

Overland Redevelopment Themes

by Jack Unruh 02/06/2007

As an orientation for our 11:00 am meeting Saturday, February 17, 2007, here is some background of a general nature about planning in Overland Park and the principles in use by planners today.

"New Urbanism" is a planning and development movement that evolved in the early 1980's and is concerned with better land use for better quality of life.

- It generally views the urban dominance of autos and traffic to be dehumanizing, unsafe, and environmentally degrading: it emphasizes "walkability" within neighborhoods.
- It supports population density (to a point) as a remedy for urban sprawl and for destruction of habitat and arable land. New urbanism can be seen as an ecological movement: the city is for the people and the country is for the natural processes that support the people.
- Development within cities and in rural areas should be "sustainable" and new urbanists support "green" building techniques and energy technologies. "Reduce, reuse, recycle" applies not only to products and packaging but to cities themselves: reduce sprawl and the urban footprint on the land, reuse existing urban space more efficiently (more life in less area), and recycle parts of cities back into natural systems through parks, urban forests, green roofs, reduced air pollution and cleaned up waterways.
- New urbanism also supports density as a means of creating more social interaction, and supports "mixed use," meaning that residents' homes, jobs, entertainment and shopping venues coexist, creating a walkable "live-work-play" village-like existence.
- Increased density means more economic activity in less space, which in turn means more public revenue to tend and improve smaller areas to higher standards. Nevertheless, the driving economic force behind new urbanism in the U.S. is private investment in a marketable trend – a growing but relatively small business sector.
- Mixed use may imply walking between home and work, but new urbanists also support public transit as an alternative to traffic and commuting by car. Because transit can to some extent replace reliance on cars, transit stops are seen as ideal places for new urban development.
- Community-building public spaces are an important aspect of new-urban development, since a degree of "tribal" cooperation is needed to coexist with more neighbors. Transit stops, parks and streets (as "shared space") can help fill this need, but churches, schools, recreation centers and "eating-and-drinking establishments" are more obvious socializing spaces.

City of Denver planning and development has reflected new urbanism since the early 1990's. The 2020 Comprehensive Plan, Blueprint Denver and Greenprint Denver, as well as FasTracks and the Union Station redevelopment all show the influence of new urbanism in the area, as do the City-approved development plans listed below. The Comprehensive Plan in particular emphasizes new-urban people-scale and quality of life principles by devoting half its table of contents to "Human Capital," and by showing the relationship between the built urban environment and the viability of social and economic life.

The current City administration, partly reflecting the dip in revenues since 2001, is basically entrepreneurial in character, meaning that privately financed developments are reviewed for compliance but there is limited mandate for new urban principles. Significant developments

generally require a General Development Plan and often rezoning – processes that allow a public voice and leverage the City's stake in guiding the project.

The most significant current planning and development movement by Denver is the reworking of the zoning codes. It is new-urban in philosophy because it emphasizes shape and scale of new building over use, acknowledging that multiple- and mixed use are trends, and that cities evolve new use patterns over time. Products are already emerging from this ponderous undertaking (the statement of problem runs over 100 pages) and notable among them is the Main Street zone, developed out of the East Colfax planning process. It emphasizes mid-rise building volumes transitioning in scale to surrounding residential areas, and an activated public character to the streetscape.

The evolution of Denver's approach to development affects any Overland Park initiatives to improve our neighborhood and we should be familiar with its principles in order to work effectively. Because Denver's philosophy is spelled out in documents like Blueprint Denver, we can leverage our ideas by showing that they coincide with the City's; because all this is a process of representative government we also have the opportunity to lead where we find the City's thinking is not yet as advanced as our own. The City Council race is a key to placing our needs in the public conversation.

Council-adopted (and other) local plans that surround and influence development in Overland Park include

- Overland Neighborhood Plan (1993)
- South Platte River Management Plan
- South Broadway Transportation and Redevelopment Plan
- RTD Southwest Corridor Plan (note Bates Station project to come)
- Shattuck District Plan
- Denver Parks and Recreation Game Plan (City in a Park)
- Denver Pedestrian and Bike Masterplans
- Cherokee General Development Plan
- Lionstone General Development Plan
- South Broadway NEPA Plan

Overland Park development history begins and ends with the land. The Platte River prehistorically eroded its channel and flood plain, leading to American Indian trails along its course, the so-called Trapper Trail, the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad and the Denver and South Park Railroad, Santa Fe Drive, and agricultural and industrial use of the river bottom.

The first placer gold strike on the Platte (at Dartmouth) caused the first platted settlement on the Eastern Slope in 1858 (roughly at Galapago and Warren), predating the founding of Auraria and Denver City.

The alcohol-free Town of South Denver was founded to tame the rough South Broadway and South Santa Fe roadhouses. Rufus "Potato" Clark's original homestead became Overland Park, initial home of the Denver Country Club. A hundred years later, the commuting demand between highly paid downtown Denver jobs and desirable (?) south suburban homes led to the widening of Santa Fe into a CDOT Expressway, rupturing the integrity and walkability of Overland. The historic rail right of way did, however, land us the RTD Light Rail line.

Building spurts occurred in the late 1800's, after World Wars I and II, and during the Cold War Arms Race (Santa Fe motels like the *Martin Manor* and the *Titan Manor*, the *Flying Saucer* trailer court, and the Federal and Evans bar *The Rocket Lounge* betray that era). The decommissioning and redevelopment of the Gates Rubber factory matches other industry-to-gentry trends along the Lower Platte Valley. Overland, however, has often been "downstream" from up and coming areas, receiving on the one hand new home buyers priced

out of other areas (wonderful!), and on the other homeless populations and onerous factories no longer tolerated elsewhere (less wonderful...).

Overland has always been mixed-use as a neighborhood, but the uses are not well integrated. We are, in roughly comparable land areas, made up of: green Open Space, residential, commercial, and transportation uses. All the public recreation elements are west of Santa Fe, while more residents are east; industry is concentrated in the northeast quadrant, with a small patch at our southwest tip; and most of the community-building dining and entertainment is on Broadway, at our eastern edge.

We are not well served by community-building public spaces: no fire station, police station, recreation center, library or school lies within our boundaries. The Golf Course is well-used because it is small and level and urban, but most of our residents are not golfers. The new AquaGolf driving range will attempt to remedy this by having a focus on kids, but aside from the Overland Golf Course clubhouse the only real "public" gathering place is John Collins Church.

The area south from Mississippi to Asbury is underutilized and ripe for development. As with the Shattuck District plan (Iowa to Evans) the most stimulating and flexible zoning available now is CMU-30 (high density Commercial Mixed Use). Because it would be commercial, though allowing residential use, it could give Overland jobs as well as new residents.

General development options for Overland hinge on the direction in which we want to evolve. Like the Denver Comprehensive Plan we can best consider home, business and infrastructure developments from the viewpoint of Human Capital. At its root, a neighborhood is a platform for the health of its inhabitants, and health is a condition measured by options. Say you're sick in bed: you don't have the option to go to work or school or a movie or...

If, as a realistic example, both parents work two jobs to make ends meet, children are often neglected, homework is often unfinished, gangster life looks good, drugs, crime and graffiti increase, homes get robbed, people go to jail, families are broken up. This kind of stuff goes on in Overland Park so a condition of a healthy neighborhood we could embrace is the option of accessible living wage jobs. The option of safely walking to a place to socialize, the option to spend quality time with our kids, the option to recreate near our homes, the option to invest in real estate with little chance of loss – all reflect the interplay between personal health and the built environment.

We may have bought or begun renting in Overland as a simple "retail" transaction: money in return for dwelling space. But by distinguishing the (new-urban) development directions that will build a better platform for our health and options we can become "shareholders" in the neighborhood, accelerating property appreciation and quality of life improvements. If we know what we want Overland Park to be we can lobby for it, we can evaluate others' plans for alignment with that vision, we can better avoid being "out-NIMBY'd" and taking in negatives others don't want. We may even be able to get the City to adopt our vision into the Comprehensive Plan.

To do this we need to discover the optimum development ideas that mesh with the plans of nearby interests and the City's general outlook on planning. Here are some very general directions that answer our shortcomings and move us forward positively...

- Show quoted text -

- Activate our green spaces with more uses than golf – this will point up the attractiveness of outdoor recreation options in Overland and draw homebuyers.

- Reconnect the neighborhood across Santa Fe and the tracks – this will make Platte River greenspace accessible to east-siders and Broadway shops and entertainment accessible to west-siders.
- Pursue interest in and rezone the northeast quad as CMU-30; put the word out that affordable land and space are ready for skilled handwork living-wage jobs (like Denver Woodworkers and RJR Circuits) - this will draw jobs and population and give us a bigger voice and economy.
- Pursue Main Street zoning for all of Broadway and for Delaware near the Evans Station – this will serve notice of revitalization aims and stimulate value-added transit-friendly development
- Pursue CMU-20 (slightly less dense) zoning for the industrial patch at Evans and the Platte – river- and greenway-oriented development of multiple family and entertainment projects would activate the surrounding R-1 homes and draw attention to our outdoor resources.
- Look at schemes for greater density in our R-2 areas and evaluate their desirability – in general, more people (and more active people) means more power.
- Develop a Neighborhood Plan update that expresses initiatives like these and captures an overall vision with implementation strategies – this will leverage our influence on our future and define our identity in a way we can support.
- Educate ourselves in the language of development, keep our eyes and ears open, and participate strongly in every development public process that remotely affects us – once we develop a vision for Overland and a strong institutional memory for it (lots of active planning mavens) we'll have the best chance of a healthier, wealthier neighborhood.
- Become better organized and politically active as a population – ONWATCH and ONA are a start, but we can be better at looking out for one another and squeaking for the grease. There is no limit to how involved and organized we can become as a neighborhood culture.

Check out the ideas on the [2007 ONA Redevelopment Concept map](#) – you can use the zoom function in Acrobat Reader if it's too small.

Kevin Dickson would like to add:

"Once you come to understand all the benefits of Transit Oriented Development, you can start thinking more like a wise urban planner and less like one of those [neighbors who are vaguely afraid of change](#). Education is the key, and some increased density can be part of the solution. Let's face it, people are sick of fighting traffic to reach the city, and they've decided to move back to the city. Our neighborhood is well-positioned to reap the benefits and avoid the detriments of this shift."