REGION BUILDING

Denver works with its neighbors to accommodate future growth
DEVELOPMENTS

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and outside consultants, they formed a strategy to study design options through a public process. John Sale, the resort’s director of planning, was convinced that the proposed village would only gain community support if it was planned using traditional neighborhood design (TND) principles, which would make it the first TND mountain resort community at the base of a ski area.

North Village is proposed to be a mixed-use community of about 1,100 units and 54,000 square feet (5,000 sq m) of retail and skier services. Affordable housing plays a prominent role in the housing mix, representing more than 200 units that are integrated into the village. North Village will be connected to CBMR’s trail and lift network via a gondola. Wolff-Lyon Architects has developed a set of development guidelines specifying that the community be diverse, compact, walkable, affordable, and authentic. A transect through the property organizes the development in a way that responds to the topography and environmental features, making North Village respectful of its setting.

The combination of a public planning process, and a design that reflects community values and creates a special place has resulted in overwhelming public support for a project that had been a catalyst for heated debate.—CHRIS DUNN

CHRIS DUNN manages the Truckee, California, office for CBMW, and was principal-in-charge for CBMR North Village planning while at SE Group.

Branding ULI Colorado

How is a ULI district council like Coke, Nike, and Starbucks? That is what ULI Colorado aimed to discover as its executive committee undertook a branding exercise during July. The marketing charrette was led by board member David Miles, president of Denver-based Milesbrand, one of the nation’s top companies for branding and naming new communities, traditional neighborhood developments, and other real estate projects.

“The idea came about because ULI is complex and can be hard to explain,” says Marilee Utter, chair of ULI Colorado. “You end up listing a series of great attributes that can’t be summed up in a bullet point. But they don’t always work when you’re asking people who don’t know ULI for membership, volunteers, and sponsorships — or, at a deeper level, when you’re asking communities and corporations to change the way they think and operate.”

“Branding is a way of connecting positively to the way people feel about a product, place, or organization,” says Miles. “Starbucks is not necessarily about liking coffee but about feeling ready to ‘bring on the day.’ Successful brands emphasize a few key attributes. With Mercedes, the three points of the hood ornament symbolize speed, safety, and beauty. That is the brand promise.”

After showing the ULI Colorado executive committee a series of clever television spots, Miles encouraged the group to brainstorm on ULI’s key strengths. Participants then went through a competitive analysis exercise comparing ULI Colorado to 30 other land use and real estate organizations and agencies in the Denver region.

Key words the committee devised to describe ULI Colorado included trusted, unique knowledge, leadership, quality, and the elite of the land use arena. Miles plans to digest these results with ULI Colorado staff and board members to complete the branding exercise this fall.

“The final products may range from a bumper sticker slogan to a 30-second ‘elevator statement,’” says Michael Lecese, executive director of ULI Colorado. “Many of our district council members would like to take discussions about land use to the broadest level of public discourse and influence. This effort will ultimately boost our support as well as our effectiveness in the community.”

Learning Landscapes Transform Denver Playgrounds

Mike Langley remembers when most of Denver’s inner-city elementary school playgrounds were eyesores, littered with dated, graffiti-covered equipment sitting atop ugly pea gravel, concrete, or asphalt. Thanks to the Learning Landscape program, Langley, executive director of facility management for Denver Public Schools (DPS), has witnessed growing numbers of Denver children spending recess surrounded by new plastic play equipment, gardens, brightly painted play areas, grass playing fields, inviting shelters, and unique gathering places.

The Learning Landscapes program got its start when Lois Brink, a
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landscape architecture professor at the University of Colorado at Denver (UCD), decided to work with her graduate students to redesign and improve her daughter’s elementary school playground. Brink’s goal was to design a playground that provided not only more green space in an urban setting, but also creative opportunities for recreation and learning. Because the space would be open to the public, she hoped it would help reconnect the community with the school. “We raised $250,000 for the first learning landscape without district funds,” Brink notes. “Toward the end, we still needed between $10,000 and $15,000. The district loved the concept and decided to help.”

In fall 1999, DPS and UCD signed a formal agreement in which the university established a multicourse graduate curriculum in urban learning landscapes. Because of a successful public/private partnership among DPS, UCD, private foundations, local business, and community volunteers, Learning Landscape initiatives have blossomed across Denver’s public schools.

Four elements have been critical to the program’s creation and success. The first was the existence of an aging elementary school infrastructure. Second was the elimination of forced school busing. “Up until 1995, Denver had mandated busing,” Brink says. “Busing essentially disenfranchised people from their local schools. Consequently, few people cared about what their local school looked like.” Once busing was eliminated, the opportunity arose to use neighborhood schools as a catalyst to revitalize inner-city neighborhoods.

UCD’s decision to become a true urban university also played a key role in the program’s creation. “Under the urban university mandate, professors and students were encouraged to work with city neighborhoods and communities,” Brink notes. Finally, city, state, and non-
profit funding was made available, serving as the catalyst for the program's implementation.

No two Learning Landscape facilities are alike, Langley says. UCD students, as part of their course load, work with students, teachers, and community volunteers to create a master plan that suits a school's specific needs. While under the program some schools have slides to allow children to move from one play level to the next, others have artwork created by neighborhood artists, or chessboards built into picnic tables.

"Because these facilities are open to the community, we're seeing much less vandalism," Langley says. "Garden Place School, for example, is located in one of Denver's poorest communities. Since the learning landscape was installed, there's been only one incident of vandalism, and that vandal was turned in within 24 hours. Community members are incredibly proud of these facilities and want to see them maintained."

Langley believes that the success of Learning Landscape facilities helped garner the voter support needed to pass a 2003 school bond. "As I went out to talk to the community before the bond was voted on, I heard people refer to these facilities as parks," notes Alan Bacarek, associate director of research and planning for DPS. "Some 60 percent of voters didn't have school-age children," Langley adds. "But when we talked about learning landscapes and how they would revitalize an important community space, thus increasing property values, we got voter attention and support."

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The 2003 bond calls for the design and creation of three dozen Learning Landscape projects. "The remainder of DPS schools will be covered in the next bond," Langley adds.

Heery International, in a joint venture with AMI Mechanical Inc. and Empire Construction Services, is responsible for project management. "Learning landscapes are time-consuming projects," notes Heery project manager Charles Burdo. "It takes a good year for the graduate students who manage community research to create a master plan for a single learning landscape. Of course, watching the ultimate transformation of a drab site to colorful learning and playing space makes the effort worthwhile."

The benefits associated with Learning Landscape facilities stretch well beyond new play equipment. "Many of the schools use these facilities to enhance their classroom instruction," Baczarek notes. "Teachers now look at how they can incorporate learning landscapes into their lesson plans." Brink is currently seeking a grant to obtain quantifiable data about the impact Learning Landscape facilities have on student physical activity and health.

Early studies have shown that these new facilities have contributed to a reduction in disciplinary problems. "We're seeing more constructive play, more focus when the students return to the classroom, less bullying, and fewer injuries," asserts Baczarek. UCD is currently studying the statistics to create a baseline for accumulated data.

Other school systems have phoned Langley asking how they can incorporate Learning Landscape facilities into their program. "Learning landscapes have changed the face of our elementary schools," he says. With the aid of a continued public/private partnership, that face will continue growing brighter over time. \underline{UL}.

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