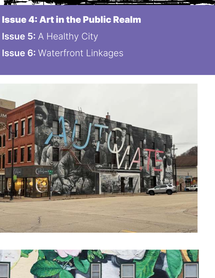
notes from the field

Urban design observations on Dubuque, Iowa

March, 2026
vol. 04

art in the public realm



This periodic e-newsletter provides an update on the Downtown Core Development Strategy. The strategy leverages the University of Dubuque's new College of Medicine and the Dubuque Museum of Art expansion that will stimulate mixed-use development and amenities downtown. This work situates growth to maximize economic impact, foster connectivity and enhance quality of life. The issues will explore the following topics in more detail to share thoughts and ideas as they develop:

Issue 1: Scale Matters
Issue 2: Mind the Gap
Issue 3: Downtown as Neighborhood
Issue 4: Art in the Public Realm
Issue 5: A Healthy City
Issue 6: Waterfront Linkages

In downtown revitalization efforts, attention tends to focus on the impacts of density, traffic, parking (always parking), the rising cost of living, gentrification and, occasionally, climate change resiliency. Yet we miss a critical component of a city and citizen's well-being; the human connection, wonder and innovative thinking that arises from bold, contemporary art.

Dubuque's new Museum of Art will be more than just a traditional art museum. It will be a place to experience well-being and connection. The cultural venue, now under construction, reimagines what is possible for a 21st century museum and for Dubuque's downtown through an immersive, indoor-outdoor campus. The plan integrates gardens, sculptures, makerspaces, screening and performance spaces, a coffee bar and cutting-edge galleries; a new kind of community gathering space. As an integrated building and landscape it will connect great artists to one another and reinforce the 4th Street elevator to Washington Park, the Town Clock, Main Street and Five Flags.

Dubuque's mural project has turned many building facades on private property into compelling canvases of cultural expression.

Image credit: Schulhof Rashidi Architects

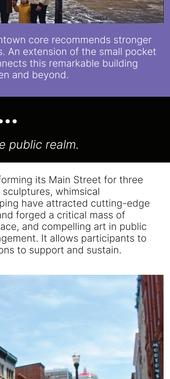
The 20th -century urban planner Lewis Mumford once described the city as "a theater of social action." He believed that schools, theaters and community centers formed a "social nucleus" - the most critical elements in city planning.* Dubuque is fortunate to have the Five Flags Center on Main Street, the Art Museum now under construction, the National Mississippi River Museum and Aquarium, the Grand Opera House and numerous other cultural attractions. These individual attractions are impressive, and more engaging temporary or permanent art in the public realm will augment their allure.

The emerging development strategy for the downtown core recommends stronger east to west connections, linking existing districts. An extension of the small pocket park in front of St. Raphael's Cathedral better connects this remarkable building - "itself a work of art" - to Main Street, Hotel Julien and beyond.

A great downtown is...

a place where engaging art enhances the public realm.

Louisville Kentucky has been incrementally transforming its Main Street for three decades with engaging artistic treatments. Large sculptures, whimsical streetscape furniture, unique paving and landscaping have attracted cutting-edge museums which have driven private investment and forged a critical mass of activity. Streets can be a city's greatest public space, and compelling art in public spaces is the ultimate manifestation of civic engagement. It allows participants to create new strategies, processes and collaborations to support and sustain.



Dubuque Forward Intentional. Community. Speek

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*For more information, refer to "What is a City" (Architectural Record (Vol. LXXXII, Nov 1937).

*More information on Louisville's arts-inspired Main Street can be found in "Rebuilding the American City" (Gamble/Heyda, Routledge Press, 2015).

This effort is coordinated by Dubuque Forward and is led by architect and urban planner David Gamble. David is co-author of "Rebuilding the American City (Routledge, 2016) and "Rebuilding the American Town" (Routledge, 2024). He is Principal of Gamble Associates and a Lecturer in Urban Design at MIT. The Strategy builds on the Envision 2030 initiative and anticipates a city-led Master Plan in 2026.