HILLSIDE BETTER BLOCK
WHAT

The Better Block Foundation, with support from the Duluth Superior Area Foundation and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, developed a Better Block project in the fall of 2018 to highlight opportunities for improved infrastructure and land use in the Hillside neighborhood.

WHO

Better Block Foundation
Zeitgeist
City of Duluth
John S. and James L. Knight Foundation
Duluth Superior Area Community Foundation
SHIP-MN Statewide Health Improvement Partnership

WHEN

November 2 & 3, 2018

WHERE

North 6th Avenue East, and 4th Street, Duluth, Minnesota
SITE

The project site was located at the edge of downtown Duluth and the Hillside neighborhood. The scale of city streets and land use changes from walkable and dense to auto-oriented immediately after crossing North 6th Avenue East Setbacks (where buildings are positioned further from the street). At this point, roadways expand to accommodate greater vehicle movement, and the pattern of business mixes reflects the change in landscape.

Community concerns around high-speed accidents, lack of multi-modal facilities, and psychological divisions from separations of neighborhoods were noted in multiple studies of the area.
THE BETTER BLOCK APPROACH

The Better Block Foundation uses an approach to address opportunities and constraints that bring the community into the center of the problem, and documents a vision based on the concerns and goals of the residents, business owners, and area stakeholders. The ideas are then turned into a series of demonstration interventions, built by the community-members, that creates real-world test environments to see what truly works and doesn't. The information derived from the Better Block project provides action items that communities can take to begin shaping the type of neighborhood they hope to live in. The project also identifies neighborhood leaders, small-business opportunities, and enhancements that make an area more vibrant and accessible.
DEMONSTRATION OPPORTUNITIES

Given the dramatic shift in land use and infrastructure when crossing North 6th Avenue East, opportunities were identified by community members to improve the area's safety, accessibility, and enhance land use to promote a more vibrant small-business landscape with a street frontage that continues the walkable pattern of the downtown building line. The project focused on two areas: street and land-use modifications.

STREET

Sixth Avenue is a four-lane road with wide outside lanes. The size of the street encourages higher speed vehicle movements, and dangerous pedestrian crossings. There are multiple options for reducing speeds including vertical deflection (eg. speed bumps), horizontal deflection (chicanes), and lane thinning. The city of Duluth noted that traffic counts inbound were low enough to justify removal of one lane, which was taken into account through the demonstration project.

LAND USE

The adjacent land provided ample opportunity to infill with small business frontages and act as a gateway to the neighborhood. Concepts focused on encouraging residents and visitors to embrace the recaptured real estate and create a sense of "place."

An example of a street with traffic caliming.

Building frontages brought to the sidewalk encourage pedestrian activity.
What do you love about living in the Hillside?

- Always run into people I know on my bike / walk to work.
- Convenient; close to downtown + my workplace.
- Busing.
- People.
- I can walk to work.
- Close to everything, great public services.
- Beautiful views of the city & lake.
- Beautiful lake views & friendly people.
- Easy walking, mostly to walking.

What makes the Hillside neighborhood unique or special?

- Lots of artists.
- Strong sense of community.
- The views.
- The co-op.
- Gloria del Carmen.
- Co-op D'Vo.
- Views & great people.
- Co-op.
- Green space.
- Co-op.
- The awesome people.
- Damiano.
- For our little peoples safety.

What specific images, places, or events shape the identity of the Hillside neighborhood?

- Basketball at Washington Center.
- Hillside Public Orchard.
- Crime & infrastructure in poor condition.
- Washington Center.
- City views.
- Old Central HS.
- Co-op, community gardens.
- Co-op, community gardens.
- People walking and biking.
- People walking and biking.
- Juneteenth.
- End of year & crime.

WE SUPPORT
- People, for people.
CELEBRATING PLACE

Online and in-person community surveying took place immediately after the kickoff meeting in the summer of 2018. When asked what residents loved most about the area, proximity to nature and diversity stood out as highlights. For opportunities to bring more people to the area, recommendations for family-friendly activities, food options, and increased safety were all requested. When designing places for people, embedding cultural elements and providing a comfortable place to linger drove the ultimate designs for Hillside Better Block.

For detailed results of community input on this project, please see the appendix.
CONCEPT PLAN:
THE STREET

After reviewing multiple design options, for Sixth Avenue, a plan to create a series of horizontal deflections through a serpentine design approach was ultimately approved. One inbound lane would be removed, crosswalks installed, and pedestrian islands installed.

At Fourth Street, bicycle lanes would be continued into downtown, and a "Dutch-style" intersection would be installed. These intersections create clearer routes for bicycles, improved crosswalks, and islands that reduce right-hook incidents between vehicles and cyclists.
CONCEPT PLAN:
LAND USE

During community meetings, the idea of creating a "gateway" into the neighborhood was agreed upon. The approach would need to accommodate the enhanced multi-modal design of the street, welcome people into the area, and provide amenities that encourage lingering. The idea of a transit hub was considered, and as the design became more fully formed, queues from historic train stations were incorporated, as these were classic entry points into communities that provided small commerce, information into the area, and an obvious drop-off/pick-up destination.

Considering the colder climate, other concepts were discussed that would create a welcoming environment in colder temperatures. Fire pits, hot food and drink stations, and heat absorbing furniture were all included in the final designs.
THE BETTER BLOCK

Work started in earnest on a cold morning in November, transforming a once barren parking lot and empty auto repair center into a community destination. Volunteers and staff worked together stringing lights, painting walls, installing landscaping, and constructing the framework for the transit hub.
A COLD COMFORT

Special attention was paid to making spaces inviting where temperatures regularly hovered around freezing. Lounging chairs were arranged around fire pits, faux fur blankets were scattered around the site, and outdoor gas heaters were brought in to warm the site.

A sense of enclosure was created by bringing in Christmas trees, and long tables centered the space to invite residents to eat beside each other.

Kids play elements were built to give families ample opportunity to enjoy the space, and a gateway sign was erected notifying people coming into the area that they were entering the Hillside neighborhood.

The large transit hub framed the street, returning the missing building edge to the sidewalk, and vendors set up shop along the inside, showing where small business could help continue activating the lot.
DESIGNING STREETS FOR PEOPLE

Working closely with a local sign and barricade company, we designed a traffic plan in a way to allow temporary traffic signage to orient drivers to the realigned streetscape. The timeline for the installation would allow for each intersection to be installed during off-peak times, and to make changes in real-time if issues were noted with cumbersome street dimensions. During this point in the project, multiple issues arose with the city's transportation engineering department. There was a noted lack of desire to address the systemic issues that had created the recent pedestrian fatality. This is not an uncommon issue, as engineers focus tends to be on vehicle throughput and not pedestrian safety.
ENHANCING AN INTERSECTION

Volunteers from throughout the community arrived early on a Friday morning to begin addressing the major intersection of Fourth Street and Sixth Avenue. The county had installed bicycle lanes on one side of the intersection, but those stopped immediately at the downtown entrance. The initial street painting would begin with completing the interrupted segment.

The intersection itself presented an opportunity for dramatic calming measures and pedestrian and bicycle islands to create safe and clear zones for all transportation modes to enter and exit. The concept of the "Dutch intersection" creates a highly predictable environment for all modes of transportation, creating a series of channels that each user can safely navigate improving sight lines, reducing speeds, and creating a more visually pleasing streetscape.
FROM PAVEMENT TO PLAZA

Key to creating an environment that invited people to linger was to develop a warm and convivial atmosphere. The site was filled with broken concrete and debris. The teams brought in Astroturf and Christmas trees to return a greenscape, and lights were strung throughout the lot to enhance the feelings of safety and comfort.

A sense of enclosure was created by redefining the edge of the street with the community-built transit hub, which acted as a gateway into an interior plaza. Along the periphery, local merchants sold food, drinks, and art that spotlighted the unique talents of the area.

Throughout the project's opening, community members could be seen walking, bicycling, and driving to the block to experience the changes. Immediately upon entering, couples sat in lounge chairs and huddled by fire pits, DJ's took to the stage, and neighbors were connecting.
A FAMILY FRIENDLY ENVIRONMENT

From the earliest community surveys, the desire to have amenities for children were regularly noted. Swing sets, see-saws, large xylophones, and small tables and chairs were arranged at key areas so parents could sit and enjoy a conversation while watching their children play in close proximity.

Neighborhood kids took to all of the play elements quickly, and began arranging them throughout the space, informally setting up new arrangements and enhancing the sense of place.
THE TRANSIT HUB

Throughout the Better Block build process, residents would drive and walk by the area to ask what was taking place. The transit hub became an identifiable landmark that invited conversation and interest. The outside seating that was arranged along the edge of the hub began being used even before the site was officially opened. Transit users sat and waited for buses, while vendors were setting up shop on the interior space.
Merchants interacting with residents inside the community-built transit hub.

Lit up at night, the transit hub became a notable landmark.
SUMMARY

At the conclusion of the project, several key goals were unfortunately not met. The constraints within local government to create a temporarily enhanced streetscape proved to be too difficult to surmount. A successful place was installed by the community, but the invitations from the neighborhood into that space were incomplete and presented the same constraints that systematically reduced the walkability to the area.

Despite this, the impact on those involved is still growing. Conversations have opened with the city's Engineering Department to formalize a system for future placemaking projects where local artists and community groups can continue to inspire permanent change.

Two business participants were inspired to take their work to the next level. One of the food vendors started a pre-order food delivery service after testing his idea at the event, and a local artist is seeking to open a studio in the area. Ultimately, the data collected on neighborhood identity, culture, and priorities will be combined with the newfound understanding of local business to propel the neighborhood forward.
The Welcome to the Hillside sign incorporated an Anishinaabe greeting and visual depiction of the indigenous activities and cultural history of the region.
RECOMMENDATION I

Align engineering with planning and land use

WHY?
Duluth has two environments: urban and suburban. The infrastructure, land use, and lifestyle are nearly opposite for both of these. Applying urban design models in suburban landscapes creates frustration, and vice versa. Developing a boundary which creates metrics within a dense, well concentrated urban ring, and outside of one, will help clarify expectations for businesses, residents, and commuters.

HOW?
A Planning Director should be embedded within the Engineering Department. Current metrics appear to focus on Level of Service for automobiles. Re-orient metrics to include placemaking goals.

There's a direct correlation between the street and the corresponding land-use. In the urban setting, suburban uses should be minimized due to lack of space and need for a multi-modal environment.

RECOMMENDATION II

Advise on and create a prototyping permit to test street redesigns, bike lanes, pedestrian infrastructure

WHY?
Tactical urbanism as a tool for demonstrating and testing infrastructure changes is now sanctioned by the National Association of City Transportation Officials, whose guidelines include methods and materials permitted for project execution. Currently, permitting can only take place through block party or construction permits, which requires cost-prohibitive prerequisites. For tactical urbanism to be used effectively, it needs a simpler, and more streamlined permitting process.

HOW?
Develop an "Infrastructure Prototyping Permit" that reduces the need for security, barriers, and allows for a waiving of fees from onstreet parking meters. This permit would also need a flexible amount of time to allow for a project to gather data.
RECOMMENDATION III

Creation of Tactical Urbanism toolkit

WHY?
When community members desire to make changes to their built environment, they often don't know where to begin, are unfamiliar with the treatments available to improve infrastructure, and are put through an overly burdensome and time consuming bureaucratic process that reduces support over time, and can lead to plans on shelves. Allowing community members a rapid and approachable toolset creates clear and concise parameters for real change to take place.

HOW?
Several cities, including Charlotte, North Carolina and Memphis, Tennessee, have developed well-documented Tactical Urbanism toolkits that can be duplicated in Duluth.
The MemFix program is in its sixth year, and can be found at Memfix.org.

RECOMMENDATION IV

Continued focus on connecting bike and trail network

WHY?
Uncontiguous bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure reduces people's perception of safety and connectivity, which leads to a limited number of multi-modal users.

HOW?
Continue enhancing, and connecting the existing bike and trail network. Prioritize development of bike lanes that are connected to and built off of existing lanes.