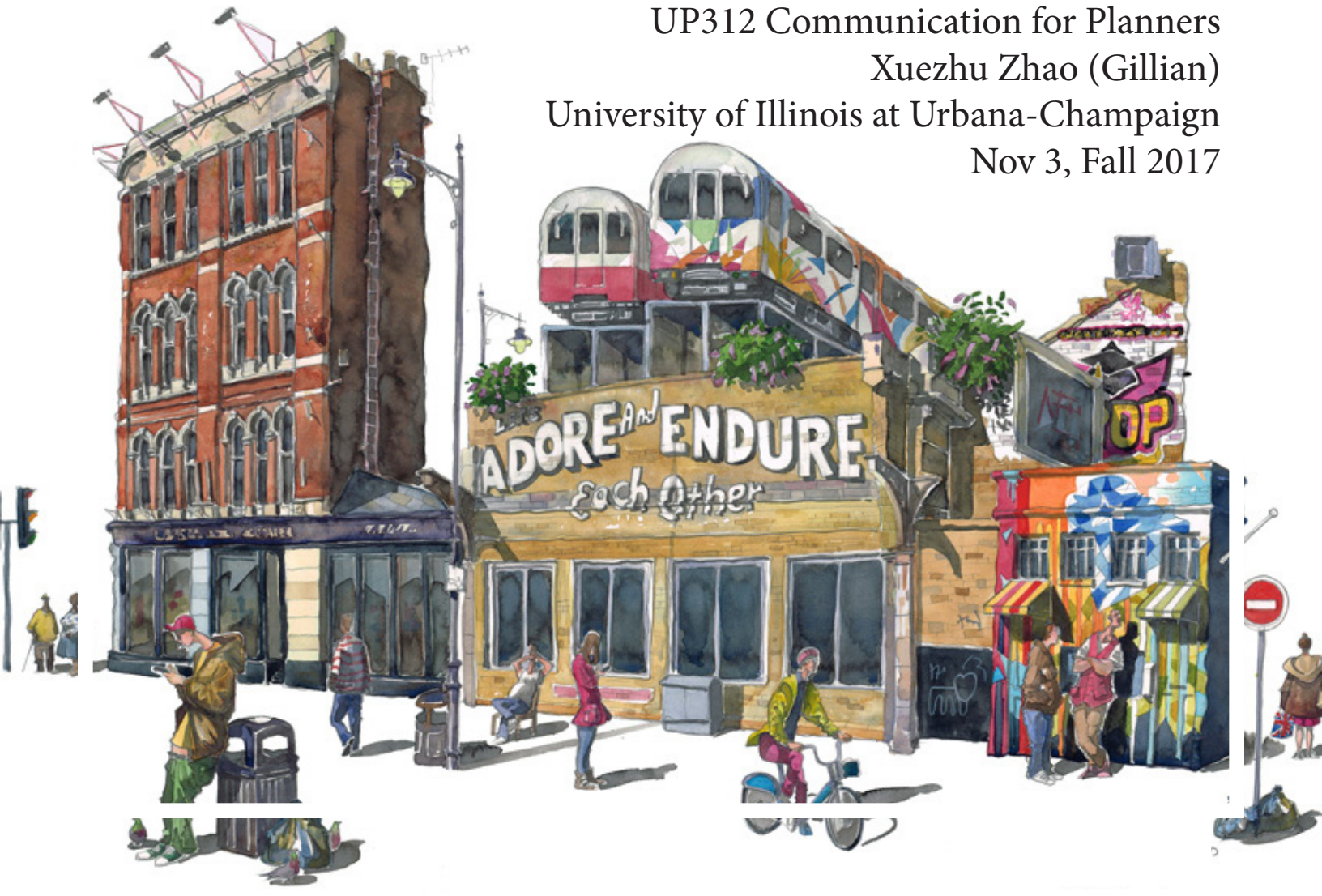


# Neil Street Plaza Redevelopment Plan

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## Executive Summary

This report investigates the potential redevelopment possibilities for the Neil Street Plaza located in the middle of Downtown Champaign. A brief background outlines the expectations and guidelines from the city of Champaign. The report then focuses on analyzing the current site, along with suggesting feasible opportunities for redevelopment. Finally, it arrives at the proposing policy amendments and physical adjustments for this site through the following criteria: promoting growth of businesses, introducing landmarks and history, enhancing accessibility, and cultivating a shared pride for Champaign.

It is recommended that the surface parking lot of the site should be replaced by a “railroad plaza” which serves as a space for people to relax and a information center for the purpose of introducing the legacy of Champaign. Incentives for developing a balance of small, medium, and large businesses are provided to sustain long-term commercial activities; tours are given to help visitors know more about this area; public facilities are improved to ebgabce safety and accessibility. Overall, the culture of Champaign could be revealed through the redevelopment of the site.

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## Introduction

Adopting several policies, Champaign has been advocating for renaissance of downtown area. Looking at the Comprehensive Plan and Zoning Ordinance, the proposal for redevelopment for Neil Street Plaza attempts to draw businesses, attract visitors, and maintain the vitality of downtown. Planning tools like zoning and subdivision policies will be used to promote change, while physical adjustments will also be established to meet the expectations from the city to a greater extent.



## Background

Downtown Champaign has been under revitalization for decades. Accompanying activities surrounding the previous Urbana Station of the Illinois Central Railroad, it first arose as a community core in the 1850s; with migration and expansion, it now serves as a community commercial center and a employment center.<sup>1</sup> The latest Comprehensive Plan issued in 2011 desired further growth of the downtown area by issuing economic incentives, perfecting public facilities, and cultivating community culture.<sup>2</sup> Recently, the city of Champaign has proposed to incorporate physical, cultural, and behavioral features in the Neil Street Plaza,<sup>3</sup> meeting the guideline of a growing, sustainable, complete, attractive, and healthy community.

Located east of Neil Street and north of Main Street, the Neil Street Plaza is an ideal pioneer for redevelopment. As the southern tip of the plaza has already been redesigned to incorporate open space for dining on street, the northern tip of the plaza stays as a surface parking lot which seasonally hosts special events like Champaign's Farmer's Market and Oktoberfest. Facing challenges like stagnated business growth and underutilized buildings to the north of the plaza, the City of Champaign wishes to redevelop the Neil Street Plaza not only to promote vitality but also to reconnect the area north to the plaza to the rest of the downtown. It has partnered with MKSK, an award winning urban design firm, to "attract a diverse range of people throughout all seasons."<sup>4</sup>

1 City of Champaign Planning Department. 2005. "2006 Downtown Plan."

2 Champaign City Council. 2011. "Champaign Tomorrow 2011 Comprehensive Plan."

3 "Champaign Seeking Public Input on Multiuse Plaza Downtown." n.d. Accessed October 13, 2017. <http://www.news-gazette.com/news/local/2017-10-06/champaign-seeking-public-input-multiuse-plaza-downtown.html>.

4 "City of Champaign Invites You to PlanOurPlaza! – PlanOurPlaza." n.d. Accessed November 2, 2017. <http://planourplaza.com/city-of-champaign-invites-you-to-planourplaza/>.



Figure 1. Context Map A of Urban Form

## Methods

### • Site Analysis

Referring to the Figure 1, plenty of parking lots and green lands serve as nodes. The current surface parking lot of Neil Street Plaza is an example of a node, which is an intensive foci where observers can enter. Landmarks are scattered within walking distance, preserving history of Champaign. For instance, the Orpheum Children's Science Museum just northeast of the plaza is a historical landmark which saved the historic Orpheum Theatre from destruction. Edges including constructing roads, fences and different building uses are either barriers or regional lines. According to Figure 2, differentiation of paths indicating principle arterials, minor arterials, major collectors and minor collectors guarantees circulation and accessibility. Overall, although zoned as Central Business District, the merchandising and service businesses are highly mixed while the residential districts are more spread out.

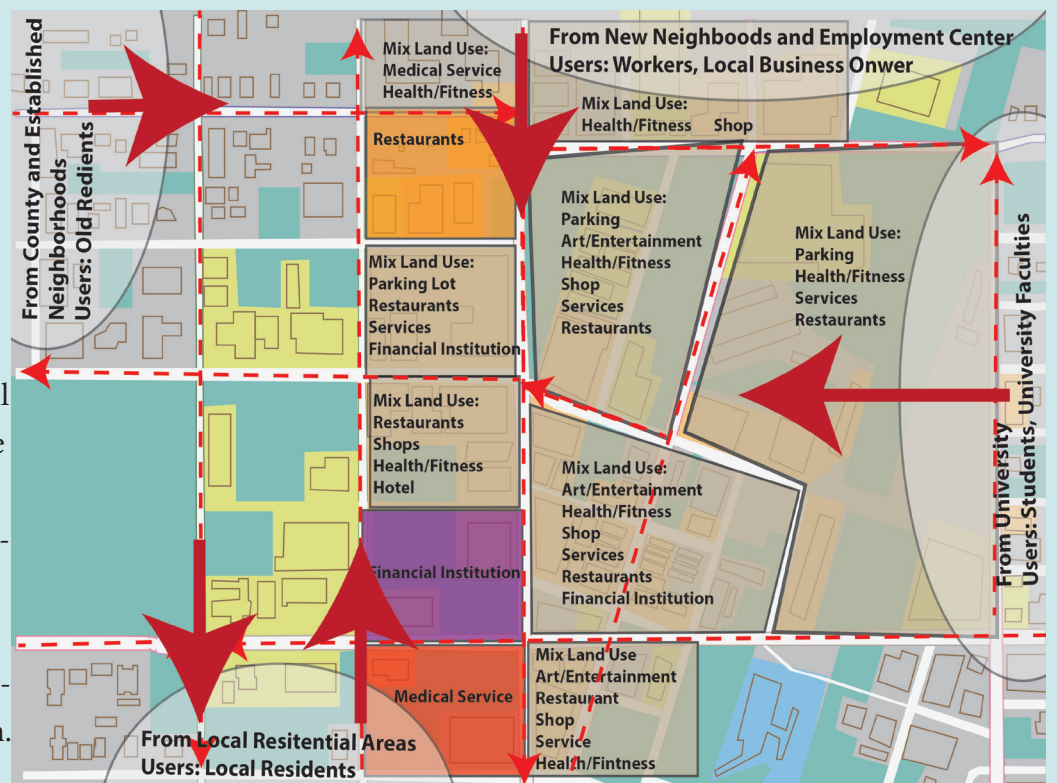


Figure 2. Context Map B of Urban Form



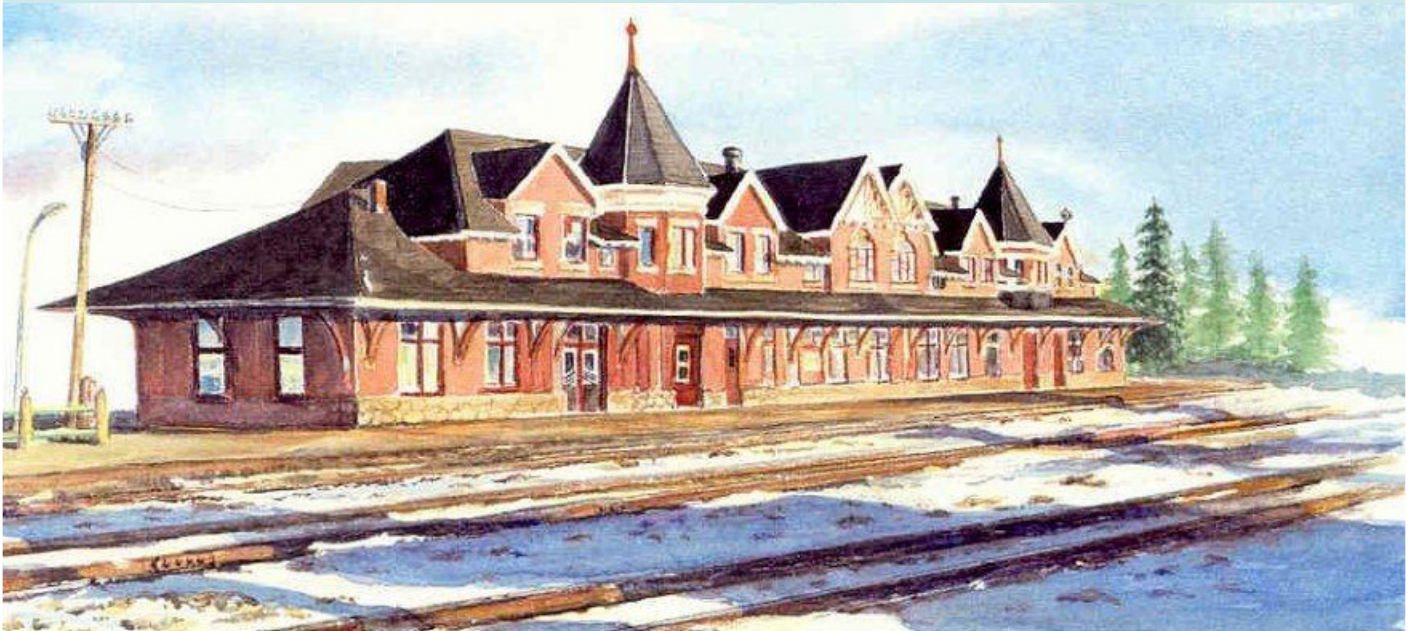
- Opportunities for Redevelopment

There are opportunities for redevelopment to support City Council's vision in the Comprehensive Plan. One challenge would be the growth of local businesses. As the maps has shown, there are plenty of local businesses existing now in the Neil Street Plaza. However, they are not attractive enough comparing to the chain stores in Regional Commercial Center to the north and Campustown to the east. City ought to promote diversity and uniqueness for businesses in downtown, in order to draw people to visit for purposes besides fulfilling daily grocery needs. Another challenge is addressing the landmarks: although there are numerous landmarks, few people know about them and would not be easily informed of the history behind. It would be helpful to introduce the landmarks in a centered area, the plaza for example, where people could gain information and curiosity. In addition, edges like the fence surrounding the parking lot reduce accessibility of pedestrians. Single-direction paths could also be confusing to some extent. Designing some of the paths locating in the high-density and mixed-use lands as pedestrian streets would enhance pedestrian's safety and walking experience. Moreover, with the revitalization of the Neil Street Plaza, more service and manufacturing businesses would be drawn to the northern district. Workers could take advantage of the plaza here through walking. Last but not least, downtown Champaign lacks a common culture for people to share a pride and identity from. The legacy of the train station could be an opportunity for planners and artists to explore and further foster social capital. In this way, the history and economic values of downtown could be incited to create vibrant urban life.

- Proposed Changes

Policy Amendment

Referring to the 2006 Downtown Development plan, weaknesses in conflicting land uses, under-utilized buildings and blighted area were identified.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, Champaign could issue policies which establish subdivision and land use plans, to create incentives for utilizing building uses and reconstruct



the blighted areas. Specifically, the parking lot east of the plaza is for permitted vehicles only. The policy could be amended by making parking free during special events to bring convenience and attract visitors. Moreover, policies should not only aim at drawing small to medium businesses. Although it is often good to support local merchants, the unstable nature of them could be contributing to business retention. Bigger businesses could be beneficial in establishing a stable commercial market. After the market data are analyzed, the city of Champaign could consider a more ambitious business plan for retailing and entertainment with a balance of small, medium and large businesses. Last but not least, the plaza is currently planned for special events like festivals and farmers' market to take place. However, it serves as a mundane parking lot during most of the time: it is not contributing to the growth of downtown.

Policy incentives designed for fulfilling both daily purposes and special events in the plaza that create a shared pride could be particularly favorable. It could, for example, issues policies to promote businesses pertain to higher education, research and technology, healthcare, and creative and applied arts in the northern and other surrounding districts. They could hold occasional demonstration and information fairs additional to the well-used redeveloped Neil Street Plaza. Champaign could also maximize the reuse of existing landscapes and buildings in order to limit redevelopment impacts on natural resources and environment. Densi-

ty, number of parking spaces, setback, and mix of uses should also be considered in the zoning ordinance.

### Physical Adjustment

#### *Promoting Social Capital and Community Pride*

Attributes of “railroad plaza” and “information center” are the two characteristics given to the redeveloped site. Re-



Figure 3. Site Plan

ferring to the history of downtown Champaign as developing from a railroad terminal, social capital and community collectiveness could be created here. Social capital is the outcome from different social groups which bonds people together to form the sense of collectiveness. Public open space is a great resource to generate social capital. Instead of functioning as a parking lot and a space for pop-up events, Neil Street Plaza is proposed to serve as an information exchange center to cultivate pride and identity of Champaign. A locomotive model that people could interact with corresponds to the history of Champaign: children could climb on it while adults could examine the interior which briefly introduces the history of Champaign. In addition, information boards behind the locomotive model point out the historical land-

marks for visitors. Tours lead by community volunteers could start from here to create opportunities for people to learn about the history and present situation of Champaign, strengthening the historical legacy.

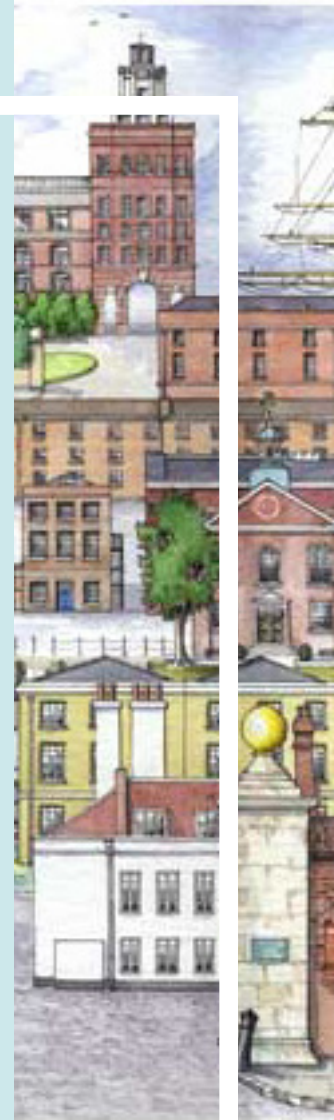
### *Enhancing Public Facilities*

While the locomotive is the center of the plaza which introduces downtown to everyone, a space near it with plants and interactive water sources are created for relaxation. The circulation and walking facility are to be improved that the site is accessible for pedestrians and cyclists from the west entrance only and is open for vendor's trucks from the north entrance. To enhance the experience of pedestrian visitors, first of all, the fences and meters surrounding the parking lot are removed. Bushes are planted to replace the fences, insulating people inside the plaza from road traffic. Secondly, safety is guaranteed by removing raised road shoulders for children and those with disabilities. The grass is also added to prevent physical injuries to some extent. The separation of non-motor-vehicles and motor-vehicles ensures travel safety. For people travelling from farther areas, bike parking is also provided and automobile parking is offered on the parking lot east to the plaza. This surface parking lot, in particular, is to be preserved and could be converted into a parking building compensating the parking spaces originally on the Neil Street Plaza. However, the over-building of parking lot is not encouraged since transportation other than driving is promoted in downtown and the site is within the walking distances for nearby residents.

### *Improving Local and Large Businesses*

Currently, farmer's market is held every Tuesday in the parking lot, and Oktoberfest was successfully celebrated during the first week of October. However, most of the space is empty for most of the time. To utilize the space, this specific parking lot could be preserved as a location for local merchants only: parking spaces exclusively for food trucks and movable vendors are designed for seasonal and local merchant fairs located in the north of the plaza, indicated by the orange square with the legends. In the meantime, buildings are also rentable for long-term large businesses, located to the west and north of the site. The special consideration for mobile businesses and outdoor tables aims to regenerate the atmosphere of a busy market near the train station in the past. According to the site plan (Figure 3) and the vision (Figure 4), outdoor picnic tables are designed by landscape architects to fit in the theme of railroad. This could not only promote human interactions but also generate vibrant vibes in public. All kinds of events could be held here after removing the trucks and temporary vendor stands.

Not only fulfilling the daily needs of residents, the unique products of the businesses could also attract people who originally preferred going to Campustown and the regional commerce center. Entertainment businesses should be separated from the administrative offices due to the potential





creation of nuisances. In the near future, immediate surrounding buildings are to be occupied by entertainment businesses like fitness centers, clubs, and dancing schools. Lands half a block away and north to the plaza could be zoned for service and manufacturing office buildings. Therefore, workers could visit this site easily between and after work, strengthening social capital and casual activities of this site. In this way, physical, cultural, and behavioral features will be generated while meeting most of the goals addressed in the Comprehensive Plan.

- **Vision**

Given its location near business offices, universities, and residential areas, this plaza welcomes all officers, students, tourists, families, and so on. As shown in Figure 4, families could buy groceries from nearby supermarkets and have picnic on the grass. They could also learn the history and landmarks of downtown Champaign from the locomotive and information boards. Officers from offices north to the plaza could hang out and grab freshly-made food during lunch break. People like students and tourists could take a shortcut through this site when navigating around merchandise stores and shopping for hand-crafts and souvenirs. Joggers and residents could buy energy supplies after working out from the surrounding recreational centers. Contrast between before and after redevelopment is illustrated through the following images.



*Figure 4. Before and After Redevelopment Images*

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

For Neil Street Plaza, the proposed redevelopment could contribute to a better living environment for the residents and visitors in general. Having a recreational open space, access to history through the locomotive model and information board, and incentives for developing unique and miscellaneous businesses, social capital and urban vitality are expected to be regained. Further steps should be taken by the City Council to attract funding sources. It should also continue advertising their awesome projects to the residents, preparing for the reconstruction of the future “Heart of Champaign.”



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