



# **ACTIVATING THE ALLEYS OF AUSTIN**

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## ABSTRACT

A wealth of converging forces has created a situation in which downtown Austin, Texas is losing some of its greatest historic and cultural assets. At the same time, this prominent and recognized core of the city is rapidly increasing in density without corresponding plans to increase the number and quality of public open spaces. For five of the last six years, Austin has ranked as the fastest growing city in the nation (Carlyle), yet relatively little work has been done to invest in the downtown's public realm, an area which should be functioning as the "living room of the city." Compared with earlier periods in our country's history and the standards currently set by other nations, American cities are no longer in the business of creating these types of rich, communal spaces. This trend could prove problematic for Austin, except that Austin has-- to put it proverbially-- an ace up its sleeve. The city's historic framework contains over half a million square feet of publicly owned land that is currently underutilized and ripe for redevelopment as public open space. This space exists in the service alleys of the existing block structure. Austin's original city plan and street grid included alleys within the blocks of all 196 blocks, and the large majority of the network remains intact. At current, the alleys provide invaluable service functions for businesses and residents, but these utilitarian activities occupy the alleys for less than 1% of day. The minimal demands of these services do not prevent the alleys from adopting other roles. In short, the alleys have a much greater capacity to provide value for downtown than the minimal ways in which they are currently being used. A number of projects around the globe have revealed that cities can transform residual public space and city infrastructure into dynamic and valuable offerings for residents. Activating Austin's alleys as public open spaces would provide tremendous value to the city and address a number of existing city problems, primarily serving to protect and enhance the city's vibrant culture.

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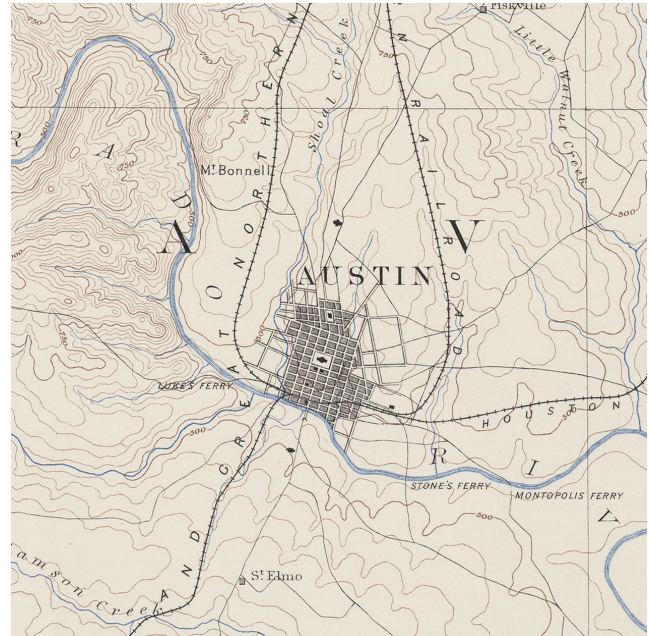
*"If at first the idea is not absurd,  
then there is no hope for it."  
–Albert Einstein*



# I. INTRODUCTION

### *The physical and geographical form of downtown Austin*

Austin, Texas is a city defined by its landform. As it was originally settled, the city sits nested in a large horseshoe bend the Colorado River. The heart of the city was positioned upon a flat mesa with some changes in topography on all sides. Located at the eastern edge of the Texas Hill Country, the western portions of Austin showcase the most drastic changes in landform, as they consist of a ridge of hills that provide an edge to the city, although it a porous one with sparse development dotting the terrain. One result of this setting is a city with a clearly



*Figure 1: A portion of an 1894 topographical map, showing Austin's location in the curve of the river with hills to the West*

Source: University of Texas Libraries

defined center. From its first days spreading beyond the original city plan to today, Austin has always thought of its center city as its heart. As post-WWII trends in our country saw people leaving cities in large numbers, the sprawling open land around downtown Austin did foster suburbanization, but even in those periods, this nucleus of the city was still recognized by all as the social, cultural, historical, and economic center. Since 2000, the city as a whole has seen unprecedented growth, and the downtown core has seen a significant return of its residents. Owing to these trends, the city center is once again expected to not only be the proverbial heart of the city, but also to deliver the highest quality of life to both residents and visitors.

## ***Unique creative culture***

Austin is known to many for its eccentric culture. The “Keep Austin Weird” motto was introduced in 2000 as campaign to support local businesses in the city, but the city has always had a history of being an incubator for alternative culture. Playing host to both the state’s largest university and its seat of government, Austin naturally became a liberal mecca in an otherwise conservative state. This unique classification also meant that the city was a magnet for people who were seen as outsiders in their own towns, and over time, the city became accustomed to welcoming people of all types. The trend propagated a community of nonconformists, intellectuals, artists, and the just plain quirky. This culture came to national prominence in the 1960’s when Austin was breeding notable musical acts like Janis Joplin and Willie Nelson amidst a significant population of hippies who were supporting a host of countercultural ideas. This time period is known to many long time residents as “Old Austin” suggesting a cultural shift in recent decades to more mainstream ideas, but even still, the city is comprised of a diverse population that proudly embraces its label of “weird” and one that continues to celebrate the bizarre and unconventional. On the whole, citizens have great pride in the city, championing local and unique ideas, while avoiding national chain businesses when possible.

## ***Unprecedented growth***

Together, Austin’s beautiful landscape and its unique culture-- in combination with a few smaller factors like weather and a healthy business climate-- have attracted national attention to the city. In recent years, it has repeatedly been recognized for its high quality of life, and in response, young people have started moving there in droves. The major influx started sometime before 2000, but it has taken off since. Austin has ranked first on Forbes’s list of the fastest growing cities in the nation five out of the last six years. The ranking considers the nation’s 100 most populous metropolitan statistical areas in its calculations, and in the single year that Austin did not top the list (2015), it

placed a close second to its neighbor-to-the-south, Houston (Carlyle). In this time period, a large portion of new residents has chosen to make their homes in downtown Austin. Table 1 below shows that the area has welcomed over 8,000 residents since 2000, which serves as an approximately 320% increase in population. The chart also shows that the city's goal is to add more than 12,000 residents to the downtown area in the next decade.

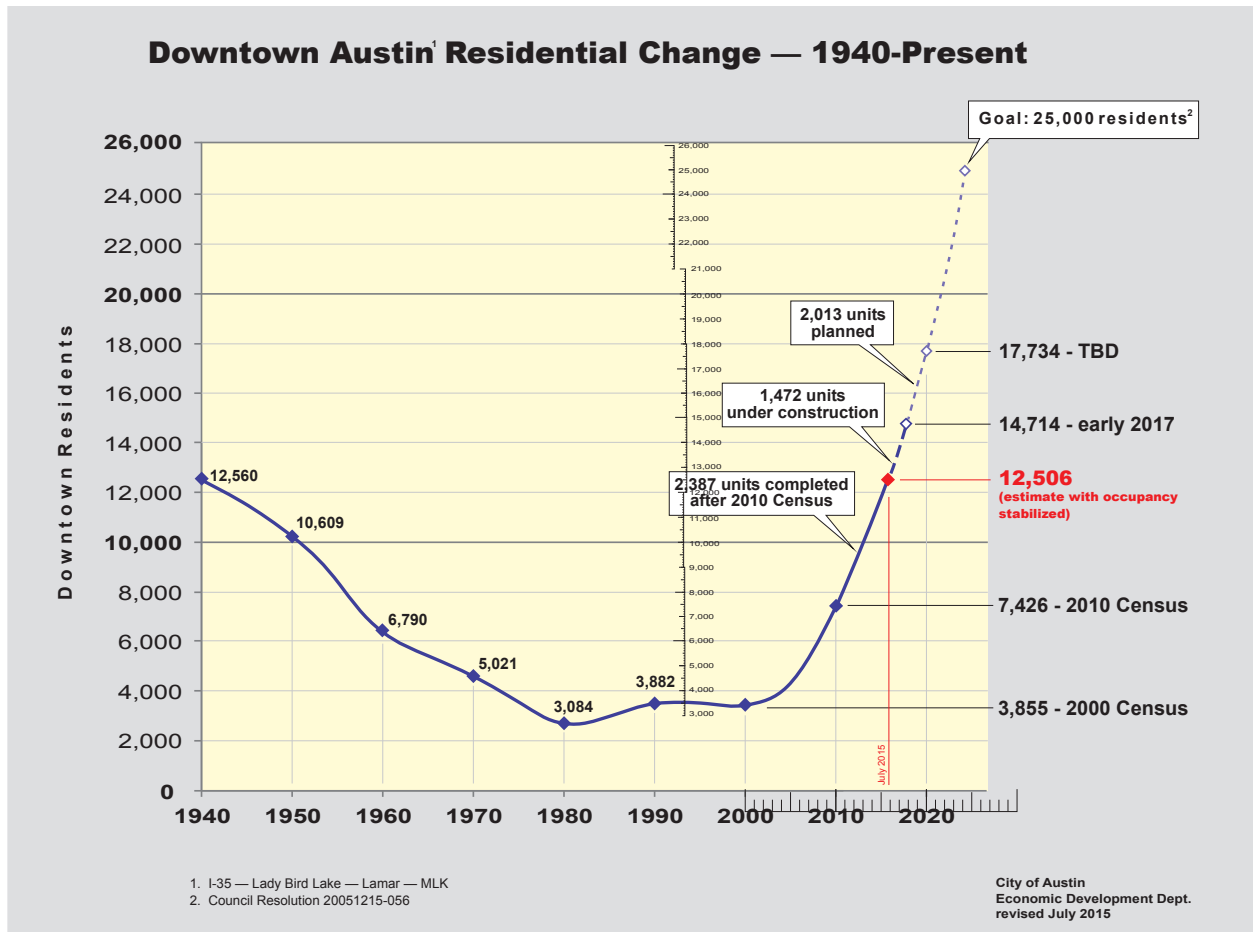


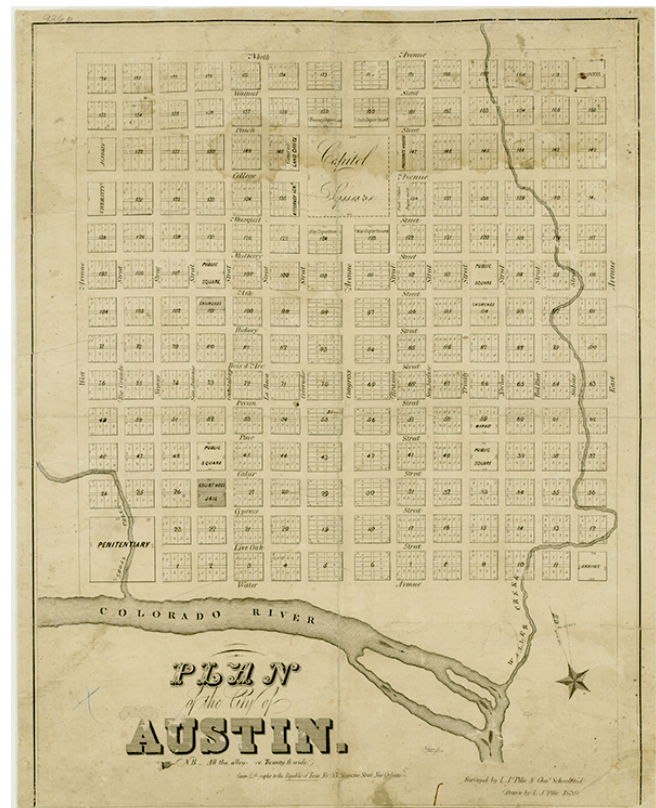
Table 1: Charting downtown Austin's residential growth

For this study, City of Austin defined downtown as the area between Interstate 35, Lady Bird Lake, Lamar Boulevard, and Martin Luther King Drive, but my study will have a slightly more narrow focus. It is worth noting that the areas cut from my study do not constitute largely residential areas, so the numbers above still serve as an accurate prediction of growth for the area of the city defined as downtown with this study.

## ***The definition of downtown Austin and a geographic scope***

Without well-understood edges on most sides of the district, there are a number of different definitions of downtown Austin, most of which serve specific purposes. A once common understanding of downtown was a combination the two significant downtown census tract. Many City offices typically adopt a slightly altered version of that definition that attempts to rationalize a somewhat arbitrary western border. The Downtown Austin Alliance (DAA), the downtown business association and largest single organization working on behalf of downtown, serves a public improvement district that was drawn out in 1993 to represent their understanding of downtown. This designation largely encompasses the commercial nodes that people associate with downtown. The Downtown Austin Neighborhood Association embraces an even broader boundary of downtown, as it seeks to welcome all residents whose living experiences are affected by the conditions of downtown.

Given that there is not a well-recognized definition of downtown, this report will draw unique boundaries that best serve the goal at hand, the activation of alleys, as its geographic scope. The delineation will start with Austin's original 14x14 block street grid in which the alleys were first drawn into existence, as these are the only blocks in which the urban alley conditions are present today. The eastern and southern edges of that plan are today's Interstate 35 and Cesar Chavez Street, respectively, and serve as understood



**Figure 2: The 1839 Plan of Austin includes 196 blocks with alleys**

boundaries of downtown. The western edge of that plan is today's West Avenue, and while it may seem like an arbitrary line to call the edge of today's downtown, extensions of blocks beyond the street did not incorporate alleys, so they are not helpful to this study. The northern edge of the scope will be 11<sup>th</sup> Street. The Texas State Capital grounds start at 11<sup>th</sup> Street, and while the original plan did propose blocks and alleys for the areas north of 11<sup>th</sup> Street, the insertion of the capital's major superblock and its growth over time into the street grid largely changed the urban conditions. The capital itself has no block structure, while blocks to the west contain primarily single family residences, and blocks to the east are home to large state-owned parking garages that do not entail alleys. The final geographic scope is then seen in Figure 3 below.

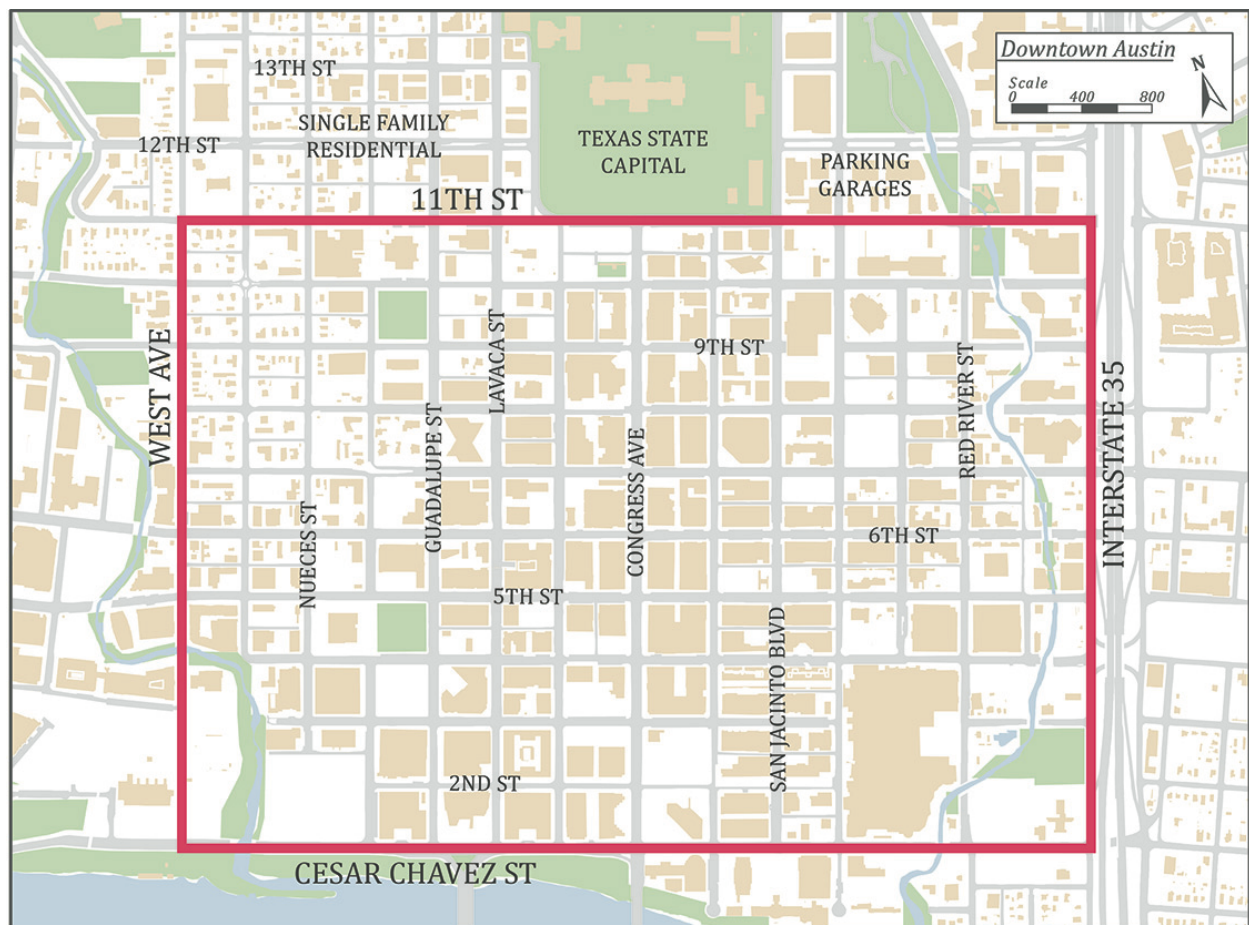


Figure 3: Geographic scope of the study



## II. PROBLEM RECOGNITION

### *Issues plaguing downtown Austin*

As reflected in the City's desire to increase downtown residents, the rapidly growing population of Austin is not a problem for the downtown area in regards to the sheer number of people. From city employees to average city residents, almost all people would agree that the center city could actually benefit from more residents and increased density, as a means to activate the public realm. The difficulties created by the influx of people are actually the effects of trying to accommodate this substantial populace in a built environment which was never intended to house this many people. The city has been forced to transform from a largely two-story downtown of fine-grain storefronts into a forty-story downtown of monolithic buildings, which has had devastating consequences for the culture of the city. The primary two problems that fall into this category are the destruction of cultural assets and the soaring costs of commercial real estate that are excluding local businesses from the downtown.

The large, new construction projects contributing to the rapidly growing skyline of downtown Austin are the most destructive force in regards to wiping out existing cultural assets. In many places in the city, a person can walk up to an intersection and see four new buildings on all four corners around them. These are likely buildings constructed in the decade and half. Some replaced surface level parking lots, but others replaced buildings that had stood in that spot for many years before. The 2011 Downtown Austin Plan notes that "more than 150 potentially significant historic properties, identified in Austin's 1984 Cultural Resources Survey, have been demolished in Downtown over the past 35 years" (Downtown). These structures, as tangible expressions of Austin's culture could be defined as "formal cultural assets." In recent years, the City of Austin's Historic Preservation Department has invested a great deal of work in identifying and protecting valuable historic assets of this type in downtown Austin. So if the beautiful and historically significant buildings are somewhat better protected, how is it that the destruction of

other ugly and insignificant structures counts as the eradication of cultural assets? To answer that question, another form of cultural assets must be outlined.

On the whole, a cultural asset can also be defined as any element within the built environment that contributes to and/or communicates the culture of a particular place or people. This classification included the types of formal and well-conceived cultural resources that people typically think of—performance halls, manicured gardens, libraries, architectural buildings, and fountains—but within this same definition, there are also a number of informal and unplanned elements that communicate the everyday culture of the city-- small local businesses in hole-in-the-wall locations, impromptu sitting places for brownbag lunches like curbs and ledges, derelict buildings that serve as a canvas for graffiti, and even the gritty residue of time. As stand-alone components, this latter group of features can seem insignificant, but when factored into one's impression of the culture of a city, these extremely expressive elements add up to the rich "patina" of a city. The gnarly, twisted arrangements of pipes and layers of messy utilities wires that have been incrementally added to buildings over time tell a story about the long and rich history of many downtown structures. So too do the numerous ad hoc modifications of ground floor retail spaces that have had many lives while overlooking and providing for the bust downtown streets. In the same way that Austinites value the character of gritty dive bars, vintage clothes, family-owned Mexican restaurants, so to do these elements of the city express a certain homegrown charm.

Many of these special compositions are being lost to new construction. While this might not serve as a great loss for certain other communities who pride themselves in modern and flashy compositions, one must acknowledge that these are certainly important components within Austin's cultural framework. This everyday urbanism showcases the gritty, countercultural, inventive, unconventional, and authentic spirit of Austinites. The upgrades to the city come at a great cost then, as many of the city's raw and unpretentious environments are being traded for pristine and sterile new construction that can feel contrived and that often lacks unique or engaging

character. Looking at a number of new projects downtown, there is a sense that the culture of Austin has been diluted or sterilized. The single redevelopment of a lot might not constitute such a loss in other contexts or other cities, but as most of Austin's downtown grid has been redeveloped in the last two decades or is due for these types of necessary renovations very soon, this issue could play out across a majority of the city's downtown property as a slow and incremental demise of the character of downtown. Loss of rich history and culture at this scale would be devastating.



*Figure 4: The same cluster of downtown blocks in 2002 and 2015. The former shows a fine-grain character, while the latter shows the large number of monolithic buildings that dominate blocks, which have all appeared in the short 13 year span.*

The second major problem that downtown Austin is currently facing is the increasing costs of commercial real estate and its toll on local businesses. The previous portions of the text thoroughly described the immense development that has occurred in downtown Austin in recent years, but it did not address the matter in terms of financial investment. It is important to note that with these new, large-scale constructions projects, a great deal of money is on the line. Not only are banks and other lending institutions attempting to shield new projects from any exposure to risk, but at the same time, developers are requiring large and steady flows of income to justify their spending on such mammoth endeavors. Naturally, the cost of commercial real estate has skyrocketed, both for office and retail units. As a response to the building type and increased rent, larger retail units have been created. The rationale is that larger volume stores can justify the large rental rates. These trends have made it increasingly difficult for local business to maintain space in downtown Austin. Numerous prominent and cherished local businesses have been forced to close

their doors, as they were no longer able to prosper in the highly competitive and demanding downtown environment. Conversely, a number of new, generic, and often upscale chain businesses have moved into the district, being some of the only entities that are able to afford the much higher costs of operation.

### ***Positive growth and development***

It is worth stating again that most of these new construction projects are essential to the survival of the city, as they are serving to capture the incoming population growth and activate the streets of downtown. As well, these recent developments bring innovative amenities to downtown Austin and provide one of the largest sources of funds for downtown improvements. With these thoughts in mind, one can not deny that these ventures contribute to positive growth for the city.

On the other hand, the context surrounding this growth-- Austin's robust alternative culture—makes widespread changes both difficult and not wholly desirable. Many will argue that the hippies of yesteryear are the hipsters of today-- still with the same free sprites, open minds, and longing for creativity. The city has always embraced local business and loved the gritty informality of “mom and pop” restaurants and dive bars, which are still the order of the day for a fun night on the town. The city's unofficial, yet much-cherished credo is still “Keep Austin Weird.” Within this framework, new architectural wonders and pristine streets do not rouse citizens or contribute to social capital. They provide the necessary facilities of a growing city, but they are not a part of what makes Austin unique. This inherent conflict raises a very important question that is not being asked: Is there a way then to allow positive and beneficial growth for downtown while still celebrating and strengthening Austin's vibrant culture?

## ***Considerations of a solution***

If there is one place you can turn to answer the aforementioned question, it is public open space. It is imperative that one recognizes that all the previously discussed projects are private sector investments, over which the City of Austin has very little control. On the other hand, one of the City's most important roles is shaping the experience of the downtown's public realm. In a conversation about the preservation of culture, this public service could not be more fitting.

Public space is the fundamental setting for the elaboration of a community's culture. It is the locations where citizens assemble, express themselves, celebrate victories, exchange ideas, protest, interact with new people, stage festivals, and take part in the informal economy. It is a spot where people know their fundamental rights are protected and where each person is treated as an equal and equally valued by the community. The ownership is shared by all. In public spaces, people give back to the community, and it gives back to them. Through all of these interactions, the culture of a place is refined and shared.

In contrast, private spaces are fleeting. Rights are not shared, but instead owned by an individual or individuals, who may choose to put an end to the space at any time. The specific interests of a select few must be served in order for value to be created. Shared culture can not be left to these forces, as its value will have to be commoditized and sold in order for it to be promoted.

This significance of these ideas can not be stated enough, as Austin lacks great public space downtown. The Downtown Austin Plan states that public realm, which it names as the publicly owned streets and open spaces of the district, accounts for 50% of Downtown's land area (14). That proportion is extremely substantial, yet under the current conditions, this half of the land area holds significantly less weight than the other half, the private realm. It is under these types of conditions when the replacement of one privately owned building for another implies a significant adjustment in culture. In order to protect the city's culture amidst changing physical conditions in

the private realm, the City of Austin will need to recognize its public realm as the fundamental platform for culture.

When considering plausible solutions, it is worth noting that, in the last half century, American cities have no longer been in the business of shaping or giving over land as public space. Famed Danish architect and public space expert, Jan Gehl, blames the trend on the whole-hearted adoption of cars and suburbanization. He is quoted as saying, “Cars took over the streets in industrialized nations ... putting many more places within easy reach but making walking and biking dangerous. Towns and cities spread out, with many merchants moving to outlying shopping malls. Telephones, refrigerators, television, computers, and suburban homes with big yards transformed our daily lives. People withdrew from the public realm. No longer essential, public spaces were neglected. Many newly constructed communities simply forgot about sidewalks, parks, downtowns, transit, playgrounds” (Walljasper). In his commentary, Gehl is referring to trends across America, but Austin is no different. With the exception of the Waller Creek renovation on the east side of the district, the City of Austin has certainly not created new public open spaces in the downtown area. Regarding the improvement of existing spaces, the City has invested in positive streetscapes throughout the downtown, but that buildout is a slow and incremental process. The two most significant barriers to improvement are the lack of funds dedicated to public spaces and the lack of land available to be appropriated into public spaces. The former can be addressed with a more manageable solution, as the City need only showcase the value of the public realm and make changes to budgets that reflect these modified priorities. The latter is the more major concern for Austin and many other dense urban cities like it. How can cities create new and engaging public spaces when there is no empty property for such purposes? Is there another option besides using eminent domain, which can be a costly and contentious process? For leaders in Austin, the answer is easy, and it is right under their nose. More appropriately, it is waiting right at their back door.

Most have overlooked this solution, but in short, it involves the activation of one the city's most fundamental forms of public space.

### ***Activated alleys as a proposed solution***

This study proposes that downtown Austin should rethink its district-wide network of service alleys as a unique and dynamic form of public open space, in which the culture of the city can be put on display for all to see. In their current form, most blocks within downtown still contain the service alleys with which the street grid was originally designed. While a few of the alleys exist as public easements on private property, the large majority of alleys are property of the City. While the spaces are publicly owned, their prescribed status as a system of service thoroughfares means that they have a very narrow range of uses and users. This minimal activity amounts to individual alleys being used less than 1% of the day. Not only is the alley system an underutilized space, but it also constitutes a rather large amount of space. Each individual alley is 5,600 square feet, and while a full survey has not been done of all of downtown, current projection estimate that the city should have about 130 intact alleys, which would account for 728,000 square feet of public space. This constitutes a massive amount of publicly owned land that is barely being utilized. Austin's most urban public spaces are the three remaining Downtown Historical Squares that were part of the original city plan—Republic Square Park, Brush Park, and Wooldridge Park. Measuring approximately 80,000 square feet, any one of these parks could be replicated nine times before it would add up to the amount of public open space that currently exists in the alleys. In response to barriers, it is apparent that the alleys could then offer the City of Austin a wealth of property that to serve as a public open space, but do the alley conditions address the cultural concerns that are at the heart of this discussion?

As it turns out, the alleys are strongly tied to both the formal and informal cultural assets of the city. Given their location on almost every downtown block, alleys exist in close proximity to all



of the recognized cultural facilities—like the theaters and museums-- of downtown. Given their historic condition and their long-standing role as service corridors, most of the alleys showcase a wonderful grit and patina that speaks volumes about the history and culture of Austin. By these standards, it is clear that the alleys could serve as a form of the public open space, but given their role as a space for utilitarian functions, can they possibly even function in a different manner? Does the historic and well-defined role of the alley as a service corridor mean it is destined for only this singular use? To answer these questions, one must revisit the history of the alleys to ask where they came from and what their original intent was.

### III. A HISTORY OF ALLEYS

#### *Austin's historic street grid*

Austin's alley network was originally laid out in 1839 as part of the city's grid plan. In 1836, Sam Houston had defeated Santa Anna to secure victory in the Texas Revolution, allowing for the creation of the Republic of Texas. Five cities would serve as temporary capitals for the fledgling country before the nation's second president, Mirabeau Lamar, would take office in 1838 and lead the campaign to select the small village of Waterloo, the present day site of Austin, as the permanent capital. The city was officially chartered as 1839, and renamed after the "Father of Texas," Stephen F. Austin. Lamar chose Judge Edwin Waller to survey the site and lay out the first plan of the town (Kearl). Waller selected a 640-acre site that sat on a bluff between two creeks in a grand, sweeping curve Colorado River. "The city was laid out in a simple grid pattern on a single square-mile plot with 14 blocks running in both directions. One grand avenue, which Lamar named "Congress," cut through the center of town from Capitol Square down to the Colorado River. The streets running north-south were named for Texas rivers with their order of placement matching the order of rivers on the Texas state map. The east-west streets were named after trees native to the region" (Austin Streets). Waller's plan would create a 14x14

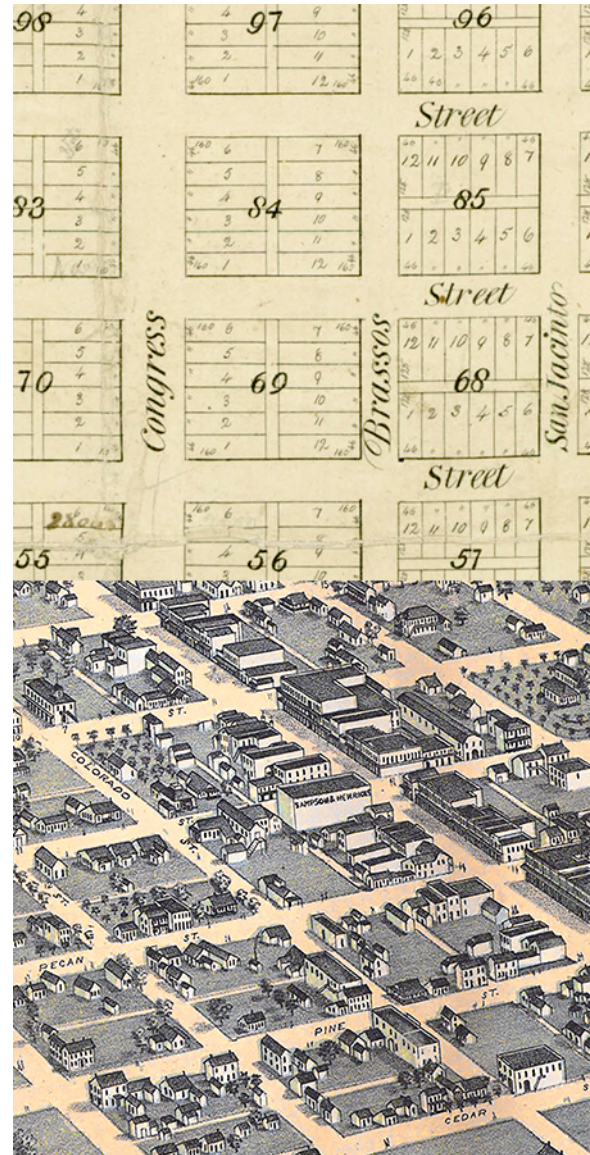


Figure 5: An inset of Edwin Waller's 1839 plan showing alleys in every block; A portion of an 1873 map of Austin with alleys illustrated within blocks.

grid of city blocks that made up the city, which can be seen in Figure 2. Of the 196 blocks, 16 were given over to public functions, ranging in use from public squares to prisons and schools. The remaining 180 blocks would follow a uniform parcel arrangement that included 12 lots in each block-- two set of six lots oriented outward on the opposite sides of the block. This assembly can be seen in Figure 5.

As part of his plan, Edwin Waller included alleys at the center of all blocks. This was keeping with the trends of the time, as most city plans of the period included alleys at the heart of their city blocks. For example, James Thompson had laid out Chicago's now-famous street grid just nine years prior, and he had included alleys. Numerous other American cities developed during the 19th century, and almost all had some form of alley. But where did they come from and what was their function?

### ***The origin of American alleys***

A large number of influences contributed to the American form of the urban alley, but the single greatest precursor was the idea of the British mews. In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries, wealthy London residents often had large country homes outside of the city. They “came by horse to London for ‘the season’ and all of London’s grand families kept their own horses for trips to the country” (Norwood). In order to handle the dirty processes of stables of the day, while also maintaining high-class exterior facades of the homes, a new rear access street was built into city blocks, which would become known as mews. These narrow passages were normally lined with stable houses that occupied by horses and coaches and included a place for their staff to live upstairs. Trend was most prevalent in London, but the ideas were



*Figure 6: British mews as seen in today's landscape*

slowly adopted in other parts of Europe. The French word for such a street was “allée,” a term that American colonialists adopted in the design of some of our country's earliest cities.

While the American version of mews was less rooted in keeping up pretenses, they were still largely a result of horse-based transportation systems. Horse maintenance of the day had significant inflow and outflow demands—large amounts of hay had to be moved in and large amounts of manure had to be moved out. For a country that was laying out new cities from scratch, these considerations were vital. This was especially true in the American West—a categorization that would have included both Chicago and Austin-- where there was high horse ownership. When Thompson was laying out the street grid for Chicago, there was not even a question as to whether or not alleys should be included. “Alleys had become so commonplace in the American West that the Illinois General Assembly ‘simply expected it to happen in Chicago’” (Jackson).

These expectations help up through most of the 1800's, but by the turn of the century, the ripples of the Industrial Revolution had provided new technology that largely changed the way people moved about the city and performed service functions. As a result, the demands of horses no longer dominated the alleys, but a new set of grimy services had taken hold. The delivery of coal for



**How the Presence of Other, Slower Vehicles Holds the Truck Back**

*Congested traffic conditions in the alley in the rear of the Siegel, Cooper & Co., store. The coal wagon on the right is largely responsible for this congestion. In this instance, 67 minutes were required for the unloading of the coal with a shovel. A motor coal truck would have bottled up the driveway for a much shorter period.*

*Figure 7: A 1912 catalog selling service vehicles criticizes the horse-drawn coal wagon in a service alley and compares it to the truck on the other side of the alley.*

heating was commonplace in alleys. As well, most municipalities had become denser while their streetscapes had become cleaner, putting a greater pressure on cities to move intense service functions into alleys. The stowing and collection of both trash and human waste was pushed into these service corridors, and services were conducted by means that we would today consider primitive.

These patterns continues with some minor fluctuations through the 1920's and 1930's, at which point America moved away from coal as a primary fuel for residential heating. The mass adoption of the automobile not only made some service functions more efficient, but it also enabled the great suburbanization of the nation. As city densities started to fall in large numbers after WWII, the role of the alley became much less significant. As well, new city patterns were based on suburban ideas. These novel plans started out by including residential alleys behind rows of single family homes, which might be faced by detached small garages, but these notions would eventually be traded for the idea of the large attached garage as the place to house messy projects and the service functions of the home.

Urban alleys were left empty within the city centers. In some ways, the alley conditions improved, in the sense that less heavy use made them easier to maintain. In another sense, the alleys significantly declined, as there now vacant, dark spaces in largely empty cities, allowing them to become a haven for homeless populations, crime and illicit behavior. While the suburbs were experiencing their heyday in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the image of the alley became the metaphor for what was scary and unsafe about cities.

### ***The current state of Austin's alleys***

It is only in recent decades, since people started moving back into cities like Austin in large numbers, that a proposal of activated alleys could even be possible. Like many other cities around the country, the commercial and residential growth in Austin has provided more “eyes on the

street,” driving some undesirable activities out of alleys. At the same time, present municipal services provide an environment that feels clean and safe at all times of the day and night. Trash removal is so frequent that not even odors or rodents have a chance to take hold of the alleys.

Comparing the nature of the filthy tasks for which American alleys were created with today’s much tidier and efficient service functions, one could argue that the role of the alley is much less important. It is no longer vital that such tasks be hidden from human exposure. While there is certainly value in a service-focused corridor that frees up the primary street grid to operate more effectively, there is definitely not a sustained need for this type of service passage to be completely segregated from other functions of the city.

The resulting conditions suggest that Austin’s downtown alleys are at an unprecedented place in their historical development. At no point in time has the city possessed a vibrant downtown street life that contained clean and safe alleys that are used less than 1% of the day by functions that are able to effectively share the space. Does this description portray a setting that is primed for activation as dynamic public open space? Would there even be value and interest in developing the spaces into more dynamic places? Is there information to support that these narrow passages would contribute to a positive experience? A summary of urban planning and urban design theory answers a great deal of these questions.

## IV. URBANIST THEORY THAT SUPPORTS ACTIVATED ALLEYS

### *Much beloved narrow streets*

At their most fundamental level, alleys are essentially narrow streets. What specifically separate them from the other categories of streets are two particular features. The first, as mentioned before, are the more slender proportions that alleys typically support. The other is the fact that alleys are routinely lined with other physical features, such as trees, fences, or buildings, creating a somewhat enclosed passage. This sense of enclosure at a small scale often conveys the feeling of being in an interior space that is surrounded by walls. This study, which focuses on the American urban alley, considers only passageways whose edges are defined by building walls. With this in mind, a study of all other forms of narrow urban streets can show how humans have existed within such spaces.

A brief history of streets across time and cultures reveals that many of today's broad streets and roads are relatively new to mankind. For most of human history, the corridors of cities were more compact spaces. It is only in recent decades with the advent of the automobile that our perception of streets has changed into something broad and wide. Modernist urban planning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century embraced cars and speed as the defining characteristics of street. The effects of this unfortunate development can especially be seen in America, where most people consider the terms "street" and "road" to be synonymous without any other conceptions of different street typologies. But even as Americans have started to reject some ideas about car-dependence that came out of the Modernist school of thought, today's streets and roads are still shaped by this outside force-- the automobile-- and its extreme safety demands.



Numerous countries outside our own existed long before the invention of the automobile, and they hold a wealth of historic places that reveal the conditions that existed previously. Many streets in these nations were constructed at a time when the car was not part of the equation, so they reveal, among other things, the human's natural pedestrian preferences. Jan Gehl points out that "it is important to note that these cities did not develop based on plans but rather evolved through a process that often took many hundreds of years, because this slow process permitted continual adjustment and adaptation of the physical environment to the city functions. The city was not a goal in itself, but a tool formed by use' (Gehl, 41). With this, he explains that the slow formation of streets of this nature was loaded with thought and intention.

An examination of such places uncovers the fact that a wide range of street widths exists, but many of the most loved and cherished streets are the smaller passages. Examples include the corridors that run through Jerusalem's Old City, the paths and staircases that wind through Lisbon's hillside neighborhoods, the routes that traverse Morocco's vibrant markets, the passages that connect Stockholm's Gamla Stan, the lantern-lined hutong lanes that link the courtyard homes of Beijing, and the bustling footpaths that crisscross Venice, to name a few. It is worth noting that the examples all come from different roots—classical, Islamic, medieval European, and Asian traditions—yet they all have produced



*Figure 8: Human-scale places.  
Jerusalem, Beijing, Marrakesh, Lisbon.*

small streets that are considered very special to residents. While surrounded by very different cultural contexts, these places reveal the power of human-scale proportions. It is the defining element of these famed streets and corridors.

### ***In praise of small, human scale places***

Human scale proportions are those measurements that correlate with the dimensions of humans and human capabilities. People interact with the environments around them based on their sensory capabilities, and given the physical proficiencies of the human body, there arises a number of understood preferences, especially with regards to the built environment. This framework helps designers understand a number of reasons why certain places are more or less desirable than others for human occupation. Designing human scale places recognizes that, on the whole, the human sensory system operates within a very small proximity and has inherent fondness for intimate details that can cater to the senses accordingly. Jan Gehl champions this cause in his book *Life Between Buildings*, where he strategically chart the ranges of each human sense. He explains that “in cities and building projects of modest dimensions, narrow streets, and small spaces, the buildings, building details and the people who move about in the spaces are experienced at close range and with considerable intensity. These cities and spaces are comparably perceived as intimate, warm, and personal. Conversely, building projects with large spaces, wide streets, and tall buildings often are felt to be cold and impersonal” (Gehl, 69).

This thinking would explain why the narrow streets of the world are so highly valued. Within them, all five senses can process the immediate context. A pedestrian walking through the streets of Lisbon can see the beautiful wares displayed in shop windows, smell the scent of pastries cooking nearby, make eye contact with a passerby, hear the chatter of the older gentlemen at the adjacent café table, and feel the momentary gust of wind as two children dart by. In sharp contrast, a pedestrian on the sidewalk of a wide American street would have less ability the process the

events on the other side of the street. Much of it would just be a blur. Only the sense of vision can operate well at this distance, but even still, most faces would not even be recognizable. These predispositions work together to shape this involuntary set of preferences, which defines our understanding of human scale proportions and types of environments in which people like to be. In short, human scale places are places that people physically prefer.

In addition, human scale places also promote a social dynamic that is not found in other settings. In considering the ways that small spaces contribute to people's interactions, Jan Gehl expresses that "life between buildings is potentially a self-reinforcing process. When someone begins to do something, there is a clear tendency for others to join in, either to participate themselves or just to experience what the others are doing. In this manner individuals and events can influence and stimulate one another. Once this process has begun, the total activity is nearly always greater and more complex than the sum of the originally involved component activities" (Gehl, 73). While his description can sound somewhat scientific, William Whyte put a very humanistic face on this trend. His famed book *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* is a love letter to the little, more humane public places of the city, and he calls the social effect that happens within them "triangulation." He defines this idea as the phenomenon that occurs when one stimulus exists to bring two other people together. Whatever the impetus, it "provides a linkage between people and prompts strangers to talk to each other as though they were not" (Whyte, 94). He provides numerous examples of events that serve as catalysts for such exchanges and argues that such occurrences are only feasible in the public realm where people are held as equals and in small spaces where people are brought into contact with each other. Whyte claims that this social dynamic is the human preference, stating that humans "go to lively places where there are many people. And they go there by choice-not to escape the city, but to partake of it. It is wonderfully encouraging that places people like best of all, find least crowded, and most restful are small spaces

marked by a high density of people and a very efficient use of space. I end, then, in praise of small spaces. The multiplier effect is tremendous” (Whyte, 101).

Given these facts and opinions, it could be argued that narrow lanes might be the most comfortable and desirable form of streets for people. The study of thoroughfares around the world and urban theorist across time definitely supports this argument. If this is the case, activated alleys could provide a particularly inviting and friendly social urban space for the people of the city. They would be ideal as a setting in which the senses are stimulated with all the facets of cultural exchange. But would people actually go into alleys? Aren’t they just dirty service corridors? Have there been projects that prove that alleys can be shaped into positive environments? Luckily, they are a few precedents that address these very concerns.

## **V. PRECEDENTS TO FOLLOW**

### ***At home and abroad***

There are a small number of places that have activated their contemporary alleys in one fashion or another, and for the most part, all of them have been extremely successful in terms of creating valuable public realm for cities. In our country, Seattle, San Francisco, Detroit, Chicago, Denver, Oakland, Cincinnati, and Fort Collins have all engaged in something rethinking of their existing alley system. Seattle and Fort Collins were the only two cities mentioned here that were thinking about alleys at the city-wide scale. The others in the list were looking more specifically at individual alley projects.

Beyond just alleys, there is something of a public space renaissance occurring in our country, and most projects are not working with conventional public spaces. Supporting the idea that cities are not in the business of creating entirely new public spaces, these cities across the nation are using unused or residual public land to transform it into activated communal spaces. The most notable of these projects is New York City’s Highline Park, which transformed an antiquated

elevated rail line into a spectacular linear park. Atlanta's Beltline trail is a similar project that is working to rethink and revive a ring of former rail corridors that circle the city center. The Los Angeles River project hopes to convert a massive concrete culvert, now a neglected wasteland, into an urban oasis that stretches across miles of the city's landscape. As another expression of this trend in American public space revival, cities are seeking to activate public infrastructure as public open space. In short, municipalities that have been low on funds are realizing that that projects that require major investments in public infrastructure can have more than one single function. Besides just providing for service needs, most infrastructure can also perform a public space function. For example, Dallas's Klyde Warren Park served to not only cap a portion of a sunken interstate, connected disjointed parts of the city, but the space also escorted in the city's most popular park space. Atlanta's Historic Fourth Ward Park was formed when city leaders looking to rebuild an outdated sewage system realized it would actually be cheaper to address the repairs with a stormwater retention pond, which could be built as the focal point of a public green space.

Many of these projects have generated national and international attention, stirring up excitement and thirst across the country for additional public spaces. As cities are creating unique solutions and deliver quality products with these unconventional projects, it could be suggested that these trends add up to the rebirth of great public spaces in our country. Given this movement, the activation of Austin's alleys would not be out of character. The project involves the utilization of a publicly owned residual space while also giving multiple purposes to a form of public infrastructure. That being said, overall American trends serve as precedent to suggest that alley activation could be successful, but within our own borders, there is not a singular project or city whose work offers substantial guidance in this endeavor. For that, one must look outside our country.

Understanding that the American alley idea developed at a very particular time in history when our nation was planning a large amount of its cities explains the prevalence of this particular

urban morphology in our country. It also explains the lack of it in places like Europe, where most city designs were already embedded in the land. It is worth noting then that other country with the most alleys and the most successful work in alley activation is Australia, a country that is very near to America in terms of age and overall development patterns. In that country, the City of Melbourne has made a name for itself with its system of activated alleys, and the trend was quick to follow in Brisbane and Sydney. Melbourne will serve as the chief precedent for this study, as the city has seen unmatched success in their efforts to bring their alleys—which they call “laneways”—to life.

## ***The story of Melbourne***

To understand the laneways of Melbourne and how they transformed and redefined that city’s downtown, a little history is required. Prior to the 1980’s, the history of Melbourne is very similar to Austin and other American cities. A busy and well-defined downtown had developed in the mid-1800’s and flourished through the mid-1900’s. In the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, suburban sprawl started taking over, and the downtown collapsed. It became only a central business district, where daytime office work was dominant, and the district emptied at the end of every work day. It was lifeless on the weekends, and most residents felt there was no reason to visit, due to the lack of amenities and the perception of petty crime. Figure 10 shows a 1980 newspaper article that announced that Melbourne’s downtown was empty and useless.

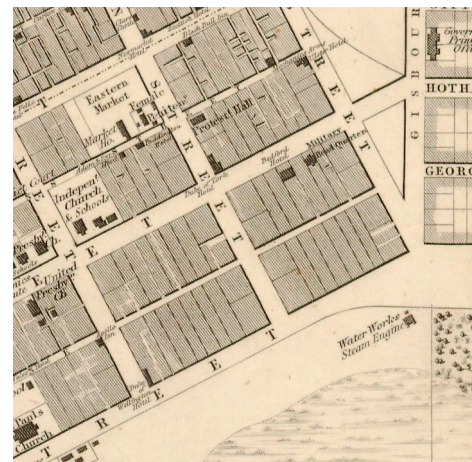


*Figure 9: A Melbourne newspaper tells of the state of downtown in the 1980’s*



This claim was not completely valid. As a business district, there was still demand for office space. The downtown also featured a number of municipal functions that obliged people to visit the area on occasion. Leaders understood and these operations had no reason to leave the area, and they also felt that the history, centrality, infrastructure, and economic function of the district meant that there would always be a role for downtown. They sensed that if they could activate the public realm, they could create a vibrant downtown that would bring back residents and provide a reason for other citizens to visit. The question of how to activate a dead downtown was a complex one, but downtown Melbourne did have one special attribute to its name that could serve as a unique draw: the laneways.

The City of Melbourne had been surveyed and laid out in 1837, just two short years before Austin. Robert Hoddle, who created the design for the city, had shaped large blocks that were bisected by narrow lanes. Over the years, the laneways had provided a place for service access, but they also presented corridors that pedestrians commonly used to cut through the large blocks. As the downtown had emptied towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the laneways became the haven of crime in the city.



*Figure 10: A portion of an 1855 map, showing the Hoddle Grid block structure*

Often visible to few eyes, the dark settings were magnets for criminal activity. When city leaders consider plans to reignite downtown, they knew the laneways would warrant a great amount of thought. Activated alleys were not the obvious solution though. In fact, no one really thought of activated alleys in the early phases of planning. There were other priorities to address.

One of the greatest criticisms that Melbourne citizens had about the state of downtown was the lack of local businesses. Without foot traffic, retail had evacuated the area, and with a white-collar workweek crowd as the primary demographic, there was little demand for lively and



creative restaurants and bars. Amidst the office towers, however, there sat a large number of small, fine grain historic storefronts on main streets that were either vacant or underutilized. City officials felt that that these buildings were full of character and were the ideal setting for local shops and dining. In 1986, research was done to investigate why entrepreneurs were not looking into these cheap and charming storefronts, and one consistent response surprised local leaders. Many restaurant and bar owners quoted the price and complexity of the city's liquor licensing process as a barrier to entering the market. The steep annual fee was so high that it created a sharp divide between the type of business that would be open during the day to serve the business lunch crowd and the type of evening restaurant that would serve alcohol as part of the fine dining experience. As well, policies required any establishment with a license to serve food as well, entirely inhibiting the possibility of stand-alone bars. Entrepreneurs had already been hesitant to open a location downtown, given the risk of trying to start a restaurant in a dead area of town, but many stated that the high cost of the liquor license on top of that created a setting in which success seemed completely unattainable. In response to the feedback, the City of Melbourne very quickly reduced not only the fees of a liquor license, but also the processes and paperwork required in order to secure the document. The City also struck down the rule that establishment serving alcohol must also serve food.

The effects of the policy change were quick but rather surprising. New liquor license applications were filed almost immediately, but while city leaders sat and watched the main street storefronts for new signs of life, the trend started taking off somewhere else. Officials had thought the changes in regulation were simply about making the process more affordable and therefore less risky, but what they had not considered was that the hefty fees were actually constraining the types of businesses that were possible. The large expense and requirement for food meant that only large-scale restaurants with a large number of tables could survive, but after the changes took effect, "bar operators no longer needed large premises to obtain the economies of scale required to

pay high licensing fees” (Davies). In addition, the changes “minimized overheads including kitchen fit-outs and operational costs which had previously priced out smaller independent businesses. The changes enabled a greater variety of premises to serve alcohol such as small cafes, bars and restaurants” (Oberklaid). As it turns out, these small venues were not interested in the large, main street storefronts, which the regulation changes had targeted. They wanted small and intimate spaces that matched their small business concepts, and these types of properties were available as the residual space at the backs of the buildings that otherwise had little purpose. These were locations that faced the unused laneways, but this mattered little to business owners, as the corridors offered other perks. “Melbourne’s laneways and inner city streets offered the sort of low cost premises of varied size that entrepreneurs were looking for. The proliferation of venues gave operators the scope to specialize and offer unusual and idiosyncratic experiences” (Davies). As a result of this investment, the laneways started to awaken.

Jan Gehl had been a visiting professor in Melbourne during the 1970’s and had taken a strong interest in the city. He worked with the City of Melbourne in 1993 to consider ways to activate the public spaces of Downtown, and in his work, he was particularly taken with the laneways. In his final report, he strongly suggested that the city begin investing in the laneways and considering other ways to support the small businesses that were popping up within them. As a result, Melbourne produced a plan called “Postcode 3000,” the goal of which was to bring residents back to the stagnant city and transform the business district into a 24-hour city. “The City provided a range of financial incentives, technical guidance, promotion, policy change and street level support to encourage residential development. A focus of these efforts was re-purposing and re-designing the oversupply of offices and vacant heritage buildings and warehouses for residential use. The number of residential units increased by 830% in a decade from approximately 1,000 in 1992 to almost 10,000. Today about 20,000 people live in the Central Business District.” (Oberklaid). Postcode 3000 was a large success, but most agree that none of it would have been

possible without the activation of the laneways. At the same time, the eventual increase in downtown residents also served to further develop the laneways. “In the 1980s, there were just 2 outdoor cafes in central Melbourne, which has risen above 500 today. There are hundreds of little bars, and street-side cafes, hidden in Melbourne’s maze of laneways, creating a sense of intrigue and surprise.”



Figure 11: The increase in Melbourne cafes from 1983 to 2004

### ***Melbourne’s laneways today***

Taking a stroll through downtown Melbourne today, it is clear that the laneways are a vital component of both the district’s and the city’s culture. The narrow corridors are lined with all types of businesses from sidewalk cafes to boutique clothing stores. Citizens argue that the laneways have become the single greatest proponent local business. As the downtown area has grown in

popularity, the real estate market too has spiked as well. Within historic building that are being transformed and even in monolithic structures that are being built to meet these growing demands, there is always residual space available to support the nature of the laneway culture.

Surprisingly, the large majority of laneways are still open to vehicular traffic. Service functions and through traffic exist within the small spaces, and they do not take away from the pedestrian environment at all. Automobiles must move at slow speeds through the laneways, and as a result, there is a feeling that everyone is an equal in the laneways. The car is not intruding upon a pedestrian space, and the pedestrian is not interfering with a car space. This form of cohabitation within the laneways present an environment that seems foreign in idea, but one that is remarkably comfortable in experience.

In most laneways, the entrances of businesses and residents open to the laneways, providing an active street frontage, but there are also instances when this is not feasible. The nature of the business inside a building or long-standing functions may not offer the opportunity for entries, windows, or other porous elements along the adjacent laneway. In these instances, the city has developed sanctuaries for creativity in the form of public art. With the building owner's consent, blank and bland walks are transformed with grand creative gestures. In some cases, this is commissioned works of art, but at other times, it is simply street art. Regardless, the results are remarkable and stunning. "Art on the walls lining many laneways are treated as temporary, often layered over, providing an interesting and constantly changing experience for pedestrians and generating exposure for artists."

In terms of policies that support the laneways, there are very few. On the whole, the laneways have developed at the hands of the individuals and businesses that call a particular laneway home. The City realized that the this "bottom up" approach was successful, and as with the example of the liquor licensing, is has chosen to shape policies that have enable additional laneway development, but it has largely stayed out of the particulars of how that happens. The City performs

two primary functions in laneway activation: it lays down pavers on the street surface, and it provides lighting. After many years of trial and error with the laneways, the city found that these two steps were the bare minimum step required in alley activation. If not a single other action was taken, the City found that the addition of pavers and lighting alone created a large enough change in the environment that pedestrians started seeing the route as a viable cut through. In these cases, the pavers took the place of asphalt, and therefore, the new surface created an impression that the laneway was not just for cars. The lighting provided vitally important feelings of safety that allowed uses to take advantage of the laneways at all times of the day. The City also took major steps to

reconsider waste management in the laneways. Businesses within the laneways consolidated their waste containers, removing and downsizing the dumpsters that were present. Waste picking frequency was also increased to twice a day to prevent the large-scale accumulate of trash. In response, a number of businesses were able to move from a dumpster to much smaller individual waste bins. Some remain on the laneways, while others are small enough that business owners take them out to the street and bring them back inside in response to scheduled collection times.



*Figure 12: What does the City of Melbourne pay for in the laneways? Looking at the top photo, it might be hard to guess. The bottom photo reveals that the City only pays for the lighting and pavers.*



Laneways today are primarily shaped by private investment. In the same way that property owners and business owners shape and clean up their facades, so too do these parties care for their laneways in Melbourne. Buildings owners, responding to market demands, have recognized the rear of their



*Figure 13: Dumpster don't feel out of place in laneways, and humans don't feel out of place with dumpsters present.*

structure as a viable storefront and created business units and business entrances accordingly. Most times, this means transforming the residual space that exist at the back of the buildings. Loading docks, service entrances, small offices, and the like can be shaped into new business spaces. In some instances, a component as small as a broom closet can serve as a new business if a hole is cut in the wall and a barista is allowed to sell coffee out of it. On the exterior of the buildings, owners have created ornamental facades where there were none. They have also modified some of the former service functions of the rear wall, raising HVAC units above first floor awnings and burying grease traps.

Such simple changes have created a dynamic and experiential form of public realm unlike anywhere else in the world. It is both gritty and beautiful, foreign and welcoming. The laneways have become a symbol of Melbourne and one of the city's top tourist attractions. Yet even as a place that draws outsiders in this manner, the laneways remain completely authentic to the culture and character of Melbourne. Business owners laugh that their store footprints are too small to house Starbucks or other chains, so they remain local. The laneways are home to a number of event and festivals throughout the year, and their flexible, open form allows them to host numerous forms of





Figure 14: Scenes from the Melbourne laneways.



programming. It is clear to most that the laneways are “ground zero” for the culture of Melbourne. In a city that had a weak and crumbling public realm, the activation of these quirky, human-scale spaces brought an entire downtown back to life.

Given this wonderful success story, one might follow up by asking if these ideas can be transformed to other places or if they are the result of specific contextual characteristics that only exist in Melbourne. The answer to that question can be found with a number of key leaders in Melbourne that were asked to translate the popular ideas of Melbourne’s laneways to a similar system of alleys in Brisbane. Their work was a success in Brisbane, and after that project, in Sydney as well. The team is adamant that active alleys can work anywhere. They expressed that the success in Melbourne and Australia as a whole had little to do with contextual factors. More than anything, they felt the value of their alley network came as a result of putting vibrant local businesses in fine grain retail units within human scale public spaces that are rich with patina.

If this is the case, then it is possible for Austin’s alley network to share in the same successes. Not only can the same physical conditions be created within the alleys themselves, but also, the culture of Austin shares much in common with that of Melbourne. Both cities serve as hubs of creativity and embrace their label of being the bohemian and somewhat peculiar city in their greater state. The two both champion music and have a notable live music scene. The downtowns of both cities are spotted with just as many small historic buildings as large, contemporary buildings. The bulk of the populations of the cities live outside the downtown areas but commute into downtown to take advantage of culture and entertainment, which does not have a clear epicenter elsewhere. Both cities are cynical about chain businesses and have a strong entrepreneur spirit, which fosters local pride and allows people to shop from local business much of the time. While Melbourne leaders quote that the physical form of the Austin’s alleys would be sufficient to produce a success store comparable to their own, the number of similarities between the two cities only serves to support that case. What form then could Austin’s alley take? How exactly would they look?

## VI. CONSIDERING ACTIVATED ALLEYS IN AUSTIN

### *Imagining what Austin's alleys could be*

The thought of capturing all of Austin's vibrant culture into one shared and common space is exhilarating. It is easy to daydream and imagine this unique urban setting that hosts art, diversity, music, food, community, story telling, celebrations, spontaneity, performance, gatherings, socializing, festivals, and the rich narratives of Austin history. The alleys would not be the culture themselves, but the framework and canvas in which culture plays out in organic and humanistic ways.

The alleys could be a place where downtown residents could find breakfast tacos on the morning walk to work. Amy's Ice Cream location could serve their famous scoops through a hole in the wall to family's enjoying their weekend by strolling the alleys together. Blue Lapis Light could present unforgettable aerial dance performances high on the walls and fire escapes of the narrow alley passages. The numerous artist studios that locate along the alleys could open up their shops as a part of the Art City Austin festivities. Revelers reaching the end of their night could enjoy hot slices of Roppolo's pizza and spark up conversations with new friends that they meet in the lively alleys. The Mexican American Cultural Center could stage an elaborate parade through the alleys as part of its Dia de los Muertos celebrations. The Alamo Drafthouse could screen movies on alleys walls and provide funky and posh furniture for a one-of-a-kind movie experience. Austin historians could give alley tours that express the rich history of the city as seen through the historic buildings that sit on the original street grid and abut the alleys. Garage doors windows of Austin Java could be pulled opened on pretty days, allowing smells of espresso and sounds of live music to spill into the alleys. The staff at a bohemian boutique could offer face painting for children during Eeyore's Birthday while their moms enjoy the shopping. A small pocket location of Book People could offer unique reads and a reading nook with unmatched people watching. Christmas lights and tinsel could be strung across the alleys to create sparkling canopies during the holidays while couples sip

hot chocolate at the café tables beneath them. In these ways, the activated alleys in Austin would be both a microcosms of the city’s culture and the very epitome of it as well.

Another unique value that alleys would provide to Austin is the addition of a new business type the currently does not exist: the small, fine-grain brick and mortar unit. While other older cities across the nation and the world may maintain buildings that contain extremely small-scale retail footprints, this is not the case in Austin. In addition, in the last decade, the city has received praise for being one of the American cities that help ignite the food trailer trend. For Austinites, the excitement for the movement came only in small part from the novel notion of eating food from temporary, outdoor stand. Instead, the real interest from locals was rooted in food trucks’ ability to bring new businesses to life. Very early on, this city that cherishes the notion of supporting local business saw that the trailers provided an opportunity for entrepreneurs to launch small projects without the great investment that brick and mortar businesses require. Food trailers provided a new rung the ladder of development from business idea to full, permanent operation, and this was an important new step in which ideas could be tested and refined without extreme risks to business owners. After the adoption of the mobile food trucks, that range runs from working at home to food trailer ownership, but it is worth noting that there is now a large and risky jump from managing a



Figure 15: A range of business unit types in Austin

food trailer to occupying a permanent real estate location. The missing middle likely serves to hold back some positive business development. With their tendencies to transform the residual space of existing buildings into small, fine grain business units that would not otherwise be built in today's real estate market, activated alleys could provide a great benefit to local businesses and economic development for the city as a whole.

### ***Previous efforts towards alley activation***

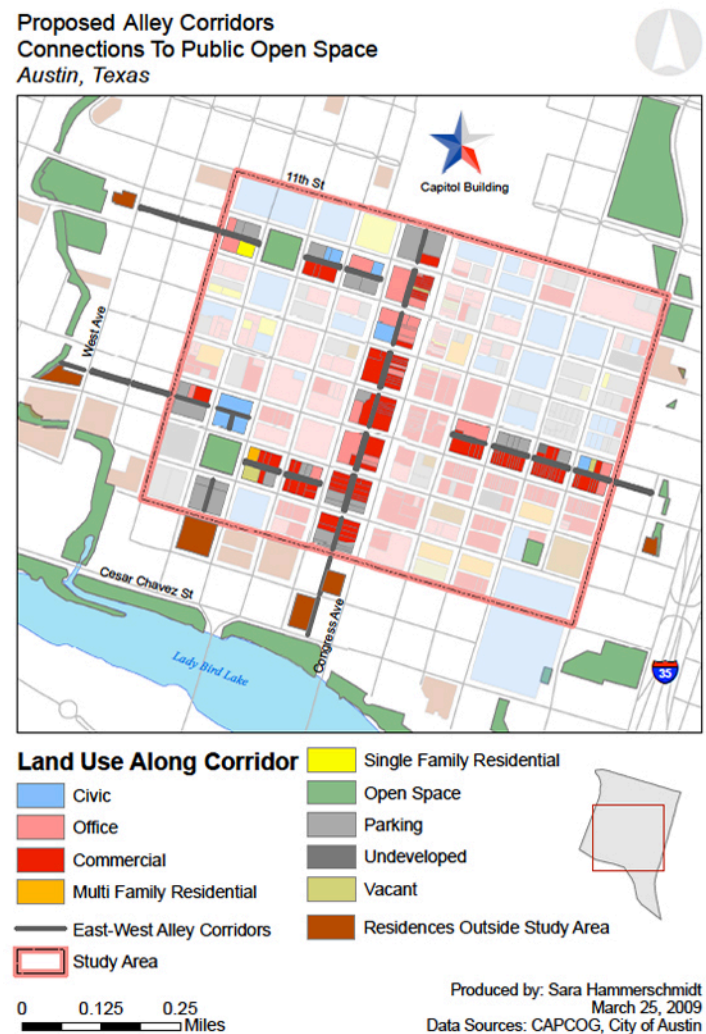
Over the years, others have seen the same vision for Austin and considered the possibility of activated alleys. Their works is reviewed here, because all of it leads to the current environment that makes Austin alleys primed for activation.

In 2009, University of Texas graduate student Sara Hammerschmidt used her thesis for her masters in city and regional planning to consider the activation of Austin's alleys. Sara's research can be credited with causing a number of Austin leaders to question the feasibility of activated alleys for the first time. Her work was extremely beneficial it is ability to outline the alleys as an untapped asset for Austin. Her analysis of the existing conditions of the alley system was the first comprehensive look at the otherwise overlooked spaces. Her final proposal was that of several interconnected alleys that could serve as an alternative transportation route through downtown. She believed that streets and sidewalks offered one means of traversing the city, but a connected alley system would over a completely unmatched, experiential means of moving from point A to point B within downtown.

Sara's suggestions of alley activation on the whole are still relevant, but because she did not study the City of Melbourne at all, her work relied on a number of assumptions that have since been proven false by the extensive alley research coming out of that city. Her first faulty assumption was that the potential for alley activation relied solely upon existing uses surrounding the alleys. Her assessment of the area started with a land use map and with her belief that only alleys adjacent to

commercial uses could fully support activation. Years of success in Melbourne directly contradict this belief. The city has shown that completely dead alleys with not entryways onto them are perfectly viable as art alleys in which creativity is given freedom to flourish at a grand scale. Some of these place in Melbourne form the most immersive and experiential environments, and they illicit the strongest feelings from visitors accordingly. Without seeing this possibility, Sara's research omits any areas of downtown that do not support primarily commercial functions.

Chief among Sara's false assumptions was that the value in alleys lay in their connected nature, such that successive alleys could serve as a transportation route. Studies from Melbourne's alleys have revealed quite the opposite. First and foremost, in studies that gauged the factors that contributed to the highest quality experiences with alleys, researches found no correlation between connectivity and the perceived alley quality. The factors that did contribute to highly treasured laneways were those sensory stimuli that surrounded a person and were evident when standing in a single spot within the laneways and looking around. They were the elements that contributed to a sense of place within that single alley, and they had nothing to do with whether that same alley extended into adjacent blocks. Without this information available to her, Sara's overall assessment of Austin's alleys only assigned value to those



*Figure 16: The proposal of connected alley threads in Sara Hammerschmidt's report.*

alleys that were directly connected to two or more contiguous alleys, which by defaulted, invalidated a number of alleys, such that they were never studied.

In addition, Sara's primary goal was to consider places where these strings of alleys could create an alternative mobility path through the city for pedestrians. The same research from Melbourne negates this thinking. The studies revealed that users don't think of the laneways as a place of efficient movement, but rather as a place for lingering and pausing. The alleys are a place to window shop and take in the surroundings, and as a result, the pace within them is comfortable and slow. As a result, pedestrian traffic in downtown Melbourne became slightly segregated by function. Those people who were in a hurry or who headed somewhere specific were more likely to take the sidewalks on the main streets, taking advantage of timed pedestrians signals at intersections that made their journey efficient and predictable. Those without a specific goal in mind were more apt to wander through the laneways at a leisurely pace. As well, Sara's research did not address the pesky question of the mid-block crossing. If a pedestrian reaches the edge of an alley and meets a main street, that person is at mid-block, where there is no intersection. To follow a contiguous row of alleys, a mid-block crossing would have to be installed. Given Austin's short 280' blocks and the 20' width of alleys, the 130' distance between traffic signals would create a horribly choppy downtown. It also violates many understood traffic standards regarding the distance between signalized intersections. With these factors in mind, it is clear that thinking of the alleys as a place primarily for mobility is inappropriate. In summary, the goal of activated alleys should not be the movement through them, but the experience within them.

Following Sara's research, the City of Austin's Downtown Commission authorized an Alley Activation Workgroup in 2012 to investigate the matter more fully. The Downtown Commission is a board elected by the city council that advises the City in regards to policies and projects that may impact downtown Austin. The group also serves as stewards for the Downtown Austin Plan. The group works primarily with the City's Economic Development Department, and in commissioning



the alleys workgroup, they hoped to understand the potential benefits of alleys for downtown. There was not strong direction given to the workgroup, and early in their investigation, they decided the best means to understanding alley activation was simply to try it for themselves. They elected to activate a downtown alley as a prototype over the course of a five day period. While they hoped to gauge the interest of Austinites in an activated alley, their greater goal was understanding which practical steps in the activation process presented the most extreme hurdles.

The project, which was titled “20ft Wide, was a success. The team grew in size of its lifespan, eventually embracing a large, multi-disciplinary group of volunteers that included city employees, local arts leaders, downtown business, local design firms, transportation experts, and a bevy of other supporters. The dedicated team worked for weeks to create a fun and engaging space. The alley was activated with a wealth of unique programming in the course of its five day existence. Volunteers also conducted surveys that assessed the public’s opinion of the project.

The workgroup learned a number of practical lessons in their work that will be important for future alley activation work. The following were notable concerns that demanded future consideration:

- The high concentration of dumpsters presented a setting in which there was little free space for other uses. Dumpsters had to be relocated across a street in order to create the open space necessary for the project.
- Most downtown alleys were poorly lit, if lit at all, making it



Figure 17: Scenes from 20ft Wide



difficult to create a sense of safety. The workgroup had to bring in their own lighting to make the project site feel friendly and welcoming.

- A number of businesses downtown use the alleys as permanent parking spaces, sometimes legally, sometimes illegally. With little active use, no one is patrolling the alleys, and so this type of unlawful use has been allowed to flourish, clogging up many alleys.
- The workgroup struggled to understand traffic flow. The project closed the 20ft Wide alley to car traffic and faced a number of obstacles in doing so. The street closure required not only special event permitting, but also a requirement to hire police officers to maintain the street barricade.
- The alleys lacked any form of electrical access. In order to create successful programming, the team was forced to stretch extension cords over long distances. This problem would need to be addressed in the future.
- Adjacent property owners did not see the value in the project, and many had strong hesitations about it. Very few could see the ways that uses could be layered on top of each other, and most only saw activated alleys as something that would take away the business's undisputed possession of alley access, which was not seen in a positive light.

The Alley Activation Workgroup produced a list of suggestions for next steps, both in terms of practical research that still needed to be addressed and policy changes that the group felt would be necessary in order to create a setting in which downtown alleys could thrive. Their recommendations spanned several categories, including alley design, economic development, programmatic support, tourism, and the arts. Most of these ideas were small considerations that the group thought would be helpful in future work. The one major suggestion that the team produced was that the City should commission and create an alley masterplan. Team members felt this was imperative, as all of the other suggestions could be packaged within such a plan. The plan,

as stated in the workgroup's report, would start by mapping alleys were there primed for development. It suggested relying upon Sara Hammerschmidt's 2009 thesis for its system of codifying the alley typologies. The team also mentioned using the alley master plan of Fort Collins, Colorado as an example to follow.

While this workgroup championed the cause of alley activation and produced invaluable lessons for the City, the team's thinking is not wholly in line with lessons learned in Melbourne. The first flaw in the workgroups rationale is the thinking that alleys only work when closed off to vehicular access. The group spent a large amount of time and money navigating the closure of the alley. Having done so, the design of their project within the alley and the programming that they produced were largely contingent upon having a car-free environment with which to work. In total, the setting that they produced was more like a plaza or park that just happened to be set within alley conditions. While this setup produced an engaging environment over the course of the five days it was in place, the workgroup never figured out how to make sense of this for future work. Their suggestions were riddled with concerns about street closures and even permits. At the same time, other parts of their summary addressed the vital nature of service functions within the alleys. No one took the time to consider that if the form of the group's project was replicated across the entire downtown alley network, the entire system would be closed to service access. The team did not think of the alleys as shared spaces, and their research suffers accordingly.

The second notable flaw is the Alley Activation Workgroup's rationale was the notion that bringing alleys to life is a top-down process. This is exemplified with their suggestion of an alley masterplan as a means to implement the idea. The group relied heavily upon Sara Hammerschmidt's suggestions that an alley could somehow be codified given a few preexisting conditions. The team felt that an accepted, objective standard could be applied across all of downtown, and that this impartial research would produce the best locations in which to activate alleys. Given their heavy reliance on such an idea, it is interesting that the group could produce no

such understood standards by which to judge the alleys, and that their ultimate suggestion simply said that Sara's standard should be used, without ever questioning if those were valid. Yet, as mentioned previously, Sara's faulty ideas have been since been disproven by research coming out of Melbourne. Leaders in that city would have a hard time understanding the idea of a top-down alley, given that it flies in the face of the bottom-up approaches that have been successful there. They are also vocal proponents of the idea that any alley can be activated and would therefore likely argue against a set of standards that attempted to assign value to certain alleys without more individual considerations. In that same vein, it is worth noting that the Fort Collins Alley Master Plan, which was referenced as an ideal model by the City of Austin, produces an alley that looks nothing at all like those of Melbourne. The alleys in the Fort Collins plan are not shaped organically and incrementally by the people who call them home, like those Melbourne. Instead, the task was given to an outside design and consulting firm whose work was to design alleys based on its own tastes and to create uniform and repeated design standards that would exist across all of the downtown alleys. The City of Fort Collins paid \$46,000 for the firm to create an alley masterplan that took 11 months to create. The resulting designs came with an estimated price tag of \$7,600,000 for the public right of way improvements of the ten alleys included in the plan, all of which was paid by public funding..



*Figure 18: The clean and sterile street scenes designed by the Fort Collins Alley Master Plan*

This process stands in sharp contrast to the processes that have shaped Melbourne's laneways, so it is not surprising that the results are utterly opposite. While Melbourne embracing its grit and character, For Collins whitewashes it in exchange for pristine plazas that look like a

scene from a theme park or resort. Looking at them, one does not see anything that appears to represent the unique culture of Fort Collins. Instead, they look like generic landscape architecture design that could be applied across any number of settings. This approach does not produce a setting that reflects local culture and the diverse perspectives of a historic downtown like Austin's. The alley activation workgroups desire to see alleys across downtown Austin is a positive outlook that is worth celebrating, but an alley masterplan as a means to reaching that goal is not ideal.

At the conclusion of its research, the Alley Activation Workgroup would go on to write a report that laid out their findings. The workgroup involved a lot of important Austin stakeholders, and the work generated a flurry of interest. The team's efforts and the related documentation would go on to influence the Austin City Council, who, in 2013, voted to institute a downtown alleys master plan. A stipulation of the vote was that the masterplan should come at low or no cost to the city. The Department of Public Works was tasked with overseeing and/or commissioning the work of the alley masterplan, and after doing some initial research, they found that the master planning process would cost the city an estimated \$250,000. When this information was reported back to the Austin City Council, the issue was put on pause until other possibilities could be considered. In the mean time, a substantial overhaul was taking place within City Council. Previously, the group has consisted of seven at large council members that were elected by popular vote, but in 2012 vote, citizens elected instead for geographically based representation. As a result, the City of Austin was divided into 10 diverse districts, and City Council was transformed into a 10-member panel containing representatives from each district. The changes took place in late 2014 and ushered in a vastly different set of Council priorities. It was during this period of transition that the push for alley activation got lost. As well, the present Council, which is much more focused on broader Austin issues and gives less weight to downtown, is not likely to champion public space amenities in downtown or the activated alleys cause without a stronger case for them.

## ***Where Austin's alley activation stands***

By fortuitous chance, the City of Austin and many members of the Alley Activation Team have been given another opportunity through which they can champion the cause. This project, called Rainey Alley, does not take place with the parameters of downtown's historic street grid, but in an area immediately south of downtown known as the Rainey Street District. Despite its location immediately adjacent to downtown, the neighborhood was a sleepy residential neighborhood until 2004, when its zoning status was raised to make the area part of the central business district. Without changing the form of the many quaint bungalows, business owners transformed the function of Rainey Street's single-family residential homes into unique bars and restaurants almost overnight, and the area soared in popularity. Since that time, Rainey Street and the small surrounding neighborhood has seen nothing but positive growth. In response, business owners on the east side of Rainey Street asked for a paved alley. The area had not been part of the historic Waller street grid, but when it was laid out, it was given service alleys. In the years since, the area has primarily been home to small residences, so the residential alley existed as an unpaved dirt road between low fences, and it was rarely used. Since the transformation of the neighborhood, business owners have sought to use the alley for deliveries and services functions. The unpaved conditions prevented the consistent use for which occupants had hoped. Mud and ruts were common. The City agreed to address the demands, and the Department of Public Works was given the the challenge.

A number of employees within that department had been a part of the Alley Activation Workgroup, and saw this task as an interesting opportunity. Given Rainey Street's role as an entertainment district with high pedestrian foot traffic and small, porous businesses, there was potential for the alley to function as more of an activated alley. In response, the City held a number of design charrettes with local urbanist leaders in May of 2015. The event not only brought attention to the alley, but it also yielded some remarkable designs. Designers and city leaders were

ecstatic, but business owners were not. The City had tried to sell adjacent businesses on the value of the alley serving more than one function, but they did not want to hear it. With the City presented the idea of an activated alley as a possibility, many owners were angry, feeling that that the decided had already decided to move forward with its plan, despite the business community's opposition. Try as it might, the City was never able to garner the kind of excitement needed to build in the alley with the kind of public space components that it wanted. Public Works reached something of a compromise, agreeing to create a watered down version of an activated alley. The ultimate design utilized pavers and included some minor landscaping and removable planters. This approach allows for the business owners to activate the alley if they see fit, but if not, it can just as well play the role of a service-only alley. Plans for the project are moving forward very rapidly. The project breaks ground in May 2016 and is expected to be finished in August 2016. At current, the City has a strong desire to see programming that activates the alley, but there are no specific plans in the works, no budget for such activates, and no obvious person or group to spearhead the work.



*Figure 19: A rendering showing some ideas that came from the Rainey Alley design charrettes*

A great number of city leaders are putting high hope on Rainey Alley. Without any other outlets to pursue activated alleys, the City hopes that this “prototype” project will show Austin residents and businesses exactly how special the experience can be within an activated alley. Nearly every leader interviewed for this study referenced Rainey Alley as the current state of activated alleys in Austin. They all believe it will produce positive results.

Once again, there are lessons to be learned in this instance from Melbourne. On multiple occasions, the City of Melbourne has both conducted its own research and commissioned external firms to research the characteristics that contribute to the experience of laneways. The studies have taken different forms, but many started with surveys that identified those laneways most valued by citizens, and then research sought to isolate the consistent factors present in each. Despite the research design, the studies have consistently revealed the same base characteristics that contribute to a favorable laneway experience. City leaders now quote the five specific factors that every great alley must have, which can be seen in Table 2. First, an activated alley must, by definition, be an alley. It should be enclosed by walls or other physical elements that create a sense of enclosure for those within them. If one side of the passage contains a building while the other houses a surface level parking lot, alley conditions are not present, and visitors to the space will feel that they are simply standing at the rear of a building. The second necessary condition is the connection to other activated parts of the city. This can be businesses within the alley or activity centers nearby. In short, activated alleys on their own can be a strong enough draw to bring people to the area, but the best alleys play off of and mutually support their lively surroundings. Third, a high percentage of the walls or enclosures of an alley must contain active frontage. The greater the number of business owners that create business facing the alley or alley art on their walls, the better. When only a small number of businesses are on board, their few active segments can not compensate for the large portions of the alley that remain lifeless. The fourth essential condition is highly articulated building faces. The eye should have plenty to explore when visiting an alley.



Businesses that move in should bring with them attractive signs and charming awnings. They should think of their space as a business storefront and dress it accordingly. When utilizing artwork in the alleys, it should not be oversized murals that feel like billboards, but instead detailed works that call for closer inspection. This level of articulation makes the alleys a place of exploration and discovery. Lastly, the alley should offer views of the broader city form. While the sense of enclosure is important, it should not feel like a cave or canyon in which visitors are trapped. People most appreciate the experience when they can see up and out of the alley to other buildings on the skyline or when the views at the ends of the alley are not barren walls both the active facades of other buildings or lively street scenes. This set of conditions is interesting, because it does not define existing parameters that suggest whether or not an alley has potential to be great, but it instead support that notion that any alley can be great and provides helpful rules of thumbs that will help people create value within their respective alley.

|   |                               |  |
|---|-------------------------------|--|
| 1 | Inherent alley conditions     | Walls or other elements should create a sense of human scale enclosure and intimacy        |
| 2 | Connection to the city        | Neighboring activities/programs present a reason to stop in or walk through the alley      |
| 3 | Proportion of active frontage | Most of the alleys walls are activated either are storefronts or opportunities for artwork |
| 4 | Articulated building faces    | Surrounding walls are rich with pronounced details that stimulate the visual senses        |
| 5 | View the broader city form    | Space is not closed off from the city but offers glimpses of the scenery beyond the alley  |

*Table 2: Conditions that provide for the ideal activated alleys*

These clear standards provide a goal for Rainey Alley, but given the existing conditions of the place, these rules of thumbs suggest that Rainey Alley has a long way to go. Considering each of the conditions makes this clear. First, Rainey Alley currently only has buildings on the west side of the alley. The east side is largely vacant lots, suggesting that true alley conditions are not currently present. The second conditions does bode well for Rainey Alley, as the area is full of activity nodes that are worth visiting. The remaining three conditions are not as positive. The alley currently do

not have any active frontage on it, and at the moment, there are no plans for such endeavors. With this in mind, there are not articulated building faces either. A new residential tower at the north end of the block will provide some interesting scenery, but it is not designed at a scale that matches the pedestrians experience of alleys. Lastly, the alley does not offer a view of the greater city. The alley itself does not sit on a traditional city block, but rather a large super block. Whereas Austin's downtown blocks are 280' in length, the block on which Rainey alley sits is 1100'. The alley itself will end just short of the full block length, but given the Melbourne standards, there is the chance that this elongated passageway will not feel like a comfortable alley that one can see out of, but instead, it might feel like a confined passageway that one can not escape. With this assessment in mind, the City of Austin should recognize that Rainey Alley may take a great amount of work before it can feel like a success. This might not be a problem in other setting where this is buy-in from stakeholders, but the City still has not support of Rainey Street business owners. As well, the City has no dedicated funds or programs to support the activation of the alleys. If the City believes that the addition of the pavers alone will change the entire concept of the alley, it has been misled. Even the rendering in Figure 18 is deceiving, as it shows a hotel building that is not currently present and streetscape amenities like lighting and creative dumpster screens that are not part of the existing plans.

With all of this in mind, it is troubling the City wants to hold up Rainey Alley as a prototype. The trajectory of its development does not suggest that it is a place that will serve as a valuable activated alley. Given that it is the only alley project in which the City of Austin has any current or future interest, it is fair to say that the City is not on track towards the system of activated alleys that it desires. If there remains hope for a new form of vibrant and active downtown public spaces, the City of Austin must acknowledge its faulty assumptions and rethink its approach to activated alleys. Given the research, is there a clear path that the City should take? Where should leaders start?

## VII. HOW TO ACTIVATE AUSTIN'S ALLEYS

### *Change of mentality*

It is clear that, in order for the City of Austin to make great strides in the activation of downtown alleys, a changed in the City's thinking is in order. First and foremost, city leaders must begin thinking of the activation of alleys as a bottom up process. In Melbourne, allowing individuals and businesses to shape the laneways has proved successful on many fronts. It has proved cheaper and easier, as the private sector businesses shoulder the bill and the workload. It has allowed for more unique products, as various blocks and neighborhoods have treated their laneways completely different. In Fort Collins, the top-down, mass produced alley is something cold and lifeless. In Austin, forcing Rainey Alley on business owners stirred up anger and distrust, and in the long run, this likely means that the alley will not get the kind of love and TLC that makes Melbourne alleys special. At least not any time soon.

In 2013, when the Alleys Activation Workgroup was doing research, employees of the Downtown Austin Alliance served on the team and were constantly gauging the response of the Downtown business community. As the sole party that is forced to answer to the property owner and business owners of the district, the DAA paid particularly close attention to feedback from these parties. While the Alley Activation Workgroup report paints a relatively rosy picture of the excitement about activated alleys with all constituents, DAA staff members are quick to point out what the report did not cover: that almost no downtown business and property owners were on board. As community that is particularly averse to risk and significant actions that could alter the economic landscape, the businesses had an understandable reluctance in terms of considering activated alleys. Many people in this group are already skeptical of any time that the government get involved with their livelihood, so trying to sell this foreign idea with them did no go far.

For activated alleys to be a success, there must be buy-in from the owners of both properties adjacent to the passages and the businesses that line them. The City is thinking about

this in the wrong way if they hope to make converts of out people. That is the definition of a top-down approach. A much feasible technique is then to seek out owners who might have already see value in their alleys and have some interests in creating value for their business. Enabling these individuals and organizations to activate their own alleys is the definition of a bottom-up approach, and this path would seem to produce a final product that is special and unique.

In much the same way, the City of Austin must embrace the idea the alley activation is an incremental process. The desire to drop in an activate Rainey Alley all at once, and the need to create a master plan that guides every move within the activation process reflect this view. In Melbourne, these distinctive places developed on their own time, and as was expressed with regards to the constantly changing art, these places are always growing and changing. Residents think of them as living organisms that shift as a reflection of the surrounding culture. The City would likely balk at the fact that Fort Collins held a ribbon cutting ceremony in 2010 to open an alley, as it suggests that the process of construction is finished and ready to be consumed (Alligood).

Thinking about alleys in an incremental form would allow downtown Austin to embrace and shape the places as needed. If a particular business can't afford rising rents in its existing location and needs to move to a cheaper alley location, the business owners can locate an ideal spot and carve out a shop from residuals space that makes sense for them. If rising tensions around a particular subject matter incite an increase in graffiti protest, then the alley may provide a welcome home for that expression. If a trend arises whereby young families are moving downtown, and there is an increased demand for places in which children can play, the alleys might grow to offer more playful elements. Master plans present fixed ideas that can not be easily changed over time, whereas an openness to incremental changes embraces whatever shifts come along.

Lastly, the City must acknowledge those actions that can serve as the bare minimum steps towards alley activation. As mentioned previously, Melbourne has determined that, for spaces with

inherent alley conditions, the addition of pavers and lighting are the only steps necessary to enabled alleys to commence activation. As seen in Rainey Alley, the city initially hoped to add a massive package of amenities that included lighting, rain gardens, paver patterns, decorate dumpster screens, landscaping, programming, etc. If the City accepts alley activation as an incremental, bottom-up process, then it must also realize that it has a very small role to play. If it can provide only pavers and lighting, then dedicated individuals will bring the rest of the framework.

If the City can adjust its thinking in regards to these three topics, it is nearly ready to begin its role in the transformation of the downtown alleys. A small set of logistical concerns need only be attended to, such that the focus can remain on the creation of vibrant public space.

### ***Objections to address***

In previous reports and interviews with City leaders, the same four objections to activated alleys came up again and again. Surprisingly, the uncertainties expressed were not large-scale hesitations about the concept of activated alleys, but they were instead the smaller logistical concerns that previous studies did not address well. As a result, several of these issues were expressed with an almost hopeless tone, as many proponents of activated alleys felt these were the impossible obstacles, which, if not tackled, could prevent further discussions. These objections were: emergency services, waste management, deliveries, and additional business costs.

The number one objection to activated alleys was that they would inhibit the vital role of alleys as a unique access point and passageway for Austin's emergency services, a group that includes Austin-Travis County EMS, the Austin Police Department (APD), and the Austin Fire Department (AFD). Interviewees expressing this objection stated that Austin's emergency services considered the alleys a vital asset and than any use that "clogged" the alleys would prevent public safety. Given the great priority of public safety in dense cities, it is clear that the opinions of these

parties needed to be considered. Probably the most unexpected revelation in all of this research was that none of the three emergency services providers felt the alleys were an asset. In fact, both EMS and APD felt the alleys were more of a threat than an asset and that alley activation would be beneficial in their eyes. AFD took more of a neutral stance. This rationale was derived from a few different factors. First, all three agencies expressed in some form that alleys were an unreliable means of getting around the city. Whereas a small fender bender or delivery on the primary city streets rarely blocks overall traffic flow, unpredictable obstructions are common in alleys. An action as simple as an employee running into his place of work to pickup a paycheck while leaving his unmanned car in an alley with its flashers on actually renders an alley completely useless to through traffic, and emergency vehicles can not take that risk. The computer systems within EMS vehicles that map emergency routes do not even include downtown alleys. Second, both APD and EMS felt that the alleys are shelters for unsafe and unlawful activity. The neglected spaces go unchecked, and as a result, they are the setting for everything from illegal drug use to prostitution. Both of these parties felt that activated alleys could provide “eyes on the alley” and reduced the undesirable activities that currently thrive in the vacant spaces. Lastly AFD had both positive and negative feelings about activated alleys, but on the whole, was rather neutral about the idea. With regards to fire safety, any additional access is beneficial in attending to incidents, so while AFD does not utilize alleys to reach the scene of a downtown fire, once on site, the use of the alley may provide helpful positions from which to fight the blaze. This had little to do with whether or not the alleys were activated in some form. AFD did express some concerns that activated alleys would need to conform to fire code, and that there was little currently on file that reflected conditions comparable to alleys, but this comment was followed up with a reassurance that this issue should by no means prevent the activation of alleys, as AFD said it there was responsibility, and that they would be happy to work with City to address this concern in the future.

In summary, the objection that activated alleys will inhibit emergency services is unfounded, as it is based on assumptions about the ways that emergency service providers use the alleys. On the whole, the providers were more in favor of activating alleys than leaving alleys in their current form.

The next of the primary objections is that involving waste management. This opposition to activated alleys is rooted in the notion that, while public open space can happen almost anywhere, waste collection can really only happen in alleys. In that sense, trash collection is the more vitally important alley function, and it should not have to be compromised for the much less important use of public open space. A small part of this argument seems to suggest that waste collection and public open spaces are not incompatible uses. It is worth noting that in many places without alleys, the two work perfectly fine together. On most suburban residential streets, trash is placed on streets without compromising the sidewalk experience. In dense, urban settings without alleys—places like Manhattan—trash is also placed in the public right-of-way without impairing the value of the public realm experience. Given that waste collection and public open space can then coexist, the concern still remains that when one function—either waste collections services or public space functions – becomes a strong enough force, the other is compromised. Within this thinking, a high concentration of dumpster spoils public space or a high concentration of pedestrians impedes waste services. These are legitimate concerns, and they will require work on behalf of the City of Austin, but successful projects in other place provides positive precedents to follow.

The City of Austin should look to both Melbourne and the City of Seattle for direction. In both cities, the frequency of trash collection was increased to twice a day to aid in the reduction of accumulated waste. Both cities worked with businesses to define daily collection times that are beneficial for the greatest number and then established regular collection schedules accordingly, to which operators must closely adhere. This allows various business owners to put out waste bins only in relation to collection times, as opposed to leaving them out for long periods of time. In



Melbourne, a number of establishments also wait to put out street furniture until the morning pickup has passed. Officials with both cities said that after initial schedules were determined, the process was not taxing on service providers or business owners.

As another positive step, businesses and residents occupying property adjacent to alleys in Melbourne and Seattle were asked to consolidate their waste containers. In most places, waste collection operators with a “better safe than sorry” approach. Operators do not estimate the storage needs of an address based upon normal usage, but upon projected maximums. In this thinking, the worst-case scenario would be if a resident fill their waste containers and had to place a trash bag on the ground next to a container. In response, this means that operators often provide waste bins for every individual address, and in doing so, furnish way more containers and way larger containers than necessary. When there is unlimited space, this thinking is understandable, as it serves to both keep the public realm clean, and it makes pickup easier for operators. To maintain activated alleys, the attitude has to be the exact opposite of this. Adjustments made in both of these model cities were made with the goal of having as little waste collection infrastructure as possible. In Melbourne, this approach has allowed for several businesses to downgrade their container from a full dumpster to smaller rolling bins typical of residential homes. It has also permitted the sharing of dumpsters, which is surprisingly not common, given that many municipalities charge for waste collections services by quantity, requiring that all containers be separated.

Seattle has taken a more dramatic approach to the solution. Based on the initial work of some visionary citizens, The City of Seattle in partnership with their waste collection provider created the Clear Alley Program (CAP). With little national precedent to follow, leaders created a completely container-free system of waste collection. As part of the process, users must purchase official CAP trash bags, which are color-coded according to the type of waste (ie. Landfill, recycling, compost). Once the waste is ready to be taken out, individuals simply place their bags in the alleys, where the service providers collect them accordingly. The visible effect in Seattle has been

powerful. While the trash bags do sit uncontained in the alleys, they are picked up with increased frequency, and they never sit long enough accumulate in a manner that makes the alleys feel congested. Employees of City laugh that the customarily clear alleys reveal that the prior dumpster were merely holding tanks for waste that were not necessary and were rarely full. The now clear alleys, most without any form of activation, have started welcoming increased numbers of pedestrians.

When presented with these ideas, staff of Austin Resource Recovery (ARR), the department that handles waste management, felt that most ideas were doable in Austin. They mentioned that container-less waste collection is not just a trend for places like alleys that are tight on space. Ideas surrounding the technique have risen steeply in recent years, primarily in suburban settings, as numerous municipalities have found the approach cheaper and easier. ARR staff said that they have a special affinity for making sure waste collection goes smoothly in downtown, and that they are willing to try any new idea if it can benefit the City.

In summary, the objections to activated alleys based upon waste collections surveys are varied. Those suggestion waste and pedestrians can not exist are unfounded, while those that think waste collection would need to be reconfigured are valid. Fortunately, successful precedents exist, and representatives of the City said that such ideas could be embraced in Austin.

The third of the regular objections to alleys pertains to deliveries. Those voicing this concern felt that the alleys are a prime location of deliveries for downtown businesses that and activated alleys could compromise this use. These notions presume that, because businesses have a service corridor in the form of an alley and a service entrance that faces it, this must be the primary avenue through which deliveries are handled. Like those concerns with emergency services, these apprehensions are largely unfounded. In speaking with managers of retail stores, bars, and restaurants in downtown, it seems that most businesses on alley handle their deliveries through the front door. When asked why, these individuals provided two very different but related answers.

First, businesses mentioned that a great number of companies delivering products to them used large vehicles that did not easily fit in alleys. From large beer trucks to Sysco eighteen-wheelers, these vehicles were not capable of navigating through the narrow alley system, so they defaulted to parking on the main streets and utilizing the front door. Second, the businesses explained that from an operations side, it was easier to designate one single door as the delivery door. With a large staff and deliveries coming at different times of day, the most organized manner in which to receive deliveries was to create standard procedures, and in order to do so, there needed to be an established entrance to which deliveries were assigned. So while some delivery services may operate smaller vehicles that can fit into the alleys, those providers ultimately have to conform to the majority of other delivery services that are using the front door. Given this trend, a large majority of businesses on the alleys do not rely on the passages for deliveries. This is not to say those back doors are not being used for deliveries. They certainly are. But because of the small quantity of deliveries that take advantage of these spaces, it is not difficult to imagine that the deliveries could coexist with other activated alley functions in these “layered” environments.

The last regular objection to activated alleys is the increased costs that they would force onto businesses. This argument suggests that if the businesses open themselves up to the idea of alleys, they will be unduly burdened with a number of unforeseen costs. To some degree, this proposition is valid. As discussed previously, this study is advising that the City of Austin should leave the bulk of the expenses for alley activation in the hands of private businesses. On the other hand, what this argument is overlooking is that no business is required to respond to the alleys in any way. Business decision will only be made out of choice. However, this study posits that market forces will shift in such a way as to present opportunities for businesses to extract value from their proximity to alleys, creating a desire for strategic investments in them. For example, one recognizable expense that bars would take on would be cost of an additional bouncer. In order to comply with Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission (TABC) regulations, most downtown bars

currently place a bouncer at the front entrance to check ID's. This is not a TABC requirement, but it does shift the age verification process to the front door, taking this responsibility off of bartenders and allowing them to focus on making and serving beverages. Ultimately, the legal burden to check a patron's age is on the bartender who serves that person a drink, but a bouncer at the door provides a first line of defense, so that bartenders can run an efficient process, performing the sole task that makes money for a bar. As expressed on more than one occasion, objections to activated alleys asked why bars should be forced to take on a second bouncer and how they would afford to do so. In this instance, the bar would not be forced to open its back door and provide a bouncer accordingly. If the rear alley was activated, the bar could very easily choose to keep their back door closed in an effort to avoid the additional expense. But over time, the bar is not likely to maintain this stance. Once heavy foot traffic picks up in the alley and large crowds are gathering, the bar will think it silly to close itself off to this potential clientele that is just outside their door. In response, management will make educated business decisions accordingly. They will gauge the times when the alley is most business and possibly start by opening their backdoor at those times with an additional bouncer. If they find that this choice induced more patrons to come in and that they made more money, this will make this a regular occurrence. If, at certain down times it does not make sense to open the door, they will not. A bar manager interviewed in this study explained that this process is already how his bar operates with regards to bouncers. On slower weeknights and on Saturday and Sunday afternoons, the bar operates without a bouncer. During these times, all bartenders are responsible for verifying the age of patrons. The arrangement is purely a response to supply and demand. At times when there is low demand, fewer staff are needed to provide the basic services of the bar.

As this bar responds effectively to the market, so too will other businesses make well-informed decisions in response to activated alleys. If some of those judgments call for an outlay of funds, business owners will decide what is right for them. If the painting of a rear wall makes a

business appear more inviting, management may consider it worthwhile investment. If burying an exposed grease trap provides a restaurant added space in which to insert café tables, it might be worth the expense. If installing large rollup garage doors on the back of a coffee shop allows musicians on the stage to play music both into the shop and into the alley, it might be a worthwhile way for the business to increase its visibility and appeal. In these ways, businesses not only apply funds to ventures that will create value for themselves, but they also contribute to the series of events that brings an alley to life.

In summary, the final objection to activated alleys is that they will require additional, unwarranted expenses of businesses. This objection is baseless, as simple economic rationale shows that businesses will only expend funds at times when they feel there is money to be made from the investment.

With all major objections addressed, the City of Austin can move forward to plans to activate its alleys. But where then should the city start? What are the first steps necessary?

### ***First steps***

If it hopes to see the proliferation of activated alley, the City of Austin needs buy-in more than anything else. If the hope is for a trend to catch on that moves across the system of downtown alleys, then there has to be a catalyst. The City needs an example that people can see. Citizens will need to be able to walk into the world of an immersive alley to understand the experiential nature of the setting. Business owners will need to see how business models similar to their own address the practical concerns of trash and deliveries. Property owners will need to realize that an investment in improvements of the rear of their buildings actually translates to higher income. Downtown residents need to glimpse the special “living room” atmosphere that exists in alleys, so that they can start demanding such places on the blocks adjacent to their building. Artists need to observe that activated alleys presented an unparalleled canvas in which artwork serves as the most

predominant features that establishes the environments of the place. A pilot project of this nature would allow the City to not only test ideas, but to gauge public opinion as well.

Some might suggest that the Rainey Alley is meant to play this very role, but as an exception to so many standards, including the very definition of an alley, it is unlikely to serve this function any time soon. As well, with well over 100 downtown alleys at its disposal, all of which share identical dimensions, the City would be foolish to use Rainey Alley as a prototype. The alley is neither downtown nor does it maintains dimensions anywhere close to downtown's alleys. A fashion design would not make a prototype for a woman's dress and then test its fit by asking a man to try it on. Just as the frame of a man is very different from that of a woman, so too is the context of Rainey Alley fundamentally different from the downtown alleys.

In order to shape a downtown alley prototype, the city should start by seeking out one alley in which there interest about the activation between business owners. To find these organizations, the City should locate businesses that currently use their alleys in same manner as part of their day-to-day operations. These are the businesses that have the most to gain from alley improvement. For example, a number of downtown bars currently use both their front door and rear entry through the alley as customer entrances. At current, these establishments are asking their clientele to walk through the lifeless and sometimes intimidating alleys in order to visit their business. Given the opportunity, these organizations would likely see value in alley improvement. Research for this study questioned two bar managers whose establishments currently use both entrances, and both were enthusiastic about the potential value that activated alleys could add to their business.

This study recommends that the City look into the activation the alley of Block 28. This is the block bordered by 3<sup>rd</sup> Street, 4<sup>th</sup> Street, Colorado Street, and Lavaca Street. First, it already conforms to most of the five standards for a high quality alley. Second, two bars (Rain and OCH) currently use the alley as an entrance. Third, a new restaurant occupying the 310 Colorado location hopes to create rear patio seating that overlooks the alley. Fourth, management at The Ginger Man

has recently expressed concerns to city leaders about the undesirable activities taking place in the alley and ways to curb those actions. The notion of having “eyes on the alley” was suggested by management. The bar has a large back patio that is separated from the alley by only a privacy fence. A simple gate could be installed in the fence to open the bar up to the alley. Lastly, the south side of the alley still has a vacant parcel that currently serves a surface level parking lot. This void serves as a rich opportunity in which a number of programs could serve to support alley activation, and there is reason to believe that market forces would shape that decision-making. The lot is owned by the adjacent Sullivan's Steakhouse and used for valet parking. The lot can hold 25 cars. As an amenity for customers, valet parking is typically outsourced and not a service on which a restaurant directly makes money. With this in mind, a restaurant does make or lose significant profit based the number of available valet parking spaces. Sullivan’s currently has no outdoor dining, so it is safe to imagine that something as simple as an outdoor dining area could meet the alley, while taking away as few as 4 parking spaces. The large increase in tables and the offering of a new dining setting would provide much greater payoff for the restaurant. If not for their own purposes, the restaurant could

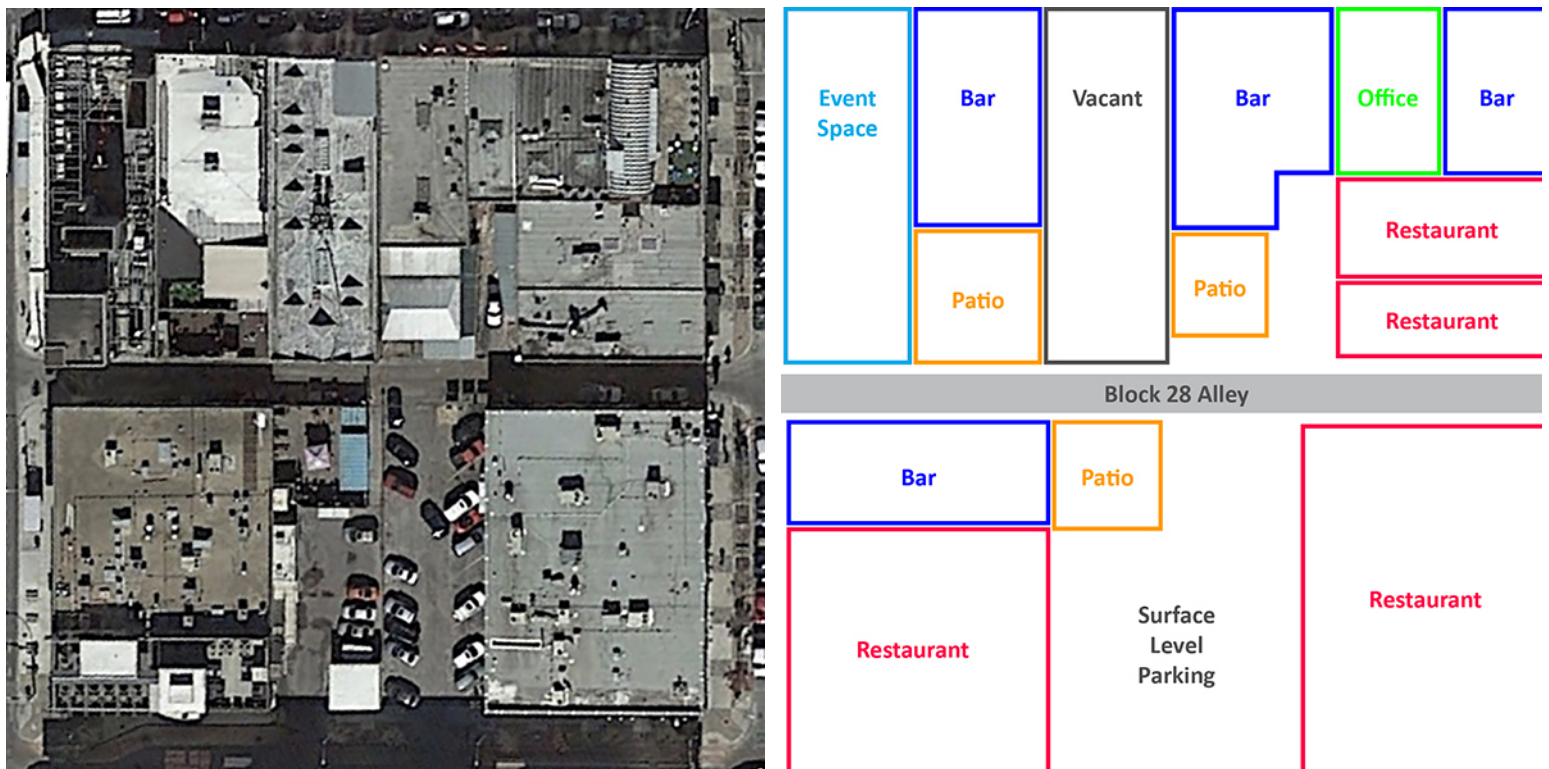


Figure 20: Aerial photo of Block 28 paired with current use map

also consider renting 4 parking spaces to a food truck that could serve food in the alley. Regardless, the market can and will adjust to the demands of increased alley activation.

As stated before, the City should gauge interest in such a project. A simple meeting could be staged with the property owners and business owners to see if the parties could see value in such efforts. As stated before, the City's role in such a project would be as simple as placing pavers and lighting. While the City alarmed the Rainey Alley owners with their overzealous and far-reaching alley plans, a meeting with this more restrained mentality that favors enabling business owners would simply be one in which leaders could explain the potential to rethink the alley as a multi-purpose space. They would simply ask business owners if pavers and lighting would add value to the alley and to their businesses. Pictures could be shown of alleys in Melbourne and elsewhere, but the City would not impose any feeling of pressure. The guiding tone would suggest that the improvements were only to be enacted if the stakeholders were interested. Given the particulars of the alleys uses mentioned above, it is safe to imagine that owners would welcome improvements.

In the research for this project, a downtown bar manager was asked a similar set of questions. The initial inquiry was simply about the bar's use of the alley, but when ask if he felt if pavers and lighting would be welcome additions, the manager's was simply an enthusiastic, "We can finally get that sign." He explained that for months, he had been trying to convince other staff of the value of a sign on the rear of the building, but apparently, others did not feel it was a justified cost. While it is only anecdotal evidence, it is worth noting that when presented with the ideas of only the bare minimum alley improvements, the manager's mind still went immediately to how his establishment would improve its presence in the alley. If this type of thinking is pervasive elsewhere, it is clear that the City's minimal improvements could spark private investment in alley conditions.



## ***Fostering an alley culture***

With a prototype in place, the City's next great move would be preparing for the large-scale adoption of activated alleys. While the work will be in the hands of citizens, the City can still be a proponent of the process. To do this, the City should hold large-scale public meetings in which downtown residents, businesses, and property owners could be shown visions of alleys in other places and told of success stories from around the globe. The presentations would show the range of options available in activating alleys. Some small and minor changes are just as valuable as complete overhauls.

The City should then create a process that allows interested business owners to pursue an activated alley. Much like the Soul-y Austin Business District Incubator, the City could encourage blocks to rally around their respective alleys and form small-scale business districts recognizing their shared interest in its improvement. These "block groups" would not need the complete approval of all of the block's constituents, but a majority interest would be required. Upon securing this level cooperation, the City would offer the block groups a suite of services that could be utilized in order to activate alleys and generate the most value. In order to obtain the City's commitment to pavers and lighting, the block group would be required to name the alley and create a unique identity for it based upon historical or cultural context. The process would require a component of historical research into the alley and previous inhabitants of the block, but the block group could use any elements of past or present culture to express its identity. The ability to participate in these processes that shape the character of the alley would serve as substantial incentive for all businesses on the block to be involved with the block group's work as business district. A type of small scale business improvement district financing could also be put into place to fund future expenditures for the alley.

Individual block groups would come out of these activities in a very healthy place. They would have a team of neighboring business all committed to working together, an alley with a

unique name and identity, the basic improvements to the alley that make it ripe for activation, a long term vision of what the alley could be, and funding source. This arrangement describes the ideal scenario for alley activation under the bottom-up, incremental approach.

Once alleys are blossoming all over the downtown Austin, the City takes on new job in promoting the alleys. Playing the role of both economic development agency and chamber of commerce, the City gets the opportunity to support the alley and block groups in another indirect manner. While still not directly shaping alleys, the city can consider policy changes that encourage or protect alleys as well as planning promotions and programming that supports the alley culture. Grant programs could be offered to block groups that present visions and proposals to improve they alley.

### ***Incremental steps to shaping an activated alley***

Another valuable resource that the City could offer would be a visual guide that lays out the steps necessary towards alley activation. While some block groups may have original ideas, strong leadership, and a clear vision of their alley design, others may not be as fortunate and may seek the aid of the City. Austin should at least maintain information pertaining to best practices and/or rules of thumb for particular teams.

For the purposes of this study, the necessary steps toward alley activation have been laid out chronologically into four distinct periods of time: existing alley conditions, required minimum public upgrades, partial alley activation, and complete alley activation. To cover the large multitude of alley conditions that exists, three archetype models were created that model three distinct forms of alley: the art alley, the retail/mixed-use alley, and the dining alley. While very few alleys have one singular function in this manner, these models will help to express the various facets affiliated with these three forms of program. Figures 19 and 20 on the following pages lay out the various steps towards activation. Figures 21 and 22 offer renderings to show what this work could look like.

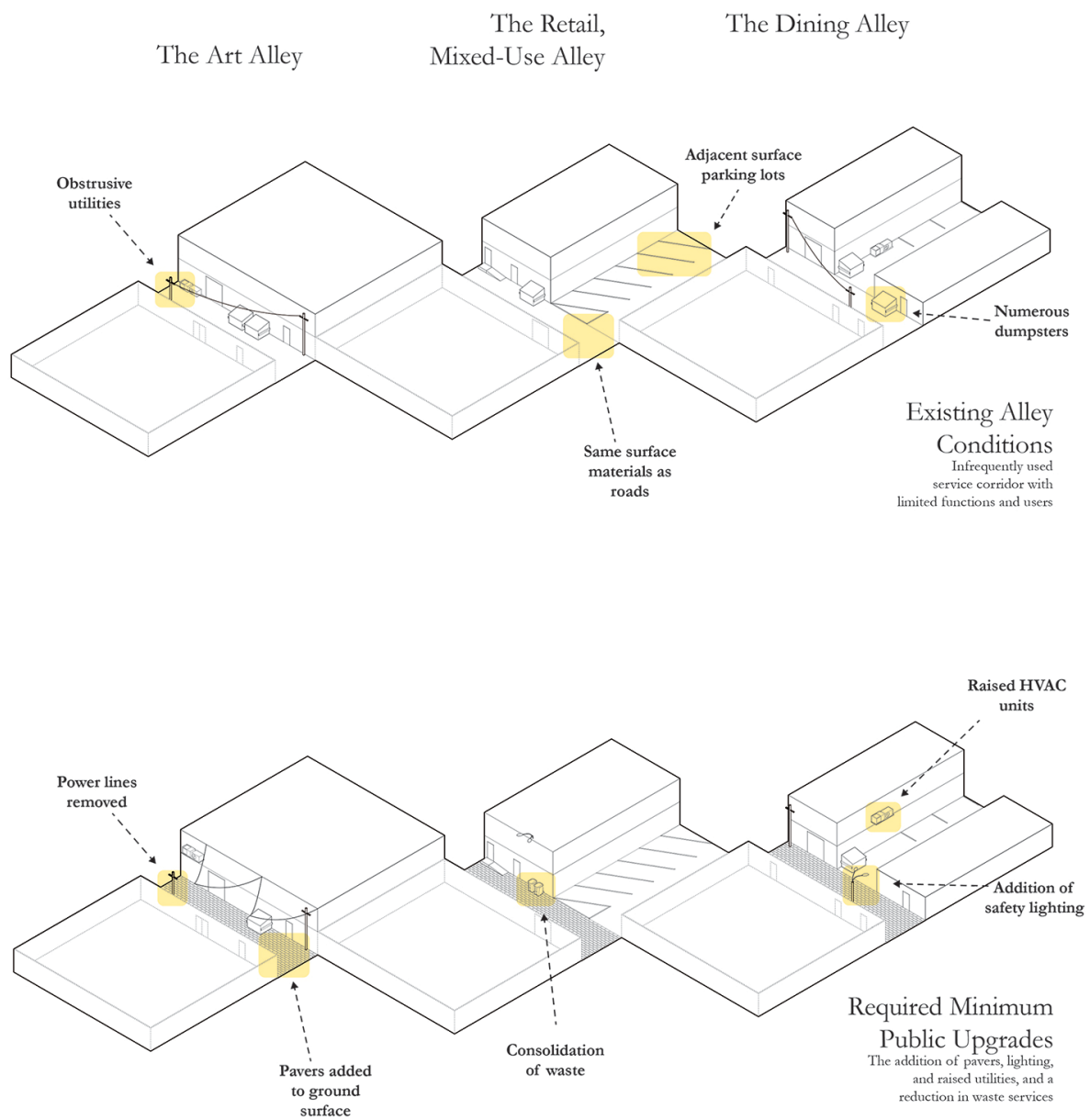


Figure 21: Existing alley conditions and required minimum public upgrades

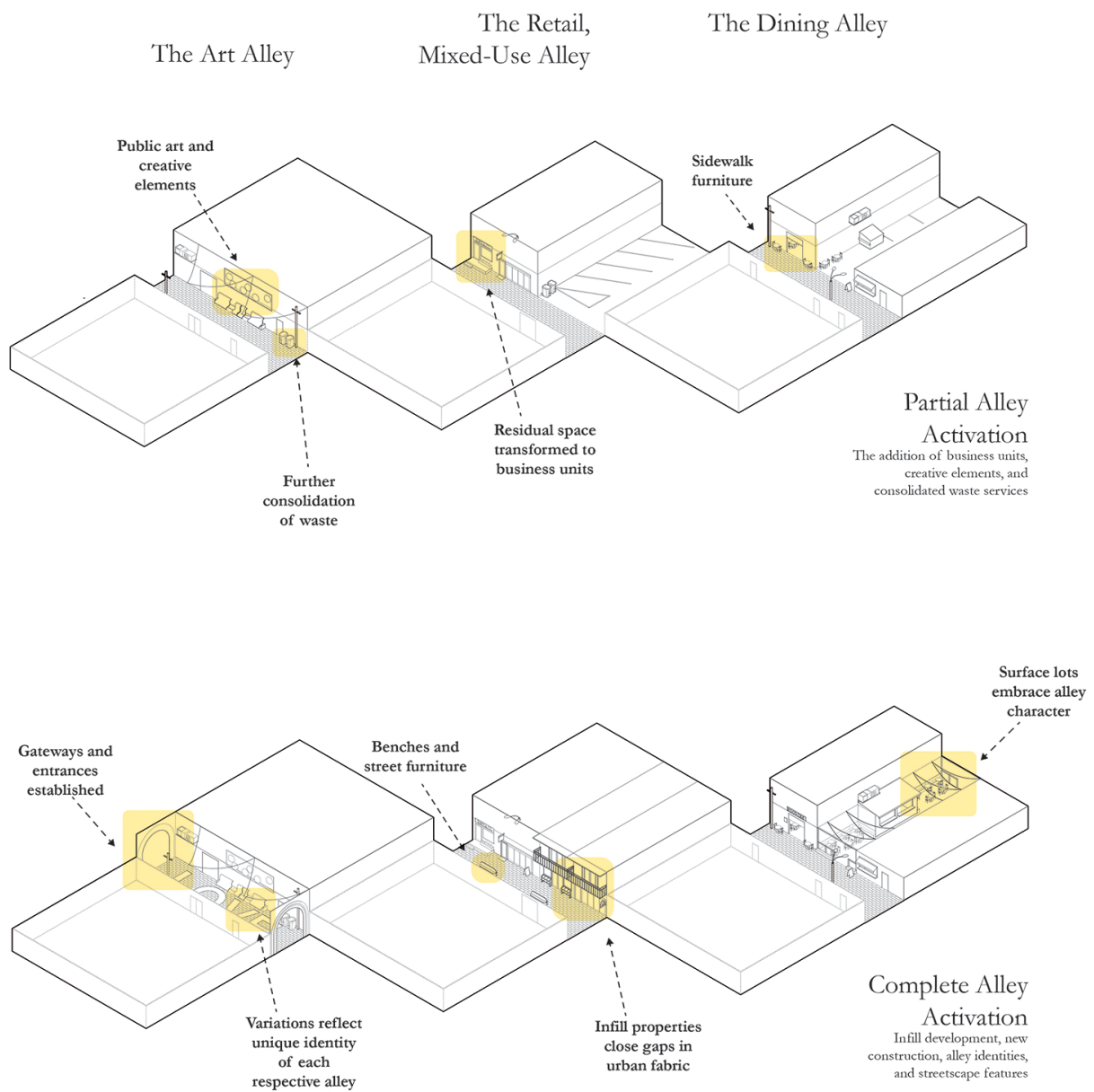


Figure 22: Partial alley activation and complete alley activation.





*Figure 23: Visualizing existing alley conditions and required minimum public upgrades*





Figure 24: Visualizing partial alley activation and complete alley activation

## VIII. ADDITIONAL RESEARCH

From an academic perspective, the report builds on the others before it to make a strong case for the activations of downtown Austin's alley systems. The City Council's vote in favor of an alley masterplan also shows that leadership in Austin can be made to see the value of activated alleys without additional research. Given these perspectives, future work should not be focused on an intellectual argument in favor of the idea. What would be most valuable for the City of Austin would be addressing the logistical processes that lie ahead. As part of the next phase of research, the following actions should be addressed:

- A widespread survey of downtown businesses that measures the existing use of alleys
- A broad assessment of downtown businesses, property owners, and residents that gauges the current interest in activating alleys
- Partnering with the City of Austin Public Work department to create an estimate for the cost of necessary upgrades to alleys (pavers and lighting)
- The creation of a strong promotional campaign that can effectively communicate the value of activated alleys downtown businesses
- Work with Austin Resource Recovery to begin the work of rethinking an alley waste management scheme
- Ask the Austin Fire Department to start producing a fire code that would specifically address any concerns related to activated alley
- Work with the Downtown Austin Alliance Operations staff in order to address all business functions that exist in alleys (eg. grease traps, smoke breaks), so that the City of Austin and DAA can provide a list of best practices and rules of thumbs to business interested in alley activation
- Historical research relating to the various blocks and alleys of downtown that can be provided to constituents of that respective block ground

## IX. CONCLUSION

Downtown Austin is growing at an unprecedented rate, and while that progress brings a great deal of benefits, it has also had devastating effects on the culture of the city. The City must act to safeguard its vibrant and distinctive heritage, and within downtown, Austin's proverbial soul, the existing service alleys present unmatched potential to achieve such ends. No longer providing the same kinds of functions for which they were originally created, the alleys can now play host to new uses and users. The passages do continue to perform some vital services for downtown businesses, and those operations should be protected and enhanced, but as various projects across the country have proven, public infrastructure can have more than one role. The capacity exists within the alleys to welcome a number of other public functions, inviting a rich, layered experience into the place, where a variety of programs and uses can peacefully coexist. This unique setting in which grit meets beauty and utilitarian function meets charm has bred unparalleled experiential environments, of which people are quite fond. This can likely be attributed to alleys' matchless human scale proportions, which engage all of the human senses in a magical and enchanting way, not common in our American public realm environments. Activated alleys would not only serve to delight people in this manner, but they could also serve as a cultural sanctuary, preserving and enhancing the culture of the city for years to come. Utilizing fine grain businesses, the preservation of historic patina, and extraordinary displays of public art, the passion and personality of Austin would be put on display for visitors and residents alike. As small business districts rise up to champion various alleys across the neighborhood, downtown Austin will come alive like never before. No other project has this inherent potential and power to ignite the city in this way, and until the City of Austin sees this unrivaled possibility, the unused alleys will be waiting quietly at its back door.



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