

# REVIEW

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# THE URBAN PLANNED

# Discussions on Surface Parking (An Elwood Grid)

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Aerial view altered to show density of surface parking in Crossroads area. (Courtesy of James Woodfill)

The abundance of surface parking in downtown Kansas City, Missouri is commonly viewed as a negative condition, as a visceral lack of density and a blatant symbol of non-urbaness. This condition is often a source of shame, particularly within the design community. Blight associated with neglected lots, and the psychological difficulty of reconciling the ideal of model urban living (à la New York, Tokyo, Hong Kong, Chicago, San Francisco, etc.) with the local reality of daily dependence and even preference for single-person automobile usage, are two primary contributing factors. Is it possible that this view of surface parking lots is the product of repeatedly missed design opportunities (i.e. a lack of vision) and a lack of orientation regarding the embedded characteristics of a viable Kansas City-specific urbanity?

Kansas City has its roots in late 19th-century westward expansionist urbanity. The Jeffersonian grid laid down nicely over a surprisingly hilly landscape, establishing a quick ordering mechanism within which the business of developing the west could prosper. The grid was and continues to be a universal and non-place-specific surveying device. Applied to an urban setting, the grid established block after rectilinear block of abutting 25- to 50-foot wide plots that could be purchased and developed as the property owner saw fit. The needs of the growing city and its inhabitants guided the uses. The urban plots were generally filled with storefronts, behind which stood multistory, 100-foot-deep buildings and narrow, shared alleyways. Surface parking lots were relatively uncommon and the spaces between buildings were used principally for product storage or simply awaited construction. There weren't enough vehicles to fill the streets and trigger the need to alter the use of the grid's innards. The fully built-out block, extending in perfectly north-south and east-west directions, guided the early physical evolution of Kansas City, as it did in many other American cities born after the Louisiana Purchase. Deviations from this pattern were allowed for parks and other important civic amenities, such as the City Market. Uncooperative topography — both high (cliffs) and low (rivers) — demanded an occasional shift away from the grid.

Spatial pressures, induced by the need to park automobiles, forced the grid to experience its first substantial, and lasting, redefinition in internal use.

*Cities are the biggest and most complex things that we make as a society, and each city is unique with its own character, strengths, and potential. Consequently, there is no one instant solution (a stadium, an entertainment zone, a pedestrian mall) [to revitalization] that can be applied universally and uncritically. We must not replace one orthodoxy with another regarding the city plan, nor reduce our thinking to issues of style or taste. In a rush for a believable urban center, a city cannot make itself into a vision of the last century but must value historical buildings and spaces of all periods while also encouraging innovative new building solutions.*

— Mark Robbins,

Former Design Director of the National Endowment for the Arts,  
in *The Mayors' Institute, Excellence in City Design*



Without succumbing to the critique, “What is wrong with this picture?,” we prefer to ask “What is this picture?” Surface parking is an indication of the cultural and economic conditions that drive the organization of Kansas City. To deny surface parking is to deny a significant manifestation of how we experience our city.



Looking east from Mcgee Street, between 13th and 14th. (Photo: James Woodfill)

*We build our images of the world with data from our senses. By presenting these data in novel patterns, artistic inventions alter our sensibilities — change what we see and therefore how we conceive the world and again how we look at it. We argue a particular aspect of this general case: that there are novel temporal manipulations of environment that will not only delight us but also vivify our image of time — help us to heal the breach between the abstract intellectual concept and our emotional sense of it.*

— Kevin Lynch, *What Time is This Place*

We have arrived at a time where our memories of downtown include a large number of demolished building sites and vast areas of surface parking. This process accelerated in the 1970s and went unchecked for decades. At a recent Urban Culture Project opening, many people commented on how wonderful it was to see so many people downtown at night. Implicit in these comments were memories and perceptions of the area as vacant of nightlife — notions that this was an area where people came to work in the day and then left as soon as possible. As the city's urban core is reinvigorated, remaining expanses of parking lots will be a constant reminder of its recent history. There exists a unique opportunity to use this element of the environment as a means of amplifying the nature of change that is taking place.

As the original floor plates (typically 50'x100', with a centerline of steel or heavy timber columns) became inefficient due to changes in commercial, retail, and residential use, and expectations were altered by comparisons to whatever happened to be new at the time, the small building module became more useful for storage or industrial use. More recently, new uses have included artists' studios; small, locally-based retail operations; and entrepreneurial startups. Rents generated by such low-paying uses tend to encourage poor maintenance. Vacated buildings became sites of opportunity — more income could be generated from surface parking than from building tenants. As well, offering more parking became an ad-hoc method of inviting people back downtown. Degradation of building stock and an insatiable demand for parking in the urban core led to a natural editing-away of physical fabric.



To service the commercial or residential uses of small buildings, adjacent parking lots were needed. They are still needed, and the lack of parking is considered a major hindrance to the continued development of the Crossroads Arts District and the River Market, two areas where structured parking lots do not yet make economic sense. Buildings that were costing more to keep the rain out of than they could generate in rental income could be knocked down, demolished, and paved over if the process allowed another building to be utilized for “higher” purposes. Of course, another developmental path for original infill blocks was to knock everything down and cover the entire block with a single, massive infill building. The larger the project, the more likely the economics allow for structured parking to be included.

The grid itself is a neutral organizing principle — other than the fact that it springs from the Enlightenment belief that order can be rationally ascribed, with beneficial results, to a chaotic or undefined situation. The way in which the components comprising the grid are articulated communicates something about the skill and intentions of the planners, architects, developers, and property owners of any particular city. Grid components include streets, sidewalks, the block itself, subdivided plots within the block, the use of the plots (built or unbuilt), alleyways, and infrastructure. It is in the articulation of these components, both individually and as a whole, where place specificity has the potential to be realized. Any attempt to define a specific urban Kansas City-ness ultimately lies in how we understand, utilize, and talk about the grid as an ever-flexible, moldable system. The inclusion of the ubiquitous automobile in any working definition of how the grid is to be used seems only prudent.



Many people wonder about street parking when discussing the ever-increasing need for places to put our automobiles. Many small-business people and residents in the Crossroads and River Market do use street parking for parking counts, which is legally allowed (a code issue for building-use requirements) if the use of the building has not changed. There are a number of complications with this situation, however. An intelligent, cash-poor city might view street parking time restrictions as a possible revenue generator. Also, many businesses and residents find the possibility of not finding a guaranteed parking space too hassling. This all too common perception, regardless of how one views it, chips away at the potential for a shared, imaginable, reinvigorated urban Kansas City. The standard marketplace rule of thumb is that for every 1,000 square feet of office space, three parking spaces should be provided. This is a minimum, and anything less puts a given property at a competitive disadvantage. Perhaps surprisingly, this ratio is more than city codes require for office use. For residential usage, one space per dwelling is both code-required and market-demanded.

We can think of surface parking as necessary “negative” space, needed to support the current economic functions of the “positive” building space.

The surface lots themselves tell us that what once existed was on some level not viable given the conditions at the time. The sporadic nature of the lots' placement, and details within their construction (fences, signage, pavement surface, etc.), tell us that they were created over a long period of time. These clues also reveal the slow economic and structural changes that have taken place in the downtown area.



Retaining walls and building foundations around Mcgee, between Admiral and 8th St. (Photo: James Woodfill)

While historic preservation can enter into this discussion from many directions, it is an issue that is a lively debate in itself. We have to agree that decisions about historic preservation have already been made in cases where buildings were razed to make room for surface parking. The proper balance between historic preservation and economic and logistical needs for parking is a contentious issue. In the debate on preservation, there is often a search for defining points in history that need to be saved. Spectacular examples of past architecture are protected, but clues about our normal day-to-day existence are torn away. Connections with the past become symbolic and nostalgic, while the continuity of daily life often gets abruptly altered.

Connections with the distant past can be bridged with present conditions, creating a sense of continuity in the area. As we look at our downtown, what we can clearly see is the ongoing history of change that has driven the area. The ebb and flow of economic growth and decay show us that this is a living city, an ongoing process, where both good and bad are elements to be remembered. By leaving clues about the mundane as well as the spectacular, and by promoting contrasts of new and old, we can weave together an environment that preserves a real and ongoing connection with the past while offering new and exciting changes and a sense of direction into the future.

As one travels down a street in a dense area of buildings, the rhythms are apparent. The movement seems uniform and consistent. A break in the rhythm caused by missing buildings can be disconcerting, raising questions of the blight that led to demolition, which thus causes an association of blight with the parking lots. But it can also be seen as a shift to a broader rhythm or overview. Seeing through the wall of buildings allows for a secondary relationship of movement.

It is easy to see the changing relationships of a skyline as one travels down a highway. Various buildings come in and out of view, allowing us to deduce their locations with increasing clarity. It is intriguing, and it helps one start to establish a map of the area they are about to enter. A large, dense city offers spectacular views of giant buildings, popping in and out as you walk down the streets. At street level, the buildings are a continuous rhythm, broken only at intersections.

The smaller scale of Kansas City, and its years of downtown decline, offer a different experience. The fabric of the city seems more like cheesecloth. But it is unique in that multiple vistas are available everywhere. The static rhythm of the experience of driving down a walled-in street is not often present. In its place is a series of multiple views traversing the downtown area. You can see through one block into an area perhaps three blocks away. And as you move, the vista changes, block by block. This offers a possibility of visual connection between sites in an unusual way.

In new development, it is often seen as important for all elements of the site to be centrally visible. In a shopping center, for example, centralized parking offers an even access to all of the available stores, each being visible and attainable. This is an area where planning could take advantage of the unique nature of our downtown. Carefully locating new construction to preserve site lines and vantage points would help amplify those experiences that already exist. In existing lots, consideration of views could be amplified in a multitude of ways. Visual connections with distant buildings could be made. Pedestrian access could lead to specific vantage points.

As we look at the situation presently, the existence of a surface lot now often adds considerable value to the neighboring property. Developers and business owners are scrambling to procure existing lots and looking for new viable parking options. We are at a point where new buildings might soon be constructed on existing parking sites. The pressures of providing parking will become more acute. Property values are rising, making it less viable to tear down existing buildings for parking.

Attempts to secure a viable mass transit system in Kansas City are way down the road, and even then it will take time to break the habit of driving to work. There are vast numbers of people in the suburbs that need to be lured downtown for work and play in order to re-establish the urban core. While we can debate the merits of a “car culture,” the reality is that developers will not build or rehabilitate, banks and investors won’t provide financing for, and the city won’t allow development that doesn’t adequately provide parking. In short, it seems difficult at best for business and development to build around anything but automobile traffic use. Commonly perceived as a sign of blight, surface parking is starting to be seen as a positive trigger for redevelopment. Given the proper care, a surface parking lot can act as an environmental clue for the transition from decay to growth.



Continued pressure for parking will put great emphasis on questions of maintaining building stock, and an honest dialog is essential while deciding priorities. By not facing up to the need for surface parking lots, one of Kansas City’s greatest assets — our stock of late 19th- and early 20th-century pragmatic masonry structures — is bound to dwindle, and not in any predictable or controllable way. We can look at parking as an opportunity to bring into focus the nature of our city. By considering the experience offered by the area as a whole, we can make better informed decisions about what should stay and what can go. As well, we should consider future needs, with an eye towards infill and rebuilding that could be driven by mass transit or structured parking.

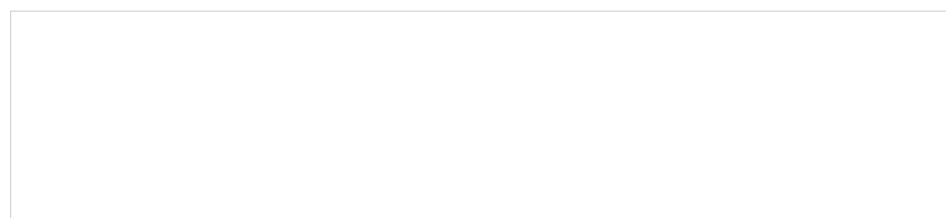


David Ford’s garden in alley behind YJ’s on 18th St. (Photo: James Woodfill)

Pride of ownership and a sense of community are necessary elements of a healthy city. Absentee owners and large-scale development bring great challenges. A discussion of code issues and various incentives might be needed to address these challenges. Finding a way to connect with the needs and wants of the community is essential in all areas of development, and parking is integral to any discussion of this issue.



Views of Freight House parking lot. (Photos: Mike Sinclair)



The ongoing history of the city — a process of change and reassessment — is easily apparent and accessible in the surface lots. Building remnants and foundation lines offer a chance to speculate about what this history has been. Many lots in the downtown area were built on top of remains of buildings, often with walls remaining, or retaining walls built. Curiosity about the archeology of the area can be heightened. Access to alleys can be turned into pedestrian-friendly passageways. Old foundations can be used to create intriguing spaces or seating. Old building sites can be used as guides for terracing. Building footprints could be demarcated.

By reinvigorating clues about the origins of a particular site, we can start to build connections with the past while allowing for present and future needs. Instead of seeing what was, we see how what *was* has changed into what *is*. A sense of the ongoing change and mutation of the area becomes evident. This connection with transition as history allows us to project into the future. We start to see how our current actions can shape things to come.



There is a small lot on the east side of Wyandotte, between 17th and 18th Streets. The lot sits atop what was formerly the street level of a building. Where the block slopes down to the east, a once lower-level entrance was filled in as an embankment, sloping down to the alley behind the site. This area had been long left in disarray. David Ford, an artist with his studio in an adjacent building, cleaned up the site and started a garden on the slope. The result is a site that brings a sense of care and order to the entire alley. Instead of the usual intimidation one would have entering an urban alley, one finds a surprising oasis with a genuine sense of security. While the garden is generously maintained, the cost of this type of intervention is nominal.

On a larger scale, we were able to participate in the development of the parking lot area for the Freight House. Many of the issues discussed above came into play as we developed our ideas for the site. Central to our concept was the idea of embracing surrounding areas as assets. The views ranged from train yards to industrial buildings to high-end office buildings. Integrated sculptural elements and site lighting were designed to offer connections with other visible aspects of the area, such as the Western Auto sign, old sign frames on many of the large buildings around the site, as well as the functional language of the structures in the rail yards. With the decks of the restaurants facing the parking lot, its treatment became a transition and connector to the rail yard. (Sitting on the decks and patios, watching passing trains, is a wonderful urban experience.) A second phase of the public art program enhanced the area even more, offering a variety of stimuli.

What ultimately makes the Freight House site work is the ongoing sense of community and the pride of ownership shown by developer Dan Clothier. He has taken great care in maintaining the site, working constantly to manage plantings and landscaping. His ability to see the “necessary evil” of a parking lot as a potential asset has led a development that is defined not just by the building but by the entire site.



The typical parking lot downtown features a mishmash of location signs, pole and chain structures that have been bent, and a barrage of different types of signage from various companies. The hodgepodge nature of their existence reads as chaos. Decisions made in an “as needed” fashion, without regard for how new decisions affect previous ones, has led to a sense of disorder. Simply cleaning up the site, maintaining the structural facilities (straightening posts, maintaining coherent signage, providing adequate lighting, paint, etc.), and keeping a sense of order is a start. From there, a good look at the site can offer clues for developing a sense of place.

In addition to the energy provided by artists and small businesses in the Crossroads, it is likely that the existing building stock has played a major, yet unheralded role in making the



Structure in parking lot surrounding Little Jakes on Grand. (Photo: James Woodfill)

district so appealing to both users and visitors. In comparison to the central business district, which is overburdened with fields of poorly designed surface parking lots, the Crossroads maintains a discernibly holistic feeling. This is not to say that the surface parking lots have all been properly designed. But, striking and maintaining a balance between built and unbuilt will be much easier with just a little bit of effort on the part of developers, architects, planners, city officials, users, owners, etc.



View looking north from Southwest Boulevard, toward Wyandotte. (Photo: James Woodfill)

A multitude of issues and opportunities confront us. The city’s want and need for parking has led to a sense of disarray, with relationships shifting dramatically from block to block. What we have is the grid. By concentrating on that organizing device we can find continuity not only in similarities, but in contrasts: old next to new, small next to large, positive space next to negative space.

By not insisting upon thoughtful, even inspired parking lots, but at the same time knowing that they will continue to be necessary, we are allowing a substantial portion of our experience of Kansas City to go unattended. With just a little bit — just a little — of effort and care, surface parking lots might actually have the potential to become a source of pride in the community. No, really.

Driving around the downtown area, many opportunities are apparent. There is a series of lots, each created at a different time but all connecting around the corner of 13th and Grand, surrounding Little Jake’s barbecue. A ramp structure from some previous building, several odd concrete structures, and multiple levels make this site an interesting place. The possibilities for intervention are numerous. Editing some of the disorder, cleaning, and repairing are some starts. It would be a small project to find a coherent system of signage and fencing that could unify the area without spoiling the fort-like qualities of the site. Lighting could emphasize the relationships and contrasts of the variety of structures at the site. With considered sculptural intervention, this area has the potential to be an incredible urban structural garden.

Across Mcgee Street is another lot, surrounded by the remains of a large brick building. The site is carved into the block, leaving green area at the top of the wall to the east. Trees and brush have grown up in this area. There are trees planted behind the Missouri Court of Appeals, maybe as an attempt to block the site line to the lot and the areas to the south of the building. There is an incredible view of the Civic District, with the Jackson County Courthouse, The Federal Building, county jail, and City Hall all visible from the site. Simply through a considered managing of the plant growth and trees above the wall, a focused view of that area could be maintained. Looking west offers a view all the way to Municipal Auditorium. Perhaps a fencing scheme that offered a framed view could be used to point out the vast site lines that exist at this site.



*James Woodfill is an artist living and working in Kansas City, Missouri. Primarily a sculptor, he has concentrated on site-specific installation art over the last decade or so, with work usually containing elements of light, sound, and movement. In the last year, Woodfill has presented solo shows at Joseph Nease Gallery and at the Wichita Art Museum, and his work was included in Awakenings at the Daum Museum of Contemporary Art in Sedalia, Missouri. A 2000 Charlotte Street Fund Grant recipient, he is also a part-time faculty member of the Kansas City Art Institute, from which he graduated in 1980.*

*David Dowell received a BA in Architecture from Washington University in St. Louis and a Masters degree in Architecture from UC Berkeley. After living and teaching in Dresden, Germany, he returned to the U.S. to teach at several American universities and work with a number of architecture firms before joining el dorado inc as a principal in 1998. With a focus on adaptive re-use, innovative infill construction, and community programming, he is currently concentrating on issues concerning the reconstitution of Kansas City’s urban core.*

*The collaboration between Woodfill and el dorado inc is ongoing and encompasses a number of projects to date, including exhibitions, public art commissions, and the integration of art and architecture through writing and practice. In 2002, el dorado inc and Woodfill formed a partnership, ELWOOD LLC, geared towards the development and implementation of their ongoing collaborations. That year, they were awarded a One Percent for Art commission by Kansas City, MO, now complete at the new parking facility at 11th and Oak.*