

Project Name: Heart of the City

Location: Rochester, Minnesota

Entry Category: General Design

Description of the project: This project re-imagines a car-centric streetscape of two city blocks and a plaza as a new public realm aligned with the city's vibrant and diverse community. Proactive community engagement drove the success of this work: over 70 pop-up and prototyping events, one-on-one stakeholder meetings, artist sessions, and other engagement events captured a true understanding of the community's needs and desires for this project. The project pioneers a curbless street design, integrates dramatic public art installations from local and internationally known artists, and utilizes custom-designed accessible site furniture. Cutting-edge sustainability strategies promote greenery and reduce stormwater runoff and ice-melting salt usage.

Narrative

Project Scope

This project creates a world-class public realm for Rochester, Minnesota—home to the Mayo Clinic. This project re-imagines the car-centric streetscape of two city blocks and a plaza. The new public realm aligns with the city's vibrant and diverse community that welcomes millions of guests each year (Mayo Clinic patients and their families).

Our client, Destination Medical Center (DMC), is a non-profit organization implementing a \$5.6 billion, 20-year economic development initiative expected to generate 30,000 jobs. Heart of the City is Phase 1 of a public realm master plan.

Our Role

We were the landscape architect and design lead. We saw the project from design through construction administration, coordinated all stakeholder and community engagement meetings, and led the team of architects, engineers, and artists.

Design Solution

The project site is adjacent to the Mayo Clinic's campus with a mix of retail, hotels, and cultural centers. The existing site was challenging. The wide road was flanked with parking; most sidewalks were not ADA accessible; and there were no pedestrian gathering spaces. Constrained spaces, dominated by hardscape and minimal greenery, created a drab and unwelcoming experience.

We transformed this site through three main design processes:

Creative Community Engagement

Community engagement played a central part in understanding and addressing the needs of this project's user groups (residents and Mayo Clinic visitors), as well as other project stakeholders. The design team went beyond traditional engagement methods to meet the community on their terms.

During one of the first engagement sessions, we summarized the public's 12 core principles for the project. These principles became our guide for the overall project:

- Make It Rochester
- Make It About Life
- Embrace The North
- Make It A Destination
- Make It About Art
- Make It Bright
- Make It Big & Keep It Small
- Make It About Healing
- Make It Connected
- Reveal The Unseen
- Make It Inviting
- Make It Green

We used community sessions to get feedback on site elements—including the desire for a performance stage. The community felt our first mock-up (a full-scale terraced viewing stage) blocked too much of the plaza's viewshed. Through numerous design studies, we settled on the winning approach: a flexible bench system on rails that could be deployed as seating across the plaza or re-arranged to form a stage.

All told, we held over 70 individual engagement sessions, including 35 one-on-one meetings with business and property-owners, 12 open house and art & design events, 12 pop-up events, 11 prototyping events, and 3 DMC lobby discussions.

Make It About Art

The community wanted to create a place that captures the imagination of everyone who visits this unique city. With the help of an art curator, we were able to integrate public art through a balance of local and internationally renowned artists.

Peace Plaza celebrates life, death, water, and light. The project acknowledges the history of this site as Dakota land through Ann Hamilton's artwork *Song for Water*, which embeds Dr. Gwen Westerman's poem *De Wakpa Tan̄ka Odowaŋ / Song for the Mississippi River* into a 200-foot-long plaza. Eric Anderson's "Wakefield" consists misting jets along the length of the plaza and is actuated by Mayo Clinic data: emitting mist for every first and last breath (representing birth and death).

The Peace Sculpture predates our work, but we redesigned the plinth so people could stand closer and view the sky through the structure of overlapping doves. This sculpture informed Inigo Manglano-Ovall's piece, "Not So Private Sky". His artwork creates a vertical element made of reflective materials that offer visitors another way of experiencing the sky.

A Healthy Place for People and Nature

Universal design was incorporated throughout this project. A Mayo Clinic ADA specialist advised on cutting-edge innovations and best practices. Emphasis was placed on creating accessible circulation paths and site furniture—including custom wheelchair-friendly furniture and paving patterns that are easier for visually impaired people to navigate.

One of the community design principles is "Make it Green". We planted 117 street trees and worked with experts to ensure long-term tree health. Continuous soil volumes were placed under the forest rooms with soil cell systems. Pervious pavement in the forest rooms allows stormwater to percolate down to be stored in the cells. The use of heated sidewalks throughout the streetscape and plaza reduces the need for ice-melting salt—reducing stress on the trees.

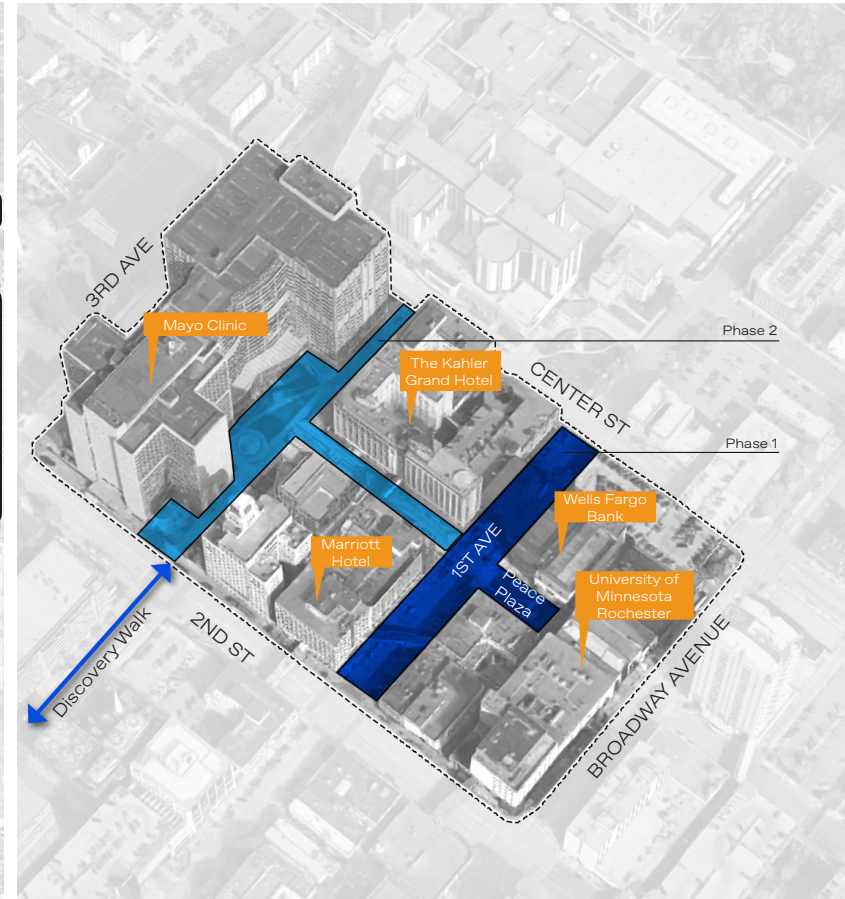
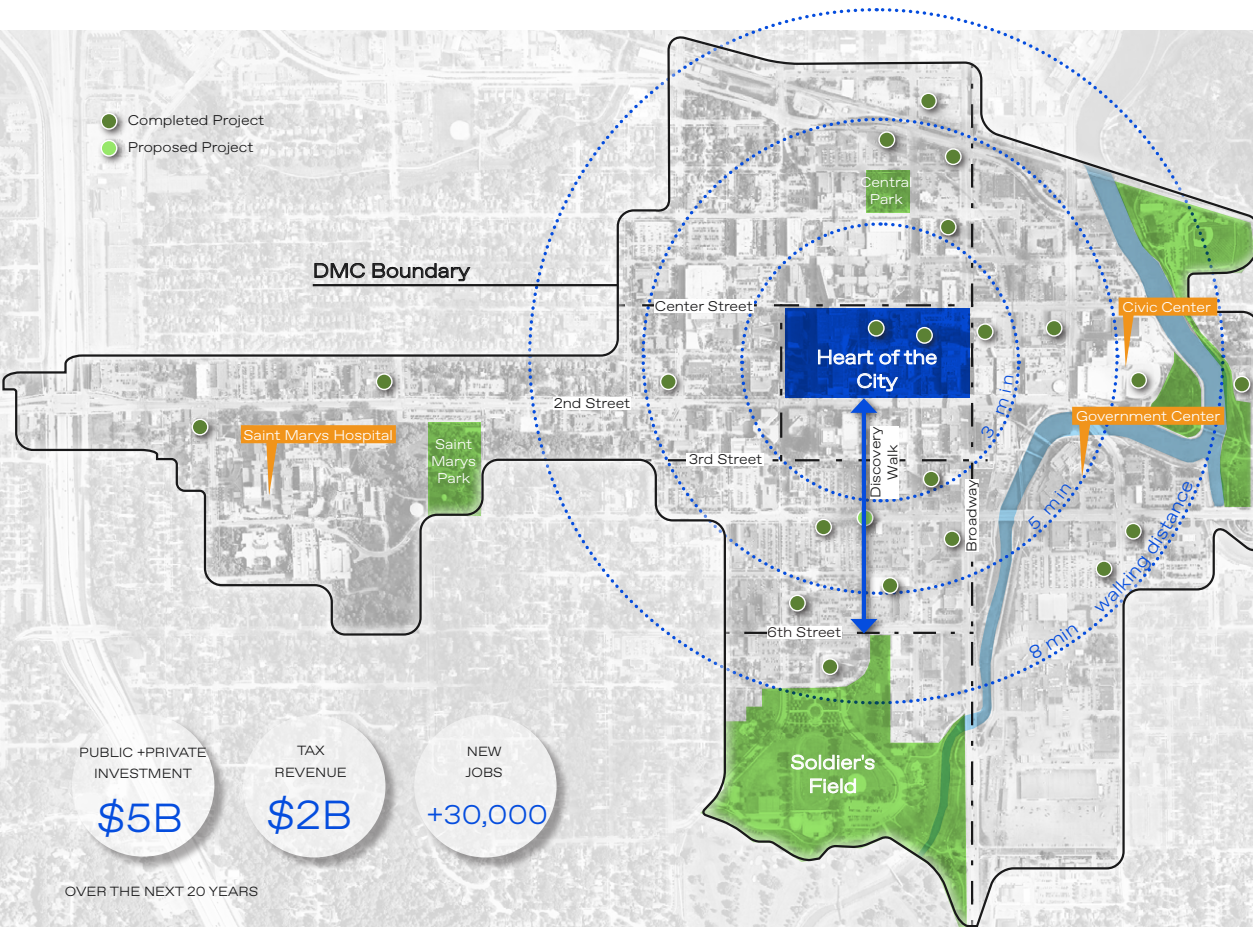
Unique Project Attributes

Flexibility Drives Activation Success:

Since opening May 2022, this project has fulfilled its main goal of elevating and activating downtown Rochester. Flexible programming space is the key to this success. As of the end of 2022, the plaza had held 100+ events, and averaged 2,500+ daily pedestrians.



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Heart of the City is the Phase 1 of a larger public realm master plan (completed in 2016) that will substantial invest in quality spaces for Rochester's residents and visitors to the Mayo Clinic.



4 Artist Talks



8 Open Houses



12 Pop-up Events



3 Activations



35 One-on-one Meetings with Business Owners



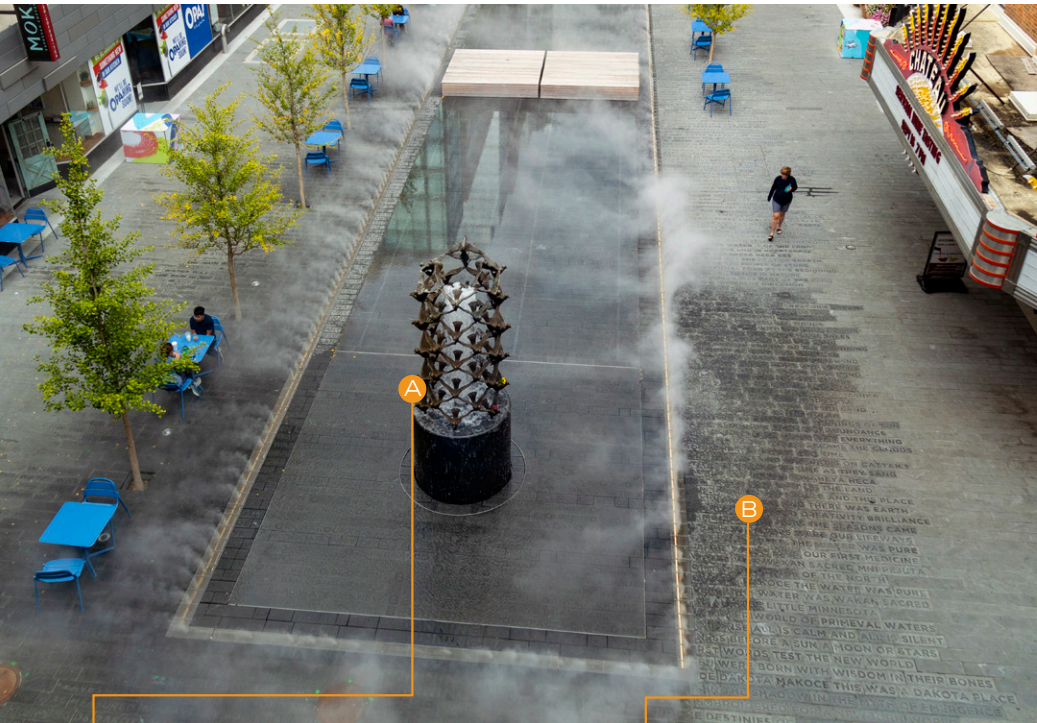
11 Prototyping Events



Integrated Art Pieces:

- A** Peace Sculpture by Charles E. Gagnon
- B** Song for Water / Song for the Mississippi River by Ann Hamilton, Dr. Gwen Westerman
- C** Wakefield by Eric Anderson
- D** A Not So Private Sky by Inigo Manglano-Ovalle

Site plan showing major design elements as well as several public art pieces located throughout the project.



A Peace Fountain (1989)

Charles Eugene Gagnon (Rochester, MN)

Re-positioned with a raised pedestal above the water, allowing people to see the sky through the doves and water.

B A Song for Water

Ann Hamilton (Columbus, OH) and Gwen Westerman (Mankato, MN)

A collection of pavers with words and phrases carved into them, weaving concepts of time, geography, place, and the beginnings of human cultures.



C Wakefield

Eric Anderson (Rochester, MN)

Light and fog honor [the first and last breaths of life](#). The artwork activates in response to these health events occurring within Mayo Clinic.

D Not so Private a Sky

Iñigo Manglano-Ovall (Chicago, IL)

Vertical sculpture [pays tribute to the original Peace Fountain sculpture](#) and book end the plaza.

Detail on public art pieces incorporated into this project. The community prioritized the use of public art as an awe-inspiring element of this project. We worked with a curator to select a mix of local and internationally-known artists.



Substantial research was done to ensure that the pavers that comprise the scrim pool of Peace Plaza would meet universal design standards and would also up to the environmental considerations of being constantly submerged.



Left: detail of poem pavers. Right: larger view across the plaza, showing the mist of Eric Anderson's "Wakefield" installation which consists of jets and is actuated by Mayo Clinic data—emitting mist for every first and last breath (literally representing birth and death).

Engagement Informed Plaza Design *Achieve Maximum Flexibility*



Master Plan

Public Feedback:
Remove terraced seating that's blocking
views to the Mayo clinic building



Prototype

Public Feedback:
Need more flexibility in the plaza



Constructed

Flexible stage that can be disassembled
and moved around to provide seating



Left: flexible site furniture configured as an event stage at the end of the plaza. Right: same site furniture deployed as benches, being used for seating as well as as miniature stages for a music and dance performance at the project's grand opening



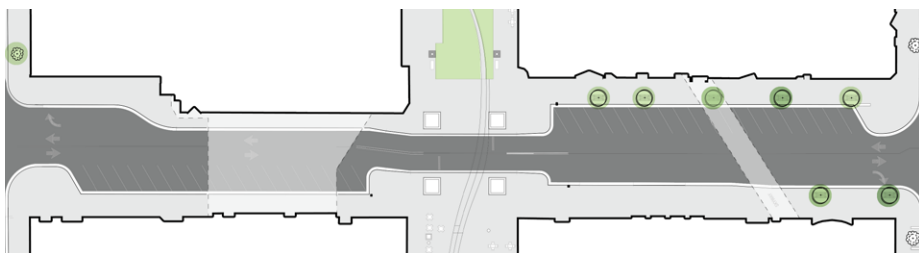
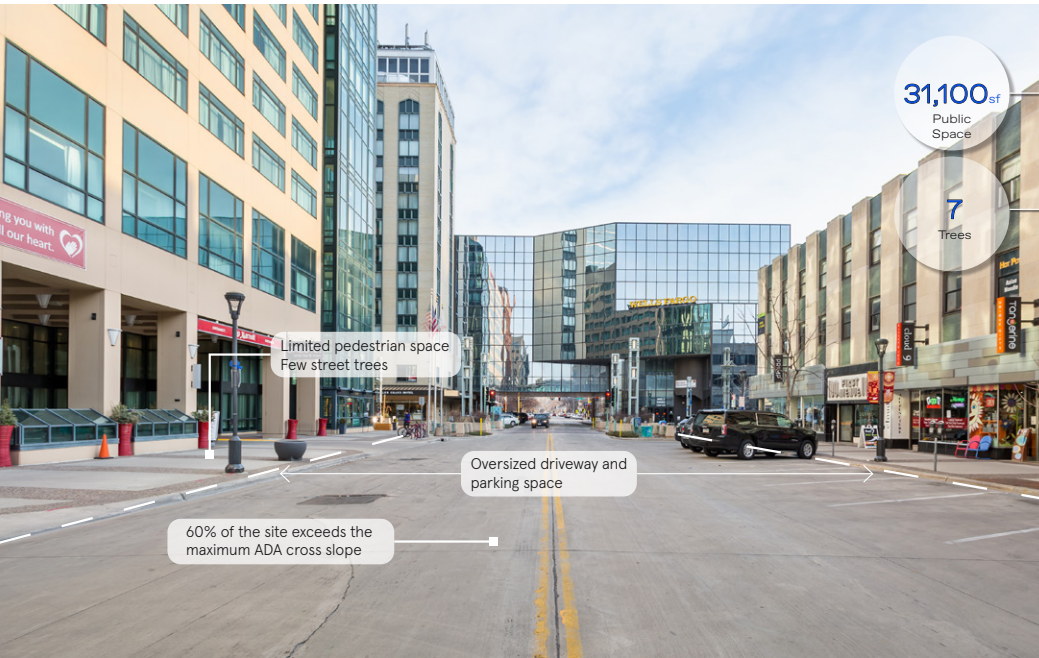
▲ Before



▶ After



▶ After



Before



After

Before and After view of streetscape: Dramatic transformation from car-centric drab street to curbless pedestrian haven, greened with 117 new street trees and punctuated by public art.

Engagement Informed Furniture Design *Addresses Universal Design*



Prototype #1

Public Feedback:
Too cold and sharp, lack color



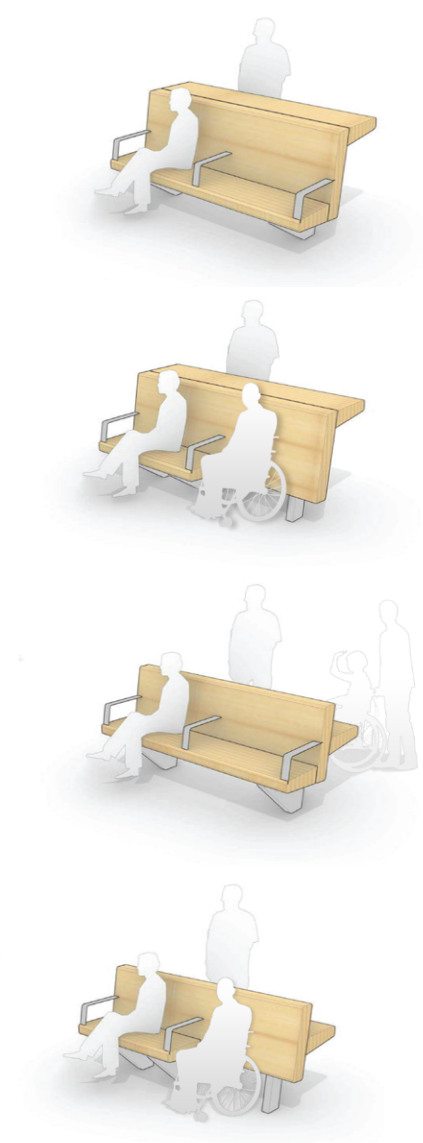
Prototype #2

Public Feedback:
Love the wood table top and seats



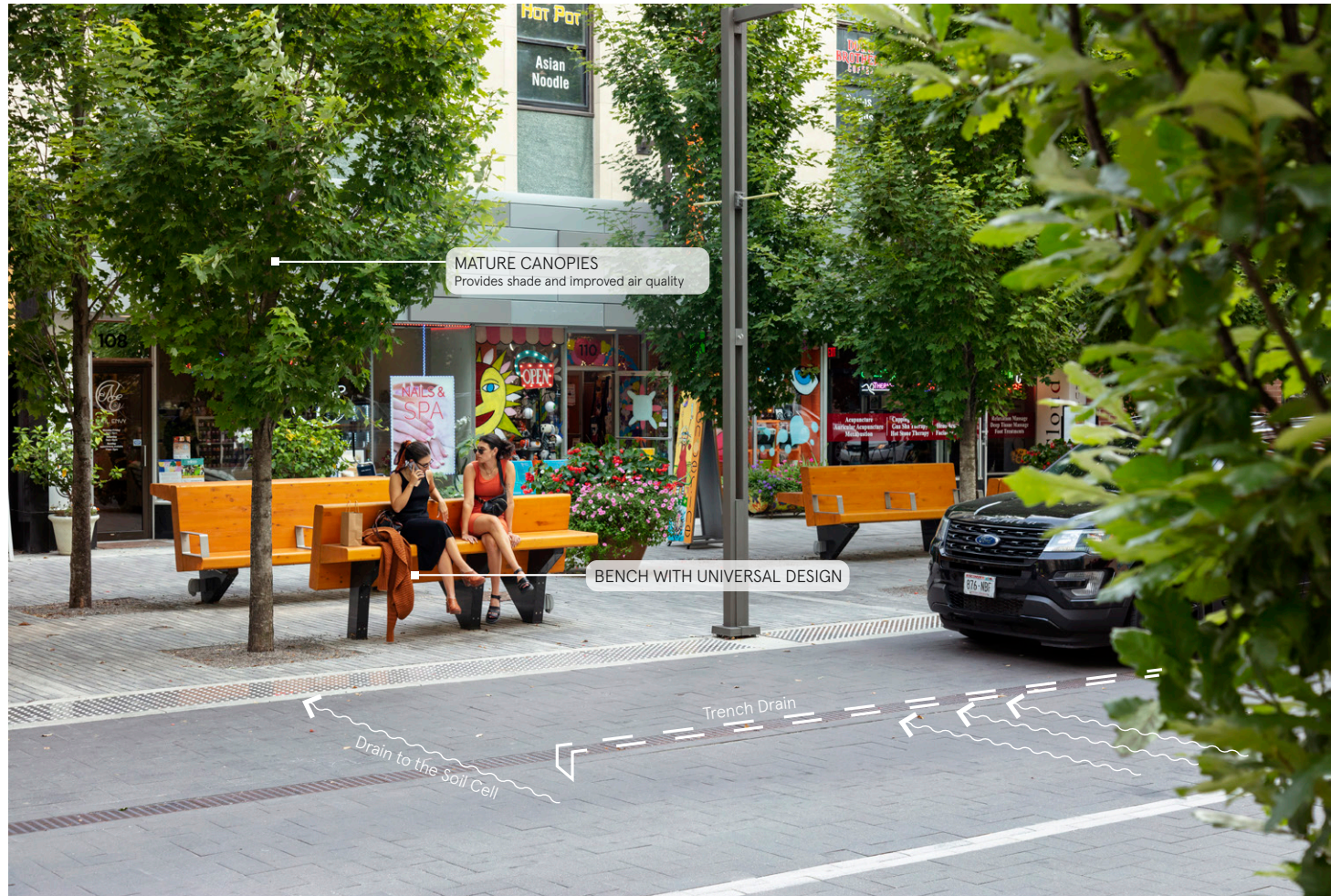
Constructed

Changed the back to wood





A view of one of the "forest rooms"—streetscape areas dominated by columnar trees and featuring custom-built benches. This view demonstrates the positive impact of the curbless street and also highlights the minimalist approach to stormwater management.



Illustrating the sustainable aspects of the streetscape design: stormwater drains to the continuous soil cells (irrigating the trees). Heated roadway and sidewalks reduces the amount of ice-melting salt needed, reducing stress on trees.



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