



2. The North End Today

In order to better understand the opportunities and constraints in developing a community campus center around the Gerena School and in the North End, an inventory of the neighborhood was conducted. The physical and social assets of the North End were analyzed through the following three lenses:

1. Architecture, Urban Design, and Open Space
2. Transportation and Pedestrian Traffic
3. Social and Economic Activity

Each analysis was conducted through a series of visits to the community, maps of initial neighborhood impressions, research of current conditions, and information gathering from the Campus Concept Committee, NEON staff and current North End residents. The analyses uncovered a wide array of issues, many of which are addressed in the final Campus plan.



Existing housing stock

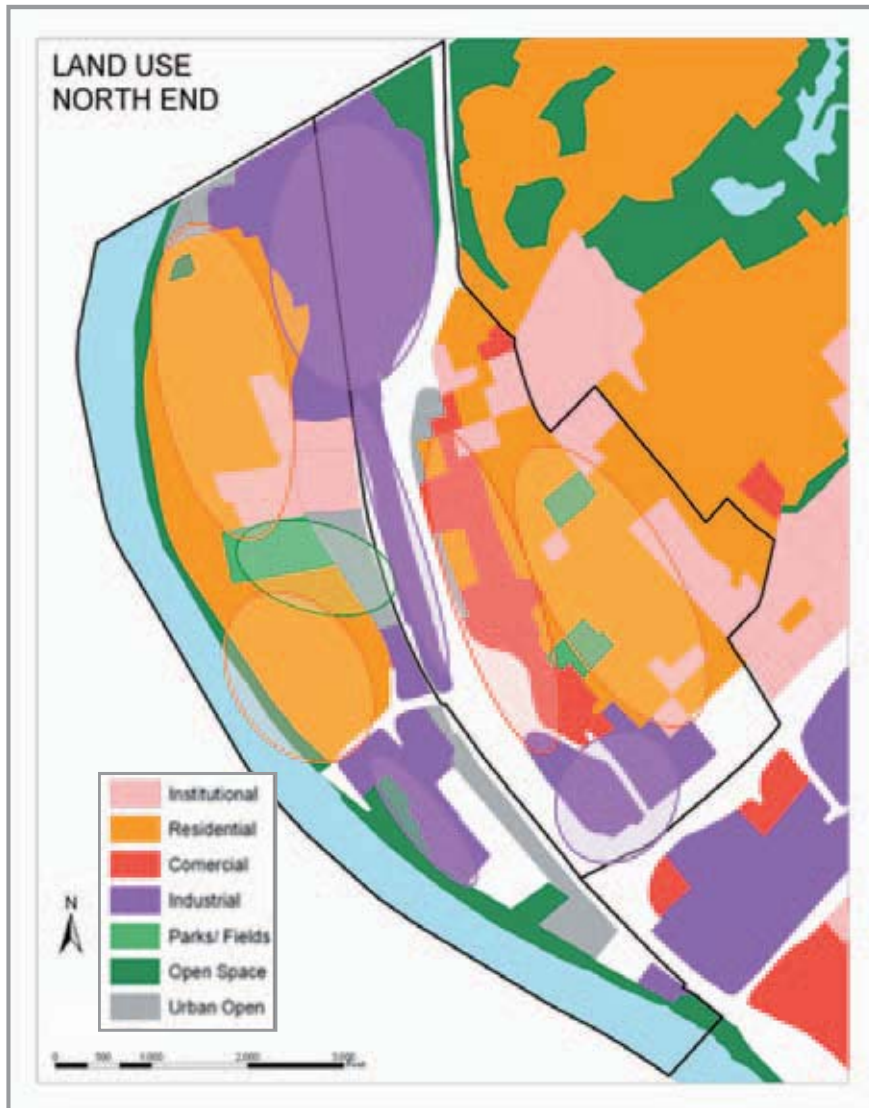


Old factory building on Birnie Avenue

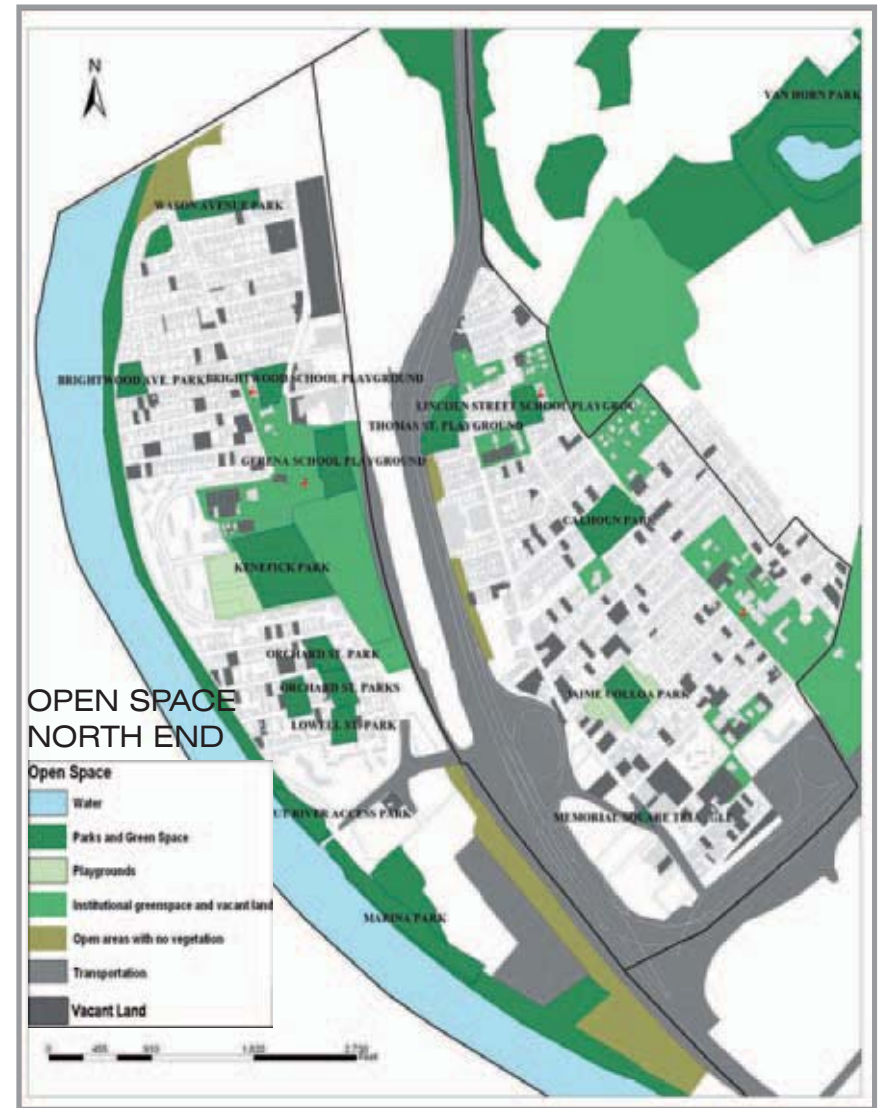
Architecture, Urban Design, and Open Space

The architecture and urban design analysis primarily sought to understand the physical design qualities of the neighborhood. Specifically, it focused on looking at current land uses, availability of open spaces, neighborhood gateways and boundaries, and architecture and existing building conditions.

The architecture of the North End varies in style and size. The housing located in Memorial Square is higher in density while the housing in Plainfield consists of more single and multi-family housing units. While there is a large supply of housing, many structures are in poor condition. Most of the deteriorating housing stock can be found around the edges of the neighborhood where



there are higher concentrations of renter occupants. The Brightwood side of the neighborhood is mostly residential with some industrial and green space areas while the Memorial Square side combines a more balanced array of land uses including residential, commercial, institutional and green space.



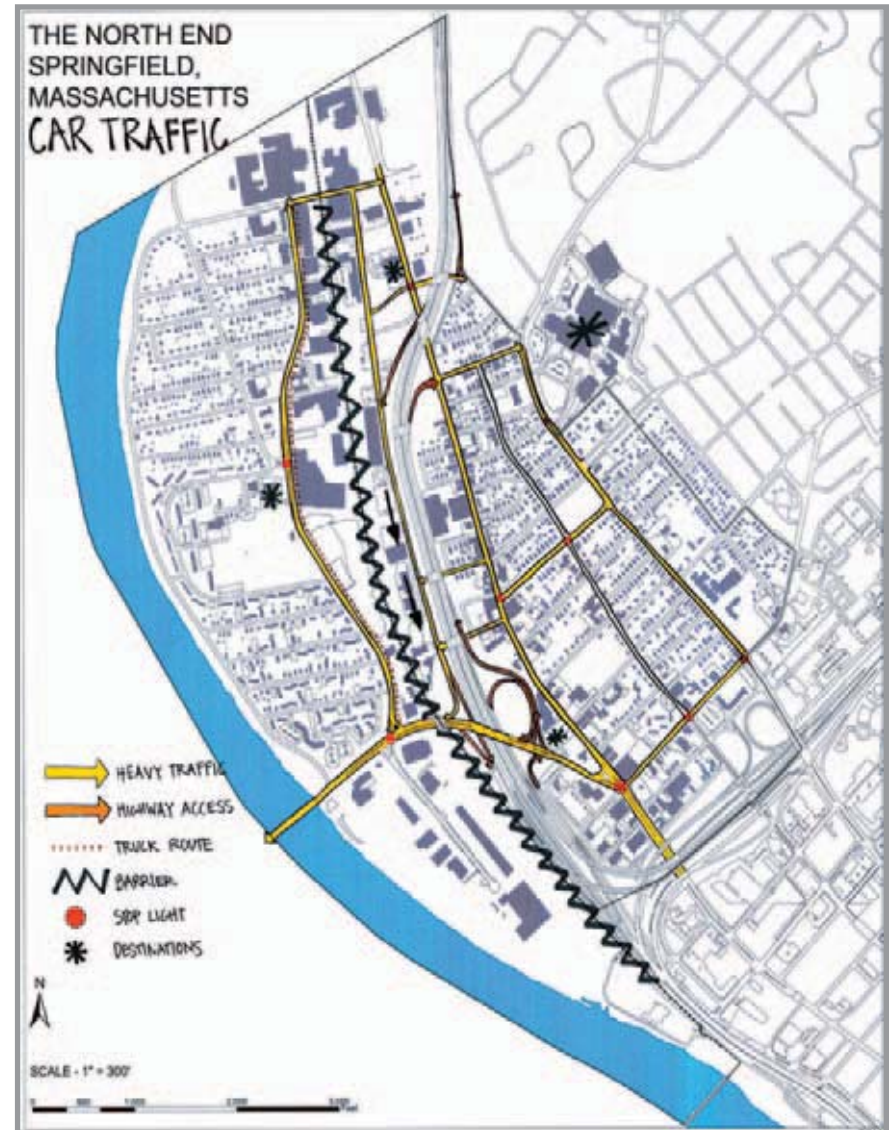
Although the North End has a considerable amount of community open space to enjoy, most spaces are underutilized and uninviting for residents and visitors. For example, access to the waterfront corridor located along the River is impeded by the flood wall. The outdoor space in Thomas Street Park located directly in front of the Gerena School along Main Street is approximately the size of a football field yet is characterized by inactivity. The park is surrounded by

trees and benefits from interesting topographic variations, yet lacks areas for people to sit and for kids to play. It is also poorly lit at night and lacks any commercial activity on the actual plaza to attract passersby. The doors to the school are painted black and give the entrance a “bunker” type of feel. Similarly, the interior open space areas including those in the lower level of the Gerena School are large and often underutilized. With the lowest floor below the water table, leaking and flooding cause water damage including stains, mold, and poor air quality. Water is such a serious problem, that several key community institutions left the building after the damage caused by the last major flood, amongst these the Public Library. In spite of these challenges the well-lit atrium and rooms around it provide a great opportunity to house programmatic and community activity.

Transportation and Pedestrian Traffic

The traffic analysis focused on understanding the patterns that cars, public transportation, and pedestrians follow within the neighborhood and in the surrounding areas. It also looked at congestion points and areas of resistance, particularly for pedestrians. Similar to other communities divided by a highway, the North End faces significant physical connectivity challenges.

I-91 off ramp at North Main Street



Main Street is clearly the main traffic artery within the neighborhood both for cars and pedestrians. Yet in conjunction with unclear gateways, the analysis identified poor signage on I-91 directing drivers to the area. The highway access ramps allow Bay State Medical visitors and workers to bypass the neighborhood, representing a missed opportunity to attract outsiders to Main Street businesses



Crossing from Plainfield to Memorial Square on the I-91 overpass

and to special events. In terms of public transit, the neighborhood's major destinations are well served by local buses. However, most buses run along North-South routes and completely neglect the east-west connections so deeply needed in the neighborhood.

The main pedestrian issues are tied to the informal crossings residents typically use in order to travel from east to west in the North End. Due to the lack of east-west public transit connectivity, lower-than-average car ownership rates, and time restrictions on the formalized pedestrian crossings, many North End residents regularly use dangerous crossings such as the one in the photo above. The Gerena School passageway is only open from 7am to 10pm, Monday to Friday. Besides the school passageway, there are only two other formal pedestrian crossings, one in the far northern and one in the southern part of Main Street.

Economic and Social Activity

The Economic and Social Activity analysis primarily sought to understand the networks that exist within the North End neighborhood. It looked at a wide array of services and activities including schools, health clinics, social services centers, commercial areas, and employment centers. In addition, it focused on understanding and addressing the needs of the youth and senior citizen population in the North End through a series of workshops and informal interviews.

In the interviews with the elderly, citizens expressed an interest in improving their limited mobility throughout the neighborhood, as well as access to exercise and dancing facilities, and community space. In the youth workshops, teenagers ranging from 14 to 19 years-of-age expressed their desire to have a place of their own, where older youth could socialize in a setting with activities that address their interests. Some of the ideas mentioned included designing a place to create music and dance or a space that has computers, food, a movie theatre, or a night club. Some other ideas include rehabilitating and adding park equipment for recreational use, constructing a bridge



Busy day at McDonald's

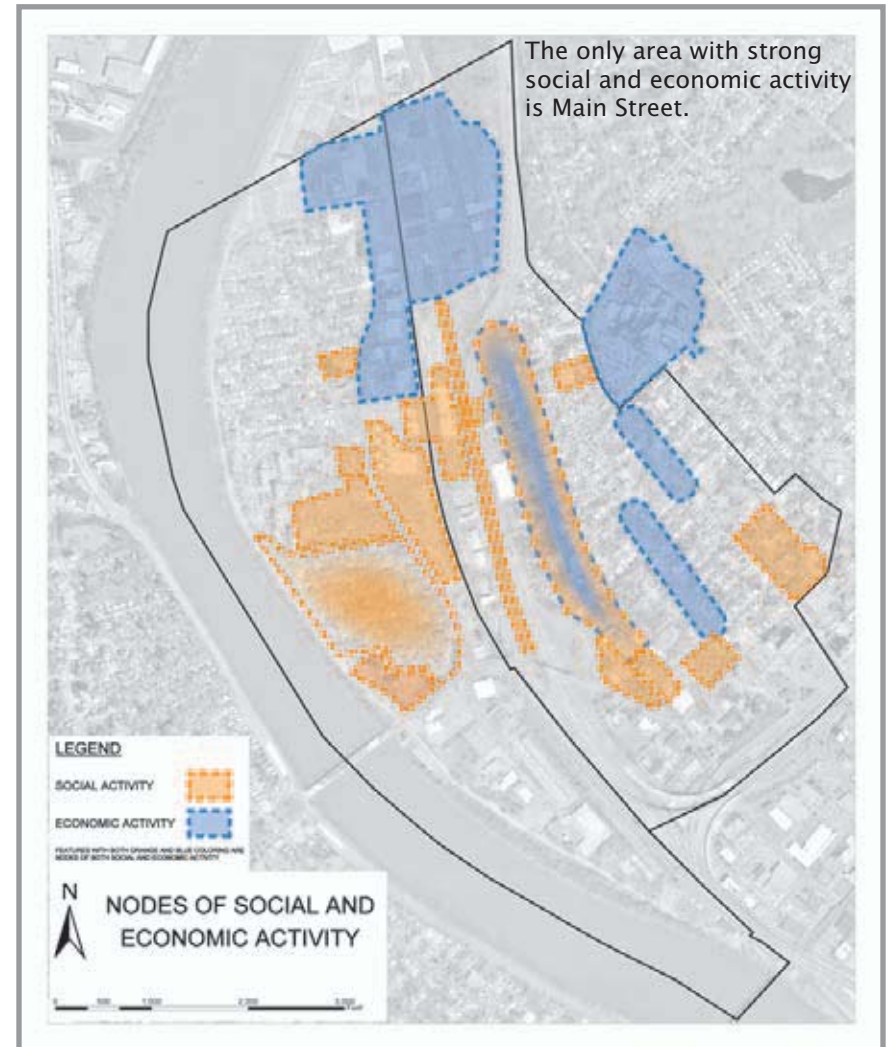


Business in Memorial Square

to cross over the railroad tracks, and establishing a youth café. Teenagers also believe that the largest challenges to creating better social spaces in the North End are maintenance and safety.

The North End is clearly a neighborhood with strong community-building opportunities. The extensive social service programming and high levels of civic involvement make it rich in social capital. In addition, the neighborhood has strong political resources in both local and state governments. Most of the institutional and programmatic resources are concentrated in two areas: (1) the blocks on the southern end of Main Street; and (2) the inner ring around the Brightwood Clinic including the Chestnut and the Gerena Schools. The division of institutional and programmatic resources into two separate areas can make coordination between existing programmatic offerings a challenging task. In addition, problems associated with poverty including crime, health-related issues, lack of education, and lack of economic opportunity limit the ability of community organizations to reach North End residents.

According to the 1958 Urban Renewal Plan, commercial activity was planned to extend along Main Street from downtown Springfield into the Brightwood area. Due to the building of highway I-91, this



plan was never implemented. The North End became divided, with the vast majority of commercial activity located in Memorial Square. On Main Street, residents frequently visit local stores. Yet, as noted earlier, this corridor of activity is not easily accessible to residents on the Brightwood side of the neighborhood, and is also perceived as unsafe by many residents. Although the North End represents a working place for many people in the larger metro area, non-residents represent an untapped market with great potential.

Constraints

The main constraints facing the North End include:

- *Limited Connectivity*

It is clear that the North End is disconnected physically by the highway and railroad tracks, severely limiting traffic and pedestrian patterns. This idea of disconnect can also be extended to the programmatic activity in the neighborhood.

- *Deteriorating Infrastructure*

The deteriorating housing stock, high number of vacant buildings and vacant lots, and poor street conditions could potentially lead to further disinvestment in the community if not addressed properly.

- *Social Issues*

The North End contains the poorest Census tract in Massachusetts according to the 2000 Census. Many residents face serious social, economic, and health issues that need to be addressed. In addition, a perceived increase in real and actual crime has impacted the residents' sense of security, and has altered the way outsiders view the neighborhood.

Opportunities

The main opportunities include:

- *Rich Social Networks*

The North End is a neighborhood with a strong identity and sense of community. The richness in social capital is evident by the large number of programmatic offerings to residents, and should be leveraged.

- *Strong Economic Corridor*

The vibrancy of the Main Street commercial corridor and number of locally owned businesses create the framework needed to further expand commercial activity.

- *Easily accessible by transportation*

The North End is easily accessible by car or public transportation due to its proximity to the highway and its connectivity within the Pioneer Valley Transit Authority bus system.

- *Physical Assets*

The location of the schools and availability of vacant lots around them present a great opportunity to further develop a strong core area. In addition, the open space corridors, spaces for plazas, and waterfront location add to the physical assets of the neighborhood.

