

Chapter Three

A Partner in Neighborhood Redevelopment and Revitalization

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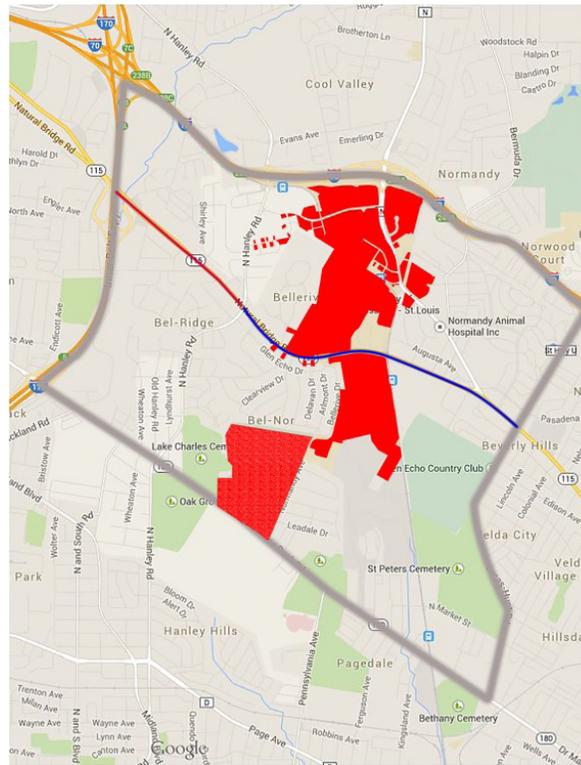
The University of Missouri-St. Louis (UMSL) was founded in 1963 as a land-grant institution with the responsibilities of teaching, research, and engagement. A part of the University of Missouri System, UMSL was created to meet the needs of the local community, and therefore has a strong commitment to its immediate neighbors and to the broader St. Louis area. Through collaboration among faculty, staff, students, institutions, and community partners, UMSL engages in programs to improve the quality of life in communities locally and internationally. These collaborative efforts are responsive to community needs while at the same time focused on preparing students to contribute meaningfully to a diverse, global society. The University's mission includes a stated commitment to Community Engagement, and was recognized in 2010 by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching designating UMSL as a Community Engaged campus. UMSL is a vibrant campus community with over 17,000 students and 2,500 faculty and staff, many of whom live in the area nearby campus.

Since the founding of the University, people living in the neighborhood immediately surrounding UMSL have been involved as stakeholders in the development of the campus, and the university has been conscientious in seeing itself as a part of the community in which it resides. Throughout the years, UMSL has purposefully communicated with and listened to these community stakeholders about the demographic changes in the community, and included them in the strategic and capital plans for future development. One of the projects that came about as a result of this ongoing dialogue and engagement in the community is the *Great Streets–Natural Bridge/University Square* project.

Great Streets–Natural Bridge Road Project/University Square (Community Development Corporation & Urban Redevelopment Corporation)

UMSL anchors a community/region that wholly contains eight municipalities and touches portions of five others (Figure 1. University Square). The boundaries of this region and for the project are Lucas & Hunt Road on the east, St. Charles Rock Road to the south, I-170 on the west and the northern border is I-70. Strategically located within a few miles of the St. Louis airport, there are also four light-rail stations for public transportation within these boundaries, with two located on the UMSL campus.

Figure 1. University Square



Neighborhood Characteristics

This was once a thriving, prosperous area with golf courses and country clubs interwoven with residential homes and a myriad of Catholic churches and monasteries. However, the area has seen decades of economic decline and a changing population. Approximately 11,600 people currently live within the borders of this 2 x 2.5 mile area, of which 70% are black and 25% are white. The poverty rate in this area is around 25%, and the housing values and economic viability of the area has continued to decline over recent decades. Nevertheless, people in the area are still proud of their community and many who live there are interested and engaged. In this area alone there are 43 elected officials, including three mayors, four chairmen, eight City Council members, eight aldermen, and 20 Trustees. Though the governance structures may seem fractured, they actually support the development of relationships which have lent themselves to creative responses to the economic challenges of the area. For example, the personal investment in the community and supportive partnerships with UMSL helped attract Express Scripts International, a Fortune 20 company, to locate their headquarters on the campus.

UMSL started out with property that was once a golf course purchased by the local school district and “donated” for a token payment to the university to create educational opportunities in higher education for people living in the area. In those early years, preference in enrollment was given to residents of the local school district. Major expansion took place in the mid-1970s when property across Natural Bridge Road directly adjacent to the university, which had housed a convent and monastery, was put up for sale. Purchase of this land brought UMSL to 190 acres. That new addition now houses the only College of Optometry in Missouri, and the College of Education, which educates most of the teachers in the state. Further expansion in the 1990s added space for campus housing. In just over 50 years since its founding, the university now encompasses over 350 acres. It houses not only academic and student buildings, but several museums reside on the campus, including the St. Louis Mercantile Library, which was founded in 1846 and is the oldest library west of the Mississippi River, as well as the newer, state-of-the-art performance center that provides a hub for cultural programming in the community.

Even so, the Urban Land Institute report on Technical Assistance Recommendations completed in 2012 acknowledges that there are mixed perceptions of the area from people who do not live there. Due to the proximity to other depressed areas of North St. Louis County, many believe the area to be blighted. There are few restaurants, and there is no immediate access to amenities like grocery stores and health care services. However, it is very much a lovely, quaint community with a multitude of trees, green space, beautiful and affordable homes, and friendly people.

Redevelopment Initiative

Natural Bridge Road (MO State Highway 115) is the backbone of the area, but it also bi-sects the University campus into what is commonly referred to as North and South UMSL campuses. Historically, this road was the primary state highway access to the regional airport. When Interstate 70 was developed, the traffic and use of Natural Bridge Road dropped off significantly, leaving a five-lane concrete divider through the heart of a changing community. In 2007, East-West Gateway, the metropolitan planning organization responsible for developing and adopting plans for the region’s surface transportation system, called for proposals for the *Great Streets* program. This new program was designed to look at streets as public space that actively help establish a community’s sense of place, integrating land use and transportation planning; accommodating multiple modes of transportation; supporting the development of economically vibrant neighborhoods in an environmentally responsible manner. *Great Streets–Natural Bridge Road* was one of the first five projects selected by East-West Gateway to fund and develop.

With UMSL serving as an anchor for the *Great Streets–Natural Bridge Road* initiative, a partnership was formed with the City of Normandy along with North County Incorporated, a regional economic and community development advocacy organization serving 47 municipalities and unincorporated areas of the northern portion of St. Louis County. The majority of commercial property in the proposed development site for this project is within the City of Normandy, so their input and support is critical to develop economically vibrant neighborhoods. North County Incorporated’s boundaries are the broadest and envelop all of the municipalities that are bound by this project. As a regional development organization, they act as a catalyst to define and advocate for economic and community development for North St. Louis County. After the project was selected and moved from concept and analysis towards actual construction, additional partners committed to the project including St. Louis County, Missouri Department of Transportation, Great Rivers Greenway and Metro Transit, the operator of the public transportation system

for the St. Louis metropolitan region. These partners helped to realize the actual construction of the road re-visioning. Their commitment led to the support and funding of Phase I of the *Great Streets–Natural Bridge Road* project, an estimated cost of \$20M, which involved no capital commitment from the university. Construction of Phase I (Natural Bridge Road from Hanley Road east to Lucas & Hunt Road) began in 2014 and was scheduled for completion by the end of 2015.

The road re-visioning involved a road “diet” with fewer driving lanes, dedicated bike lanes, planted medians and 10 feet wide multi-use paths along the roadway to encourage safe pedestrian experiences (Figure 2. Natural Bridge Road vision). After a number of community meetings with input from area stakeholders, a decision was made that a roundabout would be designed at the intersections of Florissant Road and Natural Bridge Road, and a town center plaza should be created surrounding the roundabout (Figure 3. Roundabout Plaza). This area will be a hub in a vibrant new destination with a multitude of commercial, residential, and entertainment opportunities that will simultaneously serve the university campus and local communities.

Figure 2. Natural Bridge Road Vision



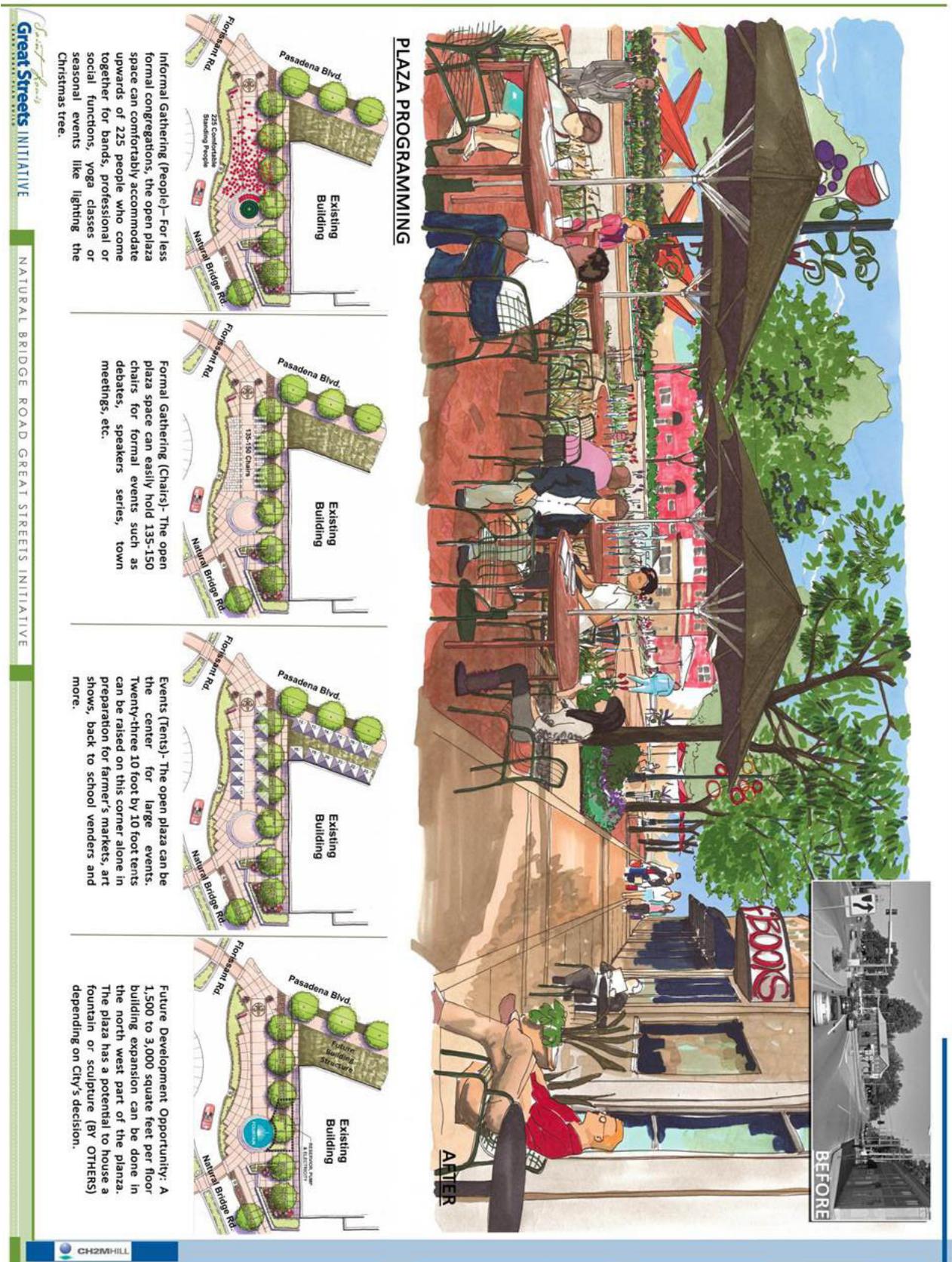
Accompanying the re-visioning of Natural Bridge Road, the project included development of a land-use plan that evaluated the existing economic conditions of the region and suggested approaches that supported and stimulated economic growth. The diverse population of residents, students, and employees can be seen as both an asset and a challenge for development in this area. Basic analysis of the area’s demographics often does not take into consideration the considerable number of people who commute to and from the area each day to the university and surrounding businesses. Zip code analysis, often used in planning, also does not represent the area accurately. The University Square area has a strong institutional corporate headquarters, small business, and residential neighborhood base that is underserved by retail, restaurants, and entertainment services. With both residents and commuters in mind, creating and attracting development that is appealing and accessible to all segments of this community is essential.

The University has led in the formation of two economic development entities to support and facilitate development in the region surrounding the *Great Streets–Natural Bridge Road* project. The entire focus area for the project is now known as University Square. St. Louis County continued their partnership and awarded a \$250K grant committed to the economic development of University Square. This money supports some staffing and operational needs to market and implement the plan, and the University contributes overall supervision and administrative support, along with legal and planning services.

As a direct result of the planning and partnership activities, new investments are already materializing in University Square. To date, some of the new economic developments include two renovated apartment complexes that invested more than \$5M in their complexes. They identify that the majority of their tenants are UMSL students. A development, construction, and realty business located in the Square is renovating an existing building and establishing 10 new jobs. An anonymous donor gifted funds for UMSL to purchase Normandie Golf Course. Normandie Golf course lies in the heart of University Square and its previous owners had been looking to sell it for several years. It is significant to the community because it is the oldest public golf course still in operation in its original location, west of the Mississippi River, and UMSL intends to maintain it as a public golf course. Furthermore, UMSL has embarked on the largest physical growth in its history, with four new buildings either under construction or planned and approved to begin in the next year for a total investment over \$100M. One of the buildings is a new Patient Care Center. Scheduled to open in 2016, this new building will house the UMSL College of Optometry Clinic and includes space for campus and community partners to offer complementary health-care services, such as dental and primary care. This new state-of-the art facility will offer a welcoming environment that engages and serves the health needs of both the UMSL community and the area residents.

The *Great Streets–Natural Bridge/University Square* project is poised to become a success story for both UMSL and the community, due to the broad and strong partnerships that have been created and nurtured. The physical space of the area is already undergoing improvement with a transformed roadway with improved walkability conducive to safety and renewed economic development. New construction and renovations of existing buildings exhibit a shared commitment to the area, and new developments exemplify a committed investment in the community.

Figure 3. Roundabout Plaza



Authors

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