



Metropolitan Branch Trail

Public Art / Civic Design

Sketchbook

Introduction

This sketchbook imagines the ways that public art and civic design elements might be incorporated into the segment of the Metropolitan Branch Trail being built in the District of Columbia. The sketchbook is part of a concept plan that is being developed by the city's Department of Transportation.

The Metropolitan Branch Trail will run for about seven miles from Union Station in the city's monumental core, to the Maryland state line in the Takoma neighborhood. A spur will run east from Fort Totten into Maryland. The trail will be built in phases over the coming years.

The trail will be an unusual kind of civic space in the District of Columbia, different from classic spaces such as the National Mall, the circles and squares of L'Enfant's Washington, or even the rediscovered Potomac and Anacostia waterfronts. The trail can have a transforming impact, establishing new relationships between different parts of the city and creating new patterns of activity and opportunities for community reinvestment.

The trail will also be a unique kind of environment, a linear place used for getting from one place to another, for recreation or exercise, for quiet enjoyment, or for escape from the bustling city.

Along the way, the trail will create new kinds of shared civic spaces that have the potential of becoming common ground for both trail users and the adjacent communities—gathering places, resting places, viewing places, places that interpret the history of the city and region, places that stimulate people's sense of adventure, creativity and connection.

Public art and civic design can enhance the trail's stature as a new public space—for bike riders and pedestrians, for commuters and the community. It can attract people to the trail and make the experience of being there more rewarding. Already, trail planners and the communities along it have begun exploring the possibilities through a grant from the National Millennium Trails program and the National Endowment for the Arts.

This sketchbook imagines a wide range of possible public art and civic design projects. It describes four general categories of opportunities:

- art that relates to user experience of the trail,
- art that relates to functional and infrastructure elements,
- art that relates to special trail segments, each with its own identity,
- art that assists in interpreting the history of the trail corridor.

These ideas are meant to stimulate the creativity and ingenuity of the city's arts and design community, to serve as the starting point of discussing specific projects that can be implemented by public agencies or cultural organizations as the trail is developed.

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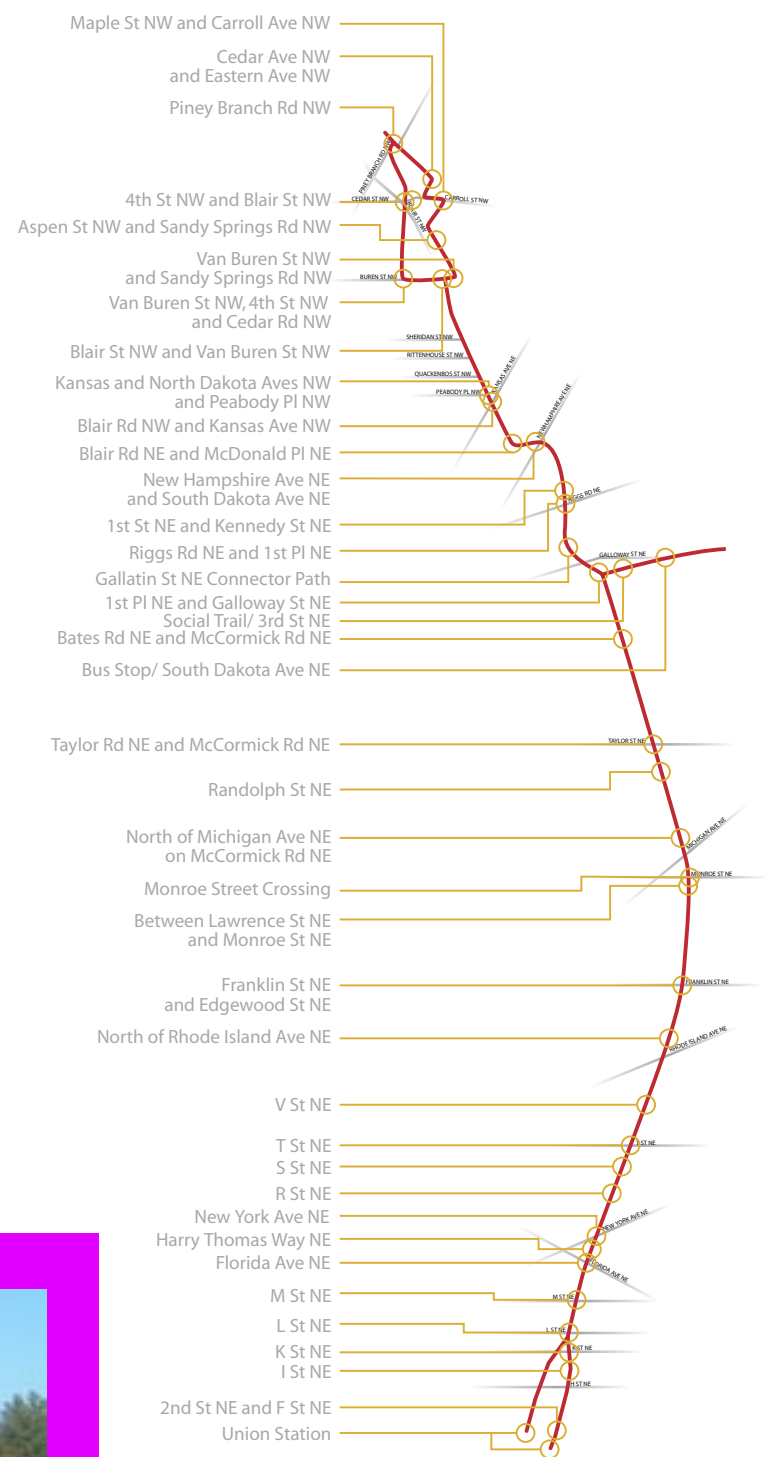
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Thresholds and Gateways

Thresholds and gateways are places of passage where people move from one place to another. They are places where people enter or leave the trail, places that mark transitions between different areas of the city, or places where the character of the trail or the surrounding landscape changes. At these locations, art might mark the location of a transition, highlight the contrast between places, signal a changed identity, or be incorporated into information elements that provide guidance to trail users.



A major gateway: The District–Maryland boundary at Eastern Avenue and Piney Branch Road.



Typical intersection of Met Branch trail corridor with public street.



Connection between Eighth Street/Brookland and the CSX corridor.



Use specially-designed bollards at trailheads.

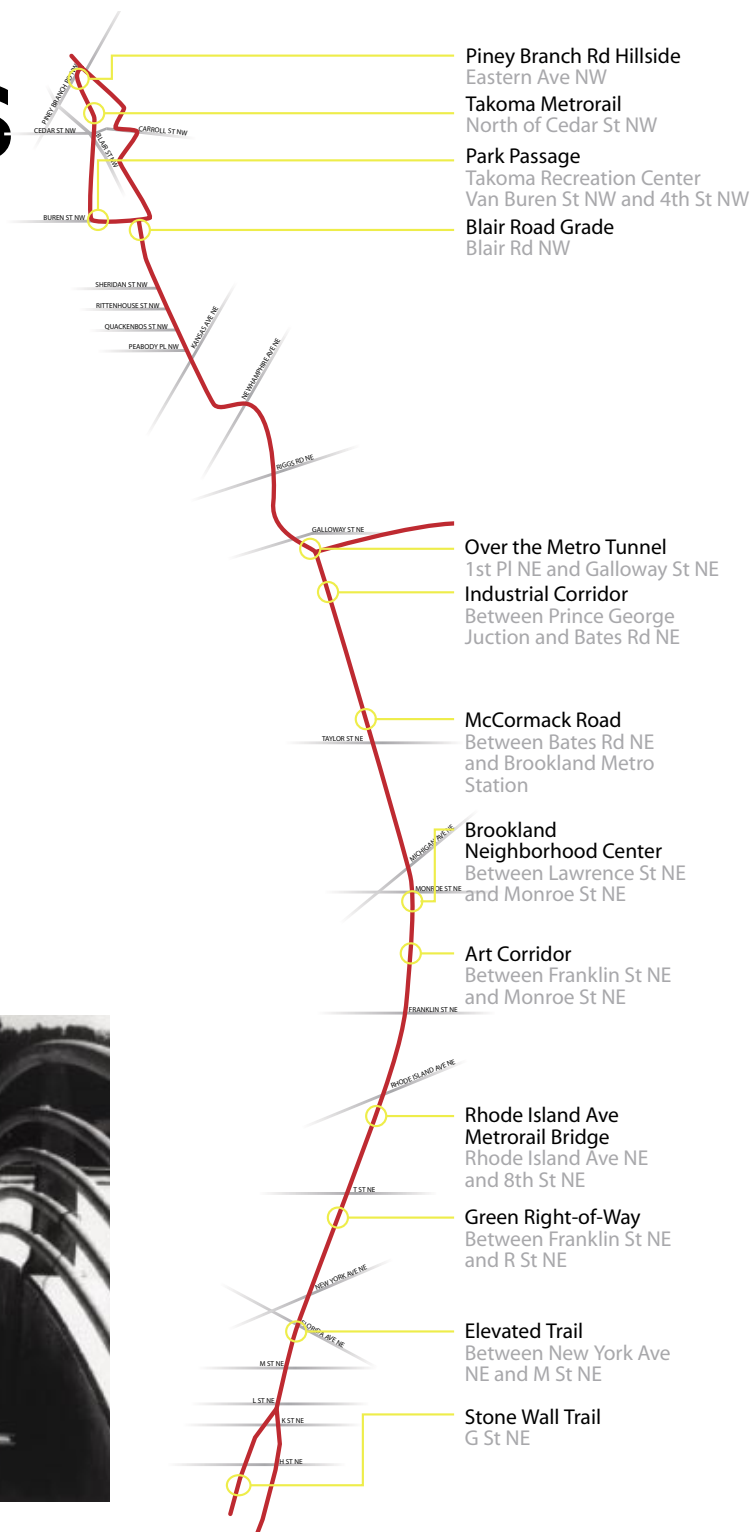


Highlight transitions, such as entrances to the trail, with gateway markers, insignias or projects that heighten the drama of passage.



Flows and channels

Flows and channels are places of motion, where the primary activity is moving along the trail or passing by something. In places like these, art can celebrate our sense of movement and motion, through kinetic devices, optical illusions, contoured surfaces or dynamic shapes, or bright and shifting colors. Art projects can be designed to intrigue people riding by on bikes or viewing from afar.



Ramps and railings



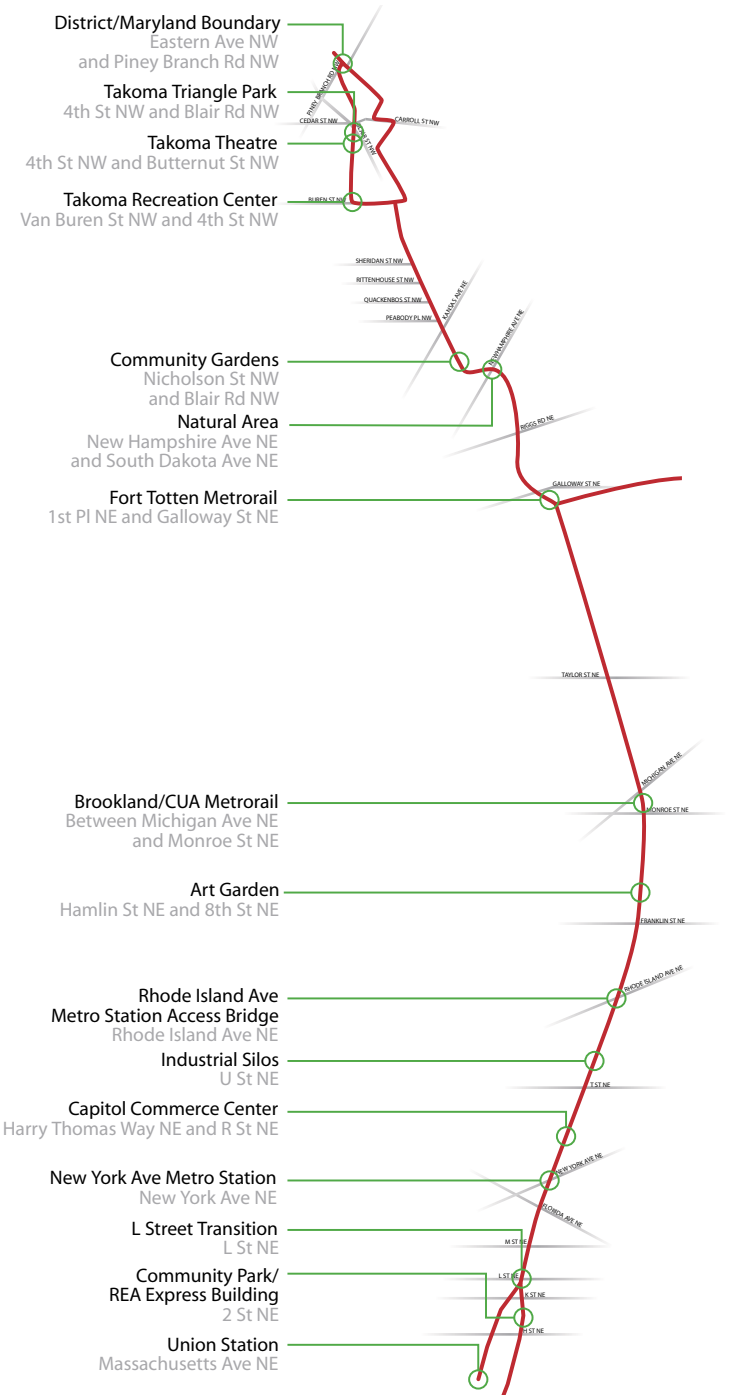
Banners and Underpasses



Trail courses

Pausing Places and Waysides

Pausing places and waysides are special locations along the trail where people might stop. These could include resting places or oases; viewing places or vantage points; welcome centers, transitions or gateways; or gathering places like parks, plazas and gardens. Art projects would respond to the specific nature of the place—they might serve as symbols or place markers, or be incorporated into the design of an element that is integral to the place—but would always focus on creating places that have civic stature, serving trail users and the community alike. Some of these projects might be developed through a participatory process.



District/Maryland boundary, Eastern Avenue, a potential wayside location.



Possible gathering places in Takoma.



Blair Road crest, a potential wayside location.



Use art and civic design to create gathering places, such as gardens or community play areas ...

... and amenities, like seating, shade and water, that serve bicyclists and the community.



Pausing Places and Waysides



Potential wayside: overlooking the community gardens along Blair Road.



Existing pausing place: the Brookland / CUA seating area.



Proposed wayside: The Art Garden, Brookland, Eighth Street.



Involve artists in the design of viewing places, such as towers, platforms and stages ...



...and of places to sit.

Points of Reference

Points of reference are places that are visually prominent and serve as landmarks along the route. They could include existing elements that are memorable because of their architecture or engineering, their industrial or vernacular nature, or their historic value; as well as gateways or focal points that mark important locations and are identity elements for a community. New points of reference might be incorporated into community gathering spaces or focal points along the trail. More than other art projects, these should be unique, one-of-a-kind efforts.



Clock tower as place marker.



Historic places: Cady Lee Mansion.



A trail blaze and a commemorative sculpture.



Abandoned silos at Rhode Island Avenue.



An ordinary bridge transformed by color.



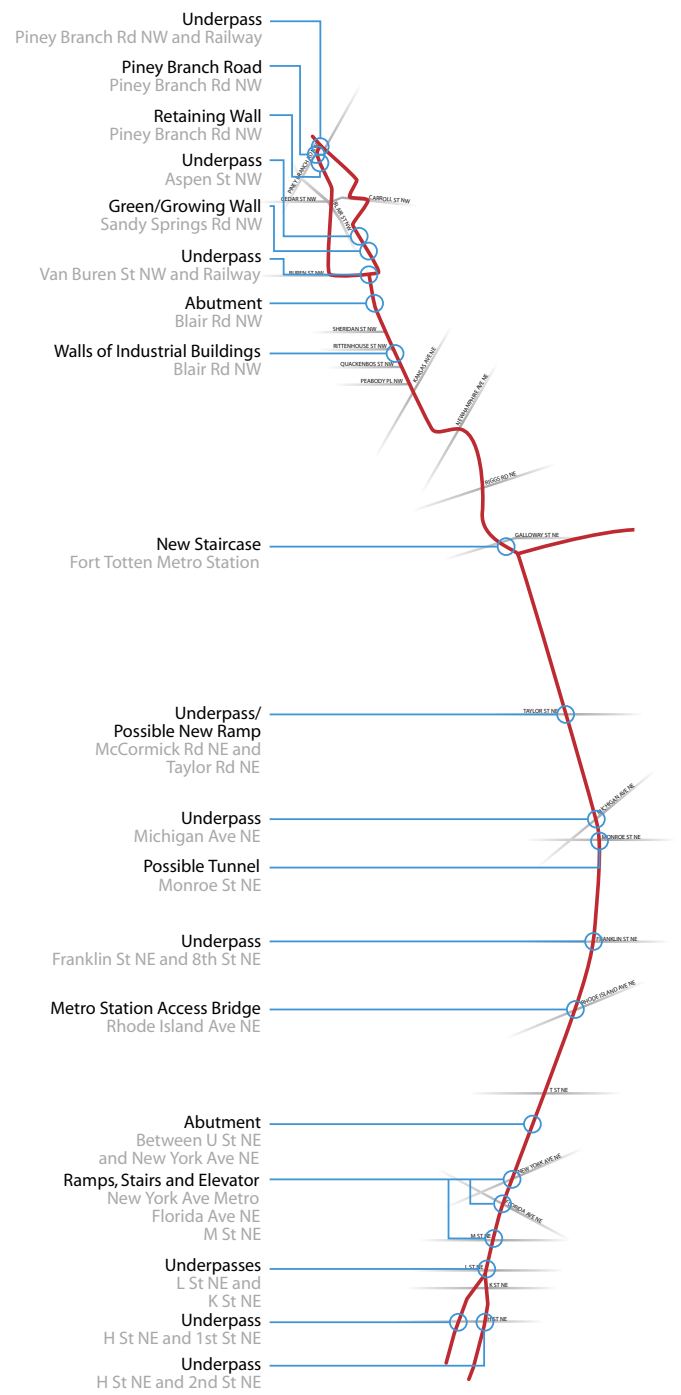
The U.S. Capitol, first visible just south of Franklin Street.



A platform that invites passersby to take advantage of a special view.

Trail Identity / Infrastructure

Infrastructure elements can be turned into a canvas for civic design and public art. Existing infrastructure elements, such as retaining walls, underpasses and fences, can be retrofitted with many kinds of art projects—wall mounted sculptures, murals, kinetic elements, light–shadow projects, scrims or screens, and projections. Projects like these can turn mundane elements of the cityscape into visual assets and are an effective location for community-based projects.



Underpasses: Locations for murals and ornamental sculptures, reliefs and paintings, maps.



Underpasses at the Brookland/CUA Metro station entrance.

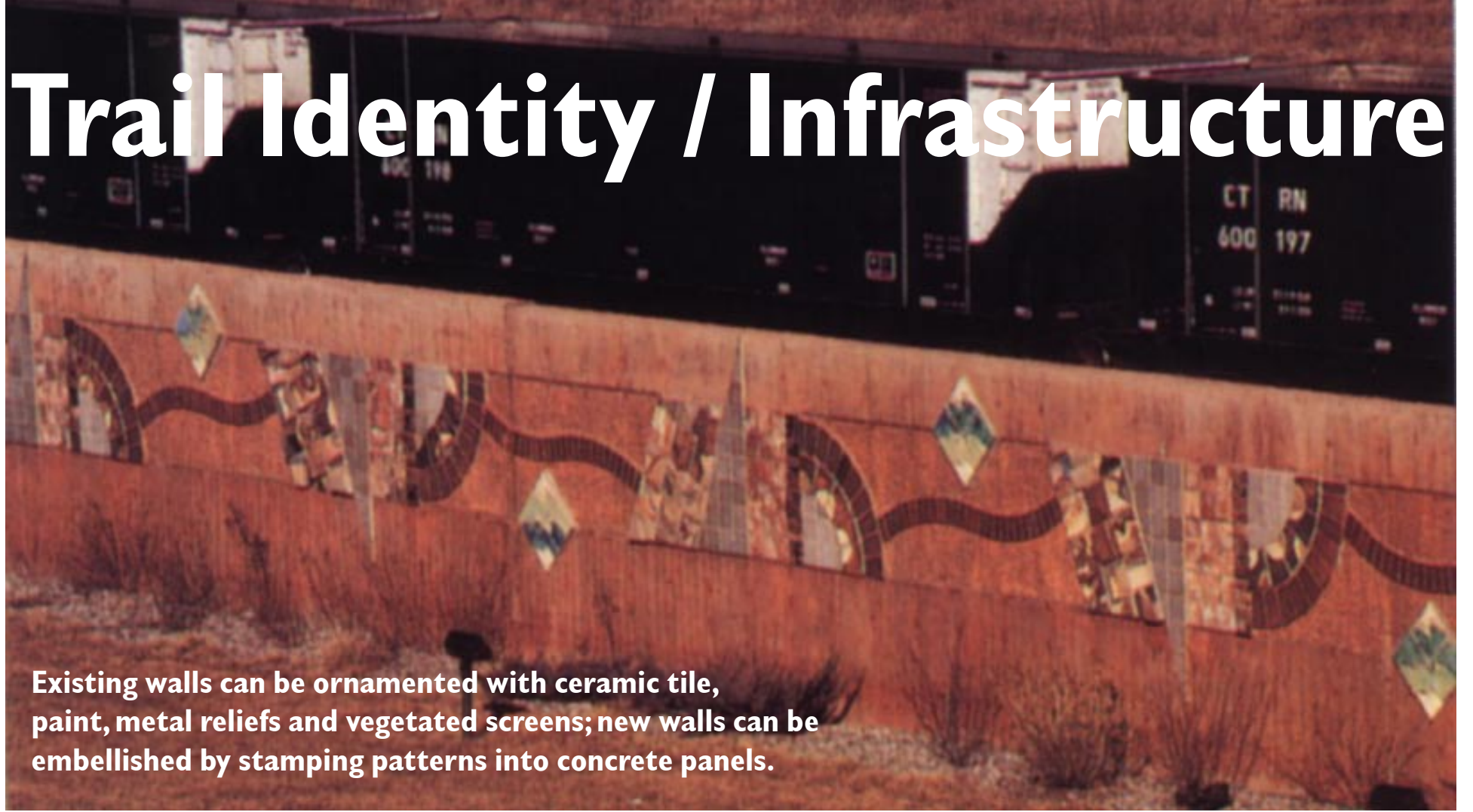


Aspen Street, NW, Takoma

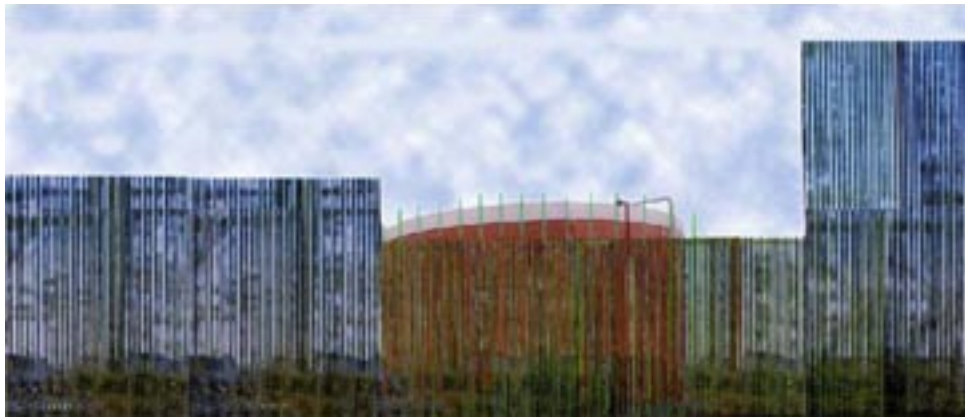


L Street, NE

Trail Identity / Infrastructure

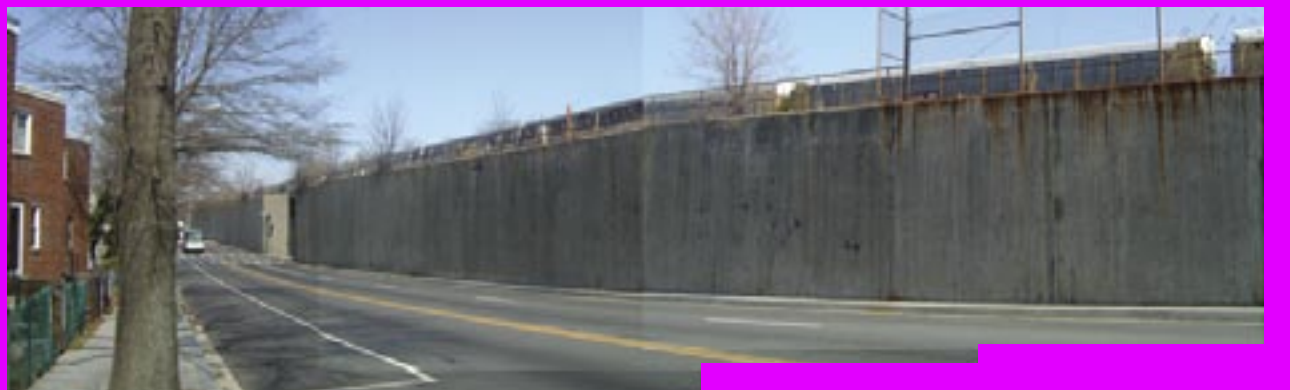


Existing walls can be ornamented with ceramic tile, paint, metal reliefs and vegetated screens; new walls can be embellished by stamping patterns into concrete panels.



Piney Branch Road

Blair Road



North of New York Avenue



Trail Identity / Color

Color can be a powerful tool for creating a unified visual identity for a trail, particularly one like the Metropolitan Branch Trail, whose visual character changes dramatically from section to section. One color might be chosen to repeat itself in elements along the trail and act as an easily recognizable trail blaze. Alternatively, repeated color sequences, such as a spectrum or semaphore pattern, might be integrated into elements like bollards, signs, panels, flags or banners that might ornament fences, walls or poles.



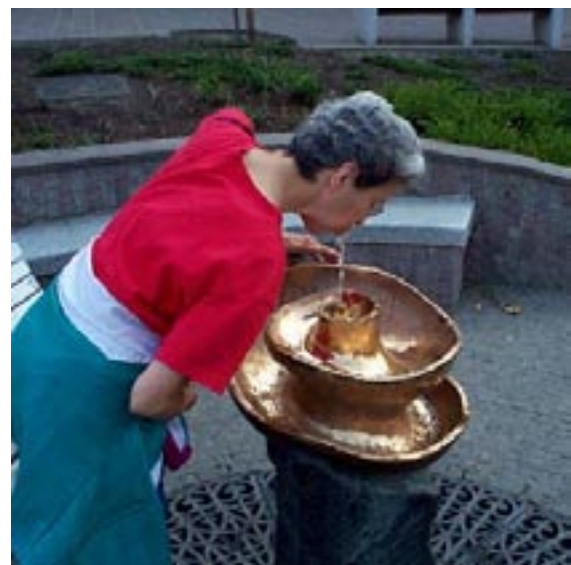
Trail Identity / Curves

Shapes can provide a visual language for the trail. The overall path of the Metropolitan Branch Trail is a gentle arc, but in some places the trail will make dramatic curves—as it runs along the hillside at Fort Totten, for example. Artists could be asked to celebrate the sense of movement along the trail by using curves or swoops as a theme. Dynamic shapes could be incorporated into infrastructure, landscape or trail contours, and surface materials; or echoed in the language of sculpture.



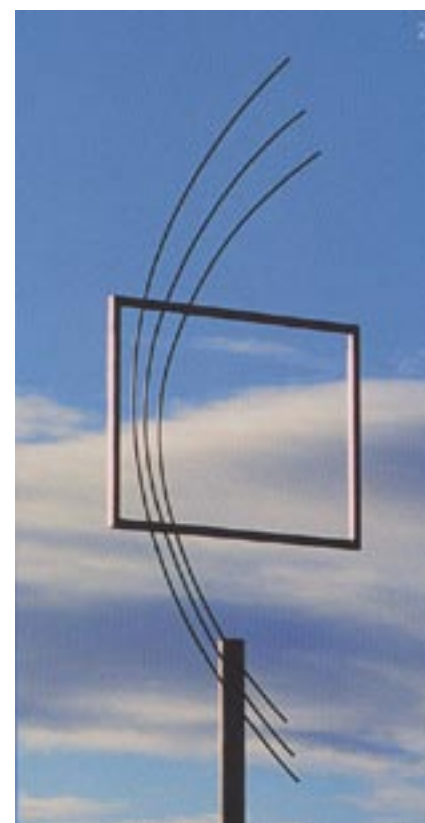
Trail Identity / Functional Elements

The Metropolitan Branch Trail will incorporate a range of **functional elements**, such as barriers, bollards, seating, mileage markers, drinking fountains, bike racks and signage. Involving artists in the design of these elements would create an artistic presence along the length of the trail.



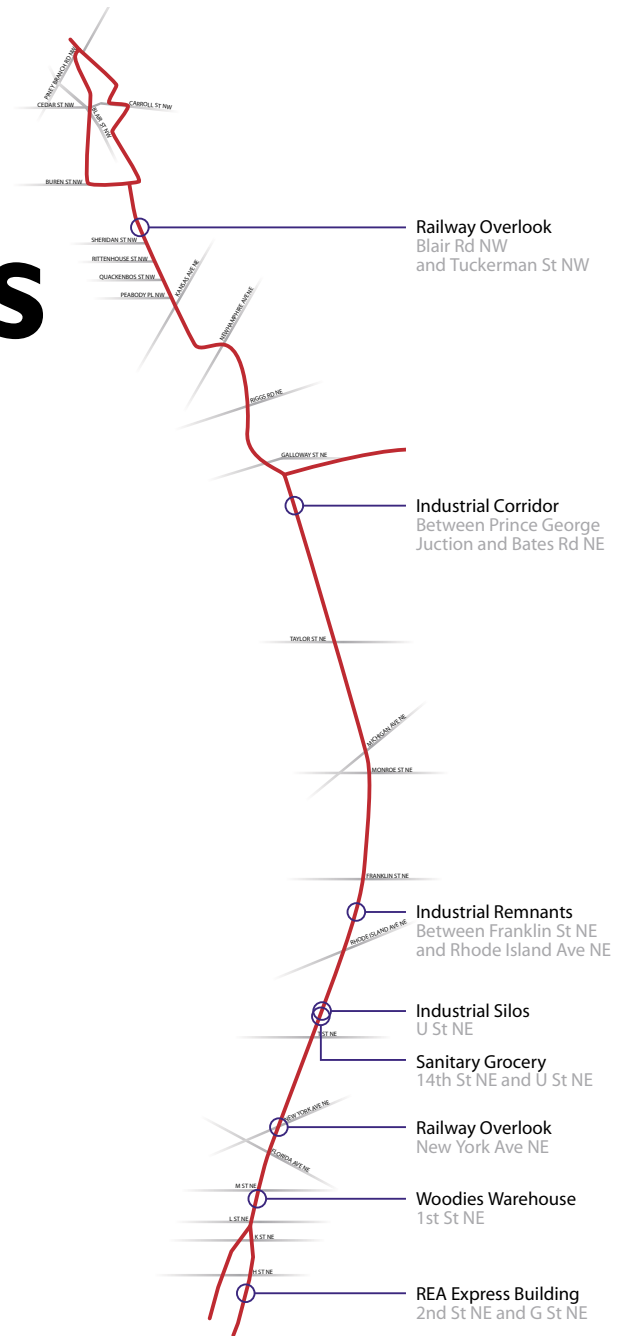
Trail Identity / Trail Blazes

Traditionally, trail blazes are recurring markers that identify the path of a trail through the landscape. Urban bike trails can reinterpret this tradition in a way that is both whimsical and functional. Some cities have commissioned artists to create families of sculptures or signage that mark the progression of a trail, others commission a range of artists to create their own interpretations of a common theme. These blazes not only let trail users know they are on the right track, but also add to the image of the place.



Trail Identity / Industrial Elements

Industrial elements are one of the most consistent aspects of the visual character of the trail. Artists could be encouraged to develop projects that relate closely to the corridor's industrial and transportation heritage. They could be asked to work with ideas of motion; bright, bold colors; or large-scale structures fabricated from durable materials. In addition, existing industrial sculptures, whether functioning or relics, could be embellished with paint, screens, light or other non-intrusive art projects.



A discarded cable spindle near Rhode Island Avenue.



Art integrated into electrical substations, Seattle.



Storage silos near Rhode Island Avenue.



Art using wind to create motion, Seattle.



PEPCO substation along Second Street.



Neon ornamentation of industrial shed structure, New York City.

Segment Character

Takoma Loop



In Takoma, the trail will branch into two routes. The trail will not only be a path for commuters, but also an important community resource—a loop that connects civic places, provides a route for casual riding, and serves as a starting point for longer trips—featuring art that connects both commuters and community users. The trail can serve as an armature for art generated by the trail project itself, by private development initiatives, and by community initiatives. Art projects could be related so that they form a narrative or family, literally or visually, as one travels the loop; art projects could be related to places that are important to the community as well as trail riders.



Create community reference points.



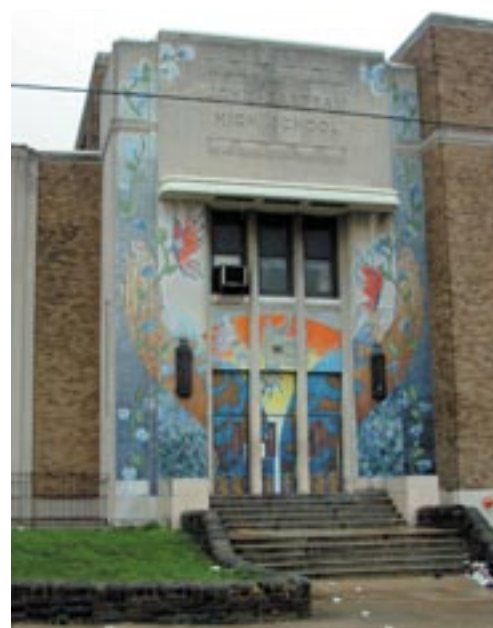
Organize community-based projects.



Consider projects that are human-scaled or reflect the life of the community.



Use art to integrate trail amenities, such as resting places, with community spaces.



Integrate art with community facilities.



Segment Character / Brookland



In Brookland, the trail passes near a number of community, civic and cultural resources, including the Brookland neighborhood center and arts cluster, Catholic University of America, Galladuet University and nearby schools and recreation centers. In this area, public art should celebrate the community's spirit of creativity and provide clear links to resources that are nearby but not directly on the trail. Fanciful, colorful art in open spaces, as well as an overlay of incidental "art on the street" projects and event-related art should make this an exciting, everchanging place for biking and walking. Special trail blazes at important community locations, such as schools and recreation center, could signal the presence of the trail a block or two away.



How to mark a neighborhood: In Chicago, a plaque was placed at the gateway to the Bronzeville neighborhood, and artist-designed benches were placed along streets.



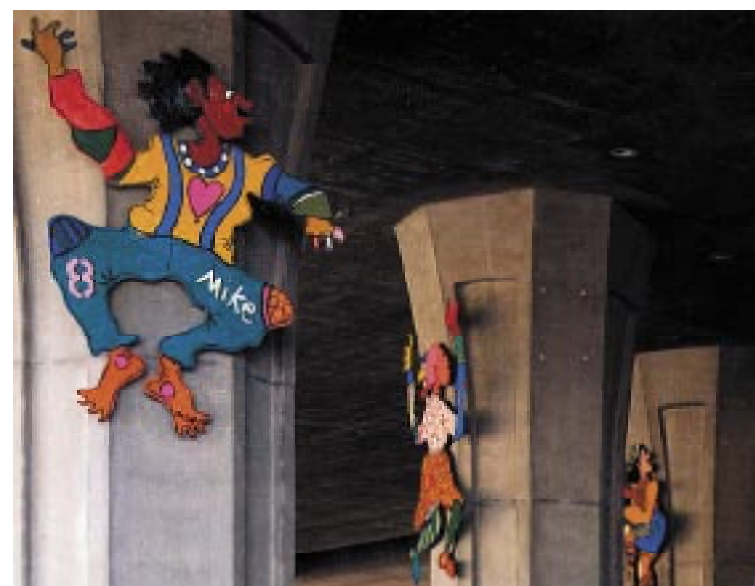
A pausing place: seating at the Brookland/CUA Metro station entrance.



Artist workspaces along Eighth Street.

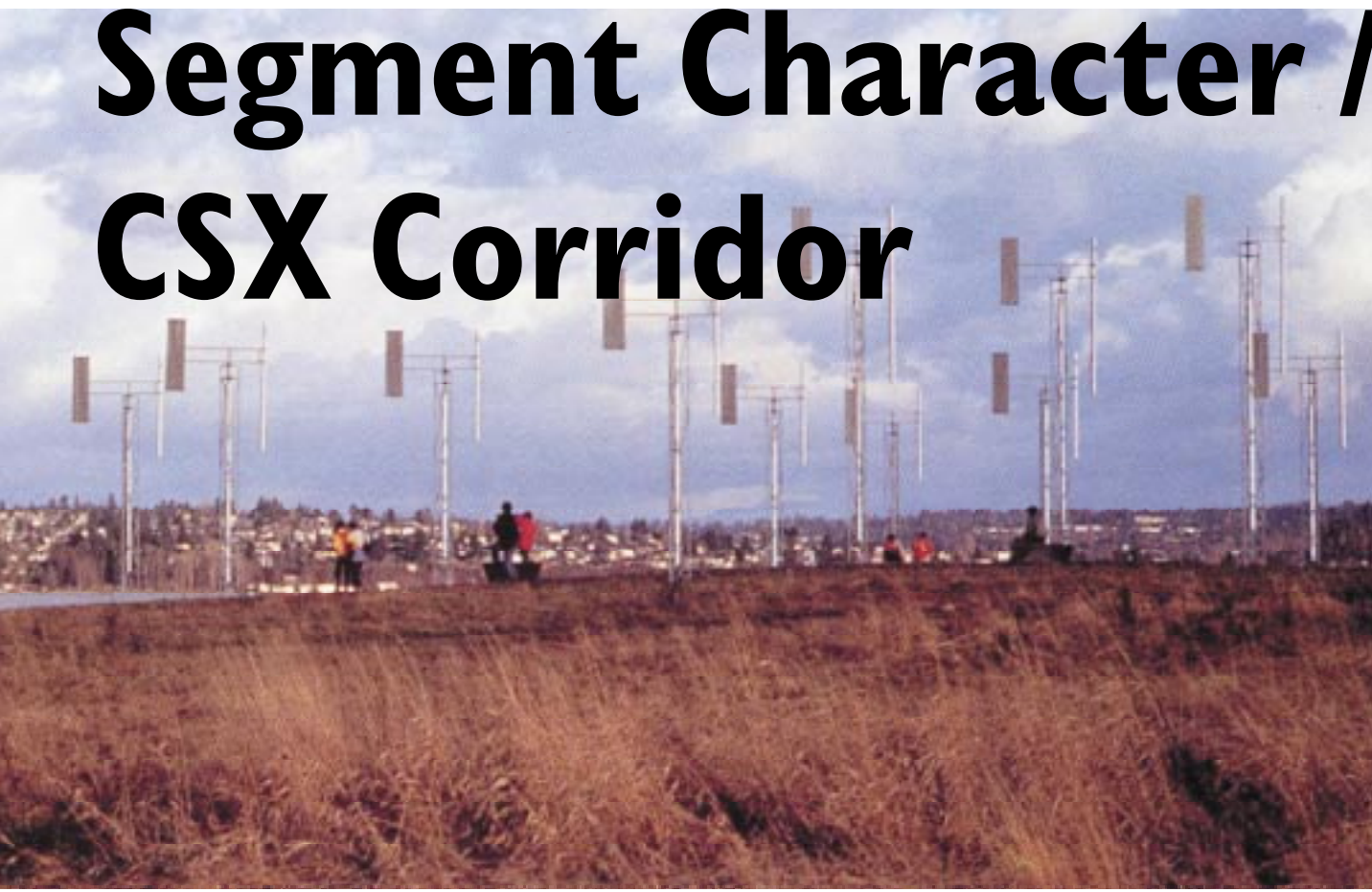


In Miami, a colorful concrete walkway links a transit station to the adjacent community.



In Los Angeles, colorful art was designed in collaboration with the community.

Segment Character / CSX Corridor



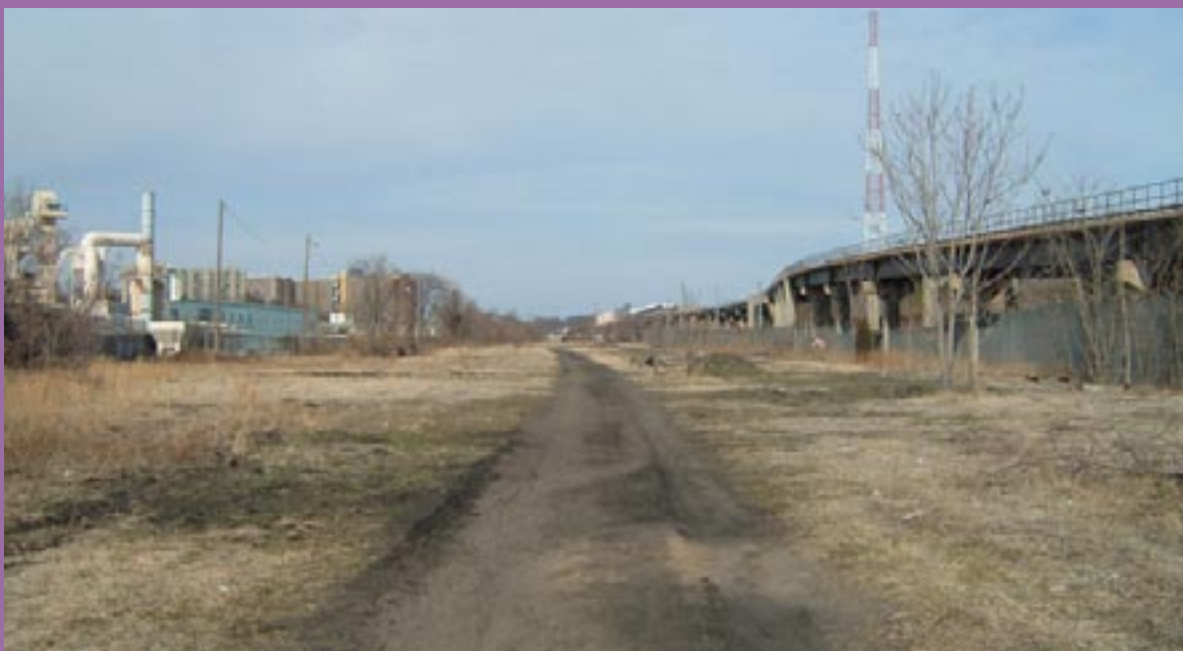
The segment of the trail between Franklin Street and New York Avenue is perhaps the most dramatic. Once a branch of Tiber Creek and more recently a CSX railyard, it is now a flat meadow that offers long vistas and dramatic juxtapositions of scale and movement.

This segment, currently bracketed by a rail line on one side and light-industrial operations on the other, is isolated and littered with industrial and railroad artifacts. A sculpture garden or large-scale environmental art could be located here; projects might be assembled from found objects scavenged from the railroad corridor; retaining walls, building facades and fences might be turned into surfaces for art projects as well.

Over time, as redevelopment occurs along this corridor, the trail could play an enhanced role. Connections to and from the trail, especially to Metro stations, will become important. The trail could be an important connection between office buildings, and a recreation resource for residents and office workers.



Industrial material can be turned into whimsical forms; wind can be harnessed in dynamic sculptures or to create temporary performances.



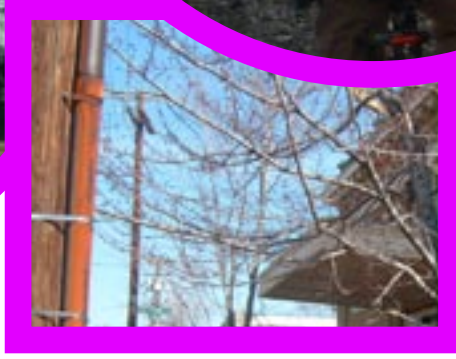
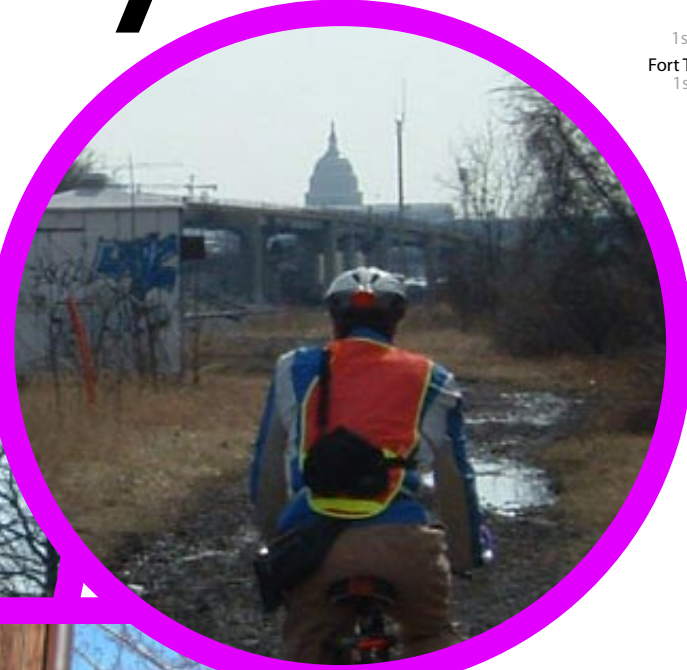
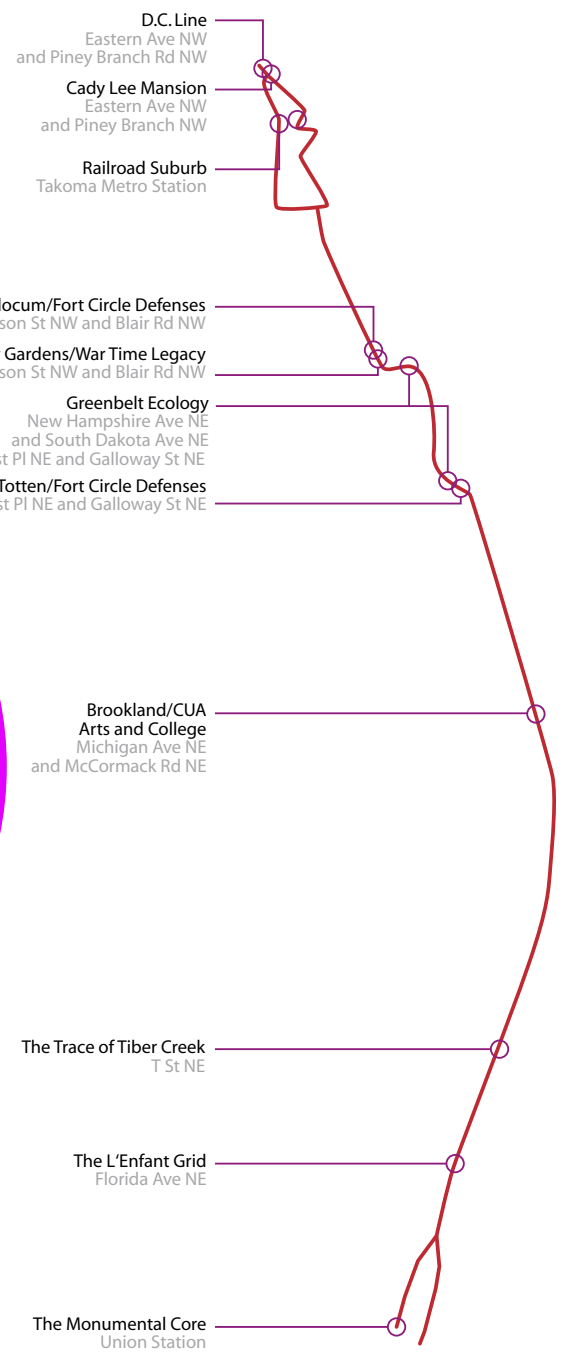
Rail corridor segment, north of New York Avenue.



Used rail ties, south of Edgewood Street.

Interpretive Braids

Place History



Cady Lee Mansion, Capitol view, historic Ft. Totten.

This interpretive strand would consider the cultural, social and developmental history of the places that the trail intersects. There are several neighborhoods and specific locations that would be considered, as well as several sites where the general pattern of the city could be interpreted. Art projects could include a trail-length system of interpretive markers (such as panels, pylons or medallions) or special monuments associated with aspects of the corridor's history. Special focus could be given to interpretive markers for areas like Brookland or Union Station that have a particularly dense history.

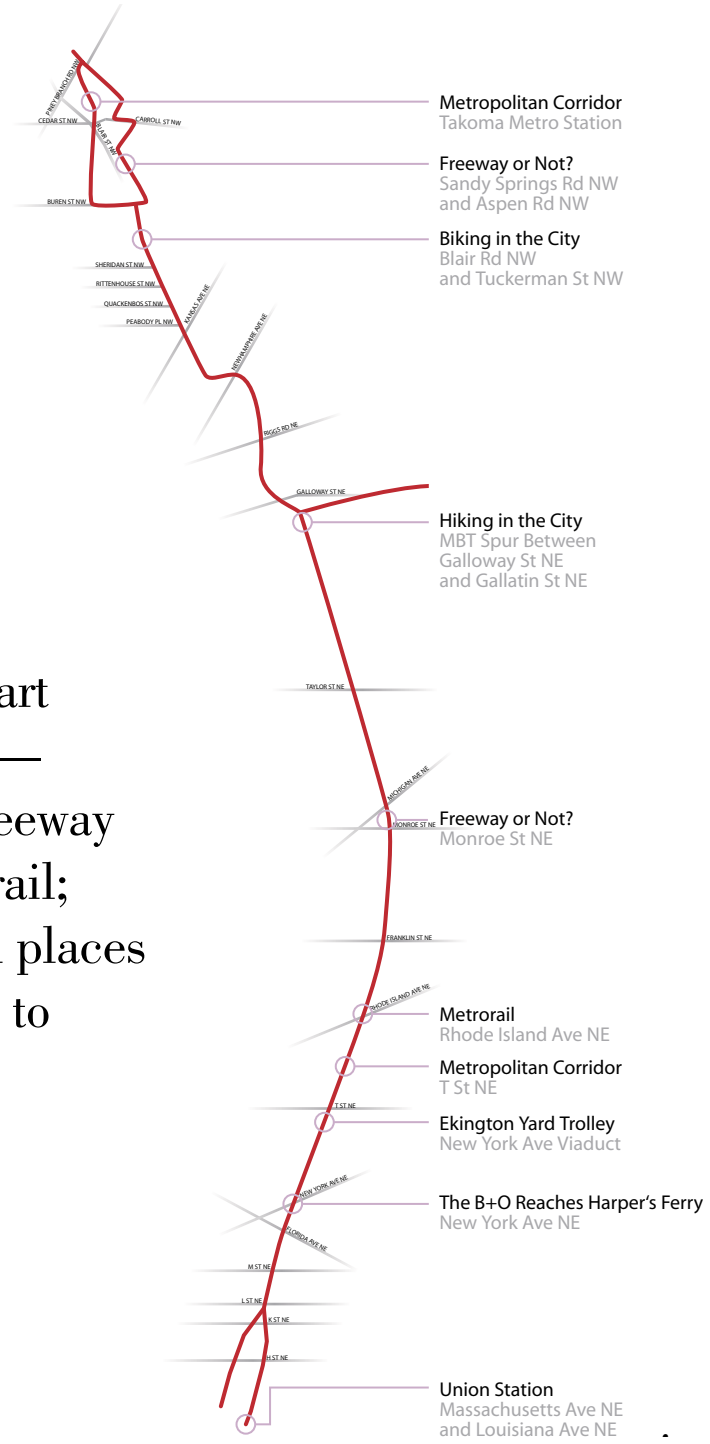
- D.C. Line / Banneker Survey, Monuments**
- Piney Branch Road / Cady Lee Mansion**
- Takoma / Railroad Suburb**
- Community Gardens / Wartime Legacy**
- Fort Slocum / Fort Circle Defenses**
- Woodlands / Greenbelt Ecology**
- Fort Totten / Fort Circle Defenses**
- Brookland CUA / Arts and College**
- Florida Avenue / The L'Enfant Grid**

Sculpture honoring Harlem resident Ralph Ellison; mural depicting scene from England's military history; sculpture commemorating industrial history; marker honoring Chicago musician Louis Armstrong.



Interpretive Braids Transportation

The Metropolitan Branch Trail corridor has long been defined by the role it plays in regional transportation. Along the route, a system of interpretive markers or individual commemorative art projects could explore different layers of transportation history—early trails and roads; passenger and freight railroad history; freeway proposals and citizen backlash; Metro, Amtrak and commuter rail; and the new bike trail. Some of the projects could be located in places specific to historical events, others could be spaced in between to create a rhythm of experience.



Union Station
The B+O Reaches to Harper's Ferry
Freeways or Not?
Metropolitan Corridor
Metrorail
Biking and Hiking in the City



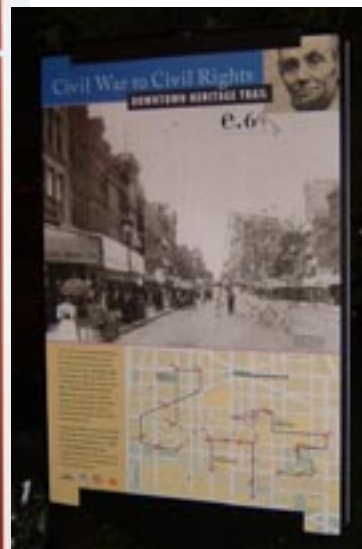
Memorial sculpture interpreting the history of the wartime shipbuilding industry in Richmond, Calif.



Mural depicting views of historical Manayunk, Philadelphia

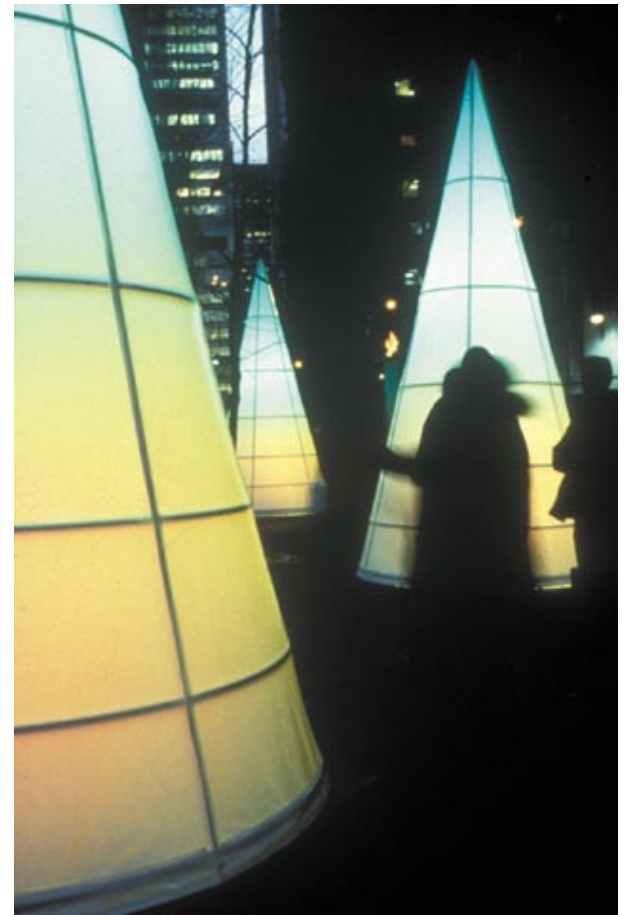


Interpretive signage from Germany, Philadelphia, Indianapolis, downtown Washington and Los Angeles.



Temporary Projects / Special Events

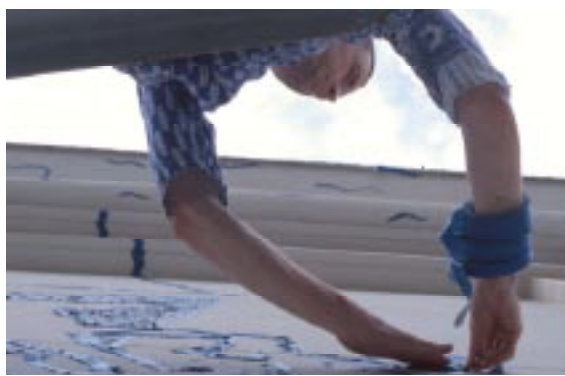
Urban places are always changing, and public art can contribute to that dynamic. The Metropolitan Branch Trail and the spaces it connects might be considered as a linear gallery for art that comes and goes, such as temporary installations. Artists can also be involved in designing special events, either to commemorate special thresholds in the evolution of the trail (groundbreakings, ribbon cuttings) or celebrations and activities (such as races and festivals) that become traditions for the trail.



Clockwise from upper right: Wintertime lighting in Lower Manhattan; temporary sculpture exhibition in Midtown Manhattan; Mardi Gras festival in Arlington; construction wall in Philadelphia; Waterfire cultural event in Providence; temporary exhibition in Arlington.

Community Involvement

Community involvement is a cornerstone of the public art process in Washington, D.C. Community involvement can take a variety of forms—from participation in the artist selection process; to collaborating with artists in the gathering of materials, themes and motifs; to hands-on involvement in creating sculpture, mosaics or murals; to temporary projects that involve intensive bursts of community creation. Each project along the trail can have its own approach.



Top to bottom: Community street art festival in Santa Monica; “tape art” project in Arlington; community tile project in Corpus Christi; community photo project in Philadelphia.

