

# *st*ART *NORMAN* BETTER BLOCK

Norman Arts Council  
OU College of Architecture  
OU Institute for Quality Communities



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# introduction

The Norman Arts Council created StART Norman to demonstrate how art is playing a role in community revitalization, borrowing from two successful models. No Longer Empty is an organization in New York that creates a site-specific art installation to temporarily occupy vacant spaces. The Better Block is a model originating in Dallas, Texas, that temporarily transforms streetscapes to better serve the needs of daily life.

The University of Oklahoma Institute for Quality Communities (IQC) and Norman Arts Council hosted the creators of No Longer Empty and the Better Block for workshops walking volunteers and students through how the programs work. Manon Slome of No Longer Empty presented at Gould Hall in September, and Jason Roberts and Andrew Howard of the Better Block presented at MAINSITE Gallery in February. These workshops provided a great benefit to the project.

StART Norman utilized both of these models to create an interesting program on the 200 Block of West Main Street in April 2014.

IQC created the Tactical Urbanism Workshop course to include eight students in the Better Block program.

## Tactical urbanism means **lighter, quicker, cheaper** interventions.

Tactical urbanism is a term for a growing movement of citizen-led 'lighter, quicker, cheaper' interventions in the built environment, including Better Block. Tactical urbanism and other lighter, quicker, cheaper methods are increasingly included as part of the tool kit of city planners and community leaders.

Students in the workshop came from many academic programs, including Architecture, Public Affairs and Administration, and Film and Video Studies. Students analyzed conditions on the site, proposed interventions, participated in construction and installation, then measured the effects of the interventions during the event.

# collaborators

## **START NORMAN COMMUNITY COMMITTEE**

Jim Adair, Adair & Associates  
heather ahtone (Curator), Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art  
Susan Atkinson, City of Norman  
Carol Beesley, Norman Arts Council  
Judith Blake, Community Volunteer  
Tessa Breder, Norman Chamber of Commerce  
Rob Crissinger, Bumbershoot PR  
Jonathan Fowler, Fowler Holding Group  
Ron Frantz, University of Oklahoma College of Architecture  
Erinn Gavaghan, Norman Arts Council  
Susan Greer, Norman Arts Council  
Amyie Kao, Mariposa  
Daniel Kao, Mariposa  
Stephen Koranda, Cleveland County Fairgrounds  
Taylor Mauldin, Norman Convention and Visitors Bureau  
Richard McKown, Norman Arts Council  
Laura Reese (Curator), Oklahoma Visual Arts Coalition  
Amber Roth, Norman Arts Council  
Melissa Scaramucci (Chair), Norman Arts Council/LOCAL  
Mike Tower  
Larry Walker, Norman Arts Council  
Tracey Zeeck, Bumbershoot PR

## **GUESTS**

Team Better Block  
Jason Roberts, Founder  
Andrew Howard

No Longer Empty  
Manon Slome, Executive Director

## **NORMAN ARTS COUNCIL**

Erinn Gavaghan, Executive Director  
Joshua Boydston, Communications Director  
Tim Stark, Project Manager

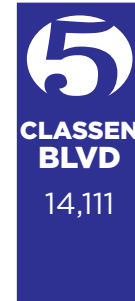
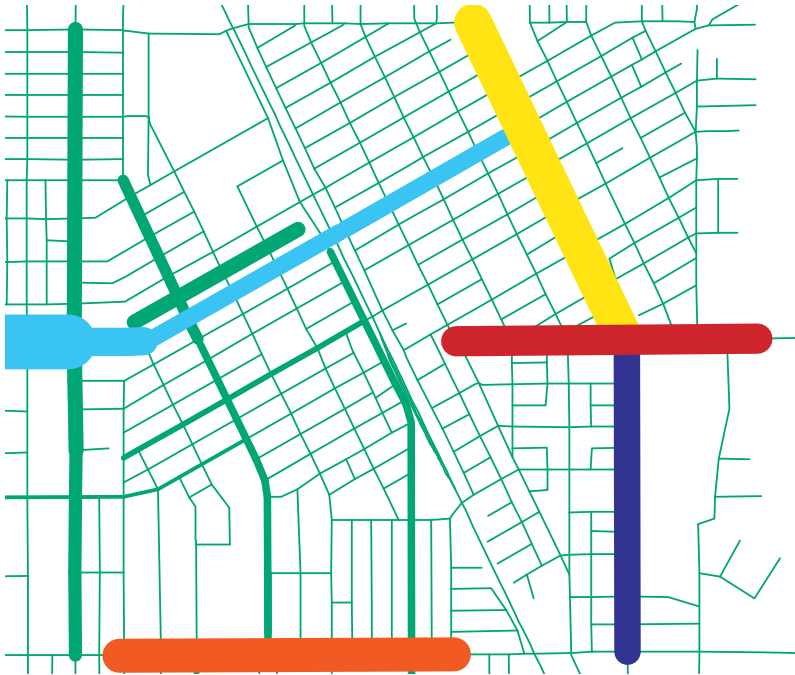
## **OU COLLEGE OF ARCHITECTURE STUDENTS**

Amber Conwell  
*Architecture - Fort Myers, Fla.*  
Connor Cox  
*Public Administration - Duncan, Okla.*  
Layne Ferguson  
*Public Administration - Cleveland, Okla.*  
Barbara Luiza Franco  
*Architecture - São Paulo, Brazil*  
Luan Vinicius Juliao das Virgens  
*Architecture - Rio de Janeiro, Brazil*  
Scott Mitchell  
*Film & Video Studies - Tulsa, Okla.*  
Amy Shell  
*Architecture - Tulsa, Okla.*  
Garrett Stouffe  
*Architecture - Flower Mound, Texas*

## **OU INSTITUTE FOR QUALITY COMMUNITIES**

Shane Hampton, IQC Fellow

# traffic volume



**“Road diets”** trade extra travel lanes in favor of turn lanes, bike lanes, extra sidewalk space, or parking.

Many communities decide to prioritize pedestrian amenities or bicycle access instead of maximizing traffic flow. The Federal Highway Administration recommends that cities consider road diets for all streets with around 20,000 vehicles per day or less.

## Resources

> Traffic Counts, Association of Central Oklahoma Governments

# traffic speed

Traffic speeds in the block can be quite high depending on a few factors. When the light at Webster is green, cars have built up speed and can go quite fast through the intersection.

Traffic speeds ranged from 20-46 miles per hour, with the fastest 20% of drivers averaging over 35 miles per hour.

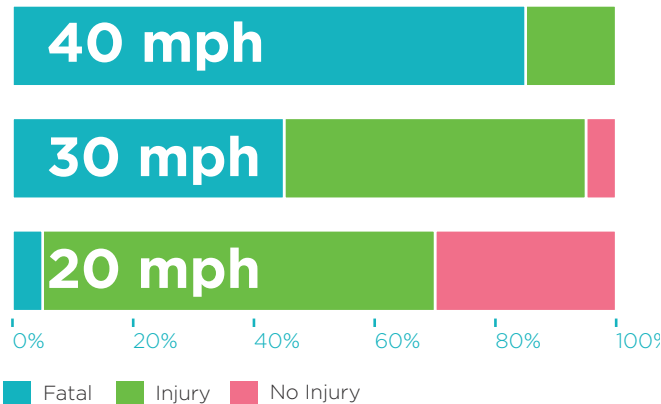
Traffic speed is a critical factor of pedestrian safety. A speed of 20 miles per hour is ideal for a commercial district. A goal for the tactical urbanism improvements of Start Norman is to reduce average traffic speeds.

## Resources

> National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

Traffic Speeds Recorded on Main Street	
	Speed (MPH)
Overall Average	27.2
Highest Recorded	46
Lowest Recorded	20
Fastest 20% of Drivers	35.6

## Effect of Vehicle-Pedestrian Collisions at Various Speeds



A speed of **20 miles per hour** is ideal for a walkable commercial district.

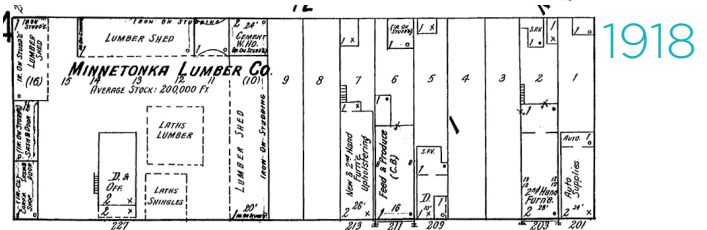
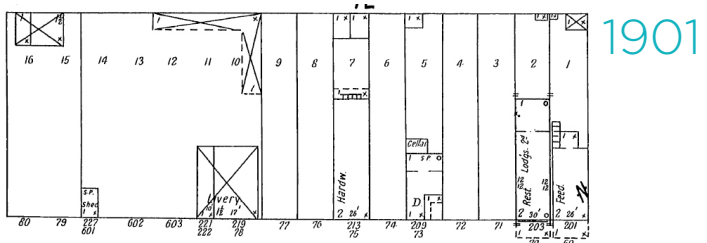
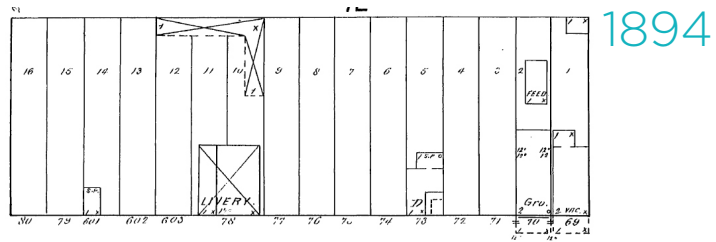
# site history

The Lumber Yard site is part of Norman's original townsite established by the railroad, described as Lots 10-16 of Block 72. These lots were originally used for various small businesses until 1909 when Lots 10-14 were purchased by Widow Brittain who established the Brittain Lumber Company. She and her family held the property until 1916, when it was sold to the Minnetonka Lumber Company. That same year, Lots 15-16 were joined with others to form the current footprint of the property. By the mid-1920s, Barbour & Short, a locally owned construction company, were established as partners within the space to offer construction services. Between these two company's efforts, this lumber yard was the central source for the lumber and construction of much of Norman. Many of the most striking historic buildings in Norman were designed and built by these two companies.

## Resources

- > Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps
- > City of Norman

A major source for the materials for the construction of much of Norman.





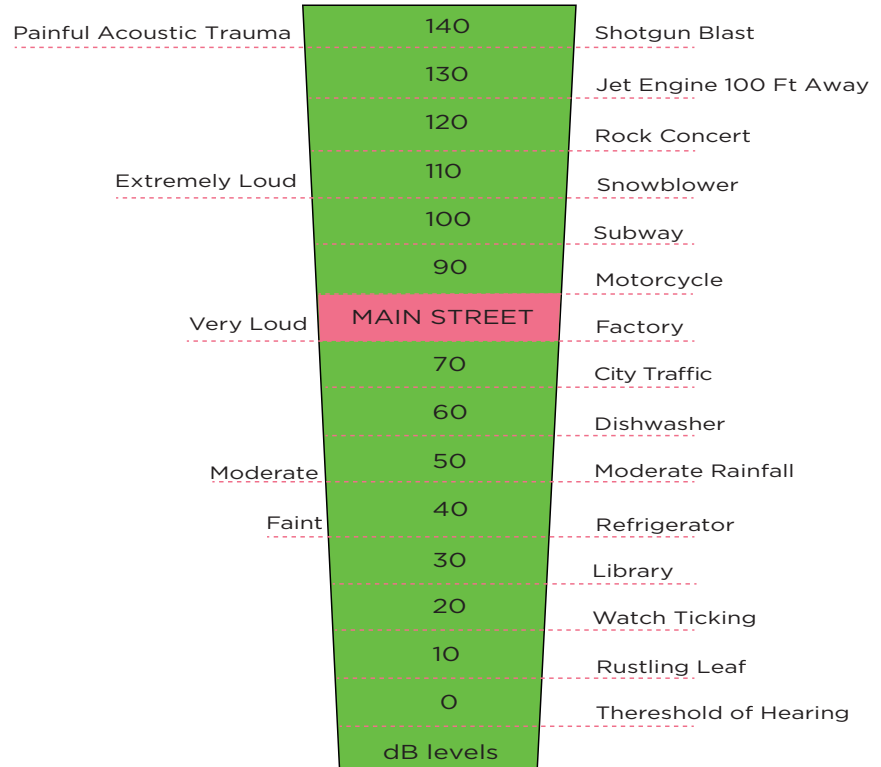
# noise

Noise on Main Street is the loud or unpleasant sound of traffic. The analysis and studies of the noise levels from the area reveals that noise on Main Street is very loud, with an average of 79.25 decibels (dB).

For long periods of exposure, this noise level can affect our quality of life and even cause damage to the body, such as:

- > Disturbs digestion
- > Correlates with premature birth
- > High levels of blood pressure
- > Disturbs sleep
- > Change to heart rates

This data shows the importance of controlling the noise level, and how it can interfere in daily life. While the average person may not think about it, the graphics show how unpleasant and dangerous it can be. Alternatives that reduce traffic noise, such as slower speeds are needed.



## Resources



- > American Speech-Language-Hearing Association

# walk and bike

There are over 1,900 housing units within a 10-minute walk of the Better Block location. These are consumers who would not necessarily require a parking location due to the accessibility of the location. There is also a population of 12,915 citizens within a five-minute bike ride to the block. That is a relatively high population in a small area who have easy access to the downtown businesses on bike or by foot.


Another aspect of the Better Block that could generate more attraction to downtown Norman is the cycle track. During Better Block Norman, a full bike lane was implemented that displayed how a cycle track could operate in the downtown area. The implementation of cycle tracks in the downtown area would create a safer environment for the users. The Better Block bike lane is a protected cycle track designed to fit between the parked vehicles and the sidewalk.

It's a

3	10
Minute Ride	Minute Walk
	

to Campus Corner

- Promotes Health  
The average resident of a walkable community weighs 6-10 lbs less than someone who lives in a sprawling area.
- Benefits the Environment  
82% of CO2 emissions are fossil fuels. Your bike has 0.
- Helps Finances  
Cars & Gas are the second largest household expenses in the United States.
- Builds Communities  
Studies show that for every 10 minutes a persons spends in a daily car commute, their community activities fall by 10%.



**3,701** people live within a 10-minute walk of the Lumberyard site.

**12,915** people live within a 5-minute bike ride.

## Resources

> US Census Bureau.

# one-way streets

A one-way street reduces commuter traffic coming in and out of a downtown district. If you believe that the only function of a street is to serve vehicular circulation then one-way is probably your best choice. With synchronized signals, minimized traffic slowdown on left turns, and more lanes of traffic in one direction, it is effective in maximizing traffic flow. But, left out are the pedestrians, street-scaping, and businesses that line the road. Are they not just as important?

In Savannah, Georgia, in 1969, several streets were changed to one-way traffic and there was a loss of almost two-thirds of the active and occupied spaces along the thoroughfares. When a new elementary school was proposed for the area, concerns of speeding traffic caused the city to return to the two-way street. Soon after the changes were made, fifty percent of the active addresses increased.

In Vancouver, British Columbia, painting double yellow lines to get rid of a one-way street brought life back into to the city practically overnight. Other cities over the last ten years have followed suit and have been reverting one-way streets to two-way streets to revive urban life in the downtown area, providing opportunities for financial growth and community prosperity.

Whether or not Norman's Main Street converts back to a two-way street, there needs to more consideration placed on the pedestrians and streetscape to promote a more walkable and healthy way of living.

“One-way streets should not be allowed in prime downtown retail areas. We’ve proven that.”

[Vancouver's Downtown Association](#)

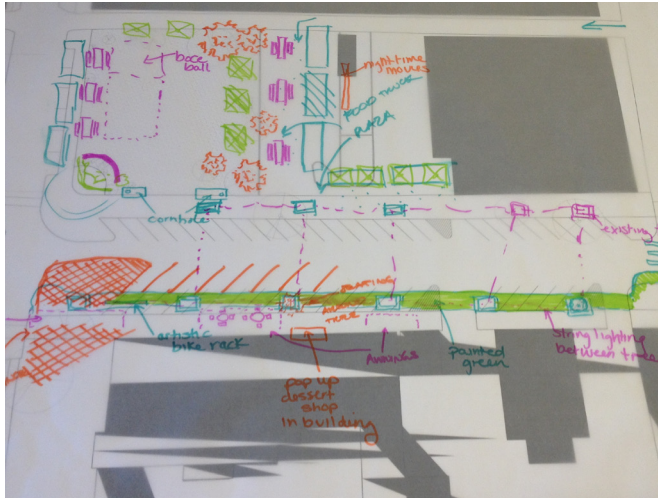
## **The Advantages of the Double-Yellow Stripe Comeback**

- > Traffic slows down, making it more pedestrian friendly
- > Sidewalk cafes begin to pop-up
- > Buffering of on-street parking and landscaping make it a more pleasant space
- > The frustration of circling blocks to reach a destination is gone (we have all been there)
- > Businesses along these roads begin to flourish
- > More pedestrian and cyclist circulation

## **Resources**

- > “Walkable City: How Downtown Can Save America, One Step at a Time.” Jeff Speck.

# better block plan



## Generating Concepts

Students in the course split into groups to brainstorm program and design elements of the tactical urbanism improvements. They considered how the temporary installation could accurately represent quality urban design. Their goals also included slowing down traffic, reducing noise levels, and educating the community on new concepts.

## Building a Consensus

The small groups came together to combine the best elements from each plan to put them together into a final concept. Not every idea made it into the actual better block installation. As the project encountered constraints, some things were added or changed. Real infrastructure and development projects go through the same types of challenges.

# final concept



- 1 MID-BLOCK CROSSING
- 2 BIKE LANE SIMULATION STATION
- 3 BIKE PARKING
- 4 NARROWING STREET TO 2 LANES
- 5 CURB BUMP-OUT EXTENSIONS
- 6 POP-UP SHOPS
- 7 ACTIVITIES FOR ALL AGES
- 8 FUSION OF LOCAL ART + FOOD CULTURE
- 9 TEMPORARY STREET TREES + SEATING

# construction



## Building Geodesic Domes

The Norman Arts Council rented geodesic domes to serve as pop-up shops. A team of volunteers from the OU College of Architecture, Norman Arts Council, and around the community followed the detailed instructions to construct the domes.



## Resetting the Curb

Straw wattles, used for erosion control at construction sites, make the perfect temporary curb to realign the street. Wattles were important for forming a new curb line and building new street features like the mid-block crosswalk.



## Putting Main Street on a Diet

One lane was removed from Main Street during the event by shifting the row of on-street angled parking outward. White duct tape formed the new parking spaces.



## Painting a Cycle Track

The cycle track was created with a temporary, washable paint made from corn starch and food coloring. Paint was also used to define new public spaces.

# event day



## Safer Crossings

The mid-block crossing effectively made crossing Main Street much safer. Cars stopped and allowed pedestrians to cross even without a traffic signal. The City of Norman provided the official signage to make this crosswalk look even better.



## More Activity

Existing businesses on the block helped to activate the sidewalk. A clothing rack provided lots of entertainment with people trying on vintage items, and outdoor seating was added for restaurants. Main Street had a much more vibrant and active appearance.





## New Businesses

Pop-up shops provided a place for small businesses to sell some items. Maybe some of these shops will end up finding a permanent home on Main Street someday.



## A Complete Street

Main Street did much more than simply move traffic during the event. Benches and landscaping made the sidewalk more comfortable. The cycle track demonstrated a way to attract and accommodate more bicycle traffic to Main Street.

# results

The tactical urbanism improvements to Main Street resulted in a street that was more comfortable for spending time.

Motorists behaved in a way that was much more appropriate for an important place like Main Street. Speeds were reduced to safe levels. Because speeds were reduced, the amount of noise from passing traffic was also much lower. With slower speeds and less noise, Main Street was much more comfortable.

Main Street felt safer, traffic moved more slowly, and noise dropped to comfortable levels.

## Traffic Speeds Recorded on Main Street

	Normal Conditions	Better Block Conditions
Overall Average	27.2 mph	17.9 mph
Highest Recorded	46 mph	25 mph
Lowest Recorded	20 mph	12 mph
Fastest 20% of Drivers	35.6 mph	21.1 mph

## Sound Levels Recorded on Main Street

	Normal Conditions	Better Block Conditions
Overall Average	79 dB	64 dB
Highest Recorded	82 dB	66 dB
Lowest Recorded	72 dB	62 dB

# next steps

Norman should utilize the momentum and ideas generated from StART Norman to take Main Street to the next level.

An already identified priority for Norman is to reduce the number of lanes on Main Street. Based on research in this report, this plan could be even better if it included a conversion back to two-way traffic flow. While observations of traffic speed and flow show that congestion increased during the event, slow-moving traffic should be considered a good thing for Main Street.

StART Norman also highlighted the potential for improving cycling infrastructure. Students would like to see better, safer bike infrastructure around Norman. Dedicated lanes and protected cycle tracks would encourage more people to take a bike. Implementing a cycle track on Main Street would require significant streetscaping projects, but there could be opportunities to implement similar infrastructure elsewhere.

Students suggest improving the bicycle connections between the OU campus, Campus Corner, and Main Street. StART highlighted the fact that the university is not very far from Main Street, and yet Main Street is off the beaten path for many students on campus.



Finally, businesses are encouraged to continue activating sidewalks with patio furniture and outdoor retail displays. Outdoor activity during StART Norman made the block come to life with interesting sights, sounds, and smells.

Tactical urbanism provides an example that can lead to permanent change throughout Norman.

