BOONE STREET: MULTIMODAL NEIGHBORHOOD

Walnut Hills
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“Our shortcomings are the eyes with which we see the ideal”
Friedrich Nietzsche quotes (German classical Scholar, Philosopher and Critic of culture, 1844-1900.)

Walnut Hills has many of the same characteristics that other Cincinnati first ring suburbs have. There are historic buildings, littered streets, and yet some intangible quality that makes it feel like home. During the public meetings and the fieldwork sessions through-out this quarter, I’ve learned that the residents of Walnut Hills are diverse in their opinions. Some are skeptic of the planning process and some attend the public meetings with a sense of excitement and civic duty. Some take pride in their property and their community, while others throw their trash on the sidewalk. Walnut Hills should be a source of pride and nostalgia for the city as a whole. The buildings that once made a vibrant neighborhood business district, now stand broken and unoccupied. While commercial activity slowly trickles away from the intersection of Gilbert and McMillan, store fronts are left empty or filled with a less intensive use. In many ways, Walnut Hills speaks to the narrative of the state. Both Ohio and Walnut Hills are experiencing a change in their significance to the large region. The following document will explain my final project (entitled “Boone St: Multimodal Neighborhood”), and how this project is relevant to Walnut Hills and the City of Cincinnati.

Vision Statement and Goals

Before I began work on an independent design assignment, my colleagues and I were asked to create a framework plan. These framework plans were based on the findings from last quarter’s students and were revised and perfected by our group. We came up with the following vision statement and goals, in order to focus our work.
Vision:

To transform Walnut Hills into one of Cincinnati’s premiere neighborhoods offering unmatched accessibility, a thriving business district that is safe and walkable, residential opportunities and a center for employment.

We aim to revitalize the Neighborhood Business District by addressing the issue of blighted properties owned by absentee landlords, the implementation of form-based code zoning, business development incentives, and improving street configuration and character in the vicinity of Peeble’s Corner along McMillan Street.

The community is seen as becoming a region of employment through the introduction of industry and greater transit options. Walnut Hills will benefit from a highway alternative that supports the neighborhood as a destination as opposed to one experienced only in passing by. The community has also been flagged as potentially being along the paths of both the street car and light rail developments which will make it desirable by business owners and residents alike.

Goals:

- To revitalize the NBD making it attractive, safe, walkable and economically successful.
- To advocate for the highway reconfiguration alternative best suited for the neighborhood and capitalizing on the associated benefits.
- To become a center for green industry and jobs within Cincinnati and the region.
- To transform McMillan street specifically Peebles Corner into a “Great Street” recapturing the vibrancy from its past.
- To empower community members in helping to develop the neighborhood socially and shedding its negative image.

Our goals and objects run congruent with the communities and were guided with research, explorations into past plans and documents, and discussion with the community council president Cathy Atkinson. Ms. Atkinson was able to provide us with some of the best insight. Most notable, was her explanation of the threat of losing the Kroger’s located along East McMillan. The grocery store is located in the central business district and is one of the most important tenants in that area. Many of the nearby elderly apartment complexes depend on the Kroger’s to obtain their groceries. The elderly are the demographic that are most effected by mobility and proximity to healthy foods. Ms. Atkinson asserts that Kroger’s owns the land; however they are currently leasing the building. She says, that Kroger’s is having difficulty making the profit margin they expect, in part because of their current lease agreement. It is my belief that Kroger is the anchoring institution within the neighborhood business district, if they discontinue their store in Walnut Hills, there will be further disinvestment. From an economic development stand point, the most current plan (Cincinnati 45206 : Template for Tomorrow) falls dangerously short of understanding what goals should be pursued. The document was produced for both East Walnut Hills and Walnut Hills. This partnership will be helpful in dealing with efforts at a regional scale; however, the economic and
transportation goals are drastically different for each community. For example, if there was a light rail or street car stop to be located in the area, each community would want it located within their boundary. The 45206 plan’s goals are as follows:

“Economic Development
Goal 1: Strengthen and improve the economic viability in the ’06 community business districts
Goal 2: Maintain the existing historic and architectural character of the business districts.

Goal 3: Improve the safety cleanliness and visual identity of the ’06 business districts
Goal 4: Develop and implement a plan to provide convenient and safe parking that will adequately support the thriving business districts.”

(Definitive Works LLC., 8)

“Transportation:
Goal 1: Establish the ’06 community as an accessible destination with various modes of transportation for its residents
Goal 2: Develop a strategy for the implementation of two-way traffic on East McMillan and William Howard Taft Road west of Victory Parkway
Goal 3: Create a street grid that leads easily to the ’06 community’s (3) business districts, entertainment districts, leisure, and cultural and historic amenities”

(Definitive Works LLC., 13)

“The’06 Community refers to both of the communities that share the zip code 45206 (Walnut Hills and East Walnut Hills)

My group’s framework project attempted to adhere to the triple sustainable bottom line. This means that our concepts would sustain themselves environmentally, economically, and socially. It is important to recognize that many of our goals sought to regain focus at the neighborhood business district.

**Project Description**

After the preparation of our framework assignment, our group broke into the individual preparation of design recommendations. Much to my dismay, a large focus of this quarter’s studio is focused on the scheduled improvements of both I-71 and I-75. Seeking to make improvement base on the knowledge obtained from the framework, community stakeholders and the instructional staff at the Niehoff studio, I chose to explore design options for the neighborhood abutting the highway and the current
location of KOI auto parts. Cincinnati is gearing up to make massive renovations to its transportation system. Light-rail, street car, interstate passenger train, and more tradition highway construction will all provide an advanced opportunity to reinvent Walnut Hills and increase the available property tax base. The community council would be well suited to have a variety of ideals about not only how their community could be changed, but also, in which ways would change be the most advantageous. My design takes an accurate look at the existing conditions of Walnut Hills and then provides three alternative design typologies that could utilize the future transportation options in order to bring about a market desired product for developers.

**Rationale**

Any design proposals must take an accurate look at the existing conditions. As I mentioned before, the input from the community council was irreplaceable; however, the community council needs to identify a highway alternative that works best for them. During our conversation Ms. Atkinson said that the community council had no preference for any of the alternatives and that their main concern was changing McMillan and William Howard Taft from one-way streets to two-way roads. A group of engineers familiar with the process of converting a one way road to a two way road asserts that highway alternative S-R is the best alternative for implementing that goal. Walnut Hills currently has Humana as one of its largest employers within the neighborhood boundaries. Vacancy and the perception of crime are also large hurdles that the community will have to overcome. During the framework stage of work, I identified six buildings that were the most impactful on the community. These buildings are traditionally historic, vacant, and centrally located in the community. These buildings offer massive amount of opportunity for office or apartment uses. Getting these buildings in working order with tenants will be paramount to the success of the business district as a whole.
The following Diagram is an existing conditions diagram. It is useful for understanding the different factors that surround my site and how they play into the design alternatives that follow. Following the Existing Conditions Diagram are the three design diagrams. I focused particularly on integrating office uses into my site because this would be the highest and best use of the land.
Development Near A Stop
Development Near A Stop

This design proposal requires minimal amount of intervention. A rail stop could be located within the right of way for I-71. This stop would increase mobility, but doesn’t set the ground for a TOD. Passengers would easily move to and from downtown; however, little new construction could be expected near the rail stop.

1. Locate transit stop in the right of way
2. Focus commercial uses near McMillan
3. Use office to buffer residential from the highway
4. Make McGregor Ave. pedestrian only
5. Provide office uses at varying scales and configurations

Transit Oriented Development

This option involves a high degree of intervention and investment. Locating a stop in the middle of the existing KOI Auto Parts site would give the stop and adjoining development a high degree of visibility from the highway. The development of the stop should be coupled with massive construction of residential, commercial, and office uses. The neighborhood that abuts the site is has many demolished or abandon homes. Any improvements for the purpose of the TOD should be coupled with the addition of affordable housing units nearest the stop.

1. Highway views of major public space
2. Gateway entrance from Burbank St.
3. Respond to the existing street grid
4. Enclosure of the stop
5. Separation of pedestrian and automobile approaches
6. Create draws from churches and local business
7. Density radiates from the transit stop

Traditional Office Product

The third alternative offers the tradition office product. While this layout is not as exiting as the other options, it does have a tract record of being successful. The office buildings buffer the community from the loud noises associated with the highway and are easily visible from the highway.

1. Office space with highway visibility
2. Buffer residential neighborhood from highway
3. Respond to the existing street grid
4. Semi enclosure of the parking area

Precedent Studies

The Brewery Blocks
Portland, Oregon
Transit-Oriented Development

Portland is known for being one of the most transit friendly cities in the nation. They have been extremely successful at not only getting huge transportation project funded, but also getting the high levels of ridership needed to sustain these projects into the future. The Brewery Blocks is a five block region on the southern edge of Portland’s Pearl District. It was originally Blitz-Weinhard Brewery that was zoning primarily commercial and residential. The initial redevelopment attracted art galleries, boutiques, and restaurants that are of vital importance for higher income apartments and condos. While many cities were dealing with decline Portland took a significant gamble to fund this project. “The total cost of the redevelopment was approximately $300 million. The city of Portland supplied $8 million: a $6 million loan for the construction of a three-level, 1,350-space underground parking facility; and a $2 million grant for infrastructure improvements. The remaining $292 million came from private sources, producing a 36:1 private-to-public investment ratio.” (Iams & Kaplan) Once the new light-rail stop was completed the city recorded records gains in property taxes. Developers know that the city have made a huge infrastructure investment that is tied to the geography of the area via the tract. Commercial and retail establishments can count on the constant flow of people moving to and from the train. As a result the area saw a total of 1.18 million dollars in new construction and 1.27 million dollars in rehabilitated retail and office space (Iams & Kaplan)

The most important thing to remember about this case study is that this is a transit oriented development (TOD) not just a train stop. The difference is that a train stop can be anywhere, where as a TOD must be located near a dense neighborhood. Large metropolitan areas allow for the development that is typical of TOD projects.
populations have the financial ability to sustain another wise over saturated commercial and retail market. In order for a TOD to work in Walnut Hills, there would need to be significant investment in the area.

**Bibliography**

