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Reimagining Center Street

Walter J. Hood

Revealed through time-lapse photography, the life of Center Street in downtown Berkeley, California, is like that of most American streets: a cacophony of cars, buses, and people moving back and forth. Looked at more closely, Center Street is not so ordinary. At one end is Berkeley's Civic Center and Park; at the other, the University of California. The street dramatizes arrival at these destinations through a gradient that exceeds twenty feet over its short, three-block length.

But the most profound aspect of

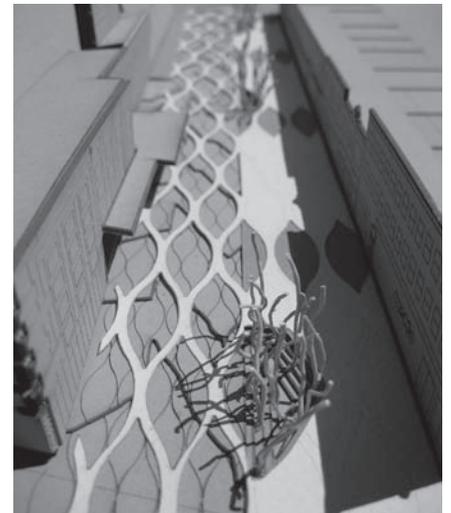
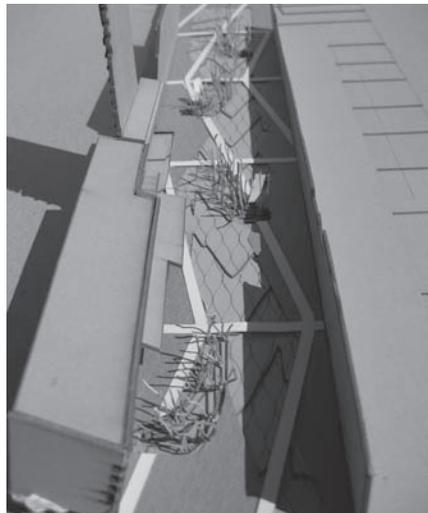
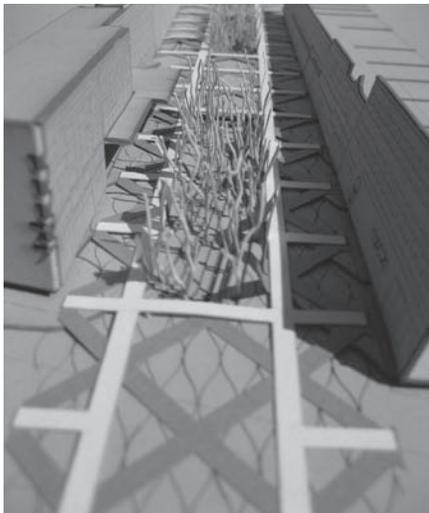
It is within this context that the city and university are connected—and disconnected. Standing in Civic Center Park or in the university's green entry crescent, one senses no formal or natural connection between these emblematic spaces, even though Center Street runs directly between them.

Revealing Landscape

Walking along Center Street is a memorable experience. The body engages the gradient by leaning back going downhill and shifting the weight forward on the uphill. Visually and

this figure has since been augmented and reshaped by the presence of Strawberry Creek. Today, the path of the creek and its associated flora provide an equally powerful figurative spine.

Understanding the dynamic between figure and figuration is paramount in designing an urban landscape that reveals its context. If designing with figure and ground can give order, balance, and spatial clarity, the figuration of space suggests involving users—or, more literally, entangling them within a set of experiences that emanate from the landscape.



Center Street in environmental terms may be that it is built near what was once the riparian corridor of Strawberry Creek. This stream, which flows out of the Berkeley hills and through the university campus, disappears once it reaches the edge of downtown. From there it continues underground toward San Francisco Bay—first in a culvert beneath the blocks south of Center Street, on which are various businesses, a BART station, City Hall, and the lawns, paths, and memorials of Civic Center Park.

sensorally, one is also always aware of the sun: because of the east-west orientation, one is either in shade on the south sidewalk, or sun on the north. Looking upward, toward the university, one sees simply hills and...trees.

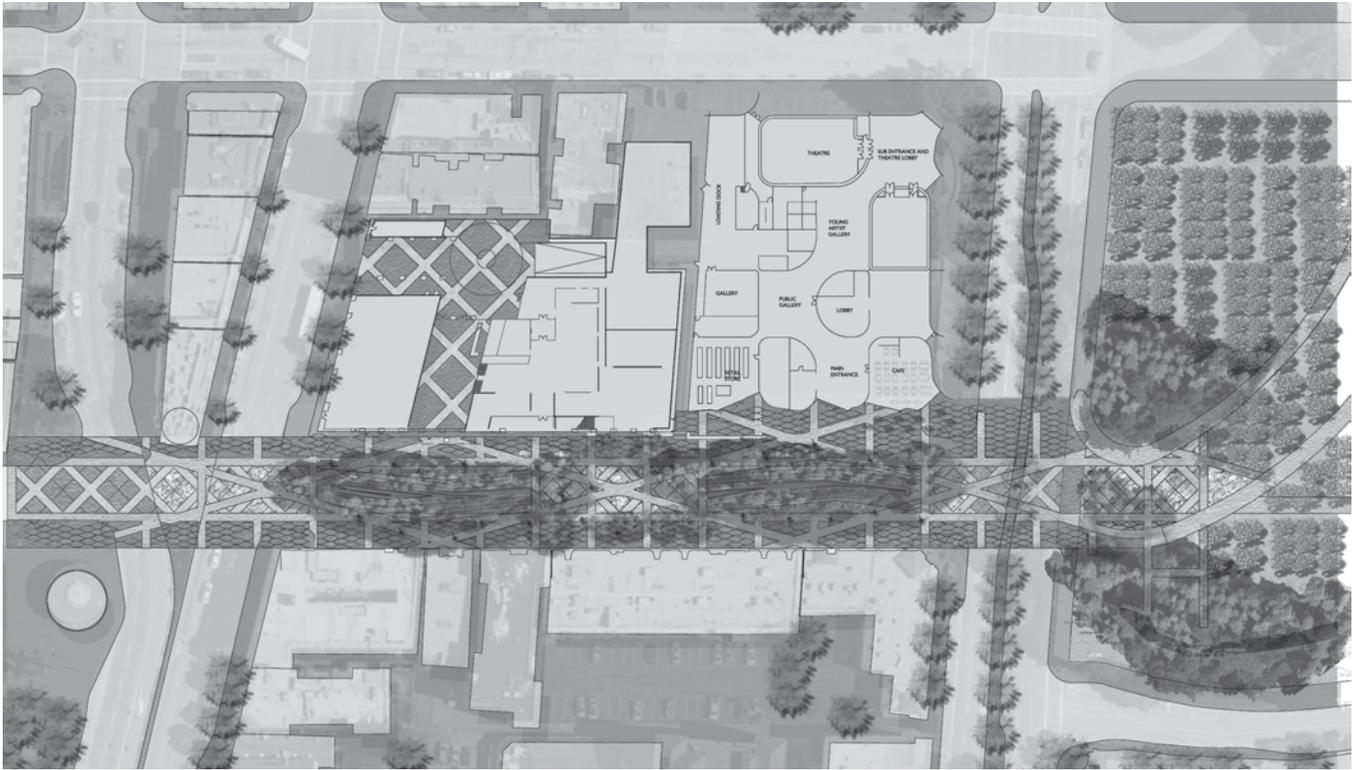
These are the tangible experiences of place that do not always factor into street design. But suggest a real distinction between figure and figuration.

There is another excellent example of this distinction nearby, on the Berkeley campus. Its central portions were ordered by a formal plan in 1898. But

From Studies to Scenarios

Clear morphological understanding can create a set of figurative strategies to employ in the design process. In the case of our work on Center Street, we sought to discover these through three areas of investigation. One was to look at the watershed of Strawberry Creek; a second involved understanding the general morphol-

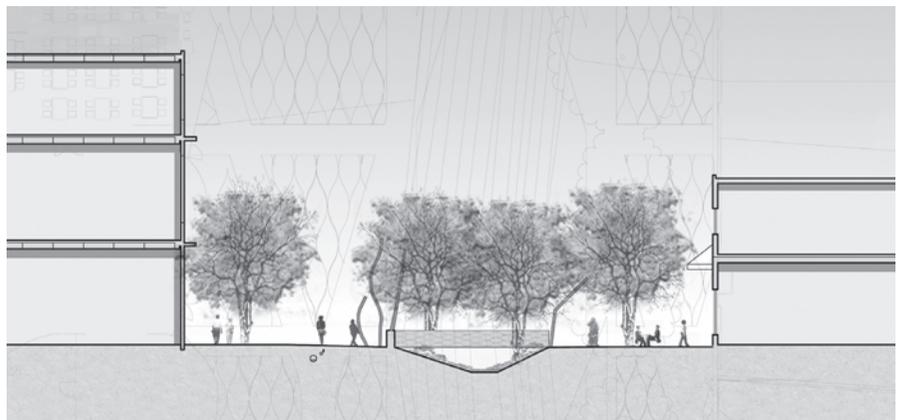
Above: Models of three out of fourteen scenarios for Center Street.



ogy of streams; the third was to look at patterns of aggregate movement, of both humans and local fauna.

From these analytics, we derived a landscape vocabulary. From the watershed study came an awareness of triangulations of alluvium. From stream morphology came the knowledge that gradient and form are intrinsically linked—the steeper the slope, the straighter the stream. And from the study of human and animal behavior came a sense of social enmeshing and interconnected fabric.

Further development of this vocabulary in the context of Center Street meant combining it with a basic understanding of streets. Physically, streets can be manipulated in many ways to accommodate people, infrastructure, and vehicles. However, we considered seven models: a central median (as in Barcelona’s Ramblas);



bulb-outs at corners and mid-block (creating a crooked street); an open street (with no curbing); justified north (curb only on the north side), justified south (curb only on the south); stepped (where retaining walls create a series of terraces); and divided (split down the middle).

Next, we combined these typologies with various character “samplings” of Strawberry Creek and the Berkeley city grid. We subjected twenty-eight such composite scenarios to feasibility studies of access, public safety, hydrology, and new development. The results were four-



teen practical combinations. From these, we created three hybrid designs to advance discussion.

Each design took a different position on rebuilding the landscape in the presence of the nearby creek. One imagined an open street where natural creek flow would be maximized within an open channel at the upper and lower ends, and where a grand public space would emerge in the middle. A second involved a stepped street, where the creek would be allowed to pool in three places, creating an episodic experience and the chance to remediate natural water quality. The third imagined a central median where the creek was absent, but where a porous field of bioswales might remediate storm runoff from the street and nearby roofs in contrast to an adjacent set of mechanized fountain pools.

Community Design, Scenario Building, and Hybridity

This is not the end of our design exploration. The next step is to produce a single design that builds upon these three positions. To get to this point, however, will involve further technical scrutiny and consensus-building.

There are many roles for the community designer within the context of city and neighborhood building: facilitator, translator, instigator, advocate, and even provocateur, to name a few. Reimagining Center Street indicates that at times the designer must move between these. The work may also be less about evaluating design positions than reframing the terms of conversation about people and the environment.

The Center Street project is less about whether a street should be open

or closed, or whether a creek should be daylighted or not. It suggests a need to reimagine our everyday world by looking more closely at the environments in which we live. In this case, research and design have revealed what may be a false polarity between nature and the city that must be broken down if we are to achieve a new, more hybrid view of urbanism.

All images courtesy of Hood Design.

Opposite above: Plan—Open Hybrid Scenario.

Opposite below: Section—Open Hybrid Scenario.

Above: Perspective—Open Hybrid Scenario.