

(Re)Regulating the Commercial Strip: Reversing the Trend of Disorder in the Urban Landscape

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As patterns of sprawl development continue unabated, commercial strips are becoming increasingly commonplace in the built landscape of American cities and towns. With their characteristic concentrations of varied commercial uses and visual symbols, these business spines weigh heavily on the national experience. Although they are popular destinations for suburban dwellers and the motoring public, the strip is also one of the worst examples of late 20th-century urbanism. Major criticisms have centered around their lack of order and coherence, their traffic congestion, their inefficient use of land and their visual clutter. The occurrence of strip conditions however, can be directly related to the short-sighted land-use policies adhered to around the country and the outmoded nature of the regulatory framework that governs them. This paper will investigate ways to improve the form, character and function of the strip through a strategy of regulatory reforms. In doing so, it will consider some of the more progressive measures currently being implemented that have the potential to enhance the environmental quality of the strip and reverse the trend of disorder that characterizes it everywhere.

BACKGROUND AND CURRENT CONDITIONS

Commercial strips, those that exist in cities and towns throughout the United States, have evolved significantly from their modest beginnings along early 20th century trolley lines. As urban conditions were intensifying in city centers after the 1920's, new roads extending out into fringe areas were also being planned and built at a rapid rate. The commercial buildings that sprang up along them initially, established a new type of development pattern. Often referred to as "taxpayer blocks," these were considered temporary developments between the well-established city and emerging suburbs. Implicit in the name given to these commercial spines, was the interim or short-term circumstances they were conceived under. The primary purpose of many of these buildings was to simply generate sufficient revenue to cover its tax burden until the land became valuable enough to support a more stable commercial enterprise (Liebs, 1985). These areas would soon mushroom into full fledged "taxpayer strips" –

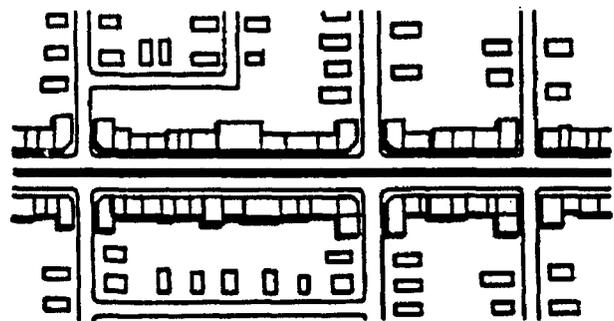


Figure 1. Early 20th-century taxpayer strip (MIT Press).

with contiguous commercial block frontages along high-volume traffic arteries leading out of town (Figure 1).

Early strips, which were really extensions of traditional main streets, were usually built according to most of the same ordering principles as their central city counterparts but with a significant difference. Whereas the structure of traditional main streets was usually based on human-scale dimensions and a clear sense of order, the structure of these emerging suburban strips was largely based on the dimensions of the automobile and was considered primarily as a transportation corridor. Guided initially by convention and tradition, rather than written regulations or guidelines, buildings along early strips had a more direct relationship to the roadway and helped define the general street context. Facades attempted to convey a distinctive, yet tasteful architectural images and buildings seemed to acknowledge their contribution to the local context. Familiar features like signage and advertising graphics were organized in horizontal bands above shopfront windows or vertical strips along parapets. Many of these qualities would quickly fade as the strip became more pervasive and ineffective regulations were adopted by mid-century.

As these new strips became increasingly more dense and extended even further out into the hinterlands, they quickly acquired many of the suburban characteristics that are still visible today. This phenomenon coincided directly with a number of major trends in American society during the

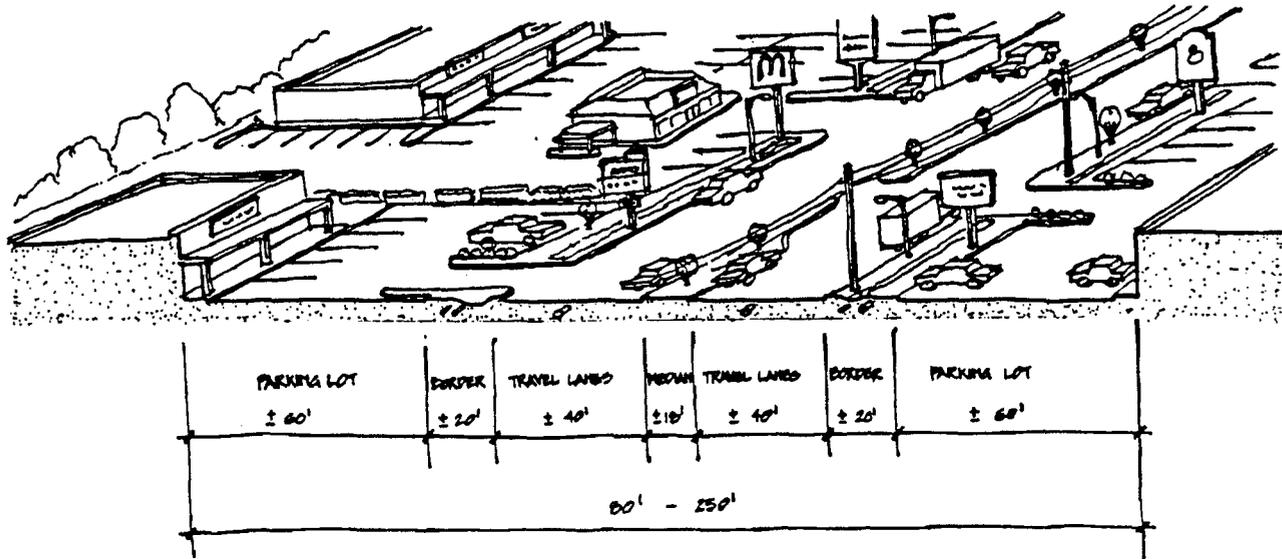


Figure 2. Spatial form and character of a typical commercial strip.

1920's: a rise in consumerism, the proliferation of automobile ownership, the growth of suburbia and the expansion of regional roadway systems. Altogether, these forces contributed significantly to the overall form of the strip, but with new regulations on the horizon, development patterns defining commercial strips would rapidly become institutionalized.

Zoning legislation enacted in thousands of communities following World War II established the first set of codified rules governing development along America's commercial strips. Many of these ordinances were directly influenced by the emerging significance of the automobile (Barnett, 1995) and the increasing need for vehicular access to support economic development. Development standards specified under the umbrella of local zoning ordinances after mid-century, have remained largely intact and continue to shape physical conditions of the contemporary strip. However, many of these ordinances are now outdated and do not acknowledge the larger physical problems of the strip as an urban entity. The fragmented and incoherent nature of the most strips can be attributable to the perpetuation of dispersed development patterns, overly generous parking provisions and visual dominance by signs prescribed under most zoning ordinances. Even though some current regulations are quite broad in their intent, they are ineffective in establishing higher standards of environmental quality in the built landscape. Despite its economic success, the strip is one of those places in American cities that always seems to exist in a state of physical disarray (Figure 2). This situation is best described by political scientist Norton Long as "... a series of inconsequential decisions that have built to massive calamity."

During the last half-century, the strip, more than any other part of the American city, has produced some of the most regrettable urban conditions associated with economic development initiatives. It is now quite clear that zoning, the very tool that has the potential to address the shortcomings of the

strip, has been largely ineffective. The inescapable gravitational attraction the strip has on a wide range of commercial businesses has provided a welcoming context for ersatz architecture, traffic congestion and overall visual clutter in the urban landscape. Increasingly, roadways are being designated as transportation arteries and zoned for this type of development with little regard for how the constituent parts should work together. Traffic engineers and land-use planners, working almost entirely independent of each other have obliged both consumers and passing motorists with a variety roadway conveniences: multi-lane thoroughfares with long block frontages, relatively few intersections and traffic signals, and mile after mile of "drive-up" shopping. With the higher than average speed limits along most strips, these roadways are increasingly being designed to facilitate the efficient flow of traffic, accommodate more cars and facilitate more growth. One of the unforeseen consequences of this has been the discordance between the physical elements of the strip.

Given this set of circumstances, the strip has become a marginalized environment - a place seemingly at odds with itself. Its irrational organization and form creates a unique set of physical conditions that rank at the lowest levels of urban design quality. For urbanists and others concerned with the physiology of built landscapes, unanswered questions surrounding commercial strips continue to resonate with a familiar theme "... how can their disorderly development pattern be reversed? how can they be made more suitable specimens of urban design? how can their physical and functional properties be improved? and what kind of regulatory measures are necessary to promote general environmental quality?"

After decades of analysis, debate and proposals, neither the academic nor professional design community has been able to produce effective measures for combatting the problems of the strip. Many attempts to cure its ills have focused

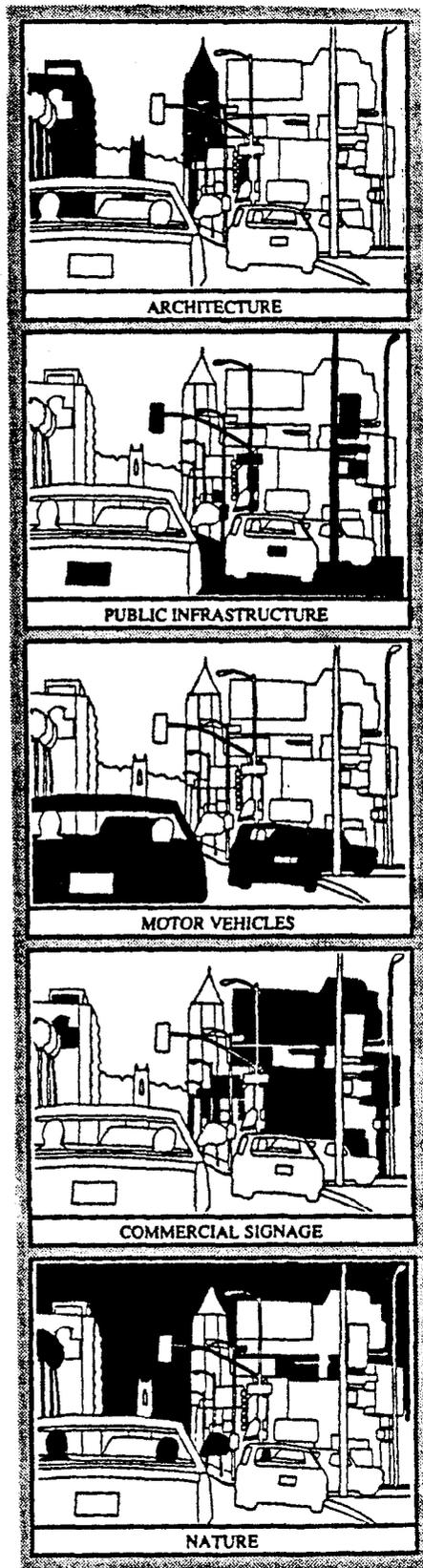


Figure 3. Visual elements of a typical strip (Los Angeles Forum for Architecture and Urban Design).

solely on design visions that have not had the foresight of how they could be effectively implemented. Although many of these proposals have offered compelling alternatives for "end state" conditions, overall they have had a negligible impact on reversing the disorder that is pervasive along most strips. In fact, ongoing discussion and urban design investigations about the evolution of the strip may continue to be misguided in their focus. The highly publicized work, *Learning From Las Vegas* authored by Robert Venturi, Denise Scott-Brown and Steven Izenour revealed several important theoretical insights relative to the phenomenology of the strip - but this work, like many others posits few substantive answers. Since its initial publication in 1972, it has largely served to legitimize the strip as a symbol of American popular culture, but steers clear of the issue of "... what do we do with it?" Subsequent investigations have also come up short in identifying the root causes of the strip's many urban design maladies. Its vitiated architecture, riotous collection of signs and congested levels of traffic result in a series of inter-related urban pathologies (Suisman, 1989). What is needed most in the effort to correct the problems of strip development, is an approach that addresses the problematic nature of its form, character and function at a fundamental level. This suggests that in order to bring about a greater sense of coherence, improved visual clarity and enhanced operational characteristics, the most effective prescription must include a re-tooling of its regulatory underpinnings (Barnett, 1995). Given the complex cultural economic and political context that most strips exist in, this appears to be one of the most effective ways in starting a reversal of the negative trends affecting its physical context.

COMMERCIAL STRIPS AS A REGULATED URBAN PHENOMENA

Like other parts of the city, strip development today is governed by a multi-layered web of regulations and standards. Along with the roadway and traffic parameters, measures aimed at regulating the strip's built form, largely determine its basic urban design framework. On an incremental level, these measures define the configuration of the right-of-way, building massing, site development, and other discernable features. However, to the lay public, or even trained professionals, it may not be so obvious as to exactly which aspects of the strip are regulated. The fact that there is little detectable coordination between its constituent parts suggests that the only controls in effect are those prescribed by individual business and public sector interests (Figure 3).

In reality though, zoning ordinances, land development codes, roadway standards and commercial development practices are the primary regulatory tools at work along the strip. For the most part, these tools focus on the development of private property, with such diverse measures as site development standards (e.g. minimum lot sizes, setbacks, height limitations and parking requirements), sign ordinances and landscape criteria. Although they have far-reaching implica-

FIGURE 1: Table of Zoning District Regulations OUTSIDE the Traditional City. Use this table to determine district regulations that apply within each zoning district. For additional regulations for specific uses, see Chapter 58, Part 3. Numbers in parentheses refer to footnotes, page 58-13.

STANDARDS	AC-N	AC-1	AC-2	AC-3
Gross Res. Density				
Minimum	15du/ac	20du/ac	30du/ac	75du/ac
Maximum	30du/ac (9)	40du/ac (9)	100du/ac (9)	200du/ac (9)
Non-Residential FAR				
Minimum		0.35 (11)	0.5 (11)	0.75 (11)
Maximum	0.30 (9)	0.70 (9)	1.00 (9)	1.50 (9)
Minimum Lot Area				
1 family conventional				
2 family conventional	4500sqft			
other residential	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)
non-residential				
Min. Mean Lot Width (11)				
1 family conventional				
2 family conventional	45ft			
other residential	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)
non-residential				
Min. Mean Lot Depth				
Min. Bldg. Site Frontage	45ft	50ft	50ft	50ft
Max. # DU's or Sq. Ft. per Building Site				
offices	(9)	(9)		
commercial	(9)	(9)		
Principal Building Setbacks (10,15)				
front yard	0ft (6)	0ft (6)	0ft (6)	0ft (6)
side yard	0 or 3ft	0 or 3ft	0 or 3ft	0 or 3ft
street side yard	0ft (6)	0ft (6)	0ft (6)	0ft (6)
rear yard	20ft	20ft	10ft	10ft
res. dist. setback	20ft	20ft	20ft	20ft
Max. ISR	0.75	0.85	0.90	0.90
Max. Bldg. Height				
permitted	35ft	75ft	100ft	200ft
conditional	75ft			

Figure 4. Table of zoning district regulations (City of Orlando, FL Planning Department).

tions, the prescriptive nature of these measures establishes only the minimum standards necessary to protect the health, safety and welfare of the general public. While some ordinances infer some degree of objective quality in the built environment, specific provisions are vague in suggesting how it should be achieved. The narrowly defined legislative intent of most zoning allows for broad discretionary interpretations by individual property owners. In the case of the strip, decisions by different business interests can only be characterized as self-serving, with little or no interest in civic propriety. The disorder that results, is symptomatic of the larger problems facing the strip as a whole.

Under most zoning, strips are given either a generic commercial designation, or identified as special district (Figure 4). These categories ultimately establish the basis for how certain restrictive criteria will be applied and the kinds of businesses that will be permitted on a parcel by parcel basis. It is interesting to note that commercial strip zoning typically allows a greater variety of uses than any other part of the city. In addition to those uses that exist in other parts of the city, the strip is also home to a variety of commercial establishments that are considered undesirable or inappropriate in downtown or neighborhood commercial areas. In addition to this, strips with special designations may also include large concentration of businesses of a particular type. Development criteria in this instance is usually more restrictive and is aimed at promoting a more homogenous commercial context.

Use diversity along the strip is without question, one reason for its broad appeal and the general public. Everything from the familiar fast food restaurants, to automobile dealerships, to roadside motels can be found here. In fact, the strip is usually the spawning ground for new and hybrid commercial enterprises – during the post-World War II years, shopping centers and drive-in restaurants emerged as new building types (Liebs, 1984). Today, its "big-box" super stores and off-price outlet malls. In certain instances, the amount of diversity seems far too extensive. Rather than adding to the mixed-use nature of the strip, one could conclude that it makes the strip all the more "mixed-up." On average, no less than twenty-five different types of conventional uses exist along most commercial strips. This number is increased when other uses are allowed under conditional or special provisions. This "catch-all" approach makes it virtually impossible to coordinate so many disparate uses in an effective manner. It further limits the ability to apply a uniform set of standards that go beyond general site requirements – thus perpetuating the fragmented nature of the strip.

The iconographic gallery of signs flanking the strip are also subjected to regulatory controls under most ordinances. By far the most conspicuous aspect of the strip, they emit constant consumer-oriented messages and images in an effort to flag down passing motorists as potential patrons. Defining most of the visual character of the strip, these signs are generally of two types: commercial signs and roadway information signs. For regulatory purposes, commercial signage is further categorized as pylon-mounted, building-mounted or window-mounted. Criteria for each category is spelled out in sign ordinances and restricts placement, size and illumination levels for each. Pylon-mounted signs are usually restricted to the edge of the development parcel and sized according to the length of the property frontage. Billboards, where permitted, are also restricted in size and height, but usually command the largest presence along the strip. The size of building-mounted

BORDER		
TYPE FACILITY	MINIMUM WIDTH (METERS)	
	TRAVEL LANES AT CURB	BIKE LANES OR OTHER AUXILIARY LANES AT CURB
ARTERIALS COLLECTORS Design Speed ≥ 70 km/h	4.2	3.6
ARTERIALS COLLECTORS Design Speed ≤ 60 km/h	3.6	3.0
URBAN COLLECTOR STREETS Design Speed ≤ 50 km/h	3.0	2.4

Figure 5. Roadway design standards - border conditions (Florida Department of Transportation).

signs is often limited by a ratio of the amount of primary facade frontage. For example, a shopping center with 150 feet of facade fronting the street would be permitted a total of 150 square feet of building-mounted sign area. However, the property owner has complete discretion as to how the sign area would be distributed. Window signs, those that usually advertise current bargains, are usually limited to a certain percentage of glazed area on the primary building facade.

Roadway signs add another visual element to the strip's physical makeup. These signs, erected by the local road or public works departments are situated according to government standards and are usually not coordinated with any other signs or secondary elements. Needless to say, this adds considerably to the amount of visual clutter and disorder along the strip. Based on the informational content of the sign, rigid standards specify its physical properties and where it will be located within the right-of-way. All combined, this multitude of signs command a looming presence along the strip. Standing cheek by jowl, these commercial and roadway signs broadcast a continuous message while defining the edge of the street as an exclusive information zone.

Another category of regulations that significantly affects the design structure of the strip, are right-of-way standards promulgated by local or regional transportation departments. Their guidelines and policies define the basic geometry of intersections, cross-sectional properties of roadways, border and median conditions, as well as vehicular access points to adjacent businesses. In some states, no less than three different design references are used. In each case, the main purpose is to facilitate vehicular mobility and safety within the roadway corridor. In the State of Florida's *Manual of Uniform Minimum Standards* ..., the base criteria for roadway design is its anticipated design speed. Dimensions for lane widths, medians and shoulder conditions are all based primarily on future speed limits. Utility companies and public works agencies also regulate aspects of the strip's right-of-way.



Figure 6. Signs and businesses along North International Drive, Orlando, FL

Their standards determine the type and location of all infrastructure elements along the street – including aerial power lines, light poles, street furnishings and other secondary elements. As in other cases, there is little coordination with other public agencies or private property owners (Figure 5).

Given the extensive range of disparate regulatory measures governing the form of the strip and the absence of inter-agency coordination, it is painfully evident why these areas evolve in apiece-meal manner. What seems to be certain at this point is the need for revised standards, better coordination of its physical elements and greater oversight of the entire regulatory and operational framework. Although the probability for this may seem remote, there are some isolated instances where these kinds of corrective measures are being put into place.

THE CASE OF INTERNATIONAL DRIVE

The circumstances that have defined Orlando, Florida's International Drive over the last twenty years are unique in the evolutionary process of commercial strips. What began as a local arterial connecting several attractions in the heart of Central Florida's booming tourist industry, quickly grew into a thriving commercial corridor. It literally sprang up shortly after Walt Disney World opened in 1972, a few miles away. Straddling both city and county jurisdictions, the area was quickly overrun by every type of commercial business that could gain a foothold in the loopholes of the zoning ordinance (Figure 6). Strategically located in one of the most active tourist areas in the world, International Drive is anchored by the Orange County Convention Center and Sea World to the south, Universal Studios and Wet & Wild water park at its mid-section, and several large outlet malls at its northern end. Between these, almost every kind of retail, entertainment, recreational, hospitality and personal service business can be found here, giving the strip a 24-hour activity cycle.

Initially, building owners took advantage of the broad flexibility allowed under International Drive's early zoning and used their merchandising creativity to erect a veritable hodgepodge of tourist architecture accompanied by the latest in sign and advertising technology. Recognizing the need to

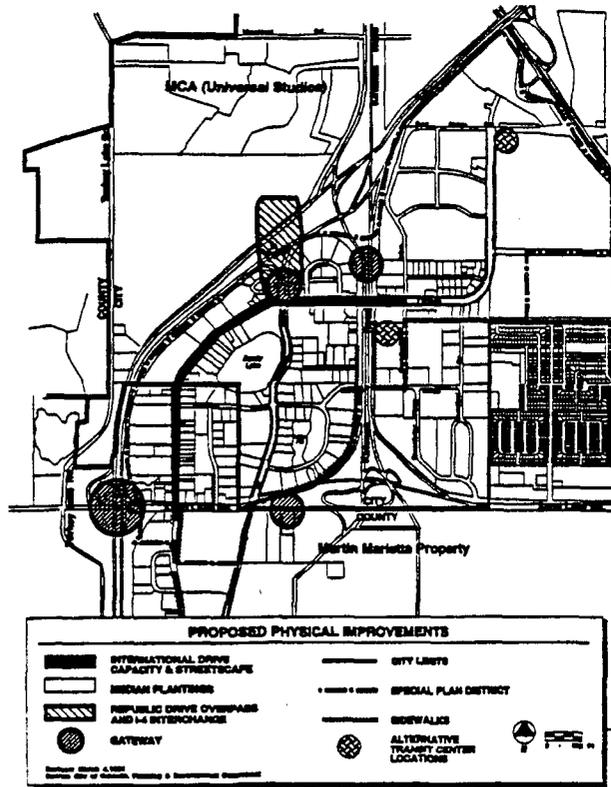


Figure 7. Map of proposed physical improvements on North International Drive (City of Orlando Planning Department).

improve its image, curb the increasing problem of traffic congestion and exercise better control of over code compliance, the City of Orlando took some decisive actions in the early 90's. Along with the local Chamber of Commerce, the City implemented a new set of urban design policies intended to radically alter the physical structure of the street (Figure 7). Based largely on regulatory reforms, these measures included amending the City's Growth Management Plan to recognize the unique nature of the area, creation of a new urban design plan, establishing a new special zoning overlay district with an "activity center" designation (AC-3/SP), instituting a master transit improvement plan, and creation of a special municipal services taxing district (City of Orlando Planning Dept. 1994).

These kinds of actions are unprecedented along commercial strips elsewhere. Because of the financial and political challenges faced by such bold measures, not to mention the deep-seated antipathy for broad based change, most cities have chosen not to tackle the major problems of strip development. Even attempts to adjust existing zoning legislation have proven formidable tasks. In the case of International Drive, reform measures have been instituted in both a top-down and bottom-up manner - a strategy with a better than 50/50 chance of eliminating, or at the very least, minimizing the disorderly nature of the street.

SITUATIONAL PROBLEMS OF COMMERCIAL

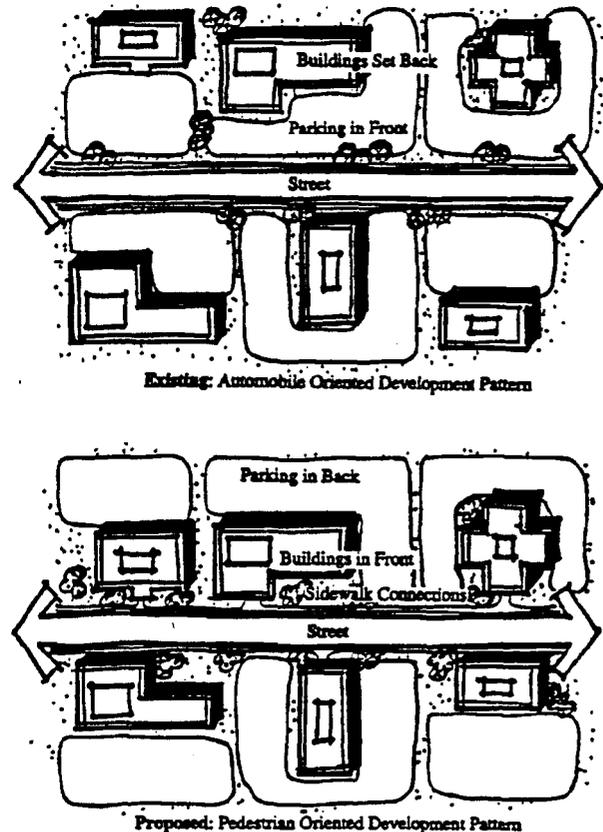


Figure 8. Comparison of existing and proposed development patterns - North International Drive (City of Orlando Planning Department).

STRIPS AND REGULATORY AFFECTS

The problems of most commercial strips emanate from a number of inter-related causes. From an urban design perspective, these problems can be isolated into three distinct areas - form, character and function. The regulatory measures mentioned above can be directly associated with the shortcomings in each of these areas. The three-dimensional form and spatial order of the strip is often criticized for its lack of discernible coherence. Along Orlando's International Drive, spatial proportions are now being determined by the linear roadway corridor and the combined effects of right-of-way width and building setbacks. What the city is attempting to do, without decreasing the number of travel lanes, is create a perceived reduction in right-of-way width by encouraging businesses to expand towards the street on land currently used for parking and reconfiguring border conditions. This would have the desired effect of creating a discernible street wall, with buildings having a more direct relationship with the street and better defined pedestrian zones along both sides. Lost parking spaces would be offset through shared use lots between adjacent businesses.

Another problem with the form of the strip, is its general development pattern of isolated buildings in the middle of

their respective lots. On International Drive, it is being addressed by eliminating side yard setbacks. New buildings in the future can be built "shoulder to shoulder." Parking lots that currently create voids between existing buildings will be allowed to be filled in – thus creating a pattern more reminiscent of early taxpayer strips (Figure 8).

To address problems stemming from the chaotic visual character of International Drive, the city has modified its sign ordinance to render commercial signage secondary to building architecture. Large billboards have been outlawed and are being phased out of existence altogether. All other signs will have to comply with a specified set of design standards aimed at reducing the chaotic scenography of commercial icons along the street. This will hopefully lead to a championing of buildings in space rather than symbols in space. The indiscriminate placement of various types of roadway signs, secondary elements and above-ground utilities will also be better coordinated to eliminate visual clutter along the street.

The functional problems of International Drive in recent years have centered around increased vehicular and pedestrian traffic and the conflicts between the two. The city is addressing these issues with a broad-based transportation management plan aimed at transforming the street from an auto-dominated environment to one that is more pedestrian-oriented. The plan includes roadway improvements, bus and shuttle service, a future light rail station and a pedestrian and bicycle component. Additionally, negotiations with roadway officials are expected to yield revised standards to better reflect the nature of the street and its future direction. Regulatory amendments to accommodate a future transit system within the existing right of way, wider sidewalks, narrower traffic lanes, elimination of continuous right-turn lanes and provisions for planted medians, are all called for in this plan.

CAN WE "FIX THE STRIP?" – TOWARDS A STRATEGY FOR PRACTICAL APPLICATION

As they currently exist, commercial strips are universally condemned for their consistently poor environmental quality, as well as their lack of pedestrian scale and inefficient use of land. However, it is unlikely that they will improve much without the kinds of initiatives being implemented by the City of Orlando. Because many have become major economic centers in their own right, people may conclude that even with the problems they engender, there is not enough of a compelling reason to alter the form and character of the strip. If however, the argument was framed as an economic, environmental and political imperative, cities and towns are much more likely to acknowledge the need address the problems of the strip. In any event, it is abundantly clear that the larger urban context would benefit greatly from efforts to reverse the current undesirable trends that are so deeply entrenched in strip morphology. Another issue to factor into the possibility for change, is the complex institutional structure that currently manages development and other activities along the strip (Lynch, Southworth, 1974). In order to realize significant improvements in its physical and functional quality, any

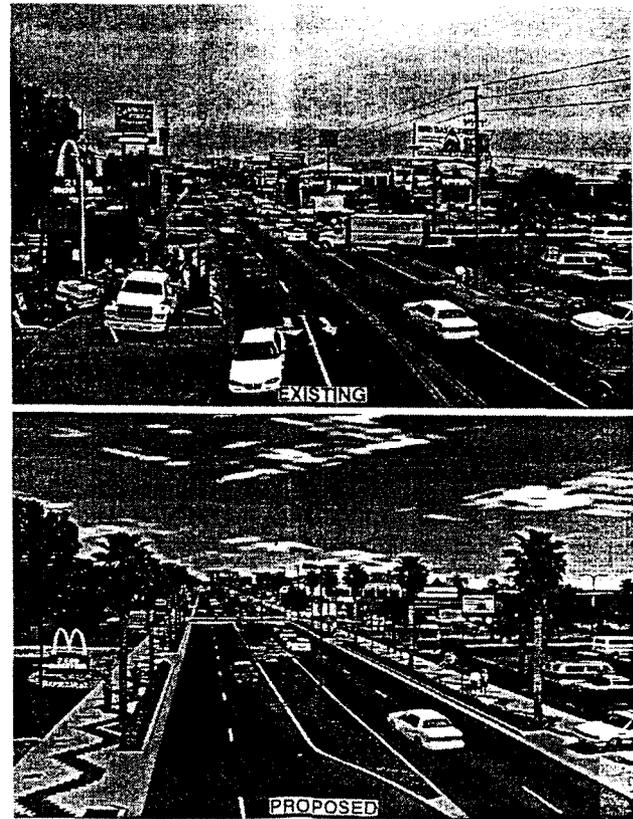


Figure 9. Comparison of existing and proposed streetscape conditions – North International Drive (City of Orlando Planning Department)

new strategy that deals with the strip's regulatory framework must also include reform measures for how it is managed on a daily basis.

First, commercial strips would have to be given greater priority relative to regional planning objectives. They would also have to be more clearly defined within the context of comprehensive or growth management plans. Designations such as suburban activity centers or mixed-use commercial centers should be established to better reflect current conditions. Over the years, it has become painfully clear that commercial strips can gain a foothold in fringe areas as a result of uncoordinated land-use policies and random decisions on the part of business interests. In order for these areas to exist within the mainstream of contemporary urbanism, they must benefit from prudent planning decisions, as opposed to being simply legislated into existence (Figure 9). Where they already exist, commercial strips should be delimited with fixed boundaries and not allowed to expand through a process of accretion.

Second, comprehensive regulatory reforms should be implemented with clearly defined qualitative objectives. Major portions of zoning ordinances and land development codes that affect the strip should be completely revised. In order to guide future growth and development in a more orderly manner, the following regulatory categories should be established:

Right-of-way standards - incorporating all criteria for

physical roadway elements including roadway, median and border areas.

Building design code – defining permitted uses, site design standards, bulk regulations and facade controls.

Signage code – incorporating standards for location, number and physical properties of all free-standing, building mounted and roadway signs.

Transportation/parking Management Plan – establishing operational criteria for transit, vehicular traffic and access, parking and servicing requirements, and bicycle and pedestrian provisions.

Landscape/environmental code – defining location and type of landscape features, drainage and stormwater retention requirements, and pedestrian amenities.

Infrastructure/utility code – establishing requirements for light standards illumination levels, above grade utilities, street furnishings and other secondary elements.

The third tier of this strategy calls for the creation of a centralized management entity responsible for enforcing the above-mentioned regulations and overseeing the strip's growth and development. This agency would also be responsible for managing daily operations along the strip such as transit,

traffic, parking and certain pedestrian functions. Its make-up would include officials from a variety of different agencies that already have specific jurisdictional responsibilities along the strip, as well as representatives from business interests and the general public. Consolidation of management responsibilities currently performed by different entities, along with regulatory reforms and better planning, would be the crucial first steps towards achieving the objective of reversing the trend of disorder along the commercial strip.

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