

REVITALIZING DOWNTOWN DENVER



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Three Proposed Mixed-Use Districts:

- The 20th & Welton Residential District
- The 14th Street Promenade
- The Hospitality District

DOWNTOWN DENVER OVERVIEW

As the sun sets on a typical Denver evening, just before it disappears behind the peaks of the Rocky Mountains, the golden rays beam across the sky toward the skyscrapers that rise up from downtown Denver. The massive towers of glass capture those rays and produce a brilliant golden mist that envelops the entire city. The locals call it “The Golden Hour”, and it is one of the few instances that the skyline in Denver is perceived to be in a flawless state.

The other twenty-three hours of the day, the skyline in Denver appears no different than a second tier, Midwestern city. There are only a few skyscrapers sprinkled across the horizon in Denver. Most of them were constructed in the early 1980’s as a manifestation of the energy boom that occurred at the time. The architecture of those buildings reflects the philosophy at the time that form must follow function. The result was a conglomeration of plain, uninspiring towers littered across the downtown region.

The buildings rose out of the ground as quickly as the economy skyrocketed, and before those buildings were fully constructed, neighboring lots with older, decaying buildings were razed to make way for more skyscrapers. But the energy boom fizzled out before those buildings could be constructed, and Denver was left with scores of empty lots to complement the dull skyscrapers. Downtown Denver has no doubt become a flawed mix of skyscrapers, high-rises and empty lots with no coherent organization and very little unique character.

By the end of the 1980’s the Denver skyline looked no different than the countless, nondescript skylines across the Midwest and the development of Downtown had completely stagnated. In response to the stagnation, the last twenty years have seen a substantial amount of growth in Denver. The arid climate and proximity to the Rocky Mountains spawned the idea that Denver is a desirable place to live. Denver is growing everyday and should continue to grow significantly over the next twenty years. This growth coincides with the New Urbanism trend that is en vogue right now in urban planning. The city officials of Denver are being persuaded by city planners to channel the current growth into Downtown Denver and revitalize the region.

The New Urbanists believe that the thousands of people moving to Denver over the next twenty years would be willing to live, work, and play in Downtown if the city would provide the resources to do so. The city has responded with the construction of an outdoor pedestrian mall that runs through the middle of downtown. They built several high-rise lofts to the north and to the east of downtown to allow people to move into the area. They built a new baseball stadium on the northeastern edge, a football stadium and basketball arena on the northwestern edge, and a new convention center on the southeastern edge of Downtown. The Light Rail commuter train cuts across Downtown dumping thousands of workers into the city everyday. The Pavilions, The Tabor Center, and Larimer Square bring retail shoppers everyday, and The “LoDo” entertainment district brings people into the city every night. The Platte Valley is filling up with residential lofts and Union Station is being rebuilt to be the Metropolitan Region’s Transit Hub that it had once been. There are signs of revitalization all over Downtown Denver.

Regardless of the current additions, there is still much lacking in Downtown Denver. There are goods and services that are still missing. Office spaces are empty and cash registers are silent at retail stores. Hotel rooms are full with businessmen watching the television in their room instead of walking through an art exhibit. Workers are commuting into Downtown instead of walking to work from their Downtown apartment.

The initial steps for revitalization are beginning to occur in Downtown Denver. A unique character is beginning to take shape, although, there is still a long way to go. The new structures and their respective uses are forming an outline of an identity. To fill in the outline, the city must develop the remaining empty lots in Downtown. There are currently forty-five empty lots in the area that need to be addressed. The manner in which these lots are developed will solidify the character of the area, and if it is done correctly, it will bring some much needed organization to Downtown Denver.

DEVELOPMENT POTENTIAL SUMMARY

During the economic boom that occurred in the late 70’s and early 80’s the city of Denver prepared itself for the invasion of company headquarters by planning for skyscrapers. This would allow the city to accommodate the influx of professional jobs and lease office space at a premium price. It was a good plan, and for a while it was

working. Unfortunately, a recession hit and the city was left with plans for high-rise buildings that would never materialize.

Within the last ten years or so, the city has attempted to give itself an identity other than its proximity to the mountains. This seemed to be a difficult task, as there were pockets of undeveloped parcels left to be parking lots which were fit in between the skyscrapers that were developed and leased. This left the downtown area with no real identity, or flow of organization. This leads to the question that developers and planners must answer for today's market downtown. That question is what should be the identity of Downtown Denver?

The forty-five parcels that are located downtown that lend themselves to redevelopment are in areas that could easily be transformed into productive uses. Downtown Denver is a diverse community that could support several different uses in close proximity to one another. The important thing in doing this revitalization of Denver is to make sure that those uses compliment one another, provide people with a reason to be downtown, and make it more convenient to spend both time and money there.

The scales at which the parcels available for development currently exist are in common with those that currently exist in Denver. The lots that are available, for the most part, have good symmetry as far as length to width and would allow for great creativity in building design. The challenge is to make sure that the buildings that are placed on vacant parcels maintain the current scale of the buildings on similar parcels. If buildings do not maintain a certain amount of integrity in relation to existing buildings, it will give the impression that Denver was created without much thought and it will detract from people wanting to be in the environment. A monstrosity of a skyscraper does not seem functional or congruent with the current buildout of Denver and to build one would overwhelm the city. These types of scenarios must be kept in mind as Denver becomes redeveloped. Therefore, a downtown would be created that has a legitimate function within the region as a whole, and helps identify the region and state.

One positive aspect that came from the boom and bust of the 70's and 80's in Denver was that Denver created a city that had sections laid out. There was a part of downtown that was a majority of business, there was a section that had a majority of commerce,

and there was some residential (although during this time there was not much of a movement to live in an urban environment). Denver would behoove itself if it continued this trend, while enhancing it. The parcels that are available for new development are in proximity to existing uses that could incorporate and sustain new uses. The city is benefiting from the fact that there are many parcels available, and those parcels are not spread out in such a way that they would make development difficult. There are parcels close to mass transit that would be convenient for mixed use of housing and commercial. There are parcels available by the Convention Center that would be ideal for hotels and retail use, to take advantage of the pedestrian traffic that will be there.

Denver is in an exciting point in the city's history. The city of Denver, and those who would like to get involved in redeveloping the city, holds a tremendous opportunity in their hands. People want to return to the city. Denver has both a blessing and a curse in terms of its proximity to the mountains. The mountains bring people to the city, as well as pull them away. However, those who live in the state are rediscovering Denver. Redeveloping the downtown should liven the city and provide a place where people are comfortable to live, work, and play. With movements such as New Urbanism people are finding it trendy and responsible to move back into the city.

If Denver can provide a place for people to live, work, and play, then they would be able to give the city the identity that it has been lacking. There is a market for the redevelopment of downtown, if it is done correctly. If there are enough infrastructures to support people living in Denver, then people will move there. If people move to downtown, the retail will be supported and it will survive, bringing in more retail. If large businesses see that retail can survive, then large business will stay there rather than go to the Tech Center or other areas of business.

Forty-five parcels are available in Denver for quality development. The proximity of the parcels both to each other and existing uses are workable. The lots that are available are in relative size to other lots already in use. There is a market for new facilities and innovative mixed uses in the area. The ability to give Denver an identity is there, all that remains is a quality plan, and the fortitude to see it through.

PROPOSED BUILDOUT SCENARIO DESCRIPTION

Overview

The goal behind the Future Land Use Map of downtown Denver is to develop a more diverse and balanced socioeconomic core to create a sustainable environment for new infill development and revitalization. The concept stems from the image of a healthy, active, exciting, and cultural downtown, which provides an engaging experience for visitors, businesses, and residents. The plan spurs vitality, energy, and excitement by increasing the overall critical mass of people evolved in activity and diverse interactions among them. The key elements of the plan are:

- Creating activity within the 3 new districts by increasing broader use types,
- Engaging flow between districts by establishing retail/service areas and corridors in addition to flow between residential and commercial offices,
- Developing overall balance and critical mass in residential, business and tourism populations.

Districts

The physical plan surrounds the existing commercial core with three predominant use districts. The Residential Mixed Use District comprises of the proposed “20th & Welton” neighborhood, which will adjoin the “Five Points” neighborhood. This large, new residential neighborhood will complement the Platte Valley residential neighborhood to the east of the commercial core. The “14th Street Promenade” is Commercial Mixed Use District with a strong emphasis on ground floor retail. The Hospitality Mixed Use District provides strong tourism infrastructure and hotel accommodations in the Convention Center and Performing Arts area.

Each district incorporates the three key elements mentioned above. The macro level element provides overall balance to downtown uses while creating flow between districts and the commercial core. The micro level element creates diversity of use with in the district and provides mix of services. This tiered approach creates distinct district identity while utilizing the central commercial district and retail centers.

The three main use districts should be distinguished from cultural and/or identity districts. They are designed around broader uses to complement the existing commercial core surrounding 16th street, the residential flats and lofts of Lower Downtown and Platte Valley, and diversify the Convention Center and Performing Arts Center area. While they provide diverse space to encourage unique districts with cultural identities, it is not the intention of this plan to address the community development process needed to create these unique neighborhood attributes.

The **Residential Mixed Use District** is designed to create a third residential district in downtown in addition to Lower Downtown and Platte Valley. This district is on the eastern end of downtown and provides a transition to the “Five Points” neighborhood to the east. The district adds 6,173 new apartments comprising 64% of new residential growth. Enclosed is the eastern end of the commercial core with a residential population. Several large commercial buildings accommodate the inflow from major transit station in the district. Hotels also serve the district and broader downtown. The ground floor use is predominantly residential support with some retail. Larger ground floor spaces for residential support will be encouraged, as a major need in downtown is the infrastructure to support residential use. The overall macro elements are the increased residential population to the downtown with strong integration to the core commercial district. In addition, the district to Lower Downtown and Platte surround the core commercial district with residential. This creates a larger spatial flow pattern to support the market for larger central services. The eastern and western residential areas also provide travel corridors for walking and transit commuting. (The 20th & Welton Light Rail Station is the namesake for this proposed district to remind the residents it is there for them to exploit.)

Within the district, the residential, office, and hotel mix provide a small market for retail and residential support. The residential district is primarily based on developments similar to development site 28. The buildout of the site creates 318 residential units. The 10,000 net square feet of ground floor space accommodates primarily residential support with some pedestrian friendly retail. The sites larger than 30,000 square feet were maximized for residential and commercial use based on the rectangular shape of the lots; these sites will accommodate other buildout scenarios that do not maximize the site buildout.

The **Hospitality Mixed Use District** strengthens the tourism aspect of downtown. Overall, the plan nearly doubles the number of hotel rooms in downtown. The district provides needed hotel rooms for business and leisure travelers creating a strong tourism facet for downtown. The district assimilates into the “14th Street Promenade” retail corridor which provides further access into downtown shops and restaurants. Commercial office and residential uses are mixed into the district creating a strong presence for both day and night uses. The majority of ground floor levels provide large public lobbies with some retail and residential support. A residential support and retail hub is added for several large retailers behind the Pavilions. One of the key sites is number 33 which is behind the “Pavilions” on Fifteenth Street. The buildout would incorporate medium to large retailers into the Pavilions site, to hopefully reinvigorate the area and create foot traffic there to strengthen the area’s retail. The buildout creates five floors of retail space, spanning the entire two lots and over Glenarm. The development would add 141,000 net square feet of retail. Ideally, the space would host a large and medium size retailer depending on their need and the remaining space could be used for office or residential lofts.

The **Commercial/Retail Mixed Use District** adds commercial office space while also hosting a mix of residential and hotel uses. A strong ground floor retail emphasis provides a retail corridor along 14th Street; thus creating the proposed “14th Street Promenade”. Overall, the district provides mixed use and travel corridors for the other districts and lower downtown. The district creates ground floor retail along 14th Street, with links into 16th Street mall through Larimer Square, Writer Square, the extended Arapahoe Plaza, and The Tabor Center. The new “14th Street Promenade” district will connect these current retail centers providing a strong travel pattern. Also, located in the district is the twin tower residential and hotel site 3, with a two story retail and residential support base. The base retail provides space for several medium sized retailers, health club, and other hospitality and residential needs. The tower center has 500 residential units in tower one, 1000 hotel rooms in tower two with 60,000 net square feet of retail and residential support in the base.

Corridors and Flow

Each district provides general services to support its residents, workers, business, and tourists. However, access to major services, other districts, and the commercial core is a key to the success of the downtown plan. The plan has diversified the land use mix in downtown and surrounded the commercial core with residential and tourist populations. The creation of the “14th Street Promenade” retail corridor and the extension of Arapahoe Plaza between 14th and 16th Streets, in addition to Larimer Square, are designed to create pedestrian flow. The flow pattern creates circular pedestrian traffic up and down 14th and 16th Streets, connecting the two corridors. This pedestrian-friendly corridor also connects the major residential population and the commercial offices located in the urban core. The motorized accessible routes are on 19th and 20th Street. These streets connect and create flow between the east and west residential districts and the commercial core. The plan strategically locates the four main major service areas along these corridors.

Services

The plan designates four key sites for large retailers and larger residential support uses. These sites are located on main corridors and are intentionally located in opposite corners of the central downtown area. The concept is to create flow between the districts by providing a major service in each. For example: the 20th & Lawrence site could host a Super Target and Grocer; 15th & Glenarm could host Macy's; 19th & Broadway could have a specialty Grocer and hardware store; and 14th & Arapahoe could have a large health club and other major residential support. The intent is to create a downtown that has the amenities that are needed to support residential use in an urban environment.

Numbers

Overall, the plan introduces some major changes in the makeup of downtown. The 9,104 residential units and the 4,675 hotel rooms the plan creates are the cornerstones to the success of downtown. The 956,780 net square feet of retail can be supported with buildout, however the major service and retail developments listed above should be priorities. The plan anticipates that increases in residential populations and tourism will revitalize the commercial office attractiveness of the area bringing in new business to

support the 3,964,137 net square feet of office space. These figures are show below in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1

Project Breakdown						
Residential Units		Net Residential (SF)	Net Retail (SF)	Net Office (SF)	Hotel Rooms	Parking Spaces
1 Bed	2 Bed					
5,328	3,776	9,059,789	956,780	3,964,137	4,675	26,267

Source: Buildout Matrix, Methods, Fall 2005