Reinventing South Willamette:  
Transforming Southtown into a diverse, walkable 20-minute neighborhood

The Setting
Willamette Street is literally central to Eugene’s geometry, history and identity. Stretching from “butte to butte” as an axis between east and west halves of town, it has served commercial, domestic and even recreational users since the city’s earliest days.

Today it changes character along the way south from Skinner’s Butte -- through the Downtown, Midtown, Southtown and South Hills neighborhoods -- to the base of Spencer’s Butte. In Eugene’s Southtown commercial district, between 24th and 29th Avenues, Willamette has become a major conduit of rushing cars, trucks and the occasional LTD bus. Some vehicles pass through as quickly as possible, contending with others darting in and out of driveways to local businesses. Pedestrians are relegated to meager sidewalks sandwiched between fast traffic on one side and parking lots on the other. And the few cyclists who dare risk life and limb for a share of the roadway. It is a disaster of a street from a transportation and neighborhood planning perspective – ugly, dangerous and divisive. Yet it continues to support a healthy mix of businesses – grocers, restaurants, healthcare professionals for people and pets, a laundry, dry cleaners and even the essential local hardware store – as well as some of the older, more established lower density residential neighborhoods of the city. Willamette works, but barely. And its condition is not improving.

The Challenge
Recently the district’s neighborhood association, Friendly Area Neighborhood (FAN), and its business association, South Towne Business Association, (SoBA) teamed up to explore opportunities to transform their neighborhood into a more pedestrian and bicycle friendly shopping district – one that will attract the development of more diverse, denser housing options, serving more local residents and more local customers. These groups have begun working with City of Eugene urban and transportation planning staff to undertake the development of a
neighborhood area plan that identifies “opportunity sites” for higher density, multi-family housing and eventually the redesign of Willamette Street itself.

This design studio will explore design solutions for both of these issues – from the neighborhood scale to the individual building scale. The goal of the studio is develop design concepts that city staff and the neighborhood can build upon to create a viable “20-minute neighborhood” – one that provides diverse housing types and creates a multi-modal street network that is beautiful, safe and memorable, within 20 minutes' walk of local amenities.

Our Approach
We will begin the term developing an understanding of the key ingredients of a 20-minute neighborhood and the land use and transportation planning concepts for creating livable, walkable streets. We'll continue by examining the existing neighborhood through direct observation and discussions with FAN & SoBA representatives. Students will work in teams to develop three to four neighborhood area plan options, develop strategies to improve South Willamette Street and identify appropriate sites throughout the neighborhood for higher density housing development. After mid term, students will work independently to develop prototypes for new housing on sites identified in the neighborhood area plan. The housing work will pursue a variety of options – from rowhouses to high rise apartments -- within the neighborhood.

Students will be required to attend at least one neighborhood meeting with city staff during the term and there will be a neighborhood presentation, after final review week, where students will present their work to the public.

Anne DeLaney, AIA CSBA is a principal in the firm of Bergsund DeLaney Architecture & Planning, PC located in Eugene - a small, award winning firm that specializes in the design of affordable, multi-family housing throughout Oregon. She has served on several advisory boards related to urban and neighborhood planning in Eugene, including the West Broadway Advisory Committee and the Opportunity Siting Task Team. She received a Masters of Architecture from the University of Oregon in 1989 and maintains an active relationship with the Architecture School, as a regular guest critic and adjunct faculty every few years.