Landscapes of Thrift and Choreographies of Change: 
Reinvestment and Adaptation along Austin’s Commercial Strips

by

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To Julia, Erik, Dale, and Tricia.
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Landscapes of Thrift and Choreographies of Change: Reinvestment and Adaptation along Austin’s Commercial Strips

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Commercial strips are ubiquitous elements of the American landscape. They offer important opportunities for inquiry into the ways in which cities are adapted, preserved, and redeveloped over time. This research examines the dynamics of reinvestment along central city commercial strips in Austin, Texas. Research was aimed at understanding the relationship between reinvestment in existing commercial buildings and larger processes of redevelopment and change along commercial strips undergoing transition. Case study commercial strips were selected that had been established in the early to mid-twentieth century and that had experienced decline and subsequent reinvestment. Historic patterns of land use, transportation, and economic trends were described and related to the relatively recent growth of concentrations of local businesses and reinvestment activity along case study commercial strips. “Core samples” of preservation and adaptive reuse were examined using spatial data, building surveys, historical data, and interviews with associated actors. Additional interviews were conducted with actors who have initiated, influenced, and regulated reinvestment, including business and property owners, developers, neighborhood activists, a media correspondent, city officials, among others. This
research details the private, public, and community-based actors who shape the character of reinvestment; the influx of new businesses and retention of iconic businesses; and conflicts and negotiations at the edges of commercial and residential districts and between public and private sectors. The dissertation relates observations along Austin’s commercial strips to four themes identified in the literature and their associated views of improvement: 1. commercial strips as “wicked problems” of land use and transportation; 2. commercial strips as cultural landscapes and roadside heritage; 3. commercial strips as concentrations of commercial properties with opportunities for sustainability and retrofitting of commercial properties; and 4. commercial strips as contested arenas of gentrification.

This research highlights the importance of understanding the durability of existing land development patterns and of incorporating an understanding of the continued and adaptive use of buildings and urban fabric in land use planning. It presents emerging opportunities for preservation practice beyond standard practices of survey and landmarking. It illustrates the many ways in which actors have agency, or “choreograph” change individually and collectively, in responding to opportunities and challenges presented in the context of social and economic change.
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Chapter 1: An Overlooked Geography of Change

Commercial strips are among the most common features of the American landscape. They are artifacts of a hundred years of automobile travel. From central business districts, these tendrils of commerce were constructed in successive waves of commercial venture. Commercial strips grew with increases in car ownership, major public investment in highways and arterials, and innovations in retailing, architecture, and urban planning and design. As the speed and mobility of American life expanded, these long linear corridors of commercial development grew and evolved. Often only one parcel deep, older commercial strips reside at the edges and boundaries of many neighborhoods and downtown areas. The ubiquity of commercial strips often renders them invisible as background to everyday life.

In Austin, Texas, the adaptation of commercial buildings, the hum of entrepreneurial activity, and the jagged juxtapositions between old and new were striking features of the 21st century urban landscape. During a recession that rivaled the Great Depression, the capital city remained under construction. This construction activity was represented not only in cranes alongside Austin’s tallest skyscrapers, but in numerous instances of building remodels along its more humble commercial strips. While large development projects slowed, and in some cases stalled altogether, clusters of bars, restaurants and other new businesses moved in and adapted older commercial properties. Some mature businesses and commercial landscapes remained as remnants of the past. With substantial reinvestment activity, Austin’s central city commercial strips were
rendered visible as arenas of both urban change and continuity. Central questions emerged from observations of evolving commercial strip landscapes: How did instances of adaptive reuse and preservation relate to larger scales of redevelopment and change? Who was producing, designing and reinvesting in these commercial properties? I began to investigate these striking instances of reinvestment in Austin’s urban fabric and the micro-dynamics of change.

Austin’s commercial strips were also captivating, because they were central to local urban planning efforts aimed at managing and spurring redevelopment. These commercial strips were obvious arenas of negotiation between the public and private sectors. I wondered whether reinvestment in existing buildings would add up to positive benefits or if this development activity was simply a process unrelated to the broader scope of public policy or the practice of urban planning.

From a planning perspective, commercial strips have long been recognized as problems and in need of change. They have often been disdained as sprawling scars and junkyards of the American landscape.¹ They have been derided as blight, scourge, and areas of crime and vice. Many commercial strips are seen as zones of transition, marginal places, and non-places. There is much to reform along commercial strips that are harsh, pedestrian-unfriendly environments.

On the other hand, there is substantial evidence in Austin, as I believe there to be in many communities, that commercial strips are comprised of much more than urban problems. Joshua Long has written about the restaurants, music

¹ Reference to God’s Own Junkyard by Peter Blake (1964). See chapter 2 of this dissertation for a more detailed description of the literature of commercial strips as blight and sprawl.
venues, and other commercial spaces that contribute to Austin’s sense of place and serve as fulcrums of creative resistance to the homogenizing forces of globalization.2 These valued local places reside as much along commercial strips as they do in downtown. Local artwork, blogs and social media, films, and historical plaques celebrate the history of commercial icons along Austin’s older commercial strips.

Many speak of Austin as being weird, unique, and exceptional; however, the potential to discover insights applicable to other growing communities was a prime motivation for this research. Austin provided a robust sample of reinvestment sites. Rapid reinvestment and redevelopment were activating debates about the future form of commercial corridors and the importance of local businesses to the economy. Market conditions were fueling local entrepreneurs as well as national development companies to invest in a full range of urban developments and commercial experiments. Merchants’ organizations, neighborhood associations, city council members, planners and other public officials, artists, and newspaper columnists were promoting local independent businesses, preservation of icons, sustainability, and other goals along Austin’s commercial strips. Meanwhile designers, investors, property owners, and business owners were participating directly in reinvestment along these strips. This combination of numerous instances of reinvestment, along with substantial public discourse about the nature and desirability of change, made Austin a particularly rich case study.

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2 See Long (2010).
Austin’s older central city commercial strips were selected for in-depth study based on evidence of substantial reinvestment. There were many examples of commercial strips within Austin that did not exhibit this level of activity. Along many commercial strips, landscapes remained bleak. Towering electrical poles leaned over vacant windows and aging expanses of parking lots. In many places, national chains still dominated the commercial strip landscape with fast food restaurants, gas stations, and predatory lending outfits. These are common conditions along the nation’s commercial strips. Even among Austin’s revitalizing commercial strips, the thriving concentrations of local businesses and the unique places fashioned out of aging properties were relatively limited eruptions of vitality along vast, oversized expanses of marginal commercial spaces. This did not reduce the significance of this inquiry. Instead, it highlighted the importance of understanding the conditions within which reinvestment had occurred and how various actors participated in that change. Given the ubiquity of commercial strips, it is important that all communities ask: Who will adapt our vast reserve of commercial strip landscapes? How will they be adapted? Can positive change be accomplished in these areas?

**COMMERCIAL STRIPS AS LANDSCAPES OF THRIFT**

Over time, I came to understand Austin’s commercial strips as “landscapes of thrift.” To me, this phrase has multiple associations. The first meaning refers to the commercial landscapes produced by business owners who have scrimped, saved, and invested in livelihoods along commercial strips. Associated with these properties are histories that include the first waves of property ownership and construction along once rural roads. These histories
include the successive waves of generations of entrepreneurs who moved in to establish businesses along commercial strips. “Landscapes of thrift” invokes the many ways in which commercial strips have provided pathways to entrepreneurialism and methods for multiple generations of business owners and property-owning families to earn and invest money.

Landscapes of thrift are also produced through the economical construction of fast-food restaurants, gas stations, and other corporate chains and franchises. Commercial strips have long been the territory of corporations; they are largely comprised of corporate footprints across the American landscape. In some cases, the discarded building shells of corporate chains and franchise businesses have become fertile ground for locally-grown, independent businesses. Gas stations have been converted to a multitude of uses, including coffee shops and restaurants. Fast food restaurants have transition from MacDonald’s, Wendy’s, or Arby’s to single location independents and local chains. The trend of reinvestment by independent businesses was of particular interest to me, although the direction of transition was not always toward independent businesses. National chains sometimes move in where independents have been successful.

Third, “thrift” describes the logic informing the ways in which commercial buildings are regularly adapted by undercapitalized commercial tenants and economical property owners. These are landscapes that reflect methods of limiting risk and lowering the upfront capital cost of improvement.

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3 It should be noted that franchise businesses, such as fast food restaurants, are owned and operated by local entrepreneurs under the imprimatur of national and global corporations. In Austin, it is particularly notable how many businesses along central city commercial strips are locally-owned and independent of the franchise structure.
In some cases, the economical management of commercial properties has produced landmarks of thrift – old neon signs, longstanding diners and bars with exteriors and interiors intact, the bones of old motels that have been converted to new places. These landmarks of thrift form the iconography of the commercial strip. These are identifiable remnants of history and are popularly identified as contributing to a sense of place.

In another turn of the phrase, “thrift” describes the resale of secondhand goods. The thrift store is a regular inhabitant of commercial strips where real estate and rents are still low; it is an indicator of affordability where cost savings flow from the low cost of land and improvements to the goods and services affordable to a broad customer base, including low-income customers. It is not only used goods that are sold along the commercial strip, but secondhand buildings that may be adapted or sold, sometimes at bargain prices.

Finally, “landscapes of thrift” is a phrase that may be used in a normative and hopeful sense. It is meant to prod at the current boundaries and limitations of urban planning and sustainability. If the definition of thrift is: “Wise economy in the management of money and other resources,” one is prompted to ask: Are there means of improving commercial strips that can flow from the adaptation of existing buildings and urban fabric? Are there regular processes and cycles of

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4 In fact, unlike the central business districts or suburban enclaves, the restaurants and stores along America’s commercial strips often appeal to broader segments of the population. Restaurants offering a range of ethnic foods abound along some strips, providing a taste of home to immigrant communities or a sense of adventure for middle-class populations. Commercial strips offer auto-repair, pet supplies, dry cleaning, among other everyday goods and services of everyday life. They may contain health and social services geared toward low income residents - services that cannot find space in more exclusive shopping districts.

change that can be harnessed to improve the economic health, social equity, and environmental performance of cities?

This research examines these various connotations of thrift and the process of adaptation along older commercial strips. This research was inspired by the observation that when land use planning is aimed at reforming the strip, existing buildings often remain invisible in the process. Future land use maps often erase what does not fit certain ideals of the good life and the good city. Existing buildings and the communities associated with them can too quickly become invisible within the abstractions of land use planning. In doing so, we risk painting over real communities with idealized visions, possibly ignoring potential mechanisms for and barriers to change.

Some land use planning efforts imply that the most appropriate role of both the public and private sector is to level commercial strips completely and rebuild them anew. In fact, commercial strips are vast landscapes that are not simply going to disappear or evenly redevelop. As will be detailed in this dissertation, the development patterns of the commercial strip landscape exhibit surprising durability and even resilience. Austin’s older commercial strips have gained complexity over time, evolving with the urban neighborhoods that have grown up alongside them. Their trajectories have been shaped by flows of capital and people. Their form and condition have followed change in planning and development practices, technology, market forces and real estate cycles. As their

character has evolved and their complexity has increased, they have become social and temporal collages.\(^6\)

The continued life of common building types along commercial strips challenges the deep-seated emphasis in planning and architecture on new development as the primary mechanism of urban change. Along countless American roadsides, “taxpayer strips” are an early and common form of development. These one- to two-story buildings were constructed along streetcar lines during the early twentieth century. They were constructed with a short expected lifespan – a means of generating profits until higher density buildings could be justified.\(^7\) In many cases, they still remain 80-100 years later, albeit often in heavily modified form.

In addition, gas stations, fast food restaurants, and shopping centers constructed during the span of the twentieth century line aging commercial strips. These collections of buildings and their parking lots, common forms shared in cities across the nation, have had a hand in reshaping the form, appearance, and function of contemporary cities. Many of them will remain standing far longer than their intended lifespan.

Reinvestment regularly reoccurs within the bounds of existing buildings and parcels. This more immediate scale of change, one that regularly transforms commercial buildings and landscapes, is too often overlooked in the blunt instruments of land use planning. This change includes the constant refashioning of building skins; the churn and change in the uses and composition of

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\(^6\) Refers to concept of temporal collage as described by Kevin Lynch in *What Time is This Place?* (1976).
businesses; and grassroots efforts that occur among merchants’ organizations public agencies, and neighborhood associations that attempt to direct both building and district-level change. Change is comprised of numerous transformations of buildings regulated by building plans examiners and current planners; however, these common changes do not seem to be fully accounted for in long range planning or in academic research.

Meanwhile, architectural histories do not often venture far into the relatively humble buildings and architecture of the strip. There are whole histories of adaptive reuse along commercial strips, and among the much wider swathes of urban fabric, that have yet to be written. This dissertation begins where many architectural histories end. In the Epilogue to Main Street to Miracle Mile: American Roadside Architecture, Liebs muses on the limited instances of preservation of a few iconic buildings and whether solutions to preserving and interpreting the past “might be discovered by combining existing techniques with new approaches not yet found in the lexicon of historic preservation.” On the very last page of Orange Roofs, Golden Arches: the Architecture of American Chain Restaurants, Langdon asks whether chain restaurants, the very actors who contributed vast numbers of buildings and numerous innovations to commercial strips, can be “roused to enhance everyday surroundings not only for a few affluent locales but for much of the nation.” His commentary was aimed at new construction and he references experiments in the improvement of fast food restaurants in a few locations; however, it is just as apropos a question among

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8 Liebs (1995), 226. This is another crucial question for which innovations may be emerging from Austin’s experiences with the commercial strip.
9 Langdon (1986), 199.
the cadre of businesses who regularly adapt property. There are numerous last chapters of books on the history of American architecture that reflect on the fate of remaining artifacts of twentieth century shopping centers, motels, gas stations, diners, and other remnants of urban history along strips. This research touches upon some of these artifacts, examining them in their geographical context and finding stories of extended service life and economic and cultural value in the continuing story of urban transitions and change.

The future of commercial strips are related to the acts of many actors and forces, from humble entrepreneurial endeavors, to the investment patterns and choices of chain business, to governmental policy, to the structuring force of land economics, and to the grassroots efforts within communities of residents and merchants. To understand and affect cities, it is essential to understand the continual production of places through the numerous incremental acts of reinvestment, the geographic patterns and social processes of urban change, and the connections between what people do and the kind of urban landscapes they produce.

Through case studies of commercial corridors undergoing reinvestment and transition, this research offers insights into the ways in which aging commercial strips have served as pathways to entrepreneurialism, can provide insights into the dynamics of continued and adaptive reuse, and are microcosms of urban change that reside at the edges and tensions between residential and commercial uses, public and private sectors, and old and new development. As described in the following pages, Austin’s commercial strips not only contain numerous success stories, they also reflect enduring issues and unintended consequences.
THE READER’S PATH

This dissertation is organized to take the reader through themes and gaps in the literature and on a detailed tour of properties, actors, and patterns of change along Austin’s commercial strips. The second chapter, “Trash, Treasure, Adaptation, and Transition: The Literature of America’s Commercial Strips” focuses on four themes or literary domains. The first domain is that of planning with its critiques of commercial strips as sprawl and calls for reform through beautification, urban design, and redevelopment. A second theme in the literature focuses on commercial strips as cultural phenomenon and historical artifacts, viewing them through the lens of cultural landscapes. A third section describes an emerging area of research related to adaptive reuse, building retrofits, and sustainability. The last section describes debates in gentrification literature about the nature of reinvestment and their relevance to transition along commercial strips.

Chapter 3 provides an overview of the research design and methods employed in this dissertation. It includes a discussion of the philosophical assumptions that underlie this approach. I describe the reasons for selecting four case study commercial strips and explain the “core sampling” methods used to understand key instances of reinvestment through actor interviews, mapping, and historical research.

Chapter 4 describes the historical development of Austin, relating transportation history to contemporary land use patterns. It provides an overview of economic and social changes that have contributed to the emergence of concentrations of local businesses along aging commercial corridors. It
concludes with observations on patterns of change and continuity along case study commercial strips.

Chapter 5 is derived of the results of in-depth interviews with business and property owners, investors, architects, engineers, and other participants in the development process. It provides glimpses into the experiences of re-investors who have participated in Austin’s inner city strips. It includes the story of the ice cream entrepreneur turned small-scale developer, who fashions multi-tenant enclaves of local business called “Austinvilles.” It highlights the role of a designer who adapts buildings into havens for local business, carving a niche out of limited finance and city code. These core samples scale from local entrepreneurs and limited trickles of investment, to local chains and city-wide investors and designers who adapt multiple properties, to examples of corporate redevelopment that works in and around existing buildings. In each core sample, an actor’s story is described around the continued existence of a commercial building.

Chapter 6 is focused on the role of the public sector and community in shaping the outcomes of reinvestment along commercial strips. The chapter begins with visions and analytical methods employed in the City of Austin’s Imagine Austin comprehensive planning process. The chapter then moves to a discussion of City Council Member Chris Riley’s corridor redevelopment initiative, including his preferred approaches to revitalization and redevelopment along three commercial strips. The Vertical Mixed Use Opt-In Opt-Out process is described as a means of public deliberation over the incentives for redevelopment and how this relates to the value placed on local businesses. The chapter includes a discussion of the nexus between local
business and preservation efforts, including the Chair of the Planning Commission’s efforts to draft an iconic business preservation ordinance. The chapter then moves to formal and informal preservation efforts along case study commercial strips. It includes observations on adaptive reuse and redevelopment from the perspectives of neighborhood association leaders. The chapter ends with observations on adaptive reuse and patterns of change from the City of Austin’s Development Assistance Center and the Commercial Site Plan Review.

The final chapter describes the implications of this research, including insights on the durability of development patterns and building stock and the challenges and opportunities for adapting future cities out of present conditions. It provides recommendations for making existing building stock visible in the planning process and policy recommendations in relation to preservation and sustainability.
Chapter 2: Trash, Treasure, Adaptation, and Transition: The Literature of America’s Commercial Strips

The commercial strip has many deficiencies – its noise, its confusion, its harsh climate, its monotony, its inhospitality to man on foot, its overwhelming ugliness. Strips are among the most ‘polluted’ man-made environment we have. They affect the quality of entire regions because of their extensiveness… They epitomize the irresponsible use of the public environment for private gain. These endless, formless, eventless, cluttered avenues saturate the urban experience.

- Kevin Lynch\textsuperscript{10}

We have not really tried to understand it yet. For one thing we know little or nothing about how roadside development, the strip, came into being or how it grows. We know (and seem to care) far too little about the variety of businesses that comprise it.

- J.B. Jackson\textsuperscript{11}

Commercial strips have been alternately framed within scholarly and professional literature as wicked problems; cultural landscapes; technical challenges and opportunities for sustainability retrofits; and contested, gentrifying districts. This chapter relates these four associated ways of approaching commercial strips. The first domain is identified within urban planning, where a trajectory of reform has followed environmental and social concerns about the future of the American landscape. This has translated into proposals for improving urban form and restructuring relationships between transportation and land use. A second domain is identified within the scholarship in cultural geography, architectural history, and historic preservation. In this domain, authors have called for in-depth study of and

\textsuperscript{10} Lynch (1974), 579.
\textsuperscript{11} Jackson (1970), 58.
appreciation for the cultural heritage and social history associated with commercial strips. In a third area of the literature, commercial building reuse, adaptation, and preservation have been promoted as vehicles for improving the performance of buildings and the overall sustainability of the built environment. A fourth literature relate to theories of reinvestment, gentrification, and urban change. This last domain has mostly been comprised of research related to residential neighborhoods; however, this literature can be used as an approach to examining the territory of commercial strips, viewing urban change in terms of waves of people, culture, and capital.

Although diverse, these bodies of literature set the stage for my inquiry into reinvestment along Austin’s commercial strips. Deep divides among and between these literatures speak to the complexity of understanding and influencing change in areas condemned for their flaws and elevated for their virtues. Ultimately, it is argued that all four domains have value and should be understood for their various views of and proposals for change. This research positions itself within the interstices and overlaps between these four domains.

**FROM BLIGHT, SPRAWL, AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION TO PROPOSALS FOR PLANNING, REDEVELOPMENT, AND REPAIR**

In the early and mid-twentieth century, commercial strips were viewed by some planners as a natural outcome of the engine of economic growth. Rational planning and market forces pointed to the allocation of prime real estate near arterials, highways, and interstates for commerce. These districts were

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12 This chapter is presented with the caveat that literature reviews are inherently tricky. The actual expanses of the literature that directly or indirectly could pertain to commercial strips – their past, present, and future – are expansive and interdisciplinary.
considered rational and market-based answers that produced utilitarian and economical landscapes. Commercial strip development also included flashy and futurist designs comprised of experiments in design intended to draw the attention of passersby. The dynamism of investment and the excitement of new designs produced the “Miracle Mile,” a term coined in reference to the commercial growth along Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles. This phrase was enthusiastically applied to commercial strips across the country. Quick low density growth and the “horizontal city” were considered a boon to economic prosperity and social desirability.

Despite the enthusiasm for growth and economic activity, many commercial strips had a gritty edge that was condemned by its critics. The businesses that sprang up along the commercial strip were sometimes seen as areas of immorality and blight. Even as early auto camps were forming at the edge of towns in the 1930s, commercial strips were coming under attack for their crass commercialism and as the environs for places of ill repute. Motels became a favorite setting for the literature of sensationalism in the 1950s, as a popular literature formed around the criminal and immoral activity associated with transient populations, prostitution, and areas convenient for sexual and criminal activity. Teenage pregnancy and delinquency became associated with drive-in theaters and fast food restaurants. Responding to these issues, corporate hotel

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13 Liebs (1995), 29. A quote from a city planner on suburban growth in 1968 is telling: “[Now] the vast majority of its businesses are the identical ones found downtown or in any neighborhood commercial area or any new shopping center. Its motels are the meeting places of the local civic clubs, its drive-ins the congregating places for local teenagers… It is a healthy response to new patterns of living and it is not going to go away.” From Liebs (1995), 33.
14 Hall (1996), 276.
15 Henry (2012).
and restaurant chains invested along commercial strips at mid-twentieth century, constructing modern accommodations and controlled environments offering predictability and comfort to middle-class families.\textsuperscript{17} The bowling alleys and diners of the mid-twentieth century began to offer a wider range of services and amenities aimed at appealing to women and middle-class families. This was a shift from their earlier focus on serving predominantly working-class male customers in downtown locations.\textsuperscript{18} Motels and fast food restaurants also offered new family-oriented environments aimed at appealing to middle-class families.\textsuperscript{19} These corporate chains and franchises expanded along commercial strips in relation to a suburbanizing customer base that increasingly used automobiles for local as well as long distance trips.

During this period of suburban growth, the basic outline of development along commercial strips became a mandated urban form through land use codes requiring the separation of residential uses from commercial ones. Planning codes followed innovations such as drive-in markets and supermarkets, setting parking requirements that were based on allotments required for the number of trips expected to be generated by use. The segregation of land uses appeared to be rational choices based on the needs and externalities of business and technology and the needs of the commercial sectors and residents. The role of planning was to facilitate growth and to manage it through the rational planning of transportation systems.

\textsuperscript{17} Hess (2004).
\textsuperscript{18} Hurley (2001).
\textsuperscript{19} Jackle and Sculle (1996); Jackle and Sculle (1999).
In the 1960s, Peter Blake’s God’s Own Junkyard: The Planned Deterioration of America’s Landscape melded a moralistic disdain for what he viewed as the crassness of America’s roadside landscapes with concerns about environmental quality and pollution. It was also during this time that Ladybird Johnson made highway beautification a priority, seeking to limit the negative visual externalities of commercial development along highways, such as billboards and junkyards that marred the beauty of rural landscapes. The Federal Highway Beautification Act was passed in 1965. Concerns about uncontrolled growth and impacts on the environment were translated into federal policies and other provisions to protect natural areas.

Reaction to uncontrolled growth also spurred the first statewide land use policy in the US. In 1973, Oregon established a statewide system of land use planning that was unique in the nation. Resistance to the impacts of low-density, auto-oriented development brought together a coalition of legislators; farm and forestry industry groups, environmentalists, and citizens concerned about the quality of areas developed from mid-twentieth century to the present. This legislation was aimed at stemming threats to Oregon’s forest and farmlands along the state’s interstates and highways and at the interface between rural and urban lands. Oregon’s statewide framework for addressing sprawl has served as a model for other states.

In “Designing and Managing the Strip,” Kevin Lynch proposed local and district-level action to address the deficiencies of commercial strips. In a piece

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20 Blake (1960).
first published in 1974, Lynch criticized commercial strips as the irresponsible use of the public environment for private gain, pointing out the deficiencies of the strip for passing drivers, motorized shoppers, bus passengers, cyclists, walkers, workers, street people, neighbors, and others.\(^{23}\) He wrote that the “quality of the strip cannot be radically improved without new institutional structures.”\(^{24}\) He proposed the creation of a unified street agency that would bring together fractured public departments into a district level street authority. Where this was impracticable he suggested a private frontage association that would manage public areas. Lynch provided design solutions for the new arterials that avoid the problems of the past. He ended the piece with questions about older strips:

Old declining strips are everywhere in the American city. How can these semi-abandoned frontages be restored to useful life? Has anyone given thought to what empty stores, vacant parking lots, or old gas stations could be good for? Could worn-down strips accommodate some community uses now cramped for space? Strong public management and relatively modest physical changes could rehabilitate these older arterials.\(^{25}\)

This is a question that remains relevant in planning and urban design to this day.

During the latter half of the twentieth century, a body of literature began addressing the history of suburban development patterns; this has translated into a general consensus among planners on the issue of “sprawl.”\(^{26}\) Commercial

\(^{23}\) Lynch (1974).

\(^{24}\) Lynch (1974), 599.

\(^{25}\) Lynch (1974), 616. These are precisely the themes that this research sought to address.

strips are now widely recognized as a form of sprawl, a term used to refer to areas characterized by low-density, auto-oriented development. Common critiques of sprawl include its orientation toward the automobile and lack of accommodation for other modes of travel, its isolation of land uses often through single-use zoning, lack of quality construction or aesthetics, and the lack of common public spaces and civic uses. It is viewed as an inefficient use of land that could otherwise be used in more productive and scenic ways, such as in forestry, farmland, parks, or other natural reserves. It is understood to severely reduce the ecological services within metropolitan regions through miles of impervious surfaces and piped streams that affect a watershed’s hydrology.

As a response, many local governments have operationalized Smart Growth, a framework for planning that is focused on reforming the relationship between land use and transportation. Public policies that encourage or mandate compact urban development are seen as a means of conserving land and minimizing the regional ecological footprint. Local governments have implemented Smart Growth policies through a variety of means, from reforming land development codes to facilitating public-private partnerships to providing incentives for desired forms of development. Common approaches include allowing and incentivizing higher density, transit-oriented, and mixed use redevelopment and addressing aesthetics and urban form through design guidelines and form-based codes.

Robert Fishman has identified East Coast and West Coast variants of New Urbanism that have been widely adopted within planning as means of

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addressing the problems of urban sprawl. According to Fishman, a West Coast variant focuses on channeling growth through balancing land use and transportation. An East Coast brand of New Urbanism is concentrated on improving the quality of new construction by incorporating neo-traditional characteristics. East and West Coast variants may also be understood in terms of land use planning versus design orientations. Both approaches encourage urban infill and redevelopment along commercial strips.

The Congress of New Urbanism is a primary advocate for both planning and design interventions. This organization and associated architects, planners and leaders, such as Howard Kunstler and Andres Duany, have produced searing critiques of sprawl. Talen and Ellis have argued that New Urbanist principles should provide a normative framework for planning.

Planning initiatives have also focused on transit and street improvements to improve the conditions along commercial strips. The Complete Streets Movement, the Great Streets program, and numerous mobility studies and street standards across the country seek to transform existing rights-of-way to better serve pedestrians, bicyclists, and transit users. Light rail has been constructed and proposed in numerous cities, including Austin, as a means of not only improving transportation mobility, but spurring redevelopment. In recent years, new books and textbook planning primers have also incorporated transportation infrastructure improvements as opportunities for harnessing urban design and economic development to improve existing suburban commercial districts.

29 Talen (2002).
30 Urban Land Institute (2012); Dunham-Jones and Williamson (2011).
Where commercial strips are viewed as sprawl, prescriptions are to incentivize and otherwise foster new development, often through land assembly and redevelopment. New development is considered an opportunity to orient new buildings toward the street and to transit. *Retrofitting Suburbia* and the *Sprawl Repair Manual* are examples of recent literature promoting urban design and redevelopment oriented interventions. These more recent books also include descriptions of modifications at the building-scale as well as at the scale of the commercial strip. As examples of newer literature on “retrofitting” they tend to incorporate more discussion of reusing existing buildings than earlier New Urbanist literature that simply condemned sprawl and either ignored existing development or prescribed wholesale replacement.

It should be noted that proposals for reform are not completely unified within planning and urban design. For instance, a collection of essays in *Everyday Urbanism* proposes small interventions that are based on an appreciation of ordinary landscapes.\(^{31}\) The craft of planners, architects and other designers is viewed as the creation of “ordinary magic” out of the existing city.\(^{32}\) In other words, planning and design is not to approach the city as a blank slate. Instead, planners and designers are admonished to creatively engage with existing urban fabric. *Everyday Urbanism* was written as a subversive critique and alternative to the New Urbanism. It emphasizes small, community-based solutions and improvement in the context of low-income and moderate-income communities.

Planners’ approaches and proposals for reviving and improving commercial strips vary from polemic critique and avoidance; to land use and

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\(^{32}\) Ibid.
transportation based interventions; to community-based revitalization and urban design strategies. Contemporary planning literature includes research and best practices aimed at redevelopment of transportation corridors to enhance their performance on an array of indicators and to reform development patterns. From a planning perspective, commercial strips are most commonly viewed as wicked problems. From this perspective, existing buildings along commercial strips are likely to be viewed as an integral part of the problem, rather than having any relation to the solution.

**COMMERCIAL STRIPS AS CULTURAL LANDSCAPES AND VERNACULAR TREASURE**

Cultural geographers and architectural historians have increasingly included the everyday, ordinary and vernacular within their purview of investigation. The most famous inquiry into the virtues of the commercial strip is that of Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, who challenged the status quo of architectural design and theory with their attention to the Las Vegas commercial strip. In *Learning from Las Vegas*, they praised examples of American architecture along The Strip that were dynamic and had popular appeal. They searched the outdoor landscapes of the strip, including its freestanding signs, parking lots, and inward architectural focus. They held that these architectural patterns provided important lessons for both architects and the academy. They admonished the design community to look deeper at the strip for inspiration and to use these insights to inform the craft of contemporary design.

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33 In a seminal article, Rittel and Webber point out that planning policy and practice is characterized by attempts to address “wicked problems.” These are policy issues that are particularly tricky because they are defined by their solution, they cannot be completely solved, and there is no immediate test or solution to them. Rittel and Webber describe ten characteristics that define wicked problems. See Rittel and Webber (1973).
architecture. They contrasted the exuberance of the commercial strip with the sterility of high European modernism, finding in it a muse for postmodernist architecture.\textsuperscript{34}

The writings of cultural geographer J.B. Jackson greatly influenced Venturi. Jackson wrote extensively about vernacular landscapes, including commercial strips. He saw vital connections between American roadsides and entrepreneurship. Jackson defended the small nonconforming roadside businesses that he felt were under attack by proponents of highway beautification.\textsuperscript{35}

In Jackson’s defense of small businesses, one can see parallels to Jane Jacobs’ critique of urban renewal in the \textit{Death and the Life of Great American Cities}.\textsuperscript{36} Jacobs attacked planning initiatives at mid-twentieth century that threatened the diversity and vitality associated with small businesses in older downtown commercial buildings. She blamed the shortsightedness of city planners for their inability to see and understand the rich urban fabric of existing neighborhoods. In viewing urban neighborhoods as blight and indiscriminately

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item Even before that, Edward Ruscha turned a systematic photographic exploration of Sunset Boulevard into high art. Ruscha, Edward. Every Building on the Sunset Strip (1966) Self Published.
\item For instance, he wrote: “Let us hope that the merits and charm of the highway strips are not so obscure but that they will be accepted by the wider public; that our professed and frequently genuine regard for the small businesses will protect these smallest of the small businessmen from extinction, and in some manner give them a firmer footing in the community. And let us hope that all those architectural and planning skills, the advertiser’s knowledge of public taste and customer would welcome the opportunity to broaden the scope and to work together. We can be sure of none of these things. A tide of urban improvement is beginning to rise all over the country, and it is reinforced by public money and the kind of impatience with nonconformity as noticeable on the left as on the right. What local zeal cannot achieve may well be achieved by the Federal Highway Program: the sterilization of our roadsides.” Jackson (1970), 71-72. “Other-directed Houses” in Landscapes (1970).
\item Jacobs (1961).
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redeveloping them, she blamed urban planning orthodoxy for turning vital neighborhoods into bland and dysfunctional modern landscapes.

In 1997, Timothy Davis conjured Jacobs’ values of opportunity, diversity, and vitality and J.B. Jackson’s values of “informality, adaptability, and impermanence, and relative freedom” in describing aging commercial strips. In the article, Davis critiqued historic preservation as “an elitist activity that mummifies exemplary buildings or turns them into upscale commercial boutiques…” Instead he called for balancing preservation and redevelopment, writing that aging strips should be understood “not simply as a repository of quaint commercial architecture to be preserved for nostalgic purposes, nor as a persistent blight to be eradicated in the name of moral or aesthetic improvement, but as a resilient vernacular landscape that continues to evolve in response to the needs of people who use it and depend on it.”

Others have acknowledged that commercial strips serve important functions for communities of merchants and customers. Loukaitou-Sideris has described commercial strips as “ethnospaces” in which immigrant and minority communities shape commercial spaces to reflect their ethnic identities and to provide opportunities and services. In Retrofitting Suburbia, Ellen Dunham-Jones and June Williamson caution against retrofitting aging strip malls, a common building type along commercial corridors. They point out that aging strip malls are “much more likely to house public services, such as a community health clinic or job center, ethnic specialty shops and restaurants, and places of

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37 Timothy Davis (1997), 103.
38 Davis (1997), 95.
39 Davis (1997), 110.
worship, as well as shoe or bicycle repair shops and thrift stores, than when it first opened. Cheap space, accessible to the larger community, is also vital to incubating immigrant entrepreneurial economies.\footnote{Ellen Dunham-Jones and June Williamson (2009), 68.}

A diverse array of cultural geographers, architects, planners, and historians have explored the production of vernacular commercial buildings and landscapes and many of them have challenged critics of the strip to look deeper. Richard Longstreth has written of the development of commercial buildings that represent substantial innovations in the retail sector spanning the history of central business districts to regional malls.\footnote{For example: Longstreth, Richard. \textit{City Center to Regional Mall: Architecture, the Automobile, and Retailing in Los Angeles}. Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1997. Longstreth, Richard. \textit{The Drive-In, The Supermarket, and the Transformation of Commercial Space in Los Angeles, 1914-1941}. Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1999.} Alan Hess has popularized Googie architecture, a stylistic category used to describe the commercial designs and coffeehouse architecture that originated in Southern California.\footnote{Hess (2004).} Andrew Hurley has traced the history of diners, bowling alleys, and trailer parks from the early twentieth to mid-twentieth century, narrating their design evolution as it relates to gender, class, and ethnicity in postwar America.\footnote{Hurley (2001).} Ann Satterthwaite has written on the history of shopping and implications of the retail sector on communities. She points out that shopping and the retail sector are neglected areas of scholarship, perpetuating class and gender biases in academic research.\footnote{Ann Satterthwaite (2001).}

These describe only a small portion of a burgeoning literature that highlights commercial strips as integral to American history and cultures. The temporal and spatial reach of these studies and the theoretical and methodological approaches
within them are diverse. This speaks to the richness of commercial strips for academic inquiry.

The practice of historic preservation has, in some cases, ventured into the identification and conservation of cultural assets along commercial strips. John A. Jackle and Keith A. Sculle have advocated for preservation and interpretation of commercial strips. Federal preservation efforts, such as the Route 66 Corridor Preservation Program and the Historic Arroyo Seco Parkway Corridor Partnership Plan outline actions for preservation along major transportation corridors. A stretch of fifties era tourist motels in Wildwood City is listed on the State of New Jersey register and the National Register of Historic Places.

Some debates in historic preservation are centered on the question of preserving properties within commercial strips. These areas of the city can be contested ground as the field orients itself toward preserving a wider range of resources than it has in the past. This includes resources identified with a full range of social and ethnic histories, modern and recent past resources, and cultural landscapes preservation. With notable exceptions, the geography of historic preservation practice is often disengaged from commercial strips. Many preservationists see the commercial strip as no place at all. Municipal preservation programs stretched to their limits and fully engaged in Main Street programs may perceive preservation initiatives in the commercial strip as threatening. They may be viewed as a menace to the sanity of preservationists’ workload and to the credibility of preservation as it pushes into new territory,

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46 Jakle and Sculle (2011).
49 Shapiro (2007).
threatening to dilute the limited economic resources afforded preservation programs. There may be little political support for the search for historic landmarks beyond the boundaries of downtowns and inner city neighborhoods.

**REUSE, COMMERCIAL RETROFITS, AND SUSTAINABLE ADAPTATION**

While planning and preservation efforts may sometimes be at odds, alliances have been forged. Many planners and preservationists view sustainability as a shared normative model with value for professional practice. From the perspective of planning, Campbell portrays the sustainability triangle as essential tensions between environmental performance, social equity, and economic growth.\(^{50}\) Within preservation, Carl Elefante has promoted the view that “the greenest building is the one already built” and that preservation is synonymous with sustainability within the context of the built environment.\(^ {51}\) Guy and Farmer identify six different paradigms or logics for sustainable architecture.\(^ {52}\) There are numerous examples of sustainability metrics, heuristics, and initiatives that interpret sustainability in various ways and relate them to architecture, planning, and preservation. While definitions may vary, the focus on sustainability speaks to its potential to promote improvement in the built environment. This includes the possibility for sustainability at the scale of existing buildings along commercial strips.

Sustainable retrofits along commercial strips may be greatly accelerated by the rate of change among commercial buildings. Commenting on the rate of remodeling activity, Brand has written that “commercial buildings are forever

\(^{50}\) Campbell (1996).  
\(^{51}\) Elefante (2006).  
\(^{52}\) Guy and Farmer (2001), 141.
metamorphic.”

He points out commercial buildings are constantly adapted due to the high failure rate among commercial businesses and their constantly changing requirements. Brand’s observations have been cited in James Douglas’ book *Building Adaptation*, where Douglas describes and promotes sustainability within the context of adaptive reuse projects. Similarly, Rabun and Kelso’s 2009 book *Building Evaluation for Adaptive Reuse and Preservation* is a primer aimed at providing tools such as evaluation of building systems and sustainability considerations. Peter Bullen has extended the technical literature of adaptive reuse into academic research, studying professional practices in adaptive reuse and their connections to sustainability. Additional preservation-focused books, such as Robert Young’s *Stewardship of the Built Environment: Sustainability, Preservation and Reuse* and Jean Carroon’s *Sustainable Preservation: Green Existing Buildings* provide further discussion of the connections between preserving and adapting existing buildings and sustainability.

Promoting the value of reusing buildings and advancing sustainability goals have been major initiatives for the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s Office of Sustainability. Patrice Frey has related building reuse, sustainability, and public policy in a white paper advocating for placement of preservation and building retrofits on a national climate change agenda. Frey suggests that there are substantial sustainability benefits to reuse and retrofits, pointing out that “building-related climate change policy in most cities and states

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54 Bullen, Peter (2007) and Bullen (2010).
55 Young (2012); Carroon (2010).
is directed toward greening new construction” rather than addressing existing building stock.\textsuperscript{57}

Following Frey’s report, the Preservation Green Lab (PGL), the research wing of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, has pursued a research agenda examining the energy retrofit potential among commercial buildings. \textsuperscript{58} PGL has partnered with the New Buildings Institute to conduct market research and case studies of energy retrofits among commercial buildings under 50,000 square feet. As will be discussed in the methodology chapter of this dissertation, data collected in Austin for the PGL survey was incorporated into this dissertation.

While the Urban Land Institute has advocated for retrofitting the 7\% of commercial buildings above 50,000 sq. ft. that are responsible for 50\% of greenhouse gases, the Obama Administration has moved to address energy efficiency in the much more numerous stock of smaller existing commercial buildings.\textsuperscript{59} In concert with the Better Buildings Initiative, the Department of Energy’s Building Technologies Office (BTO) and Commercial Buildings Integration (CBI) program recently announced $12 million dollars in funding to advance energy conservation in the nation’s 4.6 million small commercial buildings.\textsuperscript{60} This is a promising, but modest investment in influencing this vast building stock.

As consensus grows about the sustainability benefits to retrofitting buildings, there are many barriers along commercial strips. A primary

\textsuperscript{57} Frey (2008), 3.
\textsuperscript{58} Preservation Green Lab (2011); Preservation Green Lab (2012).
\textsuperscript{59} Urban Land Institute (2010), Preservation Green Lab (2012).
\textsuperscript{60} Building Technologies News (2013).
mechanism for advancing sustainable architecture has been through sustainability certifications. In the context of the commercial strip, the efficacy of these certifications is limited. Green building certification programs, such as Energy Star, LEED, and the Living Building Challenge, are typically geared toward large-scale governmental and corporate property owners. The penetration of green building certifications are typically quite limited among the commercial remodels and smaller-scale infill projects along aging commercial strips.

Furthermore, the economics of green retrofits are often in tension with the role that affordable real estate has played in incubating small, independent businesses. Benefits of sustainability certifications often accrue to property owners. They are typically used to attract commercial tenants who can afford higher commercial lease rates. The commonality of triple net leases, in which tenants must pay the cost of utilities, insurance, property tax, improvements, is an added disincentive and economic barrier for commercial tenants. While some sustainability retrofits reduce the cost of utilities, tenants still need to pay for upfront costs and resulting increases in property taxes. If sustainability initiatives are going to influence the vast array of building stock, it will be necessary to address the barriers to participation in retrofitting and sustainability upgrades.

The Flip a Strip competition held by the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art (SMCA) provides a vivid illustration of sustainability

61 Yudelson (2010).
62 Ibid.
initiatives along commercial strips and the limits to these visions. The SMCA sought entries for redesigning a strip mall. The results were architect-driven proposals that consisted of many exciting and glamorous museum pieces, including an entry for a $3.5 million retrofit with an additional $3 million dollar robotic parking tower. The winning entry was an $800,000 algae walls and ponds that generate alternative energy. The winners commented:

The strip mall is ‘already perfect and abject.’ It efficiently provides shoppers with a quick and easy way to retrieve goods and quite beautifully does so with no apologies. The firm wanted to sustain the frank, lowbrow purpose of the strip mall, rather than “gentrify” the genre. No money or energy was wasted on ancillary services or aesthetic flourishes.

The entries were intriguing, but provided conspicuous reminders that these visions for sustainability would come at a considerable cost. The entries were largely insensitive to issues of displacement of commercial tenants even though the cost associated with the proposals would likely be recaptured through increased rents. The designs focused on the adaptation of a single building at a scale that would be largely impractical for most of the other properties along a typical commercial strip. This brought into high relief the relationship between sustainability efforts and gentrification. While remodeling class C commercial properties may be common, sustainability initiatives are not. If commercial strips are the habitat of local businesses, there are many remaining questions about the best means to manage the economic effects of reinvestment or to promote building-scale retrofits within an entire district comprised of commercial tenants and property owners of modest means.

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64 Urban Battery on Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art Flip a Strip website (2008).
GENTRIFICATION ALONG COMMERCIAL STRIPS

Much of the literature on gentrification problematizes reinvestment, raising the issue of displacement as flows of people and capital change the socioeconomic profile and increase properties values in central cities. Gentrification literature is typically concerned with displacement of vulnerable working class and minority populations. It is an area of academic inquiry that attempts to account for the cumulative effects of many acts of investment. This body of literature has focused primarily on urban change within the context of residential neighborhoods.

Sharon Zukin has noted the dearth of research on commercial gentrification.65 Timothy Davis wrote briefly on gentrification in the article mentioned above, raising the specter of gentrification along aging commercial strips:

The gentrification of rundown miracle miles has begun to displace marginal tenants in much the same way that development of traditional downtowns eradicated the independent businesses, low-income residents, and urban ethnic communities that gravitated to these areas when the middle-class abandoned them for the suburbs.66

Another notable exception is Katharine Rankin’s research on commercial strips in Toronto.67 Rankin challenges the widespread perception that commercial gentrification is a natural and neutral process of change and she recommends that local governmental policies take into account the negative effects of gentrification on low income residents and small independent businesses.68 She recommends policies that support the stabilization of local

65 Zukin (2010).
66 Davis (1997), 106.
68 Rankin (2008).
businesses through property ownership incentives and programs, community land trust models adapted to support locally owned businesses, and municipal or community owned retail spaces.\textsuperscript{69}

In a very different context than the ubiquitous commercial strips in most communities, Zukin has studied gentrification in New York City neighborhoods.\textsuperscript{70} In two articles she presents distinctly different arguments. In one article, Zukin analyzes the success of an urban block in East Village within New York City. In it, she combines Jane Jacob’s theory of diversity with Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of distinction. In this piece, Zukin embraces Jacob’s insights into the value of a mix of old and new development and high and low rents and the diverse urban environments that they create.\textsuperscript{71} She describes the distinction produced by local merchants who foster a sense of place through aesthetic diversity and social relations that are differentiated from both upscale shopping districts and suburban malls. Those areas appeal to customers seeking an alternative to the corporate landscape.\textsuperscript{72}

In another article, Zukin recounts issues with “boutiquing,” or the rise of retail outlets and restaurants catering to an upscale clientele. She describes this as a: "broad dynamic of postindustrial change and urban revitalization that may benefit certain residents while deepening economic and social polarization and place low- and middle-income neighborhoods at risk.”\textsuperscript{73} Her inquiry is limited to instances of gentrification in neighborhoods within New York City and one is left

\textsuperscript{69} Rankin (2008), 40-41.
\textsuperscript{70} Zukin, Trujillo, Frase, Jackson, Recuber, Walker (2009), Zukin (2004).
\textsuperscript{71} Zukin and Costa (2004), 103.
\textsuperscript{72} Zukin and Costa (2004), 112.
\textsuperscript{73} Zukin, Trujillo, Frase, Jackson, Recuber, Walker (2009), 48.
to question whether the dynamics of urban change and gentrification are similar in other regions, cities of different sizes, or in different neighborhoods.

Gentrification literature may be particularly useful in its body of competing theories on the causes of urban change. The debates between production-side and consumption-side theories provide entree into the potential roots of change along commercial strips. These debates can be roughly characterized as either elevating the importance of economic structures or cultural explanations, which have their roots in related debates about the importance of structure or agency in understanding social processes and urban change.

From the production-side, Neil Smith argues that reinvestment in inner cities has followed capital depreciation of land and the eventual return of capital to areas where there is a substantial gap between the current value of the land and its potential to yield higher profits. This “rent gap” is defined as the “disparity between the potential ground rent level and the actual ground rent capitalized under the present land use.” Smith posits that reinvestment in aging inner-city properties is best understood as the movement of capital into inner cities based on profit maximizing behavior. Rent gap theory has been used to explain patterns of investment and the likelihood of reinvestment, demolition, and redevelopment based on profit maximizing behavior. The rent gap theory emphasizes structural processes that affect the type and scale of urban transition.

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74 Lees, Loretta; Tom Slater, and Elvin Wyly (2010).
75 Smith (1979), 545.
Despite its potential to yield important insights, the rent gap theory has been criticized on many fronts. In reality, it is hard to operationalize in testing real data and it may oversimplify a much more complex set of processes. Limitations to rent gap theory also become apparent where demolitions and redevelopment do not uniformly follow rational choice and profit maximization.\textsuperscript{77} It can be viewed as an overly deterministic picture of urban change, where residents, business owners, property developers, and other participants are simply viewed as tools of a larger social and economic world order.

In contrast to production-side theories, consumption-side theories of gentrification focus on the agency of upper and middle-class consumers in choices to invest in inner-city neighborhoods. These theories explain gentrification in terms of the agency of property owners and the interactions and conflicts between an influx of newcomers that have significantly different patterns of consumption and investment than early inhabitants.\textsuperscript{78} Theorists also incorporate discussion of larger economic shifts from a manufacturing to a service economy and changes in consumer tastes and spending patterns that affect the geography of reinvestment. These theories do not assume that economic relations are deterministic and they typically leave room for accounts that incorporate the agency of individuals and groups. In applying these theories to commercial districts, investment decisions by merchants are not likely to be made in a vacuum and instead they can be understood as embedded in the perceptions and values of actors.

\textsuperscript{77} Weber, Doussard, Bhatta, and McGrath (2006).
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid.
Other theorists posit that both consumption-side and production-side theories are relevant to understanding the nature and causes of gentrification. Hamnet proposes that both production and consumption-side factors are necessary conditions for a critical mass of gentrification in inner-city neighborhoods. 79 Lees notes that this initial debate has largely shifted to consensus that these approaches are complementary.80

Beyond debates about the causes of gentrification, there are concerns expressed about the ways in which federal and local policies promote gentrification as a strategy for revitalization. Lees expresses concern about urban renaissance and revitalization strategies promoted by the British Urban Task Force and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.81 Neil Smith lambasts New Urbanism and Urban Regeneration as a global neoliberal strategy in which urban neighborhoods become targeted for “major colonization by the middle and upper-middle classes.”82 Public policy aimed at limiting sprawl and revitalizing cities is said to feed real estate development, which is further accused of supplanting an urban area’s productive economy. Smith states that gentrification as a strategy “weaves global financial markets together with large- and medium-sized real estate developers, local merchants, and property agents with brand-name retailers, all lubricated by city and local

81 Lees (2000), 393.
82 Smith (2002), 505.
governments for whom beneficent social outcomes are now assumed to derive from the market rather than from its regulation.”

While globalization may be a potent force reshaping the economic and social character of cities, some theories appear to reinforce the helplessness of local populations, ignoring the agency of local actors. In doing so, these theories generalize gentrification into larger global economic structures, while overlooking local processes and actors. Private, nonprofit, and government actors become simply the pawns of larger structural forces.

Gentrification literature raises vital questions about the uneven nature of reinvestment and its negative consequences. It is a body of literature that has been led by strong normative, emancipatory values. It has noted the importance of small urban changes that are often below the radar of planners who are more often concerned with new development and restructuring land use or preservationists who are focused on properties that can be defined as having historic significance. Gentrification literature has the potential to lend a critical eye to land use planning, preservation, and sustainability. Perhaps in doing so, it might help reinforce connections between social equity and building-scale change. Conversely, gentrification theory can benefit from understanding the potential for local actors to become agents of positive and equitable change, even in the face of larger structural forces.

The literatures of planning, preservation, sustainability, and gentrification represent distinct ways of “seeing” commercial strips. They have different vantage points with visions that focus on distinctly different proposals for

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83 Smith (2002), 504.
change. All of these domains have had an influence on my research direction, which seeks to understand the nature of reinvestment along commercial strips and to find integrative means of applying these insights to the practice of planning cities. The next chapter will describe the approach that I took in examining the interstices and overlaps between these domains.
Chapter 3: A Hybrid Methodology for Studying the Reinvestment and Re-invention of Austin’s Commercial Strips

In plain English, to say something is constructed means that it’s not a mystery that has popped out of nowhere, or that it has a more humble but also more visible and more interesting origin. Usually, the great advantage of visiting construction sites is that they offer an ideal vantage point to witness the connections between humans and non-humans. Once visitors have their feet deep in the mud, they are easily struck by the spectacle of all the participants working hard at the time of their most radical metamorphosis.

– Bruno Latour\textsuperscript{84}

This chapter details the research methods used to trace reinvestment and change along Austin’s commercial strips. It describes the epistemological and ontological implications of my approach. In this research, I elected to place commercial buildings and landscapes in the foreground in order to understand the ways in which they are preserved and adapted. My intention was to understand the micro-dynamics of reinvestment, including the various actors who make decisions and enact change in the context of commercial real estate, how this affects segments of commercial strips, and how these dynamics relate to a broader picture of urban change.

Austin was a particularly dynamic urban laboratory. During the period of my research, business owners, property owners, and investors were adapting commercial buildings and landscapes in intriguing ways, mixing the physical imprint of history with that of urban transition. Numerous incremental site-specific changes were juxtaposed against new construction. Reinvestment in

\textsuperscript{84} Latour (2007), 88.
existing commercial buildings seemed to be adding up to larger transitions along strips, mingling with and responding to public sector investments and initiatives. The goods and services offered along strips were changing along with the overall composition and mix of businesses. With these shifts and an influx of new construction projects, the function and identity of commercial strips was changing. Strips were undergoing physical, social, and economic changes associated with shifting neighborhood demographics, changing demand, and business turnover.

My primary research question was: How does reinvestment in existing buildings relate to larger processes of redevelopment and change along Austin’s older, commercial strips? A series of sub-questions included: What is the range of reinvestment and adaptation in existing commercial properties along these strips? What kinds of incremental processes of change transform the public realm along commercial strips? Who produces those incremental changes? What kinds of businesses inhabit and engage in adaptive reuse? What roles do the public sector and the community play in reinvestment? These questions required attending to empirical patterns of change and the actors who participated in this change.

The research was conceived as a means of revealing the dynamics of change as they are situated in a particular context. I wanted to include a variety of perspectives rather than settling on a single theory or meta-explanation of change. This dissertation is in essence an assemblage or bricolage of instances of reinvestment and their relationship to the actions of various public and private actors.
HYBRID METHODS, POSITION OF THIS RESEARCH, AND RELATED THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS

Given my interdisciplinary approach to commercial strips and my interest in relating to four distinct domains in related literature, I chose to employ a hybrid approach in my research design. My epistemological approach can be characterized as “weak” social constructivism, as characterized by Schwandt.\textsuperscript{85} I wanted to allow for multiple accounts and logics among actors; however, I also wanted to incorporate empirical evidence in my research.

I drew some methodological inspiration from philosophical and sociological writings of Bruno Latour. It is important to clarify that this research drew from Actor Network Theory (ANT) as a resource; this dissertation is not a strict application of his approach. Latour’s writings were compelling in that they offered novel methods of tracing associations to understand social phenomenon. Latour proposes that social science should engage in analytical practices that “reassemble” an understanding of society by paying close attention to actors, how they describe what they do and why, and the networks or associations between people, technologies, and conceptualizations of society. In one example, he traces the mechanics of voting, describing the ways in which society is “assembled” through actions that connect the “clichés, arguments, columns, and opinions” in the newspaper out of which a single actor makes up her mind, to the transformation of her vote in the ballot box, and on to its transformation into an anonymous dot tallied in a final election.\textsuperscript{86} He describes how global and local

\textsuperscript{85} Schwandt in Denzin and Lincoln (2000). While the language and tools used to understand the world may differ from person to person and are necessarily complete, I ultimately sought to describe shared and observable phenomena. I did not take a strictly relativist position that any interpretation was as good as another.

\textsuperscript{86} Latour (2005), 222-226.
scales are employed in each step and he challenges distinctions between macro and micro scales in social theory.

Latour challenges the ascendancy of critical sociology in which theorists apply social theories as if “the social” were a known constant or substance that is distinct from the rest of the world. In ANT, society or “the social” is not assumed to be a single substance, like ether, instead it is a network of connections in which individuals have agency in assembling, negotiating, and producing a society that is neither separate or alien from the rest of the world. Social structures do not exist on their own and they are not static, they are in a constant set of flux and active assembly by individuals and groups.

Latour cautions social scientists about meta-theories of society that narrate over the top of what scientists or other actors do.\textsuperscript{87} Latour insists that society should not be taken automatically as an explanation for phenomenon, which too easily orders the outcome of research. Instead, an essential part of the research process is to reveal the agency actors have in generating those connections. He accuses critical sociology of settling too quickly on social explanations, pointing out that these critical explanations render actors largely paralyzed in the face of social structures. He warns critical theorists:

\begin{quote}
It does not require enormous skill or political acumen to realize that if you have to fight against a force that is invisible, untraceable, ubiquitous, and total, you will be powerless and roundly defeated. It’s only if forces are made of smaller ties, whose resistance can be tested one by one, that you might a chance to modify a give state of affairs.\textsuperscript{88}
\end{quote}

In a sense, this dissertation takes Latour’s metaphor of construction sites quite literally, seeking answers in bricks and mortar and actor’s direct association with

\textsuperscript{87} Latour (2005).
\textsuperscript{88} Latour (2005), 250.
them. However, I disagreed with Latour that ANT and critical approaches to
society are incompatible. I saw substantial benefits in combining the strengths of
Latour’s research approach with a critical one. I agree with Latour that there is a
danger in beginning with a rigid structural theory to explain social change. On
the other hand, I disagreed with his proposition that society need be assembled
from scratch within each research project.

My research is heavily influenced by both normative values and by an
appreciation for the strong influence that economic and social structures, such as
class, race, and gender play in the development of cities. I do not see these
economic and social structures as rigid, deterministic structures. Instead, these
social structures are shifting, dynamic and have the potential to be redefined
over time. I agree with Nancy Folbre, who finds fault with classical economic
theory in which individual agency is the sole locus of power. Folbre also
describes structuralism as neglectful of the ways in which individual agency and
participation in collective action relocate power.\footnote{Folbre (1994).} She emphasizes that a full and
productive picture of society must include a full accounting of agents
(individuals, chosen groups, given groups) and structures (assets, rules, norms,
preferences) and processes (that range from consensual to coercive). In this
research, I related both the agency of individual actors and groups with
structural forces that are economic and social. My intention was to drill down
into particular instances of change along case study commercial strips. I
acknowledged that economic relations and power differentials between
landlords and tenants, between local and national scale capital, between

\footnote{Folbre (1994).}
businesses and residents, and numerous other social divisions are integral to the picture of how reinvestment occurs.

How does reinvestment in existing buildings relate to social theory and vice versa? I believe buildings are visible manifestations of social and economic relations. They are also indicative of what individuals and groups value, their technologies and their modes of production. Central to my methodology was to dig deeper into instances of change and investigate these in a process that related multiple sources of information.

**CASE STUDY COMMERCIAL STRIPS AND CORE SAMPLES**

In order to understand multiple scales of change – the individual buildings and commercial strips and how they relate to larger scale processes – I employed a case study model. I focused on older, central city commercial strips within Austin’s inner beltway highways, because these areas were recognized as undergoing a significant process of reinvestment that included both adaptive reuse and redevelopment. I was particularly interested in the role of preservation as well as planning; therefore, I concentrated my inquiry on building stock that ranged in age from early to mid-twentieth century.

South Lamar and Burnet Road were initially selected as case study commercial strips. Both of these early suburban corridors were noted as being under significant redevelopment pressure in the Austin’s Community Inventory, a documented drafted to support the Imagine Austin comprehensive planning
process. They were also observed to have concentrations of local business and a visible evidence of reinvestment.

During the research process, several factors expanded the scope of my investigation. South Congress Avenue, one of Austin’s oldest commercial strips outside of downtown, turned out to be central to both narratives of preservation and of substantial urban change. South Congress is known locally as one of the most dramatic transformations of a declining commercial strip. In addition, students in the Graduate Program in Historic Preservation at the University of Texas at Austin gathered substantial data about its commercial buildings and retrofit potential. This survey of commercial buildings will be described in more detail below.

I also began to observe South Austin’s commercial strips as intimately related to each other – not only as a transportation network, but also as social and economic networks. Several interviews conducted early on compared and contrasted them and highlighted the migration of businesses from one corridor to another. In addition, there was business data available by zip code that could be mapped and analyzed for the entire inner South Austin area. Therefore, I incorporated all three of these South Austin corridors into my research.

A third reason for incorporating additional corridors beyond South Lamar and Burnet Road, related to the interviewees’ spheres of influence. As I began to

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90 City of Austin (2009), p 4-5: “The commercial category includes retail centers and strip developments, which are ubiquitous along the City’s major corridors. Older commercial strip development exists along Lamar Boulevard, South Congress Avenue, and Burnet Road, to name a few. These corridors are seeing significant redevelopment pressure due to City policies and market factors.”

91 Reeves (2004).
interview more actors, I realized that there was a distinct network of entrepreneurs and designers who operated citywide. Their work formed precisely the geography of reinvestment that I wished to understand.

The result of this expansion of my inquiry was inclusion of three South Austin corridors – South Congress Avenue, South First Street, and South Lamar Boulevard. Burnet Road also remained a case study commercial strip in North/Central Austin. These corridors represented the most traveled and analyzed corridors in my research. Throughout this research, I remained mindful of the processes of change along other corridors, how they contrasted with each other, and how they functioned in relation to each other in a citywide network.
Central Austin Case Study Commercial Strips

Figure 1. Central Austin Case Study Commercial Strips
For each of my initial research questions, a series of data were examined that ranged from administrative records such as building permits and zoning ordinances, to firsthand accounts gathered through interviews, to visual investigations of historical photographs and current reinvestment sites.

Table 1: Primary Question and Sub-questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-questions and related domains</th>
<th>Sources Examined</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is the range of reinvestment and adaptation in existing commercial properties along case study commercial strips?</td>
<td>Mapping building permits, land use patterns, Travis Central Appraisal District data, and business data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Visual analysis aerials, Sanborn maps, contemporary and historical photographs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Data and observations from Preservation Green Lab’s Getting to 50 Survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What kinds of incremental processes of change transform the public realm along commercial strips? Who produces those incremental changes?</td>
<td>Observations along commercial strips, building permits, interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What kinds of businesses inhabit and engage in adaptive reuse?</td>
<td>Interviews with business owners, property owners, and an economic development consultant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Business directory information, building permits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What roles do the public sector and the community play in reinvestment along commercial strips?</td>
<td>Analysis of development codes area plans, <em>Imagine Austin</em> comprehensive plan, historic landmark data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interviews with City staff and public officials</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In addition to investigating broader themes and patterns related to case study commercial strips, I developed a methodology of investigation that I refer to as “core sampling.” In industries that employ core sampling, such as oil and gas and transportation sectors, core sampling is a means of gathering samples of natural occurring substances to understand the composition of the earth within particular areas. Within this research, the term “core samples” is used as a metaphor to describe the process of gathering and relating information from multiple sources about specific places along case study commercial strips. This is not meant to imply that this research mimicked techniques within the natural sciences. Instead, core samples describe place-based examples where I mapped data about buildings and parcels, examined building permit data and other related planning documents, and interviewed a related actor or set of actors.

The metaphor of the core sample can be extended further by referencing the drill that is used to produce physical core samples. Here I mean to evoke the image of a research drill comprised of the “hermeneutic circle.” Hermeneutics is a methodology in which the researcher engages in a kind of dialogue to interpret and locate deeper meanings. While hermeneutics typically relies on the interpretation of texts to gather interpretive insights and meaning, the sources of my data were more diverse than the analysis of narratives or discourse. In hermeneutics, there is no assumption that a complete meaning can be obtained, rather the hermeneutic circle or inquiry can continue indefinitely. Knowledge is contingent and context specific. These were compatible with my own epistemological and ontological assumptions. In contrast to scientific

\[92\text{Schwandt in Denzin and Lincoln (2000).}\]
methods of core sampling, the landscape hermeneutics employed at each site varied in levels of depth and specificity. I neither drilled to a prescribed depth nor did I evenly space the core samples. Like core sampling used in a search for oil, I had a purposive intent. My intent was to investigate changes observed in the landscape and to relate them to actors other instances and observations of change. The following sections describe the elements of data collection within each these core samples in more detail. The following methods were also employed to study citywide change and relate it to core samples of reinvestment.

**Actor Interviews**

At the beginning of this research, particular categories of actors were hypothesized as important to understanding the nature and processes of change. They include the business owners, property owners, developers, designers, neighborhood activists, city officials, and others who were observed or hypothesized to directly shape reinvestment outcomes. I wanted to understand how actors approached reinvestment and the interviews gathered underlying logics and perspectives on change.

As my research evolved and I interviewed a variety of people, I began to understand each person as a potential choreographer of change. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 28 people. The table below summarizes their roles and the geography of their involvement with commercial strips. Interviewees were selected based on either their observed influence in the

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93 In addition, four other interviews that had been conducted prior to the dissertation research informed the analysis. This included interviews with two city staff members and a neighborhood activist associated with the adaptive reuse of a 1965 theater into a branch library. A previous interview with the Director of the Austin Independent Business Association was also a resource in this research.
reinvestment process and their areas of expertise. For instance, I observed the prevalence of Michael Hsu Architecture signs on construction sites along case study commercial corridors. Other architects also recommended that I speak with him. He was the architect for several prominent local and regional businesses that had located along case study corridors. When I saw the direction his firm was taking toward vertical mixed use projects in South and East Austin, I looked at others in his network, like Big Red Dog Engineering. I began to unravel a network of actors who had influence over a considerable number of properties along case study strips.⁹⁴

Table 2: Actors Interviewed, their Geographic Scope, and Sector

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actor/Role</th>
<th>Geographic Scope</th>
<th>Sector</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Architect</td>
<td>Citywide: South Lamar, South First, South Congress, Burnet Road, Manor, North Lamar</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business owner and property owner</td>
<td>South First</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business owner and property along Burnet Road</td>
<td>Burnet Road</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineers</td>
<td>Citywide: South Lamar, South 1st, Manor</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager in property management company</td>
<td>South Lamar and citywide, operates across the country</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vice-President, Development Services for Real Estate Development Firm</td>
<td>South Lamar and citywide, operates across the country</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

⁹⁴ Most of the actors who I contacted were willing to be interviewed. There were several unfortunate nonrespondents. I received no response from a loan officer who had been recommended as a contact. I had also hoped to include an additional commercial real estate broker.
Table 2, continued.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actor/Role</th>
<th>Geographic Scope</th>
<th>Sector</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local investor</td>
<td>Citywide, all case study corridors</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Development Consultant</td>
<td>Nationwide, based in Austin</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artist and icon defender</td>
<td>Citywide</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Architect and neighborhood activist in South Austin neighborhood</td>
<td>South Austin</td>
<td>Private and community-based organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader in local preservation organization, private investor</td>
<td>Citywide</td>
<td>Private and nonprofit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business owner, small-scale developer, active in merchants association</td>
<td>South Congress</td>
<td>Private and nonprofit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business owner and small-scale developer, both property owner and commercial tenant; Founder of Austin First nonprofit</td>
<td>South Lamar, South 1st, Burnet Road, Manor, North Lamar, Guadalupe</td>
<td>Private, nonprofit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media - <em>Austin-American Statesman</em> Columnist, icon commentator</td>
<td>Citywide</td>
<td>Private/Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>President of Zilker Neighborhood Association</td>
<td>South Austin, primarily South Lamar</td>
<td>Community-based organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chair, Bouldin Creek Neighborhood Association Zoning Committee</td>
<td>South Congress</td>
<td>Community-based organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chair of the Bouldin Creek Neighborhood Planning Contact Team</td>
<td>South River City Neighborhood association</td>
<td>Community-based organization</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Semi-structured interviews began with a series of questions based on background research. Questions revolved around the particular businesses or projects with which the interviewee was involved or their area of expertise. Near the conclusion of each interview, interviewees were asked a similar question: Do
you have a vision or prediction for what corridors such as South Congress Avenue, South Lamar Boulevard, Burnet Road, S. First Street, will look like in 40-50 years? Interviews were transcribed and analyzed. While some interviews provided personal stories and perspectives, others aided in the identification of factors in and processes of reinvestment. In presenting the results of these interviews, I wanted to reveal personal narratives and frames of reference, in order to present participants beyond mere categories and classifications. I wanted participants to express perspectives and participation in reinvestment that may be based on logics not yet understood in the literature.

**Mapping**

This research took place while the City of Austin was undertaking the Imagine Austin comprehensive planning process, Austin’s first comprehensive planning effort since a 1979 plan. Data collected for the comprehensive plan process meant that several GIS datasets were updated and readily available. From these GIS datasets, I constructed a geodatabase, a geospatial format that is specific to ArcGIS. I piloted various approaches to organizing and analyzing this data and ultimately settled on a process starting with the City of Austin’s core transit corridors. Core transit corridors in this layer corresponded quite closely with historical maps of early highways and arterials at mid-twentieth century. Using a 500-foot buffer around core transit corridors, I extracted from a larger dataset of parcels from land database data. These polygons held basic information from the Travis Central Appraisal District for the year built for

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95 If the interview was with a neighborhood resident or business owner along a particular commercial strips, the question was sometimes phrased in reference to that particular corridor.
improvements on parcels. I also selected a subset of buildings and parcels within 500 feet of core transit routes.

Using GIS, I explored and related land use and building permit data obtained from the City of Austin as well as data on businesses obtained through ReferenceUSA. I georeferenced historic transportation and Sanborn fire insurance maps. In addition, I mapped the sites associated with several of the actors I interviewed, in order to understand their spheres of influence. While I had piloted spatial analysis techniques to understand building permit activity, I ultimately decided to focus my efforts on descriptive mapping rather than employing spatial statistical models of change. I chose to employ descriptive mapping as a means of exploring and depicting associations, instead of limiting this research to a quantitative and primarily deductive inquiry.

**Getting to 50 Survey of Commercial Buildings**

During the research process, the Preservation Green Lab (PGL) announced that it was conducting a national survey of commercial buildings called *Getting to 50: A National Survey of Vernacular Buildings for Deep Retrofits for Existing Buildings*. This research represented a partnership between PGL and the New Buildings Institute, a nonprofit whose mission is to improve the energy efficiency of commercial buildings. The Getting to 50 Survey was conducted with the participation of eight universities across the country, including the University

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96 This reduced the number of polygons that I had to process from 254,085 to 8,049. This was further reduced by removal of streets and roads and water among the polygons (N=7,985).

97 Buildings data from: City of Austin. ftp://ftp.ci.austin.tx.us/GIS-Data/Regional/coa_gis.html#DXF_format. (Last accessed November 9, 2012.) The total number of buildings within 500 feet of transit corridors was 17,197.
of Texas at Austin (UT-Austin). Recognizing the survey as a potential opportunity, I served as an initial contact and coordinator at UT-Austin School of Architecture. My role was to recruit interested faculty, students, and other volunteers from the community to participate as surveyors. I provided an orientation to the survey, answered questions, and helped surveyors to access tax assessor's information and building permit data.

The Preservation Green Lab required selection and survey of three survey areas comprised of eight contiguous blocks each. Part of the selection process was to match 26 building typologies that PGL had identified. I identified areas that met their criteria. Two of these areas were along my case study strips – Burnet Road and South Congress Avenue. The process of preparing for the survey involved looking at the buildings and describing them within a commercial building typology. Both the process of working with surveyors and the data from the survey provided insights for the research. Abridged data from these surveys is located in Appendix A.

**HISTORICAL RESEARCH**

In addition to the use of building histories gathered in the Getting to 50 Survey, I examined other sources to understand the historical development of Austin’s commercial strips. Historical records were accessed through the Austin History Center, the Portal to Texas History, the Perry-Castaneda Map collection, and other historical sources. At the Austin History Center (AHC), the City of

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98 Participating universities included: University of Texas at Austin, the University of Colorado at Denver, Arizona State University, University of North Carolina-Charlotte, New School in New York City, University of Pennsylvania, and University of Kentucky.

99 A third survey area was located along Sixth Street in downtown Austin.
Austin’s official archive, I utilized the AHC’s house/building file index for individual buildings as well as collections pertaining to each street. I utilized historic context surveys and historical surveys that had been conducted along South Congress Avenue, I-35, and Mo-Pac (Loop 1) corridors. These provided historical context information for case study commercial strips and the historical development of the street network.

I also monitored the Austin Historical Survey Wiki (the Wiki) for historical resources along case study commercial strips. The Wiki is an on-line participatory web tool that allows any member of the public to contribute to the City of Austin’s inventory of historic resources.100 The beta version of the Wiki was launched in summer 2012 after several years of testing. During the following fall, UT graduate students worked with the Rosedale Neighborhood Association to gather historical information. Some of this research yielded information about the history of Burnet Road and some of the commercial businesses along it.

OTHER RESOURCES

I reviewed newspaper articles, community blogs and newsletters, and planning and preservation documents, including the Imagine Austin plan. Content from these sources was compared with interviews and other historical and spatial data. I paid particular attention to the nexus between local business, existing building stock, and both evidence and visions of change along case study corridors.

The Austin Independent Business Alliance invited me to observe an IBIZ district meeting along Burnet Road. I also attended several AIBA events. This

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100 I served as project manager while the Austin Historical Survey was under development.
included a presentation on issues pertaining to local business site selection and commercial leases and a luncheon with presentations from the City of Austin’s Small Businesses Development Center and the Development Assistance Center.

Although the corridor was outside of my case study area, I attended public workshops for the Upper Airport Boulevard Redevelopment Initiative. This provided a valuable window into the City of Austin’s corridor planning efforts. Related to this, I was also a reviewer for the mid-term work of a graduate planning studio at the University of Texas at Austin. Graduate students presented data and proposed plans and policies in conjunction with the Upper Airport Boulevard plan. I also attended student presentations in a physical planning studio for South First Street, which was a case study corridor.

This research benefited from my role as a guest lecturer and participant in Michael Holleran’s Sustainable Preservation seminar. During one sequences of seminars, graduate students were split into groups to study retrofitting of two older suburban areas of Austin. One of the areas selected for this seminar was Burnet Road. The student team that examined Burnet Road identified potential historic resources along its length. The following year, I worked with students in the Sustainable Preservation seminar on the PGL’s Getting to 50 Survey, which was a requirement for students in that seminar.
Chapter 4: Historical Patterns and Contemporary Landscapes of Local Business

The image most closely associated with a city’s outward persona is typically its downtown skyline. The line of skyscrapers has been used to give cities a sense of cosmopolitan grandeur. Signature buildings often become synonymous with a city’s identity, such as Seattle’s Space Needle or Paris’ Eiffel Tower.

It would seem at first a ridiculous proposition for a commercial strip to symbolize a city or to contain its iconic images. The landscapes along them may seem too pedestrian to represent a world-class city. Yet it is Austin where a run-down honky-tonk, a neon motel sign, and a fast food restaurant with old-fashioned curb service, are used as signifiers of Austin’s urban appeal (figures 2-4). Even the UT Tower stands apart from the downtown milieu in the backdrop to Austin City Limits, a television show that is broadcasted nationwide that regularly reinforces Austin’s image as a place where cultural heritage extends beyond corporate skyscrapers. Images of these places have taken on a kind of potency among some audiences. These images rival and contrast with representations of Austin that focus on its increasingly cosmopolitan downtown with its rising glass-clad towers. In fact, it is the icons of Austin’s commercial strips that consistently stand in as symbols of Austin, replete with a heritage of hamburger joints, taco bars, and live music venues.

While Austin holds its own unique signifiers, it does not stand alone in promoting its urban appeal through means other than its skyline. Melbourne is marketed with artistic street graffiti and Las Vegas with the neon signs of “the Strip.” See Dovey, Kim; Simon Wollan and Ian Woodcock (2012).
The Austin Motel is located along South Congress Avenue and is a major anchor within a concentration of local businesses just south of the Colorado River from downtown.

Figure 3. Broken Spoke.
Photo taken by Angi English, March 2, 2009 via Flickr, Creative Commons License.
Images of the city are not solely geared toward an outward identity. The images used to represent a city’s identity may also gain considerable currency among local residents. Jann Alexander’s *Endangered Species of Austin*, is just such a representation. This poster, and other photographs in the series “Vanishing Austin,” depict Austin via its local businesses, particularly its photogenic music venues, bars, and cafes. The businesses portrayed in Alexander’s work are located downtown and along the commercial strips of Central Austin, such as Barton Springs Road, Burnet Road, South Congress Avenue, and South Lamar Boulevard. They are images of the popular appeal of the commercial vernacular.
Alexander’s artwork portrays an epic David and Goliath struggle between local businesses and the forces of change. It is a form of localism resisting the forces of homogenization as Austin grows and changes. These nostalgic commercial landscapes are carefully selected aspects of Austin. Alexander aims her lens to capture scenes with aesthetic qualities. She juxtaposes images of new and old architecture. Her images depict a mix of 50-year old businesses and relatively new local businesses that have gained a quick ascendancy as favored third spaces.¹⁰²

Behind a city’s image are real communities and people. While the simulacra images of Austin’s places are endlessly promoted in photographs and on tourist merchandise, there are real places and people associated with them. The iconography of Austin’s local businesses speaks to both the social and market value of symbols of place. However, to understand the connection of people to these images does not take one far beyond the understanding that people have attachments to landscapes of local business and vintage places and treasure the local in a kind of resistance to the global.¹⁰³

Certain buildings are icons or landmarks, because they have histories and communities attached to them. There is a context out of which these icons have been formed that is often in contrast, and sometimes in congruence, with their surroundings in the commercial strip. Beyond the image, there is a materiality as well. They are made of real bricks and mortar (or concrete blocks, gold anodized or corrugated aluminum, and neon). They can leak, decay, underperform, fail to

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¹⁰³ Long (2010).
meet building codes or fail to be used any longer. They can be remodeled, retrofitted, added onto and demolished.

This chapter seeks to describe the wholesale fabric out of which icons have been fashioned, from broader patterns of land use, transportation, economic and socioeconomic change down to a contemporary geography of local business. It is a relationship in which larger patterns of change at the macro scale provide a context for the micro-dynamics of reinvestment.

**Street Networks as the Infrastructure of Commerce**

The history of Austin’s circulatory system, and the development patterns in relation to it, reveal the intertwined nature of transportation and commercial land use and the relationship between public infrastructure and private development. The development of its street network guided the patterns of enterprise and directed flows of investment.

Austin’s original street network was an orderly grid system that evolved with technological advancements in transportation and expansion beyond this core. An 1840 plan for the city was comprised of a grid of blocks and lots on 640 acres between Shoal and Waller Creeks. Areas beyond the original town site (OTS) were known as Austin Outlots. These eight outlots were comprised of 7,100 acres of land to the north, east and west of the original town site grid. The layout of the OTS and Outlots were the downtown’s DNA. This grid pattern remained a defining pattern for Austin’s downtown. It set the stage for Congress

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104 Mirabeau B. Lamar, the first President of the Republic of Texas, appointed Edwin Waller to the task of laying out the original town site (OTS) for Austin. This 1840 plan, including the Austin Outlots extended to 45th Street to the North, Springdale Road to the East, West Lynn to the West, and the Colorado River to the South.
Avenue to become Austin’s main street, with its dramatic terminus at the capitol building.  The 1840 plan also laid out some of the streets that were to become major thoroughfares. Guadalupe Street and Lamar Boulevard became major highway routes through Austin.

During Reconstruction, Austin boomed as a center for commercial and trade as it temporarily held the position of western terminus of the Houston and Texas Central Railway (H&TC). Just as later transportation developments in the capital city would do, the railroad encouraged entrepreneurialism and land speculation. It brought a diversity of goods that could be sold to a growing market. The population increased and Austin’s population became more ethnically diverse with growing African American and foreign born populations. Additional rail lines were built in Austin -- the International and Great Northern Railroad and the Austin and Northwestern Railroad Company. When the H&TC railroad and other rail lines expanded, Austin lost the uniqueness of its position as the terminus of a railroad.

During the era of railroad expansion, a new bridge constructed in 1877 improved the connection of South Austin to downtown. The downtown was connected to the south by three ferries, the most successful of the ferries was owned run by James Gibson Swisher. Swisher owned land along present day

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105 Austin’s current capital building was constructed in 1853 and has remained the focus point of downtown due to the orientation of streets and the more recent system of regulating building heights.

106 These included Guadalupe, 19th street (present-day E. Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd), Lamar, Manor, Duval, Speedway, Springdale Road, Seventh, Enfield, and Lake Austin Boulevard. Hardy Heck Moore (I-35 corridor survey), p. 5-6.

107 Speedway and Duval became integral parts of the North University and Hyde Park neighborhoods, serving local residential populations rather than developing into major arterials.

South Congress Avenue and he had granted Travis County the right of way in 1852 to build what would become known as San Antonio Road, Post Road, and most recently South Congress Avenue. Early nomenclature described its role as a connection between Austin and San Antonio and as the main postal route.

The same year a new bridge was constructed, John Milton Swisher subdivided 23-acres and the Swisher Addition, which was the first residential subdivision outside the original 1840 plan. A 120-foot right-of-way was dedicated through the subdivision. The wide ROW would shape the character and function of South Congress Avenue. Its substantial width still provides a grand view and approach to Texas’ capitol from South Austin into downtown.

A new South Congress bridge was built in 1910 and a streetcar was established along this route. It spurred additional commercial and residential development in the area. South Congress flourished with these transportation improvements and it became part of Texas Highway 2. While still unpaved, new businesses grew to serve the increase in traffic and the needs of new residents moving in to take advantage of cheaper lands and better connections to downtown.

Central to the development of Austin’s transportation system was a 1928 plan for the City of Austin drafted by consultants Koch and Fowler. At a time when few of Austin’s streets were paved, the plan established paving priorities

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and recommended street widths. The plan detailed the development of a “parks and boulevards” system that paired the provision of open space with boulevards that were to be limited to fast-moving traffic. This plan not only provided a hierarchy of streets, where traffic would move quickly and efficiently, a secondary effect was to established drives where automobiles would speed past the naturalistic landscapes. Examples include Barton Springs Road within Zilker Park and North Lamar Boulevard as it meanders next to Pease Park. Along these segments, commercial development still remains limited by parkland. The plan also established certain routes in relation to recreational and tourist-oriented destinations. Commercial development concentrated in areas with frontage on well-traveled roads and in proximity to major parks.

The Koch and Fowler plan not only directed the future of transportation and other municipal infrastructure systems; it was aimed at influencing the demographic composition of whole neighborhoods. The plan identified East Avenue as destined to become “the backbone for all traffic on the eastern portion of the City.” The area east of this avenue was determined to be the best location to concentrate Austin’s African American population in a “negro district.”

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111 Koch and Fowler (1928). On page 57, the plan states: “There has been considerable talk in Austin, as well as other cities, in regard to the race segregation problem. This problem cannot be solved legally under any zoning law known to us at present. Practically all attempts of such have been provide unconstitutional. In our studies in Austin we have found that the negroes are present in small numbers, in practically all sections of the city, excepting the area just east of East Avenue and south of the City Cemetery. This areas seem to be all negro population. It is our recommendation that the nearest approach to the solution of the race segregation problem will be the recommendation of this district as a negro district; and that all facilities and conveniences by provided the negroes in this district, as an incentive to draw the negro population to this area. This will eliminate the necessity of duplication of white and black schools, white and black parks, and other duplicate facilities for this area. We are recommending that sufficient space for a complete negro play-friend in connection with the negro high school. We further recommend that the negro schools in this area be provided with ample and adequate play ground space and facilities similar to the white schools of the city. Koch and Fowler (1928), 15.
strategy outlined in the plan was to serve minority populations only in this district; establishing schools and parks for African American residents and businesses only within the established area in East Austin.\footnote{Ibid.} It was a policy that had a major influence on the racial and ethnic composition of Austin’s neighborhoods.

This aspect of the plan has had a lasting effect on the rate of development and the composition of businesses. East Austin’s corridors did not experience the pace or concentration of commercial development that West Austin’s did. East Austin corridors lack the extensive stock of motel and shopping center development constructed west of Interstate 35. Factors that led to this uneven development were likely to have included differences in the availability of financing and insurance for minority-owned businesses and property owners as well as the greater overall prosperity of neighborhoods in West Austin, which have fed commercial growth.

The 1928 plan also established the city’s zoning districts. The plan’s Zone C Commercial District reinforced existing patterns of commerce along major roads. The length of South Congress Avenue was zoned for Commercial, as were properties that fronted on Guadalupe Street, which was the main highway through town at the time. Some corridors were not yet zoned for commercial. Burnet Road was farther North than city limits at that time. South Lamar Boulevard remained an area for residential development, although the plan recommended widening this street (then called Fredericksburg Road) along with South First Street.\footnote{Koch and Fowler (1928), 18.}
The 1928 plan predicted further change in city’s transportation system. It noted that:

The street railway situation in Austin is typical of a great many street railway systems in the United States in cities of this size... The street railway industry at the present time is passing through a very radical and critical period. The introduction of the motor bus lines and their extensive use appears to some people to be threatening to displace the street car. The experience in other cities along this line has shown that the operation of motor busses in competition with the street car has usually been disastrous to both.114

In the decades between their establishment and their demise, the street car system left a significant imprint on the location and form of commercial buildings. South Congress Avenue still exhibits an orientation of commercial buildings to a former street car line. Several blocks of street frontage consist of taxpayer strips. These one and two story buildings, firmly oriented along the street, were constructed as income-generating properties. Likely to have been viewed as temporary and redevelopable in a relatively short amount of time, they remain integral to South Congress’s contemporary landscape.

By 1940, the removal of street car lines was seen as heralding a new age of modern transportation. This new age of automobility would take center stage as Austin developed. A highway map produced by the Texas Highway Department and updated to 1940, shows the evolving structure of Austin’s transportation system.115 On the map, darker lines indicate the highways that ran through Austin. By this point in time, US 81 ran through downtown, enabling a flow of traffic to and from San Antonio to the south. It continued through downtown

114 Koch and Fowler (1928), 49.
115 This was the year in Austin’s history when Mayor Tom Miller ceremoniously presided over the removal of Austin’s streetcar system.
along Guadalupe Street and along North Lamar Boulevard, named the Dallas Highway for its destination to the north. South Lamar is shown as US 290, connecting Austin to Fredericksburg.

Along South Congress Avenue, Guadalupe Street, and North Lamar Boulevard, tourist courts and motels proliferated to serve a growing clientele. The Austin Motel opened in 1938 on South Congress Avenue and is still extant today. The Blue Bonnet Tourist Camp was constructed during this period and survives on Guadalupe Street as an apartment complex listed on the National
Register of Historic Places. There were numerous examples of auto courts, motels and hotels constructed during the late 1930s to 1960s along Austin’s older highways. Many of them have since been partially or wholly demolished.

Where tourist courts and motels have remained, they generally have served as barometers of social and economic change. Along South Congress Avenue, where there has been significant reinvestment, the upscale boutique hotel, the Hotel San Jose was created out of adaptive reuse of the San Jose Motel. Nearby, the Austin Motel has remained in the same family and upgrades have been made to keep up with a changing tourist market. In contrast, the Texan Inn and other motels along North Lamar Boulevard still cater to a low-income, mostly transient population.

An act that would ultimately shift the economic fortunes and geography of motel construction and the function of whole commercial strips, came with the construction of the Interstate highway through Austin. In 1946, a $940,000 bond package was passed to construct an inter-regional highway along the US. 81 alignment, which ran along East Avenue north of the Colorado River. This highway alignment was to become Interstate Highway 35 (IH-35). Completed in 1962, the opening of IH-35 had dire consequences for highway-oriented businesses along older highways such as South Congress and Dallas Highway (North Lamar Boulevard) to the North. Business was diverted from early auto courts and mid-century motels along older corridors to access roads and exit points along IH-35.

Austin’s transportation system has maintained a strong North-South orientation that connects this center for state government and education with other major cities. This is both a geographical relationship between Austin and
other metropolitan areas, but also an orientation toward residential growth. For instance, Burnet Road, delineated as State Highway 29 by the 1930s, became increasingly oriented toward the mid-twentieth century residential neighborhoods that were developed alongside of it.

Development along Burnet Road reflected a revolution in the location and design of shopping. Across the nation, shopping began to be constructed with a distinct orientation toward the automobile. Buildings were constructed farther from the road with convenient parking in front. Austin’s revolution was a much more humble affair than in California and other population centers. Nevertheless, this suburban style development had a lasting impact on the character of Burnet Road, as well as the other major highways and arterials, such as South Congress Avenue and South Lamar Boulevard, which exhibited substantial growth during this period.

The following photograph shows the HEB grocery store along Burnet Road in 1950 (figure 6). The vacant lands that surround the store to the North and West would become suburban-style residential tracts developed in the 1950s and 1960s. HEB’s expansive parking lot and modest flat topped building hardly seem the stuff of revolution, but this format in retailing transformed Austin’s commercial corridors from rural roads to new commercial districts. With construction of additional retail spaces, this site became the Allandale Shopping Center, a larger multi-tenant shopping destination. It was the beginnings of a shift from downtown retailing and from freestanding shopping centers, into the strip malls that characterized the architecture of shopping along commercial strips into the present.
It is during the rapid expansion of commercial development at the mid-twentieth century that some of Austin’s most iconic mid-century family businesses were established. The Frisco Shop began operation along Burnet Road in 1953. It was No. 3 of three Night Hawk restaurants founded by Harry Akin, the Mayor of Austin from 1967 to 1969. Frisco was an expansion of Akin’s

popular local chain, which began along South Congress Avenue and Riverside Drive in 1932 and had expanded along Guadalupe Street soon after. While none of the original buildings survive, The Frisco remains in business in another building on Burnet Road.

Other examples of restaurants and leisure-oriented businesses from this period still remain. Along Burnet Road, long-time businesses include The Poodle Dog, a tavern established in 1964, and the Top Notch, which opened in 1971. Along South Lamar and Barton Springs Road, Peter Pan Mini-Golf, established in 1948, remains. Bobby Layne’s Bowl-O-Rama was constructed along South Lamar and Highland Lanes on Burnet Road. Highland Lanes still retains its name and use as a bowling alley, while the bowling alley on South Lamar has transitioned to new uses.
Like other leisure uses, theaters were constructed that also followed their markets to suburban neighborhoods and major highways and arterials. The Austin Theater, constructed on South Congress Avenue in 1939 remains in heavily modified form. The Americana Theater, constructed just west of Burnet Road in 1965, remains as the Yarborough Branch of the City of Austin’s library

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system. All of the drive-in theaters along Austin’s commercial strips, including the North Austin Drive-In, the Burnet Drive-In, and the Chief Drive-In, have been demolished. Current development still retains the imprint of the Burnet Drive-in. Lanes of self-storage units have replaced lines of parked cars and a new sign for Burnet Self-Storage mimics the old Burnet Drive-In sign.

![Figure 8. Two views of the Burnet Drive-In site.](image)
The image on the left shows Burnet Drive-In in a 1968 aerial photograph. The right hand image shows the same site in 2009. In this photo, Burnet Self-Storage has replaced the drive-in theater.\textsuperscript{118}

The importance of mobility to daily life produced a landscape comprised of a large number of buildings and lots that catered to the sales and services for cars. Commercial strips saw a substantial growth in businesses such as gas stations, auto-repair services, and car dealerships. For instance, by 1962, South Lamar Boulevard had 25 auto-related businesses, including auto repair services, used and new car sales, car washes, and gas stations.\textsuperscript{119}

\textsuperscript{118} 1968 aerial photograph from City of Austin. Bottom photograph is from CAPCOG, MJ Harden (2009).
\textsuperscript{119} Polk’s Austin City Directory (1962).
In addition to gas, shopping, and leisure, other uses were developed at mid-twentieth century and some remain a common feature of the contemporary landscape. Trailer parks were a common along South Austin commercial strips. Many of them provided housing for low- to moderate-income residents as well as tourists. The Pecan Grove Trailer Park along Barton Springs Road is a still extant. In fact, the imagery of trailers and trailer park has become a symbol of Austin in general and South Austin in particular. Vintage Airstream trailers have been converted to mobile food trailers and are prominent features of these mobile food courts. The Trailer Park Eatery along South Lamar Boulevard is one of many vacant lots that have been converted to outdoor food courts comprised of mobile food trailers. Vintage airstreams are parked outside of apartment complexes to serve as leasing offices and are used to promote tourism.\textsuperscript{120}

In addition, the diversity and uses along Austin’s commercial strips increased with the construction of apartments and speculative office developments. This is especially the case along Burnet Road, where concentrations of mid-twentieth century office buildings can be observed along Burnet Road and Hancock Drive. In addition, state offices were constructed in proximity to North Lamar and Burnet Road. While this dissertation focused on commercial buildings, these other buildings have played an integral role in the evolution of Austin’s commercial strips.

\textbf{DEPRECIATION AND DECLINE; REINVESTMENT AND REINVENTION}

The result of successive waves of new construction was a concentration of struggling businesses in depreciating commercial buildings along aging

\textsuperscript{120} Dinges (2012).
commercial strips. New commercial construction was oriented to a transportation infrastructure that was expanding and scaling up. As noted before, the construction of Interstate Highway-35 affected travel-oriented businesses along older highways. This process continued with construction of State Highway Loop 1 (also known as the Mo-Pac Expressway) in 1982.\textsuperscript{121} While population in Austin continued to grow during the 1970s and 1980s, it spurred new construction at the edges of the city. The retail sector in Austin’s downtown and central city commercial strips was affected by the suburbanization shopping and new formats such as the regional mall.

South Congress Avenue went through a marked period of decline. Although this stretch of early auto courts and motels had long been associated with prostitution, it gained notoriety for drug trade, commercial vacancies, the transition of businesses to adult-oriented uses, and issues associated with vagrancy. According to a Police Department account:

South Congress Avenue between Barton Springs and William Cannon had begun to show signs of indifference, as vacant buildings, graffiti and general neglect began appearing. Many of the neighborhoods were also experiencing some of the same problems. Gang houses and reports of drug dealers were known to be everywhere as evident by the increase of graffiti, drive-by shootings and heavy vehicular traffic up and down certain streets... Drug and prostitution problems, in that area, became more noticeable almost overnight.\textsuperscript{122}

The dynamic began to change in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The process of reinvestment is described in interviews and in media accounts of change along these corridors. This renewed vibrancy of businesses along

\textsuperscript{121} The Mo-Pac Expressway is a major north-south freeway. Construction of Mo-Pac between Highway 1983 or Research Boulevard and the Capital of Texas Highway (Loop 360) was completed in 1982. A northern extension was completed in 1989. An extension to the south to Highway 45 was completed in 1994.
\textsuperscript{122} Behr (1999), unnumbered.
commercial strips was fed by larger scales of social and economic change. In a sense, the winds of economic opportunity helped to fill the sails of adaptive reuse and transition in the types of businesses along central city corridors.

An influx of high tech businesses is credited with contributing to a booming economy and to a changing economic geography. Early high tech firms included Tracor, which was founded in 1955; IBM, which opened an Austin site in 1967; and Texas Instruments in 1969. During the 1970s and 1980s, high tech firms such as Motorola, Symantec, and Microelectronics and Computer Technology Corporation built campus-style offices on the edge of town. In tandem with growth in the high tech sector, new office buildings and hotels were constructed in downtown. As smaller high tech firms proliferated in the Internet age and downtown reinvestment gained traction, the stage was set for reinvestment smaller commercial properties close to downtown.

The relationship between continued growth in the high tech industry, the growth of smaller firms, and the micro-dynamics at the district scale are reflected in the transition of the Cinema West porn theater along South Congress Avenue. Originally constructed in 1939 as the Austin Theater, it fell into disuse and became a porn theater in 1977. It was later reborn as a marketing firm specializing in search engine analytics. According to one account, Juan Creixell, the resident of a local realty group, recognized that demand was growing for office space in the central city:

Creixell stumbled upon Cinema West in January 1999 and immediately was entranced by the building’s “high ceilings, its openness, its flexibility of space, and the potential for

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124 Humphrey (2013).
redevelopment to a new life.” The building was just one mile from the CBD and had an excellent view of the State Capitol. Despite the theater’s checkered past, Creixell knew he was looking at a winning property.126

It was not only an investor’s foresight that led to this site of reinvestment. Neighborhood complaints and police involvement spurred the Travis County district attorney’s office to sue the theater as a nuisance, and it shut down.127 This put the property on the market, and afforded Creixell and CSA Realty the opportunity to invest in a new use for the building. A niche was created and filled in a confluence of economics and local agency.

The strength of the local economy and growth in particular sectors are reflected along corridors in other ways. Austin exhibits a higher proportion of businesses within the Leisure and Hospitality sector than Texas as a whole.128 This sector is comprised of two different categories of business: Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation (NAICS 71) and Accommodation and Food Services (NAICS 72). Maps on the following pages depict the types of businesses that cluster around case study corridors in South Austin. Businesses within the Accommodations and Food Services sector, as well as the Retail Trade and Other Services sector, are concentrated along segments of South Congress Avenue, South Lamar Boulevard, and South First Street.129

126 Barta (2001).
127 Barta (2001); Behr (1999), unnumbered.
128 City of Austin (2010), Economy and Employment Trends in the Imagine Austin Community Inventory. Austin’s four major employment sectors include Education and Health Services; Trade, Transportation and Utilities; Professional and Business Services; and Leisure and Hospitality.
129 According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics: “The Other Services (except Public Administration) sector comprises establishments engaged in providing services not specifically provided for elsewhere in the classification system. Establishments in this sector are primarily engaged in activities, such as equipment and machinery repairing, promoting or administering religious activities, grantmaking, advocacy, and providing drycleaning and laundry services, personal care services, death care services, pet care services, photofinishing services, temporary
Many of the most well-known places along Austin’s commercial strips consist of these concentrations of locally-owned restaurants and bars. These clusters have emerged in areas where local and regional demand has combined with a significant tourist market drawn to Austin as an entertainment destination. Many of these bars and restaurants are live music venues; these areas are where the local entertainment industry contributed to momentum in the hospitality sector. South Congress Avenue, in particular, has gained a reputation as an entertainment district comprised of restaurants and bars, niche hotels, and boutiques.

Austin is heavily marketed as the “Live Music Capital of the World” and its arts, culture and creative sector have been identified as valuable assets to the local community.\textsuperscript{130} This creative sector is a diverse and includes architecture, arts education, film and video, the gaming and digital media, film and video, theater, among other cultural activities.\textsuperscript{131} Major festivals such as Austin City Limits and the South by Southwest Festival have contributed to tourism and in raising the profile of Austin’s creative sector. There appears to be a strong association between the creative sector and the Food and Accommodations sector that provides the live music venues and services associated with creative services activity.

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\textsuperscript{130} The television program Austin City Limits (ACL), which is touted as the longest running music program in television history, was an early vehicle for spreading this cultural reputation. Austin City Limits online and the Texas State Historical Association (2012).
\textsuperscript{131} City of Austin (2010), Economy and Employment Trends in the Imagine Austin Community Inventory.
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Figure 9. Distribution of Businesses in South Austin.
Figure 10. Maps Showing Distribution of Businesses by Industrial Classification.

Distribution of Businesses by Type in South Austin (78704)

Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting (NAICS 11)
Mining, quarrying, and oil and gas extraction (NAICS 21)
Utilities (NAICS 22)
Construction (NAICS 23)
Manufacturing (NAICS 31-33)
Wholesale Trade (NAICS 42)

Figure 10, continued.

Distribution of Businesses by Type in 78704 (continued)

- Retail trade (NAICS 44-45)
- Transportation and warehousing (NAICS 48-49)
- Information (NAICS 51)
- Finance and Insurance (NAICS 52)
- Real estate and rental and leasing (NAICS 53)
- Professional, scientific, and technical services (NAICS 54)

Figure 10, continued.

Distribution of Businesses by Type in 78704 (continued)

- Administrative and support and waste management and remediation services (NAICS 56)
- Educational services (NAICS 61)
- Health care and social assistance (NAICS 62)
- Arts, entertainment, and recreation (NAICS 71)
- Accommodation and food services (NAICS 72)
- Other services (except public administration) (NAICS 81)

Farther from downtown and more distant from Austin’s reputation for arts and culture, Burnet Road has experienced reinvestment that is also associated with neighborhood change. It is not a major tourist attraction or entertainment district like the corridors in South Austin; however, it is recognized for its eclectic character and thriving concentration of local businesses. Some business activity has been buoyed along Burnet Road with growth in the central city and the growing desirability of homes in Rosedale, Allandale, and Crestview neighborhoods.

**Corridors and Socioeconomic Change**

In tandem with growth in particular economic sectors, the demographics of Austin’s central city neighborhoods have shifted and reflect a more affluent population. The City of Austin’s demographer has identified among the top ten demographic trends “An increasingly sharp edge of affluence” in which “socio-economic spatial separation has steeply increased.” The case study commercial strips in this dissertation reside between the wealthy neighborhoods to the west and the lower income, yet gentrifying neighborhoods of East Austin. The median family income within 78704 is $60,000 to $75,000. This is the same range as zip code 78757, where upper Burnet Road is located. Along Lower Burnet road, the median family income is between $75,000 to $100,000.

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A map of median family income by census tract shows a more nuanced picture area’s socioeconomic composition. The census tracts between South Lamar Boulevard and South Congress Avenue have a lower median family income, while the census tracts west of South Lamar and those to the east of South Congress exhibit higher median family incomes. All of the case study commercial strips appear to have access to relatively affluent surrounding neighborhoods. The neighborhoods where South Austin case study commercial strips are located retain more income diversity than the neighborhoods immediately surrounding Burnet Road.

In census data for 2000 and 2010, demographic shifts can be observed along case study corridors. South Austin has long been home to a significant Hispanic and Latino populations. Figure 13 illustrates a visible decrease in the Hispanic/Latino population along Oltorf Road and segments of South Lamar. The decline in the proportion of Hispanic or Latino population and a growing affluence with the neighborhoods in which case study corridors are embedded, are shifts that are likely to have had an influence on the composition of businesses along case study commercial strips.

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Figure 13. Percent of Population Hispanic/Latino by Census Block Group in 2000 and 2010.
While there has been substantial growth in the number of families with children in Central Texas region, there has been a decline in the proportion of families with children in the central city. Within 78704, neighborhoods have struggled to keep central city schools open. This exacerbates a growing suspicion that these neighborhoods are transitioning well beyond the reach of the working class and middle income families with children.

Housing costs have risen while housing vacancy rates have plunged in Austin. In addition, The City of Austin has also pursued policies encouraging density in the downtown and along commercial corridors that are aimed at decreasing urban sprawl and increasing the supply of central city housing units. According to the City of Austin’s demographer, 2012 brought “an astounding 7,500 of these units are going up inside the central City--central as defined by the "loop" of Ben White, US 183 and MoPac.” While many of the units were constructed downtown, Austin’s central city commercial strips have begun to absorb much of this new construction.

Austin’s commercial strips are embedded in this context of neighborhood change. Their businesses relate to these changing local market conditions. These economic and social shifts have created opportunities for local businesses and pose challenges for some of them as commercial rents rise in tandem with social

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135 Taboada (2011) and Heinauer and Taboada (2011) in Austin American-Statesman. Mentioned in interviews with South Austin neighborhood activists Brad Patterson and Andrew Elder.
136 The overall housing vacancy rate as of the 2011 American Community Survey was 8.1% of all housing units. U.S. Census Bureau. (Last Accessed March 23, 2013.) Low vacancy rates were featured in newspaper articles such as “Austin in top 20 for low housing vacancy rate” in the Austin Business Journal, 2012; and " Apartment market rebound good news for landlords, but tenants face higher rents” in the Austin American-Statesman (2011).
137 Mueller (2010).
and economic shifts. In some cases, the local businesses themselves act as amenities that make the area more desirable for particular populations.

**AGING COMMERCIAL PROPERTIES AND THE GEOGRAPHY OF LOCAL BUSINESS**

Concentrations of local businesses have emerged along Austin’s commercial corridors, in relation to these larger economic and social shifts. While many of Austin’s commercial strips remain comprised of franchise restaurants, gas stations, and other national chains, many of the left over buildings of earlier waves of corporate chain construction have transitioned into ripe habitat for local, independent business.

The Austin Business Alliance, a nonprofit that acts as a unified voice for independent businesses in Austin, has developed Independent Business Investments Zones (IBIZ districts). IBIZ Districts are a means for local businesses to organize and market a joint identity. The map below shows the location of eight IBIZ districts and the South Congress Merchants’ Association. (Although the merchants’ association along South Congress is not an IBIZ district, it is organized and comprised of independent businesses.)

IBIZ districts must meet certain criteria intended to reinforce synergy and promote walkability. They must contain over 75% locally-owned businesses, be comprised of 15-80 businesses, and have active business owner participation. Although these criteria do not require a linear form, all of them have been organized along street frontages. This is a pattern that follows the overall structure of Austin’s commercial strips, typically one parcel deep and adjacent to neighborhoods.
Figure 14. Map of Independent Merchants’ Associations.
Each of the IBIZ districts has a name and image developed by local businesses in consultation with the Austin Independent Business Alliance. The images help to depict a shared outward persona that has been developed from participating local businesses, their products, and an understanding of their customer base. Several of these identities focus on the image of the commercial strip. The North Loop IBIZ District’s catch phrase is “Get Hip to the Strip,” a road is central to the district’s logo. Similarly the South First IBIZ district fashions an arrow out of road and proclaims itself “South of the River and center of cool.” In the South Lamar IBIZ District logo, a lonely man in a cowboy hat and boots and with a guitar strapped to his back, struts down an endless stretch of road.

It is important that the direction of causality is clear; IBIZ districts did not “create” the mix of local businesses. These districts are indicators of areas where there is already a sufficient concentration of locally owned businesses – often a mix of old and new businesses – with enough merchant interest forging a common district-level identity. The boundaries of IBIZ districts are artifacts of the number of business owners who have indicated a commitment to work together.

IBIZ districts are comprised mostly of commercial buildings that date from mid-century, although within these epicenters of local business, there are former single-family homes converted to commercial spaces and small-scale infill shopping centers. IBIZ districts are not the only concentrations of local businesses Austin’s commercial strips. Many local businesses line the lengths of all of the case study commercial corridors. These local businesses are inhabitants of the substantial older building stock along Austin’s older properties. The
following maps (figures 15 and 16) show the age of building stock along case study commercial strips. Within South Austin’s merchants’ association, the building stock ranges from primarily early twentieth century along South Congress, to majority mid-twentieth century building stock within the South Lamar IBIZ district. From the map, one can observe the notable longevity of older buildings on small lots, particularly along South Congress and South First Street. While many of these properties have been heavily adapted, the building stock continues to live on far beyond original expected lifespan.

Depicted in yellow are new and recently constructed projects. These are multi-family and mixed use developments. The process of redevelopment has largely followed existing land development patterns. The large rectangular parcel on South Lamar Boulevard and Treadwell Street (on the Northern end of the strip) is a redevelopment project on the site of a 1950s era shopping center. It is discussed in more detail in Chapter 5. There is also a hotel project planned for a large gravel lot on South Congress Avenue. These are examples of large projects that require no land assembly; they illustrate how the shape and size of existing parcels and ownership patterns influence the location of infill projects. This is often a legacy of the original development pattern along these commercial strips.
Figure 15. Map showing construction year for properties along South Austin’s commercial strips.
Figure 16. Map showing construction year for properties along Burnet Road.
PATTERNS OF CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

Commercial land use data from 2010 overlaid on a map of Austin’s transportation system in 1940 shows the extent to which commercial land uses have remained along early transportation routes. Although the large commercial parcels most immediately draw the eye, it is the long line of commercial uses even on smaller parcels that closely follow the pattern of Austin’s older highways and arterials.

Figure 17. City of Austin existing land use layer (2010) with georeferenced General Highway Map of Austin. General Highway Map produced by Texas State Highway Department. (Revised to 1940). General Highway Map was georeferenced to contemporary street network by author.
This map shows durable associations between patterns of transportation infrastructure and commercial development. These patterns provide a skeletal structure out of which reinvestment is taking place. Reinvestment is tied to the economic and social change as Austin ascends to the status of a major Sunbelt city and a hub of economic and cultural activity. It is not only the fundamental relationship between transportation and land use, but also micro-dynamics within the context of old buildings and aging urban fabric that produces the landscapes of local business and changing urban neighborhoods.

In a sense, this map also masks as much as it reveals. Despite the representation of commercial parcels depicted uniformly in red, there are major shifts in the kinds of commerce taking place along these strips. The case study commercial strips have undergone change in both the composition of businesses and in ownership of real property. Small professional services offices and creative services have located along strips. There are a growing number of bars and restaurants relocating in the husks of old car dealerships and gas stations. Local businesses have taken up residence or purchased property where it is affordable, adding to the emerging identity of certain segments of the strip. There are also major shifts in land ownership. Where new construction is occurring, land development companies are purchasing properties that have long remained in family ownership.

Population growth, economic shifts, and social trends have provided momentum; however they have not determined patterns of reinvestment. Many actors have participated in shaping the nature of change, actively designing, investing, and constructing changes along the strip. The next chapter focuses on
core samples of reinvestment and the actors involved in change along Austin’s commercial strips.
Chapter 5. Reinvestment and Re-investors and Core Samples of Landscape Change

The previous chapter foregrounded historical and contemporary patterns in the development of Austin’s commercial strips. Like the view from an airplane, these patterns seem largely devoid of actors and animated by anonymous forces. It is the handiwork of a multitude of actors responding to external pressures and pursuing both individual and collective goals. This brings to mind questions about who these actors are and how they operate. In a text aimed at introducing students to planning theory, Susan Fainstein and Scott Campbell comment: "The most basic of questions too often remains unanswered: who exactly designs, builds, manages, and finally tears down cities? Ambitious, omnipotent planning theories often collide with the modest, constrained powers of actual planning practice."139

This research provided the opportunity to reveal the narratives of the people who have had a direct hand in shaping Austin’s contemporary commercial strips. Who are they? How do they work in concert and in conflict? How do they relate to others in pursuit of their agenda? What can we learn from them about what they do and how they see and act within Austin’s commercial strips?

In interviews, I sought out people who could speak to various logics and scales of reinvestment. Embedded in each of the following core samples is an instance of adaptive reuse or preservation at the center of change. The interviews revealed underlying logics in the decision-making processes of people who own,

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139 Fainstein and Campbell (2011), 2.
design, and invest in commercial spaces. Interviews provided information about actors who were not only embedded in relationships depicted in various theories of urban change; these actors showed considerable acts of judgment and agency. The first two core samples illustrate the connection between individual’s lives and the lifespans of businesses and generational turnover in property. Additional core samples scale focus on actors who have adapted or designed multiple buildings along Austin’s commercial strips. The final two core samples revolve around actors who were involved in redevelopment that incorporated existing buildings and local businesses in two contrasting ways.

A LANDMARK OF THRIFT

Along Burnet Road there is a small storefront and lumberyard that could easily be missed. Home Lumber is a time capsule of Burnet Road’s history, painted in blue and white, it proudly fronts the road. Immediately adjoining the storefront is a rusting metal lumber shed. At first it seemed a puzzle. Is it the storefront or the lumber shed that came first? Either could have been added to the other. This small puzzle and a mention by Amy Simmons of Amy’s Ice Cream, an entrepreneur who operates across the street, led to an interview with Frank Bomar, the owner of Home Lumber. Bomar’s family purchased the property in 1945 and Bomar solved the mystery as to the age of the storefront and sheds. They are roughly the same vintage.

The interview with Bomar took place in the storefront. The storefront exhibits little change in either the building or the business. On the interior, aisles are crowded with building material samples. Clientele are largely drawn from personal contacts, mostly builders who have worked with Home Lumber over
the years. No computers are used for inventory; in fact, the shop has no website or e-mail address. All business is done face-to-face or over the phone.

Bomar recalled the day that his family moved onto the property, August 18, 1945. He explained: “We used to think it was about 108 degrees that day. This was when there was an old farmhouse that was probably built about 1928 as I understand it... My dad bought it. I say “we” because I feel I was a part of it. We had been so close.” He described the origins of the business:

This one was founded about 1937, 1938 by a fellow by the name of Cartwright who was the main mover and shaker, if you want to call it that. Here he built this lumberyard out in the sticks. I mean, just literally in the prairie grass, weeds. There’s a painting of the

Figure 18. Home Lumber Co. on Burnet Road.
Two heroic investments over the years had restored the storefront after two catastrophes – a truck that hit it in 1952 and a fire in 1976. Photo by author.
way it looked when we bought it, but that was 1945. That’s all ice and snow out there in front. That was taken by this friend of ours who painted it from a photograph. That was 1949 when that picture was taken. And the house that we were living in… is right to the right there. And that old garage was in the back and my dad bought this place and the place that is the ice-making place next door at the same time. At that time it was vacant. So we had a big old vacant lot that we raised corn and potatoes on. We had to get out there and mow that Johnson grass out of there. My dad and mother made us get out there and cut the grass and weeds and finally raised enough to plant the potatoes.

Figure 19. A framed watercolor image of Home Lumber as it appeared in the 1940s. The watercolor was based on a photo of the property. Photo by author.

Bomar recalled the details of the garden plots and where his mother kept chickens. This area had been redeveloped for an ice-making business. He remembered the lot across the street, where the Allandale Shopping Center is now, when it was filled with grass, weeds, and sheep. He described Burnet Road with barbed wire running along it and when it was “about 16 feet wide, old humpback, turtle back, bunch of holes in it and you had to dodge the holes in the pavement.”
It would be tempting to attribute the 1950s era modernization of the Home Lumber storefront to trends in storefront improvement aimed to appeal to a changing suburban market. The new storefront involved replacing a curved entry overhang with a modern flat-topped one. Small symmetrical windows on either side of the door were replaced with a large-picture window on one side. The newer storefront expresses an early modern flair; however, it was not fashion that precipitated the changed; it was an unexpected collision. A linen delivery truck collided with the building when Mr. Bomar was around 19 years old.

My daddy sent my brother over here at six o’clock in the morning to open this place up and let it air out a bit and get some of the heat out of it from the day before. And I stepped out on the front porch to pick the paper up. This [local company] truck came rolling past me, through the yard, through our front yard, crashed into this building. [It] pushed that wall out over the bottom. And my mother, you could hear her screaming no telling how far, because she knew that my brother was over here. And he got out the back door. That back door was there also. He got out that back door and ran all the way behind the sheds. Back up here. And he was OK. I came through that hole that the panel truck ran on the wall there. And the driver was sitting there, just shaking. And the engine was still running. I reached in and I tried to talk with him, and I didn’t get any response, and I reached in and turned the engine off, and took his key out.

In 1965, the Bomar family sold the farmhouse on the property; trading in the house for room to develop a leasable commercial space. After the farmhouse was moved to Pflugerville, he and his parents moved into the adjoining Allandale neighborhood. An architect and family friend designed the new commercial building. A succession of commercial tenants has leased the commercial property over the years. This included a pet grooming business, Hertz auto rentals, and a cabinet store. According to Bomar the property originally yielded $325 a month and at the time of the interview it was leasing for $2,100 a month. There was an expectation of a higher rate when the property was
leased to a new tenant. A few months after the interview, a furniture store specializing in mid-century modern furnishings had moved into the space.

Figure 20. Photo of commercial space developed in the 1960s. The Bomar family constructed this commercial building after they moved an original farmhouse from their land. Photo by author.

In addition to the tenants on either side, Bomar leased space to a food trailer, which temporary set up shop next to the storefront and adjoining shed on a strip of grass. The same business moved into a bricks and mortar location down the street after its experiment in selling chicken and waffles proved successful. This small-scale churn of tenants and their improvements have reflected both change and continuity along Burnet Road.
Home Lumber has survived through the lives of three generations of the Bomar family. Frank Bomar, the middle generation, has maintained the property and business as a physical and economic connection to his family’s history. He has made small improvements to the properties over the years in pursuit of a steady income stream and continuing his family’s livelihood. His tenants have changed around him, while Home Lumber has remained largely the same.

Bomar reflects ambivalence about the change that has occurred along Burnet Road. He knows fewer of the business owners along the strip; many of the original property owners and businesses have left. A self-described Barry Goldwater conservative, he disapproves of the power of the surrounding neighborhood association and he is skeptical of the city’s land use planning initiatives along Burnet Road. When asked whether his property is still a good location for his business he replied:

No. This site, it would be too small for a lumber business and you couldn’t and the neighbors wouldn’t let you put a lumberyard in here anyway ... The city neighborhood associations, they all have a plan. They want to plan what is going to be there. And they want to tell you what to do and see if what you want to do coincides with the plan... But they, the city planners don’t like big stores. They think that they all need to be coffee shops and little things where you sit out on the deck and philosophize.

Home Lumber sticks out as an anachronism; it is incongruent with the City or neighborhood association’s visions for the future. The value of the buildings on the property is well below the value of the land, according to tax records.\textsuperscript{140} The parcel is large, zoned for mixed use, and would likely be readily re-developable upon sale. Property taxes have risen as the value of property

\textsuperscript{140} The improvement to land ratio is a typical measure of the susceptibility of a property to change.
along Burnet increases, exerting pressure to redevelop the storefront and lumberyard buildings into a more profitable endeavor.

Home Lumber is not the kind of iconic diner, motel, or other roadside business that would more easily garner the attention of preservationists seeking to interpret roadside resources. The modernization of the storefront is charming, but modest. It is associated with a local architect, but not a particularly famous one. So far, the mechanism preserving the storefront has been a sense of family pride, a way of life that has been maintained since the 1940s, and a conservative and intermittent stream of investment in improvements. It reflects thriftiness combined with pride. The property is maintained with enough investment in maintenance to keep the buildings functional and maintain the charm of its unassuming storefront.
Figure 21. Map of Home Lumber site and surrounding context.
This core sample, although specific to a single property, represents a relatively common form of continuity and an informal type of preservation along Austin’s commercial strips. It is historical continuity that reflects a family’s history of entrepreneurship and its connection to income-generating commercial property. The fact that Bomar owns the property outright insulates him from the immediacy of change. This insulation is shared with his tenants only to the extent to which rents remain affordable. A crucial decision point will occur when Frank Bomar passes this property to the next generation. With the next generation at the helm, the business might be retained or it could be sold to a buyer who sees economic or community value in retaining the storefront. It seems more likely that redevelopment pressures will come to bear on the property; replacing a landmark of thrift and a remaining remnant of Burnet Road’s history.

AN ARTIST AND HIS ROADSIDE RELICS

While the story of Home Lumber is one that began over 70 years ago, the businesses that moved into Austin’s corridors in the 1990s spawned a more recent generation of local iconic businesses. This includes Roadhouse Relics on South First Street. It is owned by Todd Sanders who creates and sells original “modern vintage” neon artwork. The art gallery is housed in an old commercial building that sticks out for its artful patina. The building has a nostalgic mural on one side based on a design from an old Austin postcard.
Todd Sander’s path to entrepreneurship began in 1990 on a road trip to Austin. A neon sign was the magnet that pulled Sanders from an art program in Houston to Austin. When he saw the “Terminix bug” neon sign, he turned to his friend and said: “I’m moving to Austin. I love this place. I’d never seen anything like it.” He recalled his reaction:

In an instant I realized that I was going to move to Austin, quit art school, and help build neon signs. And I thought my friend and he told me years later, I thought you were just spouting off: “Oh yeah, right. And you did exactly what you said you were going to do. You moved to Austin and you started building neon signs.”

I initially approached Sanders as an expert on a prominent element of Austin’s commercial strip roadsides. Neon signs are private investments that actively shape the public realm. I wanted to get a sense of the geography of neon signs in Austin, who produces them, and where they are concentrated. I also

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141 In addition, graduate students in a planning studio at the University of Texas School of Architecture had been examining South First and opportunities for enlivening public space and finding properties where there was room for redevelopment. Students spoke with great interest and respect for Todd Sanders and Roadhouse Relics.
wanted to gain his perspective on the changes that were occurring along South First Street. Like South Congress and Burnet, this commercial strip has a vital concentration of local businesses, both inside the boundaries of the South First Independent Business Investment Zone and beyond it.

Sanders shared his personal story of rehabilitating a collapsing building, which was one of a wave of small-scale reinvestments along South Austin commercial strips. When Sanders first moved to Austin, he lived in a Village Trailer Park on South Lamar behind an iconic business called Maria’s Taco Xpress. Like many of trailer parks that lined South Austin corridors, the Village Trailer Park was redeveloped. Sanders spoke of the loss of the trailer park and several other favorite places, a leitmotif throughout his life story:

It seems like Walgreen’s is stalking me and tearing down all of the things that I love and I could name ten things that were really neat locations all over Texas that Walgreen’s have bought and torn down these gorgeous old places and build Walgreen’s. There was a Petrified Forest Motor Courts on Guadalupe and they tore it down. My old school in Houston... they tore it down. The Frisco, the original Frisco, was torn down. Now it’s a Walgreens. I mean all of these places were torn down... what do you guys have against vintage architecture, you know?!

Living in a 1954 Spartan Travel Trailer, his first studio was a metal shed on the concrete pad that was all that remained of a former laundromat. When he needed more room to expand and he began to look around South Austin for a new space:

I always just loved South First. It was sort of the “mutt” of a business district. You know it wasn’t the polished South Congress and it wasn’t the gritty Lamar with the super busy street and all of the hustle and bustle. It was sort of its own little village.

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142 Maria’s Taco Xpress is an exuberant roadside taco business spared and incorporated in this redevelopment. That story is featured in Joshua Long’s book Weird City: Sense of Place and Creative Resistance in Austin, Texas.
And so I started driving around and looking and I saw this place. I just fell in love with it. It was falling in. The roof had collapsed in the ‘80s and it was Baker’s Fruit Stand and they just closed it down. And the guy that was running it lived in this old Detroiter trailer in the back, which is still there. I approached him about buying the property. He was this old crotchety man, who was like: “Go on, get out of here!” You know, and so I respected his wishes, but I felt like I already owned the place. I had a real connection with this place and I used to sit across from it. The peach colored building was a dog grooming place called Doggy Styles and I would just sit in the parking lot and drink coffee and look at this place. And I became friends with these two artists who were renting a place just south of me here and I was hanging around in there. I said: “You know, I really love ya’ll’s studio here, it’s just really great, but my dream is to own the place across the street – the Baker’s Fruit Stand.” And the guy said here is the phone number of the daughters. They are putting it up for sale next week. The guy died and you are the only one in town who knows it is going up for sale.

Sanders quickly read up on commercial real estate, figuring out that he could get a contract that would lock out other buyers for a certain period of time. He secured a contract on the property and within a few days the back-up offers were double his offer. The sellers required cash for purchase, but he had no cash at the time. Time was running out and on the 42\textsuperscript{nd} day of a 45-day contract he was able to find an investor. This was the first of many challenges related to rehabilitating the building to establish an art gallery.

He camped out in the building making small improvements over time. He took the collapsing roof of the building down and rebuilt it himself:

There it was just four walls and they were just so old and brittle. That corner was about to collapse into the sidewalk and so I wrapped a cable around the entire building with a come-along and kind of cinched it together long enough to do all of this structural steel work, which I had no idea what I was doing. I just had to do it. I couldn’t afford to hire anyone to do it.

I put my life on hold for over ten years. I entertained no thoughts of relationship or marriage or a house or a nice car. I drove hoopties\footnote{A “hooptie” refers to an old and decrepit car.} and every penny I could scrape together, I just put into this building and into my business.
And somewhere along the way, it just finally started getting easier. And the response for what I was doing grew. When I started doing vintage neon people didn’t get it. They just thought: “Why did you mess that sign up. I was in here last week and it was all nice and shiny and new. And now it’s got rust and is flat and unfinished and has bullet holes.” I said: “I don’t know, but I love it and I’m doing it.”

As the business took off, he gradually expanded the gallery. The whole front of it had been boarded up. He put in windows and a door.

His personal story goes crescendos with a marriage proposal. He took his future wife back to the gallery where he had a single neon sign that said: “Sarah, will you marry me?” At the time of the interview, he had a one-year old child and business had increased to selling three large art pieces a month.

At the beginning of the interview, I asked Sanders about Austin’s neon signs. He described what he calls Austin’s “neon drives,” including Sixth Street in downtown, Burnet Road, and South First Street. These are areas of Austin where concentrations of neon signs coincide with concentrations of local business. Sanders lamented the loss of many signs, including some of his own. Before creating his own indoor neon sign art, he apprenticed with Ionart, a neon sign company that has grown in recent years. He has restored vintage signs and designed new ones throughout Austin. Sanders produced signs for Doc’s Motorworks on South Congress Avenue, Lambert’s in downtown,\(^{144}\) and Jovita’s on South First Street.\(^{145}\)

\(^{144}\) Lamberts’ is a barbecue joint owned by Liz Lambert’s brother and frequented by local officials on city council nights. Liz Lambert was the entrepreneur who purchased the San Jose Hotel and revamped it into the Hotel San Jose, an upscale boutique hotel on South Congress.

\(^{145}\) At that time, there was no indication that Jovita’s neon sign would darken. In summer 2012, federal agents seized the property, as the business owner was accused of running a heroin business out of it. At the time of this writing, the fate of that business is in question. There was extensive news coverage in the Austin American-Statesman and the Austin Chronicle.
The neon signs along Austin’s commercial strips become landmarks at night. The fate of these landmarks typically follows that of the businesses that commissioned them. As businesses have faltered over the years, Sanders has kept neon remnants of them. He has a collection of old neon signs that keeps out behind the gallery:

I’ve taken a lot of old signs down in Austin and it’s sad to see them go and it’s kind of a mixed emotion, because I’m kind of saving it. It’s not out in the public anymore. There was a Dart Bowl on Burnet Road years ago with this enormous bowling pin, and I took it down. And right next to the Blue Bonnet... they had this brand name sign that was up for years, that was Oil-O-Matic or something and I took it down. The Night Hawk on Congress on Riverside. It was taken down. They are at Threadgill’s at the neon museum. But I’ve taken a lot of old signs and I’ve seen a lot of them go. The old Terminix bug is no longer around anymore. That’s also at Threadgill’s.

Threadgill’s is a popular music venue, bar, and cultural hub in Austin. The connection between commercial spaces, local art and music history, roadside
preservation and adaptive reuse are themes that converge at Roadhouse Relics, Threadgill’s, and other businesses along Austin’s commercial strips. These themes help to explain the success of local business and their aesthetic of vintage commercial history.

Sanders’ do-it-yourself ethic has produced a story that brings together art and thrift with a sense of place and community. For Sanders, Austin’s commercial landscapes are indicative of creativity and openness, an illustration of places of special value and historical continuity. The neon signs within his
narrative are not symbols of crass commercialism, but expressions of creativity and care for place. To him, well-crafted neon signs are contributions to the public realm, where local business, creativity, and thrift are virtues of the roadside. He has not only used an existing building as the medium for his art gallery, he tends to neon signs as a form of roadside preservation and stewardship.

**Organic Change and Land Assembly along South Congress Avenue**

A local investor told me that the reason he brought Rob Lippincott into a development deal was that he is the “luckiest guy he’d ever met.” Lippincott is a restaurateur who invested in land along South Congress Avenue before it became trendy and expensive. His investments have not only been fruitful, they are considered an integral part of the look and feel of change in South Austin.

I interviewed Lippincott in his office, which has panoramic views of South Congress Avenue. It sits on a top floor of a mixed use development called “04.” It was developed with partners on Lippincott’s property. The number that stands in for a name is a reference to South Austin’s 78704 zip code. Lippincott’s investments along South Congress Avenue represent a full spectrum of reinvestment, from purchase of an old grist mill and feed store and its transformation into Guero’s Taco Bar; to the creation of an outdoor music venue that helped to establish the area as an entertainment district; to his investment in an award-winning adaptive reuse of a World War I airfield. His most recent accomplishment was the development of the 04.

Lippincott started in the restaurant business on Oltdorf Street in South Austin in 1986. After a time, he and his wife had been talking about expanding Guero’s, either into a series of smaller restaurants in multiple locations or in a
single location. His wife was pregnant and she preferred to concentrate time and energy on one larger location. Independently, they spotted a promising commercial property for sale. They were comfortable with the site because it was close to downtown and visible along a busy street. They applied for a small business loan and purchased the property in 1995. The additional parking served their growing business well and owning the property improved their position. Lippincott explained:

We had worked ourselves into a position at our old location with our landlord paying a percentage rent, and we were doing so well that we were paying a lot in percentage rent. When we came over here with this nicer, bigger place, that we were going to end up owning, we were only paying 20-25% more than we were paying at the old place. It had a lot more advantages... So, we jumped in and luckily it worked out.

The old feed store on the site is an 1887 building known as the J.M. Crawford building. Lippincott initiated a historic landmark designation after purchasing the property, which made the property eligible for a valuable property tax abatement for income-generating properties.

The conversion of the old feed store into Guero’s Taco Bar triggered additional parking requirements that could not be met on site. Lippincott decided to move an old house on his property for restaurant parking. This required review by the Austin Landmark Commission. There was strong opposition by people who owned a historic house across the street and had a direct familial connection to the original owners of it. Rob successfully persuaded the Landmark Commission to allow the historic home to be moved for parking. He argued:

The roof had already caved in at that point and was starting to leak real badly. The only way anybody is going to be able to redo it, unless they redo it as a home or something, is
they are going to have to have parking. So to save this historic building, we need to move this other one that is potentially historic, too.\textsuperscript{146}

In 2004, Lippincott purchased an adjoining property that had been a used car dealership. He bought it to ensure that future use of the site would be compatible with his own. The bones of the car dealership showroom were incorporated by Dick Clark Architecture and architect Michael Hsu into the design of the 04 mixed use development. The former car dealership showroom now serves as restaurant and retail spaces and it is presently inhabited by a popular “burger bar” and a designer clothing store. Lippincott described the decision to incorporate the used car dealership as “what we considered the right thing to do, because you save what you can.” He added that in retrospect, the financials would have been better if they had redeveloped rather than retained the showroom.

Lippincott also purchased another adjoining parcel in 2004 that had a small, 1950s era two-bay strip center on it. He bought this parcel with the intention of leasing it to commercial tenants in the short term until he redeveloped the site.\textsuperscript{147} With these purchases, Rob and his partners had assembled the entire block. On the northernmost portion of the property, he began a process of developing the first mixed use development along South Congress Avenue. This project activated a series of conflicts with the neighborhoods on either side South Congress. The negotiation with the

\textsuperscript{146} At the last minute, friends who were going to move the house found the process of moving it cost prohibitive. A week later, a couple of other people came along and paid for the house and moved it off the property to another location in South Austin. The lot was paved and a garden added to it in 2004.

\textsuperscript{147} Around the time of the interview, there had been an article in a weekly newspaper about the possible demolition of the building, which holds a local, independent video store and a shop specializing in eco-friendly gifts and building materials. Lippincott expressed frustration with the media for a premature story that he described as inaccurate.
neighborhood associations involved many of the common issues contested at the edges of commercial districts and residential neighborhoods including the impact of traffic and parking on surrounding residences and the visual impact of new, higher density development.

Rob Lippincott's Reinvestment Site

![Map of Rob Lippincott's Reinvestment Site](image)

Figure 25. Rob Lippincott’s Reinvestment Site. Map created by author.

Among residents active in the neighborhood association, Lippincott has a reputation as a developer and major player in reshaping South Congress as a major entertainment destination. Lippincott insisted that he was a restaurateur first, who had stumbled into development, and not a developer. Some of this conflict stems as much from his role in organizing local festivals as it does from
his role in property development. He was instrumental in the organization of a Celebrate South Austin Street Fair in 2004. While a street fair might sound innocuous, it precipitated a major conflict with the neighborhood associations. Lippincott proposed the idea along with other merchants in the area. He assumed much of the financial responsibility for the fair and for this was promised 50% of the proceeds. To get a street closure permit for the fair, a percentage of the merchants along the corridor had to agree to it. There was also an additional requirement for approval from the neighborhood association. After successfully obtaining a permit for the fair, Lippincott was summoned to a meeting at the City, in which the neighborhood association attempted to have the permit rescinded. A legal battle ensued with Lippincott prevailing 36 hours prior to the opening of the fair.

According to a weekly newspaper account, profits from the Celebrate South Austin street fair were not only going to benefit Rob Lippincott, they were to be funneled through Lippincott’s own nonprofit organization, the Save South Congress Association. The nonprofit was founded to combat light rail plans along South Congress, a year after the defeat of a bond package for light rail in 2000.148 Lippincott remains adamant that light rail is aimed at redevelopment that would force local businesses out of the district:

Financially, we would have been able to survive with the restaurant as soon as we had our own parking, we just survive the deal, but all of the little shops would have closed and the only parking they have is in front of them... and at the beginning people totally admitted it’s not really a transportation deal, this is for development, this is to spur development along the [light rail] line... I mean it’s just a bad idea. I know urban development has a really good argument for public transportation. But why not buses... And you know our property values are going to go up, it will be good for me and my family, but it will totally change the character of the street... The landlords will either

have to lease to national vendors or sell to the developers and that’s the plan. And from the beginning that was the plan. It’s for redevelopment.

Lippincott’s own mixed use development benefits from the current mix of businesses. It is the only development of its kind on that segment of South Congress. For critics of Rob Lippincott, the defense of local businesses seem incongruent with his role as a landlord who has raised rents on his commercial tenants.

Lippincott actively participates in other events to promote South Congress including “First Thursdays.” These are monthly events in which merchants stay open late, sponsor live music, and offer sales and other promotions. These events are blamed or credited (depending on the commentator), with fanning the flames of South Congress’ popularity as an entertainment district. These events have remained a bone of contention among residents who resent the transition of South Congress beyond a neighborhood-serving commercial strip to a major tourist attraction and entertainment district.

Lippincott’s pattern of reinvestment, one primarily based in adaptive reuse, organic change, and incremental land assembly, have actively contributed to the establishment of a major entertainment district. The area is considered one of Austin’s most vibrant commercial districts and a generator of both rising property and sales taxes. While Lippincott’s concern over the fate of small businesses among rising rents is met with some skepticism, the ability of small businesses to remain an integral part of redeveloping central city corridors

149 Mottola (2004). Upon review of this piece, Rob Lippincott offered the following response: “The street fair that the south congress merchants had in 2004 lost money. As to the irony of me defending tenants while raising rents beyond the reach of my tenants, I would say that while in the nine years since, I have never had a tenant leave because of too high rent.”
remains a debated issue – one that may yet have influence in another vote on urban rail.

The controversy over South Congress’ future is one where the merchants and residents in surrounding neighborhoods are at times aligned and at other points in opposition. While many residents value the local businesses along South Congress, many of Lippincott’s run-ins with the neighborhood are related to the externalities associated with the transition of South Congress into an entertainment district. These externalities include increased traffic; a greater demand for free parking in the neighborhood; and loud, outdoor music.

Parking is a major factor in reinvestment and commercial development that was mentioned by nearly every interviewee during this research. Many of the popular businesses along South Congress Avenue are housed in taxpayer strips that lack off-street parking. This tension will be described from the other side of the fence in the next chapter; the political economy of parking that remains a central concern in both adaptive reuse and redevelopment along transitioning commercial strips.

Reinvestment in old buildings is an important thread in Lippincott’s narrative of change along South Congress. His involvement extends beyond the site of Guero’s and 04. In the late nineties, during a major road improvement project, Lippincott played a minor role in reinvestment in Penn Field, an award-winning adaptive reuse project on the site of a World War I airfield.\textsuperscript{150} The

\textsuperscript{150} The Penn Field adaptive reuse project won a 2004 award for “Best Mixed Use Project” from the Austin Business Journal’s Commercial Real Estate awards; a 2004 award for “Best Recently Restored Building” from the Austin Chronicle; a 2003 award for “Best of Everything Old is New Again” award from the Austin Chronicle; an honorable mention from the Environmental Construction + Design magazine in 2005; and a 2002 Merit Award by the Heritage Society of Austin.
creation of an office park in the ruins of Penn Field is also credited for bringing new employment and new life to South Congress. Lippincott recounted the memory of driving by sidewalks and new walls installed in the street improvement.

I was just out driving around one night and saw the barricades come off and thought wow, that’s cool. And I liked the way it looked. They had put in great sidewalks and some new walls. Anyhow, it looked nice and so I thought well that growth that we had been experiencing farther north is going to squeeze out this way, probably now for sure that they had redone this street. And then a couple of days later a friend of mine who was in the development business and still is, kind of, said: “Hey I want to show you something.” And so we drove to Penn Field and he showed it to me and I thought, wow that this is really neat, these old buildings, and I was familiar with redoing old buildings and the allure that they have…. and he was looking for investors in that project, or partners in it. And so, I just thought well, I could be right about this... development really is going to scoot out here in this part of Congress and this is a beautiful place to do it. And so, I got involved with the other partners in that and it turned out really good.

Lippincott is a restaurateur, investor, property developer, and merchant organizer who found a niche among the old buildings along South Congress. His narrative illuminates the politics of reinvestment in surrounding neighborhoods that see South Congress’ ascent to a major entertainment district as both an amenity and a nuisance.

**STREETS PAVED AND PARKING LOTS DE-pAVED WITH ICE CREAM**

While Lippincott choreographed change along South Congress, Amy Simmons has had a direct hand in change along many more of Austin’s commercial strips. She is an entrepreneur who came to Austin in the 1980s and started one of the most popular businesses in town. Within her narrative, she moves from commercial tenant, to property owner, to small-scale developer. Simmons’ approach has been to adapt properties to the needs of her growing chain of ice-cream shops and restaurants. She has learned not only to adapt
individual properties, but to attract local businesses to complement her own. She has both actively adapted existing properties and she has influenced the composition of surrounding properties along several Austin commercial corridors.

An interview with Amy was conducted at the Amy’s Ice Cream headquarters, situated to the west of Burnet Road and across from Home Lumber. Her unique apartment-like office space sits atop a production facility, overlooking an Amy’s Ice Cream shop and Phil’s Icehouse, a hamburger stand. An outdoor seating area is bordered by a low concrete-block wall separating customers from cars speeding by along Burnet Road. Her ice cream shop, restaurant, production complex, and headquarters were adapted out of a car dealership and post office.

Figure 26. Amy’s Ice Cream and Phil’s Icehouse on Burnet Road. Photo by author.
The beginning of the interview captured the well-publicized story of Simmons’ start in the ice cream business. Her background and original interests had little connection to either entrepreneurship or ice cream; she originally intended to go to medical school. While working for another ice cream business, she explored the possibility of opening an ice cream business in England, before settling on a move to Austin in 1984. Austin was a growing city and she expected the local climate to actively contribute to ice cream sales.

Simmons’ ice cream business opened in a space north of the University at Texas at Austin campus in an old strip mall that had been remodeled by a local investor. She recalled that this space was her first lesson in the importance of synergy with surrounding businesses and location. The location did not seem like it would be ideal at first. It had no off-street parking and was just north of the main campus. She noted that the turnover in the student population was about 25% every year and it made sense to locate in proximity to surrounding residential neighborhoods. In addition, she was near to Texas French Bread, a popular local, independent business and a card shop with steady business. This location was also within proximity to a Toy Joy, a popular toy store. She reinforced this synergy when she moved the ice cream shop to an available location on the other side of the street.

Simmons opened 25 stores and she has closed 10. Some of the other locations have been within theaters, regional malls, and in The Arboretum, an early version of the regional lifestyle shopping center that contains a mix of national and local tenants in a planned retail, office, and hotel development in
suburban Austin. There are presently two locations outside of Austin, one in Houston and another in San Antonio.
Figure 27. Amy’s Ice Cream – Locations in Austin.
Table 3: Key for Map of Amy’s Ice Cream Locations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Map #</th>
<th>Store Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Amy’s Ice Cream’s main production facility with an Amy’s Ice Cream Store and adjoining Phil’s Ice House. This adaptive reuse project was designed by Michael Hsu Architecture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>This location involved adaptation of a commercial site. There is a single tenant space associated at the site and Amy leases it to local businesses that are synergistic with her ice cream parlor at this location.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Amy leases space along South Congress Avenue, across from the Hotel San Jose and Austin Motel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Amy’s Super South location in a 1957 commercial strip center that, according to tax assessor’s data, appears to have been updated most recently in 2005.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Amy’s Ice Cream location associated with Austinville 78704, a shopping center developed by Amy of local businesses and designed by Michael Hsu Architecture. The ice cream parlor at this location was developed in the footprint of an existing building, but heavily modified.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Store located next to theater in a suburban style shopping center developed in the late 1990s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Amy’s at The Arboretum, another suburban style shopping center developed in the 1980s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Amy’s at the Westbank Market shopping center.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>The Grove location in South Park Shopping Center.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Southpark Cinema location within shopping mall, next to theater.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Location in the Hill Country Galleria shopping center.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>This is a leased space in the Austin Bergstrom International Airport (ABIA). Austin’s prominent chains, including Amy’s, are featured in the ABIA’s food court.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In 2004, Amy purchased an old post office building on Burnet Road for her production facility. She recalled thinking that it was not a particularly good retail location, but it was a central location that would work for manufacturing and shipping ice cream. There was a used car business leasing the car lot out front and she saw the purchase of the old car dealership as insurance. They had a constant stream of potential car dealers who seemed willing to pay more in rent than their own profits, but she decided to put the ice cream shop out front instead.\footnote{Amy noted that the high rents car dealerships are willing to pay for locations as a potential pressure against change along commercial strips.} According to Amy: “We had no idea it would do well there. Literally.
No idea. We did it just to complement our tours of the manufacturing facility.” The reception was overwhelmingly positive. The location was immediately embraced by neighborhood residents seeking nearby family-friendly restaurants and businesses to patronize.

Adaptation of the site included the creation of a playground from a former concrete lot. Amy’s ice cream offers educational programs in entrepreneurialism and busloads of kids come to tour the ice cream facility to learn about starting their own businesses. The playground provides space for kids who are touring the facility. Located in proximity to outdoor seating for the restaurant and ice cream shop, the playground also provides a place for snacking parents to allow kids to play.

The playground was one of the most difficult aspects of adapting the site. One would predict that the issue had to do with loss of parking, but in this case it was the City of Austin’s impervious surface regulations that spurred a fight with the City. According to Amy’s account, Amy’s Ice Cream was going to be charged a large fee for pulling up concrete and adding trees on the lot. She did not expect to be penalized for this, but staff had interpreted the development code to require a fee for any increase or reduction in impervious surface. She got the Mayor Pro Tem involved and eventually persuaded staff that a reduction of parking and impervious surface should not be penalized.

At this Burnet Road location, she experimented with actively recruiting synergistic businesses. She determined that hamburgers would be the best match for the ice cream shop; however, she could not find any local operators who wanted to lease a location next to that store. “Phil’s Icehouse” was invented by Simmons and her husband Steve to create variety; it would appear to be a
separate business in an adjoining space, but it would remain owned and operated by the couple.

Amy’s Ice Cream Headquarters

Figure 28. Map of Amy’s Ice Cream Headquarters site.

Amy and Steve Simmons have been active advocates for local independent businesses in Austin. In 2002, the Simmons’ organized Choose Austin First. This was the same year that the Austin Independent Business Alliance (AIBA) was founded. The mission of Choose Austin First was “supporting locally owned businesses by educating the public of the importance and benefits of shopping locally through proactive and strategic marketing initiatives.”\textsuperscript{152} The two groups had different approaches to city government.

\textsuperscript{152} Austin Independent Business Alliance (2009).
Choose Austin First was oriented toward networking among businesses, while the AIBA has steadily increased its partnership with the City of Austin. In 2009, the two nonprofits had merged under the banner of the AIBA.

Simmons’ interest in local business and her experience in adapting property have inspired her to move from property ownership into the role of small-scale developer. In 2011, she developed Austinville 78704, which is a strip center along South Lamar Boulevard with spaces that she leases to local businesses that complement her own. Simmons described the goals and difficulties of developing Austinville 78704:

The cost of development and the upfront cost of doing a small development like this is prohibitive. It makes you tear everything down and do the Walmarts…. We want to take human-scale architecture, good bones, historic architecture, maintain it and enhance it, modernize it, but keep it and keep it on a human scale and then lease it to only local tenants. And do the development as inexpensively as we can so that we can keep our rental rates low to the locals.

Across from Austinville 78704, an Amy’s Ice Cream shop and Phil’s Icehouse were established within the footprint of an existing building. The building does not retain much of the original material. It is mostly new construction that features glass plates that Simmons described as mimicking the look of a classic gas station. It has the appearance of adaptive reuse, but with minimum reuse of the original building.

Simmons described a keen interest in the interplay between city government and local business. She has served as a City Council Member and Mayor Pro Tem for the wealthy suburban community of Westlake Hills. According to Amy, the City of Austin is biased in favor of large developers and chain stores. Part of the impetus for her involvement in founding Choose Austin
First was a controversy over giving larger corporations tax breaks to develop property in downtown.

At the time of the interview, Amy was working on her second local business development, Austinville 78750. This location is much farther north along Highway 183, a beltline highway that represents the far boundary of Central Austin. The site will involve new construction. Amy was suing the developers of a neighboring property over a faulty stormwater system. When asked which is easier – scrape and redevelopment or adaptive reuse, Simmons’ response was “definitely adaptive reuse.”

While Amy’s Ice Cream was viewed as a positive for Burnet Road, it is an unlikely story to be selected in gentrification literature, which is so often aimed at pointing out the more exclusive enclaves of contemporary society. The striking thing about the experience that Amy’s Ice Cream sells is that it is relatively accessible and it is family friendly. While purchase of ice cream does depend on some amount of disposable income, the market is a broad one. It may be that the businesses that co-locate and lease from Amy Simmons appeal to a particular market segment, but it does not seem to be a particularly exclusive one compared to a recent wave of upscale bars and restaurants. Amy’s and Phil’s are two places where hamburgers and ice cream, standard, fairly egalitarian customer base may enjoy a playground and a chat.

Amy’s Ice Cream is a modest representation of Pine and Gilmore’s experience economy, selling the experience of fun along Burnet Road.153 The ice cream business, Amy explained, is not merely about selling food: “People go for

an ice cream, but we say we don’t sell a food product, we sell an experience. They come to cheer themselves up or as a kind of entertainment, something to do, not just consumption. You don’t go to an ice cream store because you are hungry.” Amy’s Ice Cream is perhaps a more recent reinvestment along Burnet Road, from which entertainment experiences were once sold out of a Dairy Queen, from a Drive-In Theater, and from a mini-golf course and kiddie park—all long gone.

Amy’s Ice Cream locations are adaptations and constructions mostly aimed at creating a pleasing experience, by fashioning architectural distinctiveness out of a palette of ordinary buildings. Amy’s Ice Cream shops heavily rebuild humble sites, replicating the aesthetic of old, even when construction and building materials are mostly new. As will be discussed in the next section, the retention of commercial building footprints is a logic that resonates with economizing local businesses.

**MICHAEL HSU: MODERN ADAPTATIONS FOR LOCAL BUSINESS**

Michael Hsu is the architect of the commercial spaces that comprise Amy Simmons’ ice cream empire. She credits him for Austin’s look and feel of local business. It is a retro chic created through adaptation of existing buildings to give them new curb appeal and a nostalgic, often mid-twentieth century modern look. Michael Hsu Architecture is arguably the best known restaurant and retail design firm in Austin. The firm thrives in the context of relatively low rent commercial properties, transforming them into successful and often upscale businesses. The firm has carved out a valuable niche in Austin’s design community. Even in the context of a national recession that stalled many large
development projects, Hsu’s retail and restaurant businesses remained strong. The firm’s calling card sign is a regular feature of construction fencing around sites that front on Austin’s resurgent commercial strips. Hsu’s influence can be observed within Austin’s downtown, but even more prominently along these commercial strips.

Hsu’s designs often incorporate references to the past, while retaining original building footprints. He describes this strategy as more palatable to Austin’s neighborhood residents and within the bounds of financial feasibility for smaller, independent businesses. Adaptive reuse has been the bread and butter of his work; it is an outcome of his clients’ needs and the City of Austin’s permitting process. He has positioned his firm into a niche based on the practical considerations of local businesses, their budget conscious circumstances, and Austin’s land development code. He explained:

My clients want to not have to go through the complete site planning process and so many of my projects are site plan exemptions and that pretty much means keeping the existing building. You can do a change of use, you can do a lot of remodeling, you can nearly rebuild a building, but not pushing at the site planning process saves about eight months on the project and an exemption doesn’t require that it goes through the typical improvements for the site like detention/retention facilities and water quality, so there is a lot of cost savings there... like on a lot of the boulevards that we talked about, like the newer areas Burnet and South Lamar those areas have a lot of paving... the existing impervious area is usually huge and we have 90% impervious cover. In a way those things get grandfathered into the development...Some of those big boulevards are really flat, they are really paved over, and have existing buildings that can be salvaged.

According to the interviews with Hsu and with other City officials, Austin’s environmental regulations, especially stormwater regulations, are more extensive than in other communities. By keeping projects below the threshold for new development and maintaining them as commercial remodels, tenants and property owners can retain grandfathered entitlements and save money and
time. Hsu describes clients interested in this kind of adaptive reuse as primarily small, local business owners and very small-scale developers. He added:

And those clients were looking for some buildings that brought some kind of innate character that can add some richness to the project.... Austinites seem to be more comfortable with buildings that are reused because they have an air of authenticity to them and sort of a preserve, you know, the existing fabric of neighborhoods as opposed to brand new shiny buildings. So a lot of times it’s not just an economic decision. It’s sort of an aesthetic, creative decision that we make with the owners.

Other city permitting processes were contributing factors, tilting the equation either for or against adaptive reuse. A recent change in the building code lowered the threshold that triggered installation of sprinklers to 1,700 square feet for restaurants. According to Hsu, a property just a parcel or two off of a main corridor would require additional water line extensions to be operated as a restaurant – a costly proposition. He predicted that this would push against the feasibility of adaptive reuse, making some smaller properties less likely to be adapted for use. Hsu saw Austin’s Heritage Tree Ordinance and other tree protections as acting as a damper on redevelopment activity on properties with large trees. The Heritage Tree Ordinance protects certain species of trees that are 24 inches or more in diameter and additional tree protections require protection for trees over 19 inches.\footnote{Austin ORDINANCE NO. 20100204-038. Adopted February 4, 2010.} Conversely, these protections made redevelopment opportunities along near treeless boulevards like Burnet Road and South Lamar all the more valuable.

The interview with Hsu highlighted the role of property ownership as a major factor in reinvestment momentum along commercial strips. According to Hsu, many of his firms’ projects are on properties recently purchased by “the first [new] owner that a property has had in decades.” The property is often
purchased from a family, some of whom have owned the property from the time of original construction. He described the typical profile of a commercial property as one constructed in the 1950s through the 1970s that had been paid off 20 years after construction. With property owned in the clear, many of these property owners hang on to property without any particular need to sell. Hsu described this as a common process:

That’s something that a lot of developers have always sort of known about, so much of the property is owned in the clear in these corridors, because they were built in the ‘60s or whatever. They aren’t owned by development companies who are trying to flip them over; they are just generating a little bit of rent and even though the rent is low it makes sense because the property hasn’t been remodeled or anything in decades. And they still sort of turn a nice little profit and they just kind of churn in a way like that for a while and then it’s the new developers that come along and buy it at market rate and then redevelop it. And they kind of raise the bar for property taxes along that whole corridor and along with that the rents all raise at the same time. It’s interesting because, it doesn’t actually take a lot of properties to do that, it only takes a couple of key projects to see that kind of cycle flip the other direction.

He cited South Congress Avenue as an example of this process. He credited Rob Lippincott’s restaurant, Guero’s Taco Bar, and the Hotel San Jose as key anchors. Hsu noted that this process had also led to the rediscovery of longstanding businesses along South Congress such as Fran’s Hamburgers and the Continental Club, and then an influx of more mainstream businesses such as Amy’s Ice Cream.

Hsu described the attributes of South Congress and other commercial strips as having similarities in terms of the turnover of land and the rise in rents, but the existing development patterns and parcel dimensions heavily influenced the scale of reinvestment. He contrasted South First Street with South Lamar Boulevard. He described South First as more residential in character with smaller lots and South Lamar as having more capacity for redevelopment with larger
lots, more paving, and fewer trees. While South First remained largely constrained to redevelopment at scale of the residential neighborhoods that flank it, South Lamar was developing into “a mix of very large developments and small development projects and adaptive reuse gas stations to restaurants and everything in between.”

Hsu’s work has transitioned to include high profile vertical mixed use projects along these corridors. He was selected as the consulting architect for the South Lamar Plaza redevelopment, which will include more than 400 apartments and approximately 85,000 sq. ft. of retail space. He described this redevelopment project as similar to large-scale redevelopment projects along other corridors. Along South Lamar and Burnet Road, there was a larger supply of parcels that can accommodate large redevelopment projects without land assembly. He also mentioned that they were surrounded by relatively high income neighborhoods that provide a strong local market for retail and restaurant development. These factors were fueling a process in which developers were fiercely competing for larger parcels. Hsu’s firm was also working on mixed use developments on Manor Road in East Austin and along North Lamar, with similar parcel sizes, but surrounding residential neighborhoods of more modest means.
Design Work by Michael Hsu
Restaurant and Commercial Projects

Sources: Michael Hsu Architecture website and on-line sources;
ESRI Topographic base map.
Map is not all inclusive and projects are not in chronological order.
Map produced by author.

Figure 29. Map of Projects designed by Michael Hsu Architecture.
# Table 4: Key for Map of Projects Designed by Michael Hsu

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Map #</th>
<th>Project Name/Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Michael Hsu Architecture Headquarters – The firm adapted an existing commercial building on Burnet Road and Hsu relocated his headquarters from a previous location along Guadalupe Street. (The firm was formerly across the street from Amy’s Ice Cream’s Guadalupe location.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Rosedale Village – Michael Hsu said that he worked for the architectural firm that designed this one-story multi-tenant shopping center on Burnet Road. The center was constructed in 2004. The building was designed to have an urban feel and was constructed with salvaged brick.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>La Coq Rouge – This was a recent adaptive reuse project. In an interview with representatives from the Rosedale Neighborhood Association, I learned that the neighborhood was fighting the new restaurant over anticipated conflicts between this commercial use and surrounding residences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>4200 Lamar. Michael Hsu’s firm completed a façade remodel of a 1960s era commercial building. They also completed the commercial tenant build out for Uchiko, an upscale Japanese restaurant.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>1510 West 34th. Adaptive reuse project.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>P. Terry’s is a local hamburger chain that quickly rose to popularity. Michael Hsu Architecture has designed this chain to reflect a mid-century look reminiscent of the roadside architecture of the 1950s and 1960s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Fino – This is a commercial tenant remodel for an upscale restaurant.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>University Park – Lobby and third floor design of an office tower.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>2900 Manor Road - Design for an East Side Mixed Use project.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>916 Springdale – This is the conversion of an industrial warehouse to art galleries, “creative office suites,” and a café. This is the East Austin project mentioned in an interview with Abe Zimmerman in the next section.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Tacos and Tequila (TNT) – restaurant project.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Snap Kitchen – restaurant project.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Haddington’s – restaurant project.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Mellow Johnny’s – Adaptive reuse project that won a merit award from the Heritage Society of Austin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>The Belmont – restaurant project.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>La Condesa and Malverde – restaurant project in new mixed use development in downtown Austin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Icenhauer’s – restaurant project.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>701 S. Lamar – office remodel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Uchi – remodel for upscale Japanese restaurant along South Lamar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Lamar Plaza Redevelopment – designed exterior of new development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Olivia – restaurant project.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Sway – restaurant project.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>04 Mixed Use Development – designed with Dick Clark Architecture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>More Home Slice – restaurant project.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Lucy’s Fried Chicken – restaurant project.</td>
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</table>
When asked about the future of the case study commercial strips, Hsu replied that he hoped the process would remain “organic.” He described the influence of Austin’s commercial design standards, also known as Subchapter E, which control the interface between development and the street, including standards for landscaping, sidewalks, sidewalk cafes, and parking lots. Subchapter E is aimed at changing the character of streetscapes and Michael replied that:

It will control the streetscapes. It has its roots in a lot New Urbanism tenets, which in general is positive. But a lot of times, because the lots are so small, it’s hard to sort of have an idealized, you know, streetscape like you would see in New York or San Francisco. That would be so disjointed. You can imagine on Burnet or something. The Design guidelines push toward a typical Manhattan street… sometimes that idealism is hard to achieve.

He noted that he actually liked how Burnet and Lamar are “vaguely disorganized places,” because it provides “different opportunities for different kinds of businesses.”

Michael Hsu’s influence appears to be specific to Austin, but his role in crafting the look and feel of commercial spaces is likely to have its analogies in other places. Themes in the interview revolved around the development patterns, infrastructure, codes, and scale of financing as important factors in patterns of reinvestment. These are structures and processes that shape the character of the small adaptive reuse projects as well as larger-scale redevelopment projects.

**Abe Zimmerman and Investments in History**

A plaque on a small strip of retail shops on South Congress commemorates the acts of a two local business leaders in revitalizing South Congress:
In 1999, when South Congress was in a state of neglect and disrepair, local businessmen Abe Zimmerman and Stan Biderman purchased this building and began their extensive renovations on South Congress which later included “04”, Penn Field, the Hotel San Jose. They named this building “SoCo Center” and the area “SoCo” partially because they were trying to create a new identity for the area, but primarily because those letters were available from an old sign they recycled.

I interviewed Abe Zimmerman at a Starbucks in West Austin. He has been an investor in numerous restaurant and retail ventures in Austin. He put together investments in both adaptive reuse and new development projects, including the adaptive reuse of Penn Field. His investments provided essential financial backing for South Congress, but he put together financing for local businesses and small development projects along Burnet Road, South Lamar Boulevard, North Lamar Boulevard, Guadalupe Street, and in East Austin.

Zimmerman shared his life story beginning with the lives of his parents, who are Holocaust survivors. His family emigrated from Eastern Europe. An integral part of his story is the search for personal and financial security after witnessing the struggles of his parents, who spent their lives recovering from their experiences. He described growing up poor in Houston and his transition to a career as a lawyer:

My parents either couldn’t see what was coming in East Europe... the Holocaust, or they saw it coming and didn’t have the means to get out. And so they suffered mightily at the hands of Hitler and at some point I decided I... I didn’t want to be poor anymore and I wanted to do whatever it is that would make me feel safe. You know, I didn’t feel safe growing up and you know, I think I was looking for safety. And I think, at some point, I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do and I decided that I was good at school. I was good at making good grades... Looking back, I think what happened was, because I got bullied a lot as a child, I think [being a] lawyer was just a way to be able to stand up for myself. So I went out and opened up a practice in Austin that was successful, even though everyone told us that it wouldn’t be.

It was the death of his father that permanently changed his life direction from lawyer to investor. He reassessed his priorities, marrying his wife and
changing his career path. His sister and brother-in-law moved to Austin from New York. His brother-in-law asked him if he wanted to open a business and he helped to open Katz’s Deli located on Sixth Street in downtown. At that point, Zimmerman decided that he was going to get into real estate and he was also a small-time venture capitalist in the software industry:

If you had a software deal and you needed someone to raise money or you had something that banks would say... they wouldn’t loan you money.... you’d come to me and say: “Hey! Here’s my idea and would you help me bring my idea to fruition?” “And I would say “OK.” And I might help raise money. I would help structure the deal... and then I would sometimes consult with them.

Over time, his reputation grew as a deal maker: “If you had a pretty good idea and you couldn’t get bank financing, you would eventually end up at my door.” This knack for business got him into real estate, but he was also heavily networked in Austin’s business community. For a time, he and his partner Stan Biderman managed Book People, a major independent bookseller in downtown Austin.

Zimmerman maintained close relationships and lent a hand to some of Austin’s most iconic businesses. This includes a partnership with Eddie Wilson, the owner of Threadgill’s, one of Austin’s famous music venues and the place where Janis Joplin got her start. Along the Dallas Highway (present day North Lamar), Threadgill’s was founded in 1933 as a bar in a converted gas station. The bar became renowned in the sixties for the country and rock and roll music. It was purchased by Eddie Wilson in 1980, just before the demise of the World Armadillo Headquarters, a live music venue that had been founded by Wilson in an old National Guard armory. Both the World Armadillo Headquarters and

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155 Approximately a year prior to the interview, the story of Katz’s closing was a feature story in the *Austin American Statesman*. 142
Threadgill’s have legendary status in Austin’s live music history. When Wilson had the opportunity to purchase land next to the former site of the Armadillo Headquarters for a Threadgill’s South, he called on Zimmerman to help.

Eddie’s deal with me was... we laughed about it... I would teach him to make money and he would teach me how to have soul. And, so I just needed somebody to nurse me along, teach me to be a little more soulful... I always wanted to do things that would be different. I don’t want to do that cookie cutter stuff. I’m always looking to do the thing that would make Austin different, which led me by the way to both San Jose and Threadgill’s... It’s fun. Or let me rephrase that... it’s an interesting way to get people’s approval... I would listen to your dream, which is what I did with Eddie and Liz Lambert and I could tell your dream, boy it really makes sense, I get it and I see it and that’s enough.

This quote alludes to Zimmerman’s role in helping Liz Lambert establish the Hotel San Jose. The story is well known locally of Lambert’s reinvestment in an aging motel on South Congress called the San Jose Hotel. The motel was known as a “flop house” and was identified by the City of Austin Police Department as a place of prostitution and the drug trade. It was also home to a population of residents living week to week and day to day. Lambert bought the property in 1995 with a dream of renovating the motel into a boutique hotel room by room. In a self-produced documentary, Lambert is shown opening rejection letters in her quest for small business loans to fund the transition. It was Zimmerman who provided the financing to make her dream happen:

I remember when she told me about it, man, I could just see it... It just made such sense what she had in mind to do. Take this old hotel, which was on South Congress, which is now turning into a pretty neat street... but [she] had the idea to turn it into a really small, boutique hotel that is about service. It’s about all this and the landscape... I mean I got it. It just kind of lit me up at the time.

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Beher (1999)

After he financed the Hotel San Jose, Zimmerman recalls that Max Nofzinger, a former Austin city council member, drove him around South Congress pointing out other opportunities for reinvestment.

But Max called me up and says, you’re the guy who did San Jose... I want you to do more of that on South Congress. I want to show you around. He was driving me around South Congress, saying this could be redeveloped, [and that] could be redeveloped... And he makes a left turn and on the right is a sign that says “For Sale.” And I say, “What’s this?” And he says, “This is just some old abandoned warehouse and I say: “Do me a favor and drive through it.” So he drives through it and I had no idea it was there. And it was an unbelievable property.

The adaptive reuse project at Penn Field was a catalyst not only for South Congress, but for Zimmerman’s sense of purpose and investment trajectory:
Well, getting into how I got into Penn Field, because that’s really how it all came together for me... I think I finally understood what I was trying to do... I see the potential for buying property that has already seen one use... for just buying property with good bones, and it needs to have a good feel to it, too. That you know, you take this and you can change its use. There are different ways of making money in real estate. I relied on trying to make inflation just lift me up in the prior version, in the early ‘80s. And inflation, that’s a funny thing, because it will come and go and then you can have bad times. So I thought you know a better way, or another way to make money is to buy property and change its use to a higher value.

He remembered thinking about the possibility of having artists at Penn Field and “all sorts of creative people.” He said that there were four or five investors and an architect working with them. Zimmerman described Penn Field as “by far the thing that I am proudest of” and “a labor of love.” To him, the project was a reflection of what the community was going to be:

And you know the community you are going to be in and you just listen to it, it tells you what it needs and wants and really, that really was it. And we thought it was just going to be this funky space and then we get this call from a Tech company that wanted it, “Hey we need cool space like that.” And having been in the tech business and in the high tech world, too... I realized what this new economy wanted... one of the ways that you really get people...put them somewhere where they feel they need to be. You give them somewhere... you know, people who are talented, you need to feed their souls... and so that was really what was happening on South Congress.

Penn Field was completed just before the bubble burst on the dot.com sector. Zimmerman recalled having to pay attention to the mix of tenants within the adaptive reuse project and this experience helped him to figure out longer term strategies. In the office park setting of Penn Field, he included Clear Channel, a large corporate tenant, while also focusing on smaller, local tenants.

As with his retail properties, such as SoCo Center, he describes himself as “a sucker for somebody with a unique idea that just adds a little more difference to Austin.” Like Amy Simmons’ Austinvilles, his retail tenants are primarily local, independent businesses.

Which is a philosophy, but it’s a real headache sometimes, because what you will learn is that your one store, versus a chain like Anthropologie is that you’ll get... you’ll have that
founder again, that has that great idea, but doesn’t really understand the books. Whereas if you go to Starbucks or Anthropologie, they just really know everything. They are used to those complicated uses, but we decided to endure and try and stay with people who have good ideas and try to do something a little bit different. And not chains.

At the time of the interview, Zimmerman was involved with a project in East Austin in an industrial warehouse undergoing conversion into gallery space for artists. This project was relatively far from the gentrifying commercial strips of central Austin, but is also home to a burgeoning artist community and gaining a reputation as a gentrifying neighborhood. Zimmerman purchased the property six or seven years ago and it is the location of the “Blue Hanger” which is an outlet for Goodwill – the last stop for clothes in Goodwill’s inventory. Goodwill had recently pulled out of the property and Abe had been looking for a tenant for 35,000 square foot space.

Daryl Kunik, who I mentioned who has Uchi, earlier and who is much younger than me and who has the same sensibility. I said, Darrell, you step in and I don’t have the energy and he says, I’d love to and so I partnered up with Darrell, who brings in Michael Hsu and Michael Hsu is a partner in that building as well. A perfect team, because now the building is going to be small spaces for art and creative class as well as just artisans.158

He also described a building on North Lamar that had recently been demolished. Located on a substantial parcel at the corner of North Lamar and an east-west arterial called North Loop, the property was a multi-tenant shopping center. A carpet company called “Fashion Floors” had been located in one of its most prominent spaces and the cursive font on the storefront was reminiscent of the 1960s. Abe had purchased it with the intention of reuse, when a national developer offered what he described as a “silly amount of money.” The transaction had occurred just before the market collapsed. Given the company’s deep pockets, the developer was able to wait out the recession between 2007 and

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158 Uchi is a restaurant located on South Lamar Boulevard. The restaurant was designed by Michael Hsu Architecture.
2012. The property was undergoing demolition and was going to be redeveloped as a mid-rise mixed use building. The size of the parcel and the financial resources of the national company had tipped in favor of new construction over adaptive reuse.

Zimmerman continues to look for investment opportunities. He says his wife laughs about the fact that he is constantly driving around trying to get a feel for places. He would sense places and say: “Wow, it’s got a pretty good energy here!” He reflected on the value of old buildings:

I travel quite a bit now and I can feel it in the city. The energy of something that has had a life and that has been neglected. Because we would just keep building out, because in America, we come from this idea that, you know, everything is expendable, you use it up and then you move. We use it up and then you move, or whatever, everything has to be new. So we left behind all of these really interesting pockets of architecture, really interesting buildings… every city has it and so they are available. And there is just something about... somebody was in the building, trying to do something, a while back that leaves [energy]... and that is especially true if you go to Europe and you walk into these 1000 year old buildings, and you see, there’s something you feel. Maybe for other people, you don’t. But I feel it when you walk in. You walk into an old church. And I don’t know there... people leave their energy behind.

Zimmerman took pride both in the process of converting old buildings to creative space and in generating substantial profits from this process. His way of doing business is one that fits rent gap theory, but works from knowledge of and motivation to serve the creative sector. The gap between a low price property and additional profits is one that is filled by understanding a market that desires creative and inspiring places. His narrative seems a missing link in the literature. For Zimmerman, the gap may not be a steep one: “You know if you buy real estate right, you can really charge low rent. And with low rent... Eddie [Wilson] had always told me about this... with low rent, it feeds the creative world.”
Figure 31. Map of Sites in Interview with Abe Zimmerman.
Table 5. Key for Map of Sites in Interview with Abe Zimmerman.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Map #</th>
<th>Project Name/Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Katz's Deli – Zimmerman helped his brother-in-law open this deli. It opened in 1979 and closed in January 2011.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Threadgill’s South – Second location for well-known bar and music venue. Zimmerman was an investor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>SoCo Center – Zimmerman and Biderman purchased this building and leased it out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Hotel San Jose – Zimmerman was an investor in Liz Lambert’s project to convert an the San Jose Motel to a boutique hotel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>04 Development – Zimmerman was an investor in this mixed use development on Rob Lippincott’s property.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Penn Field – Zimmerman was one of the primary investors in this conversion of a World War I airfield to an office park.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>1700 S. Lamar – Zimmerman is an owner of this multi-tenant shopping center.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>916 Springdale – This is the conversion of an industrial warehouse to art galleries, “creative office suites,” and a café. This is the East Austin project mentioned in an interview with Michael Hsu.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Shopping center with “Fashion Floors.” Zimmerman purchased the property and then resold it to a developer who is building a mixed use development on the site.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>6601 Burnet Road - 1969 building adapted into a multi-tenant shopping center in 2004</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DESIGNERS, ENGINEERS, REAL ESTATE BROKERS, AND THE MEDIA REMEMBER THE ALAMO

Michael Hsu was the first interviewee to mention the redevelopment of the Lamar Plaza. Hsu was selected as the design architect for a major redevelopment project on a nine-acre parcel along South Lamar Boulevard. Hsu’s firm would be responsible for the overall look and feel of a four-story mixed use development that when built, will combine 85,000 square feet of retail with approximately 400 apartments.\(^\text{159}\) It represented a substantial project for him; it was design at a scale much larger than the firm’s more numerous adaptive reuse and tenant build-out projects.

The South Lamar Plaza project involves the redevelopment of an existing shopping center constructed in 1957-8 called the Lamar Plaza. Hsu described it as

\(^{159}\) The number of apartments in the development varied according to the source.
a “standard sort of design approach, giant parking lot in front with kind of an L-shaped development with an anchor, sort of a classic way to develop something like that in the ‘60s.”

Figure 32. The Lamar Plaza on South Lamar Boulevard around the time of its construction (1957-8). Photo courtesy of the Austin History Center.¹⁶⁰

The shopping center was a study in building adaptation over time. Several additional pads had been added to the site, including over 20,000 square feet in 1972 and a 4,240 square foot restaurant in 1973.¹⁶¹ A two-story apartment


¹⁶¹ Travis Central Appraisal District records.
building was added behind the strip center in 1983. Other adaptations to the original L-shaped shopping center included a second story above one of the tenant spaces.

Trending along with the decline in South Austin’s commercial strips, the Lamar Plaza’s had transitioned from major grocery and department store tenants to lower rent spaces. Hsu commented on the mix of businesses shortly before the center was demolished: “You know, the more interesting tenants usually the cheaper the rent.” This sentiment was widely shared in the media. The Austin Chronicle, a local weekly newspaper opined:

For many, South Lamar Plaza was what was best about South Austin, its iconic sign a neon-wrapped beacon of old-fashioned weirdness. The strip mall was a little run down,
sure, and parking could be a minor nightmare, but its mixture of low-rent units and hip entertainment meant stores like the quirky vintage emporium. Bitch’in Threads shared an address with the internationally known Alamo South Lamar. Now the institution has gone under the wrecking ball, as property firm Greystar turns the site into a mixed-use development... Some, like World Spirit Books, are gone forever. Others have relocated, like the Lamar Plaza Drug Store, which moved a couple of blocks south and still serves the same community. Ray Hennig packed up his instruments from Heart of Texas Music and shipped them to his store in Temple. Depending who you ask, this is either the demise of another chunk of Austin’s soul, or just another change in a part of town that has always seen companies come and go.162

Although the Chronicle described the “iconic sign” as a beacon of “old fashioned weirdness,” the sign was actual a relic of the shopping center’s recent past evolution.163 In standard suburban strip mall format, it lists all of the businesses within the shopping center. Having moved in seven years prior, the Alamo Drafthouse Cinema is listed second under the Heart of Texas Music Sign. The topmost sign served as a reminder of South Austin’s identity as a hub for music culture.

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162 Whittaker and Birchum (2012)
163 Ibid. It is a good illustration of the relative nature of both icons and “old-fashioned.” Businesses can be quick to gain iconic status; their lifespans and commercial surrounds having the relative lifespan of a butterfly compared to other uses in the city.
From Michael Hsu’s perspective, the shopping center and its funky mix of tenants were rediscovered when the Alamo Drafthouse, a locally born and popular theater chain, moved into the center seven years prior. Hsu described the Alamo Drafthouse as a “dream anchor” for the new mixed use development; it was a proven tenant that would continue to draw energy and traffic to the site. It was housed in an old grocery store that will remain in heavily altered form as the site is redeveloped. The retention of the building that housed the Alamo
Drafthouse was a means of retaining the internal improvements of the tenant space and saving money, by keeping these improvements in situ.

Derek Brown, Managing Director at Greystar Properties, provided additional information about the logic behind keeping a part of the shopping center:

We talked to the Alamo about potentially relocating them somewhere else and building an entirely new structure. And as it stands today, a portion of their existing building is going to stay, and then we are going to build onto that. We looked at several different options and 1) where they are right now is the best for the development and 2) it's important to them to get back up and running quickly and utilizing the existing building helps us to do that.

He added that the Alamo gives the new development “credibility on the retail side.” Greystar Properties is one of two brokerage firms managing the property. Hsu and Brown both emphasized a concerted effort to bring in local restaurant operators and local boutiques to fill the newly developed spaces. Brown described the desire to keep the South Lamar Pharmacy and Ray Hennig’s Hearts of Texas Music Store, which were also considered key tenants in the Lamar Plaza. He acknowledged that the loss of commercial space for the year or more during construction would have been too long for these businesses to endure. The pharmacy would have lost valuable prescriptions to chain pharmacies like Walgreens and the owner ultimately opted to move into another location along South Lamar. The guitar store left for another Texas town rather than wait.

Brown described the evolving reputation of the corridor as important to the redevelopment. He said that South Lamar Boulevard once had a negative

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164 I also sought to interview representatives of the two firms that were brokering the deal, Greystar Properties and Stream Realty. Stream Realty was in charge of the commercial leasing end of the operation; however, I was unable to secure an interview with a representative.
reputation and was beginning to appeal to a market of young professionals attracted to an influx of new restaurants in the area. While many of these smaller, adaptive reuse projects relied on local investors and small business loans, the majority of financing for the mixed use development would come from privately held companies. Brown explained the process of securing construction financing, usually between 60% and 75% for a development of this type and then bring in an equity partner, who in most cases would take the lion’s share of the equity in the project. At the time, he would not release the name of the equity partner, but explained that partners were often national companies, but might also be a small equity firm in Dallas.

While the mixed use development would involve partners that were likely to be far removed from Austin, Brown described his local connections and his commitment to a successful project from a local standpoint:

I’m from Austin. [Another person] at Stream [Realty Partners] is from Austin. You know, born and raised here. And I’d like to think that I know what is important to Austin and if we build something on Lamar at this prominent location, a credit tenant like TGIFridays would be an absolute disaster. Not only from an economic standpoint, but because we would have just missed and it would have just been tragic. As much as anything, I was concerned about an outside developer coming in and doing something like that and [who would be] just focused on the economics. And granted, the economics are just fine, but if you have someone who doesn’t understand Austin and what might work in Austin and what doesn’t, it could be a disaster. And so it was and still is very important to have the right tenant base in there. And I think again, it’s somewhere that we want people to come to and ultimately that enhances the attractiveness of the residential if what is going on on the ground floor retail is cool.

I also interviewed Will Schnier, the founding principal of a civil engineering firm called Big Red Dog about the South Lamar project and more generally about the process of redevelopment along the case study commercial strips. Schnier was joined in the interview by Ricardo M. De Camps, a principal.
Big Red Dog is a civil engineering firm that has quickly gained a local reputation as a leader in planning mixed use developments along Austin’s transitioning corridors. Their grasp of Austin’s development code led to quick success for a recent startup firm where all of the principals are under 35.

Big Red Dog had worked with Michael Hsu during the brief economic downturn that affected the number of large-scale development in Austin. Adaptive reuse work for bars and restaurants had continued through the recession because, as Schnier put it: “Bars and restaurants were still full, because people needed to drink.” Hsu’s business was booming and Big Red Dog did engineering work for his small projects. One of the projects was on South Congress and the other in a nearby Austin suburb. Vertical Mixed Use projects started coming in by the fall of 2010 and Schnier had recommended Hsu’s shop as architect for the Lamar Plaza project. He added:

But the architect of record who actually produces the plans is BOKA Powell. And if you are not familiar with the terms, the design architect basically means he designs the skin of the building, what you see from the public domain. And the corridors, the rooms, the bathrooms, the mechanical, the plumbing would all be BOKA Powell. It’s kind of a name brand though. You pay the expensive guy [Michael Hsu] for the outside and the cheaper firm to document it and get the plans settled.

Like Hsu and Brown, Schnier emphasized the importance of recruiting local tenants to the new mixed use development. He explained: “The reason that we went with Hsu is that we wanted to encourage local commercial tenants here.” He listed off a number of local independent chains that had both the appeal and the financial wherewithal to afford space within the new development. He added that 8 out of 10 of the tenants in the new development were clients of Michael Hsu architecture. There was a direct connection between

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165 This included work on two P. Terry’s restaurants, a popular local fast food chain.
Hsu’s reputation, which had been built among local businesses and small projects, and the desired outcome of the new development.

I had asked Schnier and De Camps about the reinvestment and change occurring along South Lamar Boulevard, South First Street, and the other corridors where they had clients. Schnier replied:

There was a time, prior to 1995 [when] South Congress was prostitution and drug related. We wouldn’t have found ourselves walking down the sidewalk there. You know if we wanted anyone to know about it. Starting in about 2000, Mrs. Lambert bought the San Jose Hotel, which was a rent the room by the hour whorehouse hotel and now it’s a $300-a-night hotel. But slowly she built it into a $300-a-night hotel. You know, after Hotel San Jose, an apartment project came in... all of those were really cheap, existing buildings and then you saw the so called Mixed Use where Perla’s is and Hopdoddy’s Hamburger is. And then what else is in there, Kendra Scott designs is in there. That was a brand new 30-million dollar project. We’ve talked about putting a hotel there where the food trailers are. And now you are seeing big Vertical Mixed Use projects coming in the corridor. So just like the people you know, when the artists come in, it’s just like the existing buildings, when the bars start coming in - you know they start getting turned over in that way... [The Lamar Plaza project] is a 90-million dollar project. No one is going to come in and have a 90-million dollar project investment, when the place is unproven. But you prove it up with other successful businesses.

The South Lamar Plaza was an aging shopping center. As it was on a larger lot in a desirable location, it represents a common candidate for redevelopment. Its building history is that of ongoing adaptation and modification. It is another landscape of thrift that evolved into local business habitat. The low rents and adaptable spaces provided rich soil for an eclectic group of tenants. The success of the Alamo Drafthouse had “proven the site,” a Vertical Mixed Use zoning overlay was added as fertilizer to this large plot of land. Now a mixed use development was being constructed with the intention of pulling in new local tenants to provide an identity and activity for the project.

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166 He is referring to Rob Lippincott’s 04 development.
This core sample describes the activity generated along the corridor through adaptive use and new retail and restaurant activity. As architects and engineers were scaling from adaptive reuse to mixed use, they were attempting to bring successful local businesses with them. Time will tell whether this model would succeed in the short term or if depreciation and age would first need to run its course.

**A NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMPANY AND THE VALUE OF A TEXAS HONKY-TONK**

The Broken Spoke is a Texas institution that receives its own entry in the Handbook of Texas. It is a bar and country music venue or “honky-tonk” in traditional country and western parlance. The proprietor of the Broken Spoke described it as "the last of the true Texas dance halls." Everyone from Bob Wills to Willie Nelson has played there. It is known for its chicken fried steak and an egalitarian atmosphere. The owner has quipped: "It doesn't matter if you are a millionaire or a ditch digger, all can have a good time at the Spoke."

Proudly fronting on South Lamar with its Texas flag hung high, the Broken Spoke was expected to remain at the center of a brand new $60 million dollar vertical mixed use project. The Broken Spoke is a commercial tenant on property that was mostly pastureland when it opened in 1964. It remains in place with a 10-year lease and an expectation to remain aging gracefully in place.

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168 Ibid.
169 Ibid.
I interviewed Ty Puckett, the Vice-President for Development Services at Transwestern, a privately-held real estate firm that was founded in Austin. The firm develops shopping centers, office buildings, data centers, industrial facilities, and apartments. It has more than 30 offices across the U.S, and operates in urban areas on the West Coast, Southwest, and down the East Coast from New York to Florida. Puckett opened the first office of Transwestern in 1986.

During an interview, Puckett sat across from a framed rendering of the “704,” the planned mixed use development named after the last three numerals of South Austin’s zip code. Puckett was happy to share information about the
704, the logic behind preserving the Broken Spoke, and his perspective on the future of urban infill along Austin’s commercial strips. At the time of the interview, Transwestern was looking to develop other urban infill sites in Austin, San Antonio, Phoenix, and Denver, within downtown areas and in what he described as “very mature, urban, commercial areas, similar to South Lamar.”

Puckett explained that the 704 would have 20,000 sq. ft. of commercial space and 386 apartments. In accordance with Austin’s Vertical Mixed Use zoning overlay, the project would have 10% affordable residential units to families at 60% or below the median family income. The project would also include live-work units intended to serve professionals such as architects and lawyers who wish to have an office associated with their apartment unit.

The Vertical Mixed Use overlay on the property was a major factor in the selection of the site. This entitlement meant that the mixed use project could proceed nearly “as of right.” To the developer, the VMU overlay is a benefit that reduces, or in this case prevents altogether, negotiations with surrounding neighborhoods. It also comes with reduced parking requirements and raises density allowances.

Puckett explained that Transwestern had original underwritten the South Lamar Plaza site, but had backed out given the price of the land. According to Puckett, in order to pencil out, the site would have required 80,000 to 100,000 sq. ft. of retail, which was much more than they predicted equity partners would be willing to finance. Difficulties in filling retail spaces in other mixed use developments had given investors pause.

When asked what kind of explanation of economic value had been provided to investors in order to justify retention of the Broken Spoke he replied:
You know, not so much the economic value, but we did describe the value of retaining [the Broken Spoke] and the whole, if you will, vision for the project. You kind of had to explain that. And the best way was to get people down here and stand across from the property and look at the Broken Spoke and kind of the linear frontage that you had on the bar, and take them into the Spoke and describe what it is you are trying to achieve. And it was helpful to take people over to South Congress so they could see how that has transformed. You know, back when I was at UT, there was nothing but hookers hanging around on South [Congress], particularly once you got two blocks in... it was a pretty rough area and this area down here was not great either, but you know, over time it has all redeveloped and it is some of the more valuable real estate in Austin.

Puckett is not only a founder of a major real estate firm; he is active in the Urban Land Institute and advises students in the McCombs Business School at the University of Texas at Austin. He is experienced and knowledgeable about the development process. When asked for his prediction of South Lamar in 40 to 50 years, Puckett replied:

Well, when you get at 40 [years], you’ve almost outlived the life expectancy of this project, but my vision would be that it becomes very much a part of the urban core and I think in 40 years, a lot of these projects that were built to be 40 to 60-feet will be 80 to 100-foot projects in a lot of these areas. So they will be second generation redevelopment, if you will. More near term I think you are just going to see an intensification of redevelopment in all of these corridors that we’re talking about, whether it be Burnet, South Congress, or South Lamar. And frankly, hopefully we will have rail. And that’s how it should be. I mean they need to become very walkable environments, hopefully with sufficient green space so that hopefully they are not like Manhattan. You know, it’s the way we need to develop Austin, versus going out and eating up all of this urban land.

The 704 project was featured at least four times in columns by John Kelso, the Austin-American Statesman’s jocular newspaper columnist who frequently writes about Austin’s local culture and changing flavor as the city grows. Kelso has been an avid (and comical) defender of preserving the Broken Spoke. In one article, he even interviewed the owner about the treatment of the dirt parking lot and weighed in on nearly every detail of its landscape. He protested the replacement of windows in an old bus that sat out front, the possibility of a new neon sign and marquee, and the removal of faded entrance and exit signs with
sponsored Coca-Cola symbols.\textsuperscript{170} This is from a commentator who poked fun at proposals to designate Austin’s only Edward Durell Stone designed high rise a historic landmark, quipping: “1966 is historic? I’ve got hangnails older than that.”\textsuperscript{171}

One of Kelso’s columns provided a different account of the Broken Spoke’s survival. The site of the 704 redevelopment had been owned by Jay Johnson, an Austin City Council Member. When Johnson died in 2001, the family waited to sell the property to a buyer who would agree to retain the Broken Spoke:

Joe Willie McAllister, the Austin real estate broker who handled the sale, said the deal worked this way: “If James White (the Spoke’s owner) wants to leave the parking lot caliche, let him leave the parking lot caliche.”

So when the land was sold in 2010 for an undisclosed amount to a company called Riverside Resources, it couldn’t fool with the Spoke.

“What they promised us is that they would allow the heritage of the Spoke to be maintained, and therefore we picked them as the buyer,” McAllister said of Riverside Resources.\textsuperscript{172}

Whether it was the Johnson family who had placed restrictions on the property or the creative inspiration of Puckett and others at Transwestern, both accounts highlights the social and economic value assigned preserving the local business and its physical representation of local culture.

Even with consensus on the value of retaining the Broken Spoke, its fate could still be viewed as tenuous. The business has a 10-year lease and an aging founder that is near, if not solidly, within retirement age. According to Puckett,

\textsuperscript{170} Kelso (April 21, 2012).
\textsuperscript{171} Kelso (September 29, 2012).
\textsuperscript{172} Kelso (February 16, 2013).
the mixed use building would be sold in five years. When asked whether they would consider landmarking the building, he replied:

You know, nobody has talked about that. The building is about 45 years old and no one at the city has approached us. We don't really want to do that, just because of the process. That's just not something that we'd do... One thought we had was that if Mr. White did not want to renew his lease, our thoughts were we were going to turn it into a country and western music museum... the other was to have someone like one of the local musicians, whether it be Asleep at the Wheel... They already opened a bar down on Red River... So that was something that we discussed, but Mr. White really from the start, the first time we sat down with him said: “No, I want to stay.”

ASSOCIATIONS OF PEOPLE AND PROPERTY, OLD BUILDINGS AND NEW DEVELOPMENT

The core samples in this chapter describe a spectrum of ways in which existing buildings provide the raw medium, activity, and economic and social value that are integral components of the dynamics of urban change. These core samples provide a behind-the-scenes glimpse from the perspective of actors who own, rent, design, engineer, and reinvest in property. They retain, maintain, gut and remodel, preserve, and refashion buildings in numerous ways. In Todd Sanders’ story, an old building provided the medium upon which his art gallery was created through sweat equity and persistence. For Rob Lippincott, it was the availability and allure of old buildings, the necessity of parking, and the opportunities afforded by surrounding property owners willing to sell, that created an ever-widening opportunity to mix his restaurant with live music, lofts, and local business tenants. Lippincott proceeded in a block-sized choreography that involved relocation of a historic house to a new location, historic designation of a commercial building, and the blending of new construction into the skeletons of an old car dealership. Amy Simmons found refuge in purchasing property and like Lippincott, actively recruited and
managed synergistic commercial tenants on old and new sites. In Amy’s Ice Cream sites, as well as his other commissions, Michael Hsu, employed adaptive reuse as both aesthetic and economic strategies. He and Abe Zimmerman have situated themselves within an economic niche that creates spaces for clients who desire creative space and a central city location.

Even within the context of new mixed use buildings at the South Lamar Plaza redevelopment and the 704, old buildings remain integral to an overall trajectory of change. The Lamar Plaza project was the outcome of earlier success in finding an anchor tenant. The Alamo Drafthouse enlivened and activated the old shopping center. This new activity on a large, centrally located parcel attracted mixed use development for which market conditions provided adequate financing and a growing market. In this case, it was not only development that scaled to new heights, but the careers of Michael Hsu, Will Schnier, and others. Success in adaptive reuse and among local businesses translated into a proven strategy for mixed use. This is a very specific case study at the nexus of new businesses and old, rising rents and redevelopment, old buildings and new.

Finally, the preservation of the Broken Spoke is, in a sense, the retention of and reinvention of tradition. An old building and longstanding business are retained, integrating and preserving a recent past history outside the regulations and incentives of historic preservation. The economic and social value of this landscape was so persuasive, that it did not require a pro forma to pencil out. It also remains as a testament to the remaining legacy of the Johnson family’s long term property ownership. It is an example of the transfer of family property to
corporate ownership, with all of the benefits of density along with the reformulation of local tradition.

All of these cases reflect the many ways in which “landscapes of thrift” may be recast, transformed, and retained. In many cases, it is not the historical significance “naturally” emanating from these existing buildings that preserve them. It is their usefulness in defining and reinforcing ideas of local tradition, in drawing customers, and in circumnavigating or economizing within development codes. This does not mean that the history of these commercial buildings is fictitious or inconsequential. Rather the associations between these buildings and the people who shape them vividly allude to important connections between entrepreneurialism, design, development, and planning codes. It is this interaction between public, private, and community and between planning, development, and code, to which the next chapter turns.
Chapter 6. Negotiating Change and the Visible Hand of the Community and Public Sector

It would be tempting to view both the past and future of Austin’s commercial strips as simply the outcome of market forces and private sector actors. Generations of restaurateurs and merchants have started and operated Austin’s iconic businesses over the years. New merchants have brought new life to the strip. The entrepreneurialism of Rob Lippincott, Abe Zimmerman, Liz Lambert and others are widely recognized as having spurred the transformation of South Congress into an entertainment district. Reinvestment is certainly tied to the actions of private actors; however, neglecting the role of the public sector and community would be an utterly incomplete account of change along the corridors. Numerous public and community actors have participated in visioning, planning, regulating, and advocating for the nature of reinvestment.

Urban planning seeks to guide urban development within the context of this interaction between public and private actors. This chapter considers long range and current planning initiatives within the context of case study commercial strips. It illustrates how existing urban fabric and local businesses alternate between visibility and invisibility within long range planning initiatives. This chapter includes discussion of the perspective of Austin’s Historic Preservation Officer and attempts to create an “iconic business preservation ordinance” that is patterned on the preservation ordinance. It includes perspectives from the vantage point of participants from the neighborhood association. The chapter ends with sections on the micro-dynamics
of current planning, building codes, and site plan review, which shape change at the scale of individual buildings and parcels.

This chapter depicts the ways in which public and community actors conceptualize the commercial strip and the views of benefits and threats posed by reinvestment. It shows the many ways in which these perspectives are translated into action that influences, but does not determine, the form of reinvestment and change along Austin’s commercial strips.

**IMAGINING THE FUTURE OF AUSTIN’S CORRIDORS**

Within the field of planning, the long range comprehensive plan is intended as a vehicle to guide public investment, channel market forces, and find consensus on shared public goals. The goals, objectives, and actions outlined in a comprehensive plan specify public policies that are intended to be implemented within agency initiatives, capital improvement projects, and land development ordinances. The outcome of a comprehensive plan is supposed to be a coordinated future, where the many private actions of citizens and groups add up to a shared future.

During this research, the City of Austin had initiated a comprehensive planning process called *Imagine Austin*, encouraging citizens to participate in articulating desired development patterns and the future of the community as a whole. The comprehensive plan was being drafted in tandem with this research; therefore, it is not included here as a factor or force shaping the character of reinvestment. Instead, it is included for its treatment of commercial strips within the visions and analysis of future development.
Imagine Austin is the first comprehensive plan to be adopted since the Austin Tomorrow Plan in 1979. The plan presents a general picture of the preferred path for growth through its Growth Concept map. This map shows neighborhood, town, and regional centers where future jobs, housing, and development are to be concentrated. The Growth Concept Map illustrates the influence of New Urbanism and best practices of growth management, with a focus on compact urban development. The case study commercial strips are depicted as activity corridors. The following is a description of activity corridors within the plan:

Activity corridors have a dual nature. They are the connections that link activity centers and other key destinations to one another and allow people to travel throughout the city and region by bicycle, transit, or automobile. Corridors are also characterized by a variety of activities and types of buildings located along the roadway — shopping, restaurants and cafés, parks, schools, single-family houses, apartments, public buildings, houses of worship, mixed-use buildings, and offices. Along many corridors, there will be both large and small redevelopment sites. These redevelopment opportunities may be continuous along stretches of the corridor. There may also be a series of small neighborhood centers, connected by the roadway. Other corridors may have fewer redevelopment opportunities, but already have a mixture of uses, and could provide critical transportation connections. As a corridor evolves, sites that do not redevelop may transition from one use to another, such as a service station becoming a restaurant or a large retail space being divided into several store fronts. To improve mobility along an activity corridor, new and redevelopment should reduce per capita car use and increase walking, bicycling, and transit use. Intensity of land use should correspond to the availability of quality transit, public space, and walkable destinations. Site design should use building arrangement and open space to reduce walking distance to transit and destinations, achieve safety and comfort, and draw people outdoors.\(^{173}\)

Within Imagine Austin, an illustrated case study portrays opportunities for mixed use redevelopment along South Congress. A set of images shows the redevelopment of unloved gas stations into new mixed use development. Within the vision is the retention of the iconic Hill’s Café and Classic Inn. This

\(^{173}\) City of Austin (2012), Imagine Austin Comprehensive Plan, 106.
represents a vision for a future in which iconic businesses are surrounded by mixed use development and transportation improvements. This depiction captures an image of a more walkable urban form produced in tandem with the retention of a valued local business.

Figure 36. Image from the Imagine Austin Comprehensive Plan: “Case Study: South Congress Avenue Today.”
Another analysis conducted in the Imagine Austin process, depicts a more generalized view of change. Called a Susceptibility to Change analysis, the City of Austin contracted with consultants to perform a spatial technique to assess the likelihood of redevelopment throughout Austin. The 11 factors included in the analysis are detailed in the table below. Each factor had an associated layer of spatial data that was comprised of a grid (or raster) with numeric values associated with it. All of these factors were equally weighted in the analysis. The outcome was a grid of cells depicting three categories: Most susceptible to
change, Moderately susceptible to change, and Least susceptible to change. Case study commercial strips were identified as areas most likely to redevelop.

Table 6: Factors and Scales in Susceptibility to Change Analysis from Rouse and Dobshinsky (2010)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Scale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Owner occupancy</td>
<td>1 = not owner-occupied or not residential 0 = owner-occupied residence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land status</td>
<td>1 = undeveloped, no constraints 0.67 = developed no constraints 0.33 = undeveloped, constraints 0 = developed, constraints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improvement to land ratio</td>
<td>1 = ILR &gt; 1.5 0 = ILR = 0, or non-commercial property</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoning and overlay districts</td>
<td>1 = areas in vertical mixed use, mixed use, planned unit development, transit-oriented development, or North Burnet/Gateway districts; areas in North Burnet/Gateway, transit-oriented development, university, urban renewal, or central urban redevelopment overlay districts; and areas with high-density mixed use, major planned development, mixed use, mixed use/office, neighborhood mixed use, or transit-oriented development future land use designations 0.5 = not in any of the above or below districts 0 = areas in historic or neighborhood conservation combining districts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Projected growth in employment</td>
<td>1 = greatest growth in employment density (jobs / acre) 0 = least growth in employment density (jobs/acre)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water service</td>
<td>1 = areas currently served by water mains 0.75 = retail water area served 2009 0.5 = impact fee service area boundary 0.25 = outside impact fee service area, in desired development zone 0 = outside all areas above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transit corridors</td>
<td>1 = areas closest to most transit corridors (well served by transit) 0 = areas outside all transit corridors (not well served by transit)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Road access</td>
<td>1 = areas with greatest density of arterial roadways (best road access) 0 = areas with least density of arterial roadways (worst road access)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Property violations</td>
<td>1 = most property violations 0 = no property violations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6, continued.

| Year built                      | 1 = built in or before 1900 or undeveloped  
|                                | 0 = built in 2000 or late  
|                                | All years in between are on a continuous scale that is normalized to scale between 0 and 1. |

| Development cases               | 1 = areas with development cases  
|                                | 0 = areas without development cases or developed |

What is most interesting about this analysis is what was left out of it. At least in the short term, it depicts a continuous surface of change that smooths the bumpier realities associated with parcel-by-parcel change. The pattern and size of parcels and land ownership patterns, central factors in developer’s decisions about where to develop, are not included. Parcels were incorporated to a limited extent through a “year built” layer that included the age of properties as reflected in tax assessor’s data. The assumption is a linear one; the model assumes that the older a property is, the more susceptible it is to redevelopment. Some of the factors are proxies for development momentum, such as the number of development cases; others are based on entitlements and limitations based on current zoning.

The Susceptibility to Change analysis was based on the best available assumptions and the availability of data. Time will tell the voracity and validity of the model. Impossible to quantify are the many negotiations that take place within neighborhoods or the power differential between a highly organized neighborhood and one that lacks participation. Within the broad analysis of the Susceptibility to Change analysis, the Hill’s Café appears as susceptible to develop as the parcels around it. This may, in fact, be a correct assumption, given the owner’s financial struggles and the voracity or larger economic and social
factors. On the other hand, the models of change mostly leave out the uneven patterns of reinvestment or the economic and social value of existing buildings or businesses. These are integral aspects of each of the core samples in the previous chapter.

The unified and coordinated growth depicted in the comprehensive plan contrasts with what is for now a more diffuse nature of change along the corridors. A long range plan affects change only to the extent that public investments are keyed to it, development codes faithfully enact it, and the private sector and community respond to it as anticipated. As will be described, Austin’s development code and public investments and programs have influenced the shape of development, but the incremental nature of this change is an ongoing negotiation between the private and public sectors.

The next few sections detail the ways in which various municipal agencies and citizens have negotiated, shaped, and created change along Austin’s corridors. This includes corridor redevelopment initiatives, the selection of parcels for a Vertical Mixed Use overlay, historic preservation, and attempts to create an iconic business ordinance. It includes neighborhood activism and the craft of negotiating building codes and site plan requirements.

**CORRIDOR PLANNING INITIATIVES**

During the *Imagine Austin* planning process, another planning initiative was moving forward at the district scale. This planning process was aimed at spurring redevelopment on the northernmost segments of Airport Boulevard. Airport Boulevard contrasts with case study commercial strips such as South

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Congress Avenue and Burnet Road that have received significant reinvestment. Airport is still considered a declining commercial strip. It is a major arterial that runs diagonally through north central Austin neighborhoods and continues east of Interstate Highway 35 through East Austin. It once connected Austin west of the Interstate with Austin’s Mueller Airport. The airport has since been moved farther South, but Airport Boulevard retains its name.

The planning phases of the Airport Boulevard Redevelopment Initiative were underway at the time of this publication. City of Austin staff and consultants were working on proposed development code modifications, called form-based codes. Form-based codes provide a framework for new construction that emphasizes the preferred urban form for new development, rather than regulation by land use type. They loosen the regulation of land use and provide opportunities to mix a greater variety of uses within a single development. The codes place additional requirements on the character of development, focusing on creating pedestrian-oriented environments and higher densities oriented toward the street.

Austin City Council Member Chris Riley and chief advocate for the Airport Boulevard Redevelopment Initiative explained the genesis of this corridor redevelopment effort in an interview. Riley’s interest in corridor planning and form-based codes originated in his experiences as a downtown resident over the span of twenty years. He described Austin’s downtown as “mostly desolate,” and comprised of bleak landscapes and surface parking lots in the 1990s. At that time, Riley began reading the work of Jane Jacobs, James Howard Kunstler, and other critics of sprawl and proponents of New Urbanism. He became aware of urban conditions in cities across the country after World
War II. This interest was a major thread throughout his involvement with the downtown neighborhood association and on the Planning Commission. Riley actively promoted it when he was running for city council:

I wound up talking to a lot of architects and others who were interested in urban planning. We talked about these issues facing efforts to revive not only downtown, but corridors across the city. And so there was a lot of interest at the time in form based codes as something that could provide an alternative to the conventional zoning system that we have in place. We talked about how it would be useful to have a pilot. Some sort of place where... we could undertake an effort to apply form-based codes to see if they would be useful in changing the dynamic along the corridors. So we talked about if we could pick one corridor in Austin, what would be best suited for an effort to demonstrate the efficacy of form-based codes.

After Council Member Riley was elected to Council, he continued discussions with the City Manager about opportunities to test form-based codes. The idea for a corridor redevelopment initiative fit in with the comprehensive planning initiative.

Discussions with the neighborhood associations around Airport Boulevard found residents to be supportive of the effort. Riley described a general consensus among neighborhood residents and city officials, that Airport Boulevard needed revitalization. There were a significant number of large parcels along the corridor with used car dealerships and other low intensity uses or that were in public ownership. Highland Mall, a large regional mall that has been losing anchor tenants, sits along a stretch of Airport Boulevard. It is recognized as one of the most significant redevelopment opportunities in the area.175 In addition, a commuter rail line runs along Airport Boulevard and there is a rail stop near Highland Mall. The support of surrounding neighborhoods,

175 The anchor spaces at Highland Mall had been purchased by Austin Community College, which was supportive of efforts to revitalize and redevelop the area.
land and ownership patterns, and proximity to rail were defining factors in the selection of Airport Boulevard for the initiative.

Riley compared Airport Boulevard to Burnet Road:

Burnet Road did have some role in getting the Airport Boulevard project started. Because a few people had looked at Burnet Road and pointed out how difficult it would be to achieve a significant revitalization of the corridor under existing regulations. If you take compatibility regulations, drainage requirements, and parking requirements and you look at the cumulative effect of those things, you see that it’s very difficult to achieve any kind of meaningful change in terms of a continuous, critical mass of redevelopment. You might see a three or four-story building here or there, more often a two or one-story building. But generally you wouldn’t really see long stretches of redevelopment and there frankly wasn’t that much interest in the surrounding neighborhoods. There was a lot of grumbling in the surrounding neighborhoods about the specific projects that had taken place... So it was a whole different dynamic. So frankly, I just don’t sense the kind of excitement around Burnet Road that I do around Airport, but I do see interest in those infrastructure changes... I just think we are likely to take a whole different tact[ic]. If we are able to reconfigure the road, people might start thinking of the corridor in a different way, but that’s more of a long-term process.

Given the lack of support for a redevelopment initiative among the neighborhoods along Burnet Road, Riley’s vision for improvement shifted to bike infrastructure. He envisioned the creation of a separated bikeway, similar to one in Montreal that he had toured:

If you are, just through infrastructure changes, making the road itself a place that is more pedestrian-oriented, then maybe that would have some ripple effects on the type of development that we would see along the corridor and even in people’s receptiveness to changes in the regulation governing the corridor. That people start thinking of it as a place for more pedestrian-oriented development, then it would be easier to talk about some of the changes we are starting to see along Airport Boulevard.

As for South Lamar Boulevard, he explained that neighborhood politics and skepticism toward planning and city processes would lead to yet another approach. The Zilker Neighborhood did not have a neighborhood plan; residents had opted out of a planning process during the late 1990s and early 2000s due to neighborhood skepticism about the planning process. This was taken by Riley as
a sign that the neighborhood would likely resist another planning initiative. Redevelopment was already occurring in the area, and he thought South Lamar might eventually wind up with better streetscapes through a process that would “happen naturally over the course of the development process.” The perceived reluctance of the neighborhood to engage in planning initiatives, combined with redevelopment already occurring along the corridor, made South Lamar Boulevard an unlikely candidate for a major corridor initiative in the near term.

As for the role of local businesses in the Airport Boulevard Corridor Redevelopment initiative, as often happened during interviews, the conversation returned to South Congress Avenue:

Absolutely! In fact, some of the main people involved have been the owners of small, local businesses. I think there are great, smaller businesses along the corridor, but they are not very well connected to each other. You often don’t see people strolling from one cool, local business to the other, the way you would say along South Congress. And I think that’s part of the reason that those local businesses have been the main advocates for the Airport effort. They see some potential for making it the kind of place where people might want to stroll from one business to another. And that is one of the most interesting challenges along Airport is that it presents the question: Can we bring new life to this corridor, while still preserving the cool, old businesses that are there?

The contrast between the fairly walkable urban form of South Congress Avenue, with its taxpayer strips and early auto courts, versus the larger properties developed on large parcels at mid-twentieth century, would return as a theme in other interviews.

Additionally, Riley commented on the desire to create Airport Boulevard into a successful destination:

I think the hope is that as more business comes to the corridor… people will regard it is a destination. That would naturally support businesses and put them in a position to be able to pay the higher rents that might be expected as the corridor improves. It is an inherent problem with any effort to revitalize a corridor, because if your goal is to keep property values low and declining, then you are really not revitalizing the corridor is
probably not... probably doesn’t have much appeal. We do expect property values to increase... and there has been a longstanding concern for merchants on South Congress. But by and large what we have seen on South Congress is that those cool little businesses that have helped revive the corridor have for the most part been staying in place and doing well, by all indications. But, it’s a very legitimate concern. We don’t want to see Gaps or other national chains.

The interview with Riley revealed a political trajectory of reform that had been born out of Riley’s application of New Urbanist concepts in an Austin context. In the interview, Riley reveals the geography of neighborhood politics and a city council member’s response to it. Within the narrative, one can see three separate approaches, or public sector visions, for redevelopment: 1) large-scale redevelopment as was being envisioned along Airport Boulevard, 2) a focus on improving bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure along Burnet Road, and 3) a laissez faire approach of wait and see as South Lamar Boulevard transitions.

**Deliberation over Density and the Protection of Icons**

Prior to Council Member Riley’s Airport Boulevard Redevelopment Initiative, the Austin City Council undertook a process in which neighborhoods were given the opportunity to deliberate parcel-by-parcel on redevelopment along central city commercial strips. Residents were provided the opportunity to identify parcels that should be redeveloped with high density, vertical mixed use development. Austin’s Vertical Mixed Use (VMU) overlay was adopted as a new means of clearing the path for developers interested in developing housing in combination with retail, office, or live-work space. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the overlay offered new entitlements for mixed use, while relaxing parking requirements and increasing the maximum number of apartments or condos that could be developed on site. To qualify, the proposed development would need to meet green building standards, offer pedestrian amenities, and
10% of housing units would have to be affordable to families earning 60% or 80% of Austin’s median family income.

What is particularly unique about the “Opt-In and Opt-Out process” was that neighborhood associations could participate in determining which parcels were eligible for the VMU overlay. This process occurred prior to the comprehensive plan and it was considered a step toward identifying appropriate places to add density along commercial corridors. The intention was to prevent sprawl on the outskirts of Austin, while improving the quality of existing streetscapes and adding more housing options in the central city. Katherine Gregor of the Austin Chronicle wrote:

As suggested by Envision Central Texas, if Austin is to remain a sustainable, eco-friendly community as it grows, it must increase central-city density. Yet the prospect of adding more people and cars and high-rises to one's own central neighborhood - even in the noble service of the environment - is often a bitter pill. (Couldn't our own 'hood just donate its fair share of newbies to Round Rock?) But Austin is growing so fast - estimated to add more than 1 million people in the next 20 to 30 years - that the only real growth choice we have is: To sprawl or not to sprawl? In choosing to avoid the ills of sprawl - environmental, economic, social equity, and quality-of-life - Austinites are being asked to accept increased density. The "d" word looks like oodles of people living, working, and public-transporting in the urban core - in your central neighborhood and mine.\(^{176}\)

The Opt-In Opt-Out process provided a 90-day window in which neighborhood associations could identify properties to be included or excluded from the VMU overlay. All of the parcels along Austin’s core transit corridors began with VMU overlay zoning. The Opt-Out process allowed neighborhoods to indicate the parcels that they deemed inappropriate for additional density entitlements. Neighborhood participants could also chose to "opt-in" properties that were not located along core transit corridors and therefore lacked the VMU

\(^{176}\) Gregor (2007). Note: Envision Central Texas is a nonprofit that was established in 2001 to address growth issues in the Central Texas region.
zoning overlay. This process, which had been proposed by City Council Member Laura Morrison and a vice-president of the Austin Neighborhood Council, represented a way in which neighborhoods could help shape the location of incentives offered for density.

In Gregor’s article, the reasons given for opting a parcel out of the VMU overlay were revealing: “For example, if a property has a historic structure on it or a cultural landmark or an iconic business or affordable housing – or just a cool locally owned coffee shop where the neighbors love to hang – then there’s no reason for VMU, which could encourage razing the existing structures.” An example of this very scenario occurred along South Lamar Boulevard. According to an online account of the South Lamar Neighborhood Association, the Planning Commission voted to allow VMU on all properties on the east side of South Lamar except for Matt’s El Rancho, Taco Xpress, and the Broken Spoke. While other opt-out recommendations of the neighborhood were overridden by the Planning Commission, these three neighborhood recommendations were adopted because the properties were iconic businesses. This instance revealed the overlap of neighborhood association concerns with a protective stance toward local businesses represented on the Planning Commission.

**DEFINING AND PRESERVING “ICONIC BUSINESSES”**

The acceptance of the South Lamar Neighborhood Associations’ recommendations to opt-out parcels along South Lamar was a demonstration of the Planning Commission’s, and ultimately the City Council’s, support for the preservation of iconic businesses. Dave Sullivan, the Chair of the Planning

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177 South Lamar Neighborhood Association (2008).
Commission had initiated an effort to draft an Iconic Business Preservation Ordinance in 2006, the year before the Vertical Mixed Use Opt-In Opt-Out process. Sullivan’s effort had been precipitated by a controversy over Las Manitas, a popular Tex-Mex restaurant in downtown Austin that had been ousted for a hotel redevelopment. The story made national headlines, as the City of Austin tried to find a workable solution that would support the displaced restaurant.¹⁷⁸

Sullivan gathered city staff, including Austin’s Historic Preservation Officer, to find a way to draft an ordinance that would help preserve iconic businesses. Sullivan shared a working draft of the ordinance with me. It outlined proposed criteria for defining an “iconic businesses.” An iconic business had to be unique with few, if any, imitators. It could not be a chain or franchise, but had to be an independent business. An icon was to be “eclectic,” further defined as promoting “cultural and lifestyle diversity.” It had to be popular and famous. There were questions as to how long the businesses had to persist. Five years was proposed, illustrating a miniscule timeframe for a commercial business to reach iconicity as compared to the 50-year threshold for a historic building to be deemed a landmark.

As for the possible incentives offered to property owners or proprietors, the brainstorming session yielded the following list:

- Tax abatement similar to historic zoning (with the note: “but this may not be legal.”)
- Taxes frozen on both business and property.

¹⁷⁸ Long (2010).
- Zero-interest loans.
- CoA provides information technology help.
- CoA offer free advertising.
- Ease in permitting for improvements or up-zoning.
- Density bonus.
- CoA financial and permitting assistance in rebuilding after a fire or other disaster.
- Higher priority for CoA infrastructure repair or capital improvement (e.g., sidewalk repair or Great Streets upgrade, flood prevention, graffiti removal).

The memo outlined a possible process for designation and possible requirements for maintenance of iconic businesses. A business owner would apply for the program through the Historic Landmark commission. The applicant might include a letter from the owner stating the intent to preserve the iconic features of the business. At that point, the application would go to the Planning Commission and then to City Council for final approval. A business owner would sign a memorandum of understanding about maintaining the character of the business. Just as designated historic landmarks go through a periodic review process, the Historic Preservation Office would also periodically review the status of an iconic business. Dramatic change in character would lead to a loss of this designation.

Sullivan described the fate of the ordinance:

I mean the Heritage Society liked it, Austin Neighborhood Council liked it, my fellow members of the Planning Commission liked it and they authorized me to work on it. But,
who was I talking to... one of the city boards, and a friend of mine was a chairman on that board and he says: “You know Dave, Austin is a city that is a pretty honest city... we don’t have much graft. But this really does seem like the kind of thing that could generate corruption. When you go to designate what is my iconic business, is it the same as your iconic business? And I tried to get around that by developing criteria. You know, you have to meet all of these criteria, but still there would be some subjectivity. We have that with historic zoning, but we have professional staff, we have national standards -- we have Department of the Interior standards -- but we would have been out there on a limb as the only city in America to have Iconic Preservation.

While the City of Austin retreated from this initial effort to incentivize and potentially regulate iconic businesses, there are other efforts that, either indirectly or directly, serve a similar purpose. For instance, the Small Business Development Center and the Austin Independent Business Alliance provide technical assistance that includes general small business assistance with advice on how to navigate the City of Austin’s permitting process. As will be discussed below there are also various grassroots efforts aimed at recognizing and preserving iconic places. These public and nonprofit efforts indicate a distinct awareness of the value of local businesses as public gathering spaces and local cultural heritage. They are also indicative of the ongoing negotiations and tensions in the process of planning and development, the desire to retain local businesses, and the urge to retaining the identity and quasi-public spaces that comprise it.

**Preservation along Commercial Strips**

Austin’s Opt-In Opt-Out process and the draft Iconic Business Preservation Ordinance are unique to Austin. In contrast, local historic preservation programs are a regular feature of local governments across the country. Designation of landmarks and historic districts provide regulatory methods of preserving buildings associated with Austin’s cultural heritage.
While listing on the National Register of Historic Places is a significance achievement, designation as an Austin historic landmark or as a “contributing structure” in a local historic district affords the greatest protection against demolition.\textsuperscript{179}

In Austin, designation is limited outside of downtown and older, residential neighborhoods. There are only a handful of historic landmarks and no local historic districts along the case study commercial strips. The following map depicts local historic district and landmark designations. There is little overlap between the geography of preservation and commercial uses outside of Austin’s downtown.

\textsuperscript{179} According to the City of Austin Land Development Code a “Contributing structure” is defined as follows: A structure that contributes to the historic character of a historic area (HD) combining district, [that] was built during the period of significance for the district, and which retains its appearance from that time. An altered structure may be considered a contributing structure if the alterations are minor and the structure retains its historic appearance and contributes to the overall visual and historic integrity of the district. A structure is designated as a contributing structure by the ordinance establishing the historic area (HD) combining district.” From the City of Austin Land Development Code, 25-2-350 CONTRIBUTING STRUCTURE DEFINED.
Commercial Land Use and Historic Zoning

Figure 38: Map of Commercial Land Use and Historic Zoning.
I interviewed Steve Sadowsky, the City of Austin’s historic preservation officer about the role of preservation along Austin’s corridors. He had attended the meetings aimed at drafting the Iconic Business Preservation ordinance. In the interview, he carefully explained that the purpose of the Historic Preservation program was “to preserve the built environment” and not as a means of preserving particular businesses. He added:

There is so much involved, because these iconic businesses for a lot of them, they don’t meet our criteria for age. Some of them have only been in business for thirty years, which that’s certainly an achievement to be in business for thirty or thirty-five years. But that’s not the purpose of a historic preservation program… I think the other issues are: what if the building they are in is too small? … Or [what] if a business has been run by the same family for a long time, the parents are ready to retire, but the kids don’t want to take it over? What do you do then? I think there are so many variables that come up when you look at retaining a quote, unquote iconic business in its original location… So I don’t think those discussions went very far when they realized the complications of trying to do something like that….We are more than willing to look at a building that houses an iconic business as a potential landmark, but not necessarily because the of the business that is currently there.

Sadowsky described how historic designation can yield benefits that might keep a business in place, for instance tax abatements that accrue to the property owner and might be passed to tenant. However, he stated that it is not within the purview of the historic preservation to landmark a building because of the importance of a current business.

This does not mean that preservation has stayed entirely distant from either iconic businesses or the history of commercial strips. In the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s magazine South Congress was featured as a preservation success.\textsuperscript{180} The National Trust for Historic Preservation had opted to feature South Congress Avenue instead of highlighting other potential historic

\textsuperscript{180} Patoski (2010).
preservation stories such as the Texas State Capital building; the Governor’s Mansion; or the Bremond Block, a set of stately Victorians in downtown Austin.

The feature in *Preservation* magazine went to print seven years after the Historic Preservation Office commissioned a preservation plan and windshield survey of historic properties along South Congress. By 2013, the effort had yielded few historic designations. Sadowsky explained that at the time, property owners had been resistant to the idea of anything that would limit their ability to tear down or alter a building. Further action was still in a holding pattern until development pressure forced the City’s hand:

And I don’t know if that resistance is still as active as it was back in that period, but we basically maintain almost a hands-off attitude toward South Congress and it seems to be working really well. The buildings are being preserved. There are very few tear downs…I do have worries that as South Congress continues to get more and more pressure... The one that is a plus on that side is that everyone loves the character of South Congress. Everyone loves how funky it is and the old buildings and basically, I think there is a community emphasis to keep it the way it is. And that is playing in preservation’s favor, but as far as any kind of city effort to try to encourage preservation or … or a preservation effort along South Congress. We are not going to do that at this point. If the development pressures along South Congress really start threatening the buildings and the character, I think we will re-evaluate and perhaps take a different stance, but for right now it is very much a laissez-faire attitude. It is working really well and we haven’t seen any demolitions along South Congress. There are a number of buildings along South Congress that could easily be landmarks.

There were two popular businesses along South Congress Avenue that are housed in designated properties. The former feed store that is Rob Lippincott’s Guero’s Taco Bar, was one of the first commercial buildings to be designated outside of downtown. The second was the Continental Club, a popular music venue that operated for fifty years and was designated a few years after Lippincott’s building. Sadowsky recalled that the 2008 designation of the Continental Club as being the outcome of a negotiation between the developer and the South River City neighborhood association. Although Sadowsky could
not recall the details of those concessions, he said the intention was to anchor that block of South Congress as a means of preserving its character. Steve wrote up the nomination and the public hearing drew the press:

I remember when it actually went to council and some of the TV stations were there. And they asked me on camera: “Why the Continental?” And I said, “Because, first of all, it’s an important part of Austin’s history, you know it’s not that old of a building and it’s not high style architecture by any means, but it’s an important part of Austin history, and it’s a piece of history and a landmark that everybody in this city has access to.” So to me, it’s an educational tool or an appreciation tool of historic resources, and preservation, and you know if the Continental is designated, then what else? What’s the story of these other buildings? So it’s starts piquing people’s curiosity, I think. So to me, it was a very important nomination… Name any other landmark in the city, they don’t know where the landmarks are, but name the Continental Club as a landmark. And it really gets people to think: What’s the story of these other buildings around here? How about the Austin Motel or the San Jose? They want to know… So I think a landmark like the Continental Club is a real asset to our program, because people walk into the Continental Club and they see the plaque on the wall, on the outside wall and they think, “Oh, it’s a historic landmark!” And it doesn’t hurt their business either.

When asked about other South Austin corridors, he replied that “there is much less cohesiveness to South Lamar Boulevard, because it really came about in the era of shopping centers, rather than businesses right on the street, like South Congress. So to me, there is less historical character to South Lamar. It basically looks like any other pre-1960s highway.” Later in the interview, the lack of cohesion was attributed to both South Lamar Boulevard and Burnet Road:

Again, I think Burnet is a different kind of animal altogether. It’s like South Lamar in that things are separate and to me when I think of… historic commercial corridors, I think of something more like South Congress or East Sixth Street, where there are commercial buildings, but they are in blocks. It’s a smaller scale replica of downtown…. Burnet Road and South Lamar, I think the individual buildings that would have historical significance on those roads are so far apart that they… it leads almost to a… dis-cohesiveness to the main historic character.

Sadowsky’s assessment of other South Austin commercial strips was based on this concept of cohesion and compatibility. He compared South First with South Congress, pointing out that South First lacks the concentration of
early commercial buildings. Many of the commercial spaces consist of converted residential buildings from the 1920s through the 1940s with some infill commercial development. He described Barton Springs Road as still maintaining much of its historic character, which consists of restaurants in freestanding buildings surrounded with open space and in relation to Zilker Park. To Sadowsky, the relationship of remaining buildings to open space recalled its historical development, in spite of the density of condos that had been developed behind the commercial buildings that comprising the restaurant row.

When asked about the role of preservation along Austin’s commercial strips, Sadowsky returned to South Congress Avenue:

Back in ’03, South Congress was coming around, but it had only been about 10 years since it was a no-man’s land… 2003 rolls around and I think a lot of the resistance to preservation was a response to the fact that the street had been cleaned up and all of the noxious activities basically had been swept aside. I don’t know where they went, but they weren’t on South Congress anymore. And people were looking at South Congress as a real treasure chest of development possibilities. What has happened is that people really started embracing the street for its character and the buildings have not gone away. The buildings are still there and such an important part of the character of South Congress, that there is less thought of “all of this stuff can go away and we can build new commercial… private mixed use projects.” A lot of that has dissipated. There is still going to be pressure for mixed use density in South Congress, close to downtown, but I think people really understand now that it is the character of South Congress that brings people there.

Sadowsky also described how a section on “vernacular and utilitarian structures” had been added to the City of Austin’s criteria for historic landmark designation. These criteria were taken from examples in San Antonio’s historic preservation ordinance, which addressed “architectural oddities and utilitarian structures.” The adaptive reuse of gas stations is a common feature along Austin’s commercial strips, even if landmarking of them is not. Sadowsky
commented on the way that gas stations provided a sense of nostalgia and their covered areas were conductive to adaptation as outdoor seating areas.

As for the role of the preservation program in preserving mid-twentieth century commercial buildings from the 1950s and 1960s, Sadowsky commented on the political limitations. While he felt the Landmarks Commission would definitely review and evaluate commercial buildings from mid-twentieth century, he described a general reluctance to landmark them compared to older properties: “If I propose preservation of a 1959 commercial building, unless it is something that is just extraordinary, I don’t know how seriously people would take that. If I propose the preservation of an 1899 commercial building, there is no question about that.” He felt that preservation professionals were more attuned to buildings of the recent past having architectural and historical significance. He also described this as a function of time. He recalled how a 1984 comprehensive survey of historic resources had largely overlooked the historical significance of bungalows, now considered treasured architectural assets in central city neighborhoods.

While the Historic Preservation Officer struck a cautious note in the interview about the role of preservation along mid-twentieth century commercial strips, it should be noted that there are various examples of informal forms of preservation and interpretation along them. For instance, in the figure below, the Violet Crown Shopping Center on North Lamar Boulevard sports a privately-funded plaque describing it as “Austin’s First Shopping Center.” It also commemorates a Richard Linklater film, which was shot at the location in the early 1990s.
An art installation in Austin’s Crestview neighborhood called the *Wall of Welcome* is another community-based approach to interpreting the mid-twentieth century commercial landscapes of the area. The businesses along Burnet Road and North Lamar are featured in several sections of this mosaic mural, including Home Lumber, Top Notch, Threadgill’s, and the Burnet Drive-In Theater, among other businesses considered iconic and integral to the neighborhood’s history. Although this mural does not involve the preservation of existing buildings, it raises awareness about the value of longstanding (and some long gone) iconic businesses and their associated buildings and landscapes.
Figure 40: The Wall of Welcome in the Crestview Neighborhood commemorates the history of a mid-twentieth-century subdivision as well as Burnet Road and North Lamar Boulevard in north-central Austin. Photo by author.

Figure 41: Detail of the Wall of Welcome. Homage to the icons along Burnet Road and North Lamar. Photo by author.
Similar to the *Wall of Welcome*, the whimsical outdoor landscapes of the South Austin’s Museum of Popular Culture (SAMPC) on South Lamar Boulevard, promote a sense of place and community. SAMPC is a nonprofit whose mission is to document, interpret, and preserve the history of Austin’s art and culture. Adapted from an ordinary commercial building, the museum is adorned with colorful murals, music posters, and other folk art. The installations both inside and outside of the museum promote an appreciation for Austin’s live music history, including the bars and restaurants that have served as the incubators and venues for the live music scene.

Contributing even more directly to the act of preserving commercial landscapes, the Heritage Society of Austin has given “Maintaining an Austin Cultural Landmark” and iconic business awards to the Austin Motel on South Congress Avenue; Peter Pan Mini-Golf on South Lamar Boulevard and Barton Springs Road; the Top Notch on Burnet Road; The Tavern on North Lamar Boulevard; Cisco’s on East Sixth Street; and Dirty Martin’s on Guadalupe Street.¹⁸¹ This non-regulatory incentive raises the profile of popular businesses along Austin’s commercial corridors by praising the ongoing preservation of these commercial vernacular landmarks.

**Friction and Negotiation at the Residential Edges of the Strip**

As illustrated by the *Wall of Welcome*, the general enthusiasm for the local businesses and eclectic architecture along Austin’s commercial strips is often

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shared by the residents who live among them. This does not mean that nearby residents are merely passive customers of these businesses. Austin’s neighborhoods have a reputation for involvement that was borne out in interviews with residents of Austin’s central city neighborhoods along case study commercial strips.

Bradford Patterson, Chair of the Bouldin Creek Neighborhood Association (BCNA) Zoning Committee, shared his views of change along South Congress Avenue. The BCNA lies to the west of South Congress, which forms its easternmost boundary.\(^{182}\) Patterson had lived in the neighborhood for 11 years in a house close to Rob Lippincott’s Guero’s Taco Bar and 04. In fact, it was Rob Lippincott’s mixed use development that got him involved in neighborhood politics. Patterson’s home is in a block of 1940s houses and his backyard once overlooked Capital Car Credit. At the time of the interview he could see the parking garage of the 04 mixed use development from it.

Patterson described the neighborhood zoning committee he chairs as one that is primarily reactive; the committee was established to respond to development proposals. A neighborhood plan was adopted in 2002, which outlines priorities and guidelines for development in the area.\(^{183}\) The Zoning Committee responds to a variety of cases, from homeowners who want to add an addition to their house, to improvements to existing commercial buildings, to redevelopment proposals like 04.

\(^{182}\) The neighborhood is large and includes South First Street and continues west to a boundary near South Lamar.

\(^{183}\) City of Austin (2002). Bouldin Creek Neighborhood Plan.
According to Patterson, residents feel squeezed by the transition along South Congress Avenue, which he described as having gone from a neighborhood-oriented commercial strip to a major tourist destination with a “national, or even international, draw.” Before South Congress transitioned to primarily bars and restaurants, Patterson said there was a time when he could shop at “a pet store, hardware store, restaurants you could actually get into without a gigantic wait.” He added: “Not that that is an entitlement.” With South Congress’ transition to an entertainment hub that supports events for huge festivals such as South by Southwest and the Austin City Limits festivals, the neighborhood became gridlocked. According to Patterson:

The merchants look and see our neighborhood and essentially the publicly subsidized free parking that’s been provided. They want to continue that and they have fought anything that would possibly change that. The residents look at it from the other perspective. Well, some of the residents feel like they are entitled to complete peace and quiet and to the parking. I like to think I’m somewhere more in the middle. But, for a lot of us, it’s a quality of life issue. We are overrun. If it were just parking, we could live with it. If it was just a few events a year, we could live with it. If it was just noise, we could live with it. But we have all of those things the vast majority of the time. I don’t resent anybody parking in front of my house, but I resent the businesses for making a buck off of that… they don’t generally seem to realize the constant stream of people driving down the street, doing circles looking for parking space and it is continuous… And unfortunately many of the people are less than courteous, which isn’t the merchants fault. We’re out there picking up diapers [and] beer cans continuously, [and] car parts, oddly enough. I mean I watch people, not able to fit stuff in their trunk, and they just took stuff out of their truck and threw it in our yard so that they could fit something in.

He described negotiations over the parking garage constructed at 04 as a painful process that required hours of mediation. In other negotiations over the prospective reuse or redevelopment of a nearby empty church, residents used a combination of tactics including elaborate negotiations with developers and private covenants with landowners. These negotiations would last for months, sometimes falling though as economic conditions changed.
For the Zilker Neighborhood Association, growing pains along South Lamar Boulevard sound similar, but involved redevelopment activity at a much larger scale. Andrew Elder, President of the neighborhood association described the state of change:

South Lamar was very much a blue collar stretch of road, you know, a highway into town that was covered by a lot of car lots, of auto repair, service places and that has started to change and then a lot of the service places or car lots have closed and it’s a question of what happens there. And oddly enough there are still a lot of empty lots just sitting there. I assume that the market is still trying to sort itself out about what speculation is going on. But then you also see some renovation of... in terms of car service places, becoming scooter service places. Or motorcycle scooter shops, bars, and restaurants going in. More so than the automotive. And then of course, the biggest single effects on the South Lamar are the apartment complex, condo, large-scale VMU projects. And those are certainly the single biggest impact that we have seen and will continue to see in the next 10 years.

Elder weighed in on the South Lamar plaza redevelopment. He had been involved in discussions with Big Red Dog, Greystar, and Michael Hsu:

In the big scheme of things, if you look at the Lamar Plaza today, it is not exactly, it is very sort of, it’s a very suburban style strip mall kind of development. There is really nothing especially, you know, beautiful about it or historic about it. But by the same token, it houses a lot of small independent businesses, who can [only] afford to pay a much lower amount of rent... it creates an atmosphere that is very eclectic and I think is much cherished by the neighborhood. So, while VMU... it’s hard to think of any tracts that would be more suitable for VMU, quite honestly. It’s already developed commercially. It is already 95% impervious cover. Basically adding residents to that space and keeping commercial use is in my humble perspective, is a very substantial benefit for our city and for our neighborhood.

He acknowledged the benefits and described two areas of concern. The first concern was that neighborhood businesses that had contributed to the character of South Lamar and of South Austin would be lost. In his mind, the “more policy-oriented” issue has to do with the influx of bars and restaurants
replacing a broader spectrum of businesses. His was concerned with the loss of diversity among businesses that were in walking distance of the neighborhood:

I think you could look at any one establishment and say that losing a vintage store, that’s not that important. Or losing one pharmacy, that’s not that important. Any individual case, it’s probably at the margins and not that big of a deal; but, you collectively add these up and at some point. South Lamar and the neighborhood in general is at risk of becoming isolated in a way that is completely counterintuitive.

He was supportive of efforts to improve the form and accessibility of South Lamar for pedestrians, bicyclists, and transit users, but he expressed concern that auto-dependence remained a feature of both new and old landscapes. The Vertical Mixed Use ordinance had been created to bring density to the corridors and these were enacted through new requirements and entitlements that he suspected were not working as expected. A part of the VMU bargain was to allow developers the option to reduce parking lots required per unit. This was seen as reducing costs, which would make redevelopment more feasible for developers. However, Elder saw no indication that developers were reducing parking spaces. Many of the new developments were geared toward middle and higher income tenants and development activity created a substantial supply of units to fill. He felt that developers were reluctant to give up built-in benefits such as parking spaces given that there was a growing supply of units in the area and the necessity to compete.\textsuperscript{184} New development had the potential to improve streetscapes and walkability along South Lamar, but they were not necessarily reducing the availability of free parking. Elder

\textsuperscript{184} This observation was confirmed in speaking with one of the companies involved in developing the South Lamar site; the development was “over parked” by 200 parking spaces above the requirements.
thought that this dynamic was maintaining the auto-centric nature of South Lamar Boulevard.

Elder saw the introduction of bus rapid transit along South Lamar as a positive step, but insufficient to change the situation:

So there is a combination of market forces, financial forces, development forces, and maybe even neighborhood forces that are all kind of conspiring to keep parking to be the same problem that it has been. And obviously with the increase in density that is only going to be worse and that’s where I go and look and say, part of what I am looking for as a neighborhood association, and we have a relatively small amount of leverage on, but to say, anytime anyone is going to be looking to get a parking reduction, or looking to take advantage of those benefits, we are expecting them to demonstrate some other commitment to alternative transportation.

He added that he would like to see a rail line down the center of South Lamar that could trigger alterative development. He explained that this would be “a demonstrable tool to get cars off the road and to give people options for how they might want to get around.”

Elder also commented on the relative affordability of the new units. The VMU ordinance required 10% apartments units to be affordable to families at 60-80% of median family income. He pointed out that this was still unaffordable to many of the working class families that the neighborhood had once supported.\(^\text{185}\)

Much of the interview was focused on the large-scale transitions that South Lamar was undergoing. It underlined Elder’s commitment to the neighborhood and his nuanced view of change. Some of the literature on land use planning and gentrification focuses on neighborhood associations and residential property owners as regressive players in development negotiations. One introductory text book on comprehensive planning goes as far to advise fledgling planners: “People testifying at a public hearing in opposition to a

\(^{185}\) The VMU ordinance also does not have affordability requirements for commercial uses.
rezoning that, they believe, will increase density in the neighborhood may speak as though they know a lot about density. Most of them probably do not. “\textsuperscript{186} This was quite far from my impression of the neighborhood representatives that I interviewed. Instead, there was a substantial level of knowledge not only of density, but of the issues and interactions between land use and transportation, and commercial and residential uses. This may have been the outcome of a population grown savvy with planning processes and specific to the neighborhood leaders who I interviewed. However, it was evident from these and other interviews, that there were many residents with detailed local knowledge and progressive ideas that were informing planning and development processes. Interestingly, these neighborhood participants often had intimate knowledge of the businesses and buildings that comprised neighboring commercial strips. Representatives of the neighborhood were often involved in complicated negotiations from large-scale redevelopment down to residential and commercial remolds.

\textbf{PRIVATE SITES, PUBLIC SPACE: CODES, THRESHOLDS, AND MECHANICS OF INCREMENTAL CHANGE}

As Austin’s public sector and neighborhoods debated the merits of shifting to form-based code and vertical mixed use, it has often been the incremental influx of businesses with their adaptive use of commercial buildings that have created Austin’s entertainment districts and popular commercial strip landscapes. Along South Congress Avenue, the remains of the San Jose Motel were submerged in lush landscaping in the creation of the Hotel San Jose. South

\textsuperscript{186} Kelly (2010), 180.
First Street had become increasingly ablaze with neon signs. The canopies of South Austin’s gas stations and auto repair places had been converted into outdoor patios; popular restaurants and bars have added outdoor seating and stages. Many commercial buildings are adorned with fanciful murals. Even a Chevron gas station on Barton Springs Road has a mural – one that celebrates itself at the center of Austin’s tourist destinations. All of the case study commercial strips had mobile trailer parks that generated additional activity in vacant gravel lots and off-street parking spaces. These were small choreographies of change intended to draw the eye and produce a sense of place.

Figure 42: A mural on the side of a chain gas station. The mural blurs boundaries between art and advertisement, drawing from the aesthetics of tourism and local business. It places the food mart in the context of South Congress Avenue. Photo by author.
Along some segments, these small changes have added up to new district identities. Some were collective efforts, such as Independent Business Investment Zone murals, banners, and billboards that advertised a joint identity among concentrations of local business. Often, they reflected an incremental and adaptive process, where like businesses flocked together. In contrast to downtown alliances and main street programs that have street improvement funding and beautification efforts, strategies of coordinated private investment seemed rare, even within IBIZ districts. Austin’s commercial strip landscapes were largely comprised of many individual investment decisions. These individual choices caught on, as merchants learned from the investments of others or as similar tenants moved into available spaces, creating continuity out of proximity to similar or synergistic businesses. The cacophony of different building types, businesses, and the outward persona of concentrations of local business creates eclectic districts out of this diversity.
The volatile nature of small businesses and their drive to survive is often reflected in rapid and exuberant change along commercial strips. Commercial remodels typically outpace other residential and industrial among industrial or residential buildings.\textsuperscript{187} This reflects the more volatile nature of small business. Nationally, half of new small businesses survive five years and one-third survives 10 years or more.\textsuperscript{188} The rate of failure, even along a stagnant commercial strip, can lead to a steady parade of new businesses cycling through properties. Businesses that rely upon their image remodel their spaces to be

\textsuperscript{187} Douglas (2006), 11.
\textsuperscript{188} U.S. Small Business Administration (2013).
competitive and to adapt to changing customer needs and tastes. This leads to cycles of reinvestment and change, even where businesses remain successful.

While often thought of and treated as concrete, changeless objects, buildings maybe more accurately viewed in terms of cycles of physical change. As noted by Stewart Brand, the lifespan of a building might range from 30 to 300 years, but its skin is estimated to last only 20 years, its services 7-20, and its interior plan only three. Buildings are re-skinned and remade, through a constant series of landscape, interior and exterior improvements.

Some commercial uses are unique in that they are quasi-public spaces are designed for the public. This is certainly the case among the restaurants, bars, and boutiques that have moved to fill available spaces along case study corridors. Improvements are often oriented toward drawing particular segments of the population and the process of exterior and interior remodels are geared toward achieving goals of program as well as creation of experience.

For a small, independent business with limited access to financing, drastic improvements may be avoided given a small budget. As Michael Hsu described, the city’s building codes and site development requirements create thresholds for improvement activity. Crossing the threshold where an improvement transitions to a regulated activity is avoided where possible.

Improvements below the threshold of regulation can be difficult to measure, where there are no permits or other official records of change; however, these changes can be discerned qualitatively. Painting is one of the most economical, unregulated, and affordable modifications a business can make to attract customers. Along Austin’s commercial corridors, the effect can be striking. For instance, the bright red and yellow color combination is a common
expression of title loan and pawn shop outfits, while upscale boutiques are announced through trendier color combinations aimed at drawing an upscale or middle-class segment of the population.

Figure 44: Commercial Eco-tones. Photo by Author.

The colorful and often artistic murals on commercial businesses are indicative of Austin’s laissez faire and even supportive atmosphere for creative expression. The City of Austin requires permits for signage; however, it does not regulate the painting of murals. As long as a mural does not constitute a sign, businesses may use them liberally to draw the attention of customers.

If an improvement to a property involves a remodel or a change of use, a tenant or property owner’s first stop is the City of Austin’s Development
Assistance Center (DAC). The DAC is a “one-stop shop” for development. It is the front counter for various permitting processes where the public can access city staff. Staff answer questions the development process and identify applicable regulations. Staff at the DAC also support the permitting of signs and music venues. Representatives from Austin Energy and the water utility also have representatives at the center.

According to Christopher Johnson, the DAC’s manager, the customer base “runs the entire spectrum from professional developers who do this all the time, whether they are local or out of town and they want some guidance on the development that they are doing, all the way down to the person who inherited a piece of property from a relative and doesn’t know a thing about anything and wants to know what they can do.” Johnson described the difference between local investors and small businesses and national developers by the kinds of help that the need:

Obviously the big time developers, if they are coming to us, it’s because something is really complicated, because they know all of the normal stuff, so they would consult with us if there is an issue if the site has some weird drainage issues or floodplain issues or some other issue like how to comply with the commercial design standards, because they are complicated. Whereas the other folks who want to covert a house into a coffee shop or something, you know, they come to us with a dream and an address. And what we do is we look at it, we evaluate it and determine whether it is even feasible.

Sometimes staff must delicately explain that a proposal for a new use will simply not work on a particular piece of property. Where feasible, staff outlines a “roadmap of the processes” they will need to go through:

We would determine whether they can make the parking work. And then let them know how to get through the site exemption process and they are going to have to develop some building plans. And then they would say that the building is already here. And then we get to explain to them that different uses have different requirements in the building codes and so even if it is an existing building and you don’t plan to do a single
thing physically for it, you still have to file a building permit for the change in use, because it has to be reviewed for the proposed occupancy.

Johnson’s comments reinforced observations on the centrality of parking in the calculus between adapting an existing building versus constructing a new one. Along South Congress Avenue, for instance, Chris noted that that parking requirements were established after taxpayer strips had been developed. The development code allows staff to legally maintain parking deficiencies as long as the new use wasn’t drastically different from the old one. This allows a churn of businesses with similar parking requirements. He explained that “if it was a retail space historically and they wanted to change it to a salon, in our code today, retail and personal services have the same parking ratio, so we would allow them to make that change if they weren’t making things worse.” If the new use is something that is more intensive, such as a restaurant, then some arrangement would need to be made to find addition off-street parking or obtain a variance.

As I had learned from interviews with neighborhood residents, parking along South Congress Avenue was a hot button issue. In a sense, area neighborhoods that had elected to maintain the Vertical Mixed Use on commercial properties had the ultimate bargaining chip. It was expedited Residential Permit Parking (RPP). If adopted by a neighborhood, it would effectively remove free parking along neighborhood streets. As long as businesses were happily churning through existing buildings, a delicate balance of power was maintained by avoiding the need for additional parking. New development would require a whole different scale of parking and it would put pressure on neighborhood residents who might elect to apply for RPP. Small
businesses that fit within existing buildings could be maintained without meeting current parking requirements in the code.

Johnson mentioned Rainey Street, a National Register District comprised of old houses that dramatized the relationship between parking regulations, adaptive reuse, and subsequent redevelopment. Rainey street had been rezoned Central Business and according to Johnson:

When [Rainey Street] went through the whole [up-]zoning process the majority of the neighborhood was really in favor of it, because they were seeing dollar signs with CBD zoning, because they had visions of the big condo developer coming to town and buying up 20 lots and building a tower and conveniently enough the zoning didn’t work out that way. They got their CBD zoning and it coincided with a crash in the economy and there was a convenient loophole in the code. Well it’s not a loophole, but the code says no parking is required for a change of use in CBD zoning for any building that is less than 6,000 square feet. … when that code was written it was all of these downtown buildings shouldn’t be held up from potential reuse because they don’t have parking. But here you have Rainey street and it is CBD and these old buildings that were built before ‘97 and less than 6,000 square feet so they can do a change of use and [they] don’t require parking and they all turned into restaurants and bars and there is no place to park.

Rainey Street had recently topped the list of preservation issues for the Heritage Society of Austin, because CBD zoning was not only leading to adaptive reuse, but it was to become the location for a 23-story tower on a few assembled lots. As described by Michael Hsu, along commercial strips such as Burnet Road and South Lamar Boulevard where buildings have available off-street parking, the entitlements for an existing building still remain in favor of maintaining existing lots and the footprints of existing buildings. Along Rainey Street, proximity to downtown and proven activity in buildings converted to bars and restaurants was leading to larger-scale reinvestment and redevelopment.

The interview with Johnson provided additional evidence of the unintended consequences of code. This included the incremental transformation
of outdoor spaces as bars and restaurants added outdoor patios. According to
Johnson, the construction of outdoor patios was most likely a result of the City of
Austin’s indoor smoking ban. He commented that “the biggest push that drove
outdoor seating stuff was probably the adoption of the smoking ordinance. As
soon as that happened every bar and restaurant wanted to have outdoor space to
accommodate smokers.” This was a simple explanation that seemed to rival
assumptions that these quasi-public spaces were primarily a reflection of trends
in design or the construction of places to cater to an “Austin lifestyle.” It
suggested a pragmatic response to changes in code in order to retain valuable
customers.

Johnson also affirmed a pattern of near complete demolition of
commercial buildings and new construction in their original footprints. This had
been described by Michael Hsu and it could be observed in numerous places
along case study commercial strips. Johnson commented:

Yeah, I think it’s fairly common. I’m sure it’s simply driven by the market. At this point
in the process we don’t really have any control. The only control we have is control
through regulations. What people do with their property, the market kind of decides
that, but certainly in these corridors that are redeveloping now, it seems like a lot of that
is driven with restaurants and what not. But, yeah, we see that quite a bit, as far as
completely refacing buildings and stripping it down to the bones, and basically making it
look like a new building, while maintaining it as a remodel.

According to Johnson, there is no specific definition for demolition in the
development ordinance. While there is a threshold for the percentage of a
residential building before it is considered a demolition, there is no specific
percentage or guidance with respect to commercial properties. He described the
rule of thumb used in lieu of a clear line in the code:

If someone were submitting a site plan exemption and they were proposing a building to
be demolished down to the slab and rebuilt from the ground up, we would say, no that’s
new construction. But if they are maintaining the framework of the building, then yeah, that’s fine.

The maintenance of building footprints can hardly be called adaptive reuse when buildings are completely gutted and rebuilt. Adaptive reuse of existing commercial buildings has the potential to reduce the flow of construction and demolition waste, but in these cases, there may be hardly benefit at all. In addition, the auto-centric elements of many freestanding commercial buildings remain the same. Their parking lots are retained, stormwater remains unaddressed, and buildings remain far from the sidewalk. Furthermore, these footprints retain little indication of their actual history. They may serve as new community gathering spaces, as restaurants and bars; however, this might have been achieved through less intensive and perhaps more sustainable means.
Figure 45: Sinclair Service Station on South Lamar. Courtesy of the Austin History Center.\textsuperscript{189}

Figure 46: Former Sinclair Service Station stripped for conversion to bar. Photo by author.

Figure 47: Former Sinclair Service Station as the Corner Bar in 2011. Photo by author.
Site planning and development review are not the only processes of public regulation. While the DAC was the first stop, the Commercial Plan Review Office is the last stop for those proposing a change of use, additions, remodels, demolitions, and new construction. Plans examiners are the last public officials to stand between the plans of an entrepreneur or developer and their realization. It is the immediate interface between the actions of many private investors and the safety and accessibility requirements of the public.

Just past the Commercial Plan Review front desk, where people draw numbers to meet with a plans reviewer, are dense rolls of construction documents. Each roll represents a different development case and the number of sheets is an obvious indicator of the complexity of the proposal. During an interview, staff pointed out the rolls for the Seaholm Power Plant project, a mixed use development and adaptive reuse project in downtown that was under review at the time. Each roll was intriguing. It was sobering to see the number of sheets a plan reviewer would need to evaluate. It represented a level of detail, coordination, and regulation that is an often unacknowledged process in the production and adaptation of cities.

In addition to the plans themselves, building permits are a product of this process. These are the bureaucratic artifacts of this regulatory process and a window into the rate and nature of change along Austin’s commercial corridors. The map below depicts the remodels, additions, repair, and demolition activities along South Austin corridors for a single year.
Figure 48: Map of commercial site plan reviews and building permits in South Austin.
Building permits are a necessary part of the process of building adaptation and permitting includes the review of plumbing, air conditioning, mechanical and electrical systems. Permits are required when a business changes from one kind of use to another or to demolish a building. I interviewed a plans examiner on the condition that I not include the interviewees’ name. The plans examiner explained that for existing buildings, staff look at drawings to determine whether a building is safe for a new use:

Additional exits may be necessarily, structural strengthening of certain elements may be required, sprinkler systems may be required. Larger water lines, larger waste water lines, newer electrical service. Whenever you convert a building, a lot of times the old services, which were adequate for the previous use, may not be adequate for the new use, because the new use is more intensive demand on the utility infrastructure and the exiting capabilities of the building itself.

The plans examiner pointed out that restaurants in particular are more hazardous due to cooking operations, grease hoods, the number of occupants, and alcohol consumption. All of these increase the relative hazard of this kind of building compared to uses such as residences and officers. The examiner commented:

The restaurant uses are really interesting, because it’s been my observation that typically, folks who are wanting to open a restaurant have the least exposure to the development process. [They have] the least amount of knowledge about the development process and they are choosing to strike off into an endeavor that has more regulatory requirements than just about any other commercial venture I can think of. Because you have all the hazards that we talked about that are inherently larger when you are dealing with a larger number of people, you have health department requirements, you have industrial waste requirements having to do with grease traps and those types of that nature, TABC [or Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission]. If you are wanting to serve alcohol. So you have more regulatory requirements than most other uses.... you are dealing with folks that aren’t professional developers, they’ve got their nest egg and they thought they always wanted to open a restaurant and so they strike off and go do this. It’s really challenging sometimes.
The examiner contrasted this common situation with the representatives of national chains who typically did due diligence before settling on a particular building and site. They also have experience with development regulations and building codes. As Johnson had described, it was a whole different experience and kind of assistance.

The examiner gave an example of an instance where the Existing Building Code, which had been adopted by the City of Austin, was modified to address local trends in commercial remodeling. Staff had observed that property owners and tenants were increasingly opting to alter rooftops to create additional outdoor restaurant and bar space. Neighborhood groups and citizens were beginning to expressing concerns with this. Rooftops had been a grey area of the building code and they posed life safety issues for the public. Staff proposed new standards for rooftop occupancy and fire resistance and new standards were adopted that clarified that rooftop seating should be treated as an additional floor of a building for construction related purposes, and that had provisions for fall protection and treatment of interstitial spaces between buildings. It was just one of many interesting stories of the evolution of city ordinances that reflected the evolving adaptation of buildings.

The examiner pointed out the disconnect between long term plans and the necessary short term perspectives of business and property owners: “They are interested in their project on their parcel of land and they are not really much interested in what is happening in the neighborhood or only to the extent that it is going to impact their business operations.” When the discussion turned the Imagine Austin plan and development code updates, the examiner commented: “There have been site related development regulations such as commercial
design standards that have building implications. They start to have requirements on the amount and the location of glazing, the height of a false front facade that we have to look at. But in general, there is a pretty sharp divide between site development regulations and building regulations.”

Speaking individually, rather than as a spokesperson for the City of Austin, the plans examiner added:

You had kind of touched on: “Do you feel there is a need or a role for existing buildings?" And I absolutely do. I believe it from a number of aspects having to do with historically grounding yourself -- as far as where you are from and keeping that vision. In terms of sustainability, conservation, you name it. We should be making an effort to reuse existing building stock whenever possible. And I am really pleased to see the evolution of things like the Existing Building code and provisions and all of the other technical codes. [The] provisions in the land development code that encourage the reuse of existing buildings, because... as things become more homogenous, we lose our identity... You go to some of the shopping centers, some of the newer shopping centers and you walk through that one and you go to one in San Antonio or one in Phoenix or wherever and they all look the same. You lose something when you establish that level of predictability. MacDonald’s has its place. You can be guaranteed wherever you go in the United States, or anywhere in the world for that matter, you’ll receive a certain product. A certain level of quality, etc., but you can’t live on that all the time. You need those things... those unique experiences, those unique restaurants, those unique places, that make you go... Oh, I’m in Austin. I’m in New York, or I’m in Chicago, you know. Anyway, I’ll get off my soap box.

As planning efforts around the country focus on adopting form based codes and other reforms that seek to reshape low density areas as transit-oriented, compact urban forms, it seems that the common phenomenon of commercial remodels and more generally reinvestment in existing urban fabric is largely overlooked. The mechanics of building codes and their impact on how cities evolve remains even farther afield. This is a major area of research that is largely untapped in the literatures of planning, preservation, and gentrification. There are few systematic studies that venture into this important area of interaction between codes, private actors, and incremental processes of change.
CONNECTIONS BETWEEN BUILDINGS, ACTORS, AND THE COMMUNITIES THEY CREATE

By following the associations between various actors and their participation in shaping development outcomes, one discovers that what actors value matters. The City of Austin, through various planning initiatives, has attempted to incorporate the preservation of “iconic businesses” and their popularly appreciated landscapes. This is illustrated not only in the visualizations and policies of the comprehensive plan, but also in participatory processes such as the Vertical Mixed Use Opt-Out process. This is one aspect that speaks to the ways in which the public sector and community actors have participated in managing change. In addition to the defense of local business and icons, there are additional public and private dynamics that produce remodeled commercial spaces out of the durable patterns of building footprints. Retaining building footprints is a creative strategy to negotiate land development codes and grandfather entitlements.

These layers of public policy and community negotiation allude to crucial, unresolved questions in the future of commercial strips. In particular, given the convergence of private and public consensus on the value of retaining local businesses, what are fair, practical, and equitable ways that the community and public sector can foster local business and the local economy? As for the substantial amount of incremental change, such as commercial remodeling activity, one is left to ask whether this activity is adding up to positive outcomes for the community. If not, how could it?
Chapter 7. Incorporating Landscapes of Thrift and Choreographies of Change in Planning and Preservation Practice

First, the built environment must be understood as an agent for the benefit of both humans and non-humans, and as such, designers must work to preserve and enhance the environment aesthetically, ecologically, functionally, and with respect to history and the specificity of local or regional cultures. Second, project “sites” must be understood as always already social, political, and ecological entities such that any project is and conceptually treated as a local renovation.

- Vincent Canizaro

Austin’s central city commercial strips have been evolving within the context of rapid growth consistent with Central Texas’ position along the Sunbelt. Although Austin is unique in many respects, reinvestment along mature, central city commercial strips is relatively common. As noted by Ty Puckett of Transwestern, real estate development companies are increasingly focusing on urban infill in many cities across the country. While Austin ranks high for its small business activity, independent businesses contribute to the local economy and sense of place in all communities.190 Many communities contain vibrant concentrations of synergistic businesses. This case study afforded the opportunity to delve deeply into commercial strips where reinvestment has been occurring. Many commercial corridors across the country share similar looming questions about the means to wisely use and plan for change within the urban fabric inherited from the past and how to guide and coordinate the process of reinvestment and adaptation.

190 In 2013, Forbes and The Business Journals gave Austin scores of A+ for business friendliness and #1 for small business growth, respectively. See Tice (2013) and Thomas (2013).
As illustrated within this dissertation, the complexity and resilience of commercial strips should not be underestimated. Commercial strips’ development patterns represent the durable imprints of history. Existing buildings and parcel configurations will continue to shape future possibilities. The condition of commercial strips are influenced by the ebb and flow of local, regional, and global scales of capital and by shifts in economic and social conditions within metropolitan regions. Even with these larger structural forces, the fate of central city commercial strips are neither determined nor fixed. Processes of reinvestment and change will continue to evolve. The outcomes of change will continue to be actively influenced and shaped by local actors.

In Austin, where there is sufficient reinvestment momentum, the micro-dynamics and local politics of change have become visible. Austin’s commercial strips represent cumulative and ongoing private calculations. They are remade of private ventures extruded through the regulation of parking spaces, land use, and development; public investments in rights of way, and an evolving set of business models and consumer expectations. These corridors are complex commercial ecosystems and the logic of adaptive reuse versus scrape and redevelopment is often a complex calculus that relates to city regulations and negotiations with neighborhoods, the availability of financing, and the creativity of investors, designers, developers, merchants, and property owners.

Substantial public and community effort has been expended to shape the character of change along Austin’s commercial strips. Many of these actors feel that reinvestment does not automatically mean progress or improvement. The micro-dynamics of change represent areas where the professional practices of planning and preservation, as well as the individual and collective acts of many
other private, public and community actors, make a difference. Reinvestment occurs through a multiplicity of actors and their choreographies of change are seldom wholly unified; even the land use plans and codes that aim to provide substantial certainty may have unanticipated consequences. As described in this dissertation, there is the potential for alliances between various interests that may create the harmonics for successful adaptation of commercial strips. Still, many questions remain about the extent and character of this change.

By using the phrase “landscapes of thrift” in this dissertation, I meant to invoke its many meanings, from the entrepreneurial opportunities that older buildings along commercial strips afford; to the way commercial properties are economically constructed and adapted; to the normative meaning of “thrift” as the wise use of resources. It is this last association that seems most important. Are the many private, public, and community investments along commercial strips wise ones? Are they adding up to public benefits? To answer these questions, it is worth reviewing them within the context of the four domains of literature described in Chapter 2. From this discussion, I will relate this research to the much broader context of planning and preservation practice beyond commercial strips.

Wicked Problems

The commercial strip remains, from the perspective of planning, a wicked problem. Consistent with comprehensive planning initiatives in cities of roughly the same size, the vision for change along Austin’s commercial strips is one of redevelopment in the form of compact, mixed use development. Within Austin’s comprehensive plan, this vision includes the retention of local businesses as
assets along commercial strips. This vision echoes instances in which iconic local businesses have been retained and have proven to be interrelated to the success of new development. Core samples such as Rob Lippincott’s 04 development on South Congress Avenue, the Broken Spoke at the 704, and the Alamo Drafthouse at the Lamar Plaza development are a few concrete examples of a larger set of instances where existing commercial buildings are related and incorporated into new development.

The City of Austin’s planning efforts, including Chris Riley’s corridor redevelopment initiative, the Vertical Mixed Use Opt-In Opt-Out process, and efforts to draft an iconic business preservation ordinance, provide further demonstration of the awareness of the value of local businesses and their relationship to existing buildings. These represent novel and creative attempts to address the nexus between commercial strips as local business habitat and the desire to spur sensitive infill redevelopment along commercial corridors. In fact, there is evidence from core samples that planning initiatives must address local business displacement or they risk the loss of needed political support. This has certainly been the case along Austin’s corridors, where merchants have contributed to the defeat of a light rail initiative.

A range of large and small reinvestments have incrementally changed the public realm in Austin. New businesses have enlivened once vacant or underutilized spaces. Some businesses have added outdoor enhancements that improve the visual characteristics of public rights-of-way or create new outdoor quasi-public spaces, such as outdoor patios and music venues. New vertical mixed use developments are adding housing and retail spaces that are typically supportive of new pedestrian and in a few cases, bicycling facilities. Although
there are many successful examples of private enhancements to public space, Austin’s commercial strips remain substantially auto-centric.

Many public rights of ways remain dangerous or even inaccessible. At times, they are nearly uninhabitable due to the unmitigated exposure of pedestrians to traffic and the blazing Texas sun. Both adaptive use of individual properties and redevelopment can assist in improving micro-climates that facilitate pedestrian activity. However, the creation of truly walkable, transit accessible corridors will require larger-scale planning initiatives as well. The frequent mention of conflicts over parking by many of the people interviewed, suggest that parking will remain an enduring political question. There remains much work to be done to transition commercial strips into more complete and accessible corridors and to address the accumulation and reproduction of parking lots.

It is also quite instructive to compare the adaptation of older commercial strips to more recently developed commercial districts. In many cases, it is difficult to see how the small adaptations of existing fabric can gain traction among more recently constructed commercial strips and freeway interchanges with huge buildings and parcels of land. The discarded shells of old gas stations, small freestanding restaurants, and taxpayer strips have provided a comparatively more human scale and greater adaptability for small businesses that does not seem to exist among more recent commercial development patterns associated with big boxes and power centers. There is much more that planners and designers need to learn about the kinds of commercial spaces that can be successfully converted into active incubators of independent businesses and
vibrant urban places. There may be derived of detailed observations and research into reinvestment patterns in aging urban fabric.

Communities seeking to reach long range planning goals should look closely at the existing urban fabric for assets and opportunities. Within long range land use planning and in academic theory, site review and current planning are typically underappreciated, even though they are essential to implementation of plans. At the time of this dissertation, the City of Austin is preparing for a review of its Land Development Code. While much of this effort is likely to focus on the adoption of form-based codes and other means of addressing new construction, it is important for planners and policymakers to remember that long range goals are often accomplished (or subverted) through many small, incremental processes of reinvestment in existing properties. The thresholds and regulations that pertain to existing buildings make a difference.\footnote{In some cases, the fixes to Austin’s land development code may be relatively modest, such as the addition of language that defines “commercial demolitions” and draws a clearer distinction between demolition and remodeling projects. In Austin, this alone may go far in reducing the number of new construction projects that are camouflaged as commercial remodels. Thus, the definition of commercial remodels can be limited to those projects that achieve retention of more of the original fabric of buildings and that contribute to a reduction of construction and demolition waste. Furthermore, a review of codes should address built in incentives to avoid environmental performance standards, be supportive of efforts to reduce impervious surfaces, re-examine parking standards, and recognize that local businesses rely on existing buildings as economical space. A review of codes may in some cases tighten regulations, while in other cases, provide more flexibility for achieving desired incremental change.}

I would like to emphasize that if urban planners fails to understand the role of existing buildings and urban fabric in managing change, they will lose important opportunities for improving the environmental performance, social equity, and economic health of cities. Planning is most often concerned with new construction, yet cities are comprised of vast areas of existing buildings that will
most likely remain for significant periods of time. Planning practitioners and academics need to expand their knowledge of existing buildings and urban fabric and incorporate reinvestment and adaptation of them into land use planning.

**Cultural Landscapes**

A second domain identified within the literature of commercial strips focused on identifying, appreciating, and in some cases, preserving cultural landscapes and roadside heritage. In Austin, recognition of the role of local, iconic businesses and concentrations independent businesses have been elevated through efforts such as the Heritage Society of Austin’s awards; public artwork that celebrates longstanding businesses such as the *Wall of Welcome*; within the Iconic Business Preservation ordinance effort; and in the overall recognition and success of the Austin Independent Business Alliance’s Independent Business Investment Zones.

In addition, designers such as Michael Hsu, seem to understand the value of roadside and mid-century architecture, incorporating the look of mid-century modern into both adaptive reuse and new construction. The marketing for IBIZ Districts similarly picks up the image of the road in its graphic identity. These graphic and architectural nods to commercial strip architecture speak to the continued popular appeal of roadside architecture. This might be dismissed as mere trendiness; alternatively, it can be understood as an integral part of place-making. Planning and preservation will benefit from understanding the popular appeal of commercial strips and how iconic landscapes are created and become
vibrant and popular places. In some communities this may help to adapt uninspiring “blandscapes” into treasured places.

Meanwhile, the regulatory process of landmark designation remains largely outside of efforts to support the nexus of local businesses and cultural landscapes. As discussed by Austin’s historic preservation officer and in interviews with other actors, it was clear that preservation is often misunderstood and even feared as excessively regulatory or a tool of gentrification. Preservation’s language of historical significance and integrity can seem alien, elite, and threatening within the context of commercial strips, where landmarks are often of different forms and eras than those of central business districts and residential neighborhoods. There remain questions as to degree to which prescriptive and regulatory preservation will be employed in managing change along commercial strips.

Even where formal historic designation is avoided, as was the case in the Broken Spoke, preservation practice influences what various actors do. From interviews with designers, investors, and entrepreneurs, there was substantial appreciation for the role of preserving and adapting buildings. Preservation and adaptation of existing buildings have been an integral part of how particular investors and designers, such as Abe Zimmerman and Michael Hsu, find a successful niche in producing new landscapes from old. The role of both formal and informal mechanisms of preservation should be recognized as an integral component of adaptation along commercial strips. The potential role of historic preservation becomes even more apparent as one considers the potential recasting of preservation’s role beyond the retention of landmarks and into the practice of sustainability at the building and landscape scale.
Building Retrofits and Sustainability

A third domain is just beginning to emerge from the overlapping literatures of historic preservation, adaptive reuse, and sustainability. The relationship between existing building stock and sustainability is an important one that is too often overlooked. It is often assumed that a wave of new buildings will solve society’s problems, while the majority of our cities remain comprised of aging buildings. Planning and design are most often concerned with the birth of new buildings; however, maintenance, monitoring, and adaptation of buildings must quickly follow this initial phase as buildings inevitably undergo an aging cycle. Public policy and stewardship of the built environment should not end at the beginning of the development cycle. Planners should consider a broader set of public policies and incentives beyond new development, working to foster stewardship of all building stock and cities as integrated systems. We will benefit from recognizing existing buildings and urban patterns as much more than wicked problems or landmarks of history, but also as rich arenas for potential adaptive experimentation.

The Preservation Green Lab’s effort to survey commercial buildings alludes to the possibility for preservation to grow in expertise beyond its traditional role of sorting the built environment into categories of “historic” from the “nonhistoric.” Within the context of sustainability, preservation has the potential to branch out into influencing the built environment as a continuous surface of history rather than a dichotomous one. It has the potential to grow and share its expertise on how buildings perform and how commercial resources can be maintained and adapted.
There is so much that could be gained from expanding the practice of preservation to directly address the stewardship and adaptation of ordinary commercial buildings along with landmarks of thrift. This should include further inroads into working directly with the network of actors who design and invest within the medium of old buildings. In fact, the buildings along commercial strips may not be so different from the ordinary commercial buildings in downtowns and along main streets, where the National Main Street program has been quite successful in spurring revitalization and promoting sustainability.

Commercial strips provide the opportunity for preservationists to establish ties to the positive meanings of “thrift” by finding and sharing practical and economical means of conserving the built environment. Commercial buildings are often physically modified far beyond what is necessary for successful adaptation. Preservation is a discipline with experience facilitating and guiding wise investments in the maintenance of buildings. It has expertise in retaining valuable cultural fabric that is likely to be appreciated for its visual qualities and connections to the past. Preservation organizations can lead the way in identifying and sharing strategies for building adaptation that is less resource intensive than is currently the standard. This may be accomplished by working directly with the designers, investors, merchants’ organizations, and other actors involved in reinvestment. Preservation organizations may find non-regulatory, practical, and noninvasive means of preserving valuable urban artifacts by partnering with organizations and providing education that is not predicated on a single standard for historical significance.

The sustainable adaptation of buildings is just as likely to be led at the grassroots level by entrepreneurs and designers with a broad view of their
mission. Concentrations of local businesses have an innate drive to draw customers and differentiate themselves from other businesses. This drive may be harnessed for collective improvements and sustainability innovations, perhaps in the form of eco-districts as in Portland, Oregon. Business owners, property owners, architects, interior designers, contractors and subcontractors can develop new methods and economical approaches to retrofitting existing buildings and sites to improve energy and environmental performance and enhance the public realm.

Independent merchants’ associations, such as the Austin Independent Business Alliance, should continue to bridge the gaps between public resources and initiatives and the private sector. For instance, the Austin Independent Business Alliance has been working with the Austin’s municipally-owned electric utility to promote energy retrofits. This is an important role that could be expanded into sustainability efforts at the building and district scale and that include sustainability efforts beyond energy conservation.

Gentrification and the Equitable City

Remodeling and retrofitting take place within a larger context of reinvestment. This reinvestment does not automatically result in improved environmental performance, nor is it guaranteed to proceed in a socially equitable manner. The geography of reinvestment is an uneven one and benefits often accrue to the investor or entrepreneur who can identify a fruitful rent gap produced through a cycle of disinvestment. The geography of “landscapes of

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192 For example the Foster Green EcoDistrict, which is along a busy commercial corridor in Portland. Information from http://www.fostergreenecodistrict.org/ and Rob Bennett’s presentation on EcoDistricts at the University of Texas at Austin.
thrift” or affordable opportunity is not fixed. As described along South Congress, low rent districts can fairly easily transition into high rent areas.\textsuperscript{193}

As noted in the literature, a planner’s ability to effect positive change in landscapes of thrift without the ill effects of gentrification is presently quite limited. Many sustainability and revitalization efforts along commercial strips seem to rely on a larger process of neighborhood gentrification. Planning research and sustainability efforts should be extended to a search for looking at low cost pilot projects and community-based sustainability and revitalization efforts that are aimed at serving working class communities and comprised of commercial tenants.

Planning and preservation need to develop additional means to advance the cause of equity within the context of reinvestment. Low income residents and local businesses often rely on affordable, aging building stock. This dissertation has been focused on commercial buildings; however, Elizabeth Mueller has identified the need for comprehensive planning to incorporate preservation strategies for aging apartment buildings along commercial strips and in other areas of the city.\textsuperscript{194} When the existing buildings that serve low income and minority communities become visible and immediately relevant to planning and preservation practice, there are sure to be opportunities for more equitable distribution of professional concern and service to broader constituencies.

\textsuperscript{193} For instance, as rents rise along Austin’s commercial strips west of I-35, there is ample evidence that reinvestment momentum is moving east of I-35.
\textsuperscript{194} Mueller (2010).
Toward Understanding the Dynamics of Existing Buildings and Existing Communities

Whether crude or well-crafted, iconic or ordinary, buildings serve a variety of functions that are sentimental and practical. Buildings are not only material artifacts; they have communities of users and a cadre of actors who regulate, design, invest, steward or neglect them over time. As one travels through communities, the condition of buildings alludes to social relationships and community histories. Our use, maintenance, and adaptation of buildings and land are highly indicative of our social relations.

Planning is often aimed at large-scale change and this is understandable and often necessary given the desire for sweeping change in cities. This research highlights the importance of the many smaller adaptations that can too often remain overlooked in the professional practices and academic theories that seek to guide and interpret urban change. Urban planning is often geared toward master planning change with the assumption of a master hand, a bird’s eye view, and a shared rationality that will benefit all. These were predominant paradigms in the era of urban renewal and modernist planning and design. Perhaps planning has not yet traveled far enough from the assumptions of high authoritarian modernism. Austin has provided a rich case study into the ways in which many actors participate in choreographies of change that are not entirely top down and authoritarian. As detailed throughout this dissertation, change is often shaped at the level of the grassroots and in interactions and negotiations between private actors and local government. There are shifting

197 Ibid.
alliances between residents, merchants, property owners, real estate development companies, among others. There remain questions about where these alliances and sometimes conflicting choreographies of change will lead the city.

Howard Davis has written on shifts in the culture of building and the need to critically examine the codes and professional practices of which contemporary architecture is comprised. This dissertation has built on Davis’ approach by focusing on the much more common and numerous instances of continued and adaptive use of buildings. To create more sustainable cities, we must address not only the culture of new construction, but learn from and address our cultures of adaptation. Existing buildings and development patterns must be incorporated into our understanding of how cities change and how we can guide this change. More scholarship is needed to understand the codes and practices that regulate and incentivize the ways we use and adapt buildings. It is equally as important to understand the web of actors who work together to adapt buildings and by extension have the power to influence whole districts and cities.

This dissertation details the many ways in which commercial buildings and landscapes play an important role in urban change. It describes the many private, public, and community-based actors who assemble, negotiate and choreograph reinvestment. It is only in recognizing the potential power of these individual and collective choreographies of change, and in grappling with the

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198 Howard Davis (1999).
landscapes that we inherit from the past, that we can hope to manage and benefit from reinvestment and change.
Appendix A: Preservation Green Lab’s Getting to 50 Existing Buildings Survey

The table on following pages summarizes the building histories of commercial buildings within two eight-block study areas along South Congress Avenue and Burnet Road. These areas coincided with case study commercial strips within this dissertation. Data is provided in this appendix to give the reader a detailed sense of some of the building types within these case study areas and their building histories. Additional data on energy usage and building and neighborhood attributes were gathered; however, only a selected number of attributes are provided below.

The following figures are screenshots of maps produced on ESRI’s ArcGIS Online platform. These interactive maps were used in coordinating survey work.

Figure 49: Screenshot of Burnet Road Survey Area
Figure 50: Screenshot of South Congress Survey Area
Table 7: Excerpts of Data from Preservation Green Lab Getting to 50 Survey for Buildings along South Congress Avenue and Burnet Road

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Address</th>
<th>Building Name</th>
<th>Building History</th>
<th>Year Built</th>
<th>Building Use</th>
<th>Original Use</th>
<th>Gross Square feet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1200 S. Congress Avenue</td>
<td>Current business: Heritage Boot</td>
<td>This building may have been built as an addition to what was then 1200 S. Congress Avenue (currently 1202 S. Congress). The estimated year of construction is ca. 1925 (between 1922 and 1935 based on Sanborn maps). 1984 - Alpine Car Audio Systems (building sign permit application)</td>
<td>1925</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>1100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1202 S. Congress Avenue</td>
<td>Current business: Blackmail</td>
<td>This was the first building built on the 1200 block of S. Congress in 1889, and originally had the address of 1200 S. Congress. Currently the address is 1202 S. Congress. The building's original use was general merchandise. 1889 -- Eck, Leonard, general merchandise -- res. Eva St., opp. Deaf &amp; Dumb Asylum 1891-1892 -- Eck, Leonard, general merchandise -- sw corner S. Congress &amp; Nellie res. same 1893-1901 -- Eck, Leonard, general merchandise -- 1200 S. Congress, res. same 1903-1907 -- Jackson, Wm., grocer/ Austin Post Office Sub-station -- 1200 S. Congress 1940 --</td>
<td>1889</td>
<td>Mixed-Use: multi-family over retail</td>
<td>Mixed-Use - multi-family over retail</td>
<td>4350</td>
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<td>Address</td>
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<td>Schneider's Handy Andy Food Store -- 1200 S. Congress 1965 -- The Showcase, antiques (John and Betty Renka) - - 1200 S. Congress 1977 - - Diversaform Plastics -- 1200 S. Congress (above information obtained from the Austin History Center) 1979-? -- Church 1984-? -- The Audio File 1986-? -- The Gardeners 1986-? -- Kidz Klub (above information obtained from the City of Austin website, permit history)</td>
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<td>1204 S. Congress Avenue</td>
<td>Current business: Stella Blue</td>
<td>This was the second building built on the 1200 block of S. Congress in ca. 1910 (it appears in a 1911 photograph found at the Austin History Center, showing the two buildings with nothing else around). Its original address was 1202 S. Congress. Currently the address is 1204 S. Congress. The building's original use was drug store. 1912-1914 -- Odiorne, T. Edwin, drugs -- 1202 S. Congress 1916-1918 -- Carson, Matthew V., drugs -- 1202 S. Congress 1920 -- South Austin Drug Store/ J.H. Hargrave, W.H. Morley -- 1202 S. Congress 1922 -- Wright, B.F., drugs -- 1202 S. Congress 1924-</td>
<td>1910</td>
<td>Mixed-Use: multi-family over retail</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>4350</td>
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<td>Address</td>
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<tr>
<td>1206 S. Congress Avenue, 1208 S. Congress Avenue, 1210 S. Congress Avenue</td>
<td>Current businesses : 1206 S. Congress: Creatures Boutique; 1208 S. Congress: The Turquoise Door; 1210 S. Congress: S. Congress Massage. Although the building does not currently have a name and it houses three different businesses, the name The Turquoise Door is the most visible on the building</td>
<td>1210 S. Congress was built in ca. 1905 or earlier (appeared in the city directory in 1905) w/ addition of 1208 and 1206 sometime between 1922-1935 (based on Sanborn maps). Occupancy: 1905-1906 -- Baker, W.E., meat market -- 1210 S. Congress Ave.; 1906-1907 -- Horton, Henry (c) lab. -- r. 1210 S. Congress Ave.; 1909 -- Freeman, Robert (c) lab. -- r. 1210 S. Congress Ave.; 1910-1911 -- Crawford, Sydney, ice dealer -- 1210 S. Congress Ave.; 1912-1913 -- Cocreham, Chas., ice dealer -- 1210 S. Congress Ave.; 1924 -- Maddox, Earl, clothing cleaner -- 1210 S. Congress Ave.; 1930-1931 -- South Austin Barber Shop -- 1210 S. Congress Ave.; 1940 -- Martin Linen Supply -- 1208-1210 S. Congress Ave.; 1965 -- Johnny Cole Plumbing Co. -- 1210 S. Congress Ave.;</td>
<td>1905</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>2700</td>
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<td>facade.</td>
<td>1977 -- Vacant -- 1210 S. Congress Ave. (information above obtained from the Austin History Center) 1988 -- Barnhill's Hand Carved Signs -- 1206 S. Congress Ave. 2005 -- Re Ki Essence Wellness Center -- 1210 S. Congress Ave. (information above obtained from the City of Austin permit history)</td>
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<td>1220 S CONGRESS AVE</td>
<td>Austin Motel</td>
<td>From the Owner of the Austin Motel: “Though Mr. and Mrs. Eck were very enterprising with business property in several locations, for our purposes, this story begins in May of 1888 when Leonard and Frances Eck, immigrants from Germany, bought the land that now comprises the Austin Motel and its associated businesses. The following year, he built the first business south of the river in Austin at 1200 S. Congress. He also installed the first Telephone south of the river. This was initially a general merchandise store that had a pawn shop, sold jewelry, produce, and home goods, and had a livery stable and blacksmith shop next to it. This building still stands</td>
<td>1938</td>
<td>Other: Hospitality</td>
<td>Other: Hospitality</td>
<td>16503</td>
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<td>Address</td>
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<td>today and is now BLACKMAIL. Upon the death of Mr. Eck, Jennie Eck Stewart inherited the ownership of the eastern half of the 1200 S. Congress Block. Similar in entrepreneurial spirit to her father, she [went] along with her husband Earnest Stewart expanded the stores along the block. In the ‘30s when the country was experiencing the &quot;boom&quot; of the automobile and Americans wanted to travel with their cars, little &quot;Motels&quot;... or &quot;Motor Inns&quot;... a new concept in the lodging industry sprung up all around the country. Mr. and Mrs. Stewart were quick to see the value in this new concept and built The Austin Motel which opened its doors in 1938 and has never closed them since. It was the Stewarts who built the Austin Motel landmark neon sign way back in 1938 and it has remained here from the beginning. In 1961, Mrs. Stewart received a letter of inquiry from a High School teacher and her husband, a Superintendent of schools in North East Texas. Would the</td>
<td>Year Built</td>
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Stewarts be ready to sell their little Motel? Mrs. Stewart was getting up in years by this time and responded with some eagerness to this offer. Thus John O. and Katherine Thompson, bearing the same last name as the historic and infamous Austin Marshall, became the 2nd owners of The Austin Motel. Burning with enthusiasm for their new venture, the Thompsons put all of their savings into the down payment and began working around the clock to pay off the mortgage and build their business. They worked so hard that they did pay off the mortgage in a fairly short time and in 1968 added on the two story building in the back of the Motel grounds. They also purchased the remaining businesses and apartments on the S. Congress block from Mrs. Stewart. For over 20 years, Kate and John O. ran these businesses and for the most part these were very happy years. At the time of Mrs. Thompson's passing, a portion of the property along with the care of Mr. Thompson, then 82, moved into the
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<tr>
<td>1303 South Congress</td>
<td>Zen</td>
<td>According to the county tax assessor, 1303 was built in 1948. In the Austin City Directory for 1949 (directory for 1948 is unavailable), the occupant listed for 1303 is Austin Floor Covering and City Tile Company. The business remained the same into the 2000s when it was changed to the restaurant Zen.</td>
<td>1948</td>
<td>Restaurant</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>2036</td>
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<td>Address</td>
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<tr>
<td>1313 South Congress</td>
<td>The Continental Club Gallery/Tattoo</td>
<td>When 1313 South Congress was built in 1942 it was occupied first by Palace Cleaners and Dryers. This business was followed by another cleaning business called Longhorn Cleaners (possibly just a name change), and in 1949 it was a restaurant (Irving's Restaurant). In the late fifties and into the seventies the upper apartment was used by an architect, and the lower was vacant. Both sections were vacant until 2000 when Audio Arts Recording and One World Graphix Inc. moved in, and in 2010 South Side Tattooing was using the lower section. Recently the Continental Club Gallery moved into the upper floor.</td>
<td>1942</td>
<td>Other: Mixed use: Retail over Personal Services</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>3300</td>
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<tr>
<td>1315 South Congress Avenue</td>
<td>The Continental Club</td>
<td></td>
<td>1935</td>
<td>Other: Nightclub/Bar</td>
<td>Other: Nightclub/Bar</td>
<td>2355</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1317 South Congress</td>
<td>Ten Thousand Villages</td>
<td>Building was used by Pates Food Store from 1945 - 1960, and then by a series of Insurance Agencies into the 1990s (the last of these was the Insurance Financial Company of Texas). Texas Folklife Resources museum's art gallery took control around by 2000.</td>
<td>1945</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>Food Retail</td>
<td>3000</td>
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<tr>
<td>1321 South Congress</td>
<td>Boticelli's</td>
<td>In 1935 1321 S Congress was occupied by Advocate Printing Co., which was joined in the '40s by two weekly papers: The South Observer and the South Austin Advocate. In 1945 it was the home of Gerald Shop Cabinet Makers. From 1949 to the 1960s it was the location of a Maytag retail store, which was replaced with Cook Air Conditioning and Heating Company. In 2000, there was no listing for 1321 until Botticelli's.</td>
<td>1933</td>
<td>Restaurant</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>1400</td>
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<tr>
<td>1323 South Congress</td>
<td>Tabu</td>
<td>The building at 1323 South Congress was built in 1933 and the first business to occupy it was Spears Barbecue Kitchen which appears in the 1935 Austin directory. From 1942 to 1970 it was the home of two liquor stores, and various single occupants. After 1970 it was occupied by a typesetting company (M&amp;L Typsetting Co., Inc.), and from 1975-1990 it held two meat markets. In the 2000s it was inhabited by Shampooch, Under the sun Family Clothing Co., and Rivers and Reefs. Tabu is the most recent tenet.</td>
<td>1933</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>Restaurant</td>
<td>1400</td>
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<td>Address</td>
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<tr>
<td>1325 South Congress</td>
<td>American Apparel</td>
<td>The building at 1325 South Congress was built in 1933 and the first business to occupy it was the Gulf Coast Fish Market. Afterwards it also housed the McNamara Bakery (1942-45), and later by knife and gun importers (Cruse Forest and Son Knife Importers; Cruse Forest and Son Gun Importers; 1955-1980)</td>
<td>1933</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>Food Retail</td>
<td>3244</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1327 South Congress</td>
<td>Saint Vincent de Paul Thrift Store</td>
<td>The first business recorded in the Austin city directory for 1327 South Congress is Dan's Liquor Store (previously located in 1323 South Congress) in 1970. It was variously occupied in following years by Dan's Wines and Spirits Inc., and Dan's Cellars (likely the same ownership?), and by 2000 was taken over by the Saint Vincent dePaul Thrift store.</td>
<td>1955</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>Food Retail</td>
<td>9455</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1413 S. Congress</td>
<td>Home Slice</td>
<td>This a retail turned take-out pizza (pizza by the slice) restaurant building.</td>
<td>1951</td>
<td>Restaurant</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>2852</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1423 S. Congress</td>
<td>Stag</td>
<td>This building used to be a laundromat until the area gentrified and property values went up. Now it is a super swank men's clothing shop.</td>
<td>1951</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>5840</td>
</tr>
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<td>Address</td>
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<tr>
<td>1412 South</td>
<td>Guero's Taco Bar</td>
<td>This was one of the first buildings constructed on South Congress Avenue. As early as the 1890s, J.M. Crawford occupied the lot located at the corner of South Congress and Elizabeth Street. Crawford likely built his wood frame residence first (formerly located at 1410 South Congress) and later built the adjacent brick building now located at 1412 South Congress. J.M. Crawford is listed as a grocer and miller in the 1905 Austin City Directory, and the building appears in its current configuration in the Sanborn Fire Insurance Map of 1922, the first year that this part of Austin was mapped by that company. A 1935 City Directory lists the location as J.M. Crawford grocery and feed. The proprietorship of the building likely passed to a relative, for in a 1940 City Directory, the building is listed as Philip Crawford Grocery and Central Feed and Seed. However, by 1945 the building is listed solely as Central Feed and Seed. The property continued as Central Feed and Seed until 1981.</td>
<td>1891</td>
<td>Restaurant</td>
<td>Other: Mixed Use - residence and grist mill; (later) Retail - feed and seed store</td>
<td>6720</td>
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<td>Address</td>
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<tr>
<td>110 W. Elizabeth Street</td>
<td>Two businesses: Vulcan Video and Eco-Wise</td>
<td>Tenant reports that building used to be a post office and a car dealership. Unconfirmed.</td>
<td>1957</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>5250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1500 South Congress Avenue</td>
<td>Tesoro's Trading Company</td>
<td>The building was constructed in 1928 as a grocery store. Originally occupied by Loveless Grocer, but was quickly bought by Piggly Wiggly and continued as such until the 50s. After serving as a grocery, it passed through a number of uses, including a furniture store, van and stage, appliance shop, thrift store, antique shop, and even acted as the Nixon Clay Technical College before its current use as Tesoro's Trading company, with its iconic painting on the north facade. In 2009, solar energy system was installed (permit # 2009-098129 BP). A portable storage building was added in 1981 that appears to still be in the</td>
<td>1928</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>Food</td>
<td>4116</td>
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<td>Address</td>
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<td>1506 South Congress Street (1504 historically)</td>
<td>Lucy in Disguise with Diamonds</td>
<td>Opened as a bakery, then Hage and Company 5 &amp; 10 cent stores, a brief occupation as a chiropractor, housed the Capitol Cash Register and Adding Machine Company for 40 years before becoming its current occupation in the late 80s. Lucy in Disguise with Diamonds has become an Austin landmark on South Congress with its iconic signage. The building has been added onto with temporary storage buildings to accommodate the growing collection of costumes, and appears to be expanding onto nearby lots.</td>
<td>1929</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>Food Retail</td>
<td>4200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1510 South Congress Avenue (Maya is listed as 1508)</td>
<td>Yard Dog, Maya</td>
<td>The first floor of the building is split into two retail spaces: 1508 - Opened as the South Austin Bakery, it was converted in the late 30s to a beauty shop, which it would remain until the 1980s. It then served as an antique shop until its current use as a clothing shop. 1510 - served as the Austin</td>
<td>1929</td>
<td>Mixed-Use: office over retail</td>
<td>Food Retail</td>
<td>5340</td>
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<tr>
<td>1512 South Congress Avenue</td>
<td>Hage Building, (Uncommon Objects)</td>
<td>Chick Hatchery in the 30s, then as the Austin Radio Shop. In the 50s, became the office for Frank W. McBee, Justice of the peace, and also housed the constable for district 5 until the 80s. Was a sewing machine repair shop, then its current tenant, an art gallery, opened in the late 90s.</td>
<td>1948</td>
<td>Mixed-Use: office over retail</td>
<td>Other: mixed use - office over grocery</td>
<td>10842</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1516 South Congress Avenue</td>
<td>part of Allen's Boots</td>
<td>Opened as Parker Grocer, it then housed Hudler's Ice Station. Karl Wiedemar had a bakery here in the 40s. 5 &amp; 10 cent store, evangelistic temple, bargain furniture shop, upholstery, before becoming its current use of an antique shop in the 90s. Upstairs has generally housed physicians and lawyers of some sort.</td>
<td>1936</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>Other: Bakery</td>
<td>2757</td>
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<td>Began as Conrad's Bakery, then was a flower shop for over 30 years, a brief use as a bargain furniture shop, then Allen's Boots next door annexed it in the late 80s. In 2009, an apartment was built on top, with access from the adjacent property, but the surveyor was unable to access the unit to get information about it.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1600 South Congress Avenue</td>
<td>South Congress Cafe</td>
<td>The lot which now contains 1600 South Congress Avenue was likely developed in the early 1900s with a grocery and a saloon, which were probably wood frame buildings. The north half of the current building at 1600 South Congress appears in a Sanborn map of 1922, the first time this area of Austin was documented by that company, but the south half of the lot is unbuilt. In 1927, the location is listed as Doherty Grocery. In the 1931 City Directory, the property at 1600 South Congress is listed as Sanders Drug Store, and this proprietorship continues into the 1960s. The south half of the lot was likely built out (as 1602 South Congress) in the early 1930s, and it appears in the 1935 Sanborn map in its current configuration. The Sanborn map notes the building on the south half of the lot as being a clothes cleaner, and it appears listed in the Austin City Directories as the same use throughout the 1940s. The property likely had various uses throughout the rest of the 20th century, until it</td>
<td>1920</td>
<td>Restaurant</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>3814</td>
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<tr>
<td>1604-1606 South Congress Avenue</td>
<td>New Bohemia</td>
<td>This building, as it is currently configured, was a late development on the 1600 block of South Congress. The land was developed as early as the 1920s with two separate buildings: a small wood frame shop and a wood frame blacksmith. The uses of these buildings changed over time to uses such as offices and auto repair, but they were likely demolished in the early 1960s. The current building was then constructed between 1964-1967.</td>
<td>1964</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>Other: Repair shop and light manufacturing</td>
<td>3552</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1608 South Congress Avenue</td>
<td>South Congress Books</td>
<td>Although no building at this location appears on the 1935 Sanborn Fire Insurance map, there is a business listed for this address (1608 South Congress) in the 1935 Austin City Directory. However, this address was also used for one of the storefronts to the south, so the usage history is uncertain. Nonetheless, it was</td>
<td>1950</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>1200</td>
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<tr>
<td>1610 South Congress Avenue</td>
<td>Vespaio</td>
<td>The property on which the current building stands was likely developed around 1900. In a 1905 Austin City Directory the property is listed as containing a residence and a feed store belonging to Samuel W. Redd. A 1921 Sanborn Fire Insurance map shows two structures on the site: a small wood-frame dwelling on the northern half of the lot and a small wood-frame shop on the southern half. The 1935 Sanborn map shows the dwelling replaced by two small shop buildings in the same configuration as the northern half of the existing building. City Directories list the business at 1610 South Congress as a grocery, and in 1949 the use changes to a music store. The southern half</td>
<td>1935</td>
<td>Restaurant</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>5280</td>
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<td>Address</td>
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<tr>
<td>1700 South Congress Ave.</td>
<td>Current businesses: 1700 South Congress Ave. - Mi Casa; 1700a South Congress Ave - The Gifted; 1700b South Congress Ave - Feathers Boutique; 1700 1/2 South Congress Ave - Prototype Vintage Design. These businesses are all in one building, with separate entrances on the exterior but open</td>
<td>According to tenant - Mi Casa business owner, the front half of the building (1700 South Congress - Mi Casa) was built in ca. 1911 and was originally a corner grocery store. The back half of the building (comprised of 1700a, 1700b and 1700 1/2 South Congress) is a two-story addition that was built in ca. 1950's. The 2nd floor of the back half of the building, as well as the 2nd floor of the adjacent 1704 S. Congress building that it is connected with, is occupied by the offices of Woodland Properties, owners of the entire 1700 block of S. Congress,</td>
<td>1911</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>Food Retail</td>
<td>6700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Address</td>
<td>Building Name</td>
<td>Building History</td>
<td>Year Built</td>
<td>Building Use</td>
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<tr>
<td>1704 S. Congress Avenue</td>
<td>Current business: Off the Wall</td>
<td>The building was built in 1929 and the first business that occupied it was Caldwell's Variety Store (according to the business owner of Off the Wall). The building appears for the first time on the 1935 Sanborn map. A one-story addition was built at the rear (west) side sometime between 1935 and 1962 (determined by aerial view and Sanborn map). The 2nd floor originally had apartments, and the use was changed to office in 1983 (per the City of Austin's online permit search). No mechanical permits were found for this address on the City of Austin's online permit search since 1950.</td>
<td>1929</td>
<td>Mixed-Use: office over retail</td>
<td>Mixed-Use - multi-family over retail</td>
<td>15350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Address</td>
<td>Building Name</td>
<td>Building History</td>
<td>Year Built</td>
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<tr>
<td>1706 S. Congress Avenue; 1708 S. Congress Avenue; 1710 S. Congress Avenue.</td>
<td>Current businesses: 1706 S. Congress: Big Top Candy Shop; 1708 S. Congress: Co*Star; 1710 S. Congress: Avenue Barber Shop.</td>
<td>2007 - change of use from retail to food sales</td>
<td>1933</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>5476</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1712 S. Congress Avenue</td>
<td>Current name: Monkey See Monkey Do</td>
<td>According to the Travis Central Appraisal District (TCAD), the building was built in 1948. The building does not exist in the 1935 Sanborn map of Austin, and it appears for the first time in the 1962 Sanborn map. Building permit history obtained from the City of Austin's online permit search reveals that in 2002 a business named Gossip occupied the location, while the current business, Monkey See Monkey Do, has been at the location since 2005. No mechanical or change of use permits were found for this address on the City of Austin's online permit search since 1950.</td>
<td>1948</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>1764</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Address</td>
<td>Building Name</td>
<td>Building History</td>
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<tr>
<td>1714 S. Congress Avenue; 1716 S. Congress Avenue; 1718 S. Congress Avenue; 1722 S. Congress Avenue.</td>
<td>Current businesses : 1714 S. Congress: Crafts (right side entrance); Leighelen a (left side entrance); 1716 S. Congress: Woodland Restaurant 1718 S. Congress: Farm to Market Grocery 1722 S. Congress: Wahoo's Fish Tacos</td>
<td>According to the Travis Central Appraisal District (TCAD), the building at 1722 S. Congress was built in 1934. However, according to Sanborn maps, what is now 1722, 1718 and part of 1716 S. Congress was there already in 1922, with an addition extending the back of 1916 prior to 1935 (perhaps this is the 1934 year that TCAD refers to), and another addition extending 1916 to the north and adding 1914 prior to 1962. Note: The 1989 building permit for new roofing is only for the 1714 S. Congress address, not the entire building.</td>
<td>1934</td>
<td>Other: Multiple uses: Retail, Restaurant, Grocery</td>
<td>Retail 12898</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4902 BURNET RD</td>
<td>Top Drawer Thrift Store</td>
<td>The original use of the building had been for retail. The original building name was &quot;The BR. F. IR. Cols.&quot; The permit history shows the first physical intervention in this building's spot as 1947 for providing the commercial water pipe. Austin Historic Center doesn't have The lack of historical</td>
<td>1948</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>Retail 3910</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Address</td>
<td>Building Name</td>
<td>Building History</td>
<td>Year Built</td>
<td>Building Use</td>
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<tr>
<td>4930 BURNE T RD</td>
<td>Mr. Cassette</td>
<td>The original use of building was residential and goes back to 1960. It seems that the change of use to Mr. Cassette office has occurred between 1970s and 1980s. The Mr. Cassette began in 1958 as a recording studio called Austin Custom Records. Being one of the few places that cut records on the spot, transferring master audio tape to records became increasingly in demand. Also, an interior space was remodeled for beauty salon in 1992. Currently some other office use as the architecture office is incorporated to the building.</td>
<td>1960</td>
<td>Mixed-Use: office over retail</td>
<td>Office</td>
<td>3632</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Address</td>
<td>Building Name</td>
<td>Building History</td>
<td>Year Built</td>
<td>Building Use</td>
<td>Original Use</td>
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<tr>
<td>5010 BURNET RD</td>
<td>Wilson Jewelers</td>
<td>The original use of the building had been for Auto repair. The construction date goes back to 1960. Based on the building's permit history between 1970 and 1980 the building use has been changed to the Wilson jewelry store. In 1981 a workshop has been added to this store. The history of the building's neighborhood as Allandale dates back to the late 1800s. The land was originally part of a grant by the President of the Republic of Texas to George W. Davis, in recognition for his service in the battle of San Jacinto. The age of the neighborhood lends itself to beautiful trees and established parks.</td>
<td>1960</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>Other: Repair</td>
<td>2107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5020 BURNET RD</td>
<td>Subway and Yogurt Shop</td>
<td>The original date of construction goes back to 1969. The original use was commercial which has been changed into office use in 1981. The building has</td>
<td>1969</td>
<td>Restaurant</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>4134</td>
</tr>
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<td>Address</td>
<td>Building Name</td>
<td>Building History</td>
<td>Year Built</td>
<td>Building Use</td>
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<tr>
<td>2105 HANCOCK DR</td>
<td>Billy’s on Burnet</td>
<td>The original use of the building was residential. At the end of 1940s the use of building has been changed to office use. Later, between 1985-1990 the building has been remodeled to work as a restaurant. Since 1980s to present the building has been remodeled to insert auxiliary spaces such as walk-in cooler space required for the restaurant.</td>
<td>1940</td>
<td>Restaurant</td>
<td>Other: Residential</td>
<td>2236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5025 Burnet Road</td>
<td>Balina Bridal Triana Tailors Doopla</td>
<td></td>
<td>1965</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td></td>
<td>4742</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Address</td>
<td>Building Name</td>
<td>Building History</td>
<td>Year Built</td>
<td>Building Use</td>
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<td>Gross Square Feet</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Salon</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5011 Burnet Road</td>
<td>Eye Physicians of Austin</td>
<td></td>
<td>1968</td>
<td>Office</td>
<td></td>
<td>9756</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5003 Burnet Rd.</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
<td>1940</td>
<td>Other: Abandoned</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5101 BURNET RD</td>
<td>Spring Frost</td>
<td>The Building's neighborhood was originally a cotton farm until about 75 years ago. The original use of the building was retail store named &quot;ANTHONY NAK.&quot; The building then after has continued its retail function until 2001 when it has been remodeled for jewelry wholesale.</td>
<td>1950</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>2124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5111 BURNET RD</td>
<td>Furniture in the Raw</td>
<td>The date of the building goes back to 1960 and the original use of that was for Motor Sales and Services adjacent to a parking area. The building in 1990 has been remodeled from Marine store to a thrift store.</td>
<td>1960</td>
<td>Warehouse</td>
<td>Auto Garage/Parking</td>
<td>7818</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Address</td>
<td>Building Name</td>
<td>Building History</td>
<td>Year Built</td>
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<tr>
<td>5119 BURNE T RD</td>
<td>Torchy's</td>
<td>The original use of the building was residential and goes back to 1960. The building's function has been changed to restaurant between 1970 and 1980. The use of the building has continued as a restaurant while experiencing some remodeling changes in 1984 and 1985 and 1994. The last remodeling was in 2010 when in the interior area some walls have been removed, on the main entrance a transparent facade was applied and the expansion on the back side of the building (opposed to the main facade) has occurred.</td>
<td>1966</td>
<td>Restaurant</td>
<td>Other: Residential</td>
<td>540</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5209 BURNE T RD</td>
<td>Miguel's Import</td>
<td>The original use of building back to 1969 was residential. Between 1980 and 1990 it has been remodeled for change of use to commercial purposes. In 1992 the building has been remodeled to</td>
<td>1969</td>
<td>Other: Retail and Warehouse</td>
<td>Other: Residential</td>
<td>1536</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Address</td>
<td>Building Name</td>
<td>Building History</td>
<td>Year Built</td>
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<tr>
<td>5249 BURNE T RD</td>
<td>Victoria's Bakery and Say Hi</td>
<td>The original part of the current strip center is Say Hi building which goes back to 1960. Based on the building owner's words he is the occupant of the building since the beginning. Then after during the time up to 1994 other sections of the strip center have been added to it which the main expansion was between 1980 and 1990. In 1994 some part of the warehouse section on the east side of the center was remodeled considering the roof material which has been changed from</td>
<td>1960</td>
<td>Other: Retail + Warehouse</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>4581</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Address</td>
<td>Building Name</td>
<td>Building History</td>
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<tr>
<td>5500 Clay Ave.</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>wood to metal. Currently the strip center is divided to three individual properties which seems have the same owner.</td>
<td>1961</td>
<td>Other: Abandoned</td>
<td></td>
<td>3910</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5605 Adams Ave.</td>
<td>Fisk Antiques</td>
<td>1954</td>
<td>Retail</td>
<td>2800</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5425 Burnet Rd.</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>1956</td>
<td>Other: Abandoned</td>
<td>4068</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B: Existing Land Use Map

Figure 51: Existing Land Use in Central Austin.
Appendix C: Street Network Map

Figure 52: Street Network in Central Austin.
Appendix D: Vertical Mixed Use Map

This following map was produced by the City of Austin Planning and Development Review Department. It depicts core transit corridors and Vertical Mixed Use Development (VMU) combining districts.

Figure 53: Current Core Transit Corridors and Vertical Mixed Use (VMU).
Figure 54: Excerpt of Current Core Transit Corridors and Vertical Mixed Use (VMU) for Central Austin.
Appendix E: Draft of Iconic Preservation Ordinance

Iconic Preservation –Second Revision  10/25/06
Dave Sullivan, CoA Planning Commission, sully_jumpnet@sbcglobal.net, Cell – 914-4710

All comments below are in the spirit of brainstorming. Nothing is final, these are just ideas… Intent is to create language that roughly parallels Historic Zoning for Iconic Preservation. (compare § 25-2-351 – 359) This version has been modified after meetings with City of Austin Planning staff, Heritage Society Preservation Subcommittee, Historic Landmark Commission, Downtown Commission, and West End Austin Alliance.

1. Definition & Criteria for Business
Number of designees may be limited to 12 (?) the first year, 4 (?) added in subsequent years. Develop point system based on the following characteristics defining “iconic”:
   - unique – few imitators
   - independent - not a chain or franchise
   - eclectic – promotes cultural and lifestyle diversity
   - popular - would be bemoaned if lost
   - famous – “Buddy Holly played here”, “Bill Clinton ate here,”
   - sustainable – all the above elements have persisted at least 5 (?) years

2. Possible Rewards to Property Owner and/or Business Owner
   - Tax abatement similar to historic zoning – but this may not be legal.
   - Taxes frozen on both business and property.
   - Zero-interest loans.
   - CoA provides information technology help.
   - CoA offer free advertising.
   - Ease in permitting for improvements or up-zoning.
   - Density bonus.
   - CoA financial and permitting assistance in rebuilding after a fire or other disaster.
   - Higher priority for CoA infrastructure repair or capital improvement (e.g., sidewalk repair or Great Streets upgrade, flood prevention, graffiti removal).

3. Preservation
   - Business owner would sign memorandum of understanding regarding maintaining character.
   - Business owner has the right to abandon/quit an iconic business.
   - Property-owner has the right to not renew the lease for an iconic business, but then loses rewards.
If business owner closes the iconic business or loses iconic status, business and property owner lose the rewards.

4. Selection
- Owner makes application to Historic Landmark Commission.
- Application may include press clippings, letters from customers, and letter from owner stating intent to preserve the iconic features.
- Recommended by HLC and PC, then approved by CC.

5. Review
- Historic Preservation Office to periodically review status of iconic businesses.
- Dramatic change in character would lead to loss of designation, which business owner could appeal to HLC, PC, and CC.


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Kohler, Nicholaus and Uta Hassler. "The Building Stock as a Research Object." 


———. “I Can’t See It; I Don’t Understand It; and It Doesn’t Look Old to Me,” in Preserving the Recent Past (1995), I.15-20.


— — —. “Jorge’s closing, but name, fare to be reprised in new concepts” in Austin American-Statesman. Thursday, December 6, 2012. (Last accessed December 6, 2012.)


University of Texas at Austin School of Architecture. "EcoDistricts: and what does it offer the sustainable cities movement by Rob Bennett." University of Texas at Austin School of Architecture Lecture Series. Video file, 1:04. January 8, 2013. https://meeting.austin.utexas.edu/p3z7f5b1z8h/?launcher=false&fcsContent=true&pbMode=normal.


