



A Chapter of The American Institute of Architects

July 7, 2010

John Desmond
Vice President of Urban Design and Environment
Downtown Denver Partnership
511 16th St., # 200
Denver, CO 80202

Dear John,

Thank you for your recent presentation to the AIA Denver Urban Design Committee (UDC) about the design options for the renovation of the 16th Street Mall. The AIA Denver Board of Directors and UDC value the opportunity to have input into the process of renovating this great civic treasure.

Following your presentation, UDC's members, who include local architects, urban planners and interested professionals, debated the merits of the design options and physical elements of the Mall. Opinions generated from the committee were summarized and presented to the AIA Denver Board of Directors.

At the recommendation of the committee, the AIA Denver Board of Directors advocates for Option 1, which retains the existing design by refurbishing the discolored granite pavers, their setting beds and supports, while making minimal modifications to the original plan. The 16th Street Mall, designed by Harry Cobb, FAIA, of Pei Cobb Freed, has become the living room for the City of Denver, and we are reluctant to recommend wholesale changes. It is important to maintain the Mall, keep it in good repair and modify some elements of design to meet the changes in codes and the demands of an aging population, but we feel the original design is stronger than any of the other proposed options.

Modifications to the B-5 Downtown zoning to lower the threshold to require review under the design guidelines for all storefronts, including kiosks and temporary carts, regardless of the value, and to create an agent and method of enforcement are important. It is critical to improve the quality of design on the Mall, which will serve to maintain the Mall as one of the primary tourist destinations in the state.

We realize the *16th Street Plan* is a work in progress and will continue to be refined. Attached are the AIA Denver Urban Design Committee's comments based on the 16th Street Urban Design Plan – Progress Report (5/12/10) and the Phase II Urban Design Plan, 3rd draft (3/15/10). Initial recommendations are followed by detailed responses to specific elements, though without the full consensus of UDC members. Please note that these comments are the thoughts and input from individual committee members. They do not represent the opinions of AIA Denver.

AIA Denver looks forward to the development of the *16th Street Plan* design and to continue to be a partner in this process.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tania Salgado', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Tania Salgado, AIA
AIA Denver 2010 President

AIA Denver
1515 Arapahoe St., Ste. 1-110
Denver, CO 80202
303.446.2266 (p)
303.446.0066 (f)
www.aiacolorado.org

AIA Denver Urban Design Committee Comments

Considerable discussion took place at the committee level. Not all issues received consensus. The following documents the opinions of several UDC members.

Design Options:

The idea of creating a “sunny side of the street” is a unique opportunity given Denver’s 45 degree street orientation. The concept is being incorporated into the planning of the 17th street transit corridor under construction and would seem to make sense here - although the shaded side has advantages in Denver’s hot summer sun. The primary benefits of an asymmetrical sidewalk are the opportunities for larger kiosks, gathering spaces, outdoor eating areas, fountains, et cetera, in the enlarged spaces. Several of our members preferred this option. (Option 2)

The Committee expressed great respect for the original design by one of America’s great architects, however, and so are reluctant to recommend major modifications, especially after losing most of the work of Pei Cobb Freed in Denver to insensitive demolition and addition in the past. The majority of Committee members who have taken part in this review believe Option 1 is the best option.

While we see benefits to allowing variations in the design of the mall to take advantage of particular civic features, buildings and opportunities, these aspects change over time, and so should not be a primary factor in the decisions surrounding the Mall’s configuration. The majority of the Committee believes the median blocks are successful for some activities, like chess boards - which should be kept - provide shaded seating areas, and serve to relieve pedestrian flow when sidewalks are crowded.

We discount concerns that the asymmetrical design gives preference to one set of property owners because we feel the 19’ sidewalks work to create a critical mass of pedestrian movement as well as retail interaction, while still leaving space for outdoor dining areas to function. The world’s best streets have multiple entrances in each block, building breaks, visual complexity, transparency at the street, protection from the sun and wind and encourage interaction but at not too slow a pace. We believe the 19’ wide sidewalk section can accomplish these characteristics with the proper design elements and guidelines in place.

The majority of the Committee does not feel the existing asymmetrical sections of the Mall create a noticeably better condition than the predominantly symmetrical arrangement, and thus are not convinced that restructuring the entire length of the Mall along an asymmetrical pattern would be an improvement.

Some on the Committee suggested that food carts should be consolidated in certain areas – perhaps including private plazas – or certain street corners with increased bulb-out space to create a synergy of activity – mini epicenters – in selected locations based upon location, safety, scale, flexibility and seating opportunities. One member suggested Skyline Park could be used for this purpose.

Option 2.1: The extension of the asymmetrical design one block at each end of the original mall, and reversing the wider asymmetrical side mid-mall, adds complexity to the options but fails to be compelling. Switching the asymmetrical configuration to the south side of the street mid-mall defeats the purpose - to take advantage of the sunny side for activities. The added cost of the infrastructure and structural modifications required for this option is also a factor in our decision not to advocate this option.

One aspect of Option 2.1 makes sense to some members of the Committee, the extension of the asymmetrical design for one block at each end of the mall (one block east from Arapahoe to Curtis and one block west from Tremont to Glenarm). In lieu of Option 2 this could be combined with Option 1 to keep a primarily symmetrical

mall with two extended asymmetrical ends, or Option 1.1. Again, the committee was not in agreement on this issue.

Bicycle Lanes: We feel bicycle lanes should not be incorporated into the original Mall cross section, but rather be developed on 15th and 17th streets. Primary intersections with the city's established bike lanes at Lawrence, Arapahoe and Wynkoop streets should be emphasized with dismount zones, bike parking and storage facilities.

Bicycling as a mode of transit is incompatible with the slower paced pedestrian and stop-and-go shuttle transit focus of the mall. In addition the complexity of interactions of bus loading zones and bicycle crossing make it impractical at the pace of shuttle traffic, every 75 seconds. Use of the center median for bicycle lanes would avoid that issue, but we believe the center medians should be used for pedestrian purposes rather than bicycles.

The installation of bike lanes in the mall shuttle zone in the LODO section of the mall could be justified if part of an overall strategy for access into and out of downtown and its primary attractions and interconnections. As part of a connection from the existing striped lanes on Arapahoe and Lawrence to Union Station and the Millennium Bridge the bike lanes make sense – although west of Wewatta auto traffic is planned on 16th Street, complicating the cross section. The blocking of 18th Street as part of the Union Station development requires resolution of the current downtown bike lanes. We suggest a simple pilot program could be created with painted striping to test the concept of bike lanes on the Mall west of Wynkoop. Coordination with the Union Station Transit District's plans for bicycle traffic integration is essential. Others felt strongly that bikes should not be incorporated in any part of the Mall

Mall Design Elements: Designs options for a variety of physical elements of the mall were presented. We have the following recommendations:

- **Pavers:** We recommend flipping, reconditioning and reuse of existing pavers and continuing the original color themes and patterns wherever possible. (Others felt the continuation of the diamondback color pattern was unnecessarily complex resulting in additional costs). Granite pavers are preferred over pre-cast, even for textured specialty stones. Some members felt concrete should be used in the shuttle lanes, though most felt strongly the original design should be maintained. We believe the vertical sandstone pavers and patterns in LODO are not well suited to the climate or appropriate to use in conjunction with the granite pavers that constitute the majority of the mall. A uniform design which blends horizontal sandstone with the granite should be developed similar to the newly installed 1800 and 1900 blocks as a way of uniting the original Mall pavers and the Transit District expansion. Intersections should be modified beyond ADA requirements to meet Universal Design Guidelines.
- **Bulb-outs:** We recommend the extension of bulb-outs at cross axis intersections and their modification to meet Universal Design Standards. Bicycle dismount zones, bike parking and newspaper kiosks as well as carts or kiosks could populate the increased sidewalk areas.
- **Fountains:** We encourage the use of fountains – particularly interactive water features - and agree that removing benches from their immediate area would be beneficial.
- **Trash Receptacles:** Opinion was mixed regarding the use of the football shaped stainless receptacles presented over the original mushroom shaped trash receptacles, but if the original receptacles are retained, their forms should be altered to meet recycle requirements.
- **Telephones:** We believe permanent telephone kiosks are quickly becoming anachronisms, but agree that for safety reasons some could be retained at several primary locations. Changing the telephones to incorporate view screen technology for the use of the deaf is encouraged. Reducing the number of phone stations by replacing some with emergency call stations with a blue light was suggested.
- **Benches:** We agree that backless benches with arms are a good solution to the need for public seating, but recognize the need to accommodate an aging population. For this reason many of the benches should retain backs and the height of all seating elements should be 19", to make the seating more accessible to disabled and elderly persons. We think the experimental large benches with arms will

encourage many people to share benches and discourage sleeping. We believe the Mall should retain the moveable individual chairs as well.

- Color Schemes: Generally the committee believes that the original grey scheme was too monochromatic, and that the revised primary scheme went too far in the opposite direction. We believe the Olin color scheme with “Colorado” colors including blue and rust is appropriate, though some members of the committee preferred the original grey scheme, believing that returning to the original monochromatic grey was appropriate for all Mall elements, letting plantings and people be the color.
- Light Fixtures: While the original design is well established, the fixtures need to be updated and a standardized design developed which can be effectively maintained for reasonable costs. Complete replacement of the fixture with a contemporary, understated but commercially available – and maintainable – fixture may be appropriate, but if possible should mimic the original design. Changing the fixtures in LODO to a historical replica was agreeable to some but others felt the lighting should be a consistent design element through its entire length.
- Signage: While signage is an opportunity to unify the different sections of the mall, we encourage variety and complexity over corporate homogeneity. Signage is art and could be treated as such. We encourage interaction with the design community including the possibility of design competitions for the signage. Some regularity to the signage is in order though, to avoid a chaotic response. Some suggested categorizing the signage into way-finding and informational typologies, creating uniformity within the categories.
- Art: We believe public art should be accomplished through design competitions and encourage permanent installations of significant art commissioned for particular locations. The inclusion of high quality public art is very important and can be highly effective in generating the success of the mall. We suggest establishing three criteria for evaluation: *a. a place making installation* – a three dimensional presence placed in a focal point on the Mall in scale with its surrounding architecture, related to the immediate activities and actively and passively interacting with the public, 24/7 all year round; *b. a multidimensional art-form* which includes and integrates a diverse set of plastic expressions, materials (including water) media, technologies and illumination that reflects and responds to the urban context of the Mall and ‘electrifies’ the public; and *c. the event/place art form* should be intended to become a *signifier* of the Mall, unique and undisturbed by other art pieces – a monument to the Mall and to the city.

Other thoughts:

- We also encourage modified intersections at critical intersections keyed to City features at cross axes – like the Webb Building on Court street, The Convention Center on California, the DCPA on Curtis street, sports venues on Blake street, Skyline Park on Arapahoe, Larimer Square, and the new transit features on Wynkoop and Wewatta. These important civic elements should be emphasized through changes in the paving patterns or street features such as banners or crosswalk patterns. The sound sculptures and pavement changes on Curtis Street are an example well received by the Committee.

Design Guidelines:

The Committee concurs with the recommendations discussed and outlined in the Commentary on Denver Downtown B5 zoning, specifically:

- All frontages, alleys, kiosks, Retail Merchandizing Units (RMU’s) and carts should be subject to design reviews. Lower the threshold to activate design review in order to require all businesses on or fronting on the Mall to be required to comply with the B5 Downtown Design Review Standards and Guidelines, rather than exempt businesses whose improvements are valued at more than 50% of the buildings’ value. Requiring owners and developers, rather than designated representatives, to attend meetings may complicate the process, might be difficult to manage and may not be necessary, however.
- Creation of an “Exhibit” vehicle, tied to lease agreements, to regulate design and behavior.
- Authorize and fund an enforcement method. Create an authorized person or persons attached to the City, but paid for by the Business Improvement District (BID) to perform design review and enforce the conditions of the “Exhibit”.

- We agree that a primary focus for developments should be on the street and ground floor. In as much as the Guidelines can require, encourage and/or provide incentive to maintain a high level of design at the pedestrian level we believe it will be beneficial. We encourage the concept of requiring a minimal acceptable quality level for design elements, including transparency, use of high quality, maintainable materials and detailing; uniform signage, lighting and graphic requirements that encourage visual stimulation; encourage multiple entrances and building breaks, but discourage building frontage from creating arcades or setting back from the build-to line, except to create occasional enclaves for respite from the traffic line.

We hope that these recommendations are helpful to the efforts of the Downtown Denver Partnership to refurbish and renovate the 16th Street Mall. The AIA Denver Board of Directors, the Urban Design Committee and its members are committed to continue our oversight of the activities and progress in the important work to maintain and update this important civic feature. If we can be of further help, please contact us.

Sincerely,



Dean Foreman, AIA
AIA Denver Urban Design Committee Co-chair

Terry Willis, AIA, AIA Denver UDC Co-chair
Jeff Bartosik, Assoc. AIA
Alan Gass, FAIA
Robert Schmid, AIA
Niccolo Casewit, AIA