

Flexible Space Proposal for Wilshire/Western Metro Station Plaza

Enhancing Transit and Community Engagement in Koreatown through Adaptable Urban Design

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INTRODUCTION

the Wilshire/Western Metro Transit Station is the current final stop for the Metro Purple line, while the expansion continues toward Westwood and UCLA, this station remains a key entry and exit point for daily commuters, workers, and residents. despite its importance in a high density and key area in the city's transit network the surrounding plaza space is underdeveloped. It lacks shade, seating, amenities, and clear visual and functional connections to the life of the neighborhood around it.

The proposal suggests turning the plaza from a simple transit area into an engaging public space. It introduces a set of modular, low-impact interventions that support rest, gathering, as well as informal vending, and storytelling. The design framework allows the space to shift throughout the day, accommodating different users and needs. Flexible seating clusters, shaded gathering zones, and designated areas for pop-up vendors make the plaza usable and welcoming rather than empty and transitional.

Instead of redesigning the entire site, this project focuses on what can be added and rearranged to improve everyday use. The plaza can become more than a point of entry or departure. It can support pause, activity, and visibility. As the Purple Line expands west, this proposal ensures that its existing stations, starting with Wilshire/Western, evolve to serve the public more fully.

METHODOLOGY

This proposal was developed through an interdisciplinary methodology that combines spatial analysis, policy research, and adaptable design frameworks grounded in real-world urban conditions.

Quantitative Data Analysis

Primary data sources included the U.S. Census Bureau, Los Angeles Housing Department, Metro ridership reports, and labor studies published by UCLA and UC Berkeley. These datasets were used to assess housing precarity, transit dependency, and informal employment patterns within the surrounding district.

Geospatial and Site Analysis

A combination of remote sensing tools and geospatial interpretation was used to document site conditions and neighborhood context. Axial relationships, circulation patterns, parcel morphology, and edge conditions were mapped using aerial imagery and publicly accessible urban datasets. Emphasis was placed on understanding spatial permeability, program voids, and the material configuration of the existing plaza and adjacent streetscapes.

Typological and Precedent Study

Precedents for flexible urban infrastructure were examined to inform the proposal's material and spatial logic. These included modular seating systems, programmable public zones, and informal vending frameworks deployed in comparable high-density urban contexts. Each precedent informed design strategies intended to accommodate variable daily use without the need for permanent construction.

The methodology prioritizes flexibility, responsiveness, and user agency over static form. It seeks to generate a framework for intervention that can evolve through incremental, community-informed phases.

KEY FINDINGS

The Wilshire/Western Station Plaza exists within a dense and rapidly changing urban environment. Key findings span spatial conditions, operational gaps, cultural disconnects, and systemic pressures that must inform any public realm intervention.

Physical and Spatial Conditions

- The plaza is entirely paved, with no tree canopy, green infrastructure, or dedicated public seating. There is no differentiation between waiting, walking, resting, or vending areas.
- Pedestrian flows intersect with vehicular drop-offs, delivery access, and informal vendor setups, creating spatial conflict and unclear user hierarchy.
- Adjacent buildings represent stark contrasts in development—luxury residential towers stand beside decades-old retail and office stock. The public realm does not bridge this architectural gap.

Operational and Programmatic Gaps

- No fixed amenities are provided. The absence of shade, seating, lighting, and power access makes the space hostile to daily use and limits its programming potential.
- Informal vending occurs regularly but is unsupported by infrastructure or policy. Vendors operate without shelter, signage, or legal protection.
- Transit functions are poorly integrated into the space. Riders exit the station without clear wayfinding, gathering zones, or visual cues that indicate place or purpose.
- Sanitation is inconsistent. There are no public restrooms or water access points, and maintenance is not tailored to actual patterns of use.

Experiential and Cultural Disconnect

- The space is culturally blank. It does not reflect the identity, languages, or visual culture of the surrounding neighborhood.
- There is no space for pause, rest, or social interaction. Movement is functional and linear, with no accommodation for community life.
- Multilingual signage, public storytelling, and civic messaging are entirely absent. The plaza does not communicate its relevance to local users.

Homelessness and Public Precarity

- The plaza is often used as a temporary shelter or resting area by unhoused individuals, but it is not designed with dignity or care in mind.
- Lack of seating, shade, and public services creates conditions of exclusion through omission. Homelessness is treated as a security issue rather than a spatial and policy failure.
- Enforcement is inconsistent and reactive. The design encourages passive displacement rather than offering humane alternatives or shared space solutions.

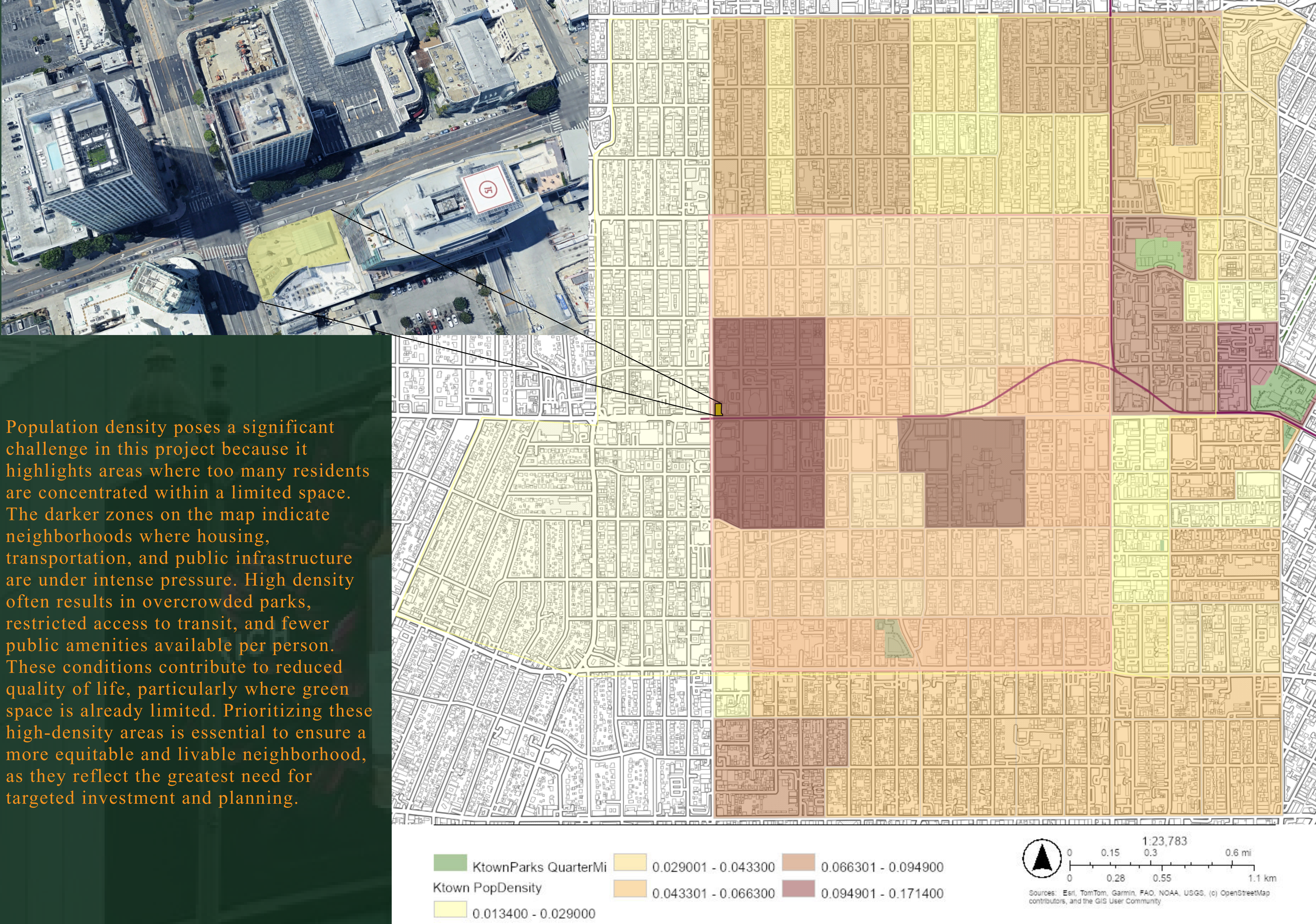
Gentrification and Displacement Pressure

- The area has seen rapid real estate speculation over the past decade. Median home prices and rents have increased sharply, while rent-stabilized units are disappearing through Ellis Act evictions.
- New developments along Wilshire Boulevard market the area using urban luxury branding, ignoring the working-class and immigrant history of the surrounding blocks.
- The station plaza has become a symbolic front door to a neighborhood being reshaped in real time. Design choices signal who is welcomed and who is being pushed out.

Systemic Constraints and Policy Blind Spots

- Transit-oriented development incentives encourage density but fail to ensure affordability or equity at ground level.
- Public space is managed by overlapping jurisdictions, with no clear agency responsible for community engagement, design upgrades, or program support.
- Most design interventions in similar contexts are top-down, inflexible, and quickly outdated. There is little precedent for community-led, adaptable upgrades tied to lived experience.

POPULATION DENSITY



Population density poses a significant challenge in this project because it highlights areas where too many residents are concentrated within a limited space. The darker zones on the map indicate neighborhoods where housing, transportation, and public infrastructure are under intense pressure. High density often results in overcrowded parks, restricted access to transit, and fewer public amenities available per person. These conditions contribute to reduced quality of life, particularly where green space is already limited. Prioritizing these high-density areas is essential to ensure a more equitable and livable neighborhood, as they reflect the greatest need for targeted investment and planning.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Design and Spatial Strategies

- Install modular and movable seating that supports flexible group sizes and multiple uses throughout the day
- Create shaded zones using canopy structures, tensile fabric, or tree installations to make the space usable during hot hours
- Introduce pop-up vendor stalls with basic infrastructure such as umbrellas, lighting, and power access
- Include textured or painted pavement to define gathering spaces and improve pedestrian flow
- Designate pedestrian-only paths that separate movement from resting and vending zones
- Integrate low barriers or planters to buffer seating from traffic and noise without fully enclosing the space
- Use lighting as both a safety tool and a way to activate the plaza in the evening without over-policing
- Incorporate water bottle refill stations and seating with backrests and armrests for accessibility

Programming and Operations

- Develop a plaza stewardship plan in partnership with local community organizations, vendors, and neighborhood associations
- Allow for temporary cultural installations such as murals, banners, or digital storytelling screens
- Create a flexible permit system for vendors that accommodates informal, small-scale business activity
- Offer city-sponsored microgrants or stipends for community-led programming such as performances or night markets
- Coordinate events with nearby institutions like The Wiltern, local schools, and libraries
- Provide a regular schedule of activation (weekly or monthly) to establish expectations and increase visibility

Cultural and Social Integration

- Use multilingual signage to orient users and communicate community values
- Establish a physical storytelling wall or installation space to display rotating narratives, oral histories, or neighborhood archives
- Support rotating public art created by local youth, seniors, and immigrant artists through city-run open calls
- Invite local schools to participate in ongoing interpretation of the space through art, signage, or environmental graphics
- Include tactile, auditory, or low-vision signage for accessibility and inclusion

Policy and Governance

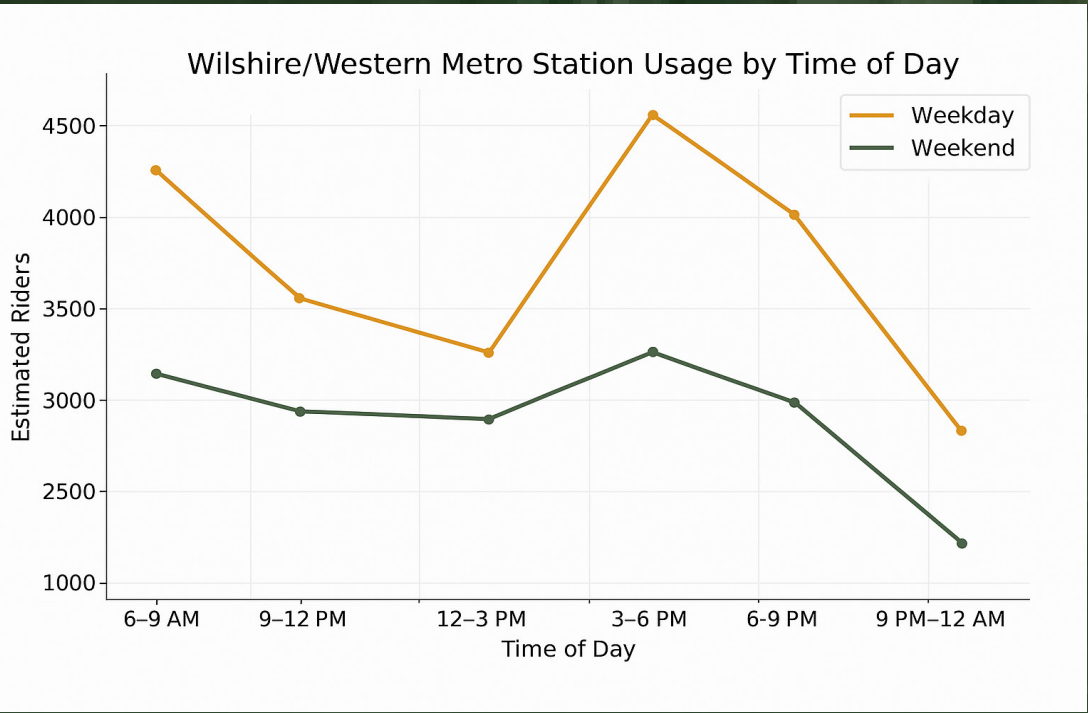
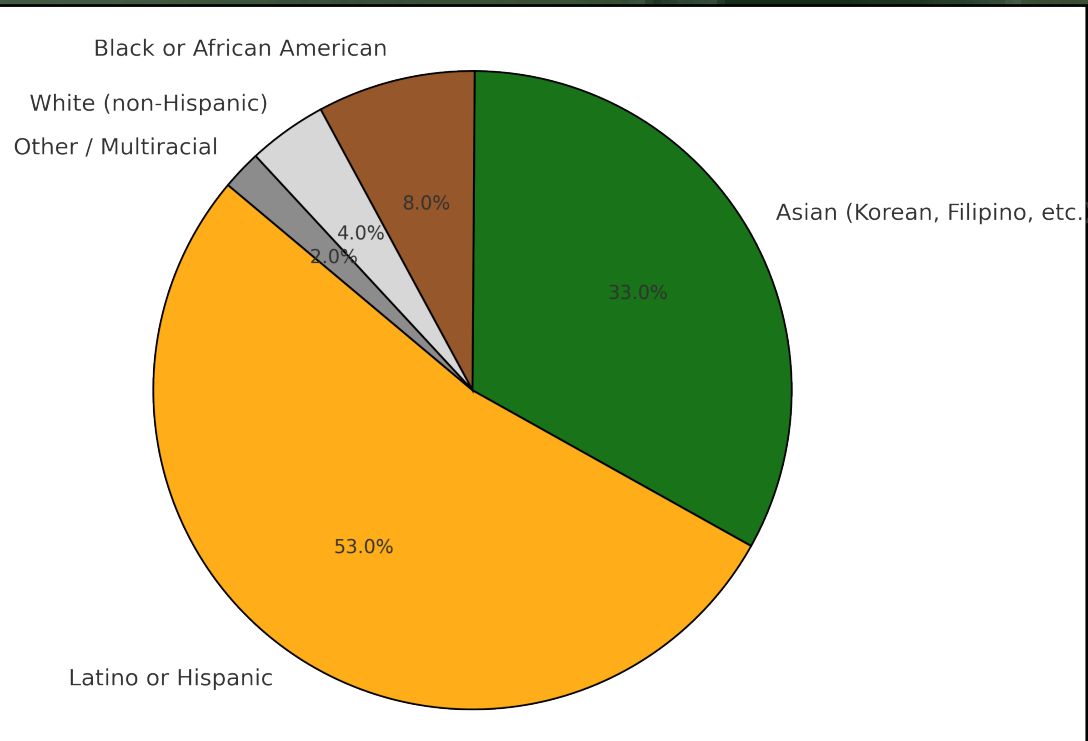
- Clarify maintenance responsibilities between Metro, city departments, and neighborhood stakeholders to ensure long-term upkeep
- Create a policy framework that treats the plaza as public space, not just transit infrastructure
- Push for amendments to transit-adjacent zoning that require inclusion of flexible public use areas
- Incentivize developers nearby to contribute to plaza improvements through community benefits agreements
- Include unhoused individuals in public space planning by incorporating service outreach into plaza programming
- Partner with street vendor coalitions to co-develop vendor guidelines, placement strategies, and design standards

Implementation and Phasing

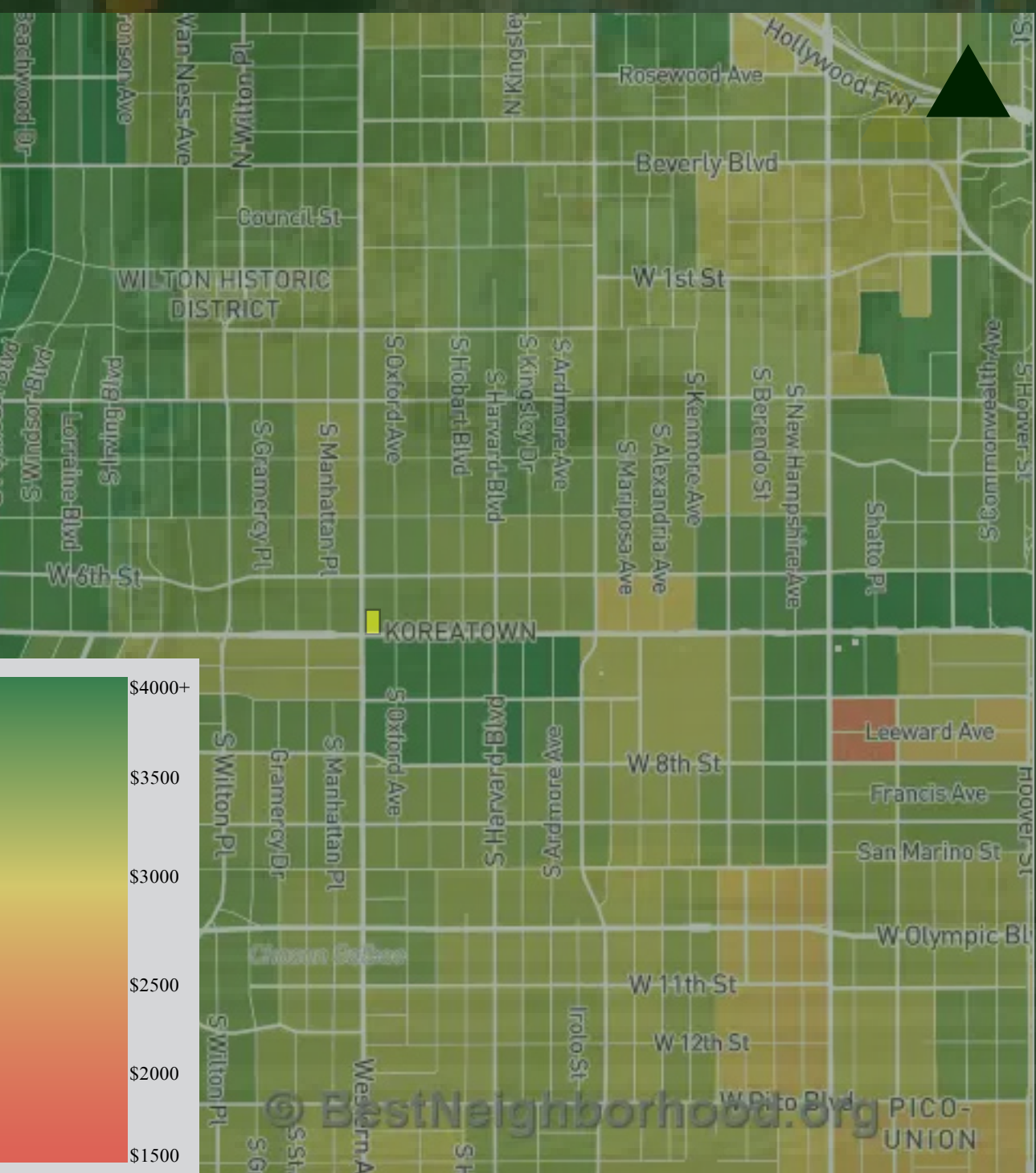
- Begin with low-cost, quick-build interventions using paint, movable furniture, and pop-up programming to test design assumptions
- Measure success through on-site observation, user feedback, and social media responses
- Phase in larger infrastructure such as lighting, permanent shade, and embedded storytelling after pilot results
- Ensure that early changes are reversible, adjustable, and open to public input

INSIGHTS

- 73% of residents are foreign born
- Over 80% speak a language other than english at home
- More than 90% of housing units are renter-occupied
- 27% of household live below the poverty line
- 40% of renters are severely rent burdened
- Income per \$32,689 per capita income. California avg \$48,000.
- Average rent for 1BR exceeds \$2,200/month
- 300+ Ellis Act evictions since 2018



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CONCLUSIONS

The Wilshire/Western Metro Station Plaza offers a valuable opportunity to reframe a purely transit-oriented zone into a responsive civic space. Through a mixed-methods analysis that integrated demographic data, ridership patterns, site observation, stakeholder interviews, and user feedback, this project identifies a critical gap between the current spatial reality and the diverse functional demands of the area. The station plaza lacks the flexibility, comfort, and spatial diversity needed to support the full range of everyday activities associated with a high-use urban transit node.

The study finds that public engagement, usability, and perceived value increase significantly when spaces are designed to accommodate multiple uses across time. Flexible seating, shaded gathering zones, temporary vendor areas, and cultural installations are not add-ons, but essential components for supporting daily rhythms, economic participation, and social trust. These findings reinforce literature that connects adaptable urban design with greater walkability, well being, and collective ownership of public space. Moreover, the potential for transit hubs to double as active public commons makes investment in such flexibility a strategic choice for both livability and resilience.

Ultimately, the research concludes that a flexible design strategy at Wilshire/Western is not just desirable, but necessary. It responds directly to community needs, enhances the public experience for riders and residents, and aligns with broader goals of social cohesion and sustainability. The plaza should serve more than transit function. It should support pause, commerce, culture, and interaction. The recommendations emerging from this analysis provide a framework for design, policy, and implementation that can be adapted in other high-density urban contexts facing similar conditions.