a period of time:

"Landscape denotes an interaction of people and place: a social group and its spaces, particularly the spaces to which the group belongs and from which its members derive some part of their shared identity and meaning. All human intervention with nature can be considered as cultural landscape... cultural landscape studies focus most on how people have used everyday space--buildings, rooms, streets, fields, or yards--to establish their identity, articulate their social relations, and derive cultural meaning."<sup>3</sup>

The field of cultural landscapes includes practitioners and academics from a wide array of disciplines including geography, history, anthropology, sociology, architecture, and landscape architecture. A basic tenet of the field maintains that not only are everyday landscapes like the suburbs "important and worthy of study," but they are also "essential to the formation of human meaning."<sup>4</sup>

In 1979, Geographer Pierce Lewis wrote that "our human landscape is our unwitting biography," but it is more difficult to read than a typical book.<sup>5</sup> Lewis describes an ordinary landscape as "messy and disorganized, like a book with pages missing, torn, and smudged; a book whose copy has been edited and re-edited by people with illegible handwriting."<sup>6</sup> In an effort to enhance its legibility, Lewis outlined six axioms for reading the ordinary landscape that have since become widely accepted guidelines for how to decipher cultural meaning in the ordinary built environment:

#### Pierce Lewis' Six Axioms of Cultural Landscapes<sup>7</sup>

1. *The Axiom of Landscape As Clue to Culture:* The man-made landscape provides strong evidence of the kind of people we are, were, and are in the process of becoming. Our human landscape represents an enormous investment of money, time, and emotions. People will not change that landscape unless they are under very heavy pressure to do so. We must conclude that if there is really major change in the look of our cultural landscape, then there is very likely a major change occurring in our national culture at the same time.
2. *The Axiom of Cultural Unity and Landscape Equality:* Nearly all items in human landscapes reflect culture in some way. There are almost no exceptions. Furthermore, most items in the human landscape are no more or no less important than other items--in terms of their role as clues to culture.
3. *The Axiom of Common Things:* Common landscapes--however important they may be--are by their nature hard to study by conventional academic means.
4. *The Historic Axiom:* In trying to unravel the meaning of contemporary landscapes and what they have to "say" about us as Americans, history matters. That is, we do what we do, and make what we make because our doings and our makings are inherited from the past.

5. *The Geographic (or Ecologic) Axiom*: Elements of a cultural landscape make little cultural sense if they are studied outside their geographic context.

6. *The Axiom of Landscape Obscurity*: Most objects in the landscape—although they convey all kinds of “messages”—do not convey those messages in any obvious way.

In the context of new architectural possibilities for the suburbs, these axioms outline an alternative and in-depth approach to site analysis. Rather than relying on an understanding of the suburbs from an architect’s professional perspective, cultural landscapes allows for an understanding of the suburbs from the perspective of the people who use and shape the landscape daily. It also provides a means with which to move beyond a surface analysis of suburban form and interpret that form through various layers of social, economic, environmental, and psychological meaning.

In his essay “Seen, Unseen, and Scene,” architectural historian Dell Upton describes the landscape as a series of seen and unseen spaces, with “scenes” comprised of visual snippets that often fail to capture the social and psychological nuance of a particular place (the “unseen”).<sup>8</sup> Upton urges that “care for the landscape demands attention to both the seeable and the un-seeable, particularly to the relationship between scene and unseen space.”<sup>9</sup> The suburban “scene” is comprised of the dominant imagery of sprawling tracts, the assumption of a social monoculture, and the drive-by impressions of banality. Employing the methods of cultural landscape studies towards a more nuanced understanding of the suburbs—and employing new and varied methods for decoding messages inherent in this landscape—can help architects move beyond the scene of suburbia and understand its unseen cultures and meanings.

While the discipline of cultural landscapes calls attention to an admittedly daunting array of landscapes, it does not maintain that these landscapes are without fault or hold no room for improvement. The discipline does urge, however, that regardless of the quality or desirable characteristics of a place, it is nonetheless imbued with meaning. Cultural landscape historian JB Jackson described this caveat well, writing that he hoped Americans could share “an intelligent affection for the country as it is, and a vision disciplined enough to distinguish what is wrong in the landscape and should be changed from what is valuable and worthy of protection.”<sup>10</sup> Engaging with and reading a cultural landscape challenges established formal and aesthetic methods of valuing the built environment, and requires the “reader” to be open to alternative definitions of value and beauty. Jackson conveys such beauty as a result of shared and sustained processes imprinted on the landscape, stating “the beauty that we see in the vernacular landscape is the image of our common humanity: hard work, stubborn hope, and mutual forbearance striving to be love.”<sup>11</sup> Critical engagement with a cultural landscape entails an empathetic understanding of these processes as a basis for future interaction and improvement.

### *The Suburbs as Organization Landscape*

In her book *Organization Space: Landscapes, Highways, and Houses in America*, architecture and educator Keller Easterling offers a theory-based discussion of the processes, patterns, and systems that organize the built environment. Easterling proposes that “eccentricities” or “wild cards” in otherwise banal and monotonous organization infrastructures create “organization space”—space that is simultaneously defined by and

contrary to its infrastructural context. Easterling describes these eccentricities as a way of adjusting and reinterpreting a pervasive landscape order, stating that “eccentricities are often amplified within an organization so that an effective intervention may not involve comprehensive control but partial or tactical adjustment. Tactical sites have larger powers. Generic spatial production, for instance, amplifies small adjustments by way of its own banality.”<sup>12</sup>

Easterling’s theory of organization space is primed for application to the suburban landscape. Mass-produced housing, roads, highways, and parking lots are all what Easterling terms “infrastructure networks” that achieve their spatial meaning as sets of multiples, and the protocols that govern their formation lie outside traditional understandings of architecture.<sup>13</sup> This does not mean, however, that they are unchangeable or architects should not interact with them; rather they are responsive to different kinds of intervention than architects may be accustomed to making.

In Easterling’s analysis of the infrastructures that define suburban environments—superblocks, cul-de-sacs, parking lots, and single family homes—the constraints of how these infrastructures are built and perceived can be used as creative impetus. Easterling argues that there is a wealth of opportunity in small interventions in such a landscape, and architects can interact meaningfully with existing infrastructures:

“Perhaps in these sites, architects return to find a previously obscured opportunity and an expanded repertoire for their formal skills and aesthetic inclinations. If the most powerful sites are improvisational and responsive to the circumstantial changes of anarchical organizations, they are also suggestive of an active and inventive practice in architecture within some of the most common development protocols in America.”<sup>14</sup>

The scale and uniformity of the organization landscape and its development protocols give the impression that it is immutable—a foregone conclusion. Easterling urges architects to challenge this notion through direct engagement with the infrastructures in an effort to construct new meanings from the language of the existing landscape. What might such an effort look like in the suburbs? How do eccentricities and their resulting organization space alter perceptions of the landscape? Many eccentricities to the suburban organization landscape already exist. Some are professionally designed, but many are not, and fall into a diverse category of informal or temporary use. The following section discusses some of these existing eccentricities, and outlines potential methods to explore further the development of organization space in the suburbs.

### *Identifying Existing and Potential Eccentricities*

Existing eccentricities in the suburbs occur most commonly in parking lots. In his book *Rethinking A Lot*, architecture and urban planning professor Eran Ben-Joseph explores insurgent visions and uses of parking lots. Conservative estimates put the total number of parking spaces in the United States close to 500 million (bolder estimates put the number closer to 2 billion), and Ben-Joseph points out that for all their square mileage, parking lots receive scant design consideration.<sup>15</sup> Ben-Joseph’s framework draws from historic and contemporary examples of alternate parking realities, and points to farmer’s markets, tailgaters, RV drivers, and teenagers as organization space-makers, retooling parking lots to suit a variety of social uses. While he does not explicitly refer to Easterling’s theories, the questions he poses about the future of the lot are reminiscent

of her descriptions of eccentricities and organization space:

“Can parking lots be designed in a more attractive and aesthetically pleasing way? Can environmental considerations be addressed and adverse effects mitigated? Can parking lots provide more than car storage? Can they be integrated into our built environment—not only as a practical necessity, but also as something elegant and enjoyable? What can we learn from studying usage behavior and manipulation of lots by unlikely users such as kids, food vendors, theater companies, and sport fans? And finally, are there any great parking lots that can inspire alternatives?”<sup>16</sup>

Ben-Joseph identifies key characteristics of surface parking lots that make them amenable to insurgent uses: minimal spatial or aesthetic character, large amounts of open space, and relatively benign regulations.<sup>17</sup> Parking lots are a blank canvas and can accommodate a variety of planned and impromptu public uses. As a result of this flexibility, a seemingly banal infrastructure can foster a great deal of social, spatial, and temporal complexity.

Parking lots and spaces are a pervasive part of the suburban landscape and lifestyle. They are sites of movement and exchange. They are not designed to be sites to linger and interact with others, but as Ben-Joseph’s examples of alternative uses illustrate, that can be easily changed. Parking lots are a de-facto public space occurring in various neighborhoods throughout the suburb and they present an opportunity. Ben-Joseph describes parking lots as “found” places, explaining, “...with their intended and unintended usages...they are the unplanned urban rooms that fill physical and mental gaps in our designed environment. Places where counter-interactions and social occurrences are happening on a daily basis.”<sup>18</sup>

Parking lots are a microcosm of suburbia. The individual parking spot is a scalar element for the suburban, auto-dominated landscape. It provides uniform, individual spaces within a broader collective—it is a multiple in a set. Parking lots are undoubtedly part of what Easterling terms the “most common development protocols in America,” and already host unintended uses that create organization space. These uses are rarely top-down and thus allow community members to play a part in shaping their environment. Ben-Joseph states that “parking lots may not be thought of as public open spaces like parks and plazas...but with their ability to accommodate the public and allow for both formal and informal uses, they should be.”<sup>19</sup> If parking lots are the most pervasive public space in the suburbs, how can architects use these spaces to engage suburban residents in shaping their broader suburban environment?

#### *PARK(ing) Day*

PARK(ing) Day is an annual worldwide event where artists, designers, and citizens transform parking spots into temporary public parks for their community. Started in 2005 by Rebar, an art and design firm in San Francisco, PARK(ing) Day is an “open-source” activity: free to participate in and open to interpretation and personalization.<sup>20</sup> Communities, small groups, or individuals use the individual parking space as a unit of expression for visions of alternate uses. The word “park” is only loosely descriptive of the wide range of installations that take place in parking spots on PARK(ing) Day. Past installations have included a productive garden, a free health clinic, a pirate’s cove, a dinner party, a lawn bowling course, a finger painting studio—any imagined alternative that addresses an unmet community want or need.<sup>21</sup> In 2011, PARK(ing) Day participants created

975 individual parks in 162 cities, 35 countries, and 6 continents.<sup>22</sup>

A suburban application of PARK(ing) Day holds much potential for organization space, community design, and storytelling. As an open-source activity, PARK(ing) Day—much like the parking lot itself—is inherently adaptable and flexible, and receptive to different perspectives and ideas. PARK(ing) Day can be a tool to explore not only parking lots as potential public space, but community-based suburban place-making as well. PARK(ing) Day has the potential to address numerous eccentricities simultaneously—a disbursed collective network of “organization spaces” in an organization landscape. As an event that blurs the divisions between art, design, and community organization, PARK(ing) Day encourages residents to creatively engage with their surroundings, share their stories, and imagine alternative futures. The resulting activities can reveal untold stories, make visible the “unseen” suburban experience, and question the typical development protocols that shape residents’ understanding of their suburban environment.

#### *The Parking Day Manifesto*

Rebar provides both a PARK(ing) Day Manifesto and Manual to help anyone interested implement their own PARK and understand the theories behind PARK(ing) Day. Rebar writes that the goal of PARK(ing) Day is “re-valuation through creative acts.”<sup>23</sup> As an open-source event it functions as a “spatial meme” through which anyone can experiment with a landscape.<sup>24</sup> Rebar maintains that the sharing, imitations, and iterations of the meme are key to its vitality as a creative act, stating that “it was only through the replication of this tactic and its adoption by others that a new kind of urban space was measurably produced...the creative act literally ‘takes’ place—that is, it claims a new physical and cultural territory for the social and artistic realm.”<sup>25</sup> While Rebar discusses cities and urban areas specifically, and focuses on the metered parking space as the individual site, the PARK(ing) Day meme is well-suited for a suburban adaptation. Rebar defines the theoretical framework for PARK(ing) Day through four distinct but complementary forms of urbanism: tactical urbanism, generous urbanism, authentic urbanism, and absurd urbanism—all of which dovetail with the previously discussed modes of interaction with the suburban landscape.

#### *Tactical Urbanism*

Rebar defines tactical urbanism as “the use of modest or temporary revisions to urban space to seed structural environmental change.”<sup>26</sup> This approach maintains that the landscape is a product of organizing structures and a series of expected or learned behaviors within those structures. “Tactical” adjustments to the structures that shape our environments exploit gaps in an organizational structure to generate “novel and inventive outcomes.”<sup>27</sup> An individual tactic temporarily projects a new set of values onto a space within the official structure. In the case of PARK(ing) Day, the individual tactic is the park inserted into the official structure of the parking landscape. The contrast of the insertion creates a dialogue between the existing values and proposed values. Rebar’s discussion of tactical urbanism is very similar to Easterling’s descriptions of eccentricities (Easterling even refers to eccentricities as “tactical sites”) as adjustments to the organization landscapes of the suburbs.

*Generous Urbanism:*

Rebar defines generous urbanism as “the creation of public situations between strangers that produce new cultural value without commercial transaction.”<sup>28</sup> PARK(ing) Day installations are meant to serve as an alternative to the consumption activities that have come to define many public spaces. Rebar asserts that the goal of any park is “art production” in the form of a public, cultural good, as opposed to commercial production in the form of a private good.<sup>29</sup> This framework becomes even more important when adapting



a) Rebar's first Parking Day park

PARK(ing) Day to a suburban landscape considering the defining role of spectacle and privatization in the landscape. Rebar expresses why such an act resonates, stating that “when an unregulated act of generosity is interjected into this environment of commercial consensus, the result is a cognitive disruption—a ‘blow against the empire.’ Offering the public something without expectation of anything in return is at once subversive, suspicious, and potentially profound and transformative.”<sup>30</sup> Like tactical urbanism, generous urbanism relies on stark contrast for expression. While such contrast naturally embodies commentary or criticism, the tone of the disruption is positive and inclusive. Rebar emphasizes this concept, explaining that “if generosity is the medium of this kind of work, then the medium does indeed become the message.”<sup>31</sup> Generous urbanism positions the process as the product.

*Authentic Urbanism*

Rebar defines authentic urbanism as that which offers “moments of relief and respite from the grand inauthenticity of the spectacle.”<sup>32</sup> Furthering the concept of generous urbanism, authentic urbanism does not have an ulterior motive. It is simply an effort to create “temporary generative territory for unscripted social interaction.”<sup>33</sup> Contrasted with the suburban landscape of the spectacle—where the commodity is the central focus of the public realm—authentic urbanism refocuses the landscape on people and their improvisations.

*Absurd Urbanism*

Absurd urbanism operates on the basis that the assumptions and justifications that underlie our most “rational” systems for ordering the built environment are in some cases arbitrary and illogical.<sup>34</sup> Rebar describes their work as that of a “DJ who samples... well-established tropes of the urban landscape—sod, a bench, and a tree, for example—and remixes them into a new context, as a mode of critical analysis of the structures that generate the form and content of public space.”<sup>35</sup> The exaggeration and playfulness that define this approach enhance the accessibility and critical inquiry of the installation. As Rebar describes, “an authentic critical message draped in absurd trade dress has a unique capability to reach people, to cut through the thickets of verbal chatter and visual clutter that suffuse the urban environment, and to propose—lightly and perhaps with a wink—that change is required.”<sup>36</sup>

While operating in the realm of absurd urbanism, the architect exaggerates to make a point. This effort can be designed and physically alter the landscape in doing so, but is more importantly the starting point for a larger conversation. Rebar stresses that “the landscape itself is a field for experimentation and play about space but also about structure, one where the final results of that experiment can lead to broader conclusions.”<sup>37</sup> PARK(ing) Day renders a collection of temporary, dispersed spatial interventions that last a couple of hours or at most a day, but these temporary realities create ripples in discourse and perception that can yield permanent change.

*The Permanent Potential of Temporary Change*

While PARK(ing) Day is an intentionally temporary event, it has also inspired permanent change. In San Francisco the success of the event directly inspired permanent “parklets” as part of the city’s “Pavement

to Parks” program.<sup>38</sup> The power of PARK(ing) Day as a spatial meme lies in its adaptability to different contexts, goals, and states of permanence. Temporary installations are merely the nascent instances of the meme, and multiple variations, interpretations, and revisions can follow.

The tactical importance of temporary change is a strategy routinely employed by Gehl Architects. The firm refers to these temporary adjustments to the urban fabric as “quick wins”—immediate change that inspires action. Quick wins can take a variety of forms, from colorful paint applied to a banal streetscape, moveable furniture, or the introduction of plant life to an urban sidewalk. Quick wins have the ability to signal a change in use and identity, and draw attention to underutilized or under-designed spaces.<sup>39</sup> Jan Gehl has also expressed that an added benefit of the quick win is that it allows “for a period of psychological adjustment,” providing time and space for users to imagine future alternatives.<sup>40</sup>



Photo caption: Gehl and “quick wins”

The potential for temporary uses to inspire systematic, city-wide change has unfolded over the past twenty years in Berlin, Germany. Following reunification in 1989, Berlin possessed a high percentage of vacant and underused lots—even after intensive civic redevelopment efforts.<sup>41</sup> While city officials conceived of these spaces as voids or blights on the landscape, they functioned as “spaces of transgression” for groups referred to as “urban pioneers,” and hosted a variety of creative and insurgent uses—from urban gardening and experimental communities to entertainment and food venues.<sup>42</sup> While many of the sites were executed on a strictly temporary basis, many of the urban pioneers became new stakeholders in urban development, partnering with land owners and civic entities to re-value their communities and transition their temporary initiatives

into permanent community resources.<sup>43</sup> As a result, Berlin forged an evolving and increasingly inclusive place identity, incorporating perspectives that had previously been left out of the dominant narrative of the city.<sup>44</sup>

Architect, urban planner, and educator Quentin Stevens has written about the achievements of temporary space in Berlin and throughout Europe. He characterizes them as tools to bring a variety of uses to monotonous and outmoded industrial and postindustrial landscapes, and describes that much of their capacity for systemic change is a direct result of their temporary nature:

“Indeed, their ephemerality can heighten their attraction, impact and their legacy. The temporary nature and relative intangibility...do not mean that they are completely disconnected from the conventional land development process. Indeed, they serve important niche roles within this process.”<sup>45</sup>

Stevens maintains that many of these temporary uses have the effect of “loosening” tightly planned and regulated landscapes.<sup>46</sup> While the programming can differ, temporary sites share important traits: they “facilitate social gathering...stimulate and display the local community’s capacity to run cultural events,” and their “physical openness and free admission help dissolve physical and socio-economic boundaries.”<sup>47</sup> Stevens also argues that temporary spaces surpass permanent ones in their ability to engage a diversity of users and “broadening and deepening a public sense of place,” citing their “rich, robust human infrastructure” as key to their success.<sup>48</sup> If temporary use and programming are incorporated into and allowed to inform traditional processes for design and development, these qualities can be embedded in the eventual permanent change.

Spanish architecture and urban design firm Ecosistema Urbano offers a compelling case study for integrating temporary and permanent change with their project, Dreamhammar. The project is a multi-faceted

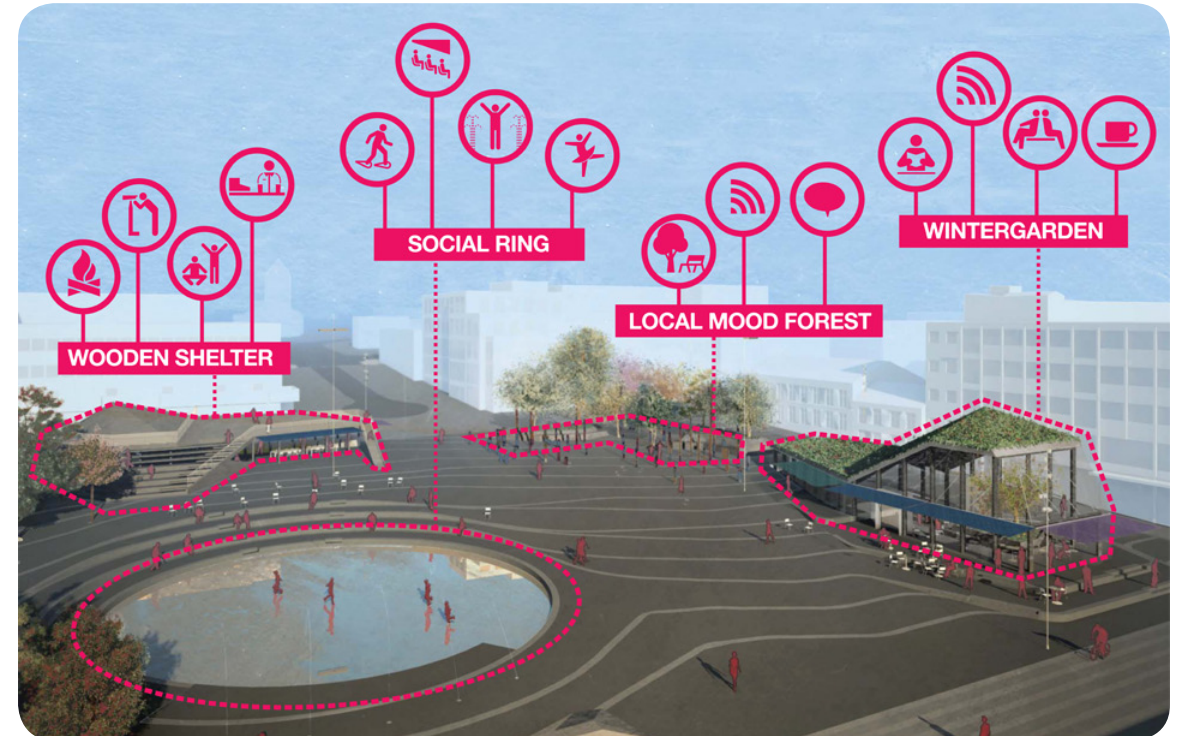


c) Dreamhammar

effort to reimagine a parking lot in Hamar, Norway and transform it into a dynamic public space. The firm adopted a “network design” approach for the project, not only leading community design efforts for the eventual but creating a layered framework within which the design could evolve.<sup>49</sup> This included using the lot itself as a creative community space for “urban actions,” establishing physical and digital labs for workshops, exhibitions, and information sharing, and bringing together academic and community networks.<sup>50</sup> Dreamhamar uses temporary change as a springboard for permanent change, and encourages iterative shifts in perception, function, and design.



d) Dreamhamar



e) Dreamhamar

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## Image Notes

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## THE SUMMER STORY

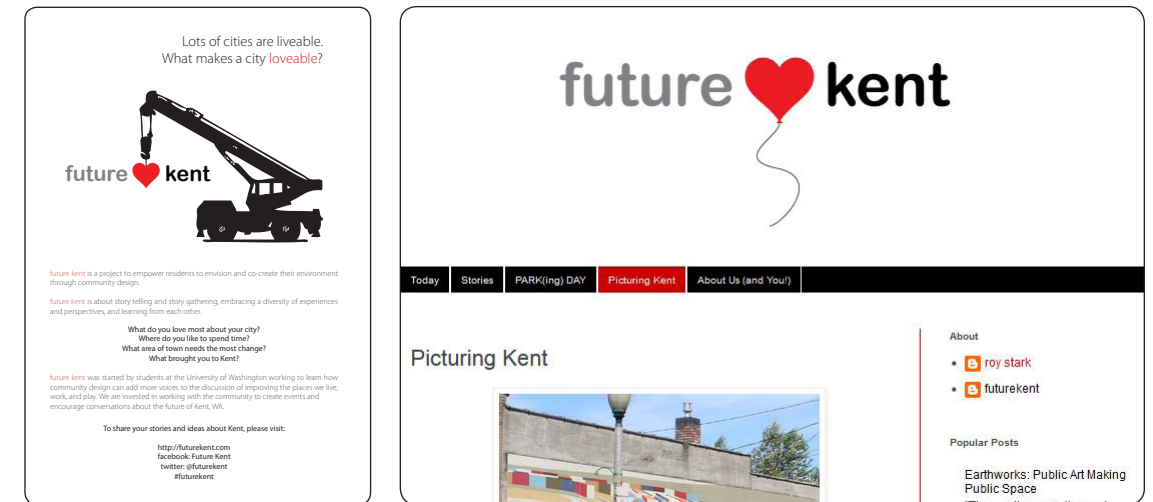
*"I lived in Kent all my life except for 4 years in Pullman for college. It has changed so much in the last 30 years. East Hill has developed into something completely different than it was when I was a kid. I love it here, but I honestly don't understand why anyone would move here today." – Kent resident*

Following our preliminary research to ground and focus the project, we used our summer to make contact and build a rapport with various community constituencies, from city officials to neighborhood groups and non-profit organizations. Working as a team directly enabled this effort, allowing us to maintain ongoing conversations with a broader group of people than either of us would be capable of on our own. We made contact with these groups through a variety of events and methods, and sought to use these interactions as opportunities to collect Kent's stories. Our goal in finding ways to have community members tell their stories of Kent was to absorb a multiplicity of perspectives and allow them to inform our own evolving interpretations of Kent.

We set out with the goal of using PARK(ing) Day as a collaborative community event at the end of the summer, where various community groups could share their perspectives on Kent through their individual parks. The event served as a focal point for many of our conversations with community groups, and our attempts to explain and facilitate the event generated a considerable amount of stories.

### Digital Presence

Prior to making contact with city organizations and community groups in Kent, we developed a project identity to use throughout the summer. This included the project name, Future Kent, our logo, basic flyers to describe the project goals and PARK(ing) Day, a website, and social media presence.



Future Kent flyer, web screen shot, sticker, etc.



Future Kent spray chalk and parking signs

### Community Activities

To develop a basic understanding of stakeholder groups in the community, we participated in a variety of planned events and informal activities. Planned events included Kent Chronicles, a Volunteer Picnic, and a tour at the Historical Society; meetings with city officials in the Economic Development and Planning Departments; and Cornucopia Days, a street festival organized by the Kent Lions Club. Informal activities included attending the Kent Farmer’s Market and driving and walking around the city for causal observation and interaction.

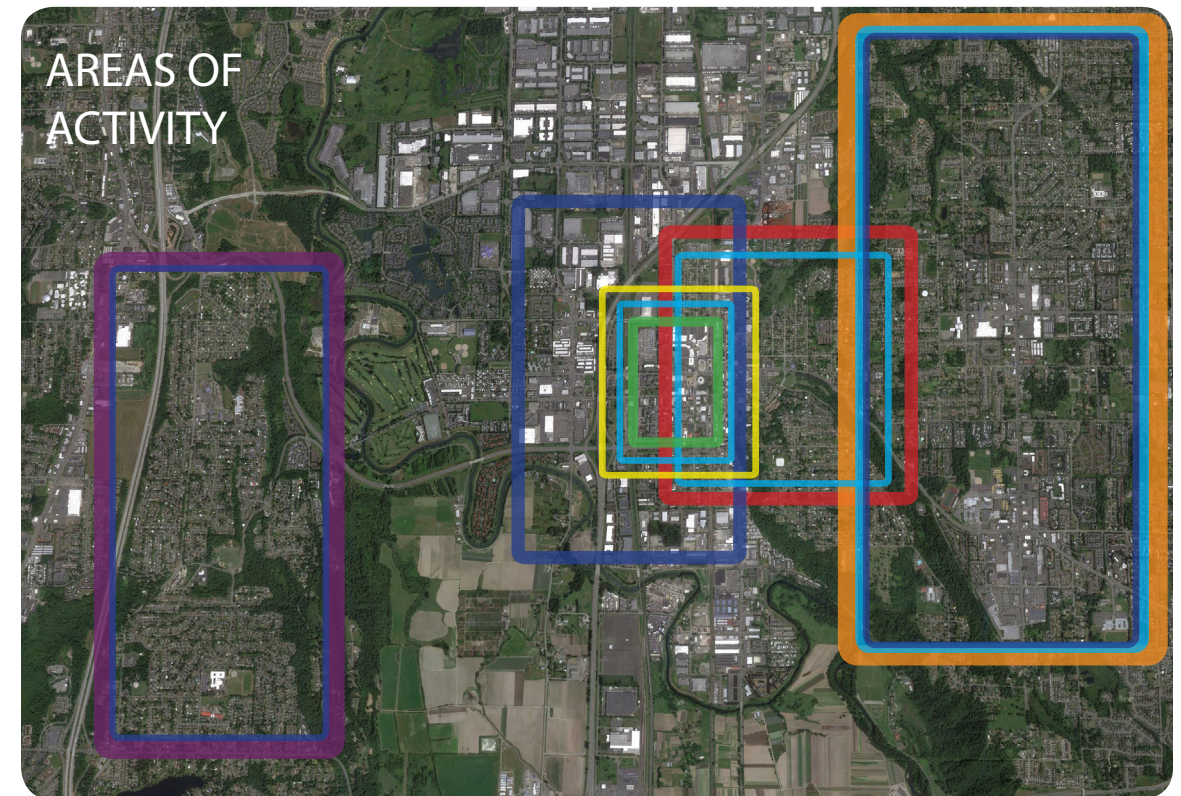
### Informal Art

We used informal art as a way to draw attention to our presence in Kent and start conversations with residents. At Cornucopia Days, we set up a storytelling booth where residents were invited to fill out tags to hang on a board describing what they love about Kent and what they would change about Kent. We used temporary spray chalk stencils in various parking spots throughout the city to depict alternate uses and draw attention to the parking landscape. And we displayed mock parking signs on PARK(ing) Day depicting alternate uses and photographed the signs in context, then posted them online using our digital media tools. Both the tags and the parking signs caught people’s attention and were good conversations starters.

### PARK(ing) Day

Our attempts to curate PARK(ing) Day for a variety of community groups included multiple meetings with various groups, planning and hosting a PARK(ing) Day workshop, and implementing our own park on PARK(ing) Day. We met with the City of Kent, the Kent East Hill Revitalization group (KEHR), Kent Historical Society, and the Kent Downtown Partnership (KDP) to pitch PARK(ing) Day and gauge interest in the event.

The City was our first point of contact. They were initially quite enthusiastic about the event, and thought it would be of particular interest to KDP and KEHR. They mentioned the Golden Steer lot in East Hill



Stakeholder map

as a potential site for the event. We asked about permitting issues for the event at our first meeting with the City. They mentioned implementing some sort of special use “blanket permit” for the day of the event.

We met with KEHR on two occasions and the group expressed a great deal of interest in participating. They generated a variety of ideas for specific parks, and also singled out the Golden Steer lot as a site where they could envision the parks being created. The group also generated a list of other East Hill community groups they wanted to include in the event. KEHR took the lead in attempting to recruit the other community groups. Despite this enthusiasm, they were hesitant about being able to coordinate the event with only a month and a half’s notice, but expressed interest in participating next year.

Much of our meeting with KDP was about their specific efforts to revitalize Downtown Kent. They did express an interest in PARK(ing) Day as a fun and low-cost event, and wanted us to pitch it specifically to downtown business owners, but we were unable to schedule a meeting to do so before the actual event.

As PARK(ing) Day approached and we began planning a workshop to help the public design their own parklets, the City began expressing hesitations about the event. The permitting issues became much more complicated than they had been portrayed previously, and attempts to resolve them drew criticism and complaint from the Parks Department. In the end, the city strongly discouraged us from doing any parks in public street-side spots or municipal lots, instead suggesting that we coordinate with business owners to use

spots in a private lots. (A selection of quotes from email exchanges are included in the Appendix Stories).

Prior to the PARK(ing) Day workshop, we spoke with some business owners and managers in the Golden Steer lot to discuss the event and ask if they would allow us to use a spot in the lot for a few hours in the afternoon. We had a spot in mind for where we wanted to set up the park, and gave business owners a general description of the event and what activity we were planning to host in the spot. We received permission from the owners of the Golden Steer and Paolo's, and permission from the manager of Arielle's Espresso. Due to the temporary nature of PARK(ing) Day and the scale of our individual park within the larger lot we did not attempt to contact the lot owner, and reasoned that an informal agreement with business interests in close proximity to our spot would suffice.

The PARK(ing) Day workshop was held at the Kent Public Library. We advertised the workshop with promotional posters throughout Downtown, East Hill, and West Hill. We also sent email invitations to specific groups and individuals we had been in contact with throughout the summer. We had hoped the workshop would attract individual community members interested in the event, but this did not happen. We had three people in attendance at the workshop—one from KDP, and two from the Historical Society. KDP wanted to learn more about executing the event and possibly participating next year. The Historical Society members wanted to participate this year, and had a specific lot and activity in mind. They wanted to set up a public display of historic photos on the Arney lot, an abandoned lot in Downtown Kent. The lot has been the site of various buildings throughout Kent's history, but has been used as a makeshift parking lot since its most recent building burned down in 2006. Unfortunately, the Historical Society encountered a lot of resistance from the city in trying to arrange the activity and was unable to coordinate it in time for PARK(ing) Day. (A selection of quotes from these meetings are included in the Appendix Stories).

## What does "park" mean to you?



# PARK (ing) DAY

PARK(ing) DAY is an annual worldwide event where artists, designers and citizens **transform parking spots into temporary public parks for their community.**

**2013 will be the first year that Kent participates in PARK(ing) DAY!** Individuals and groups from around the city will choose a parking spot, imagine an alternative use, and make that use come to life on **Friday, September 20th.** You can be a part of this fun and free community event!

**futurekent** is hosting a PARK(ing) DAY Workshop to share ideas and resources. If you'd like to participate in PARK(ing) DAY or are just curious and want to learn more, **please join us for brainstorming, snacks, and conversations about Kent. All are welcome!**

## JOIN US AT THE WORKSHOP!

Monday, Sept. 9th, 6-8:30pm

Kent Library

**IT'S FUN! IT'S FAST! IT'S FREE!**

facebook: Future Kent  
twitter: @futurekent



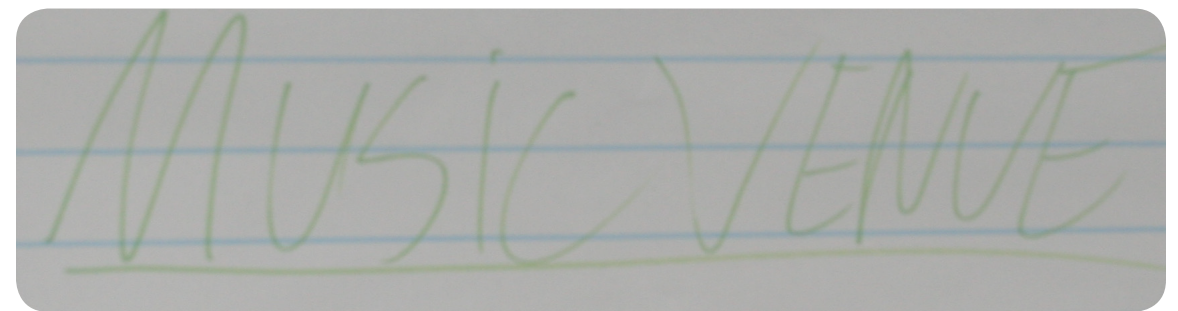
For more info please visit  
futurekent.com

(original PARK(ing) DAY concept by Rebar ([www.rebargroup.org](http://www.rebargroup.org)))

On PARK(ing) Day, we spent the first half of the day displaying and photographing our mock parking signs throughout Downtown, East Hill, and West Hill. The second half of the day we spent in the Golden Steer lot, with our park installed in a spot at the edge of the lot, next to the sidewalk and directly behind a bus stop. The park activity was a storyboard that supplied big sheets of paper, markers, and crayons for passersby to answer brainstorming questions or add general comments about Kent. The board included an aerial view of the Golden Steer lot and surrounding context in addition to the following questions:

- What do you love about Kent?
- What does community mean to you?
- What does your community need?
- What do you worry about?
- What do you look forward to?
- What would you change about Kent?
- What are your hopes for Kent?
- What's missing?

Despite the modest nature of our park, our unexpected presence was enough to draw attention from people driving by, people patronizing businesses in the lot, and people using the bus stop. We had a number of conversations with people while they were waiting for their bus, and four other people stayed at the park for an extended period of time to talk to us and other participants about our project and about Kent.



Future Kent park on Parking Day: Story boards



Future Kent park on Parking Day: Story boards in the Golden Steer lot

*Rojas Workshop*

After PARK(ing) Day, we had the good fortune of attending a lecture given at the UW CBE by James Rojas, an architect and planner based in Los Angeles. Rojas lectured about his public planning method, "The City as Play," which involves non-professional community members in planning activities using toys and found objects designed to allow a childlike state of play to express people's desires and ideas about a place. Rojas translates the models and stories produced during these workshops into planning ideas understandable to professionals. The following day, we were able to meet with Rojas and discuss his work and ours. He emphasized that it is difficult to get people to answer complicated or uncommon questions with words—whether written or spoken—and it is important to find the ideal place and time when people will be available to participate. He also conveyed that it is advantageous to plan your workshop so that people of different ages and backgrounds can take part in the workshop. He suggested we try the "City as Play" method in another East Hill workshop.

We set up an evening workshop at the Phoenix Academy Community Center on Kent's East Hill. The community center is run by the Parks Department and is open nightly to teens from 7<sup>th</sup> grade through 19 years of age. We hosted a design charrette for the youth at the community center centered on the Golden Steer lot. To facilitate this, we gathered toys, found objects, and modeling materials. We also plotted a large format, table-sized aerial view of the parking lot to build on top of. We set up in the early evening for around 2 hours and had 15-20 youth stop by to participate. There was a huge interest in the uncommon activity and it we stayed longer than planned because of enthusiastic participants. The participants imagined a huge variety of solutions and interventions for the parking lot, from the most banal to the most fantastical. A few examples were:

- a place to sing or perform
- covered area
- kid friendly play space with pets
- bike riding
- more intimate scale, more to do
- new entrance gateway
- swing/light structure
- place to hunt or interact with animals
- barriers between cars and people
- light poles with games like tetherball

Several youth asked us if we could come back and do the workshop everyday. This event was one of the most productive and promising of the whole summer. It was simple, fun, and seemed scalable for various age groups and number of participants. It was a highly effective method for gathering a large and diverse group of stories.

*Concluding Thoughts on Summer Activities*

Our experiments with on-the-ground story-gathering and community design taught us many things about a process that is seldom accessible during an academic program. The largest factor in this process was whether we could gather stories from a community at all...would they want to share with us? The answer turned out to be very clear. People want to talk and share their stories. We had many brief encounters as well



Rojas Workshop at Kent Phoenix Academy Community Center

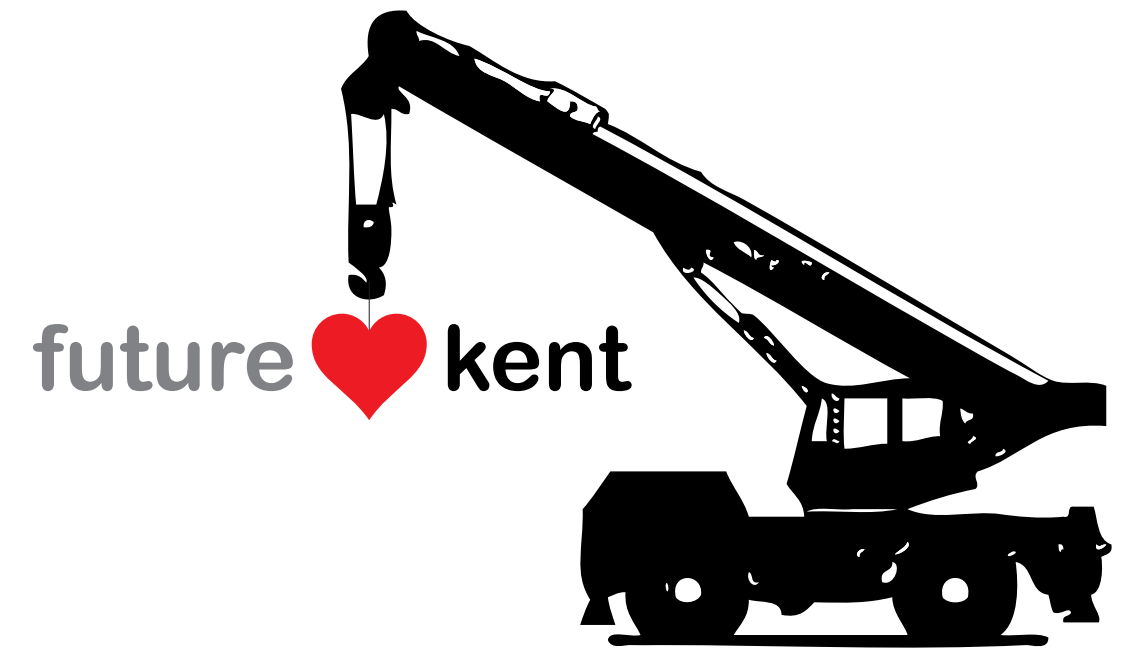
as lengthy and often personal conversations. While people do like to share their stories and it is easy to get them excited and wanting to participate in activities, it is much harder to get people to commit, to do specific things at specific places. There is much to be practiced in the realm of community design, but learning how to attract people to events is perhaps the most important and challenging.

During the summer, we quickly started to understand more about the issues and dynamics affecting Kent, and to see the web of players and goals. With only a modest investment of time we found that gathering stories was very lucrative. Forming relationships with the Historical Society, City Planners, KDP, KEHR, and

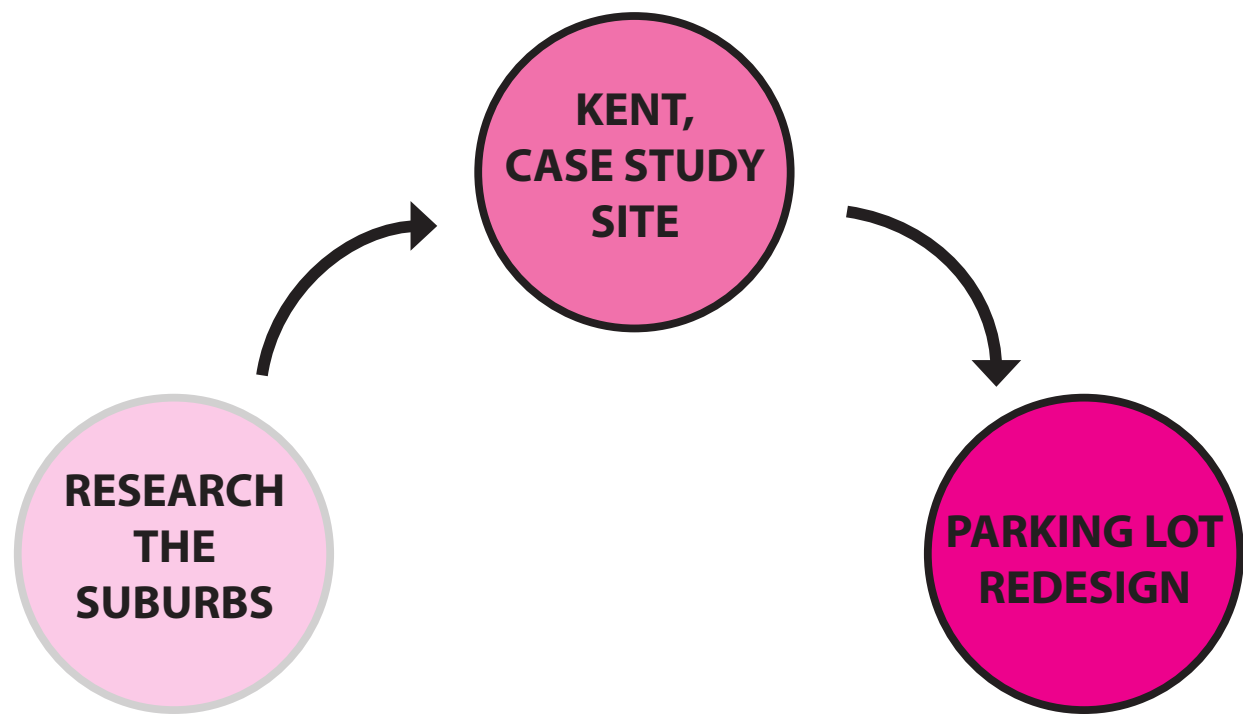


THE PROJECT STORY

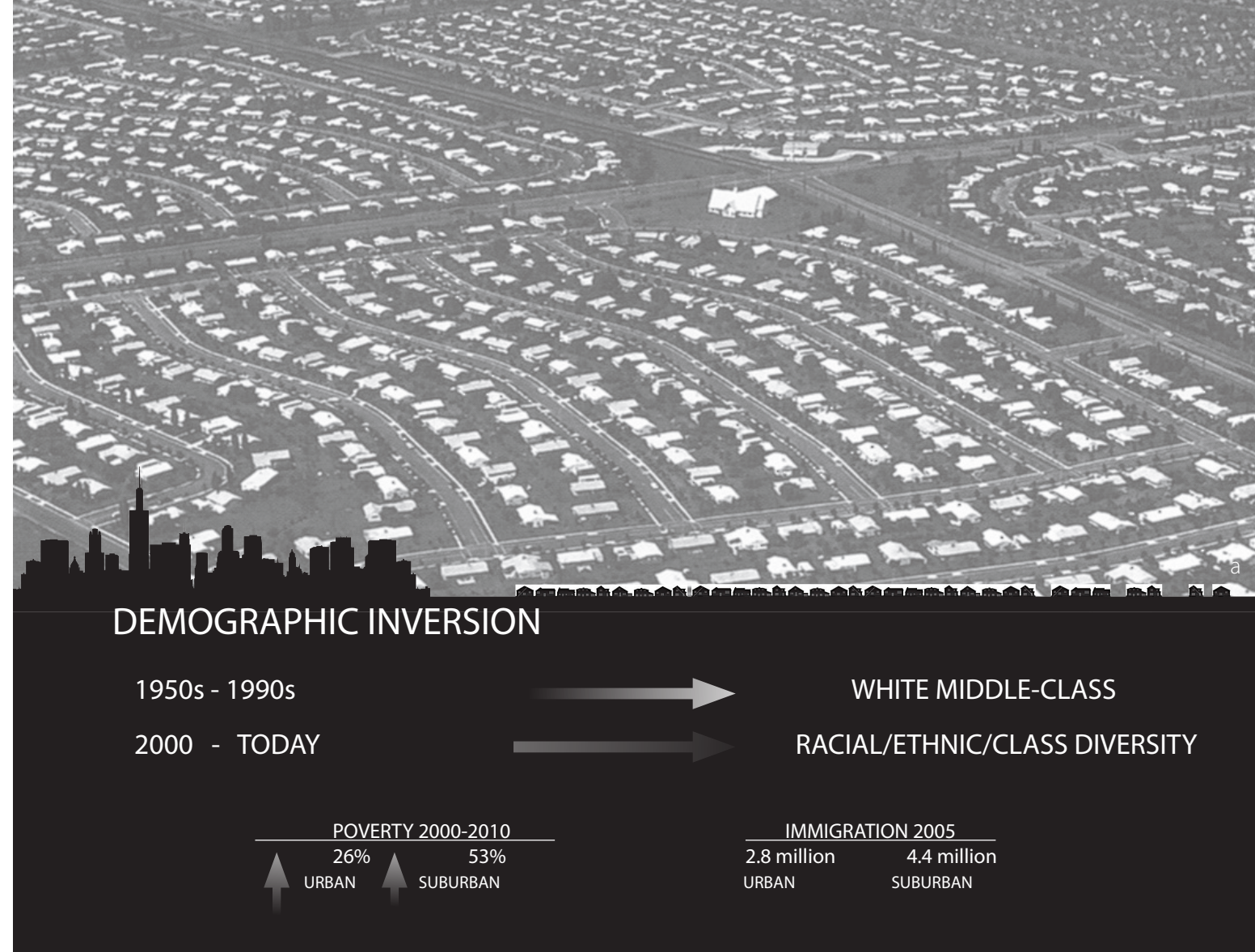
*"Hi again! You guys still looking for the one thing Kent needs?" – Kent Resident*



This thesis is about learning to look closer at a place and the people who live there--looking past preconceptions of the suburbs to find the stories of the residents, and improve their experiences without judging their lifestyle.



We began the project with general research of the suburbs, followed by a case study of Kent WA, and we are now redesigning the Golden Steer parking lot in Kent's East Hill neighborhood.

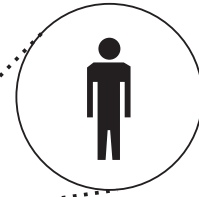
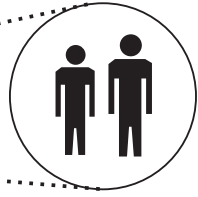
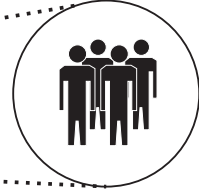
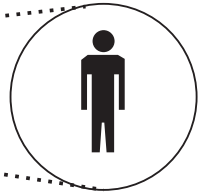
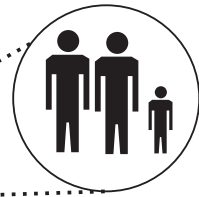
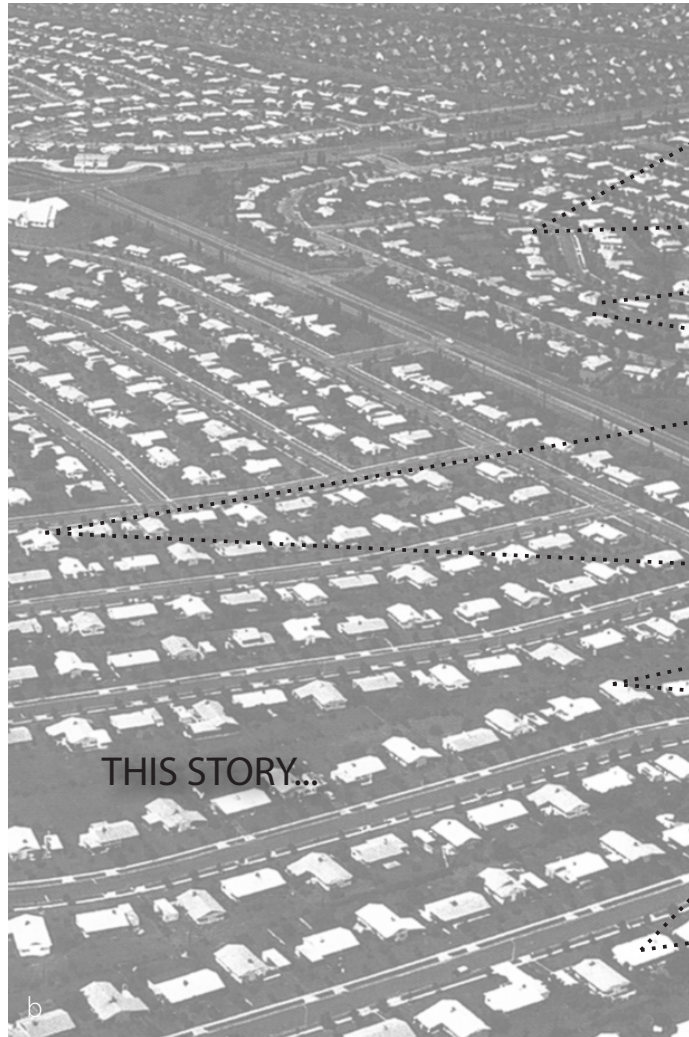


American suburbs are ubiquitous and complex places. They are dynamic and evolving, and popular conceptions of them don't necessarily match reality. Much of this evolution is due to dramatic demographic shifts that have amplified during the past decade. Suburban spatial form does not reflect the diverse needs of changing suburban populations, and the suburban landscape needs to evolve accordingly.



For many additional reasons—from climate change, to changing lifestyles, to poor construction quality, the suburban landscape is in need of a retrofit.

This fact presents professional designers with the opportunity to examine our pre-conceptions of these places, attempt to develop a more authentic understanding of their place identities, and make them more resilient and inclusive for the future.



does not tell their stories.

## KENT: A CITY & A SUBURB

### POPULATION

**120,916**

Seattle  
620,778

### COMMUTE HABITS

**74% drive alone**

**9% take public transit**

### PERSONS (per sq mi)

Seattle  
7,250.9

**3,228.3**

Seattle  
**54% drive alone**

**17% take public transit**

### HOUSING UNITS

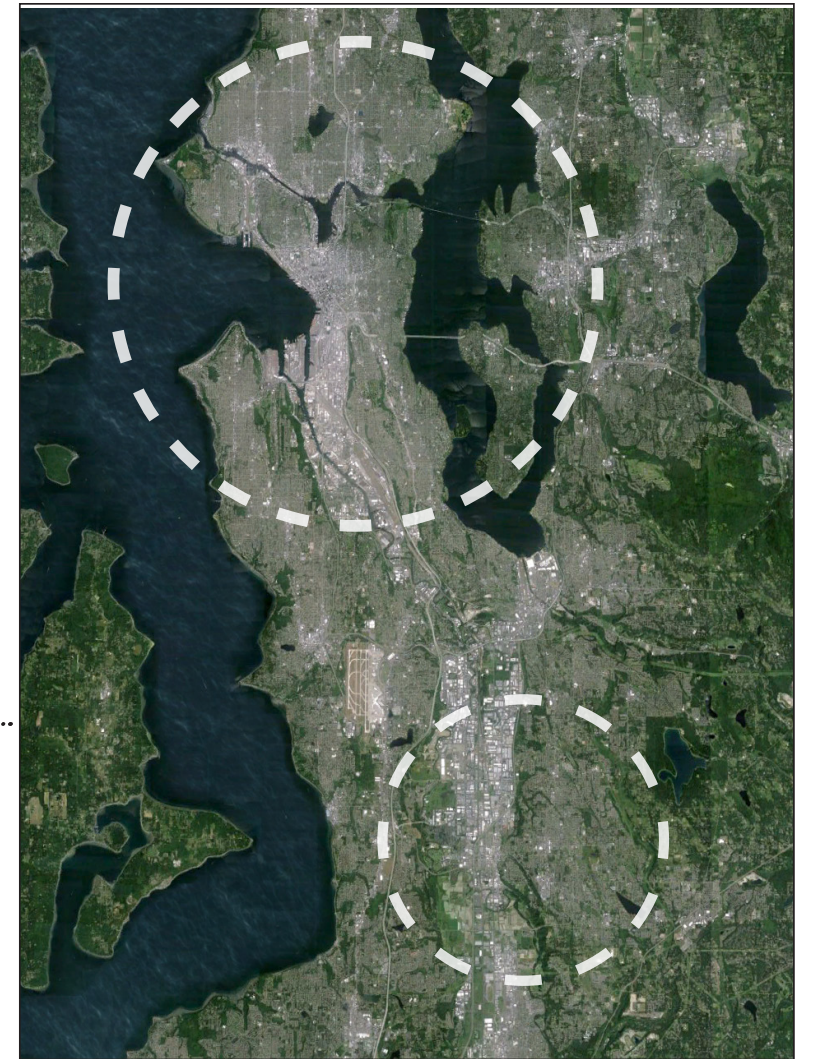
Seattle  
308,516

**36,424**

(TOTAL)

Seattle  
**42%**

(MULTI-UNIT)



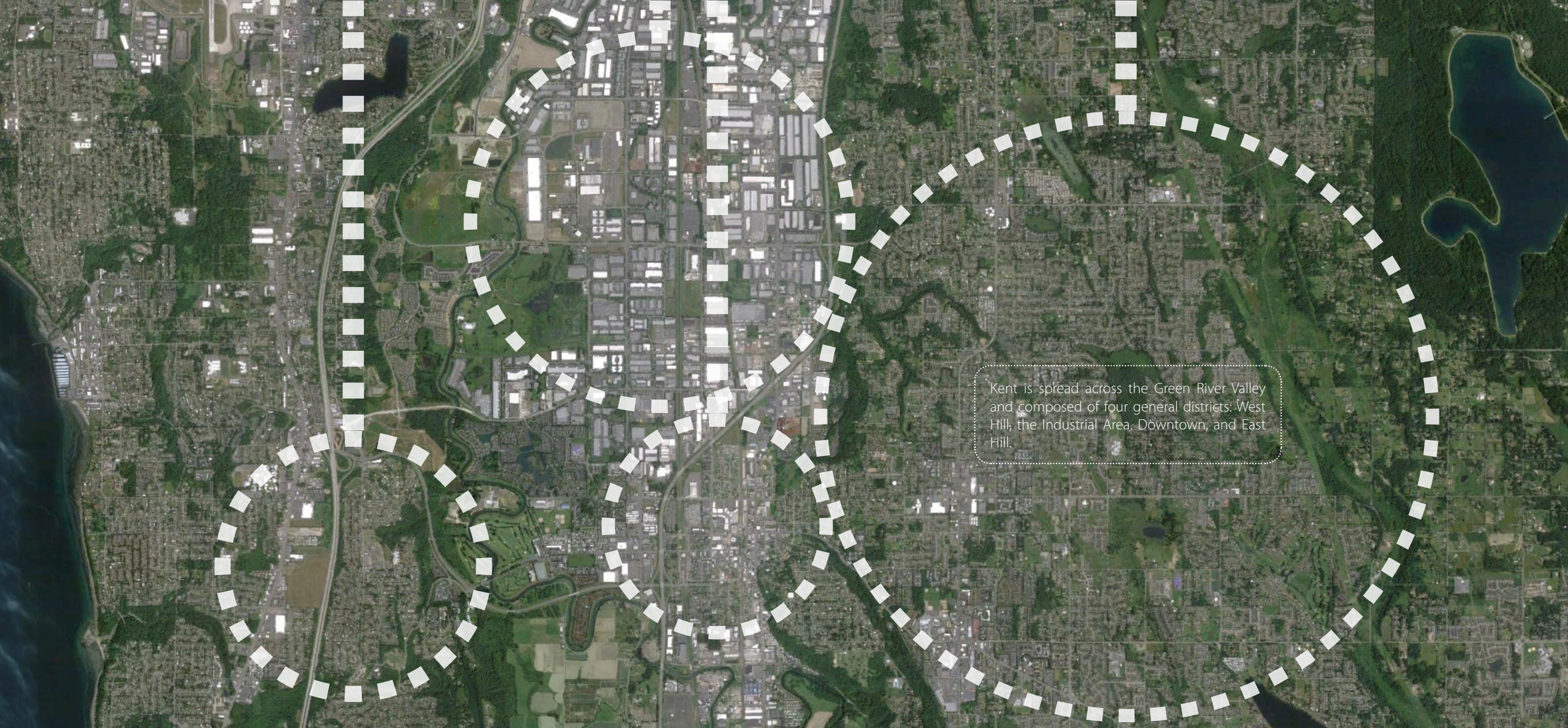
This project has been an exploration of what happens to our understandings of a suburb when we take into account the stories of the people who live in the suburb. "Power affects which stories are told, heard, and carry weight."<sup>1</sup> As professional interpreters and shapers of the landscape, architects are part of that power structure, and through our work we can reveal untold stories and strengthen the voice of residents.

Kent, WA is an in-between place. It is an autonomous city of 120,000 people with a unique character, history, and identity. It is also a suburb of Seattle—twenty miles south of the city with commuters, low density housing, and a privatized, car centric landscape.

**WEST HILL**

**INDUSTRIAL AREA  
DOWNTOWN**

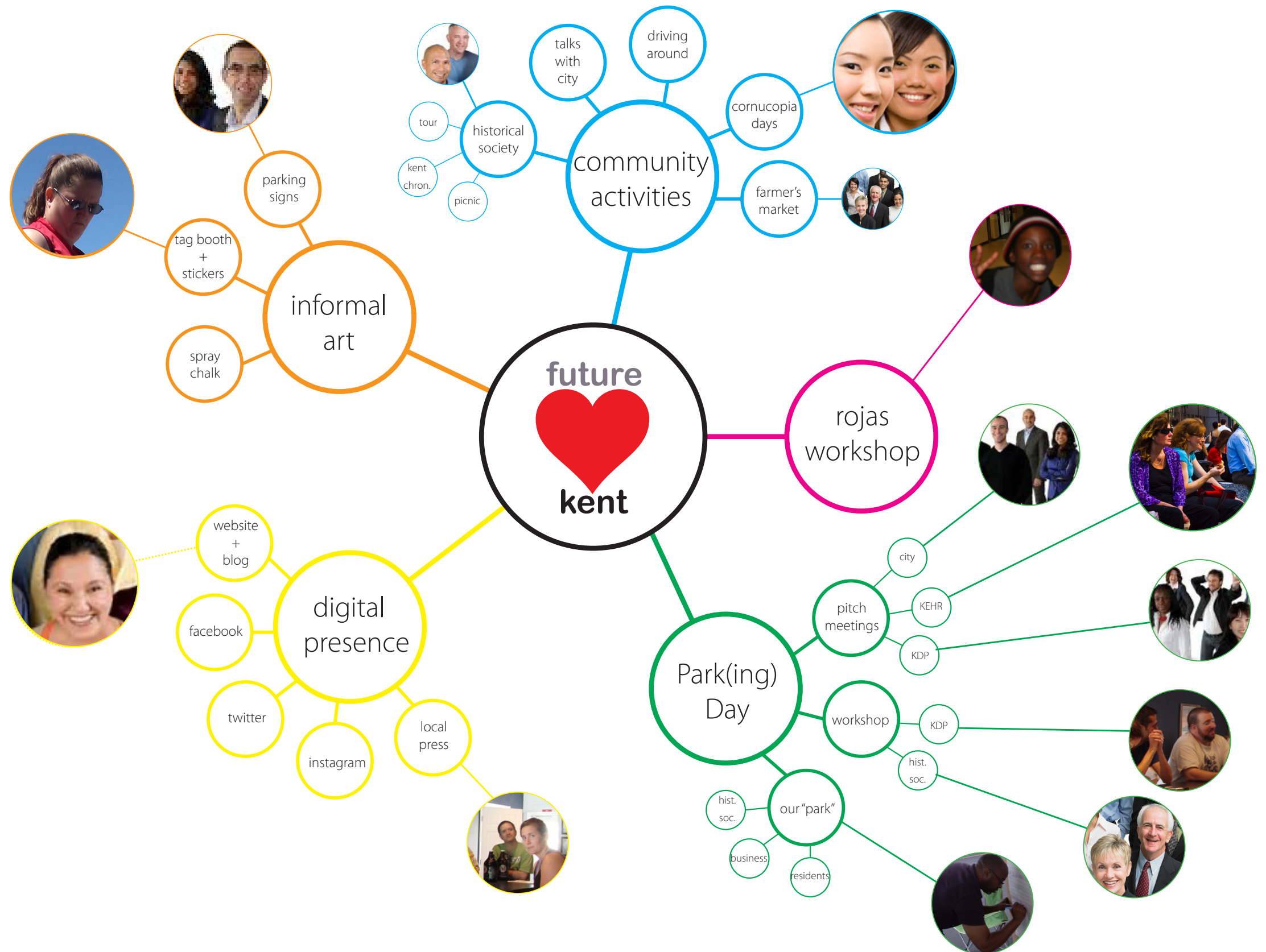
**EAST HILL**



Kent is spread across the Green River Valley and composed of four general districts: West Hill, the Industrial Area, Downtown, and East Hill.

During our time in Kent, we learned from many individuals and community groups. Using the project name, FutureKent, we also hosted our own events, curated an online presence, planned Kent's first Park(ing)Day event, and hosted community design charrettes...

This diagram shows the diversity of groups, events, and methods we used in our research to collect Kent's stories. Our goal in finding ways to have residents tell their stories of Kent was to absorb a multiplicity of perspectives. Stories are personal and mutable. They are powerful tools for understanding emotions and relationships within and between communities. No story is the full story. Rather than whittling down complexities into generalizations, stories help articulate and understand difference.





C

Kent is a city desperately trying to define itself amidst significant change, and in the face of being defined as “x” miles from something else. Over the past several months we have repeatedly made the commute from Seattle to Kent, and each trip has added a layer of complexity to our understanding of this place.

Much of our time there has been spent listening. Kent was historically an agricultural community. The valley flooded yearly and had “soil, fertile like the Nile.” The arrival of the railroad shifted the balance between agriculture and industry. Boeing and other industrial tenants have fueled the growth of the concrete glacier on Kent’s north edge. Suburban housing tracts built over the last fifty years on East Hill have attracted thousands of commuters pursuing the American Dream. We have heard long-time residents lament the loss of what Kent was before “everything changed”

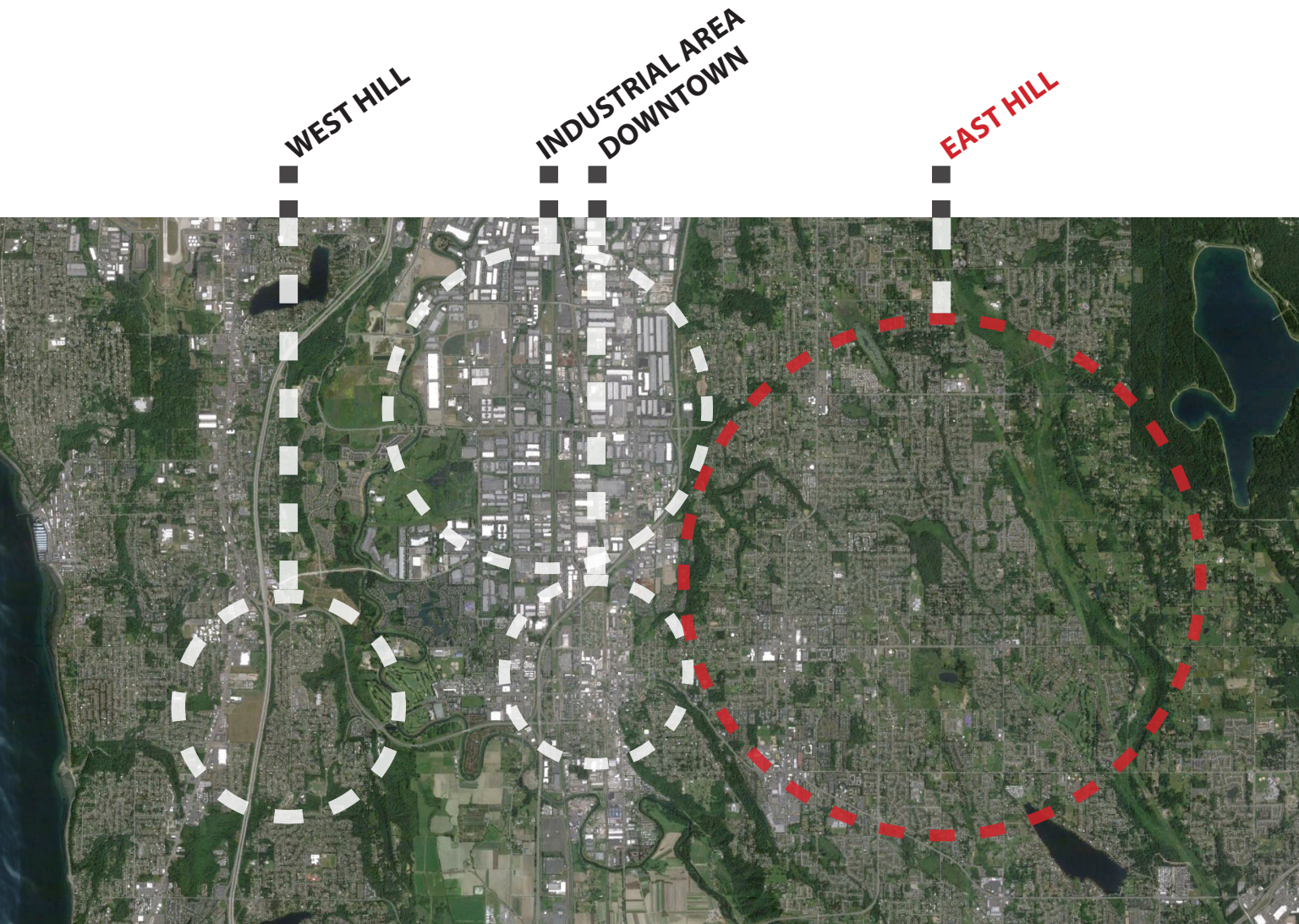


*Wish You Were Here!*



We have heard city government and business interests intently focused on Kent's future, trying to mold it into a "destination" with economic vitality and cultural clout.

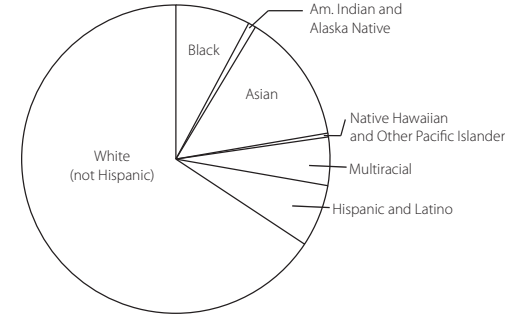
One resident told us that while she grew up in Kent and loves it, she couldn't imagine why anyone would move there today.



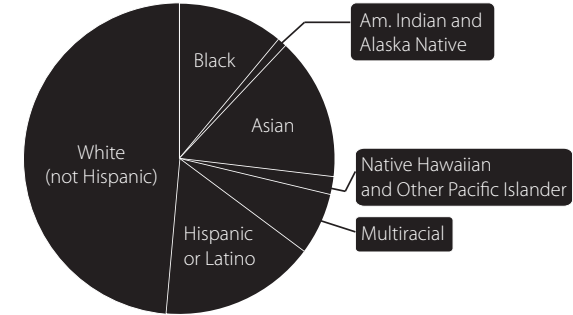
## KENT: A CITY & A SUBURB

### DEMOGRAPHICS

Seattle



Kent



Many of the residents who are moving there today live in East Hill.

This part of Kent historically boasted five to ten acre farmsteads and is now a familiar visual chaos of big boxes, roadside strips, parking lots, and cul-de-sacs. But this is also the part of Kent where one hundred and twenty-nine languages are spoken. East Hill's diversity is grafted onto the sprawl landscape, creating a place that is at once familiar and unique. Community members view this diversity as a strength, but have expressed the neighborhood's need for a "face lift, a sense of place," and a way for community groups to forge a sense of unity from this diversity.



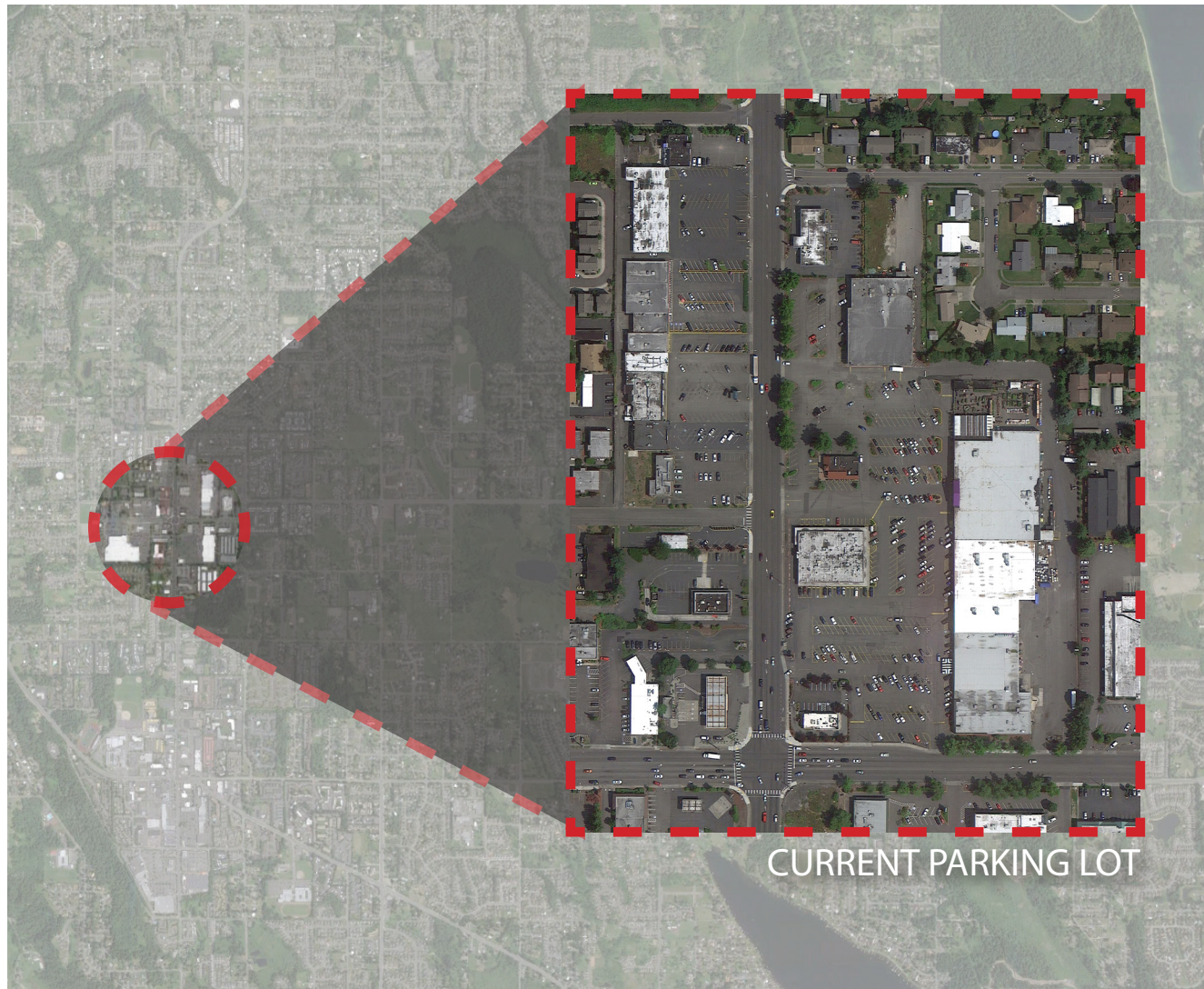
The community organizations in East Hill have long-term and short-term revitalization goals: they would like to market East Hill as an International District and harness the entrepreneurial spirit of the community; they want to build capacity for the community to take ownership of its future; they want the neighborhood to be clean and safe, with more reasons to walk and more destinations; they want youth to have a place to go to hang out and learn; they want art that reflects different cultures; they want people to be proud of their community.



*Miss you a lot!*



Much of our time in this neighborhood has been spent in one particular parking lot, the Golden Steer Lot, trying to understand what is unique about it and how it can better serve the surrounding community.



The lot was mentioned early on in our meetings with the city as an aging strip mall in need of reinvestment. It resurfaced repeatedly in various conversations as an important activity center for East Hill. After the city strongly discouraged us from doing Park(ing) Day downtown in a public spot, business owners in this lot welcomed us. Despite its unremarkable appearance, this lot is well used by the community.



As designers, when we see parking lots, we see them as barriers to good design—a necessary evil ...But what if we could conceive of them as opportunities?...As places ripe for an infusion of community amenities?

There are many valid arguments to reduce parking, but many of them are long-term in scope and require significant lifestyle changes for users. We can't force people to give up their cars overnight. But we can "compel them with context,"<sup>2</sup> by including them in the process and gradually demonstrating beneficial alternatives. Our intention is not to force people to change their lifestyle, but to engage their evolving communities with a design that is more resilient. Our intention is to give people more options, more opportunities per square mile, and more to love about where they live.



# GOALS

## A LOT OF AUTHENTICITY

reflect and strengthen community identity

Parking lots are banal but flexible. Seldom are they designed, other than to satisfy basic code. Our goals in redesigning this lot center on the interdependent themes of authenticity, inclusivity, and resiliency.

We set out to make the lot a place that can reflect and strengthen community identity. This meant working with the lot as a native but underperforming space in the landscape. We assessed the current successes of the lot and future needs of the community. And we wanted to increase the density and diversity of opportunities within the lot, while making it flexible for community use.

## A LOT OF INCLUSIVITY

gathering and interaction without commercial imperative

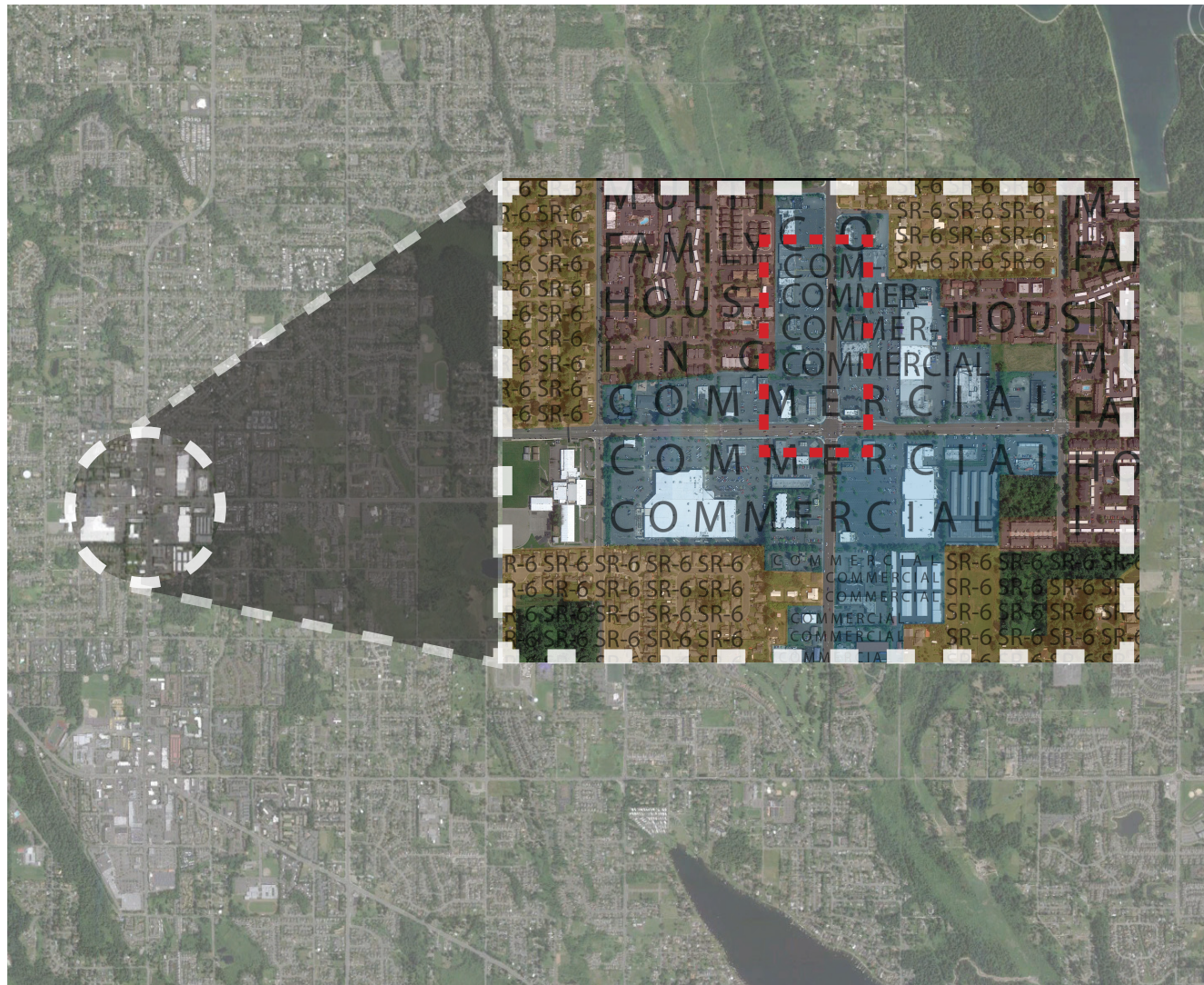
The lot is a product of the privatized suburban landscape. Many suburban lots function as de-facto public spaces and host events or activities they are not explicitly designed for—from farmer's markets to tailgating and causal gathering among teens. Architect Jan Gehl wrote, "By allowing the public realm to drive the design process, public spaces can serve as a place for all, while also embracing the unique qualities and amenities of the specific context. A city should be open and inviting to people and allow for many different activities and possibilities to ensure multiplicity and diversity."<sup>3</sup> Our redesign creates opportunities in the lot for gathering and interaction without commercial imperative. We've also established a phased design as a framework for community involvement, "quick wins", immediate change that inspires action (coined by Gehl Architects), and gradual change.

## A LOT OF RESILIENCY

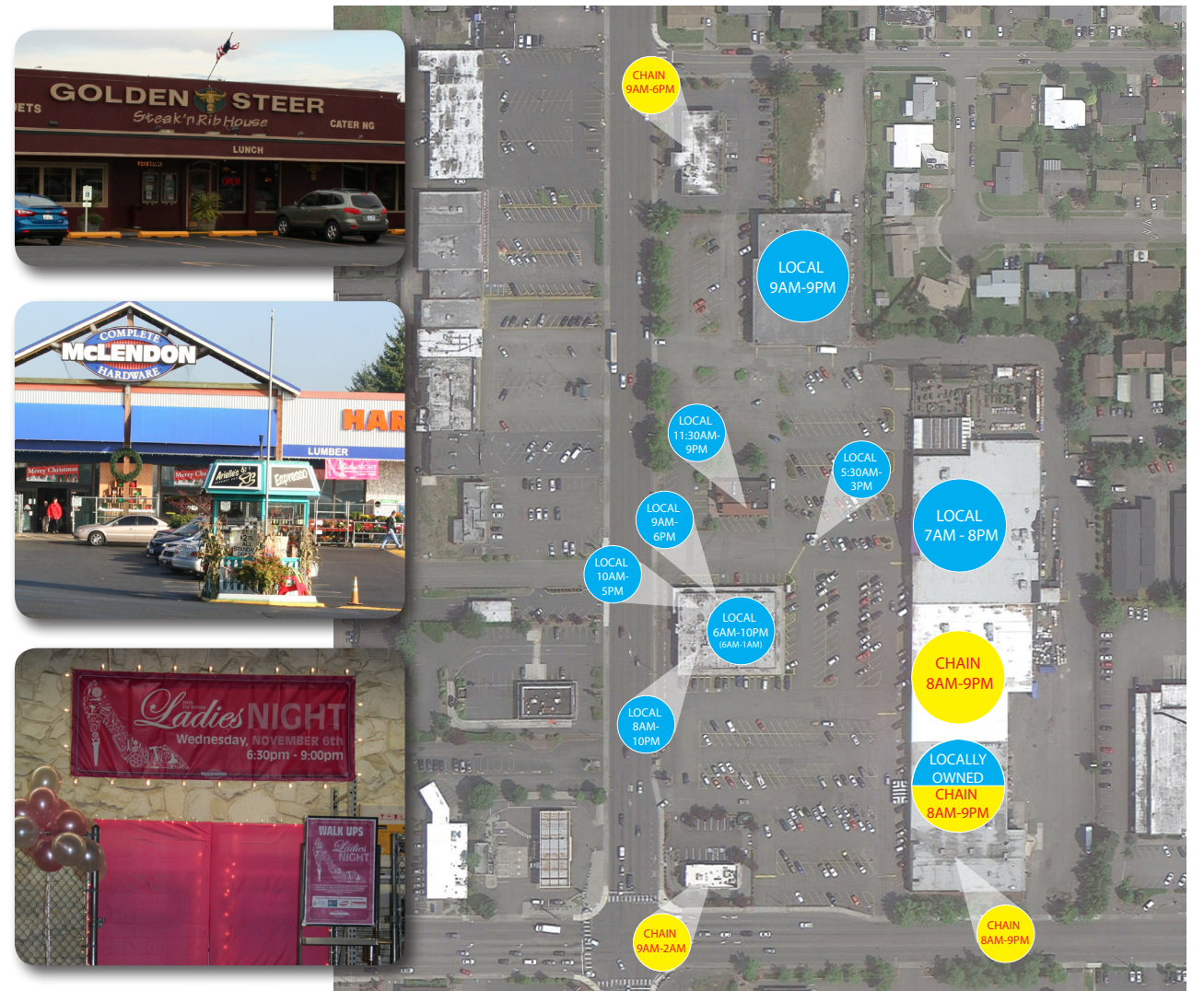
improving the social, economic, and environmental health of the lot (dynamic and responsive)

The social, economic, and environmental health of the lot all need to be improved for the future. In addition to reimagining the lot as a community asset, the phased master plan includes strategies for community-driven microenterprise. We've also established a green stormwater infrastructure through the use of bioretention areas and cisterns, which can serve as a basis for a future net-zero stormwater system.





The lot is located in East Hill's main commercial corridor, surrounded by single- and multi-family housing.



While downtown Kent and other lots on the East Hill are struggling to attract tenants, this lot has no vacancies, and a high percentage of local businesses. The variety of services and retail in the lot provides eyes on the lot for most hours of the day—from early in the morning until after midnight. The Golden Steer Restaurant and Bar has been in this lot since 1964. The owner is an active leader in the community, recently elected to city council. The hardware store holds an annual “Ladies Night” event that has attracted hundreds of community members for free drinks, food, and do-it-yourself workshops.

Our redesign of this lot responds to specific goals and needs identified by the community, and makes explicit allowances for alternate activities in addition to parking. We have defined 5 general zones of activity, responding to the many stories and shared experiences we have had with the people of Kent over the last 6 months...



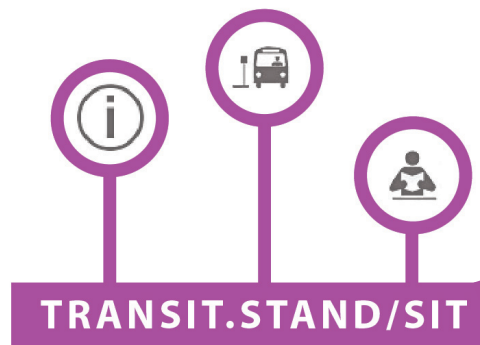
**PARK PLAZA**

- NEIGHBORHOOD CONNECTOR
- SPORT/PLAY SPACE
- PARK/PLAYGROUND
- AMPITHEATER/STAGE



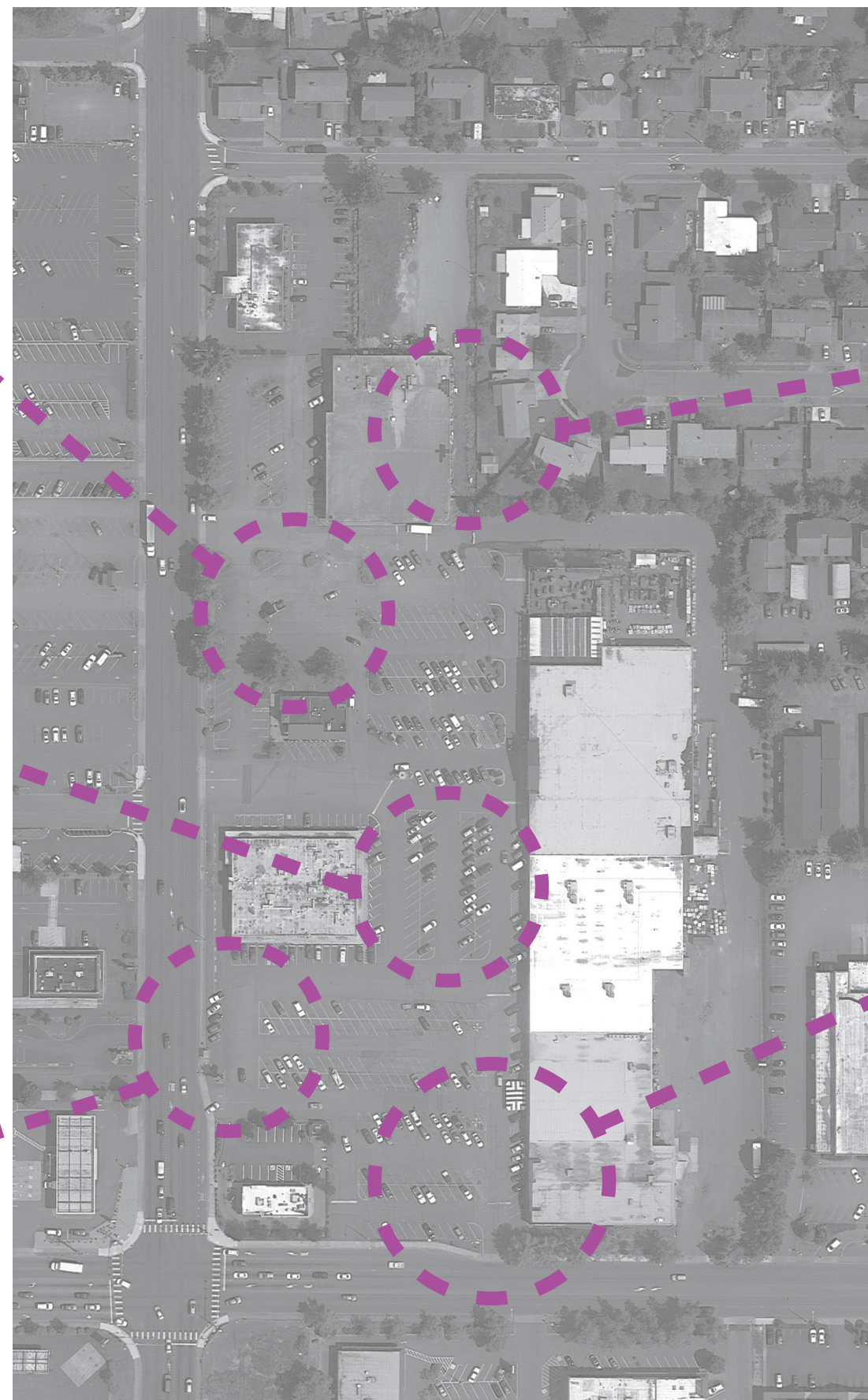
**CENTRAL MARKET**

- BIO RETENTION AREAS
- MARKET/PARKING SHELTERS
- FLEXIBLE EVENT SPACE
- WATER HARVESTING



**TRANSIT STAND/SIT**

- INFORMATION
- BUS STOP/WAITING AREA
- COMMUNITY FREE LIBRARY



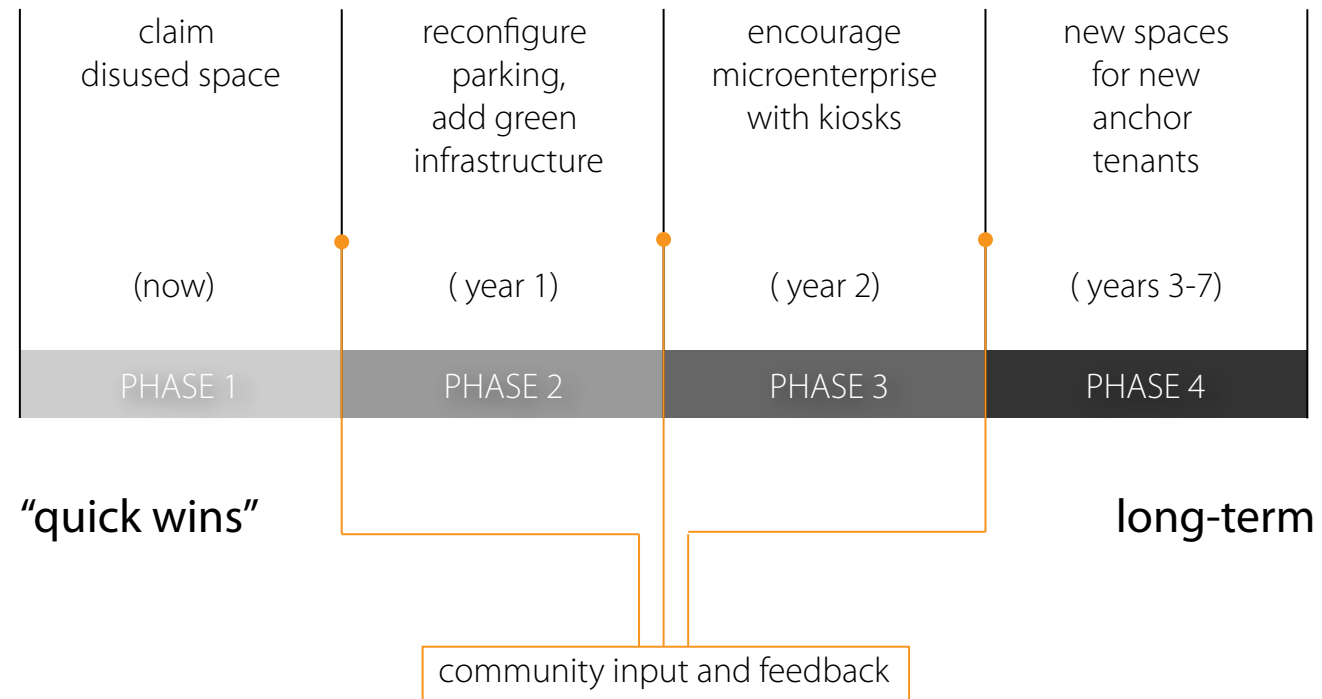
**CART ALLEY**

- NEIGHBORHOOD CONNECTOR
- PET SPACE
- COMMUNITY ART INSTALLATION
- BIO RETENTION AREA



**CORNER PLAZA/  
FOOD COURT ALLEY**

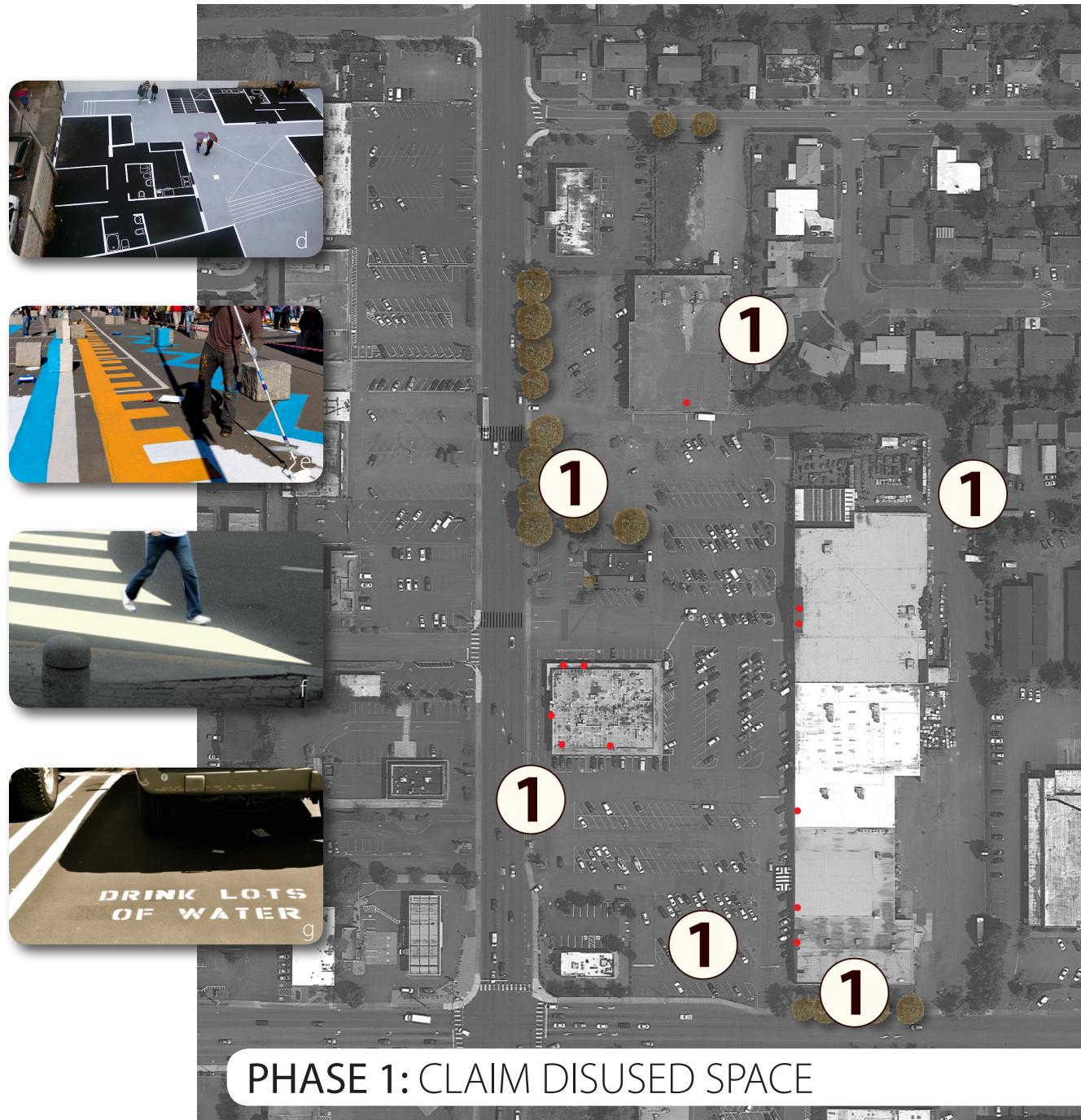
- PERFORMANCE SPACE
- FREE INTERNET
- COFFEE BAR
- MUSIC VENUE
- RESTAURANTS



We're proposing that the lot be redesigned in phases through a community design process. So while the master plan proposes an eventual outcome, the process would be open to community feedback and participation.

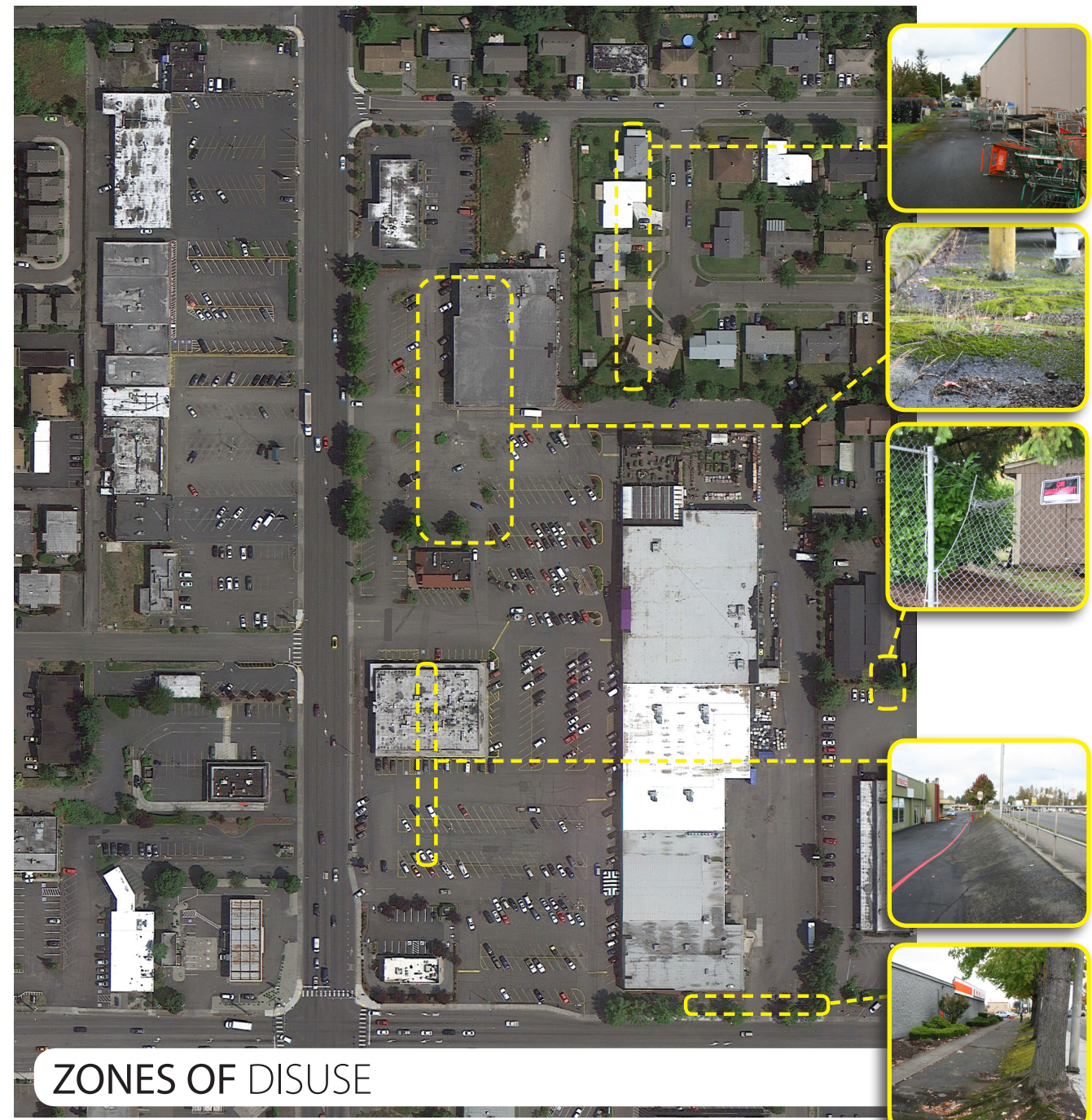


Phase 1 is to claim disused space in the lot.



**PHASE 1: CLAIM DISUSED SPACE**

We have looked at several precedents that use public art to temporarily reimagine a space--sometimes as an end in itself, sometimes en-route to a more permanent redesign.



**ZONES OF DISUSE**

There are several areas of space throughout the lot that are not utilized to their potential. Many are in visible disrepair, and would be the first sites of clean-up and reimaging for the lot.





The large swath of space next to the Auto Zone on the south end of the lot is one area that could be better utilized to serve pedestrians in the neighborhood.

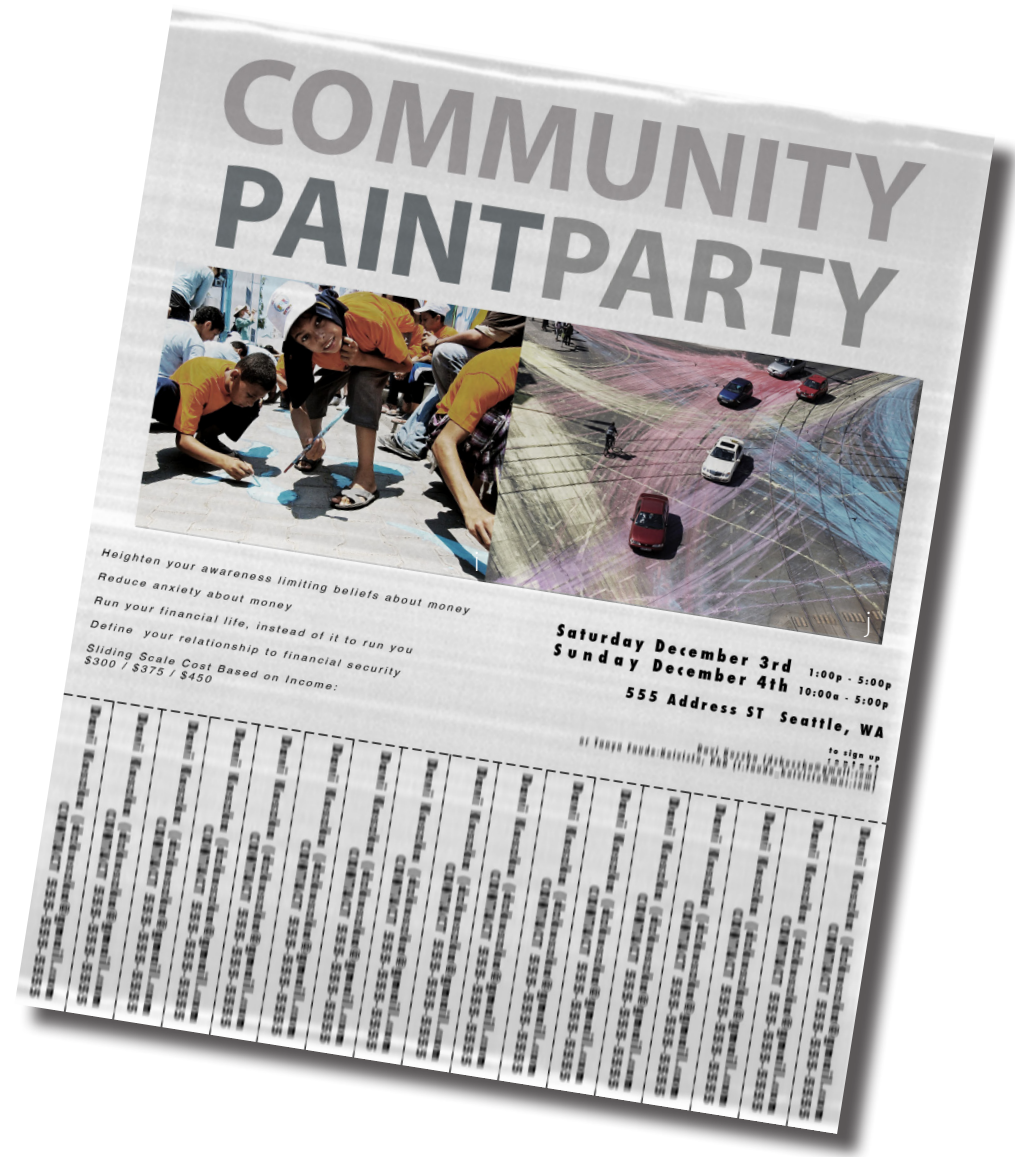




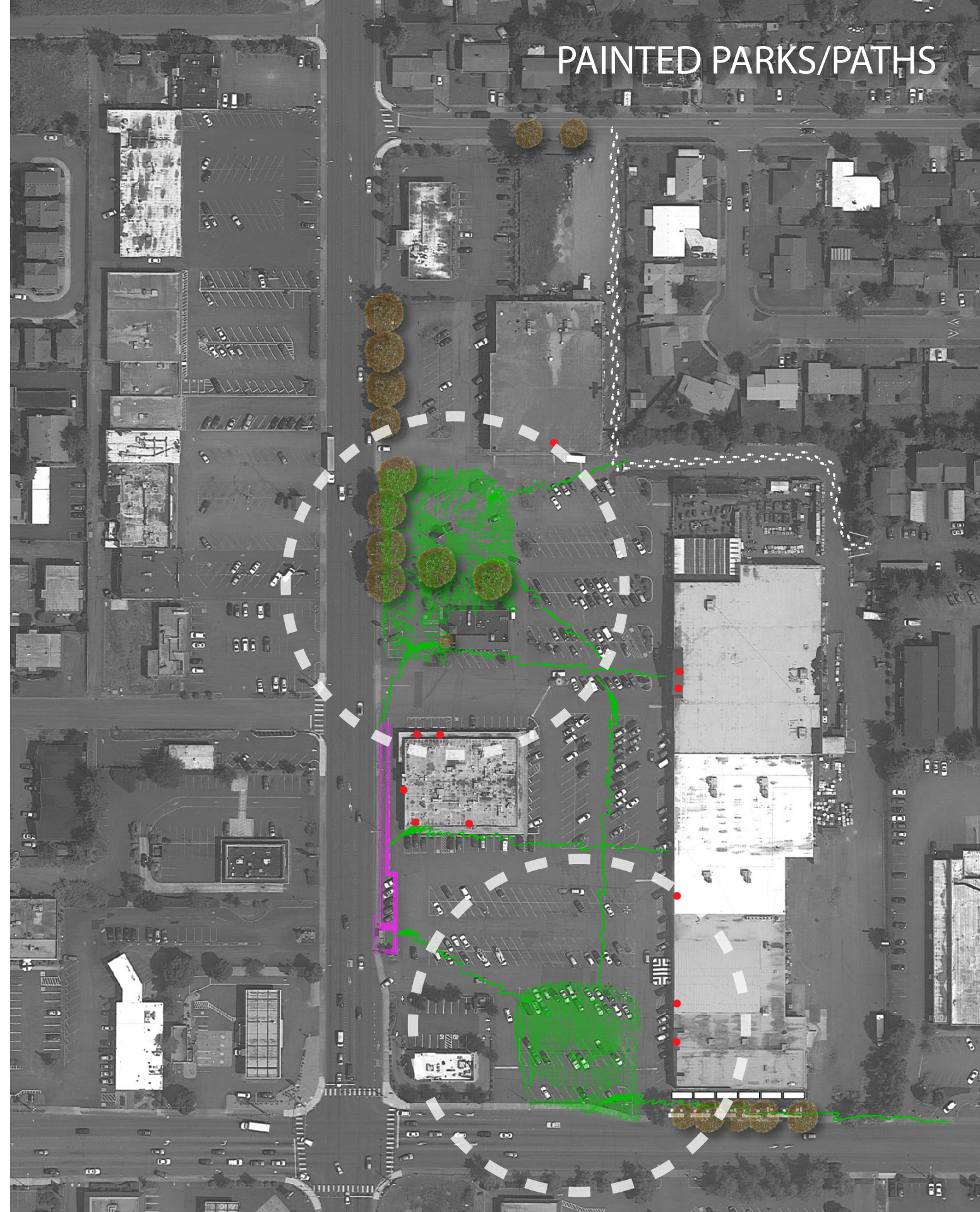
This is on the main pedestrian desire path through the lot to the neighborhood. It is large enough to accommodate food trucks and informal seating without significant redesign, making it an ideal first step to signify that a lot of change is coming.







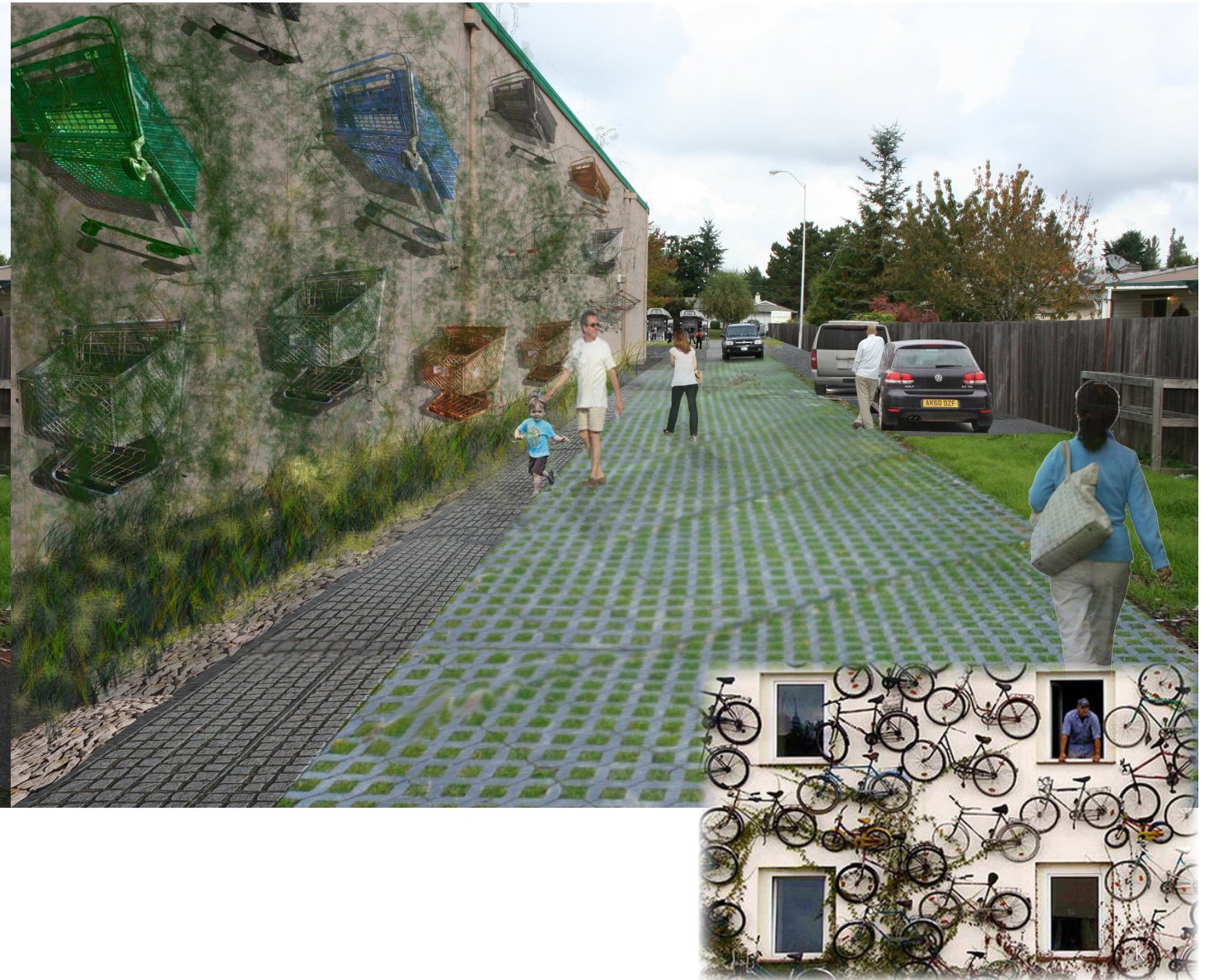
Then we would address the proposed network of park space and pedestrian paths during an interactive workshop with the community.



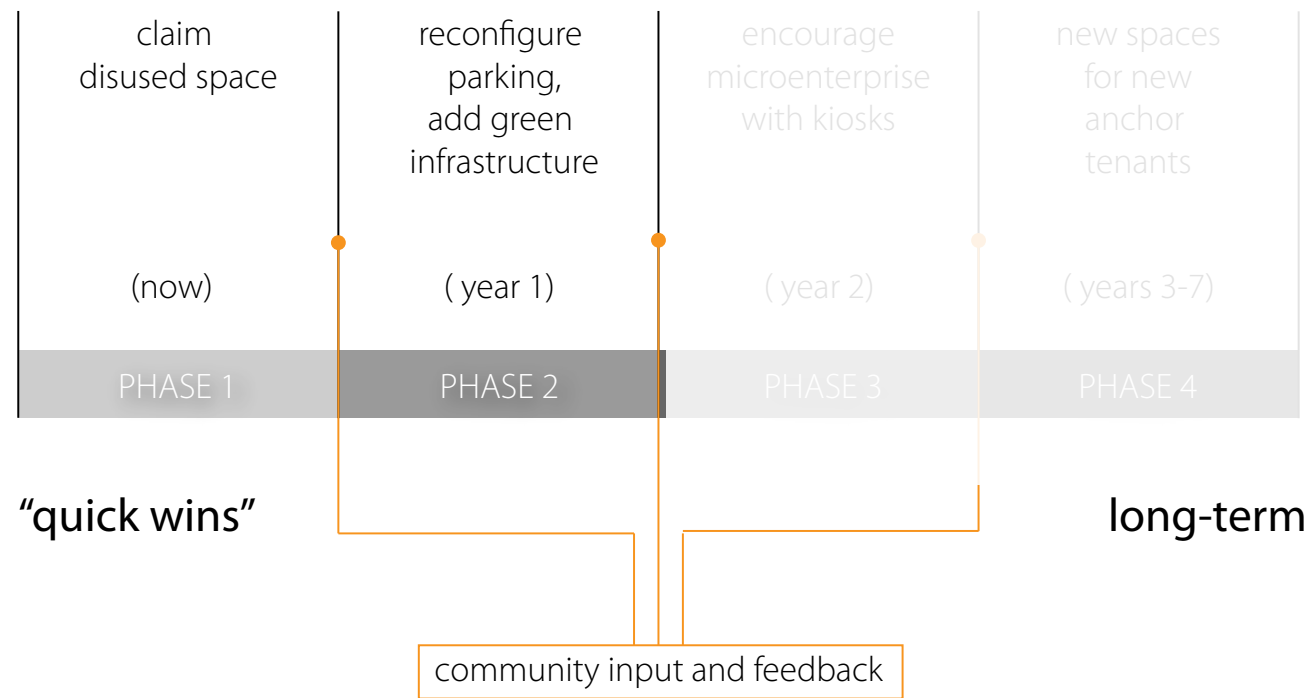




...It connects directly to a residential street, and is currently a shopping cart graveyard. People cut through the lot routinely to the neighborhood, but there is no direct, curated route for them to do so.

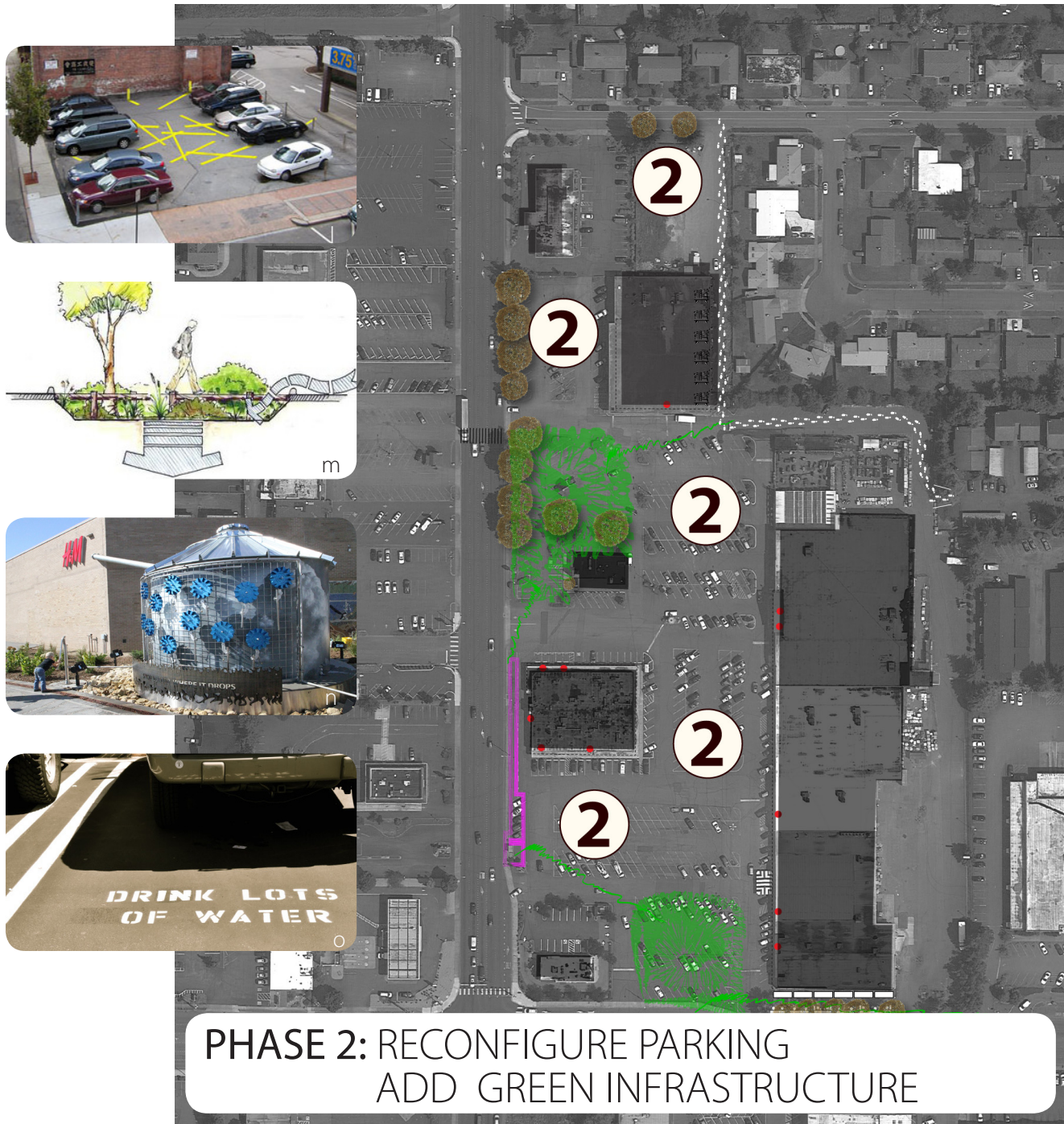


We'd like to up-cycle the shopping carts into a trellis running the length of the alley, and create a pedestrian access route for neighborhood residents.



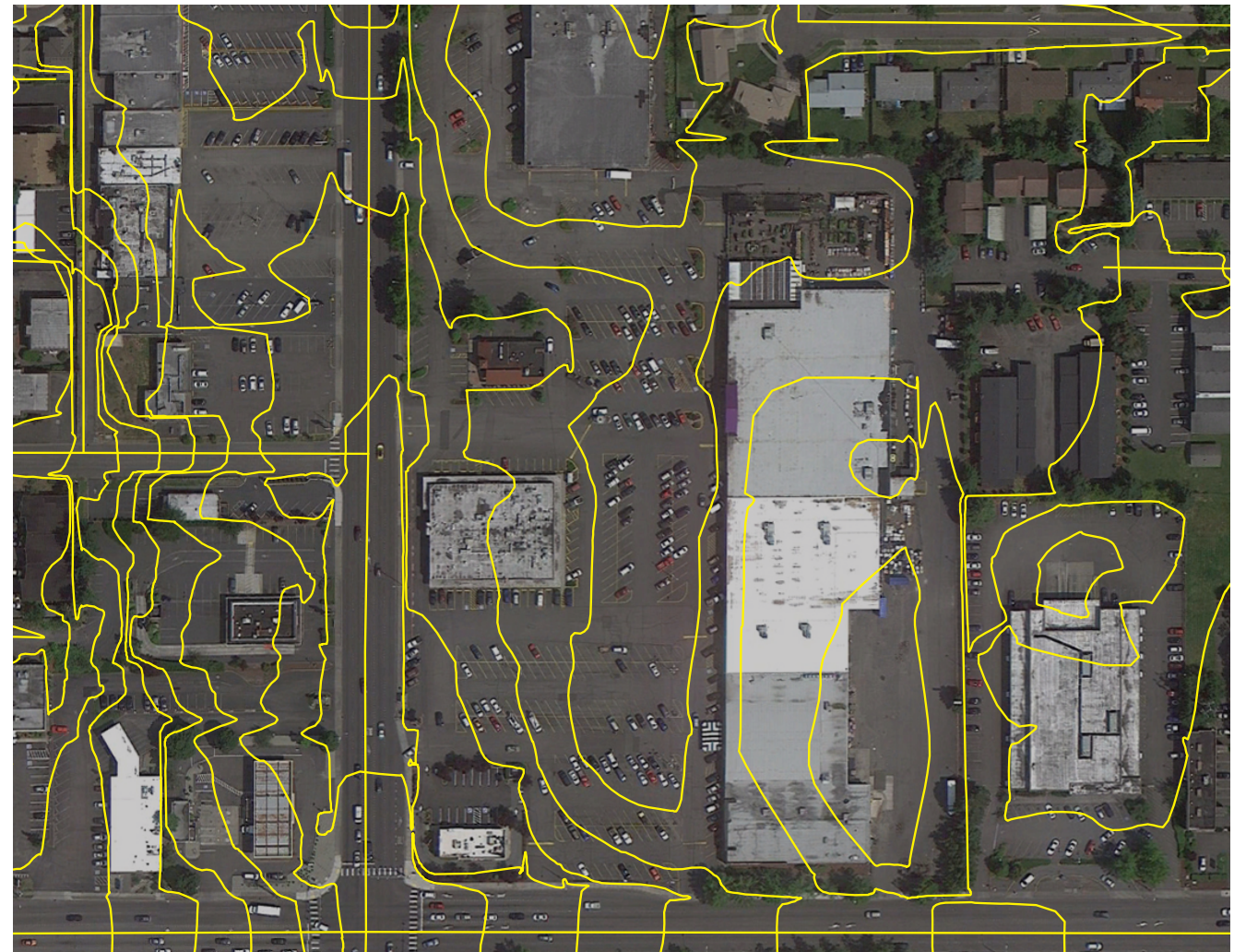
# 2

In Phase 2, we reconfigure parking and add green infrastructure. There are many inefficiencies with the current parking layout—large portions of the lot remain empty throughout the day.

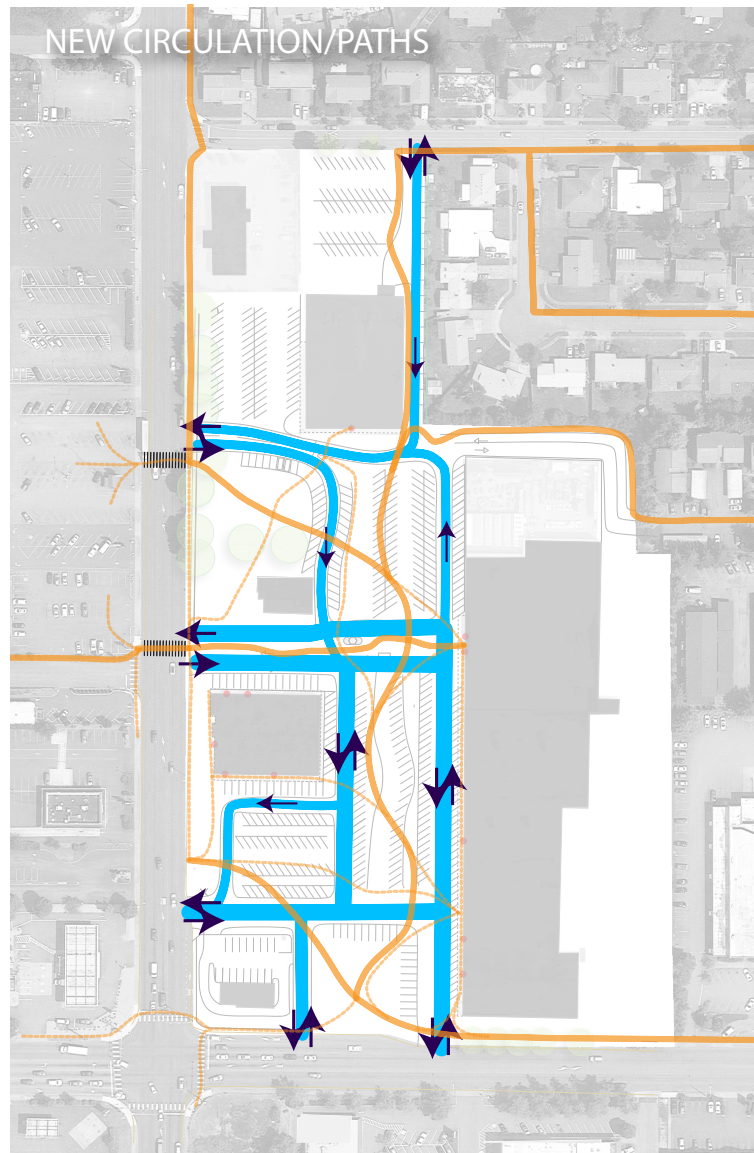
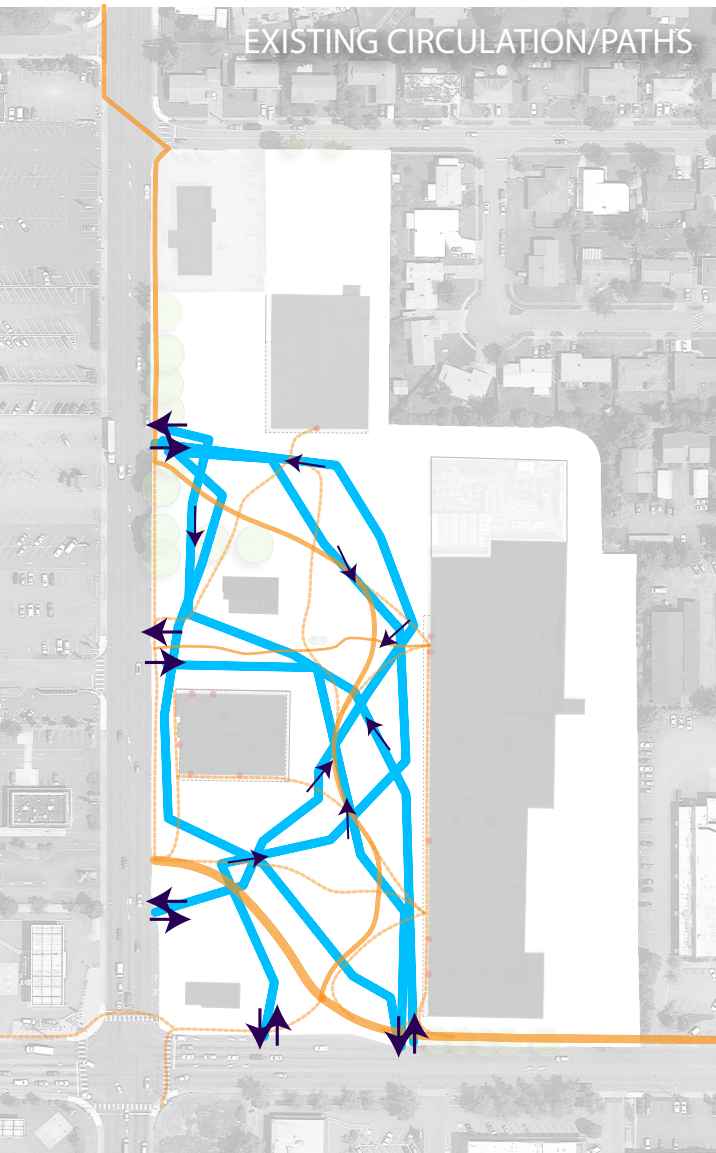


**PHASE 2: RECONFIGURE PARKING  
ADD GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE**

We wanted to examine different ways of configuring the lot to make room for additional uses and circulation patterns. We would maintain standard parking along the main facades of the businesses while the larger parking areas throughout the lot would be integrated with permeable driving surfaces and raingardens for bioretention.



The lot is a giant bowl. There is a 6-8' elevation change from the edge of the lot to the center. We've been there on days when it hasn't rained for a week and there is standing water.



**PARKING COUNT**  
Google Earth Image 7/5/12

**522** total parking spots

**170** occupied spots

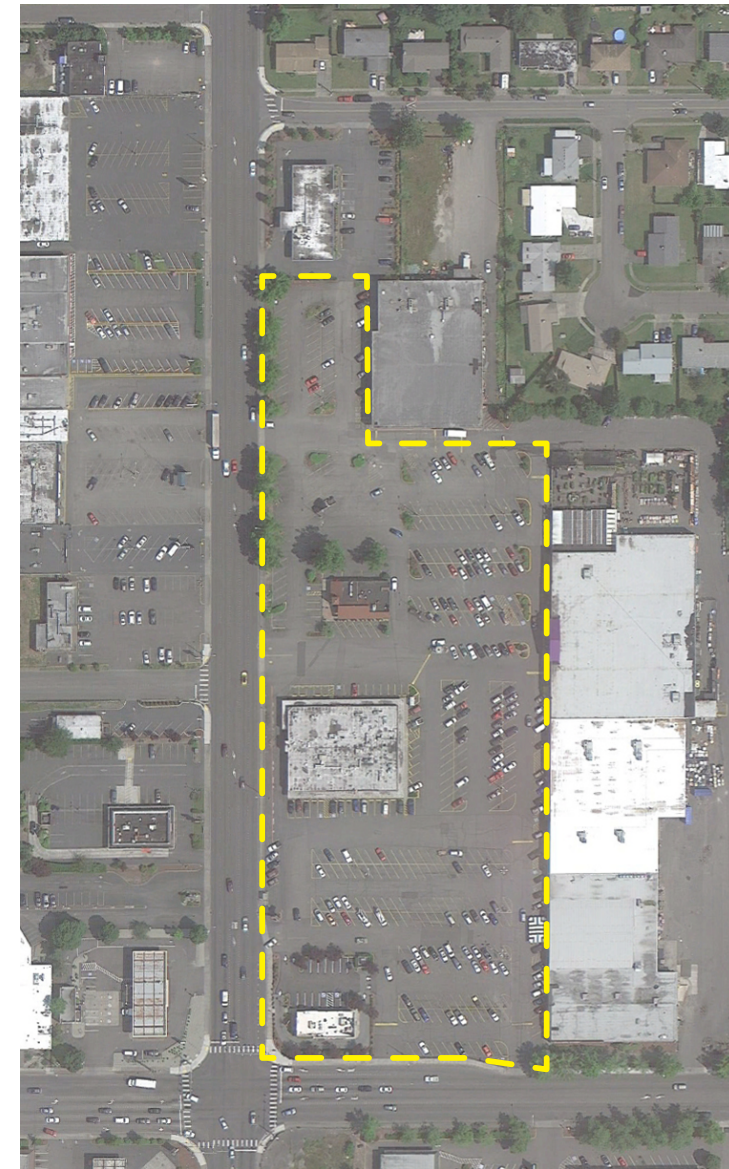
**32%** total parking spots

**68%** total parking spots

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**472** parking spots proposed redesign

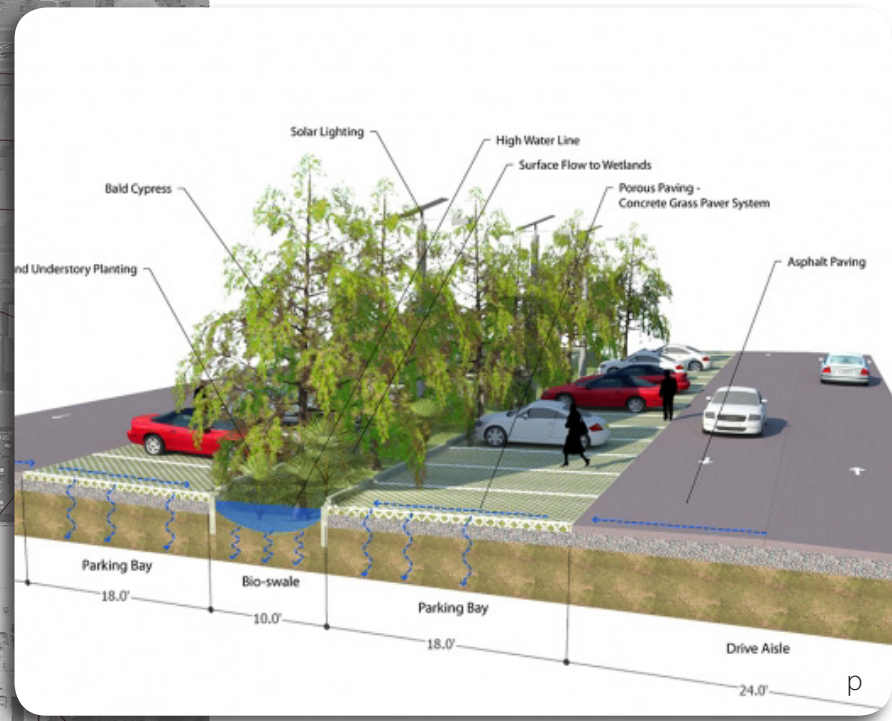
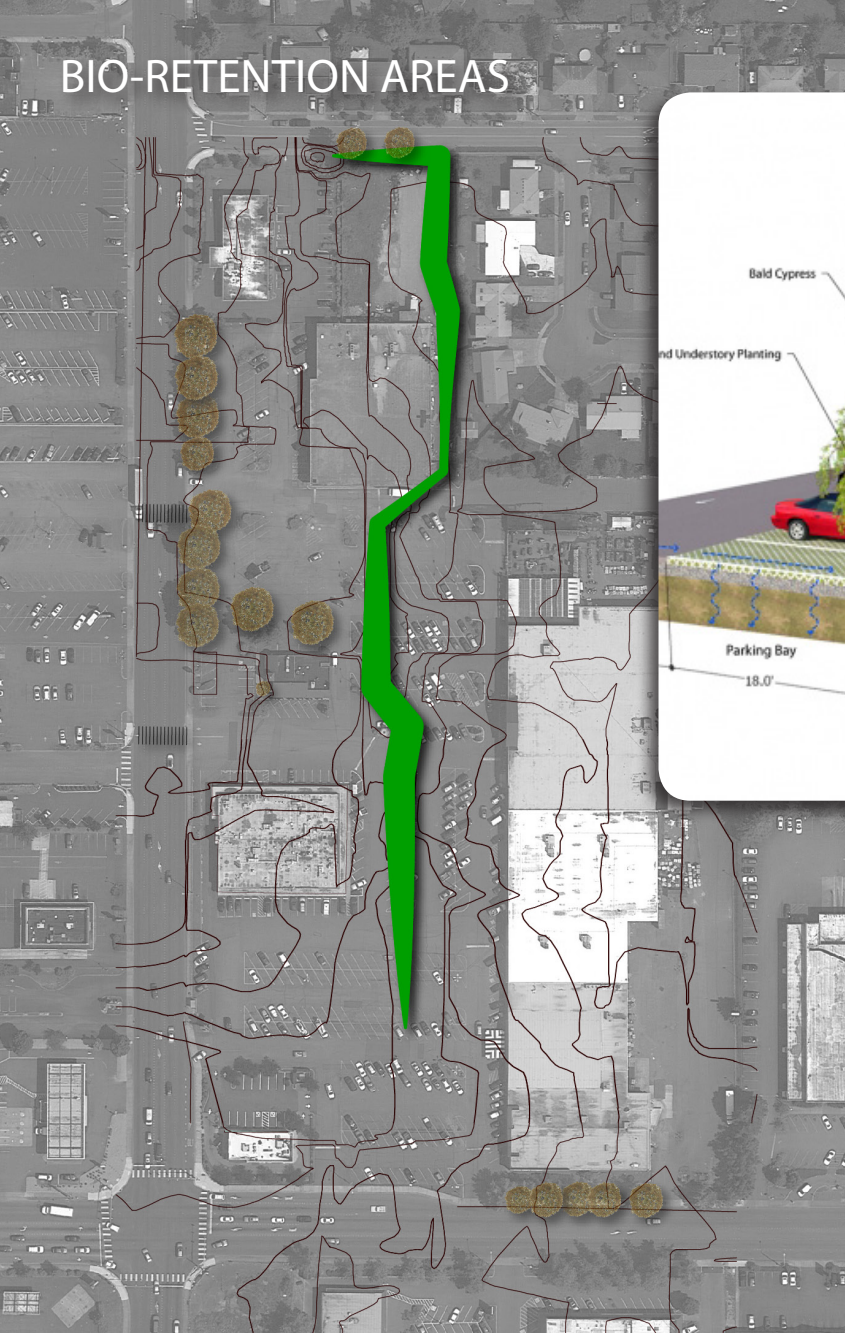
**90%** of current total



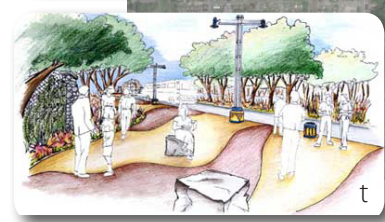
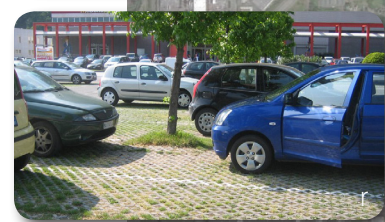
Both drivers and pedestrians currently cut through the lot in whatever way they choose. Cars do not stay in driving lanes, often cutting across empty parking areas, and pedestrians routinely walk through the middle of driving lanes. We want to allow for both of these modes of circulation to take place and in a safer, more predictable way.

Through ongoing observation and a specific count of used and unused spots in the lot, we calculated that on an average day, the lot is only 32% occupied. The lot is designed per city code for a shopping center—4.5 spots for every 1,000sf of leasable space. While we believe reducing parking will be feasible in the long run, we've maintained 90% of the current spots, making the proposed changes more immediately desirable for the lot owner and current tenants, and giving people time to adjust to how the new space could inform their daily routines.

# BIO-RETENTION AREAS



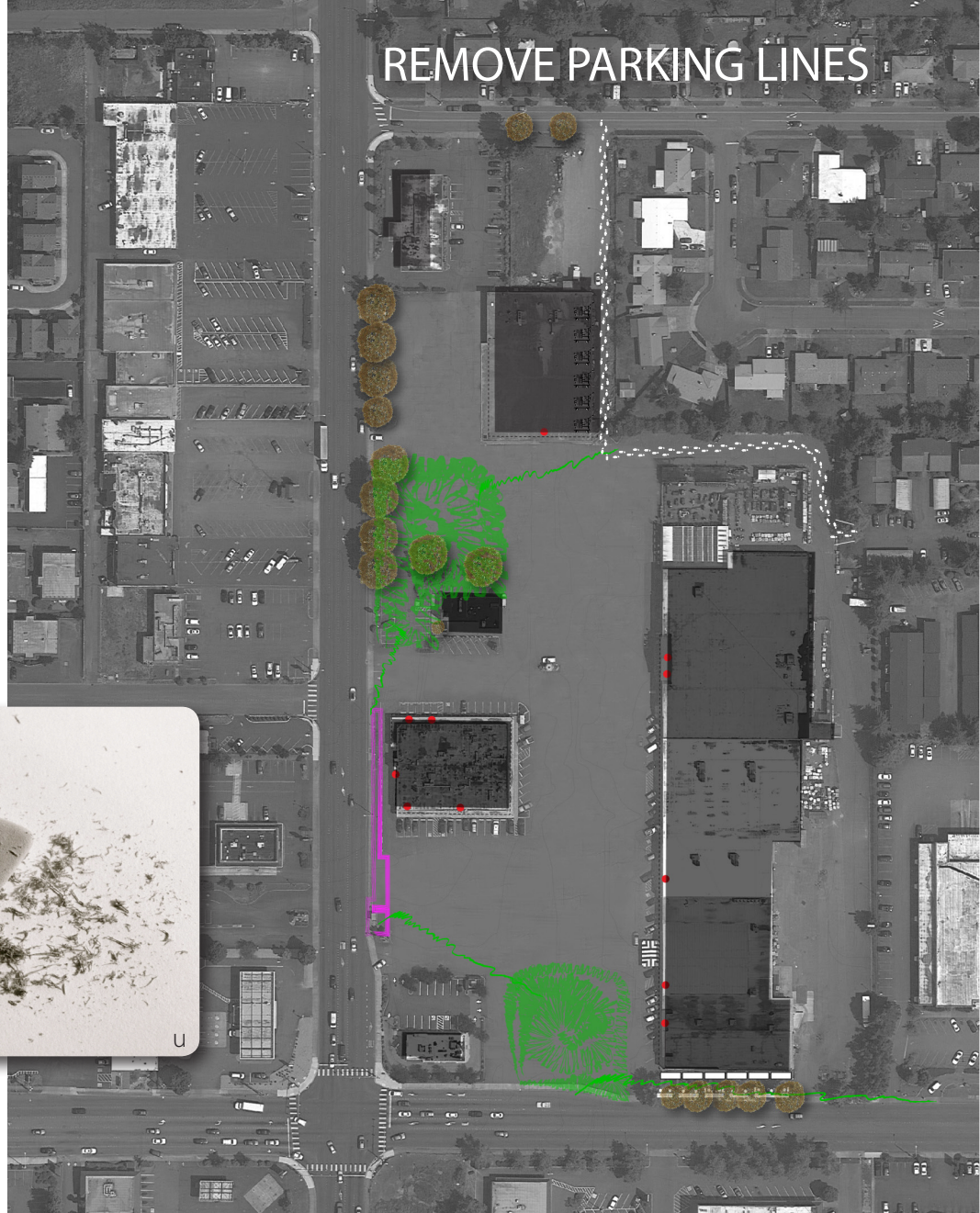
# PUBLIC PARKS



The green space proposed for the lot includes park space as well as raingardens for bioretention. The raingardens would run from the north end of the lot through the low point in the center, diverting runoff from the city's storm sewers.

The drainage improvements to the lot would also be an opportunity to add public green space to East Hill. There are very few public parks in the vicinity of the lot.

## REMOVE PARKING LINES



## PAINT NEW PARKING LINES LAY PEDESTRIAN PATHS



To begin Phase 2, the existing parking lines on the lot would be removed...

...and replaced with new lines that encourage safe and more interconnected circulation. The new pedestrian paths would be laid down as well, giving equal value to cars and those on foot.

# INSTALL BIORETENTION AREAS



# DE-PAVE /PLANT GARDENS/PARKS



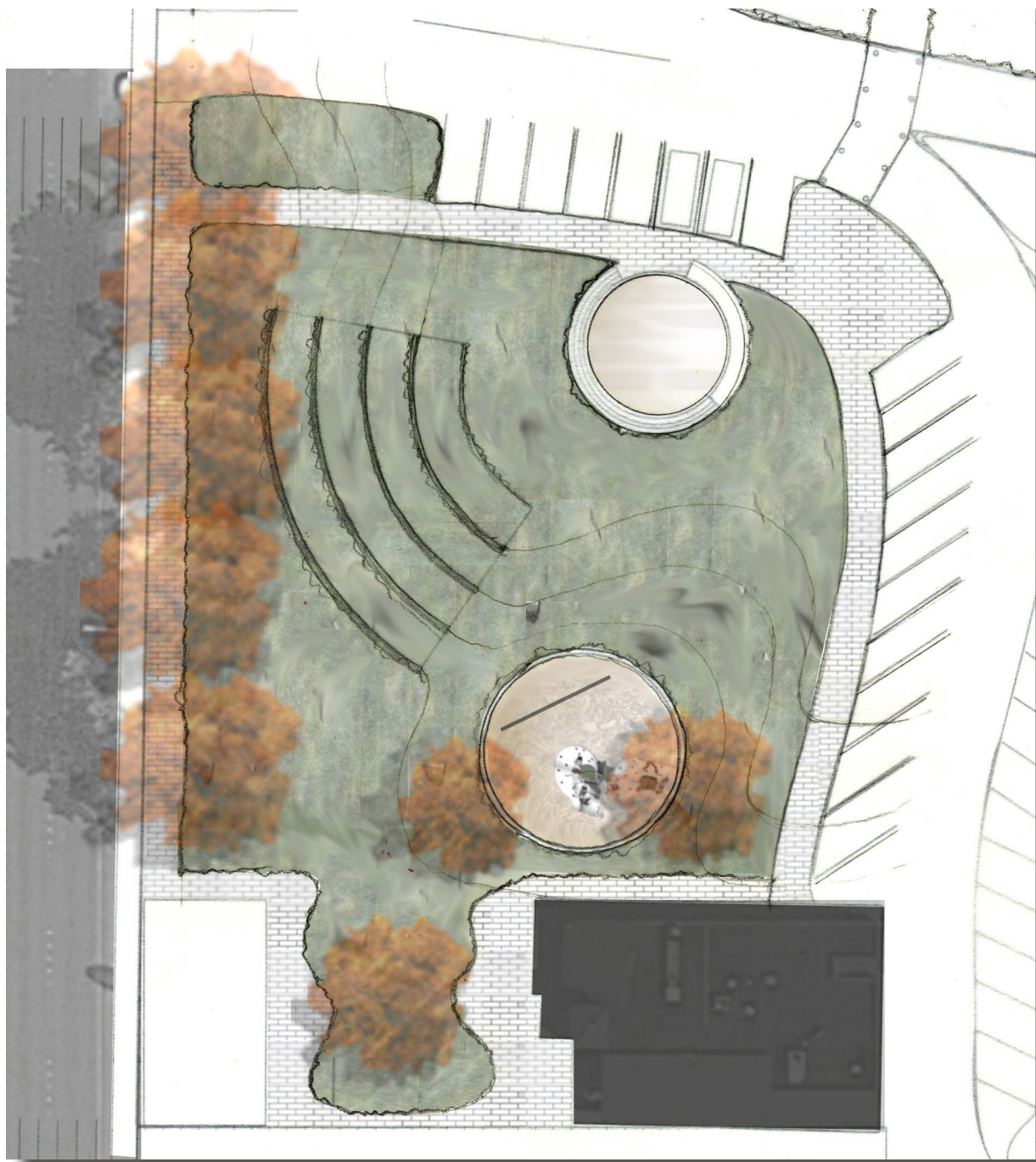
**COME DE-PAVE THE LOT**

Saturday December 21st 10am-12pm  
 Sunday December 22nd 10am-12pm  
 925 ADDRESS ST. SPANISH, WA

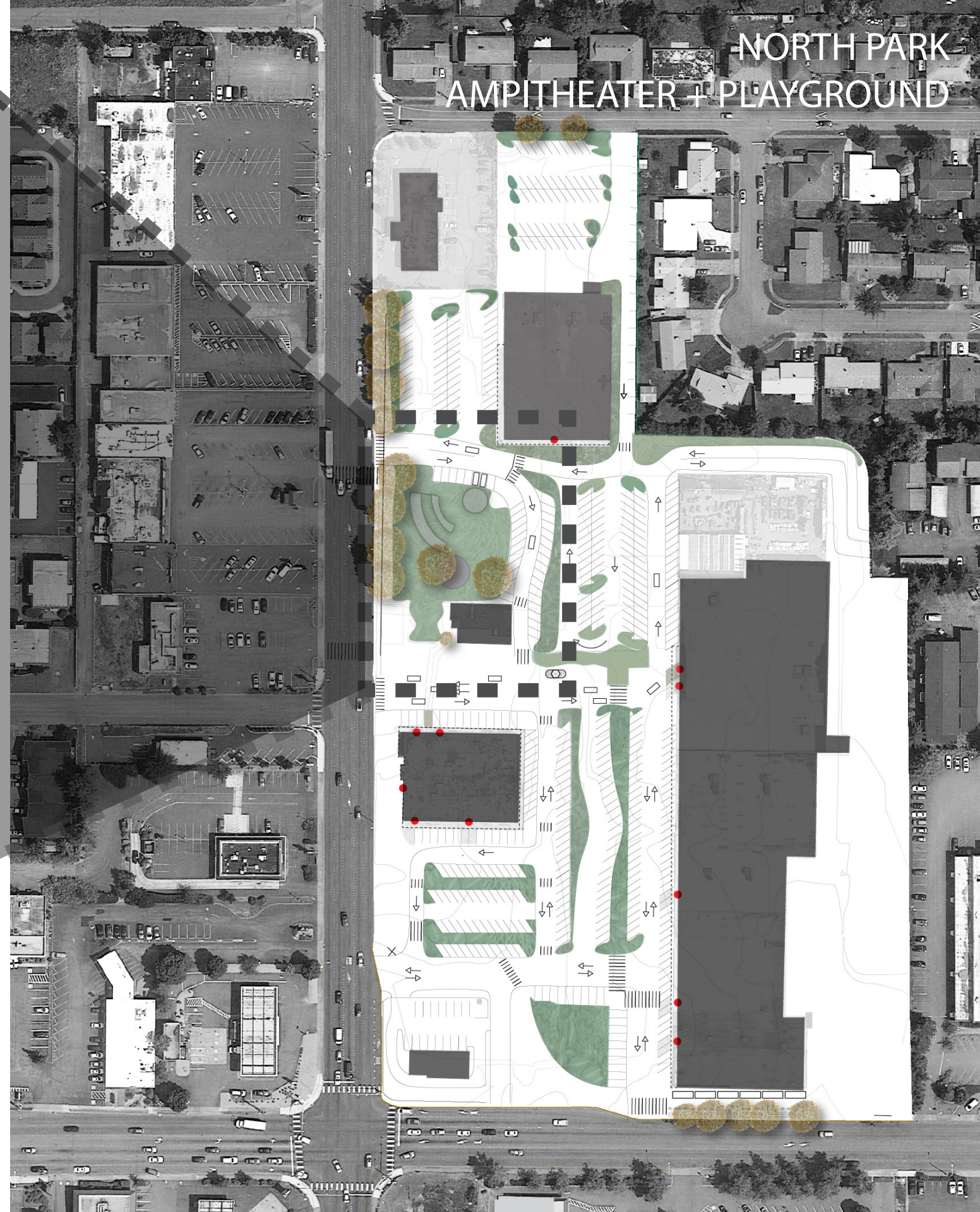


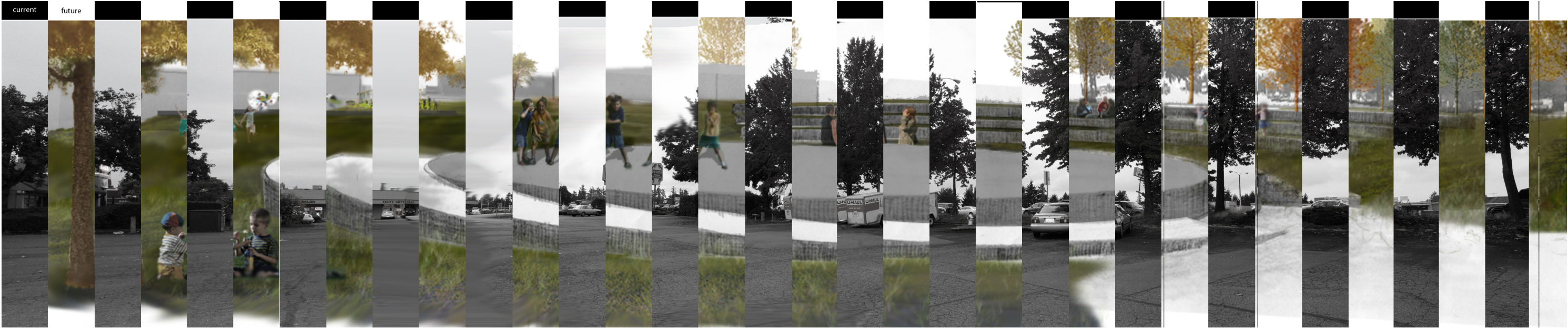
Next, the asphalt would be cut open to expose the storm water system and install the new bioretention areas. With overflow capacity, these will create a net zero storm water system, retaining all runoff on site, preventing the pollution and erosion of local water ways.

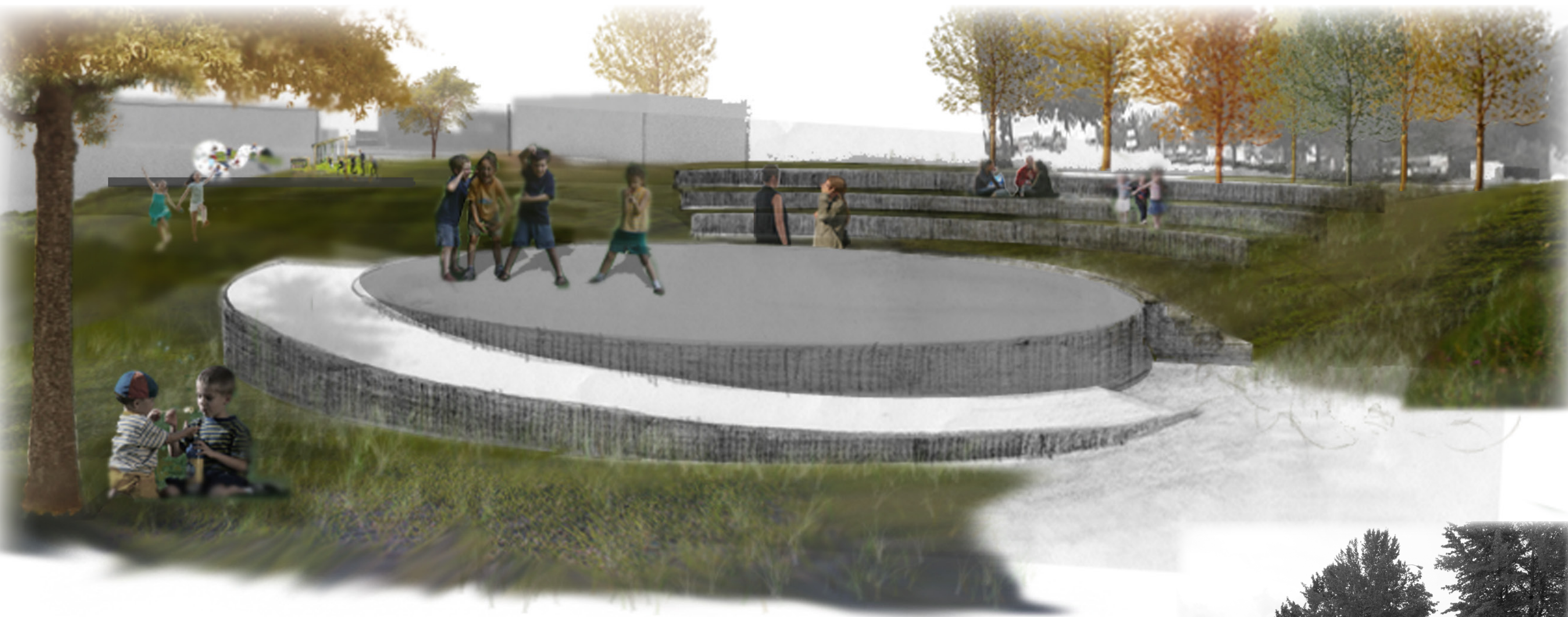
As the raingardens are installed, a community workshop will be held to remove the pavement from the future park and garden areas. Much of this material will be reused as fill on site for the various grading needs of the design. Community groups will have the opportunity to plant garden islands, claiming a piece of the lot as theirs to care for.



As the lot's neighbors work to reclaim its soil, workshops will be held to design its landscape and play spaces. Using the elevation change of 6 feet across the lot, we sited an amphitheater and stage framed by mature existing trees on the site. A playground will also sit on the south side of the park.

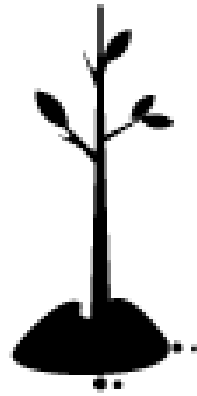






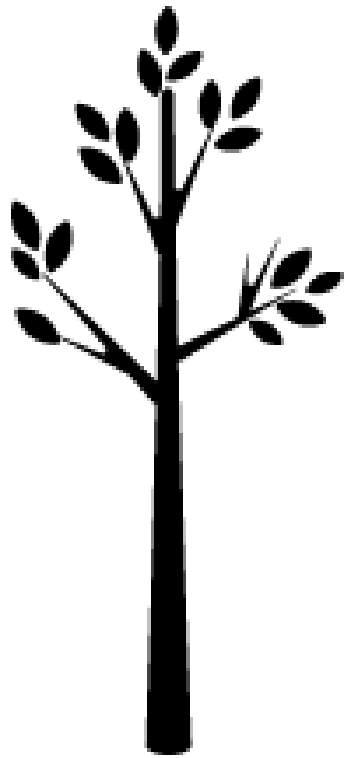
This section of the lot is in the most disrepair and disuse, but we envision a lively green space can fill this void. The park will be within short walking distance for many neighborhood residents. As the first prominent claim of disused space for public use, the park would serve as a spatial frame of reference for the community to forge a shared public identity

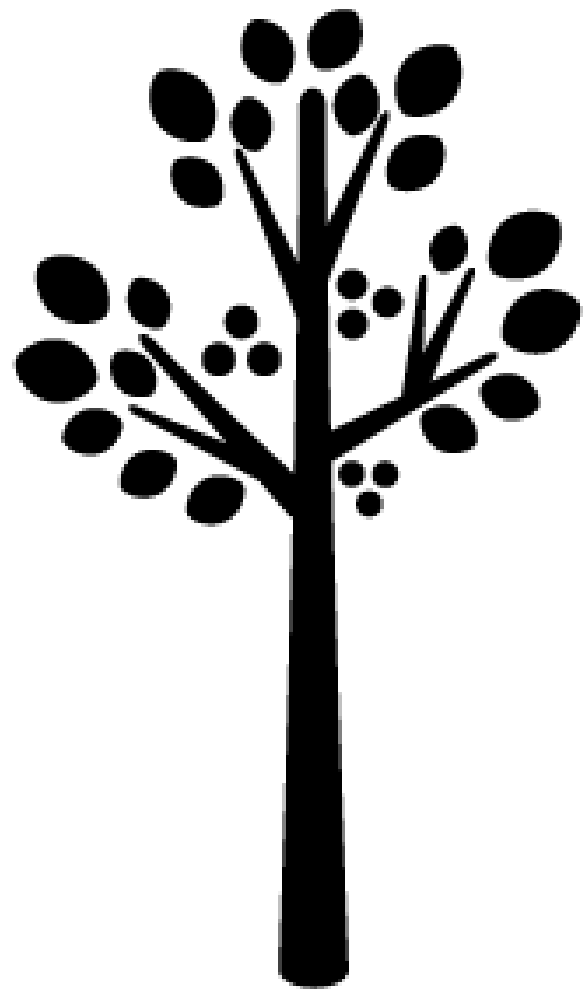


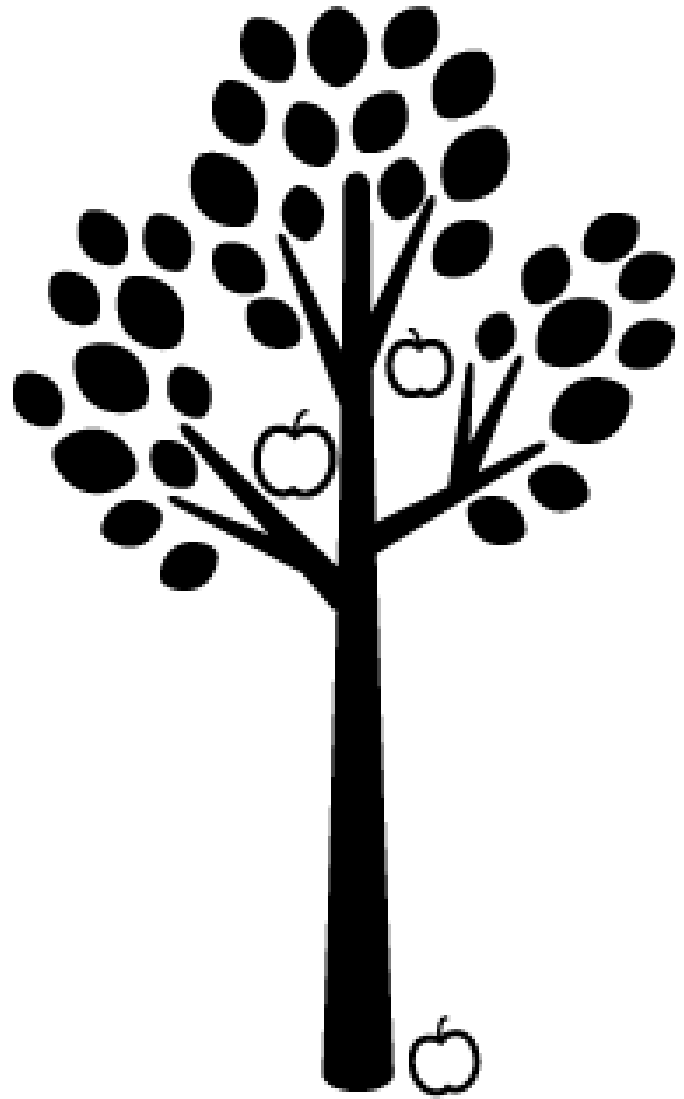


As green space is brought back to the lot, trees will be planted to provide shade, cooling, habitat, and food... over the next 20 years, the canopy will transform the experience of being in the lot.



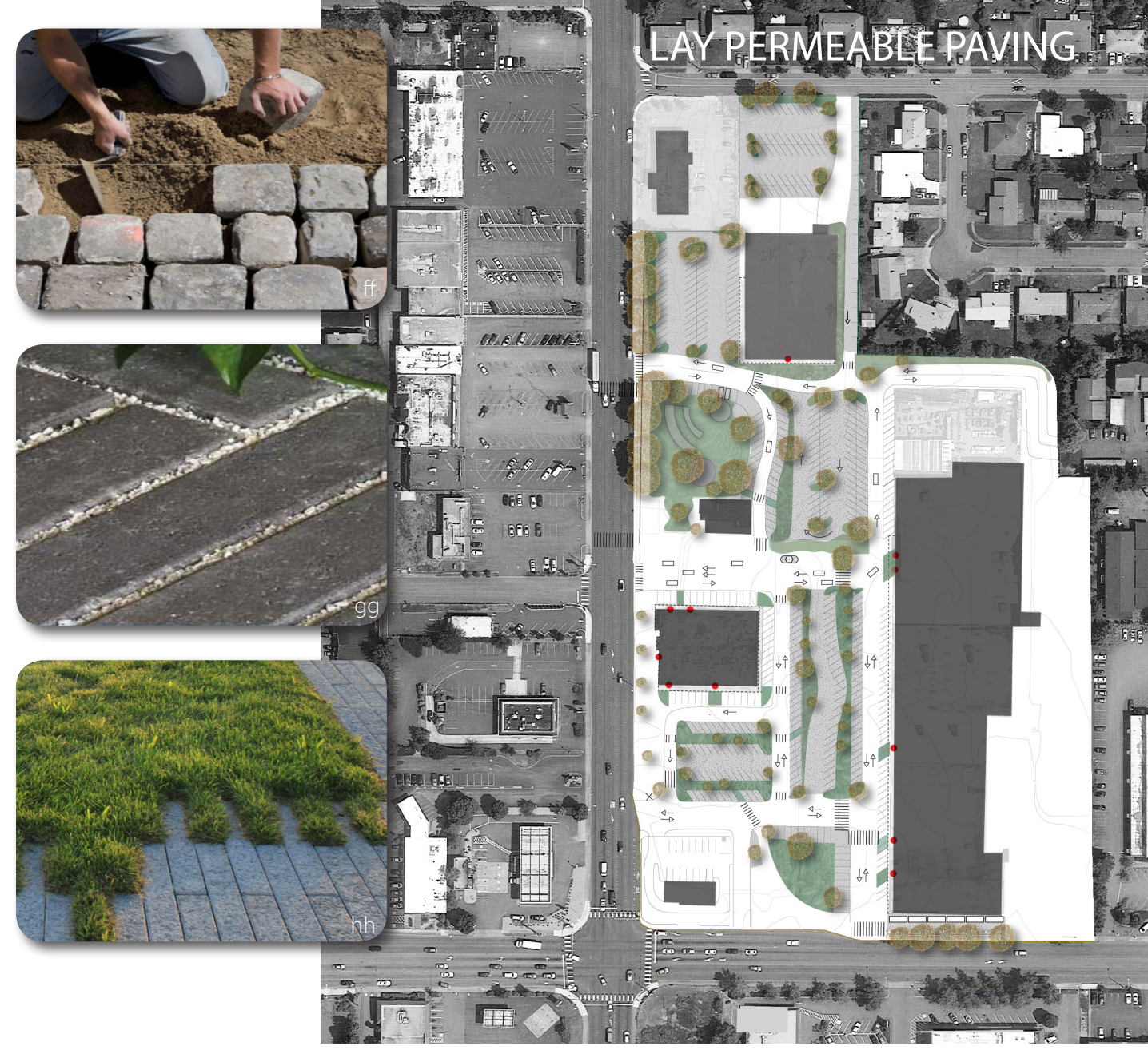






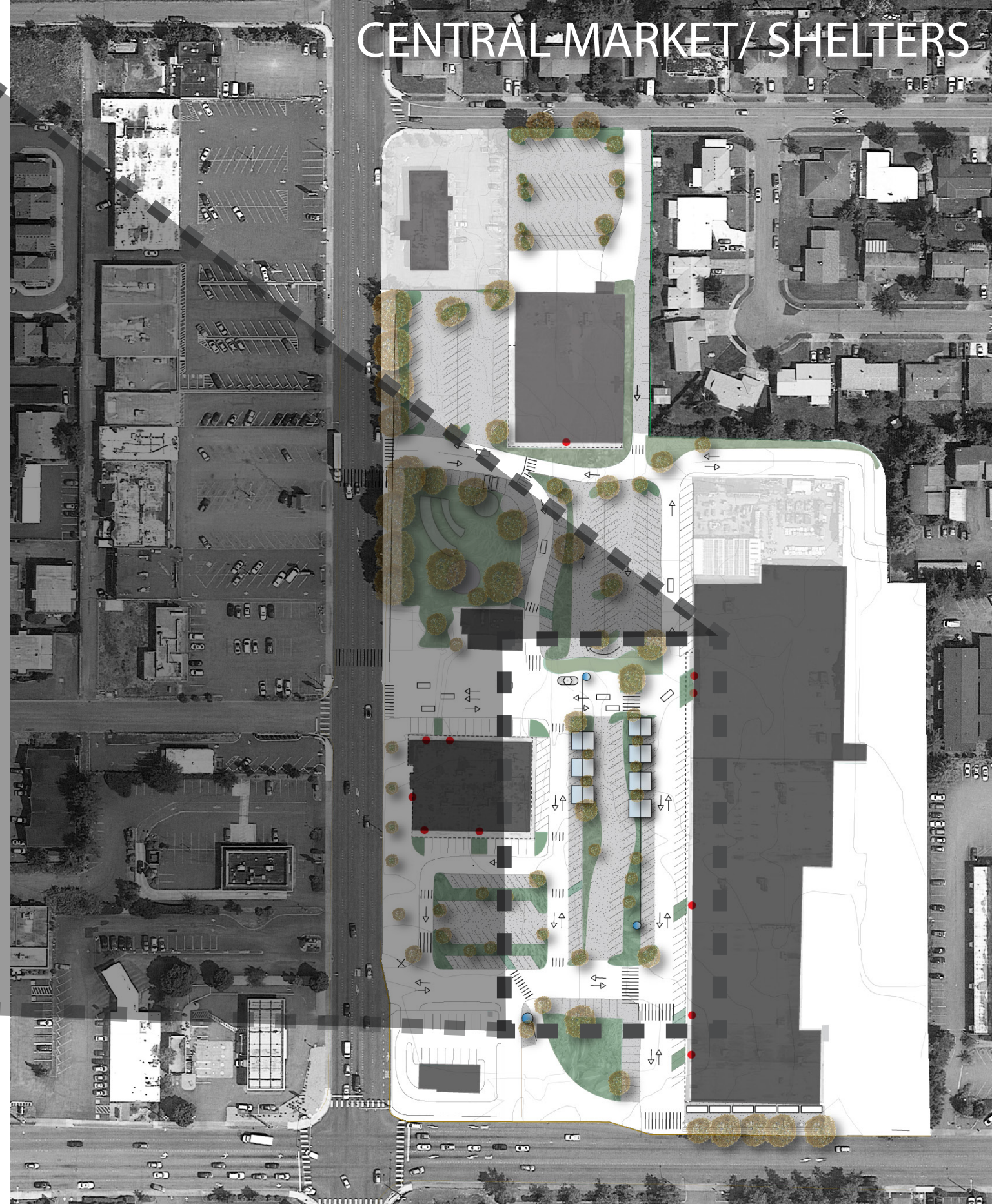
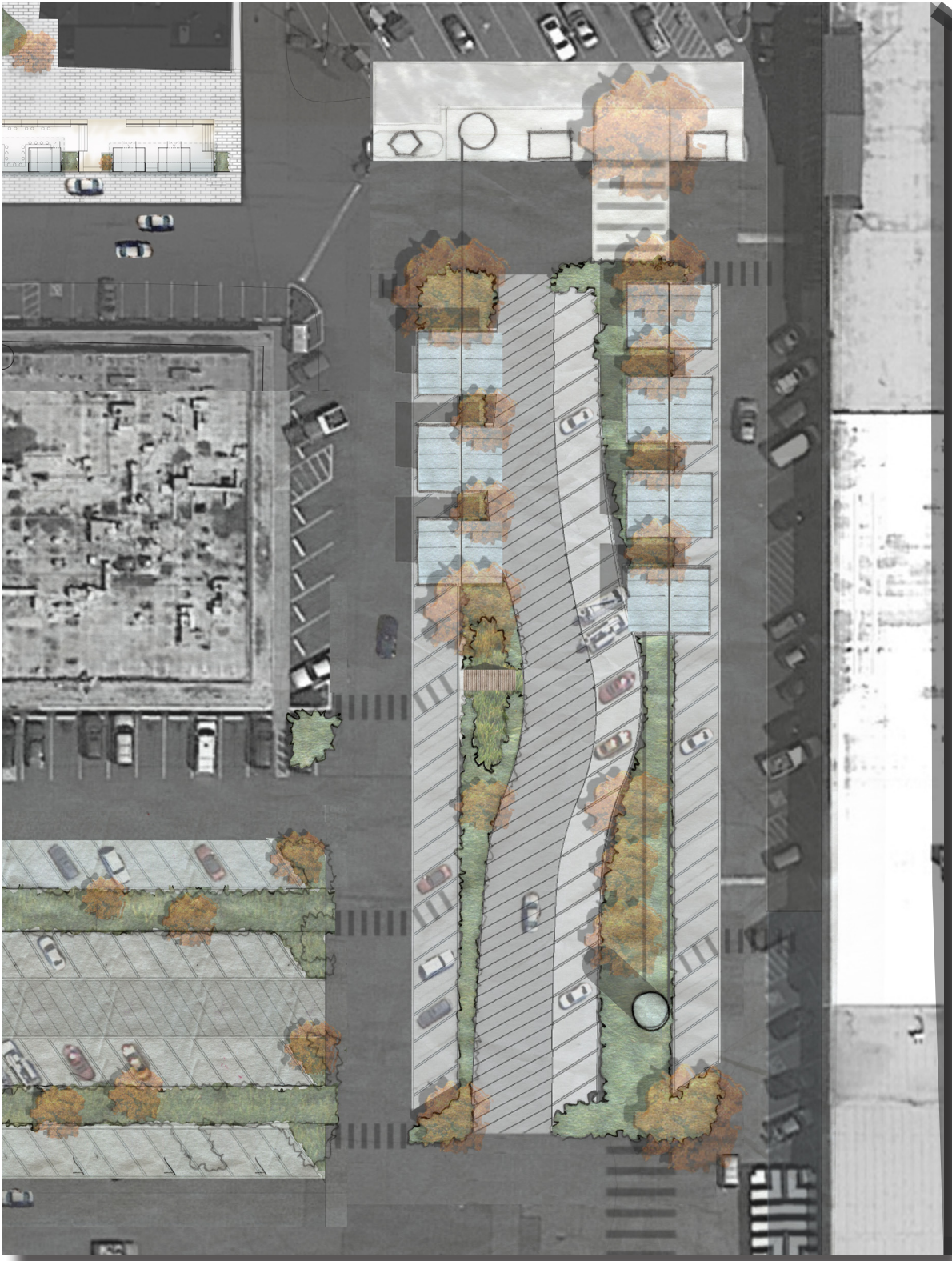


Next, entry parks will be installed in front of each business, connecting them to the new program in the lot

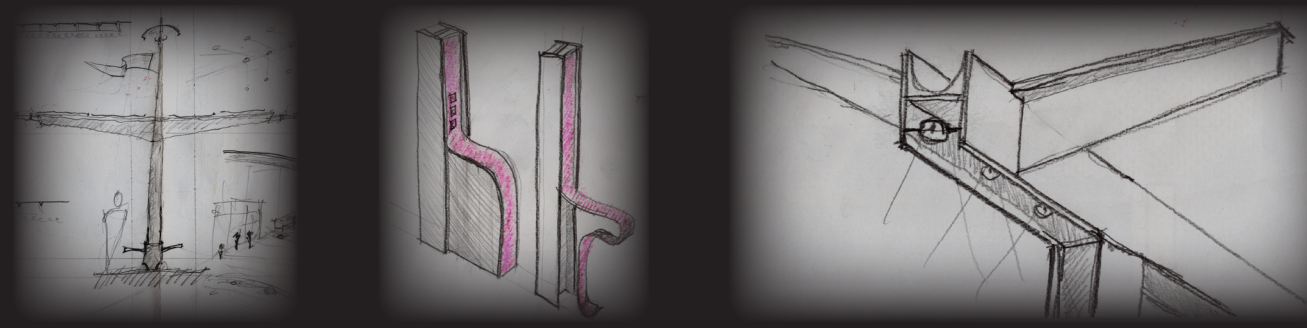
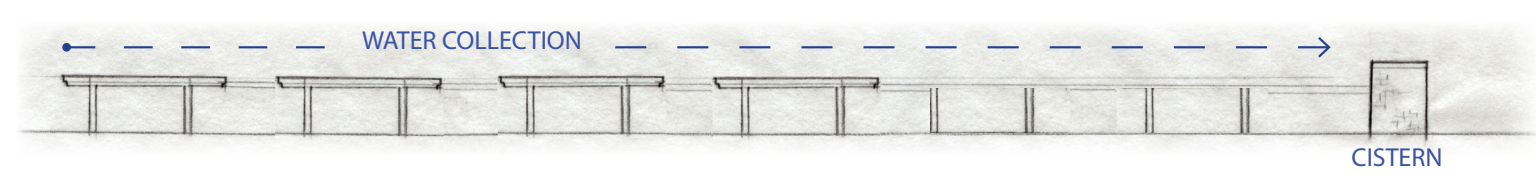
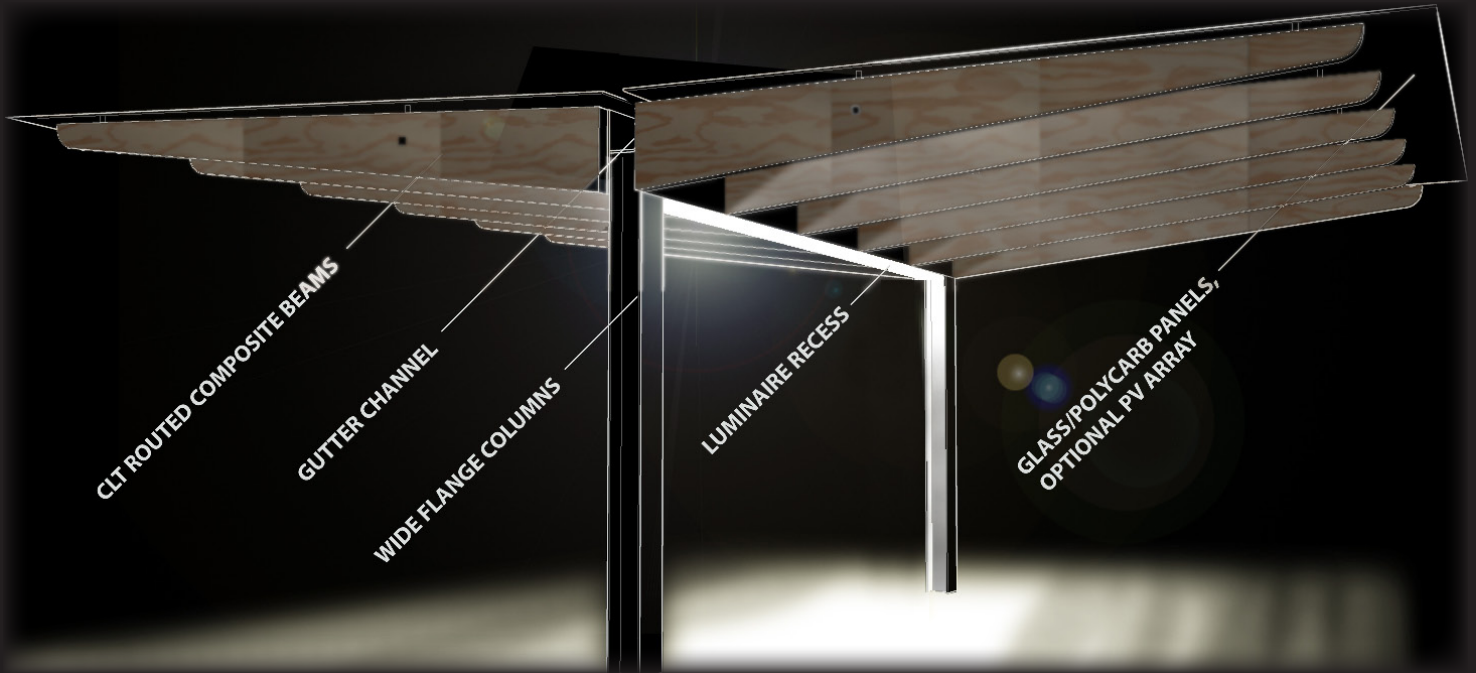


Then permeable paving will be laid in the interior zones of the lot, aiding the bioretention areas and allowing storm water infiltration into the site

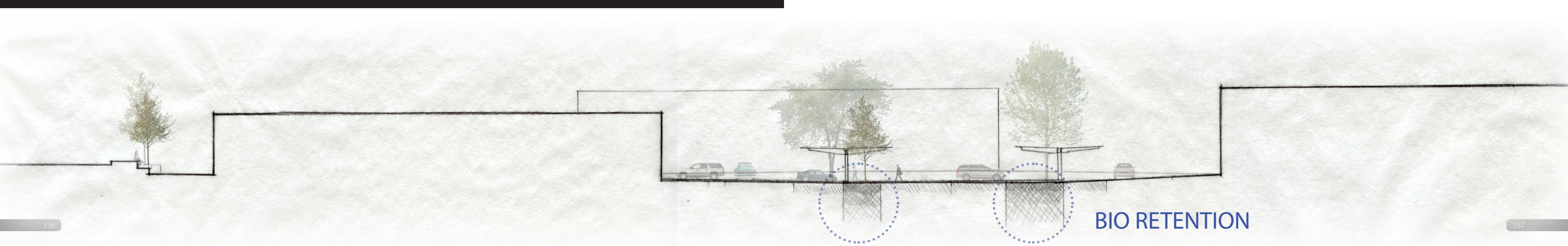
# CENTRAL-MARKET/ SHELTERS



The central area of the lot lies between the Golden Steer building to the west and the main strip to the east. This area will be developed as a flexible space where on a typical day, parking may be restricted and markets, festivals, or other events can take place.

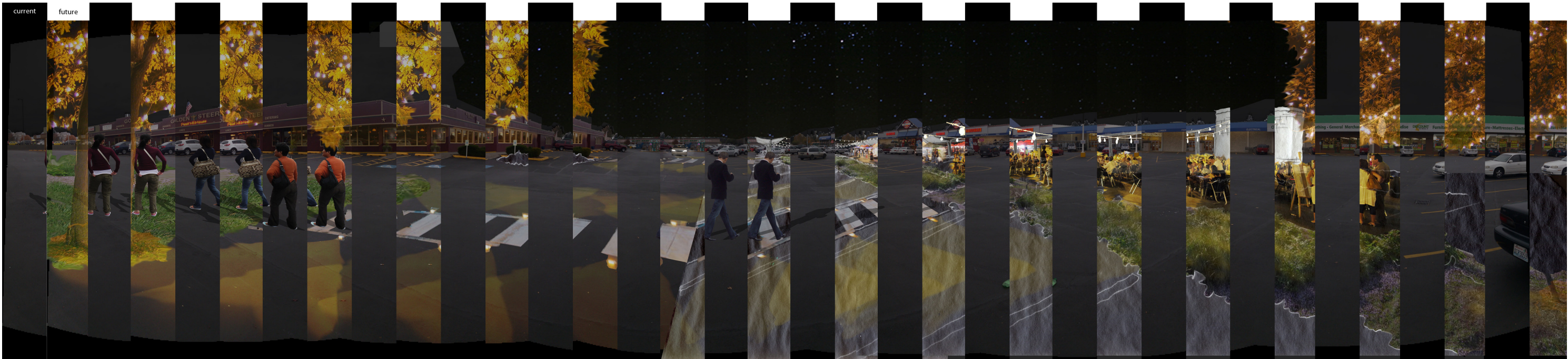


To enhance the use of this space, shelters will be installed along the north/south green belts, creating a central market. The shelters are steel and wood. They do not obstruct parking and they mitigate the endless expanse of the lot. They are simple but can accommodate drainage, integrated lighting, and a future optional pv array. The shelters share a central gutter channel that collects water from their roofs and delivers it to cisterns. The water can then be accessed during the drought months of summer.



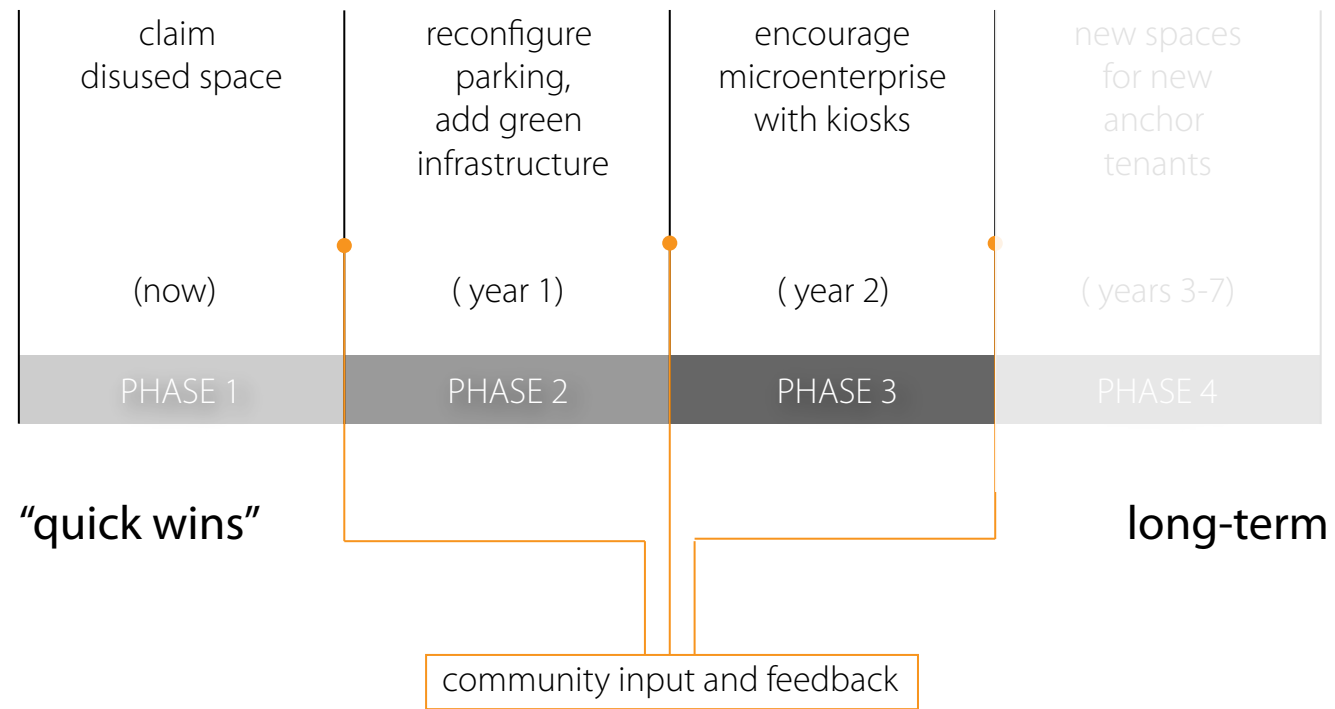


An evening shopping at the Golden Steer lot...





...could be transformed into an event, providing the "third place" so often missing from suburbs



In Phase 3, we encourage microenterprise in the lot with kiosks.

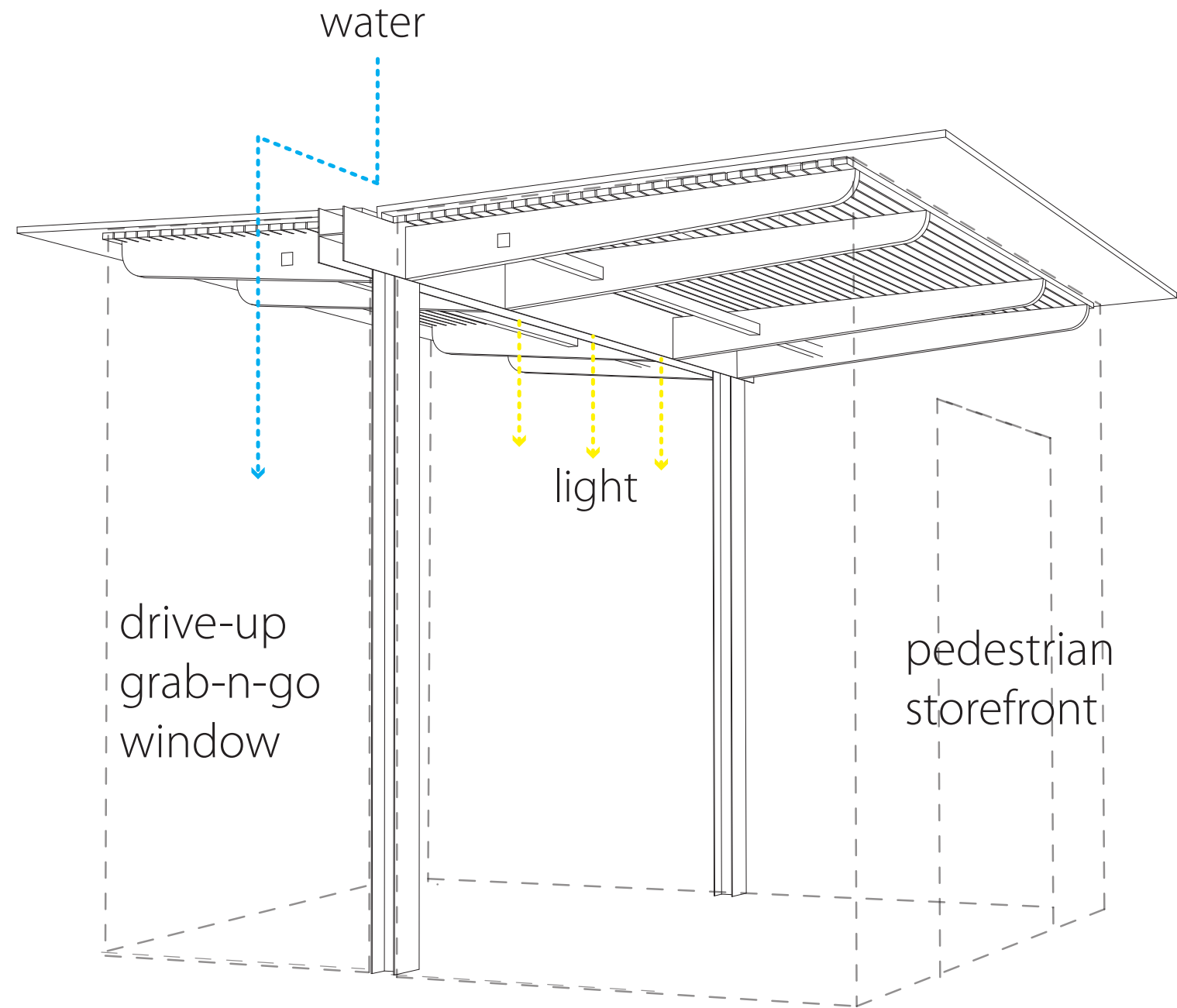


This is an old Fotomat kiosk in the lot that was turned into an espresso stand 15 years ago. The kiosk attracts both drive-up and walk-up customers. It is a surprisingly vibrant spot in an otherwise monotonous space.



**PHASE 3: ENCOURAGE MICROENTERPRISE WITH KIOSKS**

Small additions to the lot, such as these, are actually quite common in Seattle—from UVillage to independent coffee huts. We'd like to use the kiosk model as a way to foster the entrepreneurial spirit of the community.



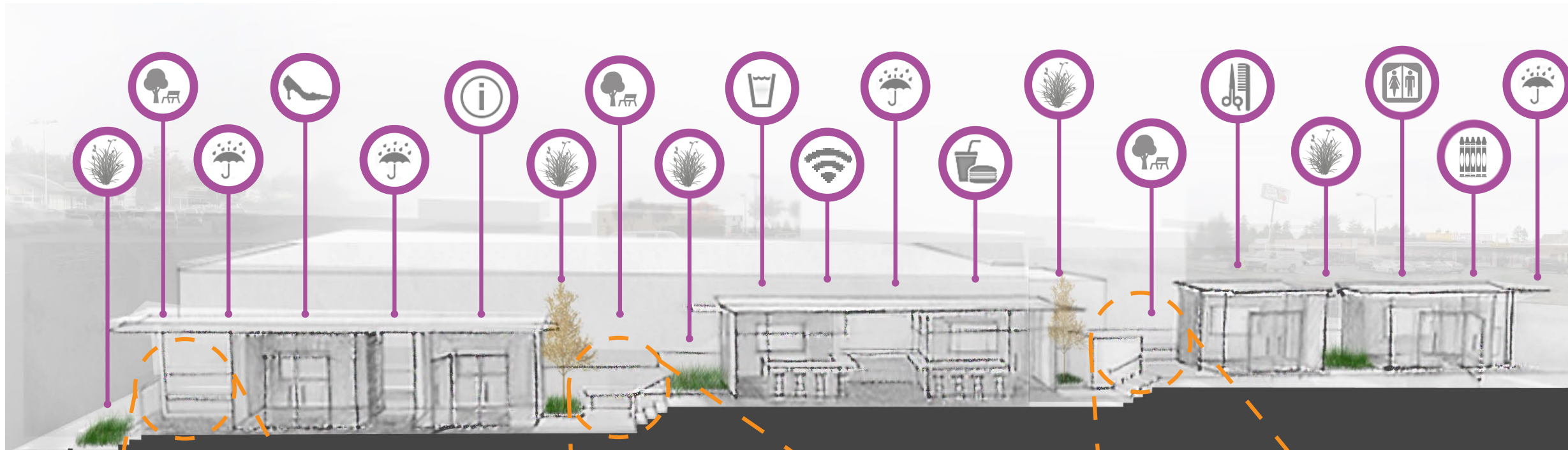
A row of kiosks would line a pedestrian plaza between the north park and a main lot entrance. The kiosks would sit on platforms with both integrated and flexible seating. They would allow drive up access on one side, and pedestrian access on the other.





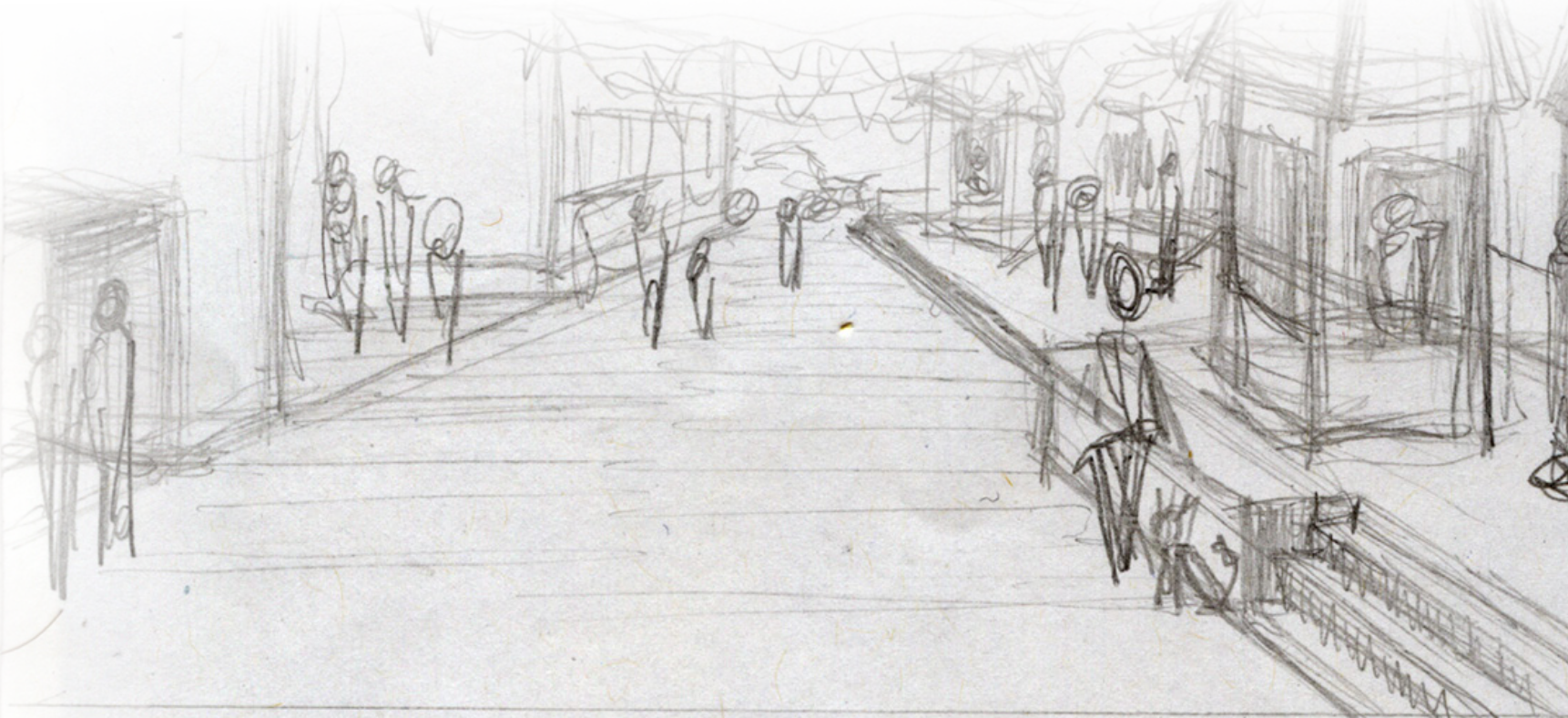
Kiosks could be modestly sized and used strategically throughout the lot for microenterprise. Their built form would be an adaptation of the shelter structure, with the additions of a storefront system, drive-up window, and interior modifications depending on use.

# KIOSK ROW

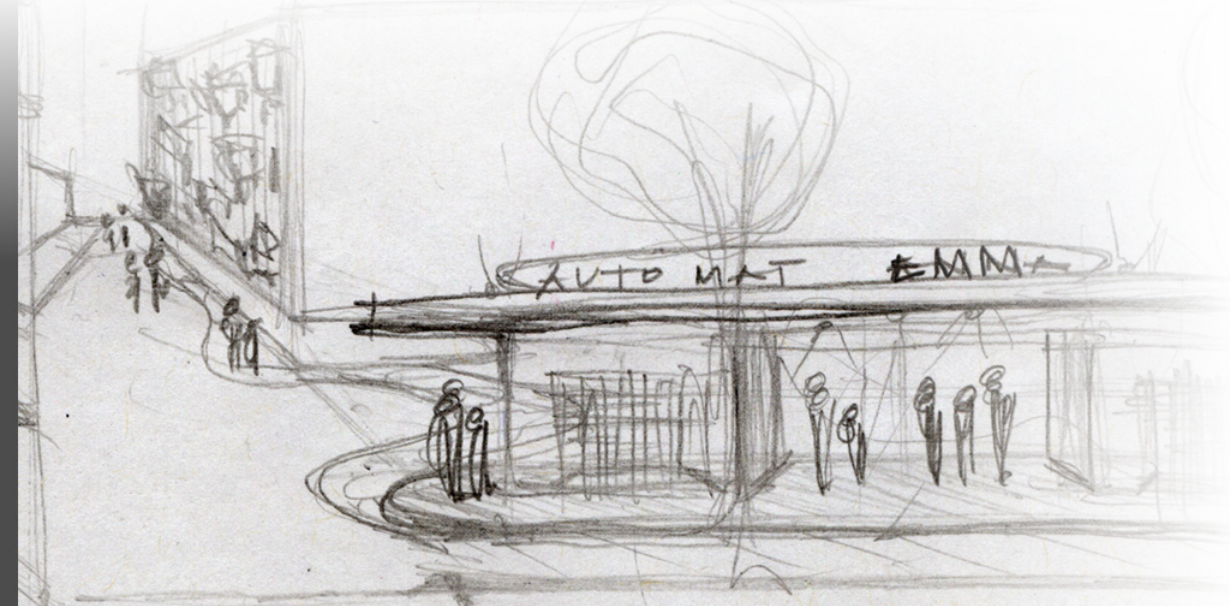


Kiosk row will create a pedestrian thoroughfare from 104th st into the center of the lot. The diversity of program will represent the needs and skills of the community. The small scale of these structures creates a fine grain of spaces, both intimate and public.

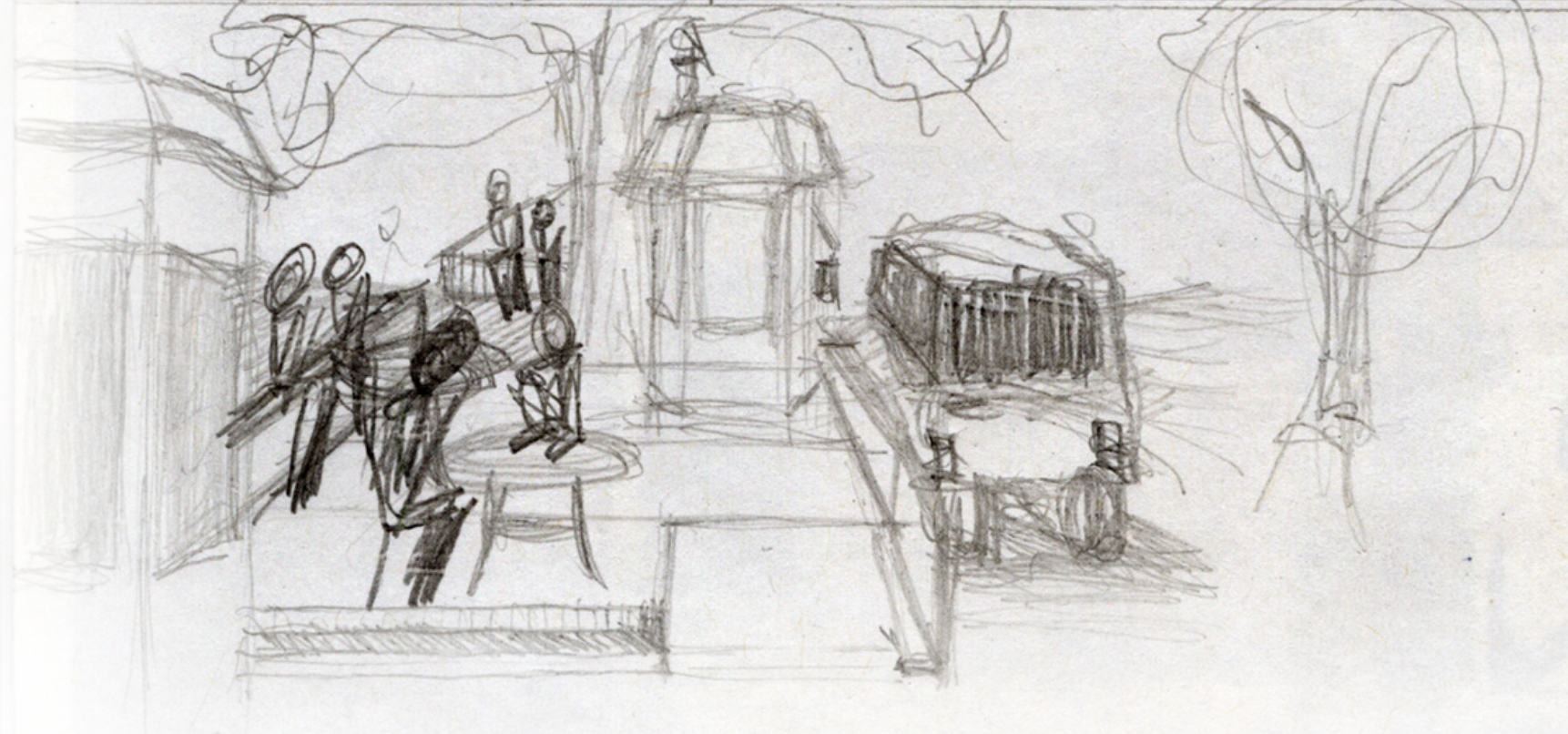




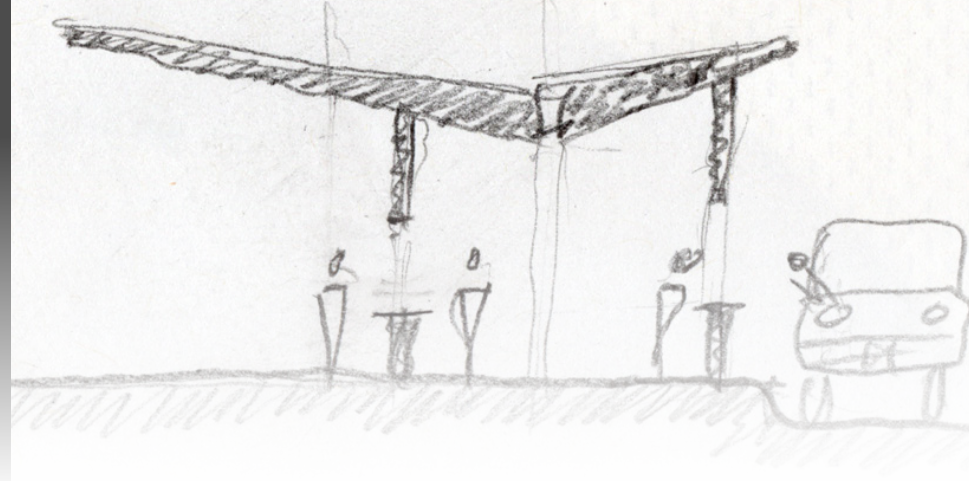
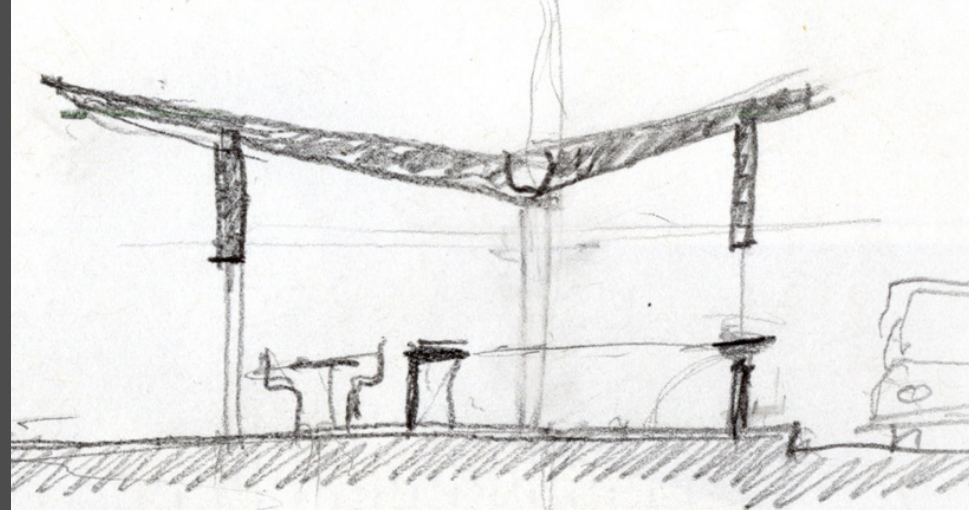
KIOSK ROW @ PARK



KIOSKS @ NEIGHBORHOOD



KIOSK ROW @ ARIELLE'S







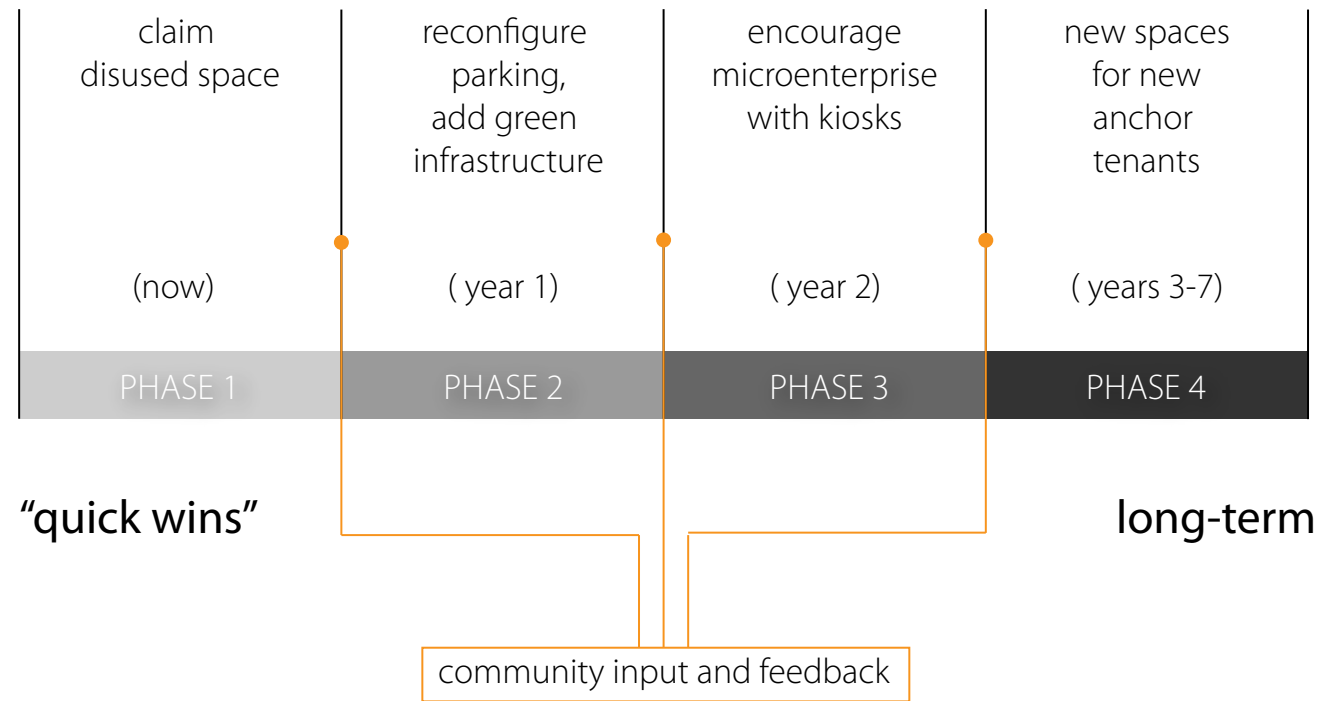
Seen from the center of the lot looking west, Kiosk row mediates the pedestrian and vehicular experiences in the lot.



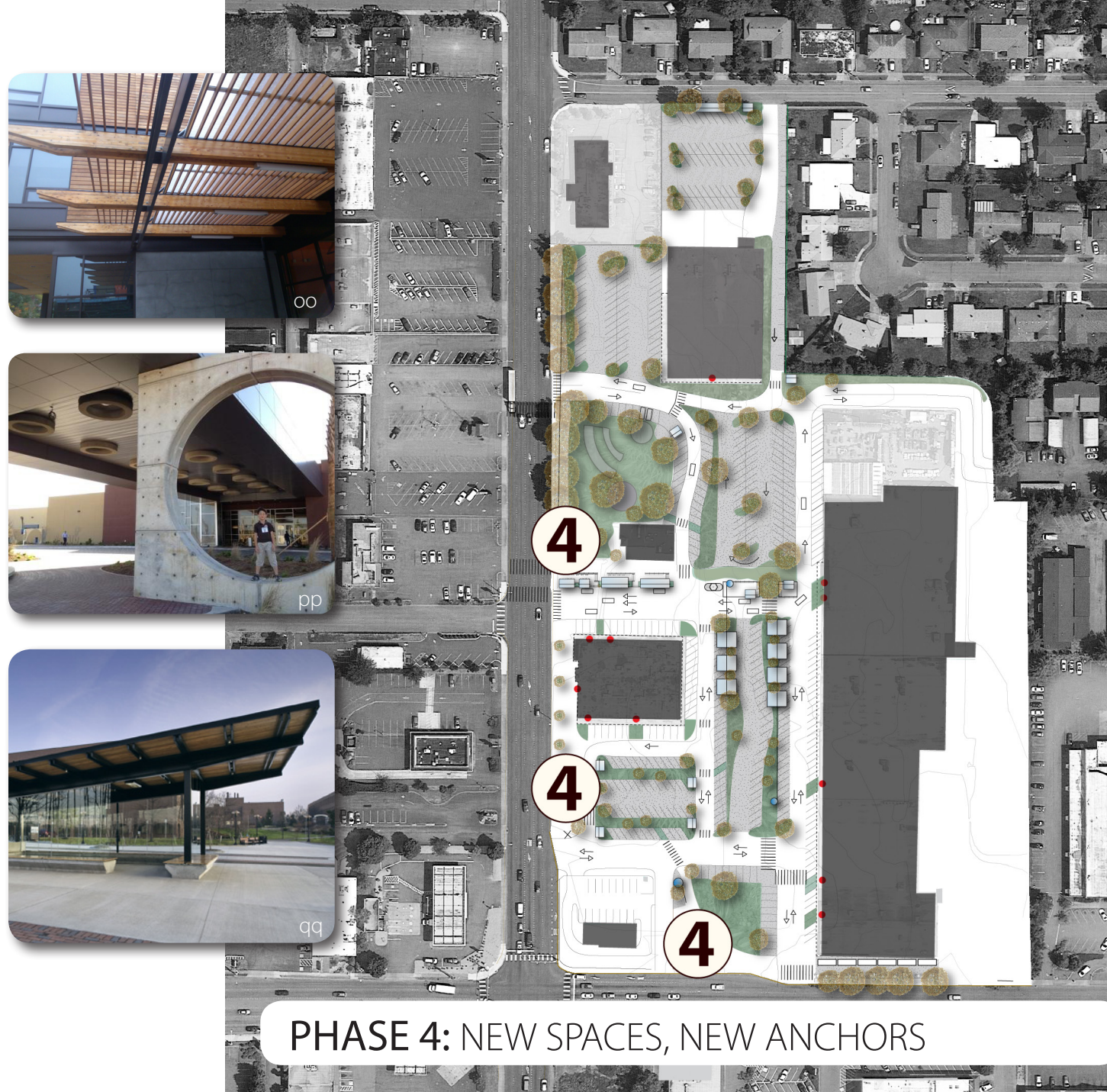
Cars will be able to pull into a grab-n-go zone on the south side of the kiosks, drivers can step out and order from windows, encouraging the transition from driver to pedestrian.



The platforms engage the sidewalk along 104th st and spill into the plaza and park to the north. Each kiosk provides an opportunity for a small business or organization to add to the fine-grained experience of the lot



In Phase 4 spaces will be constructed for new anchor tenants, adding proximity, density, and addressing specific community needs.



**PHASE 4: NEW SPACES, NEW ANCHORS**

The buildings will be sited to define key sites in the lot, such as the plazas to the north and south, as well as the bus stop to the west.



**BUS ROUTES**

The bus stop on the west edge of the lot is consistently busy throughout the day, and used by a wide range of age groups. But it is a vulnerable, isolating place to wait.



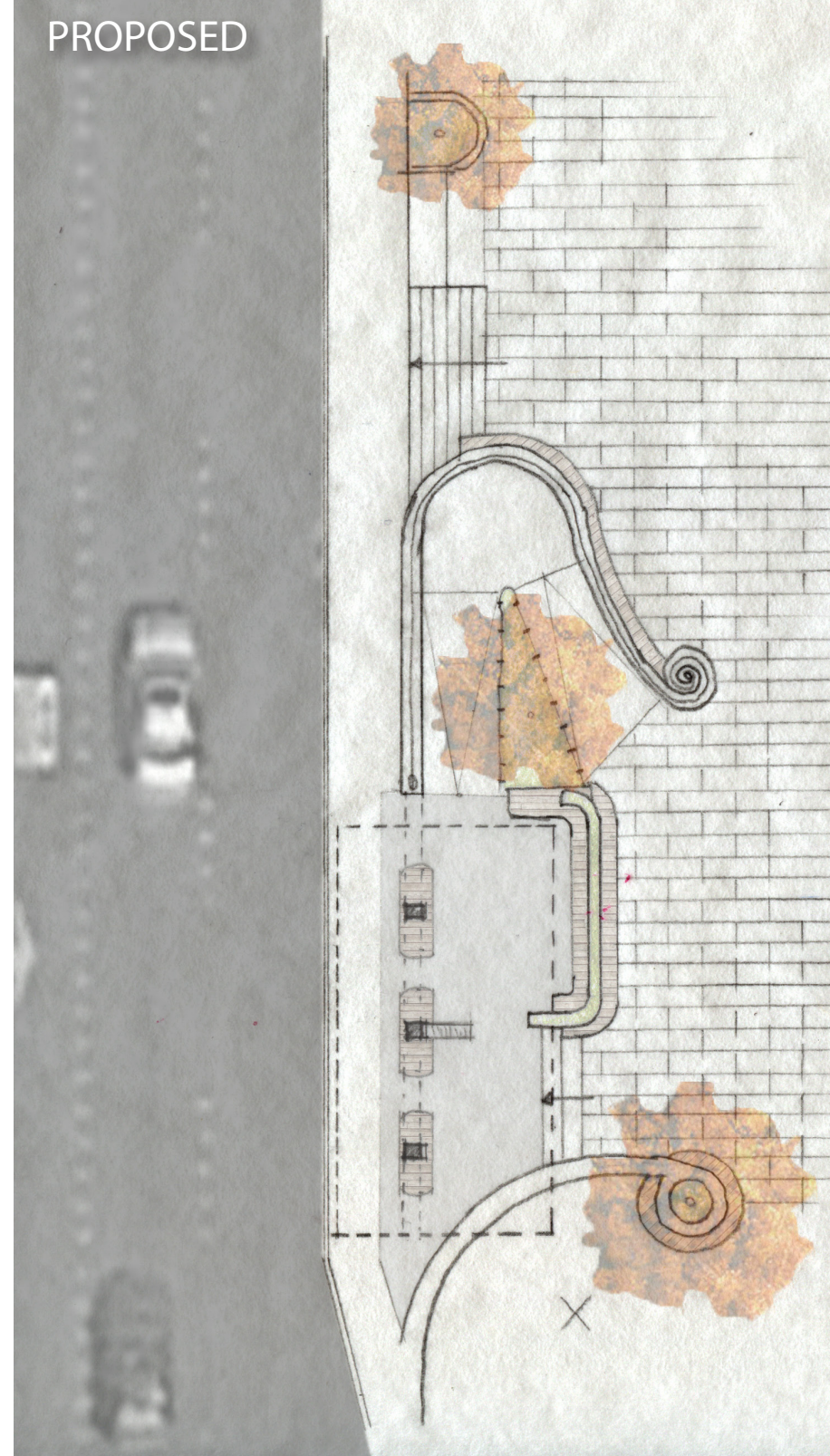
The bus stop will be expanded into a safer waiting place, with ample seating and cover, as well as connections to the center of the lot via green-way paths.

EXISTING BUS STOP



Currently, the bus stop is fenced off from the lot.

PROPOSED



We propose opening it up and allowing movement down into the lot.



The bus shelter will catch rain water and direct it into a stone channel that doubles as the ramp's handrail



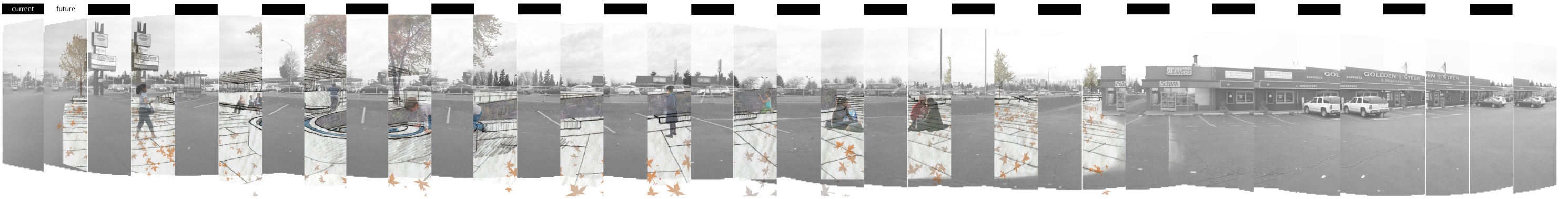
The bus stop can serve as a gateway into the lot for travelers using public transportation and a place of respite for those passing through.

# EXISTING BUS STOP

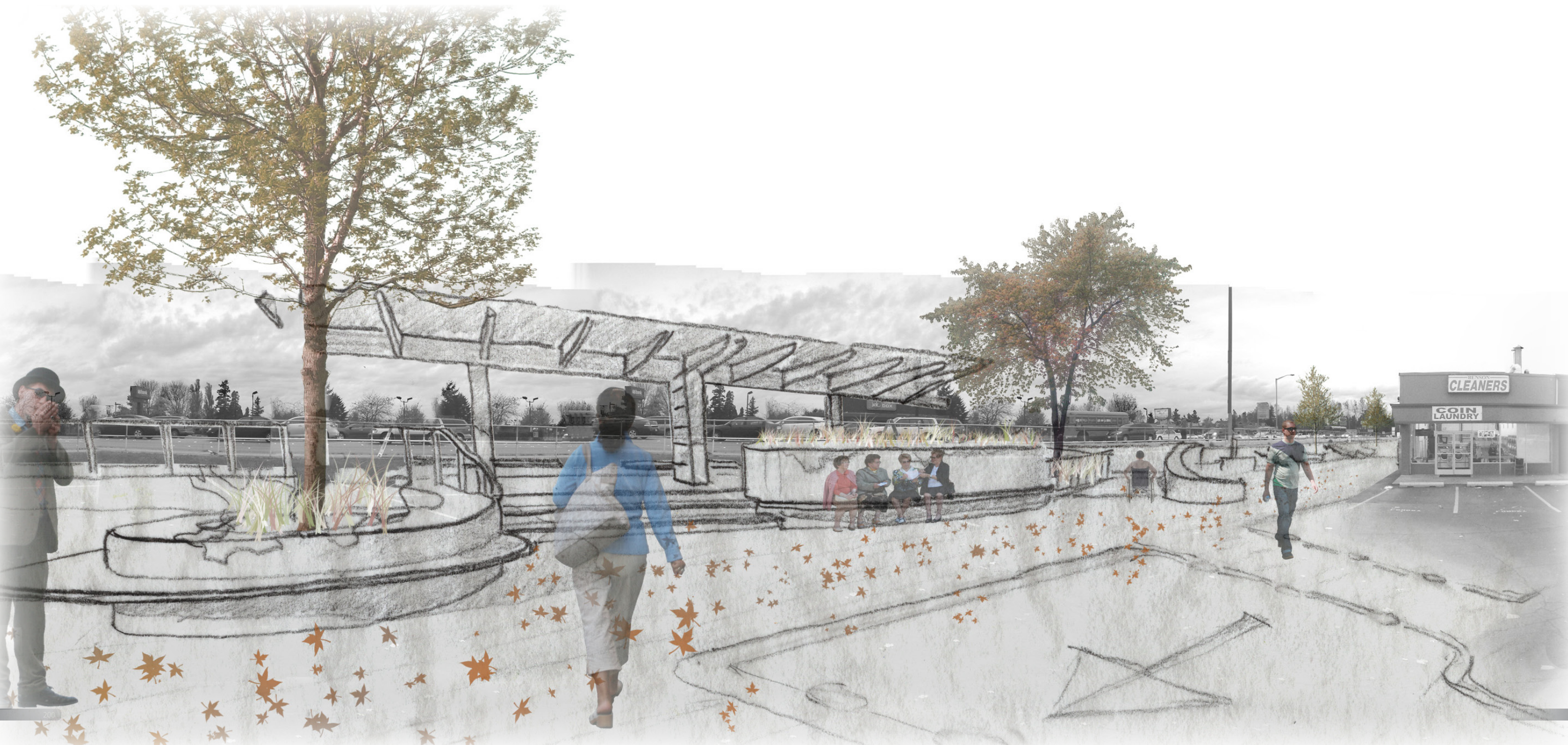


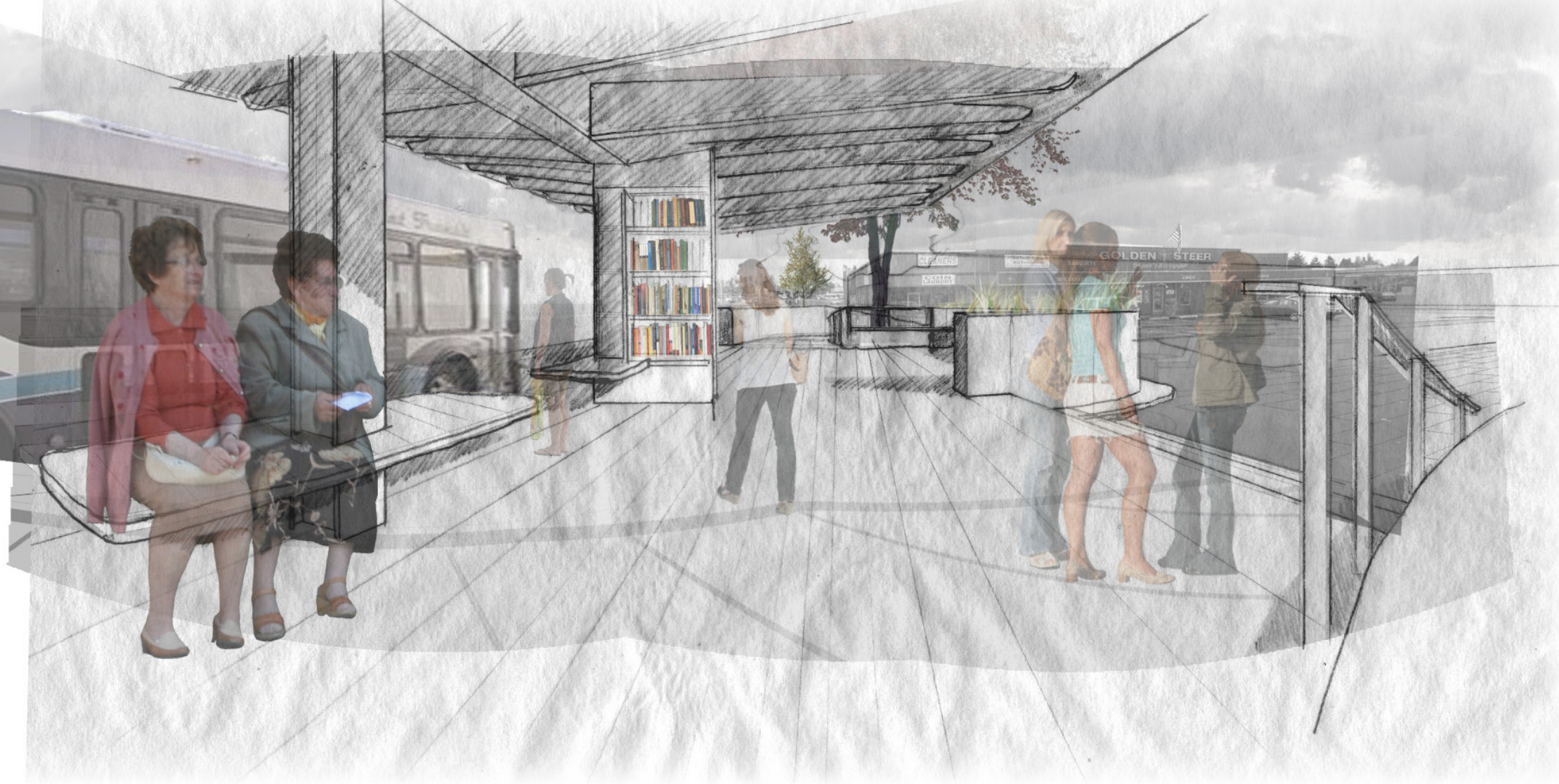
The desolate, steeply sloping edge of the golden steer lot will become a place in its own right... with chalk-able walls, planters, a spiral fountain fed by runoff, permanent and movable seating...





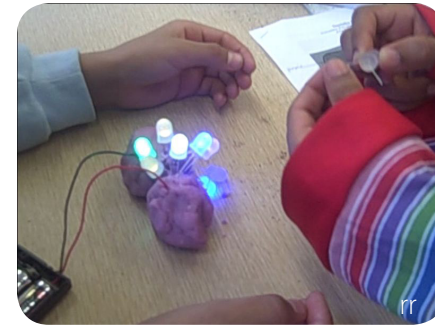
It will be a place to sit and wait for a bus, read a book, or wait for your clothes to finish washing at the corner laundry-mat.



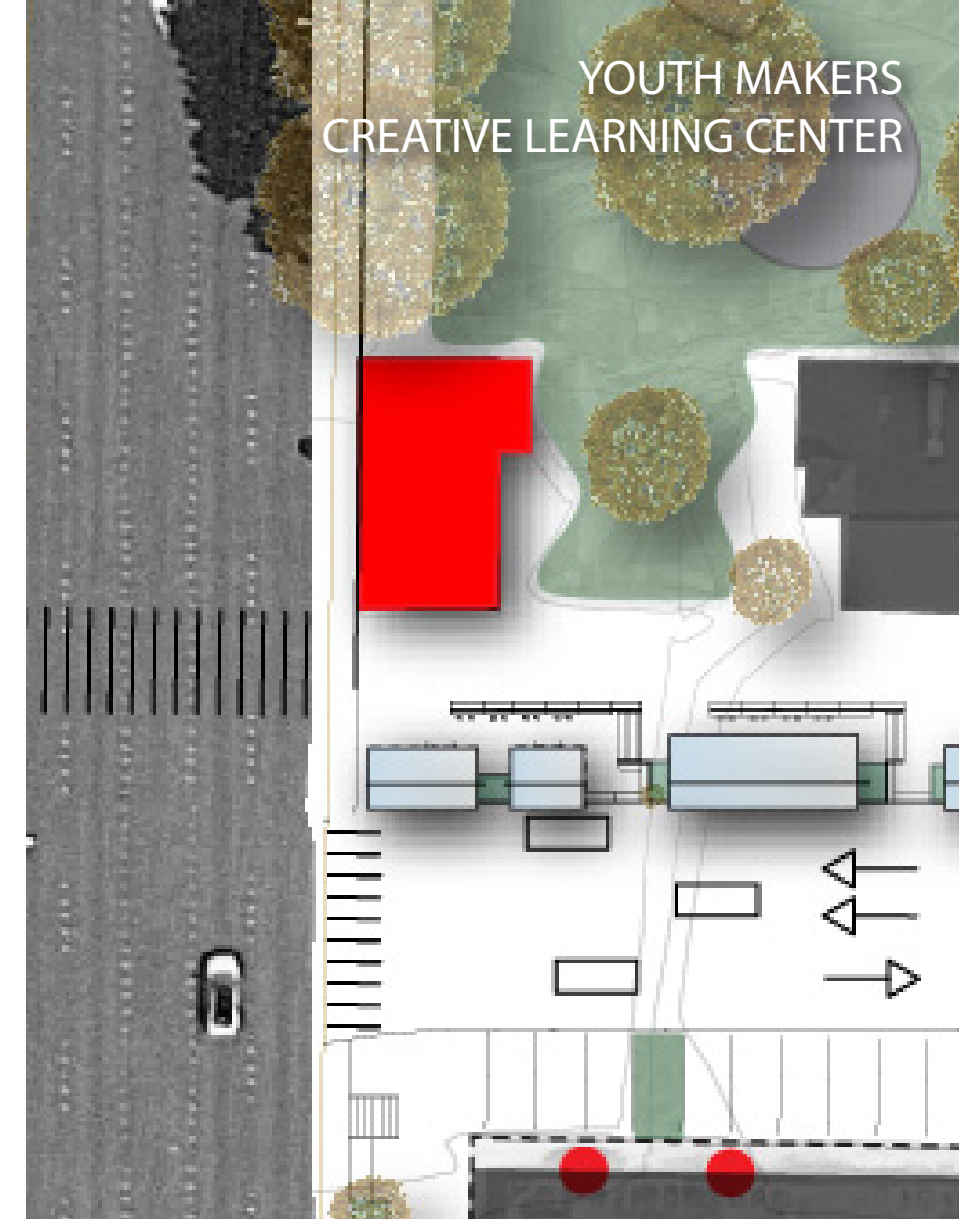


This isolated bus stop will become a primary entrance to the lot, will provide small but meaningful changes that would dignify the everyday commute experience.

# NEW BUILDINGS

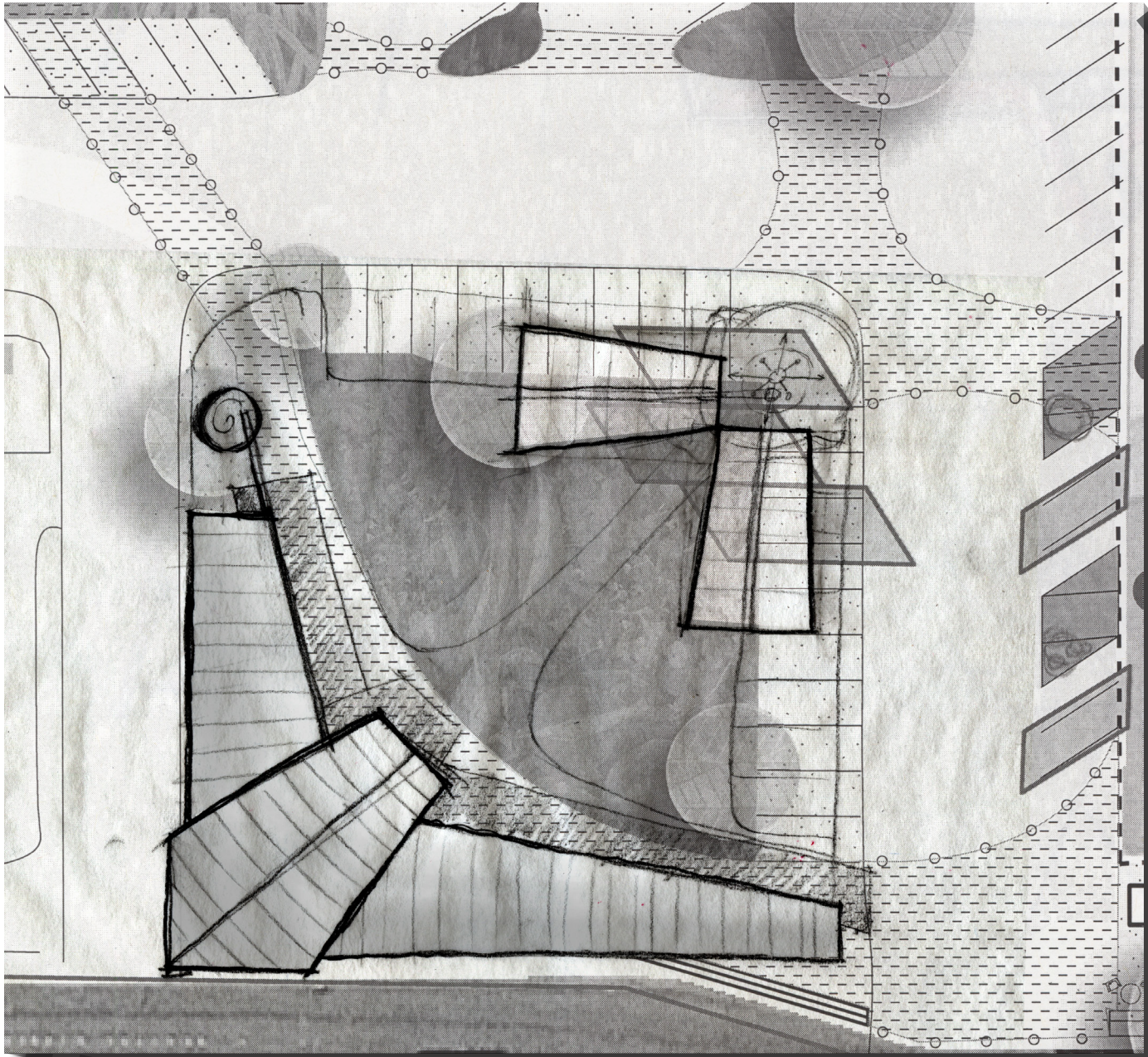


# YOUTH MAKERS CREATIVE LEARNING CENTER



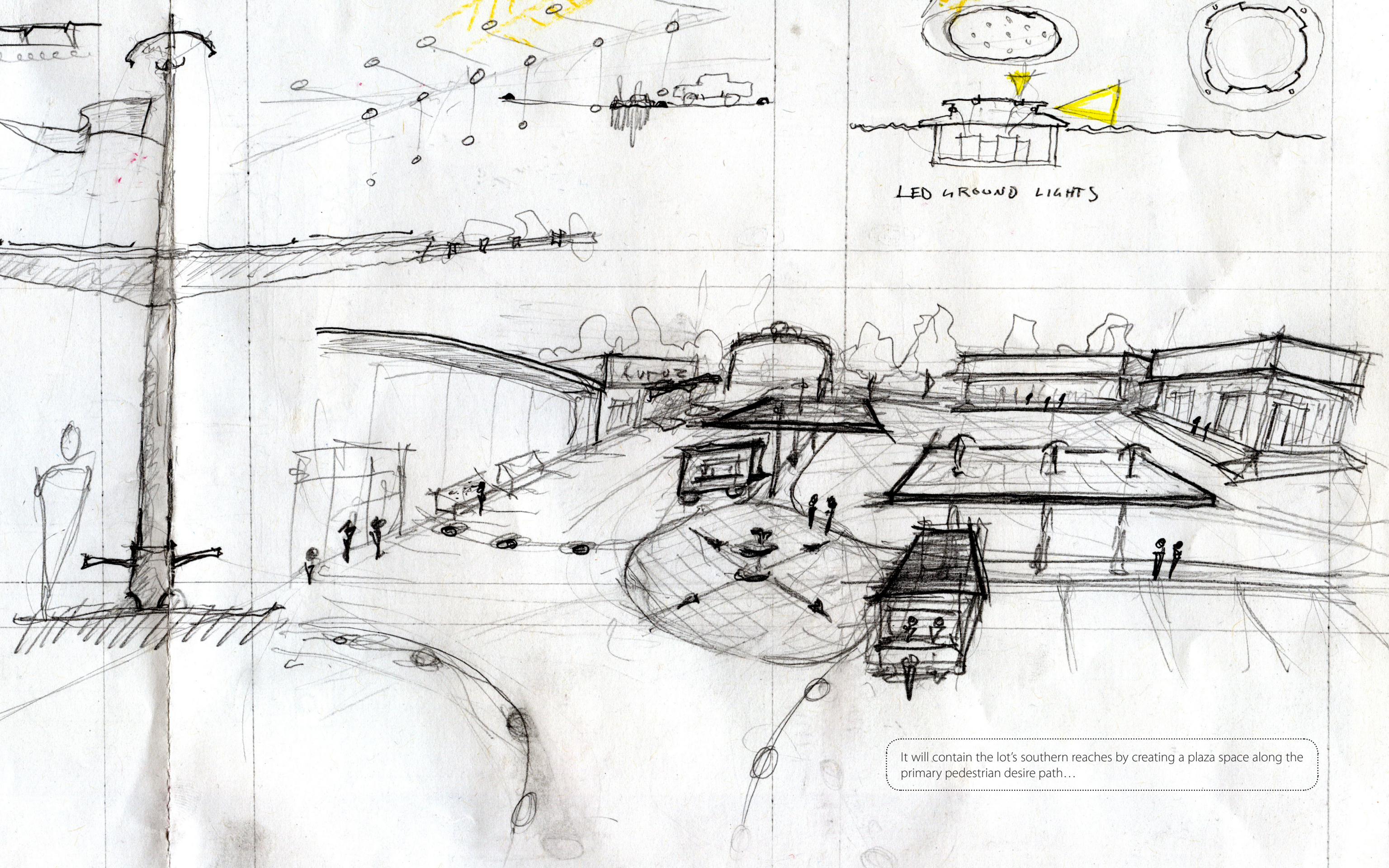
The design and construction of two new buildings will complete phase 4.

From our experience doing design activities with local youth, we saw the potential for a place where young people from all backgrounds can come to build, learn, and communicate through design in a creative Learning Center. In a community of such diversity of language and culture, non-verbal communication and shared experience can be an important way to build relationships.



The second building will create a new corner for the lot, countering the isolationism of the taco-bell/pizza hut on the true corner.



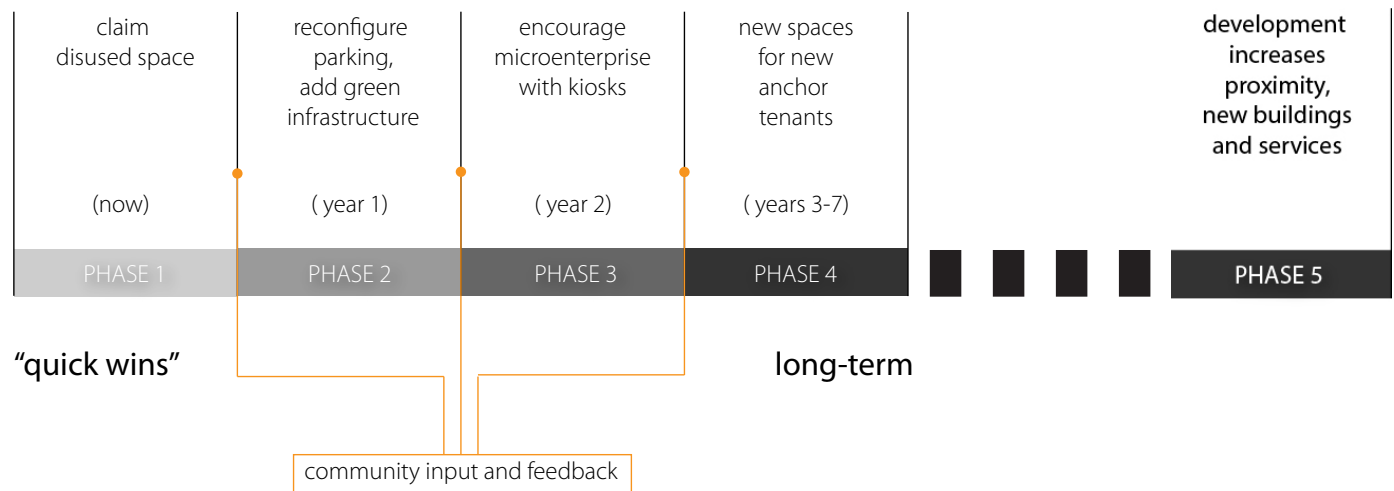


LED GROUND LIGHTS

It will contain the lot's southern reaches by creating a plaza space along the primary pedestrian desire path...



...transforming the monotony and pedestrian averse nature of the lot... into a community space full of amenities. The park plaza will respond to expressed community needs and shortcomings by providing a place to hear live music; a place to get coffee that isn't a gas station; and a place for community meetings.



As Phase 4 comes to an end... we anticipate the community can take an active role in the lot and the neighborhood's future. The redesign of this important activity center could be a catalyst for community change. Incremental, community-driven reinvestment can combat gentrification and allow current East Hill residents to benefit from the improvements to their neighborhood.

Stories can change. They can be rewritten, reimagined, and recombined to express new community goals and identities. As development of the lot gains momentum, reductions in the minimum parking code would be more likely, allowing more development on the site, adding ever more opportunities per square mile.

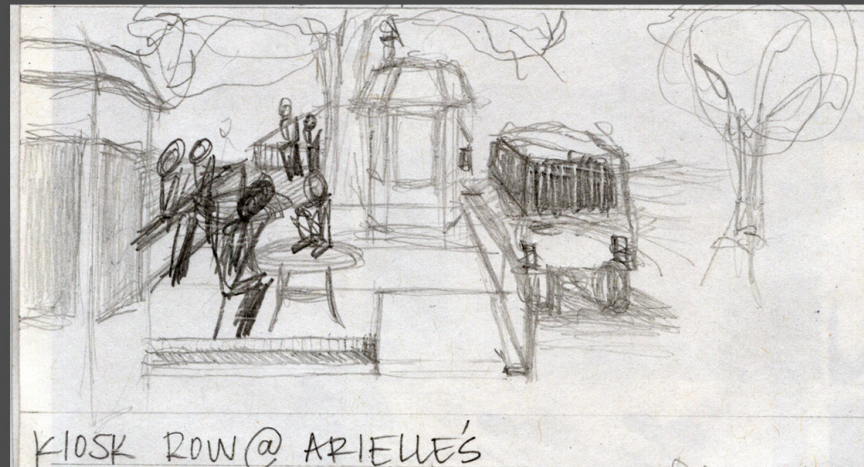


Over the next few years, the lot is seen as a hub of walkable destinations for many East Hill residents. The East Hill community helped transform the lot. They take pride and a sense of ownership in their new public space, and see the potential for other sites in the neighborhood. We envision ideas from the golden steer lot will begin to propagate and evolve in the surrounding lots.





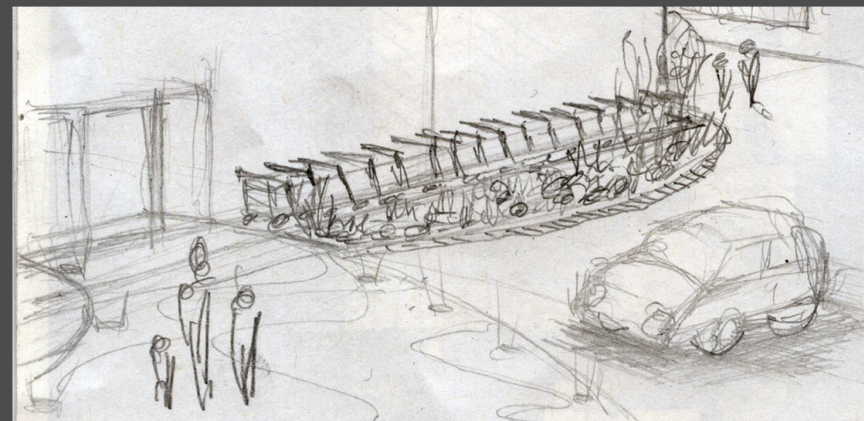
KIOSK ROW @ PARK



KIOSK ROW @ ARIELLE'S



KIOSKS @ NEIGHBORHOOD



CROSSING @ VALLEY HARVEST



Architect and educator William Saunders wrote that "A true alternative to sprawl would not be a style, but a profound transformation in the whole system that created the sprawl environment...a 'utopianism of process' rather than a 'utopianism of spatial form.' That is, the goal is not some predetermined 'right form of density' but a process that overcomes the social and physical fragmentation of sprawl itself."<sup>4</sup>

This captures the spirit of our attempt to conceive of how a suburban community might be integrated in reshaping their own suburban landscape.

## Endnotes

- 1 Leonie Sandercock, *Cosmopolis II: Mongrel Cities in the 21st Century* (London ; New York: Continuum, 2003), 182.
- 2 Bianca M. Hermansen, *Lecture given at University of Washington*, November 13, 2013.
- 3 "Jan Gehl in Saskatoon: Liveable, Sustainable Cities Symposium, August 31, 2009," accessed December 12, 2013, <http://artsandscience.usask.ca/news/event.php?newsid=1102>.
- 4 William Saunders, ed., *Sprawl and Suburbia: A Harvard Design Magazine Reader*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), xiv.

## Image Notes

- a) University of Minnesota, accessed October 24, 2013, <http://blog.lib.umn.edu/ande8939/architecture/LevittownPennsylvania.jpg>.
- b) Ibid
- c) Ed Reitan, Greater Kent Historical Society Archive.
- d) Maider Lopez, accessed December 11, 2013, <http://www.maiderlopez.com/?lang=en>.
- e) Dream Your City, accessed December 11, 2013, <http://www.revistaplot.com/dream-your-city/>.
- f) Design Boom, accessed December 11, 2013, <http://www.designboom.com/design/ergo-crosswalk-by-jae-min-lim-design-for-all-competition-shortlisted-revealed/>.
- g) Robert Hofer, accessed December 11, 2013, <http://www.lisaleonardonline.com/blog/thoughts/parking-lot-poetry>.
- h) Maia Mural Project, accessed December 11, 2013, <http://maiamuralproject.org/2011/10/347/>.
- i, j) Web Urbanist, accessed December 11, 2013, <http://weburbanist.com/2012/04/25/painting-reality-surprised-motorists-make-sudden-street-art/>.
- k) My Modern Met, accessed December 11, 2013, <http://www.mymodernmet.com/profiles/blogs/120-bicycles-on-the-wall-4>.
- l) The Design Office, accessed December 11, 2013, <http://thedesignoffice.org/project/parking-lot-painting>.
- m) The Cleanest Line, accessed December 11, 2013, <http://www.thecleanestline.com/2013/07/keeping-our-waters-swimmable-bioswale-project-at-patagonia-hq-and-swimmable-california-day.html>.
- n) Art Place America, accessed December 11, 2013, <http://www.artplaceamerica.org/articles/city-artist-in-residence-5/>.
- o) Ibid, 8.
- p) Tipton Associates, "Portfolio," accessed December 11, 2013, <http://tipton-associates.com/portfolio/first-baptist-church-denham-springs-master-plan/>.
- q) Elimandat, accessed December 11, 2013, <http://elimandat.wordpress.com/architecture-uo/lents-ecodistrict/process/eco-bioswale-park-diagram-2/>.
- r) Google Image search "permeable pavers," accessed October 1, 2013.
- s) Ibid.
- t) Ibid.

- u) Free Fever, accessed December 11, 2013, <http://www.freefever.com/wallpaper/1920x1200/eraser-widescreen-wallpapers-44113.html>.
- v) Graco, accessed December 11, 2013, <http://www.graco.com/us/en/products/contractor/linelazer-iv-5900-auto-layout-system.html>.
- w) Design Boom, accessed December 11, 2013, <http://www.designboom.com/design/ergo-crosswalk-by-jae-min-lim-design-for-all-competition-shortlisted-revealed/>.
- x) A Glorious Garden, accessed December 11, 2013, <http://agloriousgarden.blogspot.com/2013/01/bioswale-vegetated-swale-or-glorified.html>.
- y) Village of Greendale, WI, accessed December 11, 2013, <http://www.greendale.org/News/files/category-department-of-public-works.html>.
- z) Eco City Builders, accessed December 11, 2013, <http://ecocitybuilders.org/projects/past/>.
- aa) DJC Oregon, accessed December 11, 2013, <http://djcoregon.com/news/2010/06/07/portland-volunteers-face-hurdles-before-beginning-work/>.
- bb) My Mother Mode, accessed December 11, 2013, <http://www.mymothermode.com/2011/05/fun-gardening-with-kids-the-planting/>.
- cc) Akumalsands, accessed December 11, 2013, <http://www.akumalsands.com/blog/?p=251>.
- dd) Google Image search "permeable pavers," accessed October 1, 2013.
- ee) Ibid.
- ff) Ibid.
- gg) Gardenista, accessed December 11, 2013, <http://www.gardenista.com/posts/eco-friendly-paving-solutions>.
- hh) Ibid.
- ii) Ibid.
- jj) Flickr Fotomat Group, accessed December 11, 2013, <http://www.flickr.com/groups/fotomat/>.
- kk) Ibid
- ll) Ibid
- mm) E-Architect, accessed December 11, 2013, <http://www.e-architect.co.uk/madrid/madrid-architecture-photos>.
- nn) The World is Round, accessed December 11, 2013, <http://www.worldisround.com/articles/311880/photo205.html>.

- oo) Trip Advisor, accessed December 11, 2013, [http://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction\\_Review-g56255-d2493995-Reviews-McAllen\\_Public\\_Library-McAllen\\_Texas.html](http://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g56255-d2493995-Reviews-McAllen_Public_Library-McAllen_Texas.html).
- pp) Mossien, accessed December 11, 2013, <http://mossien.com/architects-rochester-ny-win-award/>.
- qq) Afasiaarq, accessed December 11, 2013, <http://afasiaarq.blogspot.com/2011/10/ecosistema-urbano.html>.
- rr) Maker-Kid, accessed December 12, 2013, <http://www.maker-kid.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/squishy-circuit1.jpg>.
- ss) Ecosistema Urbano, "Dreamhamar," accessed December 12, 2013, <http://ecosistemaurbano.com/portfolio/dreamhamar/>.

## CONCLUSION

*"We seem to have an expectation that the suburbs should forever remain frozen in whatever adolescent form they were first given birth to... It's time to let them grow up."*

*-Ellen Dunham Jones*

## Lessons Learned

Suburbs are not placeless—they are places in need of improvement. Popular perceptions of the suburbs obscure the nuances of contemporary suburban culture, and the dominant, historical patterns for suburban development do not facilitate the evolution of contemporary suburban communities. These processes have unfolded predominantly beyond the perceived boundaries of the architecture profession. There are, however, avenues through which these dominant processes can be re-evaluated, and valuable roles that architects can play in shaping future suburban places.

Architecture is an intermediary between people and the landscape, where self-identity and place identity can intersect and inform one another. Its built form embodies choices and values pertaining both to the inhabitants and to the land upon which it sits. Beyond the immediate sphere of site and users, architecture is situated in a larger web of social, economic, ecological, and political values that shape the identities of a given locale and its residents.

Architect and historian Christian Norberg-Schulz asserts that architecture has the potential to translate the "genius loci" of a place—its latent, true identity.<sup>2</sup> The character of a place is not a fixed, absolute value, but a resilient quality capable of evolution and adaptation. Norberg-Schulz explains that "...place may be interpreted in different ways. To protect and conserve the genius loci in fact means to concretize its essence in ever new historical contexts. We might also say that the history of a place ought to be its 'self-realization.'"<sup>3</sup> Different interpreters create different translations of place. Place is to this extent, subjective. The notion of self-realization conveys a process of participatory place-formation. As a process and a practice, this type of place formation suggests a potential evolution in the role of the architect—from a private practitioner for hire to a public service provider and community leader. As facilitators and collaborators within this process, architects can and should play a role in the effort to make suburbs more authentic, inclusive, and resilient for the future.

## The Future of Future Kent

As our professional story of the Golden Steer Lot has now been written, we can once again return to Kent to reflect our ideas back to the stakeholders and communities we have corresponded with throughout the project. During our thesis presentation to professionals and faculty, a former member of Kent City government with intimate knowledge of the site and its complexities fully endorsed the project and suggested that several key individuals and groups in Kent should see this work and that many of the ideas it proposes are imminently realizable and needed. From stakeholders in the lot itself, to community groups working in the area, to city planning officials, we intend to share our observations and response to Kent's stories. Whatever the outcome, as we take our proposal back to the community, we hope to include a wide array of voices in the conversation about the Golden Steer lot and Kent's future.

#### Endnotes

- 1 Ellen Dunham-Jones: TED Talk, *Retrofitting Suburbia*, 2010, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J\\_uTsrxfYWQ&feature=youtube\\_gdata\\_player](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J_uTsrxfYWQ&feature=youtube_gdata_player).
- 2 Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1980).10.
- 3 Ibid, 18.

"Growing up in Kent, we lived on East Hill. We had a small lot, about an acre. Most lots were 5 or 10 acres. We had ponies and rode them to Enumclaw."

"Housing south of Boeing is built on 10'-12' plateau of fill to avoid the flood plain. The area has fertile soil "like the Nile" and is being covered up by continued development."

"When the downtown core was gutted it "took away the soul of Kent." Downtown went from small stores to "nothing," and the city lost its identity."

"When discussing whether ShoWare Center would "blend in" vs "define a new context", the new context idea won out--City of Kent was eager to define/redefine the downtown area around this project."

"City had seen lots of boxy, typical precedents and wanted something that felt lighter and 'people oriented'."

"Community organizations in Kent are 'islands,' they need to do more communicating and collaborating."

"There is a belief in the city that there isn't enough parking or not enough signage for free parking, so people don't know where to park."

"There is no where to buy books or greeting cards downtown--no live theater in Kent."

"Demolition is becoming increasingly likely in order to re-image the area and offer 'attractive features'."

"East Hill Neighborhood is home to the Golden Steer, an anchor restaurant in an older strip mall that needs reinvestment (recently got a Grocery Outlet)."

"Most of the constituencies involved in the Downtown Strategic Action Plan want to 'cap downtown growth and change, i.e., "no more tall buildings'."

"I lived in Kent all my life except for 4 years in Pullman for college. It has changed so much in the last 30 years. East hill has developed into something completely different than it was when I was a kid. I love it here, but I honestly don't understand why anyone would move here today.."

"Kent just doesn't have "the army" of city employees like Seattle to make [PARK(ing)day] happen."

"The city would not be amenable to a guerrilla act of 'civil disobedience' somewhere on public property."

"Attempting to occupy public parking spaces in front of businesses without consulting them could cause significant conflict between the business and the project participants that could quickly lead to a call to the police."

"By bringing this project, you are really pioneers in Kent."

"But I do want to be sure you and the participants have thought of how you're going to clean up so that the library or city staff have absolutely nothing to do with it, since it is an event that is not being sponsored by the city. And did you explore whether you needed any permits or, since it is going to be held on library property? If they've approved it, I can relax and wish you a fabulous event."

"Customers and business owners might be not too happy if people can't park in front of businesses."

[Regarding PARK(ing) Day activities] "And I'll repeat that there SHOULD NOT BE ANY MESS left for city staff to clean up."

"Letting people choose a place that is 'meaningful to them' can create a lot of problems and be the first, last and only time you will be able to do something this potentially cool!"

"You have sparked the imagination and sowed the seeds for a project that will have some legs."

"If the point to Parking Day is to get people thinking and acting with imagination, it has at least succeeded in that for me!"

"The Dam changed the agriculture/industry balance, and led to the commercialization of downtown which is prime agricultural land."

"There are a lot of homeless people in Kent, there should be a shelter or better resource center for them. Some go to the Lutheran Church for help, but there is not an established shelter."

"King County sends all its homeless to Kent. We passed an ordinance prohibiting churches from feeding the homeless in public parks. A non-profit wants to set up a homeless shelter in downtown Kent... we think up north in the warehouse district would be better suited..."

"They [the homeless shelters] don't have to be on bus lines, we gave them bikes...some homeless people want to be homeless."

"*American Graffiti* captured what it was like growing up in mid-century Kent--lots of 'cruising' from one town to the next."

"So many things go on and so few people hear about it."

"When the downtown core was gutted it took away the soul of Kent. Downtown went from small stores to nothing, and the city lost its identity."

"In a conversation about what Kent needs, people should be asking 'what feeds your community?'"

#### LOVE / CHANGE TAGS AT CORNUCOPIA DAYS

##### *What do you love? (city)*

Relaxed, friendly environment  
The Parks!  
I (heart) Kent Station!  
The shopping - everything you need  
Love the Community Park, fountain, Cornucopia Fair. Mayor Cooke is doing a good job.  
I love how all the stores are close (walking distance!)  
I love coming here with my girlfriend Carlene!  
The city is cool. Its classy and small. Easy to get around.  
More fall community activity  
Drunk driving- man said it was the only issue he cared about but didn't want to put it on a tag

##### *What would you change? (city)*

Need to incorporate the Kent "West Hill" into more events. Also, need another youth football field.  
Traffic. More bikes. More Jesus in the city please.

##### *What do you love? (neighborhood)*

Everybody knows everybody  
I (three hearts) Kent Meridian High School  
Trapper's Sushi is so good!  
everything's close  
Driving on the West Hill and the view of the valley  
We know all of our neighbors

##### *What would you change? (neighborhood)*

Bring back a grocery store to the West Hill (mentioned the Thrift Way specifically)  
fields, multiplex field, more of gyms/rec  
Rec youth activities! NEED MORE!  
traffic

##### *What do you love? (home)*

I love the small space I share with my wife  
My dogs and cat  
My pets

##### *What would you change? (home)*

More pets!  
MORE KITTENS!!!! - And....?

APPENDIX: PHOTOS



