



300 Block
Alley Vision

a design
Rochester
production

on behalf of
Rochester
Downtown
Alliance
Space & Place
Committee

June 2013

Design Rochester Mission:

*To operate a workshop comprised of local designers
and become a valuable resource to the Rochester community
in support of thoughtful design.*



Rochester Downtown Alliance Space and Place Committee:

*Creating a Sense of Community through Experience
Advocating for a Positive Experience
Promoting Downtown Identity*

Recognition

This document represents a collaboration between the Rochester Downtown Alliance and Design Rochester working in the interest of downtown property owners and businesses to address concerns related to the quality of the built environment.

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Introduction

The epicenter of pedestrian activity along 1st Avenue SW and Historic 3rd Street SW has led to increased foot traffic and nuisance complaints involving the 300 block alley between Broadway and 1st Ave SW. The following excerpt from the Urban Village Design Guidelines offers a description of the desired environment:

“The Urban Village is intended to be an area of high pedestrian activity; include structures of pedestrian scale, rich architectural details, and historic significance. It is close to many natural assets, such as the river and Soldier’s Field. Urban Village living will be enhanced by increasing walkability, and compatible convenient uses that creates critical mass and density.

As many building facades as possible should open onto alleys, arcades, river walks, and other open spaces, interconnecting all uses with the public sidewalk and public skyway system, where present. An interconnection of active, safe, and pleasurable walkways supports mixed usages.”

The Urban Village Design Guidelines further elaborate on specific recommendations for addressing public alleys, among other public spaces.

- Identify connections through alleys, arcades, intra-block areas, courtyards, river walks and traditional sidewalks that help to create a pedestrian network linking all downtown zones and assets.
- Provide creative design solutions for vibrant alleys/walkways that are active, safe, engaging and help stimulate business activity.
- Integrate the operational needs of downtown alleys, including service, trash and vehicular access, with pedestrian activities.

Background

How did we arrive here? . . .

Beginning with property owner Hal Henderson, the 300 block neighborhood agreed to pursue ideas and procedures to enhance the alley environment behind properties and businesses.

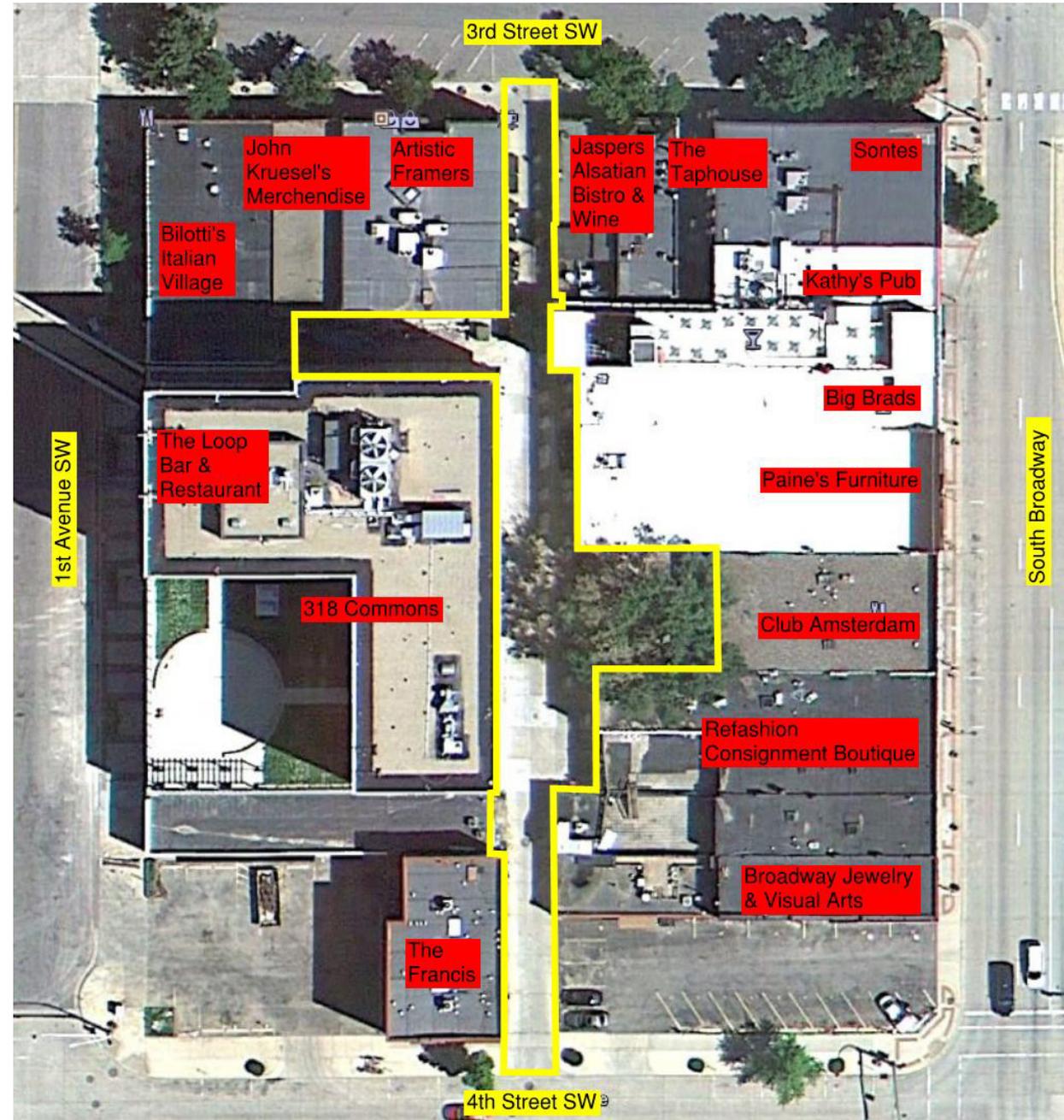
An initial organizational meeting was held on May 31, 2012 to discuss ideas and a collective approach to managing the activity in the alley.

This meeting identified many areas of concern that need be included in an holistic approach to alley improvements. These concerns included:

- Lighting
- Trash: Control, Screening, & Removal Frequency
- Aesthetics
- Security
- Managing Deliveries

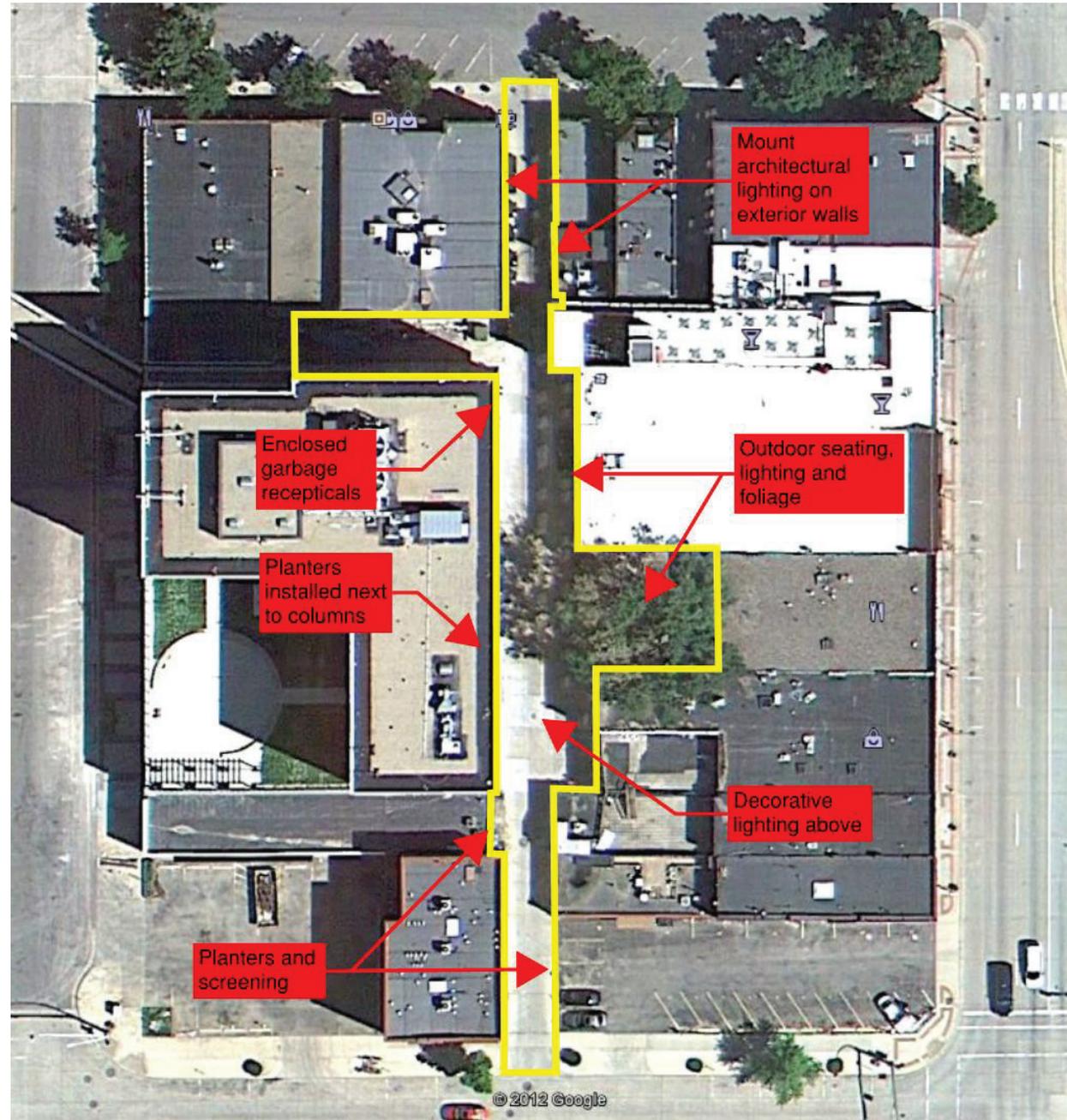
Ideas from the May 31, 2012 meeting:

- Install more lighting throughout the alley that is both functional and aesthetically pleasing. Possibly implement an “adopt a light” program.
- Screen garbage receptacles.
- Install seating and planters to improve the aesthetic appeal of the alley.
- Improve the overall safety and accessibility of the alley to pedestrians.
- Incorporate improvement concepts from the surrounding streets and alleys to provide design continuity throughout the downtown area.
- Neighborhood clean-up and debris control program. Police the alley frequently for cleanliness.



300 Block Alley adjacent businesses

image courtesy of HGA



300 Block Alley suggested improvements

image courtesy of HGA

The meeting established design direction, and agreement that there should be improvements such as:

- Façade art
- Benches
- Potted trees & plants
- Trash screening
- Architectural decorative lighting
- Seating & tables at strategic locations

However, at this point the stakeholders did not know how to proceed and who could best assist with implementation.

The Rochester Downtown Alliance was subsequently approached because their Façade Improvement Grant program seemed like a resource that could be utilized for at least the facade improvement portion of the alley renovation, if not further financial incentives to improve the pedestrian environment. The RDA delegated this decision on how to proceed to the Space and Place Committee.

RDA's Space and Place Committee was presented the preceding information and felt strongly that it was something the RDA should assist with. Furthermore, they wanted to be sure that there was a unified vision for the entire block, and that the design scheme that was agreed upon could be similar in context and quality to other areas in downtown. That way additional property owners on other blocks could benefit from an established set of designs for downtown public places.

Design Rochester, a non-profit dedicated to community-oriented design, volunteered to facilitate a design charette to provide third-party evaluation of ideas from the stakeholders and establish a coordinated and shared vision for the improvements.

This document is intended to serve as both the process documentation and tabulation of information in addition to being a "basis of design" for the 300 Block stakeholders moving forward.

Input Gathering

May 7, 2013 | 3:30-6:00



Input Gathering

Meeting Results

Property owners, property managers, business owners, residents, and City officials were asked:

What concerns do you have with the alley?

- Will there be more skyway connections? If so, will they run down alleys?
- Trash - garbage collection
- Poorly lit
- Pick-ups and deliveries block traffic and create pedestrian conflicts
- Young, immature people - travelling through
- Aesthetics, quality/condition of facades
- Safety/crime ... fights
- Snow removal, limited space but high priority
- Controlled/controlling parking
- Littering
- General upkeep/maintenance
- Noise
- Traffic circulation...bike/ped too
- Drainage / run-off
- Shading / pleasant environment
- Lack of human scale
- Access - doors, deliveries, etc.
- Actually alley surface

What constraints exist for improvements?

- Drainage capacity
- Existing utilities
 - public & private
 - overhead
 - underground
- Concrete surface is in good condition, should last another 25 years
- R-O-W boundaries
- Vertical clearances (14' minimum)
- Transformer access
- Parking (residences and businesses)
- Lack of good soil for vegetation
- Also lack of sun and space for vegetation



300 Block Alley meeting participants

How long have you been at that location?



1-5 Years



5+ Years

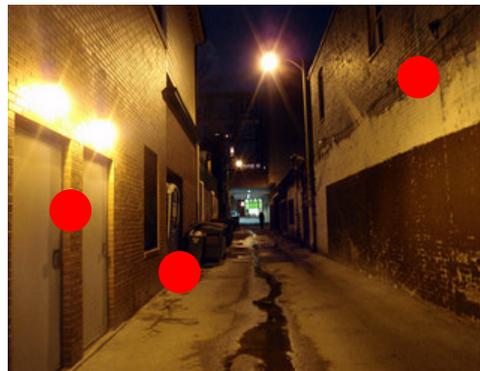
DOTmocracy:

In this exercise, stakeholders were given a selection of photos in different categories, corresponding to the areas of concern, with disparate images in each category.

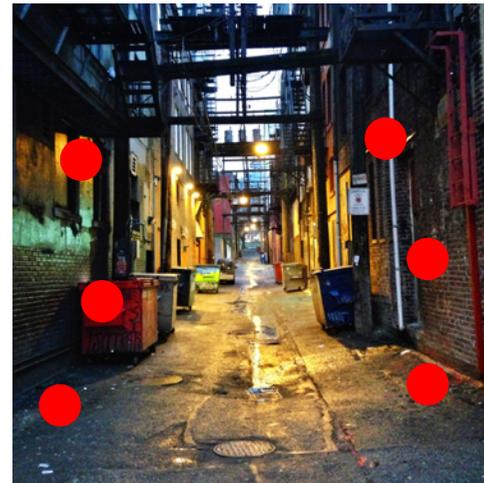
Participants were given 2 green dots and 2 red dots and asked to put green dots on their favorite images, and red dots on their least favorite images, in any category that they cared most about.

The purpose of this activity was to understand what preferences they most and least favored for the alley. The following are all the images that received red and green votes:

Lighting



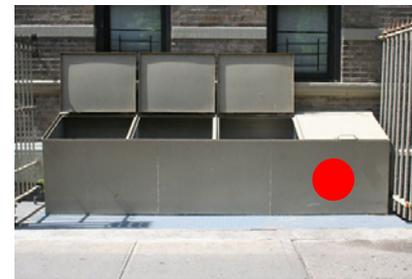
Use



Aesthetics



Trash Enclosures

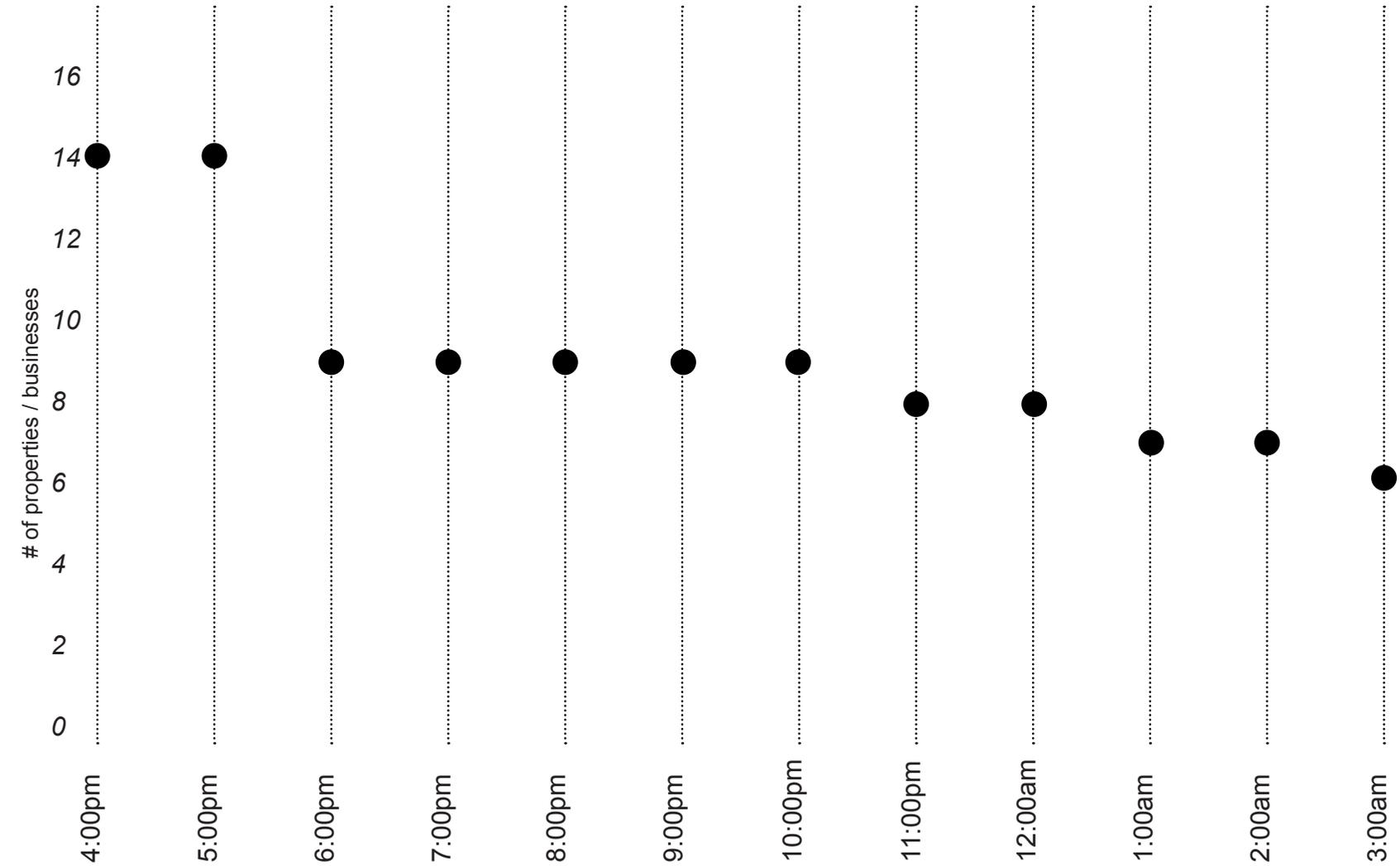
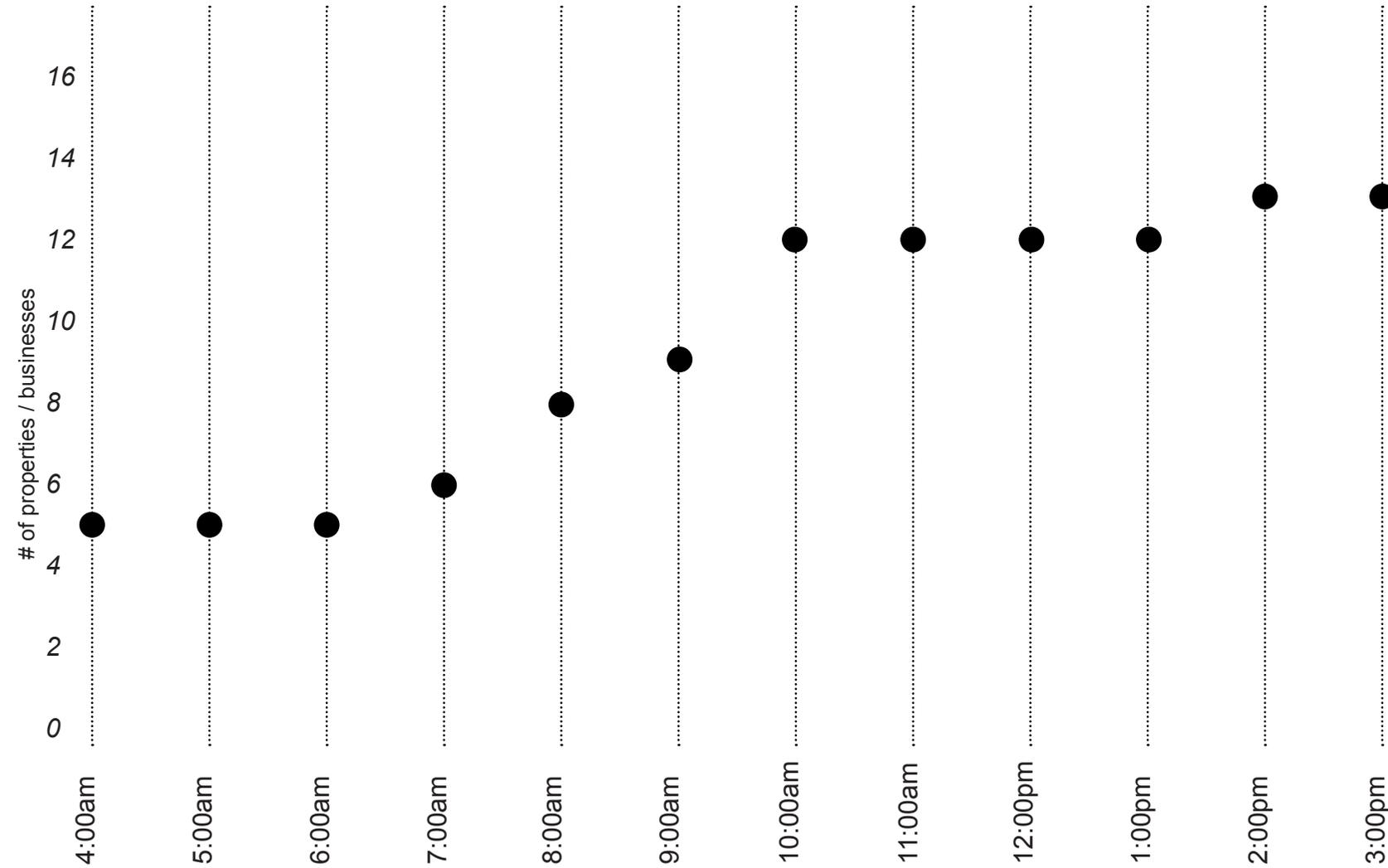


Amenities



Timeline:

This exercise was meant to graph "interactions" at various points during a "typical" day. These may be customers, staff, residents, deliveries, pick-ups, or any other use that would bring people into the alley. Several buildings have 24-Hour access for residents including The Francis, 318 Commons, and the residential 2nd floors along Broadway. This means that access needs to be maintained for some portion of the population 24 hours a day. This graph reflects ONLY THE ATTENDEES input and does not account for other properties or businesses who may have interactions.



Vision

Inviting, yet Functional.

The overall vision for the 300 Block alley is not revolutionary. As stated during the input gathering meeting, there are some basic things that can be done that will make an immediate impact on the pedestrian environment. However there are some underlying systemic problems that have prevented it from being a truly inviting public space. The design team firmly believes that stakeholders need to solve some of the logistical problems first, THEN improve the conditions. The biggest mistake that can be made is to begin to “beautify” or simply treat the symptoms without addressing the root cause. This may lead to wasted effort and resources without the desired outcome.

During the DOTmocracy exercise, the overwhelming response was **against** treating this alley as a utilitarian, infrastructure-laden corridor. Rather the voting indicated a desire to have more pedestrian amenities. So to achieve that vision, the following are suggested and inferred recommendations to bring about a more attractive AND still functional alley.

Shared Trash Services

Without a doubt the trash issue has been one of frequent complaint. The random nature of pick-up dates and times, inconsistent aesthetics for bins/enclosures, irresponsible dumping, and nuisance (both noise and smell) make the alley a more dangerous place to be. The suggestion during the meeting to form agreements with several business to share trash services makes sense for a number of reasons. First the simplified nature of a single pick-up location will lead to greater economy and ultimately cheaper expense. It also gives more bargaining power for getting a good deal as well as pick-up times and dates that are consistent with expectations. This will cut down on the number of trips made by trucks through the alley, making it **safer**. The third benefit is that it removes multiple locations of trash bins and enclosures which frees up much desired space for pedestrian-oriented amenities (e.g. seating, benches, planters, landscaping, rain gardens, etc.)

Pedestrian Lighting

Identified early on in this process, the lack of sufficient and attractive pedestrian lighting provides dark places for illicit activity and crime to take place. There seems to be satisfaction with the illumination level for cars and vehicles. Increasing light levels closer to the ground, where it most enhances the pedestrian environment, is the key. The easiest and most effective way to achieve this is through additional lighting being mounted on the sides of buildings facing the alley.

Improved Stormwater Retention

Overlooked by many stakeholders is that the alley receives a significant amount of rainwater run-off particularly from the buildings along Broadway which shed rooftop water to the alley. Since the alley is a non-porous surface, finding small areas to retain and infiltrate water into the soils will reduce the overall amount of water flowing through the alley. There are only a handful of locations where this is possible, however, and locating retention areas next to building foundations is also problematic.

Shared Responsibility

The 300 Block is similar to a residential neighborhood. With close proximity of all the neighbors, there is a reliance on everyone to bring issues forward and share in the problem solving. Whether this is through the “block captain” method or through some other means, the stakeholders need to find a common set of principles that everyone can uphold. Agreeing to share some of the burden often leads to sharing in the allied benefits. It may seem like an insignificant item in the overall Vision, but this is a critical element of implementing ANY improvements throughout the alley. Sometimes new members can help ease tensions and bring fresh energy to stalemated issues. Allowing the greater good of the block to stay at the fore will be critical in developing long-term stewardship.

Hold Events to Change the Use

Closing off the alley and holding an event does a lot to alter public perception. It may be after some other Vision items have been addressed, but a change in use to one that is more active and vibrant would foster a sense of place.

Landscaping and Hanging Plants

Because there is a dearth of soils available for landscaping, and the soil that does exist is neither enriched nor fertile, hanging plants may be a solution. This may be tied into rainwater collection systems such as rain barrels to provide a source of water for the plants, as well as alleviate a small amount of water discharge. This alley could become known for the hanging plants and its unique identity could blossom out of this functionally driven design solution.

Limiting Access

A great idea that was suggested toward the end of the meeting was to limit the vehicular access after a certain time of day. The knowledge that there will no longer be trucks or cars travelling through the alley (only cars coming to park for residences) provides some additional flexibility for holding events and some security for pedestrian usage. This is not without some logistical issues, but it is definitely an idea worth exploring further.

Security Cooperative

The Francis made mention of the fact that they have some surveillance cameras that monitor their property, and that they would consider investing in an actual security presence if the cost was shared among other interested properties. This shared cooperative for security at either high volume or crime prone times may be something worth pursuing.

Stricter Enforcement of Disorderly Conduct

The nuisance and disrespectfulness of public urination, excessive intoxication, and “late night” activities is another often referenced grievance. Most of the burden lies on establishments that are serving customers lots of alcoholic beverages. In addition to providing ample opportunity after close of business for toilets to remain available, additional enforcement and fining of the already existing ordinances may be a necessary step. Perhaps in conjunction with any security monitoring if utilized.

Basis of Design:

Lighting

Improved pedestrian lighting can improve safety, and create a more inviting atmosphere. The specific type of fixture is less as important than ensuring a consistent mounting height throughout the alley. This will give the appearance of uniformity of design while allowing each building owner to select a style of light that most suits their taste. However avoid using high-pressure sodium or metal halide light fixtures.

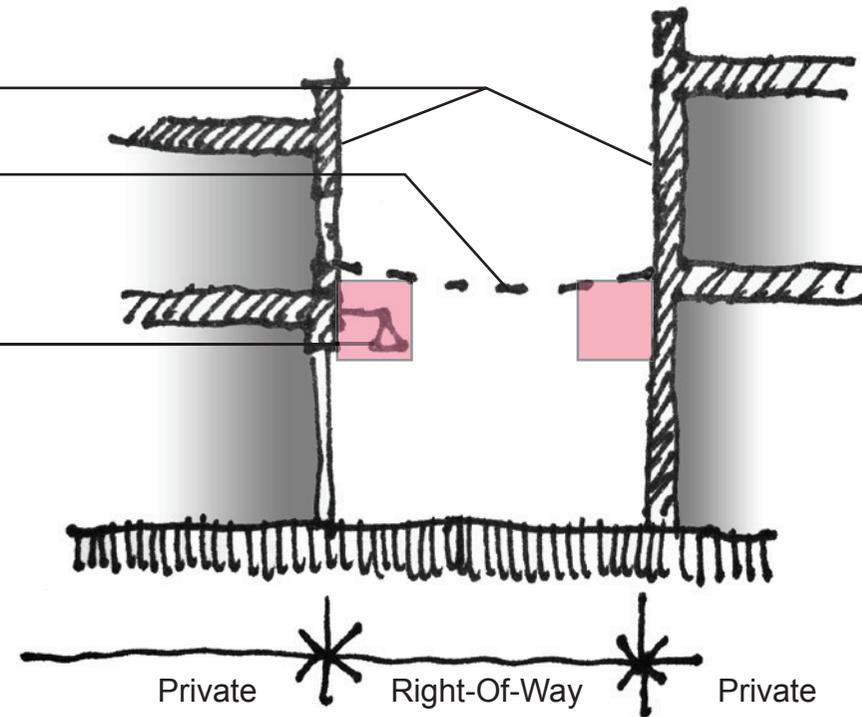


Examples of Wall Mounted Pedestrian Lights

Building Edge

Decorative canopy lighting should be hung a minimum of 14'-0" above the alley surface at the lowest point.

Pedestrian lighting should be mounted at a height between 10' and 12' above the alley surface. Wall mounted light fixtures should protrude no more than 2' into the R-O-W. Prioritize lighting at building entrances and walkways, and evenly space light fixtures to avoid "dead" spots.



Basis of Design:

Lighting



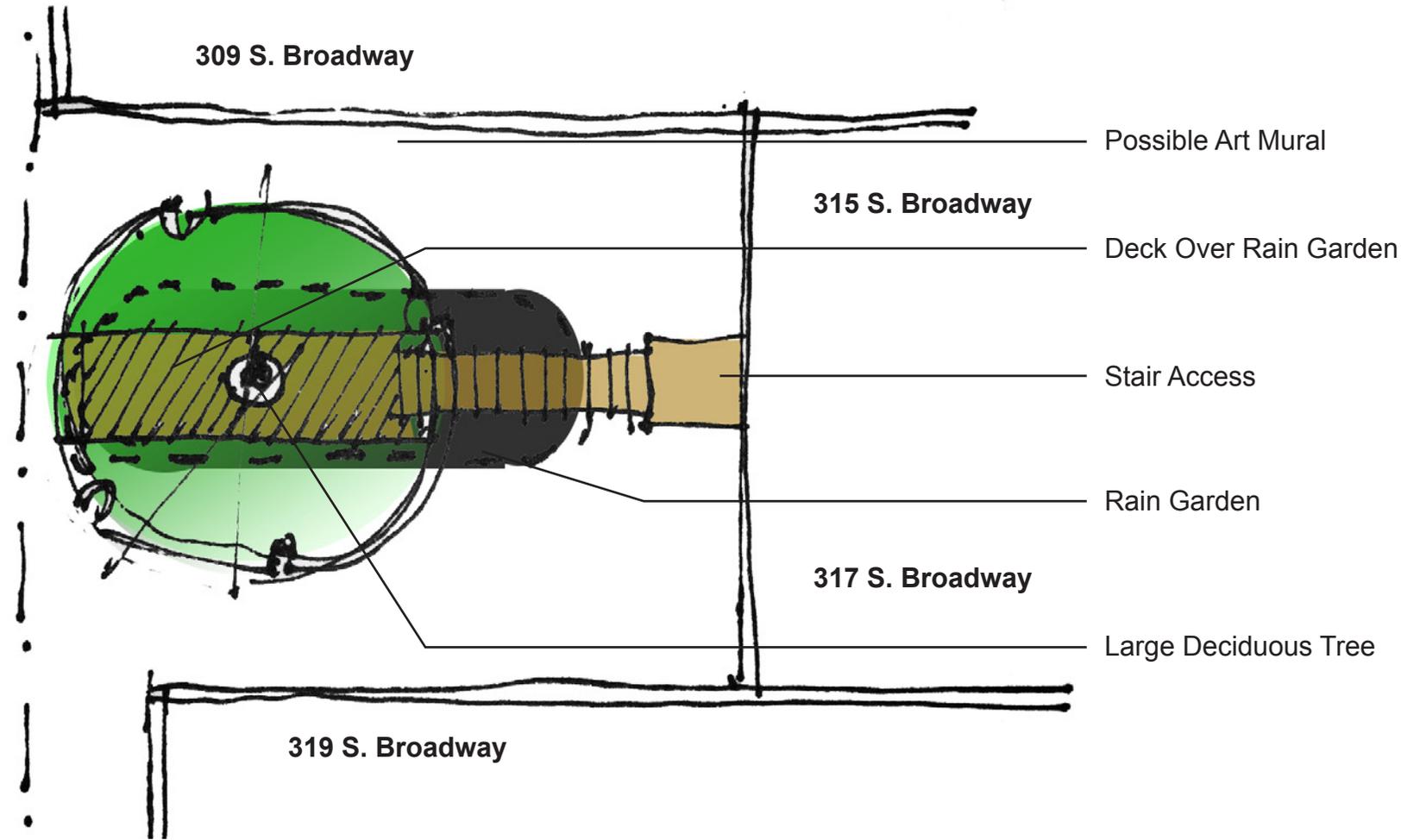
The entrances or "thresholds" to the alley can be highlighted with the use of decorative light fixtures that drape across the alley. Only necessary for 20' or so of lateral distance, they demarcate the alley entrance and bring it down to a human scale. The four affected property owners could apply to the RDA for 50% of the funds to be paid for by the Facade Improvement Grant and split the remaining 50%; essentially requiring those owners to pay 1/8 of the total cost.



Basis of Design:

Stormwater

One of the only locations large enough for stormwater infiltration, far enough away from building foundations, is the alcove space behind 317 and 315 S. Broadway. This area serves as parking, stair access to the upstairs apartments and rear entrances to two businesses, but its location mid-block has a lot of potential to be designed as a pedestrian node of activity with seating, landscaping, and a rain garden to aid in stormwater retention.



Basis of Design:

Landscaping



Landscaping should be selected by a qualified gardener or nursery to ensure the plant can flourish in the harsher environment of the alley. Many of the surfaces do not receive much if any sunlight and therefore it will be critical to select hearty and/or drought tolerant species. Locating the plants in hanging baskets can become an iconic signature of the 300 block alley. Be sure to hang low enough to allow easy watering if necessary, and high enough to avoid basic vehicle conflicts (above 5'-0").

Rain barrels can be located at the end of downspouts to collect rainwater for easy plant watering. Be sure to mount barrels out of the way of vehicle traffic and on an elevated pedestal to create pressure. Also allow overflow from any storage container to drain back into the alley.



Next Steps

Implementation

Where do we go from here?...

A vision plan is useless without implementation. The initial step was to establish some shared consensus about the Vision for the alley, but now it will be about actually making progress in many of the areas identified.

Phase One

To keep the momentum going, it is important to select an “easy win” as the first project that one or many property owners and/or businesses can support. In other words, find a place to start. Plant a ceremonial first tree. Hang a set of new lights. Hold an event where multiple building owners paint an art mural. By accomplishing a quick element of the Vision there is a sense that larger change can occur and that things are already beginning to improve.

After that there needs to be a concerted effort to prioritize the implementation by creating short term, medium term, and long term goals. This should be done by the 300 Block stakeholders themselves.

Phase Two

Only after the stakeholders begin to feel empowered to affect change, and there is a clear hierarchy of projects, can you begin to identify the resources necessary to assist in the process. Some resources that were identified during the Input Gathering meeting are:

- Facade Improvement Grant
- CDBG
- Tax Abatement
- Sales Tax Funds
- C4 (for murals and artists outreach)
- Federal & State Historic Rehab Tax Credits
- Energy Tax Credits
- Accessibility Tax Credits
- Utility Rebates
- Historic Preservation Commission Funding

Further support of this document as a basis of design for alterations and improvements going forward will also reinforce the overall 300 block environment. And as with any visioning document, re-evaluation and assessment at a later date is crucial to maintain relevance and keep turnover in stakeholders from degrading the shared vision.

Urban Design Principles

American Institute of Architect's 10 Principles for Livable Communities

These urban design principles are general recommendations on how to achieve a better, more livable built environment.

1. Design on a Human Scale

Compact, pedestrian-friendly communities allow residents to walk to shops, services, cultural resources, and jobs and can reduce traffic congestion and benefit people's health.

2. Provide Choices

People want variety in housing, shopping, recreation, transportation, and employment. Variety creates lively neighborhoods and accommodates residents in different stages of their lives.

3. Encourage Mixed-Use Development

Integrating different land uses and varied building types creates vibrant, pedestrian-friendly and diverse communities.

4. Preserve Urban Centers

Restoring, revitalizing, and infilling urban centers takes advantage of existing streets, services and buildings and avoids the need for new infrastructure. This helps to curb sprawl and promote stability for city neighborhoods.

5. Vary Transportation Options

Giving people the option of walking, biking and using public transit, in addition to driving, reduces traffic congestion, protects the environment and encourages physical activity.

6. Build Vibrant Public Spaces

Citizens need welcoming, well-defined public places to stimulate face-to-face interaction, collectively celebrate and mourn, encourage civic participation, admire public art, and gather for public events.

7. Create a Neighborhood Identity

A "sense of place" gives neighborhoods a unique character, enhances the walking environment, and creates pride in the community.

8. Protect Environmental Resources

A well-designed balance of nature and development preserves natural systems, protects waterways from pollution, reduces air pollution, and protects property values.

9. Conserve Landscapes

Open space, farms, and wildlife habitat are essential for environmental, recreational, and cultural reasons.

10. Design Matters

Design excellence is the foundation of successful and healthy communities.

