

692 MAIN STREET – A REVISIONING OF  
AN URBAN VOID

AN EXPLORATION INTO CHALLENGING CULTURAL  
PERCEPTIONS OF AN URBAN VACANT LOT

BY  
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A Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of

The University of Manitoba

in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of

MASTER OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE

DEPARTMENT OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE  
FACULTY OF ARCHITECTURE  
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## ABSTRACT

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This practicum delves into the challenges of vacant lots in our urban centers, particularly the issues of cultural perception, meaning and value. Vacant lots are part of the urban cycle of growth and decay; they are common occurrence within our urban centers and yet their existence within the urban everyday tends to be overlooked, even avoided. Although these urban entities are often temporary in nature, essentially land that is in transition, they have a profound impact on cultural perceptions that not affect their meaning and value but can subsequently affect the perception of the surrounding neighborhood and city.

This practicum examines the North American cultural meaning of vacancy and how this cultural meaning affects the treatment of urban vacant lots in terms of its perceptual value and development. Through the use of a literature review to investigate vacancy and issues of vacant lots, it was determined that although urban vacancy is a broad and complex topic, it can be examined through three general characteristics: cultural, economic, and ecological. These characteristics illustrate the multifaceted nature of urban vacant lots and also expose the cultural perceptions that subsequently affect their everyday use in our urban centers specifically within the context of the City of Winnipeg.

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## INTRODUCTION

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*It is perhaps inevitable that the landscape project will wax and wane with time.*

*James Corner*

On casual observation while taking a day walk through an urban center one will notice empty spaces; empty spaces that occur between buildings, empty parking lots, parcels that are devoid of structure. We can accurately guess what happens within the buildings as we pass by, given the signs on the buildings, and the products that we see in the windows. We continue walking, passing by clothing stores, furniture dealers, trendy restaurants and the like. We keep walking past dormant night clubs, bustling office buildings, and hotels. We pass building after building until we notice, up ahead, a gap in the walls; as we approach the gap widens into a cavity. Perhaps it's a parking lot or an outdoor sport court. But as we pass by we see emptiness. There is no paved surface, no signage identifying what this empty space is. All we seem to notice is an unkept and untended lot; a lot with patchy grass areas, no trees or shrubs, no activity, just weeds and nothing else. This exploration began from a curiosity of these everyday outdoor spaces; these "negative" spaces that exist within an urban landscape, these are the spaces that are often invisible in our daily lives; they are featureless, nondescript spaces that exist within every suburb, every urban centre. They are the leftover spaces, the hiding places for the surplus items, the dumping areas for unwanted items; the nooks and



crannies; these are the everyday spaces that exist within our daily lives.

My observations began after taking a recent drive through downtown Winnipeg and noticing that the physical features have significantly changed, I was at a loss. After several years of absence from the city, I had noticed that many of the prominent buildings I had seen for many, many years were gone. Many of the landmark structures that I had used for navigating the urban core had disappeared, particularly at 692 Main Street. The sight of abandoned and derelict buildings were common in this area of the city, buildings would stand empty for years, windows and doors boarded up, before they were demolished and removed from sight/site. Their usefulness had expired. However, once the building was removed from sight, the land it once occupied stood out like “missing teeth” and had a profound impact on the visual nature of the street and neighborhood. This empty lot became a source of curiosity for me; and I discovered that urban life did not stop once the building had disappeared; this open space became a source for informal and unprogrammed activities.

Although these and other typical vacant lots go unnoticed in our everyday routines it is an issue that can contribute to our cultural experience. I will argue that as these spaces are a product of culture they play an important role in understanding cultural values. These spaces are often temporary in nature there is an immense potential for these spaces to be meaningful even in the interim and even for a brief period. In this practicum I will attempt to challenge the common cultural perceptions of vacant lots as empty, meaningless non-places by extracting the layers of cultural and social history, and reveal the natural ecological processes in an effort to give a temporary and transitional functional presence to an otherwise unused, vacant lot. In order to do this, I will discuss the importance of studying vacancy as it relates to the urban everyday experience. I will then investigate the language and meaning of vacancy as it relates to the built environment and how this language shapes the cultural, economic and ecological perceptions of vacant land. I will conclude this exploration with a design resolution that appropriately addresses my selected site.

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I

THE IMPORTANCE OF ABSENCE

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*Vacancy in the Urban Everyday*

In my introduction I related a typical experience of walking down an urban street. As part of the everyday urban landscape one of the most ever-present aspects are the non-spaces or void spaces which occur. (Figure 1) These are common, everyday spaces that are left after a building has been razed, or have been overlooked by urban planning or development; they are sights in every urban center. Although this ordinary experience may seem trivial and unworthy of study it is quite the opposite. Many cultural geographers, such as John Brinkerhoff Jackson, Paul Groth, and Donald Meining believe that the places of our everyday life become invisible through familiarity. Yet these scholars and others believe that “Ordinary, everyday landscapes are important and worthy of study. At the core of cultural landscape studies is a straightforward



Figure 1: Absence in the urban everyday

question: How can we better understand ordinary environments as crucibles of cultural meaning and environmental experience...Everyday experience is essential to the formation of human experience.” (Groth, 3) The cultural geographer, J.B. Jackson stated “there is really no such thing as a dull landscape or farm or town. None is without character, no habitat of man is without the appeal of the existence which originally created it...A rich and beautiful book is always open before us. We have but to learn to read it.” (Jackson, 5) In other words, the ordinary, everyday landscape is worthy of study; it is always inhabited by cultural or natural history; “it has been shaped and marked in subtle or dramatic ways and is occupied by forms of life and processes which register on many scales macro and micro.” (Corbin, 12)

In many of these cultural geographer’s works, the focus of their research is on the vernacular architecture such as the farm houses, factories, railroads, essentially the everyday positive space. Much of our everyday environment is shaped by landmark structures, clearly

delineated spaces, directional signs, place names, identification symbols and signs. We orient ourselves with landmarks, built forms, place-names, and navigate with maps, guidebooks, and GPS systems that are typically focused on positive space. In the urban everyday, emptiness is a common occurrence within the ebb and flow of the city yet is a difficult concept as it is an integral part of the urban fabric. These everyday spaces typically have no identification signs, provide no source for orientation; they are spaces that are “internal to the city yet external to its everyday use” (Sola-Morales, 120).

This leads to the question: What is the relevance of the un-built or this counter-space to our cultural experience? The life cycle of cities rise and fall as an organic narrative; there is interplay of construction and deconstruction, positive and negative spatial relationships and one enduring character of this narrative is the byproducts: land that is left exposed and unused. As the city itself is a transitory entity, vacancy is a natural microcosm of this condition. Everyday places can disappear from our consciousness and places that have no apparent function or visible use can further recede from our attention. But in recent decades, scholars have found that what is not visible is just as important as what is. In “The Cultural Meaning of Urban Space”, Gary McDonough believes that studying empty spaces rather than the built environment is how one really learns about a city, its culture and its values, “Emptiness appears to represent a problematic category to pose to the social and cultural analysis of urban space and place, a study which usually focuses on a “fullness” of interactions, structures and meanings” (McDonough, 3) His work focuses on various cities and contexts around the world including Barcelona, Orlando and Pilsen Czechoslovakia and he examines each of these areas in terms of their unique cultural perception and treatment of vacant lots through observations over many years. He argues that emptiness “as a complex social space is defined by conflict among groups with distinct visions of the city and presences in society. The underpinnings of emptiness range from the interstices of neighborhoods to representations of control and resistance.” (McDonough, 7)

In her 2003 article *Vacancy and the Landscape: Cultural Context and Design Response*, Carla Corbin gives several reasons for the importance of studying vacancy. She talks about how the natural ‘there is nothing there’ reaction to an empty lot can effectively erase cultural or historical dimensions of the site. “The declaration of vacancy or emptiness erases important dimensions of a site: natural processes and characteristics above or below the scale of conventional perception, cultural history or meanings that may not have a physical

presence, and systems that are not recognized as having immediate functional purpose” (Corbin, 12) In other words, with a loss of purpose comes a loss of identity.

As well, her article raises questions of morality and waste and the value that vacant land has within the cycles of growth and decline within the city. “As landscape architects, scholars and educators, we know that even the most bare or featureless land is ‘occupied’ in a number of ways, that there is always something or some processes present, some history to be found, if not at the site, then in historical records or local memory.” (Corbin, 12)

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## II

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### THE CULTURAL VALUE OF VACANCY

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#### *Finding Meaning within the Emptiness*

*“Cultural values ascribe norms and meanings to everyday life as they infuse daily events with relevance and significance...Cultural values reference being in the world as a social animal as they assign relative worth and value...To the extent that they are widely shared across a population and structure values and norms, they carry power to organize the world conceptually...cultural values define the standards by which lives are lived”*

(Jackle, Wilson, 31).

In *The Language of Landscape*, Anne Whiston Spirn, believes that landscape is a language and hence has metaphorical or symbolic significance. In other words landscape is a story, a narrative that represents time itself with iterations, phases, and episodes. Therefore, ordinary landscapes can provide cultural signals; much like human language, landscape can be read and understood, landscapes have cultural significance. Spirn believes that landscapes contain signs which can be ‘read’ and understood like language. These signs can provide clues to culture. Although one needs to study the syntax and vocabulary of landscape to understand its meaning. (Figure 2)

In her book, she distinguishes language on two levels. On the first level is the syntactical which she compares the structure of verbal language to the structure of landscape. For example nouns are features in the landscape and natural processes are similar to verbs.

The verbal subjects are the landscape interactions. Underlying level one is level two where the metaphorical is revealed and the structure of landscape can take on meaning. She relates an example of coming upon a small farmhouse in the middle of an open expanse of prairie and immediately surrounding the house was planted large shade trees. The trees not only provide shade and shelter from the prairie sun and wind but provide a position for this house in the wide expanse of the surrounding plain. “Each farmhouse is planted round



Figure 2: A common sight/site: A couch dumped in a vacant lot? Or purposefully placed?

with trees...straight vertical trunks in sharp contrast to the broad horizontal sweep, marking each a special place...they tame the landscape, give to the openness a locus.” (Spirn, 63) In this example the physical objects (trees, farmhouse, and prairie) have a relationship to the metaphorical and underlying symbolism which is providing identity and a vertical point of reference in the expanse of horizontality and openness. This leads to the question of how to read an empty lot? Are there elements within emptiness that can be extracted and have cultural meaning and value? These are questions that I hope to answer in the following sections.

In everyday human language vacancy refers to a temporary condition. It typically refers to a condition of being empty such as a container, or an office position that has not yet been filled. The term is often advertised by hotels, apartment building to indicate an opportunity for occupancy. In terms of the built environment “land or a building described as “empty” or “vacant” means there are no structures or people visible, or the building is currently unoccupied, or that neither have apparent productive use”. (Corbin, 12) In political terms, meaning is imposed on vacant land through a system of classification. Because vacant land is a “broad and imprecise term covering various types of non-utilized or underutilized land...when governments conduct land inventories, officials often wrestle with creating an operational definition of vacant land... in an effort to manage vacant land.” (Bowman and Pagano, 5) One method of classification of vacant land is the acronym TOADS or “temporarily obsolete, abandoned or derelict sites” by Greenberg Popper and West. There are three varieties of TOADS: formerly productive and valued sites, such as automobile factories, furniture plants, warehouses, or textile mills that have since been abandoned by their owners; formerly productive but unwanted sites that housed less desirable activities such as slaughterhouses, leather tanneries, and paper mills; and unused parcels of overgrown land that for various reasons have not been developed. (Greenberg, Popper, West, 25) Other classifications are similar in that the vacant lots tend to be temporary in nature, although may not be used for decades, tend to be void of visible structures or buildings and are often devoid of social



Figure 3: ‘Missing Teeth’: A void between buildings

activity. (Figure 3) From these various methods of classification we can see how vacant land is an elastic, ambiguous concept that can encompass areas such as Rights-of-Way corridors (power lines, highways, railways, river banks etc.), to vacant street boulevards, back alleys, scrub woods, and empty industrial lots; it may be a left over parcel of land between buildings that somehow escaped urban planners or it may be an abandoned construction site. It could take the form of an urban wetland or may be a future site of a community centre or a shopping mall. Vacant land has many contexts and many faces; it is an ever-present and diverse term.

In terms of defining vacant lots using Anne Whiston Spirn's methods, the level one language that relates to vacant lots nouns such as litter, refuse, garbage, weeds are often common features in vacant lots Adjectives such as open, temporary, dangerous, empty are often used to describe vacant lots. Underlying level one is level two where the metaphorical is revealed and the meaning of vacant lots come into focus. Level one combined with level two results in a typical cultural perception of a vacant lot.

### **The Typical View of Vacant Lots**

In his article *Geography of Emptiness*, Gary McDonough conducted research into the meaning of urban vacant lots from around the world and notes reoccurring relationships between social and cultural interpretations. "Given the lifeways and values that associate with cities-the very type-specimen civilization-emptiness disturbs. For some, it may be unnerving or "dangerous" to deal with such spots. For others, the emptiness of "no one goes there" represents such a cultural imposition that it eclipses patterns of use and therefore marked as deviant and therefore nonexistent. It may simply seem wasteful, uneconomic, or threatening, but empty space begs explanation" (McDonough, 7). From his research, he has also concluded that most vacant or empty lots do not indicate openness and a freedom of cultural activity but rather a conflict, "emptiness as a complex social space is defined by conflict among groups with distinct visions of the city and presences in its society" (McDonough, 7).

Unfortunately, in modern North American cultural discourse the representation of these urban spaces has been primarily pessimistic. Although vacancy is a temporal condition, when the term is used in reference to the built environment it refers to a transition, a condition inherently unstable and in the context of the urban condition it often is

associated with similar but distinct terms such as dereliction, abandonment or waste and is often viewed in a negative light. The label of ‘vacant land’, tends to evoke images of decay and abandonment, empty lots that are overgrown with weeds, littered with refuse; these words can conjure up powerful images that not only paint a vivid physical picture but also carry with it provocative cultural signals.(Figure 4, 5) They are often anonymous, featureless entities that have “Evocative labels such as ‘dead space’, and disturbed space’ have been levied at bare derelict land, roughly vegetated wasteland, abandoned buildings and an assortment of various temporary uses such as material dumps and construction sites”. (Bowman and Pagano, 2) Too often vacant land is seen as a sign of economic and social failure that carries with it a moral facet “Signs such as broken windows, weedy fields, or deteriorating fences are readily understood in contemporary culture as human failure made tangible in an anthropomorphized landscape” (Corbin, 15)

In addition many Cities’ By-Law policies perpetuate this perception that vacant lots are an attractant for garbage dumping and illegal behavior. For example the City of Winnipeg does not have policies on the treatment of vacant lots per se, although the policy on vacant or derelict buildings is enforced within the city. “The goal of the By-Law is to ensure that vacant buildings meet basic standards of maintenance so they do not detract from neighborhoods, the City as a whole, and do not pose an undue hazard for firefighters and the general public” (By Law 35/2004 3). One may interpret this as vacant buildings detract from the neighborhood and therefore reflect poorly on the economic and social state of the neighborhood and surrounding city.

Similar By-Laws are enacted across Canada: In Ottawa, for example, the property maintenance By-Law states “(1) Where on any lands there is refuse or debris, the owner



Figure 4: Overgrown pile of construction waste: a sign of neglect.

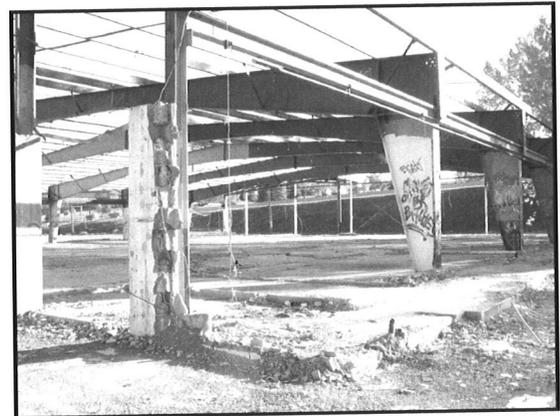


Figure 5: Building skeleton as a sign of abandonment

or occupant shall remove the refuse or debris from the land so that the land is left in a clean condition. (2) Where on any lands there is heavy undergrowth, long grass or weeds, the owner or occupant shall clear the lands of such heavy undergrowth, long grass or weeds so as to be consistent with the surrounding environment.” (City of Ottawa, Property Maintenance By-Law No. 2005-208) In Vancouver the Standards of Maintenance By-Law No. 5462 states “All land shall be kept clean and free from rubbish or debris, objects and materials, except for materials for immediate use in the construction, alteration or repair of a building on the site. (2) No vehicle, trailer, boat or mechanical equipment which is in a wrecked or dismantled condition shall be parked, stored or left on any land, except as provided in Sentence (3). (City of Vancouver Property Maintenance By-Law No. 5462) Typical By-Laws across Canada are enforced based on a similar principle that un-kept, and untidy land detracts from the neighborhood and reflects poorly on the area and City. In other words vacant lots are meant to be maintained in a static state of mown grass and free of objects. The objective here is to maintain a certain aesthetic and appearance that will not dissuade potential buyers and developers.

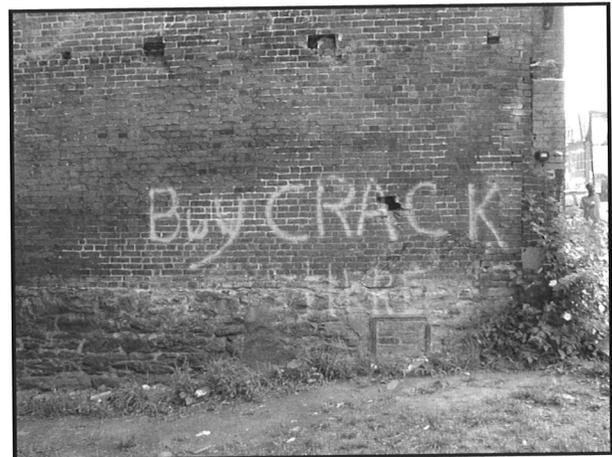


Figure 6: Vacant lots attract illegal activities  
Image from: [visualresistance.org](http://visualresistance.org).

Unfortunately, even more prevalent is the perceived fear of vacant lots and that they are considered to attract marginalized people of society who typically engage in undesirable, possibly criminal, activity; these places are unsafe. (Figure 6) In 1980, William Whyte identified “undesirables” as obstacles to construction “They are not themselves much of a problem. It is the measures taken to combat them that is the problem. Many businessmen have an almost obsessive fear that if a place is attractive to people it might be attractive to undesirable people. So it is made unattractive...no eating, no sitting...benches are made too short to sleep on, that spikes are put in ledges; most important, any needed spaces are not provided at all, or the plans for them scuttled.” (Whyte, 60). In this case emptiness is an issue of control and regulation. CPTED, Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design, is a systems approach that focuses on design principles to reduce or eliminate ‘undesirable’ activities. In his 1998 Plan Canada article “Empty Spaces, Dangerous Places”

Tom McKay writes “vacant lots encourage crime.” He explains that vacant lots are “seen as intimidating, these spaces are avoided by normal users, thereby exacerbating the problem and encouraging the criminal element.” He goes on to write that “a public place that lacks significant ownership interest is often perceived by prostitutes, drug dealers and others as an environment in which their activities will be tolerated.” (McKay, 35) He supports his claims with statistics of crime rates in a particular area in Toronto, demonstrating that incidents of illegal behavior have decreased since a community garden developed in the communities’ vacant lots. On the City of Winnipeg website, The City of Winnipeg Police Services issues a personal safety pamphlet in which it states, among other personal safety tips, is to “avoid vacant lots, parks and dark alleys” (City Of Winnipeg Safety Pamphlet, 1) Further to this point, in Derelict Landscapes, Wilson and Jackle write: “Abandoned buildings in our inner-city neighborhoods continue to erode the local social fabric. They signify the ills of neglect, communicating to people the futility of inner city living...To invest here is to risk losing money...abandoned buildings are a sign of irreversible deterioration.” (Wilson and Jackle, 175)

As a result of this negative perception, vacant lots create, divide, and separate people, neighborhoods, and communities. Vacant lots have the ability to create social buffers. They also have the power to protect property value. In the case of road or waterways, vacant lots can serve to isolate communities from others just as well as a high wall in a gated community. “City policies toward (re)using vacant land or creating vacant land (open space) serve the purpose of protecting or enhancing property values by demarcating neighborhoods...It should not be surprising then, cities are not always eager to reuse vacant land for seemingly “productive” or revenue generating purposes...if the land in its ‘vacant’ or unused state serves a value enhancing or value –maintaining purpose”.

(Bowman and Pagano, 94)

## The Visions for Vacant Lots

*"In all the whole town, the most wonderful spot is behind Sneelock's Store in the big vacant lot. It's just the right spot for my wonderful plans" Said young Morris McGurk "...If I clean up the cans." Now a fellow like me said young Morris McGurk could get rid of this junk with a half hour's work. I could yank up those weeds. And chop down the dead tree. And haul off those old cars. There are just two or three. And then the whole place would be ready, you see..."*

(Theodore Geisel, 2)

Although there is a litany of evidence that condemn vacant lots within our urban centers as entities without meaning and value, much has also been written on the potential of vacant lots. Although when vacancy is used in the context of an urban condition it often is associated with similar but distinct terms such as dereliction, abandonment or waste; this may not always be the case, "Some vacant land or buildings are abandoned, but not all, so vacant retains an idea of value, though perhaps deferred to the future" (Corbin, 15). The above excerpt taken from a popular children's book, illustrates this initial point of the potential vision for a vacant lot.

As a kid I remember playing in riverbank woods, sneak between garages, play through back alleys and empty construction sites looking for fun. We always had the most interesting finds and experiences in these places and the fun was always diverse and unique. The vacant lots had a sense of dangerous excitement. A large part of the excitement of a vacant lot is the opportunity for free play. In his book Wasting Away, Kevin Lynch writes, "Many waste places have these...attractions: release from control, free play for action and fantasy, rich and varied sensations. Thus children are attracted to vacant lots, scrub woods and back alleys." (Lynch, 25)

In his article "Vacant Urban Land: Hidden Treasure?" Neal Pierce writes of the positive opportunities that vacant lots can supply. A vacant lot strewn with refuse can be reborn as a community garden and meeting place. (Pierce, 3053)

In her article, Jane Schukoske writes "community gardens build social capital not only by



Figure 7: Linda K. Johnson's Tax Lot #1S1E4ODD

Photo taken from: [www.metropolismag.com](http://www.metropolismag.com)

reclaiming or preserving urban space, but also by fostering collaboration among nearby residents across racial and generational lines.” (Schukoske, 357) In recent years an increasing number of community groups, local artists, designers and activists have focused their attention on urban vacancy as an important community resource. In 2005, the City of Philadelphia held an international design competition in response to their growing urban problem – over 40,000 vacant lots, totaling almost 1000 acres of vacant or abandoned land within the city boundaries. The City of Philadelphia sought to transform the perception of vacant land from an urban blight to a valuable urban resource. The intent of the competition was to come up with long-term solutions to their urban vacant lot crisis. The products of the design competition ranged from a system of urban agricultural plots which filled each vacant lot to a city wide system of water purification and filtration systems that imbed themselves within the vacant lots. At the local level, grassroots initiatives have recycled vacant lots as community garden areas, community green spaces, and even opportunities to create affordable housing. For example Portland Oregon artist Linda K. Johnson transformed a long empty traffic median into an urban vegetable farm. (Figure 7) Her intention was “to make people rethink the possibility of unused urban space.” (Donahue, 50) She donates her crop of lettuce, tomatoes and potatoes to local soup kitchens. Other positive examples exemplify the ability of vacant lots to be converted and as a result act to renew community cohesion and encourage positive social interaction. In his book Cities and Natural Processes Michael Hough writes, “The concept of urban forests, planting design founded on succession, grassland management and the larger structure of city spaces that bring together natural processes and human behavior, provide benefits in a more diverse environment, greater economic and environmental productivity and greater social and educational values.” (Hough, 129) He notes a significant urban renewal project in London, England which created an urban ecological oasis from an abandoned coal yard, “The site is adjacent to the Regent’s Canal and surrounded by industrial development and rail tracks. Its development included a large wetland fed by the canal, woodland, meadow, a pathway through the property and observation decks associated with the wetland. The nature centre provides environmental education for school children of all ages.” (Hough, 122)

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### III

## THE PRODUCTIVE VALUE OF VACANCY

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### *The Productivity of Vacancy: A Moral Imperative*

Productive value is an important concept in the cultural meaning and perception of vacant lots. The terms often associated with vacant lots, such as, derelict, or abandoned communicate unproductive and worthless land and as a result, “As productivity and usefulness is lost, so is identity...” (Corbin, 17)

To put vacant land back into productive use as soon as possible is part of North American culture. Whether it was for economic gains or for personal survival the meaning was that open or vacant land required settlement, that virgin or untamed land was available for the taking. In his book Visions of Paradise: Glimpses of Our Landscape's Legacy, John Simpson explains the importance of the productivity of land as it was seen through a moral and religious imperative “In a vacant soyle, hee that taketh possession of it, and bestowed culture and husbandry upon it, his Right it is.” (Simpson, 22) In other words it's was one's moral duty to occupy and take possession

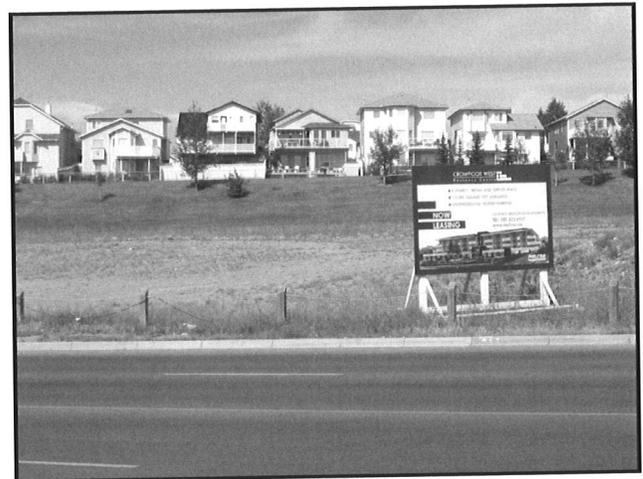


Figure 8: Coming soon: A roadside sign indicating the intent to occupy a vacant lot

of vacant land. This is evident in today's culture where decay or abandonment is negatively viewed and is often an unacceptable condition. Vacant land “which unless pleasing in a conventionally scenic sense, has little positive identity and may be instead be regarded negatively.” (Corbin, 16)

To counter this unsettling condition of vacant land ground breaking ceremonies is a common ritual proceeding new development. Often to indicate the land owner's intent and provide a potential meaning to a vacant lot, signage is erected to indicate the intent or opportunity to occupy the signs text often accompanied with an image of the proposed development. (Figure 8)

Another factor that contributes to the productive value of vacant land is the length of time a lot stands “vacant”. “Cities whose vacant land has languished in an unproductive state for some long, yet undefined, length of time fear that vacant land, like a virus, will spread through adjacent areas. The quicker the vacant land is put back into productive use, the less likely decay will spread.” (Bowman and Pagano, 156-157) The effect of ‘bad’ vacant land, or land that has been empty for a long period of time, is widespread. Not only does the presence of vacant land affect the physical form of the city but also the image of the city and in turn the economic viability of the neighborhood, the community, and consequently the city. Does a vacant lot need to have an economic benefit to it? In many cases replacing an empty lot with green space is enough to attract people into an area (whether desirable or not). An empty groomed lawn may be enough to change the image of a vacant lot rather than one which is weedy and unkempt.

The perception of “The dominant culture in much of North America reads a neat, orderly landscape as a sign of neighborliness, hard work, and pride” (Nassauer, 162) The conflict in values between the groomed and the wild are in constant battle “The diverse community of plants that flourish in profusion in the adjoining abandoned lot, in every crack in the pavement and invade every well-kept shrub border and lawn, represent, in the public mind, disorder, untidiness and neglect.” (Hough,

92) One of the most well know environmental art installations that deal with the issue of productivity of vacant lots was Agnes Denes’s 1982 work entitled “Wheatfield: A Confrontation” in which she planted 1.8 acres of wheat in a vacant lot across from the most expensive real estate in New York. (Figure 9) One thousand pounds of grain was gathered from the fall harvest. After harvesting, the hay was fed to the horses stabled by the New York City Police department. The artwork was a comment on “human values and misplaced priorities”. The wheat sold for \$158.50 the value of the real estate directly across the street was worth \$4.5 billion. (Lippard, 190)



Figure 9: Wheatfield: A Confrontation. Image from Lippard, 190

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## IV

### THE ECOLOGICAL VALUE OF VACANCY

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#### *The Nature of Occupation*

In *Cities and Natural Processes*, Michael Hough believes that there is a contradiction of values represented through two different urban landscapes: the formal, well groomed urban plazas of mown turf, flowerbeds, fountains and gardens and the other “fortuitous landscape of naturalized urban plants and flooded areas left after rain that may be found in the forgotten places of the city... These two contrasting landscapes...The formal and the natural, the pedigreed and the vernacular, symbolize an inherent conflict of environmental values.” He goes on to say that if “diversity is ecologically and socially necessary to the health and quality of urban life, then we must question the values that have determined the image of nature in cities.” (Hough, 6) The perception that vacant lots are weedy, visually unpleasant and unkempt is not uncommon. Despite this perception, there is a complex ecological system at work. (Figure 10) The challenge is to extract and reveal meaning in these vegetative communities.

In her 1997 article, *Messy Ecosystems, Orderly Frames*, Joan Iverson Nassauer discusses the cultural perception of ecological functioning and framing the concept of a healthy ecological system to fit with cultural language. “We know how to see ecological quality only through our cultural lenses and through those lenses it may not look like nature.” (Nassauer, 161)



Figure 10: A mixture of pioneer species including dandelions, foxtail barley, and quack grass.



Figure 11: Pioneer species: Foxtail Bromegrass

There are limited numbers of plants that can adequately survive the harsh conditions of an urban center without significant human intervention. (Figure 11) These plants, that on casual observation occur within the cracks of a sidewalk, along side fences and building foundations, are the pioneer species that require little to no human assistance. These hardy plants, called ruderal plants, are both native and alien species that voluntarily colonize disturbed and waste spaces. (Vessel and Wong, 1) The soil conditions are a primary reason for this limited palate of plants. Urban soils as opposed to natural soils often display characteristics that include variable soil chemistry, great vertical and spatial variability, modified soil structure leading to compaction, presence of a surface crust on bare soil that is usually hydrophobic, restricted aeration and water drainage, interrupted nutrient cycling and a modified soil organism population and activity, presence of contaminants, and highly modified soil temperatures. (Craul, 88) Soil in an urban vacant lot are often severely disturbed, compacted and contaminated by foreign material that few plant types may survive. Disturbance of the soil can be a result of a variety of factors such as infilling or backfilling, following the removal of a razed building, compaction from vehicles or pedestrian traffic. (Figure 12) Soil contamination “arises from the deposition, mixing, and filling of materials not naturally found in the soil. It is also due

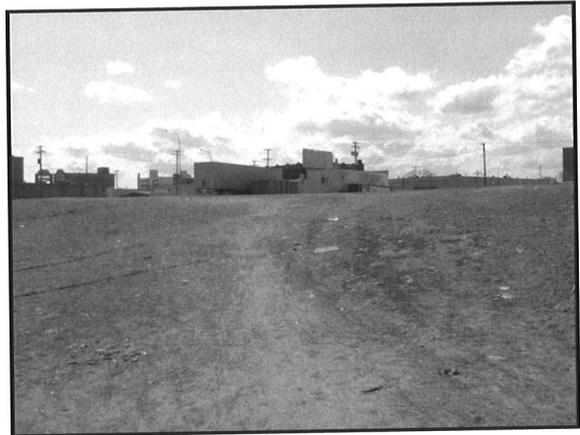


Figure 12: Soil Compaction: Results of foot traffic on the soil

to the addition of materials in concentrations or amounts exceeding those found in natural soils (Craul, 87) Thus in order to transform a vacant lot into a useful community garden or plant new vegetation would require significant soil remediation, aeration, amelioration unless appropriate plants that could thrive in such soil conditions were used. For example soil compaction may be overcome by planting of species tolerant of such conditions. Trees such as Manitoba Maple (*Acer Negundo*), Green Ash (*Fraxinus pennsylvannica*) Burr Oak (*Quercus macrocarpa*), and Hawthorns (*Crataegus spp.*) are relatively resistant to soil compaction since they tend to tolerate the anaerobic soils conditions of flooding and poorly drained soils. (Craul, 242)

Soil contamination usually occurs from the introduction of a foreign material or chemical to the soil. “The activity may be the deliberate dumping of harmful substances as the byproducts of manufacturing, deposition of trash and refuse on vacant, derelict land, the widespread deposition of contaminants from polluted air and precipitation, the application of herbicides and pesticides directly to the soil, the transport of deicing salts and other contaminants from streets and sidewalks to the soil, and the building rubble as residue from structure demolition. (Craul, 1985) In essence there are a variety of means of deposition and a wide variety of contaminants that can inhabit soils in an urban vacant lot. Various plants can tolerate soil contamination for example some of the most salt tolerant species such as Russian Olive (*Elaeagnus angustifolia*) and Honeylocust (*Gleditsia triacanthos*). Other species listed below are tolerant to extremely contaminated sites such as landfills. (Table 1) Plant species that were determined not to be tolerant of the climate in Winnipeg, according to the Hardiness Zones of Canada, were omitted from Table 1.

Ranking	Plant Species Tolerant to Landfill Conditions
1	Norway Spruce, <i>Picea abies</i>
2	Mixed Poplar, <i>Populus sp.</i>
3	White Pine, <i>Pinus strobus</i>
4	Pin Oak, <i>Quercus palustris</i>
5	American Basswood, <i>Tilia americana</i>
6	Winged Euonymus, <i>Euonymus alatus</i>
7	Green Ash, <i>Fraxinus pennsylvannica</i>
8	Honeylocust <i>Gleditsia triacanthos</i>
9	Hybrid Poplar, <i>Populus sp.</i>
10	Weeping Willow, <i>Salix babylonica</i>

Table 1: Table adapted from Craul, 199

Left on their own, plant communities develop within a series of events or ecological succession, which continues until a stable environment is achieved. In a vacant lot typically succession begins with the invasion of grasses and other colonizing plants. The

seeds from these plants are often carried by wind, rain, blown in from passing cars or dropped by humans or animals. The seeds may also have been laying dormant in the existing soil waiting for the right conditions to germinate. Over time and depending on the degree of soil disturbance, these are replaced by shrubs and fast growing tree species. These in turn are replaced by climax species. "Ecosystems that have developed in urban conditions may be the prevailing ecosystems of the future. Many of the most resilient plants in our industrial areas and in cities...are non natives" (Hough, 87)

On closer inspection, in any given vacant lot there may be more than one distinct habitat. Areas along pathways or proximity to roads may be distinctly different from those areas that have not been downtrodden. Soil conditions may vary; available sunlight and moisture can also influence the plant arrangement. As an example, pathways (or desire lines) worn into the ground, compact the soil and thereby reduce the air available to seed and roots. As a result there are few nitrifying bacteria that occur in the soil and only plants with minimal nitrogen demands can grow in these areas. The plants that can grow exhibit certain characteristics such as they are small in size; have flexible stems that can withstand trampling and are primarily annuals. In disturbed areas grasses often dominate followed by clover species. There is also an abundance of organisms (consumers) that feed on the plants (producers) such as herbivores, the insects such as slugs, snails, grasshoppers up to the carnivores and omnivores such as snakes and raccoons. Eventually these organisms die and are decomposed by bacteria and fungi and their nutrients enrich the soil. This complex ecological system that occurs within typical vacant lots, "often have an ecological, historic and topographic diversity that is far richer than those created by reclamation and redevelopment." (Hough, 94)

What can be done to allow for natural succession within an urban vacant lot while indicating human intervention and care? In Joan Nassauer's 1995 article, *Messy Ecosystems, Orderly Frames*, she describes several cues for care that can aide in changing perceptions of a 'messy' ecosystem. Some of her cues include mowing, flowering plants and trees, wildlife feeders and houses, bold patterns, trimmed shrubs, plants in a row, fences, architectural details, lawn ornaments, and painting. "Orderly frames are not a means of dominating ecological phenomenon for the sake of human please. Orderly frames can be used to construct a widely recognizable cultural framework for ecological quality." (Nassauer, 169)

In 1981, the City of Ottawa initiated a woodland naturalization program for its urban park system. A series of test plots were designed and planted in 1983. This new and radical plan for the City was intended to reduce park maintenance costs, be economical and produce a park system that was self-sustaining. Through the "creation of meadow communities through a modified mowing regime and an experimental reforestation study program designed to gain long-term knowledge of methods for establishing new woodlands" the system was monitored for 6 years and proved to be successful in reducing park maintenance costs and increasing biodiversity and park use. In 1987 an evaluation took place to discover what test plots were successful and which had not been. Several conclusions were drawn: the method of managed succession was the most effective way of establishing a woodland ecosystem. They also discovered that poor soils were not necessarily an impediment to plant growth as long as they had a neutral pH and are well drained. In order to reduce competition from grasses and other groundcovers, a plastic sheet covered with mulch was the best and least expensive method to ensure growth of pioneer species which grew to 8 to 10 meters with four years. They also learned that the spacing the plants at about 1 meter ensured a greater survival rate and faster canopy closure than wider spacing. The program was terminated some years later due to the lack of governmental interest in the naturalized program. (Hough, 103)

THE CONTEXT OF VACANCY

*Vacancy within the City of Winnipeg.*

All cities have vacant land; in recent studies most major urban centers average approximately 15% of useable vacant land (Bowman and Pagano, 25). Whether the land is left over from a razed building or land that has never been developed, as I have pointed out, vacant land within an urban context is an unsettling concept. The affects of an open lot where once was occupied by building is a dramatic perceptual change.

**A Historic Look**

The City of Winnipeg changed in several distinct stages from a small, compact, ethnically homogeneous community to a large, sprawling, cosmopolitan city. With the exception of a sharp increase in the early 1880s, growth was steady and resulted primarily from immigration from Britain and Ontario. These early immigrants established a dominance that persisted until after 1945, despite the arrival of other groups. In contrast, the growth from 1900 to 1913 was phenomenal, and by 1911 Winnipeg was the third-largest city in Canada. After 1960 the population of the city proper increased at about 2% per year. (Statistics Canada)

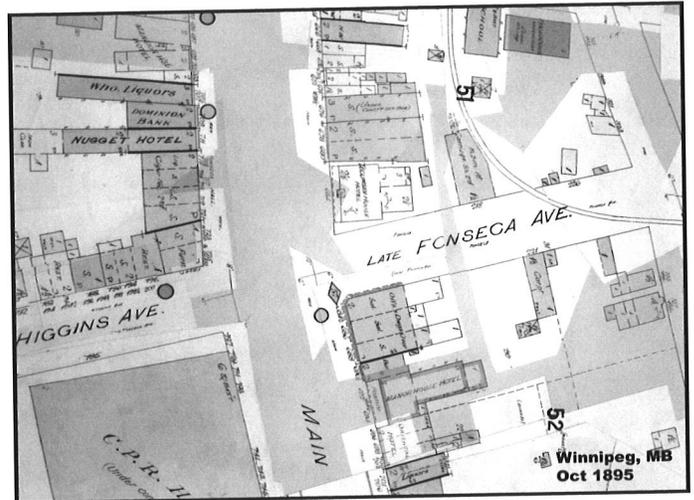


Figure 13: Main and Higgins in 1895

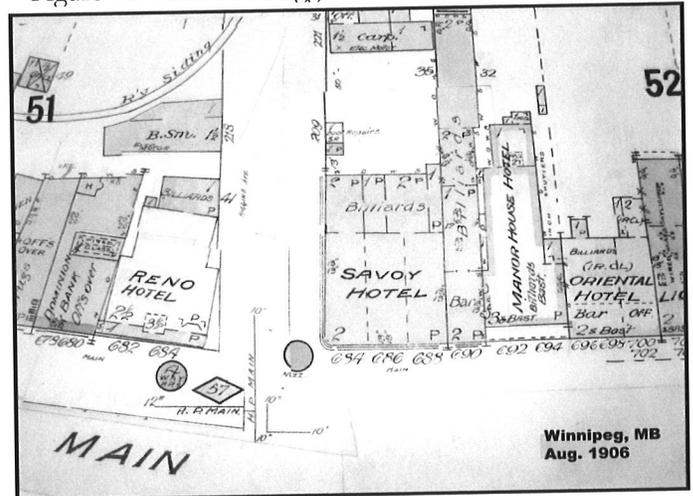


Figure 14: Main and Higgins in 1906

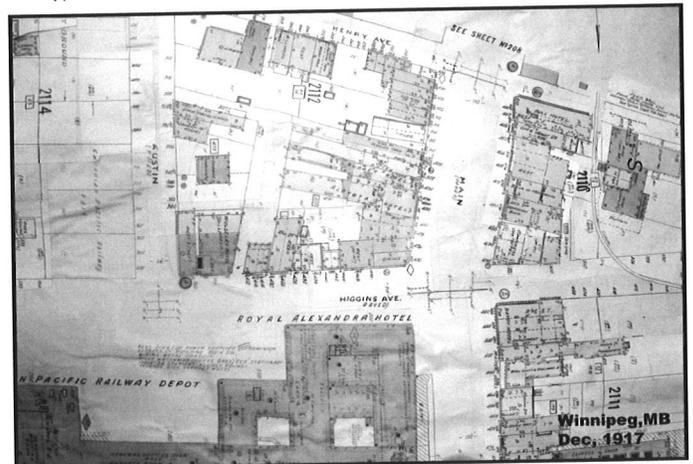


Figure 15: Main and Higgins in 1917

In 1813 the building of Fort Douglas began. The first Selkirk Settlers who arrived in 1812 found “the forks”, where the Red and Assiniboine Rivers meet, already occupied by the North West Company’s Fort Gibraltar. The settlers decided relocate on the south side of Point Douglas where fire had reduced the tree cover; the land could be easily cleared for agriculture in this area. For the first settlers from the east the Red River was a mixed blessing. It was an efficient transportation link, a guaranteed source of water for cultivation, but at the time of spring breakup it could be and proved itself more than once to wreak havoc on the early settlement and what was to become Winnipeg of the future. (Artibise)

Despite the early setbacks and strife during 1870-74 when the city was being formed, it appeared that Point Douglas would become a fashionable residential district. For the greater part of the 19th century North Point Douglas was known as a prestigious area of the city. It was home to the Ashdowns, the Schultzes and the Logans, some of Winnipeg’s founding families. Real-estate investors banked upon the expectation that the area would boom, however Point Douglas was not to realize its early promise. All too quickly other areas, particularly the Hudson Bay Reserve and property south of the Assiniboine River provide attractive residential alternatives. Despite this, like all communities, Point Douglas evolved its own share of churches, retail outlets, schools, and businesses, each contributing to the character of the community. (Artibise)

The study site, located at 692 Main Street at the intersection of Higgins Avenue and Main Street, rests within the Point Douglas district of Winnipeg.

In 1881 a decision was made to run the CPR rail line through Point Douglas area and effectively changed the character of Point Douglas, cutting the neighborhood in two, with the portion north of the CPR tracks remaining for the most part residential, while the portion south became dominated by the railroad and its associated industrial and commercial buildings. In response to Winnipeg’s growth as the commercial and grain centre of Canada, the railway embarked on a vast expansion program. This in turn led to the establishment and location in Point Douglas of light and heavy industries such as foundries, cement plants, soap factory, furniture companies, saw mills, flour mills, carriage works, warehouses, hotels, and farm implements. (Artibise) Within the building boom between 1900 and 1913 four hotels were erected at the popular intersection of Higgins Avenue and Main Street: During the building boom between 1900 and 1920 these four hotels were the center of Winnipeg social life. The Royal Alexandra which was built in

1906 and described as “a palace and the largest hotel in Canada,” and was one of Canadian Pacific Railway’s chains of great hotels. (Figure 17) These hotels were where “dignitaries and celebrities stayed and orchestras played in the ballroom”. (CPR brochure, 1) The existing office buildings which were constructed in the

late 1890’s on the northwest corner were subsequently converted to the Savoy Hotel in 1906, the Empress Hotel built on the south east corner in 1912 and the Alberta Hotel. (Figure 16)

While Point Douglas was never primarily an industrial area, its character had been permanently changed. Within two decades from the incorporation of Winnipeg in 1874, Point Douglas had changed from an attractive residential area where it’s most important citizens resided, to an area bisected by train yards, with factories belching smoke and dirt, trains rumbling through the area, their smoke darkening the skies. Its residents changed from upper middle class, largely of British origin, to working class, of non-British descent. The area offered the immigrants cheap, affordable housing, close proximity to their jobs and a community in which they would not have to struggle with language difficulties. (Artibise)

Within the past 30 years the area has seen a steady decline of people and resources as people have been moving out of the area

In 1991 the population in the Point Douglas ward was 41,540 in 1996 it was 39,220 or a change of -5.6%.

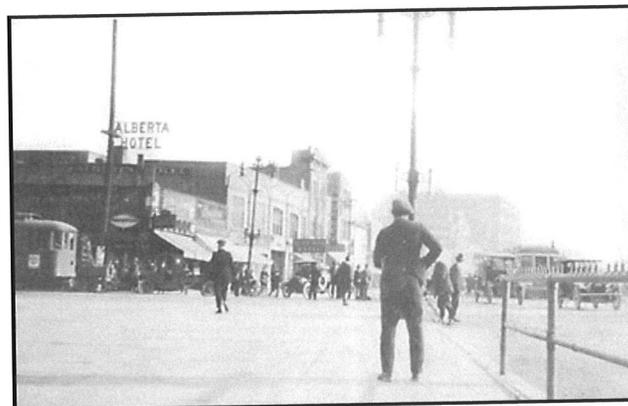


Figure 16: The Alberta Hotel in 1914. Image from [www.virtual.heritagewinnipeg.com](http://www.virtual.heritagewinnipeg.com)



Figure 17: Royal Alexandra: circa 1915 Image from [www.virtual.heritagewinnipeg.com](http://www.virtual.heritagewinnipeg.com)

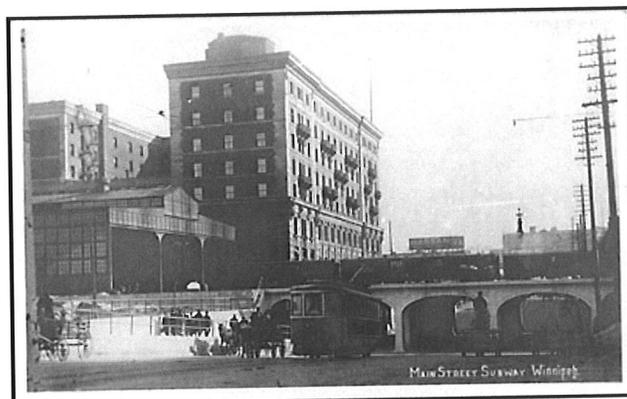


Figure 18: Main Street and Higgins looking North at CPR railway circa 1900. Savoy Hotel yet to be built on the left side of the image. Image from [www.virtual.heritagewinnipeg.com](http://www.virtual.heritagewinnipeg.com)

In 2001 the population declined another -4.9 %. (Statistics Canada)

The Point Douglas area is one of 14 neighborhoods in Winnipeg classified as a Major Improvement Area, defined by the City as “older areas that have experienced significant decline to the point where housing and neighborhood infrastructure require complete renewal” (Winnipeg, 2000, 2-3).

<b><i>Serviced Vacant Lots</i></b>	
<b><i>North West</i></b>	<b><i>700</i></b>
<b><i>North East</i></b>	<b><i>800</i></b>
<b><i>South East</i></b>	<b><i>1100</i></b>
<b><i>South West</i></b>	<b><i>465</i></b>
<b><i>Total</i></b>	<b><i>3065</i></b>

Table 2: City of Winnipeg 2004

In 2004, The City of Winnipeg had approximately 3065 serviced vacant lots which are either privately owned or owned by the city (Table 2). There are 700 lots which are

located in the northwest area of the city. In 2004 the City of Winnipeg released data on the number of serviced vacant lots defined as “Vacant land that is either fully serviced and subdivided into lots or is currently approved for development or included in the provisions of an existing development agreement. These lands are considered to be readily serviceable for development of housing within at least one year” (City of Winnipeg 2004); the following table

<b><i>Approximate Infill Lots</i></b>	
<b><i>North West</i></b>	<b><i>549</i></b>
<b><i>North East</i></b>	<b><i>284</i></b>
<b><i>South East</i></b>	<b><i>374</i></b>
<b><i>South West</i></b>	<b><i>1121</i></b>
<b><i>Total</i></b>	<b><i>2328</i></b>

Table 3: City of Winnipeg 2004

summarizes the quantity and location of these lands expressed as potential lots. As well the City of Winnipeg also released data on the number of available infill lots which are defined as, “smaller parcels of land in established neighborhoods without a dwelling unit. Both individual vacant lots along with larger remnants of vacant land that could be further subdivided to create lots are identified.”(Table 3) (City of Winnipeg 2004)

The area of study is located at the corner of Main and Higgins and is one of the aforementioned infill lots.

After many years of driving a familiar route to and from school, work and seeing the same sights day after day the physical features that I often used for navigation had disappeared. What once was an intersection defined by hulking buildings was no longer. The change in this landscape is the reason for this exploration into vacant lots. At this time the intersection was defined by the structures. (Figure 22) During the 1980’s the only hotels that remained were the Savoy Hotel, on the northwest corner and the Empress Hotel on

the south west corner of Main and Higgins. The Royal Alexandra had been razed in 1971 and replaced with open green space. (Figure 20) The Alberta Hotel was razed in 1989 and left vacant until the Thunderbird house was constructed in 2000. (Figure 19) The remaining two hotels had severely deteriorated and were primarily homes for the low income and transient. In the late 1990's one by one the buildings were condemned, reduced to rubble, and removed. Their occupants subsequently displaced. The Savoy was demolished in 1999 and the lot has since remained vacant. (Figure 21) The Empress Hotel at the south east corner was demolished in 1980 and the lot is currently under development by the owners of the adjacent TD bank.



Figure 19: Thunderbird House 2005. Site of former Alberta Hotel



Figure 20: Green space 2005. Site of former Royal Alexandra Hotel



Figure 21: 692 Main Street: Former site of the Savoy Hotel – now vacant.



Figure 22: Hotels that defined the intersection at Main and Higgins.

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## VII

### SITE INVENTORY AND ANALYSIS

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Located at 692 Main Street, this lot is situated at the Northwest corner of the intersection between Main Street and Higgins Avenue, in the Point Douglas area of Winnipeg. (Figure 20) The site, which has been vacant since 1999, is currently owned by CentreVenture Development Corporation, an arms-length real estate and property development agency of the City of Winnipeg. The lot measures 2391.3 square meters (25,740 square feet) in area and is located in a high traffic area, bounded by transportation routes on three sides: Main Street on the east, Higgins Avenue to the south and the CPR railway on the north. According to the Winnipeg Downtown Zoning by-law (2004) the site is located within Multiple Use Sector. The neighborhood has a variety of uses from industrial to office and retail services to restaurants and residential housing.



Figure 23 Area Context Map

## Visual Inventory of the Surrounding Neighborhood

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A general visual observation of the immediate surrounding neighborhood reveals an area with a variety of businesses and uses from hotels and bars to retail and professional offices. It also reveals an area in transition. Although there are significant signs of deterioration and neglect (Figure 24), there are also signs of renewal. By this I am referring to the mix of newly built buildings, such as the Thunderbird House or buildings that appear to have recently undergone a facelift, such as the TD Bank which has been recently renovated by the new tenants; the new intermingling with the older and disheveled buildings in the area. Visual signs of neglect include numerous buildings which appear vacant, buildings with peeling paint and decomposing cladding material. (Figure 25) Many building signage have been left behind following the building closure revealing the previous uses and tenants. Building faces that have obviously been spray painted with graffiti have been painted over with mismatched, off color paint in an attempt to conceal the crime. Many buildings exhibit 'for sale' signs, which in themselves show signs of decay and appear to have been posted for quite some time. Although the signs demonstrate the potential for occupation, they seem to have suffered the same fate as their hosts to which they had been attached. (Figure 26)

Another observation of the neighborhood reveals various types and sizes of wall murals that depict scenes of various historic eras. Many of these murals have been painted on the plywood that has been used to cover up window openings. Others have been applied directly to the building walls. Unfortunately many of these murals show wear, paint peeling



Figure 24: Many buildings along Main Street appear to be vacant.



Figure 25: An example of the lack of care that inhabits many of the buildings along Main Street.



Figure 26: A sale sign on the building reveals a building in transition.

and chipping, as they appear to have not been maintained in quite some time. Others appear to have been recently applied and show less signs of decay. (Figures 27-29)



Figure 27: Many buildings along Main Street depict historic eras such as this.



Figure 28: More recent mural depicting a woman with outstretched hand welcoming visitors to Winnipeg.

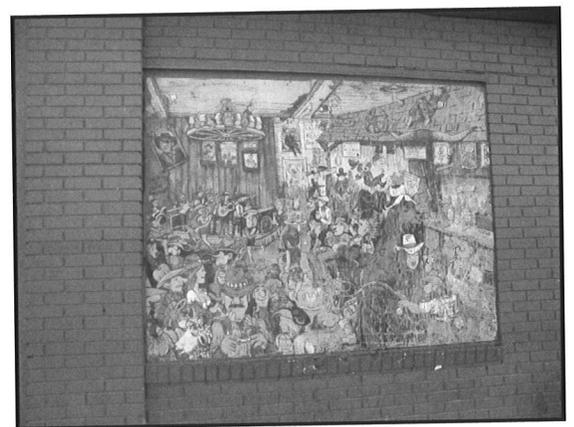


Figure 29: Older mural depicting an historical bar scene of hotel.

## Views into the Site

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The following map and corresponding images document various viewpoints into the site from four directions along Main Street and Higgins Avenue. The images reveal the sequence of views as one approach the site from different perspectives. “Since landscape is usually experienced by a moving observer, it is not a single view that is important so much as the cumulative effect of a sequence of views...The sequence of views or spaces is crucial in a site design.” (Lynch, 202) The views into the site help determine what the design intervention will need in terms of scale and the intervention’s relationship to its immediate surroundings. The views reveal openness to the site and the lack of definition and focal points. Several of the views reveal the railway embankment as an important and natural backdrop to the site.



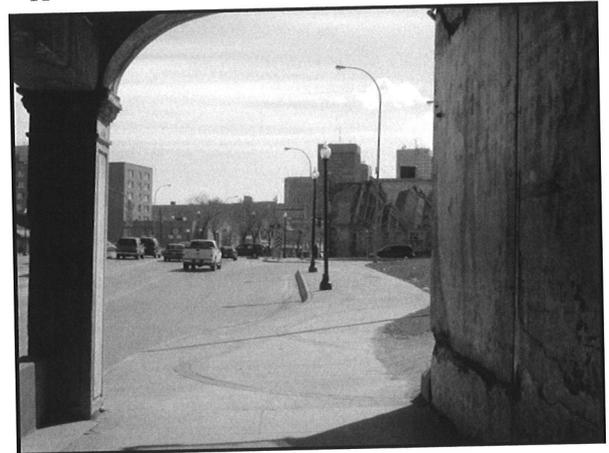
### Series 1: South Views along Main Street

Beginning just North of the CPR tracks and moving south along Main Street there is a relatively consistent wall of buildings along the West side of Main which provide a sense of enclosure and human scale. Parking is permitted along the street and the parked cars further reinforce this sense of enclosure (when cars are parked) along the sidewalk.

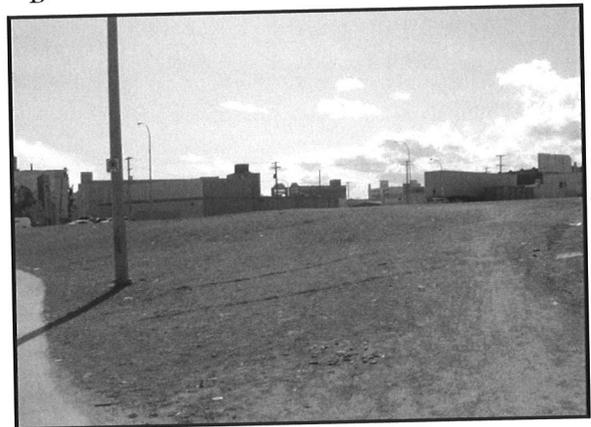
Ramping up through the underpass and coming out onto the south side of the tracks one is struck by the sudden openness of the site on the west side. The openness suddenly breaks the proximity of the buildings and is a release to the confines of the tunnel and immediately one notices the exposed site. The gentle slope leads the eyes upward toward the buildings in the distance and to the sky above. One feels the openness and lack of human scale at this point with very little to delineate and define space.



A



B



C

## Series 2: North Views along Main Street

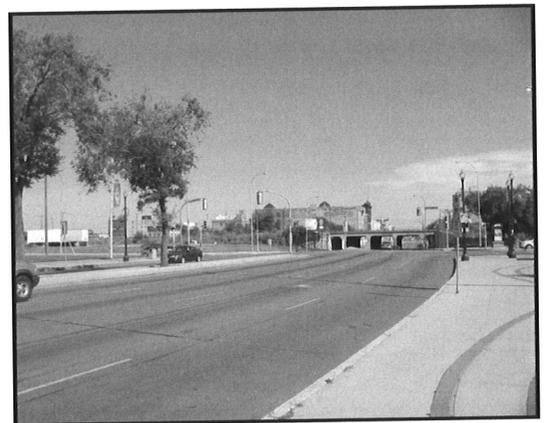
Beginning about a block south of the site and travelling North, the buildings provide a relatively continuous façade on the East and West sides of Main Street, although there is an apparent end to the buildings as one moves North towards Higgins Ave. As the buildings facades end sooner on the East side than on the West the site does not fully reveal itself. The site is fully exposed once one move a few meters south of Thunderbird House. There is very little that defines the site and from this view the site is only roughly by the rail line embankment to the North; because of the consist color and size of vegetation the embankment only seems to provide a backdrop to the site when the temporary and sporadic passing of the railcars help to further define the site.



A



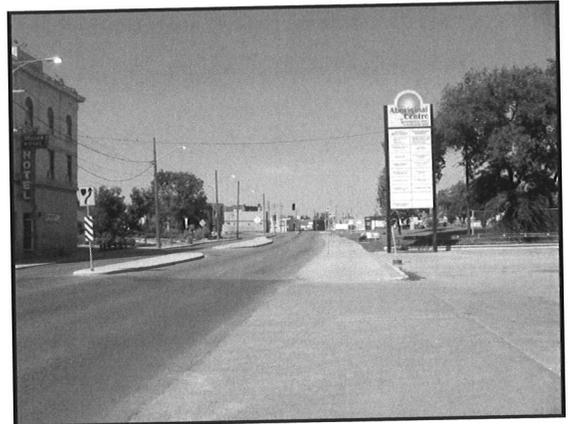
B



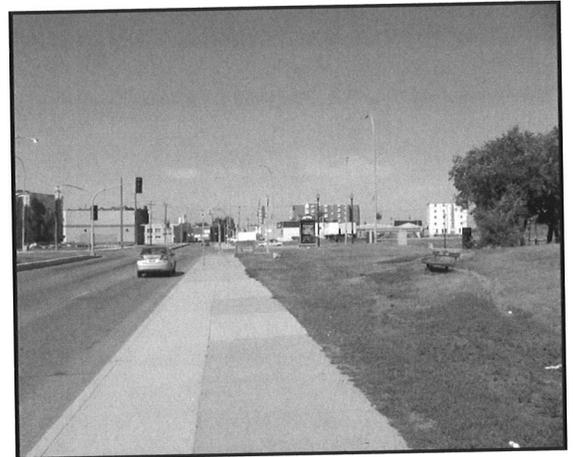
C

### Series 3: West Views along Higgins Avenue

Proceeding West along Higgins Avenue starting from the Aboriginal Center, there is an apparent openness to the site almost immediately. With very little in the way of buildings or structures along the North side of road to provide human scale there the openness carries to the apartment buildings in the distance. This approach to the site also reveals the openness and lack of scale of the entire intersection.



A



B



C

#### Series 4: North/East Views along King Street and Higgins Avenue

In the final series of views the continuous facades of the buildings provide a sense of enclosure and human scale as one moves North along King Street toward Higgins. As one approaches the intersection and turns east onto Higgins the site is fully exposed aside from the vehicles that are temporarily parked in the adjacent business parking lot. There is little defining the site from this view as well. The large maples in the green space on the East side of Main provide some sense of enclosure and scale but they seem to only augment the openness of the surrounding site and intersection.



A



B



C

## 692 Main Street: The Site

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The site itself is visually exposed with no shrubs or canopy trees to shade from the sun and wind. Aside from low growing grasses and disturbance species there is no vegetation which provide enclosure or shelter from the weather, which makes this site visually and physically unwelcoming. Since a portion of the site is being used as an overflow parking area, the ground is severely compacted. The soil has been topped with gravel and in areas, remnant pieces of asphalt. A pedestrian desire line cuts diagonally across the site and other than the desire line there is very little evidence of human use (Refer to Social Mapping Figures 33-35). The site gently slopes from the center to the perimeter of the site forming an inverted bowl. (Figure 31) The site is covered by mostly annuals and herbaceous species with small to medium sized woody shrubs bordering the north perimeter of the site (along the toe of the railway embankment). There is no canopy or shade trees on the site so the soil is in constant sunlight resulting in very dry soil conditions.



Figure 30 Site Map

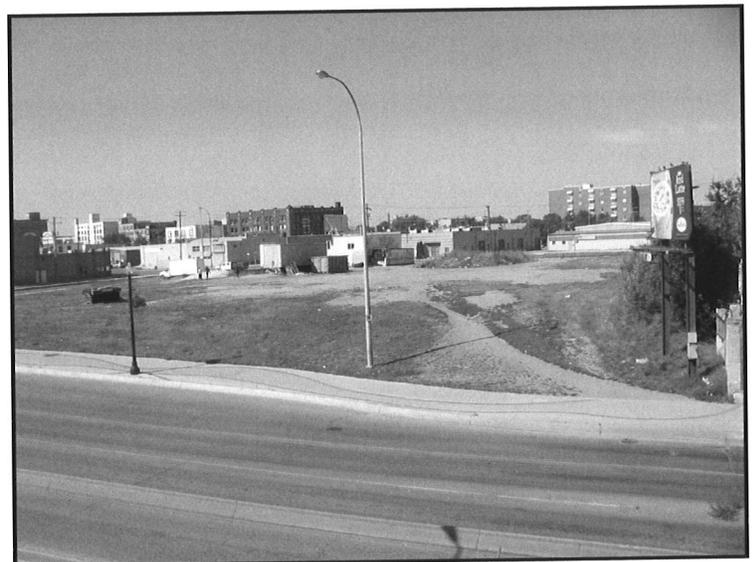


Figure 31: 692 Main Street: Looking west across the site

## Existing Site Vegetation

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The site is about 70-75 % covered with typical disturbance species of plants including clover (*Trifolium sp.*), foxtail barley (*Hordeum jubatum*), couch grass (*Agropyron repens*), Canada thistle (*Cirsium arvense*), sow thistle (*Sonchus arvensis*), pineappleweed (*Matricaria matricarioides*) and common dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*). On the north slope of the site is a mix of grasses including couch grass, slender wheat grass (*Agropyron trachycanlum*), Kentucky bluegrass (*Poa pratensis*) as well as smaller shrubs including Dogwood (*Cornus spp.*) and Saskatoon (*Amelanchier sp.*); small Manitoba Maple and Poplar seedlings have also taken hold along the toe of the slope. (Figure 32) It seems that the trees and shrubs that occur along the slope of the rail line have been allowed to get to the size that they are only because they have evaded cutting since the slope is too steep to cut with a mower.



Figure 32: Diagrammatic distribution of plant species on site.



North view of the railway embankment.



Mixture of grasses and annuals on the site.



Common dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*)



Shrubs along railway embankment



Foxtail brome growing in the compacted soils.

## Social Mapping

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A small sample from site observations regarding the social patterns of the immediate area was taken to get a sense of how the study site was being used within the context of the Higgins and Main intersection. The dots on the maps represent 2 or more people at a particular area. The blue arrows represent cut through areas. The observations revealed that the vacant lot was primarily used as a cut through. The observations of the rest of the intersection revealed that people tend to congregate at edges or areas that have seating close to the main pedestrian routes (i.e. sidewalks). Observations were taken at three times during a single day of observation: A morning sample was taken from 8am to 9am. An afternoon sample was taken from 12pm to 1pm and an evening sample was taken from 5pm to 6pm.

The morning observations (Figure 33) revealed the bus stop at the northeast corner of the intersection was used frequently for those who are possibly traveling to or from work. Also are the areas on the south side of the Thunderbird House that were being used. Small ornamental boulders scattered on the grass provided the seating. The study site was not used



Figure 33: Morning Observations



Figure 34: Afternoon Observations



Figure 35: Evening Observations

during this time.

In the afternoon observations (Figure 34) revealed that the green space at the north east corner became more used although the benches that were being used more often tended to be closer to the main pedestrian pathways.

The evening sample (Figure 35) showed the frequency of use along Main Street increased at the areas in front of hotels and stores. Areas around the Thunderbird House also increased as people used the ornamental boulders as seating and conversation areas. The study site had no activity aside from a few people cutting across the site.

In general the observations showed that entry points at the existing hotels and bars tended to be areas for social gathering and congregation. Within the green space at the north east corner of Higgins and Main, the north half of the site, where tree cover and shade were present was used more frequently for gathering, socializing and sleeping. The green space has several benches scattered about the site and were frequently used during the day either for sitting or lying down, although the benches which were in closer proximity to the trees were used more often than the ones adjacent to the sidewalk, where no tree cover is present. Street noise from passing vehicular traffic is a significant problem and unless people were waiting at the bus stops most people tended to socialize away from the street. Along the sidewalks, people tended to congregate at store or hotel entrances sitting along steps and low walls. 692 Main Street was primarily used as a cut through from Higgins Avenue to Main Street. (The blue arrow in Figures 33-35) and other than that, exhibited no visible social use.

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## VIII

### CONCEPT AND DESIGN DEVELOPMENT

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#### *Conceptual Development*

*The investigation of a specific site is a matter of extracting concepts out of sense-data through direct perceptions... One does not impose, but rather expose the site... The unknown areas of sites can best be explored by artists.*

*Robert Smithson*

*The form and character a subsequent design derives from the physical fabric as well as the inherited attributes (past conditions) of the site and its larger territory*

*Sebastien Marot*

Throughout this document I have been talking about the common perception of vacant lots within an urban center and various methods to challenging this perception. These everyday spaces that occur throughout our urban centers are not the empty, meaningless entities that they are perceived to be; although they may be temporary and transitory in nature they are spaces that hold meaning and are worthy of attention.

The approach to 692 Main Street is based on re-visioning an urban void by making the absence a presence. Since vacancy is a temporary state, my intervention will be temporary in nature and is layered over the span of the eight years that the site has been vacant.

I envision the site interventions as a series of layers, and as the design evolves and changes over its eight year lifespan, the intent is to create a place that will continually evolve and thus challenge the way one looks at this urban vacant lot.

Because vacancy is a temporal condition the elements of the site are intended to be temporary in nature; the components of the site were chosen in order to demonstrate their life cycle in a temporary nature. The components were also

chosen in order to demonstrate, not only their syntactical meaning but also their underlying metaphorical meaning. In other words, the components of the site are used to reveal the inherent characteristic of the site. I will attempt to extract various layers of historical, social and ecological elements from the site and allow for the inherent characteristics of the site to reveal themselves.

Since there is very little visible evidence of historic use on the site and very little evidence of site 'occupation' the design interventions are primarily extracted from the historic analysis of the site and the surrounding neighborhood therefore one of the layers is derived from the cultural history of the site, its former use and role in relation to the surrounding intersection.

The next layer is extracted from the ecological functioning of the site. The intent is to allow the natural ecological process of succession to take place, with minimal human intervention, and by this allowing for another layer of visual change to take place. The succession of the plant material frames the transitional, temporary nature of the site. The design will incorporate the work sited in this document. Since one significant issue of vacant lots is the perceived lack of ownership and care I will draw from the research of Joan Nassauer and her cues for human care in order to frame the natural process that I intend to allow to regenerate through the lifecycle of the site. The intention is to create a design that has elements of human care yet extract and use site attributes and allow for a natural procession of change to occur.

Based on the social analysis of the surrounding neighborhood, I also intend to create a site that allows for spontaneous social interaction, and allows users to temporarily take ownership and personalize the site while allowing the site itself to change and evolve over its lifespan.

## **Years 1-2**

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Based on a series of layers and using elements from the surrounding neighborhood as inspiration I begin with defining the site's visual boundary. The boundary, the outer layer, is based on the visual inventory and analysis of the site and is defined by a series of wooden pole structures. The poles are connected to concrete piles and fastened with steel bolts which can be relatively simple to remove when needed. The pole structures frame the site and provide a reference to the buildings that once stood on the site. The poles vary in height with the 10 meter poles erected along the west side of the property in order to screen the buildings in the background and 8 meter tall poles along the sidewalk bordering the property, along Main Street and Higgins Avenue. The poles are spaced at 5m intervals to provide a sense of pedestrian and vehicular scale and rhythm while maintaining a level of openness of the site relating to the former hotel that was built to the sidewalk edge. The intent is to provide a visual frame to the vacant lot. Anchored to the poles are temporary semi-transparent fabric screens on which depicts images of the historic uses including images of the Savoy Hotel which had stood on this site for over 100 years. The inspiration of the screens derived from many of the temporary wall murals in the neighborhood. The combination of screen and poles provide a temporary continuous street façade. From the visual analysis, looking into site, the screen is elevated 3 meters above the ground to provide a visual frame and focal point to the site from a distance. Raising the screen also allows visual and physical access into the site giving a sense of entry into the enclosed vacant lot. Within the framed boundary of the site the interior expresses another layer in that the existing vegetation is allowed to naturally succeed unheeded.

## Years 2-4

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Within the site boundary the existing vegetation is allowed to naturally grow and succeed in order to ameliorate the soil drainage, fix nitrogen and stimulate soil microorganisms which will provide a foundation for new plant growth; following a year of growth, selected areas of vegetation are mown. To further indicate the presence of human attention, linear 'care' strips are mown into the site and planted with an agricultural crop of corn reminiscent of one of the crops that was once used in the area. To add color and contrast, native pioneer species of wildflowers that are typically found in hot, dry and exposed areas including Common Yarrow, Goldenrod, and Rudbeckia are planted within these 'care strips'. The corn was selected due to its tall columnar profile and it would provide a sense of scale underneath the screens to the pedestrians on the sidewalk. The planting is organized in strong linear patterns which are reminiscent of the agricultural planting and plowing arrangement along the prairie landscape. Much like the farmland had been organized in linear strips along the major transportation route, i.e. the Red river, so too do the new plantings as they run perpendicular to their transportation route i.e. the street. Poplar pioneer seedlings, taken from the railway embankment, are also inserted into the 'naturalized' strips which occur in between the corn and wildflowers. Poplar was selected as a fast growing species that can tolerate the compacted and contaminated soils of the site. The existing desire line representing a current layer in time cuts across the site and is articulated with crushed red brick mulch. As the vegetation grows and begins to further frame the site, entry points are articulated at the former entry points of the Hotel with salvaged wooden planks as objects reminiscent of the floor boards of the Savoy hotel. As the site slowly transforms and develops into a new entity, temporary free standing site furniture such as hay bales and wooden pallets which have been modified into benches are simple reminders of the area's agricultural and industrial history are inserted into the interior of the site and

can be moved and adjusted in order to give users the opportunity to occupy the site as they see fit.

## **Years 4-8**

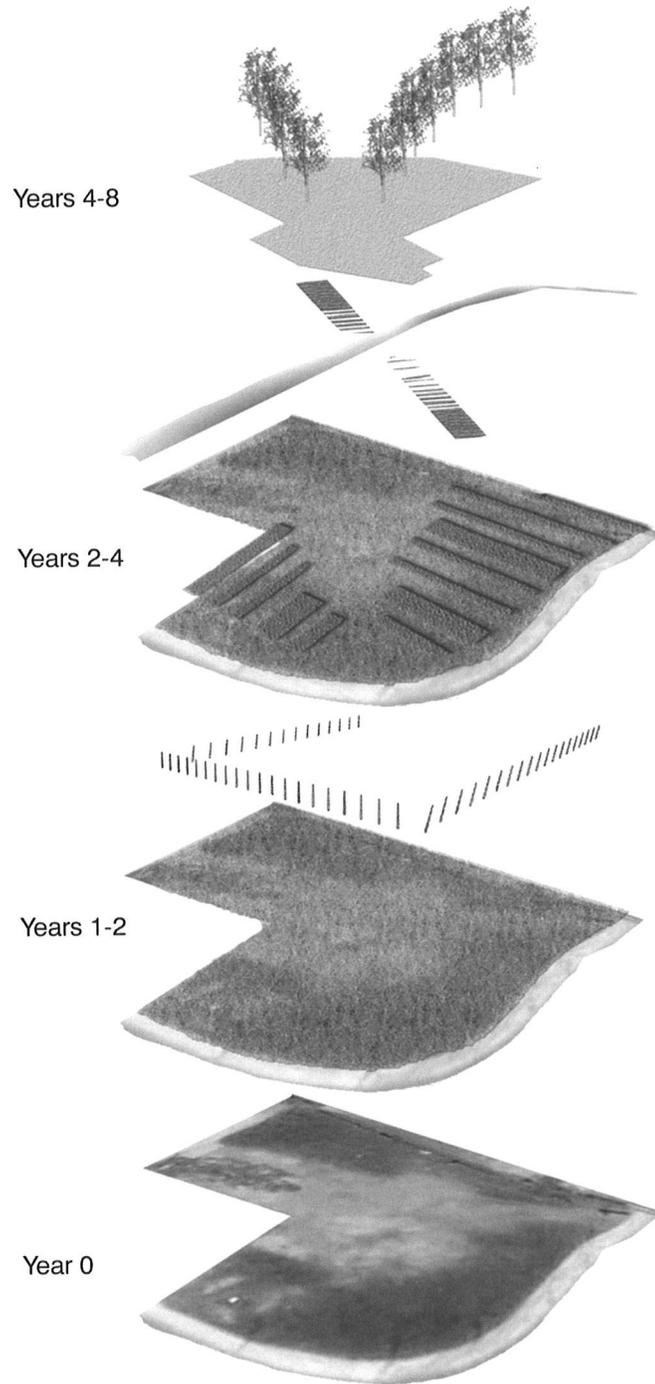
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The interior of the site is further modified as an area is overlaid with sod as further indication of care and provides an area for open unprogrammed social activities, and provides contrast to the naturalization of the rest of the plantings. In later years, following year 8, if the site continues its evolution pioneer tree species previously planted grow within the site to provide shade and cover from the elements. As the trees grow and mature – if allowed, the screens can be removed and the vegetation allowed to naturally succeed with intermittent maintenance as needed. If the site is to be built on, or occupied by a building, the temporary interventions can easily be removed. The temporary screens can also be integrated within the new building façade. Although the intent of this design was to be a temporary intervention and to be removed upon new construction of another urban layer, i.e. the site being occupied by a new building.

In the eight years that this site is designed to evolve the current property owners may need to attend to its maintenance more frequently than the current quarterly general mowing; for example the crop of corn would need annual harvesting and could be donated to local soup kitchens. The small area of sod would be mown on a biweekly basis. However, in exchange for a more frequent maintenance schedule, the site would provide visual interest and social activity than its current unused and static state.

## A ReVisioning of an Urban Void

Figure 36: Axonometric. Demonstrating the layering of design interventions that occur over the eight years the site has been vacant.



692 Main Street

A ReVisioning of an Urban Void

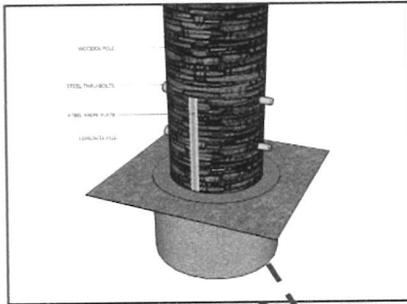


Year 0

A ReVisioning of an Urban Void

692 Main Street

## A ReVisioning of an Urban Void



Years 1-2

A ReVisioning of an Urban Void

692 Main Street

A ReVisioning of an Urban Void

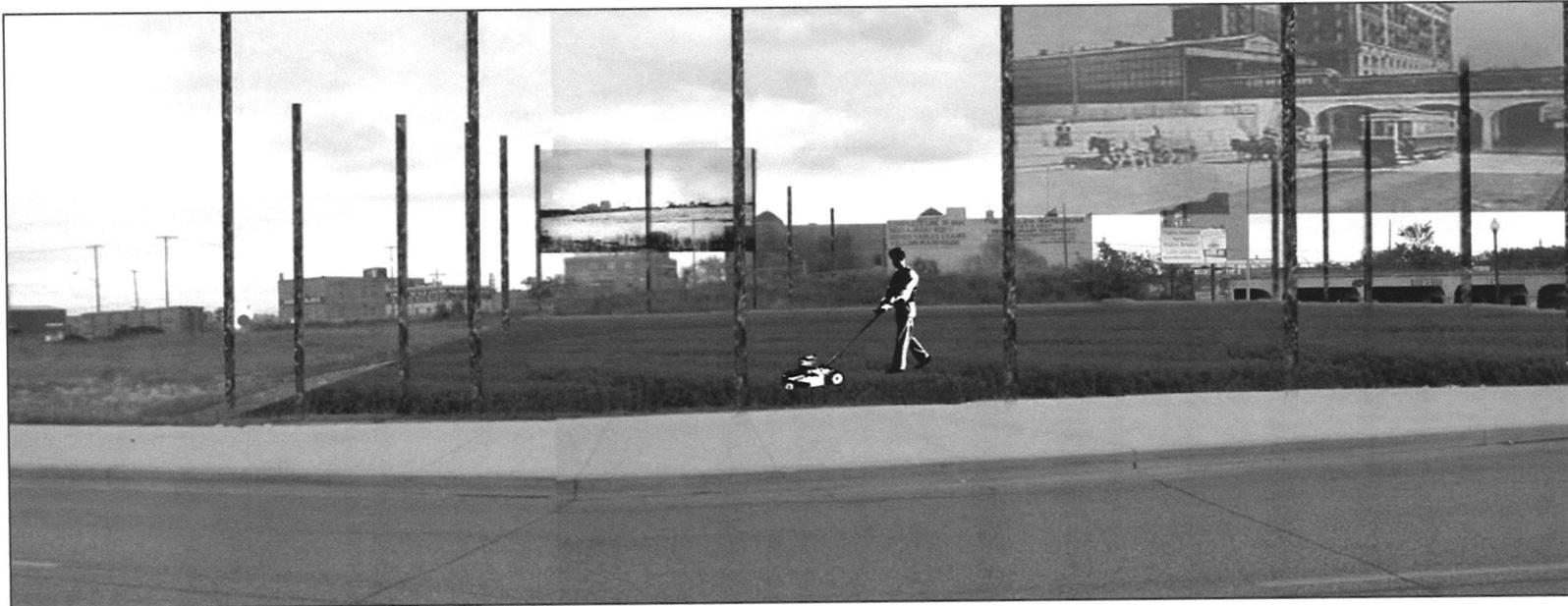


Years 1-2

A ReVisioning of an Urban Void

692 Main Street

A ReVisioning of an Urban Void



Years 2-4

A ReVisioning of an Urban Void

692 Main Street

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A ReVisioning of an Urban Void



Years 2-4

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A ReVisioning of an Urban Void

692 Main Street

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A ReVisioning of an Urban Void



Years 2-4

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A ReVisioning of an Urban Void

692 Main Street

## A ReVisioning of an Urban Void



South View along Main St



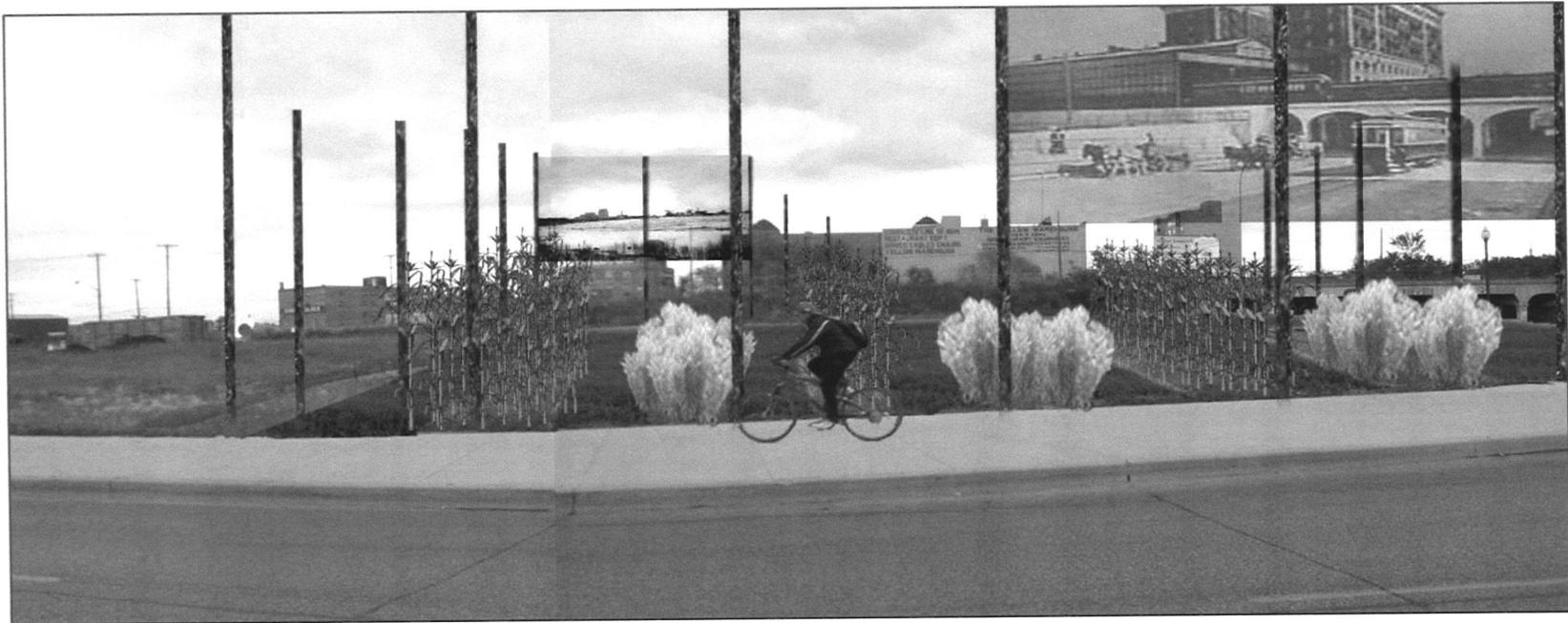
Southeast view from the site  
and temporary site furniture

A ReVisioning of an Urban Void

692 Main Street

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A ReVisioning of an Urban Void



Years 4-8

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A ReVisioning of an Urban Void

692 Main Street

A ReVisioning of an Urban Void



Years 4-8

A ReVisioning of an Urban Void

692 Main Street

A ReVisioning of an Urban Void

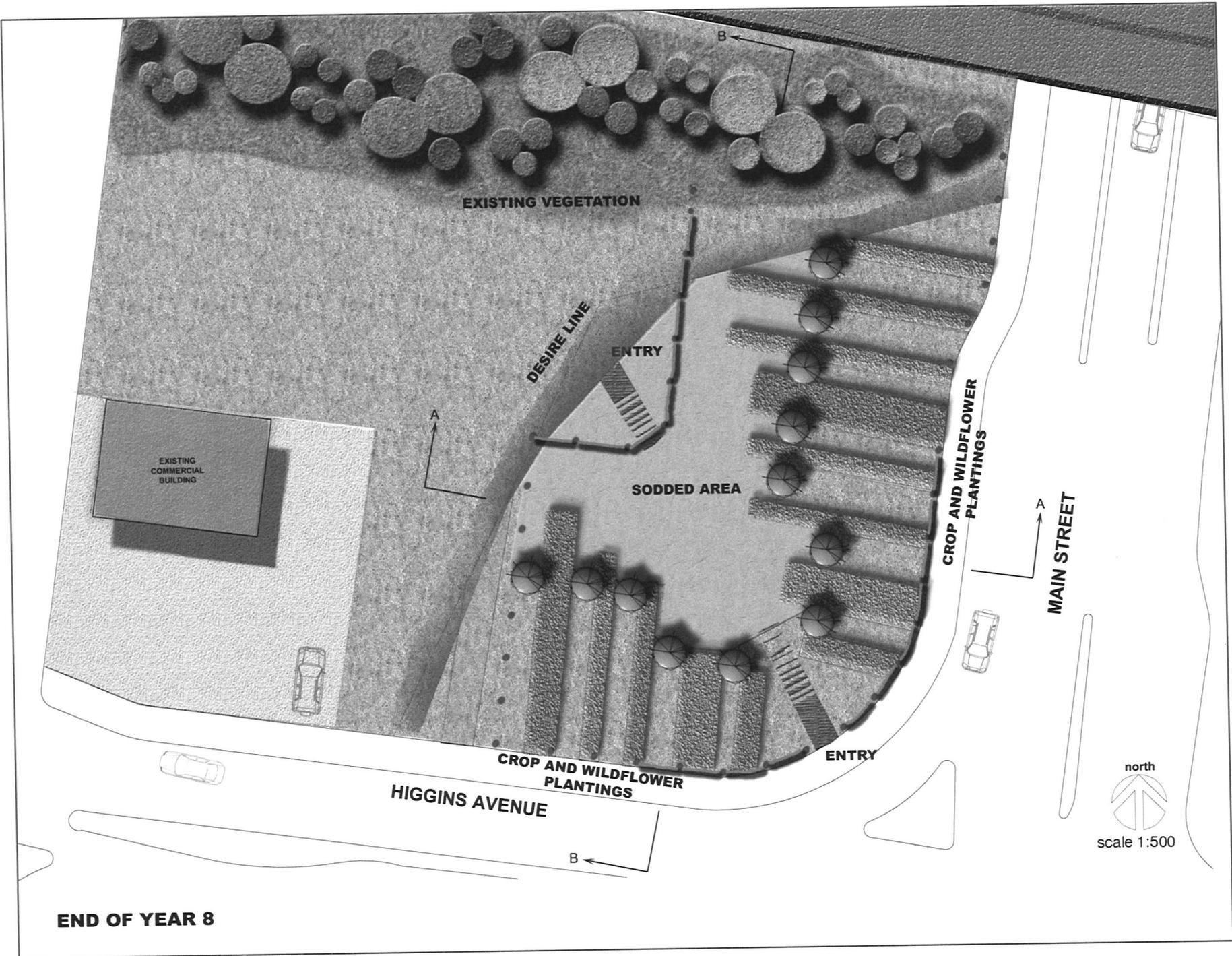


Years 4-8

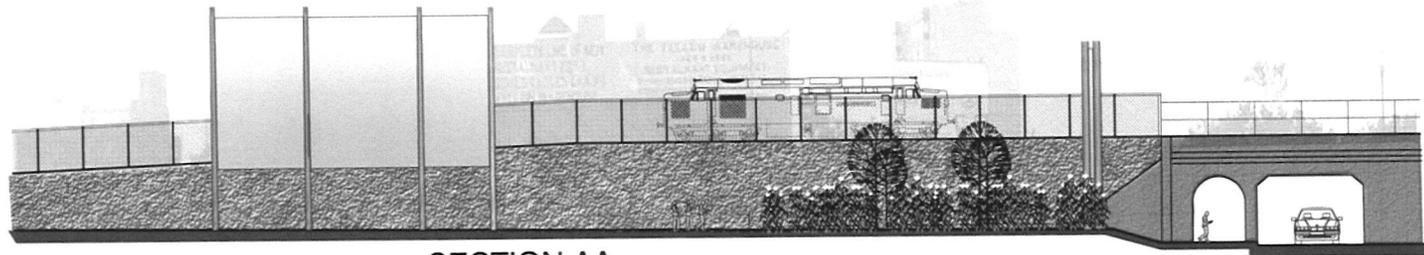
West view at Night



A ReVisioning of an Urban Void

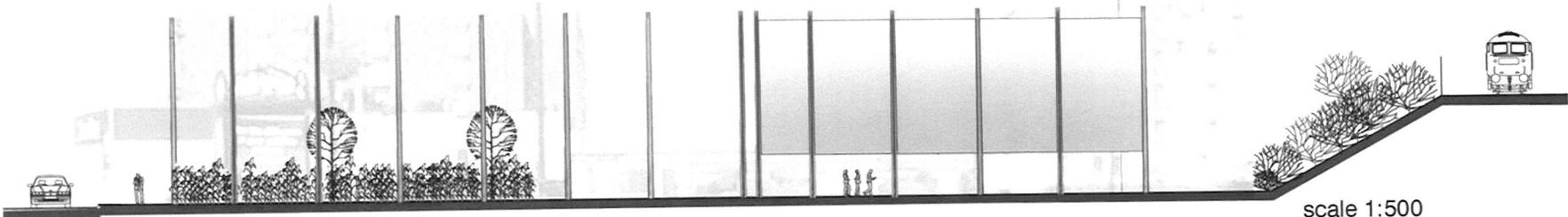


**END OF YEAR 8**



SECTION AA

scale 1:500



SECTION BB

scale 1:500

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## IX

### CONCLUSION

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This practicum is an exploration into the challenge of vacant lots in our urban centers, particularly the issues of cultural perception, meaning and value. Although vacant lots are part of the urban cycle of growth and decay, their existence within the urban everyday need not to be left unused. Although these urban entities are often temporary in nature, essentially land that is in transition, they can have a profound effect on cultural perceptions that not affect their meaning and value but can subsequently affect the perception of the surrounding neighborhood and city. “The most compelling circumstances are cultural associations of negativity attached to place and land” (Corbin, 22) The evidence presented in this practicum question the common preconceived notion that these spaces are empty which can obscure their cultural history and value within the urban context. Vacant land in an urban center is inevitable, but they do not need to be relegated to dead, unused and unsafe spaces. They need to be accepted as a temporary part of urban flux and can be reincorporated into urban daily life as with temporary interventions in order to mitigate this cultural bias and subsequently reduce the negative impact on the surrounding community and city.

There are opportunities to these sites but in the case of sites such as 692 Main Street the visual emptiness can be a difficult aspect to overcome. Much like a writer facing an empty sheet of paper, the lack of starting points, can be significant impediment. As well, give the context of the site, pessimistic attitudes towards development can also be a significant obstacle. 692 Main Street is located within a low income area of Winnipeg which has typically struggled with issues of crime and visual blight and having empty, unproductive land means a reduced tax income for the city government and thus fewer resources being invested back into the community. In turn, getting parties to invest in the site may be a difficult task.

The study into vacant lots has also revealed an interesting but potentially ironic conundrum: once these sites have been occupied are they no longer considered vacant? Although stuffing vacant lots with items in order to fill the emptiness is not sufficient. Vacant lots are vacant for many reasons and on many levels and they require multi-layered

solutions. One possible approach to these sites/sights is to study the context and discover what is needed within that context. How can a vacant lot be utilized in order to fulfill the needs of the community? The relevance of the profession of landscape architecture and an important role for landscape architects is to unite the social requirements with artistic and functional solutions to these urban spaces to reintegrate them as temporary urban places. Vacant lots are important to the viability and productivity of a city; as cities expand into the surrounding undeveloped land there is an increased pressure on city infrastructure, budgets, and resources and cities are looking to revitalize and redevelop existing areas and vacant lots are an important resource to be utilized. Landscape architects and urban designers have an “immense potential to develop work that mitigates cultural biases, decrease negative impacts on communities and suggest alternatives” (Corbin, 22) for the re-visioning urban vacant lots.

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