



THE THIN GREEN LINES

A PROGRESSIVE PLAN WOULD TRANSFORM DOWNTOWN SAN DIEGO BY CONVERTING STREETS INTO NARROW PARKS.

BY LYDIA LEE

TOP RIGHT

Downtown San Diego is one square mile with a lively waterfront; the modestly sized blocks are 200 by 300 feet. By comparison, Manhattan blocks are 264 by 900 feet.

INSET

The green dotted lines are narrow parks that double as pedestrian routes to the city's larger park system.

To a casual observer, San Diego seems to have plenty of open space. The 1,200-acre Balboa Park, with its historic museums and the San Diego Zoo, is a major tourist attraction for the entire region. However, Balboa Park is effectively walled off from downtown by a fearsome moat in the form of an interstate highway. The city's one-mile-square downtown has some open spaces along its waterfront, but it is otherwise nearly devoid of parks. Until the past decade or so, downtown was for businesspeople and tourists, and residents were ensconced in the suburbs.

Things are changing now in downtown San Diego, though, as the district grows more dense. The downtown population is expected to triple over the next 15 years, reaching 90,000 people by 2030. To prepare for this influx and make a more attractive urban core, the city created an ambitious plan called One Park to retrofit its existing streets as park space. The plan, like so many others in California, was derailed after the state closed all of its redevelopment agencies in 2012 to help eliminate a deficit. But the idea for what came to be called One Park is still a potential

model for other cities interested in creating a truly pedestrian-friendly environment. "It's a vision of a beautiful, walkable downtown," says Martin Poirier, FASLA, a principal at Spurlock Poirier, which helped develop the plan in multiple phases over the course of several years.

At the time One Park was proposed, it had 80 acres of parks, providing less than half the open space recommended by the city's own standards for its current population (which call for 2.8 acres per 1,000 residents). One Park was a follow-up to the city's



ABOVE
The green rights-of-way (GROW) are narrow but can still accommodate traditional park amenities like small gathering spaces.

2006 downtown land-use plan, which identified potential areas for parks, as well as to a subsequent survey of the community that identified flexible, open lawns and leash-free dog parks as among the most requested amenities.

“We all gave up our backyards, our front yards, our side yards in exchange for the vibrant community downtown, so parks became a very high priority,” says Gary Smith, the president of the Downtown Residents Group.

In 2009, the city’s redevelopment agency issued a request for qualifications to develop a master plan for a downtown park system. The winning team, led by Spurlock Poirier, outlined 50 acres of new, traditional parks. But it also expanded the vision for “green streets” that had been identified in the 2006 land-use plan. Of the 13 streets

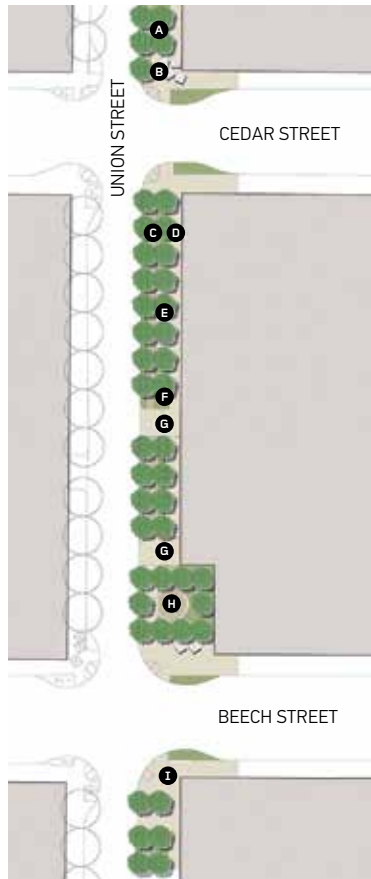
identified as good pedestrian routes, the team chose six—three north-south and three east-west roads—to form a grid that would connect the existing and planned parks.

“We saw that 40 percent of the space downtown was taken up by streets—public rights-of-way—and a light bulb went on,” says Poirier, whose firm has a 25-year history working in San Diego. The team proposed narrowing the streets, which can be as wide as 80 feet, by taking out a traffic lane and parking on one side. Still keeping two lanes of traffic, along with parking on the other side, the designers could use the recovered space for a narrow, 32-foot-wide park. “They put ‘green streets’ on steroids, reclaiming some of the pavement and doing a linear park,” says Brad Richter, an assistant vice president at Civic San Diego, the redevelopment agency’s

successor organization. “There is a whole movement for parklets—small public gathering spaces. These are a whole linear series of parklets, but more permanent.”

With this single masterstroke, the design team was able to find more than 16 acres of open space along four miles of roads. “It’s enough space for little tiny play areas, dog runs, picnic areas,” says Laura Burnett, FASLA, a consultant whose firm, Burnett Land & Water, does master planning for public parks. “And people can get to them within a two-minute walk.”

The One Park plan also promotes public health by encouraging jogging as well as walking. In addition to sidewalks on both sides of the street, it establishes a separate jogging trail that meanders through the park strips. Because these are quiet streets,



UNION STREET PROMENADE

LEGEND

- A TOT LOT
- B PLAZA
- C PATH
- D SIDEWALK
- E GAME/PICNIC TABLES
- F DOG PARK
- G DRIVEWAY
- H FOUNTAIN
- I PUBLIC ART IN PLAZA



LEFT AND INSET

The target streets currently have three lanes of traffic and parking on both sides. The One Park plan removes one lane of traffic and parking on one side and uses that space for a substantial greenbelt with a jogging trail.

FAR LEFT

The proposed design for one of the narrow parks incorporates a tot lot, game tables, and a dog park.

not main thoroughfares, there are sharrows (shared-lane markings) for bikes to share the road with cars. The design concept for these narrow parks, which run on the sunny sides of the streets, include public amenities such as game tables and tot lots. The team coined a new term for these streets: green rights-of-way, or GROW. “Green rights-of-way is a concept that is transferable to any other community that has a growing population and needs park space,” Burnett says.

Another potential benefit of these urban greenbelts outlined in the One Park plan is stormwater management. Though San Diego sees less than 12 inches of rain a year, when it does rain, it goes straight into the drains or down the streets and into the bay. To meet the state’s strict new requirements for stormwater treatment, which go beyond EPA standards, any new developments in the city

have to include passive treatment systems. These green rights-of-way could handle stormwater capture, cleansing, infiltration, and storage.

Other municipalities that have experimented with road diets know that they invite controversy. But in San Diego’s case, the idea of street narrowing was already firmly entrenched. Because these streets had been evaluated as pedestrian routes in the 2006 land-use plan, One Park’s proposal to eliminate a traffic lane wouldn’t require additional traffic analysis or environmental review. In the plan, cars continue to have travel lanes sized generously at 13 feet wide. And because underground garages beneath the planned “traditional” parks would more than make up for lost spaces, removing on-street parking wasn’t an issue.

The estimated cost for implementing the green rights-of-way alone

is \$90 million, while the total One Park vision, which includes freeway lids and a recreation center, brought it to \$420 million. Though the city has not been able to move forward with the grand plan, it has started to implement it piecemeal through smaller projects. The green rights-of-way have been incorporated into the most recent draft update of the city’s mobility plan; depending on what ends up in the final version, developers with frontage along those streets may be required to implement or maintain them. Plans are already moving forward for a block of one of the green streets. Richter says that a couple of blocks should be in place within the next two years, serving as a good demonstration of the concept. ●

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