

2ND Street District

Austin, Texas



Observing the Urban Landscape

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Figure 1. Map of 2nd Street District
 1 = Amlis on 2nd
 2 = The W Hotel and Residences
 3 = Amlis Downtown
 4 = City Hall
 (<http://www.terrain.org/unsprawl/19/>)

The revitalization of the 2ND Street District has been in the works for a long time, and in 2010 we are just starting to realize some of the results, especially in the past 24 months. Since 1989, Austin planners have been discussing how best to redevelop the area, starting with City Council’s invitation of a Regional/Urban Design Assistance Team (R/UDAT) of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) to Austin. Later, the Great Streets Master Plan was created, and the Second Street Retail District Plan was incorporated, making guiding principles such as managing congestion, balanced/active streets, streets as places, interactive streets, pride of place, and public art applicable across the board.

The 2nd Street District is located right near downtown Austin, Texas—specifically, it spans from Cesar Chavez Street (along Lady Bird Lake) north to 3rd Street, and from San Antonio St. west to Colorado St. 2nd Street runs straight through this 2 by 3 block area, hence the name 2nd Street District.

The most recent push towards revitalizing the 2nd Street District has come from Amlı, a national company headquartered in Chicago that is “focused on the development, acquisition and management of luxury apartment communities.” They’ve helped build the neighborhood’s identity by creating a 2nd Street District website, which maintains a directory of retail, residential options, parking and travel information, and an events calendar.

This study of the 2nd Street District will roughly follow Kevin Lynch’s Five Dimensions of Good City Form—that is, vitality, sense, access, fit, and control.

Vitality refers to how a place serves humans—most importantly, the people who live, shop, work, recreate, and travel through the area. The focus is on safety, health, and environment. In the 2nd Street District, pedestrians are the stated priority; The Great Streets Urban Design Guiding Principles state that streets are for “people first, commercial second, parking third and through traffic fourth.”

Because the downtown of any thriving city is necessarily congested, the 32-foot-wide sidewalks along the north side of 2nd Street manifest the commitment to pedestrian safety. Other sidewalks in the area are also wide (though not a whole 32 feet in all cases), encouraging walking through the neighborhood. Sidewalks

are consistent and well-maintained, and there aren’t large gaps with empty lots or undesirable destinations that might tamper foot traffic. Unfortunately, since the 2nd Street District is in the heart of downtown Austin, automobile traffic can’t be avoided completely, though the planners are trying to divert much of the through-traffic. One of the busiest streets in the area is Cesar Chavez, making its intersection with Guadalupe (a core transit corridor identified by the City of Austin’s GIS) in front of City Hall a dangerous one for pedestrians. The irregular crosswalks and unusual pedestrian paths make it aesthetically pleasing but also confusing for people not familiar with the area, as traffic merges onto the bridge.



Figure 2. Wide, tree-lined sidewalks along 2nd Street encourage pedestrian traffic. (Photo by Alix Scarborough)

The natural environment is also a stated priority for the 2nd Street District. Because it is a highly urbanized part of town, there aren't a plethora of open green spaces. However, the exception is Lady Bird Lake, which acts as the southern border of the 2nd Street District. This natural feature is a major attraction that increases residential property values and showcases Austin's investment in health and fitness (the popular hike and bike trail is rarely empty).

The way an area is viewed contributes to the *sense* of a place—its identity, structure, transparency, legibility, perceptions. The 2nd Street District is already becoming a recognized neighborhood, partially due to Amli's creation of a 2nd Street District website that clearly delineates the area and characterizes it as “urbane chic, youthful exuberance and true Texas spirit.” The neighborhood has a cohesive, modern look that is clean and well-maintained—distinct from the areas of urban grime that are found on some sides. The grid street layout makes the small neighborhood easy to navigate, and tall landmarks such as the Frost Bank Tower can be seen throughout the area and used to orient oneself. One-way streets may occasionally confuse motorists, but overall the layout is self-explanatory.

Walking through the 2nd Street District, storefronts and restaurants make up the majority of street-level areas. Window shopping and people watching are the best forms of cheap entertainment here, as you can see into store windows and sidewalk cafes are prevalent (encouraged, no doubt, by the wide promenades along the streets). Sidewalks are heavily furnished with benches from the city, and many businesses provide mod-looking tables and chairs. This contributes to a certain liveliness in the district because there are always people around.

Another way the 2nd Street District unifies its identity is with celebrations and events. The 2nd Street website is constantly updated; recent happenings listed on their “District Dish” newsletter include scotch and wine tastings, a Mardi Gras party, art talks, and Valentine's Day spa specials, all hosted by local businesses. These events are indicative of the area's target audience. I talked to a barista at Delish (a cupcake and coffee shop on 3rd Street), who said she loved her job because of the variety of people she meets; however, the coffee shops, high-end home décor stores, spas and salons, and designer boutiques clearly cater to a wealthy, cultured elite. Combine that with the residence options in the

area—namely, luxury high-rises with a base price of around \$1000/month—and the picture is clear.

This portrait of typical businesses is one part of *access*, the ability to reach other parts of the neighborhood and city. The mixed-use development in the 2nd Street District provides residents with many of their needs, including a small (and of course gourmet)



Figure 3. Bike racks and Pay to Park provide a variety of transportation options. (Photo by Alix Scarborough)

grocery store on 3rd Street. It is easy for residents to access elements of the neighborhood, as everything is within walking distance. If residents have cars (as is likely, since this is America and the demographics of 2nd Street would imply that they can afford it), Amli has ensured that they have ample parking in underground garages and can thus access the rest of the city.

Nonresidents have the option of Austin’s Pay to Park (like parking meters but more fancy), and CapMetro buses run through the area. The Capital MetroRail’s downtown station will be just a few blocks from the area, near the Convention Center, though that transportation system is not yet online.

One way to measure the access of an area is by using its “Walk Score,” a scale developed by an board of urban planning, environmental and technical experts. The Walk Score at the corner of Lavaca and 2nd Street, the heart of the district, was 97 out of 100, a so-called “Walkers’ Paradise.” The score was calculated by the distance to amenities such as transit, grocery stores, restaurants, coffee shops, bars, movie theaters, schools, parks libraries, bookstores, fitness, drug stores, hardware stores, and clothing and music. Austin’s average score is 55, making the 2nd Street District one of the most desirable places in the city in regards to walkability. Of course, the Walk Score system admits that it’s flawed—distance to amenities is the only thing taken into account, not bodies of water or safety of crosswalks or topography or sidewalks. However, with what we know about the 2nd Street District’s pedestrian-friendly character, I’d say the Walk Score is about accurate, and is a good way to explain the success of the neighborhood.

The *fitness* of an area discusses its adaptations and flexibility. The first application of this is the change in structures over time. I talked with Jacob Allen, an assistant community manager at Amlı Downtown, about how Amlı has fit in to Austin’s existing culture. 2nd Street used to be part of the warehouse district, and though Amlı’s structures are all new, they wanted to retain the authenticity of the area. In Amlı Downtown, apartments are “warehouse-style,” which means exposed concrete and open, multiuse spaces that are designed to look antique. Amlı on 2nd is more of a “green” building—though they did not apply for LEED certification, they integrated light-reflective building materials to work towards the city’s emphasis on sustainability.



Figure 4. Warehouse-style interiors at Amlı Downtown stay true to the area’s rich history. (<http://www.amli.com/apartments/austin/downtown/photos.aspx>)

One of the other major corporations in the 2nd Street District, the W Austin Hotel and Residences, is also aware of local values and doing their best to incorporate these into the new structure going up in the heart of the 2nd Street District. A huge portion of their space is going to be a new recording studio for Austin City Limits, an annual festival and the “longest-running broadcast concert series in the USA” that is one of the city’s biggest points of pride. Like Amlı, the W is a national chain, but they take pride in customizing each location to its surroundings.

Control looks at the balance between public and private, and its relation to ownership and conflict. The 2nd Street District development was and is highly steered by public forces. Amlı Downtown, for instance, is under a 100 Year Lease with the City of Austin, meaning that their property is owned by the city (although they still pay taxes on it). This provided a huge incentive for Amlı to develop in Austin, and is one of the reasons for the boom of the area. Also, Amlı has a large amount of control over the types of retail and business on their blocks, because they manage the leases for the spaces under their residential towers. Another public aspect of 2nd Street is the City Hall, which is a focal point of the area both architecturally and as a destination for a variety of people.

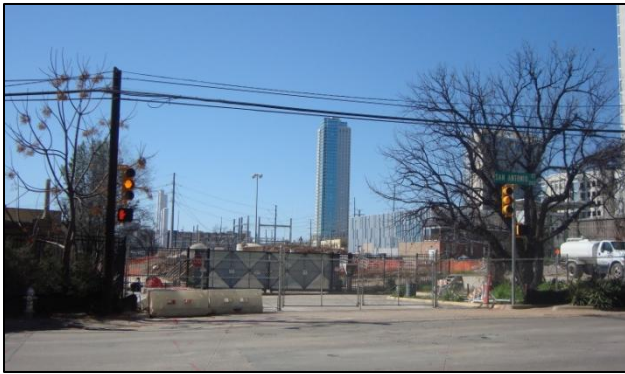


Figure 5. Looking across San Antonio St. reveals an abrupt change in the landscape. (Photo by Alix Scarborough)

there are few gaps in the storefronts. The exception to this could have been City Hall, but the presence of the Austin Java coffee shop built into the back of City Hall, complete with outdoor seating and landscaping, resolves this. One of the few examples of bad planning I ran across, actually, was not technically in the district but directly across San Antonio Street. A few trees attempt to mask the desolate parking lot, dumpsters, expanse of concrete, and construction machinery that lead to the City of Austin Power Plant. Of course, the power plant was there first, and I believe renovation is set to begin on it soon, but locating high-rise luxury apartments just across the street from an area that visually unappealing was not good planning. Most of the 2nd Street District is under vertical mixed use, so land uses are very integrated. Ground level is mostly commercial, such as small retail. On either side of City Hall on Cesar Chavez are office buildings, which also integrate some commercial space, and the blocks between 2nd and 3rd Streets have residential spaces above ground level and parking below ground.

Overall, the 2nd Street District is finally beginning to solidify its sense of place with the construction of pedestrian-friendly walkways and the development of audience-specific retail and services. While its spirit may not be appreciated by every Austinite in the city, the young and hip will find it a place to relax, people-watch and spend their money. Residents of Amli and the W will be able to fulfill most of their needs without having to jump in the car, and the clean and reputable 2nd Street District is a perfect complement to Lady Bird Lake and its hike and bike trail.

Much thought has been put into planning the 2nd Street District, and little in the small area has developed by chance. One would certainly hope that such a controlled-growth area would show evidence of good planning, and I think this one does. 2nd Street is the main retail spine, and

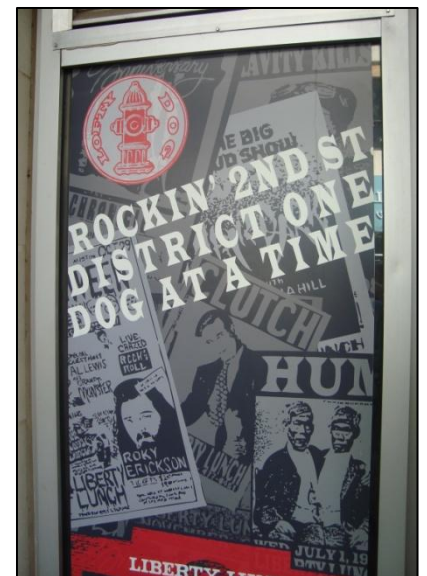


Figure 6. A window at Lofty Dog pet boutique proclaims its pride in the 2nd Street District. (Photo by Alix Scarborough)

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