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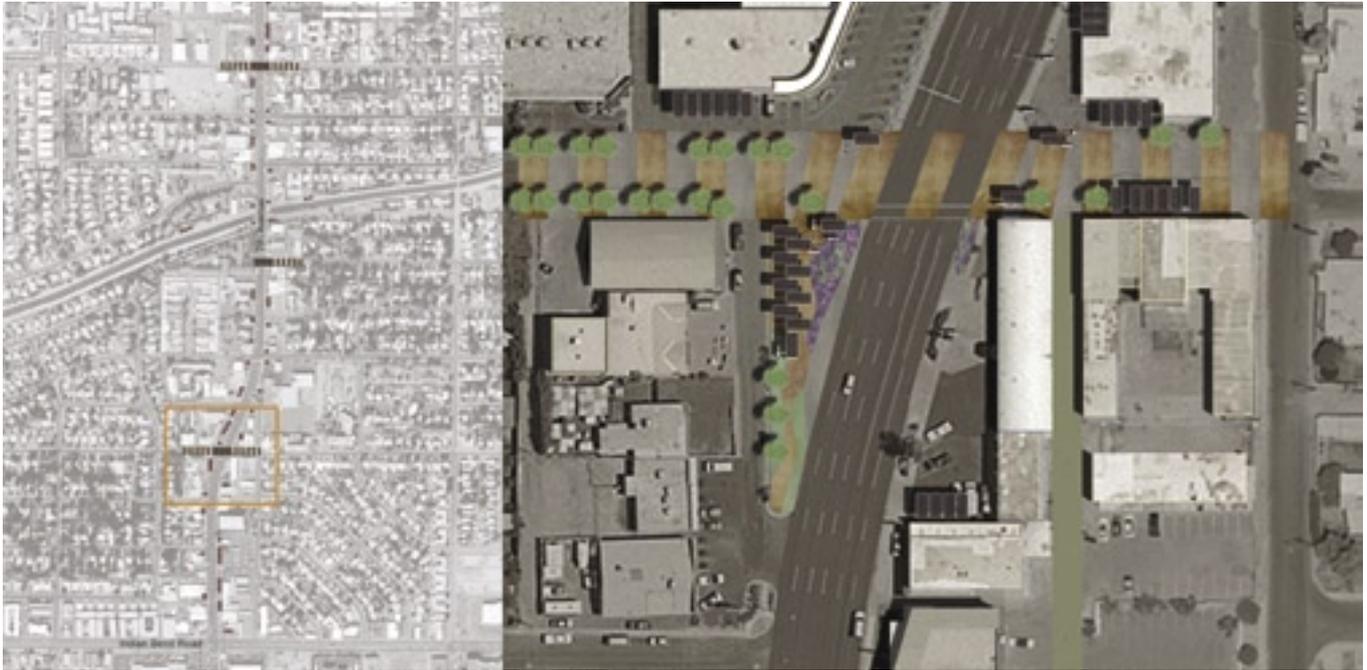


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Stripscape: Pedestrian Amenities along 7th Avenue

Darren Petrucci



In his essay “Programming the Urban Surface,” the urbanist Alex Wall described the commercial areas of post-World War II American cities as “generic zones, peripheral sites, middle landscapes that are neither here nor there, and yet [that] are so pervasive as to now characterize the dominant environment in which most people actually live.”¹ The project “Stripscape” attempts to graft a new type of infrastructure onto this generic landscape in an attempt to develop a connective tissue that can facilitate the rich complexity of urban life.

The demonstration site is a one-mile section of 7th Avenue between Indian School Road and Camelback Road in Phoenix, Arizona, chosen for reasons both physical and economic.² In 1968, 7th Avenue was widened by the Arizona Department of Transportation to create a high-volume transportation corridor. Widening, however, meant the area where normal landscape improvements might typically be located was sacrificed to increased road width. The City of Phoenix also proved unable in the

years that followed to make conventional “beautification” improvements. These conditions, combined with increased competition from regional malls, created the conditions for grassroots citizen action.

In 1997 more than sixty property owners along the corridor formed the 7th Avenue Merchants Association, and began to lobby the City of Phoenix to create a redevelopment strategy that could restore value to their properties and businesses. The City contacted Arizona State University’s Joint Urban Design Program (JUDP), and the JUDP in turn contacted me, knowing that my previous research and design had explored alternative revitalization methods for such underused/undervalued sites.

The project that has since emerged is the result of a three-year public/private research and design partnership aimed at developing general new infrastructure prototypes for public and private spaces.³ It also represents a holistic approach to urban design—one that is not imported but emergent from place.

The Process

In 2000, after the city received a \$500,000 Federal Transportation Enhancement (T-21) grant, which it matched, we set to work on the project. Our first step was to convene a series of predesign meetings to understand the desires of stakeholders. We eventually arrived at three

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principal objectives: to establish a character for the strip that would be identifiable within the metropolitan area; to increase business by promoting renovations and new development; and to form stronger pedestrian connections with surrounding neighborhoods.

The project next required both tactical analysis based on individual merchant improvements and the development of an overall strategic plan that would be of use to the city. To accomplish this, we combined the better aspects of conventional master planning with smaller tactical interventions typical of “everyday urbanism.”⁴ We also decided to concentrate the \$1 million in funding at one demonstration site, in hopes that intensive intervention and rehabilitation could provoke and catalyze further capital investment elsewhere.⁵

Completed in May 2004, the built result of our research and design is a series of landscape gateways that establish a strong connection between the 7th Avenue commercial strip and surrounding neighborhoods. Installed at each quarter-mile cross street, they are composed of combinations of standard new components that we call the Lamp-Shade, Art Panel, Bands, Vine Wall, and Color Palette.

Unlike conventional street infrastructure, which is generally focused only on life safety, the new elements were designed with the experience of the pedestrian, motorist, merchants and neighborhoods in mind. Although the prototypical elements were first installed only in the public right-of-way as part of a demonstration project by the city, they are also available for purchase by merchants and private property owners. In this way they may one day create a seamless transition between the public and private realms, and so encourage a sense of activation and ownership (both actual and imagined) across traditional boundaries.



Major Design Elements

The new design elements—bands, vertical panels, canopies, and trees—are “amenity infrastructures” because they seek to create desirable conditions other than those typical of the dominant order.⁶ Along 7th Avenue such amenities might include the modification of public space to provide for pedestrian shade and refuge, commercial display by local merchants, and recreation and leisure activities. The prototypical elements are also a flexible, “emergent” infrastructure that will develop with the city, reflecting the specific conditions present at each site they are installed.

In terms of design, new architectural elements that connect with the ground share a rusted material palette that is “self-healing” and resistant to graffiti. Elements raised off the ground are lighter and more refined, made of aluminum and translucent materials. The distinction will allow the lighter-framed elements to be refreshed or replaced as needed, providing a dynamic image commensurate with the commercial nature of the corridor, while the structures that support these elements will be encouraged to weather and embed their materiality within the context.

Bands. The bands are constructed of concrete into which fine iron fillings have been broadcast and allowed to rust, creating a colored surface. The dimensions of the bands help mediate between the scale of the automobile and the pedestrian. They also visually connect block to block, across streets, and into surrounding neighborhoods. Since their construction is simple and durable, they will also be easy for the city to maintain.

Vertical Panels. The vertical panels serve either as Art Panels or as an armature for growing vines. As Art Panels they consist of two 6-inch diameter rusted poles supporting a 6x8-foot aluminum and Lexan illuminated panel.

The Phoenix Public Art Department has agreed to curate an “urban art gallery” using these panels. This will change every six to twelve months, providing display space for local artists, school art programs, and local cultural groups.

Additional vertical panels are deployed as vine screens to help soften the hard urban context. The panels are grouped with other architectural elements to block the south and west sun and form transportation hubs (bus stops) and/or create pedestrian “cultural rooms of retreat” from the harsh desert climate.

Canopies. The other major architectural element, the LampShade, is constructed from a single 8-inch diameter vertical rusted pole that supports a 9x18-foot light box. A standard urban unit, the parking space, provided the basis for the lateral dimensions of the Lampshade, while its height (12 feet clear to grade) was based on the need for a garbage truck to pass beneath. In the chaotic environment of the strip, the Lampshade’s standard vertical dimensions will establish an important new design datum.

By being able to combine covered parking, pedestrian lighting, and signage into one flexible unit the Lampshade does in one move what typically requires three. During the day it can provide shade for a multitude of activities, while at night it can provide illumination for pedestrian safety and evening events. In the demonstration project, the vertical faces of the Lampshade are adorned with an enlarged image of an Evergreen Elm branch—the species planted nearby. But merchants will also be able to purchase the LampShade to replace less effective signage (as well as provide shaded parking).

Single LampShades can be adapted to accommodate photovoltaic cells and battery storage for off-grid use. They can also be multiplied in a variety of configurations, depending on the conditions of a site. Bus stops, parking areas, commercial display, and outdoor eating are among the uses they could complement. In 2004, the Phoenix Department of Street Transportation established the LampShade as one of its standard details.

Trees. Tree planting provided the final layer of intervention on the demonstration site. As mentioned, when Seventh Avenue was widened in mid-1960s it largely eliminated the possibility for landscape improvements in the right-of-way. Thus only the cross-street right-of-ways provided any area for tree planting. The trees chosen (a drought-resistant species called Evergreen Elm) work well with the rusted concrete bands. They create a shaded gateway to surrounding neighborhoods, an effect augmented by rusted tree grates and up-lighting.

Final Touches

In addition to the new amenity infrastructures, other tactics were employed to help the merchants along 7th Avenue. A consultant was employed to establish a common color palette they can refer to when repainting their buildings. Graphic designers created a new letterform and logo for the district—now called “Melrose on Seventh Avenue” after the surrounding Melrose Neighborhood. Others collaborated on signage and graphic elements for the LampShades.⁷

Such identity-creating measures—now reproduced on letterhead, banners, business cards, and T-shirts—are helping the Merchants Association create a new vitality for their district within the Phoenix metro area.

Notes

1. Alex Wall, “Programming the Urban Surface,” in James Corner, ed., *Recovering Landscape* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999), p. 234.
2. This section of 7th Avenue lies within the 85013 zip code. The 2000 U.S. Census found this to contain 20,842 people, with a median age of 36 and a median household income of \$36,150 (median family income of \$46,047). The median value of a single-family, owner-occupied home was \$119,100.
3. The design of these prototypes is the result of a unique partnership among Arizona State University’s School of Architecture, the 7th Avenue Merchants Association, the Melrose Neighborhood, and the Departments of Streets and Transportation, Neighborhood Services, Public Art, Planning, Community and Economic Development, and Development Services of the City of Phoenix.
4. See John Chase, Margaret Crawford, et al., *Everyday Urbanism* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1999).
5. Subsequently, an additional \$500,000 was granted for Phase 2 of the project, which will be completed in August 2005.
6. In his book *Points + Lines: Diagrams and Projects for the City*, Stan Allen gives an appropriate definition of infrastructure. He states that the primary modes of operation for infrastructures are the division, allocation and construction of surfaces; the provision of services to support future programs; and the establishment of networks for movement, communication and exchange. In the 7th Avenue context, then, amenity infrastructures could be considered any public or private modification to existing right-of-ways, alleyways, utility easements, setbacks, and retention areas perpendicular to the street that help create a connective tissue of experience.
7. The following collaborators and consultants were hired to provide specific expertise for the project. Janet Waibel, Landscape Architect, of Waibel and Associates, collaborated on the hardscape design. Celia Conover, of Conover Design, produced the color palette. Prof. Jennifer Brungart collaborated on the graphic design for the canopies. Prof. Andy Weed collaborated on the graphic design for the Melrose on Seventh Avenue identity package. Prof. Matthew Innes collaborated on the structural design for the LampShades. The realization of this project is indebted to Lisa Hubbard, Neighborhood Specialist, City of Phoenix; Tom Simplot, Councilman District 4; and Phil Gordon, Mayor of the City of Phoenix.