

University of Washington Tacoma – Community Development Course
Applied Community Development Assessment

Art Implementation within the Tacoma Mall Subarea Plan

I took a drive through the Tacoma Mall Neighborhood and realized that the area is an art desert, not human friendly and in general, an unhealthy place to live. With vast areas of concrete (yet no walkable streets) and little green space, it is hard to believe this is a neighborhood at all. In fact, this highly diverse neighborhood has the highest Hispanic (14.5%) and African American (23%) populations as well as a large percent of Asians (9.05%) and American Indians (3.75) in the Tacoma area. Although highly diverse, the residents have the same main concerns. According to a focus group response (for residents that called Madison, Lincoln Heights and the West Mall area their home) the top 3 most meaningful goals specific to them and their neighborhoods are: 1) Health and Safety; 2) Human and Social Needs; 3) Natural and Built Environment.¹ During my drive through the community, all three were clearly lacking. The Tacoma Health Department states that, “Healthy communities are healthy and sustainable places built on a balanced foundation of people, prosperity and planet. The integration of these 3 foundational elements, when making policies and investments, generates a livable natural and built environment, a viable economy and an equitable social environment.”² It seems that the residents and the health department are in agreement are what is needed in the Tacoma Mall Subarea.

The average man living in the Tacoma Mall Neighborhood earns about \$28,008 with women earning \$18,354. The average annual household income is \$45,882 with the average family income is \$41,640. This is an affordable housing area showing the beginning signs of gentrification with newer condominium type housing that gives the appearance of higher income levels moving into the area. There are no neighborhood schools, no library, no “Boy’s and Girl’s

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Club”, no live theatres, no museums, no bike or pedestrian trails, no centers for higher education, a park that is underutilized and a park that is an untended vacant lot in Lincoln Heights, and an underutilized x-school yard in Madison. The neighborhood does not support the human needs of people, does not promote equitable prosperity and does not support a living planet. The community is in dire need of the Tacoma Mall Subarea Plan.*(a)

Why is The City of Tacoma interested in focusing on this area? The Tacoma Mall Subarea is near the center of Tacoma and contains the Tacoma Mall Regional Growth Center (RGC) which is one of the 16 Mixed Use Centers designated by the City of Tacoma and one of the two Regional Growth Centers designated by the Puget Sound Regional Council (PSRC) for Tacoma. The City of Tacoma is giving priority for regional funding to encourage growth in the area and is planning to have three times as many people and twice as many jobs in the area by 2040. Additionally, the Subarea is also on top of the South Tacoma aquifer that provides up to 40% of Tacoma's water in the summer. The Subarea Plan will help build a complete neighborhood that has a diversified, sustainable economic base as well as a neighborhood with a strong sense of community. I propose that art can contribute to all of these needs.

At the last Stakeholders Meeting in May while discussing a possible name change for the community, local residents expressed their frustration with how the Tacoma Mall Neighborhood is perceived by outsiders. Prior to the 1980's, the neighborhood had a wholesome family feel to it and residents were proud to say they lived in the neighborhood. During the 1980's, gangs and drugs were the talk of the area and those outside the community shared a belief that the neighborhood was undesirable: just get to the mall, shop and get out. The residents at the Stakeholder's Meeting want to keep the name, Tacoma Mall Neighborhood, but want to reinvent the image. This is a social need for a positive identity. It effects the people who live here and

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contributes to the economy. Art can help bridge the gap and turn the neighborhood image around. The residents also complained about all the “renters” and how they only live in the neighborhood until they are ready to purchase a home and then move elsewhere. Developing a positive, family oriented community with art and culture will encourage renters to want to stay in the community; thereby increasing the human, social and financial capital.

My onsite research proved the area is an art desert. The only art I found was along 38th Street and consisted of a few beautiful pieces: an etched mural about 15 feet by 5 feet along the sidewalk next to O’Reilly Auto Parts, which has the (Leonardo) da Vinci Man and the moto “We Are One” with various ethnic symbols in the mural (since it was along a busy road and you could not step off the sidewalk to embrace the entire mural, this is not a safe place for viewing art); multiple brown bear statues in 4 places at the Brown Bear Car Wash; and the Arby’s sign, which they do not make any more according to Elliott Barnett, City of Tacoma Planner.*(b)

So how can we revitalize this area with art and culture? One option is to reinvent the Tacoma Mall. In some communities, a dying mall offers an opportunity for rebirth, or the chance to turn a poorly conceived shopping center into something that serves the needs of the community at large.³ Recognizing the community’s culture and art assets, along with the ability to market them, is an important contributor to equitable economic development. The mall can be redefined as a place to experience art by encouraging arts specific “business incubators” with low-cost space to help artists or cultural/creative professionals get their work out in the community. The proposed plaza at the mall will provide an area to host various events that support and enrich the community along with patrons of the mall. You will be able to purchase your consumer goods and share a creative experience with family and friends.

I came across an excellent idea that belongs to Adrian Cheng: the K11 Art Mall. His idea is to infiltrate culture into space at the mall, thereby “incubating the community”. Local artists sell their pieces and volunteer to teach art classes in the mall space. You can also think of this as building a new art ecosystem in the Subarea. What K11 does is “merge the cultural arts scene with commerce, because people go to shopping malls. So in order to groom audience, to do art education, you need high traffic, so art becomes accessible.”⁴

In New York City, The United Neighbors to Revitalize Allen and Pike Coalition began advocating the city to renovate the Allen and Pike Street malls beginning in 1998. Passing through 3 neighborhoods, the malls needed to provide green space for citizens to socialize, exercise and play. They utilized a vision session and charrettes so both organizations, residents and merchants could help develop a more positive vision for the mall neighborhoods (Chinatown, the Lower East Side and the East Village). They incorporated “People Make Park” tools in the visioning process, including Park Stories, Walking Tour, Questionnaires and Design Darts.⁵ At first the residents described the malls as noisy, unattractive and not safe. Afterwards, they were able to envision the malls as a resource to bring green spaces to the community; and, as a way to attract visitors into the neighborhoods to experience the historical, social, cultural and artistic attractions. This community made a significant change that is now being duplicated in New York (6 of 13 malls have been renovated) and throughout America.

I attended the last two Tacoma Mall Subarea Plan Stakeholders Meetings and was shocked and disappointed at the low neighborhood resident turn-out. Although there was plenty of experts from The City of Tacoma and related state agencies (ex. representative from Pierce Transit), someone must have forgotten to notify the residents because I could count them on both hands. The meeting held in May only had 7 residents in total. There were 3 round table discussions held

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after the update presentation by Elliott Barnett: renaming the community, determining which street plans will be implemented first, and determining who and how the residents desires, wants, and needs will be enforced. Elliott was on a mission to make those attending understand that once the plan is approved by the city council, the representatives they have been dealing with, such as Elliott and everyone else present besides the residents, will be stepping out of the picture.

We brainstormed actions and events we could organize to rally public participation and volunteerism. Residents were asked to sign their names on a volunteer list. No one would list their name; so, I wrote my name down. It seemed the consensus was that the first step we should take towards outreach would be to publish a community newsletter with door-to-door distribution as well as postings at any local place that will accept it. I recommended the use of a Storefront Studio either at/in the Tacoma Mall or along South Pine Street to encourage neighborhood/resident participation in art implementation and to promote a transformational attitude for the residents that live in the Tacoma Mall Neighborhood. I will address how this collective voice of people can be encouraged to carry on after the plan is implemented.

I suggested the newsletter as well as holding two Storefronts: one on South 38th Street (for locals) and one inside the mall (for tourist). Bill Grimes (with Studio Cascade) and Mark Hinshaw (with Walker Macy) pioneered this technique based on the theory that with more participation you have a better outcome. Participation also creates a sense of advocacy, a feeling of ownership, a transformational attitude, and voice. The basic framework is to leave the tech requirements to the experts and the details to the residents.

An “Art Slam” could also be organized to provide a place for a collective design brainstorming experience. This is an exciting way to reach all ethnicities and to make sure each one is represented in the art and art spaces. These participation encouragement events can be

posted in the newsletter, spread by word of mouth through local churches, email blasts, newspaper ads, and flyers posted around town. We may be able to get The City of Tacoma to post the events on their website.

Each of these events encourages all 5 levels of the Spectrum of Public Participation: informing and consulting with the residents, involving and collaborating with the residents, and most important – empowering the residents. The resident’s “voice” equals action, momentum and involvement. Once a residents sees that they are heard by those they see as in charge (for example considering their idea or moving forward with an idea they present), they feel a sense of community and are empowered to speak out and get involved because they see that their voice matters and can make a difference. Bringing the residents together to discuss place strategies through art promotes equitable development which includes community voice, capacity building and empowerment, and will hopefully result in residents moving into leadership positions. By investing in art, you not only give voice to the people, but you create places to socialize and discuss new ideas; thereby promoting double bottom line investments. Lastly, I recommended to Amy Pow, City of Tacoma Health Department representative, who led the round table determining how the residents will move forward once the plan is approved, that the Tacoma Mall Neighborhood Volunteers should form a Community Council; and encouraged they first use the South Tacoma Neighborhood Council as a “council mentor” until they feel comfortable with the networks, connections and responsibilities involved to branch out on their own.

Art will generate money by attracting patrons who will most likely spend money while they are in the community enjoying the art and culture. The artistic atmosphere also attracts businesses to locate within the subarea. Richard Florida defined the creative class of workers as being attracted to communities that create and support high quality places to live. The arts

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(museum, live performance and music, ethnic events, farmers markets, etc.) have been realized as a necessary tool for economic growth in cities. The arts do not represent the only cultural assets, but they do provide excellent examples of how these assets can be mobilized.⁶ Incorporating green spaces into the art equation supports our human need to be in touch with nature. Implementing art into the Tacoma Mall Subarea Plan creates a triple bottom line by utilizing art to support social equity, the economy and the environment.

At this moment in time, the community's common areas, such as the inner circle of a round-about, buffer areas that separate land use, green spaces designated as parks or play grounds are scarce. Most of the round-a-bouts are full of earth and rocks. I did find one in Madison that was pretty with flowers that was being maintained by a volunteer – a sign was posted that read “Adopt a Spot”.*(c) This is a great idea and was a friendly reminder that there are residents who are willing to volunteer to beautify their community....they may be willing to get involved with community improvement projects or organizations to improve their living environment. These are the people we want to encourage to attend the Storefront Shop and Art Slam.

Also located in Madison along South Junett Street, you will find the current site of Head Start, which was previously Madison's Neighborhood Elementary School. I would like to note here that the residents who attended the April and May Stakeholder's Meeting emphasized their hopes and desires to see the buildings and grounds restored back to a neighborhood elementary school. Currently the site is uninviting and does not promote social or cultural gatherings/events on the grounds.*(d) Since the Subarea Plan hopes to gain 3 times as many people in the area by 2040 I imagine this place as an elementary school that would not only serve the students, but the families and residents by using the facilities and grounds for annual events, fairs, a farmers market, after school care during the week and adult education in the evenings and weekends as well as planned

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art events that encourage and teach youth and residents to express their inner self.... the list is endless.

Drive by the Athletic Center and the empty large building on Montana Ave in Lincoln Heights and you will find an empty parking lot across the street with a scenic overlook.*^(e) Each time I have driven by (3 times) the lot was empty. The City of Tacoma's objective for the plan is to "carefully leverage all public investment and actions for multiple strategic benefits."⁷ This space is not active. The addition of art to this space, along with sustainable landscaping, benches, possibly a playground or shade trees, will activate this space in a way that benefits the neighborhood residents, workers enjoying lunch and visitors to the community.

Right around the corner on South 36th Street/Nevada Avenue, you will find the perfect walls for a mural (Tacoma Fleet Operations) and as a bonus, right across the street is the Lincoln Heights Park – which at this time is just an empty, overgrown lot with no safe access by sidewalk or vehicle parking area.*^(f) ^(g) Adding a mural to the wall would be a perfect way to link the area to the park across the street. The park's upgrade is scheduled in the Subarea Plan. I cannot tell at this time exactly what features the park will have.

There is another in Lincoln Heights at the intersection of South Steele Street and South California Avenue that stretches along the roadway with a playground and some shade trees, but most of it is a large lawn waiting to be activated with a ball field, basketball court, covered areas with picnic tables and grills to cook food on. Adding art would attract people – this is the perfect area for a water fountain playscape/artscape for kids on hot days. You could also add the water repellent paint to create murals underneath the play/art/scap. This may also be the perfect space to incorporate a Graffiti Wall because it is a large area, outside, that could support large gatherings; and public restrooms could be installed.

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If you look at what “Creative Placemaking” strives to produce (anchoring a community, activating spaces by providing activities, and fixing/repairing design problems) and read through the Tacoma Mall Subarea Plan, you can see that The City of Tacoma is trying to utilize Creative Placemaking within the plan. Every place based action must be intentional and integrated into the plan on multiple levels. The Loop Trail in the Transportation Plan is a fine example and provides optimum locations for art to take form.*(h) The Loop Trail was designed to unite the 4 quadrants of the Subarea Plan and promote a community identity as well as a safe pedestrian and bike trail along with public transportation access. Placing art along the trail will not only create a walkable presence with the ability to attract visitors to “Walk the Loop”, but it will also stimulate the local economy and promote economic development by creating a need for refreshments and places to stop, eat and refuel oneself. It may even establish a regional or national presence. The health benefits for the residents is incredible because at this time, the streets are unsafe, unwalkable and unbikable. Integrating art along the trail can also assist in establishing a community identity and is a great opportunity for reaching out to the residents to see what kind of art they want to experience along the loop. All of the ethnicities can be represented along with a historical representation of the area. The loop will give the people a place to connect, socialize, create memories, develop and grow. The “Art Loop Road” would also satisfy Amy McBride, The City of Tacoma’s Art Administrator’s necessary points for an “art town” (as - re noted in her presentation in Professor Yerena’s Introduction to Urban Planning class): 1) Access, it must provide many points of entry in order to make it so people experience art; 2) prosperity, it must provide a living for local artists; 3) systemic, it must be integrated into systems such as infrastructure, civic engagement and community partnerships; and, 4) risk taking, there must be a tolerance for ambiguity, controversy as they create conversation. And lastly, an Art Loop Road

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would integrate the Subarea Plan's 4 Big Ideas: 1) Coherent Neighborhoods – build an internal loop street for walking and biking/incorporate linear parks and green features into streets, 2) Scale & Character - transitions in scale to create cohesive mixed-use neighborhoods, 3) Natural Environment – walkable neighborhood/increase area-wide landscaping, tree cover and access to parks, play spaces and nature, and 4) Strategic Improvements – capture economic benefits of development through strategic catalytic investment in streets, infrastructure, services and sites.⁸ Another example of Creative Placemaking in the Subarea Plan is in Madison with regards to the South Tacoma Aquifer. The Subarea Plan intends to connect the streets and repave them with permeable asphalt which allows the water to penetrate the roadway instead of running off it into the stormwater system. According to Elliott Barnett during an interview regarding implementing art within the plan, the city is investigating this area to see what steps need to be taken, if necessary, to an area noted in Madison as toxic on a City of Tacoma Subarea Plan Map. They are also providing street trees and parks which will integrate with the green stormwater infrastructure as well as address the current local flooding. The Subarea Plan has a strategy for each quadrant.

In conclusion, now is the time to implement art into the Tacoma Mall Subarea Plan. Stakeholder participation is actively being pursued by The City of Tacoma Planners; however, actually obtaining participants is difficult. I still believe creating a community newsletter may be key to reaching resident stakeholders and generating a base of hopeful volunteers. I propose that creative placemaking techniques should be utilized and incorporated into Storefront Shops, Charrettes and Art Slams. The City of Tacoma's website could also assist with website questionnaires and meeting notices. Incorporating art into the Loop Road will contribute to a connected, safe community with areas to socialize, discuss controversial art and stimulate an active

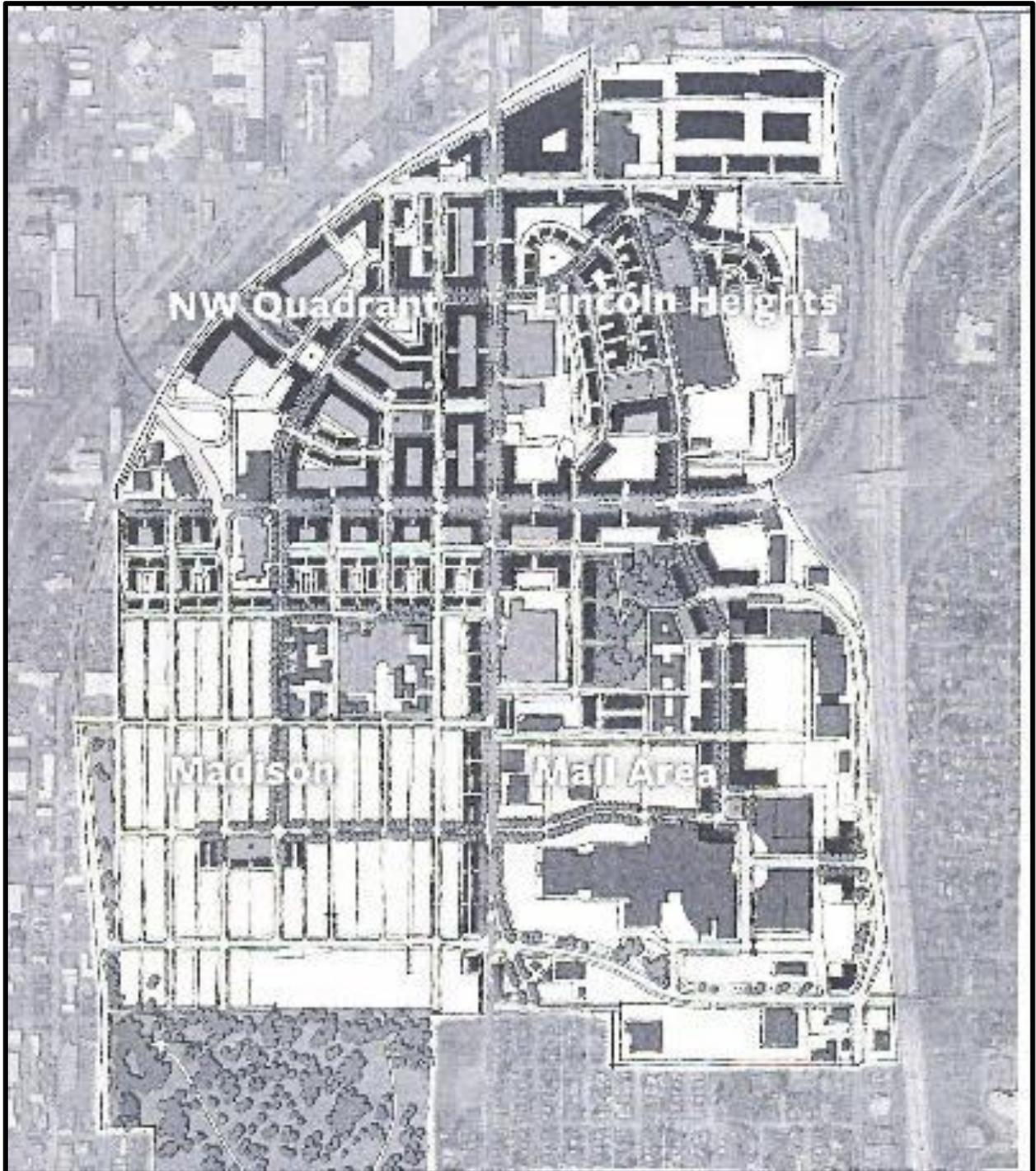
community voice. This equitable and sustainable development will ensure that vibrancy and resiliency is restored and maintained in the Tacoma Mall Neighborhood.

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*** Photographs**

(a) Tacoma Mall Subarea Plan – Illustrative Vision Plan



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(b) Art along South 38th Street



Additional Art along South 38th Street



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(c) 45th & S Lawrence Street



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(d) Madison – South Junett



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(e) Lincoln Heights – Montana Ave



(f) South 36th Street – Tacoma Fleet Operation – Possible Mural Location



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(g) South 36th Street – Lincoln Heights Park



(h) Proposed Loop Road = Green Line



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