SECTION 4

District Planning and Design Guidelines
map of the various downtown districts discussed in this section
DISTRICT PLANNING AND DESIGN GUIDELINES

In the twenty years since his firm began work in Des Moines, Mario Gandelsosas observes focus has shifted from a strong east-west linear condition of downtown to a quilt of districts north and south of the strong east-west axis. This change represents significant progress in downtown, a maturing in the city.

With the grand new West Capitol Terraces, the thriving East Village, Gateway Park, Riverwalk work underway along both banks of the Des Moines River, the connections between the east and west sides of downtown have been greatly strengthened. While the work of completing this east-west spine that forms the structure of downtown must be maintained and improved, downtown as a whole, from Meredith Corporation and Gateway Park on the west through to the East Village and Capitol grounds on the east, has been realized. The once strained competition between east and west has become a complementary condition. The historic potential of traversing downtown captivated by a series of treasures – Gateway Park, the dense downtown core, Nollen Plaza, crossing the River, a civic precinct, an eclectic commercial district, and finally approaching the grounds of the grand Capitol, an enticing icon visible for the entire 2-mile stretch -- is within reach.

With a number of new places in downtown, attention to a "quilt" condition has begun. With new downtown places such as the Woodland Brickstones south of Sherman Hill, the Science Center of Iowa along ML King Jr. Parkway, Allied / Nationwide along Gateway Park, and the future bridges crossing the Des Moines River, downtown is expanding and forming unique districts in downtown.

The following pages identify the Districts and offer an overview of the primary condition of downtown to a quilt of districts north and south of the strong east-west axis. This change represents a goal of balancing the distinctiveness of each district with attaining a cohesive and connected downtown. Some districts reinforce the historic east-west axis while others contribute to north-south connectivity. Many have aspects of both. This overview of the Districts is followed by an enumerated list of planning guidelines that pertain to downtown Des Moines’ specific situation. This list identifies sound, progressive planning principles intended to challenge downtown’s future evolution.

Volume II

A forthcoming Volume II of What’s Next: Downtown offers detailed guidelines for future development in each of the Districts. This informational companion to the downtown plan discusses each District individually through a series of plans and diagrams.

The set of information, Volume I and Volume II, provides each district with a concept, bulk and massing proposals, and indications of uses. Together, this work has the potential to inform future zoning decisions in the downtown, guide capital improvements, and shape development decisions. Revamped downtown zoning that provides pro-active guidance and an easily understood vision of what is desired should be a goal derived from this planning effort. This vision should integrate the desired densities and mix of land uses appropriate to each ‘neighborhood’ while providing sufficient flexibility to incorporate changes in market and trends over time.
### Districts’ Response to Downtown Plan Proposals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initiative</th>
<th>South of Sherman Hill</th>
<th>Gateway</th>
<th>Gateway North</th>
<th>10th Street Village</th>
<th>Gray’s Landing</th>
<th>ML King Jr. Parkway</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Walnut Street Transformation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>• long-range downtown transit on 15th Street</td>
<td>• long-range downtown transit on 15th Street</td>
<td>• downtown tram on</td>
<td>• long-range downtown</td>
<td>• long-range downtown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• long-range downtown transit on 15th Street</td>
<td>• long-range downtown transit on 15th Street</td>
<td>Walnut Street</td>
<td>transit on 15th Street</td>
<td>transit on 15th Street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• park and ride serving transit</td>
<td>• park and ride serving transit</td>
<td></td>
<td>• park and ride serving</td>
<td>• park and ride serving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Skywalks &amp; Sidewalks</strong></td>
<td>• Woodland Avenue</td>
<td>• vertical access points along Walnut Street</td>
<td>• vertical skywalk access near 10th and</td>
<td>• vertical Skywalk</td>
<td>• pedestrian-friendly</td>
<td>• key pedestrian crossings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and Ingersoll Avenue</td>
<td>• Walnut Street and Grand Avenue</td>
<td>Walnut Streets</td>
<td>access near 10th and</td>
<td>network of new streets</td>
<td>at 15th/16th St., 11th/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>median</td>
<td>• Grand Avenue sidewalk widening</td>
<td>10th and Walnut Streets</td>
<td>10th and Walnut</td>
<td>w/ small blocks</td>
<td>12th St., 5th St., 3rd St., and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Woodland Avenue</td>
<td>• Methodist Park - open</td>
<td>Streets</td>
<td>• pedestrian-friendly</td>
<td>Water Street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Ingersoll Avenue</td>
<td>space and entry to Iowa Health Systems'</td>
<td></td>
<td>network of new streets</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Grand Avenue</td>
<td>Campus</td>
<td></td>
<td>w/ small blocks</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• vertical access points along Walnut Street</td>
<td>• 'green' numbered streets</td>
<td></td>
<td>• pedestrian-friendly</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Greening Downtown</strong></td>
<td>• 18th Street promenade</td>
<td>• sculptures in Gateway Park</td>
<td>• bike lanes at Walnut Street School</td>
<td>• bike lanes at</td>
<td>• commercial development</td>
<td>• additional tree planting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• bike lanes on</td>
<td>• playground at Walnut Street School</td>
<td>• playground at Walnut Street School</td>
<td>Walnut Street</td>
<td>along the Parkway</td>
<td>along the Parkway</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ingersoll Ave.</td>
<td>• bike lanes along Walnut St.</td>
<td>• bike lanes on 15th St. south of Ingersoll</td>
<td></td>
<td>• commercial development</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Crocker Street bike</td>
<td>• 10th Street landscape</td>
<td>Avenue</td>
<td></td>
<td>along ML King Jr. Parkway</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>lanes</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Methodist Park</td>
<td></td>
<td>• mixed use development</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Woodland Avenue</td>
<td>• open space and entry to Iowa Health</td>
<td></td>
<td>along SW 11th Street</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Ingersoll Avenue</td>
<td>Systems' Campus</td>
<td></td>
<td>• mixed use development</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Grand Avenue</td>
<td>• 'green' numbered streets</td>
<td></td>
<td>along SW 11th Street</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Downtown as a Business Hub</strong></td>
<td>• Woodland Avenue</td>
<td>• mixed use commercial development along</td>
<td>• mixed use infill development</td>
<td>• mixed use infill</td>
<td>• new multi-family</td>
<td>• commercial / mixed use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and Ingersoll Avenue</td>
<td>Gateway Park</td>
<td>• mixed use infill development</td>
<td>development</td>
<td>residential development</td>
<td>development at consistent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>commercial</td>
<td>• mixed use development south of existing</td>
<td>• mixed use infill development</td>
<td>• mixed use development</td>
<td>new multi-family</td>
<td>setback and ~60’ height</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>development</td>
<td>hospital including hospital expansion and</td>
<td>• mixed use infill development</td>
<td>along ML King Jr.</td>
<td>residential</td>
<td>adaptive reuse of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>along Gateway Park</td>
<td>health-related facilities</td>
<td>• mixed use infill development</td>
<td>Parkway and</td>
<td>infill</td>
<td>warehouses to housing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• mixed use development</td>
<td>• mixed use infill development</td>
<td>Tuttle Street</td>
<td>• residential</td>
<td>• residential infill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• mixed use development south of existing</td>
<td>• mixed use infill development</td>
<td>• mixed use</td>
<td>• high rise housing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>hospital including hospital expansion and</td>
<td>• mixed use infill development</td>
<td>development along</td>
<td>development at SW</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>health-related facilities</td>
<td>• mixed use infill development</td>
<td>SW 11th Street</td>
<td>corner</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Living Downtown</strong></td>
<td>• medium density</td>
<td>• mixed use development with residential</td>
<td>• residential infill</td>
<td>• new multi-family</td>
<td>• high rise housing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>residential transition</td>
<td>along Gateway Park</td>
<td>• retail focus area around 10th and Walnut</td>
<td>residential</td>
<td>development at SW</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>between Sherman Hill</td>
<td>• mixed use development with residential</td>
<td>Streets</td>
<td>development</td>
<td>corner</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and Gateway</td>
<td>along Gateway Park</td>
<td>• new multi-family residential development</td>
<td>• high rise housing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• mixed use development south of existing</td>
<td>-- rowhouses, townhouses</td>
<td>development at SW</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>hospital including hospital expansion and</td>
<td>• high rise housing development at SW</td>
<td>corner</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>health-related facilities</td>
<td>corner</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cultural Development</strong></td>
<td>• retail and mixed</td>
<td>• sculptures in Gateway Park</td>
<td>• key cultural / mixed use development</td>
<td>• key cultural /</td>
<td>• key cultural / mixed use</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>use along Woodland</td>
<td>• cultural arts district along Walnut Street</td>
<td>site at south end of 10th Street</td>
<td>mixed use site at SE</td>
<td>mixed use sites at SE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Avenue</td>
<td>• mixed use along Gateway Park</td>
<td>• 10th St. cultural expansion</td>
<td>end of ML King</td>
<td>end of ML King bridge</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>connections to Hoyt</td>
<td>• 10th St. cultural expansion</td>
<td>• Walnut Street cultural and entertainment</td>
<td>bridge, 10th Street</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sherman Place</td>
<td>• 10th St. cultural expansion</td>
<td>district</td>
<td>(north side), and</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• 10th St. cultural expansion</td>
<td>3rd St. (south side)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. DEVELOPMENT DISTRICTS

**Initiatives**

- **Development Districts’ Response to Downtown Plan Proposals**

**Movement**

- **Walnut Street Transformation**
  - long-range downtown transit on 15th Street
  - long-range downtown transit on 15th Street
  - park and ride serving transit

**Skywalks & Sidewalks**

- Woodland Avenue
  - vertical access points along Walnut Street and Grand Avenue
  - Grand Avenue sidewalk widening

- Ingersoll Avenue
  - vertical access points along Walnut Street and Grand Avenue

**Greening Downtown**

- 18th Street promenade
  - bike lanes on Ingersoll Ave.
  - Crocker Street bike lanes

**Downtown as a Business Hub**

- Woodland Avenue
  - commercial
  - Ingersoll Avenue
  - commercial development

**Living Downtown**

- medium density residential transition between Sherman Hill and Gateway

**Cultural Development**

- retail and mixed use along Woodland Avenue
  - cultural arts district along Walnut Street
  - mixed use along Gateway Park
  - 10th St. cultural expansion

**South of Sherman Hill**

- downtown tram on Walnut Street
  - downtown tram on Walnut Street

**Gateway**

- long-range downtown transit on 15th Street
  - long-range downtown transit on 15th Street

**Gateway North**

- long-range downtown transit on 15th Street
  - long-range downtown transit on 15th Street

**10th Street Village**

- downtown tram on Walnut Street
  - downtown tram on Walnut Street

**Gray’s Landing**

- long-range downtown transit on 15th Street
  - park and ride serving transit

**ML King Jr. Parkway**

- long-range downtown transit on 15th Street
  - key pedestrian crossings at 15th/16th St., 11th/12th St., 5th St., 3rd St., and Water Street

- key pedestrian crossings at 15th/16th St., 11th/12th St., 5th St., 3rd St., and Water Street

- additional tree planting along the Parkway

- key pedestrian crossings at 15th/16th St., 11th/12th St., 5th St., 3rd St., and Water Street

- key pedestrian crossings at 15th/16th St., 11th/12th St., 5th St., 3rd St., and Water Street
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Court Avenue</th>
<th>Lower East Village</th>
<th>East Village</th>
<th>Central District</th>
<th>Iowa Events Center</th>
<th>North Edge</th>
<th>Oakridge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• future downtown transit on 2nd/3rd Street and E. 6th Avenue</td>
<td>• long-range downtown transit on E. 6th Street</td>
<td>• downtown transit on East Walnut Street</td>
<td>• downtown transit on 2nd/3rd Streets</td>
<td>• long-range downtown transit on 15th Street</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• horizontal skywalk access points on north side of Court Ave, west of River</td>
<td>• prioritized north-south streets for pedestrian amenities: E. 4th, E. 5th, E. 6th Streets</td>
<td>• prioritized north-south streets for pedestrian amenities: E. 4th, E. 5th, E. 6th Streets</td>
<td>• vertical skywalk access points along Walnut Street</td>
<td>• pedestrian-friendly network of new streets and small blocks integrated with surrounding neighborhood</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• improved sidewalk conditions along Court Ave.</td>
<td>• open space at west side of City Hall</td>
<td>• open space at west side of City Hall</td>
<td>• revitalized Nollen Plaza</td>
<td>• bike lanes on 9th Street</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Courthouse square parks</td>
<td>• linear park along abandoned railway</td>
<td>• open space at E. Elm &amp; E. 3rd St.</td>
<td>• revitalized Nollen Plaza</td>
<td>• gardens and landscape in residential development</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• median at E. Court Avenue</td>
<td>• bike lanes at E. 6th (south) and E. 9th Streets (north)</td>
<td>• mixed use infill at E. Locust Street</td>
<td>• Nollen Plaza revitalization</td>
<td>• Edmunds School yard</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• continue evolution of Court Ave. entertainment district with mixed use adaptive reuse/ infill; match existing heights west and smaller scale east</td>
<td>• mixed use infill at E. Locust Street</td>
<td>• mixed use infill throughout Central District</td>
<td>• convention center hotel</td>
<td>• bike lanes at Crocker St.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• commercial focus along E. 4th and E. 6th Streets</td>
<td>• mixed use infill and adaptive reuse</td>
<td>• strategies to re-occupy Central District office space</td>
<td>• mixed use development north of existing Principal campus</td>
<td>• mixed use commercial development ‘buffer’ between Methodist Hospital and neighborhood</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• continue inhabiting upper floors with housing</td>
<td>• mixed use with residential throughout district</td>
<td>• adaptive use of office buildings</td>
<td>• mixed use with residential</td>
<td>• mixed use commercial development ’checkerboard’ between Methodist Hospital and neighborhood</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• in-fill with similar height construction to form Court Avenue street wall</td>
<td>• mixed with residential throughout district — infill and adaptive reuse</td>
<td>• retail focus area around along Walnut Street</td>
<td>• mixed use with residential in IEC district</td>
<td>• mixed income housing through expansion and phased redevelopment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Polk County Courthouse restoration</td>
<td>• new construction at northeast riverfront</td>
<td>• new construction at northeast riverfront</td>
<td>• mixed use with residential building</td>
<td>• Edmunds School as community / cultural / recreational resource</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• key cultural / mixed use site south of Court Ave. at 5th St.</td>
<td>• key cultural / mixed use development sites each side of new bridge crossing along the Des Moines River</td>
<td>• key cultural / mixed use development site at riverfront</td>
<td>• focus cultural, retail, restaurant, and hospitality development south of IEC</td>
<td>• key cultural / mixed use development site at riverfront</td>
<td>• focus cultural, retail, restaurant, and hospitality development south of IEC</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• historic Court Avenue bridge</td>
<td>• focus cultural and retail, development between East Village and the River</td>
<td>• Walnut Street cultural and entertainment district</td>
<td>• strengthened IEC’s presence on the River</td>
<td>• key cultural / mixed use development site at riverfront</td>
<td>• strengthened IEC’s presence on the River</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• year-round farmer’s market</td>
<td>• key cultural / mixed use development sites each side of new bridge crossing along the Des Moines River</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. DEVELOPMENT DISTRICTS

composite map of the district planning concepts
Planning and Design Guideline Themes

Many common themes consistent with sound planning practice and, ultimately, a vibrant urban areas arise throughout the Movement and Development sections of the Plan. Downtown Des Moines should strive to address the following issues:

1. Integrate parking

In downtown Des Moines, a parking pattern has developed in recent years where an office building is adjacent to a parking structure of approximately equal size. Often this parking structure is adjacent to a surface parking lot of similar size. Visitors to Des Moines commonly remark about the enormous scale of our parking structures.

Jeff Speck, former director of design for the National Endowment for the Arts, visited Des Moines recently. He advised against the vast areas of parking in downtown, “if you want to keep people walking, pedestrians must feel safe, comfortable -- and entertained. Nothing is more boring than a parking lot. Whether they are open air of six stories tall, parking lots must be banished along any street that hopes to attract walking.”

In addition to damaging the pedestrian experience, parking has significant economic impacts on the downtown. With some 50,000 parking spaces in downtown, parking occupies 15-20% of the downtown area. Much of this parking is “free” to employees. In his book, *The High Cost of Free Parking*, Donald Shoup points out the price paid for this phenomenon of pervasive parking in urban areas is cost buried in higher prices of goods and services and as an opportunity cost of a lower tax base than would be realized for commercial or residential development.

Parking needs in downtown Des Moines are not going to go away. The best we might aim for is slightly decreased or steady parking needs in a thriving downtown. However, we need to work at integrating parking into the city by addressing parking quantity and design quality:

- create parking mixed with other uses, so that housing, offices, or retail “disguise” parking and the active uses are experienced from the street
- institute policies that better utilize on-street parking
- develop shared parking agreements so that private parking structures can be utilized by the public and residents during off hours
- reduce the need for parking through quality transportation choices
- re-examine implicit and explicit parking requirements to reduce the quantity of parking (for example, Does one employee really equal one parking space? Does each residence need two parking spaces?)
- locate entrances and exits of parking structures so that they do not interfere with pedestrian experience and safety
- institute landscape requirements where parking is exposed to the street
- design parking with quality and use durable, high quality materials
- invest in below-grade parking solutions

To integrate parking, attention to the quality and quantity of parking space in downtown needs to be examined. The right two photos exemplify downtown Des Moines’ current methods for meeting parking needs: single use parking structures and on-street parking (top left photo). Meanwhile a windowed structure was built in conjunction with the Nelson-Atkins museum expansion. Portland, OR has implemented a streetcar system (center photo) that meets many of downtown residents’ transportation needs.
2. Create higher density

More people beget more amenities and services. Many of the proposals discussed throughout the Movement and Development sections — transit, skywalks, parks, retail, cultural amenities — depend upon a quantity of people living and working in close proximity.

While considerable areas of vacant and under-utilized land exists in the core of the city, downtown is generally a constrained area. In each direction clear boundaries form the downtown — the Raccoon River to the south, I-235 to the north, the Capitol grounds to the east, and sloping topography to the east and west. The downtown area is a limited resource; in some desirable development areas, the amount of land for new investment is extremely limited. Yet, in recent years, development in downtown has tended towards lower densities.

In many cities development is shaped by limiting heights, a concept based on the premise of limited land. While downtown Des Moines’ land area is constrained, it seems to have the opposite challenge: often buildings — residential and commercial — do not maximize their buildable area and are not built tall enough to produce the desired urban spaces and places nor generate the quantity of people necessary to induce the aforementioned urban amenities. Higher densities are intended to:

- create memorable, urban places — such as Gateway Park, the Riverwalk, and ML King Jr. Parkway
- generate returns on investments in such public goods as skywalks, transit, and parks
- engender downtown with additional amenities — the transit, skywalks, parks, retail, and cultural places proposed by this Plan
- preserve long-term development opportunities in the constrained downtown area.

3. Embrace authenticity

Recognize the unique cultural identity that Des Moines offers. Traditionally, art, agriculture, biking, education, the rivers and our unique history have been aspects that make Des Moines stand out from other cities. A new commitment to health and wellness should be added to this list.

Preserve and promote these physical and cultural resources. Old buildings should be retained and re-used wherever possible. On its own, an individual structure may not have obvious historical merit, but when considered amongst several in a district, these buildings offer unique character. Onerous preservation measures are not always necessary in order to retain the character that historic structures offer to an area. Instances of authenticity achieved through historic architecture have proven they attract people. Des Moines’ commitment to public art is among the best in the country. The collection in downtown from the Capitol Grounds...
4. Landscape

Recent landscape efforts in downtown have targeted redevelopment in specific areas through such projects as the East Locust streetscape or Gateway Park and aimed to beautify the downtown as a whole, for example, institution of the Self-Supported Municipal Improvement District (SSMID). Both efforts have economic development initiatives at their core through retroactively improving downtown’s aesthetic environment. Similar efforts should continue advancing the quality and quantity of landscaped environments in downtown; new projects should be undertaken and systematic improvements should be expanded. Recent efforts are recognized and appreciated, with a common theme in public input calling out to “make it beautiful.”

In addition to ongoing landscaped efforts, a new strategy of incremental, planned landscape improvements that coincide with ongoing redevelopment should also be instituted. The approach calls for detailed planning over multiple block areas so that individual efforts can ‘plug into’ the plan over time. For example, this strategy could produce the Grand Avenue envisioned in the Skywalks & Sidewalks segment of the Movement section and create the Central Green parks envisioned for the Lower East Village.

This approach is not new. Harland Bartholomew, in his 1927 Civic Art Report for Des Moines sums up the strategy in this way, “The problem of building a more attractive city is not so much a matter of spending large sums on superficial decorations and embellishments as of giving proper guidance to its normal physical growth.” Proactive planning is absolutely necessary to create a downtown that is graced with landscape that does not add an undue burden to any single entity. Landscape is a fraction of the cost of most downtown investments, yet it is often the most-noticed element if “properly guided” with comprehensive landscape planning. Over time “normal physical growth” can produce a significantly greener downtown.

- The seasonal Downtown Farmer’s Market on Court Avenue supports the local agricultural heritage and draws enormous crowds each weekend through the summer. Many cities, such as San Francisco and Milwaukee shown above, have indoor markets, as well.
- The East Village bike racks are a good example of combining a Des Moines’ strengths — public art and bicycling. The collection of bike racks scattered throughout the East Village were accomplished through a local design competition sponsored over a couple of years. Retailers have used them to promote biking with events such as ‘bike nights.’
- These examples identify successful ways that authenticity has been embraced and, in the process, strengthens urban environments.
5. Pay attention to the scale

While increased density in downtown is desirable, as noted in item two, it should do so with regard to appropriate scale. Horizontal dimensions have a profound affect on a city’s walkability. Large blocks of big, monotonous buildings do not encourage life on the sidewalks. Smaller blocks encourage activity and are better attuned to a human scale. Portland, OR is widely recognized for its walkability, due in part to its small block pattern. Generally, Portland’s block sizes are 200’x200’, compared to 300’x300’ in downtown Des Moines. This condition is exacerbated when streets are closed and blocks are combined for large developments. In downtown Des Moines, a comparison of horizontal scale can be made between the East Village where the length of the blocks are 250’-300’ and the blocks around Gateway Park on the west side of downtown where the blocks measure over 600’ in length. Where active street life and walkability are desired, the sizes of downtown’s blocks should not be increased.

Vertical scale also has a profound affect on the urban environment. The height of urban buildings affects the sense of enclosure and shapes the shadow pattern and daylight. For example, the sense of Gateway Park as a ‘urban room’ can only be achieved through the creation of ‘walls’ formed by new development at the perimeter of the park. The Gateway Park district guidelines call for street walls of a consistent height in order to improve the environment of the Park, a condition that exists in many great parks across the country, including Central Park in New York City and Millennium Park in Chicago. ML King Jr. Parkway also calls for new development to provide a minimum vertical scale, in part, to create an urban sense of place along the new parkway in other cases, vertical scale is limited to protect desirable aspects. For example, views to the Capitol are protected in the low-lying East Village to preserve views to the distinguished gold-domed landmark. Another example is the allowance of sunlight and protection from shadows along the downtown section of the Des Moines River. Shaping heights along the river ensures these environmental characteristics and the historic scale of the Civic Center District buildings will continue. Transitions in vertical scale assist in seamlessly shifting from places of varying character, allowing each to be respected and developed to its fullest potential.

6. Provide transportation choices

The movement proposals are aimed at transforming the downtown from a place that depends almost exclusively on auto use to a downtown that offers viable transportation options. This single change can have a profound effect on the downtown. It lessens the burden on businesses to provide employees with parking, frees residents’ financial resources, connects downtown’s cultural places, and provides a sustainable alternatives to single occupancy vehicles. Over time, viable transportation choices would change the way downtown is used. Changes in transportation patterns require broad, sustained, thoughtful support. Little things make a big difference. The trail along ML King Jr. Parkway was a tiny fraction of the cost of the infrastructure investment, but it connects the downtown, Gray’s Lake, and Water Works Park and is well-used by downtown residents, workers, and visitors. Future street repair and re-investment needs to take the bike network into consideration. Much of the network of urban bike lanes and future trails can be accomplished through the course of routine infrastructure upgrades.

Transportation change requires planning and commitment ahead of investment. For example, implementation of the north-south downtown transit line proposed in the Movement section would be much more plausible if upcoming infrastructure work at SW 16th and E. 6th Streets accounted for the possibility of a tram line.

Changes in transportation patterns take place over a number of years, even decades. It is most efficiently and effectively instituted when the public at-large, public entities and private developers are committed to it. Streets are the place where transportation choice is made available. Ultimately, transportation choice means a shift in priorities in the design of downtown’s streets.
7. Preserve streets and alleys
We often think about historic buildings as endangered in downtown. In equally significant peril is the downtown street network. The value of a contiguous block pattern cannot be underestimated. A confusing street network is a commonly-noted downtown challenge in downtown Des Moines. Amidst a dense urban area, streets and alleys provide the expected mechanism for moving people throughout downtown. They provide a scale that is attuned with human movement. In addition to meeting service demands, alleys are often among the most beloved places in cities. Like many other cities, downtown has several cherished deck and patio eating areas that reside along alleys; this could be expanded in areas such as the Iowa Events Center and Lower East Village districts through developed alley use. Closing and selling these streets and alleys for development is the antithesis of achieving the explicit downtown goal of creating connectivity.

Sometime in the middle of the 20th century street design became the responsibility of transportation engineers who were charged primarily with moving cars swiftly and safely. This resulted in wide roadways, many one-way streets, elimination of on-street parking, skywalks, wide turning radii, and large curb cuts. Many cities have recently implemented “complete streets” policies which recognize a shift in street design priorities to people over cars. Des Moines should implement similar policies that balance a range of transportation needs on our downtown streets. Auto use is not sacrificed, rather attention is focused on the ways that people move throughout the downtown, balancing cars with transit, pedestrians, and bikes.

8. Mix the uses
Most, if not all, of the districts call for mixed use development. It has become a panacea of urban development and does, indeed, have many merits for a vision that calls for a “vibrant downtown area.”

Mixed use development can take many forms — sometimes it mixes uses within the same structure or building, other times it combines uses within several blocks, sometimes the uses are directly complementary (parking and office or residential), other times they draw from well beyond the borders of the development (a popular restaurant attracting upstairs residents and suburban patrons). These are all desirable combinations.

Mixed use development tends to encourage vibrancy through activity: it creates at nearly all hours of the day, throughout the week, and across the seasons. The majority of offices are used ~10 hours/day, Monday-Friday. Cultural places tend to be most active in the evenings and on weekends. Restaurants have trouble staying open evenings and weekends in office districts. Conversely, restaurants and shops in cultural districts have difficulty maintaining businesses with only weekend hours. Mixing these uses produces complementary, extended use districts.

Residents are a key because they tend to bring consistent activity. Additionally, residents fuel the market for many of other uses — retail, commercial, even open space. Successful residential development is important to attracting mixed use development. As the cadre of residents in downtown Des Moines grows, building codes, economic incentive policies, and lending practices must work in concert in order to support desirable mixed use projects. Activity tends to breed activity. Mixed use development can build from recent activity and is crucial to the next steps in downtown’s evolution.

In addition to these more traditional definitions and applications of mixed use development, downtown would do well to overlap uses in a single place. Could a corporate plaza invite lunchtime concerts. Could the ice skating plaza serve as a bike hub in the summer? Could an urban plaza include a sculptural playground? Could the empty top floor of a parking garage serve as a weekend gathering place with sweeping skyline views topped by the stars? Such multiplicity leads to active, vibrant places that draw a diverse set of users and activities throughout times of day, days of week, and seasons of the year.
9. Build a culture of public life

The principles for downtown note a desire to be a vibrant place, accessible and diverse place. A culture of public life supports these agendas. In addition to the network of public places – such places as the Central Library, the Science and Historical Centers, the Brenton Skating Plaza – a network of urban, public amenities and accommodations should exist to communicate that downtown is a welcoming place. Ensuring access to restrooms, trash cans, skywalks, and parking indicates downtown invites public use. Cross-walks, public open space, clear, frequent signage, and gracious, landscaped sidewalks are all part of communicating a welcome message to pedestrians moving about the downtown.

As downtown continues to develop, care must be taken to ensure continued public access to downtown’s public places. For example, the river has always enjoyed public access along its edges. As high value development entertains ideas for riverfront construction, public access to the river should be maintained.

As downtown Des Moines has traditionally served a role as a commercial district, there are clear divides between public and private places. Certainly private areas and security requirements must continue to exist. However as new investment is undertaken and agreements are made, parking, skywalk access, building entrances, lobby spaces, ancillary development areas, restroom access, and plaza access should be considered as a part of tailored design solutions to new development that supports a culture of public life. In general, as these investments strengthen downtown life, the “life,” in-turn, strengthens these investments.

10. Evolve sustainability

At a time where we acknowledge global warming and live with soaring energy costs, cities have an obligation and a profound opportunity contribute to a sustainability agenda. Many of the aforementioned items have sustainable underpinnings - transportation choice, mixed use, parking, density, landscape. The very act of revitalizing an existing urban area is a sound environmental measure.

In terms of future physical development, downtown Des Moines should adopt a suite of sustainability measures, potentially as a part of initiatives, policies and/or future zoning changes, that work in concert including regulations and/or incentives that address:

- energy efficient construction
- construction waste recycling
- building preservation and reuse
- construction that meets LEED quality standards

(Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design)
- storm water management
- improved water quality in the rivers
11. Require (urban) design quality

Downtown Des Moines enjoys a legacy of quality design. A few recent lapses show this legacy cannot ensure future quality. Continued design quality must be demanded. This is not an onerous requirement; research shows real estate values in downtown areas are a solid value and design quality can enhance the bottom line. The infusion of public investment and exemplary private development deserve the confidence that their investments will only be enhanced through future evolution of the downtown.

Quality materials and durable construction should be expected of public investments and required of private development. Details aligned with the speed of their viewing is needed. For example, buildings that enjoy pedestrians walking by on the sidewalk should require a finer grain of details than the detailing of buildings along ML King Jr. Parkway or I-235. Setbacks, density, heights mentioned in previous items are a part of the equation that produces design quality. Less tangible, but of equal importance are ambitions for continuing the legacy of inventive and artful design of buildings, open spaces, and street conditions in the downtown.

12. Take risks

Downtown Des Moines needs to embrace some ideas that may not be totally familiar and comfortable in order to keep downtown on its upward, positive, and progressive track. While there may some failures amongst our risks, let’s learn from any mistakes as we proceed to the next round of projects. As the adage goes: no risk, no reward.

We need to be willing to take Interim steps and experiment -- a temporary park area that provides a short-term recreation spot for one or two years is more desirable than an empty, vacant lot for those same two years. It could teach us that gardening or basketball or skateboarding is a highly desirable downtown park program. We need to anticipate unexpected outcomes and become agile with the findings of these thoughtful experiments.

We wisely look to many other cities for examples to guide our urban explorations. For what do we want other cities to look to Des Moines?

A legacy of design quality in downtown spans from the late 19th-Century State Capitol on the east end of downtown to Gateway Park with new corporations, public art, and the Central Library on the west end of downtown.

Risks in other cities have paid big dividends including the 2005 “Gates” installation in Central Park (New York City), the Emerald Necklace lacing through downtown Boston with its series of parks ranging from play fields and community gardens to monuments and formal gardens, and Millennium Park in Chicago where a former parking lot has become a major destination in downtown Chicago. In Des Moines, the “Nomade” was recently installed in Gateway Park to rave public review.