Exploring the Next Urban Condition

Adam Fromme\textsuperscript{a}, Jeff Haase\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a}The Ohio State University
\textsuperscript{b}The Ohio State University

*Corresponding author e-mail: fromme.3@osu.edu, haase.3@osu.edu

Abstract: Urban transportation within the United States is at a critical point. The automobile dictates our infrastructure, but there is a hunger for something else. Many mass transit solutions ignore the need to develop unique urban neighborhood identities. It seems time for a different approach. The Ohio State University’s Department of Design (Columbus, Ohio, USA) held a 16-week graduate studio in the spring of 2016 to explore this idea. The class deliverable was an immersive installation in a gallery space corresponding to the national Barnett Symposium “Planning Creative Cities” 11–13 May 2016 in Columbus, Ohio. The 6 diverse graduate design students and their professor explored social change in a metro area, realizing that sometimes the best spark for change can come from building the tools to change the conversation.

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1. Introduction

Recent population growth in Columbus, Ohio is starting to strain its automobile-based infrastructure. The Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission projects the central Ohio area to add 1 million people between 2010 and 2050 (2016), and the city’s transportation system is dependent, near exclusively, on auto and bus transit.

Many local leaders are looking for solutions. However, most discussions focus on large scale, city-wide solutions, like light rail. While these may provide rapid transit across the city and reduce the congestion on the roadways; it seems no one is speculating what impact these proposed solutions would have to the personality of specific neighborhoods.

With this in mind, a graduate-level studio course in the Department of Design at The Ohio State University was developed by Professor Jeff Haase. The class would meet twice a week during the 16-week semester. The challenge for the students would be to investigate mobility in the context of Columbus’s dependency on cars with special consideration for the need for neighborhoods to have autonomy in their urban conditions. The Ohio State University was set to host the The Barnett
Symposium "Planning Creative Cities," a national conference 11–13 May 2016, therefore the final course artifacts were scheduled to run as a parallel gallery exhibit.

2. Research

One of the first decisions the team made was to identify 6 neighborhoods near downtown: The Short North, Grandview, Franklinton, German Village, the Near East Side, and Downtown. The identification of these areas was based on the team’s existing knowledge of the city. The 6 graduate students each became responsible for one area. They performed walk and drive audits, researched trends, and worked to understand the personalities of residents in their area. Students used census information for supporting data (crime rates, employment, demographics, education level, and other key factors). Their findings were then presented to the team. As decisions were made throughout the rest of the course, each student was responsible for voicing the needs of their neighborhood.

Separately, each graduate student was assigned a domain related to transit: walking, biking, alternative fuels, ride sharing, mass transit, and public spaces. Student researched current global and local trends, and found successful case studies (and identified the economic, political, and cultural drivers). These findings were also presented to the team.

These investigations fueled discussions about identity, flexibility, empowerment, encouragement, incentives, financial responsibility, psychological impact, political disruptions, and what physical change means for Columbus.

3. Designing the solution

The team then started working with the two data sets, applying their found transit ideas to the neighborhoods. Maps and plans were unrolled with tracing paper overlays and ideas were voiced. These work sessions were a blend of marked maps, conversations, and quick sketches.

Frustrations during this part of the process quickly mounted. The students felt locked to the existing infrastructure which limited their ideas and blocked opportunities for quick change. Additionally, they realized a need to consult city planners, architects, traffic professionals, and other experts. The tensions mounted during a student-only work session in week 5. There, the students co-authored an email to the professor addressing their seeming inability to complete the course project, heightened by the expectation of a gallery exhibit. The email addressed 30 ideas that the students believed to be potential drivers for the neighborhoods, but the existing roads were seen as barriers.

During the next course session, the professor and students came together and addressed the concerns. As a group, the team realized that they were not listening to the data. Part of the initial charge was “to remove cars from downtown.” This could not be done without a long-term plan resulting in slow change. And it was decided that the interim would produce, among other things, a climate of car-shaming drivers who lacked a viable alternative.

That session also revealed an opportunity. Instead of seeing the team’s role as agents of the city, they instead became agents of the neighborhoods. This was felt when the team switched mindsets.
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from 'removing cars' to asking how can we make Columbus a 'healthy city'. This Healthy City mindset had the potential to prompt residents to make better decisions (for personal and the city's fitness).

With this new outlook, the team expanded the list to 50 resolved ideas. This framework became a way to address all of these issues. It organized the messiness of the condition and steered conversions away from the city's recent obsession with mass transit systems to distinct significant decisions that could create empowerment and momentum toward localized change and awareness.

3. Designing the gallery

This idea was translated into a gallery exhibit, highlighted by a 45-foot long wall sharing the 50 ideas and their attributes: mode of distribution (public space, foot transit, bike transit, auto transit, mass transit, and speculative transit), cost distribution, and range of impact (street-level, neighborhood, and city-level). The team also constructed an immersive story to explain the idea: a full-scale micropark (a community green space occupying a single car parking space) bookended by reserved parking for retail delivery (projectors displayed different types of services-to-you). Additional elements like wi-fi hubs, a neighborhood walking campaign, branded neighborhoods, and unique bike art racks would bring together and reinforce nearby shopping, creating a density typically found only in city centers. Nearby residents could walk (or drive) to this public space for their evening shopping and entertainment. This example showed how one neighborhood might choose from the 'menu' of 50 ideas.
4. Reflection

Similar to (almost) all design projects, this project experienced the rush of activity surrounding the final push to complete. However, the authors, both involved in this course (student and instructor), scheduled time afterwards to reflect on the project. This poster shares their individual reflections as apart of their documentation of the course project. Three key insights overlapped their individual statements: (1) a need to be responsive to the research—to follow what is uncovered, (2) to be sensitive (and flexible) to the moment—embracing the frustrations, and (3) meaningful experiences (filled with uncertainty) are the most memorable—providing confidence to overcome future design challenges.

References

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