

Creating Creative Cities:

The Role of Redevelopment in Boise, Idaho



Boise, Idaho, is a city that is redefining itself on its own terms. Boise has changed from a city that *Harper's* magazine in 1974 said resembled the aftermath of a "bombing raid," to one that *Forbes* magazine in 2003 named the nation's second best place for business and careers (behind Austin, Texas). Boise now has an exciting downtown, situated between the Boise River and the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, and is the center of business, government, health care, education and culture for a multistate area, with a bustling entertainment and retail business segment. That turnaround didn't occur overnight. The number of factors that led to Boise becoming the lively city of today combine to make an interesting story, one that is far from over. This article outlines the history of Boise, its current successes and its plans to extend those successes into the future.

One of the young cities of the intermountain West, Boise grew up beside a U.S. Army outpost that was founded in 1863. Like many Western cities, Boise's early economy grew around the extraction, processing and shipping of natural resources: mining, first, followed by timber and later by agriculture. The thriving early city that grew up with these industries, and mirrored their ups and downs, slipped into decline a century after its founding. By the 1960s, Boise was suffering from many of the problems facing other American cities: the rise of the automobile and population flight to the suburbs chief among them.

The U.S. War on Poverty and the attendant vision of a "Great Society" that emerged in the '60s led to massive



Early Boise Redevelopment Agency project

federal urban renewal investment in American inner cities. The Boise Redevelopment Agency was founded in 1965 in order to take advantage of this funding. The goal of the city and BRA during this period was to assemble downtown properties, many of which had been razed, in order to create a downtown shopping galleria. Over a 20-year period, five separate developers attempted to bring together the necessary critical mass of large retail stores but were unsuccessful. At the same time, the city council refused building permits to other developers who were interested in creating a large auto-oriented regional shopping mall out on the outskirts of town. Finally by the mid-1980s a number of events came together in what is now referred to as the "Boise Revolution," and completely changed the direction downtown Boise was headed.

The revolution began with a change in political leadership that first allowed the retail shopping center to go to the suburbs where it always wanted to be. The new mayor and members of the city council brought a neotraditional approach to urban design in downtown that emphasized pedestrian-friendly streets and mixed-use buildings. This approach was advanced by the visit from the American Institute of Architects' Regional/Urban Design Assistance Team. The R/UDAT made 16 specific recommendations related to redevelopment and city design, most of which have been accomplished or are currently underway. The top recommendation, however, was a charge of unity: "The citizens and civic factions need to submerge their individual agendas and work together in the broader interests of the entire community." Now, when so many people throughout the greater metropolitan area look at Boise's downtown with a shared sense of pride, it is instructive to remember that was precisely the thing that was missing following the "bombing raid" days of not so long ago.

One other significant change in the '80s was the virtual end of federal urban renewal funds. Idaho's state government instituted a replacement funding mechanism called revenue allocation that was intended to maintain urban renewal momentum. In simple terms, the

mechanism, known elsewhere as tax increment financing, captures the taxes from any incremental increase in property value in an urban renewal district and invests it back into the district itself, rather than in the larger city as a whole, for the duration of the district's 24-year lifespan. This allows the urban renewal agency to borrow against anticipated increment in order to fund civic improvements, including parking garages, urban infrastructure, land acquisition, development partnerships, public art, streetscapes, master planning and more.

This new approach to funding redevelopment amounts to a reversal of the days when federal money flowed to the inner cities. Instead of being redistributed from throughout the nation, funding now originates in the district where improvements are to be made. This localization of resources has led to expanded commitments from other local sources—landowners, lenders and developers—which in turn lead to a variety of dynamic partnerships. It is through these partnerships that the success of downtown has come about. Along with the changes in funding mechanism, the city's urban renewal agency changed its name to Capital City Development Corporation, and its development philosophy now emphasizes these new emerging partnerships.

One of the newest local partnerships is the Boise Smart City Initiative, a project that is jointly sponsored by CCDC and the Office of the Mayor. The goal of the Smart City effort is to create in downtown Boise the kind of dynamic urban village that appeals to the new highly mobile workers in the knowledge-based "new economy." In Boise that means nurturing the burgeoning arts and music scene, preserving and promoting the many outdoor recreational opportunities and improving access to higher education options, particularly research and professional programs.

The initiative began with around 50 civic leaders who brought a diverse range of experience to bear on the question of how to make downtown a highly competitive place for this new economy. The group divided into subcommittees dealing with education, business and economic development, technology and power infrastructure and urban design and transportation. After meeting for a year the committees collected their vision and recommendations into a report that is currently serving as a blueprint for developing an implementation strategy. Old partnerships are sustained and new ones created in order to put these recommendations into place.



Historic Idanha Hotel restored as mixed residential and retail building

CCDC is helping the Smart City effort in several ways, including investments in cultural and technological infrastructure, but one of the most important at present is in the area of downtown living options. For too long Boiseans, along with the rest of the country, have been building sprawling, auto-oriented suburban housing products.

Increasingly, however, a broad segment of the population, from students to retired "empty-nesters," would prefer to live near the shops, services and employment centers of downtown, if a range of living options were available. CCDC is working with landowners and developers to recognize and accommodate this demand. Other likely projects the agency and its partners will work on in the coming years include a streetcar circulator system and other transportation improvements, helping enhance the downtown presence of higher education as well as informal learning opportunities, removing barriers for businesses and developers considering downtown projects, and promoting sustainable design and development in downtown Boise.

One of the refreshing early results of the Smart City Initiative is a growing new unity of vision regarding the kind of community downtown Boise could be 20 years from now. While there is plenty of dialogue about the details, this sense of common purpose and pride indicates that Boise has learned an important lesson from its recent history, and the discord of 20 years ago is not likely to be repeated.



Café scene on Eighth Street

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