

The Bright Lights of LoDo

By Rebecca Crosby

There's a long list of bright lights in LoDo, particularly now with so many exciting developments on the slate, but I'm referring to the lights that have made all the difference. The ones that changed the course of LoDo from a dark, scary, don't-want-to-be-there-after-dark kind of place to the extraordinarily vibrant neighborhood it is today. The streetlights.

Think those architectural lights in LoDo are original? Think again. The deep green filigree lights on 17th Street and the acorn shaped street lights on the named cross streets as well as the LoDo gateway signs were designed in the late 1980's as a part of the Lower Downtown Urban Design Project by the City and County of Denver. Those were the days when Federico Peña was mayor and before Coors Field was even a dream. The plan was a joint project of the City and County of Denver and the Denver Partnership who hired DHM Landscape Architects as the design organization. Gregg Brown was designated project manager and designer.

Denver had plans to change the zoning in LoDo to save the fabulous concentration of old buildings that were quickly being demolished to create endless parking lots. As a concession to the property owners who were losing some of their rights in the process, the city agreed to over \$1 million in streetscape improvements with new streetlights a main feature. The plan was to go heavy on the lights, encouraging people to come to LoDo, knowing it would result in a lighter, brighter and safer place. The lights became the primary design element and the main vision of DHM's design.

Using the historic district's old character for inspiration, landscape architect Gregg Brown found photos of the cable cars that carted around Denver in the early 1900's and that showed the first streetlights and cable connectors. In 1910 Denver had installed a series of filigreed cast iron lights that varied according to the street location and situated on the numbered streets only. The lights became a source of pride among the citizenry and made Denver one of the first cities in the nation to boast electric streetlights. Gregg designed on paper a replica but needed realistic dimensions for the filigree and the correct positioning to balance properly with the height of the pole. In addition the new light fixtures needed to meet current standards.

First Gregg got the design to work on paper then he projected the design onto a screen at the Paramount Theatre with a person standing on stage, enlarging the light fixture until it seemed the right scale. After that exercise he plotted a full-scale model on foam core and hoisted it outside their office on the corner of 17th and Wynkoop, propping it on an existing light post at the appropriate height. This process allowed the entire design team and concerned citizens, read property owners and city officials, a basis for input. The first attempt was too small so they rescaled the filigree and created a second model this time with great success. The whole design method proved to be much cheaper than trying to do it all in cast iron.

Finding a company that could fabricate the agreed upon design was the next challenge. It just so happened that next door to DHM's office at 1660 17th Street was a sales rep for Union Metal, Dave Jennings. Public Service, the arm charged with the installation of the future LoDo lights, was already working with Union Metal on the streetlights now located along Speer Boulevard. Union Metal won the contract and the installation commenced - the rest is history. The current lights are made of steel and painted a federal green to match the Speer Boulevard lights.

The LoDo lights were part of the overall design overlay that included the benches, trash receptacles, brick paver crosswalks, historic plaques, gateways, and decorative railings; many of the encompassing elements that you enjoy as you walk the district today. Together the designs helped change the course of LoDo's history with the lights showing the way to a neighborhood filled with so many new bright lights every day.