Immediately after entering The Domain shopping complex in Austin, TX, it is obvious that the designers were aiming to create a unique architectural condition. The facades of the buildings are continuous, eerily resembling the streets of a medieval European city and defiantly contrasting the archetypal American shopping mall. The sidewalks are generous and encourage pedestrian traffic. Shading is meager but present, and the height of the buildings compliments the human scale. However, the streetscape is still dominated by the conventional mode of transportation in the United States: the car. When compared with an actual medieval city in Germany, it is obvious that the generously proportioned parking areas and streets are caustic anachronisms that prevent the Domain from fully approaching the desirable qualities of its precedents. The factors that prevent the Domain from approaching a high-quality urban condition extend beyond the designers; the development of Austin, as well as countless other U.S. cities, varies radically from that of medieval Bavarian towns. The designers are also hindered by the misaligned priorities of the developers and the conventional expectations of the general public. United States citizens depend on their vehicles not only out of necessity, but preference as well. Although the automobile is responsible for many of the problems deteriorating the experiential quality of The Domain, expectations and familiarity have formed deep roots within the American collective conscience; the issue can no longer be resolved by eradicating, replacing, or discouraging use of the automobile. In order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the issue it is necessary to carefully examine the qualities of an outstanding urban condition to expose the successes, failures, and resolutions during the development of an ideal urban fabric. Munich, Germany, is renowned for its careful thought and attentive treatment of public urban spaces and has a wealth of insight regarding the topic of urbanization.
Munich has a particularly unique history due to its ancient roots as a prominent city in Bavaria, near complete destruction during the Second World War, and guidance by urban planners continuously through its development. It began as a key point of the salt trade route due to the crossing of the Isar River in 1158. After acquiring significant revenue from the trade, the town grew quickly and expanded its walls three times by the 15th century. Several plazas were contained within the walls, and these large open spaces were the central nodes of commerce in the city. Weekly markets, religious movements, tournaments, and festivals were all housed by these plazas. The large amount of wealth that accumulated in the city from trade enabled the nobility to begin the construction of large scale religious and royal buildings.

By the 19th century, the rulers declared that Munich would be an “open city”, and began the destruction of the fortified walls to help promote urban growth. The leaders of the city understood the importance of large public spaces, planning open plazas in the footprints of existing fortifications. The English Gardens were also hashed out with generous proportions and were considered the “people’s park” from the moment of conception. Rapid growth followed the expansion of the city beyond the existing walls, particularly in the mid-19th century during industrialization, but the city planners were always quick to draft regulatory plans in order to prevent unrestrained and uncoordinated growth. Such master plans were enforced as early as the 1780’s.

As the capital of Bavaria, Munich had the pride and the means to blossom into a regal city. The kings spent inordinate amounts of capital purchasing land and buildings in order to clear space for promenades and plazas, such as Odeansplatz and Leopoldstrasse. Their decision to promote their wealth resulted in beautiful public spaces that are still utilized and beloved by the residents today. The mid-19th century also introduced the rail as a public transit system and allowed the city to grow even more rapidly. During the latter half of the 19th century the population increased by 500%.

After the First World War, a housing shortage necessitated the rapid construction of high density housing blocks. The Nazi party initiated these projects as well as proposals for large axial cuts through the city during its rise to power. Their ambitions were bold and costly, but the invasive proposed remodeling of the city was indefinitely delayed by wartime costs and the eventual widespread destruction from bombing raids. By the end of the war, 60% of the city was destroyed. This destruction left Munich at a crossroad; the opportunity to completely change the face of the city presented itself and tempted many designers. Eventually the planners agreed to maintain the original character of the city by reusing the still standing facades, underground utility lines, and treasured intimacy of the infrastructure—a decision that has helped Munich develop into one of the most livable cities in the world.
As Munich continued to grow in the late 20th century, they developed and adhered to a simple motto: “compact-urban-green.” High density housing was required to maintain the urban quality of the city, and it was regularly punctuated by public green spaces. This so-called “Munich Perspective” also influenced their view of vehicular traffic. Transportation grids were limited to only what was “absolutely necessary” to cope with the traffic flow, and large transportation arteries were designed in rings around the city instead of as bisectors. Subway, bus, and light rail systems were utilized in harmony in order to reduce the demand for vehicles. This reinforced the urban, pedestrian friendly character of the city center and enabled growth in the surrounding area to emulate, if only to a limited degree, the intimate nature of the center. [1]

Not surprisingly, the city center is a remarkable architectural experience. Narrow blocks flanked by four to five story buildings echo the experience of walking through a canyon; densely packed storefronts, cafes, and restaurants provide a constant change of scenery; and the busy but not crowded streets induce an personal connection with the city and its residences. The narrow spaces are relieved by small plazas, gardens, and occasional generous squares. The rhythm of the experience is further enhanced by the rich materials facing the buildings and sidewalk. Carefully placed stones permeate the sense of meaningful and long-lasting intentions. The textures and patterns are warm and inviting, sharply contrasting the poured concrete slabs that dominate many U.S. streetscapes for no reason other than economic efficiency. Infrequent interruptions by cars calm the entire pedestrian experience; one feels at ease walking instead of endangered by fast-moving vehicles.

The quaintness of the city extends beyond aesthetic values. Although there are exceptions to every generalization, the overall character of the city is welcoming and communal. One example of such qualities can be found in the famous biergartens. Take, for example, the Biergarten at Chinesischen Turm. Its location is picturesque: tall, shady trees create a cool, breezy atmosphere, and it is located in the heart of the English Gardens. A five story, distinctly Chinese structure acts as a central node for the Biergarten and is charmingly
interaction with neighboring tables during their meal.

The community oriented ideals extend beyond socially vibrant restaurants. Munich has a rich history of careful planning and forethought; the leadership has consistently keen sense regarding the cost of uncoordinated urban development. The prerogatives of the Munich City Utilities [SWM] showcase this forward thinking perfectly with their initiatives to protect groundwater. The company found that if farmers in the south of Germany practice ecology friendly farming, the water that reaches the city is much cleaner. The lack of pesticides or heavy metals means far less filtration is necessary. The SWM created a program that subsidizes organic farmers by covering the extra costs accrued from organic farming. Consequently, the farmers produced healthier products, were able to sell them for a higher profit, and SWM, after careful cost analysis, found that they saved funds by reducing the filtration demands [2]. Although this anecdote seems periphery to the problem of urban design, this type of holistic thinking is both a reflection of the attitude driving the development of the city and an influence on future decision making. Innovation requires intellectual sustenance and open minds to thrive. The unique solution to source protection utilized by SWM is a source of inspiration from which future decision makers can draw from. Unfortunately, Texas policy makers seem to favor commercialism over public needs, viewing monetary gains as indications of success or failure. When the urban fabric is determined by investors, the burden on developers’ shoulders drives them toward the path of least resistance, which is not always the most beneficial or efficient solution.

The history and cultural ideals of Austin greatly contrasts those of Munich. There is a rich story within the city, but the motives gradually evolved from culturally conscious intentions to commercially oriented thinking. When Texas first declared independence from Mexico the Congress selected a bend in the Colorado river for the location for the capitol, and Edwin Waller hashed out the initial plans for Austin: a grid of fourteen blocks. Wooden construction comprised the bulk of initial buildings, although a large fire in 1869 interrupted by the onset of the civil war. After the war, the demographic of the city changed drastically, with newly freed blacks composing 36 percent of the population and establishing schools, churches, and residential districts.
In 1871, Austin acquired its first railroad and experienced an economic invigoration. It became a trade hub for the area and accumulated wealth for public improvements. Streetlamps were implemented for the first time, a streetcar system was constructed in 1874, and another bridge crossing at Colorado Street was added. By 1880 the population surpassed 10,000 residents, and a hydroelectric dam improved access to electricity in the city. Eight years later the construction of the monumental Texas State Capitol Building began and the site for the University of Texas was selected on a hill north of the capitol. The availability of electricity initiated corporate and industrial growth in the city, causing the population to triple again by 1920. However, the debts incurred from the large scale construction projects prevented the city from providing parks, paved streets, or even an adequate sewage system for its 30,000 inhabitants. Political turmoil and several changes in governing systems eventually legitimized the government and enabled the city to secure a $4,250,000 bond in order to improve public spaces. The next 10 years brought vast improvement to the publically available facilities and laid the foundation for an environmentally oriented way of thinking. Further developments were made during the depression due to an active Public Works Administration that provided jobs for people by way of civil improvement. Some of their contributions include another hydroelectric plant, public housing, and improvements to infrastructure.

By this point the automobile had become the dominant form of transportation and the streetcar lines eventually deteriorated and were removed. From the 1950’s to the 1990’s, Austin sustained a staggering 40% population increase per year. The growth was relatively unregulated by the government, but by the 1970’s residents of historic districts feared that the character of the city they cherished would be overtaken by poorly planned development. Over 150 neighborhood protection committees formed in an attempt to prevent deterioration of the existing building fabric. They also campaigned for environmental protection of streams and lakes in the city; through their efforts much of the inner fabric of the city as well as important historical buildings were saved and Austin developed an identity that viewed green space and authentic buildings as paramount ideals [3]. However, the growth on the periphery of the city was widely unregulated and relied heavily on the automobile for access. No effort was made to integrate or facilitate efficient public transportation to the newer parts of the city; capitalists determined the new character of the city, maximizing profits whenever possible.

For this reason, the city of Austin has very drastic changes in its urban fabric. The downtown area is relatively urban, although the streets are the dominant feature of the experience. As one leaves this area, the density decreases rapidly until it achieves the wasteful land use practices of suburban sprawl. Generously proportioned streets give priority to the movement of the car. The city in the downtown is relatively easily traversed by foot, but it is isolated from the other districts of the city without the use of bus or car. Efforts are being made to return areas of the downtown to the pedestrian by narrowing streets and widening sidewalks. In particular, 6th street and the eastern border of historic downtown have a welcoming quality. 6th street houses a vibrant bar scene, and is often closed to car traffic on
holidays or during large celebrations. The large crowd and wide variety of businesses is an exciting, though sometimes exhausting experience. The western edge of the downtown area is the heart of live music venues in Austin as well as many quality restaurants. These areas are somewhat walkable, but it is still much easier to access nodes within each area by car. Most of the housing in Austin is located far from this commercial center, so users are often in their vehicle out of necessity to begin with. As a result the area is experienced from the automobiles’ point of view instead of the pedestrians’.

One such “node” of activity is the Domain mixed-use development. To reach the Domain from the heart of the city it is absolutely necessary to use vehicular transportation. The developers consider the development as a potential second downtown that services the northern part of the city. However, the connection between the nodes is completely severed. With public transit it takes more than two hours to reach downtown from the Domain. The bus stop at the new shopping center is an additional 15 minute walk from core of the commercial areas. The city is proposing a light rail stop in order to connect the center, but the lack of public transit to service these medium distanced public transit stops makes the usage very limited; one could only travel from areas in north of Austin or to the east side of downtown—two options that don’t help if you live in other districts of the city. In order to create a functioning medium distance light rail, the city must first integrate a local transportation system that allows users to access desired areas without a car. Whether or not this is feasible in the low density fabric that makes up most of Austin is an entirely different issue.

The density of the Domain, however, resembles its European inspiration much more closely than its surroundings. The stores are densely packed and accessible by short walks. The walks themselves are also quite pleasant; varied scenery, shading, trees, and an integrated music system create a relaxed atmosphere, although it is obvious that the designers tried very hard design this experience. Noticing this effort does not deteriorate the experience greatly, but it hints at a certain insincerity, resembling a “mall” version of Europe. Housing is placed above stores and in separate buildings and integrates nicely. People who live in the area have most of their shopping needs met within a short walk from their door. Patrons begin to form relationships with store workers due to familiarity and association with their “neighborhood”. Unfortunately, the creators of the Domain walked a thin line between reinterpretation and imitation, and failed due to incomplete attention to certain ideals and the overemphasis of others.

Analyzing the qualities of a particularly beautiful part of Munich—Marienplatz—will clarify the shortcomings in the Domain.

Marienplatz is located in the heart of Munich. It is one subway stop from the regional train station and is the area surrounding the city hall. The area is full of pedestrian traffic and activity. The large plaza is grazed by two roads on each corner, but neither provide passage through the open space. The only transportation entrance is through the U-bahn. As a result the people are everywhere and can enjoy the space comfortably without the danger of vehicle traffic. Markets, flower stands, and cafe seating punctuate the edges of the space as well as the inner courtyard of the town hall. These spaces are comfortably crowded and give the visitors a sense of belonging and im-
importance; the act of mimicking those around and seeing their enjoyment reinforces one's own experiences. The seating areas are excellent places to people watch, have a conversation, or do some light reading. Small vegetable stands and various other stalls allow people to get fresh food, flowers, or souvenirs as they pass through. The overall sense of the place is one of activity and enjoyment; there is no rush, no necessary goal, but plenty to do.

In contrast, the experience of the Domain is temporal and goal oriented. Although the design does not explicitly express superficiality, there is an underlying impression that the amenities provided intentionally lure consumers—not visitors—to the space. People arrive at the Domain with the intention to shop, and their possible activities while they are there are limited as such. Mareinplatz generates lucrative amounts of money and is one of the most expensive places to live in the whole of Europe, but these profits and high costs are the result of the outstanding existing urban conditions; the Domain, on the other hand, seeks to create these conditions with the sole intention of generating income. As a result, the disingenuous urban spaces fail to form meaningful impressions on the visitors. The ulterior motives are, if only subconsciously, perceived and end up negating the potential beauty that exists. Specifically, materiality, context, accessibility, and underlying interests distinguish the two spaces from each other. These ideals, as prioritized by the differing building cultures, determine the success of a public urban space.

Marienplatz has a rich material palette. Warm stones make up the
swaths of building faces are stuccoed blandly and without rhythm or texture. Even faces that have more expensive materials, such as limestone, are obviously thin veneers imitating the look of heavy masonry construction. Entire exterior walls of buildings are left undesigned as swaths of stucco without any fenestration or visual complexity. The developer of the site is a single investor with profit in mind, so the project was built in order to maximize revenue as quickly as possible. After visiting the apartments above this orientation of thinking was obvious; the walls were thin, the floors were loud, and the high prices were inflated in hopes that the location would compensate for the quality. No money was invested in creating a sense of human inhabitation or interaction. The windows lack shades, the facades lack aesthetic values, and the buildings lack any sense of permanence or quality. One window bay on the Town Hall in Marienplatz has more craftsmanship than an entire apartment complex in the Domain, and the consequence is directly related; there is little or no desire for the consumer to invest in purchasing or even renting such a neglected design.

Instead the Domain gives a very superficial treatment to the materiality of the space. The prominent facades of buildings lack visual intrigue: large majority of the historic facades and are complimented by well constructed modern responses. The investment and quality of the construction is evident to the visitor; it is clear that these buildings were built to last many years. The ground is paved with small squares of concrete or stone in semi-circular patterns. Again, the effort it takes to lay the stones is perceived and resonates with the overarching themes of quality and longevity. The small streets that drain the pedestrian traffic from the plaza also have shading from trees, buildings, umbrellas, and overhangs. Places to sit and gather invite groups to have a conversation and individuals to rest and collect themselves.

The allure of Marienplatz is heavily reinforced by the context of the square: countless stores, restaurants, public transit points, parks, and fountains surround the area and generate interest for visitors. Housing and offices are integrated above the stores. The residents and workers can easily walk to do day to day shopping or lunch breaks as needed. These contextual elements, in conjunction with perceptibly thorough construction methods, help create an urban space that is attractive, enjoyable, and sustainable.
Marienplatz also serves a function within the area it is located; such a square would not have the same qualities if it were located outside of the city by the airport. Marienplatz did not develop overnight, but was designed in response to the needs of the people and the intentions of the urban planners. The need for an open public space was necessitated by the economic structure of the medieval city; over time, the space evolved into a cultural icon as well as a place to simply enjoy the beauty of a thriving city.

The detrimental oversight by the developers of the Domain was the location of the complex. Its isolation from other commercial centers doesn’t provide it with an opportunity to generate a new node of commerce, but instead isolates it and necessitates long traveling distances to access it. People, in order to visit the Domain, must have a specific reason to go there. This may seem like a good thing to the developer, but in the end it prevents people from associating with the place on a personal level and instead propagates its existence as a marketing scheme. The urban spaces within may be architecturally sound, but in the end they are merely tools to entice more shoppers to visit. In order for the development to create a truly sustainable public space, users must identify with the location on a personal level as well. The biergarten, cafes, and shops around Marienplatz all generate revenue, but users visit them for the experience as well as the product. In order for the Domain to transcend the typology of a “mall that looks like Europe,” the financial and intellectual investment must extend beyond profit margins.
In the end the solution is difficult to find. So many factors have led to the situations that breed complexes like the Domain that it impossible to even isolate or define them. Fortunately, the development is a much needed step in the right direction in the U.S. Mixed-use communities are a new concept and implementation must start somewhere. Still, it is clear that the interpretation at the Domain is not sustainable in its current state. Investors must be given incentives or regulations to promote sound building practices that will benefit communities as well as profit seeking developers. Public space must be seen as an improvement in quality of life, not merely a marketing tool. Before the Domain invests in bringing high end retail to their properties, marketers need to persuade the city to invest in a reliable public transit system that allows people to access the stores. The leadership in Munich has consistently had a strong hand in the development of the city; perhaps Austin needs to make similar bold steps in order to take responsibility for urban growth. The thinking is radical, but not impossible.

The Domain is by no means the shining example of Austin. Barton Springs emanates the same spirit of pride and ownership as Marienplatz or the Chinesischen Turm Biergarten. The historic downtown and vibrant music scene makes Austin one of the most interesting places to live in the U.S. However, in order for new construction to match the quality of Austin’s and Munich’s beloved spaces, an entirely new perception of building culture must be adopted. It is impossible for stick-frame construction to impart a sense of nostalgia on a community for a simple reason: it won’t last long enough. At a certain point it is more economically feasible to tear these buildings down and replace it with one of equal quality. Such construction is possible in the U.S. because investors hope to create a marketable complex and sell it as quickly as possible to maximize profits in the shortest time. This mindset unnecessarily wastes resources and energy without producing meaningful products. How to inspire a sense of pride in construction is an important issue that will take innovation to solve, but it is a dire need. If nothing is done, the urban fabric created during the early 21st century will deteriorate rapidly and erode the quality of life within our cities.

Fig. 17 In order to create a sustainable urban public space, the U.S. building culture must re-evaluate its priorities. Quality of life must come before profits. Only then will the spaces evoke the same sense of belonging for its visitors that exists in Marienplatz.
References:

[1] History of Munich:

[2] SWM Organic Farming Initiative:

[3] History of Austin:

Images:

Fig. 2:

Fig. 3:

Fig. 7

Fig. 8

Fig. 10

Fig. 12

Fig. 13

Fig. 14

Fig. 16

All other pictures taken by author.