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The urban ecotone: A connecting district in downtown Memphis

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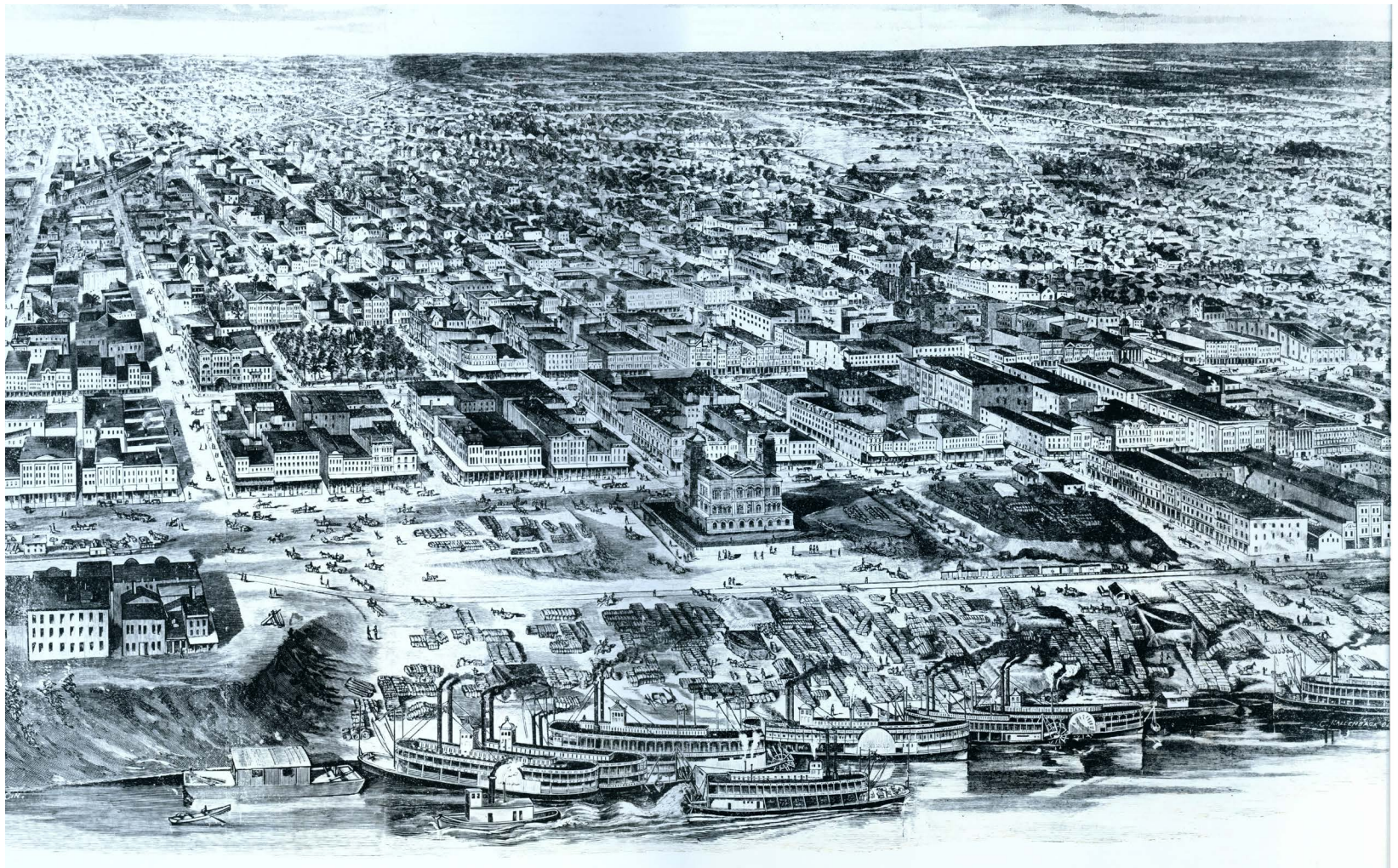


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THE URBAN ECOTONE

A Connecting District in Downtown Memphis



“While the complexity of the modern city calls for continuity, it also furnishes a great delight: the contrast and specialization of individual character.”

-Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City*



Memphis Aerial 1950

The Problem

Memphis is a shrinking city. As more people move out to the suburbs, the downtown area falls into a greater decline. With fewer people to support the businesses and attractions of downtown Memphis, more and more vacant lots start to show up. Breaks in what was once a vibrant city fabric have led to the decay of the downtown area.

While the downtown area offers amenities that cannot be found in the suburbs such as attractions like Fed Ex Forum, Beale Street, and the Orpheum Theater, as well as specialty shops, and a riverfront. The suburbs offer a quality of livability that the downtown area does not, by providing ample amounts of green space often surrounding a larger park.

If downtown Memphis will ever regain the urban qualities of life it once had, it needs to provide the sense of livability it now lacks. It must be just as appealing of a place to live, as it is to visit.

To do this, a new housing district with different options of livability must be created.



Memphis Main Street 1915



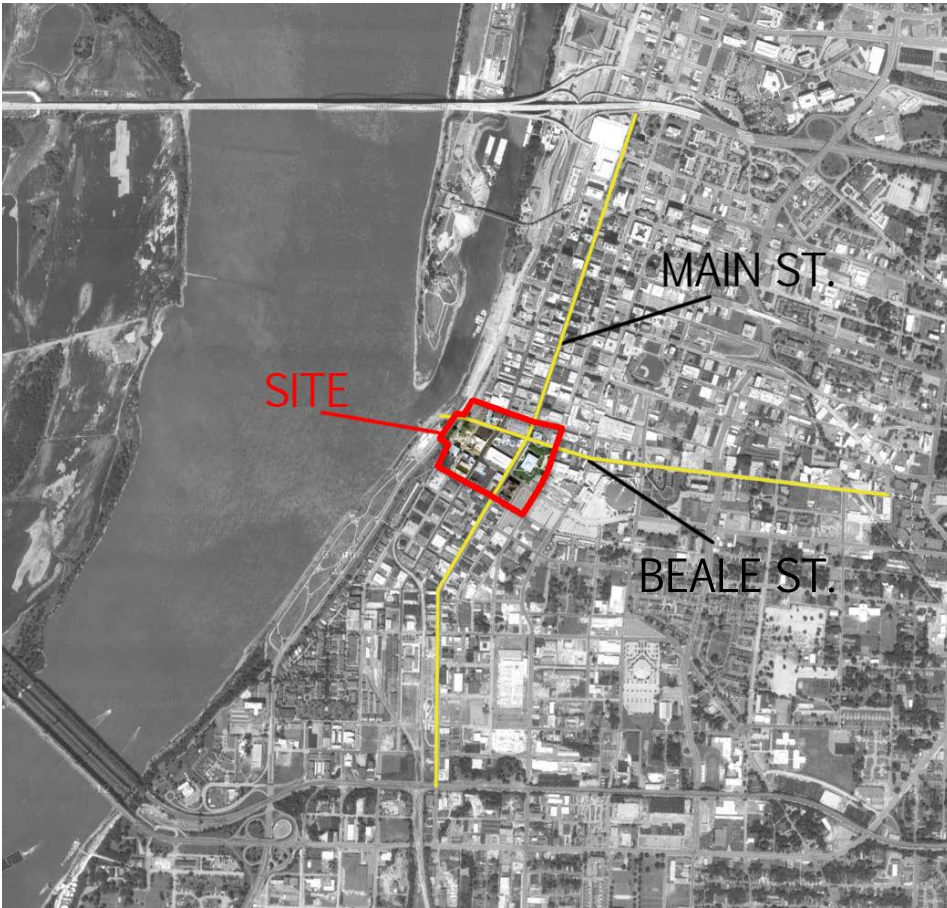
Memphis Main Street Present

The Site

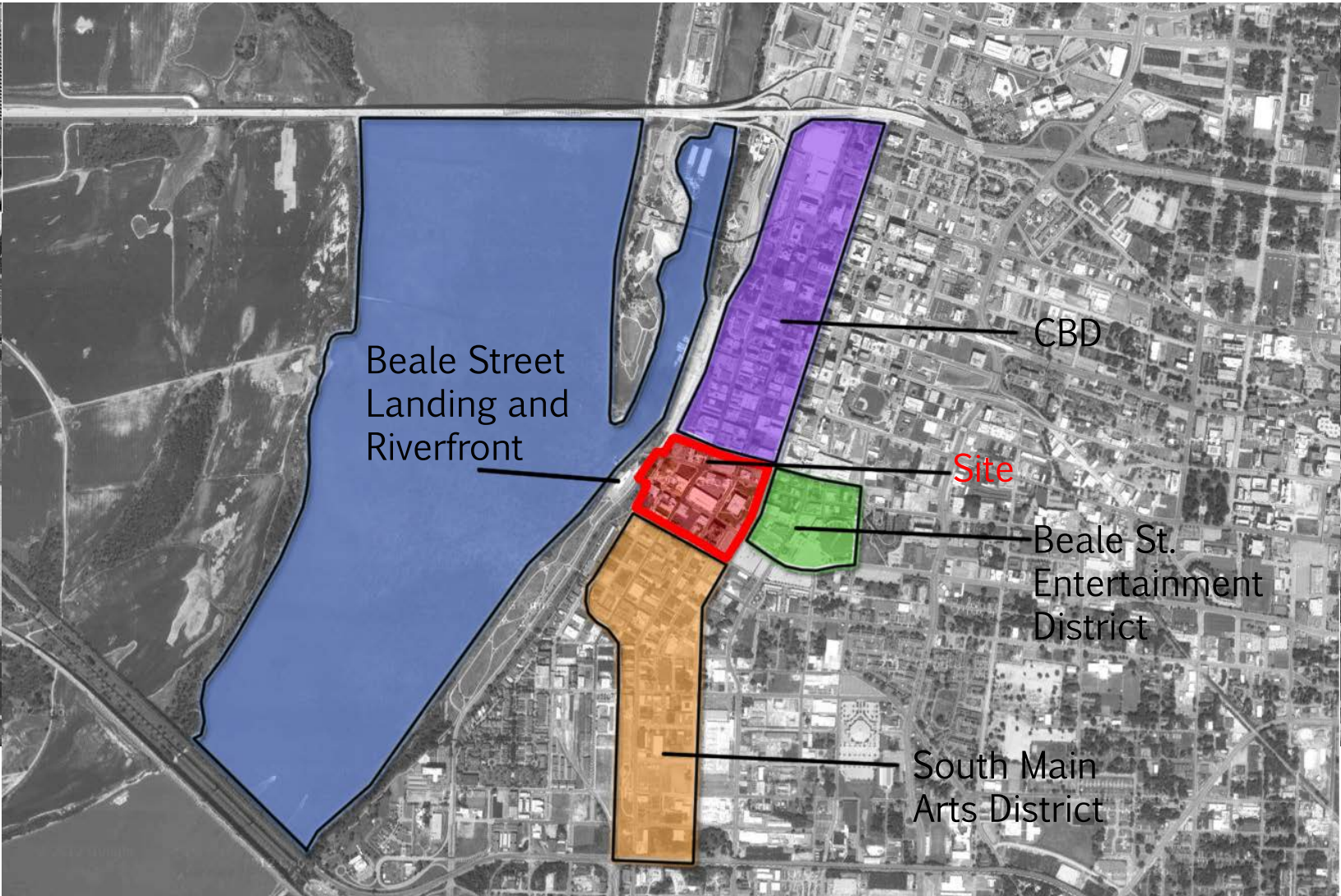
My chosen site lies at the heart of the downtown core. Located at one of the most important and historic intersections of Memphis: Main Street and Beale Street. A place where the blues and commerce once came together as one. This area was once the center of a bustling downtown district and acted as a gateway connecting the business district to the north and the warehouse district to the south. As well as connecting the blues scene on Beale Street to the riverfront.

The Orpheum Theater, once known as the finest and most elegant theater of the south, is located on the site and has been since 1890.

Today the site lies in a desolate state. It is filled with empty parking lots, abandoned buildings, and a broken building fabric with remnants of what once was a thriving district. The site lies between three converging districts and opens up to the Mississippi River to the West. Each district differs typologically and functionally from one another.



The historically important intersection of Beale St. and Main St. bisects the new district.

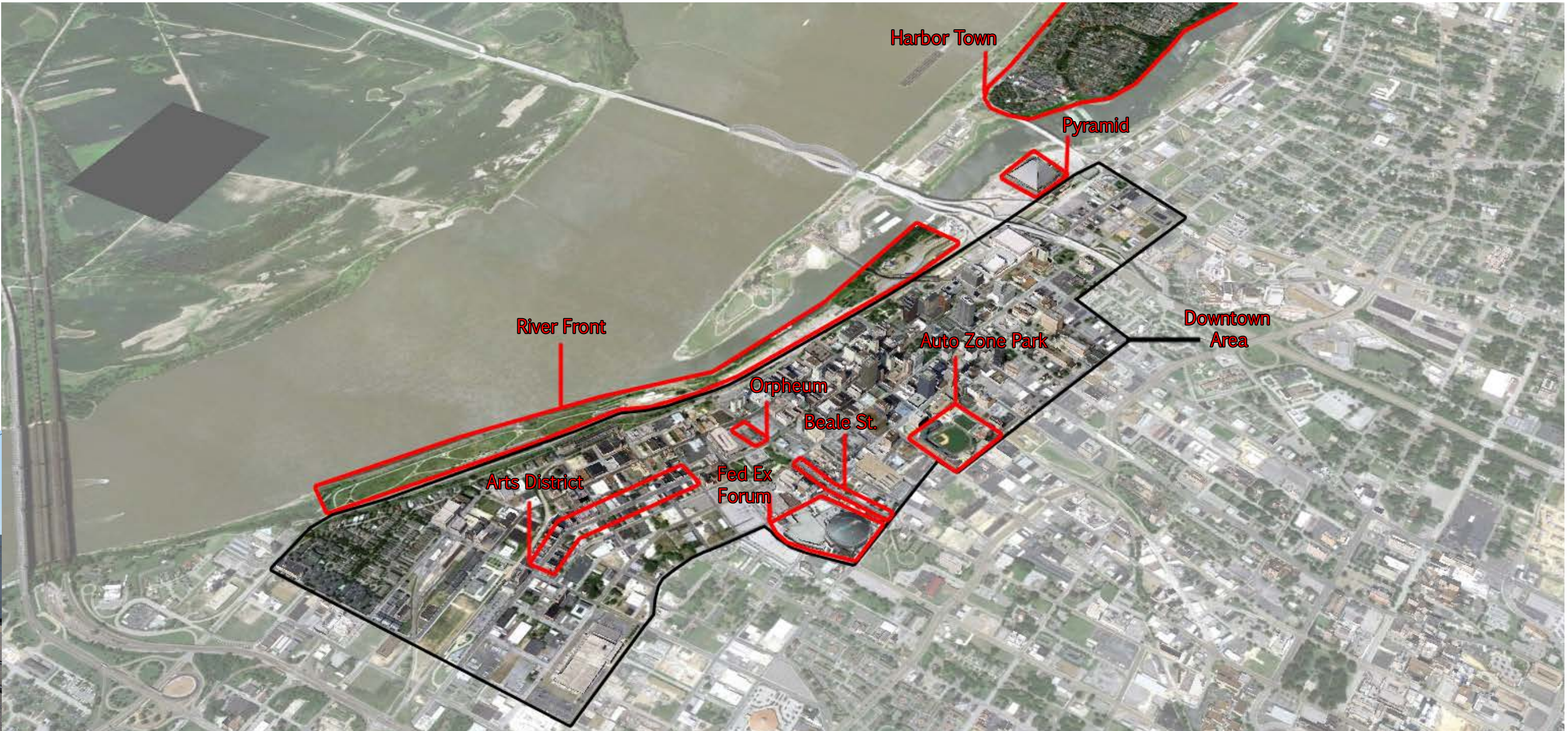


Attractions and Livability

The downtown area is full of attractions that draw people from the suburbs back into the heart of the city.

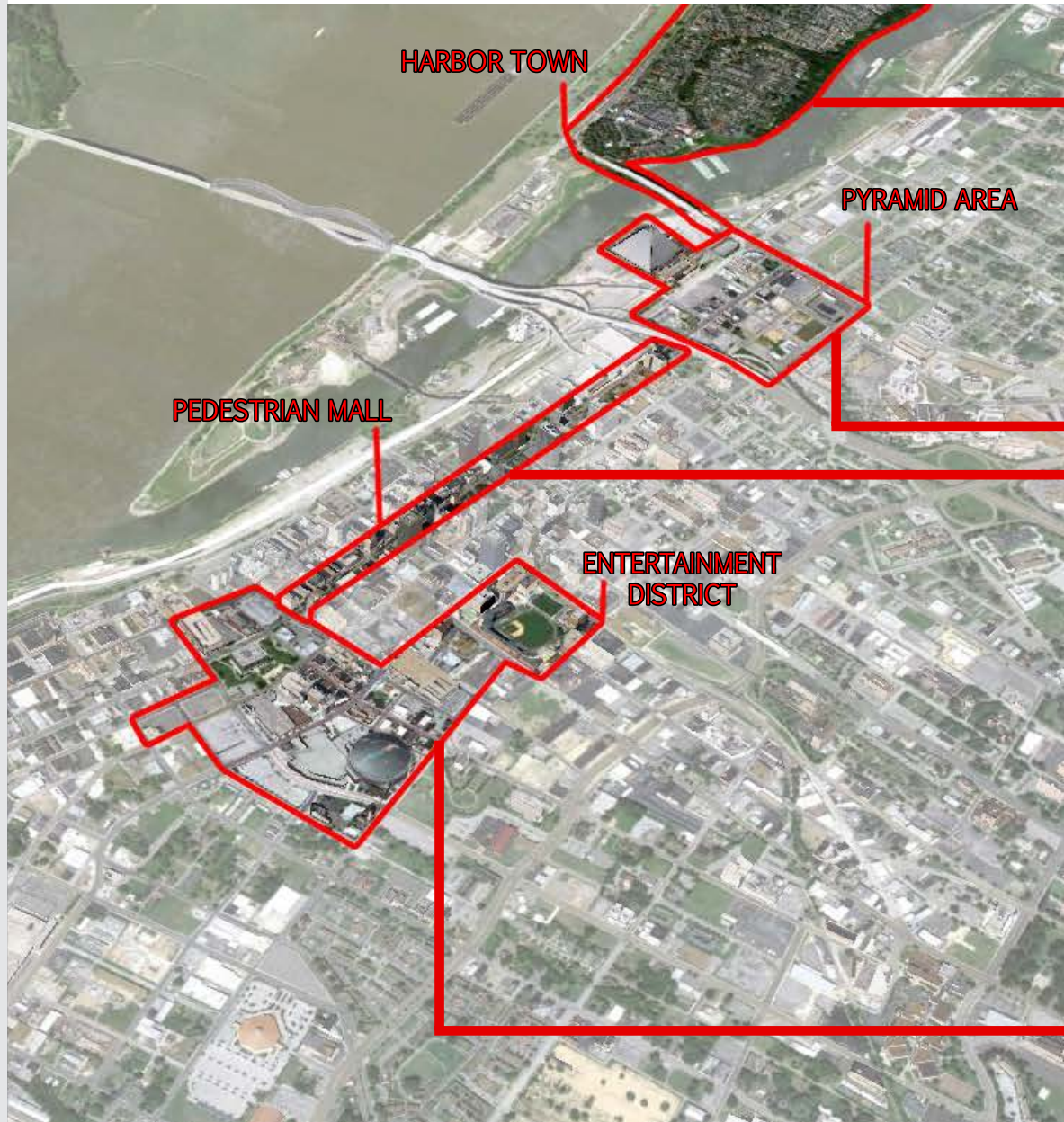
These attractions can only be found downtown and would seem to be nodes in a connected downtown urban experience.

The reality is that these nodes have hurt the downtown fabric and have become tourist attractions due to the lack of livability they have created.



Where's the Problem?

Although downtown attractions can bring revenue to a city and life to a downtown area, they can also bring about it's demise if done incorrectly. Some examples of failed urban attempts in Memphis include Harbor Town, the Pyramid Area, the Pedestrian Mall, and lots surrounding the Entertainment District.



Lack of walk ability to downtown.



9 block stretch of no vehicular traffic at the heart of downtown.



Vacant blocks fronting Arena caused by urban wall of highway.



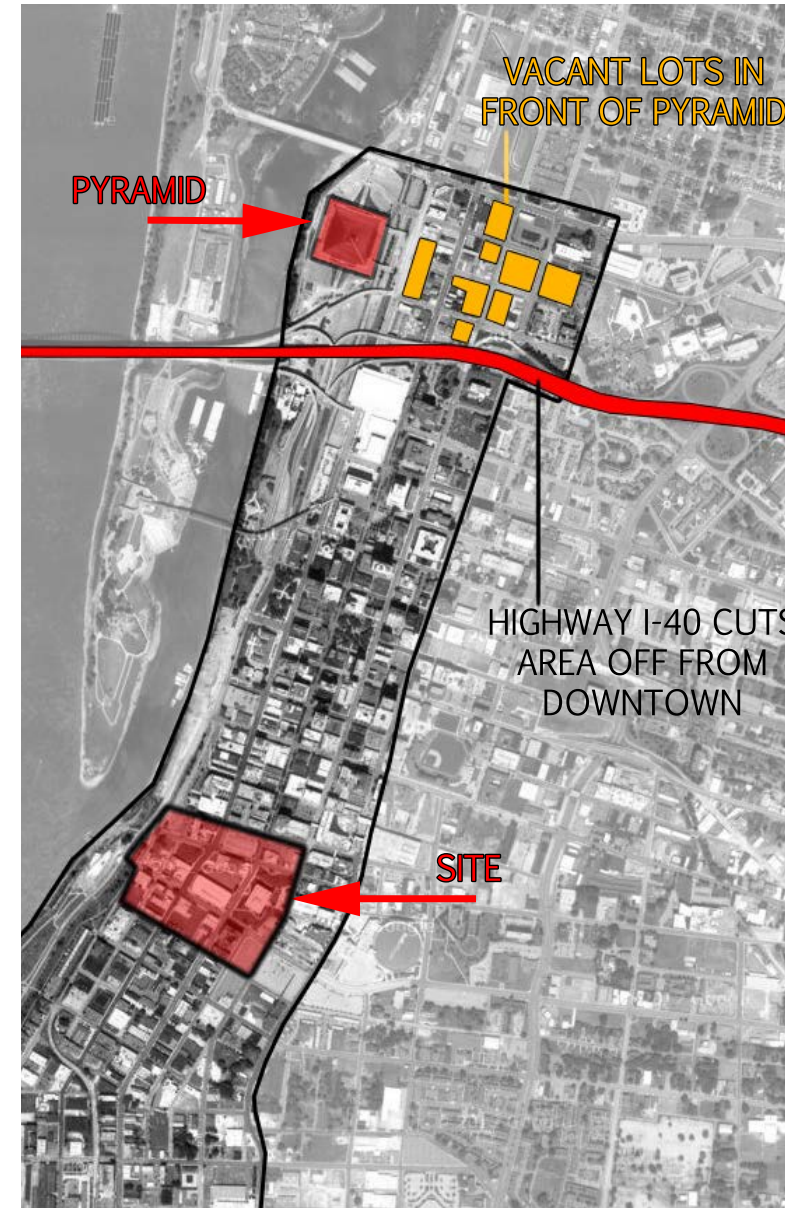
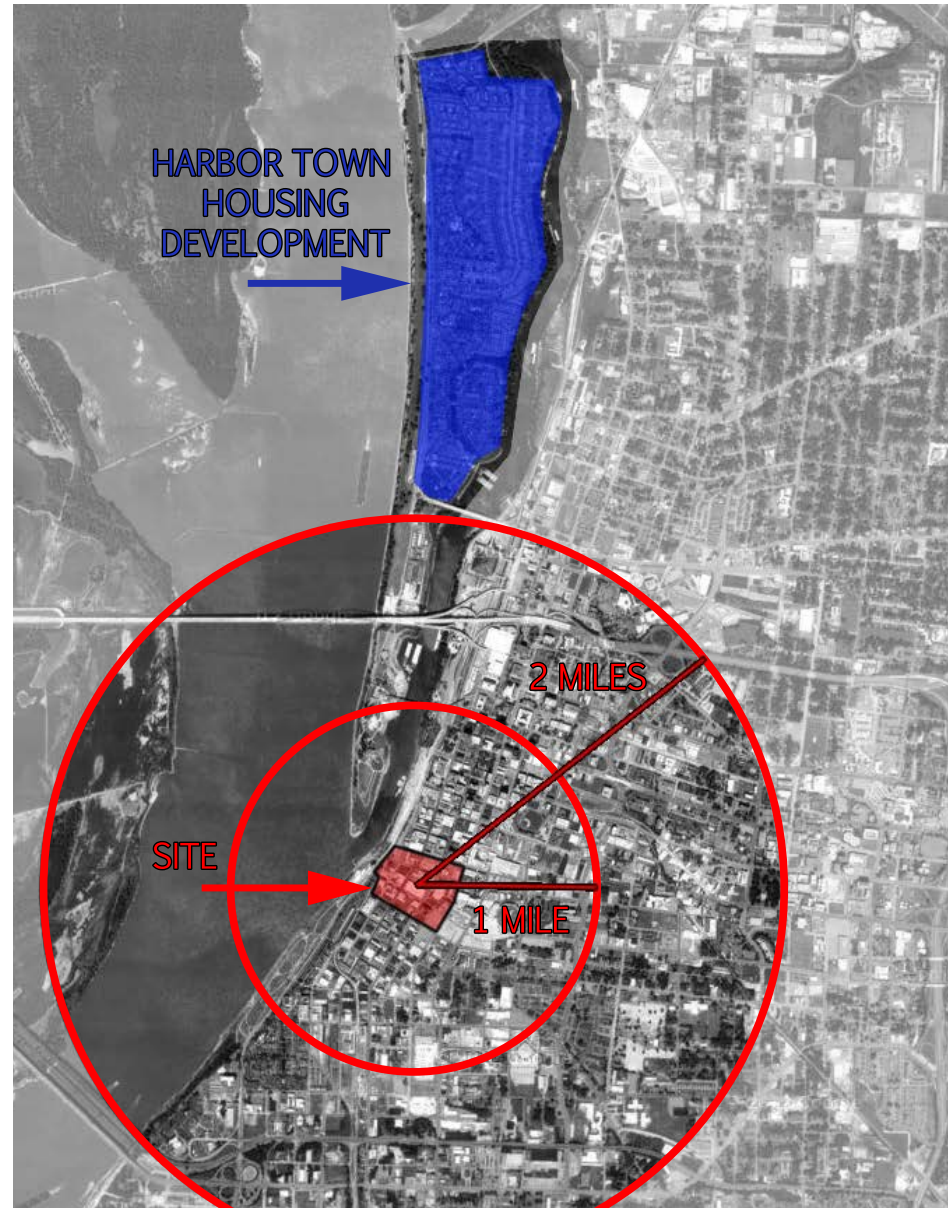
Empty lots surrounding downtown attractions.

What Went Wrong

A new urbanism housing development called Harbor Town, was developed North of the downtown area in the 1980s. While this provides a true neighborhood feel found only in the suburbs of Memphis, it is located 2 miles away from the downtown area and is out of a comfortable walking distance.

The introduction of I-40 cuts off the Pyramid from the downtown area, resulting in a loss of foot traffic and commercial appeal. As a result the site is now surrounded by vacant lots.

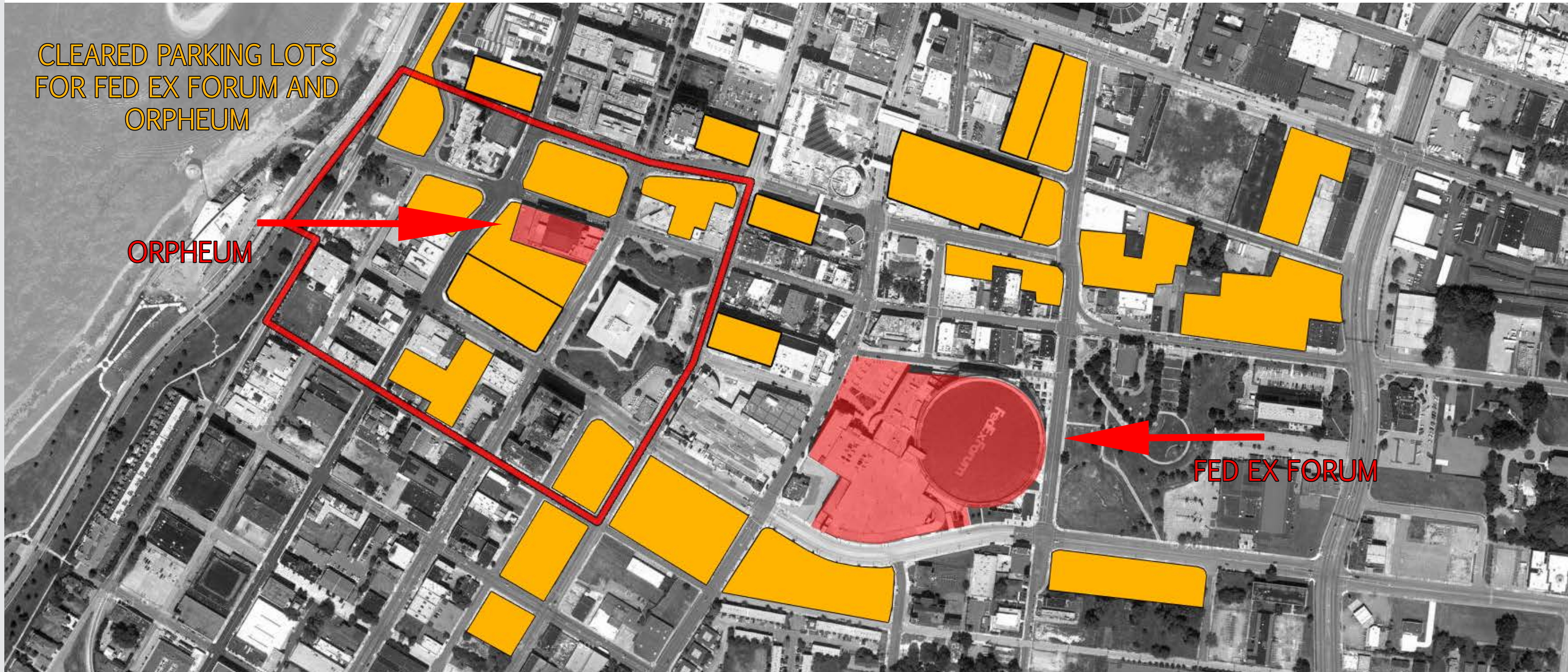
A 9 block pedestrian mall, closing off Main St. from vehicular traffic from Peabody Pl. to Exchange Ave., was implemented in 1976. As soon as 1980, the Mall's physical conditions were deteriorating and today the mall has close to 40% vacancy rate for retail space.



What Went Wrong

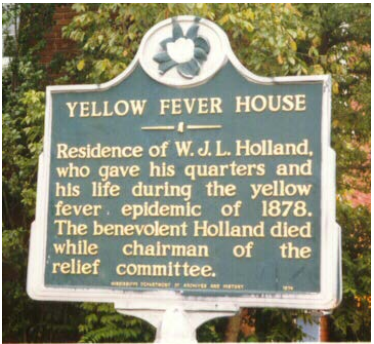
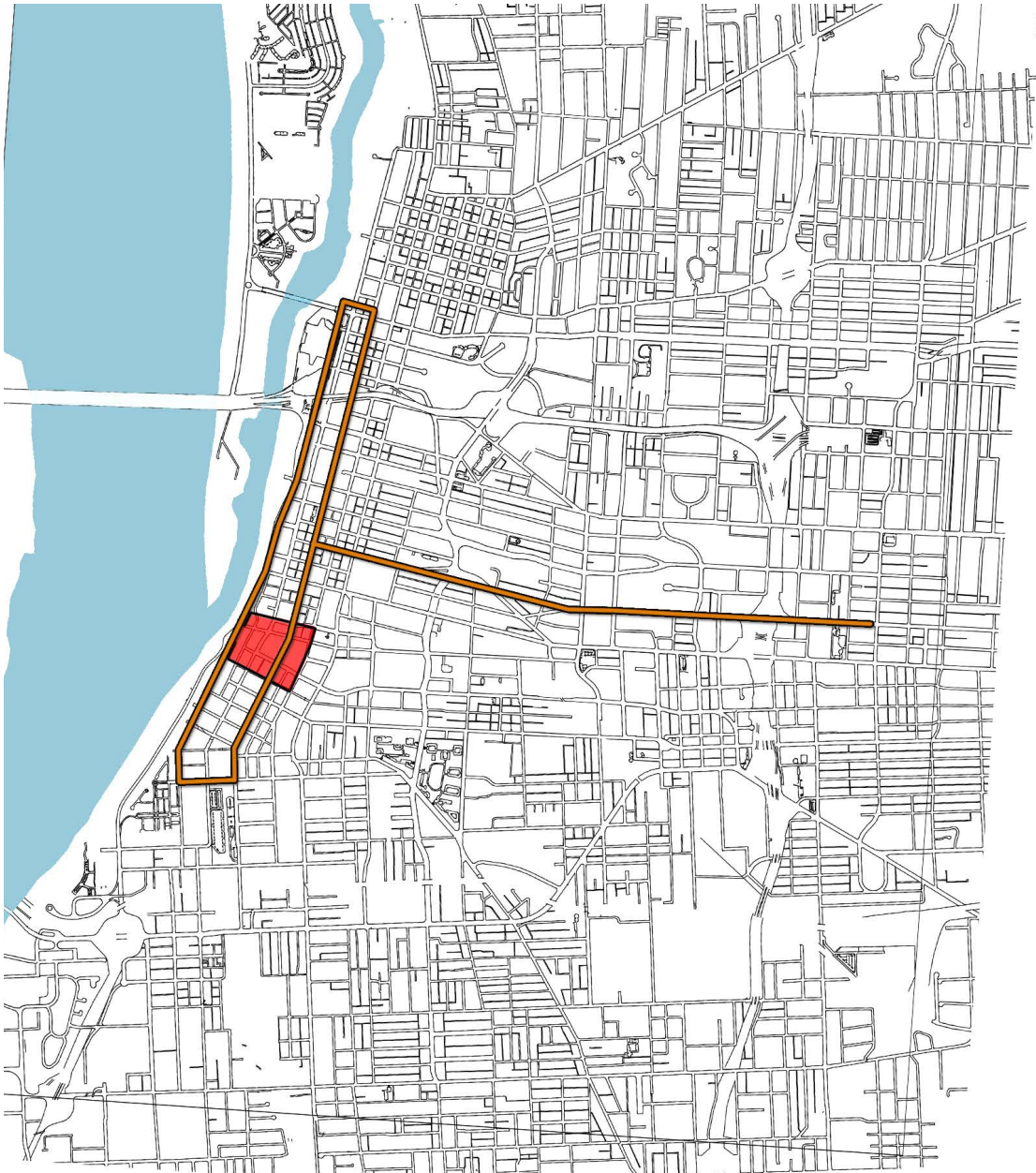
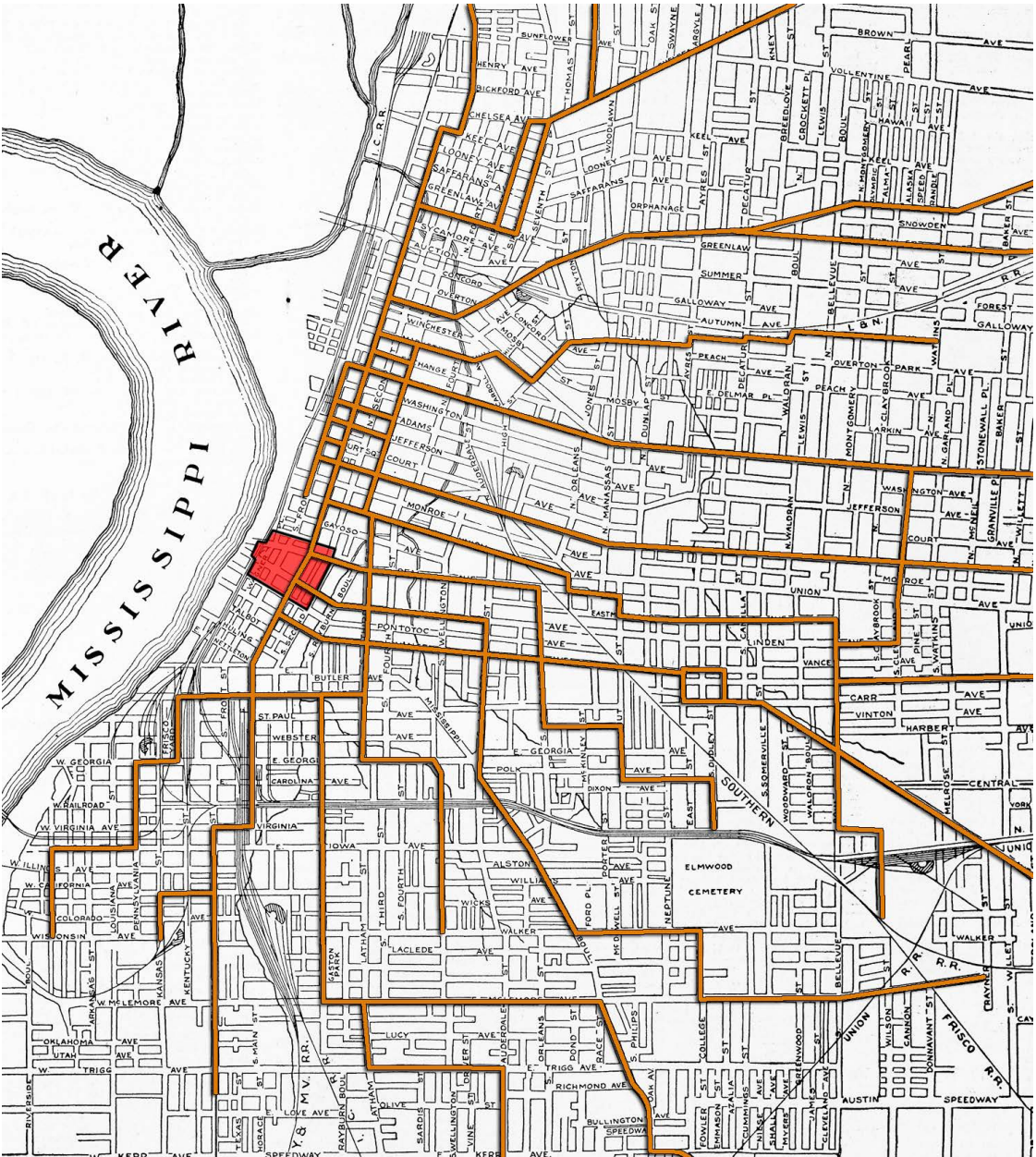
With new urban attractions, comes the need for additional parking. After the Fed Ex forum was built, blocks surrounding the site were cleared for game day parking and remain vacant for 324 days out of the year.

This isn't about creating a new urban attraction, but instead creating a new urban district that will inject a vibrancy into the downtown area. With this approach, the new district will stitch together the torn fabric of a shrinking city while at the same time become a focal point connecting all of the existing nodes and attractions. It will also increase the livability and overall urban experience of the downtown area that can't be found today.



Decline of Downtown Memphis

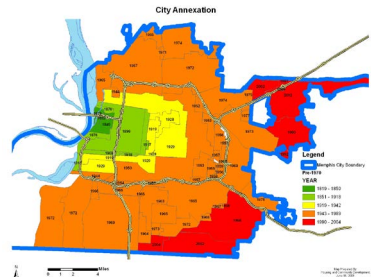
You might hear “Memphis” and think Beale Street, the blues and Elvis Presley. But outside the spotlights, Memphis is dealing with major urban challenges. What once was a vibrant city, economically affluent due to its centrality in cotton exportation and musically enriched by the sounds of blues at every corner, is now viewed differently by many. Memphis is now remembered as the place where yellow fever ran wild causing a mass migration to the countryside in 1878, where Martin Luther King Jr. was murdered due to extreme racial tensions throughout the city on April 4th, 1968, and as a suburban city that not only turned its back on the river but on its residents by ignoring the potentially rich urban fabric that has been interwoven throughout the city for centuries. What has eluded outsiders, as well as area residents alike, are the recent efforts Memphis has made in improving its identity, mostly its urban identity and the overall livability of the downtown area.



Plaque commemorating Yellow Fever victims downtown.



Site of MLK Jr.'s Assassination



Suburban Sprawl

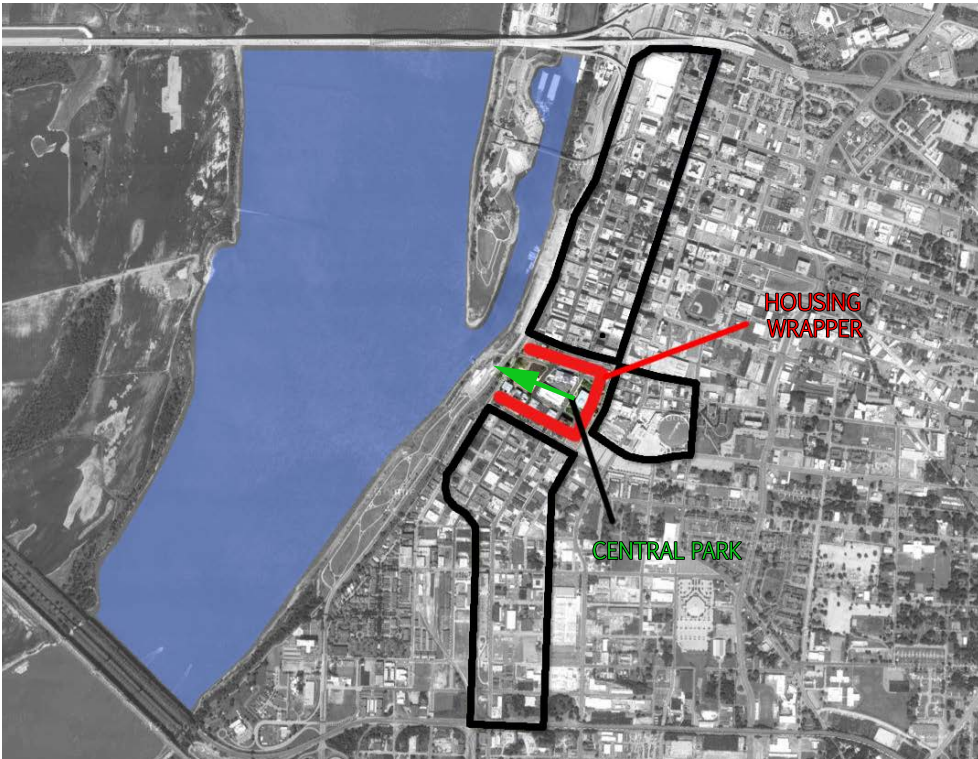
Design Approach

Given the surrounding context of the site and adjacency to the riverfront, I am proposing a “wrapper” of development centered around a central park. This “wrapper” creates connections to the surrounding districts while also maintaining a strong edge to define the new emerging district.

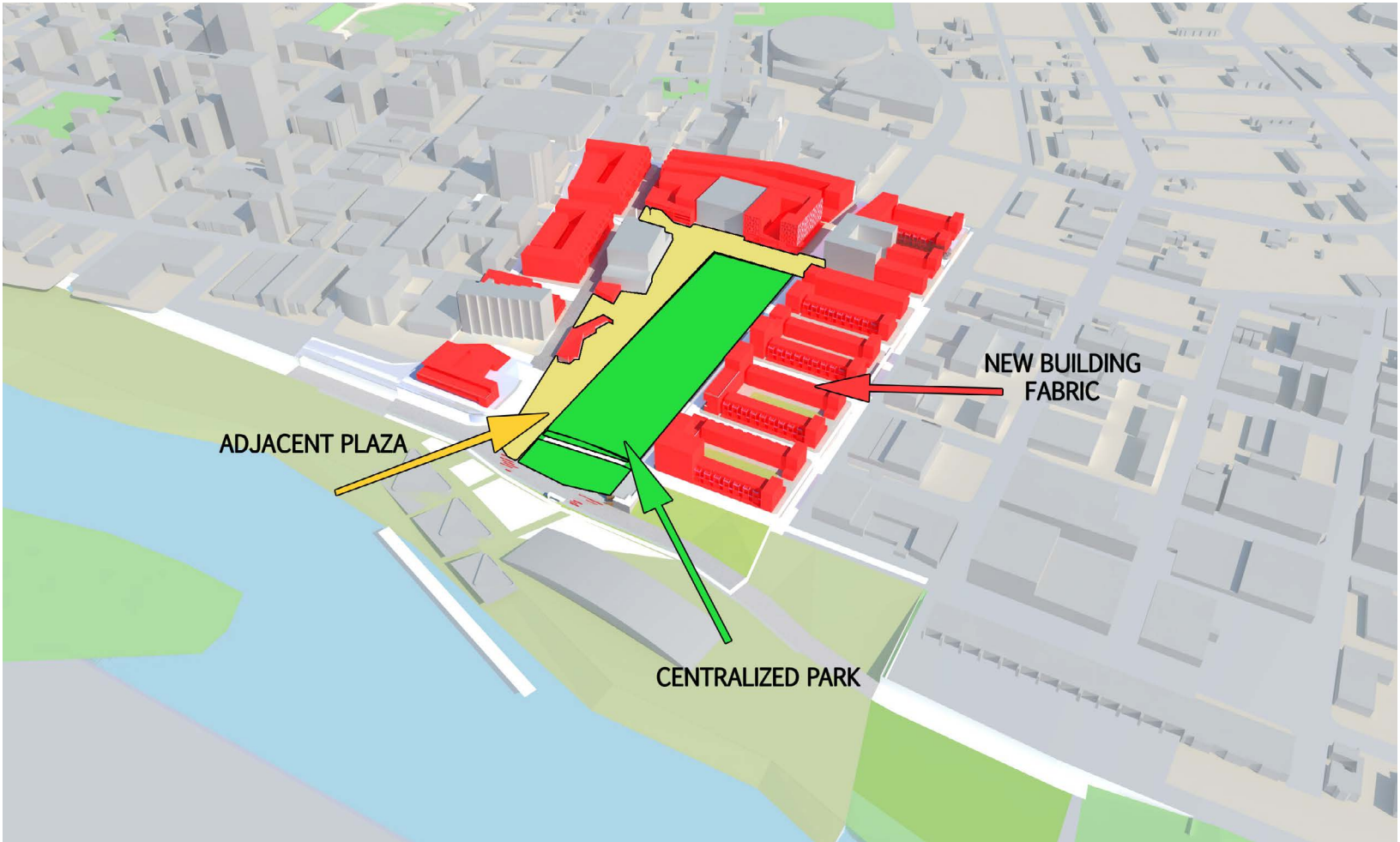
The “wrapper” of development opens to the West to engage the riverfront with a central park connecting Main Street to the water’s edge.

This “wrapper” is a mixed use building fabric comprised of different housing types as well as retail and office space.

This new district will not only tie the downtown core together, but will also act as a focal point for attracting people to live downtown by providing them with pleasures of downtown living one can’t find in the suburbs.



Conceptual Diagram



Conceptual Diagram



Memphis Today

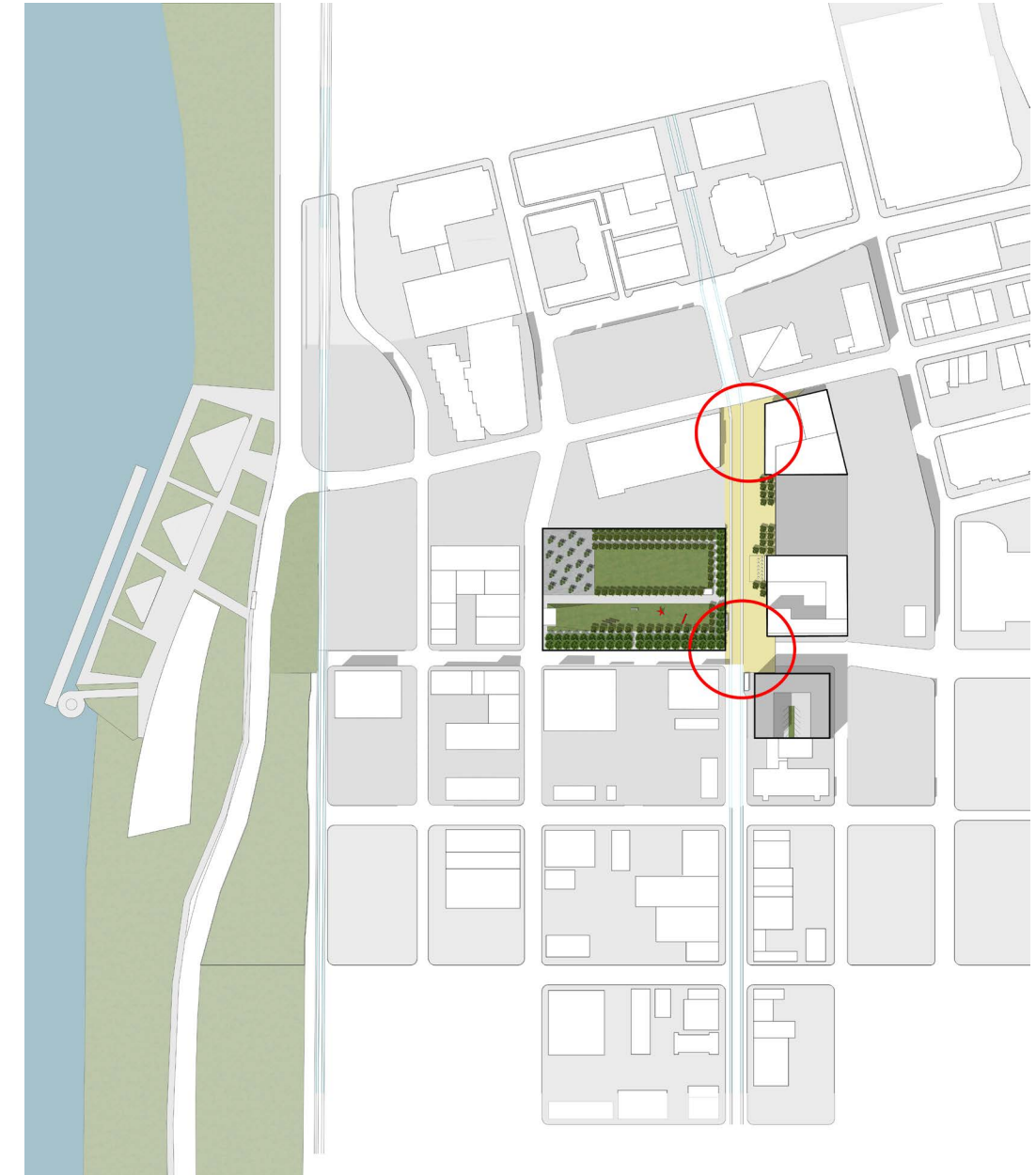
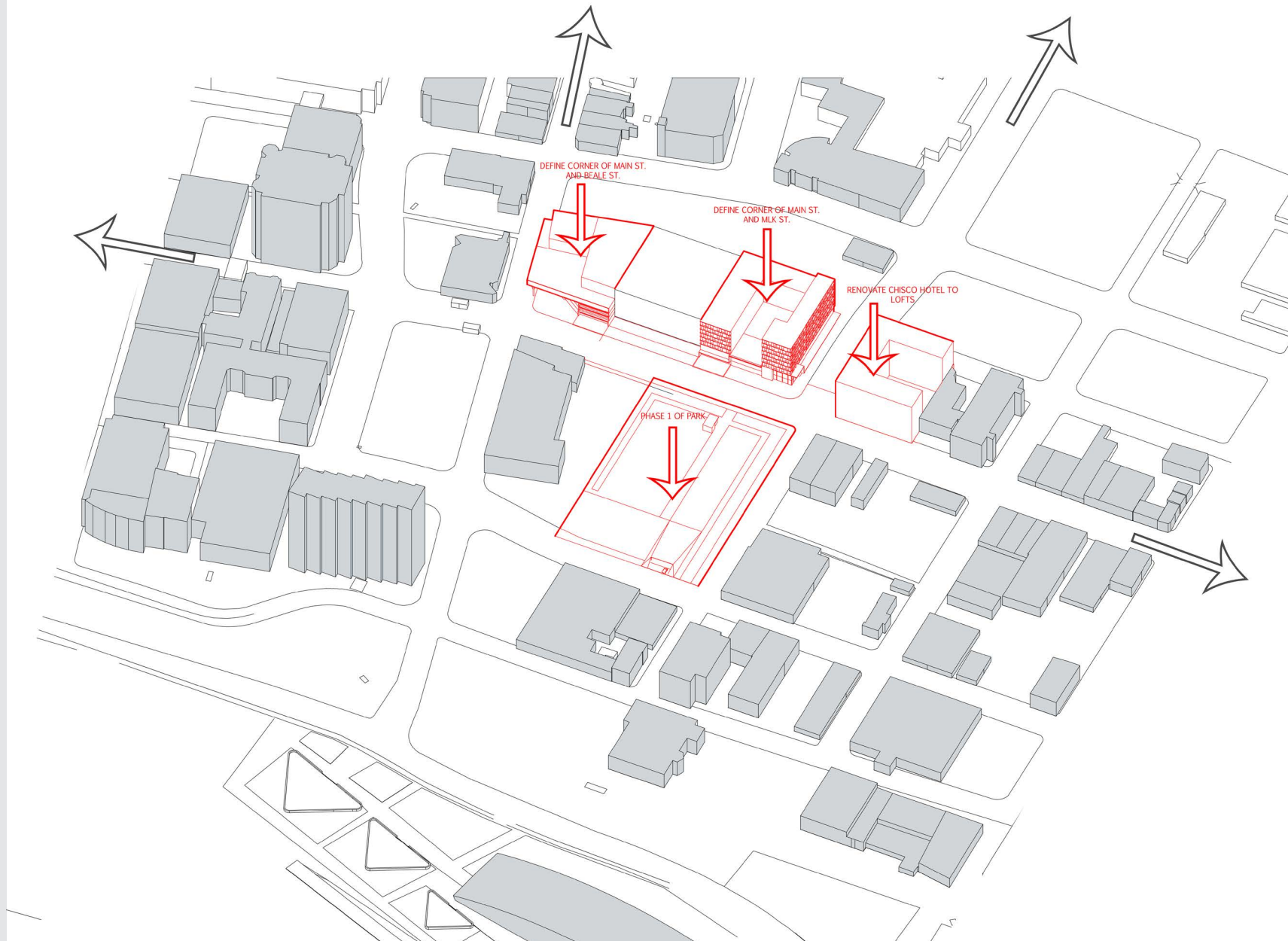


Aerial View

1 Create Nodes

Nodes are points, the strategic spots in a city into which an observer can enter, and which are the intensive foci to and from which he is traveling. In this instance, the two nodes are located at the two most important intersections within the site. Locating a building at the intersection of Main St. and Beale St. will not only entice people coming from Beale to turn the corner and head down Main St., but it also functions as an plaza for the Orpheum.

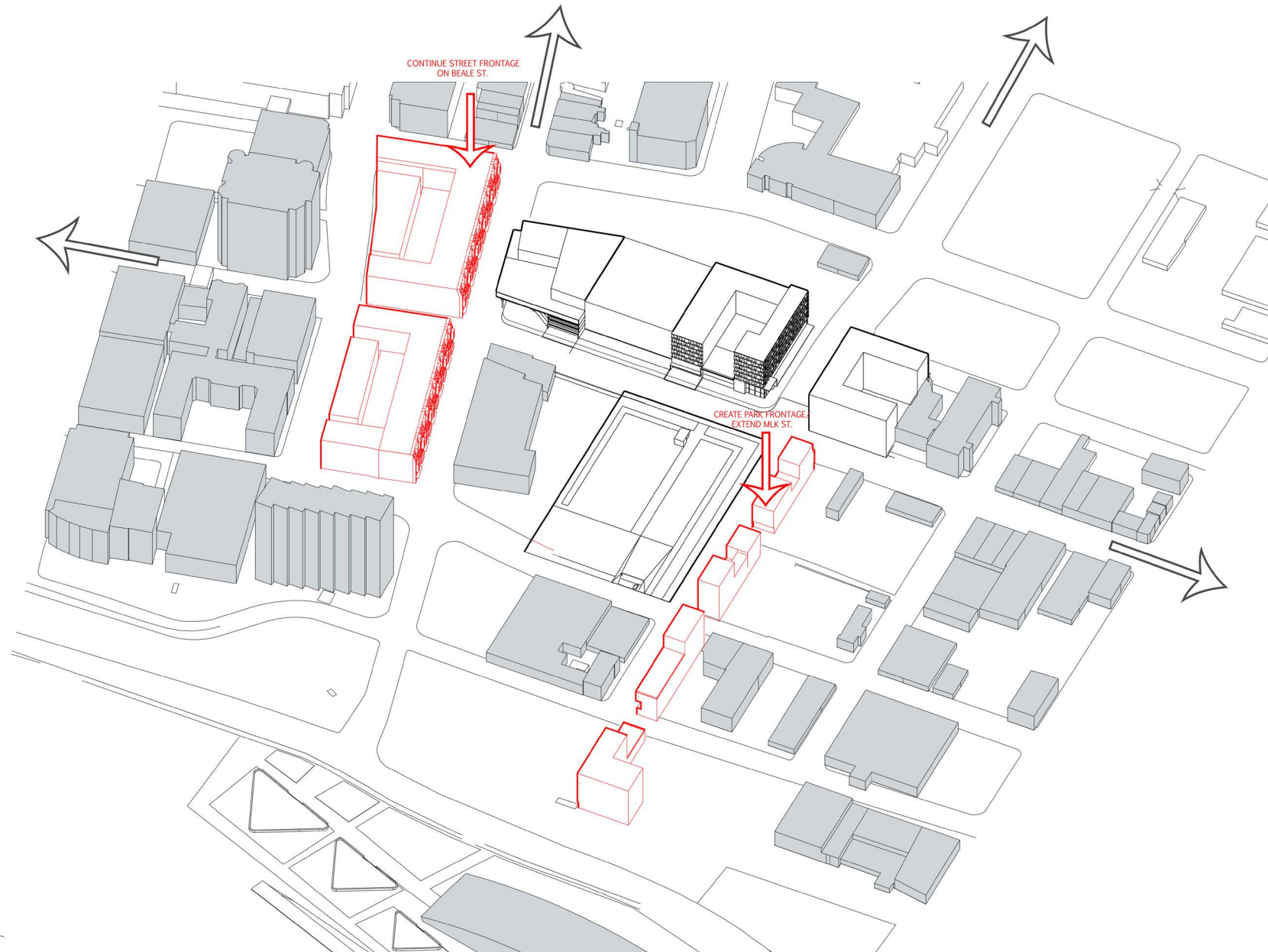
Renovating the Chisco hotel to lofts will bring people permanently to the area. Providing them with a park and a grocery store on the corner of MLK St. and Main St. creates an area that will always be filled with people.



2 Create Edges

Edges are the linear elements not used or considered as paths by the observer. They are the boundaries between two phases of development or two different regions. In this instance continuing frontage on Beale Street extends the street and creates a new edge of development that better connects Beale to Main Street.

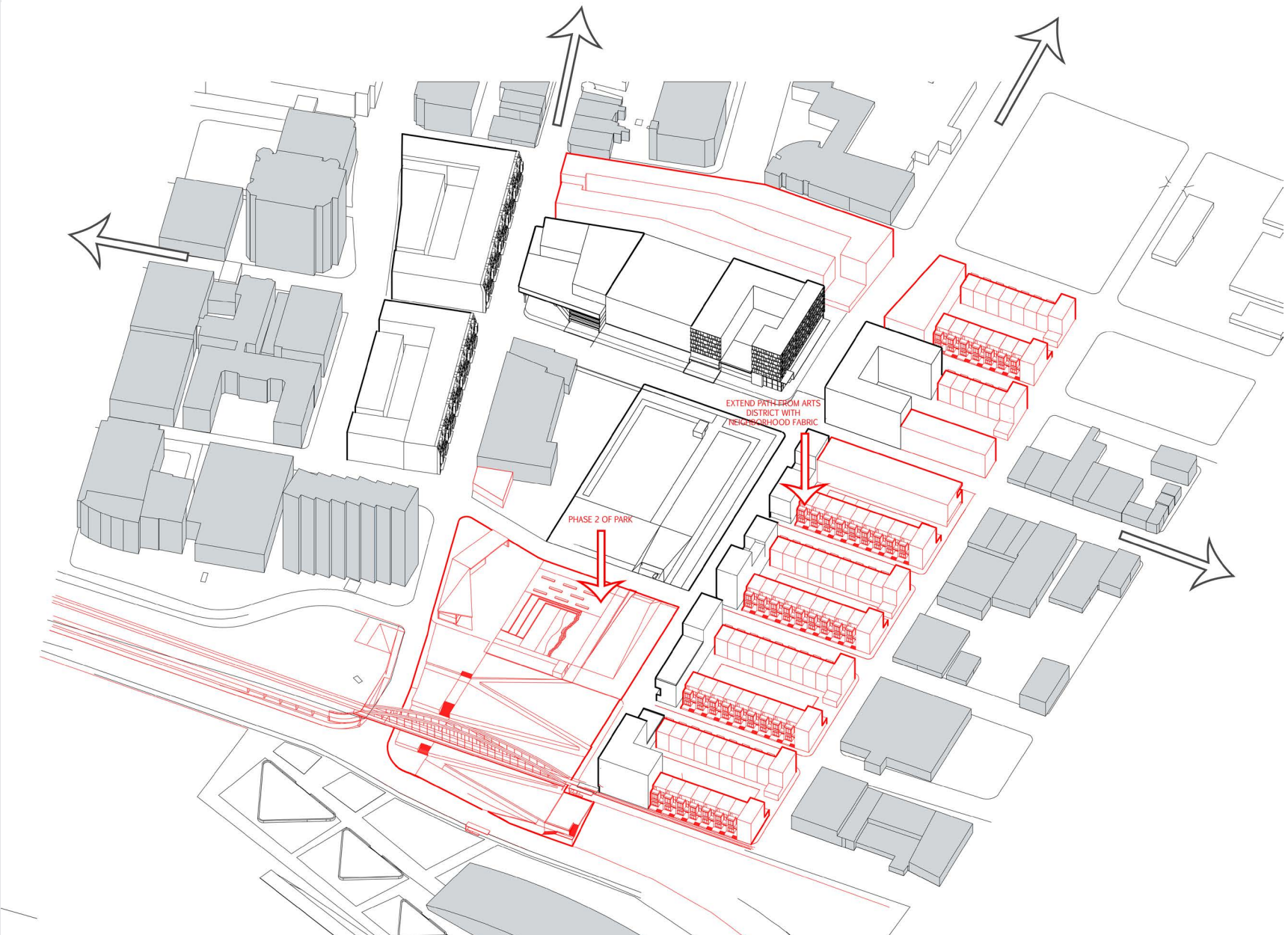
New linear development of mixed use buildings along MLK St. bring back the street as a commercial corridor and front the new park. This creates an edge that allows development to begin to the south to connect to the South Main Arts District.



3 Extend Paths

Paths are the channels along which the observer customarily, occasionally, or potentially moves. People observe the city while moving through it, and along these paths the other environmental elements are arranged and related. Phase two of the Park extends the observers path from Main St. to the River and vice versa.

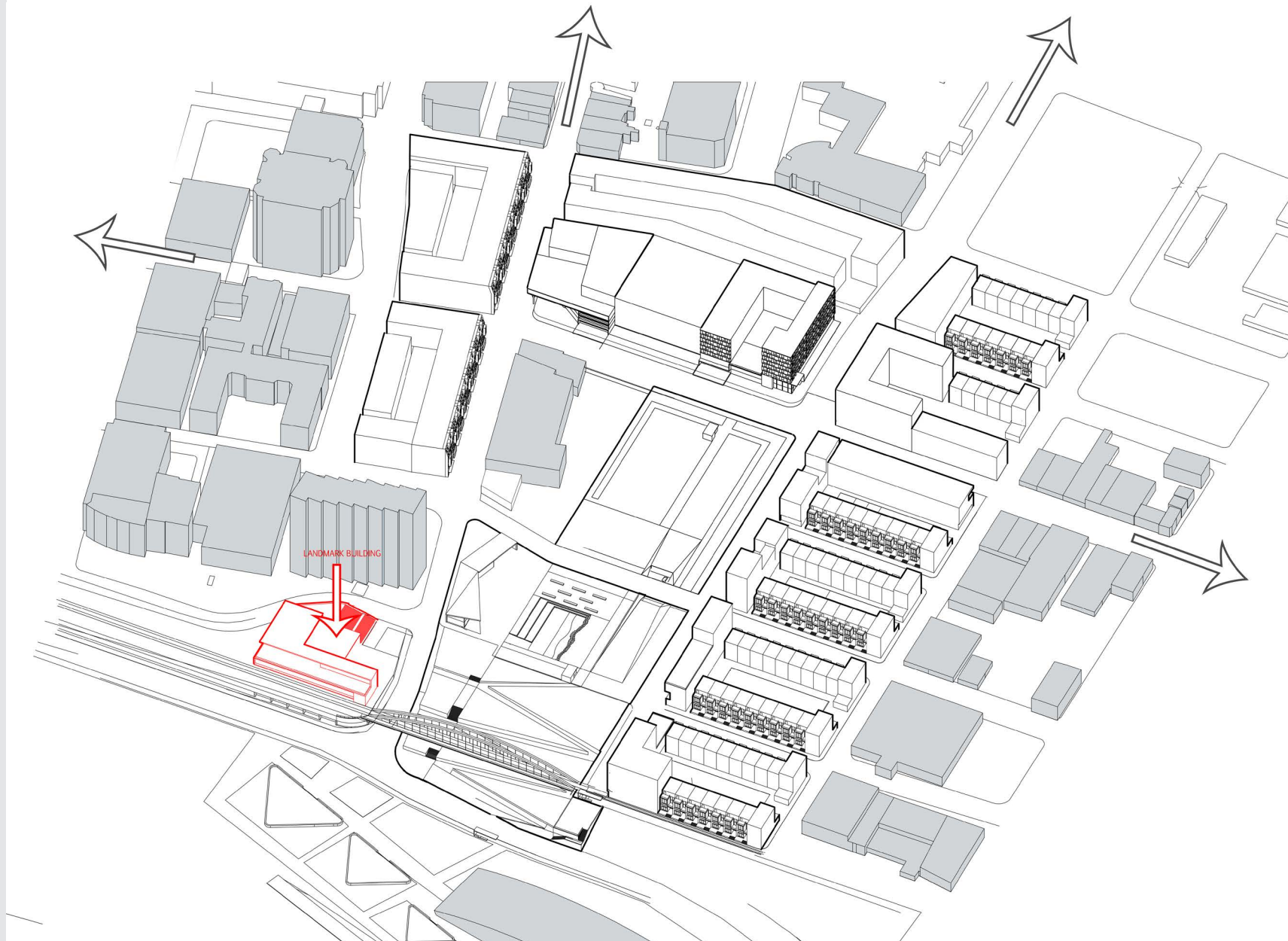
Developing a new neighborhood fabric towards the South Main Arts District creates new paths or avenues from the district to the new park.



4

CREATE A LANDMARK

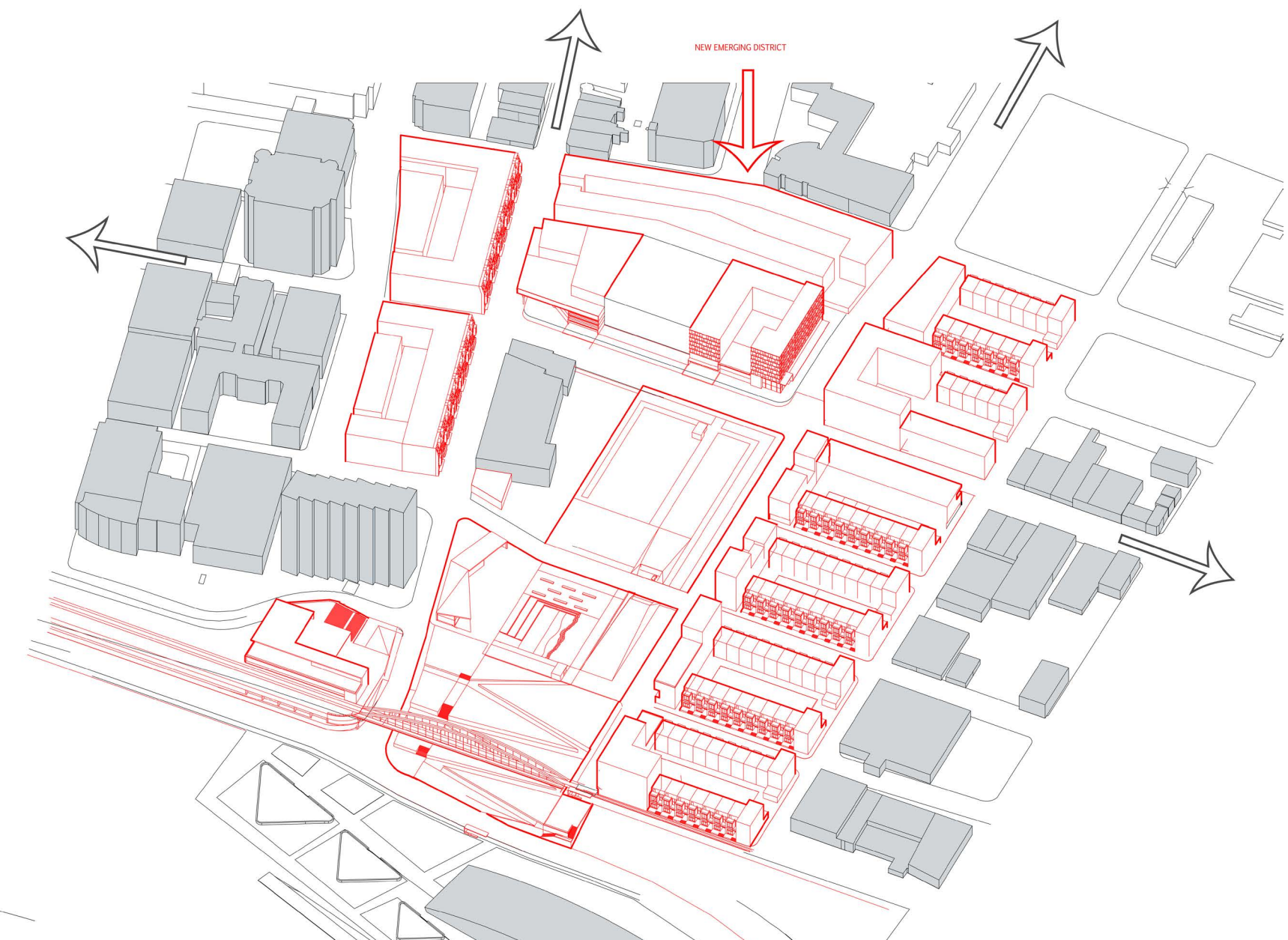
Landmarks are another type of point-reference, but in this case the observer does not enter within them, they are external. In this instance the landmark is defined by a building on the corner of Riverside Dr. and Beale St. This is the final piece that connects the Beale St. extension to the River and Beale Street Landing. It also connects to the trolley line and is an extension of the park and plaza. This landmark will be a point of reference upon entering the city by boat or car.



5

CREATE A DISTRICT

Districts are the medium-to-large sections of the city, conceived of as having two-dimensional extent, which the observer mentally enters “inside of,” and which are recognizable as having some common, identifying character. This new district is centered around a park and creates an extension of the city fabric that ties the downtown area together.

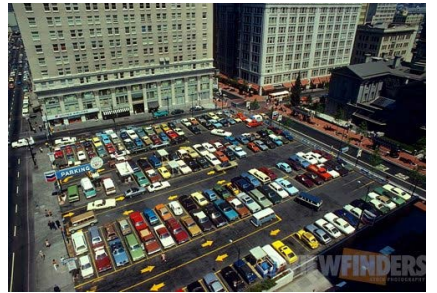


Precedents in Urban Park Integration

As cities across America continue to grow, the perception of public green space's importance in the metropolitan area is changing from a commodity to a necessity. Most of the interventions shown, take place at the heart of their respected cities. Each park integration takes what once was a parking lot or parking structure and transforms it into a public green space. These green spaces have not only created a new urban experience for the pedestrian but have become focal points of interest within the city and have resulted in new urban centers being formed.



1



2



3



4

- 1. Post Office Square, Boston
- 2. Pioneer Courthouse Square, Portland
- 3. Discovery Green, Houston
- 4. Citygarden, St. Louis

Solving the Problem

There is no quick fix for the resurrecting of downtown Memphis. Cities form over an accumulation of time through the construction of building fabric. This same mind-set must be at the forefront of any urban design solution to revitalize the downtown area. In other words the problem can't be solved with one building. One Beale is a proposed \$175 million project that would provide condominiums, hotels, office space, a retail and dining center, and a spa and fitness center. Claiming to be “the next progression in downtown urban living for Memphis,” it does not take into account its surroundings and instead is more focused on being the next landmark building in Memphis. While there is a need for housing in downtown Memphis, housing with a starting price at \$750,000 per condo located in an area in a rebuilding process is not very enticing.



One Beale Location



One Beale Rendering



Boston Bay, Boston MA



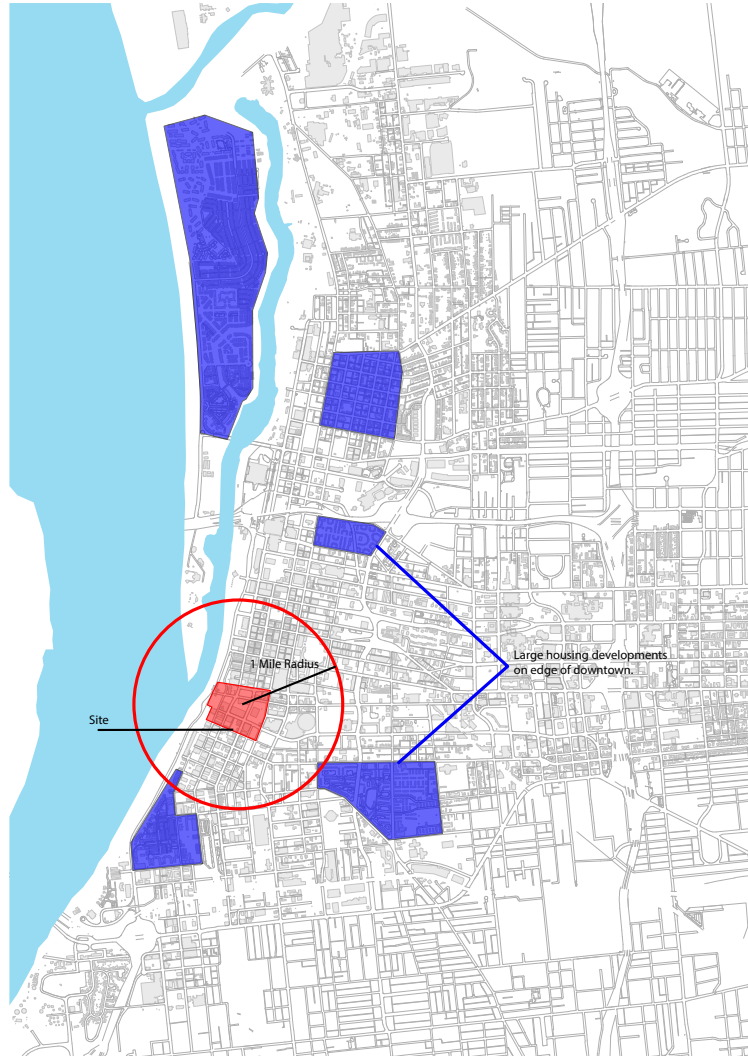
Washington DC Townhouse Neighborhood

Neighborhood Fabric

The development of a neighborhood fabric, on a smaller scale, will not only provide more affordable housing in the downtown area, but will also be a generator for future growth of a housing district. By creating an urban neighborhood, the experience at the ground level provides pedestrian interaction from block to block. It also enhances the walkability of the surrounding area, and creates a more continuous city environment. The end goal is a creation of a place as opposed to a destination.

Need for Downtown Housing

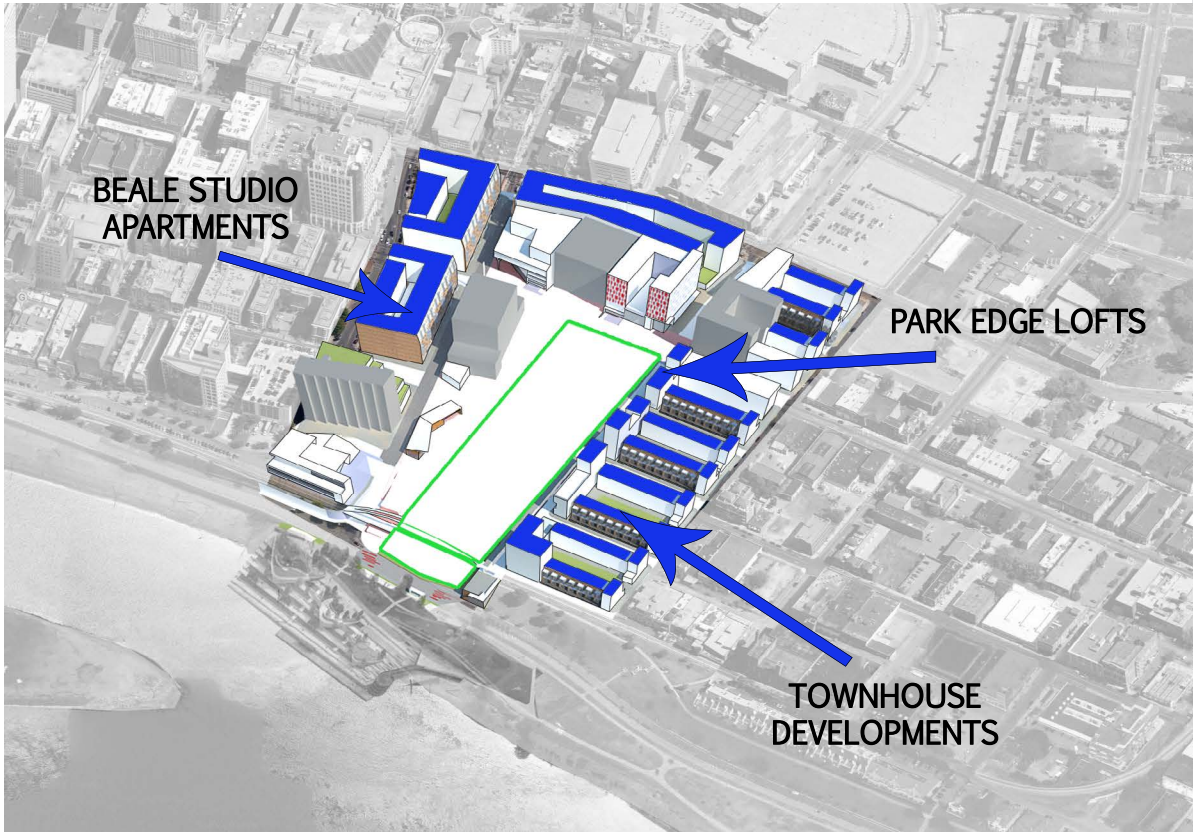
Despite a faltering economy, many of America's downtowns are in the midst of a revival, according to a September U.S. Census study, and Memphis is no exception. After previous decades of decline, the residential population in Downtown Memphis increased, growing by 7 percent to reach approximately 22,000 residents in 2010, according to the latest metrics compiled by the Downtown Memphis Commission. Memphis is currently at about 92 percent occupancy in Downtown rental space, with a growing need for more. Paul Morris, president of the Downtown Memphis Commission, is a full advocator of a move for more downtown housing saying, "If we want to succeed in attracting this next generation of professionals, we have to continue to create a vibrant, livable Downtown." As more people flock to the downtown area there will be an urgent need for affordable housing.



Housing developments on edges of downtown area. 1 Mile Radius from site.

Housing Options

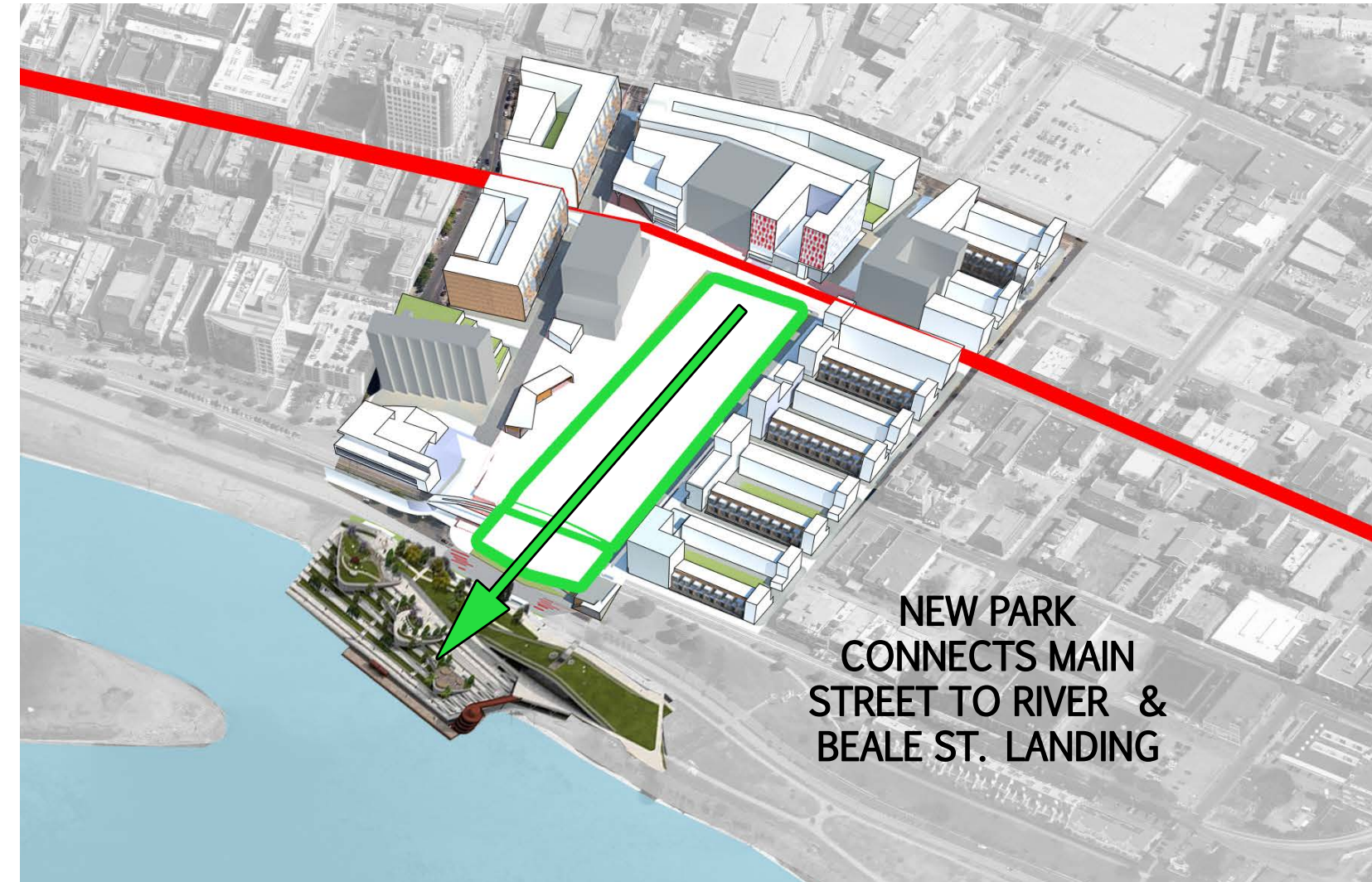
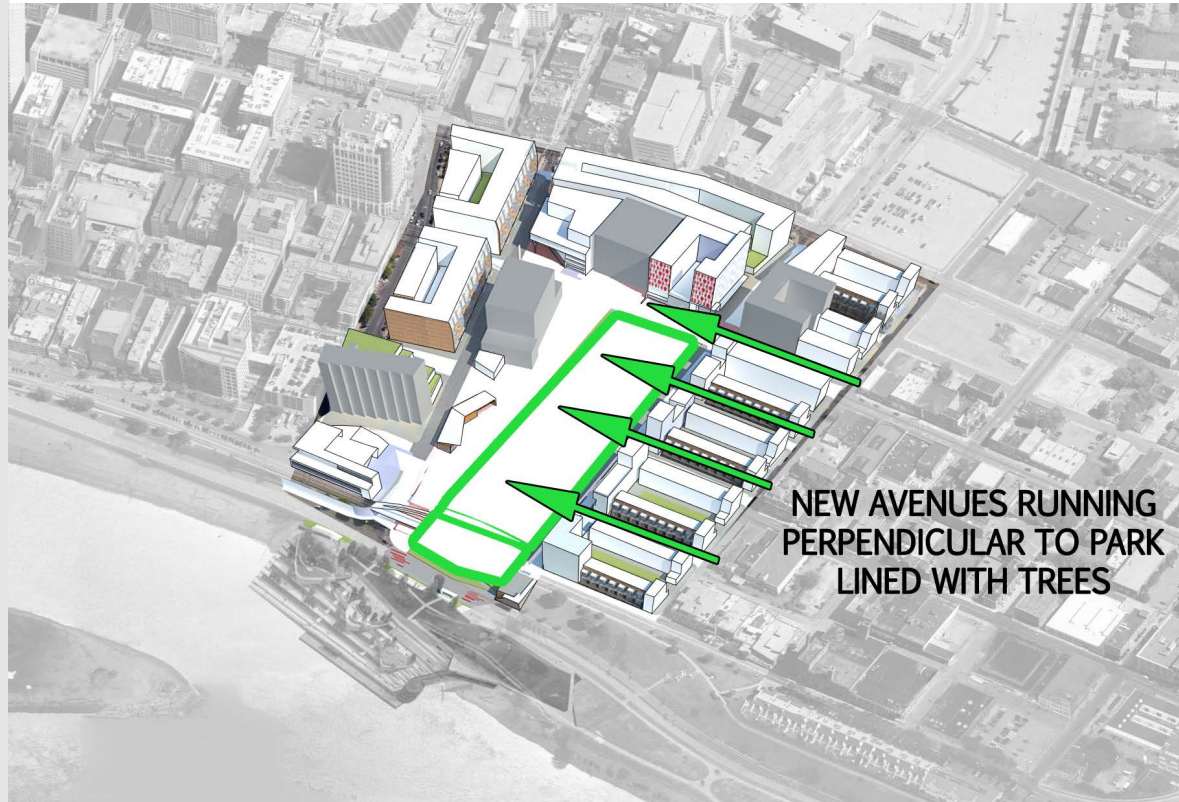
Downtown Memphis has potential for continued growth and development, therefore making it attractive for future housing investments. The 55+ population, college and graduate students, single households, Medical Center workers, and families are target populations to sustain residential growth. In the future, Downtown must continue to offer a range of housing types and price points to maximize opportunities for residential development.



New district offers multiple housing options.

Connectivity

Along with creating a neighborhood fabric comes the responsibility of the streets created by the buildings. Streetscaping is a crucial role in the shaping of an urban experience. New avenues lined with trees running perpendicular to the park will not only extend the park into the neighborhood, but will also encourage future extensions of the avenues to the South. While the new avenues are shaped to connect neighborhoods to the park, the park acts as a connecting element. The park runs from Main Street back to the riverfront creating a strong axis connecting the two while also becoming the centering focal point of the new district.



District Typologies

Each district surrounding the site is made up of its own distinct typology. The convergence of them on the site is what makes it such a vital point within the downtown core.

This allows for a mixture of typologies to take place on the site. This also creates the opportunity for new typologies to emerge.

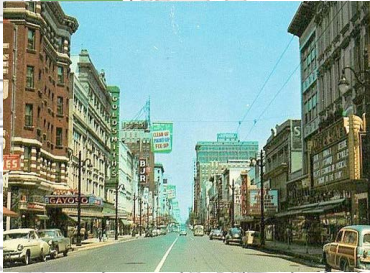


North Main Street Business District

During most of the city’s history Main Street has been the city’s center of commerce, lined with high rises, hotels, restaurants, theaters, shops and businesses of all kinds. Suburban flight took a toll on downtown Memphis (and other major cities) in the latter half of the twentieth century, and many businesses deserted the downtown core. To lure shoppers back to the city, Main Street was converted into a pedestrian mall between Poplar Avenue and Peabody Place; the mall was inaugurated in 1976 with great fanfare by President Gerald Ford. The mall’s success was short lived however as people took flight to the suburbs, so did the department and retail stores along Main Street. As early as the 1980s, the mall’s physical conditions deteriorated. With no place to park, and vacated store fronts lining the mall, a push to reopen Main Street to cars was soon urged.



Main Street 1910



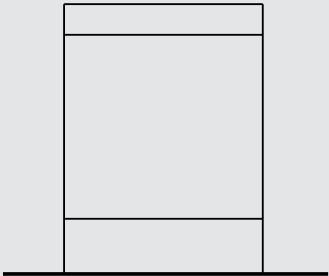
Main Street 1952



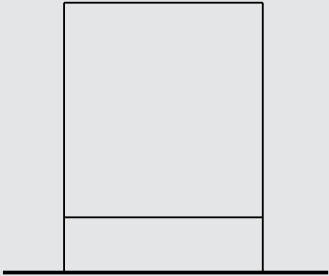
Main Street Today

Typology

Today the CBID is mostly made up of high rise developments consisting of two and three-part vertical blocks with retail on the lower floors and office space above.



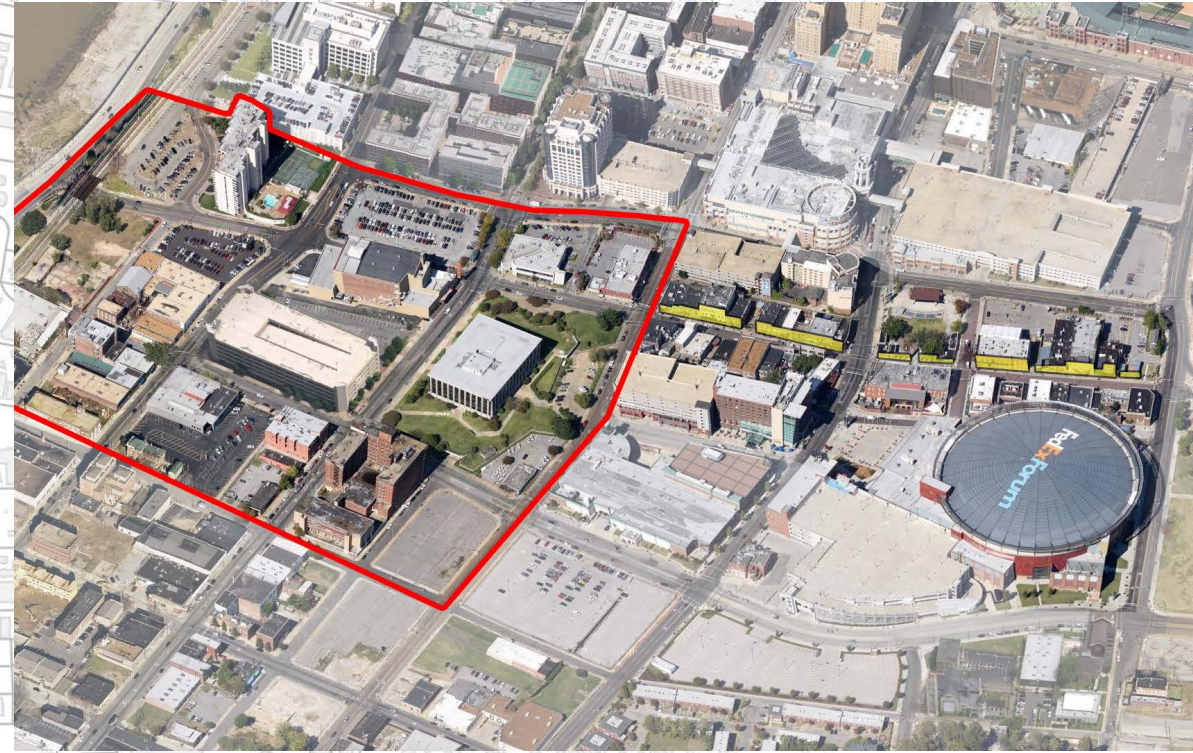
Three-Part Vertical Block



Two-Part Vertical Block

Beale Street Entertainment District

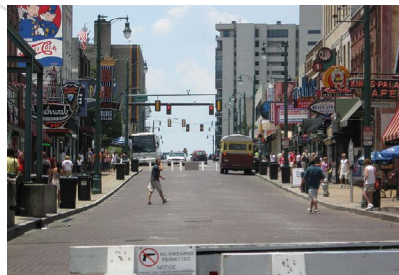
In the first half of the nineteenth century, Beale Street was the main thoroughfare of South Memphis. Near the river landing were warehouses, saloons and rooming houses. Between Main and Third Streets, retail stores and respectable businesses of all kinds could be found. By day Beale Street was a respectable retail and professional district; at night, there was whiskey, gambling, prostitution, drugs and murder, but, most of all, there was music. During the mid-twentieth century, a string of musical greats launched their careers here, as the city blossomed as the creative center of blues music. Post-war sub urbanization and the general decline of downtown Memphis in the late 1960s and '70s almost spelled the death of Beale Street, and several misguided attempts at urban renewal nearly bulldozed it out of existence.



Beale Street 1940



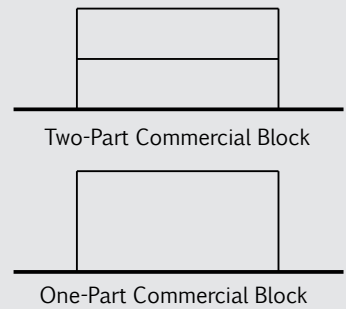
Beale Street 1974



Beale Street Today

Typology

Today, Beale Street is made up of one to two-part commercial blocks. These buildings are still home to bars, retail, and restaurants.

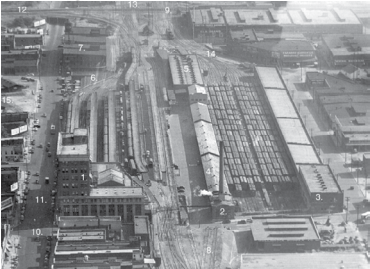


South Main Street Arts District

In the 19th century, South Main Street was primarily a muddy residential street lined with Victorian homes, linked to downtown by the trolley. The completion of Union Station in 1912 and Central Station in 1914 dramatically changed the face of the neighborhood, making it the bustling Gateway to Memphis. Most of the existing structures on South Main Street--originally warehouses, hotels, bars and brothels--date from this era, built during the early decades of the twentieth century to serve the needs of travelers and railroad commerce. The rise of the automobile in the 1950s meant a decline in the city's railroad traffic and this, combined with the general decline in the downtown area in the wake of Martin Luther King's assassination, caused the neighborhood to fall into neglect.



South Main Street 1950



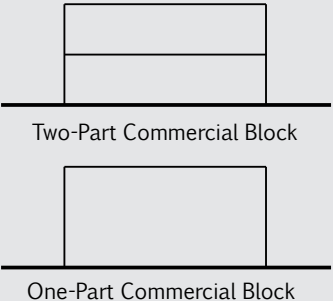
South Main Street 1960



South Main Street Today

Typology

Today, the South Main Arts District is still made up of one to two-part commercial blocks. These buildings consist of specialty retail shops as well as restaurants and a few art galleries.



Mississippi River, River walk

The river was the lifeblood of Memphis in its earliest days, bringing wealth and commerce in the form of cotton to its wharves on flatboats and, later, on graceful steamboats. It has also brought war, disease and refugees in times of crisis. Though railroads and, more recently, the airport, have taken the prime places in the city's transportation industry, the river remains a vital thread running through the history of Memphis. Where Beale Street hits the river, known as Beale Street Landing, lies one of the most important landings along the Memphis shore, and was one of the first to be paved in cobblestone. The growth of the nation's railroads slowly diminished the importance of the landing, especially after the completion of the Frisco Railroad Bridge in 1892. But it still remains a vital piece of Memphis's history.

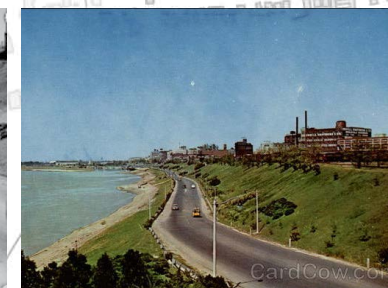


Typology

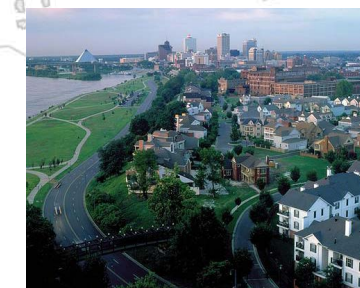
Today, the riverfront is made up of a mixture of individual homes to large office and residential buildings with all glass facades. With new projects such as Beale Street Landing being built, the leaders of Memphis are emphasizing the importance of engaging the riverfront once again.



River Front 1912



River Front 1982



River Front Today

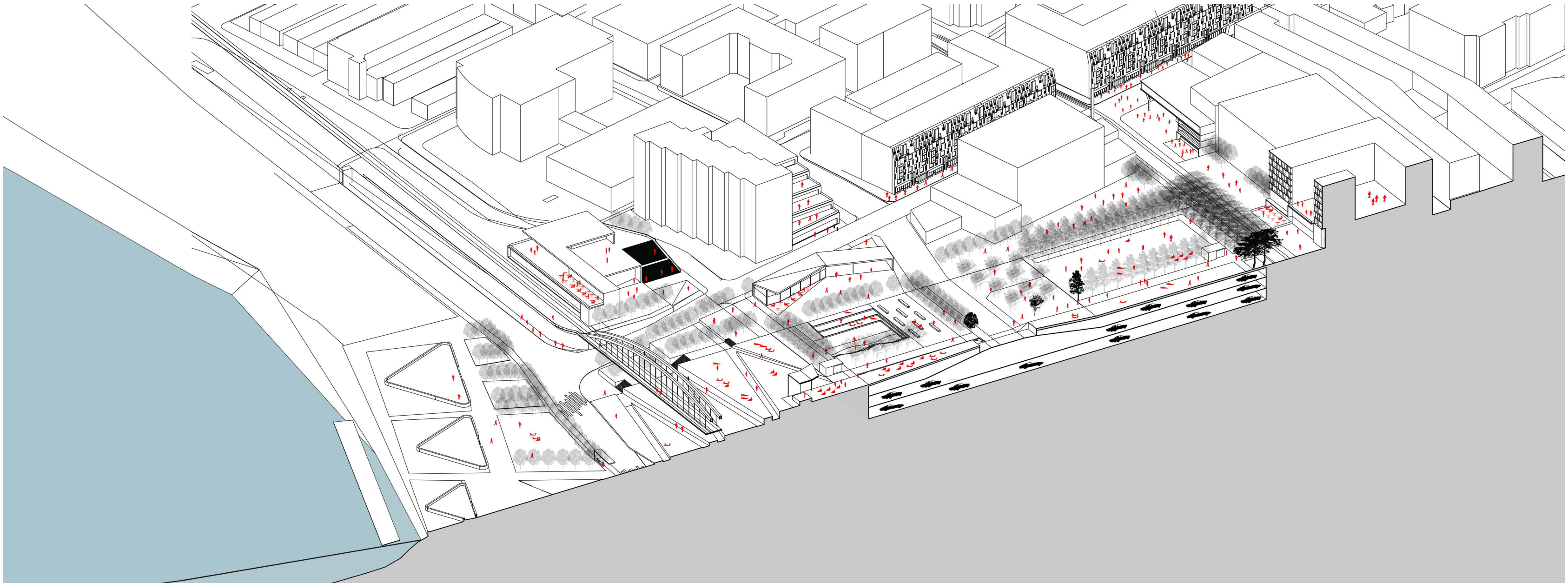
Urban Ecotone

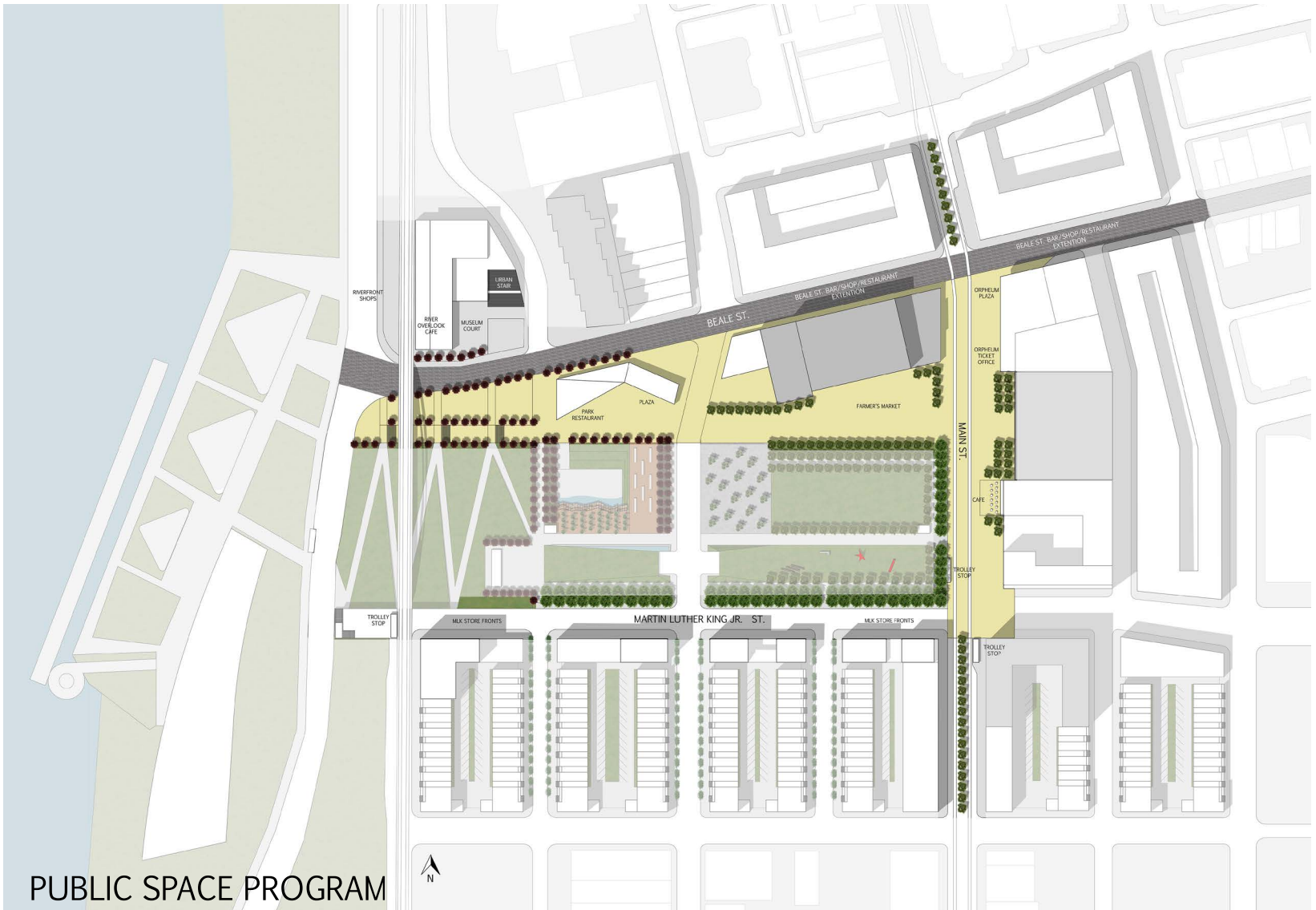
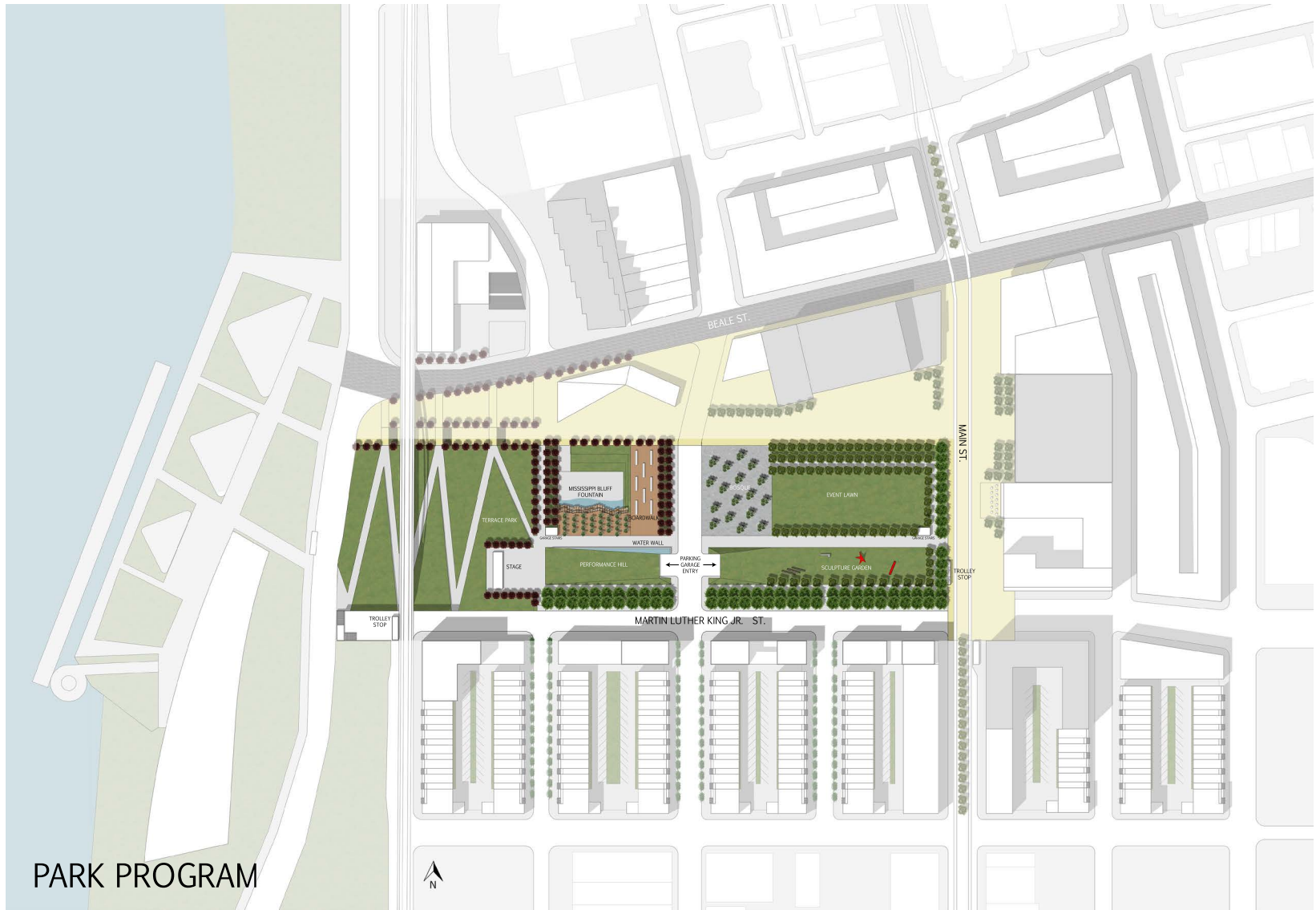
The project results in a cohesive plan that blurs the edge between the converging districts and the new downtown core, while also maintaining an individual character about the site.

This creates a connectivity across the entire downtown area, bridging the gap that once split Main and Beale Street's building fabric.

This new district will serve as a precedent for future regeneration efforts of downtowns and will be an example of how to continue future growth in downtown Memphis.

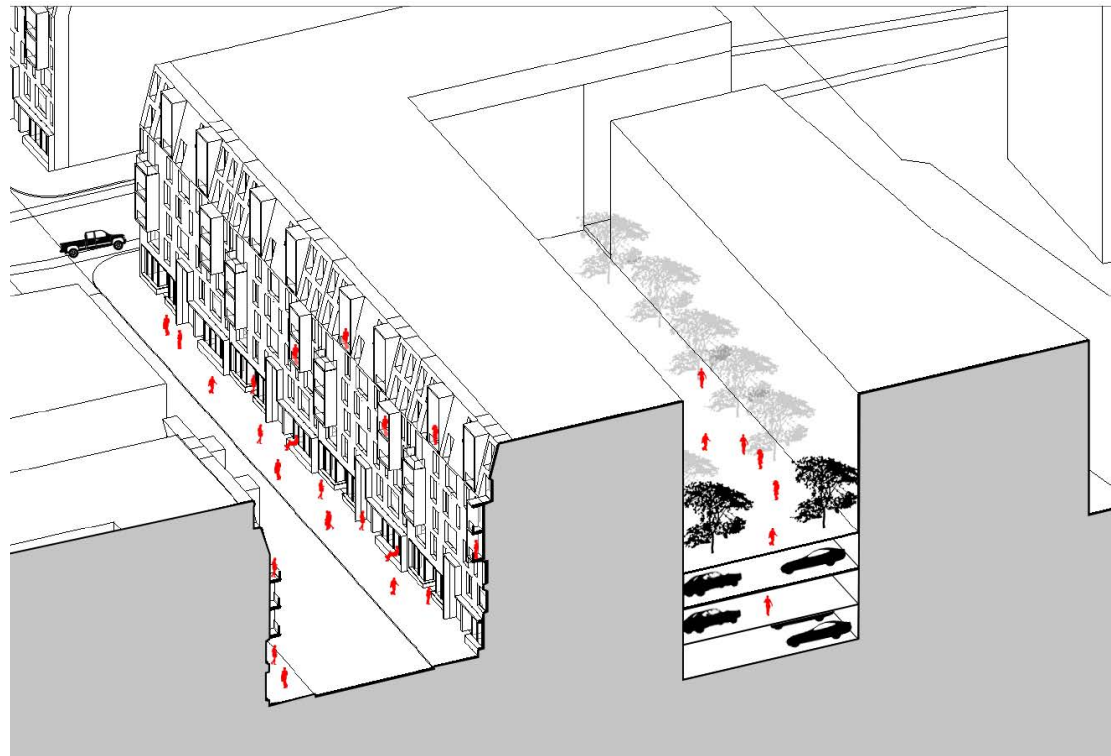




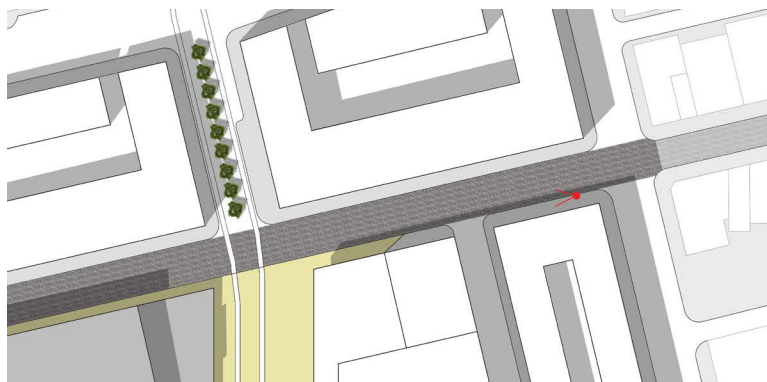


Beale Street Extension

Buildings on Beale Street extend the activity along the street to the river. What was once a gap in the fabric, now becomes a new retail, bar, and restaurant scene. Housing units provide balconies cantilevering out over Beale St. to allow the occupants to be a part of the street's bustling activity while in the privacy of their apartments. An interior park is offered for the residents to provide an area of solitude away from the noisy street.

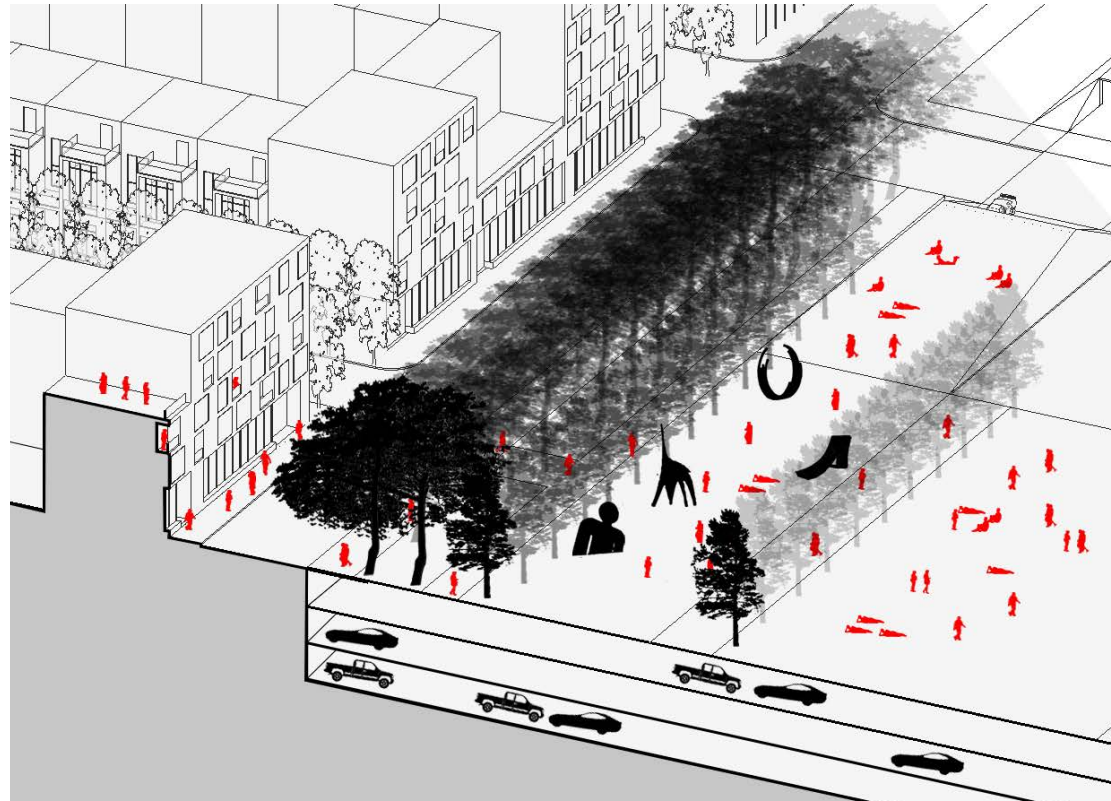


Section Axon



Park Frontage

Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard once again becomes an important street in the city. It is now an edge condition where the South Main Arts District meets the new park. It offers retail options at the ground level and loft space above. Each loft provides a private balcony overlooking the park as well as a community green space that the tenants of the building can share.



Section Axon



Before

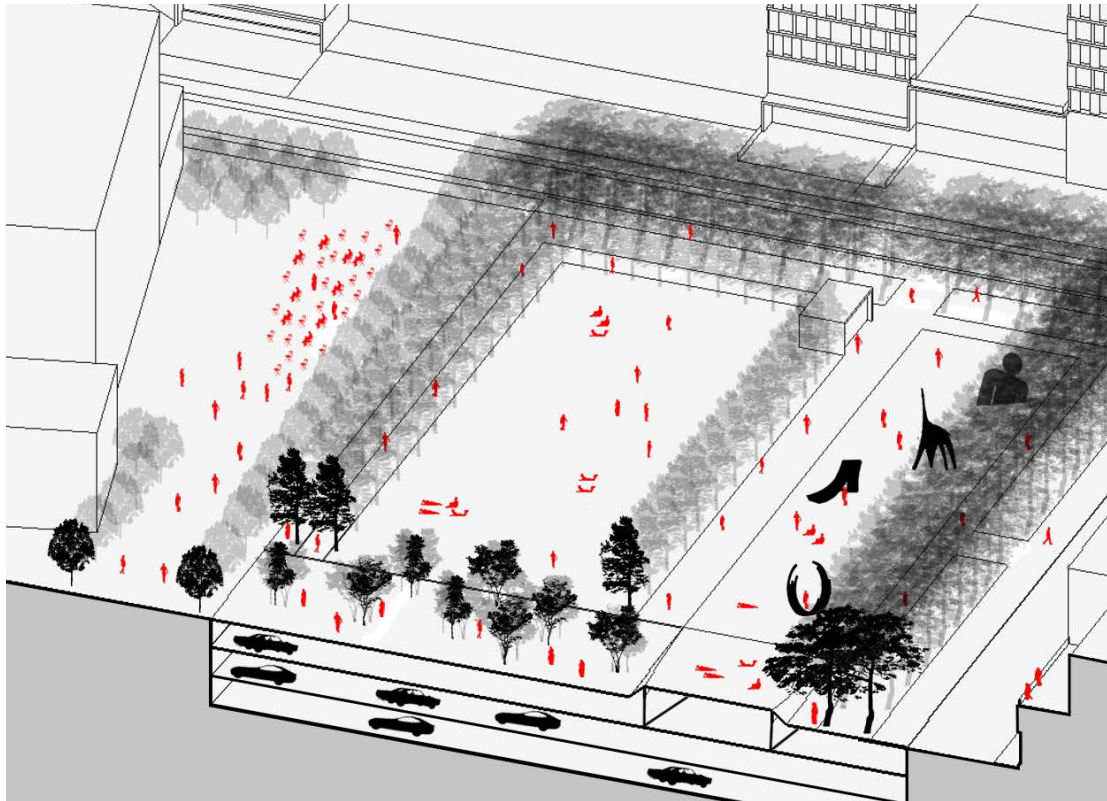


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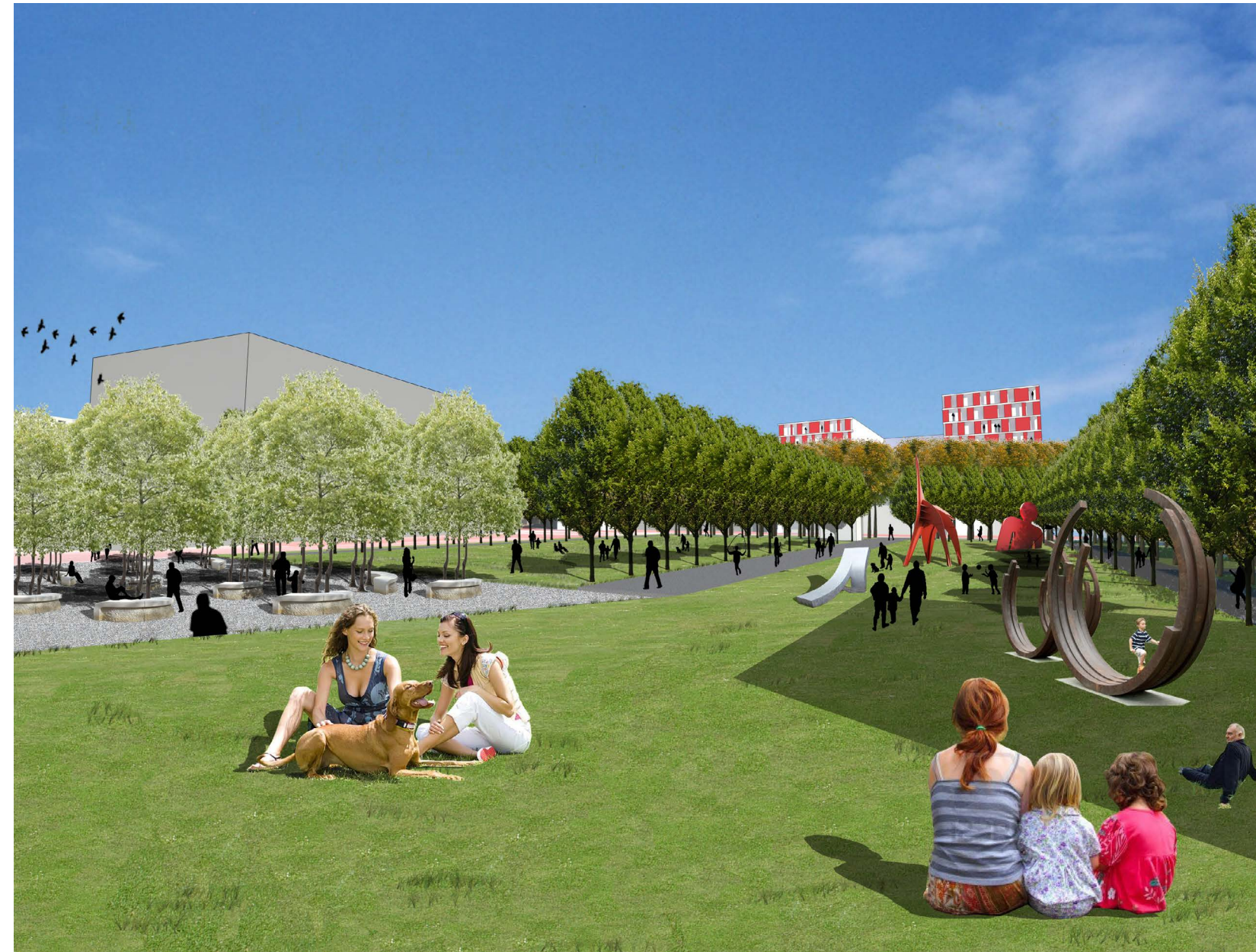
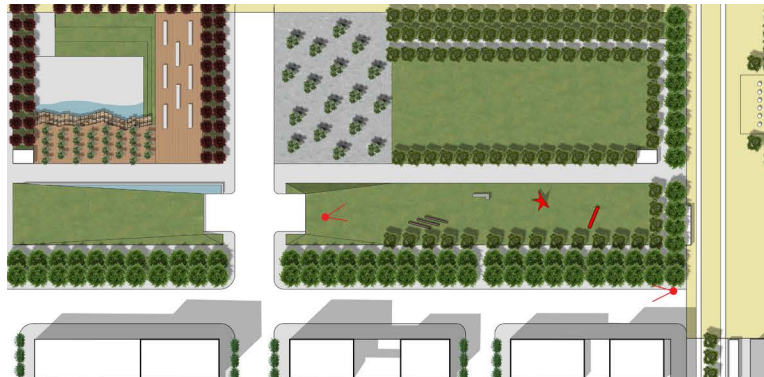
57

The Park

The Park becomes the new center to the downtown area. Trees line the park giving it its own urban experience within the city. The trees, along with its elevation off of the surrounding streets give it its own urban room feel. The park now becomes a place where pedestrians can go to escape the city, while still being at the heart of the downtown area.

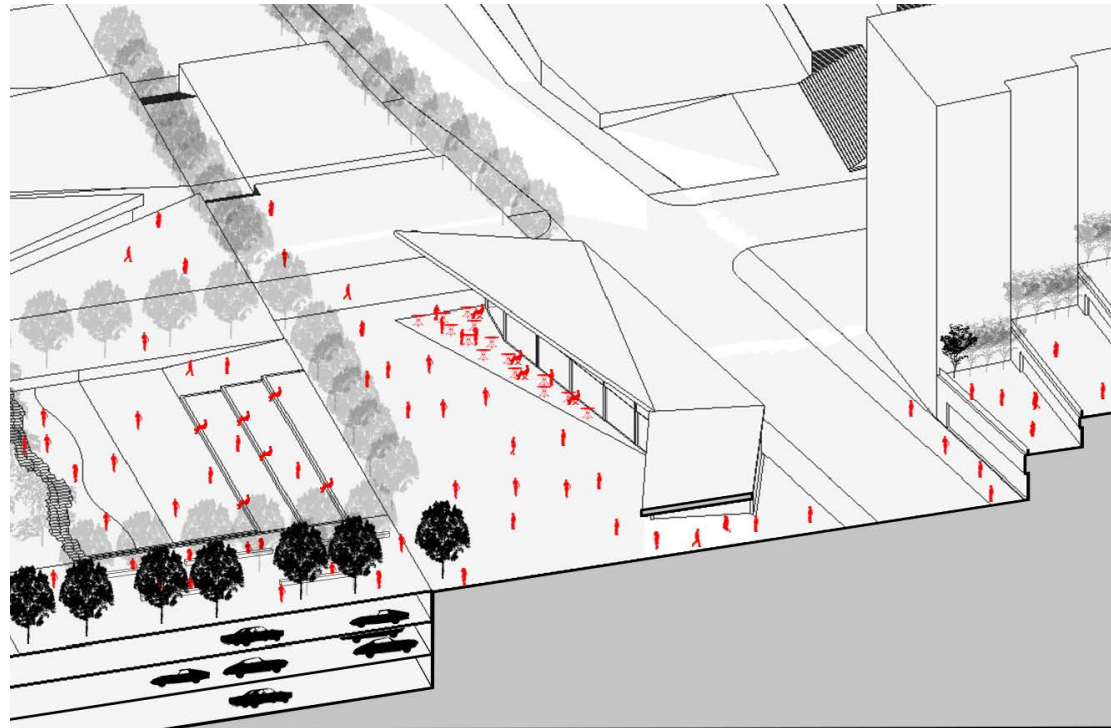


Section Axon

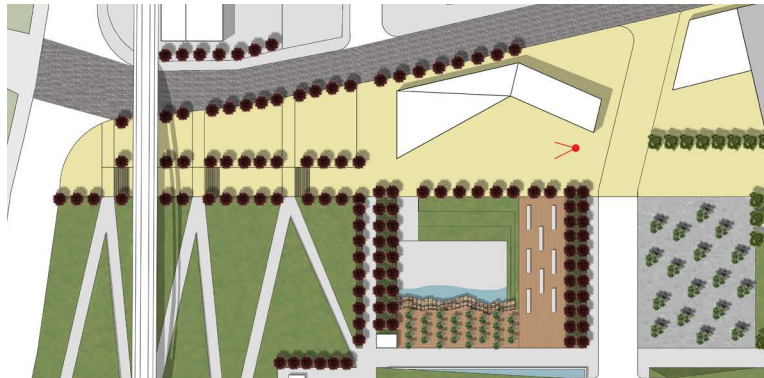


Plaza

This plaza space is the only building located within the park. It acts as a meeting place for pedestrians while also functioning as a cafe and restaurant. Fronting both the park and Beale St., the building acts as a connecting element between a distinct edge condition.



Section Axon



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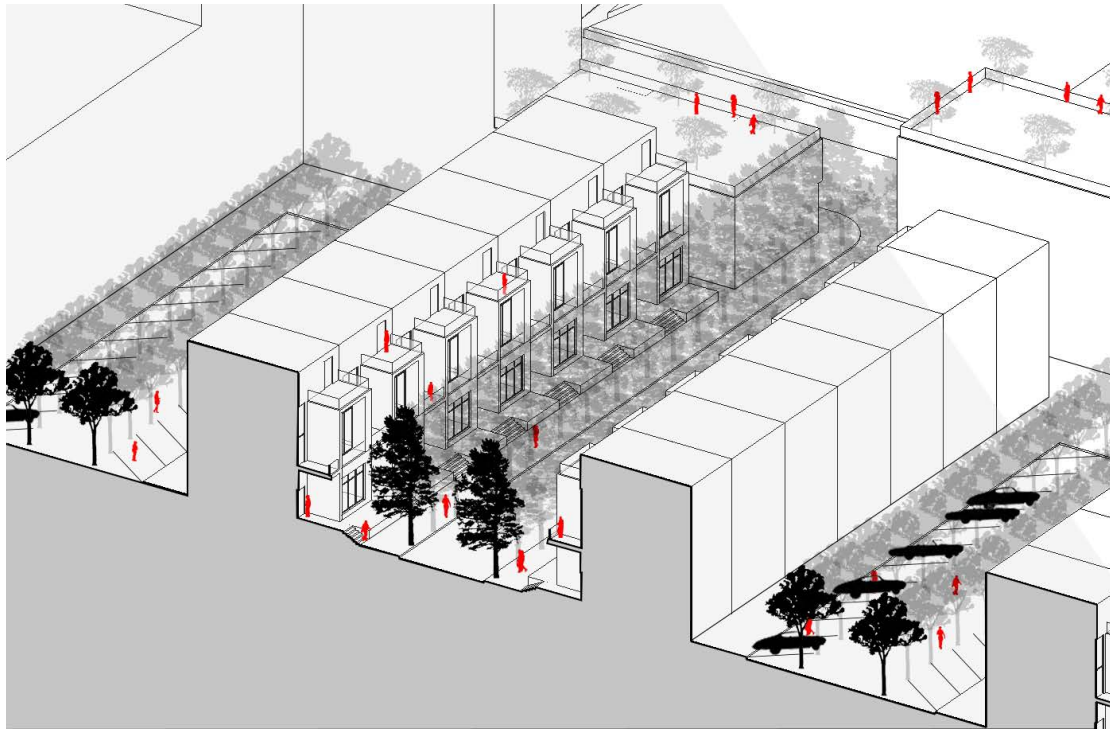
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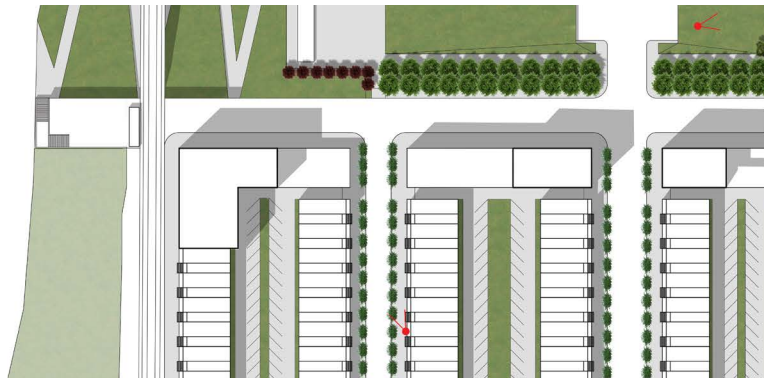
62

South Main Street Neighborhood

Rows of townhouses with interior courtyard parking make up a new neighborhood fabric for the South Main Arts District. The streets are lined with trees to create new avenues leading to the park. These townhouses give Memphis residents the option of owning their own house at the heart of the downtown area.

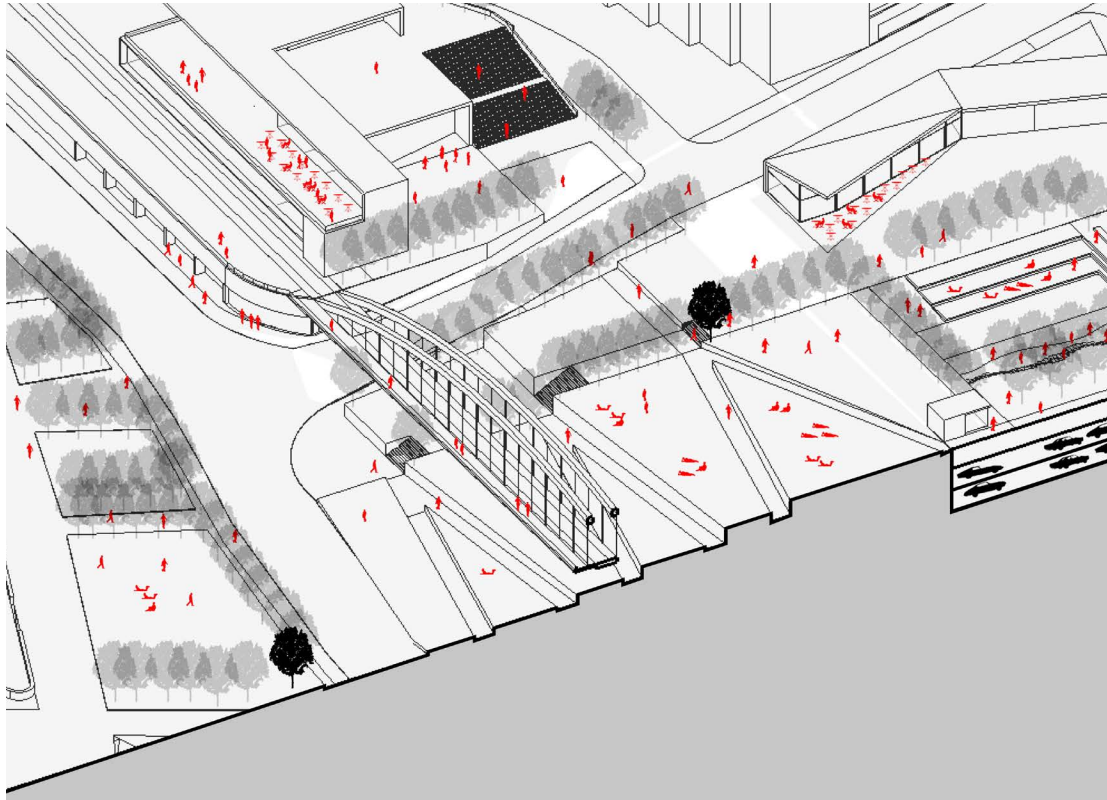


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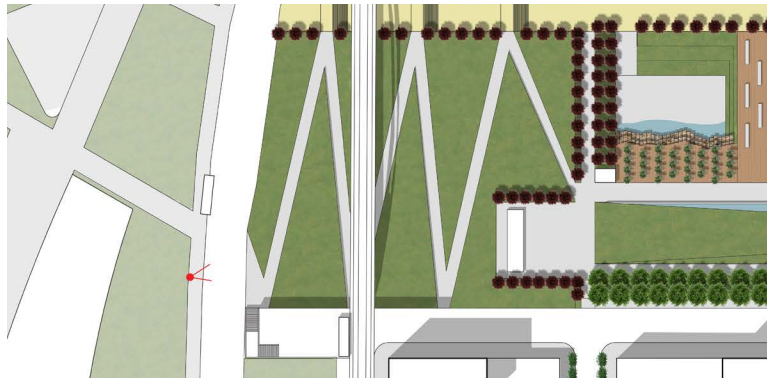


Riverfront Edge

A terraced landscape extends the park down to the river and makes the connection back to Main Street more accessible to pedestrians. It also provides an elevated green space that allows pedestrians a view of the river while still being separated from the noise and pollution of the city environment.



Section Axon

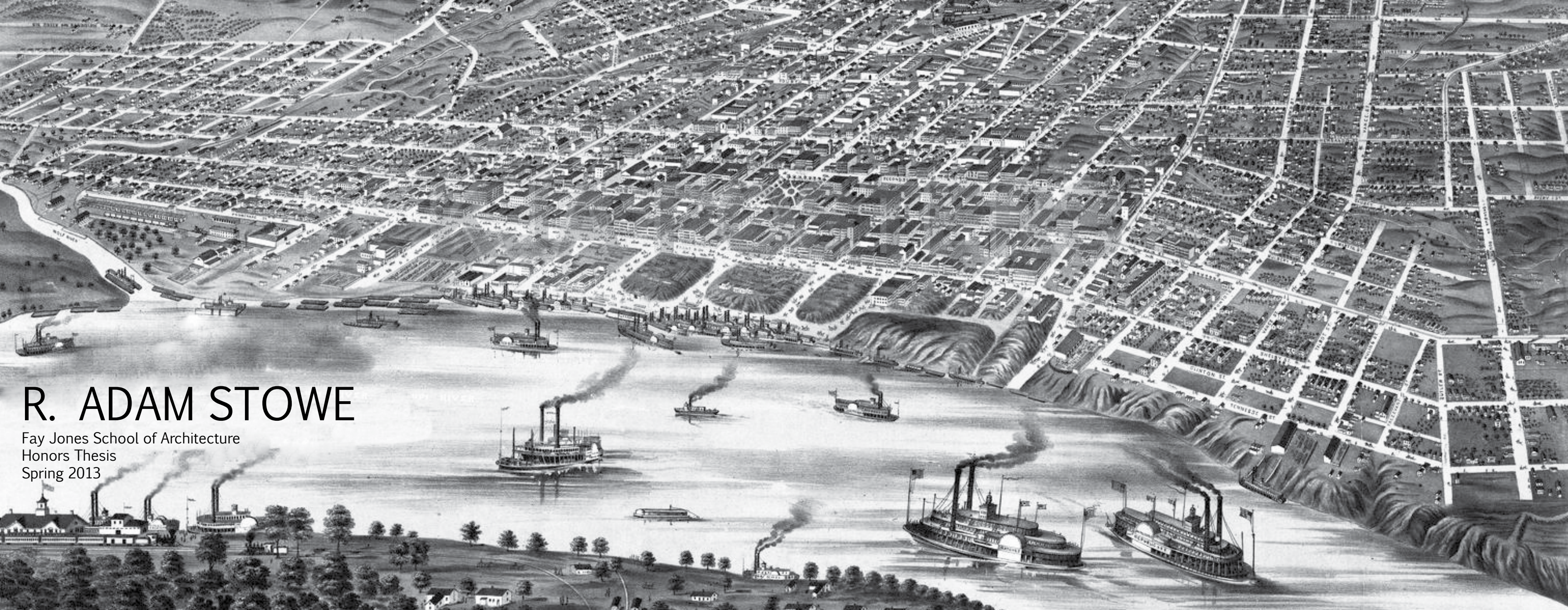


65

Before



66



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