April 2005

Unrecognized Potential along Twin Cities Commercial Corridors

Paul Singh
Macalester College

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Unrecognized Potential along Twin Cities Commercial Corridors

Paul Singh

Senior Honors Project
Macalester College
Geography Department
Advisor: Professor David Lanegran
Introduction to the Publication

This publication developed out of a collaborative effort between the Macalester College Department of Geography and the Neighborhood Development Center (NDC). According to their mission statement, NDC is a community-based non-profit organization that works in the low-income communities of St. Paul and Minneapolis to help emerging entrepreneurs develop successful businesses that serve their community. In order to further their mission, NDC has become involved with redevelopment efforts along the commercial corridors in the Twin Cities. In 2004, NDC approached the Macalester College Department of Geography with the task of developing a method for identifying areas along the commercial corridors that had the potential to support start-up businesses.

The Macalester College Department of Geography agreed to work with NDC because of the department's belief that the corridors provide both social and economic functions that are crucial for vibrant, healthy cities. Over the summer of 2004, a research team comprised of Professors David Lanegran and Laura Smith and students Cole Akeson, Jovana Trkulja and Paul Singh worked to develop a statistical and Geographical Information System (GIS) model that would identify segments of the corridors that had unrecognized potential for business success. Upon completion of the research, the model was presented to the NDC staff. The findings of the study have been used by NDC to guide future investments along the corridors.

The model for identifying unrecognized potential is a powerful tool that can be used by many other non-profits and community organizations that work toward the redevelopment of the commercial corridors. Yet at the completion of the study, the findings did not exist in a format that was readily accessible to these organizations. Therefore, it was my goal to create a publication that could be easily read and understood by this target audience. Also, although the model is a powerful tool for identifying unrecognized potential, the model in itself does not suggest ways in which this potential could be realized. In addition to producing a publication detailing the results of the study, it was also crucial to provide specific strategies that enable non-profits and community groups to bring about revitalization along the corridors.

The publication that comprises my honors project is not a traditional academic paper; it is meant to have a wider audience and hopefully, a greater impact on the surrounding Twin Cities communities. I am pleased to report that the publication has received a great deal of attention from the planning departments of the cities of St. Paul and Minneapolis as well as the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), a non-profit consortium of organizations involved in community development efforts. It is my hope that this publication will continue to serve to guide the efforts of organizations that work toward revitalization of the corridors.

Paul Singh
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April 2004
Unrecognized Potential along Twin Cities Commercial Corridors

Part I: An analysis of the potential for commercial success along historic streets in Minneapolis and St. Paul.

Macalester College
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St. Paul, Minnesota

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with support from the Neighborhood Development Center

January 2005
Introduction

The commercial corridors were once the premier location for commercial activity in the Twin Cities. Commercial functions located on the corridors to take advantage of the easy accessibility of the streets. As the cities grew, however, the corridors lost their status as the premier shopping locations. Despite the decline of commercial functions along these streets, the commercial corridors remain a crucial component of the inner-city neighborhoods in Minneapolis and St. Paul. For that reason, many organizations are working to improve the status of the commercial corridors.

Revitalization efforts along the corridors have had mixed success. Attempts to bring businesses to the corridors have succeeded in some areas, but failed in others. These experiences have prompted concerned individuals to ask if there is potential for success along the corridors, and if so, where it would occur.

The purpose of this publication is to share the findings of a study conducted by the Macalester College Department of Geography. The aim of this study was to determine a technique for identifying unrecognized potential for business success along the commercial corridors.

This publication will cover three main areas: the history and present state of the commercial corridors, the process of identifying areas with unrecognized potential for business success and the implications of the study. By identifying areas with unrecognized potential, this study offers a development model that can assist neighborhood groups and business organizations in their revitalization efforts.
The History of the Commercial Corridors

The commercial corridors of St. Paul and Minneapolis follow the historic pattern of the streetcar lines that branched out from the two downtowns and supported the urban cores.

Prior to the streetcar era, commercial functions had been centered in the urban core. The introduction of the streetcars to the Twin Cities in the late 1880s enabled workers to leave the downtowns in favor of low density suburban neighborhoods. With the streetcar system fully in place by the 1930s, business entrepreneurs moved out along the main transit routes to take advantage of the highly accessible locations.

Clusters of stores thrived at the major streetcar line intersections and transit stops. Retail and commercial functions that served the neighborhoods positioned themselves between the major intersections. Small department stores, offices, grocery stores, bakeries, pharmacies and many other goods and services providers all were located along the commercial corridors. The streetcars remained the dominant form of transportation until the 1950s when they were replaced by the automobile and the bus system. This shift in transportation modes forced the old streetcar corridors to compete with new car-oriented shopping centers in the first-tier suburbs for business.¹

The commercial corridors analyzed in this study were chosen to encompass a wide range of variation in the character of the corridors. The eight streets in St. Paul and the seven streets in Minneapolis combine for approximately fifty miles of mixed commercial and residential functions.

Selected Commercial Corridors in Minneapolis and St. Paul

Minneapolis:
A: Broadway Ave  B: Central Ave  C: Franklin Ave
D: Lake St    E: Hennepin Ave  F: Lyndale Ave
G: Nicollet Ave

St. Paul:
1: Rice St  2: Payne Ave  3: Arcade St. 4: East 7th St  5: University Ave  6: Selby Ave
7: Grand Ave  8: West 7th Street

¹Unrecognized Potential along Twin Cities Commercial Corridors
An Era of Decline

The rise of the automobile era ushered in an era of decline for the commercial corridors. Not only were the inner-city transit strips competing with suburban shopping centers, they were also losing their local population base to the suburbs.

Can the commercial corridors once again become successful business locations?

The automobile allowed people with means to live further away from their jobs in the cities. The inner-city neighborhoods experienced a population loss as people moved outward. The population that filled into the newly available inner-city housing stock was often poorer and sparser than the population that had left for the suburbs (see map below). In these neighborhoods, the businesses that once relied on the purchasing power of the local residents suffered.

Beginning in the late 1960s, many businesses relocated from the commercial strips or went out of business. Conversely, the few commercial corridors in areas that retained a middle class population, such as Grand Avenue or the Uptown district at Lyndale Ave and Lake Street, remain successful business locations.


The health of the inner city neighborhoods is inevitably linked to the health of the commercial corridors. A vibrant commercial street provides goods, services and employment to the local population.

Due to widespread business decline, neighborhood-based development corporations (NDCs) and community organizations have turned their attention and efforts towards the commercial strips. But before investing valuable and often scarce resources into the streets, NDC organizers have questioned whether there is potential for business success along these corridors. After all, conventional wisdom has long held that that these streets are destined for failure.

Unrecognized Potential along Twin Cities Commercial Corridors
The Role of Ethnic Businesses

The commercial corridors have traditionally been a site for ethnic entrepreneurs to establish businesses. In the past, European immigrants established stores along the streetcar lines. Today the corridors serve as commercial space for new immigrants to the Twin Cities. St. Paul has become home to a large population of Hmong. Minneapolis has attracted large numbers of Somali, Ethiopian and Native American residents. Both cities are home to large communities of Hispanics. These populations have established themselves in several inner-city neighborhoods in Minneapolis and St. Paul.

The recent decline of business along the commercial corridors created an accommodating environment for new ethnic businesses. High vacancies and low rents for commercial buildings allowed ethnic entrepreneurs to locate along the strips inexpensively. Many of the commercial corridors run through neighborhoods with high percentages of ethnic populations. The ethnic businesses located along these corridors to take advantage of the local consumer base.

In many areas the landscape of the corridors is dominated by ethnic businesses. Since the ethnic businesses established themselves along the economically depressed commercial corridors, they have been considered by some to be a symptom of business decline. Yet increasingly, members of the community outside the ethnic population are turning toward ethnic businesses for a diverse shopping or dining experience.

By creating niche markets that attract customers to the corridors, the ethnic businesses may play a role in the revitalization of the commercial corridors.

The map reveals the areas that have high concentrations of ethnic businesses. Sources: Macalester College Geography Department Ethnic Business Survey; Polk Business Directory 1999.

Unrecognized Potential along Twin Cities Commercial Corridors page 4
The Potential of the Commercial Corridors

**Question:** Where is there unrecognized potential for business success along Twin Cities Commercial Corridors?

**Solution:** Develop a model* that predicts the success potential for segments of the commercial corridors.

*Model Procedure:

Geographical Information Systems (GIS) software was used to develop the model. The model involved four steps:

1. **Step 1:** Develop an index that displays current levels of success along the commercial corridors.
2. **Step 2:** Investigate the neighborhood and parcel level variables that contribute to high levels of business success.
3. **Step 3:** Map the locations of favorable variables to predict where success is likely to occur.
4. **Step 4:** Compare the predicted successful locations to the current successful locations to determine where there is unrecognized potential for business success.

Grand Avenue in St. Paul is home to many successful businesses

The final result of this procedure will be a map that displays where there is potential for commercial success along the corridors.

**Data Sources:**

In order to assess the potential for commercial success along the corridors, data was compiled from three main sources:

1. Neighborhood level data was obtained from the United States Census Bureau for the year 2000. All census data was analyzed at the block group level (a census block group is comprised of approximately six city blocks).
2. Parcel level data was obtained from the Hennepin and Ramsey County Tax Assessors’ Offices for the year 2004. A parcel refers to a plot of land and any buildings that stand upon it. Only commercial parcels were considered in the analysis of the corridors.
3. A survey of ethnic businesses along the commercial corridors was conducted by the Macalester College Department of Geography in May and June of 2004. Ethnic businesses were identified from the street based on the name of the business, storefront signage and products or services sold.

All data used to access the potential of the commercial corridors was aggregated to the block group level. This made it possible to compare variables collected at varying scales. The results of the analysis will therefore be displayed at the block group level.

Hennepin Avenue and Lyndale Avenue, despite being commercial corridors, serve different markets and perform different functions than the rest of the commercial corridors in Minneapolis. Therefore, they were omitted from the analysis of potential success.
Success Levels along the Commercial Corridors

**Question:** Where is there unrecognized potential for business success along Twin Cities Commercial Corridors?

**Step 1:** Develop an index that displays current levels of success along the commercial corridors.

Although the motivations of individual business owners may vary, it can be generalized that businesses succeed when they turn a profit. Businesses will locate in areas that will result in the greatest patronage for their goods or services. Competition for the best locations results in greater demand for the prime locations. As a result, rents at in-demand locations are high, and vacancies in these areas are infrequent.

Therefore, business success along the commercial corridors can be measured by two indicators: the value per square foot of commercial buildings (rent) and the percentage of commercial buildings that are vacant per block group (vacancy rate).

A high value per square foot and a low vacancy rate along a commercial corridor indicates that the segment of the street is a desirable business location. A low value per square foot and a high vacancy rate indicates an unsuccessful business location.

The success index combines two attributes, rent and vacancy rate, into a single variable.

In order to analyze the current levels of success along the commercial corridors, the rent and vacancy rate were combined into a single variable: the success index.

The maps of the success index in Minneapolis and St. Paul break the combined measure of rent and vacancy into five categories ranging from low to high to display the variation in success along the commercial corridors.

In Minneapolis, high levels of business success are occurring along Nicollet Avenue, especially in the area known as ‘Eat Street.’

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The success index displays a wide variation in business success along the commercial corridors. Sources: Census 2000; MNIS.
Success Levels (cont.)

Grand Avenue, commonly thought of as the most successful commercial corridor in the Twin Cities, is shown on the map of St. Paul to have a high level of success based on the success index. This fact reveals that the index is an accurate depiction of the business reality along the corridors.

Areas labeled as ‘No Data’ lack commercial buildings. As a result, they cannot be assigned a success level. West Seventh Street in particular has large amounts of non-commercial functions bordering the corridor.

The underlying reasons for business success are not apparent in the maps of the success index. What makes Nicollet Avenue in Minneapolis and Grand Avenue in St. Paul successful while other commercial corridors fail to attract or keep businesses? The answer to this question is obviously complex; otherwise all the commercial corridors would be successful.

This study will examine two sorts of variables in order to explain discrepancies in business success along the corridors. The characteristics of the surrounding neighborhoods and the characteristics of the commercial buildings along the corridors will be analyzed to test whether these variables have an impact on business success.

Neighborhood and parcel level variables are not the only variables that affect success. Nevertheless, they are the most readily available and easily accessible datasets to analyze. Attempts to include other variables such as accessibility, safety, or people’s perceptions of the corridors in the analysis proved too difficult to quantify at the block group level.

What attributes make a commercial corridor successful?

The maps of the success index are a snapshot in time; they reflect the reality on the ground in June of 2004. Success along the corridors is constantly fluctuating. As such, this publication will attempt to predict where future success will occur.
Variables that Influence Success

**Question:** Where is there unrecognized potential for business success along Twin Cities Commercial Corridors?

**Step 2:** Investigate the neighborhood and parcel level variables that contribute to high levels of business success.

Several neighborhood and parcel level variables were tested using a regression analysis to determine which variables lead to variations in success along the commercial corridors. A regression analysis is a statistical procedure that determines the causal relationship of variables. In other words, the regression analysis will reveal which variables cause certain areas to be more successful than others.

The variables tested in the regression were selected to reflect characteristics of the corridors. Not all variables tested were found to be significant in determining success levels. The insignificant variables were eliminated from the analysis. These variables included the percentage of minority population, distance from competing shopping locations and the median age of the neighborhoods. Variables that could not be quantified such as traffic patterns or the perceived safety of the corridors were also excluded from the analysis. The end result is a significant regression that identifies the variables that determine success (see table).

An ideal regression would account for all of the possible variation along the commercial corridors. Unfortunately, due to the wide variations in factors that influence success, such a result is not possible. In Minneapolis, the significant variables account for thirty-one percent of the variation of success along the corridors. In St. Paul, the significant variables account for twenty-one percent. These percentages indicate the extent to which the variables are influencing the success of business along the corridors.

**Understanding the Regression Results:**

The coefficient determines the strength and direction of the relationship. The greater the value of the coefficient, the stronger the relationship. A positive coefficient indicates a positive relationship in which a greater presence of the variable leads to greater success; a negative coefficient indicates a negative relationship in which a greater presence of the variable leads to less success.

The P value indicates the significance, or validity, of the variable. In general, the smaller the P-value, the more significant the variable is in determining success.

The R² value indicates the accuracy of the regression in predicting the variations in success along the commercial corridors.

The variables that were determined to have a causal relationship with success will be used to map the potentially successful locations along the commercial corridors.

### Variables that Determine Success - Regression Results for Minneapolis and St. Paul

#### Minneapolis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>P-Value</th>
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<tr>
<td>Percentage of Ethnic Businesses by Block Group</td>
<td>4.1642</td>
<td>0.0057*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Average Condition of Commercial Buildings by Block Group</td>
<td>1.6430</td>
<td>0.0206**</td>
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<td>Average Family Size by Block Group</td>
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<td>Average Age of Commercial buildings by Block Group</td>
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#### St. Paul

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<tr>
<td>Median Income</td>
<td>0.0002</td>
<td>0.0063*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Average Age of Commercial buildings per Block Group</td>
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<td>0.0026*</td>
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<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.21</td>
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* level of significance = 1%
** level of significance = 5%
Predicted Levels of Success

**Question:** Where is there unrecognized potential for business success along Twin Cities Commercial Corridors?

**Step 3:** Map the locations of favorable variables to predict where success is likely to occur.

In St. Paul, the regression indicated that a higher median income and older commercial buildings along the streets contribute to the success of the corridors. The presence of these variables creates a more favorable business environment.

The median income of a neighborhood is an indicator of the population's potential spending power. Areas with greater median incomes are better able to support more businesses. Also, gentrification in St. Paul has led to more affluent residents living along the corridors.

Older buildings along the corridors increase the aesthetic appeal of the street. Shoppers enjoy the historic feel of the corridors that older buildings create.

Using the results of the regression analysis, it is possible to map where business success is likely to occur. Areas with the greatest concentrations of favorable attributes are the most likely to experience success. In the following maps the variables that were found to influence success were combined into one variable to display the predicted levels of success.

![Map of Predicted Success Levels along St. Paul Commercial Corridors]

The predicted success levels for the commercial corridors in St. Paul were determined using the results of the regression analysis. Sources: Census 2000; Ramsey County Users' Group.
Predicted Levels of Success (cont.)

In Minneapolis, three variables were found to contribute to the success of the commercial corridors: a greater percentage of ethnic businesses, commercial buildings in good condition and older commercial buildings. Conversely, a greater average family size along the corridors was found to hinder the success of the streets.

While the proliferation of ethnic businesses has been seen by some as a symptom of business decay along the streets, the regression results prove that ethnic businesses have a positive impact on the corridors. These businesses provide goods and services to both ethnic and non-ethnic populations in the Twin Cities. The ethnic businesses in Minneapolis have succeeded in attracting new consumers to the corridors. The ethnic businesses also give many of the streets distinctive characters that attract customers seeking a diverse shopping experience.

As was the case in St. Paul, older buildings along the Minneapolis corridors increases the aesthetic appeal of the street. Shoppers enjoy the unique historic feel that the older buildings create. Similarly, customers enjoy shopping in locations with buildings that are in good condition. Well maintained buildings increase the aesthetic appearance of the streets.

A high average family size in a neighborhood correlates with a variety of other demographics. In this case, a higher average family size is believed to represent the presence of immigrant populations. Different purchasing needs and shopping preferences of large families may inhibit some of the businesses in these areas. Also, larger family sizes may leave certain areas with less discretionary income.

The maps of predicted success for the Twin Cities display higher levels of success along Grand Avenue in St. Paul and around the intersection of Lake Street and Nicollet Avenue at Minneapolis. This observation indicates that the model was accurate in depicting the most successful business locations.
The Success Index v. the Success Prediction

**Question:** Where is there unrecognized potential for business success along Twin Cities Commercial Corridors?

**Step 4:** Compare the predicted successful locations to the current successful locations to determine where there is potential for business success.

Each block group was assigned two success levels: one based on the success index and the other based on the success prediction. A comparison of the two levels reveals the accuracy of the success prediction. For example, based on the success index a certain block group was assigned a medium-low level of success. Based on the success prediction the same block group was assigned a medium high level of success. The comparison of the two levels reveals that the success prediction over-predicts the level of success by 2 levels. In the graph, each block group is assigned a value ranging from 0 to 4 based on how many levels the success prediction over or under-predicts success.

As shown in the graph, the model exactly matches the index in 64 block groups. Since there is no discrete difference between levels of success, this study will consider block groups in which the prediction only differs from the index by one success level to be a match. Therefore, the model matches the index in 159 out of 205 total block groups or 78%.

The comparison also reveals whether the block group is more or less successful than would be predicted based on neighborhood and parcel level variables. 17 block groups, or 8%, are more successful than the model predicts. Conversely, 29 block groups, or 14%, are less successful than predicted.
Unrecognized Potential for Success along the Corridors

The map displays the ability of the success prediction (based on a quantitative analysis of neighborhood and parcel variables) to match the current levels of success experienced along the commercial corridors (based on rent and vacancy rate). The red areas represent places in which the model predicts higher levels of business success than are actually being experienced. Conversely, the blue areas are places in which the model predicts lower levels of business success than are actually being experienced.

Areas where the model predicts more success than is currently occurring are areas that have unrecognized potential for future business success.

The model over or under-predicts success by varying degrees. This is reflected in the shades of blue and red. Lighter shades reflect a prediction that is close to reality while darker shades reveal areas in which the model is less correct in its assessment of success.

A: Broadway Ave  B: Central Ave  C: Franklin Ave  D: Lake St  E: Hennepin Ave  F: Lyndale Ave  G: Nicollet Ave
1: Rice St  2: Payne Ave  3: Arcade St.  4: East 7th St  5: University Ave  6: Selby Ave  7: Grand Ave  8: West 7th Street

Unrecognized Potential along Twin Cities Commercial Corridors
Conclusions and Implications

The process of identifying segments of the commercial corridors that have unrecognized potential for business success revealed four major findings about the commercial corridors in the Twin Cities.

Firstly, the model displays unrecognized potential in 29 out of 205 block groups or 14% of the segments along the commercial corridors. This finding runs counter to the long held belief that the inner-city commercial corridors are destined to decline. This study has demonstrated that certain segments of the corridors are potentially successful locations for future business development.

Secondly, ethnic businesses have the potential to revitalize the commercial strips. In Minneapolis, the ethnic businesses exert greater influence over the success of a commercial corridor than the income of the surrounding neighborhood. The ethnic businesses have great potential to create niche markets that attract customers to the corridors. In this manner, the ethnic businesses can bring new life into the economically depressed sections of the commercial corridors.

Thirdly, historic preservation plays an important role in assuring business success. The historic appearance of the corridors can differentiate the street from the myriad of other potential shopping locations. Many segments of the commercial corridors have older buildings that could be used to promote the street as unique shopping locations.

Lastly, the wealth of the surrounding community is not the sole factor in the success of the commercial corridors. While income does play a role in determining successful locations, the model identified unrecognized potential in a wide variety of neighborhoods. In both Minneapolis and St. Paul other variables proved to be more important to business success than income.

In attempting to create vibrant business locations, the organizations working with commercial corridors have many assets to draw from. In Minneapolis the model revealed that the historic nature of the streets in combination with the unique ethnic businesses creates a desirable shopping experience. While the income of the surrounding neighborhood was an important factor in St. Paul, shoppers have been drawn to the streets by historic preservation efforts.

These findings should strengthen the resolve of nonprofits and business organizations that work to improve the status of the commercial corridors. Their efforts in working with ethnic businesses, historic preservation and business promotion have the potential to create healthy commercial corridors and in turn, healthy neighborhoods.

With the findings in this report, business entrepreneurs in Minneapolis and St. Paul have the potential to develop the corridors in ways which draw upon the assets of the commercial corridors.
Unrecognized Potential along Twin Cities Commercial Corridors

Part II: The lessons of 'Eat Street:' strategies for commercial redevelopment along the corridors

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Paul Singh

Senior Honors Project
Advisor: David Lanegran, Ph.D.

April 2005
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_The Lessons of Eat Street_
Introduction: Realizing Unrecognized Potential

In a study conducted by the Macalester College Department of Geography certain neighborhood and parcel level variables were found to have an impact on the level of success experience by businesses along commercial corridors in the Twin Cities. Using these variables, it was possible to predict where success was likely to occur along the corridors. By comparing current levels of success with predicted levels of success, several sections of the corridors were identified as having the potential for greater success than they are currently experiencing.

The study's finding that areas along the corridors have potential for success naturally raises the following question:

How can unrecognized potential along the commercial corridors be realized?

The Macalester College study identified the assets that lead to commercial success, but did not specifically suggest how these assets could be developed to bring about future business success. The purpose of this publication is to look in depth at the areas with high levels of potential and suggest ways in which these locations might become more successful.

Before recommending strategies for commercial redevelopment along the corridors, it is useful to look at currently successful corridors like Grand Avenue in St. Paul or the section of Nicollet Avenue known as ‘Eat Street’ in Minneapolis. What strategies were deployed along successful corridors in order to make them premier shopping or eating locations?

The narrative of Grand Avenue has been previously addressed in other works (see Lanegran, et. al.: The Avenue). Therefore, this publication will focus on the redevelopment of Nicollet Avenue. Not only is the story of Nicollet Avenue lesser known, but the situation along Nicollet Avenue twenty years ago was very similar to the situation experienced by many of the corridors today.

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The following pages recount the renaissance of Nicollet Avenue. From this narrative, specific strategies will be developed that can aid in other corridors' redevelopment efforts. The aim of these strategies to offer specific measures that can improve upon the corridor's assets as historic and unique shopping locations.

This publication will then highlight the areas with great potential and suggest ways in which the recommended strategies can be applied to enhance business success along these corridors. The corridors that will be treated in this manner are: Arcade Street, Central Avenue, East Seventh Street, Lake Street, Payne Avenue, Rice Street and University Avenue.

The following strategies are proposed with the realization that not all areas will be as successful as Grand Avenue or Nicollet Avenue. The Macalester College study did not find that great potential is uniform across all sections of the streets. Rather, specific areas were predicted to have more potential than others. With this in mind, this publication will suggest ways in which potential can be realized in a manner that is appropriate for specific locations. The discussion of each street will include the corridor's history, the current status of the corridor and tactics for realizing unrecognized potential.
Nicollet Avenue

History

In the late 1880s, Nicollet Avenue served the Minneapolis elite living in the Whittier neighborhood. The area was abandoned by the elites in the 1930s and became the site of high-density housing. In the 1960s, Whittier was home to a diverse low-income population. Over time, the businesses along Nicollet Avenue declined in response to the decreased purchasing power of the surrounding neighborhoods. During the 1970s, Nicollet Avenue experienced abandonment, blight and crime along the street.¹

Nicollet Avenue Today

In the previous section of this publication, the commercial corridors of the Twin Cities were analyzed to reveal whether or not potential for redevelopment existed along the corridors. The analysis of parcel and neighborhood level attributes revealed that several sections of the corridors did, in fact, have the potential for future business success. Other areas of the corridors were found to be experiencing greater success than would be expected based on the neighborhood and parcel level attributes.

One highly successful area that was found to be experiencing more success than would be predicted is the section of Nicollet Avenue known as ‘Eat Street’ (see map below). South of Lake Street, the landscape along Nicollet Avenue still reflects the decline of business along the street. North of Lake Street, however, Nicollet Avenue has been transformed into a thriving restaurant district.

In order to improve the local economy, Nicollet Avenue business leaders teamed up with community groups to form a coalition. The group members recognized that in order for the surrounding neighborhoods to succeed, Nicollet Avenue needed to succeed. The Nicollet Avenue coalition was instrumental in transforming Nicollet Avenue from a blighted street into a renowned restaurant district with a wide variety of dining options.²

Many of the problems once associated with Nicollet Avenue are similar to problems faced by commercial corridors throughout the Twin Cities today. In transforming Nicollet Avenue into a success commercial corridor, the success of the Nicollet Avenue group offers lessons for other corridors with the potential for commercial redevelopment. Therefore, the sections that follow will detail the creation of Eat Street.
The Creation of Eat Street

The intersection of Lake Street and Nicollet Avenue was closed to traffic in 1974 in order to make space for a new Kmart store. The decision to cordon off Nicollet Avenue proved to be devastating for Nicollet Avenue businesses. With the closure, the businesses on the northern section of Nicollet Ave lacked accessibility; the street was no longer a vital traffic artery to downtown. The location of the Kmart on Lake Street served to exacerbate the decline along Nicollet Avenue. Businesses left, property values decreased and many of the storefronts and properties along the street became blighted.

As the surrounding neighborhood went through the period of decline, Asian, Mexican and Middle-Eastern immigrants moved into the area. The decline in commercial property values allowed ethnic entrepreneurs who could not pay high rents elsewhere to establish businesses along Nicollet Avenue.

Throughout the 1980s, the number of ethnic enterprises on Nicollet Avenue increased. By the early 1990s, many of the blocks along Nicollet Avenue were filled primarily with ethnic businesses. These businesses drew the ethnic populations to the street for groceries, food and other goods and services unique to their homelands. Despite the presence of these new businesses and the influx of ethnic customers, blight, litter and crime remained a problem along the street.

The problems associated with the closing of the street served as a rallying point within the business community. In the late 1970s, business leaders along Nicollet Avenue united with community members and the neighborhood organizations of the Whittier, Stevens and Loring Park neighborhoods to form the Whittier Alliance. All of the actors were motivated by the common belief that Nicollet Avenue had potential and was worth saving. The coalition of business leaders and community groups was unique in that it was able to work across neighborhood boundaries in order to address the redevelopment of Nicollet Avenue.

The Whittier Alliance initially began with small activities to improve the street, such as the installation of decorative trash cans. The group also worked to secure weekly street cleaning, prompt snow removal and a beat cop to walk along Nicollet Avenue. These efforts were designed to create immediate visual improvements. Small successes galvanized further support for the group’s efforts. Spurred on by this support, the Alliance turned to address the street’s larger problem of business decline.

The Lessons of Eat Street

The closing of Nicollet Avenue served as a rallying point within the business community.

Traffic Levels along Minneapolis Commercial Corridors

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The map of traffic levels reveals the effect of the closing of Nicollet Avenue north of Lake Street in 1974. Cars are unable to directly access Nicollet Avenue from Lake Street. Source: Minnesota Department of Transportation; 1999.

The Lessons of Eat Street
The business leaders were reacting to the unrecognized potential that they perceived to exist along the street. By this time, the ethnic businesses had established themselves as stable enterprises along the street. The business leaders, some of whom had been operating on the street for decades, observed that the wide variety of ethnic businesses along the street was a tremendous, unique asset that could aid redevelopment. After all, one could not find such a dense agglomeration of ethnic businesses, especially restaurants, anywhere else in the Twin Cities.

Business leaders felt that the ethnic businesses brought a new vitality to the street. Here Chinese business owners celebrate the Chinese New Year on Nicollet Avenue.

One of the main priorities of the Whittier Alliance was to challenge people’s perceptions of Nicollet Avenue as crime ridden and dangerous. In order to do this, the group turned to improving the physical appearance of the street. The first step undertaken to this end was to photograph all the storefronts on the street. Once these photographs were viewed as a whole, the organization was able to identify specific sites to target for redevelopment. The organization and planning process for targeted parcel redevelopment took over the Alliance over three years. What had developed over this time was a committed group of community activists with a clear plan of how to improve Nicollet Avenue.

At this juncture, the Whittier Alliance approached the city of Minneapolis to invite the city into the redevelopment process. The city was able to aid the group’s efforts by providing funds for streetscape improvements. The Alliance also secured funds and assistance from the Minneapolis Neighborhood Revitalization Program (NRP). In conjunction with the city and NRP, the Whittier Alliance was able to improve blighted storefronts, plant trees and improve parking facilities along the street. In 1996 and 1997, with the streetscape program nearly complete, the Whittier Alliance took steps to guarantee that the streetscape would not merely result in a simple window dressing. Instead, the group wanted to substantively improve the fortunes of business along the street. In order to address these concerns, the Alliance turned to a marketing firm that agreed to work pro bono with Nicollet Avenue.

Examples of ethnic restaurants and businesses along Nicollet Avenue.

In conjunction with the marketing firm, Nicollet Avenue businesses sought to establish a unique identity for the street. By giving the street a new identity, the businesses hoped to further challenge the common perceptions of Nicollet Avenue as a decrepit and dangerous area. The marketing firm looked to build an identity upon the presence of so many restaurants along the street. The firm’s idea was to market Nicollet Avenue as ‘Eat Street’—a diverse restaurant district. In order to promote the new image, the firm hung Eat Street banners up along Nicollet Avenue. Food writers and restaurant reviewers for the local papers quickly caught onto the idea and promoted Eat Street in their columns. Positive reviews for restaurants encouraged people to seek out Eat Street.
Nicollet Avenue's location near downtown Minneapolis aided the formation of a restaurant district identity. The Avenue's proximity to the Convention Center, the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, the Children's Theater and other arts and events attractions drew downtown visitors to Eat Street. In the late 1990s, the neighborhood surrounding Eat Street also underwent demographic changes. The inner city was no longer being viewed as an undesirable location to live. As a result, many people moved into the Whitter, Stevens and Loring Park neighborhoods.

Currently there are over 30 ethnic restaurants and grocery stores between Lake Street and Franklin Avenue along Eat Street. These establishments form the backbone for one of the most successful commercial corridors in the Twin Cities. On weekends the street has an atmosphere of vitality as patrons shop and eat along the street. Nicollet Avenue restaurants are often featured in the local papers as some of the best in the Twin Cities. Groups often arrange tours of Eat Street businesses to experience all the unique foods. People come from all over the Twin Cities seeking an adventurous and tasty dining experience. The customers shopping and eating in these businesses are not only from within the ethnic immigrant groups. Eat Street has become a major draw for people from outside the immigrant communities as well.

The successful efforts of the business and neighborhood coalition are apparent in the pleasing streetscape of Nicollet Avenue. The area is no longer viewed as dangerous or crime ridden. Property values along Eat Street have risen in recent years (see map below). Currently there are four major developments taking place along the street. Loft-style living complexes with business space on the first floor are moving onto the avenue. Despite the rapid success of the area, the ethnic businesses which were originally attracted to Nicollet Avenue because of cheap rent do not appear to be leaving the street. Turnover among the ethnic businesses has remained relatively low. As long as these businesses continue to thrive along Nicollet Avenue, Eat Street will retain its identity as one of the premier locations for eating out in the Twin Cities.

The Lessons of Eat Street
Ethnic Entrepreneurs on Eat Street

Urban Ethnic Economies:

In order to understand the process that Nicollet Avenue experienced in becoming an successful commercial corridor, it is important to understand the dynamics of urban ethnic economies.

The clustering of ethnic restaurants on Eat Street can be attributed to the efforts of immigrant populations to assert themselves into the mainstream economy. New immigrant arrivals to the city often lack skills needed to enter the primary labor force. As a result, these immigrants occupy a marginal position in the workforce. Ethnic entrants to the labor pool perform jobs that the majority population is unwilling to do. Jobs at the lowest tiers of the labor market are poorly paid and offer little opportunity for advancement. Restriction to these low tier jobs inhibits the immigrants' ability to assimilate in the mainstream economy.

In response to the lack of opportunities found in the mainstream economy, ethnic entrepreneurs seek self-employment in sectors with unmet demand. Usually this demand comes from within the ethnic community itself. Immigrant groups require goods or services unique to their country of origin. These goods and services require providers with intimate knowledge of the ethnic community. Ethnic entrepreneurs are consequently able to establish small businesses to meet the needs of their own ethnic community. In this sector, the ethnic entrepreneurs supply products and services that cannot be obtained elsewhere. Small ethnic businesses provide an opportunity for economic advancement that does not exist in the larger economy.

In certain instances, the proliferation of ethnic businesses can lead to the formation of an ethnic enclave.

The proliferation of ethnic businesses along a corridor can lead to the formation of an ethnic enclave.

The Spatial Location of Ethnic Enclaves:

Ethnic business exist in several stages of incorporation into the mainstream economy. These stages not only pertain to the individual ethnic firms, but also reflect changes within the larger ethnic community. The stages are as follows:

1. Replacement Labor: The first stage is characterized by a highly concentrated ethnic population and small specialized ethnic businesses offering a narrow range of goods and services to their own ethnic group.

2. Ethnic Niche: The second stage is characterized by a concentrated ethnic population and ethnic businesses that provide a wide range of goods and services to their own ethnic community.

3. Middleman Minority: The third stage consists of a residentially dispersed ethnic population and ethnic business that provide a wide range of goods and services to other minority groups.

4. Economic Assimilation: The forth stage is comprised of a residentially dispersed ethnic population and ethnic businesses that serve the members of the majority that are interested in a diverse shopping experience.
Ethnic Entrepreneurs on Eat Street (cont.)

The Eat Street ethnic agglomeration represents a distinctive form of an ethnic commercial district. Like an enclave, the ethnic businesses on Nicollet Avenue are spatially concentrated and focused in one sector, food. Unlike an enclave, one ethnicity does not dominate the Eat Street businesses. The entrepreneurs on Nicollet Avenue reflect the variation in ethnic groups that came to occupy south-central Minneapolis. Also, unlike a ethnic business district, Nicollet Avenue does not lie at the heart of a concentrated residential ethnic population. Instead, Eat Street is surrounded by several diverse communities, including middle-class white neighborhoods.

Another aspect of Nicollet Avenue that differentiates the street from a traditional ethnic enclave is the stage of incorporation of Eat Street businesses. The businesses on Nicollet Avenue originally sought to fulfill the unmet demands of Minneapolis immigrant groups. A major unmet demand for any immigrant group is for familiar food. Ethnic entrepreneurs along Nicollet Avenue responded to this demand by establishing grocery stores and restaurants. Over time, Nicollet Avenue became one of the main places where Minneapolis immigrant groups went for ethnic food.

Based on previous observations about ethnic enclaves, it would be expected that as the ethnic groups in south-central Minneapolis move toward economic assimilation, the Nicollet Avenue ethnic concentration would disseminate. Yet the experience of Nicollet Avenue suggests that the ethnic entrepreneurs along Eat Street are following a different path to economic assimilation. The businesses on Nicollet Avenue has not dispersed over the last twenty-five years. In fact, the businesses along the street appear to be firmly established on Eat Street.

Eat Street provides an example of an alternate fourth stage of incorporation of ethnic businesses into the mainstream economy. This stage is characterized as the following:

**Ethnic Experience:** ethnic businesses remain spatially concentrated while selling goods and services to members of the majority. These ethnic businesses provide a unique, diverse experience to the majority that cannot be obtained elsewhere.

Ethnic businesses providing an ethnic experience are apt to remain in agglomeration to take advantage of the joint attraction created by many businesses offering similar goods. The presence of so many ethnic restaurants on Nicollet Avenue allows patrons to visit the street and sample a wide range of food. People visiting the street often go without a specific restaurant in mind, but decide where to eat upon arriving. Eat Street appeals to an adventurous clientele. Nearby neighborhoods have significant concentrations of college-educated professionals with disposable incomes and busy lifestyles. These are the type of people who eat out frequently, but also appreciate and seek out the diverse Eat Street experience.

The distinctiveness of the Nicollet Avenue ethnic agglomeration is reflected in the street's marketing scheme. The name 'Eat Street' promotes ethnic food while being inclusive of all of the ethnic groups found on the street. The Eat Street concept also capitalizes on the ethnic experience that the street provides. The agglomeration of ethnic businesses on Nicollet Avenue created a niche market that attracts customers to Nicollet Avenue. In this way, the ethnic agglomeration on Eat Street was instrumental in transforming the street from an undesirable business location to a thriving commercial corridor.
Strategies for Redevelopment

Nicollet Avenue provides a model of commercial redevelopment that may be used to advance revitalization efforts along other commercial corridors in the Twin Cities. Using the development of Eat Street as a model, three strategies for redevelopment can be developed.

1) Business-Community Partnership: A remarkable aspect of the Eat Street story is that the impetus for improvement along Nicollet Avenue came from within the community, not from the city of Minneapolis. The coalition that developed out of opposition to the closing of Nicollet Avenue was able to gather support from business owners and community and neighborhood organizations. Both the business owners and the community members were heavily invested in the street and had much to gain from economic redevelopment. The commitment of these individuals made commercial revitalization along the corridor a realistic goal.

2) Infrastructure Improvements: Blight and disrepair along a commercial corridor leads to perceptions of the street as crime-ridden and dangerous. Once these perceptions become associated with the street they are difficult to counter. If people are unwilling to walk down a corridor, businesses will undoubtedly suffer. Improving the appearance of the street was the first priority of the Whittier Alliance. The group recognized that Nicollet Avenue had an asset in its buildings. Once improved, their facades would have a pleasant effect on the street. The group appraised the status of the street’s storefronts and acted to secure funding to improve the streetscape. These efforts slowly paid off as perceptions of Nicollet Avenue improved. Now new commercial and residential space is being built on the street.

3) Creation of Niche Markets: Nicollet Avenue does not have an upper-income residential population in the immediate surrounding area. Instead, Nicollet Avenue has to attract customers from areas outside the adjacent neighborhoods, such as the upper-income Lakes District. To this end, the Nicollet Avenue organization was able to capitalize on the presence of ethnic businesses. The ethnic enclave that had been established along Nicollet Avenue provided community leaders with a framework upon which they could build an identity. The creation of the Eat Street identity promoted these businesses to the outside community. In this fashion, the ethnic businesses and the Nicollet Avenue organization were able to create a niche market in exotic foods that attracts customers to the street.

The experience of Eat Street demonstrates the imperative roles of business-community leadership, infrastructure improvement and the creation of niche markets in creating viable commercial corridors. This is not to suggest that every commercial corridor strive to become a restaurant district in the image of Eat Street. Each commercial corridor varies in two regards: the availability and condition of infrastructure and the presence of ethnic business. These two factors will shape the direction of redevelopment. Nonetheless, along each corridor there exists the potential for business-community leadership in the redevelopment process.

In the sections that follow the strategies for redevelopment will be used to generate specific recommendations for certain commercial corridors. The aim of these recommendations is to demonstrate ways in which businesses and community groups can build upon the existing assets of the streets.
Central Avenue

History

Northeast Minneapolis was the originally the site of industrial functions built around the Mississippi River and the Railroads. The neighborhoods in this area were first settled by European immigrants beginning in the 1870s. German, Scandinavian and French immigrants found work in the sawmills, lumber yards and brick mills. Skilled laborers were able to find jobs as clerks in downtown businesses. Eastern European immigrants soon followed their Western European counterparts into Northeast Minneapolis. The availability of employment created a prosperous working class in Northeast Minneapolis.

Taverns and European ethnic restaurants on Central Avenue served the working class population. In addition Central Avenue provided a myriad of every-day goods and services. Like all commercial corridors, Central Avenue entered a period of decline in the 1960s. Yet Central Avenue was not as adversely affected as other corridors. The presence of a stable working class immigrant groups in the area allowed Central to maintain some of its functions. Even so, during the 1960s, the population of Northeast Minneapolis decreased drastically. Although Central Avenue retained some of its ethnic restaurants, many businesses left the street.

Central Avenue Today

The vacancies created on Central Avenue were filled by Northeast Minneapolis' newest ethnic groups: Hispanics, Asians and Africans. Today Central Avenue has a strong concentration of South Asian spice shops, grocery stores and video stores, East African barbers and coffee shops, Hispanic restaurants and grocery stores and South East Asian takeout food restaurants. The presence of so many ethnic restaurants and grocery stores on Central Avenue has transformed the avenue into an Eat Street of its own right.

The largest ethnic operation on Central Avenue is the Holy Land Deli. Majdi Wadi, the owner of the combined restaurant, butcher, grocery store and bakery opened the Holy Land Deli in 1987. The Holy Land caters to Middle Easterners, South Asians and East African. The restaurant has become renown for its inexpensive and tasty gyros and other Middle Eastern fare. The grocery store has an olive bar with what must be the Twin Cities largest selection of olives. In 2001, Wadi spent $1 million to expand and renovate the building he now owns. Operations like the Holy Land Deli including the Crescent Moon Bakery, Patel's Indian grocery store and Chiapas Mexican restaurant attract ethnic customers to the street and have transformed certain sections of Central Avenue into a vibrant street once again.

The Lessons of Eat Street
Central Avenue (cont.)

Central Avenue has also benefited from an initiative to improve the streetscape. More than $1.5 million was contributed to the effort from a variety of sources including the Metropolitan Council, Local Initiatives Support Corp., and the Minneapolis Neighborhood Revitalization Program. The funds were devoted to business renovations, creating Central Avenue banners to hang from streetlights, landscaping, making more space for parking, cleaning up alleyways behind stores and efforts to keep crime away from the street. Banners hang from the streetlights identify Central Avenue as the commercial corridor of Northeast Minneapolis. The results of these efforts are clear as the image of the corridor has been remarkably improved.

**Potential Along Central Avenue**

The map of potential along Central Avenue shows that despite the recent successes of Central Avenue, there remains potential for future business development. Two areas stand out: the section of Central Avenue adjacent to downtown Minneapolis (1 on map) and the segment of the street north of 18th Avenue NE (2 on map). These sections are separated by an industrial area focused on the railroad.

Although there are many ethnic stores along the street, the vast majority are engaged in lower level functions. Unlike Eat Street, many of the shops along Central Avenue have not expanded their markets into the majority population. In this sense, Central Avenue remains an undiscovered gem for diners seeking exotic food. The secret may soon be out as restaurants along Central Avenue have received a fair amount of press in the major papers and the local arts and events publication.

The emergence of yet another food focused commercial corridor raises the question of whether the Twin Cities can support so many restaurant districts. The answer seems to be yes—as long as the food is good! Many restaurants can coexist in the same market as long as they offer an inexpensive high quality dining experience. There appears to be a constant demand for high quality food served in a pleasant environment with good customer service. Ethnic restaurants in particular provide a cheap form of entertainment that can be varied in many ways, which allows a large number of ethnic restaurants to coexist in the same market.

The unique mix of ethnic enterprises along Central Avenue can provide a dining and shopping experience that is different than the one found on Nicollet Avenue, Selby Avenue, or any of the other commercial corridors. As long as each corridor develops in its own manner based on its unique assets, the Twin Cities can be home to many thriving corridors.

Central Avenue can thus build upon its image as an undiscovered gem. Having already convinced food critics, Central must now promote itself to the greater population. The use of marketing and branding techniques like those used along Nicollet Avenue have the potential to increase Central Avenue’s prominence. These efforts can build upon the success Central Avenue has had in creating a positive image of the street.

The Lessons of Eat Street
The East Side

History

Several industrial areas developed on the St. Paul's east side to take advantage of the area’s proximity to the railroads that served the downtown. The industry in the area attracted immigrant laborers to the East Side. Beginning in the 1840s, European immigrants moved into Swede Hollow, a creek bed located below the Hamm Brewery. Swede Hollow became the home for several subsequent immigrant groups: Swedes, Irish, Italians, and Mexican Americans. As each ethnic group became wealthier, they would abandon Swede Hollow, making way for the next wave of immigrants. Swede Hollow was demolished by the city in the 1960s, but the East Side continues to attract immigrant groups including recent Hispanic and Asian immigrants.¹

As the population left the East Side in the 1950s, the area was deprived of its economic base. By the 1960s, Payne Avenue had a reputation for selling used furniture, an indication of the street’s decline. The loss of industry in the area, most recently the closure of the 3M plant on East Seventh Street resulted in further economic troubles for the East Side. Shops and businesses along the East Side were forced to close or relocate.²

The East Side Corridors Today

The commercial buildings on the East Side are some of the oldest in St. Paul (see map on next page). Very few corridors in the Twin Cities retained the same density of historic storefronts. However, the condition of these buildings has suffered as a result of business decline. Signs of the East Side communities’ struggles are visible on the landscape of East Seventh Street, Payne Avenue and Arcade Street. Many of the storefronts along the three streets are vacant or in disrepair. Several businesses have done little to improve upon the condition of the commercial buildings.

The businesses along the East Side corridors provide basic services for the surrounding community. Hardware stores, laundromats, bars, furniture stores, barber shops and pharmacies are typical businesses along the East Side corridors.
As would be expected, many ethnic businesses are located on the East Side commercial corridors. On Payne Avenue near East Seventh Street, three Italian restaurants serve as a reminder of the East Side’s early immigrant populations. Most ethnic businesses on the East Side corridors reflect the newer Asian and Hispanic immigrant arrivals to the East Side. East Seventh Street has Hispanic and Asian grocery stores, restaurants and clothing stores. Payne Avenue has an agglomeration of similar ethnic businesses around the intersection of Case Avenue. Arcade Street has fewer ethnic businesses than Payne Avenue or East Seventh Street, but the street is home to a couple Asian restaurants and Hispanic money-wiring operations.

Several ethnic businesses have prospered on the East Side corridors. The Plaza Latina on Payne Avenue is a Hispanic mini-mall similar to the Mercado Central on Lake Street. The Plaza Latina has small stores, vendor stalls and a food cantina. The Bymore Mexican Supermarket and Las Tapitas Restaurant are other examples of major ethnic operations on Payne Avenue.

The Plaza Latina is an example of a successful ethnic enterprise on the East Side.
Potential along the East Side Corridors

Much like the successful intersection of Selby Avenue and Western Avenue, the commercial corridors on the East Side can capitalize on the presence of historic buildings. Potential along the East Side corridors exists in the historic nature of the streets. The redevelopment of older buildings could strengthen the streets’ identity as well as make the streets more attractive places to shop. The Swede Hollow Café on East Seventh Street, with its renovated historic façade, provides one example of how historic preservation can be used to benefit East Side businesses. In addition, East Seventh Street has already taken steps to improve the streetscape by installing historic style streetlamps and planting trees along the sidewalk. Similar steps along Payne Avenue and Arcade Street could improve the walk-ability and appearance of the corridors.

Along Payne Avenue, the ethnic businesses may also aid in the redevelopment of the area. The successful ethnic enterprises, such as the Plaza Latina, are creating multi-cultural corridors on the East Side. Creating an identity revolving around the historic nature of the streets in combination with the ethnic experience could attract more customers to the East Side streets. In order to do this, community organizations should provide monetary assistance to bring more ethnic business to the streets to fill out the available commercial space.

Convincing ethnic entrepreneurs that investment in storefront improvements and historic preservation is a worthwhile expenditure is, at times, a difficult task. At first, the ethnic entrepreneurs operate with narrow profit margins, leaving little resources for infrastructure improvements. Communicating community goals to startup business and financial assistance for improvements could convince ethnic entrepreneurs to support corridor redevelopment.
Lake Street

History

For many decades, Lake Street served as the principal east-west commercial corridor in Minneapolis. Built up mostly before the 1920s, Lake Street was anchored by the large Sears shipping center. The businesses along Lake Street provided all necessary goods and services to south-central Minneapolis. Along with the department store, the street was home to drug stores, professional offices, bakeries, convenience stores, clothing stores, dancehalls, movie theaters and grocery stores. At one point Lake Street was even home to an amusement park and the Minneapolis Millers' baseball stadium. The street's location near the railroad also promoted the growth of many industrial functions.

As the population entered the automobile era, the face of Lake Street began to change. Many auto centered businesses such as garages and car dealerships located along Lake Street. The rise in traffic on Lake Street led to a severe parking shortage. The parking problem along with the loss of inner-city population and competition from new suburban shopping centers ushered in the period of decline along Lake Street.

In response to the decline, Lake Street businesses and planners attempted to bring shoppers back by remodeling the street to function like the suburban shopping centers. In the 1970s, big box retailers like Kmart, Target and Super Valu along with many other chains moved onto Lake Street. These stores were set back from the street to provide ample parking. Despite bringing some revenue to the street, these stores were not successful in reversing Lake Street's fortunes. In 1994, Sears closed the shipping center, leaving the street with an enormous vacant building. The sheer size of the Sears building made it a near impossible vacancy to fill.

Lake Street Today

Lake Street stretches across several miles and runs through many of Minneapolis' south-central neighborhoods. Consequently, the street exhibits a wide range of conditions. At its western edge in Uptown, Lake Street is home to trendy restaurants and stores frequented by young urban professionals. Moving east, Lake Street is more economically depressed with several dilapidated or vacant storefronts. Major intersections serve as focal points for commercial activity. The businesses along these sections of the street provide basic goods and services to the surrounding neighborhoods. These neighborhoods are home to several minority and immigrant groups. The diversity of the neighborhoods is reflected in the types of businesses found on Lake Street. At its eastern edge, Lake Street serves the middle class neighborhoods located near the Mississippi River.
Lake Street (cont.)

Ethnic businesses have a long tradition on Lake Street. The street has always served as a center for ethnic enterprises. Ingebretsen's, a Scandinavian food and gift shop located one block east of Bloomington Avenue, is a rare remaining example of the European immigrant shops that were once found on Lake Street. Ethnic businesses located along Lake Street today are focused on serving the needs of recent immigrant communities. Ethnic travel agencies, money wiring operations, grocery stores and restaurants are ubiquitous along Lake Street. These businesses serve a wide variety of ethnic groups: Hispanics, South East Asians, East Asians, East Africans, Middle Easterners and South Asians. These businesses are not concentrated in certain sections based on ethnicity, but are interspersed with one another along the street.

While most of the ethnic businesses are small, a few entrepreneurs are quite successful and have expanded their businesses into large enterprises. One example is the Sabri Commons, a large mall-like bazaar east of Hiawatha Avenue that rents space to immigrant shopkeepers. The Sabri brothers own smaller properties along Lake Street. Although they have frequently clashed with the city and each other, the Sabri brothers have invested a lot of capital into Lake Street.2

Despite the success of some businesses, blight and vacancy remains a problem along Lake Street. The map of the current success level below displays higher levels of vacancy and lower property values along many sections of Lake Street. The streetscape in these areas reflects the lack of current business success. Many properties, like the Gustavus Adolphus Hall which was gutted by fire in 2003 (see above photo), have remained vacant for some time. The presence of blighted and vacant properties may influence or reinforce perceptions about Lake Street as a stagnant, dangerous and undesirable shopping location.
Potential Along Lake Street

The map of potential along Lake Street displays a great range of potential along the street. Several segments of the street are shown to be less successful than predicted while others are currently more successful than predicted. Most noticeable is the high potential for future business success at Lake Street and Nicollet Avenue. The intersection between Lake Street and Nicollet Avenue was closed to traffic in 1974 to make space for the Kmart store. The severed connection between the streets cut off traffic flow to the area and has adversely affected business success in this location. The Kmart lot remains an underdeveloped site; an often discussed reconnection of Lake Street to Nicollet Avenue would help spur business development.

One area that has greater success than was predicted is the corner of Lake Street and Bloomington Avenue. This success is in large part due to the Mercado Central, a Hispanic marketplace that is located on the southwest corner. The Mercado Central complex is home to over fifty small business. The ethnic entrepreneurs sell every imaginable good including videos and music, clothing and authentic Mexican food. Mercado Central is very popular with the local Hispanic population. On a given weekend the marketplace is full of shoppers. The agglomeration of vendors makes shopping easy and fun. The Mercado’s success has spurred other developments in the vicinity of Lake-Bloom, most noticeably the large Me Gusta restaurant.

Ethnic business along Lake Street have piqued the interest of non-ethnic shoppers. The attraction to ‘authentic’ ethnic food may increasingly bring non-ethnic customers to the street. Mexican food is a Lake Street specialty; besides the Mercado Central food court there are many restaurants offering inexpensive tacos, tortas or tamales.

Ethnic restaurants and stores on Lake Street have yet to create broad appeal outside the ethnic communities. Simple steps to improve the streetscape might go a long way in attracting outsiders to Lake Street. The size and diversity of Lake Street makes attempts to brand the street difficult. Recently it was announced that an international bazaar will be moving into the Sears building. The redevelopment of this crucial space may give Lake Street an opportunity to recast itself as the international marketplace of Minneapolis. Operations like Sabri Commons and the Mercado Central, as well as the ethnic restaurants, could figure prominently into this new Lake Street identity. After all, of all the commercial corridors, Lake Street has perhaps the widest range of ethnic experiences to offer.
Rice Street

History

Rice Street served the North End neighborhood of St. Paul. The North End was initially settled by European immigrants and remained a fairly homogenous population. The neighborhood grew out from the industrial area surrounding the railroads south of Front Street. Rice Street served as a major transportation and shipping route between downtown St. Paul and the suburban farms to the north.

Rice Street was not only a major transportation route; the street served North End with neighborhood retail functions. During the 1950s, white flight from North End in combination with the building of public housing in the vicinity of Rice Street led to public perceptions of the street as crime-ridden. Businesses in the area declined as a result. Many of the street’s neighborhood services were replaced by auto-focused businesses. Other storefronts were simply left vacant.¹

In the 1970s, the lack of parking along Rice Street was viewed as preventing customers from coming to the street. However, attempts to revitalize the street by clearing space for parking proved to be unsuccessful at attracting business back to the street. Instead, the ample parking space created gaps in commercial buildings along the street that now sit as undeveloped lots.

Rice Street Today

There are relatively few retail functions along Rice Street. Asian and Hispanic ethnic businesses, such as the Double Dragon grocery store, provide neighborhood services to the local ethnic populations. A number of ethnic clothing and fashion shops are located south of Maryland Avenue. Yet the number of ethnic businesses on Rice Street is relatively low as compared to University Avenue or the East Side commercial corridors. The North End has not experienced the same growth of immigrant populations as other neighborhoods in St. Paul.

Space cleared for parking left gaps in commercial space along the Rice Street.

Ethnic businesses aside, auto-focused businesses dominate the retail functions. One exception is the Caron-Fabre furniture store that sells eclectic antique furniture. Business suppliers and construction firms, namely United Products and Twin Cities Roofing, have located on Rice Street to take advantage of the large amounts of available space. The lack of general retail on Rice Street is reflected in the streetscape; several storefronts remain abandoned. Also, vacant lots line several sections of the street. Consequently, perceptions of Rice Street as an unsafe and undesirable commercial corridor persist to this day.
Rice Street (cont.)

Potential along Rice Street

The potential displayed on the map of Rice Street results from the many older commercial buildings that remain along the street. While many are vacant or in disrepair, they remain the street’s greatest asset. Historic preservation and storefront improvements could combat the negative perceptions that plague Rice Street.

The lack of retail along Rice Street makes the redevelopment of the street especially challenging. The business service providers and construction firms based on the street do not create foot-traffic or attract shoppers to the street. The ethnic businesses, some of which have prospered while serving the local community, could serve as a new draw for shoppers. Small business loans provided by the corridor community development organization, SPARC, could aide in attracting more ethnic businesses to the street. Bringing businesses into the vacant storefronts would greatly improve the image of the street. The development of an ethnic fashion district along Rice Street is an intriguing possibility for the street. Clothing and fashion shops targeted at ethnic groups all over the Twin Cities as well as the majority population could bring new life to the street.

Several Asian fashion shops and clothing stores are located on Rice Street.

Historic buildings are an asset for Rice Street.
Selby Avenue

History

Selby Avenue was initially the premier shopping street for St. Paul's elite, serving the Ramsey Hill and Summit Avenue neighborhoods. By the 1930s, population demographic shifts transformed Selby Avenue into the commercial center for St. Paul's Jewish population. As the Jewish population assimilated and moved to the suburbs, African Americans took their place. In this manner, Selby Avenue reflected a pattern seen in most North American cities: series of new immigrant or minority groups replacing older groups in the inner city. The elite shopping functions once found on Selby relocated to Grand Avenue during this time period. Throughout the 1950s, Selby Avenue catered toward the African American population.

The riots following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968 devastated Selby Avenue. Businesses were looted and burned. In response, many of the commercial operations left the street. New businesses did not move onto the street and many storefronts and lots remained vacant for decades - some remain vacant to this day. The street became notorious in St. Paul as the center of vice and crime. The intersection of Selby and Dale Avenues was known as "Hell's Kitchen." In addition to decay along the street, houses in the surrounding Ramsey Hill neighborhood were neglected and abandoned.

In the 1970s, the fortune of Selby Avenue began to reverse. The city of St. Paul acquired federal funds to improve real estate in the Ramsey Hill neighborhood. Investors also began to buy and renovate older structures in the Ramsey Hill neighborhood and along Selby Avenue. The Dacotah Building at Selby and Western Avenues was renovated and reopened as the W.A. Frost and Company restaurant. The city improved the appearance and accessibility of the street by widening the sidewalks, planting trees and installing streetlamps. Developers responded to these efforts by building apartments and condos along the street. Entrepreneurs returned to the street and opened restaurants, bars and shops.
Selby Avenue

Selby Avenue Today

Efforts to revitalize Ramsey Hill succeeded in attracting middle class residents back to the neighborhood. Businesses on the eastern edge of Selby Avenue now benefit from the surrounding Crocus Hill neighborhood and the proximity to downtown St. Paul. Since the street was largely abandoned in the 1970s, new businesses were able to move onto the street with relative ease. The presence of the apartments and condos along Selby Avenue insures that businesses along the street have a steady consumer base. These attributes have led the eastern end of Selby Avenue developing into a small restaurant and entertainment district. Many small neighborhood bistros and cafes in the area serve gourmet food, coffee, wine and dessert. The western side of Selby Avenue has not benefited from commercial revitalization like the eastern edge. West of Dale Avenue, there are few commercial operations besides convenience stores or hair salons. Some of the commercial properties are in disrepair and many parcels are still vacant or have been converted into large parking lots. Except for nodes of commercial activity at Snelling Avenue and Fairview Avenue, the eastern edge of Selby Avenue is mostly residential, with a few small offices and professional firms interspersed.

Potential Along Selby Avenue

The map of Selby Avenue displays potential along the entire corridor. The presence of an upper-income population and historic commercial buildings makes Selby Avenue an attractive location for shoppers. These two factors have already contributed to the redevelopment of the eastern edge of Selby Avenue. While potential exists along the entire avenue, it has not been recognized everywhere. Slowly, however, the success experienced on eastern Selby Avenue is spreading westward. New developments are being built on previously vacant lots between Victoria and Lexington Avenues. These developments offer storefronts and office space as well as loft-style living. Other empty parcels and large parking lots are still available for redevelopment.

In many respects, the eastern end of Selby Avenue has already created a successful image of a vibrant commercial corridor. The neighborhood bistros and cafes are instrumental in attracting patrons to the street. Unlike Nicollet Avenue, these restaurants were not part of an ethnic enclave. Yet the same principal of joint attraction through agglomeration applies. Selby Avenue, once the roughest street in St. Paul, was able to attract customers to the street by offering a unique shopping and dining experience along a historic avenue.

Potential for Business Redevelopment along Selby Avenue

The Lessons of Eat Street
University Avenue

History

University Avenue served to connect the two downtowns of the Twin Cities by streetcar. In St. Paul, the proximity of the railroads led to the development of industry in the vicinity of University Avenue. Commercial functions located on University Avenue to take advantage of the well-traveled and highly accessible street. The large Montgomery Wards store near Snelling Avenue anchored the street’s retail functions. Shoppers could find every imaginable good along University Avenue. In addition to retail, University Avenue has traditionally been the site of automobile and truck sales and repair outfits. The street was even home to the St. Paul Saints’ baseball stadium.

With the removal of the streetcar lines, University Avenue was taken over by the automobile. University was transformed into a four lane thoroughfare with parking on both sides of the street. Traffic levels on University Avenue are heavy and constant. Auto centered business, such as car repair garages and auto-parts stores located on the street to take advantage of the traffic and wide swaths of cleared industrial land. The dominance of the automobile has detracted from the walkability of the street. New shops were set back from the street to provide ample parking for customers.

During the 1970s, in response to the decline of the corridor, University Avenue business leaders and the city of St. Paul encouraged big-box retailers to locate on the street. The Midway Shopping Center now houses grocery and department stores as well as other large national chain retailers. This section of University Avenue was developed to serve as a regional shopping center for the residents of St. Paul. The Cub Foods and Target chains on University Avenue are now both national leaders in revenue in their franchises.

University Avenue Today

University Avenue displays a wide range of functions. At the intersection of University Avenue and Raymond Avenue, a small cluster of galleries, coffee shops and restaurants gives the street an artsy atmosphere. Moving west-to-east, the big-box retailers, fast food restaurants and auto-centered business dominate the street. Smaller businesses along the street do little in terms of aesthetics to appeal to passersby, as there are few. Blighted storefronts exist along the entire street. In many areas litter accumulates on the sidewalks, which further deteriorates the appearance of the streetscape.

The eastern end of University Avenue is the site of St. Paul’s largest agglomeration of ethnic businesses. Beginning in the 1980s, Hmong immigrants from the highlands of Laos began to move to the Frogtown neighborhood of St. Paul. University Avenue, which serves as the southern border of the Frogtown neighborhood, provided commercial space to the new immigrant group.
So many Asian businesses located on the street that the eastern end of University Avenue has become an ethnic enclave. Asian restaurants, grocery stores, garages, clothing stores, travel agencies and money wiring firms provide basic goods and services to the immigrant population. In addition to these businesses, a few Asian professional services such as lawyers and realtors have located on University Avenue.

The ethnic businesses on University Avenue cater exclusively to the local immigrant population. The high demand for ethnic goods in the area has allowed several businesses to prosper. Shuang Hur, a large Asian supermarket located at Dale Avenue and University Avenue, sells a wide variety of unique goods including seafood and fresh vegetables. The store has succeeded in meeting the demand for authentic Asian groceries. Mai Village Restaurant, located near University Avenue and Western Avenue, recently built a new multi-million dollar facility to expand its seating and serving capacity. The restaurant is now the largest Vietnamese restaurant on University Avenue. The restaurant is quickly becoming renowned for its expansive menu and incredible décor.

The map of University Avenue displays several block groups with slight potential for future business success. In order to recognize any potential, University Avenue businesses will need to deal with the problem of traffic and the appearance of the street. University Avenue played an important role in the development of the Twin Cities, yet that history is not reflected in the buildings along the street. Efforts to repair blighted storefronts and preserve historic facades would improve the aesthetics of the street. Currently businesses are focused on attracting traffic to their stores. Improving the streetscape might encourage people to walk down the street and shop rather than simply driving to certain businesses.

The ethnic enclave on University Avenue may have potential to attract shoppers to the street. Although ethnic businesses in St. Paul were not found to contribute to the success of a street, the lessons learned from Eat Street can still be applied to University Avenue. Currently, Asian businesses do not seek to bring in customers from outside the immigrant group. Mai Village Restaurant is an exception; it attracts a diverse crowd. Following Mai Village's example, ethnic businesses may move to expand their market. Although it is still in an early stage of development, the enclave has the potential to sell an ethnic experience to the majority population.

**Potential along University Avenue**

The Lessons of Eat Street
Conclusions

In an interview with the Star Tribune, Daisy Haung, the owner of the Shuang Hur Supermarkets that operate on Nicollet Avenue and University Avenue, said of her business, “It’s either reinvent or die. We’ve had to reshape our business to fit this neighborhood.” Shaung Hur has succeeded in both locations by offering unique goods and services to the Twin Cities’ Asian and Hispanic population. In many ways, Haung’s statement about reinvention applies not only to her business, but to the commercial corridors as a whole. It is unreasonable to expect that the corridors will regain their historic position as the sole focus of commercial activity in the Twin Cities. Instead, the corridors must find a new ways to draw consumers to shop along the streets.

Nicollet Avenue, which was identified as exceeding its prediction of success, is a clear example of a corridor that has successfully reinvented itself. Eat Street was a unique concept that capitalized on the presence of ethnic restaurants and grocery stores. Through a strong business and community organization, Nicollet Avenue was able to improve the streetscape and create a new image that challenged people’s perceptions of the street as blighted and dangerous.

The experience of Nicollet Avenue in recreating itself as Eat Street provides valuable lessons to community organizations working for commercial revitalization along the corridors today. The Eat Street experience highlighted how business-community partnerships, infrastructure improvements and the creation of niche markets can transform a street from a blighted and undesirable location into a thriving commercial corridor.

The Shuang Hur Supermarket on Nicollet Avenue.

The potential for this transformation exists along many of the corridors in the Twin Cities. Arcade Street, Central Avenue, East Seventh Street, Lake Street, Payne Avenue, Rice Street, Selby Avenue and University Avenue are all examples of streets that can develop into successful business locations. Favorable attributes such as historic buildings and the presence of ethnic businesses makes redevelopment along these corridors possible. As has been demonstrated through several recommendations for revitalization, efforts to promote historic preservation, create attractive streetscapes and enable ethnic entrepreneurs to do business along these streets can all lead to the future business success of the corridors.

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The purpose of making recommendations for revitalization was to highlight possible ways in which unrecognized potential could be realized. The recommendations made in this publication are not the only ways in which these places could redevelop in order to prosper. They are merely starting points. Commercial redevelopment along these streets requires the creativity and imagination of concerned business owners and community members.

In the words of Daisy Huang, “it’s either reinvent or die.” Fortunately, there exists unrecognized potential along the commercial corridors. Hopefully the strategies presented in this publication to realize this unrecognized potential will help to assure that the demise of the corridors never occurs. After all, the livability and viability of the inner city neighborhoods in the Twin Cities depends on the health of the commercial corridors.

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End Notes

The History of the Commercial Corridors


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2. Ibid., 72.

The Creation of Eat Street


2. Ranae Hanson and John McNamara, Partners (Minneapolis: Dayton Hudson Foundation, 1981), 146-147.


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University Avenue


Works Cited


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