

ACTIVATING URBAN SPACE: A STRATEGY FOR ALLEYS & PASSAGES



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Photo of Block Place, Melbourne, Australia
Source: Derek Midgley on Flickr



Photo of the Brattle Book Shop in Cambridge, MA
SOURCE: bill_comstock on Flickr



Photo of Wolf Lane in Perth, Australia
Source: jarkti on Flickr

DESTINATION VIAS

- » Have the most potential to play a dynamic role in the urban fabric
- » Focus on capital improvement projects, new development and business attraction
- » Possible programming of events to attract residents and visitors

ACTIVE VIAS

- » Great potential for improvement as enhanced multi-modal corridors that provide through block connections
- » Focus on capital improvement projects to improve access and safety for all users
- » Create guidelines or incentives to encourage businesses to expand into the via and improve their alley facades

CONNECTING VIAS

- » Encourage aesthetic enhancements to expand the pedestrian network
- » Capital improvement projects focus on aesthetic improvements such as new paving, furniture, public art etc.

This study identifies alleys and passages in and around Downtown Birmingham, and seeks to provide a framework to classify alleys and passages into different categories based on their existing uses and to outline options to capitalize on opportunities for aesthetic improvement and activation of these spaces.

Alley and passage classifications provide a flexible framework from which to consider the level of regulation needed to achieve the desired outcomes for each type. The proposed classifications are not meant to be static, and may change due to future land usage, new technology, new destination locations, etc.

DESTINATION VIAS

Destination vias have the most potential to assume an active and dynamic role in the urban fabric. These vias would likely be the focus for capital improvement projects, new development and business attraction, as well as the possible programming of events to attract residents and visitors.

ACTIVE VIAS

Active vias have great potential for improvement as enhanced multi-modal corridors that provide through block connections. These vias would likely be the focus for capital improvement projects to improve access and safety for all users, and for guidelines or incentives to encourage businesses to expand into the via and improve their alley facades.

CONNECTING VIAS

Connecting vias have great potential for aesthetic enhancements to create interesting and creative spaces to expand the pedestrian network and greatly enhance walkability. These vias would likely be the focus for smaller scale capital improvement projects. These projects would improve the aesthetic of the via, using elements such as new paving, landscaping, furniture and public art.

This document outlines recommendations for design guidelines, enhancement strategies and activation strategies for our alleys and passages. These recommendations encourage the enhancement of the urban realm by improving pedestrian and bicycle connectivity; creating active and interesting building edges that provide better engagement opportunities with pedestrians; and allowing for the creation of both formal and informal gathering spaces in alleys and passages. These recommendations ensure high quality urban design, engaging and pedestrian friendly activities, while simultaneously recognizing that service functions will likely continue to exist and need to be accommodated in certain places.

ACTIVATING ALLEYS & PASSAGES

Alleys and passages in cities across the world have traditionally provided a functional purpose, such as access for service vehicles collecting trash, deliveries for adjacent businesses, back door access for employees or corridors for power lines, water lines, sewer lines and drainage. Alleys usually run behind or along side of buildings to keep these service functions hidden from view and out of the street. Many alleys and passages are found in older areas of town; they are often in historic districts and were designed at a time when large motorized vehicles did not exist. Away from the bustle of main roads, alleys and passages offer an integrated system of pedestrian and vehicle linkages that connect streets and districts.

Often alleys and passages are forgotten spaces. They are not considered part of the main streetscape; they are hidden from view and do not attract visitors other than service providers. However, alleys and passages provide opportunities to create unique urban spaces. In tight urban conditions, alleys and passages provide intimate corridors for pedestrians, and allow for convenient shortcut routes to adjoining streets and destinations. Encouraging activity to spill out from adjacent buildings into alleys and passages can strengthen retail, provide additional space for outdoor dining and special events, and can expand the pedestrian and bicycle network linking many different areas. Public investment designed to improve the aesthetics of alleys and passages, such as paving upgrades, the addition of furniture, lighting or landscaping, will attract people to these spaces, and will have revitalization benefits for all adjacent properties.

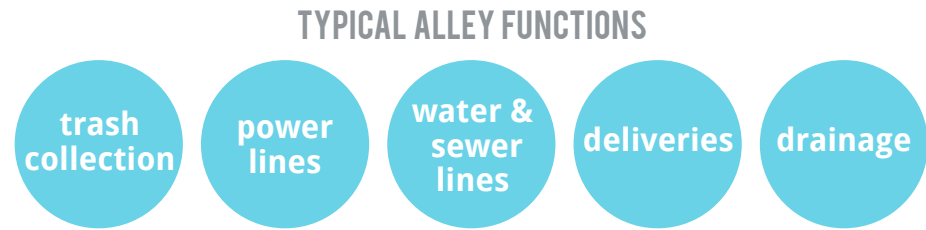


Photo of Cady's Alley in Washington D.C. This alley has upgraded paving and added other aesthetic improvements to make it more pedestrian-friendly.
SOURCE: The Great Photographicon on Flickr

PURPOSE & GOALS OF STRATEGY

Activating Urban Space: A Strategy for Alleys & Passages is designed to provide a plan to manage and maintain existing alley and passage assets in the city, and to prepare a framework for re-imagining life in these intimate urban spaces. This plan includes a study of existing alleys and passages in Birmingham. It reviews existing master plans, ordinances, and the improvements that have been implemented in alleys and passages as a result of these plans.

This strategy then identifies needed improvements and it provides recommendations for both design enhancements and activation strategies to encourage activity in hidden and underutilized urban spaces to provide active and attractive spaces that enhance public life and increase pedestrian activities in the study area. The overarching purpose of this plan is to inspire interest from adjoining property owners, businesses and residents to create high quality urban spaces that encourage active use and engagement that enhance public life in Birmingham.

Activating Urban Space: A Strategy for Alleys & Passages seeks to recognize the role and character of alleys and passages in creating a fine grain urban realm, and seeks to activate these hidden urban spaces.

The overarching purpose of this plan is to inspire interest from adjoining property owners, businesses and residents to create high quality urban spaces that encourage active use and engagement to enhance public life in Birmingham.

GOALS

To maintain and enhance existing alleys and passages.

To improve the walkability and permeability of urban spaces in Birmingham.

To facilitate and create opportunities for activation of selected alleys and passages.

To ensure the safety and well-being of all users of alleys and passages.

To facilitate new development that assists in achieving desired outcome of plan.

To form the basis for ordinance amendments that will encourage a form of development in alleys and passages that will achieve the physical qualities necessary to enhance, activate and re-imagine the unique urban spaces in Birmingham.

BIRMINGHAM'S COMMITMENT TO ALLEYS & PASSAGES

For many years, the City has demonstrated that it is deeply committed to maintaining and enhancing its alleys and passage system. The City recognizes the intrinsic potential for these alleys and passageways to become dynamic spaces that play a critical role in enhancing our street network and serve as unique destinations within the fabric of our City.

The existing *Downtown Birmingham 2016 Plan* identifies and classifies existing alleys and passages in the downtown core. It provides basic recommendations for improving and activating the City's alleys and passages. The recommendations contained in the section, *Circulation 5*, of the *2016 Plan* state that alleys and passages should be held to higher aesthetic standards, similar to sidewalks, given their pedestrian function. *Appendix C-9* of the *2016 Plan* provides a map of all alleys in downtown Birmingham, and classifies each as an alley or a pedestrian passage. Additional attention is given to alleys and passages as pedestrian-friendly spaces in the *Birmingham Zoning Ordinance*. The *Zoning Ordinance* requires screening for parking adjacent to alleys and passages in the same manner provided along streets.

Over the last several years, many of the changes downtown have invigorated the streets and enhanced public life; these changes further reinforce the need for the City to develop a comprehensive strategy to further activate its downtown alleys and passageways. Examples of some of the recent changes to downtown that have been catalytic for enhancing the public realm are the construction of new residential units, the revitalization of three downtown parks, and the addition of a Farmers' Market. These changes have brought more people downtown—including residents and visitors, and make it important for the City to continue to cultivate the character of its alleys and passages.

The substantial increase in outdoor dining has also activated the streets and expanded public life. The implementation of the bistro ordinance has provided the potential for additional improvements to passages by requiring 70% glazing between 1 and 8 feet above grade on building facades that face a pedestrian passage. Examples of recent and proposed improvements to alleys and passages can be seen in the Willits alley that was improved at the time the Willits building was constructed, and the Social passage which was approved as a part of the Social bistro plan.

“Designate downtown alleys as either ‘alleys’ or ‘passages’ according to the plan in Appendix C-9 [of the Downtown Birmingham 2016 Plan]. Alleys should remain service places, while passages should be treated as sidewalks.”

-Downtown Birmingham 2016 Plan



TOP: Vehicles and pedestrians utilize Willits Alley.
BOTTOM: Photos of Social Passage and the Social bistro outdoor dining area.



EXISTING CONDITIONS & 2016 PLAN CLASSIFICATIONS SUMMARY

Birmingham has many alleys located downtown and throughout the city. These alleys and passages vary in character, function, and condition. Each alley has the potential for some degree of improvement.

According to the *Downtown Birmingham 2016 Plan*, it is imperative to consider the function of each alley and passage when deciding which improvements should be undertaken and determine the desired level of pedestrian activity that should take place in each space. These spaces were classified as either an alley or passage in the 2016 Plan.

The *2016 Plan* identifies **alleys** by the service-oriented uses that take place here. The need to maintain access for deliveries and trash pickup is critical in alleys, these spaces must therefore maintain a clear zone that vehicles can traverse.

The *2016 Plan* defines **passages** as non-motorized cut-throughs. The pedestrian scale and activity can be allowed to flourish without the clear zone restrictions necessary in alleys.

The following list is an account of the classifications given to the downtown alleys and passages in the *Downtown Birmingham 2016 Plan*.

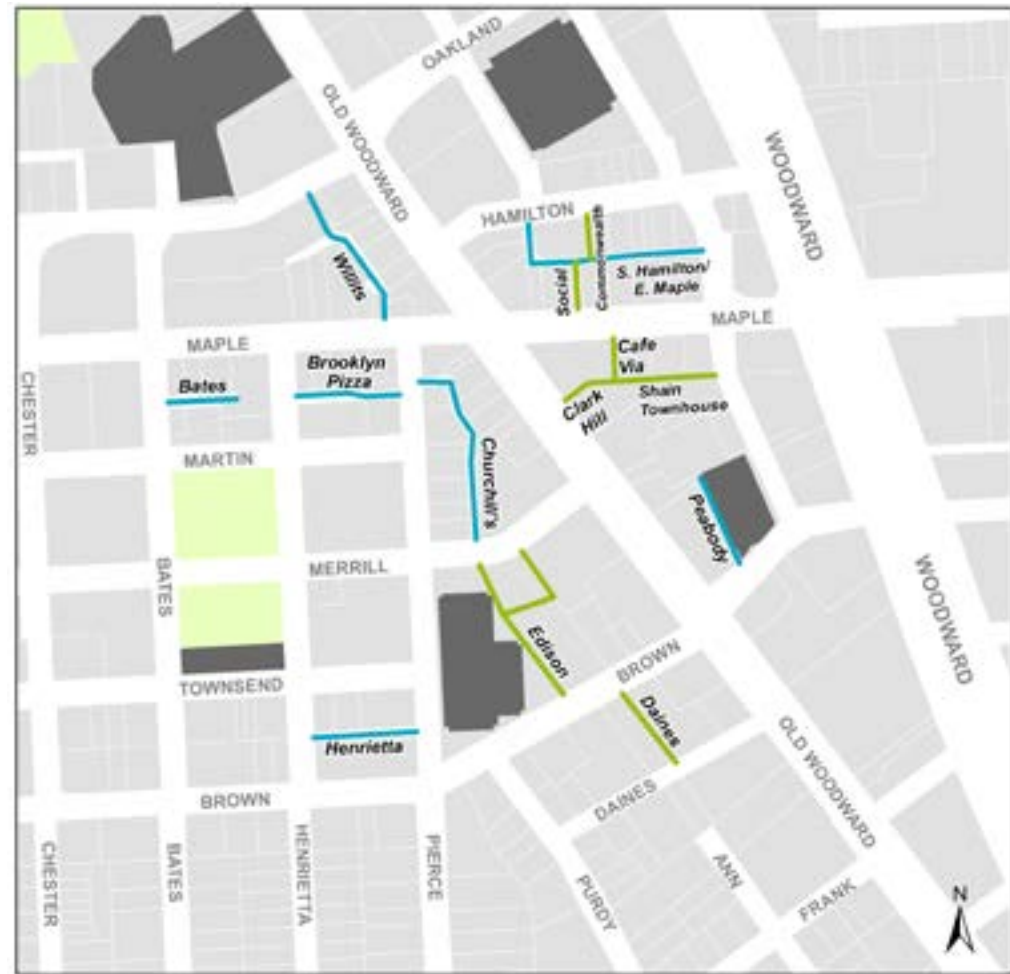
2016 PLAN: ALLEY CLASSIFICATION

- » Service oriented
- » Need access for deliveries & trash pickup
- » Require a clear zone

2016 PLAN: PASSAGE CLASSIFICATION

- » Non-motorized cut throughs
- » Do not require a clear zone
- » Ideal for pedestrian activity

MAP OF ALLEYS & PASSAGES LISTED IN THE DOWNTOWN BIRMINGHAM 2016 PLAN



LEGEND
 — Alley
 — Passage
 ■ Parking Structures
 ■ Parks

ALLEYS: IDENTIFIED IN THE DOWNTOWN BIRMINGHAM 2016 PLAN

WILLITS ALLEY: W. MAPLE TO WILLITS



CHURCHILL'S ALLEY: PIERCE TO MERRILL



HAMILTON ALLEY: PARK TO HAMILTON



HENRIETTA ALLEY: PIERCE TO HENRIETTA



BATES/BROOKLYN PIZZA ALLEY: BATES TO PIERCE



PEABODY ALLEY: OFF OF BROWN



PASSAGES: IDENTIFIED IN THE DOWNTOWN BIRMINGHAM 2016 PLAN

SOCIAL / COMMONWEALTH PASSAGE: W. MAPLE TO HAMILTON



CAFE VIA PASSAGE / BRIGGS BUILDING



EDISON / 220 PASSAGE: MERRILL TO BROWN



DAINES PASSAGE: BROWN TO DAINES



Although the Edison/220 passage was identified by the 2016 Plan as a passage, it should be noted that this passage can be classified as both an alley and a passage. The east side of the building is accessible to non-motorized users only. The west side is accessible by cars and trucks, and it is used for the service functions identified in alleys.

RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION 1: CREATE A NEW CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM FOR ALLEYS & PASSAGES

Existing alleys and passages can be broken up into different classifications for further study based on their future potential. As the urban context surrounding alleys and passages varies, so does the level of access provided and the type of services supported by the alley. These factors, along with others such as location within commercially zoned areas, presence of adjoining commercial development that could extend into the alley or passage, existing or future opportunity for mid-block connections, and level of importance in existing master plans, were all considered in the process of designating alleys and passages into the classification system. This classification system can form the basis for future development and enhancement. Three types of alleys and passages have been identified based on existing conditions, existing use and future potential.

DESTINATION VIAS

Alleys and passages that people are drawn to as a destination for public gathering to participate in cultural activities, commercial activities, recreational activities, outdoor dining, special events, or pausing for respite. These are pedestrian scaled urban spaces designed without vehicular access for service functions.

Destination vias have the most potential to assume an active and dynamic role in the urban fabric. These vias would likely be the focus of capital improvement projects [public or private], new development and business attraction, as well as the possible programming of events to attract residents and visitors. Destination vias will likely be the focus for early implementation of design guidelines and activation strategies.

Destination vias include, but are not limited to:

- » Café Via Passage & Plaza
- » Social Passage (Formerly known as Tokyo Sushi Passage)
- » Peabody Passage & Plaza (behind the Birmingham 8 Theater)

ACTIVE VIAS

Alleys and passages with a mix of uses and multi-modal activities. Active vias can be used by pedestrians and bicyclists for travel, smaller scale commercial activities (i.e. outdoor dining, retail sales and display), small pockets for pedestrian respite, and shared use by vehicles for access to parking and service functions.

Active vias have great potential for improvement as enhanced multi-modal corridors that provide through block connections. These vias would likely be the focus of

capital improvement projects [public or private] to improve access and safety for all users, as well as guidelines or incentives to encourage businesses to expand into the via and improve their via facades. Active vias will likely be the focus of ongoing implementation of design guidelines and activation strategies, as they may require significant changes in the behavior and use patterns of adjoining businesses.

Active vias include, but are not limited to:

- » Edison / 220 Alley
- » Churchill's Alley
- » N. Hamilton Alley
- » S. Hamilton Alley / E. Maple Alley
- » Brooklyn Pizza Alley
- » Willits Alley
- » Bates Alley
- » Henrietta Alley
- » Peabody Alley (area with cars and dumpsters)

CONNECTING VIAS

Alleys and passages that provide a through-block connection exclusively for pedestrians and/or bicyclists. These have limited opportunities for commercial activity, limited service function, and no vehicular access.

Connecting vias have great potential for aesthetic enhancements to create interesting and creative spaces for pedestrian and bicycle use, to expand the non-motorized network and greatly enhance walkability. These vias would likely be the focus for smaller scale capital improvement projects [public or private] to improve the aesthetic of the via, such as new paving, landscaping, seating or public art. Connecting vias will provide low cost, high impact, implementation opportunities.

Connecting vias include, but are not limited to:

- » Daines Passage
- » Edison Passage (with the plaza)
- » Peabody Mansion Passage
- » Commonwealth Passage (near cafe)
- » Shain Townhouse Passage
- » Clark Hill Passage
- » Tender Passage
- » Baldwin Passage

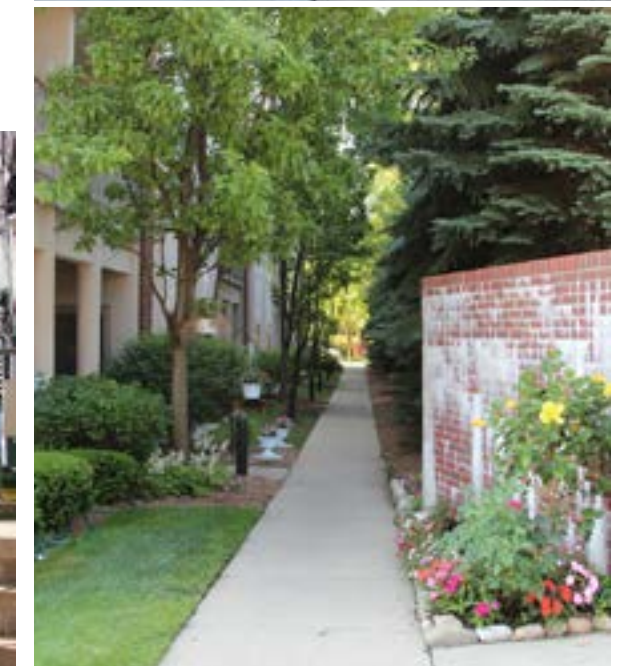
DESTINATION VIA: CAFE VIA PASSAGE



CONNECTING VIAS: EDISON'S PASSAGE & BALDWIN PASSAGE



ACTIVE VIA: CHURCHILL'S ALLEY





Classifications for Alleys & Passages

LEGEND

- Active
- Connecting
- Destination
- Parking Structures
- Parks
- Crosswalks
- ☀ Vistas



RECOMMENDATION 2: ESTABLISH DESIGN GUIDELINES & ENHANCEMENT STRATEGIES

Depending on the classification of an existing (or new) alley or passage, different types of design guidelines and enhancement strategies can be applied as new developments or capital improvements are proposed. The following elements should be integrated into design guidelines or design standards for each classification of alley or passage:

PAVING

Paving should be consistent with the materials and design patterns within the existing streetscape standards. Broom finish concrete with exposed aggregate accents is typical. Generally, broom finish concrete should serve as the primary pedestrian path.

LIGHTING

Pedestrian scale street lights may be added where feasible. Architectural and accent lighting should be encouraged to provide added visual interest. In addition, surface lighting of building facades and edges in alleys and passages should be encouraged as it provides better visibility and security.

FURNITURE

Where feasible and practical, streetscape furniture should be provided including trash receptacles, bike racks, benches and City news racks. Determining factors in placement should include available space, potential for use and adjacency to activity centers.

LANDSCAPING

Additional landscaping and greenery should be added wherever possible, particularly vertical elements along the edges of alleys and passages. This includes trees, bushes, shrubs, and flowers as well as vertical plantings in planter boxes, trellises or green screens with plant material such as climbing ivy and vines.

NAMING RIGHTS

A naming rights program should be explored as an additional method to provide funding for physical improvements in public alleys and passages.

PEDESTRIAN SCALED DESIGN

All portions of buildings and sites directly adjoining an alley or passage should maintain a human scale and a fine grain building rhythm that provides architectural interest for pedestrians and other users. Design details such as windows and doors overlooking the alley or passage to provide solar access, visual interaction and surveillance of the alley and passage should be encouraged or required. Walls facing alleys and passages should include windows and architectural features customarily found on the front facade of a building, such as awnings, cornice work, edge detailing or decorative finish materials.

CROSSWALKS

Crosswalks may be appropriate in some areas as a means to link alleys and passages together. Crosswalks could help visually connect the alleys and passages network and create a convenient way for pedestrians and bicycles to move through the city.

COMMERCIAL SIGNAGE

To draw people into alleys and passages, directory signage should be provided at each entry to all alleys and passages. In addition, to encourage creativity, to add color and to activate the urban space in alleys and passages, specific sign guidelines should be created for all properties with building facades immediately adjoining alleys or passages. Alley and passage signage should be bold and graphic in nature, and be used by individual businesses to draw attention to the rear access points of ground floor businesses.

TERMINATING VISTAS

Some of the alleys and passages could be enhanced by giving special attention to the terminating vistas residents and visitors see as they meander through alleys and passages. Interesting architectural details, landscaping, or the addition of public art along blank building walls and other terminating vistas will enhance how residents and visitors experience these spaces.

PAVING



Broom finish concrete with exposed aggregate accents

LIGHTING



Barcelona, Spain passage with edge lighting
SOURCE: Carter Henricks on Flickr



Example of a light fixture

STREET FURNITURE



The City's official street furniture

LANDSCAPING



Climbing vines



Utility boxes screened by shrubs



Landscaping makes passages more welcoming to pedestrians



A fountain that doubles as a bench in the Cafe Via Passage

NAMING RIGHTS



The passage for Cafe Via is known as the Cafe Via Passage

COMMERCIAL SIGNAGE



Example of wayfinding signage for Willits Alley

PEDESTRIAN SCALED DESIGN



Architectural features help make an alley more pedestrian-friendly

RECOMMENDATION 3: ESTABLISH ACTIVATION STRATEGIES

Depending on the classification of an existing (or new) alley or passage, different types of activation strategies can also be used to encourage new developments and new uses. The following elements should be integrated into activation guidelines or standards for each classification of alley or passage:

ACTIVE EDGES

To enhance the amenity and character of alleys and passages, to enhance visual interest and encourage surveillance of urban spaces, active uses should be provided at the ground floor level along the majority of the edges of buildings located adjacent to alleys and passages. Uses such as outdoor dining, retail sales and display and art display should be encouraged to allow first floor uses to spill out into alleys and passages. All first floor uses should be directly accessible to the public from adjoining alleys and passages, with care taken to avoid conflict with pedestrian movement in the alley or passage. All doors adjoining alleys or passages should be required to provide signage identifying the first floor business(es) to attract visitors, and add visual impact and color to the alley or passage.

Uses such as drive-in facilities or commercial uses that encourage patrons to remain in their automobiles while receiving goods or services should be specifically prohibited in all alleys and passages. In addition, conditions that limit opportunities and the desirability of pedestrian uses, such as outdoor automatic food and drink vending machines, unscreened trash receptacles and unscreened outdoor storage should also be prohibited in alleys and passages.

Uses such as community gardens and public plaza space should be developed in or adjacent to alleys and passages to enhance public life by providing intimate public gathering spaces for special events, rest and relaxation or people watching. Design details for such spaces should include formal seating to create "places to pause" and informal seating that is integrated into the design of the public space, such as planter boxes or sculpture bases at chair height.

MULTI-MODAL ACCESS

Active and functional alleys and passages should provide 24-hour accessibility for bicycles, pedestrians and /or vehicles depending on their widths and functions. For alleys and passages with vehicular access, only slow speeds should be permitted, and equitable access should be provided to bikes, pedestrians and cars. Reconfiguration of existing traffic flow may be needed to provide for the safe flow

of pedestrians and bicyclists. A clear zone should be maintained to allow alleys and passages with existing vehicular traffic to maintain safe access for service vehicles. In addition, to ensure safe and secure pedestrian and bicycle routes in alleys and passages, it is important to reserve a shared zone that minimizes conflict points for bikes and pedestrians, while integrating any required service or access function. Any barriers that preclude full access of alleys and passages, such as parking gates, fences or enclosures blocking off stairs, windows or entrances should be prohibited. In some areas, where alleys align across streets, crosswalks may be appropriate to visually link alleys and passages together. Alleys and passages should also be utilized to provide multi-modal connections to key destinations throughout the city, such as parks or public libraries.

PUBLIC ART

Tasteful and appropriate public art should be encouraged in all available space. Special emphasis should be placed on creating terminating views that provide visual cues to users that these spaces are intended to be active and friendly.

WAYFINDING SIGNAGE

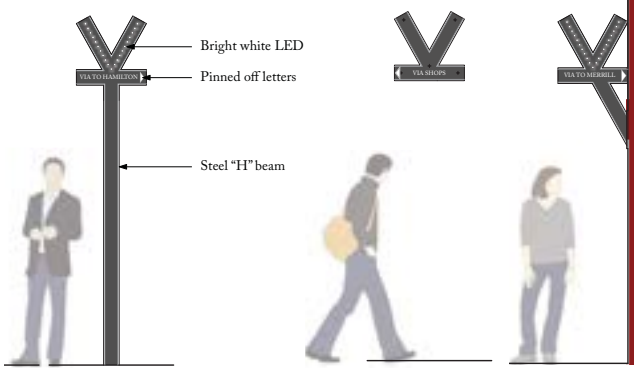
Wayfinding signage can be the most effective method of raising awareness that alley and passages exist, and that these spaces provide additional retail and recreation opportunities. The signage could also indicate that they provide convenient shortcuts and increased connectivity in commercial areas.

ACTIVATION STRATEGIES

BUSINESS SIGNAGE



WAYFINDING SIGNAGE: STAND ALONE & WALL MOUNTED



GARDEN ADJACENT TO EDISON PASSAGE



UTILITIES SCREENING



ENHANCED PASSAGE: PUBLIC ART, RETAIL DISPLAYS, LANDSCAPING, OUTDOOR DINING & WAYFINDING



BEFORE



AFTER



Burnett Lane in Brisbane, Australia. This alley has been activated through outdoor dining.
Source: <http://desktopmag.com.au/news/sydney-laneway-art-submissions/>



This is an example of a passage in Sydney, Australia that is part of the Laneway Art Program. The Laneway Art Program's goal is to activate and enliven Sydney's alleys and public spaces through temporary public art. The pieces are on display for a few months out of the year.
Source: <http://desktopmag.com.au/news/sydney-laneway-art-submissions/>

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY

| TIMELINE | ACTION | DELIVERABLE |
|---|--|---|
| PRIORITIZATION PHASE 1 | Identify and classify all alleys & passages within study area | Maps and photo survey |
| | Document existing conditions (pavement width, condition, etc.) | Prepare information sheets on all alleys & passages within study area |
| | Identify multi-modal connection opportunities within alleys & passages | Integrate findings and connections into Multi-Modal Plan |
| | Identify green strategies for alleys & passages | Establish a pilot section of green alley within the study area |
| | Develop signage standards for alleys & passages | Amendments to Sign & Zoning Ordinance |
| | Incorporate public art into alleys & passages | Attend Public Arts Board meeting to present <i>Activating Urban Spaces: A Strategy for Alleys & Passages</i> , encourage placement of public art to enhance alleys & passages |
| | Improve wayfinding | Create brand for alley & passage wayfinding, develop standards for location of directional signage, install |
| | Develop conceptual case studies | One conceptual plan for each classification of alley and passage |
| | Enhance Design Guidelines for private development adjacent to alleys & passages | Alleys & Passages Overlay ordinance, or integration of regulations into existing Downtown & Triangle Overlay Districts |
| | Consider establishing a Naming Program for alleys & passages | Establish donor program for naming and improvement of alleys & passages |
| PRIORITIZATION PHASE 2 | Review implementation strategies and prioritization for capital improvements | Prepare Capital Improvement Plan for alleys and passages with identified funding sources |
| | Establish a funding mechanism to encourage enhancement projects | A funding program to ensure that alleys and passages are enhanced |
| | Conduct regular review and plan update every 5 years | Revised strategy to reflect changes |
| | Encourage social, artistic, cultural events within destination alleys & passages | Develop event calendar and program for alleys & passages |
| | Investigate opportunities to attract and promote business within alleys and passages | Create incentive provisions in Zoning Ordinance or establish activation requirements, prepare pamphlet for distribution to existing businesses |