

Cool Cities – Urban Design Competition

Urban Revitalization in Jackson, MI

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In 2005 a team of CRP students was one of the finalists in the Cool Cities urban design national competition for the revitalization of an area in downtown Jackson, MI.¹ The team developed a strong and feasible proposal marked by its contextual design. In this article, Craig Minus, one of the participants, writes about the competition and comments on their design vision and on the major features of their competition entry.

Jackson, Michigan, poses a great challenge to the architects, designers and planners of the future. The city is currently facing many of the economic and social challenges that small towns across the country are battling, namely, trying to retain both the younger and educated demographic. While both young people and educated students are located at major universities around the City of Jackson, its current ability to attract this demographic is fatally flawed. This demographic is choosing to relocate to more active and savvy cities, quite often outside of the state. Rather than accepting this current trend, Jackson and the state of Michigan have taken proactive roles in fighting it by plotting out the course for the future of the city.

On June 2, 2004, Jackson was designated as one of twenty Cool Cities finalists that would receive a catalyst grant of up to \$100,000 and have access to another \$100 million in state grants, loans, and other resources. The goal of the Cool Cities program is to develop vibrant, attractive cities and urban centers. Along with other catalyst projects, the city opened a nationwide urban design competition to graduate programs across the country. This three-month competition aimed to design an 8-acre Downtown site in the context of its surroundings and based upon the Cool Cities goals and City initiatives.

Our team envisioned a design approach that intended to respond not only to the existing community needs but also future needs of those of who may one day call Jackson home. As planners, we were very careful not to lose sight of the feasibility aspects associated with the design. Neither did we propose a futuristic nor a theoretical solution, but rather one that Jackson could practically use to help guide and incorporate future development and success within the

community. Our design was dramatically influenced by the younger and educated target demographic that the Cool Cities initiative aimed to attract and retain.

Throughout the design process we were guided by and maintained the following goals:

- Create a diverse, vibrant environment that will attract and enrich the young and educated while retaining the current citizens that make Jackson a great place to raise a family;
- Provide options for retail, eating facilities, entertainment, culture, living and transportation that appeal to those at both the local and regional level;
- Create a sense of place where the town of Jackson can come together to socialize and function as a community;
- Maintain the character of the historic buildings and architecture;
- Create an environment that offers options for a healthy, active lifestyle;
- Accelerate the artistic revival movement set forth by the city;
- Design in context to the current urban fabric and integrate with other catalyst projects.

In addition to our goals, the general design principles used were the following:

- Incorporate mixed-use buildings wherever appropriate;
- Introduce two new creative learning centers: the Jackson Culinary Arts Center and the Jackson Digital Arts Center;
- Provide adequate open space linking all the elements of our design;
- Incorporate elements of visual complexity that encourage visitors to explore the site;
- Promote a pedestrian-friendly environment.

¹ The team was composed of students Craig Minus (MCRP), Robert Betts (MCRP/MSc Engineering) and Noah Christman (BSCRCP). Roberto Rodriguez (CRP visiting professor) was the academic advisor.

Our final design proposal weaves the old with the new while providing for the needs of Jackson. It maintains the historic and civic elements, including churches, libraries, and a historic hotel; complimented by a culinary arts center and digital arts studio. In our proposal the historic but underutilized Hayes Hotel shall undergo exterior façade treatments and interior renovation to achieve desirable aesthetic qualities. Our decision to retain the Hayes Hotel stems from its iconic and defining presence for the community. Throughout our proposed developments, many upper level residential units were added to first floor commercial space to achieve the vitality needed for a lively public space and a sustainable downtown.

Open space was used to simultaneously provide pedestrian-friendly links throughout the project area, a visual frame for the historic Hayes Hotel, and connections to the surrounding city fabric. The open space element incorporates many of our design goals while providing an organic sense of place, which was integral to the circulation element. Exceptional internal circulation and exterior linkages were fundamental to encourage an active lifestyle. Pedestrian and bicycle movements were given priority while not sacrificing the needs of the automobile. To directly connect the site with the rest of Jackson, a light rail system was proposed to complement the current bus system, providing more transportation choices for the future.

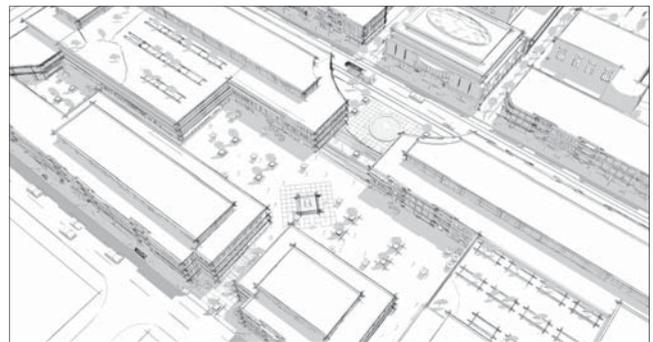
Other city promoted actions should complement the design elements and could help bring vitality back to the Downtown. Some of the suggestions in our proposal included:

- Outdoor concerts and festivals;
- Public art within the downtown central business district;

- Computer networking including a “wireless downtown”;
- Identity through creation of Districts with a sense of place and ownership characteristics.

Our design proposal also included a general implementation program to guide development in Jackson towards a successful future. Jackson should use the downtown intervention as catalyst, and a vibrant Downtown as its first step. A strategic approach to program development and project goals should be used to improve the perception of Downtown Jackson. The use of adjacent catalyst projects will help overcome negative stereotypes of the greater Downtown area, while offering increased entertainment and recreational activities will attract a larger critical mass. As the positive momentum continues and the excitement about Downtown grows, providing residential units will be a dynamic way of further promoting the city center. With retail following the critical mass, Downtown Jackson will foster its own new identity and would evolve into a regional attraction offering services for locals and tourist alike.

While what we proposed isn't an exact blueprint for the future of the Downtown, it does provide a framework of practical and feasible solutions to guide the City of Jackson. We should remember that redevelopment does not occur overnight and great things happen with small steps. Our design would provide a vision and the correct elements to accelerate and guide the city's current pursuit of becoming a Cool City.



Figures 1 & 2: Details of the project showing the proposed Jackson Digital Arts Center along Michigan Ave (left), and the townhome development in the downtown district where elevated entries provide a level of security and distance from the streetlevel. All renderings in SketchUp CAD modelling.

Figure 3: Aerial view of the proposed Marketplace, a shopping area with outdoor plazas for the community. The plazas and building envelope respond to the proposed Visual Arts center across the street.

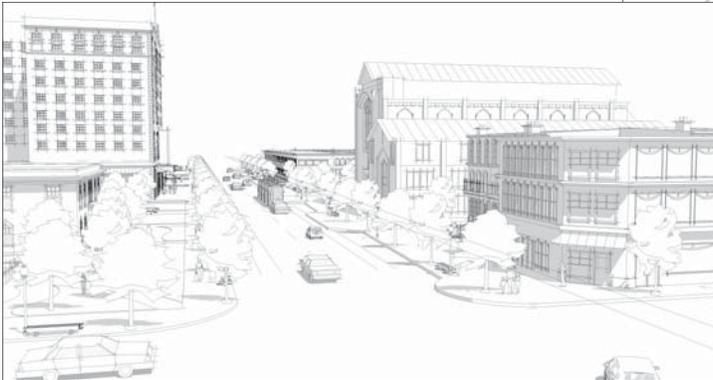
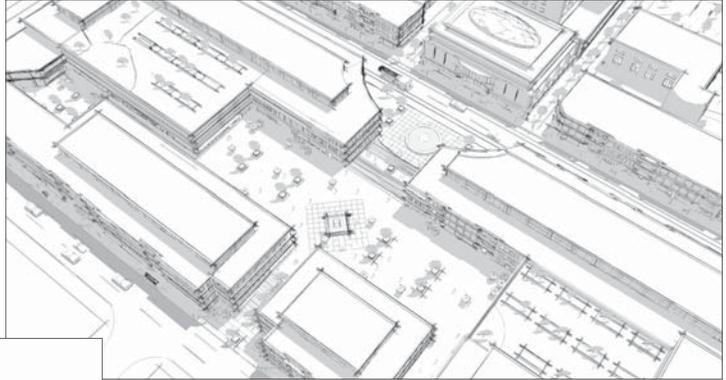


Figure 4: Perspective looking down the main street of Jackson, Michigan Ave, as entering the proposed project site.

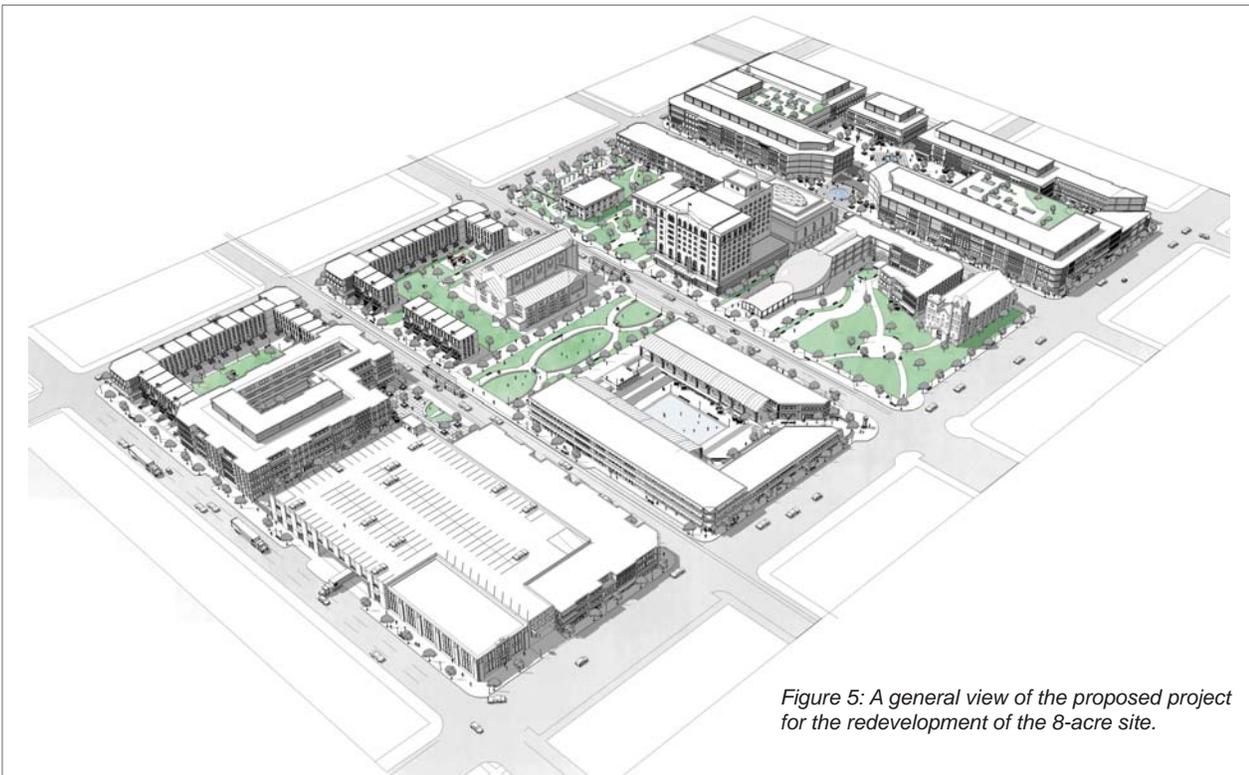


Figure 5: A general view of the proposed project for the redevelopment of the 8-acre site.