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## IDA ADVISORY SERVICES

## PANEL RECOMMENDATIONS

CENTRO SAN ANTONIO  
SAN ANTONIO, TX  
OCTOBER - NOVEMBER 2017

# ACTIVATE HOUSTON STREET



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## ADVISORY PANEL

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**Kelly Kost**  
Retail Strategists  
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Kelly Kost joined retail consulting firm Downtown Works in 2008. She has firsthand experience of what it takes to make operations successful, having owned and operated stores and a restaurant. In her role with Downtown Works, she supports all aspects of retail revitalization projects, with a particular emphasis on strategy development and recruiter training. Additionally, she works with merchants, both individually and via workshops, on overall store branding, presentation and display.

Before joining Downtown Works, Kost worked for a U.S.-based philanthropy focused on invention-led social and enterprise development. She conducted research and assessed opportunities to build the organization's international program strategy, helped form partnerships with organizations and institutions to advance its work in Oregon, and directed the organization's communications efforts, securing national and international media coverage.

Kost served on the Board of the International Downtown Association (IDA) from 2011 to 2017, and is an associate member of the Urban Land Institute (ULI). She has served as a judge for Retail Traffic magazine's Superior Achievement in Design & Imaging (SADI) awards, and participated on the ULI's Technical Assistance Panel focused on TOD in Seattle's U-District. Kost earned a B.A. degree in Communications and a minor in Spanish from Washington State University.

**Kate Durio**  
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Kate Durio works with the Mayor of Lafayette, Louisiana on the cultural economy, creative placemaking, downtown development, transportation and public spaces. She is on several boards and also co-founded ReCover Acadiana to tackle beautification and blight projects through collaboration or rogue action. She is also a Tactical Urbanist and Creative Placemaker working in local neighborhoods leading to her Ted Talk in 2017 to teach citizens that there is no "they", there is only "we" in successful communities. She believes we should all do what we can, where we can, starting on our own block. Kate is an award-winning investigative journalist and has worked in Portland, Oregon and Lafayette. She loves typewriters, snail mail and the public library. In 2014, she was the recipient of the Young Leader Award Grant and was also selected as one of the Top 20 Under 40 in Lafayette. In 2016, her program "Creativity Everywhere" was honored with the Award of Excellence for Public Space from the International Downtown Association and has also served as a presenter on multiple IDA conference panels.

**Jim Yanchula**  
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Jim Yanchula is Urban Regeneration Manager in the Planning Division at the City of London, Canada. His current portfolio is focused on rejuvenating its downtown and traditional "main streets", heritage conservation, and community improvement planning. Following his Architecture education at Ottawa's Carleton University and Planning at the University of Waterloo, he held positions in municipal and provincial government, urban design consulting, and university

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Jennie Schumacher is Communications Coordinator for Downtown Grand Rapids Inc. (DGRI) in Grand Rapids, Michigan. After completing three years of training in peace, justice and conflict resolution, she received her undergraduate degree in communications from Grand Valley State University. Ms. Schumacher works to execute the DGRI's marketing and communications initiatives across a variety of platforms, including the DGRI website, print materials, social media, video and more.

**David Downey,**  
CAE President and  
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A 20-year association professional, David is an accomplished not-for-profit leader in the community building industry. At IDA, David provides overall strategic direction and drives success toward the organization's vision to build a world full of vital and livable urban centers. Prior to IDA, David served as the Managing Director for the Center for Communities by Design at the American Institute of Architects and as Executive Director for the Michigan Society of planning. He currently serves on the Board of Directors for both the Mount Vernon Triangle BID and the Responsible Hospitality Institute (RHI). David has been a city advocate since 1989 receiving his degree in Architecture and Design with a focus on Urban Design from Lawrence Technological University. David and his wife Margie live in northern Virginia with their three sons Connor, Liam, and Declan.

**Faith Broderick**  
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As the Research Associate for the International Downtown Association (IDA), Faith Broderick has worked with place management organizations across North America, spearheading research projects and publications on top issues and the value of downtowns in relation to their greater metropolitan region. Faith is currently completing her Master's in Urban and Regional Planning from Georgetown University. Her academic research has included anti-displacement strategies in gentrifying neighborhoods through a grant awarded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. She also serves on the Dean's Advisory Committee. Faith sits on the Cleveland Park Streetscape Committee in Washington, DC.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# CHAPTER 1: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## About the Panel and Activation Recommendations

The findings and recommendations outlined in this report were informed through careful evaluation of the corridor, dialogue and discussion with key stakeholders, and thorough research into the current and historical conditions along Houston Street. The recommendations reflect the assets and challenges articulated by the local community of residents, property and business owners, and public and private sector employees. The primary objective is to provide Centro San Antonio ("Centro") and the City of San Antonio ("City") with a revitalized vision for the Houston Street Corridor. The recommendations are intended to act as the first phase of a longer-term iterative placemaking and activation strategy, leveraging the continued efforts of local stakeholders such as American Institute of Architects (AIA) and the Urban Land Institute (ULI).

Through the community engagement process, it became evident that Houston Street has strong architectural bones, an appropriate street scale, a rich history, and diverse cultural assets, however, it faces significant challenges. The rich history along Houston Street evokes nostalgia and while this remains an important community asset, the corridor lacks a contemporary, cohesive definition. Today's experience along Houston Street is passive; the corridor lacks a stickiness, a "there there," or a certain staying power. Turning the passive nature of Houston Street into an active one, one that encourages people to experience and engage in the uniqueness and vibrancy of the corridor will transition Houston Street from a corridor you pass through and pass by to one visitors and locals will go to and stay in.

While the panel reviewed the study area in its entirety from North Alamo Street to North San Saba, the Houston Street Corridor is understood best in segments until the segments unite into a contiguous experience. Physical improvements and redevelopment are underway on several blocks. While these efforts continue, a current uniqueness found within four segments along the corridor presents an opportunity for immediate and customized activation strategies. Successful revitalization of Houston Street will come by highlighting the strengths within each segment through customized activation while also connecting them through a unified vision of the corridor.

Reenergizing Houston Street will require the corridor to obtain staying power: activities, and offerings that provide a diverse range of amenities to users throughout the day and evening. In addition to activation and redevelopment, key reinforcing revitalization principles will be necessary to assure the success of any activation effort. Strategies to mitigate the perceived lack of access or parking along the corridor, to fill empty storefronts, and to develop a robust communication campaign will be important components of attracting more users to the corridor. Houston Street's brand needs to reimaging in order to define its place in the future of the city and to simultaneously create a destination in its own right.

## Activation Defined

### Scale of Activation

Activation strategies for each segment of the corridor may differ in theme and duration, depending on the needed intervention. **Activation initiatives are broken down into pilot, seasonal, temporary, and permanent interventions.** Activations can be implemented through a lighter, quicker, cheaper approach (LQC) that provides added flexibility for implementation. Activation is not a one-size-fits-all solution and having flexibility in the size and scale of the projects helps achieve the goal of providing unique solutions to each segment of the corridor.

#### Pilot

Pilot projects are experimental in nature. They are implemented to test a concept, understand how the community responds, and reassure the community that incremental change is a priority. These initiatives may be



removed after a set duration or, if proven successful, pilot activations can be incorporated as a permanent placemaking component along the corridor.

<b>Seasonal</b>	Seasonal activation is coordinated around annual events, seasons, and holidays. These events can be introduced year after year and surround a particular event. Similar to pilot projects these initiatives are temporary. However, unlike pilot projects, these initiatives will be repetitive and based on the calendar.
<b>Temporary</b>	Temporary interventions are those that have a definitive timeline. They are neither extended nor made permanent regardless of demand. These interventions can range in size, quality of materials, and cost. While similar to pilot projects and seasonal interventions, temporary interventions are neither extended nor repeated annually regardless of demand, making them unique in their singularity.
<b>Permanent</b>	Permanent interventions, unlike seasonal and temporary activations, are designed to remain operational regardless of event or season. These activation initiatives are designed to draw excitement and attraction continually. They can be interactive such as musical street instruments or more passive such as murals and street art. Pilot projects can develop into permanent interventions. However, permanent interventions are always designed with longevity in mind.

### *Segments within the Houston Street Corridor*

Houston Street represents a key corridor within the downtown structure. Rather, the panel discovered instead of a single uniform corridor; the study area is comprised of a series of segments. These segments are complementary in nature and not strict in boundaries. In fact, they overlap in many ways. However, each segment has unique characteristics. The ability to activate the Houston Street Corridor will be informed by the ability to embrace the unique characteristics of each segment.

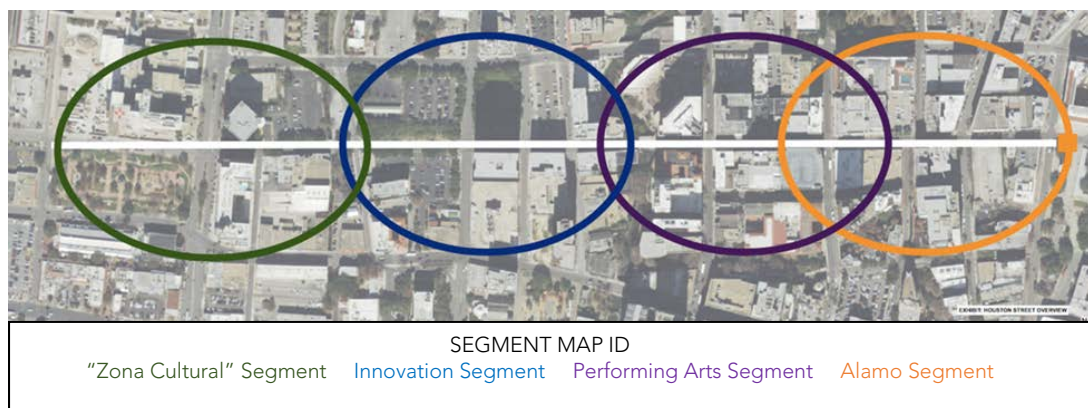


FIGURE 1.0 Houston Street Segment Map

Different segments of Houston Street draw energy and animation potential from different sources. These can be cultivated to offer varying magnetic experiences which together and over time will define the corridor as a destination.

The panel recommendations for activating the Houston Street Corridor include the Alamo Segment; the Performing Arts Segment; an Innovation/Technology Segment; and "Zona Cultural" Segment. The following sections provide an overview of each segment as well as segment-specific activation strategies on a variety of topics including programming, streetscape, communications, and storefronts.

**Alamo Segment:** This segment is transitional in nature. It connects the largely tourist-centric area of Houston Street with the increasingly local-centric area. Due to the mix of uses, this segment will have the most diverse types of users. This segment stretches from Alamo plaza west beyond Broadway.



FIGURE 1.1 The Alamo

**The Performing Arts Segment:** This segment is the most active and established local-centric node of Houston Street. Tourists will likely venture into this segment, but it will be more populated by local residents. This segment stretches from Broadway Street to North St. Mary's Street.



FIGURE 1.2 The Majestic Theater

**Innovation Segment:** This segment is small and less-defined, but appears to be the beginning of an innovation and tech cluster on Houston Street. This segment is less linear and will, therefore, requires activation in the connecting areas along Houston Street as well including surface parking lots, Frost Park, and along the new Frost development site.



FIGURE 1.3 Construction within Innovation Segment

**"Zona Cultural" Segment:** This segment includes many assets and is also the least defined area of Houston Street regarding development character and consistency. It stretches from the new Frost Tower development site to include the hospital, Milam Park, and the Mercado. This segment offers the most extensive opportunities for proactive activations rather than reactive activations.



FIGURE 1.4 The Alameda Theater

The following report will outline steps to activate each segment, utilizing varying activation typologies. The report will also outline overarching revitalization principles that will support and reinforce activation efforts. The recommended strategy is to improve Houston Street's staying power, attracting residents and tourists alike, by programming engaging, informative, and authentic activations across as the entire corridor, as well as within each segment while focusing on reinforcing revitalization principles of connectivity, storefront activations, and communications and engagement. While the following report will provide a more nuanced approach for each, the list below highlights key recommendations for moving forward.

## Activation Strategies by Segment

### Alamo Segment

Achievable within 0-12 months

- Provide useful information regarding the entire corridor (i.e., events, arts and theater, public spaces, etc.).
- Encourage shopping locally through a “buy local” card, which can be marketed and procured within this segment.

Achievable within 12-24 months

- Establish Centro’s street-level presence. Be the face of information that both locals and visitors turn to.
- Invest in interactive digital kiosks that support and inform locals and visitors on topics such as wayfinding, events, businesses, and connectivity.

### Performing Arts Segment

Achievable within 0-12 months

- Create temporary art around construction sites.
- Establish a theatre district officially or unofficially and begin a public relations campaign to establish the district identity and produce and distribute an annual schedule of events to market theatrical events.
- Encourage live art throughout the corridor showcasing the various artists throughout the segment.
- Integrate local artists and theatrical productions with storefront activations -- using window displays as a street-level stage.
- Imagine creative placemaking projects around themes based on the production schedules at the theatres around Houston Street.

Achievable within 12-24 months

- Identify one project each year on Houston Street with integral art organizations in San Antonio.
- Incorporate more color into the palette along the corridor through murals, flowers, colorful crosswalks, street furniture, and sculptures.
- Begin educational partnerships and service learning projects with the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA), the Henry Ford Academy, and other nearby schools.
- Explore opportunities for activation in Frost Park.
- Establish an “artist in residency program” and develop partnerships with local artist groups.
- Re-establish pre-existing programs such as X Marks the Arts and the Houston Street Fair to attract long-time residents and showcase Houston Street’s authenticity.
- Develop a public art strategy for Houston Street.

### *Innovation Segment*

Achievable within 0-12 months

- Encourage pop-up activities such as mini golf throughout this segment for after work and weekend activations.

Achievable within 12-24 months:

- Leverage innovative nature of employers to brand and promote seasonal events
- Provide pop-up, innovative digital experiences from gaming to film screenings.

### *"Zona Cultural" Segment*

Achievable within 0-12 months

- Implement pop-up programs that attract a variety of users and provide needed amenities for residents, workers, and nearby students.
- Introduce seasonal activations at Milam Park utilizing a strong, authentic color palette and lights.

Achievable within 12-24 months

- Develop an activation plan in order to integrate placemaking initiatives with new development taking place throughout the segment.



FIGURE 1.5  
Beach activation in downtown



FIGURE 1.6  
Outdoor chess activation in downtown



## Revitalization Principles

Each segment of Houston Street is unique and should, therefore, be activated in separate and distinct ways. However, key principles for revitalizing the corridor in its entirety emerged while listening to stakeholders, and conducting background research into the events and initiatives. These revitalizing principles lay the groundwork for activation strategies, which will only benefit from a strong, healthy, and vibrant corridor. Corridor-wide revitalization strategies will bolster activation initiatives.

The strategies outlined below apply to the entire corridor. These principles will reinforce activation initiatives and help unify the segments, presenting locals and tourists with a holistic appreciation for Houston Street. These revitalization strategies target missing and low-performing placemaking characteristics, which are crucial for establishing a sense of place. These principles should be incorporated into the activation work within each segment, while also being applied universally across the corridor. Further, revitalization strategies can be applied in pilot, seasonal, temporary, and permanent projects, however, these principles aim to be long-lasting and should be incorporated in every facet of activation regardless of the duration of the individual programmatic objective.

The panel has broken down essential revitalization principles into three parts: an improved storefront environment, a connectivity strategy focused on ease of access and inviting entrances, and a comprehensive communication strategy for Houston Street.

## Revitalization Principles to be applied across the corridor

### Storefront Activations

Achievable within 0-12 months

- Activate storefronts through art, theater, and pop-up initiatives.

Achievable within 12-24 months

- Creatively present new retail opportunities to locals and artisans through mobile and flexible retail spaces.
- Repurpose the underutilized large floorplates of retail stores by reusing the back entryways.
- Work with the city and landlords on providing grant money and incentives to retailers as well as encouraging longer operating hours.



FIGURE 1.7 Outdoor Seating



FIGURE 1.8 Storefront window activation

## Connectivity

Achievable within 0-12 months

- Develop a wayfinding system to draw tourists and residents from the Alamo into the corridor.
- Implement soft, pedestrian-friendly lighting for safe and inviting access onto Houston Street.
- Promote Houston Street along the River Walk.
- Create a campaign that informs and communicates parking, transit, and bicycle options along the corridor.

Achievable within 12-24 months

- Pilot the roll-out of city-wide approaches to heating and shade issues, lighting, pedestrian-prioritization, cycle-friendliness, and social equity.
- Improve bicycle infrastructure, include adding bike racks, misting pots, change rooms, and shaded bike carrels.



FIGURE 1.9 Downtown Winnipeg  
Bike Racks



FIGURE 1.10  
Downtown Santa  
Monica, Inc. wayfinding



FIGURE 1.11  
Downtown Brooklyn wayfinding  
signage

## Communications

Achievable within 0-12 months

- Emphasize the unique characteristics of each segment and brand them accordingly.
- Further, integrate downtown and Centro's webpage and communication outlets.
- Develop an activation awareness campaign: what it is, what is happening, and what is coming.
- Use social media to fill information gaps by posting digital maps, event information, and dedicated campaigns.

Achievable within 12-24 months

- Highlight ambassadors as the face of downtown and Houston Street
- Run a small educational campaign featuring Houston Street's assets.
- Re-establish the relationship between Centro and downtown to create brand awareness and enthusiasm.



FIGURE 1.12 Participatory community engagement



FIGURE 1.13 Community engagement work sessions

### Next Steps for Activate Houston Street

The recommendations within this report were informed by a day-long planning session, which was broken into four sections having 50 total participants. Participants were invited by the Host Committee and represented key stakeholders along Houston Street. These individuals helped inform the recommendations as outlined in this report. Future planning charrettes focused on activating Houston Street should seek to engage not just key stakeholders, but rather should be a public forum inviting all community members to engage in dialogue to inform next steps. A comprehensive, multi-channel communications and engagement strategy will open the door for dialogue and ideation.

While the recommendations outlined in this report answer the “what” and “why” for activation and revitalization along Houston Street, community participation will inform the “how” and for “whom.” Deep understanding of what makes Houston Street an important local asset and the authentic values of San Antonians should be used to make the activation recommendations outlined below a reality. Leveraging the heritage of San Antonio to implement a contextual and place-based activation strategy can be enacted if the activation ingredients recommended below are incorporated. Further, the physical streetscape and place enhancing improvements that will be made, should speak to the heritage, local flavor, and needs of each segment, while weaving a continuous thread down Houston Street that reinforces the brand and importance of the corridor. The activation recommendations are intended to act as the backbone for future implementation and propel ideas that fit the local context.

## CHAPTER 2: SEGMENT ACTIVATION

### Part 1: Houston Street Corridor: Alamo Segment

Located on the eastern edge of the Houston Street Corridor, the Alamo segment is a short four-block section that serves as a transitional zone from the Alamo and other tourist-centric attractions toward the more local-centric section of Houston Street to the west. This presents unique opportunities to engage both visitors and locals along Houston Street.

This segment has a high concentration of hotels and tourism venues, which could deter local residents from experiencing this segment of Houston Street if they believe it lacks local authenticity in terms of the mixture of businesses and experiences. As a result, the activation of the Alamo segment of Houston Street will require a delicate balance appealing to local residents and visitors alike. While challenging, activation along this segment will be successful if the common interests of both groups are taken into consideration.

This segment should be viewed as an important informational area. With high levels of foot traffic from tourist venues and hotels, it includes the offices of Centro, some of the easiest connections between Houston Street and the River Walk, and the easternmost bikeshare station on the corridor.

Not only should this segment of the corridor be viewed as the informative “front door” of the corridor, it should also be viewed as the entry point for connectivity and accessibility for the rest of the city. Informative activations that engage both locals and residents will be important to this segment, alongside improving the accessibility into the corridor.

While the development strategy for the Alamo is finalized, the Alamo should continue to be viewed as a key gateway to Houston Street. This connection should remain unobstructed, allowing visitors and locals arriving by car, bus, bike or foot to easily experience both the Alamo and Houston Street. Preserving the connectivity to both destinations and improving accessibility will only benefit the experience at the Alamo and along Houston Street, tying these two nodes into one comprehensive segment.

### Pilot Activations for the Alamo Segment

Due to its location, creative placemaking throughout this segment should focus on presenting information on the entirety of the corridor including **special events, retail experiences, and unique public spaces in a fun, animated and unique manner**. Essentially serving as the “front door” for visitors to Houston Street, relatively standard pillars provide pedestrian scale information along the sidewalks. These stands are essentially static with very little capacity for interactivity. While they serve the purpose of providing historical information regarding the area, they do so in a very functional way.

Pilot activations along this corridor can extend beyond static signage. While still being functional, a corridor map can be painted or stenciled onto the sidewalk at the easternmost part of this segment to educate users of the amenities throughout the corridor. Engaging programming, like a scavenger hunt incorporating businesses and cultural destinations, can also be an informative tool. Incorporate game-like elements in these activations, thus building excitement around how information is distributed. Gamification is a new, world-wide phenomenon wherein information is increasingly being provided in game-like contexts, eschewing traditional, passive modes of distribution for more active experiences.



## Seasonal Activations for the Alamo Segment

Creative placemaking that informs tourists and residents on local theater and arts productions can also be implemented along this corridor. Having street performers that represent the topical productions at the Majestic can be both informative and engaging to local residents and tourists.

Similarly, pop-ups represented by local shop owners along the corridor can be installed on a seasonal basis. One could imagine that a “Small Business Saturday” neighborhood champion campaign could be set-up throughout this segment. A retail map of the corridor could be distributed and space for local vendors to set up a pop-up booth to showcase their merchandise could be arranged. Additionally, a “buy local” card that incentivizes shoppers (both visitors and residents) to shop at local retailers could be handed out during seasonal campaigns. This initiative could also be a permanent campaign or distributed by Centro employees through pop-ups or street-level presence. Providing a “buy local” card is informative, generating excitement for local merchants along Houston Street.

## Temporary Activations for the Alamo Segment

Using temporary activations to showcase the walkability of this segment can also prove beneficial. Initiating temporary street closures that highlight the ability to walk and cycle down Houston Street can act as a reminder that Houston Street is a walkable corridor.

Additionally, a historical wayfinding campaign that focuses on the history of retail and cultural amenities along the corridor can be implemented. Informational and educational, these installations can tell the stories of historic retailers and amenities along the corridor. To promote engagement, comment cards or the ability to provide testimony from residents and visitors who remember the attraction can be included. This activation could be seen as a gateway initiative starting at the easternmost section of the corridor and extending to the western-most segment.

## Permanent Activations for the Alamo Segment

One could imagine the concept of an informational pillar being applied in a unique new way that would visually engage pedestrians and provide useful information. For instance, rather than static pillars, the informational stands could be replaced with LED versions that could be programmed to rotate through images of the entire corridor and its varied segments. These informational kiosks can also be equipped with unique “sights and sounds” of the Houston Street Corridor, ranging from excerpts of shows at the Majestic or Alameda, glimpses inside interesting restaurants like Pinch, La Panaderia, and Rosella, renderings of iconic destinations like San Pedro Creek.

Essentially, these interactive signs serve the functional purpose of providing information but do so in a visual and auditory manner—one that is most likely to compel tourists to explore the corridor further while inducing locals to check out the often-changing kiosks for local insight.

On a longer-term basis, this concept could be expanded beyond permanent and pop-up kiosks to incorporate interesting lighting, audio, and interactive features. These setups could also house a pop-up Centro office staffed with ambassadors and micro-shops for unique establishments like Rosella Coffee, Paleteria ice pops, and other quick artisan treats served in the Downtown San Antonio area.

Connectivity for this segment can also be implemented in a more permanent fashion. Being that this segment acts as a tourist funnel from the Alamo and a gateway for many residents, having an informative and easy to read wayfinding campaign will be important. A wayfinding campaign that informs the user of the destinations ahead and the walk time it takes to get there would be both informative and helpful in combatting the negative perceptions of connectivity.

## Next Steps

- Think of the Alamo Segment as a funnel. The initial entry point onto Houston Street for locals and tourists will be through this funnel. Therefore, adequate, engaging, interactive, and historical information and wayfinding should be well presented throughout.
  - Information on the entirety of the corridor should be present.
  - This can include special events, new restaurant openings, theater and art experiences, and unique public spaces.
- Establish a Centro presence on the street. Be the face of information that both locals and tourists know to turn to.
- Encourage shopping locally through a “buy local” card, which can be marketed and procured within this segment.
- Long-term activation should consider interactive digital kiosks that help tie in wayfinding, Houston Street branding and engagement, ongoing arts and culture initiatives, and storefront enhancements.



FIGURE 2.1.0 Interactive NYC kiosks



FIGURE 2.1.1 Activated public park with games and street furniture

## Part 2: Houston Street Corridor: Performing Arts Segment

Houston Street provides an incredible opportunity to cultivate a draw for locals and visitors alike with the concentration of historic theatres. The creation of a special performing arts district along the Houston Street Corridor, even if de facto, sends a message to community activators to focus performing arts efforts within this compact area, creating a place for the critical mass of performing arts and all of its supporting arts and businesses to thrive. Further, this segment is well positioned to preserve and appreciate the history, culture, and authenticity of San Antonio. By celebrating the arts through a designated district, the historical significance of arts along Houston Street can be amplified and celebrated as a contemporary expression of what it means to be a San Antonian.



FIGURE 2.2.0 Playhouse Square, Downtown Cleveland chandelier

A performing arts district becomes a destination for music, live theatre, dance, improv, comedy, children's theatre and many other artistic expressions. In addition, the performers who are not playing in theatres are more likely to perform in other spaces within close proximity to the theatres for a chance to be noticed or booked. These performers could activate vacant storefronts, parks, and sidewalks. Savvy businesses within this new district will benefit from offering their own spaces for performance to enhance their involvement in the performing arts district.



By highlighting the Majestic, Empire, Alameda, Aztec, and Texas <sup>1</sup> Theatres, along with the Tobin Center for the Performing Arts, efforts to create a theatre district will provide an annual schedule of events, show themes, performances, activation and bring awareness of these theatres and Houston Street. “Distrito” organizers could take an innovative approach and move beyond just a “performing arts distrito” to become the “performing arts distrito” inviting all types of art to occur in a live or accessible fashion as performance. Live paintings, live music, visible costume design work or set building become cultural assets that encourage bringing the creativity out where it can be seen, celebrated and more supported.



FIGURE 2.2.1 Performing Arts district



FIGURE 2.2.2 Locally painted street furniture

Stakeholders shared that a lack of “stickiness” or staying power was a common challenge on Houston Street, along with empty storefronts. By establishing the “distrito” and committing to using culture and the arts as a placemaking tool, the challenges become assets as the stickiness is reimaged in a new way by highlighting the street’s theatres, its strongest assets, and funneling that momentum into a ready inventory of empty storefronts without having to build new spaces. The creation of a theatre distrito is one option; however, if desired, micro-districts could be imagined along Houston Street as hubs of identity that Houston Street connects together, creating interest and a desire to see what the next block has to offer.



FIGURE 2.2.3 Downtown street with heart paintings



FIGURE 2.2.4 Artists enhancing their set in public

Houston Street can benefit from encouraging a variety of uses at all times of day at museums, other cultural institutions, and buildings such as coffee shops, bookstores, or other public interest purposes.

<sup>1</sup> Downtown Cleveland Theatre District

Activators should be encouraged to look at all needs as creative opportunities, whether it be for bike racks, bus stops, crosswalks, street furniture, lighting or access to food. Other creative opportunities include gateways and the River Walk bridges and stairs. Activators can use color to connect mix-matched elements.<sup>2</sup>

### Pilot Activation Strategies

Artist-in-vacancy programs are currently sprouting up around the country, and Houston Street appears to be a prime candidate. Activators could establish a space matching system to connect available space to artists and theatrical or music groups to serve in the artist in vacancy capacity, thus activating empty storefronts or the “missing teeth” in the activation fabric. The visibility of creative work complements the theatre distrito to create more three dimensional and authentic experiences.<sup>3</sup>

Activators can encourage theatrical groups to workshop scenes or perform rehearsals out in public spaces, either in parks or vacant storefronts. Much like athletes who exercise between games, many performers workout their bits, scenes, or their improv abilities as a means to keep fresh and agile. This presents an opportunity to showcase the community’s talent in an intimate way and creates interest in the distrito with something always happening on Houston Street. Residents may feel as though it is worth visiting because one never knows what may be witnessed or experienced.



FIGURE 2.2.5 Outdoor performances



FIGURE 2.2.6 Doors Open Ottawa

Activators could encourage theatres to go out and perform scenes beyond Houston Street in the surrounding neighborhoods. This type of engagement can also be beneficial to the efforts of Centro and the City of San Antonio by engaging residents, possibly with youth outreach and pre-or post-performance improv games. Improv games can be a very useful city-planning outreach tool that makes

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<sup>2</sup> Exterior of the Des Moines Social Club, TheClio.com, 2015: The Des Moines Social Club provides a variety of uses throughout the day and into the evening cultivating creative collaborations and bringing awareness for resident artists and commercial operators. <https://www.theclio.com/web/entry?id=15593>

Cross Your Heart Walk, Creativity Everywhere, Downtown Lafayette, 2014: The Creativity Everywhere program injected art and creativity in unexpected places in the downtown district, invested in local artists and used its modest marketing budget to implement the program, gaining over \$800,000 in earned media for the district. <http://www.downtownlafayette.org/explore/cross-your-heart-walk-crosswalk> <http://www.downtownlafayette.org/explore/azalea-bench>

<sup>3</sup> Artist in Vacancy, Newburgh Community Land Bank, 2017: Programs like this are building value and activating empty spaces while employing artists. <https://www.newburghcommunitylandbank.org/artist-in-vacancy-temporary-site>

Grosvenor Park Open Air Theatre, 2017: Chester, U.K. offers a season of shows from July through August each year. <http://www.chester360.co.uk/whats-on/grosvenor-park-open-air-theatre>

residents feel comfortable with sharing due to the lightness of the activity and sincerity and honesty of the process.

Houston Street could become the “Best Happy Hour in San Antonio” with a robust effort to make the district the place to spend your break between work and entertainment. Successful, happy hours offer inexpensive food in addition to or instead of drink specials. Further, the San Antonio Cocktail Conference could be expanded to happy hour program or a year-round event with pre-show drink specials or thematic opportunities.

Engage the Museo Alameda, Texas Public Radio, and Univision as partners in taking ownership of the gateway with Santa Rosa and promoting the area as an arts district and an area friendly to the creative community helping to brand the area as their creative playground. Music can be used to draw people from the Alamo and the River Walk and invite employees to stay after work. Music could be live or played through outdoor speakers.

Activators may want to consider bringing back the Houston Street Fair that was once held on one Sunday each month as an authentic and historic vehicle to support new pop-up markets and shops. The X Marks the Art program could also be re-launched with more temporary or pilot art projects that generate interest and put more public art along Houston Street.

Dinner in the Street, an event with a long table down Houston Street, was mentioned as something done in the past that residents enjoyed. An event like this could be the foundation for a variety of add-ons such as themed performances in the theatres, constructive “dinner conversations” around difficult issues in the community, or highlighting rising stars from the Culinary Institute of America or collaborations from multiple chefs in town.

Another option to consider is emulating the Open Doors program offered in Ottawa, Canada. This event invites the public to tour the inside of buildings, especially ones available for purchase or lease, generating more interest with unavailable or off-limits properties that can be opened for one day only. <sup>4</sup>

Establishing partnerships with the local arts organizations and delegating projects from these recommendations or others can ensure at least one partnership with an arts organization annually that contributes to vibrancy along Houston Street, creates activations and builds strong partnerships.

Houston Street offers an attractive opportunity for educational partnerships. One project could be a partnership with UTSA for service-learning opportunities to utilize downtown and the rich architecture of Houston Street as a living classroom for students in urban studies and architecture. City-led efforts to redevelop, streetscape, and plan parks or other investments could be learning opportunities for all involved, incorporating these projects into the curriculum and building a strong partnership with the university. For even more radical creative solutions, Houston Street could greatly benefit from engaging the Henry Ford Academy Alameda School for Art + Design on public art initiatives and creating a mentor program with UTSA for collaborative projects.

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<sup>4</sup> Doors Open Ottawa: <https://ottawa.ca/en/residents/arts-heritage-and-culture/museums-and-historic-sites/doors-open-ottawa>

## Temporary Activation Strategies

One quick win would be keeping the marquees lit along the corridor at all times, no exceptions. Activators should offer to help monitor burnt bulbs and keep them operational. Lighting can help activate nighttime activities, accentuate architecture, introduce color and motion and improve safety. Using the abundance of lighting to establish a “distrito de luz” encourages the belief that Houston is the brightest street in Texas.

Lighting could be the most interesting placemaking tool and opportunity for Houston Street. As a theatre distrito, lighting could help Houston Street become the brightest street in Texas with creative lighting that illuminates and inspires even becoming a secondary district: “the light distrito”.



FIGURE 2.2.7 Downtown Street Lanterns



FIGURE 2.2.8 Interactive art with a gradient color

Houston Street could become “the street where the stars come to shine in Texas,” something that could be said of the stage performers as well as actual star lanterns that could be hung in sections, across intersections, or across the length of Houston Street. This could create a more charming and romantic lighting scenario while also providing a very photo-worthy experience that helps to share Houston Street with the world through social media and an accompanying promotional campaign.<sup>5</sup>

Houston Street could also stand out by using crushed quartz in the concrete of all sidewalks creating the look of glitter on the sidewalk which can look very theatrical. During the day, the quartz captures sunlight, and in the evening, it captures the lights from the marquees and street lights, contributing to a glow on Houston Street that adds to the experience and sense of place.

Houston Street deserves a considerable public art strategy which could be coordinated with the City of San Antonio’s program. More color should be introduced into the palette of colors on Houston Street, even if temporarily through rotating installations. One creative option would be to utilize the gradient of a Texas sunset from one end of Houston Street to the other, starting with creams and yellows near the Alamo into oranges and reds near the Alameda. This could manifest in street light pole decorations, crosswalk colors, signage, flowers in the planters, and other creative solutions.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Star lanterns, pinterest. <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/45458277459026792/>

<sup>6</sup> Sugar and Cloth: <https://sugarandcloth.com/the-sugar-and-cloth-color-wall-in-houston/>

Ann Arbor Fairy Doors, [http://www.mlive.com/entertainment/ann-arbor/index.ssf/2015/05/fairy\\_doors\\_in\\_ann\\_arbor.html](http://www.mlive.com/entertainment/ann-arbor/index.ssf/2015/05/fairy_doors_in_ann_arbor.html)

Ann Arbor Before and After, Kate Durio, 2016, katedurio@gmail.com



Art in unexpected places, especially on a level where children can notice them, provides an interest and activity for all ages. Examples such as the Fairy Door series in Ann Arbor mimic full-size doors but are designed for tiny visitors.



FIGURE 2.2.9 Downtown Fairy Doors



FIGURE 2.2.10 Translucent Historic before and after photos

Activators could use retail to help artists establish galleries or visible workspaces and studios on Houston Street. This creates a hyper-local retail opportunity where San Antonians can come to find numerous experiences and authentic assets.

The historical elements along Houston Street could be more interactive with the addition of translucent historic “before” photos positioned over their present-day condition so that visitors can see the “before” over the current “after.”



FIGURE 2.2.11 Construction Fence Art Work (example 1)



FIGURE 2.2.12 Construction Fence Art Work (example 2)





FIGURE 2.2.13 Construction Fence Art Work (example 3)



FIGURE 2.2.14 Construction Fence Art Work (example 4)

The intersections along Houston Street are opportunities for sculptural or light art. Sculptures that go across the street, up light poles or hang down provide visual interest, enhance corridor identity and can distinguish micro-districts or provide wayfinding elements.

Activators should review existing signage for visual clutter and streamline effectiveness while standardizing signage. Right now, there is so much signage that it is hard to determine which signs are important to acknowledge.

Houston Street could benefit from showcasing its designation as a national historic district. Tasteful sidewalk markers are one way to avoid vertical, visual clutter and bring attraction without distracting from the historic nature of the assets. Markers at the entrances of Houston Street could create a threshold of importance and historical significance.

Temporary art installations around construction fences or in vacant areas can pilot more permanent installations or serve as creative outlets for community input on issues or opportunities.<sup>7</sup>

### Seasonal Activations for the Performing Arts Segment

Utilizing the season of each theatre as inspiration or a prompt for an annual schedule of placemaking efforts can keep activators engaged and resisting the urge to let anything get stale. For example, if the Majestic is doing *An American in Paris* in May, activators could kickoff efforts in March with a screening of the film on the blank wall of the Kress Building at Jefferson and Houston Street. From March through May, Houston Street could highlight costume work, set work, rehearsals in public, artist talks with the director and performers in restaurants or office spaces along Houston Street. Houston Street itself could see lighter, quicker, cheaper enhancements through the use of thematic street decorations or art installations in parks or the stairs from the River Walk. This would create excitement for opening night and create places that help position Houston Street as an extension of the set for the show. Activators could also encourage restaurants to offer show specials in the same theme of the show. Another way to do this would be to pull costume designers and their workshops out into storefronts with windows to activate otherwise vacant spaces and create excitement around shows. These efforts make Houston Street an experiential destination and provide a feeling of limited availability that can drive more traffic to the corridor.

<sup>7</sup> Library Wall Project, ReCover Acadiana, 2013:  
[https://www.facebook.com/pg/recoveracadiana/photos/?tab=album&album\\_id=520369824720849](https://www.facebook.com/pg/recoveracadiana/photos/?tab=album&album_id=520369824720849)



FIGURE 2.2.15 Outdoor Community Dining



FIGURE 2.2.16 Interactive Community Art Walls

The food scene on Houston Street could use participation from students and instructors from the Culinary Institute of America to activate vacant buildings or parks and encourage pop-up test kitchens or restaurants, initiating a scarcity principle for residents and visitors alike to participate or miss out.<sup>8</sup> Murals, moveable art walls, and sculptures can communicate messages, introduce creativity and establish interest for pedestrians to continue exploring Houston Street. Murals, even if vintage in style can advertise shops or restaurants on Houston Street and fill some of the blank walls by introducing color, interest, and creativity to the corridor. Art walls that encourage pedestrian activity -- similar to "Before I die..." walls -- often become destinations, photograph opportunities, expression of creativity and experiences offering a "leave-behind" on Houston Street. As part of the theatre distrito, Houston Street may want to offer a thematic version with the changing show season or ask for input on favorite shows or even shopping. Some examples customized for Houston Street are: "The best show I've ever seen was..." or "If you were to buy me a gift, I'd really hope it would be...". A fun holiday sign could be a giant list where people come and write their names and the one thing they want for the holidays, like a giant Santa's List. Then Centro, as Houston Street elves, could come back and write in where someone could find that gift on Houston Street. So, you could get people you knew on the list exactly what they wanted! Of course, people could also offer more charitable options for those requesting it, or Centro could organize an "Adopt a Family" campaign around the holidays to help.<sup>9</sup>

Activators can piggy-back on Southtown's First Friday, or take the cheeky approach of offering a competing "Last Friday" event on Houston Street to celebrate the counter-culture of San Antonio featuring performing arts, visual arts, music, pop-up markets, food pop-ups, live mural painting, games and other activations.

If an "art walk" event does not exist, it would be an inexpensive and easy activation tool that works well with a theatre distrito.

Free parking could be made available during the holiday season to help establish Houston Street as a local destination for holiday shopping, expanding upon the offering of Downtown Tuesday free parking.

<sup>8</sup> Childhood Deconstructed, 2013: Runaway Dish generates donations for partner non-profits through pop-up dinners highlighting chefs and unlikely dining locations such as this one in the Children's Museum. <http://www.runawaydish.org/>

<sup>9</sup> Plan Lafayette, 2014: <https://www.facebook.com/LafayetteComprehensivePlan/photos/a.666905106700768.1073741849.323768914347724/670763092981636/?type=3&theater>

A holiday market of ideal gift items held throughout the season could help address a lack of variety in offerings on Houston Street.

Incubating pop-up shops with micro-retail spaces to house enterprises such as snowballs, popsicles, coffee and fresh juices can activate public spaces and thoroughfares and can build a loyal clientele for existing or potential Houston Street operators. Employ a retail incubation program experiment to find a formula that works with appropriate lease lengths of three months or longer. Additionally, pair spaces with professional development courses to set operators up for entrepreneurial success by incubating them with bookkeeping, employee management, and marketing classes likely already offered by economic development organizations in the area. For a starting place, activators should study the lessons and successes from Raising the Barn that established a pop-up zoning district in Alamo Heights. A good place for this would be underutilized park space or surface parking lots.<sup>10</sup>



FIGURE 2.2.17 Pop-up Markets seasonally decorated



FIGURE 2.2.18 Pop-up nighttime marketplace

A night market in empty storefronts, surface parking lots or IBC Plaza at the River Walk can encourage makers, creators, and artists to set up temporary shops. These temporary shops will generate traffic through their individual networks as well as create a critical mass, sense of place and means to diversify the retail market on Houston Street. By utilizing IBC Plaza and stairs from the River Walk for a pop-up market, activators can encourage shoppers to transition from the River Walk during the day and a market during the night.<sup>11</sup>

The Mercado is an incredible opportunity to celebrate the cultural diversity and history of Houston Street and build on the outside-inside sort of shopping experience all along Houston Street through pop-ups or new pavilions with market stalls.

Promotional efforts can highlight Houston Street as the historic shopping district for San Antonio with messaging such as “San Antonio’s original shopping experience” or “San Antonio’s most authentic shopping experience”.

<sup>10</sup> Micro Retail, Coffee Shop, Bob Gibbs, 2016

<sup>11</sup> Frenchmen Night Market, The Culture Trip. [https://theculturetrip.com/north-america/usa/louisiana/articles/where-to-buy-local-art-in-new-orleans/?utm\\_source=Pinterest&utm\\_medium=share](https://theculturetrip.com/north-america/usa/louisiana/articles/where-to-buy-local-art-in-new-orleans/?utm_source=Pinterest&utm_medium=share)



## Permanent Activations for the Performing Arts Segment

The distrito could create a marquee sign that serves at the ground level as a photo opportunity for visitors of the district. The sign could change with the show schedule to make use of similar messaging to “I saw the stars of Texas on Houston Street in San Antonio” or “Houston Street is where the stars come to shine in Texas.” The ever-changing schedule creates an opportunity for return visitors and photos without being stale. Another photo opportunity could be a smaller, person-scaled stage that looks like the Majestic or one of the other theatres in the district. It could be placed outside on the street, in a lot, in a park, or on the sidewalk.



FIGURE 2.2.19 Majestic Theater interior <sup>12</sup>

Bus stops and shelters are potential creative opportunities that can be inspired by local aesthetics, including bus stops that look like the box offices, such as those of the Majestic.

Activators could also use the show schedules and seasons of the theatres as a tool for drawing in visitors at gateways with lit-up marquees that show what is showing on Houston Street with a list of performances. Activators could think of this sign, which could be digital, as a community marquee for all of Houston Street. If regularly updated, it could be an easy tool to combat the jaded view that “there is never anything happening downtown.”

Lights with sensors can be used to build a smart grid on the Houston Street Corridor scale as a “living lab” for San Antonio to experiment and test smart city initiatives, monitoring the city’s data and movements and applying lessons learned city-wide. One way to do this would be to track temperature, air quality, moisture, and pedestrian and bike traffic counts while incrementally addressing the heat island effect through mitigation efforts such as planting trees, adding awnings and other shade elements, and introducing water elements in streetscape improvements, etc. These efforts can lead to the creation of a smarter street tree policy, a landscaping policy guide, awning standards paired with complementary

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<sup>12</sup> Majestic Theatre, <http://visitsanantonio.com/Browse-Book/Attractions/Majestic-Theatre>

signage standards, and a stormwater management plan. Houston Street could also generate more activity by offering Wi-Fi.

With an intentional effort, activators can engage and improve the West Side resident experience with Houston Street through outreach to strategize optimal outcomes for equity, inclusion, and affordability. Houston Street could go beyond “placemaking” and look to do critically important “placekeeping” to protect the authenticity of Houston Street, incorporating artist housing and providing accessible workspaces that can be shared for increased collaborations.

The “bubble” culture could be explored to establish new neighborhood groups and empower local champions to address needs and celebrate assets of specific bubbles on or adjacent to Houston Street to protect and maintain the area through the changes it is currently facing.

Houston Street should carefully monitor the San Pedro Creek Improvements Project by championing the needs of residents, operators, and owners along the Houston Street Corridor in order to ensure the redevelopment is in concert with other efforts to Activate Houston Street.

### Next Steps

- Establish a theatre district officially or unofficially and begin a PR campaign to establish the district identity.
- Develop a public art strategy for Houston Street.
- Identify one project each year on Houston Street with each arts organization in San Antonio.
- Imagine creative placemaking projects around themes from the production schedules at the theatres on Houston Street.
- Install creative and colorful lighting along Houston Street.
- Incorporate more color into the palette along the corridor through murals, flowers, colorful crosswalks, street furniture, and sculptures.
- Begin educational partnerships and service learning projects with UTSA and the Henry Ford Academy and other nearby schools.
- Encourage activation within underutilized public spaces such as parks, surface lots, and storefronts and evaluate the opportunity to activate Frost Park.

### Part 3: Houston Street Corridor: Innovation Segment

The Innovation Segment of the Houston Street Corridor includes a nascent cluster of technology and innovation companies and venues. This segment is ripe to expand and leverage that cluster into additional technology businesses, venues, programming and--significantly--shops, eateries, and services that appeal to an innovation-centric audience. In addition, the relocation of many City of San Antonio offices into the former Frost Bank Tower represents the potential for a significant innovation expansion in this segment as, in today's new governmental structure, smart cities like San Antonio serve as public sector innovators. This concentration of public and private innovators is an important feature of this unique segment.

The assets include venues such as Geekdom where creative types can gather in a collective and diverse work environment. An additional asset includes the location of the segment within the geographic middle of the Houston Street Corridor.

Another asset includes the potential offered by the greenspace outside of Frost Tower. While the greenspace is privately-held and lesser utilized by the Houston Street Corridor users, if that space was opened to more use, it would provide an ideal space to activate with the "retro play" activities that are increasingly popular with the creative class. At the same time, the Innovation Segment includes a variety of challenges that thwart effective activation. Examples of the challenges include connectivity and accessibility issues due to construction, dark and uninviting block faces due to office building architecture, overly clustered street furniture resulting in a crowded pedestrian right-of-way, surface parking lots, and busy vehicular intersections.

Taking these assets and challenges into consideration, the activation of this segment of Houston Street includes unique programming and streetscape opportunities. The following recommendations focus on both short-term and long-term activation strategies that have proven successful in other jurisdictions that have analogous assets and challenges.

#### Pilot Activation for the Innovation Segment

A rapid expansion of innovation clusters has begun to take root in downtowns. In the private realm, co-working spaces, business incubators, accelerators and open office designs are responding to the desires of the users drawn to the innovation clusters. The public realm can complement and enhance these private activations through programming activations that, though they can appeal to a wide audience, are targeted toward the interests of the creative class.

A great example of this can be found in Downtown Huntsville, where the concept of retro play has been quickly embraced by the Rocket City's high tech and innovative workforce. In particular, Downtown Huntsville has implemented free retro play activations such as the Downtown Open Pop Up Putt-Putt and the Human Foosball Pop Up Park. In both cases, Downtown Huntsville, Inc. partnered with the City of Huntsville to utilize portions of the public sidewalks and on-street parking spaces to introduce temporary mini-golf holes and a temporary human foosball court. Both projects involved local businesses designing the holes and court for the temporary activations.

For the Houston Street Innovation Segment, these projects offer lessons which could be easily adapted to the wide sidewalks or on-street parking along the Houston Street cross-thoroughfares. The projects offer three important benefits that make them ideal for Houston Street pilot activations: 1) quick and easy to construct, 2) inexpensive to construct, and 3) proven to have high levels of engagement with creative class and other innovators.

## Seasonal Activations for the Innovation Segment

Seasonal activations create excellent opportunities because they are often centered around established holidays or established seasonal traditions such as Fiesta San Antonio. The fantastic opportunity that exists within an innovation cluster is to recognize these established holidays and traditions in a technologically-unique way.

For instance, rather than incorporating conventional holiday decorations (such as holiday decorations affixed to streetlights) the Innovation Segment could re-interpret these decorations through digital mapping throughout this segment. Essentially, the conventional state decorations would be replaced by dynamic digital mapping versions of snowflakes, sleigh rides, and other holiday imagery. An example of this could be structured as a “Twelve Days of Christmas” digital art experience where digital mapping artists transform their light art in the select area for each of the traditional twelve days. This innovative flair on conventional decorations would signal that Houston Street represents a vibrant and dynamic mixture of the convention and innovation.<sup>13</sup>

## Temporary Activations for the Innovation Segment

Though innovation is often tied to digital and virtual experiences, it is becoming increasingly common for the creative and innovative class to be drawn to retro play and other tactile experiences. The proliferation of “bar-cades”, pool halls, bowling alleys, dart rooms, and other tactile activities demonstrate that life “beyond the screen” is an important part of the innovation culture.



FIGURE 2.3.0 Outdoor Arcade Games

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<sup>13</sup> Additional sources for inspiration: <https://la.curbed.com/2015/12/31/10850256/downtown-los-angeles-grand-park-new-years-eve-projections-light-show>



The Houston Street Innovation Segment can tap into this trend through temporary “pop up” versions of these activities until more permanent retail establishments open. An interesting example could be Sidewalk Pinball Tournaments where pinball machines are placed on the sidewalk and opened for free play on select evenings of the week. Pinball machines are relatively simple and inexpensive to rent and can be easily moved on pinball wheel tracks.

One could imagine residents, workers, and visitors to the Innovation Segment area competing in pinball or other retro arcade games on beautiful spring or fall weekend evenings along this portion of Houston Street. It could represent a dynamic combination of innovation and retro play for a minimal expense and straightforward logistical planning.

### Permanent Activations for the Innovation Segment

This segment is the ideal location to introduce a streetscape, lighting, and signage overlay that embraces innovative approaches to all of these important elements in the public right of way. The key here would be to design the overlay in a way that rewards creative approaches to the above elements (within defined prescriptive ranges) through either reduced administrative burdens or incentivized results. These should be tied directly to implementations that embrace both the functional and decorative aspects of the elements.



FIGURE 2.3.1 Digital Wifi and Smart City Interactive kiosks



FIGURE 2.3.2 Geometric Shade Coverings

For instance, digital ticker tapes are popular in iconic urban areas like Rockefeller Plaza. These can double as both functional signage and interactive displays. One can imagine an LED screen in the Innovation Segment where pedestrians could watch TED Talks or other streaming experiences directly from the sidewalk. These types of digital signage can both entertain and inform--neither being exclusive of the other.



This same concept holds true to streetscape elements like seating, wayfinding, and lighting. The Innovation Segment is where the Downtown San Antonio community implements these functional elements in unique ways that evolve them beyond simply static experiences. Important elements such as shade and lighting in the public right of way become open to unique interpretations of both shade and light but do so in a way that doubles as a decorative or innovative feature. In other words, shade and light don't have to be boring!

Even the concept of "permanent" should be unique to this segment as innovation is continuously re-evaluating and re-testing in this segment.

Significantly, this does not mean that the Innovation Segment is unregulated. Rather, it means that the approach to a regulatory framework is innovatively designed through an overlay that meets the public's general welfare interests while enabling innovation to result in both the public and private areas of this segment.

### Next Steps

- Encourage pop-up activities that meet the needs of San Antonians throughout this segment for after work and weekend activations. These can include mini-golf or paint night.
- Leverage innovative nature of employers to brand and promote seasonal events
- Provide pop-up, innovative digital experiences from gaming to film screenings

## Part 4: Houston Street Corridor: “Zona Cultural” Segment

Among all the segments of the Houston Street Corridor study area, the segment from Flores Street to San Saba Street represents the most opportunity for future redevelopment as it includes the largest concentration of surface lots, underdeveloped property in the study area, and a dense array of cultural assets. This segment is strategically positioned within the “Zona Cultural” district, the city’s second state-designated cultural district. While the city has designated the “Zona Cultural” to include 44 contiguous blocks, for the purposes of this report, the “Zona Cultural” Segment will be viewed as just those blocks along Houston Street. Given the important initiatives taking aim at the “Zona Cultural” district, the following recommendations are intended to work in tandem, enhancing the goals and objectives of prior and already underway initiatives.

This segment offers the widest variety of uses and users with existing residential, employment, entertainment, civic, cultural, and retail uses all represented in this area. This offers a strong base to make this segment a true 24/7 location where users can live, work, play, and shop within a walkable district. As a result, the activation strategies for this segment should deliberately realize that this portion of Houston Street could redevelop into one that serves a significant neighborhood-centric base (as opposed to visitor-centric base) that would parallel other dense, walkable neighborhoods like Southtown.

While this result is not preordained, the nature and mixture of uses, combined with the amount of undeveloped and underdeveloped property, strongly suggests that this is a distinct possibility in the future. This strong possibility means that the activations in this segment must appeal to individuals who spend much of their living and working time in this area rather than visitors. As a result, shorter intervals and increased interactivity for activation projects will be necessary to keep their appeal fresh and interesting.

Below are several potential activation strategies that simply represent types of creative placemaking activations that could thrive in this segment, however, implemented activation strategies should mirror the needs, wants, and characteristics of San Antonians. As always, these are merely representative and would be most successful with modifications that embrace the local character of this area.

### Pilot Activation for the “Zona Cultural” Segment

Like many city centers, Downtown Huntsville is fortunate to have a significant public library where patrons can engage in research, attend concerts, participate in continuing education, and, of course, borrow books. Unfortunately, the Downtown Public Library is located on the perimeter of the city center away from much of the residential and office population. Recognizing this, Downtown Huntsville, Inc. convened a strategy session in 2016 to discuss how to bring free books, magazines, and other media types closer to where people live, work, and play in the city center. The result was a partnership between Downtown Huntsville, Inc., Arts Huntsville, Inc., the Huntsville/Madison County Public Library System, the local newspaper, and the City of Huntsville. This partnership developed a novel way to meet the goal of making books and other media more accessible.



FIGURE 2.4.0 Downtown Huntsville Library Program

To accomplish this, the partners adaptively repurposed unused Huntsville Times newspaper racks by converting them into free library book borrowing stands. Each of the book boxes were placed in easily accessible and heavily trafficked areas of the city center including outside downtown residential lofts, office buildings, and the downtown YMCA. However, rather than simply replace newspapers with books in these unused stands, the partners decided to turn this initiative into a public art project. To accomplish this, Arts Huntsville promoted the project among the local arts community. In particular, local artists were invited to submit proposed Book Box designs with the winners being commissioned to create one box each. Once the locations were selected and the Book Box designs were completed, the Public Library system stocked the boxes with books. When doing so, the Public Library carefully stocks the Book Boxes with titles and genres that appeal to all ages. To date, the selections have been popular with an estimated 2,000+ books borrowed since inception.

For the “Zona Cultural” Segment, a similar program could be quickly implemented that could be centered between the Alameda Theater and the Mercado/Milam Park area. Several reasons existed to focus on this general area. First, it includes a strong cultural and entertainment anchor (the Alameda Theater) along with a strong residential anchor (Vistana), employment anchor (the hospital), civic space anchor (Milam Park), and destination retail anchor (Market Square/El Mercado). A project like the downtown book boxes could connect each of these complementary uses in a subtle but intentional way by having artists design boxes that represent the colors and icons of each area.

Another innovation would be the expansion beyond books to include other forms of media and other shareable products. The Houston Street book boxes could evolve into a sharing, multi-media form of Amazon lockers that double as informational kiosks. One could imagine content including media-related events to shows at the Alameda and activities at Milam Park and El Mercado. With a general lack of multimedia retail shops in the corridor, this pilot activation could connect the segment's assets, provide a temporary public art opportunity, and meet an unmet need of the segment's residents, workers, and visitors.

### Seasonal and Temporary Activations for the "Zona Cultural" Segment

The seasonal activation strategy should be centered around the beautiful colors that define this segment including those of the Alameda Theater and El Mercado. These bright, thematic colors could be extended into seasonal holiday activations located in Milam Park. With its extensive path network, Milam Park is ideal for a strolling holiday experience such as a "tinsel trail",<sup>14</sup> a "pumpkin trail"<sup>15</sup>, or another seasonally-connected trail. The Christmas trees or pumpkins can be designed by local businesses with the trails being located along the pathways of Milam Park. This type of trail is typically free to enjoy and can be maintained during its operation in a partnership between Centro and the City's parks division. One can imagine beautiful and brightly designed temporary Christmas trees and Halloween pumpkins that add to the vibrant permanent colors of the Alameda and El Mercado.



FIGURE 2.4.1 Downtown Tinsel Trails

### Permanent Activation for the "Zona Cultural" Segment

As mentioned above, the "Zona Cultural" Segment represents the largest amount of undeveloped and underdeveloped land on the Houston Street Corridor. This challenge represents a great opportunity for activation planning because it allows for the proactive inclusion of pocket parks and micro civic spaces into development plans. In addition to working with private developers who eventually redevelop surface lots and other underdeveloped spaces, a critical action item is to develop activation plans for San Pedro Creek and Milam Park. Both represent large civic spaces along the Houston Street Corridor that could be planned for vibrant activation.

Importantly, an activation plan is not simply a plan to place public art or other functional items like benches, lights, or even informational markers. Instead, an activation plan identifies specific locations

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<sup>14</sup>Downtown Huntsville, Tinsel Trail: [www.tinseltrail.com](http://www.tinseltrail.com)

<sup>15</sup> Downtown Oak Park, Pumpkin Trail: <http://www.downtownoakpark.net/signature-event/green-halloween/>

within these civic spaces where activation is targeted. Where will pop-up projects not just be allowed but be most effective? Where will events and installations not just be allowed but be able to maximize public engagement from the residents, workers, and visitors to this segment of Houston Street? This activation plan essentially can serve as a form of a creative placemaking overlay to both of these public assets. Too often, creative placemaking becomes an opportunistic, ad hoc, and “after the fact” initiative. With the open nature of Milam Park and the unfinished nature of San Pedro Creek, the Houston Street stakeholders have the opportunity to intentionally and proactively plan for the activation of these spaces. Best of all, this type of activation plan can be completed and implemented in a very targeted and low-cost manner if the principles of Lighter, Quicker, Cheaper and tactical urbanism serve as the “operating system” for the plan.

### Next Steps

- Implement pop-up programs that attract a variety of users and provide much-needed amenities for residents, workers, and nearby students.
- Introduce seasonal activations at Milam Park utilizing a strong, authentic color palette and lights.
- Develop an activation plan to integrate placemaking initiatives with new development taking place.



## CHAPTER 3: REVITALIZATION PRINCIPLES

### Part 1: Storefront Strategies

Spend time in commercial districts large and small across the U.S. and you will find a good deal of variation in the health of retail. Competition for consumer dollars is fierce; today more than ever, districts and operators must offer a unique, high-quality experience to gain customer attention and loyalty.

Thriving districts tend to be marked by a mix of quality daytime and nighttime operators, with a strong emphasis on localism and regionalism. Numerous factors in the enabling environment — streetscaping, building quality, access, parking—help set the stage for attracting and retaining this type of mix (see Table 3.1.0: Retail Guiding Principles). Places that lack a vibrant retail scene are in such a position for a variety of reasons, and, in most cases, more than one reason; these can include population shifts, poorly designed buildings, low maintenance standards, safety perceptions, and operators that have not evolved their businesses to stay relevant as consumer tastes and habits change.

### Houston Street: Retail-Centric Comments

#### Observations

One of the biggest challenges, when looking at Houston Street through a retail lens, is its gaps in continuity along the street front due to vacancies, non-retail uses, surface lots, and large lobbies. There are also, in a few instances, imposing setbacks and columns that hide storefronts. And while there is some great signage along Houston Street, overall there is a need for better branding of storefronts.

Houston Street appears to be more successful today with restaurants than with stores; this was supported by stakeholders who said there isn't enough of a draw to make them want to spend the day on Houston Street in the absence of events. This was further supported by anecdotal conversations with several store operators, who said their customers are overwhelmingly tourists and convention-goers, with downtown office workers making up a small portion.

Stakeholders said, and our team noted, that there is a lack of diversity among restaurants (they are, with a few exceptions, steakhouses); however, this is beginning to change, with the recent openings of new operators like La Panadería, Rosella Coffee, and Pinch. Among retail offerings, there are a number of home, and gift stores focused on the likes of art, glassware, ceramics, and jewelry. Walgreens is well-used by the daytime population of office workers, those who live close by, and visitors staying in the hotels that dot Houston Street.

TABLE 3.1.0 Retail Guiding Principles

#### Retail Guiding Principles

*Successful downtown shopping and dining districts tend to be marked by a significant number of the following attributes:*

- *Retail is contiguous—not broken up by other uses (e.g., professional offices, parking structures, expansive office lobbies) or by blank walls.*
- *Service uses are located on side streets, not on prime shopping and dining streets.*
- *The mix of uses balances daytime and nighttime operations.*
- *The mix of operators is weighted in favor of unique, local and independent operators.*
- *Streets are not wide (no more than two lanes of traffic each way), with storefronts along both sides, and they are not blocked off to vehicles—stores do best when they are visible to both pedestrians and those traveling past in vehicles.*
- *Ample parking is accessible on-street and in nearby lots and garages. On-street parking spaces are parallel, not angled.*
- *Access to the area includes transit options, but transit lines do not run on primary retail street(s). Pedestrians are kept on the street, not taken off of it via elements such as sky bridges or underground tunnels.*

- *Streets and sidewalks are well-cared for—they are free of trash and debris, and kept clean with frequent power-washing.*
- *Streets and sidewalks are well-lit.*
- *Streetscaping elements—street furniture, trees, plants and flowers—help create an inviting pedestrian experience without blocking storefronts and signage.*
- *Buildings are human-scaled with ample transparency at the street level.*
- *Storefronts are well-branded, signed and maintained.*

## Retail Activation Along Houston Street

The recommendations below focus on temporary retail activations and flexible and mobile pilot projects that could become longer-term or could incubate entrepreneurs into storefronts. These recommendations are distinct from a targeted effort to fill storefronts in the long-term, as Centro San Antonio is working on implementing this initiative based on a 2015 retail study.

- Storefront activation through art: activate vacant spaces with artwork, and with theater-related artisans actively working on their craft (e.g., costume and set designers).
- Mobile/flexible retail: activate surface lots by lining the edges along sidewalks with movable/flexible structures that could house, for example, the likes of a bike hub/shop/cafe (bikes'n'brews!) in the tech segment along Houston Street. Alternatively, at the intersection of Presa/Jefferson and Houston Street, a couple of mobile structures could be placed, all of which rotate out quarterly with local artisans (leather pieces, jewelry, apparel) and food purveyors, like popsicles or poke. This would allow operators to test the market before potentially becoming longer-term tenants in storefront spaces, while they simultaneously create a more engaging pedestrian environment.
- Night market: set up an evening market of vendors on a weekly or monthly basis for a block or two, spilling down onto the River Walk to help better connect it to Houston Street. See the [Commercial Street Night Market](#) implemented by the Downtown Bellingham Partnership as one example.
- Storefront activation through pop-ups: consider a reincarnation of the pop-up program previously done by the City. Another model to look at is the [Spaceworks](#) program in Tacoma, which has been successful in leading to longer-term tenancies; the program also activates spaces with artwork.



FIGURE 3.1.0 Intersection of Presa and Jefferson Today



FIGURE 3.1.1 Intersection of Presa and Jefferson Tomorrow

*The intersection of Presa/Jefferson and Houston is dominated by the presence of a surface parking lot today; this could be used as a testing ground for retailers who could become longer-term tenants of storefront spaces.*

### Overarching Retail-Focused Recommendations for Houston Street

Vibrant downtown retail is made up of a mix of shops and eateries, as well as services like spas, nail salons, bike repair shops, and barbershops. Done right, the mix in a focused part of downtown can be a draw for those in the greater metropolitan area while also meeting a good deal of the needs of those who live and work close by, and of visitors who like to shop and dine where the locals do.



FIGURE 3.1.2 Example Spaceworks project in Tacoma, WA. Quick, inexpensive, and eye-catching, these projects can help activate storefronts along Houston Street.

Considerations as Centro works to implement the retail program based on the 2015 retail study:

- Strategically prospect for quality operators to locate along Houston Street.
- Get the word out that City Council will approve funding to prospective operators on a case by case basis.
- Shorten large spaces and use the back halves as parking (if there is access from an alley) or other non-retail uses.
- Encourage more sidewalk seating at restaurants (e.g., tables and chairs at La Panaderia)
- Work with operators to better brand their storefronts. In particular, parking garage tenants are hidden behind a low, heavy overhang and voluminous pillars, and there is little-to-no branding of storefronts.
- Encourage landlords to require minimum operating hours for their retail tenants. For example, one store on Houston Street close to the Alamo was locked tight at 1:00 pm on a Wednesday. The neighboring operator, a jewelry store, said the store was open sporadically—about 3-4 hours a day on some days and not at all on others.
- Longer-term uses to be on the lookout for:
  - Dog daycare (locate in the tech section, or near a dense area of residential and office populations)
  - More varied food offerings (for example, a delicatessen/specialty food market)
  - Building on the existing mix of arts, jewelry, local artisans, and gifts operators to create a critical mass
  - Bike shop/repair operator
  - Experiential retail—appropriate to San Antonio (for example, in Santa Barbara, CA, one operator sells art supplies and does daily painting classes. In Tacoma, WA, there is a store that sells, by the bagful, a plethora of recycled materials, pieces, and parts; patrons either take their finds home to work on their creations, or craft at large tables provided right in the store. The store also allows you to book out their tables for kids parties or an evening gathering of friends over wine and crafting)

## Next Steps

- Activate storefronts with artwork, and theater-related artisans.
- Explore the feasibility of activating surface lots with mobile/flexible retail.
- Pilot a night market on a weekly or monthly basis that spills from Houston down to the River Walk.
- Talk to landlords about doing short-term leases on vacant spaces for pop-ups.



FIGURE 3.1.3 Storefront outdoor seating

## Part 2: Connectivity

The potential for Houston Street's successful activation relies on understanding the corridor's connectivity. The Houston Street of today feels intermittently connected, or even disconnected, from the experience of the majority of visitors to San Antonio and the frame of mind for many San Antonians. To understand connectivity and how the corridor is utilized, we need to understand the location of the "you" in "Houston" Street.

### Connectivity as a Driving Purpose

*[Re]Connecting Houston Street strategically within downtown, within the City of San Antonio, and beyond.*

Houston Street can become the place where experimentation of ideas and activities can inform the transformation of the city as a whole. Houston Street 2.0 needs to reset the 20<sup>th</sup>-century street and building fabric for its 21<sup>st</sup>-century functions. Today's San Antonians will reconnect to and leverage locality -- "roots," "retro," "vintage" -- if reimagined in contemporary expressions. Houston Street can become the local destination if it claims to be the undisputed go-to location for, and faithfully executes:

- What is authentic, "home grown," and "made in" San Antonio
- Staging of unique, first-time activities and experiences
- Piloting roll-out of city-wide approaches responding to heat/shade issues, lighting, pedestrian-prioritization, cycle-friendliness, and social equity

Let Houston Street aspire to the cultivation of innovation, adaptation, and experimentation. In the near-term, Centro can act upon this through strategic and consistent communications of pilot, pop-up, and temporary activations. In the mid-term, introducing free public WiFi along the street would connect Houston Street with the world. In the longer-term, partnerships with the city and others can manifest this through infrastructure and installations that implement smart city technologies that address environmental sustainability (water conservation, energy-efficient lighting, traffic-control sensors, sidewalk heat-shielding, and other smart city techniques).



FIGURE 3.2.0 Illuminated sidewalk features



## Connectivity “On the Ground”

### *Strategic connectivity – now and later on*

Connectivity is often easier to achieve with proximity. Activation of Houston Street is much more likely to occur in a repeatable, reliable, (often in a more affordable and efficient) way where there is a concentration of magnetic experiences. The more disparate these experiences are, the more diluted and weaker the connectivity, and therefore the longer it will take for Houston Street to develop as a “third place” between the office and the home where something interesting is bound to be happening. In the short term, dedicated, concentrated activations of all sorts, most often near where the existing strongest recurring centers of energy already exist on the street, must be prioritized.



FIGURE 3.2.1 Activated Alleyway

It is important not to limit connectivity attention solely to Houston Street. Houston Street acts as the backbone to the downtown that can better physically connect disparate existing centers of energy in downtown San Antonio not far off surrounding areas, such as existing linkages to the River Walk, Travis Park, the Tobin Center, and new connections to the San Pedro Creek redevelopment. Even the “backstage” character of College Street can be leveraged to connect the Aztec and Empire Theaters to the “performance energy” activations that can coalesce around the Majestic Theater. And experimentation with animations in Peacock Alley should be explored in limited doses in the short term as long as they don’t draw energy consistently off Houston Street.

## Physical Connections

### *The Walk Along Houston Street*

Houston Street’s connection to the past is strongly evident in its substantial high-quality collection of heritage architecture. This offers animation opportunities that can be developed and delivered in the short- to medium-term to a variety of audiences ranging from cultural tours to kids and teens. Partnering with the students, faculty, and local alumni of the architecture program at UTSA, and other locals with a passion and proficiency for heritage architecture, programming could be developed to include:

- Architectural appreciation tours [modeled after Chicago Architectural Foundation]
- Architectural mystery tours and seek-and-find contests
- Building stories – actors portraying legends, personalities, or significant events associated with buildings; or “progressive theatre” at three or four buildings modeled after or with progressive dinners

In addition to broadening the understanding and appeal of the architectural patrimony for visitors and San Antonians, drawing from and beyond the Alamo Mission's UNESCO World Heritage Site status, providing more congenial opportunities to view and get inside vacant spaces may offer new ways to market them to prospective tenants.

From an interactivity and interest perspective, the walk along Houston Street is inconsistent and intermittent. Connectivity gaps presented by unoccupied sidewalk-facing vacancies nominally occupied hotel and office building lobbies, and driveway and parking lot sidewalk interfaces that are inhospitable to pedestrians, conspire against the surprise and delight that a captivating, memorable urban amble should provide for. Animations can remedy each of these conditions in specific locations that are suited to and serve the energies present within the four different street segments.

With varying aesthetic approaches in varying states of repair, Houston Street streetscaping is visually disjointed. It doesn't read as a unified corridor. Should the four segments be deliberately different? Can they align within an overall more uniform treatment that denotes this downtown stretch of Houston Street as a destination to arrive at and linger in, even as it maintains its transportation role as a route to move through? These are questions of design that have longer-term implications on whether, how, and or when Houston Street needs to be physically reconfigured if there is a desire to improve its flexibility to more feasibly serve as a great "go-to" street. Our recommendation is for the ULI and AIA charrette to look into this further.

## Physical Connections

### *Linkages to Houston Street*

In the meantime, new and better ways of achieving connectivity to Houston Street from various points can help to activate it. Arriving up at street level, from the River Walk vertical connections below it, can create a more inclusive Houston Street for those with mobility challenges. What is the potential to improve accessibility using sidewalk elevators and escalators, given San Antonio's climate? What about making it more fun? Might people even pay for unconventional ways in controlled situations to move between these two levels of the city? What about moving up using rope ladders, or rock climbing? How about moving down by belaying or on firefighter poles? What if an urban high ropes course moved from treetops or rooftops over Presa Street sidewalks and land at Houston Street?

On a more practical note, horizontal walking connections between parking locations and destinations off Houston Street could be improved by attention given to wayfinding and orientation. Not everyone has a mobile device or cares to use it as a navigation tool, and the particularity of a place will rarely come through in the same way that on-site orientation devices can. In the short-term, Centro could sponsor installation of a visually coordinated system of guerilla wayfinding signs tied or strapped to streetlamp poles that could indicate the direction and walk-time to Houston Street and specific destinations on it. More elaborate options for the longer term could include motion-activated audio or pixel-board messages.

To further bolster Houston Street's prominence as the local go-to corridor, entering and exiting Houston Street should be a reminder of that. The north/south entry points along Houston Street should be well lit and inviting. A sense of safety and arrival should be felt when approaching Houston Street from any north/south street. Amsterdam's 9 Great Streets, which intersect their equivalent to Houston Street, are lit up, inviting users to engage with both the main street as well as the side streets. Not only are the side streets lit up, but they can also serve as a wayfinding tool. As seen in the photo, the lighting installations can also demarcate one's locations along the corridor.



FIGURE 3.2.2 One of Amsterdam’s Nine Great Streets that bisect their Houston Street equivalent provides an enjoyable, appealing, and safe entry and exit along the corridor<sup>16</sup>.

### Houston Street connections to multi-modal transportation networks

Houston Street’s connections go beyond the pedestrian and the motorist. There is an activation dividend, beyond the affordability, environmental sustainability, and social inclusion dimension from having VIA transit routes and stops that travel along and intersect at Houston Street. Transit riders are pedestrians at the start and end of their trips; in larger numbers, they contribute to the “feet on the street” that offer a sense of security in occupied rather than empty sidewalks and bolster market thresholds needed to support certain kinds of retail. Over the longer term, some thought should be given to what the acceptable trade-offs are for detouring routing transit off Houston Street if it should frequently be closed to vehicles for larger street festivals and events. If Houston Street assumed a role that had Chalk It Up scaled events monthly or more, the transit-user expectations that come from traveling on fixed routes become ambiguous.

### Cycling

Cycling in hot-weather climates presents challenges, but a downtown route that is as relatively shady as Houston Street can become a preferred option for cyclists. Being that lane-widths are already comparatively narrow, and that vehicle travel is two-way, a slower pace of traffic results in a potentially safer-feeling, slower cycling experience. In such a case, separately designated (painted, curbed) bicycle lanes should not be necessary. But other bike-friendly investments can be read as welcome gestures to cultivate a reputation of Houston Street being where the cycling crowd congregates. Installing secure, weather-sheltered bike-lockers set in the corners of parking lots, near the sidewalk entrances to parking garages, or tucked into courtyards and pedestrian routes just off the sidewalk are mid-to-longer term outlays that healthcare and innovation workers in the western segments of the area might especially appreciate. Even better, if misting posts, change rooms, or restrooms can be in the vicinity to help alleviate the stresses of cycling in a hot climate. But just to start, more bike racks installed along Houston Street would be a more immediate and obvious nod to welcoming the spokes-set. Additionally, utilizing

<sup>16</sup> Photo credit: <https://cdn.theculturetrip.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/amsterdam.png>

and educating more riders and the benefits and ease of use that come with B-Cycle. With four locations just within the Houston Street Corridor, events, educational campaigns, and easy to understand signage should accompany these stations.



FIGURE 3.2.3 Current bicycle parking along Houston Street



FIGURE 3.2.4 Bicycle parking under shaded element

### Connectivity Extrapolated

Considering the existing municipal budgets and financial development incentives available, an immediate effort should be made to identify how they could be applied, by policy and or in practice, to target activation improvements to Houston Street. For example, with \$8 million made available for public art in the current bond appropriation, what aspects of the public art plan could be situated on or suited to Houston Street? Or, if city staff are already able to review downtown retail projects and recommend incentives on a customized basis, can this discretionary responsibility be developed to target – say – five key targeted uses or tenants in a chosen storefront? Can these stretch together to knit a cohesive activation plan and fill gaps so that the concentration can more readily demonstrate results?

### Next Steps

- Develop a wayfinding campaign to draw tourists and residents from the Alamo to the corridor.
  - Ensure the reconfiguration of Alamo Plaza visibly and overtly connects to Houston Street
- Implement soft pedestrian-friendly lighting for safe and inviting access onto Houston Street.
- Promote Houston Street along the River Walk and better connect Houston Street to Travis Park, the Tobin Center, San Pedro Creek and the Alamo.
  - Make entryways to Houston Street from these destinations more accessible, brighter and fun.
- Create a campaign that informs and communicates parking, transit, and bicycle options along the corridor.
- Pilot roll-out of city-wide approaches responding to heat/shade issues, lighting, pedestrian-prioritization, cycle-friendliness, and social equity.
- Foster architectural appreciation and mystery tours, and seek-and-find contests.
- Champion improvements to bicycle infrastructure including added bike racks, misting pots, change rooms, and shaded bike carrels.



## Part 3: Communications & Engagement Strategy

### #ActivateHoustonStreet

The Houston Street Corridor is prime for activation; however, these initiatives require the support of a strong communications and ongoing engagement strategy to be a sustainable and successful effort. The corridor's adjacency to the River Walk presents a great opportunity for activation that appeals to a diverse audience, with special emphasis on staying power for San Antonians. The panel discussions with community stakeholders revealed a general confusion that exists among the community regarding the place. This confusion currently serves as a deterrent though presents an opportunity for renewed engagement between Centro and San Antonians.

Many assets exist along the corridor as does a sense of personal investment among San Antonians that can be utilized within the forthcoming communications strategy. A successful strategy includes clear and concise content that manages expectations of the platform, the organization and the areas up for discussion. Among other outreach efforts to honor downtown, Centro has the opportunity to promote Houston Street as the destination for locals. The panel recommends tailoring Centro's content to locals, stakeholders, and community prospects.

### An Opportune Moment for Houston Street Activation

The preservation of culture, history and local pride stands as a top priority in the midst of innovative downtown development. With the adjacent River Walk, business district, and budding development, Houston Street can be a catalyst for a greater engagement effort within Downtown San Antonio. Finding and preserving the place for locals within downtown is a priority; much of the downtown experience that exists carries the perception that it is tailored to visitors or that there is nothing to do.

A robust engagement strategy utilizing various communications initiatives is deemed necessary by the panel to bring that local sense of pride and activation back to Houston Street as it once existed.

### Assets for Amplification

- |                     |  |
|---------------------|--|
| <b>Ambassadors</b>  | The downtown ambassadors currently serve as the strongest communications asset across all platforms. Continuing to utilize these team members as a strong point-of-contact for residents and visitors maintains the public-facing expectation that they (and Centro by extension) are the best downtown resource available. Ambassador data points make for great content to be celebrated within the community.   |
| <b>River Access</b> | Utilize the River Walk energy to draw folks to the Houston Street Corridor. Wayfinding signage, ambassadors on the River Walk, and outreach across all platforms highlighting the access point on Houston Street may redirect people to take an alternate route. A great way to achieve this is by creating sample itineraries for people to use when visiting the Alamo or the River Walk while ensuring vibrancy along Houston Street.   |
| <b>Local Pride</b>  | San Antonians feel passionate about the corridor and maintain the vision for how it might evolve. This sense of pride can and should be a major component of the outreach strategy throughout Houston Street revitalization efforts. Encourage San Antonians to take part in evolving the narrative with incentivized social media campaigns, pop-up engagement opportunities along the corridor, or an invitation to future stakeholder engagement opportunities. Additionally, let it be known that Centro's efforts are intentional and mindful of San Antonians' goals for the corridor. Celebrate the partnerships and level of investment the City of San Antonio and other stakeholders are putting into the place. |



## Challenges to Address

<b>Misunderstood Access</b>	Misconceptions surrounding downtown parking, public transit, and general wayfinding result in a general deterrent for visitors and locals alike. This misunderstanding surrounding access can be addressed with clear and defined communications consistently pushed across all channels.
<b>Perception of Safety</b>	Some San Antonians perceive Houston Street as a place that closes early and is historically unsafe. Combat this myth with ambassador safety data points; images cycled across all channels of the well-lit corridor, the frequency of VIA stops to emphasize that it is vibrant and awaiting their participation.
<b>Branding</b>	Houston Street doesn't have a unifying brand that defines the place as a destination. Segments discussed in this report maintain identities reflective of San Antonians. Emphasize the brand as a place designed for locals and parade it throughout Houston Street communications. Outreach supporting the proposed activations serve as the thread that connects the segments within the Houston Street Corridor and Downtown San Antonio.

## General Recommendations

<b>Centro vs. Downtown SATX</b>	<p>Much of the feedback the panel received highlights the confusion that exists within Houston Street and Downtown San Antonio as a whole. Parallel narratives exist online that generate confusion between resources, Centro and Downtown San Antonio. The websites and social media platforms do not clearly relate back to one another, and this amplifies the confusion felt by the general public that a consistent source of downtown information. Understanding that one is the place and the other the organization is an insider's perspective that doesn't communicate fully to the public.</p> <p>Creating a clear relationship between the two or merging the narratives altogether would help address this. The panel recommends developing a concise route from one platform to the other in the form of a webpage and relating the branding more directly.</p> <p>The panel recommends the development of project pages throughout Centro's boundaries that emphasize vibrancy downtown beyond the ambassador program. As it stands right now, the hashtag for Houston Street stands on its own though it does need additional explanation. Creating a landing page for the Houston Street Corridor would provide the opportunity to expand on what activation is, what is planned and ways to be involved.</p>
<b>Educational Outreach</b>	<p>Develop a general awareness campaign that covers what activation is, what activations are planned for the corridor, ways to be involved, etc. Emphasize how these efforts serve larger goals. <i>(Example: Centro is partnering with the City of San Antonio and Commissioner Smith to bring 60 additional trees to Houston Street. Increasing the urban tree canopy will greatly reduce the temperatures and make Houston Street more accessible for all).</i></p>
<b>Social Presence</b>	<p>Educational outreach can take form via social media, web-based campaigns and printed pieces distributed among the Downtown Ambassadors and businesses. Social media gaps in content currently exist and can be filled with clarifying information in a variety of formats. Digital maps providing wayfinding guidance,</p>

informational videos, dedicated campaigns about parking, etc. would be a good place to begin.

Determine local social media champions and incentivize them to cross-post with Centro to help raise the awareness of Houston Street activation. Recognize where the most audience attention resides and use that opportunity to lead people to the next round of content.

## Engagement Strategy

Houston Street Corridor activation continues to advance a significant public information and engagement effort that directly involves citizens, developers, businesses, non-profit and institutional partners, decision makers and other stakeholders. The following strategy broadens the reach of traditional public engagement efforts by deploying innovative methods and technologies.

The panel encourages Centro to create and nurture relationships with neighboring communities as it strengthens the placemaking initiatives. The following engagement strategy encourages the use of incentives and ongoing outreach to make sure opportunities for public participation are well known.

## Value of Engagement Strategies

Downtown initiatives solidified by the community's strengthened relationship with organizations, campaigns, and downtown as a whole. Providing the opportunity to pique interest, add input, and receive updates on projects and efforts enables downtown organizations to move forward with community support.

## Approaches to Community Engagement

The more efforts towards creating a two-way communication pathway between Centro and Downtown San Antonio constituents the stronger the activation efforts will be. By initiating opportunities for public engagement, Centro is guaranteeing public investment in the initiatives as they progress. Additional ways to grow this relationship with Centro includes but are not limited to the following:

- Pop-up collaboration opportunities. Locate these within soon-to-be activated spaces or even at public meetings in specific neighborhoods.
- Implementing comment card drop-off locations.
- E-newsletter of updates and insights distributed weekly. Promote this access point across all social media platforms.
- Collaborative mapping exercises. Take the mapping exercise demonstrated with the IDA Panel to community meetings and pop-up booths at public events.
- Creating mini-grants. Incentivize neighborhoods and communities in the spirit of creating an equitable corridor to support public outreach and participation.
- Distributing surveys to downtown residents, workers, and businesses. Gauge how they feel about the corridor as it exists today versus how they would like it to feel. Gauge their level of interest in supporting revitalization efforts. Request they provide an email to stay in the know as developments progress.
- Leadership Luncheons featuring local civic leaders participating in roundtable discussions. Utilize Facebook Live or other social media outlets to spread the word that these groups have invested in the corridor.
- Hosting public forums and post meeting notices for specific neighborhoods, business districts, and vacant spaces to encourage strong attendance and participation.



FIGURE 3.3.0 Grass roots community engagement



FIGURE 3.3.1 Community engagement and interaction

The vacant windows and ticket booths along Houston Street present an interesting opportunity to encourage public participation and provide information that may guide online participation. Take public engagement to the next level and partner with the media to spread the word. Let the community know that they drive the development and future activations along Houston Street.

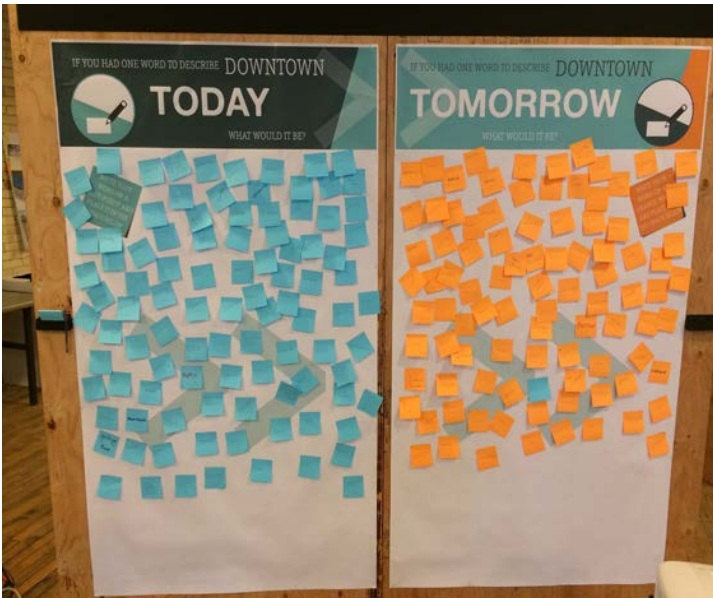


FIGURE 3.3.2 Strategies for collecting public comment



FIGURE 3.3.3 Community engagement strategies for informing public comment

DO YOU FEEL LIKE YOU CAN PLAY A ROLE IN IMPLEMENTATION?

YES ☐ NO ☐ If you do, please tell us how below.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Neighborhood: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip Code: \_\_\_\_\_

**G7R FORWARD**  
DOWNTOWN & RIVER ACTION PLAN

FIGURE 3.3.4 Comment card example from Downtown Grand Rapids

## Going Forward

Maintain consistency that builds from the now-clear platforms and empowers the Houston Street narrative. Within the content strategy, dedicate daily posts to raise the awareness of Houston Street activation efforts. Centro should lead in forming the narrative and making use of the power of the #ActivateHoustonStreet hashtag, thus leading by example. Use the hashtag to rally excitement about future developments while playing up existing nostalgia.

Centro can also encourage local champions, key organizations and residents of the area to take ownership of the narrative. This component of the communications strategy continually echoes the pride and opportunity felt by San Antonians.

## Next Steps

- Streamline the source of communication to exist under one brand (see *Centro vs Downtown SATX*) or establish a clearly defined page dedicated to Houston Street activation on the designated platform.
- Continue the initiative to communicate the difference between Centro and Downtown SATX to the public. Utilize consistent social media posts that make it clear that Houston Street activation is taking place in the place of Downtown SATX lead by the efforts of Centro.
- Conduct a community-wide social media campaign making use of the #ActivateHoustonStreet hashtag to provide San Antonians the opportunity to chime in on what activation means to them and how they envision the Houston Street Corridor.
- Run a small print educational campaign featuring the assets Houston Street has to offer. Distribute informational handbills, posters, coasters, and other takeaway items to downtown stakeholders to aid in the outreach.
- Equip the Downtown Ambassador team with wayfinding materials that feature Houston Street as a destination with an emphasis on Alamo and River Walk connectivity.



FIGURE 3.3.4 Playhouse Square Arch



FIGURE 3.3.5 Shipping Container Pop-up Market