COMMUNITY IDENTITY & PUBLIC PLACES

"Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody."

—Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*

Community Identity & Public Places CONTENTS

E7.3	**Introduction**
E7.6	**Goal CP1: Celebrate historic and cultural aspects unique to Normal and embrace those that continue to shape the community's identity in the future.**
E7.10	Strategy CP1.1—Protect and Promote Historic Elements that Contribute to Normal's Unique Identity
E7.11	Strategy CP1.2—Build Upon Existing Community Assets to Develop a Stronger Identity
E7.12	Strategy CP1.3—Embrace and Celebrate Cultural Diversity
E7.13	Strategy CP1.4—Nurture Leaders and Volunteers to Preserve and Promote Identity
E7.14	**Goal CP2: Utilize the public realm as a canvas to showcase Normal's identity and establish a strong sense of place.**
E7.16	Strategy CP2.1—Enhance Placemaking Efforts
E7.19	Strategy CP2.2—Showcase Normal as a Smart City Through Effective Use of Technology in Public Places
E7.20	Strategy CP2.3—Promote Public Art in All Aspects of Urban Design

A community's identity is its core element of being and expression, of uniqueness in a globalized world. It is visible in everything from local history and culture to favorite spots to grab lunch, annual festivals, architecture styles, and public institutions.

Normal's identity is strong and distinct, shaped by its history and unique local assets and by every member of the community. Normal is defined by a culture of lifelong learning; agricultural roots; family-friendly neighborhoods; a wealth of arts and entertainment amenities; a forward-thinking and sustainable approach to community development; and, in Bloomington, a similarly vibrant and prosperous twin city.

This chapter, then, is not about *creating* a community identity. Rather, it is about recognizing the identity that already exists and building on it through programming and urban design. It is about fostering *a sense of place,* a shared understanding of what makes Normal unique.

There are a number of things the Town can do to contribute to that understanding. Some will be subtle and may even be invisible, whether because they have no tangible, physical manifestation or because they involve preserving what we already have. Cataloging, preserving, and enhancing our historical and cultural assets; embracing and celebrating our diversity; and fostering community engagement and leadership all fall into this category.

Other measures will be more visible. In particular, the Town's role as a steward of public spaces allows it to have a palpable impact on our sense of place. Public spaces—streets, parks, trails, streams, public buildings—are where that sense is often strongest, because public spaces are used by everyone, together. We travel, mingle, relax, work, and demonstrate in our public spaces. They are where we connect with each other, a collection of individuals forming a community.

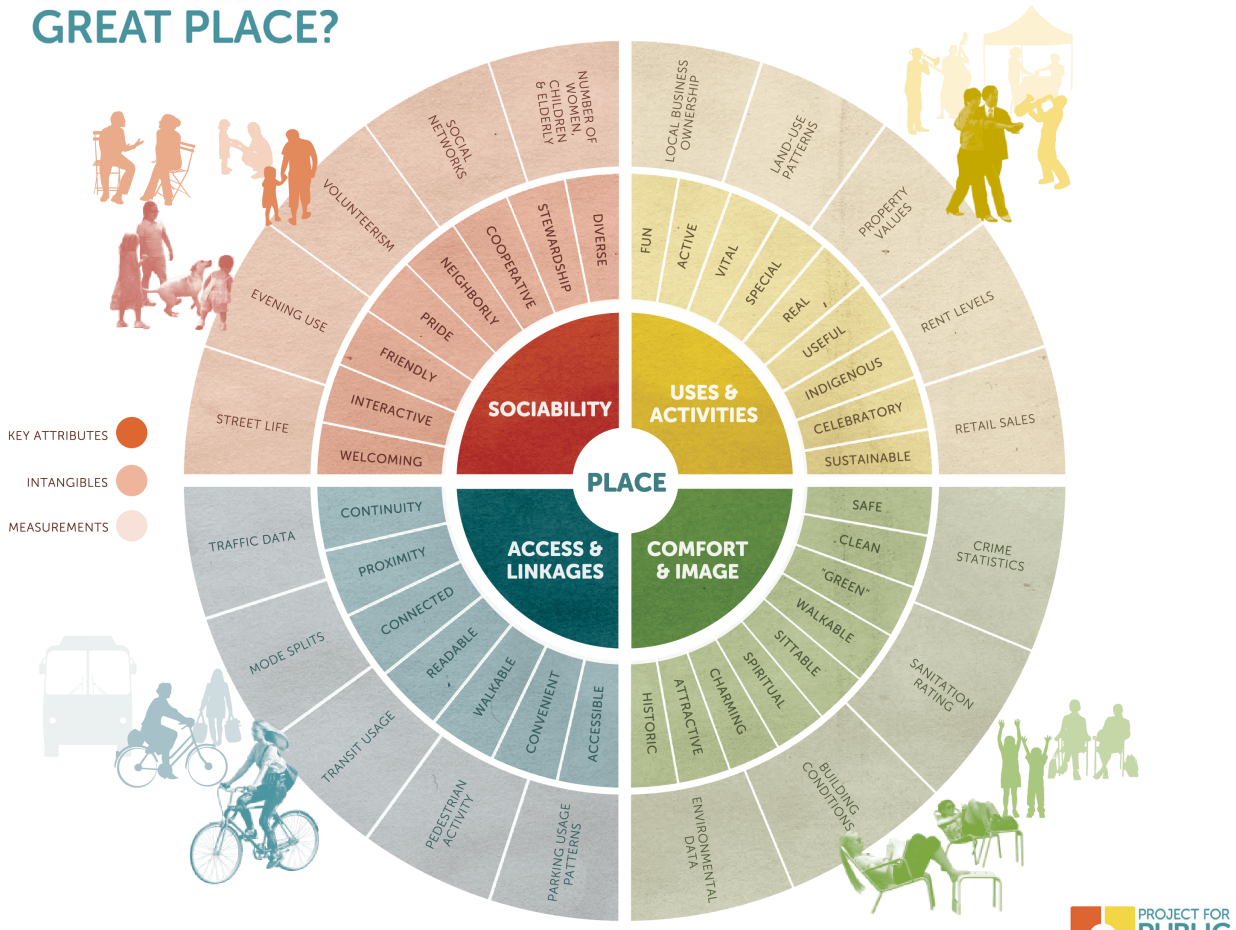
The image on the left looks south down Main Street at its intersection with Raab Road (a major gateway for the Town); the image on the right is from Brook Road in Richmond, Virginia. Without knowing that these two places are in different parts of the country, it becomes difficult to distinguish one from the other. Land use choices and urban design heavily influence the evolution of a community's identity.

Images source: Google Maps

Of course, not all public spaces make us feel a sense of place. Indeed, anonymous public spaces—bland, inoffensive "Anywhere USAs" that get the job done but could be swapped with any number of spaces across the country without major disruption—are a dime a dozen. But the best have a quality that is hard to define but easy to recognize—a sense that they are unique, rooted in their surroundings, the products of *this* community and none other. They both reveal and reinforce a community's identity. Normal is full of such places—Uptown Circle, Old North Normal, the Cedar Crest neighborhood, the Illinois State University (ISU) Quad, One Normal Plaza—that stand out as examples of thoughtful, timeless, sustainable design at a human scale. These did not happen by accident; they were designed by people working consciously to express, on these public canvases, the best of the Town of Normal.

This chapter is about building a one-of-a-kind community that we want to live in and show off to the rest of the world. By protecting our historic landmarks, celebrating and enhancing our cultural assets, and designing our public spaces to be memorable, interesting, appealing, and sustainable, we will encourage visitors to take a second look, and give residents one more reason to continue calling Normal home.

WHAT MAKES A **GREAT PLACE?**



PROJECT FOR PUBLIC SPACES

FIGURE CP1: What Makes a Great Place?

Great Places are:

Diverse—having a mix of land uses to attract people throughout the day and night and to include people of all abilities and incomes.

Engaging—invoking the senses, encouraging interaction between individuals and their environment, facilitating interactions among people.

Memorable—presenting unique elements and qualities that make a place easy to remember and worthy of additional visits.

Ongoing—planning and design of a place and its uses are always open to the public to contribute to and feel ownership in. Places are never "finished," they are always evolving.

Connection to the Vision

Core Value 1: Engagement. Ours is a resourceful and collaborative community that fuels civic engagement and inspires meaningful and generous contributions from residents of all walks of life.

Core Value 3: Spaces. Ours is an inter-related community visible through safe and accessible spaces that people love.

Core Value 5: Multiculturalism. Ours is an inclusive and welcoming community that celebrates our unique and diverse backgrounds, identities, cultures, and talents.

Core Value 7: Creativity. Ours is a creative community that promotes art and artists as an essential infrastructure and values art as a powerful process for bringing people—and ideas—together.

GOALS

GOAL CP1: Celebrate historic and cultural aspects unique to Normal and embrace those that continue to shape the community's identity in the future.

GOAL CP2: Utilize the public realm as a canvas to showcase Normal's identity and establish a strong sense of place.

Goal CP1: Celebrate historic and cultural aspects unique to Normal and embrace those that continue to shape the community's identity in the future.

A strong and healthy community identity can act as a driver for other elements of the community, like the local economy or the social cohesion between residents. It is not something that can be created or improved overnight. It must be nurtured over many years by all members of the community, developing and evolving through their use of public spaces. Understanding and celebrating this evolution is vital for it to continue and for Normal to achieve its vision for the future.

Positive Contributors

- Constitution and Route 66 Trails
- Uptown redevelopment efforts
- Illinois Soldiers' and Sailors' Children's School (ISSCS) site and buildings
- Illinois State University (ISU) campus
- Historic Districts
- Landmark Properties
- Parks
- Railroads

Challenges

- An east side versus west side mentality
- The dwindling of historical knowledge and loss of artisanship and skills regarding historical technologies
- The need for volunteers and champions when trying to begin a new project or implement a new program

Indicators and Metrics

- Analyze the spread of public events throughout the year to identify gaps and opportunities
- Establish demographic baselines for programming attendance, park usage, space reservations, etc. and track progress overtime

Partners

- Town of Normal Historic Preservation Commission
- Illinois Historic Preservation Agency
- Town entities like the Normal Theater, Children's Discovery Museum, and Connie Link Amphitheater
- Normal Public Library
- Uptown Partners
- Corn Crib
- Bloomington-Normal Convention and Visitors Bureau
- Illinois State University
- Heartland Community College
- McLean County Museum of History
- Conexiones Latinas de McLean County
- McLean County Indian Association
- National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)
- Unity Community Center
- Theater groups
- Marcfirst
- Special Olympics Illinois
- Normal Township Activity & Recreation Center

Community Identity and Cultural Assets in Normal

An appreciation for a community's identity is built on an understanding of its past, its present, and its vision for the future. Following is a brief inventory of the historical forces that shaped Normal's identity; elements of its current cultural character; and how Normal can continue to strengthen its identity into the future.

Historical Context for Normal's Community Identity

- **Agriculture:** Agriculture was a core economic driver in the development of the Town. Early businesses included artisan farms, orchards, nurseries, and gardens.
- **Education:** Education has been a pillar of the Town since before it was officially incorporated in 1865. Illinois State Normal University, for which the Town was named, was established in 1857 and renamed to Illinois State University (ISU) in 1968. Heartland Community College (HCC) and Lincoln College were also established in Normal towards the end of the 20th century.
- **Caring for Children:** Illinois Soldiers' & Sailors' Children's School (ISSCS) was established in Normal in 1865 as a home for orphans of those who died in the Civil War; it was the first public welfare institution for children in Illinois. At the beginning of the 20th century, The Baby Fold was established as a private entity in the community providing similar services. These two organizations served children through WWI, the Great Depression, and WWII. Service at ISSCS ended in 1979 but The Baby Fold continues to operate today.
- **Railroads:** Through Jesse W. Fell's diligence, railroads were routed through Normal to provide local agricultural businesses access to freight transportation throughout the Midwest.
- **Circus:** The circus has had a strong presence in Normal for the majority of the Town's existence. As early as the end of the 19th century, a large number of circus performers spent their off-season training months in the community. This tradition paved the way for the creation of the Gamma Phi Circus, the oldest collegiate circus in the nation, at ISU in 1929.
- **Route 66 Highway:** One of the original highways of the US Highway System, Route 66 ran through the heart of Normal on its way from Chicago to St. Louis. It became one of the nation's most famous roads due to its role in the westward migrations of the 1920s and 30s.
- **Twin Cities:** Since the Town's inception, Bloomington and Normal have been mutually influential. Outside of governmental functions, the two municipalities virtually merge into one community that works, lives, and plays without paying attention to the dividing line.

Normal Today

- **Small Town Feel with Big City Amenities:** Normal is a small town of approximately fifty-five thousand people but has many big city assets and amenities like universities, medical centers, museums, theaters, water parks, golf courses, retail centers, multi-modal transportation, and more.
- **Family-Friendly:** The community prides itself on being family-friendly with good schools and parks. Sports, recreation opportunities, and extra-curricular activities are highly valued.
- **Sports:** Sports tourism is a growing sector of the local economy, driven by the many sports teams and tournaments in the community.
- **Bike-Friendly:** There is an emerging biking culture encouraged by the Constitution Trail, the Route 66 Trail, the new Bike Share 309 program, and local bike advocacy groups. The League of American Bicyclists recently awarded Normal the Bronze Level designation as a Bike Friendly Community.
- **Striving for Sustainability:** Uptown Circle and the surrounding buildings were among the first projects to achieve Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Neighborhood Development plan certification. Uptown South is taking the Living Communities Challenge to guide redevelopment efforts in that area.
- **Diverse:** The community features increasing ethnically diverse and foreign-born populations, people of all age groups and abilities, and a growing support network for LGBTQIA individuals.
- **Local Food:** Assets like community gardens, a food forest, local breweries, a co-operative grocery store, and farm-to-table restaurants are at the forefront in creating a local food system in the community.
- **Performing Arts:** Theater productions like the Illinois Shakespeare Festival have become cultural mainstays and the Connie Link Amphitheater hosts a variety of musical and dramatic stage events each year.

Normal 2040 will:

- Preserve and *Celebrate its History*
- *Embrace its Existing Assets*
- *Showcase its Identity in Public Places*
- *Create Unique Places and*
- Effectively *Utilize Technology to transform Public Places*

Aerial View of Normal Corn Crib

Image Courtesy BN Area Convention and Visitors Bureau

Strategy CP1.1—Protect and Promote Historic Elements That Contribute to Normal's Unique Identity

CP1.1a Enhance Historic and Cultural Preservation Efforts

CP1.1b Continue to Promote Route 66 as a Historic and Cultural Corridor

Strategy CP1.2—Build Upon Existing Community Assets to Develop a Stronger Identity

CP1.2a Facilitate Creation of Unique Places

Strategy CP1.3—Embrace and Celebrate Cultural Diversity

CP1.3a Bring Life to Public Places with Events and Programming

CP1.3b Ensure That the Visual Cues in Public Rights-of-Way Are Multicultural, Inclusive, and Welcoming

Strategy CP1.4—Nurture Leaders and Volunteers to Preserve and Promote Identity

Image courtesy of ISU Milner Library

Strategy CP1.1—Protect and Promote Historic Elements that Contribute to Normal's Unique Identity

CP1.1a—Enhance Historic and Cultural Preservation Efforts

- ☐ Emphasize preservation of historic buildings, neighborhoods, districts, and other historically significant physical features.
- ☐ Compile and maintain a comprehensive database of artistic, cultural, and historic assets and resources throughout Normal. The Town can partner with ISU Milner Library, McLean County Museum of History, and McLean County Regional Planning Commission (MCRPC) on this effort. (Q)
- ☐ Build upon the vast repository of people, places, and things celebrated during the various Normal 1-5-0 events held in 2015 to honor Normal's sesquicentennial. (Q)
- ☐ Support the development of a local food system to help revive Normal's agricultural roots. *[See Economic Vitality Element for more information.]*
- ☐ Collaborate with local and regional partners to leverage historical attractions via traditional and non-traditional formats such as themed events and walking or biking tours.

CP1.1b—Continue to Promote Route 66 as a Historic and Cultural Corridor

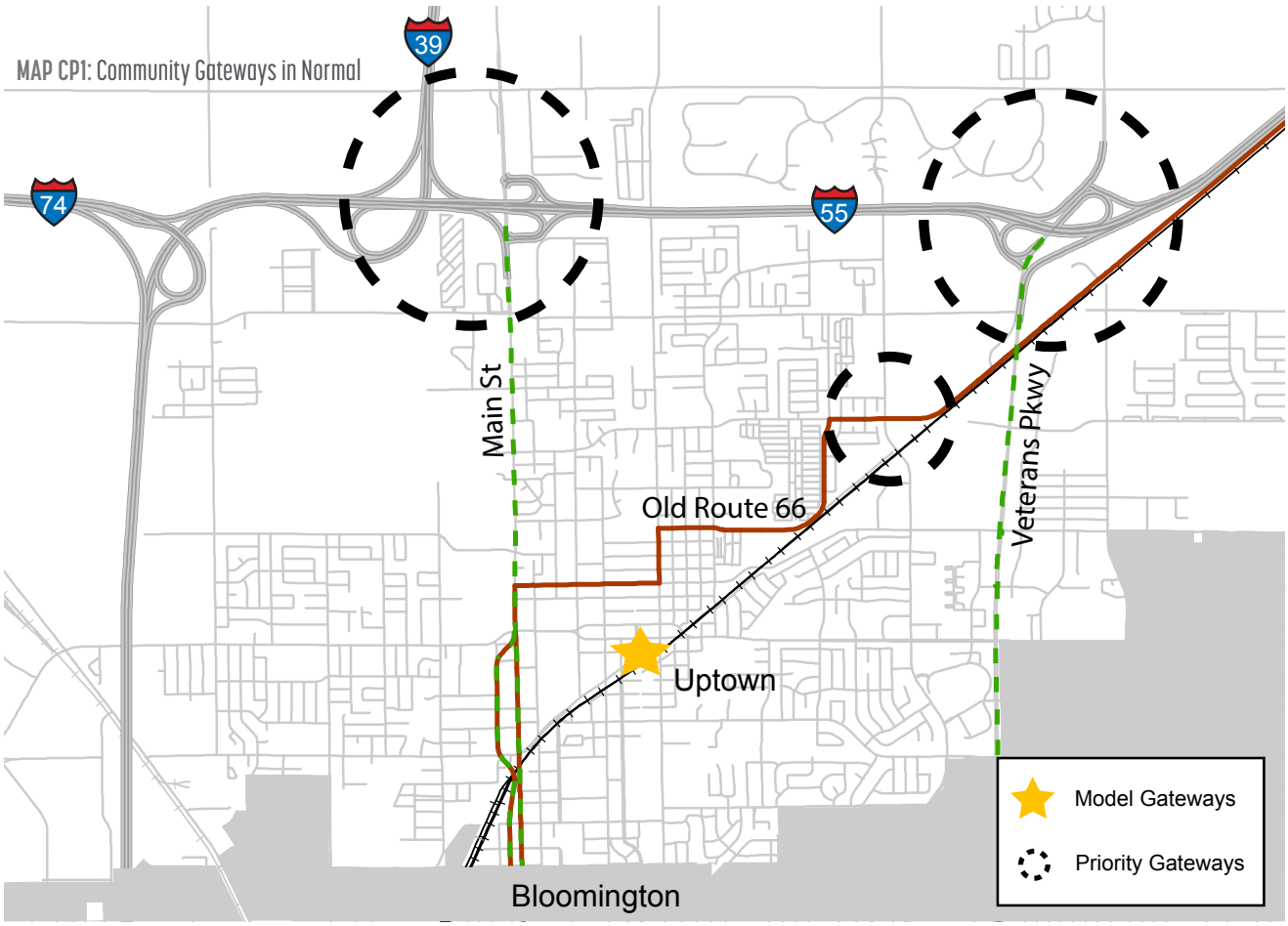
[See Cultural Corridors in the Corridors Chapter of the Planning Framework Section.]

Host to the ISSCS historic buildings, a public park, a food forest, Heartland indoor theater and community spaces, a school, and several commercial uses, the One Normal Plaza area is one of Normal's most unique places.

Strategy CP1.2—Build Upon Existing Community Assets to Develop a Stronger Identity

CP1.2a—Facilitate Creation of Unique Places

- ☐ Continue developing Uptown as a center for art, entertainment, learning, transportation, sustainability, and technology.
- ☐ Establish the proposed Innovation District to act as a regional epicenter for education, medical services, art, sustainability, and technology.
- ☐ Develop and program Normal's portfolio of parks and recreational facilities in a manner that gives each one its own unique identity.
- ☐ Pursue a public-private partnership for the ISSCS campus and surrounding One Normal Plaza parkland to make improvements that underscore and celebrate the historic and cultural heritage of the area.
- ☐ Enhance bike, pedestrian, and transit connections to the HCC campus.
- ☐ Partner with MCRPC and the neighborhood groups in developing neighborhood level plans to identify and preserve aspects unique to their neighborhood.
- ☐ Improve major community gateways to showcase Normal's identity *[See Map CP1]*.



Strategy CP1.3—Embrace and Celebrate Cultural Diversity

Jesse W. Fell, Normal's founding father, envisioned a community open and welcoming to all. Building on this strong founding principle, the Town should take every opportunity to celebrate current residents and embrace new ones.

CP1.3a—Bring Life to Public Places with Events and Programming

- ☐ Promote existing events that showcase Normal's cultural diversity. (Q)
- ☐ Consider new events that would appeal to diverse audiences.
- ☐ Collaborate with multicultural groups to address needs regarding cultural programming and events.

CP1.3b—Ensure That the Visual Cues in Public Rights-of-Way Are Multicultural, Inclusive, and Welcoming

1. El Dia de los Muertos, 2. Santa's Station, 3. Saint Patrick's Day Parade, 4. Make Music Normal
5. Gamma Phi Circus, 6. Sugar Creek Arts Festival, 7. Light the Night
8. Sweet Corn Blues Festival, 9. Summer Theatre Productions

Strategy CP1.4—Nurture Leaders and Volunteers to Preserve and Promote Identity

A community's identity is only sustained and enhanced if there is a sense of community engagement with and ownership of the Town's various happenings. Completing the many actions recommended in this *Plan* and attaining the vision for 2040 cannot happen without support from volunteers, community groups, and champions of projects and programs.

- ☐ Partner with local leadership programs (e.g., Leadership McLean County and the Multicultural Leadership Program) to support individuals and groups with diverse backgrounds and interests. (Q)
- ☐ Create volunteering opportunities to promote broad-based community engagement. Design these to accommodate varying time commitments and encourage entire family participation.
- ☐ Consider partnering with a local not-for-profit organization or university to manage volunteers.
- ☐ Enhance partnerships with local universities to integrate volunteer activities with academic credits for students.
- ☐ Collaborate with advocacy, conservation, ethnic/cultural, recreation, art, and hobby groups in the community on projects, events, and programming.

Leadership McLean County Class of 2017
Source: Leadership McLean County Facebook

Goal CP2: Utilize the public realm as a canvas to showcase Normal's identity and establish a strong sense of place.

The public realm consists of all space open to the public, including streets, sidewalks, trails, parks, parking lots, green spaces, detention ponds, and civic buildings. Many opportunities exist to transform these spaces into *places* that showcase the historic and contemporary elements of Normal's identity. Such places act as public living rooms for the community, where people go about their daily routines, have chance encounters and intentional gatherings, and stage events and activities open to the public. Most importantly, these places can become laboratories for the Town as it seeks to realize its vision.

The primary method used by cities of all sizes across the country to develop and maintain great public places is called *placemaking*. The goal of placemaking is to turn a space in the built environment—a street, a park, a public building—into something more than the sum of its parts, a place that people remember and adopt as their own. This requires urban design that celebrates and builds on a community's identity while being welcoming and accessible to everyone. Is the space safely and conveniently accessible for all ages of users and modes of transportation? Is it welcoming? Does it reflect the history and diversity of the surrounding community? Is it unique or aesthetically pleasing? Does it give people reasons to hang out for a while?

We should be able to answer "yes" to all of these questions. But placemaking is more an approach or a philosophy than a checklist. Placemaking requires a willingness to go beyond the core or typical function of a space and consider all the ways people might interact with it. When cities see the potential for their streets to be more than just rights-of-way for automobiles; empty parking lots to become markets, parks, or public squares; public buildings to be not only useful, but distinctive, fun, and sustainable; then they start turning nondescript spaces into great and memorable places.

Positive Contributors

- Uptown redevelopment efforts
- Constitution and Route 66 Trails
- Parks
- Harmon Arts Grants

Challenges

- Capital requirements for producing public amenities
- Engineering design guidelines

Indicators and Metrics

- Property values near public amenities
- Number of trail users at various times of the day, week, and year
- Bike and pedestrian counts on streets and sidewalks
- Number of public art installations

Partners

- McLean County Unit 5 School District
- Town entities like the Normal Theater, Children's Discovery Museum, and Connie Link Amphitheater
- Normal Public Library
- Illinois State University and Heartland Community College
- Corn Crib
- McLean County Regional Planning Commission (MCRPC)
- Illinois Arts Council Agency

Strategy CP2.1—Enhance Placemaking Efforts

CP2.1a Encourage Compact Development Patterns with Mixed Land Uses

CP2.1b Continue to Locate and Build Public Buildings in a Manner That Raises the Bar for Architectural Distinction and Placemaking

CP2.1c Reimagine Public Spaces as Unique Places

CP2.1d Capitalize on Parks as Models of Placemaking

Strategy CP2.2—Showcase Normal as a Smart City Through Effective Use of Technology in Public Places

Strategy CP2.3—Promote Public Art in All Aspects of Urban Design

Strategy CP2.1—Enhance Placemaking Efforts

Placemaking refers to the use of public or private investments, programming, or other actions to facilitate the conversion of regular spaces into diverse, engaging, memorable, and ever-evoloving places. These actions help build identity, spur activity and vitality, and promote active living by creating places that people want to be in all year long.

CP2.1a—Encourage Compact Development Patterns with Mixed Land Uses

The most inviting and beloved spaces are designed for pedestrians. This can only be accomplished in a setting with compact development, a mix of land uses, and multiple modes of transportation that mitigate the need for significant amounts of parking. *[See the Planning Framework Chapter for details.]*

CP2.1b—Continue to Locate and Build Public Buildings in a Manner That Raises the Bar for Architectural Distinction and Placemaking

Public projects offer a unique opportunity to create dynamic and memorable places, and the quality of their construction translates into a visual impact over many generations. Thus, every new public structure presents a significant opportunity for placemaking. Examples include Uptown Station, the Children's Discovery Museum, and the Fire Headquarters.

Uptown Station at night

CP2.1c—Reimagine Public Spaces to Become Unique Places

Actively work to expand the use of public places.

- ☐ Open streets to non-vehicular uses and turn them into places that promote interpersonal interactions and neighborhood events. Tactical urbanism in one popular method for doing this that many municipalities are taking advantage of. (Q)
- ☐ Consider ways in which public storm water detention ponds can serve public recreational purposes, such as fishing, and provide trail space for walking and bicycling.

PARK(ing) Day in Chicago. PARK(ing) Day is an international event where pop-up parks take over street parking spaces in order to spread awareness about the need for more park space and community space in urban areas.

Image source: Flickr user metroblossom

A pop-up intersection redesign in Minneapolis, Minnesota incorporating bicycles into the roadway design

Image source: Flickr user nickfalbo

Tactical urbanism refers to the variety of low-cost, temporary changes intended to improve the built environment. A common form of tactical urbanism is pop-up planning, where various public amenities like parks and bike lanes temporarily appear as a way to visualize and experience what a more permanent change would mean.

CP2.1d—Capitalize on Parks as Models of Placemaking

Given their high visibility, large size, and significant visitorship, Normal's parks are already unique places. The Town should further capitalize on this by incorporating new trends and best practices.

- ☐ Continue to provide opportunities for both passive and active recreation.
- ☐ Normal already has parks with specific areas of emphasis, including the water park features at Anderson and Fairview, the cultural offerings at the Connie Link Amphitheatre and the dog park at Shepard. Consider improvements to existing parks that enhance their uniqueness by featuring things such as fitness equipment, adventure playgrounds, and parks accessible to kids and adults with physical and developmental disabilities.
- ☐ Parks with large amounts of open space (like One Normal Plaza) could play host to additional public events for the community.
- ☐ Continue to work closely with the McLean County Unit 5 School District to co-locate parks near schools, a model that has served the community well.
- ☐ Continue to utilize school and university facilities after hours and during the summer as much as possible for community programming.

A fitness park in Dublin, Ohio

Image source: City of Dublin, Parks and Recreation

Parks for populations with Physical and Emotional disabilities in Beaverton, Oregon

Image source: Taulatin Hills Park and Recreation District

ADVENTURE PLAYGROUNDS

Adventure playgrounds intentionally prioritize free and unstructured play for their users. Common playground equipment like swings, slides, and climbing bars are seen as too constricting on the types of play they allow. Adventure playgrounds, on the other hand, are designed to help users build creativity, problem-solving, and teamwork skills by leaving the type of play up to them. As of this writing, only seven adventure playgrounds exist in the country.

The Adventure Playground in Berkeley, California

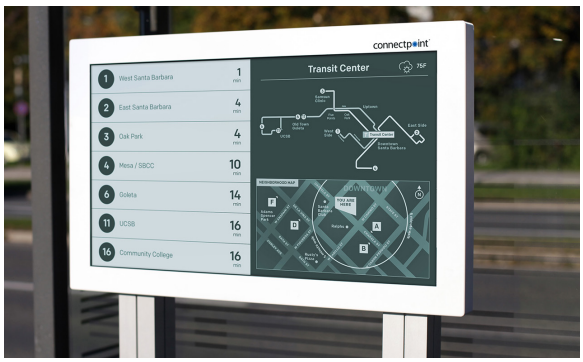
Image source: Flickr user tkazec

Strategy CP2.2—Showcase Normal as a Smart City Through Effective Use of Technology in Public Places

Strategically integrate advanced technologies into existing infrastructure investments. Examples include multifunctional "smart lighting" poles, expanded public Wi-Fi, and location of renewable energy installations on public properties.

Solar panels above a parking lot provide shade and generate energy.

Image source: Flickr user stuartwildlife



A digital transit stop shows schedules, routes, and nearby destinations.

Image courtesy of CHK America

An electronic bicycle and pedestrian counter in San Francisco.

Image source: Streetsblog San Francisco

Electronic message boards in Austin, Texas

Image source: Town of Normal staff

Strategy CP2.3—Promote Public Art in All Aspects of Urban Design

Public art encompasses much more than sculptures, statues, and paintings. It includes every aspect of the visual experience, from landscaping to architecture, public infrastructure, and every other physical element in a space. Public art can make a statement or start a conversation. It can add visual cues that enhance navigation and wayfinding. Ultimately, public art can influence how memorable a place is and, in turn, how economically successful a community can become.

The appropriate incorporation of public art can be supported by the establishment of a public arts ordinance or a public arts advisory committee to examine infrastructure and development projects for ways to incorporate public art.

Landscaping along Beaufort Street creates a vibrant streetscape.

Public infrastructure like bridges and streets provide ample opportunities for public art.

The Lego Bridge in Wuppertal, Germany, an example of a bridge turned into an iconic structure through art.

Image source: Wikimedia Commons user Morty

The City of Rochester, New York utilizes its BoulevArt Program to support community development and traffic safety through painted murals on residential streets.

Photo courtesy of Michael E. Tomb

College Avenue/Main Street pedestrian underpass.

Union Pacific railroad bridge crossing School Street.

Pedestrian bridge connecting Oakdale Avenue to Oakdale Elementary School.

Union Pacific railroad bridge crossing W.Vernon Avenue.

Public art can be a driver for sustainability.

The image on the left shows a metal tree whose leaves are actually small wind turbines; the image on the right is of the Ross Lovegrove Solar Tree in Milan, Italy.

Left image courtesy of NewWind R & D; right image source: Flickr user ricrossi