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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Re-Imagining the Spaces In-Between: Design Interventions to Transform Urban Voids in Downtown Dayton into Active, Breathing Areas

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## ABSTRACT

In today's rapidly expanding urban landscapes, space paradoxically grows scarce, yet underutilized voids remain overlooked. Downtown Dayton, like many cities, faces the challenge of meaningfully integrating these neglected spaces into its urban fabric. With its dense concentration of offices, downtown Dayton needs places of tranquility—areas where employees and residents alike can engage in psychogeographical exploration, experiencing moments of personal solitude and quiet reflection. Such subtle, personal interactions with the city can emerge in liminal spaces, akin to what Roland Barthes calls the *punctum*—moments that "prick" individual consciousness, creating personal significance. To address this lack of tranquil spaces, I propose transforming Dayton's neglected urban voids into areas where solitude and fresh air can be deeply experienced. Rather than focusing solely on high-activity spaces, a balanced emphasis on areas for solitary exploration and contemplation, alongside active public spaces, is essential. My design interventions aim to reclaim Dayton's overlooked voids, forming a network of "breathing spaces" that invite exploration of the downtown's architecture and social fabric. As Michel de Certeau describes, pedestrians' unpredictable movements through these spaces will carve "rhetorical" paths that challenge Dayton's urban order, reimagining it as a dynamic landscape enriched by personal stories and experiences.

## KEYWORDS

Urban Voids, Downtown Dayton, Public Space Design, Industrial Heritage, Urban Renewal

## ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 10 July 2025

PUBLISHED: 25 August 2025

DOI: 10.32996/jmcie.2025.6.3.10

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## INTRODUCTION

In the heart of downtown Dayton, Ohio, lies an intricate interplay of history, emptiness, and opportunity. Urban voids—those pockets of unused, forgotten, and overlooked spaces—dot the city's landscape, telling a story of transition and neglect. These urban voids, however, are not mere absences but spaces brimming with potential. My thesis seeks to reimagine these voids as catalysts for renewal, tranquility, and connection.

Urban voids can be broadly defined as the spaces left behind by the ebb and flow of urban development—vacant lots, underutilized plots, or remnants of infrastructure that no longer serve their original purpose. In this thesis, I envision them as transformative opportunities to create a network of tranquil public spaces. These spaces aim to offer moments of pause and introspection within Dayton's bustling downtown, fostering deeper engagement with the city's layered history and evolving identity.

Downtown Dayton, with its rich industrial heritage, was once a thriving hub of innovation and commerce. However, economic decline and shifting urban dynamics have left many of its spaces underutilized. Today, the city's central business district reflects

*Images 1 & 2: Urban voids in Dayton Downtown.*

*Photo Courtesy: Author*

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these changes through high office vacancies and a diminished population. Yet amidst these challenges lies a unique opportunity to redefine how urban spaces are perceived and utilized.

These urban voids also embody the essence of adaptability. Over time, as cities evolve and functions shift, such spaces often acquire new roles—whether as informal green areas, pop-up community hubs, or even sites of artistic intervention. My vision expands upon this inherent adaptability by proposing a framework for their intentional transformation into vibrant public realms. By prioritizing accessibility, tranquility, and ecological integration, these spaces can become the lungs of downtown Dayton, supporting both physical and mental well-being. Additionally, urban voids offer a chance to reconnect with the past while addressing the needs of the present. The remnants of Dayton's industrial heyday, including the site of the former Union Station, evoke collective memories that can anchor a renewed sense of place. By integrating design elements that honor this history, the transformation of voids can resonate with both longtime residents and new visitors, fostering a shared appreciation for the city's layered narrative.

By exploring the potential of Dayton's urban voids, this thesis offers a vision of renewal—one that pays homage to the city's history while embracing innovative urban design strategies. A more in-depth discussion of the key concepts and themes, including solitude, liminality, and connectivity, will be presented in the subsequent sections of this document. Together, these discussions will frame a design approach that transforms Dayton's urban voids into spaces of reflection, connection, and revitalization. This document is organized to guide the reader through the layered narrative of urban voids and their potential transformation. The journey begins with a detailed exploration of the context, focusing on the history of the site and its surroundings. Following this, the discourse around urban voids and their interpretations will be examined to provide a foundation for the design approach. The next section will delve into an in-depth analysis of the site, considering its spatial, historical, and social dimensions. Finally, the document will culminate in the presentation of the design proposal—a vision for reimagining Dayton's urban voids as interconnected spaces of liminality and engagement. Through this structured approach, the thesis aims to present a comprehensive narrative that connects theory, context, and design, offering a framework for revitalizing urban voids in downtown Dayton.

## LEGACY OF THE DAYTON UNION TRAIN STATION

The Dayton Union Station, a pivotal piece of Dayton's urban fabric, opened in 1900. Its construction marked a period of economic growth and industrial prosperity in the city. As a central rail hub, it replaced an earlier depot and became a bustling point of convergence for travelers and goods, embodying Dayton's significance as a transportation node in the Midwest. The station served the city until Amtrak briefly took over in 1971, only to see its complete cessation of services and eventual demolition in 1979.<sup>1</sup> Today, the remains of the station consist of four elevated train tracks. Two remain operational, while the other two lie abandoned, overgrown with wild shrubs and plants striking symbols of nature reclaiming unused urban spaces. These skeletal traces stand as a testament to the station's former glory and its current state of neglect, highlighting the broader challenges faced by post-industrial cities like Dayton.

The downtown area, particularly the site of the Dayton Union Station—captures the narrative of urban transition. Vacant lots, unused buildings, and infrastructural gaps punctuate the city's core, creating urban voids that embody both absence and potential. These voids are not merely empty spaces; they represent opportunities for renewal and reinterpretation of Dayton's urban identity.

The station's site, located at a critical downtown node, is surrounded by key landmarks such as Sinclair University, the Great Miami Riverfront, the Dayton Convention Center, Levitt Pavilion, and various playgrounds and stadiums.

These surrounding elements underscore the potential of the station site to serve as a unifying elemental stitch that weaves together the disparate parts of downtown Dayton.

Dayton's industrial roots shaped its identity and spatial development. The city's rise was marked by its contributions to innovation, manufacturing, and the development of aviation technology. Companies such as NCR Corporation and Delco were headquartered in Dayton, driving economic prosperity and making the city a hub of industrial activity in the Midwest. However, the decline of manufacturing in the late 20th century initiated a cascade of economic and social challenges. The city's population, once at a peak of 262,332 in 1960, plummeted to 137,655 by 2020.<sup>2</sup> This decline reflected a broader trend of urban shrinkage as industries relocated or shut down entirely. With fewer jobs, the city struggled to retain its residents, and neighborhoods became increasingly vacant. Downtown Dayton mirrored these struggles, as high office vacancy rates—now among the highest in the nation at 34% exacerbated the sense of stagnation.<sup>3</sup>



The 21st century brought additional hurdles. The rise of remote work, particularly following the COVID pandemic, further

*Image 3: An Interpretive collage of the void spaces in Downtown Dayton.*

*Photo Courtesy: An Exercise done by the Author*

diminished the need for traditional office spaces. Iconic buildings in Dayton's downtown core, once bustling with activity, now stand underutilized or empty. Vacant lots and neglected spaces tell a story of businesses that closed their doors and opportunities lost to economic shifts.

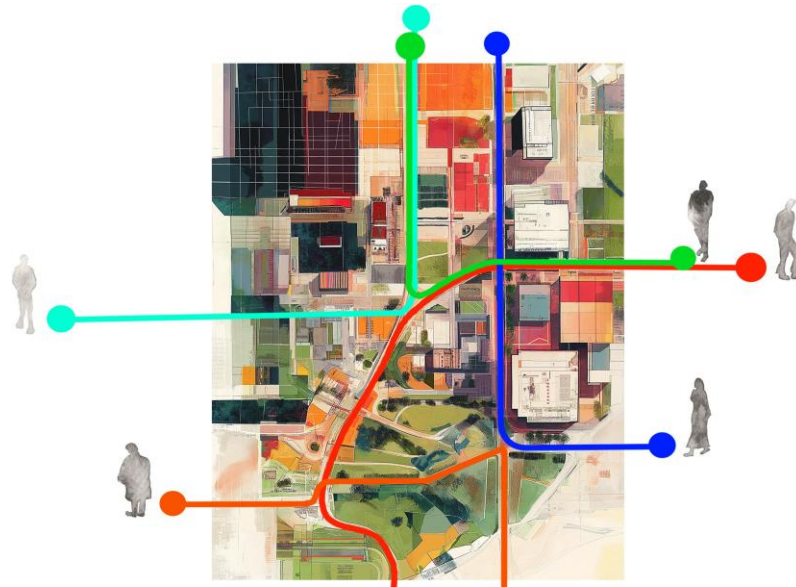
Among these changes, Dayton's Union Station became emblematic of the city's broader struggles. After its closure, the surrounding area, formerly a vital hub of movement and activity, became a fragmented landscape. The station's absence left a void not only in the urban fabric but also in the collective memory of the city, reflecting the challenges of adapting to economic decline and infrastructural redundancy.

## **DISCOURSE ON URBAN VOIDS AND DOWNTOWN DAYTON**

Urban Voids are viewed in distinct, contrasting ways by different theorists. Rem Koolhaas, for instance, describes urban voids as 'junk spaces'—fragmented and leftover areas born from chaotic urban expansion, often devoid of purpose or coherence, representing the transitory and fragmented nature of contemporary cities.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, Kevin Lynch perceives these undefined spaces as 'negative spaces' that disrupt the cognitive map of a city, diminishing its legibility and cohesion for inhabitants.<sup>5</sup> Aldo Rossi, however, sees urban voids through a historical lens, suggesting they are essential elements that embody a city's collective memory and identity, holding latent potential rooted in the past that can be reactivated to shape the urban future.<sup>6</sup> Adrian Forty adds another layer to this understanding by emphasizing that 'space' in architecture is more than mere physical absence; it encompasses the qualities, uses, and experiences that fill it.<sup>7</sup> He suggests that spaces, even those unbuilt or vacant, contribute meaningfully to the urban context when thoughtfully considered. Together, these perspectives reflect a spectrum of interpretations—from spaces of neglect to potential areas rich with history, context, and meaning.

But at first glance, through the eyes of an observer, these gaps—formed by vacant lots, unused areas, and spaces left by infrastructural shifts—might appear as mere absences or negative spaces. However, as Henri Lefebvre highlights, even these 'unused' spaces hold a form of 'use value,' serving various roles beyond their economic exchange value.<sup>8</sup> Nature begins to reclaim these voids, shaping them into spontaneous ecosystems, and property assessors leverage these spaces to gauge neighborhood values, reflecting Lefebvre's assertion that social spaces are never purely passive but rather enact and resist different social forces.





**Image 4:** Interpretation of the ideologies of Michel De Certeau.

**Photo Courtesy:** Exercise done by the Author. Background Image created using AI

Therefore, while these spaces lack traditional uses, they actively shape and are shaped by social, economic, and natural

processes. Recognizing their latent potential for reappropriation, especially in post-industrial cities like Dayton, highlights the transformative possibilities of urban voids as sites for renewal and reconceptualization.

Urban voids offer a unique opportunity to redefine how we perceive public spaces within our cities. These spaces are not just gaps in urban fabric; they hold potential as sanctuaries of tranquility and liminality—areas where individuals can pause, reflect, and experience a moment of quiet away from the city's rhythm.

By 'tranquility,' I mean creating spaces that support solitude and introspection, fostering a slower, more contemplative interaction with the urban landscape, and the material culture of the city and its inhabitants.

This is particularly relevant in cities like Dayton, where remnants of past industries and changing infrastructures evoke collective memories that can anchor a sense of place. My thesis sees these spaces not as escapes but as meaningful places that



**Images 5, 6, 7:** The Quiet Contemplative Nature of Downtown Dayton.

**Photo Courtesy:** Taken by the Author

deepen our engagement with downtown Dayton.

Downtown Dayton offers a unique atmosphere of solitude that sets it apart from larger, bustling downtowns like Chicago or New York. Unlike the overwhelming density and constant rush of these metropolitan areas, Dayton's downtown is marked by a quieter, more reflective urban rhythm, which Michel de Certeau might describe as an opportunity for personal engagement within the city's structured framework.

## AN ANALYSIS OF THE LAND USE OF DOWNTOWN DAYTON

The current land-use in downtown Dayton is predominantly occupied by office buildings and parking garages. These spaces dominate the urban fabric, leaving limited room for other forms of activity or engagement. Surface parking lots take up a significant portion of the landscape, reflecting a car-centric urban planning approach. It also has a unique nature that can only be fully experienced on foot, which aligns with the main target of this thesis—reimagining these spaces to enhance pedestrian engagement and personal interaction with the urban fabric. While these areas serve a functional purpose, they fail to contribute to the vibrancy or livability of the city. In stark contrast to the abundance of parking facilities, downtown Dayton has a scarcity of open spaces where residents and visitors can relax and breathe.

Public parks and plazas are few and far between, limiting opportunities for leisure and interaction. These open spaces are not well-integrated into the urban fabric, further diminishing their potential to serve as cohesive and inviting environments for urban dwellers. This imbalance highlights the need for intentional urban design interventions that prioritize the creation of tranquil, accessible spaces for the community.

Dayton's downtown is home to many historically significant buildings and landmarks, which serve as reminders of the city's rich industrial and cultural heritage. However, many of these structures are endangered, suffering from neglect and underuse. Vacant and deteriorating, these buildings represent a missed opportunity to celebrate and preserve Dayton's history while integrating it into a vision for the city's future. The irregular distribution of these underutilized spaces punctuates the city with abrupt gaps, creating a fragmented urban landscape. These transitional spaces, while seemingly disruptive, embody a unique potential for transformation. Their very nature as "in-between" areas position them as opportunities for reconnection and renewal. By reimagining these spaces, Dayton can create a cohesive urban network that honors its past while embracing contemporary needs and aspirations.

Downtown Dayton experiences uneven activity patterns throughout the day and the week. During office hours on weekdays, the area remains relatively active, as workers occupy office buildings and businesses operate. However, after office hours, the downtown quickly becomes lifeless, with minimal activity due to a lack of amenities or spaces designed to draw people in during leisure hours. Similarly, while weekdays see a modicum of vibrancy, the weekends highlight the stark absence of engagement. Without events, attractions, or gathering spaces to sustain activity, the downtown area becomes notably quiet, reflecting the



*Occupied Spaces in Downtown Dayton, Ohio.*



*Surface Parking in Downtown Dayton, Ohio*



*Open Spaces of Downtown Dayton, Ohio.*



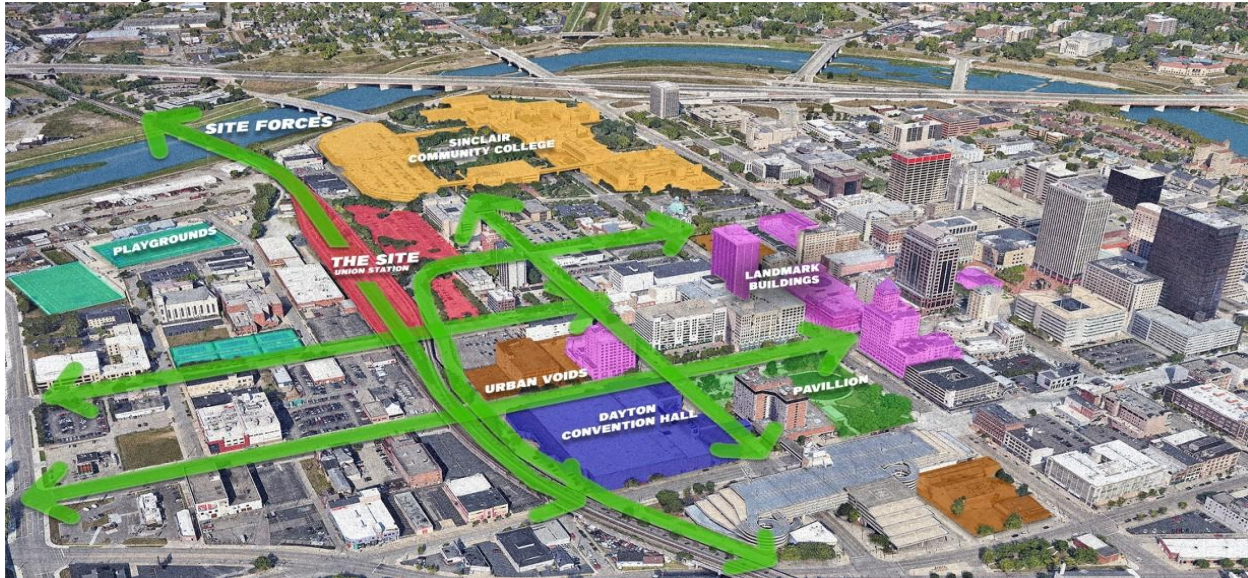
*Landmarks and Voids in Downtown Dayton, Ohio*

limitations of its current infrastructure. Addressing these patterns is central to the vision of reactivating urban voids, aiming to create a more dynamic and consistent urban experience.



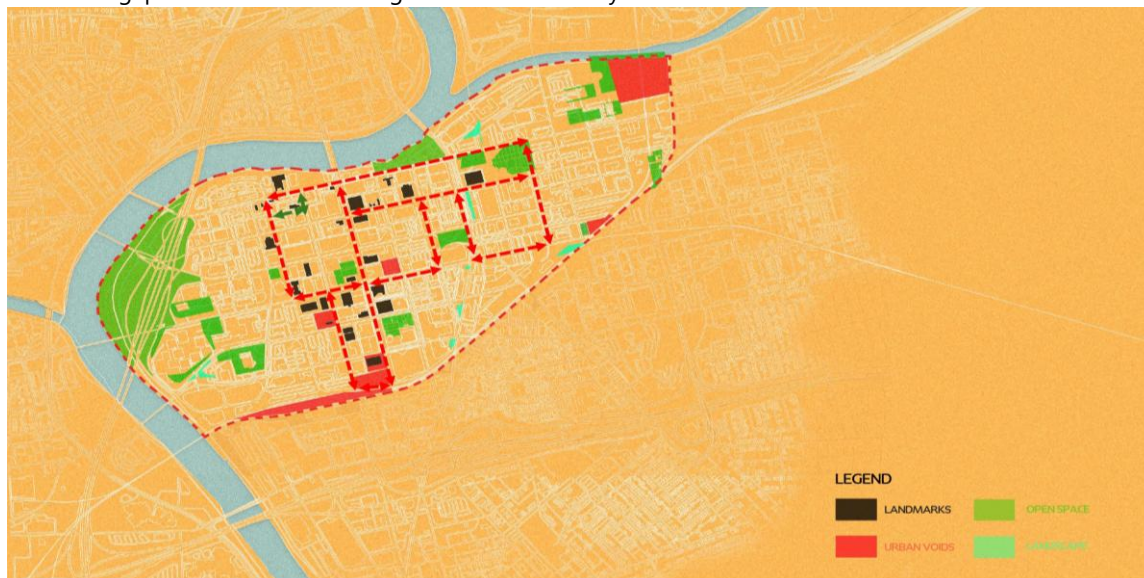
## SITE ANALYSIS: THE DAYTON UNION STATION

The Dayton Union Station site, positioned at a pivotal downtown node, holds a unique geographic and historical significance within the urban fabric. While the original station was demolished in 1979, remnants such as the elevated train tracks remain, marking its legacy as a critical transportation hub. The site is surrounded by key landmarks, including Sinclair University, the Great Miami Riverfront, the Dayton Convention Center, Levitt Pavilion, and various playgrounds and stadiums. Despite its central location, the site is underutilized, serving as a reminder of Dayton's transition from a thriving industrial city to one searching for renewal.



*Neighborhood Areas of the Site.*

Currently, the area is characterized by its fragmented and transitional nature. The elevated tracks, two of which remain operational while the others lie abandoned, form an unusual juxtaposition of activity and decay. Overgrown vegetation intersperses with structural remnants, creating a sense of disconnection that echoes the broader challenges of the downtown area. The site's adjacency to vibrant cultural and educational nodes offers immense potential for reactivation, yet its current state emphasizes the gaps in cohesion and integration within the city's core.



*The Route of Reflection connecting the Landmarks, The open spaces and the voids of Downtown Dayton.*

## **STITCHING THE CITY A VISION TO INTEGRATE THE VOIDS OF DAYTON**

To transform these voids into meaningful spaces, this thesis proposes a "Route of Reflection", network of interconnected voids throughout downtown Dayton. The concept stems from the unique character of the downtown area, where spaces tell a fragmented yet rich story of the city's evolution. By connecting these voids, the "Route of Reflection" seeks to weave together Dayton's layered urban narrative, encouraging moments of pause, introspection, and engagement. This initiative aligns with the broader objective of creating a cohesive urban network that balances Dayton's historical legacy with contemporary needs, transforming underutilized spaces into hubs of activity and connection.

This network will link key void spaces and landmark buildings, creating areas for withdrawal and observation. But what should form the basis of this network?

The foundation of this network lies not only in Dayton's landmark buildings but also in spaces that hold value beyond social recognition. While Dayton has many architecturally, historically, and functionally significant structures that shape the city's identity, other, less recognized spaces—some vacant, abandoned, or underutilized—hold unique potential for connecting people and creating nodes of activity.

These spaces can serve as focal points for urban life, offering pathways and connections that reflect a deeper, more inclusive understanding of value within Dayton's layout. By using these landmark buildings as anchors, we can begin to stitch together the surrounding voids into a cohesive network of public spaces. These reimagined voids become extensions of the landmarks, creating a fluid experience between the city's architectural heritage and its modern-day public realm. My goal is to provide spaces that invite new interpretations of the city, encouraging fresh interactions and connections among residents. Similar to how the High Line in New York offers a vantage point overlooking the busy life of Manhattan, allowing people to gaze at the city from a step removed while still being part of it, this network of spaces can create unique grammar for Dayton. Here, people can find a quiet moment of solace within themselves or with the city, transforming the urban voids into places of reflection and connection.

The Route of Reflection is conceived as more than a connective path—it is a spatial and emotional strategy for repairing the fragmented narrative of downtown Dayton. In a city where disjointed parcels, empty lots, and neglected corners have slowly eroded the sense of continuity and place, this route offers an intentional framework for reconnection. It weaves together dispersed spaces into a coherent urban experience that acknowledges both the physical landscape and the layered memories embedded within it.

Rather than proposing a rigid intervention, the route allows for flexibility, accommodating diverse forms of interaction—movement, pause, observation, and gathering. As individuals traverse this network, they encounter a sequence of moments that



*The Route of Reflection connecting the Landmarks, The open spaces and the voids of Downtown Dayton.*

invite reflection, spark curiosity, and promote engagement with the surrounding city. The path becomes an invitation to notice what is typically overlooked, to restore meaning where it has faded, and to reimagine the role of public space in urban life.



Through careful spatial sequencing, the Route of Reflection reintegrates marginalized spaces into the city's collective rhythm. It emphasizes slowness in a culture of speed, openness in areas of exclusion, and intentionality in a landscape shaped by neglect.

## READING THE LANDSCAPE OF VOIDS: CONDITIONS OF ABSENCE IN DOWNTOWN DAYTON

Downtown Dayton, like many post-industrial American cities, bears the imprint of shifting economies, evolving infrastructures, and population decline. What remains is a landscape marked by absence—spaces that have fallen out of formal use, slipped through the logic of zoning, or been bypassed by development. These voids, while often overlooked, form a crucial part of the city's spatial and cultural identity. They are not singular in type or meaning but emerge in different forms, each shaped by the forces of time, function, and neglect. To move toward a design intervention, it is first necessary to examine these voids not as a collective absence, but as distinct spatial conditions with names, logic, and latent possibilities.

The following typologies — asphalt seas, wild pockets, underlines, abandoned infrastructures, and ghost frames—represent a taxonomy of voids that recur throughout downtown Dayton. Each reflects a different kind of vacancy, and together they form the fragmented framework through which the city can be read and ultimately reimagined.



**Asphalt Seas:** Perhaps the most immediately visible form of urban void in Dayton is the vast expanse of surface parking lots. Referred to here as asphalt seas, these areas cover entire blocks with impermeable blacktops, offering minimal pedestrian interaction and no contribution to civic life. Their scale disrupts walkability and erases the spatial continuity between buildings, creating visual and social gaps. These voids are the physical manifestation of a car-centered planning paradigm—spaces that prioritize storage over engagement, function over presence. Despite their utilitarian purpose, they present a blank slate for reintegration into the city's public realm.

**Wild Pockets:** In contrast to the stark flatness of the asphalt seas, wild pockets are spaces where nature has begun to reclaim the urban grid. Often fenced off, overgrown, or unofficially “off-limits,” these parcels suggest a quieter form of resistance. Grasses, weeds, and small trees grow untamed, erasing traces of previous human intervention. These spaces challenge conventional ideas of order and control in the city, introducing ecological succession into the heart of downtown. Their unstructured beauty invites a different reading—one that embraces spontaneity, biodiversity, and the poetic dimension of abandonment.

**Underlines:** Beneath Dayton's overpasses and along the edges of elevated infrastructure lie the underlines—spaces that are shaped not by buildings, but by the void's infrastructure leaves behind. Dark, loud, and often unwelcoming, these residual spaces lack definition and program. They are zones of passage rather than destinations. Yet their centrality is within the urban grid and proximity to pedestrian pathways make them critical junctures. When reimagined, these underlines can shift from places of disconnect to nodes of transition—thresholds that bridge neighborhoods, anchor civic life, and hold new kinds of activity.

**Linear Echoes:** Throughout downtown, remnants of Dayton's industrial and civic past still stand, hollowed out by time. These abandoned infrastructures, the old factories, transit facilities, or public service buildings—once served vital functions in the city's ecosystem. Today, they exist in stasis: structurally present but socially absent.



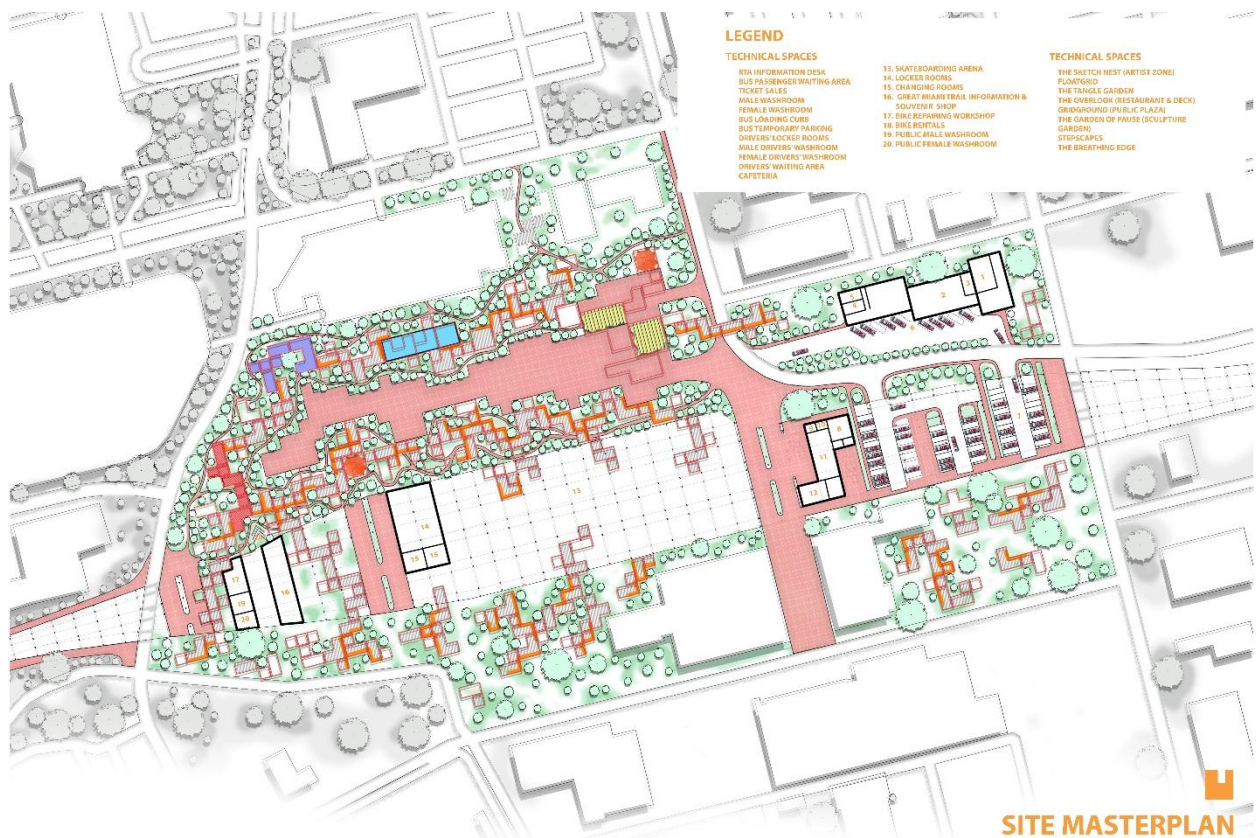
**Ghost Frames:** Perhaps the most emotionally charged of Dayton's voids are the ghost frame—historic or landmark buildings that still stand yet exist on the brink of erasure. Often visually prominent, these structures may retain their facades while their interiors are vacant, decaying, or inaccessible. They speak to memory, identity, and the precariousness of legacy. These voids are not merely spatial but psychologically representing both potential and loss. As urban figures, ghost frames possess a haunting presence, demanding recognition and care in any future urban vision.

**Ghost Grounds:** Distinct from ghost frames—which still physically stand—ghost grounds refer to the spaces where buildings or infrastructures once existed but have since been completely removed. These are erasures in the urban landscape: plots of land that hold no vertical trace of what came before, but remain imprinted with memory, form, or invisible boundaries. Often left as gravel lots, fenced areas, or ambiguous open fields, ghost grounds carry a sense of disorientation. They lack architectural markers but are saturated with historical and emotional weight—sites where past presences still echo in the absence of form. By identifying and examining these six distinct typologies—asphalt seas, wild pockets, underlines, abandoned infrastructures, ghost frames, and ghost grounds—a more nuanced understanding of Dayton's urban voids emerges. These are not homogenous spaces of lack or failure, but layered conditions shaped by history, infrastructure, nature, and neglect. Each type tells a different story about the city's evolution and offers a different kind of opportunity for engagement. To transform these spaces, one must first recognize them as active components of the urban fabric—each with its own constraints and potentials.

Rather than erasing their identities, the goal is to work with their specificity, interpreting them not as empty gaps, but as fragments of a larger narrative waiting to be woven back into the city. These readings form the foundation for the next phase of this thesis: proposing a framework through which these voids can be stitched into a meaningful, reflective, and inclusive urban experience.

## **FROM FRAMEWORK TO SITE: A GROUND FOR TRANSFORMATION**

While the Route of Reflection offers a compelling conceptual framework for re-engaging with the fragmented landscape of downtown Dayton, its effectiveness ultimately relies on its application at the level of the site. Conceptual thinking alone cannot resolve the physical, social, and emotional complexities embedded in urban voids. The transformation of space requires a deliberate and contextual design response—one that tests the framework's intentions through spatial intervention. To explore this, a site has been selected that embodies multiple layers of vacancy and potential. Situated at the former Dayton Union Station, the site combines three distinct void conditions: extensive surface parking lots, infrastructural remnants, and overgrown, unmanaged land.



These elements—referred to in earlier chapters as asphalt seas, linear echoes, and wild pockets—exist in proximity, forming a contiguous but fragmented terrain in the heart of downtown.

This site represents more than just a place of physical vacancy; it is a point of convergence for memory, infrastructure, and missed opportunity. Its centrality within the urban fabric and adjacency to key cultural, educational, and civic institutions enhances its potential as a transformative ground. The following chapter analyzes the site's context, spatial forces, and user dynamics, and proposes a design strategy that integrates transit, public gathering, and contemplation. Through this intervention, the site becomes a prototype for how voids—when thoughtfully reimagined—can be reinserted into the city's rhythm as places of layered meaning and shared experience.

### THE MASTERPLAN: The Technical Spaces

The design intervention at the former Dayton Union Station aims to transform a layered urban void into a breathing hub—a space that fosters both movement and reflection.

Rather than imposing a new object onto the site, the proposal allows it to reemerge from within the city's fabric, acknowledging its infrastructural and ecological layers. Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's theory of latent "use value" in neglected spaces and Michel de Certeau's ideas on spatial practice, the intervention embraces everyday life as a generative force in urban renewal.

The site is organized into two primary zones based on acoustic and spatial character. The noisy underside of the elevated tracks houses technical functions, including a regional bus hub serving local and interstate travel. This hub is equipped with amenities for students and commuters, as well as designated rest areas for drivers—responding to a current gap in the city's infrastructure during large events and festivals. Above and around this core, quieter zones are designed for social interaction and contemplation.

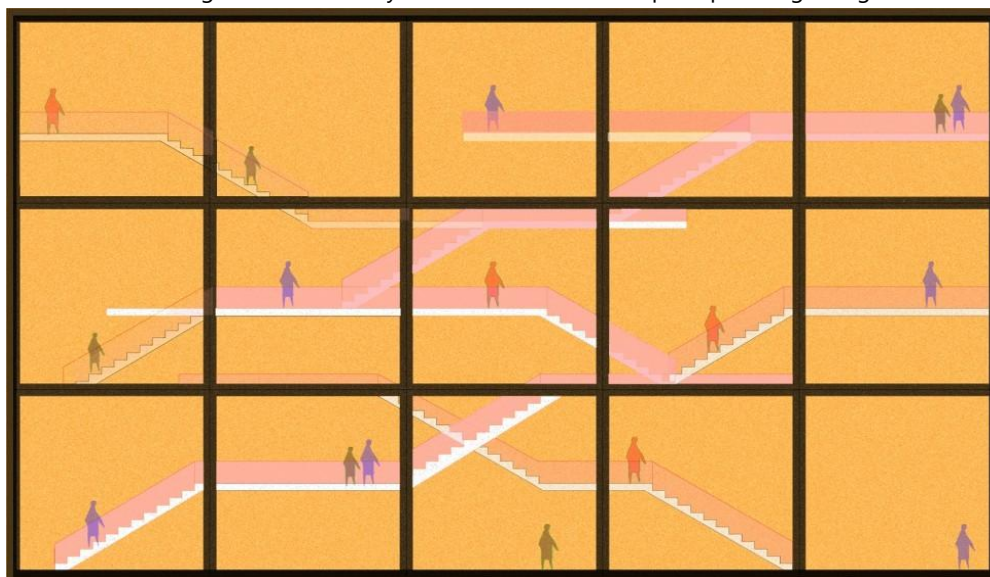
To activate public life, the proposal includes a skateboard park—leveraging nearby sports fields and the growing urban skateboarding culture—as well as a bicycle rental and repair station. These elements are linked to the Great Miami River Trail, making the site a key node within Dayton's recreational network. A visitor kiosk and souvenir shop further embed the project into the city's cultural and ecological flows.

Together, these interventions reframe the void as a dynamic threshold—a place where infrastructure, culture, and daily movement intersect, breathing life back into a forgotten site.

### THE MASTERPLAN: The Grid Folly

At the heart of the proposed intervention lies the Grid Folly—a spatial framework that redefines how visitors experience the site. Rather than serving as a traditional architectural enclosure, the grid acts as an open, layered system that frames space without confining it. Inspired by Kevin Lynch's theories on mental mapping and the personal construction of urban meaning, the folly encourages users to navigate the site intuitively, forming their own narratives through movement, pause, and observation.

The grid is not a singular object but a collection of modular segments that vary in openness, height, and orientation. These shifting conditions generate a multiplicity of spatial experiences, allowing each visitor to engage with the site differently depending on where they stand or move. The structure avoids prescriptive circulation, instead inviting exploration through ambiguity and variation. In doing so, the Grid Folly becomes a scaffold for perception—guiding without dictating.



*The Grid Folly*



As time passes, this framework is envisioned to evolve through use, weathering, and adaptation. It becomes more than a spatial device; it transforms into a living canvas for the city site where memories, events, and encounters are continually inscribed. By resisting closure and embracing openness, the folly challenges conventional ideas of monumentality or fixed programming. Instead, it establishes a participatory environment where meaning is not designed in advance but discovered over time through interaction and personal connection.

Ultimately, the Grid Folly forms the experiential core of the breathing hub—an armature that binds the technical and contemplative zones while offering a continuously unfolding encounter with the city.

## **THE MASTERPLAN: The Creative Realm**

The Grid Folly, while appearing as an abstract framework, is deliberately embedded with spatial logic and intent. Each grid segment is designed to hold its own micro-narrative, guiding visitors through various physical and emotional experiences. This is achieved through a network of “stepscares”—carefully placed stairways that weave through the structure. These stairs are not merely functional; they are spatial storytellers, directing the body, shifting perspectives, and offering moments of pause or redirection. They organize vertical movement while maintaining openness, allowing the journey within the grid to remain non-linear and exploratory.

Among these journeys, certain spaces are carved out for specific uses. One such space is the Sketch Nest—an informal, creative zone inspired by local artists who gather to draw, share stories, and reinterpret the city through sketches. The Sketch Nest provides a sheltered, collaborative environment for drawing workshops, installations, and public engagement. It is a direct response to Dayton’s cultural character, fostering grassroots creativity within the evolving urban framework.



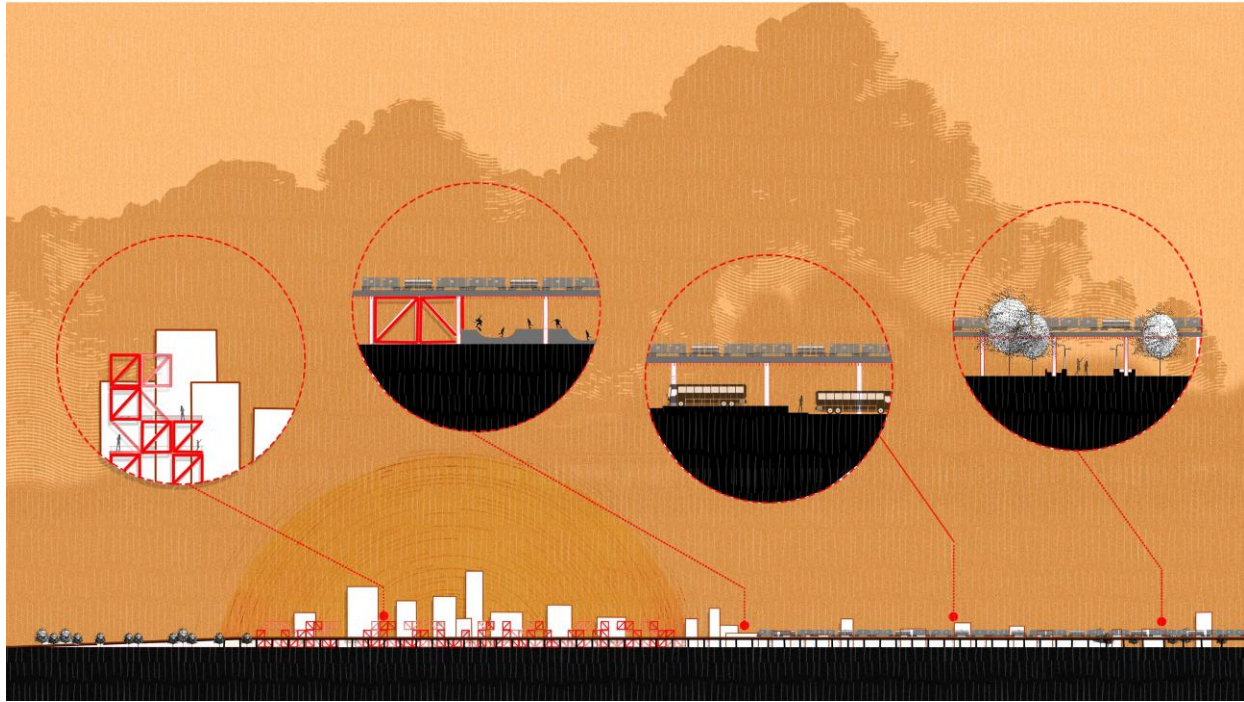
Above the site, the FloatGrid offers a playful layer of elevational mesh walkway that hovers above the primary grid and invites people to move across it with a heightened sense of interaction. This elevated pathway allows users to observe the spaces below, creating a dialogue between levels. Transparency and layering have become key experiential tools, enabling a multiplicity of visual and social encounters.

These vertical strategies culminate in the GridGround, a public plaza situated at the most socially active node of the site. Designed to host public events, performances, and cultural gatherings, the GridGround transforms the formerly silent void into a vibrant social condenser. It balances formal programming with informal occupation, offering space for both curated activities and spontaneous gathering.

Surrounding this energy are additional interventions that expand the site’s inclusivity. The Tangled Garden introduces an interactive, child-friendly space defined by suspended ropes and soft climbing elements. It is designed as an imaginative

landscape—physically stimulating and psychologically freeing—allowing children to explore and engage the grid on their own terms.

Adjacent to this is the Overlook, a rooftop restaurant and viewing deck that invites slower forms of engagement. Visitors can



*A conceptual section of the Transformed Urban Void.*

dine while observing the city, the flowing movement of people across the grid, or the rhythmic passage of cargo trains. The space is intentionally placed to bridge activity and reflection, offering a moment of stillness and perspective amid the dynamic spatial choreography.

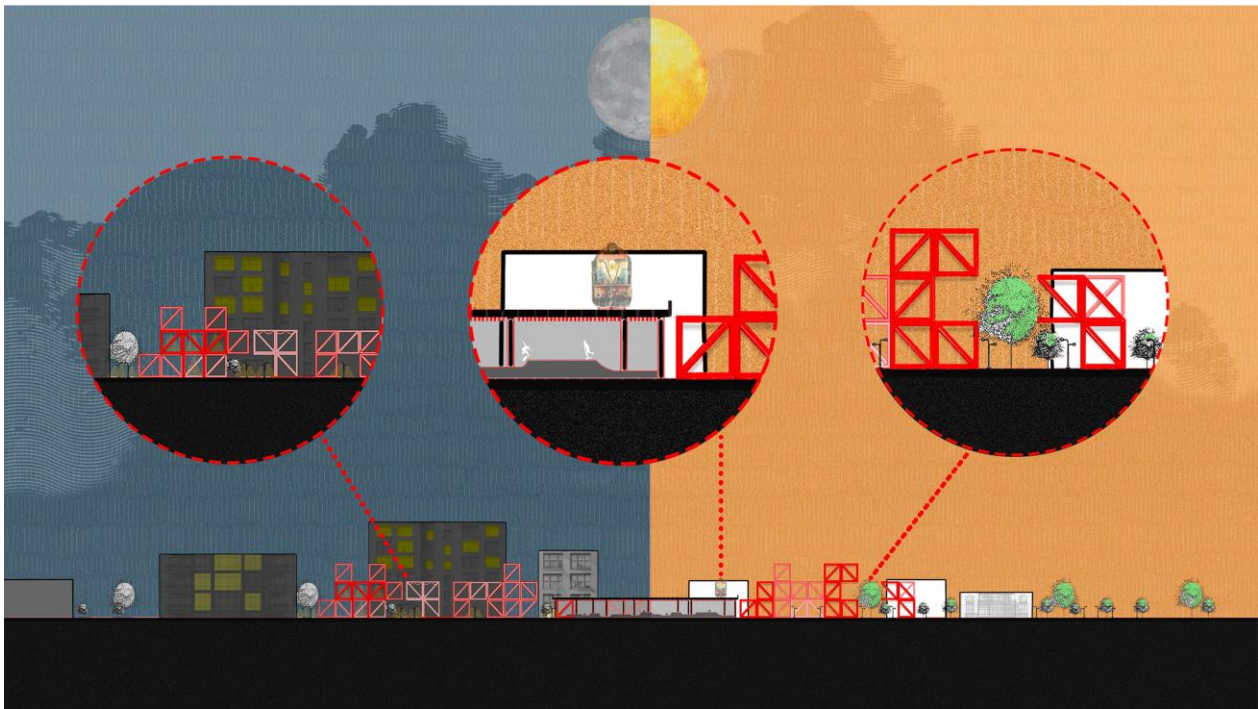
Central to the contemplative dimension of the design is the Garden of Pause, a sculptural courtyard where temporary art installations and local exhibitions can unfold. The space is envisioned as both a gallery and a meditative sanctuary. It also responds to institutional proximity, supporting programming from Sinclair University's drone research and design efforts. This overlapping of artistic and academic use ensures that space remains dynamic, community-oriented, and temporally responsive. Encircling the entire site is the geometry becoming poetically, casting long shadows and giving the structure a dreamlike presence. Movement slows, sounds soften, and the grid holds stories in stillness. The same spatial elements that energize the day now foster reflection at night.

The elevated rail tracks that divide the site contribute further to this duality. Two of the four lines remain operational, while the other two—long overtaken by wild vegetation—have been preserved as a contrasting wilderness within the design. Rather than clearing them, the project integrates these naturalized areas as a quiet backdrop. Their untamed condition reminds visitors that not all spaces must be controlled to be meaningful.

Breathing Edge—a Sectional drawings illustrate contemplative walking path that how these different layers coils softly around the interweave—providing spaces

perimeter. Designed to act and quietude, accommodate slow, solitary openness and enclosure, movement, the pathway elevation and grounding. The narrows at key points to site are not a singular gesture but encourage intimacy and quiet a complex system of observation. It resists the experiences that shift across conventional boundaries by time and user intention. becoming a space, buffering the inside. This approach reimagines the activities while connecting them void as both a spatial and with the surrounding city fabric.





*Activities in the Void.*

Beyond daylight activity, the transformation is not static, but sites embrace transformation continually unfolding. By through time. As evening sets proposing a design that in, the Grid Folly adopts a new accommodates multiplicity—of character. Under the soft use, of mood, and of illumination of lampposts, the meaning—the project puts forward a replicable model for other voids in Dayton and beyond.

It concludes with a call to perception: these spaces, often bypassed or neglected, hold untold potential. When treated with care, they are not merely places of absence but powerful grounds for presence, memory, and future authorship.

This thesis began with a deceptively simple question: What if the neglected voids within our cities are not signs of failure, but opportunities for new forms of presence? Through the lens of downtown Dayton, this work has examined how overlooked and underutilized spaces—often seen as fragments—can be reframed as vital components of urban experience.

Drawing from critical theories of spatial practice, urban memory, and psychogeography, the thesis has proposed a conceptual framework—the Route of Reflection—to guide the transformation of these voids. This route is not simply a physical path, but a strategic method for reconnecting spatial, emotional, and cultural discontinuities. It is designed to cultivate both activity and contemplation, encouraging users to move through the city with heightened awareness and personal authorship.

The design intervention at the former Dayton Union Station site served as a testbed for this framework. Through layered programming, experiential structures such as the Grid Folly, and the careful choreography of public and intimate spaces, the project reclaims the void not as absence, but as a dynamic field of interaction. It accommodates infrastructure, supports public life, invites artistic engagement, and protects solitude—demonstrating that a single intervention can hold multitudes.

Ultimately, this thesis argues for a shift in how cities approach vacancy—not as something to be filled, but as something to be revealed, respected, and reimagined.

Urban voids are not empty. They are spaces of potential, memory, and future authorship. When designed with care and intention, they can offer not only new public spaces but new ways of seeing the city itself.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> “Dayton’s Union Station: Later Years 1960s+.” 2016. Wright.edu. 2016. <https://libraries.wright.edu/about/library-news/2025/01/29/daytons-union-station-later-years-1960s>.

<sup>2</sup> “Dayton, Ohio Population 2024.” 2024. Worldpopulationreview.com. 2024. <https://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/ohio/dayton>.

<sup>3</sup> “Dayton Office Price per Sqft and Office Market Trends.” n.d. Www.commercialcafe.com. <https://www.commercialcafe.com/office-market-trends/us/oh/dayton/>.

<sup>4</sup> Koolhaas, Rem. "Junkspace." *October* 100 (2002): 175–90.

<sup>5</sup> Lynch, Kevin. 1960. *The Image of the City*. London: The MIT Press.

<sup>6</sup> Rossi, Aldo. 1982. *The Architecture of the City*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 29–32, 61–63, 130–133.

<sup>7</sup> Forty, Adrian. 2004. *Words and Buildings: A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture*. London Thames & Hudson, 256–265.

<sup>8</sup> Lefebvre, Henri. 1991. *The Production of Space*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oxford: Blackwell, 346–371