

# Addressing 7th Avenue

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## Introduction

The following is a project that responded to the need for a design liaison between the Merchants of 7th Avenue and the City of Phoenix. Last fall a Seed/Money/Planning Grant was granted for initiating this community design project. The result of that grant was a Block by Block Building Catalogue that inventoried 7th Avenue in Phoenix. Recent project discussions with both the 7th Avenue Merchants, the City of Phoenix, and neighborhood members have resulted in a clearer focus and delegation of roles between stakeholders. What follows is an ongoing project of design mediation for this urban public/private partnership. Never before in the history of Phoenix have merchants, neighbors, city municipalities, and a university equally come together to help redevelop part of the city.

## Site

This project focuses on the 7th Avenue commercial corridor between Camelback Road and Indian School Road in downtown Phoenix Arizona. Originally developed in the decade following W.W.II, 7th Avenue has suffered the fate of many older districts across the country. A once thriving neighborhood, now a victim of expansive suburban development, 7th Avenue struggles to retain its commercial viability. Like other postwar commercial strips throughout the United States, 7th Avenue has had difficulty competing with new commercial developments. With the advent of large corporate franchises, regional malls, and big box retail centers saturating the suburban landscape, 7th Avenue has been reduced to those programs that do not fit the global model. In fact, what has become more common about commercial strips such as 7th Avenue in Phoenix is that it does not have a single franchise. Family restaurants and specialty retail stores are in the minority. While antique shops, auto repair, and auto body shops are the prevailing businesses that have not yet been absorbed or branded by corporate retail. Like commercial orphans, these seemingly incongruous programs are struggling for economic survival. Realizing their precarious commercial condition, the retailers of 7th Avenue have grouped together to combine forces in hopes of developing a set of strategies for the strip which could enable it to develop as a district within its existing fabric. The opportunity for redeveloping this strip is not unique to 7th Avenue, but a prototypical condition that could be a role model for many other areas of Phoenix and beyond.

## Stakeholders

The 7th Avenue Merchant's Association was formed two years ago. Merchants' associations are not unusual in defined homogeneous districts, however in an undefined heterogeneous context

such as 7th Avenue this association is rare. The membership of the 7th Avenue Merchant's Association is growing, and the success of their initial efforts to improve the quality of life in their neighborhood have exceeded their expectations. The Association has already established strong ties among the merchants themselves, to the adjacent residential district, and to the City of Phoenix.

Four city departments: Planning, Community and Economic Development, Streets, and Neighborhood Services have demonstrated their strong commitment to the redevelopment of the 7th Avenue commercial district. Before the university's involvement in the project, representatives from the City attended meetings of the newly-formed 7th Avenue Merchant's Association and worked with the shopkeepers to develop some initial strategies for revitalizing their neighborhood. In the summer of 1998, the City solicited the assistance of the Joint Urban Design Program in the College of Architecture and Environmental Design at the university. In recent meetings, representatives from the City have been extremely cooperative and supportive-expressing their concerns for density, signage, and parking. This is a unique condition for Phoenix because this stretch of 7th Avenue does not fall in line with the past or future master plan. With this in mind, 7th Avenue must develop its own alternative tactics for redevelopment. What is missing in the gap between the commitment of the City and the efforts of the merchants and the neighborhood is the design vision and insight to bridge these stakeholders and illustrate potential solutions.

## History

With the help of a Seed/Money Planning Grant three faculty partners Darren Petrucci, Terry Surjan, and Leslie Van Duzer were able to work very closely with the merchants to catalogue the physical condition of each building, the adjacent signage, and the surrounding parking lots and vegetation of the mile-long commercial strip between Camelback Road and Indian School Road in the City of Phoenix. In addition, photographs of material details record each building's construction type and color palette extending east and west to the boundaries of the residential neighborhoods along the strip. Site Mappings were also made depicting the distribution of specific physical conditions ( i.e. signage location, building to street relationships, and the location of vacant properties) and non-physical forces of development ( i.e. hours of operation, owner vs. rented, and the location of buildings which qualify for storefront funding assistance from the City). These overall views of the site help to identify pockets within the district which are most in need of (and eligible for) redevelopment assistance. The site mappings, together with the Block by Block Building Catalogue, helped

the merchants to focus on three specific problem areas in their district: sidewalks, advertisement, and landscape. The faculty partners worked with both the merchants and the City of Phoenix in identifying approaches that could be used to address these issues. There is a strong interest and support from the city to move ahead to address these issue areas as a starting point to rejuvenating the area. In fact, the city has proposed that a federal T-21 grant might be appropriate here.

## Proposal

*Becoming 7th Avenue* presents an alternative method for urban redevelopment. Rather than the imposition of one-sided master plans with such conventions as gateways, centers, and imported thematic imagery, this project proposes the establishment of collective strategies for incremental, localized redevelopment. This agenda is not only in accord with the city agencies, but it will also allow them to modify their standard method of street improvements. The City of Phoenix has been a key advocate for the project. They understand that their current method for street improvement is conventional, and they see this as an opportunity to reconsider and test alternative schemes.

The objectives of the project are three-fold:

- First, the underlying (or unseen) potential of the site must be revealed by identifying the concerns and possibilities within the existing conditions that are capable of catalyzing multiple development opportunities. This is being accomplished through a series of design charrettes involving the 7th Avenue Merchants, the neighboring community, and the City of Phoenix. With this particular approach to urban redevelopment—an approach which rejects the conventional master plan in favor of modifications that unfold with events over time—the site is never viewed as fixed. Therefore, it can accommodate the constant developmental and programmatic shifts so crucial to successful retail development. The goal is to catalyze an alternative urbanism that will emerge from the existing condition. This method also allows for smaller improvements to affect a larger area. Rather than biting off the entire strip and overlaying it with an overarching plan, it will be redeveloped as consenting pieces as their needs or goals are made manifest.

Three tactical examples for catalyzing redevelopment along 7th Avenue are:

- **appropriation** (i.e. sidewalks)
  - **Intensification** (i.e. advertisement)
  - **Grafting** (i.e. programmed landscapes)
- Currently, merchants along 7th avenue are appropriating the sidewalks in front of their establishments for the display of their wares. This first tactic has proven effective in turning

the store inside out, thus causing drivers to slow for drive-by browsing. However, the display of goods on city sidewalks is currently in violation of the City Ordinance in this location. One of the design objectives is to propose a zoning overlay and to promote the side walk as a pedestrian mall. The City of Phoenix Planning and Zoning department will play a large part in this development.

- The second tactic (Intensification) pertains to the signage and advertisement along the strip. Like many strips of this typology, 7th Avenue is buried in a forest of disparate signage. Billboards, street signs, attached signs, and supported signs are scattered along the strip. However, except for the billboards which do not advertise for 7th Avenue merchants, most signage is too small to be read in a moving car. 7th Avenue has not changed its signage since the early 1960s. The City of Phoenix stipulates a certain size sign based upon square footage of retail. This equation does not consider the speed of traffic or lack of pedestrian movement. Rather than incorporate a homogenizing signage code conventional to a New Urbanist approach, 7th Avenue accepts its heterogeneous signage, and (in a modified Las Vegas method) attempts to intensify its condition. One potential design objective is to increase advertising square footage by utilizing the side of the retail building perpendicular to the street as a large murals artistically depicting the program of the interior. For example, a laundry might have painted on its side a beautiful large abstract field of white shirts. This strategy would begin to blur the boundary between art and commerce and begin to establish an identity for the strip.
- The third tactic (Grafting) develops programmed landscapes within the existing streetscape of the strip. Parking lots, alleys, and spaces between buildings become prime sites for multi-use programs. Overlaying amenities onto these infrastructures establishes a method for connecting the buildings along the strip, promoting pedestrian circulation, and interfacing with the neighborhood directly behind the commercial buildings. Open space and parking lots are prevalent throughout the strip and are grossly under used. All current parking requirements are based upon the conventional 200-250 square feet of commercial space per stall. A ratio developed for a single retail building's ability to facilitate its customer base. On a strip such as 7th Avenue, where each retailer is separated by open space and operates at different business hours, parking should not be a problem. The word "Park" is part of parking and as such could be developed as leisure spaces between retail programs. Basketball courts, roller hockey, and automobile display areas are but a few of the programs that are easily overlaid on conventional parking lots. With the assistance of the City of Phoenix, street lights and landscaping are being reconsidered to facilitate multi-use programs rather than the single objectives of safety and beautification.

- The second objective after having identified the places on sites most capable of generating positive development, is to work with the neighborhood and the City to establish a series of design guidelines. These guidelines allow merchants interested in making improvements to their properties to make changes which contribute to a collectively-held goal. Here, the term “guideline” is used for its familiarity: the intent is not to establish a universal aesthetic, but a common goal. Each merchant is encouraged to make modifications specific to their own site and in healthy competition to out do one other. The guidelines will exist as a series of design tactics, rather than covenants, codes, and restrictions, thus allowing for looser interpretations and individuality. The potential effects of these guidelines will be demonstrated by using computer models of the site that have been already generated. This three dimensional graphic depiction allows the merchants to better visualize the impact of their decisions.
- Finally, the third objective is to provide the merchants with a road map through the city approval process. This document, prepared in collaboration with key City agencies, aims to clarify, expedite, and to modify the application process to aid in facilitating the redevelopment agenda.

## Conclusion

The product evaluation is built-in with the T-21 grant proposal and subsequent redevelopment along the strip. The goal is to integrate the resident neighborhood, the individual merchant improvements, and the City provided improvements through tactical guidelines. All of the pieces of this urban puzzle are there, and they are waiting to be directed into place.

This approach to community redevelopment has broad implications for sites beyond 7th Avenue in Phoenix. While 7th Avenue has very specific characteristics, there are a multitude of older commercial strips in Maricopa County also in need of redevelopment. The unique collaboration of community, City, and institution has created incentive, willingness, and guidance beyond what any single developer could produce. This is not a single vision or master plan, but an enlightened grassroots development catalyzed by merchants forming their own corporation. The *Becoming 7th Avenue* project may well provide a model framework for other urban redevelopment projects throughout the Phoenix metropolitan area.