

## LoDo District: Talk to Me!

On September 1 a quiet but important alliance was conceived in LoDo. At the beginning of the Lower Downtown Design/Demolition Review Board (LDDR) meeting, LoDo District, Inc. proposed formalizing communications with the LDDR. The proposal was accepted. No details were decided—just the notion that the two groups had a lot to gain through collaboration. When change is in the air—and it is in LoDo— it is comforting to know that the people who can influence that change for the better are sharing information rather than protecting territory. When the LDDR turned its attention back to its regular business—the review of a key new real estate development in the heart of the neighborhood—a seed had been planted. And, as important as that new building might turn out to be, that seed may have more of an impact on the neighborhood’s future than any one project.

You may ask, what is momentous about a neighborhood organization and a design review board talking? One would think they couldn’t avoid it, especially in LoDo where the notion of “small world” is an understatement. But, while LoDo District concerns itself with a broad range of issues including transportation, marketing, surrounding neighborhood issues, the redevelopment of Denver Union Station, member benefits, etc, the LDDR has a much more specific focus. Their one and only task is to meet monthly to pass judgment on whether or not proposed real estate developments in LoDo meet the design guidelines that were established to protect the character of the historic district. This task is accomplished through a tightly orchestrated process that governs submissions, the guidelines and the conduct of the monthly meetings. The volunteer board members are actively involved in the community in their personal or professional lives—that is why they were appointed by the Mayor— but the board itself has no formal method of assessing the winds of change that sculpt the neighborhood. So, the LoDo District goes about its business and the LDDR concentrates on individual projects. All worthy activities, but activities that would certainly benefit from more dialogue.

The fact that these two groups have maintained such a respectful distance over the years makes little sense. It’s reminiscent of conjoined twins attempting to lead separate lives, forgetting that they share one heart. This became clear to the LoDo District Urban Design Committee as they began deliberations this spring on the “State of LoDo”. According to Kathy Weykamp, landscape architect and Urban Design Committee member, “Every project that happens in LoDo has an impact on the social structure—the commercial and financial structure of the neighborhood. The most beautiful building can be parked in the wrong place at the wrong time and it will not benefit the community. We are trying to assemble a base of information that will help guide good decisions.”

Isn’t that what the zoning and the B-7 guidelines are for? Yes! But legislation, no matter how well crafted, is static while neighborhoods are in constant flux. The ever evolving influences affecting this community cannot be ignored, even with the protections afforded by legislation.

Chris Shears, a LoDo District Urban Design Committee member and architect who frequently appears before the LDDR is an enthusiastic supporter of a stronger relationship between LoDo District and the LDDR. He says “We can no longer ignore the influences of surrounding neighborhoods and Denver Union Station. If we begin to assemble information, we can provide a service to the LDDR regarding issues they need to be aware of. The information we can provide will give them a bigger view and make them a better board.”

The bigger view includes developing a point-of-view on integrating contemporary buildings into the neighborhood—something LDDR is already grappling with—and addressing pressures on the edges of the neighborhood as well as pressures from within. A current controversy concerning the removal of Bell Park from the historic district and the associated development of the Speer Boulevard “edge” is an important example of outside pressures that should concern both organizations. Transportation pressures from within and without have compelled the LoDo District to embark on the creation of a parking district. This is a formidable, long-term project that

could have a profound effect on how future developers address parking requirements and the design of their buildings. LDDRБ should have input. And what happens to the “State of LoDo” when the square block occupied by Market Street Station becomes available for development? Certainly LoDo District and LDDRБ want to cooperate in constructing a vision for that community altering situation.

Assembling information and assessing that information according to the risks and opportunities facing the built environment in LoDo is exactly what the “State of LoDo” effort is about. And with that information, both groups must plan for the future as surface parking lots are finally converted into modern buildings that will attract more people to our streets bring with them new vitality and increasing transportation needs and service requirements.

Says Everett Shigeta, Preservation Architect for the City and staff to the LDDRБ, “It is a very healthy proposal to get together and talk.” Fortunately, the members of the LDDRБ and LoDo District Urban Design Committee agree unanimously. Now it is up to all those dedicated volunteers to decide how and when to talk. No matter what they decide, the future of the Lower Downtown Historic District will surely benefit.