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# R/UDAT ★ AUS'ION

# DOWNTOWN AUSTIN

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DOWNTOWN AUSTIN

REPORT OF A

REGIONAL/URBAN DESIGN ASSISTANCE TEAM

Submitted to

The Citizens of the City of Austin

January 21, 1991



Sponsored by: Austin Chapter, American Institute of Architects  
City of Austin  
Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce

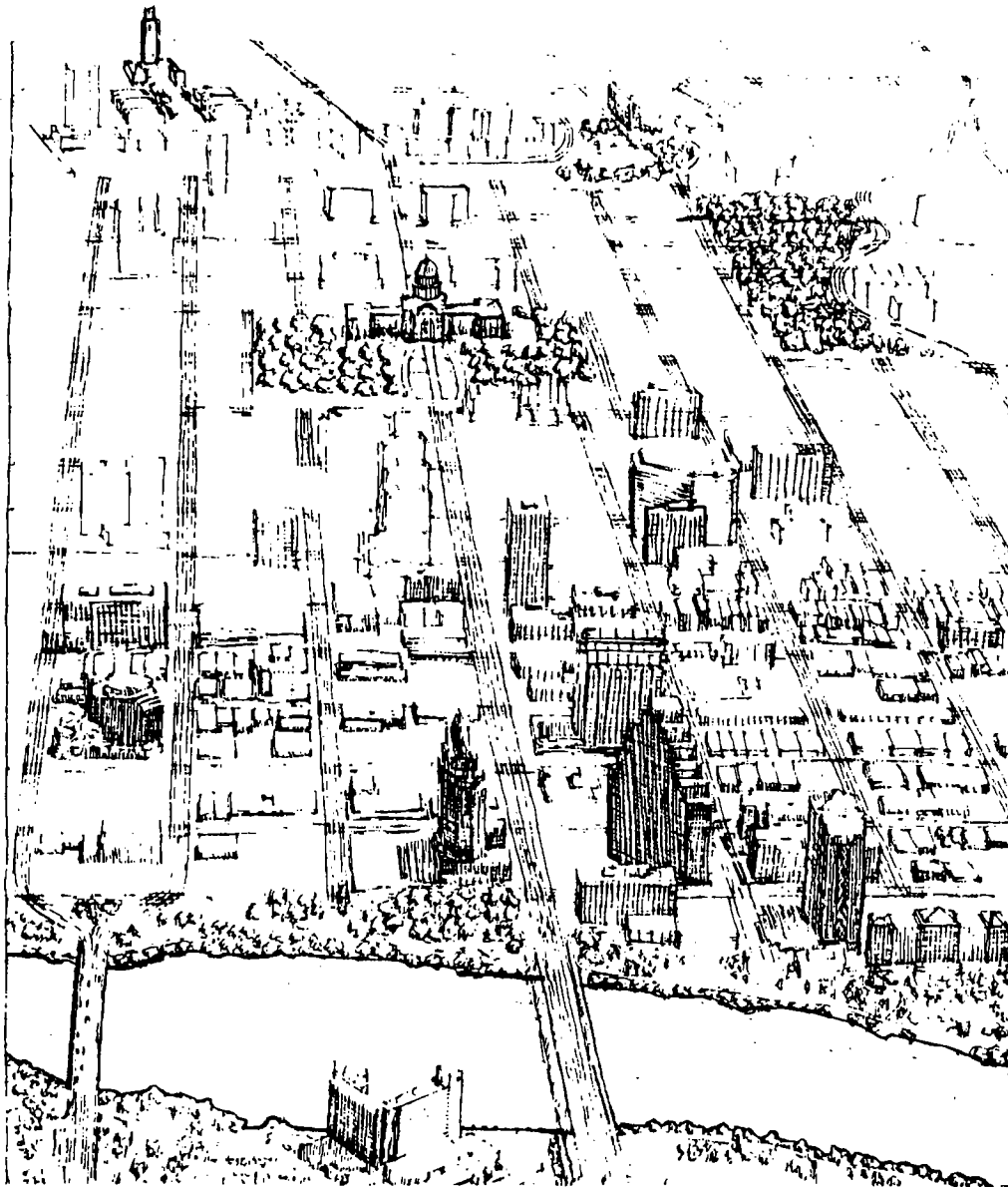
# DOWNTOWN AUSTIN

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## THE CHARGE

The Regional/Urban Design Assistance Team (R/UDAT) was invited to Austin by the City of Austin, the Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce, and the Austin Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, "to assist in the assessment of those current conditions and the transfer of today's community interest in downtown into a strategy for action and to potentially provide a spark for additional public-private action."



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the past few days, the Austin R/UDAT Team has examined Austin's downtown, and listened to hundreds of citizens who care about their downtown. We've listened to people who work downtown, own businesses there, are residents, live in adjoining neighborhoods, and study downtown. What we've seen and heard support's Austin's reputation as a very special city. With a high regard for participating democracy, the wonderful setting, ethnic and cultural diversity, dynamic public/private relationships, and spirit and concerns of Austin citizens and leaders have made a strong impression on the team.

Austin's wealth of urban, natural and cultural assets constitute the most compelling rationale for significantly increasing the community's commitment to its heart, its downtown. In the words of Austinite Nan McRaven, "Austin has a good downtown. It should have a great downtown." The R/UDAT team wholeheartedly agrees. Speaker Pro Tempore Wilhemina Deleo says tht "Austin should be inclusive, not exclusive."

A great downtown in Austin will require a solid, sustained commitment that is guided by a clear, articulated, agreed-to vision. The R/UDAT Team suggests a concept and language for a downtown vision in this report. The community must now make the vision its own. First agree on it, then commit the needed resources to its implementation. Subsequent community actions must hew to the vision.



We have included numerous recommendations about steps and actions that are needed in downtown organizations, the natural and built environment, transportation, and governmental policies. We have discussed linkages between the downtown and surrounding neighborhoods like East Austin, and made recommendations for improvements.

Lastly, we have suggested a process for implementation, and priorities for action. Importantly, the R/UDAT team thinks an inclusive community process is an essential element for achieving the vision. There must be a recognition of the interdependence of the minority communities and that investment in one requires it in the other and that both support each other. The implementation program is built around the notion that short term actions should focus heavily on those items that will help ensure the new Convention Center is viewed as a strong success story. There is a mere 15 to 18 month period for this purpose. Other important priorities, in particular those that can build on a successful Convention Center experience, are also identified.

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## CONTEXT AND EXISTING CONDITIONS

The City of Austin has a long and proud history. Its location and beauty are not the result of historical accident. From its conception, Austin was designed to serve as the capital of a vast nation full of energy and promise. Today, Austin retains most of the character and beauty that captured the imagination of the early leaders and citizens of the Republic of Texas. It also faces many of the significant challenges confronting urban areas throughout America in the 1990's.

Downtown Austin is more than a simple set of geographic boundaries. It is a living organism. It is a complex set of relationships. It is the economic and social heart of the city. It is the community's most significant investment. And, it is in trouble. While Downtown Austin and the community as a whole possess enormous strength, there are serious reasons to be concerned about the near term future of the Downtown. What follows is a summary of some of the strengths and weaknesses that currently exist. These lists should be viewed as a rough kind of balance sheet for the Downtown, an accounting of its collective assets and liabilities.

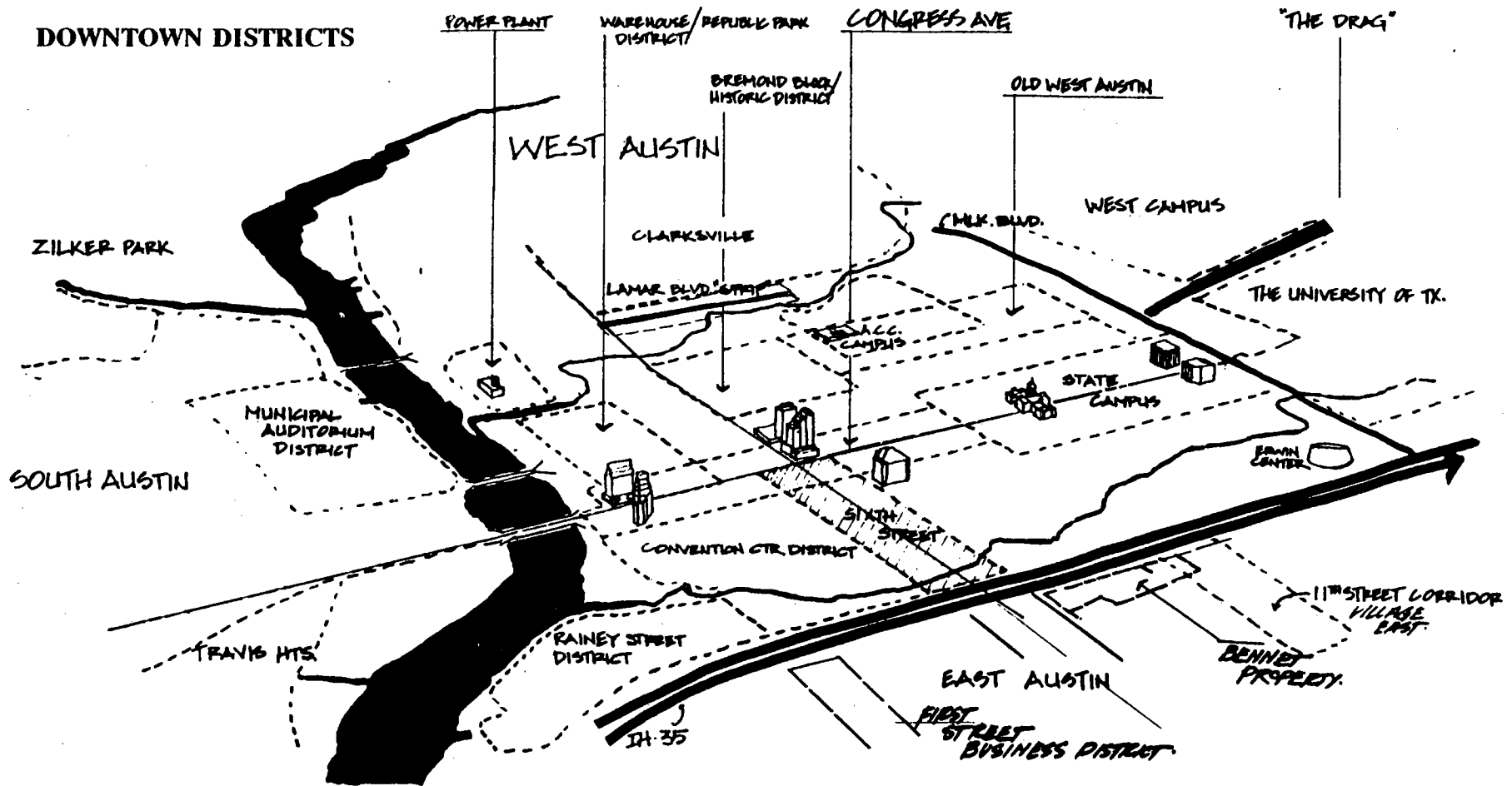
## STRENGTHS

- Austin's physical setting on the banks of the Colorado River at the foot of the Texas Hill Country is spectacular. Town Lake, Waller Creek and Shoal Creek, Barton Springs and the nearby lakes are significant natural amenities.
- The presence of The University of Texas and the State Capitol and associated state agencies make Austin the center of government, culture and ideas for the State of Texas and beyond. It is more than simply the home of a large bureaucracy. It is a true capital in the fullest sense of the word.
- Austin has an energetic and educated population. It is ethnically and culturally diverse. People participate in the affairs of the community. There is a wealth of creativity and a strong desire to preserve and promote the best of what Austin has to offer. Austin is a city with pride.
- The last five years have been difficult economically. Despite this fact, the long term economic base of Austin is sound and relatively diverse. The downtown tax base is



still quite significant. The State and University presence creates a huge potential market for retailing and services, and insulates the community from the full effects of normal business cycles. The non-state workforce in downtown is still substantial and high quality office space is available at an affordable rate. By national standards, Austin's current economic and fiscal position is really not that bad.

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- Downtown itself possesses many strong resources and links to its history. Congress Avenue remains a great civic boulevard. East Sixth Street continues to demonstrate

great resiliency. It is the most vital, active street in the Downtown. The stock of remaining historic structures in the Downtown is still quite large. These buildings provide interest and

character, and help maintain a human scale for development in downtown. Foremost among these historic buildings is the State Capitol.

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- Austin is truly a destination for visitors. The music industry continues to thrive. The new Convention Center provides a significant opportunity to attract more visitors and provide a stronger market base to support the activities desired by visitors and local residents alike. This potential has barely begun to be tapped.
- While specific problem areas exist, access to Downtown Austin is relatively easy. Mobility within the region and between downtown and outlying areas is not an immediate constraint to downtown development.

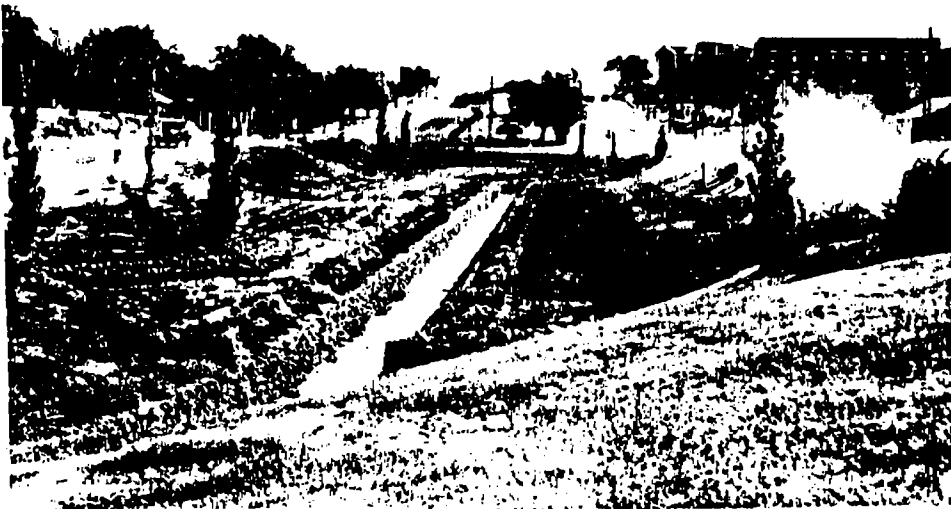




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## WEAKNESSES

- Downtown benefits little from the enormous economic activity and market potential represented by the faculty and students of The University of Texas or State complex employees. Linkages between these two major areas and downtown are weak or nonexistent.
- IH-35 presents a formidable barrier between downtown and East Austin. This separation has effectively divorced the East Austin neighborhoods from downtown. The separation is visual, psychological, physical and inescapable.



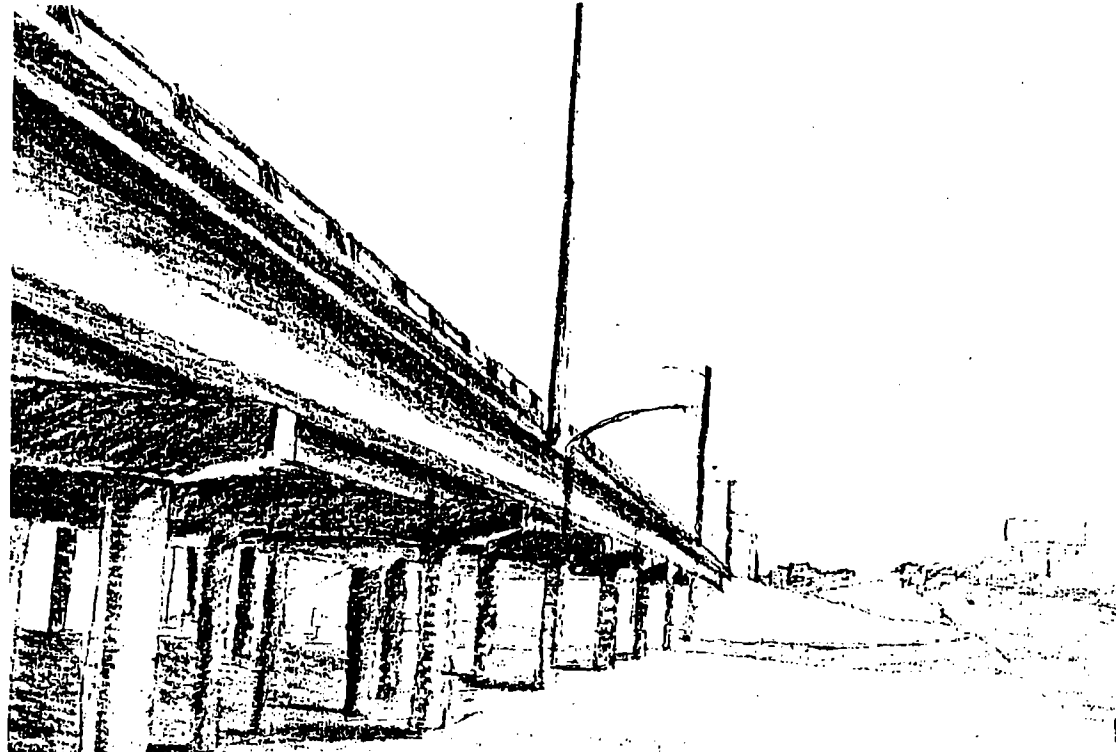
EAST AVENUE BEFORE IH-35

- Downtown's historic role as a retail center has been almost entirely lost. Few stores remain and the mix of retailing type is quite limited. Few stores in the downtown can function as single destinations for retail customers. The majority of the remaining retailing is convenience shopping for Downtown employees. As a result, the market for virtually all land uses remains soft.
- Development in outlying portions of Austin and beyond the city limits has captured a large portion of the retail, employment and housing opportunities. City policies towards growth in outlying areas have increased municipal capital and service obligations in these areas, creating further competition for limited city resources.
- Many traditional downtown uses have been permitted or even encouraged to occur outside of the downtown area. State and City offices, civic buildings, hotels, significant high rise office towers and major retail centers have all been proposed or actually developed in locations outside the downtown. These events further reduce activity in the downtown and promote a predominantly suburban form for the urban area.
- Austin and its citizens have proposed an abundant list in an almost dizzying array of projects to be developed in the downtown area. Despite the creativity that these proposals embody, there appears to be no underlying vision or concept that is guiding their development. Few priorities have been established. Accountability for producing results is lacking. The criteria by which projects are evaluated in terms of need, siting funding and impact on downtown are missing.

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- Basic service issues in downtown have not been adequately addressed. The downtown environment must be safe, clean and active in order to succeed. It must be enhanced physically and marketed collectively. Methods for property owners and merchants to address these issues directly in conjunction with the City are lacking. The limited service commitment made by the City to date is threatening to undermine the community's very substantial investment in downtown.
- There is a high degree of frustration in portions of the community regarding the lack of inclusion of all segments of the community, particularly African-American and Hispanic residents of East Austin. Failure to effectively address these issues further fragments the community and reduces the community's ability to produce meaningful results. To succeed, downtown needs to be everybody's neighborhood. Today, that is not the case.
- There is little housing in downtown proper. The few residential units that exist are isolated. Virtually no services or amenities, other than open space along the river and



creeks, exist to support downtown housing. As a result, the vitality of the area is further reduced.

- Physically, the distances between activity centers are great. The absence of any effective linkages or an appealing environment for walking further reduces the likelihood that State or University employees or students will venture downtown. The Capitol complex itself serves as a significant barrier.

Except for the Capitol building, the overall feel of the State complex area is sterile and institutional. Blank building facades, large parking structures and few street amenities characterize the area. The redevelopment now in design may modify this current liability.

- Access and linkages to the substantial resources of Town Lake, Waller Creek and Shoal Creek have not yet been maximized. Great

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concepts have been only partially developed. Gaps in the network of trails and access points still exist.

- The most recent wave of high rise development in downtown has yielded mixed results. The relationship of small existing buildings (historic and non-historic) to adjacent office towers and hotels is awkward in some locations. The feel of the downtown at street level is uneven and varies greatly from block to block.
- Key organizations with a significant stake in downtown do not coordinate their activities. The City, County, University, and State rarely work effectively as a unit to address downtown issues. Downtown also suffers from the absence of a single, strong downtown business advocacy, promotion and management group.



## IMPLICATIONS OF CURRENT TRENDS

While no one can predict the future, existing conditions and trends should be a cause for concern among members of the Austin community. If nothing is done, the very likely results are a downtown that will:

- be occupied between 8:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. only.
- experience increased difficulty supporting existing hotels and East Sixth Street businesses.
- be increasingly dominated by the automobile and resulting structured and surface parking.
- be characterized by barrier streets and little pedestrian traffic.
- provide virtually no significant retail services and will have very limited ability to attract shoppers from other parts of the city and region.
- experience further decline in the stability and viability of adjacent residential areas.
- ultimately generate less tax revenue than it does today.
- see public safety and maintenance issues become increasingly problematic.
- be characterized increasingly by fortress island of activity that minimizes contact with the rest of downtown and facilitate easy entry and access by auto.
- fail to maximize its potential to attract visitors and convention delegates to the city and to downtown.



Like the ghosts that appear to Ebenezer Scrooge in Charles Dickens' Christmas Carol, these are only visions of what may be, not what must be. But the warning signs are there. Austin is a proud city with a rich heritage. In its history, it has successfully resisted the efforts of presidents to move the Capitol elsewhere. It has been a stage for some of the most significant events in Texas history. It has weathered the turbulence of economic boom and busts. The challenge Austin faces today is to organize itself and its energy to save downtown from the fate which will follow these trends.

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## DIRECTIONS FROM PAST PLANS AND PROPOSALS

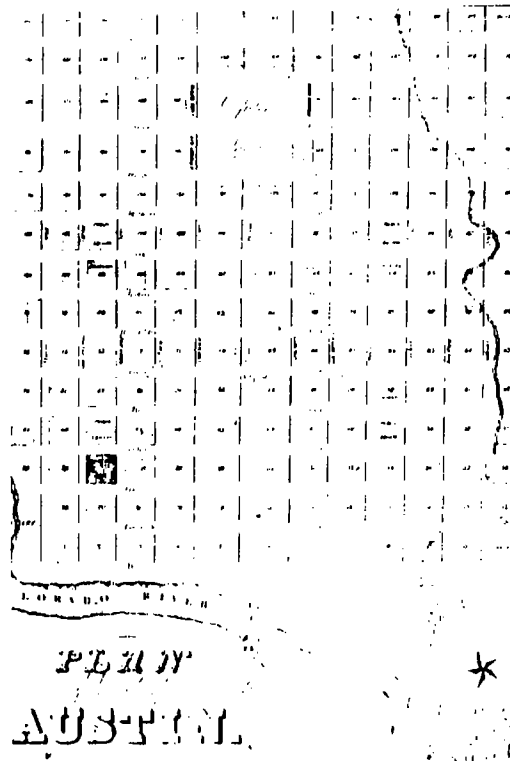
During the course of our R/UDAT visit, we were introduced to over eighty proposals for new projects that are located in, or substantially impact downtown. The impressive volume of previous study shows that there is no lack of enthusiasm and interest on the part of the public, and nearly all of the proposed projects were creative and visionary. Unlike R/UDAT teams in other communities, we found that there was little need for us to provide new ideas, but a strong need to suggest priorities.

## EARLY PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION

Planning of previous decades has yielded a number of significant built projects. Most notable among these are park improvements at Town Lake, "Hike and Bike" trail improvements at Waller Creek and Shoal Creek, sidewalk improvements on Congress Avenue and historic preservation ordinances in several downtown areas. Collectively, these measures have left a framework that current planning has built from.

## RECENT PLANNING EFFORTS

Recent planning history is notable for a broad range of proposed public, and public/private projects which have been frustratingly difficult to implement due to a



difficult economic and political climate. A notable exception is the new Convention Center which is now under construction, and is the first significant step toward downtown revitalization in several years.

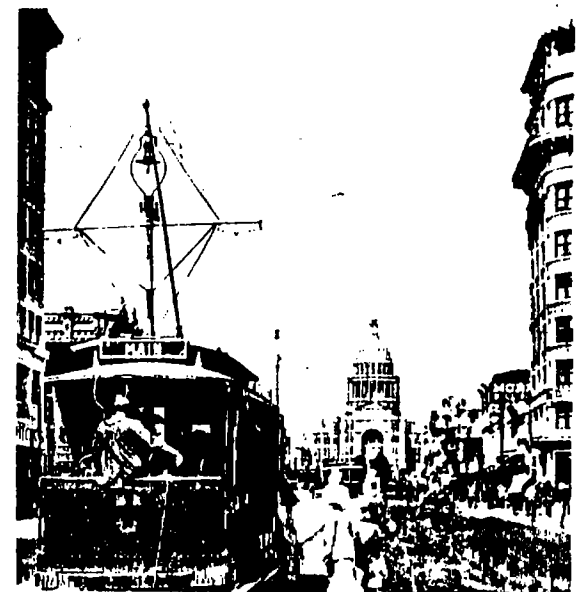
Other significant proposals for downtown projects include the following:

**Capitol Metro Light Rail Transit:** A proposal for the first increment of a light rail transit system connecting the downtown with neighborhoods to the north

**Historic Trolley:** A proposal for a restored trolley line connecting downtown with the Capitol

## Transportation Proposals

**Austin Gateway:** A parkway and street improvement project on 3rd and 4th Streets



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**Historic Steam Train:** A proposal for including service to downtown in the plans for a historic steam train project currently underway in Northwest Austin.

**IH-35 Expansion:** Proposal to increase the number of lanes and add overhead access ramps to IH-35.

## PEDESTRIAN IMPROVEMENTS

**Sixth Street Improvements:** Part of the overall plan for improvements to the East Sixth Street music and entertainment district.

**Waller Creek:** Improvements to the existing park lands and hike / bike trail system.

**Town Lake Bicycle Path:** A parks department proposal to add a separate bicycle path to the park area along Town Lake to reduce bicycle / pedestrian conflicts.



**The Rambla:** Proposed improvements to 3rd Street into a tree lined pedestrian avenue as part of redevelopment of the Republic Square area.

**North Congress Avenue Connection to The University of Texas Campus:** A proposal to redevelop Congress Avenue from the Capitol building, north to Martin Luther King Jr. Way, making a strong visual and pedestrian connection between the Capitol Campus, and the University Campus.

**First Street:** Pedestrian improvements to First Street to make it more compatible with park uses along Town Lake.

**Trinity Avenue Improvements:** Pedestrian street improvements to Trinity Avenue making a connection from the new Convention Center to the East Sixth Street District.

**First Street Improvements:** Pedestrian street improvements to First Street, making a strong connection between the Convention Center, Congress Avenue, and Town Lake.



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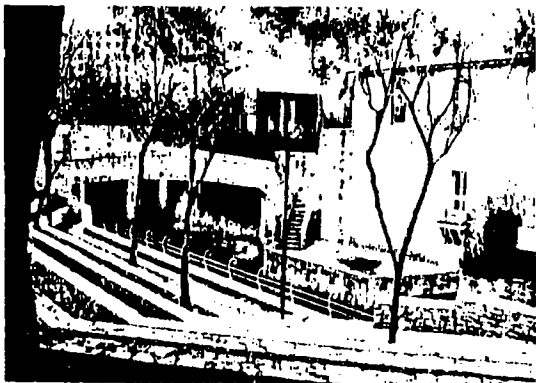
## DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

**Municipal Center:** A three block redevelopment project north of First Street and west of Congress Avenue.

**East Austin NCCD proposal:** An active proposal to encourage commercial redevelopment on 11th St. east of IH-35.

**Bennett Property Proposal:** A development proposal to develop a mixed use retail / hotel / office project on vacant property immediately east of IH-35 in East Austin.

**Capital Metro/East Fourth Street Site Development:** An open air market on the now vacant site between East Fourth and Fifth Streets just east of IH-35.



## ARTS AND CULTURAL FACILITIES

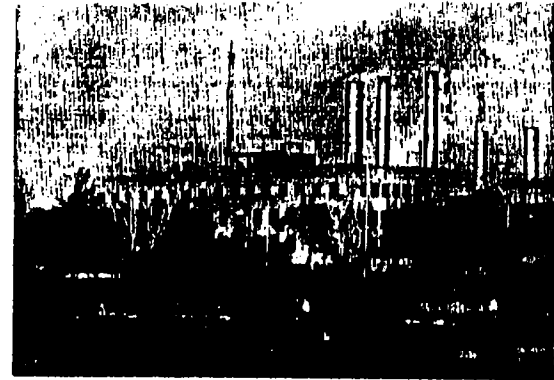
**Laguna Gloria Art Museum:** A proposal for a new civic art museum once to be located in the Republic Square area.

**Town Lake Science Park:** A proposal to construct a series of linked facilities for education and recreation in the sciences.

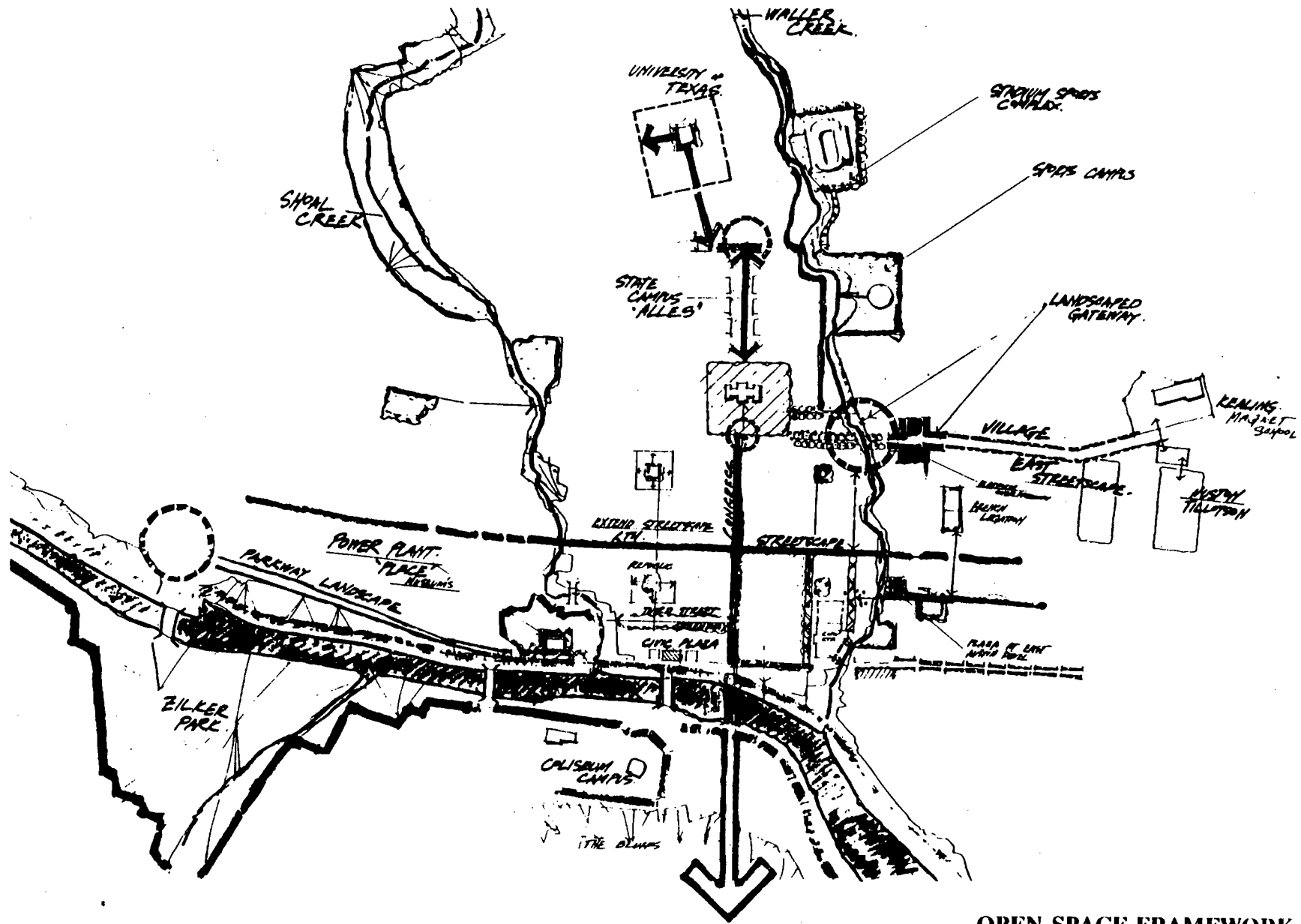
**Power Plant Adaptive Reuse:** A proposal to use the existing City power plant building on Town Lake to provide a community arts center with facilities for performing arts.

**Texas Music Museum:** A proposal to develop facilities for presentation and performance of local music, and the music industry.

**Austin Community College:** Current development of the existing high school site on Rio Grande Avenue for community and vocational/technical education.



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OPEN SPACE FRAMEWORK

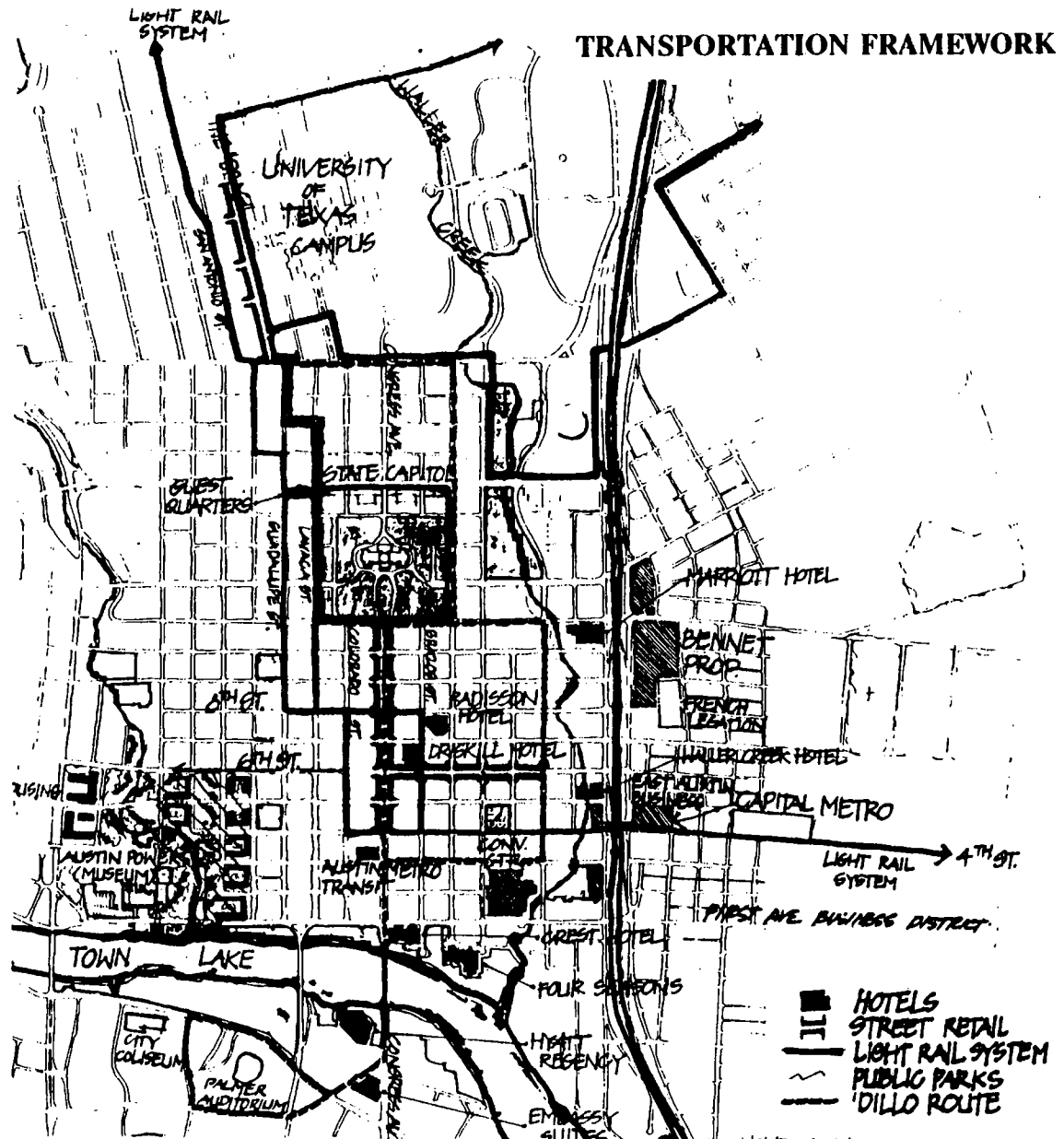
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## A VISION FOR DOWNTOWN AUSTIN

The challenges Downtown Austin faces are complex. There is no dearth of creativity, energy or opportunities in this community. What is lacking is a basic vision to guide downtown, one based on fundamental values strongly held and adhered to by the community. Even enormous commitments of dollars and energy invested without a guiding vision will almost certainly produce disappointment. Buildings, amenities and jobs can be created, but downtown will not necessarily succeed.

The vision that guides Downtown Austin need not be overly complex. In fact, it can be relatively simple and still be quite powerful. Based upon what we have seen and heard, we would suggest that the following might represent the type of vision this community holds but has yet to articulate.

1. Downtown provides the identity and focal point for the community; Downtown Austin is not just a collection of buildings. It is the active heart of the community. Downtown is a large part of the identity of the city. Downtown should be a diverse, multicultural environment. It should be an active, beautiful place. Downtown should be a welcome place for residents and visitors, not cars. It symbolizes





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the values you hold and tells people who you are. It is everybody's neighborhood.

2. Downtown will contain strong linkages: Downtown is now made up of disconnected centers of activity. The University campus, State office complex, downtown grid, adjacent neighborhoods and the river are disconnected. These areas are all part of downtown. But they are separated by significant barriers and function in relative isolation. These barriers must be overcome. Everything you do should be oriented to making pedestrian and shuttle/transit linkages between the University and Congress Avenue, between the Convention Center and East Sixth Street, between downtown and East Austin across IH-35, and between downtown and the river and creeks.

3. Downtown Austin should build on what already exists: Downtown Austin has many marvelous resources. These resources must be the starting point. The students, University staff and faculty, state workforce and downtown workforce represent well in excess of 100,000 people in and around the downtown everyday. The adjacent neighborhoods represent tens of thousands more people who can be served by downtown. The downtown hosts over 1.5 million visitors to the Capitol and other destinations each year, and the new Convention Center will add substantially to this number. Those people represent a market and a source of activity. In addition, Austin is home to a thriving music industry and a very active arts and cultural community. East Sixth Street, despite challenges, is a vital center for dining, entertainment and retailing. Congress Avenue is a great civic boulevard unequalled in Texas. Clubs and restaurants continue to populate the downtown area. The creeks and river provide highly accessible amenities within the downtown. Before searching for any additional activities to add to this mix, it is imperative to maximize the opportunities these existing resources provide.



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4. Downtown must be inclusive: Downtown exists for the entire community. It cannot be a resource or an economic opportunity for only part of the community. The responsibility for what happens in downtown, and the economic benefits of what is created downtown, must be shared. People in East Austin and other areas surrounding downtown need to have a share in downtown. The converse is also true. Downtown's interests must be served and advanced by investing in the development of and linkages to areas such as East Austin.

5. The community must be committed to downtown: Any vision for downtown is only as good as the commitment that starts behind it. Budget priorities effect that commitment. The vehicles for carrying out the program and projects you envision for downtown must be created. There must be a strong, ongoing organization of people with a stake in downtown's future prepared to advocate the steps needed and hold the appropriate people accountable for the results. There is also a need for an ordering of priorities. Everything cannot be done at once, and some things should never be done at all.

There is a need for a more explicit set of criteria for making decisions about projects and proposals for downtown. If there is a shared vision, then the first questions should always be "Does this move us closer or further away from our vision for downtown?" and "Is this more important than what we have already comitted to do?"

6. The downtown environment is as important as the bricks and mortar: A successful downtown is more than a collection of structures. More attention is needed to the total environment that is created. Downtown must be, and more importantly, must be perceived to be, safe, clean and active. The basic services needed to ensure this occurs are an essential component of the downtown program. Beyond these services, downtown must be marketed and public and private spaces programmed with activities that give people more reasons to come downtown and stay downtown.

7. Downtown must be a place that emphasizes street level activity and amenities: What matters most in downtown is the experience at street level. The connections between activity centers, the amenities provided on the street, the quality of



building facades and the patterns of circulation with downtown are all of vital importance. Every project and issue should be evaluated from this perspective. The better the experience on the street and the connections between places of activity or amenities, the better the markets that exist to support downtown can be tapped.

