



# Plan-It Hennepin: Creative Placemaking for Downtown Minneapolis

Executive Summary

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R. S. KEELER  
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# Creatively Building on a Long Tradition

*Hennepin Avenue, arguably Minneapolis' oldest thoroughfare and most important street, performs the same vital functions today that it has for 500 years. It is a meeting ground of pathways where natives and visitors make contact, share cultures and exchange goods, information and ideas — the site of the first bridge across the Mississippi River, the street from which the city grew and continues to grow.*

## BACKGROUND

In this plan, “culture” is defined to include a wide range of creative, traditional, recreational, culinary and social activities through which people share experiences.

Funded largely by an “Our Town” grant from the National Endowment for the Arts and dovetailing directly with the *Downtown*

2025 Plan released in 2011 by the Minneapolis Downtown Council, *Plan-It Hennepin* was a process including conversations with urban visionaries and public workshops to develop and define a vision for the Hennepin Cultural District. The District includes parallel and intersecting streets surrounding Hennepin Avenue’s two-mile stretch from the Mississippi River to the Walker Art Center/Minneapolis Sculpture Garden.

With the goal for Downtown residential population to reach 70,000 by 2025, the refinement of this already culturally and academically rich urban district becomes increasingly fundamental to the growth and progress of Downtown and to the city’s vitality as a whole. Hennepin remains the current and historic heart of the social and cultural life of the city, a destination for millions each year for arts, business, education, entertainment, religious and sports activities.

The diversity of people who connect to Hennepin as a place to live, work, play and visit, necessitated a flexible and layered planning approach that was inclusive, creative and participatory. Artists and urban designers engaged with a variety of organizations, business owners and members of the public in creative placemaking, a robust process that involved large numbers of people, aimed at defining values, goals and opportunities for

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Throughout its history, Hennepin Avenue has served as a central transit route, social meeting place, and point of exchange. The early 20th Century photo of 6th and Hennepin reflects evolving modes of transportation.

Historical image courtesy Hennepin Theatre Trust. Planning activity photos: Mark VanCleave.

collaboration. Nearly 1,500 people concerned with the future of the Avenue and Downtown represented this complex group of stakeholders and contributed to *Plan-It Hennepin's* vision for The Hennepin Cultural District. The resulting plan represents a broad consensus around a vision that involved parties are committed to achieve.

#### KEY STRATEGIES

- Build on the current strengths of Hennepin Avenue and Downtown.
- Actively partner across public, private and nonprofit sectors coordinating efforts with the Downtown Council, City of Minneapolis and other stakeholders.
- Launch and lead through a Cultural District Alliance.
- Create a “culture of possibility” that encourages experimentation and innovation in urban design, public art and cultural programming, fostering new models of regulation, financing and other elements of conducting business in both the public and private sectors.
- Balance initiatives requiring long-term planning and infrastructure investment with high-visibility events and spontaneous grassroots efforts to animate the district.
- Develop a statewide network of arts and cultural districts of all sizes to build collective momentum, put in place policies and incentives and create an infrastructure that supports Minnesota as “the arts and culture state.”

#### 10-YEAR OUTCOMES

*Plan-It Hennepin's* recommendations bring to life and sustain a vibrant Cultural District that enhances the lives of residents and entices

visitors. Inclusive leadership advocates for policies that support active public spaces and complementary development. The Alliance together with volunteer civic, business and public sector leadership, supports and facilitates an active public realm and creative sector.

Successful outcomes for *Plan-It Hennepin* include:

- A VIBRANT, ACTIVITY-RICH AND SEAMLESS DOWNTOWN “CAMPUS” distinguished by arts and accessible programming, including activities for young people, singles, families, seniors and diverse populations. Arts, culture, education and sports organizations implement joint promotion and marketing campaigns, ensuring a cohesive array of diverse experiences. Recruiting and supporting additional nonprofit cultural organizations, arts-related retail and creative sector businesses infuse a consistent vitality along Hennepin Avenue and in the District.
- DOWNTOWN IS A RESIDENTIAL AND GATHERING PLACE OF CHOICE. For an expanding residential population, the Cultural District is central to everyday life and to the success of the business community. New cultural, retail and residential development catalyzes and promotes an active 24/7 street-level experience. Working with property owners and the City, the Alliance catalyzes the transformation of sites surrounding the light rail transit area at 5th and Hennepin and surface parking lots at 10th and Hennepin. Developments include an artist live/work building, hotel and/or arts hostel, mixed-income residential housing, creative and culturally oriented enterprises, food choices from around the globe and other retail services. Families, students, workers, seniors and people of various means are increasingly attracted to Downtown living and use alternative modes of transit within Downtown and to travel elsewhere. Public spaces, programmed activities and educational options for all ages and abilities reinforce the decision to live Downtown.

→ VISITORS TO DOWNTOWN COME MORE OFTEN AND STAY LONGER. Robust cultural, sports, food, educational and entertainment choices entice visitors to take part in multiple activities in a welcoming environment. The District delivers positive pedestrian experiences and convenient transit options. Priority is placed on re-development, public art and green space around the 5th Street light rail station as a central Downtown transportation hub and arrival point. Retail in the District expands, with an emphasis on unique, locally owned shops and arts-related products and services, especially in the Theatre District. The Gateway and Hennepin-Harmon areas develop retail that serves the needs of Downtown residents. In the short term, vacant storefronts are infused with unique activities, such as pop-up art galleries, designed to draw interest until the properties can be fully leased. Visitors have many options, including food and historic tours, world class musicals and concerts, free outdoor events and seasonal festivals at designated sites on a regular basis.

→ INFRASTRUCTURE DESIGNED FOR GREEN, CREATIVE, SAFE AND WALKABLE PUBLIC SPACES. Residents and visitors find distinctive, welcoming, active and well-connected green spaces at least every two blocks between the Mississippi River and Minneapolis Sculpture Garden. Each space includes places to sit, directional signage and access to services, such as public restrooms, public drinking fountains, warming areas, coffee shops and food vendors or proximity to restaurants. A stimulating, eclectic and inviting environment includes both public art and programmed cultural activities. Pedestrian and transit amenities encourage walkability, biking and ease of movement throughout the District. Safety is a priority.

→ DISTINCTIVE PUBLIC ART. Public art in the District is eclectic and iconic with an element of unpredictability. It reflects different cultural aesthetics appealing to the growing



diversity of people visiting and living Downtown. Like the District and its stakeholders, public art work is a juxtaposition of old and new, permanent and changing, with a great mix of cultures and styles. Public art in the District is anchored by complementary iconic pieces at the Hennepin Avenue Bridge in the River Gateway, and at the I-94 overpass in the Hennepin-Lyndale Gateway. Key investments give the street unique visual integrity and enliven challenging spaces.

#### FIRST STEPS (TWO YEARS)

These initial actions provide formal recognition to the Hennepin Cultural District and create a Hennepin Cultural District Alliance with real influence. Following City recognition, the Alliance would then work along two tracks, creating the conditions for grassroots initiatives and leading larger efforts requiring cross-sector support and funding. Actions include:

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Photo collage of a  
Hennepin Avenue  
streetfair.

Photoshop by Josh Bergeron,  
AECOM, Inc.



- FORMALLY RECOGNIZE THE HENNEPIN CULTURAL DISTRICT. The City of Minneapolis gives formal recognition to the Hennepin Cultural District and to a Cultural District Alliance as an active participant in planning, design and development review for the District.
- EXPLORE NEW MODELS to advance and incentivize arts and complementary development in the District and State. The Hennepin Cultural District serves as the hub of creative and cultural exchange in the region, powering the innovation that keeps the city vibrant, ever-changing and resilient.
- LAUNCH AN OPEN STREET PROJECT, WITH EVENTS CENTERED IN THE DISTRICT. In partnership with District arts, education and sports organizations, local businesses and the Downtown Improvement District, this will bring a burst of creative and cultural activity to Hennepin Avenue with everything from art markets to swap meets.
- CREATE AN ONGOING “NO VACANCY” INITIATIVE FOR DOWNTOWN STOREFRONTS. Vacant storefronts and other under-used real estate become home to ongoing greening initiatives and artist-led projects, including pop-up galleries, performances and seasonal displays.
- EXPAND ACTIVITIES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE DISTRICT. Partner with civic, arts, culture, education, sports organizations and law enforcement along Hennepin and elsewhere in Downtown, the Minneapolis Youth Coordinating Board and philanthropies to create opportunities of interest to young people in a safe, welcoming, supportive and inspiring environment.
- INITIATE JOINT MARKETING AND PROMOTIONAL EFFORTS and launch a District campaign, including a positioning study to formalize a name and brand for the District.
- MONITOR OUTCOMES. The Alliance will track key indicators through *Track-It Hennepin*, in partnership with City departments, Metro Transit, Minneapolis Police Department, Downtown Improvement District and others.

➤ Planning workshop participants explore Hennepin Avenue led by landscape architect, Bob Close (right).

Photo: Mark Vanleave.



- **INVEST IN DISTINCTIVE PUBLIC ART.** Initiate investments to realize key defining public art commissions to give the street unique visual integrity and to enliven challenging spaces. Opportunities include utilization of blank walls and buildings, murals, temporary installations in green spaces, performance events in outdoor spaces and artist-designed street furniture, artist-inspired lighting and other functional elements.
- **IMPROVE THE PERCEPTION AND REALITY OF SAFETY** by encouraging a variety of lighting options in the Theatre District and at various strategic gateway points throughout the District and by encouraging more pedestrian activity.
- **UNDERTAKE INITIAL STEPS FOR ARTIST LIVE/WORK SPACE IN THE DISTRICT.** Although this is a long-term effort, the Alliance can work to secure sites and develop plans for building projects that would provide residential opportunities for artists on Hennepin Avenue.

- **CREATE MORE VISUAL STIMULATION.** Facilitate the creation of public art and other visual stimuli such as lighting, banners and seasonal decorations that reinforce a sense of arrival in the Theatre District and at gateway areas of the District.
- **SUPPORT DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS THAT IMPLEMENT A NEW VISION FOR THE HENNEPIN CULTURAL DISTRICT.** The Alliance will work with the City, developers and property owners to help ensure that Downtown projects—retail, office, residential and institutional—will reflect and further the idea of a Hennepin Cultural District.
- **LEGISLATIVE ACTION.** Explore development of an agenda that identifies state policies in support of cultural and creative districts in Minneapolis and across Minnesota.

↪ The Pantages Vaudeville built in 1916 continues to serve regional audiences. Restored in 2002, it is one of four theatres operated by Hennepin Theatre Trust.

Photo by Charles Hibbard, courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

↑ Participants in planning workshops indicated their likes, dislikes and future visions using the 42-foot-long 1/20-scale model of Hennepin Avenue built by AECOM, Inc.

Photos: Mark VanCleave.









