



# An Assessment of the Quality of Six Intersections in Omaha

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## Overview

Great streets are designed and operated to be safe and enjoyable for all types of users: pedestrians, cyclists, transit users, and motorists alike, yet there is no one-size-fits-all solution for designing a great street or a great intersection. They serve very different purposes and their function varies greatly. But if we are to set high standards for the quality of a street, I believe the highest bar should be set in parts of our city that were formerly traditional "main streets".

I set out to measure and assess the quality of six intersections in our community that are traditional main street environments. They are likely the most pedestrian-friendly streets in Omaha (aside from residential streets, of course). In doing so, I needed a tool and was directed by a friend to [Chicago's Complete Streets Design Guidelines](#). I chose Chicago's *Main Street - Mixed Use* designation as the standard from which to measure certain aspects.

I then created a series of 27 other measurements that indicate how safe and enjoyable the public right of way might be. These included things like presence of street trees, public seating, event space, building transparency, cleanliness, and whether the street was on a bus line.

## Summary of Results

There were four intersections that stood out; the remaining two didn't fare as well. It should be no surprise that 11th & Howard (the heart of the Old Market) scored highest (82.00). It's extraordinarily walkable, has a plethora of amenities, metered parking, a 4-way stop, and great building stock. 24th & N (78.75) was close behind the Old Market, and 24th & Lake (71.75) and 50th & Underwood (70.75) rounded out the top four. Results were not as good in Benson at 64th & Maple (50.25) and 33rd & California (49.00).

Location	Score
1. 11th & Howard	82.00
2. 24th & N	78.75
3. 24th & Lake	70.75
4. 50th & Underwood	70.75
5. 64th & Maple	50.25
6. 33rd & California	49.00

When assessing factors across the six intersections, there were also some interesting trends that jumped out. On the bright side:

- spaces dedicated to pedestrian right of way were good, normally exceeding the 6' target set out by Chicago's guidelines, and the quality of the sidewalks was generally quite good
- Walkscores were all above 60 with the highest in South Omaha (89) and the Old Market (86)
- Speed limits were 25mph in 5 of 6 cases, which is the legal minimum in Omaha. (I would still advocate for 20mph.)
- Actual pedestrian activity was quite robust in every location except 24th and Lake.
- Building space types were appropriate in most cases with a mix of retail, restaurants, office, and residential

Opportunities for improvements certainly existed across nearly all areas as well. Here are a few that stuck out:

- The only on-street infrastructure for cyclists were sharrows on 33rd Street. While it may be true that the speed limits in these areas are slow enough to easily allow drivers and cyclists to safely co-exist, I still firmly believe that bike infrastructure is important, especially in this car-centric city.
- Travel lanes were too wide (> 10') in every situation. In some cases they were 13' wide (e.g., 24th Street).
- Access to transit and bus stop infrastructure was mixed
- Street vendors were non-existent everywhere except the Old Market
- Outdoor seating was good in the Old Market and Dundee but extremely poor in the other four areas
- Building transparency was excellent in the Old Market, Dundee and Benson but poor in South Omaha, North Omaha and 33rd and California. I was amazed at what a big difference this made in how I felt as I walked around.

## **Disclaimer**

Let's be really honest, here: I have no training in urban design or transportation engineering. Not only that, it's an extremely complicated field with many variables that impact design and outcomes. In developing my rubric, I likely made several mistakes, and more than likely mis-measured, mis-counted, or mis-understood several aspects of the street while I was conducting this assessment. In short, it's flawed. So be it. My hope is to personally start to understand these issues better and maybe even spark a discussion about what makes our most common public spaces - our streets - stand out as great spaces.

## **More About Methodology**

I conducted this analysis in May 2014 on a Thursday afternoon and Friday morning. In both cases, the weather was quite pleasant. All measurements of ROW distances should be considered estimates. While I did use a tape measure to try and get accurate readings, I didn't block off traffic to get really precise.

The scoring rubric I created (details on the next page) was an attempt to somewhat objectively quantify extremely complex factors. It was difficult to take all subjectivity out of the equation. When I do this again, there are certainly refinements that need to be made. By in large, however, I think the methodology is sufficient to provide some insight into the quality of these intersections.

## Scoring Rubric

Metric	Scale
4' frontage	0 - nonexistent
6' pedestrian	1 - falls short of target
5' furniture	2 - meets target
1' curb	3 - exceeds target
8' park	
10' travel	
marked pedestrian crossing	0 - no & obstructed 1 - no 2 - faded 3 - yes
walk signal time	0 - too short 2 - appropriate
bump outs	0 - none 1 - partial 2 - all
speed limit	0 - 40+ 1 - 35 2 - 30 3 - 25
traffic control	0 - 2-way stop 1 - stoplight 2 - roundabout 3 - 4-way stop
traffic	1 - semi-trailers 2 - delivery trucks 3 - appropriate
driveways through pedestrian ROW	0 - multiple 1 - some 2 - few 3 - none
parking meters	0 - no 2 - yes
canopy (trees or overhangs)	0 - none 1 - low 2 - medium 3 - high
landscaping	0 - none 1 - low 2 - yes; not estab. 3 - yes; estab.
bus line	0 - no 1 - one 2 - two+
bus stop	0 - none 1 - pole 2 - bench 3 - covered
public art	0 - none 1 - little 2 - some; static 3 - some; interactive

Metric	Scale
street amenities	0 - none 1 - few 2 - some 3 - excellent
street vendors	0 - no 2 - yes
average building heights	1 - one story 2 - two story 3 - 3+ story
building space types	0 - parking 1 - non-active 2 - active 3 - very active
building transparency	0 - 0 - 25% 1 - 26 - 50% 2 - 51 - 75% 3 - 76 - 100%
waste/recycling	0 - none 1 - waste; poor 2 - waste; good 3 - w & r; good
actual pedestrian activity	0 - none 1 - minimal 2 - fair 3 - several
public seating	0 - none 1 - minimal; fixed 2 - good; fixed 3 - good; flexible
restaurant outdoor seating	0 - none 1 - limited 2 - some 3 - excellent
event space	0 - none 1 - limited 2 - some 3 - dedicated
walkscore	0 - 0-25% 1 - 25 - 50% 2 - 50 - 75% 3 - 75 - 100%
sidewalk quality	0 - poor 1 - fair 2 - good 3 - excellent
cleanliness	0 - poor 1 - fair 2 - good 3 - excellent
curb ramps	0 - no 2 - yes

**TOTAL POSSIBLE POINTS**

**119**

# 1. 11<sup>th</sup> & Howard

# 82.00

Metric	Score
4' frontage (street 1)	1
6' pedestrian (street 1)	3
5' furniture (street 1)	1.5
1' curb (street 1)	2
8' parking (street 1)	2
4' bike (street 1)	0
10' travel (street 1)	1
4' frontage (street 2)	1
6' pedestrian (street 2)	3
5' furniture (street 2)	1.5
1' curb (street 2)	2
8' parking (street 2)	2
4' bike (street 2)	0
10' travel (street 2)	1
marked pedestrian crossing	1
walk signal time*	2
bump outs	3
speed limit	3
traffic control	3
traffic	3
driveways through pedes. ROW	2.5
parking meters*	2
canopy (trees or overhangs)	3
landscaping	3
bus line	0
bus stop	0
public art	2
street amenities	3
street vendors*	1
average building heights	2.5
building space types	3
building transparency	3
waste/recycling	1
actual pedestrian activity	3
public seating	2
restaurant outdoor seating	3
event space	2
walkscore	3
sidewalk quality	3
cleanliness	3
curb ramps*	1

The Old Market is one of Omaha's most iconic destinations, and 11th & Howard is the heart and soul of the area. Its buildings and streets date back to the 1800s, and the feeling one has traversing the sometimes treacherous cobblestone streets is nothing short of magical some evenings.

## Where it Excels

It's an extremely desirable atmosphere for pedestrians, motorists, and cyclists. There isn't (and shouldn't be) transit at that intersection, but several bus lines run throughout downtown. Several facets of the intersection cause it to excel. They include:

- Wide sidewalks (6' - 13')
- 4-way stop
- Planters that serve as bump-outs and provide public seating
- A canopy consisting of awnings and trees
- Appropriate landscaping that strikes a good balance between highly manicured and less so
- Speed limit that's appropriate
- Several street amenities
- Building space types that include retail, office, and residential
- Excellent building transparencies
- Abundant outdoor seating, both public and private
- High walkscore (86)
- Clean and inviting atmosphere

## Where it Falls Short

- Travel lanes were still on the wider side (12' - 13')
- It's a bit of a bumpy ride for a cyclist, which is unavoidable given the cobblestone
- Street vendors were not present at the time observation occurred (10am); this changes dramatically during later hours of the day and on weekends
- No curb ramps
- Limited (if not entirely nonexistent) recycling

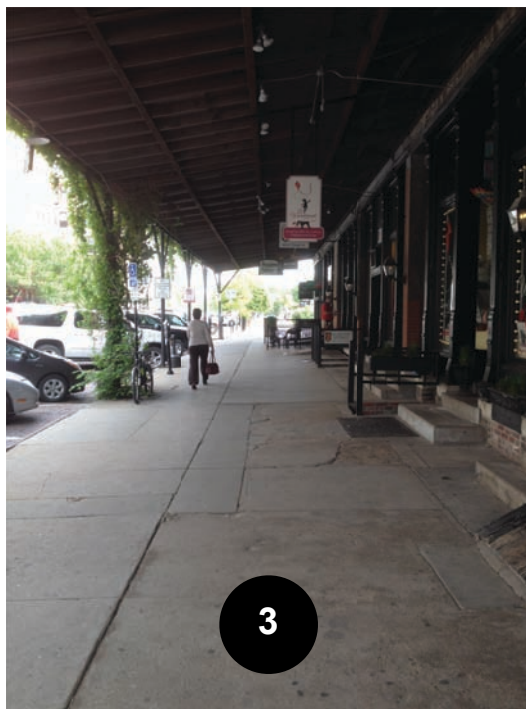
All in all, the very characteristics that make the area exceptional also limit it (e.g. cobblestone street).

\* Two total points are possible. Three points are possible in all other categories.

# 1. 11th & Howard



(1) One of Omaha's more iconic intersections with brick pavers and tree planters on corners that allow for sitting, lingering, gawking, and strumming a guitar. (2) Wide sidewalks on the SW corner boast good tree canopy. (3) Most sections have great overhangs that give Old Market patrons an improved sense of place. (4) The picnic table-style seating outside of Spaghetti Works provides a unique place to enjoy a plate of pasta and the Old Market's many activities.



## 2. 24<sup>th</sup> & N

# 78.75

Metric	Score
4' frontage (street 1)	0
6' pedestrian (street 1)	3
5' furniture (street 1)	3
1' curb (street 1)	2
8' parking (street 1)	2
4' bike (street 1)	0
10' travel (street 1)	1
4' frontage (street 2)	0
6' pedestrian (street 2)	3
5' furniture (street 2)	0
1' curb (street 2)	2
8' parking (street 2)	2
4' bike (street 2)	0
10' travel (street 2)	1
marked pedestrian crossing	1
walk signal time*	2
bump outs	3
speed limit	3
traffic control	3
traffic	3
driveways through pedes. ROW	2.5
parking meters*	1
canopy (trees or overhangs)	2
landscaping	2.5
bus line	1
bus stop	2
public art	2.5
street amenities	3
street vendors*	2
average building heights	2.25
building space types	3
building transparency	1
waste/recycling	3
actual pedestrian activity	3
public seating	2.5
restaurant outdoor seating	0
event space	2.5
walkscore	3
sidewalk quality	3
cleanliness	1
curb ramps*	2

The intersection is the heart of South Omaha, and its design and flavor honor the Hispanic heritage of the area. There aren't many better places in Omaha to slowly saunter while eating ice cream and enjoying the smells and sights of the area.

### Where it Excels

It's very pedestrian-centric and pulls (and retains) people to the area with a variety of design and programmatic strategies. Several facets of the intersection cause it to excel. They include:

- Wide sidewalks (6' - 13')
- Excellent public seating and furniture
- 3-way stop at the T intersection
- Public art that is representative of the area
- Bump outs at crossings
- Appropriate speed limit
- Landscaping was good but lacked upkeep in some areas
- Abundant street amenities, including places for chess
- Building space types included retail, office, and residential
- Waste and recycling containers
- Dozens of pedestrians were out and about
- High walkscore (89)
- Sidewalks were in excellent condition

### Where it Falls Short

- On-street bike facilities don't exist
- Travel lanes were wide (12' - 13')
- Pedestrian crossings were not marked
- No parking meters (but signs indicated 1 and 2 hour parking limits)
- Building transparency was extremely limited despite the existence of windows (many were painted on or generally covered with other materials)
- No outdoor restaurant seating
- General cleanliness was substandard

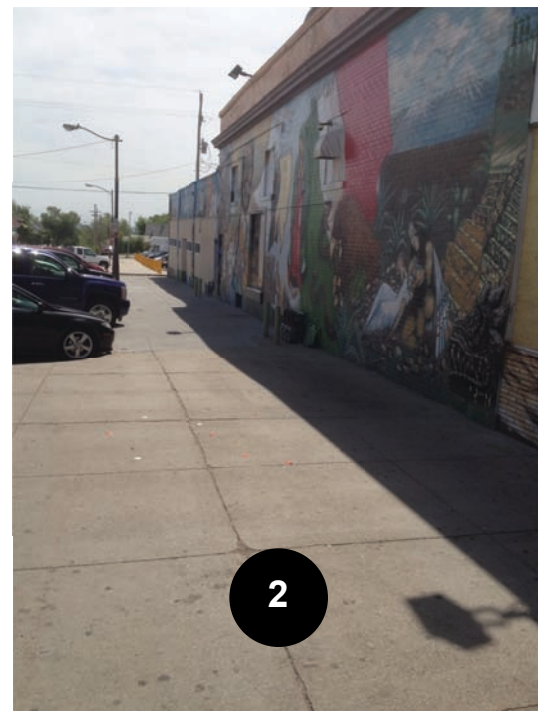
The intersection provided one of my favorite experiences of the exercise with many people out and about, and great and eclectic seating, art, and other amenities.

\* Two total points are possible. Three points are possible in all other categories.

## 2. 24<sup>th</sup> & N



(1) The 3-way intersection with public space on the west provides an excellent gathering spot for lingering, nibbling helado, playing chess, and enjoying good conversation. (2) A mural on the SE corner of the intersection. (3) Unique public seating, planters, and sidewalk treatments give the area a look and feel all its own. (4) Standard issue bus stop with a sign on a pole, although ample public seating nearby provides a place of respite for transit users.



# 3. 24<sup>th</sup> & Lake

# 71.75

Metric	Score
4' frontage (street 1)	0
6' pedestrian (street 1)	2
5' furniture (street 1)	1.5
1' curb (street 1)	2
8' parking (street 1)	2
4' bike (street 1)	0
10' travel (street 1)	1
4' frontage (street 2)	0
6' pedestrian (street 2)	3
5' furniture (street 2)	2
1' curb (street 2)	2
8' parking (street 2)	3
4' bike (street 2)	0
10' travel (street 2)	1
marked pedestrian crossing	2.5
walk signal time*	2
bump outs	3
speed limit	2
traffic control	1
traffic	2.5
driveways through pedes. ROW	2
parking meters*	1
canopy (trees or overhangs)	2.5
landscaping	3
bus line	3
bus stop	2
public art	3
street amenities	3
street vendors*	0
average building heights	1.5
building space types	0.75
building transparency	1
waste/recycling	2
actual pedestrian activity	1
public seating	2
restaurant outdoor seating	0
event space	2.5
walkscore	2
sidewalk quality	3
cleanliness	2
curb ramps*	2

This intersection is often considered the center of North Omaha, and it's received some good attention over the last few years. It's generally in excellent condition and has a design that is inviting and pedestrian-friendly.

### Where it Excels

The public investments in the area have been good and queue the area up for more private investment. Several facets of the intersection cause it to excel. They include:

- Wide sidewalks primarily on 24th St. (6' - 13')
- Appropriate parallel parking widths (8')
- Pedestrian crossings were marked but slightly faded
- Bump outs at all corners
- Excellent landscaping that was well maintained
- Two bus lines on 24th Street
- Benches used for bus stops
- An exceptional pocket park just south of the intersection
- Good tree canopy on most corners
- Great public art
- Multiple street amenities
- Ample space for events on the intersection with dedicated event space in the nearby park

### Where it Falls Short

- No on street bicycle infrastructure
- Travel lanes wider than necessary (13')
- Stoplight for traffic control
- No parking meters (but signs indicated 1 and 2 hour parking limits)
- Virtually no pedestrian activity or street vendors during the time of observation (possibly a function of the time of day (10:30am))
- Building space types were primarily homogenous on each corner (office, retail, parking)
- Building transparency was limited despite windows in most buildings (shades were drawn, windows painted over)
- No private (restaurant) outdoor seating

The area feels as if it's on the cusp of becoming an excellent pedestrian-oriented destination with good public investments in place. Some programmatic and private actions are needed to improve the area.

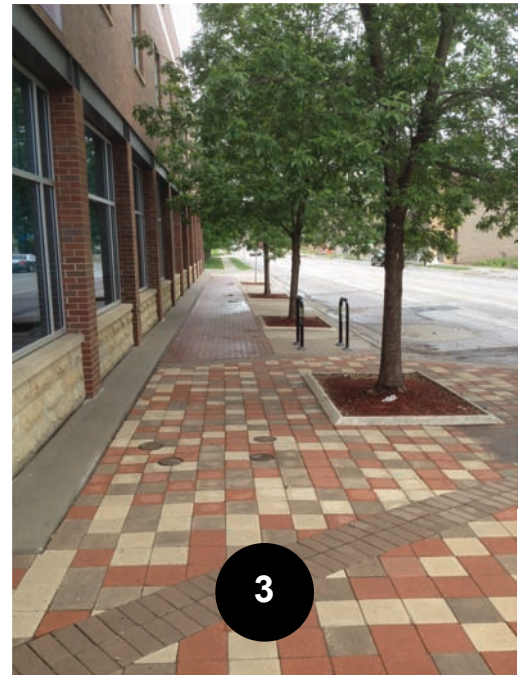
\* Two total points are possible. Three points are possible in all other categories.



# 3. 24<sup>th</sup> & Lake



(1) One of Omaha's best pocket parks sits just SW of the 24th & Lake intersection and includes great art, bike racks, and a performance stage (the public art honors the jazz history of the area). (2) Public seating, educational public art, a small green space, and an announcement board activate the NW corner. (3) Streetscape enhancements a few years ago provide interesting context, bike racks await a visitor, and excellent street trees create an overall exceptional environment.



# 4. 50<sup>th</sup> & Underwood **70.75**

Metric	Score
4' frontage (street 1)	0
6' pedestrian (street 1)	2
5' furniture (street 1)	3
1' curb (street 1)	2
8' parking (street 1)	1.5
4' bike (street 1)	0
10' travel (street 1)	1
4' frontage (street 2)	0
6' pedestrian (street 2)	3
5' furniture (street 2)	3
1' curb (street 2)	2
8' parking (street 2)	1
4' bike (street 2)	0
10' travel (street 2)	1
marked pedestrian crossing	3
walk signal time*	2
bump outs	3
speed limit	3
traffic control	1
traffic	3
driveways through pedes. ROW	0.5
parking meters*	1
canopy (trees or overhangs)	1
landscaping	2
bus line	0
bus stop	0
public art	1
street amenities	3
street vendors*	0
average building heights	0.75
building space types	2.5
building transparency	2.5
waste/recycling	2
actual pedestrian activity	3
public seating	2.5
restaurant outdoor seating	2.5
event space	2
walkscore	2
sidewalk quality	3
cleanliness	3
curb ramps*	2

The Dundee neighborhood is one of Omaha's most sought-after residential destinations, and a recent (2013) streetscape enhancement changed the main street business district, which is anchored at 50th & Underwood.

## Where it Excels

Dundee is a very pedestrian-friendly area, and its growing restaurant and retail scene continues to attract visitors and residents alike. Several facts of the intersection cause it to excel. They include:

- Great public seating and dedicated space to furniture
- Fairly wide sidewalks in most areas (5' - 9')
- Pedestrian crossings are well marked
- Bump outs at all corners
- Appropriate speed limit and associated traffic
- Several great street amenities, including a large rock for sitting and nature play
- Good building space types, including retail, restaurants, office, and residential
- Good building transparencies in most cases
- Extensive pedestrian activity (it was a beautiful Thursday afternoon)
- High-quality sidewalks
- Very clean and tidy environment

## Where it Falls Short

- No on street bicycle infrastructure
- Wide travel lanes (12')
- Stoplight traffic control
- Driveways through pedestrian ROW are dangerous, especially around the gas station
- No parking meters
- Very immature tree canopy (a result of all trees being removed for the streetscape work)
- No street vendors
- Building heights were all primarily one story

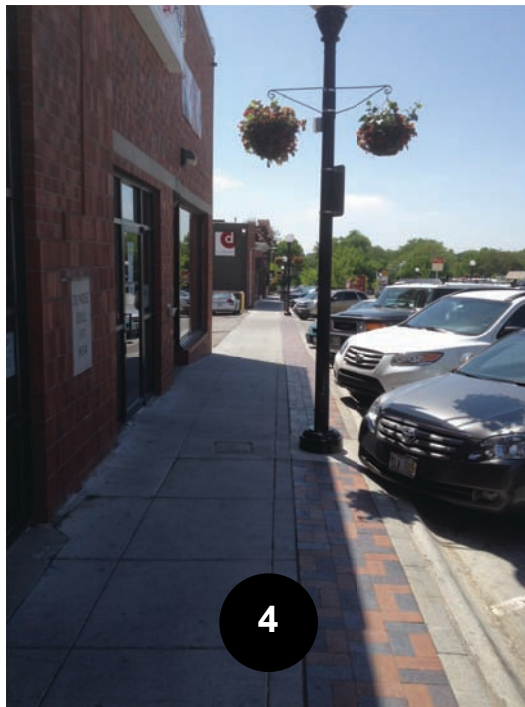
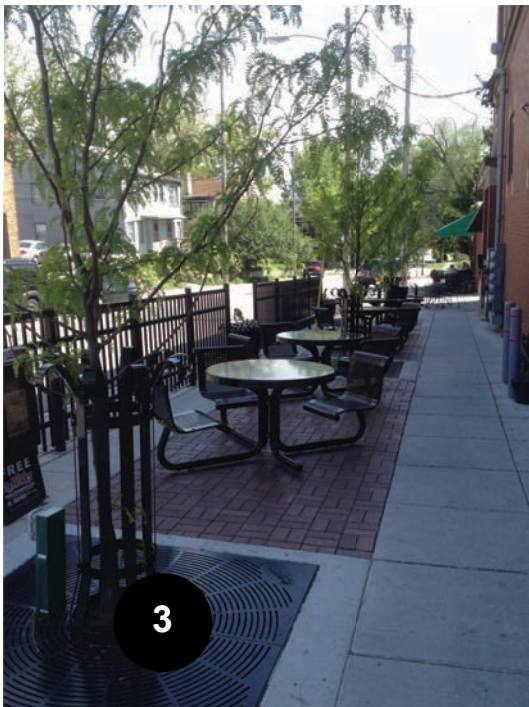
The streetscape enhancements were generally very well done and have improved the area, and the excellent retail and restaurant will always attract people to the area. The stoplight often creates an unsafe environment, and the tiny trees make the area feel a bit naked - with time the clothes will slowly return.

\* Two total points are possible. Three points are possible in all other categories.

# 4. 50<sup>th</sup> & Underwood



(1) A recent \$2+ million streetscape project produced this public seating area and bike racks. (2) There are several restaurant patios throughout the intersection. (3) A new seating area on the SW corner includes a nice fence that provides protection for ice cream or falafel eaters from motorists. (4) In many cases, the streetscape work did not result in much larger sidewalks, which limits opportunities for random lingering. (5) A gas station on the NE corner creates often dangerous interactions between motorists and pedestrians.



# 5. 64<sup>th</sup> & Maple

# 50.25

Metric	Score
4' frontage (street 1)	0
6' pedestrian (street 1)	2
5' furniture (street 1)	1
1' curb (street 1)	2
8' parking (street 1)	2
4' bike (street 1)	0
10' travel (street 1)	1
4' frontage (street 2)	0
6' pedestrian (street 2)	2
5' furniture (street 2)	0
1' curb (street 2)	2
8' parking (street 2)	2
4' bike (street 2)	0
10' travel (street 2)	1
marked pedestrian crossing	2
walk signal time*	2
bump outs	0.5
speed limit	3
traffic control	1
traffic	1
driveways through pedes. ROW	2.75
parking meters*	1
canopy (trees or overhangs)	1
landscaping	0.5
bus line	1
bus stop	1
public art	0
street amenities	0.5
street vendors*	0
average building heights	2
building space types	3
building transparency	3
waste/recycling	3
actual pedestrian activity	2
public seating	1
restaurant outdoor seating	0
event space	0
walkscore	2
sidewalk quality	0
cleanliness	0
curb ramps*	2

Benson is one of Omaha's hottest neighborhoods with a ton of exceptional bars, shops and a good main street vibe. Every time I'm in Benson, whether it's for coffee at 8am or a cocktail at 8pm, there is plenty of activity all around. It's generally an interesting place to be despite some pretty severe limitations in the streetscape.

## Where it Excels

Benson's good building stock, and the manner in which that stock is being developed, is a big asset for the area. Other great aspects include:

- Building space types and building transparency were excellent
- Waste and recycling containers were present, although the aesthetic quality of those containers isn't particularly pleasing
- The speed limit was appropriate
- Transit access was good
- There were very limited driveways through the pedestrian ROWs
- Bikes and bike racks were prevalent
- There was good pedestrian activity

## Where it Falls Short

The intersection I chose is an odd one in that it's where Military somewhat awkwardly connects with Maple. This, coupled with several other facets, made for a fairly uninviting experience. Challenges included:

- Sidewalks were narrow and crumbling in several cases (soon to be resolved)
- Truck traffic made the area pretty unenjoyable. Maple is also State Highway 64.
- Street furniture was limited
- Bike infrastructure (other than parking) was nonexistent
- The tree canopy and other landscaping was pretty limited
- There was no outdoor seating (sidewalks are too narrow to allow as much)
- Litter was fairly common

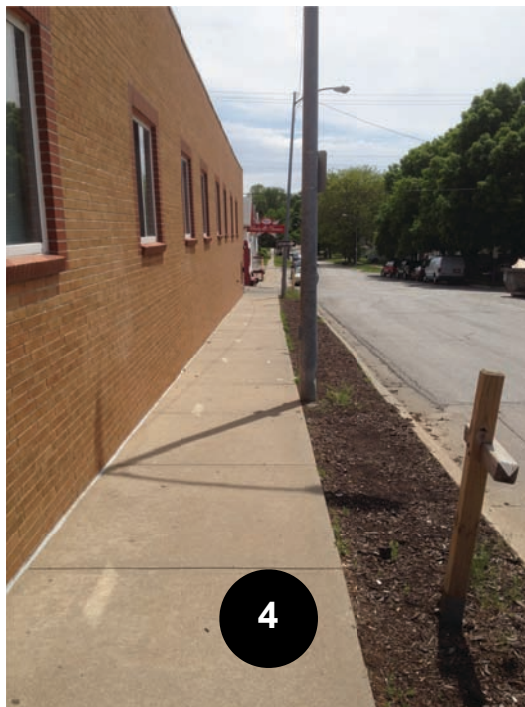
All in all, Benson is succeeding despite the challenging streetscape design and infrastructure. The upcoming streetscape enhancement will address many of these issues and improve the area dramatically.

\* Two total points are possible. Three points are possible in all other categories.

# 5. 64<sup>th</sup> & Maple



(1) Maple Street is designated as a Nebraska State Highway, which inhibits good pedestrian-friendly design and results in unfortunate truck traffic. (2) The only true public seating was a lone bench discreetly tucked under an enjoyable tree. (3) Sidewalks along Maple are narrow and in disrepair, as are (4) those on 64th Street. Landscaping is less than inspiring. (5) Bikes and fortunately bike racks are quite prevalent in Benson despite limited space.



# 6. 33<sup>rd</sup> & California

# 49.00

Metric	Score
4' frontage (street 1)	0
6' pedestrian (street 1)	3
5' furniture (street 1)	0
1' curb (street 1)	2
8' parking (street 1)	2
4' bike (street 1)	1
10' travel (street 1)	1
4' frontage (street 2)	0
6' pedestrian (street 2)	3
5' furniture (street 2)	0
1' curb (street 2)	2
8' parking (street 2)	2
4' bike (street 2)	0
10' travel (street 2)	1
marked pedestrian crossing	2.5
walk signal time*	1
bump outs	0
speed limit	3
traffic control	1
traffic	3
driveways through pedes. ROW	1
parking meters*	1
canopy (trees or overhangs)	0
landscaping	0.5
bus line	1
bus stop	1
public art	0
street amenities	0
street vendors*	0
average building heights	1.5
building space types	2.5
building transparency	1
waste/recycling	1
actual pedestrian activity	2
public seating	0
restaurant outdoor seating	0
event space	1
walkscore	2
sidewalk quality	2
cleanliness	2
curb ramps*	2

I chose this intersection because of its potential and proximity to the development at Midtown Crossing. It's a really interesting little area but has the fewest businesses along its two main streets when compared to the other five intersections. It's a quirky corner that can make some simple enhancements to improve the area.

### Where it Excels

- Fairly wide sidewalks in most areas (5' - 12') and sidewalk quality was adequate but not interesting (basic concrete)
- The only intersection with on street bicycle infrastructure (sharrows)
- Pedestrian crossings are well marked but fading
- Appropriate speed limit and associated traffic
- Building space types were fairly mixed, including retail, restaurant, and residential
- Pedestrian activity was fair and steady with several bus users in the area
- A decent walkscore (77)
- Smattering of bike racks

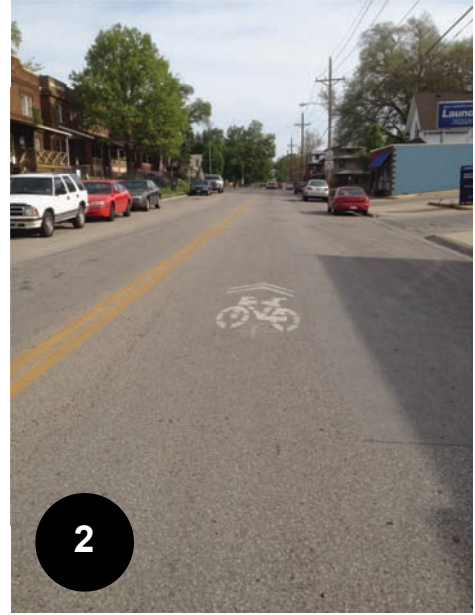
### Where it Falls Short

- The tree canopy was mostly nonexistent
- Travel lane widths varied but were generally on the wide side (9' - 13'6")
- Stoplight traffic control with malfunctioning walk signals
- No street furniture
- Planters with no plants and generally no other landscaping except for that in front of the Melrose Apartments
- No bump outs at intersections
- Building transparencies were mostly poor
- Old and ugly trash containers (no recycling)
- No parking meters
- No street vendors
- No bar/restaurant outdoor seating

It's currently not a very inviting area, although it has potential to dramatically improve through increased outdoor seating, trees, and landscaping. There is plenty of sidewalk space that could be used more intentionally to create a better environment.

\* Two total points are possible. Three points are possible in all other categories.

## 6. 33<sup>rd</sup> & California



(1) The intersection is anchored by an historic apartment complex on the NW corner. (2) The only intersection studied that includes any on-street markings for bicyclists; in this case, sharrows. (3) The crosswalk signal was malfunctioning at the time of my visit; a local merchant and I discussed and phoned the Mayor's Hotline. (4 & 5) Sidewalks along 33rd to the south are in average condition but, aside from a few planters and a lonely bike rack, don't have any more desirable amenities such as public seating.

