

PROJECT DESCRIPTION



The Westchase District is a 4.2 square mile territory located in West Houston. The District has a population of nearly 25,000 residents, similar to that of Manhattan, is served by two school districts, one public building (a library) and no dedicated public green space. Decimated and humiliated by office towers from the 70's and 80's, strip centers, surface parking and aging apartment complexes, the District faced the problem of all future development requiring detention due to downstream flooding. All development to date simply drained into a series of ditches that fed into two bayous that had become increasingly overwhelmed by the deferred capacity control. Thus the district divided into two drainage basins that did not lend themselves to ecumenical coverage. One half of the district had less potential future development potential than the other yet each had equally recoverable underutilized sites and vacant land.

Complicating matters was the radicalized atomization of control. There were literally hundreds of sites controlled by over 185 sets of site by site deed restrictions, again not under the control of the district and with no hope of being so as zoning is anathema in Houston. In light of all of this, The District gave the consultant team the task of creating a 20-year plan (long range for Houston) to reinvigorate the results of a previous plan (symmetrically 20 years old) and keep the district competitive in surrounding markets. Board members of the District were very clear about what they wanted to see. They used examples like Times Square, and Central Park. They spoke in acronyms like T.O.D. (Transit Oriented Development) and P.A.P. (Public Agency Partners) and B.H.A.G (Big Hairy Audacious Goals).

Our analysis exposed an existing network of underutilized infrastructure spanning the district composed of the previously mentioned ditches feeding into the two water sheds, several aggressive aerial easements (one 180 feet wide) and large setbacks within the right of way of the key organizing boulevards passing through the District. This presented opportunities that had been absent in our previous efforts. Primarily the opportunities to capitalize on an existing asset while positively affecting the district and adding much needed detention capacity in the process. We began to see this as a network of canals, linear public parks and detention banks organized by spaces that existed in a new matrix of potential places.

Working with our hydraulic engineer, we were able to calculate the maximization of the ditch network in addition to the potential of the connection facilitated by the right of ways. This led to the preliminary establishment of the Detention Bank's balance, this being the tool for incentivizing some developers to build detention features where possible but allowing others who normally would be economically disadvantaged in land-cost-to-density ratios to maximize development by drawing on the bank. Thus was born both a tool for incentives and a tool for passive influence over what was to be built. As a connected network of open spaces that will provide the greenery and recreational opportunities that the District needs to support denser development while providing residents and workers with a refuge from the hectic pace of today's busy world, the scheme will also create opportunities for higher-value private development and facilitate increased densities.

This newly established water mitigation and source provided the potential for episodes of pocket-like development that began to break down the mega scale of the district and yet remain connected in a subversive way. We envisioned a series of oasis-like interventions that thrived off of the tension with the areas of The District that were robustly resistant to development, at least in the foreseeable future. We constructed images of environments that made water an integral organizing element while benefitting from its sustainable attributes, cooling effects and functioning a passive system of biotechnology. Our canal matrix differs in some ways from conventional approaches to generating or renewing urban fabric in that its order of implementation creates a random modality which resists the technique of illustrating in plan the unified diversity that is the ultimate goal. We had to construct conceptual drawings that activated our framework in a way that underscores the stimulative effect we know the plan will produce without trying to predict which sites were key or had to be done first and so on. It betrays our deep belief in the notion that stimulation is preferred over simulation in proposing urban environments. We sensed that the case studies and actual design interpretations would activate the potential of the framework more so than guidelines and prescriptive methods.

Once established, this water-based initiative allowed us to begin to look more broadly at existing conditions on sites potentially benefiting from second fronts, new views and pedestrian connectivity. Utilizing several instruments our team generated, not the least of which was our economic consultants market-based value studies, we initiated a series of form-based interventions on a series of strategic sites (*Principle 11*);

- On the site of the aging strip mall owned by a district board member developer, we mixed retail and residential uses to form a micro community both diverse and walkable. With the added density and due a favorable elevation, we created detention that could be banked to sell to future disadvantaged development sites.





- On a site with an underperforming capital improvement in the form of an aging apartment complex that abutted the canal network thus creating a second “front”, we proposed a courtyard-permeated residential complex. The proposal illustrates a series of landscaped courtyards with water views and favorable southerly wind exposures on one side and a defined street façade with potentially excellent pedestrian interest regarding porches and through access.
- On a green-filled site, one of the few undeveloped land aggregations in the district (owned by a Chinese conglomerate), we capitalized on proposed improvements to the boulevard right-of-way in the form of a linear park connecting to the canal network. We illustrated how market-based office and residential building types could interact to provide a pedestrian zone facilitating public space access, housing and walk-to-work proximity.
- On a series of very small parcels, we tested single use building types such as townhomes, build-to-suit corporate facilities, future public buildings and mid-rise office in a manner that illustrates the scheme’s potential to allow individual episodic development to take on urban characteristics of connectivity. The network allows for properties to connect through the revitalized public right-of-way thus accommodating the individual quirks of deed restrictions with very little sacrifice on the part of developer / owners.



Houston is in many ways the ultimate industrial landscape. This is important because Houston is often cited as the poster child of sprawl at the expense of its awesome industrial landscape. It is the landscape of the billboard and the refinery that have a disconcerting visual and economic impact. It has been described as “a loose confederation of industrial profit centers...”. If the compositional element of sprawl in Houston is the single-family ranch house, the increment of organization binding them together is the industrial / office park. It is the DNA of the District. In cities like Houston and on problems with outsized scale in urban plans regional infill environments, adherence to time-tested urban standards need not be abandoned to populism and market forces. Plans must be flexible enough to be interpreted in effective configurations in problems that are becoming more and more typical. They must remain a framework for strategies that promote stewardship of The Public no matter where they are found. They should not generate typical solutions nor should it apply only to certain types of problems. We hope we have illustrated one such illustration of its flexibility.

We concluded that:

- Most master plans fail because of inherent inflexibility in the face of unpredictable variables. This is especially true of plans intended for long-term implementation...as is this master plan.
- The beauty of this plan lies in the fact that it is not a plan at all.
- It is better termed a strategy for the incremental implementation of a district-wide infrastructural improvement with the goal of inducing development where opportunities exist and redevelopment where necessary.
- It is not dependent on any one element. Rather than creating a singularity within the district this strategy seeks the creation of a fabric of character over the entire district.
- It can begin anywhere in the district, we simply selected those areas in which a first step seemed most logical.
- It answers, through its very concept, the deadly question asked at the end of most master planning exercises, “Now what?”.



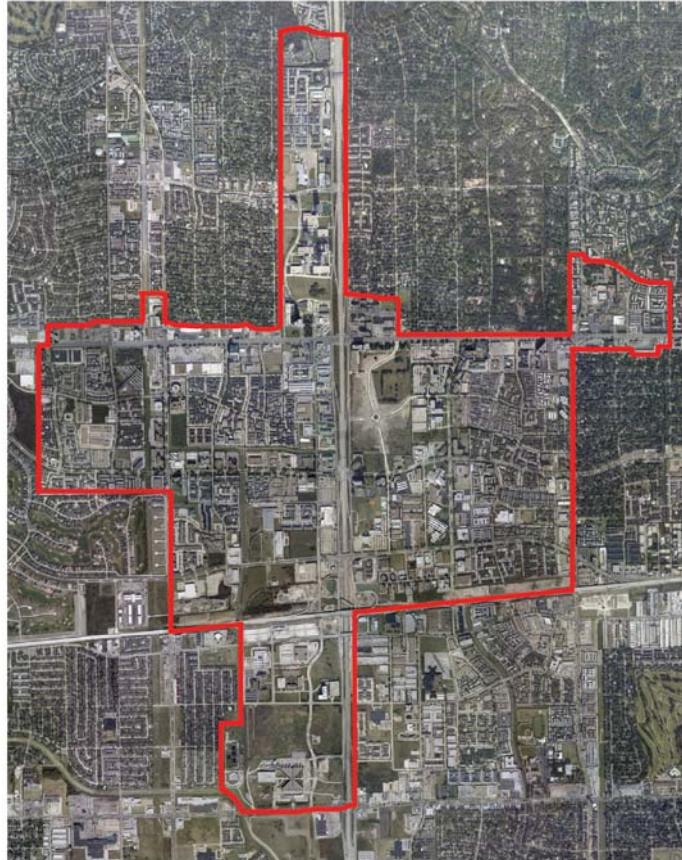
WESTCHASE MASTER PLAN

HOUSTON, TEXAS
4.2 SQUARE MILE

DEFINING THE DISTRICT



Site Photos



The District

LONG RANGE MASTER PLAN

The district is a 4.2 square mile area located in West Houston. Composed of office towers from the 70's and 80's, strip centers and aging apartment complexes.

The task was to create a long range plan (20 year implementation) for the district to help reinvigorate the results of a previous plan and keep the district competitive in surrounding markets.

The District Board members were very clear about what they wanted to see...

They used examples like Times Square...And Central Park... And spoke in acronyms like T.O.D., P.A.P... And B.H.A.G...



City of Houston



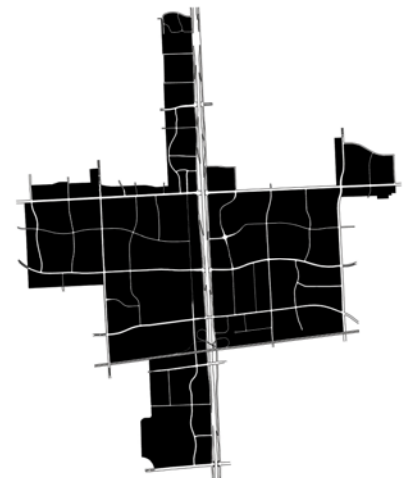
Texas Medical Center



Midtown



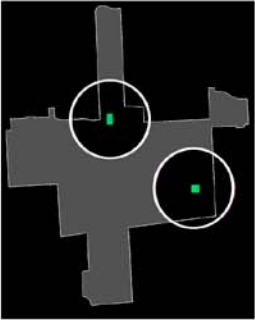
Uptown



Analyzed District



ANALYZING THE DISTRICT



District Park = 3.2 Acres
 25,000 Population Requires
 531 Acres of Parks / OS.*
 *RE National Standards



Infrastructure Diagram

Fields & Land Diagram

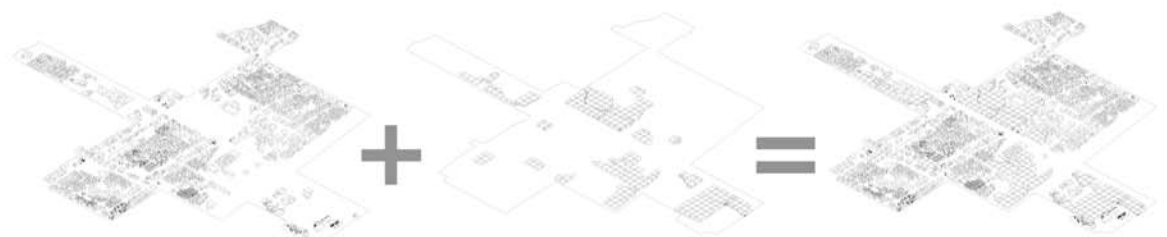
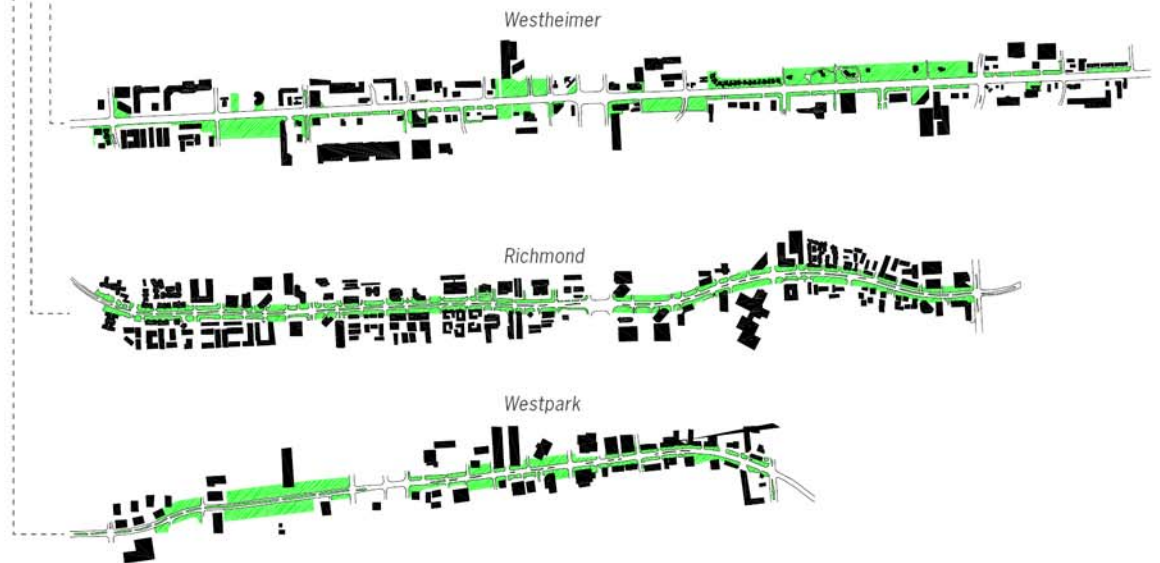
Vertical Structures Diagram

ANALYZING + PROBLEMS

We began by pulling the district apart and analyzing it piece by piece... Discovering beautiful patterns in the process...

And problems...

If the District received all the projects it could optimistically expect to receive within the next twenty years, it would only begin to fill in the voids... And that's at one story. Clearly the District can not hope to build itself into a sense of place through density alone.



Existing Density

20 Year Projected Growth = 16,150,000 SF

UNCOVERING THE DISTRICT

PROCESS...

We began audaciously. Focusing on the core of the district...Added streets and reduced block sizes.

Then proposed market building type interventions...



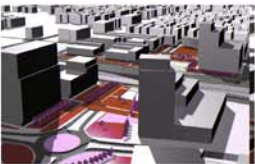
Existing footprint



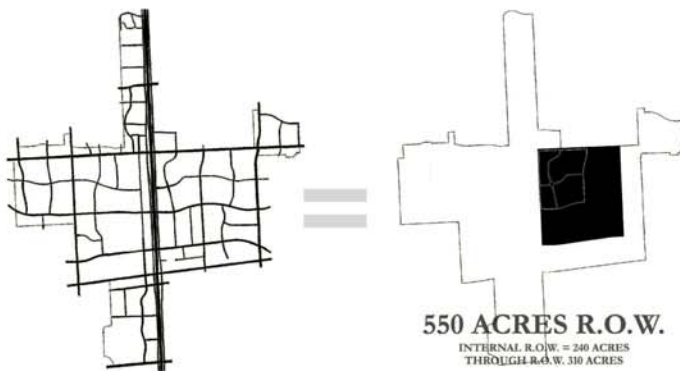
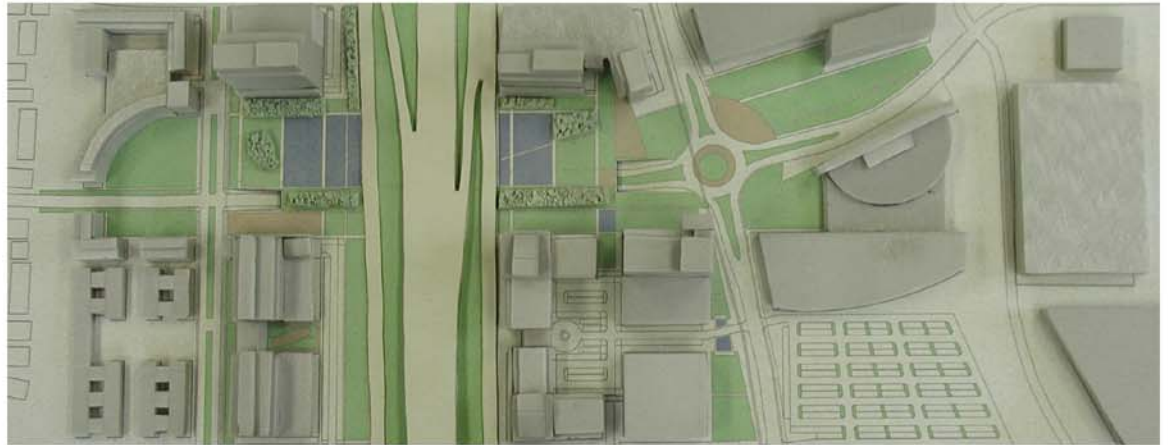
Block system: added streets and reduced block sizes



Overlay with existing and new block system



District Block Study

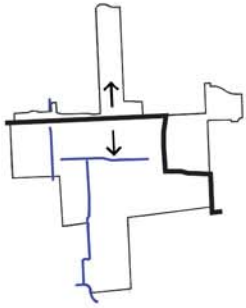


DISCOVERED...

Unlike most cities, Houston, and therefore the District, has no zoning. As a municipal management the District is supported by taxes on commercial property within its boundaries, but controls only rights of way. The private realm is controlled by an array of 185 independent deed restrictions.

But, looking back at what the district could actually control... We decided to try another approach.

RE-FRAMING THE DISTRICT



The District is situated at the crest of two water sheds. All future development within the district will require detention.



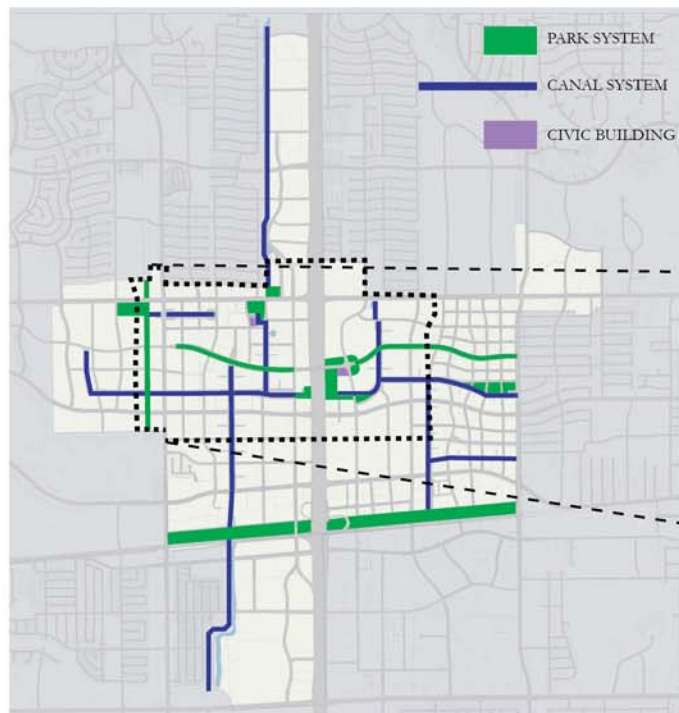
Site Photo

OPPORTUNITIES

Returning to our analysis, we saw something we had missed before. . . An existing network of under utilized infrastructure spanning the district. This presented opportunities that had been absent in our previous efforts. *Primarily the opportunities to capitalize on an existing asset while positively affecting the district and adding much needed detention capacity in the process.*

PROPOSED AREAS

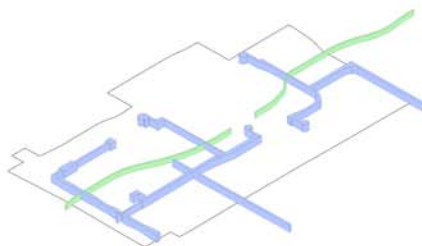
Working with an area twice the size of the Houston CBD, we again felt the need to focus our efforts. We chose an area that intersected the major drainage and power easements, a nascent boulevard, and areas of strategic opportunity... And envisioned what it could become.



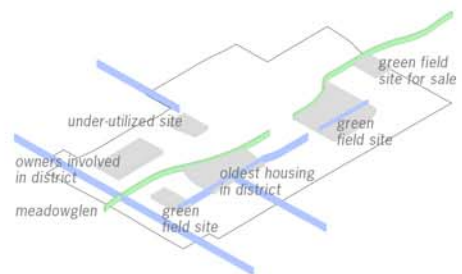
Existing Canal and Park System



Canal and Park System with future density

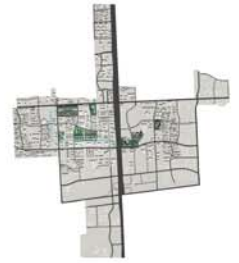


Canal and Park System Axo



Canal and Park System with proposed market-based developments

"All connected by right of ways, flood walls, and aerial easements, into a 'sustainable' network of detention banks"



PROPOSED AREAS FOR DISTRICT

Existing:



Proposed:
new market-based
developments



- 1 Condo Style Residential Complex
- 2 Mixed Retail / Residential
- 3 Mixed Office / Residential
- 4 Townhomes with a Park
- 5 Built-to-Suit Office Buildings
- 6 Midrise Office Tower
- 7 Bike Trail

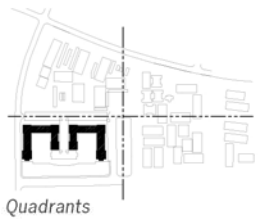
CONDO STYLE RESIDENTIAL COMPLEX



RESIDENTIAL COMPLEX

With higher densities and more green space than the apartments it replaced...
It could be implemented in phases...

And we also utilize what had formerly been a drainage ditch.



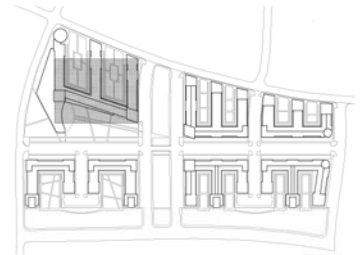
Quadrants



Public Recreational - 51,150 SF



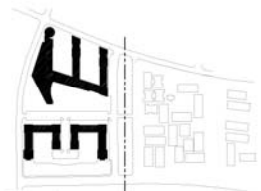
Residential - 1,626 Units



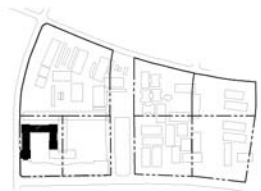
Parking 2 Levels (below grade) - 1,050
Surface Parking - 800
Outdoor Green - 430,800 SF



Bisections



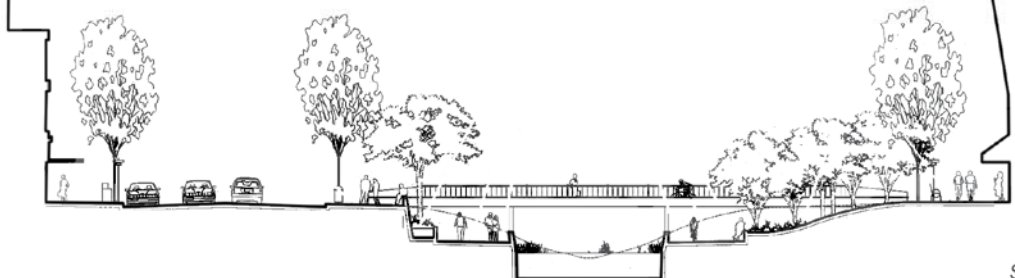
Bisections



Building Parcels

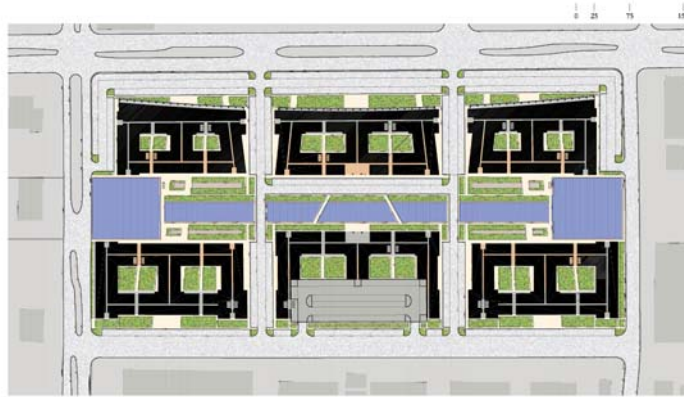
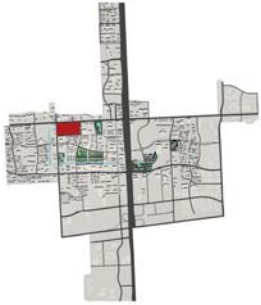


Perspective A



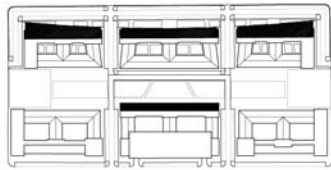
Section A

MIXED RETIAL / RESIDENTIAL

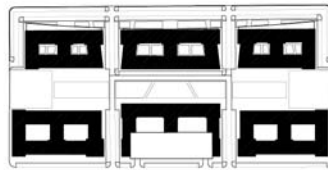


MIXED-USE: RETAIL + RESIDENTIAL

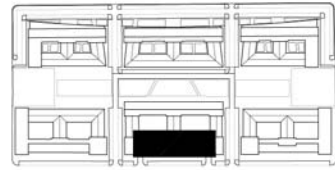
On the site of the aging strip mall we mixed retail and residential. Adding detention that could be banked for other development. While providing an amenity for residents and shoppers alike, with much needed detention.



Retail - 132,845 SF



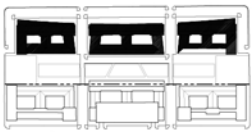
Residential - 1,023 Units



Parking 8 Levels - 1,050
Surface Parking - 300
Outdoor Green - 330,800 SF



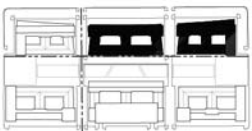
Trisections



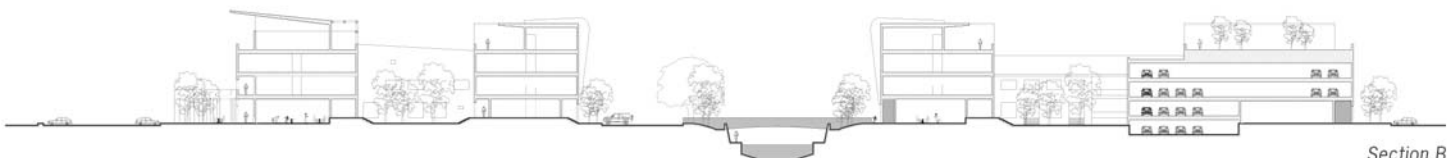
Bisections



Building Parcel



Quadrant



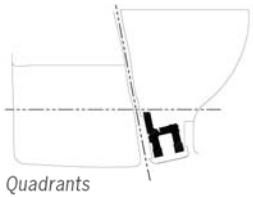
MIXED OFFICE / RESIDENTIAL



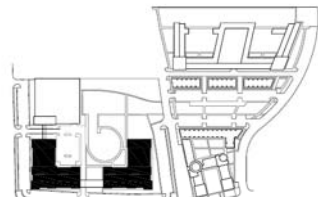
MIXED-USE: OFFICE + RESIDENTIAL

On the green field site, office is mixed with residential, creating a large mixed use development, while continuing the canal concept through on-site detention...

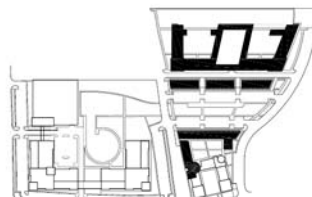
And granting access to a proposed boulevard/linear park.



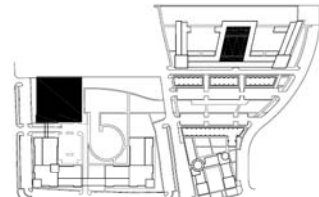
Quadrants



Office - 457,200 SF



Residential - 280 Units



Parking Office 10 Levels - 1,800
 Parking Residential 3 Levels - 336
 Outdoor Green - 210,000 SF



Bisections



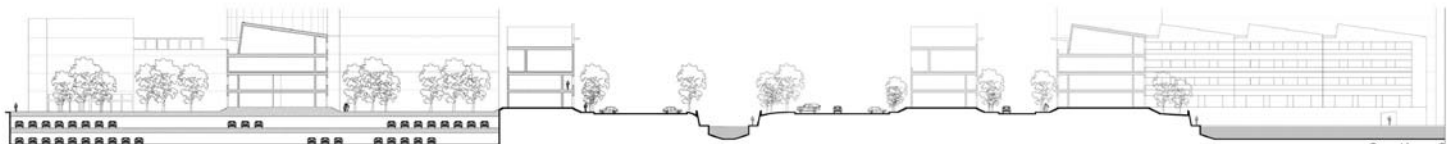
Bisections



Building Parcel



Perspective C



Section C

SMALLER PARCELS



Perspective D



The smaller parcels can be developed independently... Each development can be incentivized by the District

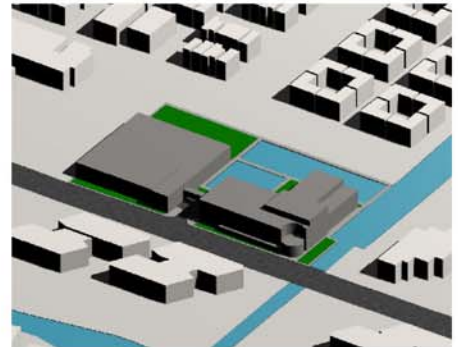


TOWNHOMES WITH A PARK

Residential: 36 Townhomes
Courtyard Green: 40,100 SF

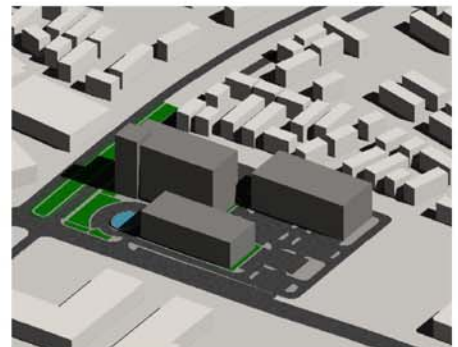
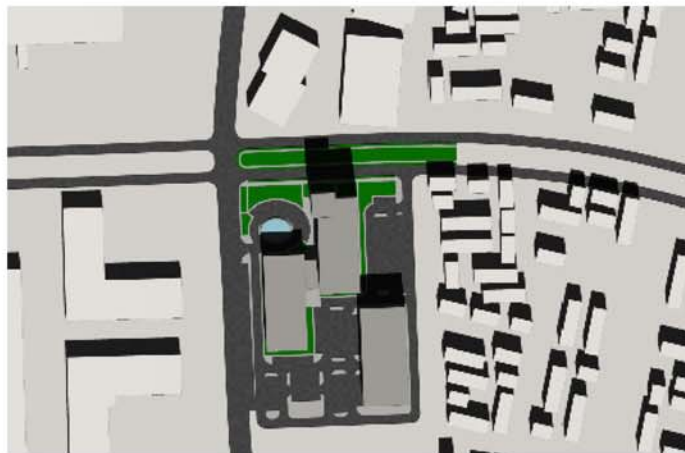


and connected through the network of right-of-ways and public areas controlled by the district in co-operation with public agencies.



BUILT-TO-SUIT OFFICE BUILDINGS

Office: 264,600 SF
Courtyard Green: 30,800 SF



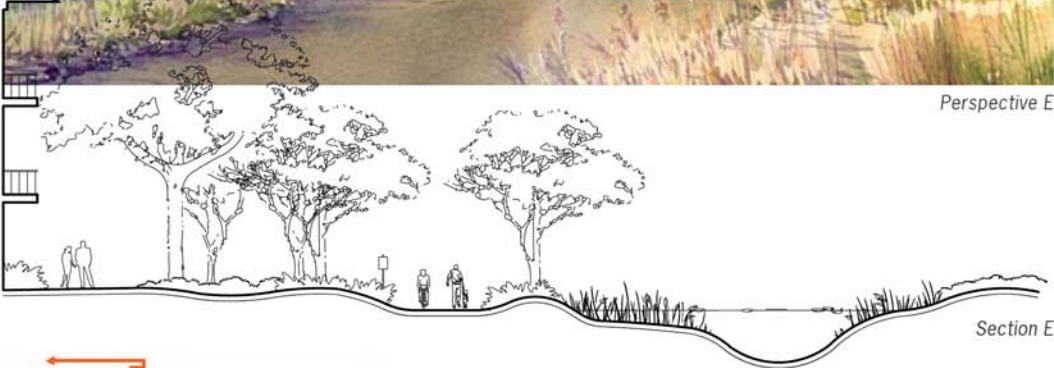
MIDRISE OFFICE TOWER

Office: 450,000 SF
Courtyard Green: 17,500 SF

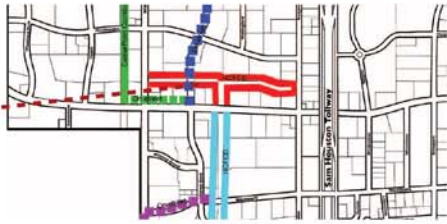
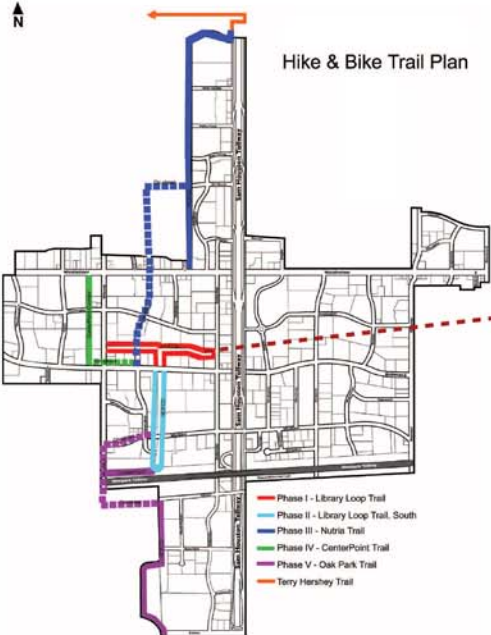
HIKE & BIKE TRAIL



Perspective E



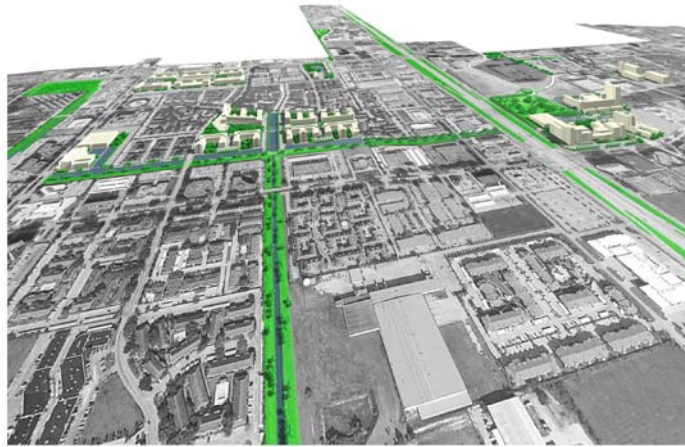
Section E



RECLAIM POWERLINE EASEMENT WITH HIKE AND BIKE TRAIL IMPLEMENTATION

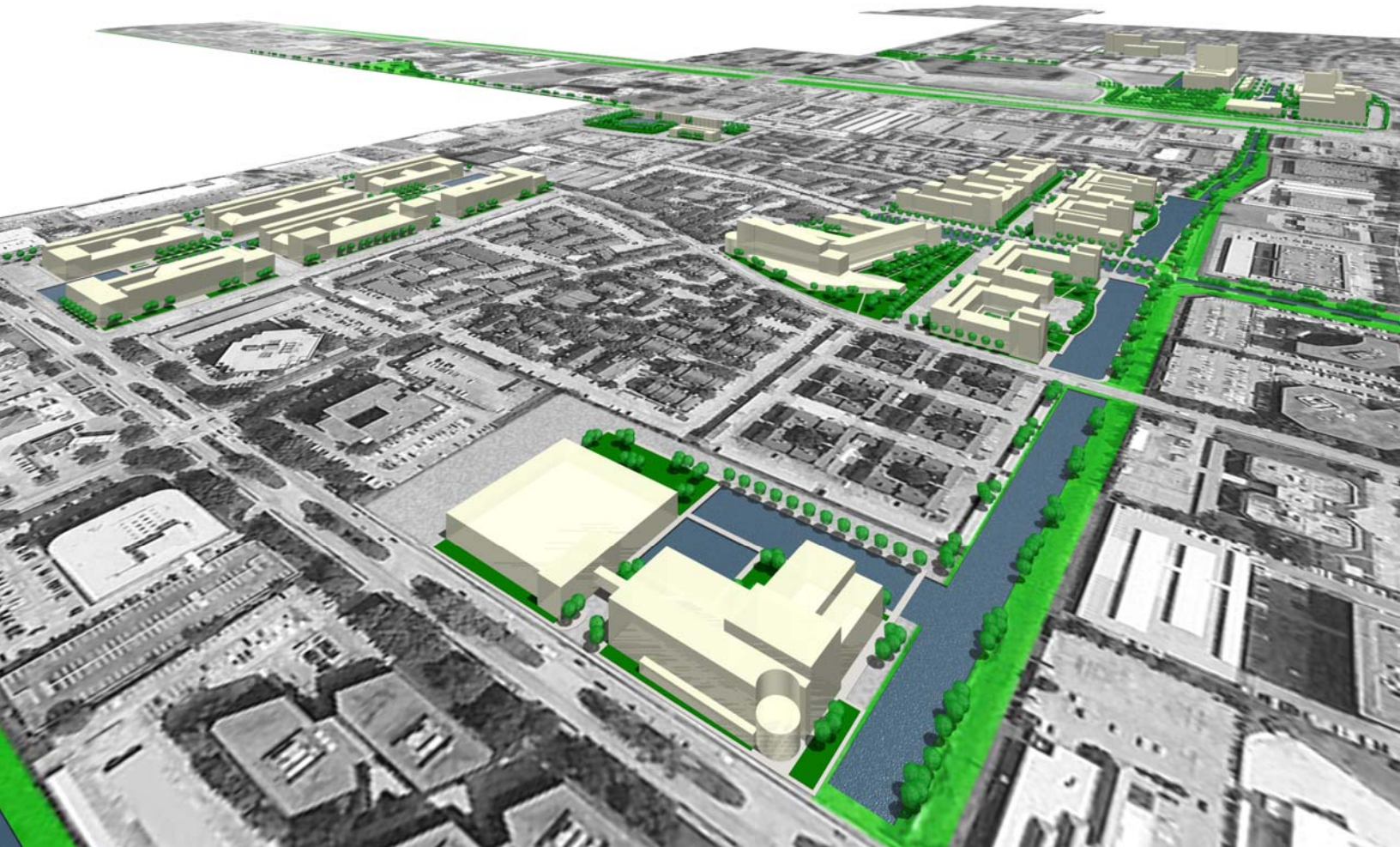
The District is using internal funds of 1 million towards the design and construction phase for the Hike and Bike trail along the aerial easement - to begin in March 2010

MASTER PLAN



NETWORK

A connected network of open spaces will provide the greenery and recreational opportunities that the District needs to support denser development while providing residents and workers with a refuge from the hectic pace of today's busy world. It will also create opportunities for higher-value private development and facilitate increased densities.



REMARKS

Most master plans fail because of inherent inflexibility in the face of unpredictable variables. This is especially true of plans intended for long term implementation...As is this master plan.

The beauty of this plan lies in the fact that it is not a plan at all...

It is better termed a strategy for the incremental implementation of a district wide infrastructural improvement with the goal of inducing development where opportunities exist and redevelopment where necessary.

It is not dependent on any one element. Rather than creating a singularity within the district this strategy seeks the creation of a fabric of character over the entire district.

It can begin anywhere in the district, we simply selected those areas in which a first step seemed most logical.

It answers, through its very concept, the deadly question asked that the end of most master planning exercises, "Now what?".

