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AUSTIN TEXAS 6TH STREET ENTERTAINMENT DISTRICT



DOWNTOWN MARKETING & DEVELOPMENT By Barry Cassidy

When I first went to Austin in 2021, I thought the project area would be the Capitol, where redevelopment was underway. That did not work out because the level of demolition for the expansion was higher than I expected. Plus, while I was taking pictures of the Capitol, someone thought it necessary for police with automatic weapons to surround me at one point. It was a lesson learned.

On my next visit, I saw extensive demolition, so I looked for another project area. I chose the 6th Street Entertainment District. It fit my subcategory of arts and entertainment districts, rather than the Capitol Area, which I had planned to compare with the district in Indio, California, where buildings were demolished to build an arts center.

At one point, this historic entertainment district was known as "The Street of Dreams;" in 1899, people traveled the cobblestone lane on horseback. Over the

years, it defied segregation and welcomed all to its storefronts. It also gave Stevie Ray Vaughan and The Grateful Dead one of their earliest opportunities.

The first time I surveyed was after demonstrations and civil unrest on the street. Barricades ran down the center of the street, similar to what I did on South Street when I managed crowds at Mardi Gras and the Greek Picnic. The place was crawling with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents. I was taking pictures of all the vacant buildings, and they were hanging out on the corner. I gave them the option to either move or be included in the visual inventory. They moved from the corner, but the guy with the automatic weapon stayed put, so he was included in the photo inventory.

There were 121 storefronts in total, with 20/24 (16.5 percent/19.8) vacant in 2025 and 2026. Hard-core vacancy: 20 addresses were vacant in both years. These are the persistent empty spaces on 6th Street. No previously vacant spaces were filled in Year 2. 89 storefronts retained the same non-vacant tenant across both years.

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DOWNTOWN MARKETING & DEVELOPMENT

(Continued from page 50)

This indicates a high stability rate (~88 percent of occupied spaces in Year 1 stayed with the same operator).

The mix wasn't much of a mix; hospitality dominated the street: 89 storefronts in 2025 and 84 in 2026. Restaurants and bars dominated the street. A small retail component and some offices rounded out the street.

When I first went, the 600 and 700 blocks were completely vacant: 11 vacant storefronts, and foot traffic stopped at the 500 block. As I continued to investigate, I found a developer who had purchased 31 properties in an attempt to bring back "Old Sixth," sometimes called "Dirty Sixth," because of the wide ethnic makeup of the six blocks of 6th Street, which was widely represented and viewed as the red-light district.

I thought that the shifting of downtowns in use and function may signal the end of the 500 and 600 blocks. I recognized it as a contraction of the downtown. The days of Old Sixth probably cannot be replicated because I think brothels and the like were part of the fabric. The formal break at Congress Street no longer existed to a great extent; the district was not four blocks out of six but instead attached to six blocks on the other side of Congress Street, creating a ten-block district.

The developer is selling a dream of a return to "The Street of Dreams," which is admirable. When I define commercial districts, it is not always what people think. I look for the break where there is no reason to go forward because of a lack of interest or opportunity to interact with commercial entities. It is more than a non-transition zone; it is the end of the district.

Often, the district effect is achieved through public amenities, to the point where a district ends. A common lighting scheme and compatible street furniture design remind you that you are in the same place. In Austin, the district was shrinking by two blocks. It is now a clean slate, and it will be interesting to follow its progress.

With 121 properties plus 11 vacancies, there are 132 in the corridor; if someone

owns 31 of these units, that is a 23 percent stake of the total. A concerted effort of capital and theme could bring a fast recovery, but the question will then be what impact that will have on the sense of place. Will the units share a common design language, and what effect will that have on the district's spontaneity, as this company interprets what happened naturally over the years? Will it be an attempt to Disneyize the street as a replica of the past, or will it remain wide open with diversity on many levels, as it was in the past?

Barry Cassidy is a freelance grant and economic development consultant. He can be reached at barrycassidy@comcast.net.



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