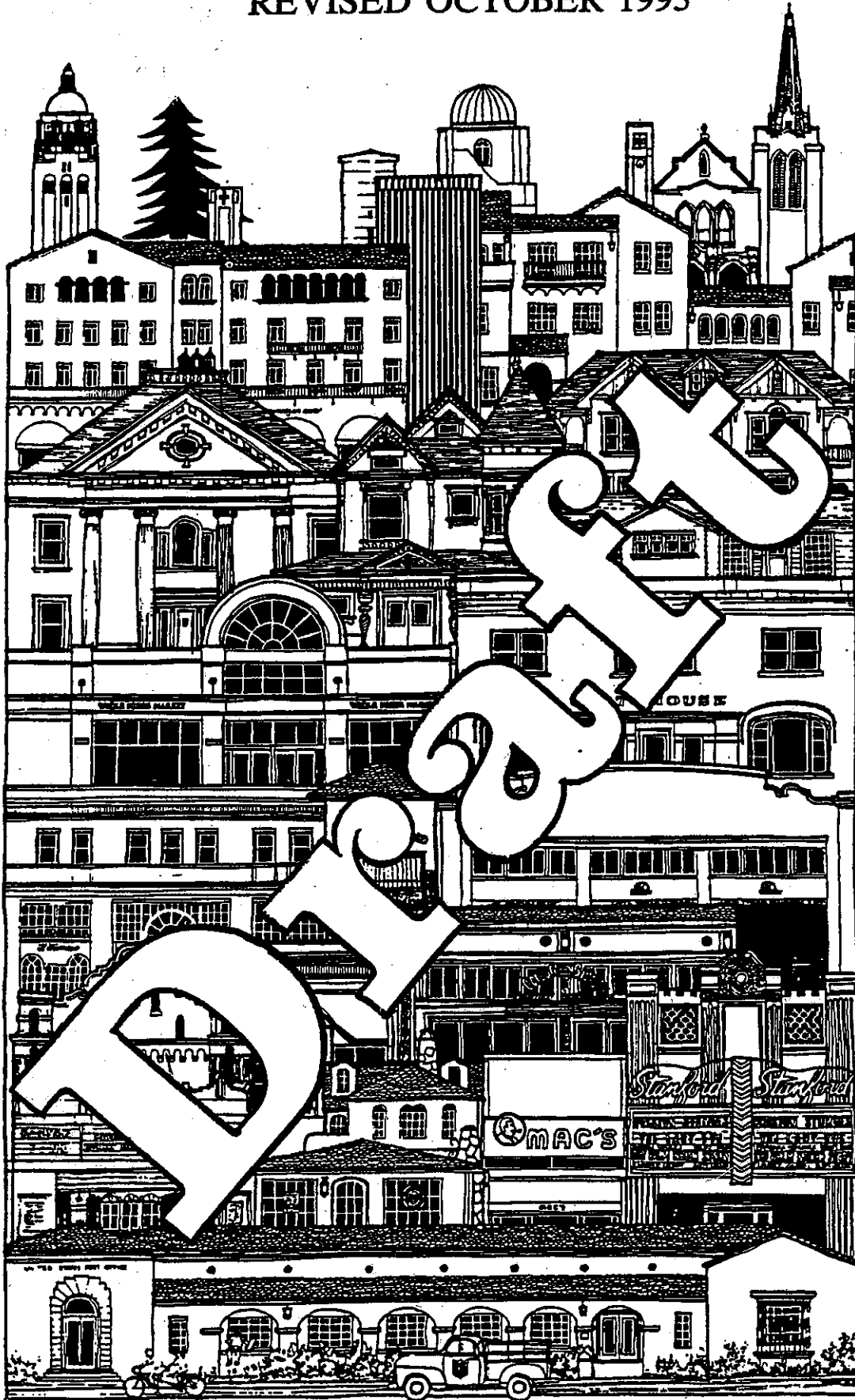


REVISED OCTOBER 1993



P A L O A L T O

Downtown Urban Design

CITY OF PALO ALTO DOWNTOWN URBAN DESIGN

Draft 10/93

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The Urban Design Committee would like to thank the City Council of 1987, whose authorization made this plan possible: Betsy Bechtel, Mike Cobb, Ellen Fletcher, Larry Klein, Leland Levy, Frank Patitucci, Emily Renzel, Jack Sutorius, Gail Wooley. Credit for illustrations to Bob Frank, David Gates, and Terry Beaubois. Special thanks to Susan Wexler and Sandy Eakins for their contributions to the final plan.

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STATEMENT OF INTENT

The concepts presented in this plan have the potential to enhance the quality of downtown and ensure that it retains its appeal and attraction. However, it is important to emphasize that this plan is intended to guide downtown development and amenities, and is not intended to be binding or regulatory in nature. Implementation of this plan is expected to occur over the long-term rather than the short-term. Some of the public improvements could take many years to complete. In the interim, any actions that are taken should take the general direction outlined in the plan into account. The Urban Design Committee hopes that it can be inspiring and help to create unique, vibrant, visually and intellectually nourishing spaces.

INTRODUCTION

What is it about Palo Alto that allows it to be selected repeatedly by the San Francisco Chronicle as the Bay Area's best city? Why do people from up and down the Peninsula come to the Downtown to browse at a bookstore, see a foreign film, meet friends for dinner, or find that special gift? What makes Palo Alto's Downtown the envy of and model for other cities attempting to revitalize and strengthen their own downtowns? How can the Downtown retain that special status with increased competition from surrounding peninsula cities? Can the wonderful qualities that make Downtown Palo Alto special be enhanced and improved through urban design?

These were just a few of the questions raised by the City Council in 1987, when the Temporary Committee on Downtown Amenities presented their recommendation that the City prepare an Urban Design Plan. The Amenities Committee was an outgrowth of the 1984-1986 Downtown Study, which generally resulted in stricter development regulations, such as more restrictive floor area allowances, and an overall development cap, for the downtown. The Amenities committee was charged with developing information and incentives to encourage private developments to provide a variety of public amenities in the downtown area. One of the recommendations presented to the Council was that an Urban Design Plan be prepared for the Downtown. While architectural control through the Architectural Review Board had long been in effect, the Amenities Committee strongly believed, and the City Council concurred, that opportunities for the downtown area could not be maximized without the guidance of such a plan.

PURPOSE

Palo Alto's downtown boundaries are not easily recognizable today. This plan strives to better define the downtown area to ensure a downtown that provides memorable experiences for the user. Downtown should be an exciting and desirable place not only for the pedestrian, but for the retailer as well. In light of these goals, countless individual architectural decisions, without awareness of their context and urban design consequences, are apt to shortchange the public areas of Downtown. Architecture in Palo Alto should be innovative and varied, but the cumulative effect might be disappointing if the exterior spaces and building forms are weak and fragmented. Having individual buildings that are exciting and attractive is not enough to create the strong organizing patterns that are essential to all outstanding urban cities and towns. The spaces around those buildings must also be strong and eventful, with form and character. Public spaces must be transformed from remote and impersonal spaces to the traditional commons where people gather, connect and build community. Artists and public art can also be uniquely helpful in achieving these goals. Architects and urban designers are urged to consider the use of art and artists in projects from their inception rather than as "add-ons" in the design process. The Public Art Commission can function as a helpful facilitator in bringing new vitality and a sense of place to Palo Alto. Urban Planners use the idea of creating outdoor rooms and connections between them, whether a small courtyard or the visual enclosure of a large open space, to make public spaces more attractive. These are the spaces which provide people using the Downtown with the positive experience that planners and architects strive earnestly to define and create - the "sense of place".



BEFORE



AFTER

The Plaza Ramona Development at 250 University Avenue contributed to the improvement of a sense of place for downtown.

HOW THIS PLAN WAS DEVELOPED

In September 1987, the City Council appointed a ten member Urban Design Committee to prepare this plan. Initial direction provided by the Council was to produce a comprehensive document of policies and guidelines describing the physical form of Downtown Palo Alto. The plan was to be in a form that could be used to help developers and designers in understanding the objectives for downtown development, with reference to public amenities and facilities.

Additionally, the plan was intended to serve as a master plan to guide public improvements and art in public places.

The Committee met on numerous occasions over a four year period, initially gathering information and observing downtown, and then developing the recommendations and graphics presentations to be included in the Plan. The sketches, drawings and ideas that resulted from the Committee's many creative sessions, including walking tours and detailed inventories of existing downtown features, eventually formed the basis of the plan.

[A paragraph explaining the public review and outreach for this Draft Plan will be inserted here.]

HOW THIS PLAN IS ORGANIZED

This plan is organized into three major parts:

- **INTRODUCTION.** The Introduction describes the need for an Urban Design Plan and the issues which it addresses.
- **THE PLAN.** This section presents the plan itself and consists of four elements:
 - The *Guiding Principles* are the conceptual foundation upon which the remainder of the plan is based.
 - The *Basic Plan* provides an overview and geographic framework for improving the major functional areas of the downtown, such as the retail core and the entries.
 - *Districts*, as distinct and recognizable parts of a downtown, are important elements lending vitality and identity. For each district in downtown Palo Alto, a summary of its strengths and weaknesses, and a statement of goals to be considered, is identified.
 - *Architecture* and *Public Improvement Guidelines* that apply to all districts identified by the plan are contained in these two sections.
- **IMPLEMENTATION.** The implementation section provides direction and suggestions as to how the concepts and public improvements identified by this plan can be carried out. The specific ways in which the City, and downtown property owners and merchants, can be active in implementation of the plan are outlined in the "Implementation" section beginning on page 73.

WHO SHOULD USE THIS PLAN

This plan is intended to be used as a resource reference in conjunction with existing zoning regulations and Comprehensive Plan policies.

- *Project Sponsors* such as architects, interior designers, contractors and developers should first review the plan for those areas and guidelines that are applicable to their project, then they should interpret the guidelines in the design of the proposed project.
- *Planning Staff* should use this as a reference when reviewing proposed projects, and make appropriate suggestions to project sponsors to improve their projects. In addition, city staff should use this document developing public capital improvement projects.
- The *Architectural Review Board*, *Planning Commission* and *City Council* should use this resource reference in reviewing proposed projects and in formulating future city projects and capital improvements.
- *Civic groups* and *downtown merchant groups* may use the document to help protect the characteristics that are currently valued in downtown Palo Alto and to effect needed change to make the downtown area better. *Property owners and tenants* in specific areas may wish to work together to fund some of the civic improvements identified in these resource references to create a strong district image. As the first improvements are completed, other property owners and tenants will likely be inspired to follow suit.

LOOKING AHEAD

The desirability of the downtown and confidence of property owners to reinvest is evidenced in the significant and recent redevelopment efforts which have occurred, including the new Thoits Building at 156 University Avenue, Whole Foods Market at 774 Emerson Street, Plaza Ramona at 250 University Avenue, the remodeled PacTel Building at 529 Bryant Street and the renovation of the historic Stanford Theater at 221 University Avenue.

Some of these developments were the result of Planned Community (PC) zoning actions, an approval process that allows some project flexibility in exchange for a significant community benefit resulting from the project. One development, Plaza Ramona at 250 University Avenue, was also the result of a joint public/private venture involving the addition of a public parking lot. City Council directed policy and action to ensure such creative actions in the future will be needed to facilitate and implement the changes and improvements envisioned by this document.

It is hoped that the ideas shown in this plan will improve future design decisions. The plans and drawings as presented are conceptual and are not intended to be considered as the only solution. Such things as district boundaries, transitional edges and other map lines are somewhat indefinite. Drawings and photographs of buildings and improvements are intended only to serve as representative samples of desirable qualities found in each district. Moreover, changes and modifications in sites, regulations and environmental conditions may well necessitate further change and modification to the Urban Design Plan. In any case, if this document opens the imagination to possibilities that will foster the character of the marvelous area that is downtown Palo Alto, then it will have been a success.

It is important to note that the term "pedestrian" in this document includes those individuals that may need mobility assistance through the use of wheel chairs or other devices. It is further notable that landscaping proposals, both public and private must conform to the City of Palo Alto Low Water Use Landscape Guidelines.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The Guiding Principles are the values inherent to this document. Taken together, they represent the foundation upon which the committee based its decisions for determining goals desirable for the future of downtown. The resource references and recommendations discussed in this plan are derived from these Guiding Principles.



AN ACTIVE PLACE

Downtown Palo Alto will be an exciting, active and friendly place both during the day and night.

Photo?

A PLACE TO LIVE AND WORK

Downtown will be an inviting, clean and safe place for people to live, shop, work and recreate.



A GOOD NEIGHBOR

The residential character of neighborhoods adjacent to the downtown will be protected from encroachment by commercial downtown uses.



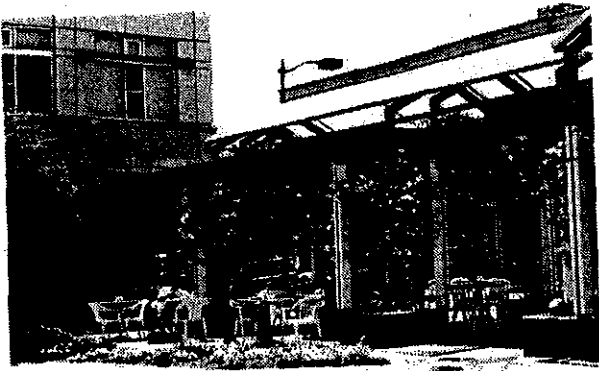
A SENSE OF LOCAL HISTORY

Preservation of historical structures and places will be emphasized. Future projects can draw from historic buildings and social characteristics of Palo Alto for inspiration.



THE PEDESTRIAN ENVIRONMENT

The existing building pattern of storefronts or structural bays create the human scale of Downtown. Attractive and easily recognizable pedestrian and auto entries welcome people. Creatively designed, clean and functional alleys, sidewalks and streets further enhance the pedestrian scale and experience.



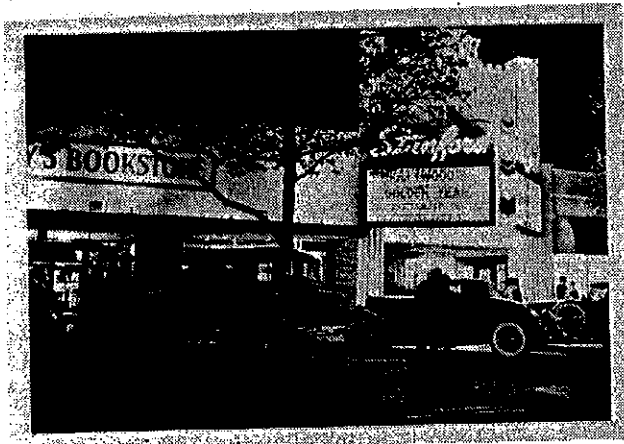
AN OUTDOOR PLACE

Advantage will be taken of the temperate climate by providing outdoor amenities, such as attractive street furniture, newsracks, benches, lighting, restrooms, for beautiful, useful open spaces, preferably designed by artists, architects, and landscape architects. These design elements encourage a stronger sense of community. Abundant and well maintained landscaping will provide Downtown with rich, urban greenscape and outdoor spaces.



EASY ACCESS AND ORIENTATION

A clearly defined and developed "city center," downtown "edges" and landmarks will provide a sense of orientation for the Downtown. Varied transportation methods including automobiles, bicycles, buses and trains will increase ease of access. Adequate and useable parking will be available where it is most needed.



CULTURAL AMENITIES

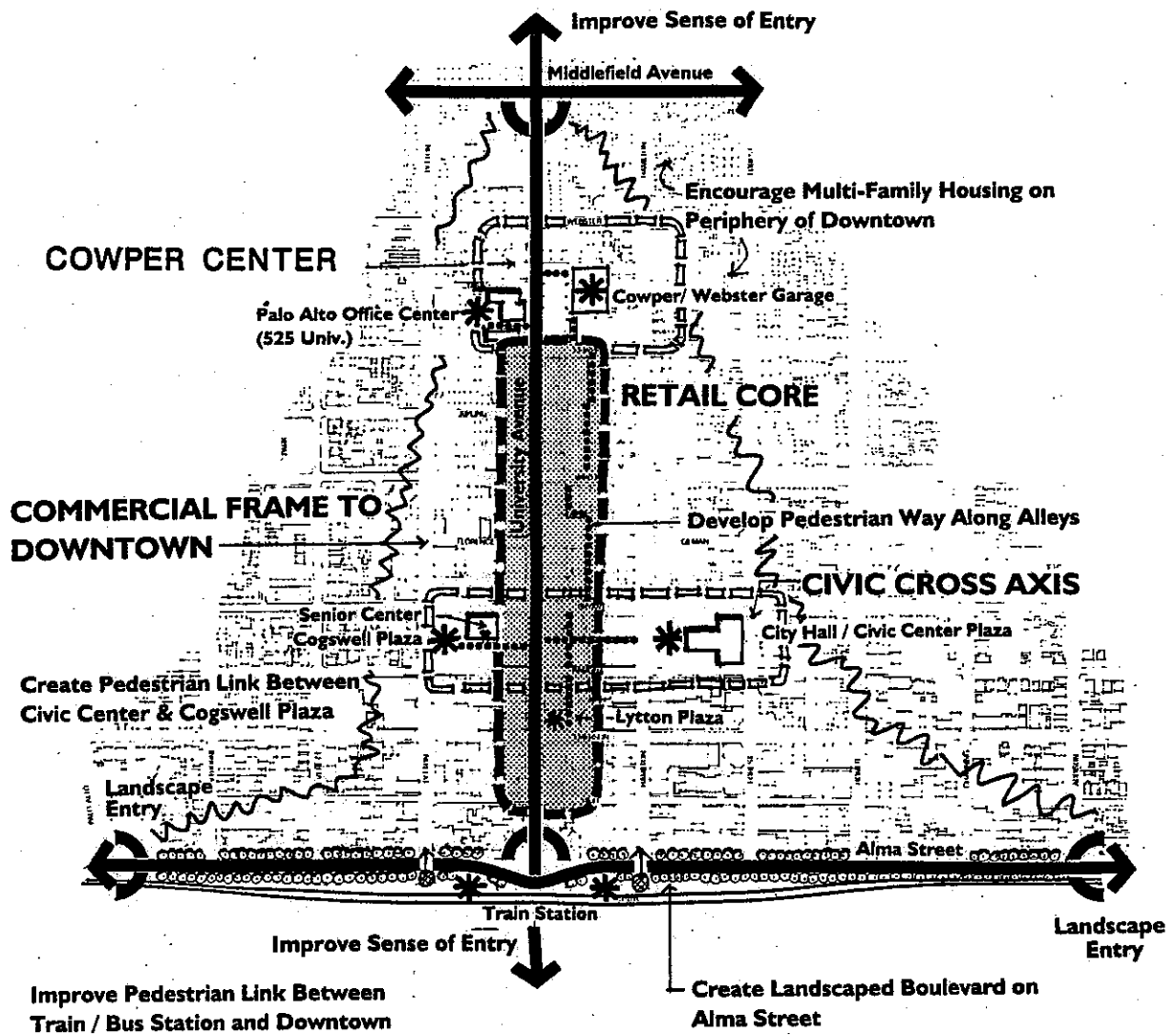
Downtown will celebrate and emphasize cultural amenities which contribute to the richness and diversity of Palo Alto. We will also recognize and nurture the cultural relationship and influence of Stanford University by reestablishing and promoting the historic physical connection of Downtown to the University.

THE BASIC PLAN

The Basic Plan presents the comprehensive framework for improving the use and character of Downtown Palo Alto. The Basic Plan is organized by six overall elements:

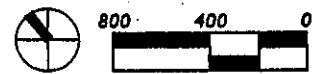
- The Retail Core
- The Downtown Entries
- The Civic and Commercial Centers
- The Alma Street Boulevard
- The Commercial and Residential Edges
- The Pedestrian Ways

These six elements emerge from Palo Alto's historic past and have produced a rich and attractive urban form. With the framework defined, it is possible to set out fundamental directions for increasing the attractiveness of all parts of the Downtown.



LEGEND

- ← Major Auto Route
- Pedestrian Way
- * Anchor Destination
- ↑ Pedestrian Crossing
- ⌒ Entries



The Retail Core

The Urban Design Plan strives to reinforce University Avenue as the retail core of the Downtown. Concentrating ground floor retail uses along University Avenue will help keep the area active and economically stable. A concentrated core also results in a pleasant pedestrian environment, and protects surrounding residential areas from intrusion by traffic and incompatible development.

This Plan reinforces University Avenue as the retail core of the Downtown.

The Plan reaffirms the University Avenue District as the Retail Core by:

- improving the sense of entry at both Alma Street and Middlefield Road;
- enhancing the historic connection to Stanford University;
- improving pedestrian access to the transit depot;
- creating and improving linkages to landmarks and public facilities; and
- maintaining the diversity of architecture and tree-lined ambience that contribute to downtown's pedestrian friendliness.

The Downtown Entries

The document recognizes the importance of downtown entries and suggests improvements to the primary entries at both ends of University Avenue. The Alma street entrance improvements should give particular emphasis to the creation of a pleasant pedestrian walk from the Palo Alto Train Station to the Downtown, and a more attractive connection to Stanford University. A stronger Middlefield Road entrance should have a more defined landscape statement than the subtle transition from residential which now occurs. These entry improvements will address both motorists and pedestrians. Secondary vehicular entrances are also marked for improvement, primarily at the El Camino Park entry (Palo Alto Avenue and El Camino Real) and on Alma Street near Embarcadero Road.

The Basic Plan calls for improvements to the primary downtown entries.

Figure 1 on the next page details one example suggested improvements to enhance the entry at Alma Street. These improvements are also illustrated in the drawings on page 12. Significant improvements include a safer pedestrian access from the Palo Alto Train station, enhancement of the sense of pedestrian entry by improving the pedestrian spaces at High Street and University Avenue and beautification of the vehicular underpass. While the pedestrian crossings of Alma Street to the train station are in need of further study, three possible scenarios are outlined in the diagram. See also "Dreams to Vision, A Summary of the Stanford/Palo Alto Interface Urban Design Charrette," March 26-28, 1993.

PEDESTRIAN CROSSINGS

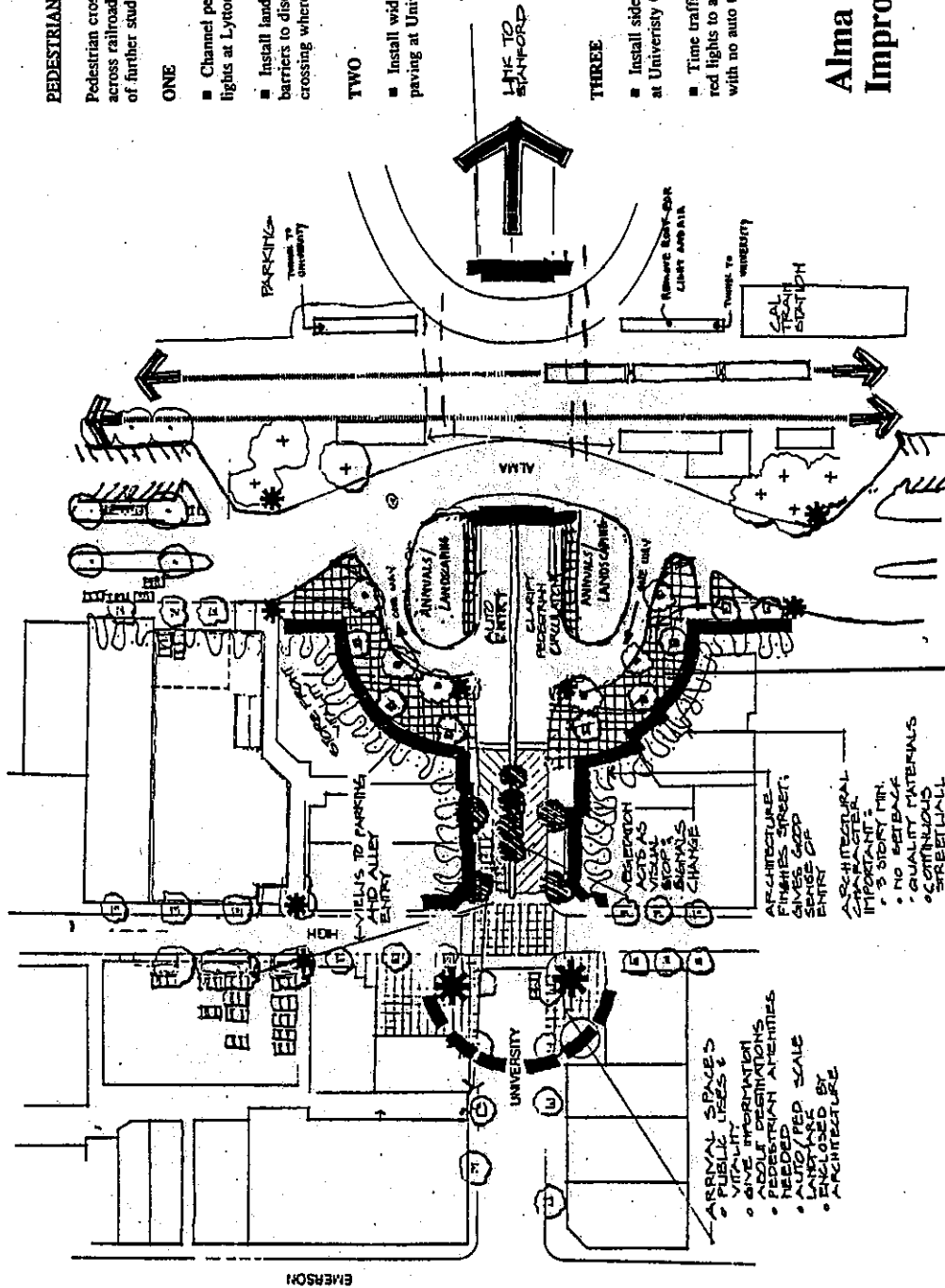
Pedestrian crossings from Alma Street across railroad tracks are in need of further study. Ideas include:

- ONE**
- Channel pedestrians to existing lights at Lytton and Hamilton Avenues
 - Install landscaped or architectural barriers to discourage pedestrian crossing where there are no crosswalks

- TWO**
- Install wide sidewalks of decorative paving at University Circle

- THREE**
- Install sidewalks and traffic lights at University Circle
 - Time traffic lights with simultaneous red lights to allow Alma Street crossing with no auto traffic

Alma Entry Improvements

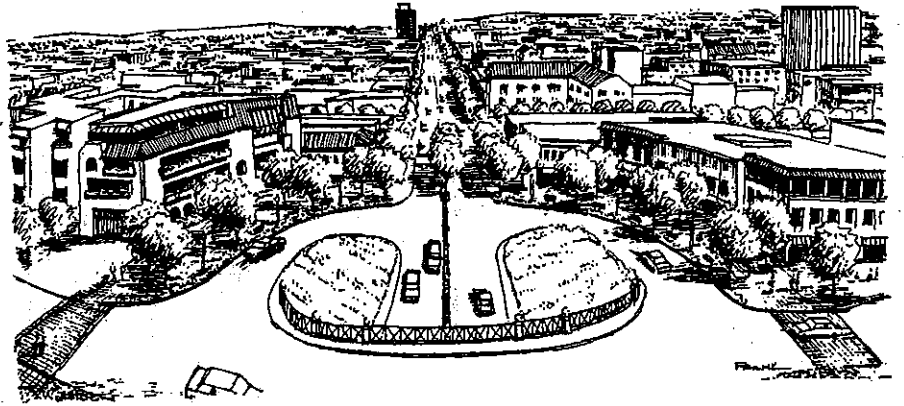


ARRIVAL SPACES
PUBLIC USES
VISUAL INFORMATION
ADOLESCENT AREAS
PEDESTRIAN AMENITIES
NEEDED
AUTO/PEDESTRIAN SCALE
LANDSCAPED
ARCHITECTURE

ARCHITECTURE
FINISHES STREET
GIVES GOOD
SPELLE OF
ENTRANCE
ARCHITECTURAL
CHARACTER
IT'S STORY TELLING
NO SETBACK
QUALITY MATERIALS
CONTINUOUS
STREETLIFE

FIGURE 1
Alma Entry Improvements

- New landscaping in cloverleaves
- New decorative guardrail
- Increase building volumes on south side of entry



- Reduce cloverleaf traffic lanes from two to one
- Add pedestrian amenities



- Double row of street trees
- New street lighting
- Decorative paving



The Civic and Commercial Centers

The document suggests the creation or completion of two main downtown activity centers, one civic in nature and the other commercial.

The Plan suggests the creation or completion of two main downtown activity centers.

The *Civic Cross Axis*, anchored by the Civic Center Plaza and City Hall at the South end and Cogswell Plaza and the Senior Center at the North end, encompasses Bryant Street and the nationally recognized Historic Ramona Street Architectural District. The creation of a cross axis in this location is important to creating a major focus of activity downtown, but will be challenging since there is not now a public right of way directly connecting the two anchors. Significant progress toward this goal was achieved in 1990, when the acclaimed Plaza Ramona opened with a publicly dedicated pedestrian system linking University Avenue to the Civic Center Plaza. The completion of the linkage will depend on capturing the remaining pedestrian corridor between University and Lytton Avenues in future public/private cooperative efforts. This would require private cooperation for the removal of some building frontage on University Avenue opposite the Ramona Plaza alley. Lost square footage could be moved to upper stories to allow new shops and offices to open onto the alley. This may require FAR incentives to the property owners since ground floor retails is significantly more valuable than second story space in the Retail Core. We recommend that the Comprehensive Plan Committee may want to consider this possibility, thereby the alley itself could accommodate a number of pedestrian oriented services, such as information kiosks, newspaper and flower vendors and theater ticket sales. Both the overall conceptualization and the creation of the amenities could well benefit from the input of artists. The activity center and pedestrian concepts are illustrated on the following page.

The *Cowper Center* is an area which encompasses the Palo Alto Office Center at 525 University Avenue, and the Cowper/Webster public parking garage. A strong Cowper Center is important because it would fulfill the need for an eastern focus and anchor to the downtown retail. Improvements to the plaza both in front of and behind the Palo Alto Office Center could create a destination point and ultimately an activity center that will help anchor the east end of downtown and provide opportunity for additional retail activity.

The encouragement of private or public/private reinvestment in the Varsity Theater, a historic landmark, to transform it into an entertainment center, could do for this end of downtown what the Stanford Theater renovation has done for the other end. While competition with the Stanford Theater would not be desirable, creation of a performing arts center would provide Palo Alto with a downtown civic amenity it now lacks.

The Cowper/Webster garage serves as an auto destination point. Improvements to the Cowper Street entry to the garage would enhance the appeal, visibility and safety of the garage. As redevelopment occurs, attention should be paid to increased and attractively designed pedestrian access to the garage.

- Architectural elements and narrowing of street indicate pedestrian way entries



FUTURE INTERSECTION OF UNIVERSITY AVENUE AND PEDESTRIAN WAY

- Shops and storefronts open onto alley
- Exciting pedestrian environment created with special paving, lighting and seating
- Provide architectural features appropriate to scale of space
- Include civic-type amenities such as kiosks, theater ticket sale booth, public event podium and vendor sales



CONTINUATION OF CIVIC CROSS AXIS PEDESTRIAN WAY, LOOKING TOWARD CITY HALL FROM LYTTON

The Alma Street Boulevard

The document calls for the City to improve the appearance of Alma Street and capitalize on the residential and mixed-use development opportunities which exist there. The primary means for accomplishing this include:

The Basic Plan envisions Alma Street transformed into an attractive, tree-lined boulevard.

- transforming Alma Street into an attractive, tree-lined boulevard;
- providing an inviting and safe pedestrian path to the Train Station and Transit Depot;
- creating a pedestrian and bicycle parkway parallel to Alma Street;
- beautifying and enhancing El Palo Alto Park and making it accessible to Downtown pedestrians; and
- creating pedestrian links between Downtown and the Stanford Shopping Center and between Downtown and the Urban Lane areas

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

- Center street median with trees
- Vary building heights
- Modulate building walls
- Transition scale of buildings to the residential areas



ALMA BOULEVARD

The Commercial and Residential Edges

Running parallel to University Avenue are Hamilton Avenue and Lytton Avenue. These parallel streets, lying north and south of the University Avenue Retail core, each have a distinctive character. Together with University Avenue, they comprise the Central Business District. From Lytton and Hamilton Avenues, the downtown transitions into residential areas. The definition of this commercial/residential edge is very critical north of Lytton Avenue since little room exists to buffer the downtown north neighborhood from the commercial downtown. South of Hamilton Avenue, the edge is softer due to the mix of residential uses with the transitional South of Forest Commercial area and the Palo Alto Medical Foundation.

Appropriate sidewalk, landscaping, street sign and lighting treatments can help to more clearly distinguish the transition from downtown to the residential areas.

The gradual change from downtown to the residential neighborhoods is partly recognizable by the increased landscaping and tree cover of the residential areas. These transitions can be further distinguished through the use of appropriate sidewalk and landscaping treatments, as shown in figure 2 on the next page, and the use of special street signs and lighting (see the Conceptual Lighting Plan on page 65).

The Pedestrian Ways

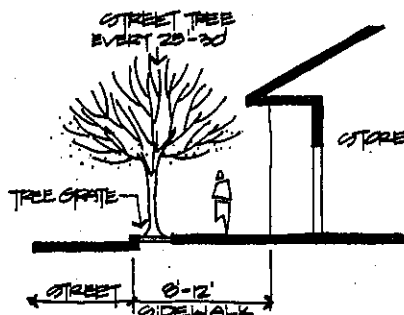
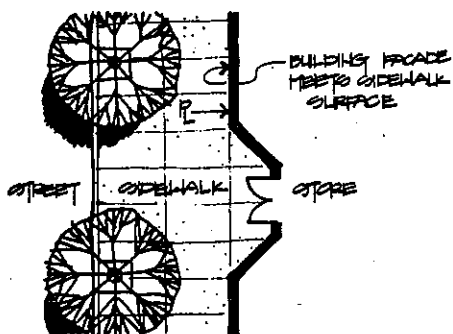
In general, the pedestrian travel route in the Downtown synchronizes with that of the motorist, but it is a pleasant relief when a retreat can be discovered allowing those on foot to withdraw and separate from the vehicles. Many of those familiar with the Downtown know the short-cuts behind buildings, through public parking lots and along the system of alleys.

The Basic Plan envisions improvements to existing downtown alleys to provide a continuous and apparent pedestrian corridor.

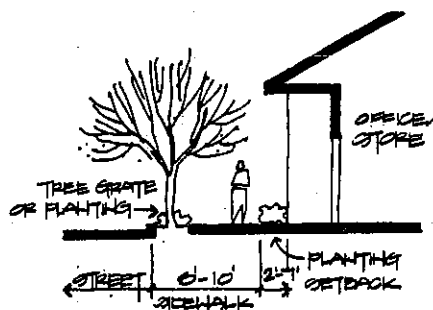
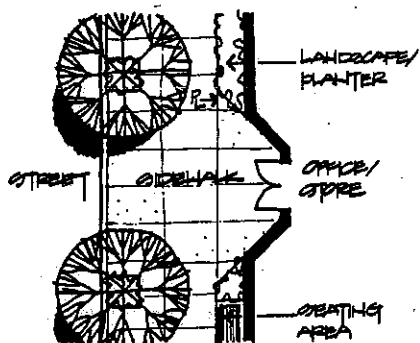
Figure 7 on page 25 outlines the overall pedestrian way plan envisioned for downtown. As detailed in the figures 3, 4 and 5 beginning on page 18, service alleys are intended to primarily service the buildings which front onto them, but sufficiently cleaned up and reorganized, to be made more hospitable to pedestrians and to encourage occasional pedestrian passage. Shortcut alleys should be comfortable for use by pedestrians on a regular basis, while maintaining their service functions. They are primarily to allow "shortcutting" from one location to another. Place alleys are intended as true gathering places for pedestrians. They should be designed in such a way to allow and encourage pedestrian use, with service functions mostly not apparent. Here again, the involvement of artists and public art could prove most beneficial.

The Plan envisions improvements to the existing alleys in order to provide a continuous and apparent pedestrian corridor, running parallel to and the entire length of University Avenue. Such improvements would include the conversion of some service alleys to place alleys, the most significant being the linkage between the Civic Center Plaza and Cogswell Plaza, completing the Civic Center Cross Axis.

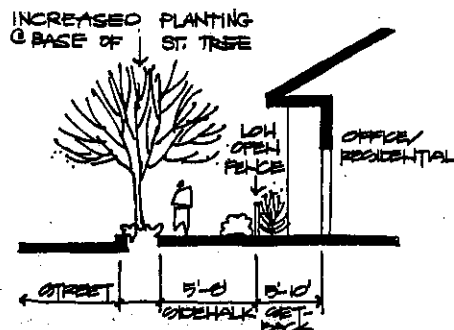
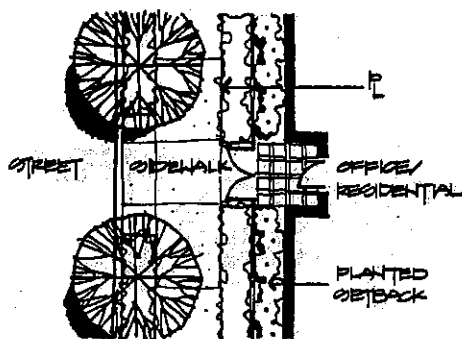
DESIRABLE STREETScape EXAMPLES



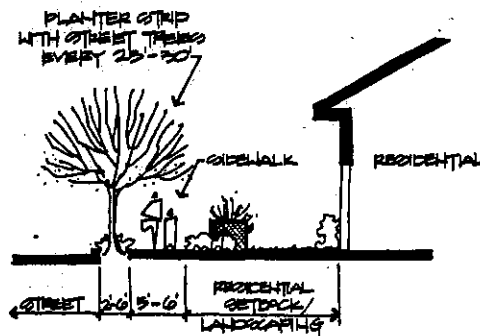
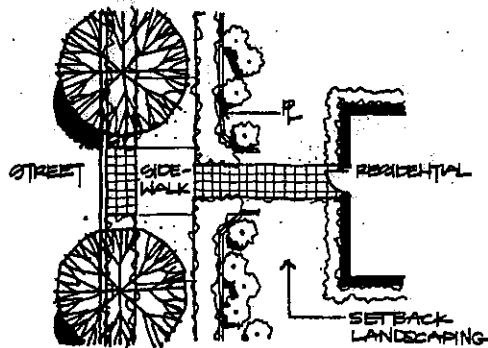
Downtown



Transition to Downtown



Transition to Residential



Residential

FIGURE 2
Transitions from Downtown Commercial to Residential

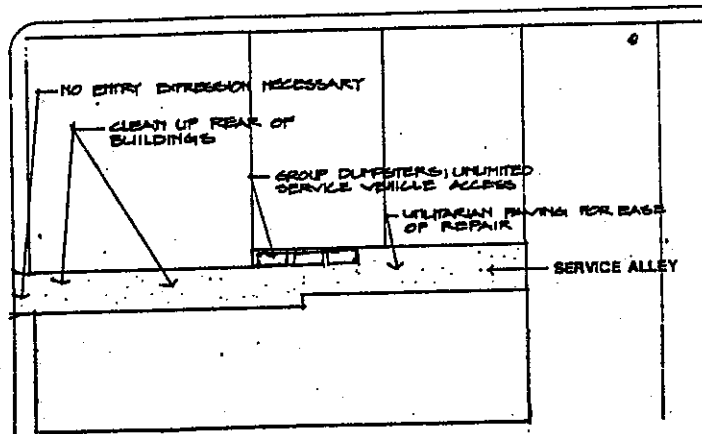


FIGURE 3
Service Alley Criteria

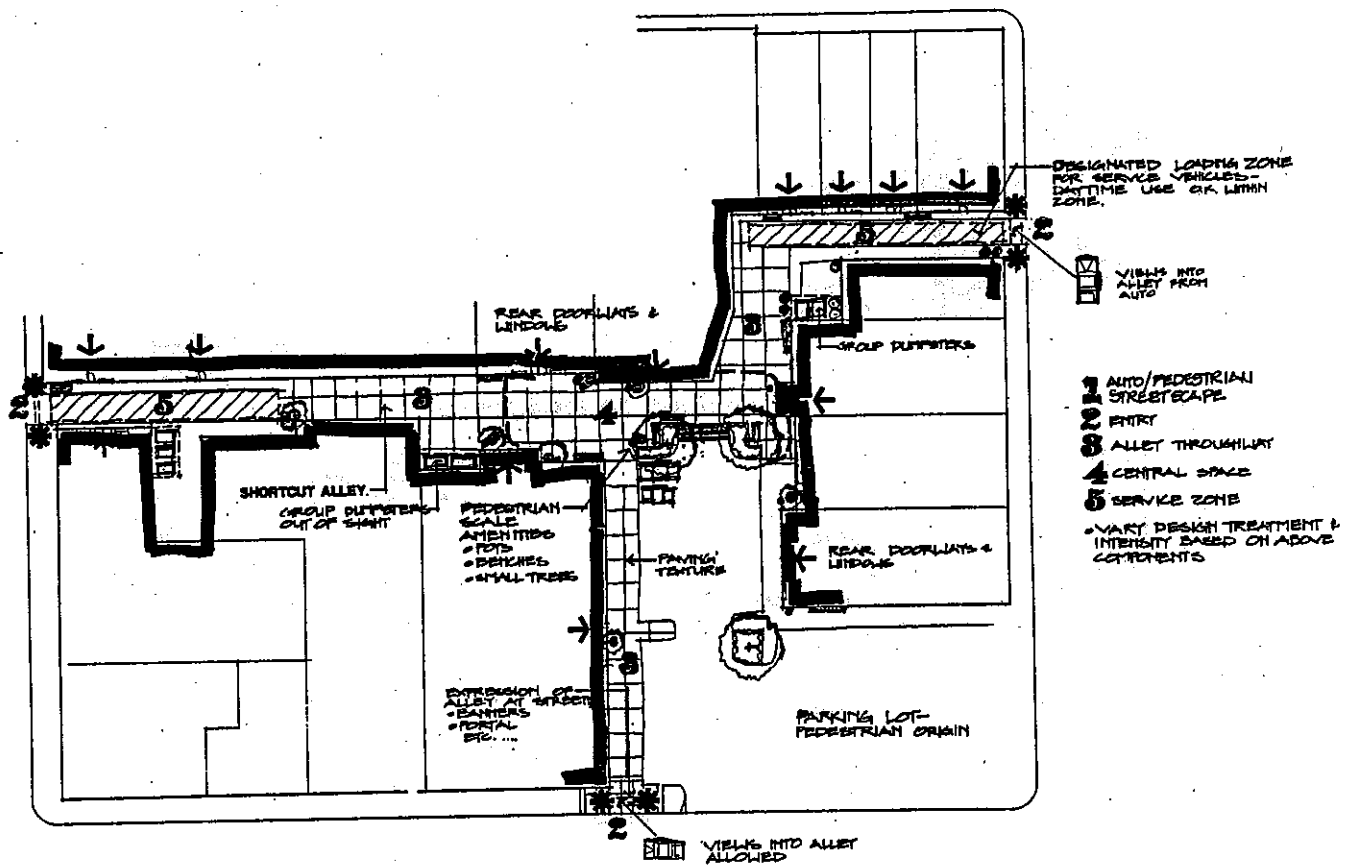


FIGURE 4
Shortcut Alley Criteria

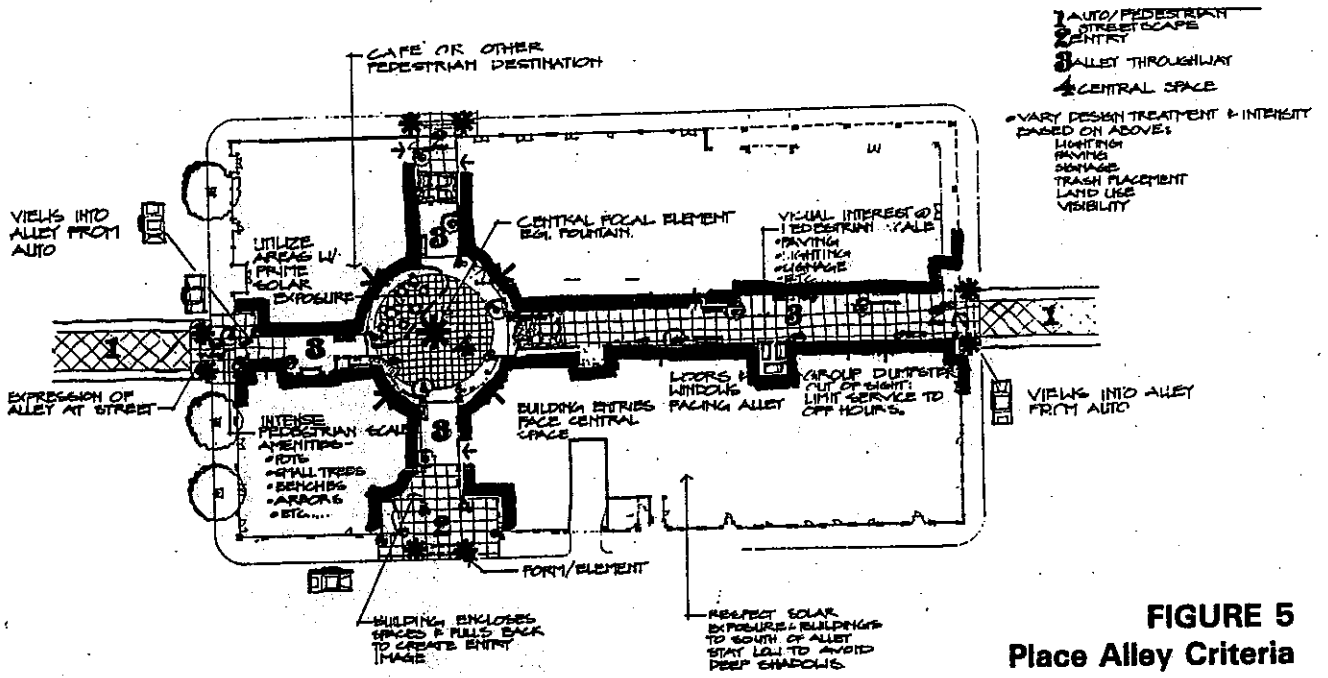


FIGURE 5
Place Alley Criteria

• **Typical Place Alley**

