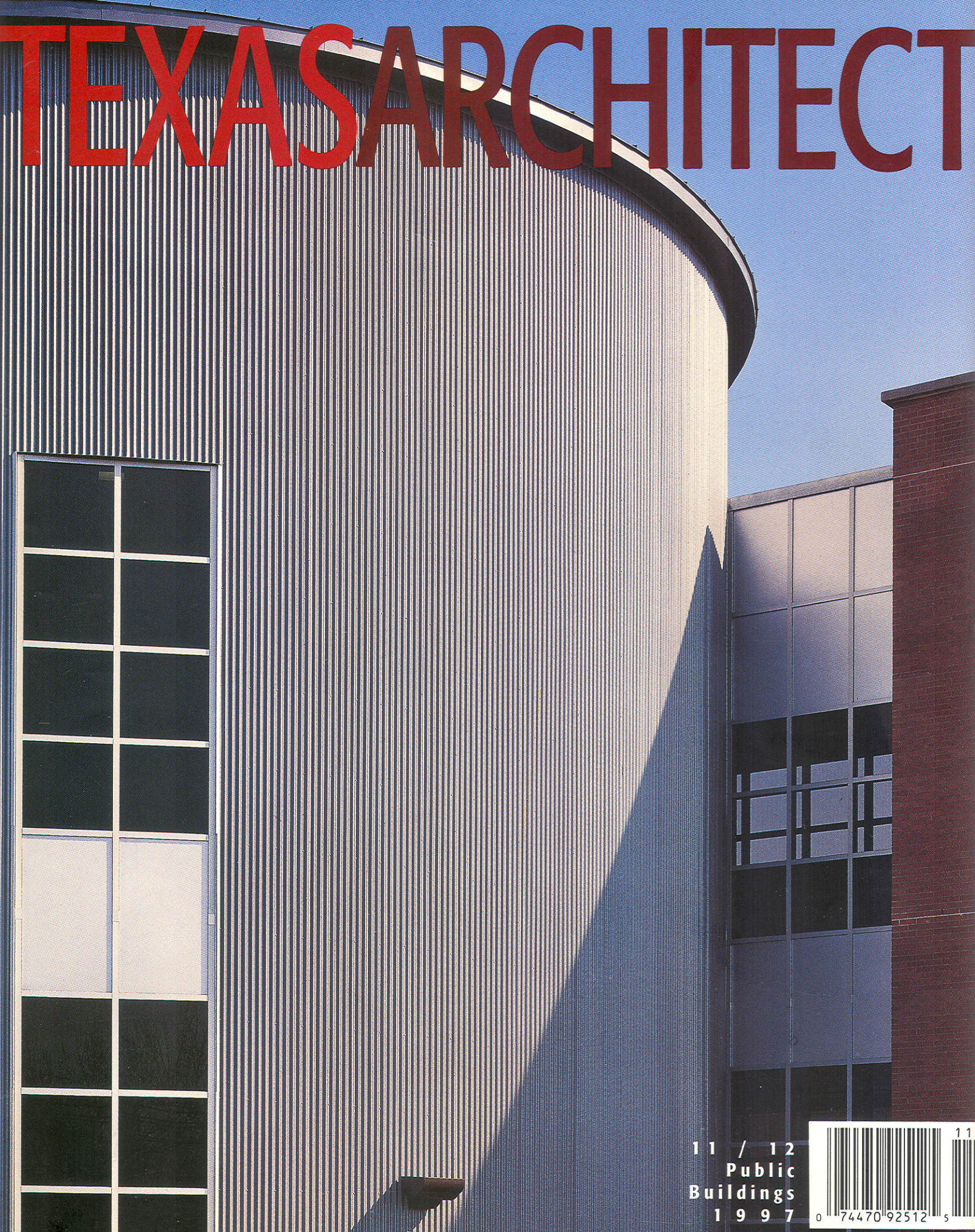


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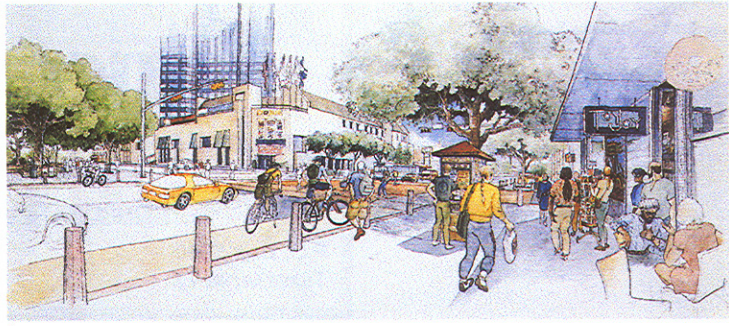
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Public
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An Uncertain Fate

AUSTIN Along the west side of the University of Texas at Austin (UT), across from the original forty acres, stretches Guadalupe Street. Although it passes north to south through a variety of neighborhoods, the 10-block section from Martin Luther King Boulevard to 29th Street is one of the heavier-traveled pedestrian and vehicular pathways in the city's center. Three years ago, in the face of an ever-increasing

deterioration, efforts to revitalize the street began mobilizing. Today, that struggle continues, in what has become a test of wills and a battle over seconds and street width. The efforts are indicative of many of the issues facing urban centers today—pedestrians and mass transit versus cars; local shops versus national chains; private versus public; solving social problems or moving them from one neighborhood to the next. Whether Austin succeeds or fails to soothe the competing interests and organizations and make a new foray into urban revitalization remains to be seen.



The west side of Guadalupe Street, known locally as "the Drag," is an eclectic, colorful conglomeration of locally owned shops, businesses, coffee houses, chain stores, churches, and apartments, filled with students, university and business employees, and hangers-on. As the barrier between the university and the neighborhood known as West Campus, the road is heavily traveled by students going to and from their homes. It also serves as home to seven Capital Metro bus routes, says Andre Tanner, senior project manager for Austin's mass transit system, as well as the university's shuttle bus system, which Capital Metro operates. Its parking spots are always full, and the street always crowded. But its problems, many acknowledge,

- 1 a watercolor rendition of the Drag renovation
- 2 Looking south down the street: The west side of the Drag is lined with cars and trash cans, and

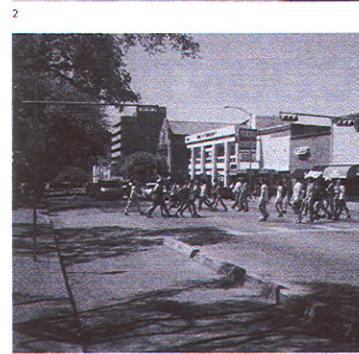
- not much else.
- 3 Looking south from the east side: One of the major crosswalks for students is fairly unprotected from traffic.

rectors of University Area Partners (UAP). UAP is a group of merchants, businesses, religious organizations, and others, including the university, that deals with community and neighborhood issues.

Three years ago, UAP's continuing effort to "beautify" the Drag ran into a timely coincidence: the UT master plan. The initiative, begun at the behest of Robert Berdahl, then president of the university, defined the edges of the university community, and the Drag renovation "emerged as an edges priority," says Sinclair Black, FAIA, architect with Black & Vernooy in Austin, the firm that designed the Drag renovation plan. "[Berdahl] was a university president that generally cared about the community and was a humanist. He understood the value of a good neighbor policy."

Enter Capital Metro, which identified the project as a transit improvement initiative, says Norman, and had funds available through the

Build Greater Austin program. The Build Greater Austin program, says Black, is an existing multi-year commitment to improve streets and corridors, generally in communities that have the po-



tential for light rail. Into that mix came the Austin City Council—which was presented with a joint request by UAP and UT that Capital Metro carry out the renovation, and which passed a resolution on September 21, 1995, that declared the initiative a "pedestrian-dominated project"—and all the players were finally present.

Each of the parties involved has a slightly different perception of what the project will accomplish. For the architects, it is an urban-design initiative that could be the impetus for further city restructuring; for the city, it is a chance to actually build an urban-renewal project. For the merchants, it is a safer street and better

business; for Capital Metro, it is better mobility; for the university, it is a safer, cleaner student environment. "Originally, we thought we would just be widening the sidewalks, with crosswalks, and adding trees and furniture. We got into the discussions and it became clear that it needed to be a traffic project," says Kit Krankel, project manager with Black & Vernooy.

Currently, the Drag has four traffic lanes, a right-turn lane at 24th Street, a left-turn lane at 21st Street, parallel parking on the west side, and an east-side bike lane. The sidewalk on the west side varies in width along the 10-block area; the project would increase it anywhere from 2 to 25 feet, says Black. Traffic lanes, says Krankel, range now from 10-foot-2-inches to 11-foot-6-inches; the project aligns each of the four lanes at 10 feet, with the turning lanes, but not right turns, eliminated; parallel parking retained (and slightly increased); and a five-foot-wide bike lane for both the west and east sides. Concrete pavers, inexpensive and built to withstand the weight of buses, would be used to repave the street. The renovation plan would also

dedicate one of the four traffic lanes to light rail, should it ever come to Austin.

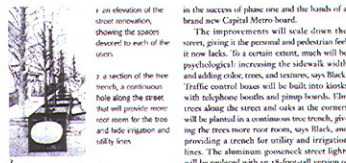
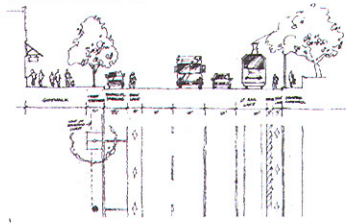
Congestion and traffic speed are universal worries; the project gives everyone a safe, predictable space, out of the way of each other. "After the city council resolution, the direction being taken was to give pedestrians more space, slow traffic

down, and increase bicycle mobility and safety. The Drag is a congested area; you have buses, cars, bicycles, and pedestrian traffic—multiple modes in a small area all competing for space," says David Gerard, manager of the transportation division in the Department of Public Works and Transportation for Austin.

"The project means slower traffic and more pedestrians, which will make the street work better. We will make the street tougher and maintenance-free with practical, long-lasting materials and shade. We'll also have a new bal-

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... between cars and people. Right now, 90 percent of the priority is given to cars. That should be reversed," says Black.

The project, as a whole, is not intended to create a streetscape, but rather a pedestrian destination. Its eventual completion is not even forecast until the year 2000. Phase one (11 to 24th St.) is tentatively scheduled to begin in the spring of 1996, with completion before the beginning of the fall 1996 semester. "Our intention is to complete a phase every summer," says Krankel, with phase two (Martin Luther King Blvd. to 21st St. and 24th St.) in 1997 and phase three (16th to 24th St.) in 2000. Capital Metro has committed "slightly in excess of \$1 million for phase one," says John Holdren, manager of facilities, design, and construction

is not in the immediate future, but it is still in the master plan," says Steve Krul, associate director of business services in the office of campus planning and facility management at UT. But times change and people move on, including Berdahl, who left UT in the summer of 1997. And whether or not the Drag project succeeds ultimately lies in the face of the demonstration project, which Black calls "the most important and critical part." Scheduled to begin October 1 and continue through mid-November, it will temporarily modify the street from 21 to 24th, mimicking new traffic patterns and impact but not pedestrian improvements. Turn lanes will be removed, curb stops pulled out to simulate bike lanes, and paint sprayed to indicate the new lane width, all at a cost of \$5,000, to be paid by the city. After its completion, the results will be studied and the design changed, if necessary, to accommodate any concerns. It is the university's evaluation of the demonstration project that will hold the key to the Drag's success, and it is the university's position on the project that is the most precarious. "We do support the concept of beautifying Guadalupe, but we are concerned about the impact of the project on traffic flow. The street is very important. It has to work for merchants and pedestrians, but it needs to continue to be effective for vehicle movement," says UTS-Krail.

Concern from the university, and from Capital Metro, stems from the proposed lane width and the impact on traffic times. "The lanes are 10.5 inches (8-foot-6-inches) wide and 12 to 14 inches (10 feet) wide and 11 feet wide. A minimum lane width of 11 feet would be adequate, and 12 feet would be comfortable. A 10-foot lane with 11 inches is not adequate," says Marshall Tanner. "We are concerned about the safety of passengers and occupants, and how slow lanes will seriously impact it."

Krankel believes the extensive studies conducted should allay any concerns, and that for mass transit in particular, the renovated street will work. "We have had that for the people who have reservations; it will prove that traffic won't stretch a mile. It will add approximately 40 seconds to travel time, but the private traffic taking us will move through slower but more smoothly,

and goals, there is a groundwork established for further cooperation that enables the neighborhood to be involved in solutions for its problems. "It's hard for people to work together, everyone has a different agenda. ... There have been changes. I've noticed since the groups started coming together, and working things out and networking. We all want the same things, we just have different ideas about what is the most important," says Norman.

For Capital Metro, it has been a learning process. "The project is a lot more complex than we realized. ... A project speaks to the streetscape, it is critical to have people involved. Instead of Capital Metro coming in and saying, 'We are doing this year neighborhood,' we are providing the funding, and helping to create the neighborhood," says Holdren.

That grassroots effort is why Black believes the process could be duplicated in other city neighborhoods. "This is a creative and new relationship between a quasi-private group and the public. Most really good worthwhile urban design projects come from bottom up. That is one of the best things about this. There is no agency-dictated solution. I hope this is a prototype for other city streets, and is a process for understanding the value of investing in public space," says Black.

Beyond the disagreement over facts and figures, methodologies and priorities, all express present is the hope that the Drag represents one initiative that may give us newspapers wrong. Says Krankel, "There are a lot of schemes and plans and dreams about how to improve our urban environment, and this is one that might actually get built."

Whether or not the project goes forward, the Drag will continue to feel the effects of pressure on its infrastructure, and says Krankel, "The space we've pushed its vision and ideas into the life of the city. If you are going to have a great city, you need to have a great public space. The space we occupy and inhabit every day are our streets. Now, they are an embarrassment, and ignored by our city leadership. If you can control and design public space, businesses will thrive because of it. Then we can call it a great city," says Black. KR