

DEVELOP

Denver's Residential Peaks and Valleys

Rugged snow-capped mountains hover in the distance and agricultural fields encircle the outskirts of the city, but Denver is much more cosmopolitan than cowboy these days.

The city has a history of growth, modulated by boom/bust economic

of riverfront parks—all located within walking distance of one another.

It has not happened overnight: the people and policies that have shaped the last 40 years of development have effectively managed issues of growth, weathered economic ups and downs, reinvented industrial properties, and created a market for downtown housing that has changed the way Denverites live.

molybdenum, but the companies that passed through Denver traditionally took their money and left. In time, residents also moved farther and farther from the core. Denver was a place to leave, not to live.

Denver's downtown includes the central business district and the areas just around it, including Lower Downtown (LoDo), and today developers cannot get new housing on the market there fast enough. Modest beginnings in downtown residential development have now become a tidal wave, says land use attorney Thomas J. Ragonetti, senior shareholder and director of Otten, Johnson, Robinson, Neff, and Ragonetti, P.C. Residential conversions of 19th-century warehouses in LoDo started the trend in the 1970s, and between 2000 and 2004, nearly 6,500 new residential units were built downtown, including luxury and affordable apartments, townhouses, and lofts.

Coordinated public policies got underway as early as the 1980s to combat an economic bust that threatened the city's stability. Residents called Denver's commercial office towers "see-through" buildings because they were so empty, recalls William Fleissig, vice president of development for Urban Villages, Inc. At the same time, the city realized from the start that housing for all income brackets needed to be in the mix, to the point that uniform regulations for affordable housing setasides have been in place since 2002.

When the LoDo historic district adjacent to the city core was little more than a ghost town, neglected, and somewhat seedy, private developers pioneered projects such as Larimer Square, a chic retail hub, and



Downtown Denver, with the Central Platte Valley and Commons Park in the foreground.

cycles and fueled by a constant flux of new ideas and new people. In its 21st-century incarnation, Denver has reconceived itself as a hub for the arts, entertainment, and technology. It also has some of the best new urban housing in America, an array of cultural and sports venues, a popular historic district, and a string

of riverfront parks—all located within walking distance of one another. Denver's success is attributable in large part to a coterie of enlightened leadership—downtown businesspeople, mayors, and civic and community groups—who share a vision and collaborate to achieve common goals.

Starting with the gold rush of 1859, Colorado has been mined for precious materials, oil, gas, coal, uranium, and

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residential conversions like the Blake Street Racquet Club. LoDo was ripe for development because it had good building stock that was centrally located and relatively cheap.

Additional support for LoDo grew in the wake of destruction: nearly one-third of downtown's historic buildings were demolished by the Denver Urban Renewal Authority (DURA) starting in 1969. Developers began to snap up whole city blocks for new commercial towers, dwarfing the existing small-scale brick structures. These early events blazed the trail for the rezoning of 22 blocks and, in 1974, the first application of B7 zoning that transformed a former industrial area into the city's first mixed-use zone.

In the early 1980s, local merchants attempted to save downtown's suffering retail market. The city and county of Denver created the 16th Street Mall, a 13-block transit mall that links Denver's City Beautiful center with LoDo.

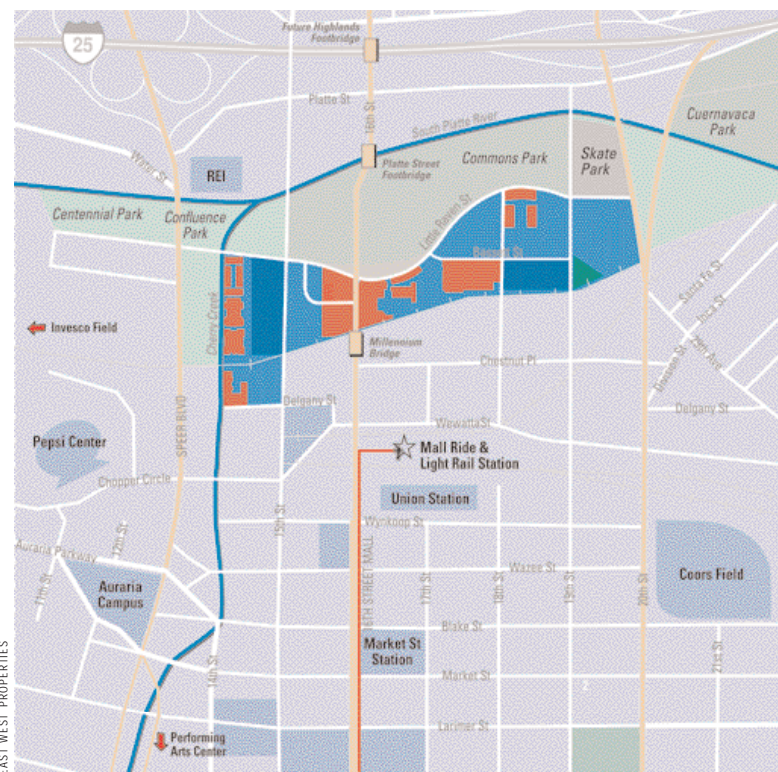
The Downtown Area Plan of 1986, adopted by the city council on the advice of business and community leaders, confirmed broad support for downtown with a pledge backing preservation, creation of 10,000 units of housing, and incentives for mixed-use projects. In an effort to encourage development of new housing, then-mayor Federico Peña backed subsidized residential development through the Skyline Development Fund to demonstrate its viability in downtown Denver.

Widespread residential construction has been "instigated by conscious public investment to create a growing base of people downtown—and for more than just the rich and famous,"

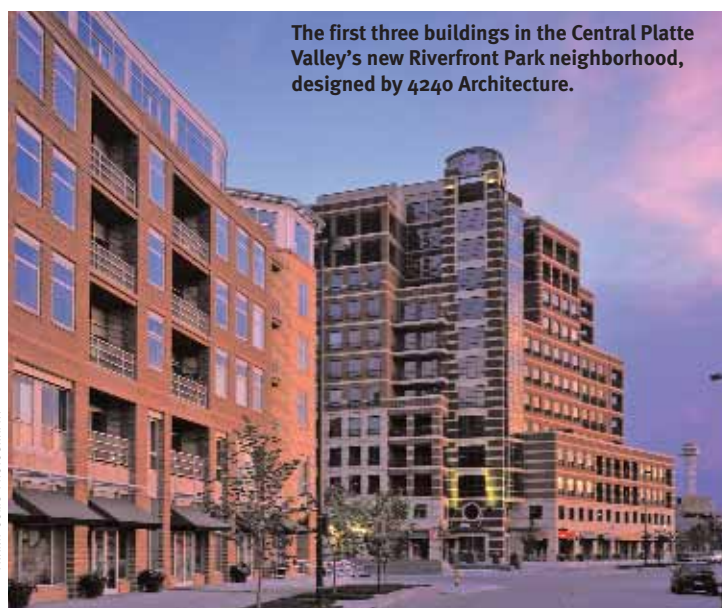
says Susan Powers, president of Urban Ventures, LLC, and former executive director of DURA. Despite public support, the process was not always easy. When DURA converted the historic Denver Dry Goods Building on the 16th Street Mall into retail space, affordable rental apartments, and market-rate condominiums in the early 1990s, investors were still cautious: the project required 23 separate sources of funding. Now it is completely occupied.

High-quality architecture—a hallmark of early LoDo projects—set the tone for a commitment to superior design in Denver, from not only the private sector, but also the public sector. In the past several decades, the city has improved the local infrastructure, first with street lighting and street furniture, and now with pedestrian bridges.

When the public and private sectors unite as they have in Denver, development has a domino effect. The opening of Coors Field in 1995 on



Downtown Denver has a number of major attractions.



The first three buildings in the Central Platte Valley's new Riverfront Park neighborhood, designed by 4240 Architecture.

FRANK COOMS PHOTOGRAPHY

the edge of the commercial core generated a lively entertainment district, which in turn has become a popular and desirable place to live. Today, Denver has four professional sports venues downtown—the most of any North American city. In the past decade, hundreds of millions of dollars in private investment and public bonds have also raised capital for the Denver Public Library, the Denver Museum of Art expansion, and the Ellie Caulkins Opera House, among other civic institutional projects.

These cultural amenities have instigated private residential development throughout Ballpark (around Coors Field) and other downtown neighborhoods. The most ambitious project to

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date, however, is occurring at Riverfront Park in the Central Platte Valley just north of the central business district. (See “Birthing a City within a City,” page 114.)

In the mid-1980s, when the railroad began to consolidate its services, the city seized the chance to bridge the tracks that severed the valley from downtown. Community groups and business leaders pressed for more housing when the city began working with Trillium Corp., the new owner, to rezone the former industrial area. Mayor Wellington Webb envisioned a new park at the terminus of the 16th Street Mall that would link the downtown all the way from the Civic Center to the valley and the riverfront. The city responded to the call for housing and scrapped a plan that was circulated in 1999 for a second commercial district.

Unlike LoDo with its residential conversions, Riverfront represents the first substantial construction of new housing—\$1 billion worth—just as the appeal of urban living has begun to take hold. Webb’s vision led to the creation of the 30-acre (12-ha) Commons Park, which completed a 90-acre (36-ha) chain of waterfront parks and integrated Denver’s outdoor lifestyle with planned growth. The city also built the Millennium Bridge, a pedestrian connection that puts Riverfront within walking distance of the commercial district, and through founder Joe Shoemaker, the Greenway Foundation built miles of recreational trails and bike paths along the Platte River.

The city also has been a catalyst for new types of residential construction downtown, such as retirement housing and the first

residence hall for the Auraria Campus, which serves 37,000 students who attend three higher education institutions in Denver.

The momentum continues. Denver is now realizing an ambitious plan to recast its historic train station, Union Station, as an intermodal transit hub just across the Millennium Bridge from Riverfront Park. It is intended to support the next wave of growth—new, transit-oriented projects that will be made possible by FasTracks, a regional mass transit system. This growth will reshape more remote areas of Denver based on the mixed-use, pedestrian model that has been so successful downtown.

The relationship among city officials, public agencies, civic groups, the business community, and residents remains a formidable force.

The level of participation is indicated by the fact the Union Station steering committee has 96 members, says Tyler Gibbs, manager of plan implementation with the Community Planning and Development Department for Denver, who participated on the master plan for Riverfront Park. But that amount of engagement is not surprising to Gibbs. Denver is “a community where people have real knowledge about issues,” he says. And, as the support for Union Station illustrates, “They’re powerfully engaged in Denver’s planning.”—**PETER H. DOMINICK, JR.**

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