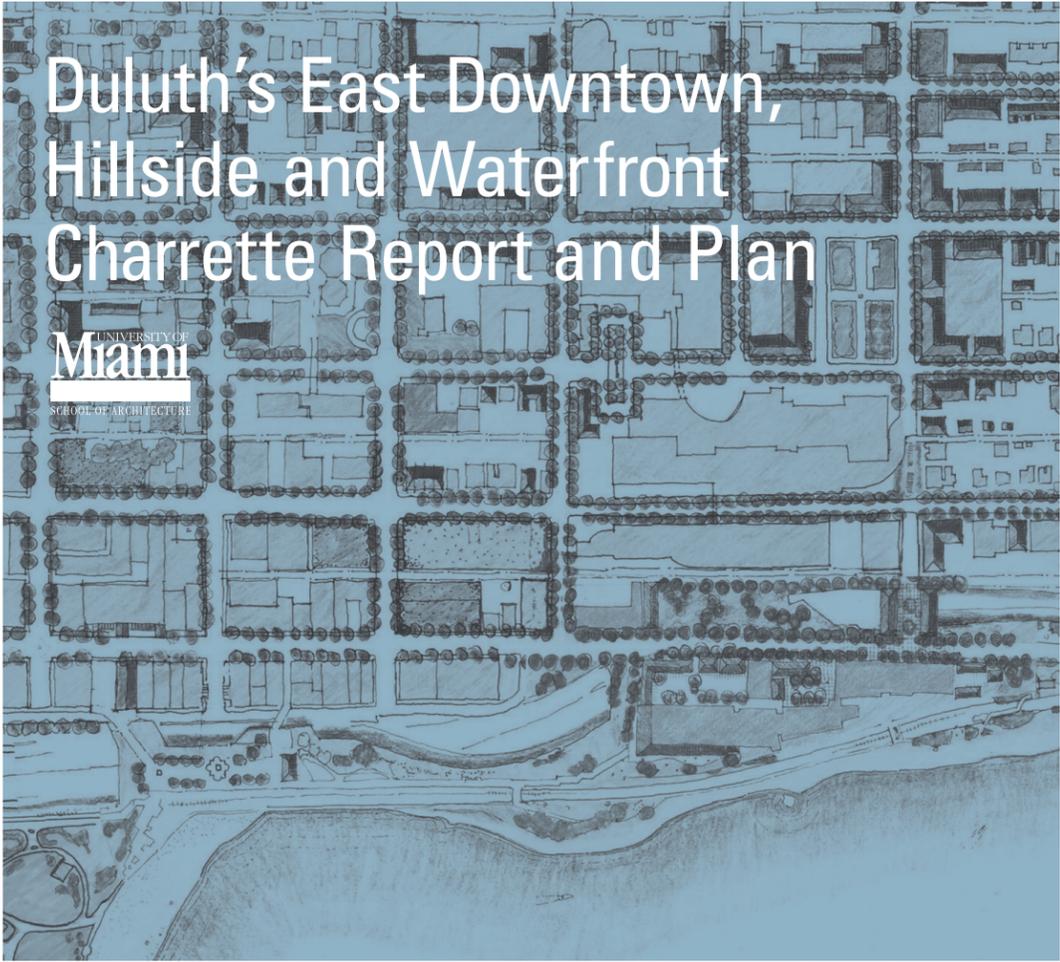
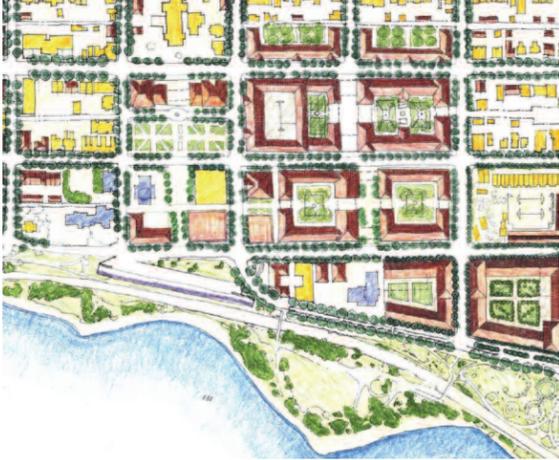
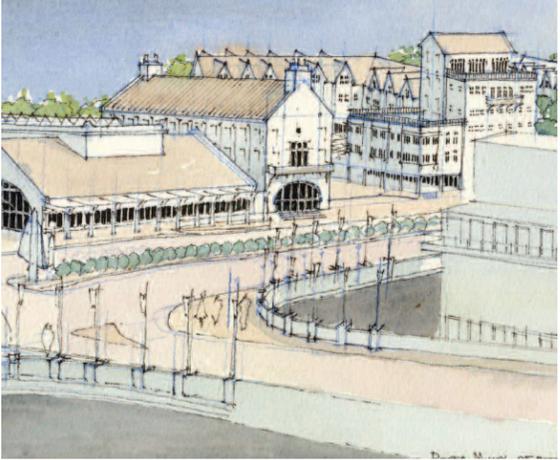
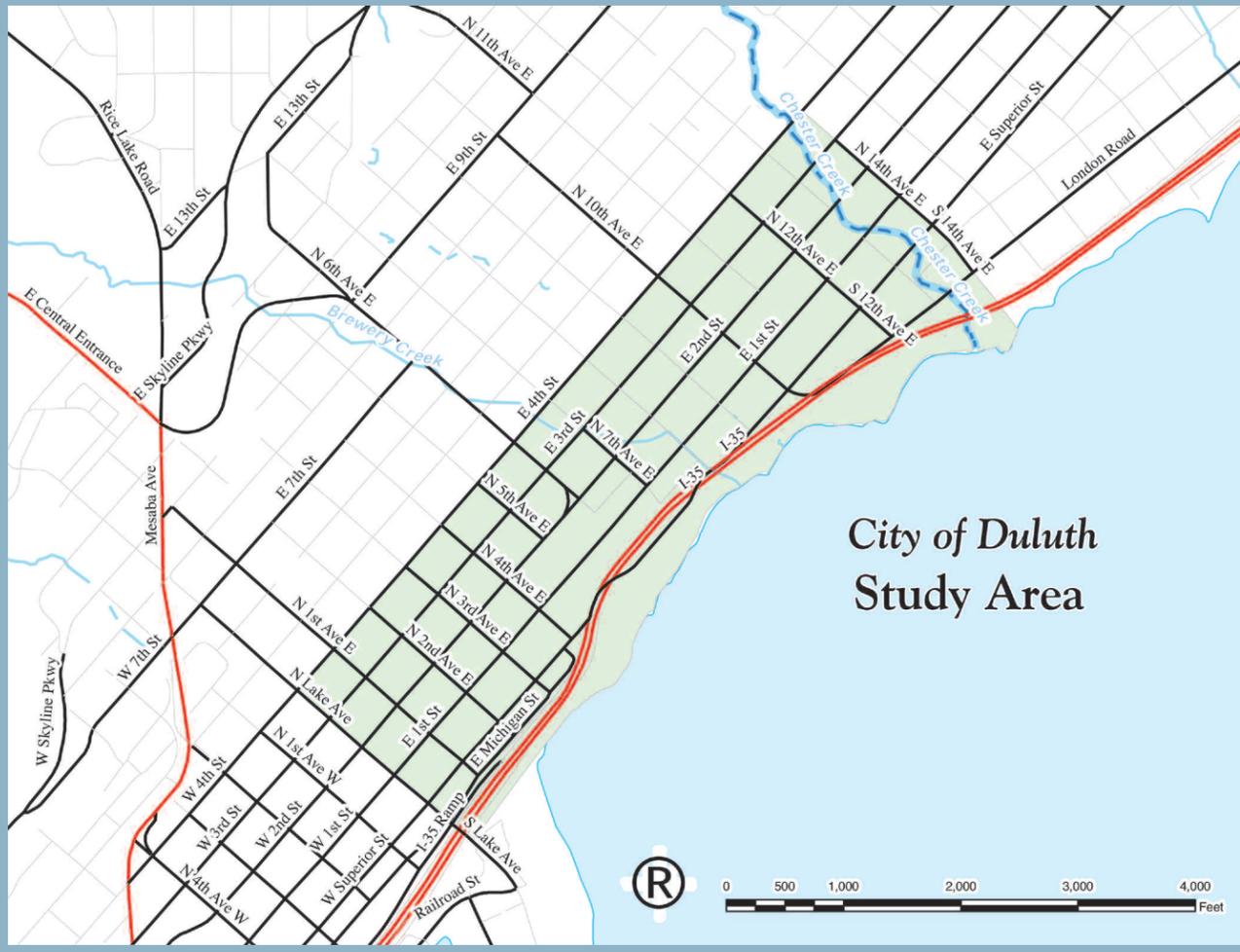
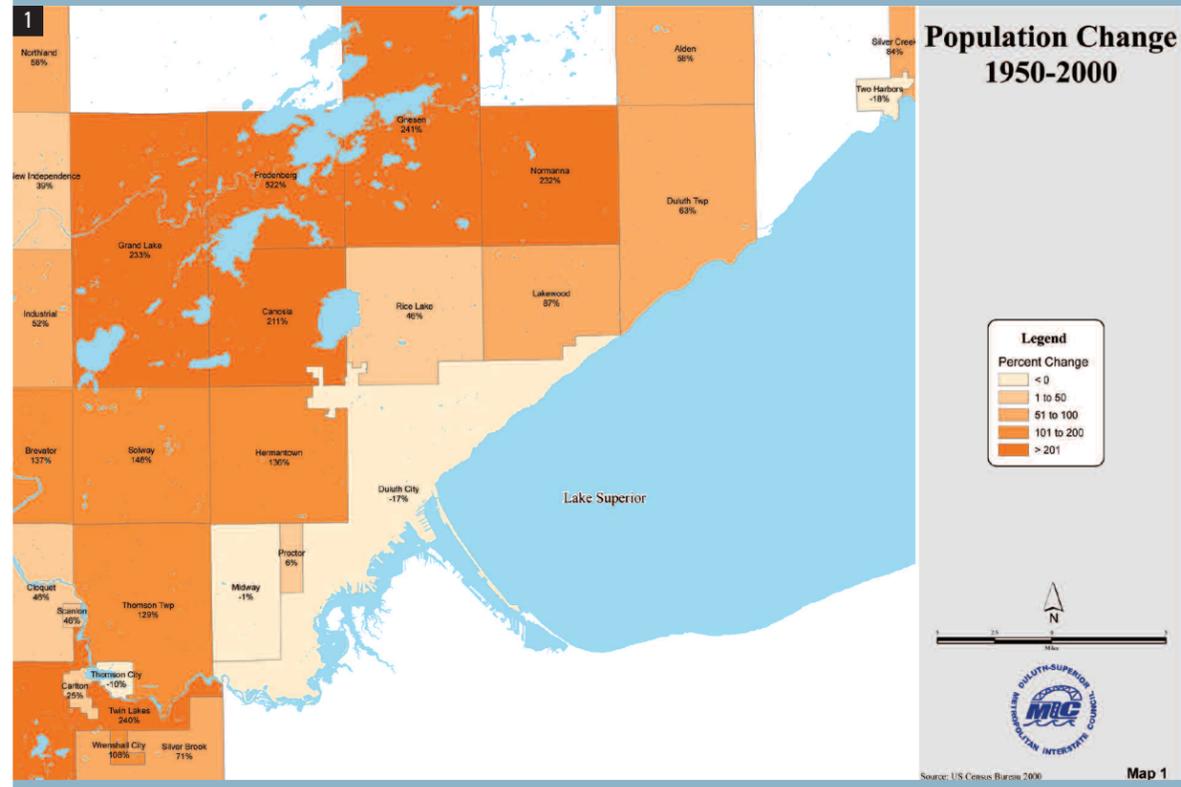


Duluth's East Downtown, Hillside and Waterfront Charrette Report and Plan

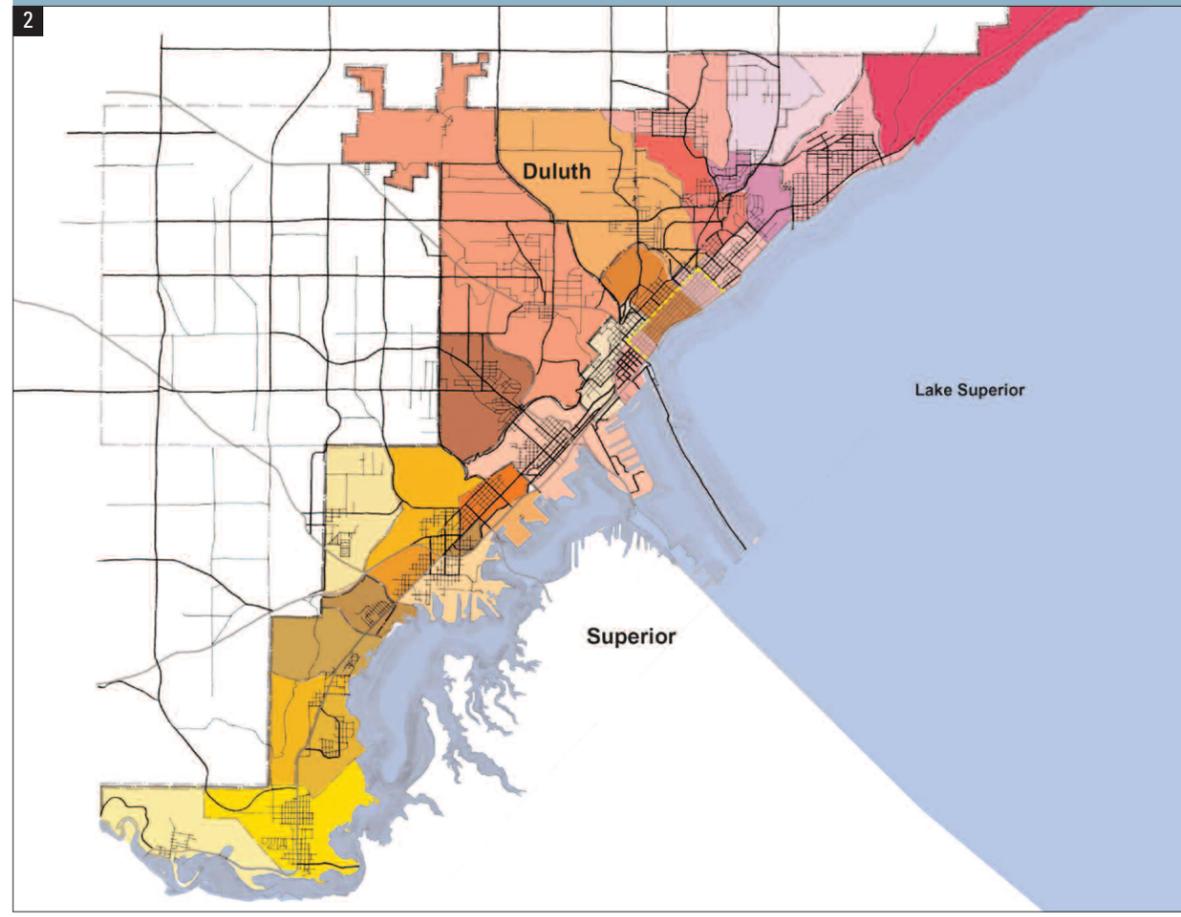


Existing Conditions Assessment 3





The borders of Duluth's East Downtown, Hillside and Waterfront charrette are: Lake Avenue to 14th Avenue East from west to east and Fourth Street to Lakeshore from north to south.



- 1 Like most metropolitan regions in the Midwest and elsewhere, Duluth has experienced a dramatic loss of population base in its central core over the last five decades, while suburban areas at the fringes experienced steady growth.
- 2 This diagram was prepared to illustrate how the charrette study area (highlighted by the broken yellow line) fits into the larger context and relates to the surrounding neighborhoods and transportation network of Duluth.

This chapter presents the assessment of factors that the charrette team studied in depth in order to inform the Master Plan, overarching principles, and specific recommendations. Duluth is at a crossroads in its transition from a declining, rustbelt community to one with a lively, diverse economy and a commitment to its urban wilderness character. Duluth is the fourth largest city in Minnesota, with a population of 86,000. It was a center of bulk shipping—the city's past was tied to its location as a shipping and railroad center, but as these methods of transportation declined, so too did Duluth. The city experienced the closure of many factories following World War II and continuing through the 1980s. The city has, since the early 1980s, balanced the loss of manufacturing jobs with the growth of health care, tourism,

and retail. Today Duluth is a regional center, but problems created during the decades of decline continue to present challenges. Among the problems are widespread poverty and a lack of development in the urban core and adjacent residential neighborhoods. Like all metropolitan areas, Duluth has experienced its share of suburban sprawl in the postwar period, characterized by sprawling residential subdivisions, shopping centers, and other land uses that are widely separated from each other. The pervasiveness of this development pattern has contributed to the decline of the central core of Duluth, as it has in other places, as a major shift in population and businesses to automobile-oriented suburbs that have little connection to the traditional urban core occurred (see population change figure).

Duluth is sometimes called the “San Francisco of the Midwest” because of its dramatic topography, proximity to Lake Superior, and abundance of historic architecture in its downtown and surrounding neighborhoods. This, combined with its location in the northern alpine wilderness, gives it a distinctive character among small U.S. cities. The charrette team was inspired by Duluth’s stunning geographic setting juxtaposed with the traditional urban fabric imposed on the landscape.



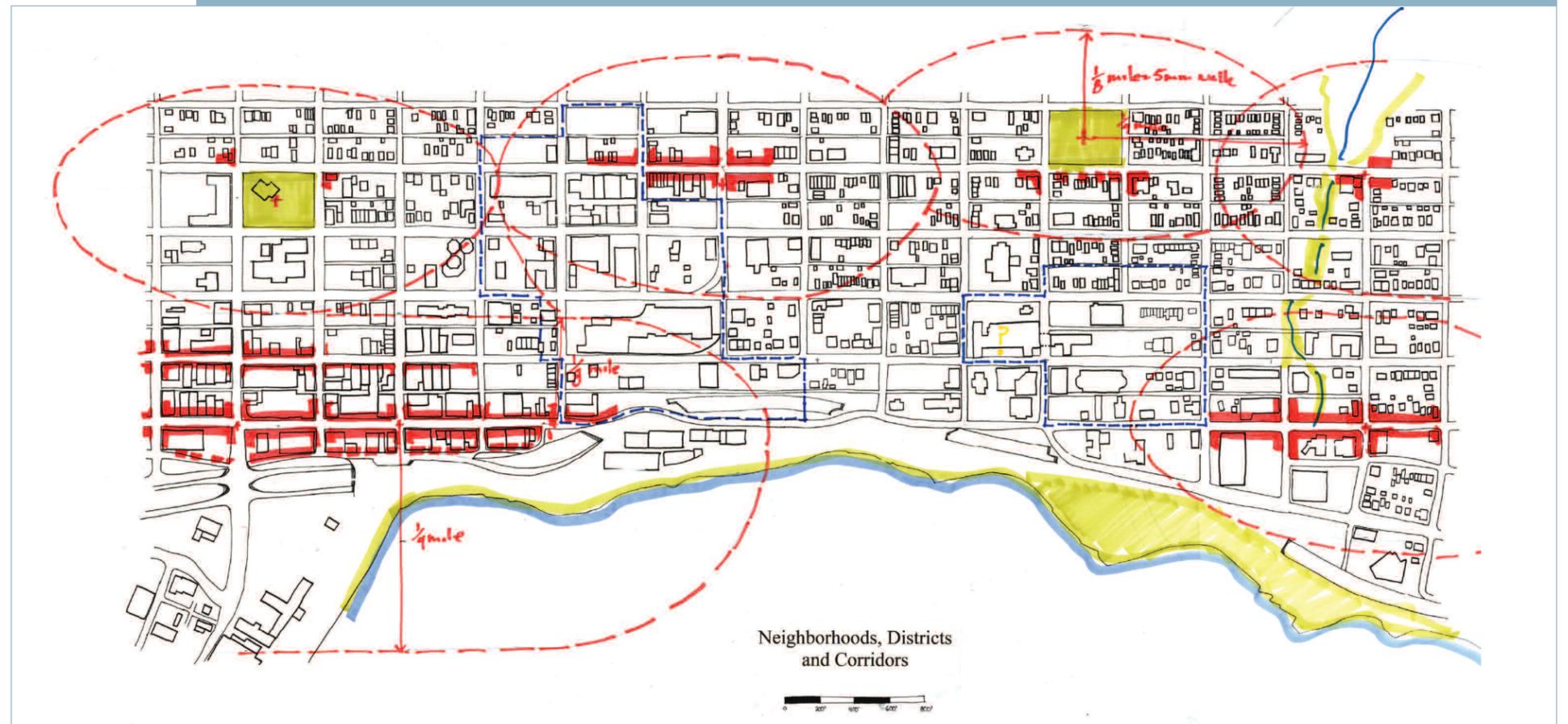
### 3.2.1 URBAN FORM

The charrette study area, which is one of the oldest developed parts of the city, has a fine-grained “urban fabric” based on an interconnected urban grid, typical of how most American cities were laid out in the 18th and 19th centuries. The East Downtown area consists of tightly defined blocks of commercial buildings, most of which are seventy or more years old. Most of the buildings here are two to five stories tall, giving it an exceptionally human scaled, town-like feel. Just a few blocks to the west lies Duluth’s central business district, which has taller buildings and a somewhat more cosmopolitan feel. The Hillside Neighborhood above downtown consists of a wide array of housing stock of all types and sizes, as well as clusters of small commercial and civic buildings. The waterfront area is one of Duluth’s greatest assets and a great source of civic pride. There are a series of large parks and open spaces immediately adjacent or overlooking Lake Superior.



The charrette team began analyzing the study area by identifying discernable districts, neighborhoods, and corridors. Several neighborhood centers and their five-minute walk circle (or oval, in the case of hilly Duluth) were identified. This helped the team to understand the physical structure of the area and how the individual pieces function and relate to each other.

Much of the older building stock throughout the study area has remained intact, and contributes to a walkable environment because older buildings that were built before the prevalence of the automobile were designed to help define the public realm (whether it be the streets, parks, or plazas) and make it comfortable for pedestrians. During field observations, the team identified considerable gaps where buildings had been demolished and left as vacant lots or replaced by contemporary buildings that did not relate well to the street. Numerous older buildings in downtown had also undergone façade alterations at street level in an attempt to “modernize” them; unfortunately, those alterations left the buildings less welcoming to the street. These incremental changes over time weaken the cohesiveness of a neighborhood and its sense of place. Reversing these effects, which have occurred over decades, represents both a challenge and an opportunity.



View of the Hillside neighborhood looking toward St. Luke's Hospital and Lake Superior beyond



East Downtown commercial buildings along Superior Street provide a comfortable downtown scale.



Buildings with a strong relationship to the street can create a high-quality public realm.



In order to further identify where the fine-grained development pattern that fosters connectivity and sociability still exists and where it has been compromised, a “figure ground” of the study area was created. The black areas in the diagram represent buildings and the white areas represent the space between buildings. This assisted the team in systemically assessing the charrette study area and in locating opportunities for potential infill and greater connectivity.



The topography of the Hillside neighborhood affords it stunning views of Lake Superior.

3.2.2 TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE

As mentioned, the charrette study area consists of a traditional orthogonal street and block grid pattern. Most of the blocks in the grid are 375' by 475', which is a comfortable scale for pedestrians, as opposed to very large blocks, which deter walking. This is especially important in a place like Duluth, with its harsh climate and hilly topography.

This diagram shows the traditional grid pattern within the study area. The thinner lines represent alleys that bisect most blocks. Alleys play an important role in the transportation system of an urban area by allowing automobiles access to properties, while de-emphasizing their place in the public realm. It also helps keep the public realm more appealing by relegating refuse and other unattractive elements behind properties.

During the course of the charrette, the team found that many of the roadways in the study area were functioning in a way that encouraged through traffic at higher speeds than appropriate for the

character and context of this area. This was particularly true of one-way streets. The construction of I-35 through downtown during the 1980s removed much of the need for one-way streets; one-way streets seemed to be a "leftover" from the pre-interstate era. This sentiment was echoed at public meetings during the charrette by participants who emphasized the need for traffic calming on many local streets.

Valiant local efforts prevented the interstate from destroying the lakefront. While creating less burden on local streets, the interstate did, however, create a significant physical and psychological barrier between the East Downtown/ Hillside area and the Waterfront/ Canal Park area. Despite the desire to provide connections through specially designed overpasses that incorporate open space and pathways, the highway remains a major divider that discourages pedestrian activity between destinations that would otherwise easily be walkable.



1, 2, and 3  
Examples of transportation infrastructure that accommodates cars more than pedestrians.

4  
The lakefront path is well used by walkers, joggers, and dog walkers.

5  
A pedestrian-friendly streetscape in East Downtown.

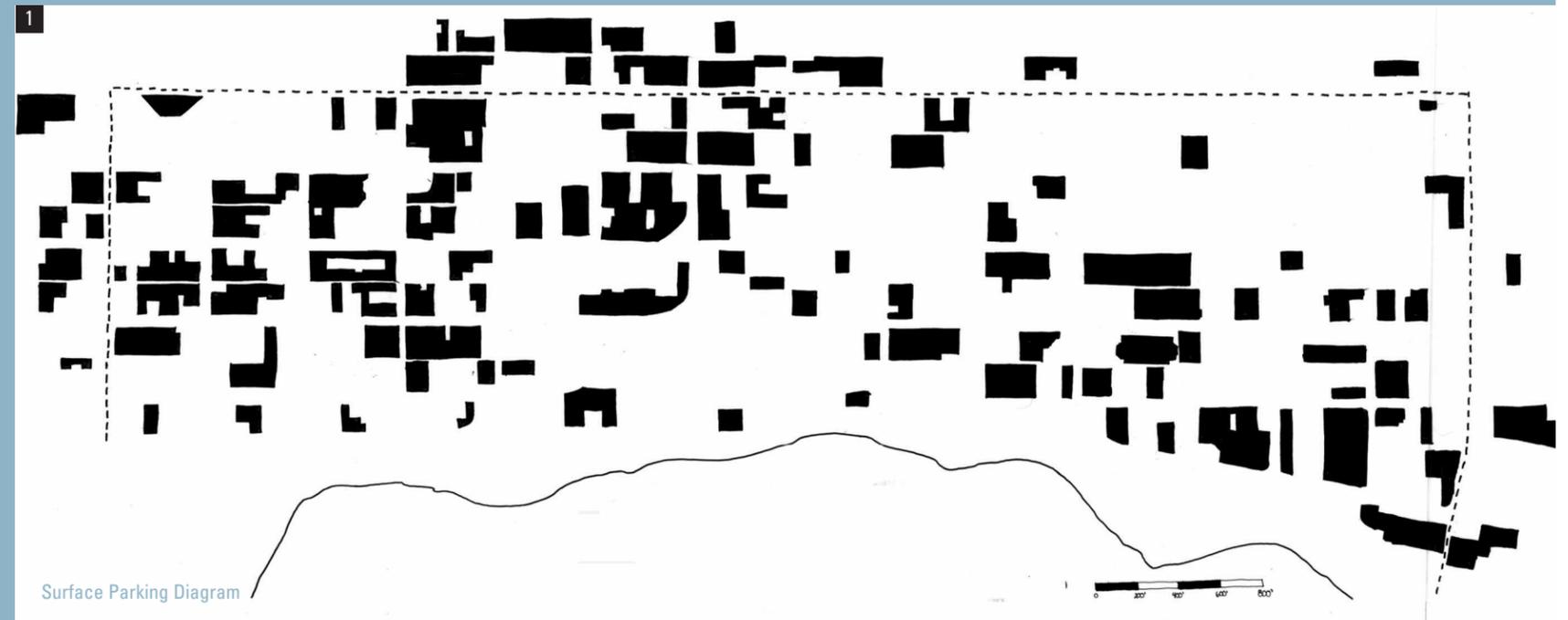


As automobile usage became ubiquitous after WWII, the amount of land needed for parking cars in and around downtown areas of the U.S. increased dramatically. Duluth was no exception. This Surface Parking Diagram shows the vast amount of space devoted to off street parking in the charrette study area alone. The areas in black represent surface parking lots and ramps.

The large amount street frontages devoted to parking creates widespread disruption in the urban fabric and a less pedestrian friendly environment. In addition, valuable real estate that could be productive and contribute to Duluth's revitalization is not realizing its highest and best use.



Parking garage.



Surface Parking Diagram



Examples of transportation infrastructure that take into account the needs of cars alone.



The parking lot at the Armory offers one of the best lakefront views in town for cars.

Duluth's skywalk system presented a unique challenge to the charrette team. While most of the skywalk network is located in the western portion of downtown outside of the charrette study area, there are conceptual plans to expand it into East Downtown. While the system affords climate protection during the cold months, there are several problems inherent to skywalks that work against creating vibrant, healthy downtowns. Skywalks tend to remove activity from the street, which can contribute to a feeling of desolation. Because retailers in traditional downtowns rely heavily on pass-by foot traffic, this can make it more challenging for them to survive during colder months. Another problem is that skywalks harm the continuity of the streetscape. They create large, unattractive visual barriers along the street, place large areas of the street in perpetual shadow, protrude into building facades, and create an often-confusing labyrinth of semi-public passage-ways that can be intimidating to navigate. All this can make the street and downtown a less appealing place to be.

The contrast in character between Duluth's East and West Downtown is stark, and the presence of skywalks is a strong contributing factor to that. The hospital complexes have their own internal skywalks that connect various medical buildings to each other. These skywalks are also quite imposing,

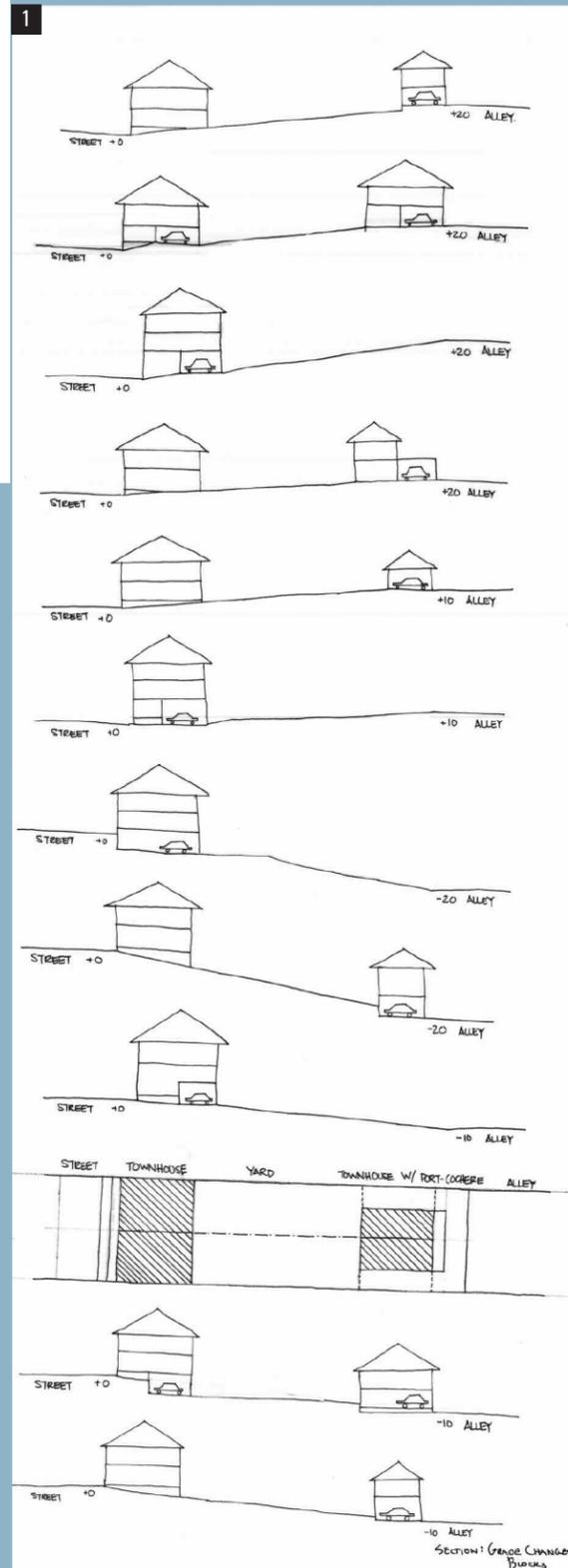
and can conflict with the scale and character of the surrounding neighborhoods. Under current thinking, as the hospitals continue to expand, skywalks will very likely be added to each new building, which can reinforce the impression that the hospitals are self-contained compounds divorced from the neighborhoods.

Despite these challenges, the team recognized early in the charrette that the skywalk system is largely viewed positively by the community. Therefore, the focus was on developing models for better integrating the skywalk system into downtown Duluth and greatly improving its form and function. The goal is to enhance the hospitals connections with their neighborhoods.

1 Diagram showing parking.

2, 3 Skywalks provide shelter to pedestrians during inclement weather, but can create conditions that do not promote vibrant, walkable communities over the long term.

4 Enormous hospital skywalks and a fast-moving street create a particularly inhospitable pedestrian environment in one part of the Hillside neighborhood.



3.2.3 PARKS AND OPEN SPACE

Duluth is fortunate to have a number of fine parks and open spaces, many of which are within the charrette study area. This includes the string of lakefront parks and walking paths along Lake Superior known as the “Lakewalk,” the Chester Creek Trail, and a number of smaller neighborhood parks including Portland Square and the Central Hillside Park.

However, the general sense encountered is that the parks are not being used to their full potential. Lake Place Park, developed as a result of the construction of the interstate highway in the 1980s, which sits between downtown and the waterfront, tends to feel isolated and unwelcoming. The vegetation has become extremely overgrown to a point that it shields the parkland from view, which has attracted vagrants and other illicit activity. The boardwalks that connect the parks to downtown also provide an isolated environment between and behind buildings out of public view, which further discourages use of the open spaces.

The Chester Creek Trail is a great natural resource and amenity, but it is not clearly identified and a visible part of the neighborhood.



1 The Chester Creek Trail is a great natural resource and amenity, but it is not clearly identified nor is it a visible part of the neighborhood.

2, 3 Scenes from some of Duluth's attractive public parks.

1  
The public space in the park at the Central Hillside Community Center, while well maintained, is neither well defined nor inviting to the community at large.

2, 3, 4  
The parkland and walkways that were developed as a result of the interstate feel isolated from both downtown and the waterfront.



Before the charrette, members of the team visited Duluth to meet one-on-one and in small groups with key business leaders, government officials, developers, hospital officials, and other stakeholders. During the charrette, a series of public meetings was held that covered a wide spectrum of economic development factors that affect Duluth's revitalization. From each meeting came the following (selected) suggestions, which helped inform the recommendations that the team subsequently developed:

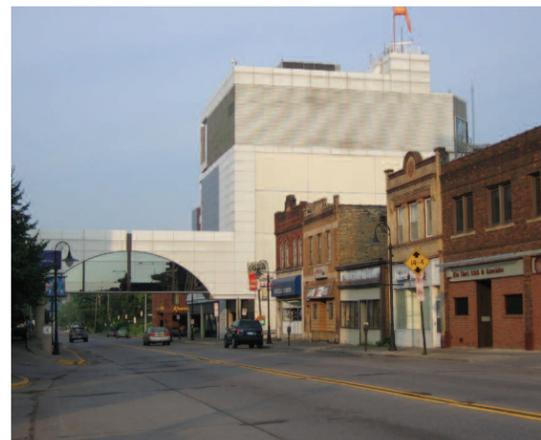
HEALTH CARE INDUSTRY

Health care industry as an economic driver

- Economic importance of healthcare industry
- Industry growth and change to remain competitive
- Health care employees as potential housing customers
- Neighborhood impact concern about expansion

Physical integration of healthcare industry in city

- Efficient use of limited growth space
- New facilities integrate with the existing fabric and structures
- 24-hour function impact on traffic patterns and safety

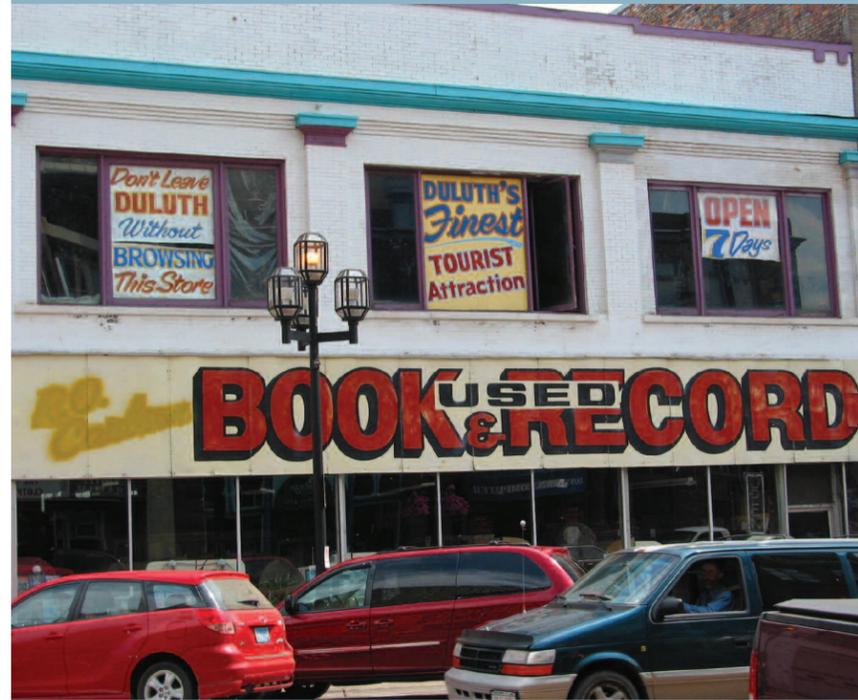


EAST DOWNTOWN BUSINESS OWNERS AND ARTS-RELATED BUSINESS

- Preserve existing diversity, especially for artists, young professionals, and the elderly
- Support more housing for students, young professionals, and live/work spaces for artists
- Provide amenities for visitors—signage and way-finding, public restroom, stronger connections to the lakefront
- Encourage a wider range of retail and restaurants with longer hours

DEVELOPERS, LANDOWNERS, AND FINANCIAL INSTITUTIONS

- A perception that Duluth is not welcoming to business, growth, and entrepreneurs
- Unpredictable and burdensome public process seriously impacts development efforts
- Area needs market-rate housing to drive growth and economic activity, and to support the tax base
- TIF districts as important tools to encourage growth



4TH STREET BUSINESS HILLSIDE NEIGHBORHOOD

Housing

- Reduce and/or minimize the displacement of current residents
- Better planning for university student housing
- Restore historic structures where appropriate
- Promote affordable and workforce housing
- Add transitional housing
- Replace housing that is beyond repair

Neighborhoods/quality of life

- Create Dinkytown (Minneapolis) college student activity area
- Establish more youth centers
- Create resident parking permit program
- Hire code compliance officer; improve regulations and enforcement
- Create and enforce lawn/grass maintenance regulations

Business

- Zoning to promote mixed use
- Promote convenience retail in designated clusters

Safety

- Keep vehicles out of intersection sight lines
- Convert streets to two-way



Policies and design guidelines that promote redevelopment of underutilized commercial properties that could enhance Duluth's appearance should be pursued.

During the charrette, numerous public meetings were held to discuss a wide range of issues that included housing, historic preservation, cultural heritage, tourism, and other topics. All of these issues affect the overall state of Duluth's well-being and to what extent revitalization will take hold and be sustained within the study area.

### 3.4.1 HOUSING AND NEIGHBORHOOD REVITALIZATION

Desired characteristics of housing and neighborhoods:

- Increase homeownership among all income levels
- Promote mixed-income neighborhoods with variety of housing types
- Family-friendly and student-friendly neighborhoods
- Handicapped-accessible neighborhoods
- Environmentally sensitive, energy-efficient
- Adequate parking
- Clean, well-maintained, and safe
- Integrate more neighborhood retail into the community
- Revitalization must accommodate existing residents and not cause displacement





### 3.4.2 HISTORIC PRESERVATION, CIVIC AND CULTURAL HERITAGE

There is a growing realization in Duluth of the value of historic preservation's role in fostering revitalization and economic development.

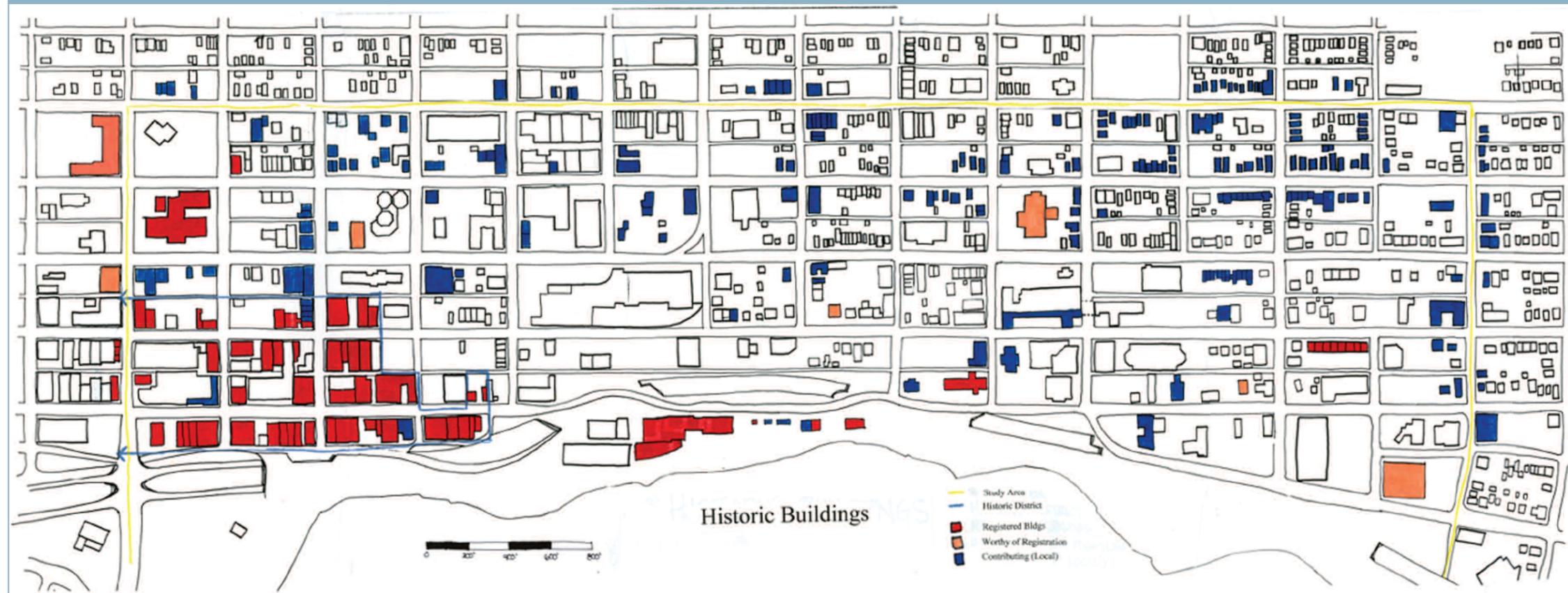
A number of programs exist to help property owners rehabilitate older buildings, but there was also a sense that more can be done to ensure that older buildings are not destroyed when viable alternatives exist that can be win-wins.

The diagram at right highlights the older buildings in downtown Duluth within the study area (shown in red, orange, and blue) that, to one degree or another, contribute historic value to Duluth.

#### What does Historic Preservation mean in Duluth?

The following list was compiled from the results of the stakeholder meeting:

- Heritage tourism and historic legacy
- Unique Duluth character
- Economic redevelopment
- Recycling at a large scale
- Mixed-use and neighborhood services
- Public art
- Education
- Pride in built environment
- Diverse building types
- Diverse neighborhoods

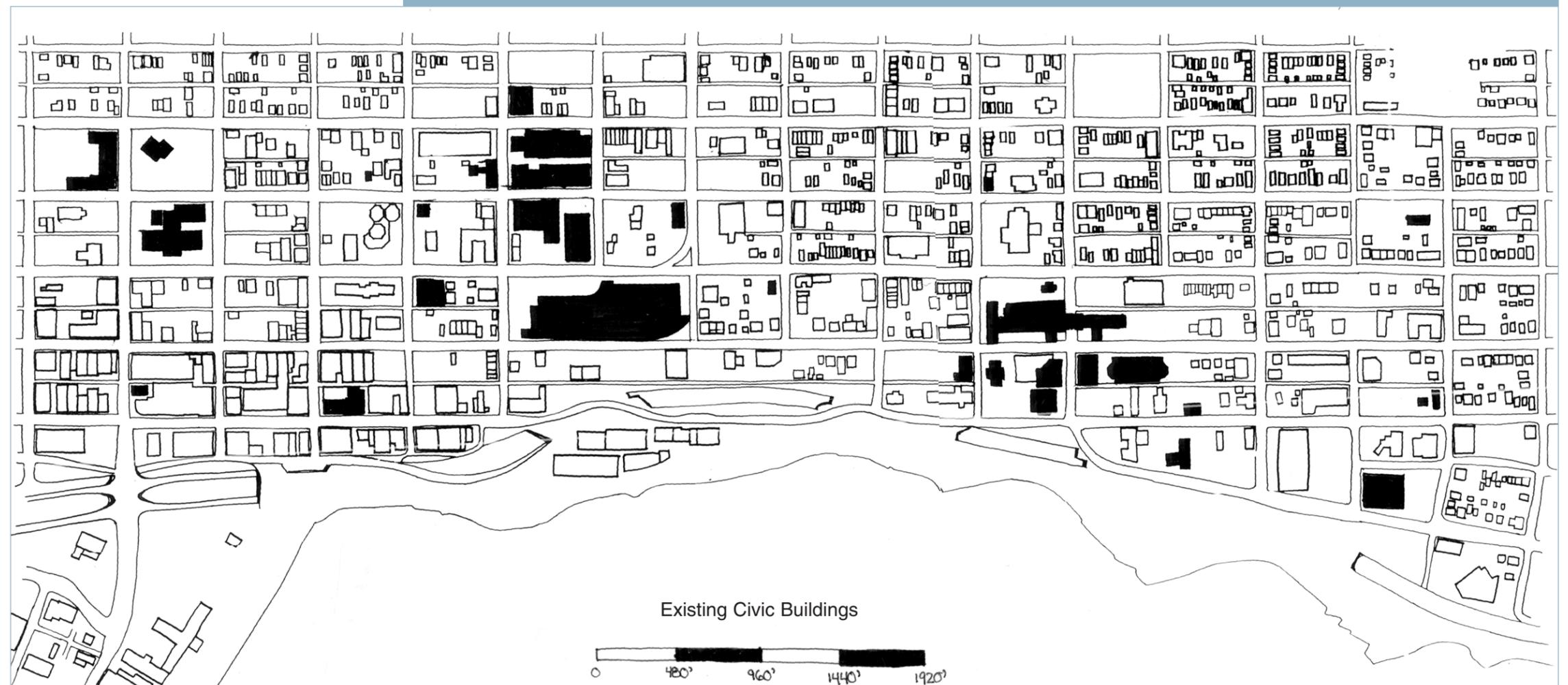


Affected Stakeholders:

- Property owners
- Homeowners
- Business owners
- Investors/developers
- Planning Department
- Planning and Zoning Commission
- City Council
- Potential residents
- Tourists
- Housing and Redevelopment Authority
- National Park Service
- Students



There are a significant number of civic buildings in the charrette study area, including schools, hospitals, theaters, and other institutions. They serve as important landmarks and help reinforce community identity. Many of these civic buildings are also historic in nature, but because of their age and design, have become underutilized or vacant. There is interest in adaptively reusing some of these buildings, most notably the Armory. A feasibility study was recently completed for renovating the building and using part of it as a hotel and conference center.



### 3.4.3 TOURISM, SPECIAL EVENTS, AND CASINO

The charrette meeting on this topic led to the following findings:

#### Streets, signage, and wayfinding

- Refine existing events and help visitors find key locations
- Implement signage and wayfinding plan
- Create new framework for sidewalks and crosswalks
- Skywalks need to be connected to venues
- Opportunity to address parking creatively

#### Create an entertainment district

- Casino as a hub for a four-block entertainment district
- Additional incentives to encourage streetscape improvements
- Address mobility issues for tourists, seniors, and disabled
- Provide more public restrooms and public telephones
- Restore the NorShor Theatre



### 3.4.4 SAFETY, EDUCATION, AND EMERGENCY SERVICES

The charrette meeting on this topic led to the following findings:

- Potential school closures create uncertainty for families
- Schools need more extracurricular programs to support neighborhoods
- Budget constraints have reduced community policing
- Sidewalk maintenance (trash, snow removal) create safety issues and perception that the area is unsafe



### 3.4.5 MULTICULTURAL FORUM

During the charrette a special multicultural forum was held. Highlights of the comments received include:

- Comfort and discomfort zones: The Lakewalk, Canal Park area, Lake Avenue/Casino area and 4th Street Market
- Special places of local heritage: Clayton Jackson McGhie Memorial
- Important community gathering places: Central Hillside area
- Community gardens are needed
- Cost of living in the neighborhood is higher than other areas
- Demolishing housing for parking seems to be more of a priority than housing for people



### 3.4.6 YOUTH INPUT

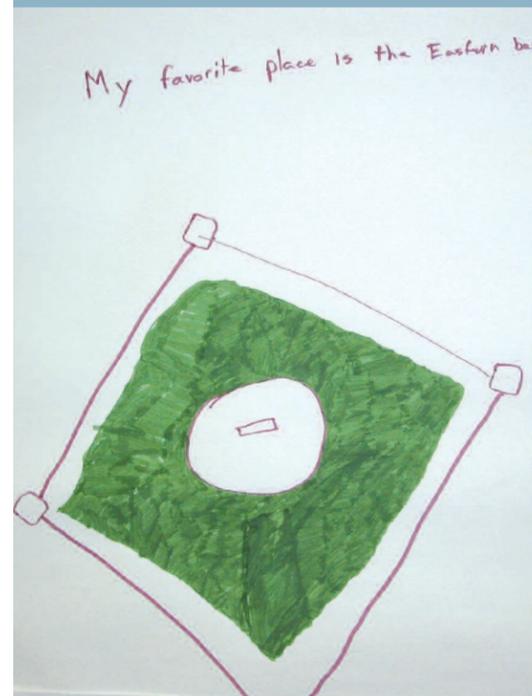
In the spirit of inclusiveness and getting input from the widest range of residents possible during the charrette, a “youth charrette” was held for young children and teens. Children were given the opportunity to draw their favorite places in Duluth and teens were asked what changes to their built environment and policies could be put in place that could improve their quality of life. Dominant themes included:

#### Programs for youth

- Need a teen center and city league sports for teens
- Tutoring and cultural programs, and youth public art, murals
- Youth-employment programs to provide neighborhood services

#### The built environment

- Athletic fields in the focus area
- More family-friendly parks with playground equipment, grills, tables, and gathering places
- Need a library up the hill accessible for neighborhood youth
- Need more businesses that cater to neighborhood residents
- Need pedestrian signage at intersections



Before and during the charrette, the team met with officials about the current planning framework in order to assess obstacles and identify areas of improvement, which could be key to accelerating the revitalization of the study area and the city at large. The Duluth Planning Department was forthcoming about the shortcomings that exist in the current process, and were eager for the team to develop recommendations for improvements.

The city Comprehensive Plan dates from 1927, while the Zoning Ordinance is nearly fifty years old and extremely outdated. The existing land use is fine-grained and complex, but the zoning is oversimplified and in some cases does not allow new development that emulates the traditional, human-scale pattern and form that characterizes the charrette study area. Procedurally, there is a lack of standard policies or procedures for applicants to follow that can be applied uniformly. This creates an atmosphere of unpredictability and uncertainty, which is a major deterrent to most developers. There is also no current regulatory way to manage lake views, which is a central issue for the public.

During the charrette a large meeting was convened to discuss land use policies, planning, regulations, and codes. The salient points that came out of this meeting included the following:

**Vision**

- Create a critical mass of retail downtown
- Keep Duluth unique
- Need fewer surface parking lots
- Encourage a diversity of housing types to accommodate all ages

**Policies to consider**

- Provide incentives for “greening” Duluth
- Develop a plan to accommodate student housing in study area
- Encourage area employees to live in the neighborhood
- Update zoning ordinance
- Improve review and approvals process

