

## LoDo District – People or Place?

By Jim Theye, LoDo District, Inc.

I was recently asked about the difference between the LoDo Historic District and the LoDo District organization. One is a place, and the other is a group, right? Jan Nelsen of Kentwood City Properties tossed this question out during our office meeting. I didn't quite have a clear explanation for her, so I did a little research and found a pretty interesting story behind the history of the place, the group, and the names. Some of this took place a while ago, so I checked in with several long-time local personalities: Ellen Wilensky, Barbara Gibson, Rebecca Crosby, and Joe Dolan to get the story straight.

Let me give you some of the background, which starts around the mid-1980's. This is when the identity of the District was largely tied to the design industry. Many of downtown Denver's historic buildings had been razed, but Denver's Historic Lower Downtown (later known as "LoDo") was recognized as having been spared the wrecking ball and new hi-rise construction of the blocks further uptown.

Around this time, there were several groups that were active in LoDo, including the Lower Downtown Property Owners Association and the loosely knit group of architects and designers that gave the neighborhood its creative identity. These two groups didn't have quite the same motives, but they both knew that great things could happen if the area could achieve its own identity as a mixed-use community.

Dana Crawford, then developer of the Ice House building, helped get things going when she lured public relations expert Rebecca Crosby to lead a marketing effort promoting the area as a center of design and creative talent. The name "The District" was used to refer to the membership organization which promoted the Design Center at the Ice House building and the Blake Street Design District. Later, some used the terms Design District and Design Collaborative in a similar reference. The area was also thick with architects, PR and marketing firms, and a few restaurants like the Wazee Supper Club catered to the locals. Otherwise, it was largely a warehouse/industrial area. The zoning had been changed from industrial ("I") to mixed use ("B-7") in 1974 to slow demolition of the historic buildings, but some of the old buildings were still coming down for parking lots, etc.

Historic Denver, Inc, among others, started pushing for the formation of a historic district to formally protect the buildings. This was a contentious issue, and 60% to 80% of the property owners were against the historic designation. Their opposition was generally based on fear of losing development rights and the ability to modify their properties. (The economy in Denver was suffering from the energy-related recession at the time, and many building owners were barely able to keep their properties out of foreclosure.) Still, the property owners group and the design group worked together to ensure that all interests were fairly considered during the process of forming the historic district.

In 1988, the Lower Downtown Historic District was created, consisting of a 20 or 23 block area, depending on how you count it. The boundaries were set from the middle of 20<sup>th</sup> Street to about Speer Blvd, and from the alley between Wynkoop and Wewatta Streets to the alley between Market and Larimer Streets, more or less. Creation of the Historic District was quite an effort, replete with plenty of politics and posturing, and the individual property owners around the margins of the District lobbying either to be included or excluded from historic designation. At the Ice House, owners decided to donate the exterior façade of the building to Historic Denver Inc, instead of including the property in the historic district. Union Station, which was owned by the railroad companies at the time, was excluded from the Historic District all together.

Ordinance 109 which created the Lower Downtown Historic District also established the Mayor-appointed Lower Downtown Design and Demolition Review Board, or “Design Review.” A total of 127 historic structures were identified as “contributing” to the inherent value of the district (others were identified as “non-contributing”). The historic designation restricted the ability of property owners to tear down or modify the buildings identified as “contributing” without Design Review approval. Further, Design Review was empowered to review proposed changes to non-contributing buildings without an approved redevelopment plan.

Also about that time, the City modified the B-7 zoning which overlapped the area of historic designation. The revised B-7 zone was an innovative move on the part of City Council, and it further encouraged re-use of the historic buildings. The LoDo B-7 zone was the city’s first mixed-use zone, and remains only B-7 zone within the City of Denver. For the first time, mixed-use residential, small business, and retail uses were encouraged, and the loft and residential market was begun.

Now, let me catch you up on the story of the neighborhood groups: in 1989, the group known as The District and the group of LoDo Property Owners banded together to form the Lower Downtown District, Inc., or LDDI. Their mission was to preserve, promote, and protect, and their name aligned them closely with the Historic District to help foster their identity as stewards of their new community. Mickey Zeppelin, a local business/property owner and developer hosted LDDI at his City Spirit Café, and the grand beginnings of today’s LoDo District, Inc. were established. It was gritty, but it was home to LoDo’s founders.

The Lower Downtown Historic District and LDDI had plenty on their plate in the early years. The area next to the Historic District was chosen as the site for Coors Field in the early 1990’s. There was talk of locating the Convention Center somewhere in the Central Platte Valley, and the Taubman Company was looking at building a large shopping mall at 17<sup>th</sup> and Blake Streets. Some wanted to put a huge parking structure right behind Union Station, and there was even talk of a gambling casino coming into the area.

Today, we are affected by many of the issues which drew the original founders together. Consider what is happening at Union Station, with developers from throughout the **E**country vying to beat out Donald Trump and win the rights to be the site’s Master

**D**developer. And consider the recent sale of the Rocky Mountain Seed buildings at 15<sup>th</sup> and Market Streets, which were identified as “non-contributing” ~~historic~~ buildings during the original survey ~~which~~ for the Historic District. The new owners could demolish the current buildings, but they must go through Design Review and receive approval for the replacement buildings before the existing structures can be torn down. As well, the City is in discussions to trade a piece of the B-7 zone at Bell Park to a local developer in exchange for land to facilitate the new Justice Center. **It’s** politics, but we are fortunate to have the LoDo District, Inc. (formerly LDDI) to advocate for the community.

So back to the original question – what is the connection between Lower Downtown Historic District (the place) and LoDo District, Inc. the community advocacy group? Well, they are distinct but connected, and the similarity of name was intentional. The Mayor-appointed Design Review Board has the official say over building design changes within the neighborhood, but as we often see, real change on the community level comes from efforts separate from the City-sanctioned commissions. There were traffic, design, parking, event, and retail committees in the earliest days of LDDI, and those efforts continue. Today, similar committees meet to advocate for the delicate balance of our mixed-use community.

Dave Moore, current President of LoDo District Inc. says “LoDo has a great future! Our grass-roots efforts to enhance the vitality of the neighborhood through improvements in transportation, parking, design, and retail are taking shape. And Councilwoman Judy Montero is really supporting our efforts to maintain LoDo as a vital mixed-use community while we become the transportation hub for the entire city”.

Please get involved in your community by joining the LoDo District Inc. Visit our new website at [www.lodo.org](http://www.lodo.org), or us them a call at 303-628-1234.