Dev Report #4

I’ve been pretty hesitant to go to downtown Lincoln in any capacity since the pandemic began, so these observations are my first look through the area since early March. The observations were made across an hour long walk through several blocks of downtown on the late morning of Wed. 9/23. Overall, I give an overview of what I observed, how this feels in comparison of campus, and give a critical overview of the enriched material experiences downtown locations are still trying to make possible despite the pandemic.

While walking through downtown, I couldn’t help but compare it to the experience of walking around campus. On campus, you’re met by a barrage of signage, directing you to wear masks, wash your hands, keep six feet apart, etc…UNL’s signage is also uniform, and for the most part, evenly distributed across campus spaces – an orderly material experience. Downtown was anything but. Most business had signs indicating that due to the city mandate, masks were required. While some of these signs were similar, many varied in design and placement – some were visible from far away, outside of the business. Others you could only see once you got to the business, visible just inside the entryway. Some, but very few places, seemed to have signage that suggested that people socially distance. Restaurants were a really interesting example of this. Some were busy, others were not. Yet all seemed to have some enforced way of controlling social distancing within the restaurant. Some places had literally removed the table to create adequate space, others simple removed the chairs, or had signs or tape or other barriers put in place to create distance dining. Waiters, waitresses, hosts, and other people working in restaurants had masks on while those who were dining in walked in with masks but removed them once seated. Very few people wore masks outside. Again, I was struck by the lack of uniformity here in relation to campus, not just in the signage, but also in the physical set up of spaces, the dynamics between masked and unmasked people, the way that language on some “masks required’ signs seemed to suggest businesses were only doing it to meet the ordinance while others seemed to suggest that masks would be required, with or without ordinance. While there were no exact patterns between this language, it made me think how customers likely view franchises v. small businesses – which ones are upholding it because of franchise rule, which because of personal belief, and which because of city mandate?

My observations made me think a lot about the enriched material experiences we are trying to make possible despite being in the middle of a pandemic. Going to a restaurant, for example. In a normal time, perfectly plausible, but now there is so much happening – masked workers, distanced dining, etc…is this still the same experience as before? How do the physical, material changes disrupt the experience? And should we even be aiming for material, normal experiences during a pandemic anyway?