URBAN TANGLE: ENVISIONING DENVER’S 16TH STREET MALL

2016 Downtown Denver Leadership Program

Ashley Householter
Hannah Merten
Matt Meunier
Laia Mitchell
Kristine Wille-Matney

small changes can make a big difference
Introduction

In recent years, Denver, Colorado has attracted national attention as U.S. News and World Report’s #1 Best Place to Live\(^i\), Forbes’ #1 Best Place for Business\(^ii\), and Mayflower Company’s third top spot for Millennials to move\(^iii\). For Colorado natives, these rankings come as no surprise\(^iv\); Denver has had a long history of diversity and culture, entrepreneurial spirit, and sunny climate, as well as an ideal central location just minutes from the Rocky Mountains. Such achievements have been in no way a lucky coincidence\(^v\). Indeed, while the vision of recent leaders like Governor Hickenlooper and Mayor Hancock have brought the city into this new era of massive growth, Denver has been on the long track to success for many decades. As early as the 1960’s, people like preservationist Dana Crawford have been working tirelessly to preserve the vibrancy of Downtown Denver and usher it gracefully into the future\(^vi\). The primary engine responsible for maintaining focus and momentum on this ongoing endeavor has been the Downtown Denver Partnership (DDP). Founded in 1955, the DDP has evolved into the premier organization that brings business, government, and nonprofit stakeholders together in stewardship of Denver’s success as a great American city\(^vii\).

In the DDP’s own words, “the Downtown Denver Partnership creatively plans, manages and develops Downtown Denver as the unique, diverse, vibrant and economically healthy urban core of the Rocky Mountain Region that is recognized for being prosperous, walkable, diverse, distinctive and green.” To further these goals, the organization has turned a strong focus to the 16th Street Mall–a 34 year old, 1.2 mile pedestrian and transit corridor in the heart of Downtown Denver–as a primary amenity among Denver’s walkable, distinctive, and green resources. Then, the City and County of Denver launched The Mall Experience Project to identify the best possible ways for the 16th Street Mall to reach its full potential\(^viii\). In the tradition of collaboration, the City and County of Denver and the DDP engaged Gehl Studio to help identify the best path forward to achieve The Mall Experience’s goals of creating an inclusive and vibrant Downtown. Specifically, Gehl Studio is a planning and design firm that specializes in “placemaking”\(^ix\) and, for the last three years, Gehl’s methodologies have been used to strategically research and develop the 16th Street Mall. The premise of the Gehl methodology is that small steps can create big change; by implementing, measuring, and modifying pilot projects within a space, an effective and scalable development plan can be generated.

One specific way The Mall Experience has worked to implement and measure placemaking strategies was through a series of Meet in the Street (MITS) weekends, where the Mall is transformed into a “fully activated pedestrian zone.” During these days, buses were rerouted around the Mall, and a variety of activities including patio cafés, live music, cultural performances, kids’ zones, vendors, and fitness classes were programmed. MITS took place on Saturdays and Sundays between June 25\(^{th}\) and July 24\(^{th}\) during 2016. Overlapping that time frame, another initiative within The Mall Experience was the Prototyping Festival. This competition involved local artists and organizations creating interactive pieces that were placed throughout the Mall.
In addition to actively guiding the planning, management, and development of Downtown Denver, the DDP has traditionally hosted the Downtown Denver Leadership Program (DDLP) for each of the last 13 years. The leadership program engages up to one hundred local, emerging leaders by familiarizing them with Denver’s distinctive opportunities and challenges. Within the framework of the course, participant leaders are tasked with a collaborative project intended to address one of these unique challenges.

And so, tasked with re-imagining the future of the 16th Street Mall in conjunction with the DDP’s Meet in the Street program, the 2016 DDLP leader participants took on the challenging prospect of transforming the block located from Champa Street to Stout Street. By employing Gehl’s principles of placemaking to positively impact just that one block, the group was able to experiment with concrete ways to improve the space and influence a new vision for the Mall’s future. To that end, this case study will review the purpose, conception, execution, impact, and effectiveness of the 2016 Downtown Denver Leadership Program project: Urban Tangle.

Project Context - Placemaking & Stickiness

In February of 2016, Gehl Studios delivered a document titled “Downtown Denver 16th Street Mall: Small Steps Towards Big Change” to the City and County of Denver and the DDP. Based on data collected during the Summer 2015 Meet in the Street (MITS) events, the plan outlined eight key steps the City should take in order to, in the words of the Gehl report, “elevate 16th Street to become a better place for people—to help it reach its full potential as a welcoming
place for everyone, in the heart of a vibrant Downtown Denver.” Within this context, Urban Tangle became a case study in two critical steps within Gehl’s recommended comprehensive process: Provide a Series of Experiences and Create Invitations for People to Spend Time.

One of the core elements that the Gehl report addresses is the concept of placemaking: a multi-faceted approach to the planning, design and management of public spaces. Placemaking capitalizes on a local community’s assets, inspiration, and potential, with the intention of creating public spaces that promote people’s health, happiness, and well being. Through successful placemaking efforts, an area develops stickiness. Stickiness is expressed through the willingness of a person to linger in a space. Further defined, stickiness is the basic ratio of people spending time within a space versus people moving through that same space. With improved stickiness as the outcome of successful placemaking, it is through activation that placemaking is manifested. At once a simple and dynamic concept, activation is the idea that places should be active, i.e. planned for diverse and inclusive human activity. At its core, the idea of placemaking is to create “mutually beneficial relationships between people’s quality of life and their built environment.” In Downtown Denver, this specifically means taking the 16th Street Mall (a very effective, high-volume transit corridor) and elevating it to the type of place that invites people to linger and spend time in rather than only pass through.

Placemaking, activation, and stickiness are not new concepts, nor are they unique to Denver and the work of Gehl Studio. Indeed, another prominent organization in this arena is Project for Public Spaces (PPS). Since 1975, PPS has completed placemaking projects in 43 countries and all 50 United States, with over 3,000 communities served. Many of PPS’ practical guides for placemaking align with the 16th Street Mall plan Gehl has developed for Denver. In particular, the “Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper” (LQC) approach resonates with our concept for Urban Tangle. PPS’ blog highlighting examples of LQC includes the use of simple umbrellas over streets in Portugal to create inviting shade for pedestrians in the summer, pop-up parks in Australia where streets were turned into engaging pedestrian zones, and community painted intersections in Oregon that have created inviting streets for a diverse mix of users. Ultimately, as PPS states, “All LQC projects can have an impact, no matter how big or small. Creative and community-led, the process of implementing an LQC project shows how small-scale and low-cost change can have a strong impact on the spaces in a community and the people who use them.”
Within either placemaking ideology, one critical component is always community involvement. As outlined in Gehl’s method, two elements are critically important: the process should be both inclusive and multidisciplinary. In the words of Gehl Studio, the process should reach out and include, “a part of the population that traditional planning processes tend to exclude,” and should be “created and defined by citizens and a larger variety of professions beyond the usual engineering, architecture and planning professions.” By giving the 2016 Downtown Denver Leadership Program the privilege and responsibility of programming the Champa to Stout block of Denver’s 16th Street Mall, 95 leaders from across the city have become engaged in its evolution—an element critical to success!

Project Conception & Execution

After understanding the goals of the project, the DDLP took on the task of activating the Champa to Stout block according to Gehl’s principles of placemaking; they began by investigating the block and researching potential ways to transform the space. Upon analysis, the DDLP found that the block between Champa and Stout was largely inactive by Gehl’s standards. The major tenants on the block include Ross, Walgreens and 7-Eleven, which provide retail demand, but do not create stickiness in the way that blocks with more café or restaurant uses enjoy. The block also has a thick tree canopy and shade from neighboring buildings, which makes this block less bright than other segments of the Mall. In recent times, the lack of engaged, positive interaction between people and the environment on the block has enabled less desirable activities to take root within the public space. In fact, 8 tables and 18 chairs were removed by the DDP in early 2016 to discourage loitering on this block. While the seating removal may have reduced loitering, it also contributed to a general decrease in stickiness by all users and re-emphasized the block as a pass-through space rather than a destination.

When imagining transformations, the DDLP class dreamed big, looking iteratively at what would be possible in the space. The team considered using color and materials in many different ways and started thinking pragmatically about the space, time, and budgetary constraints. With additional input from design and construction professionals within the group surrounding the structural safety, public health, and longevity of our design, concrete ideas began to form. Notably, this was the first “design” project for many group members and a real growth experience for everyone. Indeed, this formation of a cross-disciplinary cohort was a uniquely great aspect of the DDLP program, bringing leaders in diverse fields together to work collaboratively on a project!

Several ideas to brighten up the block were compiled and ultimately the class decided on two key elements: a large-scale overhead installation combined with an interactive feature at street level to draw people in and create a more inviting streetscape. The team started brainstorming and options to create this wowing effect were generated. Potential visions included archways down the median, a horizontal overhead installation, and several different
designs using rope to define the overhead plane (see below). These ideas were considered and evaluated based on aesthetics and the ever-present limitations of a slim budget and a tight timeframe. A rope feature satisfied all of the constraints and also provided a platform that could be expanded at a later date. This ability of the feature to be adapted and expanded over time appealed to the group because it captured two of the key tenets of successful placemaking—flexibility and community ownership.

From there, Urban Tangle was developed. As shown in the site plan below, the canopy of Urban Tangle was designed to span the entire length of Champa to Stout with dynamically formed wings at either end of the block to draw visitors into the space. The sheer magnitude of the time, energy, and material resources that went into building the string canopy was impressive! It took 36 volunteers well over 100 hours (spanning three nights) to untangle, measure, cut, and tie the rope triangles that made up the major element of the design. Then, to work around Mall Ride schedules, a crew of 6 spent an entire overnight with ladders and cherry pickers installing the triangles on the Mall. These 17 triangles were composed of 22,600 feet of rope, that’s over 4 miles long!
Another way the project sought to increase the “stickiness” of the space was by inviting people to linger through an engaging experience. The DDLP was able to procure interactive Herman Miller “Spun Chairs”, which were placed within the center median on the block. The Spun Chairs quickly became a highlight of the activation and were the surprise winners in terms of achieving authentic community engagement. Indeed, these interactive seating elements created a truly unique way to experience the 16th Street Mall. On any given day, children and adults alike could be seen enjoying the playful chairs.

After installation, the project quickly gained support from the community and the DDP decided that Urban Tangle would remain in place beyond MITS—up until the traditional holiday lighting installations. The DDP further enhanced the feature by adding solar powered light globes suspended from the strands of rope, as well as through the addition of brightly colored chalk paint along the street and sidewalk. The additions of these supplemental enhancements ties back to Gehl’s methodology in that small changes continued to be made to the project in order to advance the community’s engagement with the space.
Project Data and Results

In order to judge the success of Urban Tangle in increasing stickiness on the Champa to Stout block, the DDP employed Gehl’s research methodology to track pedestrian counts and activities. This method captures three main data points: the number of people moving through the space, the number of people stopping to spend time in the space, and what specific activities people engage in when they do stop to spend time. Data collection occurred under a number of different circumstances, including:

- **Pre-Intervention**: Status quo, typical non-programmed day on the Mall
- **Intervention and MITS**: Days when MITS in full swing and Urban Tangle was in place
- **Intervention and Prototypes**: Days when the Prototyping Festival was live (with two interactive prototypes on our block), and MITS was NOT taking place
- **Intervention, MITS, and Prototypes**: Days with Urban Tangle, MITS, and Prototypes

The data effectively proves that Urban Tangle, along with MITS and the Prototyping Festival, did increase stickiness. Generally speaking, stickiness on the block increased from the pre-intervention regardless of stationary activity type and at almost all times of the day. Excluding non-lingering activity types *Standing, Waiting for Transportation, and Lying Down*, stickiness on the block increased anywhere from 90% to 104% from the pre-intervention. In other words, stickiness on the Champa to Stout block essentially doubled compared to a “normal”, status quo day.

However, that stickiness was varied across the different scenarios. The greatest increase in stickiness on the block was recorded on days when the Prototyping Festival was active and MITS was not. One possible explanation is that during MITS, the Mall was so activated that programming on other blocks may have been more appealing and actually pulled users away from the Champa to Stout block. Additionally, it was noted that, because of the immense crowds moving up and down the Mall during MITS, breaking from the flow of people to linger could have become difficult. Anyone who has attended a packed concert or festival has probably experienced this phenomenon. By contrast, on those days without competing MITS activations
and heavy crowds, users may have been more inclined to spend more time exploring the prototypes and Spun Chairs on the Champa to Stout block.

Anecdotally, researchers found the Spun Chairs to be immensely engaging to users, driving stickiness on the block more than anything else. In trying to quantify the effect of the Spun Chairs in promoting stickiness, analysis of the Moveable Chair, Children Playing, Bench Seating and Secondary Seating activity counts showed that stickiness increased between 62% and 81% across those groups. Additionally, stickiness did decrease after the 6pm hour as the Spun Chairs were locked up around that time frame—which supports the idea that the Spun Chairs contributed significantly to the overall stickiness of the block.

Data collected on the age and gender of visitors to the 16th Street Mall showed that women and children represent a greater proportion of visitors to the Mall during the MITS weekends, with five times more Children Playing than on pre-intervention days. The data collected specifically on the Champa to Stout block saw a proportionally similar increase, indicating Urban Tangle’s contribution encouraging women and children to linger on the Mall.

In addition to the pedestrian counts gathered through the Gehl method, users were also asked to leave comment cards describing what they “love” about the Mall and what they “wish” for the Mall. This qualitative feedback was gathered from both the Champa to Stout block (DDLP block) and one additional block (lawn block) and was bucketed into dozens of different themes. When commenting on what they love about the Mall, users most frequently mentioned programming on the Mall (including events like Meet in the Street), the capacity of the Mall to bring people together to create community, and the built environment and design of the Mall. Among comments about what users wish for the Mall, frequent themes were a wish for more programming and events, better or more restaurants and retail, and a concern for the presence of people experiencing homelessness on the Mall.

The impact of MITS can be studied through the change in commentary from users during those days. During MITS, a greater proportion of comments reflected users’ positive reactions to the programming and events on the Mall, and a desire for more events like it. In addition, commentary from MITS days contained relatively less content about several key pain points on the Mall: homelessness, cleanliness, and safety. Lastly, commentary to the effect of “I wish we had this in my city” was ONLY recorded on MITS days, and comments describing a user desire to spend more time on the Mall represented a greater proportion of comments on MITS days. In short, MITS days reflected an enthusiasm for programming, a diminished focus toward the pain points of the Mall, and hints of a desire to spend more time on the Mall.

User comments also reflected this summer’s sensational media focus on safety on the 16th Street Mall, particularly after the highly publicized PVC pipe attack on the Mall at the end of June. While zero comments (of 101 total comments) referenced safety before the pipe attack and publicity that followed, an average of 11% of “I wish” comments recorded after the pipe attack referenced safety concerns.
Project Effectiveness and Impacts

Beyond the impact to stickiness that has been discussed in the data/results section of this report, the Urban Tangle intervention achieved a lasting impact on the Champa to Stout block and beyond. From a design standpoint, perhaps the greatest success of Urban Tangle was that both the rope canopy and Spun Chairs were able to add to the block in a way that needed minimal maintenance. While the intervention was originally scoped to last through the six week duration of MITS, the DDP chose to maintain the installation past the original expiration date and actually added to it during and after MITS. The design provided an ample canvas for further additions, which came in the form of chalk art and hanging lanterns.

In hindsight, the Urban Tangle rope canopy may have been more impactful if it were more visible. This aesthetic could have been achieved by a lower overall hanging point to avoid visual competition with the tree canopy, and more or thicker gauge ropes for a greater perception of density. That said, if the installation itself was perhaps less impactful than expected, the Spun Chairs exceeded all expectations in terms of user engagement and activation! The Spun Chairs became the surprise hit of our block, with anecdotal evidence noting the chairs being almost constantly occupied. The Spun Chairs created an environment of play for children and adults alike, which encouraged more lingering in the form of watching, taking turns, and snapping pictures (many of which became social media content). Given more time and volume, the unique experience of the chairs could also contribute to a sense of placemaking through
Imagine an instance where the red Spun Chairs could someday be as iconic and distinctly Denver as the Big Blue Bear. This and other learnings have the potential to inform future iterations of Mall activation as the City and Partnership continue to hone the Mall Experience for the long term.

Finally, potentially the most lasting impact of the DDLP work on Urban Tangle is not based on design or in stickiness but in human capital. Ninety-five of Denver’s emerging leaders came together for this project, some with a background in design and urban planning, and many others from wide-ranging industries. Our class was endowed with a powerhouse of architectural and design talent, as well as a scrappy resourcefulness that brought the design vision to life. Individual class members brought key threads together, including procuring the donated Herman Miller Spun Chairs that were a smash success, walking door to door to get buy-in and perspective from the tenants on our block, and finding a perfect space for our class to assemble countless yards of string and knots, not to mention that our class members fundraised to cover the expense of creating the installation. And once the installation of Urban Tangle was complete, our class members continued to connect the many distinct threads of the project through data analysis and eventual graphic and web design to communicate our findings.

More importantly than what the class brought to the table is what the class takes with them going forward: a greater awareness and appreciation for the complex issues involved with city building. As the DDLP class members continue to develop as leaders in our various industries, we will carry a stake in what happens to the City’s great public spaces. In many ways, there can be no greater gift to a city than a dedicated group of citizens who are emotionally and intellectually invested in the community; Denver can now count 95 more to its ranks.

Community Call to Action

As Denver continues to grow and thrive, the iconic 16th Street Mall will remain a central focus for city planning efforts, with Denver advocates honing in on the recipe of conditions needed to unlock the full potential of this community amenity. As the Mall strives to reach that potential, both locals and visitors will feel invited to stroll down the tree-shaded sidewalks, sit and enjoy a meal with friends, browse shops, admire public art, and play with interactive features like Spun Chairs and other installations. The Mall is a short walk from many offices, residences, and hotel accommodations, and a quick hop on nearby transit connects visitors to the entire Denver metro area. Indeed, the 16th Street Mall has the potential to be an entertainment, arts, and community hub for the entire surrounding region.

Within the Meet in the Street weekends, the DDLP Urban Tangle activation served as a valuable case study to highlight how small changes to an environment can make large-scale positive impacts on the feel and enjoyment of a space. With a limited budget and timeline, the DDLP team was able to make notable impacts on the experience of the block, particularly through the Urban Tangle rope installation at the tree canopy level, and the highly-popular Spun
Chairs at ground level. The case study also shows the limitations and challenges that surfaced during the project, such as the short, seasonal timeline of Meet in the Street, limited access to the right-of-way, the temporary impact on the built environment, challenges collecting data, and the restrictions of limited time and money. This case study calls for moving from pilot projects to policies that are able to fully activate the Mall and that invite expanded community participation in activating spaces. The project highlights the positive placemaking rewards that come when the community feels pride and shared ownership of a public space.

By working together as local citizens and as representatives of Downtown Denver’s private and public sectors, the DDLP participant leaders will continue to engage in the creation of a lively, animated, and enjoyable 16th Street Mall experience, and encourages decision makers to take note of the case study outcomes. The DDLP aspires to see the pilot project informing future placemaking efforts along the 16th Street Mall and throughout the area in order to create an ever-improving, vibrant downtown for everyone.
Bibliography

iv Hancock, Michael B. (Twitter). “We’ve said it all along, but now Forbes has proved it. #Denver really is the best place to work, live and play! Https://t.co/bzfG9aXLNS.” 21 Oct. 2016, Web.