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Pike-Pine corridor focus of design ideas to spur renaissance

The Downtown Seattle Association wants to increase public and private investment in the Pike-Pine area and proposes design ideas to spur a renaissance there.





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GUSTAFSON GUTHRIE NICHOL

BEFORE: GGN came up with design ideas for east-west streets in the Pike-Pine corridor. Here is the current appearance of a typical street: University Street at Third Avenue, looking west. (See the “After” rendering in the next photo, and scroll through the other photos for other examples.)

Fast facts on downtown Seattle

- Families moving in: The number of kids living downtown has risen 31 percent since 2010. The number between ages 5 and 9 grew the most, 72 percent.
- Two-thirds of downtown workers commute without driving; 86,000 are daily bus-riders.
- Taxable retail sales downtown grew for the third consecutive year to \$1.14 billion in 2012, the latest year available.
- Amazon.com, the largest public company headquartered downtown, has 7.9 million square feet of real estate occupied or planned that in total could support more than 40,000 employees.
- Almost 30 percent of apartments under construction in the tri-county area are in downtown Seattle.

In parts of downtown Seattle, the sidewalks are a jumble of incongruous patterns. Some blocks feel cavernous and lack identity. Others attract drug dealers.

This is what could be: Uniform sidewalks with street art. Uncluttered views of the water and the hills. A grand retail corridor to rival those in San Francisco, Chicago and New York.

“Downtown’s streets don’t reflect our progressive ideals,” said landscape architect Shannon Nichol, who spoke Wednesday at a breakfast hosted by the Downtown Seattle Association, a nonprofit that represents businesses and retailers.

Last year, the association hired Gustafson Guthrie Nichol, or GGN, using part of a \$150,000 city grant to recommend design ideas for to improve Pike and Pine streets from Pike Place Market up to Capitol Hill.

“There should be no contest. We’re the place that hatches ideas other cities later enact,” said GGN principal Nichol.

The area’s last major transformation was in the 1990s, when developer Matt Griffin and a group of investors raised \$175 million to create Pacific Place at the corner of Sixth Avenue and Pine Street. Griffin and his partners also struck a deal to have Nordstrom open its flagship store in the historic Frederick & Nelson building next door.

Since then, despite numerous studies and piecemeal efforts, the Pike-Pine area’s streets and buildings have yet to blossom into a coherent, harmonious whole. There are blocks of prominent retail space such as Pacific Place and the renovated Westlake Center followed by blocks of mediocrity.

“If you’re a mall and control the space, you can give thought to the uses in the center,” Pat Callahan, CEO of Urban Renaissance Group, a Seattle real-estate manager, said in an interview. But in a downtown area, where owners of neighboring buildings may have different priorities, “it’s trickier to do.”

Last year, an association task force on the Pike-Pine area called for major investments by the private and public sector to create a world-class destination corridor.

Some task-force members like Jeff Blosser, CEO of the Washington State Convention Center, envision something on par with Chicago's Michigan Avenue, known as The Magnificent Mile.

There's a long way to go, especially in the Pike-Pine area bounded by Second and Third avenues. For years, drug-dealing and other illicit activity has taken place openly on those blocks.

"They're an embarrassment to the city," said developer Greg Smith, who plans to build an apartment tower at Second and Pike. "We've lost those streets to predators."

To reverse that trend, the solution isn't greater police presence, but "knots of activity," such as small groups playing chess, knitting or practicing tai chi, said Dan Biederman, a New York City urban-redevelopment consultant who also spoke at Wednesday's breakfast.

The co-founder of the Bryant Park Corp., Biederman shared how the 9.6-acre Manhattan park went from being the site of rapes and other violent crimes in 1980 to fewer than one violent crime a year today.

The not-for-profit private company manages a thick schedule of public events at Bryant Park, drawing enough non-homeless people to vastly outnumber homeless people in the park, at a ratio as large as 800 to 1, he said.

It's important to have a balance between men and women visitors to the park.

"Women are your most important users," Biederman said. "They'll leave if they don't feel safe. Men will plop themselves down next to a killer."

With no government funding, Bryant Park Corp. runs on an annual budget of \$12.2 million, about half coming from corporate sponsorships.

The owners of the Grace Building, a 1.3-million-square-foot office building across the street, report that since the privatization of the park's management, they've seen their rents grow substantially, raising the building's value by \$217 million, Biederman said.

But can a pro-union city tolerate private management of public spaces? Biederman said it worked in New York because the financially strapped park system could reallocate public funds to neighborhood parks that don't attract corporate sponsorships.

The Downtown Seattle Association is focused on improvements in the Pike-Pine corridor, which it defines as the area between Seneca and Virginia streets, running from the waterfront to Interstate 5. GGN estimates there are 65 acres of total street acreage in this area.

There are steps that could be taken now to enhance the corridor's character, Nichol said. s

A daylong “Market-to-Market Scramble” would offer families a fun experience walking or running from Pike Place Market to Capitol Hill’s Melrose Market.

A wintertime light installation along Pike Street would help enliven “the blank zone of the Convention Center,” Nichol said.

Another would be an outdoor garden festival and competition on Pike Street as a summer counterpart to February’s Northwest Flower and Garden Show.

Over time, the city also could revamp policies for street grids by, among other things, converting one-way streets to two-way, lowering the downtown speed limit, and carrying out the bicycle master plan, Nichol said.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of GGN’s recommendations would be gradually phasing out tall shrubs from east-west streets, to expose views and building facades. Only north-south avenues would be lined with trees, a visual cue for pedestrians roaming downtown.

“We have great vistas to the water from these east-west connections,” said Susan McLaughlin, urban design lead in the Seattle Department of Transportation’s street use and urban forestry division.

She said the department already has endorsed most of GGN’s ideas and has a Pike-Pine street concept plan. But the plan is voluntary, and for there to be consistency, private-sector developers need to commit to it, she said.

Urban Renaissance’s Callahan said it cuts both ways.

When his group renovated the Joshua Green building at Fourth and Pike, it focused on the look and feel of that corner. Today RN74, a wine-bar and restaurant, anchors it.

“That was a more expensive deal for us than other options, but we were looking at it long term,” Callahan said.

Now, he said, “if we have a good plan and can fund some streetscape improvements, we’ll leverage additional private capital that’s investing in the corridor as well.”

GGN estimates it will take between \$27 million and \$54 million to carry out the streetscape improvements.

The costliest elements are 20 intersections with raised crosswalks along Pike and Pine and installation of dozens of shade-giving trees and underground soil vaults along First and Second avenues between Union and Virginia.

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