AN OPERATIONAL DEFINITION OF AN URBAN VOID

-noun

The voids of the city are necessary by-products created by human and natural processes that occur over time. They are often understood only as spaces that disrupt the pattern in the urban fabric, creating holes and throw into question the use of those spaces. Sometimes called urban ruins, they are at the limit between private and public space, without belonging either to the one or to the other. Urban voids are containers of memory, fragments of the built city and the ‘natural’ environment; memories of the city which constitute a random, unplanned garden.

VOID

-noun
an empty space; emptiness: He disappeared into the void. something experienced as a loss or privation: His death left a great void in her life. a gap or opening, as in a wall. a vacancy; vacuum. 
Source: Webster Dictionary
URBAN LANDSCAPE PALIMPSEST

THE RINO DISTRICT

The River North, RiNo “district” is a dynamic urban palimpsest that has so far been unaffected more or less by new urbanist development strategies and therefore is a perfect example of a true mixed-use post-industrial neighborhood that retains intrinsically attractive and unique characteristics. After doing a series of spatial analyses and modeling exercises, we have determined that this particular zone, just north or our original target area, has the most diverse distribution of different kinds and sizes of “urban voids”.

Again, as critical urban designers, we are operating with the understanding that we recognize the value of this district and its’ spatial, commercial, and community diversities. At this point in time, we can argue that new urbanist development scrapes away and removes all essence and memory of place when imposing the misnomer “new urbanist mixed-use development”. Some of the most important aspects of our working definition of Urban Voids is that they act as containers for memory, they are valued for their randomness, and that they should serve as in-between spaces that belong to both the public and private realm which should be free from a top-down development approach and left to continue to evolve in to a number of different potential uses. We believe that its’ tissue will heal or fill in on its own, so-to-speak.

What has developed over time to create unique spatial relationships: gritty nuances, and district identity, should not be removed by in descript, high-income housing, which will in effect undoubtedly continue the trend of gentrification and monolithic hegemony.

With delicately subtle design interventions based on our understanding of how this place and its’ voids came to be, we will attempt to retain and support the social, spatial, and commercial functionalities that should continue to develop over time in this particular district. While these artist, business, and residential communities respond to one another, we can predict outcomes of further development and functionality that support our theory. This district will stand apart as being culturally rich from its’ complete mirrored opposite counter-part south of 31st and Brighton.

Our study objective is to attempt to promote voids as productive space in the built environment and re-envision their purpose. Urban voids can become the flat bed foundation of the new urban infrastructure where ecology and human settlement can be reconciled by their re-adaptation. In the RiNo District, voids have the potential of providing infrastructure and improving the public realm rather their erasure by “new urbanist” ideals to turn surface parking lots into “post-modernist tract housing”.

Urban Voids identified within the Transit Oriented Development Plan for the RiNo district Many of these spaces consist of surface parking lots, vacant tracts, abandoned buildings, and in between spaces.

Image of T.O.D. plan for the RiNo district which includes densities for mixed-use development from 30 DU’s per acre to 60DU’s per acre.

Newly developed high density housing in RiNo district

Conceptual massing model depicting void spaces developed at 30 DU’s per acre
ANALYSIS SUMMARY

This analysis compares 4 similarly sized areas within our study area with distinct building footprints.

Zone 2 is the most unaffected to date by "new urbanist" built development to date and is the most diverse in terms of building typology and form.

ZONE 1: POST-INDUSTRIAL
Large building typology

ZONE 2: TARGET ZONE
Most diverse building typology
District identity
Untouched by top-down outside development

ZONE 3: COMMERCIAL
1-2 Story commercial

ZONE 4: RESIDENTIAL
Small family neighborhood
RINO PLANNED STRATEGIES
BRIGHTON BOULEVARD ALTERNATIVES

Image examining implementation of the T.O.D. plan for Brighton Blvd.

North perspective view of Brighton Blvd. comparing “new urbanist” development to incremental change

Street scape study examining incremental change along Brighton Blvd.

Void projection of possible uses in the public realm
BRIGHTON BOULEVARD ALTERNATIVES

Existing north view of Brighton Blvd.

Plan view of existing conditions
Street geometry

Plan view of alternative curb condition
Street geometry

Existing condition

Proposed alternative
“After 5 p.m., downtown Holyoke, Mass., is a ghost town. People used to flock to this part of the city to shop, see a show and grab a bite to eat. But the former industrial hub — once famous for manufacturing paper — has been in decline for the past half-century. More jobs are key to its revival, but some locals think sharing in a good meal could really help the city out.

On a recent evening, an abandoned gas station with a curb blocked by cement barriers is the meeting point for a group of people who appear to be pulling chairs and tables from the trunks of their cars. It’s almost dark. Some boxes are set on the sidewalk; linens and dishes and food are pulled out; and what moments ago was an eyesore has been transformed into a popular place to eat. It’s called BYOR. That stands for "bring your own restaurant." It’s not quite an established venue, but the food is very good.”