

Public Space in a Placeless Time

The Reorientation of Sparks Street

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral
Affairs in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Architecture

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Figure 1. Sparks Street aerial view

abstract

What is the future of public space? With life increasingly shifting online, what becomes of our streets, our squares, our commons? Rapid urbanization around the world has also reinvigorated debates about the right to place. While the pandemic has pushed such issues to the forefront, it is the confluence of intensifying digitalization and displacement that calls for a reconsideration of public space not only as public good, but as dynamic sites of citizenship and community.

The subject of perpetual renewal, Sparks Street is a pedestrian mall in Canada's capital that serves as an ideal site to reimagine public space in these incongruous times. How is our relationship to place changing? What does that mean for our sense of place? To present an alternative to conventional placemaking, this thesis project aims to redefine public space as urban destinations that reinforce our identity of, our belonging to, and our connection through place.

acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful to my thesis supervisor, Professor Zachary Colbert, for his invaluable feedback and constant encouragement, and to my thesis group for making the most of our weekly meetings during this exceptionally isolating year.

Many thanks to all the staff, critics and instructors who have contributed in their own unique way to an enriching educational experience, especially Adriana Ross, Paul Kariouk, Yvan Cazabon and Piper Bernbaum. I would also like to extend my gratitude to Ozayr Saloojee and Ewa Mroz for guiding me through the administrative hurdles.

To my fellow graduates, what you have managed to create under trying circumstances is truly inspiring.

Finally, to my partner, Meby, thank you for coming along on this crazy ride.

preface

Most city dwellers like the idea of public space, but how many of us actually spend time in local parks or pay any attention to city streets? Who actually uses our public spaces today? In most urban centres, what comes to mind are tourists, commuters, delivery workers and homeless people. But all of a sudden, we found ourselves in a state of lockdown. It soon became a weird new normal to avoid human contact and the spaces that once enabled it. The pandemic has made us more aware of the public realm, and for many, it has even provided some reprieve from isolation. But has this whole experience changed the way we think about public space?

We live in our own boxes, both figuratively and literally. We also move from one box to another, typically in a type of mobile box of our own, for work and leisure. With the advent of the smartphone, e-commerce and telecommuting, we have even fewer opportunities to meet face-to-face, to know our neighbours and to participate in urban life outside of our own social bubbles. What then is our connection to others who live in the same city? Can we still be a community even if we don't act like one?

In considering these questions, I began to wonder about the relationship between architecture and community. But more specifically, how are we designing our cities for social resilience? We often talk about urban planning for economic growth and environmental sustainability, but what about creating an urban landscape that also reinforces our common humanity? Faced with greater economic disparity, social diversity and political sensitivity, cities need public spaces that

can help build a shared sense of belonging, especially in times of crisis.

Living in the capital of Canada, I am all too familiar with the site-as-monument approach to urban design. Much of the public realm in the downtown core consists of static landmarks rather than living spaces. But Sparks Street is one site that remains woefully underutilized as a public space, particularly given its central location and national significance. How can this pedestrian mall better serve the needs of a capital city? But more importantly, how can design play a role in building a more resilient community? In trying to answer these questions, I hope that this project will help broaden the conversation about public space and encourage bolder experimentation in the public realm.

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part 1

The Commons: *A public realm redefined*

Figure 2. *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, William H. Whyte

1.1 An evolving placelessness

Spatial Trajectories

“Space is abstract. It lacks content; it is broad, open, and empty, inviting the imagination to fill it with substance and illusion; it is possibility and beckoning future. Place, by contrast, is the past and the present, stability and achievement.

-Yi-Fu Tuan

Place: An Experiential Perspective, 1975

We tend to classify the world into three basic categories: person, place or thing. If something is not a person, it must be either of the two inanimate alternatives. Such compartmentalization is obviously oversimplistic not because of the myriad categories excluded, but the disregard for how people give life to both objects and spaces. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, place is “a particular position, point, or area in space.” While the term is typically used to specify a geographic location, our sense of place goes far beyond its physical character. We develop an attachment or an aversion to places based on our experiences, and these associations shape our memories and reinforce our identities. In fact, neuroscience seems to validate this dynamic, interdependent relationship, as Alzheimer’s research confirms the existence of neurons that correlate with spatial memory, without which subjects lose their ability to remember who they are.¹

When does space become place? Humanistic geographers such as Edward Relph and Yi-Fu Tuan focus on how subjective meaning is derived from spatial experience. Through such a phenomenological understanding of place, Relph identifies three interconnected components: the physical context, the activities experienced in that context, and the meaning that comes from those experiences. As outlined in his 1976 book *Place and Placelessness*, these factors, when taken together, ultimately determine our sense of place, which falls along a continuum ranging from deep connection or existential insideness on one end to intense alienation or existential outsideness on the other. Through his exploration of different modes of spatial experience, Relph reveals how the meaning of place is fluid and complex. Just as the character of a place changes over time, our relationship to a place can also evolve. For instance, a city that once felt like home may feel foreign after many years away or after a personal tragedy.

Tuan also takes an experiential perspective, but expands on how a sense of place develops across different scales, from private spaces to geographic regions. He defines places as “centers of meaning” that can be as intimate and personal as the location of a favourite rocking chair in a home or as abstract and expansive as nation-states constructed through symbolism and narrative.² Tuan further emphasizes that a place “is sustained not only by timber, concrete, and highways, but also by the quality of human awareness.”³ In other words, places can lose their meaning unless they remain relevant in our lives and present in our minds. Just as Kierkegaard described the loss of self as occurring “very quietly in the world,” losing a sense of place often goes unnoticed given our tendency to take places for granted.

“A life without places is as unimaginable as a life without other people.”⁴ There was a time when our sense of place was bound to a specific locality, where shared experiences and collective

identities were largely rooted in distinct geographic domains; nevertheless, globalization and technology have certainly changed, and continues to transform, our relationship to place. When Relph first coined the term *placelessness*, he was essentially lamenting the shift from diversity to universality that came to define the modernist aesthetic of practical, packaged landscapes detached from local contexts. Borne from a world of mass production and communication, this type of generic environment is what contributes to an inauthentic experience of place, as described by Relph.⁵

Strikingly similar to the concept of *placelessness* developed by Relph, the term *non-place* was introduced into the lexicon of spatial theory sixteen years later by the anthropologist Marc Augé in *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. Whereas Relph criticized the kitsch of modernity, Augé was concerned about the excesses of late modernity, as manifested in the proliferation of anachronistic, acontextual and

anonymous sites. He contrasts anthropological places tied to identity, relations and history with *non-places* that are basically devoid of time, context and meaning. Defining the traveller's space as "the archetype of *non-place*,"⁶ such transitory spaces of circulation, communication and consumption include airports, highways, hotels, shopping malls, tourist attractions and even cyberspace.⁷

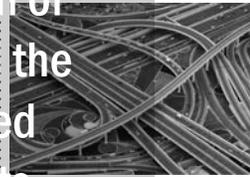
Placelessness:

STRIP

SPRAWL

TRANSIT

The casual eradication of distinctive places and the making of standardized landscapes that results from an insensitivity to the significance of place.



-Edward Relph, Place and Placelessness, 1976



HOTEL

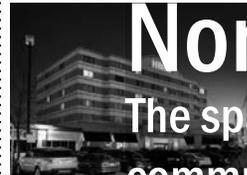
MALL

SUPERMARKET



Non-Place:

The spaces of circulation, communication and consumption, where solitudes coexist without creating any social bond or any social emotion.



-Marc Augé, Paris and the Ethnography of the Contemporary World, 1996

Figure 3. Typologies of placelessness

Although our relationship to place has long been a common interest among influential philosophers from Martin Heidegger to Michel de Certeau, the concepts of *placelessness* and *non-place* have continued to shape the discourse around placemaking and to characterize what constitutes much of our contemporary urban landscape, especially in so-called global cities, which are almost indistinguishable from each other. Dismissing *placelessness* and *non-place* as overly binary, some critics have argued that spatial experience is much more nuanced and dynamic than these concepts allow. Even though such criticism may be based on a misinterpretation of *placelessness* as the romanticization of place⁸ or a misunderstanding of *non-place* as more than a personal observation of place,⁹ both concepts remain limited by their focus on spatial typologies rather than urban conditions that are transforming how we think about space and how we define place. If a sense of *placelessness* cannot simply be defined as the experience of *non-places*, then what does it mean today?

Heightened Incongruities

“We live in a world where great incompatibles coexist: the human scale and the superhuman scale, stability and mobility, permanence and change, identity and anonymity, comprehensibility and universality. These are the reflections of the gap between advancing technology and humanity as historical existence.”

-Kenzo Tange
Kenzo Tange by Robin Boyd, 1962

Technological progress has catalyzed social change throughout human history, but no other form of innovation has arguably outpaced our adaptability as much as digitalization. While digital networks have not replaced material conditions, they are transforming how we engage with and think about our physical environment. According to Bernard Tschumi, “Airstrips, information centers, public performance spaces, internet and worldwide web access all point to a redefinition of received ideas about parks, nature, and recreation, in a 21st century setting where everything is ‘urban’, even in the middle of the wilderness.”¹⁰ Digitalization is undoubtedly challenging the very notion of the city. A place that once shaped and defined our identities is being reduced to a spectacle on the one hand, while the endless connections enabled by virtual networks are expanding our sense of place on the other.

In his 2008 essay *Toward a City of Events*, Antoine Picon raises concerns about digital culture creating the illusion of an “eternal present” by erasing markers of time and place.¹¹ As cities become part of global networks, so too its built landscape, manifesting in the homogeneity of urban centres. We are also witnessing the transformation of architecture into digital artifact, with the city objectified into a collection of Instagrammable images wiped clean of all the inherent messiness of urban life. Such an experience of place is similar to that of the tourist described by Augé as a detached spectator making up the very spectacle of place.¹² But the rising dominance of smartphones may be the most conspicuous example of how technology is transforming our connection to and our engagement with place. We can now be almost anywhere at any time and navigate any place without any prior knowledge. We are even capturing more of our everyday lives as digital data, relying less on place-based memory.

A quarter century ago, the geographer Doreen Massey asked, “In an era when, it is argued, ‘local communities’ seem to be increasingly broken up, when you can go abroad and find the same shops, the same music as at home, or eat your favourite foreign-holiday food at a restaurant down the road- and when everyone has a different experience of all this- how then do we think about ‘locality’?”¹³ This question is even more poignant today as we continue to transition from the physical to the digital sphere. Our sense of place was already shifting in the 90s, but technological advancements have since broadened the scope of globalization exponentially, accelerating and expanding the time-space compression of modernity.¹⁴ Responding to the *placelessness* explored by Relph, Massey argued for a global sense of place to better reflect the fact that places are actually processes in a complex network of ever-changing relations. Digitalization only serves to further expose the paradox of place,

where old and new, local and global, internal and external, are in constant dialogue.

Intertwined with digitalization is the issue of displacement, especially as we move toward greater automation and a deepening digital divide. Neither new phenomena nor solely caused by technological shifts, displaced communities are more evident than ever with the emergence of refugee and homeless encampments across our urban landscapes. Even though migration flows are driven by a multitude of global forces, gentrification and commodification are largely attributed to local policies that have renewed debates about the right to the city. When Henri Lefebvre first came up with the concept in 1968, his aim was to reassert the rights of inhabitants over the rights of property owners.¹⁵ He emphasized that the right to the city was not simply about gaining greater access to urban space, but democratizing its production through social interaction and active participation.¹⁶

Decades after Lefebvre, Sharon Zukin coined the much-cited expression “pacification by cappuccino” to highlight how consumer culture has made gentrification palatable to the masses.¹⁷ She argues that cities, once engines of production, have morphed into landscapes of consumption now that cultural capital reigns supreme in our post-modern condition.¹⁸ Cities today are not unlike corporations competing for talent and investment. But when the focus on global competitiveness undermines public accountability, the very diversity that attracted the most creative of classes to these cities is rendered untenable unless governments prioritize inclusive development strategies, such as affordable housing and public healthcare.

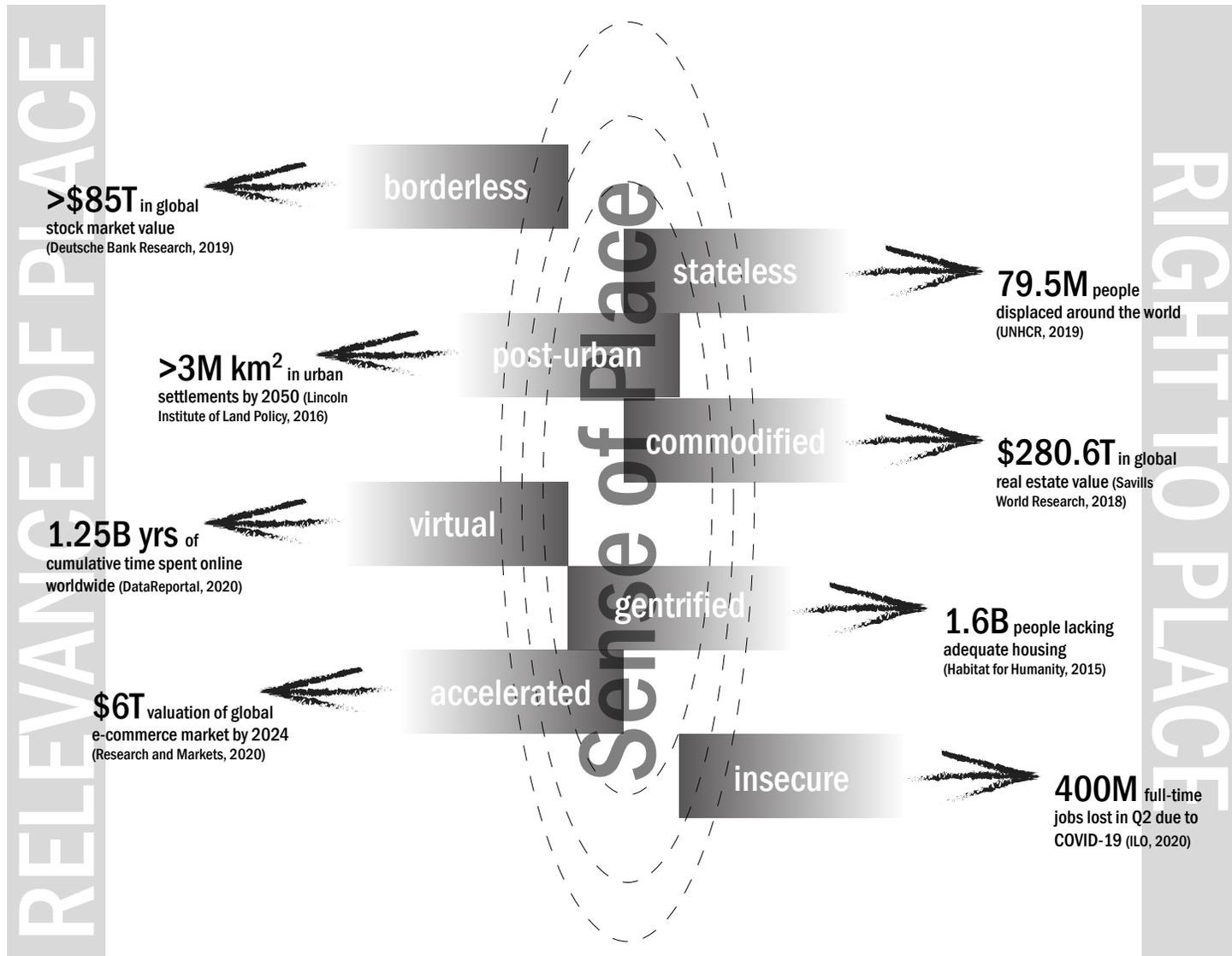


Figure 4. Incongruity diagram

Contrary to speculations about the diminishing role of place amid globalization, Saskia Sassen highlights not only the network of global cities required to support such developments, but also the growth of transnational urban spaces generating new claims on the city.¹⁹ More importantly, “a focus on the city in studying globalization will tend to bring to the fore the growing inequalities between highly provisioned and profoundly disadvantaged sectors and spaces of the city, and hence such a focus introduces yet another formulation of questions of power and inequality.”²⁰ Sassen warns that the commodification of the city through rising corporate acquisitions and large-scale redevelopments is undermining cities as drivers of social progress.²¹ Without spaces that enable civic action and institutions that provide public services, those who actually inhabit the city essentially lose the ability to exercise their democratic rights.

We live in a time when the relevance of place is being questioned just as the right to place is being threatened. Such incongruity

is only becoming more embedded as a result of the current pandemic, with social connection restricted to digital platforms and economic lockdown jeopardizing already precarious employment. Faced with the disorientation and dislocation of our current placelessness, what is the future of public space? This question had already been percolating within academic, planning and design circles before the pandemic, but the new norm of social distancing adds another layer of complexity to how we engage with public space. Pedestrian flows and outdoor gatherings, once considered to be defining features of vibrant communities, are now perceived as public risks to be managed through limited contact. Under such circumstances, ambivalence toward the public realm grows as people simultaneously grapple with the fear of transmission and the yearning for interaction. As we adapt to these uncertain times, a public realm that continues to serve the public will be more critical than ever.

PANDEMIC STREETSCAPES

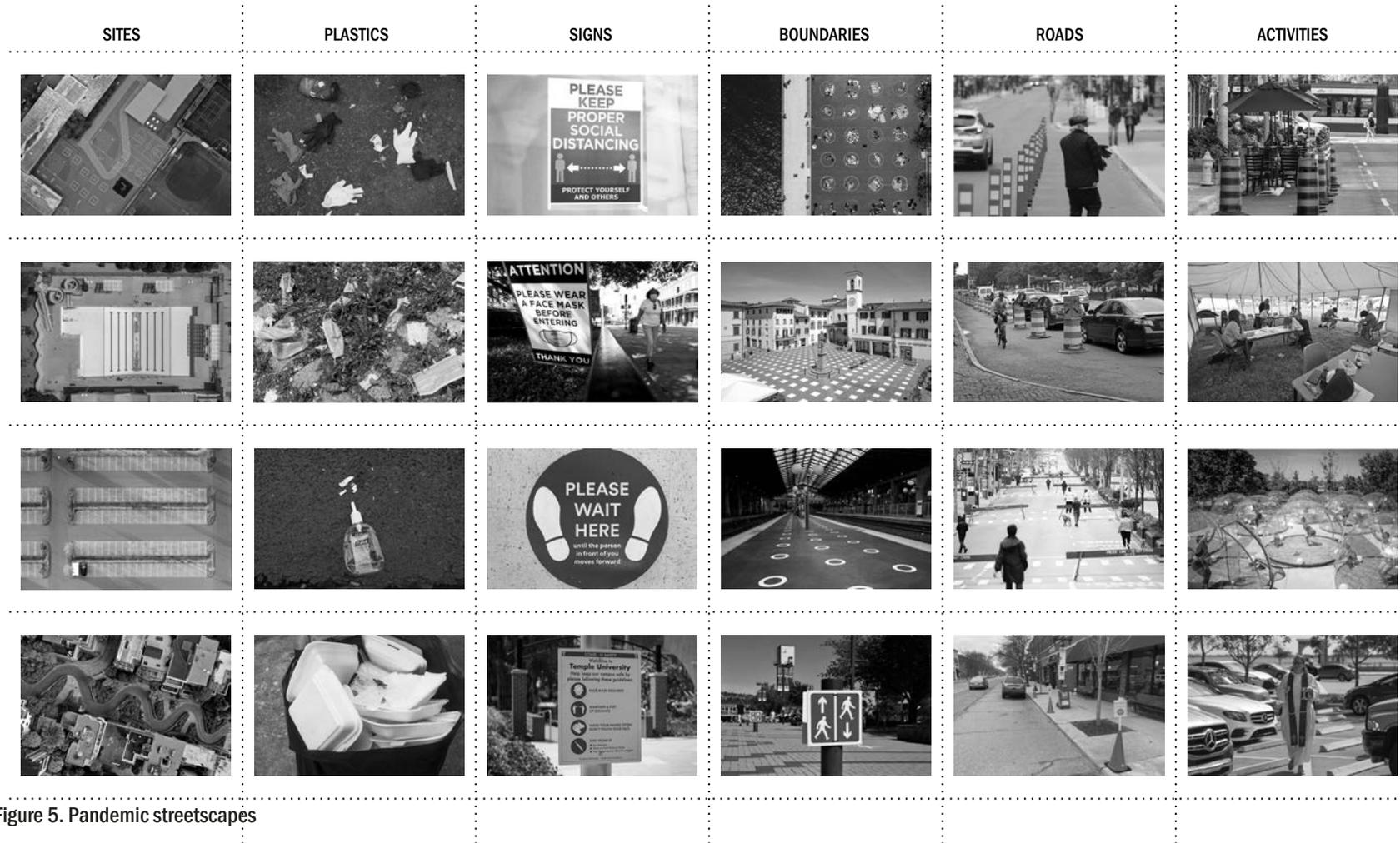


Figure 5. Pandemic streetscapes

1.2 Public space as public good

From Liveability to Living City

“The street is the river of life of the city. They come to these places not to escape, but to partake of it.”

-William H. Whyte
The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces, 1979 documentary

Showcasing urban life in all its chaos and glory, public spaces make great cities. The public realm has always been an inextricable part of urban planning discourse; however, growing urbanization around the world has reinvigorated discussions about the role of public space as a public good. In fact, the New Urban Agenda adopted at the 2016 United Nations Habitat III Conference included the following principle:

“We commit ourselves to promoting safe, inclusive, accessible, green and quality public spaces, including streets, sidewalks and cycling lanes, squares, waterfront areas, gardens and parks, that are multifunctional areas for social interaction and inclusion, human health and well-being, economic exchange and cultural expression and dialogue among a wide diversity of people and cultures, and that are designed and managed to ensure human development and build peaceful, inclusive and participatory societies, as well as to promote living together, connectivity and social inclusion.”²²

What Makes a Great Place?

Project
for Public
Spaces

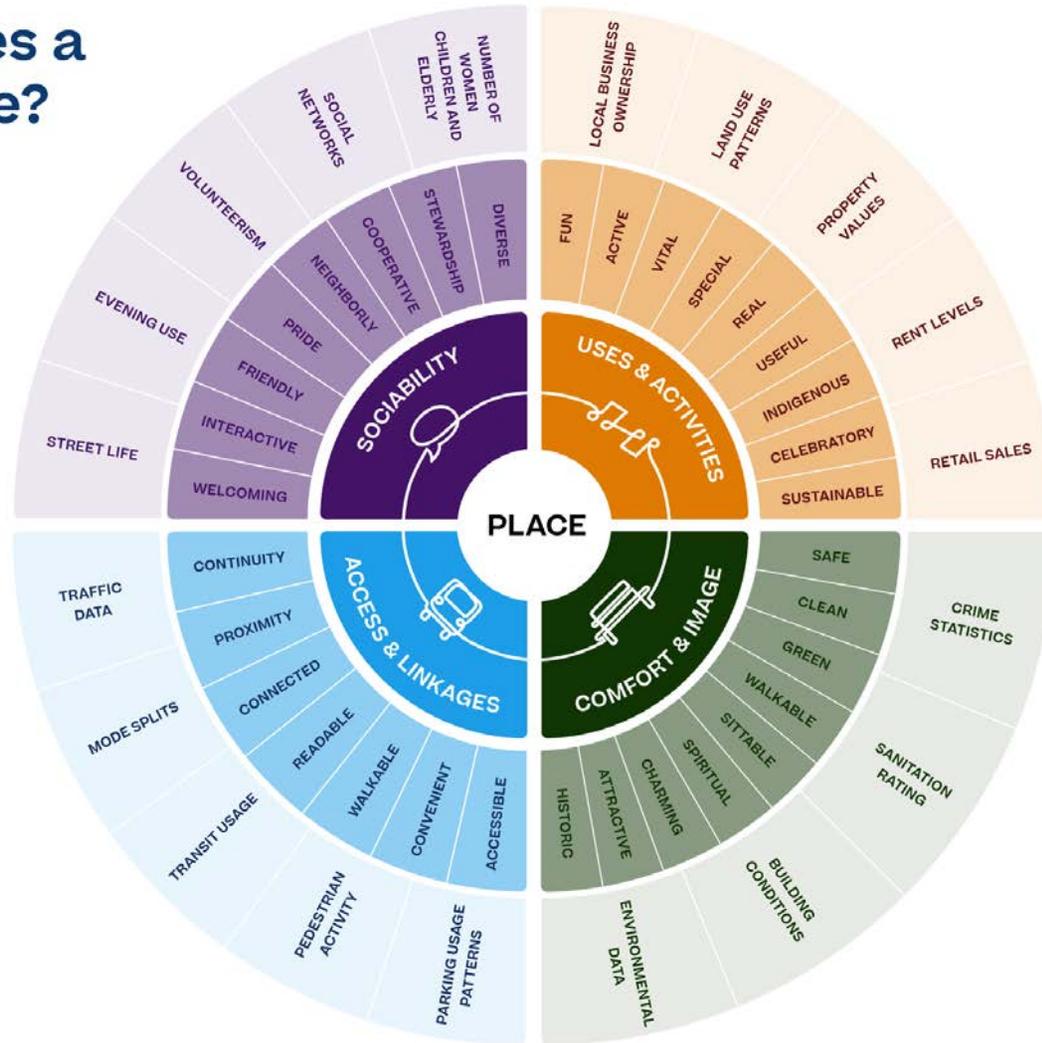


Figure 6. What makes a successful place? Project for Public Spaces

From Jane Jacobs to Jan Gehl, leading thinkers in urban design have long promoted a people-centred approach, which may seem obvious today, but much of the planning logic throughout the 20th century was based on the automobile, as demonstrated by the expansion of roadways and suburbs. With UN projections indicating that over two-thirds of the world's population will reside in cities by 2050, the sustainability pressures on cities have never been greater or more complex, especially given the challenges of balancing environmental, economic and social priorities. It is under these conditions that “liveability” has re-emerged as the concept du jour in urban planning, development branding and political decision-making.

The multitude of indices ranking cities around the world reflects and reinforces our current preoccupation with urban liveability. Annual reports such as The Economist Intelligence Unit's *Global Liveability Ranking* and Monocle's *Quality of Life Survey* are often the subject of media headlines and marketing campaigns, yet

they tend to present a misleading picture of what constitutes a liveable city, as their methodologies are shaped by particular perspectives and their outcomes are targeted at specific audiences.²³ What defines liveability is ultimately subjective, and the lack of consensus on its definition limits the impact of global indices to enhancing city branding instead of improving urban well-being. All the attention paid to this ambiguous concept has merely served to perpetuate a new type of utopian urbanism that conflates lively streets with liveable cities without challenging the hypocrisy behind this thin veneer of urban vibrancy.²⁴ “While the livable city is complicit in the poverty of citizens who can't afford to promenade and sip cappuccinos, it lives off the labor of an increasingly precarious class of urban dwellers.”²⁵

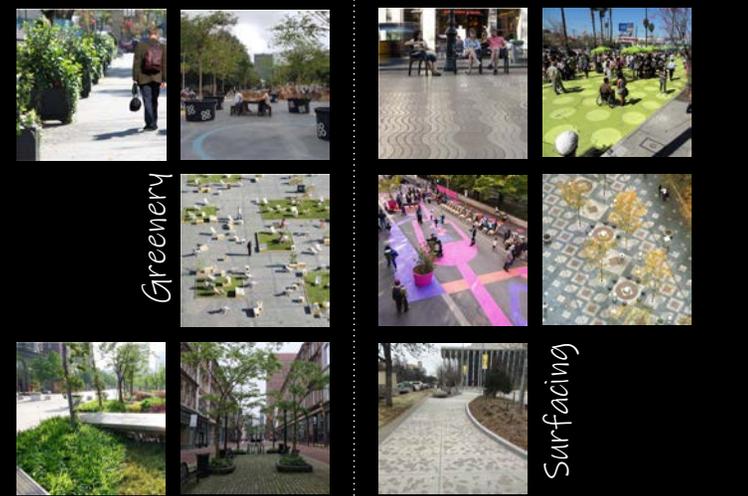


Figure 7. Mallscapes

Although the framework of a living city has gradually replaced the cliché of the liveable city in urban design, approaches to public space remain fairly uniform around the world, typically characterized by some combination of commercial activity, enhanced vegetation and pedestrian-friendly strategies. These interventions may seem sensible given the appeal of vibrant, green spaces conducive to social interaction; however, the decline of the pedestrian mall across North America demonstrates that simply removing traffic, adding flora and building retail space will not necessarily animate the public realm.²⁶ Many other factors play a role, from population size and density to amenity mix and concentration within a given neighbourhood. Moreover, often-cited best practices feature fairly straightforward principles such as access, activity, comfort and sociability.²⁷ In general, public spaces continue to reflect a superficial cookie-cutter approach that focuses more on urban beautification than user activation.

Rather than replicating and scaling conventional strategies, some urban designers have adopted a more holistic view of the relationship between public space and urban life. Influential theories underpinning this shift include landscape urbanism and urban acupuncture. Both perspectives emphasize the city as an organism, but the former favours large-scale transformation whereas the latter employs small-scale intervention to enliven the urban experience. Aligned with this organic framework is tactical urbanism, a pop-up street design movement that fully embraces the dynamism of city life. Such departures from traditional architecture in urban planning are inspiring designers to think beyond project sites and permanent structures at a time when interdependency and adaptability have never been more critical to urban sustainability. New contexts demand new strategies. “Faced with austerity, unaffordable housing, and rising debt, responding with wider sidewalks and bicycle lanes becomes so

banal that it is almost insulting.”²⁸ If emerging trends are any indication, urbanism may already be on the postmodern trajectory that Rem Koolhaas had anticipated for a post-urban world:

“If there is to be a ‘new urbanism’ it will not be based on the twin fantasies of order and omnipotence; it will be the staging of uncertainty; it will no longer be concerned with the arrangement of more or less permanent objects but with the irrigation of territories with potential;...it will no longer be about meticulous definition, the imposition of limits, but about expanding notions, denying boundaries, not about separating and identifying entities, but about discovering unnameable hybrids...”²⁹

From Public Space to Civic Place

“Space is not the setting (real or logical) in which things are arranged, but the means whereby the position of things become possible.”

**-Maurice Merleau-Ponty
*Phenomenology of Perception, 1962***

By virtue of its name, public space is taken for granted as urban zones open to all. But is public space actually public? Who makes up the public? Who controls these spaces? The urban commons, made up of our streets, our parks, our plazas are labelled as public, yet the reality is a continuum of access and agency differentiated across social, economic and political lines. We often assume that public spaces are also publicly owned when they are typically managed by a consortium of multi-sector organizations that may even involve different jurisdictions.³⁰ Through architecture, regulation and surveillance, these administrative entities govern which users and what behaviours are acceptable in our so-called public spaces, thereby defining the limits of what constitutes the urban commons. For the public realm to remain a truly shared asset, we need to appreciate our own role in defining the publicness of these spaces.

One way to reorient how people think about public space is through the concept of “democratic streets”, which brings access and agency to the forefront.³¹ Although living in a democracy necessarily entails certain rights and responsibilities, we are only conscious of these relationships when injustices arise in much the same way that public space becomes an issue only when access is denied. Democratizing the public realm requires a commitment to open access and an understanding that social impact rests with public usage. As argued by influential urban theorists such as Kevin A. Lynch, we should not see ourselves as merely passive users, but active participants with the freedom to modify and claim public space, as well as transfer those spatial rights.³²

Public space “is more than a domain in which individual action is aggregated, more than just a space of pedestrian traffic and sociability. It is a normative universe that is sustained by the action within it.”³³ How then do we move beyond mere space-making? The idea of *placemaking* refers to a more collaborative

approach to meaningful urban design that usually involves some form of public consultation, but preferences and priorities change over time, and even more rapidly in today’s politically-sensitive climate.³⁴ To fully optimize the public realm, it must be seen as a civic space where we participate in the collective experience and continual process of community-building. A more productive way forward may be exploring open-ended strategies through the lens of citizenship, as “claims for and demands on public space are enshrined in broader struggles over the psychological boundaries of belonging, identity, and civic entitlements.”³⁵

ANCHORING CONCEPTS

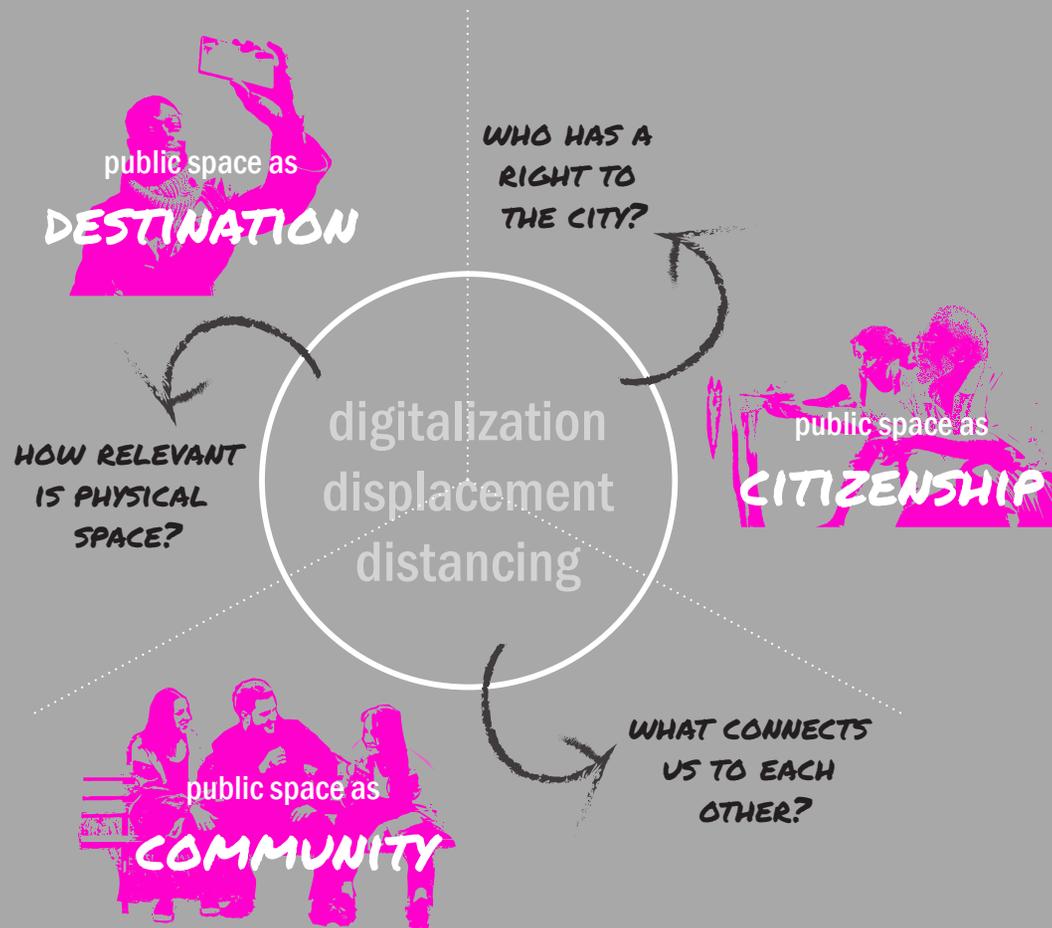


Figure 8. Anchoring concepts1

Current conditions of placelessness cannot be adequately addressed using past approaches to placemaking. With digital technology and socio-economic disparity eroding our sense of place, public space becomes vital as urban destinations that can help reinforce citizenship and community. The aim of this thesis project is, therefore, to redefine the public realm as sites of meaning, where we are simultaneously the users and the producers of spaces that strengthen our identity of, our belonging to, and our connection through place.

As everyday lives become more digital, our public spaces should provide the types of experiences that cannot be replicated online. The goal is not to reject technology, but to complement our digital lives by providing a platform for face-to-face interactions – where we can see and be seen. As cities become more unequal, our public spaces also need to serve diverse interests that make up thriving democracies. They are sites of contestation as much as sites of meaning, allowing competing authorities, narratives, and

opinions to converge and converse. And finally, as we continue to endure current and future conditions of pandemic alienation, the public realm will become even more essential as civic spaces that can help foster an evolving sense of community.

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²⁰ *Ibid.*, 40.

²¹ Saskia Sassen, "The City: A Collective Good?" *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*, Vol xxiii, Issue ii (Spring/Summer 2017): 125, <http://bjwa.brown.edu/23-2/the-city-a-collective-good/>.

²² United Nations, Habitat III Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development, *New Urban Agenda* (2017), 13, <https://habitat3.org/wp-content/uploads/NUA-English.pdf>.

²³ Brian Conger, "On Livability, Liveability and the Limited Utility of Quality-of-Life Rankings," *University of Calgary School of Public Policy Communiqué*, Volume 7, Issue 4, (June 2015), <https://www.policyschool.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/livability-conger.pdf>.

²⁴ Maroš Krivý and Leonard Ma, "The Limits of the Livable City: From Homo Sapiens to Homo Cappuccino," *Avery Review* 30 (March 2018): 7-8, <http://averyreview.com/issues/30/limits-of-the-livable-city>.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁶ Mark Francis, "The Making of Democratic Streets," *Contesti. Città, Territori, Progetti*, no. 1-2 (March 2017): 195, <https://doi.org/10.13128/contesti-20378>.

²⁷ "What makes a successful place?" Project for Public Spaces, accessed February 18, 2021, <https://www.pps.org/article/grplacefeat>.

²⁸ Krivý and Ma, "The Limits of the Livable City," 8.

²⁹ Rem Koolhaas, "What Ever Happened to Urbanism?" in *Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, S, M, L, XL* (Rotterdam: O10 Publishers, 1995), 969.

³⁰ Matthew Carmona, "Principles for public space design, planning to do better," *Urban Design International* 24 (2019): 51, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41289-018-0070-3>.

³¹ Francis, "The Making of Democratic Streets," 198.

³² *Ibid.*, 199.

³³ David Brain, "Reconstituting the Urban Commons: Public Space, Social Capital and the Project of Urbanism," *Urban Planning*, Volume 4, Issue 2 (2019): 179, <http://dx.doi.org/10.17645/up.v4i2.2018>.

³⁴ Mark Del Aguila, Ensiyeh Ghavampour and Brenda Vale, "Theory of Place in Public Space," *Urban Planning*, Volume 4, Issue 2 (2019): 256-57, <http://dx.doi.org/10.17645/up.v4i2.1978>.

³⁵ Andrés Di Masso, "Grounding Citizenship: Toward a Political Psychology of Public Space," *Political Psychology*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (Feb 2012): 123, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9221.2011.00866.x>.



Figure 9. Intersection of Sparks and Kent

part 2

A Placeless Site: *Neither town nor crown*

2.1 Canada's first promenade

The Past "Broadway" of Ottawa

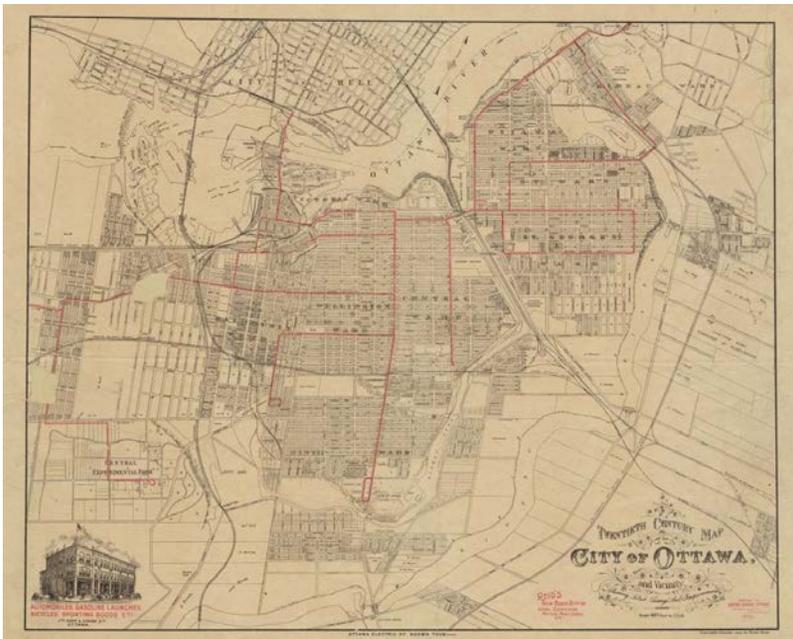


Figure 10. 1909 streetcar network, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation

The role of public space in a changing context will be explored through the lens of Sparks Street in Ottawa, the capital of Canada. Having been the subject of many failed attempts at urban renewal, the first pedestrian mall in the country remains a fairly placeless site that belies its intended role as the interface between the city and the seat of government. Although within walking distance to national institutions and attractions, Sparks Street is largely a dead zone outside of office hours and beyond sporadic summer events. But its very location also complicates planning due to the jurisdictional divisions and public expectations involved. In light of such challenging dynamics, the recent unveiling of yet another revitalization plan for Sparks Street presents an opportunity to reconsider the future of this nationally significant space against the backdrop of an increasingly digitalized, displaced and distanced public.

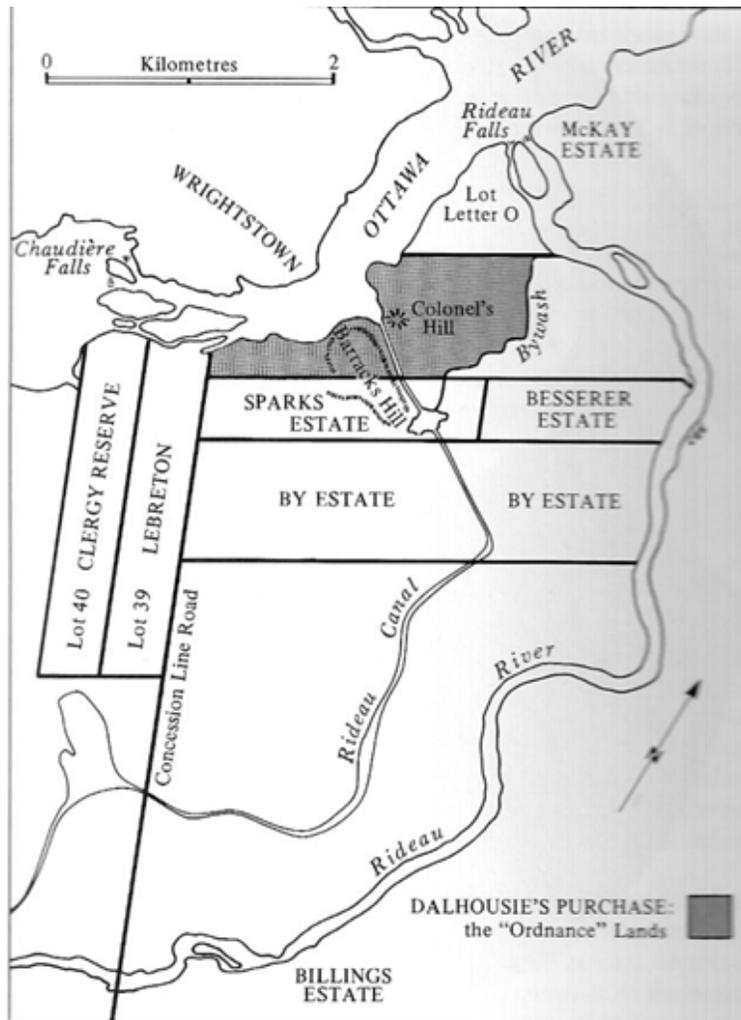


Figure 11. Map of Ottawa (c. 1840), *Ottawa: An Illustrated History*, John H. Taylor

Established in 1848, Sparks Street is named after Nicholas Sparks, an Irish immigrant farmhand who eventually became a wealthy landholder through the purchase of Crown land in the unceded territory of the Algonquin-Anishinaabe Nation.¹ What we know today as the Ottawa valley had been continuously occupied for thousands of years by the Algonquin people prior to European colonization, as its location at the intersection of the Gatineau, the Ottawa and the Rideau Rivers made it a strategic trading site.² In fact, the name Ottawa originates from the Algonquin word *adawe*, which means “to trade”.³ Once the region fell under British rule, political threats in Europe and from the United States led to permanent colonial settlements that eventually formed the lumber village of Bytown in 1850 and then the city of Ottawa in 1855.⁴ Only after Ottawa was designated the new capital of the Dominion of Canada in 1867 did Sparks Street rise in importance, quickly becoming the political and economic centre of the city.



Ottawa Museums and Archives Collection, 1910

Late 1800s to Early 1900s: **THE "BROADWAY" OF OTTAWA**



1950s to 1960s: **CAR CULTURE & URBAN FLIGHT**



City of Ottawa, 1968

1960s to 1970s: **BRINGING BACK THE PEDESTRIAN**



1970s to 1980s: **GOVERNMENT EXPROPRIATION**



City of Ottawa, 1990s

1980s to 1990s: **URBAN WINDOW DRESSING**



1990s to Present: **MYRIAD RENEWAL ATTEMPTS**

Figure 12. Timeline of Sparks Street

By the early 20th century, Sparks Street was a bustling corridor known locally as the “Broadway” of Ottawa.⁵ While sheer proximity to the Parliamentary Precinct was vital to its development, the arrival of an electric railway system in the 1890s enabled the street to attract broader interest beyond bureaucrats and parliamentarians.⁶ The post-war period, however, was a time of rapid urban transformation across North America. The automobile led to the demise of the streetcar as well as greater suburbanization, which was championed by Jacques Gréber in his 1950 urban plan for the national capital.⁷ Following the decentralization of government offices, the development of several regional malls served to further disperse residential and commercial growth.⁸

In an attempt to revive the downtown core, Ottawa turned to pedestrianization as a pilot project that was permanently adopted in 1967, when Sparks Street was officially rebranded as Canada’s first pedestrian mall.⁹ Nevertheless, the city has yet to see the

successful renewal of Sparks Street even after many decades of experimentation, from removing vehicle access and redesigning the streetscape to consolidating the national broadcaster and curating event programming on the site.

The Present Irony of Sparks Street



Figure 13. Sparks Street city sign

Ottawa is a rapidly expanding city that seems ill-prepared for growth and indifferent to its role as the nation’s capital. Beyond the Parliamentary Precinct and the Rideau Canal, there are few iconic landmarks that define the city and appeal to locals and tourists alike. Epitomizing this lackadaisical approach to city planning is Sparks Street, advertised as “an attractive destination encompassing local and national culture” on its website, but rather non-descript and underwhelming in person. As many visitors have likely wondered, “Where are the sparks on Sparks Street?” The pedestrian mall is dominated by office buildings even though it is technically designated as a mixed-use zone. Reflective of typical workday schedules, street activity is concentrated from 9 to 5 on weekdays and primarily along the eastern half of the 5-block mall, where most bars and restaurants are located. Despite the relative resilience of Ottawa through these pandemic times, fewer tourists and office workers downtown have made an already quiet street even more deserted.

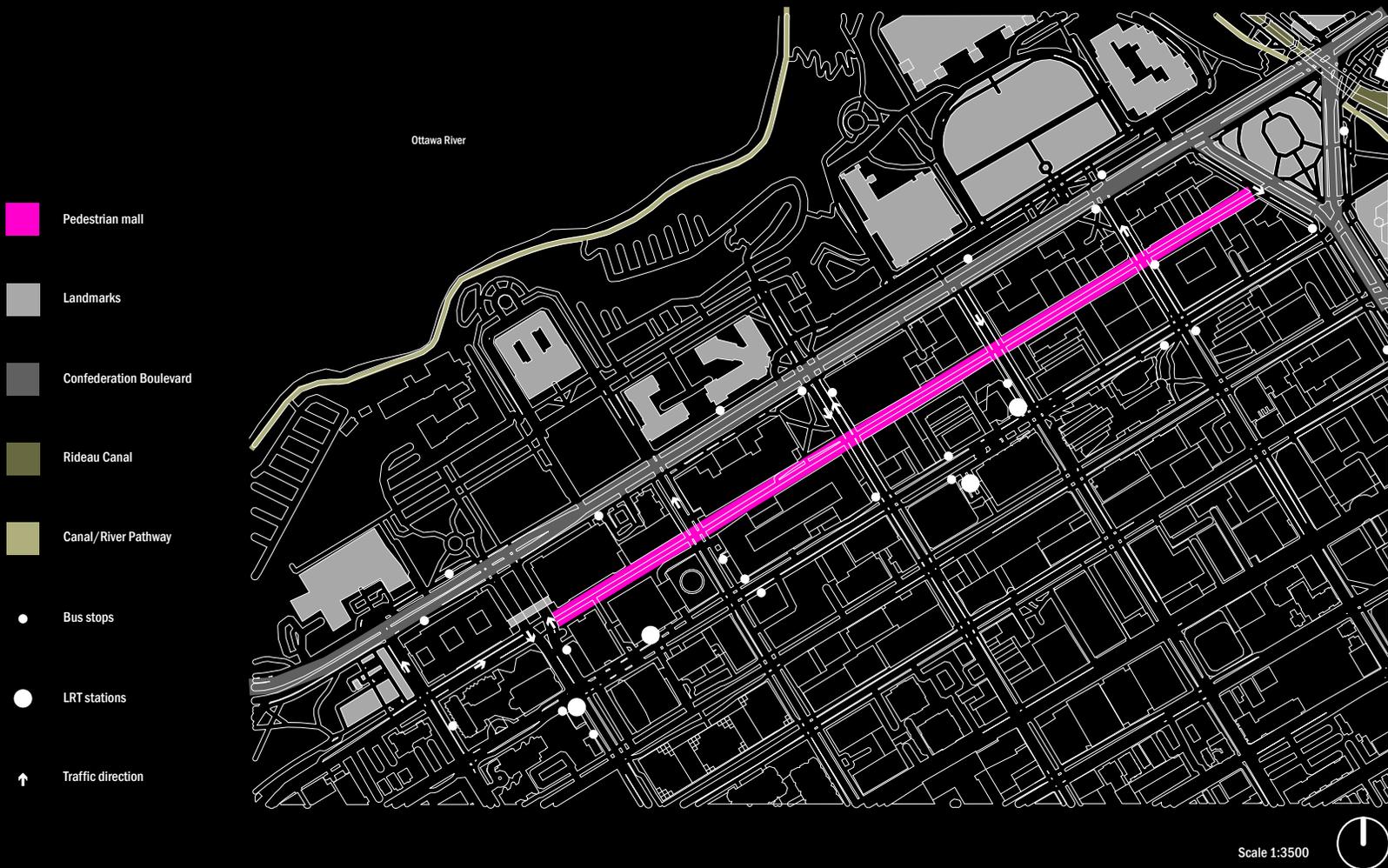


Figure 14. Site context



-  Sparks Street
-  Bike lanes
-  Ceremonial route
-  Light rail transit system (above/below grade)
-  Transport routes
-  Key commercial zones

Figure 15. Urban networks

DEMOGRAPHICS

20-39 year-olds

make up ~50% of the neighbourhood

1 to 2-person households

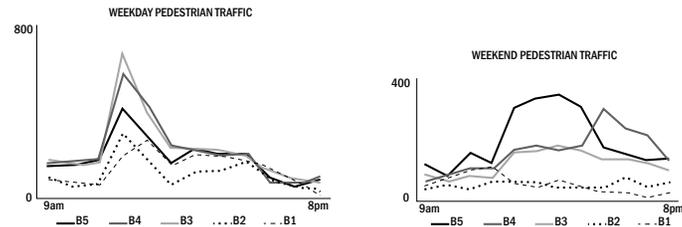
make up the majority

~25% are either in the **top/bottom quintiles**

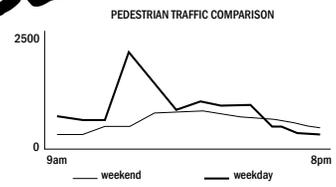
~50% **walk** and ~25% take **public transit**

REAL ESTATE

Market Indicators	Ottawa			Greater Ottawa		Yearly Trend
	Market Q2 2015	Market Q2 2016	Yearly	Market Q2 2015	Market Q2 2016	
Vacancy Rate	12.4%	14%	↓	9.9%	10.9%	↑
Net Absorption (\$ mil)	10,885	7,081	↑	-24,128	-25,993	↓
Rental Rate *	\$17.19	\$17.06	↓	\$17.78	\$18.95	↑



PUBLIC USAGE



Sparks Street NEIGHBOURHOOD STUDY

Figure 16. Neighbourhood study, data sourced from *A New Vision for Sparks Street: Background Report*, School of Urban and Regional Planning, Queen's University

With government expropriation and corporate redevelopment over the years, the pedestrian mall has essentially transformed into a mere pathway for office workers, especially as many of the buildings feature indoor amenities that compete with those on Sparks Street.¹⁰ Aside from office buildings and a handful of food establishments that make up the bulk of street life, the only attractions are a Winners store, the Bank of Canada Museum and a scattering of small independent retail outlets. Enhancements are also few and far between, as seating is quite sparse along the street, and only one out of the five blocks is lined with trees or decorated with art. If it were not for the limited heritage architecture preserved on the northeast side, Sparks Street would be like any other unremarkable pedestrian thoroughfare largely detached from its context. Even the newly-built light rail train (LRT) system has not increased foot traffic on Sparks Street, although no apparent effort was made to visually connect nearby stations to the mall.

But the greatest disappointment may be the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, which was intentionally situated to improve the vibrancy of Sparks Street.¹¹ Since its completion in 2004, the CBC building has not had much of an impact due to the lack of visible street-level interface beyond the barely detectable programming emanating from outdoor speakers. To make matters worse, building access from Sparks Street has been restricted as a security measure, thereby reducing the very activity that the CBC was supposed to generate.¹²



PRIMARY/GROUND-FLOOR OCCUPANCY

- A. Department of Justice
- B. Department of Justice, cafe, salon
- C. St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church
- D. Transport Canada
- E. Vacant
- F. Marriott Hotel, Starbucks Coffee
- G. Bank of Canada/Museum
- H. Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada; restaurant; various retail
- I. House of Commons offices
- JKL. Vacant
- M. Salon, optometrist, offices
- N. Parliamentary Press Gallery
- O. Parliament of Canada offices
- P. Jeweller, entertainment
- Q. Cafe, jeweller, various bars/restaurants
- R. McDonald's, various services, yoga studio
- S. Cafe, various services
- T. Bar, entertainment
- U. Gym
- V. Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, cafe
- W. Restaurant, department store
- X. Government of Canada, food service
- Y. Senate of Canada offices
- Z. Vacant
- a. Parliamentary offices, cafe, various retail
- b. Interim Library of Parliament
- c. Indigenous Peoples Space
- d. Souvenir shop
- e. Vacant
- f. Vacant
- g. Tourist info centre
- h. Restaurant, various services
- i. Bar
- j. Bank, gym, residential, various food/services
- k. Bank
- l. Condominium
- m. Offices, various food services
- n. Office of the Prime Minister and Privy Council
- o. Government offices, bike shop, various food/retail
- p. Restaurant, vacant offices
- q. Jeweller, salon
- r. Bike shop, salon
- s. Various organizations
- t. Canada Post
- u. Bank, government offices
- v. Restaurant
- w. Canada Post, various organizations
- x. National Capital Commission
- y. Jeweller, restaurant, tour guide
- z. Cafe, various services

Figure 17. Site plan and elevation

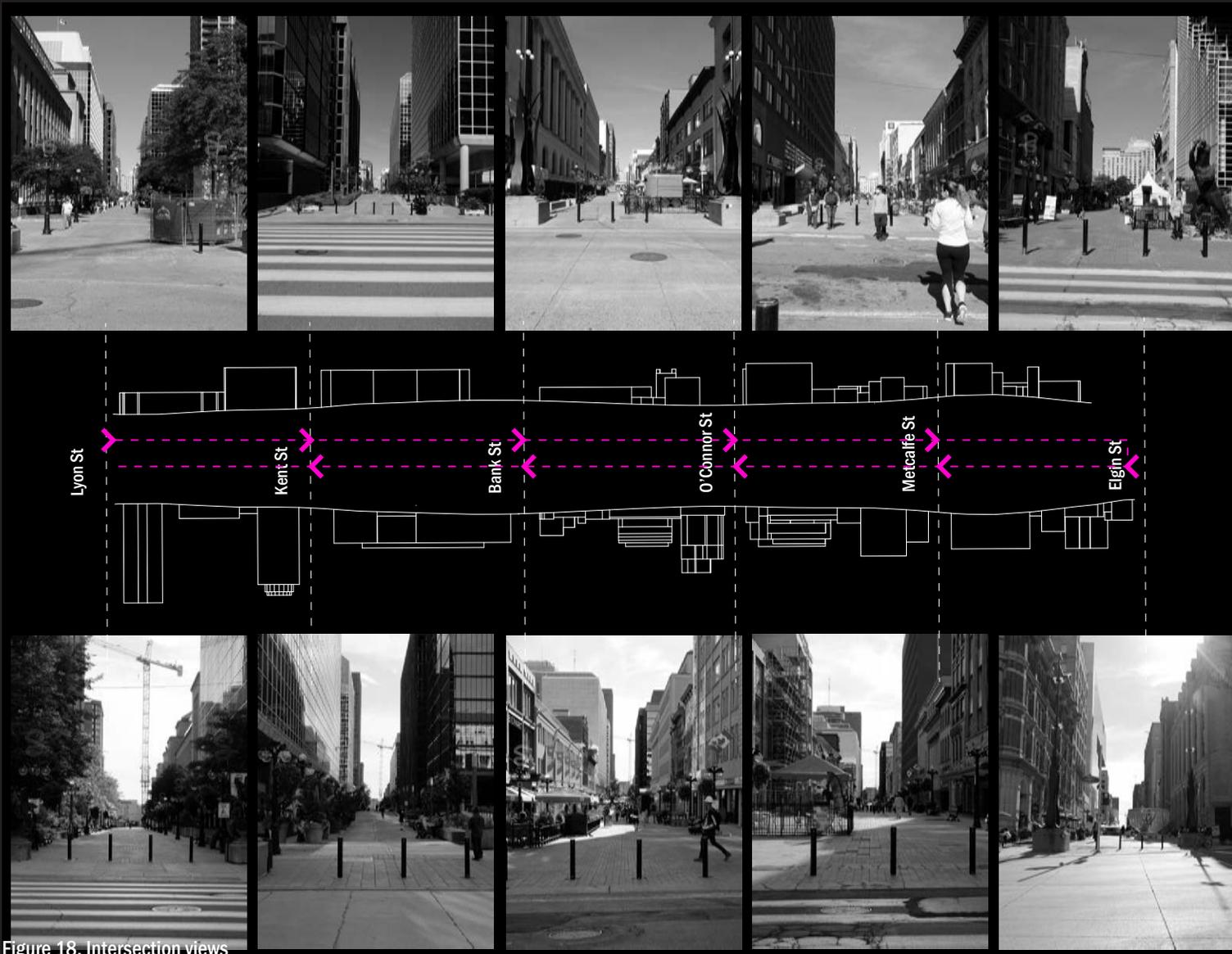


Figure 18. Intersection views

A key issue undermining the revitalization of Sparks Street is urban governance. As with most urban planning projects, multiple stakeholders are involved in vision-setting and decision-making processes, from planning and funding to implementation and management. In the case of Sparks Street, its location in a capital city also means navigating jurisdictional boundaries as well as competing interests. At the federal level, the National Capital Commission (NCC) is responsible for Crown lands and nationally significant sites, and Public Services and Procurement Canada (PSPC) oversees the Parliamentary Precinct, which includes much of the north side of the street. At the local level, the City of Ottawa is the primary urban planner that regulates municipal development, and the Sparks Street Mall Authority and Business Improvement Area (SSMA/BIA) manages the actual pedestrian mall.

With four separate governing bodies, establishing leadership and ensuring coordination becomes an ongoing challenge, particularly

when most of the stakeholders have mandates and priorities beyond Sparks Street. For instance, a common grievance directed at PSPC is the lack of interest in building a vibrant pedestrian mall, as many federal properties remain either unoccupied or inaccessible to the public.¹³ While the switch to short-term leasing may be a contributing factor, others simply blame it on bureaucratic management.¹⁴ More generally, consultations have highlighted poor communication among stakeholders as a major barrier to improving Sparks Street.¹⁵

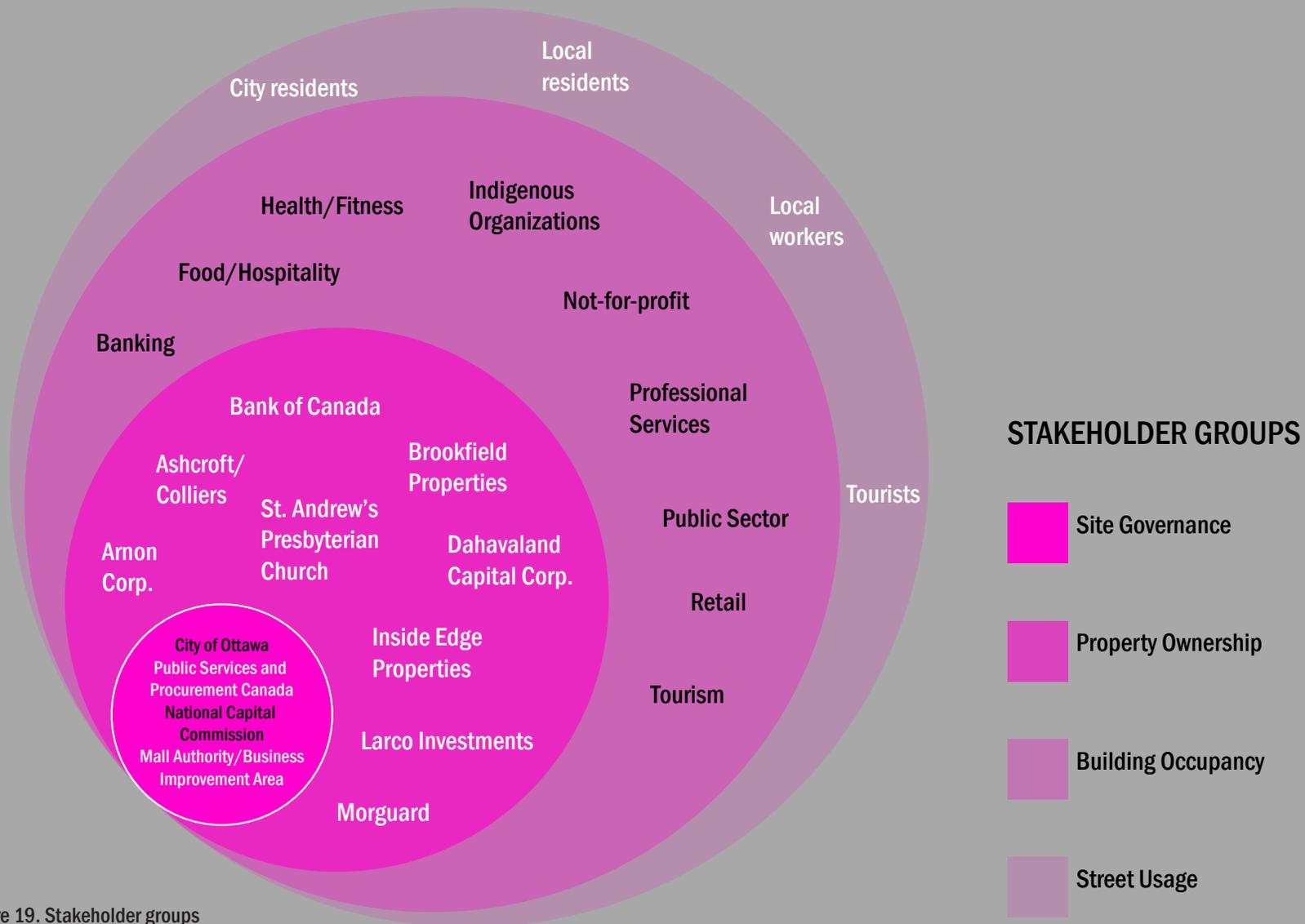


Figure 19. Stakeholder groups

2.2 Brand new plans, same old ways

A State of Perpetual Renewal

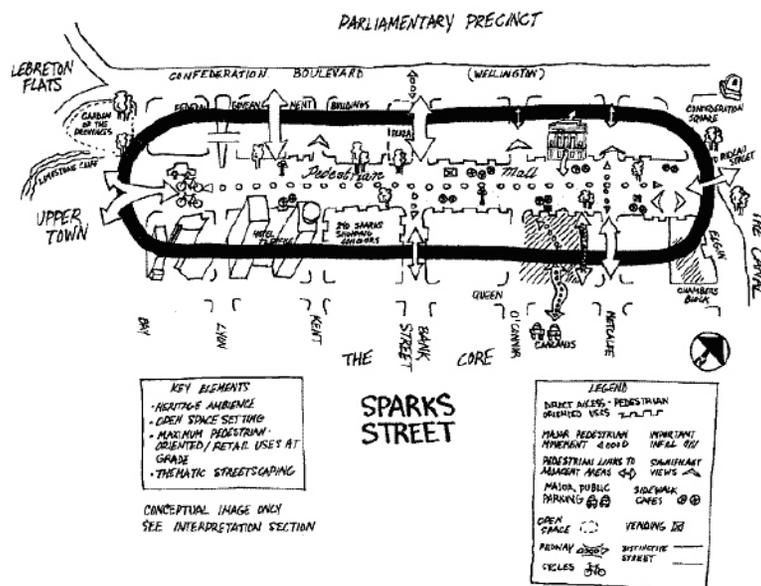


Figure 20. Secondary Plan diagram, City of Ottawa

Since Sparks Street was officially converted into a pedestrian mall, subsequent revitalization measures have been implemented, yet little has changed in terms of public usage, even after a major revamp in 1989.¹⁶ Perhaps the issue is not just the design but the underlying vision. Is it possible that stakeholders are actually “asking the wrong questions by focusing on a quick fix treating visual symptoms and judging success by retail indicators?”¹⁷

Over the years, layers of policies and principles have guided the development and redevelopment of Sparks Street. Aligned with provincial objectives, the 2003 Official Plan of the City of Ottawa is a holistic approach to urban growth that prioritizes heritage, liveability and sustainability.

Outlined in the more detailed Central Area Secondary Plan are the following key goals for Sparks Street: To strengthen its identity as a mixed-use pedestrian mall, to protect its historical and cultural significance, and to promote its role as a pedestrian corridor connecting significant sites in the downtown core. Despite an appreciation for its broader values, Sparks Street is still envisioned as an open-air shopping mall,¹⁸ which is not much of a departure from previous attempts at reviving the past. Echoing many of the same objectives as the Official Plan, the Core Area Sector Plan produced by the NCC also includes the revitalization of Sparks Street.

To execute these plans and to maximize future developments, authorities have conducted a number of studies both jointly and separately. In 2004, the NCC, PSPC, the City of Ottawa and the SSMA commissioned the *Sparks Street Vocation Study* that resulted in the four thematic options of shopping centre; linear urban park; arts, culture and entertainment; and transit corridor.

Although this study was completed 17 years ago, many of those themes continue to resonate with the stakeholders today.

Following confirmation of the LRT project, an urban design and transportation study entitled *Downtown Moves* was undertaken in 2013 to identify opportunities to animate Sparks Street and the surrounding downtown core outside of office hours. A noteworthy outcome of this study is the reframing of all downtown streets as public spaces integral to the capital city experience. More specifically, Sparks Street is redefined as a “plaza street”,¹⁹ which arguably shifts the focus from retail zone to public realm. Additional studies were completed in 2016 and 2017 by the City of Ottawa and the NCC respectively to inform the development of a new vision and plan for the pedestrian mall.

Even though approaches and priorities may differ across these studies, most of the recommendations for the revitalization of Sparks Street have concentrated on a similar set of predictable

themes. Ensuring heritage preservation is an obvious priority given the historical significance of the street, from its architectural quality to its prominent role in the development of the nation's capital. Improving urban connectivity is another critical function, not only as the interface between the Parliamentary Precinct and the downtown core, but as the link between LeBreton Flats to the east and Rideau Canal to the west.

To draw greater public interest, a third recommendation is strengthening the identity of Sparks Street through thematic approaches and design anchors that can help transform it into a true capital destination. Today, the pedestrian mall still lacks a clear vision. Other than a few streetscaping details, such as gateway pillars and branded lampposts, the built environment remains fairly generic, almost unnoticeable from intersecting streets. Finally, studies underscore the need to invest in more diverse street programming, as usage patterns are limited to workday schedules, weekend tourism and seasonal events.

While this new plan presents a thorough strategy for moving forward, it remains ostensibly driven by clichés and conventions that are not reflective of a truly unique and dynamic public realm.

Defining the concept behind the plan is the following excerpt from the vision statement:

“Sparks Street has long been a place for cultural exchange and civic celebration and this plan calls for a refocus and refinement around this same vocation by providing spaces and programming that celebrates and publicly reinforces the **broad values and diverse traditions that unify us as Canadians. Our connections to nature, our winter resilience, inclusion, equity, reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples, sustainability, CBC, hockey, poutine, maple syrup, being sorry and so on.**”²¹

As the foundation that anchors and guides the design strategy, a vision statement rooted in such stereotypes about Canadian culture risks perpetuating outdated, insensitive landscapes. The conflation of challenging political issues with superficial cultural characteristics is also problematic, especially when it relates to an

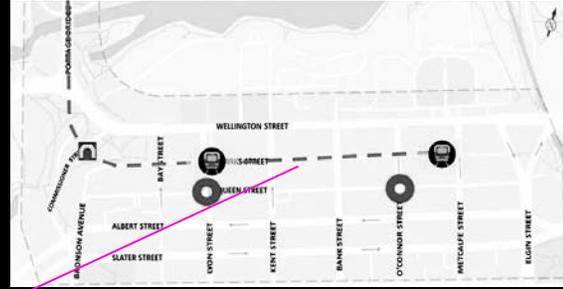
historically significant public space such as Sparks Street. In terms of actual interventions, the plan draws from urban design features that are already ubiquitous in the public realm.

To enhance the pedestrian-centric quality of the street, directives include typical additive elements such as soft landscaping, seasonal decorations, moveable seating, art installations and street signage. Other commonly employed strategies include curated programming and property alignments, both of which often involve bureaucratic processes as well as strong commitment from all stakeholders. Although proposed gathering nodes within each block certainly open up new possibilities for the public realm, the role of Sparks Street as the town-to-crown interface is only explicitly addressed through profile constraints that protect sightlines. The plan mentions enhancing mid-block building connections to adjacent streets,²² yet this strategy is neither fully explained nor represented.

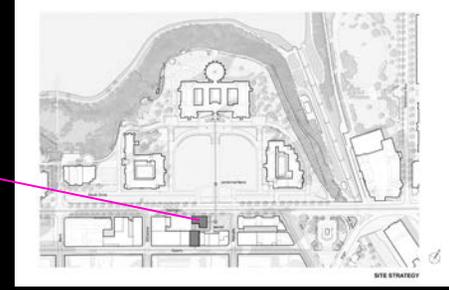
To further complicate the upcoming redesign of Sparks Street, a number of redevelopment and infrastructure proposals for downtown Ottawa may bring challenges as well as opportunities. While funding has yet to be confirmed, an underground LRT tunnel running along Sparks Street has been approved by City Council as the preferred route for connecting Gatineau and downtown Ottawa.²³ The city is also seeking federal funding to conduct a feasibility study for a more extensive rail loop and another pedestrian mall just north of Sparks Street.²⁴ As the Long Term Vision and Plan for the Parliamentary Precinct is currently being updated, such an ambitious proposal for Wellington Street could incentivize a bolder approach to Sparks. One notable change already undertaken is the designation of an *Indigenous Peoples Space* within the Precinct, which includes property facing the pedestrian mall.

Immediately west of the downtown core is the LeBreton Flats redevelopment, where a new pathway and the future Ottawa

Public Library–Library and Archives Canada joint facility will be located. The hope is for these projects to bring more pedestrian traffic to Sparks Street, although the future remains uncertain given the impact of the pandemic on workplace practices and local businesses in the downtown core. With Ottawa developing a new Official Plan for the next 25 years, now is an ideal time to rethink the public realm in the nation’s capital. How do we create public spaces that can help ensure better outcomes for residents in the face of greater disorientation, dislocation and disconnection? Might this be the moment to finally explore interventions that not only draw people to Sparks Street, but empower them as actual agents of urban transformation?



STO Underground Tram



Indigenous Peoples Space



Precinct Renewal



LeBreton Flats Master Plan

Figure 22. New developments

endnotes

¹ City of Ottawa, Public Services and Procurement Canada, National Capital Commission and Sparks Street Mall Authority, *Sparks Street Public Realm Plan*, prepared by Vlan + Civiliti in collaboration with WSP (2019), 6, https://documents.ottawa.ca/sites/documents/files/sparks_street_public_realm_plan_en.pdf.

² Jean-Luc Pilon, "Ancient History of the Lower Ottawa River Valley," in *Ottawa River: A Background Study for Nomination Under the Canadian Heritage Rivers System*, prepared for The Ottawa River Heritage Designation Committee (2005), 16, <http://ottawariver.org/pdf/0-ORHDC.pdf>.

³ "Origin of the names of Canada's provincial and territorial capitals," Natural Resources Canada, accessed March 15, 2021, <https://www.nrcan.gc.ca/earth-sciences/geography/origins-canadas-geographical-names/origin-names-canadas-provincial-and-territorial-capitals/9188>.

⁴ Brett McGillivray, "Ottawa," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, June 21, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Ottawa>.

⁵ City of Ottawa et al., *Sparks Street Public Realm Plan*, 6.

⁶ Tom New, "Remembering Ottawa's original 'LRT,'" *Ottawa Citizen*, August 23, 2019, <https://ottawacitizen.com/opinion/columnists/new-remembering-ottawas-original-lrt>.

⁷ City of Ottawa et al., *Sparks Street Public Realm Plan*, 7.

⁸ Maria Cook, "The Strøget Solution," *Ottawa Citizen*, March 22, 2008, <https://web.archive.org/web/20151109111044/http://www.canada.com/ottawacitizen/story.html?id=d47ee45e-4f47-4b2b-b947-ab95578e2e8a&k=30759&p=1>.

⁹ City of Ottawa et al., *Sparks Street Public Realm Plan*, 7.

¹⁰ Cook, "The Strøget Solution."

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Paula McCooey, "CBC staff can't use Sparks St. door to shop on Sparks St.," *Ottawa Citizen*, September 04, 2015, <https://ottawacitizen.com/news/local-news/cbc-workers-with-access-to-sparks-not-allowed-to-shop>.

¹³ Cook, "The Strøget Solution."

¹⁴ Giacomo Panico, "Sparks Street's great divide bad for business, merchants say," *CBC News*, November 01, 2019, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/sparks-street-s-great-divide-bad-for-business-merchants-say-1.5339340>.

¹⁵ City of Ottawa, *A New Vision for Sparks Street: Background Report*, prepared by the School of Urban and Regional Planning, Department of Geography and Planning, Queen's University (2016), 163, [https://www.queensu.ca/geographyandplanning/sites/webpublish.queensu.ca.dgpwww/files/files/SURP/Project Course Documents/SURP 826- Background Report \(3\).pdf](https://www.queensu.ca/geographyandplanning/sites/webpublish.queensu.ca.dgpwww/files/files/SURP/Project Course Documents/SURP 826- Background Report (3).pdf).

¹⁶ City of Ottawa et al., *Sparks Street Public Realm Plan*, 7.

¹⁷ Cook, "The Strøget Solution."

¹⁸ "Central Area Secondary Policy Plan," City of Ottawa, accessed March 18, 2021, <https://ottawa.ca/en/planning-development-and-construction/official-plan-and-master-plans/official-plan/volume-2a-secondary-plans/former-ottawa/10-central-area#1-13-sparks-street>.

¹⁹ City of Ottawa, *Downtown Moves: Transforming Ottawa's Streets* (2013), 28, https://documents.ottawa.ca/sites/documents/files/documents/dm_draft_report_en_0.pdf.

²⁰ City of Ottawa et al., *Sparks Street Public Realm Plan*, 12.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 16.

²³ Joanne Chianello, "Sparks Street tunnel for Gatineau LRT gets committee's OK," *CBC News*, November 16, 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/transportation-committee-sto-light-rail-sparks-street-1.5803392>.

²⁴ Ibid.



Figure 23. Street art, Manly Beach

part 3
Spatial Civitas:
Beyond pedestrianization

3.1 Reorienting our public spaces

Present conditions of placelessness are making us rethink our relationship to the public realm. How relevant is public space when more and more aspects of everyday life are experienced remotely? How do we ensure that everyone has a right to place in the face of increasing dislocation? How can we maintain social cohesion if we continue with distancing measures and deepen the economic divide as a result of ongoing lockdowns? These are the questions that have spurred this thesis project on the reorientation of Sparks Street from a placeless site to a shared street where meaningful experiences are derived through interaction and participation. More specifically, the project aims to create a distinct public space connected to its context, to enable users to contribute to placemaking in diverse ways, and to provide a year-round venue adaptable to the changing needs of a growing capital.

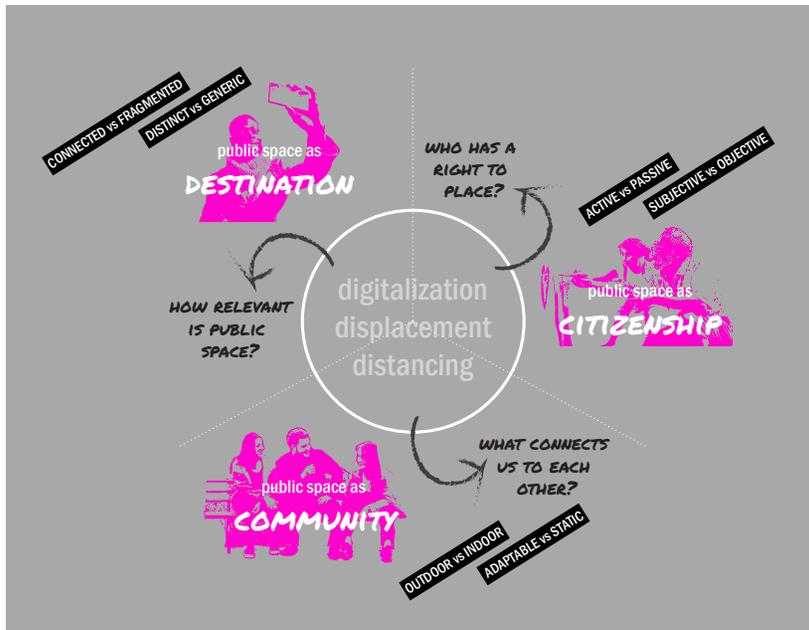


Figure 24. Anchoring concepts2

Taking into consideration our eroding sense of place, especially in this current pandemic, different conditions demand different responses. From governments and businesses to non-profits and communities, many organizations have demonstrated their capacity to pivot in the face of crisis. Despite uneven success, efforts have been made to reduce red tape across the public sector, particularly in regards to funding supports and regulatory requirements. Where possible, the private sector has shifted to outdoor operations and online services. Communities have also mobilized local resources for various food-sharing and delivery initiatives. Even before the pandemic, the rise of the sharing economy and social platforms had already revealed growing demand for alternative modes of exchange, expression and engagement. In light of such trends, we have an opportunity to reimagine our public spaces as community-building sites where people can not only engage with one another, but also discover their own agency in shaping their neighbourhood and their city.

Pedestrian malls like Sparks Street can become much more than their building occupants, which are certainly not irrelevant, but beyond the scope of design. In fact, there is a growing body of work challenging conventional practices in the public realm, with projects applying adaptive strategies to abandoned sites and firms proposing alternative approaches to urban design more broadly. Serving as a repository for radical departures from traditional architectural practice, the Spatial Agency project showcases projects that use collaborative spatial design to maximize social impact.¹ A much-lauded case study of architecture as empowerment is the social housing work by the Chilean firm Elemental. The first of such innovative projects was the 2003 Iquique development, which involved building half houses with allocated space for communities to incrementally expand and increase property values.²



Figure 25. *The Cineroleum*, Assemble



Figure 26. *City Thread*, SPORTS

Providing an alternative model for urban land use, the 2009 Interboro Partners project LentSpace animated a vacant Manhattan lot awaiting redevelopment by using moveable planters and barriers to form a modular art park.³ Another temporary revitalization of unoccupied urban space is The Cineroleum, a 2010 project by Assemble that transformed an empty London gas station into a movie theatre with the help of local volunteers.⁴ Winner of the 2016 Passageways 2.0 competition to activate urban alleys in Tennessee,⁵ City Thread by the design collaborative SPORTS is a more recent example of architecture for social good. With the pace of technological and social innovation further accelerated by the pandemic, the proposed intervention for Sparks Street presented in this thesis project is inspired by such deviations in design thinking and methodology, which are opening up new avenues for democratizing space in the 21st century.



Besiktas Fishmarket, Istanbul, GAD



CAAC, Córdoba, Paredes Pino



Vieux Port, Marseille, Foster+Partners



Urban Bloom, Shanghai, Urban Matters



LentSpace, New York, Interboro



Mountain on the Moon, Tarifa, Enorme Studio

Figure 27. Precedents

3.2 Democratizing the urban street



Figure 28. Current site (top) and redesigned site (bottom)

Sparks Street is made up of five pedestrianized blocks separated by crosswalks that interrupt the flow of the site and diminish its impact as a capital attraction. As these cross streets connect key landmarks to the rest of the downtown core, it is even more unfortunate that they remain as roads fragmenting the pedestrian mall. Missed opportunities also exist within each block of Sparks Street, especially where heritage designation is not a design constraint. Two glaring examples are the blocks that bookend the pedestrian mall, as neither are well-defined except for the presence of fairly banal entrance pillars.

Multiple blocks are also dominated by glass office buildings that could be found in almost any business districts around the world. Other underutilized assets that could draw more foot traffic to the street include the national broadcasting corporation and nearby LRT stations. While the blocks present multiple avenues for further exploration, this thesis project focuses on transforming the overlooked cross streets into civic intersections where spatial agency shifts from the urban planner and designer to the urban user.



Figure 29. Block 1 opportunities

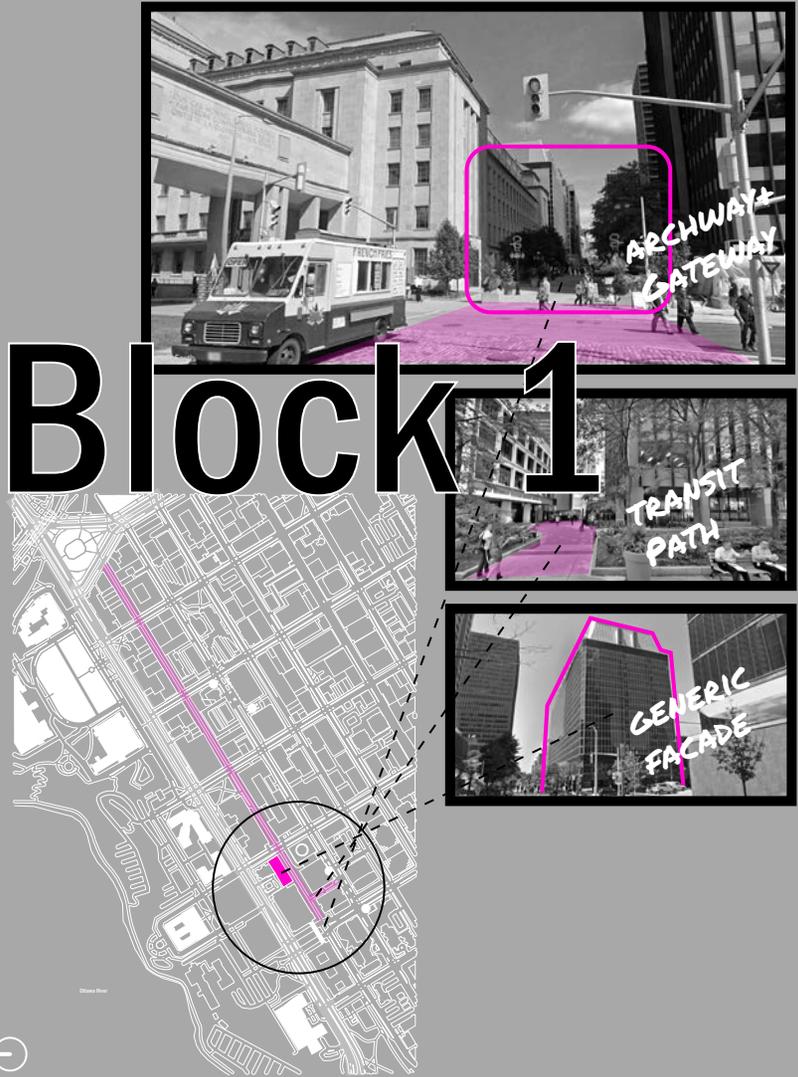




Figure 30. Block 2 opportunities

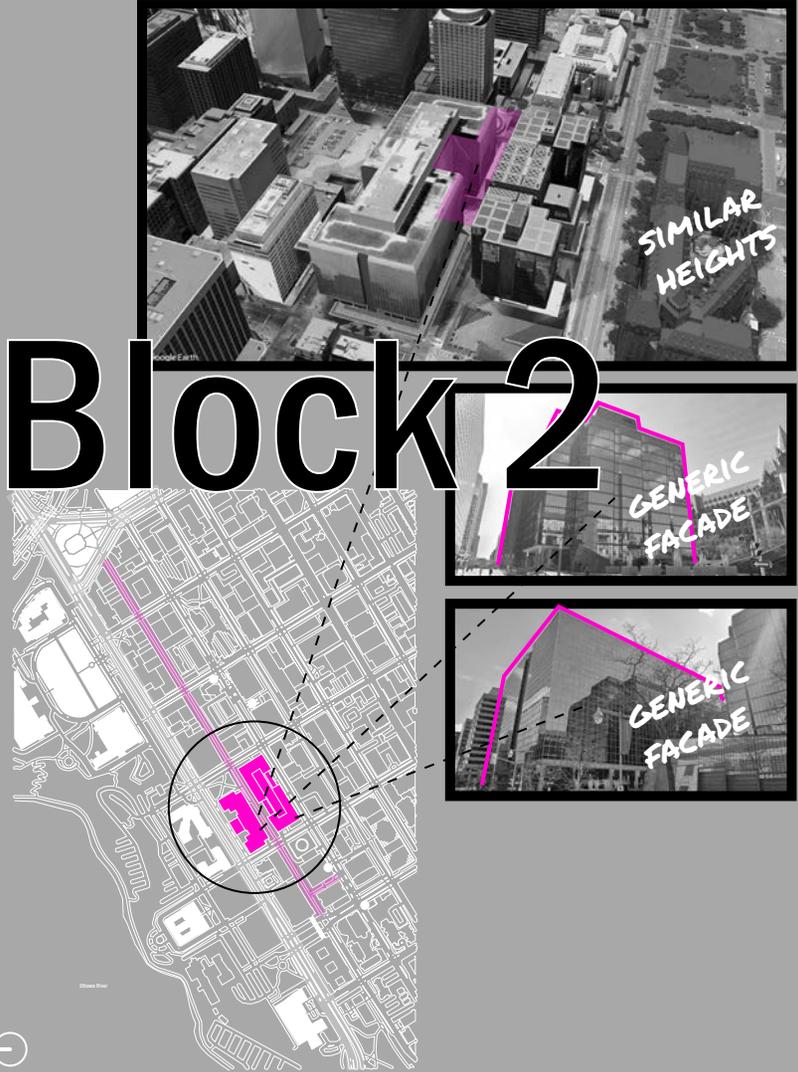




Figure 31. Block 3 opportunities

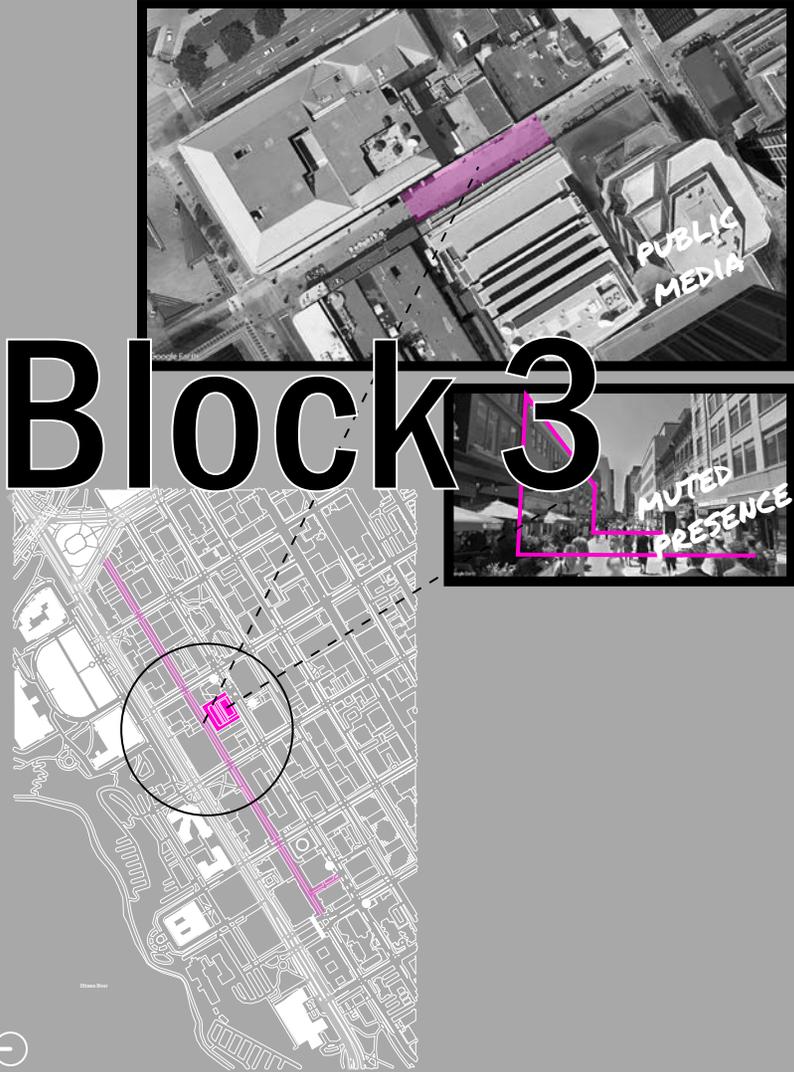




Figure 32. Block 4 opportunities

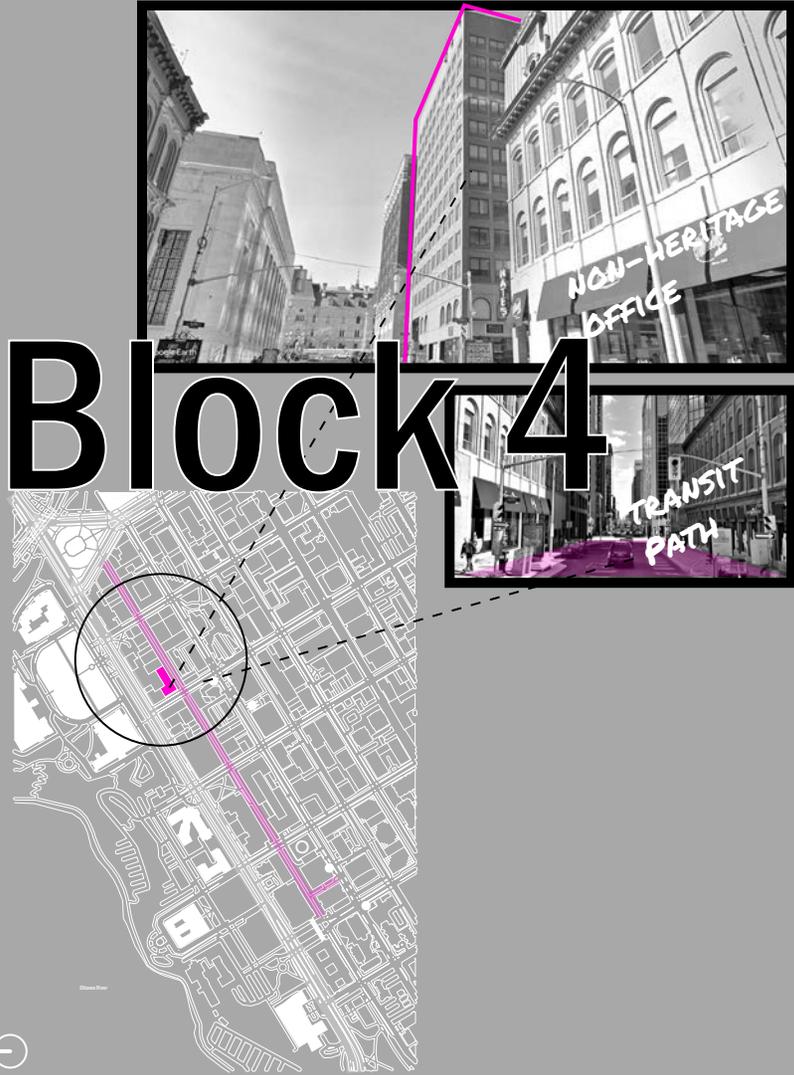
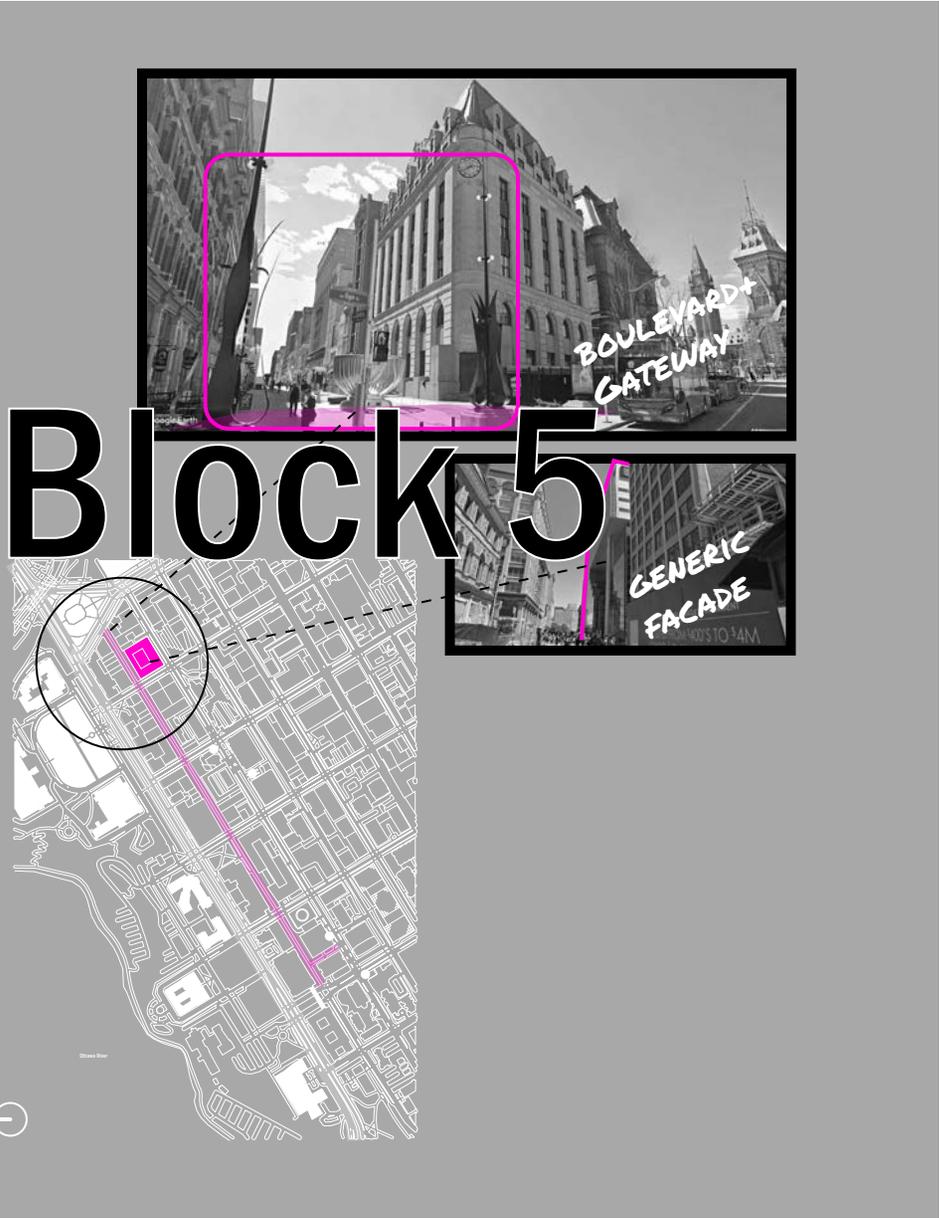




Figure 33. Block 5 opportunities



The theme of connectivity figures prominently in all of the planning documents and commissioned studies addressing the revitalization of Sparks Street. As noted previously, the latest plan for the pedestrian mall briefly mentions mid-block building connections to adjacent streets. The Downtown Moves study also highlights priority nodes near Sparks Street that should be made more visible to improve wayfinding.⁶ Although the streets intersecting Sparks provide some of the best views of the Parliamentary Precinct, they have yet to be recognized as potential anchor points for the pedestrian mall. A closer examination of these cross streets reveals existing conditions that can be better optimized to improve the pedestrian experience, from greenspace and wide roads to landmark views and transit hubs.

To improve site continuity, the proposed design strategy converts these cross streets into additional public spaces integrated with Sparks Street to truly reflect its intended role as the interface

between “town and crown”. Pedestrianizing these intersecting streets enables them to be fully maximized as activation nodes that extend into Wellington Street to the north and Queen Street to the south, thereby enhancing the visibility of Sparks Street and connecting Parliament to the city. Should an STO transit loop and additional pedestrian mall on Wellington actually transpire, these cross streets will become even more important as connection points in the downtown core.

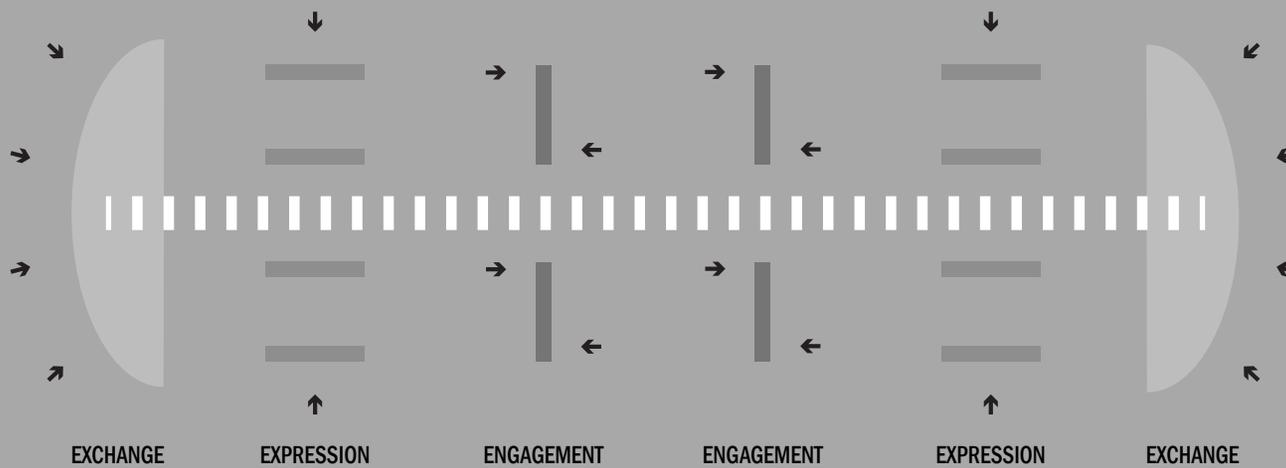
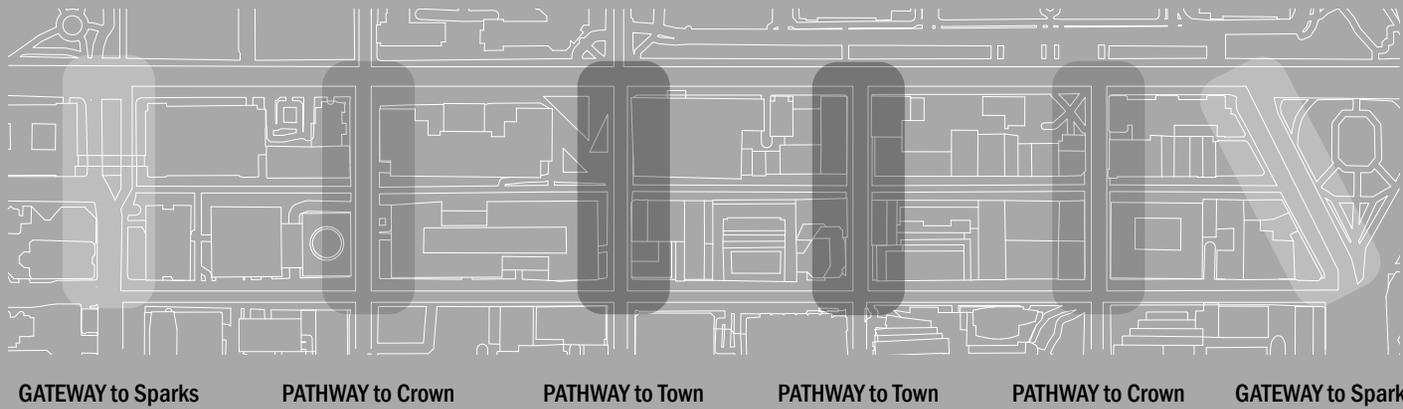
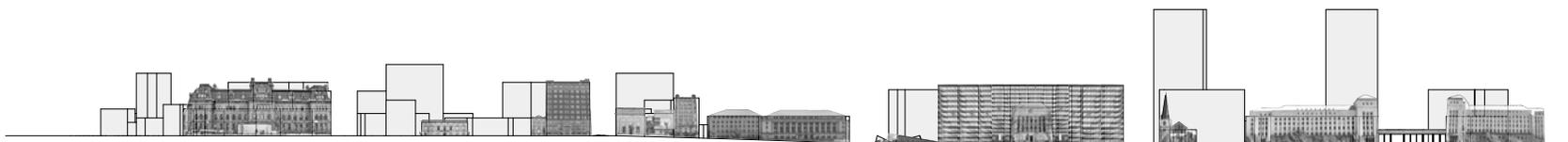


Figure 34. Design scheme

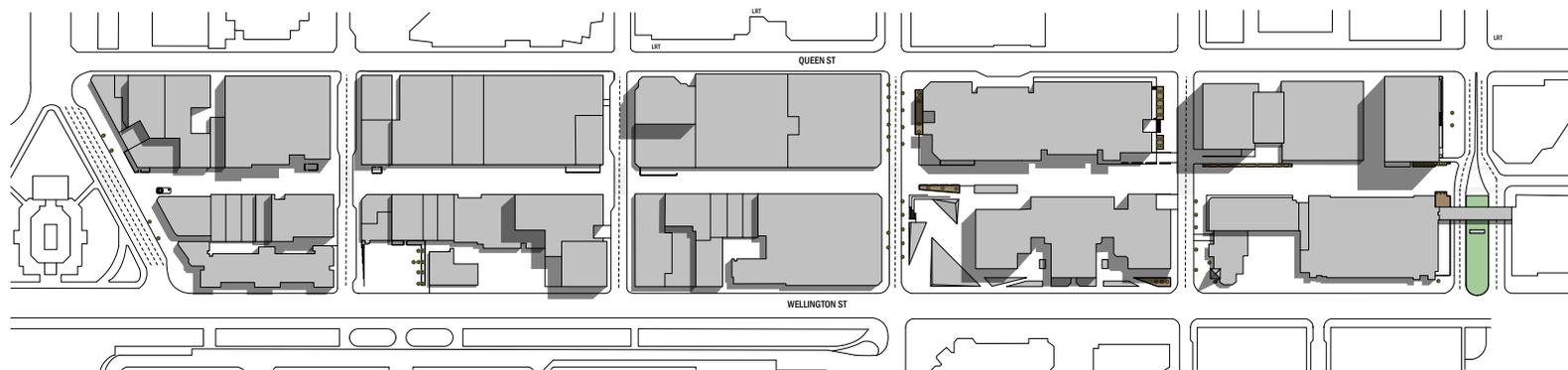
Another frequently discussed issue is the identity of Sparks Street. Whereas Downtown Moves categorizes the pedestrian mall as an ambiguous “plaza street”, the public realm plan defaults to the traditional cultural site inspired by stereotypes of what it means to be Canadian. Most plans and studies also recommend curated programming and generic streetscaping to animate Sparks Street, but the failure of similar approaches in the past and the need for responsive strategies in the present bolster the case for a more radical vision. As public spaces are often enlivened by markets, buskers and events, the regulation of such activities through municipal fees, permits and licenses can act as barriers to a vibrant public realm.

To ensure greater access for a wider range of public uses, these cross streets are reimagined as deregulated zones where all citizens can come together to freely participate in building a shared sense of place. Aligned with this objective, the design intervention for each intersecting block focuses on strengthening

the visible identity of Sparks Street, framing the views of surrounding sights as well as enhancing the versatility of the pedestrian mall. The ultimate goal is to create civic spaces for diverse forms of public exchange, public expression and public engagement in the capital of a leading democracy.



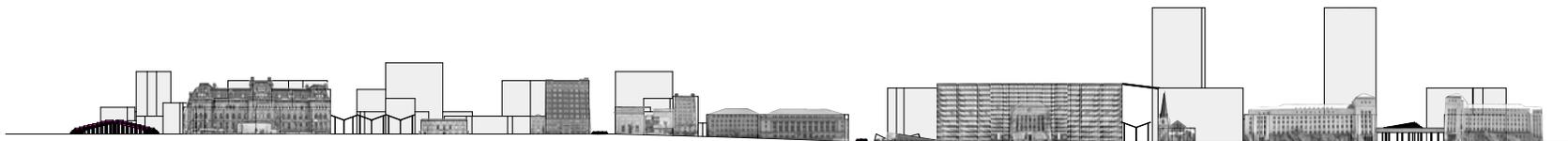
WELLINGTON ST ELEVATION



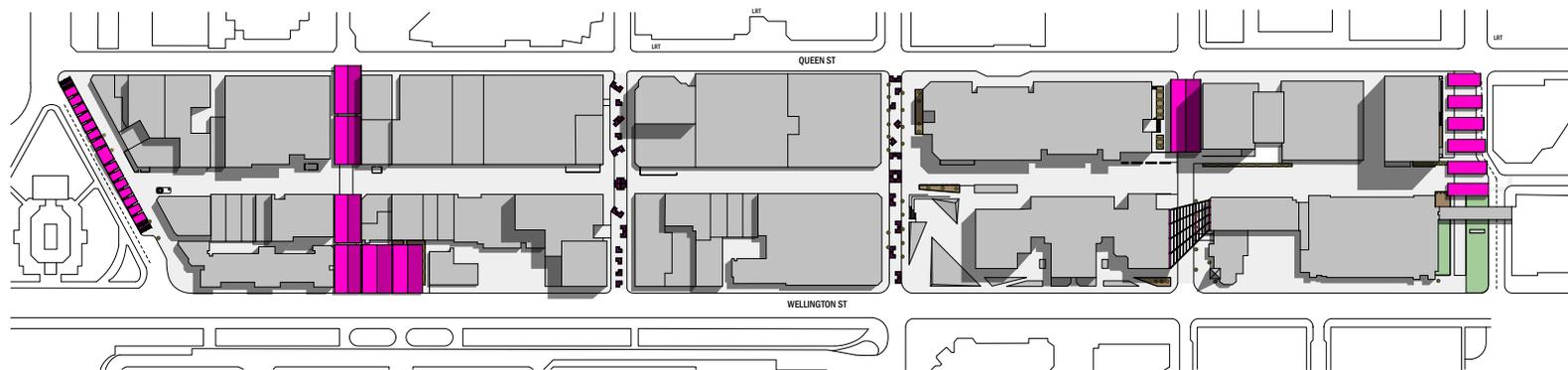
SITE PLAN



Figure 35. Current site



WELLINGTON ST ELEVATION



SITE PLAN

Figure 36. Redesigned site

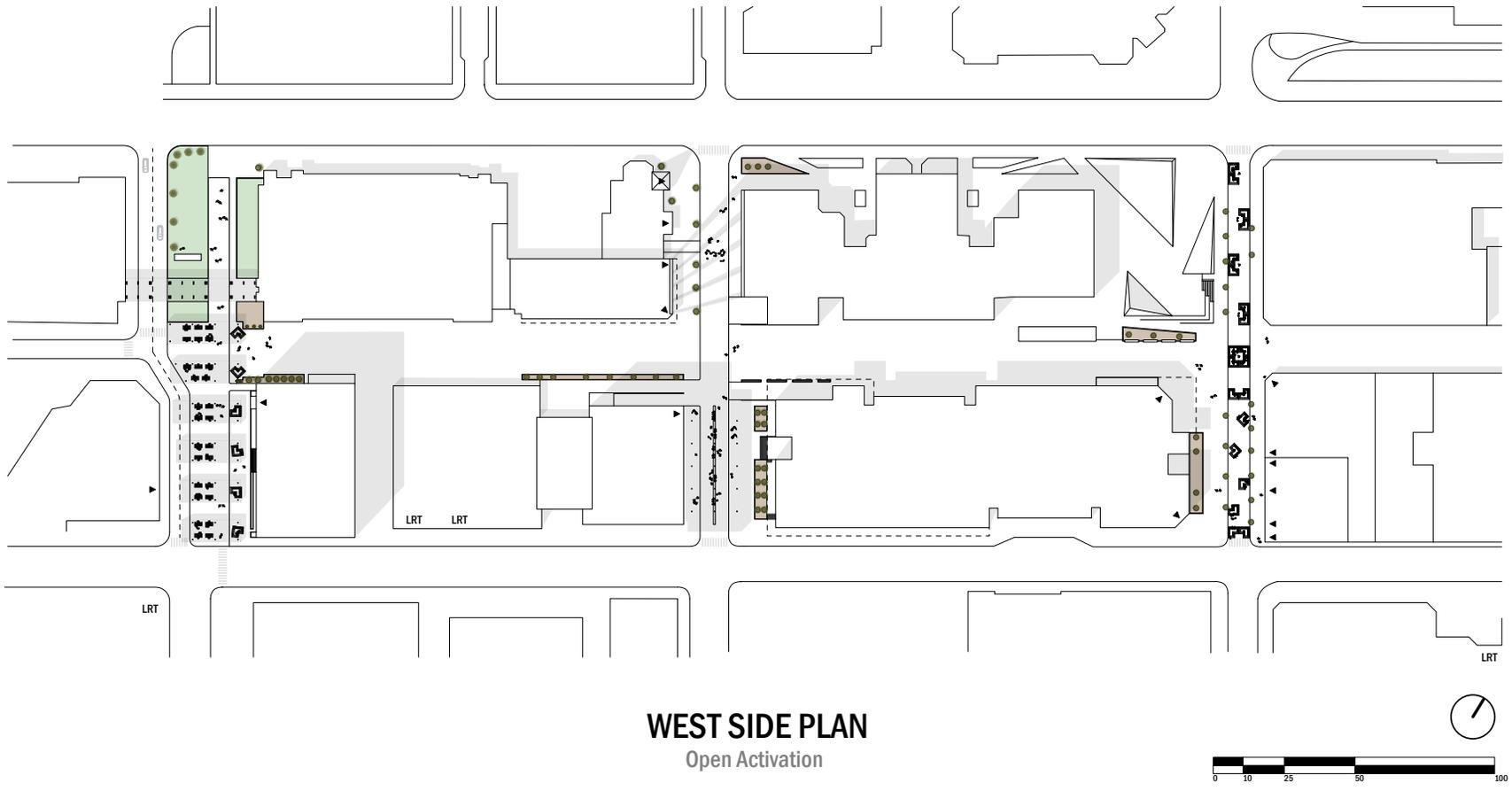
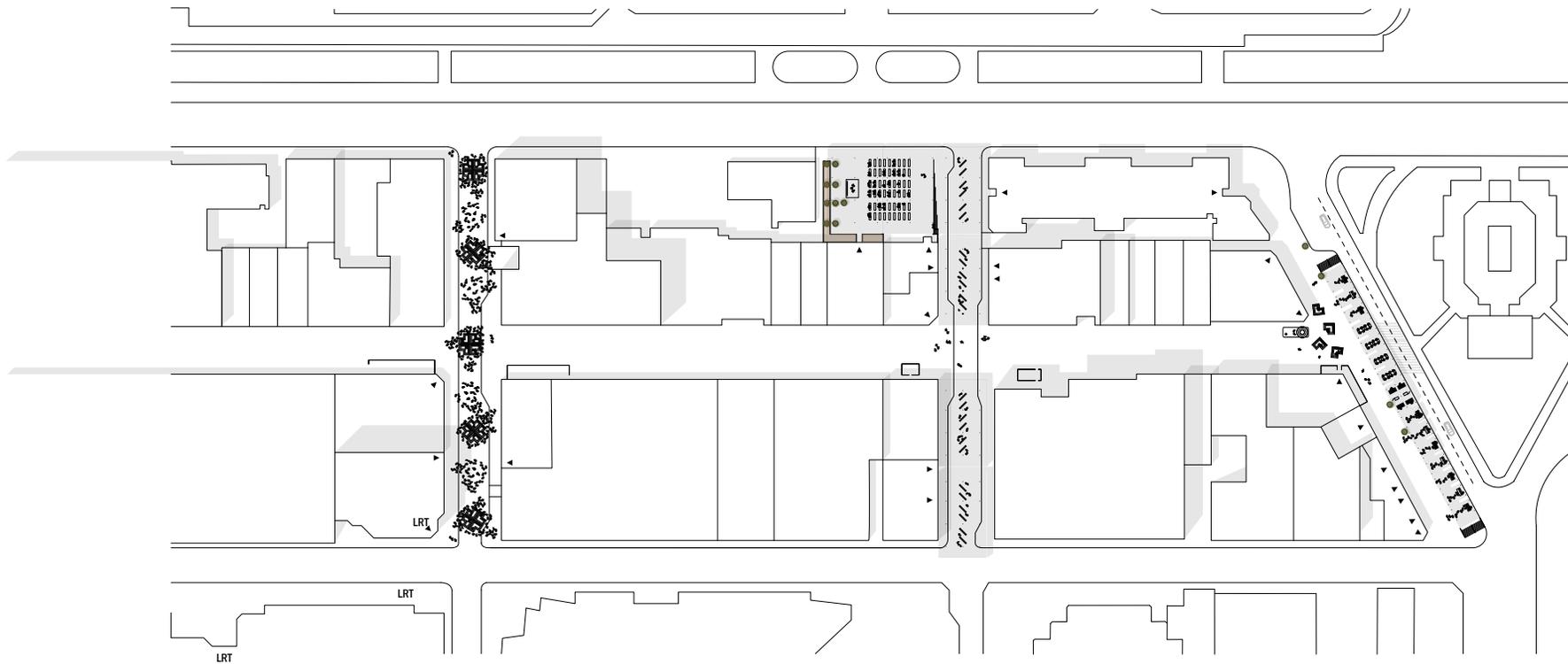


Figure 37. West side plan



EAST SIDE PLAN
Organized Activation

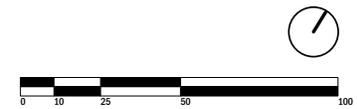


Figure 38. East side plan

While the heritage preservation of Sparks Street is undoubtedly a key priority for all stakeholders, the pedestrian mall also warrants a revitalization strategy that honours its historical role, respects its present context and supports its future evolution. Given the national significance of the downtown core, it is important to recognize that each street intersecting Sparks has its own story to tell. When Nicolas Sparks regained property lost to government expropriation during the construction of the Rideau Canal, he donated land back to the city for public markets on Lyon and Elgin Streets.⁷ To commemorate this history, both gateway streets are designed as sites of public exchange inspired by, but not limited to, the common marketplace, animating and drawing attention to the pedestrian mall. The intervention on Lyon is an array of reflective canopies creating a spatial connection to the Memorial Arch that forms a threshold into the core of the city. As the Elgin Street intersection crosses a four-lane boulevard with key

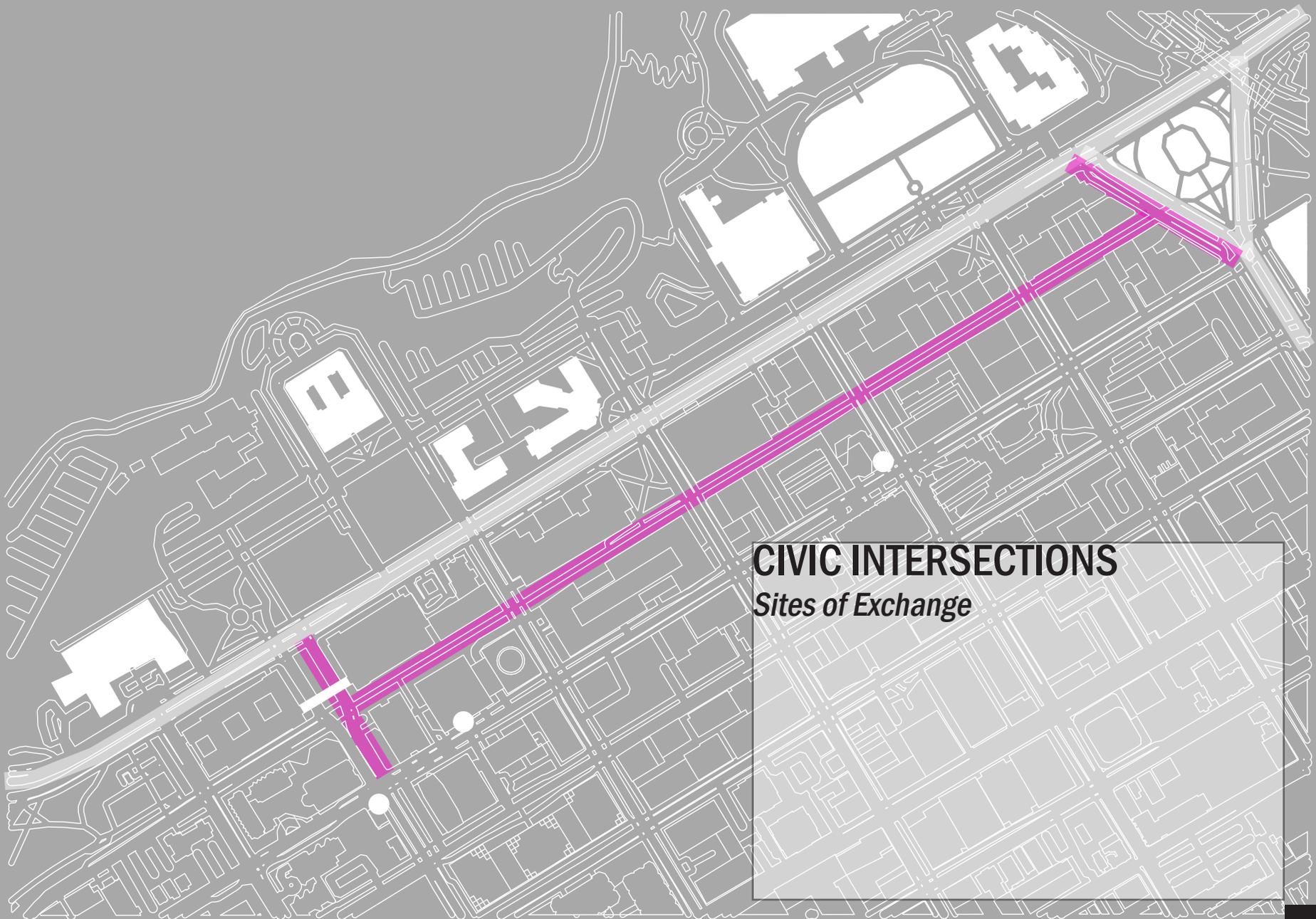
sightlines, this gateway is marked by a lookout bridge that also serves as a covered space for ground-level activation.

Considering the views of the Parliamentary Precinct from Kent and Metcalfe Streets, these intersecting blocks provide the ideal backdrop for sites of expression, where artists and performers can have an open platform all year round. As the St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church on Kent Street also sits on land donated by Nicolas Sparks, the intervention of a canopy reminiscent of stained-glass windows references this connection while taking advantage of the adjacent tall buildings. Furthermore, the south end of this intersecting block features a similar reflective canopy as Lyon Street to build a sense of spatial cohesion. Metcalfe Street is particularly significant as it opens onto a small plaza next to the new Indigenous Peoples Space that sits opposite Parliament Hill. Highlighting this profound spatial arrangement, the intersecting

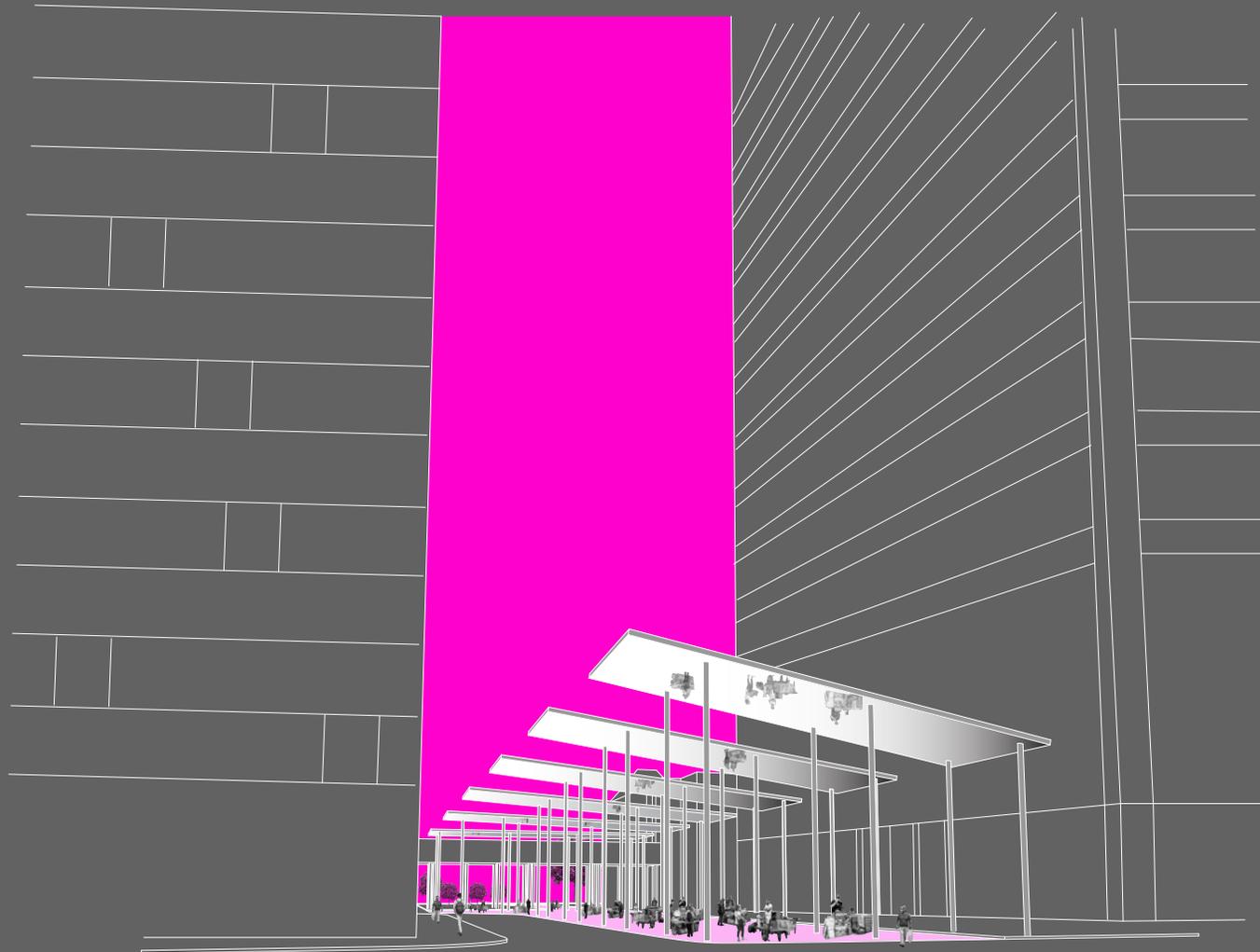
block on Metcalfe is defined by a series of Y-shaped timber canopies symbolizing a future relationship of convergence and openness.

Finally, the cross streets of Bank and O'Connor are best-suited as sites of engagement given that they are the most animated segments of Sparks Street. Bank is a main street with plenty of ground-level activity further enhanced by the recent addition of a small plaza at the entrance of the Bank of Canada Museum. Although O'Connor lacks the street-level interface of Bank, it leads to the Parliament LRT station, which has the potential to attract more foot traffic to Sparks Street. To amplify rather than compete with existing assets, the intervention on Bank and O'Connor consists of moveable stepped platforms that can be easily reconfigured for different functions, from seating and gathering to stages and enclosures. As adaptable venues, these sites of engagement can also serve multiple purposes at the same time, allowing for more creative experimentation in the public realm.

Together, all six cross streets form a diverse network of civic intersections intended to transform Sparks Street from a placeless pedestrian mall to a dynamic capital destination that continues to evolve with the city.



CIVIC INTERSECTIONS
Sites of Exchange



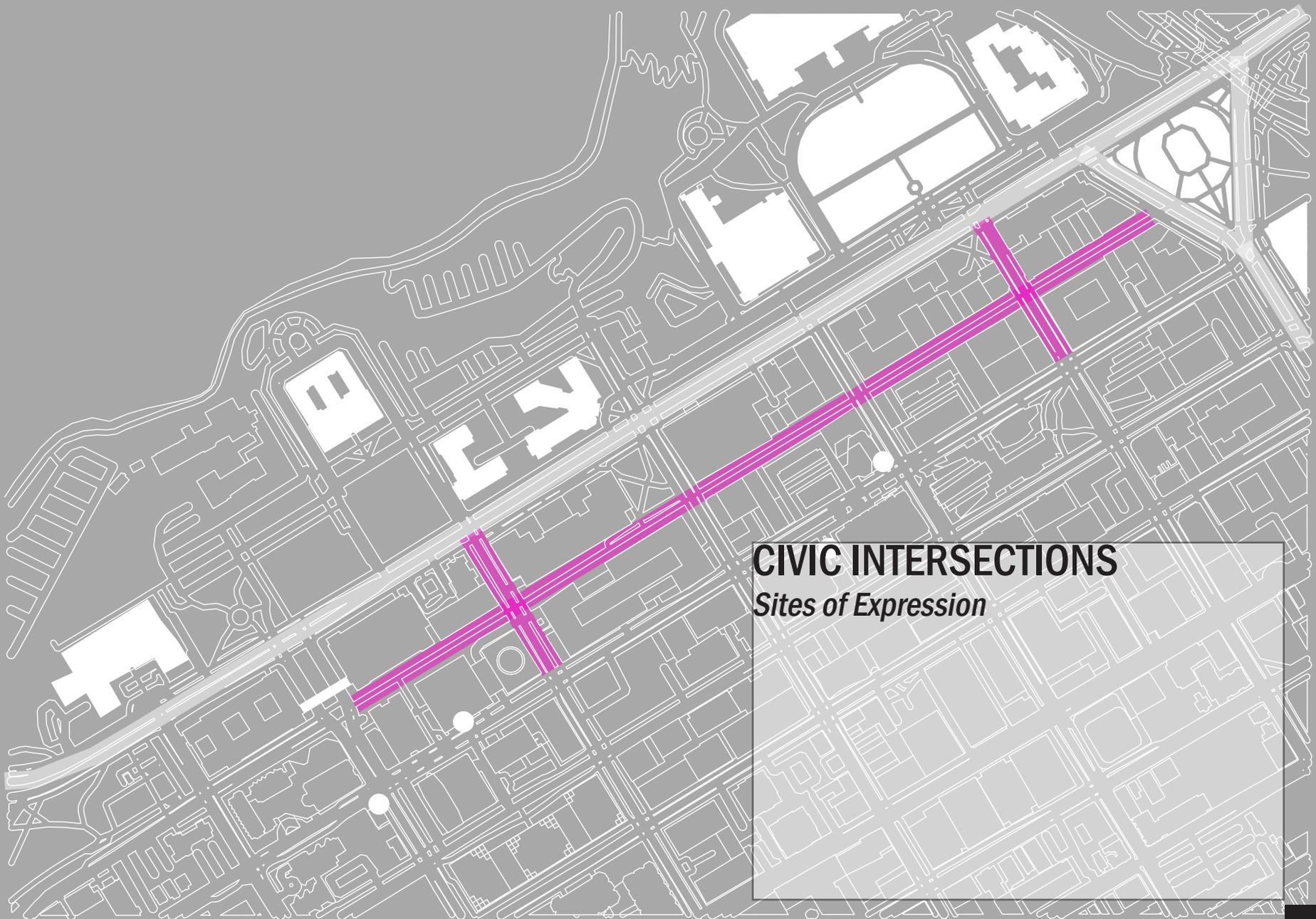
LYON ST Intersection

Figure 39. Lyon Street perspective

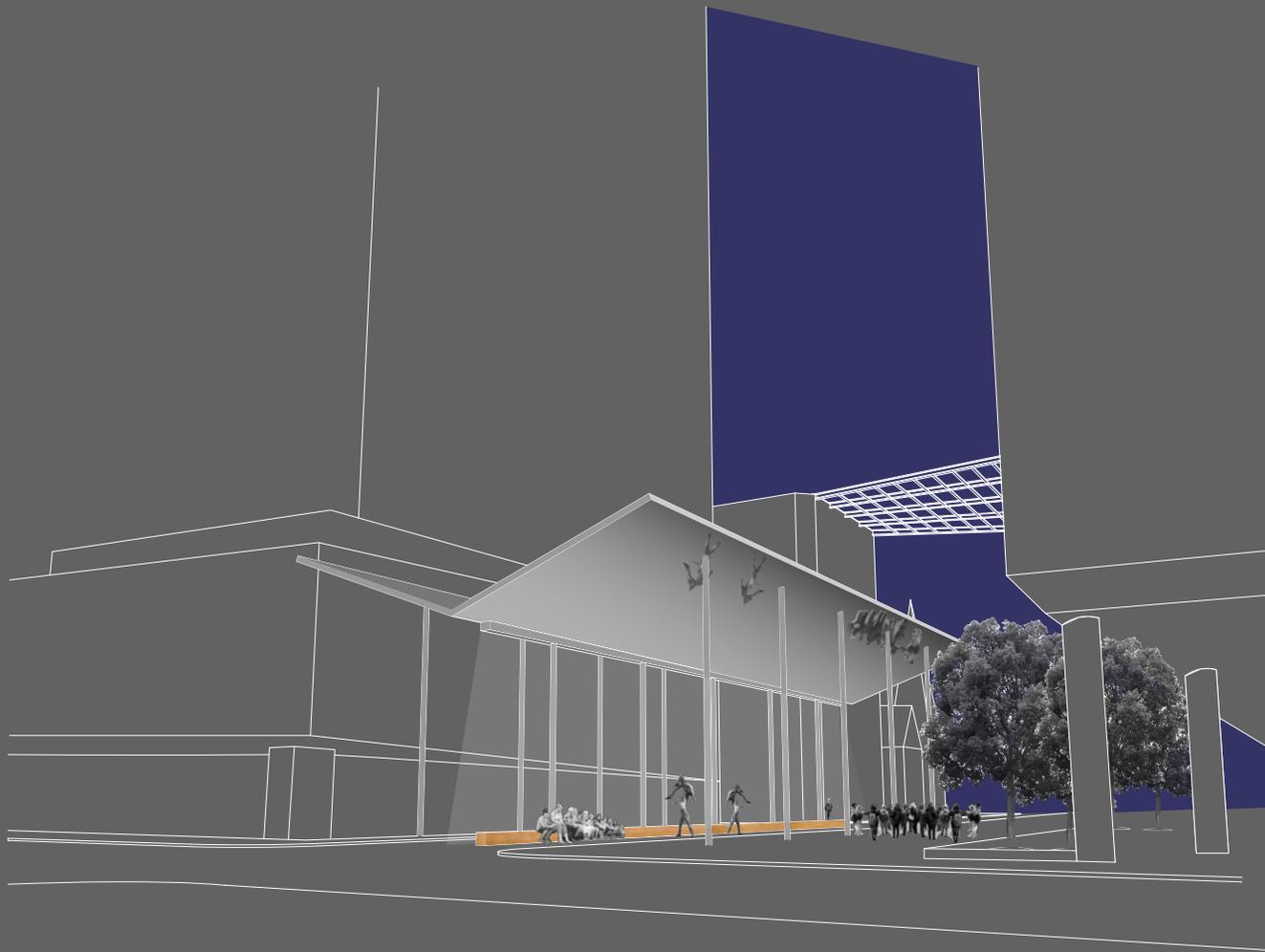


ELGIN ST Intersection

Figure 40. Elgin Street perspective

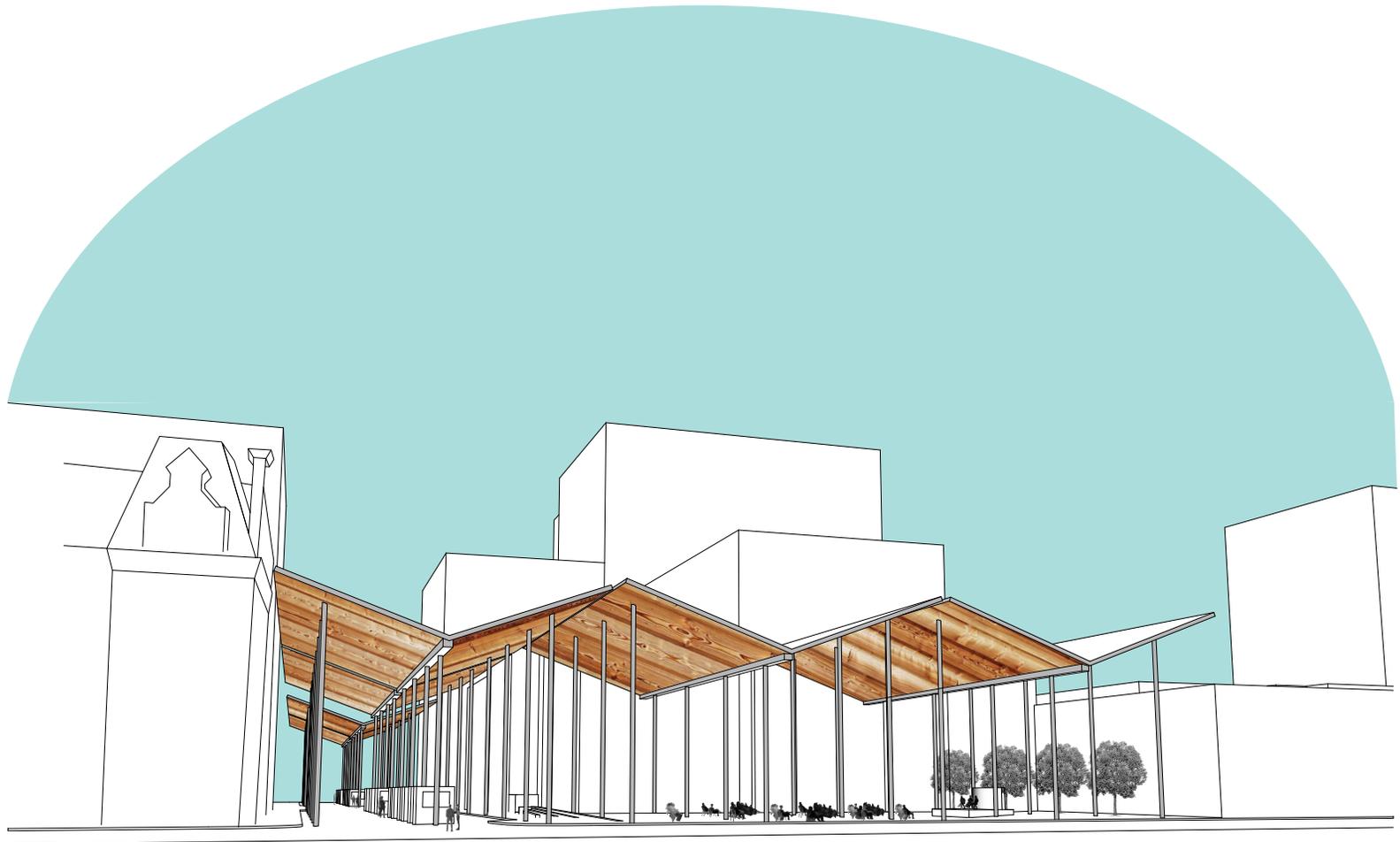


CIVIC INTERSECTIONS
Sites of Expression



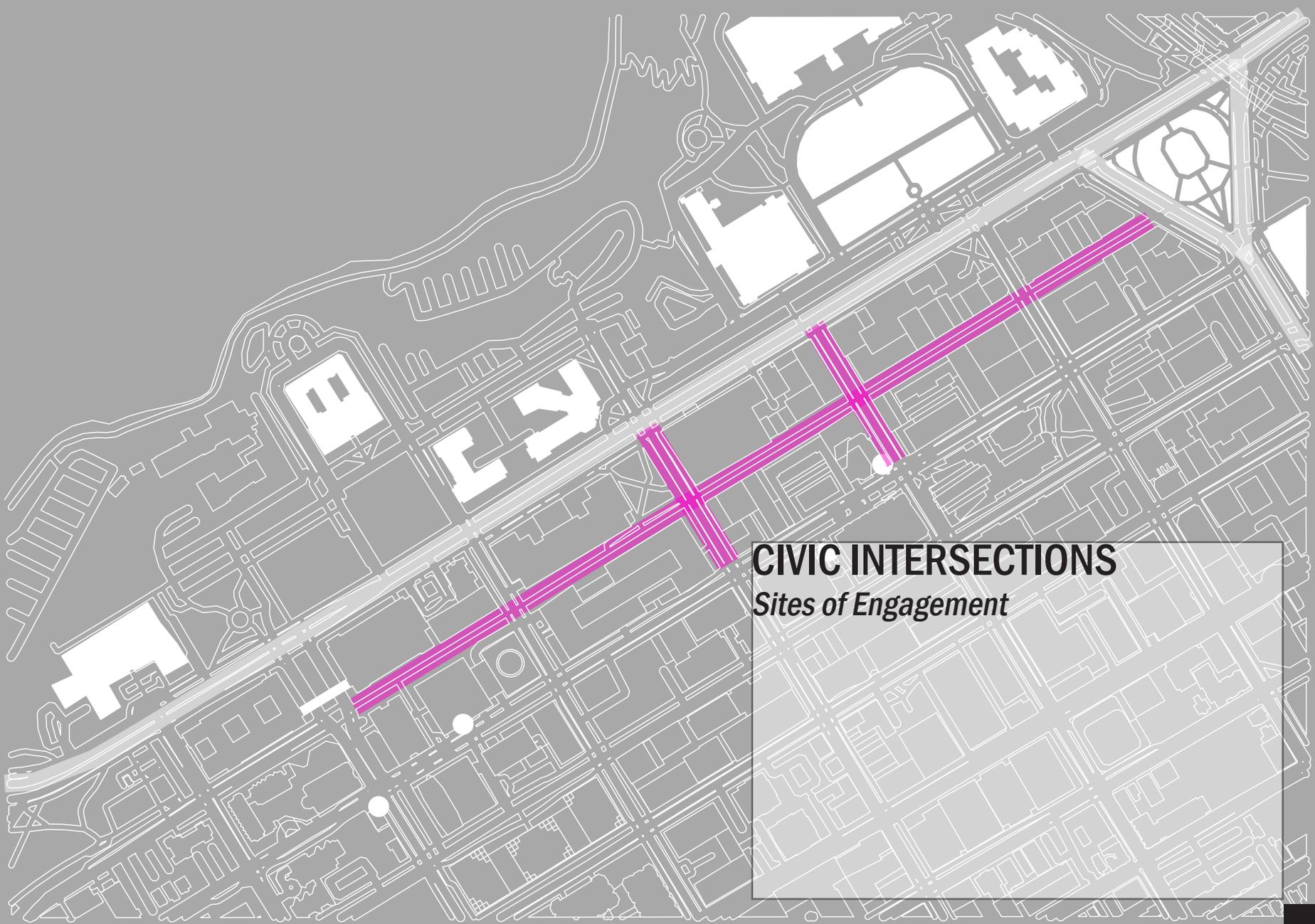
KENT ST Intersection

Figure 41. Kent Street perspective



METCALFE ST Intersection

Figure 42. Metcalfe Street perspective

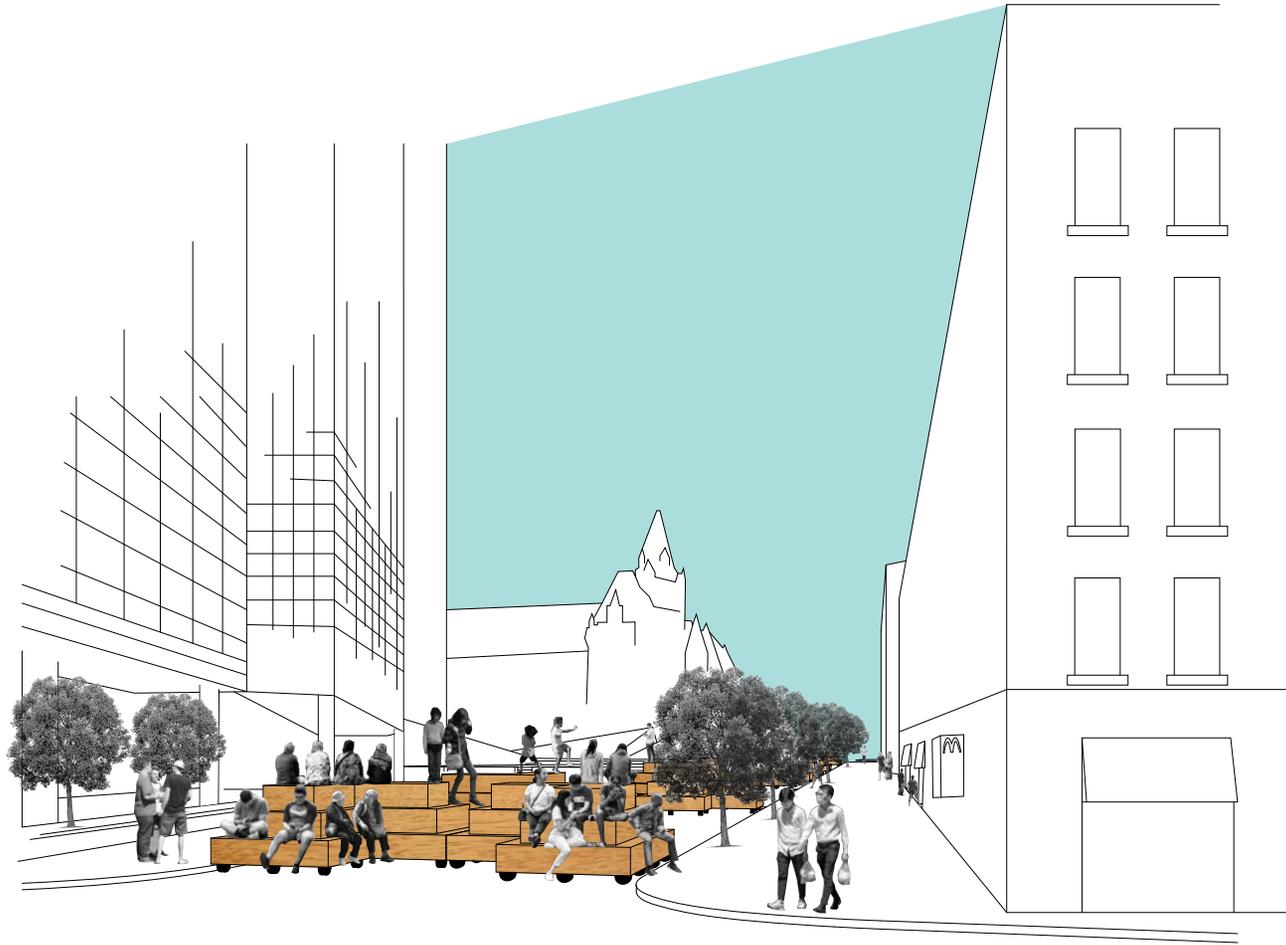


CIVIC INTERSECTIONS
Sites of Engagement



O'CONNOR ST Intersection

Figure 43. O'Connor Street perspective



BANK ST Intersection

Figure 44. Bank Street perspective

endnotes

¹ "About," Spatial Agency, accessed March 18, 2021, <https://www.spatialagency.net/>.

² "How? Empowerment," Database, Spatial Agency, accessed March 18, 2021, <https://www.spatialagency.net/database/how/empowerment/elemental>.

³ "LentSpace," Interboro Partners, accessed March 18, 2021, <http://www.interboropartners.com/projects/lentspace>.

⁴ "The Cineroleum," Projects, Assemble, accessed March 18, 2021, <https://assemblestudio.co.uk/projects/the-cineroleum>.

⁵ "City Thread," Projects, SPORTS, accessed March 18, 2021, <http://www.sportscollaborative.com/projects#/city-thread/>.

⁶ City of Ottawa, *Downtown Moves*, 32-33.

⁷ Serge Barbe, "From Pathways to Roadways: The Origin of Selected Ottawa Street Names," in *Ottawa: Making a Capital*, eds. Jeff Keshen and Nicole St-Onge (University of Ottawa Press, 2001), 74-75.

conclusion

Could a bureaucratic capital like Ottawa ever embrace such a concept as democratic streets? The pandemic has definitely forced governments to be more innovative, but deregulated public spaces would likely face quite a bit of opposition from risk-averse citizens as much as policymakers. While everyone may have a different idea about the public realm, it is ultimately where we can all experience and contribute to a sense of community. This is especially important at a time when the very places that once shaped our identities, from the office to the neighbourhood, are undergoing their own transformations. In this current moment of upheaval, how do we find a sense of belonging, a sense of connection?

In Ottawa, lockdowns have merely accelerated economic and technological trends. As a city dominated by the public sector and the tech industry, remote work has, and will likely continue, to spread development beyond the core, altering its amenities, demographics and transportation networks. Nonetheless, an expanding capital still needs to invest in building a vibrant downtown district to represent not just a dynamic city, but a thriving nation. As the city is currently updating its Official Plan, now is the time to reject the status quo and reorient the public realm to better reflect and respond to changing needs. Such progressive ends demand equally progressive means.

To promote community resilience, this thesis project has explored citizen-driven design as a starting point for further development. Other potential avenues for investigation include public space as infrastructure to enhance public health, improve urban sustainability and ensure access to technology. As we all begin to

imagine a post-pandemic world, designers and planners have an opportunity to envision a bolder future for the public realm. But in taking on this challenge, they must not forget that “Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody.”¹

¹ Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1962), 238.

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**public space
in a
placeless time**
The Reorientation of Sparks Street