

THE DISCOVERY DISTRICT: A ROAD MAP AND TOOL KIT TO CONNECT, CATALYZE AND CAPITALIZE THE TRANSFORMATION OF DOWNTOWN HOUSTON

HOUSTON, TX



**Urban Land
Institute**

Houston

THE DISCOVERY DISTRICT: A ROAD MAP AND TOOL KIT TO CONNECT, CATALYZE AND CAPITALIZE THE TRANSFORMATION OF DOWNTOWN HOUSTON

HOUSTON, TX

January 26-27, 2012
A Technical Assistance Panel Report

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About ULI Houston

A District Council of the Urban Land Institute

ULI Houston is a district council of ULI—the Urban Land Institute, a nonprofit education and research organization supported by its members. Founded in 1936, the Institute today has almost 28,000 members worldwide representing the entire spectrum of land use planning and real estate development disciplines, working in private enterprise and public service.

As the preeminent, multidisciplinary real estate forum, ULI facilitates the open exchange of ideas, information, and experience among local, national, and international industry leaders and policy makers dedicated to creating better communities.

ULI's mission is to provide leadership in the responsible use of land and in creating and sustaining thriving communities worldwide. ULI Houston carries out the ULI mission locally by sharing best practices, building consensus, and advancing solutions through its educational programs and community outreach initiatives.

About the Technical Assistance Panel (TAP) Program

The objective of ULI Houston's Technical Assistance Panel (TAP) program is to provide expert, multidisciplinary advice on land use and real estate issues facing public agencies and nonprofit organizations in the Greater Houston Metropolitan area. Drawing from its extensive membership base, ULI Houston conducts two-day panels offering objective and responsible advice to local decision makers on a wide variety of land use and real estate issues ranging from site-specific projects to public policy questions. The TAP program is intentionally flexible to provide a customized approach to specific land use and real estate issues.

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The findings and recommendations provided in this report are based on the collective expertise of the panel, along with the briefing materials, and information gleaned from the tour, stakeholder presentations, and roundtable discussions conducted during the panel's two-day effort.

ULI Houston Panel

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Area map showing defined focus area for ULI panel.

Foreword: Overview and Panel Assignment

As part of an ongoing and comprehensive process to ensure the competitive strength of the George R. Brown Convention Center (GRB), and to obtain the greatest possible return from the other public investments that have been made in the surrounding area, Houston First Corporation and Central Houston Civic Improvement, Inc. sought out recommendations from a ULI Houston Technical Assistance Panel, in order to help realize the following desired outcomes:

1. More convention business for the city;
2. Increased resources flowing back to the City of Houston; and
3. A more diverse offering of cultural experiences to attract more private investment that will in turn increase utilization by visitors, businesses and residents.

To that end, the panel was charged with the following questions:

1. What is the best mixed use development program: hotels (including large convention headquarters), residential, cultural, entertainment, retail, institutional, and other uses for the 15-block area bounded by Walker, Avenida de las Americas, Rusk, Chartres, Texas, Crawford, Preston, and Austin?
2. What tools provide incentives to encourage successful development in alignment with this plan?
3. What is the road map to navigate from current conditions to the desired outcome, including phasing of development and potential barriers this plan must overcome?

The recently completed *George R. Brown Convention Center 2025 Master Plan*¹ and the *Livable Centers Study for Houston Downtown Management District & East Downtown Management District*² provide essential and thorough background information on the existing conditions for the GRB and the areas that surround it. The panelists were indeed fortunate to have the benefit of these studies before they began their own process, and strongly commend the studies to others seeking an in-depth review of the study area. Thus, the panel does not attempt here to reiterate the information contained in those reports, but rather seeks to move quickly, as it did during its two-day session, to assess the market potential for the area, and to develop recommendations that provide a pathway towards achieving that potential.

¹George R. Brown Convention Center. (2011, December). *George R. Brown Convention Center 2025 Master Plan*, Retrieved January 20, 2012 from <http://www.houstonconventionctr.com/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=viWTWXo8lJQ%3D&tabid=39>

²Houston-Galveston Area Council. (2011, September). *Livable Centers Study for Houston Downtown Management District & East Downtown Management District*. Retrieved January 20, 2012 from http://videos.h-gac.com/CE/livablecenters/2011-09-30_Downtown-EaDo_Livable_Centers_Study_Final.pdf

“...to create THE BEST
scenario for public/private
development of the
DISCOVERY CONVENTION DISTRICT
and eventually, the future
expansion of GRBCC...”

Executive Summary

U LI Houston convened an expert Technical Assistance Panel in response to a request from Houston First Corporation and Central Houston Civic Improvement, Inc. to consider potential development, including a proposed 1,000-room hotel, adjacent to the George R. Brown Convention Center in Houston.

The panel articulated its assignment this way: "...to create the best scenario for public/private development of the convention Discovery District and eventually, the future expansion of the GBRCC." Thus, the panel's purpose included recommending a redevelopment program for the area currently called "The Convention District," identifying tools and incentives to attract and reward appropriate development, and advise on a road map to get to a successful result.

Protecting and Enhancing Assets

Houston has made the "big moves" in this area: three major league sport venues, a world-class convention center, and a successful public park. To protect and enhance these assets, it is time for the city to be bold at a smaller, street-level scale. Vitality at the ground level is necessary for the future success of the area as a whole and its individual components. There are great examples across the country of this sort of district that Houston can replicate.

A convergence of opportunities

Today, we have a convergence of opportunities. National trends favor the recommended development program, and local conditions may never be more favorable.

Tapping development demand to create a 24-hour district

The "Discovery District" is vibrant on weekdays, when office workers are Downtown, but evenings and weekends are inconsistent. To remedy this, Houston must tap three sources of demand: out of town visitors like convention-goers, local visitors coming from other parts of the region, and area residents. New development can create this demand. Specifically, the panel sees a need for a large convention center hotel and significant market potential for residential. Both would add 24-hour life to the area and will support more retail, which can do more than anything else to stimulate street activity.

Celebrating the pedestrian experience and extending Discovery Green

The panel strongly believes the success of the study area will depend on celebrating the pedestrian experience. Pedestrian connections must join the parts of the area -- Discovery Green, the Convention Center, the Hilton Hotel, Toyota Center, and Minute Maid Park — and connect to adjacent activity areas like EaDo, the Pavilions, and The Shops at Houston Centre. Key links include Dallas, Rusk, and Avenida de las Americas. These need streetscapes that are designed to entice pedestrians, strategies like shading to moderate heat, and measures to reduce the impact of buses on pedestrians. The pedestrian realm should be seen as a public open space. The panel believe that Crawford street can be transformed into a "Green Street", with fewer traffic lanes, wider sidewalks, and park-like landscaping, extending the experience of Discovery Green north to Minute Maid Park.

New Development Potential: Hotel

The panel believes that a new convention center hotel north of Discovery Green and west of 59 as an initial project can greatly contribute to the goal of building a vibrant Discovery District. The timing is right to build this soon.

New Development Potential: Residential

Hotel development should be complemented with residential development. The capital markets are currently favorable for residential, but land costs are an issue. West of 59, 8 to 12 story multifamily is the product that can work with appropriate incentives. East of 59 in EaDo, lower land values will permit more reasonable prices for a broader market, allowing workforce as well as market rate housing targeting a broader market than Downtown.

New Development Potential: EaDo

In EaDo, the inadequacy of surface and subsurface utilities is limiting redevelopment; upgrades to those utilizes as well as public realm improvements should be a priority. More residential development in Downtown will stimulate development in EaDo.

New Development Potential: Retail

Of all types of development, retail development has the highest potential to add street life, but the current market is weak. Thus, buildings should be built with shells that can be converted to retail later, but retail will not be the driver of development.

Defining a district to offer Incentives

Public incentives are critical to promoting high quality development and maximizing the benefits of the public facilities already in the area. The panel believes that the city can use incentives already in use in Houston — a convention hotel tax abatement and 380 agreements – but that the city needs to proactively put those incentives in place for the entire district, not project-by-project. Furthermore, all incentives should be conditional on higher quality design benefitting pedestrians and activating the street level.

Coordinated parking

Parking is key to successful development. Parking must be made more legible and understandable and must be coordinated across the district. The panel recommends establishing a parking district to share parking, ensure availability, and make pricing easy to understand. A public parking garage with shared use could also serve as additional incentive for hotel and retail uses, allowing new development to use the garage.

Perception of Safety

Operationally, a perception of safety is key. “Eyes on the street” from new, pedestrian-oriented development and increased pedestrian activity will play a major role here, but improved lighting and public safety guides, who will also serve as a first point of contact for people needing social services, are critical.

District Branding

The panel believes that this district can capitalize on existing attractions but also build a sense of place that is a destination in its own right. This will require high-quality development that stimulates activity, a public realm that celebrates the pedestrian, and a cohesive brand. The Discovery District is perhaps Houston’s last, best, chance to bring the pieces on the east side of Downtown together and get it right.



Today! View from Discovery Green toward Minute Maid Park.



Future! The Discovery District as a true mixed-use, pedestrian-oriented area. (Livable Centers Study)

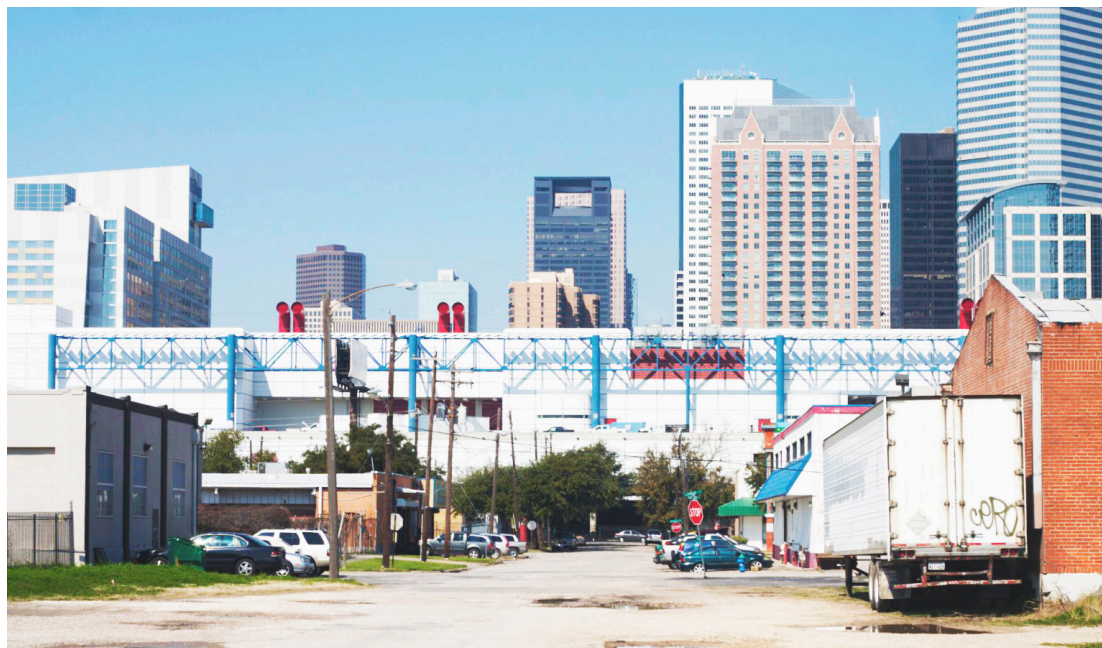


Vacant land and land values (Livable Centers study)

Market Potential

The panel began its evaluation of the study area's market potential by first taking into account several macro trends that could greatly benefit the study area if properly seized upon, the most obvious of which is Houston's strong economy relative to one that is still-struggling nationally. The panel also noted the growth of walkable urbanism, that is, the creation of mixed-use, densely developed, pedestrian-friendly districts in U.S. center cities. At a time when cities are fiercely competing to attract the coveted demographic of 25-34 year olds, who have demonstrated a strong preference for walkable urban environments, the Houston metro has seen a dramatic in-migration of this group, second only to Denver according to a

recent analysis of 2010 U.S. Census data³. As a result of these factors, the capital markets currently hold a very favorable view of Houston, particularly regarding the prospects for multi-family residential development. Of course, the favor of the capital markets can shift rapidly, particularly in a region such as ours where supply can quickly rise to meet—and, as we have often seen in the past, exceed—demand. Given this context, the panel seeks to convey a sense of urgency regarding the need to take bold steps to capitalize upon this convergence of opportunities and grab a share of this regional growth and economic development for the study area, while the window still remains open.



View from EaDo towards downtown.

³Brookings Institution Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy. (2011, October). Young Adults Choose "Cool Cities" During Recession. Retrieved January 26, 2012 from http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2011/1028_young_adults_frey.aspx

“The bold steps that need to be taken are at the human scale, linking projects so the whole can be greater than the sum of parts.”

Fortunately, many bold steps have already been taken on the larger scale, and these in and of themselves contribute to this once-in-an-era convergence of opportunities: they include the GRB and its previous expansion; the Hilton-Americas Houston Hotel; Toyota Center and Minute Maid Park; future completion of light-rail expansion and BBVA Compass Stadium; and last but certainly not least, Discovery Green. Indeed, the panel deems Discovery Green to be so important a factor for the area’s market potential, that the panel recommends branding the area “The Discovery District,” as is discussed later in the report. Similarly, and as can be seen on the map on the inside cover, the panel changed the boundaries of the study area slightly to further focus in on the areas closest to Discovery Green, with the panel’s boundaries being U.S. Route 59 on the east, Caroline Street on the west, Texas Avenue on the north, and Clay Street on the south.

The above list of projects is certainly not exhaustive, as it only includes those investments that have been undertaken by the public sector or via public-private partnerships. The private sector has also made significant investments within the area, including most recently One Park Place, the Houston Pavilions, and Hess Tower, which have added to the residential, retail, and employment base of the area west of U.S. Route 59, while the area east of U.S. Route 59 continues to see redevelopment into a nascent entertainment district. Taken together, these projects would appear to create a mix of easily-accessible amenities that has few peers within our region, acting as a draw for both new residents and visitors.

And yet, there is a very good reason for listing the projects above individually, as that is how they are perceived both on the ground by the panel and seemingly within the public consciousness by Houstonians and visitors alike, due to the lack of connectivity between these major activity generators. This perception significantly hinders the city’s competitiveness as a convention destination, at a time when the convention industry has undergone a paradigm shift. In the past, having a central location and a hub airport were deemed to be two of the most important factors considered by convention planners. Now, such planners focus on the quality of experience that their attendees will have at the destination, especially within the immediate vicinity of the convention center and hotels. Looking out their windows from a room in the Hilton-Americas, visiting convention planners will no doubt see and appreciate all of the amenities surrounding them, but without seeing people on the street dining or walking, the area lacks the essential ingredient of 24/7 vibrancy.

The bold steps that need to be taken now are instead at the human scale, linking these projects together into a true mixed-use, pedestrian-oriented district, so that the whole can finally be greater than the sum of its parts. These linkages can only be accomplished by having more people on the street at all times of day and into the evening, circulating among the destinations and thereby creating a vibrant and inviting atmosphere. The panel therefore set out to determine the market potential for each development product type on its own merits, as well as to consider the relative spin-off benefits of each for the study area as a whole, in terms of creating this desired environment.

Hospitality

The panel understands that Houston does not currently have a sufficient number of hotel rooms within the immediate vicinity of the convention center to successfully compete for mid-size conventions of 3,000 to 5,000 attendees. As a result, the city finds itself competing with cities such as Indianapolis and Kansas City for smaller conventions, instead of competing with cities that Houston would normally consider its peers. It may seem counter-intuitive that another convention center hotel would be needed, given the fact that downtown Houston hotels feature moderate occupancy rates, and slightly sub-par average daily rates. However, when one considers the number of conventions for which Houston simply cannot compete due to its deficiency in total hotel rooms, as quantitatively confirmed by

the Convention and Visitors Bureau, the case for an additional large hotel becomes clearer. The panel therefore recommends the addition of at least one large (1,000 room or greater) convention center hotel within the study area, in an area west of U.S. Route 59 and north of Discovery Green. The panel's recommendation for a large hotel, in lieu of multiple smaller hotels, is in keeping with convention planners' stated preference to have their attendees stay in as few hotels as possible. If done correctly, such a hotel and its occupants could greatly contribute to the goal of linking the area more closely together to form a cohesive district. In order to ensure this positive outcome, though, the city must insist that certain design standards for the hotel are met in exchange for public incentives, as shall be discussed in the Development Strategies section of this report.



Lofts at the Ballpark

Office

Houston is indeed fortunate to have a thriving downtown office sector, and the panel fully recognizes that given the strength of this market and the value of the land within the study area, a developer could easily determine that the highest and best use for one or more parcels would be an additional office building. Such a use would contribute to the city's tax and employment base, to the daytime population of the area, and to a small degree, to hotel room occupancy. Unfortunately, such a use would do nothing to contribute to the vibrancy of the area after 5:00 pm and on weekends, and would therefore hamper efforts to create a well-connected and lively district within the study area. In the event that office development does occur within the study area, the panel recommends that steps be taken to ensure that the building engages the street as much as possible, as discussed later in the report.

Retail

Few if any types of development can do as much to stimulate street activity and create a festive and inviting atmosphere as retail can, particularly restaurants and bars. As a result, cities across the nation often do everything they can to directly stimulate retail development, often with disappointing results. Based upon its assessment of the existing market, including its interviews with area retailers and restaurateurs, the panel does not believe that sufficient demand currently exists for additional retail. Adhering to the accepted rule that "retail follows rooftops," the panel believes that additional residents and visitors must lead the way within the study area. This is not to say that accommodations should not be made for future retail growth, as is discussed later in the report, but retail should not be viewed as the prime mover.



Mainplace, Downtown Houston

“If a truly vibrant urban environment is a goal, this is not where we can afford to just let the market take care of everything.”

Residential

Given the study area’s unmatched accessibility to employment, transit, and amenities—especially the best-in-class Discovery Green—as well as the favorable capital markets conditions and other national trends outlined previously, the panel quickly identified the greatest market potential for the area as residential, specifically 8- to 12-story multi-family rental residential development, due to the relatively more affordable rents achievable with such buildings as compared to taller structures. Not only would such projects satisfy an unmet need in the marketplace, but they and their residents would also do more than any other type of use to add life to the street and create the well-connected, active, 24/7 district that is needed to tie together all of the existing parts of the study area.

The panel recognizes, however, that without public incentives, land values west of U.S. Route 59 are prohibitively expensive for the type of residential product that would be in greatest demand, i.e., that which would be affordable to a broad spectrum of those working in downtown. Nor does the panel believe the market is deep enough for quick development of multiple higher-end residential products at the large scale of One Park Place. Nonetheless, the panel believes that with public incentives 8- to 12-story projects are doable, and that, as a means of protecting, enhancing, and maximizing the value of the significant public and private investments that have already been made in the area, they are necessary in the immediate term. The panel also identified additional residential demand for those neighborhoods surrounding the study area, including EaDo and Midtown, as is discussed within the Development Strategies section of the report, but does not believe that additional development there would have anywhere near the type of direct positive impacts upon the study area as would residential development west of U.S. Route 59.

Although the market potential outlined above may present an enticing portrait for what the

area can become, the panel stresses that if a truly vibrant urban environment within the study area is a goal, this is not an instance where we can afford to just let the market take care of everything. The effort and public funds already expended within the area and the economic importance of the area to the city as a whole is too great, the window of opportunity is too short, and the margin for error is too slim for this market potential to be realized without bold steps also being taken by the public sector. Those steps, in terms of continuing to improve the public realm and literally creating the groundwork for tying together the study area’s existing and future assets, are the focus of the next section of the report.



One Park Place

Public Realm

The panel commends the work that the Downtown Houston Management District and others have done over a number of years to improve the public realm within downtown; indeed, much of the hardest and costliest work has already been completed. The panel also appreciates the balance that the District, the City, METRO, and others need to strike, to ensure that the massive numbers of employees who come into downtown each day can easily access their jobs, and that visitors can access the many amenities. Nonetheless, the panel notes that the most successful downtowns in the country have traffic, and that the only cities that have “solved” their traffic problems are those whose downtowns are dead or dying. Thus, the

panel took as their guiding principle the need to “Celebrate the pedestrian, and accommodate the automobile.” That is to say, every possible signal should be given that this is a place where you can, and are invited to, get around on foot at the ground level, in order to enjoy all of the amenities that are available. Ironically, the fact that the study area is largely unserved by the downtown tunnel system can actually be a competitive advantage here, as that factor adds to the unique opportunity for this area to have a more active pedestrian realm at the street level.

As noted in the Livable Centers study, every block face is critical in terms of providing positive signals to pedestrians. One blank building wall,



Current sidewalk conditions (Livable Centers study)

“For Crawford Street, the panel recommends extending the Discovery Green ‘Experience’ as far as possible.”

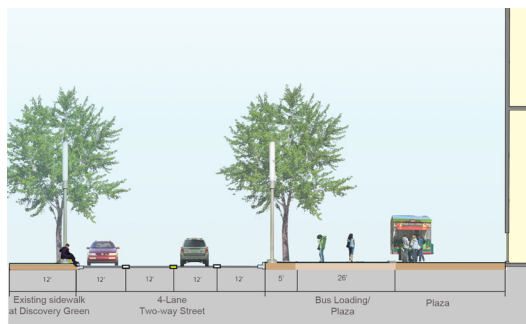
or one expansive surface parking lot, is enough to deter a pedestrian from venturing any farther. But in terms of tying together the study area, the panel identified several blocks as super-critical, i.e., ones that need to be focused on immediately. These streets include Crawford and Dallas, the latter of which has also been identified in other studies as an important connection. These corridors need to have not only sufficiently wide sidewalks, but also enhanced lighting as well as other basic streetscape elements, including street trees and awnings for both shade and visual enhancement. For Crawford Street, which already turns into a pedestrian promenade through Discovery Green, the panel recommends extending the Discovery Green “experience” as far as possible. This does not mean that all automobile traffic should be removed from the street entirely, as future development there will need such access and on-street parking, but rather that the cross-section of the street be narrowed in order to accommodate wider sidewalks, diagonal on-street parking, and green infrastructure all the way north to Texas Avenue, thereby reinforcing the pedestrian linkage and park-like feeling to Minute Maid Park.

Regarding Dallas Street, the panel heard from several stakeholders that diesel buses are a major impediment to sidewalk dining, particularly when accelerating from stops and intersections; while recognizing the essential role that buses play within downtown, the panel urges rerouting buses away from these critical pedestrian corridors, or least upgrading to cleaner and quieter buses. The panel was happy to hear, for example, that the new GreenLink service will feature cleaner and quieter buses that operate using compressed natural gas.

Another street that the panel places at the top of the list for needed improvements is Rusk, as it offers the first opportunity to experience EaDo for anyone who is traveling north after exiting the Convention Center, the Hilton, or a new hotel facility north of Discovery Green. Creating an inviting pedestrian connection under a wide freeway is always challenging, but successful examples do exist where enhanced lighting, art,

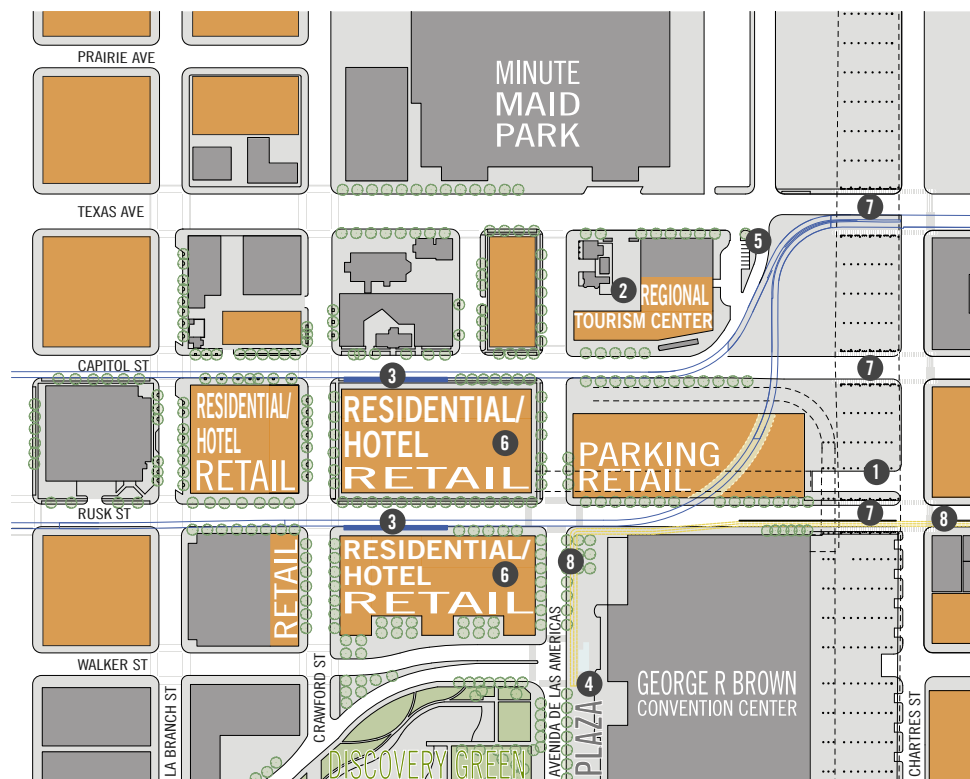
and vegetation provide reassuring visual cues to pedestrians. Indeed, we have already seen in Houston where such features have transformed the experience along Buffalo Bayou under the highways there, through the Sabine-to-Bagby Promenade. Regarding Avenida de las Americas, the panel strongly agrees with the general consensus, as discussed in other studies, that the roadway is too wide and underutilized, and endorses the Livable Centers recommendations for improving the pedestrian experience along it by widening the sidewalk adjacent to the Convention Center.

By prioritizing such improvements, the public sector helps set the stage for private investment. The manner in which the streets address pedestrians and buildings is a critical factor for success, but it is only one factor; just as important is how those buildings address and interact with that streetscape, which is addressed next.



Proposed reconstruction of Avenida de las Americas to create a more pedestrian space. Top: current Bottom: future (Livable Centers study)

“Five new residential projects scattered around the study area will have far less of an impact than five new projects focused on priority corridors such as Crawford and Dallas.”



Possible development between convention center, Discovery Green, and Minute Maid Park (Livable Centers study)

Development Strategies

As discussed in the Market Potential section of the report, the panel finds the greatest near-term demand for a large additional convention center hotel and for multi-family rental residential development. Fortuitously, these are also the types of development that can most contribute to creating a lively, 24/7 environment within the study area by filling in the gaps and adding more people on the street, while also strengthening existing retail and laying the foundation for its future growth. The potential impact of these new developments and residents, however, can be greatly increased or diminished, depending on where the projects are sited and how they address the street. Five new residential projects scattered around the study area will have far less of an impact than five new projects focused on priority corridors such as Crawford and Dallas. In the latter scenario, visitors, residents—and lenders for future projects—will immediately grasp that a transformation is happening here, which will in turn help create a virtuous cycle of additional buzz and development farther afield.

On a related note, buildings with blank walls, no matter how tall they are and how many people are residing or staying within them, contribute far less to a pedestrian's sense of safety, comfort, and engagement than one with ground floors that are transparent and feature active uses. The most effective means to activate such ground-floor spaces is through the inclusion of fully-occupied retail, but because the panel does not anticipate additional retail demand within the study area in the near-term, the panel instead recommends that the ground floors of these new developments simply have active uses and transparent faces. In a residential building, for example, this could take the form of the building's exercise room or another type of amenity; indeed, in many cases such uses do more to activate the streetscape than many 9:00 to 5:00 retail uses would. This is not to say that provisions should not be made within these buildings for future retail growth: sufficient ceiling heights and other features should be included to ensure that such spaces could be transitioned for retail in the

future; moreover, any parking garages should be designed to accommodate future shared parking opportunities.

Of course, there is currently no requirement within Houston for buildings to address the street in such a manner, and although most developers recognize the value that is added to their projects by incorporating such features, the urban fabric within the area is already too frayed to take a chance that another block might be lost. An even greater roadblock to the realization of the area's market potential as a mixed-use pedestrian district, though, is the fact that precisely because so many public investments have been made in the area, the value of the land has increased so much that high-rise office is the only type of development that now "pencils out." Thus, in order to achieve the full benefit from the investments it has already made, the public sector will have to step in to incentivize additional hotel and residential development within the study area, and to ensure that the ground floors of such uses are active and transparent.

The fact that some sites are already under the control of public or not-for-profit, civically-minded owners provides a leg up in this regard. The planned parking structure across Rusk from the north end of the GRB, and the north frontage of the GRB itself, are an especially critical opportunity where Houston First can take measures to ensure that their own building designs and streetscape support the objectives for an active and friendly street environment. In terms of the hotel, the public incentives that can be used to get the project done, and to ensure a high-quality design that benefits the streetscape and the pedestrian experience, can include 10-year abatements for City of Houston property and hotel occupancy taxes. The construction of a public parking garage within the study area, in addition to the one already planned for the GRB, can serve as an additional incentive both for the hotel and, in the longer-term, for future retail development. As the panel has recommended for all other buildings, care should also be taken with these garages to ensure that

they have transparent ground floors with active uses.

From a residential standpoint, the panel believes that the best tool the city has is the 380 agreement. The panel believes that this agreement should not be done on a project-by-project basis as has been done in the past, but rather within the boundaries the panel has defined and especially on Crawford and Dallas Streets, with an explicit policy declaration that the purpose of the incentive is to spur residential development with active ground-floor uses. As noted in the Market Potential section of the report, the panel believes that the most easily financeable type of residential product for the area would be 8- to 12-story buildings, which are exponentially less expensive to build than higher-rise projects, and therefore allow for lower rents that would appeal to a broader swath of the market, most notably, to many downtown workers. With the benefit of currently reduced construction costs, favorable capital markets conditions, strong demand for multifamily rental generally, and the 380 agreement and the infrastructure improvements it would help facilitate, such projects would be feasible.

Just east of U.S. Route 59, where land values are lower—but rising—the panel sees an opportunity for the type of 3- to 4- story wood frame construction that allows for even lower rents, but which is simply not feasible west of the highway. Such development could potentially qualify for funding from other sources for workforce housing, generally defined as that meeting the needs of those making 80-120% of the area median income. Adding residents on both sides of the highway would also facilitate greater connectivity between the two sides, and provide for a broad array of housing choices within range of downtown, its amenities and employment opportunities. The panel is careful to note, however, that although the surface infrastructure needs to be altered west of and under the highway, both the surface and subsurface infrastructure east of the highway require investment, as the poor condition of the sanitary sewer, stormwater, and water infrastructure are limiting factors for substantial new development on the east.

“From a residential standpoint, the panel believes that the best tool the city has is the 380 agreement.”



Discovery Green

Implementation

In addition to the new approaches laid out above, the panel recommends continuing with and ramping up those positive steps that have already been taken, including those related to improving the perception of safety, and to district branding. The panel commends the Downtown District for its use of public safety guides, a cadre of trained individuals who serve as the first point of contact for people who need social services, provide a safe and welcoming presence for visitors, and act as the eyes and ears of police in a more subtle and affordable manner. Expanding this program seems like a cost-effective way for the Downtown District and Houston First to continue to improve the pedestrian experience for visitors and locals alike, and could be phased in as new projects come on-line and street level activity increases.

Previously noted but worth repeating is the need to continue upgrading lighting within the study area, which, coupled with the enhanced uniformed presence and more “eyes on the street” provided by new active ground floor uses, will significantly increase the perception of safety in the area.

Providing a new public parking garage and as many on-street parking opportunities as possible throughout the study area will also enhance the accessibility and “legibility” of the area. The panelists heard from several stakeholders that parking availability and pricing is currently difficult to understand, which acts as a deterrent to coming downtown. In order to better coordinate this essential resource, the panel recommends the establishment of a parking district within the study area, so that all on- and off-street parking can be coordinated to the greatest extent possible and maximum shared parking between different land uses can be achieved.

Finally, the panel recommends branding the area as the Discovery District, in an effort to continue building on that treasured public space and extending its identity throughout the study area. One can imagine that locals, and likely visitors as well, would be far more interested in living in or going to an area known as the Discovery District instead of one known as the Convention District.

As is usually the case when there is a convergence of opportunities, great care must be taken to ensure that such opportunities are not squandered. It is for this reason that the panel urges the public sector to once again think and act boldly, this time at the human scale, to provide needed infrastructure in advance of development, to shift focus from the automobile to the pedestrian, to provide incentives to enable hotel and residential development within the study area, and to ensure that they and indeed all uses have active and transparent ground floors. In Houston, one occasionally sees a bumper sticker that reads, “Lord, Please Give Me One More Boom- I Promise Not to Blow It This Time.” Although the panel fully recognizes and appreciates that it may not seem like a boom time within the still-struggling public sector, the description is indeed apt when one considers Houston’s current position relative to the nation, and the unique opportunity Houston now has to leverage a relatively small amount of additional public investment into a much larger private one. Major investments have already been made, but there has also been harm done to the urban fabric over the years as a result of the piecemeal development of the area; this is perhaps Houston’s last, best chance to bring all the pieces within the study area together and get it right.

“The panel recommends the establishment of a parking district within the study area.”

About the Panel

John Desmond, Executive Vice President of Downtown Environment, for the Downtown Denver Partnership, Inc., served as Chair for this Technical Assistance Panel.

Lance Gilliam, Managing Partner, UCR moody rambin PAGE, and shareholder in MoodyRambin Interests, represents national, regional and local restaurateurs and retailers throughout most of the southeastern and western U.S.

Robert Heineman FAIA, Vice President for Planning with The Woodlands, has been instrumental in developing one of the nation's most celebrated master planned communities from its inception.

John Keeling, Executive Vice President of Valencia Group, is a nationally prominent hospitality industry expert, with more than 35 years of experience in hotel brokerage, appraisal and consulting.

Ben Pisklak, Regional Vice President of Investments for Gables, is responsible for development and acquisitions in Houston, Austin and Dallas.

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Tim Williamson, Executive Vice President and head of Real Estate for Cadence Bank, is responsible for all of the bank's commercial real estate loan origination and portfolio management in Houston and across the southeastern US.



Pedestrian improvements on Rusk (Livable Centers Study)