

HIGH DESIGN IN DENVER

By Sarah Rich

If you looked at a cutaway view of the American West, Denver would be one final hiccup at the end of a persistently flat horizon, where the foothills of the Rockies rise. While the compact downtown skyline forms a mere blip on the landscape, concentric rings of development have turned the mile-high desert into a prolific city.

Denver has been a destination since the gold rush, and modern prospectors continue to arrive seeking the good life. As a candidate for inclusion among the world's great cities, Denver's résumé shines, with a thriving art and music scene, new infill enlivening the urban core, and a Rocky Mountain backdrop. Perhaps the only missing credential is a sophisticated architectural portfolio.

But change is afoot in Denver. A number of buildings are now being reconsidered by world-class architects. This past fall, the Denver Art Museum's tremendous new extension opened as the first of Daniel Libeskind's United States projects to reach completion. Soon to follow will be a new Museum of Contemporary Art, designed by David Adjaye; the Clyfford Still Museum; a new Justice Center Courthouse; and a reinvented Civic Center Park, also by Libeskind, which forms a green hub at the center of these buildings.

But not all of Denver's architectural gems lie in CAD drawings and blueprints. In one of the older suburbs, a treasure sits amongst the tract homes and McMansions: about 50 Frank Lloyd Wright-style Usonian houses populate Arapahoe Acres, a neighborhood so unadulterated by modification and new development that a visit feels like time travel to the 1950s.

One of these mid-century-modern bungalows belongs to our tour guide, Lewis Sharp, the director of the Denver Art Museum. Sharp recently shared his thoughts about Denver's architectural metamorphosis, his light-rail commute, and how to preserve the history of this forward-looking city.

When most people think of Colorado, they think of ski country. It seems like the art museum extension might finally put Denver on the world's cultural map.

When we were selecting Libeskind, I would often say that we would like to engage an architect who would do a building that would be as strong—and as much of a signature work for the city and the Rocky Mountain region—as the Sydney Opera House.

The building is already having a real impact on the Civic Center area. What does Denver think of its new monument?

This has been a process that engaged a lot of public opinion from the start. Libeskind participated in numerous public forums over [a period of] three years, so everyone in the community has been aware of our plans. The process has really raised interest in architecture and its impact on community and the urban landscape.

Some critics say it's crazy for a city like Denver to introduce this kind of architecture.

I think the issue for most of the critics has not been as much about the building's exterior as the belief that such strong architecture may compromise the programs within it. But we have watched every skeptic emerge from a tour of the building feeling very positive about how the space complements the art. And all of the artists that have come in to do installations love working here.

The Clyfford Still Museum will sit next to the Libeskind extension. They just announced the finalists for that building—what do you think of the choices?

I'm on the board of the Still Museum as well as on its architectural selection committee. It's an impressive shortlist, [including] David Chipperfield, the very notable London-based architect, and Brad Cloepfil of Allied Works in Portland [Oregon], one of the more dynamic young firms in the country. I see this as another opportunity for Denver to bring a significant piece of architecture into the landscape.

The Still Museum is meant to be quite different architecturally from the Libeskind. I think it needs to be simple, refined, and elegant, and allow the art to be the dominant element. But it still needs to be something that is beautifully crafted and designed, and stands in bold contrast to the baroque quality of Libeskind's building.

And right across the street is Civic Center Park, a rather neglected place for as long as I can remember. What's happening there?

Civic Center Park is such an important historic site, but it's been turned into an island by the busy thoroughfares that surround it, and taken over by the homeless. It lacks the type of urban activity that makes a public park dynamic.



A VIEW OF DENVER'S DOWNTOWN CITYSCAPE FROM THE SURROUNDING CENTRAL AREA. PHOTO BY CAMERON WITTIG.



REMNANTS OF THE PAST MINGLE WITH MORE RECENT DEVELOPMENTS, EXEMPLIFIED BY THESE MODERN STRUCTURES SITTING ATOP AN OLD BRICK WAREHOUSE. PHOTO BY CAMERON WITTIG.

Libeskind is working on a new plan for the park, which will be presented for public comment. It's a major project that really would redefine downtown Denver. [Mayor] John Hickenlooper is motivated a bit by what Chicago did with Millennium Park. He hopes to find ways for people to enter the park more gracefully, to engage a lot of different activities there, and really bring it back to life.

Denver has been trading a little of its Wild West identity for something more urban and cosmopolitan. What's pushing that shift?

Whenever you talk about Denver today, one of the things that's having an enormous impact is the light rail. It has opened up and connected so many neighborhoods. You can almost look at a map of the city and see pockets where the light rail stops that have gained new vitality. I take the light rail every day; I'm at the office in exactly 30 minutes.

Speaking of your commute, let's talk about the Usonian homes. How did you first come across them?

When our son, also Lewis, was moving back to Denver, he said to [my wife] Susie and me, "I can't afford a very expensive house, but I want to live in a place with some architectural integrity." So Susie and I began driving around town. And then one day about three years ago, there was an article in the Denver Post that talked about five or so mid-century neighborhoods in the Denver area.

I knew the Usonian homes and had always been interested in them, so we went looking. When we got out to Arapahoe Acres, we liked it the best. The neighborhood was still very much intact—almost none of the homes' exteriors had been severely altered.



DESIGN FOR MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART DENVER ON NORTHWEST CORNER OF 15TH AND DELGANY STREETS. DAVID ADJAYE ARCHITECT. DIGITAL RENDERING BY STUDIO TONI YLI SUVANTO.



DON'T BE FOOLED BY DENVER'S WESTERN ROOTS AND COSMOPOLITAN ASPIRATIONS. YOU CAN STILL CATCH AN ALT-COUNTRY OR INDIE SHOW AT ONE OF ITS THRIVING MUSIC VENUES LIKE THE LION'S LAIR. PHOTO BY CAMERON WITTIG.

They all have a lot of work to be done on them, but the essential feeling is there—the way the house opens up to the outside, the quality of life that you are able to have. It's a design that takes advantage of the entire landscape. In Denver, during so much of the year, you really can enjoy breezeways and patios. We're just very comfortable here.

How has this neighborhood remained intact despite the rampant suburban development of Denver?

Everybody in this neighborhood loves the houses; and where they may not be very knowledgeable about Frank Lloyd Wright or the Usonian homes or California-style architecture, they nevertheless made very conscious decisions that these were the type of homes that they wanted to live in.

This little area is aggressively pushing for landmark status. The people are very committed to them, and I think that says a lot about the homes themselves.

And newer buyers are now willing to make greater investments in upgrading and restoring them. Each has been done with great respect for the design of the houses and the way they were meant to function. It's exciting to watch it happen.