

DICKERMAN PARK: ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

Dickerman Park is an exciting collaboration on a forgotten public space along the busiest avenue (University) connecting Minneapolis and St. Paul. The park, donated to St. Paul in 1910, has never functioned as a viable public space and today serves as a parking lot, service area, and front yard for businesses along a quarter mile stretch of street. The redesign of this space looks to the surrounding neighborhood and its rapidly changing identity for inspiration as well as to the 100 year old oak trees dotting the site. Emphasizing temporal qualities and the neighborhood's diverse population, the park will employ photography, in different forms, as a generator of surface texture, night lighting, perceived movement, and as an evolving documentary of University Avenue. A successional planting of oak trees mimics the changing nature of the avenue while ensuring that the park always has an iconic stand of multi-generational oaks.

**ABSTRACT**

## Landscape Architect's Role

This project was initially introduced as an invited Request for Proposal in December, 2004. The landscape architect selected and collaborated with a locally based, nationally recognized documentary photographer on the RFP. The Dickerman Park redesign was awarded to this team in March, 2005. The landscape architect is responsible for all design decisions including design visioning, conceptual design, and design development. The landscape architect and photographer developed a strong dialog regarding site and imagery, working together to establish design direction and parameters for how photography is meaningfully integrated into an urban public park. This dialog sparked a myriad of ideas, many of them working their way into the design. In addition to leading the design process and collaboration, the landscape architect also lead a group of key public and private stakeholders through the design process culminating in the enthusiastic public endorsement of this innovative and unusual park plan.

## Project Scope

Dickerman Park is a curious urban park in Saint Paul, Minnesota adjacent to University Avenue, a major transportation corridor linking the two downtowns of Minneapolis and Saint Paul. The long thin blocks comprising the park are barely one-hundred feet wide and currently serve as unassuming front lawns to businesses along the Avenue.

Dickerman Park has an interesting and nearly forgotten past. In the late 1800's the City of Saint Paul embarked upon an early redevelopment of the industrialized avenue with the intent to remake University into a Midwest version of the Champs-Élysées, complete with wide boulevards, gardens and art. Although the dream was never realized and University Avenue continued to develop as a key piece of industrial and transportation infrastructure, Charles Dickerman, a 19th Century entrepreneur, donated this parcel of land to the city in 1910 for 'park and parkway purposes'.

Almost one-hundred years later, the landscape architect's and artist's intent is to recapture pieces of the early dream for University Avenue through a redesigned Dickerman Park that is a marker and barometer of the social diversity, change, and urban evolution occurring on University Avenue today.

## Design Solution

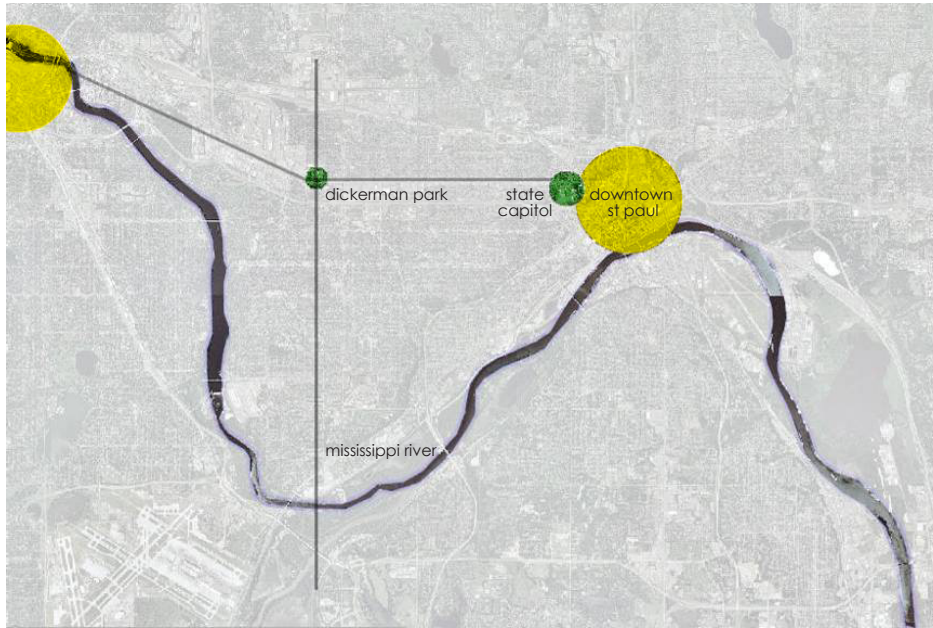
The dominance and vibrancy of University Avenue permeates Dickerman Park. The park's long awaited design reflects the energy of the avenue through its varied textures, programmatic elements, playfulness, and celebration of the intense diversity characteristic of this part of St. Paul. Because the park is so long and thin, mimicking the street, the linear nature is emphasized with one grand gesture both new and old. A strolling promenade stretches from west to east through the park lined with an alley of native Northern Pin Oak trees and grounded on the south by a long band of Minnesota's favorite native grass: Little Bluestem. Emerging from the Little Bluestem are over thirty larger than life illuminated panels with poignant images featuring members of University Avenue's diverse community. The panels have an intense truthfulness to them as they document the ever-changing University Avenue. The Oak promenade emphasizes both length and time with its linearity, multi-generational stand of oaks, and the artist's vision about city, place and community.

Currently, an iconic stand of 100 year old White and Burr Oak trees dot the site, forming a large part of Dickerman Park's current identity. Celebration of the existing oaks is essential. Underneath each large oak tree is a low, brightly colored, highly textured perennial garden. These oak gardens run perpendicular to the street and the oak promenade; they are a first step in developing an east/west spatial rhythm for the park. The spatial rhythm and its perception are important. People will experience the park from many vantage points – the car, the future LightRailTransit, and by foot or bicycle. A dynamic and engaging reading of Dickerman Park is critical at all scales.

The east and west ends of the park are capped by open plazas embracing the street and offering early views into the park. At the west end University Avenue's bend towards Minneapolis, a response to the area's first railroad, truncates the Entry Plaza. This exposes it to the street, and creates a great place to watch traffic, catch a bus, and filter into the park. The east end, The Grove, is a quieter space. It is exposed to the street yet protected by an airy canopy of Honey Locust trees and filled with flexible seating and photographs. These two park edges are the first and last place that one experiences larger than life documentary photographs of area residents as a permanent part of Dickerman Park.

Dickerman Park is comprised of two long blocks, while on the south side of University two additional streets intersect the avenue. Two large gathering spaces are located at the terminus points of these intersections. The West Plaza is a playful space composed of a large textured paving pattern like a large carpet rolled out from building façade to street edge. It contains flexible open space, seating, trees, and a grid of water jets for both children and adults. The backdrop to this scene is a series of three illuminated walls with abstracted imagery relating to Dickerman Park and University Avenue's past. At the mid section of the east block, the Café Plaza is a more serene space with flexible seating, tables and chess beneath another airy grid of Honey Locusts. This plaza also houses two structures: a café/gallery and a working automatic photo booth. The café includes a neighborhood coffee house and a gallery for Dickerman Park's revolving art. Every five years a new artist will be invited to document the Avenue and the previous artist's work will be housed in this photographic archive of the community. The photo booth offers a way for area residents and visitors to take their own photographs within the park. Digital duplicates of the booth's photos will be captured and displayed in a series of three walls within the plaza.

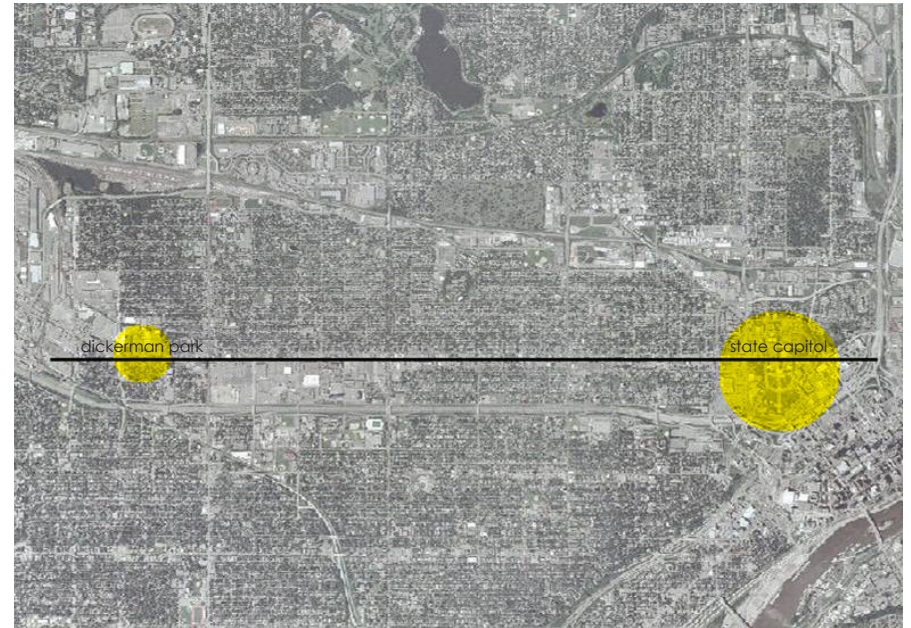
All of these elements, ideas about community, movements, claimable spaces, and continual documentations meld together creating an unusual urban park plan very much about chronicling and celebrating this specific place on University Avenue in St. Paul for coming generations.



Dickerman Park is located at the northeast corner of University and Fairview Avenues in Saint Paul's Midway neighborhood. The park is well positioned at the head of the first major urban bend of the Mississippi River; the river demarcates the boundary between Minneapolis and St. Paul. The park is also equidistant from both downtowns.

Yellow highlights downtown Minneapolis and St. Paul.

Green highlights Dickerman Park and the State Capitol grounds.



As University Avenue is a major transportation and industrial corridor it lacks significant green infrastructure. Dickerman Park and the State Capitol grounds are the two significant open spaces book-ending a four mile stretch of strip retail, Hmong and Latino storefronts, light industrial and odd remnant patches of early 20th Century homes.

Paralleling University Avenue to the south, Interstate 94 cuts through what was once a vibrant middle class African-American neighborhood.

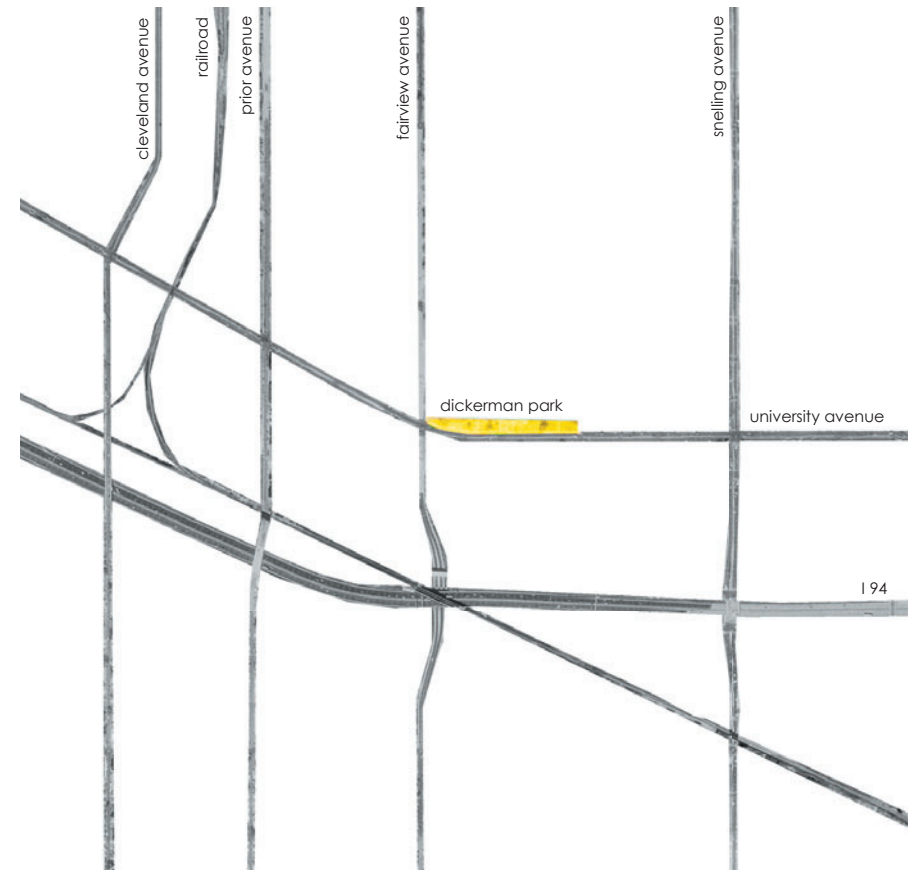
Yellow highlights Dickerman Park and the State Capitol grounds.





The park occupies a distinct edge between the larger-scaled fabric of industry and the more refined textures of single family residential and multi-family walk-ups. The boundary between these scales is the result of many factors, principally the importance of regional railyards to the west where flour, grains, and other rural commodities were shipped east via rail, and south on the Mississippi River.

Yellow highlights Dickerman Park.  
 Orange highlights residential-scale texture.  
 Green highlights other open spaces in the area.



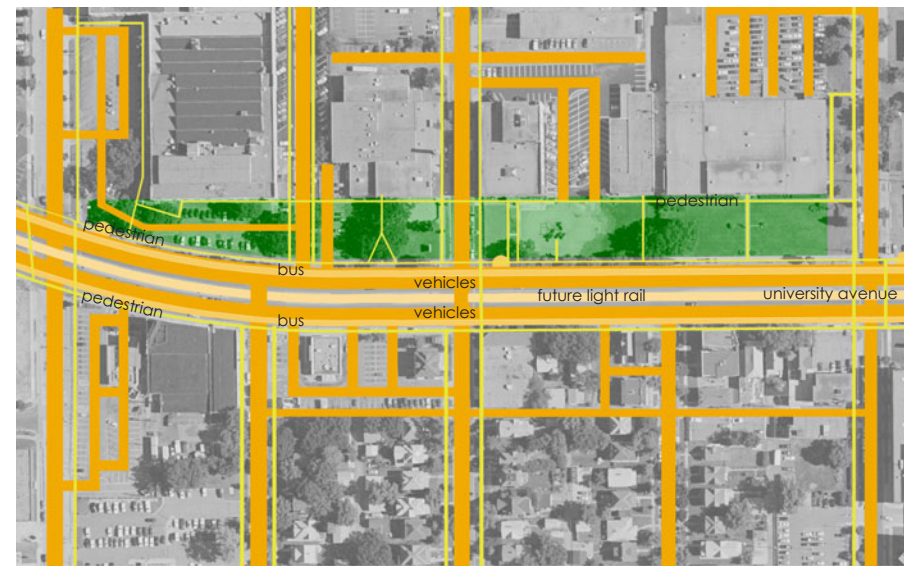
At the intersection of Fairview Avenue, University Avenue curves noticeably. Dickerman Park is located at the bend in the Avenue, the only bend along the entire length as the street moves through Minneapolis and Saint Paul. Looking at late 19th Century transportation maps (not shown), the bend of University mimics the position of early railroads between the two cities.

This significant location at the edge of industry and residential, infused with a rich transportation history, and sited at a critical bend on the Avenue lets the concept for Dickerman Park's redesign emerge from both past and current histories of the street. Future identities emerge as nascent redevelopment opportunities take hold and the re-introduction of light-rail street car service becomes a reality.



Dickerman Park is currently a front lawn defined by a chaotic mix of uses, multiple building scales, and a punctuation of mature oak trees.

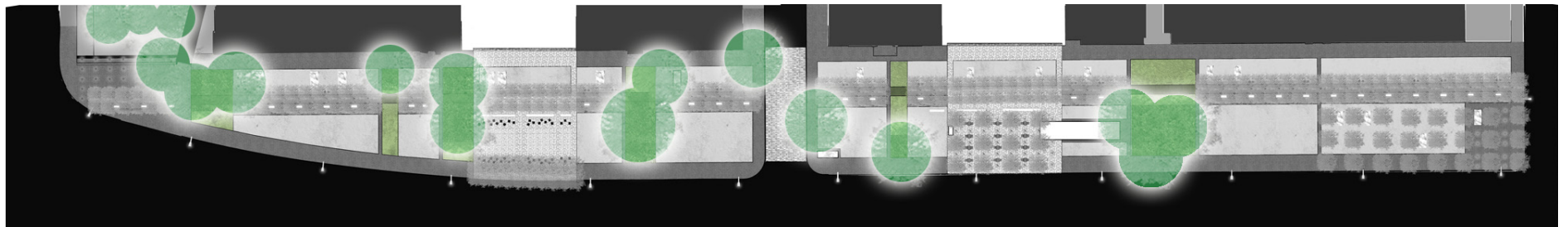
The structures on the north edge are large in scale and diverse in use and architectural style. They maintain a consistent setback, but at two locations along the park's length the edge bleeds significantly (highlighted by yellow circles), allowing the adjacent parking lots to critically impact perception of the park. Parking lots and automobiles dominate the western third of the space, while the eastern end presents a suburban corporate appearance and sits almost sixteen feet higher in elevation. The southern edge of the park is defined by intense traffic along University Avenue and contrasting smaller structures located across the street.



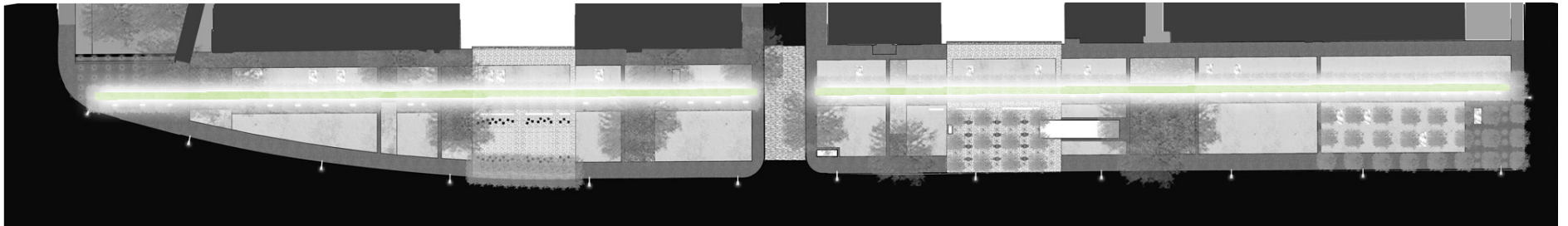
The past and future identities of University Avenue and Dickerman Park are linked to transportation and movement. Street cars once dominated public transit on this avenue and rail is being reintroduced, linking the downtowns, with a light-rail station planned for the University Avenue intersection at the west side of Fairview Avenue.

Vehicular traffic numbers in the tens-of-thousands per day. Pedestrian movement from the neighborhoods to University, and along the Avenue, is heavier here than in other parts of the city as up to twenty-five percent of neighborhood residents do not own cars.

This intense exposure of Dickerman Park from multiple transit modalities means that Dickerman Park's redesign must reveal itself at multiple scales from zero to fifty-five miles per hour.



A multi-generational stand of White and Burr Oak trees exist within Dickerman Park's boundaries. The oak trees are iconic. The trees are celebrated in the park's redesign through the planting of low-growing brightly colored gardens underneath each tree. The gardens span the park's width drawing attention to the oaks and beginning a dynamic rhythm of spaces perceptible from University Avenue.



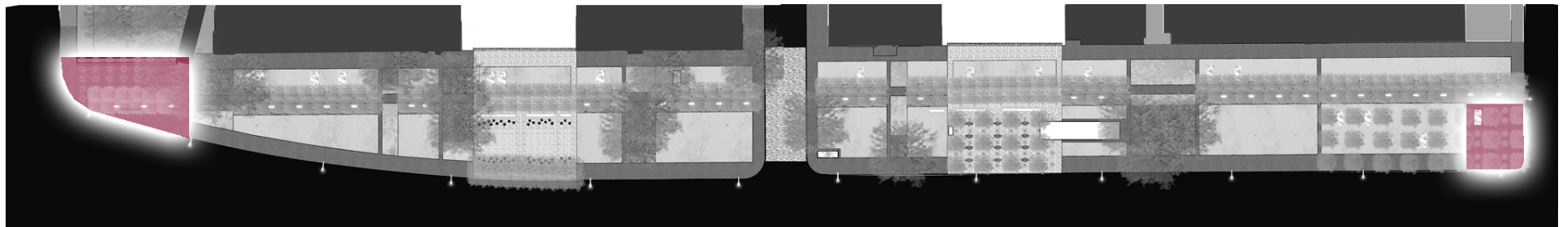
The design team strove to emphasize the unusual size of Dickerman Park and its relationship to the street by striking a long line down the park's axis. This wide walk, or promenade, is the park's spine and flanked by an allee of native Northern Pin Oak trees. These new oaks, with a highly structured form, offer a counterpoint to the existing oaks while assuring that Dickerman Park will have a multi-generational stand of oak trees for generations. On the south side of the walk a long band of native Little Bluestem grass reaches the length of the promenade. The photo panels emerge from the grass between the trees.



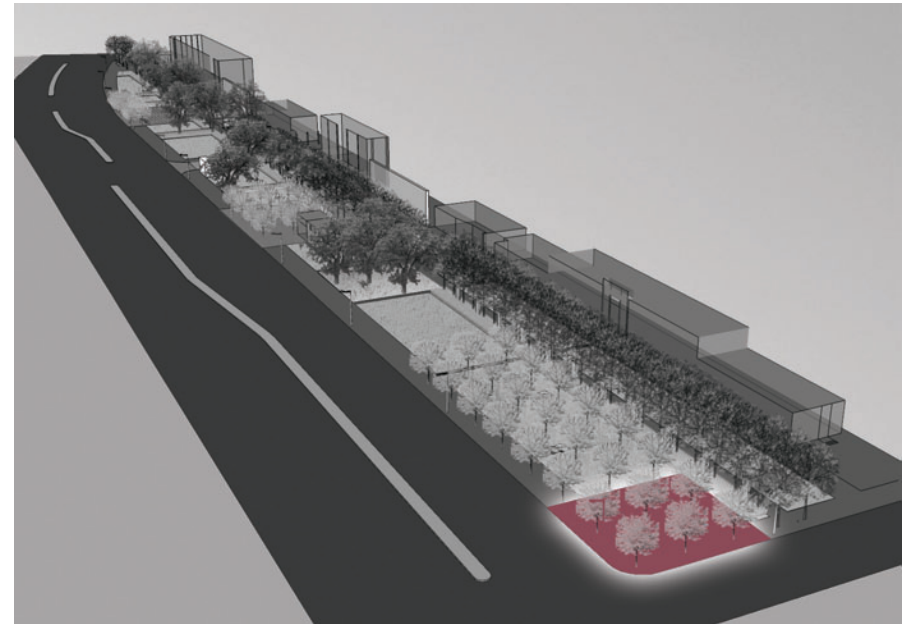
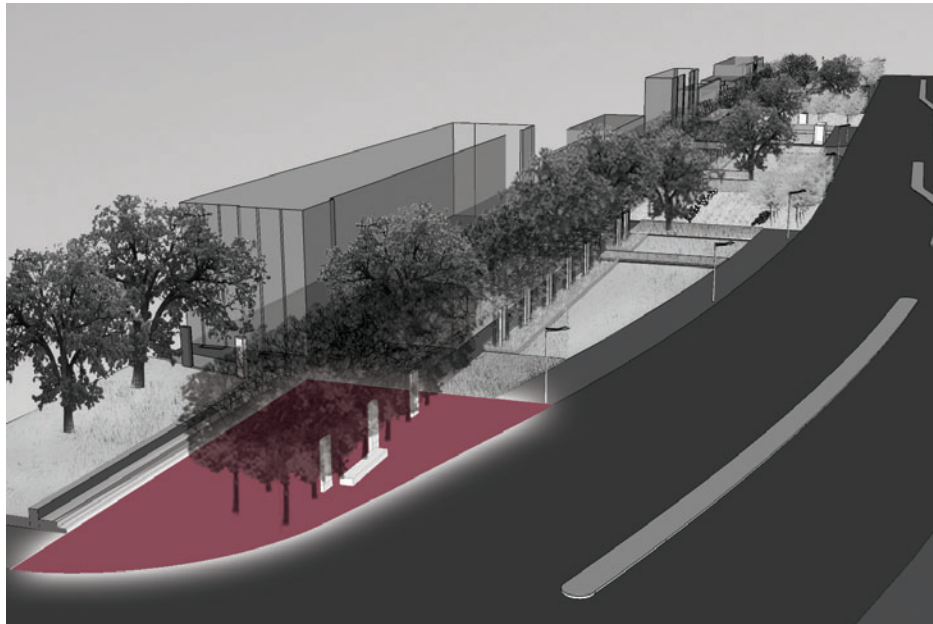


Looking east from the north edge of the park towards the Oak Promenade with Little Bluestem grass and community photographs. The photos shown in the perspective are from University Avenue.



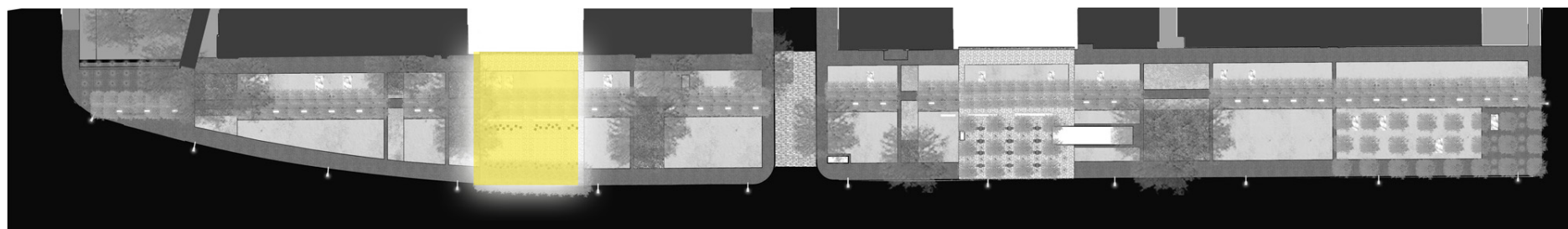


Two plazas demarcate the east and west edges of Dickerman Park. At the west edge the Entry Plaza is a highly visible and porous space with seating, a transit stop and photo panels. At the east edge The Grove also has good connection to University Avenue yet is sheltered by an airy canopy of Honey Locust trees. Both plazas, underlain by dark and quiet paving, represent clear transition zones from the busy avenue into the park. These two park edges are the first and last place that one experiences larger than life documentary photographs of area residents as a permanent part of Dickerman Park.



Entry Plaza at the west edge of Dickerman Park, looking east down University Avenue.

The Grove at the east edge of Dickerman Park, looking west down University Avenue.



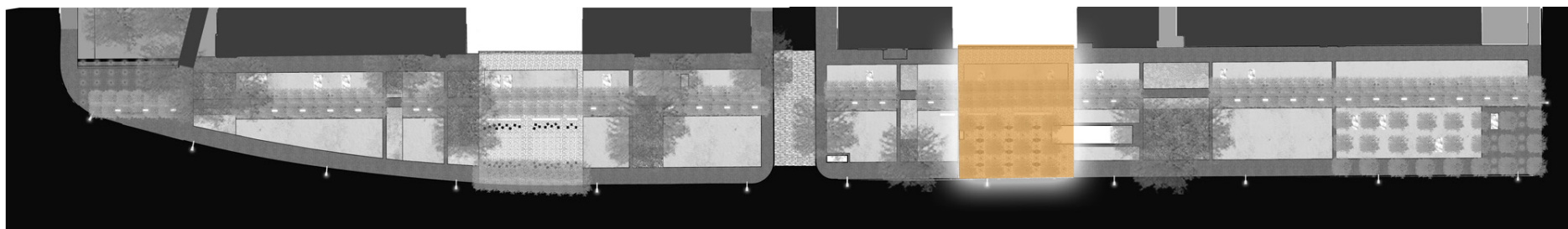
Located mid-block in the west half of the park, the West Plaza is a playful space composed of a large textured paving pattern like a large carpet rolled out from building façade to street edge. It contains flexible open space, seating, trees, and a grid of water jets for both children and adults. The backdrop to this scene is a series of three illuminated walls with abstracted imagery relating to Dickerman Park and University Avenue's past.





Looking east from the walk adjacent to University Avenue towards the West Plaza. This plaza will be a prominent gathering space for neighborhood families. The Dickerman Park and University Avenue history/image walls are the plaza's backdrop.



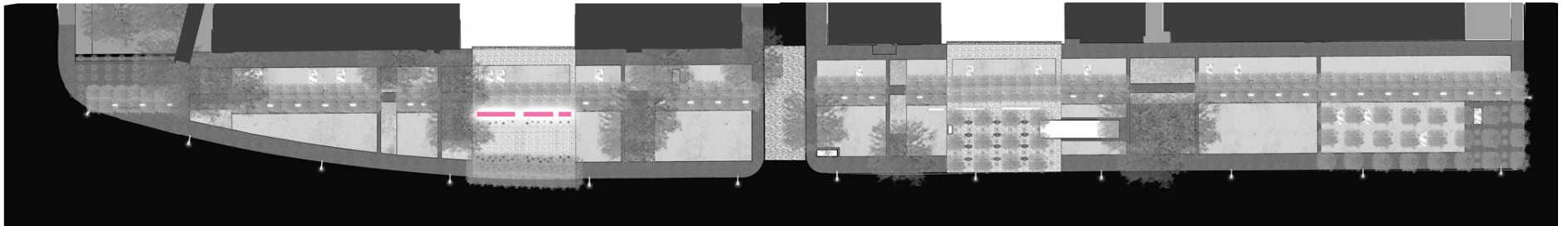


At the mid section of the east block, the Café Plaza is a more serene space with flexible seating, tables and chess beneath another airy grid of Honey Locusts. This plaza also houses two structures: a café/gallery and a working automatic photo booth. The café includes a neighborhood coffee house and a gallery for Dickerman Park's revolving art. Every five years a new artist will be invited to document the Avenue and the previous artist's work will be housed in this photographic archive of the community. The photo booth offers a way for area residents and visitors to take their own photographs within the park. Digital duplicates of the booth's photos will be captured and displayed in a series of three walls within the plaza.



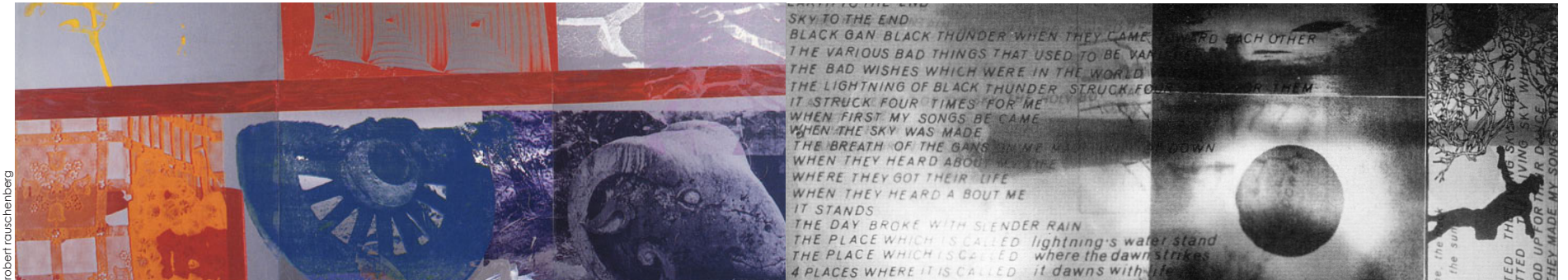
Looking east into the Cafe Plaza with the coffeehouse, photo booth and Honey Locust bosque.



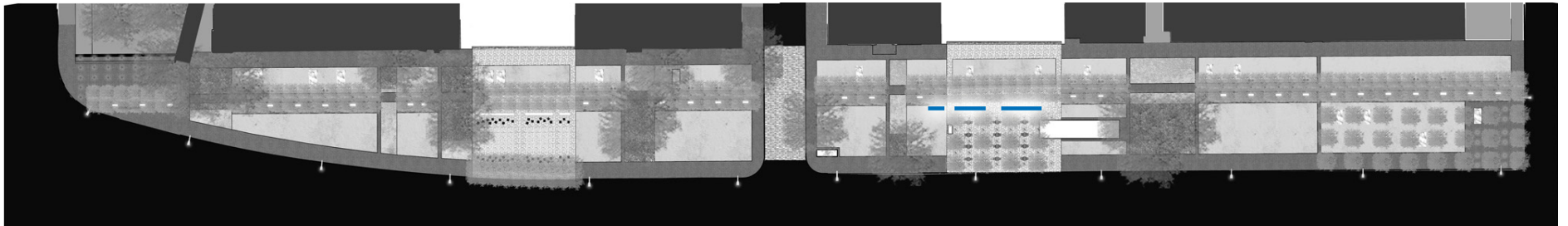


In the West Plaza, three large walls are a backdrop to the gathering space and grid of water jets. These walls may be constructed out of metal or glass and will be illuminated at night. An artist or artists will be commissioned to abstract the area's history and present it in a large scale format as colorful etchings, silk-screens, illuminated resins, etc. The design team feels it is important to showcase the past history of the area but to present University Avenue's history in a new way, stepping away from multitudes of compiled historic photographs with captions to something both emotional and fresh; history walls that empower people to take ownership of this space and the avenue's past.





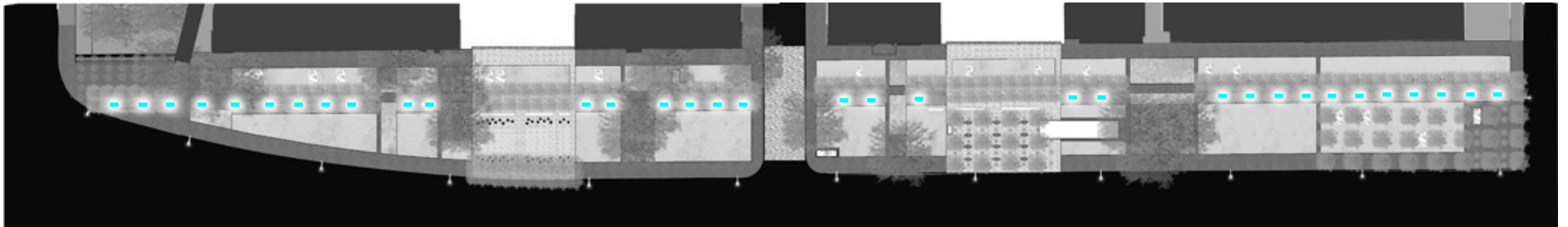
Precedent images for materiality and color of the West Plaza's walls. Silk-screened metal, both color or black and white are options for these walls. Illumination will happen through a series of perforations in the wall or by LED strip light wash from the bases of the walls.



As a striking counterpoint to the walls in the West Plaza, three large walls are also a backdrop for the Café Plaza. These walls will be constructed of glass or ecoresin and will be illuminated at night. Unlike the artist driven walls in the West Plaza and the photo panels in the park, these walls celebrate the community's multi-layered interpretation of itself. The walls will have a ribbon of display space running their length where digital duplicates of photos taken by residents and visitors in the photo booth, and other community photos submitted on-line, will be on rotating public display.



An elevation looking north of a possible display system within the glass walls of the Cafe Plaza. The design team is looking at both LCD/video display and paper photographs which could also constitute a hard-copy documentary to be archived with past photo panels in the plaza's gallery space.



Along the Oak Promenade emerging from the band of Little Bluestem are over thirty larger than life illuminated panels with poignant images featuring members of University Avenue's diverse community. Dickerman Park's images are taken by a well-known urban documentary photographer from the Twin Cities. As an important member of the design team the photographer meets the community subjects multiple times, often being invited into their homes. This intimacy is a catalyst for capturing portraits that offer an intense truthfulness about life in this part of the city. This truthfulness and pride regarding family, community and place is then transposed to the park. In public meetings the community has enthusiastically embraced this approach to place making in anticipation of sharing their stories and neighborhood with the greater public.





The photo panels, constructed out of eco-resin with the image imbedded into the resin, will take multiple forms. Two prototypes are being developed, one horizontal at eight feet by six feet, and one vertical format. Each panel will sit on a one to two foot high concrete base within the Little Bluestem band. The patterning of sizes and photo type (color or black/white) will be determined after the final photos are selected. Each panel will have a front and a back with the full image facing the Oak Promenade and an illuminated silhouette facing south towards University Avenue. The illumination and the rhythm will be perceptible from the street. The photos shown above are actual images from University Avenue taken specifically for the schematic phase of Dickerman Park's redesign.