

# Organic Revitalization



Artspace Buffalo

**Think**



**Different**

**PLANNING OBJECTIVES**

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The City has devised some planning objectives for Midtown that aim to enhance the historic character of the neighborhood and establish a framework for its future development. Following an “organic” model of revitalization, the City will focus on “planting” targeted public improvements in key corridors and nodal points. Planting provides the seeds for a community-initiated, grassroots renewal process. Since it is outside the bounds of the City to do “everything,” the objective will be to focus on modest but meaningful improvements that “fertilize” a revitalization effort already underway. This strategy aims to leverage public investment to complement, not overwhelm, the efforts of citizens and private investors in Midtown.

The plan has defined broad goals for the neighborhood to be pursued by public and private partners:

1. reinforce tightly-knit, urban streetscapes
2. provide gap financing for new home construction and rehabilitation
3. create new small business opportunities along walkable retail corridors
4. preserve and reuse resources important to the history and character of the neighborhood
5. enhance neighborhood densities through quality infill development
6. identify neighborhood greening strategies and public space opportunities
7. add new and distinctive streetscape amenities
8. provide a staging ground for arts-related neighborhood improvements
9. encourage bicycle and transit use
10. solidify the unique image and sense of place inherent to the Midtown district



*Coe Place, with its quaint Queen Anne's.*

## 1 Reinforce tightly-knit, urban streetscapes

The Block Analysis section attempts to reinforce Midtown's prevailing urban design to stem a creeping suburbanization of the neighborhood, encourage walkability over automobility, enhance densities useful to establishing neighborhood retail, and promote development that complements the unique character and image of the neighborhood. The past fifteen years has brought housing development to Midtown that, while often very beautiful and frequently matching some design aspects of the older housing stock, still fails to match the densities, prevailing setbacks, use of materials, and details of character that would otherwise enhance and solidify the imageability of a very unique place. This plan assumes a belief that urban neighborhoods like Midtown should remain vitally, unmistakably *urban*.

To protect and bolster the historic *urban-ness* of Midtown, the Block Analysis is a catalog of the concrete, historically consistent features of every block to assemble a design ethic that will inform revitalization efforts in which the City takes part. The analysis also highlights key structures and streetscapes whose importance to the fabric of the neighborhood is paramount. In some instances, this ethic will take on greater legal authority with the recommendation of historic designation status for streets like Coe



*Laurel Street fully exemplifies the prevailing density and compact arrangements of Midtown's historic streetscapes. Double houses of remarkably good character and condition prevail on Laurel.*

Place. In most instances, however, the City will apply a “soft” or guiding hand for developing in urban ways distinct to the area. In other words, the City will assist only the efforts that enhance existing streetscapes, not degrade or negate them.

Every block in Midtown engenders subtle variations in urban design, the specific caveats of which will be detailed in pages to follow. The prevailing urban design of the neighborhood, however, encompasses broad themes that will be consistent throughout, depending on the building type and use. Remarkably, a few simple rules would allow a great deal of variety and innovation to emerge in any new development, entirely consistent with and complementary to the existing building stock. This plan wants to encourage architectural variety as part of its effort to create a neighborhood embracing imaginative, even whimsical, ways of thinking. These “rules” would allow new development to be creative and contemporary, not merely a mirror image of older building stock, while nurturing compact streetscapes that enhance the historic composition of the neighborhood.

Design guidelines to be supported by the City would be shaped by the prevailing features of four building types commonplace to the area:

### ***Mixed-use commercial buildings***

These structures exist primarily along and near Main Street, but also exist along select corners of residential streets, such as the intersection of Riley and Holland. They always directly abut the street. They always contain at least two stories. They are built of durable, permanent materials, such as stone and brick. They tend to have ample fenestration, especially at street level, as well as tall ceilings often exceeding 12 feet in height. They often contain character brickwork and subtle details that give the buildings character and distinction. With a focus on walkability, not



*The Ross Eye Institute on Main Street, across from the intersection with Dodge Street, is a colorful example of the mixed-use buildings common to Midtown.*

automobility, they also rarely contain off-street parking.

### ***Multifamily residential apartments***

Multifamily dwellings are not the most common form of residential development in Midtown, but in a certain areas, like East Utica and Laurel streets, they are prominent contributing features of the streetscape. They are usually two-story structures (sometimes more) built of durable materials, such as brick and stone, and often contain usable porches on each elevation. Facades are usually broken up by features like bay windows. Setbacks vary, but are often shallower than those of single- and double-family detached dwellings. Lot widths for these structures rarely exceed sixty feet. Parking is typically absorbed by on-street spaces rather than dedicated driveways or surface lots.

### ***Residential rowhouses***

Rowhouse architecture in the area, particularly north of Midtown in the neighborhood of Cold Springs, tends to repeat a single distinctive design over several contiguous units. Each unit contains its own usable porch and stoop. Unit widths never exceed twenty-five feet. Setbacks are usually very shallow, typically about six feet. Substantial variety exists in design, detail and form.

### ***Single and double family detached homes***

Single and double-family detached houses are the most common building type in Midtown, and are the most pertinent to future development efforts in the neighborhood. The most important and definable features of the structures are the following:



*The Emerson Rowhouses on Emerson Place, north of Midtown in Cold Springs, are the best representatives of a rowhouse style unique to Mditown.*

- prevailing setbacks, which rarely exceed 10 feet and are sometimes much shallower
- building height, which is never less than two stories and never more than three
- lot width, which typically varies from 29 to 35 feet
- usable porches, often on both elevations, typically extending over the width of the house but almost always containing a depth of at least 6 feet and a width of at least 12 feet
- where garages exist at all, they are set back from the street at least 30 feet
- use of traditional materials, such as wood and brick
- often on corner lots, first-story converted storefronts with ample fenestration, clear points of access, and minimum or zero setbacks

## 2 Provide gap financing for new home construction and rehabilitation

*"People are poor not because of architecture. They're poor because they don't have any money." -- Neil Brenner, urban sociologist*

The City already provides funding for the rehabilitation of vacant and/or deteriorated City-owned, HUD-owned or privately owned residential homes through the Fifty-Fifty (50/50) Program. This plan advocates for a strategic, targeted application of this program over the Midtown district to maximize its impact and enable grassroots restoration.

Under the 50/50 Program, the City provides up to one-half of rehabilitation costs as a conditional grant, up to a total of \$25,000, provided that the homeowner or purchaser documents the availability of matching funds (or greater, depending on the cost of the rehab) and agrees to reside in the property for the



*Many houses in Midtown have fundamentally good character and features, but are desperately awaiting new investment.*

defined term of a loan. Funds must be used to bring the home into compliance with local codes and to reduce lead based paint hazards. The program is available to homeowners and first-time homebuyers with household incomes of less than 80% of the area's median (adjusted for household size) who are able to obtain conventional funding for the purchase of property and/or their share of the rehab cost.

In the special case of Midtown, the 50/50 Program will be modified so artists who cannot gain residence in Artpspace and teachers from the Buffalo Arts Academy will not have to meet any income requirements for application. As part of the City's effort to lure arts-oriented and creative personalities to Midtown, these income ceilings will be eliminated to encourage people with careers in the arts to settle in the area. The City will also set aside several character structures it owns in Midtown and Cold Springs, like the Emerson Rowhouses, specifically for artists.

The structures to be improved with 50/50 assistance must be residential or mixed-use buildings with no more than four dwelling units. All properties assisted must include the owner-occupied unit. Recipients of program assistance must correct code deficiencies and ensure that the assisted units and common areas meet federal housing quality design standards. In addition to these base requirements, this plan advocates that rehabilitation projects on Midtown buildings older than 50 years also follow federal guidelines for the National Register of Historic Places to qualify for the 50/50 Program. This would assure that rehabilitation projects are sensitive to the historic character of the neighborhood, utilizing traditional materials, preserving intricate details of craftsmanship, and affirming the integrity of the building's original design.



*Main Street abounds with retail structures that could be revived as centers of community life, within walking distance of residents.*

### 3 Create new small business opportunities along walkable retail corridors

*"Living cities, therefore, ones in which people can interact with one another, are always stimulating because they are rich in experiences, in contrast to lifeless cities, which can scarcely avoid being poor in experiences and thus dull, no matter how many colors and variations of shape in buildings are introduced." -- Jan Gehl, Life Between Buildings: Using Public Space*

The City must actively plant new locally-owned retail venues along key nodes of the Midtown district, particularly along Main Street and on strategic corners of residential streets to its east. It is assumed retail development in Midtown will be, as well as *should be*, shaped by people walking and biking from homes and workplaces nearby. Thus, this plan attempts to fertilize a design ethic that encourages walkability over automobility, such that stores tend to be small, are built up to the street, contain a mix of uses, and rely on on-street rather than dedicated parking.

The vision for Midtown encompasses not merely the establishment of local businesses per se, but their contribution to an atmosphere encouraging daily social interaction between people. Street corners provide an irreplaceable function in urban neighborhoods. They are the rivets that tie a community together, socially and physically; they either contain uses that activate community life or they contribute to an environment of insularity and provincialism. Corner stores, filling a crucial gap in community life, provide opportunities for casual contact and association between neighbors who might not ever see or know each other under other circumstances. In neighborhoods like Midtown whose retail base has been decimated by overwhelming competition from suburban malls and strip plazas, the need for the corner store takes on increasing urgency. Neighborhoods become only mere "areas," abstractions on a map, without the prevalence of neighbors seeing and interacting with one another outside the private spheres of work and home.



*Some potential retail buildings, like this former livery stable on Riley Street, are in the midst of streets already highly trafficked by pedestrians.*



Community is almost nonexistent without it.

To foster walkable neighborhood retail now largely absent in Midtown, this plan proposes the City purchase and renovate a small number of historically-important, underused commercial buildings to provide venues for new small businesses. Following a model that was successful for the City's Market Arcade initiative in the Theatre District, the City would acquire two or three undervalued mixed-use buildings, bid out renovation, and rent to neighborhood retailers that create "Third Places" important to the fostering of community. So-called "Third Places," identified by sociologist Ray Oldenburg as neighborhood meeting places outside the home and office, include hair parlors, taverns, book stores, news and magazine shops, restaurants, diners, gyms, corner stores, flower shops, and cafes. They are places where nearby residents feel invited, on a regular basis, to come and meet other neighbors in a casual setting, learn about daily news and gossip, and form a climate of congeniality without which a cohesive, tightly-knit neighborhood is difficult to achieve.

The neighborhood contains many underused, retail-supportive structures, some detailed in pages to follow, whose survival and reuse is absolutely critical to the future of the area. To save these structures would do more than infuse the neighborhood with new social and economic life; it would give residents and investors a reason to believe in Midtown's future.

#### **4 Preserve and reuse resources important to the history and character of the neighborhood**

Midtown is historically and architecturally a very rich place. Key neighborhood landmarks, like the Sarabeth Building and St. Vincent's Convent, are now capturing the attention of investors and architecture enthusiasts. Streets like Coe Place, Ellicott Street, and Northampton Street are recognized urban spaces worth



*The corner of Ellicott and Northampton streets is a locus for architecturally distinctive houses, many of them the homes of former German merchants of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.*

preserving, not destroying or degrading. Midtown, in other words, already contains an existing landscape with something to offer the people of Buffalo, bestowing upon it a sense of possibility not every neighborhood enjoys.

This plan is founded on a belief that the neighborhood's historic resources will be crucial ingredients in making the Artspace project successful for the rest of the neighborhood. This Artspace investment is certain to provide new eyes and ears for other potential redevelopment and homeownership opportunities in Midtown, so it's essential to ensure a climate of preservation and good stewardship so character buildings are still extant as investment inevitably comes.

Not all of Midtown's historic building stock is secure. On some streets, like Dodge, there are examples of character structures whose immediate future is very much undecided. In some cases, demolition could theoretically come any day, a process that must be arrested for even some of the worst properties. In other cases, including areas of Michigan Avenue, entire streetscapes of 100+ year old homes of mixed upkeep could be undermined if the demolition of even one deteriorated property is permitted. This plan advocates for aggressive and immediate action on important, at-risk structures throughout Midtown.

Precedents from other metropolitan areas document the transformative effect a City can have by taking decisive action ensuring the restoration of one or two of a block's worst buildings. The impact of this approach has been to demonstrate the potential of properties in even poor condition, bucking the "necessity" of demolition, and in many cases elevating the entire perception of a block's future. The psychological effect on a neighborhood can be enormous. The less radical and more-frequently pursued strategy of only investing in properties of already moderately good upkeep has been less transformative, the visual impact less hope-inducing.



*Coe Place and the setting sun.*

This plan thus advocates for demolition under only the most extreme circumstances, circumstances where the life and safety of nearby residents is clearly at risk. There are very few such circumstances in Midtown. Mostly, properties in poor condition still exhibit amazing qualities of craftsmanship and design that make their renovation a worthwhile goal. In pages that follow, each block will be detailed, with every building's character and condition noted. It is hoped public and private partners will heed the recommendations listed in this plan for each property in matters concerning their potential demolition, renovation, sale or purchase. Ultimately, the goal of this plan is to preserve and reuse wherever possible.

Not all properties in Midtown, undoubtedly, are works of transcendent importance to the history of the city, and very few are designed by noted architects. Increasingly, this is not what is important with regard to preservation. Midtown is a place full of character, a place of history-besotted structures of modest means, often contractor houses, workman's cottages or ordinary mason's brick commercial structures. These are the everyday masterpieces whose importance to the image and unique feel of the neighborhood are as vital as its more identifiable works of architecture, like the recently renovated Squier House. This plan takes into account the value of both the so-called ordinary in addition to the transcendent, assuring that good buildings are not simply reduced to isolated museum pieces surrounded by blight and decay, but are embedded in living, functioning neighborhoods.

Every effort will be made to return Midtown's historic streetscapes to a place of value in Buffalo's urban scene, from the modest Queen-Anne homes of Coe Place to the immaculate houses of Northampton Street. In some instances, this plan will recommend subtle interpretative components (like landmark signage), streetscape enhancements (like brick streets), and protective



legal measures (like district designation) to enhance preservation and reuse endeavors. Good stewardship will be encouraged and rewarded, the City adding crucial nutrients to move the process forward.

## 5 Enhance neighborhood densities through quality infill development

*"You know the golden rule: whoever has the gold makes the rules." -- Anonymous*

The City of Buffalo owns over 3,500 properties. In the relatively smaller Midtown alone, the City owns dozens of vacant lots that create damaging gaps in the streetwall, establish a climate of blight and disinvestment, and impose enormous burdens of upkeep on an overstretched and underfunded City bureaucracy. Inevitably, vacant City-owned properties receive sparse maintenance when, in fact, private owners have always been the best stewards of urban property.

The sheer breadth of City-owned vacant lots in Midtown exposes it to the danger of a quick-fix mentality, with solutions seen as near-term rather than long. This plan assumes a total redevelopment solution for Midtown's vacant resources will be found only with time and patience, a range counted in many years, not few. There are methods of expediting the development of vacant land that can actually harm the long-term prospects of the neighborhood, represented namely in the two strategies most widely accepted by some public partners: 1) the combination of several 30-foot-wide lots for the development of suburban-style homes with spacious lawns, and 2) the sale of vacant properties to adjacent homeowners for the establishment of excessive side yards. Only in limited cases have these strategies represented appropriate, effective decisions in those few neighborhoods where increasing, or even maintaining,



*The ghosts of former houses shows through on abandoned lots on Ellicott Street.*

residential densities is untenable. It is a questionable notion indeed that decreasing density and increasing abandonment of Midtown is inevitable, and that city policy is powerless to prevent it or even reverse it.

Undoubtedly, Buffalo and especially Midtown has witnessed substantial thinning of population over the past few decades, but this plan views a suburbanization policy for Midtown to be short-sighted, a course that only fuels the decline of a neighborhood with remarkable potential for revival and re-urbanization.

The resurrection of neighborhood retail, walkable streets, vital public spaces, and a supportive tax base all depend on *density*. Value is created by people, in large numbers, who are able to walk to stores, take transit, enjoy nearby parks, and share the costs for needed infrastructure like sidewalks and sewers. While it may seem obvious that urban neighborhoods don't work without lots of people in them, the City has actually been advancing a policy that discourages dense settlement patterns in favor of what is perceived to be the suburban good life. Over the past fifteen years, the City has focused its vacant land policies on the creation of new housing that follows a suburban development pattern, undermining densities that are essential to other worthwhile goals.

On streets like Michigan Avenue, attractive new housing has been constructed on very wide lots, in some instances only three or four houses to an entire block. The economic and social benefit of this sprawling arrangement is minimal, providing a passing aesthetic boost but adding nothing to the general public's enjoyment of the neighborhood as a whole. Devoting such vast land areas to such unintensive uses only reinforces conditions that make it difficult to uplift the area's prospects.

Under the city's Urban Homestead Program, property owned by the City can be purchased for One Dollar (\$1.00). Vacant parcels



*Not quality infill development: suburban-type housing with deep setbacks and excessive lot sizes. This kind of housing is now becoming typical to Michigan Avenue, where a historic streetscape has been giving way to new development.*

acquired through tax foreclosure can be homesteaded after the applicant provides certified building plans and proof of financing for home construction to the city's Division of Real Estate. This plan calls for very aggressive, but measured, disposition of underkempt vacant properties to private owners who intend to build on them.

The advantage of sprawl is that it consumes much more land, much more quickly. For some this would mean developing neighborhoods more quickly, but nothing could be further from the case. Nearly entire blocks of Midtown have been rebuilt in fell swoops, to no noticeable benefit. It should be no surprise this plan calls for the sale of vacant land expressly for the creation of compact, urban building types that make a fundamentally urban place more viable. The City is in an advantageous position to use its collection of vacant land to rebuild neighborhoods in its own, urban image. (The vacant land is the "gold" and the City makes the rules.) The Main Street corridor, supported by a half-billion dollar light rail investment, is a logical area in which to shift and reconcentrate the city's ebbing population. In areas like Midtown, a reconcentration and urbanization policy would provide the greatest returns on regional investments in transit, infrastructure and neighborhood retail amenities. This plan calls for utilizing City-owned vacant land to advance that purpose.

## **6 Identify neighborhood regreening strategies and public space opportunities**

*"Conventionally, neighborhood parks or parklike open spaces are considered boons conferred on the deprived populations of cities. Let us turn this thought around, and consider city parks deprived places that need the boon of life and appreciation conferred on them." -- Jane Jacobs, The Death and Life of Great American Cities*



*Riley Street: Could this mere gravel be transformed into a vibrant community garden?*

The Block Analysis is designed to create and enhance public spaces in ways that entice people outdoors to enjoy the neighborhood and to enliven it. Doing so seems like a simple concept, but achieving it in any substantive way is a major design challenge. It's a challenge to provide spaces that attract large numbers of people of different backgrounds, to induce people out of automobiles in favor of leisurely strolls, or even to bring people out on their porches on a regular basis. Every impulse in modern society resists neighborhood interactive activities, like walking to the store, as inadequate, even passe. Imaginative, time-tested design has the potential to go against the grind, however, providing incentives for enjoying outdoor environments firsthand rather than through the television set or car window. Detailed in pages to follow, potential new spaces would be planted in ways that provide venues for casual relaxation, public performances, art displays, traffic calming, children's play, and pedestrian passage.

The number of vacant parcels in Midtown is too vast, and residential densities too thin, to populate numerous open spaces at once. The plan for Midtown calls for focusing resources, not only money but resident users, on a small number of very high quality spaces framed by areas of new infill development. In some instances, empty lots can simply become formalized pedestrian paths, over existing desire paths, or decorative spaces ideally maintained by private homeowners. Truly public spaces, however, meant to attract an actual using public, can only be carefully placed and planned. This plan supports a "Small is Beautiful" policy of limiting the number of off-street public spaces, each serving a varied purpose and target audience.

The street itself, as a conduit for pedestrian traffic, is Midtown's most overlooked public space -- a "garden" in need of tending. Sidewalks are always the most intensively used pedestrian spaces in a city, and it is rare for people, or even planners, to think of them as filling a park-like function. They are often the destination



*These empty lots could become any landscaped entryway into the Artspace project area.*

of choice for children's play, they are the view enjoyed from a porch, they are the avenue through which people get from place to place. Almost any judgment about the quality and livability of a neighborhood is made from the vantagepoint of the sidewalk. As part of this plan, sidewalks will be the staging ground for the most meaningful improvements that can be made in Midtown, from accommodation for play space to new landscape amenities.

A key aspect of the Artspace project will be to ensure the general public's enjoyment of its presence in the neighborhood. This means creating opportunities not only for the provision of public gathering areas on site, but for new pedestrian access to the site from Midtown east of Main Street. This plan wants to emphasize the importance of creating a direct positive impact on the East Side, where it is needed the most, and de-emphasizing more obvious spillover to Elmwood Village on the west. The plan advocates for two "front doors" to Artspace, forging symbolic and physical linkages that open up to both the East and West sides. The City will work with Artspace to forge new pedestrian connections and passageways from lots aligning Coe Place and Ellicott Street to avoid the "back door" effect possible without careful planning and design.

One of the most important contributing elements to any public space is the quality and quantity of one thing -- trees. Along sidewalks as well as on empty parcels, this plan will highlight the ways adding more of this amenity will elevate property values, provide needed shade and quiet, create beauty, calm traffic, complement well-maintained homes, and improve the overall pedestrian experience. On some streets of Midtown, like Southampton, nearly all trees have been removed, leaving behind a scene of desolation that does nothing to affirm the efforts of residents who dutifully maintain their homes. Some streets of Midtown provide the very picture of the way an absence of trees can rob a place of hope. Others, like the well-



*Is anything more unwelcoming to a pedestrian than a sign that says "Do Not Enter"? One-way streets can have a detrimental impact on the quality of sidewalk life, increasing vehicle speeds and confusing traffic.*



maintained Laurel Street, are showcases emphasizing how a complete treewall can buttress a vital and cohesive community. The contrast between streets like Laurel and some others in the surrounding area can be quite stark.

Trees survive for decades, often outliving the buildings they complement. A tree planting initiative is therefore no short-term fix; it is actually a long-term investment whose impact is intended to last for a century or more. The recommendations in the Block Analysis calls for planting a diverse array of trees of varying species and heights, emulating a landscape formula devised by Frederick Law Olmsted for the residential streets of Buffalo's Parkside neighborhood. The beauty and variety represented in the planting strips of places like Parkside's Crescent Avenue make a case for how such a multi-species panorama can create distinctive and eminently livable environments. Species diversity also provides a stronger foothold against tree-infecting pandemics that at one point in the city's history nearly wiped out its entire inventory of beautiful Elms.

Invariably, these public spaces benefit most when coinciding with streets that are heavily populated and well-used. Public spaces benefit no one when very few people are present to enjoy them. It is ultimately necessary to recognize that public spaces by themselves are powerless at creating public life. They can only contribute to environments that already have something to contribute in return – density, pedestrian flow, visibility, centrality. This is why this plan will carefully concentrate public space investments in key intersections, streets and vistas that already seem to be a focus of public life in Midtown. Public spaces will act only to build upon, and to fertilize, the vitality that is there presently.



*If there's any doubt of the importance of trees in Buffalo's public spaces, one need only be reminded of the famous Oak tree of Delaware Park.*

## 7 Add new and distinctive streetscape amenities

Streets must be approached as though they were “outdoor rooms” whose purpose in public life is elevated through the placement of amenities – the furniture and décor, so to speak – that make them feel like an extension of a home, only no longer private. Like indoor rooms, streets are places that are intimately affected by decisions of design. Are they comfortable places? Are they good places to spend one’s time? Do they have personality, character, vibe?

Midtown is a place whose streetscape amenities, if they exist at all, contribute negligibly to the public’s experience of the street. Where there are street lamps, they are too few, too bland, too auto-focused. The neighborhood’s everpresent cobra-head street lamps and wooden utility poles only add to a sparse, bare-bones amenity scheme for the street that is unbecoming of its often striking architectural setting.

As the “furniture” of the public realm is intimately linked to the livability of the street, it is a vital part of the plan for Midtown. There are many opportunities for novel streetscape additions as varied as creative signing, mini-traffic circles, artful pedestrian lamps, decorative sewer covers, and attractive stoplights. This kind of “décor” is hardly superficial. They pronounce a sense of place. They articulate a community’s character. They add flavor. This plan calls for a meticulous attention to the way all of these characteristics correlate in the making of comfortable, inviting communities.



*Precedent: Miller Highway in New York City once contained these Art Deco street lamps. Imagine Gothamesque street lamps gracing Midtown Main Street.*

## 8 Provide a staging ground for arts-related neighborhood improvements

*“Argue, if you like, about whether it is art when the work is in private. The important part of public art in public spaces is its larger message: some person, some individual, has passed this way before and has put some of his or her life, time, and attention into making what we see before us. [...] Some person has individualized the place and made it less anonymous.” -- David Sucher, City Comforts*

The plan for Midtown anticipates a gradual, open-ended process of renewal in the urban environment prompted by the input of artists and creative people. Artists are sources of a caliber of ideas and insights that can rarely be substituted or predicted by urban planning efforts alone, so the role of the city will be as facilitator, not planner, of arts-related improvements in Midtown.

What this plan aims to do, especially, is not over-plan. The beauty of creating a community for artists is that the creative forces of that community will have their own, spontaneous impact. Where the City can provide an occasional canvas – a blank brick wall, an empty lot, an old building, a street corner, a traffic circle – artists will step in to do the rest. The Block Analysis identifies several opportunities in the neighborhood where the City can provide that canvas, but will be eager to step aside and allow a creative process to emerge on its own.

## 9 Encourage bicycle and transit use

Taking transit and riding a bike should be a dignified experience, encouraged because it is safe and enjoyable enough to occasionally forgo the use of an automobile. Current conditions in Midtown, as in Buffalo writ large, tend to discourage both of these activities as uninviting, even degrading, experiences.



*The space beside St. Vincent's Convent on Ellicott Street used to be an active playground. Could it be reclaimed as a venue for public performances and art displays?*

Automobile traffic is simply given preference over alternative transportation modes, resulting in streets that are too wide, traffic that is too fast, bus stops and train stations that are unsocialable and uncomfortable, and neighborhoods that are designed for auto-convenience rather than people-convenience.

In places where there are dozens of parking spaces but no bike racks, two-car garages but inadequate bus shelters, four vehicle lanes but no bike lanes, car washes but no benches, it is unsurprising the automobile enjoys such a monopoly status. The entire urban environment is designed to deter people from using the streets for any purpose that doesn't require a V6 engine.

Midtown is a place that's "almost right," where buses, light rail and bicycles are well utilized but are relegated to a second-class status by the preponderance of auto-focused design.

Midtown is in many ways subject to Ameri-cultural forces outside its realm of control. This plan doesn't pretend to discourage the use of automobiles, although it does propose modifications to the urban environment that make alternative transportation options more attractive. The aim of pedestrian, bicycle and transit improvements is to broaden choice, not limit it. Where some proposals for enhancing auto use are put forth -- such as converting Ellicott Street to two-way traffic -- still others are defined that make walking, biking and transit more viable. This plan attempts to strike a balance that makes many transportation options popular simultaneously.

This plan endorses the idea of creating a contiguous bicycle route and center landscaped median for Main Street from Goodell Street to the University District. Ultimately, this is an initiative that will require the careful study and consensus of many community stakeholders around the City of Buffalo, and is naturally beyond the scope of this particular report. In the

context of the Midtown plan, however, it's safe to say the idea's a good fit.



*Sheltered bicycle parking can contribute greatly to the convenience of cyclists, especially along employment corridors like Main Street.*



In the interim, this plan recommends the City and the NFTA place new bicycle racks outside transit stops and prime retail corners throughout Midtown, especially on Main and Ellicott streets. Some of these racks can be sheltered from inclement weather, providing the protection of a garage-like enclosure. Historically, there has been an incomplete link between bicycle routes and destinations of importance to the community. By providing convenient parking for bicyclists, the City will be a quarter way toward making Midtown a more bicycle-friendly place. In encouraging bicycle use in Midtown, the City will also be encouraging greater exposure to architectural and historical assets less frequently seen by foot or by automobile.

This document makes transit stops centers of community activity. For too long, the city's LRRT stations have been dull, single-purpose places. To infuse more interest and vitality into the transit experience, this plan calls for installing in the Utica and Summer/Best stations several market stalls and kiosks for the sale of daily conveniences, morning coffee and pastries, flowers, newspapers, or farmer's goods, essentially making the stations an extension of the Main Street retail strip. Inexpensive kiosks have enlivened the dead spaces of corporate plazas, transit stops and pocket parks in cities all over America. Recommendations in the Block Analysis call for using Midtown's LRRT stations as demonstration projects in using sidewalk commerce to reenliven the transit experience.

Improving the often disastrous public spaces surrounding bus stops and transit stations is necessary. At the Utica and Summer/Best stations, in particular, outdoor spaces appear designed to make prolonged use or relaxation an impossibility. At most, benches or seating areas are placed in unsocialable ways or in spaces crowded (or even destroyed) by dysfunctional public art. Bus shelters are often provided, especially on Main Street, but are designed in ways that create uncomfortable closeness when any more than two people are located within



*Outside the Summer/Best Metro station. Would you want to sit here? Public spaces, where successful, fuse art and comfort simultaneously.*

them. In some instances, women can be observed actually standing *outside* bus shelters in the middle of the rain, simply to avoid awkward enclosure with strangers. By embracing an open air design, new shelters can produce more functional social spaces that encourage transit use. Bus shelters and transit stops also tend to be very institutional, very shabby, much less comfortable than the enclosed space of a new car. In the everpresent competition with the automobile, it is essential these facilities are able to provide Cadillac levels of beauty, spaciousness and comfort. As the transit authority fails to do so, many people will, quite simply, continue to drive their Cadillacs.

In the absence of bus shelters, there is rarely any sign of comfortable benches facing the street scene, an almost mandatory amenity for elderly people who depend on transit for getting from place to place. The oversight is glaring, especially on streets where the placement of benches would be desirable even in the absence of transit stops. As a rule, this plan calls for the installation of benches next to every stop on #8 bus line on Main Street.

## **10 Solidify the unique image and sense of place inherent to the Midtown district**

***"To thine own self be true." -- William Shakespeare, Hamlet***

This is really an umbrella goal, meant to reinforce the idea that improvements in the neighborhood will avoid cookie-cutter, standardized approaches to city planning. Midtown is a unique place. It is not a blank slate. It is a place defined by its own patterns of design, form and character, all long-established and engrained. Midtown's development is the result of a history shaped by global as well as super-local forces, by political unrest that led to the emigration of Germans in the mid-nineteenth century, by the calculated logic of neo-Baroque ideas of city



*Midtown, where history sleeps.*

planning under Joseph Ellicott, by the many dozens of individual development decisions of everyone from brewery barons to eccentric skating rink owners to the titans of a nascent automobile industry. New development, restoration efforts and public improvements must all recognize the intense interplay of this history with the shaping of a future true to the neighborhood's identity.



