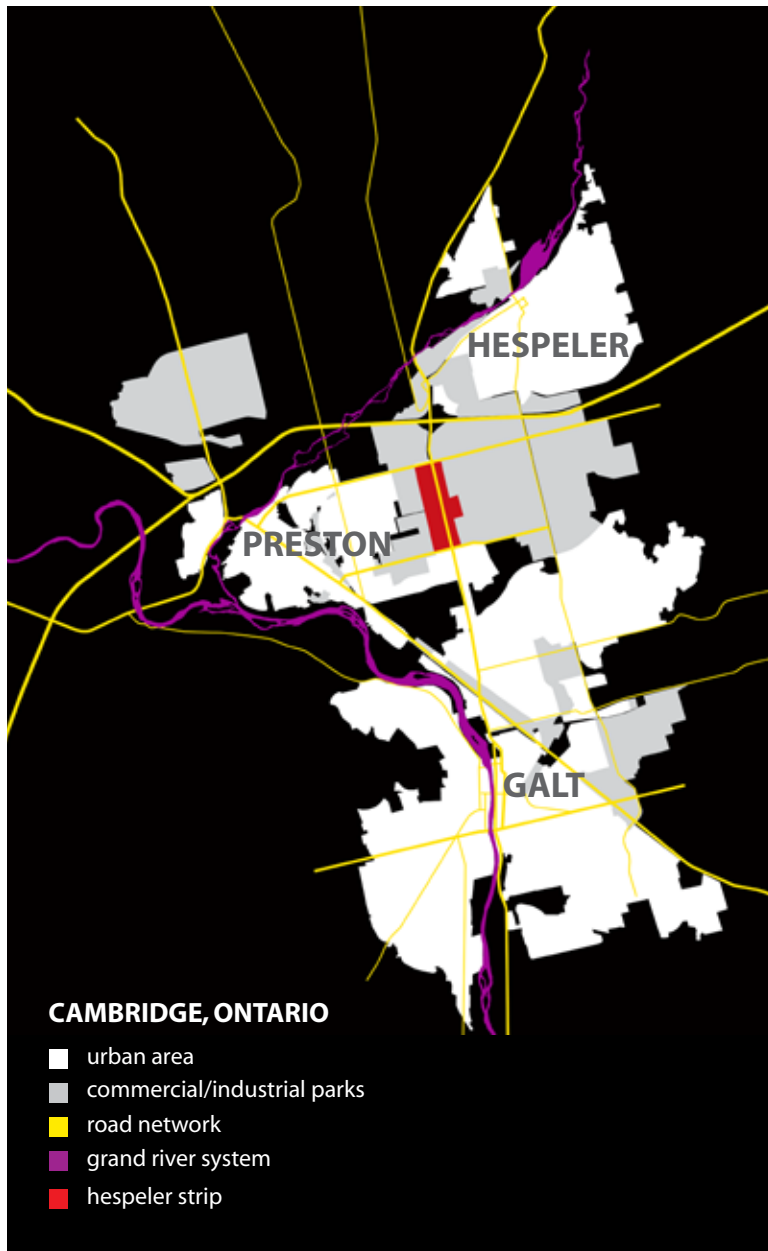




----- The Road as a Landmark



In 2005, it is hard to imagine Canada without the extensive network of motorways. However, it was only 120 years ago when railroads formed the country's primary transportation and communication arteries which materialized the political impulse to connect disparate parts of this vast land into one nation. Approximately sixty years after the opening of Canada's first trans-continental railroad, its cardinal role as the country's central communication artery was quickly diminished by the growth of the trans-Canada highway & road system. A mass car-culture quickly developed after the Second World War; personal mobility became the quintessential icon of freedom, complete with new urban planning theories and architectural typologies to reflect this modern lifestyle of the 1950s and 1960s. The history of the automobile is a story of phases, each one far surpassing the last. The car developed from a plaything for the rich into a plaything for the masses, and then, into one of life's prime necessities. To support the needs of the automobile user, road systems were built in such a vast scale that their extensiveness can be a measure of the country's urbanization rate; the end of the road is the limit of human habitation.



As arterial roads and highways become a permanent part of the modern cityscape, along with them are the architecture and spaces designed to serve the users of these large scale roads: from service stations, strip malls, mega-malls, big-box power centers, commercial/industrial parks to suburban housing developments. The conglomeration of all of these programs had spawned many urban planning and architectural debates. This project will not be concerned with whether those spaces are blights or not. Instead the strip mall/arterial road typology is explored as a potential space for injecting civic culture into the suburban model of development. The focus is to challenge the user and (re)designer of these spaces to perceive them as being simultaneously distinct, chaotic, orderly, ugly and beautiful. They are the spaces of mobility. And they should be considered as landmarks of the 21st century.

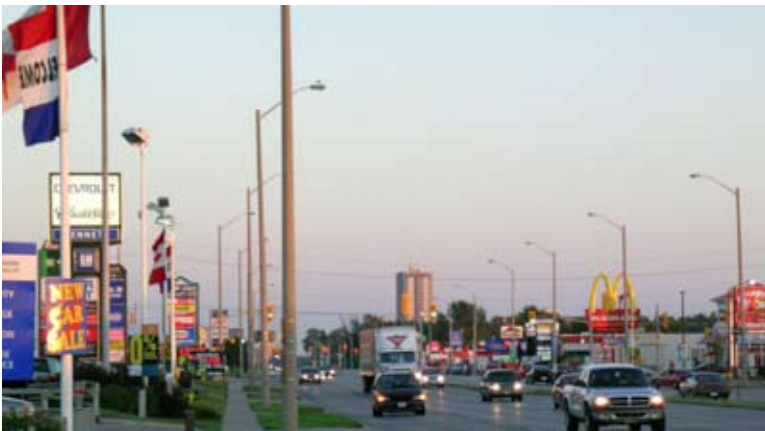
Mobility space is a very different category from what was traditionally considered as a landmark. “A landmark draws attention and becomes an identifiable marker for the visitors of a town. A landmark is also loved by the people who live there and is a source of pride, irrespective of its scale or size. Among them are high rises such as the Empire State Building, the towers of San Gimignano, temples and palaces with historic settings and many towering, grand-scale work’s of architecture. But small works buried within a town that draw people inside instinctively, such as Vienna’s Retti Candle Shop and the Schullin Jewellers designed by Hans Hollein are also splendid landmarks.” Strip malls, however, are considered as development rather than architecture. They have no traditional architectural merit since they were constructed as anonymous hosts for signage. Their raison d’etre is to efficiently provide low rent retail spaces with enough parking to accommodate the automobile dependent consumers. Thus, a 2km corridor of strip malls along a 6 lane arterial road would hardly make it on the list as a potential landmark. However bizarre it may seem, the Hespeler Road commercial strip may be considered as such. It has become a prominent part of the City of Cambridge. Its location serves as a gateway into the city. It is central to the daily lives of the residents. It has evolved into a distinct entity. Most importantly, it



evokes passion and curiosity from residents and visitors alike. It is the ugly duckling that the city wants to be proud of.



Cambridge is a city that oscillates between the traditional charm of stone architecture and the amorphous chaos of strip mall signage. It was created in 1973, primarily, by the amalgamation of the City of Galt, the Towns of Hespeler and Preston. These historical towns along the Grand River form three geographical poles that define the “T” shape of Cambridge. Due to their distance from one another, they continued to be developed as separate entities, each endowed with its own wealth of heritage buildings and local shops on the main streets of its downtown. The river is a common feature that winds through the three centres. It is at times disguised by buildings that are constructed right up to its retaining walls, visible only to users of the buildings. There are also open spaces, parks and abandoned industrial lands along other parts of the river. Whatever the edge condition, the Grand River is an integral part of one’s experience of these town centres. It forms an underlying order on which the towns were built; it is a visual backdrop and a winding corridor of unique microclimate. After the 1973 amalgamation, the development of the twentieth century Cambridge was accelerated. Agricultural fields between the three poles were replaced by new industrial and commercial uses. A rural road that ran between the three towns along these lands was transformed into a 6-lane artery that serves as an internal connector within the city and a major linkage between the city and the provincial highway. Thus, it is named both as a road and a highway: Hespeler Road/ Highway 24. A 2km stretch of this road (the Hespeler Strip) was developed into an amorphous corridor of retail and entertainment centre for the whole city. Geographically, this strip, also designated as the Hespeler Road/ Hwy 24 Commercial Area, is located in the middle of the three old towns. It is a collection of strip malls, service stations, shopping mall and big box power centers. The simultaneous growth of the old towns along the river and the new commercial hub along the motorway, the City of Cambridge has developed two distinct spatial qualities: the historical town and the twentieth century urban conglomerate.





The Hespeler Road/ Hwy 24 commercial area emerged in the 1980s as the major focus of retail development in Cambridge. It stretches from Highway 401 south along Hespeler Road to Munch Avenue and is comprised primarily of a mix of shopping amenities. In the past 25 years, it has evolved into a quintessential urban artifact of Cambridge. It not only provides all of the amenities needed by the residents, the structure of the strip mall foster small businesses which may not be able to survive in the historic downtowns due to higher rent. The separate developments of strip malls had become a single entity, and it is experienced as such by the motorists who speed down the road or the residents who use the amenities offered. It draws attention and becomes an identifiable marker for the visitors of the city.

Functionally, it provides the city's residents with a cornucopia of domestic amenities, retail needs, leisure activities, entertainment, health, financial and other types of services. The mix of commercial buildings in the area includes shopping malls, strip plazas and several freestanding commercial buildings. Overall, there exists approximately one million square feet of space. The major development for the area is Cambridge Centre, a 725,000 sq.ft. mall which features 130 shops and services including Zellers (120,000 sq.ft.), The Bay (130,000 sq.ft.), Sears (140,000 sq.ft.), Sport Chek Sporting Goods Store (20,000 sq.ft.); Galaxy Cinemas (44,000 sq.ft.), and an NHL sized skating rink. Other retailers and amenities that can be found on the strip are Zehrs Food Grocery Store (80,000 sq.ft.), Home Depot, Canadian Tire, fast food and other restaurants, coffee shops, discount stores, clothing stores, gift shops, bowling alley, rollerskating rink, snooker club, hair salons, beauty parlours, auto garages, accountants, lawyer's offices, real estate companies, medical clinics, and pharmacies. This large scale conglomeration of amenities, retailers and services represents a new type of civic space in which the residents' errands become tightly intertwined with their social lives. As was described by Joel Garreau, shopping malls, plazas, and skating rinks have become the new civic centres in the "edge city"; they are the twenty-first century piazzas.

Architecturally, this civic centre is a chaotic collection of many commercial developments. The disorganized appearance was partially the result of a zoning amendment that turned agricultural fields into retail and commercial lands without specific design guidelines to advocate a more cohesive spatial quality. Thus, the Hespeler Strip evolved under the pressures of economy and traffic demands. It is two kilometers of vastness, interrupted by a floating collage of large neon signs and grounded by flat, anonymous boxes in a black sea of asphalt. In "Learning from Las Vegas", Robert Venturi termed these one storey architecture "shed" and "duck". A "shed" is a very basic block-like form that serves no aesthetic functions other than to stand as a base for a sign. It is the "\$10,000 building with the \$100,000 sign." The "duck", on the other hand, is a building that itself is a sign. Venturi named the category after a Long Island roadside attraction shaped like a duck; it was a building that advertised itself.

Most buildings on the Hespeler Strip are "sheds". Economic practicality steered strip malls to become flexible vessels for low-rent businesses. Change of tenant only requires new signage graphics; there are no architectural commitments required by the shed typology. The site plans of these developments always place the sheds as far back from the sidewalk as possible, giving adequate space for parking. Thus, store signs are too far for drivers to see from the street, giving rise to the freestanding sign. They stand like colourful totems on the edge of the street, taunting drivers to enter their shopping plaza. The dense display of freestanding signs, store signs, temporary "sales" signs, bus shelter advertisements, and the occasional helium float creates a light spectacle after dusk on the Hespeler Strip. Their supporting structures all disappear in the darkness of night, leaving brightly lit graphics floating in the vast sky. It is the pauper's version of the Las Vegas strip; its similarity not in opulence but in visual abundance. Contrary





to the purpose of signage, which is to help direct the user of a space to his destination, signs on the Hespeler Strip are disorienting. There is no order, no landmark, and no indication of distance; there is only vast space, and a lot of signs. Drivers enter the strip, lose themselves in it, and without warning, they've already left it.

Aside from signage and rentable floor area, parking is the top priority of strip mall developments on Hespeler Road. On this strip, a monotonous field of parking maybe adapted into an outdoor event space. In the summer, a section of the parking lot at Cambridge Center transforms into a funfair complete with games, food kiosks, and rides, including a carousel and Ferris wheel. Other strip malls put up gigantic inflatable balloons to attract customers, adding another layer of dynamic energy to the streetscape. Although these occasions are rare, they reflect both the desire and the capacity for civic programs on the Hespeler Strip. After the funfair is packed away and when the gigantic balloons are deflated, the strip becomes a vehicle dominated zone again. Pedestrian amenities, if not lacking, are poorly designed. Coffee shops are located close enough to the sidewalk that they provide a welcoming shelter for pedestrians stranded in the rain or a snowstorm. However, the decision to site them at the edge of parking lots is based on the design needs of the drive-thru service, whose goal is to provide convenience to the driver by shortening the distance that one has to veer from the road to order coffee and muffins directly from one's car. Bus shelters are located far away from stores and major intersections to ensure that transit does not interfere with regular traffic flow. Red traffic signals only last long enough for a pedestrian to speed-walk cross the street; seniors will find it difficult to comfortably cross this 6-lane municipal highway. After all, this mobility space is designed for the auto-mobile only.



There are many examples of mobility spaces; not all of which are automobile-focused. Mobility spaces are the quintessential elements of city building. In great historical cities such as Rome, Paris and Berlin, roads were of primary military and economic importance. However, they were also the locations of cultural architecture, from gates at the city



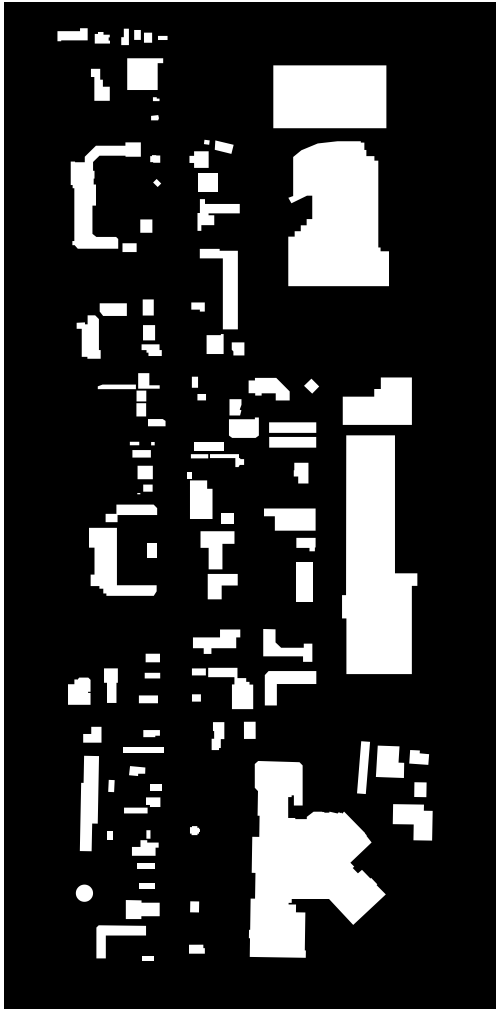
walls, to ceremonial arches, memorials, obelisks and circles. These landmarks transcended segments of roads into the nexus of festivals and cultural events. Such celebration of the aesthetic and cultural importance of the road was lost after the post war period. For a century, planners and road-builders have been overtaken by events. The pressure of car traffic led to a constant disruption of the infrastructure, accompanied by the demand for even more asphalt. The digression of the cultural importance of the road, however, was much more far-reaching, partly as a result of technological advances, which aroused the desire for specialization of everything man-made. Thus, roads were considered only within the domain of the engineers; aesthetics were cast aside as unnecessary and uneconomical. Thus, the road's relationship to the landscape and the urban fabric becomes neglected. Though this new methodology lacks cultural aspiration, the resultant conglomeration of road, parking, "shed", and sign is a typology that is continually maturing.



The landscape of strip malls on Hespeler Road has evolved into such a distinct entity that it can be examined as one experience, one site, and eventually one landmark. This landscape is a conglomerate of multiple spatial scales: scale of the highway, the road and the pedestrian. It is a space that is perceived in motion. There is nowhere to pause. It is a place made for consumers in constant movement, whether in cars, on funfair rides or on foot. This multi-scaled chaos is the underlying condition that spawned the design concepts of "the road as a Landmark".

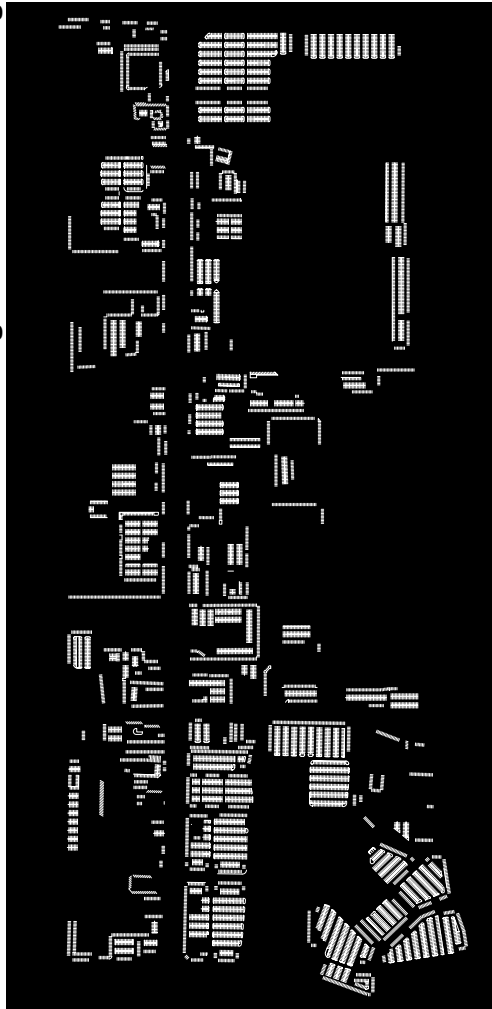


Figure Ground - Building



This figure ground illustrates the cornucopia of building sizes on the site, reflecting the combination of big box stores, malls, strip malls, stand-alone stores or restaurants found on the strip. Scattered and disconnected, these buildings are the result of many independent developments.

Figure Ground - Parking



Parking is essential in any strip mall or big box development. The area of parking in many instances is greater than the gross floor area of the buildings. The intense density illustrated in this figure ground represents the vast emptiness on-site.

Figure Ground - Boundary



Curbs and walkways form a series of boundaries and landings on which pedestrians can navigate between plazas, stores and malls. Conversely, their openings form an internal path system for cars to navigate from one plaza to the next without using the main arterial road.

Planning Initiatives:

Break Down the Strip

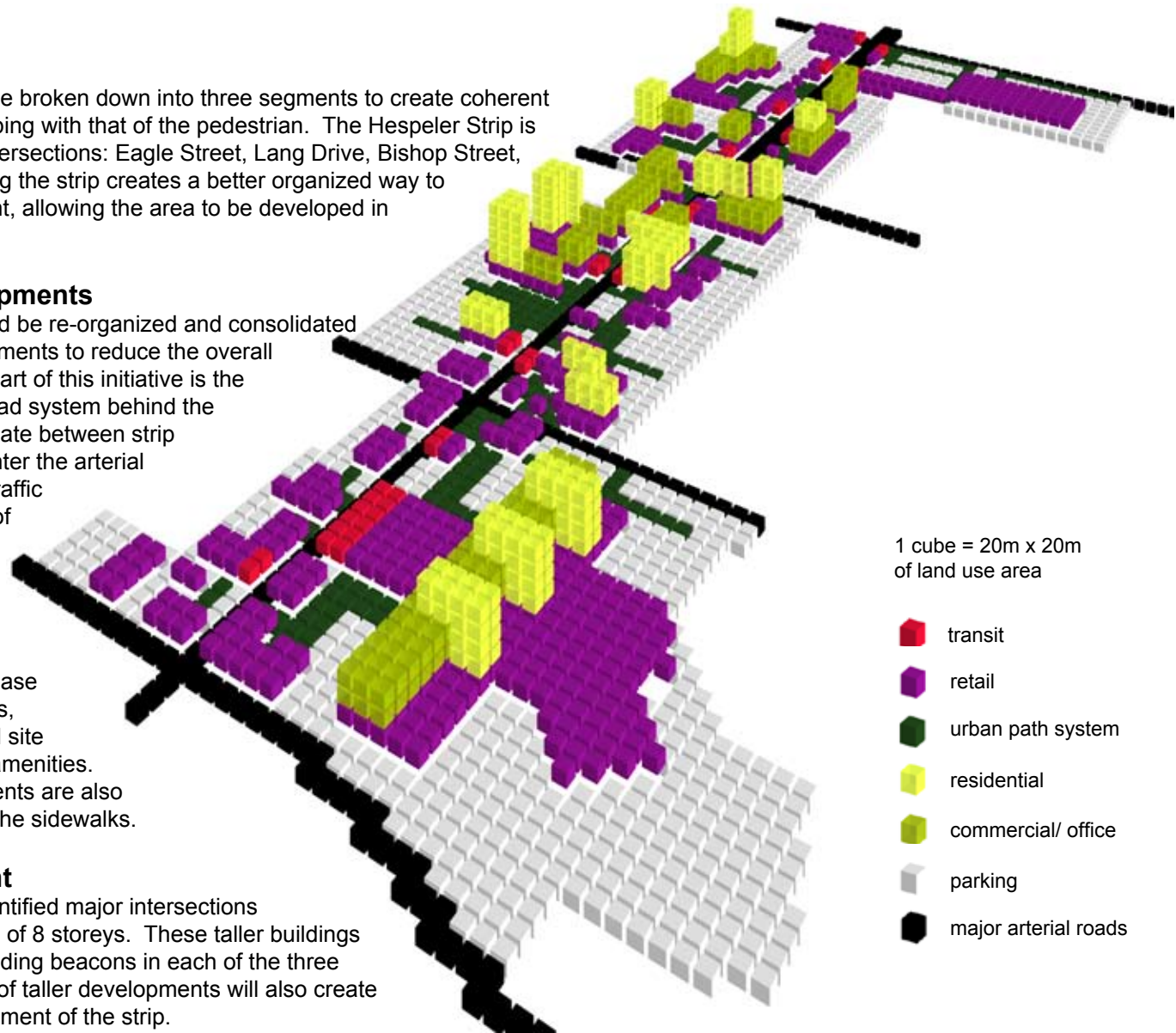
Development of the strip can be broken down into three segments to create coherent spaces in a scale more in keeping with that of the pedestrian. The Hespeler Strip is defined by four major traffic intersections: Eagle Street, Lang Drive, Bishop Street, and Dunbar Road. Segmenting the strip creates a better organized way to accelerate denser development, allowing the area to be developed in three phases.

Mixed Use/ Infill Developments

The existing parking lots should be re-organized and consolidated between the separate developments to reduce the overall area of parking. The second part of this initiative is the establishment of an internal road system behind the building, allowing cars to navigate between strip malls without the need to re-enter the arterial road, thus, helping to reduce traffic congestions caused by users of the strip. The area saved from the reduced parking will then be used for infill developments. Mixed use developments are advocated, because they can help to increase the volume of pedestrians, thus, justifying greater spending and site considerations on pedestrian amenities. The location of infill developments are also encouraged to be adjacent to the sidewalks.

Increase Building Height

Building heights at the four identified major intersections should increase to a maximum of 8 storeys. These taller buildings will act as anchors and way-finding beacons in each of the three sections of the strip. Clusters of taller developments will also create an overall identity for each segment of the strip.

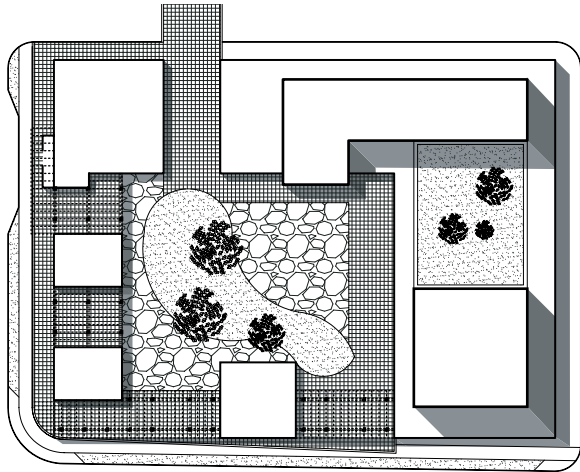


Mixed Use Development:

Atypical mixture of program:

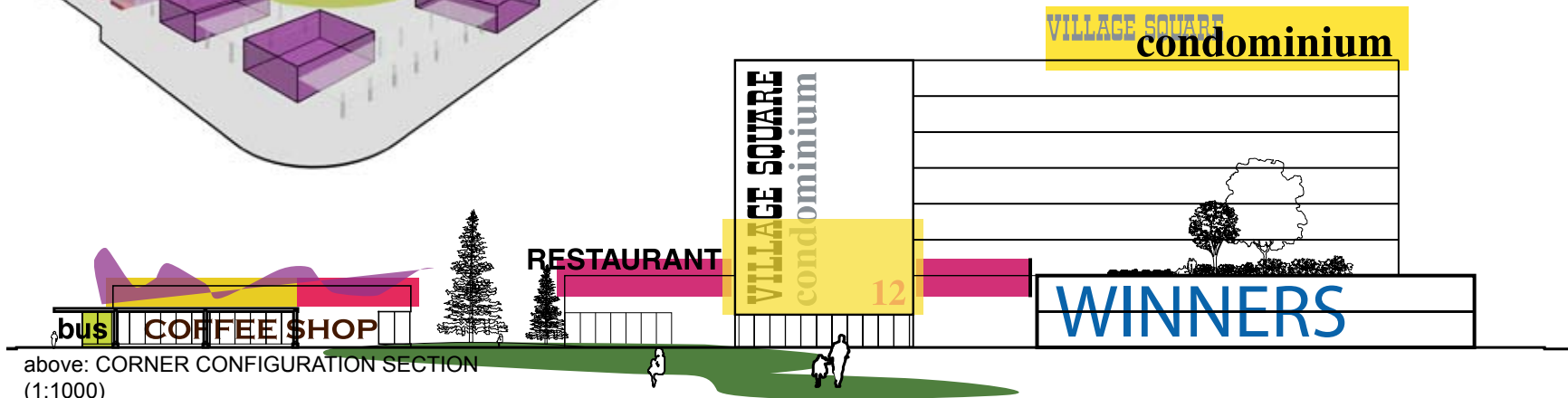
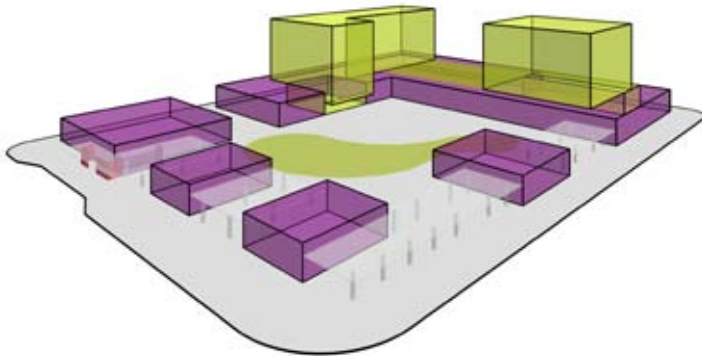
- 1 Big Box retailer
- 1 high density residential development
- 4+ individual retailers/ offices
- urban park

The large scale at which strip malls operate can be modified to include multiple uses. Mixing up the program type and scale can encourage pedestrian flow between the strip malls. The XL conglomeration of programs act as key anchors along Hespeler to create flow and rhythm along the street. Parking is consolidated between the plaza to create a continuous network. The concept is to allow cars and pedestrians to weave new pathways along the 2 km strip.



above: CORNER CONFIGURATION SITE PLAN (1: 2000)




below: CORNER CONFIGURATION MODEL
(nts)



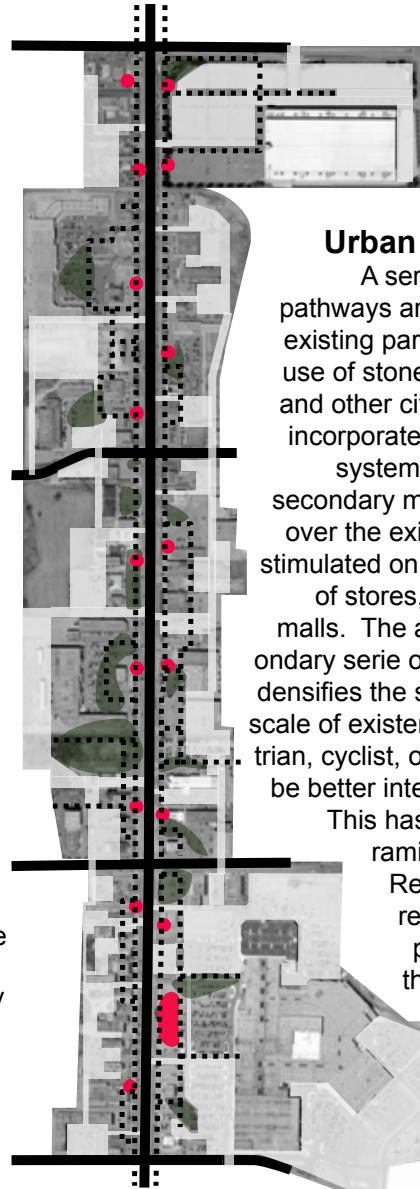
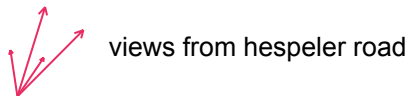
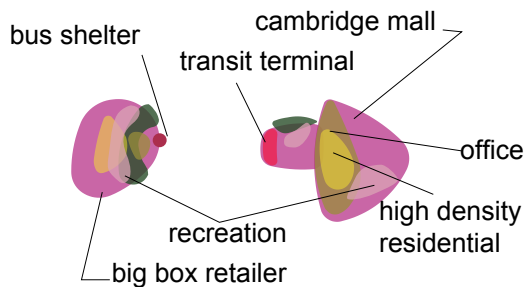
above: CORNER CONFIGURATION SECTION
(1:1000)

Spatial Structure:

LEGEND

-  single retail store
-  mixed use: retail at grade with office above
-  urban path system: civic/ anchor space

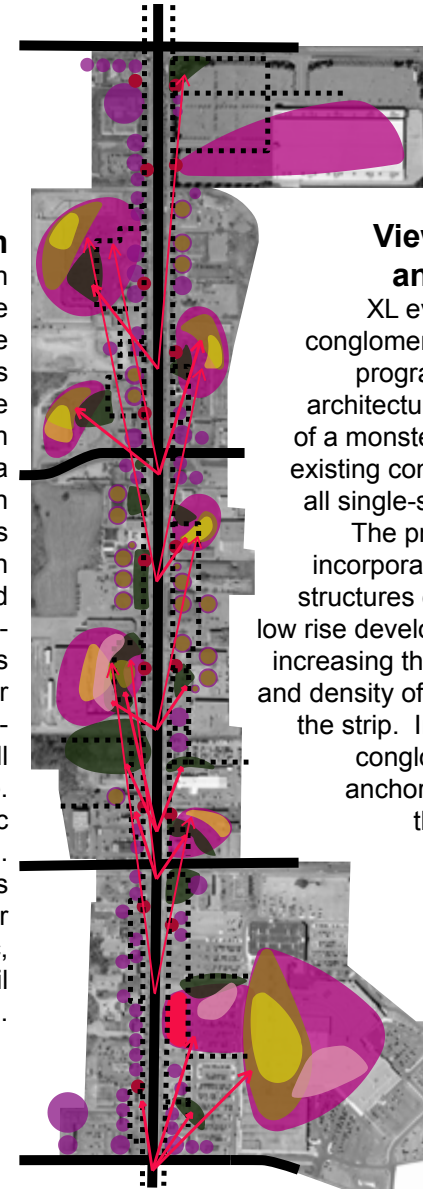
XL event space:



Urban Path System

A series of pedestrian pathways are woven into the existing parking lots with the use of stone pavings. Parks and other civic programs are incorporated along this path system, thus, creating a secondary movement pattern over the existing, which was stimulated only by the location of stores, restaurants and malls. The addition of a secondary series of civic programs densifies the strip with another scale of existence. The pedestrian, cyclist, or transit rider will be better integrated into strip.

This has great economic ramifications as well. Reduced parking is replaced by higher pedestrian traffic, thus, greater retail possibilities.



Views, Rhythm, and Sequence

XL event spaces are conglomerates of multiple programs which have architectural ramifications of a monster building. The existing conglomerates are all single-storey buildings.

The proposed version incorporates high density structures onto the existing low rise developments. Thus, increasing the visual interest and density of buildings along the strip. In turn, these XL conglomerates act as anchors at each of the three sections of the strip.

Architectural Initiative:

Hybrid

As a mobility space, the Hespeler Strip is experienced in motion. Currently, the main audience consists of drivers and passengers. Thus, the scale of lighting and public furniture (mainly signs) are often large and located high above the ground. To transform this vehicle oriented design into one that integrates the pedestrian, the cyclist or the public transit user, several different types of hybrid public furniture are proposed. Hybrid of the two extreme scales that are so prevalent on the existing strip into the design of public furniture (Highway lighting w/ pedestrian light; pedestrian bridge & wayfinding signage & Cambridge history/gallery; bus shelter/coffee shop/city information kiosk)

Scale

Spatial Sequence and Rhythm are achieved with the re-organization of signage. Sizes of public furniture constantly oscillate from large to small. Thus, one can understand the organization of the strip through the location of pedestrian bridges and taller structures at the major intersections. While smaller and denser elements: signage, lighting, benches and bus shelters create another rhythm that may change over time within the larger order of the strip.



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