



Growing Up Downtown: Raising a Family in Urban Seattle

A proposal to research Design and Policy Best Practices in North America

Application for the
2012 AIA Seattle Emerging
Professionals Travel Scholarship

Sarah Snider

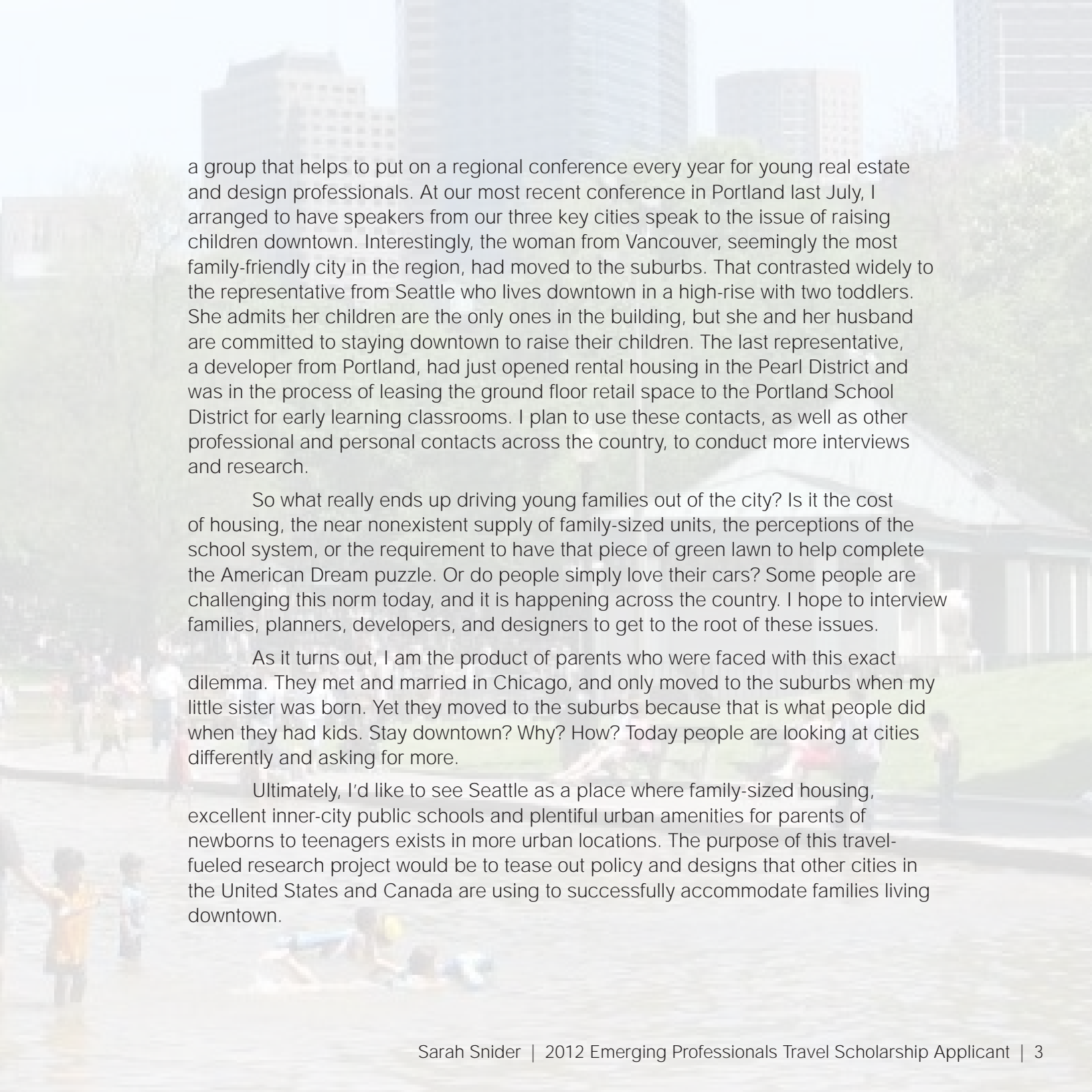
Current trends suggest that people are gravitating back to cities, choosing to live more urban lifestyles than generations prior, and Seattle is no exception. In many cases it is young singles or couples and empty nesters that are answering the call to urbanity. They come for the trendy restaurants, walkability, shops, transportation options, parks, people, and the energy buzzing on the sidewalks. What happens, however, when these young singles become young couples, and these young couples start to have children?

Will they flee to the suburbs, their children in tow? Will they head out on the highway to where, more likely than not, they can afford what they were taught is a “good place to raise kids” --to a land of longer commutes, better schools, and seemingly more convenience? Or will their preference for more culture, more transportation options, more diversity, less driving, and more sense of place lead them to shape a new vision of the city?

Buying a home or condo is often one of the biggest financial decisions a family will make. Subsequently, where a family chooses to buy a home will have major effects on the neighborhood, the city, and the region. In simple terms, a family will buy the best house they can afford. But tied up within this simple goal are factors that are weighed against one another, factors that will enhance or compromise the family's desired quality of life. Basic economics dictates that more desirable qualities fetch greater rental or purchase prices, especially if the supply is limited. While it is true that on a per-square-foot basis, larger units rent for less than smaller units, the fact remains that a two bedroom condo or rental apartment in the city is much more expensive a similar-sized residence further from the city's core.

As a member of the Seattle Planning Commission, the decisions embedded in a family's housing choice are very fresh in my mind. Our recently released report, titled *Housing Seattle*, highlights the fact that Seattle lacks affordable family-sized units. For the purpose of the report, a family-sized unit is defined as having 3 or more bedrooms. Amazingly, only 2% of market-rate rental apartments in Seattle have more than three bedrooms. And only half of those units are affordable to those earning 80% of Area Median Income (AMI). As part of my research, I plan to use this report to help me tease out demographic information related to families and housing choices.

I am also a member of the Seattle Urban Land Institute's Young Leaders board,



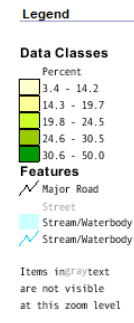
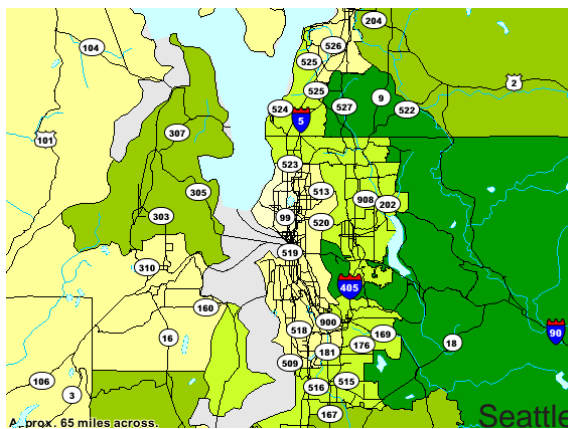
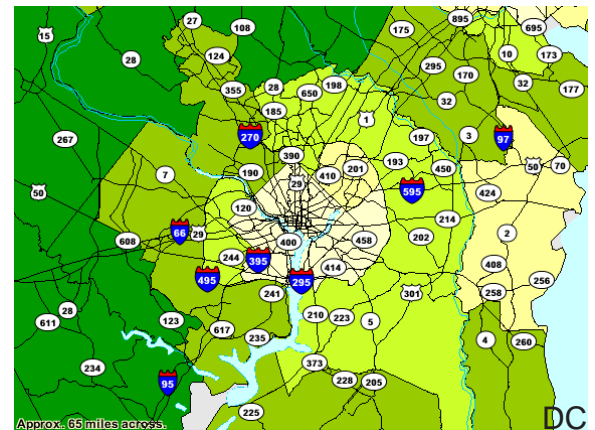
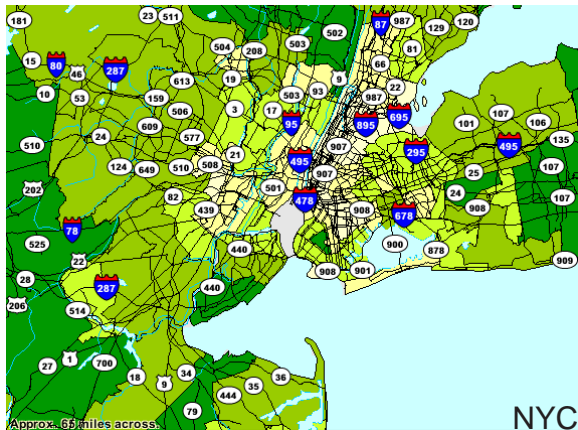
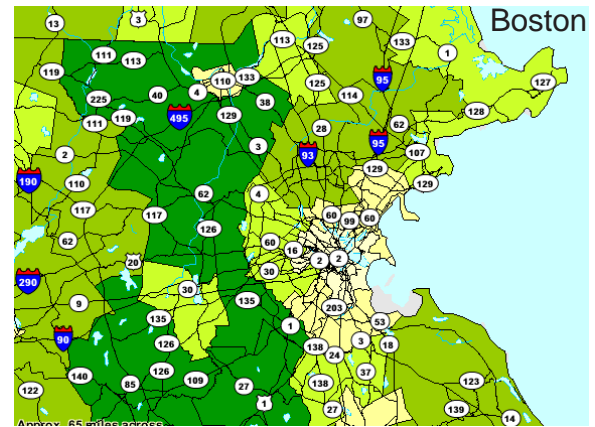
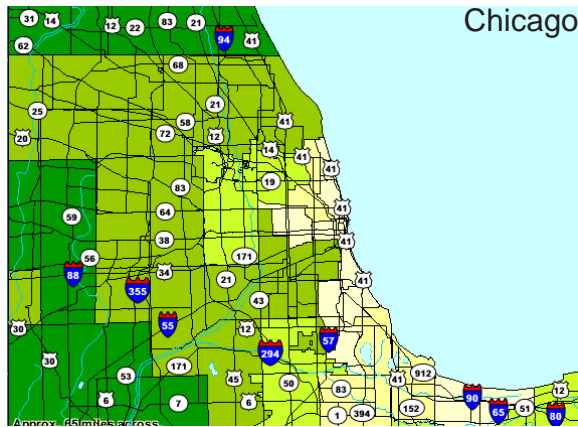
a group that helps to put on a regional conference every year for young real estate and design professionals. At our most recent conference in Portland last July, I arranged to have speakers from our three key cities speak to the issue of raising children downtown. Interestingly, the woman from Vancouver, seemingly the most family-friendly city in the region, had moved to the suburbs. That contrasted widely to the representative from Seattle who lives downtown in a high-rise with two toddlers. She admits her children are the only ones in the building, but she and her husband are committed to staying downtown to raise their children. The last representative, a developer from Portland, had just opened rental housing in the Pearl District and was in the process of leasing the ground floor retail space to the Portland School District for early learning classrooms. I plan to use these contacts, as well as other professional and personal contacts across the country, to conduct more interviews and research.

So what really ends up driving young families out of the city? Is it the cost of housing, the near nonexistent supply of family-sized units, the perceptions of the school system, or the requirement to have that piece of green lawn to help complete the American Dream puzzle. Or do people simply love their cars? Some people are challenging this norm today, and it is happening across the country. I hope to interview families, planners, developers, and designers to get to the root of these issues.

As it turns out, I am the product of parents who were faced with this exact dilemma. They met and married in Chicago, and only moved to the suburbs when my little sister was born. Yet they moved to the suburbs because that is what people did when they had kids. Stay downtown? Why? How? Today people are looking at cities differently and asking for more.

Ultimately, I'd like to see Seattle as a place where family-sized housing, excellent inner-city public schools and plentiful urban amenities for parents of newborns to teenagers exists in more urban locations. The purpose of this travel-fueled research project would be to tease out policy and designs that other cities in the United States and Canada are using to successfully accommodate families living downtown.

Initial Findings



These maps from the US Census Bureau show the dispersed pattern of where families choose to, or can afford to live surrounding major metro areas. Data represents households with married couples and children and is based on the American Community Survey Data from 2005-2009.

Why would we want more families in the City?

There are many potential benefits to having more families live in downtown Seattle, such as:

- a more tourist-friendly environment
- a potential increase in transit coverage, service, and efficiency
- less carbon emissions spent on commuting by automobiles
- less pressure to develop at the edge of the urban growth boundary
- an increase in downtown residential development
- an increase in urban retail
- an increase in the tax base
- an increase in '24 hour places' and safer streets
- an increase in green spaces and subsequent positive environmental benefits such as natural storm water mitigation and increased urban biodiversity
- an increased emphasis on accessibility
- an increase in public school enrollment and subsequent increases in funding allocations to inner-city schools

Family-friendly Seattle

I plan to discover why families with children are choosing to live in cities or suburbs through the following methods:

- interviewing families, designers, developers, and planners in each city about designs and policies that encourage families to live in urban environments
- obtaining and graphically representing data and statistics that are comparable to data available for Seattle, such as the maps on the right
- photographing family-friendly urban amenities, residential buildings, community centers, transportation modes, and urban design elements

Specific topics for interviews and further research include:

- Overall quality of life
- Schools (location, quality, public vs private)
- Public Amenities (parks, recreation centers, trails, street design)
- Private Amenities (private playgrounds, building amenities, etc)
- Services (day-care, after-school programs)
- Transportation
- Housing (affordability, size, location, type)
- Neighborhood amenities (shops, grocer, etc)

There are certainly cities throughout the world that accommodate and plan for families much better than we do in the United States. Japan and many European cities come to mind. However, I chose to focus my travel and research on North American cities to better compare the results to Seattle. I did not want to lightly skim the surface of the subject and try to dissect widely variable national governmental policies or tax codes. While fascinating, I doubt the information would ultimately affect change here in the Puget Sound Region.

I plan to visit the following American cities:

- Boston, MA
- Brooklyn, NY
- Chicago, IL
- Denver, CO
- Minneapolis, MN
- Montreal, QC
- New York, NY
- San Francisco, CA
- Washington, DC
- Vancouver, BC

Initial Resources and Research

Where's the family in multifamily? What families want in higher density housing. Catherine Benotto. Seattle Daily Journal of Commerce. Oct. 7, 2004

Sippy Cups at Starbucks: Enticing Families to Live Downtown. Catherine Benotto. AIA Seattle Forum Vol. 2 No. 2. Summer 2009

The new trend downtown: Married, with children. Kristin Tillostson. Minneapolis Star Tribune. Jun 29 2010.

Raise Your Kids Downtown? Meet Two Families with Advice. Ashley Lusk. www.borderstan.com/10/raise-your-kids-downtown-meet-two-families-with-advice/ [12/13/2011 12:36:28 PM]

Making Your Community More child and Youth Friendly: A Toolkit for Getting Started. Society for Children and Youth of BC.

Reversing the Trend: Strategies to Make Center Seattle Livable and Attractive to Families with Children. Dara O'Byrne. Thesis in Urban Planning. University of Washington. 2006

Downtown residents not pining for suburbs. Vancouver Sun. June 25 2008

Family Friendly Urban Neighborhoods: Places and Spaces for Families and

Children in Seattle's Center City; A Workbook for City Staff. City of Seattle. Dec. 2006.

High Density Housing for Families with Children Guidelines. City of Vancouver, Land Use and Development Policies and Guidelines. Adopted by City Council March 24, 1992

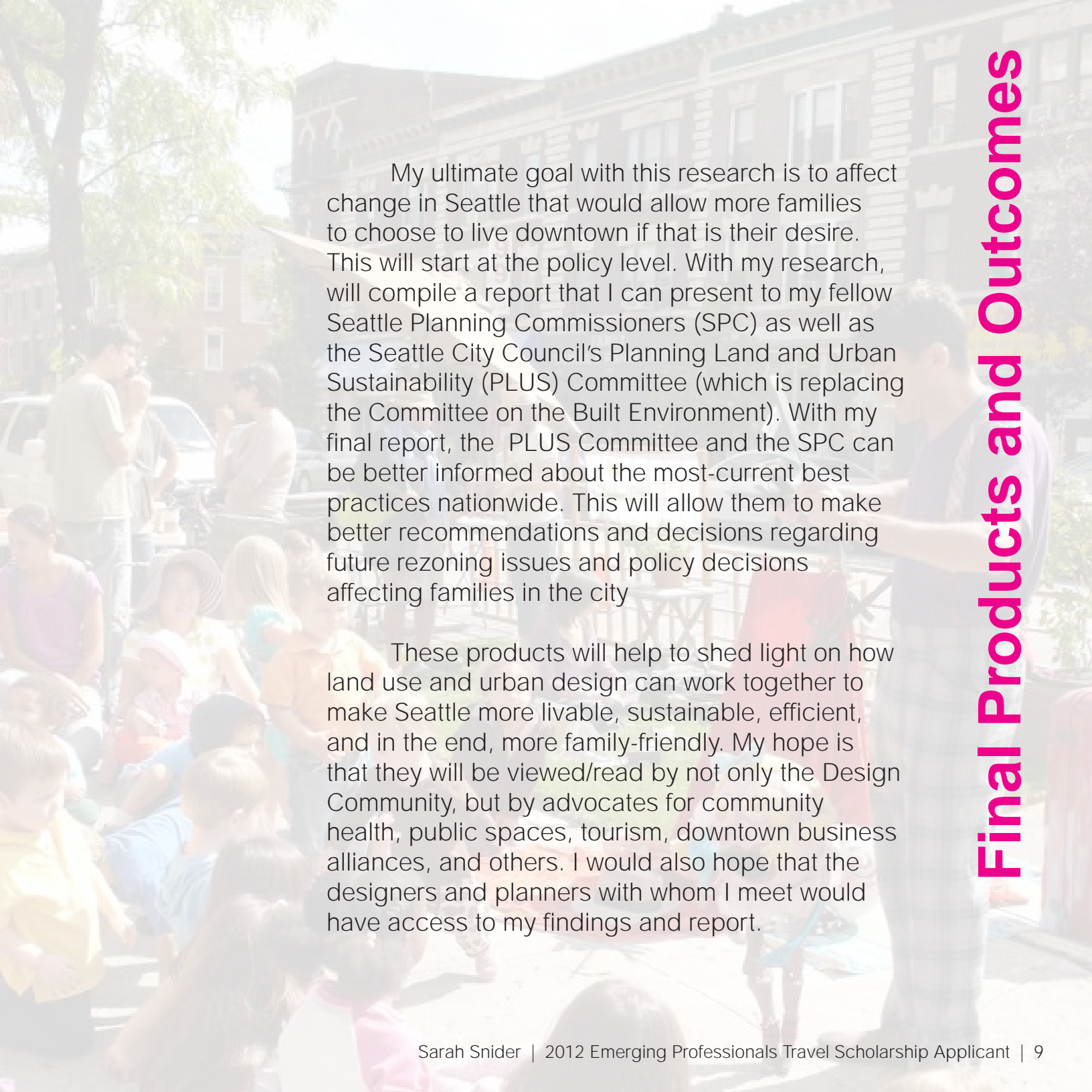
Active Design Guidelines: Promoting Physical Activity and Health in Design. City of New York, 2010.

Living in False Creek North From the Residents' Perspective: Summary of Findings and Recommendations from the False Creek North Post Occupancy Evaluation. College for Interdisciplinary Studies, School of Community and Regional Planning. June, 2008.

Millions could be earmarked for downtown school. Emily Alpert. Voices of San Diego. July 7, 2008.

Planning for Family Friendly Communities Evelyn Israel and Mildred Warner. Nov/Dec 2008 Issue of APA Magazine.

Housing Seattle. A Report by the Seattle Planning Commission. Winter 2011.



My ultimate goal with this research is to affect change in Seattle that would allow more families to choose to live downtown if that is their desire. This will start at the policy level. With my research, I will compile a report that I can present to my fellow Seattle Planning Commissioners (SPC) as well as the Seattle City Council's Planning Land and Urban Sustainability (PLUS) Committee (which is replacing the Committee on the Built Environment). With my final report, the PLUS Committee and the SPC can be better informed about the most-current best practices nationwide. This will allow them to make better recommendations and decisions regarding future rezoning issues and policy decisions affecting families in the city.

These products will help to shed light on how land use and urban design can work together to make Seattle more livable, sustainable, efficient, and in the end, more family-friendly. My hope is that they will be viewed/read by not only the Design Community, but by advocates for community health, public spaces, tourism, downtown business alliances, and others. I would also hope that the designers and planners with whom I meet would have access to my findings and report.

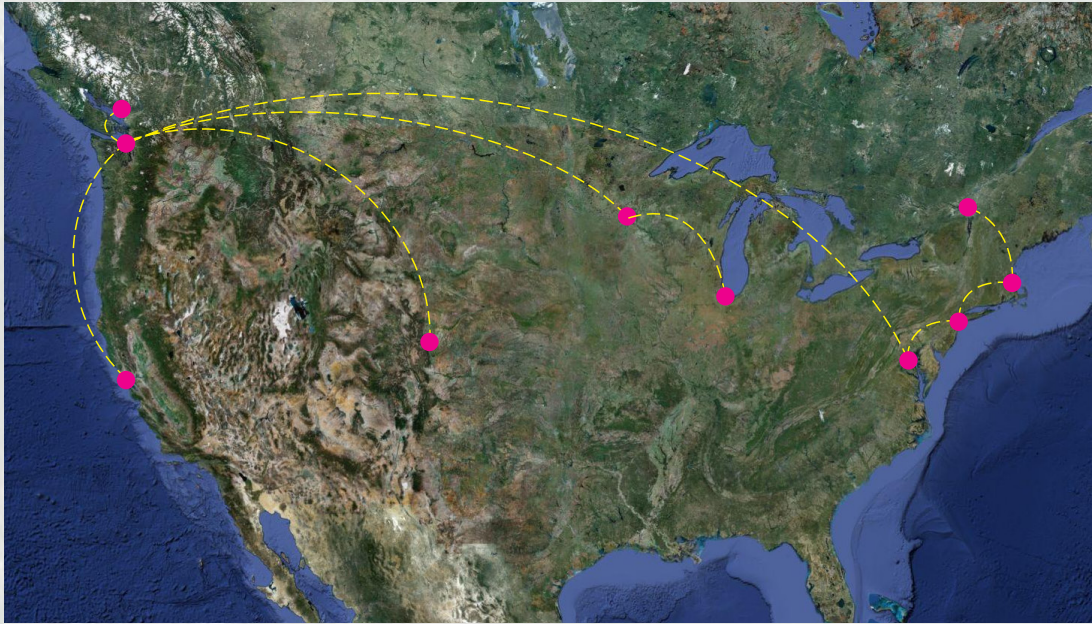
Final Products and Outcomes

Budget Estimate

Approximate Budget:

Flights	\$1800
Train/Bus Travel	\$300
Lodging	\$1400
Food	\$1000
Publication	\$500
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Total:	\$5000

Proposed Itinerary



March 2012 - May 2012

- Research connections
- Collect data
- Plan detailed trip

May 2012

- Visit Denver

June 2012

- Visit Chicago and Minneapolis

July 2012

- Visit San Francisco

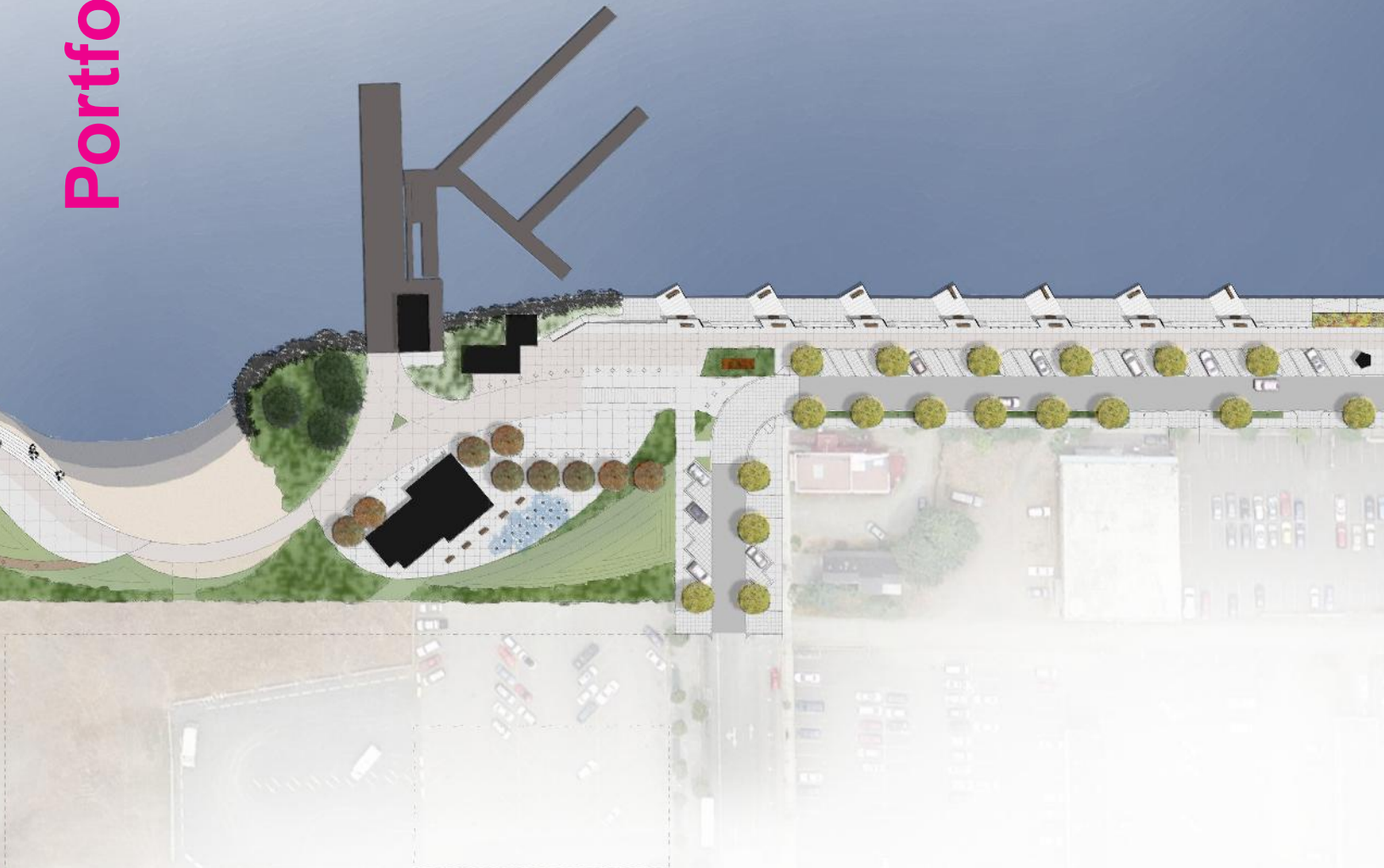
September 2012

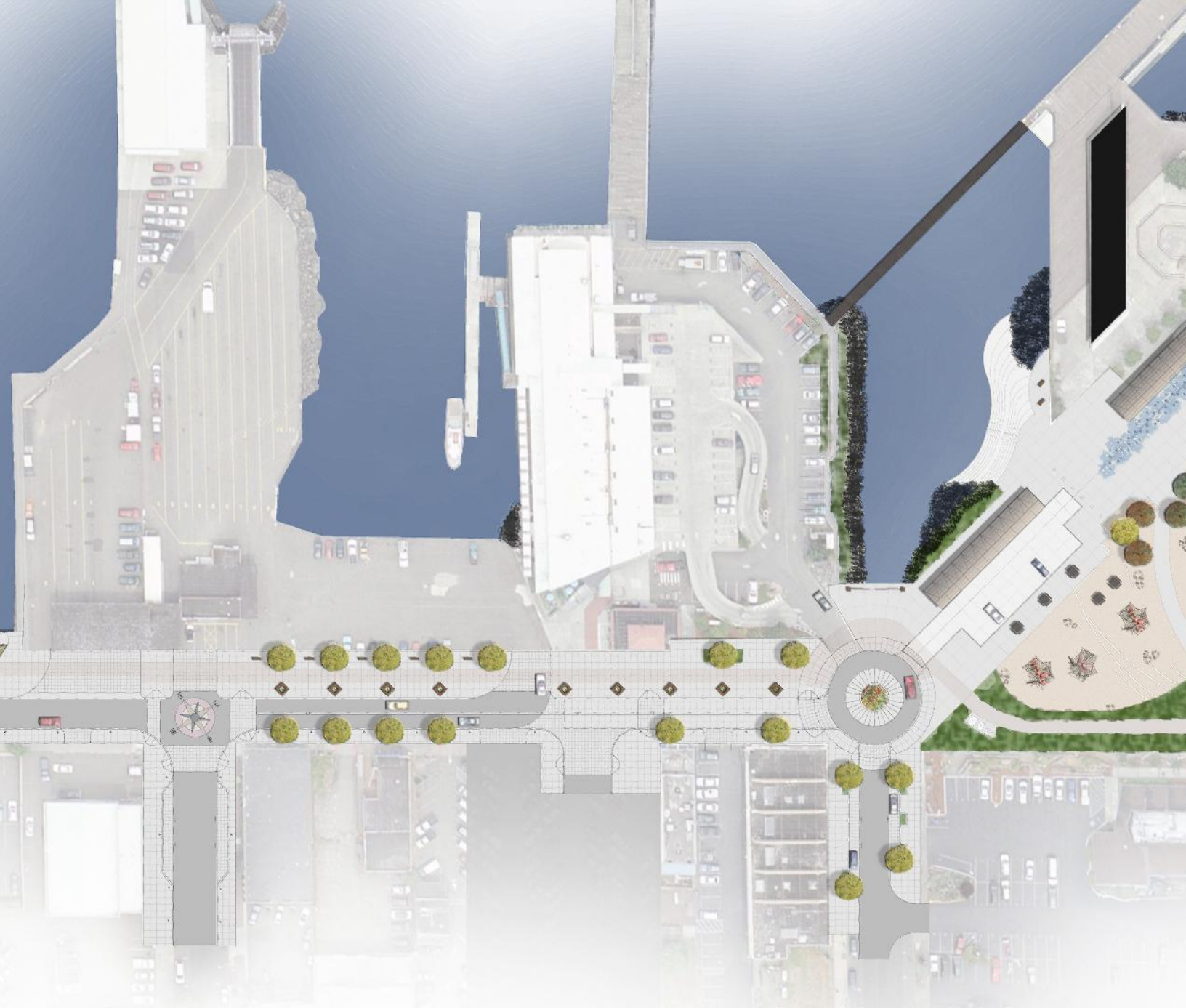
- Visit Montreal, New York and Boston

October, 2011

- Compile research
- Develop presentation and publication
- Make presentation to the Seattle Planning Commission and City Council Planning Land and Urban Sustainability Committee

Portfolio of Work





Port Angeles Waterfront and Transportation Improvement Plan
Port Angeles, WA
LMN Architects 2010-2011
Voted Best Plan by the Regional APA Chapter

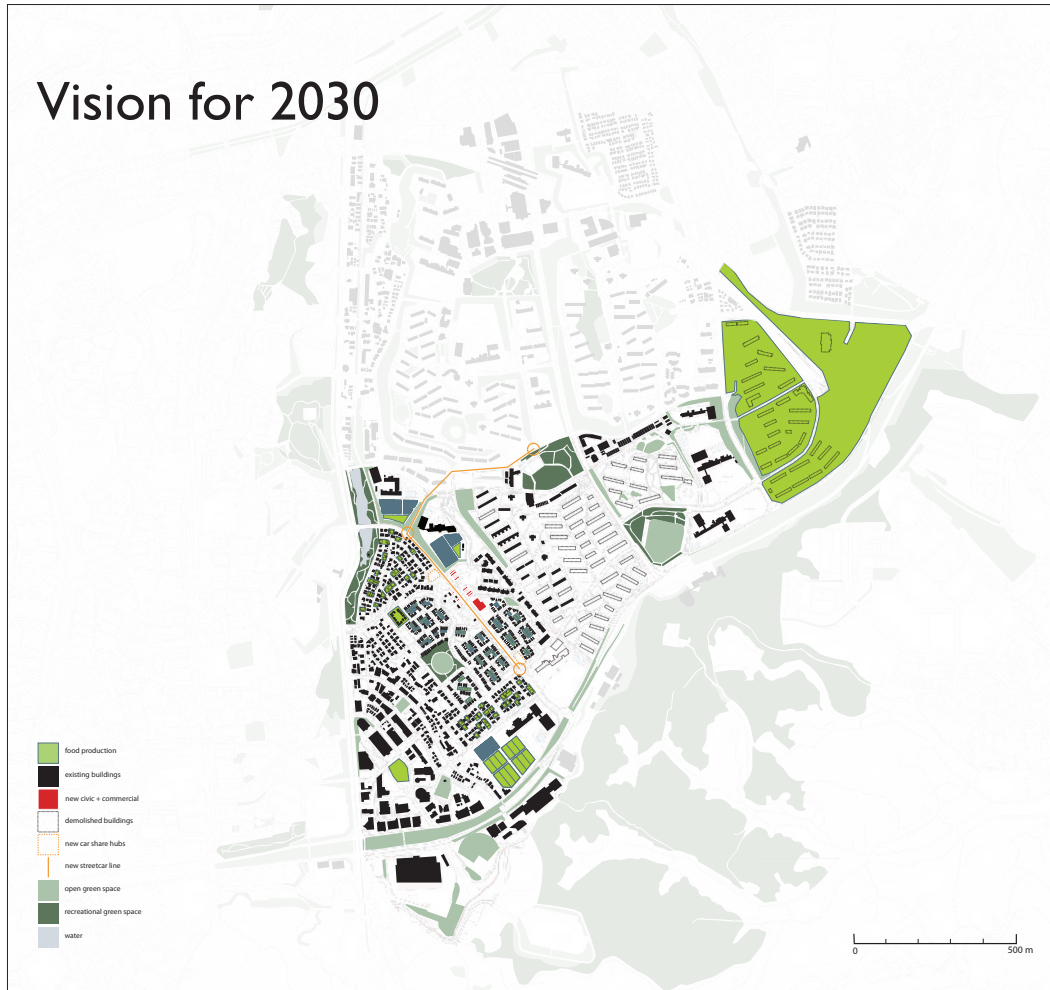


Cleveland Convention Center and Medical Mart
Cleveland, OH
LMN Architects
2010

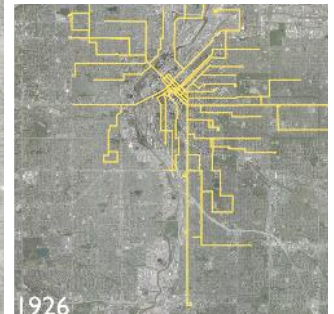
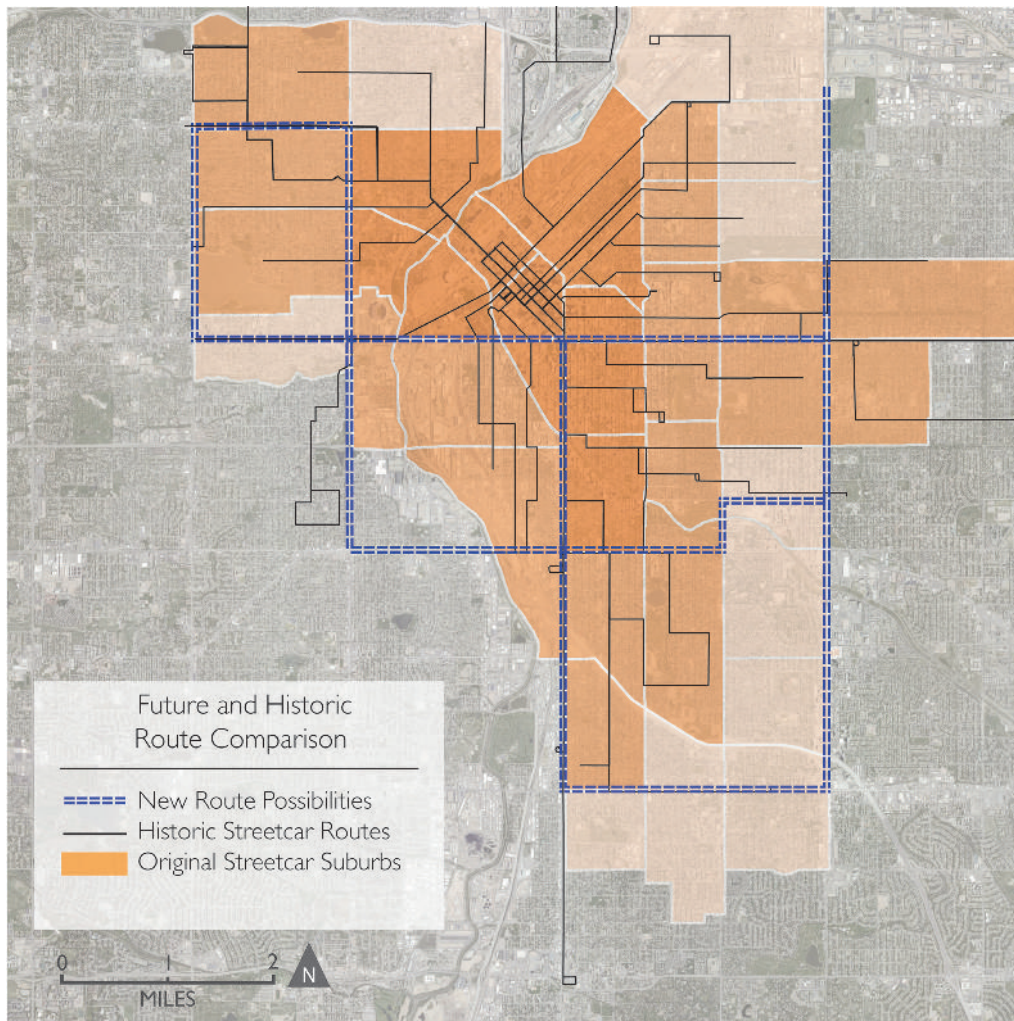


ULI Hines Student Urban Design Competition Winner
 Denver, CO (competition site)
 Massachusetts Institute of Technology
 2009

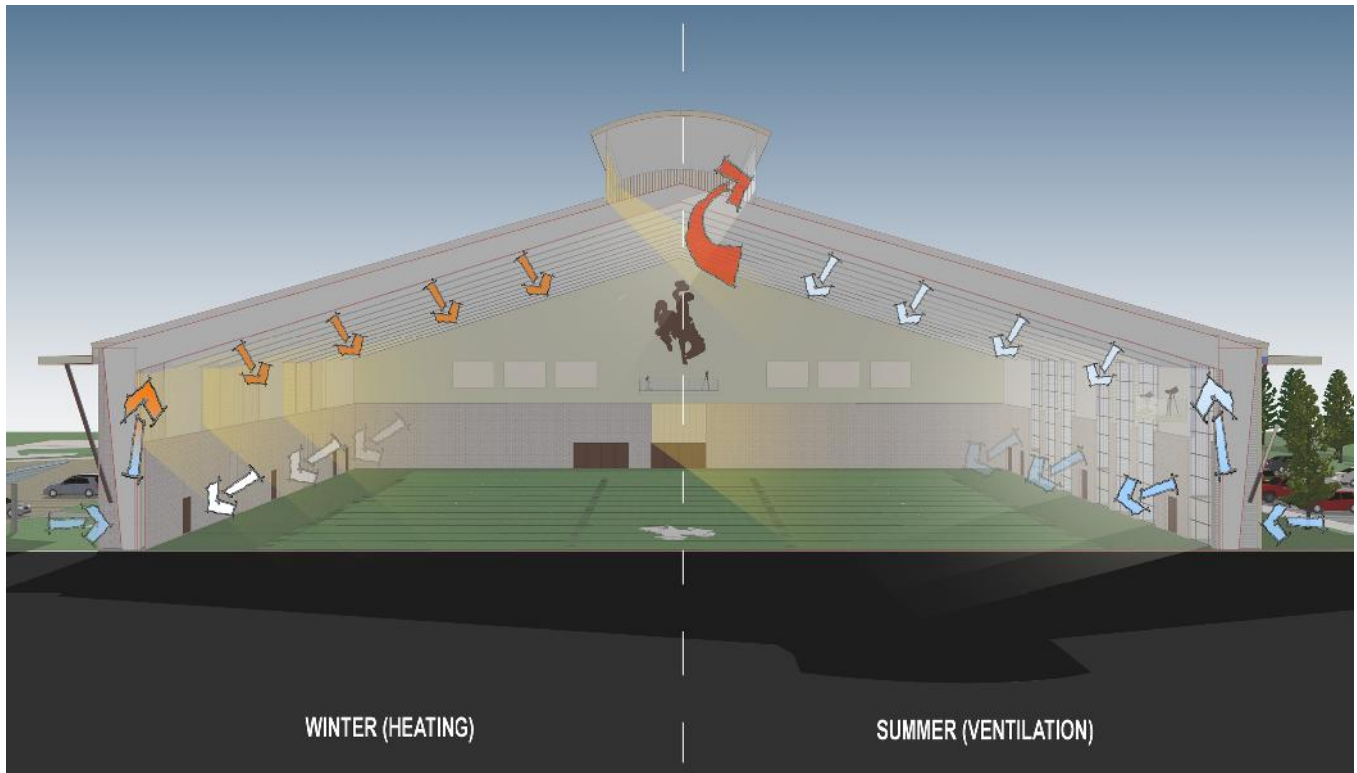
Vision for 2030



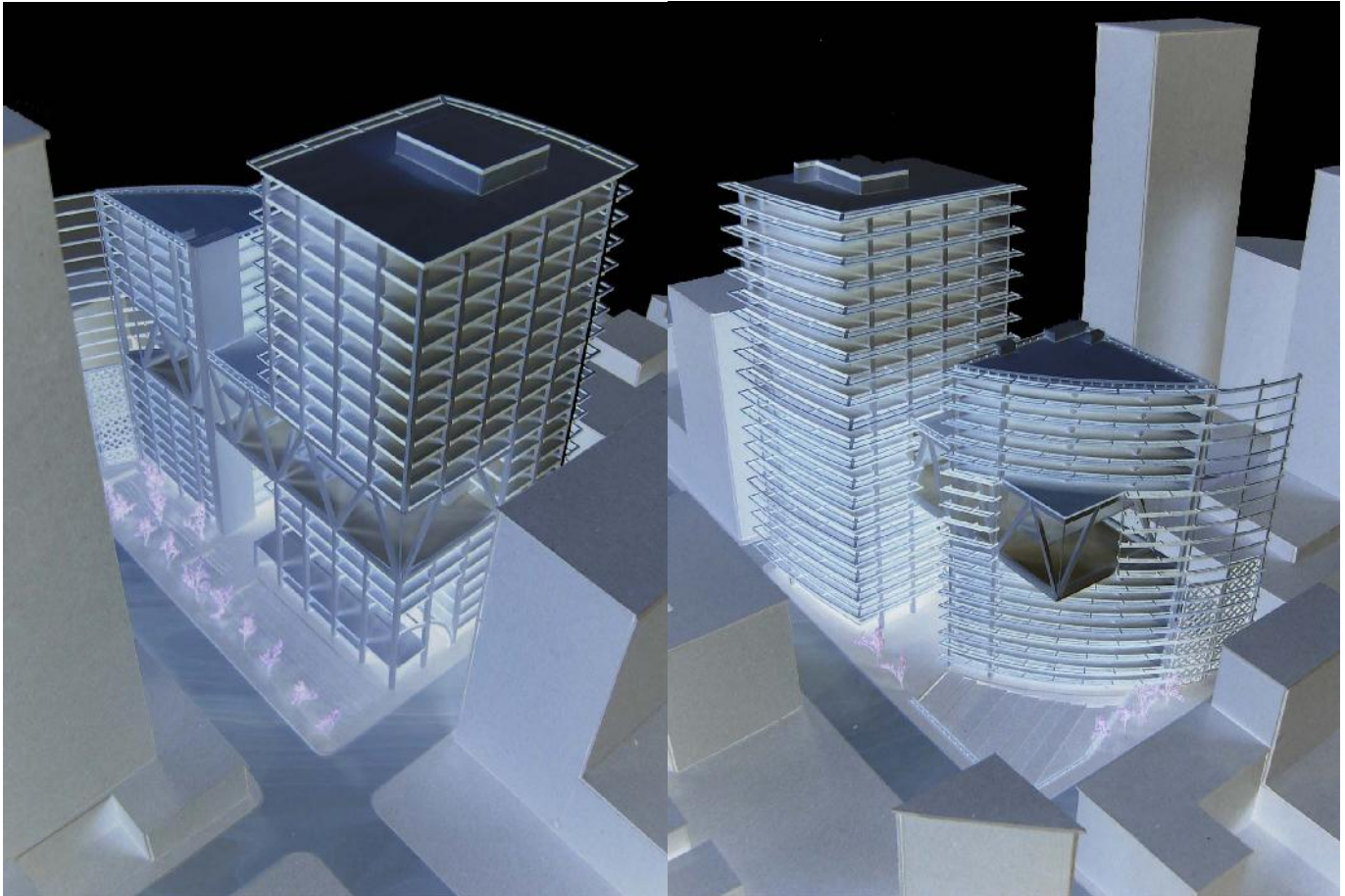
Japan Urban Design Studio
Tokyo, Japan
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
2008



Graduate Thesis: Reintroducing the Streetcar to Denver's Historic Streetcar Suburbs
 Massachusetts Institute of Technology
 2009



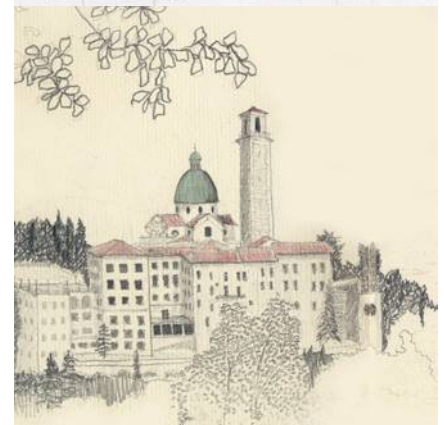
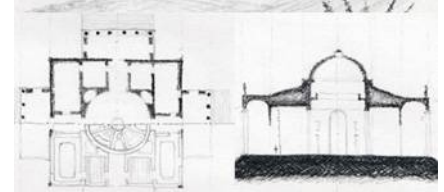
University of Wyoming Indoor Practice Facility
Laramie, WY
Sink Combs Dethlefs, Architects
2007



Sustainable Skyscrapers Senior Studio
Denver, Colorado
University of Virginia
2004



Eastern Washington University Recreation Center
Cheney, WA
Sink Combs Dethlefs Architects
2006



Vicenza Sketching Program, Vicenza, Italy
University of Virginia, 2003

