

A Broadway linear park?

UTSA team reimagines urban space in Alamo Heights

By Antonio Petrov
FOR THE EXPRESS-NEWS

The statement "Alamo Heights is a paradox" is polemic and possibly a provocation. However, Alamo Heights allows for ambiguity when it comes to its identity.

What exactly is Alamo Heights — a city, a drive-through town or a San Antonio neighborhood? And how is the community represented by, or tied to, its main urban artery: Broadway?

Some argue the affluent community is primarily defined by its school district, The Alamo Heights Independent School District. Others are more uncertain about their sentiments toward the town and its links to Broadway.

Clearly the issues surrounding the relationships between Alamo Heights and Broadway, and Broadway and San Antonio are systemic. Broadway, which stretches from the airport right into the heart of downtown San Antonio, is searching for its potential in one of the largest urban areas in the United States.

Recent developments and long overdue changes to building codes continue to elicit ambivalence when we refer to them as "urban," especially on the 2.5-mile



Alamo Heights residents recently had the opportunity to see a demonstration of what a Broadway linear park might look like.



Antonio Petrov: Alamo Heights appears to be in a subliminal state of crisis.

stretch within the city limits of Alamo Heights. As these changes are occurring, it is a good moment to question past assumptions about what urban actually means in San Antonio and Alamo Heights. It also is the time to cast wider nets and establish a more nuanced understanding of what a "city on the rise" needs.

For instance, what do we refer to as urban in the context of San Antonio? What determines its characteristics? And how do we engage with it productively?

At this point, the experience of Broadway only feels urban through the windshields of our cars. And frankly, there is hardly a pedestrian experience to be had along the Alamo Heights stretch of Broadway.

Yes, there are 571 trees along Broadway within the city limits of Alamo Heights (we counted them), but nearly 50 percent of its urban landscape is flanked by parking space. In fact, nearly all spaces along Broadway are tied to businesses and almost no public spaces exist for people to mingle or gather as citizens without being consumers.

As a result, the architecture along the corridor feels

Park continues on E6



Courtesy illustration/photo

Through the years, there have been attempts to re-imagine Broadway in Alamo Heights, as in this artist's rendering that depicts the proposed mixed-use mid-rise, Alamo Heights Gateway. A UTSA team proposes a linear park on Broadway.

How a suicide bomber is made — a Pakistan story

Ashrafuddin Pirzada
FOR THE EXPRESS-NEWS

Editor's note: Ashrafuddin Pirzada, the author, is a correspondent with The News, an English-language daily in Pakistan. He was in San Antonio for a fellowship with the Express-News last year, when he wrote this. Given current events, his personal insight on how one could-be suicide bomber was made is as timely now as it was then.

"I am the luckiest one. Allah saved my life just a few seconds before I had to trigger my explosive-packed vest when I entered the military compound in Tirah Valley ... I would never have had a chance to make amends to those I was supposed to kill."

This came from Mursaleen, 13. See if you can understand



Ashrafuddin Pirzada: Tells a boy's story — kidnapped and trained as a suicide bomber.

this — a 13-year-old boy, just another pawn in the turmoil that has long embroiled the area where I live and work as a journalist.

I'm not using his real name to protect his identity — and his life.

He had been sent by militants to kill Pakistani security forces in the hilly areas of the Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA), a region in Pakistan that borders Afghanistan. But he surrendered before he completed his task.

Mursaleen says militants kidnapped him and three other children years earlier to train



Associated Press file photo

In 2014, a displaced Pakistani mother and daughter wait to get relief supplies at a distribution center in Bannu, Pakistan. Suicide attacks have become commonplace in this region.

them as fighters and suicide bombers. They told him that he had to kill the soldiers because they were "kafir," non-Muslims.

He told me his story in a rehabilitation center about a

year after he had been sent on his suicide mission. He had been kidnapped from a camp for displaced persons in the city of Nowshera. He was never sure of the location where the militants kept him.

"In those first few days, I was crying for my home and family, but with the passage of time I adapted to the situation there," he said.

Mursaleen said there were

Bomber continues on E6

OPINION

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incoherent with an urban façade that reminds us of a commercial corridor rather than a great avenue in one of the great cities. The architecture of Broadway, including recent developments, leaves no room for imagination. This supports the argument that Broadway is an unresolved urban space.

Alamo Heights and Broadway are centerless spaces bordered by ensembles of micro-communities and scattered urban programs. However, now more than ever, Broadway is a critical space within the larger fabric of San Antonio. And Alamo Heights, within the complex cultural, ecological and economical geographies of San Antonio, brings about spatial implications that merit greater attention than it's received.

While Alamo Heights' true definition as a framework of interrelating social, cultural, economic and ecological systems is hard to decipher, the speeds at which new shifts and resulting spatial consequences occur on Broadway have suggested a new level of significance for the readability of the urban fabric in the past few years.

It is true Alamo Heights has no Pearl Brewery, but how would new urban development register in Alamo Heights? From the distance it appears as if the future of Alamo Heights is characterized by its lack of urban identity, which currently keeps it as it is — a transitory space in constant "tension."

Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben uses the analogy of an ill patient going to the doctor to describe this kind of non-space. In ancient medicine, crisis is the decisive moment that determines whether the patient is sick, chronically ill, or going to die, he said, and it is instrumental in the construction of urban space.

Crisis can also refer to an enduring state in which uncertainty is extended into the future indefinitely. This can sometimes be used to serve and legitimize political actions, which deprives urban and regional space of a fixed identity, leaving citizens without a clear understanding of who they are, where they are, and what it actually is they expect from their future.

Alamo Heights appears to be in this subliminal state of crisis. The old — its present state — is dying, but the new and diverse, a possible future, cannot be born. In other words the non-deterministic centerless existence of Broadway, the popular



Photos by William Luther / San Antonio Express-News

Broadway's identity in Alamo Heights seems in stasis. Other possibilities exist. New amendments to Alamo Heights building code dictate that new multifamily projects — from Burr Road to Albany Street — have zero setback from facade to sidewalk. This could be the start of something big.



There is a tendency to identify Alamo Heights purely through its excellent school district. But that is shortsighted. The city can be more and its arterial, Broadway, can do much of the heavy lifting.

school district, and perhaps even the distinct socio-economic pluralities of the Alamo Heights micro-communities continue to determine its urban and non-urban identities without allowing something new to emerge.

This not only suffocates new development, but it also stagnates a strong local culture that deserves to be illuminated.

At the University of Texas at San Antonio Department of Architecture — housed in the College of Architecture, Construction and Planning — we have investigated issues related to urbanization, urban transformations and the evolution of sustainable cities.

Alamo Heights and San Antonio could be cities that are shaped by their own transformation processes. However, in reality we are still dealing with sprawl rather than a city on the rise.

To induce a breath of fresh air we have changed scales from sprawl and regional planning to more local community based placemaking. In a "Think/Do-Tank" at UTSA, we have explored expanded ideas of architecture to rethink current conditions of the city in order to dismantle prevailing spatial meanings in Alamo Heights and San Antonio.

Within this framework we did this not only to ask critical questions that could help these communities change current conceptualizations of Broadway, Alamo Heights and San Antonio, but also to rethink the evolving agencies behind shaping possible (urban) growth.

Alamo Heights' distinct cultures, both local and global, are so distinctive that they could already be defining inherent potential futures for Broadway.

We have developed strategies that we believe can lead to archi-

tectural interventions and something we are referring to as "The Third Condition" to invigorate new life and inspire new public and consumer spaces along Broadway.

The Third Condition is a connective linear park situated parallel to Broadway that aims to find equilibrium between open and closed spaces, the natural and artificial, and the urban and the non-urban conditions found in Alamo Heights. It includes a continuous public garden, walkways, dog parks, space for recreational activity, public plazas and a bike path connecting Basse Road to Hildebrand, possibly to downtown.

With excellent design and innovative programming we seek to engage the vibrant and diverse community in Alamo Heights and San Antonio. Architectural interventions like a Start-up Haus, a business park, a new library, a public amphitheater, a new gallery district, a farmer's market, or a parking garage that changes over time into a public leisure space also invigorate the linear park, Broadway, Alamo Heights and San Antonio with new ways to live, work, innovate, and study.

The "Think/Do-Tank" recently presented research-based strategies and individual architectural propositions to local citizens, scholars and public officials at the Alamo Heights Fire Station and Brick within the Blue Star Arts Complex.

The two-night exhibition displayed propositions through which we stepped away from the traditional confined domains of the master-plan. Our idea was to develop a dialogue among the linear park, Broadway and the neighborhoods on a pedestrian level. Also we wanted to unite the urban and non-urban into a new third condition. What we considered as newly designed "rooms in the city" would activate the urban landscape and operate as catalysts and active agents from the street, for the street, and about the street, giving Broadway a new sense of place.

This approach not only resulted in a shared approach, but most important in common conversations with local activists and the community in an attempt to improve one of the main urban corridors in the city.

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BOMBER

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several other children at the militants' camp. They spent much of their time just being boys, playing with each other and having fun. But the militant commanders slowly began introducing them to the tools of their new trade, at first an AK-47 and a small pistol. And then he got months-long training as a suicide bomber.

"The master (the bomb specialist) told us that suicide bombers who completed their tasks would be in paradise and be happy there," Mursaleen said.

As if to get the boys accustomed to easy death, the militants executed prisoners in front of them with knives and guns.

Mursaleen was put to work grazing the militants' goats and sheep in the hills at the hideout. He milked them as well.

He described a process of indoctrination tantamount to brainwashing. It wasn't long before the militants' sentiments against Pakistani security forces were his own.

A year into his stay at the rehabilitation center, he was regaining some sense of normalcy. I interviewed him over that time about a dozen times.

At first, there was no friendliness. He told me that when he caught me in the mountains, he would slaughter me with sharp wire. I believed him. This is how he was trained.

But after a few sessions, we became friends.

It was clear, he needed one. Before Mursaleen was captured by the Khyber Agency, a tribal area in FATA, he had never attended school and was basically ignorant about Islam.



M SAQLAIN / AFP / Getty Images

Pakistani firefighters extinguish a fire at the site of a bomb explosion Dec. 13 in Parachinar, the capital of Kurram tribal district. Many young boys have been forced to become suicide bombers.

But soon, thanks to indoctrination by a man who preached to the militants about holy war against U.S. and Pakistani forces, he was reciting the Quran.

"I was taught in this preaching that those who supported U.S. forces that occupied Afghanistan are kafir and that it is jihad to kill them," Mursaleen told me.

The militants' indoctrination has taken its toll on Mursaleen. During my encounters with him, he didn't behave as a normal boy would and sometimes seemed as intoxicated with the same emotion as he must have felt before he was sent on his mission. I saw him kiss an official at the rehabilitation center and call him "father." He called the other security personnel his "brothers."

Why didn't he complete his mission? He simply realized the militants had lied. He saw this immediately when he entered the army compound.

"I saw soldiers were offering prayers. I realized that they were Muslims. Why should I kill them?," he said. "I cried to the security personnel for help — that I have an explosive jacket around my body but that I did not want to kill them."

The soldiers removed the explosives from his body and asked many questions.

Asked about the other children who were with him at the militants' camp, he said he didn't know what became of them.

Mursaleen's circumstances do not represent an isolated case in FATA. Suicide attacks

have become commonplace, killing hundreds in the region — security forces and innocents alike.

Among the deadliest attacks was a suicide bombing on a mosque in a subdivision of Khyber Agency that left 40 worshippers dead and more than 60 others injured in August 2010. Several other mosques, public gatherings, aid centers and security check points have been targeted across FATA and much of the rest of Pakistan since the United States began its war in Afghanistan, and started drone attacks in the tribal areas.

But also among the casualties have been children such as Mursaleen. Kidnapped, trained to be militants or suicide bombers, they often have no place to go if they escape or otherwise

survive their ordeals. Their parents often disown them. Mursaleen avoided talking to me about his parents, perhaps fearing that the militants would take their revenge on them. But an official told me that he had found his parents and that they were ready to take him back.

If so, Mursaleen will be one of the lucky ones.

Mursaleen is trying to piece his life back together but it's difficult trying to wash away the memories. He was undergoing therapy in the center.

The local people are well aware of boys such as Mursaleen. They blame lawlessness, poverty, ignorance, corruption, and a poor health and education system. They say these promote extremism and militancy in FATA.

They notice that the draconian laws applied to the tribal areas by the British in 1901 have been replaced by neglect, indifference — and sometime brutality — from the Pakistan government.

Pakistan gained its independence in 1947.

The local people have a point: Young men with no jobs and no prospects are easily wooed into militancy and extremism.

Sincere and competent leadership can make a difference. Such leadership might start with economic development, but it would necessarily include giving tribal people full rights in Pakistan.

It starts with addressing the conditions that turn little boys into would-be killers.

Mursaleen is now in one of the best schools in Pakistan. He says he wants to serve Pakistan and its citizens when he grows up.

One boy saved. So many others yet to be saved.