



CORRIDORS OF VISION: EMERGENT THEMES & OUTCOMES TO DATE JUNE 2006

This document represents a summary of dominant themes that emerged from the seven "Corridors of Vision" sessions sponsored by Upcorp from 2000 through 2003. Included are some successes toward constructively addressing these issues.

PROCESS:

Each Corridors session brought together a broad group of stakeholders (merchants, residents, non-profits, activists, design professionals, etc.) who examined a distinct commercial corridor within the Uptown community. The exception was the final session that tackled the broader theme of "Uptown - Through the Artist's Eye."

Before each session, invited participants received an assessment workbook with thought-provoking questions centered on five values: accessibility, safety, goods and services, aesthetics, and community diversity. Each participant was asked to visit the study area, preferably more than once to observe activities during several different times of day. Based on their notes and observations, the session participants shared their current impressions and visions for the future of the study area. The group shared their ideas to revitalize the corridor, then developed those ideas further by grouping them and discussing potential next steps for each vision category.

BROADER THEMES:

Although the Corridors of Vision process initially focused the attention of community stakeholders on a distinct section of Uptown's commercial geography, a number of themes emerge across every session. Clearly when examining an urban community of over 60,000 residents within a larger metropolis, these themes become interwoven.

1. Branding & Segmenting of Uptown - Unification with Meaning

Identity - Through the Corridors process there was a recognition of and willingness to consider the greater Uptown community as a collection of several distinct sub-neighborhoods. Furthermore there was an interest in celebrating these distinctions via physical expression (e.g. street banners, historic markers, gateway features, distinct maps and signage, etc.).

Festivals - Uptown's personality should also be expressed via events and activities such as a street festival, farmer's markets, holiday events, etc. Alderman Shiller's annual Unity Fest captures only a small portion of the enthusiasm expressed in Corridors for an Uptown street fest. Over the past several years, there had been some progress toward an Uptown Jazz & Poetry Festival centered within the Broadway-Lawrence Entertainment District.

Marketing - The marketing of Uptown means both internally and externally. Internally, for example, many Uptown residents are unaware of the variety of retailers and entertainment options just a few blocks away. Externally, Uptown can be marketed to shoppers, restaurant goers, theatergoers, etc. who do not reside in Uptown.

2. Uptown's History as a Building Block

Uptown has a unique history among Chicago's neighborhoods. It has served as home to a burgeoning movie industry, a center for regional entertainment and merchandising, a port of entry and home to refugees and newcomers from across the country and the world. Corridors participants encouraged the retention, recognition, and marketing of Uptown's heritage - both physical (its inventory of historic architecture) and cultural (its diversity in ethnicity, language, and arts).

A keystone in the restoration of Uptown as an entertainment district is, of course, the Uptown Theatre. The Aragon Ballroom has seen ongoing maintenance since opening its doors in the 1920s. The Riviera, though less cared for, has also remained in use as a movie theatre, nightclub, and live music venue. Its prospects have improved since its acquisition by longtime tenant, Chicago-based entertainment production company Jam Productions.

The largest of three sizable theatrical venues at the Broadway Lawrence intersection, the Uptown Theatre, has more complex, though not unreachable prospects for revival. In 2005, through a court-appointed receiver, the City of Chicago advanced funds to stabilize the building's deteriorating terra cotta façade.

Above and beyond the restoration and reuse of the Uptown Theatre, Corridors participants wanted to see rehab of Uptown's other historic properties and new development projects be sensitive to and architecturally consonant with their surroundings.

While only minimal work has been done to slow the Uptown Theatre's deterioration, a number of rehab and new construction projects have taken place. Among these projects are:

- The rehab of the Perkins Building (1100 W. Lawrence) into a mixed-use condo development with street level retail/office and a nightclub.
- Inspiration Corporation's rehabilitation of the former Harper House on the 4700 block of Sheridan Road and the opening of its restaurant, Café Too.
- At Properties is planning a complete rehab of the terra cotta jewel Uptown Broadway building on the 4700 block of Broadway.

- The former Heilig-Meyers Furniture building at the corner of Broadway & Ainslie has been converted into a mixed-use property with condominiums above street level commercial activity (restaurants, theatre).
- Of course this list would be incomplete without Freed & Associates' redevelopment of the former Goldblatt's complex on the triangle bounded by Racine, Broadway, and Leland. Two of the three buildings were restored. The new third building is respectful to the massing of the structure it replaced.

The Corridors participants repeatedly mentioned the desirability of historic district markers, plaques, maps, motion picture museum, and other possibilities for honoring Uptown's history. These ideas may be considered by the newly established Special Service Area Commission and/or within the context of the anticipated streetscaping projects on Broadway as they proceed north from Irving Park Road.

A very visible celebration of Uptown's cultural diversity is now in place. The recently completed Argyle Mural at Argyle & Winthrop walks the viewer through a century of the street's occupants - from Charles Chaplin and Parker to the variety of immigrants who have made Uptown their home.

3. Safe, Attractive and Vibrant Street Life

The theme of safe, attractive, and vibrant streets was prominent throughout the Corridors of Vision sessions. This theme can be broken down into three areas:

a. Design/Physical Attractiveness

The desires for an attractive streetscape were stated emphatically. Street furniture (such as benches, streetlamps, banners, kiosks, incorporation of art into signage & maps, etc.) that is consonant with Uptown's personality (movie history, architecture, culture) was expressly desired.

Sensitive rehab of buildings and commercial space also plays a role in making an attractive streetscape. In addition to larger projects mentioned above, there have been a number of property owners - often in conjunction with Upcorp or the Uptown Chamber - making efforts to improve their property's street image. The City's Façade Rebate program has been a useful tool. A number of businesses have used this program effectively in the past several years.

Other projects have or will result in a more pedestrian-friendly Uptown. Bridgeview Bank reconfigured and beautified its drive-thru facility to include a safer curb cut and more green space. The addition of sidewalk cafes has been a benefit to the attractiveness of Uptown's streets (e.g. Tweet, Crew, Thai Pastry). The Asian Village mall on the 5100 block of Broadway will be redesigned to gain more parking and commercial space yet present a friendlier face to the Broadway side.

b. Cleanliness & Safety

Clean, litter free streets, better street lighting, removal of security gates from shops, less loitering and public drinking. These were all topics across the Corridors of Vision sessions.

Probably the most important step toward cleaner streets will be the establishment of the Uptown SSA. Concern with litter on Uptown's streets has been consistently expressed by businesses and residents alike. The SSA will provide an immediate, visible, and effective activity toward alleviation of litter problems.

The community stakeholders in the Argyle Street area have considered making removal of security gates and bars from store windows a priority. The consensus is that the bars **may not** really **be** needed as prevention and that they present the feeling of an unsafe street for business patrons and residents. A number of Argyle businesses have removed their gates as an example to their fellow merchants and a security camera was installed at the corner of Argyle and Winthrop. Hopefully improved crime statistics and positive reinforcement from within the community will convince Argyle merchants to remove their security gates and beautify their properties.

The Chamber and Uptown Chicago Commission have worked with businesses and elected officials to address concerns with public drinking. Packaged liquor sellers in Uptown have agreed to restrict the sale of specific sizes and brands of liquor to help limit public drinking and loitering.

c. Vibrant Street life

Again, sidewalk cafes have been a benefit to the attractiveness of Uptown's streets. But one theme from Corridors that has not quite been achieved is an Uptown street fest. As noted above, there have been smaller scaled efforts (Unity Fest, Jazz/Poetry) already. A larger annual festival might be supplemented by smaller scaled, targeted festivals (e.g. ethnic, artists, music)

4. Role of Locally Owned v. Chain Businesses in Economic Development

There was an expressed desire to encourage local ownership of small businesses. Additionally, there was a recognition that national chain retailers and businesses can play a role in the economic development of Uptown. For example, the opening of a Borders Bookstore in the former Goldblatt's building proved to be a complimentary addition to Uptown's handful of specialized bookstores. Similarly, the planned opening of a Target store in the Wilson Yard development affords Uptown the presence of a general retailer it does not have now.

Through the efforts of and communication between various organizations, property owners, business people, and residents, there have been a number of locally-owned businesses opened in Uptown over the past several years. Among them are Holiday Club, Rique's

Mexican Restaurant, Connexio Café, Urban Tea Lounge, Tweet/Big Chicks, Soggy Paws, and Crew Bar+Grill.

Concerns with retention of existing local businesses (i.e. displacement issues) have also been addressed with some effectiveness. For example, businesses facing displacement by the Wilson Yard redevelopment have received assistance in finding new space within Uptown and in dealing with licensing and zoning issues (e.g. Azusa Liquors, Tattoo Factory, Peoples Law Center, Mr. Salsa). A number of other longtime Uptown institutions have moved within the community and/or expanded. These include Inspiration Café, African Wonderland, Nick's, Anna Maria Pastaria, and Tweet.

5. Parking and Transportation

a. Parking

Parking is a recurring theme in almost any neighborhood in the City of Chicago. The dense urban fabric of an Uptown platted and built in the early part of the 20th century did not allow for the abundance of parking inventory expected today. The desirability of a cohesive and relatively compact entertainment district or shopping area is balanced with the needs of these activities to have parking spaces for an automobile dominant consumer. Despite efforts toward a pleasant, walkable commercial districts, the need for parking will remain.

A valet parking arrangement between Aon/Combined Insurance and Aragon Ballroom has done much to alleviate parking problems on full-house concert nights at the Aragon, and Aon/Combined has offered space for valet parking to other restaurants and theaters within the district.

Parking for Wilson Yard, the areas around the Broadway-Lawrence intersection, Argyle Street, and Truman College are being carefully monitored and encouraged to provide for as much parking for the community as possible.

b. Chicago Transit Authority

An historically-sensitive rehab of both the Wilson and Lawrence CTA Red Line stations would have an extraordinary impact. It would make for a safe, pleasant place for commuters and shoppers and it would provide renovated commercial space on Broadway. As of now, there has only been funding to plan the renovation of Wilson and no timeline for rehabilitation for the chain link Lawrence Station.

6. Underutilized Spaces

This theme draws together some conspicuous projects and properties that have and will continue to have prominent impact upon redevelopment of Uptown.

- a. Wilson Yard
Among its impacts, the Wilson Yard redevelopment will present changes in traffic patterns, retail attraction, parking availability, and density of shoppers.
- b. Uptown Theatre
The good news is that the shuttered hulk of the Uptown Theatre has not prevented investment in the Broadway/Lawrence intersection (e.g. Uptown Square development, Perkins Building, Crew, Heilig Meyers). The bad news is, of course, that the Theatre still remains in its blighted, decaying state.
- c. CTA-Wilson Station
The Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) owns and manages the underutilized and highly-visible commercial properties in the Wilson Elevated Station. The long-term vacancies, lack of upkeep, etc. represent a continuous black eye that dominates the retail node of Wilson & Broadway.
- d. Riviera Theatre Complex
Although the theatre portion of this corner appears to be in good hands, the remaining office/retail building fronting both Lawrence and Broadway continues to be a determined eyesore that detracts from the many positive developments around it.
- e. Winthrop/Lawrence
Plans for the surface parking lot kitty-corner to the Aragon Ballroom into a combination parking garage and street level commercial space will greatly alleviate evening entertainment/theatre parking problems while adding a livelier, retail-oriented space to the street.
- e. Truman College
Although viewed as a sort of public square in the Corridors, the College needs physical improvement and a way to mitigate the negative impacts on community and commercial parking inventory

7. The Need for Successful Coalition Building

To accomplish such an ambitious range of goals, a real coming together of community stakeholders is necessary. Communication and trust between government, social service agencies, residents, businesses, etc. is key. In the past two years there are several successes to point out.

One success is the Roots of Argyle street mural project at the corner of Argyle and Winthrop. It is a result of the hard work of many different people and organizations. Artists, block clubs, and business people came together to raise money and identify the historical themes that represent the Argyle Street neighborhood in the content of the mural.

Another note of progress is the study & successful implementation of Uptown Special Service Area via Upcorp and the Uptown Chamber. The SSA process requires communication with and education & participation with property owners and businesses.

A reconfiguration and refocusing of the Upcorp & the Uptown Chamber over the past year is another step in the direction of fruitful coalition building. The two organizations have restructured to be more inclusive yet more targeted in their goals.

A "Creative Alliance for Uptown" has also been formed. The Alliance functions as a network of artists and artistic organizations for information sharing.

ADDITIONAL NOTES:

Below are some additional thoughts on projects and issues that will impact the progress toward Corridors of Visions' goals.

Uptown Special Service Area

Clearly the establishment of the Uptown Special Service Area (SSA) will enable the community to make dramatic strides toward the revitalization goals envisioned in the Corridors process. Tangible examples will be street cleaning, marketing for local merchants through printed materials, events, new street banners. Furthermore, a budget and process can be developed to further identify and refine the image and symbols of Uptown's sub-neighborhoods (e.g. Buena Park, Sheridan Park, Heart of Uptown, Argyle Street, Entertainment District). Enhancements such as new sidewalks, street furniture such as planters, benches, street lighting etc. will be addressed partially through the SSA program.

Broadway Streetscape

An additional large step in the direction of a more inviting and pedestrian-friendly Uptown is the streetscape project for the 4000-4600 blocks of Broadway. This Capital Improvement Project is slated for the budget year of 2008-2009.

Availability of Public Funding

Lack of public funding could have a negative effect on redevelopment in Uptown. This could include delay of non-SSA and non-TIF funded streetscaping, and transit monies to rehab and reconfigure Uptown's CTA stations.

Likewise, funding for the City Colleges of Chicago to enhance the physical plant of Truman College or to add parking capacity **is essential**.

Cutbacks in the federally-sponsored Community Development Block Grant Program (CDBG) have already had an impact in the elimination of the City-funded Façade Rebate Program.

Properties in the "Wrong Hands"

Owners of the Uptown, Riviera, the CTA, etc. The list of bad property owners and their poorly managed and neglected properties goes on. The positive note is that the list has shortened over the past several years. The Heilig-Meyers building, the Perkins building, the Riviera Theatre, the Bachelor Apartments, the Uptown Broadway building, all represent steps in the direction of an engaged, responsible property ownership.