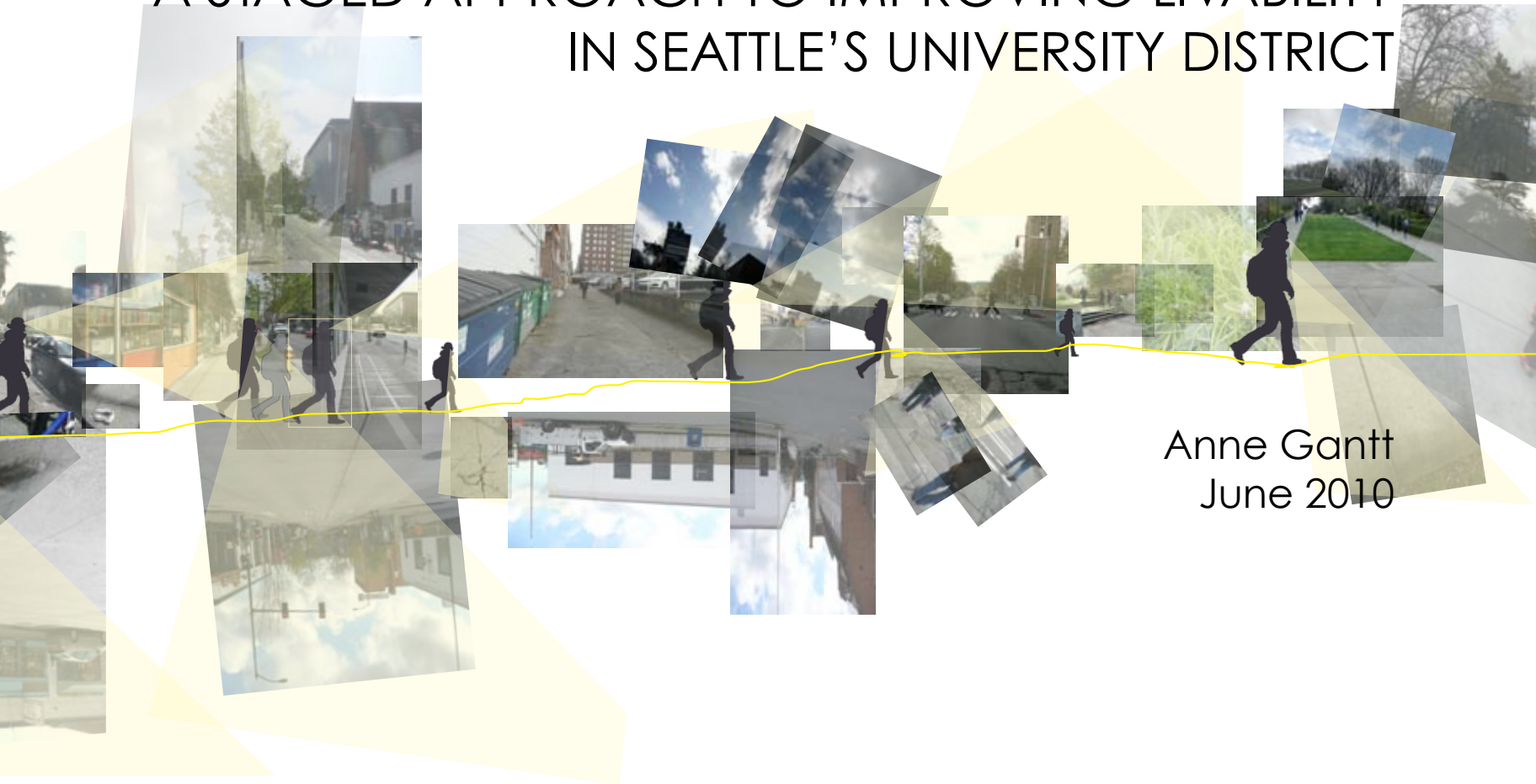


ONE STEP AT A TIME:

A STAGED APPROACH TO IMPROVING LIVABILITY
IN SEATTLE'S UNIVERSITY DISTRICT



Anne Gantt
June 2010

The goal of "One Step At A Time" is to humanize the urban spaces of the University District for the people who live, work and study in it.

As important as the specific interventions that are proposed is the paradigm that is used in which interventions are phased in over time.

Initially, many simple, inexpensive projects are tested -- some of which will not be successful -- while others, that are, will help to focus the implementation of a select number of larger scale projects.

The simple interventions alone may, in fact, be of extremely high value, providing radical improvements in the ways the urban space is perceived and used for a minimal investment.

The University of Washington is integrated into urban spaces that have heavy car traffic and are not well suited to walking, cycling, or gathering outdoors.

These issues are not just aesthetic:

According to the University Area Transportation Action Strategy, between 2004 and 2007, forty-six pedestrian-vehicle collisions occurred with one resulting in death.

In the same time period, 39 bicycle-vehicle collisions occurred.

In 2010, a UW student was killed crossing 15th Avenue while in a crosswalk.

In the summer of 2011, a bicyclist was killed while riding on The Ave.

The need to facilitate safe walking and bicycling will become acute once the Light Rail station opens at Brooklyn and 43rd Street.



More than 10 pedestrians are hit by vehicles each year in the U-District.

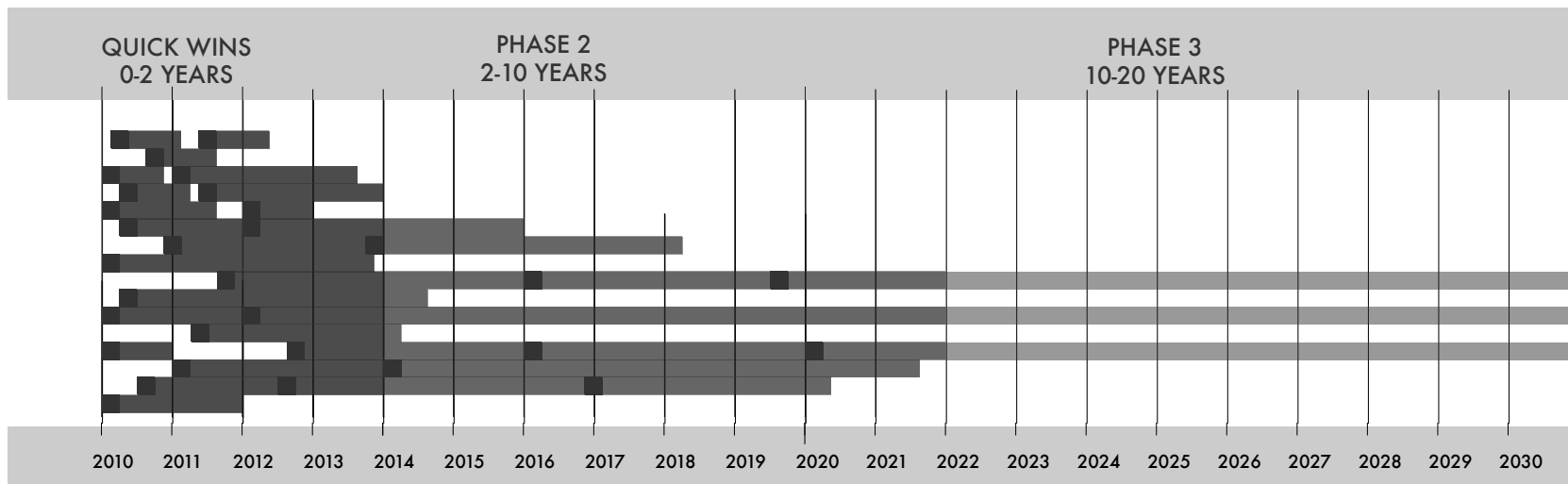
Providing safe passage for pedestrians and cyclists and pleasant public spaces improves the quality of life for everyone who visits the area, no matter what form of transportation they use.

This study was influenced by the work of Jan Gehl who, over the past thirty years helped transform Copenhagen from being car-oriented to being one of the most pedestrian friendly, livable cities in the world.

Importantly, the improvements in Copenhagen's livability did not result from a single, unified plan. Rather, they were largely achieved through multiple, incremental changes, many of which were on a small scale.



Copenhagen street: people, bikes, and cars share the street space.



Schematic project timeline

The diagram above shows a twenty-year time frame for implementing strategies that will improve livability.

The projects are focused on low-cost, high yield strategies to improve livability, termed "Quick Wins" by Gehl. These are things that can be tested over the course of a few months or years, before investing in more permanent and higher cost projects.

People's lives are affected by where they live. The spaces people live and work in can either contribute to one's health and feeling of happiness, or they can cause stress.

Livability means creating places where people and the activities that people undertake throughout the day are prioritized over all other factors.

It means creating places that are safe, active, appealing, and sustainable.



SAFE

LIVABILITY

ACTIVE

SUSTAINABLE

APPEALING



KEY ELEMENTS OF LIVABILITY

Livability is essential to quality of life because when people spend time living, working and relaxing in places that are safe, active and appealing, they become invested in the place and want to spend more time there.

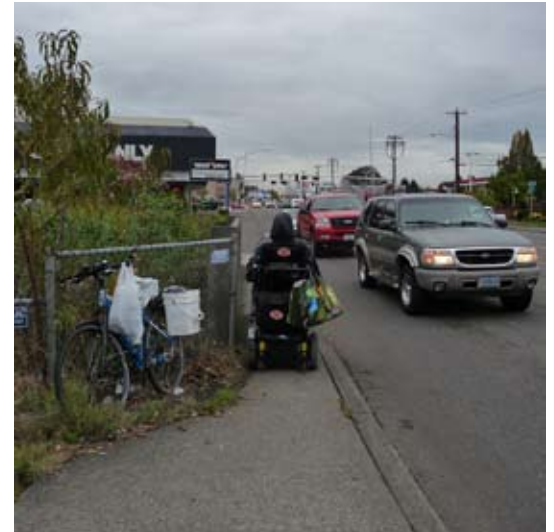
It means streets and sidewalks that feel-- and are-- safe, both day and night.

Safe



A clearly marked intersection provides safe space for bikes, people and cars in Portland.

Unsafe



The limited sidewalk and lack of separation between cars and people makes using the sidewalk dangerous.

Active places are spaces that change throughout the day and with each season.

They encourage people to see and experience these changes through sight, smell and feel.

Active



Copenhagen pedestrian street filled with people, bikes, cafes and trees.

Unchanging



Retaining wall along 15th Avenue at 43rd Street.

Appealing places are places that are pleasing or interesting to the eye.

In terms of physical space, they are places with large open windows for people to look into or see out of, walls with changes in texture, the presence of interesting views and smells -- things that hit all five senses.

Appealing



Bulldog News, The Ave, University District.

Uninviting



Speech and Hearing Sciences building,
15th Avenue and 42nd Street, University District.

Finally, places that are livable are also sustainable in terms of people, systems and the natural world.

Sustainable



Street swale, High Point, Seattle.

Non-renewing



The Ave, University District.



Site Overview: University District boundaries, campus boundary, and future Light Rail route and stations



Important locations in the University District, including the future primary path between the Light Rail station and the UW campus

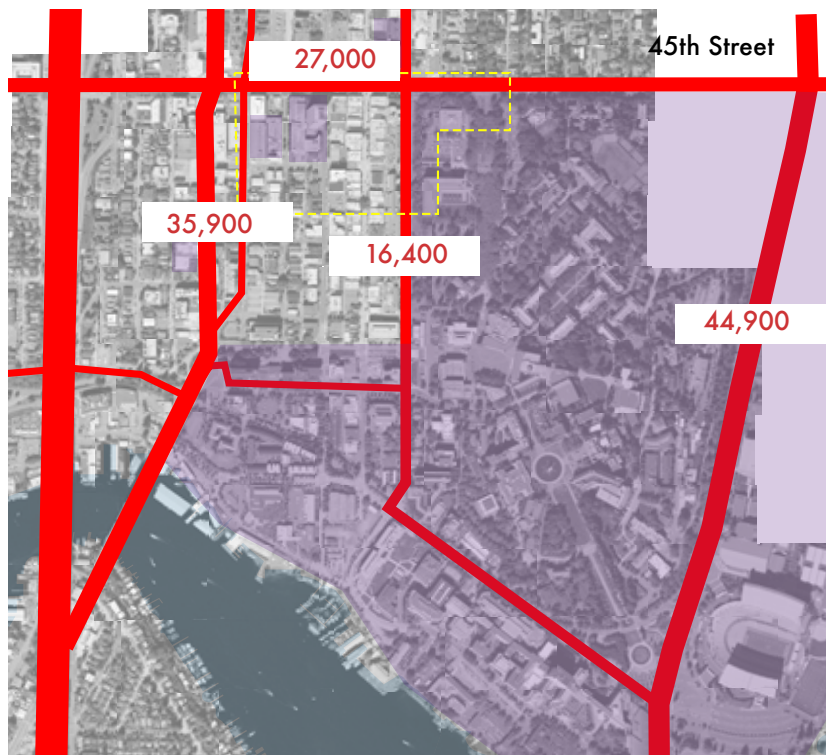
SITE OVERVIEW

The project site is located across six blocks directly west of the University of Washington campus proper.

This area is ideally suited to become the most livable, pedestrian- and bike-friendly neighborhood in all of Seattle.

And the need for this to become a reality is pressing: in less than ten years a light rail station will open at the base of the UW Tower, bringing 12,000 or more people daily into the heart of the neighborhood.

Ultimately the strategies proposed here make sense for the entire University District neighborhood, but the project site was chosen as a pilot because of the acute issues around high foot traffic that will only intensify when the light rail station opens.



Daily vehicle traffic on major University District arterials.



Street-Level parking in the University District

The major challenge of the site is how to transform the neighborhood from being automobile-oriented to becoming pedestrian oriented.

High levels of vehicle traffic along 45th Street and 15th Avenue NE create an atmosphere that is threatening and unsafe for pedestrians.



1,680 = Number of parking spots along University Way (SDOT)



40 = Number of seats for people along University Way

Although there are many cafes, restaurants and bars on The Ave, the number of street-level parking spaces adds considerably to the sense that space for cars is more important than space for people.



Having comfortable, safe seating areas right on the street, whether cafe seating (where you have to buy something to sit in a particular area) or public seating that is free and accessible to all, is essential to creating a lively street life.

Existing space for people in the University District is limited and is not designed to enhance the atmosphere of the street.

The pedestrian entrances to the UW campus along 15th Avenue NE provide another example of the primacy of cars in the University District

The entrances for walkers and bicyclists are indistinguishable from major thoroughfares.

As a student heading to her first class, or a community member going to campus to attend a performance, there is little indication that you are entering one of the preeminent universities in the nation.

The effect is not welcoming, seems to lack University pride, and misses opportunities to affirm to the student or community member that they are in a place of value.

It doesn't have to be this way.



15th and 45th



15th and 42nd



15th and 40th

The question "How can the U-District become more livable?" was approached from two directions.

Jan Gehl's work provides inspiration in terms of terminology and methodology, and case studies of successful approaches to the question of livability from other universities provided lessons on "Best Practices."



Appealing:
Good lighting

Active:
Street scene changes
from day to night

Safe:
Many eyes on
the street

Sustainable:
Pedestrians and bicyclists

Pedestrian priority street in Copenhagen.



Low-cost, low-tech signals that enhance a sense of community
New York University, New York, New York

New York University is an urban university which lacks a discrete campus entirely.

Yet NYU creates a sense of “campus” within the city through simple, low-cost means: iconic and highly visible flags at building entrances, planters filled with purple flowers, and large street level windows.

These are things that beautify, welcome and validate the place students and members of the community occupy within the neighborhood.

All of these strategies could be applied to the University of Washington.



Connecting the Building to the Street Parsons School of Design, New York, New York

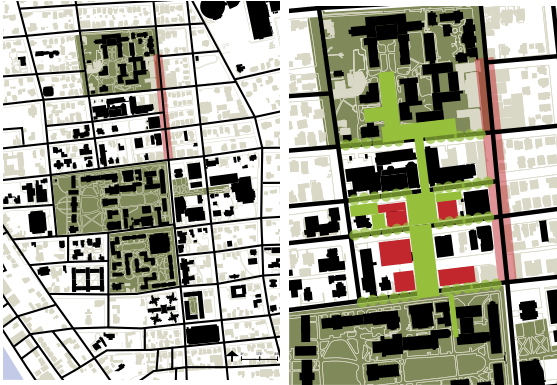
Another example from New York is the newly renovated Sheila C. Johnson Design Center at Parsons.

The renovation, by Lyn Rice, also incorporates large open windows at the street level and interior lobby-esque spaces for students and community members to gather.

The Johnson Center is an outstanding example of how to improve a building's connection to the street.



© Lyn Rice



**Linking Campus Open Spaces
Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island**

On the Brown Campus in Providence, two quads were separated by several city blocks.

The University linked the two areas with a broad pathway with plenty of welcoming places for people to sit and spend time.

From these and other case studies, three key strategies for increasing livability emerged: creating places for people, enhancing building–street connections, and improving University identity in the neighborhood.

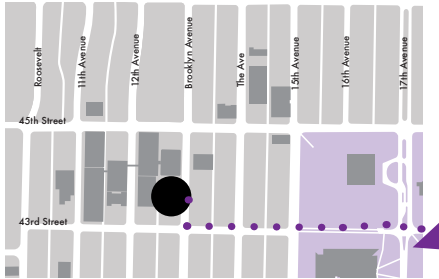
For this project, each strategy is applied in a specific location where, in the spirit of Gehl's "quick wins," the intervention would have the greatest impact.

The method identifies the low-hanging fruit, allows for experimentation, and provides space and resources to strategies that work.

The method also recognizes that some experiments will fail, and lets the unsuccessful projects end before they become big-budget items.

The sites develop over time, integrate with other strategies and allow for change to occur in both planned and unexpected ways.





BROOKLYN AND 43RD: ENHANCING BUILDING TO STREET CONNECTIONS

The base of the UW Tower on the west side of Brooklyn and 43rd will eventually be directly across from one of the Light Rail station entrances.

At the street level there is a fifty-foot blank wall with a few darkly tinted windows.

This space presents the opportunity to enhance the connection between the building and the street.



One idea is rotating art billboards, designed and installed by Industrial Design students from the School of Art.

A year of funding the rotating exhibits would cost less than two-thousand dollars, but provide a major visual impact for the area.

Five years later, the area has evolved into an active, appealing place where people can sit and have a positive urban experience.





43RD STREET BETWEEN BROOKLYN AND THE AVE: CREATING PLACES FOR PEOPLE

Continuing along the path between the future Light Rail station and the UW campus, is Samir's Falafel shop, on 43rd Avenue between Brooklyn and the Ave.

The presence of Kai's Bistro, Samir's Falafel Shop and Hagen Dasz Ice Cream means this block already has the potential for activity throughout the day.

With the transformation of two parking spaces, a place is created where adjacent restaurants can set up tables and chairs, providing customers and passersby a comfortable place to sit.

Five years later, the park has developed down the block and the interventions have begun to overlap. The street is has become a model of livability for the city.





15TH AVENUE AND 43RD STREET: IMPROVING UW IDENTITY IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

The current entrance to campus at 43rd Street and 15th presents another opportunity for improving livability.

As is, after crossing six lanes of traffic, the pedestrian is greeted by a six foot high concrete retaining wall.

With a coat of paint and some friendly banners, pedestrians are given explicit support for and validation of their place as valued entities in the community.

Drivers also receive a clear message that these are important passages.

This and the other pedestrian entrances eventually will need major resources for improvement.

But in the next five years a number of interventions could be experimented with to see what benefits the university and for the community the most.

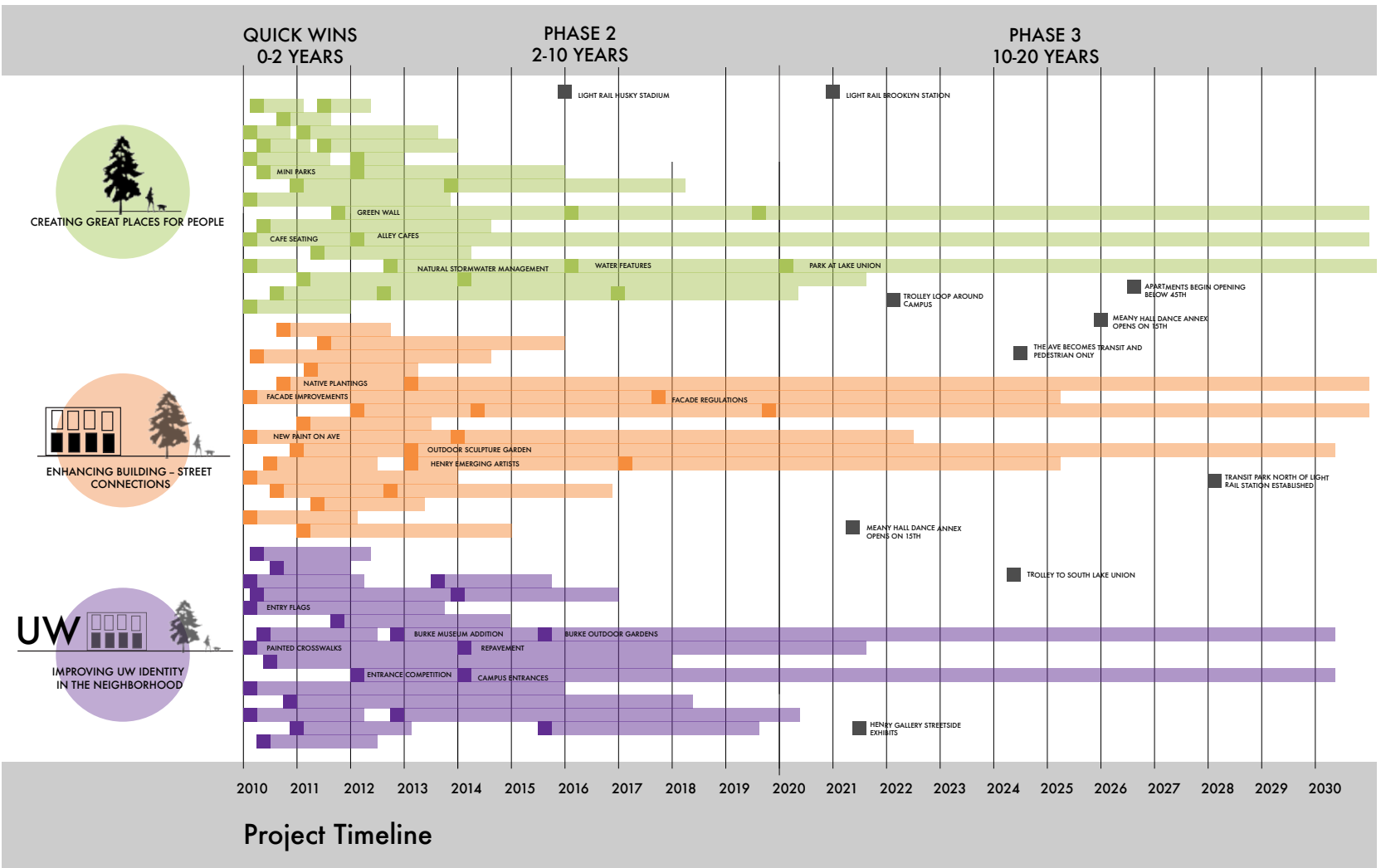
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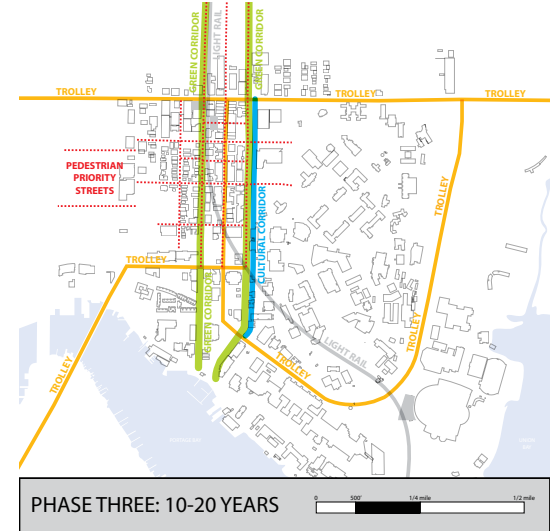
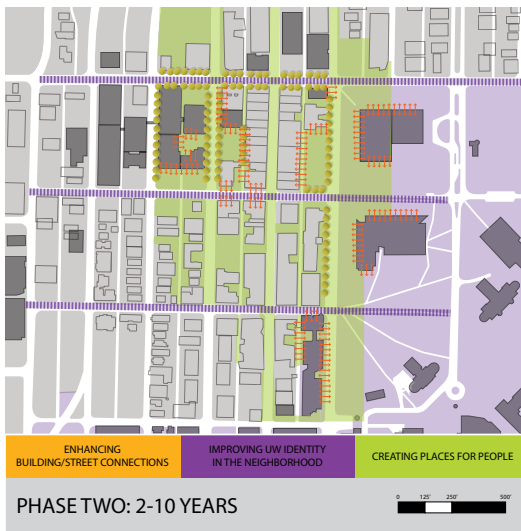




DETAILED PROJECT TIMELINE

The matrix above shows how initial small-scaled strategies develop into more permanent interventions.

Long-term goals exist from the start, but the goals are allowed to develop through incremental changes that test ideas and allow for experimentation before becoming major building projects.



TWENTY-YEAR PHASING PLAN

Quick Wins are a starting point.

The strategies of enhancing building/street connections, improving UW identity in the neighborhood, and creating places for people can be applied around the campus edge and into the community.

As the projects develop, there are many more places for people.

Increasing foot and bicycle traffic has increased spending at local businesses.

And the sometimes unsavory character of the Ave is being countered by a 24-hour presence of students, faculty and local residents who feel welcome in the area and who want to spend time there.

Longer term, the initial strategies have evolved into much broader goals that look not only inward, but also outward.

The U-District becomes better connected to surrounding neighborhoods, the rest of Seattle, and the region.

And the University District is the most livable neighborhood in Seattle.

One final image--

Instead of a built structure for the Light Rail station at Brooklyn and 43rd, perhaps the station area could function as open space.

Existing buildings and alley entrances have new lives as cafes and live-work lofts, and the neighborhood has a special place just for people.



IMAGE CREDITS

Unless otherwise noted, all images are by the author.

p. 7 Chris Brunn. "Copenhagen Cafe." flickr. Web. 13 Apr. 2010. p. 9 Oran Viriyincy. "Light Rail." flickr. Web. 15 Apr. 2010. Lars Daniel. "Rainy Bikes." flickr. Web. 2 Feb. 2010. Andy Pal. "Fountain." flickr. Web. 6 March 2010. Rita Crane Photography. "Cafe." flickr. Web. 4 March 2010. JRTopp. "Tanner Springs." flickr. Web. 4 March 2010. p.10 KTesh. "Unsafe Bridge." flickr. Web. 15 Apr. 2010. SmilingMonk. "Portland Bike Culture." flickr. Web. 23 Nov. 2009. p.13 justsmartdesign. "High Point." flickr. Web. 4 Mar. 2010. p. 16 Herr Hans Gruber. "University Ave." flickr. Web. 23 November 2009. p.21 Chris Brunn. "Copenhagen Street." flickr. Web. 13 Apr. 2010. p.22 shutterberry. "NYU." flickr. Web. 2 Feb. 2010. Travelling Mango. "NYU." flickr. Web. 2 Feb. 2010. p.23 Alex Terzich. "Sheila C. Johnson Design Center-window." flickr. Web. 2 Feb. 2010. Alec Terzich. "Sheila C. Johnson Design Center- entry." flickr. Web. 2 Feb. 2010. © Lyn Rice Architects. Used with permission. p.24 Brown University. "Building Brown: A Guide to Ongoing Construction Projects." www.brown.edu. Web. 3 Mar. 2010.

THANK YOU

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