

Section 1: Downtown Denver Overview

Downtown Denver is definitely an urban center nearing its "tipping point". The city has made significant improvements throughout the downtown over the last 10 years that have made it a regional destination and a "cool" place to go. However, despite the growth and economic improvement that Denver has seen, it still has not yet reached the critical mass or magic combination that characterizes vibrant and economically prosperous downtowns. One glaringly obvious deficit is evening and night-time liveliness. Once the 9 to 5 work day ends, most of the downtown begins to shut down as well. Creating a downtown with activity at all hours, 7 days a week is essential to becoming a healthy, sustainable city. A description of the downtown environment provides insight into both the potential and challenges in Denver.

What has Denver done well? Larimer Square could easily be considered the crowning gem of the Denver revitalization. It draws people for dining and shopping throughout the day. But more than just drawing people to shop and dine (Wal-Mart does that too); the city has created an enjoyable environment for people. The area is characterized by people strolling and hanging



Figure 1: Week day at lunch time in Writer's Square

out and the sidewalk cafes are almost always active. In New Urbanist fashion, there are studios and lofts as well as professional offices above the ground floor retail. Another vibrant node that attracts shopping, dining, and people gathering is Writer's Square which can be considered an extension of Larimer Square (See Figure 1). It is especially active as a lunch-time destination for those employed downtown.

The 16th Street Mall and the free shuttle service are achievements that Denver can be proud of as well. Where Larimer Square tends to be a bit more gentrified, attracting a more white middle-upper class, the 16th Street Mall has the

full range of the socio-economic spectrum. Larimer Square, the 16th Street Mall, and Writer's Square represent just one element and one geographic area that make the downtown great. The Convention Center, Pepsi Center, Elitch Gardens, Confluence Park, and LoDo residential are exceptional nodes that are also important ingredients for the ultimate success of downtown.

Denver has also done a good job of providing transit options both to and within the downtown. An extensive bus service, the light rail, improved pedestrian amenities, and bike lanes and paths have provided the critical element of connectivity, an essential element of successful downtowns. It appears to be well used, particularly at 5 pm when people are lined up at the 19th and Stout Station to have the light rail whisk them away to their suburban homes.

Most of these key nodes are concentrated in the south-west portion of the downtown. The majority of the jobs are concentrated in the North and North-West. The older, more affordable housing is outside the central business district (CBD) planning area to the North, South, and East. The employment district in the North and North-West generally lacks vitality, even during the day. This area is distinguished by an uninspiring architecture of steel and glass. There is limited retail and residential and it can generally be described as boring. In the vicinity of Broadway, Welton, and 19th, there is a "sea of parking" on undeveloped lots that are a drain to any potential vibrancy (See Figure 2). For those who do live downtown, there is an obvious lack of residential support, particularly grocery stores. If people have to get in their cars to buy food, they may as well do all of their shopping at the suburban malls. For the majority of the downtown, there are few parks, trees, and usable open space.



Figure 2: Sea of Parking in the North

What then, is Denver missing to reach its potential? The simple answer is people. The complicated part is how to attract and sustain great numbers of people living in the downtown.

It was with all of this in mind that the evaluation of vacant parcels and the subsequent build-out strategy was developed.

Section 2: Development Potential Summary

The currently undeveloped parcels of downtown Denver are a fairly homogenous group, in that they consist primarily of surface parking lots. These parcels are underutilized in the urban fabric of downtown, yet present much potential in their ability to be developed. In the building boom of the 1980's, many structures downtown were demolished to make room for new development. Unfortunately, the construction boom ended too quickly for all of these parcels to be redeveloped. As a result, many of them sit in wait for new construction. One good thing about this is that developing these lots is quicker and easier, since there isn't an older building in the way of construction.

Spatially, the vacant parcels are interspersed throughout downtown yet seem to proliferate around the edges. Development of these parcels should take into consideration what lies beyond the edge of downtown, such as LoDo, the Civic Center, the Auraria Campus, Coors Field, and I-25. Vacant parcels next to Auraria campus provide opportunity to serve the student population: both in housing as well as other student amenities. These same parcels and a few others are located not far from LoDo; and with LoDo's increasing urban population, downtown will need jobs and services to provide for this community. So, thinking of the surrounding neighborhoods and needs of these communities is a key to success in redeveloping downtown.

Many of the undeveloped parcels are found next to or between existing structures. These sites have potential to be developed in a way that compliments the existing architecture and current uses of the neighboring buildings. For example, the vacant parcels across the street from the recently constructed Convention Center provide opportunity to be developed in a way that will compliment the various uses of the Center.

In other parts of the city, vacant parcels are located next to one another on the same block, taking up either quarter, half, or the entire city block. The development of these parcels has tremendous potential to affect an entire neighborhood and so the uses employed at these sites must be given great thought. Additionally, combining multiple vacant parcels creates a greater floor plate for a building, and therefore the building has more of an impact on the urban skyline as well as streetscape. For example, in the northeastern section of downtown the prevalence of surface parking lots exceeds that of existing structures. As a result, the central business district stops abruptly. However the undeveloped land presents an opportunity to continue and expand the downtown area, and since so many of the blocks are semi-vacant, the opportunity to create a neighborhood or district of one's choice is great.

There are also vacant parcels located on key blocks within the core of downtown. For some of these, it is a wonder they have stayed empty for so long. The success of the 16th Street Mall should bring more business to adjacent parts of downtown, and since many of the vacant parcels are located only a block away from this district it seems that they have great potential for being nice places to live, work, and visit. Several vacant parcels are located along 17th and 18th Streets, and this part of town is the center of Denver's corporate offices. These lots are ripe for development in adding more jobs downtown.

It is hoped that the large vacant parcels in Denver will be developed soon, for their emptiness not only impacts the economy, but it also affects the greater community consciousness and self-image. These large lots should be developed soon to improve the overall workings of downtown Denver. Infrastructure has only gotten better in the last several years, in that most of downtown is readily accessible. Travel via car, the light-rail and the 16th Street Mall Ride make getting around easier than in the past, and so developing vacant parcels makes sense from a transportation standpoint. It is hoped through the re-development of downtown, Denver-ites will have more pride in their city and people from other cities will look forward to visiting as well.

Section 3: Proposed Buildout Scenario Description

Live, Work and Play in Mini-districts

One example of our plan for mixed-use neighborhoods is the crossroads of 14th and Court, parcel 42 (previously 5 separate lots), these lots were combined to make a total of 28,125 square feet; it also includes the parcels across the street on 14th (See plan map for the parcels). Currently, the majority of this area is surface-level parking lots. However, the buildings located nearby are historic; one is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and there are a couple of historic row houses, and the Fireman Museum. Across the street on Court is a large modern office building for the city and county of Denver.

Our recommendation for these lots is to create ground floor retail in each building, and have residential use above. The reason for this is that there is simply a lack of housing in this area. With the major office buildings nearby, several state and city offices, and proximity to Denver's cultural attractions (museums and public library) this has potential to be a very nice community. We would further suggest that these buildings take into consideration the existing heights of the historic structures nearby, and be constructed in a way that does not overwhelm or distract from their historic character.

Another section of town that exemplifies our concept of live, work, and play is in the north-west section of town. This part of our development includes parcels 26, 19, 24, 27, 25, 28, 29, and 30. Currently, these parcels are huge surface parking lots, taking up entire blocks in some cases, and looking terribly out of place being near so many tall office buildings. This area was planned to take advantage of the proximity to downtown workplaces and the light-rail. About half of these buildings are planned as residential and half as office. There are plans for a child-care facility, a grocery store, retail space on the ground floor of buildings, and on lot 35, we recommend a park, to protect the view of the Trinity Church and to provide some green space for this section of town.

In this area of development we have planned 985 one-bedroom apartments, 696 two-bedroom apartments, and 1,058,544 square feet of office space. Assuming that number of parking spaces equals the number of jobs created, this works out to 2,117 jobs per 1,681 residential units. In a plan such as this, there is plenty opportunity to work as well as live in this neighborhood.

We believe that people are the key to creating the vibrant, sustainable downtown that Denver is seeking. The people, however, need to be more than just the regional population who might come to the CBD a couple times a month to shop or see a show. True vitality will come only when there is sustained activity, which means residents in the downtown. There is a complex circular relationship between people, jobs, and retail. Retail needs people to be profitable but people want access to good retail when selecting a place to live. Jobs need people and people need jobs. Each element feeds off of and supports the other. However, jobs are probably the least dependant variable. Employment can exist in the downtown by drawing its skilled labor from the suburbs, much like it is doing right now. So we thought focusing on the livability and residential relationship would be best.

To do that, we focused on creating New Urbanist mini-districts that focused on live, work, and play with a strong emphasis on both vertical and horizontal mixed use. Rather than creating distinct, homogenous districts across the whole down town, we tried to create numerous mini-districts of mixed use that support live, work, and play all within the walk-able mini-district itself. We surveyed an area and looked for what was missing or out of balance in deciding what to build. There is theory that business will follow skilled labor pools and we felt that once residential and retail were thriving and feeding off of each other, that may be the "tipping point" to attract more jobs downtown. Residential support such as grocery stores, child-care, and hardware stores were an important component in making sure that districts were truly livable and served all the needs of the residents in that area.

We think that the Macy's will really serve as a bridge or connector between the Convention Center / Performing Arts Complex and Larimer Square. On parcels 11, 9, and 14, we have a hotel, an office tower and a residential tower, all of these uses will be served by this large retail tenant as well. Macy's would be a significant attractor for would-be residents in the downtown and these people can and will come from all of these uses.

The Mall

On parcels 22 and 33 we envision a mall that in reality would be 3 stories but for the project was maxed out with office space above the 3 stories. It is envisioned after the River Park Square Mall in Spokane, Washington.

“The crowded bars, restaurants and entertainment venues are a far cry from the vacant buildings and drive-by shootings that plagued Spokane's urban core a decade ago. Some credit local developer Betsy Cowles, whose uncle and father built the original River Park Square in the early 1970s, with sparking \$1.6 billion in downtown growth in the past five years. Cowles spearheaded a \$115 million public-private redevelopment of the mall that kept Nordstrom from heading to the 'burbs and lured Banana Republic, Williams-Sonoma and other coveted retailers to Spokane.”ⁱ

It goes along with the retail-as-catalyst theory. This mall will help to revitalize downtown and it will help the Pavilions to be more successful by drawing people downtown. The idea is that

ⁱ http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0OUH/is_7_33/ai_n6153763.11-13-05.

something similar will happen downtown as did in Spokane and it could eventually be one of the main attractions in downtown Denver.

Just as an example, after spending some time in downtown Spokane last January 2005 and having no intention of going shopping, I ended up leaving the mall with bags in my hands because after seeing the mall I wanted to spend time there. When you walk into the atrium with the incredible crisscross escalators 5 stories above you it invites you up to see what all is there. That is why I think Denver could benefit from the same sort of thing and that the parcels behind the Pavilions are the perfect spot for something like this, because it would link both those areas together and they could support each other. (See appendix 1)

Our downtown is in need of a pull, something that draws you down there, other than your job. That is why big retail spots that consist of large anchor tenants are necessary to give downtown the vitality it needs to be successful. We also planned a Macy's on parcel 3 because it is such a big name that it will draw not only consumers' downtown but also other big retail names.

Overall, our main ideas for downtown were: live, work and play communities in mini-districts and large retail areas such as the mall and a Macy's. We think that these elements could push Denver over its "tipping point" into a vibrant, successful downtown.

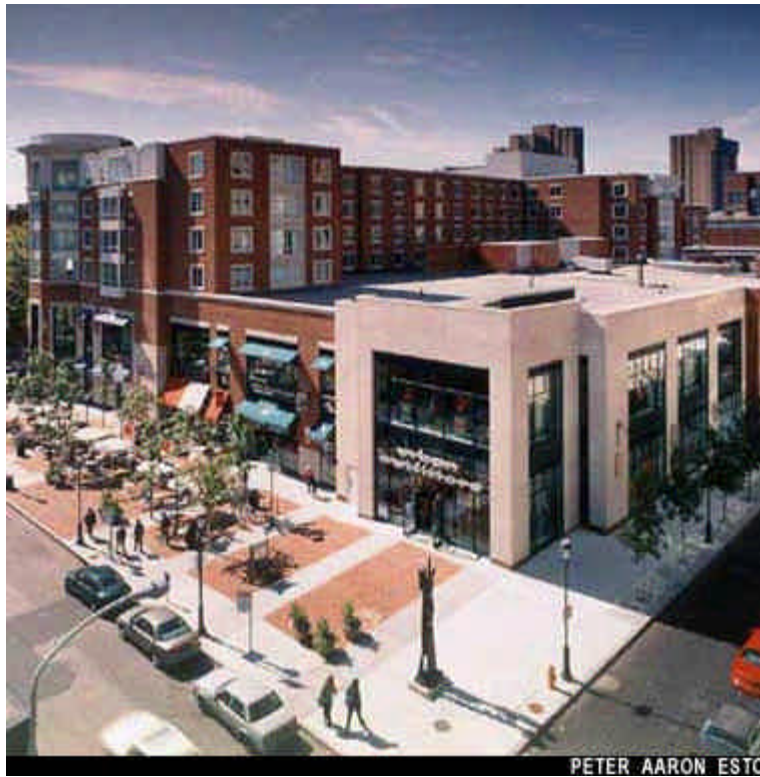
Appendix 1: River Park Square Mall in Spokane, Washington



Appendix 2: Visual Examples of Proposed Buildings



Macy's in Cincinnati – Proposed for Parcel 26



Mixed Use Building – Proposed for Numerous Parcels



Ground Floor Retail and Residential – Proposed for Numerous Parcels