



When we think about our current prosperity and abundant development opportunities for contractors and architects, it is hard to overlook the last 30 years of changes Colorado's real estate leaders created for us. Those changes enabled Denver to recover from the recent recession and achieve a vibrancy that fuels our future.

Who were the people who had a hand in the projects that opened the door for our current prosperity and what are their stories?

Who among us will be meeting the challenges of tomorrow and blazing trail ahead for Colorado's future?

They are the Sages whose stories offer us wisdom. They are the Stars who see the potential for our future and whose tireless commitment offer opportunities for future generations.

We invite you to enjoy our interviews with Colorado's Sages and Stars and welcome your nominations for future interview candidates.

by Joy Spatz, AIA

Looking back over nearly 30 years, you have made a significant mark on downtown Denver, both as the executive director at Denver Urban Renewal Authority (1987 to 1998) and then as a developer. How did you find your way to the DURA executive director position?

I have a degree in city planning and went to grad school in Tucson, Arizona. I actually went to school with Bill Mosher - small world. Then, after six years in Nevada, a friend, Sam Mamet, who was working at the Colorado Municipal League at the time, encouraged me to apply for the city of Englewood planning director position. So that's how I came to Colorado.

I had been at the city of Englewood for about seven years when the DURA executive director position became available. At that time, I had a 6-month-old and a 3 1/2-year-old, so I didn't apply for it. I considered it but wondered how I could handle that job with two young children.

DURA had been searching and a headhunter kept calling me, asking me to apply. So I came downtown for an interview and met John Moye, who was on the board at that time, and I fell in love with him!

How could you not?

He just said, "We can do this together, We can do this!"

In the late '80s and early '90s, downtown wasn't a family friendly place. Under your watch, DURA launched 18 projects, which was quite an achievement. Did you know the work you were doing was going to precipitate a rebirth for the 16th Street Mall?

It wasn't just me; we had a group of amazing people who all came together with dedication and commitment to each other and to downtown. We knew the work was important and necessary. Peña was mayor at the time, and he started to replace board members on my board with new people - and the board became this group of energetic and thoughtful leaders who shared my a commitment to turn downtown around, without tearing it down (which had been DURA's past).

We looked at what we had and knew we had these *incredible buildings!*

There was a lot at stake. At that time, a third of the buildings downtown along the mall were vacant and boarded up, and most were empty upstairs.

We can't say "that's an incredible parking lot" and get anything meaningful from that. But you can say "that's an incredible building" and garner commitment to bring it back.

For example, the Denver Dry Goods department store building was an asset and one we all agreed we needed to capitalize on. It was 350,000 square feet, and at that time there wasn't any single user who was going to occupy the building, so we had to figure out how to fill it up. We ended up breaking it into seven distinct projects, each with its own financing and use.

That project took many years to complete and 23 lenders. There were several times when we didn't know if it was going to come together. We assembled a blend of public and private investment for a project that was a mix of retail, housing and office space to make that project work.

In the early '90s, no one could imagine this could be the downtown of the country - failure was not an option! There was an energy and a sense of responsibility to make this happen.

There is something about the public responsibility that came with the DURA job and, with it, a fantastic group of people to work with: Mayor Peña and Mayor Webb, John Moye, Jerry Glick, Bruce Alexander, Cathy Reynolds, Jennifer Moulton with the city of Denver, a great team at DURA and countless others at the time giving their all to make downtown come alive again.

All of these people woke up every morning saying, "We're going to make this happen. We can't screw this up. There is too much at stake"

Most of the 18 projects in downtown were incredibly complex and challenging: Elitch Gardens' relocation from the Highlands to the Central Platte Valley, the conversion of two city blocks to create the Pavilions, etc. What defines the most challenging projects? What do you draw upon to make it through them?

Looking back on it now, I would say that the financing was the toughest part of the projects, but there were incredibly stubborn people involved who were determined to figure out how to make the projects pencil out.

The most challenging projects were ones with difficult developers who challenged my value system.

How many times did it take for a "values conflict" to bring you self-awareness that values were important?

I think you pick up a person's values pretty quickly.

I know that there's a world out there that I'm not going to agree with all the time and that's fine, but I always hope that a community as a whole shares some common values about what kind of city we want to be. I think the current debate about affordable housing in the city is one example of how our community's values are reflected in public policy.

We have a problem here and we can't just ignore it anymore. It's not good for our community to not have diverse housing stock and for people, to not have a choice about where they want to live in the city.

We don't want to become San Francisco - I'd love to become San Francisco in many ways, but in terms of housing and housing pricing and inclusion, we do not want to emulate San Francisco. I'd like to live in a city that has opportunities for all to live here. For the first time in Denver's history, the



Before: The Denver Dry Goods department store building as its renovation began in 1992.



After: DURA helped coordinate 23 lenders for the transformation of the 350,000-square-foot Denver Dry building.

mayor's budget includes general fund dollars to address this issue. That's a big deal - we won't solve this overnight, but using city money (not just federal funds) says it's a communitywide problem that needs to be solved by the whole community.

Do you think most developers focus on both sides, business and humanity?

I don't think that's unique. I think there are many developers who are committed to both business and social issues.

At the time I led DURA, almost every single one of those developers brought that combination to the table. The few who didn't were quite memorable.

I think that there are a lot of people and developers out there who are not the flashy ones, but who are committed in neighborhoods and doing important projects in areas that are considered to be transitional neighborhoods. This is tough work and it seems to attract a handful of people who like that challenge.

So what's it like to look back 30 years and look at all the good you created?

I just don't think anybody does anything alone - I mean we had a team.

The answers to our problems are much better answers and richer when you have many minds involved. I mean, that's the strength of diversity that we are dealing with in so many parts of our lives today.

As I look back, I'm very proud and very fortunate to have been here at that time in Denver's history. While it was the most difficult job I ever had and the most complicated work, it was also very rewarding work.

What are you doing now?

My partners and I founded Urban Ventures in 1998 and we develop projects in neighborhoods within Denver.

We are in it for the long haul, which is what I love about my partners. We are likeminded and we have always been aligned in the belief that we can't just build buildings and walk away. Our projects are rooted in authentic community connections.

We continue to work with Chuck Perry and Jonathan Rose

(from DURA days) as project partners and that is definitely their ethic, too. I brought Jonathan and Chuck into the Aria Development, which is the Marycrest project, a former Franciscan Convent on the north side of Interstate 70 and Federal, near Regis University, because of our shared history. It is a fascinating project on many levels because of the setting and opportunities to truly develop a neighborhood on 17 acres. We also just purchased a 35-acre property on the Platte River with another partner. It's an industrial property that had turned its back on the river forever. We intend to change that and develop a mixed-use neighborhood that will link into the exciting ideas coming out of the Sun Valley redevelopment plans.

What do you see for Denver's future?

Looking to the future of Denver, we are going to have a lot of people living downtown - a lot of building and that's the best thing that can happen to downtown to give us stability for the long term.

More people living downtown means more people supporting the businesses and restaurants. It becomes an engine.

Having Denver known for a downtown that's vibrant and almost a 24-hour city will be really important.

Also, we can't underestimate the importance of having all the rail connections throughout the area. That will and already has fueled downtown's economy. The revitalization of Union Station has made such an impact in the short time since its reopening. The future of rail and its impact on our city is something we can't even describe today.

Now we need to focus on the edges of downtown and look to those areas to help us address our needs for diversity in housing. These adjacent neighborhoods also need to share in the prosperity of downtown. That's where I want to have a role to play.

What are your top three indulgences?

Can I have four please? Well, chocolate, of course!

I love rock 'n' roll music. I went to Woodstock. I love Red Rocks.

I like to bike ride as much as I can.

I love hanging out with grandchildren - there is nothing more stabilizing in life. \\\