

News From LoDo District: Turning the Tide in LoDo

By Ellen Wilensky

Tides. They wash over coastlines regularly and with consequence, altering landscapes—building and undermining. When it comes to real estate development, landlocked LoDo is as tidal in nature as an ocean. Here, conflict and resolution scour the neighborhood with regularity and our landscape is remade in the process. No sooner had the Bell Park rezoning battle ebbed into a thoughtful collaboration that will eventually transform LoDo's southwestern edge, than the conflict over 1400 Wewatta Street deluged the LoDo design review process, eventually receding into similarly thoughtful cooperation.

The cycle started in September 2005 when Opus Northwest submitted a plan to the Lower Downtown Design Review Board (LDDRB) to redevelop vacant land bordered by Cherry Creek, Wewatta, and Wynkoop Streets and bracketed by the beloved Cherry Creek trestle bridges. Over a period of about nine months a series of design review meetings were held, the end result of which was substantial approval of a new mixed-use building for the neighborhood. Under normal circumstances, the next cycle would have been the construction of a well designed and utterly scrutinized building that would bring new life, both residential and commercial, to LoDo. But the circumstances played out differently.

It is a fact that residents of LoDo are supremely proud of their neighborhood. To call them “protective” of the historic fabric and quality of life in our District would be an understatement. So, while the developer and the LDDRB engaged in the legislated process, which mandates the LDDRB to review projects and grant or deny approval according to a set of guidelines and the Neighborhood Plan, many neighbors became concerned about certain aspects of the project and began voicing their opposition to the development. During the many months of design review, a number of residents concluded that the project was undesirable and not permissible under the guidelines and set out to strategize a way to stop it.

Meanwhile, Opus Northwest and its architect, Shears Adkins Architects, worked within the official process, responding to the input of the LDDRB, painfully aware of the rising tide of opposition in the neighborhood.

At a May 2006 neighborhood meeting it was discovered that the City had inadvertently failed to notify two registered neighborhood associations about the submittal. As a result, the neighbors organized a political and legal protest to the approval process. Lawyers, architects and lobbyists were retained to appeal to the Landmark Preservation Commission to overturn LDDRB's approvals of the project to-date. In the meantime, because of the legal error, Opus Northwest resubmitted the project to LDDRB. After a marathon, five-hour session, the design review board re-approved what they had approved before.

But LoDo inspires passion and vigilance in its constituents. The neighbors maintained strong concerns about design, compatibility, massing, and traffic congestion. They believed that an appeal to the Landmark Preservation Commission was their only recourse to halt what they perceived to be a flawed project.

Together at a LoDo social event, LoDo District, Inc. Executive Director, Fabby Hillyard, Opus Northwest Vice President/General Manager, John Shaw, and his architect, Chris Shears, found themselves worrying about the situation. Fresh from a similar “clash of titans” over the proposed Bell Park project, Hillyard knew just what to do. The productive antidote to lawsuits was to convene a meeting of the concerned parties in order to give the neighbors an opportunity to have some positive influence.

Shortly thereafter, in an effort to facilitate a free and open discussion, LoDo District organized a presentation that specifically banned lawyers. At that gathering, according to Shaw, “the neighbors poured out their angst. They were the most civil, most articulate, concerned group of neighbors I have ever encountered in thirty five years.”

Chris Shears was equally impressed. “In a productive way, we got to recognize the neighborhood's interests.” As a result, the architect and developer went back to the drawing board. According to Marshall Burton, Vice President of Opus Northwest, the process eventually helped to create a better building. “Anytime you have design review and strong neighborhood input you realize that when you get smart people around the table you get a project that may not feel better instantly, but works, in the end, for all involved.”

At a meeting on August 25th, a large group of stakeholders filled Opus' conference room to review revisions that had been made to the project in response to the neighborhood meeting. The mood in the room was wary. Much was at stake here for all involved. Would the building enhance or harm the residents' quality of life and investments in the neighborhood? Would the developer avoid costly delays and achieve a successful project? Had the neighborhood organizations represented their constituents adequately?

Chris Shears presented the modifications...and they were significant. A controversial “arcade” on Wewatta Street was eliminated and the first floor elevation redesigned for a pedestrian-friendly streetscape. The parking structure was pulled back twenty-five feet from where it had formerly abutted the Steelbridge Lofts. Building mass was reduced by forty-thousand square feet to meet the objectives of the neighborhood. By the end of the presentation, the mood in the room was much improved.

Architect, Mark Hoskin, who had been retained by Dan Reagan, Steelbridge Lofts developer, to review the design of the project and its impact on the neighborhood gave Opus “high marks for reducing the size of the project and reorienting the parking garage.”

Still, problems persist. There is the issue of whether or not the City will allow a left-hand turn lane on Wewatta Street. Some residents were reluctant to give up opposition without assurances that it would. “Everything depends on the City allowing that left-hand turn lane,” stated Dr. Jerome Schroeder, a Steelbridge Lofts homeowner. Unfortunately, only the City has control over such matters. How to avoid a return to deadlock? Hillyard exhorted the gathering to avoid losing the ground it had gained. She urged the group to state support for the process at the next design review meeting while pushing for a joint meeting with the City to address larger traffic issues.

Janice Meinhold, a resident of the Steelbridge Lofts acknowledged “without Opus we couldn't get the City to listen to us.”

By the time the meeting ended, Opus Northwest agreed to present to the Steelbridge Lofts Homeowner's Association in hopes of, finally, winning their support; the stakeholders agreed to continue meeting to strategize a plan for addressing traffic concerns with the City; and LoDo District initiated a movement to create a “Good Neighbor Policy” relating to construction. Neighbors were smiling and shaking hands. Lawyers were notably absent. And, while there remains grist for disagreement, as Chris Shears noted with a weary smile, “We have gone from polarization to a unified group of people.” It seems the tide had turned in LoDo once again.