THE DNA OF AUSTIN

All cities are the result of pre-existing landscapes, actions of weather over time, the direct impact of human presence, jarring changes due to evolving technologies, and political and economic decisions regarding watersheds. Austin can be understood best through these same filters.

GEOGRAPHY

Austin, a product of rail traffic in the last century, is located at the southern edge of the Midwest. Its historical grid forms a city of blocks. By comparison, San Antonio, just 80 miles to the south, is rooted in the Law of the Indes and more closely resembles a European city. The differences between the two cities, which are so close in proximity, are enormous.

Austin is also located at the northern edge of the geographic span of Mexican cultural influence. It differs from surrounding Texan cities, as Dallas (to the north) portrays little of such influence, while San Antonio (to the south) is essentially a city of Mexican culture.

The most basic and formative cultural influences are from the “Old South.” Texas was primarily settled by westward migration, with healthy increments of Czechs, Italian, and primarily German immigration through the port of Galveston.

Finally, Austin’s popular culture has been greatly influenced by western U.S. states, such as California, since the 1950s. Residents have looked to these states for inspiration for fashion, cars, music, and even sprawl.

WEATHER AND LANDSCAPE

Austin is located at the western edge of the Gulf of Mexico Coastal Plain and on the Balcones Escarpment, at the eastern edge of the West Texas High Plains. Here, the cold air that sweeps down from the Rockies meets the warm, moist air drawn up from the Gulf, producing some of the greatest rainfalls in the U.S. The heaviest rainfall in U.S. history occurred in 1921 just 60 miles north of Austin in Thrall, where 36 inches fell in only 18 hours.

Austin occupies the eastern edge of the Texas Hill Country and extends into the Blackland Prairie. A clear line exists between the limestone base of cen-
tral and western Austin and the deep topsoils and clay to the east. Eighteen major creeks, some with vast floodplains, drain to the Colorado River, which flows all the way to the Gulf of Mexico. The geometry of these waterways has forever shaped and defined development patterns in Central Texas.

**COLORADO RIVER AND LADY BIRD LAKE**

Austin was first settled on the banks of the Colorado River, which has historically divided South from North Austin. While the Central Business District (CBD) and State Capitol Grounds were established on the north bank, the first permanent bridge (Congress Avenue) was not constructed until 1910. Major floods would wipe out bridges routinely, and large areas would flood from north of the river (around 6th Street) to the southern bluff line (Riverside Drive and Barton Springs Road). As a result, access between North and South Austin was very limited, and the latter was much slower to develop.

The Highland Lakes, a chain of seven lakes that extend over 127 miles, was created by damming in the late 1930s and early 1940s as part of a rural electrification program modeled after the Tennessee Valley Authority experience. The Colorado River flowed through Austin until 1961, when another dam was built to impound a cooling pond for the latest power plant. The resulting six-mile long lake, originally named Town Lake and renamed Lady Bird Lake in 2007, has become the single most defining feature of the urban landscape. The simple act of introducing this shared public space or “common ground” transformed what had been the historical barrier between North and South Austin by dissolving the political, cultural, and economic differences that existed between them.

**ONE RIVER, TWO HILLS, A UNIVERSITY, TWO CREEKS, AND A SWALE**

When the decision was made to build the permanent Capitol Building in 1876, it was brilliantly located on a high point, approximately 12 blocks north of the Colorado River. This location granted the dome visual dominance and allowed the most civic of all buildings in the state to face south, like all symbolic public buildings located north of the equator.

Congress Avenue, “the Main Street of Texas,” is a wide gracious avenue connecting the Capitol Building to Lady Bird Lake. It was constructed between the two creeks and along the path of a drainage swale, (the axis moving south from the hill between two ridgelines to the east and west). Congress Avenue has historically

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been the center of the social, economic, political and, to a large extent, the cultural life of Austin.

Next, the founding fathers of Austin looked north from the Capitol for a site suitable for a “university of the first class.” They located a second hilltop site to the north that existed on an axis 12.5 degrees off the original axis of Congress Avenue. This subtle shift of angle produced a collision of grids, creating visual intrigue as well as traffic chaos. The entire orchestra-tion of South and North Austin, the Colorado River, the two creeks and swale that is now Congress Avenue, the Capitol Building, and the University Campus gives Austin its form, its structure and, ultimately, its unique character.

At the heart of Austin, three Zones
Central Austin is remarkable, if not unique, in the fact that it is composed of three adjacent zones, which run from south to north: the CBD, the State Capitol Complex, and the UT Campus. While many cities have created rings of destruction around their core with industrial uses that leveled existing neighborhoods, Austin has little history of industrial land use to speak of, and its three-part center is surrounded by largely intact neighborhoods.

CBD
The CBD is typical of mid-size American cities, consisting of a near perfect grid of streets and commercial blocks oriented to the river. Nineteenth century walk-up buildings made from Austin Common Brick were largely replaced by mid-rise buildings equipped with elevators in the 1920s and ’30s. After World War II, the automobile pulled mercantile operations out of the CBD while banks, offices, hotels, and department stores replaced much of the remaining nineteenth century building fabric. During the 1970s, specu-

lative office buildings, with ground floor banks and law offices above, dominated the scene. At present, an aggressive policy agenda exists to develop 25,000 residential units within the next ten years. Currently, 5,000 of these units are already under construction or have been recently completed, while another 5,000 are being planned. With a few exceptions, the build-

ings are unremarkable, but their design carries little significance, as together they comprise a collective place unified by the street grid.

The State Campus
The second zone of Central Austin, the so-called “State Campus,” is the depressing result of a short blast of taxpayers’ money in the 1960s, which eradicated existing traditional neighborhoods (perfect models for New Urbanism) in order to build uninspiring, repetitive, and mono-cultural office buildings. This transition was performed practically overnight in an autocratic manner, with little forethought and no public involvement. This area, often referred to as “the black hole in the city,” is the greatest single problem of Central Austin’s built environment.

The UT Campus
The University of Texas Campus, on the other hand, is a bucolic, tree-covered network of automobile-free zone of seamless connectivity where 52,000 students and 20,000 faculty and staff enjoy one of the most supportive and accommodating environments anywhere. It is a place where a majority of the older buildings are distinguished and the trees are as much “the Architecture” as the buildings. The campus is spectacular.

Conclusion
Downtown Austin will continue to evolve, incorporating more residential units and mixed-uses as the city’s population increases and sustainable urban infill practices are implemented. The key to successful development is the preservation of the original grid. Without it, connectivity and walkability will be jeopardized at the expense of visionless development. The State Campus will remain a scale-less, inhumane, and inactive “black hole” until leadership emerges to cultivate mixed-use, walkable areas. This redevelopment will increase economic development, breathe new and authentic life into an existing blighted area, and reinvent the connectivity between the University and Austin’s CBD. Because of its visionary planning, strong leadership, historic preservation, and sustained and sustainable growth over 125 years, the University Campus should remain a great success that teaches us every day.
Above:
The “Three Zones” of Austin

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS CAMPUS

THE STATE CAPITOL COMPLEX

THE CENTRAL BUSINESS DISTRICT