

Skywalks & Sidewalks

Downtown Des Moines boasts the most pervasive skywalk system of any city in the country. With over three miles of climate-controlled, interior public walkways hovering at the second floor level, most downtown buildings west of the Des Moines River are connected by skywalks.

Beginning in the 1970's as an economic development strategy to attract and retain downtown businesses and inspired by a similar system in Minneapolis, skywalks remain a significant incentive to new and expanding downtown development. The system began in a twelve-block area in the core of downtown. As downtown businesses have expanded beyond this core, the system has grown and it now reaches the Iowa Events Center and Principal Financial's campus north of the core, a number of parking

structures south of the core, and will soon extend west to both the north and south sides of Gateway Park.

Much like sidewalks at-grade, the system is mostly public. In general, the City of Des Moines funds the construction of the bridges crossing the public right-of-way (streets) and building owners pay for the walkways within the buildings.

Skywalks are largely blamed for draining the street level of activity including pedestrians and retail. Certainly other factors contributed to the loss of street level activity with a number of other cultural phenomenon that challenge urban environments. Today, the skywalks still serve their intended purpose: they assist downtown economic development. Skywalks can also take credit

for contributing to a relatively compact downtown, a condition which will serve Des Moines well for decades to come.

The skywalk system is a unique aspect of downtown Des Moines. Skywalks appears destined to remain a vital part of the city. As the system faces its thirtieth anniversary, *Skywalks & Sidewalks* proposes a number of aspects for examination:

1. re-invigorate the skywalk system
2. expand the skywalk system
3. connect the skywalk level to the sidewalk level
4. enhance the pedestrian experience at sidewalk level

The proposals aim to elevate the quality of both the skywalk system and our sidewalk network making both worthy of their unique role in downtown Des Moines.



looking east along Grand Avenue near 5th Street



looking west along Walnut Street near 7th Street



looking east along Locust Street at 7th Street

Re-invigorate the Skywalk System

Parts of the skywalk system are over thirty years old. Much of it was built in the early 1980's. New bridges and corridors are continually in the process of being added. While a patchwork of repairs have been made on an as-needed basis, the system has not received a much-needed comprehensive upgrade: signage is out-of-date, various mechanical and electrical systems create micro-climates, interior and exterior finishes are in various conditions of repair, operation of doors and hardware varies, enclosure and structural systems need evaluation, maintenance, and, in some cases, replacement.

The skywalk system creates additional infrastructure atypical of that found in any other city. Like other pieces of infrastructure -- streets, water lines, sewers, transit -- the skywalk system needs continual attention. The system has expanded tremendously from its original twelve blocks to some sixty blocks and still growing. It needs maintenance, operational oversight, planning expertise, and some creative infusion in order for it to realize its potential as a unique asset in downtown. The incremental public-private collaboration that made the extensive system possible is also what makes it difficult to manage and maintain.

A thorough, rigorous, comprehensive system-wide mapping and evaluation of the skywalk system is needed to prioritize maintenance needs, identify system-wide enhancements, and set 21st Century guidelines for the system. This database produced by this study should provide public and private entities with a common tool to make short- and long-term decisions about the skywalk system. With public and private collaboration, the legal and governance framework that brought the system into being over thirty years should also be re-visited in light of downtown's contemporary needs and functions.



a sampling of the various interior conditions in the skywalk bridges and corridors in downtown

Skywalks and Public Art

Could the skywalks play a role in downtown Des Moines' public art network, to the mutual benefit of both of downtown's unique assets by enlivening the unique skywalk system and systematically communicating and displaying public art? Photo collages of the Walnut Street skywalk between the Wells Fargo Financial buildings using artists' work (clockwise from upper left): Jenny Holzer's digital media, Minneapolis public artist, JOA's speed paintings, and James Turrell's light sculptures



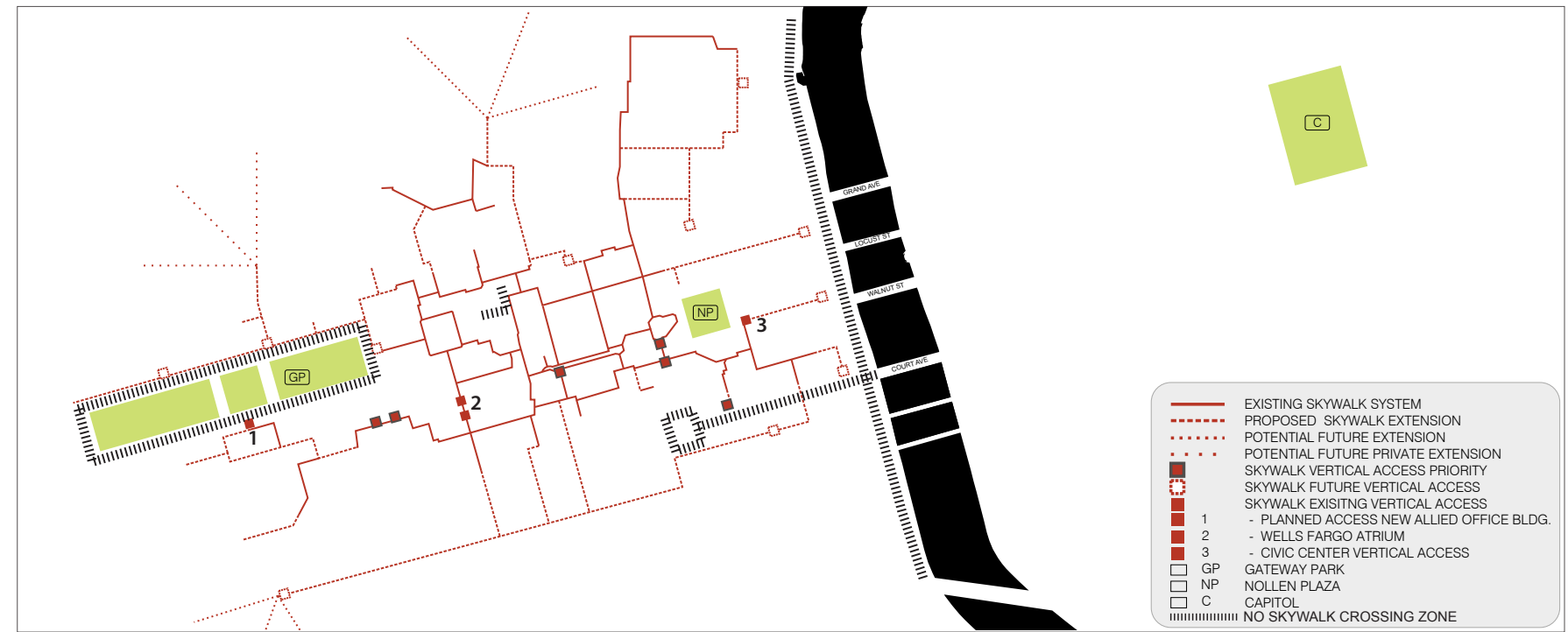
Expand the Skywalk System

While the skywalk system connects many parts of downtown, there are some areas that do not yet have skywalk access and gaining access could be beneficial to the downtown. Expanding the system offers dual opportunities:

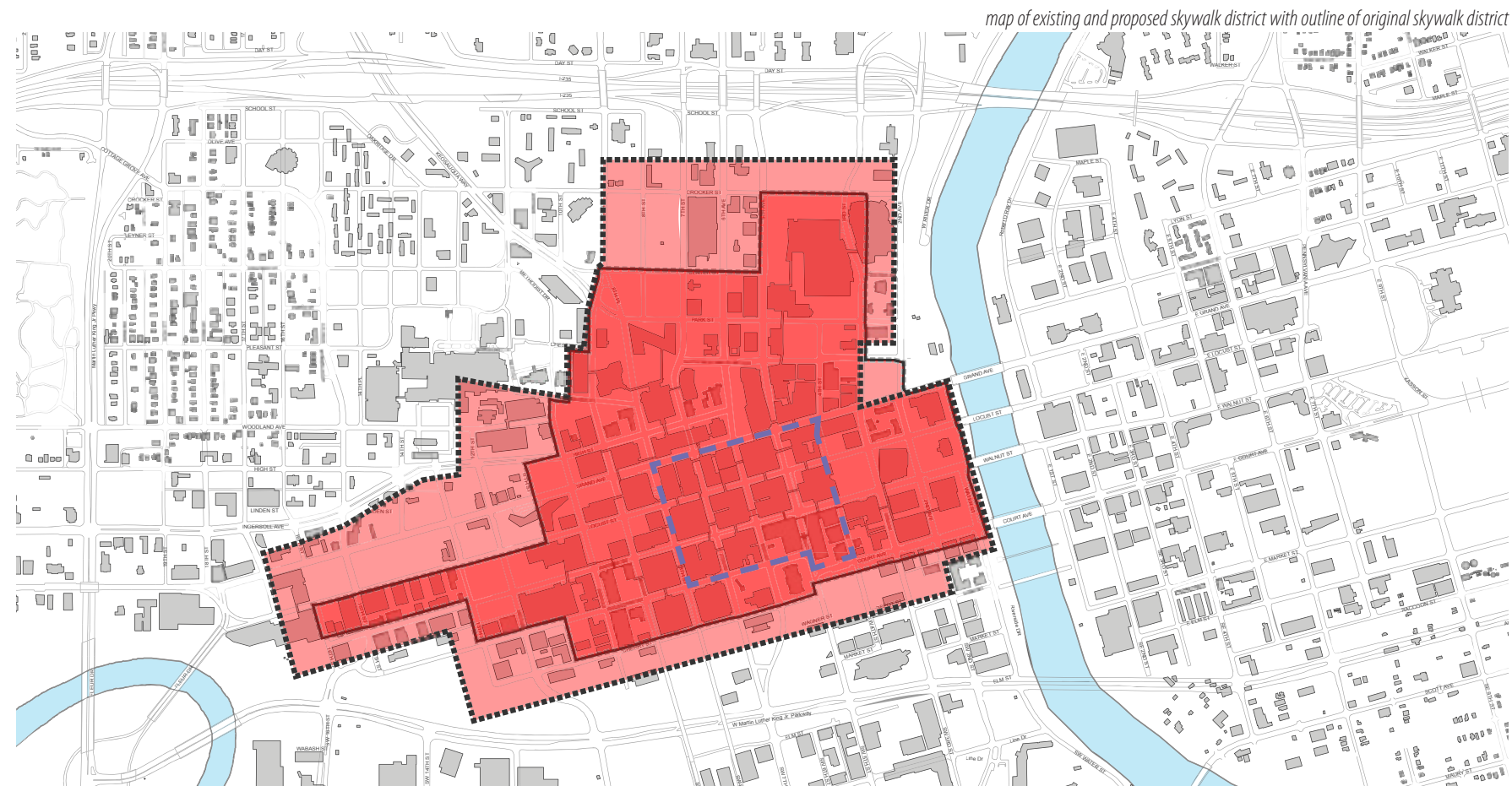
1. physically connecting existing and emerging areas of downtown
2. creating interesting new skywalk experiences

Specifically, the areas that could conceivably be reached with the skywalk system and would potentially benefit from skywalk access include: the Iowa Health Systems facilities (Methodist Hospital and related medical campus), future development around Gateway Park, future development north of Principal Financial Group's campus, areas south of Court Avenue, Wells Fargo Arena, and the western side of the Des Moines River.

Some of these areas require strategic planning to overcome challenges. For example, sloping topography north of Principal Financial creates challenges for the skywalk system that typically exists on the second level. Gaining access to areas around Court Avenue is another example. To preserve the Polk County Courthouse, skywalks should not cross Court Avenue nor into the Courthouse, yet access to the south side of Court Avenue could be beneficial to downtown. New development west and south of the Courthouse is the key to gaining access to this district. These opportunities and challenges are discussed on the following page.



map of skywalk system, system expansion opportunities, and places where skywalks are undesirable



map of existing and proposed skywalk district with outline of original skywalk district

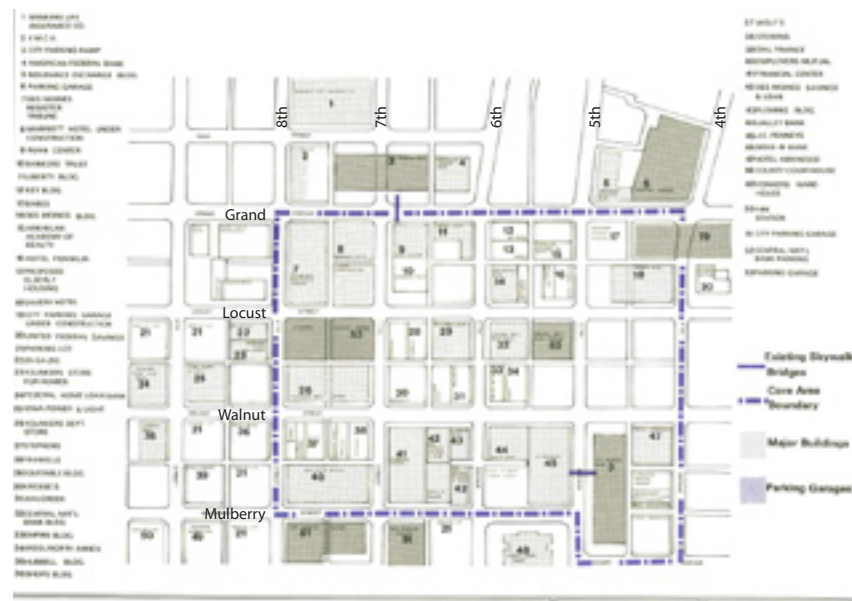


Figure 1
Downtown Des Moines Core Area

historical map of original skywalk system



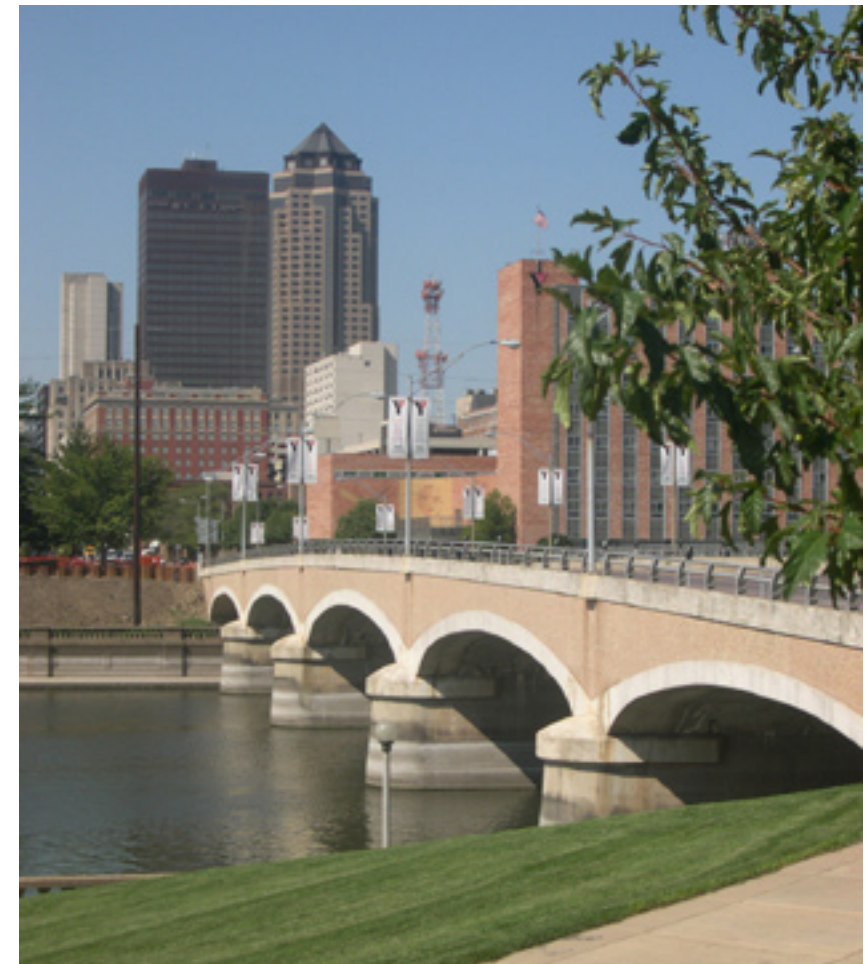
Iowa Health Systems hospital and medical campus and future development around Gateway Park. This westward expansion of the skywalk system provides connections between new downtown businesses, Methodist Hospital and the downtown core. Skywalks in this area should offer unique elevated views to Gateway Park and the green roof on the Central Library. Vertical access should be provided between the skywalk and sidewalk levels, allowing at-grade crossing into Gateway Park; skywalk bridges should not cross into Gateway Park.

future development north of Principal Financial's campus. As discussed in the previous section, topography makes access to this area difficult. However, the system presently reaches the northern portions of Principal's campus and could extend northwards. Skywalk access could be an attractive asset to new development in this area.

Wells Fargo Arena. The skywalk system's northern boundary presently extends to the Iowa Events Center (IEC). At the IEC, access to Wells Fargo Arena is presently gained through Hy-Vee Hall. Many more visitors to the Arena use the skywalk system than was anticipated, resulting in bottlenecks after events. A new skywalk between the south side of the Arena and new development would alleviate this condition and offer stunning views to the State Capitol, Des Moines River and downtown skyline. This future skywalk should include a vertical connection that facilitates access to the Center Street Pedestrian Bridge and Principal Riverwalk.

areas south of Court Avenue and westward. As noted on the previous page, skywalk bridges should not cross Court Avenue and block views to the majestic Polk County Courthouse, yet skywalk access to some of the areas south of Court Avenue could facilitate development of this under-utilized area. Redevelopment on the three-four blocks south and west of the Courthouse are instrumental to skywalk access in this area.

western side of the Des Moines River. While skywalk access is not plausible nor desirable crossing the Des Moines River to the east side of downtown, there is potential to offer skywalk access at the western edge of the River and express the skywalks across the vista offered by the River. Redevelopment projects along the western side of the River should include vertical skywalk and sidewalk connections that are accessible and visible from the Principal Riverwalk.



*left column: Iowa Health Systems / Methodist Hospital north of Gateway Park, Wells Fargo Arena, Court Avenue, aerial photograph of downtown with the southside in the foreground
right column: aerial photograph of downtown looking south with area north of Principal's existing campus in the foreground, west side of the Des Moines River at Grand Avenue,*

Connect the Skywalk and Sidewalk Levels

In its thirty-year history, the skywalk system has only aimed to move people around at the second level, above the streets and sidewalks. Access between the skywalk and sidewalk levels is confusing and difficult to identify. When on the sidewalks, you can see people moving across bridges, but it is not evident how to get to this upper, enclosed level. When moving through the skywalks, views to the exterior are frequent, yet it is unclear how you might get down to the sidewalks.

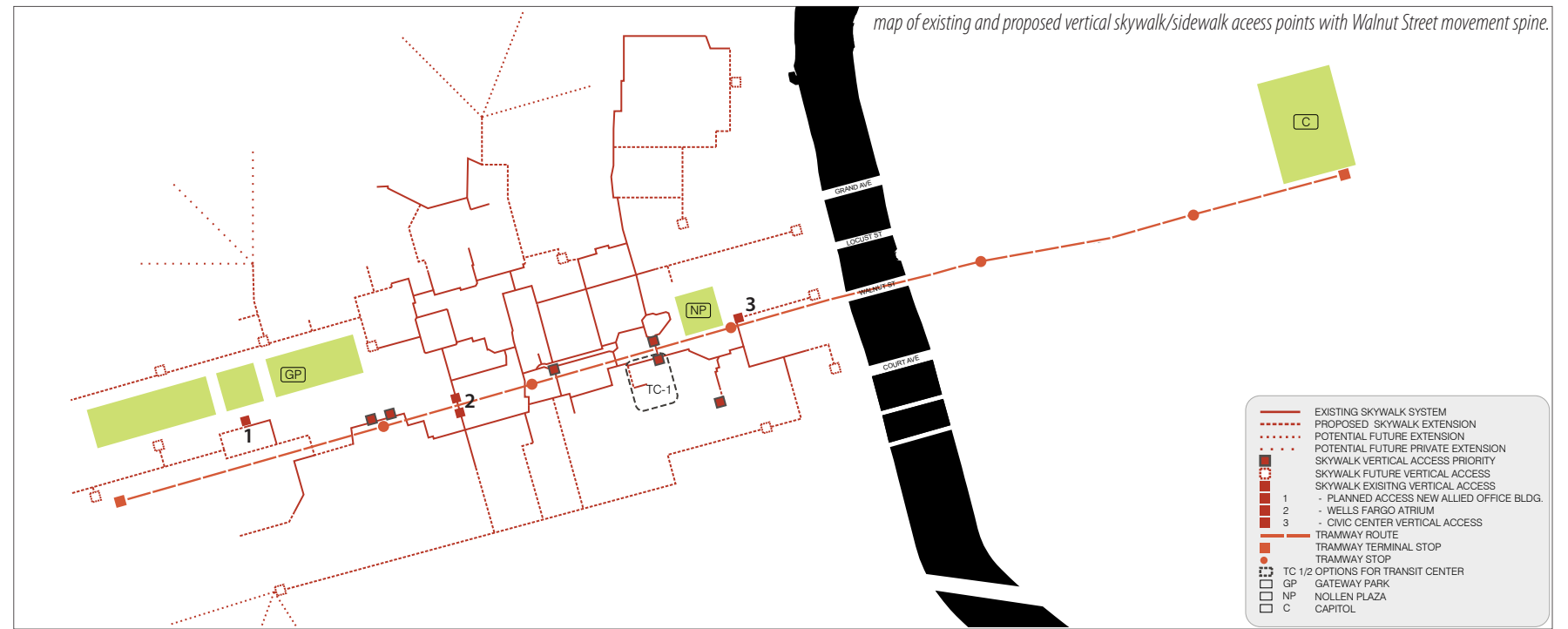
City codes pertaining to skywalks provide some detailed criteria regarding the design of the skywalk system. But, the system is almost entirely defined as a condition that occurs on the second level of buildings and bridging over streets. Connecting between the skywalk and sidewalk levels is required with no other design criteria meditated:

There shall be at least one vertical access facility in each block accessible to and usable by the handicapped. A vertical access facility may utilize an existing vertical transfer system in a private property traversed by the skywalk system.

The result of this loose definition of *vertical access* is that most vertical connections are difficult to locate and they are not typically inviting places. Many are small, nondescript elevators, some are utility stairs, and other access points are within the private precinct of buildings.

Connecting the skywalk and sidewalk levels with a network of easily identifiable vertical access points is the most potentially powerful aspect of the *Skywalks & Sidewalks* proposal. All new development with skywalk access should include these clear, high quality public vertical connections between sidewalk and skywalk levels. Additionally, the first priority for implementing this proposal should be coordinated with the *Walnut Street Transformation* proposal such that new vertical accesses are first implemented on Walnut Street, coordinated with transit stops, redevelopment, and implementation initiatives.

Advice to-date suggests that retrofitting the system to incorporate these clear, dignified vertical connections will require alterations to the skywalk's legal framework. The agreements which have guided skywalk development to-date involve many parties; unilateral changes by any single entity are not possible.



In addition to incorporating public and transparent vertical skywalk-sidewalk connections into new construction throughout downtown, the first priority for retrofitting existing buildings should occur along Walnut Street in conjunction with the Walnut Street Transformation



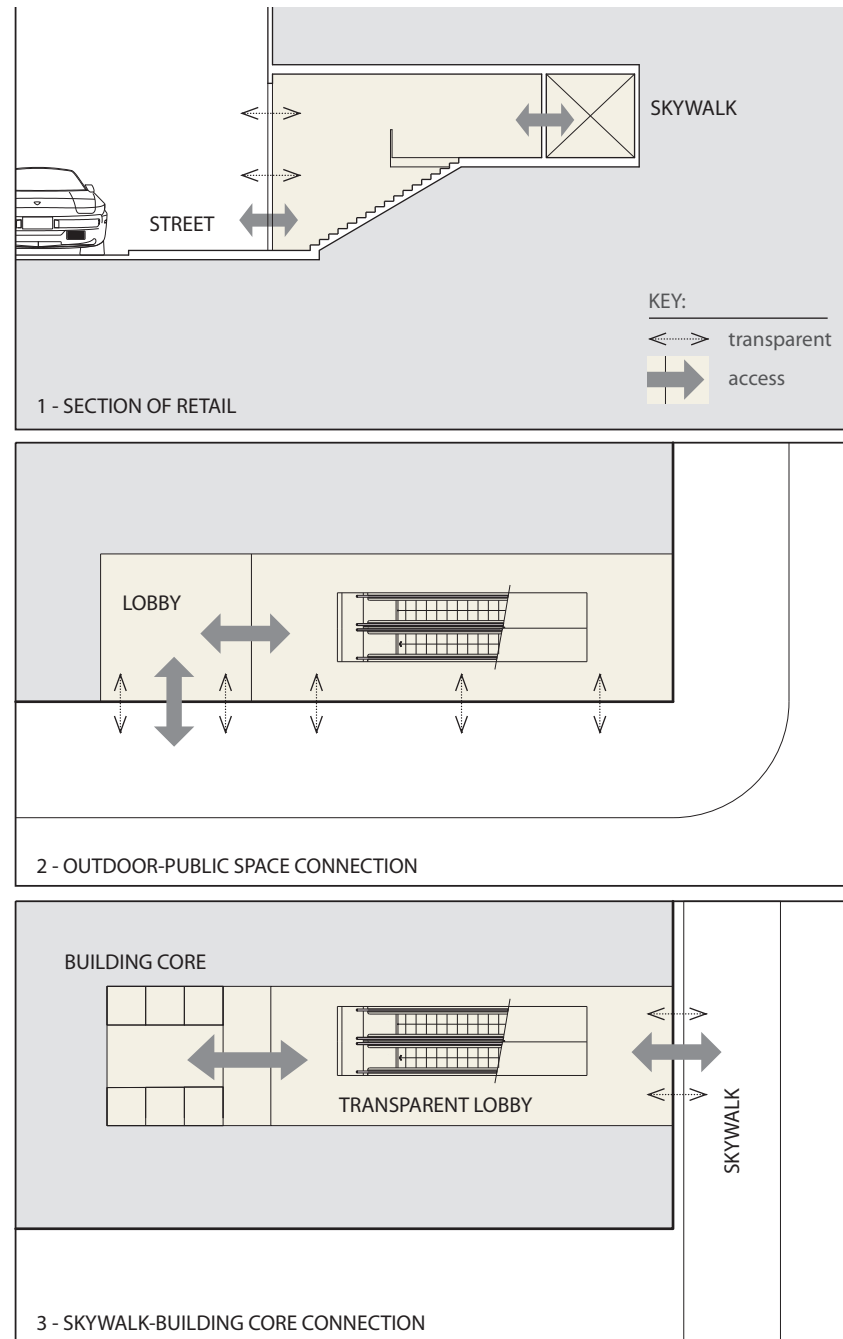
opportunities for skywalk & sidewalk integration: Walnut Street, west side of Des Moines River, Court Avenue, Gateway Park



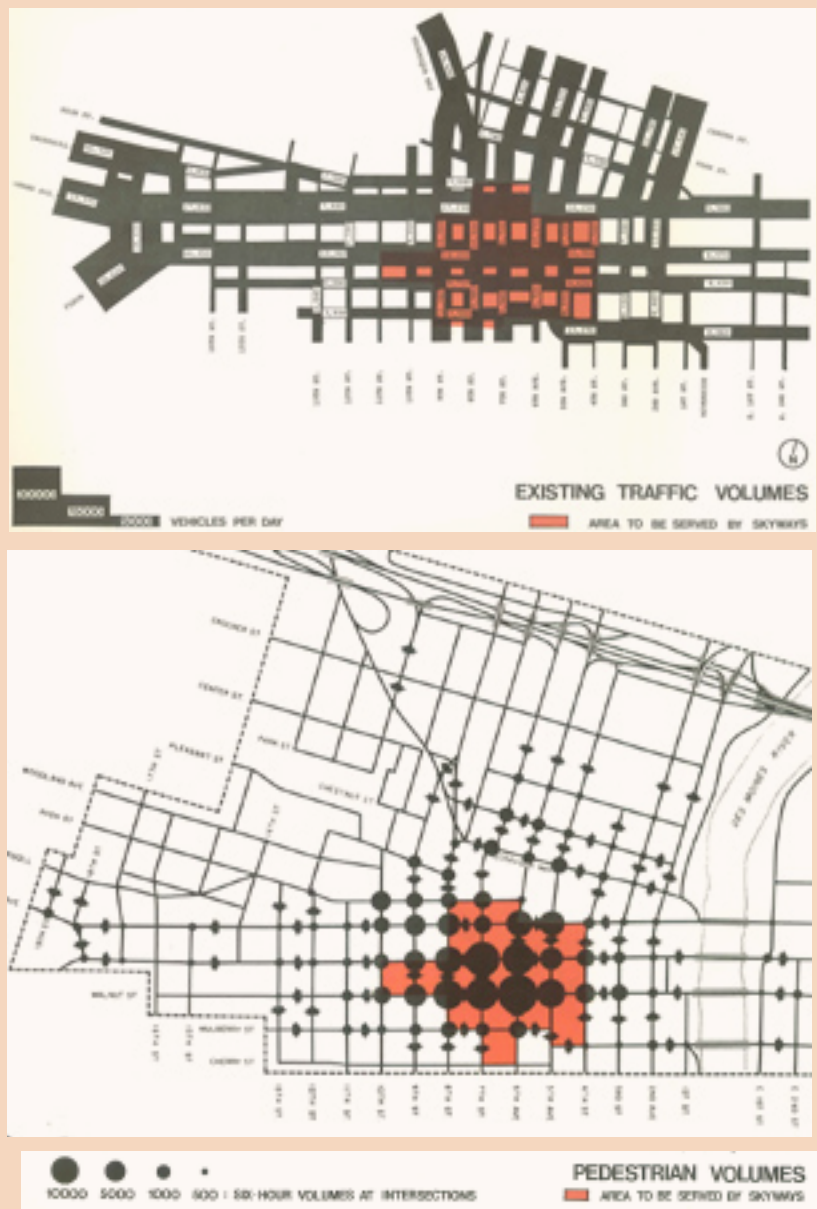
examples of existing vertical skywalk-sidewalk access: future Allied/Nationwide expansion on Locust Street, Wells Fargo Financial on Walnut Street, and the Civic Center (photo of Civic Center/Nollen Plaza courtesy of absoluteds.com)

Skywalks & Sidewalks Connection Diagrams

Vertical access between the skywalks and sidewalks will need to be achieved through retrofitting existing buildings and design and planning of new buildings. Public access and transparency to the means of vertical access (stairs, escalators, and/or elevators) are key aspects to these vertical connections.



Skywalk History



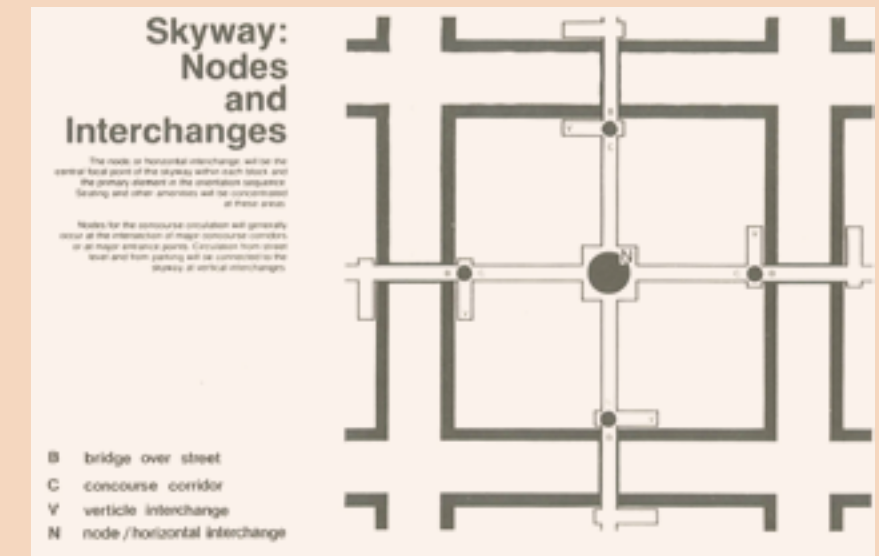
It has been estimated that if a skywalk system existed in downtown Des Moines...nearly 49,000 daily pedestrian street crossings would be diverted to the skywalk system.

-- Summary Item #1 of the Transportation Analysis of the Proposed Des Moines Skywalk System prepared for the City of Des Moines by Barton and Aschman, Associates, Inc. in August 1978.

Taking people off of the sidewalks was a major factor driving the original implementation of the proposed skywalk system. During a time in city planning where traffic efficiency was held as a highest priority, engineering and planning expertise was sought to study how many people could be removed from the sidewalks and placed in the skywalk system.

While the premise of the skywalks was largely driven by economic development, a significant traffic and transportation argument was also formed. The aforementioned statement and transportation analysis was part of an exploration aimed at securing federal transportation funding for Des Moines' skywalk system. Ultimately, Des Moines opted not to pursue federal funding, but the studies show that one of the original goals was to remove people from the downtown sidewalks.

graphics depicting plans for the original skywalk system in downtown Des Moines



Enhance the Pedestrian Experience at the Sidewalk Level

The title, *Skywalks & Sidewalks*, expresses the intention to form a strong relationship between the two pedestrian networks in downtown -- sidewalks and skywalks. The two systems need to work in concert, with both offering viable, interesting, engaging experiences in downtown.

With the Grand Avenue and Locust Street edges of Gateway Park,



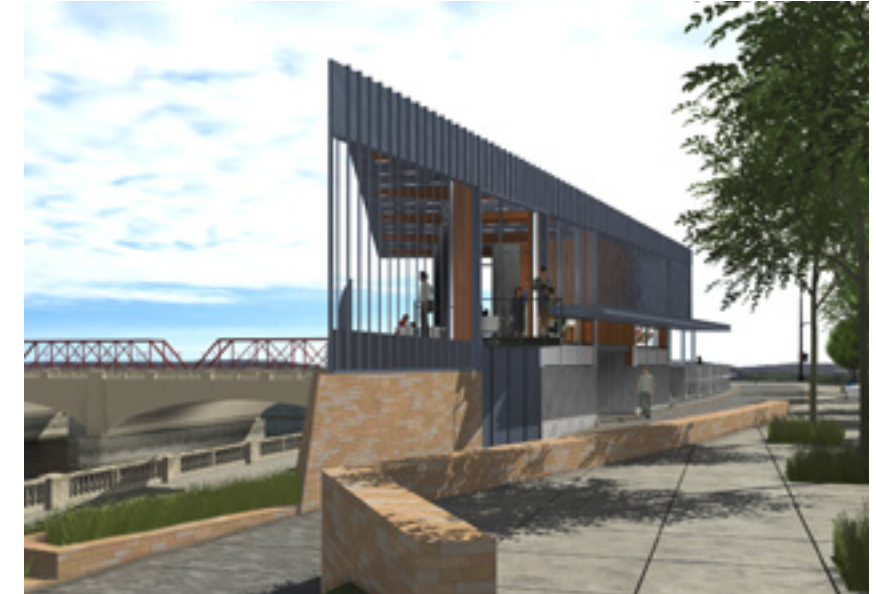
Creating quality sidewalk experiences and streetscapes have been a recent focus in downtown Des Moines. They include: the edges of Gateway Park as shown along Locust Street during the Des Moines Arts Festival,

E. Locust Street, a stretch of 15th Street, and the planned Principal Riverwalk, investment in the quality of the pedestrian experience and quality landscape has begun in downtown Des Moines. Early returns show favorable response to these places through increased investment, a thriving retail district, and increased pedestrian activity. A common theme in public input meetings called for 'beauty' in downtown, with the East Village often cited as an example.



East Locust Street shown here looking east near East 3rd Street in the East Village,

The map on the next page shows priority streets for pedestrian-related sidewalk investment, chosen for their relation to existing downtown amenities and connection potential. Currently, the extent of desired streetscape quality totals approximately fifteen blocks, whereas the adjacent map reflects a ten-fold increase in blocks of this quality. An incremental, collaborative approach will be necessary to achieve this initiative.



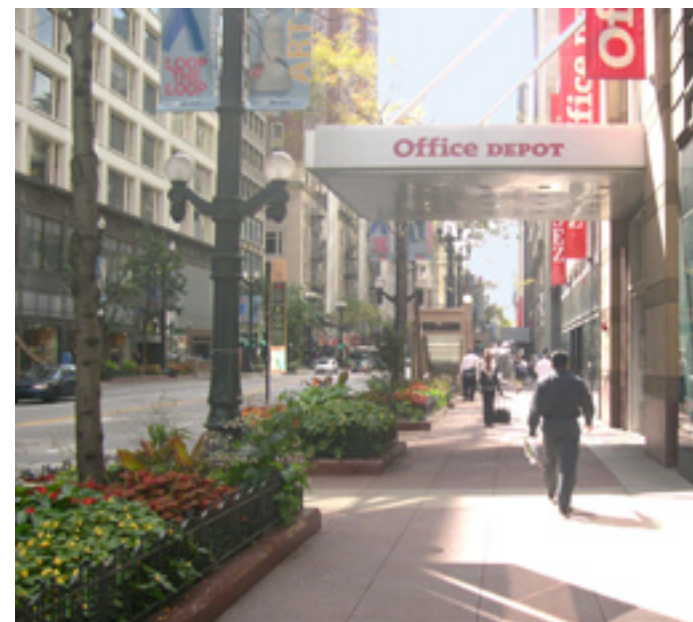
plans for the Principal Riverwalk along the Des Moines River (image of Court Avenue pavilion provided by substance)



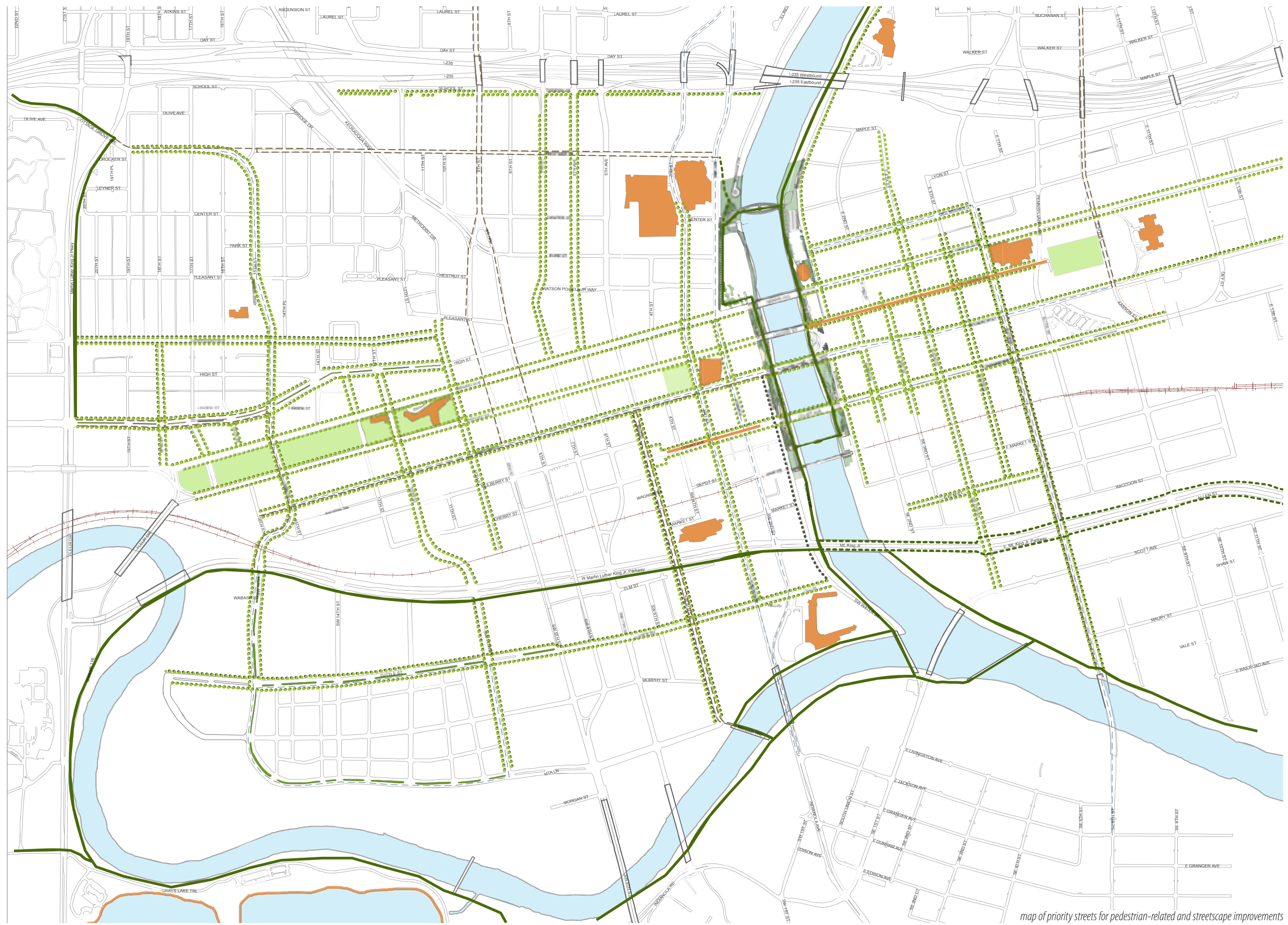
Many other cities across the country are investing heavily in the quality of their downtown pedestrian realms including: Wisconsin Avenue in Milwaukee, WI,



Chicago has made a name for itself through elevating the its public realm as a sustainability and economic development strategy -- State Street is shown in the two center photos above,



Kansas City is creating the Power and Light District, a pedestrian-oriented mixed use development around the Sprint Center (sports arena) and H&R Block Headquarters



map of priority streets for pedestrian-related and streetscape improvements

2. MOVEMENT
Skywalks & Sidewalks

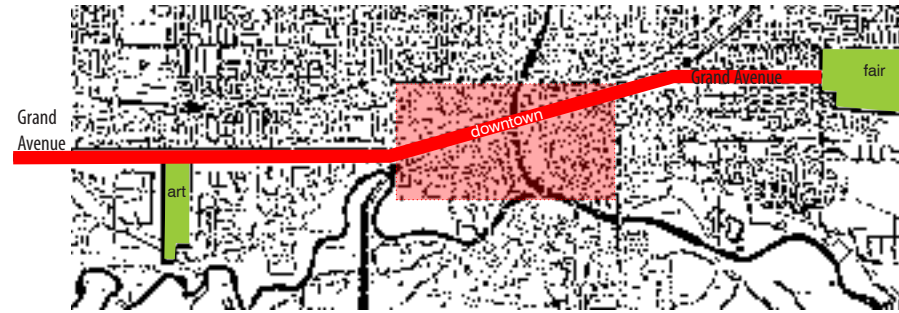
Grand Avenue: a Grand Opportunity

Grand Avenue is an opportunity to initiate the incremental, public-private collaboration strategy that is needed to accomplish the sweeping, ambitious improvements to downtown's sidewalk environment and pedestrian realm.

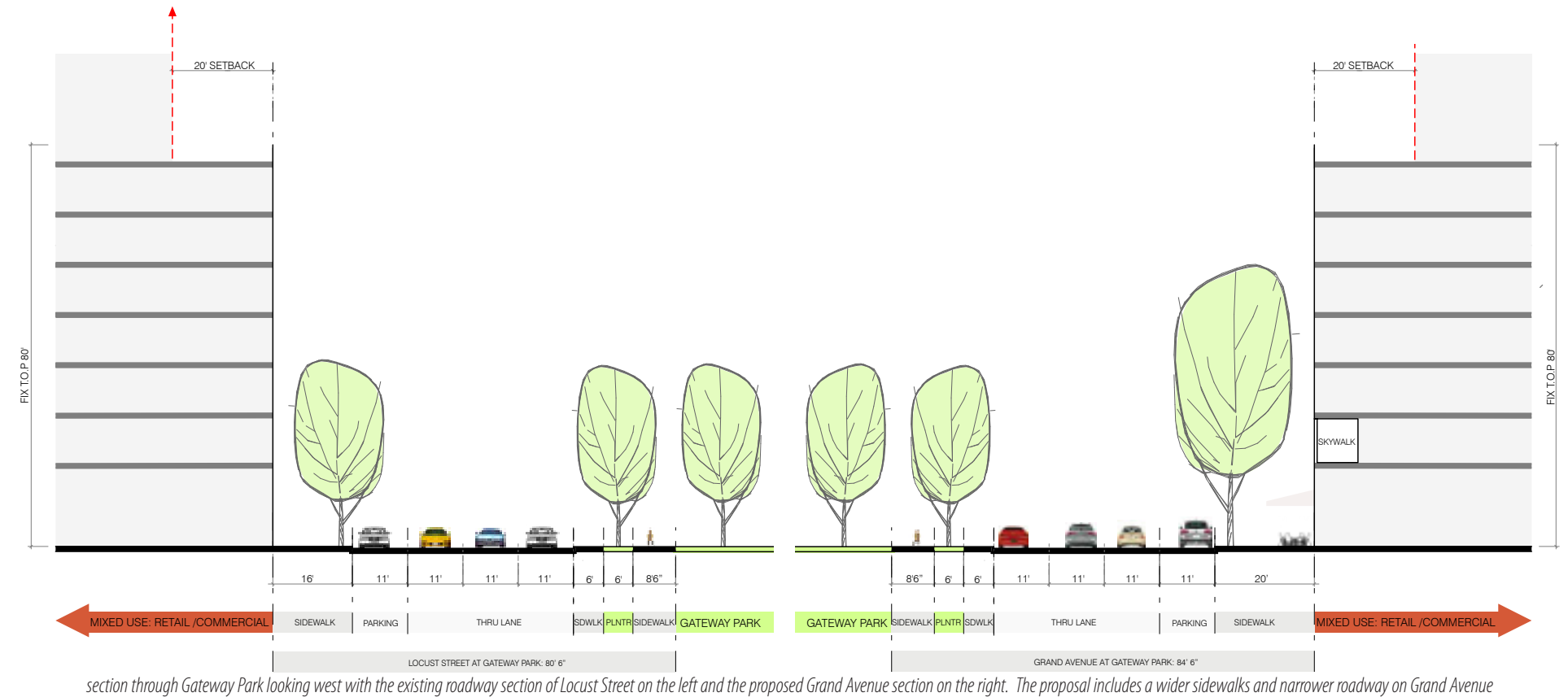
As the only street that stretches through the entire east-west length of downtown and several miles beyond to communities to the east and west of downtown, the street merits treatment fitting of its name. Grand Avenue serves as a one-way pair to Locust Street west of the Des Moines River to 17th Street and as a two-way street east of the River. In its role as a one-way pair, Grand Avenue has a 5-lane roadway, whereas Locust Street moves east-bound traffic in 4 lanes. To improve the quality of the sidewalk experience along Grand Avenue, the width of the sidewalk should be increased through the removal of a traffic lane on the north side of this broad street. This modification would accomplish a number of challenges:

- remedy the uncomfortably narrow sidewalks at various locations along Grand Avenue
- facilitate connection between north and south sides of Grand Avenue
- provide safer north-south crossing across Grand Avenue

Many blocks on the north side of Grand Avenue on the east and west sides of the River face redevelopment and/or re-investment in the coming years. With clear planning and direction in-place, this initiative could be accomplished for the entire stretch of the downtown section of Grand Avenue through incremental investment during the course of redevelopment.



Grand Avenue is a major street in the metropolitan area. It stretches through downtown, extending east to the State Fairgrounds and west past the Des Moines Art Center and into the western suburbs.



section through Gateway Park looking west with the existing roadway section of Locust Street on the left and the proposed Grand Avenue section on the right. The proposal includes a wider sidewalks and narrower roadway on Grand Avenue



existing conditions along Grand Avenue include a wide roadway, narrow sidewalks and a not-so-grand Grand Avenue (photos west to east / left to right):
a. looking east at Grand Avenue and 12th Street,
b. looking west at Grand Avenue and 8th Street,

c. looking west at Grand Avenue and 5th Street,

d. looking west at Grand Avenue and 3rd Street,

Skywalks, Sidewalks, and Parking

The first skywalk was constructed in 1968 to connect a parking structure with a commercial building -- the 5th and Walnut parking garage to the former JC Penney's department store. Today, the relationship between parking and skywalks remains strong. Most of downtown's large employers have office buildings and nearby parking structures linked by skywalk.

As discussed in the *Walnut Street Transformation* section, downtown transit holds the opportunity to begin weening Des Moines from its automobile addiction. However, auto use is a prevalent part of the culture; fulfilling parking needs will continue to be a necessary part of downtown's evolution. Presently parking is too dominant in the downtown landscape and detracts from the experience of moving around the city. Through integration with the *movement* proposals, measures can be taken to ease the dominance of parking in the downtown environment:

- integrate parking with transit; locate parking structures within easy walking access to downtown transit especially the terminus locations.
- provide quality sidewalk environments around parking structures
- connect parking structures with the public skywalk system and ensure shared use of parking structures (off-hours public use of all parking structures)

These measures should allow parking structures to be located further away from downtown's primary destinations and improve the quality of the urban environment.



e. looking west across Des Moines River at City Hall (near Robert D. Ray Drive),



f. looking west at Grand Avenue and E. 5th Street,



g. looking east along Grand Avenue at E. 6th Street,



h./i. looking west along Grand Avenue at the State Capitol Grounds

