

## **LoDo: Sports, Entertainment, Dining and Shopping ?**

When I was given the opportunity by the LoDo District, Inc. to write about the current retail environment, it was both an exciting and daunting task. As a small business owner, I can find myself inspired, frustrated, rewarded and perplexed by growing a retail business in LoDo - sometimes all in the same day.

Physically, LoDo is an urban environment in the midst of an on-going redevelopment that is changing both its physical and economic landscape. Psychologically speaking, LoDo feels as though it is caught in the midst of an identity crisis. I moved to Denver in the early 1990's - Coors Field was being constructed, Wynkoop Brewery sat ready to receive the thirsty fans and when you walked around LoDo there was a collective and palpable sense that you were experiencing Denver's urban center. A phenomenal number of changes have occurred since that time. Even now, it is far from static - this fall marks construction on one of LoDo's remaining warehouse buildings (Colorado Saddlery Co. on 15<sup>th</sup> and Wynkoop) and the sky around the Platte Valley is dotted with cranes marking the location of new residential, cultural and mixed-used projects.

The changes to Denver have not been limited to the LoDo area. Many other urban areas are in the midst of exciting revivals. Colfax Avenue, just east of East High School, has an eclectic mix of new coffee shops, restaurants and boutique retailers that blend comfortably in with the older environment. Soon they will be bolstered by the relocation of the Cherry Creek Tattered Cover to the former Lowenstein Theater. Other pocket neighborhood revivals include 17<sup>th</sup> Avenue near Park Avenue and Potter Highlands.

Then there are the New Urbanism developments that are gobbling up the suburban areas around Denver and in its place creating walkable mixed-use neighborhoods with city centers and attention to human details like the width of a sidewalk and the scale of the buildings. Examples to the east of downtown Denver include Lowry and Stapleton; to the west is Lakewood's new city center, known as Belmar.

With so many changes occurring to Denver's urban landscape, where does LoDo fit in? Clearly we are the sports and entertainment district of Denver. We are bounded on two sides by Coors Field and the Pepsi Center -- in the other direction we have the Performing Arts Complex / Convention Center soon to be balanced by the freshly ground-broken Museum of Contemporary Art at the lower end. And with sports, entertainment and cultural facilities come restaurants and bars. LoDo has a healthy supply of restaurants and bars --any given Friday night would demonstrate that we also have a healthy supply of people to keep these establishments thriving.

With all the urban competition around town, can LoDo be more than just Denver's entertainment district?

LoDo is filled with residents, business people, and visitors who both hope and *act* otherwise. I know, because these are the people who find their way into Composition, on 15<sup>th</sup> and Blake. These are the people who, like me, are optimistic that when the dust settles LoDo will be a city center with offerings as diverse and interesting as the people willing to explore it. An urban environment with a mixture of uses from affordable apartments to affluent penthouses; expansive architectural studios to petit office suites; hot-dog carts to the hottest new chef; fresh flowers to fresh fruit; a place to drop off dry-cleaning and another to buy clean socks...

The current state of retail can act as one barometer in our progress towards a dynamic and diverse urban vision. Generally, the redevelopment of an area begins with intrepid dwellers, artists and businesses looking for larger spaces at less cost. As more businesses and residents move in, the area will be able to support a coffee shop, restaurants and bars. These business models can flourish based on frequent repeat business. Next come service-based retail — salons, copy/ship centers, art framers and flower shops. Finally, “traditional” retail emerges (clothing, home accessories, gifts). The success of the retail business model depends on an increased volume of foot traffic; by nature, retail pulls from a wider base of clientele with longer gaps between patronage. The dilemma faced by many independent retailers is that the business can arrive “*too early*” i.e. not enough density or conversely, “*too late*” when lease rates become unaffordable for this type of business.

Is it important to LoDo’s identity whether independent retail survives the current redevelopment?

I would argue that it is essential — these businesses are providing more than “goods” to their community; frequently they act as an area’s public face and identity. Consider the last city you visited — perhaps you stopped into a Starbucks or The Gap, but likely these were not experiences you brought home to share with friends. Rather it is the independent shops, restaurants, and hotels that create an impression, *a story*, that we use to identify an area.

Composition opened in LoDo at the end of February 2003. In many ways the business has been unusually successful, garnering the support and friendship of so many people who value and promote the uniqueness of our urban lifestyle both in LoDo and all around Denver. Unfortunately, in a number of ways, Composition also falls into the category of *too early* and therefore will be closing its location at the end of May. So why write this article? If anything, this experience has made me more passionate about the future of LoDo and the role that independent retail will play. It is a challenging environment but one filled with incredible potential. I would encourage other small businesses to get involved with the LoDo District, Inc. and create ways to work together. I would encourage those who work and live in LoDo to walk a different route one day and notice the range of businesses that make up our urban landscape. If you are willing to explore, LoDo retail is filled with surprises -- from antique prints at The Old Map Gallery to modern accessories at Urban Lifestyle; from classic snap western shirts at Rockmount Ranch Wear to stunning floral arrangements at Bouquets; from all-weather gear at Patagonia to *in-the-now* wear from The Skye; all this and so much more.

I know that my curious and urban-minded nature will keep me coming back to watch this dynamic area unfold. And if I can get my timing right, I hope to be back.